

O M A N
عمان
D A I L Y

Observer

VOL. 45, NO. 52
PAGES 20 | BAISAS 210

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11 THE PRICE OF AN OLYMPIC DREAM



INBRIEF

A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE FOR VISITORS



A plethora of traditional food stalls at Muscat Nights locations are attracting large number of visitors who are given a first-hand experience of Omani cuisine. The wide range of food stalls at Al Amerat Public Park, where women prepare dishes, has attracted citizens, residents and festival visitors. They come to appreciate the true culinary identity of the Sultanate of Oman. **DETAILS ON P4**

MICE TOURISM GENERATES RO 15M

The meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism sector in Oman achieved a tangible economic and tourism impact in 2025, recording direct economic returns of approximately RO 15 million.

The sector attracted more than 1.9 million visitors, participants, and investors through the hosting of over 250 local, regional and international events — an indicator of the sector’s growing role as a key driver of economic diversification and tourism growth in Oman. The country has strengthened its position as a specialised destination for meetings, conferences and exhibitions tourism, leveraging integrated infrastructure, professional organisational capabilities and comprehensive experiences that attracted participants from more than 60 countries worldwide. **DETAILS ON P2**

TRANQUILITY AND BEAUTY!



A night view of Al Khuwair district, showing the flagpole with perfect reflection on the water, and the moon on the backdrop of a picture depicting tranquility and profound beauty.
Photo by Khalifa al Rawahi

‘Hamat’ to promote innovative thinking

MUSCAT: The first phase of the third edition of the Ideas Makers (Hamat) programme has been launched.

Organised by the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers in partnership with the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the programme aims to promote innovative thinking and citizenship, empower and nurture creative youth, adopt

developmental ideas to achieve sustainable development and engage the community to address the challenges.

The programme includes a comprehensive journey, with its first phase consisting of introductory tours about the programme in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. These tours will run until January 27, during which a number of challenges will be presented that

the programme seeks to address through the projects and ideas of the participants.

The programme focuses on three tracks including challenges facing companies, challenges facing the governorates and scientific research and innovation. This phase will include a number of specialised workshops to support participants and develop their ideas, with the participation of experts from

companies affiliated with the Oman Investment Authority.

The second phase of the programme, to be held during February 1-5, will include a training camp and intensive workshops for participants. These workshops will cover key topics such as problem formulation, solution development, work model building and the fundamentals of developing a project prototype. — **ONA**

Trump says US will run Venezuela till transition

U S S U C C E S S F U L L Y C A P T U R E S P R E S I D E N T N I C O L A S M A D U R O

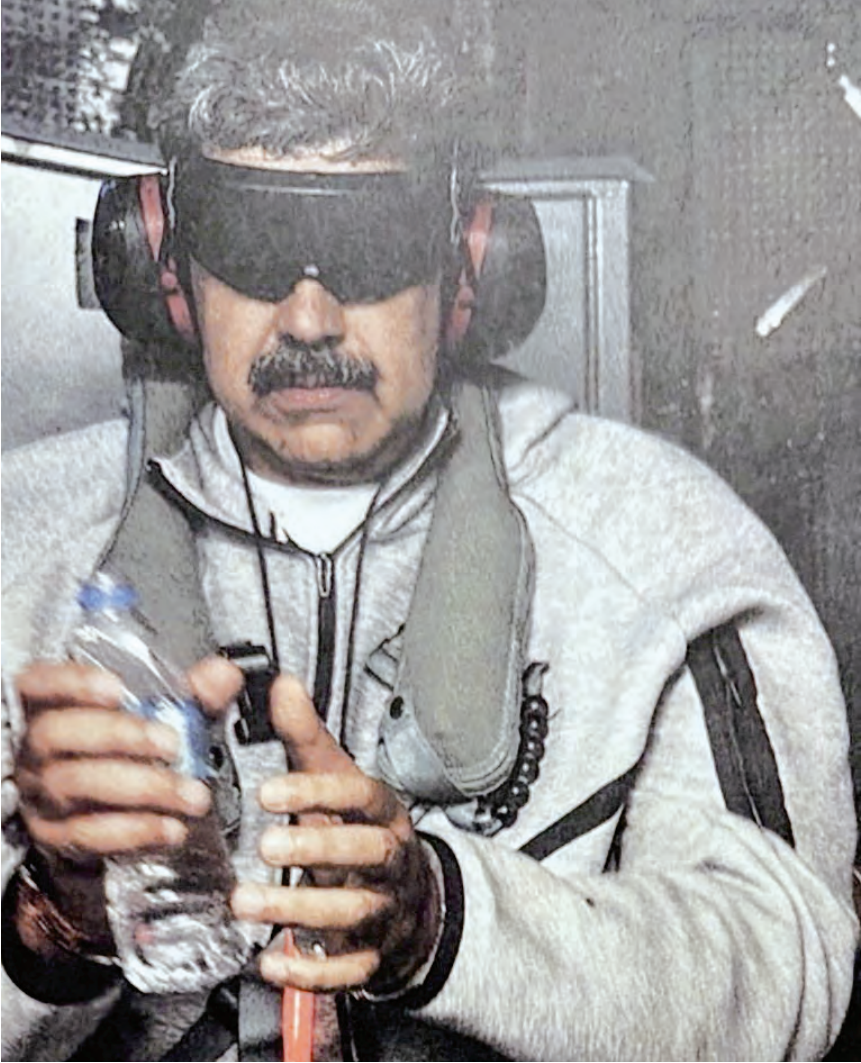
THE US attacked Venezuela and deposed its long-serving President Nicolas Maduro in an overnight operation on Saturday, President Donald Trump said, in Washington's most direct intervention in Latin America since the 1989 invasion of Panama.

“This was one of the most stunning, effective and powerful displays of American might and competence in American history,” Trump said at a press conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, where he was flanked by senior officials, including Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Trump said Maduro was in custody and that American officials would take control of Venezuela. “We’re going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition,” he said. “We can’t take a chance that someone else takes over Venezuela who doesn’t have the interests of Venezuelans in mind.”

It is unclear how Trump plans to oversee Venezuela. Despite a dramatic overnight operation that knocked out electricity in part of Caracas and captured Maduro in or near one of his safe houses, US forces have no control over the country itself, and Maduro’s government appears to still be in charge.

The removal of Maduro, who led Venezuela with a heavy hand for more than 12 years,



A photograph which US President Donald Trump posted on his Truth Social account shows what he describes as Venezuelan President ‘Nicolas Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima’ amphibious assault ship, currently in the Caribbean Sea on Saturday. — **Reuters**

potentially opens a power vacuum in the Latin American country. Venezuelan Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez - Maduro’s presumptive successor -

is in Russia, four sources familiar with her movements said, stoking confusion about who is next in line to govern the South American country.

Russia’s foreign ministry said the report that Rodriguez is in Russia was “fake.”

Any serious destabilisation in the nation of 28 million people threatens to hand Trump the type of quagmire that has marked US foreign policy for much of the 21st century, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq - which were also premised on regime change. The US has not made such a direct intervention in its backyard region since the invasion of Panama 37 years ago to depose military leader Manuel Noriega over allegations that he led a drug-running operation. The United States has levelled similar charges against Maduro, accusing him of running a “narco-state” and rigging the 2024 election.

Maduro, a 63-year-old former bus driver handpicked by the dying Hugo Chavez to succeed him in 2013, has denied those claims and said Washington was intent on taking control of his nation’s oil reserves, the largest in the world.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply alarmed by US military action in Venezuela that sets “a dangerous precedent,” his spokesperson said on Saturday ahead of a likely UN Security Council meeting. Venezuela and Colombia, backed by Russia and China, have asked for the 15-member Security Council to meet, diplomats said, after the US attacked Venezuela and deposed its long-serving President Nicolas Maduro. The meeting has not yet been scheduled. **SEE ALSO P6**

Premarital medical test for safe and stable family

MUSCAT: The decision to mandate premarital medical examinations for all Omanis wishing to get married, as per Royal Decree No 111/2025, represents a cornerstone of the preventive healthcare system. It helps reduce the spread of genetic, hereditary and infectious diseases, protecting family and community, and limiting the transmission of these diseases. It ensures the health of spouses and their

future children, given the health, social and economic challenges posed by these diseases.

The decision to mandate premarital medical examinations represents a national trend towards establishing prevention as the primary public health option by limiting the transmission of genetic, hereditary and infectious diseases. It also empowers couples planning to get married to

make an informed decision, thereby strengthening the sustainability of the health system and protecting Omani families.

Health specialists emphasised the importance of premarital medical examinations in preventing genetic, hereditary and infectious diseases. They pointed to its role in early detection and reducing the burden on families and the healthcare system. They

added that mandatory examinations would improve public health and enhance prevention in line with national goals for family and community health.

Dr Intisar bint Nasser al Shukriyah, a consultant virologist at the Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) at the Ministry of Health, said that sickle cell anaemia is the most common and serious blood disorder in terms of health complications, along

with thalassemia, particularly beta-thalassemia, which requires continuous blood transfusions. She pointed out that most of these diseases (sickle cell and thalassemia) are inherited in an autosomal recessive manner, meaning that the disease occurs only in the case that the child inherits the defective gene from both parents.

She noted that if the test results show that both partners carry the genetic

trait, and they decide to proceed with the marriage despite medical advice, there are medical options to reduce the risk of having an affected child. The most prominent of these is preimplantation genetic testing (PGT). However, the high cost of this test, its failure rate, limited availability, and associated complications minimise its use, even though it is currently the optimal medical solution. **TURN TO P3**

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The ceremony will be held at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

ROP TO MARK ANNUAL DAY, GRADUATE NEW OFFICERS ON JAN 5

MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) will mark its Annual Day on Monday, January 5, coinciding with the graduation of officer candidates and a skills development and qualification course for officers. The ceremony will be held under the auspices of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, at the military parade ground of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

The event will be attended by their highnesses, their excellencies the ministers and advisers, commanders of the Sultan’s Armed Forces, the Royal Oman Police, and other military and security agencies. Also present will be members of the State Council, their excellencies the members of the Majlis Ash’shura, senior officials, directors-general of government institutions, shaikhs and dignitaries from the Interior Governorate, as well as the parents of the graduates. — ONA

Oman hosts over 250 events, strengthens exhibitions sector

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism sector in Oman achieved a tangible economic and tourism impact in 2025, recording direct economic returns of approximately RO 15 million.

The sector attracted more than 1.9 million visitors, participants, and investors through the hosting of over 250 local, regional and international events — an indicator of the sector’s growing role as a key driver of economic diversification and tourism growth in Oman.

Oman has strengthened its position as a specialised destination for meetings, conferences and exhibitions tourism, leveraging integrated infrastructure, professional organisational capabilities and comprehensive experiences that attracted participants from more than 60 countries worldwide.

More than 20,000 international participants and investors took part in over 15 regional and international events within a single year.

The momentum of the sector was directly reflected across several supporting economic sectors, including hospitality, transport, services and retail. The continuous flow of events contributed to higher hotel occupancy rates, revitalised commercial activity and stimulated demand for services related to supply chains, event organisation, technology and hospitality.

Eng Said bin Salim al Shanfari, Chief Executive Officer of the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, said that the indicators achieved in 2025 reflect the maturity of Oman’s conference tourism ecosystem.

He emphasised that the sector has become an effective economic contributor supporting the national economy and enhancing Oman’s attractiveness as a destination capable of hosting global events according to competitive standards.

He explained that the economic impact of conference tourism extends to empowering young national talents, creating direct and indirect employment opportunities, and developing specialised skills in the exhibitions and conferences industry.

He noted that Omani human capital has been a fundamental pillar in the efficient and professional execution and management



The conference tourism sector supported more than 100 SMEs by providing opportunities to participate in events and build commercial partnerships.

of events. Al Shanfari also confirmed that participation in specialised international exhibitions and forums has helped expand partnership networks and attract new events. He pointed out that the next phase will focus on high-quality events with greater added value, capable of maximising economic impact and strengthening Oman’s presence on the regional and international conferences and exhibitions map.

In 2025, the nature of hosted events was diverse, encompassing — alongside specialised conferences and exhibitions — major cultural and artistic events, public forums and graduation ceremonies with more than 65,000 graduates.

This diversity enhanced the community dimension of conference tourism and linked it to educational and cultural milestones with wide-ranging impact.

In this context, artistic events contributed to supporting tourism activity, as concerts attracted more than 11,000 visitors from within and outside Oman, achieved high hotel occupancy rates in the vicinity of event venues, and encouraged a number of visitors to extend their stays and explore other tourist destinations, thereby doubling the indirect economic impact.

International art and cultural exhibitions also emerged as a key contributor to the creative economy, with the participation of more than 400 artists from 16 countries. These events served as platforms for cultural exchange and tourism promotion, enhancing Oman’s image as a destination that brings together business, culture and the arts.

ROP embraces strategic vision for AI, future tech

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 3

THE Royal Oman Police (ROP) has affirmed its unwavering commitment to adopting the latest technologies and digital systems to enhance the efficiency of police work and upgrade the quality of security services, in light of the rapid transformations the world is witnessing in the fields of technology and innovation.

The ROP Artificial Intelligence and Future Technologies Centre is one of the most prominent of these pioneering initiatives. It embodies a strategic vision that anticipates the future and leverages the capabilities of artificial intelligence to analyse and develop data and provide innovative solutions that enhance security and public service.

Colonel Hilal bin Mohammed al Harrasi, Director-General of Planning and Development at the Royal Oman Police, said that the establishment of the Artificial Intelligence and Future Technologies Centre reflects the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander who emphasised the importance of focusing on artificial intelligence technologies to improve productivity and efficiency across a wide range of sectors. He also stressed the need to utilise AI technologies and to expedite the development of legislation that will make these technologies a key enabler and driver for this sector.

Colonel Al Harrasi added, “The Royal



There is a need to utilise AI technologies and to expedite the development of legislation that will make these technologies a key enabler and driver for this sector.

Oman Police General Command is committed to adopting the latest global technological trends across all fields. Artificial intelligence is the cornerstone of future technological approaches aimed at enhancing innovation, efficiency and productivity.” He pointed out that the centre will bolster the Royal Oman Police’s digital transformation by developing plans, programmes, and strategies related to artificial intelligence and future technologies as well as monitoring their implementation.

Al Harrasi explained that the centre aims to develop strategies and anticipate future trends in artificial intelligence, in addition to identifying gaps and risks in the current situation and building operational models

that ensure the integration of artificial intelligence technologies with existing security systems after a comprehensive evaluation of their technical, operational and security aspects. The centre also aims to govern the use of artificial intelligence and establish the ethical and legal frameworks regulating it.

He noted that the centre operates as a key component of the ROP’s technological infrastructure, enabling all units to adopt artificial intelligence solutions and future technologies, thus solidifying the ROP’s leadership in this field. He explained that the adoption of any new technology is subject to a rigorous security and operational evaluation with the current focus on big data processing technologies and the automation of analytical tasks. Regarding the application of these technologies in police work, Colonel Al Harrasi said: “The Artificial Intelligence and Future Technologies Centre aims to enhance the ROP’s capabilities in using artificial intelligence applications for data analysis and future forecasting. This will contribute to faster and more accurate decision-making as well as support a proactive approach when dealing with any situation or event.” He added: “Artificial intelligence applications will bring about a qualitative leap in the quality of electronic services provided to citizens and residents by improving user experience, expediting service access procedures, and gradually shifting from traditional electronic services to proactive services.



Would like to invite all reputed & specialized companies, who have relevant experience to provide the required services mentioned against the below tenders for Fertilizer/Oil and Gas/Refinery/Petrochemical Industries to submit their best offer for the below Tender:

Tender No	01-15722-2026
Tender Description	Two years contract for Hiring portable chiller units for cooling the inlet air entering U-156/U-152 to improve and enhance urea product quality
Brief Details	The contractor scope is to provide a cooling system aimed to reduce the inlet air temperature of U-156/U-152 fan (available in two locations Urea 1 & 2) from ambient temperature to 25° C ± 2° C. the fan flow rate is 135000 cubic meters per hour.
Tender Collection	04 th Jan 2026 – 12 th Jan 2026
Site Visit	13 th Jan 2026 – 20 th Jan 2026
Tender Fees (Non-Refundable)	OMR. 250/= (Omani Rial One Hundred, only).
Bid Bond	OMR. 5,000/= (Omani Rial Five Thousand, only)
Minimum Experience	Five (5) Years of experience in the subject filed in similar scope of work and scale.
Bid Submission due date	Not later than 20 th Feb 2026, 12:00pm (Oman time)

All bidders shall submit their offer in THREE (3) separate physical envelopes or Online Files as following:

- Technical Bid and Un-Priced Commercial Bid.**
- Commercial Priced Bid.**
- Bid Bond valid for 120 days, with total amount as mentioned above.**

All three envelopes shall be sealed and tagged with the Envelop Title, Tender Title and Tender Number. Also, the company profile, registration documents and latest audited financials should be submitted along with the Technical Bid. All three envelops/Files should be submitted at OMIFCO Head Office in Sur - Tender Box at the Main Gate or through email.

Further details can be obtained from OMIFCO Purchase and Contracts Department at Sur Industrial Estate

Tel: +968 2553 2077 / 2553 2174
E-mail: jumaalamri@omifco.com / shaymaalghelani@omifco.com

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SHORTTAKES

PREMARITAL MEDICAL TEST FOR SAFE, STABLE FAMILY

FROM P1

She added that genetics indicates a 25 per cent chance of having a child with the genetic disorder in each pregnancy when both partners carry the gene. Dr Musleh bin Mohammed al Musalhi, Senior Hematologist and Head of the Laboratories Department at Ibra Hospital, stated that premarital medical examinations significantly reduce the transmission of infectious diseases between spouses and from mother to fetus through early detection of potential infections. This examination includes a range of laboratory tests for infectious diseases that may be transmitted through marital contact or during pregnancy and childbirth.

He added that early detection of infection is a fundamental factor in reducing the risk of transmission to high-risk groups. It also allows for timely treatment and medical follow-up, thus limiting disease progression and reducing potential complications. He emphasised that preventing the transmission of these diseases helps protect future families from the health, psychological and social repercussions that may result from infection, thereby strengthening family stability and public health in the community.

Regarding the importance of the decision to mandate premarital medical examinations, Dr Al Musalhi affirmed that the decision has a positive impact on public health efforts to control infectious diseases in the future by including all targeted groups in the examination process. This enables early detection and prevention, thereby reducing the prevalence of these diseases in the community.

Dr Raya bint Said al Kamyaniyah, Head of the Preconception Care Department at the Reproductive Health Directorate of the National Centre for Women and Child Health, pointed out that one of the most important indicators of the success of the premarital medical examination programme is measuring the number of beneficiaries of the service compared to the number of marriages in the same year. This is in addition to measuring the programme's long-term effectiveness by reducing the incidence of inherited blood disorders, such as sickle cell anaemia and beta-thalassemia, among newborns. She explained that with increasing community awareness of the importance of premarital medical examinations, the percentage of beneficiaries from the service rose to 42 per cent in 2024. However, this percentage is still insufficient given the high prevalence of inherited blood disorders, which reached 9.5 per cent according to the latest statistics. — ONA



The move is to ensure food safety, service quality and consumer protection.

DEAL WITH ONLY LICENSED DELIVERY FIRMS: MOCIIP

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MOCIIP) has emphasised that only licensed delivery companies should be used for food and order delivery services to ensure food safety, service quality and consumer protection.

Restaurants, supermarkets, commercial establishments and individuals are urged to refrain from dealing with unlicensed providers, as licensed companies are required to comply with approved health and regulatory standards.

The competent authorities will continue to monitor violations and take legal action in accordance with applicable regulations.

SME SECTOR GETS A BOOST

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

THE LAUNCH of the SME Sector Executive Plan for the period (2026-2030) was a pioneering initiative, part of national efforts to strengthen the role of this vital sector as a key driver of economic growth and diversification. The plan is in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the Eleventh Five-Year Development Plan.

The plan aims to create a stimulating and sustainable business environment that enhances the competitiveness of SMEs, boosts their contribution to GDP, and opens wider opportunities for them to access local, regional and global markets, while also supporting innovation and entrepreneurship and stimulating the transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Entrepreneur Mansour bin Abdullah al Rawahi is a prime example of a successful figure in this sector. He founded Al Raad Logistics in 2013, a logistics company specialising in integrated services including transport, warehousing, logistics operations management and local and international shipping, with a particular focus on the military sector both locally and globally.

Al Rawahi noted that prior to establishing the company, he had worked in the logistics sector since 1999. This experience provided him with extensive expertise and a deep understanding of the market and efficient operations management methods. This experience greatly assisted him in overcoming various challenges when launching his project, especially in understanding customer needs, dealing with suppliers, and managing daily operations with precision and professionalism.

The support from his family was a cornerstone of the project's success. His relatives helped him overcome early difficulties and find solutions to financial and administrative challenges. This gave him the confidence to expand his services. He also benefited from the trust of clients and business partners who believed in his vision and ability to deliver high-quality services, a crucial factor in building the company's



The plan aims to create a stimulating and sustainable business environment that enhances the competitiveness of SMEs.

strong reputation from its inception to the present day.

Al Rawahi is keen to participate in local and international events, whether military, in the oil and gas sector, or related to logistics, to ensure he stays abreast of future market changes. He also participates in events and exhibitions in the GCC countries, Europe and Asia to strengthen his global network and learn about international best practices.

He noted that these helped him share experiences, build professional relationships, and enhance the company's

standing both locally and globally. He advises Omani entrepreneurs to participate in and attend events and training programmes to stay informed about market needs and future changes.

Al Raad Logistics Company won first place for Best Logistics Practices in the Omani Services and Products category for its pioneering project in military and customs logistics expertise for 2025.

The company also participated in the Oman Vision 2024 Economic Award and received a Certificate of Excellence in the Logistics Excellence category.

Twilight festival showcases theatrical forms

MUSCAT: The Twilight Experimental Festival has opened in Muscat with the participation of several theatrical groups from across Oman, offering diverse and innovative artistic experiences.

The festival runs until January 7 at the College of Banking and Financial Studies Theatre and is organised by the Twilight Theatre Group under the supervision and support of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

It is the first event of its kind dedicated to experimental theatre in Oman.

The festival programme features six experimental theatrical productions, alongside critical sessions, discussion forums and intellectual dialogues exploring the aesthetics and key questions of experimental theatre.

The initiative aims to support research and experimentation while fostering a dynamic theatrical movement that keeps pace with artistic developments at both local and regional levels.

The opening performance was 'Savagery' by Al Luban Theatre Group, directed by Sami al Busaidy. Al Salam Amateur Theatre Group presented 'Nails of Immortality,' directed by Ahmed al Batal. Al Huzn for Culture and Art Group also staged 'Ashes,' directed by Mohammed Khalfan.

On Sunday, the Twilight Theatre Group presents 'Points,' directed by Walid al Maamari. Competitive performances conclude tomorrow with 'Gloom' by Al Ban Theatre Group, directed by Osama Zayed.



The festival celebrates experimental theatre as a theatrical movement that challenges conventional performance forms.

The festival is the first event of its kind dedicated to experimental theatre in Oman and is on till January 7

The festival celebrates experimental theatre as a leading theatrical movement that challenges conventional performance forms and continually seeks new approaches to text, direction, acting and scenography, contributing to the development of theatrical discourse and enriching the artistic experience.

The event hosts a distinguished group of playwrights, critics and researchers from within and outside Oman. The jury is chaired by Dr Amna al Rubaie and includes

Dr Medhat al Kashef (Egypt), Dr Omar al Ruwaidi (Morocco) and Akabawi al Sheikh (Algeria).

In addition, the festival welcomes a number of Arab theatre practitioners, including directors and critics, in a move aimed at strengthening cultural exchange and enriching the local theatre scene through diverse Arab experiences.

The Twilight Experimental Festival underscores the role of theatre as a space for experimentation, innovation and artistic dialogue, contributing to the development of Oman's theatrical movement and opening new horizons for contemporary theatrical expression. — ONA



A cultural experience for visitors



KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 3

APLETHORA of traditional food stalls at Muscat Nights locations are attracting a large number of visitors who are given a first-hand experience of Omani cuisine and leave with smiles on their faces.

The wide range of food stalls at Al Amerat Public Park, where women prepare dishes, has attracted citizens, residents and festival visitors. They come to appreciate the true culinary identity of the Sultanate of Oman.

“As soon as visitors arrive at the festival site, these stalls become open cultural stations, showcasing Omani cuisine in a contemporary form that appeals to the public and enhances the visitor experience,” said Huda al Bahrani, in charge of the culinary stations.

Participating chefs interact directly with visitors, answering

- DAILY EVENTS**

Fireworks in Al Amerat 8.30 pm

Fireworks in Wadi Al Khoudh and Qurayat at 8.30 pm (weekends only)

Lake Shows in Al Qurum, from 6.30 pm to 10.30 pm

Shows at the Lake Theatre in Al Qurum from 7 pm to 10 pm

Circus at the Oman Automobile Association from 4 pm to 10.30 pm

Children’s Play at the Oman Automobile Association from 4 pm to 10.30 pm

Carnival in Al Qurum from 4.45 pm to 10 pm

Masha and the Bear in Al Amerat, 5 pm to 10 pm

Little World in Al Amerat from 4 pm to 10 pm

Electronic Games in Al Amerat, 4 pm to 10 pm



questions about ingredients, preparation methods, and sharing their experiences. Over the three days, foreign visitors enjoyed watching the meals being prepared and took photos to share on social media. One of the most exciting methods was the preparation of Rakhal bread, where women bake it on a hot tin ‘Tobj’ to make triangles filled with cheese and honey, cheese and eggs, or ‘Oman chips,’ a favourite for many. This scene reflected the simplicity and deliciousness of popular cuisine.

“However, the light dishes offered at the stalls vary, including Luqaimat covered with honey or lotus, Mandazi, samosas stuffed with cheese, pies, sausage rolls and other meals loved by adults and children alike,” explained Moza al Maamari, a traditional cook serving people from across the country.

Traditional food stalls also play a prominent social and cultural role by sharing popular knowledge

related to preparation methods and introducing children, youth and other visitors to the value of these meals in national identity. Many visitors saw these stalls as an opportunity to try new meals, learn how they are prepared, and share them with their global followers to showcase true Omani food heritage.

TRADITIONAL FOOD STALLS

Following the remarkable turnout, the traditional food stalls at Al Amerat Public Park confirmed that popular cuisine is a major component of the country’s cultural landscape, not just a secondary element in festivals or events.

The artistic and heritage events surrounding the area enhanced the visitor experience inside the heritage village. The kiosks became spaces of enjoyment where food flavours intersected with the arts, prompting visitors to extend their stay inside the village for a longer period.

SHORT TAKES



The graduation demonstrated the institute’s impact on national teacher training efforts.

349 EDUCATORS GRADUATE FROM SPECIALISED INSTITUTE

SALALAH: The Directorate-General of Education in Dhofar Governorate celebrated the graduation of 349 educators from the seventh batch of the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training of Teachers, held at the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah.

Hamed bin Bakhit al Mashikhi, Assistant Director-General for Educational Affairs, highlighted the Ministry of Education’s commitment to establishing a comprehensive educational renaissance.

He emphasised the ministry’s focus on qualifying educational staff through specialised programmes that foster innovation, stimulate new ideas, and enhance performance across all educational, administrative, and technical areas.

Dr Mohammed bin Said al Amri, Head of the Training Centre, noted that the graduation reflects Oman’s dedication to developing the educational and professional system through effective collaboration between the Specialised Institute, Directorates-General of Education and programme teams. He added that the 7th batch contributed to a total of 349 graduates this year, part of 6,063 graduates across all governorates, demonstrating the institute’s impact on national teacher training efforts. — ONA

5 INDUSTRIAL FOOD INNOVATION



SALALAH: Basic Industries has funded five industrial projects in Dhofar Governorate under the Innovative Food Products Development Project, in collaboration with the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates – Madayn, represented by the Industrial Innovation Academy. The initiative supports the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 to foster industrial innovation, empower small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and increase local added value. Through this project, five SMEs in Dhofar have been provided opportunities to develop new food products. — ONA

Association of Early Intervention marks 25 years of service

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Association of Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities (AEICD) marked 25 years since its inception, celebrating a legacy of service, compassion, and measurable impact in supporting children with special needs and their families across Oman.

The event was held under the auspices of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education.

In her address, Dr Madeeha noted that for a quarter of a century, the Association has played a pivotal role in addressing developmental challenges at the earliest stages of life.



The event was held under the auspices of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education.

Through specialised early intervention programmes, AEICD has enabled children with disabilities to learn, grow and acquire essential life skills, empowering them to become active and productive members of their families and society.

100 SMEs at Entrepreneurs Forum in Al Dakhiliyah

NIZWA: The second edition of the Entrepreneurs Forum opened in Nizwa, organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry branch in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The forum will conclude on Sunday, January 4.

Saif bin Mohammed al Tiwani, Chairman of the Chamber’s local branch, emphasised that this edition builds on the success of the first forum. He noted that the forum strengthens the role of entrepreneurs and SMEs in driving



The forum strengthens the role of entrepreneurs in driving economic development.

economic development, providing a platform to meet supporting bodies, investors, and partners, and exploring broader marketing and business opportunities. The opening ceremony included a

visual presentation showcasing the forum’s journey, objectives and contributions from supporters. The event also features panel discussions, awareness sessions, and an exhibition with 100 entrepreneurs and SMEs, presenting products in crafts, national industries, and innovative projects.

The forum aims to promote a culture of innovation and self-employment, aligning with Oman Vision 2040, while empowering entrepreneurs. — ONA

Oman steps up measures to counter human trafficking

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 3

THE Sultanate of Oman carries on with its efforts to combat human trafficking, being one of the most serious crimes that degrades human dignity and threatens social stability, due to its various forms of exploitation that affect the most vulnerable segments.

Experts confirmed that addressing human trafficking requires a comprehensive system based on deterrent legislation, legal protection, rehabilitation and support programmes and raising community awareness.

This contributes to safeguarding the rights of victims, establishing the principles of justice, and ensuring integration between relevant authorities to tackle human trafficking.

They explained that the Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has played an integral role in supporting national efforts to combat human trafficking.

This includes independent monitoring and follow-up, receiving reports and complaints, submitting recommendations to the relevant authorities, providing human rights opinions on relevant policies and legislation, evaluating institutions’ adherence to national and international standards and promoting a human rights approach in the implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking.

The Omani law stipulates deterrent penalties, including imprisonment from three to ten years and a fine between RO 5,000 and RO 100,000 and the penalty can reach up to fifteen years imprisonment in certain cases.

Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of the Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC),



DR RASHID BIN HAMAD AL BALUSHI

OHRC Chairman

Human trafficking requires a comprehensive system based on deterrent legislation, legal protection, rehabilitation and support programmes and raising community awareness



Experts confirmed that addressing human trafficking requires a comprehensive system based on deterrent legislation

considers human trafficking as one of the most serious violations of human rights as it directly degrades human dignity, deprives individuals of their freedom and exploits the most vulnerable members of society.

He pointed out that, from a human rights perspective, this crime constitutes a clear violation of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Basic Law of the State as well as the international conventions and other relevant laws.

Al Balushi explained that the OHRC played an integral role in supporting national efforts to combat human trafficking through independent monitoring and follow-up, receiving reports and complaints, submitting recommendations to the competent authorities, as well as providing human rights opinions on relevant policies and legislation.

From a law perspective, Dr Ahmed bin Said al Jahwari, a lawyer, explained that the Omani legislator, in the anti-human trafficking law, defined exploitation as the unlawful use of a person. This includes prostitution, slavery, domestic

servitude, forced labour, begging, the unlawful removal of human organs or tissues for the purpose of trafficking and conducting biomedical research on individuals without legal authorisation.

Marwa bint Hassan al Balushiayah, a legal researcher at the Protection Centre, explained that the Ministry of Social Development, through the centre, provides a comprehensive system of social, psychological, and health services for the victims of human trafficking within a safe environment that preserves their human dignity and contributes to their empowerment and rehabilitation, helping them overcome challenges and achieve positive and effective integration into society.

She said that last September, an independent unit was established specifically to receive and protect male victims of human trafficking, representing a qualitative addition to the services provided, alongside the protection the centre offers to women and children. She noted that the centre provides psychological care in coordination with mental health institutions.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



A Palestinian man walks to the Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) clinic, in Gaza City. — AFP

MSF SAYS IT MAY HAVE TO HALT GAZA OPERATIONS

PARIS: Banned from the Gaza Strip with 36 aid bodies, medical charity Doctors Without Borders said on Saturday it will have to end its operations there in March if Israel does not reverse its decision. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Friday for Israel to end a ban on humanitarian agencies that provided aid in Gaza, saying he was “deeply concerned” at the development.

MSF called this demand a “scandalous intrusion” but Israel says it is needed to stop jihadists from infiltrating into humanitarian structures. “To work in Palestine, in the occupied Palestinian territories, we have to be registered ... That registration expired on December 31, 2025,” said Isabelle Defourny, a physician and president of MSF France, on France Inter. “Since July 2025, we have been involved in a re-registration process and to date, we have not received a response.

We still have 60 days during which we could work without being re-registered, and so we would have to end our activities in March” if Israel maintains its decision, she said.

MSF has around 40 international staff in the Gaza Strip and works with 800 Palestinian staff across eight hospitals. — AFP

CAMBODIA DEMANDS THAILAND WITHDRAW BORDER TROOPS



A man kneels beside unexploded mortar shells in Boeung Trakoun village. — AFP

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia called on neighbouring Thailand on Saturday to pull out its forces from areas Phnom Penh claims as its own, one week since a truce halted deadly clashes along their disputed border. Cambodia says that during that period, Thailand seized several areas across four border provinces. In a statement on Saturday, Phnom Penh’s foreign ministry demanded the withdrawal of “all Thai military personnel and equipment from the territory of the Kingdom of Cambodia to positions fully consistent with the legally established boundary”. The Thai army has rejected claims it had used force to seize Cambodia territory, insisting its forces were present in areas that had always belonged to Thailand.

The Cambodian foreign ministry also called on Thailand to immediately end “all hostile military activities” along the frontier and “within Cambodian territory”. The two nations’ border conflict stems from a dispute over the colonial-era demarcation of their 800-kilometre border, where both sides claim territory and centuries-old temple ruins. On Friday, Cambodia’s Information Minister Neth Pheaktra accused Thailand of launching the “illegal annexation” of the border village of Chouk Chey. — AFP

RESOLVING DIFFICULTIES

Khamenei stresses protesters’ fair demands



Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday acknowledged the economic demands of protesters in Iran, where demonstrations have spread to more than two dozen cities, even as he warned there would be no quarter for “rioters”. “The president and high-ranking officials are working to resolve” the economic difficulties in the sanctions-battered country, Khamenei said in a speech. “The shopkeepers have protested against this situation and that is completely fair,” he added. — AFP

DEFENCE AGREEMENT

Erdogan hails €2.6 bn jet deal with Spain



President Recep Tayyip Erdogan welcomed an agreement under which Spain will procure Turkish-made HURJET training aircraft, describing it as evidence of Türkiye’s “pioneering role” in defence and aviation industry. Under the deal, the Spanish Air Force will acquire 30 HURJET aircraft from Türkiye in a contract valued at around 2.6 billion euros. “Most recently, the agreement we concluded with Spain has confirmed our country’s pioneering role in this field,” Erdogan said. — AFP

SABOTAGE ACTIVITIES

Power outage hits Berlin, arson suspected



Tens of thousands of homes were left without electricity in Berlin after power cables were damaged by a fire police suspect was an arson attack. Emergency services were alerted at 6:45 am that several cables on a bridge near a power plant in the German capital had gone up in flames. Firefighters quickly extinguished the blaze but about 45,000 households and 2,200 businesses in districts in southwest Berlin were left without power. — AFP

US CAPTURES VENEZUELA’S MADURO AFTER STRIKES



A destroyed anti-aircraft unit at La Carlota military air base, in Caracas, Venezuela. — Reuters

THE US attacked Venezuela and deposed its long-serving autocratic President Nicolas Maduro on Saturday, President Donald Trump said, in Washington’s most direct intervention in Latin America since the 1989 attack of Panama. “The United States of America has successfully carried out a large scale strike against Venezuela and its leader, President Nicolas Maduro, who has been, along with his wife, captured and flown out of the country,” Trump said in a Truth Social post. Ahead of the overnight strikes, the US had accused Maduro of running a “narco-state” and rigging the 2024 election, which the opposition said it won overwhelmingly.

The Venezuelan leader, a 63-year-old former bus driver handpicked by the dying Hugo Chavez to succeed him in 2013, has denied those claims and said Washington was intent on taking control of his nation’s oil reserves, the largest in the world. The US has not made such a direct intervention in its backyard region since the invasion of Panama 37 years ago to depose military leader Manuel Noriega over similar allegations Venezuela’s ruling “Chavismo” movement, named for Maduro’s revered predecessor, said civilians and military personnel died in Saturday’s strikes but did not give figures.

Trump said the operation was carried out “in conjunction with US Law Enforcement,” promising more details at an 11 am press conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. Maduro was captured by a team that included elite US special forces, including the US Army’s Delta Force, a US official told Reuters. Republican US Senator Mike Lee said Secretary of State Marco Rubio had told him Maduro would stand trial on criminal charges in the United States. Rubio “anticipates no further action in Venezuela now that Maduro is in US custody,” Lee wrote on X.

Venezuela’s Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez, who could take charge of government, said she did not know the whereabouts of either Maduro or his wife and demanded



A supporter of President Nicolas Maduro holds a Venezuelan flag during a gathering, in Caracas. — AFP

“The United States of America has successfully carried out a large scale strike against Venezuela and its leader, President Nicolas Maduro, who has been, along with his wife, captured and flown out of the country

DONALD TRUMP

proof of life. Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino condemned the intervention. “In the unity of the people we will find the strength to resist and to triumph,” he said in a video message. Another senior official, Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, appeared on a street wearing a helmet and flak jacket, urging people not to cooperate with the “terrorist enemy.” With Rodriguez potentially taking the presidency but Padrino and Cabello having significant influence over the powerful military, Venezuelans were nervously guessing what might come next.

The Venezuelan opposition, headed by recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado, said it had no official comment. It says Maduro has repeatedly cheated it of power in elections, as well as crushing street protests and jailing opposition figures. Maduro has mocked Machado as being in Trump’s pocket. Her whereabouts, after recently fleeing Venezuela in disguise to pick up her Nobel prize, were unknown. One source close to the opposition, who asked not to be named, said Maduro’s removal was an “inside job” aided by Venezuela’s military. “For now no more military action, but this was a message to the rest of the members of Venezuela’s government - look what the United States is capable of, get out now and negotiate,” the source said, without offering evidence.

In the early hours of Saturday, explosions rocked Caracas and elsewhere, prompting Maduro’s government to declare a national emergency and mobilise troops. It said attacks also took place in the

states of Miranda, Aragua and La Guaira. Blasts, aircraft and black smoke could be seen across Caracas from about 2 am for roughly 90 minutes. Residents expressed shock and fear as they captured video of billowing smoke and bright orange flashes in the sky. “My love, oh no, look at that,” said one woman in a video, gasping at blasts in the distance. A local media outlet allied with the ruling Socialist Party said explosions had taken place near the Fuerte Tiuna and La Carlota military bases. State TV images of La Carlota showed what appeared to be a destroyed tank and buses.

While various Latin American governments oppose Maduro and say he stole the 2024 vote, direct US action revives painful memories of past interventions and is generally strongly opposed by governments and populations in the region. Trump’s action recalls the Monroe Doctrine, laid out in 1823 by President James Monroe, laying US claim to influence in the region, as well as the “gunboat diplomacy” seen under Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s.

Venezuelan allies Russia, Cuba and Iran were quick to condemn the strikes as a violation of sovereignty. Tehran urged the UN Security Council to stop the “unlawful aggression.” Trump had sought a “blockade” of Venezuelan oil, expanded sanctions against the Maduro government and staged more than two dozen strikes on vessels the US alleges were involved in trafficking drugs, killing more than 110 people. It was unclear under what legal authority the latest US strikes were carried out.

Trump’s move risks a backlash from the US Congress, which has the constitutional right to declare war, and from his own political base, which favours an “America first” policy and largely opposes military intervention abroad.

Venezuelan state-run energy company PDVSA’s oil production and refining were normal and its most important facilities had suffered no damage according to an initial assessment, two sources with knowledge of the company’s operations said. — Reuters

AI is finding deadly tumours that doctors might miss



VIVIAN WANG

The author is a correspondent, covering Chinese politics and society

THREE Days after Qiu Sijun, a retired bricklayer in eastern China, went for a routine diabetes checkup, he received a call from a doctor he hadn't met before. The doctor, the head of the hospital's pancreatic department, wanted him to come in for a follow-up. "I knew it couldn't be anything good," Qiu, 57, recalled. He was partly right. The bad news was that Qiu had pancreatic cancer. But there was good news, too: The tumour had been detected early. The doctor, Zhu Kelei, was able to remove it.

This was possible only because of a new artificial-intelligence-powered tool that the hospital was testing, which had flagged Qiu's routine CT scan before he had any symptoms. The tool is one example of how Chinese tech companies and hospitals are racing to apply AI to some of medicine's most stubborn problems.

Pancreatic cancer is one of the deadliest forms of cancer, with a five-year survival rate of around 10 per cent, largely because early detection is so hard. Symptoms often do not appear until the cancer has advanced. Tests used to confirm its presence, such as contrast CT scans, involve large amounts of radiation, so many experts advise against widespread screening. But lower-radiation alternatives, such as non-contrast CTs — in which no contrast dye is injected into patients' bloodstreams — produce less clearly defined pictures, making it hard for radiologists to identify abnormalities.

Artificial intelligence may change that. The tool at Zhu's hospital, which was developed by researchers affiliated with Chinese tech giant

Alibaba, was trained to look for pancreatic cancer in non-contrast CTs. The tool is called PANDA, short for "pancreatic cancer detection with artificial intelligence." At the hospital where Zhu works, the Affiliated People's Hospital of Ningbo University in eastern China, doctors started using it as part of a clinical trial in November 2024.

The tool has since analysed more than 180,000 abdominal or chest CTs, helping doctors detect about two dozen cases of pancreatic cancer, 14 of which were in the early stage, Zhu said. The tool found 20 cases of ductal adenocarcinoma, the most common and deadliest type of pancreatic cancer. All of those patients had come to the hospital with complaints like bloating or nausea and had not initially seen a pancreatic specialist, Zhu said. Several of their CT scans had raised no alarms until they were flagged by the AI tool. "I think you can 100 per cent say AI saved their lives," he said.

In April, Alibaba said the US Food and Drug Administration had granted PANDA "breakthrough device" status, meaning that its review would be expedited to help it get to market. It is also the subject of several clinical trials in China. Researchers cautioned that more real-world data was needed to show whether the tool could detect enough early-stage cases to outweigh the risks of false positives and unnecessary testing. Scientists elsewhere are studying other AI-assisted approaches to early pancreatic cancer detection that focus more narrowly on high-risk groups, in large part because the cancer's prevalence is low.

Several experts not involved with the

Pancreatic cancer is one of the deadliest forms of cancer largely because early detection is so hard. Symptoms often do not appear until the cancer has advanced. Tests used to confirm its presence involve large amounts of radiation, so many experts advise against widespread screening

Chinese research said they were sceptical that non-contrast CTs could offer as much valuable information as other forms of imaging. Even the engineers behind PANDA initially shared that concern, said Ling Zhang, a senior staff algorithm engineer at Damo Academy, Alibaba's research arm, who is one of the tool's creators.

To address it, they asked a radiologist to manually annotate the contrast CTs of more than 2,000 known pancreatic patients with the locations of their lesions. The engineers then algorithmically mapped the highlighted lesions onto the same patients' non-contrast CTs. Those non-contrast scans were then fed to the AI model, so that it could learn to detect potential cancer even in less detailed images.

At the Ningbo hospital, the system is being used to analyse scans that doctors had already ordered for other reasons, so there is no additional testing cost to the hospital or patients. Zhu and his team review any scans that the system marks as high-risk, and if necessary, they call the patients in for more detailed testing. It sometimes highlights cases of pancreatitis, and it cannot say whether a tumour originated in the pancreas or spread from a different organ. Since its launch, the model has issued alerts for about 1,400 scans, but only about 300 of them needed follow-up, doctors decided.

Detecting cancer before patients have symptoms can also create its own problems. In China, widespread medical corruption has eroded public trust in doctors. Some people may refuse to come in for follow-ups, Zhu said, because they worry that the hospital is simply trying to make money.

Nuclear plant: A big sticking point in Ukraine peace plan



CONSTANT MÈHEUT

The writer is a reporter, currently covering the war in Ukraine

PRESIDENT Volodymyr Zelensky has said that Ukraine and the United States are 90 per cent of the way toward an agreement to end the war with Russia. Within the 10 per cent still in dispute is who will control Europe's largest nuclear power plant. The plant, in the Zaporizhzhia region of southern Ukraine, has been under Russian military occupation since the early days of the war. All six of its reactors are shut down, and nuclear experts say that restarting its electricity-generating operations while the fighting continues is too dangerous. Both Russia and Ukraine want to restart the plant after the war, and both want control of its operations. They view it as a vital energy asset because of its enormous generation capacity — 6 gigawatts, enough to power a medium-sized country like Portugal.

The United States has also shown interest, seeing the facility as an opportunity to advance American economic interests in a peace deal. US negotiators, Zelensky said, have proposed that the United States, Russia and Ukraine jointly operate the plant, an idea that Kyiv opposes. Russia's seizure of the plant early in the war was widely condemned by the international community. It sits on the front line in Zaporizhzhia, a precarious situation that has raised fears of a nuclear disaster.

Nearby fighting has repeatedly knocked the idled plant off the high-voltage electricity lines needed to power cooling systems that keep nuclear fuel from melting down. During those times, the site has had to rely on backup diesel generators to cool the reactors. Limited localised ceasefires, including one this week, have been arranged to let crews repair the power lines and reconnect the plant. In 2023, an explosion at a dam drained the plant's primary source of cooling water, forcing it to rely on a smaller cooling pond and wells, and elevating worries about the risk of a meltdown.

Russia has made clear it will not relinquish control of the plant. The facility sits in a region, Zaporizhzhia, that Russia has formally annexed despite not controlling it entirely. Moscow has outlined plans to restart the reactors and feed electricity into its own power grid. Energy experts say the plant might be used to supply energy to parts of southern and eastern Ukraine under Russian occupation. Last year, a Greenpeace report

Both Russia and Ukraine want to restart the plant after the war, and both want control of its operations. They view it as a vital energy asset because of its enormous generation capacity — 6 gigawatts, enough to power a medium-sized country like Portugal



The Zaporizhzhia unclear power plant seen from across the Dnipro River, in Ukraine.

showed that Russia was building power lines in occupied southern Ukraine to link the plant to its own grid.

"They occupied it, and they believe that we cannot do much to prevent them from resuming its operation," Zelensky told reporters last week. "They will link the operation of this plant to humanitarian considerations — to the fact that there are people in the temporarily occupied territories who have no water and no electricity." For Ukraine, regaining control of the plant is not just about undoing an illegal seizure. It is central to the country's postwar energy independence. Before the war, the plant supplied roughly a quarter of the country's electricity needs. Its generation capacity would be vital for powering reconstruction efforts, energy experts say.

Talks about US involvement in the plant emerged early last year, as Kyiv and Washington negotiated a deal giving the United States preferential access to mineral extraction in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials told their US counterparts that processing the minerals would require enormous power and would be viable only if the Zaporizhzhia plant returned to Ukrainian control. The plant could also supply power to energy-intensive facilities such as data centres. The recent

peace plan drafted by Ukraine and the US mentions the development of such centres as part of Ukraine's postwar recovery.

A plan drafted in November by Russia and the United States initially suggested restarting the plant under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, with electricity production shared between Russia and Ukraine. The most recent US proposal calls for the plant to be jointly operated by the United States, Russia and Ukraine, "with the Americans acting as the chief manager," Zelensky told reporters last week. He rejected that idea. "How can there be joint commercial activity with the Russians after everything that has happened?" Zelensky said.

Instead, Ukraine has proposed operating the plant as a joint venture with the United States. "Fifty per cent of the electricity produced would go to Ukraine, and as for the remaining 50 per cent, the United States would independently determine its allocation," Zelensky said. With that statement, Zelensky hinted that the US share could be entirely or partly redirected to Russia. Moscow, however, is unlikely to completely relinquish control of the facility. Zelensky said he and his team had discussed the plant's fate for roughly 15 hours in recent days.

OPINION

When the therapist takes the patient: Lessons from Stutz



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at SQU Hospital

My Son recommended that I watch the documentary Stutz, saying, “I’m sure you’ll enjoy it, as it talks about the life of a psychiatrist.” I quickly stopped him from spoiling the plot and added it to my “to-watch” list. When I finally watched it, I was genuinely amused. Traditionally, the therapist-patient relationship has been largely one-directional; the patient shares personal experiences while the therapist listens and occasionally offers feedback. Patients usually know little, if anything, about their therapist’s personal life. However, the documentary Stutz turns this dynamic on its head. In it, the patient Jonah Hill interviews his own therapist, uncovering Dr Phil Stutz’s childhood experiences and his ongoing struggle with Parkinson’s disease. In the documentary, Dr Stutz shares his personal experiences and methods for conducting therapy. For him, it is not only about patients venting out their feelings while the therapist nods and validates, but also teaching patients practical skills on accepting that pain is inevitable, breaking life into small, meaningful actions and confronting the inner force that resists.

He introduces what he calls ‘The Tools’, a set of five simple, action-oriented techniques that use visualisation and specific actions to transform problems into opportunities for growth, empowering individuals to overcome fear, insecurity and procrastination, making change happen faster than traditional therapy. This method is not supported by scientific evidence and is not a recognised component of psychotherapy. As a psychiatrist, I was fascinated by how the documentary demystifies therapy. In many societies, including ours, many people believe that therapy is only for the “mentally ill”, that it is a sign of weakness, or that talking cannot really change anything. In the documentary, Dr Stutz challenges these beliefs, showing therapy as a courageous act that involves two people sitting together, trying to make sense of pain and find a way forward. Equally powerful was the moment when the therapist becomes the patient. Dr Stutz speaks openly about living with Parkinson’s disease, a progressive condition that has changed his body and will continue to affect his future.

Traditionally, the therapist-patient relationship has been largely one-directional; the patient shares personal experiences while the therapist listens and occasionally offers feedback

Watching the therapist talk about his own vulnerability was deeply moving. It reminds us that no one is immune to suffering, and that even healthcare providers need someone to listen to them with empathy and compassion. The documentary also emphasises that there is no perfect, pain-free life waiting for us. We often postpone living, telling ourselves, “Once this problem is solved, then I will be happy.” Dr Stutz reminds us that life will always carry uncertainty, loss and fear. The challenge is not to escape them, but to keep choosing meaning, connection and action in their presence. What I liked about this documentary is that it normalises emotional struggle by reminding viewers that they are not alone in feeling stuck, afraid, or inadequate. Even successful people wrestle with the same questions. Help does not come from magical answers, but from the willingness to engage with life, one step at a time. In my opinion, this documentary reminds us that true strength lies in accepting that we are imperfect, uncertain and human. It does not just ask us to watch therapy, but to reflect on our own lives.

CLAUDIA’S ATTIRE
DRAWS ATTENTION
IN MEXICO

LETICIA PINEDA

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum’s wardrobe is more than a statement of style; it has become known as a canvass for her political message of advancing women’s and Indigenous rights. The leftist leader, Mexico’s first woman president, proudly uses small-scale, local tailors and shuns “those brands that are super expensive,” in her own words. Rather, she supports “the weavers, the embroiderers, all those who use backstrap looms in our country - mostly women - who are a source of national pride,” the 63-year-old recently told journalists. The Mexican government has taken on famous brands for the alleged cultural appropriation of traditional designs. And in her own fashion choices, Sheinbaum has similarly chosen to give credit where she says it’s due, and to uplift those she can along the way. “Her ideology has always been very focused on people’s rights, on equality; even in her style of dress,” according to Mexican image consultant Gabriela Medina. Sheinbaum was included on The New York Times’ list of 67 most stylish people of 2025 - the only politician in the group. One person responsible for her look is Olivia Trujillo, who runs a small tailor shop from her home in the bustling neighbourhood of San Pedro Martir on the outskirts of Mexico City. “Her favourite colours, without a doubt, I would say are purple and burgundy,” the 63-year-old pattern-maker and tailor said amid her sewing machines and a mannequin on which she assembles the presidential wardrobe. Trujillo was recently called to the National Palace for the final fitting of a purple dress with finely embroidered flowers that Sheinbaum wore in December to her first face-to-face meeting with US President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in Washington. “The colour purple is associated with power, authority, luxury, royalty, spirituality and sobriety,” Medina said of Sheinbaum’s choice. It is also the colour “that the feminist resistance movement has embraced,” she added. Another emblematic Sheinbaum choice was the dress she wore for her October 2024 swearing-in: a knee-length, ivory creation with embroidered wildflowers cascading down one side. The upper part was left plain “so that the presidential sash would stand out,” recalled Trujillo. The flowers were painstakingly hand-sewn onto the fabric by Claudia Vazquez, a 43-year-old Zapotec Indigenous woman who said she had nearly given up on embroidery, her first love. — AFP

Oman readies for an exciting
AI-driven economic future

Oman Is the most civilised country I have known, a place where courtesy is not performed but lived, where strangers are received without suspicion and where dignity is ingrained. Its culture is deep rather than loud, its history carried with calm assurance, and its tolerant Sultan has made the country a rare moral landmark in a region too often bruised by extremes. In a world frequently covered in darkness, Oman stands as a bright candle. Yet even candles must be shielded from storms.

The winds of change are now sweeping across the world with unusual force, and the Middle East feels them keenly. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik faces challenges seemingly less dramatic than those confronting the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1970, but in many respects, his challenges are both more complex and more demanding. The battles are no longer fought only with rifles or slogans, but with invisible systems that move faster than politics or tradition can easily follow. Beyond the immediate pressures of regional conflict, a quieter danger gathers offshore. Artificial intelligence is not arriving - it has already arrived. What lies ahead is its second wave. Estimates suggest that up to two billion jobs worldwide may disappear within a decade. Numbers of that scale are difficult to imagine and therefore easy to dismiss. But history shows that societies are rarely undone by what they do not see. They are undone by what they see too late. The image of a tsunami is apt. Before it strikes, the sea retreats. People walk out onto the exposed seabed, curious rather than afraid. They know something is happening, but they do not know what it means.



KARIM
EASTERBROOK

The writer is a Former Cambridge School Principal and Author

Public services, healthcare and governance can use AI to support rather than replace human judgement, preserving employment while increasing effectiveness



Estimates suggest that up to two billion jobs worldwide may disappear within a decade and numbers of that scale are difficult to imagine and therefore easy to dismiss

AI is that retreating sea. We see its convenience, its speed, its novelty. What we do not yet fully grasp is the social vacuum it may leave behind when routine work, clerical labour, transport and even parts of professional life disappear. Oman is not immune. No country is. Its youth are educated, intelligent and ambitious, yet many still expect stability through employment rather than through adaptability. One protection lies in education, but not merely more of it. Oman can pivot from training people for specific jobs to preparing them for lifelong reinvention: critical thinking, ethics, creativity, craftsmanship and the caring professions, areas where machines remain weak and humans remain essential. Another safeguard is restraint. Oman has never rushed where others run blindly in. AI can be adopted selectively. Public services, healthcare and governance can use AI to support rather than replace human judgement, preserving employment while increasing effectiveness. In this, Oman’s tradition of

balance may prove its greatest asset. There are jobs that machines cannot replicate. Heritage industries, environmental stewardship, tourism rooted in Oman’s history and culture, and community-based services can all be strengthened. These are not relics of the past but anchors for the future. AI may make many things faster, but it cannot make them more meaningful. Finally, there is the wise leadership under His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik who governs a people accustomed to trust rather than fear. Honest dialogue about change, coupled with long-term planning rather than short-term reassurance, can turn anxiety into resolve. If the sea is indeed pulling back, Oman still has time to move to higher ground. Civilisation is not measured by technology alone but by how a society protects its people when technology reshapes their lives. In that test, Oman has every chance not merely to survive the coming tsunami, but to stand as an example to others watching the horizon.

It’s medicine, but not as we know it!



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

OH Look, I’m going to be a devil’s advocate this week, in looking at the diabolical extremes of GP surgeries, not so bad in the Sultanate of Oman, but horrible in the UK health system. Still, there is value in Omanis being aware of how healthcare can suffer when politicians get their hands on healthcare budgets... nothing good comes of it!

But. Is there any alternative? Well, it’s funny you should ask, as it may have passed you by, but an announcement out of China late last year announcing the inauguration of an artificial intelligence, AI, or artificial intelligence hospital, a sort of, upmarket version of a call centre I guess, has opened something of an ethical ‘can of worms’, by proposing that AI can do away with the humanitarian side of general medical practice, and still be accurate, trustworthy and viable. So, we must ask the question, can it?

This product of the Zinghua University in China is named the Agent Hospital, and is an incredible foray into medicine, possibly the final frontier of human need, and a futuristic vision of a future where robotics and AI can service thousands of patients each week, with initial estimates anecdotally suggesting a ratio of patient visits in the region of 100 to 1.

Is this an astonishingly innovative

approach to the sanctity, the closed doors, of the medical profession? Is it something our GPs, who sometimes appear bored and disinterested in our aches, pains and grumbles, would embrace? Or is it a direct assault on the profession’s societal hierarchy? Is it chopping away at the legs of the pedestal upon which the profession stands?

Probably yes! Yet it could be said justifiably, particularly in the UK presently, NHS (National Health Service) budgets are being slashed, operating waiting lists number in their thousands, even tens of thousands, young doctors – residents – are qualifying, then finding themselves without jobs, and nurses are being culled, all at the same time as non-medical management numbers, and their salaries, are exponentially increasing.

These NHS failings are placing immense pressure on the frontline health provision through GP surgeries, with the most vulnerable, the elderly and the very young at immense risk, with waiting times of up to a month just to get a GP appointment. What are you to do? You don’t get sick by choice, and a month could see a most undesirable outcome.

So, the AI model, under the Med-Agent Zero protocol, is this: Patients arrive at the hospital to be guided robotically through documentation and security, to a scanner

Late last year China announced the inauguration of an artificial intelligence, AI, or artificial intelligence hospital

which will access their medical histories, and take the myriads of measurements and readings, through non-contact AI, the data will be analysed, and a diagnosis, treatment and prescriptions all finalised as the patient exits the ‘conveyor belt’, and trundles off home.

During 2025, Beijing’s Tsinghua Chang Gung Hospital treated 1,500 inpatients and 10,000 outpatients each day through its AI package, conceding that in enhancing precision, efficiency and economics, it loses the ‘human touch.’ There is no doubt however that documentation, pathology, screening and diagnosis are ‘ahead of the curve.’

Hospitals in name only, these are, at 93.06 per cent, startlingly accurate, non-intrusive medical experiences, with no surgical or emergency interactions, providing quality, affordable and timely healthcare services. Given global concerns around the increasing costs of medical care, could AI prove a light at the end of the tunnel? Of course, concerns are legitimate regarding the authenticity of AI-human interactions, the moral and ethical issues, and the loss of compassion and humanitarian perspectives.

However, it appears China’s investment in AI medicine is relentless. So, under this assault, is the medical profession’s legacy at risk? It’s medicine, but not as we know it!

SCRUTINY TURNS TO SAFETY SET-UP AFTER DEADLY BLAZE

DAVE GRAHAM AND EMMA FARGE

Scrutiny is intensifying over the safety arrangements at a Swiss ski resort that burst into flames during a New Year’s Eve party, killing at least 40, as prosecutors said the blaze likely began when sparkling candles were held too close to a ceiling. Witnesses reported seeing staff at the Le Constellation resort carrying so-called fountain candles atop bottles, and questions have also arisen about a foam material used to soundproof the ceiling of the basement.

Beatrice Pilloud, chief prosecutor of Valais, said that available indications were that the fire started because the sparklers got too near the ceiling.

“From there, a rapid, very rapid and widespread blaze ensued,” she said on Friday afternoon.

Further investigations will show whether anyone faces criminal liability over the fire, Pilloud said. Investigations will focus on renovations made to the resort, the fire extinguishing systems and escape routes, as well as the number of people in the building when the fire started, prosecutors said.

Police arrived quickly at the scene, according to local residents, but the fire burned the victims so severely that investigators said they would need days to identify the bodies.

Illustrating the painstaking nature of that work, the Valais prosecutors’ office said in a statement on Saturday that the police had identified the bodies of four Swiss victims aged between 16 and 21 - two female and two male - and returned them to their families. It did not elaborate on their identities.

On Friday, officials had only identified one of the dead, a teenage Italian international golfer, Emanuele Galeppini. According to two people familiar with the investigation, some of the victims may be under 16.

Local residents said the resort was popular with young people and the Swiss government said many of the dead were likely youths.

One of the resort’s owners, Jacques Moretti, told the Tribune de Geneve newspaper that Le Constellation had been checked three times in 10 years and that everything was done according to the rules. Stephane Ganzer, head of security in Valais, said the investigation would determine if the place had undergone its annual raised inspections, but that the town had not raised concerns or reported defects to the canton.

Grieving residents continued paying their respects to the victims of the blaze on Friday, leaving flowers and tributes nearby, even as police began reopening the area around the cordoned-off resort in the heart of the wealthy mountain town.

One of them, Ashley Hauri, 23, said that just before the fire broke out, she had been on the verge of going to Le Constellation to catch up with friends. Ultimately, she decided against it.

Six of her former co-workers, ranging in age from their 20s to their 40s, were inside when the blaze erupted, she said. Two of them ended up in the hospital; the other four are still missing. “I was really shocked,” said Hauri, who had immediately tried to contact her friends. — Reuters

The real existential threat facing Europe

US President Donald Trump’s new National Security Strategy offers a misguided assessment of Europe, long regarded as America’s most reliable ally. Unrestrained immigration and other policies derided by administration officials as “woke”, it warns, could lead to “civilisational erasure” within a few decades. That argument rests on a fundamental misreading of Europe’s current predicament. While the European Union does face an existential threat, it has little to do with immigration or cultural politics. In fact, the share of foreign-born residents in the United States is slightly higher than in Europe.

The real threat facing Europe lies in its own economic and technological backwardness. Between 2008 and 2023, GDP rose by 87 per cent in the US, compared to just 13.5 per cent in the EU. Over the same period, the EU’s GDP per capita fell from 76.5 per cent of the US level to 50 per cent. Even the poorest US state – Mississippi – has a higher per capita income than that of several major European economies, including France, Italy, and the EU average.

This widening economic gap cannot be explained by demographics. Instead, it reflects stronger productivity growth in the US, largely owing to technological innovation and higher total factor productivity. Today, roughly half of the world’s 50 largest technology firms are American, while only four are European. Over the past five decades, 241 US firms have grown from startups into companies with market capitalisations of at least \$10 billion, compared with just 14 in Europe. These trends raise a critical question: Which countries will lead the industries of the future, and where does Europe fit in? The race for technological leadership now spans a wide range of fields, including AI and machine learning, semiconductor design and production, robotics, quantum computing, fusion energy, fintech and defence technologies. Europe enters this race at a clear disadvantage.

Whether the US or China currently leads the industries of



The real threat facing Europe lies in its own economic and technological backwardness.



NOURIEL ROUBINI

The writer is a senior adviser at Hudson Bay Capital Management LP and Professor Emeritus of Economics at New York University’s Stern School of Business

the future remains open to debate, but most observers agree that it’s essentially a two-horse race, with America still ahead in several key areas. Beyond that, innovation is concentrated in countries like Japan, South Korea, India and Israel. In Europe, by contrast, innovative activities are largely confined to the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Switzerland – two of which are not even EU member states.

It is hardly a surprise, then, that while the US and China dominate global technological rankings, Europe finds itself far from the top. And the outlook is anything but reassuring, given that the next wave of innovation is widely expected to be more disruptive than anything we have seen over the past half-century. The technological gap between the US and Europe can be attributed to several factors. First, the US has a far deeper and more dynamic ecosystem for financing startups, while Europe still lacks a genuine capital markets union, limiting the scale and speed at which new firms can grow.

Second, Europe is hampered by excessive and fragmented regulation. A US startup can launch a product under a single regulatory framework and immediately access a market of more than 330 million consumers. The EU has a population of roughly 450 million

but remains divided among 27 national regulatory regimes. An International Monetary Fund analysis shows that internal market barriers in the EU act like a tariff of around 44 per cent for goods and 110 per cent for services – far higher than the tariff levels the US imposes on most imports. Third, cultural attitudes towards risk-taking differ sharply. Until relatively recently, a failed entrepreneur in some EU countries (like Italy) could face criminal penalties, while in the US, a tech founder who has never failed is often seen as too risk-averse.

Fourth, the US benefits from a deeply integrated academic-military-industrial complex, while Europe’s chronic underinvestment in defence has weakened its innovation capacity. Technological leaders like the US, China, Israel, and, more recently, Ukraine spend heavily on defence, with military research often producing technologies that have civilian applications. Despite this, many European political leaders continue to frame higher defence spending as a trade-off between security and social welfare. In reality, free-riding on US defence spending since the end of World War II has limited the type of innovation that could have generated more of both through higher productivity.

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SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



JEDDAH TO HOST GULF CUP 27 EDITION

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation has announced the selection of the Saudi city of Jeddah to host the 27th edition of the Arabian Gulf Cup, which will be held from September 23 to October 6, in a tournament expected to be one of the most professionally organised and exciting editions in the history of the competition. In an official statement, the Saudi Arabian Football Federation confirmed that the tournament matches will be staged at King Abdullah Sports City Stadium (Al Inma Stadium) as well as Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Stadium, two of the Kingdom’s most modern and prominent sports venues.

Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al Thani, President of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation, praised Saudi Arabia’s advanced organisational capabilities and infrastructure, stressing that these factors point to an exceptional edition worthy of the tournament’s long and prestigious history.

For his part, Yasser al Misehal, President of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, expressed the Kingdom’s pride in hosting the major Gulf event, noting that preparations are already underway to deliver a tournament that meets the aspirations of Gulf fans and stands as one of the best editions in the competition’s history. Jeddah’s hosting of “Gulf Cup 27” marks the tournament’s return to Saudi Arabia after a ten-year absence, since the last edition hosted by the Kingdom in 2014. Saudi Arabia had previously hosted the Gulf Cup in 1972, 1988, and 2002, in addition to the 2014 edition.

In a related development, media reports from recent weeks have suggested the possible inclusion of Arab national teams from outside the Gulf Cooperation Council in the 2026 edition, aiming to raise the tournament’s technical level and commercial value. Countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan have been mentioned. However, sources from Asharq Al Awsat newspaper denied these claims, clarifying that any potential expansion would be limited to youth competitions, not the senior national team tournament.

The official draw for the tournament is scheduled to take place in June, with host Saudi Arabia and defending champions Bahrain placed in Pot 1. Iraq and Qatar will be in Pot 2, the UAE and Oman in Pot 3, and Kuwait and Yemen in Pot 4, with the possibility of adjustments based on the Fifa rankings released in May. The previous edition of the Gulf Cup, held in Kuwait, was won by Bahrain, who defeated Oman 2-1 in the final.



One of the female riders leading ALGoria Bigorre horse. — **Asaad al Badri**



Crowning the winner in first place. — **Rashid al Touqi**

HUBOOB MUSCAT WIN 'S LADIES' ENDURANCE

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
BARKA, JAN 3

THE Ladies’ Local Endurance Ride over 100 kilometres for the 2025/2026 season concluded in the Wilayat of Barka, organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation, under the auspices of Sayyid Mundhir bin Saif bin Hamad al Busaidy, Chairman of the Federation’s Board, following strong competition across three demanding phases.

The race saw Huboob Muscat clinch the gold medal and first place, continuing its dominance this season after previously winning the National Day Cup, the victory was achieved under the ownership of Hala bint Mohammed al Turki, with rider Zamzam bint Hamad al Hasni delivering an impressive performance, guided by trainer Hamad bin Saeed al Saeedi.

Speaking after her victory, Zamzam al Hasni expressed her delight with the achievement, saying: “Winning the Ladies’ 100 km endurance title is a major milestone for me. The race was physically and technically challenging, and this success reflects the teamwork and support I received throughout the season.”

Second place and the silver medal went to Shalbi, owned and trained by Mohammed bin Saif al Duhaili and ridden by Anne Fekody, while Makarim secured third place and the bronze medal for owner and trainer Ali bin Marhoon al Hasni, with rider Hameeda bint Saeed al Maawaliyah.

Saeed bin Matar, Director of Muscat Stud, congratulated the winners and praised the organisation of the event, stating: “I would like to congratulate Mohammed al Duhaili on his strong second-place finish and commend the federation for the excellent organisation of the race.” The event also witnessed the qualification of several horses over the 40 km and 80 km distances as part of ongoing development programmes.

Al Bashayer dominate Salalah as Al Seeb beat Nizwa in finals opener

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

The first round of the final stage of the Oman Basketball League for the 2025–2026 season featured two thrilling matches, producing a dominant win for Al Bashayer over Salalah (110–27), while Al Seeb overcame Nizwa (84–57), in an evening that confirmed the readiness of the top teams to battle for the title. With these results, Al Bashayer moved to 10 points, Al Seeb to 9 points, while Nizwa remained on 7 points and Salalah on 6.

Al Bashayer vs Salalah

Al Bashayer entered the opening game with clear determination and imposed their tempo from the opening minutes, racing to a 13–0 lead in the first four minutes thanks to strong defensive pressure and fast transitions into attack.

They continued their dominance with accurate perimeter shooting, highlighted by a three-pointer from Osama al Riyami, along with contributions from Hadid Bait Bakhit, stretching the margin to 20 points.

Salalah tried to respond through a three-



A bold attacking move as the player rises for a shot in search of points. — **Ammar al Musafir**

pointer by Faisal Abdulnabi and baskets from Ayman Mustahil and Ahmed al Jahwari, but Al Bashayer still closed the first quarter comfortably ahead, 26–7.

In the second quarter, Al Bashayer maintained their offensive momentum, adding nine points in the first two minutes to extend the lead to 35–7, before Qaisar al Balushi hit a three for Salalah. However, Al Bashayer remained in control and went into halftime leading 51–11.

The gap continued to widen in the third quarter, reaching 66–17 and then 77–17 by the end of the period, as Al Bashayer clearly outperformed their opponents in defensive organisation and quick offensive execution.

In the fourth quarter, Al Bashayer added another 33 points compared to Salalah’s 10, sealing a resounding 110–27 victory in one of the biggest results of the season.

The match was officiated by international referee Thani al Khalasi (first referee), Rashid al Mushaifri (second referee), and Taha al Amri (third referee), with Juma al Hinai, Yaqoub al Nadabi, and Mousa al Siyabi at the table.

AL SEEB VS NIZWA

In the second match, Al Seeb made a positive start through two free throws by Mamadou Badji, before Nizwa replied with a three-pointer from Basel al Subhi. Al Seeb quickly regained control through the strong performances of Mamadou, Ayman al Harmi, and Al Waqas al Hinai, finishing the first quarter ahead 24–12.

In the second quarter, Nizwa tried to reduce the deficit through points from Adam al Hinai and Hussain al Kindi, but Al Seeb kept scoring through Rashid al Zuhaiabi, Mamadou, and Al Waqas al Hinai, going into halftime with a 44–30 lead.

The third quarter saw clear dominance from Al Seeb, who scored 23 points against just 7 for Nizwa, stretching the margin to 67–35. In the fourth quarter, Nizwa improved and scored 20 points compared to 17 for Al Seeb, but the large gap was enough to secure Al Seeb’s victory at 84–57.

The game was officiated by Essam al Siyabi, Mazin al Hilali, and Taha al Amri, with Juma al Hinai and Mahmoud al Ajmi serving as table officials.

THE PRICE OF AN OLYMPIC DREAM



Al Muhannad al Balushi during a karate match with his opponent.

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

THE ROAD to the Olympic Games is never paved by talent alone. It demands relentless technical refinement, sustained financial investment, and mental resilience to withstand years of elite-level competition. For Oman's rising taekwondo talent Al Muhannad bin Tawfiq al Balushi, the journey toward the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games is no longer a distant ambition but it is an unfolding reality shaped by discipline, sacrifice and an unforgiving qualification system that rewards only sustained excellence.

At a time when Olympic qualification in taekwondo is determined by long-term world ranking accumulation rather than single-event success, Al Muhannad has emerged as one of Oman's most promising prospects. His rapid ascent on the international stage, combined with structured institutional support, placed him firmly on a pathway that could lead to Oman's presence in taekwondo at the 34th Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

A decisive step in Al Muhannad's Olympic journey came in September 2024, when he signed a three-year Olympic Scholarships Agreement with the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC). The programme was designed to elevate his technical readiness and provide structure to his long-term development, aligning his training cycle with international qualification standards. The agreement

reflected growing confidence in his potential and placed new expectations on his shoulders. Olympic scholarships are not merely financial tools but they are statements of belief that an athlete can carry national aspirations onto the world's biggest sporting stage.

INTERNATIONAL STAGE

The 2025 season proved to be a defining chapter in Al Muhannad's sporting career. He delivered a series of outstanding international performances that reflected not only medal success, but also significant progress in technical maturity, tactical intelligence, and psychological composure as key attributes required at elite level.

"I am proud of myself after accomplishing many achievements last year," Al Muhannad told Oman Observer. "During the 2025 season, I managed to achieve an impressive collection of international titles and medals. These achievements reflected my rapid rise on the global taekwondo stage."

His medal haul included a Gold Medal at the Grand Prix in Estonia, alongside a Bronze Medal at the European Clubs Championship, also held in Estonia. He further clinched Gold at the Swiss International Championship, before securing another Gold



Al Muhannad al Balushi was crowned first place in the competition.

Medal at the Grand Prix in China. Al Muhannad added a Silver Medal at the Qatar International Open, before concluding the season on a historic high with Gold at the Grand Prix Final in Bosnia as a landmark achievement for Omani taekwondo.

"These results represent not only medal success, but also valuable world ranking points, significantly enhancing my international standing," he added.

SENIOR CATEGORY

Following his breakthrough performances, Al Muhannad has entered a new and more demanding phase of his career with his transition to the senior (men's) -54 kg category which is a division dominated by experienced Olympic and world championship

contenders. "This move will require major adaptations," Al Muhannad explained. "I need to increase physical strength and endurance to compete against experienced senior athletes. I also have to build my tactical capabilities to handle faster pace and higher match intensity, while advancing psychological preparation to manage pressure at elite-level events."

Throughout 2025, Al Muhannad demonstrated steady progress in adapting to these demands, proving his ability to compete consistently against senior-level opposition. His performances indicated not only readiness for the present, but sustainability for long-term competition across multiple Olympic qualification cycles.

RANKING STRATEGY

Looking ahead, Al Muhannad is adopting a holistic athlete development approach which is a necessity in modern Olympic taekwondo. "I am focusing on high-level international training camps, continuous exposure to elite Grand Prix and G-ranked tournaments, technical and tactical analysis against top-ranked opponents, and mental conditioning and competition psychology," he said.

"This structured approach will enable measurable improvements in match control, scoring efficiency, and consistency, which are essential for accelerating my climb in the world rankings and meeting Olympic qualification requirements."

Such a pathway reflects the modern reality of Olympic taekwondo, where success depends on long-term planning, data-driven performance analysis, and sustained exposure to the highest competitive environments.

PATHWAY TO LOS ANGELES 2028

Al Muhannad is clear about his ultimate ambition. "My objective is to secure qualification for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games," he stated. "Achieving this goal requires consistent

participation in WT-recognised international tournaments, accumulation of Olympic ranking points over multiple seasons, strategic competition selection to maximise ranking efficiency, and long-term performance stability with injury prevention."

His 2025 results confirmed that he is firmly on the right trajectory toward Olympic contention but the journey remains demanding and unforgiving.

FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

Despite his progress, Al Muhannad acknowledged the significant challenges that lie ahead, particularly on the financial front. "I am facing financial challenges, including the high costs of international travel, accommodation, and competition fees," he said. "There are also expenses related to elite coaching, sports science support, training camps, equipment, recovery programmes, and medical support."

Al Muhannad's achievements in 2025 represented more than individual success as they mark a potential turning point in the history of Omani taekwondo. His smooth transition to the senior -54 kg category, combined with historic international results, underscores his ability to compete at the highest global level. With continued structured preparation, technical advancement, and financial support, Al Muhannad will stand as one of Oman's strongest Olympic hopes on the road to Los Angeles 2028.

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Ollie Watkins celebrates scoring their first goal. — Reuters

MCGINN SHINES
AS VILLA EDGE
FOREST 3-1

LONDON: John McGinn scored a second-half brace and Ollie Watkins struck for the fourth time in three games as Aston Villa secured a 3-1 win over Nottingham Forest on Saturday, provisionally taking second place in the Premier League table.

Villa, looking for their 11th straight home win in all competitions, took the lead just before the break as Morgan Rogers found Watkins at the edge of the box, and the England forward fired home with his right foot. The hosts doubled their lead in the 49th minute when Matty Cash crossed to McGinn, who found the net with a left-footed flick. Morgan Gibbs-White scored for Forest, but McGinn caught keeper John Victor off his line to make it 3-1 in the 73rd minute.

Villa, a point above third-placed Manchester City who have played a game fewer, visit Crystal Palace on Wednesday. Forest remained 17th, four points above the drop zone, after their fourth straight loss in the league. — Reuters



Ollie Watkins and Youri Tielemans in action with Nottingham Forest's Igor Jesus and Nikola Milenkovic. — Reuters



Kylian Mbappe reacts during the UEFA Champions League first round day 1 football match between Real Madrid CF and Olympique de Marseille. — AFP

Mbappe expected to miss Supercopa in Saudi Arabia

REAL Madrid forward Kylian Mbappe will miss Sunday's LaLiga home game against Real Betis due to a knee injury but is pushing to be available for next week's Spanish Super Cup semi-final against Atletico Madrid, manager Xabi Alonso said on Saturday.

The 27-year old France captain, who equalled Cristiano Ronaldo's club record of 59 goals in a calendar year for Real in their 2-0 LaLiga win over Sevilla on December 20, has a sprain in his left knee.

"We'll definitely miss Kylian," Alonso told reporters. "We have to have a lot of faith in those who are going to play tomorrow.

"Now we'll see. We have to wait and see how things develop, and we'll do everything we can to get him back as soon as possible.

"We're going to be pushing the deadlines, it's very much a matter of feelings. When is as soon as possible? That's the question. I don't know. The Super Cup? We hope."

Alonso's men were five points clear at the top before their form took a downturn in



Kylian Mbappe reacts during the UEFA Champions League first round day 1 football match between Real Madrid CF and Olympique de Marseille. — AFP

November. They drew three league games in a row before suffering a shock loss to Celta Vigo at home in December, allowing defending champions Barcelona to surge four points ahead in the title race.

REAL'S DIP

Real's dip in form has coincided with a goalless run for forward Vinicius Jr. The 25-year old Brazilian winger, who scored 22 goals last season, has struck just five times across all competitions this term and has not found the net since October.

When asked how Vinicius is doing after being booed by a section of fans in their last match against Sevilla at the Bernabeu, Alonso said: "Vini looks fine to me, cheerful and smiling. The break has been good for all of us to recharge our batteries.

"Tomorrow, we are the ones who have to give in order to receive, to spread that enthusiasm and rhythm that we need. If that flows in both directions, we will enjoy ourselves." — Reuters

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SHORTTAKES

Why Oman’s 2026 borrowing plan exceeds the RO 530m budget deficit

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 3



DR SAEED BIN MUBARAK AL MUHARAMI
Professor of Finance at Sultan Qaboos University

Dr Saeed bin Mubarak al Muharami, Professor of Finance at Sultan Qaboos University, said there is a difference between net income and net cashflows, noting that the figures highlighted at the announcement of the state budget are typically based on the income statement, which records revenues and expenses, including interest on debt as part of debt service costs.

In comments, Al Muharami said accounting includes more than one set of financial statements, but two are key to understanding the budget discussion: the income statement and the cashflow statement, which tracks actual cash inflows and outflows that are not captured in the income statement — such as repayments of debt principal.

He added there is a difference between interest due on debt and instalments of principal that must be paid.

Al Muharami said this distinction helps answer a common question: if Oman’s projected 2026 budget deficit is RO 530 million, why does the government plan to borrow more than that amount?

He said the expected RO 530 million deficit is recorded on the income statement. However, on the cashflow statement — which reflects real cash movements — the net cashflow position is expected to show a deficit of RO 2.292 billion, as RO 1.762 billion in debt principal falls due for repayment in 2026.

Al Muharami said the government plans, during 2026, to seek around RO 990 million in external borrowing and RO 902 million in domestic borrowing to cover the RO 1.762 billion of debt principal instalments due and to finance the RO 530 million budget deficit. The plan also includes drawing about RO 400 million from state reserves to finance the remaining gap.

Bankruptcy Law bolsters investor confidence

OMAN’S Commercial Bankruptcy Law has emerged as a key pillar in strengthening market stability, safeguarding investor confidence and supporting a fair, competitive business environment in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Issued under Royal Decree No 53/2019 and effective since July 2020, the law marked a decisive shift in how commercial distress is managed in the Sultanate of Oman.

Rather than treating bankruptcy as the end of business activity, the legislation introduces structured mechanisms that prioritise restructuring and preventative settlement over liquidation, offering viable companies a chance to recover.

The law regulates bankruptcy procedures transparently, protects the rights of both debtors and creditors; and reduces the stigma traditionally associated with financial failure.

It establishes clear pathways beginning with restructuring requests, followed by preventative settlements through the courts and, only as a last resort, formal bankruptcy proceedings.

A central feature of the framework is the fair distribution of assets, with priority given to fundamental rights such as employee entitlements and government dues. These provisions enhance competitive fairness and reinforce trust in the market.

In the long term, the law is expected to improve Oman’s standing in international business rankings and underline the Sultanate of Oman’s commitment



MOHAMMED BIN SALEEM AL HASHMI
Director of the Department of Commercial Establishments Control at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

The law regulates bankruptcy procedures transparently, protects the rights of both debtors and creditors; and reduces the stigma traditionally associated with financial failure.



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to transparency and equal opportunity, strengthening its appeal as a regional investment destination — particularly as entrepreneurship and start-up activity accelerates.

Mohammed bin Saleem al Hashmi, Director of the Department of Commercial Establishments Control at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, said the Bankruptcy Law represents a cornerstone of market regulation and economic stability.

He noted that it has redefined bankruptcy as a tool for debt restructuring rather than a termination of commercial activity, contributing to greater investor confidence and fair competition.

Al Hashmi identified weak financial planning, poor cash flow management, high operating costs and limited legal awareness as key drivers of commercial bankruptcy,

particularly among SMEs. He also pointed to global economic pressures, fluctuating energy prices and delayed payments as challenges affecting local firms’ competitiveness.

Dr Khalid bin Saeed al Amri, Chairman of the Omani Economic Association, said the law forms part of a broader transformation of Oman’s economic legislation under Oman Vision 2040.

He stressed that a flexible and transparent bankruptcy framework is essential for managing financial distress, protecting jobs and ensuring business continuity.

Both officials emphasised that further progress depends on enhancing legal awareness, upgrading judicial and digital infrastructure; and strengthening cooperation between government and financial institutions to create a resilient and investor-friendly business environment. — ONA

Oman spent RO 7.3 billion on subsidies during 10th Plan

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 3

THE Omani government’s subsidy allocations for key utilities and public services totalled a substantial RO 7.3 billion over the 2021–2025 period of the 10th Five-Year Plan, underscoring its continued commitment to shielding citizens from cost pressures while safeguarding social stability and economic resilience.

According to the Ministry of Finance, these allocations were made through the annual State General Budgets of the 10th Plan and covered oil products, electricity, water and sewage services, the solid waste sector, basic food commodities, development and housing loan interest subsidies, as well as the social protection system.

“The Government has made efforts to mitigate the impact of its initiatives designed to stimulate economic growth and enhance fiscal performance on the most vulnerable segments of society”, the Ministry noted. “In this regard, it has prioritised national support for basic services and products”,



Of the total subsidy envelope, approximately RO 2.733 bn was directed towards the electricity sector.

adding that these allocations aim to ensure social stability and cushion citizens against oil price volatility and inflation, as outlined in its 2026 State General Budget handbook.

Of the total subsidy envelope, approximately RO 2.733 billion was directed towards the electricity sector during the 10th Plan period, averaging about RO 546

million annually. Over the longer term, however, the government’s Fiscal Balance Plan and tariff reform agenda envisage a gradual shift away from blanket electricity and water subsidies towards cost-reflective pricing, alongside the redirection of support to eligible low-income households through the National Subsidy System.

Subsidies for transport fuels amounted to RO 1.464 billion over the five years of the 10th Plan, representing roughly 20 per cent of total subsidy allocations.

These subsidies were designed to stabilise domestic fuel prices amidst global oil market volatility. From a peak of RO 730 million in the 2022 Budget, fuel subsidies have since declined sharply, easing to an estimated RO 90 million in 2025.

Water and sewage subsidies totalled RO 904 million over the plan period, while interest subsidies on development and housing loans amounted to RO 227 million. Other sectors benefitting from government support included basic commodities (RO 71 million), solid waste management (RO 357 million) and transport services (RO 381

million). Notably, the Social Protection System — introduced for the first time in the annual budget in 2024 — received cumulative allocations of RO 1.078 billion.

For fiscal 2026, the government continues its policy of supporting essential public services and utilities, with sizable allocations for social protection, utilities, transport and debt management.

These include RO 614 million for the social protection system, RO 509 million for the electricity sector, RO 241 million for water, wastewater and waste services; and RO 82 million for transport.

Overall, total allocations under the budgetary subhead “Contributions and Other Expenses” increased by 6 per cent to RO 2.475 billion in the 2026 Budget, up from RO 2.345 billion estimated in 2025.

This increase, the Ministry explained, reflects higher allocations for oil product subsidies — up by RO 55 million to RO 90 million — as well as an additional RO 65 million in subsidies for the electricity, water and sewage sectors, bringing total utility subsidies to RO 779 million.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



The operations commenced with the successful completion of initial operational flights in partnership with Masar Petroleum.

ESBAAR LAUNCHES OIL AND GAS SECTOR DRONE CARGO

MUSCAT: Esbaar, the Omani pioneer in drone and artificial intelligence solutions, has officially launched the Middle East’s first advanced air cargo operations in the oil and gas sector using unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), marking a qualitative leap in the smart logistics services ecosystem.

The operations commenced with the successful completion of initial operational flights in partnership with Masar Petroleum, utilising a fleet of locally manufactured unmanned aerial systems produced by Sinan Advanced Industries.

The operational launch began with the urgent transport of spare parts related to oil production equipment from the Wilayat of Haima to Masar Petroleum’s operations site in Concession Area No 7, covering 137 kilometres. The delivery was completed in just one hour and 23 minutes shortly before sunset, compared to an estimated four hours or more by road transport, which could have required night driving.

By adopting an aerial route for transporting these components, Esbaar will contribute to establishing round-the-clock air transport capabilities, including night-time cargo deliveries a period during which road transport is often restricted or prohibited in oil and gas concession areas, ensuring that logistics do not become an obstacle to production operations.

Malik al Toubi, Co-Founder and Director of Advanced Air Mobility at Esbaar, stated, “From the very beginning, our focus has been on adopting and developing local capabilities to support advanced air mobility solutions that can address real and complex logistical challenges in vital sectors, foremost among them the oil and gas sector.

This launch reflects a firm commitment to strengthening the local manufacturing ecosystem, qualifying Omani talent and integrating drone technologies through a strategic partnership with Sinan Advanced Industries and Masar Petroleum. It is worth noting that the drones being deployed possess all the operational specifications required for long distance missions and challenging climatic conditions”.

Eng Yahya al Yaqubi, Production Supervisor at Masar Petroleum, said, “Integrating drone-based cargo transport into our operational processes contributes to enhancing efficiency and elevating safety standards. In addition, the availability of this service around the clock helps reduce production downtime and accelerate response to emergency situations. These are challenges commonly faced by organisations engaged in oil and gas exploration and production.”

Industrial shares lead Muscat Stock Exchange rally

MUSCAT: Industrial stocks on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) extended their rally last week, lifting the sector index for a sixth consecutive week as investors positioned themselves ahead of the announcement of preliminary 2025 financial results.

Strong buying interest pushed the industrial sector index up by 132 points to close above 7,900 points, bringing its total gain over the past six weeks to more than 680 points. This made it the strongest-performing sector on the exchange.

Shares of Al Jazeera Steel Products, Al Anwar Ceramic Tiles, Oman Cables Industry, Al Safa Foods, Voltamp Energy and Gulf International Chemicals led the advance.

Listed companies are expected to begin releasing their 2025 preliminary financial results this week, with disclosures due to be completed by mid-January. These announcements are expected to set the direction of the MSX in the weeks ahead.



Strong buying interest pushed the industrial sector index up by 132 points to close above 7,900 points.

Elsewhere, market performance was mixed. The main MSX index slipped below the 5,900-point level after nearly three weeks of gains, closing the week at 5,895 points, down 60

Toyota introduces the GR Yaris in Oman

SAUD Bahwan Automotive proudly announces the highly anticipated arrival of the Toyota GR Yaris to the Sultanate of Oman.

Born from the heat of competition in the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC), this model introduces the new Aero Performance Package, developed to elevate aerodynamic efficiency, cooling performance and driving stability.

The launch marks an exciting new chapter for driving purists in Oman, offering them a vehicle that wasn’t merely adapted for the track, but born from it.

Developed with the expertise of the Toyota Gazoo Racing World Rally Team — the force behind Toyota’s five consecutive FIA WRC manufacturers’ championships — the GR Yaris is the brand’s first model developed with a “motorsport-first” approach.

It serves as a rolling laboratory, refined through the rigorous demands of the Super Taikyu Series and the Japanese Rally Championship to deliver unmatched confidence and control on every road.

As Akio Toyoda (Morizo), Toyota Chairman and Master Driver, noted, “The GR Yaris is a car developed for the win. In the past, we tried to succeed in motorsport by adapting production cars for competition — this car reverses that process. There is no limit to how far we can improve it and the final touches should be made by your own hands”.

Under the hood lies the heart of a champion: a 1.6-litre inline three-cylinder turbo engine (G16E-GTS) that delivers an explosive 300 HP and 400 Nm of torque. Drivers in Oman can choose between two transmission options — the newly developed 8-speed Direct Automatic Transmission for rapid, seamless shifting, or a six-speed intelligent manual transmission for a more direct, mechanical connection.



Developed with the expertise of the Toyota Gazoo Racing World Rally Team, the GR Yaris is the brand’s first model developed with a “motorsport-first” approach.

Power is managed by the GR-FOUR full-time 4WD system with an electronically controlled multi-plate clutch and three selectable modes, ensuring optimal traction and stability across diverse road surfaces.

The new Aero Performance Package enhances aerodynamic efficiency through six precision-engineered components, including a ducted aluminium hood for improved cooling, a front lip spoiler to reduce lift, fender ducts to sharpen steering response, a variable rear wing for high-speed stability, rear bumper ducts to minimise drag and a fuel-tank undercover that smooths underbody airflow.

Inside, the GR Yaris features a driver-focused cockpit available in a sporty Black x Red theme or a minimalist Full Black option. Its lightweight body — featuring

an aluminium hood, doors and rear hatch, along with a carbon-fiber-reinforced plastic (CFRP) roof — ensures a low centre of gravity and superior handling.

Safety remains paramount with Toyota Safety Sense, which includes the Pre-Collision System (PCS), Dynamic Radar Cruise Control (DRCC), Lane Tracing Assist (LTA), as well as Blind Spot Monitor (BSM) and Rear Cross-Traffic Alert (RCTA).

The new GR Yaris will be available in five distinctive colours, including Platinum White Pearl Mica, Precious Black and Emotional Red. Saud Bahwan Automotive invites performance enthusiasts across Oman to experience this rally-bred masterpiece firsthand. Official sales of the GR Yaris and the Aero Performance Package commenced on December 24, 2025.

AIRPORT PASSENGERS IN MUSCAT AND SALALAH AIRPORTS RISE

MUSCAT: Passenger traffic at Muscat International and Salalah airports increased by the end of November 2025, despite a slight decline in the total number of flights, according to official data.

Figures from the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed that passenger numbers at Muscat International Airport rose by 1.8 per cent to 11,939,458, compared to 11,731,430 a year earlier.

However, total flights declined by 4.1 per cent to 84,296. International flights through Muscat fell by 5.2 per cent to 75,460, while international passenger



Passenger numbers at Muscat International Airport rose by 1.8% to 11,939,458.

numbers edged up by 0.7 per cent to 10,718,898. Domestic flights increased by 6.7 per cent to 8,836, carrying 1,220,560 passengers, up 12.5 per cent.

At Salalah Airport, passenger numbers rose by 10 per cent to 1,574,296, while total flights increased by 5.9 per cent to 10,237. International flights declined by 2.6 per cent, with passenger numbers down 0.7 per cent to 622,198. In contrast, domestic flights grew by 13.6 per cent to 5,748, carrying 952,098 passengers, an increase of 18.3 per cent. The data highlights robust domestic travel demand and steady growth in overall passenger traffic. — ONA

the top five, recording trades of RO 15.9 million and RO 10.6 million, respectively.

Share prices rose for 40 securities, while 30 declined and 25 remained unchanged. Lifa Group led the gainers, rising 13.7 per cent to 330 baisa.

Oman United Insurance advanced 9.3 per cent to 339 baisa, while Gulf Hotels Oman and Musandam Power both gained 8.2 per cent. Al Jazeera Steel Products added 7.7 per cent to close at 680 baisa.

On the downside, Port of Salalah Services fell 8.3 per cent to 330 baisa. Oman Refreshments declined 8 per cent to RO 1.370, Oman Chromite dropped 7.3 per cent to RO 3.800, Oman Fisheries slipped 6.6 per cent to 28 baisa and Oman Investment & Training eased 5.7 per cent to RO 1.550.

In separate disclosures, Oman Flour Mills said its Extraordinary General Meeting held on December 31 approved changing the company’s trade name to Atayeb Group. — ONA

SHORTTAKES



Data showed a 7 per cent increase in Omani guests to 791,286, while visitors from GCC countries grew by 7.4 per cent to 195,825.

HOTEL GUESTS TOP 2.1 MILLION BY NOVEMBER

MUSCAT: The number of guests staying in three- to five-star hotels in Oman rose by 10.9 per cent to 2,139,300 by the end of November 2025, compared with 1,929,495 during the same period last year, according to official statistics.

Visitors from Asia increased by 10 per cent to 305,460, while arrivals from Africa rose by 19.3 per cent to 13,246. Europe recorded a strong 23 per cent increase to 574,243 guests, while arrivals from the Americas climbed by 29.5 per cent to 69,697.

Data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed a 7 per cent increase in Omani guests to 791,286, while visitors from GCC countries grew by 7.4 per cent to 195,825. Guest numbers from other Arab countries declined slightly.

Visitors from Asia increased by 10 per cent to 305,460, while arrivals from Africa rose by 19.3 per cent to 13,246. Europe recorded a strong 23 per cent increase to 574,243 guests, while arrivals from the Americas climbed by 29.5 per cent to 69,697. Guests from Oceania surged by 35.5 per cent to 38,028.

Hotel revenues rose sharply by 21.4 per cent to RO 257.9 million by the end of November 2025, compared with RO 212.4 million a year earlier. Occupancy rates also increased to 55.4 per cent, up from 48.6 per cent.

The figures reflect the continued recovery and strong performance of Oman's tourism and hospitality sector. — ONA

Watchdog reinforces market confidence

THE Competition Protection and Anti-Monopoly Centre has emerged as a critical regulatory pillar supporting investor confidence and economic stability in the Sultanate of Oman, playing a central role in safeguarding market fairness and preventing monopolistic practices.

At the microeconomic level, the Centre regulates market behaviour by curbing anti-competitive conduct, promoting fair pricing and improving efficiency.

This approach widens consumer choice, protects business owners and enables small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to compete on equal footing within a transparent and regulated marketplace.

Its macroeconomic impact is equally significant. By limiting price distortions and excessive market concentration, the Centre supports productivity growth, reduces systemic risks and enhances the overall attractiveness of Oman's investment environment.

These efforts directly align with Oman Vision 2040 objectives on economic diversification and private sector-led growth.

Ahmed bin Salem al Rasbi, Director General of the Competition Protection and Monopoly Prevention Centre, said competition policy is not merely regulatory but a powerful economic tool that raises market efficiency, stimulates innovation and strengthens investor trust.

He noted that fair competition underpins a sustainable economy built on quality products and services, free from illicit market influence.

Al Rasbi explained that the



At the microeconomic level, the Centre regulates market behaviour by curbing anti-competitive conduct, promoting fair pricing and improving efficiency.

Centre operates through an integrated framework focused on strengthening compliance in sensitive sectors, protecting SMEs from restrictive practices, enhancing price and information transparency; and monitoring economic indicators to identify risks linked to monopolies or excessive concentration.

He revealed that the Centre is developing a package of forward-looking initiatives, including national competition indicators based on advanced economic methodologies, full automation of services to accelerate monitoring and analysis; and sectoral studies covering construction, building materials and e-commerce — industries with direct influence on pricing and market access.

Cooperation with government entities and the private sector is also being expanded to foster a more flexible and equitable business environment.

During the first half of 2025, the Centre completed investigations into 15 complaints related to suspected anti-competitive practices, reinforcing compliance and contributing to a more stable and efficient market.

Khalid bin Khamis al Masrouri, Director of the Prohibited Practices Department, said complaints centred on abuse of dominant market positions, price manipulation and barriers to market entry.

All cases were handled in strict accordance with the law, raising awareness among companies of their regulatory obligations.

On economic concentration, the Centre reviewed seven cases to ensure mergers and acquisitions do not result in monopolistic structures that could harm competition.

Wahiba bint Rashid al Hinaiyah, an economic

researcher in the Economic Concentration Department, said oversight of mergers and acquisitions is a frontline defence for the national economy, warning that unchecked concentration can suppress innovation and distort prices before damage becomes visible.

Meanwhile, Rajwa bint Mohammed al Rashidiyah, a competition specialist, highlighted progress in implementing recommendations from sectoral studies, including the hypermarket sector.

She added that the Centre has also investigated cases involving unfair competition against national products, helping shield local industries from dumped imports.

Bader bin Mubarak al Hajri, Head of the Anti-Dumping Department, confirmed that monitoring of dumping cases remains ongoing. — ONA

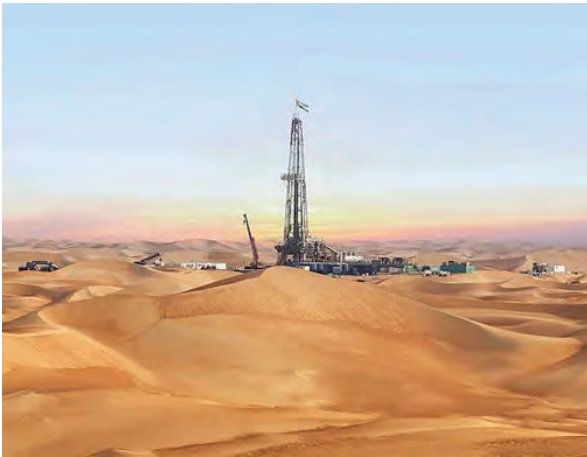
ADNOC Drilling enters Oman after closing SLB land-rig deal

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 3

ADNOC Drilling, the drilling arm of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, has formally established an operating base in Oman's onshore drilling services market after completing the purchase of a controlling stake in a land-rig joint venture with SLB that includes six rigs working in the Sultanate of Oman.

In a filing to the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange dated January 1, 2026, ADNOC Drilling said its wholly owned subsidiary, ADH RSC Ltd, completed the acquisition of 70% of SLDC Holdings RSC Ltd, the joint-venture vehicle set up with SLB for land drilling operations in Oman and Kuwait.

For Oman, the transaction is significant



The deal places ADNOC Drilling on the ground in Oman, with operating assets and contracted work from day one.

because it is not a gradual “build-up” entry.

It places ADNOC Drilling on the ground with operating assets and contracted work from day one. The disclosures linked to the transaction describe an eight-rig portfolio in total, with six land rigs in Oman and two in Kuwait; and say the rigs are fully operational and working under existing contracts with national operators.

ADNOC Drilling announced the deal in May 2025, valuing the consideration for the 70% stake at up to \$112 million, comprising \$91 million upfront and a performance-linked earn-out of up to \$21 million, subject to customary closing adjustments.

SLB retains 30% in the venture and ADNOC Drilling has said the structure includes an agreed mechanism that could enable it to acquire the remaining stake over time.

The deal effectively adds a new large-scale operator to the country's onshore drilling services landscape at a time when operators across the region remain focused on execution reliability, safety performance and cost discipline.

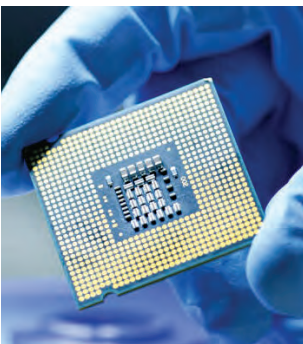
ADNOC Drilling has framed the joint venture as a platform to lift rig performance through operational efficiencies and the deployment of digital capabilities.

If rolled out in Oman at scale, such tools typically target downtime reduction, faster drilling cycles and improved safety compliance — areas that directly influence field economics and schedule certainty.

The company has also indicated that 2026 is expected to reflect the full-year impact of the transaction in its reporting following completion.

SECURITY CLAMPDOWN

Trump blocks China-linked chips deal



US President Donald Trump blocked photonics firm HieFo Corp's three-million-dollar purchase of assets from New Jersey defence specialist Emcore, citing national security risks linked to China.

The US said HieFo is controlled by a Chinese citizen and ordered divestment of all Emcore-related interests within 180 days, without detailing specific threats in the transaction. — Reuters

MANUFACTURING DIVIDE

Europe factories falter as Asia shines



Euro zone manufacturing ended 2025 in deeper contraction, while Asian factories showed resilience on stronger exports and artificial intelligence demand, surveys found.

The HCOB euro area PMI fell to 48.8 in December from 49.6, its lowest in nine months, as production and orders declined broadly across the 20-nation bloc, highlighting a widening regional economic divergence. — Reuters

TRADE HEADWINDS

German exports brace for prolonged weakness



German exporters face a prolonged slump in 2026 in the United States and China, their two biggest markets, the BGA trade body warned.

Exports to the United States fell over seven per cent in 2025, while shipments to China dropped ten per cent, hurt by high tariffs, high costs, bureaucracy and weak investment, with no meaningful recovery expected in the coming months. — Reuters

OPINION

Oman: A great place for writers and creative thinkers



DR HILAL
AL SAWAI

The writer is local content, sustainability and innovation expert.

OMAN is majorly known for its tourism and trade for its beautiful nature and deserts; and hospitable people. However, Oman is also becoming a writers’ and creators’ country for its rich culture and peaceful atmosphere.

Oman is becoming a country full of inspiration for many writers and providing various conditions beneficial for writers of all levels.

Oman’s cultural depth is its strongest element for being ideal for writers. The Omani people have a very rich history of poetry and story-telling. Traditional poetry and folk stories are still a valuable part of the Omani culture and national identity.

This rich culture is a great motivator for writers of all kinds, especially for those who love to write fiction, non-fiction, in the present or the past, or are seeking to document and preserve a culture. The unique blend of past and present, gives writers a chance to explore themes of identity and change.

Another factor contributing to Oman’s uniqueness, particularly for writers, is the relaxed and stable environment the country possesses. Global cities are hectic and fast-paced, while Oman’s lifestyle carries a slower and calmer pace. It is easier to focus, reflect and work creatively in an environment that is

calm and collected.

Writers, for example, need to have quiet environments in order to develop their ideas and think. Oman’s natural environments such as its deserts, mountains and coastlines provide the surroundings needed to clear the mind. It is also a way to foster the creation of works such as travel literature, poetry and other forms of descriptive writing.

Oman’s education and literacy levels have steadily progressed, which also raises the interest in reading and writing. It is partly due to the schools, universities and cultural centres that emphasise the importance of learning, research and creativity

. In addition, cultural events, writing contests and book fairs have been on the rise and are providing new opportunities for writers to meet readers and present their works.

Although there is an underdeveloped publishing industry, social media and other digital writing platforms have provided new tools for local writers to promote their work to the world and to themselves as authors.

Oman has a reputation for being socially inclusive and respectful. It makes for a good living environment for writers because of the constructive and peaceful discourse the society has. The writers are also able to get different viewpoints and experiences in the country because of the intersection

Oman’s cultural depth is its strongest element for being ideal for writers. The Omani people have a very rich history of poetry and story-telling. Traditional poetry and folk stories are still a valuable part of the Omani culture and national identity.

of multiculturalism and modernity with tradition and globalisation.

This type of social environment and experience positively impacts the construction and the overall theme of a writer’s characters.

The intersection of modernity and multiculturalism with tradition in Oman makes it a good peaceful living environment for writers of all social backgrounds.

Despite the constructive and inclusive environment in Oman, writers experience challenges. Writing professionally and publishing locally in Oman may not be a sustainable long-term profession. In order to develop professionally, writers are forced to use the internet and outside Oman to develop and publish their works.

These challenges are not only restrictions, but also incentivise the writer’s creativity and resourcefulness.

The challenges may be many, but the writing industry in Oman has a lot of potential in the social environment and cultural practices it has. The constructive environment and the challenges the writers face helps develop their creativity.

The rich culture and the beauty of the country helps develop the writers and the writing industry. It makes the country a peaceful and developing environment for writers.

OMAN’S SHIFT TO SMART WATER NETWORKS



NAJAH
AL RIYAMI

The writer is a Media and Communication Master’s graduate.

AS water stress intensifies globally, digital technology is reshaping how water systems are planned, operated and protected.

In Oman, this shift is already well underway. Smart water networks and digital monitoring have moved beyond pilot initiatives to become integral to national water management, reflecting the country’s need to balance rising demand, energy efficiency and

long-term water security.

Oman’s water system is defined by its reliance on desalination, an energy-intensive process that tightly links water supply to power generation and fuel costs. With population growth, urban expansion, industrial development and tourism steadily increasing demand, improving efficiency across distribution networks has become as critical as expanding production capacity.

According to the International Water Association, losses from leaks, bursts and metering inaccuracies can account for up to 30 per cent of treated water in conventional systems, making non-revenue water one of the most persistent challenges facing utilities worldwide.

Smart water networks address this challenge by combining sensors, advanced metres, control systems and data analytics to give utilities continuous visibility across their infrastructure.

Instead of relying on periodic inspections or customer complaints to identify problems, operators can now monitor flow, pressure and consumption in real time. This enables earlier detection of anomalies and faster intervention, often preventing minor issues from escalating into major failures.

For Oman, reducing losses carries direct economic and environmental benefits. Every unit of desalinated water lost represents wasted energy as well as wasted water.

Digital monitoring allows utilities to pinpoint leaks more accurately, reducing the need for disruptive excavations and lowering repair costs. Over time, this contributes to more reliable service and more efficient use of existing assets.

Advanced metering infrastructure is another cornerstone of the digital transition. Smart metres transmit consumption data automatically and at frequent intervals, providing utilities with a detailed picture of how water is used across residential, commercial and industrial customers.

This supports more accurate billing, improves demand forecasting and helps identify consumption patterns that may indicate leaks within properties. The World Bank has highlighted smart metering as a key enabler of more transparent, efficient and financially sustainable water utilities, particularly in water-stressed regions.

Budget that protects living standards

EVERY

budget season, people ask a simple question: what does this mean for my daily life? Not in tables, but at the supermarket, in rent payments, in transport costs, in service charges and in the search for a steady job.

It is a fair question — and it deserves an answer that recognises two realities at once: households feel pressure when prices rise and the state must keep public finances strong to protect the future.

Oman has made fiscal discipline a clear priority in recent years and that foundation matters. It strengthens confidence, protects essential spending and gives policymakers room to respond when conditions tighten.

At the same time, the global economy remains prone to renewed price pressures. Costs can rise for reasons beyond local demand — disruptions to supply chains, higher freight costs, commodity cycles, or geopolitical tensions that ripple through markets.

In an open economy that imports a significant share of goods, these shocks can reach local shelves quickly.

That is why cost-of-living protection cannot depend on spending alone. It also depends on smart policies that soften shocks early, before they become a lasting burden.

A key question is how support is designed. There is a form of relief that is broad and quick, but can be expensive to sustain and difficult to adjust once conditions improve.

Then there is targeted support: focused help for households most exposed to price pressures, delivered with clear rules and reviewed regularly. Broad measures can sometimes be less efficient, especially when support reaches beyond the intended groups. Over time, that can reduce flexibility for priority spending such as healthcare, education and infrastructure.

A more balanced approach is support that is precise, time-bound and measurable. Precise means it reaches those who genuinely



Oman has made fiscal discipline a clear priority in recent years. (Picture for illustration only)



QASIM
AL MAASHANI

The author is the head of the Business and Politics department at Oman Observer.

Oman has made fiscal discipline a clear priority in recent years and that foundation matters. It strengthens confidence, protects essential spending and gives policymakers room to respond when conditions tighten.

need it. Time-bound means it is strengthened during periods of pressure and eased when conditions improve.

Measurable means we ask straightforward questions: did pressure fall for eligible families? Was delivery efficient and transparent? Did support reach the right people? These are not political questions — they are the basics of good governance and responsible budgeting.

Budgets, however, do not have to address living costs only through direct assistance. There are quieter, lower-cost tools that can make a real difference. Competition matters: when markets are open and pricing is transparent, costs tend to stay more disciplined.

Logistics matter too: faster clearance, smoother movement of goods and better coordination across supply chains can reduce hidden costs that consumers eventually pay.

Strategic stocks of essential goods, managed prudently, can also help moderate sudden spikes during periods of global volatility. These measures may not always attract attention, but they often deliver lasting value.

Cost of living is also about income — not only prices. Many

families can absorb moderate price increases when wages and job security improve, but struggle when incomes are stagnant. That is why a people-focused budget must keep employment and productivity at the centre.

Short-term job programmes can help, but the stronger protection comes from jobs that last, skills that match real demand and a labour market that rewards productivity — particularly in sectors that generate value and strengthen national income over time.

Housing and essential services are another area where people feel the budget immediately. The solution here is not open-ended spending. It is better management: improvin

g supply through balanced planning, raising service quality; and ensuring fees and charges are predictable and coordinated.

When costs accumulate across multiple channels, households and small businesses may feel the combined effect as sustained pressure.

Clear communication and stronger coordination help reduce uncertainty and build trust. In the end, the budget is not only about how much is spent. It is about what is prioritised — and how effectively each Rial Omani is converted into outcomes people can see.

A budget that people can feel is one that protects living standards through smart targeting, strengthens market efficiency and invests in growth that raises incomes — while preserving the fiscal strength needed to respond to future shocks.

The strongest budgets do not promise simply “more spending”. They promise something more precise: stability, focused support for those who need it and long-term investment that expands opportunity.

When that promise is communicated clearly and realistically, the budget becomes more than a fiscal document. It becomes a practical, confidence-building bridge between the state and society.

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ART/LIFE



GALAEVENT

RUSSIA REOPENS MARIUPOL THEATRE DAMAGED DURING SIEGE



A theatre that became one of the bombed out symbols of a Russian siege of the city of Mariupol in eastern Ukraine in 2022 has reopened after a huge redevelopment, Russian authorities have announced.

A special ceremony and a show by performers from Mariupol and the Russian city of Saint Petersburg were held with Russian television showing images of the gala event as well as the theatre's rebuilt marble staircase and columns; and a 2.5 tonne crystal chandelier hanging in the auditorium.

Russian forces rolled into Mariupol, a bustling Black Sea coast city, in the first months of its assault in 2022 and imposed a brutal, nearly three-month siege that resulted in thousands of deaths — 8,000 according to Human Rights Watch and 22,000 according to the city's exiled Ukrainian municipal council.

Amnesty International said at least 12 people were killed in the bombing of the theatre.

The city on the Sea of Azov was devastated and some 300,000 of the pre-conflict population of 540,000 fled.

The UN said 90 per cent of the buildings were destroyed or damaged in the siege.

Russia has since sought to turn Mariupol into a new symbol of prosperity in the parts of Ukraine it controls.

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“Mariupol Drama Theatre has reopened its doors to spectators” after a three-year redevelopment, said Denis Puchilin, the pro-Russian leader in the Donetsk region that includes the city.

The theatre’s “historic image” has been restored with its sculptured facade and “modern equipment of the highest level”, he added in comments on Telegram.

The former Russian imperial capital of Saint Petersburg was a major contributor to the restoration, sending workers and architects to Mariupol, according to Saint Petersburg governor Alexander Beglov.

Beglov, who was in the 500 audience on Sunday, called the rebuilding project “a question of honour”.

In September 2022, Russia announced the annexation of four Ukrainian regions — Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — even though it does not fully control the areas. — AFP

QUICK FEATURES



PERFORMANCE

US singer Ciara performs as revellers take part in celebrations ahead of the 2026 New Year's Eve ball drop in Times Square. — AFP



TOURISM

General view of the ancient Inca citadel of Machu Picchu in the Urubamba valley, near the Andean city of Cusco. — AFP



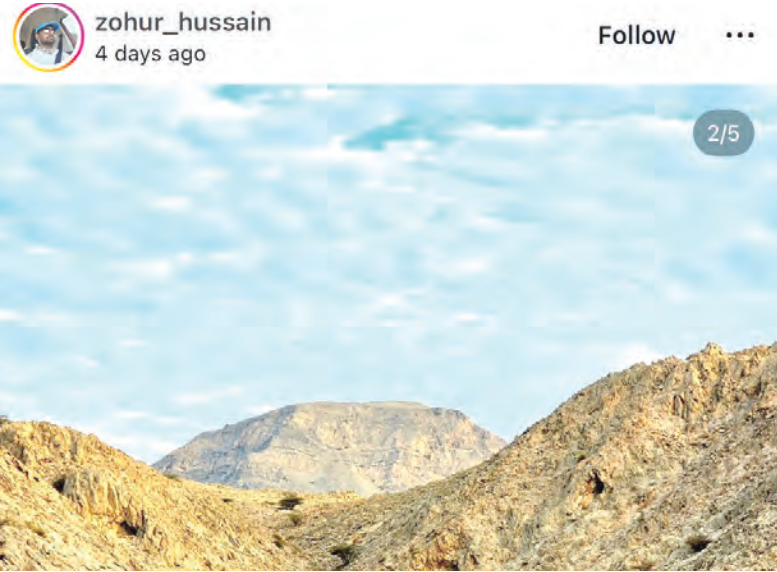
COMICS

French writer Fabrice Caro poses for photographs during a presentation of the 41st edition of French comic book series 'Asterix le Gaulois'. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Snack time for the emerald-feathered



Mountainous landscapes

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FIRST WOMAN AT THE HELM OF NOBEL PRIZE INSTITUTION

The names of the Nobel Prize winners in the categories physics, chemistry and economics will be announced by a woman in 2026 for the first time in history.

At the start of the year, Belgian-born Ellen Moons will take up her post as the new secretary general of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (KVA) in Stockholm, which awards the Nobel Prizes in those three categories every year. She is the first woman to hold this office since the academy was founded in 1739.

Moons was elected at the KVA's general meeting in mid-November to succeed the previous secretary general, Hans Ellegren. Moons has lived in Sweden for over 25 years and has been a professor of physics at the Karlstad University since 2011. The 59-year-old has been a member of the Nobel Committee, which selects the Nobel Prize winners in physics, since 2022.

As well as announcing the winners in the Nobel Prize categories of physics, chemistry and economics, the secretary general also manages the



activities of the academy and its secretariat; and is the managing director of the KVA.

Formally, she is second only to the president of the academy, who, however, makes far fewer public appearances than the secretary general.

The KVA is one of four institutions that announce the various Nobel Prize winners at the beginning of October. The Nobel Prize in Medicine is awarded by the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and the Nobel Prize in Literature by the Swedish Academy.

The Nobel Peace Prize is the only one of the awards that is not presented in Stockholm, but in Oslo, where the Norwegian Nobel Committee is responsible for selecting the winner.

— dpa



Inspiring young minds through sport, lifestyle



DR KHALED ABDUL MALAK

RECENTLY, SARA KHORSHID, a teacher and close friend at Our Planet School in Madinat Sultan Qaboos, invited me to open a school-wide event aimed at raising awareness about the importance of sport, nutrition, and their combined impact on the human body and mind.

Perhaps the most fitting way to summarise the spirit of the initiative is through the 2,000-year-old words of Roman poet Juvenal: "A healthy mind in a healthy body." The sentiment, also attributed to Thales of Miletus, the 6th-century Greek Pre-Socratic philosopher, remains as relevant today as it was centuries ago.

Following the opening, I conducted three interactive sessions of 25 minutes each with students aged between eight and 15.

During these sessions, I shared

my personal experiences exploring Oman's outdoors and spoke about the profound positive influence nature and physical activity have had on my own life.

"As an IB school, we take our responsibility to develop every aspect of our students very seriously," said Andrew Johnston, Principal of Our Planet School. "They are knowledgeable thinkers and inquirers, but equally important, they are balanced individuals. We want them to understand the value of sport, a healthy lifestyle, and the great outdoors."

The event saw enthusiastic participation from the entire school community, with a wide range of activities spanning sport, cooking, dance, and wellness.

"The school community — from three-year-olds to cleaners, teachers, and parents — maintained an unbroken plank for seven hours,"

said Sara Khorshid.

"Two teams of six, one comprising staff and the other parents, rowed continuously for seven hours, completing an impressive 120 kilometres."

Students also took part in activities ranging from yoga and meditation to preparing healthy alternatives to popular snacks.

Sessions in salsa, juditsu, and other physical disciplines added to the vibrant atmosphere of the day. Initiatives such as this serve as powerful reminders of the role schools can play in shaping healthier, more balanced future generations.

In Oman, where children grow up in a remarkably safe environment surrounded by extraordinary natural landscapes, the opportunity to connect physical wellbeing with the outdoors is both unique and invaluable.

FEATURES



In the historic corridors of Souq Al Qanater in the Wilayat of Ibra, a forum by Sablat Al Qasaed honoured two giants of Omani folk verse, transforming memory into performance and reaffirming poetry as a living art

IBRA 'S SOUQ REVIVES A POETIC LEGACY

IDRIS AL BALUSHI

AS DUSK settled over the old quarter of Ibra, the stone corridors of Souq Al Qanater began to echo with voices that have shaped Oman's cultural memory for generations. Between weathered shopfronts and softly glowing lanterns, poetry did not merely recite the past, but awakened it. Here, where trade and tales once intertwined, Sablat Al Qasaed hosted a gathering that felt both intimate and monumental, a living tribute to voices that history refuses to forget.

Founded in 2010, Sablat Al Qasaed stands as one of Oman's most devoted cultural poetry collectives, bringing together a distinguished group of poets from across the Sultanate of Oman. Through its annual activities and national occasions, the group has consistently worked to safeguard Omani heritage arts, ensuring they remain practiced, understood and cherished by present and future generations. That mission came vividly to life during the forum titled 'Poets History Will Never Forget', held in Ibra, Al Sharqiyah North Governorate.

The event honoured two towering figures of Omani folk poetry, the late poet Hafidh bin Mohammed al Maskari and poet Rashid bin Saloom al Maslahi, widely known as Al Suwairy. Their verses, once carried across villages and communal gatherings through rhythm and melody, were brought back into collective memory through research papers, live performances and heartfelt reflection. Rather than framing them as distant historical figures, the event restored their presence as living influences on Oman's sung folk arts.

The forum was held under the auspices of Abdullah bin Hamad al Harthy, Member of the Majlis Ash'shura representing Ibra, who honoured poets, muarribeen and contributors whose efforts ensured the forum's success. Their recognition underscored the collective nature of cultural preservation, where individual voices come together to form a lasting national narrative.

From the opening razha performance, the atmosphere signalled that this would be more than a formal ceremony. Rhythmic chants and synchronised movements drew community members together, setting a powerful



tone for the gathering. As the forum unfolded, it opened with a welcoming address by Sablat Al Qasaed, followed by scholarly yet accessible presentations exploring the poetic legacy of Hafidh al Maskari and Rashid al Maslahi.

Central to the evening was a renewed focus on the muarribeen of Omani folk arts, those who translate poetry into performance and shape how verses are sung, felt and remembered by folk art troupes. Dedicated segments explored the nuances, melodies and poetic structures of razha and maidan, revealing how each performance is a layered collaboration between poet, performer and community. These discussions bridged academic insight with lived cultural practice, reinforcing that folk arts are not static relics, but evolving expressions of identity.

As theory gave way to practice, Souq Al Qanater transformed into an open-air stage. Live performances of razha, maidan, shahshah and ambam unfolded organically, their beats resonating against ancient walls. The audience did not simply observe, they participated, responding

instinctively to rhythms that have long accompanied Omani social life.

Speaking from within this historic setting, Omani poet Al Hakam Tirmah al Hajri emphasised the symbolism of place. Hosting the forum in the old market, he explained, was a deliberate choice, as the souq embodies a deep connection between people and heritage. He described the gathering as a collective effort by Sablat Al Qasaed and its members, united by a shared belief that honouring past poets is also a responsibility towards future generations. Reviving folk arts in such a space, he noted, restores them to their natural environment, where history continues to breathe.

Beyond poetry and performance, the forum embraced cultural sustainability in its widest sense. A handicrafts exhibition and a dedicated corner for productive local families highlighted traditional industries and their enduring economic and social value. These spaces reinforced the idea that preserving heritage is not only about memory, but also about livelihood, continuity and community resilience.

As the night drew to a close, the echoes of poetry lingered long after the final chants faded. In Souq Al Qanater, history did not feel distant or archived. It stood present, spoken, sung and shared. Through this gathering, Sablat Al Qasaed affirmed that Oman's folk poets are not merely remembered, they continue to speak, through voices willing to listen.