

OMAN
Observer
DAILY

SUNRISE 06:51 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 05:32 AM

DHUHR 12:21 PM

ASR 03:25 PM

MAGHRIB 05:46 PM

ISHA 07:00 PM

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AL KHABURAH CASTLE
EXUDED VINTAGE CHARM AS
THE COMMUNITY SHOWCASE
CLASSIC CARS

HM, Bahrain King hold official talks

KING HAMAD APPRECIATES WARM WELCOME AND HOSPITALITY



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain held an official session of talks at Al Alam Palace on Tuesday.

KING HAMAD
ARRIVES ON A 2-DAY
STATE VISIT

HIS MAJESTY LEADS
WELCOMING PARTY
FOR BAHRAIN KING

TALKS REVIEW
DEEP-ROOTED
FRATERNAL TIES

MEANS TO PROMOTE
TIES IN VARIOUS
SPHERES

LEADERS EXCHANGE
VIEWS ON REGIONAL
SITUATION

HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain held an official session of talks at Al Alam Palace on Tuesday. At the outset of the session, His Majesty the Sultan reiterated his welcome to King Hamad, being an eminent guest of the Sultanate of Oman, wishing him and his accompanying delegation a pleasant stay. On his turn, King Hamad expressed his utmost thanks and appreciation to His Majesty the Sultan for the warm welcome and hospitality.

The session reviewed the deep-rooted fraternal relations between

the two countries and ways of promoting them in various spheres in a manner that serves the interests of the two peoples and meets their aspirations.

The two leaders also exchanged views on the situation in the region, as well as regional and international developments. They also discussed matters of mutual interest.

The official session of talks was attended from the Omani side by HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers; His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and

Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan; HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs; HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth; Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of the Royal Court; Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office; Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior; Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister; Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance; Dr Hamed bin Said al Aufi, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan; and Sayyid Faisal

bin Harib al Busaidy, Ambassador of Oman to Bahrain.

Meanwhile, it was attended from the Bahraini side by Shaikh Abdullah bin Hamad al Khalifa, Personal Representative of the King; Shaikh Nassir bin Hamad al Khalifa, Personal Representative of the King for Humanitarian Works and Youth Affairs; Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad al Khalifa, Chairman of the General Sports Authority and President of Bahrain Olympic Committee; Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, Minister of the Royal Court; Shaikh Salman bin Abdullah al Khalifa, Deputy Chairman of the Higher Committee

for Urban Planning; Gen Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa, Minister of Interior; Nabil bin Yaqoob al Hamar, Adviser to the King for Media Affairs; Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, Adviser to the King for Diplomatic Affairs; Dr Majid bin Ali al Nuaimi, Minister of the Public Affairs at the Royal Court; Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid al Zayani, Foreign Minister; Shaikh Salman bin Khalifa al Khalifa, Minister of Finance and National Economy; Abdullah bin Adil Fakhru, Minister of Industry and Commerce; and Dr Juma bin Ahmed al Kaabi, Ambassador of Bahrain to Oman. — ONA

His Majesty hosts dinner in honour of King of Bahrain



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik hosted an official dinner at Al Alam Palace guesthouse on Tuesday evening in honour of King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The dinner was attended by some members of the Royal Family, ministers, commanders of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and the Royal Oman Police, as well as ambassadors of Arab and friendly countries, members of the Council of Oman, under-secretaries, some ambassadors at the Foreign Ministry and CEOs.

Prior to the dinner, the two leaders exchanged commemorative gifts, in a manifestation of fraternal ties binding the two countries and their peoples. — ONA

King of Bahrain receives



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warm, rousing welcome



KING Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain arrived on Tuesday for a two-day state visit to the Sultanate of Oman. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik led the welcoming party for the King. When the jet touched down at the Royal Airport, His Majesty the Sultan met the guest at the foot of the ramp, welcoming him and wishing him and his accompanying delegation a pleasant stay in Oman.

Along with His Majesty the Sultan, King Hamad was received by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs; Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court; Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office; Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior (Head of the Mission of Honour); Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister; Sayyid Faisal bin Harib al Busaidy, Ambassador of Oman to Bahrain; Dr Juma bin Ahmed al Kaabi,

Ambassador of Bahrain to Oman; members of the mission of honour; and some members of the Bahraini Embassy in Muscat Governorate.

When the guest's jet entered the Omani airspace, it was escorted by a squadron of military aircraft of the Royal Air Force of Oman, showcasing a gesture of warm welcome.

His Majesty the Sultan and King Hamad then proceeded to the hall, flanked by two rows of the guard of honour of the Royal Guard of Oman (RGO). After a short break, the motorcade of the two leaders departed the Royal Airport, heading to Al Alam Palace for the official and popular reception.

As the motorcade passed through Muscat Gate, a group of Royal Camel Corps lined both sides of the road, welcoming the guest.

A cavalcade from the Royal Cavalry and the RGO Cavalry escorted the official motorcade to the National Museum, accompanied by a mounted military music band. Upon arriving at the yard leading to Al Alam Palace, a popular

reception took place with male and female citizens participating. A cluster of folklore bands lined the passage, chanting lyrics as a gesture of warm welcome to the guest.

When the motorcade reached the courtyard of Al Alam Palace, the RGO band played a welcoming tune, creating an atmosphere of fanfare. His Majesty the Sultan then accompanied King Hamad to the Dais of Honour, where the National Anthem of the Kingdom of Bahrain was played, followed by a twenty-one-gun salute.

His Majesty the Sultan subsequently greeted members of the official delegation accompanying the King, wishing them a pleasant stay and a successful visit. On his turn, King Hamad greeted members of the Royal Family, Chairmen of the State Council and Majlis Ash'shura, ministers and commanders of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and the Royal Oman Police (ROP). King Hamad is accompanied during the visit by an official delegation comprising Shaikh Abdullah

bin Hamad al Khalifa, Personal Representative of the King; Shaikh Nassir bin Hamad al Khalifa, Personal Representative of the King for Humanitarian Works and Youth Affairs; Shaikh Khalid bin Hamad al Khalifa, Chairman of the General Sports Authority and President of Bahrain Olympic Committee; Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, Minister of the Royal Court; Shaikh Salman bin Abdullah al Khalifa, Deputy Chairman of the Higher Committee for Urban Planning; Gen Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa, Minister of Interior; Nabil bin Yaqoob al Hamar, Adviser to the King for Media Affairs; Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, Adviser to the King for Diplomatic Affairs; Dr Majid bin Ali al Nuaimi, Minister of Public Affairs at the Royal Court; Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid al Zayani, Foreign Minister; Shaikh Salman bin Khalifa al Khalifa, Minister of Finance and National Economy; Abdullah bin Adil Fakhru, Minister of Industry and Commerce; and Dr Juma bin Ahmed al Kaabi, Ambassador of Bahrain to Oman. — ONA





Bahrain King begins state visit



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SHORT TAKES

His Majesty’s greetings conveyed to the Portuguese president



President Dr Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa receives credentials of Ahmed bin Mohammed al Araiimi in Lisbon on Tuesday.

LISBON: President Dr Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa of the Portuguese Republic received Ambassador Ahmed bin Mohammed al Araiimi, who presented his credentials as the non-resident Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Sultanate of Oman to the Republic of Portugal at the Presidential Palace, on Tuesday. The ambassador conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his wishes of good health and happiness to the president, the government and continued progress and prosperity for the friendly Portuguese people. The Portuguese president asked the ambassador to convey his sincere greetings to His Majesty, along with his wishes of good health and well-being to His Majesty, and for continued progress and prosperity for the people of the Sultanate of Oman. The Portuguese president wished the ambassador success in performing his duties, hoping that the bilateral relations between the two countries would see further development and growth. The ambassador stressed the keenness of His Majesty’s government on fostering bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and advancing the prospects of cooperation in all fields to serve their common interests. — ONA

Sayyid Theyazin to preside over theatre fest closing ceremony



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Wednesday, will preside over the closing ceremony of the 15th Arab Theatre Festival, hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in partnership with the Arab Theatre Authority and the Omani Theatre Society from January 9 to 15. The festival saw a number of theatrical performances, press conferences, training sessions and an intellectual conference. It brought together more than 500 theatrical actors and actresses from the Sultanate of Oman and Arab countries. —ONA

MoH’s national survey on lifestyle diseases begins

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH @lakshmioman

THE Ministry of Health has launched the National Survey of Non-Communicable Diseases to design future health initiatives in the Sultanate of Oman. It was launched by Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, in his office on Tuesday in the presence of officials. The survey, which was initiated in the Muscat Governorate, aims to collect data on high blood pressure, diabetes, respiratory diseases, cancer and heart disease, in addition to analysing the risk factors associated with them. Dr Samira bint Musa al Maimaniyah, Director-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate, speaking to the Oman Daily Observer, said: “This will provide us with a database on the common non-communicable diseases prevailing in Oman. The selected areas will be representative samples. The survey will target individuals aged 15 years and above to identify the common morbidities that are prevalent.” This initiative is a significant step because future health projects will be based on this clinical evidence. The numbers will guide decision-makers in choosing effective interventions. “This survey will help us determine where we stand, evaluate our



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DR SAMIRA BINT MUSA AL MAIMANIYAH Director-General of Health Services in Muscat Governorate



Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, speaks at the launch of National Survey of Non-Communicable Diseases in Muscat Governorate on Tuesday. — ONA

current performance level, measure progress, and identify strategies needed in alignment with Oman Vision 2040. This will ultimately reduce the economic burden of non-communicable diseases on the country,” Dr Samira said. The survey will cover all governorates of Oman, with each governorate divided into sectors and blocks. It will include both nationals and residents. The project aims to provide reliable information that contributes to formulating evidence-based strategic plans to address these health challenges and enhance prevention. Dr Samira noted that the results of the survey would help determine

health priorities and develop policies that improve the quality of life for everyone in Oman. She called on all citizens and residents to cooperate and participate effectively to ensure the success of this national project, which serves the interests of all. Sayyid Al Busaidy praised the efforts made to organise this survey, emphasising the importance of collaboration between various parties to achieve the project’s objectives and ensure a sustainable, healthy future for society. This survey is part of the Ministry of Health’s plan to enhance the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases.

Al Sharqiyah South conducts training for officials in leadership and administration

BALQEES AL ORAIMI MUSCAT, JAN 14

The Governorate of Al Sharqiyah South organised a training workshop entitled Strengthening the Role of Local Administration in the Development of Governorates, in cooperation with Jadara Development Company, to enable local leaders to face challenges and enhance sustainable development. The workshop, held in the presence of Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, is part of a series of programmes aimed at developing leadership skills and enhancing administrative capabilities within the framework of Oman Vision 2040. Dr Al Maawali said, “Developing leadership skills and analytical capabilities of local administration workers is one of the priorities that the governorate seeks to achieve to ensure comprehensive and sustainable development.”



Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, speaks at the workshop

The workshop was supervised by Dr Bakhit al Shibli, a trainer specialising in developing individual and institutional performance, who provided participants with five main tools to enhance their performance in local administration. These tools included: Training workshops to develop analysis and decision-making skills. Simulations to gain experience by representing real-

life situations. Modelling successful experiences to benefit from international and local best practices. Accumulated experiences to encourage interaction and knowledge exchange between participants. Designing hypothetical scenarios to anticipate the future and improve response to potential challenges. The workshop covered topics related to aligning operational plans with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to achieve sustainable and comprehensive development across all sectors. It also addressed building development indicators to monitor progress and achieve the desired goals of development plans. Dr Al Shibli said, “Oman Vision 2040 provides a clear framework for achieving sustainable development, and enabling local cadres to use effective tools to achieve this vision is essential to ensure its

success.” The workshop received significant interaction from participants, who praised the training content and practical tools provided. They noted that the skills and knowledge acquired would contribute to improving their administrative performance and enable them to face development challenges more effectively. This workshop is an important step in enhancing the role of local administration in achieving sustainable development in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate. By developing leadership skills and enabling local cadres to use the latest tools and methodologies, the governorate seeks to achieve comprehensive development in line with Oman Vision 2040. These initiatives confirm the governorate’s commitment to supporting local leaders and enhancing their capabilities to achieve a more prosperous and sustainable future.

Dar Al Atta’a Association bags GCC award for community work

Dar Al Atta’a Association has been awarded the Sanabel Award for Social Responsibility 2024 in the category of ‘Best Community Initiatives in Orphan Care in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)’. The honour coincided with the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Sanabel Charity Association. Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa presented the awards in Manama recently. This recognition comes as an acknowledgment of

Dar Al Atta’a’s pioneering efforts in delivering innovative and sustainable initiatives to support orphans and enhance their quality of life. The award was presented during a ceremony held in the capital city, Manama, in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Maryam bint Issa al Zadjaliyah, Founder and Chairperson of Dar Al Atta’a Association, expressed her pride and gratitude for this achievement, which reflects the association’s commitment to



Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa presented the awards in Manama recently

its humanitarian mission. She highlighted the association’s dedication to developing specialised programmes that address the needs of orphans and contribute to their empowerment under the Family Support Programme. This programme, described as the heartbeat of the association, aims to assist underprivileged families and empower them sustainably. She emphasised that this recognition strengthens the association’s sense of responsibility

towards the community and motivates continued efforts to promote social solidarity and innovation in serving vulnerable groups. Al Zadjaliyah also thanked to all supporters and partners who contributed to this success. The Sanabel Award for Social Responsibility is a prestigious regional platform that celebrates exceptional initiatives in orphan care, highlighting impactful and sustainable efforts to improve the lives of orphans across the GCC.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam speaks at the presidential palace, in Baabda, Lebanon. — Reuters

PM-DESIGNATE SALAM AIMS TO REBUILD LEBANON

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam said on Tuesday his hands were “extended to everyone”, in a gesture to the Hezbollah group that accused opponents of seeking to exclude it by nominating him for the post. President Joseph Aoun formally designated Salam, who has been serving as presiding judge at the International Court of Justice, to form the next government on Tuesday, after he won the backing of a majority of lawmakers the previous day. Speaking after the meeting, Salam said he was committed to rebuilding from last year’s war between Israel and Hezbollah, and that it was time for “a new chapter” in Lebanon “rooted in justice, security, progress and opportunities”. Reconstruction “requires the full implementation of (UN) Resolution 1701 and all provisions of the ceasefire agreement and the imposition of the enemy’s complete withdrawal from the last occupied inch of our lands”, he said, referring to Israel. Salam said he supported unity and was against exclusion. — Reuters



Britain’s King Charles III greets Iraqi PM Mohammed Shia, at Buckingham Palace. — AFP

IRAQI PM IN LONDON TO LAUNCH ‘NEW ERA’ OF TIES

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer was to meet his Iraqi counterpart Mohammed Shia al-Sudani on Tuesday for talks on trade, security and migration, in a visit hailed as a “new era” in ties. A “strategic partnership” to be signed during the trip would consolidate cooperation and be “one of the most important steps in relations between Iraq and the United Kingdom, representing the start of a new era”, Sudani said during the flight from Baghdad. Sudani first met on Tuesday with the UK’s head of state King Charles, before meeting Starmer at Downing Street. The visit will see the start of talks on a returns agreement for Iraqi irregular migrants to the UK, Starmer’s office said. The leaders will also unveil a £12.3 billion export package to boost opportunities for British businesses, it added. Starmer said the trip “marks a new era in UK-Iraq cooperation, which will deliver mutual benefits from trade to defence, as we continue to work together towards stability in the wider region”. — AFP

RESCUE CONTINUES

15 bodies pulled from South Africa mine



Over two dozen illegal miners were rescued and at least 15 bodies recovered from an abandoned gold mine in South Africa, as operations continued for a second day on Tuesday to reach more people who have been underground for months. Some 1,500 people have voluntarily left the shaft, police said. “They are very sick. They are nearly dying,” community leader Johannes Qankase said on Tuesday. — AFP

SUDAN RESCUERS SAY AT LEAST 120 KILLED BY SHELLING NEAR CAPITAL

PORT SUDAN: Sudanese volunteer rescuers said shelling in the greater Khartoum area has killed at least 120 people, as fighting between the army and paramilitaries has escalated nationwide. The “random shelling” in western Omdurman, the capital’s twin city just across the Nile River, resulted in the deaths of 120 civilians, said the Ombada Emergency Response Room, part of a network of volunteer rescuers across the war-torn country. It said the figure was an “initial toll”, and

did not specify who was behind the attack. The rescuers said medical supplies were in critically short supply as health workers struggled to treat “a large number of wounded people suffering from varying degrees of injuries” as a result of the shelling. Most of Greater Khartoum residents on both sides of the Nile regularly report shelling across the river, with bombs and shrapnel often hitting homes and civilians. Rescuers in Omdurman’s Ombada

locality reported a dire healthcare crisis, with over 70 deaths between August and December attributed to severe malnutrition, malaria and diarrhoea. The shelling came as fighting between the army and the RSF has intensified in recent weeks, more than 20 months into their war. Port Sudan was without power on Monday after a drone attack blamed on paramilitaries hit a major hydroelectric dam in the country’s north. — AFP

Qatar says Gaza truce talks in ‘final stages’

KEY mediator Qatar said negotiations for a Gaza truce and captives release deal were in their “final stages” on Tuesday, adding that it was hopeful an agreement could be reached “very soon”. Qatar, Egypt and the United States have stepped up efforts to broker a ceasefire to enable the release of hostages held in Gaza since October 7, 2023. On Monday, US President Joe Biden said a deal was “on the brink” of being finalised, just days before the inauguration of his successor, Donald Trump.

On Tuesday, Qatar foreign ministry spokesman Majed al-Ansari said the negotiations were in their “final stages”. “We do believe that we are at the final stages... certainly we are hopeful that this would lead very soon to an agreement,” Ansari said, adding “until there is an announcement... we shouldn’t be over-excited about what’s happening right now”. “We have reached a point where the major issues that were preventing a deal from happening were addressed,” he told a news conference. Israel’s campaign in Gaza has killed 46,645 people, a majority of them civilians, according to the health ministry in the Palestinian territory, figures that the UN considers reliable. A source briefed on the Doha negotiations said earlier the heads of Israel’s intelligence agencies, the Middle East envoys for the incoming and outgoing US administrations and Qatar’s prime minister had been due at the talks. “Mediators will hold separate talks with Hamas,” the source said. Qatar said later the



A boy pulls a cart loaded with salvaged items from the site of Israeli bombardment on a residential block in Jalaa Street in Gaza City. — AFP



The first phase of a deal would see 33 Israeli captives released, while two Palestinian sources close to Hamas said that Israel would release about 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange

talks were being held at the “highest level”. Sources close to the talks and Israeli media said the first phase of a deal would see 33 Israeli captives released, while two Palestinian sources close to Hamas said that Israel would release about 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange. An Israeli government official said that “several hundred will be released” as part of the first phase of the deal. Israeli media also reported on Tuesday that under the proposed deal, Israel would be allowed to maintain a buffer zone inside Gaza during the implementation of the first phase. Hamas said it hoped for a “clear and comprehensive agreement”, adding that it had held consultations with other Palestinian factions and informed them of the “progress

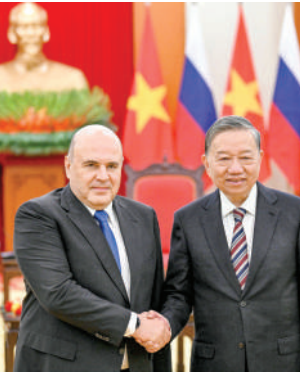
made”. Successive rounds of negotiations had failed to end the deadliest war in Gaza’s history. Among the key sticking points in the talks have been disagreements over the permanence of any ceasefire and the scale of humanitarian aid for the Palestinian territory. Other points of contention include the return of displaced Gazans to their homes, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Palestinian territory and the reopening of border crossings. Even as intense diplomatic efforts continued towards a truce deal, Israeli forces pounded targets across Gaza. The territory’s civil defence agency said overnight air strikes and shelling killed at least 18 people in Gaza City in the north, the central area of Deir el-Balah and Khan Yunis in the south. — AFP

IMPEACHMENT TRIAL OF YOON BEGINS

SEOUL: South Korea’s Constitutional Court opened the impeachment trial of President Yoon Suk Yeol on Tuesday over his failed martial law bid, but quickly adjourned the first hearing after the suspended leader didn’t show up. The trial’s first of five hearings began at 2:00 pm but lasted just minutes with Yoon not in attendance. Although his failure to attend — which his team have blamed on purported safety concerns — forced a procedural adjournment, the hearings will continue without Yoon, with the next set for Thursday. Additional hearings are already scheduled for January 21, January 23 and February 4. — AFP

DEEPENING TIES

Russia, Vietnam sign nuclear energy deal



Russia and Vietnam signed an agreement on nuclear energy during a visit by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin aimed at deepening ties. The project involves two plants in central Ninh Thuan province. Likhachiov was in Hanoi to meet Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, their third meeting in six months. The nuclear deal was among seven signed in a range of fields that also included digital technology. — AFP

FIRST VISIT

United Nations rights chief arrives in Syria



United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk arrived in Syria’s capital for the first ever visit of the global body’s rights chief to the country. Turk, an Austrian lawyer, is visiting Syria and Lebanon from January 14-16 to meet with officials, civil society groups, diplomats and UN bodies, the UN said, without giving further details. Under Assad, many UN officials and rights groups were denied access to the country. — Reuters

FLAMESWALLS



A firefighter works to extinguish the embers in the hills of Mandeville Canyon, in Los Angeles. — AFP

LA FIREFIGHTERS
BRACE FOR RETURN
OF EXTREME WINDS

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles firefighters on Tuesday braced for the return of dry, intense winds that could recharge two monstrous wildfires that have already killed at least 24 people, levelled entire neighbourhoods and scorched an area the size of Washington, DC Much of Los Angeles and Ventura County could experience gusts of 50 to 70 mph from early on Tuesday through Wednesday as dangerous Santa Ana winds picked up after relative calm since late last week, according to the National Weather Service.

The red flag warning, which the weather service designated as a rare “particularly dangerous situation,” raised fears that new fires could ignite and existing blazes could re-energise. “This setup is about as bad as it gets,” Los Angeles City Fire Chief Kristin Crowley told local residents. “We are not in the clear.” In anticipation of the winds, more than 8,500 firefighters attacked the two biggest existing wildfires from the air and on the ground, aiming to prevent them from spreading overnight.

State authorities on Monday pre-positioned firefighting crews in Los Angeles and other Southern California counties that were under elevated fire danger. The Palisades and Eaton fires erupted on the city’s western and eastern flanks during last week’s intense winds but crews made progress in controlling them since the weekend. At least 24 people have died, according to the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner, but the death toll will likely rise, officials said, as crews carry out house-to-house searches in burnt-out neighbourhoods.

The wildfires have destroyed or damaged more than 12,000 structures, turning entire neighbourhoods into smouldering ash and piles of rubble and leaving an apocalyptic landscape. As of Monday, more than 92,000 people in Los Angeles County were under evacuation orders — down from more than 150,000 - while a further 89,000 faced evacuation warnings. The Palisades Fire, which wiped out upscale communities on the western flank of Los Angeles, has burned 23,713 acres (96 square km) and was 14 per cent contained.

The Eaton Fire in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains east of the city consumed another 14,117 acres (57 sq km) and was 33 per cent contained, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) reported. A third fire, the Hurst, spanning 799 acres (3.2 sq km) was 95 per cent contained. — Reuters

FRENCH PM
PROPOSES
TO RE-OPEN
DEBATE OVER
PENSION
REFORM

PARIS: French Prime Minister Francois Bayrou on Tuesday opened the door to renegotiating a 2023 pension reform, in a bid to win over left-wing lawmakers he needs to pass the 2025 budget. Bayrou, who delivered the message to lawmakers in a key policy speech setting out his governing principles, proposed to entrust trade unions and employers groups with a three-month mission to find a new deal on pension reforms. He said the minimum age of 64 to draw a full pension, the

most contested part of the 2023 reform, should not be a taboo. But he warned that France’s growing debt pile was a “sword of Damocles” hanging over future generations’ heads, and that the new “conclave” in charge of exploring a new pension pact will have to propose a deal that is financially balanced. If it can’t be balanced, the current deal would remain in place, he said. Bayrou also said the working group will be formed after a flash financial

audit of the pension system is made public by the respected French auditing court. His speech comes after a tumultuous 2024 for France when Macron shocked the nation by calling early elections, only to lose his working majority in parliament just as public finances went off track in the euro zone’s No. 2 economy. Bayrou’s government is trying to secure assurances from some opposition parties - the Socialists in particular - that they will not vote against its 2025 budget. — Reuters

Ukraine claims biggest
aerial strike on Russia

UKRAINE carried out its largest aerial attack on Russian territory of the nearly three-year war overnight, Kyiv said on Tuesday, hitting factories and energy hubs hundreds of miles from the frontline. The Russian military accused Kyiv of using US- and British-supplied missiles for one of the strikes and promised it would “not go unanswered”. The barrage forced schools in the southwestern Saratov region to close, while at least nine airports in central and western Russia temporarily halted traffic, according to Russian officials. Moscow and Kyiv have upped strikes on each other ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration next week, as both sides seek to gain the upper hand in potential negotiations aimed at settling the nearly three-year war.

“The Ukrainian Defence Forces carried out the most massive strike against the occupiers’ military facilities, at a distance of 200 to 1,100 kilometres deep into the territory of the Russian Federation,” Ukraine’s General Staff said in a post on social media. Facilities “in the Bryansk, Saratov, Tula regions and the Republic of Tatarstan were hit,” it added. Among the targets were a chemical factory that makes rocket fuel and ammunition for Russia’s army, an oil depot near a Russian air base and an oil refinery.

The governor of Russia’s Saratov region, Roman Busargin, said the scale of the attack there was “massive”. Schools in the cities of Saratov and Engels were holding classes online on Tuesday because of the attacks, he added. Firefighters had only the day before managed to put out a blaze at an oil depot in the city of Engels, which was hit by a Ukrainian drone strike on January 8. Kyiv’s army said it had hit the same site again.

In the energy-rich region of Tatarstan, a Ukrainian drone struck a gas storage tank, sending flames and thick smoke billowing toward the sky near the city of Kazan, according to media and the regional government. Tatarstan local media said a liquefied gas storage base was hit, and published images showing flames and black smoke. Russia’s defence ministry said it shot



German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius and Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskiy meet, in Kyiv. — Reuters

down six US-supplied ATACMS missiles and six British Storm Shadow cruise missiles that Ukraine had fired in the attack on the Bryansk region.

Ukraine’s army had earlier claimed it had hit a chemical plant near the town of Seltso, more than 100 kilometres from the border, that makes ammunition and explosives for Russia’s army. “Drones successfully distracted Russian air defences, paving the way for missiles that hit the main targets,” the Ukrainian military’s Unmanned Systems Forces said. Ukraine regularly targets military and energy sites in Russia, part of what it calls “fair” retaliation for Russia’s repeated barrages of its energy grid since Moscow attacked in February 2022. “Systematic work to destroy facilities that supply ammunition, military equipment, and fuel and lubricants to the Russian occupation army will continue until the

Russian Federation’s armed aggression against Ukraine is completely stopped,” the army said. The Ukrainian air force said separately that its air defence systems had downed 58 Iranian-designed drones launched by Russia, while another 21 were destroyed with electronic interference systems or crashed.

A Ukrainian official in the Kharkiv region meanwhile said on Tuesday morning that a 52-year-old resident of the town of Kozachya Lopan had been killed by Russian artillery fire. The overnight Ukrainian attacks come at a difficult moment for Kyiv’s forces along the front line, particularly in the eastern Donetsk region.

City authorities in Pokrovsk, Russia’s main target in the region, repeated a call on Tuesday for remaining residents to flee. Around 60,000 people lived in the city before war. — AFP

Nato launches Baltic Sea patrols after suspected cable sabotage

HELSINKI: The Nato military alliance said on Tuesday it would launch a Baltic Sea monitoring mission following the suspected sabotage of undersea cables in recent months. Several telecom and power cables have been severed with experts and politicians accusing Russia of orchestrating a hybrid war against the West as the two sides square off over Ukraine.

The “Baltic Sentry” mission would involve “frigates and maritime patrol aircraft” among other assets, Nato chief Mark Rutte said at a regional meeting in Finland’s capital Helsinki on Tuesday.

But he declined to give details on the number of vessels “because that might differ from one week to another” and he did not want to make “the enemy any wiser than he or she is already”.

Nato was also tight-lipped on the duration, saying in a statement the operation would continue “for an

undisclosed amount of time”. The suspected sabotage has been blamed on a “shadow fleet” of vessels — often ageing and operating under opaque ownership — that carry Russian crude oil and petroleum products, embargoed since the attack of Ukraine. “Investigations of all of these cases are still ongoing, but there is reason for grave concern,” Rutte said. He said protecting undersea infrastructure was of “utmost importance” not only for energy supplies but also for internet traffic.

Leaders of Nato’s Baltic countries said in a statement after the Helsinki meeting that the shadow fleet “poses a particular threat to the maritime and environmental security in the Baltic Sea region and globally”. They said the fleet “significantly supports funding of Russia’s illegal war of aggression against Ukraine”. Finland’s President Alexander Stubb said foreign ministries from the



(L-R) Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal, Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Nato Secretary General Mark Rutte hold a joint press conference at the Presidential Palace in Helsinki, Finland. — AFP
Baltic Sea Nato states would set up a group of legal experts to assess what they could do without affecting freedom of navigation. Nato said in late December it would increase its presence in the region but had not announced an operation. Iro Sarkka, a researcher from the Finnish

Institute of International Affairs, said that Nato had been pushed into action by the Russian shadow fleet. A comprehensive operation would serve as a “deterrent and a strategic signal” that Nato was prepared to act, according to Sarkka. A series of underwater blasts

ruptured the Nord Stream pipelines that carried Russian gas to Europe in September 2022, the cause of which has yet to be determined. In October 2023, an undersea gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia was shut down. Two telecom cables in Swedish waters were severed on November 17-18 last year. And weeks later, on December 25, the Estlink 2 electricity cable and four telecom cables linking Finland and Estonia were damaged. Investigators suspect the cables were damaged by the anchor of the Eagle S, a Cook Island-flagged oil tanker believed to be part of the “shadow fleet”.

Finnish police seized the Eagle S on December 28 as part of a criminal investigation.

Finnish authorities last week deemed the ship unseaworthy, barred it from sailing and have banned eight crew members from leaving the country while police carry out a probe. — AFP

OPINION

Natural disasters shouldn’t be seen as divine punishment



HESSA
AL BADIA

The author is an
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THE devastating fires in California continue to spread fear, anxiety and sadness, not only among residents of the state but across the US and the world.

These fires challenge our perception of nature’s stability and the reliability of seasonal patterns, once considered predictable.

People increasingly seek refuge in greener spaces, away from urban centres, as trust in science’s ability to forecast and manage natural disasters is tested.

The Palisades Fire, the largest of four major wildfires in Los Angeles County, has burned over 23,000 acres, of which 11 per cent was contained, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Meanwhile, the death toll now stands at 24. Efforts to combat these fires have been hampered by fierce winds, which not only spread the flames but also disrupted fire control strategies.

Aircraft equipped with sensors to monitor fire perimeters have struggled with delayed data due to unpredictable wind conditions. Paradoxically, changing wind directions could also provide unexpected relief by redirecting the flames.

Such reliance on unpredictable wind patterns highlights the limitations of current disaster response strategies.

This uncertainty has also fuelled conspiracy theories, with some speculating that the fires are part of a broader scheme to destabilise the presidency of Donald Trump.

Supporters of this theory claim the fires are intended to undermine his administration at a time when he is focused on expansionist policies and economic recovery. However, critics argue that these theories distract from the real issues, such as climate change, which scientists point to as a key driver of the increasing severity and frequency of wildfires.

Instead of addressing climate-related factors like drought, rising temperatures and extreme weather patterns, Trump and his supporters have deflected blame onto state authorities, further politicising the crisis.

Such debates overshadow meaningful action to tackle the root causes of these disasters, which demand urgent attention.

On a broader level, some observers view these fires as part of a global pattern of interconnected crises.

Palestinian-American writer Ahmed Ibsis compares the destruction caused by California’s fires to that experienced in Gaza, arguing that both reflect the devastating impact of human actions on the environment.

He highlights research from Lancaster University in the UK, which links global warming to environmental degradation caused by decades of conflict.

For instance, Israel’s actions in Palestinian territories, including land bulldozing and infrastructure destruction, have contributed to desertification and significant carbon emissions, exacerbating the climate crisis.

These disasters should serve as a wake-up call for humanity. They demand thoughtful analysis and collective action to address their underlying causes. We must prioritise sustainable stewardship of the planet, recognising the environment as a shared home for all people, not a resource to be exploited or destroyed.

Ultimately, natural disasters should not be seen as divine punishment targeting specific groups.

Such a notion fails to account for the indiscriminate nature of these events, which affect innocent people and communities. Many victims of the California fires, for instance, have been strong supporters of justice for Palestine, demonstrating solidarity often lacking in other parts of the world. Instead, these disasters should serve as a wake-up call for humanity.

They demand thoughtful analysis and collective action to address their underlying causes.

We must prioritise sustainable stewardship of the planet, recognising the environment as a shared home for all people, not a resource to be exploited or destroyed.

It is through this lens of responsibility and unity that we can move forward, confronting the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation with the seriousness they require.

Only then can we hope to mitigate the devastating impacts of future disasters and preserve the Earth for generations to come.

Translated by Badr al Dhafari.
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DEVASTATING LA FIRES PROMPT 2028 OLYMPICS DEBATE

ROB WOOLLARD

The Los Angeles wildfire disaster has cast a shadow over preparations for the 2028 Olympics, raising questions over whether the city can deliver a safe and successful Games. So far, none of the more than 80 venues due to stage Olympic competition in Los Angeles have been directly affected by the infernos that have left at least 24 people dead and reduced entire neighbourhoods to smouldering ruins. However, experts say the ongoing disaster has underscored the challenges of staging the world’s largest sporting event in a region increasingly under threat of wildfires.

While the flames that razed Pacific Palisades came uncomfortably close to the Riviera Country Club — which will host the 2028 Olympic golf tournament — the overwhelming majority of venues are situated outside what would be regarded as high-risk fire zones. Historical data, meanwhile, indicates that the chances of a similar disaster erupting during the 2028 Olympics are highly unlikely. Prior to last week, no fire in Los Angeles County had appeared on a list of the 20 most destructive fires in California history, according to statistics provided by CalFire, the state’s fire agency.

The 2028 Olympics will also be taking place in July, a time of year when there are no Santa Ana winds, the powerful seasonal gusts widely seen as the biggest factor behind the unprecedented scale and scope of last week’s carnage.

Los Angeles has already staged the Olympics successfully on two occasions — in 1984 and 1932. Bill Deverell, a professor of history at the University of Southern California, said the ongoing disaster could provide important lessons for 2028.

Pennsylvania State University professor Mark Dyerson has floated the idea of the Olympics being moved to 2024 hosts Paris if Los Angeles was unable to deliver the Games.

“They could go back to Paris,” the academic told the New York Post. “It would be unfortunate, but I’m sure they have some kind of committee — the IOC is a huge bureaucracy — that allegedly looks at contingencies.” California Governor Gavin Newsom, however, told NBC’s Today morning programme that planning for the 2028 Olympics and the Fifa World Cup in 2026 — where eight matches take place in Los Angeles — was on track.

Newsom said the flurry of major sporting events in Los Angeles over the next few years — the city will also host the Super Bowl in 2027 — should be seen as an opportunity.

Conservative pundits, however, have wasted no time in demanding that Los Angeles be stripped of the Olympics. “The Los Angeles Olympics should be cancelled,” right-wing provocateur Charlie Kirk wrote on X last week. — AFP

GCC’s role in the world of technofeudalism

THE world is pivoting from oil-driven economies to a new era dominated by technology, data, and artificial intelligence (AI).

This transformation, described as “technofeudalism” by former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis in his book Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism, represents a profound restructuring of global power.

Varoufakis argues that big tech companies have replaced traditional markets with platforms and data-driven systems, creating a new order where those controlling global digital platforms rule the world. At the centre of this shift are figures like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Peter Thiel, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Sam Altman, who are not only leading innovation but also wielding unprecedented influence on global policies in AI, energy, and connectivity.

As the world embraces these technologies, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is uniquely positioned to evolve from a hub of oil and gas exports to a global leader in technology and sustainability. The Sultanate of Oman and its GCC neighbours are actively investing in technology to future-proof their economies.



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Oman’s emphasis on cultural diplomacy enhances its ability to lead in this space. By leveraging AI-driven storytelling and virtual platforms, Oman can amplify its rich heritage to global audiences, creating unique opportunities for tourism, education and investment.

routes. These initiatives position Oman as a vital player in the global supply chain and a model for the GCC’s transition into a digital economy.

The UAE’s AI Strategy 2031 and Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 demonstrate their commitment to AI-driven growth, with investments in sectors ranging from fintech to renewable energy.

Collectively, the GCC’s vision reflects an understanding of the transformative potential of technology in shaping a sustainable future.

AI and big data are not just technological tools—they are becoming geopolitical assets. Musk, now the czar of the US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has redefined global internet access through his company Starlink, particularly in underserved and politically unstable regions.

However, through his other company X, Musk has also been accused of spreading fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories to boost influence and engagement.

On the other hand, his AI rival Altman and OpenAI have sparked critical discussions on AI ethics and governance.

These advancements influence global policies, decision-making, and connectivity, underscoring the power of technology in shaping the modern world and daily life. The GCC’s sovereign wealth funds, such as Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF), are strategically investing in these trends. By committing billions to Big Tech and start-ups, the GCC is not only diversifying its economy but also embedding itself in the technofeudal order, albeit not without risks.

Oman stands out as a leader in this transformation, leveraging its strategic location, neutral

foreign policy, and cultural heritage.

As a gateway between East and West, Oman has the potential to foster partnerships with global technology leaders while strengthening its ties to emerging markets.

Oman’s emphasis on cultural diplomacy enhances its ability to lead in this space.

By leveraging AI-driven storytelling and virtual platforms, Oman can amplify its rich heritage to global audiences, creating unique opportunities for tourism, education, and investment.

Furthermore, Oman’s young and tech-savvy population is a vital asset. Investments in education and skill development, particularly in the National Digital Economy, AI, data science, and rising start-up programmes, will empower the next generation to take a leading role in the digital economy.

This focus on human capital ensures that the benefits of technology are broadly shared, creating a foundation for inclusive growth.

As the global economy pivots from oil to AI, the GCC has a unique opportunity to lead this transformation. By embracing innovation, fostering collaboration, and prioritising sustainability, the region can redefine its role in the global order.

For the GCC, this is not just a challenge but a moment of profound potential.

With forward-looking visions, strategic investments, and a commitment to progress, the region can set a model for how smaller nations thrive in a technofeudal world.

As Varoufakis says, the future belongs to those who adapt to this new order.

The people of the GCC are proving they have the ambition and vision to do just that.

Social protection in harmony with other reforms



SAMUEL KUTTY

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

In a normal sense, social protection is a set of nationally defined policies and programmes aimed at helping the people of a country to maintain an adequate standard of living and good health throughout their lives. As a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, social protection provides critical income support to people through a range of mechanisms aimed at building human capital, empowering women and girls, improving livelihoods, and responding to economic and other shocks. As the World Bank points out, “Well-designed social protection programmes have a high return on investment.” For every dollar transferred to poor families, the bank states, “there is an estimated multiplier effect of \$2.49 in the local economy.” While many countries in the world do not have adequate social protection measures, the Sultanate of Oman has reshaped its social protection system into a law to ensure the socio-economic rights of Omani nationals and residents. In July 2023, the Omani government adopted a new Social protection Law that aligns with national priorities and international best practices, designed as a sustainable, efficient, and just framework to safeguard the rights of both current and future generations. The new social protection system aligns with the Oman Vision 2040, the Five-Year Development Plan, and the Sustainable

Development Goals, focusing on achieving welfare and social protection. It encompasses all members of society at all life stages to achieve comprehensive insurance coverage and manage the new scheme “effectively, fairly, and sustainably.” Previously, the social protection system did not include all societal groups. “We have established a comprehensive social protection scheme, initiated by our government, and we have mandated that its mechanisms and programmes be reviewed periodically so that all may enjoy a decent life and desired justice,” His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik stated on January 11, the day marking the fifth anniversary of his accession to the throne. On the occasion, His Majesty announced a Royal grant worth over RO 178 million to support the social and economic needs of some segments of the society. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the experience of Oman demonstrates that the necessary path to universal social protection in the Arab region is one that ensures basic income security for all, enhances protection against new emerging risks, and facilitates labour market transitions. “The new social protection system resulting from the reforms in Oman is primarily structured around core lifecycle benefits as part of an integrated and multi-tiered social protection architecture,” comments the world body. The main features of the new system

While many countries in the world do not have adequate social protection measures, Oman has reshaped its social protection system into a law to ensure the socio-economic rights of Omani nationals and residents

include a monthly child benefit for every family, entitlements for individuals aged 60 and older, a disability allowance, and support for widows and orphans, which contrasts with traditional means-tested programmes that often leave many without assistance. These are in addition to paid sick and paternity leave, occupational injury and unemployment insurance. The new law also significantly expands protection to migrant workers in Oman, who represent over three quarters of the country’s working population. “Introduction of new benefits could potentially bolster economic growth and reduce inequality and poverty, while also improving the quality of life by enhancing the overall health and well-being of individuals and families alike,” ILO comments in its report. Through the Royal Decree, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik also established a single and unified social protection fund. Since its establishment, the fund has collaborated with partners to build a comprehensive system aimed at sustainable development and societal well-being. In 2024, the fund, according to the Oman News Agency, achieved remarkable milestones, supporting over 1.5 million beneficiaries across various social benefits. Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in its general budget allocations for social and basic sectors. In 2025, the allocation reachedanimpressiveRO5billion,representing a significant 42 per cent of Oman’s total public spending for this year.

WHY AUTISM RATES ARE RISING AROUND THE WORLD?

NANCY LAPID

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological and developmental condition marked by disruptions in brain-signalling that cause people to behave, communicate, interact, and learn in atypical ways. Autism diagnoses in the United States have increased significantly since 2000, intensifying public concern over what might contribute to its prevalence. There are no objective tools for diagnosing autism such as blood tests or brain scans. Instead, diagnoses are made based on observations and interviews. The term spectrum reflects the wide range of possible manifestations. Some people with ASD may have good conversation skills while others may be nonverbal. Some may be acutely sensitive to sounds, touch, or other triggers. Some may have restricted or repetitive behaviours or interests. Some may need help with daily living, while others require little or no support. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends screening all children for autism at 18 and 24 months, when most children will begin to show symptoms. Yet the average age of diagnosis remains close to 4 years in the US and 5 years globally. By 2020, the US autism rate in 8-year-olds was 1 in 36, or 2.77 per cent, up from 2.27 per cent in 2018 and 0.66 per cent in 2000, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A 2021 study from England put the rate in children there at 1.76 per cent, up from 1.57 per cent in 2009. The World Health Organisation estimates the worldwide prevalence in children at 1 per cent, up from 0.62 per cent in 2012, with the caveat that many countries lack the resources to identify cases and report them. The causes of autism are unclear. There is widespread speculation among scientists that its neurological characteristics may develop in utero, when the fetal brain is being wired. Studies have linked autism to maternal factors in pregnancy, and some research suggests a link to birth complications and timing. A growing area of research focuses on epigenetics — the interactions between genetic and environmental factors. One theory suggests that a woman’s exposure to air pollution or harmful contaminants before or during pregnancy may trigger a genetic mutation leading to autism in her child. Gene variations in some people with autism strengthen the evidence for a genetic component. Among the genetic disorders linked with higher risks for autism are Fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis complex, Phelan-McDermid syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome. — Reuters

A no-brainer for global growth and US jobs

In August 2021, the International Monetary Fund issued \$209 billion to developing countries in the form of special drawing rights (the IMF’s reserve asset). SDRs are much like cash, because recipient governments can convert them to hard currency. As such, they are a highly effective tool, and the IMF can and should make greater use of them. While the 2021 issuance helped billions of people around the world, hundreds of thousands of Americans also benefitted — and would do so again. Exports of US goods and services to developing countries total around \$1 trillion, and if these countries get an infusion of reserves, they will import even more. This effect can be quite significant. An SDR distribution the size of the 2021 issuance would be expected to create about as many jobs in the United States in one year as the \$740 billion Inflation Reduction Act did in its first year. We are talking, conservatively, about 111,000-191,000 new jobs, most of which would be in export-related areas such as manufacturing, transportation and warehousing. In fact, the total number of jobs created could be substantially more, since we also must account for the role of SDRs — as reserves — in stabilising developing economies. This effect would be even more important if the world economy slowed, as it seems to be doing now. (The global growth rate has declined sharply since the last SDR distribution, from a record 6.6 per cent in 2021 to half that today.). Nor is this the only compelling reason to favor another SDR issuance. With so many countries facing tight budgetary constraints in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, it could help countries make the investments needed to mitigate climate change. And even if one puts these considerations aside, it is obvious that the world needs another SDR issuance. Many countries



Exports of US goods and services to developing countries total around \$1 trillion.



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are facing debt crises, with the result that some 3.3 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on healthcare, while 2.1 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest than on education. So why hasn’t a new issuance already happened? It turns out that the US Treasury Department is the biggest hurdle. Under IMF rules (which were written in 1944), the 190-member organisation does not follow the principle of “one country, one vote.” Instead, the US has 16.5 per cent of the votes, and any decision to authorise a new SDR issuance requires 85 per cent approval. The Treasury Department, which represents the US at the IMF, thus wields a veto, and as long as it brings along other high-income countries, it can push through almost any measure it wants. What is needed for another SDR issuance, then, is America’s support. Though the Treasury Department would be required to give Congress a 90-day notice, a 2021-size issuance would not actually require a congressional vote. The outgoing Biden administration could start the process today,

and Donald Trump’s incoming administration need only concur with the decision. Would Trump go along with this? It is certainly possible, considering that a new issuance would create jobs in the US. If it happens quickly, without any slowdown in Congress, it could even be distributed as early as April. While US organised labour has already voiced support for a new issuance, Wall Street also has a big stake in the matter. US financial firms are holding tens of billions of dollars in debt-distressed developing countries’ sovereign bonds, and a fresh infusion of cash into those economies could save them from potentially massive losses on their investments. As global economic growth has slowed, the bonds they are holding are more at risk than they were three years ago. Moreover, like the 2021 issuance, a new one would have zero cost to the US budget. Of course, the biggest impact would be on the developing world. Globally, 282 million people are at risk of starvation, up from 135 million before the pandemic, and from 258 million in 2022. ©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS



DHOFAR DEMOLISH SEEB TO LIFT SUPER CUP

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 14

SALALAH powerhouse, Dhofar, defeated Seeb 3-2 to lift 2024-2025

Super Cup in a tight encounter at Al Rustaq Sports Complex on Tuesday. The victory means Dhofar's fifth Super Cup, which ended Seeb's impressive 21-match unbeaten streak.

Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South, the chief guest, presented the Cup to Dhofar Captain Salim al Nahar and medals to other players.

Both teams delivered a spirited performance in the match but Seeb dominated from the start as they were seeking for an early goal through applying pressure in the front line while Dhofar was in the defensive mode. Despite Seeb's pressure, Dhofar's striker Hamood al Saadi managed to break the deadlock after strong ball from Mohammed al Habsi but Seeb's goalie Bilal al Balushi's save was not in a proper way as the ball continued by Hamood's header in the 23rd minute to the target taking the lead for his team.

After several scoring attempts, Seeb equalised three minutes later through a goal by Abdulrahman al Mushaifri who received a perfect cross from Zaher al Aghbari. Similar to the opening goal of



Dhofar, Abdul Rahman continued the ball by header to the target. Rahman returned back again before the conclusion of the first half as he scored the second goal through a header again following a cross ball supplied by Al Aghbari in the 43rd minute. In the additional time of the opening half, the referee Omar al Yaqoobi awarded a penalty for Dhofar and it was converted to a goal by Hamed al Habsi in the 48th minute to end the opening half at 2-2 draw.

Dhofar came out strong in the second half as they managed to bounce back strongly by scoring their third goal through Sultan Badar in the 65th minute. It was a great effort by Hamed al Habsi who managed to penetrate through Seeb's defenders and sent a ground pass to Sultan who converted to the net to lead his team by 3-2.

Seeb missed a golden opportunity to score the equaliser as Abdulaziz al Maqbali missed a penalty after his ball outside the net in the 70th minute. Seeb players worked hard in the remaining minutes to raise their efforts to bring the match into the origin point but they faced a strong defending line and the active goalkeeper Mazin al Kasbi in the back side.

The referee Al Yaqoobi added nine minutes but with no change in the result as Dhofar confirmed their victory by 3-2.

SHORT TAKES



OOO three-day physiotherapy course concludes today

MUSCAT: The physiotherapy course organised by Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) will conclude on Wednesday. The course, held at Oman Olympic Academy over three days, was attended by physiotherapists from sports federations and committees, as well as healthcare professionals from hospitals.

The sessions were supervised by Dr Nasreen Hamada, a physiotherapy specialist from the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The course aimed to enhance knowledge and practical skills in sports injury management, first aid, diagnosis and treatment.

The first day included an introduction to the course, its objectives, and a comprehensive overview of sports injuries and associated first aid measures.

Practical training on the diagnosis and treatment of sports injuries was also conducted. The second day focused on various topics, including injuries to the shoulder, knee, and ankle joints. Each type of injury was discussed in detail, followed by hands-on training on diagnostic and treatment methods.

The programme will conclude this evening with intensive practical training on diagnosing and treating sports injuries, followed by a closing ceremony featuring certificate distribution and participant recognition.

This course is part of the efforts of Oman Sports Medicine Committee to support and develop national competencies in physiotherapy, aiming to enhance the efficiency of professionals in this vital field and improve athletic performance.

The event witnessed notable participation and interaction from attendees, who engaged actively in both theoretical lectures and practical sessions.

Dr Nasreen Hamada emphasised the importance of this course in building participants' capabilities, highlighting that intensive practical training provides opportunities to learn about the latest therapeutic techniques for managing sports injuries.

She also underscored the role of physiotherapy in improving athletes' performance and preventing future injuries.

It is worth noting that the physiotherapy course is part of a series of initiatives by Oman Sports Medicine Committee aimed at raising the standards of performance in the field of sports medicine.

Through such programmes, the committee aspires to create a comprehensive sports environment that enhances athletes' readiness and supports their physical and health needs.



Paralympic panel gear up for West Asian Games

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 14

THE Oman Paralympic Committee held a meeting at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), chaired by Dr Mansoor al Touqi, Chairman of the Committee, and attended by board members and national team coaches.

The meeting focused on intensive preparations undertaken by the Sultanate of Oman to host the West Asian Paralympic Games 2026, in addition to approving the internal and external participation agenda for the national teams in 2025.

This reflects the committee's commitment to enhancing the Sultanate of Oman's position in the Paralympic sports field. Dr Al Touqi highlighted that the past year witnessed significant achievements for Oman's Paralympic sports, with athletes winning various medals in regional and international championships, such as the Asian Paralympic Games and the World Para Athletics Championships.

He explained that these honourable results were the outcome of the great efforts exerted by the athletes, technical and administrative teams, continuous support from the committee's board members, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and strategic partners from the private sector.

He stressed the importance of continuing these efforts to ensure the national teams are fully prepared for upcoming competitions, particularly the West Asian Games in Muscat in 2026, which marks a historic milestone in Oman's Paralympic sports journey.

The meeting included a comprehensive review of the national teams' preparation plans for the West Asian Games. Coaches presented integrated training programmes, including domestic and international training camps, along with participation in various international competitions to test athletes' readiness and improve their technical performance.

Additionally, mechanisms for evaluating athletes' performance were discussed, with plans to collaborate with specialised sports institutions for physical and mental conditioning. Strategies to scout and recruit new players from various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman were also addressed, aiming to enrich the national teams with promising talents.

The meeting also explored the introduction of new sports within the committee's activities to expand participation in the upcoming West Asian Games. Sports such as Boccia and blind football were proposed due to their significance in enhancing sports diversity and providing opportunities for new athlete categories to participate. Furthermore,

preparations for organising the Oman Paralympic Committee's annual gathering were discussed, which will serve as a platform to honour distinguished individuals and review the year's achievements.

Plans for developing technical staff, including coaches and referees, through specialised training programmes were also examined.

The meeting approved the international participation agenda for 2025, which includes competing in several major international championships, such as the Grand Prix in Marrakech, the Asian Youth Paralympic Games in Bahrain, the Afro-Asian Goalball Championship in Sharjah, and the Asian Cycling Championship in Thailand.

The committee also endorsed implementing referee training courses in wheelchair basketball, badminton, table tennis, and powerlifting to enhance referees' competency and ensure the best technical practices are applied in local and international tournaments.

In conclusion, Dr Al Touqi affirmed that the committee operates with a clear vision to strengthen Oman's presence in international Paralympic sports arenas.

He expressed confidence in the athletes' ability to achieve honourable results that reflect the remarkable progress witnessed in Oman's Paralympic sports sector.

Quarterfinals kick off today amid intense competition

MUSCAT: The quarterfinals of the Asian and International U14 Tennis Championship and the West and Central Asia Regional Qualifiers will begin today. The tournament is being held at the tennis courts of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in the Wilayat of Bausher, with the participation of 13 countries. Yesterday's Round of 16 witnessed a thrilling competition, setting the stage for even more excitement in today's quarterfinals, especially after the strong performances showcased by the players during the first two days.

In the boys' Round of 16, Oman's Moataz al Mazroui lost a hard-fought match against Syria's Karim Salim with scores of 7-5, 3-6, 6-3. Despite the loss, Al Mazroui delivered a

solid performance. Kyrgyz player Kasim defeated Saudi Arabia's Ahmed Bahaq 7-6, 6-1, while the UAE's Mohammed al Ali overcame Kuwait's Faisal al Mutawa with a comeback victory of 5-7, 6-2, 6-3. Kyrgyz player Asinov won against Bahrain's Ali al Khayyat 6-2, 6-2, and Iraqi Hassan Gharib triumphed over Yemen's Ayham Al Dhura 6-0, 6-3.

The Oman Tennis Association has appointed ten referees to officiate the tournament. Most of them are young Omanis who have earned certifications from previous courses organised by the association. The officiating team includes eight Omani referees and two international referees. They are Mohammed al Falahi, Abdullah al Yahyai, Maryam al Balushi, Aisha



al Sulaimani, Warith al Shaibani, Abdulrahman al Hajri, Kartik, and Waziry. All referees are experienced and have previously officiated similar tournaments in past years.

Mishari al Mishari, head of the Kuwaiti delegation, expressed his happiness over the excellent organisation of the tournament, praising the high-quality preparations before and during the event. He credited the Oman Tennis Association for its significant efforts and extensive experience in managing such tournaments.

Al Mishari stated, "We extend our gratitude to our brothers in Oman for their warm hospitality and thorough preparations. This level of organisation is no surprise, and we truly feel at home here. The tournament had a successful start."

He also noted that Kuwait's participation aims to earn ranking points and gain valuable experience. "We have the youngest players

registered in the tournament, and they achieved good results on the first day. The overall technical level of the tournament is strong, with many players delivering impressive performances and holding solid rankings, which is promising for the future of tennis in the region," he added.

Bahraini player Ali al Khayyat, who was eliminated in the Round of 16, shared his satisfaction with participating in the tournament. "I am happy to be part of this championship. We came to Muscat to earn ranking points and compete for top positions, as well as to gain technical experience. Tournaments like this help refine our skills, and we need more matches to continue developing."

SPORTS



Joao Fonseca reacts during first round. — Reuters

Medvedev advances, Fonseca dazzles on debut

THREE-times Australian Open finalist Daniil Medvedev allowed his frustrations to boil over in a Melbourne Park meltdown before advancing to the second round on Tuesday while Taylor Fritz made a strong start in his bid to end a 22-year Grand Slam drought for American men.

The third day of action concluded with Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca more than living up to the hype around him as the

qualifier crushed Russian ninth seed Andrey Rublev in a stunning Grand Slam main draw debut.

Danish 13th seed Holger Rune was pushed all the way to five sets and Emma Navarro also had a tough time in one of three all-American ties, the women's eighth seed surviving a major scare to beat Peyton Stearns 7-6(5) 6-7(5) 7-5.

It was plain sailing for former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina as she blitzed Australian wildcard Emerson Jones 6-1 6-1

with new coach Goran Ivanisevic watching on impressed.

In a French thriller on Court Three, experience got the better of potential as Gael Monfils edged Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard 7-6(7) 6-3 6-7(6) 7-6(5) 6-4, while there were also wins for 2021 US Open champion Emma Raducanu, ninth seed Daria Kasatkina and former men's world number six Matteo Berrettini.

Home hope Alex de Minaur also moved

through as he beat Dutchman Botic van de Zandschulp.

Russian Medvedev, runner-up last year, smashed his racket and a net camera after dropping serve in the third set but rallied for a 6-2 4-6 3-6 6-1 6-2 win against Thai wildcard Kasidit Samrej.

The frustrated fifth seed's behaviour earned him a code violation for racket abuse as play was held up before the fourth set as staff swept up debris from the court but he cut a happy figure after the match.

"At the end of last year, this match I probably would have lost," said Medvedev. "Now it's a new year and new energy ... So I'm happy to win this match."

Fourth seed Fritz stayed cool throughout his match against compatriot Jenson Brooksby, the MELBOURNE: Three-times Australian Open finalist Daniil Medvedev allowed his frustrations to boil over in a Melbourne Park meltdown before advancing to the second round on Tuesday while Taylor Fritz made a strong start in his bid to end a 22-year Grand Slam drought for American men.

The third day of action concluded with Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca more than living up to the hype around him as the qualifier crushed Russian ninth seed Andrey Rublev in a stunning Grand Slam main draw debut.

Danish 13th seed Holger Rune was pushed all the way to five sets and Emma Navarro also had a tough time in one of three all-American ties, the women's eighth seed surviving a major scare to beat Peyton Stearns 7-6(5) 6-7(5) 7-5.

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Fourth seed Fritz stayed cool throughout his match against compatriot Jenson Brooksby, the US Open finalist easing to a 6-2 6-0 6-3 win that showed why he is now considered best placed to end America's 22-year wait for a major men's prize.

The 27-year-old played an integral part in the United States winning the United Cup to begin the new season and continued his fine form with a 106-minute drubbing of Brooksby.

Brooksby, returning from two years on the sidelines after having operations on both wrists and serving a 13-month doping suspension, fought until the bitter end but was no match for Fritz, who sealed the victory with his 34th winner.

"I'm super happy with how the match went today," said Fritz, who will next face qualifier Cristian Garin. "It's never easy playing that first match in a slam so there were some nerves."

Those who stayed last on Margaret Court Arena will not forget it in a hurry as the 18-year-old Fonseca dazzled under the lights in a 7-6(1) 6-3 7-6(5) defeat of Rublev.

His win meant he is only the second teenager since 1973 to beat a top-10 ATP player on his Grand Slam debut. — Reuters

BUSINESS

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HUMANCAPITAL



OQ achieves an impressive 85 per cent Omanisation rate across its operations.

OQ BOOSTS LOCAL CONTENT, ECONOMIC GROWTH IN OMAN

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 14

OQ, Oman’s global energy group, has positioned itself as a key player in driving local content and in-country value (ICV) while advancing Oman’s economic and energy transition goals.

Through strategic initiatives, robust investments and a commitment to sustainability, OQ has not only bolstered the nation’s economy but also empowered local communities and businesses.

Between 2020 and the third quarter of 2024, OQ allocated over RO 2.2 billion for procurement, of which more than RO 1.6 billion, or approximately 73 per cent, was spent locally.

This strategic focus on local suppliers reflects OQ’s mission to promote economic growth and self-sufficiency within Oman.

Additionally, the group’s procurement strategies have retained a significant RO 748 million in ICV value, a testament to its commitment to ensuring that a substantial share of the economic benefits remains within the Sultanate of Oman.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of any thriving economy and OQ’s focus on SME development underscores its role as a catalyst for local business growth.

Over RO 345 million has been spent directly on SMEs, enabling these businesses to expand their operations, innovate and create jobs. By actively involving SMEs in its supply chain, OQ has ensured a ripple effect of economic benefits, fostering entrepreneurship and strengthening local industries.

OQ’s commitment to Omanisation is a cornerstone of its ICV strategy, achieving an impressive 85 per cent Omanisation rate across its operations. This achievement is complemented by significant investments in developing human capital, with 720 Omani graduates hired and 2,831 interns trained.

These initiatives not only equip Omani youth with the skills needed to thrive in the energy sector but also secure a sustainable talent pipeline for the industry.

OQ’s ICV index, which averages 33 per cent, highlights the company’s deliberate efforts to maximise the local economic impact of its operations. From ensuring that contracts are awarded to Omani businesses to incorporating local content requirements in major projects, OQ has consistently elevated the role of local resources and expertise in its business ecosystem.

OQ’s initiatives extend beyond conventional energy operations to embrace renewable energy and green hydrogen projects. Its pipeline of over 7 GW of renewable energy projects and flagship initiatives like Hyport Duqm (1.3 GW), SalalaH2 (3.8 GW), and Green Energy Oman (3.8 GW) highlight its leadership in the global shift towards sustainable energy.

These projects not only position Oman as a hub for clean energy production but also create opportunities for local industries to participate in the global green economy.

Oman’s trade surplus hits RO 6.5 billion in Oct 2024

OMAN recorded a trade balance surplus of RO 6.562 billion by the end of October 2024, compared to RO 6.344 billion during the same period in 2023, according to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The total value of Omani commodity exports rose to RO 20.319 billion, an 8.7 per cent increase from RO 18.693 billion in the same period last year. Meanwhile, commodity imports grew by 11.4 per cent, reaching RO 13.757 billion compared to RO 12.349 billion in 2023.

OIL AND GAS EXPORTS DRIVE GROWTH
The sharp rise in Oman’s export value was primarily due to an increase in oil and gas exports, which totalled RO 13.768 billion, marking a significant 21.1 per cent growth from RO 11.365 billion in October 2023. Crude oil exports rose to RO 8.422 billion, up 6.1 per cent. Refined oil exports surged by 154.8 per cent, reaching RO 3.278 billion. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, however, declined by 3.4 per cent to RO 2.068 billion.

DECLINE IN NON-OIL EXPORTS
Non-oil commodity exports fell by 16.2 per cent, amounting to RO 5.106 billion compared to RO 6.096 billion in October 2023. Mineral products were the largest non-oil export at RO 1.492 billion, a drop of 32.2 per cent. Metal products followed at RO 1.092 billion, with a slight decline of 0.1 per cent.

Plastics and rubber products increased by 7.1 per cent, reaching RO 808 million. Chemical exports fell by 23.7 per cent to RO 649 million, while live animal exports



The total value of Omani commodity exports rose to RO 20.319 billion, an 8.7% increase from RO 18.693 billion in the same period last year.

declined by 15.2 per cent to RO 286 million.

RE-EXPORT GROWTH
The value of re-exports grew by 17.3 per cent, reaching RO 1.445 billion. Re-exports of mineral products increased by 50.4 per cent to RO 114 million.

Re-exports of food, beverages and liquid products rose by 30.6 per cent to RO 151 million. Declines were recorded in transportation equipment (down 4 per cent to RO 338 million) and machinery and electrical equipment (down 5.4 per cent to RO 315 million).

KEY IMPORT CATEGORIES
Oman’s commodity imports reached RO 13.757 billion, with significant contributions from: Mineral products,

valued at RO 3.886 billion (+13.4 per cent). Machinery and electrical equipment, at RO 2.368 billion (+26.2 per cent). Chemical products, at RO 1.305 billion (+4.9 per cent). Transportation equipment, at RO 1.211 billion (+11.5 per cent).

TOP TRADE PARTNERS
The UAE led non-oil exports at RO 839 million (+10.8 per cent) and re-exports at RO 494 million. Saudi Arabia followed with non-oil exports worth RO 663 million. China ranked second among import sources, providing RO 1.469 billion worth of goods, followed by Kuwait at RO 1.358 billion.

This robust trade performance reflects Oman’s resilience and strategic focus on strengthening its export-driven economy.

— ONA

Oman showcases mining opportunities at Riyadh forum

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman underscored its commitment to strengthening its position in the global mining sector through its active participation in the Future of Mining Conference held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Leading the Omani delegation, Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, was joined by Eng Matar bin Salem al Badi, CEO of Oman Minerals Development Company and other high-ranking officials from the ministry and private mining firms.

This prestigious international platform convenes governments, global companies, research institutions and experts to discuss advancements in mining technology and explore investment opportunities.

Highlighting Oman’s participation, Al Hadhrami stated, “Our involvement reflects Oman’s commitment to fostering international



Leading the Omani delegation was Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

collaboration and building partnerships to develop the mining sector as a cornerstone of economic diversification and sustainable development. Through this conference, we aim to attract global investments, integrate cutting-edge technologies, empower local talent and advance manufacturing industries to maximise the value of our resources in line with Oman Vision 2040.”

He further emphasised Oman’s mineral wealth, which

includes copper, chromium, nickel, silica, lithium and other economically significant resources. Backed by advanced infrastructure and investment-friendly policies, Oman is positioning itself as a regional and global mining hub.

Oman envisions the mining sector as a key contributor to future industries such as clean energy, battery technologies and electric vehicles,” Al Hadhrami said. “We are committed to sustainability by leveraging advanced

technologies that minimise environmental impact while enhancing operational efficiency.”

Eng Matar bin Salem al Badi shared insights into Oman Minerals Development Company’s initiatives, focusing on exploration, project development, and industrial growth.

“Our exploration efforts include offering the 11-B concession area, covering 84.5 square kilometres west the Wilayat of Suhar, for strategic investment. Geological studies and surveys have shown promising copper deposits,” Al Badi explained.

He also outlined plans for a silica quartz mining project, targeting an annual production capacity of 3 million tonnes to meet rising industrial demand. In addition, the company is pursuing strategic projects, including a copper smelter, a silicon metal factory, and ferrosilicon and dolomite ventures, aimed at maximising the added value of Oman’s resources.

ADVERTORIALS

TRIUMPHANT JOURNEY



ahlibank continues to meet the dynamic needs of its clientele across retail, commercial and investment banking sectors.

AHLIBANK CELEBRATES 17TH ANNIVERSARY

MUSCAT: ahlibank, one of the Sultanate of Oman’s most esteemed financial institutions, recently celebrated its 17th anniversary, marking a milestone that reflects both its enduring success and its unwavering dedication to sustainable growth. This significant occasion served as a moment of reflection for the bank’s employees, celebrating the core principles that have cemented ahlibank as a trusted Partner in Excellence.

Founded in 2007, ahlibank has evolved into a leading force in Oman’s financial sector. With a diversified portfolio of financial solutions, supported by a modernised branch network, advanced digital platforms and a highly skilled workforce, ahlibank continues to meet the dynamic needs of its clientele across retail, commercial and investment banking sectors.

During the anniversary celebration, ahlibank’s employees engaged in activities designed to deepen their connection to the bank’s core values — excellence, innovation, integrity, responsibility and sustainability. These initiatives served not only to inspire pride in their contributions but also to reinforce the shared vision that drives the bank’s continued success.

Central to this vision are ahlibank’s five pillars of excellence — Digitalisation, Corporate Banking, Retail Banking, Wealth Management and Socio-Economic Progress — which are intrinsically linked to these values. Together, they guide ahlibank’s strategic direction, ensuring the delivery of superior customer experiences and fostering meaningful contributions to community development.

ahlibank’s commitment to digital transformation is clearly demonstrated through its enhanced mobile banking app, instant credit card issuance, and cutting-edge digital services and branches, positioning the bank at the forefront of innovation. Groundbreaking initiatives like 1:1 IPO financing and instant minor account openings further reinforce its digital leadership.

In Corporate Banking, ahlibank continues to deliver tailored solutions through dedicated relationship managers and business-to-business platforms, while its Retail Banking division focuses on providing a seamless experience through an extensive branch network and customised services, all powered by advanced digital tools.

Complementing these efforts, ahlibank’s Wealth Management services, including the Digital Wealth Management system and Systematic Investment Plan, foster long-term financial growth, integrating seamlessly with corporate and retail banking offerings. In alignment with its commitment to socio-economic development, the bank undertakes several initiatives geared at empowering SMEs, supporting non-profit organisations and nurturing young talents.

These interconnected pillars reflect the bank’s vision, reaffirming its leadership in innovation and sustainable growth in Oman.

ASYAD PROVIDES SOLUTIONS FOR HEAVY SHIPMENT FROM INDIA TO NIGERIA

MUSCAT: Asyad Group has successfully executed an integrated shipping operation from the Republic of India to the Republic of Nigeria by providing multi-modal shipping solutions via sea and air transport to transport a heavy load weighing 335 metric tonnes of specialised equipment. The operation included transporting compressed natural gas equipment, generators, electrical panels, empty



Asyad provides multi-modal shipping solutions via sea and air transport.

gas cylinders and spare parts, starting from assembly, storage, and shipping, to documentation and customs clearance, and reaching simultaneous air and sea transport. Through this operation, the group confirmed its ability to provide integrated logistics solutions that meet the needs of global markets and enhance international supply chains through its extensive network of operations in major global markets.

— ONA

Jetour T1 and Jetour X50 launched in Oman

MHD Automobiles LLC, the exclusive distributor of Jetour in Oman, is proud to announce the launch of two premium SUVs — the Jetour T1 and Jetour X50 — marking an exciting milestone in the luxury SUV segment.

The unveiling took place on December 25 showcasing the perfect blend of luxury, performance and affordability that the Jetour brand offers.

Jetour, a luxury SUV brand with a growing global reputation, is committed to redefining the driving experience through innovative designs, advanced technology and premium features. The introduction of the Jetour T1 and Jetour X50 to the Omani market underscores MHD Automobiles’ mission to offer vehicles that cater to diverse customer needs while ensuring exceptional value.

The Jetour T1 is designed for those seeking sophistication and functionality.

This premium SUV comes equipped with:

- A panoramic sunroof offering expansive views.
- Powered front seats and a premium audio system for ultimate comfort and entertainment.
- A unique crystal-themed transmission lever, wireless



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smartphone charging and thoughtfully designed cup holders for added convenience. Under the hood, the Jetour T1 boasts a powerful 1.5L petrol engine with a displacement of 1498 cc, paired with an automatic transmission for a seamless driving experience.

The Jetour X50 is a stylish compact SUV, available in the Premium variant, featuring:

- A luxurious cabin with quilted leather seats and aluminum AWC vents.

OXY OMAN SPONSORS HAMRA AL DROOA CAMEL & FOLKLORE FESTIVAL

MUSCAT: Oxy Oman representatives recently attended the annual Hamra Al Drooa Camel & Folklore Festival, a week-long cultural event organised under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, held in the Wilayat of Ibri, the Al Dhahirah Governorate. Oxy Oman sponsored the festival for the third time.

In its Tenth edition this year, the Hamra Al Drooa Festival attracted over 20,000 visitors from across the country and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, and featured camel races and pageantry, along with other cultural activities such as folk music, traditional dances, poetry and performances.

The festival also showcased small and medium businesses, with over 73 shops



selling Omani products and handicrafts. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas,

Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, with the attendance of Nasser al Maskari, Manager of CSR at Oxy Oman, representing the company.

“We are pleased to sponsor the Hamra Al Drooa festival for the third time, as the event offers a platform to celebrate Oman’s rich culture and diversity for a regional audience, and showcases small businesses and communities located near our concession areas.

We are proud to continue our initiatives with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth in supporting community engagement and celebrating Omani cultural heritage,” said Steven Lauver, President & General Manager at Oxy Oman.

Discover your desires of adventure with the 4x4 Ford Bronco

MUSCAT: The Ford Bronco blends legendary off-road heritage with modern engineering and technology. Built tough and ready for anything, the Bronco line-up features the classic two-door, the first-ever four-door and the rugged Bronco Sport.

Every Bronco is purpose-built to conquer the wild, delivering exhilarating off-road experiences while honouring the legacy of the original 1966 Bronco and its storied racing roots. Whether scaling rocky pathways, navigating muddy trails, or cruising city streets, the Bronco combines unrelenting capability

with cutting-edge technology tailored for modern-day explorers.

With its heritage-inspired design and advanced off-road engineering, the Bronco isn’t just built to drive. It is built to dominate.

Ford’s exclusive Terrain Management System featuring G.O.A.T. Modes (Go Over Any Terrain) ensures the Bronco is ready for any challenge. Whether in Normal or Eco mode for daily drives, or venturing off-grid, Mud/Ruts, or Rock Crawl modes, Bronco transforms every journey into a thrilling ride.

At the heart of the Bronco’s



off-road prowess is its advanced 4x4 system, available in two configurations. Choose the base two-speed, shift-on-the-fly transfer

case for quick adaptability or opt for the advanced two-speed electromechanical transfer case for seamless auto-switching between 2H and 4H.

The Bronco Trail Toolbox takes your off-road mastery up a notch with innovative features like Trail Control for low-speed cruising, Trail Turn Assist for sharp cornering and Trail One-Pedal Drive for effortless rock crawling.

Designed to tackle the extreme, the Bronco doesn’t just go off-road, it thrives there. With best-in-class ground clearance of 11.6 inches, a break-over angle of 29 degrees,

a departure angle of 37.2 degrees and water-wading capabilities up to 33.5 inches, no obstacle is too big. Its legendary Baja racing DNA guarantees pulse-pounding performance with the style, comfort and confidence you need to enjoy every landscape.

Under the hood, the Bronco brings race-inspired power to every trail. Choose from two robust EcoBoost engine options — the 2.7-litre V6 with an impressive 310 horsepower and 400 lb.-ft. of torque, or the 2.3-litre turbocharged engine delivering best-in-class four-cylinder torque at 270 horsepower.

BUSINESS

FOSTERINGGROWTH



This initiative is part of a broader agreement between Ooredoo and OCCI aimed at strengthening SME development in Oman.

OOREDOO AND OCCI PARTNER TO EMPOWER 40 SMES

MUSCAT: Omani Qatari Telecommunications Company (Ooredoo) has signed cooperation agreements with 40 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to foster growth and sustainability in the sector. This initiative is part of a broader agreement between Ooredoo and the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) aimed at strengthening SME development in Oman.

The agreements include tailored communication packages, training programmes and enhanced service offers to boost efficiency. Additionally, the SMEs will have opportunities to generate extra income by marketing Ooredoo's services. Shaikh Ahmed bin Amer al Musalhi, Chairman of the SME Committee at OCCI, highlighted the Chamber's efforts, saying, "The Chamber has signed six cooperation agreements with government and private entities to support SMEs. This partnership with Ooredoo is a key step towards creating a supportive ecosystem for these businesses."

Mohammed bin Jaafar al Najwani, Director of the SME Department at Ooredoo, noted, "This partnership enables us to deliver innovative communication solutions and training programmes that empower local businesses to grow and thrive. Ooredoo is committed to enhancing Oman's entrepreneurial ecosystem."

The agreements were signed by Suleiman bin Mohammed Bait Ishaq, representing Ooredoo, and the CEOs of the participating SMEs. — ONA

Work starts on JA Solar’s \$540m project in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 14

PRELIMINARY work on an ambitious solar manufacturing project backed by JA Solar Technology, one of China's top-ranked players operating in this space, has commenced at SOHAR Port and Freezone in the northeast of Oman.

Shanghai-headquartered JA Solar announced last month that it plans to invest 3.96 billion yuan (equivalent to about \$540 million) in a world-scale facility in the Sultanate of Oman, with an annual capacity of 6-gigawatt high-efficiency solar cells and 3-gigawatt high-power solar modules.

Already, a number of local and international consulting firms are on the ground in Oman to help with the initial conceptualisation and development of the landmark project. Well-known Chinese engineering services firm KIDE International has been retained by the client to oversee the overall project design and engineering.

An acronym for China Kide Engineering Corporation, KIDE is a global EPC (Engineering, Procurement, and Construction) service provider in the technology industry chain, with its headquarters in Chengdu, and branch offices in Shanghai, Xi'an and Kuala Lumpur, and multiple subsidiaries overseas.

Earlier this week, leading electrical and energy services firm



JA Solar's investment represents a significant triumph for Oman's local content development goals. **Picture for illustration only.**

A major manufacturer of high-performance photovoltaic products, JA Solar oversees a network of manufacturing bases and 13 sales subsidiaries around the world.

Monenco Consulting Engineers (Oman) announced that it has been contracted by KIDE to undertake an 'Electrical System Study for Power Supply' to JA Solar's project site in SOHAR Port and Freezone. As part of the contract, Monenco will undertake the transmission line survey, design, tender supervision, design review and bid evaluation part of the power supply project up to the site of a proposed substation at the JA Solar site.

The duration of the Electrical System Study and Transmission Line Design is about four months.

Monenco, licensed by Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) to provide a range of electrical consultancy services to industrial, commercial and other large customers, was also tapped

earlier by United Solar Polysilicon for the provision of services linked to its \$1.3 billion polysilicon production venture at SOHAR Port and Freezone. JA Solar's impending debut in Oman will represent a major boost for the Sultanate of Oman's Net-Zero strategy.

Oman's requirement of solar modules to meet its substantive renewable energy and green hydrogen development goals is prodigious.

A major manufacturer of high-performance photovoltaic products, JA Solar oversees a network of manufacturing bases and 13 sales subsidiaries around the world.

The company's business portfolio covers silicon wafers, cells, modules and PV power stations. By the end of Q2 2024, the cumulative shipment of JA Solar reached a sizable 224GW.

Over the past 12 months, Oman has attracted investment pledges aggregating over \$2.5 billion in a trio of silicon and solar manufacturing projects — all backed by Chinese players.

In addition to investments by JA Solar and United Solar Polysilicon, leading Chinese solar manufacturer Jietai Solar announced last October the signing of a land lease agreement for the establishment of a major solar call manufacturing project at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

Jietai, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Hainan Drinda New Energy Technology Co, plans to invest around \$700 million to support the production of 5 GW of high-efficiency solar cells per annum.

STRENGTHENING MEDICINE SECURITY IN OMAN

MUSCAT: The National Pharmaceutical Industries Company and HealthTech Oman Centre, affiliated with Bravo Pharmaceuticals Group, signed an Memorandum of Understanding yesterday InvestOman with an aim to explore cooperation in pharmaceutical manufacturing, localise pharmaceutical industries, transfer technology and strengthen medicine security in Oman.

New sustainable luxury development launched in Sultan Haitham City

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 14

OMAN'S real estate landscape is entering a new chapter with the introduction of sustainable and community-focused developments.

At the forefront of this transformation is Yenaier Residences, a flagship project launched by Adanté Realty, the real estate arm of Al Adrak Group. Situated in Sultan Haitham City, Oman's first smart city, Yenaier Residences promises to redefine luxury living with its innovative design, eco-friendly principles and inclusive investment opportunities.

The launch, held on January 13 at the St Regis Hotel, Muscat, was graced by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, alongside distinguished guests from government and private sectors.

Positioned as a transformative venture in Oman's real estate landscape, Yenaier Residences combines luxury with sustainability and community-centric living.

Named in honour of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the project aims to set a benchmark as a freehold development available to all nationalities, symbolising progress aligned with Oman Vision



Yenaier Residences promises to redefine luxury living with its innovative design, eco-friendly principles and inclusive investment opportunities.

2040.

Speaking at the event, Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili emphasised the project's alignment with the nation's urban planning goals: "Yenaier Residences, located at the heart of Sultan Haitham City, represents the pinnacle of sustainable urban development, reinforcing Oman Vision 2040 and its focus

on innovation and eco-friendly growth." Strategically situated in Al Seeb, Muscat, Yenaier Residences is part of Sultan Haitham City — a 2.9 million square metre eco-city designed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

The development integrates modern infrastructure with natural and cultural elements, featuring

green spaces, smart city systems and facilities such as healthcare centres, educational institutions, commercial outlets and cultural hubs.

At the core of Yenaier Residences are six architecturally distinct towers surrounded by interconnected boulevards and greenscapes. The design philosophy champions contemporary fluid architecture, eco-conscious principles and smart living technologies.

The project offers a range of residential options, including: Loggia Studios and Suites (1 BHK); Sky Residences (2 BHK); Sky Villas and Palaces (3 BHK and penthouses).

Homes range in size from 71 to 462 square metres, with amenities tailored to promote an active and vibrant lifestyle.

These include fitness centres, wellness spaces, social hubs and leisure facilities, all designed to foster a sense of community.

Adanté Realty brings decades of expertise as part of the Al Adrak Group, a company with a 39-year legacy in Oman and the UAE. Known for high-quality craftsmanship, the group's recent collaborations with Ellington Properties in the UAE further underscore its reputation for excellence.

Dr Thomas Alexander, Founder and Chairman of Al Adrak Group,

remarked: "Adanté Realty is committed to creating legacies, not just properties.

With nearly four decades of experience, we aim to redefine luxurious and sustainable living in Oman, setting new industry standards through innovation and quality."

The sustainable design of Yenaier Residences reflects Adanté Realty's commitment to eco-conscious development. "From green building materials to advanced technologies, Yenaier is an environmentally responsible project that prioritises sustainability without compromising luxury," added Dr Alexander.

For investors, Yenaier Residences offers a compelling proposition. With freehold ownership available to all nationalities, tax-free personal income, and residency visas linked to property ownership, Oman is positioning itself as an attractive market for local and international buyers.

"Investing in Yenaier is about securing a prosperous future," said Dr Aadil Thomas Alexander, Executive Director of Al Adrak Group and CEO of Adanté Realty. "We are creating a community that balances modernity with tradition, offering spaces where people can thrive and make lasting memories."

OPINION

Progress on gender diversity in Europe but parity is far



ANDY JALIL

The author is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

WHILE the push continues for gender diversity, there are sectors which are falling behind. One of these is Private Equity where efforts to improve in this area are yielding mixed results.

Female representation in Europe has risen from 20 per cent in 2022 to 24 per cent and senior investment roles held by women who climbed from 10 per cent in 2022 to 14 per cent in 2024, according to a report from Level 20 which is a not-for-profit organisation – founded in Europe – that works to improve gender diversity in the private equity industry.

Set up in 2015, the organisation’s initiatives include mentoring, networking, research and advocacy. It inspires women to join and to succeed in the private equity industry.

However, the organisation warned that there was more “work to be done” with the picture becoming mixed when viewed in detail against decreases in some countries, seniority groups, AUM (Assets Under Management) bands and strategies. Progress in the junior level is slow, rising from 34pc to 35pc since 2022.

At that level, France and Sweden remain above 40pc: a watermark in 2022 for a market approaching parity. Seven countries are now

above 30pc but this is lower than in 2022 when three countries were above 40pc and eight above 30pc.

“Some 35pc is a good pipeline but lower growth rates at this level means that parity is not yet in sight,” the report said. More than half of the 13 European countries in the research have seen a fall in female representation at a junior level.

Italy’s 16pc is the lowest rate women in mid-level investment roles while France’s 32pc is the highest recorded. France and Sweden both outperformed the all-sample average for all investment roles of 24pc (31pc and 28pc respectively).

The European gender diversity report 2024 comprised a study of more than 11,500 investment professionals in 700 firms across 13 countries. Since 2018 , Level 20 has used all-male investment teams as a bellwether for market improvement. In the UK there have been reductions over time, from 28pc in 2018 to 17pc in 2023.

In Europe more widely, the number of local all-male investment teams has dropped from 38 per cent in 2022 to 26pc in 2024. Across strategies, firms with a focus on venture capital lead private equity “by some margin”, although the only cohort with no progress since 2022 is in VC (at the junior level).

Female representation in Europe has risen from 20 per cent in 2022 to 24 per cent and senior investment roles held by women who climbed from 10 per cent in 2022 to 14 per cent in 2024, according to a report from Level 20 which is a not-for-profit organisation – founded in Europe – that works to improve gender diversity in the private equity industry.

Chief executive of Level20, Gurpreet Manku, said: “What we heard is that when it comes venture capital, there are lots of factors that have naturally created a more diverse environment.

“Firms tend to be more recently established, at a time when workforce diversity is in focus, and employees tend to skew younger with smaller teams that tend to allow for a more flexible structure.”

The data shows that at a firm level, larger groups are much less likely to have all-male investment teams with no women in any of their offices in the sample.

“There is a clear pattern of fewer instances of all-male teams as AUM band sizes increase, with a significant decrease in frequency once a firm is over £500m AUM, to as low as 3 per cent.

While on the matter of gender equality, it is noted that a new EY report has warned, the UK economy risks jeopardising a £7bn contribution from female-founded companies unless there is a stronger support for rising women entrepreneurs.

The report identified over 240 business founded or led by women with revenues between £20m and £50m that could grow into so-called ‘super-scalers’ with the right resources and backing.

WALL STREET CLIMATE COP-OUT SUPERFICIAL — FOR NOW

ANTONY CURRIE

Talk about bad timing. Five years ago, boss Larry Fink made tackling climate change a priority. On Thursday, the world’s largest investment firm with \$11.5 trillion in assets pulled out, of the Net Zero Asset Managers initiative while large swathes of Los Angeles were burning in fires at least in part worsened by rising greenhouse-gas emissions. It’s not alone.

Other Wall Street heavyweights including JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs have in recent weeks quit the Net Zero Banking Alliance. What seems like a major climate cop-out, though, is for now mostly superficial. Donald Trump’s looming return to the White House has probably hastened their decisions. The US president-elect is set to try to increase oil and gas production as well as roll back some or all of the incentives to speed up the transition from fossil fuels contained in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

Republican-controlled states like Texas and Florida had already turned the screws, however. They started to withhold business from financial institutions belonging to climate organisations that wanted members to commit to phase out finance for coal, oil or gas - as well as firearms.

The victory for the Trump-led anti-ESG agenda, though, only goes so far. For starters, groups like the NZAM and NZBA, backed by former Bank of England Governor Mark Carney, have already achieved some of their purpose: helping financial companies to understand and quantify the risks and opportunities of climate change. Some of that work looks set to continue, even at the NZAM, which on Monday said it would suspend tracking its members’ efforts while it conducts a review of its role.

Moreover, BlackRock’s and the banks’ individual approaches to tackling climate change remain intact. The lenders are still each targeting up to \$1 trillion each in the decade or so to 2030 in financing and advisory work for zero- and low-carbon companies.

These groups continue to use data and scenarios from institutions like the Taskforce for Climate-Related Financial Disclosures, the International Energy Agency and the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to inform their risk management and portfolio analysis.

They all remain committed to reaching net zero by 2050. And regardless of what happens in the United States, they have to meet mandatory climate disclosures that are either in place or incoming in the European Union, Australia, Japan, the UK and elsewhere. — Reuters

Artificial Intelligence alone won’t save the planet

THIS year’s annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, where participants will address the theme of “Collaboration for the Intelligent Age,” comes at a critical juncture for the planet.

Ecosystems are straining under the pressure of climate change, and the interconnected cycles that maintain freshwater availability, soil moisture, ocean health, and plant growth are spinning out of balance at an alarming pace.

At least 420 million hectares of forest globally have been lost to deforestation since 1990, causing biodiversity loss to accelerate and fueling climate volatility. Freshwater resources have declined so precipitously – owing to rising temperatures, groundwater mismanagement, saltwater intrusion, pollution, land degradation, and increased population density – that demand is predicted to exceed supply by 40% by 2030.

And wildlife populations in freshwater habitats fell by 85% between 1970 and 2020. The paradox is that we continue to degrade the systems that sustain life on Earth despite knowing more about their fragility than ever before.

In the search for solutions, we often look to technology – especially artificial intelligence – as a panacea.

But AI alone cannot save the planet. Instead, we must ensure that AI complements, rather than replaces, human capabilities to realize its full potential.

While AI models can identify patterns, they often use incomplete or biased data, and thus lack important context. This is where “augmented intelligence” comes in. Augmented intelligence combines powerful algorithms with human knowledge and lived experience to ensure that these advanced tools account for cultural, economic, and ecological considerations.

For example, indigenous communities have learned how to manage resources sustainably by tracking nature’s cycles and observing the environment for centuries. This expertise can help reveal subtle trends that data fail to capture, ensuring that technology serves real-world needs.

Using both indigenous insights and scientific data has provided a



At least 420 million hectares of forest globally have been lost to deforestation since 1990, causing biodiversity loss to accelerate and fueling climate volatility.



YANA GEVORGYAN

The writer is Director of the Group on Earth Observations Secretariat

more accurate picture of polar bear populations in Canada’s Northwest Territories, while an AI-driven model that factored in such traditional knowledge has helped Inuit communities in the Arctic identify new fishing grounds amid changing climate conditions.

But indigenous populations are not the only ones with valuable insights. Local communities and private-sector actors, from smallholder farmers to multinational corporations, accumulate site-specific data when responding to droughts, adopting regenerative agriculture practices, investing in biodiversity projects, and decarbonizing their supply chains.

Sharing this knowledge, which reflects cultural traditions and economic realities and is enriched by human judgment, strengthens the data on which AI models rely.

Humans and machines learn from each other, creating a feedback loop that leads to more effective solutions. Greater openness fosters trust, which in turn accelerates the adoption and refinement of AI tools.

Before long, the willingness to share data, insights, and innovations will be seen as a mark of leadership and prestige, rather than a risk. Those who advocate data sharing will facilitate collective progress,

demonstrating the cooperation and wisdom needed to guide us toward a safe and healthy planet.

Augmented intelligence should be at the heart of global strategies for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation and adaptation. Policymakers can take steps to bridge the gap between digital innovators and local environmental stewards.

Businesses can align their investments with nature-positive goals and share any resulting knowledge. Innovators can create accessible tools that take into account cultural contexts and input from communities – turning top-down interventions into agile, responsive, and collaborative efforts.

When political leaders and executives convene in Davos, they must acknowledge that technology is not a cure-all for climate change and biodiversity loss.

Without human guidance – bolstered by our capacity for empathy, cultural understanding, and ethical reasoning – it will be impossible to unlock AI’s potential. In the Intelligent Age, coupling advanced tools with lived experience will enable us to transcend the zero-sum mentality that pits people against machines.

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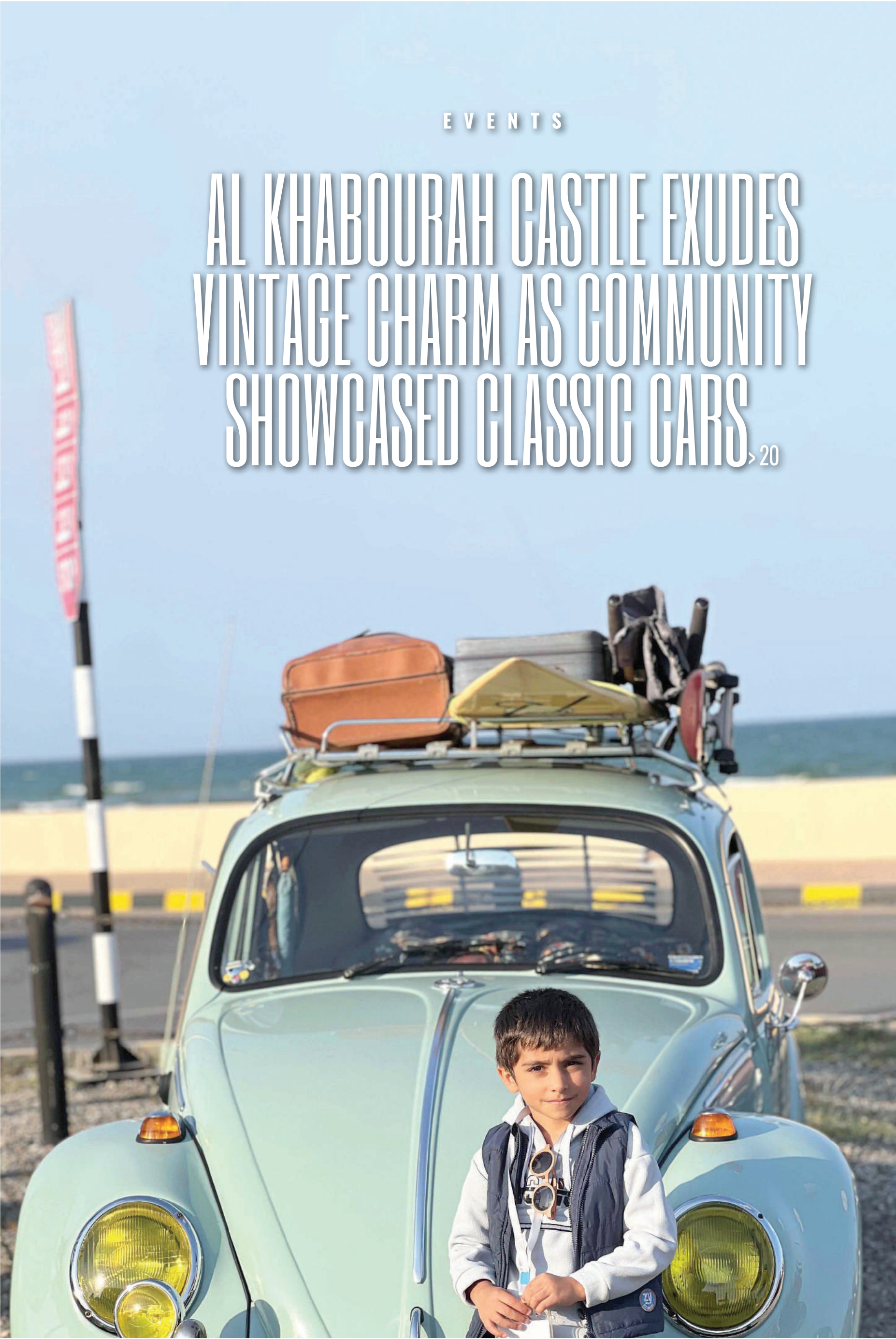
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ART/LIFE



E V E N T S

AL KHABOURAH CASTLE EXUDES VINTAGE CHARM AS COMMUNITY SHOWCASED CLASSIC CARS

> 20

ENTERTAINMENT

Prada among suitors for Versace, newspaper reports



ITALY'S PRADA is among the potential suitors looking at fashion group Versace which Capri Holdings has put up for sale, daily *Il Sole 24 ore* reported on Friday.

In November, Coach-owner Tapestry abandoned an \$8.5 billion deal to buy Michael Kors-owner Capri.

After that deal to create a US luxury conglomerate fell through, Capri executives did not rule out the possibility of a potential sale of its brands.

Capri hired Barclays to look at strategic options including the sale of its Versace and Jimmy Choo brands, two people with direct knowledge of the matter said to Reuters.

One person said the entire Capri Holdings group could also be up for sale.

Prada is looking at the file with Citi, the report said. Citi has worked with Prada in the past over a dual-listing project which was put on hold.

Contacted by Reuters, Prada declined to comment. Citi was not immediately available for comment. Prada's Hong Kong-listed shares closed down 0.4 per cent on Friday.

Versace, founded in Milan in 1978 by late Italian designer Gianni Versace and still led by his sister Donatella as creative director, became known for its bold, opulent prints, including the iconic Medusa motif.

Prada, whose rigorous, intellectual style bears the imprint of creative head Miuccia Prada, has been defying the industry's downturn with sales up 18 per cent at constant currencies in the third quarter.

Versace accounted for a fifth of Capri's revenue in the fiscal year through March 30, 2024, or \$1 billion out of a total of \$5.2 billion for the group, which compared with \$5.6 billion the year before.

In November, Capri posted a bigger-than-expected drop in quarterly revenue, hurt by execution missteps and a global slowdown in luxury goods demand. — Reuters

Q U I C K F E A T U R E S



LIFESTYLE

A Hindu pilgrim walks in front a mural of Hindu god Shiva after taking a holy dip in the sacred waters of Sangam, the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers, during the Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Prayagraj. — AFP



FASHION

French fashion collector Didier Ludot poses in his shop ahead of the closing of his vintage boutique. He will sell more than 350 pieces of couture at Bonhams Cornette de Saint Cyr in Paris. — AFP



MUSEUM

A person stands in front of a bust of the exhibition "Kykladitisses: Untold Stories of Women in the Cyclades" at the Cycladic Museum, in Athens, Greece. — Reuters

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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London Van Gogh show to open all night to meet demand



LONDON'S National Gallery will open all night on January 17 to give art lovers a final chance to see its blockbuster Vincent Van Gogh exhibition, the museum said on Thursday. More than 280,000 people have visited the "Van Gogh: Poets and Lovers" exhibition, which opened on September 14 and closes on January 19. It is the third most successful paid exhibition in the gallery's 200-year history. The show focuses on the Dutch painter's works created between February 1888 and May 1890 — the two years he spent in the south of France, in Arles and Saint-Remy-de-Provence. More than 60 works are on display, including "Starry Night over the Rhône", "Sunflowers" and "Van Gogh's Chair".

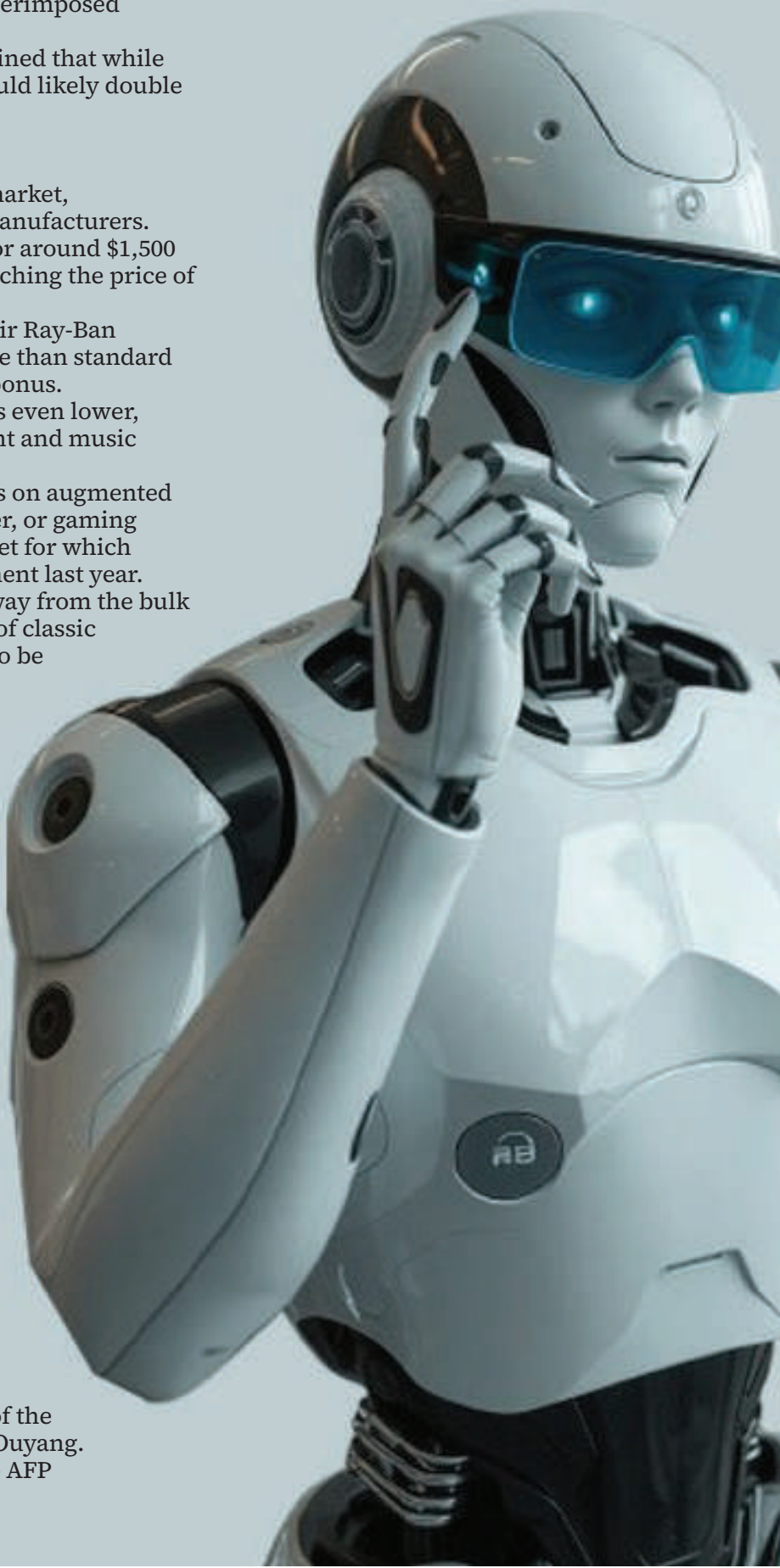
Tickets have become a hot seller. All tickets until 01:15 am (01:15 GMT) of the overnight session had already sold by Thursday afternoon. "Our visitors will have the rare and special opportunity to experience Van Gogh's pictures during the night and early hours of the morning," said Gabriele Finaldi, director of the National Gallery. They will "follow in the footsteps of artists such as Freud, Bacon and Hockney who came here during those times to take inspiration from the Gallery's collection," he added. It is the second time the museum has stayed open overnight. The experiment was first attempted in 2012 with the exhibition "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan". — AFP

Smart glasses enter new era with sleeker designs, lower prices

PRODUCERS of hi-tech connected eyewear are multiplying their innovations with increasingly discreet models in an attempt to make a difference in a highly competitive — and fast-emerging — market. Live translation, GPS, cameras: glasses are quickly adopting new functionalities. "There are so many of these smart wearables and more of them are going on your face," said Techsponential analyst Avi Greengart at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, where numerous smart glasses manufacturers showcased their latest innovations. The industry has come a long way from its early days. Gone are the conspicuous protrusions of Google Glass and the bulky frames and cables of Epson's Moverio from the early 2010s. Today's smart glasses, all paired with smartphone apps, increasingly resemble traditional eyewear. The Ray-Ban Meta, developed by Mark Zuckerberg's social media giant, currently leads the market with this new approach. According to a recent MarketsandMarkets study, the sector's growth is "driven by advancements in augmented reality, artificial intelligence and miniaturisation technologies, which are pushing the boundaries of what these wearable devices can achieve." However, integrating technology into fashionable frames requires careful compromise. The Ray-Ban Meta, for instance, can capture photos and videos, play music and provide information about objects in view, but doesn't offer augmented reality with superimposed images. Meta representative Robin Dyer explained that while AR capabilities may come later, they would likely double the current price.

— 200 DOLLARS — Price is a major battleground in this market, particularly with the entry of Chinese manufacturers. While Google Glass initially retailed for around \$1,500 in 2013, today's smart glasses are approaching the price of premium conventional frames. Meta's James Nickerson noted that their Ray-Ban collaboration starts at \$300, just \$50 more than standard Ray-Bans, offering "a cool camera" as a bonus. Chinese startup Vue has pushed prices even lower, offering basic models with voice assistant and music capabilities for \$200. Some manufacturers, like XReal, focus on augmented reality, projecting smartphone, computer, or gaming console displays — though this is a market for which Apple's VisonPro failed to create excitement last year. For AR, recent advances help move away from the bulk of a virtual reality headset towards that of classic sunglasses, even if they require a cable to be connected to the device. Meta's ambition is to launch its own pared down version, the Orion, currently in the test phase but not expected to be marketed until 2027 at the earliest.

— CHASING COOL — Companies like Even Realities and Halliday are pioneering ultra-thin frames that look identical to standard glasses while offering basic AR capabilities. "If we want to make a good pair of smart glasses, we must first make a pair of cool glasses," emphasised Carter Hou, Halliday's second-in-command. Halliday's \$489 model, launching in March, displays text in the upper corner of the wearer's vision. Using AI, it can suggest responses during conversations, provide real-time translation and function as a discrete teleprompter. Even Realities has also taken a minimalist approach. "We got rid of the speaker, we got rid of the camera," explained the company's Tom Ouyang. "Glasses are for the eyes, not the ears." — AFP



FEATURES

BY SIHAM AL SAIDI

THE ENCHANTING

atmosphere of Al Khabourah Castle in Oman provided the perfect backdrop for an extraordinary gathering of classic car enthusiasts from across the region.

With its weathered stones whispering tales of the past and the majestic architecture rising proudly against the blue sky, the venue invited families, history lovers and car aficionados to linger in its rich cultural embrace.

As guests arrived, the air buzzed with excitement and anticipation, punctuated by the roar of engines and the laughter of children racing around the castle grounds.

Classic cars, often revered as pieces of art on wheels, represent more than mere engineering marvels; they are tangible connections to the past, reflecting the evolution of design and technology over decades.

As the trend of showcasing these vintage vehicles matures in Oman, events like this gathering highlight their allure and the dedication of owners who passionately restore them. The lineup featured over 70 meticulously maintained classic cars, each with a unique story, from elegant models of the early 20th century to notable designs from the 1970s and 1980s.

Juma al Shehi, an investor and head of the organising committee, addressed the significance of hosting such gatherings in historic venues. “This event is more than just a showcase of classic cars; it’s a celebration of our heritage and a chance for families to connect and create lasting memories,” he stated. The harmonious blend of vintage automobiles and historic surroundings provided a unique experience for attendees, where the beauty of the cars complemented the charm of the castle.

The event was not solely about cars; it also embraced family fun with guided tours of the castle, exhibitions from small businesses, cultural displays showcasing Omani traditions and even a playful kite-flying initiative. Visitors revelled in the opportunity to explore the historical significance of Al Khabourah while enjoying the companionship of fellow enthusiasts.

The head of the Classic Cars Club praised the event’s organisation and the vibrant atmosphere it fostered. “We were thrilled to be part of this event, which brings together car lovers from across the region and beyond. It’s a fantastic opportunity to showcase our passion for classic cars while building a sense of community among enthusiasts,” he remarked.

Attendees expressed their appreciation for the event’s ability to seamlessly intertwine history, art and leisure. Fahad al hosni noted, “This gathering not only unites car enthusiasts but also allows us to admire the beauty of Oman’s heritage sites. It was a wonderful family experience for our weekend.” Salim Ali, a father accompanied by his two boys, echoed this sentiment: “Thanks to such events, our children are inspired to explore the castle and learn about classic cars and their mechanics.”

Abdullah al Abdul Salam from the UAE reflected on the enriching experience: “I am grateful to the organisers for such an initiative. We learned more about Oman’s heritage and the classic cars of the Gulf. This gathering was more than just an exhibition; it allowed us to connect



AL KHABOURAH
CASTLE EXUDES
VINTAGE CHARM
AS COMMUNITY
SHOWCASED
CLASSIC CARS



with families and enjoy a welcoming atmosphere near the beach.”

The international classic car gathering in Al Khabourah successfully celebrated vintage automobiles while promoting heritage tourism and community cohesion. Events like these underscore Oman’s commitment to preserving its history and creating memorable experiences for individuals and families, fostering an appreciation for the past and its cultural significance.