

OMAN

SHORTTAKES

FOOTBALL FEVER
INSPIRES VIRAL
HENNA DESIGNS

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JULY 15

A henna artist’s undying passion for football is going viral on social media with her lifelike portrayal of iconic players.

Faseela Shoukkath, a housewife living in Oman, is painting Messi, Ronaldo, and Mbappé on the hands of fans who want more.

Faseela started painting and drawing with henna for fun. It is surprising to hear that this artist, who even does Arabic calligraphy pictures with passion, learned all this on their own.

“It was all coincidental. I just wanted to keep pace with my children, who are ardent fans of football, and to be honest, I received my share of inspiration at a young age, from my mother, who used to apply henna at weddings. Since then, I have also been active in painting,” says Faseela as she puts henna on one of her Omani ‘fans’ hands.

Faseela has actively participated in most competitions held in Oman and won many prizes.

She has become a regular winner in henna competitions and calligraphy competitions. She also started working as a freelance henna artist. Faseela has given henna to natives and expatriates from various countries.

Faseela, who has created many decorative items, attributes her success to her husband, Shaukat Ali, a vegetable businessman in Oman and a native of India’s Kerala state, and her five children.

Her children, Muhammad Shahal, Aisha Ziya, Irvin Mohammad, Yezid Mohammad, and Hyzin Mohammad, are great supporters of her mother’s artistic career.

Passion is finding time to do things even in the midst of a busy schedule.

This housewife reminds us that if one is very interested in a subject, all the difficulties will just fade away.



Faseela Shoukkath, a housewife living in Oman, is painting Messi, Ronaldo, and Mbappé on the hands of fans who want more.

Research develops earthquake preparation plan for Oman

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 15

A research project conducted by principal investigator Dr Abdullah Ansari at the Earthquake Monitoring Center, Sultan Qaboos University, has developed an advanced framework to enhance earthquake preparedness and support safer urban planning in the Sultanate of Oman. The project, titled ‘Multicriteria Risk Assessment Framework for Enhancing Earthquake Preparedness for Urban Environment (M-RAFEEQ)’, provides a comprehensive approach to assessing earthquake risk in urban environments.

According to Dr Ansari, the

project introduces a Geographic Information System (GIS)-based multi-criteria seismic risk assessment framework that integrates seismic, geotechnical, structural, environmental, and socio-economic parameters to evaluate earthquake risk in urban environments.

The research aims to develop a comprehensive vulnerability assessment framework for urban seismic risk, generate detailed microzonation maps for Al Seeb, quantify potential economic losses, support evidence-based urban planning and resilience strategies, and contribute to the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 on



High-risk zones were identified in Al Hail North, Old Al Khoudh, and several industrial areas. Muscat Hills and Al Mouj demonstrated relatively lower risk

sustainable cities and communities.

Dr Ansari adds that the study revealed significant variations in earthquake risk across Al Seeb. High-risk zones were identified in Al Hail North, Old Al Khoudh, and several industrial areas, where weaker structural conditions, liquefaction-prone soils, and high urban density increase vulnerability. In contrast, areas such as Muscat Hills and Al Mouj demonstrated relatively lower risk due to stronger construction standards and more stable geotechnical conditions.

Dr Ansari recommends prioritising the retrofitting of buildings in high-risk areas, incorporating seismic microzonation maps into urban

planning and development decisions, strengthening compliance with the Oman Seismic Code (OSC 2013), expanding geotechnical investigations before new construction projects, improving accessibility to hospitals and emergency response facilities, regulating the location of industrial and fuel infrastructure to reduce secondary hazards, and promoting community awareness and resilience initiatives.

The project brought together Dr Issa El Hussain, Dr Ahmed Deif, Dr Adel M E Mohamed, Prof Khalifa al Jabri, and Yousuf al Shijbi from Sultan Qaboos University, alongside international collaborators from South Korea, Norway, and Japan.

ROP launches digital transformation programme

MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) launched the ‘Strategic Leadership for Digital Transformation’ programme at the Officers’ Institute of the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences on Wednesday.

The programme’s opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office and Head of the Office of the Supreme Commander, in the presence of Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, and a number of senior officers.

The implementation of the programme, which is organised by the Royal Oman Police in cooperation with leading international expertise houses, embodies the keenness of the General Command of Police



Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani and Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi at the event in Muscat on Wednesday. — ONA

to build advanced leadership capabilities in the fields of digital transformation, employ the latest technological advancements to develop the security work system, and

raise readiness to keep pace with rapid changes and future requirements.

It also aims to enable participants to utilise modern technologies and smart data to support security decision-making and to develop change, innovation, and foresight skills to enhance institutional efficiency.

The Strategic Leadership for Digital Transformation programme at the Royal Oman Police also supports consolidating the integration between security and technical aspects and enhancing institutional capabilities to address digital challenges and cybersecurity requirements, thereby contributing to the advancement of sophisticated smart systems. — ONA

EA pacts to tackle plastic waste, design eco-cooling

THE ENVIRONMENT Authority signed on Wednesday a number of agreements to implement research projects within the Strategic Research Management Programme. This aims to support scientific research and develop innovative solutions for environmental challenges, in alignment with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, the Oman Environment Strategy, and Net-Zero Carbon Neutrality 2050.

The agreements were signed on behalf of the Environment Authority by Eng. Sulaiman bin Nasser al Akhzami, Vice-Chairman of the Authority. On the other side, the agreements were signed by Dr Ali bin Saud al Bimani, Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Science and Technology; Dr Al Amir Nasser al Alawi, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences for Administrative and Financial Affairs; and Dr Salah bin Soumar al Zadjali, Director-General of Programmes and Capacity Building at the Research and Innovation Authority.

The agreements included the implementation of research projects to monitor and manage plastic waste in terrestrial and marine environments, and to develop sustainable solutions and mechanisms to reduce them, alongside developing eco-friendly cooling technologies that contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and lowering the carbon footprint. These efforts also

Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Kalbani, Director-General of Environmental Compliance at the Authority, stressed in a speech the importance of enhancing the partnership between the Authority and academic institutions



The agreements were signed on behalf of the Environment Authority by Eng Sulaiman bin Nasser al Akhzami, Vice-Chairman of the Authority.

aim to enhance environmental innovation and support sustainable development priorities in Oman.

The signing took place on the sidelines of a workshop titled “Reviewing the Outputs and Results of Strategic Research Projects,” organised by the Authority to review the key results of research projects implemented within the Strategic Research Program, and to highlight their role in supporting environmental decision-making and developing scientific solutions for national challenges.

Dr Mohammed bin Saif al Kalbani, Director-General of Environmental Compliance at the Authority, stressed in a speech the importance of enhancing the

partnership between the Authority and academic institutions, and transforming scientific research outputs into practical applications for achieving sustainable development.

The workshop witnessed a review of four research projects addressing several priority environmental issues. These included the sustainable management of Omani coasts, studying natural radiation levels and their health and social impacts, measuring radon gas concentrations and their impact on public health, in addition to developing innovative solutions for the sustainability of special economic zones and reducing pollution. — ONA

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SHORT TAKES

BOOK ON OMAN’S
GEOGRAPHICAL
DIVERSITY UNVEILED

MUSCAT: The National Survey and Geospatial Information Authority has published a book titled “Sultanate of Oman: Geographical Facts and Figures,” which comes as part of its scientific and documentary publications.

Through its publications, the Authority at the Ministry of Defence has sought to extrapolate geographical facts and figures regarding the unique geographical diversity that the Sultanate of Oman enjoys. This is conducted through a scientific methodology based on measurement and spatial analysis within a Geographic Information System (GIS) environment to derive geospatial information, which is then represented and displayed through the maps and charts published within the pages of the book.

The book contains several essential geographical facts and figures that highlight the importance and status of the Sultanate of Oman. It does so by shedding light on key pillars, including the area and geographical location that define the country’s spatial framework, the international land and maritime borders that define its territory and separate it from its neighbours, and the administrative division of the governorates.

The book reviews the most prominent geological features of the Sultanate of Oman, reveals the diverse terrain and landforms that characterise the Omani territory, and highlights natural reserves. It also analyses the importance of transport and communications . — ONA



AL SUWAIQ HOSPITAL
LAUNCHES DENTAL
SURGERY, TMJ CLINIC



The step was in pursuance of a drive to localise specialised medical services and minimise the need to transfer patients to referral hospitals.

AL SUWAIQ: In a special mission at Al Suwaiq Hospital, Al Batinah North Governorate, a medical team from Al Nahdha Hospital recently launched dental surgery services for people with disabilities and activated a clinic for the treatment of temporomandibular joint diseases (TMJ).

The step was in pursuance of a drive to localise specialised medical services and minimise the need to transfer patients to referral hospitals. It also helps accelerate access to healthcare, raise the quality of services offered to patients and cut down patient waiting time.

The operations are supported by teams specialised in anaesthesia and nursing, in addition to technical teams. — ONA

Papaya cultivation drives
farm diversity in Oman

MODERN

AGRICULTURAL projects in the Sultanate of Oman continue to strengthen their role in supporting the national food security system through the expansion of high-yield, economically viable crops and the adoption of advanced irrigation and farm management technologies.

The papaya cultivation project undertaken by farmer Khalid bin Mohammed al Qamshouei in the Wilayat of Shinas, Al Batinah North Governorate, stands as a promising model in this regard. Launched in 2023 across an area of approximately five acres, the project capitalises on the productive characteristics of this crop and its suitability for the Sultanate of Oman’s climatic conditions.

Al Qamshouei stated that the decision to cultivate papaya followed a thorough assessment of the crop’s attributes, notably its adaptability to local weather conditions and the fact that its potential pests are well-documented and can be effectively managed. He added that the crop’s year-round production cycle and strong demand in local and regional



Khalid bin Mohammed al Qamshouei at his papaya farm in Shinas.

markets were key factors encouraging its expansion.

He noted that the project initially faced a number of challenges, including soil conditions, water management, high temperatures and humidity, as well as difficulties in sourcing high-quality seeds. However, these obstacles were overcome through the implementation of modern agricultural practices and the utilisation of technical extension services.

He indicated that the farm cultivates two varieties — the Chinese “Red Lady” and the Thai variety — selected for their strong pest resistance, high yield density, relatively compact growth habit, fruit quality, and

strong consumer appeal.

He explained that papaya trees begin bearing fruit approximately six months after transplanting seedlings to the permanent field, with production continuing for up to 36 months. Under optimal conditions, each tree yields between 30 and 40 kg of fruit.

The project employs a drip irrigation system to optimise water consumption, with trees irrigated every 36 hours for 15 minutes per cycle, following a carefully designed schedule that ensures high water-use efficiency. A regular fertilisation programme is implemented through the injection of ready-formulated fertiliser blends into the irrigation network at

calculated rates that meet the plant’s requirements across various growth stages.

He further noted that the farm’s output is marketed locally through Omani traders, with an average selling price of approximately 350 baisas per kilogramme, subject to seasonal fluctuations and supply-demand dynamics. The production cost per tonne is estimated at around RO 100. He pointed to the support provided by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, which has included technical extension guidance and the provision of limited quantities of fertilisers — contributing to enhanced performance and improved productivity.

Looking ahead, he confirmed that the next phase aims to expand the cultivated area, alongside a strategic shift towards agro-processing and the production of value-added goods such as juices and dried products, thereby boosting economic returns.

He offered advice to prospective investors in this sector, emphasising the importance of preparing land and adopting modern irrigation networks and fertilisers as critical success factors for project viability and production sustainability. — ONA

Divers remove nets from coral reefs of Al Fahal

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, JUNE 15

A campaign to clean the coral reefs around Al Fahal Island saw the participation of more than 60 volunteers. The drive was organised by the Environment Authority, in collaboration with the Coast Guard, the Directorate-General of Civil Defence and Ambulance, and in partnership with Divers Planet Diving Center.

The Authority conducts underwater cleanups annually to protect coral reefs and the marine ecosystem.

“We have an annual programme for Muscat. Earlier, we conducted underwater and beach cleanups in Qurayat. This time, we carried out cleanups at Al Fahal Island and Athaiba Reef.

These areas are often affected by abandoned fishing nets,” said Yahya al Hooti, Marine Environmental Specialist at the Environment Authority.

“We found two large fishing nets at Al Fahal Island and one at Athaiba Reef.

We collected around three tonnes of nets and ropes. We started at 8.30 am and concluded at 3 pm. There is strong cooperation between divers from both the government and private sectors,” he said.



Three tonnes of nets and ropes were removed.

Sharks play an important role in maintaining the balance of the marine ecosystem. They thrive in clean waters and help keep the ecosystem healthy by feeding on dead and weakened marine life

YAHYA AL HOOTI
Marine
Environmental
Specialist, EA

The volunteers completed two one-hour dives with a one-hour surface interval between them, enabling them to achieve their objective.

Al Hooti had a clear message for fishermen.

“Some fishermen are using ghost nets that cause significant harm to the marine environment, affecting fish, turtles and coral reefs.

We hope they will keep their nets away from islands and coral reefs. We also hope decision-makers will introduce regulations to better protect

these areas and prevent fishermen from leaving abandoned fishing gear near the reefs.”

Many environmentalists hope Al Fahal Island will receive greater protection in the near future.

Also known as Shark Island, it is a haven for diverse coral reefs and is home to blacktip and whitetip reef sharks, with occasional sightings of leopard sharks and whale sharks.

The limestone outcrop lies about four km off the coast of Al Qurum Beach.

Al Fahal Island is regarded as one of Oman’s premier fishing and diving destinations because of its rich marine biodiversity.

“Most shark species found in Oman are not dangerous to humans.

Sharks play an important role in maintaining the balance of the marine ecosystem.

They thrive in clean waters and help keep the ecosystem healthy by feeding on dead and weakened marine life,” explained Al Hooti, who is also a free-diving instructor and an active member of Oman’s diving community.

The campaign resulted in the removal of numerous fishing nets and ropes entangled in the coral reefs, highlighting the continuing need to protect Oman’s fragile marine habitats from abandoned fishing gear.

SPECIAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF KHAREEF DHOFAR BEGINS

THE special media coverage of the Khareef Dhofar (monsoon) Season 2026 began on Wednesday, as part of an integrated media plan implemented by the Ministry of Information. The plan aims to highlight Dhofar Governorate as a major tourist destination and introduce its natural, environmental, cultural and heritage assets that attract visitors from both inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

The coverage will continue until August 31, utilising a diverse media system that encompasses various outlets and platforms affiliated with the Ministry. This will be achieved through the production and broadcasting of a package of television and radio programmes, press reports, news follow-ups, and digital and visual content, alongside live field coverage and interactive content that keeps pace with the season's activities and enhances the presence of the media message locally and externally.

Dr Mohammed bin Said al Shashai, Director-General of the Directorate-General of Information in Dhofar Governorate, said that this year's media plan for the Khareef Dhofar season is based on providing diverse media content across various platforms and media outlets. This content reflects the tourism, natural, cultural, and developmental assets abounding in the governorate and keeps pace with the growing tourism activity, alongside producing innovative digital content for social media platforms targeting different audience segments and keeping pace with developments in the media landscape.

He explained that Oman TV will present the programme Al Nas Wal Khareef (People and the Khareef) through a mobile studio travelling across a number of tourist and natural sites in the governorate to broadcast the season's details live to viewers. This will feature the participation of several presenters and media professionals from the Sultanate of Oman, the GCC countries, and a number of Arab countries, reflecting the growing status of the Khareef Dhofar season at the local, Gulf, and Arab levels, and contributing to enriching media content through the exchange of expertise and the presentation of diverse media perspectives.

Layali Al Khareef (Khareef Nights) will be broadcast live from the Ouda Al Madi (Return of the Past) activities site, covering the various heritage, cultural, artistic, and entertainment activities accompanying the season. It will be broadcast daily on the Oman General Channel.

On the radio front, Al Shashai confirmed the readiness of the Radio of the Sultanate of Oman to present the programme Atheer Al Khareef (Aether of Khareef) daily from the Ouda Al Madi site in the Al Saada area of the Wilayat of Salalah, while the Youth Radio will broadcast the programme "Al Shabab Wal Khareef" (Youth and the Khareef) from the Ittin Mountain studio. This is part of a media vision that seeks to keep pace with the Khareef Dhofar season by linking the tourist event with human culture, the characteristics of the place, and the cultural and civilisational wealth of the Sultanate of Oman.

Al Shashai stressed that Oman Newspaper has been continuing its coverage of the Khareef Dhofar season since the season's astronomical start on June 21, by publishing reports and press investigations across its print and electronic editions and its accounts on social media platforms, in addition to highlighting the economic activity,



● *Al Nas Wal Khareef (People and the Khareef) will be presented live through a mobile studio travelling across Dhofar*

● *Layali Al Khareef (Khareef Nights) will be broadcast from the Ouda Al Madi through the Oman General Channel*

● *The Youth Radio will broadcast the programme "Al Shabab Wal Khareef" (Youth and the Khareef) from the Ittin Mountain studio*

● *Gawha Ghair (Its Atmosphere is Different) on Ayn presents Dhofar an attractive destination for adventure tourism*

● *The Media Portal has dedicated a window for the Khareef Dhofar season, providing visitors with content in eight languages*



youth initiatives, and the role of small and medium enterprises in supporting the tourism sector, reflecting the season's richness and the diversity of its activities.

Within the framework of the comprehensive media coverage of the Khareef Dhofar season, Oman News Agency (ONA) keeps pace with the season's events through its multimedia news system, by publishing news, specialised press reports, photographs, and video clips across its digital platforms, social media accounts, and smart applications, alongside producing television reports, news, and live links broadcast within the bulletins of the agency's News Center, contributing to conveying the season's details and accompanying events to audiences inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

On another front, the Commercial Department of the Directorate-General of Information in Dhofar Governorate signed several contracts, sponsorship agreements, and advertising partnerships with several national private sector establishments, alongside a number of youth enterprises registered with the SMEs Development Authority Riyada, contributing to enhancing partnership

with various entities supporting the season's media coverage programmes.

Dr Amal bint Mohammed al Noufali, Director-General of Electronic Media, said that the Directorate has prepared an integrated electronic media plan to keep pace with the Khareef Dhofar Season 2026, based on producing qualitative and renewed content across the Ministry's electronic platforms, thereby contributing to highlighting the governorate's tourism, cultural, and environmental assets, enhancing the season's digital presence, and reaching various audience segments inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman by utilising the latest tools and technologies in the field of electronic media.

She added that the electronic initiatives accompanying the season include several projects implemented by the Directorate-General of Electronic Media, among which is the production of the programme "Gawha Ghair" (Its Atmosphere is Different) via the Ayn mobile app, which presents Dhofar Governorate from a different perspective as an attractive destination for adventure tourism, exploration trips, and unique experiences.

She pointed out that the Ayn has prepared an electronic competition



in conjunction with the Khareef season, which daily presents video clips generated using AI technologies to showcase elements of cultural heritage, tourist sites, or customs and traditions in Dhofar Governorate, including interactive questions in an innovative visual format, aiming to promote digital culture and expand public knowledge.

The Media Portal has dedicated an electronic window for the Khareef Dhofar season, providing visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman with information in eight languages: Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and German.

Furthermore, the Children's Interface on the Ayn platform will participate in the Khareef Dhofar season through a dedicated corner at the Modern Waterfront site in Ittin Plain during the upcoming month of August. This aims to introduce visitors to a safe and inspiring media space for children, offering a diverse package of audiobooks in the field of children's and youth literature, alongside entertainment, cultural, and educational content that combines values, national identity, and knowledge. — ONA

SHORT TAKES



The agreements included a project to rehabilitate internal roads in Haima, a project to construct a walkway in Haima, and a project to develop and beautify the Al Jouba roundabout in Mahout.

AGREEMENTS TO IMPLEMENT PROJECTS IN HAIMA, MAHOUT SIGNED

HAIMA: Shaikh Ahmed bin Musallam al Kathiri, Governor of Al Wusta, signed agreements to implement a number of development projects in the wilayats of Haima and Mahout, within the framework of ongoing efforts to enhance infrastructure and improve the quality of public services and facilities in the governorate. The total value of these projects amounted to RO 1,530,168.

The agreements included a project to rehabilitate internal roads in the Wilayat of Haima, a project to construct a walkway in the Wilayat of Haima, and a project to develop and beautify the Al Jouba roundabout in the Wilayat of Mahout.

These projects come within the plans of Al Wusta Governorate aimed at supporting local development, improving infrastructure, and enhancing the quality of life, in line with the objectives of comprehensive development in the governorate. — ONA

SECTIONS OF AL MA’AMOURA-RAZAT DUAL CARRIAGEWAY IN SALALAH OPENS



The project, valued at more than RO 4 million, aims to upgrade the main road network in the eastern sector of Salalah city.

SALALAH: Dhofar Municipality on Wednesday opened sections of the Al Ma’amoura-Razat dual carriageway project in the Wilayat of Salalah to traffic, as part of its ongoing efforts to develop the wilayat’s road network.

Dr Abdullah bin Mohammed Baowain, Director-General of Projects and Technical Affairs at Dhofar Municipality, stated that the project, valued at more than RO 4 million, aims to upgrade the main road network in the eastern sector of Salalah city, enhance traffic efficiency and improve safety and flow along the corridor connecting Al Ma’amoura roundabout and Razat roundabout — in line with the urban and tourism expansion underway in the region.

He added that the project entails the construction of a dual carriageway along the existing route, extending approximately 5.5 kilometres, with two lanes in each direction, inner and outer shoulders, and a variable-width central median, all in accordance with approved specifications.

He noted that the works executed to date have included the opening of sections of the dual carriageway to traffic, while confirming that the project has exceeded the approved programme timeline, with completion now expected in September 2027. — ONA

OMANIS WHO TRAINED IN RUSSIAN LANGUAGE FETED

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JULY 15

Omanis who completed a Russian language course were feted at the Russian House, marking an important milestone in the development of the institution’s educational activities in Oman.

They were part of the introductory programme, held from June 1 to July 13. They were trained by a native Russian-speaking instructor and focused on practical Russian, giving participants a foundation for communicating in the language with confidence.



The programmed was conducted at Russian House from June 1 to July 13.

Russian House Oman is an official partner of Rossotrudnichestvo, a Russian federal government agency promoting Russian cultural and

humanitarian cooperation, and the programme brought together an international group of participants.

“Over just a few weeks, we saw how the Russian language became a reason for people to communicate, form new connections and develop a genuine interest in Russia. It is especially important to us that participants want to continue learning. This is why we are already planning to open new groups in September and continue developing Russian House Oman’s educational programme,” said Anna Popova, Head of Russian House Oman.

Al Sharqiyah North launches projects worth **ﷂ** 34 million

MOHAMMED AL SAAADI
IBRA, JULY 15

THE GOVERNORATE of Al Sharqiyah North, represented by Al Sharqiyah North Municipality, has commenced the implementation of a new set of developmental and service projects across various wilayats of the governorate in 2026. With a total investment of RO 34,016,900, the initiative is part of the municipality’s strategic plan to bolster infrastructure and upgrade municipal services in alignment with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the governorate’s sustainable development objectives.

Eng Nasser bin Khamis al Hasani, Director-General of Al Sharqiyah North Municipality, stated that the new projects are vital to the municipality’s efforts to modernise the road network and enhance the overall quality of life for residents. He highlighted that the 2026 package allocates RO 17,860,000 for the paving of internal roads stretching over 170 kilometres. Additionally, RO 5,829,000 has been set aside for the rehabilitation and maintenance of damaged roads, while RO 850,000 will fund essential safety enhancements and road marking works across the governorate.

Al Hasani added that the developmental blueprint also focuses on community spaces, environmental safety and public amenities. Funding for these initiatives includes RO 1,305,000

Furthermore, RO 180,000 will support the completion of outstanding works on several multi-purpose community halls and RO 295,000 is earmarked for critical rainwater drainage systems and wadi protection barriers



The initiative is part of the municipality’s strategic plan to bolster infrastructure and upgrade municipal services in alignment with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

dedicated to the construction and upgrading of public parks and walkways, alongside RO 666,900 for street lighting and aesthetic landscaping projects. Furthermore, RO 180,000 will support the completion of outstanding works on several multi-purpose community halls and RO 295,000 is earmarked for critical rainwater drainage systems and wadi protection barriers.

He also shared updates on key ongoing projects that are currently shaping the governorate’s tourism and leisure landscape. Among these is the development of the natural water pools in the Wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid, a project valued at RO 2,657,000 which has reached a completion rate of 43 per cent. These initiatives build on the momentum

of last year’s massive internal road paving project, which successfully covered 460 km across all wilayats at a total cost of RO 53,976,000, marking one of the largest infrastructure packages ever executed in Al Sharqiyah North.

Work continues progressively on several other service and entertainment projects. This includes Al Khalidiya Park in the Wilayat of Wadi Bani Khalid, constructed at a cost of RO 780,000 and currently standing at 78 per cent completion. Meanwhile, Al Ghubra Park in the Wilayat of Dima W’attayeen has reached 44 per cent completion with an investment of RO 661,000 and the development of Hawar Cafe, valued at RO 153,000, is nearing completion at 97 per cent.

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar herbs turn into cosmetics

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, JULY 15

A passion for natural products has become a successful business. Shafiqah al Omairi, founder of Shatha Soap, specialises in handmade natural soaps from the plants of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

Looking at each soap that was displayed in a recent expo for small-scale enterprises, one could imagine the long journey it had taken, beginning from nature and culminating in a carefully handcrafted product. The display extended beyond handmade soaps to include a diverse collection of perfumes, traditional incense, body lotions and natural oils, reflecting the richness and diversity of Oman’s locally made products.

Al Omairi said her journey into soap-making began through PDO’s Banat Oman Programme, which trained a group of women from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in the production of natural soap. She described the programme as the starting point of her journey, after which she continued attending specialised training courses to develop her skills and diversify her range of products.

She joined the programme with a dream of building a business she could be proud of despite the challenges. Inspired by the variety of herbs found in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, she started dreaming of a factory dedicated to natural soaps and skincare products while creating a sustainable source of income.



Shafiqah al Omairi with her products.

Al Omairi said, “Natural soap making was still a relatively new industry in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar when I launched my business in

June 2016, making it one of the area’s pioneering projects. What began as a fun process of blending plant oils with local herbs gradually developed into a passion and a source of livelihood.”

Her work has also received official recognition. In 2022, Shatha Soap won the Rural Women’s Agricultural Projects Award presented by Al Dakhiliyah Governorate during Omani Women’s Day celebrations. The project was also honoured during the 2026 Rose Season for its contribution to promoting locally made products and entrepreneurship in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

The project relies on herbs harvested from Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. The herbs are carefully collected, washed, dried

and ground before being incorporated into the soap. Seasonal herbs are dried and stored before grinding to preserve their quality and natural benefits. Producing a single batch of soap takes a month.

The process begins by blending natural oils with the soap mixture before adding herbs and pouring the mixture into moulds. After being left to solidify for a day, the soaps are set aside to dry. Once fully cured, they are cleaned, wrapped, labelled and stored before sale.

Although a few simple tools, such as an electric mixer and silicone moulds, are used during production, Al Omairi said the process remains largely handmade, with every bar carefully crafted, packaged and prepared by hand.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



A hygiene worker cleans the boots of healthcare workers at the Rwampara Ebola Treatment Centre (ETC) in Bunia. — AFP

EBOLA OUTBREAK TOPS 2,000 CASES IN DR CONGO

KINSHASA: More than 2,000 Ebola cases, including 754 deaths, have been recorded in the DR Congo, where the World Health Organization warns the outbreak may be two to four times larger than official figures suggest. The outbreak has spread to five provinces in the central African country, according to the latest figures released by Congolese health authorities on Wednesday. There is currently no approved vaccine or treatment for the Bundibugyo strain behind this outbreak. There is currently no approved vaccine or treatment for the Bundibugyo strain behind this outbreak, but the first clinical trial of an antiviral drug began on Tuesday, the WHO said.

NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned on Wednesday that the outbreak was spreading at an unprecedented pace and into new areas, calling for an urgent scaling up of the medical response. “In less than five weeks, the number of confirmed cases has tripled,” while “the number of deaths has increased more than fivefold,” MSF said in a French statement. The aid group added that the outbreak had already surpassed half the number of cases recorded during the 2018-2020 Ebola epidemic in the DRC, which lasted nearly two years. — AFP

SYRIA SAYS ARRESTED OFFICIAL LINKED TO CHEMICAL WEAPONS

DAMASCUS: Syrian authorities announced on Wednesday the arrest of a former officer they say was a chemical weapons specialist in charge of sarin gas depots and chemical weapons manufacturing during ousted president Bashar al Assad’s era. Since Assad’s fall in December 2024, authorities have arrested dozens of people they say committed crimes during the country’s 13-year civil war and started trials in April.

The interior ministry said security forces had arrested colonel Ahmed Habib Ali, calling him “a chemical weapons expert”. It also said he “was responsible for sarin gas storage facilities and chemical manufacturing within Unit 417”, a key chemical weapons storage facility near the capital, Damascus.

According to the ministry, Ali was “one of the officers who supervised the manufacture of about 20 bombs loaded with sarin gas, each weighing 250 kilogrammes, which were used in attacks targeting Syrian cities and towns in 2013 and 2017”. In the first and deadliest instance in August 2013, the army was accused of using chemical weapons to target areas then under rebel control, killing more than 1,400 men, women and children, according to US intelligence and rights groups.

With Syria at the height of its civil war, the Assad government agreed to hand over its chemical arsenal in order to avert US strikes. Between 2014 and 2017, Damascus was accused of launching four further attacks on towns controlled by opposition factions, using sarin and chlorine gas. Ali’s arrest comes after Syria was reinstated into the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) last week. — AFP

INVESTIGATING FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES

Bangladesh seizes \$6.2 bn linked to Hasina



Bangladesh has confiscated assets worth 760 billion taka (about \$6.2 billion) linked to ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, her family and 10 business groups, authorities said on Wednesday. The Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit said it had seized assets worth 570 billion taka in Bangladesh and another 190 billion taka overseas. The agency’s chief Ikhtiar Mohammad Mamun told reporters while presenting the annual summary of its activities that authorities had opened 98 cases. — AFP

LEBANON PARLIAMENT DISCUSSES SWEEPING AMNESTY BILL

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s parliament commenced a legislative session to discuss and vote on several bills, including an amnesty law that could cover swathes of prisoners. More than 40 draft laws will be discussed and voted on in the two-day session, the most prominent being the abolition of the death penalty, which has not been carried out in years, and the amnesty.

For years, parliament has been trying to pass a general amnesty bill, whose primary goal is to

reduce overcrowding in Lebanon’s prisons, without gaining consensus due to sectarian and political divisions regarding who would benefit from it.

Thousands of families from the eastern Baalbek and Hermel regions have also been demanding amnesty for drug-related offences and theft. Relatives of those who fled to Israel after its withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, fearing reprisals, particularly from Hezbollah and its supporters,

also want their family members covered.

Parliament will also vote on the abolition of the death penalty, last carried out in Lebanon in 2004. Capital punishment prevents Lebanon from extraditing criminals who have fled to countries that have abolished the penalty. Wednesday’s legislative session is the first held by parliament since it postponed elections by two years in March due to the Israel-Hezbollah war. — AFP

Israel pounds devastated Gaza with more bombs

AN Israeli air strike killed a man, his wife and their six-year-old daughter in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, Palestinian health officials said as talks to advance the US-brokered Gaza ceasefire deal faltered. The strike on an apartment building in Deir Al Balah in central Gaza killed Omar Abu Qassem, his wife, Asma, and their daughter, Habeeba, medics said. Their three-year-old son, Sami, survived, but was injured, medics said.

Friends and relatives arrived at the Al Aqsa Hospital in Deir Al Balah where they paid farewell to the three white-shrouded bodies before burying them. “The child is the lone survivor. How (to live) without a father, without a mother? What kind of cruelty is this that the people of Palestine, the people of Gaza, are enduring?” Abu Anas Shahin, a relative, said. “Where is the mercy? Where is the humanity?” he said. More than 58,000 children in Gaza have lost one or both parents, according to United Nations figures as of November 2025.

In Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood in Gaza City, an Israeli air strike killed one person, medics said. The Israeli military didn’t immediately comment on this incident. The deaths add to a toll of more than 1,100 Palestinians, mostly civilians, killed by Israeli attacks since an



A child reacts during the funeral of Palestinian child Muataz Abu Shaar in Khan Yunis. — Reuters

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October ceasefire between Israel and Hamas to end the war took effect, according to health officials in the enclave. Hamas doesn’t usually disclose information about its fatalities. The truce halted major fighting, but has failed to stop near-daily Israeli strikes. Four Israeli soldiers have been killed by militants in Gaza over the same period.

The latest violence comes as Hamas leaders wrapped up another round of truce talks in Cairo on Tuesday. The discussions — mediated by Egypt, Türkiye and Qatar — were aimed at implementing the second phase of US President Donald Trump’s Gaza peace plan. The talks included the

disarmament of Hamas and the Israeli military’s withdrawal from the strip, according to sources close to the talks, who said there had been little progress amid deep distrust between the two sides.

The second phase also includes allowing a US-backed Palestinian technocratic committee to assume power from Hamas, the deployment of an international security force, and the start of the reconstruction of Gaza, which has been devastated by the war. Five countries — Indonesia, Morocco, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Albania — have committed to providing troops to the US-backed International Stabilization Force.

However, none have yet been deployed as negotiations between Trump’s Board of Peace and Hamas have stalled for months. Speaking at an aid donor meeting in Brussels on Monday, Nickolay Mladenov, the Board of Peace envoy for Gaza, said he would be visiting Morocco on Tuesday to “sign Morocco’s contribution to the International Stabilization Force, and soon we hope to see them on the ground undertaking their tasks.”

Mladenov said the October ceasefire was holding but “imperfectly” with violations continuing, adding that Hamas has yet to agree to what he called a “road map” for negotiations. — Reuters

SRI LANKA EXPANDS ANTI-DENGUE DRIVE

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka is intensifying a military-backed drive to contain the spread of mosquito-borne dengue fever, a senior official said on Wednesday, as the death toll climbed to 49 since the start of the year. The South Asian island nation deployed the military last month to identify and destroy mosquito breeding sites.

Beginning on Thursday, medical staff and security forces involved in the effort will be doubled, focusing on the capital Colombo and two neighbouring districts, which are the worst-affected areas, said Kapila Kannangara, head of the National Dengue Control Unit. Dengue causes high fevers, headaches, nausea, vomiting, muscle pain and, in the most serious cases, bleeding that can lead to death.

Official data shows that 61,057 people were infected in the first six months of this year — more than double the 30,060 infections recorded during the same period in 2025. More than 15,000 people have been infected this month alone. — AFP



WARNINGS OF RAINFALL

North Korea braces for Typhoon Bavi



North Korea warned of heavy rain and strong winds as Typhoon Bavi drew near, with leader Kim Jong Un urging “maximum vigilance” to prevent damage. The country’s weather agency issued warnings for heavy rainfall and strong winds. All officials and workers are “urged to remain on maximum vigilance and take steps to minimise damage,” Kim was quoted as saying. The southern regions, among others, are set for 150-200 millimetres of rain. — AFP

INTERNATIONAL GANG

Vietnam probes diamond smuggling ring



Vietnamese police are investigating an international diamond ring accused of smuggling 28,000 gems worth nearly \$11 million, with the country’s largest jeweller caught up in the probe. Police have seized 1,239 diamonds in the investigation so far, along with jewellery “for which no invoices or documents proving their origin could be produced”. The suspects “employed highly sophisticated criminal methods” to organise their “illegal transport”. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni listens to a debate at the lower house of Parliament in Rome. — AFP

ITALY’S COALITION VOWS TO PURSUE ELECTION REFORM

ROME: Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing coalition on Wednesday vowed to press ahead with a new election law, a day after a bruising parliamentary defeat on a key aspect of the reform. In a secret ballot on Tuesday, a proposal championed by Meloni’s Brothers of Italy to allow electors to express preference votes for candidates on party lists was defeated by a single vote, partly due to ruling coalition defections. The loss, which triggered opposition calls for Meloni to resign, has highlighted strains within the coalition before a general election due next year. It represents another major blow for the prime minister after a stinging defeat at a referendum on a justice reform in March. “It is crucial to go ahead with this law that guarantees stability,” Enrico Costa, Forza Italia’s lower house leader, told Corriere della Sera newspaper, ruling out the possibility that the setback could trigger a wider political crisis. — Reuters

FRANCE IN ‘VERY WORRYING’ DROUGHT



France is experiencing a “very worrying” drought that has spurred a record number of water restrictions for the time of year, the ecology minister said on Wednesday. Swathes of the country are under water-use controls, with the number of local restrictions in place “the highest number recorded since at least 2013”, French Ecological Transition Minister Monique Barbut told a crisis meeting at the ministry. — AFP

STARMER BIDS UK MPS ‘GOODBYE’, VOWS TO SUPPORT BURNHAM

LONDON: Outgoing UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Wednesday pledged his “wholehearted support” to his successor as he prepares to hand over to premier-in-waiting Andy Burnham. Facing his last weekly grilling from MPs in parliament, Starmer said he wanted to see the next leader of his centre-left Labour party succeed. “I will give my wholehearted support to my successor. I want this Labour government to be a success,” he said, when asked what advice he had for his successor. “I want our country to be a success.

I shall give my support privately if asked for, not publicly when not asked for.” Starmer announced his resignation last month, bowing to months of pressure to step down after a series of scandals, missteps and policy U-turns. They blighted his two-year tenure, after he led his party to victory in 2024 elections following 14 years in opposition. Burnham is expected to be crowned Labour’s leader on Friday after securing overwhelming support from the party’s 403 MPs and the backing of major trade unions. The party’s comfortable majority in the

650-seat House of Commons means he will automatically become the next prime minister. On Wednesday, the usual bad-tempered jibes and angry exchanges witnessed in the political theatre of the weekly Prime Minister’s Questions, were replaced by gentle ribbing. Starmer was also relaxed, joking with his political foes. MPs from all parties wished Starmer well, thanking him for his public service and calling on him to ensure that England wins Wednesday’s World Cup semifinal showdown against Argentina and go on to beat Spain in the final on Sunday. — AFP

EU chief announces ‘drone deal’ pack with Ukraine

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Wednesday announced a “drone deal” with Ukraine to boost joint production of the key battlefield technology. “This deal will bring together Ukrainian ingenuity and Europe’s industrial scale,” von der Leyen said in Kyiv, after receiving an award from President Volodymyr Zelensky. Ukraine has already signed similar deals with some individual EU countries and Gulf nations looking to tap into the expertise Kyiv has developed during more than four years of war with Russia.

The deals are adapted to each country, but typically involve Kyiv providing blueprints for drone technology in exchange for royalties, investments and other military hardware. “In Europe, we already have huge technological and industrial capacity that can be deployed, and we have safe and secure production sites that can help to scale up,” von der Leyen said. “But we do not have the battle-tested knowledge and expertise that Ukraine has forged,” she added. “We can work on joint production, on making all of the components of the system work, and we can provide both defence industrial bases with the impetus needed to decisively step up investment and production.”

The EU is pushing to bolster its drone capabilities after a series of incursions in countries along its eastern border neighbouring Ukraine and Russia. “The knowledge you have gained on how to work drone and anti-drone systems is truly unique,” von der Leyen told Zelensky in her speech. “We must tap into this together, because we know the threats that Europe faces in this area.” Von der Leyen did not give any details on how much — if any — new funding was involved in the deal.



Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky awards European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen with The Order of Europe in Kyiv. — Reuters

“In Europe, we already have huge technological and industrial capacity that can be deployed and we have safe and secure production sites that can help to scale up. But we do not have the battle-tested knowledge and expertise that Ukraine has forged.

URSULA VON DER LEYEN

Europe is Ukraine’s main backer in its war against Russia, and recently starting paying out a 90-billion-euro loan to help Kyiv arm its troops and plug holes in its budget. An initial six billion euros of the loan is going towards helping ramp up Ukraine’s drone production. Drones dominate the front line in Ukraine, inflicting heavy casualties on attacking Russian forces. Kyiv has also honed its abilities to shoot down Russian attack drone targeting cities across the country. Zelensky in a speech said that Ukraine was now producing 10 million drones a year and aimed to double that output. “We will achieve this together with our partners, once again proving the success of Ukraine’s defence industry, and of our partners’, and of Europe’s,” he added. Meanwhile, Russian strikes killed six people and wounded at least 20 across Ukraine on Wednesday, regional authorities said. The daytime attacks targeted industrial and medical facilities in the Black

Sea port city of Odesa and in the northeastern city of Sumy, near the border with Russia. “The enemy launched six guided aerial bombs,” said Sumy regional governor Oleg Grygorov. “Three people were killed and 17 were wounded. “Among the dead are a woman and a man,” he added. “Another person sustained extremely severe injuries, making it currently impossible to determine their gender.” Odesa endured another day of Russian drone and missile attacks targeting its port and civilian infrastructure, the authorities there said. “A massive combined missile and drone attack on the Odesa region has been ongoing for the fifth day in a row,” said governor Oleg Kiper. “Three people were killed, and at least three others were injured,” he added. Russia has in recent months intensified bombardments of Ukrainian urban areas. More civilians were killed in Ukraine in June than in any single month since April 2022, the United Nations said Tuesday, as Russia escalated long-range missile strikes. Exploiting Ukraine’s shortage of air-defence missiles, Russia has in recent months intensified its bombardments of densely populated urban areas, especially the capital Kyiv. “At least 293 civilians were killed and 1,990 injured in Ukraine in June 2026,” said the UN’s human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine. In total, the UN has recorded 16,431 verified civilian deaths in Ukraine since Russia attacked in February 2022 — among them 803 children. But the organisation says that number is likely a significant underestimate, as it cannot verify the numbers killed in intense fighting at the start of the war in places now under Russia’s control — including Mariupol and Lysychansk, where thousands are believed to have been killed. — AFP

Russia sends cosmonauts to space station with rare Nasa chief visit

WASHINGTON: Russia sent two cosmonauts and an American astronaut to the International Space Station from Kazakhstan, resuming crewed flights from a recently repaired launchpad with a rare joint attendance by the heads of Nasa and Russia’s space agency. US astronaut Anil Menon and cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina lifted off from the Baikonur Cosmodrome aboard Russia’s Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft at 10:47 am, bound for the ISS, where they will spend about eight months as the station’s 75th rotation crew. The crew arrived at the football field-sized space laboratory just over three hours later as they orbited over the Mediterranean Sea, joining three Americans, two Europeans and two Russians already aboard.

Nasa Administrator Jared Isaacman travelled to Baikonur to meet Roscosmos director Dmitry Bakanov and watch the launch, the first visit to Russia’s launchpad by a Nasa chief since 2018. Tensions over the Russia-Ukraine war had largely prevented Bill Nelson, former President Joe Biden’s Nasa chief, from such visits. The Expedition 75 mission was the first spaceflight for Menon, 49. Isaacman, a billionaire private astronaut, flew on a SpaceX capsule in 2024 with Menon’s wife, SpaceX engineer Anna Menon, and two others in the Polaris Dawn mission, a private spacewalking voyage funded by Isaacman. “Anil has spent his entire life preparing for this moment,” Isaacman wrote on X after the launch. “He is a scholar, military



Crew members attend a send-off ceremony before the launch at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Baikonur, Kazakhstan. — Reuters

officer, physician, pilot, husband, father and will undoubtedly become one of the great American astronauts.” The mission is the second spaceflight for both Dubrov, 48, and Kikina, 41, the only woman among Russia’s 23 active cosmonauts. Kikina was the first Russian to fly on SpaceX’s Crew Dragon to the space station in October 2022, a mission that renewed joint US-Russian astronaut flights. Cooperation on the 27-year-old ISS between Nasa and Russia’s space agency Roscosmos has survived years of tensions between the two countries, including Russia’s war in Ukraine, primarily out of technical necessity. US solar panels power the entirety of the ISS while Russian thrusters help keep the station in orbit. — Reuters

How much of the world can we still mend?



RUMAITHA
AL BUSAIDI

The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

THE sofa in my sitting room is worn now, thin across the seat and frayed where the arms meet the cushions. The frame under it is sound, so I went looking for covers online a few weeks ago, a particular weave in a colour I spent longer choosing than I would admit to anyone. The order was cancelled this week. The latest escalation closed the route the covers would have travelled, and the notice arrived in the flat language these messages always use, a line about circumstances beyond anyone's control.

The cancellation sent me back to my grandmother's sitting room, which looked like no other room I have been in before or since. A cushion had been recovered in a cloth that did not match the chair. A cracked dish wore a seam of repair she had made by hand and never bothered to hide. Each thing she owned carried a mark of her attention somewhere on it, and those marks were the reason the room looked like her and like nobody else.

I have been trying, without quite

admitting it, to reproduce something of that room, and I was going about it by placing an order. There is a small absurdity in that, chasing a room that could belong to no one else by adding another identical thing to a cart. We give our things one life and then a landfill, and we have agreed to call it convenience. Replacing is easy now, and cheap, and fast, and ease has a way of making an old skill look like a hobby.

With the covers gone, I have started looking closer to home, at upcycled fabric with a history already worked into it, choosing in a way a checkout page never asked me to. One remnant I keep going back to carries a faded block print, the kind of pattern that was somebody's curtain or somebody's dress before it was mine. There is a whole way of living folded into that remnant, one in which a thing is never finished, only between uses, kept in circulation and remade into whatever is needed next. Oman's first Omani-owned thrift store you can walk into is opening soon, started by two Omani women, and its arrival feels like a small sign of it returning. The

We give our things one life and then a landfill, and we have agreed to call it convenience. Replacing is easy now, and cheap, and fast, and ease has a way of making an old skill look like a hobby.

habit is finding its way back into the country through a side door, one reused length of cloth at a time.

Here is the part I find hard to write. The sofa I end up with is going to be better than the one I ordered, more clearly mine. I will have arrived at it because a war closed a shipping route, and I cannot hold that small improvement in one hand while pretending I do not know what put it there.

The route will reopen, and will carry covers again before long. Some of what this same escalation is breaking will not come back at all. My grandmother could mend a chair, a dish, the small ruptures of a household, and she lived as though nothing was meant to be thrown away. I can mend a sofa, apparently, when a closed border leaves me no other choice. The larger repairs, the ones that decide whether a way of living holds, sit at a scale neither of us was asked to work at. So I am left with a question I cannot put down. How much can we still keep and remake and pass on, and how much have we only been using up and discarding?

EGG-FREE SCHOOL MEAL PLANS SPARK INDIA ROW

SAILENDRA SIL

Teacher Raja Dey fears attendance might drop now that government-run schools have stopped serving eggs for lunch in his eastern Indian state, a dietary change that has stirred a political storm.

The humble egg, a popular food in West Bengal, was taken off the menu after the state's recently elected government said a religious charity will provide free, vegetarian cooked meals in state-run schools.

The new arrangement has rekindled a long-running debate over food, faith and nutrition in the world's most populous country, with critics accusing the government of trying to turn schoolchildren vegetarian.

Former West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, whose regional Trinamool Congress (TMC) lost May's vote after 15 years in power, has denounced the move to remove eggs from school meals as going 'against the culture' of the state, home to more than 100 million people.

"The BJP government is trying to impose vegetarianism on school children," TMC lawmaker Dola Sen said. Some teachers have expressed concerns over attendance rates as well as good nutrition.

"The mid-day meals have been one of the biggest attractions in state-run primary schools," teacher Dey said.

While there is no nationwide data linking eggs to attendance in government-run schools, Dey said that "students turn up in large numbers on days when eggs are provided".

In the southern state of Karnataka, official figures from last year showed that attendance rose from 93.5 to 98.97 per cent after egg distribution had been expanded to six days a week.

In West Bengal, eggs, previously served once a week, were replaced last month with plant-based alternatives as the state government tapped the Hare Krishna movement — as the new provider of school meals.

The lunch scheme is widely acknowledged to have improved enrolment rates across the country, with multiple peer-reviewed research papers identifying an increase of up to 15 per cent.

There are also nutritional benefits. A 2021 report by the International Food Policy Research Institute found that the scheme has played a key role in reducing stunting among Indian children.

With eggs off the menu, public health advocates have warned that children from poor families could lose an important source of protein and other nutrients.

"We will ensure that whatever nutrients a child gets from eggs will be matched or exceeded by superior quality protein and vitamins in our meals," Surovijoy Govinda Das, a senior member of Iskcon, said. — AFP

When nod silences honesty

AGREEMENT is often mistaken for strength. When everyone nods, meetings feel successful. Decisions move faster. There is less tension in the room, less debate, and fewer uncomfortable moments. Leaders may leave feeling reassured because the group appeared united.

But agreement can sometimes hide more than it reveals.

A quiet room does not always mean people agree. Sometimes it means they have learned that disagreement is risky. Sometimes it means they are protecting relationships. Sometimes it means they are avoiding discomfort. And sometimes, the team is no longer thinking deeply. It is simply moving together.



DR ASMA
AL YAHYAEI

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the silence is not real agreement.

In these situations, the problem is not lack of intelligence. The problem is lack of psychological permission to question.

This is why leaders must be careful when everyone agrees too quickly.

Fast agreement may sometimes reflect clarity. But it may also reflect fear, fatigue, hierarchy, or the pressure to conform. When people know what the leader prefers, they may adjust their voices before they even speak. When junior members sit with senior members, they may choose silence over honesty. When a team has a culture of excessive politeness, people may avoid necessary tension because they do not want to appear disrespectful.

In many workplaces, we say we want honest feedback. But the real test is not whether leaders ask for feedback. The real test is what happens when the feedback is uncomfortable. If people are interrupted, dismissed, indirectly punished, or quietly labelled as negative after raising concerns, the team will learn. And once people learn that honesty has a cost, they will give leaders what feels safe, not what is true. Groupthink is dangerous because it can make poor decisions look collective, polite, and professional. Everyone nods. Everyone signs. Everyone says the decision is acceptable. But beneath that surface, important concerns may have remained unspoken.

A healthy group does not only ask whether everyone agrees. It also examines what may be missing, who may be affected by the decision, what could go wrong, and whether the evidence is strong enough to support the direction being taken. These questions are not signs of resistance. They are signs of responsibility.

Good teams need trust, but they also need constructive tension. They need people who can disagree without attacking. They need leaders who can listen without feeling threatened. They need meetings where silence is not mistaken for approval. This matters deeply in institutions, especially those involved in education, health care, quality assurance, governance, and public service. Decisions in these settings

do not only affect internal processes. They affect students, patients, staff, communities, and the quality of services delivered. When decisions are made politely but without honest examination, the cost may appear later during implementation.

A policy may fail because frontline voices were not heard. A new system may struggle because practical concerns were dismissed. A programme may look strong on paper but weak in reality because no one challenged the assumptions early enough. A committee may approve a plan, while the people expected to implement it may already know why it will not work. This is why leadership must create space for thoughtful disagreement before decisions are finalised.

One way to reduce groupthink is to invite dissent intentionally. A leader can ask the group to consider the risks of a plan before approving it, or to identify what might make the decision difficult to implement. This gives people permission to think beyond agreement.

Another way is to separate respect from agreement. Respect does not mean silence. Respect means caring enough about the decision to examine it honestly. Leaders can also listen first before giving their own opinion. When the leader speaks too early, the group may begin organising itself around that opinion. But when the leader allows others to speak first, more honest thinking can emerge.

It is also important to include different voices, especially those closest to the work. Sometimes the most valuable insight comes from the person who understands the daily reality, not the person with the highest title.

A strong team is one where people can disagree with respect, question assumptions, and still remain committed to the shared goal.

Perhaps the real sign of a healthy team is not how quickly people agree. Perhaps it is whether people feel safe enough to say, "I see it differently."

Because when agreement silences honesty, teams may make poor decisions politely. And sometimes, the most respectful thing a person can offer a team is not agreement. It is a thoughtful question.

Oman builds. Others benefit.



DR MARYAM
TUBEILEH

The author is an innovation governance adviser and founder of Oman's first boutique innovation management consultancy

WE celebrate the exit. But did we really win? A few years back, Oman’s startup community celebrated Akeed’s acquisition by Snoonu as a landmark moment. And I understood why. Founded in 2018, Akeed built something real — 1,500 restaurant partners, 200,000 customers, deep local roots. It scheduled deliveries around prayer times, ran Arabic-speaking call centres, and proved that a homegrown Omani startup could attract regional attention. That is genuinely worth celebrating. But the thought kept lingering. Recently, I came across a LinkedIn post celebrating Careem’s acquisition by Uber as proof that Arab startups can win on the global stage. The comments overflowed with pride. One commenter argued they won because they sold on their own terms. I found myself pushing back — then questioning whether I was right to do so. Was selling to a foreign corporation the right outcome? Many smart people argued yes. And yet something still troubled me. Because when I looked more carefully, I did not see a winning ecosystem. I saw a pattern. Across the Arab world, our most promising startups — the ones that solve real problems, localise brilliantly, and prove our entrepreneurs can compete — are consistently exiting before they scale. Careem was absorbed by Uber. Talabat by Delivery Hero. Their data, their technology, their growth potential — transferred out

of the Arab world entirely. In innovation management, we call this ecosystem extraction — when value is created locally but captured globally. Closer to home, Oman tells its own version of this story. Akeed was acquired by Snoonu. In 2024, Promise — an Omani data analytics company handling billions of consumer data points daily — was acquired by Saudi Arabia’s T2, celebrated at a global tech conference as a success. We built them. And each time, we called it a win. The honest question is not whether these founders made the right personal decision. They often did. The question is whether our ecosystem gave them any other choice. The model already exists. In the US and Israel, governments deliberately built pathways for startups to scale domestically — through public listings, patient capital and stock exchanges designed for growth-stage companies. Startups stay, scale, and contribute to GDP for decades. Saudi Arabia looked at that model, understood what the Arab world was losing, and made a deliberate choice. Today, 77 per cent of Saudi startup founders are considering an IPO, with 91 per cent favouring a domestic listing — companies built from the start with the scale and structure required for public markets. And Talabat — once absorbed by a foreign parent — listed on the Dubai Financial Market in 2024, raising \$2 billion. The Arab world reclaimed it as a publicly traded company. That is what ecosystem

What we do not yet have is a structured pathway from promising startup to publicly listed, locally owned, GDP-contributing company

maturity looks like. Oman has every reason to build the same pathway. In Oman, we have incubators, hackathons, accelerator programmes, and genuine government commitment. What we do not yet have is a structured pathway from promising startup to publicly listed, locally owned, GDP-contributing company. Without that pathway, acquisition will always be the most rational exit — not because our founders lack ambition, but because the infrastructure for staying does not yet exist. What is needed is a structured innovation ecosystem — as defined under ISO 56012 — that treats startup retention as a strategic national outcome, not a byproduct of market forces. This matters beyond economics. When a startup is acquired, its data, its algorithms, its understanding of Omani consumers — all of it moves outside our control. In a world where data is the new oil, we should think carefully about who owns the platforms that serve our people. Vision 2040 calls for economic diversification and a knowledge-based economy. That vision cannot be built on an ecosystem that exports its best innovations before they mature. The question is no longer whether Oman can build great startups. We already have. The question is whether we are building the conditions for them to stay. We do not just need more startups. We need startups that stay.

‘INDISPENSABLE’ MOBILE APP FUELS CHINESE TOURISM

ISABEL KUA

Competition is fierce for professional photographers at Beijing’s tourist hotspots, including a scenic lake where women in flowy traditional robes pose for snaps to share on Xiaohongshu, China’s massively popular lifestyle app. The platform, which is reportedly preparing to file to go public as soon as this year, has shaken up the tourism industry in China, where domestic travel is booming to record levels. Known as RedNote in English, Xiaohongshu’s interface is similar to the US social network Pinterest, but it is sometimes nicknamed ‘China’s Instagram’ as users can post photos, videos and even livestream. Travellers use the app to discover new destinations and plan their itineraries around photogenic locations, like the lake in the capital’s historic Shichahai area -- one of many ‘daka’ or ‘check-in’ spots where Xiaohongshu is driving even more footfall. On a recent Monday, photographer Li Geng, 18, stood with a camera slung across her neck, touting her services to wandering tourists whom she charges \$1.47 per photo. Metres away, other photographers yelled instructions to ornately dressed young women who held their fingers in victory signs and arched their backs for the camera. Li said many of her competitors have a significant social media presence, including one who has 45,000 followers on Xiaohongshu and charges lower prices for photos. That has caused “more customers to flock to him while putting a massive amount of pressure on the rest of us”, she said. In contrast, Li, who has no big online following, can “only rely on calling out to people on the street to get customers”. Domestic travel in China hit record highs last year, Xinhua news agency reported in March, with trips by residents exceeding 6.5 billion, up more than 16 per cent on-year. Meanwhile, Xiaohongshu’s user base has grown to 350 million monthly active users, data analysis platform Qiangua said in May, from 300 million a year earlier. The app has boosted lesser-known businesses and sent tourists in droves to unconventional locations such as Zibo, a quiet industrial city in Shandong, after its cheap, marinated barbecue skewers went viral. Xiaohongshu is now the first place “a lot of younger travellers” seek inspiration, said Ming Yui Lai, senior strategy consultant at Daxue Consulting. Tourist Mina Chen, visiting the Shichahai area with her sister, had planned her Beijing trip using recommendations from other Xiaohongshu users. Searching popular keywords like ‘citywalk’ on the app brought up itineraries for the day, including where to eat and convenient routes from one attraction to another. — AFP

The perils of proximity: What maps teach us

WHEN war returned to Gaza, and earlier when the Russia-Ukraine conflict erupted into full-scale war, I found myself returning with my GUtech students to the first axiom of our study of culture and civilisation: History is a function of geography. Simply put, look at the map. These crises did not arise from geography alone, nor were the particular decisions that produced them unavoidable. Yet neither did they emerge from nowhere. Geography creates enduring pressures—proximity, contested borders, access to seas, strategic depth, demographic concentration and control over resources—that politics may manage for a time but can rarely abolish. Events may not be predetermined, but the conditions that make them recurrent are often written into the landscape. Maps appear merely to describe the world. In reality, they also reveal its pressures. They place a small country beside a continental power, a narrow kingdom between rival empires, or an island opposite a great naval state. From that arrangement alone, history can appear predetermined: the larger state will dominate, the smaller one will submit, and geography will eventually overcome sovereignty. Yet maps teach a more complicated lesson. The first mistake is to think of neighbourly relations only in terms of war or peace. Between the two lies a long spectrum. There may be coexistence, where borders are accepted and disputes are managed. There may be partnership, where trade and institutions make cooperation more valuable than domination. There may be constrained autonomy, where a smaller state remains sovereign but carefully adjusts its choices to the interests of a stronger neighbour. Beyond that lies the sphere of influence, where formal independence survives but real freedom of action narrows. But not every powerful neighbour seeks the same thing. A status quo power



AHMED
AL MUKHAINI

The author is a policy analyst

Oman’s decision to summon the Iranian ambassador in formal protest shows precisely the discipline required of a small state in a dangerous neighbourhood: firmness without hysteria, protest without recklessness, and continued commitment to sovereignty, good neighbourliness and non-interference.

may want predictability and secure borders. A revisionist power may want to alter borders or regional order. An imperial power may prefer influence to annexation. An ideological power may view the neighbour’s political system as a threat. An insecure power may interpret ordinary acts of sovereignty as hostile moves. This distinction matters greatly. Reassurance may work with a defensive neighbour. It may embolden an expansionist one. A concession may settle a limited dispute. It may also signal that pressure succeeds. The smaller state’s first defence, therefore, is not only military. It is the quality of the state itself. Cohesive societies, legitimate institutions, trusted administration and disciplined political elites reduce the opportunity for external penetration. Divided states often invite intervention before they are invaded. Foreign influence usually enters through domestic cracks. The strategic value of territory is another decisive factor. Ports, straits, mountain passes, trade corridors, energy routes and water systems may make a country important. But importance is not always protection. It may attract interest, investment and allies. It may also attract pressure and rivalry. Belgium’s location made it valuable, but also vulnerable. Korean Peninsula’s geography made it a buffer, a prize and a battlefield. Afghanistan’s mountains gave it defensive depth, but its position between empires exposed it repeatedly to intervention. Siam, modern Thailand, survived European imperial rivalry partly because Britain and France preferred it as a buffer, but that survival came with concessions and pressure. How, then, do smaller states survive powerful neighbours? Some balance through alliances. This can work when commitments are credible and assistance can arrive in time. But alliances carry risks: abandonment if the ally does not act, and entrapment if the smaller

state is dragged into another power’s conflict. Here, an old maxim attributed to Imam Ali offers a profound rule of statecraft: love your friend with measure, for he may one day become your adversary; and oppose your adversary with measure, for he may one day become your friend. This is not a call for moral ambiguity. It is a warning against emotional diplomacy. States that live in difficult neighbourhoods cannot afford permanent intoxication with allies or permanent hatred of rivals. Geography may force today’s opponent to become tomorrow’s interlocutor, and today’s partner to become tomorrow’s pressure point. Others rely on deterrence by denial. They do not seek to defeat the larger neighbour outright. They seek to make conquest slow, costly and politically uncertain. Finland’s resistance in the Winter War did not prevent territorial loss, but it helped preserve Finnish statehood by demonstrating that occupation would not be easy. Oman’s own history reminds us that geography can be both peril and opportunity. Exposure to stronger powers did not prevent Oman from becoming a maritime actor across the Indian Ocean and East Africa. Nor does Oman’s contemporary role as a mediator and advocate of dialogue remove the hard facts of proximity. The recent drone attacks targeting sites in Musandam and Al Wusta, and Oman’s decision to summon the Iranian ambassador in formal protest, show precisely the discipline required of a small state in a dangerous neighbourhood: firmness without hysteria, protest without recklessness, and continued commitment to sovereignty, good neighbourliness and non-interference. Maps show where states stand. They do not tell us what states must become. The peril of proximity is real. But geography is a condition, not a verdict. The task of statecraft is to ensure that vulnerability does not become destiny—and that power, if it comes, does not become domination.



‘IMMENSE DISAPPOINTMENT’

MBAPPE RUES END OF DREAM



France's coach Deschamps reacts after losing. — AFP



France's #10 Mbappe reacts after losing. — AFP

FOR all the hype surrounding France, they folded at the first serious examination of their World Cup credentials, their campaign ending in a spectacular collapse in Tuesday's 2-0 semifinal defeat by Spain.

France were every bit as poor as they had been during the opening hour of the 2022 World Cup final against Argentina.

That night, however, they fought their way back, lost only on penalties and could leave with the pride of having helped produce one of the greatest World Cup games.

There was no such consolation on Tuesday. This was a Spanish masterclass, and France were reduced to little more than helpless witnesses.

"The players are devastated, but we have to be clear-headed: technically, we were second best. That is on us," coach Didier Deschamps said.

It was as though those who had installed France as tournament favourites had completely misread the balance of power, and the French players themselves badly misjudged it too.

"We knew their main strength was their ability to play at a false tempo (slow the game down). At times, we should have done the same. It was more difficult than we expected," France's second-half substitute Rayan Cherki said.

Spain, led by Lamine Yamal, who had declared with the swagger of a teenager that France were the ones who should be afraid, had understood it perfectly.

SYMBOL OF FRANCE'S FAILURE
The symbol of France's resounding failure was Michael Olise.

Hailed as an old-school playmaker and thrust into the Ballon d'Or conversation, Olise looked utterly lost on the Dallas Stadium pitch.

Starved of space and ideas, he repeatedly surrendered possession and was comprehensively

outclassed by Rodri, who dictated the match with ruthless authority, gliding through midfield.

The 24-year-old gave the ball away 20 times and failed to complete a single dribble, a damning return for the player France had expected to unlock Spain's defence.

Olise, however, was far from the only French attacker who disappeared when the stakes were highest.

Ousmane Dembele posed almost no threat, while Bradley Barcola and his replacement Desire Doue were equally blunt, leaving France's vaunted forward line looking strangely powerless.

Kylian Mbappe's moment of magic never arrived, and the loudest roar of the afternoon came instead when David and Victoria Beckham appeared on the giant screen.

FRANCE VULNERABLE
France looked vulnerable throughout against the first side at this World Cup who were willing — and able — to go toe-to-toe with them.

Deschamps' double pivot was quickly overrun.

Adrien Rabiot picked up an early yellow card that blunted his aggression, while Aurelien Tchouameni, short of rhythm and stamina after missing the previous two games with a hamstring injury, struggled to keep pace with Spain's midfield.

The defence was left exposed and two mistakes were punished, first with a penalty converted by Mikel Oyarzabal after 22 minutes and then by Pedro Porro's goal just before the hour.

At the final whistle, Mbappe stood alone on the pitch. Some of his teammates dropped to their knees, while others buried their faces in their hands. All the talk of cohesion and unity, endlessly right up to the end of the match, suddenly felt a very long way away. — Reuters



FIFA WORLD CUP
2026



OMAN DAILY
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Fifa President
Gianni Infantino
gestures. — AFP

IOC URGED
TO PROBE
INFANTINO OVER
BALOGUN
REVERSAL

THE INTERNATIONAL Olympic Committee has received a complaint alleging Fifa president Gianni Infantino has repeatedly breached rules on political neutrality in his support of President Donald Trump.

FairSquare, a non-profit organisation and advocacy group, asked the IOC to investigate, among several instances, Infantino's possible involvement in the suspension of a one-game ban for striker Folarin Balogun, enabling him to play for the United States in a round of 16 match on July 6 against Belgium.

Infantino acknowledged receiving a call from Trump, who publicly lobbied for Balogun to play, but the Fifa president said he did not interfere with the decision-making process.

Balogun played as the USMNT was eliminated 4-1 by Belgium. He had received a direct red card in the 64th minute of a July 1 match for a foul on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Tarik Muharemovic. The US went on to win 2-0 with 10 men in the round of 32, and Balogun was suspended for the next game.

A red card or suspension cannot be appealed. Fifa, however, posted this message without further explanation to its website on July 5 about its use of the rule book in the case: "By operation of Article 27 FDC, the implementation of the automatic match suspension for USA player Folarin Balogun is suspended for a



The International Olympic Committee

probationary period of one (1) year."
"All I did was ask for a review because I didn't think it was a foul," Trump said on the day of the game against Belgium. "And, you know, again, I'm good at this stuff. I didn't think it was a foul. I thought it was two great athletes that crashed into each other and got entangled."

"I think they made a really brilliant decision. I think the referee's call was horrible and nobody talks about that. They talk about the red card like it's fine, nobody talks the referee's decision to red card."

Infantino said Fifa's judicial committees

act autonomously in a statement on his behalf on Fifa's website.

"Their independence is essential to the credibility and integrity of football, and this must always be respected," the statement read.

FairSquare, in its complaint, is questioning the credibility and integrity of Infantino, who also became an IOC member in 2020. The organisation said he "is obliged to adhere to strict rules on political neutrality in the Olympic Charter and the IOC Code of Ethics, adding that the IOC can expel members who don't fulfil

these obligations.
"As outlined in the FairSquare complaint, there is compelling evidence that Infantino has committed five clear breaches of IOC rules on political neutrality through statements or other clear expressions of support for the US President," FairSquare posted on its website.

One "serious breach" in the complaint was the Balogun situation with Infantino possibly giving in to pressure from Trump. Another was Infantino promoting a Fifa fan site for the 2026 World Cup, "which appears to have been part of a data-harvesting campaign run by entities linked to President Trump," FairSquare wrote.

Another alleged breach was Infantino's supportive post on his Instagram account after attending an event linked to Trump's presidential inauguration in January 2025.

Infantino also publicly endorsed Trump for the Nobel Prize in October 2025, and he made more supportive comments in November. In December, Infantino presented Trump with the inaugural Fifa Peace Prize at the World Cup draw at the Kennedy Center.

FairSquare also made a complaint to Fifa's ethics committee in December, which was supported by the Norwegian football federation as well as 50 members of the European Parliament in a separate writing on June 29.

The IOC and Fifa did not respond to requests for comment from multiple media outlets. — Reuters

Balogun expected red-card ban controversy

US striker Folarin Balogun said he knew Fifa's decision to suspend his one-game red-card ban at the World Cup would cause "a lot of controversy", after US President Donald Trump called on Fifa President Gianni Infantino to review the decision.

The 25-year-old was sent off during the team's 2-0 win over Bosnia and Herzegovina on July 1 after planting his boot into the ankle of defender Tarik Muharemovic, which carried an automatic one-match ban.

Days later Fifa made the controversial decision to suspend

Balogun's ban for a one-year probationary period, with Trump claiming credit and world soccer's governing body citing Article 27 of its Disciplinary Code.

The unprecedented move cleared the striker to play in a last-16 clash against Belgium and became one of the biggest talking points of the tournament.

"My initial reaction was I was happy to be back in the team. But when I kind of started to reflect, I knew it was going to cause a lot of controversy," Balogun told CBS Mornings on Tuesday.

"I could almost see within my teammates a bit of nerves because it

was something that's so unique.

"But the closer we got to the game, I tried to just focus as best as I could. But it was difficult, a lot of outside noise and that's hard to avoid."

The suspension thrust Fifa's disciplinary process into the global spotlight, drawing criticism from European soccer governing body UEFA and former referees.

Balogun conceded it was a confusing few days for him as he took on a supporting role in training to try to keep the team's morale high before finding out he was cleared to play.

"We found out on the

team bus. Everybody was like screaming and shouting," Balogun said. "It was a pretty intense bus ride to the practice field."

Balogun said it was not hard to separate "the emotion from the job at hand" ahead of the match against Belgium, who expressed their anger about Fifa's decision and went on to win 4-1, knocking the US out of the tournament.

"We're all professionals so it's not something I think was too difficult to be able to separate once we kind of got over the initial announcement that I'd be back in the team," Balogun added. — Reuters

Folarin
Balogun of the
US. — Reuters





DE LA FUENTE: SPAIN HAVE RECAPTURED

2010
SPIRIT



Spain's head coach Luis de la Fuente. — AFP

SPAIN

manager Luis de la Fuente said his side had revived the spirit of their 2010 World Cup triumph after a commanding 2-0 win over France on Tuesday sent them into the final and left them one victory from a second global title.

Spain, who won their first World Cup 16 years ago, neutralised a France attack that had scored 16 goals before the semifinal and had been regarded as one of the tournament's most dangerous. France did not manage a shot on target until after the 80-minute mark.

"The message was that we were up against one of the best teams in the world, but that they were up against the best team in the world," De la Fuente told a press conference.

"These players show commitment, solidarity and talent. They make the difficult look easy. They have talent and the right attitude towards life and sport.

"I see a happy dressing room and a nation behind us. We've recaptured the spirit of 2010. The character of this team is evident in the fact that those who didn't play have stayed behind to train after the match."

De la Fuente praised a squad he said had been built on humility, shared purpose and the absence of egos, saying Spain's strength came from

everyone moving in the same direction.

"I believe the most important thing is knowing how to choose your travelling companions. If you make the wrong choice of travelling companions, you could end up with a problem," he said.

"We know that this team — not just the players, but everyone who makes up the squad — works towards a common goal, with the same enthusiasm, and we are ordinary, generous people who seek the common good before our own individual interests."

Spain, who won Euro 2024, have now equalled Italy's record of 37 consecutive unbeaten matches, but De la Fuente said his players still had room to grow.

"This team never ceases to amaze me. The scope for improvement is endless," he said. "It was a labour of love, a process. It was about reaching the crucial moment in the best possible shape."

De la Fuente said he would like to face Argentina in the final because of his close friendship with manager Lionel Scaloni, while also praising England and describing the other semi-final as a match that "could easily be the World Cup final".

"I don't believe in the idea that finals are there to be won. They're there to be enjoyed," he said. "What's to come could be the icing on the cake."

— Reuters



Spain's Rodri celebrates after match.. — Reuters



MUSCAT STOCK EXCHANGE
7,571.403

BUSINESS

CRUDE OIL
OMAN \$80.14
BRENT \$85.65
LIGHT \$80.11



SHORTTAKES



Total investment has exceeded RO 280 million.

AL BURAIMI BUILDS
TRADE HUB ROLE

AL BURAIMI: Al Buraimi Governorate is strengthening its position as one of the Sultanate of Oman’s main trade gateways, supported by expanding infrastructure, streamlined customs procedures and growing industrial investment. Bordering the United Arab Emirates, the governorate has developed into a key logistics and commercial centre linking Omani markets with regional and international trade routes. Its strategic location, supported by modern roads, land ports and proximity to Gulf ports and airports, has helped attract investment while facilitating the movement of goods across borders. Customs procedures have also been streamlined through the Bayan electronic clearance system, reducing processing times for commercial shipments and supporting transit and re-export activities.

Saeed bin Abdullah al Balushi, Director-General of Al Buraimi Industrial City, said total investment in the industrial city has exceeded RO 280 million. The city currently hosts more than 370 industrial, commercial and service projects across an area of 5.5 million square metres, with additional land available for future expansion. Al Balushi said the governorate was also witnessing strong growth in small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in logistics, construction and services, supported by a rising number of commercial registrations in the retail, wholesale and supply sectors.

He said government agencies continued to coordinate efforts to improve the investment environment through the One-Stop Shop service and the Invest in Oman platform, making it easier for investors to establish and expand businesses.

The governorate is also implementing infrastructure and development projects across its three wilayats, including new commercial developments, projects in Al Rawdah and improvements to the road network connecting border crossings.

The investments form part of broader efforts to strengthen Al Buraimi’s role as a regional trade, logistics and investment hub while supporting the Sultanate of Oman’s economic diversification objectives under Oman Vision 2040. — ONA

Oman green ammonia exports bound for Europe

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JULY 15

THE Green Energy Oman (GEO) project — one of the Sultanate of Oman’s flagship green hydrogen and ammonia initiatives — remains firmly on course, with project partner InterContinental Energy (ICE) expressing confidence that the venture will be able to supply competitively priced green ammonia to European markets in the early 2030s while driving production costs down substantially over the following decade.

In an interview with Profercy, a leading UK-based provider of market intelligence on the global fertiliser sector, Alex Tancock, Chief Executive Officer of Singapore-headquartered InterContinental Energy, said the Green Energy Oman project is well positioned to benefit from growing European demand for low-carbon ammonia.

The project is being developed by a consortium comprising energy giant Shell (as lead operating partner with a 35 per cent stake), OQ Alternative Energy, InterContinental Energy (ICE), EnerTech of Kuwait and Golden Wellspring Wealth for Trading LLC.

At full build-out, GEO is expected to produce approximately 1.8 million tonnes



When we set up the business 12 years ago, our view was that with wind and solar prices dropping, it would become feasible to develop large projects based on those renewable resources.

ALEX TANCOCK
CEO, InterContinental Energy

of green hydrogen per year. According to Tancock, the project’s first phase is expected to produce around 200,000 tonnes per year, much of which is likely to be shipped to Europe.

“Shell as the lead operator understands the regulations and believes that the price we can generate at is competitive and there is a big enough market”, he said, adding that subsequent expansion phases would deliver progressively lower production costs.

ICE believes declining renewable energy costs, combined with continued technological improvements, will enable green ammonia production costs to fall sharply over the next 15 years. The company forecasts free on board (FOB) prices of around \$600 per tonne in the early 2030s, declining to approximately \$500 per tonne by the middle of the decade before reaching about \$400 per tonne in the early 2040s.

Tancock said these projections represent a dramatic improvement from only a few years ago, when many developers struggled to produce green ammonia for less than \$1,000 per tonne.

He attributed ICE’s confidence to a long-term strategy centred on developing large-scale projects in jurisdictions offering abundant wind and solar resources, stable investment environments and the ability to operate independently of

national electricity grids. “When we set up the business 12 years ago, our view was that with wind and solar prices dropping, it would become feasible to develop large projects based on those renewable resources”, he said.

Beyond Europe’s decarbonisation agenda, Tancock believes recent geopolitical disruptions have strengthened the business case for projects such as GEO by encouraging governments and industrial buyers to diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on traditional energy exporters.

Europe, in particular, is expected to remain the principal market for Omani green ammonia, supported by tightening climate regulations, including the European Union’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is expected to increase demand for low-carbon industrial feedstocks.

He also pointed to the emergence of ammonia as a marine fuel as another significant source of future demand, with ammonia bunkering expected to become an important component of global shipping decarbonisation.

Looking ahead, Tancock expects projects such as GEO to become major suppliers to both the fertiliser industry and emerging clean energy markets during the 2030s and 2040s.

OMAN
AIRPORTS
HANDLE 5.25
MILLION
PASSENGERS

MUSCAT: Passenger traffic through the Sultanate of Oman’s airports declined 9.3 per cent during the first five months of 2026, with total passenger numbers falling to 5.25 million from 5.79 million in the corresponding period last year, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The total number of international flights through Muscat, Salalah and Sohar airports also fell 10.7 per cent to 31,867 by the end of May, compared with 35,679 flights a year earlier.

Muscat International Airport

handled 4.76 million passengers, down 8.5 per cent from 5.21 million in the first five months of 2025.

Total aircraft movements, including domestic and international flights, declined 8.2 per cent to 34,242.

Salalah Airport recorded 468,797 passengers, a decline of 15.9 per cent from 557,298 a year earlier. Flight movements fell 13 per cent to 3,234.

Sohar Airport handled 173 passengers during the period, down 48.5 per cent from 336 passengers in the corresponding period of 2025.

Flight movements dropped 39 per cent to 50 from 82.

Domestic traffic at Duqm Airport also weakened, with flight movements declining 13.3 per cent to 222. Passenger numbers fell 19.3 per cent to 20,476 from 25,371 a year earlier.

At Muscat International Airport, Indian nationals remained the largest group of passengers during May, with 175,022 arrivals and departures. Omani nationals ranked second with 80,732 passengers, followed by Pakistani nationals with 45,956. — ONA

Al Mudhaibi Industrial City attracts 15 million investments

AL MUDHAIBI: Al Mudhaibi Industrial City has attracted 14 investment projects worth a combined RO 15 million as work progresses on its first phase of infrastructure, strengthening its role in supporting industrial growth and economic diversification in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate.

The city, developed by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), has begun infrastructure works covering 1.34 million square metres of its planned 9 million square metre site.

The first phase includes about 14 kilometres of internal roads linking industrial plots, together with water, electricity, sewerage and telecommunications networks.

Supporting infrastructure also includes water reservoirs, perimeter fencing, security gates, the Madayn Entrepreneurial Complex and the Masar one-stop



The city has begun infrastructure works covering 1.34 million square metres of its planned 9 million square metre site.

investor service centre. Infrastructure development in the industrial city is valued at

RO 17.5 million and has reached about 7 per cent completion, with work continuing ahead of future

expansion phases. The industrial city has secured 14 investment projects, evenly split between seven Omani and seven foreign ventures, reflecting growing interest from local and international investors.

The projects span a range of sectors, including electrical equipment manufacturing, furniture production and poultry processing.

Madayn said the development is expected to support economic diversification by creating new industrial activities, encouraging private-sector investment and generating employment opportunities.

Foreign investments are also

expected to facilitate technology transfer and expand export opportunities for Omani products.

The city is designed to support transport, logistics, maintenance and supply-chain activities while providing opportunities for agricultural and handicraft producers in Al Sharqiyah North through improved access to production inputs and markets. Authorities aim to develop Al Mudhaibi Industrial City into a regional manufacturing hub by 2030, attracting industries including food processing, pharmaceuticals and light manufacturing while promoting sustainability and circular economy practices.

The long-term strategy also envisages the city becoming part of the Sultanate of Oman’s network of smart industrial cities, integrating production, exports and innovation in support of Oman Vision 2040. — ONA

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



The programme is designed to support 100 citizens in building market-ready businesses and commercial products.

SOHAR PORT AND FREEZONE LAUNCHES RUWAJ PROGRAMME

MUSCAT: SOHAR Port and Freezone, in partnership with the Youth Centre, has launched Ruwaj in Al Batinah North Governorate, a new entrepreneurship development programme designed to support 100 Omani citizens aged 20 to 34 in building market-ready businesses and commercial products.

The programme brings together specialised training, mentorship, product development and direct market exposure, creating a practical pathway for aspiring entrepreneurs to move from idea development to market participation. By equipping participants with commercial, technical and soft skills, Ruwaj aims to strengthen local enterprise creation, support income-generating opportunities and contribute to the economic resilience of Al Batinah North.

“Ruwaj reflects SOHAR’s long-term commitment to community investment, youth development and private-sector-led growth”, Said al Balushi, Administration and Government Relation Manager at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

“By combining structured capacity building with direct market exposure, the programme gives aspiring entrepreneurs the practical tools, confidence and experience needed to develop their ventures.

Our partnership with the Youth Centre ensures that Ruwaj is rooted in local needs and contributes meaningfully to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Al Batinah North.

Ruwaj will culminate in a mini exhibition featuring the 30 best participating projects, giving participants a live market platform to present their products, engage directly with customers, test their sales and marketing approaches and receive immediate feedback.

This market-facing component is central to the programme’s approach, ensuring that participants do not only gain knowledge, but also apply it in a real commercial environment.

As a key component of SOHAR’s Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, Ruwaj supports Oman Vision 2040 by developing youth entrepreneurial talent to drive economic diversification. By enabling youth-led micro-enterprises to enter and navigate the market, the programme highlights SOHAR Port and Freezone’s role as a catalyst for sustainable community development and local economic growth.

Bank Muscat posts net profit of ~~₹~~137.49 million

BANK Muscat, the flagship financial institution in the Sultanate of Oman, announced its preliminary unaudited results for the six months period ended June 30, 2026.

The Bank posted a net profit of RO 137.49 million for the period compared to RO 125.82 million reported during the same period in 2025, an increase of 9.3 per cent.

The key highlights of the results for the period are as follows:

- 1) Net interest income from conventional banking and net income from Islamic financing stood at RO 210.49 million for the six months period ended June 30, 2026 compared to RO 206.44 million for the same period in 2025, an increase of 2.0 per cent.
- 2) Non-interest income was RO 92.23 million for the six months period ended June 30, 2026 as compared to RO 81.83 million for the same period in 2025, an increase of 12.7 per cent, mainly due to growth in business volumes and higher investment income.
- 3) Operating expenses for the six months period ended June 30, 2026 were RO 114.38 million as compared to RO 108.08 million for the same period in 2025, an increase of 5.8 per cent.
- 4) Net impairment losses on financial assets for the six months period ended June 30, 2026 were RO 24.30 million as against RO 30.16 million for the same period in 2025.
- 5) Net Loans and advances including

Key highlights of preliminary unaudited results

Particulars (RO million) For the period ended	30 Jun 2026	30 Jun 2025	Change (%)
Net interest income & Islamic financing income	210.49	206.44	2.0%
Other operating income	92.23	81.83	12.7%
Operating expenses	114.38	108.08	5.8%
Operating profit	188.34	180.19	4.5%
Net profit	137.49	125.82	9.3%
Particulars (RO million) As at period ended	30 Jun 2026	30 Jun 2025	Change (%)
Total Assets	16,290	14,174	14.9%
Net loans and Islamic financing	11,392	10,724	6.2%
- Conventional loans and advances	9,687	9,075	6.7%
- Islamic financing receivables	1,705	1,649	3.4%
Customer deposits and Islamic deposits	11,182	9,879	13.2%
- Conventional customer deposits	9,506	8,322	14.2%
- Islamic customer deposits	1,676	1,557	7.6%
Total Equity*	2,618	2,452	6.8%

*Total Equity includes Perpetual Tier I capital of RO 505 million (2025: RO 505 million).



Islamic financing receivables increased by 6.2 per cent to RO 11,392 million as against RO 10,724 million as at June 30, 2025.

6) Customer deposits including Islamic customer deposits increased by 13.2 per cent to RO 11,182 million as against RO 9,879 million as at June 30, 2025.

The full results for the six months period ended June 30, 2026 along with the complete set of unaudited financial statements will be released following the approval of the Board of Directors of the Bank at its meeting scheduled later during July 2026.

Ooredoo conducts youth focus group research

MUSCAT: Ooredoo has conducted a youth focus group research initiative in Oman to better understand the needs, expectations and perceptions of young customers aged 18 to 25. The research gathered direct feedback on Ooredoo’s mobile services, fixed-line services, digital platforms and brand experience, helping the company improve customer experience and develop more relevant products and services.

The sessions reflected Ooredoo’s commitment to listening to customers and placing young people at the centre of future service development. As digital behaviour continues to evolve, the youth insights captured through the research help Ooredoo better understand how young customers connect, communicate, manage services



The sessions reflected Ooredoo’s commitment to listening to customers and placing young people at the centre of future service development.

and interact with technology in their daily lives.

Across the discussions, participants shared their awareness of Ooredoo’s products and services, gave their opinions on current experiences, pointed to areas for improvement and set out their future expectations.

The findings are now being shared with teams across customer experience, marketing and market research, providing practical insights that can inform product enhancement, service improvements and

future customer-focused initiatives.

Feras al Shaikh, Director of Consumer Sales at Ooredoo, said: “Young customers are shaping the future of digital life in Oman. Sitting with them and hearing their experiences, expectations and ideas first hand allows us to design products, services and digital journeys that are more useful, more intuitive and more relevant to the way they live.”

The youth focus group research initiative supports Ooredoo’s customer-centric strategy by connecting customer feedback with business decision-making. It also strengthens Ooredoo’s focus on youth, digital innovation and service excellence, ensuring that future offerings are shaped by real customer needs rather than assumptions.

iCAUR’s ‘Born to Play’ spirit takes over Oman’s roads

MUSCAT: The flagship iCAUR showroom in Al Wattayah came alive with excitement as New World Autos hosted the Sultanate of Oman’s first-ever mass key handover ceremony, marking a landmark achievement in the country’s automotive history.

The high-profile event saw 20 proud customers simultaneously receive the keys to their brand-new vehicles. This major celebration officially welcomes the first collective group of owners into the iCAUR family, solidifying the brand’s rapid momentum and growing footprint across Oman.

The premium handover event showcased a diverse lineup of vehicles, with deliveries featuring both the robust iCAUR V27 and the all-electric iCAUR 03T.



The premium handover event showcased a diverse lineup of vehicles.

By putting these highly anticipated models directly onto Omani roads at the exact same time, the Born to Play brand philosophy is creating a strong wave of impact

across the local automotive landscape.

The brand’s unique blend of rugged capability and smart technology is clearly resonating with modern

consumers looking for an expressive, adventurous lifestyle.

Naveen Kumar — General Manager, iCAUR, from New World Autos said: “Today

is a monumental day as we execute the first-ever mass key presentation for new iCAUR owners here at our Al Wattayah showroom. The overwhelming response to both the V27 and the 03T proves that the Born to Play spirit is making a profound impact on the Omani automotive landscape.

This mass handover is just the beginning of our journey to redefine smart, exciting and premium travel experiences across the Sultanate of Oman. Also, we wanted to thank our customers for their patience waiting for their new cars and we wanted to celebrate this moment like a family get together. This event is indeed a token of gratitude for our beloved customers for the trust they have bestowed upon us”.

The event concluded in spectacular fashion as the newly delivered iCAUR vehicles lined up outside the venue for a grand, synchronised parade formation. The stunning visual display perfectly showcased the distinct road presence of the V27, with its long-range capabilities built for Oman’s unique terrain, alongside the urban energy, all-aluminium safety cage and agile performance of the 03T.

iCAUR is an all-new brand developed by Chery Group, born for the global market. Backed by Chery’s deep manufacturing heritage and cutting-edge innovation, iCAUR targets the young — and the young at heart — through its integrated “Category + Ecosystem + Culture” brand model.

SHORTTAKES



The value of sales contracts rose 2.9 per cent to RO 551.8 million across 27,864 transactions.

OMAN PROPERTY DEALS REACH 1.17 BILLION

MUSCAT: The value of real estate transactions in the Sultanate of Oman rose 5.5 per cent during the first five months of 2026 to RO 1.175 billion, compared with RO 1.114 billion in the corresponding period last year, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The value of sales contracts rose 2.9 per cent to RO 551.8 million across 27,864 transactions, compared with RO 536.3 million from 27,302 contracts a year earlier.

The increase was driven by higher sales and mortgage activity despite a decline in the number of property titles issued. The value of sales contracts rose 2.9 per cent to RO 551.8 million across 27,864 transactions, compared with RO 536.3 million from 27,302 contracts a year earlier.

Mortgage contracts increased more strongly, with their value rising 7.9 per cent to RO 618.1 million from RO 572.7 million. The number of mortgage contracts climbed to 11,130 from 9,140 during the same period of 2025.

The value of swap contracts increased by 17.8 per cent to RO 5.4 million, although the number of transactions fell to 319 from 538 a year earlier. Despite the increase in transaction values, the number of property titles issued declined 12.9 per cent to 82,224, compared with 94,414 during the corresponding period of 2025.

Property ownership by citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries also declined, with 439 properties registered to GCC citizens by the end of May, down 28 per cent from 610 in the same period last year. — ONA

Nama Water brings jobs closer to home

BALARAB AL TAMIMI
MUSCAT, JULY 15

For many young Omanis entering the workforce, finding a job often means leaving home for opportunities elsewhere. Nama Water Services wants to change that.

The company, on Monday, unveiled the third phase of its training-for-employment initiative, creating 303 new positions in water and wastewater operations while deliberately placing recruits in the governorates where they live.

The approach reflects a shift in thinking. Rather than focusing solely on filling vacancies, Nama is attempting to build local workforces that can support communities over the long term while reducing employee turnover.

The latest intake pushes the programme's total employment opportunities across its three phases to 1,188, making it one of the largest



Nama is attempting to build local workforces that can support communities over the long term while reducing employee turnover.

workforce development initiatives in the sector. Participants undergo technical

and administrative training before moving into three months of supervised on-the-

PRECIOUS METALS

Gold slips after rally



Gold prices eased on Wednesday after surging more than 2 per cent in the previous session, as higher oil prices renewed inflation concerns and clouded the outlook for interest rates in the United States. Spot gold fell 0.5 per cent to \$4,035.67 an ounce, while US futures slipped 0.7 per cent. Other precious metals like silver declined, while platinum and palladium posted modest gains. — Reuters

ECONOMIC DATA

US inflation eases, risks remain



US consumer inflation slowed more than expected in June as energy prices retreated, offering the Federal Reserve some room ahead of its next policy meeting. However, economists warned that renewed conflict in the Middle East and rising oil prices could revive inflationary pressures, keeping the possibility of a US interest rate rise later this year firmly on the table. — Reuters

ENERGY MARKETS

Oil extends gains on tensions



Oil prices rose about 2 per cent as escalating hostilities in the Middle East renewed concerns over global energy supplies. Brent crude climbed to \$86.44 a barrel, while US West Texas Intermediate reached \$80.77. Markets reacted after President Donald Trump reimposed a naval blockade on Iranian ports and Tehran threatened further action affecting regional energy exports. — Reuters

Oman advances major polymer plant at SOHAR

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JULY 15

OMAN has taken a step towards expanding its downstream chemicals industry after a financing agreement was signed to support the establishment of a major acrylamide and polyacrylamide production plant at SOHAR Port and Freezone, a project expected to boost industrial output, exports and local manufacturing.

The project will be developed by ZL Group, an oilfield services company, under a financing agreement with Dhofar Islamic, the Islamic banking window of BankDhofar, which is acting as the sole financier. The value of the financing was not disclosed.

The financing agreement was signed by ZL Group Chief Executive Officer Echo Liu and Dhofar Islamic Chief Islamic Banking Officer Amor bin Said al Amri. Dhofar Islamic said the project reflects the growing role of Sharia-compliant finance in supporting strategic industrial investments that contribute to sustainable economic growth and industrial development in the Sultanate of Oman.

Once fully operational, the facility is expected to produce around 350,000 tonnes of acrylamide and polyacrylamide annually, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a significant producer of the specialised polymers used in enhanced oil recovery (EOR), hydraulic fracturing and drilling operations.



The project supports Oman Vision 2040 by strengthening the country's manufacturing base.

Located at SOHAR Port and Freezone, the plant will benefit from integrated industrial infrastructure and direct access to global shipping routes, allowing it to supply customers in Oman while expanding exports across the GCC and international markets.

The project supports Oman Vision 2040 by strengthening the country's manufacturing base, increasing industrial value addition and advancing economic diversification beyond the hydrocarbons sector.

Polyacrylamide is widely used in enhanced oil recovery to improve oil extraction from mature reservoirs by increasing the efficiency of water flooding, helping operators raise production while lowering

operating costs.

The SOHAR facility forms part of ZL Group's broader strategy to establish a fully integrated enhanced oil recovery value chain in Oman, covering raw material processing, monomer production, polymer manufacturing, laboratory research, field application and technical support.

According to previously released project details, ZL Group secured land for the development in December 2023, began construction in December 2024 and completed installation of major equipment in February 2026.

The 24-hectare complex, with more than 129,000 square metres of covered area, will initially produce 45,000 tonnes

of acrylamide monomer and 60,000 tonnes of polyacrylamide annually before expanding to its planned full capacity.

The company has previously said it has invested more than \$97 million in the project, with over half of the expenditure made within Oman. Upon completion, the development is expected to create about 450 direct jobs and support more than 5,000 indirect jobs.

The facility is designed to meet all of Oman's domestic demand for EOR polymers while exporting more than 65 per cent of future production, transforming the Sultanate of Oman from an importer of specialised oilfield chemicals into a regional exporter of high-value industrial products.

OPINION

Oman-Jordan fund highlights intra-Arab cooperation



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

The writer is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI.

THE recent agreement to establish an Omani-Jordanian investment company marks a significant step towards a new era of Arab economic cooperation founded on sound governance, efficiency and long-term strategic partnerships.

The initiative builds on the Oman Investment Authority’s (OIA) expanding network of investment partnerships with both Arab and international countries. Over the past few years, the OIA has signed cooperation agreements with many countries.

These partnerships reflect Oman’s commitment to becoming a regional hub for quality investments while promoting sustainable economic growth through knowledge transfer, capital inflows and enhanced competitiveness.

The new company, jointly established by the Oman Investment Authority and Jordan’s Social Security Investment Fund, has an initial capital of RO 38.5 million (approximately \$100 million), with equal contributions from both partners.

Beyond its financial value, the agreement represents a new stage in Arab investment cooperation and further strengthens the long-standing historical and economic ties.

The partnership also reinforces the role of economic diplomacy in promoting investment opportunities in both countries. It will focus on strategic sectors that support the economic priorities of Oman and Jordan, particularly those aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

These sectors include telecommunications and information technology, agriculture and food security, medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, energy, mining, tourism and logistics. Investment in these industries is expected to accelerate economic diversification, stimulate local markets and create added value for businesses in both countries.

In recent years, cooperation between the Oman Investment Authority and Arab investment funds has expanded steadily, reflecting growing confidence in Oman’s economic stability and investment climate.

The establishment of the joint company offers several strategic advantages. It strengthens investor confidence by demonstrating that two sovereign investment institutions are willing to commit substantial resources to long-term projects in Oman and Jordan.

Such confidence sends a positive message to regional and international investors about the stability and attractiveness of both markets.

Also, the company can serve as a platform for attracting additional investments from across the Gulf region and the wider Arab world. Successful joint ventures often encourage other institutional and private investors to participate in new projects, multiplying their economic impact.

Finally, the partnership directs capital towards sectors that are essential for sustainable development, including the digital economy, clean energy, manufacturing, tourism and advanced

The establishment of the joint company offers several strategic advantages. It strengthens investor confidence by demonstrating that two sovereign investment institutions are willing to commit substantial resources to long-term projects in Oman and Jordan.

technologies.

It also promotes greater Arab economic integration by enabling Omani and Jordanian companies to expand into broader regional markets while facilitating the exchange of expertise, modern management practices, corporate governance and technological innovation.

Arab and foreign investments in Oman are already diversified across strategic sectors such as energy, renewable energy, manufacturing, mining, tourism, logistics, ports, special economic zones, financial services, information technology, food security, fisheries, healthcare and pharmaceutical industries.

This diversity supports Oman’s long-term strategy of building a resilient economy with multiple engines of growth.

The success of the new Omani-Jordanian investment company will ultimately depend on the swift implementation of projects, the delivery of measurable success stories, continued improvements in the regulatory and business environment; and the availability of commercially attractive investment opportunities.

Equally important will be stronger partnerships with the Omani private sector and coordinated investment promotion across regional and international markets . If these objectives are achieved, the company could become a successful model for future Arab investment partnerships and make a meaningful contribution to sustainable economic development throughout the region.

OIL TRADERS CALL TRUMP’S HORMUZ BLUFF AT THEIR PERIL

RON BOUSSO

Iran and the US have both announced rival blockades of the Strait of Hormuz once again, crippling an already fragile ceasefire deal. This should alarm oil traders who had been pricing in a rapid return to normal. But markets appear sanguine — and that may be a miscalculation.

The global oil and gas market proved remarkably resilient during the 108-day conflict, thanks in large part to the ample global reserves present before the war began on February 28. But the energy market is no longer protected by ample emergency stocks, so the margin for error has become a lot smaller.

President Donald Trump said on Monday that the US was reinstating its blockade of Iranian shipping in the Strait of Hormuz following Iran’s declaration over the weekend that it was closing the waterway amidst fresh missile and drone attacks between the two sides. This leaves the June 17 interim ceasefire on shaky ground.

Trump also said Washington would become the “guardian of the Hormuz Strait”, ensuring the shipping chokepoint — through which a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supplies previously transited — remained open to all other vessels. In turn, the US would be reimbursed at a rate of 20%, Trump added.

Meanwhile, Yemen’s Iran-aligned Ansar Allah on Monday threatened to disrupt ships transiting the Red Sea to the Suez Canal, potentially opening a new front in the regional war which could challenge cargoes seeking to bypass the strait.

The oil market response to all this has been surprisingly subdued. Global benchmark Brent crude futures have risen over 10% to above \$80 a barrel since the latest round of tit-for-tat attacks erupted last Tuesday. That rise may be significant, but prices remain well below the wartime peak of \$118 reached in late March.

Investors appear to be discounting the chances of a return to full-scale war and a complete shutdown of oil and gas flows through Hormuz.

That is a reasonable assumption — but it is still a risky one.

WHO BLINKS FIRST?

Neither side appears eager to return to war. Iran has been severely weakened by months of US and Israeli bombardment and stands to receive a substantial economic windfall from the interim agreement due to promised sanctions relief, unfrozen funds and potential investment. A renewed conflict would put all that at risk.

Trump, meanwhile, is unlikely to welcome a surge in domestic gasoline prices during the peak summer driving season, especially in the months before the crucial midterm elections in November.

— Reuters

UK services suffer worst shock since January 2023

COMPANIES in the UK’s services industry reported the steepest decline in activity last month for three and a half years, as the Iran war drove up business costs and dampened demand, figures show. Some hospitality firms were, however, boosted by the Fifa World Cup in recent weeks.

The S&P Global UK services PMI survey showed a reading of 48.8 in June, down from 49.3 in May and the lowest since January 2023. Any reading above 50 means the sector is growing while any reading below signals it is contracting. June’s reading marked the second month in a row that activity has declined, marking a setback for the services industry which had been growing for more than a year.

The manufacturing industry offset some of the damage across services as producers’ output reached a 21-month high. Manufacturers also continued to report moderate growth as well as a slight uptick in job numbers in the survey of around 1,300 firms. Higher production levels came as a result of “strategic stockpiling”, according to research.

Businesses in the services sector, which includes hospitality, leisure, transport and financial and professional services, typically reported lacklustre economic conditions in the UK and a general risk aversion sentiment among clients linked to the Middle East conflict.

Alongside uncertainties stemming from the war in Iran, political uncertainty in the UK was negatively affecting client confidence, according to the survey. This led to declining levels of new work received by companies in the service sector for the fourth month in a row.

Former Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer announced his resignation last month after several weeks of pressure from Labour MPs, with Andy Burnham regarded as the most



Construction workers work at a construction site near Wendover, Britain. — Reuters



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

likely to replace him.

Some consumer-facing businesses also pointed to the heatwave in late June as reducing the number of visitors to shops. Despite this, some hospitality firms said the football World Cup in the United States had boosted demand in recent weeks, as supporters flocked to pubs and venues to watch and celebrate.

Economics director, Tim Moore, at S&P Global Market Intelligence, said: “June data confirmed a clear loss of momentum for the UK economy during the second quarter of 2026, following a positive start to the year.

“Strong cost pressures, lacklustre demand and business uncertainties arising from the Middle East conflict were the most prominent themes highlighted by service sector firms in June.

“This led to fragile investment sentiment, elevated risk aversion among clients and squeezed consumer budgets, which in turn contributed to the fastest reduction in new work for just over three and a half years”.

Chief economist, Thomas Pugh, at RSM UK — a leading audit, tax and

consulting adviser for mid-market business leaders worldwide. Their integrated team empowers clients to grow with confidence — said the weakening in the UK economy could worsen if there is “speculation about the direction of fiscal policy in the coming months”.

Job-cutting continued in June, at the fastest rate since February, largely in response to rising business costs, according to the survey. However, the rate that suppliers were raising prices slowed last month after accelerating in April in the aftermath of the conflict.

Moore said: “This was largely due to lower fuel prices, but there were still many reports of suppliers passing on higher transport, wage and raw material costs in June”.

Matt Swannell, chief economic advisor to the Item Club, said: “After a strong first quarter, the UK economy has already shown signs that it’s losing momentum, with GDP falling by 0.1 per cent in April”.

He added: “Despite the recent falls in energy prices, we expect growth to remain weak over the rest of the year”.

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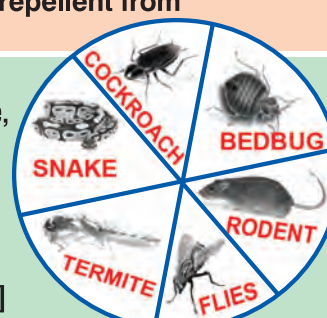
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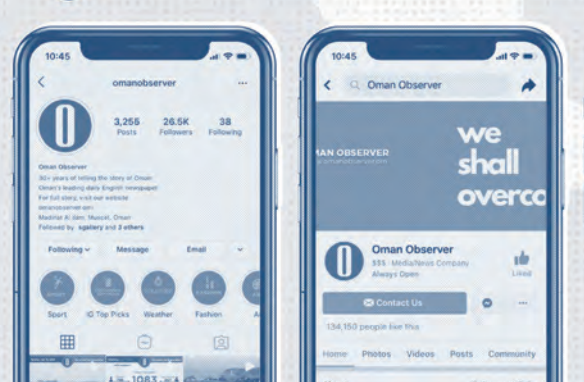
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DIGITAL CREATIVITY

MUSIC INDUSTRY DEBUTS AI CONTENT



British artist Harry Jeff rehearses a song which uses artificial intelligence to render the human voice. — AFP

Several major music industry organizations on Friday unveiled a labeling system for content created with generative artificial intelligence that they hope will be widely adopted.

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced the voluntary labels alongside six other groups, including the Grammys.

“Fans want to know whether and how generative AI has been used,” the chief executives of IFPI and RIAA said in a statement.

“These labels will provide an immediately understandable and easily scalable approach to transparency.”

The groups unveiled two labels. The first would identify music that is primarily “AI-generated,” meaning artificial intelligence “was used to generate the entirety or the primary portion of the creative elements of the recording.”

This includes tracks created entirely from AI prompts, as well as recordings featuring AI-generated lead vocals or key instrumental tracks.

The second label applies to “AI-assisted” music that is still “created substantially by humans and expresses human creativity,” but contains some expressive elements generated with AI.

However, the lead vocals and primary instrumental tracks must be performed by humans.

The voluntary labeling system is intended for broad global adoption, including by streaming services.

Under the system, a recording can therefore receive the AI-generated label even when only its lead voice or central instrumental parts were made by AI. To qualify as AI-assisted, its main performances must remain human, despite the inclusion of other AI-created expressive material within the finished recording.

Music streaming platform Deezer systematically flags AI-generated tracks, which the company recently said account for close to half of new uploads. In June, it launched an “AI music detector” that it said is 99.8 percent accurate.

Earlier this year, an Apple Music executive told Billboard that more than one-third of new uploads were created entirely with AI.

The Digital Media Association, which represents streaming companies including Apple Music, Amazon and Spotify, said it was closely following the announcement and welcomed more detailed and accurate AI metadata.

The information could “strengthen our ability to give fans the transparency they deserve,” the association said.

“DIMA has long advocated for the creators, owners, and distributors of music to provide accurate and timely metadata on all music released and distributed to streaming services,” CEO Graham Davies said in a statement. — AFP

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



FESTIVAL

A runner barely evades a bull as participants run ahead of bulls from the Jandilla bull ranch during the eighth running of the bulls of the San Fermin festival in Pamplona, northern Spain. — AFP



CULTURE

Musicians perform as hunters march to the Ngor Siid Ndour Arena to display their catch before community and traditional leaders during the Diobaye Hunt in Fatick, Senegal. — AFP



CELEBRATION

Fireworks light up the sky over the Garonne river as part of the annual Bastille Day celebrations in Toulouse, southwestern France. — AFP

INSTA PICKS



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Beautiful trio: Black-winged Stilts

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INDIAN COUTURE PRESENCE
‘LONG OVERDUE’



The designer became a viral sensation after he arrived at this year's Met Gala wearing a jacket and cape featuring sculptural and embroidered tributes to Mumbai. — AFP

Indian designers are gaining recognition at Paris Haute Couture Week, representation that newcomer Manish Malhotra says is “long overdue” for a country that has long worked behind the scenes. Malhotra, 59, became the fourth Indian designer, after Rahul Mishra, Gaurav Gupta and Vaishali S, to join the Paris calendar. European houses including Chanel and Christian Dior have long relied on Indian embroiderers and textile makers for their one-of-a-kind creations. Indian designers are now drawing on the country’s artisans to challenge Parisian tastemakers. “India is so culturally rich in terms of texture and textile, architecture, jewels, embroidery,” Malhotra said. “I think it was high time.” His debut show, entitled “Maa,” was a personal tribute to his mother, who died three months ago. The collection

featured structured dresses, including designs depicting a mother and son throughout life. “Paris doesn’t know me, and if they are going to know me, they have to know what I’m feeling,” he said. Born into a middle-class Mumbai family, Malhotra began designing costumes for Bollywood before expanding into couture and bridalwear. His Paris debut reflects his international ambitions. He has launched jewellery and beauty lines and opened his first overseas boutique in Dubai in 2023. Malhotra drew attention at this year’s Met Gala with an outfit featuring sculptural and embroidered tributes to Mumbai. He has dressed stars including Rihanna and Jennifer Lopez. “After 35 years of working, what’s the next challenge for me?” he said. “Maybe an atelier in Paris, maybe a store in New York?” — AFP

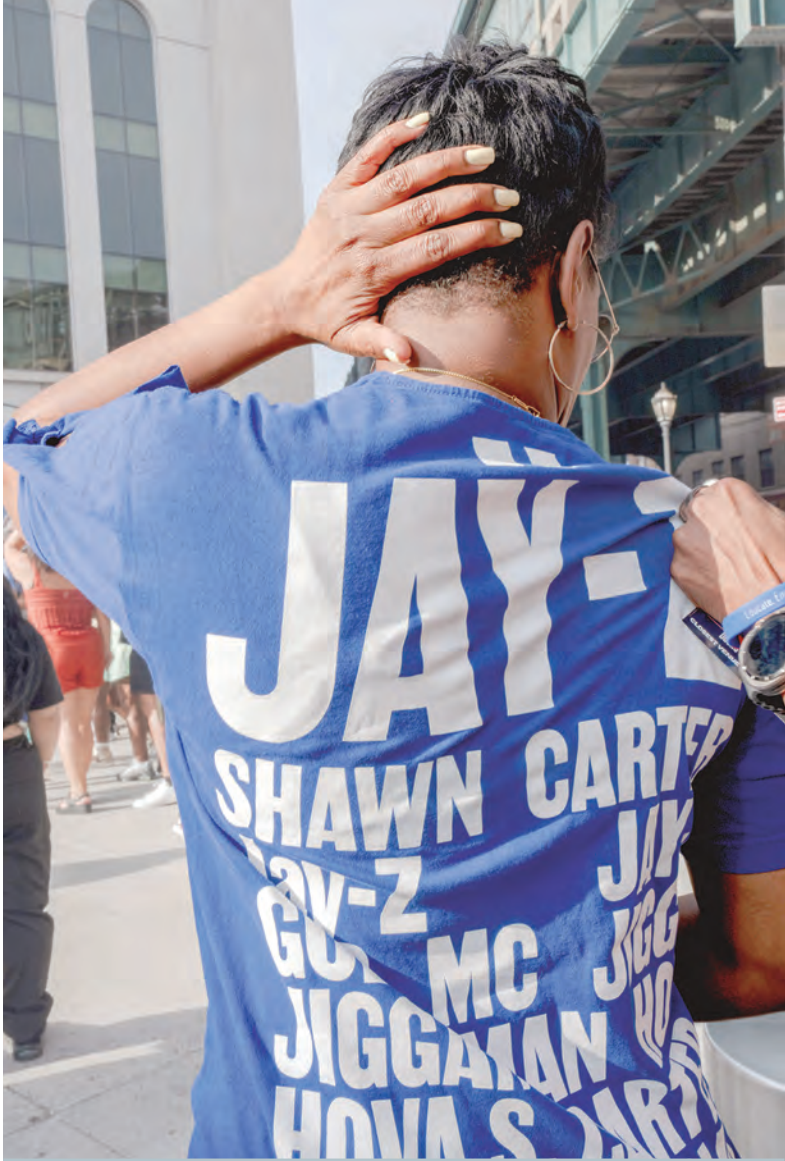


Beyoncé sings “Can’t Knock the Hustle” with Jay-Z on the first night of his three-show series at Yankee Stadium. — NYT

JAY-Z CELEBRATES
30-YEAR LEGACY IN NYC



Jay-Z taking the stage after midnight after a delay on the final night of a three-show series at Yankee Stadium in New York. — NYT



A fan arrives at Yankee Stadium for the first night of Jay-Z’s three-night performance in New York. — NYT

JAY-Z has exploded back onto the stage after years away from performing for three spectacular concerts in front of an adoring crowd of hometown New Yorkers, the last of which was blighted by delays. Yankee Stadium in the Bronx was full to bursting as the three nights saw a galaxy of stars join the rapper on stage, including his wife Beyoncé, Rihanna, Eminem, Pharrell Williams, Alicia Keys, Usher, Nas and Pusha T. The third concert on Sunday was marred by hours-long delays. According to the organisers, hundreds of ticketless fans tried to sneak in, forcing security to close the entrances, only reopening them gradually. Ticket-holders spent hours trying to get in, with some claiming they were not admitted. Jay-Z did not appear until after midnight, visibly annoyed and apologising for the wait. But once the chaos subsided, the crowd belted out the 56-year-old’s

hits with gusto, finishing with mega-hit “Empire State of Mind”. The 2009 single is the unofficial anthem of a city where each of his performances is hailed as a homecoming. “Only a select few number of hip-hop artists could create sufficient demand to sell out a venue as large and iconic as Yankee Stadium. Even fewer could do so with music they released decades prior”, Timothy Welbeck, a scholar of African-American studies at Temple University said. Jay-Z’s most recent album “4:44” dates back to 2017. But for two of his three concerts, he chose to highlight albums released decades ago, 30 years ago for “Reasonable Doubt” and 25 years ago for the second, “The Blueprint”. Both left indelible marks on hip-hop history. While Jay-Z has more or less stepped away from the studio, he has found global success with interests in sports, spirits, media and fashion, making him the first billionaire

rapper according to Forbes. His marriage to Beyoncé created a power couple to be reckoned with and further cemented his status as a cultural icon, with both among the entertainment world’s most influential figures. Back in the Bronx, the artist returned to the roots of his craft, stripped down and sharp. He ran through tracks, though not just hits, without once relinquishing the mic. He bestrode the stage with delight, relishing the pared-back setup. Thousands of voices echoed his, with much of the crowd knowing his lyrics by heart. After thrice selling out Yankee Stadium for around 140,000 people, Jay-Z will perform in September at the Stade de France, a not-yet sold-out date and in London’s Tottenham Stadium, concluding in LA. The tour could well lay the groundwork for new music. “It is widely speculated that Jay-Z will release a new album at some point this year”, said Welbeck. — AFP

FEATURES

SUMMER EXHIBITION

EXPLORES CHAOS AND CONVERSATION



“Where I Belong” by Mohammed Al Attar

HIBBA AL KINDI

AN exhibition exploring chaos and conversation opened this week at H1 Art Gallery in Muscat.

Titled “Whirlwind”, the exhibition brings together the works of prominent Omani artists Tariq al Hajri and Mohammed al Attar, also known as Mimoon Art.

Bashair al Balushi, an artist, and Artistic and Cultural Advisor at H1 Art Gallery, said the exhibition aims to combine different artistic mediums.

“The exhibition combines photography and sculpture, two different worlds, but the challenge is to merge them and make them harmonious”, she said.

According to Al Balushi, the exhibition’s title refers to the “overwhelming chaos” artists channel through their work, reflecting their inner turmoil, which is then presented to audiences within the gallery’s tranquil and orderly environment.

Indeed, “Whirlwind” lives up to its name. Its distinct artworks may, on the surface, appear to lack a common theme. Yet they are united by their ability to evoke conversations.

Speaking to the Observer, conceptual visual artist Tariq al Hajri said he is exhibiting seven works across three mediums.

“I’m exhibiting work across three mediums: film photography, film photography combined with digital illustration and standalone digital illustration. It’s my first time experimenting with this kind of mixed media,” he said.

Although his works explore concepts that are not directly connected, the 31-year-old artist said one piece, “Awadem”, directly reflects the theme of “Whirlwind”.

Printed on canvas, the digital illustration brings together multiple versions of Al Hajri in a dreamlike composition.

“Awadem’ is based on a phrase I’ve heard throughout my life from family, friends and society: ‘What will people say?’ That question stayed with me because I cared so much about other people’s opinions”, he said.

“It became something that constantly echoed in my mind. Eventually, I started asking myself: What about what I think?”

While creating the illustration, Al Hajri realised that the people whose opinions

he feared were different reflections of himself.

“They were different versions of myself reflecting all those imagined opinions. I photographed myself in different poses as references, then used them to build the final illustration”, he explained.

“You can’t identify exactly who is judging you because those voices become blurred together. That’s what ‘Awadem’ represents to me”.

When asked what he hoped visitors would take away from his work, Al Hajri answered simply: “Conversation”.

“I intentionally chose not to include detailed explanations beside the artworks. I wanted visitors to engage with them, ask questions and have conversations”, he said.

“For me, art is an icebreaker. It’s a way of sharing my perspective while also learning how other people interpret the same ideas. Those conversations help me evolve both as an artist and as a person”. Similarly, “Where I Belong” by 34-year-old artist Mohammed al Attar invites visitors to think about home and belonging.

“There is always this urge to find the feeling of home, while we ourselves carry a home within us”, Al Attar said.

The installation features five identical sculptures presented in different colours, reflecting the varied experiences that shape each person.

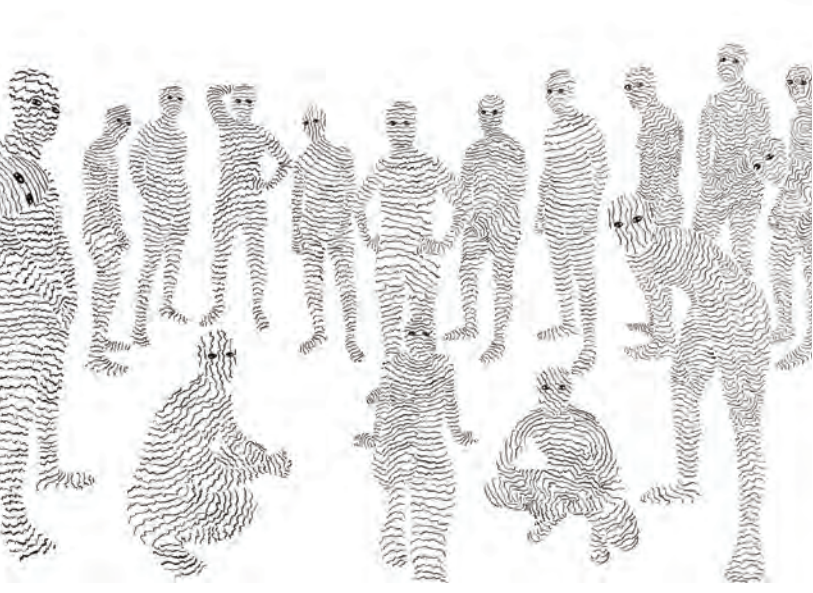
“The concept is how we build homes within ourselves and how we feel at home in places, people and things”, he explained. “The sculptures are identical, but appear in five different colours because each one of us comes from a different history, background and psychological build”.

For Al Attar, the installation’s ability to inspire different interpretations is part of its power.

“A conversation can begin when we all look at the same thing differently, yet each interpretation remains valid in its own way”, he said. “When an artwork opens up a conversation or raises a question that everyone interprets differently, I see that as a major form of success”.

The exhibition will run for three weeks, with visiting hours from 9 am to 8 pm, at H1 Art Gallery in the Jawharat Al Shatti Complex, Al Qurum in Muscat.

Readers can follow the artists on Instagram at @tariqalhajri and @mimoon_art.



“Awadem” by Tariq Al Hajri



Choose Your Fighter, by Tariq Al Hajri



31 year old conceptual visual artist Tariq al Hajri



34 year old artist Mohammed al Attar