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VINICIUS AND
BONMATI NAMED
FIFA BEST PLAYERS
OF THE YEAR



HIS MAJESTY ISSUES FOUR ROYAL DECREES

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday issued four Royal Decrees reading as follows: Royal Decree No (63/2024) on ratifying the air services agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Republic of Chile, signed in Kuala Lumpur on October 24, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No (64/2024) on ratifying an agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg on eliminating double taxation for income and capital tax, as well as the prevention and avoidance of tax evasion. The agreement was signed in Luxembourg city on October 16, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the above-mentioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and takes effect from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No (65/2024) on ratifying the air transport agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Republic of Chad, signed in Kuala Lumpur on October 24, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No (66/2024) on ratifying the air transport agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of Australia, signed in Kuala Lumpur on October 24, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

FITCH UPGRADES OMAN’S OUTLOOK TO ‘POSITIVE’

Fitch Ratings recently revised Oman’s outlook from ‘Stable’ to ‘Positive’ while affirming its Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating at ‘BB+’. This shift reflects a series of economic and fiscal measures that underscore the Sultanate of Oman’s resilience and adaptability in a challenging global landscape.

A pivotal factor in Fitch’s assessment is Oman’s improving fiscal metrics. The government and state-owned entities (SOEs) have significantly reduced debt relative to GDP, while net external debt has declined. **SEE P13**

Angola President begins visit today

PRESIDENT JOAO LOURENCO of the Republic of Angola arrives in Muscat on Thursday.

Oman and Angola seek to promote areas of bilateral cooperation in various fields and open new horizons for cooperation in a manner that serves their common interests and achieves promising and solid strategic partnerships. The upcoming official visit of President Joao Lourenco of the Republic of Angola to the Sultanate of Oman this Thursday represents a new chapter of political relations and bilateral cooperation between the two countries. It is also an important step to foster trade and economic ties in a manner that serves their common interests.

Within the context of the bilateral relations, a number of visits were made during the past period that contributed to achieving more rapprochement and



President Joao Lourenco

exploring opportunities for cooperation and prospects for partnership between the two countries.

One of the most important visits was made by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth to Angola last May 2024. During the visit, a cooperation agreement in the field of investment was inked.

In addition, a delegation

from the State Council also visited Angola in October 2023 to participate in the meetings of the 147th General Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Oman and Angola started to develop economic and trade relations recently, as there are no agreements or memoranda of understanding signed between the two countries in this field, which is reflected in the figures of the volume of trade and investment between them.

The inter-trade statistics show that the volume of trade exchange between the two countries amounted to approximately RO 3.2 million by the end of 2023, compared to 2022, when it was about RO 1.3 million, recording an increase of 145.1 per cent. The trade balance between the two countries in 2023 was in favour of the Sultanate of Oman, with a surplus of about RO 1.9 million. — ONA

SULTAN QABOOS AWARD FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LITERATURE PRESENTED



Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, presented the Sultan Qaboos Awards for Culture, Arts and Literature to Dr Abdullah bin Khamis al Kindi and Dr Wasini al Araj in Muscat on Wednesday. **REPORT ON P4**

OMAN, BELARUS TO FOSTER TIES



HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said with President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus in Muscat on Wednesday.

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Belarus have affirmed their determination to boost bilateral relations, develop partnership in the economic, political and cultural fields.

This was stated in the joint communique between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Belarus, which was issued on the occasion of the official visit made by President Aleksandr Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus to the Sultanate of Oman. The communique reads as follows: “As per an invitation from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, President Aleksandr Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus made an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman during 14-18 December 2024. His Majesty the Sultan and the Belarusian President held talks, during which they reviewed bilateral relations and means of fostering joint cooperation.

The two leaders stressed their determination to work together to achieve common goals and establishing relations based on mutual respect and understanding, underscoring the importance of promoting partnership in the economic, political and cultural fields. A number of sectors were also identified to deepen the partnership, including: clean energy, tourism, education, healthcare, technology, transport and logistics services.

The two sides welcomed bilateral efforts to enhance cooperation in the field of industries, including joint projects to assemble equipment in the Sultanate of Oman.

The two leaders urged boosting cooperation in the fields of agriculture and food security, welcoming the success of the negotiations held during the Oman Agro-food 2024 exhibition. They affirmed their support for joint projects in the production of infant milk and dairy products.

The two sides agreed that the authorities concerned in both countries would study the feasibility of establishing a joint committee to support joint initiatives. The Republic of Belarus welcomed the decision to exempt its citizens from entry visas to visit the Sultanate of Oman for a period of up to 14 days. The two sides also discussed the possibility of operating direct flights between the two countries, in addition to a mutual visa exemption agreement.

His Majesty the Sultan and the Belarusian President exchanged views on a set of regional and international issues. In this context, they stressed their respect for the international law and the United Nations Charter, and underscored the importance of cooperation within the framework of international organisations to achieve security and peace. — ONA

OIA invests in Musk’s artificial intelligence start-up xAI

MUSCAT: OMAN Investment Authority (OIA) announced its latest investment in xAI company, a leading artificial intelligence American company. The move comes as part of OIA’s ongoing efforts to diversify its international portfolio and support growth across various sectors.

This step reflects OIA’s focus on advanced technologies as part of its broader commitment to investing in high-potential sectors.

According to the Authority, xAI has already achieved two significant milestones since its launch by Elon Musk: the establishment of a major data centre in the United States and

the rollout of its enhanced platform, Grok-2. These developments are expected to further strengthen the company’s market position and boost the returns on OIA’s investment.

Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), emphasised that this investment supports Oman’s broader goals under Oman Vision 2040, which enables the Sultanate of Oman to adopt world-class technologies and drive future progress.

Elon Musk said, “The partnership between Oman and the Gulf countries with xAI is an excellent



Elon Musk talks via video at the International Forum of Sovereign Wealth Funds held in Muscat in November this year

idea. These investments will bear fruit as we work together to build a super-intelligent AI capable of solving numerous problems. We are nearing the completion of training the Grok 3 model, which we believe will be the smartest AI model in the world.” xAI aims to be a pioneer in AI systems, offering the ability to process and analyse real-time data, an essential advantage over many competing AI systems. OIA’s partnership with Elon Musk extends beyond its investment in xAI. OIA is also a shareholder in SpaceX, Musk’s groundbreaking aerospace company known for its Starlink satellite communication system. — ONA

OMAN

SHORT TAKE



The project seeks to provide safe and sustainable drinking water to all residents in the wilayats of Al Dhahirah Governorate. — ONA

NAMA BEGINS
RO 235M WATER
PROJECT

IBRI: Nama Water Services company recently embarked on implementing a project worth RO 235 million to establish water distribution networks in the wilayats of Ibri, Yanqul and Dhank in Al Dhahirah Governorate. This was unveiled during a community meeting organised by Nama Water Services company in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

The project kicked off in early December 2024, said Mohammed bin Harib al Makhmari, the Project's Director, noting that the project is expected to be completed by the second quarter of 2028. Al Makhmari explained that the project seeks to provide safe and sustainable drinking water to all residents in the wilayats of Al Dhahirah Governorate.

He pointed out that the project aims to expand the system of water distribution networks to meet the growing population in Al Dhahirah Governorate, besides enhancing the strategic storage of water in the wilayats of Ibri, Yanqul and Dhank to cater to future demand until the year 2050, based on population growth and urban expansion data. — ONA

1,477 graduate from SQU
humanities colleges

THE Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on Wednesday celebrated the graduation of the second cohort of the 35th batch from humanities colleges, under the auspices of Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance.

A total of 1,477 students graduated including 439 graduates from the College of Economics, 442 graduates from the College of Arts and Social Sciences, 408 graduates from the College of Education and 188 graduates from the College of Law.

HH Sayyid Dr Fahd bin Al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of SQU, delivered a speech in which he said that the SQU has achieved many accomplishments in its educational journey by qualifying generations armed with knowledge and skills that enable them to serve their country and contribute to its development. He said that the graduation day does not represent the end of a stage of study, but rather the beginning of a new responsibility towards society and the nation, urging the graduates to innovate and work hard to find solutions to the renewed challenges especially in light of the major transformations witnessed by the labour market.

He added that success is not measured by individual achievements alone, but by the positive impact that a person leaves on his society. — ONA



SHURA ADDRESSES EMPLOYEE LAYOFFS

MUSCAT: The Youth and Human Resources Committee of the Majlis Ash'Shura met on Wednesday with several employees who had been notified of voluntary resignation from a private company. The meeting aimed to understand the reasons behind their dismissal.

During the sixth meeting of the second annual session (2024-2025), the dismissed employees shared their perspectives on the reasons and justifications for their termination. The meeting also explored potential solutions and alternatives to the challenges of securing new employment.

Discussions included the possibility of integrating these employees into other companies operating in similar sectors, such as food products. The committee emphasised the importance of curbing layoffs due to their significant economic, social and health impacts on affected individuals.

Additionally, the committee reviewed its recommendations regarding a proposal to establish a centre for talented individuals in Oman, in coordination with relevant authorities.

Other topics discussed during the meeting included the committee's response to adding service years from the Ministry of Defence to the Social Protection Fund and its response to a submission from graduates in graphic design.

The meeting was chaired by Younis bin Ali al Mandhari, Chair of the Youth and Human Resources Committee, and attended by committee members.

Session tackles civil society guide



More than 350 participants, including Ministry employees, representatives of association boards, community clubs and their branches, attended the working session.

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

The Ministry of Social Development, represented by the Department of Civil Society Institutions Development, recently hosted an introductory session on the "Civil Society Governance Guide" in collaboration with the Oman Centre for Governance and Sustainability.

The event was held under the auspices of Shaikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development.

More than 350 participants, including Ministry employees, representatives of association boards, community clubs and their branches, attended the working session. The main goal was to familiarise attendees with the contents of the Civil Society Governance Guide and analyse its fundamental standards.

The aim was to help civil society organisations improve their internal systems and enhance their administrative and

financial efficiency.

During a speech by Sayyid Hamed bin Sultan al Busaidy, Executive Director of the Oman Centre for Governance and Sustainability, he emphasised the importance of the session in organising and improving the operations of these associations. He highlighted the guide's focus on governance principles that promote effective and transparent management, integrity, credibility and performance improvement.

Mahrn al Maashani from the Department of Civil Society Institutions Development stressed that the session was part of an effort to organise and enhance the social and charitable role of civil society institutions. This aligns with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to govern civil society institutions alongside governmental and private entities to serve the nation's interests.

The guide aims to develop the management approach of civil society associations, support their institutional character and ensure their members can contribute effectively to social development.

MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Internal Tender Committee at Ministry of Information announces its Tender for the following work:

Tender No.	Tender Name	Class & Grade	Last Date For Collection	Submission Date	Purchase Fees (R.O.)
8/2024 (503/2024) at E-Tendering	Construction of A Building for the Ministry Of Information in Khasab (Musandam Governorate)	Second Third	4/1/2025	10/2/2025	30/-

1. All specialized companies in the field of the tender shown above and are registered with the Tender Board to the degree indicated above, may obtain tender documents, against non-refundable fees, from the website through the following link: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

2. Companies and institutions are exempted from providing a temporary insurance of 1% when submitting their bid, provided that they sign a document committing themselves to the submitted bid for a period determined when the bidding strategy is approved in accordance with the document attached to the Isnad platform. As for international companies that do not have a headquarters in the Sultanate of Oman, they are required to provide temporary insurance of 1%.

(For more information, please see the original circular issued by the Tender Board on the Isnad platform.)

Note that the last date for accepting bids as mentioned above is before 10:00 am . Any bid received after the time and date mentioned in the submission date will be rejected automatically. You are requested to provide 2 hard copies for your offer after the submission in Projects Department at Ministry of Information.

3. The Ministry has the right to:

1. Add or Cancell some works in the tender if necessary.

2. Cancellation of the tender without giving reasons.

For clarifications you may contact via:

Telephone : 24943785, 24943177, Email:(Moi.Tenders@omaninfo.om)

STRONG*PARTNERSHIP*

OMAN, BELARUS SIGN TWO MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

MUSCAT: *The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Belarus signed on Wednesday two memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in industrial cooperation and in the fields of specifications, standards, conformity assessment and accreditation.*

The memoranda of understanding were signed between the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (on the one hand) and the Belarusian Ministry of Industry and the Committee for Standardisation, Metrology and Certification of Belarus (on the other hand).

The signing of the MoUs was aimed to exchange expertise and technology, develop knowledge-based industries, support joint investments in industrial projects and facilitate the movement of industrial goods between the two countries. It also aims to intensify joint exchange of information on national standards and technical regulations that may have a significant impact on trade between the two countries.

On behalf of the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, the memoranda of understanding were signed by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. They were signed on the Belarusian side by Maxim Ryzhenkov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, and Alexander Efimov, Minister of Industry.

The ceremony was attended by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, Dr Abdullah bin Masoud al Harthy, Honorary Consul of Belarus to the Sultanate of Oman, Hamoud bin Salim al Tuwaih, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Russian Federation and non-resident ambassador to the Republic of Belarus, Sergei Terentiev, Non-resident Ambassador of Belarus to the Sultanate of Oman, and other officials from the two countries. — ONA



The signing of the MoUs was aimed to exchange expertise and technology, develop knowledge-based industries and support joint investments in industrial projects. — ONA

Sayyid Fahd receives Belarus President

HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received President Aleksandr Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus at the Council of Ministers headquarters in Muscat on Wednesday.

HH Sayyid Fahd welcomed the President and his accompanying delegation, hoping that relations between the two countries would continue to grow and flourish.

HH Sayyid Fahd valued the positive outcome of the President's official visit to the Sultanate of Oman. He expressed his appreciation for the harmonic convergence of visions between Oman and Belarus in their drive to serve the interests of the two friendly peoples.

For his part, President Lukashenko commended the outcome of the official talks he held with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, noting that the talks consolidated relations between the two friendly countries. He expressed his admiration for the accomplishments made by Oman. He voiced his country's appreciation for the Sultanate of Oman's prudent policy on domestic and foreign fronts.

The meeting discussed means of activating bilateral cooperation, exchanging expertise and supporting the role of the private sector in developing joint investments in the two friendly countries.

It also touched on current issues and developments on the regional and international arenas, as well as efforts to establish peace and stability, to furnish better grounds of prosperity for all peoples.

It was attended by Omani ministers and government officials and members of the official delegation accompanying President Lukashenko. — ONA



The meeting discussed means of activating bilateral cooperation, exchanging expertise and supporting the role of the private sector in developing joint investments in the two friendly countries.



President Aleksandr Lukashenko leaves Oman after official visit



MUSCAT: President Aleksandr Lukashenko of the Republic of Belarus and his accompanying delegation left the country after an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman which lasted several days.

Royal Airport by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (Head of the Mission of Honour), Hamoud bin Salim al Tuwaih, Ambassador of the

Sultanate of Oman to the Russian Federation and Non-resident Ambassador to the Republic of Belarus and Sergei Terentiev, Non-resident Ambassador of Belarus to Oman and members of the Mission of Honour.



The President of the Republic of Belarus was accompanied during the visit by an official delegation comprising, Viktor Aleksandr Lukashenko, son of the President and President of the Olympic Committee, Maxim

Ryzhenkov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Efimov, Minister of Industry, Anatoly Linevich, Minister of Agriculture and Food and Sergei Terentiev, Non-resident Ambassador of Belarus to Oman.

— ONA

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



TRANSFER WAGES
ONLINE WITHIN
THREE DAYS: MOL

VINOD NAIR
@vinoL_nair

Private sector employers must transfer wages online within three days instead of seven days of payment deadline through Wage Protection System (WPS), the Ministry of Labour (MoL) said in a recent decision.

The WPS is aimed at monitoring the payment of wages to workers in the private sector, ensuring that employers transfer wages on time as agreed in the employment contract.

A dedicated MoL is responsible for monitoring the WPS, recording wage transactions, and preparing a database for this purpose.

Exemptions to the WPS have been outlined in specific circumstances. Employers are not required to transfer wages if a worker is involved in a labour dispute that results in absence from work for more than 30 days, is suspended from work for over 30 days for reasons not linked to the employer, or has been reported as having left work with 30 days having passed since the report's approval. Other exemptions include new workers who have not completed 30 days of employment and workers on unpaid leave.

To ensure compliance, MoL has laid out penalties for violations. Employers may face warnings and suspension of services until violations are resolved. There can also be fines RO 50 for each affected worker — with the penalty doubling for repeat offences.

Another ministerial decision bans temporary transfers of expatriate workers to jobs reserved for Omanis.

The worker's consent must be obtained before the transfer to another establishment.

The worker must have completed at least six months of service with the transferring establishment.

QATAR
EMBASSY IN
MUSCAT HOLDS
NATIONAL DAY
RECEPTION

MUSCAT: The Qatar Embassy in Muscat held a National Day reception on Wednesday. The event took place at the Kempinski Hotel Al Mouj and was attended by various dignitaries, including ministers, members of the State Council, under-secretaries, Majlis Ash'shura members, and heads of diplomatic missions in Oman. Officials from the Foreign Ministry were also present at the reception. — ONA



Sultan Qaboos Award for
Culture, Arts winners feted

ASSIGNED by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, presided over the award ceremony of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature in its tenth and eleventh editions for the years 2023 and 2024, at the Al Wahat Club in Muscat Governorate, on Wednesday.

Dr Abdullah bin Khamis al Kindi won the award for culture in the field of media and communication studies for the 10th edition. Dr Wasini al Araj won the award for literature in the field of novel while the award in the field of film directing was withheld.

In the 11th edition, dedicated to Omanis, the podcast programme Witness Beyond the Ordinary by Ahmed bin Salim al Kalbani won the award in the field of radio programmes in the Arts branch. Poet Shumisa bint Abdullah al Numaniyah won the award in the field of classical Arabic poetry in the Literature branch for her collection Maqamat Zulaykha. The award for studies in the Omani environment in the Culture branch was withheld.



The total number of candidates who met the nomination requirements in the 10th edition reached 171 candidates. — ONA

Habib bin Mohammed al Riyami, Chairman of the Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, delivered a speech in which he explained the objectives of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature and reviewed its beginnings and its journey over the past years.

During the ceremony, two visual films of the tenth and the eleventh editions of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature were screened highlighting details of nominations for the award and the methods followed by the committees. At the end of the ceremony, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, chief guest, announced the award's fields of the 12th edition 2025, dedicated to Arabs namely: the field of private cultural institutions in the culture branch, the field of sculpture in the arts branch and the field of biographies in the literature branch.

The total number of candidates who met the nomination requirements in the 10th edition reached 171 candidates, including 30 candidates in media and communication studies in the culture branch, 25 candidates in film directing in the arts branch and 161 candidates in the novel category. — ONA



NU holds White Coat Ceremony for 150 doctors



The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Planning and Health Organisation.



SUHAR: Represented by the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, the National University of Science and Technology (NU) held an annual white coat ceremony in Suhar for a new batch consisting of 150 future doctors.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Planning and Health Organisation.

Dr Ali bin Saud al Bimani, Vice-Chancellor of the National University

of Science and Technology, affirmed the attention accorded to medical education in the Sultanate of Oman in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, represented by various health institutions. This attention, he said, motivates medical students and grants them a good share of clinical training, enabling them to become skilled doctors in the future.

For his part, Prof Mohamed bin Ali al Shafae, Dean of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, said that the annual white coat ceremony

(now in its 20th edition at the NU) is a global tradition that symbolises the beginning of clinical training.

He pointed out that the college's Medical Programme (MD) has obtained full accreditation, based on international standards set by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME).

"This achievement constitutes academic excellence and offers medical students the highest standards of education and training," he added. — ONA



"Tender Announcement"
Supply of Food Parcels for the "Ramadan Iftar Program" for the Year 1446 AH / 2025 AD for Al Mahrah Governorate and Surrounding Areas in the Republic of Yemen
Tender No. 2/2024

Oman Charitable Organization (O.C.O.) announces a tender for the supply of 27,900 (twenty Seve thousand and nine hundred) food parcels for the "Ramadan Iftar Program" for the year 1446 AH / 2025 AD, and distributing them to all the districts of Al Mahrah Governorate and the surrounding areas according to the attached list of locations (16 locations).

Specialized merchants and suppliers wishing to submit their bids for this tender can obtain the terms and conditions from the Financial Department of Oman Charitable Organization against payment of nominal fees, during the period from Sunday 8 December 2024 to Wednesday 11 December 2024. The last date for bid submission and acceptance shall be Tuesday 17 December 2024.

Bids shall be deposited in the tender box at the Financial Department, O.C.O. Headquarters Building at the Wilayat of Baushar, Muscat Governorate, Al Khuwair 33, Southern Street No. 47, near Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque.

Bids shall be placed in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to H.E. the Chairman of the Projects and Tenders Committee of O.C.O. before the specified date.

"O.C.O. is not obligated to award the tender in whole or in part or to consider the lowest price."

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The programme focused on building middle-management leadership skills.

RAM CONCLUDES LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

MUSCAT: The Royal Academy of Management (RAM) has successfully concluded the fourth cohort of the “National Programme for Developing Leaders and Future Foresight,” aimed at strengthening the leadership capabilities of senior administrative officials within the state’s administrative framework.

Aligned with the strategic objectives of Oman Vision 2040, this initiative equips leaders with the skills, knowledge and foresight required to navigate an ever-changing and competitive global environment with confidence and efficiency.

A total of 30 participants from various government entities, including Assistant Directors-General, Department Directors and Assistant Department Directors, took part in the programme. Over a six-month immersive learning journey, they engaged in five specialised learning modules designed to enhance their leadership capabilities and refine their ability to tackle complex professional challenges.

ST MARY’S SECURES FIRST PLACE IN CAROL CONTEST



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

St Mary’s Jacobite Church, Ruwi, secured first place in the Interchurch Christmas Carol Singing Competition, which was held under the auspices of Father Saverios Thomas for the first time at the Marthasouni Church auditorium recently.

Named ‘Halel 2k24’, the competition saw the participation of over 250 talented choirs from various churches across the country.

The Interchurch Christmas Carol Singing Competition was organised by the Muscat Marthasouni Jacobite Syrian Church to promote music and singers.

The competition was judged by Father Saverios Thomas, a renowned singer of the Syrian Church, along with two music teachers from Indian Schools.

St Mary’s Jacobite Church took first place, with second and third places going to St Thomas Marthoma Church in Suhar and St Peter and St Paul Catholic Church in Ruwi. The event was attended by several priests from various churches, as well as community and business leaders.

SCHOOL MARKS WORLD ARABIC LANGUAGE DAY

Fatimah Al Zahraa Basic Education School (Grades 7-10) celebrated the World Arabic Language Day under the auspices of Dr Maizoon bint Bakhit al Shahriyah, Director-General of Education in Dhofar, at the school’s theatre on Wednesday. The event highlighted the importance of preserving and promoting Arabic language and culture.

The programme began with the national anthem and a Quranic recitation, followed by diverse student performances, including poetry recitals,

talent showcases, and presentations on Andalusian lyrical poetry. A theatrical performance explored the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) with the Arabic language, emphasising AI’s potential to enhance learning. The event also featured an operetta based on a seventh-grade literary text performed by the school’s music group.

An exhibition accompanied the celebration, featuring an “Arabic Language Scholars” section with timelines of notable figures, enhanced by AI-generated narrations accessed

through QR codes. In collaboration with the Land of Frankincense Museum, cultural heritage artefacts such as ancient manuscripts, bronze vessels and pre-Islamic inscriptions were showcased.

The “Language of Dhad Café” promoted Arabic language and culture through AI-driven competitions, dialogue sessions, and interactive displays celebrating student talents in Arabic arts and literature. Students also explored Arab poets’ works through AI programmes and models. — ONA

Bid to attract SMEs in postal sector: ASMED

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

THE Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) hosted a dialogue session on enhancing investment of SMEs in the postal sector. The session was held under the auspices of Eng Omar bin Hamdan al Ismaili, CEO of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), in the presence of officials and owners of SMEs.

The session presented innovative ideas to improve efficiency, encourage partnerships and cooperation between SMEs and local and international postal companies. It also raised awareness on the importance of the sector as a vital element in supporting the national economy.

“The postal sector provides and stimulates opportunities for small and medium enterprises and independent workers. TRA, by virtue of its role as a regulator of this sector, has set policies that allows investment of SMEs in the sector.

The discussion addressed the aspects related to raising the level of quality of services provided by these institutions, as well as the controls related to monitoring prices,” said Ishaq al Shukaili, Deputy



The session intended to enhance the SME role in the postal sector.

Chairman of ASMED.

The session discussed several topics including supporting legislation in the postal sector, regulatory procedures, and the necessary standards for quality and safety.

It is noteworthy that the Authority has implemented five specialised sectoral sessions during the previous period, where it addressed challenges and opportunities

in financing SMES, supportive policies and legislation, mechanisms for accessing foreign markets and working on export facilities, regulatory procedures and standards necessary to ensure the safety and quality of products, services and operations, investment opportunities, financing solutions available to investors in usufruct land in the food security, health and tourism sectors.

Sohar University celebrates graduation at OCEC

MUSCAT: Under the auspices of Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), Sohar University celebrated the graduation of its 23rd batch on Wednesday. The event honoured 1,164 graduates. It was held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre’s Al Irfan Theatre.

The ceremony commenced with Oman’s national anthem and a recitation of the Holy Quran, followed by address by the University’s Vice-Chancellor, Dr Hamdan al Fazari, who said: “It is my pleasure to congratulate you, on earning your academic degrees, which you have achieved through perseverance, dedication and invaluable time. You have our heartfelt congratulations and



The event honoured 1,164 graduates from different faculties.

best wishes on this significant milestone in your lives.

“I also congratulate your families, friends and everyone who supported you throughout your academic journey. My advice to you is to utilise your knowledge and skills in

serving your communities and contributing to the growth and development of your nations, each in their area of expertise and within their abilities.

“Set clear goals for your future, turn your ideas into actions and be drivers of your

own success. I wish you all success in achieving your aspirations. Learn from those who came before you, embrace even small beginnings in your careers, and always express gratitude to those who have supported you.”

Arab Chapter praises efforts of Oman Human Rights Commission

MUSCAT: The Arab Charter on Human Rights Committee, affiliated with the League of Arab States, and the Arab Network for National Human Rights Institutions have commended the efforts of Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC).

In this context, Counsellor Jaber bin Saleh al Marri, Chair of the Arab Charter Committee, stated that Oman Human Rights Commission had submitted its parallel report to the Arab Charter on Human Rights Committee. The report was based on documented facts gathered through monitoring activities, complaint handling, and the collection of data

and statistics in cooperation with various stakeholders. The report was distinguished by its high level of independence and objectivity, transparently and clearly reflecting the challenges and achievements in the field of human rights in the Sultanate of Oman.

Al Marri added that Oman Human Rights Commission demonstrated effective cooperation during the Arab Charter on Human Rights Committee’s visit to Oman. During this visit, the Committee reviewed the developments in Oman’s human rights framework at the legislative, institutional and policy levels, as



OHRC, headed by Prof Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi.

well as the practices adopted to protect and promote human rights.

In a related context, a delegation from Oman Human Rights

Commission, headed by Prof Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of the Commission, participated in the 26th Session of the Arab Charter on Human Rights Committee, held at the League of Arab States in Cairo. The Session was dedicated to discussing the Sultanate of Oman’s first report.

The two-day session’s agenda covered several topics related to the provisions of the Arab Charter on Human Rights. The discussions witnessed fruitful interaction, with inquiries from the Committee’s experts and responses from the Omani delegation.

Additionally, the Arab Charter Committee held a special hearing with Oman Human Rights Commission to explore its views on matters related to the Charter’s provisions and the submitted report.

The delegation of Oman Human Rights Commission included: Ahmed bin Abdullah al Owaisi, a member of the Commission, Aida bint Shamis al Hashmiyah, a member of the Commission, Abdulaziz bin Ali al Saadi, Director of the Legal Affairs Department, and Iman bint Khalid al Saediyyah, Head of the International Relations Department at the Commission.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Palestinian houses stand badly damaged during the ongoing Israeli strikes in Beit Lahiya. — Reuters

GAZA MEDIATORS RACE TO WRAP UP CEASEFIRE PACT

CAIRO: The United States, joined by Arab mediators, sought on Wednesday to conclude an agreement between Israel and Palestinians to halt the 14-month-old war in the Gaza Strip where medics said Israeli strikes killed at least 20 people overnight. A Palestinian official close to the negotiations said on Wednesday that mediators had narrowed gaps on most of the agreement’s clauses. He said Israel had introduced conditions which Hamas rejected but would not elaborate. Sources close to the talks in Cairo, the Egyptian capital, said an agreement could be signed in coming days on a ceasefire and a release of captives held in Gaza in return for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. Palestinians accuse Israel of carrying out acts of “ethnic cleansing” to depopulate the northern edge of the enclave to create a buffer zone. On Wednesday, Muhammad Saleh, director of Al Awda Hospital in Jabalia, said Israeli shelling in the vicinity damaged the facility, wounding seven medics and one patient inside the hospital. — Reuters

XI HAILS MACAU ‘SUCCESS’ IN VISIT FOR 25TH ANNIVERSARY



China's President Xi Jinping (C) speaks upon his arrival at Macau's international airport in Macau.

MACAU: Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed Macau’s “world-recognised success” as he arrived in the city on Wednesday, kick-starting a three-day trip as it prepares to celebrate 25 years of Beijing rule. Xi lauded Macau’s implementation of the framework after he landed at Macau International Airport on Wednesday afternoon and was greeted by the current and incoming city leaders. “Over the past 25 years, the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ principle with Macau characteristics has achieved a world-recognised success, and has demonstrated vitality and a unique appeal,” Xi said. The Chinese president said that he would use his trip to celebrate the anniversary with compatriots and to inspect Macau’s “new developments and changes”. “In the next few days, I will go around and have a look, and have extensive and in-depth exchanges with our friends from all places, and discuss plans for Macau’s development,” he said. Xi is set to attend the inauguration of Macau’s new administration during his trip. — AFP

S KOREAN PRESIDENT FAILS TO APPEAR BEFORE CORRUPTION WATCHDOG

SEOUL: South Korea’s impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol failed to appear before the country’s corruption watchdog on Wednesday, it said, after he was summoned for questioning over his martial law bid. Yoon was stripped of his duties by parliament over the weekend following his short-lived December 3 martial law declaration, which plunged the country into its worst political turmoil in decades. Investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) had summoned him to their facility in

suburban Seoul at 10:00 am (01:00 GMT) for questioning over charges of insurrection and abuse of power. “President Yoon did not appear for his summons today,” a CIO official said. Yoon’s legal team said that he did not commit insurrection and has vowed to fight the charge in court. “While we do not consider the insurrection charges to be legally valid, we will comply with the investigation,” Seok Dong-hyeon of Yoon’s team was quoted as saying.

The CIO said this week that a summons was sent to Yoon but returned “undelivered” after an unidentified person at the presidential office refused to accept it. Yoon’s no-show on Wednesday “will be considered as a failure to comply with the first summons”, a CIO statement said. Investigators said they were considering despatching a second summons, but CIO chief Oh Dong-woon told parliament on Tuesday they were also “reviewing” whether to issue an arrest warrant. — AFP

UN calls for ‘free and fair’ elections in Syria

THE UN envoy to Syria called on Wednesday for “free and fair” elections after the ouster of president Bashar al-Assad, as he voiced hope for a political solution for Syrian areas. Assad fled Syria following a lightning offensive spearheaded by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), more than 13 years after his crackdown on democracy protests precipitated one of the deadliest wars of the century. He left behind a country scarred by decades of disappearances and the collapse of his rule on December 8 stunned the world and sparked celebrations around Syria and beyond. Years of civil war have also left the country heavily dependent on aid, deeply fragmented, and desperate for justice and peace. Addressing reporters in Damascus, UN special envoy Geir Pedersen said “there is a lot of hope that we can now see the beginning of a new Syria”. “A new Syria that... will adopt a new constitution... and that we will have free and fair elections when that time comes, after a transitional period,” he said. Calling for immediate humanitarian assistance, he also said he hoped to see an end to international sanctions levied against Syria over Assad’s abuses. HTS military chief Murhaf Abu Qasra said Kurdish-held areas would be integrated under the country’s new leadership, adding that the group rejects federalism. “Syria will not be divided,” he said, adding that “the Kurdish people are one of the components of the Syrian people.” He said HTS would be “among the first” factions to dissolve its armed wing



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GEIR PEDERSEN UN special envoy



A man lifts a Syrian flag as passengers disembark from a Syrian Air aircraft arriving from Damascus, at the airport of the northern city of Aleppo. — AFP

and integrate into the armed forces, after the leader of the group ordered the disbanding of rebel organisations. “All military units must be integrated into this institution,” Abu Qasra said. HTS has also vowed justice for the crimes committed under Assad’s rule, including the disappearance of tens of thousands of people into the complex web of detention centres and prisons that was used for decades to silence dissent. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, more than 100,000 people died or were killed in custody from 2011. The country’s new rulers have sought to keep its institutions going and, on Wednesday, a commercial flight took off from Damascus airport to Aleppo, the first since Assad was toppled and fled to Russia. They have also stepped up engagement with

countries that had long seen Assad as a pariah, and with international institutions. EU chief Ursula Von der Leyen said the bloc would intensify its “direct engagement” with the new administration. Britain, France and Germany have sent delegations to Damascus, while Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said Rome was “ready to engage with the new Syrian leadership”, but urged “maximum caution”. Members of the UN Security Council, which includes Assad ally Russia as well as the United States, called on Tuesday for an “inclusive and Syrian-led” political process. “This political process should meet the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians, protect all of them and enable them to peacefully, independently and democratically determine their own futures,” a statement said. — AFP

QUAKE DISASTER

Rescuers hunt for survivors in Vanuatu



Rescue teams dug for survivors trapped in crumpled buildings in the Pacific nation of Vanuatu after a powerful earthquake killed at least nine people. People called out from beneath the remains of a flattened three-storey shop in the capital Port Vila, where scores of rescuers worked through the night to find them. About 80 people including police, medics, trained rescuers and volunteers used excavators, jackhammers, grinders and concrete saws. — AFP

ONE DEAD, REST RESCUED

Passenger boat capsizes off Mumbai coast



A boat carrying 80 passengers and five crew members capsized off the coast of India’s Mumbai after a speedboat struck it on Wednesday, officials said. A total of 75 people, and all five crew members, were rescued, while one was dead, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation in a statement. A speedboat crashed into the vessel, causing it to capsize, said Devendra Fadnavis, chief minister of Maharashtra state, of which Mumbai is capital. — Reuters

STIMULUS PACKAGES

Nigeria to sustain reforms with 2025 budget



Nigeria’s president said the reforms undertaken by his administration have yielded results and there will be no reversals. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu said restoring macroeconomic stability and improved security are the key points of the proposed \$31.22 billion budget for 2025. “This budget reflects a renewed commitment to strengthening the foundation of a robust economy while addressing critical sectors essential for the growth and development we envision,” he told lawmakers. — AFP

POLITICAL ALLEGATIONS



Protesters carry an image of Begona Gomez outside the court, in Madrid. — AFP

SPAIN PM’S WIFE TESTIFIES IN CORRUPTION CASE

MADRID: Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s wife Begona Gomez testified in court on Wednesday in a probe into misappropriation allegations, one of several sensitive legal cases undermining the minority left-wing government. Her appearance at a Madrid court comes during a frenzied week of legal activity in connection with cases that have ensnared Sanchez’s inner circle and emboldened the conservative opposition.

Gomez only agreed to answer questions from her lawyer during the hearing, which focuses on accusations she illegally appropriated software financed by private companies and initially intended for Madrid’s Complutense University while she worked there. Judge Juan Carlos Peinado launched an investigation against Gomez in April for alleged corruption and influence peddling.

During an appearance before the conservative-controlled Madrid regional parliament in November, Gomez dismissed the corruption allegations against her as politically motivated. She previously invoked her right to silence in July in connection with the corruption and influence peddling case. — AFP

SARKOZY MUST WEAR ELECTRONIC TAG



France’s highest appeals court on Wednesday confirmed a verdict against former president Nicolas Sarkozy for corruption and influence peddling, ordering him to wear an electronic tag for a year, a first for a former head of state. Sarkozy, who had earlier been found guilty of illegal attempts to secure favours from a judge, will “evidently” respect the terms of the conviction after the Court of Cassation’s verdict, his lawyer Patrice Spinosi said. But he will take the case to the European Court of Human Rights within weeks. — AFP

SWISS GOVERNMENT NEARS A DEAL TO ‘STABILISE’ TIES WITH EUROPEAN UNION

GENEVA: After years of negotiations, Switzerland’s government appeared poised to approve a package of agreements with the European Union, though Swiss lawmakers and a likely referendum could still sink the deal. Non-EU member Switzerland and its largest trading partner are seeking to stabilise and develop their relations, which are currently governed by more than 120 agreements.

For nearly two decades, the two

sides have been discussing the need to simplify and harmonise ties, but relations soured in 2021, when, without warning, Bern slammed the door on the negotiations. The talks tentatively resumed in March, with both sides saying they hoped to conclude a deal by the end of the year.

Unlike previous attempts to seal an overarching framework agreement, the current negotiations have sought to update the existing bilateral agreements and conclude

new ones on issues like electricity, health and food safety.

Swiss media have in recent days cited diplomatic sources saying that all issues had been agreed upon, with the exception of the amount Switzerland should pay into the EU’s Cohesion Fund, which is aimed at reducing economic and social disparities in the bloc. A fresh round of discussions on Tuesday “took place in a very positive atmosphere”, a European diplomatic source said. — AFP

Zelensky huddles with EU leaders as Trump looms

UKRAINIAN President Volodymyr Zelensky was to meet Nato chief Mark Rutte and key European leaders in Brussels on Wednesday to discuss “next steps” on Russia’s war as Donald Trump prepares to take office as US president. The gathering was expected to involve leaders from Germany, Poland, Italy, Denmark, and the European Union’s main institutions. French President Emmanuel Macron and British premier Keir Starmer looked set to miss it due to schedule clashes, but would send their foreign ministers instead.



Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky (L) and Nato Secretary-General Mark Rutte look at each other before addressing the media at a press conference, in Brussels. — AFP file photo

The huddle comes just over a month before Trump moves into the White House, having pledged to bring a swift end to a conflict that Nato says has left more than one dead million and wounded since Russia’s 2022 attack. There is growing concern that Trump could pull US support for Kyiv and force it to make painful concessions to Moscow. European leaders, keen not to be left on the sidelines, are scrambling to come up with their own plans.

Discussions have even begun between some capitals over the potential deployment of European troops to Ukraine to secure any eventual ceasefire. But while this was raised at a recent meeting between Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, diplomats say it remains too early to draw up concrete proposals. “Officially that is not on the agenda, but since there will be a lot of important people in the same room, it cannot entirely be ruled out,” a Nato diplomat said. The meeting “will be basically about Zelensky asking for more military aid”, the diplomat added.

Addressing Italy’s parliament on Tuesday, Meloni said the meeting in Brussels would reinforce European

There is growing concern that Trump could pull US support for Kyiv and force it to make painful concessions to Moscow. European leaders, keen not to be left on the sidelines, are scrambling to come up with their own plans.

efforts to assure a “just and lasting peace”. “It is also an important opportunity to discuss the future of the conflict, maintaining close coordination on the next steps to be taken,” Meloni said. Zelensky has said he believes the war could end next year, and has called for allies to help secure a peace deal that Moscow cannot violate. Leaders would discuss “how to urgently strengthen Ukraine on the battlefield, politically and geopolitically”, he said.

European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen insisted that “bolstering Ukraine right now is not only a moral imperative -- it is also a strategic imperative”. Rutte has insisted Kyiv’s allies should focus on ramping up arms supplies -- and urged them not to debate possible peace conditions in public as it risks playing into Russia’s hands. Western backers are seeking to shore up Ukraine’s forces as Kyiv’s fatigued troops are losing ground

across the frontline and Moscow has deployed North Koreans to the battlefield. “The aim is to make Ukraine as strong as possible for possible negotiations,” a German government source said.

Zelensky on Tuesday said Ukraine “needs 12-15 more air-defence systems to fully protect our country from Russian missile strikes”.

As Trump’s return to power approaches, the Ukrainian leader has appeared to soften his stance on any potential peace push. He has said that if Ukraine is given firm security guarantees by Nato and enough weaponry it could agree to a ceasefire along current lines and look to regain the rest of its territory through diplomatic means. But Nato members have rebuffed Kyiv’s calls for an invitation to join their alliance right away, sparking speculation that sending peacekeepers could be an alternative. — AFP

Georgian president urges EU to up pressure on ‘corrupt’ leadership

STRASBOURG: Georgia’s president on Wednesday called on Europe to up its support for pro-EU demonstrators who have been “fighting day and night” in Tbilisi to demand fresh elections in the Black Sea country. Salome Zurbishvili told the European Parliament that Brussels has been “slow to wake up” to the crisis unfolding in her nation, where the government faces a legitimacy crisis and a mounting international outcry over human rights violations. “Europe so far has not fully lived to the moment. Europe has so far met the challenge halfway,” Zurbishvili, who is at loggerheads with the ruling Georgian Dream party, told lawmakers in Strasbourg.

Georgia’s authorities have forcefully clamped down on pro-EU demonstrators taking to the streets in recent weeks to protest the government’s decision to shelve its push to join the bloc. The crackdown

followed an unprecedented constitutional crisis that saw Zurbishvili declare the newly elected parliament and government “illegitimate” after the opposition accused Georgian Dream of rigging parliamentary polls in October.

Zurbishvili’s mandate is meant to end later this month after the ruling party picked an ex-footballer to replace her -- but she is vowing to stay in the post unless there is a general election re-run. “While European flags are being banned in Tbilisi, Georgians are still waiting for biting measures to come from Brussels,” Zurbishvili told a plenary sitting of the EU parliament, urging the 27-nation bloc to “use your leverage”. “Europe is Georgia’s biggest donor, Georgia’s biggest market... If Europe cannot exert leverage on a country of 3.7 million, how can it expect to compete with the giants of the 21st century?”, she asked.



Georgia’s President Salome Zourabichvili addresses MEPs during a plenary session at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. — AFP

While condemning the crackdown on demonstrators, the EU has for now just agreed to take the largely symbolic move of imposing

visa requirements on Georgian diplomatic passport holders -- with Hungary blocking other sanctions. Zurbishvili pleaded for further

action against Tbilisi’s “corrupt” leadership, including a more vocal support of demonstrators and help to fight “lies” spread by the government. “If Georgia falls under Russian control... the stakes are very high,” Zurbishvili said, describing her country as “Europe’s foothold” in the Caucasus. “I hope we won’t have to wait for a deeper crisis to occur for Europe to act”. Critics accuse Georgian Dream of steering the country back towards Russia. “To the people of Georgia: You are not alone,” European parliament president Roberta Metsola wrote on X.

Several thousand people gathered outside the parliament meanwhile for the 19th straight night of protests, sparked by the government’s shock announcement that it would shelve EU accession talks until 2028. Protesters hailed the cancellation of the ceremony as a symbolic victory. — AFP

OPINION

Listening to the soils’ whispers



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI
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The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

In Riyadh, a story of restoration and resilience quietly unfolded, reminding us that the world’s deserts are not just barren landscapes but places where hope and renewal can take root. COP16, the largest gathering yet under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, saw nearly 200 nations converge with a shared purpose: to steward our lands more wisely and repair the scars that decades of environmental neglect have etched across the globe. The numbers presented didn’t lie. Over the past thirty years, more than three-quarters of the Earth’s ice-free surface, some 77 per cent, has grown drier. Drylands now stretch across 40.6 per cent of our planet, having expanded by a staggering 4.3 million square kilometres; an area larger than India itself. These figures are not mere statistics; they represent a profound shift reshaping where we farm, how we eat, and how we plan for tomorrow, and the world rose to that challenge. The Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership alone accounted for \$12.15 billion, targeting 80 of the world’s most vulnerable nations. The Great Green Wall, an audacious African-led initiative designed to restore degraded Sahelian landscapes, secured fresh momentum: Italy offered \$11.5 million and Austria \$3.7 million. Another \$70 million went to the Vision for Adapted Crops

and Soils programme, an effort to cultivate climate-resilient food systems that can thrive where rainfall is scarce and seasons unpredictable. Technological innovation was another defining note at COP16. Delegates introduced the International Drought Resilience Observatory, an AI-driven platform that doesn’t just track conditions, it actively analyses weather patterns, soil health, and water availability to predict droughts before they take hold. Such a system can give farmers and communities the precious resource of time: time to alter planting schedules, diversify crops, or secure alternative water sources. Alongside this global platform, a new regional sand and dust storm monitoring system will deliver early warnings that could save crops, protect human health, and guide disaster response efforts. Think of it as a meteorological early-warning siren that helps communities brace against the worst nature can throw at them. The Middle East, hosting its first UNCCD meeting, embraced its role as both a regional exemplar and a global contributor. Oman’s story offers a more detailed glimpse with a national plan to combat desertification already underway and a drive to plant 10 million trees, the country is not just restoring landscapes but reinventing its identity as a green, climate-forward Gulf state. The Green

The Green Oman Initiative’s aim for carbon neutrality by 2050 aligns global aspirations with domestic action, from selecting drought-resistant tree species to engaging local communities in greening efforts.

Oman Initiative’s aim for carbon neutrality by 2050 aligns global aspirations with domestic action, from selecting drought-resistant tree species to engaging local communities in greening efforts. Of course, COP16 wasn’t a tale of unbroken success. The effort to establish a legally binding global drought protocol was postponed until COP17 in Mongolia, set for 2026. Such delays are a reminder that negotiations on environmental issues are often intricate dances involving politics, differing national interests, and the lingering inertia of the past. But even with this setback, the conference concluded with 39 decisions adopted, each one a building block toward healthier lands and stronger communities. Reflecting on COP16, it becomes clear that this was not just a gathering of bureaucrats and specialists worrying over dust and data. It was a crossroads moment where we recognised that while landscapes will inevitably shift and climates will change, we hold the power to shape what emerges in their wake. We have the means, through investments, innovations, ancient wisdom, and international cooperation, to turn a fragile, increasingly arid planet into one of renewal and abundance. The real question, as we set our sights on the journeys ahead, is whether we have the collective courage to do so.

ECONOMIC WOES MOUNT FOR RUSSIA’S WAR MACHINE

ROBIN BJALON

Stubborn inflation, exorbitant borrowing costs, bankruptcy risks and a growth slowdown: the Russian economy is facing a slew of negative headlines, as the costs of the Ukraine war and Western sanctions mount. Since ordering an attack in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly touted the “failure” of sanctions and hailed strong growth in the face of unprecedented uncertainty. But going into 2025, that three-year run of mostly good economic news looks in serious doubt. The latest setback for the Kremlin came last week, when inflation accelerated to 8.9 per cent in November, according to official statistics. Prices have been rising despite the central bank having hiked interest rates to a two-decade high of 21 per cent. Russian media, usually reluctant to report on any sign of social discontent, are turning increasing attention to hard-pressed families. The price of butter, up a third since the start of the year, has become emblematic, with a slew of reports on rising thefts from supermarkets. Most independent analysts say the attack is to blame. “The root cause of the economy’s problems is labour starvation and sanctions ... the symptom is an inflationary surge,” said Anton Tabakh, chief economist at the Russian ratings agency Expert RA. Both those factors are directly related to the war. Labour shortages, already pressing due to Russia’s demographic problems, have been exacerbated by hundreds of thousands of men joining the army, being employed by arms manufacturers or fleeing the country, as well as a tightening of migration rules. “This is holding back GDP growth,” said economist Yevgeny Nadorshin, a former advisor to the economic development ministry. He estimates Russia lacks around one million workers. That has contributed to rising wages, pushing up prices set by businesses. So too has the Kremlin’s massive increase in military spending. State expenditure is set to be 67.5 per cent higher in 2025 compared to 2021, before Russia’s military offensive. Up against those huge sums, interest rate rises have so far had only a limited effect. High rates have triggered outcry from bosses, including at state-run companies, with market borrowing costs running at 25-30 per cent. Russian Railways said it will cut investment by 40 per cent next year. Even Putin’s closest allies have complained. Analysts expect many firms, unable to refinance, will go under. Faced with such an onslaught, the central bank predicts a sharp slowdown in growth next year -- to below 1.5 per cent, from over 3.5 per cent this year. It has ruled out the prospect of stagflation — low growth and high inflation -- yet the word is being used more and more frequently in Moscow. — AFP

Dignity does not vanish even if one is a criminal

In the wake of Syria’s recent upheaval and regime change, harrowing images and accounts from Sednaya Prison have emerged. Established in 1987 as a military facility for detaining political prisoners and dissenters, Sednaya has become synonymous with brutality. Its grim reputation mirrors that of Guantanamo Bay, the US-run detention centre in Cuba since 2002. Both prisons are notorious for inhumane treatment, where physical and psychological torture reduce inmates to a state below human dignity—a stark contradiction to the principles of human rights that these nations claim to uphold. History reveals that prisoners, regardless of their offences, are often stripped of their humanity. Around the world, examples abound: Gitarama Prison in Rwanda, the supermax EDX facility in the United States, Mendoza Prison in Argentina, and Russia’s Black Dolphin Prison. Others, like Iran’s Evin Prison under the Shah or Egypt’s Military Prison during Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime, are infamous for the torment their inmates endured. Some of these stories emerge later as memoirs or fictionalised accounts, serving as chilling reminders of human cruelty. Human dignity is inherent and does not vanish with the commission of a crime. This principle is enshrined in international human rights charters, including the United Nations’ declaration that all prisoners must be treated with respect for their inherent value as human beings. It also prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, or political opinion. A prisoner’s dignity remains intact, and their punishment must be proportionate, lawful, and determined by an independent judiciary. Unlawful detention, indefinite imprisonment without trial, and denial of legal representation blatantly violate these principles, particularly in cases involving prisoners of conscience. Yet, the grim reality persists. Secret prisons, often



People walk and search around the cells inside Sednaya Prison, which was known as a slaughterhouse under Syria’s Bashar al Assad rule. — Reuters



BADR AL ABRI

The writer focuses on reconciliation and understanding, and the author of ‘The Jurisprudence of Extremism’

hidden from international scrutiny, operate in many developing nations. Even in countries that champion human rights, such as the United States, breaches of these principles are evident—especially in the treatment of political prisoners worldwide. These institutions serve as stark reminders that the lofty ideals of human rights often fail in practice. Sednaya Prison is just one example. Without the recent Syrian conflict, its horrors might have remained obscured, as countless detainees vanish into secret cells, never to be seen again. Victims face summary executions or prolonged deaths under torture, their stories buried with them. In lawless environments, as seen in parts of Syria, mob justice and arbitrary killings prevail, echoing

the chaos of the French Revolution. Amid this bleak landscape, there are glimpses of hope. Prisons that prioritise reform over revenge, adhering to human rights and transparent judicial processes, exemplify the potential for humane incarceration. Such systems separate the individual’s dignity from their crime, focusing on rehabilitation rather than degradation. This model, guided by independent oversight and civil society’s watchful eye, is a vision worth pursuing—one that honours humanity and fosters progress, particularly in the Arab world. Translated by Badr al Dhafari. The original version of the article appeared in Arabic in Oman newspaper’s print version on December 18, 2024.

Optimism and resilience to navigate life’s twists, turns



SONIA AMBROSIO

The writer is journalist, academic and researcher in media studies

At times, the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges can be frightening. We, the average Joe, are used to routine: work and pay bills until change happens, either willingly or under forced circumstances. One may have everything one day, only to lose it all the next.

The blow can be related to health, money, or housing; the list is extensive. Politics, natural catastrophes, wars and conflicts, election results, and trade disputes are just a few examples of how events can impact people's lives.

Who cares? Some segments are driven more by brands and appearances than by everyday issues faced by average people. Other sectors choose to entertain individuals with less pressing issues while pulling strings and making decisions on behalf of society.

Following the events in Syria, we have observed twitchiness among regional leaders. In the past, we have seen the downfall of regional strongmen, some of whom remain questionable, such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar al Gaddafi of Libya, among others. Even showing solidarity among global and regional leaders can backfire if events unfold differently. There is a steely silence in the air.

The already precarious situation in the Middle East has escalated due to mounting popular resentment, stemming not just from political but also economic and social issues.

Frayed state-citizen ties, unemployment, cronyism, corruption, and poor-quality public services are all reasons for dissatisfaction. Leaders, like gigantic wheels, are up one moment and down the next; the same holds in politics.

The love for power is greater than the love for humanity. Otherwise, we would not see bombs aimed at populations, destroying infrastructure and the environment. We have watched the region become a hotbed for mercenary fighters.

They engage in politics, foreign affairs, and terrorism. We have also seen weaponry trade, with the United States at the forefront of international exports, followed by Russia, France, China, and Germany—while thousands of people die every day from hunger driven by violence. Further multifaceted geopolitics are emerging, with populations increasingly vulnerable. Meanwhile, political players are tailoring their goals. One example is China’s massive investment in infrastructure development around the world.

China has become the world's largest official debt collector. Aid Data reports that 80 per cent of China's overseas lending goes to countries in financial difficulties. Roughly 30 countries owe China billions of dollars.

The borrowing strategy could be a trap or a new form of colonisation, with various countries struggling to make payments. Russia, Argentina, Venezuela, Kazakhstan,

Individuals are no longer represented in the global arena except to pay for the excesses of a few actors. We are pawns, but we are able to navigate through the unexpected twists and turns in life.

Indonesia, Brazil, Iran, South Africa, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zambia and Egypt are among the countries with billions of dollars in debt under this progressive loan arrangement. Levels of discrimination based on race, nationality, religion, wealth, and social status are growing.

The most damaging is state-sponsored discrimination. For 366 days this year, I observed an increase in animosity and disregard for people's wellbeing. The assassination of an executive from a healthcare insurance firm in the United States has sparked a burst of anger against healthcare elitism, which undermines social justice—just the tip of the iceberg. The world will keep changing.

There have always been and will always be wars. People will continue to adapt to ever-increasing challenges and new types of expansionism. The region's geopolitics will become more fragmented, though there is potential for economic growth in the Arabian Peninsula. People are no longer surprised by the hollow narratives of power. Individuals are no longer represented in the global arena except to pay for the excesses of a few actors. We are pawns, but we are able to navigate through the unexpected twists and turns in life.

The year 2024 ends as it began, with bizarre events. Yet, we can always keep an optimistic attitude. Season's greetings and a successful 2025.

SOMALIA STRUGGLES TO RID ITSELF OF PLASTIC DESPITE BAN

MUSTAFA HAJI ABDINUR

Somalia took the ambitious step of banning single-use plastic bags this year, but in a country with many economic challenges, it has proved hard to implement.

It follows similar plastic bans in other East African countries, including Kenya and Tanzania. But brightly coloured polythene still dominates in the markets and shops of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu.

Long bedevilled by conflict, Somalia passed its law in February, but did not implement it until October. Despite a few arrests, there is little sign it is having an impact. “We are using these bags because they are cheap and people can afford them,” grocer Abdikarim Hassan said from his stall, stacked with plastic-wrapped goods in a central Mogadishu market.

“Everybody knows the negative consequences of using these plastic bags, but the question is: What do we have to replace them?” The price difference is stark. More eco-friendly options, such as disposable paper bags, cost around four times more: at least 4,000 Somali shillings (\$0.17 at the widely used unofficial exchange rate) compared with 1,000 shillings (\$0.04) for simple plastic bags. Meanwhile, more than half of the population lives below the poverty line, according to the government.

“If we are forced to stop [using] the plastic bags, we don't have an alternative that is cheap and can replace it,” said Shamsi Muqtar, a 41-year-old mother of five, who sells vegetables at the market. Garaad Abdullahi Ali, from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, said the continued presence of plastic was due to traders stocking up before the ban. Higher-end boutiques and supermarkets — catering to the city's small middle class — have been more welcoming of the new legislation.

“This is a positive sign; I hope all the grocers start using it too,” said Ahmed Roble, a boutique owner along Mogadishu's popular Maka Al-Mukarama Road. Supermarket customer Abdurahman Omar Mohamed said he was glad to see less of something that was “killing human beings and animals”. In 2019, the world produced around 460 million tonnes of plastic, double the level in 2000, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Plastic production is expected to triple by 2060. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates the equivalent of 2,000 garbage trucks of plastic is dumped into seas, rivers and lakes every day. Many tonnes of this rubbish can be seen on the formerly bucolic beaches near Mogadishu, snaking down the sand in festering piles. Volunteers like Abdisatar Arabow Ibrahim try to tackle the problem. “I think the government is long overdue in implementing this law prohibiting the use of plastic bags,” he said. — AFP

How Musk and Swift can resolve US-China relations



THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN.

The author is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for The New York Times and the paper's foreign-affairs columnist

America needs to tighten up, but China needs to loosen up

I just spent a week in Beijing and Shanghai, meeting with Chinese officials, economists and entrepreneurs, and let me get right to the point: While we were sleeping China took a great leap forward in high-tech manufacturing of everything.

If no one has told Donald Trump, then I will: His nickname on Chinese social media today is “Chuan Jianguo” — meaning “Trump the (Chinese) Nation Builder” — because of how his relentless China bashing and tariffs during his first term as president lit a fire under Beijing to double down on its efforts to gain global supremacy in electric cars, robots and rare materials, and to become as independent of America's markets and tools as possible.

“China had its Sputnik moment — his name was Donald Trump,” Jim McGregor, a business consultant who lived in China for 30 years, told me. “He woke them up to the fact that they needed an all-hands-on-deck effort to take their indigenous scientific, innovative and advanced manufacturing skills to a new level.” The China that Trump will encounter is a much more formidable export engine. Its advanced manufacturing muscles have exploded in size, sophistication and quantity in the last eight years, even while consumption by its people remains puny.

China's export machine is so strong now that only very high tariffs might really slow it down, and China's response to very high tariffs could be to start cutting off American industries from crucial supplies that are now available almost nowhere else. That kind of supply-chain warfare is not what anyone, anywhere needs.

The Chinese experts I spoke with during my trip two weeks ago would like to avoid that battle. The Chinese still need the US market for their exports. But they will not be pushovers. Both Beijing and Washington will be much better off with a bargain — one that imposes a gradual increase in US tariffs, while both of us do what we needed to do

long ago.

What is that? I call it the “Elon Musk-Taylor Swift paradigm.” America would use higher tariffs on China to buy time to lift up more Elon Musks — more homegrown manufacturers who can make big stuff so we can export more to the world and import less. And China would use the time to let in more Taylor Swifts — more opportunities for its youth to spend money on entertainment and consumer goods made abroad, but also to make more goods and offer more services — particularly in health care — that its own people want to buy.

But if we don't use this time to respond to China the way we did to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, with our own comprehensive scientific, innovative and industrial push, we will be toast.

Here's another way the China that Trump will face in 2025 looks a lot different from his last go-round. If Trump were even to tell China, “Hey, I'll let you off the hook on tariffs, if you build more factories in America,” that would definitely help reduce our trade deficit with Beijing, but it might not be such a vote-getter for Republicans. Because here is what China would say: “Sure, how many factories would you like? Forty? Fifty? But there's one thing. The assembly lines will all be staffed by robots, and we can even operate them remotely.” But there is another reason for China's headlong rush to robotisation: demographic necessity. In America, strong trade unions and a growing population make robots the natural enemy of working people, because of how they supplant blue-collar labour. China's population collapse and its heavy restrictions on trade unions make introducing more and more robots to factory floors both economically essential and politically easier.

In the last seven years alone, the number of babies born in China fell from 18 million to 9 million. The latest projection is that China's current population of 1.4 billion

will decline by 100 million by 2050 and possibly by 700 million by the end of the century. To preserve its own standard of living and be able to take care of all its old people, with a steadily shrinking working population, China will drive the robotisation of everything for itself — and the rest of the world.

As for my neighbours in America, I have a confession. I caught a virus in China that I never imagined I'd get: “Elon Musk appreciation.” I'd become so disgusted with the way Musk had been using his X megaphone to bully defenceless people and fawn over Trump that I just wanted that Elon Musk to shut up and go away. But there is another Elon Musk. The genius engineer-entrepreneur who can make stuff, big stuff — electric cars, reusable rockets and satellite internet systems — as well as anyone in China can, and often better.

Musk at his best is the one American manufacturer the Chinese fear and respect. It is crazy to me that Trump is wasting Musk on the project of shrinking the US bureaucracy — under the acronym DOGE, for the informal “Department of Government Efficiency” — when he should be leading another DOGE, a government office for enabling more Americans to “Do Good Engineering.” In sum, America needs to tighten up, but China needs to loosen up.

Which is why my hat is off to Secretary of State Antony Blinken for showing China the way forward. On April 26, as Blinken was en route to the airport after a visit that included a meeting with China's president, Xi Jinping,, he popped into the LiPi record store in the Chinese capital's arts district.

Blinken bought two records — one was an album by classic Chinese rocker Dou Wei. The other was Taylor Swift's 2022 record “Midnights.”

The demand from Chinese consumers is there. I'd say it's time for China's leaders to let their people have more of the supply. It would be good for both our countries — *The New York Times*

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



AL BASHAYER LOSES TO UAE’S SHABAB AL AHLI IN WEST ASIA BASKETBALL LEAGUE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Al Bashayer Club suffered a heavy defeat against UAE’s Shabab Al Ahli Club with a score of 56-96 in a West Asia Super League (WASL) match held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

Despite Al Bashayer’s attempts to narrow the gap, their lack of focus and rushed offensive plays caused them to miss several easy-scoring opportunities, allowing the Emirati team to dominate the game.

Al Bashayer’s standout performers included Slaven Kapkovic, Osama al Riyami, and Hadeed Bait Bakhit, while Shabab Al Ahli’s key players were Omar al Amri, Dominique Pinzer, and Dushinder Wushinjohn.

The game began with Al Bashayer launching an attack, earning a free throw that Slaven Kapkovic converted for one point.

Shabab Al Ahli responded with two points by Qais al Shaibi, followed by another basket from Dominique. Al Bashayer answered with two points from Saeed al Saadi, bringing the score to 3-4. However, Shabab Al Ahli began to pull away, extending the lead to 5-10. With missed opportunities from Al Bashayer, Shabab al Ahli capitalised, with Asan Buya adding another two points to make it 12-5. The first quarter ended with Al Bashayer trailing 10-29.

In the second quarter, Shabab Al Ahli continued to widen the gap, starting with a three pointer by Qais al Amri. Al Bashayer replied with a three pointer by Slaven Kapkovic, but the Emirati team scored another three pointer through Qais al Amri. Al Bashayer managed to reduce the deficit to 17-35, thanks to four points by Slaven Kapkovic. However, the visitors extended their lead further, ending the first half with a 28-53 advantage.

Al Bashayer attempted to improve their performance at the start of the third quarter, with Mahmoud al Souli managing to score two points. However, Shabab Al Ahli maintained their offensive dominance through quick attacks, with Saeed al Amri and Asan Bouya adding more points to widen the gap to 58-32. It was evident that haste in finishing attacks cost Al Bashayer the chance to make a comeback, as the players missed several clear scoring opportunities. Shabab Al Ahli continued to capitalise on misplaced passes and fast breaks to score consecutive points, ending the third quarter with a comfortable lead of 71-39 for the Emirati team.

In the fourth quarter, Al Bashayer scored four points through Osama Al Riyami and Slaven Kapkovic. However, Shabab Al Ahli’s Ahmed al Buraiki responded with two points. Al Bashayer’s Ahmed al Halhali reduced the deficit by scoring two points, bringing the score to 45-75. Despite both teams exchanging attacks, Al Bashayer continued to waste opportunities, leading to a final score of 56-96, with Shabab Al Ahli emerging victorious. *Photo by Amir Al Humhami*

Oman Club to face Dibba, Seeb takes on Najma



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Oman Club will play in group B with Kuwait SC (Kuwait), Dibba Al Huson (UAE) and Al Arabi (Qatar) in the 41st Gulf Club Handball Championship at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in February. Seeb will vie for the title against Al Rayyan (Qatar), Al Najma (Bahrain) and Al Noor (Saudi Arabia) in group A. The event will kick off on February 15 and will run until 24 February, 2025. The opener will be between Kuwait SC and Qatar’s Al Arabi, which will kick off at 4:00 pm followed by Oman Club and Dibba Al Hosn at 6:30 PM.

The draw for the 41st Gulf Club Handball Championship took place on Wednesday under the auspices of Shaikh Sultan bin Hamid al Hosni, Member of the Majlis Ash’shura representing the Wilayat of Al Khabourah and former Chairman of Gulf Handball Organising Committee. Moosa bin Khamis



al Balushi, Chairman of Oman Handball Association (OHA); Jihad bin Abdullah al Shaikh, Vice-Chairman of Oman Club and Head of the Organising Committee; Oman Club’s Board members; and representatives of the participating Gulf clubs were also present.

The hosts Oman Club are gearing up to ensure a successful hosting of the championship. The organising

committee is finalising the key arrangements including accommodations for participating delegations, selecting the referees and technical team of the event, and organising sub committees for logistics, media and other fields. The training sessions will take place at Oman Club’s indoor facilities and the complex’s auxiliary halls.

Shaikh Sultan al Hosni

appreciated the efforts taken by Oman Club and the Oman Handball Association for organising the gulf event. “ The Gulf championship’s acts as an essential event in reviving the prominence of Omani handball and its impact on local clubs and the Association. Hosting this Gulf gathering reflects Oman’s effective role in staging competitive and fraternal sporting events. I am wishing all the best for the local team’s representatives in this event towards registering positive results,” he ended

Moosa bin Khamis al Balushi, OHA Chairman, also praised Oman Club’s efforts. “ It is a great event to welcome all the gulf clubs to Muscat. The Gulf championships have always carried a unique ambiance both on and off the court offering a platform for fierce competition and camaraderie. The association will provide full support to Oman Club to ensure the event’s success,” he said.

Omani Chess Team competes in Asian championship

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC18

THE OMANI national chess team continues its participation in the Asian Amateur Championship in Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates from December 14 to 23. The championship, organised by the Al Ain Chess and Mind Games Club in collaboration with the UAE Chess Federation and under the supervision of the Asian Chess Federation, features wide participation from more than 20 countries. It represents a significant opportunity to enhance Oman’s presence in chess.

The first three rounds of the championship produced mixed results for the Omani players. Saeed al Maamari secured a win against Maldivian player Bin Yazeed, drew with Indian player Vivaan, and lost to Indian player Sharma.

Meanwhile, Qusay al Hinai won a match against his teammate Khalfan al Hosni, but suffered defeats against Indian player Mohammed Shiyan and Saudi Arabian player Ziad al Abdali. Khalfan al Hosni achieved a victory over Pakistan’s Ihsan Feroz but lost to India’s Atharv Bansal and his teammate Qusay al Hinai. Waddah Aa Sabti, however, was unable to



secure a win, losing to India’s Raj Aryan, Afghanistan’s Sharaf Farukh, and Iraq’s Sabah Noori.

Representing Oman in the amateur category are players Saeed al Maamari, Khalfan al Hosni, Qusay al Hinai, and Waddah al Sabti. Omani referee Fatima al Gharbi is part of the official arbitration team, reflecting the distinguished status of Omani talents in both the sports and arbitration domains.

The championship is held under the Swiss system, consisting of nine rounds.



Each player is allocated 90 minutes to complete their game, with an additional 30 seconds per move from the start of the match. This format demands a high level of concentration and strategic planning from the participants.

The tournament serves as a golden opportunity for players to gain experience, enhance their skills, and compete with some of the top amateur players from across Asia, in an atmosphere filled with excitement and intense competition.

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



ASHWIN, ‘ACCIDENTAL SPINNER’, WHO BECAME INDIA GREAT

SYDNEY: India’s spin spearhead Ravichandran Ashwin announced his retirement from international cricket in all formats after the third test against Australia finished in a draw in Brisbane on Wednesday.

The crafty off-spinner retires with 537 wickets from 106 tests, which is the second highest by an Indian bowler behind Anil Kumble’s 619.

Ashwin was not selected for the series-opener in Perth but returned to the side for the day-night second test in Adelaide, where he took one wicket. That match would prove to be his final test after he was left out of the side for Brisbane.

“This will be my last day as an Indian cricketer in all formats in the international level,” the 38-year-old told reporters at the Gabba.

“I do feel there’s a bit of punch left in me as a cricketer, but I would like to... showcase that in club level cricket.

Ashwin has also played 116 one-dayers and 65 Twenty20 Internationals, finishing with 765 wickets across formats.

A proven match-winner on India’s turning tracks, Ashwin also became a decent test all-rounder, hitting six hundreds in the format.

Ashwin will go down as one of India’s greatest players after retiring from international cricket on Wednesday aged 38.

India’s go-to bowler was central to their Test dominance in the last decade with his ability to outfox top batsmen.

Described as an “all-time great” by his Test captain Rohit Sharma, Ashwin earlier this year became only the ninth bowler to reach 500 Test wickets and only the second from India after Anil Kumble (619).

India head coach Gautam Gambhir paid tribute to a player he said would be greatly missed.

“The privilege of seeing you grow from a young bowler to a legend of modern cricket is something that I wouldn’t trade for the world,” Gambhir wrote on social media. — Agencies



Al Nasr and Bahla settle for a draw in OFA Cup

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

AL NASR AND Bahla played to a 1-1 draw in their postponed Round 1 match of Group B in the Oman Football Association Cup. The game, which took place at the Saada Sports Complex Stadium, showcased balanced performances from both teams.

Bahla started with confidence and defensive caution, focusing on counterattacks. Their approach paid off in the 25th minute when Mustafa al Raqeeshi scored the opening goal. He capitalised on a quick counterattack, receiving a precise cross inside the penalty area and heading it brilliantly past Al Nasr’s goalkeeper Rashad Al Dhahin.

Despite Al Nasr’s repeated attempts to equalise, Bahla’s defence remained solid, with their goalkeeper making several crucial saves. The first half ended with Bahla leading 1-0.

In the second half, Al Nasr came out determined to change the game’s course. With the introduction of Marwan Taib at the start of the half, the team showed significant improvement. Al Nasr gained control of the midfield and maintained continuous pressure on Bahla’s defence. In the 52nd minute, Al Nasr was awarded a penalty after Marwan was fouled inside the box. Marwan successfully converted the penalty, levelling the score.

Following the equaliser, Al Nasr intensified their attacks, exploiting the flanks and relying on their players’ speed. Meanwhile, Bahla focused on tight defensive organisation and sporadic counterattacks.

One such counter nearly resulted in a goal in the 75th minute, but Rashad Al Dhahin made a remarkable save to deny Bahla’s forward.

The final minutes of the match were filled with excitement as Al Nasr pushed for a winner, making offensive substitutions. However, Bahla’s defence held firm until the final whistle, concluding the game with a 1-1 draw.

Bahla increased their tally to 8 points, securing second place in Group B of the tournament, while Al Nasr raised their total to 7 points, placing them in third. Sur continues to lead the group with 10 points, while Oman Club remains at the bottom with just 2 points.

It is worth noting that the Oman Football Association Cup is a preparatory tournament in which top league clubs participate during the suspension of local competitions, without their international players.

Third Australia-India Test ends in draw after bad weather

BRISBANE: The third Test between Australia and India in Brisbane ended in a draw after storms halted the hosts’ bid for an unlikely win on Wednesday to leave the series locked 1-1.

An early tea was taken at the Gabba because of bad light with India 8-0 after having been set a target of 275 for victory, after Australia declared on 89-7.

But a big storm swept over the ground during the break and play was abandoned, with the five-Test series now heading to Melbourne and then Sydney.

The draw badly hurts India’s chances of making the final of the World Test Championship at Lord’s next year, with Australia now likely to defend their title against South Africa.

With rain causing regular disruptions throughout the Test, the chance of a result other than a draw looked to have disappeared when India avoided the follow-on late on Tuesday.

But Australia came out firing



An early tea was taken at the Gabba because of bad light with India 8-0 after having been set a target of 275 for victory, after Australia declared on 89-7.

in their second innings to give themselves a chance to bowl the tourists out and take an unlikely victory.

After losing most of the morning

session, Australia began their second innings after lunch showing no signs of an attacking approach.

But once under-pressure openers Usman Khawaja and

Nathan McSweeney fell, along with the equally out-of-form Marnus Labuschagne, the Australian approach seemed to change as the batsmen started to attack every ball.

Khawaja, who turned 38 on Wednesday, came into the second innings after a run of poor form which has seen him not score a century since June 2023.

He spanked two fours from the first over he faced from Mohammed Siraj, but it took the talismanic Jasprit Bumrah just one ball to get his man, the left-hander bowled off an inside edge that also clipped his pad.

Labuschagne was next to go after wafting at a wide ball from Bumrah and edging to wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant.

The carnage continued when McSweeney played a cut shot off Akash Deep, edging to Pant to leave the Australians 16-3.

Deep had his second when Mitchell Marsh, promoted to bat at number four, also left his bat hanging and edging to Pant, with

Australia staggering at 28-4.

That became 33-5 when Steve Smith was well caught by a diving Pant down the leg side off Siraj for four.

Australia were obviously trying to set a target for the Indians to chase and Travis Head (17) fell going for quick runs, a wild slog off Siraj getting a top edge that flew skywards for Pant to come around for his fifth catch.

Skipper Pat Cummins came in and smashed 22 runs off just 10 balls before miscuing an attempted pull shot off Bumrah and holing out to KL Rahul at mid-off.

He sent Mitchell Starc out but declared soon after.

India resumed the day on 252-9 in reply to the hosts’ 445 after a 10th-wicket partnership between Bumrah and Deep late on Tuesday allowed them to avoid the follow-on.

They were dismissed for 260 four overs into the first session when Deep was stumped by wicketkeeper Alex Carey off part-time spinner Head. — AFP

SPORTS



Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior (L) receives the Best Player trophy from Fifa President Gianni Infantino in Doha on Tuesday. — AFP

Vinicius and Bonmati named Fifa Best players of the year

REAL Madrid attacker Vinicius Junior won the FIFA Best men's player of the year award at a ceremony in Doha on Tuesday, while Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati picked up the women's prize for the second time.

The award comes two months after 24-year-old Vinicius was second in the Ballon d'Or, with Real electing to snub the ceremony when they found out beforehand that Manchester City midfielder Rodri was set to win the trophy.

But the Brazilian was this time on hand to collect the prize in person as he is in Qatar with his club ahead of their Intercontinental Cup final clash with Mexico's Pachuca on Wednesday.

"Thank you very much. I don't know where to start. It was impossible to think of getting here. I grew up in a world of poverty, of organised crime. It's for all the children who grow up in that world. I thank everyone who voted for me," Vinicius said on stage.

"(Thank you) To my family, to the club, to my teammates, to Carletto (Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti), who always helps me.

"To everyone who helped make my dream come true. I hope to be at Madrid for many years, because it is the best club in the world. To Flamengo (his first club in Brazil). To my team-mates in my national team. And to my country, which always supports me in my work." Vinicius succeeds Lionel Messi as the FIFA Best men's player after the Argentinian scooped up the last two editions of the award.

The live wire forward scored 24 goals and laid on 11 assists in 39 matches across all competitions as he led Real to a La Liga and Champions League double last season.

Having already wrapped up his third La Liga title in May, Vinicius secured the second



Spaniard Bonmati picked up the Best women's player award for the second year running,

Champions League trophy of his career as Real beat Borussia Dortmund 2-0 on June 1.

He was on the scoresheet at Wembley with a pinpoint finish inside the final 10 minutes to make the game safe for his team.

If Vinicius at times played second fiddle to club-mate Jude Bellingham in La Liga, he was undoubtedly the main man for Madrid in Europe once the going got serious.

He was the top scorer for the Champions

League winners with six goals in the competition, including the strike in the final and a brace in Madrid's 4-3 aggregate win over Bayern Munich in the semi-finals.

He also scored a hat-trick in a 4-1 victory in the final of the Supercopa against arch-rivals Barcelona in January.

But it was not all plain sailing last season for Vinicius as he endured a disappointing Copa America with the Brazilian national team over the summer.

He scored two goals in a group-stage win against Paraguay, but his side ultimately crashed out on penalties to Uruguay in the quarter-finals.

The 26-year-old Spaniard Bonmati picked up the Best women's player award for the second year running, adding to the two Ballon d'Or trophies she already boasts.

"I'm grateful, I'm proud to receive this award," Bonmati said via video link from Barcelona's Olympic stadium.

Last term, Bonmati led Barcelona to a historic continental quadruple of titles and claimed the Nations League with her national team.

She won every trophy available to her in club football in 2023/24 — the Spanish league, the Copa de la Reina, the Supercopa de Espana and a second-successive Women's Champions League.

Bonmati scored a goal and put in a player-of-the-match performance as Barcelona beat Lyon 2-0 in the final of the Champions League to claim their third title in four seasons.

Manchester United's Argentine forward Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas award for the best goal of the year for his spectacular bicycle kick against Everton in the Premier League. — AFP



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INNOVATION HUB



A number of CEOs of digital start-ups and tech companies attended the forum.

OMAN GEARS UP FOR DIGITAL ECONOMY REVOLUTION

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, hosted the first CEOs meeting for startups and technology companies in Oman.

Held under the chairmanship of Shaikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) Board of Directors, the event gathered industry leaders, entrepreneurs and government officials to discuss challenges and opportunities in driving Oman's digital economy.

The meeting witnessed the launch of two major initiatives. The CEO Network aims to foster strategic partnerships that bolster the digital transformation ecosystem, while the Tech Companies Platform, introduced by the Ministry, seeks to connect government entities, businesses and the public with active Omani ICT companies. This platform will streamline access to data, promote innovation and attract local and international investments.

Speaking at the event, Al Rawas emphasised the pivotal role of digital transformation in Oman's economic diversification.

He noted that the ICT sector, supported by Oman's advanced infrastructure and skilled workforce, holds immense potential to attract investment and drive growth in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology, highlighted the significance of public-private collaboration in realising the National Digital Economy Programme.

He stressed that such partnerships are essential for positioning Oman as a regional leader in digital innovation, with the sector expected to contribute 10% of GDP by 2040.

Ibrahim al Hosni, Chair of OCCI's Digital Economy Committee, underscored Oman's readiness to become a hub for innovation, citing its talent pool and supportive ecosystem.

The meeting, he said, is a critical step towards fostering collaboration, addressing challenges and unlocking new opportunities. The event concluded with a discussion on the future of Oman's digital economy, reaffirming its role as a cornerstone of economic growth and diversification.

Fitch upgrades Oman's outlook to 'Positive'

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 18

FITCH Ratings recently revised Oman's outlook from 'Stable' to 'Positive' while affirming its Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating at 'BB+'. This shift reflects a series of economic and fiscal measures that underscore the Sultanate of Oman's resilience and adaptability in a challenging global landscape.

A pivotal factor in Fitch's assessment is Oman's improving fiscal metrics. The government and state-owned entities (SOEs) have significantly reduced debt relative to GDP, while net external debt has declined. Additionally, the accumulation of sovereign foreign assets indicates greater fiscal prudence, with Oman now demonstrating a consistent ability to manage its public finances effectively.

The fiscal break-even oil price has been brought down to below \$70 per barrel, showcasing the success of budgetary reforms. The country now possesses a more robust arsenal of fiscal tools, enhancing its capacity to respond to economic shocks. Oman's balanced budgetary



The government and state-owned entities have significantly reduced debt relative to GDP, while net external debt has declined.

position stands as a testament to its strategic financial planning. While the budget surplus is expected to narrow to 0.7 per cent of GDP in 2025, Fitch projects only a minor deficit of 0.2 per cent in 2026. This projection aligns with Brent oil prices averaging \$70 per barrel in 2025 and \$65 in 2026.

Key reforms include a continued focus on moderating spending and improving tax collection.

The introduction of VAT and progress toward implementing

personal income tax signify steps toward diversifying revenue streams beyond oil. Moreover, expenditure on social safety nets and subsidy reforms reflect a balanced approach to supporting vulnerable segments while controlling fiscal outflows.

Oman's external balance sheet is increasingly robust, with government and SOE debt repayments mitigating liquidity risks. The country has transitioned from being a net external debtor in 2020 (-9 per

cent of GDP) to a net foreign asset holder (10 per cent of GDP in 2024).

These improvements are projected to stabilise net external debt levels at 13 per cent of GDP over the next two years.

Oman scores high in governance metrics such as regulatory quality and control of corruption, contributing positively to its credit profile. However, there is room for improvement in areas like voice and accountability.

Oman can become a global sustainability leader

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Oman is well-positioned to emerge as a global leader in sustainability by leveraging its green economy potential, said Eng Abdulaziz bin Said al Shaithani, Managing Director of Hydrom, during the GH2 Investor Day. He outlined how Oman's drive toward green hydrogen production and other sustainable industries could transform its economy, creating a resilient and diversified future beyond oil and gas.

UNLOCKING ECONOMIC GROWTH
Eng Al Shaithani emphasised that the green economy offers a pathway for Oman to achieve economic growth beyond traditional sectors. He highlighted the potential for localising new industries, fostering economic diversification and reducing dependence on oil and gas revenues. This shift could help shield the economy from volatile energy prices while promoting long-term sustainability.

HYDROGEN AS A CATALYST
Hydrogen production stands at the forefront of Oman's sustainability ambitions. The country aims to produce between 1.0 and 1.5 million tonnes of green hydrogen annually by 2030, scaling up to 3.3-3.8 million tonnes by 2040 and 7.5-8.5 million tonnes by 2050.

According to Al Shaithani, this emerging industry can create a "virtuous cycle" that drives development across multiple sectors:



This emerging industry can create a "virtuous cycle" that drives development across multiple sectors. Image for illustration only.

- Mining Hub:** Oman's mineral-rich landscape could support green-powered mining operations, supplying critical minerals for renewable energy projects and the hydrogen value chain.
- INDUSTRIAL & TECHNOLOGICAL HUB**
Abundant, low-cost renewable energy from green hydrogen could attract energy-intensive industries and stimulate technological innovation.
- RENEWABLES & HYDROGEN HUB**
Oman could become a leading exporter of green hydrogen derivatives, particularly for shipping and other industries looking to decarbonise.
- AGRICULTURAL HUB**
By repurposing excess electricity and water from hydrogen production, Oman could

- boost its agricultural output, enhancing food security.
- TOURISM HUB**
Sustainable tourism could flourish as suppliers adopt environmentally friendly practices, helping preserve Oman's natural landscapes.
- BUNKERING & LOGISTICS HUB**
Oman could emerge as a critical logistics and shipping hub, providing sustainable fuel alternatives to the global maritime industry. "Hydrogen is just one example," Al Shaithani noted. "The green economy offers diverse opportunities, from public transport infrastructure to sustainable agriculture."
- A STRATEGIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE**
This holistic approach aligns with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to diversify the economy and create thousands of high-skilled jobs. According to Al Shaithani, fostering an integrated green economy will not only drive economic growth but also position Oman as a sustainability leader on the global stage.
- Oman has already secured eight major green hydrogen agreements worth \$50 billion since launching its green hydrogen strategy in 2022. The projects are expected to generate 18 GW of renewable energy and 1.5 million tonnes of green hydrogen annually by 2030, underscoring Oman's commitment to becoming a global clean energy powerhouse.

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This significant addition strengthens the brand's presence in North America.

MALABAR GOLD & DIAMONDS LAUNCHES 6TH SHOWROOM IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MUSCAT: Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewellery retailer globally with over 375 showrooms across 13 countries, has launched its 6th showroom in the USA at Atlanta, Georgia.

This significant addition strengthens the brand's presence in North America, offering customers in Georgia access to an extensive collection of exquisite jewellery combined with world-class service.

The showroom was inaugurated by L Ramesh Babu, the Consul General of India at Atlanta in the presence of Joseph Eapen, Regional Head of North America, Malabar Gold & Diamonds; Jasar R Branch Head at Malabar Gold & Diamonds, other community leaders, management team members from Malabar Gold & Diamonds, customers, media and well-wishers.

Commenting on the occasion, Malabar Group Chairman M P Ahammed said: "The launch of our 6th showroom in the USA is a moment of immense pride for all of us at Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

North America has been pivotal in driving our international growth and our newest showroom in Atlanta is a testament to our commitment to this market.

Taking forward our long-held legacy of providing an exceptional jewellery shopping experience to jewellery lovers, we shall continue with the ambitious expansion plan we have charted for North America.

The launch of our Atlanta showroom marks yet another step forward on our journey to becoming the world's largest jewellery retailer.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our customers, team members, shareholders and stakeholders for their unwavering support in making this vision a reality."

Located in Atlanta's bustling community, the showroom spans 5,400 sq ft and features over 30,000 jewellery designs from 20 countries.

From stunning bridal jewellery to elegant daily wear, the collection includes gold, diamond and precious gemstone pieces catering to every occasion and taste.

A customised jewellery design facility is available in the showroom, enabling customers to bring their unique visions to life with expert guidance from Malabar Gold & Diamonds' skilled artisans.

The showroom also has a luxurious customer lounge, facilitating a comfortable jewellery shopping experience.

SOHAR RECEIVES DOUBLE AWARDS AT OMAN CSR SUMMIT 2024

MUSCAT: SOHAR Port and Freezone proudly announces its recognition at the Oman CSR Summit & Awards 2024, winning in two esteemed categories.

The Maseer Program MEwas awarded the Empowerment through Education accolade, highlighting SOHAR's commitment to enhancing educational opportunities within the community. This initiative has successfully enrolled over 400 students equipping them with vital skills in Artificial Intelligence, Cloud



The awards reflect SOHAR's dedication to corporate social responsibility.

Computing, Programming and other advanced technologies.

Additionally, SOHAR received the award for Best Sustainability Initiative for its impactful contribution to the national campaign aimed at planting ten million trees.

This initiative focuses on enhancing environmental sustainability in Al Batinah North Governorate by combating desertification and promoting biodiversity.

OETC achieves over 52 million safe work hours

IN a commitment to achieving the highest global standards in quality, health, safety, security and the environment, and following best practices in the field while ensuring continuous improvement and development, Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) has achieved a new milestone in health and safety by surpassing 52 million safe man-hours since the last lost-time injury.

This achievement spans various work sites and projects across the Sultanate of Oman, as part of the company's ongoing efforts to enhance the quality, safety, reliability and sustainability of the electricity transmission network.

This milestone was achieved due to the company's constant commitment to raising awareness among its employees and project workers about the importance of implementing quality, health, safety, security and environmental standards, as well as the need to follow best practices and utilise available tools to improve the safety and security of the work environment.

This also included conducting regular inspection, monitoring and follow-up campaigns by the company's specialised team

This milestone was achieved due to the company's constant commitment to raising awareness among its employees and project workers about the importance of implementing quality, health, safety, security and environmental standards, as well as the need to follow best practices and utilise available tools to improve the safety and security of the work environment.



This achievement spans various work sites and projects across Oman.

to track progress on projects, assess practices at work sites and implement corrective actions when necessary.

In this context, Fahad bin Nasser al Kiyumi, General Manager of Quality, Health, Safety, Security and Environment at the company, emphasised the company's ongoing efforts and the dedication of all specialised teams across the various fields in which the company operates. He highlighted the company's commitment to sharing best practices, adhering to the highest standards and engaging

with leading institutions in various fields to exchange experiences and expertise.

Al Kiyumi added: "At Oman Electricity Transmission Company, we believe in the importance of maintaining the safety, health and security of our employees and workers through our continuous pursuit and precise application of the highest standards and best practices locally, regionally and globally. This significant achievement, which we are proud of, is a testament to this commitment.

Value Plus opens seventh branch in Nizwa

NIZWA: Value Plus, a leading vehicle rental and leasing company and a part of the OTE Group, has officially opened its seventh branch in the Wilayat of Nizwa, continuing its expansion across Oman.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by Shaikh Ahmed bin Nasser al Abri, Member of the Majlis Ash'shura for the Wilayat of Nizwa, alongside senior representatives from Value Plus, OTE Group and other distinguished guests.

This new branch reflects Value Plus's ongoing commitment to making vehicle rental and leasing services more accessible and convenient for customers throughout Oman.

With existing branches in Muscat (three locations), Suhar, Salalah, Duqm and now Nizwa, the company continues to broaden its presence to better serve customers nationwide.



Value Plus's extensive fleet of over 3,000 vehicles offers a wide variety of options, from dependable everyday cars to premium models, all at competitive rates.

During the event, the Business Head of Value Plus remarked, "Our expansion into Nizwa reflects our commitment to both

inbound tourists visiting this region of Oman and to the residents of Nizwa. We are also eager to extend our services to the corporate sector in the region."

As part of the OTE Group, Value Plus is known for its customer-focused approach, offering flexible rental and leasing solutions tailored to a variety of needs.

The company has further expanded its offerings by introducing highly competitive rates, premium vehicles and an updated fleet.

The addition of a dedicated team helps ensure the provision of quality vehicles at great value, enhancing the company's reputation for reliability.

The Nizwa branch is designed to further strengthen Value Plus's ability to serve the local community, offering personalised services and comprehensive support to both individuals and businesses.

MSX celebrates listing of Alizz Islamic Bank's perpetual sukuk

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) announced the listing of Alizz Perpetual Sukuk on its bonds and Sukuk market, with a total value of RO 30 million comprising of Omani Rial tranche of RO 26.15 million and US Dollar tranche equivalent to RO 3.85 million.

To mark this occasion, a bell-ringing ceremony was held at Muscat Stock



Exchange , attended by members of the board of directors of Alizz Islamic Bank and a number of capital market sector officials.

This listing is a strategic step to support the financial market and promote investments in Islamic financial instruments.

It also reflects the efforts exerted by Muscat Stock Exchange to provide an investment environment

that meets the needs of both companies and investors.

Alizz Islamic Bank Perpetual Sukuk are Islamic financial instruments issued by Islamic banks to strengthen their capital in compliance with Basel III and Central Bank of Oman's regulations.

These Sukuk offer investors the opportunity to achieve Sharia compliant return over the long term.

With Muscat Stock Exchange continuing to achieve its goals, this listing reaffirms the Market's position as a leading regional destination for trading Islamic financial instruments.

Sukuk are a flexible and effective financing tool that helps balance the needs of financial institutions and the aspirations of investors seeking sustainable returns.

BUSINESS

SEAMLESS EXECUTION



RINA's role is to ensure safe and seamless system integration across the 303 km network.

ITALY’S RINA TO PROVIDE TECH SUPPORT FOR HAFEET RAIL PROJECT

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Italian-based global engineering and certification services specialist RINA has been tapped by a key contractor for the Hafeet Rail project to provide an array of system integration and engineering services aimed at ensuring the safe and efficient operation of the \$2.5 billion rail network linking Oman and the UAE.

Headquartered in Genoa (Italy), RINA is a global corporation specialising in the provision of engineering and consultancy services, as well as testing, inspection and certification across the Energy, Marine, Certification, Transport & Infrastructure and Industry sectors through a global network of 170 offices in 65 countries.

On Tuesday, the firm announced that it has been selected by Hassan Allam Construction and its subsidiary Kortech (a leading provider of turnkey solutions) to assist in the seamless execution of the project.

In April, Hafeet Rail — the joint Omani-UAE developer and operator of the 303 km network linking Sohar Port with Abu Dhabi — named Siemens Mobility, together with its consortium partner Hassan Allam Construction, as the winner of the Railway Systems Design, Build & Integration package. As part of the package, Siemens Mobility and Hassan Allam Construction will deliver the design, build and integration of the ETCS Level 2 signalling, telecom and power supply systems across the network.

For its part, RINA says it has been tasked with ensuring the complete and safe integration of the railway’s subsystems, including signalling, telecommunications and operational technologies. The company will oversee the implementation of the European Train Control System (ETCS) Level 2 signalling system, which is crucial for maintaining safety and reliability throughout the network.

Andrea Raffetti, Middle East, India & Turkey Infrastructure & Mobility Director at RINA, said: “RINA’s extensive experience in railway system integration is key to the safe and efficient operation of this critical infrastructure. Our role in the Hafeet Rail project is to ensure that all subsystems work harmoniously, resulting in seamless and reliable performance.”

RINA’s scope on the Hafeet Rail project includes: Requirements & Configuration Management, System Interface and Integration Management, System Assurance and Safety Analysis, RAM (Reliability, Availability, Maintainability) Management, Test & Commissioning Activities and Specialties such as Human Factor, Ergonomics, Cybersecurity and Electromagnetic Compatibility.

“RINA’s involvement ensures that the entire system will meet the client’s exacting specifications, guaranteeing safety and operational success for this critical infrastructure,” the company further added.

VALE UNVEILS ‘TATWEER’ TO EMPOWER OMAN’S FUTURE LEADERS

MUSCAT: Vale in Oman has launched “Tatweer,” a transformative Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme designed to develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills among Omani youth.

The initiative connects participants with international experts, industry pioneers and thought leaders to inspire innovation and enhance future career prospects.

The programme’s inaugural sessions were held in Suhar and Muscat, attracting over 500 university students and young



The programme's inaugural sessions attract over 500 university students and young professionals.

professionals.

Renowned entrepreneur Bader Nabil al Essa (Bo Nabeel) delivered

a motivational talk on finding one’s passion, fostering creative thinking and embracing adaptability.

Abdullah al Saadi, Chief of Administration and Corporate Affairs at Vale MENA, emphasised the programme’s long-term impact: “Through Tatweer, we aim to empower Oman’s youth, equipping them with skills to drive sustainable development and contribute to a knowledge-based economy.”

The initiative will continue into 2025 with an expanded agenda, reinforcing Vale’s role in supporting Oman’s economic diversification through youth development.

Manah-1 solar PV project gears up for Q1 launch

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 18

EDF Renewables, the wholly-owned subsidiary of French utility EDF Group, has announced that its 500 MW solar PV project, Manah-1, currently nearing completion in Oman’s Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, is being prepped for commissioning ahead of its launch early next year.

Manah-1 is being developed by Wadi Noor Solar Power Company SAOC, which represents the consortium of EDF Renewables and Korea Western Power Co Ltd (KOWEPO).

It follows the award of the Omani government’s mandate to implement the utility scale renewable energy scheme as an Independent Power Project (IPP).

Announcing progress in the delivery of the project, EDF Renewables Middle East noted in a recent post: “We were proud to witness the installation of the last PV module on our Oman site, Manah-1, marking a key



Key officials representing the developers and contractors of Manah-1 pictured at the project site recently during the latest construction milestone.

milestone for this ambitious solar project.

With the cold commissioning phase successfully underway, the teams are now preparing for hot commissioning as we edge closer to delivering clean, renewable energy.”

Senior executives of EDF Renewables were recently in Oman to witness first-hand the successful installation of the last solar PV module — more than a million of which now cover a vast expanse of the Manah-1 site. Chinese EPC contractor

Shanghai Electric Company has been undertaking the construction of the project through its local subsidiary Shanghai Electric Muscat Ltd SPC.

High efficiency modules for the project were supplied by JA Solar, a leading Chinese manufacturer of high-performance photovoltaic products.

The bifacial modules, capable of generating power from top and bottom faces, have been mounted on single axis trackers to maximise power generation throughout the day.

Module cleaning will be undertaken by automatic cleaning robots.

Earlier, Wadi Noor Solar Power announced the successful construction, testing and commissioning of a 400kV substation that will evacuate renewable power from Manah-1 to the grid station of Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC).

Manah-1 Solar Power is expected to start commercial operation in the first quarter of 2025.

Oman LNG, OPAL, Innotech launch graduate skills training

MUSCAT: Oman LNG, in collaboration with the Oman Society for Petroleum Services (OPAL) and Innotech, signed an agreement to launch an innovative training programme designed to enhance the skills of Omani graduates in engineering, IT and 3D printing technologies.

The signing ceremony was held under the auspices of Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

The six-month training



aims to equip participants with practical experience and technical expertise to boost their employability in Oman’s competitive job market.

The initiative reflects

the three partners’ shared commitment to supporting national workforce development and advancing Oman Vision 2040 goals. Upon completing the programme, ten trainees will secure direct employment, while others will benefit from enhanced technical competencies in high-demand fields.

This initiative is expected to prepare skilled professionals capable of meeting the local market’s evolving needs and driving economic growth.

MSX launches investment awareness booklets

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) has introduced a series of investment awareness booklets aimed at empowering individuals and investors with essential financial knowledge. The initiative seeks to simplify complex investment concepts, making financial markets more accessible and easier to understand for the broader community.

The booklets cover key investment topics suitable for both new and experienced investors. They explain various investment types, financial market benefits, and strategies for



setting and achieving investment goals. Readers can learn about stocks, bonds and other financial instruments, gaining insight into how to build a well-rounded investment portfolio.

A significant focus is placed on understanding and managing investment risks.

The materials guide investors on assessing potential risks, balancing returns, and making informed financial decisions. This section aims to enhance investors’ ability to manage uncertainties while pursuing growth opportunities.

The guides also provide step-by-step instructions on starting an investment journey with MSX, including how to register, choose a broker and make sound investment decisions. With a range of opportunities in Oman’s financial market, these resources are designed to help investors maximise their potential.

By launching these booklets, MSX underscores its commitment to promoting transparency and encouraging active market participation.

It envisions creating a financially

literate investment community, boosting market confidence and fostering sustainable growth.

Available in Arabic and English, the booklets can be accessed and downloaded from the official MSX website.

Additional resources and updates are also shared through its official communication channels. With this initiative, MSX aims to build a foundation of well-informed investors capable of making prudent financial choices, ultimately contributing to a robust and sustainable investment environment in Oman.

OPINION

How to benefit from the Ejada system



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

INSTITUTIONS in countries worldwide are adopting advanced work systems, particularly in their employees’ daily production processes.

Similarly, the Ministry of Labour in Oman is applying modern standards and systems that prioritise the worker, aiming to enhance productivity, ensure respect for work systems and legislation and foster a culture of excellence.

Since its launch, the “Ejada” system has brought noticeable improvements in performance. Approximately RO 25 million has been disbursed as bonuses to around 54,000 government employees across 68 government units.

Furthermore, over 50 meetings have been held with human resource managers and system officials to familiarise them with their roles and provide updates on the latest developments. The system has also achieved significant milestones, with over 4 million performance targets and 11 million outputs delivered by employees.

Additionally, 965 trainers, including 75 certified trainers, have been prepared to support these programmes.

The Ejada programme has strengthened governance within the administrative apparatus, positioning itself as a key enabler

of Oman Vision 2040.

According to Shaikh Mohammed bin al Waleed al Hinai, Director of the Ejada project, several improvements and developments have been introduced this year to enhance the experience of both institutions and employees in implementing the system.

Through the governance and performance management framework, the system aligns the objectives of sectors and directorates with annual plans and institutional goals.

It also broadens the eligibility criteria for nomination to higher ranks, encouraging the establishment of ambitious objectives and reinforcing governance across system units.

In the area of change management and training, various enhancements have been approved, including the development of specialised training packages tailored to different roles — leadership, supervisory, executive and governance positions.

A communication and media plan has also been implemented to increase awareness of the system among officials and employees.

Key projects under Oman Vision 2040, integrated with the Ejada system, include incentives and rewards mechanisms such as merit bonuses, incentive bonuses, promotions, training opportunities and participation in conferences and seminars.

Another notable initiative is the Human Resources Management Matrix, designed

Key projects under Oman Vision 2040, integrated with the Ejada system, include incentives and rewards mechanisms such as merit bonuses, incentive bonuses, promotions, training opportunities and participation in conferences and seminars.

to identify high-potential performers and support their career advancement into supervisory roles.

The institutional excellence system serves as a tool for enhancing government performance by aligning efforts with annual plan objectives.

It ensures the sustainability of development initiatives within government units by identifying areas for improvement and leveraging strengths. Institutional excellence is evaluated through various criteria, including leadership, strategic planning, human capital, institutional culture, partnerships, operations, innovation, customer satisfaction, governance, and societal and environmental contributions.

The Ministry of Labour continues to develop business practices at both individual and institutional levels while raising awareness among officials and employees across government units.

Alongside introducing new programmes to educate employees about the importance of work and its role in daily life, the Ministry is diligently addressing employment challenges, including issues of dismissal and unemployment.

It is also striving to create a robust business ecosystem that promotes the employment of Omanis and reduces reliance on expatriate workers.

NISSAN-HONDA MERGER WOULD BE FAR FROM CURE-ALL

If only M&A solved everything. Japan’s Nissan Motor and Honda Motor certainly need help. The country’s second and third-largest automakers are in talks to set up a holding company, media reported on Wednesday, citing a source. That may yet lead to a full merger and possibly include smaller rival Mitsubishi Motors according to the Nikkei.

Cost cuts would bolster margins at the trio, whose combined market value at Tuesday’s close was \$50 billion. But as Stellantis’s woes show, tie-ups alone don’t create great manufacturers.

Nissan, whose shares surged 24% following the reports, would benefit the most. Last month, CEO Makoto Uchida unveiled an emergency overhaul that involved cutting 9,000 jobs and 20% of manufacturing capacity.

Even so, its operating margin in the year to the end of March 2026 is expected to be just 0.4% per forecasts gathered by Visible Alpha.

Honda’s automotive unit is on track to deliver a better, but hardly decent, 4.6% — roughly half of the \$227 billion Toyota Motor’s.

Fully meshing the two together could improve the margin to 7%, Breakingviews calculates, if they managed to slash expenses equivalent to 4% of revenue — roughly the target Renault — Nissan and Mitsubishi set for their alliance in 2017.

Combining their finance units and swallowing Mitsubishi would bring even more savings.

The prospect of more revenue hitting the bottom line at the combined entity would be even more appealing if US President-elect Donald Trump follows through on his threat to impose tariffs on imports.

But M&A can only work to a point. Stellantis, for example, is the amalgam of a number of different businesses, starting with Peugeot’s 2017 acquisition of Opel, General Motors’ European business.

Then-CEO Carlos Tavares’s success turning that around paved the way to unveil a merger with Fiat Chrysler two years later.

The company today is currently grappling with falling sales and shrinking margins due largely to overpriced, uninspiring cars in the United States. Boardroom disagreements over how to fix the problem prompted Tavares to quit this month.

A well-executed merger could buy Nissan and Honda time not just to slash expenses but to bolster their subpar portfolio, not least of electric and hybrid cars. — Reuters

China’s new social contract

EUROPE’S view of China has evolved rapidly in recent decades. What began as a broad lack of knowledge about the country gave way to curiosity about its history and culture. China’s economic rise further piqued Europeans’ interest, particularly after the country’s 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization.

Over time, Europe became reliant on cheap Chinese goods and China’s burgeoning market became increasingly lucrative, especially for German automakers.

In the last few years, however, the European Union has viewed China largely through the lens of strategic competition. It has accused the Chinese of engaging in unfair trade practices, arguing that state-owned and state-supported firms enjoy excessive advantages in strategic sectors.

It has sounded the alarm over China’s dominance over supply chains and its control of critical minerals. And it has expressed concern about China’s increased geopolitical ambition.

It was with this background in mind that I arrived in Beijing recently, on a trip organised by the Communist Party of China.

And what struck me above all was not evidence of China’s global rise, but rather the country’s internal dynamics — in particular, the shifting provisions of the social contract that underpins the CPC’s rule.

For decades, China’s social contract amounted to a straightforward bargain: the state delivers strong economic growth — with the associated opportunities — and the people accept curbs on their civil liberties and political freedom.

This contract emerged under Deng Xiaoping, who initiated China’s “reform and opening up,” and whose gospel of wealth — “to get rich is glorious” — shaped China’s meteoric rise.

But China’s economy has suffered a series of blows in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic — and the draconian lockdowns the government imposed in response — caused growth to fall sharply, as it did elsewhere in the world.

China’s economy, however, never



For decades, China’s social contract amounted to a straightforward bargain: the state delivers strong economic growth — with the associated opportunities — and the people accept curbs on their civil liberties and political freedom.



ANA PALACIO

The writer, a former minister of foreign affairs of Spain and former senior vice president and general counsel of the World Bank Group, is a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University

fully recovered. Instead, it endured a real-estate crisis, a sharp decline in foreign investment and falling consumer and business confidence, owing partly to unpredictable, ideology-driven macroeconomic and regulatory policies.

The CPC is taking steps to accelerate economic recovery. After third-quarter data revealed that growth had again fallen short of the government’s 5% target, China’s leaders signaled a shift, for the first time in 14 years, from a “prudent” monetary policy to a “moderately loose” one and suggested that 2025 will bring a “more proactive” fiscal policy.

This approach aims to boost domestic demand, which has been sluggish; but exports — not least to Europe — remain essential to keep the economy afloat.

Even if China overcomes its immediate challenges, however, its economy has developed past the point where double-digit growth can form the basis of the social contract.

This is not lost on Chinese President Xi Jinping — the self-proclaimed “pilot at the helm” (a thinly-veiled reference to the “Great Helmsman,” Mao Zedong) — who

has increasingly sought to shift the foundations of his regime’s legitimacy from growth to security.

Now, China’s government is promising to ensure citizens’ well-being, such as by protecting the environment and to foster “common prosperity,” for example by strengthening support for rural workers flocking to cities.

This approach is not only central to Xi’s so-called Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation; it also supports China’s bid to enhance its international standing by positioning itself as a global climate leader.

At this year’s United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29), China’s leaders touted the \$24.5 billion in climate finance that, according to its own opaque calculations, it has delivered to developing countries since 2016.

Green investment is also happening at home. China accounts for about two-thirds of the solar and wind projects under construction worldwide and the country reached its 2030 target for installed renewable-energy capacity six years ahead of schedule.

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ART/LIFE



AT THE OPERA

ROHM'S OPEN DOORS INITIATIVE CELEBRATES MUSIC AND COMMUNITY

> 20

CHANGINGWORLD

Do parents need to intervene in settling kids' fights at school?



BY SHADDAD AL MUSALMY

Shaddad is a seasoned Omani journalist and currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors.

WHEN IT comes to settling kids' fights at school, parents often find themselves in a challenging position. The approach to take can vary significantly based on the context of the conflict, the severity of the incident, and the emotional well-being of the children involved.

As a parent, I feel we should not jump to conclusion. The first step for parents is to gauge the severity of the conflict. This involves enquiring if anyone was physically hurt, what led to the fight, how did the child feel afterwards and if it is a recurring issue with this particular child or group.

Understanding such factors helps determine whether intervention is necessary or if it's better to let children resolve their conflicts independently. I would suggest that allowing children to work through their conflicts can be beneficial for their development.

By navigating disagreements on their own, children learn essential skills such as problem-solving, negotiation and emotional regulation. Parents should encourage their children to express their feelings and thoughts about what happened and guide them in considering how they might resolve similar issues in the future.

For instance, when my child comes home upset about a disagreement with his peer, I first validate those feelings while encouraging him to think about how he might address the situation directly with his friend. This approach fosters resilience and self-sufficiency. So far in all cases, it has worked out well with him.

While fostering independence is important, there are situations where parental intervention is warranted. If there is a risk of physical harm, bullying, or ongoing conflict that escalates beyond typical disagreements, parents should step in.

To effectively support their children, parents should communicate with teachers, school administrators, and fellow parents about any concerns. It's essential to maintain open lines of dialogue with the child to identify and address potential issues early. Regular check-ins about their school experiences can reassure children that they have a safe space to express their feelings without fear of judgment. Furthermore, parents can play a proactive role in teaching conflict resolution skills at home. This involves discussing strategies for de-escalating arguments, understanding various perspectives, and fostering empathy. Engaging in role-playing scenarios can provide children with practical experience in handling disputes constructively. By equipping kids with these invaluable tools, parents not only help them navigate current conflicts but also prepare them for future social interactions.

QUICK FEATURES



ENTERTAINMENT

Popular singer Sahra Ahmed Ilays dances traditional songs from Somaliland during a recording session at Radio Hargeisa studios in Hargeisa. —AFP



FILM

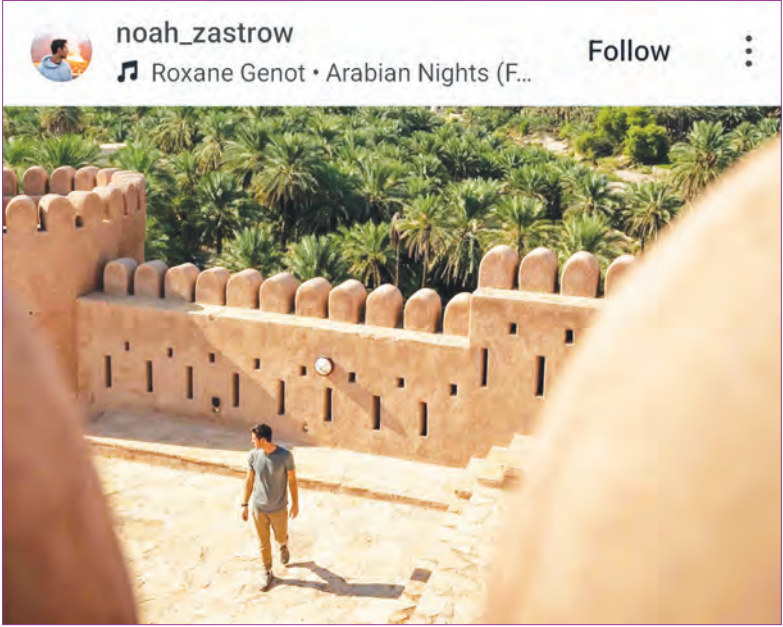
US actress Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor arrives for the premiere of "Nickel Boys" at the DGA Theater in Los Angeles, California. —AFP



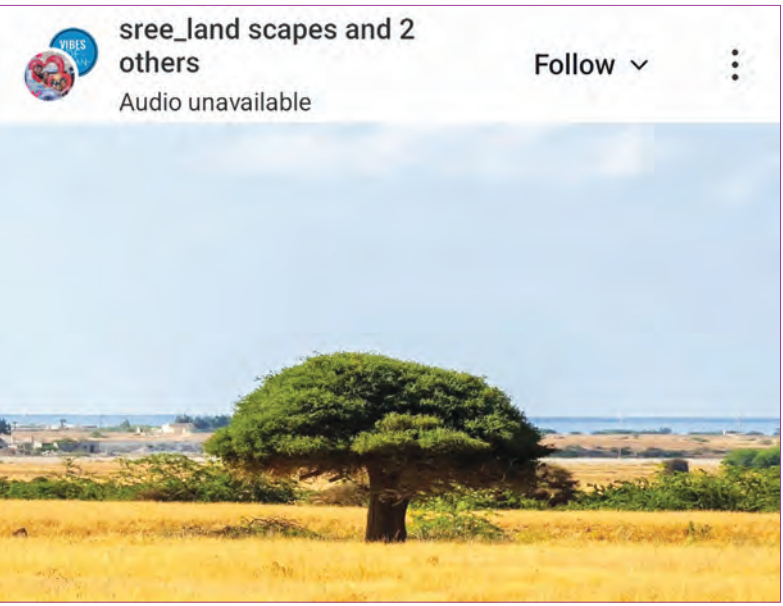
LIFESTYLE

Alida Freding, aged 19 from Stockholm plays the role of Lucia, during the Swedish 'Sankta Lucia Festival of Light' service at York Minster in York, northern England. —AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Exploring Iconic Structures



Beauty of Remote Places

SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. To be selected, follow us on Instagram and every time you upload or share your photos, make sure to tag us and use #OmanObserver and #BeAnObserver.

These Wolves Like a Little Treat: Flower Nectar



THE ETHIOPIAN wolf, Africa’s most endangered predator, has a sweet tooth. Although the wolves are otherwise strict meat eaters, scientists have spotted the canids slurping nectar from torch lilies, which are tall, cone-shaped flowers also known as red hot poker with nectar that tastes like watered-down honey. And because the wolves’ muzzles get absolutely covered in sticky yellow pollen, researchers suspect they might even be acting as pollinators — a first for a large carnivore, the authors write in a paper published in the journal Ecology.

It’s a scene from a storybook, said Sandra Lai, an Oxford University ecologist and an author of the paper.

“The wolves lick the flowers like ice cream cones,” she said.

The Ethiopian wolf is a lanky, reddish-brown canid that looks more like a coyote or fox than a wolf. It lives in Ethiopia’s mountainous highlands, a tundralike landscape where the wolves

feed on abundant rodents. In the Bale mountain range, the wolves’ prey of choice is the bigheaded African mole rat, a preposterous-looking creature with eyes set directly on top of its head so it can peep out of underground burrows. The mole rats surface for about only an hour a day to forage for vegetation. “They try keep their butt inside the hole so they can retreat if something happens, so they stretch out as long as they can” and grab at plants with their buck teeth, Lai said.

As juicy as mole rats are, they must make for a monotonous menu. Fortunately, the wolves can spice up their diet for about half of each year: The normally scrubby landscape comes alive with color as the torch lilies bloom with a fiery ombre, fading from orange to bright yellow as they ripen. Patches of the flowers can stretch for miles, Lai said, creating the illusion of a vast procession of people carrying candles. — ELIZABETH ANNE BROWN / NYT



Restoring Milan’s Duomo, one statue at a time

IN A WORKSHOP in the Milan suburbs, sculptor Giovanni Calderino completes his latest project -- a battered statue from the top of the Italian city’s gothic cathedral, and its gleaming white replacement.

Depicting a bearded man wearing a tunic, the marble statue has adorned one of the Duomo’s 135 spires for two centuries.

But decades of harsh weather, pollution and the bombings of the Second World War have taken their toll, leaving it discoloured and missing its right hand.

The damage to the statue was spotted during the twice-yearly inspections of the cathedral, by the institution that has managed the building for 600 years, the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano.

Too fragile to put back, Calderino has created a perfect replica to take its place -- the latest of a steady stream of replacements that maintain the splendour of one of Italy’s most famous monuments.



- BORN FROM A BLOCK -

“For me, a statue is like a child that I see grow day by day. It is fascinating to see it born from a block of marble after months of work,” Calderino told AFP at the workshop, where around 20 stonemasons practise their craft.

There are more than 3,400 statues on the Duomo, on which construction began in 1386.

They are carved from the dazzling pink-white marble from Candoglia quarry near Lake Maggiore northwest of Milan -- and from where Calderino and his colleagues still take marble today.

“Candoglia marble is very beautiful, very special, but it is difficult to work on because it has very large calcite grains that can break, so it is fragile,” said Marco Scolari, the geologist in charge of the workshop and quarry.

The techniques of the team in Milan would also be recognisable to the craftsmen of old, albeit with

some technological help.

First, Calderino, 46, makes a rough outline in the marble with his chisel. Then with surgical precision, he sculpts it with a pneumatic hammer, before smoothing it with an abrasive stone.

- ‘ADOPT’ A STATUE -

In the small backyard of the workshop, the old statues form a silent crowd, waiting for a new home.

Of the around 100 decapitated, disfigured or limbless figures, several have a small white sign around their necks saying “adopt a statue!”

For an annual fee of 25,000 euros (\$26,280) for up to three years, companies can take in one of the Duomo statues -- and in doing so, benefit from a tax break, and a little history.

Consulting firm Deloitte took in an imposing depiction of biblical hero Samson and the lion he is said to have killed with his bare hands, created in the 17th century by Giovanni Battista Buzzi.

Such ‘adoptions’ “bring a little



piece of the Duomo into their company”, said Elisa Mantia, the Duomo’s culture and conservation coordinator.

Many of them end up in the Duomo Museum, where the statues can be admired close up. —AFP

FEATURES

BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

IN ITS endeavour to reach out to a broader cross-section of the public, ROHM has been active recently with its ‘Open Doors’ initiative.

This is aimed at those unable to attend performances in person. Selected shows and activities were brought directly to hospitals and community institutions, ensuring that the magic and joy of live music reached audiences where they were. It is dedicated to fostering cultural connections across the Sultanate of Oman and embracing audiences from diverse backgrounds.

On Wednesday 11th December, Omani and Swiss musicians from the ‘Desert Bridges’ project held a special concert at the Elderly Centre in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, in addition to various masterclasses and workshops for Omani music students, as part of ROHM’s Education and Outreach programme.

This was all ahead of Desert Bridges’ exceptional free one-hour public concert at the Royal Opera, House of Musical Arts. The Ensemble was founded by Swiss vocal artist, Anna Grichting and the late poet-musician, Cheo Solder, and blends jazz forms with traditional (folk) music through improvisation. On Thursday evening the nine musicians performed on stage bathed in a blue haze - a theme in their creations. It began with an atmospheric work featuring the beautiful, deep timbre of the Alpine Horn - an indigenous Swiss instrument longer than a didgeridoo - playing an arpeggiated melody accompanied by Cowbells. Quite a novel start, with Anna Grichting singing an Irish folk melody above it.

“Your Beauty Strikes” opened with a bass guitar jazz riff with grand piano; and then the fluid fusion began. The Arabic qanoon plucked a striking melody juxtaposed with the Hackbrett - a Swiss zither, or hammer dulcimer - and Anna sang an hypnotic repetitive vocal line over Western drums and Arabic percussion and Oud.

Ms Grichting introduced a song she’d learnt from the nomadic Sami tribe of Northern Europe played by the ensemble in a jazz fusion, with Alphorn this time playing jazz bass. A beautiful Oud solo, played superbly by Yaqoub al Harrasi, alternated with the brilliant Qanoon behind mesmerising jazz vocals.

An entrancing dulcimer solo, composed by Ephraim Salzmann, introduced, “Water is Divine”, and gradually the Omani musicians joined the liquid flow of sound.

The following, “Water” was composed in Arabic mode by Qanoon Maestra, Farah hint Jamal al Balushiyyah. Familiar to Muscat audiences for her playing in the First Royal Ensemble for Music and Folklore, this was the only purely instrumental piece without vocals in the programme. It featured her rapid tremolo technique first, then paired Oud melodies with the Qanoon in falling sequences in a rhythmic ensemble, building up to a sparkling glissando finish.

The jazz highlight of the evening began with the recognisable dotted bass intro on piano from Miles Davis’ popular “All Blues” from his 1959 modal jazz album, ‘Kind of Blue’, with Salzmann performing the trumpet solo on Alphorn! The lyrics celebrate, ‘all shades and hues, some sad, some bright, all blues’. There was a Hackbrett solo as Grichting spoke, punning on ‘blue note’ and names for shades of blue, her jazz singing voice rich and warm.

A mainstream jazz improvisation number featuring the extraordinary skills of French pianist, Michel Bastet in, “Illuminations” was followed by “Valley of Chants”, composed by Alphorn player, Enrico Lenzin. It turns its attention to the endangered Arabian Leopard and European Lynx, and his incredible versatility in jazz improvisation, along with an agile acoustic bass solo from the talented Frederic Folmer in its highest range, suggested the Call of the Wild.



ROHM 'S OPEN
DOORS INITIATIVE
CELEBRATES MUSIC
AND COMMUNITY



The backlighting turned pink for a switch to an Arabic soundworld from percussion, Qanoon and Oud. Arabic vocals from Anna provided a clearly Middle Eastern flavour with a deep, accessible Oud melody from Harrasi over a Blues bass riff.

Blue returned to the stage and subject of “Stars, Sea, Desert”. The fusion in this project succeeds because of the improvisational nature of jazz and Arabic music; both find common language in scales and modes. As if to emphasise this, purple light coloured an Arabic rock composition. The Qanoon and Hackbrett formed continuity between styles, a thematic dialogue creating washes of impressionist sound across the ensemble with Grichting’s vocals recalling nostalgic 1980s folk-rock.

A classic jazz format finished the performance. A descending bass sequence from Folmer and the fast drumming of Béatrice Graf gave impetus to another splendid solo from Bastet, with atonal inflections. A dazzling solo from prolific Omani percussionist, Talal al Siyabi, built up to a frenzy. Graf demonstrated her rhythmic prowess in a final drum solo, then interacted with Al Siyabi in a percussive duel. The excitement melted back to subtle bending blues vocals from band leader, Anna Grichting - and all was dark again.

Desert Bridges has already brought its mission to bridge communities through music’s universal language to Bahrain and performed with the Bin Faris Ensemble: it’s hoped that they continue to spread themes of connection and cross-cultural collaboration throughout the Gulf.