

O M A N عُمَان D A I L Y

Observer



10 SAUDI ARABIA BOUNCE BACK TO BEAT FIGHTING YEMEN

A young girl with light brown hair is looking out from under a dark, torn tarp. She is resting her chin on her hand. The shelter is made of various materials, including a white plastic sheet and a piece of cardboard with some writing on it. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Israel will, however, continue relentless efforts to return hostages, he added. Israeli negotiators returned to Israel from Qatar on Tuesday evening for consultations about a hostage deal after a significant week of talks, Netanyahu's office said on Tuesday. — Reuters

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

The height of sea waves on all coasts of the Sultanate of Oman will be between 1.5 to 2.5 metres.

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OMAN

SHORT TAKES

ASIAN ARAB
BUSINESS FORUM
TODAY

KABEER YOUSUF
@KABIYUSEF

The Sultanate of Oman will host the Asian Arab Business Forum, organised by the Asian Arab Chamber of Commerce under the auspices of Noralizan Abdul Momin, Ambassador of Brunei to the Sultanate of Oman, which will be attended by business communities from Oman and OIC countries at the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) on Thursday. Ambassadors and diplomatic representatives of Brunei, Greece, Estonia, Italy, SADC, Ethiopia, and many other countries in Oman, along with industrialists and businessmen from India, GCC, and OIC countries, will join the high-level forum where the Asian Arab Declaration for OIC countries will be announced. The declaration will pledge the commitment of support between the private sector in Oman and OIC countries to establish a robust partnership. “Oman has several ongoing projects suitable for foreign investment, and investors can explore these opportunities,” said Nasima al Balushi, Director-General at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), who has been instrumental in enabling deeper partnerships between Indian businessmen invited to Oman in areas such as healthcare and infrastructure development programmes. Speaking to the Oman Daily Observer, Dr Santhosh Geever, Chairman of the Asian Arab Chamber of Commerce, said that there has been significant interest from India, which has a large NRI population, in OIC countries.

UNIVERSITY OF
NIZWA CELEBRATES
SCIENTIFIC
RESEARCH DAY



Dr Rahma al Mahrouqi toured the exhibition, expressing her admiration for the diverse projects.

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 25

The University of Nizwa hosted its annual Scientific Research Day for the academic year 2023/2024, under the auspices of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. The event, held at Al Hazm Hall on Wednesday, showcased the university's remarkable achievements in research and innovation. Attended by university leaders, faculty and students, the event highlighted 100 research posters, unveiling significant projects funded by various programmes, including institutional and strategic research grants. The university also showcased nine patents and industry-ready projects, emphasising its commitment to advancing applied sciences. In his speech, Prof Ahmed al Harrasi, Vice-Chancellor of Nizwa University for Postgraduate Studies, Scientific Research and External Relations, emphasised the university's focus on addressing national priorities such as food, pharmaceutical and cybersecurity. He highlighted milestones, including over 3,500 peer-reviewed publications, 26 patents, and 326 published books and chapters.

Omani company establishes first centre for drones and robots

MUSCAT: Ankaa Space and Technology, an Omani firm registered with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED), has begun establishing the first centre for developing drones and robots for use in the fields of agriculture, housing and urban planning. The company is also establishing an urban observatory platform,



The company is also establishing an urban observatory platform deemed the first of its kind in the Middle East. — ONA

SAYYID SHIHAB RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF JORDAN



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Tharwah Hamad Neimat, Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the bilateral relations between the two countries. They also exchanged views and discussed several topics of mutual interest. — ONA

Pact worth RO 14.5mn
inked in Al Dakhiliyah

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 25

In a move to accelerate development and enhance public services, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate has signed agreements with various companies for the implementation of projects worth over RO 14.5 million. The signing ceremony, held on Wednesday, was presided over by Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah. These agreements reflect the governorate's dedication to translating Oman Vision 2040 into actionable outcomes. Shaikh Al Hajri highlighted that the projects aim to boost local content, support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), generate employment, and enhance economic and tourism indicators in the region. Among the flagship projects is the establishment of Midan Al Dakhiliyah in the Wilayat of Nizwa. Spanning 145,000 square metres, this transformative development will integrate investment opportunities, tourism attractions, cultural elements, and environmental sustainability. The project will feature 4 kilometres of walking and cycling tracks surrounded by lush green spaces; a 2,000-square-metre children's play area with modern and safe facilities; dedicated zones for food trucks and kiosks; and solar-powered seating areas and aesthetically designed fountains. It also includes comprehensive facilities such as prayer halls for men and women and public restrooms. To ensure safety and longevity, the project will also include a concrete protective wall encircling the site. The agreements further encompass significant road infrastructure projects, with allocations of RO 4.25 million for constructing internal roads in Bidbid, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, and Manah, as well as designing and implementing roads in Tuwa Al Nisf (the Wilayat of Samayil) and Al Saih Al Ahmar (the Wilayat of Bidbid). Additional roadworks include industrial zones in the wilayats of Bidbid, Izki and Adam, valued at RO 991,000. Consultancy services for dualising the Wadi Ghul Road and developing a commercial zone in Al Hamra have also been finalised. In addition to infrastructure, the agreements prioritise enhancing municipal and digital services. Key initiatives include activating the Nizwa Gateway Project to boost connectivity, improving streetlight maintenance through the provision of spare parts and swift repair systems, and upgrading digital



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infrastructure for seamless operations and enhanced efficiency. Shaikh al Hajri reaffirmed the governorate's commitment to sustainable development by emphasising the use of local products and the active involvement of SMEs. These projects are designed to drive economic progress,

improve community well-being, and align with Oman Vision 2040's strategic goals. Through these initiatives, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is poised to deliver long-term benefits, solidifying its role as a key contributor to the nation's growth and prosperity.

which is deemed the first of its kind in the Middle East. Mohammed bin Salim al Riyami, CEO of Ankaa Space and Technology, said, “To carry out its programmes, the company joins hands with a number of government institutions and private establishments, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) and the Ministry of

Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP).” He added that the company is also working with NASA to conduct field visits for Omani students and collaborates with OQ to conduct advanced research in robotics. The activities include programming drones and artificial intelligence (AI) applications to serve various sectors, he explained. — ONA



Implementation of the drill was part of a training plan adopted by the RAO to maintain a high level of performance. — ONA

OMANI-SAUDI MILITARY EXERCISE ‘SOLIDARITY 1’ CONCLUDES

RIYADH: The Omani-Saudi Joint Military Exercise ‘Solidarity 1’ concluded in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) on Wednesday.

The drill saw the participation of a force from Oman Coast Regiment of the 23rd Infantry Brigade, Royal Army of Oman (RAO) and a force from the 2nd regiment of the 20th Brigade of the Royal Land Forces of the KSA.

Implementation of the drill was part of a training plan adopted by the RAO to maintain a high level of performance and the combat ability of its units. It was also in pursuance of an annual training programme implemented in cooperation with GCC, Arab and friendly countries to serve the overall national objectives. — ONA



Voting for ‘Oman Nation Brand’ identity begins today

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

FOLLOWING the announcement of the visual identity voting campaign earlier this week, the people of Oman can now get ready to cast their vote for their favourite Oman Nation brand visual identity, one of the several engagement phases within the broader Nation Brand development project.

Beginning today until December 29, Omani citizens and residents can visit the official Oman Nation brand website [www.omanbrand.om](#) and vote for their favourite of three Oman Nation brand visual identities.

Each of the visual identities takes the form of a branded logo that delicately unites both traditional and contemporary Omani design elements derived from rigorous research by a Creative Committee of Omani creative professionals.

The voting campaign is an opportunity for the people of Oman to play an active role in the selection of the visual identity that will accompany the nation's long-term nation branding strategy — which represents an exciting new chapter in Oman's national story, which the people of Oman can be proud to share with the world.

The voting process is designed to be simple, easy and convenient. Participants will need to visit [www.omanbrand.om](#) on their mobile phone or desktop computer;



Omani citizens and Oman-based residents can visit the official Oman Nation brand website [www.omanbrand.om](#) and vote for their favorite of three Oman identities.

register their details; select the Oman Nation brand logo which they feel best represents the Sultanate's authentic story previously shaped through a series of engagement initiatives around Oman; and cast their vote.

Speaking about the campaign, Eng Aisha bint Mohammed al Saifiyah, Director of Oman's Unified Promotional Nation Brand Project and Vice President for the National Programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher) stated: “I encourage all Omanis and all Oman-based residents to vote in this campaign. Your votes are incredibly important because they will bring the Oman Nation strategy to life with an authenticity that truly represents the people of Oman and our inherent set

of values and aspirations. This is a vital first step for the ongoing nation branding strategy and your vote ensures we can proudly and collectively showcase the Omani story to the world.”

Following voting, the winning logo will be revealed to the public in early 2025; and subsequently be used as the visual identity for the entire Oman Nation brand strategy. The development of the three visual identity options selected for the campaign was the result of a close collaboration between both Omani and international expertise, and an extensive 12-month research and development phase, which included a total of 500 surveys, 128 interviews, and numerous focus groups and street consultations with both Omani citizens and residents, across the country.

Furthermore, 5,500 international surveys were carried out, and over 3.8 million search engine keywords were analysed to understand the current perceptions of Oman and to determine how the Oman Nation brand strategy could best be implemented. The visual identity voting campaign forms one of the first of a series of public engagement initiatives planned for the Sultanate's long-term nation branding strategy, which plans to positively impact how Oman is perceived globally by its international peers and to leverage this for the benefit of the country's economy and society, and long-term growth and development. The strategy will also serve to differentiate Oman from other countries and correct any misconceptions about Oman.

CONDOLENCES

The Board of Directors, Management and Employees of
Hamdan Trading Group
are deeply saddened to announce that our beloved
Founder and Chairman

**Sheikh Hamad Bin Hamoud Bin
Hamad Al Ghafri**

Passed away on 24 December 2024

*We pray to Allah, the Almighty, to grant the deceased His vast mercy, rest his soul
in eternal peace, and to provide his family and loved ones patience and solace.*

Indeed, we belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return





A PERFECT RENDEZVOUS FOR FAMILIES



KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

BE it the chalets adorned with huge bunches of imported flowers or the lake-side joints, the Muscat Nights, a celebration of diverse cultural spectrum, fun and frolic at the seven major venues, is proving to be a perfect rendezvous of families from different parts of the country.

Besides, Oman's treasure trove of rich heritage and culture are in focus at the one-month long festivity galore.

Since it's opening on Monday, the festival has been a major crowd puller in the past few days and more so on Saturday as families even from far-flung villages began flowing into the parks.

While parents take a stroll along the largest flower collection from across the world, kids are kept busy doing swing and slides, cycling, bike riding, face painting and other family fun and adventures.

From challenging escape rooms to captivating stargazing nights, Muscat Nights got the families covered with a variety of adventure activities that will keep them entertained and create lasting memories. And not to forget, to savour the foods

Muscat Municipality, the organisers of the Nights, has presented a different experience in presenting families with a flavour of the Omani heritage showcasing the identity and cultural heritage of the Sultanate of Oman to the world

from across the world kept in a long array of stalls clad in vivid colours.

Unlike in the past festivals, when Oman celebrated Muscat Festival till 2019, the heritage village is vowing to offer a kaleidoscopic view of the historic Oman which is displayed without losing its amusing factor.

Muscat Municipality, the organisers of the Nights, has presented a different experience in presenting families with a flavour of the Omani heritage showcasing the identity and cultural heritage of the Sultanate of Oman to the world.

Through a distinguished corner that contained an exclusive array of Oman's authentic artefacts and the participation of leading Omani institutions in the field of technology and virtual reality to bring the rare facts and figures, monuments and historic landmarks to the audience make the whole difference here at the heritage corner.

"With the Muscat Nights lasting for one month, we hope that visitors would get a unique and extraordinary experience as we aim to introduce families to Muscat Nights by using virtual reality technology and simulating it for six sites in the Sultanate of Oman," said Muscat Municipality spokesperson.

SHORT TAKES



The two sides reviewed topics of mutual interest and cooperation between the two countries. — ONA

INSPECTOR GENERAL RECEIVES SAUDI OFFICIAL

Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, on Wednesday received Khalil Ibrahim Salamah, Deputy Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources for Industrial Affairs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and his accompanying delegation.

The two sides reviewed several topics of mutual interest and explored ways to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries. The meeting was attended by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, and several senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). — ONA

OMAN ATTENDS SESSION OF ARAB AFFAIRS COUNCIL



The Omani delegation was represented by Shaikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Under-Secretary at MoSD. — ONA

MANAMA: Represented by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), the Sultanate of Oman took part in the 44th session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs. The session was hosted by the Kingdom of Bahrain on Wednesday.



SHAIKH RASHID BIN AHMED AL SHAMSI Under-Secretary at MoSD

Oman's delegation was represented by Shaikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development.

The session discussed preparations for the Arab Summit, the 2nd World Summit for Social Development and the 3rd World Summit for Persons with Disabilities, scheduled to be held in 2025. The session touched on topics of relevance to the family, childhood, the elderly and social policies. The session also reviewed the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and other unstable countries. It laid emphasis on the need to provide humanitarian assistance where necessary, address development challenges in the Arab region and consolidate joint social development action. — ONA

TURKISH OFFICIAL VISITS MSC AND MTC

MUSCAT: Prof Erhan Afyoncu, Rector of the National Defence University of the Republic of Türkiye and his accompanying delegation today visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC).

The delegation was greeted upon their arrival at the MSC by Commodore Adil bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Head of the Maritime Security Centre (MSC).

Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in the safety of the Omani maritime environment.



The visiting delegation were briefed about the MTC. — ONA

They also toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties.

Meanwhile, Prof Erhan Afyoncu, Rector of the National Defence University of the Republic of Türkiye also visited the Military Technological College (MTC).

Upon the delegation's arrival at the college, they were received by the Acting Commandant of the MTC.

The visiting delegation were briefed about the MTC. — ONA

Strategic goals discussed at ONCECS meeting

AFRAH AL BALUSHI MUSCAT, DEC 25

THE Omani National Commission for Education, Culture and Science (ONCECS) recently convened its first General Assembly meeting, chaired by Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education (MoE) and Chairperson of the Commission. The meeting aimed to familiarise members with the objectives and activities of Unesco, ISESCO and ALECSO while exploring ways to align these efforts with Oman Vision 2040.

The session was attended by prominent figures, including Her Highness Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at SQU, Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education and Vice Chairman of the Commission, Dr Mahmoud al Abri, Secretary of the Commission, and members from national institutions related to education, culture and science.

The meeting discussed key objectives and it focused on understanding the needs of national institutions for activities provided by international organisations; enhancing



The meeting aimed to familiarise members with the objectives and activities of Unesco, ISESCO and ALECSO while exploring ways to align these efforts with Oman Vision 2040.

Oman's representation in global conferences related to education, culture and science; and highlighted Oman's achievements in these fields to international audiences.

In her opening address, Dr Madeeha emphasised the Commission's role as a vital link between Oman and international organisations, fostering partnerships to implement programmes that advance sustainable development and national priorities.

Dr Mahmoud al Abri highlighted the Commission's accomplishments, that include, registering five tangible cultural

heritage sites and 15 cultural elements; hosting international conferences such as the ISESCO Ministers of Education meeting; promoting initiatives like digital learning, curriculum alignment with the labour market and developing future skills.

Badr al Harthy, Assistant Secretary of the Commission, shed light on efforts towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) through initiatives that ensure inclusive and equitable education.

As part of its strategic vision the ONCECS aims to align its initiatives with Oman Vision 2040 and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030.

It aspires to build national and international partnerships to enhance development effort; and empower national institutions and individuals through capacity-building programmes.

Presentations by sector directors showcased ongoing and completed programmes, reflecting the Commission's commitment to fostering education, culture and science at both national and international levels.

The meeting concluded with a reaffirmation of ONCECS's dedication to advancing Oman's cultural and scientific standing globally.

Insurance companies urged to improve communication centres

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) has asked securities and insurance companies to take the necessary measures to improve the quality of call centres dedicated to the public, in a circular.

The issuance of this circular comes as a result of the Authority's observation of practices in this regard that conflict with the laws and provisions regulating the protection of data and personal information of clients in establishing its call centres, in addition to the impact of these practices on the level of quality and service provided to clients and insurance policyholders.

The Financial Services Authority is the body responsible for regulating and

licensing activities related to the securities and insurance sector, ensuring that they are carried out in accordance with the best international standards and practices, laws and regulatory provisions that maintain the strength and quality of the performance of institutions operating in the capital market and insurance sectors.

"This direction is part of our effort to improve the quality of services provided by companies operating in the field of securities and insurance companies to the public of investors and insurance policyholders," the Authority said in the circular.

It has also stipulated the necessity of taking the adequate measures to improve communication channels with the public by preparing its call centres, in line with the level

that keeps pace with modern communication channels; and ensures the protection of data and personal information; and provides services and inquiries with appropriate quality and speed.

The circular also has specified a number of important measures, including the necessity of training and qualifying employees in communication channels with the public; and ensuring their familiarity with the laws and legislation in force to be able to meet the needs of customers; and answer their inquiries, which will in turn contribute to raising the efficiency of call centres to achieve the goal assigned to them.

The Authority has also calls on the parties addressed by the circular to operate call centres from within the Sultanate of

Workshops enhance Omani youth employability skills

AL MUSANNAH: As part of its efforts to enhance the skills of Omani youth and empower them to enter the labour market with confidence and competence, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Al Musannah, concluded a series of workshops on CV writing, personal interviews and IQ tests for students and graduates. These workshops were delivered by Eng Ismail al Shukaili, talent acquisition

specialist at Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). The sessions lasted for six days during November and December 2024, targeting more than 180 students, graduates and on-the-job trainees.

The workshops provided practical tips on writing professional CV to effectively enhance participants' skills and experiences. They also emphasised preparation for personal interviews by offering



The workshops provided practical tips on writing professional CV to effectively enhance participants' skills, experiences.

strategies to boost self-confidence and help candidates stand out to potential employers.

Notably, this series of workshops received high praise from participants, who considered them as valuable opportunities to improve their employment prospects.

The interactive sessions with Eng Ismail al Shukaili allowed participants to ask questions and receive personalised advice to

enhance the practical benefits of the workshops.

Such initiatives reflect the university's and PDO's commitment to supporting the local community and developing young talent, as well as contributing to building a brighter future for Omani youth. The university aspires to continue these efforts in the future which will open new horizons and support the ambitions of Omani youth.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Lebanese soldiers stand next to damaged buildings in the southern Lebanese village of Kham. — AFP

LEBANON SAYS ISRAELI AIR STRIKE HITS TARGET IN EAST

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s state media said an Israeli air strike targeted the Baalbek region in the east of the country before dawn on Wednesday, branding it a “violation” of the fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah. The truce went into effect on November 27 after more than a year of hostilities that began with the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip.

Wednesday’s strike near the town of Tarya did not result in casualties, the state-run National News Agency said, calling the attack the “first violation of the ceasefire agreement” in the Baalbek area. A Lebanese security source said the strike targeted “warehouses believed to belong to Hezbollah”. Hezbollah has for decades held sway in south Beirut, and the south and east of the country. As part of the truce, the Lebanese army and peacekeepers will deploy in southern Lebanon as the Israeli army pulls out over a period of 60 days, which are due to expire in January 2025.

— AFP



South Korea flag flutters in the wind as protesters call for the ouster of President Yoon Suk Yeol, in Seoul. — AFP

S KOREA’S YOON DEFIES SECOND AGENCY SUMMONS

SEOUL: South Korea’s suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol did not respond on Wednesday to a second summons by anti-corruption authorities who, along with prosecutors, are investigating his short-lived martial law decree issued early this month. Yoon had not appeared for questioning as of 10 am on Christmas Day as requested by the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), after ignoring its first summons last week.

An agency official said it would continue waiting for Yoon on Wednesday, adding it would need to review the case further before seeking an arrest warrant, Yonhap news agency reported. An official with a joint investigation unit, which the CIO is part of, told reporters later in the day that it had neither heard back from Yoon nor received a document for the appointment of his legal counsel as of 6 pm. The unit would conduct a review and decide on further moves, the official said.

— AFP

MILITARY OPERATION

Air strikes on Afghanistan kill 46 people



Bombardment by Pakistani military aircraft in Afghanistan’s eastern Paktika province killed at least 46 people, the Afghan Taliban said. Six people were also injured in the bombing at four locations in Afghanistan, deputy spokesman Hamdullah Fitrat said on Wednesday. Afghanistan’s foreign office said it had summoned Pakistan’s head of mission in Kabul to deliver a formal protest note on the bombing by Pakistani aircraft.

— Reuters

CHINA, JAPAN FOREIGN MINISTERS AGREE VISIT, SECURITY DIALOGUE

BEIJING: Talks between China and Japan’s foreign ministers in Beijing have paved way for Japan to host China’s foreign affairs chief next year and mutual agreement to hold a security dialogue as soon as possible, Japan said on Wednesday. No details were given for when the events will take place but Japan’s Takeshi Iwaya said in a statement to reporters after his meeting and a working lunch with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi that both agreed on continued high-

level talks, including potentially an economic dialogue during the 2025 visit.

The one-day visit is Iwaya’s first to the Chinese capital since becoming Japan’s foreign minister in October, to discuss issues with his country’s largest trading partner. It follows an agreement between leaders of both countries to work towards a mutually beneficial strategic relationship. Wang stressed in the meeting that the significance of the countries’ relationship went

beyond bilateral ties. “If China-Japan relations are stable, Asia will be more stable,” Wang said at the start of their meeting.

Last month, Beijing expanded its visa-free arrangements to include Japan until the end of 2025, restoring a policy that was suspended during the pandemic. China also extended the stay period to 30 days from 15. Japanese citizens were able to enter China without a visa for up to 14 days before Covid-19.

— Reuters

Hamas says Israel delay Gaza ceasefire deal

HAMAS accused Israel on Wednesday of imposing “new conditions” that it said were delaying a ceasefire agreement in the war in Gaza, though it acknowledged negotiations were still ongoing. Israel refuted Hamas allegations that it was delaying a captive release and ceasefire deal in the Gaza Strip, saying it was the Palestinian group that was creating “new obstacles” to an agreement. Indirect talks between Israel and Palestinian Hamas, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, have taken place in Doha in recent days, rekindling hope for a truce deal that has proven elusive. “The ceasefire and prisoner exchange negotiations are continuing in Doha under the mediation of Qatar and Egypt in a serious manner... but the occupation has set new conditions concerning withdrawal (of troops), the ceasefire, prisoners and the return of displaced people, which has delayed reaching an agreement,” the Palestinian group said in a statement. Hamas did not elaborate on the conditions imposed by Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told parliament that there was “some progress” in the talks and on Tuesday his office said Israeli representatives had returned from Qatar after “significant negotiations”. Last week, Hamas and Palestinian groups said in a rare joint statement that a ceasefire agreement was “closer than ever”, provided Israel did not impose new conditions. Efforts to strike a truce and captives release deal have

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Men and children stand from afar to view the site of reported Israeli bombardment on tents sheltering Palestinians displaced from Beit Lahia at a camp in Khan Yunis. — AFP

repeatedly failed over key stumbling blocks. Despite numerous rounds of indirect talks, Israel and Hamas have agreed just one truce, which lasted for a week at the end of 2023. Negotiations have faced multiple challenges since then, with the primary point of disagreement being the establishment of a lasting ceasefire in Gaza. Another unresolved issue is the governance of post-war Gaza. It remains a highly contentious issue, including within the Palestinian leadership. Israel has said repeatedly that it will not allow Hamas to run the territory ever again. In an interview with The Wall Street Journal last week, Netanyahu said: “I’m not going to agree to end the war before we remove Hamas.” He added Israel is “not going to leave them in power in Gaza, 30 miles from Tel Aviv. It’s not going to

happen.”

Netanyahu has also repeatedly stated that he does not want to withdraw Israeli troops from the Philadelphia Corridor, a strip of land cleared and controlled by Israel along Gaza’s border with Egypt. Israel’s retaliatory campaign has killed at least 45,361 people in Gaza, a majority of them civilians, according to figures from the Palestinian territory’s health ministry that the UN considers reliable.

The Palestinian health ministry reported that an ongoing raid by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank has resulted in eight fatalities. The Ramallah-based ministry said seven were killed in the Tulkarem refugee camp and one in the nearby Nur Shams camp after the military launched a sweeping raid.

— AFP



UK KING HAILS DOCTORS IN CHRISTMAS

LONDON: King Charles III thanked “selfless doctors and nurses” for supporting the royal family in his Christmas address, marking the end of a year during which he and Princess Catherine have battled cancer. The king paid tribute to medical staff, veterans and humanitarian workers, and touched upon topics ranging from global conflicts to the far-right riots in the UK this summer.

“I offer special heartfelt thanks to the selfless doctors and nurses who this year have supported me and other members of my family through the uncertainties and anxieties of illness, and have helped provide the strength, care and comfort we have needed,” Charles, 76, said.

— AFP

UNDERSEA OUTAGE

Finland probes outage of power link



Finland’s Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said his country was investigating an outage involving an undersea power cable connecting Finland and Estonia. An unplanned outage on the Estlink 2 inter-connector occurred at 1026 GMT, operator Fingrid said, reducing its available capacity to 358 megawatts from the installed capacity. “Even at Christmas the authorities are on standby to investigate the matter,” Orpo said.

— Reuters

RETALIATORY STRIKE

Yemenis claim missile attack on Israel



Yemen’s fighters said that they had fired a ballistic missile at central Israel, with Israeli forces saying they intercepted the attack. The missile was aimed at the Tel Aviv area. The Israelis reported it was shot down before it entered Israeli territory. “The Yemeni Armed Forces targeted a military target of the Israeli enemy in the occupied area of Yaffa using a hypersonic ballistic missile, type Palestine 2,” a statement said.

— AFP

SILENCEARMS



Pope Francis delivers the Urbi et Orbi message at St Peter's square in the Vatican. — AFP

POPE CALLS FOR GLOBAL PEACE IN CHRISTMAS APPEAL

ROME: Pope Francis called on Wednesday for “arms to be silenced” around the world in his Christmas address, appealing for peace in the Middle East, Ukraine and Sudan as he denounced the “extremely grave” humanitarian situation in Gaza. He used his traditional message to the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics to call for talks for a just peace in Ukraine as the country was pummelled by 170 Russian missiles and drones in a Christmas morning.

The pontiff also appealed for a ceasefire in Gaza and for the freeing of Israeli captives held there by Hamas. “I think of the Christian communities in Israel and Palestine, particularly in Gaza, where the humanitarian situation is extremely grave,” he told thousands of the faithful gathered in front of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome for the “Urbi et Orbi” (“to the city and the world”) address. “May there be a ceasefire, may the hostages be released and aid be given to the people worn out by hunger and by war.” Francis also extended his call for peace to Sudan where millions are under the threat of famine. — AFP

SUICIDE CAUSES MASSIVE DELAYS



This picture shows the logo of the French national railway company SNCF. “Initial findings suggest that the driver of a TGV train committed suicide,” said the public prosecutor’s office in Melun the day after major disruptions on the South-East line on New Year’s Eve. Some 3,000 train passengers have been affected by delays in services between Paris and southeastern France.

BOSNIA’S SERB LAWMAKERS MOVE TO BLOCK STATE INSTITUTIONS AND EU INTEGRATION

SARAJEVO: Lawmakers in Bosnia’s Serb Republic regional parliament on Wednesday ordered Serb representatives in state institutions to block decision-making and law changes needed for the Balkan country’s integration into the European Union. The regional parliament announced the action in an emergency session called to discuss the response to the trial of the region’s leader Milorad Dodik, being prosecuted in Bosnia’s state court for defying decisions of

international peace envoy Christian Schmidt.

The Serb Republic lawmakers said Dodik’s trial was political and based on illegal decisions by Schmidt. They said the court and prosecution were unconstitutional because they were set up by the peace envoy and not by the Dayton treaty. The EU delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with embassies of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy, condemned

the Serb parliament’s acts as a “a serious threat to the country’s constitutional order”.

“At a time when formal opening of EU accession negotiations has never been so close, a return to political blockades would have negative consequences for all citizens...a majority of whom support EU accession”. Pro-Russian Dodik has tried hard to separate his Serb-dominated region from Bosnia in recent years but halted the process after the start of the war. — Reuters

Zelensky condemns drone attacks on energy grid

UKRAINIAN President Volodymyr Zelensky on Wednesday denounced an “inhumane” attack from Russia, which launched over 170 missiles and drones on his country’s power grid on Christmas Day, killing an energy worker. The country woke up at 5:30 am to an air raid alarm, shortly followed by air force reports that Russia had launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Black Sea. “Putin deliberately chose Christmas to attack. What could be more inhumane? More than 70 missiles, including ballistic missiles, and more than a hundred attack drones. The target is our energy system,” Zelensky said.

This was the 13th large-scale strike on Ukraine’s energy system this year, the latest in Russia’s campaign targeting the power grid during winter. Russia meanwhile said five people had died in Ukrainian strikes and a falling drone in the border region of Kursk and in North Ossetia in the Caucasus. Ukraine said its air force downed 58 out of 79 Russian-launched missiles. It did not, however, down the two Korean KN-23 ballistic missiles launched by Russia.

Kyiv also said a Russian missile went through Moldovan and Romanian airspace, but Romania said it detected no such violation. “Unfortunately, there are some hits. As of now, there are blackouts in several regions,” Zelensky said. Ukraine’s DTEK energy company said the attack severely damaged equipment of thermal power plants. “Denying light and warmth to millions of peace-loving people as they celebrate Christmas is a depraved and evil act that must be answered,” DTEK CEO Maxim Timchenko said, urging allies to send more air defence.

Romania said Wednesday it had not detected any Russian missile passing through its airspace to target Ukraine as claimed by Kyiv. “The Romanian military authorities have been informed by the Ukrainian military authorities that, at around 7:30 am, a missile of the Russian Federation forces, which would have impacted in the Chernivtsi region of Ukraine, would have flown through the airspace of the Republic of Moldova and, for



Rescuers of the State Emergency Service work to put out a fire in a private house after a drone strike in Kharkiv. — AFP

about two minutes, also through the airspace of Romania,” the defence ministry said.

The employee of a Ukrainian thermal power plant was killed in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, over which 42 missiles were shot down, governor Sergiy Lysak said. Lysak also said rescue operations had been completed on the site of a strike on Kryvyi Rig, which killed one person and wounded 17 others the day before.

Engineers have restored power to consumers in the Ivano-Frankivsk region. “Christmas morning has once again shown that nothing is sacred for the aggressor country,” Svitlana Onyshchuk, the head of the Ivano-Frankivsk region, said earlier.

The Christmas day attack also targeted Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city,

located near the Russian border. The missiles had targeted the the city’s boiler houses, thermal power plants and electricity facilities, mayor Igor Terekhov said, temporarily cutting power to 500,000 people.

Kharkiv’s governor Oleg Syneubov also said authorities had evacuated 46 people from the area of Borivske and Kupiansk. Moscow’s forces are aiming to recapture the town of Kupiansk, which was occupied in the first year of the war. Ukraine recaptured it in September 2022 as part of a lightning offensive that saw its forces regain large swathes of the Kharkiv region. Outnumbered Ukrainian troops are on the back foot across the front line in the Kharkiv and Donetsk region further south, ceding ground to better-equipped Russian troops. — AFP

Azerbaijan plane crashes in Kazakhstan, many feared dead

BAKU: An Embraer passenger jet flying from Azerbaijan to Russia crashed near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan on Wednesday with 62 passengers and five crew on board, Kazakh authorities announced, saying 32 survivors had been rescued. Azerbaijan Airlines flight J2-8243 had flown hundreds of miles off its scheduled route to crash on the opposite shore of the Caspian Sea, after what Russia’s aviation watchdog said was an emergency that may have been caused by a bird strike. Officials did not immediately explain why it had crossed the sea, but the crash came shortly after drone strikes hit southern Russia. Drone activity has shut airports in the area in the past and the nearest Russian airport on the plane’s flight path was closed on Wednesday morning. Video of the crash showed the plane descending rapidly before bursting into flames as it hit the

seashore, and thick black smoke then rising. Bloodied and bruised passengers could be seen stumbling from a piece of the fuselage that had remained intact.

Kazakhstan’s emergencies ministry said in a statement that fire services had put out the blaze and that the survivors, including two children, were being treated at a nearby hospital.

The bodies of the dead were being recovered.

Azerbaijan Airlines said the Embraer 190 jet was flying from Baku to Grozny, capital of the Chechnya region in southern Russia, but had been forced to make an emergency landing around 3 kilometres from Aktau in Kazakhstan.

“Preliminary: after a collision with birds, due to an emergency situation on board, its commander decided to ‘go’ to an alternate airfield - Aktau was chosen,” Russia’s



Emergency specialists work at the crash site of an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger jet near the western Kazakh city of Aktau. — AFP

aviation watchdog said on Telegram. Aktau is on the opposite shore of the Caspian Sea from Azerbaijan

and Russia. Commercial aviation-tracking websites tracked the flight flying north on its scheduled route

along the west coast before its flight path was no longer recorded.

It then reappeared on the east coast, circling near Aktau airport before crashing into the beach.

Authorities in two Russian regions adjacent to Chechnya, Ingushetia and North Ossetia, reported drone strikes on Wednesday morning.

An official at Makhachkala airport in Russia on the east coast of the Caspian, the airport closest to where the flight disappeared from tracking, said it had been closed to incoming traffic for several hours on Wednesday morning.

Reuters could not immediately reach officials at the airport in Grozny.

Authorities in Kazakhstan said a commission had been set up to investigate what had happened and its members ordered to fly to the site and ensure that the families of the dead and injured were getting the help they needed. — Reuters

OPINION

Finding light in a challenging year



RUMAITHA
AL BUSAIDI

AS 2024 draws to a close, it's easy to be overwhelmed by headlines warning of catastrophic climate scenarios. Yet this year has also delivered an abundance of encouraging news, even if it remains overshadowed by the sheer scale of our environmental challenges.

Across the globe, grassroots initiatives, bold policy moves and technological breakthroughs have demonstrated that humanity can turn hope into tangible progress.

Consider the UK's historic moment of closing its last coal-fired power plant, symbolising the end of one of the most polluting sources of electricity. Today, wind power in the UK outperforms both gas and coal combined, especially when we recall the skeptics who once dismissed renewables as unrealistic.

On a broader scale, renewable energy capacity is on track to triple globally by 2030, thanks to surging solar, wind and battery installations. In India, coal's share of power generation fell below 50 per cent for the first time in decades; a sign that the world's largest emerging economies are actively embracing cleaner energy pathways.

Deforestation also showed promising trends. In the Amazon, habitat destruction dropped by 50 per cent, supporting Brazil's pledge to end deforestation by 2030.

Meanwhile, innovative solutions to plastic pollution emerged from Japan, where scientists created a new plastic that dissolves safely in seawater, eliminating the scourge of microplastics. And in North America, Los Angeles County took a bold stand by suing major companies for their roles in plastic pollution, pushing for greater corporate responsibility and systemic change.

Wildlife conservation brought further good news. Conservationists repatriated nearly 1,000 trafficked lemurs and tortoises to Madagascar. Plans to reintroduce wild bulls in Scotland's Highlands by 2026 aim to restore biodiversity, bolster carbon storage and stimulate eco-tourism.

In the oceans, the discovery of the world's largest known coral near the Solomon Islands that is over 183 metres in circumference and possibly half a millennium old rekindled hope for marine ecosystems. Additionally, sea otters along the Pacific coast continued to protect kelp forests by controlling overgrazing sea urchin populations.

On the healthcare front, we've seen inspiring advances that point towards a future of longer, healthier lives. Global life expectancy increased, buoyed by improved disease prevention and medical interventions. With life expectancy on the rise, many of us will live to see multiple future generations, including those not yet

If we fail to capitalise on today's momentum, we risk squandering the gains we've worked so hard to achieve

born.

They will look to us, their ancestors, to see what we did to safeguard the planet they inherit. If we fail to capitalise on today's momentum, we risk squandering the gains we've worked so hard to achieve. Yet if we continue on this path, future generations could be surrounded by reforested landscapes, thriving wildlife, cleaner air and medical innovations that eradicate once-dreaded diseases.

As I pen my final column of 2024, I'm reminded of this responsibility we share with both our ancestors and those yet to be born. The ecosystems we inherit are not merely scenic backdrops; they are the bedrock upon which our cultures, economies and health depend.

Generations before us could not have imagined the scale of our modern climate challenges, yet they passed down landscapes and traditions that still shape our lives. In turn, we will pass on what remains, and what we restore to those who follow.

So, let us take these glimmers of good news and reflections to guide us into the New Year with a renewed sense of both celebration and resolve. Wishing you all a reflective close to 2024 and a bright, determined start to 2025. Let us step forward together, committed to scaling up these pockets of progress into a new era of meaningful climate action.

‘DRACONIAN’
INTERNET
LAW SPARKS FREE
SPEECH FEARS

Social media users in Vietnam on platforms including Facebook and TikTok will need to verify their identities as part of strict new internet regulations that critics say further undermine freedom of expression in the communist country.

The law, which comes into force on Christmas Day, will compel tech giants operating in Vietnam to store user data, provide it to authorities on request and remove content the government regards as ‘illegal’ within 24 hours.

Decree 147, as it is known, builds on a 2018 cybersecurity law that was sharply criticised by the US, European Union and internet freedom advocates who said it mimics China’s repressive censorship of the internet.

Vietnam’s administration generally moves swiftly to stamp out dissent and arrest critics, especially those who find an audience on social media.

In October, blogger Duong Van Thai — who had almost 120,000 followers on YouTube, where he regularly recorded live-streams critical of the government — was jailed for 12 years on charges of publishing anti-state information.

Months earlier, leading independent journalist Huy Duc, the author of one of the most popular blogs in Vietnam — which took aim at the government on issues including media control and corruption — was arrested.

His posts “violated interests of the state,” authorities said.

Critics say that decree 147 will also expose dissidents who post anonymously to the risk of arrest.

“Many people work quietly but effectively in advancing the universal values of human rights,” Ho Chi Minh City-based blogger and rights activist Nguyen Hoang Vi said.

She warned that the new decree “may encourage self-censorship, where people avoid expressing dissenting views to protect their safety — ultimately harming the overall development of democratic values” in the country.

Le Quang Tu Do, of the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), told state media that decree 147 would “regulate behaviour in order to maintain social order, national security and national sovereignty in cyberspace”.

Aside from the ramifications for social media firms, the new laws also include curbs on gaming for under-18s, designed to prevent addiction.

Game publishers are expected to enforce a time limit of an hour per game session and not more than 180 minutes a day for all games.

Nguyen Minh Hieu, a 17-year-old high school student in Hanoi who admits he’s addicted to gaming, said that the new restrictions would be “really tough” to follow — and to enforce.

Games are “designed to be addictive” he said. “We often spend hours and hours playing match after match.” — AFP

Rebuilding Syria: Truth, reconciliation path to peace

AFTER more than a decade of conflict, Syria stands at a crossroads. The scars of war are etched into its cities, its people and its very soul. Amid the devastation, the question of how to rebuild Syria is not merely one of physical reconstruction but of societal healing.

A durable peace requires a reconciliation of its fractured communities. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), inspired by models in South Africa and Ireland, offers a pathway for Syria to confront its painful past and build a future rooted in justice, accountability and hope.

South Africa’s TRC, established in 1995 after the end of apartheid, was a pioneering effort to address decades of systemic oppression and violence. By providing a platform for victims to share their stories and perpetrators to seek amnesty through confession, the TRC fostered national dialogue and allowed the country to confront its past.

While imperfect, the process was instrumental in preventing further cycles of retribution and laying the foundation for a new democratic South Africa.

Similarly, the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland in 1998, followed by subsequent truth and reconciliation initiatives, demonstrated the power of dialogue and compromise in resolving deeply entrenched sectarian conflict. By prioritising inclusivity and creating a framework for addressing grievances, Ireland achieved a fragile but enduring peace.

These examples show that reconciliation is not about erasing history but acknowledging it, creating accountability and paving the way for coexistence.

Syria, too, can draw from these experiences to heal its divisions.

The Syrian conflict has left deep fissures within its society. Communities divided along ethnic, sectarian and political lines bear wounds inflicted by violence, displacement and mistrust. Without addressing these fractures, any attempts at rebuilding the nation will remain fragile, prone to collapse under the weight of unresolved



Mahmud Khaled Ajaj reacts while standing before a destroyed apartment building in the Yarmuk camp for Palestinian refugees south of Damascus. — AFP



AHMED
AL MUKHAINI

grievances.

A TRC in Syria could serve as a mechanism to acknowledge the suffering, providing victims with a platform to share their stories and be heard, fostering collective acknowledgement of the pain endured.

It is also essential to promote accountability by allowing perpetrators to confess their actions, offering transparency and restitution or amnesty where appropriate. Most importantly, a Syrian TRC will prevent cycles of revenge by shifting the focus from retribution to restorative justice, enabling communities to coexist peacefully. Finally, it will rebuild social trust by creating a shared understanding of the conflict’s impact and a vision for a united future.

The implementation of a TRC in Syria would not be without challenges. The scale of the conflict, the diversity of actors involved, and the continued presence of authoritarian structures complicate efforts to establish a neutral and inclusive process.

The international community, particularly the United Nations, regional powers and organisations experienced in transitional justice can play a pivotal role in facilitating this process. Countries like Ireland and South Africa, which have navigated similar paths, could offer technical and moral support to ensure the credibility and inclusivity of Syria’s TRC.

Rebuilding Syria is not just a

physical or political endeavour; it is a social and emotional one. Roads and schools can be reconstructed, but the societal fabric must also be repaired.

Without reconciliation, development projects risk becoming monuments to an unresolved past rather than symbols of a hopeful future.

A TRC could position Syria as a role model for the region. By addressing its divisions and fostering a culture of accountability and forgiveness, Syria could demonstrate that even the most fractured societies can heal. In a region often marked by enduring conflicts, Syria’s commitment to reconciliation could serve as a beacon of hope, inspiring other nations to prioritise peace and justice.

The road to reconciliation is neither quick nor easy, but it is essential. Syria’s leaders, civil society and international partners must recognise that sustainable peace requires more than agreements signed in conference rooms.

It demands an honest reckoning with the past and a collective commitment to a united future.

By adopting a Truth and Reconciliation programme, Syria can take a bold step towards healing its wounds and rebuilding its nation. The journey will be challenging, but the reward - a Syria at peace with itself - will be worth every effort. The region, and indeed the world, will watch as Syria transforms from a symbol of devastation into a beacon of hope and model of renewal.

Understanding security dilemma

NASSER BIN AHMED AL ABRI

TRADITIONAL literature, based on the realist school of thought in International Relations and Security Studies, holds that the state is the key factor in achieving national security. The foundational principles of this approach emphasise the concept of sovereignty and the use of military force to maintain security in an anarchic international system. This understanding of the world order directly impacts the definition of security as a feature of that anarchic system. Pioneering realists, such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, highlight the inevitability of conflict in a world lacking a supreme authority.

Morgenthau, in his book ‘Politics Among Nations’, underscores that states operate based on the rational pursuit of power to advance their interests.

Similarly, Waltz, in his work, explains the theory of structural realism, asserting that the distribution of power within the international system determines the behaviour of states and their security policies. These arguments highlight the importance of the “balance of power” as an essential mechanism to prevent war and ensure stability.

Consequently, security studies focus on the

state as the guarantor of security. Thus, the state’s reflexive engagements in international affairs can be interpreted according to its national interests. Henry Kissinger, an academic and former US secretary of state, argues that “how realistically we perceive our national interests is a fundamental security concern.”

For realists, “no country will sacrifice its interests to serve the larger society.” This explains why states expand at the expense of others, as the security dilemma would otherwise cease to exist.

The term security dilemma has received significant attention from scholars and has been interpreted based on two main factors: positional power and national interest. Central to realist thought in security studies and international relations, the concept was first coined by John Herz in 1950 and later analysed by scholars such as Robert Jervis and Herbert Butterfield.

It refers to a situation where a state, seeking to enhance its security by increasing military power or taking defensive measures, raises concerns among other states that perceive such actions as threats. This dynamic can lead to arms races or heightened tensions, potentially escalating into armed conflict, even in the absence of aggressive intentions.

For instance, the relationship between the United States and Iran exemplifies the

Security studies focus on the state as the guarantor of security and the state’s reflexive engagements can be interpreted according to its national interests

exacerbation of the security dilemma in the Arab Gulf and the Middle East.

Despite economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies on Iran and the launch of cyberattacks (by Israel) on its nuclear project, such as the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement on May 8, 2018, under president Donald Trump, Iran perceives these actions as threats to its national security.

In response, Iran transfers the confrontation to other regional domains by supplying weapons, ammunition and drones to allies like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Ansar Allah in Yemen. These groups confront Israel (a key US ally) on multiple fronts, including targeting ships in the Red Sea.

The escalation of disputes between Russia and Nato due to growing mutual mistrust, the alliance’s defence policies and its deliberate eastward expansion is another example of the centrality of the security dilemma in international politics. Similarly, the arms race between India and Pakistan in South Asia highlights how each country bolsters its military capabilities in response to the other’s actions, increasing regional tensions.

Additionally, China’s naval expansion in the South China Sea has prompted neighbouring countries such as Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam to strengthen their own forces, further exacerbating regional tensions. To be continued..

HOW ASSAD’S INNER CIRCLE FLED SYRIA

SAMMY KETZ & MAHER AL MOUNES

A lightning rebel offensive early this month caught Syria’s ruling clan off guard. President Bashar al Assad fled to Russia on December 8, leaving behind many of his collaborators, some of whom sought refuge in neighbouring countries. According to two sources, the ousted president, who fled to Moscow via the Russian military airfield in Hmeimim on Syria’s coast, was accompanied by only a handful of confidants. Among them were his closest ally, the secretary-general of presidential affairs, Mansour Azzam, as well as his economic adviser, Yassar Ibrahim, who oversees the financial empire of Assad and his wife, Asma. “He left with his secretary and his treasurer,” an insider who requested anonymity said. Bashar’s brother, Maher al Assad, commander of the elite Fourth Division tasked with defending Damascus, did not know about his sibling’s plans. Leaving his men stranded, Maher took a separate route, fleeing by helicopter to Iraq before travelling to Russia, according to a Syrian military source.

An Iraqi security source said that Maher arrived in Iraq by plane on December 7 and stayed there for five days. Maher’s wife, Manal al Jadaan, and his son briefly entered Lebanon before departing through Beirut airport, said Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi, without disclosing their final destination. Another Assad government heavyweight, Ali Mamlouk, the former chief of Syria’s security apparatus, fled to Russia via Iraq, said a Syrian military source. His son passed through Lebanon before leaving for another destination, according to a Lebanese security source. The Iraqi Interior Ministry denied the presence of either Maher al Assad or Mamlouk in Iraq. Both are wanted men.

Maher — and Bashar al Assad — are wanted by France for alleged complicity in war crimes over chemical attacks in Syria in August 2013. The French courts have already sentenced Mamlouk and Jamil Hassan, former head of Syria’s Air Force Intelligence, in absentia to life imprisonment for complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes. On Friday, the Lebanese authorities received an Interpol alert relaying a US request to arrest Hassan and hand him over to the US authorities, should he enter the country.

The United States accuses Hassan of “war crimes”, including overseeing barrel bomb attacks on Syrian people that killed thousands of civilians. A Lebanese judicial source said that they had no confirmation of Hassan’s presence in Lebanon, but assured that he would be detained if found. Other prominent figures also made hasty escapes.

Bouthaina Shaaban, former translator for Hafez al Assad — Bashar’s father who founded the brutal system of government his son inherited — fled to Lebanon on the night of December 7-8. Shaaban, Bashar al Assad’s long-time political adviser, then travelled to Abu Dhabi, according to a friend in Beirut. — AFP

Comparing apples, oranges in education sector

IT’S apples, oranges and dates,” an Oman Ministry of Education expert once said, referring to three well-known but quite different and, therefore, relatively hard-to-compare school qualifications pursued by Omani students. By ‘dates,’ the expert meant the General Education Diploma Certificate (GED), the national qualification taught at the Sultanate of Oman’s government and private bilingual schools in Arabic or English. Like delicious Omani dates, the GED is a local ‘product.’

Meanwhile, the ‘apples and oranges’ in her story were the International Baccalaureate, commonly known as IB, and Advanced Level, also known as A Levels. Before I explain why the MoE expert came up with a localised idiom to highlight a challenge in giving Omani school students a 100 per cent equal opportunity to apply for undergraduate scholarships competitively, let me first provide some context.

The Ministry of Education (MoE), overseeing the Sultanate of Oman’s Post-Basic Education sector, treats IB and A Levels as ‘stand-alone’ international school qualifications. Both IB, especially its diploma pathway, and A Levels are designed to prepare students for direct entry to an undergraduate course taught at research-intensive universities around the world, provided such an academic journey suits their learning styles. Meanwhile, Omani students also pursue other reputed and rigorous school qualifications, such as the American high school diploma, which the MoE treats as the ‘equivalent’ to the GED.

That does not mean such qualifications are considered to be the same as the GED in terms of content or academic rigour, but it does mean they are not treated as ‘stand-alone’ international qualifications.

The ‘apples, oranges, and dates’ remark was made years ago during a meeting between representatives from the MoE and what was then known as the Ministry of Higher



BREGJE VAN BAAREN

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The Ministry of Education treats IB and A Levels as ‘stand-alone’ international school qualifications.

Education as we discussed the ‘conversion table,’ often mislabelled as an equivalency table.

The Higher Education Admissions Centre (HEAC) uses this essential tool to convert school grades obtained by mainly A-level and IB students into percentages. Within their own ‘habitat,’ A Level grades are expressed in letters from E to A*, while the IB subjects are graded on a scale of 1 to 7, with both A* and 7 representing a highly exceptional achievement. Why does the HEAC need to convert A Level and IB grades? Well, GED grades are expressed in percentages, while the HEAC manages an electronic scholarship system that aims to unbiasedly ‘screen and select’ applicants based on their academic merit expressed in percentages.

The objective is that, by and large, all Omani school leavers, regardless of their type of school qualification, should be given an equal opportunity to competitively apply for the same undergraduate scholarships, provided they meet the eligibility criteria that have mostly been adapted to

their qualification (this was once one of my tasks). However, as mentioned, IB and A Levels, and qualifications like the American high school diploma, are known for their academic rigour, making it a challenge for even the brightest students to obtain the highest possible grades in all subjects.

The IB diploma pathway is for well-rounded students who must graduate in six subjects across different subject groups and complete a rigorous core curriculum. In contrast, A Levels allow more flexibility in choosing a combination of subjects and a focus on subject-specific depth.

A Level students sit for final exams in fewer subjects compared to IB students. GED, although known for its broad curriculum and strong Maths and Science, is not known for its academic ‘maturity’ and takes one year less to complete. For this reason, GED students who want to pursue their higher undergraduate studies must first complete an academic preparatory year, often referred to as a foundation programme, except in the United States of America and Canada, and sometimes also have to pursue a pre-session English language course. To solve the ‘apples, oranges, and dates’ challenge and streamline scholarship application processes, my former colleagues and I once pitched the Direct Entry Scholarship, also known as the DES proposal.

Applicants for this scholarship were no longer primarily assessed by an electronic system based on their school grades. What counted was an official letter from an approved higher education institution confirming that an applicant was offered a place on an undergraduate degree course. Institutions call this a direct entry based on their holistic screening process, during which they assess a student’s capability based on their grades and other factors, including a personal statement and aptitude tests. In my next column, I will explain the philosophy behind the Direct Entry Scholarship more.



SPORTS



Oman achieve vital win against Asian champions, says Jaber

WALEED AL JAHWARI
KUWAIT CITY, DEC 25

OMAN head coach Rasheed Jaber attributed the upset win against Qatar to focus and great desire to triumph over the Asian champions in the second round of the 26th Gulf Cup. The Oman team achieved a challenging 2-1 victory over Qatar, raising their qualification chances for the semifinals. Omani fans, numbering 4,552 at Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium on Thursday, cheered on the Red Warriors as the players turned a one-goal deficit into a 2-1 victory over Qatar.

Omani striker Issam al Subhi, named the best player of the match, scored twice—first in the 19th minute from a penalty kick and later in the 52nd minute from an unmarked situation.

Qatar were the first to score, with striker Almoez Ali finding the net past goalkeeper Ibrahim al Mukhaini in the second minute. Rasheed said in the press conference after the match, “Our team achieved the most important victory against one of the strongest teams in Asia.”

“The victory boosted Oman’s chances of qualifying for the semifinals. We are happy with the return of striker Issam al Subhi to his true level, and his feeling that he is an important player for the team.”

“That criticism is present everywhere, and we deal with each match according to its circumstances. We hope that the Oman team will complete their journey until the end,” he concluded. Qatar’s Spanish head coach, Luis Garcia, said the loss was tough: “The loss was tough and difficult for us because we were able to at least draw from the important match in the second round. But we will always work on correcting and improving the level in the future.”

“I am satisfied with what the players presented despite the loss against Oman.

We played our way and tried to come out with a positive result, but this is the state of football; there is winning and losing,” he added.



Oman's Issam al Subhi in action with Qatar's Alhashmi Mohialdin during the Gulf Cup Group A match at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait City. — Reuters



The victory boosted Oman's chances of qualifying for the semifinals. We are happy with the return of striker Issam al Subhi to his true level, and his feeling that he is an important player for the team

**RASHEED JABER,
OMAN COACH**

KUWAIT EDGE UAE

On the other leg of Group A, Kuwait team secured a hard-fought 2-1 victory against the UAE team on Tuesday evening. The UAE took an early lead, scoring within the first five minutes of the match through Caio Canedo. However, Kuwait quickly responded with an equaliser through Mohammed Daham.

The second half was marked by intense action, including a red card for an Emirati player. Capitalising on a defensive error by the UAE, Kuwait netted the decisive winning goal by Muath al Enzi late in the match.

After the second round of the group stage, Oman topped the group along with hosts Kuwait, with 4 points each. Qatar and the UAE remain stuck at a single point each. For the record, this was Oman's 24th victory out of 114

matches in Gulf Cup tournaments, and the Red Warriors reached their 91st goal.

All teams in Group A still have chances to qualify for the semifinal. Oman must win or draw against the UAE on Friday at 6:30 pm (Oman time).

The match will take place at Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Stadium. At the same time, Kuwait will take on Qatar at Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium.

Omani players received five yellow cards in the last two matches. Mohammed al Musalmi received one against Kuwait. In the match against Qatar, yellow cards were issued to Abdulrahman al Mushaifri, Al Mundhir al Alawi, Ibrahim al Mukhaini, and Moataz Saleh Abd Rabbo.

The Oman Football Association (OFA) has filed an official protest to the

Arabian Gulf Cup Federation against the Iraqi referee, Muhannad Qasim, alleging his unsuccessful management of the match, which resulted in many cards for Omani players.

The OFA has also demanded the cancellation of Ibrahim al Mukhaini's yellow card, received for delaying the game while transporting injured Issam al Subhi. On the sidelines of 'Khaleeji Zain,' the Arabian Gulf Cup Federation will hold a general meeting on Thursday.

The meeting will include voting on the host country for the 27th Arabian Gulf Cup Championship. Saudi Arabia's bid is the closest to being approved to host the Gulf event. Discussions are also ongoing regarding the proposal to invite one or two teams from outside the Gulf countries to participate in the tournament.

Saudi Arabia bounce back from two-goal down to beat fighting Yemen

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DECEMBER 25

Saudi Arabia bounced back strongly from 2-0 down to post a 3-2 win against a fighting Yemen in the second round matches of Group B in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium in Kuwait on Wednesday night.

With the triumph, Saudi Arabia claimed their first points in the event after suffering a 3-2 defeat in the opening match against Bahrain, while Yemen remained without points after consecutive losses to Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Yemen dominated from the start and applied pressure on Saudi Arabia's defensive line.

In the 8th minute, Yemen took the lead through Haroon al Zubaidi, who capitalised on a cross supplied by AbdulWase al Matri, heading the ball strongly into the net. It was Yemen's first-ever goal against Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Gulf Cup.

Saudi Arabia retaliated as



forward star Salim al Dawsari sent direct shots towards Yemen's goalkeeper Mohammed Aman,

who saved them skilfully. The goal boosted Yemeni strikers' confidence, leading to a

second goal in the 27th minute. Abdulmajeed Sabara took advantage of a defensive error by

Saudi's Ali al Bulaihi and scored with a header.

Three minutes later, Saudi Arabia reduced the deficit when Mohammed Kanno converted a cross from Musab al Jaweer into the net. Yemen led 2-1 at the end of the first half.

In the second half, Saudi Arabia returned with better focus and managed to equalise in the 57th minute through a penalty confirmed by VAR, which was converted by Musab al Jaweer. Both teams created opportunities to score the winning goal.

In the dying minutes, substitute Abdullah al Hamdan secured victory for Saudi Arabia with a decisive goal, giving his team a 3-2 lead for the first time.

Omani referee Qasim al Hatmi issued a second yellow card and a subsequent red card to Rami al Wasmani, while a red card shown to Hamzah Sabah was overturned after a VAR review.

The 3-2 win revitalised Saudi Arabia's hopes for a semifinal spot.

SPORTS

2-MATCH SERIES



Khurram Shahzad

PAKISTAN PLAYING XI

1ST TEST AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA

SHAN MASOOD (C)

SAIM AYUB

BABAR AZAM

KAMRAN GHULAM

MOHAMMAD RIZWAN (WK)

SAUD SHAKEEL (VC)

SALMAN ALI AGHA

AAMIR JAMAL

NASEEM SHAH

KHURRAM SHAHZAD

MOHAMMAD ABBAS

PAKISTAN PACER
KHURRAM RETURNS
TO TEST SQUAD FOR
S AFRICA SERIES

LAHORE: Pakistan fast bowler Khurram Shahzad has been added to the Test squad for the two-match series against South Africa, the country’s cricket board (PCB) said on Wednesday.

Khurram was ruled out of the home Test series against England in October due to a side injury he picked up in September during Bangladesh’s 2-0 Test series victory in Pakistan.

The 25-year-old will feature alongside fellow fast bowler Mohammad Abbas, 34, who returns to the Test squad for the first time since 2021.

“The return of pacer Khurram Shahzad, who did really well on his debut in Australia and the seasoned campaigner Mohammad Abbas is a welcome development for Pakistan’s test side,” Pakistan Test captain Shan Masood said.

“We know South Africa have done well in this iteration of the ICC World Test Championship but we have prepared for this series in the best possible manner after having arrived in the country at least two weeks ago.”

Khurram and Abbas have been named in Pakistan’s team for the first test starting on Thursday in Centurion — the first red-ball assignment for newly appointed interim coach Aqib Javed. — Reuters

Pakistan team, for first Test against South Africa: Shan Masood (captain), Saim Ayub, Babar Azam, Kamran Ghulam, Mohammad Rizwan (wicket-keeper), Saud Shakeel (vice-captain), Salman Ali Agha, Aamir Jamal, Naseem Shah, Khurram Shahzad and Mohammad Abbas.



Al Bashayer and Ahli Sidab players fight for the ball during the Oman Basketball League at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. — Pics by Ammar Al Musafir

Al Bashayer triumph over
Ahli Sidab in OBL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 25

AL BASHAYER Club secured a well-deserved 70-46 victory over Ahli Sidab Club in the Oman Basketball League at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on Tuesday.

The match saw a disparity in performance between the two teams.

Al Bashayer dominated the first three quarters, while Ahli Sidab staged a late comeback in the final quarter. However, the significant point gap ensured Al Bashayer’s win.

Several players stood out during the game; for Al Bashayer, Slaven Kapkovik, Hadeed Beit Bakhit, Mahmoud al Souli and Saeed al Saadi shone, while Jane Key, Hameer al Hassani and Ahmed al Hassani excelled for Ahli Sidab.

Al Bashayer started the match with high focus, applying intense pressure in offense with precise passes and successful shots, scoring 22 points.

Ahli Sidab attempted to respond with counterattacks, but Al Bashayer’s solid defence limited their success, ending the quarter with a 22-9 lead for Al Bashayer.



In the second quarter, Ahli Sidab displayed noticeable improvement in their offensive play, utilising quick player movements and capitalising on Al Bashayer’s defensive mistakes to score 16 points. Despite this, Al Bashayer maintained

their dominance, relying on their players’ experience to add 18 points and close the first half with a 40-25 lead.

Al Bashayer shifted their playing strategy in the third quarter, focusing on strengthening their defence and executing well organised attacks through effective drives and fast passes.

In contrast, Ahli Sidab struggled with inaccurate shooting, managing only 4 points compared to Al Bashayer’s 14, widening the gap to 54-29 by the end of the quarter.

Ahli Sidab showed improved performance in the fourth quarter, with tactical adjustments from their coach that bolstered both their offence and defence.

They scored 17 points through accurate three pointers and fast breaks. However, Al Bashayer continued to exert partial control over the game, adding 16 points to secure a decisive 70-46 victory.

The match was officiated by international referee Ahmed bin Darwish al Balushi as the first referee, international referee Issam al Siyabi as the second referee, and international referee Rashid al Mashifri as the third referee.

The scoring table was managed by Jumaa al Hinai, Aisha al Balushi and Mahmoud al Ajmi.

Australia get Head boost, India ponder Rohit switch

MELBOURNE: In-form Australian batter Travis Head will be fit for the fourth Test and India are considering restoring captain Rohit Sharma to the opener’s slot for the match starting in Melbourne on Thursday.

Head is the leading run scorer in the five-Test series but the left-hander suffered a quad strain in Brisbane.

Home captain Pat Cummins confirmed Head would retain his place in the middle order as Australia chase a 2-1 lead after rain thwarted their victory charge in the last game. “He ticked off some final things today and yesterday, but no stress, no worries about injury for Trav,” Cummins told reporters after training on Wednesday.

“He’ll go into the game fully fit. I don’t think you’ll see too much management of him throughout the game ... maybe around fielding if he’s a bit uncomfortable.”

Head has 409 runs from five innings in the series, including two hundreds and a fifty, and averages nearly 82.

Australia have made two changes. Teenage opener Sam Konstas will make his debut in place of Nathan McSweeney in front of a sellout Boxing Day crowd at the MCG.

Seamer Scott Boland comes in for the injured Josh Hazlewood with the temperature forecast to reach 40 degrees Celsius on day one.

India, lucky to escape with a draw in the rain-blighted third Test, are also considering changing their



Travis Head is the leading run scorer in the five-Test series.



Rohit Sharma managed only 19 runs in three innings.

opening combination.

Captain Rohit missed the opening Test to be with his newborn son in Mumbai and KL Rahul, who replaced him as Yashasvi Jaiswal’s partner, retained his place in Adelaide and Brisbane.

An out-of-form Rohit batted in the middle order in the last two Tests but his run drought continued as he managed only 19 runs in three innings. Rahul is likely to drop to number three, Indian media reported.

India are also considering bringing in a second spinner at the expense of pace-bowling all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy. The series is level at 1-1 and India will retain the Border-Gavaskar trophy if they win in Melbourne. — Reuters

SPORTS



DJOKOVIC
EYES MORE
SLAM GLORY
AS SWIATEK
RETURNS
UNDER
DOPING
CLOUD



Iga Swiatek



Aryna Sabalenka



Nick Kyrgios

NOVAK Djokovic is confident he can still win Grand Slams, starting at the Australian Open, with the Serbian kickstarting his bid for an unprecedented 11th title and record 25th major crown in Brisbane this week.

Top-ranked Aryna Sabalenka, who is gunning for a third Melbourne Park trophy, joins him at the Queensland Tennis Centre from December 29-January 5 in a stellar women's field.

The 2025 season gets under way on Friday with the mixed-teams United Cup in Perth and Sydney, headlined by world number two Iga Swiatek in her first tournament since revelations that she served a one-month doping suspension.

It is the first season since 37-year-old Djokovic began playing that none of the other so-called 'Big Four' will be on the other side of the net following the retirements this year of Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray.

Roger Federer called it quits in 2022.

As they faded, Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz stepped up to become

“I still will try to go strong because I feel like my body is serving me well. I still have motivation to win Grand Slams, make more history

**NOVAK
DJOKOVIC**

the new Grand Slam kings, with both men opting against a warm-up tournament leading into the first major of the year which begins on January 12.

As doubts grew over Djokovic's motivation and ability to take down the new guard after a disappointing 2024, he stunned the tennis world by hiring Murray to coach him.

KYRGIOS RETURNS

The British three-time major winner is set to miss Brisbane but hook up with his old rival at the Australian Open.

“I still will try to go strong because I feel like my body is serving me well. I still have motivation to win Grand Slams, make more history,” said Djokovic, who needs one more Slam crown to surpass Margaret Court's 24.

“That's one of the biggest reasons why I asked Andy to work with me, because I still have big plans, so as long as that's the case, I will keep going.”

By his standards, 2024 wasn't kind, failing to win a Slam, claiming just one title — Olympic gold in Paris — and ending his season in October.

A resurgent Grigor Dimitrov, Holger Rune, and Frances Tiafoe are also

playing in Brisbane, as is Australian Nick Kyrgios, who returns after injuries restricted him to just one ATP Tour singles match in two years.

He and Djokovic are set to play doubles together.

Challenging Sabalenka on Pat Rafter Arena will be America's top talents Jessica Pegula and Emma Navarro, ranked seven and eight respectively, along with former world number two Ons Jabeur and veteran Victoria Azarenka.

Sabalenka, who beat China's high-flying Zheng Qinwen in the Melbourne final this year, had a sensational 2024 which culminated in being named WTA Player of Year this month.

The 26-year-old reached seven finals and won four titles, successfully defending the Australian Open, lifting her first US Open and winning WTA 1000 events in Cincinnati and Wuhan.

She also recaptured the number one ranking from five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek, whose reputation was rocked in November when it was revealed she tested positive for a banned heart medication in August.

The International Tennis Integrity

Agency accepted that the violation was not intentional, and the Polish star escaped with a one-month sanction.

SINNER AWAIT'S VERDICT

Swiatek called it “the worst experience of my life”, but vowed: “I know I will be stronger than ever.”

Her case is similar to that of Australian Open winner Sinner, who is still waiting for the outcome of a World Anti-Doping Agency appeal against his initial exoneration for twice testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March.

The agency said a ruling was not expected before the new year, but it could conceivably be handed down before or during the Australian Open.

Joining Swiatek at the United Cup is world number two Coco Gauff and fourth-ranked Jasmine Paolini.

Two-time Australian Open winner Naomi Osaka begins her season at the Auckland Classic, hoping for a better year than 2024 when she failed to win a title.

Former US Open champions Emma Raducanu, a place above Osaka in the rankings at 57, and Bianca Andreescu are also starters in New Zealand. — AFP

BUSINESS

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CLEANENERGY



With cities like New Delhi and Kanpur some of the most polluted in the world, India's government is under pressure to reduce the impact of the sector's emissions. — Reuters

INDIA REVIEWS \$30 BN CUTTING PROGRAMME FOR COAL PLANTS

India is reviewing a decade-old \$30 billion programme requiring coal-fired power plants to install equipment to cut sulphur emissions after government-backed studies showed they had little impact on curbing pollution, according to a document reviewed by Reuters.

Nearly 540 power plant units were required by 2026 to install flue-gas desulphurisation (FGD) systems that remove sulphur from the plants' exhaust gases, but only about 8% have done so, including those run by state-run NTPC and privately held JSW Power.

The government previously said expensive foreign technology and manpower were some of the hurdles in achieving the target. But with cities like New Delhi and Kanpur some of the most polluted in the world, India's government is under pressure to reduce the impact of the sector's emissions.

Instead of FGDs, government officials have proposed deploying locally made electrostatic precipitators, according to a document from the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the government summarising a November 13 meeting between it and the ministries of power, coal, and the environment. The precipitators, which remove fine particles such as dust and smoke from emissions, are one-fifth of the cost of an FGD system.

Representatives of the ministries and Ajay Kumar Sood, the principal scientific adviser who chaired the meeting, did not immediately respond to requests seeking comment.

The document showed several of the attendees agreed Indian power plants would be better off focusing on cutting emissions of tiny particulate matter that can lodge deep in the lungs rather than on sulphur reductions. While more than 100 nations wanted to cap plastic production, a handful of oil-producers were prepared only to target waste.

It cited a study by the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) that said Indian coal, which is used to generate 92% of the country's thermal power, has a sulphur content of only 0.5%.

Sulphur content is 0.9% on average for coal imported into India and more than 1% for coal used in China, where FGDs developed by companies like GE and Mitsubishi Power are common, said R Srikanth, head of the engineering school at NIAS.

"There was really never any case for having FGDs in India, in every place, every thermal power plant in the country," Srikanth, who attended the meeting, said on Tuesday. "All our cities actually suffer from high particulate-matter pollution, not from sulphur dioxide pollution," he said.

Srikanth said more than 200 FGDs are currently waiting to be installed in India because companies are reluctant to shut down their power plants for nearly 45 days for the purpose.

— Reuters

SMEs participate in Omani-Kuwaiti Exhibition

FIFTY Omani small and medium-sized enterprises participated in the Omani-Kuwaiti Economic Exhibition, which took place earlier this week in Kuwait.

The four-day exhibition, which began on December 23, 2024, is part of the Omani-Kuwaiti Economic Forum, organised by the Oman Product Promotion Team (OPEX), Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Speaking to ONA, Dr Saif bin Khamees al Maamari, Adviser to the Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Head of the Operational Team for Promoting Omani Products (OPEX), shared that the event serves as an important platform for Omani SMEs to explore investment and business opportunities in the Kuwaiti market and to showcase the quality and competitiveness of Omani products across various sectors.

He added that the forum and exhibition provide an opportunity for Omani entrepreneurs to connect with their Kuwaiti counterparts and build long-term strategic partnerships.

Meanwhile, Reem bint Mubarak al Obaidaniyah, Head of the Digital Communication Department at the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA), noted that the exhibition represents a vital opportunity to showcase Omani companies'



The Omani-Kuwaiti Economic Exhibition showcased 50 Omani SMEs.

Over 70 companies participated in the exhibition, representing a diverse range of sectors, including food products, perfumes, incense, luxury items and technology

potential in various sectors, including food, handicrafts, and modern technologies.

She added that the participation of several Omani businesses in the exhibition is part of the authority's efforts to enhance economic cooperation with Kuwait and help SMEs explore promising opportunities in the Kuwaiti market. She emphasised the authority's commitment to

boosting the competitiveness of Omani SMEs by promoting the quality of their products and innovative capabilities, as well as facilitating access to strategic partners in target markets.

Over 70 companies participated in the exhibition, representing a diverse range of sectors, including food products, perfumes, incense, luxury items and technology.

— ONA

Oman, KSA discuss trade and industrial integration

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, held a meeting with Eng Khalil bin Ibrahim bin Salamah, Deputy Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources for Industry Affairs from Saudi Arabia.

The discussion took place at the ministry's headquarters in Muscat and focused on strengthening bilateral trade and industrial relations between the two nations.

The meeting primarily addressed opportunities to enhance trade and industrial integration between Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Key areas of discussion included ways to enhance exports, optimise supply chains and address challenges faced by exporters, in alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.



Trade between Oman and Saudi Arabia surpassed RO 1 billion in the first half of 2024.

The meeting was attended by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, Ibrahim Saad Bishan, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Sultanate of Oman, Eng Abdulrahman al Thukair, CEO of the Saudi Export Development Authority, Eng Al Badr Fouda,

Deputy Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources for Industrial Development of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Mohammed al Sadhan, Vice-Governor of the Saudi Zakat, Tax and Customs Authority for Operations, and several officials from both sides.

According to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information, trade between Oman and Saudi

Arabia surpassed RO 1 billion in the first half of 2024. Oman's key exports to Saudi Arabia included mineral products, metals and machinery, while mineral products, chemicals and food were the leading imports from the Kingdom.

Furthermore, Saudi investments in Oman have increased by over 50% since 2021, marking a significant enhancement of bilateral economic relations.

Earlier statements from Eng Sultan bin Abdul Rahman al Murshid, CEO of the Saudi Fund for Development, revealed that the total funding provided by the Saudi Fund for Development in the Sultanate of Oman exceeded RO 1.1 billion as of 2023.

This included an agreement to finance the construction of infrastructure in the integrated economic zone in Al Dhahirah, a project jointly developed by Oman and Saudi Arabia, valued at RO 120 million.

OMAN

CSR AWARDS



Zuwaina bint Abdullah al Sharjiyah, Assistant General Manager of Central Operations & Change Management, accepted the award on behalf of the Bank.

BANK MUSCAT HONOURED FOR FINANCIAL INCLUSIVITY

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, a leading financial services provider in Oman, recently participated in a celebration organised by the Ministry of Social Development to mark the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

The event, held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, was under the auspices of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, and attended by dignitaries, government officials, private sector representatives and NGO leaders.

During the ceremony, Bank Muscat was honoured by the Ministry of Social Development for its commitment to social responsibility initiatives that enhance the participation of people with disabilities and for its successful implementation of programmes benefiting this important segment of society.

Zuwaina bint Abdullah al Sharjiyah, Assistant General Manager of Central Operations & Change Management, accepted the award on behalf of the Bank.

The event aimed to highlight the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities, aligning with the goals of Oman Vision 2040, which promotes a more inclusive society and ensures the rights and well-being of all citizens.

Bank Muscat continues to collaborate with the Ministry of Social Development and other government, private sector entities and civil associations to support people with disabilities through its CSR initiatives. This includes providing essential equipment that helps individuals perform daily tasks, in partnership with various NGOs.

Earlier this year, Bank Muscat also organised the 'Himam Marathon', a pioneering event for individuals with physical, visual and hearing disabilities, as well as those with autism spectrum disorders and Down syndrome. The marathon aims to empower participants and integrate them into society, reflecting the principles of Oman Vision 2040, which advocates for dignified and sustainable living for all.

To advance financial inclusion, Bank Muscat is implementing a comprehensive development plan that offers diverse services and facilities tailored to all customers, including those with hearing, visual and physical disabilities.

The Bank is equipping its branches with specialised facilities for individuals with disabilities, ensuring that these features are incorporated into all new branches.

These branches include accessible corridors, reception desks, parking areas, waiting zones, staircases, elevators and special entrances, all designed to facilitate service for customers with disabilities.

Additionally, 13 interactive kiosks have been installed to allow disabled customers to complete transactions independently. The Bank also launched the first ATM with voice instructions in Oman at Al Noor Association for the Blind.

EXTRA ACHIEVES RECORD-BREAKING SALES FOR LG HOME APPLIANCES IN OMAN

MUSCAT: OTE Group congratulates leading retailer EXTRA on achieving a remarkable milestone by recording the highest sales of LG Home Appliances in Oman for 2024. This achievement underscores

EXTRA's dedication to excellence and sets a new benchmark for retail performance in Oman.

This success highlights EXTRA's effective retail strategies, customer-centric approach, and strong

partnership with OTE and LG. By offering a wide range of innovative LG Home Appliances, supported by OTE's robust distribution network and exceptional service, EXTRA has earned consumer trust and achieved outstanding results in a competitive market.

Senior officials from OTE Group and EXTRA met to celebrate the achievement, with the OTE team commending EXTRA's consistent efforts in promoting LG Home Appliances and driving consumer

satisfaction across Oman.

A senior OTE official commented, "This record-breaking achievement by Team EXTRA demonstrates the strength of our partnership and our shared commitment to providing premium home appliances to our customers. EXTRA's dedication and performance are an inspiration to others striving for similar success."

OTE Group continues to collaborate closely with its retail partners to meet evolving consumer needs .

Genesis hosts customer meet at showroom

THE OTE Group, the exclusive distributor of Genesis automobiles in Oman, recently hosted an exclusive customer meet at its state-of-the-art showroom in Muscat. The elegant event showcased the brand's latest luxury lineup, with the Genesis GV70 taking centre stage as the highlight of the evening.

The Genesis GV70, a stunning combination of dynamic performance and sophisticated design, captivated attendees with its striking presence. Guests were treated to an up-close look at the premium SUV, which exemplifies Genesis' dedication to delivering luxury, advanced technology and unparalleled comfort.

Presided over by the Director of OTE Group, the event celebrated the essence of luxury and exclusivity, attracting a distinguished audience that included loyal Genesis customers, business leaders and VIP guests. The evening's grandeur was further amplified by prominent media coverage and the attendance of leading social media influencers in Oman, extending its impact and visibility.

Adding to the experience, the evening featured a carefully curated lineup of entertainment, creating an atmosphere of sophistication and leaving attendees with lasting impressions. Guests also had the opportunity to engage with the Genesis team, gaining insights into the brand's philosophy of



The Genesis brand represents a new era of luxury and sophistication in the automotive industry. With the GV70, we are redefining the standards for premium SUVs, offering customers unmatched craftsmanship, performance and innovation.

DIRECTOR OF OTE GROUP



The event showcased the brand's latest luxury lineup, with the Genesis GV70 taking center stage.

blending elegance with cutting-edge technology, and learning about the innovative features of the Genesis lineup. Speaking on the occasion, the Director of OTE Group said, "The Genesis brand represents a new era of luxury and sophistication in the automotive industry. With the GV70,

we are redefining the standards for premium SUVs, offering customers unmatched craftsmanship, performance and innovation.

We are delighted to bring our valued customers closer to the exceptional experience that Genesis embodies."

Em Sherif Oman redefines Lebanese dining in Muscat

MUSCAT: Em Sherif Restaurant Oman, located within the luxurious St. Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort, is redefining Lebanese dining in Muscat. Since its opening in October, the restaurant has captivated diners with its authentic flavours, innovative culinary creations and sophisticated ambiance, now available throughout the day and evening.

The restaurant's celebrated menu is now offered at lunchtime, featuring both à la carte options and signature set menus. Each dish is masterfully

prepared using the finest ingredients, paying tribute to Lebanon's rich culinary heritage. In the evenings, Em Sherif introduces live entertainment every Thursday and Friday, blending modern beats by DJ Vinyl with the classical sounds of the Qanun, performed by Bassam Rady, renowned as the first Qanun player of house music.

This dynamic atmosphere enhances the dining experience, seamlessly fusing culture, cuisine and hospitality.

"It has been truly incredible to



Founded by visionary chef and restaurateur Mireille Hayek, Em Sherif has gained global recognition for its dedication to authentic Lebanese flavors and exceptional hospitality.

witness Em Sherif Restaurant's tremendous success since our opening in October," said Executive Head Chef Yasmina Hayek. "Seeing our guests embrace and celebrate Lebanese culture within our space has been a joy. With the introduction of our new lunchtime offerings and evening entertainment, we are continuing to elevate our dining experiences.

We look forward to unveiling even more delightful surprises as we approach the festive season and the holy month of Ramadan."

Al Mouj Golf celebrates 8th consecutive win as Oman's best golf course

MUSCAT:Al Mouj Golf has once again been named "Oman's Best Golf Course" for the year 2024 by the World Golf Awards. This marks the eighth consecutive win and the tenth overall, reaffirming Al Mouj Golf's standing as Oman's leading golfing destination beyond compare.

"Receiving this award for the tenth time is a tremendous honour for us," said Nasser al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat. "It reflects our unwavering dedication to providing



Being the only course in Oman to win this prestigious title eight years in a row, Al Mouj Golf continues to set the benchmark for golfing excellence in the region.

an exceptional golfing experience.

This recognition not only celebrates our team's hard work, but also highlights the unique appeal of our course.

We are excited to continue enhancing our facilities and services to attract golfers from around the world."

Al Mouj Golf is renowned for its exceptional facilities, including a stunning seaside links-style course designed by legendary golfer Greg

Norman.

The first of its kind in Oman, Al Mouj Golf offers a challenging and sustainable golfing experience that attracts players from around the globe.

The course's unique design and breathtaking ocean views have significantly contributed to Oman's reputation as a burgeoning golfing and tourism hub.

Beyond the greens, Al Mouj Golf is a haven for over 170 bird

species, with natural water lakes and efficient irrigation systems highlighting its green credentials and commitment to sustainability.

This eco-conscious approach has earned multiple environmental accreditations, underscoring the course's role in conserving the environment.

"We invite golfers and tourists worldwide to discover the beauty and challenge that Al Mouj Golf offers," added Al Sheibani.

OMAN

CRYPTONews



Bitcoin, the world’s largest cryptocurrency, hit new records above \$107,000 this month after Trump reiterated his plan for a strategic bitcoin reserve.
— Reuters

US CRYPTO INDUSTRY EYES POSSIBLE DAY-ONE TRUMP EXECUTIVE ORDERS

The cryptocurrency industry is pushing President-elect Donald Trump’s team to kick-start his promised crypto policy overhaul when he takes office next month with executive orders that would help push tokens mainstream, according to industry officials.

Trump plans to issue a flurry of executive orders and directives on everything from immigration to energy on his first day in office on January 20.

On the campaign trail, Trump courted crypto cash with promises to be a “crypto president,” and the industry wants him to make good on that pledge with executive orders creating a bitcoin stockpile, ensuring the industry can access banking services, and creating a crypto council, the people said.

They are pushing for those executive orders within Trump’s first 100 days in office, and expect at least one could come on January 20, said two other people with knowledge of the matter.

“Given the tenor of the campaign, it would be imperative for executive orders to really set out what the actual priorities will be on day one and provide some kind of roadmap,” said Rebecca Rettig, chief legal and policy officer at crypto company Polygon Labs.

Worried about crime and volatility, President Joe Biden’s regulators cracked down on crypto companies, but Trump has pledged to reverse course. His crypto policy team is already taking shape, with the announcement this month of crypto-friendly Securities and Exchange Commission chair Paul Atkins and White House crypto czar David Sacks.

“There has been an effort in the Washington bureaucratic swamp to stifle innovation... but President Trump will deliver on his promise to encourage American leadership in crypto,” Trump transition team spokesperson Brian Hughes said in a statement.

Bitcoin, the world’s largest cryptocurrency, hit new records above \$107,000 this month after Trump reiterated his plan, first unveiled in a speech in July, for a strategic bitcoin reserve. Bitcoin has since fallen back below \$100,000.

Analysts are divided on whether Trump could use executive powers to create the reserve, potentially via the Treasury Department, or whether an act of Congress would be necessary.

One industry group, the Bitcoin Policy Institute, has gone as far as to draft a text of a potential executive order Trump could use to establish such a stockpile.

That draft would designate bitcoin as a strategic reserve asset and require the Treasury Secretary to spend \$21 billion over a year to amass a national bitcoin stockpile, according to the draft seen by Reuters.

Zack Shapiro, the Bitcoin Policy Institute’s head of policy, said the United States should get ahead of geopolitical rivals in monetising bitcoin, “rather than have the price run up without the United States having any reserves.” — Reuters

JAPAN SELECTS TWO GROUPS FOR THIRD OFFSHORE WIND POWER ROUND

Japan’s industry and land ministries on Tuesday selected two consortiums, one including BP, as operators for two offshore wind blocks in a third major round of public auctions.

The results of this round, held under a law promoting wind power development, were closely watched by domestic and international energy companies weighing the advantages of renewable exposure.

Japan aims to accelerate offshore wind development as part of its

decarbonisation strategy, targeting 10 GW of offshore wind farm deals by 2030, and up to 45 GW by 2040.

A consortium of JERA, Green Power Investment and Tohoku Electric Power won the 615 MW wind farm on the southern side of the Japan Sea off Aomori prefecture, near Tsugaru city and the town of Ajigasawa.

Another consortium, including Marubeni, Kansai Electric Power, BP’s unit BP IOTA, Tokyo Gas and local firm Marutaka, secured the

450 MW wind farm off the coast of Yamagata prefecture near Yuza town.

Both bottom-fixed projects are scheduled to begin operations in June 2030, with turbines supplied by Spain’s Siemens Gamesa.

Earlier this month, BP and JERA agreed to join forces to form one of the world’s largest offshore wind operators. Japan’s government is aiming for renewables to account for up to 50% of its electricity mix by fiscal 2040. — Reuters

Oil prices rise 1% in thin pre-holiday trade

Oil prices rose more than 1% on Tuesday, reversing the prior session’s losses on a brightening short-term outlook tied to the prospect of slightly tightening supplies as trade thinned ahead of the Christmas and Hanukkah holidays.

Brent crude futures settled at \$73.58, rising 95 cents, or 1.3%. US West Texas Intermediate crude futures settled at \$70.10, rising 86 cents, or 1.2%.

FGE analysts said they expect the benchmark prices will fluctuate around current levels in the near term “as activity in the paper markets decreases during the holiday season and market participants stay on the sidelines until they get a clearer view of 2024 and 2025 global oil balances.”

Supply and demand changes in December have been supportive of their current less-bearish view so far, the FGE analysts said in a note.

“Given how short the paper market is on positioning, any supply disruption could lead to upward spikes in structure,” they added.

Some analysts also pointed to signs of greater oil demand over the next few months.

“The year is ending with the consensus from major agencies over long 2025 liquids balances starting to break down,” Neil Crosby, Sparta Commodities’ assistant vice-president of oil analytics, said in a note. “The EIA’s short-term energy

The year is ending with the consensus from major agencies over long 2025 liquids balances starting to break down

NEIL CROSBY
Assistant VP of Oil Analytics at Sparta Commodities



FGE analysts said they expect the benchmark prices will fluctuate around current levels in the near term. — Reuters

outlook recently shifted their 2025 liquids to a draw, despite continuing to bring back some OPEC+ barrels next year,” Crosby said.

US crude oil and distillate stocks were seen falling last week by 3.2 million barrels and 2.5 million barrels, respectively, while gasoline stocks were seen rising last week, market sources said, citing American Petroleum Institute figures. Gasoline inventories were seen rising by 3.9 million barrels.

The figures come ahead of data from the Energy Information Administration, the statistical arm of the US Department of Energy, at 1 pm EST (1800 GMT) on Friday.

Also supporting prices was a plan by China, the world’s biggest oil importer, to issue 3 trillion

yuan (\$411 billion) worth of special treasury bonds next year, as Beijing ramps up fiscal stimulus to revive a faltering economy.

China’s stimulus is likely to provide near-term support for WTI crude at \$67 a barrel, said OANDA senior market analyst Kelvin Wong.

Markets will also be watching the US economy, the world’s largest oil consumer, which released a mixed bag of data.

While consumer confidence weakened in December, new orders for key US-manufactured capital goods surged in November amid strong demand for machinery and new home sales rebounded, suggesting the US economy was on a solid footing as the year closes out.

— Reuters

IMF, Egypt reach deal unlocking \$1.2 billion

WASHINGTON: The International Monetary Fund said on Tuesday that it has reached a deal with Egyptian authorities allowing the country access to about \$1.2 billion.

The funding access is subject to executive board approval. “The Egyptian authorities have continued to implement key policies to preserve macroeconomic stability, despite ongoing regional tensions that are causing a sharp decline in Suez Canal receipts,” said Ivanna Vladkova Hollar, who led the IMF mission involved in discussions with Egyptian authorities.

She added in a statement that “continued implementation of fiscal consolidation efforts will be necessary to preserve debt sustainability, and reduce large interest costs and gross domestic financing requirements.”



The International Monetary Fund (IMF) headquarters building in Washington, US.
— Reuters

The deal comes as both sides reached staff-level agreement on the fourth review under the Extended Fund Facility arrangement, the fund said.

Vladkova Hollar also noted that authorities’ plans to streamline and simplify the tax system were commendable, but that “further reforms will be needed to enhance domestic revenue mobilisation efforts.”

“A comprehensive reform package is needed to ensure that Egypt rebuilds fiscal buffers to reduce debt vulnerabilities, and generates additional space to increase social spending, especially in health, education and social protection,” said Vladkova Hollar.

The discussions culminating in the deal were held in person from November 6-20 and virtually afterwards. — AFP

Big banks, business groups sue US Fed over annual stress tests

Major banks and business groups sued the Federal Reserve earlier this week, alleging the US central bank’s annual “stress tests” of Wall Street firms violate the law.

The lawsuit filed in US District Court in Columbus, Ohio, claims the Fed’s practice of determining how big banks perform against hypothetical economic turmoil, and assigning capital requirements accordingly, do not follow proper administrative procedure.

Plaintiffs included the Bank Policy Institute, the US Chamber of Commerce, and the American Bank Association.

The lawsuit marks the latest example of the banking industry growing bolder and challenging in court their regulators’ powers, particularly in the wake of recent Supreme Court rulings placing fresh restrictions on administrative authority.

In June, the Supreme Court dealt



The lawsuit marks the latest example of the banking industry growing bolder and challenging in court their regulators’ powers. — Reuters

a major blow to such power by overturning a 1984 precedent that granted deference to government agencies in interpreting laws they administer.

The so-called “Chevron doctrine” had called for judges to defer to reasonable federal agency interpretations of US laws deemed to be ambiguous.

While the 2010 Dodd-Frank law passed following the global financial crisis broadly requires the Fed to test

banks’ balance sheets, the capital adequacy analysis the Fed performs as part of tests, or the resulting capital it directs lenders to set aside, are not mandated by law.

Specifically, the groups are calling for the Fed to make public and subject to feedback the now-confidential models they regulators use to gauge bank performance, as well as details of the annual scenarios they create to test for weaknesses. — Reuters

OPINION

Banking sector excels in digital transformation



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

THE Omani banking sector plays a major role in digital transformation by enhancing the use of modern financial technologies that are entering the market. Such techniques enable many workers in this sector to adopt new information systems and offer more banking products through which customers can be attracted and their deposits and savings in local banks can be increased.

These developments help enhance the role of banks and similar institutions in the economic and social life of the public and address the challenges and problems that people suffer from through the use of modern communication devices in daily transactions.

Over the past two decades, banks have introduced many modern applications, programmes, and technologies in banking, which has made it easier for customers to access their accounts without any hassle.

At the same time, banks continue to develop these services as is the case with many Gulf banks in the region, which have been linked together for more than two decades.

These banks are working to enhance their means of innovation and push the Gulf banking sector to adopt and use more modern technologies in their daily

operations. During the current year, the Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman approved the basics of the regulatory framework to enhance financial inclusion, increase efficiency in the banking sector, and adopt modern technologies to keep pace with the developments witnessed by this sector.

The banking sector is also working to address the challenges represented in protecting personal data and privacy, identifying customers and their sources of funds to combat money laundering, developing policies and taking measures to protect everyone from hacking and ensuring customer privacy in the face of challenges arising from digital banks.

This happens by improving cybersecurity technologies, and enhancing transparency to ensure customer confidence and compliance with laws. From this standpoint, we see today that there is superiority in the region's banks in digital transformation, such that they have become superior to their counterparts in global banks after their success in adopting digital transformation by 87% of their daily transactions.

Today, Gulf employees in banks are committed to banking work, such that the job turnover rates are not worrying and are within the range of (15-20%), which is

These developments help enhance the role of banks and similar institutions in the economic and social life of the public and address the challenges and problems that people suffer from through the use of modern communication devices

slightly higher than what is recorded in Asian banks (10-15%) and North American banks (12-15%), according to data from a report by Arthur D. Little, a global management consulting firm, which recently spoke about the importance of employee experience in enhancing institutional success in the Middle East region in digital transformation.

The report was based on its accumulated experience in helping institutions in the field of the direct impact of employee experience on improving profitability, indicating that despite the progress made by banks in the Middle East in the areas of equality and participation, they still need to continue investing - similar to their Asian and international counterparts - in orientation and training programs, employee welfare and employee appreciation, with the aim of achieving sustainable change in the employee experience.

They also still face challenges in attracting and retaining employees due to the high job turnover rates, as previously mentioned.

Hence, they demand the necessity of investing and improving their employee experience in terms of financial performance, productivity, innovation and retention, especially in the rapidly growing and developing markets of the region.

INDIA'S GREEN POWER PRODUCERS WILL GET A SHAKEOUT

MUMBAI:Dealmaking is coming for India's renewable energy industry in 2025. More than a dozen generators of wind and solar power are looking for new owners as private equity-style firms like Brookfield Asset Management, as well as industry players like Siemens and Enel, look for an exit. Despite New Delhi's target of renewables providing half the country's electricity by 2030, success isn't assured.

Hitting that goal will require around \$200 billion of investment, analysts at Nomura reckon. But companies are getting finicky about deploying capital in a market where tariffs for solar power – the single largest subcategory – have moved in a narrow range since 2019.

Sellers may be overly optimistic on valuations, too. Investment fund owners like Brookfield, GIC and Macquarie spent much of 2024 scouting for and haggling with prospective buyers. India's Inox Wind hinted on an earnings call in October that the Siemens Gamesa wind assets it took a look at were overpriced.

Some deals are set for completion after months of wrangling. A unit of Malaysia's Petronas has agreed to buy part of Brookfield's portfolio for \$900 million, the Economic Times reported in November.

Other potential buyers include JSW Energy's renewables unit and Singapore's Sembcorp.

Perhaps the biggest test will be what happens to GIC's 50% stake in Greenko, which has 7.5 gigawatts of net installed capacity; Bloomberg reported in October that the Singapore sovereign wealth fund was considering selling part or all of its holdings.

Those who cannot secure an industry sale do have another option: an initial public offering.

Public markets in India are now seen as mature enough to buy into companies in emerging sectors with earnings some way off.

That's a far cry from 2021 when ReNew Energy, the country's second-largest green power producer by capacity, went public on Nasdaq by merging with a blank-cheque company.

State-owned NTPC Green Energy's strong public market debut in late 2024 will buoy sentiment.

A listing may work best for companies that have scaled up to a couple of gigawatts, such as Brookfield-backed CleanMax, and Hero Future Energies, whose sponsors include KKR. It could be harder for firms with smaller amounts of installed capacity and less or no cash flow.

The coming shakeout in Indian renewables will reveal whose capital New Delhi might be able to rely on as its 2030 goal looms. — Reuters

Digital financial inclusion key to climate resilience

WE cannot tackle global warming without addressing poverty. That's why measures to promote digital and financial inclusion—providing internet access to underserved communities, bank accounts to workers, and digital tools to entrepreneurs—must be integrated into climate action plans.

Earlier this year, a group of economists completed the largest analysis to date on the economic effects of hurricanes in the United States. One striking finding was that businesses operating solely through brick-and-mortar locations suffered a 56% drop in sales for about three weeks after a hurricane, while those with an online presence experienced a far smaller decline—just 23%.

This finding underscores a clear point: businesses, from hardware stores in North Carolina to corner shops in Nairobi, can bolster their resilience to climate change by participating in the digital economy.

In recent years, global efforts to counteract climate change have accelerated. Industries like energy and automotive are overhauling supply chains to promote clean technologies, and governments are adopting policies to expedite the green transition. Notable examples include the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the United States' Inflation Reduction Act.

Yet, measures promoting digital and financial inclusion are often absent from climate action plans. This oversight is significant.

A report on hurricane impacts, conducted by the World Bank, the Sustainable and Green Finance Institute, and the Mastercard Economics Institute, highlights why integrating these measures could be transformative.

More than one billion unbanked individuals live in the world's most climate-vulnerable regions.

Improving their access to digital banking and payment services would enhance their ability to withstand both economic and climate-related shocks.

For instance, digital money transfers can facilitate rapid relief fund distribution after natural



Digital and financial inclusion must become a cornerstone of future climate efforts, with a focus on reducing the number of unbanked individuals and building digital infrastructure in climate-vulnerable areas. — Reuters



ELLEN JACKOWSKI

The author is the Chief Sustainability Officer at Mastercard.

disasters, while businesses can maintain operations by selling online. This presents an opportunity for fintech companies and nonprofits to create solutions at the intersection of climate resilience and digital inclusion. One notable example is Abalobi, an Earthshot Prize finalist in 2023.

Abalobi developed an app that enables small-scale fishers to log their catches, providing data on sustainable fishing practices.

The app solves two critical problems. First, it provides governments and scientists with valuable data on sustainable fishing.

Second, it allows fishers to bypass middlemen and sell directly to restaurants and buyers, securing higher prices. This reduces the incentive to overfish, lessening the strain on marine ecosystems.

Similarly, Yo! Pay Agric, powered by Mastercard Community Pass, connects smallholder farmers with regional buyers through cooperative organizations. By cutting out middlemen, farmers earn more for their crops. Transaction data from these sales also helps farmers establish creditworthiness, enabling

them to access loans for essentials like seeds, fertilizers, and clean-energy technologies such as solar-powered equipment.

Digital and financial inclusion must become a cornerstone of future climate efforts, with a focus on reducing the number of unbanked individuals and building digital infrastructure in climate-vulnerable areas. Achieving this goal will require collaboration between private companies, governments, and nonprofits to develop innovative solutions like Abalobi and Yo! Pay Agric. These tools not only enhance financial health for local users but also promote resilience in the face of climate challenges.

Climate change and poverty are deeply intertwined, and we cannot effectively address one without tackling the other. While digital tools and financial services cannot prevent climate-related disasters, they can significantly ease recovery efforts. Strengthening the financial resilience of the most vulnerable communities benefits both local populations and the global economy as a whole. — ©Project Syndicate, 2024

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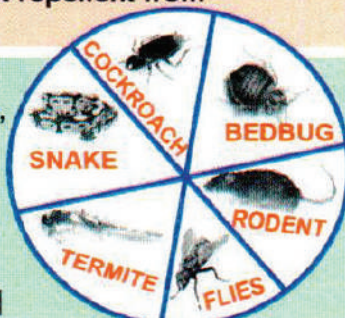
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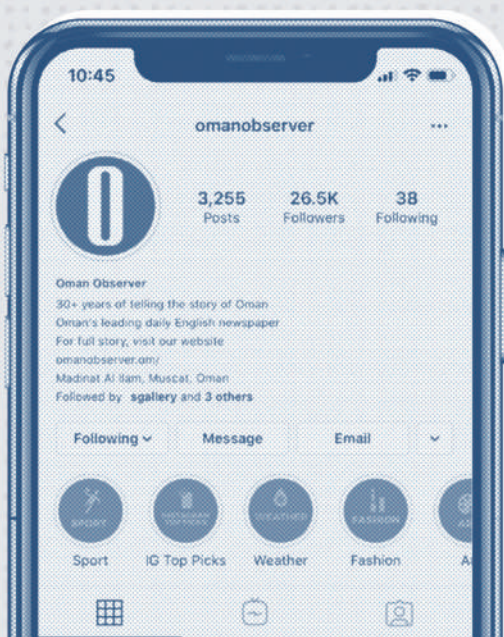
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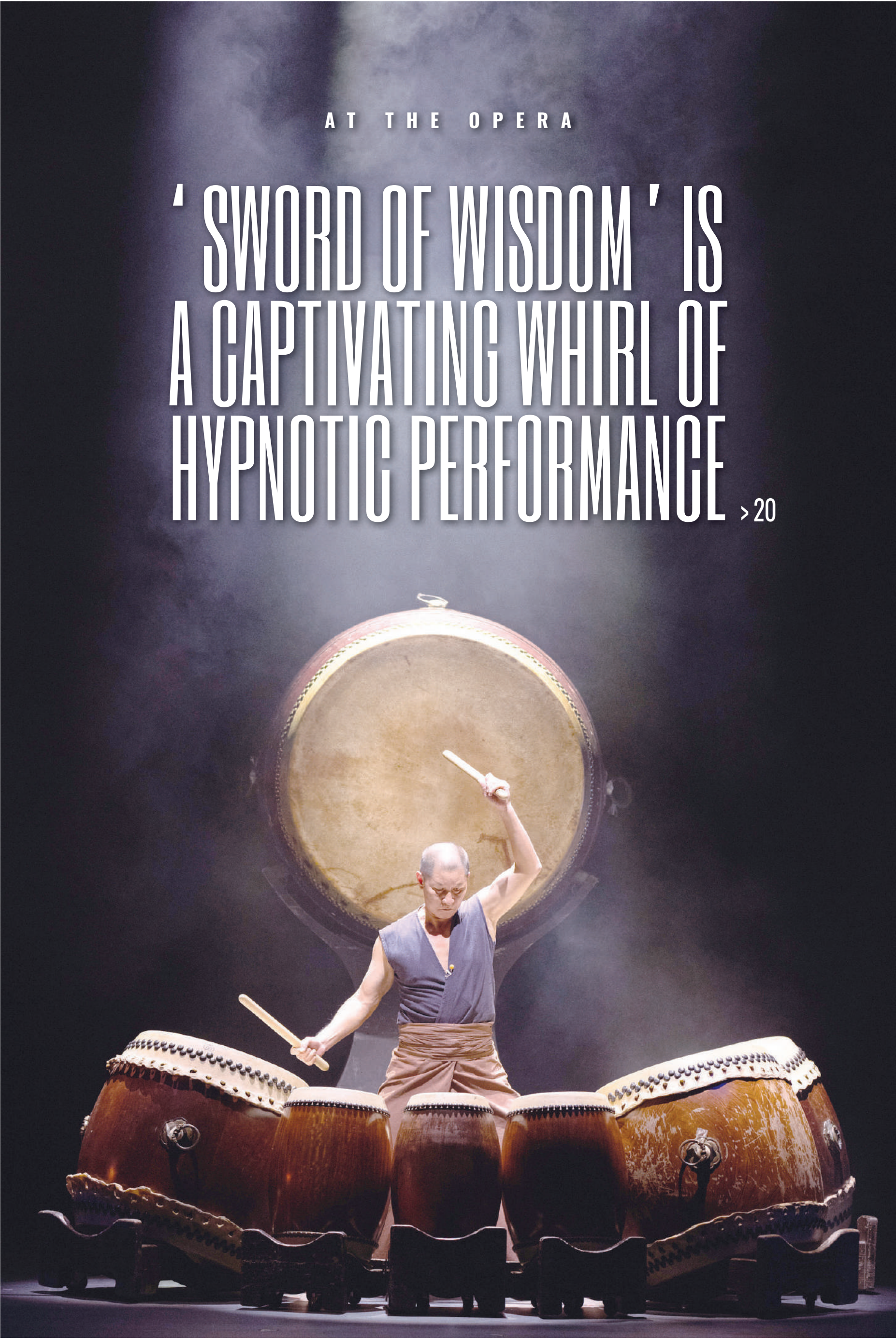
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ART/LIFE



TRAVEL

Picturesque Japan hot spring town limits day trippers



A JAPANESE hot spring town popular for its photogenic snowy scenes began limiting entry to day-trippers on Monday in a trial to tackle overtourism during winter.

Ginzan Onsen, a remote town in northern Yamagata region, draws around 330,000 visitors each year.

Many share photos online of its old-fashioned buildings blanketed in snow and illuminated by lamplight that create a nostalgic atmosphere.

However, authorities in Ginzan Onsen, as in more famous destinations such as Kyoto and Mount Fuji, have become fed up with a rise in road problems, quarrels and other nuisances.

From Monday, only people staying at local hotels will be allowed to enter the town after 8 pm, while those wishing to visit between 5 pm and 8 pm will need a reservation.

Japan has seen a record influx of foreign tourists this year as the weak yen swells a post-pandemic travel boom.

“Traffic jams have sometimes been caused by cars getting stuck in the snow, because travellers were driving with normal tyres” instead of snow tyres, said Takayuki Saito, head of commerce and tourism for the municipality of Obanazawa, where the town is located.

“We’ve also heard of cases of emergency vehicles not being able to reach” Ginzan Onsen due to congestion, Saito said.

Driving there “can be dangerous with poor visibility in snowstorms” in winter, he said.

Until the end of February, day-trippers will be asked to park at a tourism centre two kilometres (1.2 miles) away and pay for a shuttle bus.

The official website for Ginzan Onsen said the trial had been launched after years of debate, adding that authorities were hoping to maintain a good relationship with visitors.

When heavy traffic recently stopped an ambulance, “an emergency service team made it to the scene by running, but it was truly a life-and-death situation,” the site said.

“Some visitors are verbally abusive” when officials come to help cars stuck in snow, according to the site, which it described as “unbearable”.

More than 33 million foreign visitors have entered Japan so far this year, breaking 2019’s full-year record of nearly 32 million.

Locals in Japan’s ancient capital Kyoto have complained of tourists harassing the city’s famed geisha and decided to ban visitors from entering private alleys.

Authorities have also introduced an entry fee and daily cap on numbers on Mount Fuji’s most popular trail, while barriers were installed outside a convenience store nearby to stop crowds of snap-happy visitors getting injured on the road. — AFP

QUICK FEATURES



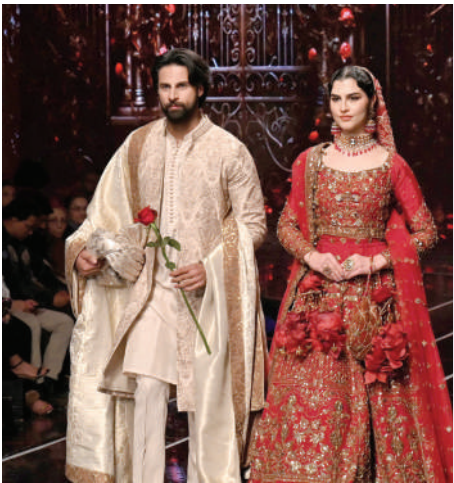
LIFESTYLE

An Afghan antique vendor shows a Dotar called “two strings” in Persian, a folkloric plucked musical instrument crafted with dried wood, at his shop in Herat. — AFP



FILM

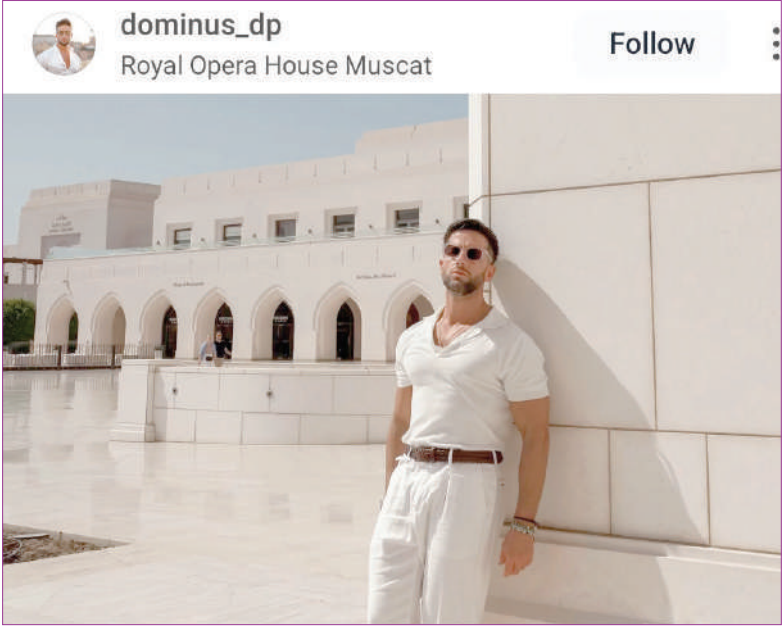
Tunisian writer, film director and producer Lotfi Achour poses with his Tanit d’or (Golden Tanit) prize for the film “Les Enfants Rouges”, during the closing ceremony of the Carthage Cinematographic Days (JCC) at the Opera Theatre in Tunis. — AFP



FASHION

Models present creations by designer Fatima Ashar during the Neo HUM Bridal Couture Week, in Lahore. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Visiting Oman's Icons



A Day at the Beach

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Christopher Nolan’s next film is adaptation of Homer’s ‘The Odyssey’



DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan is adapting Homer’s epic poem “The Odyssey” for his next film. Universal Pictures said it will be “mythic action epic shot across the world.” The film by the 54-year-old director known for “Oppenheimer” and “Interstellar” will be released in cinemas worldwide on July 17, 2026, the studio said late on Monday on X. According to Universal, the film will be shot using IMAX technology, which enables a particularly high resolution. Hollywood trade publications report that Matt Damon, Charlize Theron, Tom Holland, Anne Hathaway, Zendaya, Lupita Nyong’o and Robert Pattinson are involved in the project.

The ancient Greek poem, written around the 8th century BCE, follows the hero Odysseus as he attempts to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. His journey takes ten years, during which he faces numerous challenges, including the Cyclops Polyphemus, the seductive Sirens and the enchantress Circe. While Odysseus struggles, his wife Penelope and son Telemachus fend off suitors vying for her hand. Through cleverness and resilience, Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, disguised as a beggar. With Telemachus’s help, he defeats the suitors and reunites with Penelope, celebrating the theme of perseverance, loyalty, and the longing for home throughout his epic journey. — dpa



India’s architecture fans guard Mumbai’s Art Deco past

A TOWERING cinema with a roofline like an ocean liner stands out in India’s financial capital Mumbai, part of a remarkable Art Deco architectural heritage that campaigners say needs protection. A short walk away is a state-run insurance office with giant Egyptian-style carvings, and a palm-lined seafront promenade with pastel-coloured apartments with porthole windows, curved balconies and exotic motifs. Architecture aficionados may go crazy over Miami’s South Beach, but the coastal Indian megacity is home to what experts believe is one of the world’s largest collections of Art Deco buildings. Decades of neglect, however, have led to buildings being demolished or compromised through slapdash modern renovation.

Lovers of the dramatic architecture fear that will only increase as Mumbai undergoes a rapid \$30 billion infrastructure makeover including major road, rail and bridge projects. A sweep of some Art Deco buildings — including offices, colleges and residential complexes — was listed on Unesco’s World Heritage list in 2018, alongside the city’s Victorian Gothic architecture for its “unique style” described as “Indo-Deco”. Today, the city’s breakneck pace of development has left a small but dedicated group of building owners, architects and heritage lovers trying to conserve the city’s Art Deco character. The job requires “constant vigilance”, said Nayana Kathpalia, who lives in an Art Deco building that was recently restored — but crucially in a manner that maintained its original character.

- ‘MODERN, OPEN, FRIENDLY’ - Many apartment building owners are eager to cash in and redevelop their old dwellings, making them part of a cookie-cutter modern skyline. “We are very, very clear that we have to protect that,” Kathpalia said. Losing it could strip the city of its history and character, campaigners say.



Art Deco took the West by storm after emerging as a new wave of design in France before the First World War. Architects used geometric patterns and streamlined structures to evoke the popular technologies of the time, including airplanes and ocean liners. As a style, Art Deco can appear as an odd hodgepodge, borrowing everything from ancient Mayan to Japanese culture. But the first generation of homegrown Indian architects who visited Europe in the 1920s and 1930s were inspired. After returning home, they started designing Art Deco style buildings for rich Indian business families that had profited off the economic boom in the port city, said Atul Kumar, founder of a non-profit that seeks to conserve the heritage. Art Deco “enabled a certain cosmopolitanism” and contributed to making Mumbai a “modern, open, friendly” city, Kumar added.

- ‘BOMBAY STYLE’ - While Kumar’s Art Deco Mumbai organisation has spent years painstakingly documenting buildings, it has also more recently started offering “repair and restoration” help. “We go out, pro bono, and reach

out to people,” he said, having supported the sensitive restoration of around nine buildings, including a couple in the core World Heritage area. However, there are challenges, including stringent rent control laws which impose financial constraints on landlords. Kumar also admits that residents in newer and northern parts of the city have less of a “desire” to conserve their buildings in their original Art Deco style. A large part of this is due to a lack of awareness. Many of the city’s inhabitants walk past the vivid tropical imagery, elongated turrets and jazzy typography without giving them a second glance. Pranati Mehta, a 46-year-old school teacher, says most Indians only look at “temples as architecture”, as they “feel that is special”. Some Mumbai residents don’t realise they “live amongst art”, she said. But Mehta, who was on a weekend walking tour to learn more about the architectural style, quickly adds that Art Deco isn’t foreign to Indian sensibilities. “We recognise it as a Bombay style,” she said. “We think Art Deco is also an Indian brand.” — AFP

FEATURES

BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

THE breathtaking performances of Taiwan's U-Theatre's 'Sword of Wisdom', which took place last Thursday and Friday evenings at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts, presented something of a dichotomy. The one word that sums up their extraordinary skill and precision is: discipline. However, one might also add power and strength, perfect synchronisation, and beauty in all movements.

U-Theatre's style combines elements of Chinese martial arts, drumming, meditation, sacred dance and ritual. Its founder-director, Liu Ruo-Yu, who established the company in 1988, was deeply influenced by the Polish academic Jerzy Grotowski's aesthetic and performance training method, which explores the body and mind in theatre. In 1993, she invited Huang Chih-Chun, a traditional Malaysian-Chinese percussionist, to join and teach drumming. Huang's deeply held conviction that "to play the drum, one must first learn meditation" inspired and informed the core principle of "drumming in one's own tranquillity", which is the central ethos of U-Theatre.

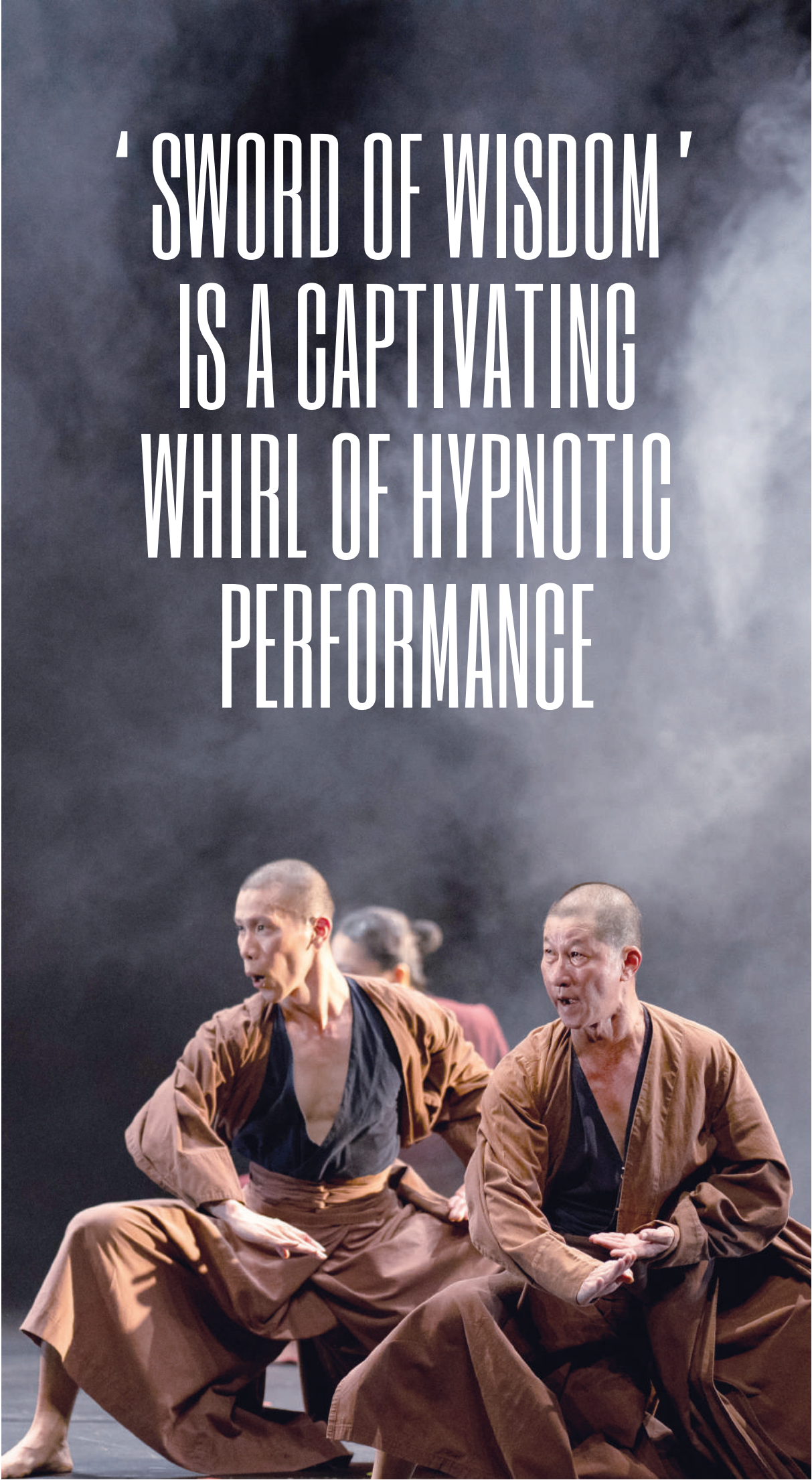
The hall was packed to capacity with a diverse audience from various backgrounds and ages, with barely a spare seat in sight. The 18 male and female performers crept softly onto the stage in red costumes like Buddhist monks to the call of a conch shell. Five large cowhide drums were smoothly wheeled on, accompanied by three huge gongs. Small percussion instruments, followed by finger cymbals, were beaten rapidly to keep the pulse, while the five large drummers were precisely synchronised in their mesmerising music, punctuated only by the eastern echoes of metallic gongs reverberating like a Gamelan. The lighting design by Lin Keh-Hua was evocative and intense throughout, yet subtle enough not to be intrusive.

A dancer wearing a four-faced mask of Buddha appeared — the Vajrasattva, who helps alleviate human suffering in his terrifying, wrathful form. A pre-recorded track surprisingly simulated monks chanting from behind, later providing vibraphones and singing. He removed his mask to reveal the Master, Huang Chih-Chun, as a warrior in quest of self-realisation.

In the second scene, the warrior uses his spiritual sword — represented by a long stick — not to fight, but to embark on a journey of self-discovery. He spins, twirls and slaps the drums and floor with a violent crack. Two drummers performed from the wings, while four women rolled double-sided drums centre stage. They performed coordinated rhythms, with the perpetual dance-like poise and grace of the women's arms never stopping. Each scene built up to a crescendo of sound before dissolving into silence. The warrior was left alone to contemplate his identity.

Scene three, 'Clearing the Grass to Find the Snake', was explained by surtitles. In eastern culture, the snake represents wisdom and human nature but can also symbolise cunning and deceit. The dichotomy of the two distinct selves in conflict yet coexisting in the warrior's heart was explored through a slow, searching mime or stylised dance in perfect synchrony to recorded pipe music, describing two aspects of the warrior's personae, or alter-egos: "One dancer is controlling and cautious while the other is open and provocative. One wields a sword while the other does not." The performance synthesises the discipline of Japanese Taiko drumming with the ritualised storytelling of Indonesian Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry).

'Crouching Lion's Roar' takes the Master on a journey of inner searching. Six drums are silently pushed on, gongs descend, and he plays a startling, powerful solo as the other performers freeze. The crescendo begins, with gongs and cymbals punctuating the frenzy. Eight drums slide on to join



seamlessly; the repeated rhythm is steady, with meticulously synchronised arm movements while warrior-master Huang Chih-Chun plays a technically challenging solo of complex patterns on the huge suspended instrument, facing backwards. The full drum ensemble builds up in a strongly syncopated, irregular rhythmic pattern as the warrior's inner conflicts dissipate into strong conviction and resilience. He emits a loud roar, addressing his challenges directly, and moves towards the 'Sword of Wisdom'. This tour de force synchronises five drummers with long sticks beating uneven, complex rhythms in choreographed leaps, hurling and flinging sticks between them with expert hand-eye coordination, while the ladies maintain a constant pulse on hand-held percussion stage right. The concluding 'Mandala Offering' represents the self, symbolising the unconscious inner wisdom that encompasses infinite beauty, transcending the limitations of time and space. A solo figure mimed a slow dance, without drum or sword, accompanied only by a pre-recorded woman singing. Then eight drummers entered with a deep-throated Buddhist chant, dressed in red and brown flowing gowns created by 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' designer Tim Yip. They began fast kicking and twirling, reminiscent of Whirling Dervishes, hands raised in uniform gesture, until just our warrior, Huang Chih-Chun himself, remained alone, spinning continuously to a haunting 'Om'. The entire performance, just 75 minutes of unbroken drama, was spellbinding and compelling. The energy in the hall was electric as the audience was transported on this profound journey of self-exploration and transcendence.