

Oman-US military drill concludes

The joint Oman-USA military drill ‘Valley of Fire 2022’, concluded on Wednesday. The drill, which began on August 14, was conducted with the participation of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO), represented by the Western Border Regiment of the 11th Infantry Brigade, and infantry units of the United States Army.



P12

ELMS RACE WINNER
AL HARTHY TARGETS
PODIUM RETURN



P13

PROCUREMENT OF
LOCAL WHEAT SURGES
TO 1,100 MT IN 2022



P17

WADI SHARJAH:
A TREASURE HIDDEN
AMONGST ROCKS



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO URUGUAY PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay on his country's Independence Day anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his best wishes to President Alberto and the people of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. — ONA

CRUDE PRICES TOUCH \$100 A BARREL

Oman oil price for October delivery on Wednesday reached \$99.77, comprising a rise by \$2.63 from the price of Tuesday, which was \$97.14. The average price of Oman oil for August delivery has stabilised at \$112.93 per barrel, thus \$5.71 per barrel higher than July delivery. World oil prices were steady following talk of an Opec output cut, with Brent crude hovering just above \$100 per barrel. Oil majors Exxon Mobil Corp and Chevron Corp rose 0.4 per cent each, tracking crude prices, after Saudi Arabia suggested that Opec could consider cutting output.



OMAN RANKS AMONG SAFEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD

TOPS AS A COUNTRY WITH LESS POLLUTION

VINOD NAIR
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The Sultanate of Oman has been ranked among the top four countries in the world in safety and crime index of Numbeo for 2022. Numbeo is a global database of perceived consumer prices, crime rate, quality of healthcare and other statistics.

Muscat has been ranked 20th globally on the safest cities index, with 79.46 points in the security index, and 20.54 points in the crime-committing index.

In West Asia, Oman has been ranked third in the crime index (19.99) and safety index (80.01), only behind Qatar and the UAE in the GCC, while globally the Sultanate of Oman has been ranked fourth behind Qatar, the UAE and Taiwan.

According to Numbeo, the level of crime is very low in Muscat (13.64).



“Chances of having a home broken and things stolen, being mugged or robbed, a car stolen, stealing of things from a car, or physical attack because of your skin colour, ethnic origin, gender, or religion are being rated ‘very low’ in the Sultanate of Oman,” the report said.

From a safety point of view,

walking alone during daylight has been rated very high at 90.79, and walking alone during the night has been rated ‘high’ at 76.80.

On the pollution index, Oman has been ranked first with 36.76 points ahead of the UAE (47.94) and Qatar (60.05).

In the quality of life index

Inflation hits 2.6% in July

MUSCAT: The inflation rate in the Sultanate of Oman reached 2.6 per cent in July, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicate a rise in the prices of main groups in July 2022 compared to July 2021, such as food and non-alcoholic beverages by 6 per cent, education by 5.1 per cent, health by 3.5 per cent, transport by 2.6 per cent, restaurants and hotels by 2.2 per cent, furniture, household equipment and routine household maintenance by 1 per cent, clothing and footwear by 0.9 per cent and housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels by 0.6 per cent.

As far as governorates are concerned, Al Buraimi recorded the highest inflation rate of 4.4 per cent, followed by Al Dakhiliyah and Dhofar by 3.1 per cent, North Al Sharqiyah, South Al Sharqiyah and Al Dhahirah by 2.8 per cent, North Al Batinah by 2.7 per cent and Muscat by 2.1 per cent.

— ONA

Muscat to host World Veteran TT 2023

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, Aug 24

The Sultanate of Oman will host the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 for the first time in the Middle East from January 15 to 21.

The International Table Tennis Federation's (ITTF) premier event is expected to feature 3,500 players from 70 nations at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) for a week of action in Muscat.

The official logo and mascot for the championships were unveiled on Wednesday at OCEC with representatives from the organisers — ITTF, Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) and Oman Sail — outlining their vision for the global event.

The championships will be staged throughout OCEC, utilising the five exhibition halls for 277 competition spaces. Players will range from the age of 40 to over 90 and will compete in different age categories with 44 world titles to be won.

ITTF President Petra Sorling said, “We are delighted to be coming to Oman in 2023 and expand the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships to the Middle East for the first time. This is a beautiful



and welcoming country with a growing reputation for staging world class events in many sporting disciplines and we are extremely confident that OCEC will be the ideal venue for the event.”

OTTA President Abdullah Bamakhalaf said, “This is a proud moment for the Oman Table Tennis Association and a major step forward in the development of the sport in both Oman and the region.”

DETAILS ON P10

OMAN FM 90.4

MUSCAT
CANDID

WEEKDAYS 12-3PM
HOSTED BY ASMA AL RIYAMI







Jabal Akhdhar festival: Celebration of outdoors

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

It is midday in the month of August but up here at Al Jabal Al Akhdhar it is 27 degrees Celsius and people excitedly gather on the sides of the road to welcome the horses and the horse riders.

This is the first tourism festival for Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. The five-day festival which began on August 23 will continue till Saturday. The festival is being organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and is held in cooperation with the Office of Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, Wali Office at Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and “Oman From Horseback Team”.

Shaikh Ali bin Mohammed al Busaidy, Wali of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, explained, “It was June of 2022 when Al Jabal Al Akhdhar was given the status of wilayat. This tourism festival will now introduce the public to various aspects of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. From its very nature to the growing hospitality sector and from its traditions such as farming -- from roses to pomegranates and producing rose water and now luxury soaps made from flowers and herbs found on Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.”

He explained how more projects are coming up from private schools, educational institutions and more resorts.

“Al Jabal Al Akhdhar has many seasons to celebrate from roses to pomegranates and of course the summer, spring and winter. We have visitors from GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and Kuwait who come by road, have a holiday here and then continue their journey to Salalah for khareef in Dhofar and at the same time visitors who on their return from Salalah come to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. We also have tourists who come from Jordan and Egypt who rent a car upon arrival at the airport and head to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar,” he explained.

The horse trail has been attracting attention and Saif al Rawahi explained how in 2019 they had attempted the trail during winter in Al Jabal Al



Picture by Shamsa al Harthiya

Akhdhar. There were eight horses of Arabian and English breed. Adding an extra touch of tradition was a young rider from Al Jabal Al

Akhdhar on donkey. The young rider is Mundhar bin Musanah al Owmari who was cheered by everyone as he received his gift

from the wali.

“He is from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and he just came over and joined us expressing his

keenness in participating. He rides his donkey every day so he is professional in his own right. The rest of the team gave him full

support,” said Saif.

Faris al Mohammed came from Saudi Arabia to participate in the equestrian event.

“My trainer saw the news about the event on Instagram and he shared it with me. I saw it as a great opportunity to experience the Sultanate of Oman and enjoy this special event. I have had a marvellous time and it is my first trip to Oman.”

The prize distribution was held at Layali Al Jabal Restaurant, an official partner for the Al Jabal Al Akhdhar Tourism Festival and the owner Ahmed al Nabhani eagerly received the horse riders to honour them with trophies.

“We would like to support the tourism initiatives in full way and support small and medium enterprises too. That’s why we have a corner for handmade products such as rose water, herbs, teas and handmade soaps,” explained Ahmed al Nabhani.

Muscat Municipality removing abandoned vehicles

KABEER YOUSUF
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The law implementation wing at the Muscat Municipality has embarked upon a mission cleaning up the streets and parking lots of abandoned vehicles, which showed an increasing trend in the recent past.

According to earlier statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), nearly 200,000 people have left the Sultanate of Oman in over 18 months after the coronavirus lockdowns were executed.

It is said that a large number of people must have left the country without selling their vehicles after they found no takers for the same.

“We have begun a cleaning spree of the abandoned vehicles with a view to avoid inconvenience to fellow vehicle owners who find parking lots being occupied by vehicles for a long period of time,” an official from the civic authority said.

He further said that this



measure of towing over the abandoned vehicles is carried

out after giving due notices to the vehicle owners or the notices

stuck on the windshield for months but found out that no

action was initiated by the vehicle owners and is part of our efforts

to avoid distortions to smooth traffic flow.

Stickers advising the vehicle owners to remove their vehicles, mostly parked near Ghala, Bausher, Muscat and old airport, have been kept under the car wipers but most of them remained at the same spot for months and the municipality decided to tow them over.

“There have been a huge number of people abandoning their vehicles, bought mostly on loans but failed to repay the same due to job loss or death during the Covid-19 and no legal heir came forward to claim the same,” an official from the authority added.

Usually, these vehicles, either confiscated or towed away by the civic authority for various offences but the owners failed to claim the same despite many reminders, are put on an auction at a yard in Al Amerat for the public.

“All such vehicles will be sold in the condition that they are kept at the yard and no claim or damages will be encouraged later,” the source said.



CPA urges vehicle owners to take recall campaign seriously

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The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) launched a national campaign on Wednesday underlining the importance of rectifying the defects in vehicles by recalling them from the market. The campaign will continue until October 24.

According to Salim bin Ali al Hakmani, Chairman, CPA, "This campaign has been launched within the framework of the continuous efforts to preserve the rights of consumers and ensure the quality and safety standards of services or products."

It may be noted that CPA has recalled over one million vehicles because some defects can cause a danger to consumer safety and health.

CPA said it implemented 764 recalls from 2013 until the end of the first half of this year, which



included 1,175,673 vehicles and 154,315 vehicle parts.

There were 25 recall campaigns involving 8,787 vehicles and 17,500 goods during the first half of this year.

Khalid bin Ali al Rashidi, director of communications and information department, CPA, said, "The national campaign to recall vehicles is because there has been a lack of response from consumers to these campaigns despite the fact some risks can lead to traffic accidents, deaths and financial losses.

"Some of the serious defects found in vehicles are related to the sudden opening of the vehicle hood, safety locks, or automatic opening of the main lock."

CPA recalled more than 20,000 vehicles with faults in the brakes, which could cause accidents, a vehicle fire due to oil leakage, and 8,295 vehicles with faults in the cruise control.

The number of vehicles affected by airbag defects was 210,420.

The number of vehicles affected by a defect in the engine start system, a defect in the

engine programming, or a defect in the fuel pipe was 32,340, while 13,648 vehicles were affected by a transmission defect, 8,378 vehicles by poor manufacturing of the components and their non-conformity with the standard specifications.

Mohammed bin Mubarak al Qasimi, CPA, said, "As per Article (27) of the Consumer Protection Law, it is obligatory for the supplier upon discovering the existence of a defect in the commodity or service that may harm the consumer."

CPA said that the supplier must stop the circulation of this commodity or provide the service immediately and must notify the consumers who purchased the commodity or received the service and the concerned authorities.

The punishment in cases of violations includes a fine of up to RO 50,000 and imprisonment of up to three years.



Omani officials meet CEOs of Indian tourism firms

DELHI: Experts from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism held a meeting with chief executive officers of tourism companies here as part of a promotional campaign being organised by the ministry in India.

During the meeting, the ministry showcased salient features of the Omani tourism strategy and the extent to which it meets the requirements of the global market, in general, and

the Indian market in particular.

The ministry laid emphasis on activating cooperation to reach out to the target segments and to promote attractive tourism patterns, now and in the future.

The meeting also highlighted marketing approaches espoused by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism vis-à-vis the Indian market and the status of Oman as a destination for Indian tourists. — ONA



GCC conference on HR begins

SALALAH: The Ministry of Labour, in cooperation with Alassayel for Conferences, organised the 10th GCC conference on developing the productivity of human resources, which kicked off here on Wednesday.

The two-day conference, themed "Modern Approaches to Leadership", focuses on the role of productivity in economic recovery.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, who felicitated the participants in the conference.

The conference, attended by 235 representatives from Oman and other GCC states, sheds light on the best leadership and economic practices. It seeks to empower and enlighten a broad cross-section of employees

through expanded knowledge about their role in improving the economy of countries. It elucidates how this role reflects on productivity and economic recovery in public and private sectors.

The conference targets the segments of directors-general and supervisors in public and private sectors, as well as entrepreneurs and university students reading different specialisations. — ONA

PDO inks three CSR pacts in Dhofar

SALALAH: Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has signed three agreements in the Governorate of Dhofar as part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR). The agreements were inked with respective officials by Eng Abdul Amir bin Abdul Hussain al Ajmi, CEO for External Affairs and Added Value at PDO.

The agreements covered the funding of a health walkway in the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands, an ambulance



for Al Mazyouna Health Centre and some developmental works

at Al Sabt Marketplace in the Wilayat of Al Mazyouna. — ONA

Mawred Plus to ease work system at education ministry

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, AUG 24

With the new academic year approaching, the Ministry of Education has inaugurated the human resources management system called "Mawred Plus", in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, in the General Directorate of Education in the governorates of North and South Al Batinah, as part of the third phase of the plan to launch this system in the Ministry of Education.

The Mawred programme is one of the important programmes, which mainly rely on, in making the work system take an electronic character that includes legal approvals, which conforms to the requirements of the times and the vision of Oman 2040.

The Mawred Plus provides services such as human resources

services, financial affairs, electronic employee file, electronic dealing and administrative decisions, salary details, daily and monthly salary adjustments, and automatic transfer of employees salaries to banks.

Initially the system targeted 23,563 employees from the two directorates, the teaching staff, and the jobs associated with them in the schools of the two governorates.

Saif bin Saeed al Kharusi, General Director of Administrative Affairs, previously said at the launch of the system: "The ministry seeks continuous development in its electronic services in line with Oman 2040 vision."

He added that this system also provides effective management of human resources, as it aims to provide an accurate, integrated and unified database on all

employees, affiliated with this ministry administratively and financially, and its professional development. It also contributes to decision-making, drawing up plans, enabling the development of training and rehabilitation programmes for them, and raising their competencies.

The central training team at the ministry will adopt a plan to train employees of the two governorates on the use of the system and implement this plan in the two governorates to match with the launch of the system.

Meanwhile, the central work team at the Ministry's General Office is currently preparing to launch and implement the fourth phase of the procedural plan for operating a resource system in the education directorate in the governorates of Al Dakhiliyah, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah and Musandam.

■ FIRE AT MUTTRAH BUILDING

The firefighting teams of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) in the Governorate of Muscat on Wednesday rescued four people and extinguished a fire that broke out at a building in the Wilayat of Muttrah. The four were rescued using a hydraulic crane and were given medical care, CDAA said.



Mega entertainment show on August 9

MUSCAT: Talent Space International is organising a mega entertainment show at Al Falaj Hotel on Friday, August 9. The three-hour show, coinciding with the Onam Celebrations, titled "Guinnes Mega Show" is directed

by Kalabhavan's K S Prasad. He will be accompanied by actress Swasika, singer Arun Gopan and other known mini screen artists.

Swasika, besides being an actress, has an active presence in stage shows mainly as a dancer,



and is also anchoring several television shows. Arun Gopan shot to fame by entering the popular reality show, 'Star Singer'. After the show, he was seen grabbing some playback opportunities and became a popular singer. K S

Prasad has directed several shows around the world.

The show will be a visual feast for the Keralite community in Oman as it is being held on the eve of Onam which is celebrated by all Keralite

community in India and abroad with great fervour and zeal. The presenters of the event are Coimbatore Ayurvedic Center and Purshottam Kanji Exchange. The Cocktail Family Team is also supporting the show.



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

Mesquite, an invasive, thorny tree is threatening the ecology of the Sultanate of Oman as it spreads like wildfire. The Prosopis juliflora or mesquite was once used as a fodder for livestock. And by holding the sands at bay with its deep, cloying roots, it was envisaged as a much-needed weapon against desertification. Initially, at least, it proved its worth. Some farmers credit their fields' continued existence to its sand-stopping properties; others value the mesquite as a ready source of charcoal at a time when there are curbs on tree cutting.

Soon the perils of this invasive species became evident. It colonised huge tracts of land and displaced other native trees and poisoned livestock that consumed its pods. Its tentacle-like roots have sponged up water in dry areas. Such is the mesquite's capacity for wreaking havoc that it seemingly even contributed to the spread of malaria as the tree's flowers provide plenty of nectar for mosquitoes.

The tree's roots, which can reach up to 50 metres to suck water in drylands, and its ability to withstand extreme temperatures have allowed it to prosper where other plants wither. With no natural predators outside of its native habitats, the mesquite has expanded across several million hectares in the last few years alone, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

It has obstructed water flow in aflaj and contributed to soil degradation by absorbing nutrients. Mesquite pollen can trigger allergy symptoms such as nasal congestion, sneezing, itchy throat, contact dermatitis, and even asthma flare-ups.

Mohammed al Hinai, a plant expert, said that one mesquite tree can carry approximately 3,000 seeds, and capable of covering large areas in short time.

Burning is the best option to stop the spread of these trees. However, this is not possible when these shrubs grow near electricity poles and farms.

Efforts to eradicate these shrubs are hampered as some people still plant mesquite. Al Hinai said there is a need to spread awareness about the harmful impact of mesquite.

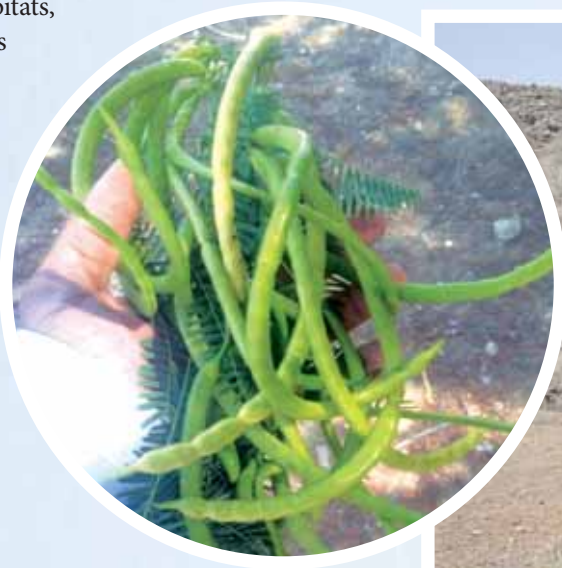
Al Hinai proposed forming field teams in each governorate comprising experts from the public and private sectors to develop a plan to stop the proliferation of this tree.

Suhail bin Salem bin Saeed Bait Saeed said mesquite is one of the invasive species that threatens Oman's environment. He pointed out that volunteers in the Governorate of Dhofar have tried to uproot these trees to prevent its spread, especially at the foot of the mountains and in places where there is a density of rare and perennial trees.

He suggested that the authorities intensify awareness in social media about the dangers of mesquite and address the local community to fight mesquite in neighbourhoods, farms and abandoned places. In Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, Abdullah al Arai said mesquite destroyed many wild trees, pastures and wells. The volunteers are trying various means such as burning and uprooting to prevent the spread.

INVASIVE MESQUITE

THE THORNY TREE POSES DANGER TO
OTHER PLANTS, ANIMALS AND WELLS





In brief

GAZA



PA URGES PALESTINIANS NOT TO USE ISRAELI AIRPORT

The Palestinian Authority urged Palestinians not to take advantage of concessions promised by Israel that would allow them to travel through Ramon airport in southern Israel, saying they should have their own airport. Israel's Airports Authority this month said Palestinians from the occupied West Bank would be offered special flights from Ramon, near the Red Sea resort city of Eilat, to destinations in Turkey.

The move followed pressure from the US to ease some of the strict travel restrictions which prevent Palestinians from using Israeli airports — including Ben Gurion — without special permission.

DUBAI



IRAN LAUNCHES DRONE TESTS AMID US CONCERN

Iran on Wednesday launched exercises to test its combat and reconnaissance drones, state media reported, amid US concerns over the possible supply of Iranian-made unmanned aircraft to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine. The two-day drill will involve 150 drones and will cover Iran's Gulf coast and most of its territory, state television reported. The country's air-defences and "electronic warfare" capabilities will also be tested against mock enemy drones. The US said earlier this month that Russian officials were being trained in Iran as part of a pact on the transfer of drones.

KUWAIT



TALKS TO RESUME 'WHEN CONDITIONS ARE RIGHT'

A delayed sixth round of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad will take place when the conditions are right in Iraq, Iran's ambassador to Kuwait said in published remarks confirmed by his embassy on Wednesday. Riyadh and Tehran launched direct talks last year in a bid to improve relations.

Baghdad has hosted five rounds of talks so far, the last in April.

Iran's envoy in Kuwait, Mohammad Irani, told Al Rai newspaper a new round was scheduled last month but was delayed due to the "latest developments in Iraq", which is facing a political crisis that has prevented the formation of a government.

Flooding devastates rural areas south of Sudan's capital

AL MANAGIL: After annual rains that have left dozens dead in Sudan, thousands of people in the farming town of Al Managil and surrounding villages have lost homes and property in what they say is the worst flooding in a decade.

"We've lost everything," said 29-year-old Butheyna Alhadi, speaking to Reuters amid the ruins of her family home.

"Five families lived here and now it's destroyed. We have no shelter and we've lost all our property," she said.

Nationwide, more than 150,000 people have been affected by flooding so far this year, double the number at the same stage of last year's rainy season, the United Nations says. Almost 34,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed, and authorities say 89 people have died.

By the end of the rainy season, which typically continues in September, the United Nations expects at least 460,000 people to be affected, a higher number than most previous years, due to heavier rains as well as lack of mitigation.

In Al Managil, a farming area about 150 km south of the capital Khartoum lined with overflowing irrigation ditches, Sudanese Red Crescent official Jamal Mustafa



People cross the water during a flood in Al Managil locality, in Gezira state, Sudan. — Reuters

said more than 100 villages had been cut off and 10,000 homes had been damaged or collapsed. At least 3,000 people had sought shelter in makeshift camps.

Residents said they had limited access to drinking water or food, with most assistance cut off by water two meters deep in some places.

"Any aid, shelter, or transportation is happening through the local volunteer effort," said local leader Altayib Abdallah.

"The government hasn't offered any assistance."

Sudan's sovereign council head Abdel Fattah al Burhan on Sunday said the government would provide the necessary assistance to Al Managil, including clearing ditches, fixing the main road to the area and providing compensation.

Trucks carrying aid from Qatar and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces could be seen waiting for roads to clear.

Some members of the army

engineering corps were seen trying to clear the main road, but locals said they had been struggling to divert water back into irrigation ditches mostly on their own.

US AMBASSADOR

Meanwhile, the first US ambassador to Sudan in 25 years took up his post on Wednesday in the latest easing of ties since Washington removed Khartoum from its state sponsors of terrorism list. — Reuters/AFP

Biden orders US strikes against militias in Syria

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Tuesday ordered air strikes in eastern Syria targeting facilities used by militias, a US military spokesman said.

The strikes in oil-rich Deir Ezzor province targeted infrastructure facilities used by the groups affiliated with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Central Command (Centcom) spokesman Colonel Joe Buccino said in a statement.

Buccino said the precision strikes are intended to defend and protect US forces from attacks like the ones on August 15 against US personnel, when a number of drones targeted an outpost of US-led anti-militant forces without



A US Bradley Fighting Vehicle fires an AGM-114 Hellfire during a heavy-weaponry military exercise in the countryside of Deir Ezzor in northeastern Syria. — AFP file photo

causing any casualties.

Tuesday's air strikes hit nine bunkers in a complex used for ammunition storage and logistics, the colonel told CNN separately.

The US military had originally intended to hit 11 of 13 bunkers in the complex but called off strikes

on two after groups of people were seen near them, he said, adding an initial assessment indicated no one had been killed.

US forces "took proportionate, deliberate action intended to limit the risk of escalation and minimise the risk of casualties,"

the Centcom statement said.

"The United States does not seek conflict, but will continue to take necessary measures to protect and defend our people."

Hundreds of American troops are deployed in Syria's northeast as part of a coalition focused on fighting remnants of the IS group.

There was no immediate confirmation of the US strikes from Syrian state media.

Earlier, Iranian state media said a Revolutionary Guard general "who was on a mission in Syria as a military adviser" had been killed on Sunday. The reports did not say how the general was killed, only describing him as a "defender of the sanctuary". — AFP

Fighting resumes in Ethiopia after five-month lull

ADDIS ABABA: Fighting erupted between government forces and Tigrayan rebels in northern Ethiopia on Wednesday, shattering a five-month truce and dealing a blow to peace talks.

Within hours, reports of fresh offensives were followed by Ethiopia's air force announcing it had downed a plane carrying weapons for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that encroached on the country's airspace via neighbouring Sudan.

The government and the Tigray rebels have accused each other of undermining efforts to peacefully resolve the brutal 21-month war in Africa's second most populous nation, and traded blame over who was responsible for returning to combat.

UN chief Antonio Guterres said he was "deeply shocked" by the renewed fighting and appealed for an "immediate cessation of hostilities and for the resumption

of peace talks".

The TPLF said government forces and their allies had launched a "large scale" offensive towards southern Tigray early on Wednesday after a months-long lull in fighting.

But the Government Communication Service accused the TPLF of striking first, saying its action had "destroyed the truce".

"Disregarding the numerous peace options presented by the Ethiopian government, the armed wing of the terror group TPLF, pushing with its recent provocations starting 5 am (0200 GMT) today committed an attack" around southern Tigray, it said in a statement.

The rival claims could not be independently verified as access to northern Ethiopia is restricted, but there were reports of fighting around southern Tigray in areas bordering the Amhara and Afar



A damaged tank stands abandoned on a road near Humera, Ethiopia. — AFP file photo

regions.

"They launched the offensive early this morning around 5 am local time. We are defending our positions," TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda said in Nairobi in a brief message.

He said on Twitter that the "large-scale" offensive was launched "against our positions

in the southern front" by the Ethiopian army and special forces and militias from neighbouring Amhara.

'VIOLATED OUR AIRSPACE'

The air force said on Wednesday it had shot down a plane "believed to be a property of historical enemies who want Ethiopia's weakness".

Iran says received US response on final N-proposal

TEHRAN: Iran received on Wednesday a response from the United States to its proposals on a final European Union draft for the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal, the foreign ministry said.

The announcement comes a day after Washington said Iran had agreed to ease key demands that had held up the revival of the 2015 deal trashed by former president Donald Trump.

That came one day after Tehran criticised the US for what it said was a slow response to its proposals. Tehran "received this evening via the (EU) coordinator, the response from the US government over the Islamic republic of Iran's opinions on the outstanding issues in the negotiations to lift sanctions", Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said. "The process of carefully reviewing the US opinions has begun and the Islamic Republic of Iran will announce its opinion in this context to the coordinator after it completes its review," Kanani added, without providing further details.

Iran had last week sent its proposals over the final draft sent on August 8 by the EU, which has coordinated talks in Vienna on reviving the pact.

Washington confirmed it had responded to Iran's proposals.

"As you know, we received Iran's comments on the EU's proposed final text through the EU," State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Our review of those comments has now concluded. We have responded to the EU today". The 2015 agreement between Iran and six world powers — Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States — gave the Islamic republic sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme. — AFP



Thai court suspends PM pending term limit review

BANGKOK: Thailand's Constitutional Court suspended Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha on Wednesday after accepting a petition from an opposition party seeking his ousting on the grounds that he has held office for his full, legally mandated term.

The petition filed to parliament last week by the main opposition Pheu Thai party argued that Prayuth's time spent as head of a military junta, after he staged a coup when he was army chief in 2014, should count towards his constitutionally stipulated eight-year term.

Though Prayuth could be restored to his position when the court rules on the petition, the surprise suspension threw Thai politics into confusion.

"The court has considered the petition and related documents and sees that the facts from the petition are cause for questioning as demanded," it said.

Prayuth has 15 days to respond, the court told media in a statement, adding that a panel of judges ruled five to four in favour of his suspension, starting from Wednesday.

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said Prayuth respected the court's decision and had ceased active duty, adding that Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan would take over as interim leader



Police block the road as protesters gather after the Constitutional Court suspended Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha from official duties, in Bangkok on Wednesday. — Reuters

and the suspension would have no impact on the government's work.

"Prime Minister Prayuth also urged the people to respect the decision of the court and avoid criticising the decision that could further create division," Anucha said.

It was not clear when the court would deliver a final ruling on the petition.

Prayuth ruled as head of a military council after he

overthrew an elected government in 2014.

He became a civilian prime minister in 2019 following an election held under a 2017 military-drafted constitution in which an eight-year limit for a prime minister was set.

Thailand's next general election is due by May next year.

In its review request, the Pheu Thai party, which was forced from power in the 2014 coup, argued that Prayuth should leave office

this week because his time as junta chief should count towards his term.

The party's leader, Chonlanan Srikaew, said in making its decision the court had reflected the party's concern about the legality and legitimacy of various laws in the absence of a suspension. He declined to make any further comment.

Nearly two-thirds of Thais also want Prayuth out of office by this month, a recent poll showed.

Prayut Chan-O-Cha
Thailand's Prime Minister



Age 68

- Former army chief came to power in a military coup in 2014 that ousted Yingluck Shinawatra's democratically elected government
- Scripted a new constitution in 2017 in a bid to recast the political system to ensure the army has a foothold on power
- Headed the junta regime for five years and continued as PM after the 2019 national elections

Aug 24, 2022
Constitutional Court suspends Prayut from office while it considers a legal challenge

- Opposition parties argue he has reached the end of his eight-year term limit as PM
- Supporters say the clock on his rule began when the 2017 constitution was instituted

AFP photo: Kazuhiro Nogi

But some supporters argue his term started in 2017, when the new constitution took effect, or after the 2019 election, meaning that he should be allowed to stay in power until 2025 or 2027, if elected.

CALL FOR NEW ELECTION
The controversy is the latest in a country that suffered intermittent

political turmoil for nearly two decades, including two coups and violent protests, stemming broadly from opposition to military involvement in politics and demands for greater representation as political awareness grows.

Pro-democracy activists have campaigned against Prayuth and his government, arguing that the 2019 election was not legitimate although student-led demonstrations petered out over the past couple of years with the imposition of Covid-19 bans on gatherings.

Activists gathered again this week in anticipation of the court decision. Nearly 100 pro-democracy protesters at Bangkok's Democracy Monument welcomed Prayuth's suspension but said it was not enough and they planned a march later on Wednesday to press their point.

"We're not just content with suspending Prayuth from duty, we want parliament dissolved and a snap election," said a woman activist who identified herself as just Manee. "Prayuth stole power from a woman and became prime minister in a coup," she said, referring to the prime minister ousted in 2014, Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of former prime minister and telecoms tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra. — Reuters



Shops tape up their windows in Hong Kong on Wednesday as an approaching powerful typhoon prompts the city to issue its third highest storm warning. —AFP

Tropical Storm Ma-on barrels towards Hong Kong

BEIJING: Several cities in southern China raised their cyclone warning signals on Wednesday, bracing for Tropical Storm Ma-on, which is expected to make landfall along the coast of Guangdong province on Thursday.

At 12:40 pm (0440 GMT), the Hong Kong Observatory issued a strong wind advisory, with speeds up to 62 kph expected. The storm, about 440 km southeast of Hong Kong, will lash the city with heavy rains

later on Wednesday and into Thursday morning. Hong Kong issued its third-highest typhoon warning on Wednesday evening as the storm trundled closer to the city, with authorities warning people to stay indoors.

Very hot weather has hung over the city for the past couple of days and temperatures reached as high as 34 degrees Celsius on Wednesday, with Ma-on - which translates to saddle - expected to be closest to the city on Thursday morning. — Reuters

Pakistan appeals for international aid

KARACHI: Pakistan has urged the international community to help with relief efforts as it struggles to cope with the aftermath of torrential rains that triggered massive floods last month, killing more than 800 people, officials said.

Funding and reconstruction efforts will be a challenge for cash-strapped Pakistan, which is having to cut spending to ensure the International Monetary Fund approves the release of much-needed bailout money.

July's national rainfall was almost 200 per cent above average, Sardar Sarfaraz, a senior official at the meteorological office said on Wednesday, making it the wettest July since 1961.

"No question of the provinces or Islamabad being able to cope with this magnitude of climate catastrophe on their own.

Lives r at risk, thousands homeless. Int'l partners need to mobilise assistance," said Sherry Rehman, Federal Minister for



Residents arrive in a boat to a safer place after being evacuated following heavy monsoon rainfall in the flood affected area of Rajanpur district in Punjab province on Wednesday. — AFP

Climate Change in a tweet. According to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), heavy monsoon rainfall and floods have affected some 2.3 million people in Pakistan since mid-June, destroying at least 95,350 houses and damaging a further 224,100.

Sindh in the country's south east and Balochistan in the south west are the two most affected provinces. More than 504,000 livestock have been killed, nearly all of them in Balochistan, while damage to nearly 3,000 km of roads and 129 bridges has impeded movement around flood-affected areas.

The main supply route from the port city of Karachi has been cut for more than a week after a bridge linking it to Balochistan was swept away.

"Federal government has also appealed to the international development partners for assistance, so reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed by the flooding can be started once the water recedes," Ahsan Iqbal, Minister of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, said in a twitter post.

QATAR INVESTMENT
On Wednesday, Qatar said it would invest \$3 billion in Pakistan's debt-ridden economy in the latest boost by a Gulf state for the ailing South Asian nation. Pakistan has been scrambling for finance in recent months, and the International Monetary Fund is due to meet next Monday to discuss reviving a suspended \$6 billion loan programme. —Reuters/AFP

TOKYO

Japan signals return to nuclear power

Japan will restart more idled nuclear plants and look at developing next-generation reactors, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Wednesday, setting the stage for a major policy shift on nuclear energy a decade after the Fukushima disaster.

The comments from Kishida - who also said the government would look at extending the lifespan of existing reactors - highlight how the Ukraine crisis and soaring energy costs have forced both a change in public



opinion and a policy rethink towards nuclear power.

Japan has kept most of its nuclear plants idled in the decade since a massive earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

NELSON

Flood costs could rival New Zealand's quakes

Increasingly severe floods driven by climate change could soon cost New Zealand as much as destructive earthquakes, a study warned on Wednesday. The country is still reeling from floods that hit its South Island last week.

Experts have warned that climate change could make flooding "as destructive to New Zealand as earthquakes", according to Wednesday's report.

The average annual cost of



repairing homes damaged by river floods in New Zealand is set to rise after reaching \$62 million, according to research firm CoreLogic and insurance provider Munich Re.

SEOUL

S Korean general commands drills with US

For the first time a South Korean general is commanding annual joint drills with American forces, the US military said on Wednesday, a step towards Seoul's long-delayed goal of gaining command of allied forces in the event of a war.

The allies began on Monday their largest joint military drills in years, known as Ulchi Freedom Shield, with a resumption of field training, aiming to strengthen readiness for potential weapons tests by North Korea.



The exercises include an 11-day "computer simulated, defence-oriented training event" to improve allied readiness, US Forces Korea (USFK) said in a statement.



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7

In brief

■ LIVERPOOL



UK POLICE APPEAL TO UNDERWORLD AFTER GIRL SHOT DEAD

Police in Liverpool, northwest England, on Wednesday urged criminals to give up a gunman after a nine-year-old girl was shot dead in the crossfire of a suspected gang war. Olivia Pratt-Korbel was killed on Monday night when the shooter's intended target, a 35-year-old man, burst into her house to try to escape his attacker. Merseyside Police said the man was arrested for breaching the terms of his early release from prison. The force said he was detained in hospital where he was being treated for gunshot wounds and would be questioned about the young girl's murder.

■ COPENHAGEN



MONKEYPOX VACCINE MAKER AND WHO INK LATAM DEAL

The Danish maker of the only authorised monkeypox vaccine said on Wednesday it had signed a deal with the World Health Organization to facilitate distribution in Latin America and the Caribbean. "Deliveries of the vaccines are expected to begin in September," Bavarian Nordic said in a statement, as the company seeks to boost production to meet high global demand for the vaccine. The agreement with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) will "facilitate equitable access to the company's monkeypox vaccine for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean", Bavarian Nordic said.

■ LONDON



HEATWAVE TRIGGERS 'FALSE AUTUMN' IN BRITAIN

Searing summer temperatures in the UK have not just parched the earth and dried up rivers, lakes and reservoirs but are also seeing trees shed their leaves early. Instead of green, many gardens, parks and woods are now a sea of orange, yellow, red and brown, with thick carpets of leaves on the ground. The early leaf fall — dubbed a "false autumn" — is a sign of stress, as trees shed their leaves to try to retain moisture. But experts say while older trees with deep roots can withstand the drier conditions, younger, less established ones could be at risk.



Attendees hold a giant Ukrainian flag as they take part in a ceremony to celebrate Ukraine's Independence Day, on the Grand-Place in Brussels, on Wednesday. — AFP



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and his wife Olena lay flowers at the Memory Wall of Fallen Defenders of Ukraine in Kyiv. — Reuters

Russian 'shackles' worse than missiles: Kyiv

KYIV: Ukraine was "reborn" when Russia attacked six months ago, President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Wednesday, marking 31 years of his country's independence from the Moscow-controlled Soviet Union with a vow to drive Russian forces out completely.

After days of warnings that Moscow could use the anniversary of Ukraine's Independence Day to launch more missile attacks on major urban centres, the second biggest city Kharkiv was under curfew after months of frequent bombardment.

The anniversary fell exactly six months after Russia sent tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine. Wednesday's celebrations were cancelled but many people marked the day by wearing embroidered shirts that are part of the national dress.

In an emotional speech to his compatriots, Zelensky said Russia's attack had revived the

nation's spirit.

"A new nation appeared in the world on February 24 at 4 in the morning. It was not born, but reborn. A nation that did not cry, scream or take fright. One that did not flee. Did not give up. And did not forget," he said.

The 44-year-old leader, speaking in front of Kyiv's central monument to independence in his trademark combat fatigues, vowed to recapture Russian-occupied areas of eastern Ukraine as well as the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014.

"We will not sit down at the negotiating table out of fear, with a gun pointed at our heads. For us, the most terrible iron is not missiles, aircraft and tanks, but shackles. Not trenches, but fetters," he said.

He and his wife later joined religious leaders for a service in Kyiv's St Sophia cathedral and laid flowers at a memorial to fallen soldiers.

Marking 31 years of his country's independence from the Moscow-controlled Soviet Union, President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed to drive Russian forces out completely

WESTERN SUPPORT

US President Joe Biden announced nearly \$3 billion for weapons and equipment for Ukraine in Washington's "biggest tranche of security assistance to date".

On a surprise visit to Kyiv on Wednesday for talks with Zelensky, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also promised a further \$63.5 million worth of military support, including 2,000 drones and loitering munitions to enable the Ukrainian military to

better track and target attacking Russian forces.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told Ukrainians they were an inspiration to the world. "You can count on Nato's support. For as long as it takes," he said in a video message.

Russia has made few advances in Ukraine in recent months, after its troops were pushed back from Kyiv in the early weeks of the war. Ukrainian soldiers on the front line in the east said they were more motivated than their enemy.

"All of our people are cheering for us," a soldier called Yevhen told Reuters, declining to give his last name. "The whole country is, and other countries who help us too. Our fighting spirit is greater than theirs."

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told a meeting of defence ministers in Uzbekistan that Moscow had deliberately slowed down what it refers to as its "special military operation" in Ukraine to avoid civilian

casualties.

On Tuesday evening, Zelensky warned of the possibility of "repugnant Russian provocations" and on Wednesday, Ukraine's military urged people to take air raid warnings seriously, reporting new air and missile attacks on civilian buildings.

NEW ATTACKS

Russian forces have seized areas of the south including Black Sea and Sea of Azov coasts and large tracts of the eastern Donbas region comprising the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk.

US officials have warned of likely new Russian attacks on civilian and government infrastructure in coming days.

The war has killed thousands of civilians, forced more than a third of Ukraine's 41 million people from their homes, left cities in ruins, and shaken the global economy, creating shortages of essential food grains and pushing up energy prices. —Reuters

Germany inaugurates world's first hydrogen train fleet

BERLIN: Germany on Wednesday inaugurated a railway line powered entirely by hydrogen, a "world premiere" and a major step forward for green train transport despite nagging supply challenges.

A fleet of 14 trains provided by French industrial giant Alstom to the German state Lower Saxony has replaced diesel locomotives on the 100 kilometres (60 miles) of track connecting the cities of Cuxhaven, Bremerhaven, Bremervorde and Buxtehude near Hamburg.

"We are very proud to put this technology into operation together with our strong partners as a world premiere," Alstom CEO Henri Poupart-Lafarge said in a statement.

Hydrogen trains have become a promising way to decarbonise the rail sector and replace climate-warming diesel, which still powers 20 per cent of journeys in Germany.

Billed as a "zero emission" mode of transport, the trains mix hydrogen on board with oxygen present in the ambient air, thanks to a fuel cell installed in the roof. This produces the electricity needed to pull the



A train powered entirely by hydrogen is pictured in Bremervorde on Wednesday. — AFP

train. Regional rail operator LNVG said the fleet, which cost 93 million euros (dollars), would prevent 4,400 tonnes of CO2 being released into the atmosphere each year.

Designed in the southern French town of Tarbes and assembled in Salzgitter in central Germany, Alstom's trains — called Coradia iLint — are trailblazers in the sector.

The project created jobs for up to 80 employees in the two countries, according to Alstom.

Commercial trials have been carried out since 2018 on the line with two hydrogen trains but

now the entire fleet is adopting the groundbreaking technology.

The French group has inked four contracts for several dozen trains between Germany, France and Italy, with no sign of demand waning. In Germany alone "between 2,500 and 3,000 diesel trains could be replaced by hydrogen models", Stefan Schrank, project manager at Alstom, said. "By 2035, around 15 to 20 per cent of the regional European market could run on hydrogen," according to Alexandre Charpentier, a rail expert at consultancy Roland Berger. —AFP

Angolans vote for president in tight race

LUANDA: Angolans were casting ballots on Wednesday in what was expected to be the most competitive vote in their country's democratic history, with incumbent president Joao Lourenco squaring up against charismatic opposition leader Adalberto Costa Junior.

The election has been overshadowed by Angola's many woes — a struggling economy, inflation, poverty and drought, compounded by the death of a former strongman president.

The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which has ruled the oil-rich nation for nearly five decades, is facing its most serious challenge since the first multiparty vote in 1992.

"It's been 20 years of peace and we are still poor," said Lindo, a 27-year-old electrician queueing up to vote in Nova Vida, a middle-class suburb of the capital Luanda.

"The people want change — the government doesn't provide for people's basic needs," said Lindo, who gave only his first name.

Eight political parties are running, but the real contest lies between the MPLA and its long-standing rival and ex-rebel movement the National Union



for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

Opinion polls suggest that support for the MPLA — which won 61 per cent of the vote in 2017 elections — will dwindle, while the UNITA, which has entered an electoral pact with two other parties, will make gains.

But UNITA's inroads might not be enough to unseat Lourenco, 68, who succeeded veteran leader Jose Eduardo dos Santos five years ago.

"The margins will be closer than ever before... but the advantages of incumbency mean MPLA is still odds on to pip Costa (Junior)," said Eric Humphery-Smith, an analyst at London-based Verisk Maplecroft. — AFP

Solar power brings work, but land shortage hits growth

MD TAHMID ZAMI

FOR THE FAST-DEVELOPING BANGLADESH, SOLAR POWER HAS BROUGHT BENEFITS FOR CITIZENS WHILE CREATING JOBS. BUT THE SECTOR'S GROWTH HAS BEEN CONSTRAINED BY BOTTLENECKS SUCH AS A LACK OF LAND ON WHICH TO BUILD LARGE-SCALE PLANTS

Topu Roy's family did not have electricity until around 2005 when his parents set up a solar power system at their home in Dinajpur, in northern Bangladesh, to run lights and fans.

In the past two decades, some 6 million solar home systems have been installed across the country, bringing electricity to remote off-grid communities.

"It is a remarkable success story," said Shahriar Ahmed Chowdhury, director of the Centre for Energy Research at Bangladesh's United International University.

For the fast-developing South Asian nation, solar power has brought benefits for citizens while creating jobs. But the sector's growth has been constrained by bottlenecks such as a lack of land on which to build large-scale plants.

Grid power finally reached Roy's

village in 2020 under a government programme to electrify the whole country by 2021, enabling residents to use a range of electric appliances for the first time.

"But with the recent power crisis in Bangladesh, we are back to square one, resorting to the solar home system as grid power is mostly off," said the 25-year-old student.

Millions of Bangladeshis are doing the same to cope with severe outages, caused by a recent power crisis amid extreme heat and high fuel prices, with rural areas bearing the brunt. Bakirul Islam, 21, a student from Mymensingh, north of Dhaka, said he is now getting only two to three hours of grid power per day and is also relying on a solar home system.

Hikes in fuel prices globally have destabilised energy policy in Bangladesh, which imports about a quarter of its natural gas

supply, sparking calls for a more diversified energy mix including a greater focus on renewables, especially solar. The country has little more than 900 megawatts (MW) of renewables capacity, out of total power capacity of 25,700 MW, falling far short of a target to achieve 10 per cent of generation from clean energy sources by 2020.

Last year, the power ministry announced a more ambitious goal to source 40 per cent of the nation's electricity from renewables by 2041, with solar viewed as having the highest potential.

BUSINESS CASE

Solar energy development has lagged partly because it was expensive a decade ago, at more than \$0.16 per kilowatt-hour, said Ijaz Hossain, a professor at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). But the price has since

plunged, making solar cheaper than using imported fuels like coal, heavy fuel oil or diesel, said Chowdhury of the Centre for Energy Research.

The recent rise in fossil fuel prices means industry can now save a lot of money by adopting solar power, said Ziaur Rahman Khan, another BUET professor.

With rooftop solar, 1 kilowatt hour of electricity costs about 4 taka (\$0.04) for a commercial or industrial user, compared with 8-11 taka per unit for grid power, said Md Rashedul Alam, assistant director at the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority, a Bangladesh government agency.

A National Solar Energy Roadmap, drafted in 2020 with the United Nations Development Programme, calculated that 6,000 MW could be generated from solar by 2041 in a business-as-usual scenario - and with aggressive

policies, as much as 30,000 MW. The report offers key policy pointers, such as the "very real opportunities" of rooftop solar installations, said Farseem Mannan Mohammedy, director of BUET's Institute of Energy and Sustainable Development.

Recent solar power expansion has focused on both rooftop solar photovoltaic systems and large-scale ground-based plants.

Rooftop solar is appealing as it does not require land acquisitions, said Munawar Moin, group director at Rahimafrooz Ltd, a pioneering solar-panel manufacturer in Bangladesh.

An earlier study estimated that 5,000 MW could be generated from solar plants on industrial rooftops.

Chowdhury noted there are now more than 30 large-scale rooftop solar PV plants, mostly mounted on factories.

—Thomson Reuters Foundation

Prayuth, the coup-maker and ballad composer

PANU WONGCHA-UM AND KAY JOHNSON

For eight years, nothing seemed to shake the hold on power for Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who first came to office in a 2014 coup and has survived a hotly disputed election, mass street protests and four no-confidence votes.

Wednesday's decision by Thailand's Constitutional Court to suspend Prayuth, 68, from official duties was a rare setback, though it's unclear whether the ouster will become permanent.

Shortly after the then-army chief seized power from an elected government in 2014 following months of destabilising protests, Prayuth exhorted compatriots to heed traditional cultural values of harmony and respect for the royal family.

He even famously released a recording of a ballad he had written called "Returning Happiness to Thailand" shortly after the coup. It played on a loop on national radio, with lines such as "Today the nation is facing menacing danger/The flames are rising/Let us be the ones who step in/Before it is too late".

The song - one of at least 10 he has released while leader - referred to political discord of more than a decade in Thailand.

For years, Bangkok's streets were periodically paralysed by duelling mass protests by the "Red Shirt" supporters of successive populist elected governments - one ousted in a 2006 coup - and counterprotests by "Yellow Shirts", royalist-military supporters who viewed the populists as corrupt and a threat to the constitutionally mandated reverence for Thailand's king.

Prayuth's seizure of power was Thailand's 13th successful coup since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and followed six years of civilian-led governments.

His supporters lauded him for restoring order and as a protector of the monarchy.

The army declared martial law and the junta embarked on a crackdown on dissent, sending hundreds of activists to camps for several days of "attitude adjustment" instruction.

Several months later, Prayuth was appointed prime minister by a hand-picked parliament.

During the early post-coup period, Prayuth's temper occasionally flared. He once threatened to throw a podium during a press briefing and at another time mused he could "probably just execute" a roomful of reporters. But the often-dour general, known by his nickname "Uncle Tu", transformed himself into a political candidate for elections held in 2019.— Reuters

Calculating the costs of war



Alan Yuhas
The writer is senior staff editor at NYT

Day after day for 181 days, the grim ledger of Russia's war of Ukraine grows longer with each missile strike, burst of gunfire and report of atrocities.

— Ukrainian civilians have paid a heavy price: 5,587 are confirmed dead, and the true number is believed to be in the tens of thousands. The number of refugees has surpassed 6.6 million.

— Military losses have been heavy on both sides, with about 9,000 Ukrainians and as many as 25,000 Russians said to be killed.

— Ukraine has lost control of 20 per cent of its territory to Russian forces and their proxies in recent years.

— The destruction has already cost Ukraine at least \$113.5 billion, and it may need more than \$200 billion to rebuild.

— Donor nations have pledged to give Ukraine more than \$83 billion in total.

— Ukrainian agricultural production, and other countries that depend on it, have been hit hard. Even with grain ships on the move again, the world hunger crisis is dire.

THE TOLL ON CIVILIANS

On Monday, the United Nations reported that it had confirmed the deaths of 5,587 civilians, including 149 girls, 175 boys and 38 children whose sex is unknown. At least 7,890 civilians were confirmed to be injured, it said.

But those are only the confirmed civilian casualties. The true numbers, UN officials concede, are without doubt far higher. The actual toll is probably tens of thousands of civilians.

That is the estimate Ukrainian officials have arrived at after months of recovering bodies.

In Bucha, near the capital, residents are still burying the roughly 400 civilians killed during a month of Russian occupation.

At least 1,500 civilians were killed in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, during Russia's failed attack, according to Ihor Klymenko, Ukraine's chief of police.

And in Mariupol, the southern city pulverised by months of Russian siege, Ukrainian officials believe that at least 22,000 people were killed. They cite witness accounts, satellite imagery of mass graves and footage showing bodies in the streets.



Family members and mourners gather at the funeral for Ukrainian soldier Oleg Marinchenko in Kyiv on Tuesday.

ON MONDAY, THE UNITED NATIONS REPORTED THAT IT HAD CONFIRMED THE DEATHS OF 5,587 CIVILIANS, INCLUDING 149 GIRLS, 175 BOYS AND 38 CHILDREN WHOSE SEX IS UNKNOWN

THE MILITARY CASUALTIES

Russia and Ukraine have kept their military casualties a closely guarded secret, though Western analysts believe both have sustained heavy losses.

Gen Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, the top commander of Ukraine's armed forces, said on Monday that about 9,000 Ukrainians had been killed at the front.

Speaking at a conference for veterans, he did not say whether that included all branches of Ukraine's military; the number could not be independently verified. In comparison, in the eight-year conflict between Ukraine and Russia-backed forces, around 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers and civilians were killed. Russia last gave an official military toll in March, when it said that 1,351 of its troops had been killed. At the time, US officials

estimated the figure to be around 5,000. Four months later, the British military estimated that 25,000 Russians had been killed and tens of thousands more wounded.

And this month, Pentagon officials estimated that 70,000 to 80,000 Russians have been killed or wounded; they put the number of deaths at 20,000. US officials said their estimates were based on satellite imagery, communication intercepts, social media and on-the-ground media reports.

Before the full-scale war, the Russian military had about 900,000 active-duty troops. British officials estimated that the initial war force had about 300,000 troops, including support units. US defence officials say Russia has committed nearly 85 per cent of its fielded army to the war.

REFUGEES AND DISPLACED

More than 6.6 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe, according to the United Nations' latest estimate. Of those, more than 3.8 million people have registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe.

Within Ukraine, roughly 7 million people have been displaced internally, UN officials estimate. About 13 million are stranded or unable to escape contested ground because of fighting, ruined bridges and roads, and a lack of resources.—The New York Times

Stories shape experiences, reality and colour our interpretations



Sonia Ambrosio

The writer is journalist, academic, researcher in media studies and events:

consciousness, or the story you tell yourself. Then the questions popped up: is happiness a right or a privilege? What makes one happy? Does everyone want others to be happy? I wonder.

Almost everyone has an opinion about happiness. Books on the subject are plentiful. Scholarly journals point to a serious field of study. The pursuit of increased and sustained happiness is driving people in search of a middle ground and compromises. But marriage, divorce, disabilities, or unemployment, have an effect on happiness. In the same way that it is believed that more is better — as if an increase in income brings lasting contentment. However, despite the growth and progress, people are not getting greatly happier. With social media, we live in the age of envy.

If happiness is a theoretical construction, from where comes the bizarre emptiness and the dark feelings that have knocked me down? Also, constructed? The shivering and the intense headache were real. Still, I wrestled to search for the happiness of perhaps being alive. Was I? Being

active and planning the future has always been my normal. But now, there I was lost between worlds. When I disappeared from social media, some friends noticed my absence. That was my brief happiness. I mattered to them. Isn't that what happens with likes and shares on social media? Instant pleasure? I have spent weeks without posting any photoshopped holiday

experience. I have thought to share my agony. The hair in disarray, and the tired and aching body would not make the perfect camera angles for Instagram Story or WhatsApp status. The images would not be the best to create envy. It would be too pragmatic to be intellectualised. There could be no vanity.

Immersed in a delirious time and space, I have tried to read all sorts of news from around the world to feel my existence: my world. The switch off life support in the case of Archie Battersbee — the 12-year-old boy who, allegedly, took part in an online chocking game — was not a theoretical construction nor was the fatal stabbing of an elderly man on his mobility scooter in London.

Closer to home, the dust storm warnings brought a sense of reality.

The only truth that overrode any public relations reporting. The cyber scams continued to exist in a more elaborate format. Definitely, I was alive and kicking to grab my sense of well-being. Even happier that there was no need to hone my personal brand on social media. There was no need to show off the strength of coming out from a dampened valley. Good journalism, the one that explains and provides analyses but lets the reader have his interpretation, helped me to breathe. That's because even breathing was exhausting. My sanity was unharmed. The entire experience has triggered an understanding that nobody says the whole truth because words fail.

Within society, there are complex relationships that involve leisure, the work environment, religion, money, social and health care, gender, migrants, and of course, social media. We are all part of the same fabric. Everyone, with no exception, plays a role in providing growth and happiness to generations to come. Because of that, there is a need to openly and broadly talk about social and economic issues in society.

There is no price tag on anybody's life because each person is of great value. We all come together in times of celebrations, hardship, or sorrow — though each narrative can be different.

The haze in my head seems to be dissipating. The cold and dark feelings are moving away at a slow pace. The surrounding is strange.

A bizarre and unreal emptiness. Time is an abstract concept until one needs to create a communication between experiences and events:



RECEDING RIVERS

An aerial view of a fishing boat coasting through a canal in Iraq's receding southern marshes of Chibayish in Dhi Qar province on Wednesday. — AFP

Human rights hold the key to protecting biodiversity

SOFIA MONSALVE AND GEORGINA CATACORA-VARGAS

In October 2021, two tractors with a large chain stretched between them cleared more than 2,000 hectares of forest in the Brazilian Cerrado, one of the world's most biodiverse areas. Tragically, such scenes have become all too familiar in the region.

In 2021 alone, 8,531 square kilometres of the Cerrado's forests, grasslands, and other native vegetation were destroyed — the highest rate since 2015.

And in recent decades, 40-55 per cent of the Cerrado biome has been converted to croplands, pastures, and tree plantations, with much of the deforestation making way for large industrial soy monocultures and cattle production.

Agribusinesses have dispossessed thousands of communities in land grabs and destroyed the surrounding environment.

The Cerrado is a tragic and alarming example of how quickly the world's biological diversity is being lost.

The region is estimated to be home to 12,000 plant species – 35 per cent of which grow nowhere else in the world – as well as around 25 million people, including indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers, and other communities where traditional livelihoods depend on biodiversity. All are in urgent need of protection.

For the past few years, governments have been negotiating a new Global Biodiversity Framework under the auspices of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

But very little progress was made at the most recent round of talks in June, and though there is a global consensus on the urgent need to act, the current debate is based on two dangerously mistaken

AS GOVERNMENTS SEEK AN AGREEMENT ON A GLOBAL PLAN TO HALT THE RAPID LOSS OF THE WORLD'S BIODIVERSITY, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, SMALLHOLDER FARMERS, AND OTHER AGROECOLOGICAL COMMUNITIES' RIGHTS ARE BEING SIDELINED. YET IT IS PRECISELY THESE GROUPS WHO KNOW HOW TO PRESERVE OUR PRECIOUS NATURAL SYSTEMS

premises. The first is the assumption that human societies and ecosystems exist separately from one another, implying that the best way to conserve biodiversity is to carve out protected areas that exclude all human activity.

Hence, most of the focus today is on the “30x30” campaign to establish formal protections for 30 per cent of all land and marine areas by 2030. But this “fortress conservation” approach has already been tried, and it was shown to lead to systematic violations of local communities' rights.

By deploying such strategies, governments risk sidelining precisely the people who live closest to the ecosystems that we are trying to protect, and who play a critical role in sustainably managing those resources to preserve their own livelihoods.

The second flawed premise guiding today's negotiations is that protecting biodiversity must be turned into a business. Instead of ensuring that industrial and financial activities are regulated to avoid harming people and

the planet, the current proposals focus on trying to transform the biodiversity crisis into another opportunity to boost corporate profits.

In “green” business and financial circles, the current buzz is about “nature-based solutions,” a term used to describe interventions ranging from reforestation to carbon markets. The concept has a nice ring to it, and it has been endorsed by the UN Environment Assembly. But it is dangerously ill-defined.

Those who use the term seldom refer to human rights and tend to focus instead on offsetting schemes, such as carbon markets, which tie the protection of biodiversity in one place to its ongoing destruction elsewhere.

Rather than a remedy, “nature-based solutions” are becoming part of the problem, serving as a license for business as usual, or even encouraging more land grabs in areas traditionally managed by indigenous peoples and local communities.

Governments need to look beyond “30x30” and “nature-based solutions” to put human rights at the centre of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Doing so acknowledges that human societies and natural ecosystems are inextricably connected, and that biodiversity protection requires a shift to more sustainable social and economic models. The goal should be to achieve human and ecosystems' well-being, not shareholder value.

A human-rights lens sharpens the focus on those people and communities who are most affected by today's destructive practices.

It shows that we need to address the drivers of biodiversity loss — extractive and industrial activities — rather than entrusting protection of the world's ecosystems to corporations and financial markets.

Governments are required to hold these entities accountable for the damage they cause to the environment and human communities, and to protect the rights of indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers, and others who have long helped protect the world's precious ecosystems.

Our food systems are a prime example of why we need a different approach. The crops and animal breeds that feed humanity co-evolved with human farming communities over the course of millennia. But with the expansion of industrial farming models since the twentieth century, we have radically broken from this tradition, destroying 75 per cent of biological diversity in our food and agriculture.

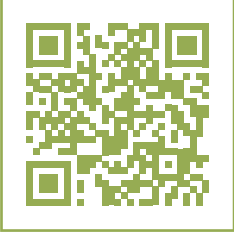
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In 2021 alone, 8,531 square kilometres of the Cerrado's forests, grasslands, and other native vegetation were destroyed.

sport

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Oman set for World Veteran TT 2023



Dignitaries at the press conference. PHOTOS: SALEH AL SHARJI



ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

The Sultanate of Oman will step up their hosting credentials to the premium level when capital city Muscat hosts the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 for the first time in the Middle East.

The world event will bring an expected 3,500 players from 70 nations to the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) for a week of action from January 15-21.

The official logo and mascot for the championships were announced at a press conference held at OCEC where representatives from the organising committee – the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) and Oman Sail – outlined their vision for the event.

The championships will be staged throughout OCEC, utilising the five exhibition halls for 277 competition spaces. Players will range from the age of 40 to over 90 and will compete in different age categories with 44 world titles to be won.

ITTF President Petra Sorling said, “We are delighted to be coming to Oman in 2023 and expand the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships to the Middle East for the first time. Now in its 40th year, the championships have brought together the best veteran players from around the world, and we are all looking forward to experiencing a new host venue. This is a beautiful and welcoming country with a growing reputation for staging world class events in many sporting disciplines and we are extremely confident that OCEC will be the ideal venue for the event.”

OTTA President Abdullah Bamakhalaf said, “This is a proud moment for the Oman Table Tennis Association and a major step forward in the development of the sport in both Oman and the region. The event has the potential to deliver wide-ranging benefits to the country, energise the tourism sector, provide further impetus for enhancing Oman’s capabilities as a world class host of events, and leave a positive social legacy for the entire



country.”

Khalil al Muhannadi, Vice-President of ITTF, President of ATTU, Arab and Qatar Table Tennis Federation, said, “The staging of the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 in the Sultanate of Oman is a huge boost to the sport across the entire region. For the first time, some of the world’s best players will head to the Middle East for a prestigious international tournament. We hope that this helps to raise the profile of the sport across the Middle East and we can look



forward to more championships coming to the region in the future.”

‘AL WASHAQ’ NAMED MASCOT

The organisers also unveiled the official logo and mascot for the Championships. Taking inspiration from the natural environment, the logo depicts a table tennis paddle adorned with colours of Oman’s spectacular landscape and a ball showing the nation’s geographical location, while the native cat Al Washaq (Caracal Lynx), known

for its power and agility, will be the official mascot.

The event will showcase the best of Omani culture along and offer participants the opportunity to explore Muscat, enjoy the local landmarks, culture, and authentic Arabian experiences.

The organising committee will work alongside ‘Visit Oman’ to create bespoke tourism experiences for attendees to enjoy. Activities will be delivered by SME operators within Muscat and the neighbouring governorates to ensure that the in-country value is

shared to benefit the wider national tourism sector.

First held in Goteborg, Sweden, in 1982, with just 450 participants from 21 countries, the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships have grown to become a major fixture in the global calendar.

Held every two years until the unfortunate cancellation of the 2020 event due to be staged in Bordeaux, France, the 2023 event will be the first since 2018 in Las Vegas, USA, which attracted close to 4,000 players from 86 countries.

- EVENT SCHEDULE**
- January 15, 2023:** Opening ceremony
- January 16, 2023:** Singles competitions, Group stage
- January 17, 2023:** Singles and Doubles competitions, Group stage
- January 18, 2023:** Day off/ Touristic offer
- January 19, 2023:** Singles and Doubles competitions, Knockout round
- January 20, 2023:** Singles and Doubles competitions, Knockout round
- January 21, 2023:** Singles and Doubles semifinals and finals

- AGE CATEGORIES**
- 40-44 years
 - 45-49 years
 - 50-54 years
 - 55-59 years
 - 60-64 years
 - 65-69 years
 - 70-74 years
 - 75-79 years
 - 80-84 years
 - 85-89 years
 - Over 90 years

- PAST HOSTS (PARTICIPANTS/NATIONS)**
- 1982 - Goteborg, Sweden (450/21)
 - 1984 – Helsinki, Finland (650/36)
 - 1986 – Rimini, Italy (1100/38)
 - 1988 – Zagreb, Croatia (1650/45)
 - 1990 – Baltimore, USA (1100/46)
 - 1992 - Dublin, Ireland (1300/48)
 - 1994 – Melbourne, Australia (1800/49)
 - 1996 – Lillehammer, Norway (1950/49)
 - 1998 – Manchester, England (1400/53)
 - 2000 – Vancouver, Canada (1850/57)
 - 2002 – Lucerne, Switzerland (2750/63)
 - 2004 – Yokohama, Japan (2384/47)
 - 2006 – Bremen, Germany (3650/59)
 - 2008 – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1378/52)
 - 2010 – Hothot, China (2065/51)
 - 2012 – Stockholm, Sweden (3335/66)
 - 2014 – Auckland, New Zealand (1640/58)
 - 2016 – Alicante, Spain (4602/82)
 - 2018 – Las Vegas, USA (3964/86)
 - 2020 – Bordeaux, France (no event held)

In brief

MUSCAT



OMAN TO TAKE PART IN ARAB SWIMMING IN EGYPT

Oman will take part in the Arab swimming championship in Egypt in September, announced Taha bin Suleiman al Kishry, Chairman of Oman Swimming Association.

The Oman Swimming Association board meeting also reviewed the results of the Oman national team's participation in the Pan-Arab Championship held in Algeria from July 20 to 24. They discussed Olympian swimmer Issa al Adawi's preparation camp in Japan for the upcoming events.

MUMBAI



LAXMAN NAMED INDIA'S INTERIM COACH

VVS Laxman will take over as India's interim coach for the Asia Cup after head coach Rahul Dravid tested positive for Covid-19, the country's cricket board (BCCI) said on Wednesday.

Laxman, who is also the head of cricket at the National Cricket Academy, had led the second-string side that beat Zimbabwe in a three-match one-day international series this month.

Dravid tested positive on Tuesday before the team's departure to the UAE and will join them once he tests negative and is cleared by the BCCI medical team. "Laxman... will oversee the team's preparation in the absence of Rahul Dravid," BCCI secretary Jay Shah said.

MANCHESTER



ENGLAND RECALL ROBINSON AT EXPENSE OF POTTS

Ollie Robinson, who last played for England in the final Ashes Test in January, has been recalled for the second Test with South Africa as the hosts bid to level the three match series.

Sussex paceman Robinson replaces Matthew Potts for the match at Old Trafford which starts on Thursday. England will need a considerably improved performance following the innings and 12 runs thrashing inside three days at Lord's in the first Test.

Robinson has 39 wickets in nine Tests at an average of 21.28.

Following a poor Ashes series, where his approach to fitness were questioned in public by the England coaching staff, Robinson missed the subsequent tour of the West Indies with back spasms.



PREPARATIONS IN FULL SWING FOR ARAB VETERANS TENNIS

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH,
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

Nearly 200 senior Arab players have registered their participation in the 10th Arab Veterans Tennis Championship to be held in Oman in September.

The championship will be staged in the Governorate of Dhofar from September 4 to 9.

Oman Tennis Association (OTA) Chairman Dr Ahmed al Saidi heads the organising committee for the Arab veterans tournament.

"The preparations are in full swing. We hope to stage a successful tournament with good participation from the Arab countries," Al Saidi said.

Competitions will be held in men's singles and doubles, women's singles and doubles and mixed doubles.

The age categories for men will be for 30-39 years, 40-49 years, 50-59 years, 60-64 years and



above 65 years while for women it would be between 30-44 years, 44-54 years and above 55 years.

OTA Executive Director Salman al Balushi said nearly 200 players have confirmed their participation.

"We have got nearly 200 registrations so far. It is expected to go further before the start of the tournament," Salman, who is also the tournament director, said.

August 25 is the last date to

register for the tournament.

International Tennis Federation referee Yousuf al Theraiyyaf will be the chief referee for the tournament.

The organising committee held a preparatory meeting on Monday headed by Dr Ahmed al Saidi, Chairman of the Committee, in the presence of Salman al al Balushi, Tournament Director, Salem al Habsi, Head of the Marketing and Promotion Committee, Bader al Zadjali,



Head of the Media Committee, and Faisal al Balushi, the tournament's coordinator.

Twenty Omani players will compete in the men's section, Salman said.

"Most of the players are expected to arrive in Salalah on September 3. The players will be put up at Al Manar and Rotana hotels," he said.

The organisers have arranged an exhibition match between star Omani player Fatma al Nabhani

and Kuwait's Mohammed Abdul Ridha Ghareeb. Hamoud bin Sangour al Zadjali, former Central Bank of Oman Chairman, will play against Ali Sultani in another VIP exhibition match.

The competitions will be held in the five courts at the Al Saada Sports Complex in Salalah.

Dr Ahmed al Saidi, head of the tournament's organising committee, will visit Dhofar Governorate to see the final preparations for the tournament.

The tennis fiesta will feature players from the age of 30 to 75 years.

The championships will be held under the auspices of the Arab Seniors Sports Federation and jointly organised by Al Nasr Club, Salalah, and the Oman Tennis Association (OTA). The championship is supported by the Directorate General of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and Oman Olympic Committee.

Golden sword festival to start on Saturday

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

The seventh edition of the golden sword camel race festival competitions will start on Saturday in Al Bashayer Camel Race Track in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate at Adam.

The race will be organised by the Al Bashaer Department for Arab Camel in cooperation with the local Committee in Al Bashayer Square and the private sector under the patronage of Engineer Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Fisheries.

The race will include 16 races, 12 rounds for 'Hagayag' category, below 3 years old, for a distance of 2 km,

including 7 rounds for 'Bakar' (female camel) and 5 rounds for 'Jaadan' (male camel).

The first place winner in the first half will have the festival golden sword and an MG car, while the winner in the second half will have the golden dagger and an MG car, and for the rest runs, the first place will be an icon for 'Haima's shield' and cash prize, in addition there are



4 rounds for 'Lagaya' category (4 years old) for a distance of 3 km, golden Shelfa and the gun will be for the winner in each rounds and cash prizes for the top ten places.

The seventh edition of the

golden sword festival, which started in 2015, comes with the support of the

Rubua Haima Company, owned by Hamad bin Saeed al Junaibi, member of the Majlis Ash'shura representing Duqm.

The support comes within the company's annual community service, which aims to support camel owners and camel coaches in Oman, as it represents a source of livelihood for a large group of breeders and those interested in

camels.

The festival is expected to witness intense competition between the qualified camels from the four qualifying races that were held earlier on different fields.

Benfica's Neres ends Dynamo Kyiv's CL hopes

PARIS: Benfica cruised into the group stage of the Champions League after overrunning Dynamo Kyiv 3-0 in the second leg of their playoff on Tuesday thanks to David Neres' assist and goal.

The two-time European champions from Portugal will be in the draw on Thursday while Dynamo will be in the Europa League.

"From the first second we wanted to win and showed it. Now we are happy to be in the Champions League," Benfica coach Roger Schmidt said.

"Let's wait for the draw and then we'll see. It's never easy. I'm happy because we deserve it," he added.

Domestic top-flight football, which had been suspended since Russia's invasion in February and during the ongoing war, returned to Ukraine earlier on Tuesday.

The Dynamo players, who begin their league campaign on Sunday, took to the pitch at the Estadio da Luz draped in the Ukrainian flag in a message of support to their compatriots back home.

Dynamo were already trailing 2-0 from the first leg and they were always on the back foot against last season's quarter-finalists.



Benfica's Brazilian midfielder David Neres (L) makes a bicycle kick during the Uefa Champions League playoff second leg match against Dynamo Kiev at the Luz stadium in Lisbon. — AFP

Former Manchester City defender Nicolas Otamendi's emphatic header put Benfica ahead on the night in the 27th

minute in front of a crowd of more than 58,000 from a Neres cross.

Rafa Silva netted next for the

Portuguese side and Brazilian forward Neres swept the ball into the net after a flowing move before half-time.

In the second half, Enzo Fernandez's close-range effort was saved by Dynamo goalkeeper Georgiy Bushchan as Benfica

wrapped up a convincing 5-0 aggregate win.

Elsewhere, Milan Pavkov's 90th minute own goal secured Maccabi Haifa's spot as they beat Red Star Belgrade 5-4 over two legs.

Jan Kliment's 73rd minute effort booked Viktoria Plzen's place in the draw as they beat Azeris Qarabag 2-1 on aggregate.

On Wednesday, former two-time champions PSV Eindhoven host Rangers with the tie at 2-2, Copenhagen head to Trabzonspor with a 2-1 lead and Bodo/Glimt go to Dinamo Zagreb with a 1-0 advantage. — AFP

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE RESULTS ON TUESDAY PLAYOFFS, FIRST LEG:

Viktoria Plzen (CZE) 2 (Kopic 58, Kliment 73) Qarabag (AZE) 1 (Ozobic 38)

- Viktoria Plzen win 2-1 on aggregate

Benfica (POR) 3 (Otamendi 27, Rafa Silva 40, Neres 42) Dynamo Kyiv (UKR) 0

- Benfica win 5-0 on aggregate
Red Star Belgrade (SRB) 2 (Pesic 27, Ivanic 43) Maccabi Haifa (ISR) 2 (Sundgren 45+5, Pavkov 90-og) - Maccabi Haifa win 5-4 on aggregate

ELMS race winner Al Harthy targets podium return

■ AHMAD AND OMAN RACING READY FOR RD4 OF ELMS SEASON

■ OMANI DRIVER HOPING FOR BOP RULING BREAK AFTER MONZA FRUSTRATIONS

■ AL HARTHY, DE HAAN, SORENSEN AIMING TO CLIMB FROM P3 IN STANDINGS

BARCELONA: Spain's Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya hosts the fourth race of the 2022 European Le Mans Series on August 28, where Ahmad al Harthy is hopeful he and the Oman Racing team can get their LMGTE championship bid back on track.

Oman's Al Harthy, who is partnered by Sam De Haan and Marco Sorensen for his maiden season in the ELMS, is already an LMGTE race winner – from round two at Imola in Italy – but last time out at Monza the squad had to contend with an extremely negative Balance of Performance grading, which ruined any opportunity to be competitive.

Fighting as hard as possible, and driving perfectly with a bullet proof strategy, the Oman Racing trio could still only rescue a ninth place finish in the Monza four-hour race with the No 69 Aston Martin Vantage GTE completely hamstrung.

Now, Al Harthy – who is supported by prestigious partners Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS – says a podium return at the very least is the target, if the BOP ruling for Barcelona is less draconian.

"Monza was a very tough weekend, we just didn't have the power to compete due to the severity of the BOP, so we're hopeful we'll be on a much more level playing field this weekend in Barcelona and able to challenge for the podium," he commented, "That's what we're all here for, to race as hard as we can for trophies, wins and, ultimately, a championship.

"Everyone at Oman Racing has done an amazing job all season in our first year in the European Le Mans Series, the team has worked so hard and I was so impressed with



how all three of us – Sam, Marco and I – drove at Monza despite how demoralising it was. We obviously lost the championship lead but we're determined to get it back and will be giving everything as we always do."

Barcelona is a track where Al Harthy has enjoyed strong success in the past with Oman Racing, not least last year's Pro-Am podium finish in the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup race which the sportsman dedicated to the people of Oman in the aftermath of tropical cyclone Shaheen.

In 2019, he was second in Pro-Am during the memorable GTWCE season finale in Barcelona, the Omani's fifth straight podium from five races which also helped to wrap up his and Oman Racing's second Pro-Am title in the Endurance Cup after a sparkling campaign.

Looking ahead to this weekend's ELMS action, opening free practice at Barcelona will get underway at 11.00 local time on August 26, with a standalone session for 'Bronze' graded drivers following at 15.30. Second free practice will take place at 11.10 local time on August 27, ahead of the LMGTE qualifying session at 15.45.

On Sunday, August 28, the 4 Hours of Barcelona will begin at 11.45 local time and will be streamed live online at: <https://live.europeanlemansseries.com/en/>

2022 European Le Mans Series – LMGTE Driver Standings (after Round 3)

3rd Ahmad al Harthy/Marco Sorensen/Sam De Haan, 28pts

2022 European Le Mans Series – LMGTE Team Standings (after Round 3)

3rd Oman Racing with TF Sport, 28pts



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Oman’s expatriate remittances vs GDP the highest in the region

JOMAR MENDOZA
@JmObserver

Remittances by expatriate workers in Oman reached RO 3.11 billion (\$8.1 billion) in 2021, a 7.5-per cent decrease compared to 2020 with RO 3.373 billion, according to a latest report by GCC-Stat. Remittances have been on a downward trend since 2015, when outflows hit a peak of RO 4.226 billion.

The UAE recorded the highest outflow of workers’ remittances in the GCC countries in 2021, with \$47.5 billion, an increase of 9.7 per cent compared to 2020. Saudi Arabia came in second with \$39.8 billion, an increase of 15.9 per cent. Kuwait with \$18.3 billion with a 6.1-per cent increase, followed by Qatar with \$10.9 billion, an increase of 8.8 per cent.

Oman and Bahrain saw a decrease in expat remittances with \$8.1 billion, a decrease of 7.5 per cent for Oman and \$2.5 billion or 7.7 per cent decrease for Bahrain.

In Oman, the RO 3.11 billion expat remittances

amount to 9.5 per cent — the highest in the region — of the ratio of worker’s remittances to Gross Domestic Product in 2021 (at current prices), the report said, citing bulletins issued by the central banks of the GCC for their balance of payments, after converting them to US dollars.

Bahrain came in second with 6.5 per cent of the ratio of worker’s remittances to Gross Domestic Product.

The slump in expat remittances is attributed to the impacts of the pandemic, which led to stagnant wages and a steep fall in the number of expatriates in Oman, according to a report by the Central Bank of Oman.

A contracting economy attributable to the oil price collapse and the pandemic led to a 15.4-per cent decrease in the total size of the expatriate population in employment in the Sultanate of Oman in 2020, the apex bank stated.

The US dollar surge, caused by the Russia-Ukraine war earlier this year, brought some news to cheer for the expats here as one Omani rial fetches

Procurement of locally grown wheat surges to 1,100 MT in 2022



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

Oman Flour Mills (OFM) has ramped up its procurement of locally grown Omani wheat in a concerted effort to sustain the growth of wheat-based farming in the Sultanate of Oman. Procurements have grown nearly four-fold to 1,100 metric tonnes this year, according to the publicly listed firm.

Haitham al Fannah, CEO - Oman Flour Mills, said: “Supporting local farmers is OFM’s top priority; that is why we have renewed the contract to purchase locally grown wheat and are keen to support local growers in any way possible. Our lifting has increased to 1100 MT from 300 MT in the previous year.”

In remarks to the *Observer*, the CEO also noted that consumer interest in flour and bakery products based on locally grown wheat is growing as well.

“Supporting local farmers is OFM’s top priority; that is why we have renewed the contract to purchase locally grown wheat and are keen to support local growers in any way possible

HAITHAM AL FANNAH
CEO, Oman Flour Mills

“We are purchasing directly from farmers to ensure that the benefits reach directly to the farmers without involving commercial intermediaries, which is a priority to support the farmers in any way. Our sales number are growing yearly and consumers are loyal to the 100 per cent Omani brand,” he

added.

The wheat crop is of interest to many farmers in the Sultanate of Oman as an important food crop that enters the food security basket. Mid-November is the time for planting wheat in most governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

The cultivation season extends from mid-October to mid-December, but much depends on availability of water and general farming conditions.

For its part, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources works, through its various agencies, to support and encourage farmers to grow wheat as a strategic commodity that strengthens food security, by providing them with seeds of improved, high-yield varieties.

This is in addition to guidance and technical support and direct supervision of the fields.

According to official figures, wheat production amounted to

about 2,649 MT in 2020/2021 season, representing an increase of 19 per cent over the previous land. Land under wheat cultivation rose to 2,449 acres, recording an increase of 19.6 per cent. Around 3,000 Omani farmers are currently engaged in wheat farming in Oman.

Khalaa Fail Mattar Jaddad, a wheat farmer who owns a farm in the Najd area of Thamrait, said: “I cultivated about 55 acres of wheat using local species distributed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources. Thanks to the support received from the ministry, we harvested about 64 tonnes of wheat.”

Qais bin Abdul Rahman al Abri, who grows wheat in the Wilayat of Bahla, added: “Wheat is a crop that generates a rewarding income when it is cultivated in proper conditions. We have produced 35 tonnes of wheat by cultivating 35 acres of farmland this season.”

Oman weighs wind power projects in Ras Madrasah, Sadah

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

Windswept coastal parts of Sadah in Dhofar Governorate and Ras Madrasah in Al Wusta Governorate are being assessed for their potential to host wind farm projects as part of the Omani government’s drive to ramp up the contribution of renewable energy resources to the country’s electricity generation capacity.

This is in addition to parts of Duqm (Al Wusta Governorate) and Jaalan Bani Bu Ali (South Al Sharqiyah Governorate), which have already been primed for new investments in wind-based power

projects in the Sultanate of Oman. Identifying suitable locations for the development of wind farms, as well as solar-based power projects, is part of the mandate of Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP), which is the sole buyer of all output from electricity and water projects.

OPWP, part of Nama Group, says it has made headway in its Wind Resource Assessment efforts.

“OPWP has successfully completed Phase I of Wind Resource Assessment monitoring stations at Duqm (SEZAD) and Jaalan Bani Bu Ali sites and



successfully commissioned Phase II in November 2021 in Ras Madrasah and Sadah sites.

“The new stations will continue to collect the data for

renewable energy development plan,” the power procurer stated in its recently published 2021 Annual Report.

Collecting comprehensive wind resource data is key to the bankability of any wind project, says the stated-owned procurement entity.

According to parent organisation Nama Group, the process of qualifying developers for proposed wind projects in Duqm and Jaalan Bani Bu Ali could potentially start this year.

Oman’s only commercial-scale wind farm is currently in operation at Harweel in Dhofar Governorate. Operated

by the Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer), also part of Nama Group, the 50 MW, 13-turbine wind farm came into operation in 2019, helping ease the governorate’s dependence on gas-based generation.

Sector regulator — the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) — has already prepared a regulatory framework to enable the production and consumption of electricity from renewable energy sources. Oman has a target to secure a 10-per cent contribution from renewables to its electricity requirements by 2025, rising to 39 per cent by 2040.

KR Eshraqa’s Stemazone conducts ‘Green Innovation’ summer camp

MUSCAT: Committed to promoting a knowledge-based economy, Khimji Ramdas Eshraqa’s Stemazone initiative has continued to focus on promoting the culture of scientific thinking, problem-solving, and analytical decision-making amongst the youth.

Designed as a sustainable educational programme, Stemazone was conceptualised in partnership with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), to introduce Omani children between 6 to 16 years, to the world of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Arts (STEAM).

KR Eshraqa Stemazone partnering with DAI’s Sustainable Business Group designed and implemented the ‘Green Innovation’ Summer Camp that highlighted ‘Climate Change’ as its central theme with the slogan ‘I can change the world’.

The ‘Green Innovation’ Stemazone Summer camp was geared at delving deeper into the concept of climate change by leveraging new technologies that utilise Big Data and other algorithms.

The camp also illustrated the use and role of Big Data in tackling real-life problems. From 1 August to 15 August 2022, summer camp catered to 50 students between 13-16 years of age, the event was held at the Muscat STEM Centre and Khimji Ramdas Infrastructure campus at Ghala.

The programme offered two modes of execution — IoT and



Electronics and 3D Modelling. The participants were divided into ten groups consisting of five members each. They were then assigned a specific problem in climate change for which they had to come up with an innovative solution.

Commenting on the programme, Nailesh Khimji, Director, Khimji Ramdas said, “KR Eshraqa has been at the forefront of spearheading initiatives that add value to society. We are delighted to partner with DAI to inculcate world-class education programmes in alignment with Oman Vision 2040.

STEAM programmes have helped foster an inclusive learning environment evoking curiosity in young minds, and boosting their

creativity. The ‘Green Innovation’ Stemazone Summer camp aimed to address broader global challenges like climate change. Students were empowered with the right tools, methods, and knowledge needed to lead transformative change.”

He further added: “Modules dedicated to climate change literacy are intertwined with the concepts of science, technology, engineering, arts, and math. Therefore, programmes that thoughtfully converge the two have the potential to have an enhanced positive impact in the long run.”

The ‘Green Innovation’ Stemazone Summer camp, apart from focusing on topics related to climate change, also highlighted

the role of sustainable cities and renewable energy solutions in Oman.

Through active mentorship from professionals, students were given valuable lessons on building business models and pitching their skills. By encouraging students to explore new techniques, the programme was able to help them connect their problem-solving ideas to real-world solutions.

To honour the efforts of the participants, an exhibition was conducted at the KR Infra office where students got an opportunity to showcase their ideas. After a thorough evaluation of the projects, the winners of the Cognitive Development and Stemazone Summer Programme were duly rewarded.

SBA enables ‘book a Nissan test drive at home’ service

MUSCAT: Prospective Nissan customers can now undertake a test drive of their favourite model from the comfort of their home. The service announced by Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) has gained a great response from interested customers.

A senior official of SBA said, “To avail our home test drive service, customers have to just let us know what vehicle they are interested in, and we will take it to their homes. Our book a home test drive’ service has been appreciated by prospective customers.”

The ‘book a home test drive’ service is applicable only in the Muscat governorate. While customers will be charged RO 5 for home test drive service, upon sales conversion a sum of RO 10 will be passed on to them as cash gift.

The service enables potential customers



to schedule their test drive online as per their convenience.

Nissan is committed to extending outstanding pre-sales services to its customers. This is yet another unique move from SBA Oman to make the experience of buying Nissan cars more convenient.

An interested customer can schedule a test

drive of Nissan models from the comfort of their homes just by logging on to the official SBA Nissan Oman website on the link <https://en.nissanoman.com/services/book-home-test-drive.html>.

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Role of banks in financing small projects



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

Banks in emerging countries are keen to finance micro and medium-sized enterprises promoted by entrepreneurs and start-up business owners with the patented to become large institutions.

We in the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab region have many young people who are distinguished in presenting creative ideas, doing research and studies, and entering into productive operations. But these young people need funds to purchase machinery, equipment and know how to enter into commercial operations.

Consequently, they look for large investors or the necessary financing units to launch their projects.

Many Latin American and some African countries have succeeded in supporting start-up funding by local banks, in cooperation with well-known financial institutions such as the International Finance Corporation.

El Salvador, for example, has succeeded during the past two years in financing these small projects, especially those led by women, in addition to engaging in smart climate-friendly investments.

These projects focused on three areas, including strengthening the productive sector, building sustainable cities and communities, and enhancing financial inclusion.

The banking policies have helped reduce barriers to accessing finance for these disadvantaged sectors, while experts believe that such partnerships, accompanied

from the outset by key technical advice can lead to job creation and a better quality of life for people.

Such partnerships, which are established in cooperation with some international financial institutions, are working to create a pilot effect by proving the feasibility of investing in emerging markets, especially since there is a need for this type of investment that enhances the economic opportunities and creates more job opportunities for citizens.

When the productive sector is strengthened, for example, it makes start-ups more solid and diversified in the production process, and provides more decent jobs, which helps people to develop their skills and generate daily income.

In building sustainable cities and communities, it works to ensure that more people have access to decent housing, to help spread mobility solutions and to support the decarbonisation of highly polluting industries.

With regard to promoting financial inclusion, this helps in facilitating access to banking products and services and providing financial education to contribute to the formalisation of the economy.

International Finance Corporation sources indicate that only 40 per cent of micro, small and medium enterprises in El Salvador can obtain a bank loan or one credit line, while there is a possibility for women to access bank accounts for loans, where banks are working to increase their share in this type of financing.

Financial support, especially for the productive sector, by more than 30 per cent to protect its owners, ensure their continuity of production, and preserve jobs in the country.

The challenges faced by small business owners are many, and the financial and banking support from local banks undoubtedly contributes to the economic revitalisation of them and the local economy of their countries and provides more work for job-seekers.

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Qatar
Investment
Authority aims
to invest \$3bn
in Pakistan

DOHA: The Qatar Investment Authority aims to invest \$3 billion in Pakistan, Qatar's Emiri Diwan said on Wednesday, lending support to the South Asian nation's cash-strapped economy.

Pakistan is in economic turmoil and faces a balance of payments crisis, with foreign reserves having dropped as low as \$7.8 billion, barely enough for more than a month of imports. It is also contending with a widening current account deficit, depreciation of the rupee against the US dollar and inflation that hit more than 24 per cent in July.

"The Qatar Investment Authority announced its aspiration to invest \$3 billion in various commercial and investment sectors in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan," the Emiri Diwan said, without giving details.

The announcement was made during a visit to Doha by Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who held official talks with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on Wednesday after a meeting with the QIA on Tuesday.

"His Highness stressed the importance of the brotherly and strategic relations between the two countries and their aspiration to enhance economic partnership by raising trade exchange and promoting investments through the Qatar Investment Authority," the Emiri Diwan said. — Reuters

Banking sector credit rises 4.1
per cent to RO 28.4 billion: CBO



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUGUST 24

Total outstanding credit extended by Other Depository Corporations (ODCs), comprising conventional and Islamic banks in the Sultanate of Oman grew by 4.1 per cent to RO 28.4 billion at the end of June 2022, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) revealed in its latest monthly newsletter.

Credit to the private sector demonstrated a slight increase of 2.3 per cent (Y-o-Y) to reach RO 23.8 billion, it said.

Non-financial corporations received the highest shares of the total private sector credit, at approximately 46.0 per cent at end-June 2022, followed by household sector at 45.4 per cent. The share of financial corporations was 5.0 per cent while other sectors received the remaining 3.6 per cent of total private sector credit as at end-June 2022.

Total deposits held with ODCs registered a Y-o-Y growth of 5.4 per cent to reach RO 26.3 billion at the end of June 2022.

Total private sector deposits increased by 1.0 per cent to RO 17.5 billion. In terms of

NON-FINANCIAL CORPORATIONS RECEIVED THE HIGHEST SHARES OF THE TOTAL PRIVATE SECTOR CREDIT, AT APPROXIMATELY 46.0 PER CENT AT END-JUNE 2022, FOLLOWED BY HOUSEHOLD SECTOR AT 45.4 PER CENT

sector-wise composition of private sector deposits, the biggest contribution is from household deposits at 52.1 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations at 30.0 per cent, financial corporations at 15.2 per cent and other sectors at 2.7 per cent.

The combined balance sheet of conventional banks showed a Y-o-Y growth of 2.6 per cent in total outstanding credit as of end-June 2022. Credit to the private sector increased by 0.7 to reach RO 19.1 billion while their overall investments in securities went up by 2.9 per cent to RO 4.9 billion at end-June 2022.

Investment in Government Development Bonds decreased by 0.8 per cent compared to the same period last year to RO 2.2 billion while their investments in foreign securities declined by 18.9 per cent to RO 0.69 billion at the end of June 2022.

On the liabilities side, aggregate deposits held with the conventional banks increased

by 3.9 per cent Y-o-Y to RO 21.6 billion at end-June 2022. Government deposits with conventional banks witnessed an increase of 15.7 per cent at RO 5 billion, and deposits of public enterprises increased by 36.2 per cent to RO 1.6 billion.

Private sector deposits, which accounted for 67.1 per cent of total deposits with conventional banks, decreased by 1.8 per cent as of June 2022 to reach RO 14.5 billion.

The total assets of Islamic Banks and Windows increased by 9.6 per cent on a Y-o-Y basis to RO 6.2 billion and constituted about 15.9 per cent of the banking system's assets at end-June 2022.

Islamic banking entities provided financing of RO 5.1 billion at the end of June 2022, recording a growth of 11.2 per cent over that a year ago. Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 12.8 per cent to RO 4.7 billion.

Among the indicators of monetary aggregates, broad

money supply M2 at end-June 2022 increased by 3.3 per cent to reach RO 20.8 billion. This is attributed to the increased in narrow money (M1) by 3.8 per cent, along with 3.03 per cent increase in quasi-money (Rial Omani saving and time deposits, certificates of deposit issued by banks, margin deposits and foreign currency denominated deposits).

Looking at components of narrow money (M1) during the same period, currency with the public fell by 5.1 per cent, while demand deposit increased by 6.6 per cent.

The weighted average interest rate on RO deposits with conventional banks witnessed a marginal decrease from 1.952 per cent at end-June 2021 to 1.870 per cent at end-June 2022, and the weighted average RO lending rate decreased from 5.524 per cent to 5.502 per cent over the same period.

Meanwhile, the overnight Rial Omani domestic inter-bank lending rate rose to 1.450 per cent in June 2022 from 0.336 per cent a year ago. The average Repo rate for liquidity injection by the CBO at end-June 2022 witnessed an increase to 1.875 from 0.500 a year ago.

Brent oil climbs
above \$100 a
barrel amid talk
about Opec cuts



An aerial view shows tugboats helping a crude oil tanker to berth at an oil terminal, off Waidiao Island in Zhoushan, Zhejiang province, China. — Reuters

LONDON: Benchmark Brent oil climbed above \$100 a barrel on Wednesday after Saudi Arabia suggested this week that Opec could consider cutting output in response to poor liquidity in the crude futures market and fears about a global economic downturn. Brent for October settlement reached a three-week high, trading up \$1.30, or 1.3 per cent, at \$101.52 a barrel by 08:50 GMT. US crude was up \$1.18, or 1.3 per cent, at \$94.92 a barrel. Contracts for both crudes soared on Tuesday after Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman flagged the possibility of cutting production amid poor futures market liquidity and macro-economic fears. Opec sources said any cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies, known as Opec+, were likely to coincide with a return of Iranian the market should Tehran secure a nuclear deal with world powers.

Opec+ is already producing 2.9 million barrels per day less than its target, complicating any decision on cuts or how to calculate the baseline for an output reduction. — Reuters

Protecting buildings and homes with demountable flood barriers

JANSHER SALAHUDDIEN

The recent floods associated with rains have again raised the need for addressing risks in the Sultanate of Oman to save lives and properties. A couple of weeks ago, there was an article published in the Observer titled, 'Managing Flood Risks', that caught my attention.

The article shed light on the massive losses incurred by the government and private homeowners during the recent adverse weather conditions, but the sad part is that this story repeats every year. The government is

doing its part by creating drainage systems and other means to divert the water. But I feel that there is a lack of awareness on how floods threatening homes and property owners can be addressed. I would like to share a few ways on how this can be done.

Floods in Oman are majorly occurring due to running water that flows through the wadi when it rains. In extreme flood events, this running water can enter houses or buildings through the entry and exit points like gates, if there is a boundary wall, doors, or low windows.

Blocking this entry and exit points with a blockade can prevent losses in a big way. But the



challenge here is that we cannot have a permanent structure as

it will hinder the movement of people and materials.

So, what we need is a temporary blockage that can be put into place when there is rain and removed later when it is safe. An old and traditional way of making these blockages is using gunny bags filled with sand which are effective in blocking the water flow up to an extent.

The challenge with gunny bags is that they are heavy to move when a quick blockage must be made and messy to handle after the flood.

A modern way of addressing this issue is by using a demountable flood barrier made of lightweight marine aluminium. These structures last more than 25+ years and make a watertight

blockage to prevent water from entering buildings.

These barriers are custom made to fit the access doors and designed based on the head of water experienced during a previous flood. The lightweight aluminium makes it easy for one person to install and the investment required for these barriers are nominal compared to the damage a flood can cause.

Multiple organisations are already using these barriers in the Sultanate of Oman to protect their valuable assets.

[The writer is the Business Head — AgTech at Unicorn International LLC; Email: jansheras@unicornllc.com]

SHORT TAKES

COLOMBO

IMF team holds talks with crisis-hit Sri Lanka

A team from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will meet Sri Lanka's president on Wednesday for talks to finalise a bailout package, including restructuring debt of about \$29 billion, amid the nation's worst financial crisis in more than seven decades.

The second such IMF visit in three months comes as the Indian Ocean island scrambles to lock down a staff-level pact with the global lender for a possible \$3 billion programme to pave its



way out of the crisis.

"The IMF team will meet with the president and a finance ministry delegation later today," an official at the presidential secretariat said, declining to be identified. — Reuters

SHANGHAI

China tightens green bond rules

China has raised the bar for issuances in the world's second-biggest green bond market, taking a major step towards adopting global standards and eliminating 'greenwashing'.

Starting this month, the Shanghai Stock Exchange, requires 100 per cent of the proceeds from green bond issuances to be invested in green projects such as clean energy.

Separately, the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC) has instructed both the Shanghai

and Shenzhen bourses to revise rules to bring issuances of such bonds in line with the newly published China Green Bond Principles, said two sources.

China published the Principles — a set of self-disciplinary green bond frameworks largely based on international standards — on July 29.

The planned rule changes would make the guidelines mandatory for exchange-traded bonds, and reduce the risk of 'greenwashing'. — Reuters

JOHANNESBURG

South African inflation hits new 13-year high

Inflation in South Africa accelerated to its highest level in 13 years in July, pushed mainly by surging food, transport and electricity prices, as workers staged protests over the high cost of living.

Consumer prices rose at an annual rate of 7.8 per cent in July, up from 7.4 per cent in June, the national statistics agency StatsSA said.

Strikers called for government action to combat rising poverty and the cost of living in the



world's most unequal country.

While the new inflation figure is bad news for consumers, economists see the country likely reaching a tipping point and believe inflation could ease in the coming months. — AFP

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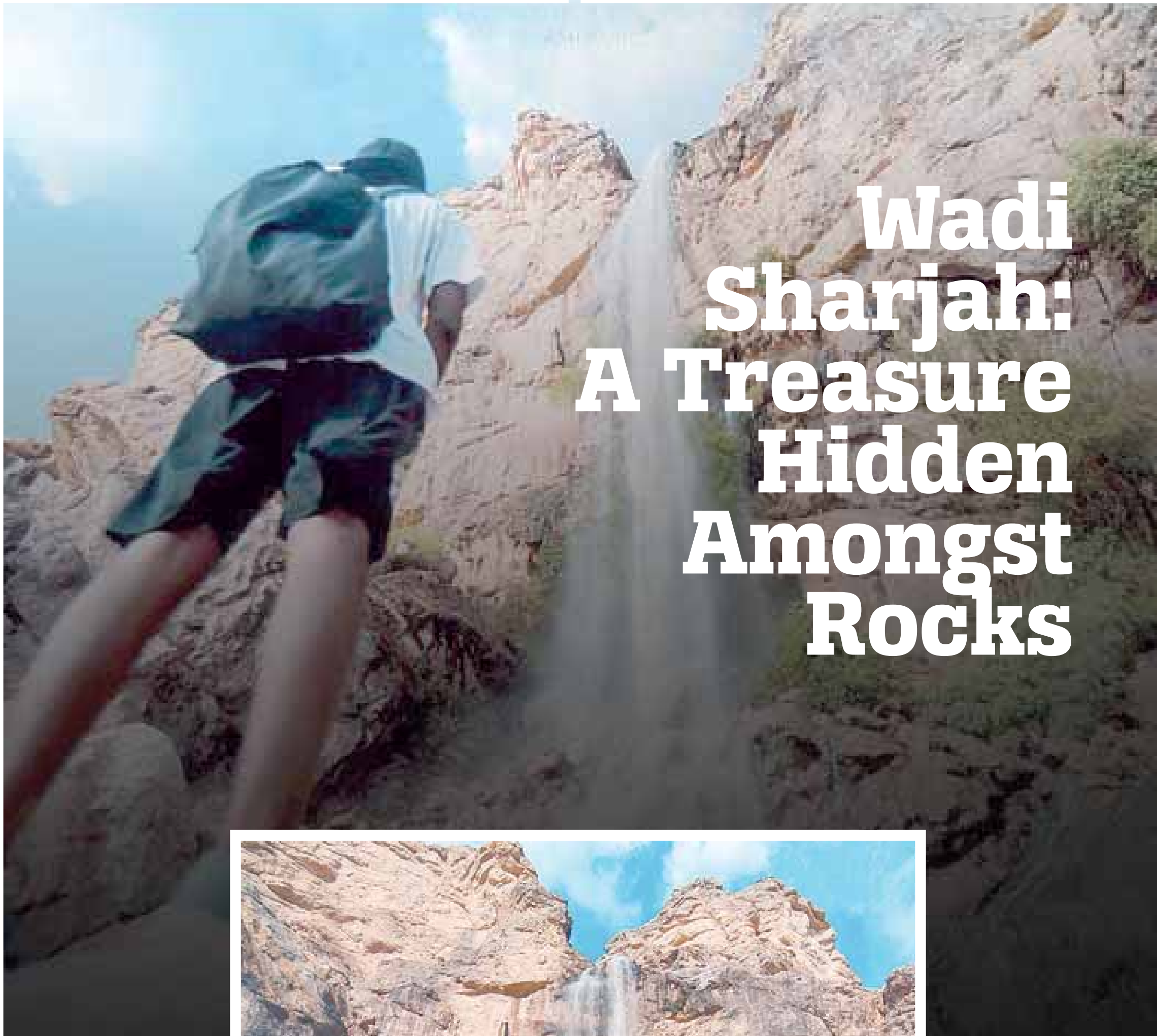





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Wadi Sharjah: A Treasure Hidden Amongst Rocks

By Arwa Al Hashimi
Photos by Muath Al Nadabi

As a cultural and adventure destination, Oman still has lots of unexplored places that are gems just waiting to be polished. One of these is the waterfall of Wadi Sharjah in Jabal Al Kour in the eastern side of the Wilayat of Ibri.

Majestically flowing from the side of Mount Al Kour, the waterway has cut into solid mountain to create a mesmerising landscape that speaks volumes of the genius of the Creator.

Passing through hidden oasis between rocks and mountains, once you enter this rocky wonderland, the waterfall will welcome you as it created its own ecosystem that is best for visits during hot summers.

The site is perfect for families to spend the best times of relaxation in trips and picnics. It is perfect for families as there are no sudden cliff drops and the surrounding area is also ideal for activities like hiking, swimming and picnics.



The way to the waterfall is crowded by Sidr and Ghaf trees so if you feel tired or hot, you can hide under the shade of these trees while finding the waterfall itself. The place abounds with many diverse and dense natural trees that visitors and tourists can enjoy including the "Arak" trees.

The natural pools and the fresh and crystal clear water lakes are what attract people the most to the Wadi. Many tourists and visitors enjoy dipping in these pools. What is an added bonus are pools located on top of the mountain where the water is falling from. Those who are able to climb these heights will even have better adventure as from the top, the view is even more mesmerising offering a clear view of the entire wadi.

READ

AS GOOD AS DEAD

BY HOLLY JACKSON

Pippa Fitz-Amobi solves murderous crimes.



LIGHT IT UP!

This aerial view shows hot air balloons launching in Goreme Historical National Park, east of Nevsehir (Neapolis) in the province of the same name in central Turkey's historical Cappadocia (Kapadokya) region. — AFP



A TRIBUTE

Françoise Mouly, art editor of The New Yorker, stands for a photo in her office at The New Yorker in New York City. Jean-Jacques Sempé, a beaten and out-of-school child, has become a New York icon by signing more than 110 covers of the prestigious cultural magazine The New Yorker over 40 years. The magazine will pay a delicate tribute to this discreet genius of cartooning this month. 'Jean-Jacques', as he is affectionately known in the New Yorker, died on August 11 at the age of 89. — AFP





If You Can Make a Salad, You Can Make Kimchi

KIMCHI IS LIKE a zombie, said Ji Hye Kim, the chef at Miss Kim in Ann Arbor, Michigan. “Not quite alive, but not quite dead.”

In kimchi making, salt stalls the decomposition of fresh vegetables and allows good lactic-acid bacteria to grow through fermentation. Kim, 44, recalls a time in her life, back in Seoul, South Korea, when she had to keep watch for the building superintendent as her mother buried a crock of kimchi in the flower garden of their apartment complex. Months later, they would dig it up and enjoy the kimchi in its aged state, with its pleasurable tang and abundance of umami.

With a pickled briny flavour and gamchil mat (‘savoury taste’ in Korean), kimchi is the national dish of South Korea and traditionally prepared at a kimjang, the communal act of making and sharing kimchi. Over several days each November, neighbours and family members gather to preserve pounds and pounds of butter-yellow napa cabbage by salting them and then mixing and packing them with sauce.

For many communities in South Korea, a kimjang (also spelled gimjang) remains a grand act. But these days, Korean cooks outside the motherland are adapting to their individual environments accordingly, scaling down their kimjangs to fit their lives or even hosting them virtually.

In a world where most people buy their kimchi at a store, preserving the act of preservation has become a priority for Koreans who wish to carry on the tradition of kimjang.

Since 2013, Unesco has recognised kimjang as an intangible cultural heritage, a tradition and set of living knowledge that is not physical like a monument.

Some of the world’s most invaluable knowledge resides within people who must pass it down in order for it to survive, said cultural anthropologist Tim Curtis, secretary of Unesco’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. What’s key is that “this kind of heritage must be developing and evolving, not frozen in time,” he said. “It must be living heritage.”

This notion of living heritage, in the form of kimjang, connects Koreans across the diaspora who share in this knowledge and experience. Kimjang symbolises the tough Korean spirit: In order to survive harsh times, you must make yourself more resilient. Kimchi was a way to preserve the fall crop so that there would be enough food to last through the winter.

Some traditions may not be as necessary anymore, such as burying your kimchi in the ground to keep it cool in the summer and prevent freezing in the winter (there are refrigerators for that now). But the ritual of kimjang lives on in other ways.

As a child, Lauryn Chun lived with her grandmother for a couple of years in Seoul, where she saw the bustling magic of kimjang up close. In the fall, her grandmother’s neighbourhood of mostly older women came together to make kimchi out of hundreds of pounds of napa cabbage. These kimjangs felt like parties,

complete with intermittent tastings of the brined cabbage bundled with the aromatic seasonings.

When Chun, 52, attempted a batch herself years later in New York, the smell alone took her right back to her grandmother’s kimjangs. The recipe that she used (and now uses for her company, Mother-in-Law’s Kimchi) comes from Jang Mo Jip, her mother’s restaurant in Garden Grove, California, which is still running after more than 30 years. It is, she said, “a culmination of people and community and of the ladies who work there.”

It’s not that one person or family owns a recipe — through the act of kimjang, the kimchi belongs to everyone.

Perhaps the most important thing to



know about kimchi is that it’s not that hard to make. Just because something takes a few steps doesn’t mean those steps are necessarily difficult. “If you can make a salad, you can make kimchi,” Chun said.

This is especially true when it comes to mak kimchi, a style that begins with chopped cabbage, versus tongbaechu, the more traditional kimjang kimchi that starts with larger halved or quartered heads of napa cabbage, which take much longer to brine.

For the spice averse, baek kimchi is milder and lets you taste the sweet cabbage more fully. This white kimchi is more predominant in the northern parts of South Korea (and in North Korea). The higher up you go on the peninsula, the less you’ll see gochugaru, the chile powder that stains many kimchis red.

Bo ssam or some kind of braised or steamed pork is a meal commonly eaten after a kimjang with the fresh kimchi as a celebration of all that hard work. But you might consider following the lead of chef Jeong-In Hwang and turn baek kimchi into a jigae as he does at San Ho Won, the restaurant he runs with Corey Lee in San Francisco. Anchored by a hunk of pork shoulder that is simmered until tender, the stew is a mighty way to commemorate

something as magical as making kimchi.

You don’t have to wait until November to have a kimjang. You can kimchi anything.

“I think of it as a formula rather than a list of ingredients,” said Ji Hye Kim, the chef in Ann Arbor. “Kimchi means salting vegetables that are in season” — and not just napa cabbage. She has kimchi-ed many vegetables every season in her life, including scallions in the spring and sunchoke in the fall.

There’s nothing like the tactile sensation of working with freshly harvested vegetables, and then turning them into a dish you’re going to eat for the next two months, she said. More than anything, kimchi is a reminder of the passage of time, that liminal space between death



and (new) life. “There’s something beautiful about that process.” You can’t buy it in a jar.

KIMCHI

By Eric Kim

Sometimes called mak kimchi, this kimchi formula starts with chopped napa cabbage and is as easy as dressing a salad. You just toss everything together in a large bowl. Fish sauce anchors the kimchi sauce with incredible savoriness, while gochugaru, the Korean red-pepper powder, lends a deep crimson sheen and mild, fruity heat. Whatever chopped vegetables you add to the onion-garlic-ginger purée will lend their own natural sweetness as they ferment with the cabbage; scallions and daikon are the most traditional, but carrot works in a pinch and lends great color. We all need a good burp every now and then, so be sure to open the lid of your jar every couple of days to allow the gas from the fermentation process to escape. For the spice-averse, start with 1/4 cup of gochugaru, or turn to baek kimchi, which is a fragrant, chile-free version.

Yield: 1/2 gallon

Total time: 2 1/2 hours, plus 2 days’ fermenting

1 medium head napa cabbage (2 to 2 1/2 pounds), any dirty outer leaves removed
3 tablespoons coarse kosher salt or 5 tablespoons kosher salt (such as Diamond Crystal)
1 medium green apple or Asian pear, peeled, quartered and cored
1 small yellow onion, peeled and quartered
10 garlic cloves, peeled
1 (2-inch) piece fresh ginger, peeled
1 tablespoon granulated sugar
1/3 cup gochugaru (Korean red pepper)
1/3 cup fish sauce
3 scallions, trimmed
1 medium carrot or 1/2 medium daikon, peeled
1 tablespoon pine nuts (optional)

1. Dry-brine the cabbage: Rinse the head of cabbage under cold running water, making sure to get in between the leaves. Trim the root end off the cabbage and cut crosswise into 1-inch-thick slices, carving out any core if it’s especially big and tough. Transfer the cabbage strips to your largest bowl. Sprinkle over the salt and toss with your hands until evenly distributed. Set aside to brine at room temperature until the hard leaves shrink and become wet and limp (but are still crunchy), 1 1/2 to 2 hours.
2. Rinse the cabbage: Fill the bowl with cold running water and swish the leaves around to rinse them of their salt (and to clean off any dirt). Lift them up out of the water and transfer to a colander. Repeat once or twice until the cabbage leaves still taste discernibly salted, but not too salty that you can’t eat it like a salad. Rinse out the bowl.
3. Make the sauce: To a food processor, add the apple, onion, garlic, ginger, sugar and process until very finely chopped into a fluffy purée. Transfer the sauce to the empty bowl and stir in the gochugaru and fish sauce. Cut the scallions into 1-inch-long pieces and add to the bowl. Cut the carrot into matchsticks: slice crosswise into 1-inch lengths, then thinly slice lengthwise, stack the slices and cut lengthwise again into thin strips. Add to the bowl, along with the pine nuts, if using. Stir to combine. Add the drained cabbage to the sauce and toss with clean hands until well combined.
4. Transfer the sauced cabbage to a clean 1/2-gallon jar, using your hands to gently pack it down. (A few air gaps are fine; they’ll fill with liquid over time.) This amount of cabbage should leave about an inch of room at the top of the jar. Top the jar with any remaining sauce left behind in the bowl. Loosely close with a lid (see Tip). Wash your hands and rinse off the outside of the jar at this stage.
5. Let the jar of kimchi begin fermenting on the kitchen counter at room temperature for 2 to 3 days, “burping” it every 12 hours or so, which just means opening the lid to let out any excess buildup of gas. After this, the cabbage should have released even more of its liquid; it’s OK if the liquid doesn’t completely cover the cabbage at this point, though it may. Refrigerate the kimchi to finish fermenting until it’s sour, 2 to 3 weeks and up to 6 months, at which point it will be very, very sour and should be eaten or turned into jigae. Check (and taste!) the kimchi every 2 to 3 days both to familiarise yourself with the fermentation process but also to allow gas to escape.

Tips: 1/3 cup of soy sauce plus 1 to 2 tablespoons of doenjang or miso can be used as a vegan substitute for the fish sauce. The flavour won’t be the same, but it will still taste wonderful.

Many containers work for kimchi, but some are better than others. Glass jars with plastic lids work beautifully, as do stainless steel containers with metal lids that lock into place. Plastic containers with locking plastic lids work just fine for this recipe as well. All of these can be found online or at Korean supermarkets and work well for kimchi since the lids aren’t airtight. Avoid using Mason jars with airtight lids since they can explode as gas builds up during the fermentation process. — **NYT**

TRAVEL TALES

Canada's Hudson Bay a summer refuge for thousands of belugas



HALF A DOZEN beluga whales dive and reemerge around tourist paddle boards in Canada’s Hudson Bay, a handful of about 55,000 of the creatures that migrate from the Arctic to the bay’s more temperate waters each summer.

Far from the Seine river where a beluga strayed in early August north of Paris, the estuaries that flow into the bay in northern Canada offer a sanctuary for the small white whales to give birth in relative warm and shelter.

In the murky bay, the belugas, with small dark eyes and what look like wide smiles, seem to enjoy the presence of a cluster of tourists who travelled to the remote town of Churchill — home to some 800 people and only accessible by train or plane — to observe the cetaceans.

For more than seven months of the year, between November and June, the bay is frozen.

The thaw marks the return of the belugas to the haven, where they are protected from orcas and feed on the rich food found in the estuaries.

The gray colour of the young whales stands out against the bright white adults as they glide through the water in packs, all the while communicating in their own array of sounds.

HYDROPHONE

Nicknamed “canaries of the sea” due to the 50 or so different vocalisations — whistles, clicks, chirps and squeals — they emit, belugas are “social butterflies” and “sound is the glue of that society,” said Valeria Vergara, who has been studying them for years.

“Belugas are sound-centred species, and sound to them is really like vision to us,” the researcher with the Raincoast Conservation Foundation said.

Listening at the speaker of a hydrophone, the 53-year-old scientist tries to distinguish the multitude of sounds from the depths — a cacophony to the untrained ear.

“They need to rely on sound to communicate and they also rely on sound to echolocate, to find their way... to find food,” said Vergara, who has identified “contact calls” used between members of a pod.

Newborn belugas, which measure around 1.8 meters (six feet) long and weigh some 80 kilos (175 pounds), remain dependent on their mother for two years.

As an adult, the mammal — which generally matures in the icy waters around Greenland and in the north of Canada, Norway and Russia — can grow to six meters long and live between 40 and 60 years.

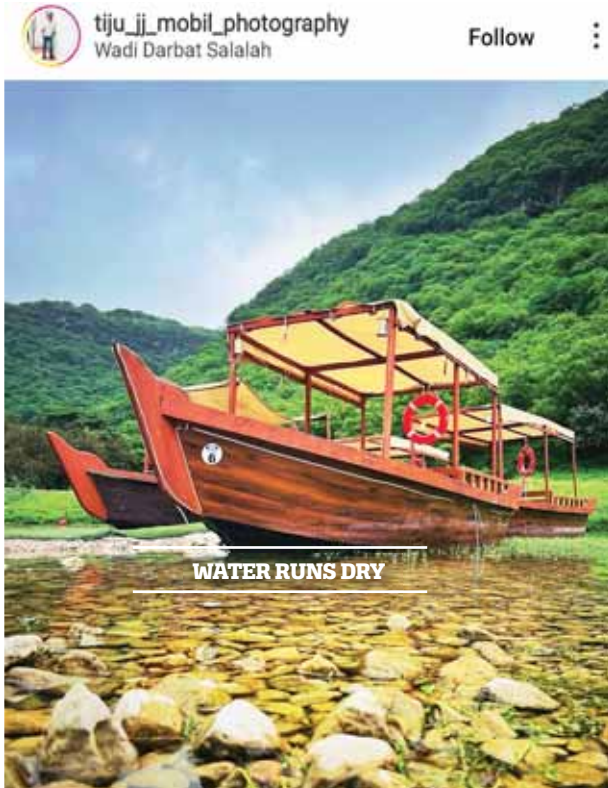
The Hudson Bay beluga population is the largest in the world.

But the decrease in ice due to climate change, in an area that is warming three to four times faster than the rest of the planet, is a cause for concern for researchers. — **AFP**



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AROUND THE WORLD

AUCTION

Princess Diana's one-of-a-kind Ford Escort goes up for auction



A UNIQUE BLACK Ford Escort driven by the late Princess Diana in the 1980s is due to be auctioned this weekend at Britain's Silverstone racing circuit.

One of 130 lots going up for sale on Saturday, the RS Turbo Series 1 Escort belonged to Diana between 1985 and 1988. It is thought to be the only example of the model made in black, according to Silverstone Auctions, which expect it to fetch more than £100,000 (\$118,000).

The RS Turbo Series 1 was usually made in white but the royal family police guard asked for Diana's to be painted black "for discretion", the auctioneers said.

For the princess to drive the vehicle, which has just under 25,000 miles (around 40,000 km) on the



clock, was "a very brave choice," Arwel Richards, Classic Car Specialist at Silverstone Auctions, said.

"All the other members of the royal family would be driving around London in the back... of an official car... and she's driving in a car... that you would see on a housing estate not outside the palace."

Next week marks 25 years since Diana died, aged 36, when the limousine in which she was a passenger crashed in a Paris tunnel as it sped away from paparazzi giving chase on motorbikes.

Other lots at the auction, taking place in conjunction with the Classic — a three-day motor racing festival at the Northamptonshire circuit — include a Rolls-Royce convertible once owned by Bee Gee Maurice Gibb.

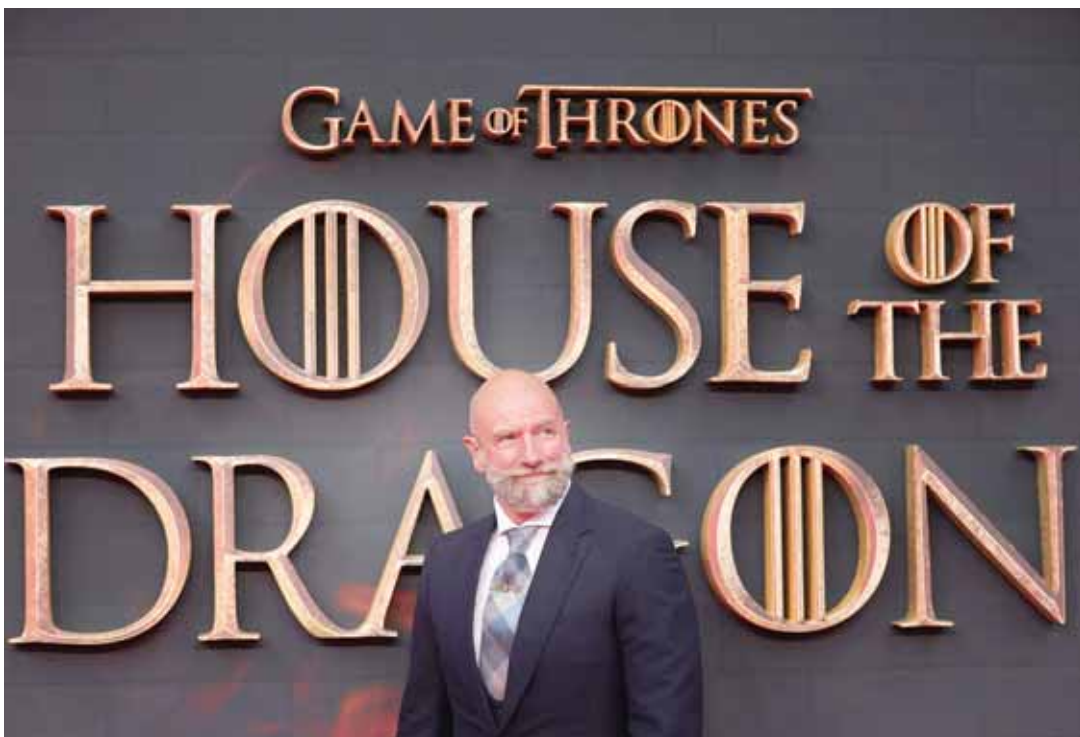
The singer, who died in 2003, bought the black 1973 Corniche in 1979. Decked out with red leather interiors, the vehicle stayed in the family until 2012. It is listed with a guide price of £100,000-£115,000.

Also going under the hammer are a 1973 Rover P5, used to drive former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher upon her 1979 election to meet with Queen Elizabeth, with a guide price of £35,000-£45,000.

A 1988 Volkswagen T25 Caravelle GL 112 minibus used to transport late British physicist Stephen Hawking is being offered without a reserve price. — Reuters

ENTERTAINMENT

'House of the Dragon' ratings boost as 'Rings of Power' nears



AS "HOUSE OF THE Dragon" debuted to nearly 10 million US viewers this weekend, HBO appears to have claimed first blood in its much-hyped TV fantasy epic showdown with Amazon's upcoming "Lord of the Rings" prequel.

Set in the same Medieval-inspired Westeros world as smash hit "Game of Thrones," "House of the Dragon," which launched on Sunday, is a crucially important series for the premium cable network and its streaming platform HBO Max.

HBO is banking on its prequel matching the wild popularity of the original "Thrones," which over eight seasons became appointment viewing, spawned countless imitations and delivered 59 Emmys — a record for a drama at television's equivalent of the Oscars.

A press release on Monday hailed 9.986 million viewers as "the largest audience for any new original series in the history of HBO" — although some analysts noted that "new original" might be pushing a definition for a spin-off, and that its parent title drew a whopping 17.4 million to the debut of its final season.

Still, the figure represents a success for newly merged Warner Bros Discovery, which is under intense scrutiny as it tries to navigate its place in a rapidly changing entertainment landscape dominated by the so-called "streaming wars."

On September 2, fierce competition will arrive in the form of "The Rings of Power," another swords-and-dragons-themed epic of the small screen, this time taking place in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and created by retail giant Amazon's own streaming platform Prime Video.

Said to be a passion project for Amazon's uber-wealthy founder Jeff Bezos, "The Rings of Power" has been commissioned for five seasons, and has been dubbed the most expensive show ever made.

Its overall budget of around \$1 billion dwarfs the \$150 million spent so far on "House of the Dragon," though HBO has several other glossy Westeros-set prequels, sequels and spin-offs in the works.



- 'GREAT FANTASY' -

Creatives and executives on each side have been careful to play down talk of a rivalry.

And in reality, comparisons between the shows may be harder to draw than in TV ratings battles of the past.

HBO's return to Westeros, and its predecessor show's addictive blend of scheming dynasties, gory violence and arguably gratuitous sex, has drawn generally warm praise from critics, though reviews for Amazon's show remain under strict embargo.

While HBO has been happy to celebrate its strong early ratings figures, Amazon is under no obli-

gation to publish viewing statistics.

Indeed, many in the more "traditional" side of Hollywood have noted that Prime Video — which produces both television and film — may not be especially interested in the same metrics as its apparent rivals.

Earlier this year, the head of the movie theatre industry's trade body said his group was "very concerned" about Amazon Prime, noting that the subscrip-

tion service's business model was not "trying to make money" off its movies and shows, but instead getting consumers to "buy their groceries and use their shipping services."

Still, fantasy fans including George R R Martin — author of the books on which both "Game of Thrones" and "House of the Dragon" are based on — have expressed hope that both can be a success.

"I want both shows to find an appreciative audience, and give them great television. Great fantasy," Martin wrote in a recent blog post.

The more fantasy hits we have, the more great fantasy we are likely to get." — AFP

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE



Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

Honesty and the truth!

WE ALL HAVE opinions that we keep to ourselves. We go through our day-to-day lives unbothered that such opinion is not spoken of. But what prevents people from sharing their thoughts? Perhaps we are partly afraid of offending others.

In this day and age, society has evolved to a point where we grow more concerned about how we make others feel. As a result, you find people appear significantly more silent when they think that their opinions represent the opinion of a minority.

There are plenty of good and logical reasons not to say what you think, especially when others disagree. Somehow also insulting people is not pleasant and can lead to professional or social consequences. Nodding something along the way may seem like a good thing, even though you're screaming on the inside. But perhaps the real act of goodness is being brave and saying what you really think. So your honesty can be an endearing act and sticking to real honesty sometimes makes you happier in the end.

On the other hand, when the truth is hard to accept, telling it can have costs, including social rejection and strained relationships. Thus total honesty is also far from (white lies) because it can reduce stress, deepen bonds with others and reduce emotional interaction. Yet some people lie all the time, perhaps psychologically and specifically

want more love and happiness. But also to persuade others, to win sympathy and to avoid conflict at other times.

It is true that some white lies — as some people claim or as we humans have created them — make life easier, but they do not necessarily make life happier. When caught, lying generally makes you less likeable, which harms relationships and thus reduces happiness. I think even a few white lies can do that.

Therefore, I see that if you really want to commit to honesty, you must commit to being honest with yourself and make an effort to seek and accept complete honesty from others, whether they are loved ones or strangers. Ask people to tell the truth as they see it, starting with those closest to you and commit not to be offended when they present it. Moreover, sometimes what you hear is meant to offend you, but you can always choose not to offend!

In the end, I believe that if you keep the truth to yourself when it is appropriate and use it to hurt others when you feel hurt, as we often observe in emotional arguments with loved ones and others, your honesty is certainly not an expression of love. Rather, it is more useful here to look for the virtues rather than the faults in others!

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and a writer.



Truly tasteless: Japan's plastic food artists get creative

FROM THE "leaning tower of pizza" to a fish slicing and cooking itself and a dragon emerging from a dragon fruit, Japanese artisans' quirky plastic food sculptures went on display this week at an exhibition in Tokyo.

The models were made with the same painstaking detail as the rock-solid noodle soups and crispy-looking plastic snacks that have long been displayed outside Japanese restaurants where they are called "shokuhin sampuru", or "sample food products".

Sampuru are common outside ramen shops and family restaurants across Japan a century after stores began using wax models to advertise their menu to a growing middle class.

"Normally we have to follow orders from clients. We take their views on board when we're making items," plastic food artist Shinichiro Hatasa, 57, said.

But when dreaming up fun designs, "you can use your imagination. How it ends up is totally up to you," he said.

For the exhibition, Hatasa crafted an ear of corn leisurely sunbathing on a beach.

Other creations on display included a deep-fried shrimp with four breaded

legs roaming like a tiger on a mountain of shredded cabbage and a Tetris game made of chicken.

A Japanese breakfast dish of fermented soybeans called natto appeared to spiral in the air, resembling a powerful cyclone — nicknamed, naturally, a "nattornado".

Around 60 sculptures were on display, some silly but others designed to showcase the artists' formidable skills.

"They are not real, but they look so real. It's wonderful," said exhibition attendee Reiko Ichimaru.

BURGERS ARE FOR BEGINNERS

All the models were handmade by specialists at Iwasaki Group, Japan's leading maker of "sampuru", which celebrates its 90th anniversary this year.

At an Iwasaki factory in Yokohama near Tokyo, artisans first take moulds of ingredients from actual meals cooked by the firm's restaurant clients.

Then they begin the meticulous work of decorating the samples to look as realistic as possible, from moisture droplets on chilled glass to subtle bruises on a fruit's surface.

"Fresh things are more

difficult to make. Fresh vegetables, fresh fish. Cooked items are easier," because the colours are less complicated, factory head Hiroaki Miyazawa, 44, said.

"Hamburger patties are for beginners," he added.

Fake food is a multi-million-dollar market in Japan, but sampuru production has been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which reduced demand for dining out.

Sampuru makers hope more tourists will soon be allowed into the country to boost the restaurant industry, but they are also putting their unique skills to use elsewhere.

For example, Iwasaki artisans have made replica bananas at different degrees of ripeness for factories to use to train new employees.

Orders have also come in from IT sales merchants, who want to use mock 5G Wi-Fi routers in their presentations.

Meanwhile, at the exhibition, the more original offerings are delighting children and adults alike.

"I think the number of restaurants using plastic food displays is decreasing," said Yutaka Nishio, 52.

"It's interesting to preserve this as art. It's really great." — AFP

