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INBRIEF

HIS MAJESTY GREETSPRESIDENTS OF
UAE AND LAOS ON
NATIONAL DAY

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), on his country's National Day.

In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes of good health, happiness, and long life to Shaikh Mohammed. His Majesty also prayed to Allah the Almighty for the people of the UAE to achieve aspirations of progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of Shaikh Mohammed.

Furthermore, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik also sent a cable of greetings to President Thongloun Sisoulith of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, on his country's National Day.

In his cable, His Majesty wished President Thongloun success in continuing to lead the people of Laos towards the realisation of further achievements.

HM visits Belgium today



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

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

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

The Sultanate of Oman

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

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

The leaders and officials of the two countries continued to exchange visits, as King Philippe visited Oman in February 2022. The visit culminated in the opening of the Duqm Port project. **SEE ALSO P4**



King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie

GCC calls for immediate
ceasefire in Gaza Strip



The 45th GCC Summit was held on Sunday at Bayan Palace in the State of Kuwait.
PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

KUWAIT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, headed the Sultanate of Oman's delegation at the 45th GCC Summit, which was held on Sunday at Bayan Palace in the State of Kuwait.

The summit called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. In the final statement of the summit, the GCC called for an "immediate and permanent cessation of Israeli fire and military operations" as well as "the delivery of all humanitarian and relief aid and basic needs to the residents of Gaza".

Earlier, Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, delivered a speech in his capacity as Chairman of the current GCC summit.

"The Gulf Cooperation Council embodies a splendid representation of unity and a brilliant manifestation of the strength of union, cohesion and integration. It denotes an authentic reflection of our firm conviction in

the need to consolidate joint GCC action for the sake of keeping pace with challenges arising from the accelerated pace of regional and international events and their repercussions and to upgrade areas of cooperation to meet the aspirations of our peoples."

Al Sabah added that, though more than four decades have elapsed since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the GCC remains steadfast in its unity, firm in its positions, solid in its will and resolute in its quest to establish the pillars of international security and peace.

HISTORICAL POSITION

Al Sabah underscored the GCC's unwavering historical position supporting the brotherly Palestinian people in their legitimate struggle to end the Israeli occupation of the occupied Palestinian land, gain all their political rights and establish their own independent state on their land within the 1967 borders, with Al Quds A'Sharqiyah (East Jerusalem) as its capital, in accordance

with international references, laws and resolutions.

Meanwhile, HH Sayyid Fahd delivered a speech at the session reading as follows: "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

"Your His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, Your Majesties and Your Highnesses, Leaders of the GCC States. May peace, mercy and blessings of All the Almighty Be Upon You! I am greatly honoured to convey to you the greetings and best wishes of His Majesty the Sultan for the success of this summit.

"I am glad to take this opportunity to congratulate His Highness the Emir of the State of Kuwait on assuming the chairmanship of the current session of the GCC Supreme Council Leaders. We hereby express our appreciation for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to us, wishing that the current session of the GCC be a success. **TURN TO P2**



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FISCAL YEAR 2025



FINANCE MINISTRY
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BUDGET

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 1

The State Council hosted Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, at a regular meeting held under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council to discuss the draft state general budget for the fiscal year 2025, on Sunday.

The meeting discussed the developments in the local economy for the year 2024 as well as the growth indicators at all sectors of economic diversification.

Abdullah bin Salim al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance gave a presentation in which he reviewed the financial and economic indicators and the efforts undertaken by the government to improve them, the credit rating of the Sultanate of Oman, the expected outcome of the state's general budget for the fiscal year 2024, the estimates of the draft state general budget for the fiscal year 2025 and the development of public debt.

The Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance reviewed the social objectives of the state's general budget for the year 2025, namely providing insurance coverage and fair social protection for various society segments, maintaining the level of basic social services provided by the government such as health, education and other services, supporting urban movement and providing the opportunity for a greater number of citizens to own houses and sustaining the government's National Employment Programme.

Today, the State Council will hold its second meeting for the second regular session of the eighth term, under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. The council will discuss the visions of the Technology and Innovation Committee on the Draft Electronic Transactions Law, the opinion of the Social and Cultural Committee on the Draft Public Health Law and the Draft Law on regulating the transfer and transplantation of human organs and tissues, and the opinion of the Economic and Financial Committee on the draft financial law referred by the Council of Ministers. The session will also review the report of the Secretariat-General on the activities of the State Council.

OMAN AND
AUSTRIA HOLD
POLITICAL TALKS

MUSCAT: The 3rd session of political talks between the foreign ministries of the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Austria was held on Sunday in Muscat Governorate.

The Omani side was headed by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, while the Austrian side was headed by Gregor Koessler, Director-General of Political Affairs at the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs.

During the session, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and underscored their joint keenness to boost cooperation in all spheres.

They also discussed regional and international issues of common concern, including the repercussions of the Israeli war on Gaza.

The session was attended by several officials from both sides. — ONA

GCC praises Oman's role
in Yemen peace efforts

THE Kuwait Declaration, issued at the conclusion of the 45th session of the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), hosted by Kuwait, emphasised key regional and global priorities. The declaration lauded the continued efforts of the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia in engaging all Yemeni parties to revive the political process in Yemen.

The statement reiterated the GCC's firm stance on the Palestinian cause, condemning war crimes and the forced displacement of civilians in Gaza. It called for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, affirming unwavering support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The declaration highlighted the GCC countries' growing role in addressing regional and global challenges in political, security, and economic domains. It underscored their contributions to promoting peace, security, and stability, as well as fostering international dialogue and cooperation among nations.

The GCC leaders directed efforts toward



On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, headed the Sultanate of Oman's delegation at the 45th GCC Summit, which was held in Kuwait on Sunday. — ONA

further strengthening the region's global standing as a hub for business and economic activity. They emphasised the importance of sustainable economic diversification, advancing digital transformation, stabilising energy markets, and addressing climate change.

The leaders also welcomed the outcomes of the extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit hosted by Saudi Arabia on November 11, 2024. They endorsed initiatives to end the war in Gaza, achieve comprehensive peace,

and implement the two-state solution in line with the Arab Peace Initiative. The Council expressed appreciation for Qatar's significant efforts to mediate a ceasefire in Gaza and facilitate the exchange of detainees.

Condemning the ongoing Israeli aggression in Lebanon, the GCC leaders warned of the grave repercussions of further escalation on regional stability and international peace. The statement welcomed the temporary ceasefire agreement in Lebanon, viewing it as a positive step toward halting hostilities, ensuring the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanese territories, and implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The leaders emphasised the need for the return of displaced individuals to their homes and extended solidarity to the Lebanese people.

Recalling Kuwait's historical contributions and the GCC's initiatives on Lebanon, the Council urged Lebanese parties to prioritise national interests, resolve differences through dialogue, and reaffirm Lebanon's role in upholding Arab national security and cultural heritage. — ONA



GCC calls for immediate ceasefire in Gaza Strip

FROM PAGE 1

"We would also like to express our thanks and appreciation to His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar for the successful management of the 44th GCC session. We would like to observe that the regular convening of such meetings would augment solidarity among the GCC peoples, enhance the GCC Council's position within the international community and promote the GCC's ability to address common challenges and achieve more progress and prosperity

for all its member states.

"We in the Sultanate of Oman affirm our determination to pursue joint efforts in all areas of cooperation to consolidate security and stability in our region and support positive interaction with current issues. On this occasion, we would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to His Excellency the GCC Secretary-General and the working team at the GCC General-Secretariat for their good preparation for this summit. We wish you success in meeting the aspirations of the GCC leadership for a better

future. May the Almighty Allah's peace, mercy and blessings be upon you!"

On his turn, GCC Secretary-General Jassim Mohammed al Badiwi said, "We call upon the international community to take decisive measures to alleviate the suffering of Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank who are being subjected to an ongoing war waged by the Israeli occupation forces. The impacts of this war have extended to Lebanon, leading to a dangerous military escalation."

The GCC Summit discussed

a number of strategic issues, including regional security affairs, GCC economic integration, mechanisms for developing the Gulf common market and cooperation in the fields of technology and digital transition.

The summit also discussed projects on environmental and energy linkage among member states, as well as political issues, including developments in the Palestine cause, updates in the Lebanese Republic, the situation in Yemen, pending issues in Iraq and relations with regional and international powers.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 'S EMBASSY IN MUSCAT MARKS 53RD NATIONAL DAY



MUSCAT: The embassy of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Muscat held a reception to mark the 53rd National Day of the UAE, on Sunday. The event was attended by Their Highnesses, ministers, members of the State Council and Majlis Ash'shura, heads of diplomatic missions and officials at the Foreign Ministry. — ONA

OMAN

SHORT TAKE



ROSO PERFORMS AT UAE NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

FUJAIRAH: The Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra (ROSO) delivered a captivating performance at the Fujairah Creative Centre as part of the UAE’s 53rd National Day celebrations.

The orchestra’s participation symbolises the deep bonds of brotherhood and neighbourly relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates, highlighting cultural cooperation between the two nations.

The concert opened with the UAE national anthem, followed by Beethoven’s Prometheus Overture and Mozart’s First Movement. The programme also featured an array of Omani and Emirati musical compositions, celebrating the shared heritage of the two countries.

The event was held under the auspices of His Highness Shaikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Sharqi, Crown Prince of Fujairah. — ONA

Royal Army of Oman celebrates graduation

THE Royal Army of Oman (RAO) on Sunday celebrated the graduation of batches of cadet officers’ course, specialised university officers’ course, transformative course and paramedic course from Sultan Qaboos Military College, the Royal Army of Oman’s Academy. The ceremony was held at the military parade ground in Muaskar Al Murtafaa under the auspices of Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office.

The ceremony began with the graduates’ giving the military salute to the chief guest.

Then, the RAO band played the Royal Anthem, after which the commander of the column asked Gen Al Numani’s permission to inspect the front row of the parade. The graduates performed a military show in slow motion and normal march. They passed in front of the dais of the celebration square, led by the banner of Sultan Qaboos Military College. Then, the column advanced forward in parade form.

After that, Gen Al Numani handed the Sword of Honour to RAO’s cadet officer Aiman bin Khalid al Mazahmi, who won first place at the level of the batch of cadet officers.

This was followed by the



Sultan Qaboos Military College’s banner changing hands, with the graduating batch handing the flag over to the current batch undergoing training at the

college, who vowed to keep the flag fluttering high as ever.

The graduates chanted the RAO anthem. They performed the Oath of Loyalty, proclaiming

allegiance and chanting thrice “Long Live His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme commander.”

The column of graduates performed the military salute. Then, the band played the Royal Anthem and the commander of the column asked chief guest’s permission to dismiss.

The column passed in front of the dais, giving the military salute to Gen Al Numani. The RAO music band presented various musical pieces and a military musical show, with different detachments exhibiting their skills, which reflected high morale and dexterity in using the latest equipment and musical instruments which the band was supplied.

The ceremony was attended by ministers, under-secretaries, Chairman of the State Council, Chairman of the Majlis Ash’shura, commanders of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF) and other military and security services, retired commanders, senior SAF officers, retired senior officers from other military and security detachments, military attachés from embassies of Arab and friendly countries accredited to Oman, RAO personnel and parents of the officer cadets.

— ONA

Fish vendor caught for weight tampering

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

The Consumer Protection Department in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, in cooperation with the Department of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has seized a commercial establishment selling and grilling fish for tampering with fish weights and deceiving consumers.

This action is part of market control efforts to combat illegal and harmful practices and address violations committed by some suppliers.

The case came to light after the department received a report from a consumer about a commercial



establishment specialising in selling and grilling fish. The consumer alleged that the establishment was tampering with fish weights. Following this, an officer was sent to purchase fish, and it was observed that the scale displayed a weight one

kilogramme higher than the actual purchased weight.

Saif al Nahdi, Head of the Market Regulation and Monitoring Department at the Consumer Protection Department in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, said: “The Consumer Protection Authority is intensifying its monitoring efforts on the markets through ongoing inspection and monitoring campaigns conducted by its directorates and departments across the governorates. The department also reminds suppliers to refrain from practices that violate the Consumer Protection Law, as this safeguards consumer rights and ensures compliance with legal accountability.”

RAM launches executive programme on resilience, risk management

MUSCAT: As part of its strategic programmes and initiatives for 2024, the Royal Academy of Management (RAM) on Sunday launched an executive programme in resilience and risk management, aiming to develop national competencies capable of addressing future challenges and formulating effective strategies for crisis and risk management.

This programme is strategically aligned with the National Risk Register by the Secretariat-General of the National Security Council and actively supports national efforts to tackle this critical issue in line with future aspirations. It is delivered in partnership with the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College of the United Kingdom, bringing global expertise to strengthen resilience and risk management capabilities.

Dr Fathiya al Rashdi, Vice-



The programme is delivered in partnership with the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College of the UK.

President for Programme Affairs at RAM, stated that the programme is a strategic initiative designed to empower the national specialised cadre competencies, fostering enhanced national resilience and developing adaptive executive capabilities capable of effectively managing risks and emergencies. It also focuses on the development and implementation of flexible policies

to ensure business continuity within the public sector. She further clarified that the primary objective of the programme is to bolster the sustainability of operations in critical sectors across Oman by cultivating advanced skills in emergency planning and risk management, thereby ensuring a high level of preparedness to address crises and unforeseen challenges. — ONA



CDCo.
العاصمة للتلية ش م ع م
Capital Desalination Company SAOC

Announcement of Ghubrah III Water Desalination / Phase 3 Environmental & Social Impact Assessment and (ESIA)

Capital Desalination Company, SAOC (CDC), a Special Purpose Venture (SPV) Company consisting of GS Inima Environment (GS Inima) along with Sogex Oman Co. LLC (Sogex) and Aljomaih Energy and Water Company (AEWC), has been contracted to construct, operate and maintain the Ghubrah III IWP project. The contract was awarded to CDC by Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (PWP) for a 20-year period.

PWP is the single procurer of power and water capacity and output in the Sultanate of Oman and is responsible for ensuring the security of sufficient electricity and water production capacity to meet the growing demands in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Ghubrah III IWP project falls under Category A projects as per MD 48/2017 (Regulations for Organizing Environmental Permitting) and as such, it is required to conduct an ESIA study as part of the permitting process in the Sultanate of Oman.

The project is also categorized as Category B as per the Equator Principles (EP1 definition: Category B – Projects with potential limited adverse environmental and social risks and/or impacts that are few in number, generally site-specific, largely reversible and readily addressed through mitigation measures), and based on the risk screening, the project requires an ESIA in accordance with EP2 requirements.

To address any potential environmental impacts arising from the project development and outline appropriate mitigation measures to reduce impacts to as low as reasonably applicable, CDC has commissioned HMR Environmental Engineering Consultants (HMR) to conduct the ESIA study for the Ghubrah III IWP.

The objective of the ESIA is to identify and assess any potential environmental and social risks and impacts of the Project activities to develop suitable management plans to control such impacts and ensure compliance with the applicable Omani Environmental Regulations and relevant international guidelines.

The site for the development of Ghubrah III IWP is a coastal area located in the north region of Ghubrah (located 12 km east of Muscat airport and 0.26 km north of Sultan Qaboos Street) in the capital Muscat, on the Gulf of Oman.

The new plant, Ghubrah III IWP, involves the design, financing, construction, commissioning, testing, ownership, operation, and maintenance of a high efficiency desalination facility based on seawater reverse osmosis technology with a gross capacity of 300,000 m3 per day (66 MIGD) of potable water output during the operation period. In addition, the plant will be designed using redundancy capacity, which is equal to stand-by unit, to produce 315,000 m3 of potable water per day during exigency periods.

The Ghubrah III IWP project has a detailed ESIA study as part of the permitting process in the Sultanate of Oman, also the Project developed an ESIA Addendum requested by project lenders.

Capital Desalination Company SAOC,
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Telephone: +968-99554922
Email to: communications@capdco.com



JOINTEFFORTS

OMAN AND BELGIUM CONTINUE TO DEEPEN TIES



FAISAL BIN ABDULLAH AL RAWAS
Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI)

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 1

As Oman and Belgium continue to deepen their ties, their joint efforts will serve as a beacon of what is possible when nations come together in the spirit of mutual respect and shared vision, setting an inspiring example for the world.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman

of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), said that this visit comes as an affirmation of the advanced bilateral relations and cooperation between Oman and Belgium, stressing the importance of the economic file as a major element in pushing these relations towards wider horizons.

He explained that there are great opportunities and potentials provided by major sectors, most notably logistics services, port development, energy, tourism and information technology.

He explained that Duqm Port represents a model of successful partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium as it is a major driver for many promising projects that enhance economic development in the Special Economic Zone of Duqm.

The OCCI Board Chairman added that there is a remarkable cooperation between the private sector in the two countries through the continuous communication between the OCCI and its Belgian counterpart with the aim of reviewing the investment opportunities available in Omani ports in addition to enhancing the private sector's participation in green mobility initiatives and supporting areas of modern technologies.



Omani-Belgian relations poised for greater heights

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 1

THE BILATERAL relations between Oman and Belgium are poised for greater heights, with both sides aligning for strategic partnerships and programmes aimed at enhancing better investment opportunities in both countries, according to Reggy Vermeulen, CEO of Port of Duqm and Honorary Consul of Belgium to the Sultanate of Oman. The volume of trade exchange between Oman and Belgium by the end of August 2024 amounted to RO 148 million, with Omani exports to Belgium totalling nearly RO 10 million, and imports from Belgium to Oman reaching about RO 138 million. Speaking to the Observer from Belgium, Vermeulen said that while Belgium exports food, industrial products, bunker oil, and others to Oman, the most prominent Omani exports to Belgium are polypropylene and its products, iron products, copper, among others.

“The two friendly countries, both with long maritime traditions, spare no opportunity for strengthening bilateral relations and pushing them to wider horizons in the areas of trade, investment, and cultural cooperation to serve the interests of the two countries and meet their peoples’ aspirations,” he said.

He sounded positive when he said that the Royal visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to Belgium on Monday and his meeting with King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie of the Belgians will support the two countries’ endeavours in



enhancing areas of cooperation.

There have been constant high-level bilateral visits to both countries by leaders and officials, and the visit of King Philippe to the Sultanate of Oman in February 2022 was marked by the opening of the Duqm Port project, a joint venture between the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and the management of the Belgian Port of Antwerp.

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

The two countries also signed the Joint Declaration of



REGGY VERMEULEN
CEO of Port of Duqm and Honorary Consul of Belgium to Oman

Intent Agreement in the field of green hydrogen and the Green Hydrogen Certificate Pilot Project Agreement for the “Duqm Hyport” project in Brussels in May 2023. Similarly, Oman and Belgium discussed means of enhancing aspects of cooperation and coordination with the European Commission

in the regulatory frameworks for clean hydrogen production and transportation projects.

“I am quite optimistic that the visit would open new horizons for the strategic partnerships between the two countries and push the bilateral relations to higher levels and wider horizons by boosting cooperation in various fields including trade, investment and energy,” Reggy added. He further said that the number of registered companies with Belgian participation until September 2024 reached 39, recording an increase of 50 per cent, and the size of the invested capital increased from RO 19,243,000 in 2023 to RO 819,778,000 until September 2024. These figures reflect the interest of the Belgians in setting up Omani companies.

Belgium — a hidden gem in the heart of Europe

MAI AL ABRI
BRUSSELS, DEC 1

BELGIUM, a hidden gem in the heart of Europe, offers more than just picturesque views — it invites you into a world of rich history, vibrant culture and unforgettable experiences.

From the moment you step onto its cobblestone streets, you’ll discover a country that is diverse in its offerings due to it its charming beauty.

Walking through the enchanting Grand Place in Brussels, often hailed as one of the most beautiful squares in the world, is an amazing experience. Surrounded by gilded guildhalls and the towering spire of the Town Hall, the square’s intricate Gothic architecture leaves one in awe.

By day, it’s alive with the hum of café chatter and the vibrant colours of flower markets, but as night falls, it transforms into a magical scene. The buildings glow under the soft light, creating a sense of wonder that feels almost otherworldly.

But Belgium isn’t just about stunning landmarks; it’s also home to some truly unique attractions.

One of the most iconic is the Atomium in Brussels. Built for the 1958 World’s Fair, this futuristic structure represents an iron molecule magnified 165 billion times. Halfway between sculpture and architecture, the Atomium’s bold design has become a symbol of innovation in Brussels and beyond. And it’s not just for show— climb to the top for

panoramic views that’ll leave you speechless.

Beyond its architectural wonders, Belgium is a haven for art and culture lovers. The Royal Theatre of La Monnaie hosts world-class opera performances, while museums like the Magritte Museum celebrate the surreal genius of Belgium’s most famous artist.

The city is brimming with galleries, theatres and cultural events that capture the spirit of creativity and artistic expression, making it a vibrant destination for anyone looking to explore the country’s rich cultural fabric.

Of course, no trip to Belgium would be complete without experiencing its culinary delights. The country is a haven for food lovers, with its rich tradition of chocolate-making standing out.

Belgium is often called the chocolate capital of the world, and for good reason. In Brussels and Bruges, boutique chocolatiers tempt visitors with handcrafted pralines, truffles and ganaches that melt in your mouth.

Iconic brands like Godiva and Neuhaus are just the beginning — small, artisan chocolatiers are always ready to introduce you to unforgettable flavours. And let’s not forget about the famous Belgian waffles, crispy fries served with tangy mayonnaise, and, of course, the incredible variety of food that turns every meal into a celebration of flavour and tradition.



OMAN

MOL UNVEILS 1,179 GOVERNMENT JOBS



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Sunday announced the availability of 1,179 vacant jobs in a number of government units for holders of different educational qualifications. The ministry explained that the employment opportunities are available as follows: 1,011 for holders of Bachelor’s degrees, 38 for holders of post-General Education Diplomas (GED) and 130 for holders of GED and pre-GED qualifications. Registration to the above mentioned jobs will be open for a period of two weeks from the date of this announcement, the ministry affirmed. — **ONA**

REGIONAL FORUM TO PROMOTE INNOVATION OF SPF

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

The Social Protection Fund (SPF) will participate in the Asia-Pacific Regional Social Security Forum, organised by the International Social Security Association (ISSA) in cooperation with the General Organization for Social Insurance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in the capital, Riyadh, from December 3 to 5.

The forum will see wide participation from ISSA member institutions, regional and international organisations, and prominent speakers discussing the most prominent challenges and innovative solutions for social security in the region.

The forum is a strategic platform for the Social Protection Fund to review its achievements and recent reforms in the field of social protection in the Sultanate of Oman.



The Fund explained in the working papers presented that the social protection system in the Sultanate of Oman aligns with global best practices, ensuring comprehensive coverage of social risks and linking to employment and empowerment policies, as well as the rights of women, children, and people with disabilities.

It also mentioned ongoing coordination

between the Fund and civil society institutions to achieve a comprehensive and just system, aligning with sustainable development goals and enhancing social stability.

The forum aims to enhance the exchange of experiences between participants from different countries and review good practices to address social security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region.

Social protection is a key focus of strategies aimed at achieving social and economic progress in the Asia-Pacific region.

With the challenges posed by volatile economic conditions and a changing labour market, social security departments seek to adopt innovative solutions to enhance the sustainability of benefits, expand coverage, and improve the quality of services to meet the needs of different communities.

Family Creativity Forum begins today

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

THE Family Creativity Forum activities kicks off today, December 2 till 6, to highlight and support the creativity of productive with the participation of more than 80 productive families. The forum organised by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), will be represented by the General Directorate of Partnership and Community Development, under the auspices of Her Highness Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at Sultan Qaboos University.

This forum hosted by Muscat Mall for five days, is an opportunity for communication between producers, consumers, and business owners to encourage future business partnerships, a vital platform to support innovation, and an emphasis on the importance of partnership between government and private institutions in promoting social and economic development.

“This forum is focusing on the creativity of productive families and supporting them by opening permanent and temporary marketing outlets that enable them to display and market their products on a wider scale, and enhancing the productive



The Family Creativity Forum will be hosted by Muscat Mall till December 6

capabilities of these families and developing their skills in a way that achieves sustainable development and contributes to improving their economic income,” said Mawaheb al Hadi, a data analyst at the Ministry of Social Development.

This forum includes many activities and events, such as entertainment programmes, marketing opportunities that contribute to improving families’ economic levels and enhancing their role in society as an effective part of the development system, and various

display stands for productive families to display the ministry’s services.

The forum will see the participation of more than 400 productive families from various governorates, as its first stop was last November in Al Buraimi Governorate, followed by the governorates of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Batinah North, Al Wusta, Musandam, Al Dhahirah, Al Dakhiliyah, and Al Batinah South. It will also be held soon in the governorates of Dhofar, Al Sharqiyah South, in the Wilayat of Sur from December 4 to 8.

Oman shines at global abacus contest

MUSCAT: Oman’s rising stars in mental arithmetic showcased their brilliance on an international stage as 44 young participants from Brainobrain Oman competed at the 12th International Brainobrain Abacus Competition in Dubai. Held on November 23, at the Sheikh Rashid Auditorium, the event celebrated the incredible mental computation and problem-solving skills of children from around the world.

The programme’s success is further evident in its annual National Competition, with the 6th edition set to take place on February 15, 2025, at Middle East College in Al Khoudh. The event promises to be another milestone for Omani talent.

The international competition, which featured 2,036 contestants from 18 countries, challenged participants with rigorous three-minute assessments in mental computation, both with and without an abacus. The event underscored Brainobrain’s global reputation, bolstered by its two Guinness World Records for achievements in mental arithmetic.

Reflecting on their achievements,



Brainobrain Oman shines at the Dubai International Abacus competition

Brainobrain Oman’s Chairman, Zaher al Sulaimani, remarked, “It gives me great pleasure to see our students competing at such a high level with peers from around the world. Their dedication and preparation exemplify the values of Brainobrain. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to each participant.”

Brainobrain Oman has empowered Omani youth through its Advanced Skill Development Programme. This initiative sharpens mental fitness, fosters multi-tasking, and enhances overall brain development, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of over 200,000 children globally.

A parent of one of Brainobrain Oman’s participants shared, “The competition was an incredible experience for my child. It provided great exposure and allowed her to test her skills against international talent.” Such experiences highlight the transformative power of education and innovation championed by Brainobrain Oman. The host city of Dubai witnessed a gathering of young prodigies from various nations, all competing for glory and celebrating the unifying power of education. As the curtains closed, the achievements of Oman’s delegation stood out as a source of pride for the Sultanate of Oman, demonstrating the country’s commitment to fostering intellectual growth among its youth.

Brainobrain Oman, which operates centres in Al Ghubra, Al Wadi Al Kabir, and Al Hail/Seeb, sent its brightest minds to represent the Sultanate of Oman. Among them were standout participants such as Ghina Hamza, Ibrahim al Harthy, Younis al Shukaily, and Sultan al Burtamani, who embodied the excellence and dedication the programme nurtures.



Recall

Recall Date: 02/12/2024

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production	Number of Affected Commodities
Simplex 49AV-WRF - AV, WALL RED FIRE USA	2021-2022	275
Simplex 49AV-WRFO - AV, WALL RED FIRE WP	2021-2022	6
Simplex 49VO-WRFO - VO, WALL RED FIRE WP	2021-2022	133
Simplex 49AO-APPLW - AO, APPLIANCE ONLY WALL	2021-2022	1
Simplex 49AO-WRF - AO, WALL RED FIRE	2021-2022	17
Simplex 49VO-WRF - VO, WALL RED FIRE	2021-2022	16
Simplex AV-WRF - AV LED WALL RED FIRE	2021-2022	3

Recall consequence

Tyco Fire Products LP ("Tyco") has performed advance testing and implemented a remedy for the firmware issue. Tyco's local dealers and distributors (each a "Local Technician") are contacting their customers that have Subject Appliances directly to schedule a site visit to implement the firmware update to Subject Appliances through the control panel as soon as practicable, or to replace any non-responsive Subject Appliance that does not successfully update or otherwise indicates trouble following completion of the update process. The Local Technician is able to follow instructions located at www.Simplex.com in order to update the firmware.

Recall Action

The Local technician will replace any non-responsive Subject Appliances that did not successfully update or otherwise indicate trouble following completion of the update process.

To check the serial Numbers of the affected commodities, please visit the website for Recalls & Warnings: <http://recall.pacp.gov.om>



هيئة حماية المنشآت
Consumer Protection Authority
www.pacp.gov.om



tyco
Fire Protection Products

tyco Fire Products LP
6 Technology Park Drive
Westford, MA 01886
Tel: 1 +978 577 4000





MUSCAT GOVERNORATE
MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY
Advertisement No. (39/2024)

Muscat Municipality would like to notify regarding the bids announced in the Advertisement No. (37/2024), as outlined in the table below, that specialized companies may submit their offers in accordance with the procedures mentioned in this announcement:

Serial	Bidding No.	Bidding Description	Document Fee	Deadline for obtaining bidding docs.	Deadline for inquiries submission	Deadline for submission
1	PRE/ 24/326	Bidding for Design, Implementation and Management of Restaurants at the Muscat Nights 2024-2025	25 R.O	04/12/2024	05/12/2024	08/12/2024
2	PRE/ 24/323	Organizing and Holding Gulf Plays and Concerts, Muscat Nights Events 2024-2025 Parks (Re-Bidding)	25 R.O	04/12/2024	05/12/2024	08/12/2024

Companies registered with Muscat Municipality and specialized in the above mentioned bidding field are invited to participate according to the following procedures:

- To get the bid's documents, company's registration with Muscat Municipality must be valid.
- Document fee for the requested bid must be paid through bank deposit into the following Muscat Municipality's Bank account:

Bank Muscat 0423010702710024
- To receive the bid's documents, a Copy of bank receipt must be submitted to the Quantity Surveying and Contracts Department at Muscat Municipality (Head office, first floor, Darsait), accompanied with the following details: (name and bid number, representative's name, contact number (mobile & office), bidder official email, commercial registration number).
- 10.00 A.M on the above mentioned dates, is the last timing for obtaining bid documents. Any bid's document request received after the specified time will not be considered.
- Bidders offers must be accompanied with a bond as mentioned in the bidding document valid for a period not less than (90) days, issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat Municipality. Bids that do not meet the required bond will not be accepted.
- Documents must be enclosed in a plain closed envelope (without mention the company identity) and placed in the box located at Quantity Surveying and Contracts Department at Muscat Municipality (Head Office, first floor, Darsait)

NOTES:

- Companies which are not registered in Muscat Municipality or their registration has been expired shall register through the Muscat Municipality's website (www.mm.gov.om). For technical support, please contact Muscat Municipality through this email (crm@mm.gov.om).
- If the bidders have any inquiries regarding the scope of the work, they have to sent their inquiries through the following e-mail (SQ.QS@mm.gov.om).
- 10:00 AM on the above submission mentioned dates, is the last timing for receiving bids. Offers submitted after the above mentioned date & time shall not be accepted for any reason.
- Muscat Municipality has the right to accept or reject any offer without assigning any reason.

Website: www.mm.gov.om

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Fighters gather in front of the Kuweires military airfield and academy in the eastern part of Aleppo province. — AFP

SYRIAN PRESIDENT VOWS TO DEFEAT INSURGENTS



BASHAR AL ASSAD
Syrian President

DAMASCUS: Syrian President Bashar Al Assad vowed to defeat insurgents by force, speaking after fighters swept into the city of Aleppo on Friday, the official Syrian news agency reported. He made the remarks during a phone call with the acting leader of the region of Abkhazia, Badra Ganba, the news agency said on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Jordan said on Sunday that developments in Syria were a “cause of concern” and that it rejected any action that threatened its northern neighbour’s security and stability. In remarks on state television, Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said the kingdom backed Syria’s “territorial integrity” and its sovereignty and called for increased diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement that would end the conflict. Inside Aleppo city, streets were mostly empty and many shops were closed on Sunday as scared residents stayed at home. There was still a heavy flow of traffic by civilians who were leaving the city, witnesses and residents said. — Reuters

DONALD TRUMP PICKS KASH PATEL TO HEAD FBI

WASHINGTON: Republican President-elect Donald Trump said he wanted former National Security official and loyalist Kash Patel to lead the FBI, signalling an intent to drive out the bureau’s current director, Christopher Wray. Patel, who during Trump’s first term advised both the director of national intelligence and the secretary of defence, has previously called for stripping the FBI of its intelligence-gathering role and purging its ranks of any employee who refuses to support Trump’s agenda. With the nomination of Patel, Trump is signalling that he is preparing to carry out his threat to oust Wray, a Republican first appointed by Trump, whose 10-year term at the FBI does not expire until 2027. Asked about Patel’s nomination, which will need Senate confirmation, an FBI spokesperson said on Saturday: “Everyday, the men and women of the FBI continue to work to protect Americans from a growing array of threats. Director Wray’s focus remains on the men and women of the FBI, the people we do the work with, and the people we do the work for.” FBI directors by law are appointed to 10-year terms as a means of insulating the bureau from politics. — Reuters

UN AID CHIEF CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION ON WAR-TORN SUDAN

PORT SUDAN: The United Nations humanitarian chief has called for immediate international action to address Sudan’s deepening crisis, highlighting the suffering of millions displaced by conflict. Tom Fletcher spoke with refugees during a nine-day visit to Sudan and Chad, vowing to amplify their plight and urge the world to provide greater support. “We are not invisible,” he said, relaying a message from those affected. Sudan has been engulfed in

war since April 2023, pitting the regular army, led by Abdel Fattah al Burhan, against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. The violence has killed tens of thousands and displaced more than 11 million people. During a visit to El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur, Fletcher met the region’s governor and heard “heart-rending stories” from refugees fleeing the conflict. “It is a tough situation out there, the

biggest humanitarian crisis in the world. And I’ve been talking to local people to host communities,” Fletcher said. Before travelling to Darfur, Fletcher visited the Adre crossing on the border with Chad after UN aid deliveries were extended for three more months early in November. “I know that the situation is very, very hard. I know that you need food and medicine and education and shelter and pride and dignity,” Fletcher told refugees in Chad. — AFP

Medics say two children killed in Israeli strikes

ISRAELI

military strikes killed at least 15 Palestinians in Gaza on Sunday, medics said, as Israeli forces kept up bombardments across the enclave and blew up houses on its northern edge. As fighting raged almost 14 months into the war, the head of the United Nations Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA) said it had had to halt aid deliveries through one crossing a day after armed gangs inside Gaza seized food from a convoy of trucks. “This difficult decision comes at a time hunger is rapidly deepening,” UNRWA’s Philippe Lazzarini said in a post on X.

In the central Gaza camp of Nuseirat, an Israeli air strike killed six people in a house, and another attack killed three in a home in Gaza City, medics said. Two children were killed when a missile hit a tent encampment in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, while four other people were killed in an air strike in Rafah, near the border with Egypt, medics added. Residents said the military blew up clusters of houses in the northern Gaza areas of Jabalia, Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun, where Israeli forces have operated since October this year.

Palestinians say Israel’s operations on the northern edge of the enclave are part of a plan to clear people out through forced evacuations and bombardments to create a buffer zone — an allegation the army denies. The military says it has killed hundreds of Hamas militants there as it fights to stop the faction regrouping. Hamas’s armed



Two children were killed when a missile hit a tent encampment in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, while four other people were killed in an air strike in Rafah, near the border with Egypt



Palestinian children stare at a building destroyed in an Israeli air strike in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip. — AFP

wing says it has killed many Israeli forces since the new operation started. The halting of aid deliveries through the Israeli-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing came almost two weeks after a large shipment was hijacked on the same route. UNRWA’s Lazzarini said it was Israel’s responsibility “as occupying power” to protect aid workers and supplies, and that the humanitarian operation had become “unnecessarily impossible” due to what he said were Israeli restrictions. COGAT, the Israeli military department responsible for aid transfers, denies it is hindering humanitarian relief into Gaza, saying there is no limit on supplies for civilians and blaming delays on the United Nations, which it says is inefficient.

Israel’s military campaign in Gaza has killed more than 44,400 people and displaced nearly all of the enclave’s population, Gaza officials say. Vast swathes of Gaza lie in ruins. In Cairo on Sunday, Hamas leaders held talks with Egyptian security officials to explore ways to reach a deal. The visit was the first since the United States announced on Wednesday it would revive efforts in collaboration with Qatar, Egypt and Turkiye to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza. Hamas is seeking an agreement that would end the war while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the war will only end when Hamas is eradicated. Two Palestinian detainees from Gaza have died in Israeli custody, prisoner advocacy groups said on Sunday. — Reuters



STORM BORA FLOODS GREEK ISLAND

ATHENS: Torrential rains flooded homes, businesses and roads in the popular Greek tourist island of Rhodes on Sunday, forcing authorities to temporarily ban the use of vehicles as Storm Bora pounded the country for a second day. On Saturday, a man died in flash floods which hit another Greek island in the northern Aegean. The fire service received more than 650 calls to pump water out of flooded buildings on Rhodes island and evacuated 80 people to safer ground, with the city of Ialysos hit the hardest. Cars and debris were piled up high in the flooded streets of Rhodes, with residents trying to remove mud from their water-logged properties. — Reuters

GUNMEN FIGHTING

Death toll in Pakistan clashes reaches 130



Deadly clashes have continued in Pakistan’s north-western Kurram district in spite of a tentative ceasefire struck late last week with the death toll now over 130 as authorities try to broker a solution. Official Wajid Hussain said 133 people had been killed in the attacks in the last week and a half. “The district administration and other relevant authorities have initiated efforts to stop fighting between the two communities,” he said. — Reuters

MARINE VIOLENCE

Thailand protests Myanmar’s navy firing



Thailand protested an incident involving Myanmar’s navy firing on Thai fishing vessels, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra said, after one fisherman drowned, two were injured and dozens were detained from a boat. Shinawatra questioned claims that the fishing boats had intruded into Myanmar’s territorial waters when navy opened fire on the vessels. Thai defence ministry said two of 15 fishing vessels were fired. — Reuters

PROJECTILE LAUNCHED

Yemenis target central Israel with missile



Yemenis said they fired a missile at central Israel, as Israeli forces announced they had intercepted a “projectile”. The group “carried out a targeting operation against a vital target” in the Tel Aviv area using a “hypersonic missile”. An Israeli statement said: “One projectile launched from Yemen was intercepted by the IAF prior to its crossing into Israeli territory.” The projectile was shot down early morning. — AFP

GOVERNMENTGOALS



Britain’s PM Keir Starmer speaks during a reception to mark World AIDS Day, inside 10 Downing Street, in London. — AFP

BRITISH STARMER TO SET OUT DETAILED POLICY TARGETS

LONDON: British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will set out more detailed policy targets to achieve the government’s five main goals, including in economic growth, healthcare, crime and green energy, as his party approaches five months in power. Starmer said he would set out a “plan for change” in the next phase of delivering goals including the fastest sustained growth in the Group of Seven advanced economies, halving levels of serious violent crime, lowering energy bills and improving state-provided healthcare. Mission-led government does not mean picking milestones because they are easy or will happen anyway. Government ministers and officials would be told to focus on these goals rather than individual ministries’ traditional priorities, Starmer’s office added. Senior Labour minister Pat McFadden said the plan would include immigration - a key voter concern according to polls - but it would not set numerical targets. Official data showed net migration reached a record of more than 900,000 in the year to June 2023. — Reuters



GEORGIAN PROTESTERS BLOCK ROAD

A demonstrator takes part in a protest against the decision to suspend the European Union accession talks and refuse budgetary grants until 2028, outside parliament. Georgian protesters blocked an access road into the country’s main commercial port in the Black Sea city of Poti. At least one entrance to the port complex blocked by protesters. — Reuters

ROMANIANS RETURN TO THE POLLS WITH FAR RIGHT TO GAIN GROUND

BUCHAREST: Romanians returned to the polls on Sunday to elect a new parliament, with the far right tipped to win, potentially heralding a shift in the foreign policy of the Nato country bordering Ukraine. The parliamentary poll comes at a time of political turmoil, sparked when a top court ordered a recount of the first round of the separate presidential election on November 24. The presidential ballot was won by Calin Georgescu, a little-known far-right admirer of Russian

President Vladimir Putin. A run-off in that poll is slated for December 8. Despite accusations of Russian influence and alleged interference via TikTok, Sunday’s parliamentary elections went ahead as planned. Florentina Noja, a 55-year-old engineer, said she voted for “some young” candidates she said were “a little less indoctrinated by the current system”. “We need to try to start afresh,” she said in Bucharest. She added she hoped for “more transparency and less corruption”,

while voicing concern that Romania might turn away from its pro-European path. Romania’s political landscape has been shaped by two major parties for the past three decades. But analysts predict a fragmented parliament will emerge from Sunday’s vote, influencing the chances of forming a future government. Polls show that several far-right parties are predicted to claim a combined share of the vote of more than 30 per cent. — AFP

New EU chiefs visit Kyiv on first day of mandate

THE EU’s new top diplomat Kaja Kallas and head of the European Council Antonio Costa arrived in Kyiv on Sunday in a symbolic show of support for Ukraine on their first day in office. “We came to give a clear message that we stand with Ukraine, and we continue to give our full support,” Costa told media outlets.

The European Union’s new leadership team is keen to demonstrate it remains firm on backing Kyiv at a perilous moment for Ukraine nearly three years into its fight against Russia’s all-out attack.

Questions are swirling around the future of US support once Donald Trump assumes office in January and there are fears he could force Kyiv to make painful concessions in pursuit of a quick peace deal.

Meanwhile, tensions have escalated as Russian President Vladimir Putin has threatened to strike government buildings in Kyiv with his new Oreshnik missile after firing it at Ukraine for the first time last month.

The Kremlin leader said the move is a response to Kyiv getting the green light to strike inside Russia with American and British missiles, and he has threatened to hit back against the countries supplying the weaponry.

As winter begins, Russia has also unleashed devastating barrages against Ukraine’s power grid and on the frontline Kyiv’s fatigued forces are losing ground to Moscow’s grinding offensive. “The situation in Ukraine is very, very grave,” Kallas, a former prime minister of Estonia, said. “But it’s clear that it comes at a very high cost for Russia as well.”

The new EU leaders -- the bloc’s top officials along with European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen -- were set to hold talks with Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky. Zelensky on Friday appeared to begin staking out his position ahead of any potential peace talks.

He called on Nato to offer guaranteed protections to parts of Ukraine controlled by Kyiv in order to “stop the hot stage of the war”, and implied he would then be willing to wait to regain other territory seized by



The President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky (R) and European Council President Antonio Costa give a press conference following their talks in Kyiv. — AFP

Russia. “If we speak ceasefire, (we need) guarantees that Putin will not come back,” Zelensky told Britain’s Sky News.

Kallas said that “the strongest security guarantee is Nato membership.” “We need to definitely discuss this -- if Ukraine decides to draw the line somewhere then how can we secure peace so that Putin doesn’t go any further,” she said.

Diplomats at Nato say there appears little prospect of the alliance granting Ukraine membership soon given opposition from a raft of members cautious of getting dragged into war with Russia.

Kallas said the EU “shouldn’t really rule out anything” in terms of the question of sending European troops to help enforce any ceasefire. “We should have this strategic ambiguity around this,” she said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Sunday that his country needed

security guarantees from Nato and more weapons to defend itself before any talks with Russia. “Only when we have all these items and we are strong, after that, we have to make the very important... agenda of meeting with one or another of the killers,” Zelensky said after talks with EU chiefs in Kyiv

Trump has cast doubt on continuing Washington’s vast aid for Ukraine and called on EU countries to do more.

Europe together has spent around \$125 billion on supporting Ukraine since Russia’s 2022 attack, while the United States alone has coughed up over \$90 billion, according to a tracker from the Kiel Institute.

The new EU foreign policy chief said the bloc would continue seeking to put Ukraine in the “strongest” position -- if and when Kyiv chose it was time to negotiate with Moscow. — AFP

Serbia denies behind Kosovo blast, says attack aimed at Belgrade

BELGRADE: Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on Sunday denied that Belgrade had masterminded a strike on Kosovar infrastructure, saying Kosovo itself had mounted a “hybrid attack” against his country. The strike late on Friday -- near the town of Zubin Potok in an area of Kosovo’s volatile north dominated by ethnic Serbs -- damaged a canal supplying water to hundreds of thousands of people and cooling systems at two coal-fired power plants that generate most of Kosovo’s electricity.

Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti immediately accused Serbia of masterminding the blast, calling the incident a “terrorist attack”. Serbia’s Vucic fired back in an address to the nation on Sunday, saying the incident and the accusations by Pristina were “an attempt at a large and ferocious hybrid attack” on Serbia itself.

Belgrade’s Kosovo office said

the strike gave the government in Pristina an excuse to crack down on ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. “We have no connection with it,” Vucic said of the attack. He stopped short of directly accusing any individual or state of orchestrating the blast and said Serbian authorities had launched their own separate investigation into the incident. The explosion has sent tensions soaring between the two arch rivals, with both sides trading accusations.

Petar Petkovic, the director of the Serbian government’s Kosovo office, said the incident provided Kosovar Prime Minister Kurti with a pretext to try and expel ethnic Serbs from northern Kosovo. “What happened in the village of Varage gave Kurti an alibi to continue the attacks in the north of Kosovo... and to continue the policy of expulsion of the Serb people,” Petkovic told public broadcaster RTS.

On Sunday, Kosovo officials



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

brought in measures to better protect critical infrastructure, with police and security forces conducting patrols. “The Security Council has approved additional measures to strengthen security around critical facilities and services such as bridges, transformer

stations, antennas, lakes, canals, etcetera,” the government said. It said it was also stepping up cooperation between its governing institutions, and with international bodies, “to prevent similar attacks in future”. On Saturday, Kosovar authorities arrested several

suspects. Police chief Gazmend Hoxha said that his office had seized “200 military uniforms, six grenade launchers, two rifles, a pistol, masks and knives” in the operation.

Animosity between Serbia and Kosovo, which has an ethnic Albanian majority, has persisted since the end of the war between Belgrade’s forces and ethnic Albania separatists in what was then a province of Serbia in the late 1990s. Kosovo declared independence in 2008.

Kurti’s government in Pristina has for months sought to dismantle a parallel system, backed by Belgrade, that provides social services and political offices for Kosovo’s ethnic Serb minority. Friday’s attack followed a series of violent incidents in northern Kosovo, including one in which hand grenades were hurled at a local council building. Kosovo is due to hold parliamentary elections on February 9. — AFP

OPINION

Community driven art engages and unites society



SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The writer is Assoc Prof, Dept of English Language and Translation, SQU

AS THE WEATHER cools down in Muscat, the art scene becomes more active and inviting. The just-concluded Raneen Art Festival at Muttrah, along Bait Al Khonji and Bait Al Khor, was an evocative example of art that, not only reaches out to the community, but actually makes them part of the process of creation, involving passersby and connoisseurs alike.

Often termed ‘participatory art’, creative productions which exist alongside the community succeed in promoting “engagement, empowerment and improving quality of life,” according to The Guardian.

Traditionally, art has been found inside prohibitively expensive art galleries, museums, castles and forts.

This instantly creates a divide between art and spectators who do not feel a connection between paintings and sculptures and themselves.

However, in the case of Raneen, the community is an integral part of the showcased art because it inspires and creates the works which represent people, places and historical memories.

For example, the welcoming canopy that reflects a Bedouin tent, with flashes of sunlight falling differently depending on

the time of day, depicts everyday life of a community and celebrates its sustainable material and architecture as it plays with light and shadows.

Similarly, the mural of an entire community consisting of people across all demographics celebrates the variety and aspiration to unity that is not only unique to Oman, but also representative of the historical community of Muttrah.

The interplay of painting with installations, heritage music as well as living art contribute to a vision of a culture that values its history, along with the desire to document, archive and preserve its tangible and intangible traditions.

Among such intangible heritage memories are the songs sung by mothers to their daughters, as showcased by Ruqaiya Mazar in an exhibit entitled ‘Hair and Poems’, a live singing session celebrates an ancient tradition of singing that brings different generations of women together and bonds them with the memory of combing, weaving and braiding.

Other instrumental music on the Oud, guitar, flute and violin permeating the corridors of the heritage buildings in Muttrah evoked a historical past in which dhows,

Art is deeply intertwined with everyday life. Viewing it as separate isolates the artist and overlooks the beauty inherent in daily moments, as captured in songs, drawings or buildings

ships and fishing boats would routinely pass by this busy port, catching on their way, the songs and music of the residents on these shores.

The participatory nature of this open air art gallery and museum was further enhanced by the opportunities that visitors had to stroll along corridors of photos and drawings to which they could contribute, adding their voice and talent to the creative performance on show.

Art indeed is not separate from everyday life.

To think so is to isolate the artist as well as to ignore the beauty of everyday moments as they are reflected in songs, drawings or buildings.

Art events such as the Raneen Art Festival bring an entire community together. From being a place for the erudite art lover alone, it becomes a place where the historian, the musician and the artist meet, along with those who are themselves being depicted, painted and celebrated.

Such inclusivity not only binds society, it also gives it a common purpose and mission. By celebrating art together, a community articulates a shared vision of its past as well as its future.

PLASTIC TREATY NEGOTIATIONS FALTER

SARA HUSSEIN & KATIE FORSTER

Delegates seeking the world’s first deal to curb plastic pollution began openly advocating for an extension of talks on Sunday, accusing a handful of nations of obstructing an ambitious agreement.

Nearly 200 nations are in South Korea’s Busan for negotiations that are supposed to result in a landmark accord after two years of discussions.

But a week of talks has failed to resolve deep divisions between ‘high-ambition’ countries seeking a globally binding agreement to limit production and phase out harmful chemicals, and ‘like-minded’ nations who want to focus on waste.

A new draft text, released after multiple delays, still includes a wide range of options, making clear the ongoing level of disagreement.

German delegate Sebastian Unger said he was “disappointed about lack of progress.” The “text should be preserved to continue negotiations and bring (the) process forward at (a) future meeting.”

The prospect of an “INC 5.2” meeting to follow the INC5 talks in Busan was also raised by Senegal’s Cheikh Sylla.

“If you ask me... we stop, we adapt the paper as it is and we try to do another session,” he said.

That would offer time “to bring the positions closer together, and at this session 5.2, we can reach an agreement that is balanced”.

The calls reflect a sense that there is simply too little time left to overcome the opposition from mainly oil-producing nations such as Saudi Arabia and Russia, who have repeatedly refused to comment.

A French minister at the talks accused the like-minded group of “continuing obstruction,” while Rwandan delegate Juliet Kabera said a “small number” of countries “remain unsupportive of the measures necessary to drive real change.”

“We still have a few hours left in these negotiations, there is time to find common ground, but Rwanda cannot accept a toothless treaty,” said Kabera.

Portuguese delegate Maria Joao Teixeira also said another round of talks might be the best option for a meaningful deal.

“We are really trying to not have a weak treaty,” she said.

Environmental groups have pushed ambitious countries to call a vote if progress stalls, and said another round of negotiations was unnecessary.

“We know what we need to do to end plastic pollution... simply adding more meetings is not the solution,” said Eirik Lindebjerg, global plastics policy lead at WWF. — AFP



Is the constitutional court important to justice?

IN ANY SOCIETY, the Supreme Constitutional Court is the cornerstone of the judicial system. The judges must be selected independently, free from state power centres and influential individuals. This independence ensures fair and impartial decisions. These courts operate without political pressure, favouritism, or nepotism. They are the ultimate safeguard for balance and justice among people.

The primary role of a Constitutional Court is to ensure that legislation, laws and rulings align with the constitution. It reviews and verifies that these texts conform to the country’s legal framework. This includes the judicial, executive and legislative branches. The court ensures that no legal texts contradict the rules of the judiciary.

The Constitutional Court is the highest authority on legal and constitutional matters.

Its decisions are binding and cannot be bypassed or tampered with. This court determines whether laws align with or deviate from the constitution. It plays a vital role in ensuring respect for the law and justice for citizens.

Constitutional courts handle lawsuits filed by parliaments, executive authorities, or societal bodies. They evaluate the constitutionality of contested cases. Sometimes, the court itself may question a law’s validity and initiate a review. These courts also provide guidance by examining drafts of new laws before they are approved. Additionally, they interpret constitutional provisions upon request.

In some democracies, constitutional courts also try high-ranking officials, such as presidents or military leaders. Their rulings in these cases are final and cannot be appealed. This makes them a critical part of governance and social justice. They also ensure that the three branches of government operate within their constitutional limits without conflicts of interest.

Over time, many Arab countries have established constitutional courts. For example, Kuwait created its court in the early 1970s, followed by Qatar and Bahrain in the 2000s. Despite this progress, justice often remains elusive.



In Oman, the judiciary has maintained its integrity and works with dedication to ensure justice for all



DR MOHAMMED AL MISHEKHI

The writer is an academic and researcher specialising in public opinion and mass communication

Studies from Western countries reveal that rulers and ministers dominate many Arab constitutional courts. Judges are frequently appointed for political reasons, undermining their independence and credibility. Instead of delivering impartial justice, these courts are influenced by political directives, damaging the judiciary’s reputation.

In Oman, however, the judiciary has maintained its integrity. Our judicial system works with dedication to ensure justice for all. Courts at various levels - primary, appellate and supreme - are staffed by highly trained professionals.

Many of these professionals are graduates of prestigious universities specialising in Sharia and law. The judiciary also enjoys the direct support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, who chairs the Supreme Judicial Council.

Despite these successes, Oman

urgently needs a dedicated Constitutional Court. Such a court would address conflicts over jurisdiction and authority between the government and other entities. It would also resolve disputes related to the constitutionality of laws and rulings. This is especially important for implementing the Oman Council Law of 2021.

A Constitutional Court would enhance governance, strengthen the rule of law and uphold justice in our nation.

Currently, the Supreme Court handles disputes about the alignment of laws with the Basic Law of the State. A specialised body within this court could serve as the foundation for an Omani Constitutional Court.

This aligns with the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. Establishing such a court would reinforce Oman’s commitment to justice, integrity and good governance.

Life, a school of challenges and opportunities



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHAMI

The write is author,
translator and a
communications
professional

LIFE IS A JOURNEY, full of unexpected twists, challenges, and invaluable lessons. Every experience, whether joyful or difficult, holds the potential to shape us into stronger, wiser individuals. It is not the events themselves, but how we perceive and respond to them that truly defines our path. In the face of setbacks, it is easy to get discouraged. However, what if we regarded these moments not as failures, but as opportunities for growth?

One should embrace life’s challenges with the right mindset that can transform obstacles into steppingstones, leading us towards success and satisfaction. Our perception drives our attitudes and reactions in response to what we experience. In many ways, you are what you think!

Making decisions can be a challenge that frustrates many people. Sometimes, we make a choice we later regret, for one reason or another. It is incredibly frustrating and difficult to accept when we realise we have made the wrong or undesirable choice.

Disappointment is a universal experience—it is a feeling we all encounter. Regret over a past decision or action will not change the outcome, so it is important to focus on what to do next. It is the moment to move on and reflect on the lesson learned from that

experience. In these situations, remember that to heal a wound, you must stop touching it. Similarly, if you find yourself in the wrong story, it is time to walk away.

Yes, it can be a difficult and painful experience, but every mistake carries a lesson. We learn from our recurring mistakes, which help us make better decisions next time. Therefore, don’t blame yourself for making an unwanted choice; it might have been the right one, and you may realise that someday. Everything that happens is ultimately for your own good—never view it as a curse or a failure. Unfortunately, some people react this way when they face difficulties or get into trouble!

The way you perceive things is crucial in making the right decisions at the right time. If you focus on the positive side of things, you will never feel lost. There is no such thing as a dead end or an unsolvable problem! Think positively and believe that it is possible to fix things the way you want. Problems are simply opportunities with thorns on them. Opportunities don’t come with their value stamped on them.

Every challenge in life comes with a blessing behind it. For instance, challenges from Allah test our patience and faith in Him. He is always with us, even as life becomes

Every test in life
can either make
us bitter or better.
Every problem is a
challenge meant to
either break us or
make us stronger

more complicated. Trust that Allah bestows blessings on us at the right time, often in unexpected ways.

Always remember that life is an experience, and every day presents an opportunity to create a new happy ending. Live in the moment and maintain faith and hope, for hope is the last thing to be lost in life. As Helen Keller, an American lecturer and author, once said: “Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence.”

Every test in life can either make us bitter or better. Every problem is a challenge meant to either break us or make us stronger. The choice is ours; we can choose to be a victim or a victor. Sometimes, all it takes is a positive mindset and a willingness to roll the dice to make things turn out the way we wish.

In some situations, fate is the only explanation we attribute to the events in our lives. While it is true that we often relate our experiences to fate, how we accept and respond to these events ultimately determines our outlook. Our beliefs and confidence shape our attitudes, our perception of life, and the decisions we make. Just don’t look back; you are moving forward, not backward. Never cry over spilled milk—it might have been poisoned!

THE FARM FIRES HELPING TO FUEL INDIA’S DEADLY AIR

ARUNABH SAIKIA

Blazing flames light the sky as Indian farmer Ali Sher burns his fields to clear them for new crops, a common but illegal practice that is fuelling deadly pollution killing millions.

Burning strips the fertility of fields, has a ruinous impact on India’s economy and sends plumes of acrid smoke packed with dangerous cancer-causing particles drifting over a densely-populated belt of northern India, including capital New Delhi’s 30 million people. But it is cheap — for farmers at least — to carry out.

Small-scale growers like Sher with less than five acres of land — who make up 86 per cent of Indian farms, according to the World Economic Forum — say alternatives to burning simply do not allow them to make the profit they need to survive. The 55-year-old farmer is just one of the many thousands who torch the stubble left after their rice harvest to prepare the fields to plant a winter crop of wheat. “I am scared of the authorities finding out, but I can’t help it,” said Sher, from Haryana’s Jind district, as black plumes rose from his fields some 115 km from the capital.

He faces a hefty fine and loss of critical government farming subsidies if caught. But he said that burning provided the only way to clear the land in time to ensure wheat seeds are planted in the narrow weather window. “If I don’t plant the wheat now, it will be too late,” he said.

Several studies indicate that farm fires turn the air in Delhi — a city already choked by too many polluting vehicles and regularly ranked as the worst capital city in the world for air quality — even more lethal.

Those fires form a key part of the toxic smog impacting the health of millions, which, along with vehicle and factory emissions, create choking air that surges to more than 50 times the World Health Organisation recommended limit of hazardous PM2.5 pollutants.

A study in the Lancet medical journal attributed 1.67 million premature deaths in India to air pollution in 2019.

India’s federal government has pumped in millions of dollars of subsidies to encourage modern machinery to stop the burning. That includes baling machines that gather the straw into blocks, as well as combined ploughing and planting tools, which return the stubble back into the soil while sowing the next crop.

It makes economic sense on paper for the long-term, but the wider cost of burning is vast.

One study by global consultancy firm Dalberg estimates air pollution overall drives losses to the tune of \$95 billion annually, or roughly three per cent of the country’s GDP.

Burning fields also “reduces water retention and soil fertility by 25 to 30 per cent”, according to the UN Environment Programme, thus requiring farmers to pay more in expensive fertilisers and irrigation systems.

But small-scale farmers say the numbers do not add up for them. — AFP

Education reform and global competitiveness...

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN is making remarkable progress in driving education reforms with its commitment to fostering globally competitive education system, aligned with Oman Vision 2040 which prioritises education, learning, scientific research and national capabilities. By addressing gaps identified in international assessments, Oman can raise its education system to meet international standards, ensuring its students are competitive and innovative workforce in the global economy.

Education systems around the world face significant obstacles in equipping students with skills that are essential to the 21st-century workforce, such as critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. Moreover, they encounter challenges related to learning gaps and inequality as millions of children lack access to quality education, with disparities based on gender, geography, and socioeconomic status. The rapid shift to digital learning has been a major concern for education systems. It has exposed significant gaps in infrastructure, access to devices, and digital skills for both students and teachers. Additionally, issues such as pandemics, climate change, and economic instability disrupt learning and strain education systems worldwide.

Oman’s education policy is based on a strong commitment to global excellence to address various challenges and issues. It has solidified its position on the global education map through its regular participation in international assessments like PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). These platforms have highlighted Oman’s steady improvement in literacy, mathematics, and science, earning international recognition for its progress.

The Ministry of Education has leveraged these studies to teacher training, curriculum alignment with global standards, and data-driven interventions to address



WAF
AL SULTI

The writer
is International
Studies
Specialist

performance gaps.

Furthermore, it has adopted strategic planning and project management methodologies to streamline its efforts. This has ensured accountability, efficiency, and transparency regarding the measurable impact of its participation in these international studies. The Ministry of Education welcomes its active involvement in international studies, as these provide a framework for enhancing reform programmes that emphasise the importance of providing vocational and technical education aligned with global standards, fostering innovation, and preparing youth for the demands of a knowledge-based economy by integrating skills like communication, problem-solving, and digital literacy into the curricula.

To address any challenges when working towards Oman Vision 2040 objectives, the ministry has launched the national study programme to provide a baseline of where the country stands in terms of students’ achievement, curriculum standards, and teaching practices. It also investigates local factors like socioeconomic status and regional disparities. It reviews current curricula and plays a pivotal role in identifying gaps, such as the need to have a stronger focus on critical thinking or inquiry-based

learning. This initiative addresses logistical and operational challenges when administering tests. Such efforts have helped Oman interpret its international study results more effectively and target improvements that align with international standards while addressing local needs.

Results from previous cycles have demonstrated consistent improvement. For example, improved reading scores in PIRLS resulted from stronger literacy programmes which were introduced in Cycle One (Grades 1–4). The results also showcased the positive impact of initiatives such as updated curricula and comprehensive teacher training programs that ensure educators are equipped with modern teaching methodologies like workshops on student-centered learning or digital teaching tools. With PIRLS 2026 on the horizon, Oman’s commitment to global competitiveness and excellence is more evident than ever.

By embracing international benchmarks and prioritizing reform, Oman is poised to nurture a generation ready to excel on the world stage and pave the way for a future-ready generation, aligned with international education standards. Oman’s efforts to future-proof its education system by incorporating global best practices have already yielded observable results.

SPORTS

CHESSCHAMPIONSHIP



OCC TO TAKE PART IN ASIA SCHOOLS CHESS CHAMPIONSHIPS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, represented by the Oman Chess Committee (OCC), is participating in the Asia Schools Chess Championship, taking place in Thailand from December 1 to 11. This championship features top chess players from various Asian countries.

Four promising players from Oman, namely Mohammed al Riyami, Majid al Riyami, Shihab al Jabri, and Abdulrahman al Jabri, are taking part in the event. This participation presents a valuable opportunity for the players to gain experience and refine their skills by competing at a high level.

Additionally, the OCC is taking part in the Qatar Masters International Chess Championship, which will run from December 2 to 13 in Doha. Representing Oman in this premier tournament are Ali al Maamari, Mohammed al Amri, Salim al Amri, and Mohammed al Mashaihi. The tournament is one of the region's top events, attracting world-class players.

These participations align with the Oman Chess Committee's ongoing efforts to support players, enhance their technical skills, and boost Oman's presence in international chess events.

Regarding the players' preparations for the tournaments, coach Bashar al Qadmi said, "The preparations have been intense over the past few weeks. We worked on improving the players' strategic chess skills. We have promising players, and I believe they are well-prepared to face the challenges in the upcoming championships. This opportunity will be very valuable for them to develop their technical and mental skills."

Al Qadmi added that participating in such tournaments opens new horizons for learning and development. "They will compete with players from around the world, giving them the chance to gain experience and elevate their performance. Moreover, it offers them an opportunity to learn from international players and acquire new strategies."

Highlighting the significance of these participations, Al Qadmi stated, "This greatly contributes to raising the level of chess in Oman. It allows players to interact with some of the best players in the world, helping improve their technical performance. It also contributes to the development of local practices and tactics, strengthening Oman's position on the international stage."

Al Manar spot second in GT World Challenge

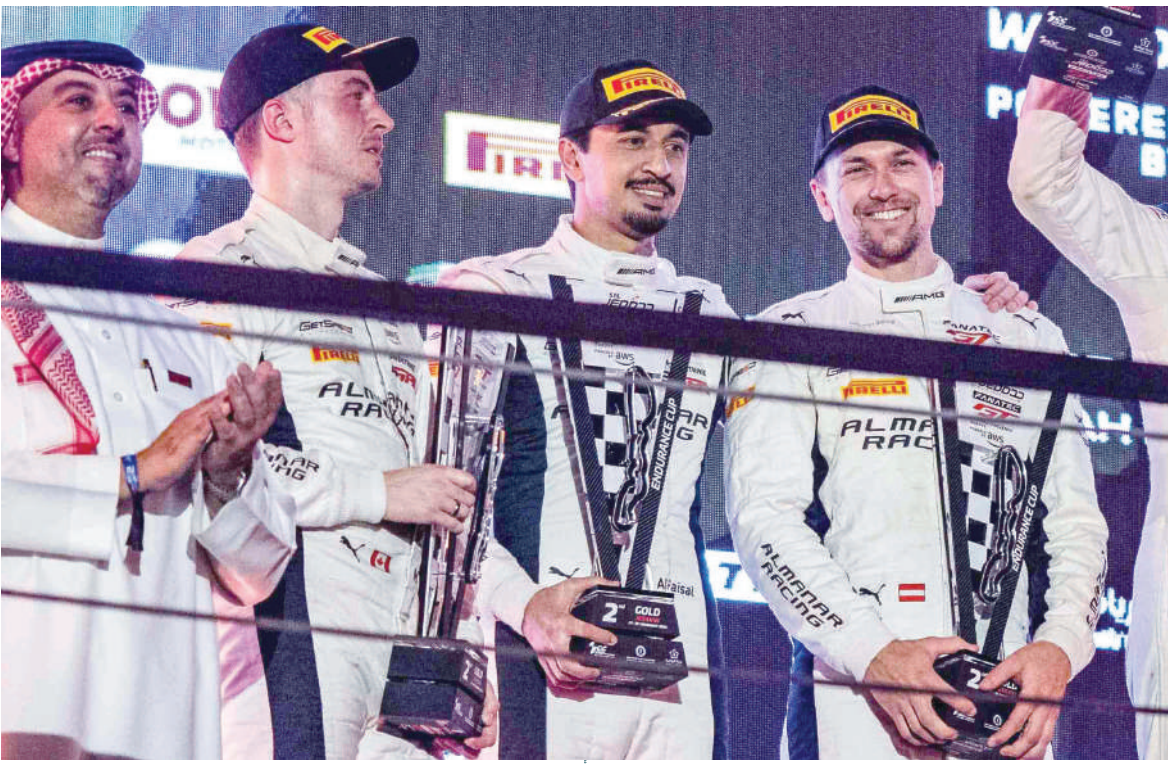
THE AL MANAR Racing by Getspeed trio of Oman's Al Faisal bin Khalid al Zubair, Austrian Dominik Baumann, and Canada's Mikaël Grenier sealed the runner-up spots in the Drivers' and Teams' championships in the 2024 Fanatec GT World Challenge powered by AWS Endurance Cup by finishing second in the Gold Cup category at the 6 Hours of Jeddah on Saturday evening.

The race was interrupted by a lengthy full-course yellow after a collision involving their pole-sitting rival Arthur Rougier in the CSA Racing Audi and Nicolo Schiro in the Kessel Racing Ferrari. The Al Manar Racing crew gradually pulled through the field to finish behind the championship-winning Saintéloc Racing trio of Paul Evrard, Gilles Magnus, and Jim Pla in front of large crowds at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit. Al Faisal said: "GT World Challenge is always a difficult championship, but the track here in Saudi Arabia was extremely demanding. Honestly, we had a blast. All the drivers enjoyed it. What a blessing to see a championship like this in Saudi Arabia. Let's hope we see more races in other Gulf countries."

"It was chaotic. We got a 30-second penalty, a five-second penalty, and a puncture. But we still finished second and second in the championship. That is something we should be really proud of. We would have liked to have won the championship, but I guess that gives us the target to improve one step next year."

The Imperiale Racing Lamborghini crew of Dennis Lind, Alberto Di Folco, and Philippe Denes rounded off the Gold Cup podium in Saudi Arabia after finishing four laps ahead of the Haupt Racing Team's Arjun Maini, Michele Beretta, and Jusuf Owega. The Al Manar Racing by Getspeed crew took part in a couple of pre-event paid test sessions before tackling the official free practice stint on the Jeddah Corniche Circuit. The Saintéloc Racing trio topped the times in the free practice stint with a best lap of 2min 00.138sec. Tresor Attempto Racing were their closest challengers, while the Al Manar Racing by Getspeed Mercedes carded a best tour of 2min 00.885sec.

Saturday's qualifying was split into a session for each of the drivers. Al Manar Racing struggled in the three stints, and when the sessions were combined, they had qualified down in sixth among the Gold Cup runners. Pole position went to Simon Gachet, Hugo Cook, and Arthur Rougier in the CSA Racing Audi R8 LMS GT3 Evo, with the championship-leading Saintéloc Racing qualifying in second.



Al Manar Racing by Getspeed crew finish second in Jeddah.

Oman eye 3rd win in Socca World Cup against Canada

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

OMAN WILL aim for their third consecutive win in the Socca World Cup 2024 when they take on Canada at the Sports Makers Stadium at Oman Automobile Association (OAA). Monday's match, scheduled for 8 pm, will feature 11 other matches and will play a crucial role in determining the teams that advance to the knockout stage of this highly competitive tournament.

Under the guidance of coach Nasr al Wahaibi, the national team is focused on securing a spot in the knockout stage by finishing in the top two positions of Group A. "We are very glad with our scores in the previous matches. Our focus has now



shifted to the remaining two games against Canada and Qatar. I believe we have good chances to qualify and compete for the top places in the event," the Oman coach said.

Oman began their tournament with an impressive 3-1 victory over Italy, with goals scored by Motasimal Balushi, Alial Harthy

and Mahmood al Balushi, while Jorge Fernandes netted the only goal for the Italian side.

In their second match, Oman edged the US with a narrow 1-0 win, thanks to a decisive goal from Loay al Wahaibi. Currently, Qatar leads Group A with six points, having defeated Canada 3-0 in the opener and the US 4-0

in the second match. Oman also has six points but stands second due to goal difference. Italy is in third place with three points, while the US and Canada remain without points.

In Group B, Serbia leads with two wins, having beaten Libya 3-2 and Bulgaria 1-0. Iraq dominates Group C, while Brazil tops Group D after a solid performance against Egypt in their opening match. Group E is fiercely contested, with France, Pakistan, and Türkiye all tied on three points. In Group F, Mexico and Albania share the top spot, while Romania and Uruguay are on track to advance from Group G. Finally, in Group H, South Africa and Argentina are leading the standings. The competition across all groups remains intense as teams battle for a place in the next stage.

SPORTS

FOOTBALL



GOVT INSTITUTIONS
FOOTBALL TOURNEY
CONCLUDES

MUSCAT: As part of its commitment to enhancing community awareness about the transformative power of well-being and sports, Ominvest successfully concluded its second football tournament for government institutions.

This initiative highlights the significant physical, mental and social benefits of regular physical activity, underscoring Ominvest’s dedication to fostering a healthier and more active society.

The month-long tournament, featuring 16 teams from government institutions, also aimed to encourage camaraderie and strengthen professional relationships among government employees, reflecting positively on their workplace performance and overall quality of life.

Held at the Military Technological College Stadium, the tournament provided an engaging platform to not only promote physical activity, but also to emphasise the vital role of sports in improving individual well-being and fostering teamwork.

Commenting on the successful conclusion of the tournament, Waleed al Yarubi, Chief People, Corporate Communication and Sustainability Officer at Ominvest, said: “Ominvest hosts this annual tournament as part of its commitment to promote well-being, teamwork and collaboration. We are delighted to witness the success of this tournament in its second edition.”

“We congratulate the Muscat Municipality team for their well-deserved victory, and extend our appreciation for the organisers and participating team for their contribution to the success of the tournament. We reaffirm our commitment to continue supporting such initiatives as they contribute to the well-being of our society and encouraging sustainable practices across all sectors.”

By promoting physical and mental well-being, Ominvest aligns its efforts with the broader goals of sustainability and societal progress, creating meaningful impacts that benefit the community at large.



Gunners hit five in first-half blitz

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, DEC 1

Only on three occasions in the Premier League, prior to this match, has there been as many as seven goals scored in the first half and, remarkably, none in the second. Five of those goals were conceded by a humiliated West Ham to give Arsenal a comfortable win.

Gunners’ manager, Mikel Arteta, said: “We have got some momentum, we have some flow back and a real determination. Winning consecutive matches against three opponents is great and we are going to enjoy tonight. The first half was crazy.”

He added: “We are in a great moment right now, but in football be on your toes and prepare the best possible way for tomorrow.”

Arsenal’s start was confident, they

were incredibly good and applied early pressure on the opposition. Their sequence of goals began as early as the 10th minute and by the 36th minutes they were four goals up. While it was a fine team effort, one outstanding player throughout was Bukayo Saka who assisted in the first two goals and scored the fifth. From his superb in-swinging corner kick Gabriel’s glancing header at the near post opened their tally of goals.

The Gunners doubled their lead in the 27th minute when Saka received a marvellous scooped return pass from Martin Odegaard and fed Leandro Trossard to guide the ball in.

Odegaard then got on the score sheet himself in the 34th minute when he converted a penalty which had resulted from a foul by Paqueta on Saka. Then within just two



Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta celebrates after the match. Reuters

minutes Arsenal were four goals up from a long ball from Trossard which Max Kilman could not cut out leaving Kai Havertz to score confidently.

With the four goals coming within a space of 26 minutes some supporters of the Hammers had seen enough and were seen leaving the ground. Those who did missed a quick response from their team which managed to score twice in two minutes to reduce the deficit, cutting Arsenal’s lead by half.

From a pass from Carlos Soler in the 38th minute, Aaron Wan-Bissaka slotted the ball past Raya and two minutes later a magnificent curling free-kick gave no chance to Raya, the Arsenal goalkeeper, making the score 2-4. There was, however, a bit left to complete the rout. Arsenal were awarded a second penalty

when their goalkeeper Fabianski’s fist, in clearing the ball from a corner kick, struck Gabriel in the 5th minute of the first-half’s added time. During this period the Hammers missed a chance of a third goal when Danny Ings missed an open goal. Thereafter, there was nothing that either side could do in the second half to change the scoreline.

West Ham manager, Julen Lopetegui said: “It was a very, very strange first-half. We didn’t deserve two goals and they didn’t deserve five. The first one was a set piece but it was a clear foul. After we have (had) to do better with the second and third goal.”

He added: “The fifth goal, before half time killed the match. It wasn’t a penalty. We were unlucky with the decision. But it’s not one excuse because we can do better.”

Seeb club secure top spot in Oman League



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

Seeb club successfully claimed the top spot in the Oman League after defeating Oman Club 2-0 on Saturday. This match, postponed from the ninth round, was held at Seeb Sports Stadium.

The match began relatively calmly, with both teams exchanging possession in midfield, and play remained concentrated in the area during the first few minutes. The first offensive attempt for Seeb came from Abdulaziz al Muqbali, who tried to take a powerful shot towards Oman club’s goal, but the opponent’s defence successfully cleared it without causing any danger.

Seeb continued to dominate the match, with players making continuous runs in an attempt to break through Oman club’s defence, while Oman club’s attempts were

limited, and they failed to threaten Seeb’s goalkeeper.

In the 40th minute, the first goal of the match came when Mohammed a Musallami rose to meet a high cross and headed it into Oman club’s net, giving Seeb the lead.

After this goal, Oman club’s players tried to regroup and search for an equaliser, but Seeb took advantage of defensive gaps with quick counterattacks. In added time of the first half, Seeb were awarded a penalty kick after a strong challenge by Oman club’s defender on Seeb’s player Jameel al Yahmadi, resulting in a red card for Majid al Balushi of Oman club due to his violent intervention.

Abdulaziz al Muqbali successfully converted the penalty, scoring Seeb’s second goal, further extending their lead as the first half ended.

In the second half, Seeb continued their offensive pressure, nearly scoring a third

goal through a powerful shot from Omar al Malki that went past the goalkeeper but was not followed up and went out of play. Oman club made their first substitution to reorganise their lineup and attempted to reduce the deficit. There was an attempt when a ball passed in front of Seeb’s goal but was successfully cleared by the defence.

On the other hand, Seeb relied on counterattacks, and despite Oman club’s attempts to get back into the game, Seeb’s defence remained solid, and Oman club were unable to reduce the gap. The match ended with a well-deserved 2-0 victory for Seeb, bringing their points tally to 27, putting them at the top of the Oman League, one point ahead of Al Nahda, despite having played one match less.

Meanwhile, Oman club’s points remained at 21, placing them third in the overall standings.

SPORTS



Al Harthy secures second podium finish in 2024 GTWCE

AHMAD AL HARTHY, Sam De Haan and Jens Klingmann made their second consecutive visit to the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup podium on Saturday night, 30th November, with a faultless performance for OQ by Oman Racing at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit.

Delivering an excellent showing throughout the season-concluding 6 Hours of Jeddah, the inaugural visit of GTWCE and, indeed, Al Harthy and his team-mates to the Saudi Arabia venue, second place in the Bronze class also ensured a richly deserved top four finish in the championship standings.

Beginning the race from eighth in class, the trio maximised the team's strategy in the No.30 BMW M4 and a great opening double-stint from De Haan was followed by equally impressive charges by Al Harthy and then Klingmann.

Following on from the team-mates' remarkable history making outright GTWCE Endurance Cup race win at Monza in Italy in September, they were able to repeat star form this weekend in Jeddah with Klingmann taking the chequered flag less than seven seconds shy of the class winning Porsche.

Near-perfect end to 2024 GTWCE campaign for Al Harthy

OQ by Oman Racing made consistent progression on the opening day of track action on Thursday, 28th November, with the team placing ninth in class



during the first test and then improving to eighth in session two. In the dedicated Bronze practice in the early evening, the No.30 BMW M4 was seventh in the hands of Al Harthy.

Making final preparations on Friday, 29th November, during free practice and pre-qualifying, the serious business really began on Saturday morning with final qualifying. Al Harthy ran in session one and posted the 10th fastest time in Bronze, De Haan was ninth in session two and then Klingmann set the sixth best lap in the third session – combined times meaning eighth on the grid for the race.

De Haan was tasked with the opening stint of the 6 Hours of Jeddah and after holding position on lap one he moved up into seventh the next time around. By the end of the first hour he was running in the top five in Bronze and then climbed into the podium placings

as pit-stops played out. Racing fell under a lengthy Full Course Yellow period around that time, with De Haan then leading the class.

Remaining in the car for a double stint, the action resumed late in hour two and roughly 15 minutes into the third hour OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel, Experience Oman and BMW Oman supported racer Al Harthy took control of the No.30 BMW M4.

Holding fourth place when the order settled, the Omani soon moved back into the podium placings and held second position with three and a half hours of fast-paced action under the night skies of Saudi Arabia still to go.

Claiming the Bronze lead soon after, Al Harthy then made his first stop just before mid-distance and rejoined the contest in sixth place. Once again, the OQ by Oman Racing car moved back up the order as the alternative strategies unfolded and around half an hour later Al Harthy was in second position in Bronze.

Still in second at the 100 lap mark, with just over two hours to run, Al Harthy reeled off the laps like clockwork and didn't put a wheel wrong. Soon enough the Omani's stint was complete and he handed over the car to Klingmann who was fourth when he re-joined the track. Moving up into third as a rival pitted, the German racer then took second fairly early in hour five.

As the final hour of racing

“I must say a huge thank you to my team-mates as well, Sam and Jens have done a great job this season with OQ by Oman Racing. This is a really proud moment for me here in Jeddah and a proud moment for my country, it is an honour to be on the podium once again for Oman

AHMAD AL HARTHY

approached Klingmann remained second in Bronze and inside the outright top 20, from a combined entry of 47 cars. With all going to plan after the penultimate pit visit, a seventh and final stop then came when there was a late Safety Car period with little more than half an hour to run. Charging hard to the finish, Klingmann sealed second in Bronze and 19th overall.

AHMAD AL HARTHY:

“I'm absolutely delighted, thrilled to finish the season with such an amazing result. Jeddah is such a difficult, such a fast and such a complicated race track. For us to come here for the first time in this championship and to come out with a podium, especially after what we achieved at Monza, is just testament to everything we have done as a team.

“Huge thank you to OQ by Oman Racing and everybody involved, our amazing partners OQ, the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel, Experience Oman and BMW Oman. The amount of support we have from back home is truly incredible. Racing in the Middle East, and racing in the Gulf especially, means such a lot and we had so much amazing local support here – it's a weekend I will always remember. “I must say a huge thank you to my team-mates as well, Sam and Jens have done a great job this season with OQ by Oman Racing. This is a really proud moment for me here in Jeddah and a proud moment for my country, it is an honour to be on the podium once again for Oman.”

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Duqm-1 marks Oman’s space debut

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

THE first rocket to be launched from the Sultanate of Oman and the MENA region will take off on Wednesday, December 4, 2024, from the Etlaq Spaceport in Duqm, according to a statement from the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT).

The first scientific experimental rocket “Duqm-1” will launch from a platform in southern Duqm (coordinates: 18°N, 56°E) and is expected to reach an altitude of 140 km above sea level at a speed of 1,530 m/s for approximately 15 minutes.

According to officials, the rocket measures 6.5 meters in length, and 80 kg in weight empty, and 123 kg fueled.

In a statement, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said: “The project is part of



ENG SAID BIN HAMOUD AL MAAWALI
Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

the Ministry’s strategic initiatives under the Executive Programme for the space sector. These initiatives aim to maximise the benefits of Oman’s strategic enablers, including its geographic location, to localise space sciences and technologies, attract investments, and develop partnerships with the private sector in executing high-value projects.”

Al Maawali added, “The project contributes to economic diversification, job creation and business opportunities in the space sector. This step marks the beginning of establishing a spaceport for launching scientific rockets and satellites, addressing commercial and research needs in space

launches, and enhancing international and regional cooperation in the space sector.”

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology, said the country’s geographical conditions make it ideal for space activities. “Oman is among the countries with favourable conditions for such space activities, including its geographic location near the equator and the Tropic of Cancer, which reduces costs and time for launching space objects into various orbits. The project also benefits from Oman’s coastline along the ocean, providing a safety zone for such ventures.”

According to Etlaq, the spaceport’s location Duqm was selected due to its proximity to the equator, which allows rockets to achieve higher launch velocities thus enhancing fuel efficiency and reducing launch costs.

Dr Al Shaithani also highlighted that

project is expected to meet the growing demand for satellite launch services, given the limited number of spaceports globally and the absence of facilities in the Middle East. It will also capitalise on the spaceport’s proximity to the Special Economic Zone in Duqm (SEZAD). The imminent launch represents a huge milestone in Oman’s efforts to venture into the space sector.

Last year, the Ministry unveiled the National Space Policy and Executive Programme, which aims to position Oman as a global hub for space activities and boost the contribution of the digital economy to the local GDP.

However, as Oman’s strategy primarily focuses on downstream activities, which include terrestrial space operations and services such as Earth observation and satellite communications, the launch marks a significant venture into the upstream sector of the space industry—a domain with no or marginal activities since 2021, according to the National Space Policy.

New pumping station project to bolster Muscat City’s water supply

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 1

CONSTRUCTION work is set to begin on a new pumping station at Al Ghubrah, the main desalination hub of the capital city of Muscat, aimed at securing the growing potable water needs of the city well into the future.

As part of the project, a fourth new pumping station is being added to Al Ghubrah complex, alongside a new major desalination plant – Al Ghubrah III Independent Water Project (IWP) - currently under construction at a cost of RO 127 million within the water hub.

Upon the completion of the upgraded pumping station and accompanying water desalination project, Al Ghubrah’s pumping capacity will surge to around 490 million litres per day by Q1 2027, up from around 190 million litres per day presently.

Last week, leading Egyptian-



The new pumping station, along with the Al Ghubrah III IWP, will secure the capital city’s potable water needs for the foreseeable future.

based engineering construction firm Hassan Allam Construction announced that it has been awarded the contract to undertake the upgrade of the Al Ghubrah Pumping Station project. The client is Nama Water Services (NWS), a wholly state-owned subsidiary of Nama Group.

“Our scope of work includes the complete refurbishment and rehabilitation of existing

facilities, the construction of a new pumping station, and the installation of transmission pipelines to enhance Muscat’s water supply infrastructure and meet the growing demands of its communities and industries,” said the company in a post.

“This project highlights our dedication to delivering sustainable infrastructure across borders. By improving water accessibility and reliability, Hassan Allam Holding continues to support Oman’s vision for resilient urban growth and resource security,” it further noted.

According to Energoprojekt Entel, the consultant for the project, the Al Ghubrah Pumping Station upgrade is an integral part of the Al Ghubrah water hub that supplies potable water to Muscat’s inhabitants. The pumping station is currently made up of three reservoirs of 40,000 cubic metres capacity each, and connected with a trio of pumping stations.



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C invites interested companies to participate in the following tender:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Site Visit Date	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/ 2024/ 019-2	Knowbe4 (Phishing Campaign and Security Awareness Tool) License Renewal	04/12/2024	11/12/2024	Specialist	-	Free

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -

Participation	- Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply). - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure, please visit www.supply.nama.om, under NESC VENDOR / E-Tender.
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent to procurement@supply.nama.om, using the inquiry form found in the tender document (05) Five working days before bid submission date. - Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.
Tender Submission	Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER and supplier guidelines available at NESC Website www.supply.nama.om, under NESC VENDOR / E-Tender.
Guarantee	- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of not less than Ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF PROCUREMENT COMMITTEE, Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C. - The hard copy of the bid bond should be deposited in the Tender Box at the Nama Electricity Supply Company Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 10:00 AM on the day specified for bid submission or any extended deadline. - Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected.
Terms and Conditions	- The Tender shall be valid for a period of (90) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof. - If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date. - NESC is not bound to accept the lowest Tenderer. - Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Omanization - NESC gives priority to award the projects to SMEs companies. - Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.
Incentives and exemptions	- Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from bid bond requirements. - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from registration fees on business opportunities platform and supplier registration with Nama Group.



SUPPLY لتزويد

Nama Electricity Supply Company SAOC

PO Box 1239, PC 131, Sultanate of Oman

Tel: +968 24250800 | CR 1/71235/7

records@supply.nama.om | www.supply.nama.om



ADVERTORIALS

SHORT TAKES

MCD ANNOUNCES
TRANSITION
TO DIGITAL
APPLICATIONS



NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

MUSCAT Clearing & Depository (MCD) has officially announced its decision to cease the acceptance of paper-based applications for registering new investors or updating individual investor information, effective on January 1, 2025.

This marks a significant milestone in the company’s strategic journey towards full digital transformation, a move aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and delivering a seamless service experience to its valued customers.

Under the new system, investors, whether residing within the Sultanate of Oman or abroad, will be able to complete their transactions with greater convenience. They can easily obtain a new investor number or update their personal investor data without the need for a physical visit to MCD’s offices in Muscat.

Instead, these services will be accessible through the user-friendly “Ashem Oman” mobile application or via the company’s official website at www.mcd.om. Both platforms are designed to provide secure, efficient and hassle-free access to the company’s services.

The transition to a fully digital framework is expected to benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including individual investors, corporate entities and regulatory bodies. For investors, the digitised services will eliminate geographical and time-related barriers, making it easier for them to manage their investment-related tasks at their convenience.

Corporate clients will also benefit from faster processing and enhanced accuracy in their transactions. On the regulatory side, the digital shift will facilitate improved data management and compliance monitoring.

In light of this upcoming change, MCD urges all investors to familiarise themselves with the available digital tools and platforms. The company has taken proactive measures to ensure a smooth transition for its customers, offering guidance and support to help them adapt to the new digital processes. Training materials, FAQs and support teams will be made available to address any concerns or technical challenges investors may face during this transition period.

MUSCAT STOCK
EXCHANGE INDEX
CLOSES UP 0.34%

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange Index 30 closed at 4,578.38 points, up 15.3 points and 0.34% compared to the last trading session of 4563.05 points.

The trading value amounted to RO 2,539,464, down by 28.3% compared to the last trading session of RO 3,543,109 .

The report issued by Muscat Stock Exchange indicated that the market value increased by 0.135% from the last trading day and amounted to approximately RO 27.43 billion.

The value of non-Omani purchases in the stock exchange amounted to RO 110,000, representing 4.33 per cent, while the value of non-Omani sales amounted to RO 389,000, representing 15.31 per cent, while the net non-Omani investment decreased by RO 279,000, representing 10.98 per cent. — ONA

Discover pure elegance,
luxury in Lexus ES300h

STEP into the era of sustainable mobility and experience the luxury, innovation and cutting-edge features of Lexus vehicles. The Lexus ES300h, with its dual-motor setup and hybrid capabilities, is an exceptionally powerful and fuel-efficient sedan. Thanks to its auto-charging system, there’s no need to plug in – simply drive and enjoy. With advanced technologies, the ES Hybrid offers an impressive 24.1 km/L mileage.

The Lexus ES300h delivers a smooth and exhilarating ride with its 2.5L, 16-valve DOHC engine, featuring VVT-iE (intake) and VVT-i, producing 215 horsepower.

At Lexus, every vehicle represents a journey of life. The ES300h stands apart with its sophisticated and modern exteriors.

Designed with modern aesthetics in mind, it features Lexus’ signature front grille, Bi-LED headlamps, a rear spoiler, a moon roof with tilt-and-slide functionality, and power-retractable outer rear-view mirrors with auto-tilt-down in reverse mode.

The interior of the ES300h is a blend of luxury and advanced technology. The 3-spoke leather and wood-finished steering wheel offers a premium feel, while the cabin features a wireless charging tray, a 17-speaker Mark Levinson Audio system, an 8-inch touchscreen display, Android Auto and Apple Car Play functionalities to experience seamless connectivity.

For added comfort, the ES300h is equipped with tri-zone air conditioning, an uplifting ambient lighting system with inner handle illumination, and a head-up display for increased visibility.

With adjustable legroom and 8-way power-adjustable front seats that include cushion length adjustments and memory seats for the driver, Powered Sunshades and Smart Power Tailgate with kick



At Lexus, every vehicle represents a journey of life.

The Lexus ES300h delivers a smooth and exhilarating ride with its 2.5L, 16-valve DOHC engine, featuring VVT-iE (intake) and VVT-i, producing 215 horsepower.

sensors, passengers can enjoy a comfortable journey, whether short or long.

Lexus introduces a comprehensive set of safety technologies to ensure a composed and pleasurable driving experience.

Make every drive a breeze and enjoy precious moments, the ES300h is equipped with advanced features such as blind-spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, lane tracing assist, pre-collision assist, SRS airbags and an adaptive high-beam system that contribute to peace of mind.

Additional safety features include an electric parking brake with brake hold, pre-crash safety system, auto speed sensing door lock, child restraint seat anchors

in the rear, a pop-up hood, tyre pressure warning system, front and rear sonar-guided parking assistance, and rear and knee airbags. It also offers a dynamic radar cruise control and back monitor with panoramic view for added convenience and safety.

Make Lexus ES300h your next companion on your journey with premium products by Lexus. The ES is a true blend of finest Japanese craftsmanship and modern era advancement inspired by changing trends of the world.

Lexus is committed to delivering a tailored experience to its customers. Visit your nearest Lexus showroom today to discover the luxurious product line-up.

GX AERO leads way in airspace innovation in Oman

MUSCAT: CGX AERO, a French leader in aeronautical information management, is thrilled to announce its first “Workshop on Aeronautical Digital Transformation and Airspace Design” in Oman, taking place on November 26-28, 2024, at the Civil Aviation Authority Training Centre in Muscat.

Organised in collaboration with Ankaa, and supported by Business France, this workshop gathered key aviation stakeholders, industry experts and government representatives.

After an opening speech from Nabil Hajlaoui, French ambassador to Oman, expert insights and real-world case studies were presented to the participants with interactive sessions for a comprehensive view of the complexities and opportunities in airspace restructuring, regulatory compliance and stakeholder coordination.



Expert insights and real-world case studies were presented to the participants.

In recent years, CGX AERO has hosted a series of influential workshops aimed at expanding expertise and raising awareness

in aeronautical information management and airspace design around the world.

Following successful events in Dakar and Jakarta in 2023 and 2024, CGX AERO is now bringing this dynamic workshop to Muscat. Designed to provide professionals with hands-on insights and collaborative strategies, the event will equip participants to drive effective, sustainable airspace restructuring initiatives.

“We are excited and honoured to launch this first workshop in Oman in collaboration with Ankaa and Business France,” said Mohamed Ali Mgalles, Head of Innovation and Business Development at CGX AERO.

“This event marks a significant step in our shared journey towards a stronger, more efficient and flexible aviation sector in Oman.”

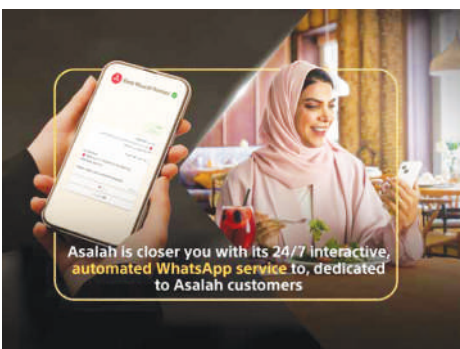
Customers utilise Bank Muscat’s WhatsApp service

MUSCAT: In line with its customer-centric vision “To serve you better, every day” and strategy to enhance communication with customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, continues its automated communication service via WhatsApp, offered exclusively to the Bank’s Asalah Priority Banking customers.

Through this service, customers can utilise advanced search features, both in Arabic and English, to

learn more about the products and services offered to them. They may also avail the service to raise inquiries about these services from 8:00 am to 10:30 pm every day, with the help of a dedicated customer service team to respond to customer inquiries.

The WhatsApp service has witnessed significant engagement from Asalah Priority Banking customers, since its launch. Customers avail a wide range of services through the platform,



Customers can utilise advanced search features, both in Arabic and English.

that has facilitated and enhanced communication between the bank and customers. Customers can also benefit from the service by messaging the number 24779999.

In addition, the bank has introduced a general WhatsApp service offered to all customers to obtain details and features about the banking services by contacting the Bank’s Contact Centre agents at 24795555, dedicated for responding to customer inquiries.

Asalah Priority Banking

customers can easily send “Hi” or “Hello” to the dedicated WhatsApp number to receive a list of all information related to their Asalah membership whether it is travel or banking benefits. Speaking about the dedicated Asalah WhatsApp service, Abdulnasir al Raisi, General Manager – Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said: “Bank Muscat is committed to enhancing communication with its valued customers through various channels.”

BUSINESS

OIA EXPANDS PARTNERSHIPS TO NINE COUNTRIES

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 1

THE Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has strengthened its global presence by establishing partnerships across nine countries, the latest of which is a \$500 million joint investment fund with OYAK, Türkiye’s largest government fund.



This new strategic partnership aligns with our approach to expansion and growth within OIA’s global investment network.

ABDULSALAM AL MURSHIDI
President of Oman Investment Authority

Investment Authority, stated, “This new strategic partnership aligns with our approach to expansion and growth within OIA’s global investment network. This reflects our commitment to forging high-quality investment partnerships that deliver substantial returns and hold strategic value for the national economy. We are also proud of OIA’s global standing and extensive expertise, which have so far enabled us to establish strategic partnerships with nine brotherly nations.”

OYAK General Manager Suleyman Savas Erdem emphasised the partnership’s significance: “The joint fund we established with Oman Investment Authority is an indication of the trust in our country and our corporation. With this fund, we will be making investments in strategic areas not only in both countries, but also in different regions of the world. This partnership will strengthen our vision of being a global economy.”

The agreement was signed at the Presidential Complex in Ankara in the presence of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It was one of 10 agreements and memoranda of understanding signed to enhance bilateral relations.

OIA’s international investment network now spans nine countries: Brunei, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Türkiye, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. These partnerships reflect Oman’s strategy of leveraging global expertise to strengthen economic ties and drive sustainable growth. Aligned with Oman Vision 2040, OIA continues to play a vital role in economic diversification, using its global investments to create value for the national economy while exploring new markets. Through strategic collaborations, OIA is positioning Oman as a prominent player in the international investment landscape.

CEO TALK

Kharazi Watches: A tale of Iranian success in Oman

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 1

RECENT data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) reveals a significant surge in trade relations between Oman and Iran, showcasing the Sultanate of Oman’s growing role as a regional trading hub.

Re-exports from Oman to Iran climbed by an impressive 77.1% during the first nine months of 2024, reaching RO 274 million compared to RO 155 million in the same period in 2023.

This remarkable growth underscores the strengthening of economic ties between the two nations, buoyed by improved logistical networks and enhanced cooperation. Iran has remained a key trading partner for Oman, and the diversity of goods and services exchanged reflects Oman’s strategic position and dynamic economy.

While Oman’s trade success with Iran highlights its economic agility, it also sets the stage for exploring the entrepreneurial journeys that enrich its market. Among these stories is the inspiring tale of Kasra Kharazi, the CEO and founder of Kharazi Watches, who has successfully expanded his family-owned luxury business from Iran into Oman.

A LEGACY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP Kharazi Watches’ journey to Oman is deeply rooted in heritage and resilience. The Kharazi family’s connection to the watch industry dates back to 1882, when Kasra’s grandfather became the first Omega agent in Iran.

Growing up amidst the precision of luxury watches, Kasra inherited a passion for horology, describing it as



Success in Oman is not solely about product quality but also about building trust, forging relationships, and delivering exceptional service

KASRA KHARAZI
CEO and founder of Kharazi Watches

“in his blood.”

Encouraged by his father, who admired Oman’s cultural values, Kasra identified the Sultanate of Oman as the ideal market to extend his family’s business.

Historical ties between Oman and Iran further solidified his decision, offering a unique blend of opportunity and cultural alignment.

CHALLENGES IN A NEW MARKET

Expanding into Oman was not without challenges. Navigating bureaucratic procedures such as business registration and residency permits required perseverance and significant resources.

Banking posed another hurdle, as international sanctions on Iran complicated the process of opening accounts in Oman.

Through determination and innovation, Kasra succeeded, becoming one of the first Iranian entrepreneurs to overcome these barriers without relying on local intermediaries.

Securing a prime retail location for his luxury watch brand presented additional competition, but Kasra viewed these obstacles as opportunities to strengthen his business’s foundation.

OMAN’S LUXURY MARKET POTENTIAL

The luxury market in Oman, while niche, holds promise. Kasra estimates that about 10% of the population can afford high-end items — a modest percentage, yet significant for a luxury brand.

Success in Oman, he notes, is not solely about product quality but also about building trust, forging relationships, and delivering exceptional service.

Unlike other GCC countries, Oman’s market stands out for its

cultural warmth and emphasis on community, creating an inviting environment for family-run businesses. This cultural alignment complements Kharazi Watches’ values, providing a fertile ground for sustainable growth.

REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

Kasra believes Oman offers an ideal environment for entrepreneurs who value a balanced lifestyle and long-term investment.

However, he advises that the Omani market favours those with patience and a commitment to cultural integration over those seeking quick financial gains.

His experience highlights Oman as a place where work and life harmonise — a destination for businesses that prioritise relationships and sustainability.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Kasra envisions a future for Kharazi Watches rooted in steady growth and community building. By integrating local talent into his team, he underscores his respect for Oman’s culture and his commitment to making a meaningful contribution to the market.

While advocating for streamlined bureaucratic processes to attract more international investors, Kasra’s journey serves as a testament to resilience and cultural appreciation.

His success reflects Oman’s ability to attract global entrepreneurs who value partnerships and shared growth. Oman’s trade expansion with Iran and its ability to attract businesses like Kharazi Watches illustrate its position as a dynamic regional hub. Oman’s unique blend of economic opportunity and cultural warmth continues to make it a destination of choice for investors and entrepreneurs alike.

Passenger traffic through Oman airports rises 4.1%

MUSCAT: Passenger traffic through Oman’s airports recorded a 4.1% growth by the end of October 2024, with 12,158,086 passengers on 90,846 flights, up from 11,677,931 passengers on 89,043 flights during the same period in 2023.

Data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) revealed that Muscat International Airport handled 10,720,381 passengers, a 3.7% rise, on 80,678 flights, reflecting a 2.3% increase in flight numbers.

Among these, 73,040 were international flights carrying 9,716,134 passengers, while 7,638 domestic flights carried



Oman’s airports recorded 12,158,086 passengers on 90,846 flights.

1,004,247 passengers.

Salalah Airport recorded a 6.4% growth in passenger numbers, reaching 1,321,622 passengers on 9,068 flights,

although flight numbers declined by 1.6%. International flights through Salalah totalled 4,410, carrying 576,743 passengers, while 4,658

domestic flights transported 744,879 passengers.

Sohar Airport saw 65,427 passengers on 580 flights, and Duqm Airport registered 50,656 passengers on 520 flights.

Indian nationals accounted for the largest number of passengers at Muscat International Airport, with 153,396 passengers, including 74,034 arrivals and 79,362 departures.

Omanis ranked second, with 99,236 passengers, comprising 48,513 arrivals and 50,723 departures. Pakistani nationals followed with 51,172 passengers, split between 25,893 arrivals and 25,279 departures. — ONA

Tender launched for 45 million l/d desalination plant in Duqm

MUSCAT: Marafiq Company has issued an international tender to establish a reverse osmosis desalination plant in Duqm with a capacity of 45 million litres (45,000 cubic metres) per day. The plant will supply industrial water and a drainage system for a major steel manufacturing company operating in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

Eng Abdullah bin Mohammed al Hashmi, CEO of Marafiq, stated that the project aligns with the

company’s strategy to expand operations, diversify revenue streams, and achieve financial sustainability.

He highlighted Marafiq’s role as a comprehensive provider of industrial services, including electricity, cooling water, industrial gases, and sewage services, enabling businesses in SEZAD to focus on their core operations.

Al Hashmi noted that the tender builds on Marafiq’s achievements, including the Duqm Integrated



The plant will supply industrial water and a drainage system for a major steel manufacturing company operating in the SEZAD.

Power and Water Plant, which has a capacity of 326 megawatts of electricity and 36,000 cubic meters of water per day. This facility serves the Duqm Refinery, the oil storage station at Ras Markaz, and provides cooling water and drainage for the refinery.

Additionally, Marafiq manages SEZAD’s drinking water system, achieving milestones such as expanding the distribution network, reducing losses, increasing production and storage capacity, and

ensuring water supply to residential, commercial, and tourism projects.

Jointly owned by OQ Group of Oman and Gulf Energy of Thailand, Marafiq specialises in industrial services under a unified strategy to support investors and industries in SEZAD.

Its services include electricity, industrial water, cooling systems, gas supply, and waste treatment, ensuring a reliable infrastructure for Duqm’s growing industrial ecosystem.

OPINION

The scope of renewable energy in EVs in Oman



MARYAM AHMED YOUSEF AL NOFLI

The author is researcher, academic faculty and Head of the Continuous Education and Community Service Department at University of Technology and Applied Sciences - Musandam

In today’s world, the energy and transportation sectors are facing critical issues in solving some of the century’s most pressing concerns, including the struggle for energy independence, the fall of oil supply, global warming and climatic change. Given Oman’s heavy reliance on oil—which accounts for around 28% of total energy consumption—there is an urgent need to shift to more sustainable transport modes, such as electric vehicles (EVs). The EV business is one of the fastest expanding sectors of the world and the most environmentally friendly alternative to traditional modes of transportation. The worldwide automobile industry is transitioning to electric vehicles (EVs) for more sustainable mobility. The Middle East, which has traditionally relied on oil, is rapidly adopting electric vehicles due to government initiatives, infrastructure investments, and increased environmental concerns due to climatic change. This transformation is critical to the Gulf region’s long-term energy and economic diversification. The Sultanate of Oman is pushing for cleaner and renewable energy, with a focus on electric vehicles. The country predominantly depends on natural gas, which makes up 71% of its energy consumption, but oil remains critical for powering vehicles. The transportation sector in Oman consumes a notable share of the country’s

energy, largely due to its reliance on oil products. In 2021, transportation accounted for a significant portion of oil’s approximately 28% total energy consumption. Oman is aggressively pursuing its goals to cut carbon emissions from the transportation sector, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2040 and with plans to phase out all cars that run on fossil fuels by 2050. As such, transitioning to electric vehicles not only cuts emissions but also reduces economic vulnerability to oil price fluctuations. The government plans to expand the charging infrastructure with a target of 300 stations by 2025 across major cities like Muscat and Suhar. However, the public lacks access to a central database that provides data on the current deployment of electric vehicles. The Authority for Electricity Regulation is working on regulations to govern and enforce the use of electric vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman. The promotion of electric cars is a key component of Oman’s energy transition policy. By 2030, 7,000 EVs are expected to be registered, accounting for 35% of new light vehicle registrations; by 2040, that number is expected to rise to 22,000 EVs, or 65% of new vehicles. Additionally, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) is leading a phased carbon reduction programme in Oman that aims to transition

Given Oman’s heavy reliance on oil — which accounts for around 28 per cent of total energy consumption—there is an urgent need to shift to more sustainable transport modes, such as electric vehicles (EVs).

trucks and heavy machinery to hydrogen and electric technologies. By 2029, Oman expects the EV market to be a size of \$805.32 million. Government incentives, such as tax rebates, subsidies, and laws requiring service stations to provide EV charging stations, support this expansion. While private sector cooperation is aggressively promoting the construction of easily accessible and effective charging infrastructure, the government has also implemented steps to address issues like range anxiety and the high initial cost of EVs. In a noteworthy move to diversify the economy and lessen dependency on oil and gas exports, Mays, Oman’s first indigenous EV manufacturer, is gearing up activities to introduce its debut model, the Alive 1, priced at \$38,964. Complementing these efforts, Oman is developing its renewable energy projects to support the growing EV ecosystem and broader sustainability goals. The country has started several projects, including wind farms in Dhofar, solar-diesel hybrid facilities, and small-scale solar panel installations under the Sahim programme. It has also operationalised its largest utility-scale solar photovoltaic project, Ibri 2. Achieving the goals of 79% electric vehicles by 2035 and switching to a zero-emission transportation system by the middle of the century depends on the combination of renewable energy and EV uptake.

OIL’S GEOPOLITICAL RISK PREMIUM IS STILL THERE

Israel and Hezbollah’s peace deal is a key step on the path to a calmer Middle East — and, in theory, lower oil prices. On Tuesday, the US and France managed to broker an agreement which reduces one aspect of crude’s geopolitical risk premium. But Iran and Donald Trump’s presidency are significant and ongoing countervailing forces. The ceasefire leaves Benjamin Netanyahu in a powerful position. The Israeli prime minister’s war has severely damaged the capabilities of Hezbollah.

That sounds like a recipe for lower oil values. Crude prices had already retreated from \$92 a barrel when Israel’s separate war in Gaza erupted in late 2023 to current levels of \$70 a barrel. And Trump, a staunch supporter of Israel, is about to take over as US president. In theory, the pair could use the latest step forward to forge other pacts across the region — for example by striking a deal with Saudi Arabia. That sounds like a recipe for lower oil values. Crude prices had already retreated from \$92 a barrel when Israel’s separate war in Gaza erupted in late 2023 to current levels of \$70 a barrel. And in big picture terms, there’s scope for it to fall further. Earlier in November, the Opec+ cut its global demand growth estimates to 1.54 million barrels per day, the fourth such cut this year. Meanwhile, OPEC+ is grappling with huge volumes of spare capacity. Rystad analysts reckon oil prices could fall to as low as \$50 a barrel if the cartel decided to unwind their output cuts. All that said, the geopolitical risk premium hasn’t gone away. Israel, the US and Arab nations still need to devise a strategy for what to do next in Gaza. And the current situation makes it easier for Trump to deploy his “maximum pressure” tactics on Iran, which include applying harsh sanctions on the Islamic Republic when he takes over in January. If that happens, there’s a risk that Iran’s 1.7 million barrels of daily oil exports sink to much lower levels. — Reuters



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The author is founder and CEO - Smart Investment Gateway, economists, board adviser & business transformation mentor



A Turkish flag is pictured on a boat with the Ortakoy Mosque in the background in Istanbul. — Reuters

OMAN and the Republic of Türkiye, linked by historical and cultural affinities, are embarking on a journey to significantly enhance their economic relationship. This partnership, grounded in mutual trust and a shared vision for progress, is poised to unlock substantial investment and trade opportunities for both nations. A recent high-level diplomatic visit to Türkiye, the first since the establishment of formal relations, solidified the commitment of both countries to elevate their partnership. This visit culminated in the signing of ten agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) spanning diverse sectors, including a landmark \$500 million joint investment fund established by the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and the Turkish Armed Forces Retirement Fund (OYAK). This fund will target key industries such as food production, manufacturing, healthcare, renewable energy, consumer goods, and logistics services, with the goal of generating sustainable returns and expanding into new markets. This collaboration aligns perfectly with OIA’s strategic objectives of diversifying its investment portfolio and securing strong returns. With assets exceeding \$50 billion invested across more than 50 countries, OIA is a major global investor concentrating on sectors like industry, aviation, energy, mining, logistics, and tourism. The partnership with OYAK will further broaden OIA’s international reach and contribute to Oman’s economic diversification goals, a key pillar of Oman’s Vision 2040.

This national plan aims to shift the Sultanate of Oman’s economy away from reliance on hydrocarbons and towards a more diversified and sustainable model. Beyond the joint investment fund, the agreements signed during the visit encompass a wide range of areas, including health, agriculture, fisheries, labour, and cultural cooperation. These agreements lay the groundwork for a comprehensive partnership that extends beyond trade and investment, fostering knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and people-to-people exchanges. This multifaceted approach recognises the importance of building strong human capital and fostering cultural understanding as the bedrock of a successful economic partnership. Oman’s strategic location at the crossroads of global trade routes, its political stability, and its investor-friendly policies make it an attractive destination for Turkish businesses. The country’s commitment to free trade is further exemplified by its membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and numerous trade agreements, including the GCC-Singapore Free Trade Agreement and the US-Oman Free Trade Agreement. These agreements provide a robust framework for international trade and investment, ensuring market access and investor protection, key factors in attracting foreign direct investment. Similarly, Türkiye, with its large and diverse market, manufacturing expertise, and access to European markets, offers exciting prospects for Omani businesses. Turkish companies have a strong track record in sectors such as construction,

textiles, and automotive manufacturing, offering potential synergies with Oman’s developing industrial base. The potential for collaboration is vast, spanning sectors like tourism, renewable energy, logistics, and manufacturing. Joint ventures, technology transfer, and skills development programmes can facilitate mutually beneficial projects in these areas. For example, Oman’s ambitious renewable energy targets could benefit from Turkish expertise in solar and wind power technology, while Omani companies could leverage Turkish logistics networks to access new markets in Europe and Asia. While bilateral trade between Oman and Türkiye reached nearly \$2 billion in 2022, there is still immense untapped potential. To further boost trade and investment flows, both countries need to actively promote the available incentives and opportunities, improve connectivity through direct air and sea links, and streamline regulatory frameworks. Increased business-to-business interactions through trade delegations, exhibitions, and online platforms can also facilitate greater understanding of market opportunities and foster new partnerships. This burgeoning partnership transcends mere economic gains; it’s about building a lasting relationship that benefits both nations and their people. By leveraging their complementary strengths and addressing existing challenges, Oman and Türkiye can unlock significant economic potential, create jobs, and foster a more prosperous future. This collaboration serves as a model for cross-regional cooperation, demonstrating how countries with different economic structures and strengths can leverage those differences for mutual benefit. As both nations continue their economic transformation journeys, the time is ripe for deeper economic integration and cooperation. The opportunity for profitable, sustainable partnerships is real and growing, promising a new era of growth and prosperity for Oman and Türkiye. This partnership also has the potential to create a positive social impact. Increased economic activity can lead to job creation, particularly for young professionals, and foster knowledge transfer and skills development. Furthermore, cultural exchange and understanding can be enhanced through educational partnerships and tourism, contributing to a more tolerant and interconnected world.

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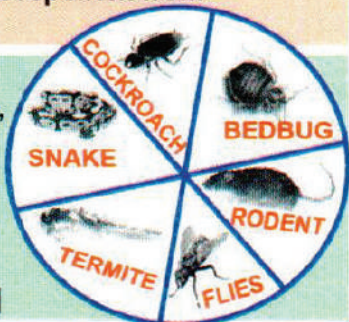


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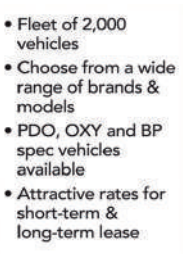
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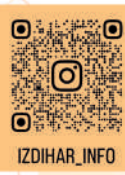


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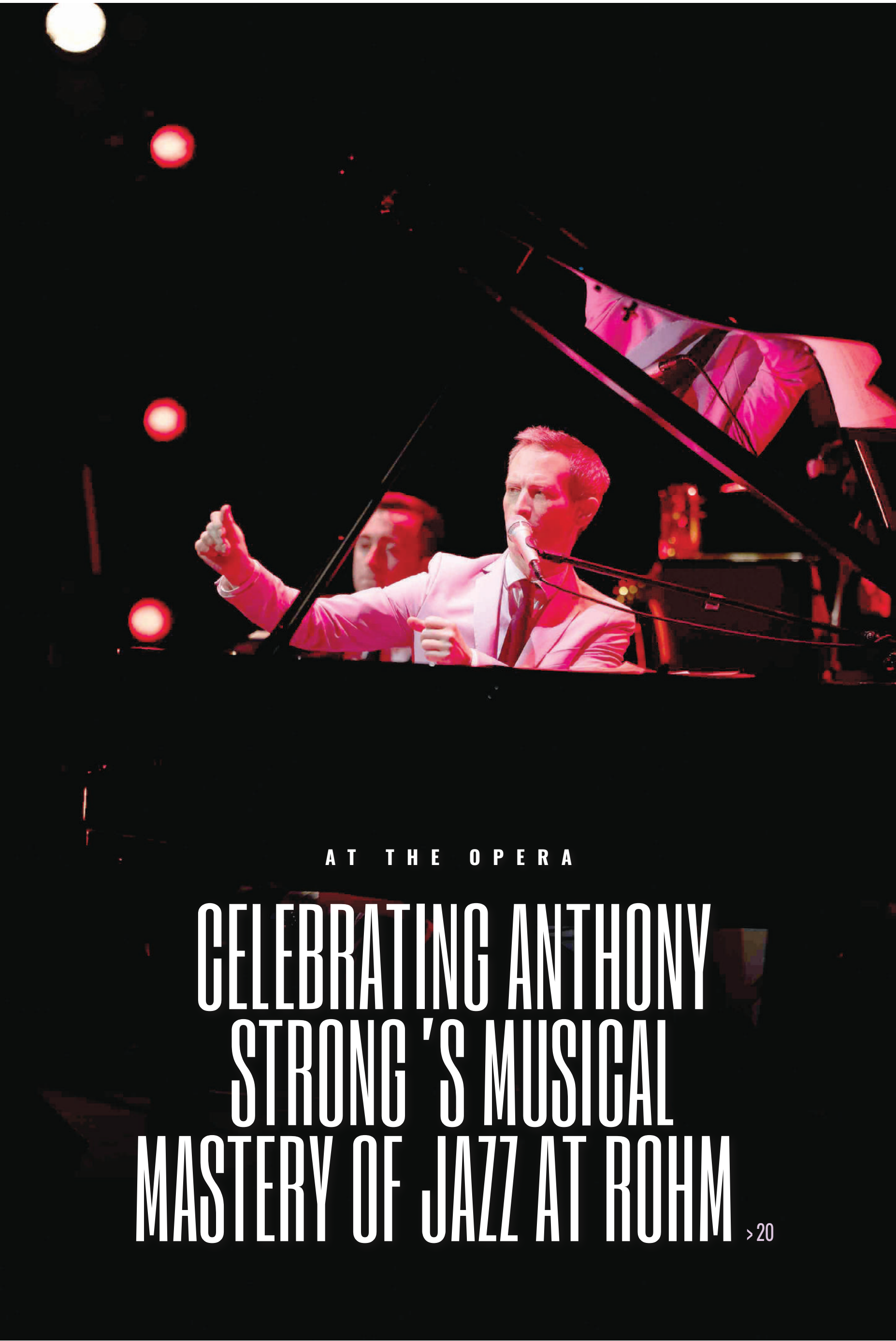
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ART/LIFE



ENTERTAINMENT

Lady Gaga to hold free concert at Rio’s Copacabana Beach, sources say



POP STAR Lady Gaga is set to hold a free concert at Rio de Janeiro’s Copacabana Beach in May 2025, two sources familiar with the matter said, a show expected to draw hundreds of thousands of fans.

The move is part of the Brazilian city’s efforts to establish what Mayor Eduardo Paes has called “Celebration May,” bringing international superstars to perform for free at events that authorities say provide a boost to the local economy.

Lady Gaga’s label Universal Music did not respond to a request for comment. Representatives for the singer also did not immediately respond to a comment request during a US holiday-related closure.

Madonna saw huge success in May with her free Copacabana Beach show, when the “Like a Prayer” and “Vogue” singer attracted an audience of an estimated 1.6 million.

“You can bet it will be her (Lady Gaga), and the concert should take place on May 3,” one of the sources said, requesting anonymity as an official announcement is still pending.

A second source confirmed the 38-year-old “Bad Romance” and “Poker Face” singer would hold the concert, adding that Irish rock band U2 had also been considered.

Paes said earlier this week he had a preliminary deal to bring an international pop star for a Copacabana concert, but did not reveal who the artist was. A final agreement is expected in the coming weeks.

For Madonna’s concert, the local government relied on sponsors’ money but also used public funds, saying at the time that the estimated 300 million real (\$49.97 million) return far exceeded its 10 million real investment.

The prospect of yet another “mega show” in Rio has excited fans and the tourism industry.

“The mayor had already said his goal was to bring big shows to Rio. Madonna was an absolute success. Lady Gaga will also be a hit and the tourism market will respond very well to it,” Rio hotel union head Alfredo Lopes said.

Past free concerts at Copacabana have also included the Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart and Lenny Kravitz. — Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



ENTERTAINMENT

Actor Paul Kircher poses with the “Marcello Mastroianni” Award for Best New Young Actor he received for his performance in “Leurs Enfants apres eux” (And their children after them) during the a photocall of the 81st Venice Film Festival. — AFP Archive



CULTURE

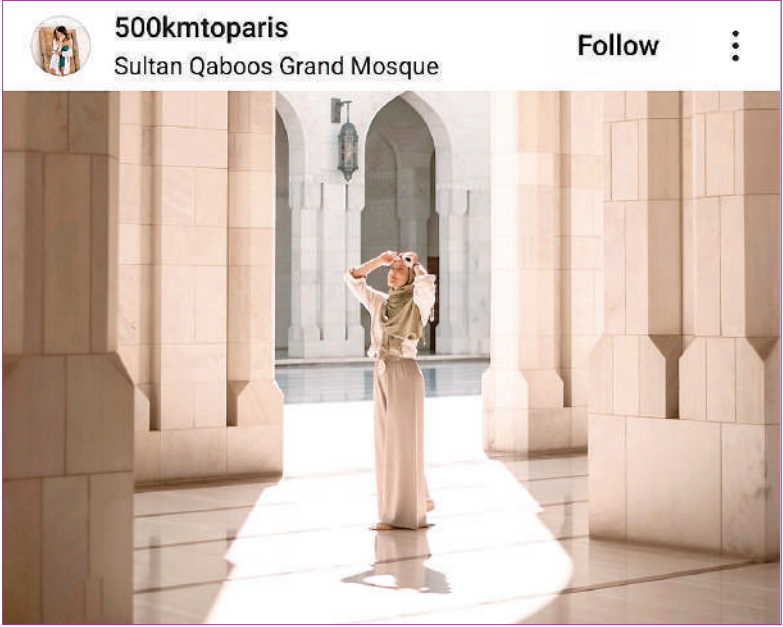
Music teacher, Lina Palera tunes up the replica of an ancient Greek lyre during a course at the Seikilo Museum of Ancient Music in Thessaloniki, Greece. — Reuters



LIFESTYLE

A vendor prepares food for customers in the Christmas market in Riga, Latvia. — Reuters

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Peru scientists unveil crocodile fossil up to 12 million years old



PALAEONTOLOGISTS unveiled on Wednesday the fossil of a young marine crocodile dating back 10 to 12 million years that was discovered in a Peruvian desert. The fossil of the gharial — or fish-eating — crocodile, around three metres-long (nearly 10 feet), was discovered late 2023 in perfect condition in Peru’s Ocucaje desert, around 350 kilometres south of the capital Lima. “This is the first time we found a juvenile of this species, that is to say, it had not reached its maximum size yet. It died before that,” vertebrate palaeontologist Mario Gamarra told a news conference. The skull and jaws of these specimens differed

from that of today’s crocodiles and alligators, according to Gamarra, who headed the reconstruction of the fossil. “They had an elongated snout and their diet was entirely piscivorous, feeding on fish,” said Gamarra. “The closest current relative to this crocodile would be the Indian gharial,” he added. The discovery was made jointly by Peru’s Geological, Mining and Metallurgical Institute and the La Union school. Peru’s Ocucaje desert is rich in fossils, such as four-legged dwarf whales, dolphins, sharks and other species from the Miocene period — between 5 and 23 million years ago — that were previously discovered there. — AFP

Cactus pear is a crop with potential in Italy’s parched south and beyond

GLOBAL warming, drought and plant disease pose a growing threat to agriculture in Italy’s arid south, but a startup founded by a former telecoms manager believes it has found a solution: *Opuntia Ficus*, better known as the cactus pear.

Andrea Ortenzi saw the plant’s potential 20 years ago when working for Telecom Italia in Brazil, where it is widely used as animal feed. On returning to Italy he began looking at ways to turn his intuition into a business opportunity.

He and four friends founded their company, called Wakonda, in 2021, and began buying land to plant the crop in the southern Puglia region where the traditionally dominant olive trees had been ravaged by an insect-borne disease called *Xylella*.

The damage from the plant disease has been compounded by recurring droughts and extreme weather in the last few years all over Italy’s southern mainland and islands, hitting crops from grapes to citrus fruits.

Ortenzi is convinced the hardy and versatile cactus pear, otherwise called the prickly pear or, in Italy, the Indian fig, can be a highly profitable solution yielding a raft of products such as soft drinks, flour, animal feed and biofuel.

The Italian businessman is far from alone in seeing the potential of the plant, whose cultivation is expanding in hot and dry regions around the world.

“As an industry, cactus pear production is growing rather quickly, especially for fodder use and as a source of biofuel,” said Makiko Taguchi, agricultural officer at the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization headquartered in Rome.

MULTIPLE USES

The cactus produces a tasty fruit eaten in much of Latin America and the Mediterranean, while in Mexico the flat green pads that form the arms of the cactus, are used in cooking.

In Tunisia, where it covers around 12 per cent of cultivated land, second only to olive trees, the cactus pear is a major source of income for thousands, particularly women who harvest and sell the fruit.

In Brazil, which has the world’s largest production, it is mainly cultivated in the north-east for fodder, while Peru and Chile use it to extract a red dye known as *Cochineal*, used in food and cosmetic production.

Sportswear group Adidas and carmaker Toyota have recently shown interest in using the cactus to produce plant-based leather sourced mainly from Mexico.

The cactus pear is not yet included in the FAO’s agricultural output statistics, but Taguchi cited the rapid expansion of CactusNet, a contact network of cactus researchers and businesses worldwide which she coordinates.

The FAO launched the group online in 2015 with 69 members. It now has 933 members in 82 countries. The plant, native to desert areas of south and north America, thrives in the increasingly arid conditions of Italy’s south, and needs ten times less water than maize, a comparable crop whose byproducts also include animal feed and methane.

So far Wakonda, an American Indian word meaning nature’s omnipresent creative force, has planted just 10 hectares of cactus with 40,000 plants per hectare, but Ortenzi plans to plant 300 hectares by the end of 2025, and he is thinking big.

Of the roughly 100,000 hectares of olive trees destroyed by *Xylella* in southern Puglia, only 30,000 will be replanted in the same way, he said in an interview.

“Potentially 70,000 could be planted with prickly pears,” he said.

In the long-run the possibilities could be even greater, Ortenzi said, considering more than a million hectares of arable land have been abandoned in Italy in recent decades as climate change has made it more difficult to produce traditional crops.

WAKONDA’S MODEL

Wakonda’s business model discards the fruit and focuses instead on the prickly pads, which are pressed to yield a juice used for a highly nutritious, low-calorie energy drink. The dried out pads are then processed to produce a light flour for the food industry or a high-protein animal feed.

Wakonda’s circular, ecological production system also includes “biodigester” tanks in which the waste from the output cycle is transformed into methane gas used as a bio-fuel either on site or sold.

The company, which now has 37 shareholders, is in contact with mayors, firms and universities to develop its products.

Under Ortenzi’s business plan, rather than buying up land to plant the cactus, Wakonda aims to persuade farmers of its potential and then licence out to them, in return for royalties, all the equipment and know-how required to exploit it.

“The land remains yours, you convert it to prickly pears and I guarantee to buy all your output for at least 15 years,” Ortenzi said. —Reuters



FEATURES



BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS KHALID AL BUSAIDI

LAST week, the multi-musician, composer and arranger, Anthony Strong, graced the stage at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts to packed houses. Along with the extraordinary skills of the fourteen musicians of the Latvian Radio Big Band and his own bespoke rhythm section brought from London, Strong appeared for the first time in Oman - but not for the last, it is hoped.

British born and known for his snappy dressing, the slight and dapper Anthony Strong fairly ran on stage in a tailored pink suit and blue suede shoes to the grand piano. He launched into the James Bond-like, “Whatever Lola Wants”, singing from the top with the huge, broad sound of the horns behind. It led straight into a very slick arrangement of, “Luck be a lady tonight”, featuring a fine trumpet solo from Andris Augstkalns.

Strong explains that in his reinterpretations of classic standards which audiences can connect to, his intros and outros will have his own unique stamp on them. This one proved the point with its driving drum rhythms — a Strong outro in every sense. In contrast came his sparse arrangement of Stevie Wonder’s Soulful, “Higher Ground”, built over a bass riff from former colleague at the Guildhall London, Spencer Brown, off-beat finger clicks and Wonder-ful vocals!

His original, “Gamblin’ Man Blues”, went down a storm, with Artistic Director of the LRBB, Karlis Vanags, adding a mean tenor saxophone solo over some discreet guitar backing, and a lyrical vocal outro.

Strong is deservedly proud of his first video arrangement of Irving Berlin’s, “Cheek to Cheek”; a fast, dazzling interpretation for bass and voice, then improvised piano licks, bringing his brilliant technique to the fore. A lovely lush piano introduction gave the audience a chance to hear his warm solo style in, “Unforgettable”. Smooth, mellow big band orchestration — featuring sleazy trombone lines — was punctuated by syncopated rhythms from all the horns. Anthony Strong was clearly enjoying his role as double soloist in this highly professional and polished production throughout the night’s performance.

His Gospel original from a recent album, “When it Moves You”, gave session guitarist, Nick Fitch, a chance to shine above the trombone section —



underpinned by great drumming from the LRBB percussionist. Unusually, there were no purely instrumental numbers in the whole programme; singing without a break for two 45-minute sets is quite a challenge.

The band fell silent, giving the rhythm section an opportunity to bring out their inner-Johnny Cash in, “16 Tons”, followed by the quartet’s interpretation of the popular standard, “The Way you look Tonight”. Anthony Strong’s voice is reliable and lyrical, hinting at Michael Bublé yet without detracting or upstaging the instrumental contribution of the musicians. There were some interesting quartel harmonies in the piano solo, and guitar inflections from Fitch echoing the piano melody. The big band jumped straight back in with Berlin’s, “Stepping out with my baby” (which nattily includes a reference to his pink suit!) bringing the first half back to the broad soundworld of the opening number.

The second set opened with a brassy, jazzy arrangement of Gershwin’s chestnut, “They Can’t Take that Away From Me”, including a tenor saxophone solo full of energy and piano glissandi for sparkling effect. The punchy horns in Strong’s reworking of Lerner’s classic,

“On a Clear Day” forms the refreshingly funky title track to an early album. The slow piano intro and saxophone riffs in his unique signature song, “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”, included rich polytonal harmony and texture in his improvisation, including some musical quotations.

Tom-tom accompaniment throughout the trio, “My Foolish Heart”, suggested the intimate night time atmosphere of Porter’s ‘Night and Day’. Despite citing Bill Evans, Chick Corea and Harry Connick Jr as major influences, Strong’s style is very much his own; a particularly lyrical mix of elegance and passion. Sometimes Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim’s chordal, hymn-like qualities come to mind in his playing, such as in the original, “Ocean”, composed for a friend.

A real highlight of his performance came in another original song, “That Kind of Guy”, sounding like a movie score with the full force of a Sinatra big band sound. Trombone player, Uldis Ziedins shone in his final solo, gaining spontaneous applause. Scat singing followed in Cole Porter’s, “It’s Too Darn Hot”, over piano vamps juxtaposed with a huge, brassy sound behind saxophone solos. Anthony Strong thanked his



band, the theatre and the audience, and plunged into his final number, Ray Charles’, “Hallelujah I Love Her So”. The Latvian Radio Big Band excelled themselves with their Funky Gospel rhythm over that Ibrahim-style of piano backing.

But it wasn’t the end; an encore in the form of Nat King Cole’s 1964 classic, L.O.V.E. sent the audience dancing out of the auditorium into a balmy November Muscat night.