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ISHA 06:39 PM

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LAS PALMAS STUN
LIGA LEADERS
BARCA ON 125TH
ANNIVERSARY

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HM to visit Belgium on Monday

Visit to boost bilateral cooperation in various spheres



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will go on a state visit to the Kingdom of Belgium on Monday.

A statement was issued by the Diwan of Royal Court to this effect. It reads as follows: “In response to an invitation received by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians, His Majesty the Sultan will go on a state visit to the Kingdom of Belgium with effect from Monday (December 2). The visit comes within the context of promoting relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium in a manner that meets aspiration of the two countries.

“The visit will discuss areas of cooperation between the two countries in various spheres and means of boosting them to serve the joint interests. During the visit, the two leaders will exchange views on a set of regional and international issues.

“His Majesty the Sultan will be accompanied during the visit by a high-ranking official delegation comprising HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Afi, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Rua bint Issa al Zadjaliyah, Ambassador of Oman to Belgium.

“May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan in his journeys!” — ONA **SEE ALSO P3**



King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie

INBRIEF

HIS MAJESTY GREETES ROMANIAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Klaus Iohannis of Romania on the occasion of his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Iohannis, and continued progress and prosperity to the friendly Romanian people.

LAUNCH OF SCHOOL EVALUATION SYSTEM

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will preside over the launch of the National School Performance Evaluation System at the Kempinski Hotel Muscat, on Monday.

Overseen by the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAQAE), the launch of the system comes within the framework of the authority's responsibilities and competencies in accordance with Royal Decree No 9/2021, which stipulates that the authority shall establish a national system to ensure the quality of school education in the Sultanate of Oman to ensure sustained realisation of international standards as well as encourage educational institutions to build their internal quality systems to contribute to achieving Oman Vision 2040. The launch of this national system is part of a comprehensive strategy to enhance the efficiency of both public and private school education institutions through rigorous review processes and comprehensive reports and it aims to improve school performance.

Oman calls for dialogue in Syria as violence flares up

MUSCAT/BEIRUT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, discussed through a phone call with Bassam Sabbagh, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic, the developments at the Syrian arena.

Sayyid Badr expressed the Sultanate of Oman's solidarity with Syria. He said that Oman stresses the importance of the sovereignty and unity of Syrian territory, as well as the necessity of restoring security and stability and preventing the expansion of the scope of conflict.

Oman urges all parties to favour dialogue and political solutions in addressing challenges and reaching peaceful and conciliatory solutions for the benefit of the Syrian people and the regional security and stability, added Sayyid Badr.

Earlier, the Syrian army said on Saturday dozens of its soldiers had been killed in a major attack by rebels who swept into the city of Aleppo in the northwest.

The surprise attack has jolted the frontlines of the



Anti-government fighters on a street in Maaret al Numan in Syria's northwestern Idlib province on Saturday. — AFP

Syrian civil war that have largely been frozen since 2020, reviving fighting in a corner of the country near the Turkish border. The army said it was preparing a counteroffensive to restore state authority.

Acknowledging the rebel advance, the Syrian army command said insurgents had entered large parts of Aleppo, which had been under full state control since government forces drove rebels out eight years ago. Images from Aleppo showed a group of rebel

fighters gathered in the city's Saadallah al Jabiri Square after entering the city overnight, a billboard of Assad looming behind them.

The Syrian military command said militants had attacked in large numbers and from multiple directions, prompting “our armed forces to carry out a redeployment operation aimed at strengthening the defence lines in order to absorb the attack, preserve the lives of civilians and soldiers and prepare for a counterattack”. — **Agencies**

ON BEHALF OF HM

SAYYID FAHD TO ATTEND GCC SUMMIT

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, will head on Sunday to the State of Kuwait to chair the Sultanate of Oman's delegation in the 45th GCC Summit.

The Sultanate of Oman has affirmed that since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it has been exerting sincere efforts to ensure the success of the Gulf march, with the prime aim of enhancing integration and cooperation among member states to achieve aspirations of further progress and prosperity for the GCC peoples.

PEOPLE RUN OUT OF HOMES AS MILD QUAKE HITS MUSCAT

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

It was on instant messaging apps people shared what they've experienced at around 11.06 am, that of a trembling feeling in their homes as several people from Al Amerat, Ruwi, MBD and CBD areas confirmed of a similar experience, people started panicked and ran out of their homes for cover. People exchanged the news of what was seemingly an 'earthquake' instantaneously and confirmed that everyone is safe from any effect of the tremor till Sultan Qaboos University's Seismological Centre reported a slight earthquake measuring 2.3 on the Richter Scale in Al Amerat at 11 am, and that the epicentre was 8 km southwest of Muscat.

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Oman embassies in Saudi, Brazil celebrate 54th National Day

THE EMBASSY of the Sultanate of Oman in Saudi Arabia, under the auspices of His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Saud, Deputy Governor of Riyadh Region, hosted a grand reception to mark the 54th Glorious National Day. The event was attended by HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, along with members of the embassy.

In his speech, the ambassador highlighted the long-standing fraternal relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia, noting the cooperation across various sectors. He reaffirmed Oman's unwavering stance in supporting the Palestinian people in securing their rights under international law, calling for an immediate cessation of the conflict in Gaza and advocating for a peaceful and just resolution.

He also emphasised Oman's ongoing role in promoting peace, stability and global cooperation. The event featured a video showcasing Oman's cultural heritage, alongside an exhibition of Omani companies operating in Saudi Arabia, offering an insight into the country's rich traditions, such



The Embassy of Oman in Saudi Arabia celebrated the 54th National Day



The Embassy of Oman in Brazil celebrated the 54th National Day

as frankincense, Omani sweets and incense. The celebration was attended by numerous dignitaries, officials and members of the diplomatic corps.

BRASILIA: The Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Brazil, led by Talal bin Sulaiman al Rahbi, Oman's Ambassador to the Federative Republic of Brazil, hosted a reception to commemorate Oman's Glorious National Day. In his address, the ambassador reflected on Oman's remarkable achievements since the start of its Renaissance in 1970 under the leadership of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, continuing under the guidance of His

Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. He also underscored Oman's foreign policy, rooted in dialogue and tolerance, and reiterated the country's commitment to peace in the Middle East, particularly advocating for a ceasefire in Gaza.

A highlight of the evening was the celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations between Oman and Brazil, which have seen significant strides in trade and strategic cooperation. Attendees included prominent Brazilian officials such as Minister of Defence José Mosio Filho and several Federal Representatives, alongside diplomats and business leaders. — **ONA**

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Indian Schools welcome first female Omani bus driver



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

MOZA AL HASANI, a former driving instructor, has become the first Omani female school bus driver in the Indian School System, marking a significant milestone in the national women empowerment movement.

Residing in Bausher, Moza now ferries students and teachers across Muscat in buses with 15 to 24-seat capacity. Her appointment underscores the expanding opportunities for Omani women in various sectors.

"I completed my education up to Plus-2, and life pushed me to seek a job for my livelihood at the age of 20. After working at a factory in Ghala Industrial Area, I realised my passion for driving. Today, I'm proud to transport children and teachers shaping our future safely," Moza told the Observer, reflecting on her inspiring journey.

Licensed to operate buses and heavy vehicles, Moza is celebrated for her



The path to success may not always be smooth, but persistence leads to achievement

MOZA AL HASANI

resilience and determination, earning admiration wherever she drives.

Rayees Ahmed, President of the School Management Committee (SMC), lauded the appointment, stating, "Who can care for children better than a mother? Supporting Omanisation and women empowerment, we ensure the safety of our students with Moza at the helm."

Papri Ghosh, the school's principal and the first female principal in Oman's Indian School stream, emphasised Moza's inspirational story. "This appointment is a testament to visionary leadership in breaking barriers and planning for a progressive future," she noted.

Moza's journey, from factory worker to trailblazer, is a testament to her unwavering determination. Her story encourages Omani youth to pursue their dreams despite life's challenges. "The path to success may not always be smooth, but persistence leads to achievement," Moza added, inspiring a new generation to dream big.

Promising investment opportunities



THE SULTANATE OF OMAN and the Kingdom of Belgium look forward to strengthening bilateral relations and pushing them to wider horizons in the areas of trade, investment and cultural cooperation to serve the interests of the two countries and meet their peoples' aspirations.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's state visit to Belgium this Monday and his meeting with King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie of the Belgians will back the two countries' endeavours in enhancing areas of cooperation.

The leaders and officials of the two countries continued to exchange visits, as King Philippe visited the Sultanate of Oman in February 2022. The visit culminated in the opening of the Duqm Port project, a joint venture between the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and the management of the Belgian Port of Antwerp.

In this context, the Hyport Duqm green hydrogen project, a joint venture between OQ Group and the Belgian Deme Group, seeks to establish an international alliance to produce and import green hydrogen for Belgium and its neighbouring countries, and implement green certification standards for the electricity grid.

During 2021, the project succeeded in obtaining a site for generating renewable energy extending over an area of 150 square kilometres in the Special Economic Zone of Duqm. In the first phase, a green hydrogen production plant will be established with a capacity of 250 to 500 megawatts, and it is planned to start operating in 2026.

The two countries also signed in Brussels in May 2023 the Joint Declaration of Intent Agreement in the field of green hydrogen and the Green Hydrogen Certificate Pilot Project Agreement for the "Duqm Hyport" project. On the other hand, Oman and Belgium discussed means of enhancing aspects of cooperation and coordination with the European Commission in the regulatory frameworks for clean hydrogen production and transportation projects. On the political side, thanks to Oman's distinguished relations with many countries of the world, Omani efforts had resulted in an agreement between Belgium and Iran to settle the issue of detained citizens in both countries.

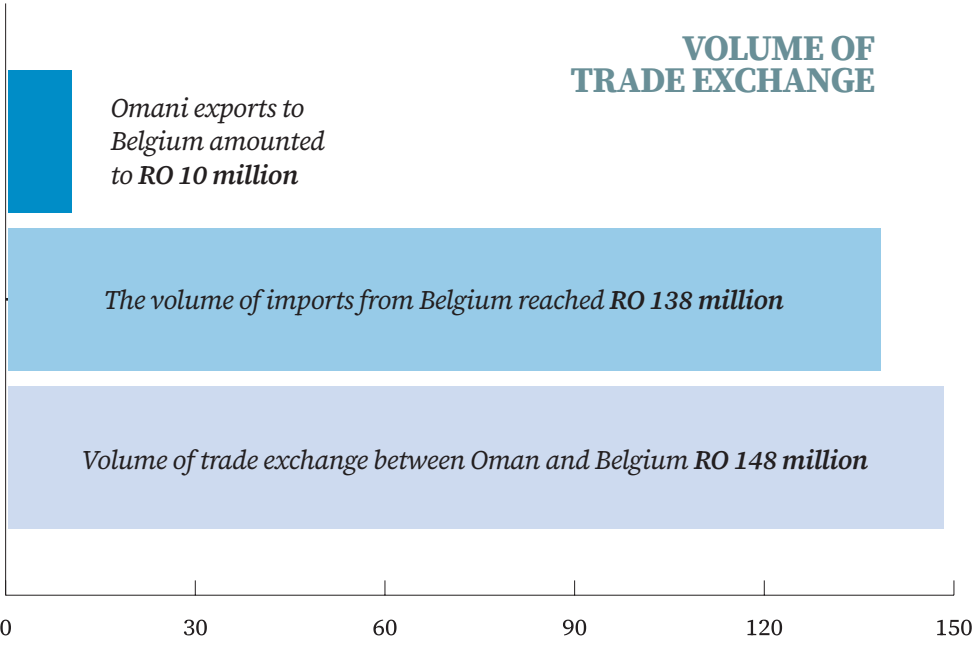
Rua bint Issa al Zadjalayah, Ambassador of Oman to Belgium and Head of Oman's Mission to the European Union, said that His Majesty's upcoming state visit to Belgium reflects the two countries' keenness on enhancing joint cooperation in various fields.



Rua bint Issa al Zadjalayah,
Ambassador of Oman to Belgium



Pascal H. GRÉGOIRE
Ambassador of Belgium to Oman



She said that this visit represents an opportunity to touch on topics of common interest and exchange views on global challenges and current issues. She pointed out that the visit would open new horizons for the strategic partnerships between the two countries and push the bilateral relations to higher levels and wider horizons by boosting cooperation in various fields including trade, investment and energy.

The ambassador explained that relations between Oman and Belgium are witnessing remarkable development and close cooperation that have contributed to the creation of strategic partnerships based on trust and mutual respect between the two countries, noting that the history of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries dates back to 1978.

TRADE EXCHANGE AT RO 148 MILLION

She added that the volume of trade exchange between Oman and Belgium

by the end of August 2024 amounted to RO 148 million, as the volume of Omani exports to Belgium amounted to nearly RO 10 million, while the volume of imports from Belgium to Oman reached about RO 138 million.

She further added that the most important Belgian exports to Oman are food and industrial products, bunker oil, and others, while the most prominent Omani exports to Belgium are polypropylene and its products, iron products, copper, and others.

Ambassador Rua said that the number of registered companies with Belgian participation until September 2024 reached 39, recording an increase of 50 per cent, and the size of the invested capital increased from RO 19,243,000 in 2023 to RO 819,778,000 until September 2024. These figures, she affirmed, reflect the interest of the Belgians in setting up Omani companies.

On his turn, Pascal H. GRÉGOIRE, Ambassador of Belgium to Oman, said that the upcoming state visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq to

His Majesty the Sultan's state visit to Belgium will back the two countries' endeavours in enhancing areas of cooperation

The visit would open new horizons for strategic partnerships and push the bilateral relations to higher levels

Volume of trade exchange between Oman and Belgium by the end of August 2024 amounted to RO 148 million

Omani exports to Belgium amounted to RO 10 million, while the volume of imports from Belgium reached RO 138 million

Oman and Belgium's collaboration is a partnership rooted in shared aspirations for stability, sustainability, and shared prosperity

Duqm Port represents a model of successful partnership between Oman and Belgium as it is a major driver for promising projects

groundbreaking partnership, led by Belgium's DEME and Oman's OQ, focuses on the production and export of green hydrogen, aiming to drive decarbonisation in industries and support Europe's renewable energy ambitions.

The ambassador affirmed that these projects not only exemplify innovation and sustainability, but also highlight the complementary expertise of both nations in maritime and renewable energy sectors.

"Recognising the immense potential for bilateral investments, Oman and Belgium are exploring opportunities to deepen ties across emerging industries, including life sciences, technological innovation and aerospace. The extension of the Port of Duqm concession would further symbolise this forward-looking partnership, enabling both countries to solidify their positions as global players in sustainable industries," said the ambassador.

He affirmed that His Majesty the Sultan's state visit would facilitate discussions on fostering investor-friendly policies and creating joint opportunities that promise lasting economic benefits for citizens and businesses alike.

PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONNECTIONS

He further noted that cultural and academic ties form the backbone of people-to-people connections between Oman and Belgium. Both nations recognise the importance of collaborative research, academic exchanges, and joint initiatives that foster mutual understanding and innovation. By investing in knowledge-sharing and cultural dialogue, Oman and Belgium aim to inspire a new generation of global leaders and thinkers. He pointed out that the state visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq is poised to elevate Oman-Belgium relations to new heights.

By focusing on sectors such as health, biopharmaceuticals, space, defence and research, this visit lays the groundwork for diversified and sustainable growth.

The mutual commitment to dialogue and innovation positions both nations as key players in shaping a peaceful, prosperous and interconnected global future. The Belgian ambassador concluded his statement by saying: "Oman and Belgium's collaboration is more than a bilateral relationship — it is a partnership rooted in shared aspirations for stability, sustainability and shared prosperity. The upcoming state visit is a testament to the enduring friendship and the boundless potential for cooperation between these two nations. — **ONA**

SPOTLIGHT

A growing concern for
school children



ENSURING SAFETY IN BUSES

KABEER
YOUSEF
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THE SAFETY of children on school buses remains a significant concern in the Sultanate of Oman, with recurring incidents highlighting the risks involved. Despite calls for greater attention to this issue, negligence continues to contribute to tragic accidents. According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), 24 children under the age of 7 were victims of road accidents in 2021. This alarming statistic averages two child fatalities per month, with 84 others under the age of 7 injured, accounting for 5.3 per cent of the total traffic accident victims.

One tragic incident earlier this academic year involved a grade 10 student who was run over after disembarking from a school bus, raising concerns about the safety of school transportation.

Parents have voiced concerns over reckless driving, citing incidents of buses breaking rules, driving on footpaths, and crossing one-way streets. One concerned parent shared photos and videos of such driving and urged school authorities to take action. A serious accident in April 2023 involving a car and a minibus transporting students in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate left 16 children injured.

The Ministry of Education has emphasised the need for improved safety measures and urged all stakeholders to be vigilant, both inside and outside the school.

“The safety of school children is a shared responsibility,” said a school principal. “It’s crucial that every stakeholder, including parents, bus drivers, teachers, and the wider community, ensure the safety of our children.”

Despite measures being implemented, such as meetings between school authorities and concerned parties, reckless driving persists, undermining safety protocols. The Ministry of Education has urged bus drivers to ensure children disembark on the same side of the road as their homes to reduce the risk of crossing busy streets.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) has launched a campaign to ensure that school bus operators adhere to safety regulations, with a focus on compliance with the Land Transport Law and other safety requirements for student transportation.

As part of Oman’s broader focus on student health and safety, the government has introduced the National School and University Health Plan (2024-2025), emphasising the need for a safe school environment for students aged 7 to 18.

The MoTCIT launched a campaign to enforce school bus safety regulations while the Ministry of Education has stressed the shared responsibility for child safety



24 CHILDREN UNDER 7
KILLED IN ROAD ACCIDENTS IN 2021

84 INJURED

WORLD

SHORTTAKES



Hungarian soldiers, part of the Nato-led peacekeeping force KFOR, patrol near the damaged canal in northern Kosovo. — Reuters

KOSOVO BOOSTS SECURITY AS BLAST THREATENS POWER



ALBIN KURTI
Kosovo's Prime Minister

PRISTINA: Kosovo worked to shore up water and power supplies on Saturday and stepped up security at strategic sites after an explosion hit a canal that sends water to its two main power plants, an incident Pristina labelled a “terrorist act” by neighbouring Serbia. Serbia’s foreign minister

Marko Djuric denied what he said were “baseless allegations” about Belgrade’s involvement in an X post on Saturday, and suggested that Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti’s government was involved, without providing evidence.

The explosion has increased tensions between the two Balkan countries. Relations remain especially frayed in the north where the blast occurred, and where the Serb minority refuses to recognise Kosovo’s statehood and still sees Belgrade as their capital. The explosion occurred around 7 pm on Friday near the town of Zubin Potok. The exact cause was not clear. Kosovo’s Security Council, which held emergency talks early on Saturday, said its armed forces were activated to prevent similar attacks. — Reuters

SYRIAN ARMY CONFIRMS FIGHTERS ENTER ALEPPO

AMMAN: The Syrian army said on Saturday dozens of its soldiers had been killed in a major attack by rebels who swept into the city of Aleppo in the northwest, forcing the army to redeploy. The surprise attack has jolted the frontlines of the Syrian civil war that have largely been frozen since 2020, reviving fighting in a corner of the fractured country near the Turkish border. The army said it was preparing a counteroffensive to restore state authority. The Syrian army command said insurgents had entered large parts of Aleppo, which had been under full state control since government forces drove fighters out eight years ago. The Syrian military command said militants had attacked in large numbers and from multiple directions, prompting “our armed forces to carry out a redeployment operation aimed at strengthening the defence lines in order to absorb the attack, preserve the lives of civilians and soldiers, and prepare for a counterattack”. The army said bombardment had stopped the insurgents from establishing fixed positions. — Reuters

ELECTION CRISIS

Georgia arrests 107 as protests continue



Georgia said 107 people were arrested during a second night of protests sparked by the government’s decision to delay European Union membership talks amid a post-election crisis. The Black Sea nation has been rocked by turmoil since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in parliamentary election. The interior ministry said 107 people were detained for “disobedience to lawful police orders and petty hooliganism.” — AFP

NORTH KOREA’S KIM, RUSSIAN MINISTER AGREE TO BOOST MILITARY TIES

SEOUL: Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and agreed to boost military cooperation between the two isolated nations, Pyongyang state media said on Saturday. Kim, who met Belousov on Friday, blasted the recent decision by Western powers to permit Kyiv to strike inside Russia with their weapons, saying it constituted a “direct military intervention in the conflict”, according to KCNA. “It is an exercise

of the right to self-defence for Russia to take resolute action to make the hostile forces pay the price,” Kim was quoted as saying. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kim signed a strategic partnership treaty in June that obligates both states to provide military assistance “without delay” in the case of an attack on the other and jointly oppose Western sanctions. Belousov’s visit “would greatly contribute to bolstering up the defence capabilities of the

two countries and... promoting the friendly, mutual cooperation and development of the relations between the two armies.” Belousov, in a statement, expressed gratitude for the two countries’ deep bonds and praised North Korea’s “absolutely independent foreign policy”. North Korea is positioning itself within the Russian war economy as a supplier of weapons, military support and labour - potentially even bypassing traditional ally China. — AFP

Israeli strikes pound more civilians in Gaza

THE Israeli military said it killed a Palestinian it accused of involvement in October 7 attack in a vehicle strike in Gaza, while medics said at least 32 Palestinians were killed in Israeli strikes across the enclave overnight and into Saturday. The escalation comes as leaders of Hamas were expected to arrive in Cairo on Saturday for ceasefire talks with Egyptian officials, days after Israel and Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire in Lebanon, two officials of the group said.

Later on Saturday medics said nine people were killed when an Israeli air strike targeted a vehicle near a gathering of Palestinians receiving aid in the southern area of Khan Younis south of the enclave. Residents and a Hamas source said that the vehicle targeted near a crowd receiving flour was used by security personnel tasked with overseeing aid deliveries into Gaza. Among the 32 killed, at least seven died in an Israeli strike on a house in central Gaza City, according to a statement from the Gaza Civil Defense and the official Palestinian news agency WAFA early on Saturday. The Gaza Civil Defense also reported that one of its officers was killed in attacks in northern Gaza’s Jabalia, bringing the total number of civil defence workers killed since October 7, 2023, to 88. Earlier on Saturday, WAFA reported that three employees of World Central Kitchen, a US-based, non-governmental humanitarian agency, were killed when a civilian vehicle was targeted



A wounded Palestinian girl is carried to the hospital, in the aftermath of an Israeli strike, in Gaza City. — Reuters

in Khan Younis, southern Gaza. The World Central Kitchen has not yet commented on the incident. Egypt is hosting a Hamas delegation in Cairo to discuss a ceasefire, two Hamas officials said. The visit is the first since the United States announced earlier this week it would revive efforts in collaboration with Qatar, Egypt, and Türkiye to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza, similar to the recent agreement reached between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Palestinian delegation is expected to meet with Egyptian security officials to explore ways to reach a ceasefire deal with Israel. However, progress remains limited due to disagreements between the two parties. Hamas is seeking an agreement that would end the war and secure the release of Israeli

and foreign hostages held in Gaza. In contrast, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated that the war will only end when Hamas is eradicated. Meanwhile, a ceasefire in the parallel conflict between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah took effect before dawn on Wednesday, halting hostilities that had escalated sharply in recent months. The accord overshadowed the Gaza conflict and marked a rare moment of calm in the region. Biden has since urged Israel and Hamas to seize the opportunity for a Gaza ceasefire, reiterating his commitment to pursuing a diplomatic resolution. Israel’s military campaign in Gaza has killed at least 44,382 people and displaced nearly all of the enclave’s population. Vast swathes of Gaza lie in ruins. — Reuters



FLOODS DISPLACE 122,000 IN MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR: More than 122,000 people have been forced out of their homes as massive floods caused by relentless rains swept through Malaysia’s northern states, disaster management officials said on Saturday. Kelantan state bore the brunt of the flooding, accounting for 63 per cent of the 122,631 people evacuated. Nearly 35,000 people were evacuated in Terengganu, with the rest of the displacements reported from seven other states. Heavy rains, which began early this week, continued to hammer Pasir Puteh town in Kelantan, where people could be seen walking through streets inundated with hip-deep waters. — AFP

POWERFUL WINDS

Schools shut as storm approaches India



Schools in India’s south were shut and hundreds of people moved inland to storm shelters ahead of a powerful cyclone storm set to hit the region. Cyclonic storm Fengal is forecast to make landfall in Tamil Nadu state with sustained winds of 70-80 kilometres an hour, India’s weather bureau said. Schools and colleges in numerous districts across Tamil Nadu were shut and at least 471 people had been moved to relief camps. — AFP

POLITICAL FIGHT

German’s Scholz starts election campaign



Three months before elections, Germany’s embattled Olaf Scholz kicked off the campaign by attacking his conservative rival as cold towards the poor but a hothead who would play “Russian roulette” with Moscow. The Social Democrat Scholz vowed to defeat the current frontrunner Friedrich Merz of the Christian Democrats (CDU). “Some have already written us off,” Scholz said, before pledging a comeback at the February 23 vote. — AFP

The New York Times

Trudeau flies to Mar-a-Lago to meet Trump amid tariff concerns



MATINA STEVIS GRIDNEFF

The author is the Canada bureau chief for The New York Times, based in Toronto

PRIME MINISTER Justin Trudeau of Canada went to Florida on Friday night to see President-elect Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago, two officials with direct knowledge of the visit said, after a threat by Trump to impose across-the-board tariffs on goods from Canada and Mexico on Day 1 of his second term. The visit makes Trudeau the first head of government from the Group of 7, a key forum of global coordination consisting of the world's wealthiest democracies, to visit the president-elect.

Trudeau and Trump dined together on Friday evening, one official said, along with a delegation of senior Trump allies poised for top trade and security positions in his new administration. Trudeau was accompanied on his visit by Dominic LeBlanc, Canada's minister of public safety. The Canadian prime minister was staying in the area overnight, but not at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's private club and home in Palm Beach, Florida.

Trudeau has been scrambling to formulate a plan to respond to the threat made this week by Trump to impose a 25 per cent tariff unless Mexico and Canada take action to curb the arrival of migrants without legal permission to be in the US and drugs across their borders into the United States. Trump said he would sign such a measure on his first day in office, a move that could potentially cripple trade across the continent.

The threat was also seen as an open-

ing salvo in what would most likely be a long renegotiation of the trade agreement among the three North American nations, known as the USMCA — the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, the successor to the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trudeau has tried to project calm and confidence, saying he believed Trump would see that tariffs would harm both countries, which are each other's biggest trading partners. About 80 per cent of Canada's oil and 40 per cent of its gas are exported to the United States, and the two countries are deeply intertwined through the joint manufacturing of cars, as well as in multiple other industries.

The Mar-a-Lago visit on Friday, which was initially reported by the Globe and Mail newspaper on the basis of tracking Trudeau's plane, is intended as a direct effort by Trudeau to show that he has a plan to address Trump's border concerns and that tariffs should be avoided for the sake of both nations' economies. LeBlanc was given the task of drafting tougher border measures. He said this week that he was preparing to deploy additional staff, as well as drones and helicopters if needed, to better manage the border between the two countries.

The security and trade issues at the heart of the Friday meeting were also reflected on the Trump side of the table: The dinner, an official said, was attended by North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, whom Trump picked to be interior secretary; Howard

Trudeau has been scrambling to formulate a plan to respond to the threat made this week by Trump to impose a 25% tariff unless Mexico and Canada take action to curb the arrival of migrants without legal permission to be in the US

Lutnick, who is Trump's selection for commerce secretary; and Mike Waltz, Trump's choice for national security adviser. Trudeau's response to Trump's tariff threats contrasts sharply with that of Mexico's president, Claudia Sheinbaum. Trudeau and other senior Canadian officials have sought to distinguish Canada's position from Mexico's, highlighting that Canada is better aligned with the United States and Trump's agenda on three key issues: the borders, restrictions on China and bringing well-paying jobs back home.

The split has driven a wedge between two allies, Canada and Mexico, that were able to leverage their relationship to negotiate a favourable agreement during Trump's first presidency.

The trade pact is officially up for renegotiation in 2026, but analysts say they believe Trump's decision to put tariffs against the two US neighbours on the table even before he takes office indicates that a renegotiation of that agreement could come sooner than planned.

Trudeau is facing considerable pressure over how to handle this difficult moment. The imposition of tariffs on Canada would throw the country into recession, economists believe, as doing business with the United States is the lifeblood of the economies of several Canadian provinces.

But Trudeau is in a precarious political moment, too, after nine years in power. He faces elections in the coming months, and polls show his party is set to lose badly.

HUNDREDS MORE NAZCA LINES EMERGE IN PERU'S DESERT



FRANZ LIDZ

The author is New York Times archaeology, science and film essayist

Gouged into a barren stretch of pampa in southern Peru, the Nazca Lines are one of archaeology's most perplexing mysteries. On the floor of the coastal desert, the shallow markings look like simple furrows. But from the air, hundreds of feet up, they morph into trapezoids, spirals and zigzags in some locations, and stylised

hummingbirds and spiders in others. There is even a cat with the tail of a fish. Thousands of lines jump cliffs and traverse ravines without changing course; the longest is bullet-straight and extends for more than 15 miles.

The vast incisions were brought to the world's attention in the mid-1920s by a Peruvian scientist who spotted them while hiking through the Nazca foothills. Over the next decade, commercial pilots passing over the region revealed the enormity of the artwork, which is believed to have been created from 200 B.C. to A.D. 700 by a civilisation that predated the Inca. "It took nearly a century to discover a total of 430 figurative geoglyphs," said Masato Sakai, an archaeologist at Yamagata University in Japan who has studied the lines for 30 years.

Sakai is the lead author of a survey published in September in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that found 303 previously uncharted geoglyphs in only six months, almost doubling the number that had been mapped as of 2020. The researchers used artificial intelligence in tandem with low-flying drones that covered some 243 square miles. Their conclusions also provided insights into the symbols' enigmatic purpose. The newly found images — an average of 30 feet across — could have been detected in past flyovers if the pilots had known where to look. But the pampa is so immense that "finding the needle in the haystack becomes practically impossible without the help of automation," said Marcus Freitag, an IBM physicist who collaborated on the project.

To identify the new geoglyphs, which are smaller than earlier examples, the investigators used an application capable of discerning the outlines from aerial photographs, no matter how faint. "The AI was able to eliminate 98 per cent of the imagery," Freitag said. "Human experts now only need to confirm or reject plausible candidates."

That 2 per cent flagged by AI amounted to 47,410 potential sites from the desert plain. Sakai's team then pored over the high-resolution photos and narrowed the field to 1,309 candidates.

Russia targets Ukraine N-plants to cut off grid

RUSSIA hit critical electricity transmission facilities linked to nuclear power plants during its latest assault on Ukraine's power grid, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported. It was the third such attack in roughly as many months, heightening concerns among experts about the potential for a nuclear disaster.

The agency said that the Russian strikes had hit electrical substations crucial for Ukraine's three operational nuclear plants to transmit and receive power. While no direct damage to reactors was reported, all of them reduced output as a precautionary measure, and one was disconnected from the grid.

"Ukraine's energy infrastructure is extremely fragile and vulnerable, putting nuclear safety at great risk," Rafael Mariano Grossi, the head of the IAEA, said in a statement released late on Thursday.

In a sign of the difficulties, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced on Friday that he was replacing the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, appointing Maj Gen Mykhailo Drapaty to succeed Lt Gen Oleksandr Pavliuk. Pavliuk had been in the role since February, a period during which Ukraine lost hundreds of square miles of territory.

"The Ukrainian army needs internal changes to achieve our state's goals in full," Zelenskyy said in a statement, highlighting the need to increase the army's combat capability and improve training.

For a long time, Russia's attack on the power grid focused on thermal and hydroelectric plants. Still, Ukraine's grid did not collapse, mainly because much of its power generation relies on nuclear plants, which had been largely spared from air strikes.

Ukraine's three operational nuclear plants, with a total of nine



Workers at a power plant that has been repeatedly targeted by Russian missiles, at an undisclosed location in Ukraine.



CONSTANT MÉHEUT

The writer is a reporter for The New York Times, currently covering the war in Ukraine

reactors, provide about two-thirds of the country's power generation capacity today, according to Shaun Burnie, a nuclear expert at Greenpeace Ukraine. Two plants are in western Ukraine, in the Rivne and Khmelnytskyi regions, while another is farther south. A fourth nuclear plant, near the southern city of Zaporizhzhia, was captured by Russian forces at the beginning of the war.

The substations also have a second, no less critical function: They deliver electricity to the nuclear plants that is needed to cool the reactors and spent fuel. "Loss of cooling function at one or more reactors would inevitably lead to nuclear fuel melt and large-scale radiological release," Greenpeace warned.

United Nations experts issued a similar warning in a statement released on Monday. They said that "further damage to Ukraine's electricity system could lead to an electricity blackout which would increase the risk of operating nuclear reactors losing access to the grid for powering their safety systems." Such an event, the statement said, could lead to a serious

nuclear disaster.

Ukrainian authorities have tried to highlight the new threat in recent months. Zelenskyy told the UN General Assembly in September that Russia was planning catastrophic attacks on Ukraine's "nuclear power plants and the infrastructure, aiming to disconnect the plants from the power grid."

On Friday, Ukraine continued grappling with the aftermath of Russia's large attack on its grid the day before. Ukrenergo, the national electricity operator, has introduced intermittent shut-downs nationwide to reduce strain on the system. Some areas, like the southern regions of Kherson and Mykolaiv, have also been mostly cut off from power because of the attacks. Ukrainian authorities reported that Russia used cluster munitions to attack the grid.

These munitions sometimes fail to detonate immediately, posing a lingering threat and hindering the work of energy workers sent to repair damaged facilities who have to wait until the area is cleared of unexploded ordnance. Ukraine has also used cluster munitions in the war.

OPINION

When a doctor dislikes a patient



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

DURING MY TRAINING as a psychiatrist in the UK, a patient with depression filed a complaint against my colleague, claiming he was misdiagnosed and started on the wrong treatment. The patient appointed a lawyer who asked for huge financial compensation. My colleague had to attend a few court meetings, which made him feel frustrated and angry about the patient’s complaint.

He told me how his negative feelings toward that particular patient affected him, especially since he always did his best to care for his patients and went the extra mile to help them.

Doctors and healthcare workers are frequently subjected to complaints, criticism, or even physical aggression from their patients, yet they are expected to remain calm, neutral, and empathetic.

This experience made me reflect on how medical professionals are often placed in challenging positions.

Doctors and healthcare workers are frequently subjected to complaints, criticism, or even physical aggression from their patients, yet they are expected to remain calm, neutral, and empathetic.

But what happens when a doctor reaches the point of disliking—or even hating—a

patient?

Is it possible to overcome such feelings and continue to provide ethical and compassionate care?

The book *When a Doctor Hates a Patient* by Richard C Horton explores this complex issue in depth. Horton examines the emotional, ethical, and professional dilemmas that arise when a doctor’s personal feelings clash with their professional responsibilities.

The book discusses how negative emotions—such as frustration, annoyance, or even outright dislike—can stem from challenging patient behaviours, such as unrealistic demands or non-compliance. Horton emphasises the importance of self-awareness in managing these emotional reactions, urging doctors to recognise and address their biases while maintaining empathy, even in the most difficult circumstances.

As a medical doctor, I often reflect on how my personal feelings can influence my clinical decisions, for better or worse. For example, when treating a young man who is the same age as my son, I have to remind myself not to slip into a parental role. It is crucial to focus on the specific needs of the patient without letting my emotions cloud my judgement.

Similarly, I sometimes encounter patients

It is vital for preserving the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship as open and respectful communication plays a key role in overcoming strained interactions

who make decisions that I strongly disagree with. In those moments, I must remind myself that each patient has the right to make their own choices and bear the consequences, even if I believe their decisions are unwise.

This self-awareness is not always easy to achieve. It requires constant reflection, professional maturity, and a commitment to ethical practice. However, it is vital for preserving the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship.

Open and respectful communication plays a key role in overcoming strained interactions. Listening to patients without judgement, seeking to understand their perspective, and offering guidance rather than imposing authority can often transform a tense situation into a collaborative one.

Negative emotions are part of being human, and doctors are no exception. What distinguishes a good doctor is not the absence of such feelings but the ability to recognise and manage them effectively.

By maintaining a professional yet compassionate approach, we can navigate even the most challenging relationships with patients.

After all, the ultimate goal is to provide care that prioritises the well-being of the patient while preserving our own mental and emotional health.

NATIONS WARN OF DEADLOCK AT PLASTIC TALKS

SARA HUSSEIN & KATIE FORSTER

Diplomats warned that a majority of countries could walk away from talks on the world’s first plastic pollution agreement if a handful of delegations continue resisting calls to compromise. Nearly 200 countries are in Busan, South Korea, for negotiations on a deal to curb plastic pollution.

Efforts to reach the landmark agreement are stuck on several key points, particularly reducing production and phasing out chemicals believed or known to harm human health. Over 100 countries support these measures and insist a treaty without them will fail to address the pollution crisis.

However, around a dozen nations — mostly producers of plastic precursors derived from fossil fuels — are strongly opposed.

As a result, just a day before talks are supposed to end, the draft text remains full of opposing views and contradictory language, and frustration is growing. “The overwhelming majority of delegates here demand an ambitious treaty,” said Panama’s delegation head, Juan Carlos Monterrey Gomez. “If the reduction of production is not there, there is no treaty.” “We cannot let a few loud voices derail the process,” he added.

A diplomat from the High Ambition Coalition, which groups dozens of countries seeking a strong deal, echoed that sentiment. “We are a large group uniting around key effective elements, and getting ready to walk away,” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss closed-door deliberations. He warned that “some countries” were actively considering calling a vote, which would circumvent the UN’s traditional approach of agreement by consensus and could “raise a lot of eyebrows.”

The Democratic Republic of Congo’s J M Bope Bope Lapwong also suggested this as a “last resort.” “I think that if we can’t reach an agreement, we’ll be obliged to go to a vote. We cannot come all this way, all these kilometres, to fail,” he said. “True, it’s not the usual way at UN meetings, and we will do it to our shame — because when you negotiate, you don’t expect to win it all.”

More than 90 per cent of plastic is not recycled, while plastic production is expected to triple by 2060.

Environmental groups have pushed ambitious countries to move to a vote if progress stalls, arguing that countries like Saudi Arabia and Russia have not offered any compromises during the talks. Neither delegation responded to repeated requests for comment. — AFP



The Hezbollah-Israel ceasefire is a cruel joke

LET’S stop pretending. If you think the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel means anything more than a brief pause in the bloodshed, you’re living in a fantasy. This truce is no step toward peace — it’s a flimsy patch on a wound that’s been festering for nearly 80 years, a wound inflicted on the Palestinian people.

Palestinians continue to endure displacement, occupation, and violence on a scale that defies belief. They’ve been stripped of their homes, their land, and their dignity. The root of the Middle East’s endless turmoil isn’t some far-off mystery - it’s the brutal oppression of a stateless people by Zionist Jews.

If you still believe Zionism is anything other than a violent, colonialist ideology, then look no further than Gaza.

The Israeli military’s slaughter of at least 50,000 civilians - most of them women and children - isn’t an accident.

It’s not collateral damage. It’s a deliberate campaign of genocide. Entire families are buried beneath the rubble of their bombed-out homes, while survivors search desperately for remains to bury.

Is this the “justice” Zionism claims to stand for?

This ceasefire, hyped as a diplomatic victory for the US, does nothing to address the horrors being inflicted daily.

Israel, propped up by Western power and money, has no legitimate claim to the land it has stolen. The idea that anyone can coexist with a State built on oppression and lies is pure delusion.

The hypocrisy is staggering. We rightly condemn the atrocities of the Holocaust, where six million Jews and millions of others were murdered in Nazi concentration camps. But let’s not confuse the Jewish victims of those horrors with the Zionist political movement, which has its dark history.

The 1933 Haavara Agreement, a pact between certain Zionist groups and the Nazis, is a chilling reminder of the complexities of this history.

Religious Jews who opposed Zionism were among those



A man comforts a child as people mourn the death of members of the Palestinian Akasha family, killed in an Israeli strike on the Sheikh Adwan neighbourhood north of Gaza City, amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. — AFP



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murdered by the Nazis - yet today Zionism wraps itself in the language of victimhood while oppressing others no differently from how the Nazis oppressed Jews. The Zionists have hijacked Judaism for their cruel motives.

The genocide in Gaza must not go unpunished.

The United States, once a supposed beacon of human rights, continues to bankroll and protect these war criminals. America’s military and economic power might strong-arm smaller nations into silence, but the world sees what’s happening. One day, the US will have to pay the price for standing on the wrong side of history.

As long as Palestinians remain stateless, living in refugee camps or under occupation, their struggle will

fuel resistance.

Groups like Hezbollah draw their strength from this injustice, positioning themselves as defenders of a people abandoned by the world. Even if Hezbollah lays down its arms for now, the rage and grief of the Palestinian people will not disappear.

Let’s call this ceasefire what it is: a mirage. A convenient illusion for Western politicians and media to sell as progress while the underlying nightmare continues unchecked.

Real peace will never come until Palestinian rights are restored, their stolen land is returned, and those responsible for these crimes face justice.

Until then, the cycle of violence will grind on and history will judge those who stood by and watched.

The doomsday vaults... Saving for another day



RAY PETERSEN
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WHAT IS IT ABOUT LOSS that hurts most? We lose not only who they are, what they are, their voice, their companionship, their reassurance... They are irreplaceable... and it hurts to lose them.

What about losing a pet? Having lost the companionship of our dog, Spongy, while in the Sultanate of Oman, I have known the impact of that loss. It's probably because their love is not unconditional, but comes from a place of their needing so little from us, yet to give so much of themselves.

What about when we simply lose something like, a watch, phone, piece of jewellery? It will be an inconvenience, as you've gotten used to having it around, used to its peculiarities... However, most of these things can be replaced, virtually like for like. Or when we are burgled, what hurts most? Our dignity, and we feel violated, then angry. The question we always ask... Why me? But unlike Humpty Dumpty, that loss, can be "put back together again."

It's different though, isn't it, when we think about loss as a community or society? The city of Christchurch, renowned as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, renowned for its sweet-scented colourful city gardens, the Avon River meandering through the city, with its ornate Cathedral adorning the most impressive city centre you could ever imagine. It was a city of joy, laughter and light. Yet, during 2011, an

earthquake struck at the heart of its serenity, virtually levelling much of the city, including its centre, its heart. Today it's not the same... and never will be. The loss of life, and the destruction of property, have dealt Christchurch a cruel blow. So, what if, God forbid, we suffered a meteor strike, a final nuclear conflict, a hostile alien attack, a biblical flood, an environmental disaster, a massive geographical upheaval, a fresh ice-age, a solar event, or a more aggressive pandemic?

Few would survive, and they would have little more than what they stand up in. It's a sobering thought to think the few would have nothing! We, as a society, a civilisation, would be devastated, and most of what we have achieved and invented would be lost!

Or would it? Sure... the ancient Incas, Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans all left us some of themselves, but we, us, and all we have achieved through trial and error, battle, discussion and debate, and what we have developed of nature, it would all be gone, wouldn't it? Well, the answer is emphatically... No, few know that colossal, purpose-built storage facilities have been constructed around the planet, with the objective of holding resources that would be essential to our survival, as a race, and the retention of our culture, traditions, animal and plant life.

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, in Norway, is a huge cold storage unit that holds 1.5

What about losing a pet? Having lost the companionship of our dog, Spongy, while in the Sultanate of Oman, I have known the impact of that loss

billion seeds, collected from all nations of the world, stored 'just in case', they should be needed, a protection against natural or man-made catastrophe. Another similar facility exists in the India's territories in the Himalayas, at a place called Chang La, 5,000 metres above sea level, which also stores seeds and plants, but in a manipulated state of suspension.

The United States National Centre for Genetic Resources Preservation on the Colorado State University campus is where over 600,000 different seeds are kept, while the San Diego Zoo also has a prized 'Jurassic Park' collection of over 8,000 samples of stem cell material, most of our most unique species like Rhinos, Pandas, Leopards, orangutans, turtles and elephants, all endangered, facing extinction.

Meanwhile, the Millennium Seedbank Partnership is home to 15 per cent of the world's wild grown species, as they may be more resilient and resistant to pollution, than contemporary cultivars.

The Arctic island of Spitzbergen accommodates 8,300 Vatican-owned artistic masterpieces, manuscripts, music, sporting and scientific memorabilia rest, and there is an Oreo Vault storing samples of our cookies, chocolates and sweets... Scientists are even investigating the possibilities of establishing an 'Ark on the Moon.' So, even in future-proofing, there is clarity perhaps, that the 'Doomsday Book,' has not yet been written.

ICELANDERS HEAD TO THE POLLS AFTER GOVERNMENT COLLAPSE

JONATHAN KLEIN

Icelanders voted on Saturday in a legislative election after the collapse of a fraught coalition prompted a snap poll where the economy has been a top concern.

Battling inflation and high interest rates, the economy, housing and healthcare have been foremost in voters' minds in the country where some 268,000 people are eligible to vote.

Voting stations opened at 9:00 am (0900 GMT) and most will remain open to 10:00 pm.

Fears have been raised that some voters may struggle to reach polling stations as heavy snowfall and strong winds have been predicted for some regions, and the Icelandic Met Office has issued several weather alerts along the island's eastern and northern coast.

"I feel we need change," 48-year-old film producer Grimar Jonsson, said in Reykjavik on Friday.

Jonsson said he hoped to see a change of government and "getting rid of so-called old-fashioned political parties."

Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson cast his vote just after 10:30 am at a polling station set up in the Myrin sports centre in a southern suburb of Reykjavik.

Benediktsson's three-party, left-right coalition resigned in October.

The coalition of Benediktsson's Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement and the centre-right Progressive Party was divided on a range of issues but broke down over the handling of migrants and asylum-seekers.

Despite causing the demise of the government, immigration is not a galvanising issue. One in five residents in the country is foreign-born.

"It is very prominent in the public debate amongst politicians, but still it does not seem to be an issue that people are putting at the front of their list of important issues," Eiríkur Bergmann, a politics professor at Bifrost University, said.

According to a Gallup poll published in early November, only 32 per cent listed immigration as a key issue and only 18 per cent included asylum issues. By contrast, healthcare, economic issues and housing were a top concern for more than 60 per cent. Broadcaster RUV reported that an AI chatbot set up to answer questions about the election had mostly been asked about housing and tax issues. For first-time voter Lena Brynjardottir, housing is a top concern.

"But also I want to have focus on the financial while also looking at human rights and immigration as well," 18-year-old Brynjardottir said. "I think balance is what is the most important for me right now in this election."

The coalition has lost support during its time in power. — AFP

A Royal visit of importance

LAST week, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik visited Sultan Faisal bin Turki School for Boys in Al Amerat. The visit entails wide-ranging importance and significance for the education sector as well as the nation as a whole.

As for the education, the visit marks a gesture from His Majesty the Sultan to draw attention to the importance of education in Oman. Education represents one of the key pillars in Oman Vision 2040. Government bodies in charge of the sector devote efforts and energies to devise detailed plans to guide progress towards what the vision aims to achieve especially in the education sector.

Before 1970s, Omanis were living in total darkness of ignorance, having little or no education. A lot of Omanis, just before then, were literally unable to read or write, let alone have the fundamentals of modern science and knowledge, despite the fact that Omanis are historically well-known for their strong affection for education based on admiration, benevolence and common interests. Omanis throughout history glorify scholars by bestowing honour, praise and admiration to those in possession of knowledge.

However, during the early years of the 1970s, the first step the Omani renaissance led by the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos focused on was to eradicate illiteracy by its roots, vowing to spread education to every part of Oman and making free education accessible to all Omanis.

The Omanis in return reacted by showing favourable reaction to the move, giving support and approval to the new era ahead. From the shades of trees to modern and high-tech buildings, the education system in Oman has revolved around one fundamental precept... delivering quality education to all citizens and at all levels.

Now, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has asserted that education should be the cornerstone and foundation of modern Oman. It is the beacon of the nation and a source of light and inspiration for the current and future generations. It is His Majesty the Sultan's vision that Omani youth should receive high-quality



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has asserted that education should be the cornerstone and foundation of modern Oman.

education which meets national as well as international standards.

His Majesty the Sultan emphasises that education in Oman should be superior in kind, and delivered with a degree of excellence. The Royal directives of His Majesty the Sultan stipulate that higher education institutions and academic programmes should be assessed against established standards on a regular basis, while policies, teaching methods, curricula, faculty qualifications, facilities and student outcomes to be reviewed for excellence.

To this end, Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQAE) has been established and mandated to ensure that education quality and standards are maintained in all educational institutions and programmes in both schools and higher education institutions.

The establishment of the authority is to help students and employers give prominence and distinction to credible institutions from substandard ones, while they are held accountable to stakeholders, including

students, parents, employers and the government. Acting on the Royal vision for education, the authority has set clear and measurable standards and criteria for higher education institutions and programmes. International points of reference have been considered by OAAAQAE, from which academic, administrative and operational benchmarks for quality education have been made.

OAAAQAE is the only authority in Oman which can award accreditation to education institutions or programmes. It may also withdraw accreditation, should an institution does not act upon its recommendations for improvement or falls short of the required standards.

Adhering to Oman Vision 2040, the country aims to promote a culture of ongoing quality enhancement within institutions as well as periodic reviews and re-accreditation to maintain standards over time, ensuring that education is delivered in the manner required. In conclusion, the visit is worthy of and attracts attention because it reflects the supreme will of His Majesty the Sultan for excellence in the education sector.



MUSALLAM AL MAANI

The writer is Dean, Al Zahra College for Women

SPORTS

KARATEWINNERS



Rayan Varghese, gold winner, at the UMAI Karate Championship in Qatar.

UMAI OMAN TRIUMPHS WITH 3 GOLDS AT QATAR KARATE EVENT

MUSCAT: UMAI Oman Karate and Kung Fu team made history by winning three gold medals, a silver medal, and a bronze medal at the United Martial Arts Academy International (UMAI) Karate Championship held in Doha, Qatar recently.

In a competition that featured over 300 participants, Turki bin Mansoor al Hinai and Rayan Varghese clinched gold medals in the Kumite category, while Ahmad Sinan secured a silver medal.

In the Kata category, Rayan Varghese added another gold medal to his tally in the below 55 kg category, and Turki bin Mansoor al Hinai earned a bronze medal in the below 25 kg category. The Oman team was led by Rashik Edakkandi and Farvesh, demonstrating exceptional performance.

Turki bin Mansoor al Hinai is a student of Jamila bint Thabit School, Maabala, while Rayan Varghese and Ahmad Sinan, aged eight, are students of Indian School Al Maabala (ISAM).

Rayan, aged 12 years and a sixth-standard student, said: “Despite the initial anxieties of stepping into the ring for the first time, the championship experience proved transformative. Winning the opening bout boosted my confidence, motivating me to push further. The Doha championship not only marked a milestone in my journey but also provided invaluable experience that will shape my future in the sport.”

The championship was guided by UMAI Grand Master Sifu Dr Arif C P Palazhi and Technical Director Shihan Noushad K Mannoli, who played key roles in the team’s success.

The event was graced by distinguished chief guests, including Captain Sameer Hassanain, Chairman of the Qatar Karate Federation Referee Commission, Mansoor al Hinai, and Khalood bin Nasser al Shamsi.



Rayan Varghese in action at the UMAI Karate Championship in Qatar



Oman stun Italy in Socca World Cup opener

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, NOV 30

OMAN STARTED their Socca World Cup 2024 campaign on a high note with a 3-1 victory against Italy in the opening match at the Sports Makers Stadium at Oman Automobile Association (OAA). The win earned Oman three crucial points as they look to progress in the prestigious tournament.

Oman faced the US in their second group-stage match late on Saturday. Oman will meet Canada on Monday while they will conclude their group matches against Qatar on Wednesday. All the matches of the national team begins at 8 pm.

The Socca World Cup 2024 Oman kicked off on Friday night with an extravagant opening ceremony under the auspices of HH Sayyid

Nadir bin Al Julanda al Said. The event was attended by Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, along with other dignitaries and officials.

The ceremony celebrated Oman’s rich cultural heritage, featuring traditional dances, team entrances onto the pitch and the official declaration to commence the tournament.

The tournament saw intense competition from the very first day.

In the morning session, South Africa defeated Tunisia 6-2, while Pakistan secured a 3-0 win over Haiti. Serbia edged Libya in a close 3-2 match, and Iraq claimed a solid 3-0 victory over Kuwait. Brazil narrowly beat Egypt 2-1, while Germany dominated Bulgaria with a 5-0 win.

On Saturday, Qatar defeated Canada 3-0,

while Iran and Ireland played out a 2-2 draw while Albania claimed a 2-1 win over Australia.

As many as 40 teams from around the world are attending in the prestigious event.

The hosts, Oman, were grouped in pool A alongside teams with America, Italy, Canada and Qatar. Group B comprised teams from Germany, Bulgaria, Georgia, Libya and Serbia, while Group C featured Greece, Belgium, Cyprus, Kuwait and Iraq.

Brazil lead Group D, along with Egypt, Ireland, Colombia and Iran. Group E consisted of Poland, France, Türkiye, Pakistan and Haiti, while Group F featured Mexico, Latvia, Albania, Peru and Australia. Group G included Kazakhstan, England, Romania, Uruguay and Sudan and Group H featured Croatia, Hungary, Argentina, Tunisia and South Africa.

Saudi’s 2034 WC bid gets higher score than US, Canada, Mexico

SAUDI ARABIA’S 2034 World Cup bid received a higher technical score from FIFA than the 2026 joint bid by the United States, Canada and Mexico even though the Middle East nation has yet to construct several stadiums proposed for the tournament.

FIFA released its bid evaluation report and said the 2034 bid received an overall average score of 4.2 out of 5 even though eight stadiums are still to be built.

All venues — including the planned 92,760-seater King Salman International Stadium in Riyadh — will not be completed until 2032 but three new stadiums are expected to be finished for the Asian Cup which kicks off in January 2027.

Meanwhile, the 2026 bid scored 4.0 having initially proposed 23 stadiums -- all of which were already built. Eventually, 16 host cities for the 2026 World Cup were announced, with many venues being existing NFL stadiums.

“The (Saudi) bid includes some ambitious stadium projects



integrated into unique locations, including the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Stadium located within the Qiddiya development and NEOM Stadium located within ‘The Line’ development,” FIFA’s report said.

FIFA added that although Saudi Arabia’s “one-of-a-kind” stadium projects have a lot of potential, the “proposed configuration and location” would “require a reimagining of

operations, with some associated unknowns or challenges at this moment in time”.

NEOM, a Red Sea urban and industrial development nearly the size of Belgium due to house nearly nine million people, is central to the prince’s Vision 2030 plan to create new engines of economic growth beyond oil.

But some of the schemes have had to be scaled back due to rising costs, including ‘The



Line’, a futuristic city between mirrored walls extending 170 km (106 miles) into the desert within NEOM.

“Consequently, should the bid be successful, it would be imperative to closely monitor and support these projects from initiation to completion,” FIFA added. Stadiums alone account for 35% of the overall score awarded to bids and FIFA said the level of risk in the 2026 bid was low. However, the Saudi bid had a medium level of risk.

“Due to the overall scale of the stadium projects, as well as the novel designs and configurations proposed in some cases, there is an elevated risk profile,” FIFA said. However, they added that the risk was mitigated as Saudi Arabia have a strong team in place and ample time to deliver on the projects.

Ahead of the World Cup vote next month, Minister of Sports, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal, said FIFA’s score reflects Saudi Arabia’s commitment to grow the game and their “rapid transformation”. — **Reuters**

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates winning his quarterfinal against Czech Republic's Jakub Mensik.

WORKING WITH MURRAY BOTH SURPRISING AND EXCITING, SAYS DJOKOVIC

PETER MURPHY

It's a job that didn't exist until recently but becoming an influencer is an ever more popular career path among Gen-Z youth in the modern era of social media. Now a first-of-its-kind course at an Irish university is teaching wannabe influencers how to convert online presence and content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube into revenue streams.

"Influencing is something that's catching fire," course director Irene McCormick said at South East Technological University (SETU) in Carlow, an hour's drive southwest from the capital Dublin.

The idea grew out of a summer crash course "Digital Hustle" launched by McCormick that was taught by TikTokers and attracted 350 applicants for 30 places. "It got amazing traction, we could see the appetite for more, so we broadened it to degree level," said McCormick, a former television producer and director. After two years of development, the course — a four-year-long Bachelor's degree in "Content Creation and Social Media" — received accreditation and welcomed its first intake of 15 students last month. On the state-of-the-art campus, students chatted, took selfies and scrolled their social media feeds on smartphones during a break between classes.

"My friends tell me I talk a lot so I thought I might as well make money out of it and try this course," Harry Odife, 22, said in the campus TV studio during a roleplay exercise.

Most of the students are already immersed in the digital space or working in it and want to expand their toolset and knowledge, McCormick said.

"You can try to learn yourself at home but being empowered with practice and theory about how to connect with target demographics online is going to make a big difference to your career," she added.

The term "influencer" was officially added to the dictionary in 2019, and refers to a person well-known through use of social media who uses their celebrity to endorse, promote, or generate interest in products and brands, often for payment.

Now the most prominent such as YouTube challenge stunt creator Mr Beast and gaming vlogger KSI tap vast online audiences, earning huge sums per sponsored post or via brand sponsorships and advertisements.

Surveys consistently show that most Gen-Z youths — those born between 1997 and 2012 — would consider a job as a vlogger, YouTuber or professional streamer. — AFP

Brighton climb to second with Southampton



Hove Albion's Kaoru in action with Stephens and Ryan. — Reuters

KAORU

MITOMA'S first-half header for Brighton & Hove Albion was cancelled out by a Flynn Downes strike just before the hour as the Seagulls drew 1-1 at home with bottom side Southampton on Friday to move up to second in the Premier League table. Brighton are level on 23 points with champions Manchester City, who face leaders Liverpool on Sunday. Liverpool are eight points ahead.

The visitors made Joe Lumley their third starting goalkeeper of the season and he was immediately under pressure as the home side started strongly.

Mitoma had the first good chance of the game as Brighton broke out from defence at pace in the seventh minute, but with Lumley well off his line, the Japanese winger dragged his shot just wide of the right-hand post.

Two minutes later, Georgino cut across the penalty area from right to left, but he too arrowed his shot just wide, and he came even closer in the 16th minute, again cutting in off the wing before smacking his shot off the far post.

Lumley's clean sheet on his Premier League debut lasted only 29 minutes as Brighton's pressure paid off. He was finally beaten by Mitoma's well-placed header from a bouncing



Tariq Lamptey cross. Rejuvenated in the second half, Southampton equalised in the 59th minute after Adam Armstrong had two shots blocked in quick succession, but midfielder Downes made no mistake with the rebound from the second effort, slamming it home. Eight minutes later, Saints had a Cameron Archer goal controversially ruled out for offside after Adam Armstrong was ruled to have interfered when he flicked his heel at the ball as it passed behind him while in an offside position, allowing Brighton to grab the point they needed to move to second in the standings. "I respect how difficult the decision is for the referee and the assistant referee. It is really difficult, but I find it hard to accept," Southampton coach Russell Martin told Sky Sports when asked about the disallowed goal. "The mistake is (that) it's not clear and obvious enough to be corrected, the on-field decision carries weight. I am frustrated, but I am really proud of my players," he added. Brighton boss Fabian Hürzeler was disappointed with his side, despite their lofty position in the table. "Not the best game from us regarding intensity, how we pressed out of possession, how we used our chances. We only deserved a draw," he told the BBC. — Reuters

Hawks top Cavs again to advance in NBA Cup, Boston beat Bulls

LOS ANGELES, UNITED STATES: De'Andre Hunter scored 23 points off the bench as the Atlanta Hawks beat league-leading Cleveland again on Friday to advance in the NBA Cup. The Hawks, who handed the Cavs their first home defeat of the season on Wednesday, came out on top at home, parlaying a 52-50 halftime lead into a 117-101 triumph. It was enough to put Atlanta into the NBA Cup knockout rounds as winners of their group after the Boston Celtics beat the Bulls 138-129 in Chicago. Trae Young scored 21 points and handed out 11 assists, and Jalen Johnson chipped in 20 points for Atlanta, who had six players score in double figures. Darius Garland scored 29 points for Cleveland and Evan Mobley added 24

points for the Cavs, who opened the season on a 15-0 tear and at 17-3 still boast the best record in the league. The Hawks held Cavs star Donovan Mitchell to 12 points and out-scored Cleveland 39-23 in the third quarter to take control for good in the contest that was one of 10 NBA Cup group stage games scheduled on the Thanksgiving holiday Friday. "They outplayed us," Cleveland coach Kenny Atkinson said after the Cavaliers were held to their lowest point total of the season. "Sometimes you just have to call it like you see it." The Los Angeles Lakers, who won the inaugural edition of the Cup last season, were essentially eliminated from the in-season tournament after falling 101-93 to the Oklahoma City Thunder.



Kobe Bufkin (4) drives the ball against Donovan Mitchell (45). — Reuters

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 15 of his 36 points in the fourth quarter for Oklahoma City, draining a three-pointer that put the Thunder up 95-91 with 1:35 remaining. Gilgeous-Alexander added a pair of free throws and Jalen Williams came up with a steal and a dunk as the Thunder kept the Lakers at bay. Dalton Knecht was the Lakers' top scorer with 20 points. Anthony Davis added 15, and LeBron James scored 12 points but produced five of the Lakers' 17 turnovers. The NBA champion Celtics, meanwhile, maintained their wildcard hopes with their win over the Bulls — who came into their game fighting the Hawks for group supremacy. Jayson Tatum scored 35 points and pulled down 14 rebounds, and reserve

Payton Pritchard scored 19 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter to help Boston pull away in a see-saw battle that featured 14 lead changes. Jaylen Brown and Kristaps Porzingis scored 21 points apiece for the Celtics, while Nikola Vucevic led the Bulls with 32 points and 11 rebounds. **KNICKS STING HORNETS** The New York Knicks, buoyed by Jalen Brunson's fourth-quarter heroics, improved to 3-0 in Cup play with a 99-98 victory over the Hornets in Charlotte. The Hornets challenged despite missing five of their top six scorers, with LaMelo Ball, Miles Bridges, Tre Mann, Grant Williams, Mark Williams and Nick Richards all sidelined. — AFP



Las Palmas’ Alex Suarez celebrates after the match. — Reuters

LAS PALMAS STUN LIGA LEADERS BARÇA ON 125TH ANNIVERSARY

LAS PALMAS CLAIMED a surprise 2-1 victory at La Liga leaders Barcelona on Saturday, spoiling the hosts’ 125th anniversary celebrations.

Sandro Ramirez sent the visitors ahead early in the second half, and although Raphinha hammered home an equaliser, Fabio Silva struck to claim three points and take his team up to 14th. Barcelona still lead champions Real Madrid by four points, but Los Blancos, who host Getafe on Sunday, have played two fewer games than Hansi Flick’s team.

The Catalans have now gone three league games without a victory, after a run of 11 wins in 12 prior in the top flight.

Barcelona wore white shorts as part of their anniversary celebrations, as they used to at the start of their history.

They held a gala in the city on Friday night to mark the occasion, having been founded on November 29, 1899, but came undone on Saturday afternoon.

The Catalans were able to name teenage starlet Lamine Yamal on the bench after recovering from an ankle problem.

Former Barcelona goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen made a solid save to deny Fermin Lopez in the opening stages, with Las Palmas showing enterprise on the counter-attack.

Barca defender Alejandro Balde was forced off with concussion in the first half after a clash with Sandro, to be replaced by Gerard Martin.

Las Palmas came close when Alberto Moleiro teed up Javi Munoz, who drilled wide, while Jules Kounde lashed an effort over at the other end. Raphinha came closest to breaking the deadlock in the first half, scoring from an offside position, after Cillessen denied Pedri, and hitting the crossbar after being played through by Gavi.

Flick threw on Yamal at the break for Pablo Torre, hoping the winger would give Barca the advantage after an even first half. Las Palmas took a surprise lead early in the second half when Kirian Rodriguez played in Ramirez, who drilled home from the edge of the box.

Raphinha hit back quickly for Barcelona with a thumping long-range effort, but Las Palmas were soon ahead again.

Silva ran onto Munoz’s probing long ball and fired past Inaki Pena to restore the Canary Islanders’ advantage with his fifth goal in eight league matches. Cillessen saved well to deny Yamal as Barca sought a leveller and Viti made a brave block to thwart Pedri.

Las Palmas survived eight minutes of stoppage time, with Dutch stopper Cillessen again saving from Yamal and two defenders desperately scrambling to block a late Robert Lewandowski chance to lock in the visitors’ victory. — AFP

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SHORTTAKES

The event will focus on sustainability, energy futures and global goals.

OMAN HOSTS 18TH GPCA FORUM

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by OQ Group, will host the 18th annual Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association (GPCA) Forum starting tomorrow, Monday, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

The event, which gathers regional and international leaders, will focus on sustainability, energy futures and global goals. Day one will feature remarks by energy ministers and the announcement of the next forum’s host country.

Key sessions will address topics such as food security and the role of agri-nutrients, energy transitions and the impact of geopolitics. The forum will also explore innovations in the chemical sector and strategies for achieving efficiency and sustainability.

Other highlights include a showcase for emerging companies in circular economy and climate action, the “Solutions Exchange” event, and a youth-focused GPCA initiative.

OQ Group CEO Ashraf al Mamari emphasised the forum’s role in promoting Oman’s leadership in petrochemicals and advancing sustainability and innovation. — ONA

OMAN KICKS OFF INDUSTRIAL SURVEY

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has launched its annual survey of industrial establishments for 2023. This year’s survey targets over 1,600 establishments, a 43% increase from 2022, and is conducted in collaboration with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones.

Dr Ahmed al Badawi, Director of the Industrial Strategy Implementation and Evaluation Department at MoCIIP, stated that the survey aims to collect accurate industrial data to enhance monitoring mechanisms, support economic diversification, and guide corrective actions. — ONA

Sohar Industrial City achieves RO 75 million in new investments

SUHAR: Sohar Industrial City, a key hub under the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), has emerged as a leader in attracting new investments and projects.

By the end of Q3 2024, the city recorded 27 new projects with a combined investment of RO 75 million and a total area of 400,000 square metres.

Eng Abdullah bin Ahmed al Mayasi, Director-General of Sohar Industrial City, highlighted that the city’s cumulative investment volume has exceeded RO 2.3 billion, supporting 395 projects

By the end of Q3 2024, the city recorded 27 new projects.

Oman targets 2,400 MW of gas-based power capacity

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, NOV 30

MARKING the end of a brief hiatus in the procurement of new gas-based power generation – in line with the country’s transition to renewable electricity – Oman’s power sector authorities are gearing up to announce a landmark procurement for one or more gas-based power projects based on advanced thermal Combined Cycle Gas Turbine (CCGT) technology.

Nama Power and Water Procurement (PWP), the single procurer of power and water capacity and output in the Sultanate of Oman, has revealed that it is preparing to launch a competitive tender for the procurement of around 2,400 MW of thermal CCGT power capacity based on the Build, Own and Operate (BOO) model.

A tender for the new capacity is expected to be released in Q2 2025, with an award date targeted by Q4 2025.

The new capacity is scheduled to be operational by Q2 2029 with early power provision by Q2 2028.

Significantly, the new project will be first since the joint procurement of the Ibri II 1510 MW and Sohar III 1710 MW power plants back in 2016, which were commissioned in early 2019. S

ince then, following an energetic procurement programme centring primarily on solar PV based renewable capacity, Nama PWP has focused on building the country’s solar and wind generation resources in line with targets set

”This project will enhance grid stability in Oman by integrating advanced thermal power plants, ensuring reliable and sustainable energy through a balanced energy mix. It marks a significant step in the company’s ongoing commitment to providing a sustainable energy future for Oman

AHMED BIN SALIM AL ABRI
CEO, Nama PWP

sustainable energy future for Oman.”

The initiative, he further noted, marks a significant step in Nama PWP ongoing

by the government.

But in light of the need to ensure grid stability in the face of multiple factors, notably energy demand growth, intermittency challenges associated with renewable based generation, and old power plants progressively falling out of contract, new gas-based power capacity has become inevitable, according to Nama PWP.

Ahmed bin Salim al Abri, Chief Executive Officer of PWP, explained: “This project will enhance grid stability in Oman by integrating advanced thermal power plants, ensuring reliable and sustainable energy through a balanced energy mix.

It marks a significant step in the company’s ongoing commitment to providing a sustainable energy future for Oman.”

commitment to ensuring a reliable and sustainable energy future for Oman through a balanced mix of energy sources, including both renewable and thermal power plants.

While state-owned Nama PWP – part of Nama Group - is committed to increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix, particularly solar, wind and energy storage, it also recognises the ongoing need for thermal power plants to meet base-load electricity demand and ensure grid security.

“PWP plans to continue its investments in efficient, modern, environment-friendly thermal power generation facilities, including natural gas-fired plants, which are expected to play a crucial role in the country’s energy supply for the foreseeable future,” PWP noted in a statement.

Importantly, the new thermal conventional power capacity will be based on advanced technology, and will leverage energy transition opportunities to optimise fuel use and reduce environmental impact. Proposals that prioritise sustainability through reduced carbon output, minimal water usage and minimal land impact will be considered.

Additionally, the new capacity will leverage state-of-art environment-friendly thermal CCGT technology, which combines gas and steam turbines for improved efficiency as well as emissions reduction.

In anticipation of the imminent release of a Request for Expressions of Interest, interested developers have been encouraged to get geared for the procurement of this strategic project, PWP added.

Hotel revenues in Oman cross RO 186 million

MUSCAT: Revenues of three-to-five-star hotels in Oman rose by 5% to reach RO 186.1 million by October 2024, compared to RO 177.2 million during the same period in 2023. The number of guests also grew by 5%, totalling 1.72 million, with occupancy rates increasing by 1.3%.

Statistics from the National Centre for Statistics and Information show a 5.7% rise in Omani guests, reaching 668,251. European

The number of guests totals 1.72 million, with occupancy rates increasing by 1.3%.

visitors increased by 8.8% to 392,767, while guests from other Arab nations grew by 11.5%. Gulf visitors saw a slight decline of 0.8%, and Oceania guests dropped significantly by 31.2%.

These figures underline the continued growth of Oman’s tourism sector, driven by diverse markets and improved hospitality services, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a preferred destination. — ONA

ADVERTORIALS

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Eco-friendly cards provide secure global transaction.

MUZN ISLAMIC BANKING OFFERS ECO-FRIENDLY CARDS

MUSCAT: NBO Muzn Islamic Banking offers a range of eco-friendly credit and debit cards, combining Sharia-compliant finance with sustainable practices. Such cards allow customers to manage their finances responsibly while contributing to environmental sustainability. Following Ujrah fee structures and credit limits based on Qardh Al Hasan guidelines, eco-friendly cards provide secure global transactions, enhanced by One-Time Password (OTP) services for added protection during online purchases.

Muzn’s credit card range includes three options, each catering to different customer needs. The Gold Credit Card offers travel assistance and discounts on car rentals, the Platinum Credit Card provides access to airport lounges and exclusive offers, and the Signature Credit Card, designed for Priority Banking customers, features multi-trip travel insurance and concierge services.

Muzn also offers a variety of Visa Debit Cards tailored to different lifestyles. This includes the Visa Signature Debit Card, which comes with exclusive travel benefits; the Visa Platinum Debit Card, which offers savings on everyday purchases; and the Visa Classic Debit Card, which provides secure and convenient payment solutions.

SIMAK LAUNCHES NEW LINE OF CANNED FISH PRODUCTS IN OMAN

MUSCAT: Under the auspices of Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, SIMAK, a subsidiary of Fisheries Development Oman, proudly announces the commencement of commercial production at its cannery factory in the Wilayat of Al Duqm. This significant milestone aligns with the Sultanate of Oman’s celebration of its 54th National Day.

SIMAK’s canned tuna products are available across the local hypermarket, with plans to introduce mackerels in the coming months. This marks an exciting milestone as SIMAK makes its first foray into the consumer products market.

SIMAK’s state-of-the-art facility, strategically located in the Duqm Special Economic Zone, harnesses advanced technology to produce over 100 million cans annually, equivalent to more than 30,000 tonnes of top-grade raw materials of seafood. This output not only meets local demand but also positions Oman as a significant player in the global seafood market.

Rewarding journey with the Toyota Corolla

THE Toyota Corolla continues to set the gold standard in the automotive world, effortlessly blending elegant design, advanced technology and a beautifully crafted interior.

Since its debut, the Corolla has become an icon synonymous with reliability, versatility and pure driving satisfaction. From its sleek, dynamic exterior to its sophisticated, well-appointed cabin, the Corolla exemplifies the perfect harmony of style, spaciousness, comfort, fuel efficiency and power.

The Corolla offers two impressive engine options designed to thrill and perform. The 2.0-litre Dynamic Force engine packs a powerful 168 horsepower and 20.39 kg-m of torque, paired with a Direct Shift CVT transmission, delivering a more immersive and engaging driving experience.

For those seeking an exceptional balance of power and fuel economy, the 1.6-litre four-cylinder engine option generates 121 horsepower and 15.7 kg-m of torque, also equipped with a smooth CVT transmission for an economical yet responsive drive. Inside, the Corolla’s interior is as refined as it is inviting.

The minimalist yet sophisticated design emphasises space, comfort and elegance, making each journey a pleasure. Newly cushioned, ergonomically designed seats, a spacious armrest and ample legroom create a premium



The Corolla has become an icon synonymous with reliability, versatility and pure driving satisfaction.

The Corolla exemplifies the perfect harmony of style, spaciousness, comfort, fuel efficiency and power.

experience for both driver and passengers.

Rear-seat passengers will appreciate the added comfort of rear AC vents, while a host of thoughtful amenities — such as a moon roof, a 4.2-inch multi-information display (MID), a 7-inch display audio system, cruise control and a six-speaker sound system enhance every drive.

Toyota’s unwavering commitment to safety shines in the Corolla, equipped with a suite of advanced safety features to keep you and your loved ones protected.

Four SRS airbags, Vehicle Stability Control (VSC), Anti-lock Braking System (ABS), Brake Assist, Electronic Brakeforce Distribution

(EBD) and a Tyre Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS) work in unison, providing peace of mind at every turn.

With its legendary performance, stylish design and premium comfort, the Toyota Corolla continues to captivate enthusiasts and set the benchmark for what a sedan should be.

Specifications of vehicle imported from Toyota Motor Corporation are as per the GSO Conformity Certificate applicable to the model/grade. Parameters such as vehicle weight, dimensions & fuel economy could vary from the GSO Conformity Certificate due to fitment of dealer installed accessories.

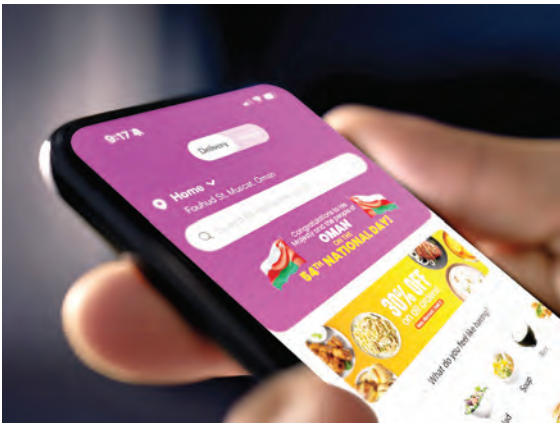
Khedmah OIFC launches Khedmah Delivery

MUSCAT: Oman Investment & Finance Company (OIFC) Khedmah, the pioneering Omani brand, launched its new mobile application, Khedmah Delivery on November 26, 2024.

This launch is part of the company’s ongoing efforts to meet the growing market demand and provide innovative additional services that satisfy the needs and aspirations of customers.

In the first phase, the application will provide food ordering and delivery services within the Muscat Governorate, with plans to expand the service to include various activities and cover all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

The application’s design has been tailored to meet the diverse needs of customers, enhancing the ordering experience by ensuring speed, ease, security and a variety of products.



The application will provide food ordering and delivery services within Muscat.

In this regard, Said bin Ahmed Safrar, the Chief Executive Officer of OIFC (Khedmah), said: “We are very pleased to launch a new vertical of the brand Khedmah, which has

a legacy of delivering the best customer services since the past 4 decades.

Khedmah Delivery reflects the company’s diligent efforts to diversify its business portfolio and support digital transformation through adopting innovation and leveraging technology to ease the lives of customers and enhance their comfort.

With the guidance of our Board of Directors, the company decided to invest in this area after the impressive success of the Khedmah app, which has been downloaded over a million times and is currently used by thousands of people monthly.

Through the Khedmah Delivery app, we aim to enhance the food ordering and delivery scene in Oman, taking it to new levels of growth and development.”

Khedmah Delivery app can be downloaded from the App Store for iOS devices or the Play Store for Android devices.

Sohar International partners with Al Noor Assoc for the Blind

MUSCAT: Sohar International, Oman’s best bank, has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Al Noor Association for the Blind in Sohar to sponsor specialised training programmes aimed at enhancing the soft skills of 50 visually impaired individuals.

The agreement was signed by Mazin bin Mahmood al Raisi, Chief Marketing Officer at Sohar International, and Mahmood bin Amer al Alawi, Financial and Administrative Affairs Manager representing Al Noor Association for the Blind in Sohar.

This initiative underscores Sohar International’s steadfast commitment to impactful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) endeavours that drive meaningful change.

By prioritising social inclusion



This initiative underscores a steadfast commitment to impactful CSR endeavours.

and community empowerment, the bank continues to champion initiatives that deliver sustainable, long-term benefits and contribute to the well-being of society.

Commenting on the bank’s involvement in the programme, Al Raisi said, “At Sohar International, we are committed to fostering initiatives that empower individuals and drive inclusivity across all sectors of society.

Our partnership with Al Noor Association for the Blind reflects

our strategic focus on impactful CSR endeavours that break down barriers and enable individuals to realise their full potential.

This programme not only enhances participants’ personal growth but also prepares them to enter the workforce, equipping them with essential skills to navigate the professional world with confidence.

By bridging challenges and opportunities, this initiative aligns with our mission to create lasting value and advance Oman’s national priorities of accessibility and integration.

Through such comprehensive support, we are fostering a resilient and dynamic workforce ready to contribute meaningfully to society.”

Commenting on the partnership, Mohammed bin Ismail al Balushi, Chairman of Al Noor Association for the Blind in Sohar,

said: “This collaboration with Sohar International is a significant step forward in our mission to empower visually impaired individuals and equip them with the skills needed to thrive in society.

The bank’s support reflects a deep understanding of the importance of inclusivity and the need for collective efforts to create opportunities for all members of the community.

This is not the first time Sohar International has supported Al Noor Association for the Blind; the bank has consistently extended its support over several years, demonstrating its steadfast commitment to our cause.

We are confident that this initiative will have a lasting positive impact, helping participants unlock their potential and contribute meaningfully to Oman’s future.”

BUSINESS

SHORTTAKES



It aims to facilitate knowledge exchange, explore innovative solutions, and address key issues affecting the sector.

FOOD SECURITY SYMPOSIUM TO HIGHLIGHT CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

MUSCAT: The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), represented by its Food Security Committee, will host a symposium on Monday, December 2, focusing on the current realities, challenges, and opportunities within the food security sector.

The event is set to take place on the sidelines of the “AgriOman” exhibition at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

The symposium will feature several visual presentations and discussion panels led by both local and international experts in food security.

It aims to facilitate knowledge exchange, explore innovative solutions, and address key issues affecting the sector.

Central to the discussions will be the role of usufruct contracts in bolstering the food security landscape in Oman.

The event will also shed light on successful company experiences in purchasing agricultural products directly from local farmers and leveraging technology and innovation to enhance food security.

Moreover, the symposium will explore strategies to improve agricultural, livestock, and fisheries production while examining the financing procedures available for food security projects in the Sultanate of Oman.

Another critical topic on the agenda is the impact of climate change on food security and the necessity of building sustainable and resilient systems to address these challenges. — ONA

RECORD HOUSING LOANS APPROVED IN 2024

MUSCAT: Oman Housing Bank approved 3,201 housing loans worth over RO 130 million during the first nine months of 2024, marking the highest loan approvals since its establishment. The loans, distributed across Oman’s governorates, aim to support citizens with subsidized financing and reduce waiting list delays.

Since its inception in 1977, the bank has provided 68,979 loans, amounting to more than RO 1.6 billion. CEO Musa bin Masoud al Jadidi emphasized the bank’s commitment to enabling citizens to secure affordable housing and boosting the nation’s construction sector.

Al Jadidi highlighted the bank’s efforts to overcome challenges and ensure loans are accessible to eligible citizens, reinforcing the institution’s role in Oman’s development journey. — ONA

17 YEARS OF PROGRESS IN THE COMMON GULF MARKET

MUSCAT: The Common Gulf Market, established under Article 3 of the Economic Agreement among GCC nations, has celebrated a series of milestones over the past 17 years. This initiative ensures that GCC citizens, whether natural or legal persons, are treated equally in all economic fields across member states.

Achievements span ten key areas, including movement and residence, employment, social insurance, practicing professions, economic

activities, property ownership, capital transfer, tax treatment, share trading and access to social services.

Data from the GCC Statistical Center reveals significant progress: 36.5 million citizens travelled between member states by the end of 2023, a 154% increase since 2007.

In government and private sector employment, over 32,000 Gulf citizens are now employed across borders, while social insurance and retirement coverage have surged by

over 300%.

The practice of economic activities has also flourished, with 81,200 licenses issued to GCC citizens, marking a growth of 455.6%.

Environmental trade reached \$131.6 billion, reflecting a 67% rise since 2012. Real estate ownership among GCC citizens in other member states grew by 25.7%, while investments in public companies and shares saw a 226.9% increase in capital. — ONA

Oman soars in global quality rankings

THE Sultanate of Oman has made a remarkable leap in the Global Quality Index issued by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Unido), climbing 57 spots to rank 60th globally out of 155 countries. Within the Middle East, Oman now holds the 6th position, significantly improving from its previous 117th place.

These efforts are designed to remove barriers to trade, facilitate imports and exports, and improve the competitiveness of Omani products globally.

DR SALEH BIN SAEED MASAN



Dr Saleh bin Saeed Masan, Under-Secretary for Commerce and Industry at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

facilitate imports and exports, and improve the competitiveness of Omani products globally.

Masan emphasized that Oman’s advancements in quality systems reflect its alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and the goals of the Tenth Five-Year Plan.

The ministry continues to invest in developing digital systems that incorporate artificial intelligence to streamline standardization processes, reduce errors, and save time and resources.

Additionally, ongoing efforts include training Omani professionals in standardization and updating policies and regulations to meet international market demands.

Imad bin Khamis al Shukaili,

Director General of Standards and Metrology at MoCIIP, noted that the strategic focus on enhancing metrological capabilities and activating private sector partnerships has been instrumental.

He highlighted the role of Oman’s active participation in regional and global organizations, including the Gulf Standardization Organization, the International Organization for Standardization, and the International Electrotechnical Commission. Oman now chairs three of the Gulf Standardization Organization’s technical committees, further cementing its leadership in quality management.

Oman also participates in 31 technical committees and working groups under the International Standardization Organization, focusing on consumer policy, conformity assessment, and supporting developing countries.

Future plans include launching an e-store for standard specifications, further digitalizing services, and signing agreements with international partners to align trade policies and mutual recognition of conformity certifications. These efforts aim to ensure that Oman continues its upward trajectory, enhancing its global competitiveness and fostering sustainable economic growth. — ONA

Tejarah Talks session to focus on AI and drones

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 30

IN a world increasingly shaped by technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and drones are redefining industries and economies. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) these innovations are opening new frontiers — enhancing efficiency, driving growth and tackling some of society’s most pressing challenges. Yet, as with any great leap forward, they also raise questions about ethics, privacy and regulation.

In the wake of the fourth industrial revolution, the MENA region is poised to become a

global leader in AI and drone technology. The numbers speak for themselves — the regional AI market, valued at nearly \$12 billion in 2023 is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 44.8 per cent from 2024 to 2030. Meanwhile, the region’s drone sector is projected to grow from \$2 billion in 2024 to \$6 billion by 2030.

In Oman, AI and drones are already making their mark. AI-driven systems are streamlining operations in sectors such as logistics, while drones are finding applications in agriculture, offering solutions for precision farming that reduce water consumption and

boost crop yields. Globally, drones have been instrumental in disaster management, providing real-time mapping and search-and-rescue capabilities in the aftermath of earthquakes and floods.

But the rapid adoption of AI-powered drones also raises important considerations. How can data privacy be safeguarded in increasingly connected systems? And what frameworks are needed to guide the responsible use of autonomous technologies in diverse applications? To explore these issues and opportunities, Tejarah Talks presents its final session of 2024: AI & Drones

— Where Are They Taking Us?

The event, taking place at the OCEC , on Tuesday, December 10, at 7:30 pm, promises an in-depth and thought-provoking discussion about Oman’s role in this technological transformation.

Moderating the evening session is Jamal al Asmi, Executive Producer, RealityCG who remarked: “AI and drones are reshaping the way we live, work and do business. In fact, these technologies not only promise to streamline sectors at the heart of Oman Vision 2040 but also drive sustainable growth and economic diversification.”

OCCI to lead trade delegation to Saudi Arabia

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, NOV 30

THE Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) is leading a trade delegation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to enhance trade and investment exchanges between the private sectors of the two brotherly countries, while also benefiting from Saudi expertise and experiences across various industrial and commercial fields.

The delegation includes several business owners and representatives from small and medium enterprises.

Eng Said bin Ali al Abri, Chairman of



ENG SAID BIN ALI AL ABRI
Chairman,
OCCI, Al Batinah
North Governorate
branch

the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Al Batinah North Governorate branch and head of the delegation, stated that this visit aims to explore commercial and investment opportunities between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as to showcase available investment

opportunities in various sectors within the governorate and promote them.

He emphasised that the visit seeks to identify promising investment opportunities in the Kingdom, discuss avenues for commercial and economic cooperation, and increase the volume of exports between the two countries, in addition to exchanging expertise in different fields and building bridges of cooperation between both sides.

Al Abri noted that this visit is part of the strategic plan established by the chamber to enhance economic, commercial, and investment relations between Oman and Saudi Arabia. According to statistics from the

National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the value of trade exchange between the two countries reached approximately RO 1.14 billion by the end of June 2024.

This figure indicates the available opportunities for business owners in both countries to increase the trade balance.

The statistics reveal that mineral products accounted for the largest share of Omani exports to Saudi Arabia, valued at RO 160.547 million by the end of June 2024, followed by ordinary metals and their products worth RO 95.036 million, and machinery, electrical equipment, and their parts valued at RO 33.592 million.

OPINION

RE100: Global corporates leadership sustainability initiative



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The author is an assistant professor at the marketing and management department of the College of Banking and Financial Studies in Muscat.

THE International Energy Agency states that electricity and heat generation remain responsible for over 40% of global CO2 emissions. Electricity and heat generation are multifaceted, resulting in resistive, inductive, and geothermal heating. As significant electricity consumers, businesses are vital in accelerating the clean energy transition. In 2014, Renewable Energy (RE100) was launched as a global corporate leadership initiative in New York. The Climate Change Group developed RE100 in partnership with the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) to amplify progress towards zero-carbon grids on a global scale. To tackle climate emergency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it is necessary to transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of electricity. The purpose and vision of RE100 are that participatory businesses must procure 100% of all their operations’ electricity requirements through renewable energy or purchase Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) matching their electricity requirement by 2050. The initiative started with founding partners like IKEA Group and Swiss Re and quickly expanded to include major companies from various sectors. As of February 2023, RE100 had grown to over 3,980 member companies across 175 markets worldwide, collectively driving over 420 terawatt-hours TWh of renewable

electricity demand annually. The RE100 membership eligibility is subject to companies with annual electricity consumption exceeding 0.1 terawatt-hours (TWh). However, exceptions can be granted for firms with lesser consumption if they are a big player in their industry, a Fortune 1000 corporation, or a crucial player in a RE100 priority area or sector. The membership also requires that companies publicly commit to sourcing 100% renewable electricity by 2050, with interim targets of at least 60% by 2030 and at least 90% by 2040. Participatory companies also require that their suppliers follow the same commitment of RE100. The RE100 renewable energy sources include wind, solar, geothermal, biomass, biogas, and sustainable hydrogen. The members can reach the 100% renewable energy goal by purchasing Renewable Energy Certificates (REC) or Power Purchase Agreements with renewable energy providers. This will support achieving the goal of zero-carbon emissions by increasing demand for renewable energy. RE100 is accelerating the power demand from hundreds of companies to the clean energy transition. We Mean Business Coalition is helping them grow faster. The We Mean Business Coalition aims to halve emissions by 2030 and transition to a net-zero economy by 2050. RE100 momentum has grown to include members across Asia,

The purpose and vision of RE100 are that participatory businesses must procure 100% of all their operations’ electricity requirements through renewable energy or purchase Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) matching their electricity requirement by 2050.

Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, China, and India. The RE100 initiative holds members accountable, celebrates milestones, communicates business cases, highlights barriers and benefits of renewable electricity, and works to address policy issues and tackle market barriers to corporate sourcing of renewable electricity. RE100 accounts for 10-15% of global CO2 emissions saved. If RE100 were a country, it would be the world’s 10th most significant electricity consumption. RE100 consumes enough renewable electricity to power France. RE100 involves influential companies and excludes smaller businesses. Climate change is an urgent emergency that the world faces; a target of 100%renewable electricity by 2050 might be a distant target. RE100 relies heavily on attribute certificates, which may yield less renewable capacity. Despite these challenges, it works to accelerate the transition to clean energy grids worldwide with collaborations across 175 markets. Climate change is one of the biggest global challenges that will alter and redefine the contours of the worldwide business landscape today and in the coming decades. The initiative will create demand for renewable power and influence renewable energy supply. RE100 is one step forward in that direction to tackle the grand challenge of climate change by taking corporate leadership on renewable electricity.

BALANCING ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DIVERSIFICATION



QASIM AL MAASHANI

The author is the head of Oman Observer’s Business section

THE data released in the Monthly Statistical Bulletin of the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) for November 2024 highlights significant developments in Oman’s economic performance. The figures reveal a decline in non-oil exports and a notable rise in imports, accompanied by fluctuations in the Import Price Index. These indicators underscore the challenges facing Oman’s journey toward economic diversification, prompting a closer examination of their implications.

Non-oil exports registered a 14.1 per cent decline compared to the same period last year, amounting to RO 4.534 billion, down from RO 5.276 billion in 2023. Conversely, imports rose by 10.9 per cent, reaching RO 12.178 billion compared to RO 10.98 billion last year. The overall Import Price Index fell by 1.5 per cent compared to Q2 2023 and by 3.3 per cent compared to Q1 2024. While this decline might ease pressure on local consumers, the rise in prices of essential goods such as food and beverages—up by 6.3 per cent and 33.1 per cent, respectively—points to persistent inflationary pressures. At the same time, the decline in mineral fuel prices by 17.4 percent could benefit production sectors but may also impact export revenues from energy-related products. These figures highlight the urgent need to accelerate Oman’s economic diversification agenda, as outlined in Vision 2040. The decline in non-oil exports and the growing reliance on imports emphasize a gap that must be addressed through policies that support local industries and enhance productivity and innovation. The private sector must play a pivotal role in this transformation by investing in industrial, agricultural, and service sectors, thereby reducing dependence on imports and generating greater value-added benefits. To achieve its ambitious goals, Oman must focus on enhancing its trade infrastructure and strengthening its logistics services. Additionally, exploring new markets for Omani products and boosting their competitiveness in international markets have become pressing priorities. Simultaneously, stabilizing local prices is vital to shield consumers from unwarranted increases in the cost of essential goods. Oman can overcome these challenges by fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors, capitalizing on available opportunities to reinforce economic sustainability and build a more prosperous future.

How stablecoins bridge gaps for economies

A quiet revolution in global finance is unfolding, not in the trading floors of New York or London, but in the mobile phones of citizens across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. While cryptocurrency markets capture headlines with Bitcoin approaching record highs, a more fundamental transformation is occurring through the widespread adoption of stablecoins - digital currencies that maintain a fixed value relative to traditional currencies like the US dollar.

In many emerging economies, citizens are bypassing traditional banking systems entirely, moving directly to blockchain-based financial services through stablecoins. This “digital leapfrog” mirrors how many countries skipped landline telephones in favor of mobile phones, but with potentially greater economic implications. Recent data reveals that Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe are experiencing the highest increases in digital currency activity. Only 49% of Sub-Saharan Africans own traditional bank accounts, compared to 93-99% in developed nations. However, these regions are rapidly embracing blockchain technology through stablecoins, which offer the stability of traditional currencies with the accessibility of digital payments. The movement of these digital dollars has reached remarkable scale. On the Tron blockchain alone, monthly transfer volumes have grown from \$350 billion last year to more than \$500 billion this November. More significantly, over 90% of these transfers are between individual users rather than trading platforms, indicating genuine daily use for payments and remittances. For Gulf economies, this trend presents both opportunities and insights. As regional financial centres continue developing digital payment infrastructure, the rapid adoption of stablecoins in



Representations of cryptocurrencies are seen in this illustration. — Reuters



STEFANO VIRGILLI

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emerging markets demonstrates how blockchain technology can enhance financial inclusion while maintaining currency stability. The UAE and Saudi Arabia’s balanced approach to digital currency regulation positions them well to bridge traditional and emerging financial systems. For regions with limited banking infrastructure, stablecoins offer a solution to common challenges like high transaction costs, documentation requirements, and physical access to banking services. Users can participate in the digital economy without sacrificing the stability of traditional currency values. The scale of this adoption is remarkable. The total market capitalisation of stablecoins has reached \$135 billion, with USDT accounting for a significant portion across various blockchain networks. Approximately \$60 billion of USDT circulates on the Tron network alone, chosen for its low transaction costs and widespread integration with global exchanges and payment platforms. Real-world applications demonstrate the practical impact of this technology. In Argentina,

where inflation has exceeded 100%, merchants and consumers increasingly turn to stablecoins for everyday transactions, preserving purchasing power while maintaining efficient payment systems. In Nigeria, small businesses use stablecoins to facilitate international trade, bypassing traditional banking constraints. Eastern European countries like Poland and Romania have seen rapid adoption through financial super-apps that combine traditional and blockchain-based services. Transaction data reveals the depth of this integration. According to CryptoQuant analysis, small-value transfers dominate activity, with wallets holding less than \$1,000 conducting nearly 30% of all transactions. Peak transfer times align with business hours in emerging markets, confirming their use for regular commerce rather than speculative trading. For Gulf economies, particularly those developing comprehensive digital payment frameworks, these trends offer valuable insights into how blockchain technology can enhance financial inclusion while maintaining currency stability.

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ART/LIFE



ART

Students in Khasab given a taste of art through art camp



BY KABEER YOUSUF

MANY participants were previously unfamiliar with the diverse hues of a painter’s palette or the various artistic mediums available to them, but they gained invaluable firsthand experience at a recent art camp.

A significant number of children from Khasab, a port city in Musandam Governorate, enjoyed an immersive art and drawing experience during a camp designed to inspire young artists in celebration of the 54th National Day. This event took place at the Indian School Khasab.

Under the guidance of esteemed artist and curator Yeldho T Ouseph, Coordinator of the Visual Arts Department at Indian School Muscat, the sessions afforded students a distinctive opportunity to refine their artistic skills.

The young participants expressed their creativity on canvas, depicting iconic cultural symbols such as the traditional Omani wooden boats, the crenellated stone turrets of Khasab Fort, and various elements reflecting the region’s rich history, including past mountain villages and lush valleys. They also captured the wilderness surrounding Jabal Hareem Peak, known for its marine fossils, alongside other noteworthy features of the port city.

This initiative, launched by Principal Bindhu Saji, exemplifies her visionary commitment to the holistic development of students. The art camp aimed to nurture artistic talent and inspire creativity among students in both the middle and primary sections.

Titled ‘Creative Canvas: An Art Experience,’ the two-day camp commemorated the birthday of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister and a well-known advocate for children, on November 15 and 16 in the School Multi-Purpose Hall.

The camp was inaugurated by Abdulla Thalangara, President of the School Management Committee, who marked the occasion with a symbolic first stroke on the canvas. Shanmugam, SMC Convenor, and SMC member Majeed PK were also present, commending the artistic efforts of the students.

The Creative Canvas camp proved to be a vibrant celebration of art, leaving a meaningful impact on both the students and the broader school community.

QUICK FEATURES



ENTERTAINMENT

Jack Ades Cohen and Jaime Jimenez Rion pose with the Kids: Factual & Entertainment award for “La Vida Secreta de tu Mente [The Secret Life Of Your Mind]” at the 52nd International Emmy Awards in New York City. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

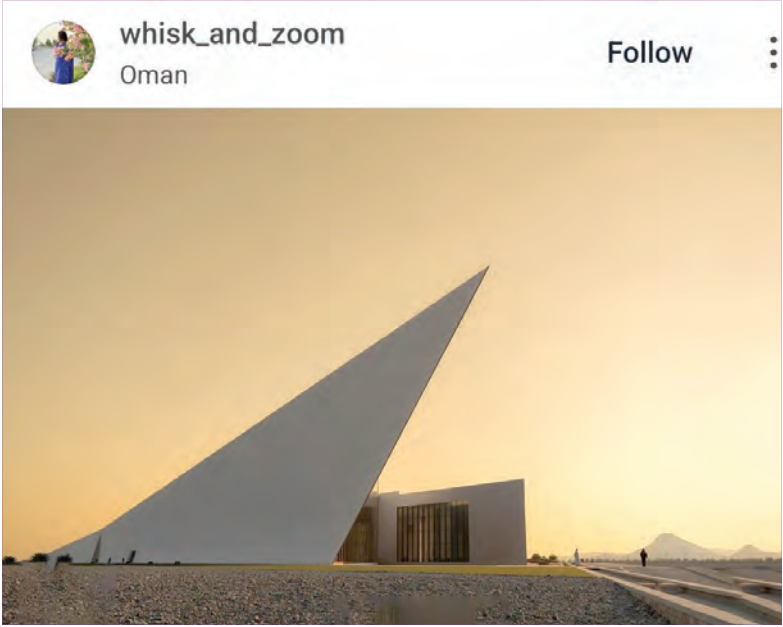
Sikh participants compete in ‘Gatka’, an ancient form of Sikh martial arts in Amritsar, India — AFP



CULTURE

A 19th century royal statue of a half-man half-bird, representing Benin’s King Ghezo, exhibited at the Quai Branly museum before being shipped to the West African country later this month in Paris. — AFP

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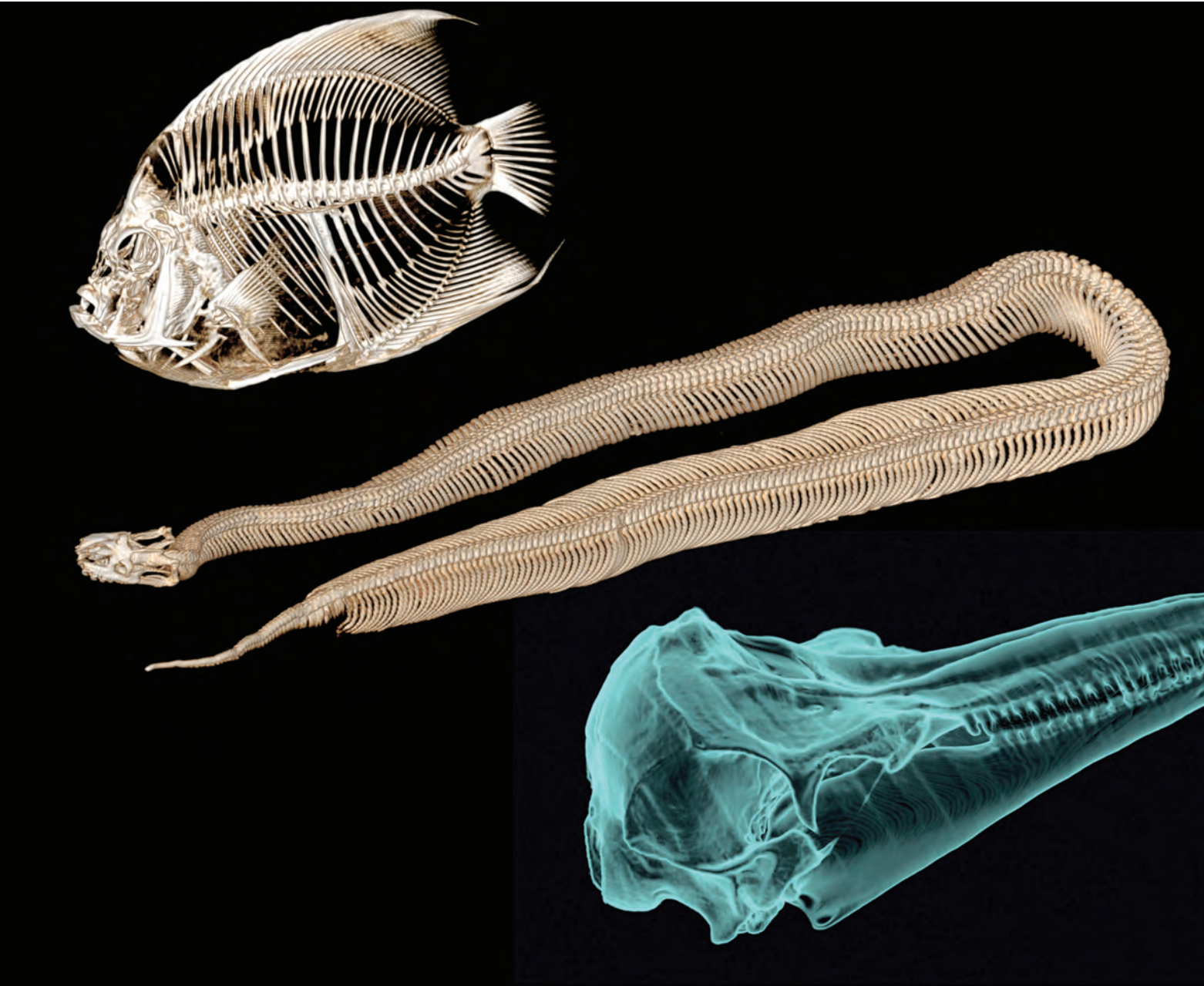
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Ruby slippers from ‘The Wizard of Oz’ up for auction



RUBY SLIPPERS worn by actress Judy Garland in classic film “The Wizard of Oz” will be sold at auction next month, nearly 20 years after they were stolen. Heritage Auctions showed off the magical footwear in London before they go under the hammer in Dallas on December 7, with predictions they could sell for up to \$3 million. “They are legendary like no other,” Nikki Hale, manager of special projects at Heritage, said of the distinctive sequin covered court shoes, which are topped with bows. “The Wizard of Oz’ really stands the test of time as a cult classic, iconic film that anywhere across the world, people know what ‘The Wizard of Oz’ is.” “You see them when she’s

clicking the heels to go home. You see them when she starts her adventure, when she goes down Munchkinland,” Hale added. “They are absolutely the Holy Grail as far as movie memorabilia.” Only four pairs made for the 1939 film still survive and those on sale have belonged to a collector since 1970. They were kept in the Judy Garland Museum in her home town of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, until they mysteriously disappeared in 2005. Despite a six-figure reward and the involvement of the FBI, it was not until 2018 that they were finally tracked down. “They were recovered, apparently buried in a Tupperware (box), underground,” said Hale. —AFP



A Skeleton Bank of Understudied Species

“**RADIOLOGISTS** are very comfortable with dogs, cats, horses, cows,” said Dr Michael Adkesson, the president and CEO of Brookfield Zoo Chicago. But ask them to peer inside a critically endangered, 2,300-pound black rhino and they might quickly find themselves in uncharted territory. In 2018, after one of the zoo’s rhinos developed hard-to-diagnose breathing problems, Adkesson and his colleagues managed to take a CT scan of its head — and then found themselves wondering what the inside of a rhinoceros head was even supposed to look like. “With zoo and wildlife animals,” Adkesson said, “we often just don’t have good reference data available.” In an effort to solve this problem, Adkesson and his colleagues built the Zoo and Aquarium Radiology Database, which was unveiled last month. The online database, a collaboration between seven zoological institutions, contains more than 1,000 medical images — X-rays and CT scans — of 50 different species, including the greater roadrunner, the cotton-

top tamarin and the bowmouth guitarfish, also known as a shark ray. The goal is to have more than 10,000 images of 500 species by 2026. Many of the images in the database, which all depict healthy animals and were reviewed by board certified radiologists, were produced in the course of providing routine care for zoo denizens. But there is nothing routine about imaging rare and exotic animals, which may require moving anaesthetised rhinos with front-end loaders, persuading giraffes to present their hooves and propping up fish on wet sponges. “If you’ve got a bucket, and you can keep a stingray in a little bath of water, you can image the entire bucket with the stingray in it,” said Dr Eric Hostnik, a veterinary radiologist at the Ohio State University and the lead radiologist for the project. “You’ll still get great images.” The team hopes that zoo veterinarians will incorporate the database into their everyday practice, consulting the reference images when they spot something strange

on a snake’s CT scan, or find themselves puzzling over why a pangolin looks peaked. “Your general veterinarian can open a number of textbooks and look up cat and dog stuff,” Hostnik said. “The same isn’t as true for our zoo vets.” It could also be a resource for field biologists studying vulnerable populations in the wild, Adkesson said, or even yield new insights into the basic biology of understudied species. And even for non-experts, the images lay bare the astonishing diversity of animal bodies that have evolved on Earth. Sea stars have no backbones, while snakes are almost all spine. A stingray’s skeleton is made entirely of cartilage. Anteaters and pangolins, which slurp down insects with their long tongues, are among the few mammals without teeth. (A pangolin’s tongue, and the bone it is attached to, extends down through its chest.) “The beauty of some of that anatomy is so striking,” Adkesson said. It’s not always easy for the public to appreciate, he added, “until you start looking at a skeleton.” —NYT

FEATURES



HARVESTING HONEY IN OMAN 'S RUGGED MOUNTAINS IS A MUST-TRY EXPERIENCE

BY HAMDOON AL HASHMI
Instagram: 7amd0on

ABOUT a two-hour drive from Muscat, Wilayat of Al Rustaq in the Al Batinah South Governorate, known for its rich history and cultural significance, featuring ancient forts, traditional markets, and beautiful natural landscapes. The city is also famous for its hot springs, which are popular among locals and visitors alike for their therapeutic properties.

Wilayat of Al Rustaq serves as a gateway to the surrounding mountainous governorates and is recognised for its agricultural activities, particularly the cultivation of dates and other fruits. The city embodies a blend of tradition and modern life, making it an interesting destination for those exploring Oman's culture and history.

While I had been actively exploring Oman, it's not an everyday occurrence that I considered joining in on honey harvesting. Oman is home to various species of bees, and its mountainous areas provide a diverse range of flora that contributes to the production of unique and high-quality honey. The honey harvest in the Omani mountains is a fascinating and traditional practice that reflects the 's rich natural resources and cultural heritage.

Typically, the honey harvest occurs during specific seasons when the flowers are in full bloom, allowing bees to collect nectar. Beekeepers, known locally as "nahal," often use traditional methods to extract honey, making it a labour-intensive process passed down through generations. They usually utilise wooden hives and follow sustainable practices that respect the environment and bee populations.

Omani honey is renowned for its distinct flavours and health benefits, often attributed to the diverse plants and wildflowers found in the mountains,

including thyme, saffron and various herbs. Honey is not only a popular local delicacy but is also sought after in international markets for its premium quality.

My journey began in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, where I immersed myself in the honey harvest season. It started with a traditional Omani breakfast at a local home, setting the stage for an authentic experience. After breakfast, we ventured along off-the-beaten-path roads to check on the beehives early in the morning.

We then visited another family in the mountains, who, as is customary, wouldn't let us leave without offering us two cups of coffee and dates. As lunchtime approached, it proved quite challenging to negotiate our departure without sharing a meal!

After a hearty lunch, we hiked through lesser-known trails to collect qanm leaves, a favourite treat for the local goats. The panoramic views from the summit were breathtaking, offering a stunning overlook of the mountainous landscape.

Upon returning to the village, the locals insisted we stay for coffee and dinner once more, particularly the father of my friend. That evening, I settled in for a restful night in Al Rustaq after enjoying a hot dip in the Al Kasfa hot spring, preparing for the hard work ahead.

I woke up early the next day to do some shopping, picking up a few cartons of mangoes as simple gifts for my close friends. We then met at our designated location, where seven of us donned bee protection suits. This was my first time engaging in such an experience, and I was fortunate to be guided by the most experienced beekeeper in the valley. He generously shared his knowledge about hive management, honey harvesting, and maintaining bee health during off-seasons, patiently answering all our questions.

During this trip, the honey

harvest centred around the Sidr tree scientifically known as *Ziziphus spina-christi*. The honey produced from the nectar of Sidr blossoms is highly revered for its distinctive flavour and exceptional quality.

Sidr honey boasts a rich, golden hue and has a smooth, viscous texture that melts in the mouth. Its taste is uniquely complex, combining sweet and slightly tangy notes, often accompanied by hints of spice.

This honey is celebrated for its high nutritional value and medicinal properties, commonly praised for its antibacterial and anti-inflammatory benefits.

The local bees' foraging on the Sidr flowers, which bloom in late autumn, imparts a unique character to the honey, making it a sought-after delicacy not only within Oman but also in international markets, where it is recognised for its premium quality and richness.

The honey harvest in the Omani mountains is not just about collecting honey; it symbolises the connection between local communities and their natural environment, highlighting the importance of traditional practices in preserving cultural heritage and biodiversity.

The honey harvesting season typically aligns with the blooming of local flowers. Beekeepers monitor the hives to determine the optimal time for harvesting, ensuring that the bees have produced enough honey. Extraction is usually done manually. Beekeepers carefully remove the honeycomb frames from the hives and use simple tools to extract the honey, often placing the combs in a natural gravity extractor or using hand-operated presses.

The harvesting process is often a communal activity, with families gathering together to participate, share skills, and celebrate the importance of bees and honey in Omani culture. This fosters a strong sense of community and connection to tradition.

Different governorates in Oman produce various types of honey based on the local flora. For instance, honey from the mountains may have distinct flavours due to the unique wildflowers and herbs found there.

This trip has deepened my appreciation for honey and the intricate process behind it. I learned that mountain people possess remarkable patience, and tending to hives requires significant effort. From now on, I will respect the prices of honey and recognise the difference between low-quality and high-quality products.

I've come to understand the importance of connecting with beekeepers and immersing myself in their world. It's not just about purchasing honey from shops; it's about participating in the harvest experience at least once in a lifetime.

