

O M A N
عمان
D A I L Y

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11
THRILLING ACTION
AT AL RAHBA
RACECOURSE
IN BARKA

INBRIEF

DECREE APPOINTS
AMBASSADOR

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday issued Royal Decree No (24/2026) on appointing an ambassador at the Foreign Ministry. Article (1) appoints Nasser bin Sulaiman bin Hamad al Harthy to the position of an ambassador at the Foreign Ministry. He shall be granted the special grade. Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

HIS MAJESTY
GETS MESSAGE



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr of the Republic of the Philippines. The message pertains to the ties of friendship and cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of the Philippines and explores avenues to strengthen them across various spheres of mutual interest. The message was handed over to Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, during his meeting with Maria Theresa Lazaro, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, who is currently on an official visit to Oman.

JAPAN’S TAKAICHI
FORGES STUNNING
ELECTION WIN

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s coalition swept to a historic election win on Sunday, paving the way for promised tax cuts that have spooked financial markets and military spending aimed at countering China. The conservative Takaichi, Japan’s first female leader who says she is inspired by Britain’s “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher, was projected to deliver as many as 328 of the 465 seats in parliament’s lower house for her Liberal Democratic Party. The LDP alone sailed past the 233 seats needed for a majority less than two hours after polls closed, on track for one of its best-ever election results. **DETAILS ON P6**

French rider Baptiste Veistroffer of Team Lotto-Intermarché claimed a decisive victory in the challenging Stage 2 of the Tour of Oman 2026, an event organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth in collaboration with the Oman Cycling Association and other governmental and private partners. **DETAILS ON P12**



Under Oman Vision 2040
national economy grows

R o y a l e n d o r s e m e n t f o r f o r u m i n g o v e r n o r a t e s f r o m n e x t y e a r

MOHAMED AL BATTASHI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

HH SAYYID THEYAZIN BIN HAITHAM AL SAID, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, inaugurated the fourth edition of the ‘Together We Progress’ forum, organised annually by the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers in compliance with the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to enhance communication between the government and society and to listen to citizens’ opinions, suggestions and identify their aspirations. Shaikh Al Fadhl bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, said that the forum has become an annual platform for constructive dialogue and strengthening community partnership. He added that the ideas and visions presented in the previous editions, which have been implemented, reflect the spirit of the forum, which is based on collaborative work. He noted that the Oman Vision 2040 theme received the highest number of votes, while the labour market and employment topic were the most requested by citizens among the open proposals. He noted that the forum witnessed high turnout with



HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, inaugurated the fourth edition of the ‘Together We Progress’ forum on Sunday.

about 8,600 citizens registering on the e-platform, and more than 2,000 citizens representing different society segments participating in the sessions. **MAJOR CHANGES** During the main session on Oman Vision 2040, Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Minister of Economy, reviewed the major changes that the national

economy has undergone since the launch of the Vision. He said that the government had worked along parallel tracks, restoring financial stability while building strong systems to follow up on implementation, and had launched national programmes to support economic diversification, employment and digital transformation. Dr Al Jabri also highlighted

efforts to expand technical and vocational education so that graduates are better prepared for the labour market needs. He stressed the importance of strengthening decentralisation in the governorates and modernising legal and regulatory frameworks to make the business environment more supportive of investment and growth. **TURN TO P3**

Industrial exports valued at RO 1.618 bn

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman will observe Oman Industry Day today, an annual occasion held on the ninth of February. This year’s celebrations will be held under the theme “From Oman to the World: Competitive Industry, Global Vision,” aimed at showcasing the competitive geographic and economic advantages of the nation’s industrial zones and their vital role in advancing export performance. The event further

highlights the strategic efforts to provide the enablers, incentives, and facilitative measures that underpin the sustained expansion of the industrial sector. Oman’s industrial sector continues to solidify its role as a cornerstone of the national economy, with industrial exports valued at approximately RO 1.618 billion in the first quarter of 2025 — accounting for nearly 28 per cent of total exports. The sector has

posted strong growth in key areas such as electrical equipment and metal products manufacturing. It contributes an estimated 9.5 per cent to the nation’s gross domestic product, with non-oil industrial exports continuing an upward trajectory, reaching around RO 6.2 billion in 2024. Oman Industry Day serves as a distinguished platform to present the international achievements of Omani industrial exports,

while encouraging national manufacturers to enhance product development and elevate quality standards to meet globally recognised specifications. The occasion also focuses on attracting and stimulating export-oriented industrial investments and sharing the success narratives of Omani enterprises that have attained global market access and international competitiveness. **SEE ALSO P15**

FRENCHMAN TRIUMPHS IN STAGE TWO OF TOUR OF OMAN 2026

GAZA BOARD OF PEACE
TO MEET ON FEB 19

WASHINGTON: The Board of Peace touted by US President Donald Trump will hold its first leaders meeting on February 19, a US government official confirmed on Sunday, without offering further details. The planned meeting was first reported by Axios, which said the gathering would also serve as a fundraising conference for the reconstruction of Gaza. “We can confirm the Board of Peace meeting is scheduled on February 19,” the official said in a statement. Further questions were referred to the

White House, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The meeting would be held at the US Institute of Peace in Washington, DC, Axios reported. At least one world leader has confirmed his participation. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, one of Trump’s closest allies in the European Union, said at a campaign event on Saturday in the western city of Szombathely that he would go to Washington in two weeks to attend the Board of Peace meeting. — Reuters

‘TOGETHER WE ADVANCE’ FORUM HIGHLIGHTS INVESTMENT DRIVE



MOHAMED AL BATTASHI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

THE “Together We Advance” forum continued with the second discussion session where participants focused on investment opportunities in priority economic sectors and ways to strengthen sustainable growth.

The session examined how manufacturing industries can support exports and improve the trade balance, alongside the growing role of tourism in creating quality jobs and stimulating related activities. Speakers also highlighted the importance of the digital economy as a driver of innovation and employment, while underlining the private sector’s central role in leading future investment and development.

During the discussion, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, stressed that rapid global technological change presents major opportunities for Oman if approached in a proactive and well-planned way. He noted that advanced technologies allow companies to operate from within Oman while serving international markets, opening new doors for digital businesses and entrepreneurs.

He explained that building national capabilities in these fields depends on training, skills development and a flexible regulatory environment that encourages innovation. He added that government efforts are focused on simplifying procedures and supporting initiatives that can create real economic value, while preparing the workforce for future-oriented sectors.

On aviation and tourism connectivity, the minister pointed to ongoing work to improve competitiveness in air transport and related services. He said efforts are under way to enhance airport operations and airline offerings



in order to support domestic and international tourism, broaden travel options and strengthen the overall investment climate linked to the sector.

From the tourism side, Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, spoke about directing investment toward projects that raise the quality of visitor experiences and increase the sector’s economic return. He described tourism as part of a wider ecosystem that benefits transport, retail and service industries, making it a key pillar of economic diversification in the coming years.

He added that future plans focus on expanding tourism’s contribution to the national economy through new products and a wider range of activities, while encouraging partnerships between the public and private sectors to attract high-quality investments capable of generating long-term jobs across the



governorates.

In regards to private sector perspectives, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said businesses are keen to benefit from new government initiatives aimed at improving the investment environment. He explained that the chamber is aligning its programmes with

national priorities and organising forums that bring together investors and decision-makers, helping turn promising opportunities into real projects on the ground.

He noted that cooperation with government bodies in promoting investment opportunities, both locally and abroad, remains a central part of the chamber’s work.

Supporting national companies and enabling them to form strategic partnerships, he added, is essential to raising their competitiveness in regional and global markets.

The open-floor discussion attracted wide participation from the audience, with questions and comments focusing on support for start-ups, strengthening digital safety, empowering national talent and improving investment policies so that they balance market openness with sustainable regulation. Participants also spoke about the need to direct investment toward emerging sectors and to link

economic initiatives closely with job creation and better living standards.

In their responses, officials emphasised the importance of cooperation between government and the private sector, along with continued development of infrastructure and legal frameworks that encourage responsible investment. They highlighted the need to measure the real impact of projects on society and to ensure that economic programmes respond to community needs while supporting long-term growth.

The session concluded with a shared view that open dialogue remains vital for shaping effective economic policies. Speakers said that involving different stakeholders in discussions about investment priorities helps transform plans into practical projects, strengthens confidence in reform efforts and reinforces the private sector’s role as a key partner in Oman’s future development path.



Under Oman Vision 2040 national economy grows

FROM P1

Speaking at the session, Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Economic Adviser at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic and Investment Affairs, outlined the role of the office in overseeing the country’s economic strategy. He said it is responsible for monitoring overall performance, following progress in non-oil sectors, identifying challenges and proposing solutions.

Dr Al Saqri added that continuous dialogue with the private sector and long-term future planning are essential to improving competitiveness. He noted that the office works to balance development spending with financial sustainability, while also preparing for global economic changes that could affect national priorities.

ECONOMIC SECTORS

Alongside the discussion sessions, the forum featured a large exhibition that visually presented Oman Vision 2040 and the five-year development plans. Displays highlighted the priority economic sectors, including manufacturing, tourism and the digital economy, as well as planning timelines, national performance indicators and future labour-market needs.

The exhibition also focused on major transformation areas such as renewable energy, innovation, research and human-capital development. Visitors were able to learn about government initiatives aimed at raising productivity, improving public services and strengthening partnerships between the public and private sectors.

Several participating bodies showcased programmes designed to support businesses and entrepreneurs. Among them was the



Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which presented initiatives to help companies improve competitiveness and expand into regional and international markets. The SMEs authority (riyada) also outlined its advisory, training and financing services for start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises.

After the main presentations, an open dialogue session with the audience drew strong participation. Citizens raised questions about empowering governorates, benefiting from retirees’ experience, protecting job stability, improving living standards and ensuring that economic projects directly support household incomes.

Other questions focused on how

foreign investment can remain resilient amid global change and how national talent can be developed in key sectors such as health, technology and industry.

Officials responding to the questions stressed the need for realistic indicators to measure the real impact of development policies on daily life. They emphasised that local planning must reflect the specific needs of each governorate and that economic programmes should be closely linked to job creation and skills development.

Speakers also explained that Oman is preparing for international economic shifts through forward-looking studies and scenario planning, while continuing to improve the business environment

by simplifying procedures and encouraging high-quality investment. The role of the private sector, they said, is central to future growth, as it continues to expand its contribution to employment and innovation.

ROLE OF CITIZENS

Throughout the discussions, officials repeatedly underlined that the forum is part of a broader effort to strengthen communication between government and society, increase transparency and involve citizens in shaping development policies. This approach, they said, helps ensure that national strategies remain closely connected to public expectations and regional priorities.



The “Together We Advance” forum comes at a time when Oman is accelerating efforts to diversify its economy, attract long-term investment and prepare a skilled workforce capable of leading future growth. Participants agreed that sustained dialogue, strong institutions and community engagement will remain key pillars in turning long-term visions into practical outcomes.

The event will continue over the coming days with further sessions on investment, digital transformation, entrepreneurship and public-sector performance, as organisers seek to transform the wide range of ideas and proposals discussed into initiatives that support Oman’s long-term development goals.

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



Al Numani with Majdi Ramadan, Lebanese Ambassador-designate.

BILATERAL TIES
REVIEWED WITH
LEBANON

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Sunday Majdi Ramadan, Ambassador-designate of the Lebanese Republic to the Sultanate of Oman.

During the meeting, Al Numani wished the ambassador success in carrying out his duties.

The meeting reviewed the bilateral relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Lebanese Republic and explored avenues to strengthen joint cooperation and coordination to achieve the aspirations of the two countries’ leaderships and peoples. — ONA

AL NUMANI HOLDS
TALKS WITH US
NAVAL FORCES CHIEF



Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani with Vice Admiral Curt A Renshaw.

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Sunday Vice Admiral Curt A Renshaw, Commander of the United States Naval Forces Central Command and his accompanying delegation, who are currently on an official visit to the Sultanate of Oman.

The two sides discussed ways to enhance joint bilateral cooperation to bolster the security of both nations, reaffirming the depth of the historical relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the United States of America. The meeting was attended by the Ambassador of the United States of America to the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

RAFO RECEIVES NEW
OFFICER CADETS FOR
MILITARY TRAINING



The new cadets will join basic military training programme.

MUSCAT: Acting in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) on Sunday received a new batch of officer cadets, as part of the RAFO’s efforts to provide employment for Omani citizens and enable them to engage in military service after they pass preliminary admission interviews and medical and physical examinations.

Those who meet the conditions will join a basic military training programme in preparation for joining the ranks of the Royal Air Force of Oman.

The RAFO extended its full expertise and facilities to serve the new recruits, including specialised manpower, administrative, health and transport services. The step aims to streamline procedures for citizens wishing to join the military service. — ONA

Winners of ‘Fastamsik’ Quran competition honoured

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs celebrated on Sunday the honouring of the winners in the inaugural edition of the ‘Fastamsik’ Quran Memorisation Competition.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. The competition was organised under the supervision of the Ministry of Awqaf and



Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili honoured winners of the ‘Fastamsik’ Quran Memorisation Competition.

Religious Affairs and sponsored by the Shaikh Mustahail bin Ahmed al Maashani Private Endowment Foundation.

Participants competed in two main branches for males and females across two levels: the first level involved the memorisation of the entire Holy Quran along with the interpretation of Surat Al Baqarah, while the second level focused on the memorisation of the

entire Holy Quran.

The competition aimed to enhance care for the Holy Quran through memorisation, recitation and reflection, while fostering a spirit of honourable faith-based competition.

It also sought to honour distinguished memorisers, support Quranic schools, qualify participants for local and international competitions. — ONA

Allocation of **₹33 million**
to boost SMEs this year

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

In a move that underscores Oman’s continued commitment to strengthening its entrepreneurial ecosystem, the ‘Inma Fund’ has announced the allocation of **₹33 million** to finance small and medium enterprises (SMEs) during 2026, aiming to enhance their contribution to economic growth, job creation and diversification.

The funding package is part of national efforts to empower Omani entrepreneurs and support SMEs as a key driver of sustainable development, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, which places strong emphasis on private sector growth and economic diversification.

According to the fund, the allocated financing will be distributed through flexible and tailored funding solutions designed to meet the needs of both emerging and established enterprises.

Priority will be given to projects with high value-added potential, scalability, and long-term sustainability across a range of sectors, including manufacturing, services, logistics and technology and food industries.

For business owners, access to finance remains one of the most critical factors in determining the success and continuity of their ventures. The new allocation has been welcomed by entrepreneurs as a positive step toward easing financial pressures and enabling expansion.

Salim bin Hamad, owner of a small industrial project specialising in plastic products, said the announcement sends a strong message of confidence to the SME community. “Financing is the backbone of any business,” he said. “This allocation by the Inma Fund reassures entrepreneurs that there is institutional support behind them. Many promising projects struggle not because of weak ideas, but due to limited access to capital. This support will help transform ideas into competitive products.”

Maryam bint Abdullah al Hinaï, founder of a food processing startup, said access to



For business owners, access to finance remains one of the most critical factors in determining the success and continuity of their ventures.

structured financing allows entrepreneurs to focus on improving quality and expanding operations rather than being constrained by cash flow challenges. “Targeted funding programmes help emerging projects grow with confidence,” she noted. “They create a more stable entrepreneurial environment and encourage women to invest in productive and sustainable ventures.”

Dr Khalid bin Nasser, a financial and economic expert, said the **₹33 million** allocation represents a strategic investment in Oman’s economic future. “Supporting SMEs is not short-term spending; it is long-term economic investment,” he explained.

“Small and medium enterprises are more agile and adaptable to market changes. When supported effectively, they become a significant source of employment, innovation and economic resilience.”

The funding initiative aligns with government policies aimed at improving

the business environment, enhancing Oman’s competitiveness and fostering entrepreneurship as a sustainable development pathway.

It also reflects efforts to channel funding toward promising sectors that support localisation, environmental sustainability and technological advancement, strengthening the private sector’s role in economic diversification.

Observers note that continued institutional backing for SMEs is essential to building investor confidence and encouraging greater participation in entrepreneurial activities, particularly among youth.

With SMEs positioned at the heart of Oman’s diversification strategy, the **₹33 million** allocation is expected to play a key role in strengthening the sector’s capacity to contribute meaningfully to the national economy.

Heritage restoration projects boost tourism appeal

NAKHAL: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism continues to implement a series of vital heritage and tourism projects across several wilayats in Al Batinah South Governorate, focusing on restoration, maintenance and adaptive reuse of historic landmarks to strengthen their role as attractive tourism destinations.

Dr Al Mutasim bin Nasser al Hilali, Director of the Heritage and Tourism Department in Al Batinah South, told Oman News Agency that current projects primarily target the restoration and maintenance of castles, forts, towers, defensive walls and heritage mosques, with the aim of preserving their historical value while enhancing their tourism potential.

Among the most significant ongoing projects is the restoration and rehabilitation



The ministry, through restoration, aims to create diversified tourism experiences.

of Al Rustaq Fort, including its interior sections, towers and outer walls, with work exceeding 60 per cent completion. The restoration of Al Kasfah Tower

in Al Rustaq, located adjacent to the well-known Ain Al Kasfah spring, has reached 50 per cent completion. The project includes maintenance of the tower, surrounding wall and corner towers, and is expected to add a new attraction to the area once completed.

In Al Musannah, the restoration of Al Owaid Tower, awarded in the third quarter of 2025 to a specialised company, is currently under preparation.

Meanwhile, restoration work on Al Mazahit Mosque (Al Khazina) in Al Rustaq has recently commenced, with 10 per cent of the project completed.

Dr Al Hilali highlighted the ministry’s strategy of partnering with specialised private-sector companies to operate restored landmarks. Sites are offered for investment through competitive processes that ensure

preservation of their historical identity and architectural integrity while enhancing visitor experiences.

The ministry aims to create diversified tourism experiences, including transforming castles and forts into museums, cultural venues and heritage lodges. Al Mansour Castle in Al Rustaq represents the first heritage lodge investment model in Al Batinah South, offering visitors a unique stay experience within a fort dating back more than two centuries.

Six heritage sites in the governorate have been assigned for private-sector investment. These include Beit Al Ghasham in Wadi Al Maawil, now operating as a private museum; Nakhal Fort, managed by Nakhal Al Ahliya Company; and Burj Al Khamis Fort in Al Musannah. — ONA

CONDOLENCE

With profound sorrow and deep gratitude for a life richly lived, the family announces the peaceful passing of Dr C. Thomas, pioneering plastic surgeon, visionary healthcare leader, devoted husband, proud father, and compassionate human being, at the age of 84.



IN LOVING MEMORY OF **DR C. THOMAS** (17 November 1941 - 08 February 2026)

Dr Thomas founded Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery Services in Oman and served with distinction as Director of Khoula Hospital, among several other key roles that contributed significantly to the growth and advancement of healthcare in the Sultanate.

His legacy as a surgeon, mentor, and leader will live on through the institutions he helped establish, the many medical professionals he guided, and the countless patients whose lives were touched and transformed by his skill, care, and humanity.

With gratitude, we thank God and the Sultanate of Oman for the many blessings bestowed upon him throughout his life.

We commend his soul to God and give thanks for a life devoted to faith, service, healing, and love.

He is survived by his loving wife, children, and grandchildren.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Malaysia's PM Anwar Ibrahim shakes hands with India's PM Narendra Modi in Putrajaya. — AFP

INDIA, MALAYSIA
PLEDGE DEEPER TIES
ON MODI VISIT

PUTRAJAYA: India and Malaysia pledged to deepen their semiconductor partnership as the Indian Ocean neighbours ramp up trade and security links during a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi touched down in Malaysia on Saturday, his first visit in more than a decade, where he inked a number of agreements with Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim, including deals on renewable energy, health care and artificial intelligence.

“Along with AI and digital technologies, we will advance our partnership in semiconductors, health, and food security,” Modi said. “This meeting and these exchanges are very vital, very strategic and critical to advance and enhance relations between India and Malaysia,” Anwar added at a news conference in Malaysia’s administrative capital Putrajaya.

Malaysia ranks sixth in worldwide exports of semiconductors, while the sector contributes around 25 per cent of gross domestic product, according to Malaysian government figures. India’s foreign ministry said the Southeast Asian nation had a “very strong semiconductor ecosystem”. “They have almost 30 to 40 years of experience in those areas,” the ministry added in a statement ahead of Modi’s arrival. — AFP

THAILAND VOTES
AFTER THREE
LEADERS IN 2 YEARS



Voters line up to cast their ballots at a polling station in southern Thailand’s Narathiwat. — AFP

BANGKOK: Thais voted on Sunday in an election where progressive reformists were the clear opinion poll leaders but the incumbent conservative was expected to remain prime minister, extending the country’s political impasse. The Southeast Asian nation’s next government will need to contend with anaemic economic growth — the tourism sector vital but arrivals yet to return to their pre-Covid highs. Multibillion-dollar transnational cyberscam networks operate from several neighbouring countries, and a longstanding border dispute with Cambodia erupted into deadly fighting twice last year.

The progressive People’s Party was the runaway leader in opinion polls ahead of the vote. But while its previous incarnation, Move Forward, won the most seats at the last poll three years ago, its candidate was blocked from the premiership and the party was later dissolved. Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut said after casting his ballot in Bangkok that he expected to “get the mandate from the people”. “We promise to the people that we’ll form the people’s government to bring policies that benefit all, not the few in the country,” he added. — AFP

CRIME INVESTIGATION

Bangladesh seeks UN help to probe killing



Bangladesh has requested assistance from the United Nations human rights office for an investigation into the killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, a popular leader in the country’s 2024 youth-led uprising. The Bangladeshi mission in Geneva had sent a diplomatic note to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). “The note requests technical and institutional assistance from the UN human rights office to support the investigation,” it added. — AFP

IRAN INSISTS
ON RIGHT
TO ENRICH
URANIUM, SAYS
FM ARAGHCHI

PARIS: Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Sunday ruled out Tehran ever giving up uranium enrichment in its negotiations with Washington, insisting it will not be intimidated by the threat of war with the United States. The minister, Abbas Araghchi told a forum that Tehran had little trust in Washington and even doubted that the US side was taking renewed negotiations seriously. “Why do we insist so much on enrichment and refuse to give it

up, even if a war is imposed on us? Because no one has the right to dictate our behaviour,” Araghchi “Their military deployment in the region does not scare us,” he said, referring to the arrival of an aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln, in the Arabian Sea. Iran is seeking to have US economic sanctions on the country lifted, in exchange for what Araghchi said at the forum could be “a series of confidence-building measures concerning the nuclear

programme.” Western countries and Israel, thought to be the Middle East’s only country with nuclear weapons, say Iran is seeking to acquire a nuclear bomb, which the Islamic Republic denies. “They fear our atomic bomb, while we are not looking for one. Araghchi’s comments came after US lead negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner visited the aircraft carrier on Saturday, signalling the persistent threat of US military action against Iran. — AFP

Japan’s PM Takaichi forges
stunning election victory

JAPANESE

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s coalition swept to a landslide election win on Sunday, paving the way for her tax cuts that have spooked financial markets and military spending. The conservative Takaichi, Japan’s first female leader who says she is inspired by Britain’s “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher, was projected to deliver as many as 328 of the 465 seats in parliament’s lower house for her Liberal Democratic Party. The LDP alone had already sailed past the 233 seats needed for a majority less than two hours after polls closed. With its coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party, known as Ishin, she is certain to deliver a supermajority that would ease her legislative agenda, public broadcaster NHK projected.

“This election involved major policy shifts - particularly a major shift in economic and fiscal policy, as well as strengthening security policy,” Takaichi said in a television interview as the results rolled in. “These are policies that have drawn a great deal of opposition. If we have received the public’s support, then we truly must tackle these issues with all our strength.” Takaichi, 64, called the rare winter snap election to capitalise on her buoyant personal approval ratings since she was elevated to lead the long-ruling LDP late last year.

Voters have been drawn to her straight-talking, hardworking image, but her nationalistic leanings and emphasis on security have strained ties with powerful neighbour China, while her promises of tax cuts have

The conservative Takaichi, Japan’s first female leader who says she is inspired by Britain’s “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher, was projected to deliver as many as 328 of the 465 seats in parliament’s lower house for her Liberal Democratic Party



Japan’s PM Sanae Takaichi places a red paper rose on the name of an elected candidate at the LDP headquarters in Tokyo. — Reuters

rattled financial markets. Residents trudged through snow to cast their ballots with record snowfall in parts of the country snarling traffic and requiring some polling stations to close early. It was only the third postwar election held in February, with elections typically called during milder months.

Outside a polling station in the town of Uonuma in the mountainous Niigata prefecture, teacher Kazushige Cho, 54, braved below-freezing temperatures and deep snow to cast his vote for Takaichi’s Liberal Democratic Party. “It feels like she’s creating a sense of direction - like the whole country pulling together and moving forward. That really resonates with me,” Cho said.

But Takaichi’s election promise to suspend the 8% sales tax on food to help households cope with

rising prices has spooked investors concerned about how the nation with the heaviest debt burden among advanced economies will fund the plan. Takaichi said in the interview that she would speed up consideration for the sales tax cut while keeping the focus on fiscal sustainability. “Her plans for the cut in the consumption tax leave open big question marks about funding and how she’s going to go about making the arithmetic add up,” said Chris Scicluna, head of research at Daiwa Capital Markets Europe in London.

The head of Japan’s top business lobby Keidanren, Yoshinobu Tsutsui, welcomed Takaichi’s win as restoring political stability. “Japan’s economy is now at a critical juncture for achieving sustainable and strong growth,” he said. — Reuters

THREE DEADLY ATTACKS ON HEALTH CENTRES IN SUDAN

GENEVA: Sudan’s South Kordofan region has seen attacks on three health facilities in the past week alone, leaving more than 30 dead, the World Health Organization said on Sunday. “Sudan’s health system is under attack again,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned on X.

The Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have been at war since April 2023, with the conflict killing tens of thousands of people, displacing millions more and triggering one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises.

In the central Sudanese region of Kordofan, where fighting is now concentrated, Tedros said the health system had faced numerous attacks. “This week alone, three health facilities were attacked in South Kordofan, in a region already suffering acute health system,” he insisted. — AFP

FURTHER ESCALATION

Ethiopia demands Eritrea withdraw troops



Ethiopia ordered neighbouring Eritrea to “immediately withdraw its troops” from Ethiopian territory. “Developments over the last few days indicate that the government of Eritrea has chosen the path of further escalation,” Ethiopian Foreign Minister Gedion Timothewos told his Eritrean counterpart. He demanded that Asmara “withdraw its troops from Ethiopian territory and cease all forms of collaboration with rebel groups”. — AFP

FATAL BLAST

China biotech factory explosion kills 8



An explosion at a biotech factory in northern China has killed eight people, increasing the total number of fatalities by one. State news agency Xinhua had previously reported that seven people died and one person was missing after the explosion at the Jiapeng biotech company in Shanxi province. The firm’s legal representative had been taken into custody. The company is located in Shanyin County, about 400 kilometres west of Beijing. — AFP

ONLINERESTRICKIONS



Czech PM Andrej Babis speaks during in the parliament, in Prague. — Reuters

CZECH PM BABIS
IN FAVOUR OF
SOCIAL MEDIA BAN

PRAGUE: Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis said on Sunday that he was in favour of banning the use of social media by children under 15, as a growing number of European countries consider similar restrictions. Countries including Spain, Greece, Britain and France are weighing tougher stances on social media use due to concern over the perceived negative effects on children, after Australia in December became the first nation to prohibit access to such platforms for the under-16s.

“I am in favour because the experts I know say that it is terribly harmful to children. We must protect our children,” Babis said in a regular video message posted on several of his social media accounts on Sunday, without giving further details. Later in the day, the government’s first deputy prime minister, Karel Havlicek, told a television chat show on private broadcaster CNN Prima News that the cabinet was seriously considering proposing a ban. If it decides to go ahead, Havlicek said legislation would be proposed this year.

Spain and Greece proposed bans on social media use by teenagers last week, as attitudes hardened in Europe against technology some say is designed to be addictive. The measures announced by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez drew fury from Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of the X platform, formerly Twitter. Britain is considering an Australia-style ban, while France is working through legislation to ban children aged under 15 from social media use. Governments and regulators worldwide are looking at the impact of children’s screen time on their development and mental wellbeing. — Reuters

FRENCH
POLICE ARREST
FIVE OVER
CRYPTO-
LINKED
MAGISTRATE
KIDNAPPING

LYON: French authorities have arrested five suspects after a magistrate and her mother were held captive last week for around 30 hours in a cryptocurrency ransom plot, prosecutors said. The arrests of four men and one woman followed the discovery of the 35-year-old magistrate and her 67-year old mother, found injured in a garage in the southeastern Drome department, the Lyon public prosecutor’s office said. During a press conference held later, Lyon

prosecutor Thierry Dran said the magistrate’s partner — who was not home when the pair were abducted overnight on Wednesday to Thursday — has a leading position in a cryptocurrency start-up. A massive police search involving 160 officers was launched after he had received a message and a photo of his partner from the kidnappers demanding a ransom to be paid in cryptocurrency. The captors threatened to mutilate the victims if the transfer

was not made quickly, Dran told reporters, declining to specify the amount demanded. But the two women managed to free themselves and raise the alarm. They were rescued on Friday morning in Bourg-les-Valence without any ransom being paid, according to the prosecutor. French authorities have been dealing with a string of kidnappings and extortion attempts targeting the families of wealthy individuals dealing in cryptocurrencies. — AFP

Ukraine urges acceleration
in talks efforts to end war

KYIV'S foreign minister has said the Ukrainian and Russian leaders need to meet in person to hash out the hardest remaining issues in peace talks, and that only US President Donald Trump has the power to bring about an agreement. Ukraine wants to accelerate the efforts to end the four-year old war and capitalise on momentum in the US-brokered talks before other factors come into play, such as campaigning for the US. Congressional mid-term elections in November, Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said in an interview.

“Only Trump can stop the war,” Sybiha told Reuters in his office in Kyiv, close to the Dnipro river. From a 20-point peace plan that has formed the basis of recent trilateral negotiations, only “a few” items remain outstanding, Sybiha said. “The most sensitive and most difficult, to be dealt with at the leaders’ level.” On key issues, such as land, the two sides appear far apart. Russia has maintained its demand that Ukraine cede the remaining 20 per cent of the eastern region of Donetsk that it has failed to occupy during years of grinding, attritional warfare — something that Kyiv has steadfastly refused.

Ukraine also wants control over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant — the largest in Europe — which is in Russian-occupied territory. During a second round of trilateral peace talks in Abu Dhabi this week there was no sign of a breakthrough, though an exchange of 314 prisoners of war



Residents stand at the site of apartment buildings hit by an air strike, in Donetsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters

was concluded on Thursday — the first such swap since October. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told reporters on Saturday that the US had proposed a new round of talks in Miami in a week, which Kyiv had agreed to. “My assessment is we have momentum, that’s true,” Sybiha said. “We need consolidation or mobilisation of these peace efforts, and we’re ready to speed up.” Nearly four years after its full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russia occupies almost a fifth of Ukraine’s territory - including the Crimean Peninsula and parts of eastern Ukraine occupied before the war - and

has devastated the electricity and heating network with targeted bombing. On the battlefield, analysts say Russia has gained only about 1.3 per cent of Ukrainian territory since early 2023. Zelensky said on Saturday that Washington hoped the war could be ended before the summer and Ukraine had suggested a sequencing plan, but he provided no details. Sources had told Reuters on Friday that Ukrainian and US officials had discussed a timetable including a draft deal with Russia by March and a referendum on it in Ukraine alongside elections in May.— Reuters

Storm-battered Portugal votes
in presidential election run-off

LISBON: Portugal, which is reeling from fatal storms, voted on Sunday in the second round of a presidential election in which the moderate favourite is expected to trounce his far-right rival. Since the first-round vote in January, the election campaign has been upended by two weeks of storms and fierce gales that have killed at least seven people and created an estimated four billion euros (\$4.7 billion) in damage. The storm disruption forced around 20 of the worst-hit constituencies to postpone the vote by a week, but the election went head for nearly all the 11 million eligible voters in Portugal and abroad, starting at 8:00 am.

First exit polls were due at around 8:00 pm after the last polling stations in the Azores archipelago close. Voters were being asked to choose between veteran Socialist Antonio Jose Seguro, who won most votes in the first round of the election in January, and extreme-right candidate Andre Ventura, who came second. Ventura alleged the government’s response to the fierce gales and floods had been “useless” and called for the entire



Portuguese presidential candidate Andre Ventura casts a ballot, in Lisbon. — Reuters

election to be postponed. The authorities rejected that demand and Seguro, during his last campaign rally on Friday, accused Ventura of “doing everything to keep the Portuguese from turning out to vote.” “I think they made the right choice to go ahead with the elections,” 87-year old retired teacher Celeste Caldeira said. “We have two candidates. Either we vote for the one who has everyone’s interests at heart or I don’t know where we’re going,” she added after casting her ballot at a school in central Lisbon.

Seguro, 63, is a veteran political operator and former Socialist party leader. Despite

being out of the public eye for the past decade, one opinion poll on Wednesday credited him with 67 per cent of voting intentions in the run-off election. This predicted victory and the recent foul weather has raised concerns in Seguro’s camp of a low turnout. On Sunday, Seguro urged voters not to abstain.

While Ventura, 43, has campaigned on a promise to break with the parties that have governed Portugal for the past 50 years, Seguro has positioned himself as a unifying candidate and warned of the “nightmare” the country could face if his opponent wins. — AFP



TENDER INVITATION

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tender:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Non-refundable) OMR	Tender Purchase Deadline	Clarification Deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2026/02/ENG/005	Revamping of Sohar Industrial Filling Station and Construction of Commercial Buildings	150/-	15.02.2026	18.02.2026	23.02.2026

Bank Name & Account Number
Bank Muscat (0423005687760617) IBAN (QM440270423005687760617)

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om The tender may be collected on any working day between 08:00 AM – 03:00 PM.
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** Tender bid should be submitted a sealed envelope and addressed to the Chairman of Tender Committee, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.
- For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling **24610376/24610287/24610355**

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co. (SAOG)
PO Box No: 57, PC: 116, Mina Al Fahal, Sultanate of Oman

OPINION

Can newspapers survive the digital age?



SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The writer is an Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

THE media world was taken aback last week when the iconic newspaper The Washington Post laid off more than one-third of its entire pool of employees. It completely cut out its sports and book reviews section. It also closed almost all its foreign bureaus, including those in Asia and the Middle East. The news of this drastic cut in this legacy media organisation has been met by surprise, even shock. But The Washington Post is not the only major newspaper to be facing closure or downsizing. While the role of such papers remains central to our lives, such drastic changes in media institutions are a reminder that innovation is the only way forward. One of the most significant obstacles facing traditional written media is the dwindling of revenue streams. Print advertising was once a reliable source of income for newspapers. However, this has now been replaced by digital platforms like Google and YouTube which dominate online advertising. These companies have large data on consumers and are able to produce more targeted and

effective advertisements, leaving print media far behind in its quest for income. The swift evolution of digital technologies has fundamentally altered how audiences consume content. This has resulted in legacy media being under immense pressure, having to find alternative forms of generating reader interest and viewership. There is also the issue of audience fragmentation. Readership is so polarised today that different groups tend to follow their preferred news sources. Unlike in previous times, when large portions of the population consumed news from a small number of shared sources, today's audiences are dispersed across countless digital platforms which have their own interests. The popularity of online formats like social media feeds, streaming services and independent creators means that they now command significant attention. Traditional media must now also compete with unverified sources that can circulate and spread fake news. Journalists have to maintain credibility while operating in a high-speed digital environment, often

The real challenge will be in balancing commercial survival with the core mission of engaging with the public

compromising on depth and quality. These seem to be insurmountable challenges for mainstream media today. But undoubtedly, such institutions are well worth preserving. Newspapers have been the main source of information, discussion and exchange of ideas for centuries. At the same time, this traditional format is unlikely to stay relevant without innovation. Many organisations are experimenting with subscription models, podcasts, frequent newsletters, and video platforms to diversify revenue and reconnect with audiences. The real challenge will be in balancing commercial survival with the core mission of engaging with the public. Today, the information ecosystem is undergoing change at a supersonic speed. Survival in such a scenario demands technological relevance, but more importantly, it requires a renewed commitment to quality reporting, transparency and audience engagement. Having the capacity to evolve without abandoning the original principles on which media rests will be the final test of success.

YOUNG VOTERS SHAPE NEPAL POLLS

PAAVAN MATHEMA

Kishori Karki, 25, has been seeking blessings from elders in her community as the young candidate prepares to fight for change ahead of Nepal's landmark election next month. The 25-year-old is among a slate of fresh faces on the March 5 ballot and said fighting against corruption and elevating youth demands are among her highest priorities. "Our demands and aspirations should not be sidelined," she said in her hometown of Okhaldhunga in eastern Nepal. Kishori had just graduated from law school and moved to Kathmandu in September when deadly youth-led anti-corruption protests erupted in the region. A video of the young candidate taking an injured demonstrator to the hospital on a motorbike became one of the movement's defining images. The two-day demonstrations had initially been triggered by rage over a brief government ban on social media and were spearheaded by young protesters under the loose "Gen Z" banner. But their anger ran deeper: years of economic stagnation and entrenched corruption had primed the country of 30 million for upheaval. The resulting violence killed 77 people, wounded scores and saw hundreds of buildings torched. "After the Gen Z movement, if educated youth like us stand back, then the same old parties will play the same game," Kishori explained. Kishori is running under the newly formed Ujyalo Nepal Party, led by former minister Kulman Ghising, who won significant public support for easing the country's chronic power shortages. Members for the 275-seat House of Representatives, the lower chamber of parliament, will be voted in - with 165 members chosen in a direct vote and 110 through proportional representation. A total of 3,406 candidates have registered for the direct election, of which 30 per cent are under the age of 40. "If you look at the candidates, the bigger portion are the new generation," said Prakash Nyaupane, spokesperson for the election commission. Younger candidates are "a bit different", Nyaupane said, adding that "some older leaders have had to step back because of this". Kathmandu's rapper-turned-mayor Balendra Shah, who resigned from his position to join the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), is also a strong contender. A prime minister hopeful, Shah will challenge ousted premier KP Sharma Oli in his eastern Nepal stronghold, Jhapa. Shah said that the protest had "opened a door" for new faces to enter politics, while raising the importance of governance among younger constituents. — AFP

Babies connect with the world through laughter

BABIES laugh before they speak. We all notice it. We smile at the sound and enjoy the moment, often smiling as if we just heard the best joke of the day, even though we have no idea what it was about.

Sometimes we even laugh back, just in case that is what the moment requires, and then we move on. But that small detail says a great deal about how human connection begins. Communication does not start with words. It starts with feeling, timing and shared moments. Long before language appears, a baby already knows how to reach another person, usually while the adults around them are still guessing what they want. The brain grows in stages. Emotional and social parts develop earlier than the parts needed for speech. Speaking takes time and effort. Laughter does not. A feeling, a sound and a sense of comfort are enough. That is why laughter arrives early, long before anyone agrees on what the first word was supposed to be. At first, laughter can seem automatic. A sudden movement. A gentle tickle. A small surprise. The baby laughs without planning it, often leaving the adult quietly wondering what exactly worked. Then something changes. Laughter starts to involve people. Babies laugh at faces, voices and familiar games. They laugh during playful routines they recognise. Often, they look towards the caregiver while laughing, as if checking whether the moment belongs to both of them, and whether it is worth repeating again. Laughter becomes shared. Very quickly, laughter turns into one of the first ways babies communicate. Before a baby can explain comfort or enjoyment, laughter does the job. It tells the



Laughter carries meaning through sound alone. Babies can sense differences in tone and rhythm.



DR KHALFAN BIN HAMED AL HARRASI

The writer is an academic and researcher

adult that the moment feels good and worth repeating, sometimes far more times than the adult expected. Adults respond naturally. They smile. They repeat the game. They stay close. Laughter keeps the interaction alive, and quietly turns many adults into full-time entertainers. Through these moments, babies learn how interaction works. Someone acts. The baby reacts. Then it happens again, with a small change. This back and forth teaches timing, rhythm, waiting and responding. It is conversation practice long before words appear, with much less talking and much more smiling. Babies also learn that laughter has an effect. Sometimes they laugh to keep the adult engaged. Sometimes they laugh to bring warmth and attention, a strategy many parents quickly discover is very effective. Early humour looks nothing like adult humour. There are no jokes and no clever lines. Babies respond to repetition, exaggeration and

small surprises that still feel safe. A familiar routine changes just a little. Something happens again, but not in the same way. Babies notice these patterns and recognise what feels amusing without needing words, which quietly proves that timing matters more than punchlines. Playful moments often hold attention longer. When something feels safe and enjoyable, babies stay focused. That focus creates space for learning. Laughter marks moments that stand out, often the same moments adults remember years later. Laughter also carries meaning through sound alone. Babies can sense differences in tone and rhythm. They can tell whether laughter feels familiar or unfamiliar. Even without understanding words, they are already reading social cues, sometimes better than the adults around them. All of this happens in a rich social world. Human babies grow up surrounded by voices, faces and exaggerated expressions aimed directly at them, often without adults realising just how exaggerated they have become. As children grow, laughter changes. Simple giggles turn into teasing, shared humour, and spoken jokes, and later into jokes adults politely pretend to understand. A laughing baby signals comfort and safety. Caregivers respond by staying close and providing care. From a survival point of view, this makes sense. Behaviours that strengthen attachment help babies thrive. Laughter keeps people connected and makes even long days feel a little shorter. Babies laugh first because connection comes before language. The heart learns before the tongue. Words arrive later. And if babies had words that early, they would probably still choose laughter, saving the talking for later.

Learn not to break in pieces...



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHAMI

The writer is author,
translator and
communications
professional

SOMEWHERE between the morning alarm and the evening news, life applies pressure in different forms. It could be a conversation that doesn't go as planned, a door that stays closed, or a future that suddenly asks harder questions than yesterday. This is how life works. Not cruelly, but persistently.

Life will test you and that is not a warning; it is a promise. And when it does, it will not ask whether you are ready or not! It will simply apply pressure and wait for your response. This happens to everyone who dares to grow.

At one point or another, life will try to break you into smaller, more manageable pieces. It will suggest that division is normal, exhaustion is permanent and disappointment means you took a wrong turn. It will whisper that withdraw is wisdom. However, in fact it is not.

Hiding from the world does not protect you; it slowly drains you. Hence, you will not fall apart all at once, but you will fade out slowly. Disappointment, on the other hand, is not a signal to stop. It is proof that you showed up. Stress is not your enemy, but panic is. Stress simply means something

matters, so let it inform you, not define you. The moment things become difficult, and doubt tries to convince you that something is wrong with you. That struggle means failure, stress means weakness and disappointment is a sign to stop, but it is not. Difficulty is not a signal to give up — it is a signal to rise.

Many people step back when life pushes forward. They isolate, they delay and they shrink their ambitions to avoid further pain. However, safety does not create strength, comfort does not build character and staying hidden only teaches you how to survive smaller. As a matter of fact, disappointment means you tried, stress means you care and pressure means you are being shaped.

Accordingly, anyone committed to become better — more capable, more grounded, more alive — will meet the same challenges. Uncertainty teaches patience, rejection builds stability and responsibility grows shoulders you didn't know you had. Loss deepens compassion, change demands courage and doubt sharpens direction.

Always remember that strength is not found in avoiding pressure, but in staying whole while carrying it.

It is the ability to hold your ground without freezing your heart. Strength is to adapt without surrendering your identity, to bend when necessary and stand firm when it

Hiding from the world does not protect you; it slowly drains you. Hence, you will not fall apart all at once, but you will fade out slowly. Disappointment, on the other hand, is not a signal to stop

matters most. You are not fragile because you are tested. You are not failing because things are difficult. You are simply being shaped and what is shaped under pressure, when it refuses to shatter, tends to last. You are not failing because this is hard and you are not broken because you feel tired. Instead, you are learning how to carry the weight of who you are becoming. Thus, if you are still standing, still trying and still believing, then you are doing better than you think. Life will always try to divide you: past against future, fear against hope and comfort against growth. It will make coming apart seem easier than holding together. So, do not freak out and never let stress become you. Life may test your balance, but it also expands your capacity. It may challenge your confidence, but it sharpens your vision. What feels like pressure today becomes proof tomorrow that you were capable all along. It is life's way of asking whether you will remain whole, will stand tall, or will choose growth over hide. The world will never promise ease, and it will never pause for your comfort. It will offer you a choice to fracture under pressure, or to be shaped by it. Nobody is breaking, but all are being tested for shape, so learn how to stay in one piece!

BUGS IN FOOD AND SICKNESS HAUNT IMMIGRANTS HELD IN TEXAS

MOISÉS ÁVILA

A detention centre in rural Texas has become a harsh symbol of President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown, with disease breaking out among the throng of people held, including some families who entered the United States legally.

The Dilley Immigration Processing Center sits in a small town of just 3,200 people, just about 135 km from the Mexico border, but has become a grim global melting pot.

Many detainees were picked up as their asylum claims were being processed or as they were checking in with authorities on their cases, lawyers said, as Trump massively expands the scope of who can be targeted for detention and deportation.

"I cry all the time. My son tries to wipe the tear from my eyes," said W, a Haitian woman who along with her son crossed the border legally to seek asylum under a programme run by Trump's predecessor Joe Biden.

Historically, asylum-seekers have generally been allowed to live and work in the United States while their claims work their way through the court system.

But W and her son were arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and sent to Dilley in October, where W says authorities have tried to force her to sign a deportation order.

Her testimony, like that of others in this report, was taken by the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), a legal advocacy group, and shown to AFP. Many names have been fully or partially withheld.

Protests have erupted over bugs being found in the detention centre's food, W said, while lights are kept on 24 hours a day, making it difficult to sleep. On Monday, Texas health authorities warned of two measles cases at the facility, prompting ICE to quarantine some people held there.

"These families have become a political pawn," Javier Hidalgo, legal director at RAICES, said.

"They were in a process. They had future court dates... there's no purpose to (detention) other than trying to convince them to give up their legal cases."

CoreCivic, the private company that the government contracts to run the facility, said "the health and safety of those entrusted to our care is the company's top priority."

The Dilley centre is the same facility that held Liam Conejo Ramos, the five-year-old Ecuadoran boy who lawyers allege was detained as bait to lure his mother to agents.

Liam has since been ordered released, though the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is seeking to dismiss the family's asylum claim - lodged after they entered the country legally in 2024 - and deport them.

Also held at the facility is the family of Mohamed Sabry Soliman, who is accused of firebombing a protest in support of Israeli detainees last year in Colorado. — AFP

Pakistan's capital picks concrete over trees

PAKISTAN'S capital Islamabad was once known for its lush greenery, but the felling of trees across the city for infrastructure and military monuments has prompted local anger and even lawsuits.

Built in the 1960s, Islamabad was planned as a green city, with wide avenues, parks and tree-lined sectors. Many residents fear that vision is steadily being eroded, with concrete replacing green spaces.

Muhammad Naveed took the authorities to court this year over "large-scale tree cutting" for infrastructure projects, accusing them of felling "many mature trees" and leaving land "barren".

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) blamed major infrastructure development, including road construction and monuments, for the mass razing of trees and natural vegetation in Islamabad.

Between 2001 and 2024, the capital lost 14 hectares of tree cover, equal to 20 football pitches, according to Global Forest Watch, though the figure does not account for tree cover gains during the same period.

For Kamran Abbasi, a local trader and resident since the 1980s, it feels like "they are cutting trees everywhere".

"It is not the same anymore," he said.

"Trees are life. Thousands are cut to build one bridge."

Meanwhile, air quality in Islamabad continues to deteriorate.

Pollution is a longstanding problem, but plants can help by filtering dirty air, absorbing harmful gases and cooling cities.

"Forests act as powerful natural filters... cleaning the air and water, and reducing the overall impact of pollution," Muhammad Ibrahim, director of WWF-Pakistan's forest programme, said.

There were no good air quality days in Islamabad last month, with all but two classed as "unhealthy" or "very unhealthy" by monitoring organisation IQAir.

While some trees are felled for infrastructure, officials justify removing others to tackle seasonal pollen allergies that are especially



Workers felling trees near a housing construction site in Islamabad. — AFP



SHROUQ TARIQ

The writer is
Islamabad
Correspondent for
news agency AFP

Between 2001 and 2024, the capital lost 14 hectares of tree cover, equal to 20 football pitches, according to Global Forest Watch, though the figure does not account for tree cover gains during the same period

acute in spring. That problem is largely attributed to paper mulberry trees, which were planted extensively during the city's early development.

"The main reason is pollen allergy," said Abdul Razzaq, an official from the Capital Development Authority (CDA) in Islamabad.

"People suffer from chest infections, asthma and severe allergic reactions. I do too," he said.

The government plans to remove 29,000 pollen-producing trees and plants, according to a recent WWF report.

However, critics argue that pollen allergies are an excuse to justify broader tree-cutting, particularly linked to military and infrastructure projects.

The solution lies not in indiscriminate tree removal, but careful urban planning, experts say, replanting with non-allergenic species - and greater transparency around development projects in the capital.

In recent months, large bulldozers have been spotted levelling former green belts and wooded areas, including near major highways.

According to WWF and unnamed government officials, some of the cleared land is tapped for monuments commemorating the brief but intense armed conflict between Pakistan and neighbouring

India last May. Other plots were razed to make way for military-linked infrastructure. "We know that trees are being cut for military-related projects, but there is not much we can do," a government source said, requesting anonymity for security reasons. "The people in power, the military, can do whatever they want."

Pakistan's powerful military has ruled the country for decades through coups and is deeply involved in the country's politics and economy, analysts say.

At a proposed military monument site along the city's express highway, WWF recorded more than six hectares of land clearing last year, with work continuing in 2026.

It saw "no active plantation... indicating that the clearing is infrastructure driven".

The military did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

Naveed's court case seeking to halt the widespread felling, which is still being heard, argues there is "no excuse" for the tree loss.

If a monument is "deemed essential, why was it not placed in any existing park or public place?" he argues.

In reply to Naveed's petition, authorities said roads and infrastructure projects were approved under regulations dating back to 1992.

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



Players compete for control in a tightly fought encounter

TOP CORPORATE TEAMS CLASH IN MUSCAT STEEL COLEAGUE SEMIS

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 8

The final week of the Muscat Steel CoLeague 2026 kicks off today at 8 pm. The tournament is organised by the Oman Football Association in cooperation with Sports Mania, with comprehensive organisational preparations in place to ensure the matches are delivered to the highest technical and administrative standards, reflecting the league’s status as one of the Sultanate’s leading sporting events for the corporate and institutional sector.

The evening will feature two semifinal matches, with Security & Safety Services taking on Takaful Oman in what promises to be an evenly contested clash, while JCDecaux face DHL in the second

Organisers are keen to enhance the fan and interactive experience, with Sports Mania announcing the presence of a live on-court commentator during the semifinals and final to create an engaging and vibrant atmosphere for both participants and spectators

encounter. All matches will be held at Navras North Court in Seeb, the official venue hosting the entire tournament.

The league began two weeks ago with the group stage, which witnessed competitive and closely fought fixtures alongside strong technical performances from the participating teams. The competition then progressed to the knockout rounds starting with the quarter-finals. JCDecaux defeated OQ Exploration & Production (OQEP) 3–1, Security & Safety Services secured a 3–0 win over Dhofar Insurance, Takaful Oman edged Muscat Steel 3–2, while DHL claimed qualification after a marathon contest against Hotpack,

decided 5–4 on penalties.

Organisers are also keen to enhance the fan and interactive experience, with Sports Mania announcing the presence of a live on-court commentator during the semifinals and final to create an engaging and vibrant atmosphere for both participants and spectators. Integrated arrangements have also been put in place covering officiating, technical operations and logistics to ensure the smooth running of the matches.

The third-place playoff and the final will be held on Wednesday, February 11, followed by the official closing ceremony and awards presentation. The top teams will receive trophies, medals and cash prizes, concluding what is expected to be one of the most competitive and exciting editions of the league.



Iraq leads as Muscat 2026 West Asia Para Games end



In goalball for the blind Saudi Arabia claimed first place, while Omani national team celebrated a historic achievement by finishing runners-up.



In the wheelchair basketball Iraq take the first place.

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

THE curtain has come down on the 5th West Asia Para Games (Muscat 2026), hosted by the Sultanate of Oman from February 1–7, with the participation of more than 600 male and female athletes from 11 countries, competing in nine para sports. The edition showcased the growing development of sport for persons with disabilities in the region and concluded with the Iraqi national team being crowned overall champions of the Games after topping the medals table in several sports with a total of 92 medals.

During the closing ceremony, Dr Mansour al Touqi, Director of the Games, affirmed that “Muscat 2026” was a successful sporting and human model, noting that the event was not just about competition, but a platform to support the Paralympic movement and entrench values of inclusion and fair play. He praised the high spirit and commitment shown by the athletes, and the efforts of the organising committees and volunteers who presented a distinguished image of Oman, stressing that this edition will remain an important milestone in the history of West Asia Games, with anticipation now turning to the next edition in Basra.

GOALBALL... A HISTORIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR OMAN

In goalball for the blind, Saudi Arabia claimed first place, while our national team celebrated a historic achievement by finishing runners-up for the first time in its history, with Iraq taking third place.

WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL

In wheelchair basketball, Iraq continued its strong run to take first place, with the United Arab Emirates finishing second and Saudi Arabia third.

BOCIA... SAUDI SUPREMACY AND OMANI PRESENCE

Boccia competitions saw outstanding Saudi dominance, with the Kingdom topping the medals table with four gold and two silver medals, alongside strong performances from Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, the UAE and Jordan. In the BC1 women’s category, Omani player Arwa al Harthy took gold, and Omani Kholoud al Kindy won silver, while Saudi Arabia’s Abdulaziz



Iraqi national team crowned overall champions of the Para Games after topping the medals table in several sports with a total of 92 medals.



al Zahrani clinched gold in BC1 men ahead of Iraqi Mohamed Fadel and Oman’s Samir al Salmi.

In the pairs events, Saudi Arabia secured gold in BC3 pairs ahead of our national team, while the UAE won gold in BC4 pairs, with Oman taking silver.

TABLE TENNIS ... IRAQI, SYRIAN, PALESTINE AND OMANI PRESENCE

In standing men’s doubles, Syrian–Palestinian duo Haitham al Qassas (Syria) and Atallah Hayek (Palestine) clinched first place, followed by Iraq’s Muntazar Farouq and Mohamed Qahtan in second.

In women’s sitting doubles, Iraq’s Rusal Fadel and Hadeel Ali took gold, with the Saudi pair Maryam al Marsil and Ranad al Rahili in second.

SWIMMING... IRAQI DOMINANCE

In para swimming, Iraqi athletes

collected a series of gold medals in freestyle, breaststroke and individual medley events, while Saudi swimmers impressed in backstroke, butterfly and middle-distance races. Qatar also stood out in visually impaired events through swimmer Shamil Shahouf, alongside strong results for Syrian swimmers Walid al Khas and Rami Qashqo.

CYCLING

Saudi cyclist Mohamed Saleh claimed several top finishes in C-class races, alongside his teammate Abbas Hussein, while Emirati riders Abdullah al Baloushi, Ahmed al Badwawi and Thiyab al Muhairi asserted their superiority in other events.

In H-class handcycling, Saudi rider Manahi Abdullah stood out by winning gold, and Omani national team cyclist Sami Al Salimi drew attention by taking first place in the 35 km marathon after finishing second in the 15 km time-trial, stressing that these results are a major boost ahead of the upcoming Asian Championships.

POWERLIFTING

In powerlifting, Emirati lifters Abdullah al Naqbi and Saif al Zaabi secured first place in the men’s 107 kg and 72 kg categories, respectively, while Omani lifter Khalifa al Yahyai claimed second place in the 72 kg category. Iraqi and Jordanian lifters shone in the 54–59 kg class, with strong showings from Syria, Bahrain and Jordan in the women’s events.

SHORT TAKES



Highlights from the Ministry Shield Handball Competition.

MINISTRY SHIELD
HANDBALL:
QUARTERFINALS
KICK OFF TODAY

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
@riyadhbaluch

The 15th edition of the Ministry Shield Handball Championship for the 2025-2026 sports season enters its decisive stage today, as four highly anticipated matches are scheduled in the quarterfinals of the competition.

The championship resumes after a brief suspension due to the participation of Oman's national senior indoor handball team in the 22nd Asian Handball Championship, recently held in the sisterly State of Kuwait. Eight clubs are competing for four spots in the semifinals, with expectations of intense and closely contested encounters reflecting the narrow gap in technical levels among the teams.

The day's action kicks off on the main indoor hall at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, where Seeb face Majees, Seeb will be looking to maintain their strong presence in the competition and reinforce their status as title contenders, while Majees aim to pull off an upset by eliminating one of the tournament favourites and advancing further.

The Al Rustaq Sports Complex will host a clash between Al Musannah and Nizwa, with both sides eager to deliver a competitive performance and secure a place in the semifinals, Matches between the two teams have traditionally been marked by intensity and high levels of competitiveness.

The final match of the day will see Al Amerat take on Al Shabab at the same venue, in a contest open to all possibilities, Al Amerat will be looking to build on their positive momentum after clinching the Second Division League title for the first time in their history during their debut season in competitions organised by the Oman Handball Association, The outcome of Monday's matches will determine the four teams that continue their quest for the Ministry Shield title, in a championship that has witnessed strong competition and a steadily rising technical standard this season.

The quarterfinals are played under a single elimination (knockout) system. In the event of a draw at the end of regular time in the first and second rounds, matches are decided directly by seven-metre throws without extra time.

However, if semifinal or final matches end in a draw after regular time, Law (2-2) of the game regulations is applied, with extra time played to determine the winner. Classification matches are also held to determine third and fourth places, while the two semifinal winners compete to decide the first and second positions.



Al Kassah secured victory.

Thrilling horse racing action
at Al Rahba Racecourse

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
@riyadhbaluch

THE Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka hosted on Friday, the 16th horse racing meet, featuring a competitive nine-race card that brought together elite Arabian thoroughbreds and purebred thoroughbred horses, in an atmosphere marked by strong competition and growing interest in the sport.

The meeting opened with the first race, Al Ghanjah, for purebred Arabian horses, Al Shibl, owned by the Royal Cavalry, claimed first place under the supervision of trainer Mohammed bin Issa al Balushi and jockey al Mutasim bin Said al Balushi.

In the second race, Al Boom, also for purebred Arabians, the Royal Cavalry continued its dominance as Al Kassah secured victory, trained by Kahlan bin Mohammed al Balushi and ridden by jockey Mohammed bin Mahmoud al Farsi.

The third race, Al Shasha, witnessed the triumph of Al Dustoor, trained by Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Balushi and ridden by Anas bin Salim al Siyabi.

In the fourth race, Al Baqarah, for purebred Arabian horses, Hizam delivered an impressive performance to take first place trained by Mohammed bin Salim al Siyabi and ridden by Amer bin Ali al Rasbi, in a tightly contested race decided in the final stretch.

The fifth race, Al Badan, for locally bred purebred Arabian horses, saw Kassab GM clinch victory, trained by Hissam bin Raid al Rasbi and ridden by Yahya bin Juma al Hamadani.

Action continued in the sixth race, Al Hoori, for purebred thoroughbreds, where Run Shiro emerged victorious. The winning horse trained by Majid bin Abdullah al Farsi and ridden by Mohammed bin Mahmoud al Farsi, who



The winners of the eighth race, which was sponsored by Al Reef Stud, were crowned.
Pictures by **MOHAMMED AL BALUSHI**

enjoyed a highly successful outing.

In the seventh race, al Sanboq, also for thoroughbreds, Boomologist, owned by Salem bin Abdullah al Siyabi, delivered another success for trainer Mohammed bin Salem al Siyabi, with Mohammed bin Mahmoud al Farsi again in the saddle.

The eighth race, the Maraza Cup, for locally bred purebred Arabian horses, sponsored by Al Reef Stud, was won by Muhajim G, trained by Hassan bin Mohammed al Falahi and ridden by Mohammed bin Mahmoud al Farsi.

The meeting concluded with the ninth and final race, Sultanah, for purebred Arabian horses where Saint Al Mori, claimed first place under trainer Ali bin Salem al Hashimi and jockey Hamad bin Sultan al Maliki.

POST-RACE REACTIONS
Trainer Mohammed bin Salem al Siyabi,

following Hizam's victory, expressed his satisfaction with the result, stating:

"This win is the result of consistent preparation and hard work. We focused on having the horse fully ready for this race and the outcome reflects the effort put in by the entire team."

Jockey Mohammed bin Mahmoud al Farsi, who recorded multiple victories during the meeting, highlighted the high level of competition, saying:

"All races were highly competitive. Success came from the excellent condition of the horses and the clear technical instructions from the trainers, which made the difference on the track."

The 16th race meeting at Al Rahba Racecourse once again underlined the growing stature of horse racing in the Sultanate of Oman and its role in showcasing the quality and competitiveness of Omani bred horses.

Seeb's winning streak ends as Ibri claims shock victory in JFL

AHME AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

Ibri ended league leaders Seeb's winning streak after claiming a valuable 1-0 victory at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex in Round 13 of the Jindal Football League.

The decisive goal came early in the sixth minute of the first half when Bissan Jacques capitalised on a precise cross, rising high to power a header into the net and hand Ibri an advantage that unsettled the visitors.

The match began at a high tempo with both sides exchanging attacks, but Ibri proved more clinical in front of goal. After conceding,

Seeb regained possession and dominated the midfield, pressing forward through both flanks and central channels. They came close to equalising on several occasions, most notably through a header from Omar al Fazari that struck the crossbar and a powerful long-range effort from Ali al Balushi, which goalkeeper Mutasim al Wahibi tipped away brilliantly.

At the other end, Ibri goalkeeper Omar al Matroushi delivered an outstanding performance, producing a series of crucial saves. At the same time, the defence remained well organised and compact, relying on quick counterattacks to threaten



Ibri Players celebrate their victory over Seeb Club

sporadically.

In the second half, Seeb intensified their attacking pressure and made several substitutions in search of an equaliser. However, haste and a lack of finishing touch denied them a breakthrough, while Ibri maintained their defensive discipline until the final whistle, despite five minutes of added time.

The victory lifts Ibri to 10 points in 12th place, while Seeb remain top of the table with 32 points.

Elsewhere, Al Khabourah and Dhofar played out a goalless draw at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex, leaving Al Khabourah ninth with 14 points and Dhofar tenth with 13.

At the Nizwa Sports Complex, Bahla recorded an emphatic 4-1 win over Samayil. Wenda, Abdulsalam al Shukaili (two goals), and Faisal al Aghbari scored for Bahla, while Bashar al Muharbi netted Samayil's lone goal. The result moves Bahla up to sixth place with 22 points, while Samayil remain 11th with 11.

Meanwhile, Oman Club defeated Al Rustaq 3-1 at Seeb Stadium. Ziki, Husni al Hinai and Waleed al Musallami scored for Oman Club, while Omar al Salti scored the consolation for Al Rustaq. Oman Club rise to seventh with 18 points, while Al Rustaq stay bottom with four points.

VEISTROFFER DOMINATES WITH SOLO-RIDE WIN AT STAGE 2



Baptiste Veistroffer of Lotto-Intermarche put up a dominant solo ride in the longest stage of the Tour of Oman (191.4 km) to claim the red jersey on Sunday.

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

BAPTISTE VEISTROFFER of Lotto-Intermarche put up a dominant solo ride in the longest stage of the Tour of Oman (191.4 km) to claim the red jersey on Sunday.

The French rider attacked late from the day’s breakaway and held off a charging peloton on the uphill finish, crossing the line at Yitti Hills in a timing of 4 hours, 22 minutes and 43 seconds. Eritrea’s Mulueberhan Henok of XAT Team claimed second spot with a narrow time gap, while French cyclist Gruel Thibaud of GFC Team secured third place.

With his stage victory, Veistroffer moved into the overall lead of the Tour, claiming the red jersey, while also topping the points classification to take the green jersey with a total of 19 points. Gruel Thibaud was awarded the white jersey as the best young rider, while Polish cyclist Patryk Goszczurny of TVL Team claimed the golden jersey as the most aggressive rider.

Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, was the chief guest at the awards ceremony.

Speaking to the media after the podium ceremony, Veistroffer said:

“I feel I truly deserved this victory after a long time. Everyone in the team believed in me, and I believed in myself. I managed the race well and attacked at the right moment. This win is not only a personal achievement, but the result of a collective team effort.”

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BAPTISTE VEISTROFFER



“The coming stages will be even tougher and it is important to stay confident and aggressive. The Muscat Classic was a good preparation but today I really enjoyed how hard the race was, especially in the final part of the stage. I like races like this,” he said.

URBAN LANDSCAPE
Stage 2 featured a challenging and scenic route highlighting Oman’s geographical diversity and urban landscapes. The stage began at Al Rustaq Fort, built in the 13th century, passing through Al Rustaq, Al Awabi and Nakhal, before heading towards Wadi Al Maawil and turning towards Al Lajal and the Bausher-Fanja Road. Riders continued through Fanja Souq and the Rusayl Industrial Area, before passing the Military Hospital traffic lights and turning towards Al Murtafaah Road and Muaskar Al Murtafaah Street.

The route then passed Bank Muscat traffic lights, turning right at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque junction in Al Ghubrah, before continuing to Al Ansab Road and descending onto the Muscat Expressway in Bausher. Cyclists then turned onto Al Jabal Street (Bausher-Al Amerat Road), passed Al Amerat Cemetery Roundabout, turned into Wadi Adai, and continued through Al Hamriyah, before concluding the stage at the demanding ascent of Yitti Heights, where Veistroffer sealed his victory.

FIRST PRO SOLO VICTORY
The Lotto-Intermarche rider had already shown his ambition by spending 151 km alone at the front during the Muscat Classic. This time, it was from a five-man breakaway, later reduced to a trio, that the young Frenchman executed a plan he had carefully prepared. The former triathlete dropped his last two companions, Patryk Goszczurny and Tim Marsman (Alpecin Premier Tech), on the penultimate steep ramp of the day to claim his first professional solo victory.

In the general classification, he leads Mulubrhan and Gruel, who contested the peloton sprint on the finish line and are respectively 25 and 27 seconds behind in the overall standings.

After the withdrawals of Briec Rolland (Groupama-FDJ United) and Einer Rubio (Movistar), 121 riders remained at the start, at the foot of the Al Rustaq Fort.

As Jayco-AlUla prepared the peloton for a final attack, Veistroffer read the situation and launched a solo attack in the final section of the 900-metre wall on the Hamriyah climb with an average gradient of 9.4%, dropping his two breakaway companions.

He charged on without looking back toward the Yiti Hills climb, which he tackled with a 45-second lead over the peloton.

On Monday, Stage 3 will run for 191.3 km from Samayil ‘Al Fayha Resthouse’ to Misfat al Abriyeen (Eastern Mountain).

GENERAL AFTER STAGE 2		
1.	BAPTISTE VEISTROFFER LOTTO INTERMARCHÉ	08H 47' 23"
2.	HENOK MULUEBERHAN XDS ASTANA TEAM	+ 25"
3.	THIBAUD GRUEL GROUPAMA-FDJ UNITED	+ 27"
4.	BRYAN COQUARD COFIDIS	+ 31"
5.	RICK PLUIJERS TUDOR PRO CYCLING TEAM	+ 31"
6.	STEFANO OLDANI CAJA RURAL-SEGUROS RGA	+ 31"
7.	IVAN GARCIA CORTINA MOVISTAR TEAM	+ 31"
8.	EMILIEN JEANNIERE TOTALENERGIES	+ 31"
9.	FRØLICH MIKKEL HONORÉ EF EDUCATION - EASYPPOST	+ 31"
10.	MARCEL CAMPRUBI PIJUAN PINARELLO-Q36.5 PRO CYCLING TEAM	+ 31"



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SHORTTAKES



The initiative forms part of Al Sharqiyah South Governorate's efforts to upgrade urban facilities.

SUR WATERFRONT PROJECT TO BREAK GROUND ON FEB 11

SUR: The Wilayat of Sur will mark the laying of the foundation stone next Wednesday, February 11, for the “Masar” waterfront development project in the Al-Bar area, with an estimated investment of around RO 2 million. The initiative forms part of Al Sharqiyah South Governorate's efforts to upgrade urban facilities and improve quality of life through partnerships with the private sector.

The project will feature a health walkway, a dedicated cycling track, children's play areas and public seating zones, alongside padel courts developed for investment purposes. It will also include restaurants, cafés and commercial kiosks, creating a mixed-use leisure and commercial destination along the waterfront.

The ceremony will be held under the auspices of Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Head of the Tax Authority and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oman LNG Development Foundation.

The project aims to create an integrated urban destination combining sports, leisure and commercial services, while enhancing the utilisation of the waterfront and strengthening the city's tourism and investment appeal.

Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maaawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, said the project represents a significant addition to Sur and reflects the governorate's commitment to developing sustainable public facilities that meet community needs. — ONA

Two-track approach to drive Oman Vision 2040



His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, patronised the opening of the forum.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 8

OMANI officials outlined a two-track approach to accelerate implementation of Oman Vision 2040, linking fiscal stabilisation, stronger delivery monitoring and private-sector empowerment to the next phase of national development.

The remarks came during a panel session titled “Oman Vision 2040: Achievements and Future Prospects” at the fourth edition of the “Together We Progress” forum, organised annually by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers in line with directives to strengthen communication between the government and society, listen to public views and proposals; and support comprehensive national development. The forum runs for two days and includes a series of dialogue and discussion sessions across priority themes.

His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, patronised the

opening of the forum.

Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Minister of Economy, said the Vision's implementation journey reflects shifts that could be studied through project and programme management, noting that the Vision was launched under difficult economic conditions rather than an “ideal start” — a context he said helped strengthen credibility and seriousness in confronting challenges.

Al Jabri said execution required work on two parallel tracks: first, addressing financial conditions to reach economic stability and balance; second, building a comprehensive follow-up framework to enable phased implementation of the Vision through clear stages.

He described the private sector as the main engine of the national economy, but said it needed additional enablers to lead development. He pointed to a national programme launched to empower the private sector by diagnosing challenges and introducing initiatives to strengthen its role.

Al Jabri added that the difference

between traditional five-year plans and the Oman Vision 2040 development pathway lies in the Vision's focus on “qualitative transformations” in development performance, particularly in delivering projects across governorates and raising implementation efficiency.

Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Economic Adviser at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, said effective leadership and economic governance were a key pillar of the Vision, highlighted by the creation of the office to provide top-level strategic oversight of the economy, supervise economic policies and strategies; and follow up on Vision implementation.

Al Saqri said Oman's economy is influenced by major global shifts — including the transition towards renewable energy, rapid developments in artificial intelligence, geopolitical changes and demographic transformations — adding that Oman is working to anticipate these trends, develop scenarios to manage their impact and maximise the opportunities arising from them.

Oman’s Block 50 multi-well drilling campaign to start next month

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 8

The first of three new development wells targeting the offshore Yumna Field in Block 50 off Oman's eastern seaboard will be drilled starting next month, marking a renewed campaign to bolster oil output from the Sultanate of Oman's only producing field off the country's east coast.

Oman-based Masirah Oil Limited (MOL), the operator of the 17,000 km² concession in the Gulf of Masirah, said a contract to this end has been signed with Northern Offshore Drilling Operations Ltd, which will deploy its Energy Emerger jackup drilling rig to undertake the three-well campaign. Signing the contract on behalf of MOL is Rex Oman Ltd, which owns a majority stake in the company.



The new producer wells will increase oil flow rates and extend the lifespan of the Yumna Field in Block 50.

Announcing the imminent start of the new drilling campaign, Mike Hopkinson, General Manager of MOL, said: “With funding and the rig now in place, we are focused on executing this drilling programme seamlessly to drill new producer wells, increase oil flow rates and extend the lifespan of the Yumna Field in Block 50, Oman”.

The move comes on the heels of a successful fundraise through the issuance of senior secured bonds worth \$25 million last December. Jasmine Energy Limited, a subsidiary of Singapore-based majority shareholder Rex International Holding, announced at the time that proceeds from the bond issuance would help fund the drilling campaign, among other corporate costs.

Significantly, Energy Emerger returns

to Block 50 two years after it successfully completed a similar multi-well programme in the Yumna Field in early 2024. The programme included the drilling of the Yumna-5 well, which started production in April 2024, as well as workovers of three existing production wells.

The new campaign will help bolster output, which dwindled to an average of 1,032 stock tank barrels per day (stb/d) in December 2025, down from 2,333 stb/d in January that year.

Last year, MOL commissioned prominent UK-based energy consultant Gneiss Energy to determine potential exploration locations to support the operator's exploration and development plans for Block 50. A key goal of that exercise was also to help identify a potential farm-in partner for the exploration and development of the licence.



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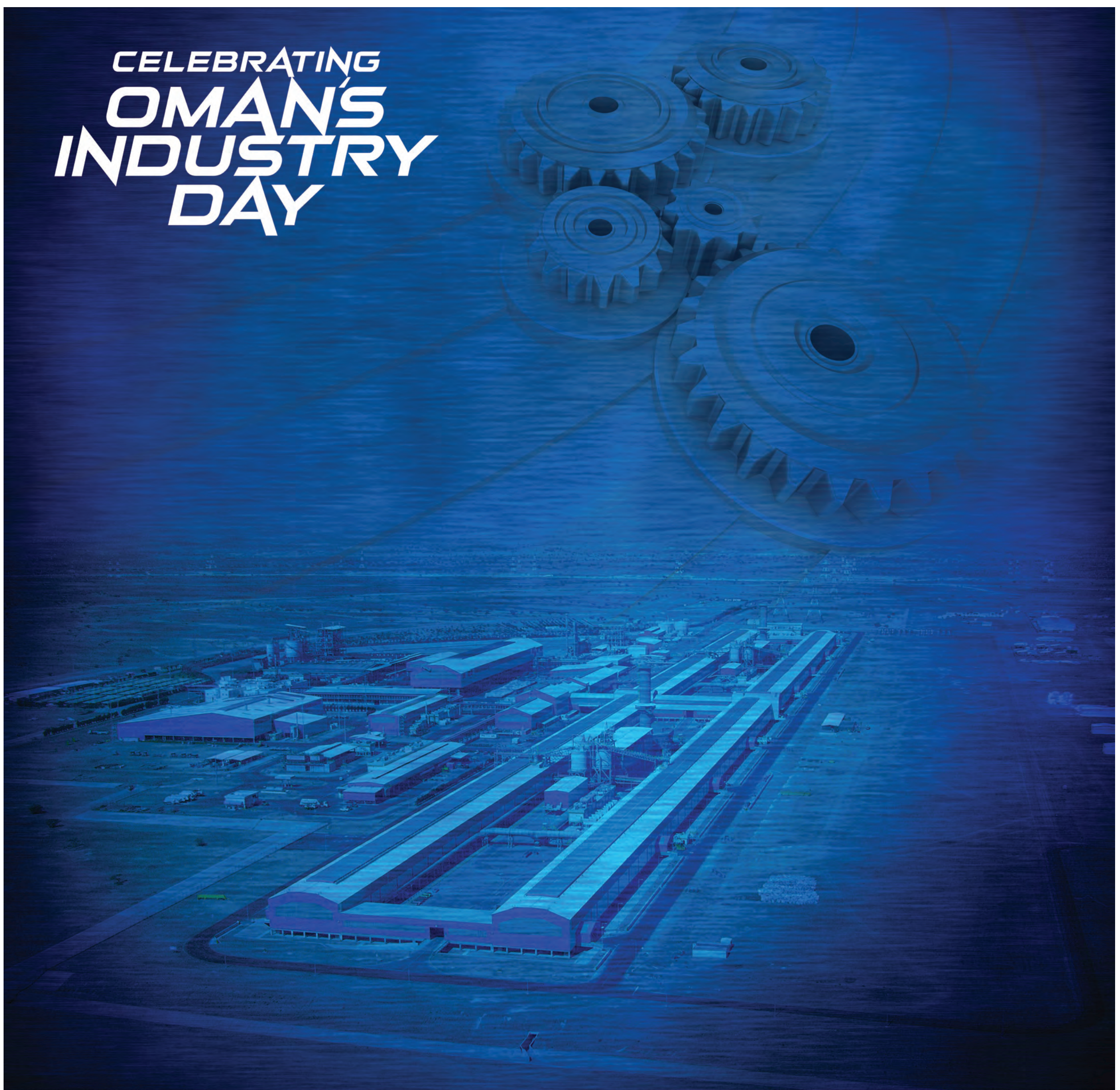


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ECONOMICPLATFORM



OMAN-CEBU INVESTMENT FORUM BEGINS TODAY

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman will host the Oman-Cebu Investment Forum in Muscat today. The forum serves as a joint economic platform between the Sultanate of Oman and the Philippines, aimed at expanding the horizons of bilateral cooperation and strengthening economic and investment relations between the two countries.

The inaugural edition of the forum, held in July 2025 in Cebu City, Philippines, was jointly organised by the Foreign Ministry and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in cooperation with competent Philippine authorities.

That session focused on exploring investment opportunities in several promising sectors, including tourism, renewable energy, technology and food security, in addition to organising field visits to Philippine economic zones aimed at exchanging expertise and promoting mutual investments.

The convening of this forum reaffirms the shared commitment to strengthening cultural, commercial, tourism, and investment ties, and empowering economic partnership by providing an attractive environment for exchanging ideas and building effective partnerships between various sectors in the Sultanate of Oman and the Philippines.

Manufacturing adds 3.88 billion to GDP

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 8

THE Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), celebrates Omani Industry Day, observed annually on February 9. This year’s theme, “From Oman to the World: Competitive Industry and International Vision”, sheds light on the geographical and economic advantages of industrial cities and their role in boosting exports. It also showcases the MoCIIP’s efforts, together with relevant authorities, to provide enablers, incentives and facilitation measures that support industrial growth.

The occasion reviews achievements in Omani industrial exports across international markets, encourages national factories to enhance product development and quality in line with internationally recognised standards and promotes export-oriented industrial investment, market expansion and the sharing of success stories of Omani companies that have reached international markets.

It further underscores coordination and integration between government entities, manufacturers and exporters to address challenges, strengthen the export ecosystem; and leverage the outcomes and recommendations of Omani Industry Day 2025 in shaping future policies and initiatives.

In 2026, Omani Industry Day places particular emphasis on the crucial role of industrial exports in strengthening Oman’s international economic presence, highlighting the quality, distinction and competitiveness of Omani products in regional and international markets.

The day also reflects joint public-private efforts to facilitate access



FDIs in the industrial sector increased from RO 1.705 billion in 2021 to RO 2.800 billion in 2024.

to international markets and foster a competitive environment for national industries, in line with Oman Vision 2040 goals to achieve economic diversification and enhance In-Country Value (ICV).

The Omani industrial sector continues to take on a growing role in supporting the national economy. Industrial exports reached approximately 3.1618 billion in Q1 2025, accounting for nearly 28% of total exports, with key sectors such as electrical equipment manufacturing and metal products recording strong growth rates.

The sector contributes around 19.5% of GDP, alongside continued growth in non oil industrial exports, which reached about 6.2 billion in 2024. This underscores the sector’s role in enhancing economic competitiveness, reducing reliance on oil and expanding the range of Omani products in international markets.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion will host an event on Sunday, February 15, under the theme “From Oman to the World: Competitive Industry and International Vision”, under the auspices of Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), along with several senior officials from the public-private sectors, at Al Bustan Palace Hotel.



GHALIB BIN SAID AL MAAMARI

Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry

The MoCIIP stated that by 2025, the industrial sector recorded tangible achievements reflecting the strength of its performance and its expanding contribution to the country’s economy. The contribution of manufacturing industries to GDP reached 3.879 billion, marking 7.2% growth compared to 2024, when it stood at 3.620 billion.

In terms of investment, foreign investment in the industrial sector rose to 3.490 billion in 2025, representing an increase of 24.6% compared to 2024, when it amounted to 2.800 billion, reflecting growing investor confidence in the sector and its investment environment.

Non-oil exports increased to 6.885 billion in 2025, recording 10.5% growth compared to 2024, when they stood at 6.232 billion, indicating the expanding presence of national products in international markets.

The number of workers in the industrial sector rose to 248,000 in 2025, up 3% from 2024, when employment stood at 240,761, highlighting the sector’s growing role in job creation.

By 2025, 166 industrial establishments had obtained the National Product Identity, while 439 exemption applications were approved, reflecting the effectiveness of incentives and facilitation measures aimed at supporting industrial activity and enhancing the competitiveness of national products.

Ghalib bin Said al Maamari, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, affirmed that the results achieved in 2025 reflect the success of government policies in strengthening the industrial business environment and the effectiveness of incentives and facilities provided to investors.

Oman, Italy to strengthen economic and investment relations

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 8

The Omani-Italian Business Forum, organised on Sunday by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), explored ways to strengthen economic and investment cooperation between Oman and Italy, focusing on infrastructure, railway engineering, construction, manufacturing, energy systems and development finance.

The forum brought together Eng Hussain bin Hassan Abdulhussain, OCCI Board Member, Pierluigi D’Elia, Ambassador of Italy to Oman; and business leaders and investors from both countries at the Chamber’s headquarters in Muscat.

Eng Hussain Abdulhussain said the forum reflects the strength of bilateral relations and the



The forum reflects the strength of bilateral relations and the shared commitment to expanding trade, investment and economic cooperation.

shared commitment to expanding trade, investment and economic cooperation. He noted that ties between the two countries have

advanced steadily in recent years, highlighted by the official visit of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to Oman last month at

the invitation of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, which further reinforced economic and commercial cooperation.

Trade exchange between Oman and Italy reached around 440 million in 2025, including approximately 80 million in Omani exports and about 360 million in imports from Italy.

Around 80,607 Italian visitors travelled to Oman during the year, reflecting growing tourism and cultural exchange.

Italian companies continue to expand their presence in Oman across sectors such as mining, industry, real estate development, oil and gas and logistics, supported by the Italian Trade Agency office in Muscat and direct Oman Air flights to Milan and Rome.

The ambassador described

the forum as an important step towards deepening partnerships and exploring new opportunities in priority sectors, noting that Italian firms view Oman as a stable and attractive investment destination supported by a clear economic vision, modern regulatory framework and strategic location as a regional logistics hub.

He highlighted Italy’s expertise in railway engineering, advanced infrastructure and energy systems, which could support Oman’s major national projects.

The forum featured an “Invest in Oman” presentation outlining Oman’s investment incentives and single-window platform bringing together more than 22 public and private entities, supported by a national negotiation team and investor relations managers.

TRADE FRAMEWORK

India to cut tariffs on US cars



India will reduce tariffs on high-end US cars to 30% over ten years and eliminate duties on Harley-Davidson motorcycles under an interim trade framework, officials said.

No concessions were offered for electric vehicles, excluding Tesla. The agreement moves Washington and New Delhi closer to a broader trade pact aimed at strengthening economic cooperation. — Reuters

POLICY DISCIPLINE

Türkiye pledges tight monetary policy



Türkiye will maintain tight monetary policy and fiscal discipline to further reduce inflation, Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz said.

Consumer prices rose 4.84% month-on-month in January, while annual inflation eased to 30.65%.

Authorities aim to reinforce disinflation through supply-side measures alongside strict financial and budgetary controls. — Reuters

LABOUR DISPUTE

Union challenges BP agreement



A US refinery union said BP does not intend to honour the national oil bargaining agreement covering industry workers, marking a first for the programme.

The United Steelworkers union, representing about 800 employees at BP’s Whiting refinery, warned the decision could disrupt labour negotiations across refineries and chemical plants nationwide. — Reuters

OPINION

The psychology behind bad executive decisions



KAMLA AL RAHBI

The writer is a leadership and business strategist focused on decision-making, organisational clarity, and cognitive frameworks in complex environments.

In executive circles, failure is rarely framed as psychological. It is often attributed to external constraints, market volatility, or operational missteps. Yet beneath many bad executive decisions lies a pattern of cognitive distortions subtle, powerful and deeply human.

Executives are not immune to flawed thinking. In fact, the higher the position, the more likely decisions are shaped by unchallenged assumptions and reinforced by insulated environments. The very structure of executive leadership limited dissent, pressure to act decisively, constant visibility creates a mental space where perception can easily replace analysis

At the core of many poor decisions is overconfidence bias. Senior leaders often develop confidence from years of past success, which reinforces the belief that their judgment is inherently sound.

Experience becomes a shortcut, not a tool for questioning. Familiar situations are assumed to be understood, even when context has shifted. As a result, executives act quickly but not always accurately

Another culprit is confirmation bias – the tendency to seek out information that supports existing views while ignoring contradictory data.

In strategic planning sessions, this

manifests as selective listening. Voices that echo the leader's perspective are amplified, while dissent is subtly discouraged. Reports are interpreted through a lens of expectation rather than exploration. A misreading of risk is not due to a lack of intelligence, but a distortion of focus

Then there is the illusion of control the belief that outcomes are more controllable than they truly are.

Executives may push for aggressive timelines, commit to fixed outcomes, or override warnings from technical teams, assuming that leadership authority itself can bend complexity to will.

But complex systems – whether economic, operational, or political – resist simplification. Control becomes an illusion dressed in spreadsheets and deadlines

These patterns are rarely addressed explicitly inside organisations. Failure is discussed in terms of execution, not cognition. Strategic retreats review what went wrong operationally, but not how thinking was shaped. Even postmortems avoid addressing the role of cognitive error in leadership ranks. Doing so feels too personal, too vulnerable even when the costs are systemic

This is not about blaming individuals. Rather, it's about acknowledging the psychological environment of leadership.

Executives are not immune to flawed thinking. In fact, the higher the position, the more likely decisions are shaped by unchallenged assumptions and reinforced by insulated environments.

Executives operate under immense pressure to appear certain, project strength and deliver outcomes. In such conditions, mental shortcuts become survival tools. But over time, they shape decisions in ways that drift from clarity, accountability and truth.

The psychology behind executive decisions deserves deeper attention not from a personal development lens, but from an organisational risk perspective. Institutions must ask: how is thinking structured at the top? How are decisions framed? How is dissent handled? Where does confidence override clarity? And how often do we mistake speed for soundness

Until these questions are normalised, organisations will continue to face avoidable failures not because their leaders lack intelligence or integrity, but because they were never invited to examine their own mental models.

The most strategic organisations are not those that eliminate human bias that's impossible. They are those that learn to recognise it, speak about it without blame and build systems that challenge it before decisions are set in motion.

When executive psychology is left unexamined, risk masquerades as resolve. But when it is brought into the open, leadership evolves from reactive to reflective, from confident to clear.

TOYOTA'S BUYOUT OPTIONS ALL COME WITH A TAINT

HUDSON LOCKETT

The battle lines have been drawn. Toyota Motor, its Chair Akio Toyoda and the family's unlisted firm Toyota Fudosan insist they have "no intention" of raising their revised bid of 5.65 trillion yen (\$36 billion) to take Toyota Industries private.

That's far too low, as does Paul Singer's Elliott Investment Management, which is lobbying other independent investors not to sell shares in the tender offer that closes on Thursday. Whatever happens in the next few days, though, this deal will stand as a lesson in how to conduct M&A badly.

Insiders can try to avoid court by meaningfully increasing the price. There's a good reason to do so: with the shares trading above the tender offer, index funds are unlikely to sell and they hold around 19%.

If the buyer consortium wins, it – and by extension the Toyota brand – will be marked as shortchanging shareholders. At 18,800 yen-per-share, the new offer put on the table last month merely adjusted for the increase

in Industries' holdings in other publicly traded Toyota companies and undervalues the target by 40%. The bidders have a big advantage in their push to obtain the 67% of shares necessary for a squeeze out: thanks to Toyota group holdings and those of allies, they have 50% already locked up.

But a win would not be the end of the affair. Elliott, which owns 7.1% of Industries, would probably take the new owners to court to have the price reappraised.

Japanese judges are typically wary of ruling on matters of valuation, but in October 2024, Tokyo's high court ruled in favour of activist Oasis Management that the fair value of FamilyMart shares was 13% higher than Itochu's successful buyout offer. That case is still under appeal but will embolden shareholders to keep challenging lowball deals.

Comments published on Thursday by the Asian Corporate Governance Association would strengthen Elliott's case. It points out potential red flags, opens new tab in how Industries' board special committee conducted negotiations.

It also estimates that the median price for Japanese tender offers launched since fair M&A guidelines were introduced in 2019 is 2.5 times book value.

Insiders can try to avoid court by meaningfully increasing the price. There's a good reason to do so: with the shares trading above the tender offer, index funds are unlikely to sell and they hold around 19%.

Add on Elliott's stake and that's not far short of the 33.1% needed to block the deal.

Bumping up the bid would help secure more support, but at the cost of a loss of face for the corporate titan. — Reuters

AI at a crossroads: Mix of progress, power and risk

ARTIFICIAL

Intelligence (AI) has made a big leap from

research labs to everyday life. What once took decades to commercialise is now reaching the real world in months or even days. AI is changing faster than almost any other technology has ever seen.

It ranges from conversational systems built into smartphones to autonomous vehicles that operate businesses. This momentum promises substantial benefits, but it also raises an important question: are people still entirely in control of the systems they are building?

AI systems have become increasingly autonomous, powerful and deeply integrated into society over the past few years. Large Language Models (LLMs) can now think about many different things, write software code, read legal documents and even help scientists make discoveries.

AI algorithms are already assisting physicians in interpreting X-rays and determining which emergency patients require immediate treatment. In finance, algorithmic methods assess credit risk and detect fraud in real time.

The advent of agentic AI, or systems that can plan, carry out and change tasks on their own without constant human supervision, is probably the most worrying. AI agents are currently being used to manage cloud infrastructure, run marketing campaigns, or execute financial trades autonomously.

For example, the shift from "assistive AI" to "autonomous AI" represents a significant leap in how people use technology.

AI today can analyse large volumes of data far faster than humans and generate language that sounds like a person, produce images and films that appear real, recreate environments and improve the performance of complex systems.

AI-generated synthetic media is a clear example. It can now record people saying things they never said, which is a significant threat to trust, journalism and democracy.

In manufacturing, AI-powered robots use sensor data to change



AI agents are currently being used to manage cloud infrastructure, run marketing campaigns, or execute financial trades autonomously.



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The writer is an assistant professor at the marketing and management department of the College of Banking and Financial Studies.



KV CH MADHU SUDHANA RAO

The writer is AI researcher based in the USA.

production lines in real time. This makes the process more efficient but also means that fewer people are directly in charge.

In cybersecurity, AI systems can protect against attacks and, ironically, create quite advanced viruses. These dual-use capabilities demonstrate that AI itself is neutral; its effects depend entirely on how it is designed, deployed and governed.

Even today, developers sometimes have difficulty explaining why complex models yield specific results. This is called the "black box" problem. When systems continually learn and change, they may not function as intended.

For example, experimental trading algorithms have caused flash crashes in financial markets within a few seconds, before humans could intervene.

Recommendation algorithms on social media sites have also spread false information and extremist content, not intentionally, but to increase the likelihood that users will interact with it.

These instances show that having different goals can lead to adverse outcomes at scale, even if there is no genuine intellect or intent behind them. Strong protections are needed to keep meaningful human control.

First, AI systems, especially those that are high-risk, need to have

human-in-the-loop features that make sure important decisions can't be made without human consent.

Second, AI models should be subject to verification and explanation, particularly in sensitive domains such as healthcare, law enforcement and finance.

Companies also need to follow specific rules for testing and deploying. Before being made available to the public, robust AI systems should be stress-tested for unforeseen effects, just like drugs. AI shouldn't be a "set-and-forget" technology; it needs to be watched all the time.

Governments worldwide are beginning to act. For instance, the European Union's AI Act classifies AI systems by risk and imposes stringent restrictions on high-risk uses, such as biometric surveillance.

Similarly, several governments require AI developers to submit transparency reports that explain how they train, test and govern their models.

AI's rapid, explosive growth is both fantastic and scary. AI strategy cannot be left unregulated and no one stakeholder should have sole decision-making capacity.

Responsible AI is essential and must be a collaborative effort; otherwise, it will serve profit without people.

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ART/LIFE



BEETHOVEN’S NINTH, REIMAGINED

> 20

UNLIKELY **MASCOT**

HARRY POTTER VILLAIN EMERGES AS UNLIKELY LUNAR NEW YEAR SYMBOL



Draco Malfoy, the villainous student who was Harry Potter’s rival in the fantasy book series, has become an unlikely Chinese Lunar New Year mascot, with his face plastered across red festive decor and merchandise from posters to phone covers.

Malfoy, played by actor Tom Felton in the films of J.K. Rowling’s books, has surged in popularity due to the Chinese translation of his surname - Ma-er-fu. Meaning horse and fortune, it bodes well for China’s lunar year of the Horse.

Social media has been flooded with images of people sticking red Malfoy posters on their doors. Fans can buy four of them for 11 yuan (\$1.60) on e-commerce platform Taobao.

“Year of the Horse’s blessing, so stick on a Malfoy,” said one user on China’s Rednote.

Other posts on the social media platform appeared to show a massive image of Malfoy in his uniform hanging across several floors of a shopping mall in central Henan province.

The Harry Potter franchise is incredibly popular in China, where foreign films make up a relatively small percentage of the box office due to strict quotas and a shift to local content.

Warner Bros has agreed to develop a “Harry Potter Studio Tour” in Shanghai with Chinese group Jinjiang International, Jinjiang said last year.

A Universal Studios theme park in Beijing features “The Wizarding World of Harry Potter”, a section dedicated to Harry Potter-themed rides and attractions.

The eight Harry Potter films were re-released in Chinese cinemas in 2024. — Reuters

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



NATURE

This photograph shows so-called Ivy Flowers on the frozen Dnipro River during sunrise in Kyiv. — AFP



HOLLYWOOD

Zoe Saldana attends a premiere for the film Dracula in Los Angeles, California, US. — Reuters



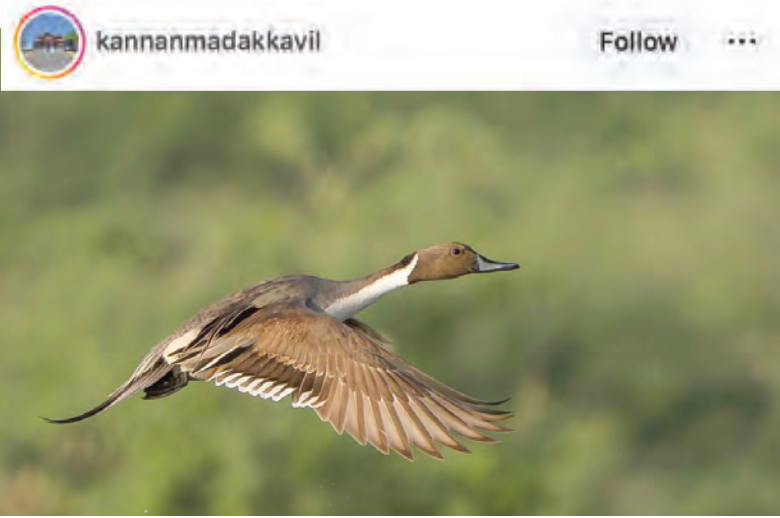
ARTS

A painting “Portrait of Olga” (1921) by Spanish painter Pablo Picasso during the “Picasso, the Figure” exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi museum in Abu Dhabi. — AFP

INSTA PICKS



The innocence of childhood



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NOEL TO BE NAMED
SONGWRITER OF THE YEAR



Noel Gallagher will be named Songwriter Of The Year at the Brit awards later this month. Gallagher, who has achieved huge success both in Oasis and with Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds, has won multiple Brit awards in the past. The Songwriter Of The Year award recognises exceptional songwriting talent, and is decided by a select panel of expert judges - with previous recipients including Ed Sheeran, Kid Harpoon, Raye and Charli xcx. Gallagher will accept the award at the ceremony in Manchester on February 28. He is best known for being part of Brit pop group Oasis alongside his brother Liam, which recently wrapped up its highly anticipated reunion world tour. He wrote hit songs "Wonderwall," "Don't Look Back In Anger" and "Champagne Supernova" for the Manchester-based band, before they split in 2009 following a fallout between the brothers. In August 2024, Oasis ended 16 years of speculation by

confirming a return to the live stage for the Oasis Live 25 tour. In the interim, Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds released four successful studio albums. Chairwoman of the 2026 Brit Awards Committee Stacey Tang said: "For more than three decades, Noel has crafted songs that have become part of our collective story - bold, brilliant, and always recognisable. "His songs have soundtracked memories for multiple generations and defined the spirit of British music globally. "Honouring Noel as Songwriter Of The Year celebrates a remarkable body of work and a creative force that continues to connect and inspire artists and fans worldwide." Harry Styles and Olivia Dean are each due to perform at the awards ceremony at Manchester's Co-op Live, along with Wolf Alice and Mark Ronson. Dean and Lola Young have received the most nominations for this year's awards — with five nods each. — *dpa*

RETRACING ANCIENT SEA ROUTES

INSV Kaundinya
flagged off from Muscat



ECHOING centuries of maritime exchange across the Indian Ocean, the Indian Naval Sailing Vessel (INSV) Kaundinya was ceremonially flagged off from Muscat in a symbolic tribute to the shared seafaring heritage and enduring diplomatic ties between India and the Sultanate of Oman. The ceremony was attended by Commodore Abdullah al Hajri of the Royal Navy of Oman; Yousef bin Issa al Zadjali, Chief of the Human Resources Department at Foreign Ministry; G V Srinivas, Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman; and Commodore Amit Srivastava, Chairman of the Indian Naval Sailing Association. Members of the diplomatic corps, senior officers from both navies and members of the Indian community in Oman were also present. INSV Kaundinya had earlier completed her historic maiden voyage from Porbandar to Muscat, retracing ancient maritime routes that for centuries connected the western coast of India with Omani ports such as Sohar and Muscat. The expedition, conceptualised in mid-2024 and executed by the Indian Navy with support from India's Ministry of Culture, pays homage to India's seafaring traditions and the long-standing spirit of maritime enterprise in the Indian Ocean region. Built using traditional stitched-plank shipbuilding techniques inspired by depictions in the Ajanta cave paintings, Kaundinya represents one of the oldest known forms of ocean-going craftsmanship. Similar vessels are believed to have regularly sailed between India and Oman, facilitating vibrant trade in goods, ideas and culture. The voyage thus reconnects both nations with a living maritime legacy that historically shaped their economic and cultural exchanges. Speaking at the event, Captain Harish Srinivasan, Defence Adviser at the Embassy of India in Muscat, described Kaundinya as a celebration of India's maritime legacy and the centuries-old seafaring links with Oman. He commended the Indian Navy for successfully executing the maiden voyage and expressed gratitude to the Royal Navy of Oman, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the



Indian community and all agencies that supported the expedition. Commodore Amit Srivastava noted that Kaundinya is far more than a reconstructed vessel. He described her as a powerful symbol of shared maritime heritage and of the Indian Navy's commitment to preserving and showcasing traditional seafaring knowledge. Acknowledging the challenges involved in recreating and sailing such a vessel, he praised the seamanship and dedication that made the expedition possible. In his address, Ambassador G V Srinivas underscored the deep-rooted historical and cultural ties between India and Oman, particularly in the maritime sphere. He said the voyage reflects a shared legacy of navigation, trade and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean, serving as a living testament

to the enduring friendship between the two nations. He also conveyed appreciation to the leadership of both countries for supporting initiatives that strengthen bilateral cooperation. The ceremony witnessed enthusiastic participation from the Indian community in Oman, whose presence added a celebratory dimension to the occasion and highlighted the strong people-to-people bonds linking the two countries. The flagging off of INSV Kaundinya from Muscat stands not only as a nod to maritime history, but also as a reaffirmation of contemporary strategic, cultural and diplomatic cooperation between India and Oman — a partnership anchored, much like the vessel itself, in tradition, resilience and shared horizons.



BEETHOVEN'S NINTH, REIMAGINED

GEORGINA BENISON

BETWEEN the two outstanding performances of Puccini's 'Tosca' at the weekend, the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts presented a rare opportunity to hear Liszt's 1865 transcription of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the 'Choral' for two pianos.

In the 4th movement, the choir and soloists from the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre were given a platform to excel on their own, conducted by their Choir Master, Sevil Hajieva.

The two internationally renowned Canadian piano virtuosos were H  l  ne Mercier and Louis Lortie whose stunning finger technique dazzled the audience for a full 75 minutes of the work.

There was some discussion among the public about Liszt's transcription; how much remained faithful to Beethoven's original score and how much had Liszt exploited the idiomatic possibilities of the piano to enhance the musical effect?

Sadly, the programme brochure, so beautifully printed with colourful biographies, provided no programme notes on Beethoven's 1824 score nor Liszt's input.

The number and names of the movements; and translation from the German text, would have been helpful for patrons less familiar with the work.

The fifty-five strong choir and four soloists in black filed in and took their seats on stage, followed by the two pianists. The two Concert Grands were cleverly placed facing each other, interlocking bodies so that Hélène and Louis could maintain eye contact throughout, coordinating entries and tempi. The scores were read from tablets on their music stands, so the extent of communication with the audience was necessarily limited.

They plunged straight into the substantial first movement, 'Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso' with the opening upper woodwind themes clearly articulated by Héléne.



Photos by:
Khalid Al Busaidi

A rare performance of Liszt's two-piano transcription of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony captivated audiences at the ROHM, as virtuosi Hélène Mercier and Louis Lortie joined forces with an international choir and soloists to deliver a stirring rendition of the iconic 'Choral' masterpiece.

In Sonata form, it bore the stamp of Liszt's flamboyant technique, keeping the audience well focused for fifteen minutes. The well known 'Scherzo and Trio' of the second movement, 'Molto Vivace' with its familiar fugal opening worked well in transcription. It retained Beethoven's sensitive melodic integrity and the piano timbre gave a percussive effect in the gallop-like Scherzo. The sudden silences and dynamic range were also effective, receiving great enthusiasm from the packed hall.

The lengthy third slow movement (Beethoven switched the usual order of Slow and Scherzo movements) 'Adagio Molto e Cantabile' lost something without the instrumental timbre in the theme.

The rich orchestral texture of the original provides the interest intended by Beethoven, but was beautifully performed with great sensitivity and nuance. The

ensemble performance between Ms Mercier and Lortie was excellent, clearly reflecting compatible and sympathetic musicianship.

Their duet performance of 50 unbroken minutes held everyone's attention before the eagerly anticipated 25 minute 'Choral' movement.

The piano opening was iconic Beethoven – his rousing symphonic style – then Lortie announced the ‘Ode to Joy’ theme deep in his ‘cello/double-bass’ register.

Liszt's harmonic language was clear in the creative embellishments of the syncopated sections as Sevil Hajieva took to the podium and the choir to its feet.

Russian bass, Konstantin Fedotov was the first voice to be heard in Beethoven's own words: 'O Freunde, Nicht diese töne!' (Oh friends, not these sounds! Let us instead strike up more pleasing and more joyful ones!) The choir, featuring an excellent men's section echoed the theme in classical choral vein.

Swiss soprano Daria Rybak performed the challengingly high solo in Friedrich Schiller's 1785 poem 'Freude schöner Götterfunken' splendidly (Joy, thou beauteous godly lightning), followed by an impressively strong choir response.

The 'golden timbred' Mexican-American Tenor, Galeano Salas, was superb in his solo variation, 'Turkish march' followed by a fast piano interlude featuring Lortie's virtuoso technique.

An 'Andante Maestoso' theme, 'Seid unschlungen Millionen!' from the tutti choir had sopranos soaring high above in a tender moment of pathos.

The four soloists (including Georgian mezzo-soprano, Ekaterine Buachidze) performed the exciting fugal section, loud and confident; and a powerful tutti for chorus and soloists. Galeano Salas resonated with the top sopranos, a reprise of 'Ode to Joy' and the glorious, resounding Coda met with sustained applause and a standing ovation. There is no doubt; Muscat loved the Beethoven/Liszt transcription tonight!

