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IN BRIEF

OMAN, ALGERIA SIGN MoU ON AMR SYSTEM

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed in the Algerian capital, Algiers, between OTEC Company, represented by Future Cities Company 'Tadom', the Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company Nama Water Services, and the Water and Sanitation Company of Algiers SEAAL, to cooperate in executing a pilot project for an Automated Meter Reading (AMR) system and Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) for water metres using LoRaWAN technology. This came at the conclusion of a three-day official visit by a delegation from the Sultanate of Oman to the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, led by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology.

DOZENS TRAPPED AFTER JAPAN QUAKE

Dozens of people were feared trapped in a shopping mall in Japan on Tuesday after a major earthquake toppled buildings, sparked fires and reportedly killed one person and injured more than 100. Private broadcaster TBS reported that a "considerable number" of people were feared dead inside the mall in the town of Kashima after the fire brigade said that the second floor collapsed in the 7.1-magnitude tremor. Emergency services earlier said "many people" were trapped inside the building. Public broadcaster NHK cited police sources as saying that between 20 and 30 employees could not be contacted, showing footage of emergency vehicles with flashing red lights outside.

AIR TANZANIA BEGINS FLIGHTS TO MUSCAT

Oman Airports on Tuesday celebrated the official inauguration of the direct flights of Air Tanzania, connecting Julius Nyerere International Airport in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Muscat International Airport in the Sultanate of Oman. Eng Peter Rudolf Ulanga, Chief Executive Officer of Air Tanzania, stated that the inauguration of flights between Tanzania and Oman represents a highly significant development for the company. It also enhances the existing cooperation between the two countries, explaining that the addition of this air link will contribute to increasing passenger traffic between Oman and Tanzania.

DETAILS ON P13

PRESIDENT TRUMP CITES 'GOOD' TALKS ON IRAN

GCC states call for safety of navigation in Hormuz

SAYYID Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, held a consultative meeting with the foreign ministers of the GCC countries on Tuesday via videoconferencing.

The ministers exchanged views on the developments of the current phase, the latest updates on the ongoing negotiations, and the efforts exerted to advance them toward practical understandings that contribute to de-escalating tensions and enhancing the environment of regional security and stability.

The meeting discussed ways to intensify coordination and consultation among the GCC countries regarding issues related to the freedom and safety of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. This is to ensure the rights of passage, transit, and the seamless flow of maritime traffic, trade, and supplies, in accordance with the provisions of international law, and in a manner that preserves the sovereign rights of all littoral states bordering the Gulf waters.

The ministers affirmed the importance of continuing joint action, prioritising political and diplomatic approaches, and creating favourable conditions to build trust and reach mutually acceptable solutions for all parties.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the White House on Tuesday for his first in-person talks with President Donald Trump since the Iran war began, as the leaders sought to patch over public disagreements on the conflict.

A vessel is seen in the Strait of Hormuz as people use boats near the beach of Bandar Abbas, Iran, on Tuesday. ***— Reuters***

The meeting — which took place behind closed doors — was dominated by the war, which began with US and Israeli strikes on Iran in late February but has seen a recent pause in the fighting as Washington says it wants to give negotiations a chance.

Earlier, Trump said there have been good talks with Iran even as he reiterated his threats to target Pickaxe Mountain as well as bridges and power plants if a deal is not made with Tehran.

In an interview with Fox News, Trump said he wanted to avoid targeting Iran's bridges and power plants if possible. "It's a very, very delicate balance. So I think we have a very strong position right now. They know I'm going to do that if they don't make a deal," Trump told the "Fox and Friends" programme.

"We cannot have them break deals anymore." "We have had some very good talks," Trump said of Iran.

DRONE SHOT DOWN

The Jordanian army on Tuesday said it downed a drone in the eastern desert near Iraq and Saudi Arabia, without specifying its origin.

"As part of its monitoring and surveillance system, the Royal Jordanian Air Force dealt with a drone that violated Jordanian airspace in the early hours of Tuesday morning," the military said in a statement.

It added that "the drone was successfully shot down in the eastern desert within the Kingdom's territory".

The statement did not specify the source of the drone.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Israeli military said it had intercepted a drone near the Jordanian border that did not enter Israeli airspace, adding that it was still determining from where it was launched.

Jordan has been repeatedly targeted since war resumed between Iran and the United States earlier this month.

SEE ALSO P6

Al Hajar Geopark Booklet to promote tourism

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has issued the Al Hajar Geopark Booklet in both Arabic and English. This comes within the framework of its efforts to introduce the pioneering national project that embodies the Sultanate of Oman's commitment to preserving geological heritage, enhancing sustainable ecotourism, and promoting the natural elements it abounds with at both the local and international levels. Al Hajar Geopark project marks the inaugural step for geopark registration projects in the Sultanate of Oman. It reflects the role played by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in preparing the requirements for establishing national geoparks and working to register them among the Unesco Global Geoparks.

Through two main chapters, the booklet addresses the fundamental pillars of the project and its developmental impacts. The first chapter reviews the economic and cultural dimensions of the Al Hajar Geopark, its role in supporting sustainable tourism, highlighting the geological and natural heritage, and empowering local communities by creating economic and tourism opportunities based on the investment of natural and cultural elements. — ONA

Cocoa cultivation sees success in Dhofar Governorate

The Qairoon Hairiti Farm, affiliated with the Royal Court Affairs, has succeeded in cultivating cocoa after stages of development, research, and propagation spanning over a decade.

The cocoa tree is a tropical evergreen that requires precise care during its growth stages. It is characterised by the growth of its fruit on the trunk in the form of pods, with colours that gradually change as they mature.

Eng Mohammed bin Ahmed al Mashaikhi, Head of the Agricultural Services Section, said that the cocoa tree is considered one of the most prominent tropical crops with high economic value.

He pointed out that the stages of its cultivation at the Qairoon Hairiti farm began in 2016 with the aim of determining the extent of its successful cultivation under the climatic conditions of the Dhofar Governorate.

He said that during the harvest period, cocoa seeds are extracted,

undergo a fermentation stage for several days, and then proceed to the drying, roasting, and grinding stages. Cocoa powder is utilised in various industries, most notably the chocolate industry, some medical drugs, and certain cosmetics, while the outer shell is used as an organic fertiliser.

Regarding the care of cocoa trees, Eng Salim bin Ahmed al Shahri, a Plant Protection Specialist, said that the cocoa trees at the Qairoon Hairiti farm receive continuous monitoring and care to protect them from various pests and to preserve the quality of the fruits.

It is worth noting that the success of the Royal Gardens and Farms of the Royal Court Affairs in cultivating cocoa at the Qairoon Hairiti farm in the Dhofar Governorate represents a qualitative addition to the trajectory of agricultural experiments for tropical crops in the governorate, opening promising economic horizons in the agricultural sector within Oman. — ONA

RUMOURS OF LPG PRICE HIKE UNFOUNDED

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JULY 28

The news about a proposed price hike in the LPG gas (cooking gas cylinder) from RO 3 to RO 3.300 or RO 3.500 is baseless and unfounded, according to Muscat Gas.

Speaking to the Observer, a representative from Muscat Gas has confirmed that there would not be and there has not been any increase in the retail prices of LPG cylinders for the end-consumer, and that all applicable rates remain as per the prices approved by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and other government entities.

Muscat Gas earlier issued a letter on July 12 titled 'New Selling Prices and Cylinder Rental Fees for Muscat Gas Cylinders' announcing the price hike due to the continuous increase in gas prices in the Sultanate of Oman and the cost of cylinders used for Muscat Gas cylinders. In the letter, it further said that the company will be updating the selling prices and cylinder rental fees at Muscat Gas receiving stations, effective from the date specified in the attached price list. This has been widely circulating and gas vendors keeping in their status and sharing with their customers apparently with a view to increase the price.

"I was sort of taken aback learning a potential increase in the price of gas cylinders and we pay RO 3.500 at the moment because the seller would ask for more due to my flat located on the 1st floor. We didn't argue and just paid the amount," Sharanya, a homemaker, said.

However, the company in its statement added, "The letter, which has been recently circulating on social media, is an internal memo addressed to one of the distribution stations and pertains to internal commercial arrangements between the company and its subsidiaries. It does not, in any way, represent an increase in the price applied to the end-consumer."

Muscat Gas affirmed its commitment to the approved official prices and confirmed that any increase in retail prices for the end consumer outside of the approved official prices is a violation of applicable regulations, the statement said.

ABRAJ ENERGY SERVICES SAOG

ABRAJ expands its Kuwait operations, improves its Net Income, Utilization Rate, sets another Backlog Record and upgrades its Full Year Revenue Guidance

- Increased Revenue +9% quarter-on quarter
- Increased Net Income, +10% quarter-on-quarter
- Highest rig utilization rate in the last 12 months
- All time high backlog of ﷼ 953 million
- Third rig started operations in Kuwait
- Full Year 2026 Revenue Guidance upgraded

ABRAJ Energy Services SAOG ("**ABRAJ**" or the "**Company**") (MSX: ABRJ), Oman national champion for integrated energy services, announced today its financial results for the second quarter of 2026 ("**Q2'26**"), highlighting an increase quarter-on-quarter ("**QoQ**") in Revenue, Net Income, utilization rate and backlog.

Financials Highlights

REVENUE

Year-To-Date ("YTD") Revenue of 75.3 million Omani Riyal ("﷼") representing a year-on-year ("**YoY**") increase of ﷼ 2.4 million, or +3%. Increase was mainly due to increase Contract Revenue of ﷼ 0.8 million on higher rig activity as well as higher Clients recharges of ﷼ 1.2 million.

Q2'26 Revenue of ﷼ 39.3 million was ﷼ 3.3 million higher than previous quarter, representing a +9% upside QoQ. This increase was mainly due higher rig activity of ﷼ 1.2 million, higher Clients recharges of ﷼ 1.1 million as well as timing differences QoQ on maintenance activities of ﷼ 0.6 million.

EBITDA

YTD'26 EBITDA of ﷼ 24.3 million was ﷼ 0.3 million lower YoY (or -1%), mainly due to decrease in Drilling segment of ﷼ 1 million, partially offset by the increase in Well Services of ﷼ 0.6 million. The Drilling segment decrease of ﷼ 1 million is mainly coming from additional maintenance and recertifications activities completed in H1'26 (impact of ﷼ -1.4 million), partially offset by incremental EBITDA on higher rig activity (impact of ﷼ +0.4 million).

Q2'26 EBITDA of 12.3 million was ﷼ 0.3 million (or +3%) higher than Q1'26. The increase is mainly due to incremental EBITDA on additional rig activity of ﷼ 0.5 million, partially offset by additional G&A cost of 0.2 million coming from General & Administrative cost.

PROFIT AFTER TAX ("PAT")

YTD'26 PAT of ﷼ 9.3 million was flat compared to last year as the EBITDA decrease of ﷼ 0.3 million mentioned above is offset by lower depreciation cost of an equivalent amount. Finance cost of ﷼ 2.8 million are approx. ﷼ 0.2 million than that of last year, in spite of a higher debt level. This reduction was due to savings realized on repricing of our bank loans which resulted in an average decrease in the rates of approx. 70 basis points since last year. Our YTD'26 effective tax rate of 15.3% was in line with that of last year.

Q2'26 PAT of ﷼ 4.9 million was ﷼ 0.4 million higher QoQ (or +10%) mainly coming from the combined effect of QoQ EBITDA increase of ﷼ 0.3 million, as mentioned above, as well as lower finance cost of ﷼ 0.1 million.

CAPEX

YTD Capex of ﷼ 29.3million was significantly higher than that of last year due to the ongoing investment program of eight newbuild rigs which are seven for Petroleum Development Oman ("**PDO**"), including six for Wave III, and one for Kuwait Gulf Oil company ("**KGO**"). To date, we have spent to date a total of approx. ﷼ 37 million of Capex associated with the 8 new builds program and the total spending associated with our this fleet expansion program is estimated to be in the range of ﷼ 90 to 95 million. Most of these investments are supported by financing lines with banks

CASH POSITION & NET DEBT

As of Q2'26, the Company's Cash and Cash Equivalent position was ﷼ 3.5 million or -50% lower than 2026 opening balance. Available excess cash as well as new financing are being allocated to support the ongoing capex intensive program. For the period ending 30 June 2026 ("**H1'26**"), the Company drew a total of ﷼ 32.2 million of banks loans and repaid a total of ﷼ 13.1 million in loans principal and interest, including lease liabilities. In addition, a dividend payment of ﷼ 13 million related to Full Year 2025 was also completed in Q1'26.

As of 30 June 2026, the Company's Net Debt position was ﷼ 121 million, reflecting a +10% increase QoQ which is consistent with the ongoing capex cycle. The net debt increase of ﷼ 11 million QoQ is coming from the combined effect of cash reduction of ﷼ 3 million plus drawing additional banks loans of ﷼ 13 million, net of loans reimbursement of ﷼ 5 million. As of Q2'26, the Company's gross debt was ﷼ 124.8 million, split between Long Term debt of ﷼ 111.5 million, Short Term debt of ﷼ 10.0 million and lease liabilities of ﷼ 3.3 million.

As of 30 June 2026, the Company's leverage ratio (Net Debt / 12-month trailing EBITDA) has increased QoQ from 2.3x to 2.5x, as previously indicated. Both Net Debt and leverage ratio are expected to continue increasing until completion of the fleet expansion program and until the new builds rigs are effectively deployed and start contributing to the Company's financials.

Key Financial Metrics

﷼ '000s	Q2'26	Q1'26	QoQ	YTD'26	YTD'25	YoY
Revenue	**39.3**	**36.0**	**+9%**	**75.3**	**72.9**	**+3%**
EBITDA	12.3	12.0	+3%	24.3	24.7	-1%
EBITDA Margin	***31.4%***	***33.3%***	***(1.9pp)***	***32.3%***	***33.8%***	***(1.5pp)***
Operating Profit (EBIT)	7.1	6.7	+5%	13.8	13.8	0%
Profit After Tax	**4.9**	**4.5**	**+10%**	**9.3**	**9.3**	**0%**
Net Income Margin	***12.4%***	***12.4%***	***0.0pp***	***12.4%***	***12.8%***	***(0.4pp)***
EPS (Baisa)	**6.34**	**5.79**	**+10%**	**12.13**	**12.11**	**0%**
Capital Expenditures	18.7	10.6	+77%	29.3	6.2	+375%
Cash Flow from Operations (excl. WC)	12.8	12.1	+6%	24.9	24.8	+1%
Net Debt	121.3	110.4	+10%	121.3	103.4	+17%
ROEC	10.9%	11.4%	(0.5pp)	10.9%	10.9%	+0.0pp
Net Debt / TTM EBITDA	2.47x	2.26x	+0.21x	2.47x	2.11x	+0.37x

Rig Activity & Contract Highlights

Rig utilization rate increased to 91% as of Q2'26 with 24.6 active rigs over a total available fleet of 27 rigs, reaching a 12-month high. By end of Q1'26, the number of active rigs was 24, resulting in a utilization rate of 89%. During the quarter, ABRAJ started two new rigs, including one for KGO in Kuwait and another rig for PDO. Also, during the quarter, one rig ended its contract with Medco and is getting prepared to move to a new contract with PDO.

As of 30 June 2026, ABRAJ only had 2 rigs inactive, including the one released by Medco. One the two rigs started mid-July with PDO and is expected to work until year-end as a gap filler for an upcoming Wave III rig. The other rig, which was released by Medco, is also expected to start with PDO by the end of Q3'26. As previously mentioned, we therefore expect to achieve full utilization rate with our existing fleet by end of Q3. .

Backlog position reached all-time high of ﷼ 953 million and was up by ﷼ 55 million (or +6%) QoQ. The backlog increase of ﷼ 55 million is coming from backlog addition of ﷼ 120 million related to the award of PDO Frac contract, as previously announced in May. This backlog increase was partially offset by decreases coming from Q2'26 revenue consumption of ﷼ 39 million as well as ﷼ 26 million of backlog position previously included as 'option' in Q1'26 that has now materialized into 'firm' in Q2'26.

The average day rate across the fleet was in the high USD 20ks

As of 30 June 2026, the remaining firm contract days across the fleet are equivalent to 140 fleet rig years and represented an average remaining contract tenure of 5.7 years per rig. Total backlog over 12-month trailing revenue ("book-to-bill ratio") was 6.4x as of 30 June 2026.

Short-term guidance

For the third quarter of 2026, revenue is expected to reflect an upside of 5 to 10% compared to Q2'26, due to higher rig activity, and the **Full Year revenue guidance is upgraded** to ﷼ 150 to 160 million, from ﷼ 145 to 155 million in Q1'26 .

EBITDA guidance remains the same from low to mid 30s percentage of the revenue, respectively.

With respect to CAPEX, we expect to spend in H2'26 another ﷼ 30 to 40 million

Eng. Saif Al Hamhami, Chief Executive Officer of ABRAJ, commented on Q2'26 results: *"We continue to execute successfully on ABRAJ's growth agenda, with two rig start-ups completed during Q2 and a further rig commencing operations in mid-July. These milestones represent important progress in converting our capital investments into productive assets that will drive future revenue and earnings growth. As additional rigs are deployed in the coming months, we expect to benefit from the increasing contribution of our recent investments, supporting both profitability and market share expansion.*

We are also pleased to have secured an upgraded Frac contract with PDO, expanding our participation in technically advanced, higher-value fracturing services. Beyond its commercial significance, the award reflects PDO's confidence in ABRAJ's operational excellence and strengthens our position within the Well Services market, while enhancing the visibility of future growth opportunities."

Hubert Lafeuille, Chief Financial Officer of ABRAJ, further commented: *"As we continue to execute our growth strategy, we remain focused on preserving a financially disciplined approach in our business model as well as maintaining a resilient and efficient capital structure. We are looking at initiatives to reduce near-term debt service pressures and enhance financial flexibility by lowering reliance on traditional bank financing. This approach would strengthen liquidity, support ongoing organic growth initiatives, and provide additional capacity to pursue selective value-accretive acquisition opportunities."*

CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION As at 30 June 2026

	30 June 2026 (Unaudited) ﷼ '000	31 Dec 2025 (Audited) ﷼ '000
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property and equipment	196,502	189,737
Intangible assets	105	147
Right-of-use assets	3,176	3,020
Contract fulfilment costs	900	95
Capex advances	27,867	13,614
	228,550	206,613
Current assets		
Inventories	26,763	27,136
Trade receivables	47,827	40,719
Advances, prepayments, and other receivables	4,007	3,012
Contract fulfilment costs	312	160
Cash and cash equivalents	3,501	7,050
	82,410	78,077
TOTAL ASSETS	310,960	284,690
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Equity		
Share capital	77,020	77,020
Treasury shares	(82)	(65)
Reserve on trading of treasury shares	(139)	(90)
Legal reserve	14,618	14,172
Cash flow hedge reserve	(44)	(360)
Retained earnings	51,388	55,492
Total equity	142,761	146,169
Non-current liabilities		
Term loans	94,002	71,993
Contract liabilities	1,943	1,651
Derivative financial instruments	47	304
Employees' end of services benefits	2,324	2,215
Lease liabilities	2,426	2,343
Deferred tax liabilities	2,433	2,532
	103,175	81,038
Current liabilities		
Trade payables	18,145	14,384
Term loans	17,491	17,060
Short term loan	10,000	10,000
Contract liabilities	1,211	1,193
Lease liabilities	862	822
Other payables	12,282	8,537
Derivative financial instruments	5	120
Income tax payable	5,028	5,367
	65,024	57,483
Total liabilities	168,199	138,521
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	310,960	284,690

CONDENSED INTERIM STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME For the three months period ended 30 June 2026

(Unaudited)

	Three months ended 30 June		Six months ended 30 June	
	2026 ﷼ '000	2025 ﷼ '000	2026 ﷼ '000	2025 ﷼ '000
Revenue	39,314	36,147	75,330	72,943
Cost of revenue	(29,172)	(27,387)	(56,011)	(54,907)
Gross profit	10,142	8,760	19,319	18,036
General and administrative expenses	(3,064)	(2,046)	(5,506)	(4,211)
Other income	6	-	6	-
Operating profit	7,084	6,714	13,819	13,825
Finance costs	(1,365)	(1,563)	(2,816)	(2,983)
Finance income	19	67	33	146
Net finance costs	(1,346)	(1,496)	(2,783)	(2,837)
Profit before tax	5,738	5,218	11,036	10,988
Income tax expense	(854)	(794)	(1,693)	(1,661)
Profit for the period	4,884	4,424	9,343	9,327
Other Comprehensive income: *Items that may be reclassified to profit or loss in subsequent periods (net of tax):*				
Net gain on cash flow hedges	166	-	316	-
Other comprehensive income for the period, net of tax	166	-	316	-
TOTAL COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE PERIOD	5,050	4,424	9,659	9,327
Earnings per share				
Basic and diluted earnings per share-﷼	0.0063	0.0057	0.0121	0.0121

Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder in Arabic or English as requested, within 7 days of receipt of the request.

FORUM DISCUSSES DEALING WITH DISABLED

The event brought together employees and specialists from government units and the private sector. — ***ONA***

THE MINISTRY of Social Development on Tuesday organised a public awareness forum titled "Techniques of dealing with people with disabilities".

The event was held as part of the "Purple Saturday" initiative undertaken within the framework of the ministry's efforts to foster the culture of social inclusion and highlight awareness about the rights of people with disabilities.

The event brought together employees and specialists from government units and the private sector. It aimed to encourage public and private sector establishments to adopt more inclusive practices in the interest of people with disabilities.

The forum's activities included a working paper that debated the 'social model of disability' and stressed the need to develop a concept of 'comprehensive inclusion' that ensures equal opportunities to encourage the participation of people with disabilities in various fields of life in a manner that facilitates their independence. The paper was presented by Majda al Balushi, a researcher in the field of guidance and counselling. She underlined the importance of applying global principles in public facilities, services, products and work environments to make related data available for all, right from the beginning. The researcher laid emphasis on professional etiquette in dealing with people with disabilities. She stressed the importance of applying correct methods of communicating with the disabled, including the use of approved legal terminology and avoiding concepts or phrases that imply pity or discrimination.

She also called for respecting the privacy and independence of people with disabilities. This, she observed, includes considering the assistive devices and tools used by people with disabilities as part of their privacy. — **ONA**

Mazoon College does not meet accreditation requirements: OAQA

MUSCAT: The Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education (OAQA) has announced the outcome of the exceptional review (Review of Accreditation Status) conducted for Mazoon College.

The review was undertaken as part of the Authority's mandate to assure the quality of public and private higher education institutions and their programmes in the Sultanate of Oman, the official statement said.

However, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has confirmed that the actions taken by OAQA regarding Mazoon College will not affect the status of students enrolled at this college or their educational future.

Their academic progress and all their rights will be guaranteed, and students and their parents will be informed of any updates related to this matter.

OAQA revoked the institutional accreditation status granted to Mazoon College in accordance with the Authority's policies and procedures. The Authority emphasised that revoking institutional accreditation falls within its mandate to assure the quality of higher education institutions.

The exceptional review was conducted in accordance with approved standards, policies, and procedures.

The OAQA clarified that an exceptional review (Review of Accreditation Status) differs from a periodic review. It is conducted when major changes occur within an institution that may affect its continued fulfilment of institutional accreditation requirements, whereas periodic reviews are conducted according to the approved cycle for institutional accreditation activities.

Accordingly, the OAQA revoked the institutional accreditation status granted to Mazoon College in accordance with the Authority's policies and procedures. The Authority emphasised that revoking institutional accreditation falls within its mandate to assure the quality of higher education institutions. The relevant government entities are responsible for taking any measures that may arise from this decision, each within its respective mandate.

The Authority also confirmed that the college will undergo an Institutional Standards Assessment in 2027, as part of the current institutional accreditation cycle, to assess the extent to which it meets the requirements and standards for institutional accreditation.

SHORTTAKES

Al Rustaq to launch smart sustainable village lab in Balad Seet.

AL RUSTAQ LAB TO FOCUS ON PILLARS ALIGNING WITH OMAN VISION 2040

Al RUSTAQ: *In a major step towards advancing sustainable rural development in Oman, Dr Yahya bin Sulaiman al Nadabi, Wali of Al Rustaq, chaired a coordination meeting to finalise preparations for the launch of the Smart Sustainable Village Lab – Balad Seet, the first initiative of its kind in the country.*

During the meeting, officials approved the launch date for the Lab and reviewed its implementation framework, strategic partnerships and stakeholder engagement plans to ensure the project's successful execution. The initiative aims to position Balad Seet as a national model for smart and sustainable village development.

The Smart Sustainable Village Lab is being organised under the umbrella of the Future Cities Expo, in collaboration with Communities Connect Cities (C3 Advisory). It adopts a Smart Innovation methodology that brings together government entities, private sector organisations, community representatives and CSR leaders to co-create practical, innovative and sustainable solutions to local development challenges.

RAINS LASH SEVERAL GOVERNORATES

Several governorates experienced rainfall of varying intensity and thunderstorms on Tuesday, causing wadis to overflow. The rain was the result of the formation of cumulonimbus clouds over Al Hajar Mountains extending to coastal areas overlooking the Sea of Oman. Several wilayats of Muscat Governorate experienced light rain.
The wilayats of Saham and Suhar in Al Batinah North Governorate experienced heavy to extremely heavy rainfall, accompanied by downdrafts and hail. The heaviest rainfall was reported in the Wilayat of Saham, particularly along the road connecting the wilayat to Wadi Haybi in Suhar, causing overflow of wadis in the mountainous areas. In the Wilayat of Suhar, the heaviest rainfall was reported in the Wadi Al Badi area, causing flash floods and material damage, including damage to electricity poles and private farms.

SAYYID BADR BIDS FAREWELL TO UKRAINE'S AMBASSADOR

MUSCAT: *Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received Olga Selykh, Ambassador of Ukraine to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid her farewell upon the end of her tour of duty.*

During the meeting, the Foreign Minister expressed his appreciation for the efforts exerted by the ambassador in enhancing the bilateral relations between the two countries, wishing her continued success in her future assignments.

RECEIVES COPY OF CREDENTIALS OF BRAZIL'S AMBASSADOR

Separately, the Foreign Minister received a copy of the credentials of João Batista do Nascimento Magalhães, Ambassador-designate of the Federative Republic of Brazil to the Sultanate of Oman.

Sayyid Badr welcomed the ambassador, wishing him success in performing his duties, and hoping for further development and growth in the bilateral relations between the two countries. — ONA

FSA explores technologies for flood risk assessment

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JULY 28

THE FINANCIAL Services Authority (FSA) has underscored the growing role of advanced technologies in transforming risk management practices, highlighting artificial intelligence, data analytics, satellite imagery and drone technologies as key enablers for enhancing the insurance sector's preparedness against natural disasters and climate-related risks.

The remarks were made during a specialised workshop titled "Flood Risk Analysis Using Satellite and Drone Technologies," organised by the FSA in collaboration with Adasah Oman and Esbar on Tuesday.

The event brought together representatives from the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA), insurance companies and brokers, as well as experts in geospatial technologies, remote sensing and risk management.

Ahmed bin Ali al Maamari, Deputy Executive President of the Financial Services Authority, said technological advancements in artificial intelligence, remote sensing and data analytics have fundamentally reshaped the way risks are assessed and managed.

He noted that the insurance industry is increasingly relying on accurate data and predictive analytics to support more informed underwriting decisions, improve insurance products and enhance the quality of services delivered to policyholders.

Al Maamari stressed that accelerating climate change requires a shift from responding to disasters after they occur towards proactive risk prediction, preparedness and mitigation.

"Adopting modern technologies has become a strategic choice to strengthen institutional readiness and improve the overall efficiency of the risk management ecosystem," he said.

He added that the severe weather events experienced by the Sultanate of Oman in recent years have highlighted the need for more sophisticated tools to assess natural hazards, supported by advanced technologies capable of collecting and analysing high-quality data.

The event brought together officials and experts in geospatial technologies, remote sensing and risk management.

According to Al Maamari, these technologies contribute to faster emergency response, more accurate damage assessments and evidence-based decision-making, ultimately enhancing the insurance sector's ability to manage natural catastrophe risks more effectively.

The workshop aimed to showcase the latest technological solutions for flood risk analysis while strengthening the insurance sector's capability to utilise satellite imagery and unmanned aerial systems for data collection, damage assessment, underwriting and claims settlement processes.

Eng Younis al Siyabi highlighted the importance of integrating Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies into residential area assessments and geospatial planning.

He said such technologies significantly enhance predictive capabilities for natural disaster risks, enabling authorities to minimise the impact of extreme weather events on residential communities and private property while safeguarding lives during heavy rainfall and tropical weather systems. Al Siyabi emphasised that effective utilisation of available geospatial data supports strategic planning and evidence-based decision-making, enhancing the preparedness of relevant authorities and improving their capacity to respond to potential risks before they escalate.

Azzan bin Abdullah al Maamari, Commercial Sector General Manager at Adasah Oman, said the workshop presented practical applications of satellite imagery and drone technologies in flood risk analysis and demonstrated how these tools can support the insurance industry with highly accurate data.

He explained that such technologies help improve asset valuation, enhance underwriting efficiency and accelerate post-disaster damage assessments, in line with Oman's digital transformation agenda and future development aspirations.

The workshop concluded with a renewed emphasis on expanding the adoption of innovative technologies within the insurance industry while strengthening collaboration between regulators, technology providers and insurance companies to build a more resilient and efficient natural disaster risk management framework.

MAHADHA TO HOST AL BURAIMI'S FIRST FRUIT PROJECT

SAUD AL ANSARI
AL BURAIMI, JULY 28

Al Zaroub area in the Wilayat of Mahadha is set to host Al Buraimi Governorate's first integrated investment project dedicated to fruit production, with an investment exceeding RO 171,000, marking a significant step towards harnessing local resources through sustainable agricultural initiatives that support the economy and enhance food security.

Spread across 30 acres, the project has reached more than 80 per cent completion and includes the cultivation of lemons, figs and mangoes.

Preparations are also underway to develop an additional seven acres for production, reflecting the project's potential and the adoption of modern agricultural techniques.

The diversified fruit production is expected to supply local markets with quality produce while positioning Al Buraimi as an emerging destination for agricultural investment, supported by its strategic location and favourable farming conditions.

Dr Ahmed bin Saif al Ameri, Acting Director-General of the Directorate-General of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in Al Buraimi Governorate, encouraged investors and entrepreneurs to explore opportunities in food security-related sectors.

30-acre fruit production project takes shape in Mahadha with a sustainable farming focus.

"Through this platform, I would like to invite all investors and entrepreneurs to take advantage of the governorate's strategic location by investing in food security projects. Investment opportunities are offered periodically across various sectors, including plant production, livestock and water resources," he said. Al Ameri noted that the project reflects Al Buraimi's commitment to promoting sustainable agricultural investments, supporting economic diversification and increasing domestic food production. As the governorate's first specialised integrated fruit production project, the development is expected to serve as a model for future agricultural ventures aligned with Oman's long-term food security objectives.

IS AI A THREAT TO CREATIVITY?

BALQEES AL ORAIMI

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) has rapidly evolved from a futuristic concept into an everyday reality. Today, it can write articles, generate artwork, compose music, and even assist in scientific research.

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into education, business, and the creative industries, one question continues to spark debate: Is artificial intelligence threatening human creativity, or is it simply reshaping the way creativity is expressed?

Creativity has long been regarded as one of humanity's most valuable qualities. It is driven by imagination, personal experiences, emotions, and the ability to view the world from unique perspectives. While AI can now produce impressive results in seconds, many experts argue that genuine creativity goes beyond generating content — it lies in originality, intention, and human emotion.

Supporters of AI believe that the technology should be viewed as a creative assistant rather than a replacement for human talent. By automating repetitive tasks and generating initial ideas, AI allows artists, writers, designers, and content creators to dedicate more time to refining their work and exploring new concepts.

"AI has transformed the way I approach my projects," says Abdullah al Kindi, a graphic designer. "It helps me create quick drafts and experiment with different visual concepts, but the final design always reflects my own vision and artistic judgment. AI speeds up the process, but it doesn't replace creativity."

His perspective reflects a growing belief that technology has historically expanded creative possibilities rather than eliminated them. Just as digital cameras changed photography and computers revolutionised graphic design, AI may become another tool that empowers creators instead of competing with them.

However, not everyone shares this optimism. Critics warn that excessive reliance on AI could gradually weaken essential creative skills. When people depend on algorithms to generate ideas, write stories, or solve creative problems, they may lose confidence in their own ability to think independently.

Content writer Reem al Alawi expresses her concern, saying: "My biggest fear isn't AI itself — it's becoming too dependent on it. Creativity develops through reading, observation, and life experiences. If people stop practicing those skills, they risk losing their unique voice."

While AI can now produce impressive results in seconds, many experts argue that genuine creativity goes beyond generating content — it lies in originality, intention, and human emotion

Another issue attracting worldwide attention is intellectual property. Many AI systems are trained using vast collections of publicly available text, artwork, music, and other creative materials. This has raised ethical and legal questions about whether original creators should receive recognition or compensation when their work contributes to AI-generated content.

Educational institutions are also adapting to this new reality. Instead of discouraging AI entirely, many schools and universities are encouraging students to use it responsibly — as a research assistant, brainstorming partner, or editing tool — while emphasising the importance of critical thinking and independent learning.

Technology experts frequently point out that AI does not possess emotions, personal memories, or self-awareness. It identifies patterns, predicts likely outcomes, and generates responses based on existing information. Human creativity, by contrast, is deeply connected to personal experiences, cultural identity, curiosity, and emotional understanding — qualities that remain uniquely human.

History offers valuable perspective. Every major technological breakthrough, from the printing press to the Internet, initially raised concerns about replacing human skills. Yet these innovations ultimately expanded opportunities for creativity rather than eliminating them. AI may follow the same path, provided society learns to use it thoughtfully and ethically.

Ultimately, the future of creativity will not be determined by artificial intelligence alone. Instead, it will depend on how people choose to integrate this powerful technology into their lives. Used wisely, AI can inspire innovation, improve productivity, and open new creative possibilities. Used carelessly, it may encourage dependence and reduce opportunities for original thinking.

Artificial intelligence is unlikely to replace the human imagination. While machines can imitate patterns and generate remarkable content, they cannot truly experience joy, failure, hope, or inspiration.

Creativity is more than producing something new — it is about expressing what it means to be human.

Rather than asking whether AI will replace creativity, perhaps the better question should be: How can humanity ensure that technology continues to serve creativity instead of defining it?

SHORTTAKES

The event showcased the role of sports in building a healthy society.

WALKING MARATHON IN SALALAH SEEKS HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

SALALAH: *The 'This is My Achievement' walking marathon was held under the slogan 'Towards a Society Free of Mental Influences' in Salalah.*

The marathon was held under the auspices of Shaikh Dr Said bin Humaid al Harthy, Wali of Salalah, who highlighted the role of sports in building a healthy society.

He said the marathon aims to encourage walking as a daily habit, promote sports awareness and support community efforts to reduce the use of drugs and psychoactive substances by encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle.

The marathon witnessed participation from citizens, residents and visitors to Dhofar Governorate representing different age groups, reinforcing the importance of physical activity in promoting health, prevention and social awareness.

At the conclusion of the event, the Wali of Salalah honoured the participating and supporting organisations that contributed to the success of the marathon. ***— ONA***

Training aims to better public service delivery

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JULY 28

MUSCAT GOVERNORATE has launched an intensive week-long training programme aimed at strengthening the leadership, innovation and public service capabilities of its employees as part of its strategy to invest in national talent and enhance institutional performance.

The programme, which began on Sunday, targets senior and middle-management employees, equipping them with modern knowledge and practical skills to lead change, improve workplace performance and develop innovative solutions for public service delivery.

A spokesperson for the Governorate's office said the initiative reflects Muscat Governorate's commitment to developing human capital and fostering a culture of leadership and innovation.

"The week-long programme is designed to strengthen the leadership and innovative capabilities of Muscat Governorate employees while enhancing their ability to contribute to institutional excellence," the spokesperson said.

The training combines theoretical and practical learning.

The theoretical component covers innovative leadership, strategic and creative thinking, digital transformation and institutional innovation, providing participants with contemporary leadership concepts and tools to support informed decision-making and organisational excellence.

The programme, which began on Sunday, targets senior and middle-management employees, equipping them with modern knowledge and practical skills to lead change, improve workplace performance and develop innovative solutions for public service delivery.

The week-long programme is designed to strengthen the leadership and innovative capabilities of Muscat Governorate employees.

The practical component includes interactive workshops, case studies of successful local and international experiences, and collaborative group projects.

These activities are designed to strengthen teamwork, planning and implementation skills while enabling participants to transform innovative ideas into practical workplace initiatives.

At the conclusion of the programme, participants will develop improvement projects and preliminary implementation plans for their respective workplaces. They will also prepare personal development plans to enhance their leadership and innovation competencies, with progress assessed through pre- and post-training evaluations.

Al Rustaq Hospital successfully performs endoscopic nasal repair

The operation involved the meticulous elevation of mucosal flaps and tension-free closure of the perforation.

MUSCAT: The Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Unit at Al Rustaq Hospital has successfully performed an advanced endoscopic nasal septal perforation repair, marking another milestone in the hospital's efforts to expand specialised healthcare services and localise advanced surgical techniques in line with the highest standards of quality and patient safety.

A nasal septal perforation can significantly affect nasal function and a patient's quality of life. The condition may cause a range of distressing symptoms, including nasal obstruction, recurrent nosebleeds, crust formation within the nasal cavity, dryness, whistling during breathing and general discomfort during daily activities.

Surgical intervention is often required when conservative treatment fails to provide relief.

The hospital's ENT team explained that the procedure was carried out using an endoscopic technique, which provides enhanced visualisation of the perforation site and enables precise surgical repair while minimising trauma to the surrounding tissues.

The operation involved the meticulous elevation of mucosal flaps and tension-free closure of the perforation.

A supporting graft was used to promote successful healing, while silicone splints were placed to stabilise the repair during the recovery period and optimise both functional and long-term outcomes.

According to the medical team, the endoscopic approach offers several advantages, including the avoidance of external surgical incisions, reduced postoperative pain and bleeding, faster recovery and improved functional and cosmetic results, ultimately enhancing patient comfort and quality of life.

Al Rustaq Hospital continues to implement its plans to expand specialised medical services and introduce more advanced treatment techniques, contributing to improved healthcare quality, reducing the need to refer patients to other healthcare institutions and supporting the Ministry of Health's objectives of delivering comprehensive, safe and high-quality healthcare services.

Arabia Falcon Insurance — العربية فالكون للتأمين

CONDENSED UNAUDITED FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE SECOND QUARTER 2026

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE SECOND QUARTER OF 2026

Dear Shareholders,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG, I am pleased to present the financial results of the company for the second quarter ending June 30, 2026.

Business overview

Macroeconomic conditions weakened during the first half of the year, driven by regional geopolitical tensions and rising oil prices, which contributed to higher inflation expectations and volatility in investment markets.

Against this backdrop, the insurance sector recorded good growth. Total gross written premiums increased by 8% to ﷼ 342 million in H1 2026, compared to ﷼ 317 million in H1 2025 (source: Financial Services Authority portal).

The industry is expected to continue growing at an average annual rate of approximately 5% over the coming years. However, claims inflation remains a key concern, placing sustained pressure on underwriting margins and reinforcing the need for disciplined pricing and effective claims management. Elevated claims have historically led to technical losses across several insurers in Oman.

Within this context, the Company's H1 2026 performance was below expectations. Results were primarily impacted by higher claims frequency and value due to inflation, in addition to slightly lower investment income during the period compared with same period last year.

Management has initiated corrective actions focused on restoring portfolio profitability and enhancing investment returns, with the objective of improving overall performance during the remaining part of the year.

Income and Technical Results

a. Gross written Premium decreased by 8% from ﷼ 17.0 million in H1 2025 to ﷼ 15.7 million in H1 2026. The decrease was due mainly to stopping writing medical business in the second half of 2025 which accounted for ﷼ 2.0 million in H1 2025.

b. Insurance revenue decreased by 3% from ﷼ 11.7 million in H1 2025 to ﷼ 11.3 million in H1 2026

c. Net insurance service results inclusive of net insurance finance expense and other income decreased from ﷼ 306k profit in H1 2025 to 259k loss in H1 2026.

d. Investment income decreased by 6% from ﷼ 1.399 million in H1 2025 to ﷼ 1.311 million in H1 2026.

e. The net profit for the first half of the year was ﷼ 492k compared with ﷼ 1053k in the same period last year, due to the drop in both technical results and investment income.

f. The shareholder's Equity was ﷼ 23.122 million on June 30, 2026, compared with ﷼ 22.122 million on June 30, 2025.

g. Dividends of ﷼ 1,239,620 (12 baiza per share) were paid this year, compared with ﷼ 1,033,017 (10 baiza per share) in the previous year.

Outlook for second half 2026

Overall, the year is expected to be challenging. Improvements in both technical profitability and investment income are expected in the remaining part of the year. Over the past few years, management has implemented necessary measures to address rising claims and has continuously reviewed pricing strategies to restore claims ratios to acceptable levels. Property and casualty lines are expected to sustain steady growth and profitability, life segment to continue a strong growth trajectory.

Management remains committed to growing the insurance portfolio in a disciplined and profitable manner, while maintaining tight control over expenses, with the primary objective of delivering improved technical profitability by year-end.

The Company also continues to advance its digital transformation strategy, with significant investments planned for the coming year to strengthen market leadership, enhance digital capabilities, and elevate service excellence.

Acknowledgements

I take this opportunity to wish success to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik bin Taimur towards further development and prosperity of the country. We would like to thank the Financial Service Authority and all other regulatory bodies for their continuous guidance and support.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would also like to thank the management team and the employees of the company for an outstanding year.

We sincerely thank our shareholders for their continued confidence, support and trust in the company over the years.

For & on behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG

Elie Khoury
Chairman of the Board

Unaudited condensed interim statement of financial position as at 30 June 2026

	Unaudited 30 June 2026 ﷼	Unaudited 30 June 2025 ﷼	Audited 31 Dec 2025 ﷼
ASSETS			
Property and equipment	92,176	98,701	85,564
Goodwill	555,883	555,883	555,883
Intangible assets	96,098	137,000	105,423
Investments fair value through other comprehensive income	24,383,564	15,229,863	22,185,486
Investments at fair value through profit or loss	8,454,342	7,460,994	5,533,143
Deferred tax asset	204,445	230,825	204,446
Reinsurance contract assets	25,399,253	16,444,499	27,575,583
Other receivables	1,065,716	1,354,165	1,910,011
Term deposits	16,108,878	24,575,455	19,643,738
Cash and bank balances	3,000,220	2,734,252	3,907,179
Total Assets	**79,360,575**	**68,821,637**	**81,706,456**
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
EQUITY			
Capital and reserves			
Share capital	10,330,166	10,330,166	10,330,166
Legal reserve	3,443,388	3,423,988	3,443,388
Contingency reserve	7,309,145	6,886,170	7,161,523
Investment fair value reserve	1,089,968	691,604	1,038,744
Investment finance reserve	107,165	(18,928)	(16,305)
Retained earnings	842,328	808,961	1,737,925
Total shareholders' equity	**23,122,160**	**22,121,961**	**23,695,441**
LIABILITIES			
Insurance contract liabilities	53,583,295	44,100,634	50,839,475
Reinsurance contract liabilities	1,227,507	1,432,660	5,203,523
End of service benefits	198,855	193,277	185,711
Other payables	890,054	578,808	1,184,215
Provision for taxation	338,704	394,297	598,091
Total liabilities	**56,238,415**	**46,699,676**	**58,011,015**
Total Equity and liabilities	**79,360,575**	**68,821,637**	**81,706,456**
Net Assets per share	0.223	0.214	0.229

Unaudited condensed interim statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the six-months period ended 30 June 2026

	30 June 2026 ﷼	30 June 2025 ﷼
Insurance revenue	11,274,283	11,682,749
Insurance service expenses	(6,584,068)	(6,333,898)
Insurance service result before reinsurance contracts held	4,690,215	5,348,851
Net income or expense from reinsurance contracts held	(4,894,452)	(4,846,099)
Insurance service result	**(204,237)**	**502,752**
Finance expenses from insurance contract held	(783,600)	(692,340)
Finance income from reinsurance contract held	474,792	376,128
Net Insurance finance expenses	**(308,808)**	**(316,212)**
Investment income	1,311,477	1,399,537
Other income	254,121	119,464
Net investment and other income	**1,565,598**	**1,519,001**
Non attributable general and administrative expenses	(482,947)	(489,657)
Net profit before tax	**569,606**	**1,215,884**
Income tax	(77,961)	(162,839)
Net profit after tax for the period	**491,645**	**1,053,045**
Net Finance expense from insurance and reinsurance contracts	123,470	(295,046)
Changes in fair value of investments through other comprehensive income	51,224	185,635
Total comprehensive income for the period	**666,339**	**943,634**
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.005	0.010

US President Donald Trump voiced irritation with Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of their White House meeting on Tuesday

The European Union condemned an "aggression" by Iranian security services against two French diplomats in Tehran

Israel said that American warplanes used Israeli bases during their attacks on Iran, reiterating to retaliate if targeted

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi held separate phone calls on Hormuz with his counterparts in Gulf states

The Israeli military said on Tuesday it intercepted a drone near the Jordanian border and was looking into its origin

Iraqi PM Ali al Zaidi called for an investigation into Saudi Arabia's claim that drones had been launched by groups

TRUMP CITES 'GOOD' TALKS ON IRAN

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday said there have been good talks with Iran even as he reiterated his threats to target Pickaxe Mountain as well as bridges and power plants if a deal is not made with Tehran. In an interview with Fox News, Trump said he wanted to avoid targeting Iran's bridges and power plants if possible. "It's a very, very delicate balance. So I think we have a very strong position right now. They know I'm going to do that if they don't make a deal," Trump told the "Fox and Friends" programme. "We cannot have them break deals anymore." "We have had some very good talks," Trump said.

Trump is meeting with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House after the two countries launched strikes against Iran in February. Trump was asked about reports that Netanyahu plans to talk to him about work happening at a site linked to Iran's nuclear programme known as Pickaxe Mountain, a fortified facility buried deep underground near one of Tehran's main nuclear sites. "I don't need Bibi to tell me that. Bibi's telling me that because he wants me to stay involved," the Republican president said, referring to Netanyahu. "I know exactly what's going on at Pickaxe. It's not a big problem. We took out their nuclear sites, and we'll have to take out Pickaxe if we don't make a deal. We don't make a deal, we'll take it out very easily," Trump said.

It's a very, very delicate balance. So I think we have a very strong position right now. They know I'm going to do that if they don't make a deal. We cannot have them break deals anymore. We have had some very good talk.

DONALD TRUMP

People cross the road past a huge war billboard, in Tehran, Iran. ***— Reuters***

HORMUZ PROPOSAL

Meanwhile, Gulf states backed a plan to manage the Strait of Hormuz with Iran, including collecting voluntary fees for using it, a Gulf source and a Western diplomat said on Tuesday. A senior Iranian source said that Tehran had yet to respond to the proposals, intended to serve as a basis to end the disruption to trade through the strait caused by the US-Israeli war on Iran.

President Donald Trump, who abruptly called off a two-week US bombing campaign over the weekend in his latest strategic U-turn, said there were "good talks" under way with Iran but threatened to restart strikes unless negotiations deliver. Iran denies seeking to resume talks with the United States. Washington launched its renewed bombing campaign earlier this month to break Iran's grip on the strait, through which about a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flowed before the war.

Iran effectively shut the strait to ships other than its own after the United States and Israel attacked on February 28. A deal last month between the United States and Iran partially reopened it, but the agreement collapsed in early July after Iran fired on ships using a channel it does not approve. Iran has said it wants to manage the strait, which controls the opposite shore, and charge service fees to ships that use it.

Washington wants to return to the status quo prior to the war, when ships were able to pass freely with no payments, and says charging mandatory fees would be illegal. Under the new proposal, Iran would not exercise sole control and fees would be voluntary, the Gulf source and Western diplomat briefed on the matter said.

GLOBAL IMPACT

The system would be analogous to one in place on Asia's Strait of Malacca, where Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore ask ships to pay voluntary contributions to fund navigation, environmental protection and search-and-rescue operations. The Western diplomat compared it to a voluntary carbon tax for flights, where anyone buying a plane ticket can choose to tick a box if they want to pay to offset their emissions.

Gulf Cooperation Council foreign ministers met via video call on Tuesday to discuss the latest developments in the conflict, including ways to intensify cooperation on issues related to freedom and safety of vessels through the waterway, a statement from the Qatari Foreign Ministry said. Iran's joint military command again rejected a plan put forward by Trump for damages to vessels to be paid from frozen Iranian assets, state media reported. **— Reuters**

SHORT*TAKE*

A photograph shows the damage in Zawtar Al Gharbiya, Lebanon. ***— AFP***

UN IN LEBANON FIND AMMONIUM NITRATE EXPLOSIVES

BEIRUT: *UN peacekeepers said on Tuesday they had found around four tonnes of mainly ammonium nitrate explosives this month in a south Lebanon border village under Israeli occupation. On July 2, during a "routine route check" near Hula, "peacekeepers found 385 containers abandoned inside a building, containing approximately 4,000 kilogrammes of explosive material, consisting mainly of ammonium nitrate compounds", the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said in a statement. UNIFIL specialists "later carried out on-site procedures to render the material inert, making it safe and removing the risk it posed".*

A source with knowledge of the matter said on condition of anonymity that the containers had Hebrew writing on them and were "likely used for demolitions". Hula is part of a strip of territory running around 10 kilometres (six miles) deep inside Lebanon along the border where Israeli forces, who invaded during the latest war with Hezbollah, have been operating and have warned residents not to return. ***— AFP***

RED SEA BAB EL MANDEB SHIPPING RISES

NEW DELHI: *The number of vessels passing through Bab el Mandeb rose to 28, a four-day high, while traffic through the Strait of Hormuz remained low, according to Kpler shipping data, amid optimism about a potential resolution to the US-Iran conflict. Traffic was still below the month's peak of 46 vessels recorded on July 14, the data showed.*

Out of 12 vessels that entered the Red Sea on Monday, four were oil tankers, based on the data at 0512 GMT on Tuesday. One was a very large crude carrier (VLCC), two were Suezmax tankers and the fourth was an Aframax tanker.

A VLCC can carry about 2 million barrels of oil, while a Suezmax typically carries half that volume. An Aframax tanker can transport about 700,000 barrels of oil. The 16 vessels that exited the Red Sea included 10 oil tankers. There were four Suezmax tankers, three Aframax tankers, two medium range tankers and one VLCC, the data showed. Hong Kong-flagged VLCC New Pearl carrying 2 million barrels of Saudi crude exited the Red Sea for eastern China's Zhoushan port, the fourth Chinese supertanker to leave since Ansar Allah declared a naval blockade. ***— Reuters***

Israel's yellow line pushes Gazans from home

GAZA: On a road in Gaza City's Zeitoun district, Palestinian resident Assem Dawla loaded mattresses and bags onto a truck as concrete yellow blocks marking the edge of Israel's expanding military zone stood amid the rubble nearby. He said it was the seventh or eighth time since the war began that he and his family had been forced to leave a shelter because of Israeli evacuation orders and the advance of what residents call the yellow line.

Zeitoun is one of at least five locations across Gaza where residents and Hamas officials say Israel has expanded areas under its control in recent days by moving forward the yellow line, a military demarcation established under a US-brokered ceasefire reached in October. As men hoisted belongings onto a waiting truck, elderly relatives picked their way through debris. Continued Israeli military activity made it too dangerous to remain, Dawla said. "We are taking our belongings out and going to leave the place because the occupation (Israel) has moved the yellow line all the way to Salah al-Din Street," he said.

Zeitoun is one of at least five locations across Gaza where residents and Hamas officials say Israel has expanded areas under its control in recent days by moving forward the yellow line, a military demarcation established under a US-brokered ceasefire

Palestinians look towards a yellow concrete block marking the "yellow zone" under Israeli military control, in Tufah neighbourhood. ***— Reuters***

With the October ceasefire, President Donald Trump set out a peace plan for Gaza that largely halted major fighting after two years of devastating Israeli war in Gaza triggered by Hamas' attack on southern Israel.

The plan called for a surge in humanitarian aid, governance by a civilian Palestinian administration, the disarmament of Hamas, the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and the deployment of an international force to help maintain security.

Israel controlled an estimated 64% of Gaza by late April. Nearly all of the territory's roughly 2 million residents are concentrated in a narrow coastal area under Hamas control, living largely in damaged buildings or makeshift shelters and facing dire humanitarian conditions. **— Reuters**

SHORTTAKES

A drone view shows burnt buildings in an area affected by a wildfire in Biscarosse. — **Reuters**

FRANCE, SPAIN MAKE HEADWAY AGAINST HUGE BLAZES

BORDEAUX: *Firefighters raced on Tuesday to subdue huge wildfires that have forced unprecedented evacuations of tens of thousands of people across France and Spain, as Western Europe braced for another heatwave. The fires have torn through a region already battered by a blisteringly hot and dry summer. Crews were seeking to capitalise on more favourable weather before a new wave of higher temperatures settled in from Wednesday.*

In the Bordeaux region of France, firefighters contained the forest blaze overnight, while in Spain, authorities allowed most people in the central Toledo province to return to their homes, lifting a state of emergency introduced on July 23. Fires still raged in the Madrid region nearby. "We are starting to see the end of the tunnel in the fight against these fires," Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told reporters.

Europe, the world's fastest warming continent, has endured record-breaking heatwaves this year. Scientists say human-driven climate change is intensifying the heat and drought that allow wildfires to spread faster, burn longer and become more destructive.

In France, the mood was sombre as fires ravaged the Cap Ferret peninsula on the Atlantic coast, a popular tourist destination, and spread through areas surrounding Bordeaux in previous days. President Emmanuel Macron called the wildfire crisis possibly the most severe the country had faced since World War 2.

Spain was bracing for its fourth heatwave of the summer from Wednesday with the risk of fire expected to reach extreme levels due to heat, southerly winds and low humidity. Firefighters are still battling fires in the region of Madrid and neighbouring province of Avila. As of Tuesday, Spain had more than 73,000 evacuees and roughly 66,000 people under confinement. — **Reuters**

WHITE PHOSPHORUS LEAKS AT US AIR BASE IN SOUTH KOREA

SEOUL: *South Korean authorities ordered brief neighbourhood evacuations on Tuesday after a leak of white phosphorus inside the US Osan Air Base south of Seoul, the Safety Ministry said. No casualties were reported and the evacuation notice for residents was lifted after about half an hour, as South Korean fire authorities and US forces carried out decontamination work, Yonhap news agency reported.*

"At 1708 , due to a ground mishap and out of an abundance of caution, Osan AB (Air Base) established a 1,000-foot safety cordon to protect base and local populace," the base said in a statement. "Our emergency response professionals are currently managing an isolated situation on the installation. We are handling this matter with the utmost care and expediency."

A spokesperson for the air base said there was a munitions-related accident and it was assessing the situation, in response to a request to confirm the nature of the leak. White phosphorus is a highly toxic substance that can ignite on contact with air and is used in battlefield smoke screens and incendiary weapons. — **Reuters**

ITALY'S PARLIAMENT WILL HAVE FINAL SAY ON EU DEFENCE FUNDS

ROME: *Italy's League party, a member of the ruling coalition, said on Tuesday that any decision on whether to tap a European Union scheme to fund military spending would be up to parliament, after the foreign minister said Rome was ready to access the programme. The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument is a joint borrowing scheme backed by the EU budget to boost the bloc's defence capabilities and help member states meet new, more ambitious Nato spending targets.*

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, leader of the co-ruling Forza Italia party, told parliament that the government had decided to request €14.9 billion by the end of the year, reversing suggestions that Rome could drop the programme. His comments triggered a swift reaction from his League allies, who repeatedly urged caution on any decision to access the scheme.

"It will be up to parliament to decide if and when to use that funding channel," said League senator Claudio Borghi.

Tajani clarified that Italy had merely "reserved" the funds and that the government will determine by the end of the year how much, if any, to demand.

Raising defence spending is highly unpopular in Italy, where Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is under pressure from the opposition to use her limited budget leeway to soften rising energy costs. — **Reuters**

Ukraine's Zelensky in US to secure Trump support

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT Volodymyr Zelensky was expected at the White House for talks with US counterpart Donald Trump, as Kyiv seeks to win fresh diplomatic and military support in its fight against Russia. The visit comes as both Kyiv and Moscow ramp up long-range strikes and US-led diplomatic efforts to end the war remain at a standstill, more than four years on from Russia's full-scale attack.

Relations between Zelensky and Trump have warmed since the beginning of Trump's second term, with the US leader this month offering Kyiv licenses to produce Patriot air defence missiles and suggesting Kyiv's strikes on Russia could help end the war. Zelensky is expected to push for fresh supplies of anti-ballistic missiles during his visit, as well as to discuss ways of restarting frozen talks on ending the fighting, a senior Ukrainian official said on the condition of anonymity. "Our number-one priority is anti-ballistic defence and strategic cooperation with America. Peace needs to be brought closer," Zelensky said in a post on X announcing his arrival in the United States.

Last month was the deadliest for civilians in Ukraine since April 2022, as Russia rained hard-to-intercept ballistic missiles on Ukrainian towns and cities, according to the United Nations. "It is crucial that Washington approve the purchase of a package of Patriot missiles. That is super important," the senior Ukrainian official said. During his visit, Zelensky also plans to attend a memorial ceremony for senator Lindsey Graham — a staunch Ukraine supporter who died unexpectedly this month aged 71, the Ukrainian official said.

A prosecutor's office employee walks at the site of a petrol station hit by a Russian air strike in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. — **Reuters**

Relations between Zelensky and Trump have warmed since the beginning of Trump's second term, with the US leader this month offering Kyiv licenses to produce Patriot air defence missiles and suggesting Kyiv's strikes on Russia could help end the war

Since his return to power in January last year, Trump has ended direct deliveries of US arms to Kyiv in favour of the PURL programme, which allows European countries to buy weapons and then supply them to Ukraine. But Washington remains a major ally of Kyiv, providing it with intelligence and access to the Starlink satellite system that enables frontline communications.

At a previous meeting in Washington in October 2025, Zelensky failed to convince Trump to provide Ukraine with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

The relationship appears to have healed since the pair's stunning Oval Office exchange in February 2025 in front of the world's cameras, when Trump accused Zelensky of ingratitude and "gambling with World War Three".

The US leader has since changed his tone and during their last encounter in Turkiye earlier this month, he offered words of encouragement, saying Zelensky had done "an amazing job".

He also announced his intention to allow Ukraine to produce anti-aircraft Patriot missiles, which Kyiv says it badly needs to face down Russian attacks.

In another sign of easing tensions, US influencers close to the MAGA orbit such as Laura Loomer and Tim Pool have recently voiced their support for Ukraine, after having long opposed aid to Kyiv.

Zelensky spoke last week with Trump's envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner about how to "reinvigorate diplomacy", after the US-Israeli war in the Middle East put the brakes on talks. — **AFP**

POWERFUL QUAKE HITS SOUTHERN JAPAN

TOKYO: *A 7.1-magnitude earthquake hit Japan's southern Kumamoto prefecture on Tuesday, knocking out power to thousands of homes, rupturing roads and leaving some trapped and others presumed dead inside a partially collapsed shopping mall. Speaking to reporters in Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said authorities were still assessing the full extent of the damage in the area, which was devastated by a deadly quake a decade ago. "We have already been informed that people have been injured. Power outages and fires have occurred in some areas, and there has also been damage to roads and bridges and the collapse of buildings," Takaichi said. "I ask everyone to take action to protect themselves, including evacuating to a safe location."*

Around 300,000 people have been instructed to go to evacuation centres, and hundreds of soldiers have been deployed to help with rescue operations as aftershocks continued to rumble in the area, on Japan's southern island of Kyushu. Multiple people were unaccounted for after a chimney collapsed at a Nippon Paper Industries factory, broadcaster NHK reported. Around 20 to 30 workers at the prefecture's largest shopping mall were unaccounted for after it was rocked by an explosion in the aftermath of the quake, NHK said. — **Reuters**

CONTAINING EPIDEMIC

Uganda declares end to Ebola outbreak

Uganda's health minister declared the country Ebola-free on Tuesday following the East African nation's latest outbreak of the viral haemorrhagic disease that infected 20 people and killed two of them. Health Minister Chris Baryomunsi said the announcement follows the "successful completion of the mandatory 42-day monitoring period which begun after the discharge of the last Ugandan national, a locally transmitted patient, on the 16 of June, 2026." — **Reuters**

FRAUD ACTIVITIES

Malaysia raids scam centres, arrest 335

Malaysian police have raided 32 premises hosting online scam activities in Forest City in the state of Johor, arresting 335 people and seizing assets worth about 1 million ringgit ($245,000). The operation was targeting two areas that had been identified as hubs for call centres running online fraud activities, Johor police chief Ab Rahaman Arsad said. "The fraud activities were carried out through investment and love scams, targeting victims from abroad, particularly from China and Indonesia". — **Reuters**

RISKING A BLACKOUT

Libya orders army to expel protesters

The government in Libya said it has ordered the army to regain control of a gas plant after a group of protesters forced their way in, risking a blackout. "The head of the Government of National Unity (GNU), Abdelhamid Dbeibah, has ordered the ministry of defence and the general staff of the armed forces to immediately take full control of the Mellitah gas complex and to reopen the gas pipelines and gas supply to the country's power plants," it said. — **AFP**

The strength that does not shout

HYESHA BARRETT

The writer is a Master Life Coach and Positive Parent Specialist

THERE IS a particular kind of strength that rarely attracts attention. It does not rush to prove itself, dominate the conversation, or insist on being recognised.

It is steady, measured and often almost invisible. Yet, when tension rises and emotions become louder, this quieter strength is usually what prevents everything from unravelling.

Oman's continuing role in regional dialogue offers a subtle example of this. While headlines often focus on tension, uncertainty and the possibility of escalation, there is also important work happening behind the scenes.

Conversations are being held, channels remain open and space is being created for people to move towards understanding rather than further apart. It may not be dramatic, but it is deeply significant.

This kind of leadership is easy to overlook because we are often drawn to what is most visible. Confidence can be confused with certainty. Authority can be mistaken for control. Strength can appear to belong to the person who speaks first, speaks longest, or refuses to soften their position. However, true influence is often found in the ability to remain composed when the atmosphere becomes emotionally charged.

Calm leadership does not mean avoiding difficult conversations. It allows room for honesty without humiliation, boundaries without hostility and disagreement without disconnection. The aim is not to remove emotion, but to prevent emotion from becoming the only voice in the room.

This applies just as much in everyday life as it does in diplomacy. Families, workplaces and relationships all have moments when tension builds. Sometimes the most powerful response is not another explanation, defence or attempt to be understood. It is a pause.

A quieter tone, a moment of deep listening. A question asked with genuine curiosity. A willingness to listen beyond the words, and recognise what may be sitting underneath them.

One grounded person can shift the direction of the entire interaction. They may not solve everything immediately, but they can prevent the moment from becoming more damaging. They can hold a boundary without withdrawing warmth. They can stay clear without becoming cold. They can choose language that keeps the door open, even when the conversation itself is uncomfortable.

Children learn this form of leadership long before they understand spoken words. They notice whether adults become louder when they feel powerless, whether disagreement becomes distance, and whether mistakes lead to shame or repair. Every difficult moment quietly teaches them something about how conflict works. They learn whether tension must always become a battle, or whether it can become a bridge.

Teams do not only respond to strategy, experience, or expertise. They respond to emotional tone.

The same is true in professional spaces. Teams do not only respond to strategy, experience, or expertise. They respond to emotional tone. A leader who remains steady under pressure creates clarity for everyone around them. Their calm does not remove the challenge, but it helps others believe the challenge can be handled appropriately.

This kind of steadiness is not passive. It requires restraint, patience and the courage to resist immediate reaction. It asks us to tolerate the discomfort of not having the final word, and to trust that influence does not always need to look impressive.

Perhaps this is why quiet leadership matters so much now. The world may notice the loudest moments, yet progress is often created elsewhere: in private conversations, thoughtful pauses and the decision to remain open when closing down would be easier.

Noise may capture attention, but calm changes outcomes. Anyone can add another voice to the chaos. Real strength is becoming the presence that steadies the room, protects the conversation and stops the fire from spreading.

El Salvador faces economic uncertainty despite taming gangs

Few Salvadorans deny that streets are safer under the iron-fisted anti-gang crackdown of President Nayib Bukele.

But that hasn't assuaged fears over a sluggish economy and the "bitter medicine" the president says is needed to fix it.

Psychologist Lilian Hernandez, 59, was one of thousands of government employees who lost her job following an International Monetary Fund-sponsored austerity reform that the government co-signed in 2024 to receive up to $1.4 billion in financing.

"The 'bitter medicine' has been for the working class," she said.

The measures were intended to, among other things, reduce a debt that represents 90 per cent of the country's GDP.

Without official statistics, economists estimate around 15,000 state employees have been laid off since 2024 in this country of 6 million.

But labour unions say 47,000 jobs have been lost since 2019, when Bukele took power with failed promises to fold Bitcoin into the dollarised economy.

The economic results of the right-wing leader have been "disastrous" for Hernandez, who struggles with a rising cost of living.

The yearly inflation rose to 2.76 per cent in June, while the average monthly grocery costs rose to $260.

Bukele enjoys a popularity rating topping 80 per cent for his anti-gang "war," which dropped the homicide rate in his country — once one of the world's most violent — to 1.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

Overshadowing that success are the widespread reports of systematic human rights abuses in Bukele's mega-prisons.

Bukele, 45, will seek a third term next February.

The newfound security has proven especially beneficial for businesses once battered by extortion.

Bars and restaurants brought life back to broad swaths of the capital San Salvador — including neighbourhoods like La Cima, now bustling with new businesses.

*Seven out of 10 Salvadorans see security as the most positive improvement in the country, but the same amount say the economy is the biggest problem, according to a recent study from Central American University. The Salvadoran economy is showing the slowest growth rates in Central America, while financial group Cibest said this year that growth rates could slow down from 3.9 per cent in 2025 to 2.9 per cent, largely due to plummeting real estate demand. — **AFP***

Lessons on honesty

HAMED S AL GHAITHI

The writer is an Omani evolutionary biologist, translator and editor

WHEN FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE wrote of Redlichkeit, he did not mean honesty in the ordinary moral sense. He meant something rarer and far more demanding: intellectual integrity — the willingness to submit one's own beliefs to the same scrutiny one applies to those of one's opponents. It is the refusal to believe something merely because it is comforting, familiar, or flattering. It is the discipline of requiring evidence from oneself before demanding it of others.

This is perhaps the most difficult form of courage. It is easier to confront an external enemy than to confront oneself. Most people do not fear truth because it is false; they fear it because it is painful. The temptation is always to replace an uncomfortable reality with a more agreeable illusion.

What is true of individuals is equally true of nations.

Societies, no less than people, tell stories about themselves. They cultivate images they come to cherish until preserving those images becomes more important than understanding reality. At that point, dishonesty ceases to be merely a moral failing. It becomes an intellectual disability. A society loses the very instrument by which it distinguishes success from failure, achievement from self-deception.

This is why civilisations do not advance because they make fewer mistakes than others. Every society errs. The difference lies elsewhere: the strongest societies possess the capacity to recognise their errors, to revise their assumptions, and to learn from experience. Error is universal; the refusal to acknowledge it is not.

The Arab experience offers painful illustrations.

The Arab defeat of 1967 is remembered not only for its military consequences but also for the language that followed it. A crushing defeat was widely described as a mere "setback". That choice of words mattered. Language does not simply describe events; it shapes the questions we permit ourselves to ask. A defeat demands inquiry into institutions, leadership, political culture, and strategic judgment. A setback suggests that time alone will repair the damage.

The question is not simply whether we are honest. It is how much truth we are capable of bearing about ourselves

Before the Tunisian revolution, official indicators pointed to respectable economic performance. Yet youth unemployment, regional inequality, and growing frustration told another story — one eventually impossible to suppress. Governments that manipulate their own picture of reality rarely deceive only their citizens. They also deceive themselves, planning for countries that exist only on paper.

The problem extends beyond politics. It also shapes the relationship between society and knowledge.

Science begins with questions whose answers remain uncertain until evidence settles them. It advances because every conclusion is provisional. When conclusions are decided in advance and research serves merely to justify them, what remains may resemble science in its language, but not in its method. The issue is not whether a particular theory is accepted or rejected. It is whether a society retains the intellectual discipline to revise its beliefs when evidence demands it.

Without that discipline, learning becomes impossible.

The same temptation appears in political rhetoric. Military defeats become victories. Institutional failure is rebranded as resilience. Grand slogans expand in proportion to shrinking realities. Public language increasingly serves emotional reassurance rather than truthful description.

Oman is not exempt from this temptation, although it often appears in gentler forms. Like many nations, we take understandable pride in our history. Yet historical achievement can easily become a shield against present scrutiny. No nation stands outside the ordinary laws of political and social development. Admiration for the past cannot substitute for honest judgment about the present.

To acknowledge that Oman remains peripheral in global scientific production and technological innovation is not an act of national pessimism. It is simply an attempt to establish our point of departure. Those who imagine themselves already at the centre rarely feel compelled to move. Only those who know where they stand can measure the distance still to travel.

The philosopher Harry Frankfurt drew an important distinction between lying and what he famously called "bullshit". The liar still recognises the existence of truth and seeks to conceal it. The producer of bullshit is indifferent to truth altogether. His concern is not whether his words correspond to reality but whether they produce the desired effect.

That distinction captures much of contemporary public discourse. The greatest danger is not that societies occasionally deceive themselves. It is that they cease to care whether they are deceiving themselves at all.

When that happens, the mechanism of correction begins to fail. Experience no longer accumulates into wisdom. Failure teaches nothing because it is never fully acknowledged. Institutions continue to function, plans continue to be announced, books continue to be published, debates continue to rage, but society gradually loses the ability to distinguish genuine progress from comforting illusion.

The question Nietzsche posed therefore extends beyond the individual. It confronts entire civilisations.

The question is not simply whether we are honest. It is how much truth we are capable of bearing about ourselves. The answer to that question measures not only our integrity but our strength. For nations, as for individuals, renewal begins where self-deception ends.

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In-person friendship brings instant joy

SAMUEL KUTTY

The writer is a freelance journalist and author who worked in Oman and India

I'VE BEEN reflecting on friendship a lot lately. We enjoy being around friends who express unconditional love, care, and appreciation for us. Regardless of our independence, courage, empowerment, or financial stability, we all fundamentally desire connection with others.

Friendship, in its original sense, was regarded as a virtue of significant philosophical importance. Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle taught in the Nicomachean Ethics that friendship is a core human need, essential for happiness and virtue.

He argued that we need friends to live a fulfilling life. After all, when life is difficult, they support us, and when life is joyful, they celebrate with us.

Socrates regarded friendship as more than mere companionship; he saw it as a means to discover truth and wisdom. He reportedly expressed scepticism about letter writing as a path to wisdom, favouring face-to-face interaction with peers.

Later, at the beginning of the 20th century, concerns were raised that landline telephones would dilute interaction or foster unhealthy social behaviours. Adding to those fears has been the domination of social media and instant connectivity, which have effected significant change.

Having navigated the complex landscape of contemporary relationships, I believe that the fear surrounding friendships — and even the very concept of friendship itself — has changed significantly over the past few decades.

Today, social media encourages us to value quantity over quality, promoting images of glossy perfection at the expense of forming deep, intimate connections. An increasing number of young people are realising that their closest companions are not relatives or classmates, but rather individuals they have never met face-to-face.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, we all had to respond to the reality that we couldn't see our friends in person. Some people isolated themselves completely, which impacted their mental and physical health.

At one point, many of us began to question whether this was the new reality we had to accept.

Just imagine - if the lockdown had occurred a couple of decades earlier, any contact with people we did not live with would have taken place via phone calls, emails, or letter writing.

The idea of being alone is frightening, especially when you have no one to turn to due to a pandemic and other factors, such as knowing that your friends are vulnerable to the virus.

Many people turned to online support options, as there was a growing need to create a safety net and a broader range of social and emotional support resources. Email, text messaging, and social media can indeed be both enjoyable and beneficial, often fostering meaningful relationships.

There is a prevailing notion that friendships blossom only within the digital landscape, unlike those formed through face-to-face interactions. I believe real-life friendships are more meaningful because of their physical presence and shared experiences

However, there is a prevailing notion that friendships blossom only within the digital landscape, unlike those formed through face-to-face interactions. I believe real-life friendships are more meaningful because of their physical presence and shared experiences.

During a recent college alumni meeting, I had the good fortune of spending time with many friends. After such a long time, meeting again, catching up, laughing, and creating new memories felt truly special. The happy faces I saw stayed with me, and witnessing old friends reconnect was truly inspiring.

It also reminded me of the days when I actually lived in Oman.

It brings a warm mix of comfort and longing. I have so many fond memories from that time with my friends and colleagues. Now, when I reflect on the passage of life, those were beautiful moments I wouldn't trade for anything - times when everything was calm, peaceful, and well-guarded.

The virtue of friendship is universally cherished. As the world celebrates International Friendship Day on July 30 amid profound divisions between nations, within societies, among individuals, and even within families, the day calls for a future where differences do not create distance and trust prevails over fear.

SOUTH AFRICA'S MIGRANT EXODUS LEAVES EMPLOYERS SHORT-HANDED

CHRIS MAKHAYE AND SHAKIRAH THEBUS

Zimbabwean farmworker Aaron Majatamhe was heading home at sunset after a shift in one of South Africa's top fruit-producing regions, where bushes laden with bright unpicked citrus stood in rows. "I see a lot of farm owners who are crying now... people have to harvest those naartjies, but there is no one," the 33-year-old said.

The same shortage, he said, is looming in the vineyards. "It's time to cut off the grapes and there is no one."

Similar scenes are playing out across South Africa as factories, farms and even ordinary households scramble for labour after thousands of foreign workers left in a matter of weeks to escape deadly anti-migrant protests and intensified immigration enforcement.

Fringe anti-foreigner groups had set June 30 as an unofficial deadline for undocumented migrants to go home, triggering the exodus of more than 160,000 people, according to an AFP tally based on figures from African governments repatriating their citizens. Zimbabwe, which accounted for the largest share of those returning, said many had worked in South Africa's farming, domestic work and construction sectors.

The first cracks were felt almost immediately in KwaZulu-Natal's sugar belt. One farmer on the north coast said he lost up to 80 per cent of his cane-cutting workforce virtually overnight.

"Production and supply have deteriorated to the point where it is going to be difficult for the mills to stay open," he said, speaking anonymously because he feared retaliation.

Another grower near Mid-Illovo, a region of rolling hills south of Durban, said most cane cutters in his area came from Lesotho, the tiny kingdom encircled by South Africa.

"There are fields we are supposed to be cutting, but there are just not enough people. Local people don't like this job because it is back-breaking and physical," he said.

With unemployment above 33 per cent - and far higher when discouraged job-seekers are included - labour unions and researchers argue there is no shortage of South Africans willing to work.

Instead, they say, many employers favour migrant workers because they are cheaper, more flexible and less likely to demand formal contracts, benefits or legal protections.

"They are making a profit out of foreign nations," said Patrick Williams, a local organiser with the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union.

*Foreign farmworkers, he said, routinely worked seven days a week, skipped lunch breaks to maximise piece-rate earnings and were often paid below the national minimum wage. — **Reuters***

Europe's wildfires are no longer seasonal disasters

THE DEVASTATING wildfires spreading across Spain and France should not be viewed as another difficult summer for Europe. They are further evidence that climate change is no longer a future threat but a present-day humanitarian crisis with increasingly global consequences.

Spain has declared a national emergency as firefighters continue battling multiple fires across the country, while France has mobilised thousands of emergency personnel to contain fires threatening communities in the southwest.

According to media reports, more than 300,000 people have been forced to evacuate their homes in Spain, while a further 200,000 have been displaced in France. Entire towns have been emptied, transport networks disrupted and thousands of hectares of forests and farmland reduced to ash.

The worst hit areas showcase the scale of the crisis. In Spain, the regions surrounding Madrid, Castile and León, Ávila and parts of Valencia have experienced some of the largest evacuations as fires spread rapidly through dry landscapes. In France, Gironde, the outskirts of Bordeaux, the Landes region and the Atlantic coast have borne the brunt of the destruction, with firefighters struggling to contain flames fuelled by strong winds and exceptionally dry conditions.

Canada also endured one of its worst wildfire seasons recently, with smoke travelling thousands of kilometres across North America and even reaching Europe.

Southern Europe has also witnessed destructive fires in Greece, Italy and Portugal, while North Africa has experienced outbreaks in Algeria and Tunisia. Despite occurring in different countries and under different circumstances, these disasters share many of the same underlying conditions: prolonged heat, severe drought, stronger winds and vegetation that has become increasingly dry and combustible.

Scientists have consistently warned that climate change is amplifying these risks. Rising global temperatures are contributing to longer and more intense heatwaves, reducing soil moisture and creating ideal conditions for wildfires to ignite and spread. Although many fires begin through human activity, whether accidental or deliberate, it is climate change that increasingly determines their intensity and speed.

*This picture shows a scorched area after a wildfire raged in La Vall d'Uixo, 55 km north-east of Valencia. — **AFP***

OMAN AL YAHYAI

The writer is a multilingual writer and media professional based in Paris. She specialises in human rights and immigration

According to media reports, more than 300,000 people have been forced to evacuate their homes in Spain, while a further 200,000 have been displaced in France

Europe is already the fastest warming continent on the planet, and forecasts suggest another heatwave is expected to move across large parts of the continent in the coming days. This means firefighters battling existing blazes may soon face even more challenging conditions, while regions that have so far escaped major fires could become increasingly vulnerable.

Every wildfire leaves behind thousands of people who have suddenly lost access to their homes, businesses and livelihoods. Some will eventually return and others may find that their communities are no longer safe or economically viable. As extreme weather events become more frequent, temporary evacuations risk becoming permanent displacement. Climate change is gradually creating a new category of displaced people, called climate refugees: those forced to leave not because of war or political persecution, but because their environment can no longer sustain normal life.

Families displaced by floods, droughts and wildfires are increasing every year, even if legal protections have failed to keep pace.

The irony is difficult to ignore. Many governments have adopted increasingly restrictive approaches towards refugees and migrants, arguing that they lack the capacity to accommodate growing numbers of displaced people.

Yet climate change is creating precisely the conditions that will force millions more to leave their homes over the coming decades. If countries are unwilling to prepare for that reality now, they may soon discover that border controls cannot prevent people from fleeing environments that have become uninhabitable.

Addressing this challenge requires far more than improving emergency response capabilities. Governments must invest in wildfire prevention through better forest management, early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure and stronger firefighting resources. More importantly, they must accelerate efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit further warming.

Adaptation alone will not be enough if temperatures continue to rise. The fires devastating Spain and France should therefore be understood as more than national emergencies. They represent another warning that the climate crisis is accelerating faster than political action.

Each year brings new records: higher temperatures, longer droughts, larger fires and greater numbers of displaced people. Without quick and meaningful action, Europe's burning forests will not be remembered as isolated disasters. They will be remembered as early chapters in a much larger humanitarian crisis that the world failed to prevent.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in these pages are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the opinion of the Observer

SPORTS

SHORT*TAKES*

Sultan al Ghaithi with ORSC officials

Oman junior squash team builds experience at China Open

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JULY 28

The Oman's national junior squash team concluded a valuable international campaign at the 2026 China Junior Open Championship which took place in Shandong, China, from July 15 to 19. The tournament brought together nearly 500 young players from 15 countries and regions, providing Oman's rising talent with an important opportunity to compete against some of Asia's strongest junior squash players.

The championship, which was hosted at the Shandong Jining Confucius School Squash Hall, recognised as an Asian Squash Federation (ASF) Silver-tier event, attracting participants from leading squash nations including China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Macau, Egypt, the United States and Canada. The competition featured age-group categories from Under-9 through to Under-19, recording one of the highest participation numbers in the tournament's recent history.

Oman was represented by promising junior player Sultan bin Nidhal al Ghaithi, who competed under the guidance of national coach Salim bin Sultan al Maqbali. The championship formed part of the Oman Squash Committee's ongoing efforts to expose its young players to high-level international competition and accelerate their technical development through regular participation in prestigious regional tournaments.

Al Ghaithi competed in the Under-13 category, where he faced a challenging opening-round match against China's Luo Tianyi, one of the country's leading junior players in the age group. Despite a determined effort, the Omani youngster was defeated in three straight games, with the Chinese player claiming victory 11-4, 11-5, 11-0. Although the result did not go in Oman's favour, the experience was viewed as an important milestone in the young player's development, allowing him to measure himself against one of the region's strongest junior competitors.

National coach Salim bin Sultan al Maqbali described the championship as an extremely beneficial experience for the player despite the early exit from the competition. "The tournament featured highly skilled players from several leading squash nations, including Malaysia, Macau and Egypt, making the level of competition extremely strong across all age categories," Al Maqbali said.

FFC 6.0 brings top fighters from 15 nations to Muscat

AHMED AL KABI
MUSCAT, JULY 28

FIGHTERS FROM around 15 countries will converge on Muscat for FFC 6.0 – FITBOX Fighting Championship, which will be held at the secondary indoor hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on Friday, July 31, 2026.

The international combat sports event is organised by Kerdi Trading SPC under the direct supervision of the company's owner and FFC 6.0 Organising Committee Chairman, Ali Bilal Kerdi. Sohar International will present the championship, with Muscat Steel and Mohsin Haider Darwish LLC among several sponsors and partners supporting the event.

The fight card features 15 professional contests across different mixed martial arts weight divisions, in addition to a Muay Thai bout. Fighters representing leading international combat sports teams and academies, including Team Khabib and Team Khamzat, will take part in the championship.

The evening will be headlined by a middleweight contest between Russian fighter Yaqoub and Iran's Amir Ardalen, while Oman's Abdulmajeed will face Iranian opponent Aref Ali in the heavyweight division.

Another major contest will see Russian fighter Sharapudin take on Britain's Sia in the super middleweight division. The card also features fighters from Oman, Russia, Iran, Brazil, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Pakistan, Norway and Uzbekistan, among other countries.

The sixth edition will place particular emphasis on Omani participation, with Abdulmajeed, Nawaf, Musab, Mahmoud and Aymen among the local fighters set to compete against opponents from different international schools and combat sports backgrounds. Nawaf will face Iran's Pejman in a super middleweight contest, while Musab will meet Egypt's Mohammed at welterweight. Mahmoud is scheduled to take on Iranian fighter Sobhan in the super heavyweight division, while Aymen will compete against Pakistan's Mustafa in the Muay Thai bout.

Fighters from around 15 countries will converge on Muscat for FFC 6.0 – FITBOX Fighting. Championship.

We have worked to deliver an international championship featuring fighters from around 15 countries, alongside representatives of well-known global teams and academies, including Team Khabib and Team Khamzat.

ALI KERDI
Organising Committee Chairman

According to the organising committee, the participation of Omani fighters represents one of the main features of this year's championship. The card also includes three Omani brothers, alongside the other local competitors, highlighting the continued growth of combat sports in the Sultanate of Oman.

Ali Bilal Kerdi said the latest edition marked an important step in the championship's technical and organisational development.

"We have worked to deliver an international championship featuring fighters from around 15 countries, alongside representatives of well-known global teams and academies, including Team Khabib and Team Khamzat," Kerdi said.

Omani participation is also a central part of this edition. We aim to provide local fighters with a genuine opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and gain valuable experience by competing against international opponents.

Kerdi said the organisers were working to stage the event in accordance with high technical and organisational standards, with particular attention given to the safety of both fighters and spectators.

"The venue, medical arrangements and logistical

preparations have been designed to meet the requirements of a professional combat sports championship. We hope FFC 6.0 will further strengthen Oman's position as a destination for hosting international combat sports events," he added.

Doors will open to spectators and official guests at 5 pm, followed by the formal opening ceremony at 6 pm. The professional and main-card bouts are scheduled to begin at 6.30 pm, with the programme expected to continue until around midnight before the winners are honoured and presented with trophies and prizes.

FFC 6.0 aims to support the development of mixed martial arts and other combat sports in Oman, promote emerging national talent and provide local fighters with a competitive pathway to gain experience, while enhancing the country's growing profile as a host of major international sporting events.

Oman U18 hoopers fall to Bahrain in Gulf qualifier, to take on Qatar today

AHMED AL KABI
MUSCAT, JULY 28

Oman's under-18 national basketball team will look to return to winning ways when they face hosts Qatar in a key Gulf qualifier for the FIBA U18 Asia Cup 2026 at Al Gharafa Sports Hall in Doha on Wednesday at 8 pm.

Oman enter the match with three points from one victory and one defeat, while Qatar have collected four points after winning their opening two games. The hosts will approach the encounter with confidence following their victory over Kuwait, while Oman will seek a strong response after suffering a 94-49 defeat to Bahrain in the second round.

The national side had entered the Bahrain match aiming to build on their dramatic 62-59 opening win against Kuwait. However, Bahrain took control from the opening minutes, capitalising on Oman's turnovers, defensive positioning and lack of concentration.

Bahrain established a 22-12 lead at the end of the first quarter before increasing the pressure in the second. Oman struggled to convert opportunities close to the basket and conceded further points through misplaced passes, allowing Bahrain to take the period 30-10 and lead 52-22 at half-time.

The pattern continued after the break as Bahrain maintained their offensive rhythm and punished a series of individual errors. They won the third quarter 25-9, taking a commanding advantage into the closing period.

Oman produced an improved display in the fourth quarter, showing better defensive organisation and greater attacking efficiency. They edged the final

An Oman player attempts to break through Bahrain's defence during the second-round encounter.

period 18-17, but the deficit accumulated over the previous three quarters proved too large to overcome.

Head coach Mohammed al Owaisi attributed the defeat to a loss of concentration and the high number of errors committed throughout the game.

"We did not produce the performance we had hoped for and neither the result nor the display reflects the players' true capabilities," he said.

"We lost possession too often and committed several individual errors, which gave Bahrain repeated scoring opportunities and allowed them to control the pace of the game.

Matches at this level require complete mental focus throughout the 40 minutes, and we were unable to maintain that."

Al Owaisi said the team must quickly put the Bahrain result behind them and concentrate on the challenge posed by Qatar.

"We understand the importance of the next match. Qatar are a strong side, playing on their home court and in front of their supporters, but this is a new challenge for us," he said.

"We have worked during the short period between the two matches to address the mistakes, restore the players' technical and mental readiness and prepare them to compete with greater discipline. We will enter the game with determination to deliver a performance worthy of Omani basketball and achieve a positive result."

The Qatar encounter will be crucial to Oman's hopes of improving their position in the standings and remaining in contention for qualification.

SHORTTAKES

Oman junior tennis squad completes arrival for Cairo camp.

OMAN TENNIS JUNIORS BEGIN FULL TRAINING IN CAIRO CAMP

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 28

Oman's national junior tennis squad has completed its arrival in Cairo after the second and third groups joined the ongoing overseas training camp at Smash Tennis Academy.

Players from the Under-14 and Under-10 teams arrived in the Egyptian capital to join the Under-16 squad, which began its training programme on July 17.

A total of 13 male and female players are taking part in the camp, which is being held at the academy for the second successive year following the positive results achieved during last year's programme.

The Oman Tennis Association aims to strengthen the technical abilities of players across the different age groups and prepare them for upcoming regional, continental and international competitions.

The Under-14 squad comprises Munther al Amri, Emad al Rahbi and Reema al Hashmi, accompanied by team official Mohammed al Dairi. Their training programme will continue until August 8.

The Under-10 group includes Omar al Shaibani, Hatim al Rahbi, Houd al Hashmi, Fayyadh al Hilali and Ali al Riyami, with Ahmed al Balushi serving as head of the delegation. Their camp will run until August 15.

The first group, comprising the Under-16 players, includes Abdulrahman al Rahbi, Mutaaz al Mazroui, Areen al Azkawi, Salma al Riyami and Talia al Busaidy.

Sara Abdulmajeed al Balushi is accompanying the group as delegation head. Their training programme will also continue until August 15.

Ahmed al Balushi said the camp had been planned well in advance by the Oman Tennis Association's Board of Directors as part of its development programme for the national junior teams.

"The camp forms part of the association's plans to train and prepare players from the various age groups for the overseas competitions awaiting them during the coming period," he said.

He added that the association regularly organises overseas training camps to provide young players with greater competitive exposure and opportunities to develop their technical skills.

"Smash Tennis Academy was selected following the successful experience we had last year, when our players benefited significantly and showed noticeable improvement in their technical level," he said.

Participants and organisers pose for a group photo at the conclusion of the programme

Sports Summer 2026 concludes in Muscat

Youngsters in action during the final football matches of Sports Summer 2026

Partners and supporting organisations are recognised for their contribution to the success of Sports Summer 2026. ***— Photos by Hussain al Muqbali***

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JULY 28

THE MINISTRY of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), represented by the Directorate General of Sports Activities, concluded the Sports Summer 2026 programme in Muscat Governorate after a season of training centres, open days and community sporting activities. The closing ceremony was attended by Dr Mansour bin Sultan al Touqi, Sports Adviser at the Office of the Under-Secretary for Sports, Zayana bint Abdullah al Yaarubi, Director of the Specific Sports Bodies Department at the Directorate General of Sports Activities, participants and parents.

The programme attracted 1,630 beneficiaries across Muscat Governorate. It featured 16 training centres and nine open days, in addition to awareness workshops and community activities targeting different age groups.

More than 700 boys and girls participated in the training centres, while the open-day activities attracted around 950 beneficiaries.

This year's programme included a badminton training centre for persons with disabilities, organised in cooperation with the Oman Paralympic Committee. The centre concluded with an inclusive open day featuring friendly matches involving players with and without disabilities.

The programme also launched its first girls' football training centre in partnership with the Oman Football Association. The centre attracted 86 participants, reflecting growing interest in expanding sporting opportunities for girls.

Activities were extended across the wilayats of Muscat Governorate, including specialised swimming centres organised in cooperation with Al Dalafin Swimming Centre in Al Amerat and Al Seeb. The initiative enabled children to access swimming lessons closer to their homes while developing water-safety skills.

Ahlam al Khamisi, a member of the Sports Summer team in Muscat, said the programme, which began on June 15, aimed to make productive use of the summer holiday through sporting and awareness activities that develop children's skills and promote healthy lifestyles.

She added that the swimming centre at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher provided advanced training for participants who had joined the programme in previous years.

The season also included a sports caravan in Hay Al Dhaher in the Wilayat of Qurayat, organised with local teams and community organisations. Around 350 people participated in traditional games, beach sports and group competitions.

Badriya al Jabri, a coach with the Oman Racket Sports Committee, said the badminton open day for persons with disabilities offered an inclusive sporting and social experience. She noted that the exercises were adapted to the participants' physical and technical abilities, with a focus on developing skills, teamwork and self-confidence. Mohammed bin Khamis al Subhi, a member of the Muscat Governorate team, said the closing programme featured three open sports days dedicated to persons with disabilities, football and mini-games.

The final day included football finals and badminton competitions, followed by the presentation of awards to the winners and recognition of the partners whose support contributed to the programme's success.

Djokovic and Sabalenka team up for US Open mixed doubles

PARIS: Serbian tennis legend Novak Djokovic and women's number one Aryna Sabalenka top the list of pairings entered for the US Open mixed doubles. However, both men's world number one Jannik Sinner and second-ranked Carlos Alcaraz have not entered the competition which was heavily revamped last year.

Reforms featured a shorter scoring format in the earlier rounds and a new scheduling slot — played over two days before the singles draws in an attempt to encourage the top players to enter.

Italian doubles specialists Sara Errani and Andrea Vavassori, who criticised the changes, will defend the title they won last year, which came with a $1 million winners' cheque. Djokovic, 39, and 28-year-old Sabalenka are certain to feature among the initial six pairings selected according to world rankings when the deadline for entries closes on August 17.

"Anytime you can bring women and men together on the same team, you showcase tennis at its best," said US Tennis Association CEO Craig Tiley. "This is exactly what the mixed doubles championship does. "We are proud to again bring the world's top players together in a format that will provide exciting entertainment for our fans."

Wimbledon champion Sinner — who did not enter last year's mixed doubles is "prioritising" his health ahead of the final Grand Slam of the year and is also bypassing the Canadian Open, which runs from August 2-13.

Alcaraz, who did play last year with Emma Raducanu, is recovering from a wrist injury that ruled him out of both the French Open and Wimbledon.

Eight teams will be determined via wild card and announced on a date to follow. Two teams will earn a main draw spot by advancing through the eight-team qualifying draw played on August 24. The two-day tournament gets underway on August 25, five days before the men's and women's singles competitions begin. **— AFP**

Djokovic, Sabalenka front star-packed US Open mixed doubles draw.

FRANCE TURN TO ZIDANE AS COACH IN LONG-AWAITED HOMECOMING

Zinedine Zidane holds aloft the 1998 World Cup Trophy in Paris. **— Reuters**

Zidane holds up the trophy in Madrid's Town Hall on May 16, 2002. **— Reuters**

Juventus French striker Zidane and his team mate Didier Deschamps wave to supporters after Juventus defeated Rosenborg 2-0 in their Champions. **— Reuters file photo**

Italy's Marco Materazzi falls on the pitch after being head-butted by Zidane (R) during their World Cup 2006 final soccer match in Berlin July 9, 2006. **— Reuters file photo**

Zinedine Zidane is unveiled as the new head coach of France senior men's football team. **— Reuters**

ZINEDINE ZIDANE WAS appointed France coach on Tuesday, as widely expected, following the departure of Didier Deschamps, the French Football Federation (FFF) announced.

Zidane, 54, had long been viewed as the leading candidate for the role and had been waiting for an opportunity to take charge of the national team for several years.

He will replace Deschamps, whose tenure began in 2012 and ended earlier this month after France finished fourth at the World Cup.

Deschamps guided France to 2018 World Cup glory and the final four years later.

"For me, it's an immense joy... being able to become the coach of this French team. I don't have any other words," said Zidane, who takes over on a four-year deal that runs until the 2030 World Cup co-hosted by Spain, Portugal and Morocco.

"I'm holding myself back because I have so many emotions inside me. I'm ready for the challenge, that's what drives me today."

Former Real Madrid star Zidane, who was Deschamps' teammate in the 1998 World Cup triumph, has been readying himself for the role since leaving Real Madrid in 2021.

"The France job was the only one I wanted," Zidane said at his unveiling in Paris, where he signed autographs and took photos with fans waiting outside the FFF headquarters after his appointment.

"I've had offers over these four or five years to take charge of a club and I turned them all down for the French national team."

The former France playmaker, who scored twice in the 1998 World Cup final victory over Brazil and also won the 2000 European Championship as a player, has coached only one club, Real Madrid.

COMPLETELY DIFFERENT JOB

During his time with the Spanish giants, he led them to three consecutive Champions League titles in 2016, 2017 and 2018, an unprecedented achievement in the competition's modern era.

"I think it's a completely different job, that's for sure," said Zidane. "I've experienced the club side of it. Now this is something new for me, but it doesn't scare me."

Zidane will follow in the footsteps of former international team-mates Laurent Blanc, who coached the national side from 2010 to 2012, and Deschamps.

"I'm going to give everything so that this team keeps on winning. That's it, the only thing that drives me is being able to work for this France team and making sure it keeps on winning."

FFF president Philippe Diallo said he first met with Zidane in February 2025, shortly after Deschamps revealed he would step down from his role after the 2026 World Cup.

"There was one thing that struck me, that perhaps ultimately made the difference," said Diallo. "During the conversations we had, he said to me, 'President, I know how to win.'

"When he said that, I saw someone who had both the desire and the self-belief needed to lead France. That is what it takes for our national team to remain successful in the years ahead."

Zidane's first game at the helm of France will come away to Türkiye in the UEFA Nations League on September 25. His first match at home will be against Italy at the Stade de France on October 2.

— AFP

MUSCAT STOCK EXCHANGE
7,247.192

BUSINESS

CRUDE OIL
OMAN $77.04
BRENT $86.89
LIGHT $81.16

SHORTTAKES

The flight strengthens connectivity between Oman and Tanzania while supporting tourism, trade and investment.

MUSCAT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT MARKS AIR TANZANIA LAUNCH

MUSCAT: *Oman Airports on Tuesday marked the official launch of Air Tanzania's direct passenger service between Muscat International Airport and Julius Nyerere International Airport in Dar es Salaam, expanding air links between Oman and East Africa.*

The state-owned carrier will operate three weekly flights, strengthening connectivity between the Sultanate of Oman and Tanzania while supporting tourism, trade and investment.

Peter Rudolph Olomi, Chief Executive Officer of Air Tanzania, said the new route represented an important milestone for the airline and would deepen long-standing ties between the two countries.

He said the direct connection was expected to increase passenger traffic between Oman and Tanzania; and encourage more visitors from the Sultanate of Oman to destinations including Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania, which share historical and cultural links with Oman.

Olomi said demand for the new service had been encouraging, with passengers using Muscat as well as onward connections to other Tanzanian cities and neighbouring countries.

"The route offers strong long-term potential, supported by the deep historical and cultural relationship between Tanzania and the Sultanate of Oman", he told reporters.

Saud bin Abdulaziz al Azizi, Head of Corporate Support at Oman Airports, said the airline would operate three direct flights a week between Muscat and Dar es Salaam, in line with Oman Airports' strategy of expanding its international route network.

He said the new service would strengthen economic and social ties between the two countries while improving connectivity between the Gulf Cooperation Council and East Africa.

*Al Azizi said the route further reinforces Muscat International Airport's role as a regional gateway linking high-growth markets and is expected to support increased tourism, trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges between Oman and Tanzania. — **ONA***

National observatory for future of work proposed

QASIM AL MAASANI
SALALAH, JULY 28

OMAN should establish a national observatory on the future of work; and use artificial intelligence and big-data analysis to anticipate what its labour market will need, as policymakers seek to make employment policy more responsive to technological and economic change.

The two proposals were among the main recommendations issued at the close of the Labour Horizons Forum 2026 in Salalah, where experts and officials also called for a unified national system to exchange employment and social protection data between the institutions responsible for them.

Together the recommendations place data, artificial intelligence and predictive analysis at the centre of future labour policy, with the aim of identifying emerging skills gaps, changing workforce needs and the likely effect of new technologies on different forms of work.

The two-day Labour Horizons Forum was held under the auspices of Khalid bin Salim al Ghammari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, as part of Labour Forum 2026, which runs in Salalah until August 13.

The forum did not specify when the proposed National Observatory for the Future of Work would be established, where it would be based or which institution would lead it. Nor did it say what the observatory would do beyond supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Those questions will determine whether the proposal becomes a working policy tool or remains a forum recommendation.

A further recommendation called for a unified national system to measure the performance of employment and social protection programmes — a common yardstick that does not currently exist across the institutions running them.

Taken together, the proposals point to a shift in labour policy: from responding to unemployment and skills shortages after they emerge, to identifying them earlier and adjusting training, education and protection systems accordingly.

The two proposals were among the main recommendations issued at the close of the Labour Horizons Forum 2026.

The system they would reshape is already large. The Social Protection Fund told a media briefing in March that 1,676,493 people were insured as of January 2026 and that the wider protection system covered 64 per cent of the population, or about 3.3 million people.

The forum also called for legislation to be updated to reflect modern and non-traditional forms of employment. Those forms were not defined in the recommendations. Oman has already legislated in this area — the Ministry of Labour reported some 2,300 registered freelance professions in January — so the recommendation points to further extension rather than a first step.

The forum also called for legislation to be updated to reflect modern and non-traditional forms of employment. Those forms were not defined in the recommendations. Oman has already legislated in this area — the Ministry of Labour reported some 2,300 registered freelance professions in January — so the recommendation points to further extension rather than a first step.

Social protection should be extended to all categories of the workforce, the recommendations said, supported by flexible insurance products and more diverse sources of financing. The emphasis on financing reflects the central difficulty of any protection system: widening coverage while keeping benefits affordable over the long term.

That balance ran through the forum's closing sessions, which examined the governance of social protection systems, the move towards collective insurance funds, cover for work injuries and occupational diseases; and rehabilitation and safe return-to-work policies.

Speakers stressed the role of specialist medical diagnosis and of work environment records in identifying occupational diseases — a question that becomes harder as workplaces and working arrangements change.

Another group of recommendations addressed the relationship between social support and economic participation. The forum called for support programmes to be linked to training, skills development and entrepreneurship; and for educational curricula and vocational training to be aligned with the requirements of promising economic sectors.

The approach would make employment outcomes, rather than financial assistance alone, a measure of whether social programmes are working.

The recommendations further urged the private sector, academic institutions and civil society organisations to invest in human capital and called for the empowerment of women, young people, persons with disabilities and other priority groups.

OPAZ showcases investment opportunities at Oman–Philippines Forum

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 28

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) participated in the third edition of the Oman–Philippines Forum, held in the Philippine capital, Manila, under the theme "The Strategic Oman–Philippines Council".

The Authority was joined by Salalah Free Zone, SOHAR Port and Freezone, the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) to showcase investment opportunities and promote the competitive advantages offered by the Sultanate of Oman.

The forum brought together representatives from government entities and the private sector from both countries. During the event, OPAZ, together with the special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities under its supervision, highlighted Oman's key investment advantages and the promising opportunities these zones offer to Filipino investors and business leaders.

Amna bint Nasser al Sharji, OPAZ Investment Promotion Manager, addressing the forum.

Throughout the forum sessions, OPAZ emphasised that economic cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of the Philippines holds significant potential for growth, particularly in the logistics, food industries and electronics sectors.

This potential is underpinned by the Philippines' globally recognised expertise in port management and precision manufacturing, alongside Oman's rapid progress in logistics, the digital economy and the development of engineering and technical capabilities.

The Authority also outlined the incentives and facilities available across Oman's special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities, including 100% foreign ownership, tax exemptions of up to 30 years, full customs exemptions on imports and exports, no minimum capital requirement, as well as streamlined residency and permit procedures, all of which further enhance Oman's attractiveness as an investment destination.

Amna bint Nasser al Sharji, Investment Promotion Manager at OPAZ, said: "The Philippine market represents a promising partner for the Sultanate of Oman and we see substantial opportunities to strengthen cooperation in value-added sectors, particularly logistics, food industries and electronics.

The competitive advantages offered by Oman's special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities extend beyond investment incentives to include a strategic location connecting global markets, a stable economic and political environment, an excellent quality of life and a fully integrated ecosystem of investor services that supports investors from the project planning stage through to operational launch.

These advantages help foster sustainable investment partnerships that serve the interests of both countries".

OPAZ's participation in the forum forms part of its ongoing efforts to promote Oman's special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities, strengthen their presence in international markets and attract high-quality investments that contribute to economic diversification and the expansion of strategic economic partnerships with countries around the world.

SHORT*TAKES*

The move marks a significant milestone in PK Exchange's ongoing digital transformation journey.

PK EXCHANGE LAUNCHES WESTERN UNION INTEGRATION ON ITS MOBILE APP

MUSCAT: *Purshottam Kanji Exchange Co LLC (PK Exchange)—Oman's first and one of the most trusted money exchange houses with over a century of legacy—has announced the successful integration of Western Union services into its mobile application.*

The move marks a significant milestone in PK Exchange's ongoing digital transformation journey, reinforcing its commitment to enhancing customer convenience while expanding access to seamless cross-border financial services.

With this integration, customers can now directly access Western Union's extensive global remittance network through the PK Exchange mobile app, across more than 200 countries and territories and nearly 130 currencies, connecting seamlessly with billions of bank accounts, millions of digital wallets and cards and a global footprint of hundreds of thousands of retail locations.

KEY FEATURES OF THE INTEGRATION•Cash Payout Transfers: Send money for instant cash pickup across Western Union's global network.
•Account Transfers: Transfer funds directly to bank accounts worldwide.
•Mobile Wallet Transfers: Enables fast and secure transfers to mobile wallets in supported corridors. Customers can initiate and complete transactions anytime, anywhere, benefiting from the speed, security and reliability associated with both PK Exchange and Western Union services.

Speaking on the launch, Supin James, Chief Executive Officer from PK Exchange, said: "At PK Exchange, our focus has always been on enhancing customer experience through innovation and trust.

Integrating Western Union services into our mobile app allows us to bring world-class remittance solutions directly into the hands of our customers, making international money transfers faster, simpler and more accessible than ever before."

Nicolas Levi, Regional Vice President of Western Union, said: "With Purshottam Kanji Exchange, we share the same mission of making financial services more accessible. I am delighted that, with today's launch, we will enable customers in Oman to connect to their families and loved ones across the world seamlessly, through Western Union's global financial network.

This is yet another step towards being there for customers when and where they need us and delivering the flexible, best-in-class digital financial services they deserve."

The integration enables PK Exchange customers to leverage Western Union's vast international network, further strengthening global financial connectivity for individuals and businesses alike.

BANK NIZWA CREDIT CARDS DELIVER GREATER VALUE THROUGH EXCLUSIVE REWARDS

MUSCAT: *Reinforcing its commitment to value-added financial solutions, Bank Nizwa's Sharia-compliant credit cards continue to offer customers a comprehensive range of exclusive benefits and flexible banking solutions. Cardholders enjoy access to VIP airport lounges, exclusive discounts, advanced security features and Nizwa Plus Points rewards.*

Bank Nizwa's comprehensive Mastercard credit card portfolio

— comprising the Gold, Titanium, Platinum and World Credit Cards — combines valuable rewards with secure, fully Sharia-compliant banking services, tailored to meet the diverse needs and lifestyles of its customers. The Gold and Titanium Credit Cards offer customers exclusive shopping and lifestyle privileges, including access to offers through Mastercard's Priceless platform.

For customers seeking a premium lifestyle experience, the Platinum Credit Card delivers higher credit limits alongside travel-related perks, including complimentary airport lounge access and exclusive offers and discounts.

Toyota Lite Ace: The compact cargo solution

DESIGNED to empower local enterprises and streamline daily business logistics, the Toyota Lite Ace continues to serve as an invaluable tool for the Sultanate of Oman's commercial sector.

This highly practical vehicle is purpose-built to cater to a wide range of modern transportation requirements, offering independent e-commerce delivery operations, small businesses and large corporate fleets a perfectly balanced solution for reliable performance and cost-effective operations on Omani roads.

The Toyota Lite Ace is specifically designed to maximise cargo volume within a compact, highly manoeuvrable frame. Featuring a remarkably low floor height of 620 mm and a spacious rear hatch entrance, the vehicle ensures effortless loading and unloading.

Businesses benefit from a square-shaped cargo hold designed right to the corners—measuring 2,075 mm in length, 1,495 mm in width and 1,305 mm in height—making it highly adaptable for cardboard boxes, tall objects and large items.

Furthermore, large 815-mm sliding doors on both sides allow users to access cargo securely even in tight city alleys or crowded loading zones.

The Toyota Lite Ace is designed to maximise cargo volume within a compact, highly maneuverable frame.

Recognising that driver comfort directly impacts business efficiency, the Lite Ace features a thoughtfully designed cabin aimed at reducing daily fatigue. Low steps at a height of just 425 mm allow for smooth entry into a roomy foot area, while the ergonomic placement of the gear shift lever next to the steering wheel facilitates easy cross-cabin access to the front passenger seat.

The cockpit offers excellent road visibility, reclining and sliding seats, electric power steering as standard and intuitive switch layouts. Large LED rear combination lamps ensure the vehicle remains highly visible to trailing traffic during heavy rain or fog.

Electric Carnival lands at House of Hype in Dubai Mall

MUSCAT: Dubai's hottest month just found its coolest escape. This summer, House of Hype inside Dubai Mall is turning up the volume with Electric Carnival, a spectacular takeover bursting with colours, sounds, movements and immersive fun.

Running from July 23 to August 30 only, Electric Carnival transforms House of Hype into a high-energy playground where every corner has something unexpected in store for everyone. One minute you're deep in the Electric Jungle, where the whole forest glows around you; the next, you've slipped through a secret door into a hidden infinity room inside a laundromat.

There are roaming carnival characters, delicious snacks, photo moments you'll actually want to post and rewards hidden in plain sight. One ticket unlocks 25 different worlds, all turned electric for the season.

The carnival is a spectacular takeover bursting with colors, sounds, movements and immersive fun.

Each guest can enjoy:

25 Immersive Worlds: Explore extraordinary worlds filled with interactive experiences, spectacular visuals and joyful surprises.

Live Performances: Meet roaming performers, spontaneous dance moments and high-energy entertainment throughout the day.

The Grand Parade: Experience Electric Carnival's signature celebration of electric beats, dancers, music and larger-than-life carnival characters.

Secret Rooms and Experiences: Discover unexpected spaces, hidden doors and playful surprises waiting to be uncovered.

AI Photo Moments: Create colourful, larger-than-life photos and videos you'll actually want to share.

Located on Level One at Fountain Views, Dubai Mall, House of Hype is Dubai's award-winning indoor immersive entertainment attraction, built for fun, exploration and surprises.

Bank Muscat reinforces commitment to urban development

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to supporting national initiatives that drive economic and urban development, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, is participating as the Strategic Sponsor of the Khareef Real Estate Season, organised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning in Dhofar Governorate from July 25 to August 5, 2026. The event was officially inaugurated under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, with broad participation from government entities, private sector organisations, real estate developers and financial institutions.

Bank Muscat's sponsorship reflects its ongoing commitment to supporting national efforts aimed at developing the real estate sector, one of the key pillars of the national economy that contributes to economic diversification, investment growth and job creation.

Bank Muscat's sponsorship reflects its ongoing commitment to supporting national efforts aimed at developing the real estate sector.

The sector also plays a vital role in developing integrated urban communities and enhancing quality of life, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

Through its dedicated exhibition stall, the bank is showcasing a comprehensive range of banking solutions and services. The bank's employees will be available to answer visitors' inquiries and provide tailored financial advice, enabling prospective homebuyers and investors to explore financing options that best suit their residential needs.

In his opening speech, Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani, General Manager – Products at Bank Muscat, said: "We are proud to participate as the Strategic Sponsor of the Khareef Real Estate Season, which serves as an important national platform bringing together all stakeholders in the real estate sector while highlighting the latest urban development projects taking place across the Sultanate of Oman.

Our participation reflects our strong belief that the real estate sector is one of the fundamental pillars of the national economy and offers significant growth opportunities, supported by the country's ongoing development projects."

SHORTTAKES

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva meets with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung at the Alvorada Palace in Brasilia, Brazil. ***— Reuters***

BRAZIL, SOUTH KOREA AGREE TO ADVANCE TALKS FOR MERCOSUR BLOC TRADE DEAL

BRASILIA: Brazil and South Korea agreed to accelerate talks on a potential trade deal between the Asian nation and the South American bloc Mercosur, their presidents said on Monday during a ceremony in Brasilia.

Brazil has been seeking to expand deals — alone or through Mercosur, which also includes Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay — to diversify trade at a time when it is being hit by tariffs from the US, one of its key commercial partners.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said his country and South Korea agreed to create a working group to accelerate the talks, while his South Korean counterpart Lee Jae Myung called a potential deal with Mercosur an urgent matter.

Mercosur has closed deals in recent years with partners including the European Union and the four members of the European Free Trade Association, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

In a phone call earlier on Monday with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Lula said he and Xi supported advancing talks on a potential deal between China and Mercosur.

During the ceremony on Monday, Lula said Brazil will receive a South Korean mission next month for a sanitary evaluation of Brazilian meatpackers. The leaders also agreed to expand cooperation in the critical minerals sector, Lee said.

The event took place five months after Lula attended a summit with Lee in Seoul.

— Reuters

Abraj Energy's order book swells to record ﷼953m

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JULY 28

OMANI oilfield services company Abraj Energy Services has reported a record contract backlog of RO 953 million as it continues to expand its drilling fleet and strengthen its regional footprint.

The Muscat-listed company said its backlog, as of June 30, 2026, represents approximately 140 fleet rig years of contracted work, with an average remaining contract tenure of 5.7 years per rig. Its book-to-bill ratio stood at 6.4 times trailing 12-month revenue, underscoring the depth of its order book.

The robust backlog comes alongside improved second-quarter financial performance. Revenue for the quarter reached RO 39.3 million, up 9 per cent from the previous quarter, driven by higher rig activity, increased client recharges and the timing of maintenance work.

Quarterly net profit rose 10 per cent quarter-on-quarter to RO 4.9 million.

For the first half of 2026, revenue increased 3 per cent year-on-year to RO 75.3 million, while profit after tax remained steady at RO 9.3 million. The company also recorded its highest rig utilisation rate in the past 12 months, with 24.6 active rigs out of a fleet of 27 at the end of June.

Abraj Energy recorded its highest rig utilisation rate in the past 12 months, with 24.6 active rigs out of a fleet of 27.

Looking ahead, Abraj expects third-quarter revenue to rise by 5–10 per cent compared with the second quarter as additional rigs commence operations. Reflecting this momentum, the company has upgraded its full-year 2026 revenue guidance to RO 150–160 million, from its previous forecast of RO 145–155 million, while maintaining EBITDA margin guidance in the low-to-mid 30 per cent range.

The company is also pressing ahead with a major fleet expansion programme. Capital expenditure during the first half reached RO 29.3 million, largely tied to the construction of eight new drilling rigs — seven for Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) and one for Kuwait Gulf Oil Company (KGO). Abraj expects to invest a further RO 30–40 million during the second half of the year, with the overall programme estimated to cost RO 90–95 million.

Commenting on the results, Chief Executive Officer Eng Saif al Hamhami said the successful deployment of additional rigs marked important progress in converting capital investments into productive assets that will support future revenue and earnings growth.

He added that the company also secured an upgraded hydraulic fracturing contract with PDO, strengthening its position in higher-value well services and enhancing its long-term growth prospects.

Abraj Energy Services SAOG is Oman's largest onshore drilling contractor and operates a fleet of 27 drilling rigs and eight workover rigs, serving major operators including PDO, Shell, Chevron and Occidental.

MSX GAINS 0.9% AS TURNOVER JUMPS

MUSCAT: *The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) rebounded on Tuesday, with its benchmark MSX 30 Index rising 0.86 per cent to close at 7,247.19 points, supported by higher trading activity and gains in market capitalisation.*

The index advanced 61.81 points from the previous close of 7,185.38 points, while trading value climbed 26.5 per cent to RO 57.95 million from RO 45.81 million in the previous session.

Market capitalisation increased 0.48 per cent to approximately RO 37.48 billion. Foreign investors were net buyers during the session, with non-Omani purchases reaching RO 10.10 million, representing 17.42 per cent of total buying activity.

Non-Omani investors sold shares worth RO 9.57 million, or 16.51 per cent of total sales. ***— ONA***

India plans up to quarter of 2027 LPG imports from US

NEW DELHI: India plans to buy up to a quarter of its liquefied petroleum gas imports from the United States in 2027, a move that would cut its reliance on the Middle East and support efforts to secure a trade deal with Washington, three sources with knowledge of the matter said.

New Delhi faced its worst LPG shortage earlier this year after the Iran war and closure of the Strait of Hormuz disrupted supplies. The government invoked emergency measures to divert petrochemical feedstocks from industry to households, which use LPG as cooking gas.

The world's third-biggest oil importer and consumer bought about 90% of its overall 21.85 million metric tonnes of LPG imports from the Middle East in 2025. Imports accounted for about 66% of India's LPG consumption, according to government data.

State refiners Indian Oil Corp, Bharat Petroleum Corp and Hindustan Petroleum are expected to issue tenders within one to two months for US LPG supplies in 2027, the sources said, adding a delegation from the companies is also likely to travel to the United States next month to discuss sourcing.

A man loads LPG cylinders onto a cart at a warehouse in Mumbai, India. ***— Reuters***

Higher US energy purchases could help India narrow its trade surplus with Washington, a key demand from President Donald Trump, as New Delhi pushes to complete a long-awaited trade deal with Washington in the next three to four months.

India has pledged to increase US energy purchases by $10 billion to $25 billion in the near future and the two nations have agreed to target $500 billion in bilateral trade by 2030.

New Delhi has already accelerated spot purchases from the United States and other suppliers to offset reduced Middle East supplies.

US LPG imports topped 1 million tonnes in June for the first time and are likely to exceed India's initial 2026 annual-contract target of 2.2 million tonnes, the sources said.

Lower supplies from the Middle East curtailed India's LPG consumption to about 14.7 million tons in January-June 2026, down about 8% from a year earlier, while imports fell about 28% to about 7.5 million tonnes, provisional government data showed.

This year India's LPG consumption is expected to decline to 30 million tonnes due to low supplies, one of the sources said.

But LPG imports could rise to about 20 million tonnes in 2027 as demand recovers to around 31 million tonnes, the source said.

"Diversification of LPG imports is being pursued to ensure supply security and mitigate risks arising from regional disruptions or geopolitical events", junior oil minister Suresh Gopi told lawmakers on Monday. **— Reuters**

CURRENCY MARKETS

Dollar holds near monthly high

The US dollar hovered near a one-month high ahead of the Federal Reserve's policy decision, with markets widely expecting interest rates to remain unchanged.

The dollar index edged up 0.03 per cent to 101.55, while the euro and sterling weakened slightly. Bitcoin fell 1.9 per cent and Ethereum lost 2.8 per cent as investors awaited guidance from the US central bank. ***— Reuters***

ENERGY MARKETS

Oil extends decline

Oil prices fell by more than $1 a barrel after the United States and Iran halted attacks, easing concerns over supply disruptions in the Middle East. Brent crude slipped to $86.89 a barrel, while US West Texas Intermediate dropped to $81.16.

Prices were also pressured by the resumption of exports from Russia's Caspian Pipeline Consortium terminal on the Black Sea. ***— Reuters***

PRECIOUS METALS

Gold slips on stronger dollar

Gold prices fell as a stronger US dollar weighed on bullion demand ahead of the Federal Reserve's interest rate decision.

Meanwhile, spot gold also declined 0.7 per cent to $4,044.81 an ounce, while US futures fell 0.8 per cent. Other precious metals also weakened on Tuesday, with silver, platinum and palladium all posting losses in early trading. ***— Reuters***

Automotive Industry: The strategic dilemma

YUGESH KRISHNAN

The writer is a lecturer at Oman Tourism College

THE automotive industry is undergoing through a challenging and transitional phase post Covid-19. The pandemic halted all supply chains, which eventually benefited the Chinese automotive brands with large supply stocks at their outlets. Post-pandemic supply chain issues and semiconductor shortages have added to established automotive manufacturers misery. With the global emission already on the red flag and net-zero timeline effecting the automotive manufacturers are in a dilemma whether they stick to the naturally aspirated (NA) gasoline engines or shift to the electric vehicles (EV).

The battery capacity and range issues of EVs have added to consumer's range anxiety while driving, which has also become a factor of consideration before buying a car. The lack of or inefficient charging infrastructure in most countries has caused a stagnation in the consumer demand for EVs. Recent sales figures show that majority of manufactures are not happy with the sales number of EVs, even though some countries have subsidised the tax for renewable energy products including EVs.

Alternatively, hybrids, although they have been in the market for long time have been smartly used by major Japanese brands who were once criticised for their slow move towards full electrification, are now being praised for their pragmatism. Hybrids have emerged as the dominant alternative to diesel and EVs. Governments in most parts of the world have not subsidised hybrids vehicles as EVs, but hybrids have generated good sales volume and interest. Manufacturers are also following a middle path in the Plug in Hybrid Electric Vehicle (PHEV) versions of their models to capture the largest possible slice of the market pie during this extended transition.

To combat these rapid shifts, the industry is moving towards a state of collaboration. A primary example is Sony Honda Mobility (SHM), which seeks to blend consumer electronics with automotive hardware.

However, even larger shifts are occurring like Stellantis, the group that manages 14 brands including Fiat and Peugeot, after a difficult 2025, has initiated a major business reset. They are offering multi-energy platforms that can host Internal Combustion Engines (ICE), hybrid or electric powertrains depending on local demand.

Even after the collapse of their previous merger talks, Honda and Nissan with Mitsubishi have moved to tighten their alliance. For years these brands were fierce competitors, but the staggering financial cost of developing software-defined vehicles has forced them into a 'Sink or Swim' partnership. By pooling their R & D budgets and standardising software, they are trying to build a collective defence against a high-tech competition that moves faster than a traditional automobile manufacturer ever could.

With the global emission already on the red flag and net-zero timeline effecting the automotive manufacturers are in a dilemma whether they stick to the naturally aspirated (NA) gasoline engines or shift to the electric vehicles (EV).

Hyundai's massive 80 per cent stake in Boston Dynamics is a clear signal that the world's biggest car makers are identifying the crisis. By integrating robotics and AI into their core business, they are hunting for new avenues for revenue generation that do not depend on the traditional automobile sales.

Established automakers are under immense pressure from the competition provided by Chinese brands, providing tech-heavy cars at budget price. While established automakers were forced to hike prices following the pandemic driven by chip shortage and supply chain issues, price-conscious buyers are now jumping ship and defecting to these more affordable Chinese alternatives.

Global trade and tariffs remains a massive headache for the industry. Even though a February 2026 Supreme Court ruling in the US cleared some tariff -related hurdles, expensive duties on steel and auto parts haven't budged. This creates a foggy regulatory environment that leaves brands with American production lines carrying a heavy financial burden.

With all the technological transformation, adaptation of most available technology, inflationary and supply chain issues, the road forward for the automobile industry at present is bumpy, steep and foggy, but it definitely offers opportunities for innovation.

ASIA'S THERMAL COAL IMPORTS CONTINUE TO REBOUND

CLYDE RUSSELL

Asia boosted imports of thermal coal for a third straight month in July as major buyers such as China, Japan and South Korea bought more of the fuel to meet peak summer demand.

Asia, which buys about 90 per cent of global seaborne thermal coal, is expected to import 73.16 million tonnes in July, up from 70.31 million in June and also above the 71.04 million from July last year, according to data compiled by commodity analysts Kpler.

Thermal coal, used mainly to generate electricity, is experiencing stronger demand in Asia this year as it remains a cheaper alternative to liquefied natural gas. The Iran war has largely cut off shipments from Qatar, a supplier of about 20 per cent of the world's LNG, leading to a surge in spot prices.

China, the world's biggest coal importer, is leading the charge, with data from analysts DBX Commodities showing thermal coal arrivals of 28.14 million tonnes in July, the most this year and up from 25.67 million in June and 24.1 million in July 2025.

Thermal coal does not compete with LNG in China as far as power generation is concerned. Rather, the increase in imports is being driven by constrained domestic output coupled with rising electricity generation.

China's coal production dropped 9.7 per cent in June from a year earlier to 380.88 million tonnes after safety inspections in the wake of the deaths of 82 people in a mine accident in Shanxi province on May 22, the country's worst mining disaster in 17 years.

China's thermal power generation, which is overwhelmingly coal with only a small amount of natural gas, rose 0.5 per cent in June and 2.9 per cent in the first six months of the year, according to official data. While China's domestic coal output is expected to pick up in coming months, import levels may remain strong. That's because thermal generation is expected to grow in 2026 as the deployment of renewables, while rapid, is not enough to meet an expected 5 per cent rise in total electricity demand this year.

Japan, the world's third-biggest coal importer, is expected to see arrivals of 10.46 million tonnes of thermal coal in July, according to DBX, up from 7.51 million in June and the highest since January.

South Korea, the fourth-biggest buyer, is on track for imports of 8.54 million tonnes in July, up from 6.08 million in June and the highest since August last year.

*The stronger demand is helping drive prices with the weekly index for 6,000 kilocalorie per kilogramme Australian thermal coal at Newcastle Port reaching a four-week high of $132.76 a tonne in the seven days to July 24, according to prices compiled by globalCOAL. — **Reuters***

Beyond investment: A strategic question

FOR decades, governments measured economic success by a familiar set of indicators: foreign direct investment, export growth, industrial output and employment. These remain important measures, but they are no longer sufficient to explain why some economies consistently outperform others.

A more fundamental question is emerging. What role should a country play in the global economy? This may become one of the most important strategic questions facing policymakers over the next two decades.

The global economy is being reshaped by artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, digital infrastructure and the reconfiguration of global supply chains. As these structural shifts accelerate, countries are no longer competing only to attract investment. They are increasingly competing to become indispensable within international value chains.

Today, around 70 per cent of international trade takes place through global value chains, where services, components, technology and knowledge cross borders multiple times before reaching consumers. In this environment, countries are no longer competing simply to attract investment. They are competing to secure an indispensable role within these interconnected production networks.

History suggests that countries rarely achieve lasting economic transformation by trying to excel in everything. They succeed by building capabilities that the world increasingly depends upon.

Ireland provides an instructive example. Four decades ago, Ireland faced high unemployment, modest industrial capacity and persistent outward migration. Rather than pursuing growth through disconnected initiatives, successive governments adopted a long-term strategy to position Ireland as a leading destination for knowledge-intensive industries. Education, research, investment promotion, industrial policy and regulatory reform were aligned around a common strategic direction.

DR ZIAD ALZAIDI

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The global economy is being reshaped by artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, digital infrastructure and the reconfiguration of global supply chains. As these structural shifts accelerate, countries are no longer competing only to attract investment.

The results have been remarkable. Today, Ireland hosts more than 1,800 multinational companies, while exports exceeded €260 billion in 2025. More importantly, it has established itself as one of Europe's leading centres for technology, pharmaceuticals and life sciences.

Ireland's transformation was not the product of a single policy.

It was the outcome of strategic consistency. This distinction offers an important lesson for policymakers everywhere.

Governments often evaluate projects individually. Competitive economies evaluate whether projects reinforce one another.

A new industrial zone, a university programme, a logistics investment or a regulatory reform may each appear successful on their own. Their real strategic value, however, lies in whether they collectively strengthen capabilities that improve a country's long-term position within the global economy.

This changes the way major economic decisions should be assessed. Before approving significant economic initiatives, governments may benefit from asking three strategic questions.

First, does this initiative develop capabilities that global markets will increasingly value over the next twenty years? Second, does it reinforce sectors where the country can build sustainable competitive advantage rather than temporary advantage? Third, does it strengthen the country's long-term economic position, or does it simply improve short-term economic indicators? These questions move decision-making beyond annual performance measures towards long-term national competitiveness.

They also encourage greater policy integration. Infrastructure should reinforce industrial development. Education should reinforce innovation.

<blockquote>Investment promotion should reinforce productive sectors. Research should reinforce future industries. When these policies evolve independently, they generate activity.

</blockquote>When they evolve together, they generate transformation.

This perspective is particularly relevant for countries implementing long-term national strategies.

The true success of a national vision should not be measured solely by the number of projects completed, regulations issued or investments announced. Rather, it should be judged by whether these initiatives collectively create internationally competitive capabilities that remain valuable as the global economy continues to evolve.

For Oman, this principle aligns closely with the ambitions of Oman Vision 2040. Oman has invested in logistics, industrial development, economic diversification, infrastructure, institutional reform and private sector development. Viewed separately, these are important national programmes. Viewed collectively, they represent the building blocks of a stronger competitive position within regional and global markets.

The strategic challenge now is to ensure that these investments reinforce one another and contribute to a coherent long-term economic direction.

Ultimately, the defining question for every economy is no longer how much investment it can attract, but what unique role it intends to play in the global economy. Investment is not the destination; it is the means to build capabilities that make a nation indispensable within global value chains. Countries that answer this question with clarity are more likely to attract high-quality investment, retain skilled talent, accelerate innovation and sustain productivity growth over generations. In the end, sustainable competitiveness is not built by accumulating projects. It is built by connecting every investment, every reform and every national initiative to a single strategic purpose: creating enduring value that the world cannot easily replace.

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ART/LIFE

THE WOMAN BEHIND OMAN'S BANANA BREAD SUCCESS

> 20

ON SECOND THOUGHT

A TABLE WORTH SAVING

Yeru Ebuen

The writer is a luxury media strategist and a creative director

A social media post by a restaurant owner recently caught my attention. It wasn't dramatic or confrontational. It was simply an honest account of how difficult it has become to keep a restaurant running.

It is a conversation worth having because restaurants are more than private businesses. They are part of how people experience Oman.

Behind every meal is a long list of expenses that diners rarely see. Many ingredients are imported, making prices vulnerable to shipping costs and global markets. Add commercial rent, electricity, equipment maintenance, packaging, delivery commissions and staffing costs. It becomes clear why many operators say the numbers are no longer adding up.

The obvious response is to increase prices, but there comes a point where families begin eating out less often. Restaurants then face a choice: charge more and risk losing customers or keep prices steady while watching already narrow margins disappear.

Many have chosen another path by reducing their menus, shortening opening hours or delaying expansion. These are sensible business decisions, but they also point to a larger concern.

A thriving food scene depends on variety. When independent restaurants struggle, communities gradually lose the places that give neighbourhoods their character. Visitors lose opportunities to discover local favourites beyond the hotel buffet or international chain. For a country that has invested heavily in tourism, fewer dining options do little to strengthen the visitor experience.

People rarely return from a holiday talking only about the scenery. They remember the seafood they ate by the coast, the small café tucked into an old street or the family-run restaurant where someone insisted they try a local speciality. Those experiences become part of Oman's story.

That is why this conversation deserves to involve more than restaurant owners.

Government can continue working with the industry to review licensing processes, encourage hospitality training and help small businesses adapt to changing market conditions. Tourism campaigns can also do more to celebrate local restaurants alongside wadis, forts and beaches, encouraging visitors to explore Oman's food culture as part of the journey.

The industry has responsibilities too. Restaurants can strengthen links with local producers, reduce unnecessary waste, collaborate on training and share practical ideas that improve efficiency. Success should not depend solely on who can afford the biggest advertising budget.

The community also has a role. Supporting local restaurants is not about dining out every weekend. It can be as simple as recommending a favourite neighbourhood eatery, returning to places that consistently deliver good food and service or choosing an independent business when the occasion allows.

Restaurants do more than feed people. They create jobs, support suppliers, give young chefs a place to build careers and offer visitors a genuine taste of Omani hospitality. If Oman wants tourism to grow, protecting that diversity is not just good for business, but also for the country's identity.

QUICK FEATURES

FILM PREMIERE

US actress Sadie Sink attends the premiere of Columbia Pictures' "Spider-Man: Brand New Day" at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood. ***— AFP***

FASHION

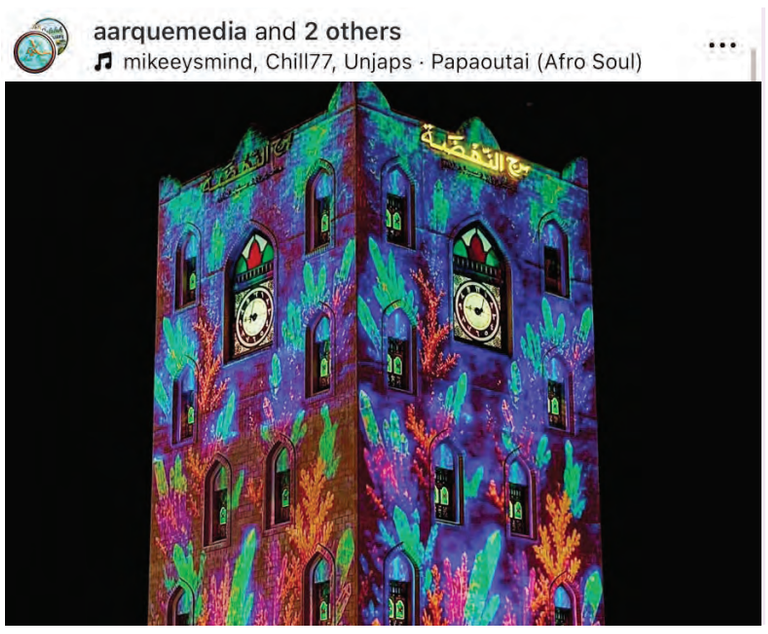
A model presents a creation by designer and musician Pharrell Williams as part of his Menswear Spring-Summer 2027 collection for LV. ***— Reuters***

FOLK DANCE

Folk dancers from Venezuela participate in a folk dance festival in the heart of Bitola, North Macedonia. ***—Reuters***

INSTA PICKS

A masterpiece poised in elegance



The stunning lights of Salalah's Burj Al Nahdha

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'DOCUMENTARY ON STAN LEE'S FINAL YEARS FACED INDUSTRY OPPOSITION'

Comic book enthusiast Jon Bolerjack began filming with Stan Lee in 2014, hoping to document how the legendary Marvel creator was spending his 90s. Instead, his camera captured what he describes as troubling signs of exploitation during Lee's final years.

The documentary, 'Stan Lee: The Final Years', released on streaming platforms on Tuesday, features allegations from people close to Lee that two former managers exploited the comic icon. One of them was charged in 2019, a year after Lee's death at 95, with fraud, theft and unlawful deprivation of liberty.

Bolerjack said he faced pressure from industry figures not to release the film, arguing that some companies preferred to preserve Lee's cheerful public image rather than revisit the difficulties he faced.

Born Stanley Martin Lieber in 1922, Lee co-created some of Marvel's most celebrated superheroes, including Spider-Man and Black Panther.

The documentary also portrays him as a gifted creator but poor businessman. In one scene, Lee reflects that "nobody has made more bad business decisions than I have," recalling how he accepted a one-time $6 million payment instead of a share of future profits during Disney's acquisition of Marvel.

Despite regretting the deal, Bolerjack said Lee never blamed Disney or Marvel and continued to enjoy appearing in Marvel films through his popular cameos.

*The filmmaker said the documentary is ultimately about protecting vulnerable people, arguing that financial exploitation can happen to anyone and highlighting the importance of trusted family members and advisers. — **AFP***

"Edge of the Cliffs at Pourville" by Claude Monet

Museum-level Impressionist works to be auctioned in Paris

SOME 60 museum-level works by artists such as Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Pablo Picasso collected by a dealer who popularised the Impressionists will be auctioned in Paris in October, Christie's said on Monday.

"These works, acquired directly from Monet, Renoir, Pissarro or Sisley, have been kept in the same family for more than a century and are being brought together today for the first time on the market," the auction house said in a statement.

A visionary dealer, Paul Durand-Ruel championed the Impressionists who were initially criticised for an avant-garde style used to capture light.

The works he acquired were exhibited in Paris, London and New York, helping to popularise the movement and the artists.

The collection "Durand-Ruel Generations of Vision" will be exhibited at Christie's in Paris from October 16 to 21, then offered at auction on October 22 during Art Basel, the international modern and contemporary art event.

Its total estimate ranges between 30.4 and 43.4 million euros, Christie's said.

The works on offer include "Edge of the Cliffs at Pourville" by Claude Monet (1882), estimated at between 11 and 15 million euros.

Capturing the beauty of the Normandy cliffs, it was bought by Durand-Ruel the year it was painted, then exhibited in London in 1905 at an event that helped to establish Impressionism on the international stage, Christie's said.

The collection also includes "Young Girls by the Seaside" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, "The Louvre, Winter Sun, Morning" by Camille Pissarro and "Still Life with Gruyere" by Pablo Picasso. — **AFP**

"Young Girls by the Seaside" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

The collection "Durand-Ruel Generations of Vision"

"The Louvre, Winter Sun, Morning" by Camille Pissarro

After struggling to find a career that aligned with her dreams and family life, Kauthar al Maskari created her own opportunity. Today, her banana bread business, The Bananary, supplies cafés across Oman and earns her more than her previous employment salary.

The Woman Behind Oman's BANANA BREAD SUCCESS

IDRIS AL BALUSHI

KAUTHAR al Maskari traded the certainty of a traditional career for the warmth of a home kitchen. Today, the Omani entrepreneur behind The Bananary is proving that passion, persistence and a loaf of banana bread can build a thriving business.

After graduating from university, Al Maskari had envisioned a future in youth and social work. But upon returning to Oman, she found it difficult to secure a role that matched both her ambitions and desire to be present for her young daughter. Rather than waiting for the perfect opportunity, she decided to create one herself.

"I wanted a career that would allow me to be present for my daughter and my family while still giving me something that was entirely my own," she says.

Although baking was never her ultimate passion, food had always been central to her life. Her father introduced her to cuisines from around the world while her aunt and grandmother nurtured her love for baking. More than anything, however, she simply enjoys feeding people.

"My passion isn't baking itself, it's feeding people," she explains. "I love expressing care through food and creating moments that bring people together."

That philosophy became the foundation of The Bananary, a home-based bakery specialising in banana bread and comforting desserts inspired by her years living in Canada. Noticing that quality banana-based baked goods were relatively uncommon in Oman, she saw an opportunity to introduce something familiar yet distinctive to the local market.

Instead of relying mainly on direct customer orders, Al Maskari pursued a different strategy, supplying cafés. She wanted customers to discover her cakes alongside their favourite cup of coffee in places they already loved visiting.

The journey, however, was far from easy.

She spent months visiting cafés, introducing herself to managers, sending follow-up messages and facing repeated rejection before securing her first partnership. Support from her family, who also served as enthusiastic taste testers while she refined recipes through countless rounds of trial and error, helped her persevere.

"Rejection is part of every entrepreneur's journey," she says. "It doesn't define your talent or the quality of your work."

Today, that persistence has paid off. What began as a small home business has grown into a supplier for several major cafés across Oman. The demand generated through social media has become so strong that The Bananary has temporarily paused accepting new café partnerships because her current kitchen has reached production capacity.

One of her proudest achievements came earlier than expected when she surpassed her target of partnering with five cafés before the end of 2026. Even more significantly, the business now generates an income that exceeds what she earned in traditional employment.

"It wasn't just about the financial achievement," she reflects. "It was confirmation that taking a chance on myself had been worthwhile."

Despite the growth, Al Maskari remains committed to quality, fresh ingredients and the values that inspired her business from the beginning. She hopes every loaf tells a story of courage, kindness and choosing a path that reflects one's own priorities.

Her advice to aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly women, is simple. Start before you feel completely ready.

"You don't have to quit your job overnight. Start small, learn as you go and allow your business to grow alongside your life," she says.

For Al Maskari, success is measured not only by café partnerships or sales, but also by the opportunity to spend more time with her daughter while building something she hopes will inspire the next generation to pursue their own dreams.