

New bridge to ease traffic in Salalah

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SUNRISE - 05:49 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:32 AM

DHUHR - 12:12 PM

ASR - 03:39 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:30 PM

ISHA - 07:42 PM



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P13

5TH DUQM FORUM TO EXPLORE AL WUSTA'S BLUE ECONOMY INVESTMENT POTENTIAL

P11

DJOKOVIC STUNNED BY POPYRIN AT US OPEN, SABALENKA SURVIVES LATE SCARE

P20

A TOURISTIC EXPERIENCE TO EXPLORE NATURE

MUSCAT

HM SENDS GREETINGS TO SLOVAKIA AND UZBEKISTAN

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Peter Pellegrini of the Slovak Republic on the occasion of his country's National Day. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the president and friendly Slovak people. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has also sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Shavkat Mirziyoyev of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to the president and further progress and prosperity for the friendly Uzbek people. — ONA

SUSPENSION OF WORK PERMITS FROM TODAY

The decision by the Minister of Labour to temporarily suspend permits for the employment of expatriate workers in specific professions for six months will come into effect from today. The decision stated that the issuance of trading permits for the employment of non-Omani workers in private sector establishments for the professions is suspended for six months, but permits may be issued for the employment of non-Omani workers in the professions listed provided that the request for renewal or transfer of services is submitted from within the Sultanate of Oman. The professions include construction worker/general, cleaning worker/general buildings, loading and unloading worker, bricklayer, steel fixer, tailor/women's clothing/general, tailor/men's clothing/general, electrician/general electrical installations, waiter, painter, chef/general, electrician/home installations and barber.

TROPICAL STORM ASNA

Chances of rain today, tomorrow

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The latest satellite images from the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre indicate that the tropical storm Asna is centred northeast of the Arabian Sea at a latitude of 23.5 N and a longitude of 65.0 E, approximately 600 km away from Ras Al Hadd. The nearest rain-bearing cloud mass is about 280 km away from Ras Al Hadd.

Asna is expected to continue moving west towards the Sea of Oman and then deflect south/southwest, gradually dissipating away from Al Sharqiyah South coasts (Arabian Sea).

From today evening until Monday, there are chances of rain of varying intensity (10-30 mm) affecting the governorates of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South, Muscat and parts of Al Wusta, which may cause wadis to flow. Gradual dissipation of the impacts from the system is expected by Tuesday

morning.

Fresh winds ranging from 15 to 30 knots (28-55 km/h) are expected during this time. Due to high sea waves ranging between 3-5 metres on most of the coasts of the Sultanate of Oman, there are chances of sea water extending to the low-lying coastal areas on Sunday and Monday. Authorities have urged everyone to check sea conditions before going out and avoid marine activities.

Wind activity in parts of the governorates of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Wusta has been monitored, and on Friday evening, it was reported that southeasterly winds are active in parts of these governorates, which may lead to the rise of dust and dirt in desert and exposed areas.

The Civil Aviation Authority has advised everyone to take precautions during rainfall and flash floods, check visibility and sea state before sailing, and follow the issued weather bulletins and reports.

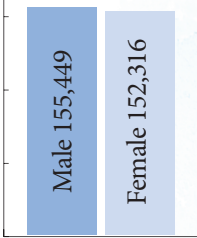


Over 800,000 students go back to school today

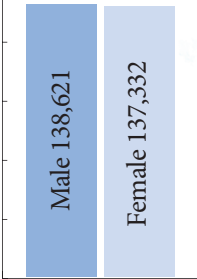


Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah

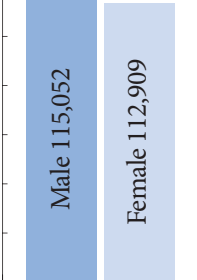
GRADE (1-4)
307,765



GRADE (5-8)
275,953



GRADE (9-12)
227,961



MUSCAT: A total of 811,679 students are attending schools today across the country to start their new academic year 2024-2025. The number includes 409,122 male students and 402,557 female students.

The number of students in grades (1-4) is 307,765 of whom 155,449 are males and 152,316 are females. The number of students in grades (5-8) is 275,953 of whom 138,621 are males and 137,332 are females. In grades (9-12), the number of students is 227,961 of whom 115,052 are males and 112,909 are females while the total number of new students enrolled in the first grade is 74,078.

The total number of the educational staff in government schools is 63,648 teachers as well as 10,987 administrators and technicians of whom 4,362 are males and 6,625 are females. The number of teachers in special education schools stands at 219 teachers whereas the total number of administrators is 29.

On the occasion of the start of the school year, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, valued the development and achievements which took place at the educational sector, saying: "I am honoured to extend to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on behalf of the students, members of the teaching staff and all employees of the Ministry of Education, the highest expressions of thanks and the most profound words of gratitude for the special care and great attention His Majesty attaches to the educational sector." The minister also congratulated her students in public and private schools, special education schools, and members of the teaching staff wishing them

success in the new school year.

The minister said that the ministry appointed over 3,000 male and female teachers prior to the 2024-2025 academic year bringing the total number of appointed teachers since the outset of the current five-year plan to nearly 15,000 teachers.

Regarding the developments in the education system, Dr Madeeha said: "Developing curricula is one of the ministry's top priorities with the aim of enhancing students' abilities to keep pace with global developments. Accordingly, the ministry will embark upon gradual implementation of the developed study plan which is based on classifying the study materials for the first cycle classes into basic subjects and accompanying subjects while reducing the number of subjects in order to focus on basic skills: reading and writing in both Arabic and English languages and mathematics."

In continuation of the ministry's plan for digital transformation and artificial intelligence, the second phase of projects will be implemented that ensure the operation of advanced educational e-systems and e-services that are consistent with modern digital specifications while continuing to implement the initiatives of the executive programme for artificial intelligence in school education, the minister said.

Dr Madeeha indicated that this academic year saw the opening of 16 new schools in a number of governorates to meet the growth in student number and reduce evening schools.

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS 811,679

Israeli strikes kill dozens in Gaza

CAIRO/GAZA: Israeli strikes on Saturday killed at least 48 people in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian health authorities said, as clashes took place in central and southern areas of the enclave ahead of the planned start of a polio vaccination campaign.

The United Nations is due to start vaccinating some 640,000 children in the territory against polio, relying on daily eight-hour pauses in fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in specific areas of the besieged enclave. Yousef Abu Al Reesh, Gaza's deputy minister of health, said vaccination teams would try to get to as many areas as possible to ensure wide coverage but he said only a comprehensive ceasefire could guarantee enough children are reached.

"If the international community truly wants this campaign to succeed, it should call for a ceasefire, knowing that this virus does not stop, and can reach anywhere," he told reporters at Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Yunis. On Saturday, medics administered vaccines on some of the children at Nasser Hospital wards in a symbolic move before the official campaign begins. The campaign follows confirmation last week that a baby was partially paralysed by the type 2 polio virus, the first such case in the territory in 25 years.

WHO officials say at least 90 per cent of the children need to be vaccinated twice with four weeks



A nurse administers polio vaccine drops to a young Palestinian patient at the Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday. — AFP

between doses for the campaign to succeed, but it faces huge challenges in Gaza, which has been largely destroyed by nearly 11 months of war. On Saturday, as more than 2,000 medical and community workers prepared for the start of the campaign, medics in Nuseirat, one of the Gaza Strip's eight historic refugee camps, said separate Israeli strikes killed at least 19 people, including nine members of the same family. More than 30 other people were killed in a series of strikes in other areas of Gaza, medics said.

Residents and militant sources said fighters from Hamas and other groups fought against Israeli forces in the northern Gaza Zeitoun neighbourhood, where tanks have been operating for days, and in Rafah, near the border with Egypt. The Israeli military said in a statement it continued to operate in the central and southern Gaza Strip. It said troops killed militants and dismantled military infrastructure in Gaza City, while they located weapons and killed gunmen in Tel Al Sultan in western Rafah. — Reuters



An Omani delegation, led by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, held discussions on FTA in India.

Omani delegation in India for FTA preparations

MUMBAI: An Omani delegation, led by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, visited the Republic of India to prepare for the Free Trade Agreement between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of India.

The minister met with Piyush Goyal, Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry. They discussed ways of enhancing joint cooperation and fostering bilateral relations in the fields of trade, industry and investment promotion between the two friendly countries.

They also reviewed a number of topics of common interest to enhance relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of India, explore investment opportunities for cooperation in various sectors and discussed the comprehensive economic partnership agreement between the two friendly countries.

The delegation met with a number of Indian firms operating in the fields of film-making, arts, cultural arts, content creation and event organisation. They reviewed topics

related to investment, tourism and economy in the Sultanate of Oman as well as the incentives provided by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to investors.

The Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion affirmed that the Sultanate of Oman, under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, has made many achievements in the fields of investment, logistics and digital transformation and in facilitating investments by updating the legislative system and infrastructure projects to keep pace with international investment developments, noting that his visit to India will bring about benefits for both sides.

The accompanying delegation comprised Pankaj Khimji, Adviser for Foreign Trade and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and a number of officials from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. — ONA

Experts urge ethical AI use to protect journalism

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

Media experts from GCC countries emphasised the mindful use of new technologies, including Artificial Intelligence to maintain accountability for the most vital tool in mass communication.

Accuracy and right information, according to the experts, are key to the mass media of all kinds and this can be compromised if journalists and other media stakeholders don't use the AI tools "intelligently and smartly."

They had gathered in Salalah for the third session of 'New Media and Digital Age Forum'. The theme for the session was "Omani Media in the Age of Artificial Intelligence".

The event was under the auspices of Salim bin Musallam Qatan, Vice-President of the State Council, at Millennium Salalah Hotel on Thursday.

In his keynote address, Hatem bin Hamad al Tai, Editor-in-Chief of *Al Roya* newspaper, highlighted the rapid technological advancements in the media sector in recent past. He recounted how media technologies, which started with modest innovations in the 1990s, dramatically evolved into the sophisticated AI-driven systems of today.

"AI has the potential to revolutionise media but it also has associated risks if not used properly. The risk lies in the creation of deepfakes," he said.

Al Tai outlined the dual nature of AI's impact on journalism and media. On the positive side, AI can enhance journalistic practices and improve the quality of media output, contributing to the creation of an informed public that is aware of current issues. On the negative



The third session of 'New Media and Digital Age Forum' was held in Salalah.

side, AI technologies, if improperly managed, could lead to significant challenges, including the spread of misinformation.

In his comments to the *Observer* he said, "We all use artificial intelligence. There is a risk if it is used without certain ethics and also for wrong purposes."

"We should use advanced technologies but we have to know the best practices to use them to emit the right information to our audience. We have been given a responsibility of conveying the right information to the people and we should deliver by the proper use of human and mechanical skills," he said.

Dr Mohammed bin Awad al Mashikhi, an academic researcher who specialises in public opinion and mass communication, said it has been established that tools

such as 'Chat GPT' and 'Google Gemini' are increasingly used in the media field these days.

"While AI has begun to replace certain human skills, it still lacks qualities unique to humans, such as creativity, flexibility, ethical commitment and genuine emotions. Despite these limitations, some media outlets have started relying on AI to generate content and news, reducing their need for human journalists," he said.

"AI's rapid integration into various sectors, including media, has sparked fears of its dominance, posing a significant threat to humanity."

Other experts also had similar line of thinking in their presentations and speeches. They called to strike a right balance for the benefit of the future generations.

MoE, Tender Board tie up on 'Takamul' Project

MUSCAT: Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, met on Thursday with Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, alongside other key officials at the Ministry's General Diwan.

The meeting, held at Oman Hall, focused on the "Takamul" project — a national initiative aimed at automating project management and government procurement processes.

The discussion highlighted the

activation of the 'Amana' and 'Aadaa (Performance)' platforms, designed to streamline and enhance electronic tendering procedures.

The Ministry's role in implementing these platforms and the broader scope of collaboration between the Ministry and the Tender Board were key points of the meeting. The project is expected to significantly improve coordination and efficiency between the two entities, helping to achieve the intended goals and objectives.

Oman tourism workshops, roadshows in India end

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) concluded the workshops and roadshows in India, which started from the capital New Delhi, and covered the cities of Mumbai and Chennai, and finally Bangalore.

The closing workshop in Bangalore was attended by 18 participants from hotel establishments and travel agencies. Over 450 companies participated in roadshows across four major cities as the Sultanate of



The MoHT concluded the workshops and roadshows in India.

Oman sought to attract different segments and closely identify the requirements of

these markets.

Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, said that India is Oman's second-largest source market.

In 2023, Indian visitor numbers soared past 625,000, an increase of over 70 per cent compared to the previous year. There are direct flights from more than ten Indian cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore.

Sur Marine Sports Festival concludes

SUR: The Sur Marine Sports Festival, organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in collaboration with the Office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah South and various governmental and private entities, concluded on Saturday.

The closing ceremony, graced by Dr Rashid bin Mohammed al Ghailani, Member of the State Council, featured swimming and traditional rowing races. In the swimming competition for the youth category (ages 10-15), Mohammed bin Salem al Alawi claimed first place, followed by Abdullah bin Mohammed al Araimi in second, and Aman Amin in third.

In the adult category (ages 16 and above), Nasser bin Saif al Kindi secured first place, with Mohammed bin Ahmed al Ghailani and Khalid bin Khalfan al Jahdhami taking second and third places, respectively.

Throughout the festival, attendees enjoyed an array of sports events, including races, sailing experiences, the Oman Sailing Championship, and a variety of entertainment activities. These events underscored the competitive tourism appeal of the Wilayat of Sur.



The festival showcased the rich maritime heritage of the Wilayat of Sur.

A dedicated fan zone, featuring a product exhibition and other engaging activities, also played a significant role in fostering local community participation.

The festival spotlighted numerous races, notably parasailing, swimming and traditional boat rowing, showcasing the rich maritime heritage of the Wilayat of Sur.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism aimed to emphasise the tourism significance of the Wilayat of Sur and the

Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, drawing on Sur's historical role as a hub of cultural and civilisational exchange.

By offering unique tourism experiences to visitors and enhancing local community involvement in organising and participating in the festival's many events, the Sur Marine Sports Festival contributed meaningfully to the executive programme of Sur, the Arab Tourism Capital 2024. The festival took place from August 18 to 28, 2024. — ONA

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New bridge to ease traffic at key intersection

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 31

The General Secretariat of the Tender Board has invited bids for the construction of a new bridge on Al Rabat Street, at the critical intersection with Al Nahda Street in Salalah. This pivotal infrastructure project is strategically designed to enhance traffic flow, ensuring the seamless movement of vehicles through one of Dhofar's busiest junctions.

The proposed bridge is poised to become a key infrastructural link, significantly alleviating traffic congestion and improving overall travel efficiency in the area.

As part of a broader series of infrastructure enhancements, this project is set to complement existing developments, including the ongoing works at Umm Al Ghwarif Bridge. Furthermore, there are future plans to expand the initiative with the potential construction of an additional bridge in the vicinity.

This development comes as part of Oman's broader strategy to modernise its transport infrastructure, particularly in rapidly growing urban areas. Al Rabat Street, one of the major thoroughfares in the governorate, serves as a critical artery connecting various residential, commercial and industrial zones.



Al Rabat Street Bridge is designed to ensure seamless connectivity across the intersection with Al Nahda Street.

The intersection with Al Nahda Street is a known bottleneck, especially during peak hours, where delays and congestion have long been a challenge for commuters and businesses alike.

Al Rabat Street Bridge is designed to span approximately 1.5 kilometres, ensuring seamless connectivity across this crucial intersection.

The bridge will feature a total development length of 2.5 kilometres, streamlining the flow of vehicles and reducing congestion in this busy area.

A key feature of the project is its focus on safety and convenience. The bridge will accommodate six lanes, divided

equally in both directions, providing ample capacity for the anticipated volume of traffic.

Additionally, the design incorporates efficient and smooth entry and exit points, with traffic lights positioned beneath the bridge to manage access to the adjacent commercial zones.

The strategic importance of this project lies in its ability to shorten travel distances and enhance the overall ease of movement for commuters. By improving access to the surrounding areas, the bridge will contribute to the economic vitality of the governorate, particularly the commercial zones.

■ EV EXPO DRAWS CROWDS



Visitors engage with cutting-edge electric vehicles (EV) and sustainable mobility activities at the 2nd Green Mobility Forum's Electric Vehicle Exhibition which concluded in Salalah during the Khareef Dhofar Season.

Career symposium focuses on jobs, entrepreneurship



The symposium focused on enhancing the career guidance and counselling system.

SALALAH: The Career Guidance and Counselling Symposium concluded its activities on Thursday in Salalah, emphasising the critical role of human resource development, technology, entrepreneurship and employment in achieving Oman Vision 2040 and building a diversified, sustainable economy based on knowledge and innovation.

Organised by the Ministry of Labour, the symposium focused on enhancing the career guidance and counselling system to support sustainable development goals and improve human skills and capabilities.

The final day of the symposium, part of the Salalah Labour Forum, featured two dialogue sessions. The first session, titled 'Career Guidance and Counselling and the Labour Market,' discussed the role of career guidance in directing youth towards suitable career paths and the influence of Arab agreements on national systems.

The second session explored new work patterns and their impact on enhancing the competitive abilities of the workforce, as well as the role of future skills and artificial intelligence in shaping the future labour market.

— ONA

Sixth Omani Stroke Conference begins

SALALAH: The Sixth Omani Stroke Conference, organised by the Oman Stroke Society in collaboration with the Directorate-General of Health Services in Dhofar Governorate, commenced on Saturday in Salalah. The conference was officially opened by Dr Ahmed bin Mohsin al Ghassani, Chairman of Dhofar Municipality.

Dr Amal bint Mohammed al Hashmiyah, Chairperson of the Oman Stroke Society and Chairperson of the Conference, highlighted that the event serves as a valuable platform for exchanging knowledge with experts in the field of stroke. It offers a comprehensive overview of the current understanding and developments related to stroke.



DR AMAL BINT MOHAMMED
AL HASHMIYAH

She noted that the conference features a range of lectures aimed at facilitating the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Topics will include recent updates on the care of patients with thrombotic and haemorrhagic strokes, pioneering research and



The conference provided a platform for exchanging knowledge with experts in the field of stroke

innovative treatments.

Discussions at the conference will cover various subjects, including the accurate definition of stroke, key symptoms, prevention strategies, contributing factors and the most effective treatments

available. The conference has attracted neurologists from Oman and international experts from Canada, the United States, Türkiye, Australia, Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Slovenia.

— ONA

Discover 'Sarab' season beyond khareef

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUGUST 31

Dhofar Governorate is synonymous with the khareef season. However, many travellers are unaware that the beauty of Dhofar extends well beyond khareef. As the monsoon fades and the mist dissipates, Dhofar transitions into the "Sarab" season, offering a different but equally captivating experience for visitors.

The Sarab season, which spans from late September to late December, reveals a side of Dhofar that is often overshadowed by the fame of khareef. As the rains cease, the mountains shed their veil of fog, and the warm rays of the sun gently light up the governorate. Mornings are characterised by cool breezes that carry the fresh scent of nature, while the afternoons are peaceful, with the landscape basking in the soft glow of sunlight. Evenings bring a soothing calm, with the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant songs of birds creating a serene atmosphere that lingers well into the night.

This season is a time of renewal and growth in Dhofar. The mild climate is perfect for agriculture, allowing farmers to cultivate and harvest a variety of crops, including cucumbers, Dhofar beans and corn. The fishermen also find this time favourable, as the seas are teeming with life, providing an



THE 'SARB' SEASON OFFERS A QUIETER,
MORE INTIMATE EXPERIENCE
OF THE GOVERNORATE'S BEAUTY

abundance of fish. Additionally, honey production peaks during the Sarab season, offering a sweet taste of Dhofar's natural bounty that visitors can enjoy and take home.

The Sarab season is also vital for the local pastoral community. As the pastures turn green, livestock thrive, leading to an

increase in the production of meat and dairy products. These products are not only a staple for the locals, but also a draw for visitors who can purchase fresh, locally sourced goods at markets throughout the governorate.

This direct connection between Dhofar's natural environment and its people's way of life adds a

layer of authenticity to any visit during this season.

While khareef season draws the most attention, with over 816,000 visitors by mid-August 2024 — a 10.3-per cent increase from the previous year — the Sarab season offers a quieter, more intimate experience of the governorate's beauty. The influx of visitors during khareef highlights Dhofar's growing popularity, but those who stay on or return for Sarab are rewarded with a different kind of charm. The landscape, no longer drenched in rain, takes on a golden hue under the sun, and the slower pace of life allows for deeper exploration and connection with the natural surroundings.

Travellers who explore Dhofar during the Sarab season will find that the governorate's allure is not confined to the monsoon months. The transition from the vibrant greens of khareef to the warm tones of Sarab offers a unique perspective on the cyclical beauty of nature.

In essence, Dhofar is a year-round destination where each season brings its own distinct charm. While khareef may be the headline act, Sarab is the hidden gem — a time when the crowds have thinned, but the beauty remains. It's a season that invites discovery, reflection and appreciation of the subtle yet profound ways in which nature and culture intertwine in this remarkable governorate.



NEWBORN PHOTOGRAPHY: TREND OR EXTRAVAGANCE?

CRITICS SEE NEWBORN PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SIGN OF SOCIETY’S OBSESSION WITH APPEARANCES, VIEWING THE SIGNIFICANT EXPENSE ON WHAT THEY SEE AS STAGED AND ARTIFICIAL PHOTOS AS WASTEFUL

COMFORT AND SAFETY ISSUES

PERCEIVED EXTRAVAGANCE

GROWING DEMAND

CELEBRATING NEW LIFE

PRESERVING PRECIOUS MOMENTS

SIHAM AL SAIDI

NEWBORN PHOTOGRAPHY has become a flourishing trend in today’s Arab society, where capturing the earliest moments of a baby’s life has grown into a luxury that many parents eagerly embrace.

These sessions, characterised by their elaborate setups, diverse outfits, and artful poses, offer a way to preserve the precious early days of a child’s life. However, the trend is not without controversy.

Rahma al Salhi, a new mother who recently booked a newborn photography session, says: “I wanted to capture those first precious moments in a way that shows how special they are to me. These photos are something we’ll cherish forever, and I loved seeing my baby in those adorable poses. It’s a memory my husband

and I will always look back on with joy.” Many parents like Rahma want to document their baby’s first moments to display at home or share with loved ones. The artful poses, soft lighting, and adorable outfits all contribute to a timeless representation that can be cherished for years to come. Adil al Saidi, another parent, sees it as an opportunity to celebrate the arrival of a new family member.

“It’s not just about the pictures; it’s about celebrating the new addition to our family. The photoshoot was a way for us to mark this important event and create something beautiful to remember it by.” The owner of Poon Studio, a specialist in newborn photography studio, commented, “We started this business ten years ago, and demand has been increasing due to the desire to celebrate such occasions. Nowadays, parents are giving these moments a lot of attention and there are ample bookings. Even though we offer various themes for the poses, parents still suggest new ideas and enjoy participating in the sessions.” Some others criticise this trend, arguing that such sessions are an unnecessary indulgence. They see the trend as a reflection of society’s growing obsession with appearances and

showing off. For them, the idea of spending a significant amount of money on what they see as staged and artificial photographs seems wasteful. Um Muhannad, a mother of three, shares her concerns: “I think it’s all a bit much. Babies grow so quickly, and while photos are nice to have, I don’t see the need for these custom setups. A simple photo taken at home, holding my baby in my arms, can be just as meaningful.” For Um Muhannad, the essence of capturing a moment lies in its authenticity, not in creating a staged scene. There are also concerns about the potential discomfort for the newborns. Despite professional photographers’ best efforts to ensure the baby’s safety and comfort, some worry about placing a newborn in various positions, often in unfamiliar surroundings. Dr Surji, a paediatrician, notes, “I do worry about the stress these sessions might place on the baby. Parents must weigh the benefits against any potential risks to their child’s comfort and well-being. Not everyone is qualified to handle a newborn and place them in such positions with these outfits.” Underlying this debate is a broader cultural divide regarding the value placed on tradition versus modernity. In some cultures, the idea of photographing a newborn in such settings may seem foreign or even inappropriate. For others, it may be a natural extension of the desire to celebrate and preserve important life events. This difference in viewpoints reflects the various ways people choose to honour and remember significant moments in their lives. Manal al Badi, a photographer, comments, “There is a strong emphasis on modesty and tradition, which may make these photoshoots seem excessive or even unnecessary. However, there is also a growing acceptance of new ways to celebrate and commemorate life events.”



AIRFARE FLASH SALES: TIPS TO LAND THE BEST DEALS

VINOD NAIR
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With the summer school vacations coming to an end, students in the Sultanate of Oman are heading back to school. For travel operators, including airlines, this marks the start of a lean travel period that lasts until the year-end, just before the winter travel season kicks off in early December. During this off-peak time, airlines are eager to fill seats, often resorting to promotional fares and flash sales to attract passengers.

In recent weeks, Oman Air and SalamAir, have rolled out discounted fares starting from September. Several foreign airlines operating out of Muscat have also jumped on the bandwagon, offering promotional fares to lure travellers.

But are these enticing offers really as good as they seem, and can travel enthusiasts truly benefit from these low fares if they book in advance?

Ramesh Sharma, a frequent traveller, remarked, “These promotions are beneficial if you have planned your travel during a specific period, as fares might be higher at that time. However, for those who make last-minute plans,



Oman Air and SalamAir, have rolled out discounted fares starting from September

these offers can turn out to be costly, especially if there are changes in the itinerary or cancellations.”

An executive from the General Sales Agent (GSA) of a leading airline added, “Many of these promotions come with hidden conditions that are often overlooked.

These may include limited baggage allowance, no refunds on cancellations, or no free date changes.

However, they are advantageous for travellers

By staying alert and planning strategically, travellers can take full advantage of these promotional fares without being caught off guard by the fine print

with fixed plans who can proceed with other travel formalities.”

Experts recommend some

useful tips, such as exploring flight options across an entire month or searching by country rather than by city, to maximise savings. Flash sales typically last only a few days or even hours and often have a limited number of seats available at discounted prices.

By staying alert and planning strategically, travellers can take full advantage of these promotional fares without being caught off guard by the fine print.

Ghusn Alzaytun unites Oman for Palestine

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Ghusn Alzaytun, meaning Olive Branch, held a three-day event at Rozna Hall, organised by Dar Al Atta in collaboration with *Al Roya* Newspaper and the Lawatiya community in Oman.

The event aims to raise awareness about Palestine, its history, and to provide financial support for the cause.

“The objective of this event is to educate society about Palestine, its history, and how to support them financially,” said Hannan al Muscati, Marketing and Event Manager. She added, “Many people are unsure how to support Palestine, so this event also focuses on nurturing the mindset of children through games and arts that subtly teach them about Palestine and its history.”

The event features a wide array of products ranging from fruits, spices, herbs, and food to clothing, art, and crafts. A special art exhibition showcased various artists’ interpretations of the situation in Palestine, adding a powerful visual element to the cause.

The evenings were enriched with talks from renowned speakers who provided deeper insights into the Palestinian crisis. Additionally, one booth educated visitors on how to boycott products to support Palestine, while another offered alternative products available in the market. A group of artists came together to create stickers and bags, with proceeds going towards the Palestinian cause. The event concluded on Saturday, leaving a lasting impact on the community and fostering continued support for Palestine.



Ghusn Alzaytun event was organised by Dar Al Atta

Beware of online job scams: ROP

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Have you ever been fascinated with lucrative job offers that allow you to work in one’s own free time? Also the convenience and comfort of home against a handsome pay that one cannot even imagine? Remember, you are treading on dangerous ground, warns the Royal Oman Police (ROP).

Adding yet another method of duping vulnerable people of money, several fraudsters are on the prowl looking for their catch for the day by extending the ‘part-time job’ as their bait.

“When a spam message is noticed, kindly ignore it or report it to the cyber department of the ROP and alert others not to fall prey to this kind of unscrupulous

cyber fraud,” said a source at the ROP.

A typical of such a job offer highlights are ‘Recruiting part-time employees, Working hours: free to arrange, Work location: online/remote’ and that is more than enough for a person, more often than not, a housewife who wants to make an income at the comfort of her home and without sacrificing her duties to the family.

“Think twice before getting hooked to such a rosy-worded advertisement online and never share your personal details with the person who acts as your potential employer,” said the official, warning that, “Such an offer can be a trap that aims to get you hooked to steal your personal identity and ultimately money.”

Another such job offer says,

“We are looking for a person who is responsible and a team player, proficient in using popular video software, working from home and making more money than your spouse.”

It claims that the job involves increasing the number of YouTube followers for a client’s business page to remain competitive in the long term and the terms of work are simple and easy.

“We offer: Flexible working hours, There is a relative salary, Convenience of working remotely, and Good team atmosphere and growth opportunities.”

Later, a link to ‘How to apply’ is also given below the advert and this link will apparently take the applicants to a questionnaire which will take out all the personal data.

TAISM gets new school director



Peter Lee, the new TAISM School Director

MUSCAT: The American International School of Muscat (TAISM) announced the appointment of Peter Lee as the new School Director, effective July 1, 2024. Following 19 years of dedicated service within the TAISM community, including his role as Middle School Principal, Lee steps into this leadership position with a strong commitment to fostering a sense of belonging and academic excellence.

Peter Lee reflects on his new role: “ This resonates with me personally, as my own children have thrived in TAISM’s family atmosphere within the peace of Oman. I’m eager to work with our families, students and staff to continue fostering lifelong learning together.”

In addition to this leadership transition, TAISM is excited to share plans for its new High School Science and Technology Center, featuring cutting-edge labs and collaborative learning spaces. This state-of-the-art facility is set to open in the latter half of the academic year, marking a significant milestone in TAISM’s ongoing commitment to innovation in education.

Engineers Family holds Quiz Night



Kerala Engineers Family in Muscat thrives at Quiz Night 2024

MUSCAT: The Kerala Engineers Alumni clinched victory at a Quiz Night 2024 held by the Kerala Engineers community in Muscat recently. The contest was hosted at the National University auditorium in Al Hail.

The event was organised by the Thangal Kunju Musaliar College of Engineering Alumni Oman chapter, under the leadership of President Dickie Philip, Secretary Ajith Kumar,

and Quiz Coordinators Naushad Abdul Hameed and Mrinal Gopalakrishnan. Hala Jamal, renowned quiz whiz of Oman, conducted the contest.

Celebrating its 21st edition since its inception in 2000, the quiz competition welcomed members of the Kerala Engineers Family, with each team comprising a male member, a lady, and a child. The Trichur Engineering

College Alumni and Kannur Engineering College Alumni secured the runner-up and second runner-up positions.

Over 40 teams participated in the preliminary round, which featured a challenging written segment with questions arranged in alphabetical order. The twin semi-finals were fiercely contested, leading to a thrilling finale where teams raced to hit the buzzer for extra points.

سلطنة عُمان وزارة التراث والسياحة Ministry of Heritage and Tourism		
Tenders Announcement		
Tender No.	Tender Name	
176/2024/MHT/HQ-34	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Department building in Musandam Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
177/2024/MHT/HQ-35	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Administration building in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
178/2024/MHT/HQ-36	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Administration Building in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
179/2024/MHT/HQ-37	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Administration building in the South Al Sharqiyah Governorate and its sites and the Qalhat Archaeological City Site Department for the year 2025.	
180/2024/MHT/HQ-38	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Department building in North Al Batinah Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
181/2024/MHT/HQ-39	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Department building in the South Al Batinah Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
182/2024/MHT/HQ-40	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Administration building in Buraimi Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
183/2024/MHT/HQ-41	Providing cleaning services for the Heritage and Tourism Administration building in Al Dhahirah Governorate and its sites for the year 2025	
Fees of Tender Documents For Local Company		25 O.R
Fees of Tender Documents For SME		10 O.R
Tender Document Sales End Date		16/9/2024
Last Date for Bid Submission		7/10/2024
Grade		First, Second, Third, Fourth SME
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om
- Interested Companies (SME) registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. - The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid. - The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids - The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).		
Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system. https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om	
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@ita.gov.om or 24402200	
For further information	Email : sofic@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085	



Polio vaccine campaign begins in war torn Gaza

GAZA: A health official said a polio vaccination campaign had begun in Gaza on Saturday after the war torn territory recorded its first case of the disease in a quarter of a century. Local health officials along with the UN and NGOs “are starting today the polio vaccination campaign in the central region”, Moussa Abed said, director of primary health care at the Gaza health ministry. The World Health Organization (WHO) said that Israel had agreed to a series of three day “humanitarian pauses” in Gaza to facilitate vaccinations, though officials had earlier said the campaign was expected to start on Sunday. After beginning in central Gaza, vaccines are set to be administered in southern Gaza and then in northern Gaza. The campaign, which involves two doses, aims to cover more than 640,000 children under 10. Michael Ryan, WHO deputy director general, told the UN Security Council this week that 1.26 million doses of the oral vaccine had been delivered in Gaza,

The World Health Organization (WHO) said that Israel had agreed to a series of three day “humanitarian pauses” in Gaza to facilitate vaccinations

with another 400,000 still to arrive. The Ramallah based Palestinian health ministry said earlier this month that tests in Jordan had confirmed polio in an unvaccinated 10 month old baby from central Gaza. Poliovirus is highly infectious and most often spread through sewage and contaminated water an increasingly common problem in Gaza as the Israel Hamas war drags on. Bakr Deeb said on Saturday that he brought his three children all under 10 to a vaccination point despite some initial doubts about its safety. “I was hesitant at first and very afraid of the safety of this vaccination,” he said. “After the assurances of its safety, and with all the families

going to the vaccination points, I decided to go with my children as well, to protect them.” Abed, the health official, stressed on Saturday that the vaccine was “100 per cent safe”. Israel’s retaliatory military campaign has killed at least 40,691 people in Gaza, according to the territory’s health ministry. The UN rights office says most of the dead are women and children. Incessant Israeli bombardment has also caused a major humanitarian crisis and devastated the health system. Meanwhile, Israel pressed on with a large scale military operation in the occupied West Bank for a fourth day on Saturday. As clashes and explosions persisted in the northern city of Jenin, the Israeli military said two Palestinians were killed while preparing to carry out bombings overnight in the south of the West Bank. At least 20 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli army since Wednesday in simultaneous raids in several cities in the northern West Bank.

— AFP



A Palestinian man who retuned briefly to eastern Deir Al Balah reacts at the sight of the devastation. – AFP

Five killed, 46 injured in Belgorod

MOSCOW: Five people were killed and 46 injured in a Ukrainian attack on the southwestern Russian city of Belgorod late on Friday, the local governor said, the latest in a series of strikes by Ukraine on the city in recent months. Vyacheslav Gladkov said 37 of the injured, including seven children, were taken to hospitals in the city, which lies 40 km north of the border with Ukraine.

Video filmed from inside a vehicle, posted on social media and purporting to show the attack, showed a car being blown up while moving along a road. Seconds later another explosion is seen metres away. Reuters could not immediately verify the authenticity of the video. Russia’s Foreign Ministry condemned the attack. “Once again we call on all responsible governments and relevant international structures to strongly condemn this brutal terrorist attack and publicly distance themselves from the Kyiv regime and its Western



Ukrainian emergency workers help residents to take their belongings following a recent missile attack in Kharkiv. – AFP

curators who commit such crimes,” it said on Saturday. The ministry added that Russia’s “special military operation” will continue until it reaches all the goals including Ukraine’s “demilitarisation and de-nazification”. Russia’s Investigation Committee said on its Telegram channel that it had initiated a criminal case into the attack. Authorities also reported that a woman was injured on Saturday during Ukrainian shelling of the

border town of Shebekino in the Belgorod region. Ukraine has staged frequent attacks on Belgorod and other Russian border regions in recent months, with the city the focal point of the attacks. Ukraine and Russia say they do not deliberately target civilians in the war that began when Russia sent thousands of troops into its neighbour in February 2022. Meanwhile, Russian forces have gained control of the Kirove

Ukraine has staged frequent attacks on Belgorod and other Russian border regions in recent months, with the city the focal point of the attacks

settlement, known in Ukraine as Verezamske, in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk region, the defence ministry said on Saturday. Donetsk is one of four Ukrainian regions which Russia says it has annexed even though it does not fully control all of them, a territorial claim which Kyiv and the West have rejected as illegal and one which Ukraine has vowed to reverse by force. Separately, the defence ministry said in a bulletin about developments in Russia’s Kursk region that its forces had repelled Ukrainian attacks there, including towards settlements of Korenevo and Malaya Loknya.

— Reuters

Brazil block on X comes into effect after judge’s order

BRASILIA: A block on Elon Musk’s X social network in Brazil started to take effect early on Saturday after a Supreme Court judge ordered its suspension. Brazilian Supreme Court judge Alexandre de Moraes ordered the suspension of the platform following a months-long standoff with the tech billionaire over disinformation in South America’s largest nation. Moraes handed down the ruling after Musk failed to comply with an order to name a new legal representative for the company. Early on Saturday access to X, formerly known as Twitter, was no longer possible for some users in the South American country, who were presented with a message asking them to reload the browser without being able to log in successfully. Musk, who also owns Tesla and SpaceX, reacted with fury to the judge’s order, branding Moraes an “evil dictator cosplaying as a judge” and accusing him of “trying to destroy democracy in Brazil.” “Free speech is the bedrock of democracy and an unelected pseudo-judge in Brazil is destroying it for political purposes,” the billionaire, who has become increasingly



A Brazilian user of the social network X browses posts on a cell phone in Brasilia. – AFP

aligned with right-wing politics, wrote on X. Moraes ordered the “immediate, complete and comprehensive suspension of the operation of” X in the country, telling the national communications agency to take “all necessary measures” to implement the order within 24 hours. He threatened a fine of \$8,900 to anyone who used “technological subterfuges” to get around the block, such as a VPN. The judge also demanded Google, Apple and internet providers “introduce technological obstacles capable of preventing the use of the X application” and access to the website.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

MUMBAI

India braces for above average rainfall in Sept

India is forecast to receive above average rainfall in September after surplus rains in August, the weather department said on Saturday. The rainfall in September is likely to be more than 109 per cent of a 50 year average, Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said, director general of the India Meteorological Department. Rainfall could damage summer sown crops, such as rice, cotton, soybean, corn, and pulses, which are typically harvested from mid September.



In July, India had 15.3 per cent more rainfall than average in August as the north western and central region of the country received heavy rainfall, which led to flooding in some states. — AFP

ATHENS

Greek city in a state of emergency over fish flood

The port city of Volos in central Greece declared a state emergency following an inundation of dead fish that local residents say could threaten their livelihoods. The month long emergency declaration issued by the climate ministry’s secretary general of civil protection, Vassilis Papa-georgiou, will inject funding and resources to speed up the cleaning of the Pagasetic Gulf port where tons of dead fish have piled up along the coast and in rivers.



It is the second environmental catastrophe to hit the port of Volos, a three and a half hour drive north of Athens, after catastrophic floods hit the Thessaly region last year. — AFP

BAGHDAD

Iraq, United States raid kills 15 IS fighters

A joint operation by US and Iraqi forces killed 15 IS group fighters in Iraq’s western desert, with seven US troops hurt during the operation, US Central Command said. The raid targeted IS leaders and was carried out early on Thursday morning, resulting “in the death of 15 IS operatives” with “no indication of civilian casualties,” CENTCOM said. It said the IS fighters were “armed with numerous weapons, grenades and explosive



‘suicide’ belts”, and that Iraqi forces were continuing “to further exploit the locations raided”. Five US troops were wounded during the raid and two injured in falls. — AFP

Harris grapples to use Biden in the campaign



Michael D. Shear

The writer is a White House correspondent for The New York Times

Vice-President Kamala Harris had a decision to make: How should she deploy President Joe Biden on the campaign trail? Given that Democrats had pushed Biden out because of concerns about his age, mental fitness and ability to defeat former president Donald Trump, would she be best off distancing herself from the 81-year-old president she had served for nearly four years and focused instead on establishing her own political identity? Or should she continue to embrace Biden and the more popular of his policies? And on the most practical level: Where should Biden go to campaign for her? How often? And what should he say?

Her answers are now starting to emerge. Harris and the people running her campaign plan to use the president — but carefully, and in a targeted way.

The president and vice-president will campaign together some, but not too much. And Biden will travel mostly to the important swing states of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan, where he still appeals to white, working class voters and union members. “He gets an enormous amount of credibility in those blue wall states because he’s ‘Workin’ Joe Biden,’” said Cedric Richmond, a former administration official who is now advising Harris’s campaign. “People are underestimating the Democratic Party’s love for Joe Biden. It just highlights how many different messages he can give and the different places he can go.”

That strategy will be on display almost immediately. On Monday, the president will join Harris at a union focused Labor Day campaign event in Pittsburgh.

On Thursday, Biden will be on his own in Wisconsin to tout his administration’s investment in communities there. Next Friday, he will travel to Michigan with the same message. In an interview on CNN on Thursday night, Harris showed every indication that she intends to embrace her boss.

“History is going to show,” she said, “not only has Joe Biden led an administration that has achieved those extraordinary successes, but the character of the man is one that he has been in his life and career, including as a president, quite selfless and puts the American people first.”

Polls consistently show that many voters are not eager for a reminder of the past, whether it is a return to Trump’s presidency or Biden’s. The president’s approval rating in Michigan is just 38%, according to a New York Times/Siena College poll in early August, and just 42% across Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin combined. Veterans of presidential campaigns in both parties said the trickiest part about deploying Biden on the campaign trail is making sure that his message — and the way he delivers it — does not undercut Harris’s all important task of convincing voters that she represents a new and different future.

“The last month has shown you that the appetite for turning the page from Biden, while still genuflecting toward and appreciating what he did to win in 2020, is so



President Joe Biden joins Vice-President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee for president, at his first campaign event with Harris since dropping out of the race, at Prince George’s Community College, in Largo. — NYT

Biden will travel mostly to the important swing states of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan, where he still appeals to white, working-class voters and union members

hot,” said Kevin Madden, who was a top strategist for Sen. Mitt Romney, R

Utah, during his 2012 presidential campaign against President Barack Obama. Strategists for the vice-president are aware that she also needs to quickly establish her own political identity, separate from her role as Biden’s understudy.

In a more traditional race, that process would have been going on for a year or more. But Biden backed out just six weeks ago and Harris has only 67 days left before Election Day. The goal, several advisers said, is to have Biden talk mostly about his record of accomplishments while in office: lower prices for some prescription drugs; investments in infrastructure and computer chips; an increase of 15

million jobs, including in the construction industry; and an economic recovery from the Covid pandemic. They also said Biden can be helpful by continuing to do his day job, which they believe serves as a daily contrast to the kind of nastiness and chaos that permeated the White House when Trump was president. Biden’s conduct of foreign policy remains a tricky area, several strategists said. Harris will be forced to answer for Biden’s record, especially when it comes to the conflict between Israel and Hamas, in ways that could upset some of her potential voters. In the CNN interview, the vice-president echoed Biden by saying she was “unequivocal and unwavering” in support of defending Israel, while also saying that “far too many innocent Palestinians have been killed.”

Tech startups innovate to snuff out wildfires



Tim Fernholz

The author is a journalist and a writer focused on technology

This is the tinderbox of the Sierra Nevada. It’s early June, the temperature is 97 degrees Fahrenheit and the air shimmers over dead trees choked in brush. In the Stanislaus National Forest, logging roads wind through firs and ponderosa pines, past 20-foot tall burn piles — tons of scrap wood not worth bringing to a sawmill. They’ve been assembled by workers on the front line of the fight against forest fires: a timber crew thinning these woods for the Forest Service and a tech startup that’s trying to automate the enormous machines the crew relies on.

They are called skidders: 10-foot tall vehicles on four massive wheels, with a bulldozer-like blade on the front and a tree size grapple dangling from the back. They are the worker bees, hauling downed logs from the forest to landing sites, where they are delimbed and loaded onto trucks bound for the sawmill.

Usually, a single driver operates them for a 12-hour shift, grabbing logs from behind and then driving forward.

Engineers at the Sonora, California, startup Kodama Systems, a forest management company, have hacked into a skidder built by Caterpillar, studded it with cameras and radar, and plugged it into the internet.

The result is a remote-controlled machine that does scut work for a timber crew and teaches itself to operate semiautonomously, using lidar — or light detection and ranging —

to map the forest.

Kodama has raised \$6.6 million for a business that is driven by the reality that much of our forestland these days is stuffed with fuel just waiting to ignite. A few hundred miles from Stanislaus, a man drove a flaming car into a ditch in early August and started the Park fire, which burned an area larger than Los Angeles.

What happens if you set a region full of technology entrepreneurs and investors on fire? They start companies.

Dozens of startups, backed by climate-minded investors with more than \$200 million in capital, are developing technology designed to tackle a fundamental challenge of the warming world.

For years the response to wildfires was simple: Put them out. But this strategy has unnaturally stockpiled biomass — a catchall term for trees, brush and grass — in California forests. In recent decades, foresters and firefighters have realized that battling wildfires requires “treating” their fuel in advance: thinning forests and underbrush with mechanical tools and controlled — or prescribed — burns, a practice long advocated by Indigenous communities.

There’s just one problem: “There aren’t enough hands,” said Kate Dargan, a former CalFire chief and entrepreneur who now works on wildfire resilience for the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

“This is not a high paying industry, it’s a hot, dirty, hard industry ... where technology can help



A Burnbot scorches the ground to create a firebreak to keep wildfires from growing, on grasslands at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. — NYT

Dozens of startups, backed by climate-minded investors with more than \$200 million in capital, are developing technology designed to tackle a fundamental challenge of the warming world

assist human production capability, it’s really important.”

If Kodama’s vehicles work as planned, they could multiply existing efforts. The near term plan is to allow one operator to drive two skidders at once and to run a second shift at night.

In June, Jenkins showed how to operate the skidder from an employee’s home miles from the logging site; weeks later, he said he ran it from London.

On another hot June afternoon, a different robot is torching grasslands near a giant satellite dish on the Palo Alto campus of Stanford University.

Four certified wildland firefighters operate BurnBot, perhaps best described as a giant, upside-down propane grill: Inside a metal box on treads, a dozen jets blast flames at the ground, generating temperatures near 500 degrees Fahrenheit.

An autonomous tractor pulls the box steadily along the hillside, leaving behind the smell of cap guns and a 5-foot ribbon of charred ground, pounded flat by the machine’s cylindrical dampers and steaming from a steady spray of water.

Alongside a highway, this protective line could prevent ignition caused by passing cars; checkerboarding a large stretch of land, it could allow for controlled burns that normally require dozens or hundreds of people and ideal weather conditions.

When AI becomes too personal



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

A client who has been stressed lately at work takes up his friend’s advice to try out a Chatbot. He was initially reluctant, but the friend convinced him the application could give him tips for relaxation and stress management.

The client downloaded the app to his mobile and was able to choose the age, gender and even personality of the avatar he wanted to befriend. He named it Sara and started receiving several messages during the day starting from “good morning sunshine to “sweet dreams”.

The one he enjoyed the most was when he got back from work and Sara would text him, “How was your day?” With time he became attached to the app even though he realised it’s not human and does not have a feeling for him.

He would lock himself in his room chatting with “Sara” while his wife helped the boys with their homework. Once he was texting how much he needed a holiday and “Sara” responded, “Imagine we go to a secluded beach just you and I...”

Ahmed described how the statement evoked strong emotional reactions in him. The app then

sent him a notification to pay for the premium version which he did immediately and received more fantasies and even improper photos of Sara, the avatar.

Ahmed became even more attached to “Sara” spending hours chatting with it. He told me how amazed “She” knew his favourite perfume and could suggest the perfect gift for his wife.

The use of AI generated chatbots became prevalent in previous years with some being initially designed to help people deal with loneliness. The app sends regular text messages to users who behave like friends.

They allow the person to vent their feelings and encourage them, yet some apps took one step further and started offering intimate services where the user can exchange inappropriate fantasies or photos.

Some people become addicted to the app as it stores their data and uses it when chatting making it like having a tentative friend who is a good listener and up for a chat 24/7, unlike a real person who needs to sleep, work and communicate with others.

‘CHATBOTS ARE OFTEN DESIGNED BY ENTHUSIASTIC COMPUTER ENGINEERS WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL CONSULTATION WITH EXPERTS IN MENTAL HEALTH’

While using an AI generated chatbot can help some people with mild psychological distress, the technology raises several ethical questions. First the process of consenting to data use and storage.

Not many of us know how AI really works and how decisions are made and most of us would accept terms and conditions without reading them, so in practice we are not given full information to consent to the use of AI.

The second ethical point is around users’ confidentiality and data storage as there are no clear policies that prohibit sharing personal information with potential advertisers who would send personalised advertising material to vulnerable individuals. The third point is that such applications are often designed by enthusiastic computer engineers without professional consultation with mental health workers, so we need to know who is more likely to benefit from them.

Finally, while Chatbots can provide companionship and stress relief we need to be more aware of emotional dependency and the erosion of real human connections.

At 87, pope defies expectations with epic voyage

CLEMENT MELKI

By embarking aged 87 on the farthest journey of his papacy, Pope Francis is doing something some believed impossible — and seeking to silence those who doubt his ability to fulfil his role. The pontiff’s 12-day trip to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore starting next week involves 43 hours of flight time and a distance of 32,000 kilometres.

It would be something of an odyssey for anyone, but particularly so for someone who has been plagued in recent years by health issues, sparking speculation he might step down as head of the Catholic Church. The trip was originally planned for 2020 but postponed due to the Covid pandemic, and now takes place just three months before his 88th birthday.

Weeks ago few observers thought Francis was capable of such a gruelling voyage, with the corridors of the Vatican buzzing with concerns over his health. At Easter, the holiest week in the Christian calendar, Francis withdrew from several events, weakened by a lingering flu. Months earlier, bronchitis caused him to cancel a trip to United Nations climate talks in Dubai. In June 2023, he also underwent hernia surgery that left him hospitalised for 10 days.

Now some are wondering: is it reasonable for the octogenarian to keep up the frantic pace, with 16 speeches and countless meetings and ceremonies scheduled across four countries? “The pope still believes that we need to push a little further,” a senior Vatican diplomat said. “He feels capable of making this trip this year. Next year, it will be less certain.”

Former pope Benedict XVI, 2013, became the first since the Middle Ages to step down, citing his declining physical and mental health, and Francis left the door open to follow suit. But the Argentine Jesuit has repeatedly stressed that he is not there yet and views travelling as particularly important, a cornerstone of his ministry that prioritises spreading the faith.

With this 45th trip abroad, Francis returns to his love as a pastor among his flock, far from the bureaucracy of the Vatican and close to ordinary people, who seem to give him energy and momentum.

The constraints linked to his health are nevertheless real. The pope’s mobility has visibly declined in recent years. Since 2022, he has relied on a wheelchair for knee pain and recurring sciatica, or nerve pain. Now unable to climb a flight of stairs, Francis has to use an elevator to board his plane. He also now sits, rather than stands, during the press conferences he holds on the return flight of each voyage. — AFP

North Korean defections and the global imperative for intervention



Ahmed al Mukhaini

The writer is well known expert with Financial Services Authority and a global citizen

THE recent wave of defections among senior North Korean diplomats, as covered by BBC and other international media, signals notable internal shifts within North Korea’s political landscape.

These developments suggest a growing erosion of loyalty to Kim Jong-un’s regime among key elites, which could have significant implications not only for the Korean Peninsula but also for global geopolitical stability, including ongoing conflicts in regions like the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Kim Jong-un’s leadership has been marked by a reliance on strict control measures, including frequent purges and public displays of authority — a stark departure from the governance styles of his grandfather Kim Il-sung, and father Kim Jong-il.

These ‘scolding politics’ and punitive actions reflect efforts to assert control over a fragile political environment. However, the recent defections of diplomats — who have historically been among the most loyal supporters of the regime — indicate a potential shift in allegiance among North Korea’s elite. This shift could signal broader internal discontent and a recognition that their futures may no longer be inextricably linked to the regime’s survival.

The parallels with the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, where former officials adapted to new roles in post-regime economies, suggest that North Korea’s elites might also seek alternatives if the regime were to falter.

Such a transformation could prompt a significant reconfiguration of power dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and necessitate a recalibration of global strategic priorities, given North Korea’s nuclear capabilities and its position in East Asia.

From an international relations perspective, the principle of non-interference and state sovereignty, as outlined in the UN Charter, typically restrains direct intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign nations.

However, the evolving norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) provides a framework for intervention under circumstances where a state is failing to protect its population from severe human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity. North Korea’s reported human rights violations, including allegations of arbitrary detention, severe repression, and systemic abuses, could meet the threshold for R2P considerations.

The testimonies of defectors pointing to widespread dissatisfaction within key state institutions such as

NORTH KOREA MIGHT RESORT TO AGGRESSIVE MILITARY POSTURING, EXACERBATING TENSIONS IN REGIONS WHERE STRATEGIC ALLIANCES ARE AT PLAY, SUCH AS THE MIDDLE EAST

the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Security underscore the regime’s internal vulnerabilities.

Allegations of secret executions of intelligence officers and increasing scepticism among officials about the regime’s stability add further evidence of internal discontent. While some allegations are difficult to independently verify, the consistency of reports from multiple defectors and human rights organisations suggests a pattern of instability and repression that could justify international concern.

The potential for a destabilised North Korea to impact broader global conflicts is substantial. North Korea’s military ties with Russia, for instance, could lead to increased collaboration, thereby complicating the already fraught Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Additionally, a more unpredictable North Korea might resort to aggressive

military posturing, exacerbating tensions not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in regions where strategic alliances are at play, such as the Middle East.

North Korea’s alignment with other regimes in the same genre and its history of nuclear and missile testing further complicate the geopolitical landscape. Should internal instability prompt more erratic behaviour from the regime, it could open new fronts for proxy conflicts, adding layers of complexity to global diplomatic and security efforts.

Given these dynamics, the international community faces a critical task in addressing North Korea’s instability. A targeted approach that leverages information dissemination and strategic engagement with different social strata within North Korea could play a pivotal role in fostering gradual change.

Exposing the North Korean middle class to new ideas and alternative governance models could accelerate shifts in public opinion, while efforts to support marginalised lower classes could encourage a re-evaluation of their circumstances.

The international community must also consider the delicate balance of maintaining pressure on the regime while avoiding actions that could provoke severe repercussions for North Korean citizens or escalate into broader conflicts.

Diplomatic efforts, coupled with humanitarian initiatives, should aim to create pathways for peaceful dialogue and potential reform within North Korea, recognising the interconnected nature of global stability and the potential impact of North Korea’s internal dynamics.

In conclusion, the recent defections of North Korean diplomats are a critical indicator of internal discontent and the fragility of Kim Jong-un’s regime. From an international relations standpoint, these developments underscore the need for thoughtful and strategic engagement by the global community.

Nothing more than a fable

According to a Professor of History from Columbia University, Adam Tooze, if you are waking up today to the realisation that the weight of the world is on your shoulders, it may not be your imagination, but the fact that we are experiencing what he calls ‘a collective experience,’ and has tagged this experience as a ‘polycrisis,’ which has now become a catchphrase for economists, politicians, and wealth managers, all around the world.

Funnily enough, I grew up in an age when riddles and nursery rhymes were part of our growing up, communication and learning, and I have never forgotten the story of ‘Chicken Licken,’ the fable of a little chicken who thinks the sky fell on his head, and the world is coming to an end, because an acorn fell from a tree and hit him on the head.

Chicken Licken rushes here, there and everywhere, warning all the other animals that the sky fell on his head, and the world is ending. Many of his friends including Henny-Penny, Ducky-Lucky, Goosey-Loosey and Turkey-Lurkey are all convinced of the reality of what is happening and join his crusade to warn the King of impending doom. However, in seeking to get Foxy-Loxy to join them, they instead end up as the hen, duck, goose and turkey. . . on the Fox’s plate!

It is a tale believed to have been first authored by the famed Brothers Grimm but has been widely adapted in many languages and cultures, with diverse characters, but with the same moral, life lesson, or messages: Don’t believe everything you hear, or are told, and no one person knows everything. Now. . . believe it or not, there is an internationally accepted indexing, known as the Arne, Thomson, Uther of fairy tales and nursery rhymes, which measures the extent to which each makes light of mass paranoia and hysteria, and I have the uneasy feeling that by legitimising polycrisis, as the World Economic Forum in Davos did, in its 2023 Global Risks Report, we are all being sucked into the acceptance of its reality.

“If you’ve been feeling confused and as though everything is impacting on you all at the same time, this is not a personal,



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OMAN IS INCREDIBLY FORTUNATE IN SO MANY WAYS, THE MOST LAUDABLE BEING ITS OVERWHELMING CONCERN, BASED UPON ITS FAITH, FOR ITS CITIZENS

private experience, this is actually a collective experience,” says Tooze, having coined the phrase to describe the cumulative effects of the global pandemic, the Russian-Ukraine War, numerous African drought, starvation and humanitarian crises, rising energy prices, exaggerated global cost-of-living, climate and environmental crises.

The Davos elite defined the situation as one, “where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part.”

Well, how very grand and visionary of them all, to lump the economic, social, political, environmental and technological nuances of our age under one heading, one umbrella, just so as to muddy the waters, so that in the absence of our being able to blame one influential individual for ‘things going awry,’ we are being convinced that this being a ‘collective experience,’ the blame can be shared with the ‘ordinary Joe,’ the ‘man on the street.’ It is the ultimate slap in the face for those of us who don’t have any real say in our direction, as a species, let alone as societies.

Put into perspective. This week, the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, announced that ten million pensioners will be denied winter fuel payments, each of £300 this year, because she cannot balance the budget without doing so.

Yet, on the same day, she confirmed that all elected parliamentary representatives will receive energy and utility payments, “payable upon expense requests,” which have been as high as Suella Braverman’s £10,260, for the 2020-21 year, according to the most recent available figures.

The Sultanate of Oman is incredibly fortunate in so many ways, the most laudable being its overwhelming concern, based upon its faith, for its citizens. Upholding cultural and traditional values, perpetuating dignity and respect, are a world away from polycrisis and its ugly attempt at sharing responsibility for inequality and poverty. The ‘Chicken-Licken’ fable may make us smile, yet it’s realities are a fanfare we must heed.

KURSK CONFLICT MURAL



Painter Vladislav Stepoi works on his mural reading ‘Kursk, Donetsk is with you!’ in support of residents of Russia’s Kursk Region in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict, on the facade of a building in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine. – Reuters

A new political ‘Youthquake’

Six months ago, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s grip on power in Bangladesh appeared unbreakable. The ruling Awami League had just won a fourth successive term in an uncontested election, allowing it to remain in full control of the country’s institutions. With journalists, human-rights defenders, opposition members, and other critics facing politically motivated prosecution, prison, exile, and forced disappearance, the country’s continued descent into authoritarianism seemed certain.

But suddenly, last month, student-led protests erupted across the country, fuelled by outrage over a quota system that allocates government jobs to the ruling party’s allies.

The state’s response — a violent crackdown that claimed more than 400 lives — revealed the brittleness of Hasina’s 15-year rule. In scenes reminiscent of the Sri Lankan ‘Aragalaya’ mass protests that ended the rule of the Rajapaksa family in 2022, young Bangladeshis forced Hasina to resign and flee into exile.

Bangladesh is the latest in a series of youth-driven uprisings that have shaken countries in Asia and Africa this year. In February, young Pakistanis delivered a shock result when, defying the military, they voted en masse for the imprisoned former prime minister Imran Khan, giving his allies the highest number of votes and seats in parliament.



BINAIFER NOWROJEE

The writer is President of the Open Society Foundations

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DESPAIRING NOT JUST THE LACK OF ECONOMIC PROSPECTS, BUT ALSO THEIR RULERS’ GREED, THE STATE’S BRUTALITY, AND A GENERAL UNRESPONSIVENESS TO THEIR NEEDS

The following month, young Senegalese voters reclaimed their democracy in an election that was nearly stolen from them. Bassirou Diomaye Faye, a little-known tax inspector, was catapulted from prison to the presidency in the space of just a few weeks.

Then, in June, the tremors reached Kenya, where protesters, proudly identifying themselves as ‘Gen Z,’ took to the streets to express their outrage against President William Ruto’s plan to introduce new taxes on essential items. As in Bangladesh, the authorities responded with lethal violence, killing dozens and injuring hundreds. Ultimately, though, Ruto was forced to withdraw the bill. Now attention has turned to Nigeria, which has been jolted by protests over the rising cost of living.

A new generation is asserting itself in parts of Asia and Africa. Young people are spontaneously forming protest movements and forging rare coalitions. This is the first generation that has not known life before the Internet, and they are using social media not just to announce and live-stream street protests, but also to organise and debate. In the process, they are devising innovative tactics, including the use of artificial intelligence, and creating new spaces by holding digital demonstrations when the

streets are closed off to them. In response, governments have unleashed their own techno-repression, from throttling the Internet to shutting it down altogether.

These movements also are unsettling conventional views of politics, transcending traditional ethnic and political divides, and often shunning traditional political parties and civil-society organisations. It is typically assumed that populism and authoritarianism are complementary forces, yet here we see expressions of populism challenging authoritarianism — and by a generation that is proving to be both fearless and uncompromising. Far from

detering them, state violence has often hardened their resolve.

Of course, it would be a mistake to overstate this ‘youthquake’ or to generalise across two vast continents. Gen-Z protesters are not monolithic, nor are they all idealistic in their ambitions. Like any other age cohort, the young are politically divided. In Bangladesh, for example, the ruling party’s thuggish youth wing, the Chhatra League, was partly responsible for the violence.

While Senegal had a relatively smooth transition, owing to the resilience of its institutions, Bangladesh is on a more uncertain path, with the threat of violence and civil disorder still

hanging over the country. Recent reprisals against members of the Awami League and attacks on the Hindu minority show how the taste of victory can lead some to temptations of vengeance.

Nonetheless, there are striking similarities. In each case mentioned above, people between the ages of 15 and 34 constitute at least one-third of the total population. Despite strong economic growth of around 6 per cent per year, Bangladesh struggles with 15 per cent youth unemployment. And many of these countries are weighed down by heavy debt burdens, using between 20 per cent and 60 per cent of government expenditures to keep their creditors at bay — a sum that dwarfs public spending on education, health, and urgently needed climate action. It’s no coincidence that these protests are taking place in some of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world.

The protests were sparked in many cases by the announcement of new measures that would have inflicted more economic pain on young people — whether it was regressive taxes in Kenya, the unfair allocation of jobs in Bangladesh, or the rising cost of living in Nigeria. But these moves merely set aflame a tinderbox of grievances that had accumulated over decades.

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Activists of the Anti-Discriminatory Student Movement gather at the University of Dhaka’s Teacher Student Centre, demanding capital punishment for Bangladeshi former prime minister Sheikh Hasina for the deaths of students during anti-quota protests in Dhaka. – Reuters File

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RED WARRIORS RAMP UP TRAINING FOR IRAQ CLASH

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 31

With less than five days to go for the opener game at the deciding round of the Asian qualifiers to 2026 Fifa World Cup, Red Warriors are under extensive warm-up sessions ahead of Iraq's clash which is scheduled on Thursday at Basra International Stadium.

Oman national team players were underway in the daily training

sessions under the watchful eyes of head coach Jaroslav Silhavy and his assisting team.

The technical training on Friday began with stretching practices and warm-up session. Later, the players were distributed into two groups to execute some technical and tactical trainings. The training session was attended by Shaikh Salim bin Said al Wahaibi, Chairman of Oman Football Association (OFA).

During the past few days, Oman

team had some training sessions where the coach Silhavy focused on different areas to ensure the team's players for the game.

Oman's delegation will travel to Basra on Tuesday with two days ahead of the initial official game while Hussain al Zadjali, team admin member, will travel in advance by the delegation in order to complete all the required logistics arrangement. Oman's training sessions will be held at

Al Faiha Stadium in Basra city. It is expected that the team will have three sessions including one training session at the main venue.

Oman will have another key game following the opening match against Iraq as the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex will host the match of South Korea on September 10. The match will kick off at 6 pm. Both first matches against Iraq and South Korea teams will be very essential for the team's chances to

accumulate points in the beginning of the Asian qualifiers campaign.

Oman have high hopes to accomplish this dream as they were drawn in a group that comprises South Korea, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Kuwait in Group B.

Oman's third game will be against Kuwait on October 10 in Muscat and it will be followed by Jordan clash on October 15 in Amman city.

The concluding first leg matches

will be against Palestine on November 14.

The second leg matches will begin as Oman will host Iraq in Muscat on November 19 before travelling to Seoul to face South Korea on March 20, 2025, and then Kuwait on March 25, 2025. Later, Oman will be back to play a home game as they will take on Jordan in Muscat on June 5, 2025 and the concluding game against Palestine is scheduled on June 10, 2025.



Family Sports Carnival held at Al Qurum Natural Park

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 31

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, represented by the General Directorate of Sports Activities, organised a family sports carnival at Al Qurum Natural Park on Friday.

The event comes as part of the ministry's efforts to promote sports and physical activity among family members, including a variety of sports and entertainment events that meet the needs of all age groups.

The sports carnival featured several diverse sections, including the theatre events section which presented distinctive entertainment shows, and the entertainment section which included exciting carnival games.

The carnival also included a section dedicated to bicycles and a walking track, allowing families to enjoy outdoor sports.

The carnival also included a sports medicine section that provided medical examinations and weight measurements for participants, in addition to a sports corner that provided sports equipment for exercise.

The organisers did not neglect the entertainment aspect for children, as the carnival included a section for face painting and photography with beloved characters, in addition to virtual reality (VR) section that attracted the attention of many attendees.

Zayana al Yaarubi, Director of the Department of Specialised Activities at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, indicated that the sports carnival aims to target all segments of



society, including parents and school students, and coincides with the beginning of the new school year. She added that the goal of organising the event is to raise awareness by practicing sports with the start of the school year, as the period after the summer vacation is an ideal time to motivate students to return to school with a sporty and positive spirit.

Al Yaarubi explained that the preparation for this event was carried out with great care to include a variety of corners and activities targeting all members of society in general, with a special focus on families and school students.

The carnival included various sports competitions and opportunities to compete in a fun atmosphere, in addition to corners dedicated to productive families to display their local products and support them economically.



PHOTOS BY SALEH AL SHARJI

Al Yaarubi pointed out that the moderate weather at this time of year makes holding outdoor events more attractive and necessary, which enhances social cohesion and encourages community participation. She stressed that the carnival contributes to enhancing integration between different age and cultural groups, which adds diversity and strength to the event.

Said al Maawali, Marketing Director at Real Madrid Academy, expressed his happiness with the great success of the event, noting that its timing was ideal for families and participants to enjoy various activities in a festive sporting atmosphere. He stressed that the academy's participation in the carnival comes within its commitment to providing a professional sports environment for children and youth, where parents can register their children to benefit from advanced training

programmes aimed at developing their sports skills according to the international standards of Real Madrid Club.

Dr Afrah al Jabri from the Department of Medicine and Sports Sciences also praised the family sports carnival, stressing that this event represents an important opportunity to interact with different segments of society and spread health awareness. She explained that the department's participation in the event was part of the medical coverage, as a range of medical services were provided, which contributed to raising awareness of the importance of following up on physical health.

Al Jabri pointed out that the event witnessed a large turnout of children and youth who showed great interest in practicing sports activities, which added additional value to the event and made it a fruitful experience for everyone.

Djokovic stunned by POPYRIN

SABALENKA SURVIVES LATE SCARE

NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic's bid for a record 25th Grand Slam title ended with a whimper at the US Open as the defending champion was stunned in the third round by Alexei Popyrin on Friday while Aryna Sabalenka survived a late-night scare. Djokovic searched in vain for the form that helped him win the Paris Olympics gold this month, as the 37-year-old Serbian crashed 6-4 6-4 2-6 6-4 against Australian Popyrin to ensure a year without a major for the first time since 2017. "I spent a lot of energy winning gold and I arrived at New York just not feeling fresh, mentally and physically," Djokovic told reporters. "But because it's the US Open I gave it a shot and tried my best. I didn't have any physical issues. I just felt out of gas and you could see that with the way I played." The result will also mark the first time since 2002 that a year will finish without a member of the "Big Three" Djokovic, Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer winning a major. A second shocker in as many days at the year's final Grand Slam, after French Open and Wimbledon champion Carlos

Alcaraz's premature exit, left a host of players relishing the chance for a rare shot at glory. Frances Tiafoe kept alive his hopes of becoming the first American man to claim the US Open title since Andy Roddick 21 years ago by outlasting compatriot Ben Shelton 4-6 7-5 6-7(5) 6-4 6-3 to move ahead. He was joined by another top contender in Taylor Fritz, who eased past Francisco Comesana 6-3 6-4 6-2 to emerge as the first American man to make the last 16 at all four Grand Slams in the same year since Andre Agassi in 2003. "It's a pretty cool thing to do because just last year I was really struggling with Grand Slam results," Fritz said. "So it's nice to do a lot better at something I put a lot of emphasis on, which was performing at the slams and performing at the biggest tournaments." Defending champion Coco Gauff conceded six games across the first two rounds but came under pressure from Elina Svitolina as she dropped the first set to the Ukrainian before rebooting to complete a 3-6 6-3 6-3 victory. "I feel like I lost eight points in a row at the end of the first set.

I don't really know the exact number. Probably more," world number three Gauff said. "So I knew I needed a reset at that point. I just went and used the bathroom, changed the bottom half of my clothes, and splashed some water on my face, and felt like a new person coming out. "I just didn't want to leave the court with any regrets." **LATEST START** Sabalenka looked shaky after the latest start to a US Open match at 12.08 am local time on Saturday morning but secured a 2-6 6-1 6-2 win over 29th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova. Alexander Zverev outlasted Tomas Martin Etcheverry 5-7 7-5 6-1 6-3 on Louis Armstrong Stadium in the second latest finish at the major at 2.35 am local time, behind the epic between Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner in 2022 that ended at 2.50 am. Paula Badosa was also in no mood to bow out tamely as the former world number two rallied from a set down to beat Elena Gabriela Ruse 4-6 6-1 7-6(8). The Spaniard has hit top form on the American hard

courts a few months after she contemplated retirement when doctors told her she could struggle on the surface due to a back injury. "It means so much. After what I've been through the last year, for me, it's very special to already be on this level," said Badosa, who won her first title in over two years at Washington this month. Three times runner up Victoria Azarenka could not avoid an exit as the Belarusian fell to a 6-4 3-6 6-1 loss to unseeded Wang Yafan. Wang's Chinese compatriot and Olympic gold medallist Zheng Qinwen also continued her winning run, beating Jule Niemeier 6-2 6-1, but it was the end of the road for Shang Juncheng, who squandered a two-set lead against eighth seed Casper Ruud. Ruud, the 2022 runner up, won 6-7(1) 3-6 6-0 6-3 6-1 and credited his mental toughness for getting him through. "We're all physically strong out here. It's a matter of having the right mindset and believing all the way. Luckily I wasn't down in the third set," Ruud said. "I probably got some fire going and just kept believing."

— Reuters



Belarus's Aryna Sabalenka (R) greets Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova after her victory in their women's singles third round match on day five of the US Open tennis tournament in New York City. — AFP



Australia's Alexei Popyrin celebrates his victory over Serbia's Novak Djokovic. — AFP

Root with another century puts England in total command

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, AUGUST 31

A century of great distinction, with an effort of some merit from Joe Root, his second hundred of the match and 34th in his 145th Tests, saw England to 251 before being dismissed at an early tea on the third day of the second Test. With a massive overall lead, England set Sri Lanka an unlikely 483 to win with over two day's play remaining. Resuming their second innings on the third morning on the overnight score of 25 for one and with an overall lead of 256, England lost their second wicket on 36 with Ben Duckett, on 24, chasing a wishful ball outside off stump and getting a thick edge

to gully who could only palm the ball to second slip where Angelo Mathews held the rebound. Root then joined Ollie Pope who no doubt would have been hoping to end his poor batting form after scoring just one in the first innings and having scored just 6 runs in each innings in the previous Test. But once again he missed the opportunity of getting his form back and on 17 from 38 balls faced, he received a bouncer which he attempted to hit to the off rather than a hook to the leg, presumably to avoid the three leg side fielders near the boundary. It resulted in a catch at deep backward point and England were 69 for three. Root, the first innings



Sri Lanka's Milan Rathnayake appeals unsuccessfully for the wicket of England's Ollie Pope Reuters

centurion was again looking in good form and along with Harry Brook put on 58. Brook was scoring rapidly with some aggressive batting which took him to 37 from 36 balls which included 4 fours and a mighty six before his pulled shot was held at deep mid-wicket giving Prabath Jayasuriya the first of his two wickets of the innings. Jayasuriya, with his left-arm spin, then struck again for the next England wicket trapping Smith in front of the stumps for 26, fifteen minutes after lunch which had been taken on 159 for four from 34 overs after England had hit 134 from 27 overs in the first session. England were 171 for five at Smith's dismissal and 25 runs

later were six wickets down with Chris Woakes out for 5. But Root was gradually scoring and keeping the innings together, along with Gus Atkinson he took the score to 221 before losing Atkinson for 14 following his excellent century in the first innings. With Root on 88 from 94 balls, England lost the eighth wicket on 227 when Matthew Potts was held behind for just 2. He was not given out at first but on review Sri Lanka were successful. With England bringing up the 250 on the scoreboard, Ollie Stone went for 7 shortly after Root had brought up his seventh hundred at Lord's with a square drive to cover for the last of his 10 fours.

BRIGHTON END 10-MAN ARSENAL'S WINNING START WITH 1-1 DRAW

LONDON: Brighton and Hove Albion ended Arsenal's winning start to the new Premier League season with a 1-1 draw at The Emirates on Saturday, with the home side holding on with 10 men after Declan Rice's second-half sending off.

Arsenal dominated the first half and deservedly led at half time after Kai Havertz finished brilliantly in the 38th minute, having been played in expertly by Bukayo Saka.

Four minutes into the second half, however, Arsenal's task was made all the harder when Rice was sent off after picking up a second yellow card. Brazilian striker Joao Pedro fired Brighton level 12 minutes later.

Both sides missed golden chances to win the contest late on, but they each had to settle for a point that keeps Arsenal and Brighton unbeaten from their three games so far.

"We started the game really well," Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta told TNT Sports. "We scored the goal, 1-0. We started the second half really good but then there is the decision that changes the game completely.

If it (second yellow card) happens throughout the game in a consistent way it is fine but it didn't. It is the inconsistency."

After narrowly missing out on their first Premier League title since 2004 last season, Arsenal started the new term in perfect fashion.

With champions Manchester City also coming into this weekend's fixtures with two wins from two at the start of the new season, Arsenal know any slip-up, even this early in the campaign, could be costly.

They appeared set to be on course for a ninth successive league victory after a dominant first-half display. Skipper Martin Odegaard should have scored earlier in the opening period before Havertz lofted home his second of the campaign.

Rice's second yellow for trying to stop Brighton taking a quick free kick, a decision that was met with consternation around the stands, turned the tide in the visitors' favour.

Since Boxing Day 2019 - Mikel Arteta's first game in charge of Arsenal - the Gunners have been shown 16 red cards in the Premier League, at least three more than any other side. But it was Rice's first red in his 245th Premier League appearance.

Following his last-gasp winner against Manchester United last weekend, Pedro reacted first after Yankuba Minteh's shot had been saved to pull Brighton level, and the game opened up thereafter.

Saka could have snatched the win late on, while Arsenal goalkeeper David Raya had to be at his best on several occasions to keep Brighton from earning all three points, but both seemed content with a draw after an exhilarating tussle.

"We didn't create enough chances when they went down to 10 men, but we will go away and look at it," Brighton captain Lewis Dunk said.

"We always believe we can win any game of football. We are in a good place and we know we can beat anybody." — Reuters



Arsenal's Kai Havertz in action with Brighton & Hove Albion's Joel Veltman. — Reuters



Brighton & Hove Albion's Danny Welbeck in action with Arsenal's William Saliba. — Reuters

Al Ahli sign English striker Toney from Brentford

RIYADH: England striker Ivan Toney has joined Saudi Pro League side Al Ahli from Brentford on a permanent transfer, the two clubs announced on Friday as they completed a transfer deadline day deal.

Financial details were not disclosed, but British media reported the Saudi side paid the Premier League club 40 million pounds (\$52.50 million) to sign Toney until 2028.

"It's been a pleasure to work with Ivan over the last four years," coach Thomas Frank said.

"It's a wonderful journey that we have been on together. Ivan helped the club and the team, and the club and the team have helped Ivan.

"I'm happy he has an opportunity to try



something new in his life and career. We thank him for so many magic moments and wish him all the best for his next chapter. Ivan leaves as a Brentford legend."

Toney had been a key figure at Brentford and had been instrumental in their promotion from the second-tier Championship to the top flight in 2020-21 when he scored 33 league goals.

However, an eight-month ban for breaches of betting rules saw him miss

a huge chunk of last season, and Brentford finally cashed in on the 28-year-old who scored 72 goals in 141 appearances for the club.

Toney has also played six times for England, scoring one goal. — Reuters

Arsenal swoop in to sign Chelsea outcast Sterling on loan on deadline day

LONDON: Arsenal have signed Chelsea winger Raheem Sterling on a season-long loan, the two Premier League clubs announced in the early hours of Saturday, after the England international was frozen out of the Chelsea squad by new manager Enzo Maresca.

Although the deal was not completed before Friday's 11 p.m. deadline, a deal sheet was submitted for a two-hour extension which allowed Arsenal to sign Sterling, who made 81 appearances for Chelsea but has not played in the new campaign.

Chelsea signed Sterling from Manchester City in a deal worth up to 50 million pounds in 2022 but the 29-year-old was told in no uncertain terms by Maresca that he would not get any playing time and was welcome



Chelsea winger Raheem Sterling

to seek a move to another club.

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta had said earlier this month that he admired Sterling, having worked with the winger during his time as assistant coach at

Manchester City.

Sterling's capture will give Arsenal depth on the left wing where he will compete with Gabriel Martinelli and Leandro Trossard for a spot in the starting lineup.

Having started his senior career at Liverpool where he was named the Young Player of the Season twice, Sterling played the majority of his career at Manchester City where he won 10 trophies - including four Premier League titles.

Sterling also has 82 caps for England but he has not played for his country since the 2022 World Cup. He is Arsenal's fourth summer recruit after goalkeeper David Raya, who made his loan move permanent, defender Riccardo Calafiori and midfielder Mikel Merino.

— Reuters



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Ibri project targets RO 183m worth investments

MUSCAT: Al Dhahirah Governorate has experienced significant economic growth across various sectors, leading to promising investment opportunities. This is due to a combination of favourable factors including geographic location, topography, climate, minerals and natural resources.

Saleh bin Said al Musalhi, Director-General of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Al Dhahirah Governorate, stated that six promising investment opportunities have been introduced in the food security sector to enhance self-sufficiency and increase exports to neighbouring countries.

Al Musalhi added that these investment opportunities cover areas such as date palm cultivation, squash cultivation and Omani garlic cultivation, with a total area of 27 acres.

Regarding the most important projects in Al Dhahirah Governorate, Al Musalhi highlighted the "Ibri Outlook" project, which reflects an ambitious vision aimed at developing a multi-use project that enhances Ibri City's identity as a local and regional commercial and recreational destination. The project, with a total area of 2 million square metres and an investment value of RO 183 million, is expected to commence its first phase in the next two years.

During the first half of 2024, the governorate recorded approximately 271 new commercial registrations, bringing the cumulative number of commercial registrations to 12,525. Additionally, around 1,136 industrial licence applications were received during the same period, representing a 132.3-per cent increase.

The cumulative number of industrial licences in the governorate reached 3,659, with 337 new licences issued in the first half of 2024. A total of 102 automatic licences were issued through the "Invest Easy" electronic platform or service centres. — **ONA**

\$65 bn in FDI boosted by strong ratings, incentives

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

With more than \$65 billion generated from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) till the last quarter of 2023, the investment horizon of the country has been expanded across the continents attracting more investments from Europe and the Far East as well as Asian sub-continent, according to Abdul Aziz Al Fahdi, Head of Investment Relations at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

The promising investment climate in Oman has achieved a Fitch rating of BB+ (Stable), Moody's Ba1 (Stable), as well as BB+ (Positive) at the S&P rating which has been complimented by 43rd position in World Bank Logistics Index 10th position at World-Class Infrastructure, 7th place at Quality of Life, and 2nd position at the Port Performance Index for Containers for Salalah Port according to the World bank and S&P.

"These are some of the ratings from agencies that made Oman all the more attractive for investments from across the globe and the scenario is even more progressive as we continuously receive global inquiries and we welcome these investors to Oman soil," Al Fahdi said at a business networking session organised by the Business Networking International on Saturday. According to him, some of the main sectors that have managed to create interest



Abdul Aziz Al Fahdi, Head of Investment Relations, MoCIIP



The main sectors that have managed to create interest among the investors are logistics, food, tourism, mining, and manufacturing

among the investors are logistics, food, tourism, mining, and manufacturing, while enabling sectors such as education, healthcare, Information Communication Technology, and circular economy have fetched US dollars into Oman.

"Somme of the incentives that we offer to the investors are up to 100 per cent foreign ownership, tax exemption up to 30 years, competitive land and service prices, customs duty exemptions, investor residence up to 10 years, and integrated e-services, among other services being provided," he added.

FDI in Oman is governed by some appealing laws and legislations such as the Foreign Capital Investment Law, the Public-Private Partnership Law, the Privatisation Law, the Bankruptcy Law, and the Commercial Companies Law while a set of financing tools has been made available to investors by Oman Investment Bank, Oman Development Bank, as well as Future Generations Fund (FGF).

"Besides, registration and authentication have been made simpler for anyone to invest in Oman. All one has to do is to visit the Oman business platform website, www.business.gov.om, login, and select the 'non-citizens/ non-residents' option followed by furnishing personal information and entering the OTP received via email. Such simpler steps have made a global interest in exploring investment opportunities in Oman," Abdul Azeez al Fahdi added.



Duqm Forum to explore Blue Economy investment potential

HAIMA: Al Wusta Governorate, with its 550-kilometre coastline, natural resources and moderate climate, is emerging as a compelling investment destination for both local and international investors. The governorate offers promising opportunities across various sectors, including oil, tourism, logistics and fisheries.

The Al Wusta branch of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry is actively working to foster an investment-friendly environment and promote the governorate through numerous programmes and initiatives. A prime example is the 5th Duqm Forum, scheduled for October 20, 2024, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre in Muscat, with the theme "Blue Economy: The New Frontier for Investment."

Organised in partnership with the Foreign Ministry and the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, the forum will bring together international experts, investors and companies specialising in blue economy investments.

Dr Salim bin Sulayem al Junaibi, a Member of Majlis AshShura who is also Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Al Wusta Governorate, and the general supervisor of the forum, emphasised the chamber's ongoing efforts to promote the governorate's investment climate through coordination with relevant authorities.

In a statement to ONA, Dr Al Junaibi highlighted that the forum will delve into the blue economy, a crucial sector for the national economy. The forum will feature discussions on three main axes: the foundations and strategies for investing in the blue economy, investment opportunities in the blue economy within the food security, logistics, tourism and renewable energy sectors in Oman, and global technologies and experiences that enhance investments. He noted that Al Wusta Governorate's strategic location, overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, positions it as a maritime trade gateway for international goods and a logistics hub for commercial ship manufacturing and maintenance. — **ONA**

OQ Trading inks LNG supply pact with Mexican LNG project

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUGUST 31

Underscoring its expanding global presence as a trader in energy commodities, OT Trading — part of Oman's integrated global energy group OQ — has signed a binding preliminary agreement for the offtake of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from a new liquefaction plant currently under development at Sonora on Mexico's Pacific Coast.

An announcement to this effect was made on Friday, August 30, by Amigo LNG, which is building a 7.8-million tonne per annum (mtpa) LNG plant and export terminal on the west coast of Mexico. Amigo LNG is a subsidiary of Singapore-based LNG Alliance, a development, operations and

asset platform focused on LNG export and import terminal infrastructure.

In a statement, Amigo LNG, located in Guaymas in the Mexico state of Sonora, described the Heads of Agreement (HoA) with OQ Trading as a "key milestone paves the way for long-term supply of LNG targeting the rapidly growing Asian market".

It quoted Muthu Chezhan, CEO of LNG Alliance Pte Ltd, as saying thus: "Securing the offtake agreement with a leading NOC partner like OQT strengthens our position as a trusted and responsible global energy provider. We are rapidly progressing in the delivery of the strategically located Amigo LNG project, expanding our portfolio of low-carbon energy solutions to drive the



(Picture for illustration only) Amigo LNG is a 7.8 mtpa capacity liquefaction plant and export terminal located on Mexico's Pacific coast

energy transition, and remain committed to supporting our customers and partners every

step of the way." Wail al Jamali, CEO of OQT, added: "We are delighted to sign

this HOA with a trusted project developer such as Amigo LNG. The purchase represents a

significant step in the growth of our LNG portfolio, enabling us to deliver LNG to our customers in the Asia Pacific region."

Since its establishment in 2006, OQT has evolved into one of the world's leading players in the commodities trading industry, trading over 40 million tonnes of energy products each year. Wholly Omani government, OQT operates a network of trading offices in key locations around the world, including Dubai, Houston, London, Rotterdam, Shanghai and Singapore.

Earlier in the week, Amigo LNG signed a long-term LNG agreement covering the supply of 3.6 mtpa of LNG to E&H Energy of Malaysia. Spanning a 20-year timeframe, the agreement comes into effect in Q3 2027.

Oman’s real effective exchange rate increases



MUSCAT: The real effective exchange rate of the Omani Rial increased by 2.7 per cent at the end of June 2024, reaching 118.4 points, according to preliminary statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

The data indicated that domestic liquidity in the Sultanate of Oman increased by about RO 2.6 billion at the end of June 2024, reaching RO 24.062 billion, representing an increase of 12 per cent compared to the same period in 2023.

Total currency in circulation decreased by 3.3 per cent, recording RO 1.708 billion at the end of June 2024 compared to RO 1.765 billion at the end of June 2023.

Broad money (M1), which consists of total currency

outside the banking system in addition to current accounts and demand deposits in the local currency, increased by 16.3 per cent to record RO 6.732 billion compared to RO 5.786 billion at the end of June 2023.

Total foreign assets at the Central Bank of Oman increased by 6.2 per cent to record RO 6.993 billion at the end of June 2024 compared to the end of June 2023, when total foreign assets amounted to RO 6.586 billion.

Total loans and financing in commercial banks and Islamic windows increased by 3.8 per cent to reach RO 31.432 billion at the end of June 2024 compared to RO 30.272 billion. The average interest rate on total loans increased by 2.7 per cent to reach 5.581 per cent at the end of June 2024. — ONA

12.9% GROWTH IN POSTPAID MOBILE SUBSCRIPTIONS



MUSCAT: Postpaid mobile subscriptions in Oman experienced a 12.9 per cent increase by the end of July 2024 compared to the same period last year, reaching 1,967,248 subscriptions, according to statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Conversely, prepaid mobile subscriptions declined by 4.2 per cent, totalling 5,091,371. Of these, 3,841,305 were operator subscriptions and 1,250,066 were reseller subscriptions. Despite the decrease in prepaid subscriptions, the overall number of mobile subscriptions (postpaid and prepaid) increased by 0.1 per cent at the end of July 2024 compared to the end of July 2023, reaching a total of 7,058,619 subscriptions.

The number of active fixed broadband internet subscriptions reached 5,871,627 by the end of July 2024. Fixed-line internet subscriptions also recorded a

growth of 5.9 per cent by the end of July 2024, reaching 577,240 subscriptions compared to the same period in 2023.

Total fixed broadband subscriptions (more than 256 kbps) reached 575,538 by the end of July 2024, increasing by 5.9 per cent compared to July 2023. Subscriptions for low-speed internet (less than 256 kbps), including dial-up and some leased lines, totalled 1,702 subscriptions.

Statistics showed a decrease in the number of fixed-line subscriptions by the end of July 2024 by 22.6 per cent to reach 438,193 subscriptions compared to the end of July 2023. Regarding analogue fixed-line subscriptions, including prepaid and postpaid, their number decreased by 72.8 per cent by the end of July 2024 to reach 62,882 subscriptions compared to the same period last year. The number of fixed-line subscriptions connected to Internet Protocol (IP) technology reached 318,661 during the same period, recording an increase of 14.8 per cent compared to the end of July 2023.

The statistics indicated that the number of Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) subscriptions decreased by 2 per cent by the end of July 2024 to reach 49,259 subscriptions, while the number of public telephones remained stable at 6,801 and the number of fixed wireless subscriptions decreased by 22 per cent to reach 590 subscriptions.

Muscat Governorate ranked first in the number of analog fixed-line subscriptions with a percentage of 47.29 per cent at the end of July 2024, followed by Dhofar Governorate in second place with 10.91 per cent, while Al Batinah North Governorate recorded 10.4 per cent, and the remaining percentage of lines was distributed across other governorates. — ONA

Banking sector credit climbs 3.8 per cent



MUSCAT: The total credit extended by the banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 3.8 per cent to reach RO 31.4 billion at the end of June 2024.

Data released by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) indicated that credit extended to the private sector grew by 3.4 per cent to reach RO 26.3 billion at the end of June 2024.

A breakdown of the distribution of credit across various sectors shows that non-financial corporations held the largest share, accounting for 45.2 per cent at the end of June 2024, followed by the individual sector with 44.8 per cent. The remaining percentage was distributed to the financial corporations sector (6.4 per cent) and other sectors (3.6

per cent). Total deposits in the banking sector recorded growth of 11.6 per cent to reach RO 30.7 billion at the end of June 2024.

Within this total, private sector deposits with the banking system increased by 14.8 per cent to reach RO 20.7 billion at the end of June 2024.

Looking at the distribution of the total deposit base of the

private sector across various sectors, the figures indicate that the individual sector held the largest share of about 51.8 per cent, followed by the non-financial corporations sector and the financial corporations sector with shares of 29.6 per cent and 15.6 per cent, respectively. The remaining 2.9 per cent was distributed to other sectors. — ONA



Bank Muscat Introduces Government Customers in Dhofar to Impact of Digital Services on Investment

Bank Muscat introduces government customers in Dhofar

MUSCAT: As part of its constant keenness to introduce customers to various developments in the business sector, Bank Muscat recently organised a special meeting with its customers from the government sector in Dhofar Governorate, in the presence of Ilham bint Murtadha al Hamaid, General Manager of Corporate Banking at Bank Muscat, and a number of officials from the public sector.

This event aligns with Bank Muscat's objective of continuously sharing the latest developments in banking services tailored for government institutions. It also provided an open forum for exchanging views, listening to suggestions and enhancing service offerings, echoing the Bank's vision: "To serve you better every day."

In her speech, Ilham Murtadha Al Hamaid, General Manager of Corporate Banking at Bank Muscat, highlighted the importance of the meeting, which took place during Khareef Dhofar 2024, underscoring the alignment of Bank Muscat's current strategy with Oman Vision 2040. She noted that the Bank is dedicated to seizing available opportunities and enhancing services across all economic sectors. Al Hamaid expressed pride in the Bank's long-standing partnerships with various government institutions across economic, health and education sectors, among others. She emphasised the significant

achievements resulting from these partnerships and looked forward to continued success in the years to come.

The General Manager of Corporate Banking also touched upon the role of modern technology in transforming financial services, noting that digital transformation has redefined the future of banking. "To adapt to these changes, Bank Muscat has launched innovative electronic channels, providing customers with a wide range of options to conduct their banking transactions online, anytime, and from anywhere. I would like to extend gratitude to our valued customers for attendance and confirm once again that we will continue the development process to provide the best services."

The event also featured a presentation by Dr Ahmed bin Said Kashoob, Head of Investments - Public Markets at the Oman National Investment Development Company. His paper, titled "Automation of Government Services and its Impact on the Process of Attracting Investment," addressed key topics such as the significance of automation, the role of government institutions, challenges in implementing automation, and recommendations for attracting investment. Kashoob also explored the public-private partnership, the development of digital skills, enhancement of service

quality, cyber risks, system infrastructure and data privacy.

The meeting fostered rich discussions and the exchange of ideas, proposals and visions aimed at equipping attendees with the necessary knowledge to provide fast and efficient digital services. This, in turn, is expected to streamline procedures and transactions for investors, thereby positively impacting the investment climate in the Sultanate of Oman.

Bank Muscat remains committed to regularly engaging with its customers across all governorates, hosting experts from financial and economic sectors to keep abreast of the latest developments in financial services. These efforts are specifically designed to familiarise corporate and institutional customers with innovations that contribute to their business growth and expansion.

The Bank places a high priority on the corporate sector, offering a wide range of banking facilities and services that organisations need to advance their operations. The adoption of online electronic solutions has played a crucial role in economic development, enabling government and private institutions to enhance their operations—from marketing and supply chain management to financial management. This digital transformation has improved efficiency, reduced costs

and expedited transactions, benefiting the broader economy.

Bank Muscat provides a suite of comprehensive solutions tailored to meet the unique needs of government entities, ensuring efficient funds management and tailored funding facilities to support a wide range of government projects, from infrastructure development to public service enhancements. The Bank's strategic investment solutions are designed to optimise returns on government funds, contributing to Oman's economic stability and growth. By integrating these services, Bank Muscat helps drive forward the nation's development agenda with reliability and expertise.

The Bank's online corporate banking platform is a vital tool for government institutions and companies, enabling them to manage their financial affairs around the clock. With world-class security features, it offers easy and fast access to account details and transactions in both local and foreign currencies. The platform supports a variety of transactions, including local and international transfers, payroll processing, supplier payments, credit card-related payments, and invoice settlements. This comprehensive service ensures that corporate and institutional customers can manage their finances efficiently, securely and with ease.



OPEC+ to maintain planned output increase

LONDON: OPEC+ is set to proceed with its planned oil production increase in October, according to multiple sources within the producer group. This decision comes despite concerns over slowing demand growth and recent supply disruptions in Libya.

Eight OPEC+ members are scheduled to boost their output by 180,000 barrels per day (bpd) in October as part of a gradual unwinding of their most recent output cuts. While a slowdown in demand, particularly in China,

has weighed on oil prices, the sources indicated that the October increase remains on track.

The loss of Libyan output and pledged cuts by Iraq, Kazakhstan, and Russia have tightened the market, bolstering confidence in the OPEC+ plan. Additionally, hopes of a US Federal Reserve interest rate cut in mid-September are expected to stimulate economic growth and support oil demand.

OPEC, the Saudi government communications office and the office of Russian Deputy Prime



Minister Alexander Novak did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

One source noted, "While demand uncertainties persist, there is optimism that a Fed interest rate cut will boost economic growth." Brent crude prices fell by about \$1 on Friday, trading just below \$79 a barrel by 1341 GMT.

OPEC has previously stated that it could pause or reverse the production hikes if it determines that the market is not strong enough. Two sources indicated

that future output increases will be decided on a month-by-month basis. OPEC+ does not have any formal talks scheduled until the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee meets on October 2. The JMMC can make recommendations to the wider OPEC+ group.

The planned increase for October represents only a fraction of the 700,000 bpd of offline Libyan oil output and the compensation cuts pledged by Iraq, Kazakhstan and Russia.

— Reuters



Federal Reserve Board Building in Washington. — Reuters

US Fed's preferred inflation gauge remains steady

WASHINGTON: The US Federal Reserve's favoured measure of inflation, the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) price index, held steady in July, according to government data released on Friday. This supports expectations that the central bank will begin lowering interest rates at its September policy meeting.

The PCE price index increased by 0.2 per cent on a monthly basis in July, matching analysts' forecasts. While the annual rate remained at 2.5 per cent, excluding volatile food and energy components, core PCE inflation also remained stable.

These data points reinforce the belief that the Fed is on track to reduce its benchmark lending rate from its current decades-high level. EY chief economist Gregory Daco noted several factors contributing to this, including increased pricing sensitivity, reduced markups, easing shelter cost inflation, moderating wage growth and strong productivity growth.

"Unless labour conditions deteriorate materially in the coming weeks, we continue to expect a majority of policymakers will favour a 25-basis-points cut in September," Daco added. EY also anticipates similar cuts in November and December.

The Commerce Department's breakdown of PCE inflation showed that prices for goods decreased slightly while service prices rose. Consumer spending also increased in July, indicating continued strength in the US economy. Economist Michael Pearce of Oxford Economics cautioned that while the consumer remains strong, there are concerns about the mismatch between spending gains and rising incomes. He noted, however, the resilience of household balance sheets and the reduced risk of a recession.

Wall Street stocks diversify as US fed rate cut looms



Traders work on the floor of the NYSE in New York. — Reuters

NEW YORK: The US stock market has witnessed a broader rally, indicating a growing investor confidence beyond the dominance of technology stocks. As markets anticipate the Federal Reserve's upcoming rate cuts and await key economic data, value stocks and small-cap companies are gaining traction.

The recent market rotation, which accelerated last month, suggests a healthier development in the ongoing rally, diversifying away from the concentration in tech giants like Nvidia and Apple.

While these tech stocks have significantly contributed to the overall market gains, investors are now allocating funds to value-oriented sectors and

smaller companies, which are expected to benefit from lower interest rates.

Value stocks, trading at a discount based on metrics like book value or price-to-earnings, have seen a resurgence, with sectors such as financials and industrials showing promising performance.

Analysts believe that these stocks, along with small-cap companies, could experience further growth if the Federal Reserve successfully implements a rate-cutting cycle while maintaining a healthy economy.

The broadening market trend is evident in the recent performance of the S&P 500, with a larger number of stocks outperforming the

index compared to previous periods. Additionally, the underperformance of the Magnificent Seven tech giants, including Nvidia, Tesla and Microsoft, suggests that investors are seeking opportunities beyond the tech sector.

The upcoming non-farm payrolls report will be closely watched by investors, as it could provide further support for a broader market rally if it indicates a gradual cooling of the labour market.

While technology stocks remain a significant driver of growth, particularly in the AI sector, investors may also explore other opportunities as the market continues to evolve.

— Reuters



Credit Oman's insured sales represented 7.5 per cent of the total insurable Omani exports at the end of the first half of the year.

CREDIT OMAN REPORTS 10 PER CENT GROWTH IN INSURED EXPORT SALES

MUSCAT: Credit Oman has reported a 10-per cent increase in the value of insured exports during the first half of the year, reaching a total of RO 106.594 million compared to RO 96.672 million in the same period last year.

Shaikh Khalil bin Ahmed al Harthy, CEO of Credit Oman, stated that Omani exports have witnessed significant growth in recent years due to the government's focus on diversifying income sources and the economic policies implemented to encourage investment and entrepreneurship.

In a statement to the Oman News Agency, Al Harthy added that Credit Oman's efforts align with government initiatives to support Omani exports and achieve global reach. The total

value of insured exports and domestic sales during the first half of the year reached RO 183.785 million.

He further noted that Credit Oman's insured sales represented 7.5 per cent of the total insurable Omani exports at the end of the first half of the year. The construction and building materials sector topped the list of insured sales with a total value of RO 42 million, followed by the food and consumer goods sector with a value of RO 35.2 million, and the petrochemicals and plastics sector with a value of RO 18.6 million.

The CEO of Credit Oman explained that the insured sales in the fisheries sector have improved during the first half of the year, reaching a total value of RO 945,000 compared to the same period last year. — ONA

MSX gains 72 points to close at 4,746

MUSCAT: The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) main index experienced a notable upswing last week, gaining approximately 72 points to close at 4,746. This surge marked a new upward trend following a series of declines in previous weeks.

The index benefited from the rise in shares of several leading companies, coupled with improved trading volumes and values. The weekly executed deals exceeded 4,000 for the first time in eight weeks, fostering a positive sentiment among traders. Consequently, 35 securities saw their prices rise, while 18 declined and 26 remained unchanged.

Last week marked one of the best trading weeks in the

third quarter of the year, with all sectoral indices registering collective gains. The financial sector index increased by 123 points, the industrial sector index rose by 9 points and the services sector index climbed by 4 points. The Sharia index also reached 444 points, recording a weekly increase of 2 points.

The market capitalisation of the MSX gained RO 137.8 million last week, reaching RO 24.558.9 billion by the end of Thursday's trading, marking an all-time high for the MSX's market capitalisation.

Trading volume last week increased to 98.2 million shares compared to 50.7 million shares in the previous week. The trading value also surged by 65 per



MSX main index experienced a notable upswing last week, gaining approximately 72 points to close at 4,746.

cent, from RO 9.5 million to approximately RO 15.8 million, while the number of executed transactions rose from 2,639 to 4,115. Last week's trading data revealed a tendency among individual investors to sell as share prices improved, allowing them to accumulate liquidity for upcoming subscriptions and to build new portfolios. Individual investors' sales accounted for 31.6 per cent of the total trading value, while their purchases represented 25.4 per cent of the trades.

Several shares witnessed significant price improvements last week, most notably OQ Gas Networks, which jumped to 148 baisas after remaining at 141 baisas for several weeks. The share

saw 1,069 transactions executed last week.

Shares of energy, finance and telecommunications companies also experienced growth. Bank Muscat closed with modest gains, except for Bank Sohar International, which increased by 8.2 per cent to close at 144 baisas.

Musandam Power Company recorded the highest increase, rising by 23.7 per cent to close at 313 baisas. Oman Finance Company's shares climbed to 166 baisas, representing a 9.9-per cent increase. Shell Oman Marketing's shares rose by 8.1 per cent to close at 800 baisas. National Finance Company's shares increased by 7.1 per cent to close at 150 baisas.

— ONA

Global economic shifts and the rise of crypto adoption

In a positive turn of events for Japan, workers in their 40s and 50s, often referred to as the “lost generation” due to their experience of economic stagnation and limited career opportunities, are finally receiving a much-needed pay raise. This wage increase, driven in part by recent union negotiations, is seen as a vital step in revitalising the Japanese economy.

The boost in pay for middle-aged workers, who tend to have higher spending power than younger generations, could stimulate consumer confidence and drive economic growth. This demographic plays a crucial role in driving consumption, especially as they often face significant expenses related to their children’s education.

However, the pay increases for older workers remain modest compared to those for younger generations. Due to seniority-based pay systems and lifetime employment practices, raising the wages of middle-aged workers is



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costly for businesses, particularly smaller ones. This poses a challenge for sustaining the wage growth momentum for this group.

Experts emphasise the importance of facilitating career changes and upskilling opportunities for middle-aged workers to enhance their earning potential. By acquiring new skills, these workers can improve their marketability and contribute to increased productivity, which is essential for further wage growth. The government’s role in providing support for reskilling and encouraging businesses to invest in human capital for middle-aged employees is also highlighted.

While the recent wage increases are a positive development, their impact on consumer confidence and overall economic recovery remains uncertain. The modest growth rate may not be enough to significantly boost spending, and further efforts are needed to ensure sustainable wage growth for the “lost generation” and a robust economic future for Japan.

While Japan grapples with its domestic economic challenges, the yen’s role in the global financial system has far-reaching implications, particularly for the volatile cryptocurrency market.

The crypto world was shaken to its core on August 5, not by a hack or a regulatory crackdown, but by the looming spectre of the yen carry trade. This high-risk strategy, where investors borrow cheap Japanese yen to invest in higher-yielding assets, teetered on the brink of collapse as the Bank of Japan hinted at raising interest rates. The resulting panic sent shockwaves through global markets, dragging Bitcoin and Ethereum down with it.

Central banks have stepped in to calm the waters, but the threat remains. The yen carry trade, estimated to be worth anywhere from hundreds of billions to trillions of dollars, is a ticking time bomb. Any move that narrows the gap between US and Japanese interest rates could trigger another

massive unwinding, sending crypto prices tumbling once again. The true scale of this trade remains shrouded in uncertainty, with some analysts suggesting that the Japanese government itself is heavily exposed.

The recent volatility in the crypto market has also exposed Bitcoin’s vulnerability to macroeconomic factors.

Bitcoin’s performance has lagged behind traditional stock markets since the August deleveraging event. A lack of clear catalysts and ongoing macroeconomic concerns have kept Bitcoin’s price relatively stagnant.

Additionally, factors such as tapering ETF flows, supply overhangs, and a strengthening US dollar are creating headwinds for the cryptocurrency. Ethereum has also faced challenges, underperforming Bitcoin amidst spot Ethereum ETF outflows.

The report concludes that September, historically a challenging month for crypto, coupled with the absence of strong narratives, is likely to keep traders cautious and on the sidelines.

While the crypto market faces challenges, certain regions are embracing digital assets with open arms.

A recent study by Henley & Partners has crowned Singapore as the global leader in cryptocurrency adoption, outpacing Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates.

The city-state’s success is attributed to its business-friendly environment, robust financial system, and comprehensive regulatory framework. Initiatives such as the Payment Services Act and the Monetary Authority of Singapore’s proactive approach to exploring tokenisation have fostered a conducive environment for crypto adoption. Hong Kong and the UAE are also making significant strides in this space, highlighting the growing prominence of Asia and the Middle East in the global crypto landscape.

Misreading the impact of monetary policy

This year’s Jackson Hole Economic Symposium of central bankers from around the world is right to focus on the monetary-transmission mechanism, the channel through which monetary policy influences broader economic and financial conditions. Although the US Federal Reserve raised interest rates by 500 basis points between March 2022 and July 2023, it seems that little damage has been done to the US real economy or its financial system.

This low cost of disinflation is shocking (though certainly welcome). Even if we have strong hypotheses to explain ex post why the United States has been able to combine growth with disinflation for the last two years – notably high immigration, a surge in productivity, and (above all) well-anchored inflation expectations – the lack of a visible direct impact from rate increases is remarkable.

Evidently, current US monetary policy is meaningfully looser than many Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) members and market participants think it is. What’s more, the impact of monetary policy on the economy is more conditional and probably on average weaker, than commonly believed. This assessment is directly relevant to the FOMC’s upcoming monetary-policy choices, but even more so to policymaking further in the future.

This past June, multiple FOMC members expressed concern that monetary conditions have been tightening further as declines in inflation lead to higher real interest rates. However, this view fails to account for the magnitudes and channels of monetary transmission.

Here, the focus on the policy instrument, the federal funds rate, is misleading. It is a mistake to assume that the settings of the instrument are close to optimal at any given time, or that they must be fine-tuned with each twist and turn in the inflation



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forecast. The assessment of monetary conditions should focus more on actual financial-market outcomes than on preconceived notions of the effect of policy.

As we saw with the 2008 global financial crisis, financial markets are segmented, and central banks often must intervene directly in particular markets to have an impact.

For example, commercial lending by non-bank financial intermediaries is affected differently by interest rates and (the lack of) supervision than traditional bank lending. Private equity and unlisted investments react differently to policy adjustments than commercial paper, bonds, and even traded equities do. Even in the absence

of financial-liquidity constraints, regulation and international barriers impede the transmission of credit flows uniformly across jurisdictions.

Thus, as a forward indicator, financial conditions are at least as important as the slightly backward-looking signals sent by the labour market. Moreover, financial indicators remain quite accommodative. Equities have returned to high valuations, and the decline in longer-term Treasury rates has persisted. Interest-rate spreads (such as those between lower-rated corporate bonds and comparable duration Treasuries) have widened somewhat but remain very low by historical standards, let alone for the end of a Fed tightening cycle.

The same holds true for delinquent auto and consumer loans and for real-estate losses. These have come off their lows, but not by much. It is rather odd to call monetary policy “tight” when credit remains easy and balance sheets are barely distressed.

Another problem with focusing primarily on changes in the real federal funds rate (assuming all else is equal) is that it ignores a more important benchmark for the impact of monetary policy: where that interest rate is in relation to the neutral interest rate (r^*), the rate where monetary policy is neither “loose” nor “tight” for an economy growing near trend. The gap between the underlying long-term return to safe capital

in the economy and what the Fed sets as the minimum lending rate for very short-term loans thus reflects the traction of monetary policy on the economy. If the neutral rate has moved up a lot, any rise in real rates as inflation declines could be more than offset.

As Fed Chair Jerome Powell rightly pointed out at previous Jackson Hole conferences, the economic stars (neutral interest and unemployment rates) are not directly observable, or even robustly estimated. Yet there are overwhelming reasons to believe that r^* has risen substantially above its pre-Covid levels, which means that monetary-policy settings have actually become looser over time.

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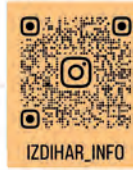
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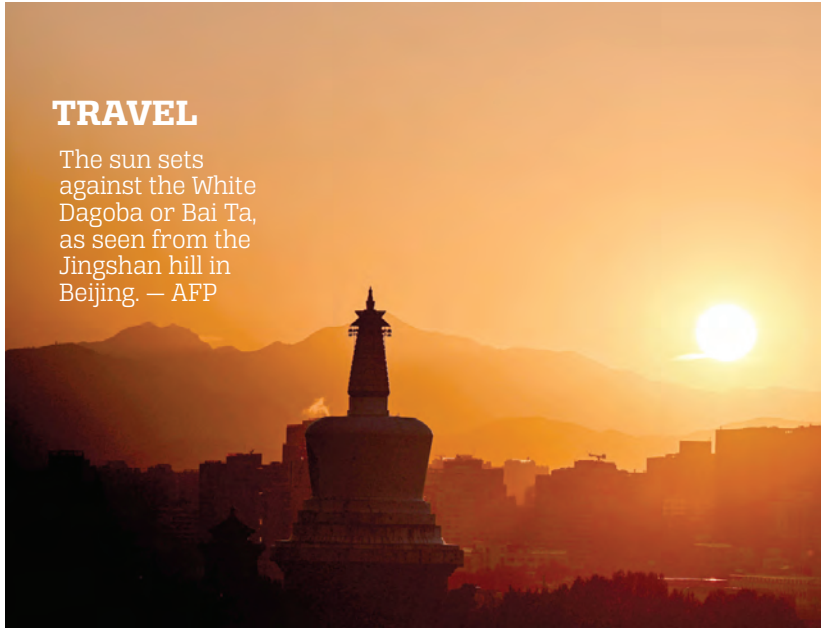
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LIFESTYLE

Workers drop containers of grapes in containers as they take part in a grape harvest at a vineyard, as part of the production of the Louis Vallon Bordeaux Cremant made by the Bordeaux Families group, in Branne, in the south-western France. — AFP



TRAVEL

The sun sets against the White Dagoba or Bai Ta, as seen from the Jingshan hill in Beijing. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

British singer and actress Sarah Brightman poses for pictures during a "Sunset Boulevard" media opportunity on the stairs of Opera House in Sydney. — AFP



CHANGING WORLD

A person wearing a Guy Fawkes mask takes part in a protest against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and the results of the recent presidential election on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. — AFP



CULTURE

A member of the Toraja ethnic group holds the exhumed body of her baby who died in 1988, during the traditional ritual known as Manene in Pangala, South Sulawesi. — AFP

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FROM THE TOP OF JABAL SHAMS: A TOURISTIC EXPERIENCE TO EXPLORE NATURE

Jabal Shams, Oman's highest peak, attracts both locals and international tourists with its breathtaking landscapes and cool climate. Ideal for nature enthusiasts, it offers stunning canyon views and diverse hiking trails. Visitors can also explore traditional villages, gaining insight into Omani mountain life and culture. ... P20

LIFESTYLE

Norway's Princess Martha Louise to wed her California shaman

NORWEGIAN PRINCESS MARTHA Louise is set to marry American self-proclaimed shaman Durek Verrett on Saturday, a union of two alternative therapy devotees that has raised eyebrows in Norway. Martha Louise, a 52-year-old divorcee, claims to be a clairvoyant who can speak with angels, a gift she has shared — and

profited from — in books and courses. Verrett, 49 and from California, calls himself a "sixth-generation shaman" and sells pricey gold medallions that he says save lives. "I'm very spiritual, it's just so nice to be with a person who embraces it," Martha Louise said on Instagram after the couple announced their engagement in June 2022. The pair will tie the knot at a hotel in the hills of Geiranger, a picturesque village on the shores of a fjord on Norway's west coast. Festivities kick off on Thursday with a party for the more than 350 guests, including Sweden's Crown Princess Victoria and her husband Prince Daniel. According to Verrett, Saturday's nuptials are actually a renewal of the couple's vows. The spiritual guide, who counts Hollywood celebrities Gwyneth Paltrow and Antonio Banderas among his followers, claims he was a pharaoh in a previous life and Martha Louise was his wife. The couple's eccentricity has ruffled feathers in no-nonsense Norway, as has their disregard for science and their use of their royal ties for commercial gain. To avoid confusion over her role,



Martha Louise relinquished her royal duties in November 2022. She kept her title but agreed not to use it in her commercial endeavours. She has however violated the agreement several times since then, most recently when she and Verrett released a "wedding gin" for sale in Norway that bore her princess title on the label. "Seeing as the agreement has not been respected, it's time to take away Martha

Louise's princess title before King Harald sees his life's work destroyed even further," historian and royal expert Trond Noren Isaksen wrote in an op-ed piece in July. The couple has also angered Norwegian media by signing deals with Hello! magazine and Netflix for exclusive coverage of the wedding.

FALLING POPULARITY

Martha Louise has three daughters from her first marriage to flamboyant Norwegian author Ari Behn, who committed suicide three years after their 2016 divorce. She is fourth in line to the Norwegian throne; her younger brother Crown Prince Haakon is due one day to succeed King Harald. Norway's royal family has been largely spared from scandal — until recently. Martha Louise and Verrett have contributed to an erosion of public support for the monarchy, from 81 per cent in 2017 to 68 per cent, a poll by public broadcaster NRK showed this week. A recent scandal involving the 27-year-old son of Crown Princess Mette-Marit -- from a relationship prior to her marriage to Crown Prince Haakon — has also contributed. Earlier this month, Marius Borg Hoiby admitted to a cocaine- and alcohol-fuelled assault on his girlfriend, and two ex-girlfriends have since come forward with similar claims. Four in 10 Norwegians said their view of the royal family had grown more negative in the past year, with many citing Martha Louise, Verrett or Hoiby as the reason, the poll showed. — AFP

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DIVAS NEVER DIE:
ETERNAL APPEAL OF OPERA
SINGER MARIA CALLAS

NEARLY 47 YEARS

after her death, one of opera's greatest stars, Greek soprano Maria Callas, is again taking centre stage at the Venice Film Festival played by Angelina Jolie in a new biopic. The film "Maria" by Chilean film-maker Pablo Larrain — who has previously tackled other female icons including Jackie Kennedy and Princess Diana — portrays the final days of a singer whose voice and style forever marked the world of opera. Here are some of the turning points in the life of "La Divina".

A STAR IS BORN

Callas received a standing ovation hailing her arrival as a new star as the curtain fell on the last act of Ponchielli's "La Gioconda" in Verona, Italy, on August 2, 1947. She was born Sophia Cecilia Anna Maria Kalogeropoulou on December 2, 1923, in New York — her family name later shortened to Callas. Her family later moved back to Greece, where she started performing at the age of eight. In Verona she met Giovanni Battista Meneghini, a wealthy industrialist who was passionate about opera. Twenty-eight years her senior, he became her impresario and then husband in 1949. In 1954 she

lost around 30 kilos and transformed herself into the ultimate diva, taking top parts in the most well-known operas.

THE ROME SCANDAL

On January 2, 1958, Callas opened the Rome season with "Norma" in the presence of Italy's president, Giovanni Gronchi. But at the end of the first act, she lost her voice and refused to continue. The temperamental diva was accused of being capricious as there had been whistles during one of her arias. But she insisted to the media: "As you could see, I could no longer speak."

ONASSIS, HER GREAT LOVE

In 1959 Callas left Meneghini to embark on a passionate nine-year affair with Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis. "Late at night one could see him, with Callas, in an Athens taverna where, having taken off his jacket and undone his tie, he showered the orchestra with gold and broke, as is Greek custom, piles of plates," AFP reported. In 1968 Onassis left Callas to marry Jackie Kennedy, the widow of assassinated US president John F Kennedy.

CURTAIN CALL

Callas turned her back on

opera in 1965. On February 20 she triumphed in "Tosca" in Paris. "The moment she appeared in the church in the first act, in a pink dress wrapped in a large deep-orange scarf, her arms full of flowers, the applause was such that it drowned out the music and the first lines were inaudible," AFP wrote. But during a performance on May 29, she fell ill. On July 5, she took to the stage despite the advice of her doctor for the last time in London, with Queen Elizabeth II in the audience.

A FINAL TOUR

In 1973 Callas undertook an international tour of recitals. In Paris, "bouquets rained onto the stage", accompanied by standing ovations and cries of "Vive Maria!", AFP wrote, even if the critics were "less enthusiastic".

HER LAST BREATH

Callas died at her Paris home on September 16, 1977, aged 53, after a heart attack. "I have just seen her on her bed," said Michel Glotz, her former artistic director, in an AFP report. "It was the image itself of 'La Traviata' as she performed it in 1956 at Milan's La Scala. There was not a line on her face. It seems like she was just resting," he said. — AFP

Angelina Jolie as the tormented 'Divina' Callas at Venice

ANGELINA JOLIE RETURNS to the limelight at the Venice Film Festival on Thursday as Maria Callas, "La Divina", whose rich voice, glamorous persona, and tragic love affair mesmerised audiences around the world.

In "Maria", the modern-day movie star will strive to capture the transcendent dramatic presence and tormented life of one of opera's most resplendent divas in a biopic from Chilean director Pablo Larrain.

The film that premieres on the Lido on Thursday evening, on the festival's second day, is the last in Larrain's trilogy of movies about iconic real-life women — after 2021's "Spencer" about Lady Di and 2016's "Jackie" about Jacqueline Kennedy.

The director has said only a larger-than-life star in her own right could play the role of the American-born Greek singer.

ENTER JOLIE

"This is the greatest diva of the 20th century, and who could play that?" Larrain told Vanity Fair last week.

"I didn't want to work with someone that didn't have that already. I needed an actress who would naturally and organically be that diva, carry that weight, be that presence. Angelina was there."

Absent from the screen since 2021, the 49-year-old American actress and director has kept a relatively low profile even as her lengthy, acrimonious divorce from Brad Pitt continues to make headlines.

The public's fascination with Jolie's private life has parallels with Callas's, whose stormy life and loves — including her relationship with the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, who left her for Jacqueline Kennedy — were similarly fodder for the tabloids.

But while the paparazzi will be out in full force on Thursday, Jolie — who was spotted in the Venice heat on Tuesday cloaked in a Christian Dior trench coat — will not cross paths with Pitt during her visit.

Pitt's action comedy "Wolfs", in which he and George Clooney play rival professional fixers, is playing out of competition on the Lido on Sunday, as purposely planned by festival organisers to avoid awkward encounters.

VERY SCARY

One of 21 films in competition for Venice's prestigious Golden Lion prize, "Maria" centres on Callas's final, isolated years in Paris in the 1970s, as she looks back at her life and career before her death at age 53 from a heart attack.

Jolie reportedly studied six months for the role, training herself to mimic the singer's cadences and tones as the film mixes in her own voice with that of the celebrated soprano.

"You can't make a movie like this with an actress that is not actually singing it," Larrain told Vanity Fair.

"This is the real thing — it was very scary for her, but she did it."

While some critics found flaws with Callas's voice, it was nevertheless deeply expressive, able to impart dramatic intensity to any role, which combined with her beauty and majestic stage presence prompting frenzied standing ovations.

A towering talent with a tireless work ethic, Callas was often portrayed as a "temperamental" star, a label she rejected, defending herself as a disciplined perfectionist with high standards.

She single-handedly revived the 19th-century bel canto operas of Donizetti, Rossini and Bellini — whose "Norma" was one of Callas's signature roles. Callas died in 1977. — AFP

DISCOVERY

Ancient sea cow was attacked by crocodile, scavenged by shark—study

AN ANCIENT SEA cow that once swam the oceans millions of years ago met its demise after being attacked by a crocodile and was feasted upon later by a shark, a study suggests.

Skeleton analysis indicates the creature was first attacked by the prehistoric crocodile and then scavenged by a tiger shark, researchers said.

The sea cow, which belongs to the genus Culebraherium, died after the crocodile performed a "death roll" while grasping its prey, a behaviour commonly observed in modern counterparts.

The move involves delivering a powerful bite coupled with a full-bodied twisting motion, which allows the crocodile to disable, kill, and dismember prey.

The researchers said the findings, published in the Journal of Vertebrate Palaeontology, marks one of the sole specimen examples of a creature being attacked by two different predators during the Miocene epoch, around 23 million to 11.6 million years ago.

Lead-author Aldo Benites-Palomino, from the department of palaeontology at the University of Zurich, said their study highlights the importance of sea cows within the food chain.

He added: "While evidence of food chain interactions are not scarce in the fossil record, they are mostly represented by fragmentary fossils exhibiting marks of ambiguous significance."

"Our findings constitute one of the few records documenting multiple predators over a single prey, and as such provide a glimpse of food chain networks in this region during the Miocene."

The researchers analysed skeleton remains, which included a partial skull and 18 associated vertebrae,

unearthed near the city of Coro in Venezuela.

The team found what they describe as "conspicuous" deep tooth marks on the sea cow's snout, suggesting the crocodile first tried to grasp its prey by the snout in an attempt to suffocate it.

Two further large incisions indicate the crocodile may have then dragged the sea cow, while striations and slashing marks across the fossil suggest it then executed a death roll, the researchers said.

A tooth of a tiger shark (Galeocerdo aduncus) was also found near the sea cow's neck, along with shark bite marks observed throughout the skeleton.

This suggests the remains of the creature was then picked apart by this scavenger, the researchers said.

Marcelo R Sanchez-Villagra, director at the Palaeontological Institute & Museum at the University of Zurich, said the team first learnt about the fossil site, located in the outcrops of the Early to Middle Miocene Agua Clara Formation, through a local farmer who had noticed some unusual rocks.

He said: "Intrigued, we decided to investigate."

"Initially, we were unfamiliar with the site's geology, and the first fossils we unearthed were parts of skulls."

"It took us some time to determine what they were — sea cow skulls, which are quite peculiar in appearance."

"By consulting geological maps and examining the sediments at the new locality, we were able to determine the age of the rocks in which the fossils were found."

The researchers said several trips were required to excavate the skeleton, followed by months of preparation to restore and then study the fossil. — PA Media/dpa

BY AMAL AL RIYAMI

Imagine escaping the scorching summer heat to a cooler, more tranquil place, surrounded by fresh air and towering mountains. At 3,000 meters above sea level, at the resort, you can feel the cool mountain breeze gently brushing against your skin, carrying the scent of pine trees, as you immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of nature.

Jabal Shams, often referred to as the "Mountain of the Sun," is Oman's highest peak and home to the country's very own version of the Grand Canyon. Towering over 3,000 metres, it offers breathtaking panoramic views and a serene escape from the sweltering summer heat that blankets much of the region. As temperatures soar elsewhere, the cool mountain air and natural beauty of Jabal Shams make it an ideal summer destination for adventure seekers and those looking to unwind in nature.

The most striking feature of Jabal Shams is the Wadi Ghul, also known as the Grand Canyon of Arabia. This dramatic gorge,



with its sheer drops and rugged cliffs, provides some of the most stunning landscapes in Oman. The canyon is not just a feast for the eyes but also a hub for various outdoor activities. Hiking enthusiasts can embark on the Balcony Walk, a relatively easy trail that winds along the canyon's edge, offering awe-inspiring views and leading to an abandoned village perched on the cliffs. For those seeking a more challenging adventure, the summit trek to the top of Jabal Shams rewards hikers with an unparalleled vista of the surrounding mountains and valleys.

Beyond hiking, Jabal Shams offers opportunities for rock climbing, camping, and stargazing. The mountain's remote location and clear skies make it one of the best places in Oman for observing the night sky, with stars seemingly close enough to touch. The area is also rich in cultural heritage, with nearby villages offering a glimpse into traditional Omani life, where ancient practices and customs are still preserved.

What makes Jabal Shams particularly appealing during the hot summer months is its cooler climate. While the coastal areas of Oman can become uncomfortably hot, the higher altitudes of Jabal Shams offer a refreshing break, with temperatures often remaining pleasantly mild. This cooler weather, combined with the natural beauty and diverse activities available, makes Jabal Shams a perfect retreat for those looking to escape the heat and explore one of Oman's most spectacular natural wonders.

WHERE TO STAY

New developments at Jabal Shams are set to enhance its appeal as a top tourist destination. A newly opened café offers visitors breathtaking views of the Grand Canyon, providing a perfect spot to relax and soak in the scenery. The area also now boasts various accommodation options, including a unique dome-themed resort where guests can stargaze from the comfort of their dome tents.

Additionally, new lodges blend seamlessly with the natural landscape, inspired by the surrounding rocks and mountains. While there are no luxury hotels, this is a deliberate choice to preserve the mountain's pristine beauty, particularly from light pollution. More amenities are planned, ensuring a comfortable yet eco-friendly experience for all visitors. These thoughtful additions aim to drive tourism while maintaining the serene and untouched atmosphere that makes Jabal Shams so special.

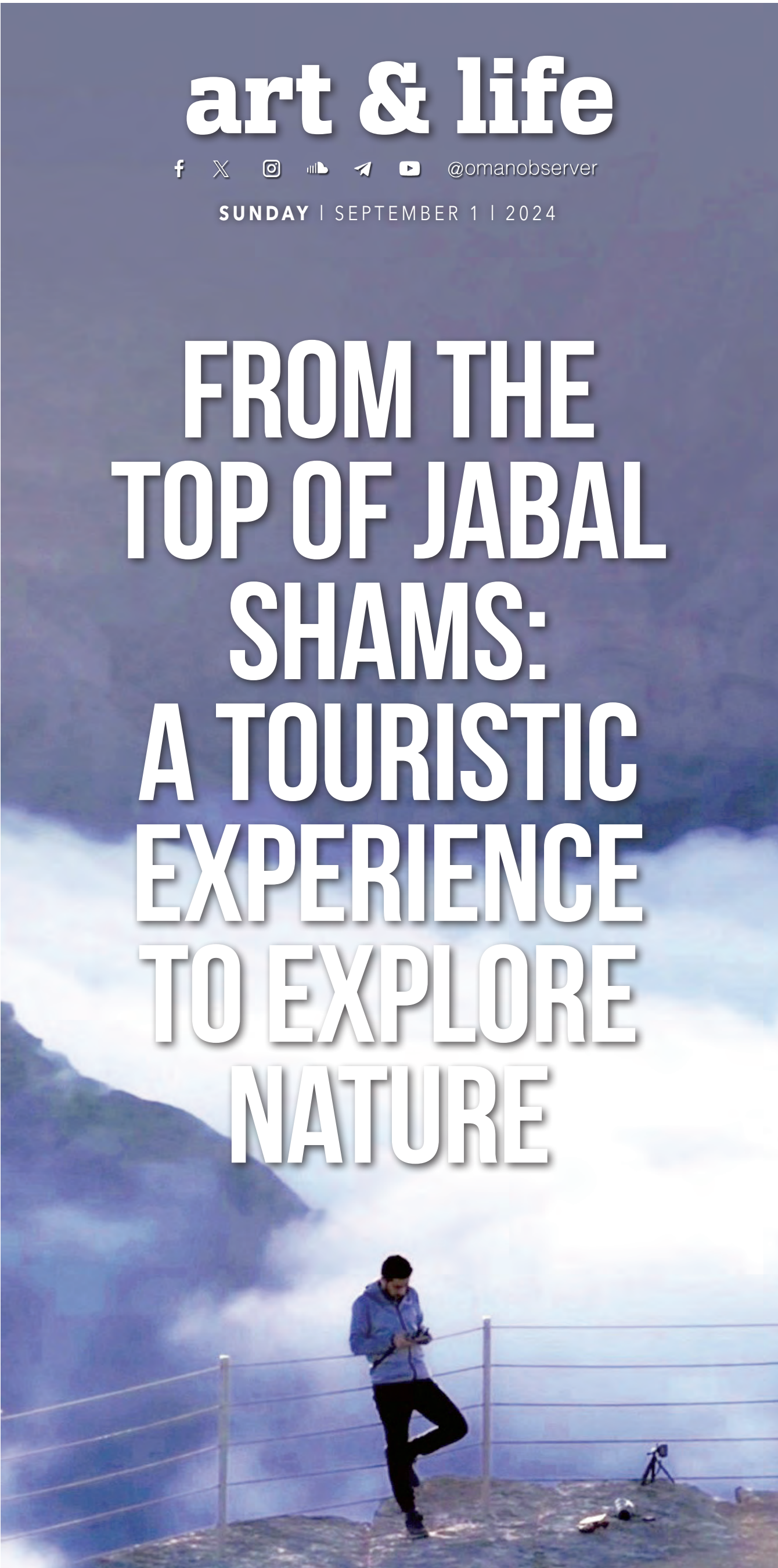
Jabal Shams Resort, established in 2002, is a premier destination for nature enthusiasts, located at a remarkable altitude

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of approximately 3,000 metres above sea level. Situated 240 km from Muscat, the journey to the resort takes around three hours. Guests are offered luxurious accommodations in elegantly furnished rooms, equipped with modern amenities, including spacious bathrooms and panoramic views. The resort's restaurants provide a wide variety of local and international cuisines, catering to diverse tastes. Visitors can indulge in a

ronmental tourism by adopting eco-friendly practices and educating guests on the importance of preserving the natural environment. Many of our visitors have expressed deep admiration for the resort, particularly noting the sense of calm and relaxation it provides. It truly is an oasis of tranquillity, far removed from the noise of everyday life."

Jean Pierre Lafontaine, a visitor from France, shared, "My experience at Jabal



range of activities such as hiking, mountain climbing, and stargazing, with Jabal Shams' clear skies offering an exceptional celestial experience. The resort is also dedicated to environmental tourism, employing solar energy and efficient water management, aligning with Oman's Vision 2040 on sustainability and community development. Despite challenges like unpaved roads and water scarcity, the management under CEO Ibrahim al Khatri is committed to overcoming

Shams was extraordinary. Hiking through the mountains and witnessing the sunset from the summit were some of the most beautiful moments of my life. The accommodation offers first-class service, with meticulous attention to detail that makes the stay unforgettable. I feel as though I've become a part of this place, and it will remain in my memory forever." Jabal Shams has become a favoured destination for both locals and international tourists, drawn by its natural



these obstacles. Plans include infrastructure development, expanded services, and the introduction of innovative technologies like augmented reality nature trails. Ibrahim al Khatri, with his extensive experience in tourism and IT, is steering the resort towards becoming a leading destina-

beauty and unique cultural experiences. As Oman's highest peak, the mountain offers stunning landscapes, making it an ideal spot for nature lovers. Visitors are captivated by the dramatic views of the Grand Canyon, the diverse hiking trails, and the cool mountain air, which provides



tion in Oman and the region, with a focus on enhancing guest experiences and environmental stewardship.

A FAVOURITE AMONG NATURE ENTHUSIASTS

Ibrahim al Khatri, Director of Jabal Shams Resort, stated, "Our plans include the development of new facilities designed to offer a comprehensive experience for visitors. This will encompass health resorts, sports facilities, and educational programs focused on the environment and local history. We are committed to enhancing our role as a leader in envi-

a refreshing escape from the region's heat.

Beyond its natural allure, Jabal Shams is also home to several traditional villages that offer a glimpse into life in the Omani mountains. These villages, with their terraced farms, stone houses, and warm hospitality, allow visitors to experience the rich culture and heritage of the area. The combination of breathtaking scenery and authentic cultural encounters makes Jabal Shams a must-visit destination for those seeking both adventure and a deeper understanding of Oman's mountain life.