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YAMAL SYMBOL
OF RISING
BARCA FOR
CHAMPIONS

Oman’s largest solar power plants inaugurated

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

Marking a major step in Oman’s renewable energy journey, HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said officially inaugurated the Manah 1 and Manah 2 solar power plants on Monday in the Wilayat of Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The event was attended by senior officials, members of the Royal family, ambassadors, and representatives of the companies involved in the projects.

Speaking on the occasion, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, described the projects as pivotal steps in Oman’s energy transition, reiterating the nation’s goals to reach a renewable energy share of 30 per cent by 2030, 60–70 per cent by 2040, and achieve 100 per cent clean energy by 2050.

Later speaking to the Observer,



HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said inaugurated Manah 1 and Manah 2 solar power plants in the Wilayat of Manah.

Ahmed bin Salim al Abri, Acting CEO of Nama Power and Water Procurement Company, said that the local content percentage for these projects stands at 20 per cent, which applies to both projects. Each station accounts

for approximately RO 45 million, dedicated exclusively to local content for local companies, contractors, and locally sourced equipment. Of this amount, a specific allocation of RO 5 million has been made for small and

medium enterprises (SMEs).

Looking ahead, while there are no specific targets for increasing this percentage across projects, the local content percentage for new projects has been raised from 20 per cent to 25 per cent. Additionally, a dedicated percentage has been allocated to SMEs to ensure their better inclusion and benefit.

Manah 1 and Manah 2 are the largest solar power facilities in Oman, with a combined production capacity of 1,000 MW. Covering 14.5 million square metres, the projects utilise over two million bifacial photovoltaic solar panels, designed to maximise efficiency. In line with sustainability goals, 1,800 automated dry-cleaning robots have been deployed, avoiding the use of water while ensuring optimal performance.

The plants aim to increase

Oman’s renewable energy share from 6.6 per cent to 11 per cent and reduce CO2 emissions by 1.4 million tonnes annually, providing electricity for approximately 120,000 homes.

Dr Mansoor bin Talib al Hinaï, Chairman of the Authority for Public Services Regulation, highlighted the alignment of these projects with Oman Vision 2040. He emphasised their role in supporting sustainable development, ensuring energy security, and promoting public awareness of renewable energy’s importance.

Ahmed bin Salim bin Mohamed al Abri, CEO of Nama Power and Water Procurement, reaffirmed the company’s commitment to sustainability and the net-zero target by 2050. He also outlined Oman’s ambitious plans to increase renewable energy capacity by 8 GW by 2030. **SEE ALSO P13**

IN BRIEF

OMAN, SINGAPORE TO BOOST COOPERATION

The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore continue pressing ahead in boosting bilateral relations through numerous strategic initiatives that reflect the two countries’ commitment for partnership and cooperation.

Dr Mohamed Maliki Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Second Minister for Education of the Republic of Singapore, underscored the depth of historic relations between Oman and Singapore.

He said that the two countries have shared objectives and future visions, notably the keenness to achieve zero-net emissions by 2050.

SOHAR PORT SEES 3,000 VESSEL CALLS

The operational performance of Sohar Port and Freezone demonstrated resilience and growth, with over 3,000 vessel calls recorded in 2024. General cargo throughput increased by 77 per cent compared to the previous year and container volumes grew by 15 per cent. Ship-to-ship operations rose by 19 per cent.

SOHAR Freezone saw significant achievements as well, with land occupancy reaching 85 per cent, reflecting robust demand from both existing and prospective tenants. These figures were announced during the annual Business Reception under the theme “Connecting Commerce, Creating Opportunities.” The event highlighted the port’s role as a cornerstone of Oman’s economic development. **DETAILS ON P14**

HIS MAJESTY GREETES PRESIDENT TRUMP

Trump pledges ‘golden age’ on being sworn in

HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Donald Trump on the occasion of his swearing-in as President of the United States of America. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere greetings to President Trump, wishing him success in his upcoming term as President of the United States of America, and to achieve more accomplishments and progress at all levels, and for the relations of cooperation and partnership between the two countries to continue to grow.

Donald Trump pronounced the start of a “golden age” in the United States after taking the oath for a historic second term as president on Monday, using his inaugural speech to lash out at what he described as a “broken” society that he would rescue.

“The golden age of America begins right now. From this day forward our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world,” Trump said in the US Capitol, where his inauguration was held indoors due to chilly weather. While promising renewal, Trump’s tone was characteristically dark, denouncing what he said had been a “betrayal” of Americans by a “radical and corrupt establishment.”



Donald Trump is sworn in as US President in the Rotunda of the US Capitol in Washington, on Monday.

“For many years, a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens, while the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair,” he said.

“From this moment on, America’s decline is over.” The Republican — at 78 now the oldest person ever to take the presidential oath — was set to kickstart his new term with a blitz of immediate orders. **SEE ALSO P7**

UN chief says 630 aid trucks entered Gaza on first day of ceasefire

GAZA: The flow of aid into Gaza could take time to ramp up, chief of the International Rescue Committee David Miliband said on Monday, as relief trucks conducted a second day of deliveries following the start of the ceasefire.

More than 630 humanitarian aid trucks entered the Gaza Strip, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council, with at least 300 of those trucks going to the enclave’s north, where the UN says famine looms.

“That’s a big step up,” said Miliband,

speaking to Reuters in London. “I fear... it will take time. We want to ramp up as quickly as possible.”

He said the IRC in Gaza is focused particularly on water and sanitation, child protection and other healthcare.

“What counts is the medicine that gets through, the water... the fuel... the aid workers... and whether they get through safely,” he said, referring to issues with looting and security threats to deliveries that have been a problem during the 15-month war, when aid to Gaza has been extremely limited.



A Palestinian youth carrying his belongings walks amidst building rubble in a ruined neighbourhood of Rafah on Monday. — AFP

In line with other humanitarian leaders, Miliband said that funding was also needed for a sustained response in Gaza, for what he described as “the biggest (aid) surge you can imagine, because it’s a massive emergency”.

Earlier, UN aid chief Tom Fletcher said 630 trucks had entered Gaza on day one of the ceasefire.

Miliband cautioned that governments globally were stepping back from tackling international problems despite a rise in humanitarian need.

SEE ALSO P6

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



Oman and Singapore shared keenness to achieve zero-net emissions by 2050

OMAN, SINGAPORE BOOST BILATERAL RELATIONS

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore continue pressing ahead in boosting bilateral relations through numerous strategic initiatives that reflect the two countries’ commitment for partnership and cooperation.

Dr Mohamed Maliki Osman, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Second Minister for Education of the Republic of Singapore underscored the depth of historic relations between Oman and Singapore.

He told ONA that the two countries have shared objectives and future visions, notably the keenness to achieve zero net emissions by 2050.

The Singaporean Minister added that the 2nd strategic dialogue between Oman and Singapore, held in Muscat, underscores the commitment of the two countries’ leaderships to continue boosting joint cooperation and exploring available investment opportunities in both countries.

He expressed his satisfaction for the development of bilateral relations during the ceremony held to mark the 40th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations.

Oman, he confirmed, is confirmed the 7th largest trade partner of Singapore in the MENA region. Both countries, he added, agreed to upgrade diplomatic representation in 2023 by upgrading the general consulates in the two countries to embassies. — ONA

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE MEETS



Members reviewed traffic statistics, public awareness programmes. — ONA

MUSCAT: The National Road Safety Committee today held a meeting chaired by Lt Gen Hassan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs.

During the meeting, which took place at the General Directorate of Traffic, the panel members reviewed traffic statistics, public awareness programmes and the role of authorities concerned in taking measures to cut down the number of road accidents.

The committee lauded the cooperation of citizens and residents through adherence to traffic rules. Such cooperation contributed to achieving high levels of road safety, evidenced by a tangible decline in road accidents, as indicated by statistics, the committee observed. — ONA

New health complex opens in South Al Maabela

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Monday celebrated the official opening of Al Salam Health Complex in the South Al Maabela district in the Wilayat of Al Seeb in the Muscat Governorate, under the auspices of Engineer Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board.

The health complex occupies an area of 15,000 square metres with a

built-up area of 1,309 square metres. The total cost amounted to RO 650,000 and the construction work was completed in 14 months.

The health complex comprises specialised primary healthcare clinics including blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, sterilisation, pregnancy care, family planning as well as secondary care clinics in behavioural medicine and



specialised clinics in adult psychiatry, child psychiatry, hyperactivity and attention deficit, neuropsychiatry, psychologists clinics. The health complex has 19 beds in the departments of men, women, childbirth, postpartum and observation.

Dr Samira bint Mousa al Maimaniyah, Acting Director-General of Health Services in Muscat

Governorate, stressed that the health care sector in the Sultanate of Oman is witnessing rapid developments, noting that the opening of the Al Salam Health Complex constitutes a qualitative step in this regard and confirms the government’s commitment to providing world-class health services that meet the needs of citizens and residents. — ONA

OMAN, UAE STRENGTHEN BILATERAL TIES

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received on Monday Saqr Ghobash, Speaker of the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates. Sayyid Badr underscored the depth of the fraternal and historic relations between Oman and the UAE. These relations, he added are based on close cooperation and joint coordination across various fields. The two sides reviewed ways to enhance the partnership between the two countries, underlining the importance of exchanging legislative



Sayyid Badr receives Saqr Ghobash, UAE official

expertise to promote integration and advance bilateral cooperation. They also exchanged views on several regional and international issues of common interest.

The guest lauded the role of Oman in promoting regional and international peace efforts. He also reaffirmed the UAE’s keenness to strengthening cooperation between the two countries in line with the shared aspirations. The meeting was attended by several officials from both sides. — ONA

Oman, Singapore release commemorative stamp

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

THE Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore launched a commemorative stamp to mark the 40th anniversary of establishing bilateral diplomatic relations and exchanged the MoU’s signed by the visiting high-level ministerial delegation with Oman in various fields of interest.

The Singaporean team headed by K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Law, and Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Second Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore was welcomed by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister.

Design for the joint stamp was carried out in collaboration between Oman Post and SingPost to commemorate 40 years of diplomatic relations. The stamp, the first day cover and post cards will be issued on 21 February, on the day of the 40 years after diplomatic relations were established. Images depict key landmark projects such as Jewel of Muscat, Muscat Street and Sultan Haitham bin Tarik Orchid.

Both Oman and Singapore valued the central role of partnerships between the



public and private sectors in achieving sustainable development goals. They also expressed their keenness on cultural communication as a method of boosting friendly relations, discovering more opportunities and implementing joint cooperation programmes to serve the two

countries’ common goals.

The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore stressed the importance of continuing boosting bilateral relations through numerous strategic initiatives that reflect the two countries’ commitment for partnership and cooperation.

MoI unveils 3-year Communication Plan

MUSCAT: Represented by the Government Communication Centre, the Ministry of Information (MoI) on Monday launched a plan for the Government Communication System to cover the period 2025-2027.

Designed in line with best international practices in the fields of communication and media, the plan seeks to enhance transparency and interaction with members of the public.

During a meeting held, the Ministry outlined the new plan, which comprises a number of initiatives and projects that aim to organise communication between government institutions and society.

Zamzam bint Hamad al Hanaiyah, Director of the Media and Integration Department at the Centre, gave a visual presentation about the government communication system’s plan based on three main pillars: empowerment, integration and proactive



The plan seeks to enhance transparency and interaction with members of the public

communication.

The pillar of empowerment deals with enhancing resources by raising the efficiency of communication and media departments in government institutions, to help them carry out their role effectively.

The pillar of integration

and coordination focuses on fostering harmony between the parties of the system to achieve a unified discourse.

The pillar of proactive communication pertains to ways of instilling confidence in mainstream media by making the government’s priorities and

achievements in area of contact between members of the public and the media. The aim is to consolidate transparency.

The Ministry’s plan seeks to upgrade the efficiency of media messages and ensure their harmony and consistency in highlighting activities of government institutions. It also establishes a uniform approach for media activities in a way that serves the government’s priorities and reflects its goals, besides raising Omani society’s awareness about government action, generating positive interaction with government institutions and enabling the government to convey its visions and aspirations.

The plan is expected to contribute to achieving organised and comprehensive government communication, develop consistent messages within a unified approach and continuous media engagement in a manner that keeps pace with society’s cognitive needs. — ONA

SHORT TAKES



The festival opened with an insightful lecture at Bait Al Zubair by Professor Ousmane Kane from Harvard University.

THE BAIT AL ZUBAIR SUFI MUSIC FESTIVAL ENDS TODAY

MUSCAT: In an effort by the Bait Al Zubair Foundation to bring diverse musical atmospheres closer to interested audiences and to build bridges between musical traditions and the rich diversity of human heritage, the third edition of the Bait Al Zubair Sufi Music Festival has commenced. Running from January 18 to 21, the festival is sponsored by ARA Petroleum, National Finance, and Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort.

The festival opened with an insightful lecture at Bait Al Zubair by Professor Ousmane Kane from Harvard University. Professor Kane is the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Professor of Contemporary Islamic Religion and Society and a scholar of African and American studies. He is also the author of several books and the producer of the documentary Haj, Umrah, and Ziyara: Four Generations of West African Pilgrims to the Sacred Places of Islam.

The Bait Al Zubair Sufi Music Festival will feature performances by women artists from various countries, held at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort:

On Monday, January 20, the festival welcomed Uzbek music icon Munojot Yulchieva, hailed as a “People’s Artist” in her homeland. She performed alongside her ensemble, featuring oud and violin player Dadaev Akhmatjon, tabla player Savarov Khudjmorad, rubab player Samadov Rozimurad, and chang player Osmanov Sirojiddin. On Tuesday, the final evening will feature a solo performance by British Kashmiri artist Sarah Yaseen. Known for her seamless fusion of Sufi music with Soul, Sarah sings in Urdu, Punjabi, and English. Her performances often feature her playing the guitar, the one-stringed ektara, or the darbuka.

The festival also includes workshops for children and adults: “Let’s Sing Together”: A family-friendly interactive workshop led by Sarah Yaseen, exploring Sufi songs. “Let’s Play Together”: A practical workshop by Jamaluddin Bishr introducing participants to Sufi musical instruments like the daf, nay, and oud, accompanied by hands-on sessions. Masterclass on Singing Techniques: A workshop by Abir Nasraoui, in collaboration with the Music Department at Sultan Qaboos University, aimed at music students in Oman, focuses on the techniques of Sufi singing.

CAA UNVEILS LOGO FOR OMAN’S WMO ACCESSION

MUSCAT: The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) on Monday launched a logo marking the anniversary of the Sultanate of Oman joining the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). The step reflects CAA’s keenness to enhance international cooperation in the fields of meteorology and climate. The logo was launched during the Virtual Laboratory Management Group’s meeting, hosted in Muscat by the CAA from January 20-23.

The meeting saw the participation of more than 35 representatives of the WMO, satellite agencies, and centres of excellence for satellite applications.

The meeting seeks to discuss ways to enhance international cooperation about using satellite applications, review the progress made in training programmes and explore ways of cooperation with other training centres, in addition to exploring opportunities for interaction, exchanging expertise and supporting the transition towards modern satellite technologies in WMO member states.

— ONA



MAJLIS ASH’SHURA UNVEILS STATISTICAL REPORT

MUSCAT: The Secretariat-General of the Majlis Ash’shura has published the statistical report detailing the Majlis’s activities and achievements during its 9th term (2019–2023). The report serves as a comprehensive record of the Majlis’s performance over four legislative sessions, covering legislative, oversight, and diplomatic efforts.



The publication highlights the Majlis’s accomplishments, including government-referred draft laws, Majlis-endorsed legislative proposals, development plans, state budgets, economic and social agreements, and annual ministerial reports. The report further details the Majlis’s legislative and oversight functions, such as urgent

statements, information requests, expressed wishes, parliamentary questions, discussion requests, ministerial statement debates, and interpellations. It also features comprehensive statistics and data related to Majlis sessions, Office meetings, the activities of standing committees, and parliamentary diplomacy initiatives during the four regular sessions of the term.

Omani-Turkish forum advances Oman Vision 2040

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

AS part of the ongoing efforts to realise Oman Vision 2040, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), in collaboration with the Turkish Embassy in Muscat and the Ataturk Foundation for Culture, Language and History, inaugurated the Omani-Turkish ‘Knowledge Dialogue’ Forum.

The three-day event aims to strengthen academic and research cooperation between Oman and Türkiye, opening new horizons for partnerships that contribute to sustainable development.

Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, highlighted the forum’s importance in reflecting the historical ties between the two nations. She emphasised that the event is a direct implementation of leadership recommendations and aligns with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 to enhance education and scientific research as key drivers of development.

Key topics of the forum include literature, translation, historical relations, innovation in aviation, medical tourism and advanced medical technologies. The sessions also showcase Turkish higher education



The Omani-Turkish ‘Knowledge Dialogue’ Forum aims to strengthen academic and research cooperation

institutions and research centres, fostering the exchange of ideas and experiences.

Dr Rahma further noted that Oman Vision 2040 seeks to improve the global ranking of Omani universities through quality scientific research and academic publishing. She stressed that collaborations with Turkish universities, such as student exchanges and joint academic programmes, will significantly enhance Oman’s educational landscape, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a regional hub for higher education.

Dr Muhammad Hakim Oglu, Türkiye’s Ambassador to Oman, praised the forum as a testament to the strong ties between the two countries. He noted that it reflects the

spirit of cooperation inspired by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s visit to Türkiye in November 2024, further strengthening academic and cultural relations.

Prof Dr Derya Aros, President of the Ataturk Foundation for Culture, Language, and History, underscored the depth of historical relations between Oman and Türkiye. He highlighted that academic partnerships serve as an extension of these ties, particularly in areas like literature, history, and scientific innovation.

The forum also provided a platform for Omani and Turkish researchers to explore potential joint programs. Professor Maryam al Hashimi, a translation researcher, expressed enthusiasm about collaborating with Turkish universities, emphasising that such initiatives enrich academic content and improve education quality.

Recommendations from the first day focused on developing joint academic programmes, increasing student exchanges, and fostering scientific research collaborations in fields such as science and technology.

The Omani-Turkish ‘Knowledge Dialogue’ Forum stands as a significant milestone in achieving Oman Vision 2040, contributing to the Sultanate of Oman’s goals of building a sustainable knowledge economy rooted in innovation and scientific research.

OCCI DISCUSSES INVESTMENTS WITH AUSTRIAN DELEGATION



MUSCAT: Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), received in his office on Monday an official delegation from the Republic of Austria, headed by Andreas Reichhardt, Austrian Vice-Minister of Finance and his accompanying delegation.

During the meeting, the two sides explored investment opportunities in several key sectors, including technology, clean energy, mining, vocational training and tourism.

They also reviewed means to enhance trade and economic cooperation. This aims to contribute to the development of both countries’ economies, broaden their foundations, and strengthen economic ties in support of shared interests.

The Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) underscored the importance of strengthening economic ties between Oman and Austria, highlighting the promising opportunities for the public and private sectors and the investment incentives offered by Oman to attract local and international investments. — ONA

Nursing conference explores innovations in patient care

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

The International Nursing Conference, themed ‘Advancing Excellence in Nursing: Innovations in Patient Safety and Quality Care,’ concluded on Monday at the Crowne Plaza in Qurum. Hosted by Burjeel Holdings, the event brought together healthcare professionals, leaders, and innovators to discuss strategies aimed at enhancing nursing practices and improving patient outcomes.

The conference opened with a welcome address that emphasised the significance of collaboration and innovation in the nursing field. Dr Mohammed al Farsi, Adviser



Dr Mohammed al Farsi opened the conference and emphasised the significance of collaboration and innovation

to the Minister of Planning and International Relations at the Minister’s Office, expressed his appreciation for the event, highlighting its importance in the evolution of nursing. He stated, “This conference holds great value in the field of

nursing, and I hope it provides important insights for all participants. As a ministry, we are proud to support initiatives like this and remain committed to contributing to such events in the future.” The conference featured engaging sessions from renowned speakers across Oman and internationally. Key topics included Clinical Documentation and Compliance by Dr Fatma bint Saleh al Dhabbari of Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.

Adding a cultural touch, the event featured traditional Omani music and dance, celebrating the rich heritage of the host country. Reflecting on the success of the event, Dr Pankaj Chawla, Regional Director — Operations at Burjeel

Holdings, shared his thoughts with the Observer: “This is one of the first international nursing conferences of its kind, focusing on enhancing nursing practices under the Burjeel Holdings banner. We’ve always aimed for excellence, with a strong focus on quality care and patient safety. Today’s conference will foster collaborative ideas to improve patient care safety and bring in more quality parameters.”

He concluded, “The conference was a resounding success, providing a platform for healthcare professionals to exchange knowledge and inspire innovation. It’s our shared commitment to excellence that will shape the future of patient care.”



Celebrating heritage and entertainment

An innovative highlight is the 'Hybrid Show Experience,' which combines live performances with cutting-edge digital technologies

THE Muscat Nights events at Al Amerat Public Park in the Muscat Governorate have drawn a remarkable turnout, captivating visitors from within and beyond Oman. Enthusiasts flocked to experience the vibrant array of entertainment, artistic and cultural programmes designed to appeal to audiences of all ages.

Eng Yasser bin Salim al Amri, a member of the main committee of Muscat Nights and head of the Al Amerat Public Park events, highlighted the strong interaction and distinguished presence of attendees from diverse segments of society, emphasising the variety of events tailored to meet the interests of all age groups.

He revealed that since the launch of the events on December 23, Al Amerat Park has welcomed over 165,000 visitors up to January 18. Among the standout attractions is the 'Heritage Village,' a vibrant showcase of authentic Omani culture, which remains a significant draw for visitors. This immersive experience includes

traditional arts, games, food, crafts and industries representing the rich diversity of Oman's cultural landscape.

In addition to heritage-themed events, the park offers a wide array of attractions, including 'electric games' for families and children, thrilling 'aerial and acrobatic games,' and engaging theatre events by the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority.

Looking ahead, Eng Al Amri noted that the Al Amerat Public Park Theatre is set to feature more entertaining theatrical performances in days ahead, adding value to the visitor experience. The much-loved 'Al Amerat Carnival' continues to delight attendees with its vast assortment of entertainment activities. The 'Children's Car Circuit' stands out as a favourite for young visitors, offering exciting electric car and truck races and remote-controlled shows.

One of the most innovative highlights is the 'Hybrid Show Experience,' which combines

live performances with cutting-edge digital technologies. This interactive showcase allows visitors to participate through a blend of digital media and virtual reality, proving especially popular with families.

Evenings at Al Amerat Park are made magical by spectacular fireworks displays, which have become a signature feature of Muscat Nights.

These colourful pyrotechnic shows captivate audiences with their artistic formations and mesmerising effects, drawing crowds night after night. The park also hosts a bustling consumer exhibition, featuring an extensive range of products that add a touch of shopping excitement to the festive atmosphere.

Adding to the cultural richness of the event is the Heritage House, owned by Marhoon bin Khalifa al Bassami.

This exhibit has been a focal point for visitors, showcasing a fascinating collection of heritage artefacts and tools. Among the highlights is the 'Harab,' a 3,000-year-old artefact that

stands as the oldest item on display. The Heritage House also features swords, daggers, Islamic shields, pottery, tin-plated handkerchiefs, and antique rifles such as the 'Sama'a' and 'Abu Fatila,' which date back over 200 years.

Marhoon shared that the purpose of the display is to introduce generations to Oman's authentic heritage and its traditional weapons and tools, providing a valuable educational experience for festival-goers.

Muscat Nights spans seven distinct locations across Muscat. In addition to Al Amerat Public Park, activities are hosted at Al Naseem Public Park, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Oman Automobile Association, Qurum Natural Park, and various beaches. The event features a blend of cultural, economic, and sports programmes, reflecting the rich culture of Omani life and enjoying enthusiastic participation from citizens, residents and international visitors alike. — ONA

Magic of open-air cinema

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyouusef

Muscat Nights, now extended until February 1, continues to light up the city's nightlife, captivating thousands of visitors since its launch on December 23. The festival has succeeded in bringing together an exciting blend of activities, culinary delights, cultural experiences, and entertainment for all age groups.

Adding a special touch to the festivities is the open-air cinema experience, where visitors can enjoy their favourite movies under the stars at Al Qurum Natural Park.

With cozy beanbags and a vast screen set against the night sky, this unique offering by Lunar

Children's classic and action movies have made the open-air cinema a magical and unforgettable experience

Cinema has become a crowd favourite.

Whether it's the beloved children's classic 'The Jungle Book' or the action-packed 'Pushpa 2' for adult audiences, moviegoers are flocking to these outdoor screenings. The two daily shows, starting at 6:30 pm, allow families and friends to relax, enjoy popcorn, and immerse themselves in cinematic magic.

"My children thoroughly enjoyed watching their favourite flicks on the big screen," said Ahmed Al Wuhaibi, a civil servant from the Wilayat of Barka. He praised the affordable entry fees, which made the experience even more attractive for families.

Located next to the adventure zone, the open-air cinemas seamlessly blend into the vibrant



Lunar Cinema's unique offering has become a crowd favourite

atmosphere of Muscat Nights. Visitors of all ages are drawn to the big screen, creating cherished memories while the excitement of gaming areas and other attractions buzzes in the background.

The Lunar Cinema team has announced that the movie lineup changes every Thursday, keeping the selection fresh and appealing to

returning audiences.

Over the past two weeks, these screenings have been a blessing for movie buffs, offering a one-of-a-kind experience that combines entertainment with the charm of the outdoors.

Parents have expressed their delight at how Muscat Nights keeps everyone engaged.

"Watching movies outdoors, alongside the various activities here, has been a joy for toddlers to teens," shared another parent. "It's heartwarming to see our kids so happy as Muscat Nights truly offers something for everyone."

Families huddled together on blankets, munching popcorn while enjoying classics like 'The Lion King', have made the open-air cinema a magical and unforgettable experience.

SHORT TAKES



The SQU programme strengthens cultural connections and highlights identity and mother tongue

SQU HOSTS ‘ARABIC LANGUAGE AND OMANI CULTURE’ PROGRAMME

MUSCAT: Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) launched the second edition of the ‘Arabic Language and Omani Culture’ programme on Monday, under the auspices of HH Sayyid Dr Fahd bin Al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of SQU. The programme, which runs until February 20, has welcomed 77 participants from the Centre for Arab Civilisation at Kazan Federal University in Russia and the Union of Dankook University and Pusan University of Foreign Studies in South Korea.

Mahmoud bin Abdullah al Kindi, Director of the International Cooperation Office at SQU, highlighted the success of the first edition, which saw 80 participants from Russia and South Korea. “The second edition builds on this success, offering theoretical and practical lessons in Arabic language through the Language Partner Programme, while also exploring Omani history and culture through lectures and field visits,” he said.

Dr Faisal bin Saif al Saadi, Assistant Dean of the College of Arts for Training and Community Service, emphasised the programme’s role in uniting participants through the Arabic language and their shared interest in Omani culture. “Participants will delve into Omani cities, customs, traditions and various aspects of local life. This programme strengthens cultural connections and highlights pride in the identity and mother tongue shared by Oman, Russia and South Korea,” he stated.

Representing the Russian delegation, Emilia, Deputy Director of the Civilisation Center, praised the programme for allowing students to immerse themselves in Omani customs, traditions and history. Dr Mona Farouk, Director of the North African Studies Center, speaking on behalf of the Korean delegation, lauded the programme’s efforts to showcase the rich diversity and tolerance inherent in Omani culture.

This year’s edition aims to enhance participants’ Arabic language skills namely speaking, reading, and writing - through immersion in an Arabic-speaking environment. Additionally, it provides insights into Oman’s cultural and civilisational heritage and its many tourist attractions. The programme stands as a testament to the strong cultural ties and mutual respect among Oman, Russia and South Korea, enriching participants with a deeper understanding of Omani traditions and values. — ONA

‘HOUSE OF WONDERS’ PREMIERES IN LONDON

LONDON: The iconic Princess Anna Theatre, home of the prestigious BAFTA Awards, recently hosted the much-anticipated premiere of the documentary film ‘House of Wonders.’ Produced by the Ministry of Information through Nizwa Magazine, the film brings to life the profound legacy of Oman’s historical presence in Zanzibar and East Africa.

This captivating three-part documentary takes viewers on a remarkable journey, exploring the Omani community’s influential role in

shaping the region’s cultural and social fabric.

The film, each episode spanning 50 minutes, offers an insightful perspective on several compelling human stories that reinforce the high values instilled by Omanis and their instrumental contribution to the establishment of the modern Omani national identity. The documentary is presented in three languages — Arabic, English, and Swahili — ensuring a wider reach and accessibility for diverse audiences.

The screening, held under the auspices of the Embassy of Oman in the United Kingdom, was attended by Ambassador Badr bin Mohammed al Manthri, alongside several distinguished members of the embassy.

Also present were a diverse group of intellectuals, academics, media professionals, and history enthusiasts, in addition to Omani students and representatives from the British community with a keen interest in Oman’s history and cultural influence. — ONA

Education ministry gears up to start school projects

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 20

THE Ministry of Education (MoE), represented by the Directorate-General of Projects and Services, held a preparatory workshop to launch the implementation of its 2024 projects. This includes the construction of 43 new school buildings across various governorates, aimed at enhancing educational infrastructure and providing an improved learning environment for students.

The workshop featured several working papers. The first addressed the distribution of engineering teams to project packages, while the second discussed specifications, plans, and new developments, including framing opportunities, challenges, preparations, financial expenditures and technical specifications.

The third paper focused on quality assurance in project implementation and supervision.

It outlined mechanisms for verifying observations, scheduling supervision visits, appointing designated chiefs for design and implementation, ensuring continuity in their absence, and providing training for engineers

I think I played really well. Obviously if I want to beat Daniil, I have to play really good tennis, high-quality tennis. I felt great on the court once again, so I’m really happy about it.

CARLOS
ALCARAZ



The ministry seeks to integrate technology to facilitate operations and make informed executive decisions

and technicians. The fourth session reviewed reporting and planning methodologies, presenting models for reports and plans, the project management document (RACI), electronic forms, and alignment with quality management standards. The fifth paper covered material, supplier, and subcontractor approvals, proposing mechanisms for team involvement in approvals

and the distribution of suppliers to projects. The Directorate-General of Projects and Services aims to establish clear supervision methodologies, resolve challenges affecting project implementation, and develop innovative procedures. Additionally, it seeks to integrate technology to facilitate operations and make informed to ensure the success of its projects.

Dhofar’s historic sites see record visitors

SALALAH: In 2024, over 165,000 visitors explored the Land of Frankincense sites and the Taqah and Mirbat Forts in Dhofar Governorate. The total number of visitors reached 155,795 to key sites including Al Baleed and Samharam Archaeological Parks, Wadi Dawkah Nature Reserve, Wabar Archaeological Site, and Taqah and Mirbat Forts, marking a 16 per cent increase compared to 2023.

Al Baleed Archaeological Park and the Frankincense



The surge in visitors is attributed to strategic tourism initiatives by the MoHT

Land Museum attracted 64,819 visitors, while Samharam Archaeological Park drew 27,582. Wabar Archaeological Site saw 13,394 visitors, and Taqah Fort welcomed 5,327 visitors, with Mirbat Fort seeing 3,986.

The surge in visitors is attributed to strategic tourism initiatives by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, including successful events such as the third edition of the Frankincense Season, which

saw more than 50,000 visitors. To support this growth, the ministry is planning new hotel and tourism projects in 2025, with 8 hotel contracts already signed in 2024. These projects aim to enhance Dhofar’s tourism infrastructure and provide top-notch facilities for both local and international visitors. Notably, Al Baleed, Samharam, Wabar, and Wadi Dawkah are Unesco World Heritage sites under the Land of Frankincense. — ONA

RO 7.5m worth agricultural projects to transform Al Dhahirah

AL DHAHIRAH: The General-Directorate of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in Al Dhahirah Governorate is driving significant progress in Oman’s agricultural sector through strategic projects that aim to bolster the local economy and enhance food security.

With 22 investment projects implemented, covering a total area of 3,000 acres and valued at RO 7.5 million, these initiatives are focused on cultivating essential crops like wheat, onions, and other agricultural products to meet growing market demands and reduce reliance on imports. Salim bin Ali al Amrani, Director-General of the General-Directorate of Agricultural



The red onion project in Dhank, specifically, serves as a model for expanding onion cultivation across Oman

Wealth and Water Resources in Al Dhahirah Governorate, emphasised the importance of these projects in developing the landscape.

Highlighting the cultivation of onions as a key focus, he noted that two major projects are underway. The first spans 1,000 acres, while the second covers 600 acres, with both projects employing modern agricultural techniques to maximise yield and efficiency.

A notable initiative within this framework is the agreement signed with Dhank Agricultural Production and Marketing Company to cultivate red onions in the Wilayat of Dhank. Supported by funding from the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund, the project encompasses 50 acres, with an anticipated annual yield of 700 tonnes of red onions. — ONA

Tender Announcement

Al-Rahma Association for Motherhood and Child Welfare announces the following tenders, with details outlined below:

Tender Type	General Details	Bid Submission Location	Bid Submission Deadline
1. Food Parcel Supply (1/2025)	Supply of food parcels according to the specifications mentioned in the tender document.	Association's Headquarters, Wilayat Seeb, Al-Khouth Area, Al-Shabab Street, opposite Al-Rafaa Hospital.	2nd February 2025
2. Zakat al-Fitr (2/2025)	Supply of Zakat al-Fitr items.	Association's Headquarters, Wilayat Seeb, Al-Khouth Area, Al-Shabab Street, opposite Al-Rafaa Hospital.	2nd February 2025
3. Charity Meat (3/2025)	Supply of charity meat according to the specifications mentioned in the tender document.	Association's Headquarters, Wilayat Seeb, Al-Khouth Area, Al-Shabab Street, opposite Al-Rafaa Hospital.	2nd February 2025

Interested institutions and companies wishing to participate in the tender are invited to contact the association via the following email:
Email: finance@alrahma.om
Contact Number: 99219972

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



President Nikos Christodoulides (L), and Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar (R) shake hands after a meeting in the presence of UN Cyprus representative Colin Stewart (C) in the UN buffer zone in the capital Nicosia. — Reuters

CYPRUS LEADERS DISCUSS OPENING MORE CROSSINGS

NICOSIA: Rival Cypriot leaders met on Monday to discuss opening more crossing points across the divided island, the United Nations said, as part of trust-building efforts to revive stalled peace talks. President Nikos Christodoulides of the Greek-speaking, internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar met in the buffer zone that has split the Mediterranean island for decades. The meeting, mediated by UN Special Representative Colin Stewart, followed an October 15 informal dinner hosted by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres with both leaders in New York.

The United Nations said the two leaders agreed that opening new crossings could foster people-to-people contacts, strengthen economic ties, build trust and help to create a more positive climate for peace talks. — AFP

RUSSIA SAYS CAPTURED VILLAGES IN EAST UKRAINE



A Ukrainian serviceman views (FPV) drone before operating during a practice, in Kharkiv. — Reuters

MOSCOW: Russian forces have captured two more villages in east Ukraine, including one just a few kilometres from Pokrovsk, a key supply hub for Kyiv’s forces, the defence ministry said on Monday. Army units “liberated” Shevchenko and Novoyegorivka in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk respectively, it said. Shevchenko is around three kilometres from Pokrovsk.

Meanwhile, Ukraine attacked a Russian-occupied town in the southern Kherson region on Monday, killing two people and wounding more than a dozen others, Russian state media reported. The region’s Moscow-installed governor said Ukrainian forces had fired “cluster munitions” near a school in the town of Bekhtery when students and teachers were on their way to lessons and that children were among the wounded.

Russia accelerated its advances in Ukraine last year, capturing seven times more territory in 2024 than in 2023, according to an analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War. Moscow is also pressing into the hilltop city of Chasiv Yar, a frontline stronghold whose capture would allow it to drive deeper into the Donetsk region. — AFP

SHARE OPPORTUNITY

Zheng urges Musk to deepen ties with China



Chinese Vice President Han Zheng met with tech tycoon Elon Musk and urged US firms to “seize the opportunity” to deepen economic ties with China. Han urged US firms to “seize the opportunity and make new and greater contributions to promoting China-US economic and trade relations”. Musk, in turn, said Tesla was keen “to deepen investment cooperation with China” as well as play an “active role” in trade between the two countries. — AFP

YOON SHUNS QUESTIONING, AS SUPPORTERS FACE CHARGES OVER COURT RAMPAGE

SEOUL: South Korea’s impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol refused to be questioned by investigators on Monday under a probe into whether he committed insurrection, as dozens of his supporters faced being charged over a violent rampage on a court building. Authorities said security was being beefed up at the Seoul Detention Centre where Yoon is being held as a pre-trial inmate and at the Constitutional Court which is holding an impeachment trial to decide whether to

permanently remove him from office.

Investigators on Monday visited the detention centre to bring him in for questioning “with force”, but ceased such an attempt at around 9 pm after Yoon repeatedly refused to comply with the probe, the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) said in a statement. The CIO, which is leading the criminal probe, said it would take legal steps including enforcing the summons again.

On Sunday, Yoon was formally processed for detention, including having his mugshot taken, after a court approved a warrant, citing concern the suspect could destroy evidence. Following the post-midnight ruling, angry Yoon supporters stormed the Seoul Western District Court building early on Sunday, destroying property and clashing with police who were at times overpowered by a mob wielding broken barricades to attack them. — Reuters

Gaza truce holding after first hostage-prisoner swap

A fragile ceasefire in Gaza war was holding on Monday, following the dramatic exchange of three captives for 90 Palestinian prisoners in an agreement aimed at ending more than 15 months of war in Gaza. The three hostages released on Sunday, all women, were reunited with their families and taken to hospital in central Israel where a doctor said they were in stable condition. Hours later in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Palestinian prisoners released by Israel left Ofer prison on buses, with jubilant crowds celebrating their arrival.

As the ceasefire took effect, thousands of displaced, war-weary Palestinians set off across the devastated Gaza Strip to return home. The truce began on the eve of the Donald Trump’s inauguration for a second term as US president, who has claimed credit for the agreement after months of fruitless negotiations. If all goes according to plan, the implementation of the truce will take weeks if not months, with only the first phase of the truce agreed so far by all the parties. Despite the risks, hundreds of Palestinians were streaming through an apocalyptic landscape in Jabalia in northern Gaza, one of the worst-hit areas in the war.

The initial 42-day truce was brokered by mediators Qatar, the United States and Egypt. It should enable a surge of sorely needed humanitarian aid into Gaza, as more Israeli captives are released in exchange for Palestinians in Israeli custody. Under the agreement, Israeli forces should leave some

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Palestinian prisoner Baraa Fugaha (R), is welcomed by relatives upon the arrival of some 90 prisoners set free, in the West Bank. — AFP

areas of Gaza as the parties begin negotiating the terms of a permanent ceasefire. During the initial truce, Israeli hostages, 31 of whom were taken by militants during October 7, 2023 attack, are due to be returned from Gaza in exchange for around 1,900 Palestinians.

The first three released hostages, Emily Damari, Romi Gonen and Doron Steinbrecher, returned home to Israel after Palestinian fighters handed them over to the Red Cross in a bustling square in Gaza City, surrounded by gunmen in fatigues and balaclavas. In Tel Aviv, there was elation among the crowd who had waited for hours for the news of their release, with the Hostages and Missing Families Forum campaign group hailing their return as “a beacon of light”.

Following the return of the three women hostages, the Israel Prison Service confirmed the release of 90 Palestinian prisoners early on Monday. In the town of Beitunia, near Ofer prison, Palestinians cheered and chanted as buses carrying them arrived, with some climbing atop and unfurling a Hamas flag. The next hostage-prisoner swap should take place on Saturday, a senior Hamas official said.

International Committee of the Red Cross president Mirjana Spoljaric called on all sides to “adhere to their commitments to ensure the next operations can take place safely”. UN relief chief Tom Fletcher said 630 trucks carrying desperately needed aid had entered into Gaza in the hours after the start of the truce, with 300 of them headed to the north of the territory. — AFP

80 KILLED IN COLOMBIAN GUERRILLA VIOLENCE

TIBU: A fresh outbreak of guerrilla violence amid a faltering peace process in Colombia has left more than 80 people dead, including civilians, and displaced around 11,000 in just four days. As residents fled for their lives, the army deployed some 5,000 troops to the cocaine-growing Catatumbo region at the centre of a fast-escalating territorial war.

It was estimated that “more than 80 people have lost their lives,” according to Governor William Villamizar of the Norte de Santander department. Terrified residents carrying backpacks and belongings on overladen motorcycles, boats, or crammed onto the backs of open trucks, fled the region over the weekend. Hundreds found refuge in the town of Tibu, where several shelters were set up, while others crossed the border to Venezuela — for some a return to a country from where they had fled economic and political upheaval. — AFP

DEADLY VIRUS

Tanzania confirms outbreak of Marburg



Tanzania’s President Samia Suluhu Hassan confirmed an outbreak of the deadly Marburg virus. “Laboratory tests conducted at Kabaile Mobile Laboratory in Kagera and later confirmed in Dar es Salaam, identified one patient as being infected by Marburg virus,” she said at a press conference that was also attended by World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in Dodoma. — Reuters

FACILITY BLAZE

Fire at Belgrade retirement home kills eight



A fire broke out early Monday at a retirement home on the outskirts of the Serbian capital Belgrade, killing eight people and injuring seven others. Luka Causic, a police officer, said there were around 30 people inside when the fire broke out at 3:30 am, adding that a resident may have started the fire. “There is suspicion that this fire was caused by one of the residents, but the investigation will establish all the details,” Causic said. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



POPE HOPES US WILL HAVE ‘NO ROOM FOR HATRED’

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis urged incoming United States president Donald Trump on Monday to lead a society with “no room for hatred” and to promote “peace and reconciliation among peoples”. In a message marking Trump’s inauguration, the 88-year-old pontiff offered the incoming president “cordial greetings and the assurance of my prayers that Almighty God will grant you wisdom, strength and protection”.

“It is my hope that under your leadership the American people will prosper and always strive to build a more just society, where there is no room for hatred, discrimination or exclusion,” the head of the worldwide Catholic church added. “At the same time, as our human family faces numerous challenges, not to mention the scourge of war, I also ask God to guide your efforts in promoting peace and reconciliation among peoples.”

Francis had in an interview on Sunday condemned Trump’s plans for large-scale deportations of undocumented migrants. “If it is true, it will be a calamity, because it makes the poor wretches who have nothing pay,” the Argentine Jesuit told Italian television channel Nove.

Francis has criticised Trump for his anti-migrant policies in the past. In February 2016, when asked about the then-US presidential hopeful’s anti-immigration stance, he said: “Anyone, whoever he is, who only wants to build walls and not bridges is not a Christian”. And last year Francis made a rare foray into the US election season to call harsh anti-migrant attitudes “madness” and criticise right-wing US Catholic figures for overly conservative stances. — AFP

BRITAIN’S FM LAUDS TRUMP’S ‘INCREDIBLE GRACE’

LONDON: British Foreign Secretary David Lammy on Monday praised Donald Trump as warm and friendly with “incredible grace” and in no way a “warmonger”, in marked contrast to past scathing comments. Britain’s new Labour government, elected in July, has spent months trying to build bridges with Trump’s team and Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Lammy dined with Trump in September.

Ahead of Trump’s swearing in as US president later Monday, Lammy pressed on with the charm offensive. “Two things that I took away from my extended dinner with Donald Trump in September -- this is not a man who, in any sense, is a warmonger,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme. “I really had a powerful sense that, in reckoning with the world’s most malign interests, he was very clear that he wanted to be strong and powerful, but he’s not embracing war,” he said.

Lammy said he saw Trump as a “revisionist actor” who “wants to change the rules of the game and the terms of the deal”. Asked if he was going through some revisionism himself in relation to his own view of the US president-elect, Lammy said his approach was “progressive realism”. “In this role, I’ve said that the approach has got to be progressive realism, and that is that you meet the world as it is, not as you would wish it.” Other senior Labour figures who have been less than complimentary about Trump in the past include deputy prime minister Angela Rayner who in 2021 said she was “so happy to see the back of Donald Trump”. — AFP



DAVID LAMMY

Triumphant Trump returns to White House

DONALD Trump was sworn in as US president on Monday, ushering in another turbulent four-year term with promises to push the limits of executive power, deport millions of immigrants, secure retribution against his political enemies and transform the role of the US on the world stage. Trump’s inauguration completed a triumphant comeback for a political disruptor who survived two impeachment trials, a felony conviction, two assassination attempts and an indictment for attempting to overturn his 2020 election loss.

The ceremony took place inside the Rotunda of the US Capitol, four years after a mob of Trump supporters breached the symbol of American democracy in an unsuccessful effort to forestall the Republican Trump’s 2020 defeat to Democrat Joe Biden. The swearing-in was moved indoors for the first time in 40 years due to the extreme cold.

Trump, the first US president since the 19th century to win a second term after losing the White House, has said he will pardon “on Day One” many of the more than 1,500 people charged in connection with the January 6, 2021, attack. That promise is among a flurry of executive actions concerning immigration, energy and tariffs that Trump intends to sign after taking the oath of office. At a campaign-style rally on Sunday in Washington, Trump vowed to impose harsh immigration restrictions on his first day.

As he did in 2017, Trump enters office as a chaotic and disruptive force, vowing to remake the federal government and expressing deep scepticism about the US-led alliances that have shaped post-World War Two global politics.

The former president returns to Washington emboldened after winning the national popular



US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden greet president-elect Donald Trump as he arrives at the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

Trump’s inauguration completed a triumphant comeback for a political disruptor who survived two impeachment trials, a felony conviction, two assassination attempts and an indictment for attempting to overturn his 2020 election loss.

vote over Vice-President Kamala Harris by more than 2 million votes thanks to a groundswell of voter frustration over persistent inflation, though he still fell just short of a 50 per cent majority. In 2016, Trump won the Electoral College - and the presidency - despite receiving nearly 3 million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton.

Jeremi Suri, a presidential historian at the University of Texas at Austin, compared the present era to the late 19th century, when Grover Cleveland became the only other president to win non-consecutive terms. Like now, he said, that was a time of upheaval, as industrial advances transformed the economy, wealth inequality exploded and the proportion of immigrant Americans reached a historical peak.

“What we’re really talking about is a fundamentally different economy, a fundamentally different

country in terms of its racial and social makeup, and we are as a country struggling to figure out what that means,” he said. “It’s an existential moment.” Trump will enjoy Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress that have been almost entirely purged of any intra-party dissenters.

His advisers have outlined plans to replace non-partisan bureaucrats with hand-picked loyalists. Even before taking office, Trump established a rival power centre in the weeks after his election victory, meeting world leaders and causing consternation by musing aloud about seizing the Panama Canal, taking control of Nato ally Denmark’s territory of Greenland and imposing tariffs on the biggest US trading partners.

His influence has already been felt in the Israel-Hamas announcement last week of a ceasefire deal. — Reuters

Trump vows to end ‘American decline’

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump pledged a blitz of presidential actions to end “American decline,” telling a fired-up inauguration eve rally that he would crack down on woke ideology and immigration. In a raucous campaign-style gathering in Washington, the 78-year-old Republican promised cheering supporters that he would act with “historic speed” from day one of his White House comeback.

“Tomorrow at noon, the curtain closes on four long years of American decline, and we begin a brand new day of American strength and prosperity,” Trump told a packed sports arena. “I will act with historic speed and strength and fix every single crisis facing our country.” Billionaire Trump was joined on stage by Elon Musk -- the tech tycoon who will lead a major cost-cutting drive in his administration -- and who vowed to make America strong “for centuries.”

Then at the end the rally Trump danced alongside the disco band Village People as they performed their 1970s hit “Y.M.C.A.” which became the unofficial anthem of his election campaign. Much of Trump’s hour-long speech focused on immigration, driving home one



President-elect Donald Trump walks out of the White House at the North Portico on his way to the Capitol in Washington. — NYT

of the dark messages that helped spur his remarkable victory in November’s presidential election over Democratic Vice-President Kamala Harris.

“We’re going to stop the invasion of our borders,” added Trump, who has pledged to launch raids targeting undocumented migrants within days of taking office.

But he also promised “lots” of executive orders from his first day back in the Oval Office. Trump reiterated a promise to release files on the assassinations of former

president John F. Kennedy, his brother Bobby Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Long lines of Trump supporters formed outside the arena despite snowy conditions. “I wanted to see history unfold before my eyes,” Alan McNeely, 21, a student from Connecticut, said.

Earlier, the future US commander-in-chief paid a highly symbolic visit to Arlington National Cemetery, the resting place of America’s war dead. Trump laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown

Soldier, followed by Vice-President-elect JD Vance.

The somber ceremony contrasted with Trump’s last trip to the cemetery as a presidential candidate in August, when the US army criticised his staff for pushing a cemetery employee. Later on Sunday Trump is set to attend a “candlelight dinner” for supporters.

Trump’s hopes for a huge crowd to see his inauguration at the US Capitol took a blow, however, when forecasts of below freezing weather prompted organisers to move the ceremony indoors.

Instead of being sworn in on the steps of the Capitol, Trump will now take the oath under the massive dome of its Rotunda, last used for the ceremony 40 years ago during the inauguration of Ronald Reagan.

“You’re going to hear President Trump talk about how we are entering a Golden Age of America” in his inaugural speech, his incoming press secretary Karoline Leavitt told “America’s Newsroom” on Fox News.

Outgoing President Joe Biden meanwhile traveled to South Carolina on Sunday, his last full day as US president, to mark a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr. — AFP

Oman hopeful of lasting peace between Israel and Palestine



THE recent ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas marks a significant moment not only for the parties directly involved but also for regional players like Oman, which views this development through the lens of its own national interests and broader regional stability.

Since the 1970s, Oman has maintained a policy of neutrality and diplomacy, often acting as a bridge between conflicting parties. This approach is rooted in the country’s desire to ensure its own security and economic prosperity.

Oman instilled a strong preference among Omanis for peace and stability. As such, any escalation in regional tensions is perceived as a direct threat to Oman’s security.

The ceasefire deal that has emerged from ongoing hostilities between Israel and Hamas is seen by Oman as a crucial step towards reducing violence in the region.

There has been a cautious optimism regarding this agreement, hence an opportunity for humanitarian relief in Gaza.

The dire humanitarian conditions faced by Palestinians have been a source of concern for Omanis, who empathise with their plight despite being geographically distant from the conflict.

Oman has been calling for restraint from all parties involved and emphasised that while a ceasefire is essential, it should not be viewed merely as a temporary solution.

Instead, there is a need for sustained efforts towards achieving a comprehensive peace process that addresses the underlying issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This aligns with Oman’s long-standing support for a two-state solution, which remains central to its diplomatic stance.

Despite welcoming the ceasefire, there are concerns about potential escalations in violence if negotiations do not lead to lasting peace.

There are fears that continued instability could spill over into neighbouring regions and disrupt security in the region.

There is widespread belief among Omanis that only through genuine engagement can lasting solutions be found — an engagement they feel has been lacking.

While Oman views the recent ceasefire between Israel and Hamas positively as an immediate relief measure for Gaza’s suffering population, it simultaneously underscores the necessity of addressing deeper issues through dialogue and negotiation.

Oman’s historical role as a mediator positions it uniquely to advocate for peace

Oman emphasises that addressing humanitarian needs must go hand-in-hand with political solutions to ensure a dignified life for Palestinians.

while remaining vigilant about regional dynamics that could threaten its own stability.

Oman has been calling upon the international community to actively engage in efforts to end this occupation. It is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical responsibility for member states to support resolutions aimed at protecting the rights of Palestinians. Oman insists on the necessity of compensating the Palestinian people for damages incurred due to Israeli policies and actions.

Oman advocates for a comprehensive solution that would lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem recognised as its capital. This vision aligns with Oman’s broader diplomatic efforts in promoting stability and peace in the region.

In addition to political advocacy, Oman has been expressing deep concern regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza, exacerbated by military operations and blockades calling for immediate urgent delivery of humanitarian aid to alleviate suffering among Palestinians. Oman emphasises that addressing humanitarian needs must go hand-in-hand with political solutions to ensure a dignified life for Palestinians.

WOMEN-CENTRIC SOCIETY IN IRON AGE UK: SCIENTISTS

Scientists analysing 2,000-year-old DNA have revealed that a Celtic society in the southern UK during the Iron Age was centred around women, backing up accounts from Roman historians, a study said. When historians such as Tacitus and Cassius wrote about Rome conquering Britain from around AD 44 to 84, they described women holding positions of power.

These include the famous warrior queen Boudica, who started an uprising against Roman occupation, sacking and burning several cities including Londinium -- which would one day become London. There was also Cartimandua, the 1st-century queen of the Brigantes people in northern England.

Julius Caesar, in his account of the Gallic Wars written more than more than century earlier, also described Celtic women participating in public affairs, exercising political influence -- and having more than one husband. “When the Romans arrived, they were astonished to find women occupying positions of power,” said Miles Russell, an archaeologist at Bournemouth University and co-author of the new study in Nature.

Some had doubted these accounts, suggesting “that the Romans exaggerated the liberties of British women to paint a picture of an untamed society,” he said.

“But archaeology, and now genetics, implies women were influential in many spheres of Iron Age life,” he said. “Indeed, it is possible that maternal ancestry was the primary shaper of group identities.”

For the study, the team of researchers analysed more than 50 genomes extracted from burial sites in the village of Winterborne Kingston in southern England’s Dorset county, which was populated before and after the Roman conquest.

Iron Age cemeteries with well-preserved burial sites are rare in Britain, perhaps because the dead were often cremated, stripped of their flesh and organs, or simply “deposited in wetlands”, the researchers wrote.

However the Durotriges tribe, which occupied the southern central coastal region of England between 100 BC and AD 100 -- and gave their name to Dorset -- were an exception, burying their dead in cemeteries.

Excavations carried out at these sites since 2009 had already yielded some clues about the high social status women held in the tribe.

The “well-appointed graves across the Dorset Iron Age” containing drinking vessels, mirrors, beads and other goods were all female -- except for one that included a sword, said Russell, who led the excavations.

The DNA analysis showed that most of the people buried at the site were related through their maternal line, going “back to a single woman, who would have lived centuries before”, said lead study author Lara Cassidy of Trinity College Dublin. — AFP

What I have learned from world leaders

AS the US approaches a new era under a different political landscape, it is valuable to reflect on the lessons imparted by prominent figures who have shaped the world over the past decade. The individuals who have been at the forefront of global leadership have shown us much about personal growth, resilience, and the ability to navigate the complexities of our world, both politically and personally. Their experiences provide insights not just for those in power but for all of us seeking to lead more meaningful and effective lives.

One powerful lesson is the importance of hope and the vision of progress, even in challenging times. Hope is not simply about feeling optimistic; it is about seeing beyond immediate struggles and working towards a better future. When faced with obstacles, holding onto the belief that change is possible—despite the difficulties—can provide the motivation needed to keep pushing forward, helping us transcend division and unify around common values and goals.

The idea of resilience is another vital lesson we can draw from these figures. Everyone faces setbacks and personal challenges, but The ability to bounce back, learn from failures, and continue forward is what sets great leaders and individuals apart. Whether it is overcoming gender biases, navigating personal defeats, or grappling with public criticism, resilience is about more than just perseverance. It is about adapting, re-evaluating, and growing through hardship. Resilience in the face of adversity can transform obstacles into opportunities, helping us evolve.

In addition to resilience, the capacity for strategic leadership plays a crucial role in personal development. Leadership often requires foresight—the ability to make tough decisions while balancing long-term goals with the immediate needs of the situation. Strong leaders do not simply act impulsively; they plan, adjust their course when necessary, and know when to stand firm. This type of leadership teaches us that change



A banner in support of US president-elect Donald Trump is displayed at a souvenir stall, ahead of the presidential inauguration, in Washington, on Monday. — Reuters



NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

The writer is an Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

does not happen overnight. Real progress often comes through measured steps and thoughtful decisions, made even when the path ahead is unclear.

Another important lesson is the value of steady, incremental progress. It is easy to get caught up in the desire for immediate results, but meaningful change often requires patience and persistence. Small victories can accumulate over time to create lasting transformation. Instead of becoming frustrated by the lack of instant results, we should celebrate progress along the way. This approach to growth can apply to any area of life —whether it is developing a new skill, building relationships, or advancing a long-term project.

Finally, there is the invaluable lesson of perseverance in the face of adversity. Life and work will never be without challenges. However, the ability to remain steadfast in our convictions, to continue working toward our principles, and to stand firm in the face of setbacks is one of the most

powerful attributes we can develop. Often, the most difficult times in life are those that reveal our true character. The ability to persevere, despite doubts or challenges, can set the foundation for lasting success, allowing us to continue moving forward even when it feels like the odds are stacked against us.

Ultimately, the experiences of these figures offer more than just lessons in leadership; they provide profound insights into the nature of personal development. Hope, resilience, strategic thinking, patience, and perseverance are all qualities that, when cultivated, can make us stronger, more capable individuals.

Leadership therefore is not just about achieving success; it is about navigating challenges with grace, learning from setbacks, and remaining committed to our goals, no matter the obstacles. These lessons from the past decade can guide us as we continue on our own journeys of personal growth, helping us to become more resilient, thoughtful, and determined in all that we pursue.

Music for the soul... folk music



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

EVERY culture has its own interpretations of music and dance. They hold special significance in the past; now is it a dying art of the world?

The world has moved on so far that it could be obsolete in some parts of the world. In other areas it is part of the cultural identity. The folk songs have stories that make it possible for them to be remembered forever because they are passed on from generation to generation. They are cherished, and I remember I had become familiar with some of the historical characters through folk songs.

Folk dances are an opportunity for a whole community to participate together. The vibration is high and the sense of belonging is greater. Today we look at various ways to stay fit, but in the past, folk dances were a way of life.

Folk music comes under intangible cultural heritage, but there are some elements of it that are tangible, such as the musical instruments.

The Oman Folk Music Festival, organised by the Royal Opera House Muscat, gave an insight into the world of music festivals. It was good to note that in the featured countries, folk music and dance are thriving and celebrated. The performers and directors are from well-established academies.

Unesco recognises folk music as part of intangible cultural heritage. Part of the tangible culture is also the traditional costumes. Today, with intellectual copyrights in place, the traditional music also has its identity protected. Now this also brings into focus the poetry.

According to the Unesco, the types of Intangible cultural heritage include oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship.”

Now the question is how this intangible cultural heritage can be preserved.

At this year’s Oman Folk Music Festival, the featured countries, along with Oman, were Bulgaria, South Korea, and India. The teams also portrayed modern interpretations.

Of course life has evolved; so have the life experiences. And art interprets life. Today’s art can also become tomorrow’s heritage. But the best way to preserve the intangible is to ensure the young generation carries on. And for that they need to be exposed to the art forms and be given the opportunity to learn and perform.

In Oman, most of the traditional art forms are presented during the traditional festivals. Today the festivals, such as Muscat Nights

Human creativity is known to promote peace and understanding. When the differences keep us apart, cultural understandings bring people closer

and Salalah Festival during khareef, are another incentive for people to carry on the traditions. As seen during the Salalah festival, different wilayats of Oman take great pride in showcasing the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

According to the Unesco, the 2003 Convention defines ICH as the practices, representations, and expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.

“The definition also indicates that the ICH to be safeguarded by this convention is transmitted from generation to generation; is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history; provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity; promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity; is compatible with international human rights instruments; and complies with the requirements of mutual respect among communities and of sustainable development.”

Human creativity is known to promote peace and understanding. When the differences keep us apart, cultural understandings bring people closer, as was witnessed at the Oman Folk Music Festival, which saw a fully packed audience.

INDIA’S ‘DIGITAL ARREST’ SCAMMERS STEALING SAVINGS

AISHWARYA KUMAR

Within five hours while sitting at home in India, retired professor Kamta Prasad Singh handed over his hard-earned savings to online fraudsters impersonating police. The cybercrime known as “digital arrest” – where fraudsters pose online as law enforcement officials and order people to transfer huge amounts of money – has become so rampant that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has issued warnings. Singh said that money was his life savings. “Over the years, I have skipped having tea outside, walked to avoid spending on public transport,” the 62-year-old said, his voice breaking. “Only I know how I saved my money.”

Police say scammers have exploited the vast gap between the breakneck speed of India’s data digitalisation, from personal details to online banking, and the lagging awareness of many of basic Internet safety.

Fraudsters are using technology for data breaches, targeting information their victims believe is only available to government authorities, and making otherwise unlikely demands appear credible. Indians have emptied their bank accounts “out of sheer fear”, Modi said in an October radio broadcast, adding fraudsters “create so much psychological pressure on the victim”.

Mobile phones, and especially video calling, have allowed fraudsters to reach straight into people’s homes. India runs the world’s largest biometric digital identity programme – called ‘Aadhaar’ – a unique card issued to India’s more than one billion people, and increasingly required for financial transactions.

Scammers often claim they are police investigating questionable payments, quoting their target’s Aadhaar number to appear genuine. They then request their victim make a “temporary” bank transfer to validate their accounts, before stealing the cash.

Singh, from India’s eastern state of Bihar, said the web of lies began when he received a call in December, seemingly from the telecom regulatory authority. “They said... police were on their way to arrest me,” Singh said.

The fraudsters told Singh that his Aadhaar ID was being misused for illegal payments.

Terrified, Singh agreed to prove he had control of his bank account, and after spiralling threats, transferred over \$16,100. “I have lost sleep, don’t feel like eating,” he said. “I have been ruined.”

The surge of online scams is worrying because of “how valid they make it look and sound”, said police officer Sushil Kumar, who handled cybercrimes for half a decade. The perpetrators range from school dropouts to highly educated individuals. “They know what to search for on the internet to find out basic details of how government agencies work,” Kumar added. India registered 17,470 cybercrimes in 2022, including 6,491 cases of online bank fraud, according to the latest government data. — AFP

School meals provide food for thought

WHEN governments adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, they pledged to eliminate hunger and poverty. But today, as the SDGs’ 2030 deadline approaches, a gulf separates their initial ambition and the reality on the ground. The 2020s are shaping up to be a lost decade for development – and the world’s most vulnerable children are bearing the brunt of this slowdown.

The future envisaged by the SDGs is drifting out of reach. In 2030, some 620 million people are projected to live in extreme poverty (defined by the World Bank as an income below \$2.15 per day). Progress toward the eradication of hunger stalled over a decade ago. At the current pace, there will be 582 million people living with chronic undernutrition in 2030 – the same number as a decade ago, when the SDGs were adopted.

This widening gap between ambition and achievement disproportionately affects young people under 18. Children account for around one-third of the global population, but more than half of the world’s poor. Currently, 237 million of the 333 million children living in extreme poverty are in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) According to our estimates, based on UN and World Bank projections, that number will increase to 326 million by 2030.

Undernutrition is taking a devastating toll. In the world’s poorest countries, around 258 million children are living with hunger – 56 million more than in 2015. For these children, hunger is not an occasional source of stress but a grinding reality of daily life. Chronic under nutrition means that millions of children are affected by stunting – one of the major risk factors for impaired brain development. Stunting rates are falling, but at just one-quarter of the rate needed to achieve the SDG targets; they remain over 30 per cent in South Asia and SSA. At the current rate of progress, there will be 36 million more children living with stunting than there would be if



Children account for around one-third of the global population, but more than half of the world’s poor.



GORDON BROWN

The writer is a former prime minister of the United Kingdom, is UN Special Envoy for Global Education and Chair of Education Cannot Wait



KEVIN WATKINS

The writer is a former CEO of Save the Children UK, is a visiting professor at the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa at the London School of Economics

the SDG for hunger were met.

Poverty and hunger have devastating effects on educational outcomes and social mobility. Some 84 million children are at risk of being out of education by the 2030 deadline, undermining progress toward universal education. Without an education, adolescents are often forced into work and early marriage, dashing their hopes of a better future. And hunger in the classroom is a powerful impediment to concentration and learning.

Too often, discussions about the SDGs descend into futile hand-wringing over disappointing progress. But hand-wringing is a luxury poor and hungry children can ill afford. They need practical policies that can make a difference in their lives by 2030. To that end, we are advocating a major initiative to achieve universal school meals in the poorest countries, backed by a new global funding mechanism.

Programmes in India, Brazil, and many other countries have shown that providing a meal in school improves nutrition, allows children to learn free from the debilitating effects of hunger, and is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty. For the poorest families, a school meal is an

in-kind transfer that eases pressure on the household budget, making it possible to keep children in education.

As a result, school meals increase enrolment and reduce dropout rates, especially among the poorest children. They also enable children to learn more. Ghana’s large-scale school meal programme led to learning outcomes equivalent to an additional year of schooling.

Procurement of school meals has the added benefit of creating economic opportunities for rural communities, where some 80 per cent of the extreme poor live. In Brazil, one-third of the school-meals budget is earmarked for smallholder farmers, linking healthy diets for children to more resilient and sustainable livelihoods.

According to research by the Sustainable Finance Initiative of the Free School Meals Coalition, providing another 236 million children in the world’s poorest countries with free school meals would cost \$3.6 billion per year until 2030. Much of that funding could come from developing-country governments, but an additional \$1.2 billion annually in outside aid would be needed.

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SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



SEEB, AL NASR SECURE CRUCIAL WINS IN HM’S CUP QUARTERFINAL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

Seeb achieved a well-deserved 3 -0 win against Ibri in the first leg of the Sultan’s Cup quarterfinals at Seeb Sports Stadium on Sunday.

The match began with Seeb imposing its dominance from the early minutes of the first half. Despite their relentless pressure, Ibri’s defence managed to withstand repeated attempts by the Seeb attackers. On the other hand, Ibri relied on swift counterattacks, creating sporadic threats.

The 16th minute marked a key moment when Seeb was awarded a penalty due to a handball, but Ibri’s goalkeeper, Motea Al Saadi saved Abu Kamara’s spot kick, keeping the scoreline intact. The first half continued as a closely contested battle, with Seeb squandering several chances, including a 44th minute header by Abu Kamara that Al Saadi brilliantly parried, resulting in a goalless halftime.

In the second half, both teams made tactical adjustments in search of an advantage. In the 60th minute, Seeb broke the deadlock through Abdulrahman al Mushaifri, who capitalised on a rebound from the goalkeeper following a header by Mohammed al Musallami.

Two minutes later, Zahir al Aghbari doubled Seeb’s lead with a clever finish from a cross inside the box, leaving the Ibri defence in disarray.

Seeb maintained their dominance, while Ibri’s performance noticeably declined. In the 68th minute, Al Mushaifri netted his second goal and Seeb’s third, skillfully converting a precise pass from Eid Al Farsi. Despite a few individual attempts from Ibri, none posed a significant threat.

Seeb attempted to extend their lead further, but their chances were not converted into additional goals. The match concluded with Seeb securing a 3-0 victory, giving them a strong advantage ahead of the second leg, set to take place at the Ibri Sports Complex. Al Nasr earned a crucial 1-0 victory over Dhofar in the first leg of the Sultan’s Cup quarterfinals at Al Saada Sports Complex.

The match began with both teams exhibiting caution, exchanging attacks without posing serious threats to the goal. Dhofar created the first notable chance in the 4th minute when Hamoud Al Saadi received the ball inside the penalty area, but his shot missed the right post of Al Nasr’s goalkeeper, Ibrahim al Rajhi.

Dhofar continued to press and relied on set pieces, with Hamad al Habsi nearly scoring with a header that was brilliantly saved by Al Rajhi. Meanwhile, Al Nasr adopted a counter attacking strategy and came close to scoring in the 23rd minute when Mulhim al Sunaidi delivered a precise pass to Abdul Fadhil Sawatina, but the latter failed to capitalise. Al Nasr had another opportunity in the 30th minute from a cross by Fahmi Dorbin, but it did not result in a goal. The first half ended in a goalless stalemate after a balanced performance from both sides.

The second half saw a more open tactical approach from both teams. Al Nasr capitalised on a quick counterattack in the 60th minute, with Al Sunaidi scoring the match’s only goal with a powerful shot from inside the penalty area, exploiting a defensive lapse by Dhofar.

Dhofar intensified their attempts to equalise, with their most significant chance in the 71st minute when Mohammed al Habsi received a pass inside the box but fired over the crossbar. In the 80th minute, Al Nasr substitute Waleed al Musallami almost doubled the lead, but his effort struck the side netting.

Despite Dhofar’s relentless pressure in the closing minutes, Al Nasr’s defence and goalkeeper, Ibrahim al Rajhi, stood firm to preserve the victory.

OMAN’S SALEH OVERTAKES RACHID FOR SECOND PLACE

Mohammed keeps top spot in ODM

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

MOROCCO’S Mohammed El Morabity kept his lead in the 165 km Oman Desert Marathon Classic after edging past Oman’s Saleh al Saidi by 11 seconds in the 40 km third stage in the Wilayat of Bidiyah on Monday.

Mohammed came first in 4:14:39 ahead of Saleh (4:14:50) and Rachid El Morabity (4:25:33).

The pack of Omani runners continued their brilliant work to dominate the top 10. Gaith al Saidi (4:25:55) came in fourth followed by Hani al Saidi (4:40:59), Khalid al Farsi (4:45:25), Russia’s Anton Zyrianov (5:05:55), Khalid Said al Jabri (5:16:59), Ibrahim al Mufarji (5:49:37) and Malik al Mufarji (5:49:40) in fifth to tenth positions respectively.

Morocco’s Aziza Raji remained on top of the women’s section as she finished in 5:52:44 to claim the third stage ahead of Great Britain pair of Lydia Oldham (6:30:49) and Sally Ford (7:18:53).

OMANIS IMPRESS

In the overall rankings after the third stage, Mohammed El Morabity (11:11:20) managed a 12 minutes 15 seconds lead over second-placed Saleh al Saidi (11:23:36) of Oman Army A team.

Saleh pushed former champion Rachid El Morabity to third by 1 minute 45 seconds while teammate Gaith al Saidi (11:53:16) claimed fourth ahead of Khalid al Farsi (12:59:41) of Oman Flour Mills Company A in fifth position.

Oman Army B team’s Hani al Saidi (13:10:37) and Khalid Said al Jabri (13:47:02) are in sixth and seventh spots while Russia’s Anton Zyrianov (14:15:39) is eighth after day three of the Oman Desert Marathon at the Rimal Al Sharqiya.

Oman Flour Mills pair of Malik al Mufarji (15:02:36) and Ibrahim a Mufarji (15:59:01) completed the top 10.

In the women’s section, Aziza Al Raji (16:02:06) topped followed by Lydia Oldham (18:44:02) and Sally Ford (19:22:58).

Midpoint Drama

The pivotal third stage of the Oman Desert Marathon began in the pre-dawn



stillness, with camp generators humming to life at 4 am under a crisp 14°C desert morning.

The 40 km of relentless rolling dunes nicknamed ‘The Roller Coaster’ produced thrilling competition.

“These untouched golden dunes aren’t just obstacles; they’re the true test of an ultra-runner’s spirit,” remarked Race Director Said al Hajri.

The route’s demanding profile forced many competitors to alternate between running and crawling up the steepest dunes, creating a spectacular display of human endurance against nature’s grandest obstacles.

British runner Patrick Wiltshire, who tackled the course alongside Ireland’s Shane McShera and Great Britain’s Mohammed Ashraf Abdin, shared their

experience: “Running along the dune tops was actually quite fun, despite sometimes having to crawl. The spectacular views made every challenging moment worthwhile.”

Before the start, Medical Director Dr Muhannad al Subhi emphasised the importance of self-awareness: “We reminded all participants that their health takes precedence over competition. The desert demands respect, and we’re here to ensure everyone finishes safely.”

The race now reaches a crucial turning point as runners prepare for Tuesday’s unique night stage - a 30 km journey under the desert stars. Competitors will begin at staggered times based on their previous performances, maximising daylight navigation before experiencing the serene solitude of the night-time desert.

Oman lose to Saudi Arabia in beach soccer friendly

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

Oman beach soccer team suffered a 4-3 loss against Saudi Arabia in the opening friendly game as part of the domestic camp at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. The regulation time ended at 4-4 draw while in the penalty shootout, Saudi players managed to end the match for their side by 4-3.

Both teams will meet again in another encounter which will take place on Wednesday at the same venue.

Oman players, coached by Rasheed Jaber, delivered an outstanding match despite the defeat in penalties. Abdullah al Souti scored three goals while Khalid al Oraimi netted one. During the match, the coach and his assisting team gave

the opportunity to different players to evaluate their performance.

Oman team players returned back to action after a long absence as they completed eight training sessions till now since they started on January 12. The camp is part of the team’s preparation for the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2025 which will take place in Pattaya from March 20 to 30. Oman is grouped in pool D alongside Bahrain, Malaysia and Vietnam. The Asian event will act as qualifiers to the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup as the top three teams will secure their berths allocated for Asian continent to attend and vie in the forthcoming Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup in Seychelles in 2025.

In the camp, the national team players worked hard for

the Asian event. The coaching staff are also busy finalising the line up. Furthermore, the coaching staff will continue various technical and tactical training sessions in the remaining days of the camp to groom the players.

The current squad comprises 18 players and majority of the players are from Al Amerat Club which was crowned champions in the domestic beach soccer league after beating Salalah 7-0 earlier this month. Oman national beach soccer team, ranked 1th internationally, will look to rekindle the memories of the 2015 AFC Beach Soccer Championship as the team had managed to win the event which was hosted in Qatar at Katara beach. In the final match, Oman had defeated Japan to be crowned

champions and both teams together with third place Iran qualified for the 2015 Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup.

It is expected the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2025 will be very tough as the Asian top nations are taking part in this event. The hosts Thailand headed group A alongside Kuwait, Lebanon and India while three-time winners Japan will face China, Saudi Arabia and Iraq in group B.

Title holders Iran will seek for their fourth title as they were drawn with two-time champions the UAE, Afghanistan and Indonesia in group C. All the 16 participating teams were divided into four groups and the top two finishers from each group will advance to the quarterfinals.

SHORT TAKES



Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe celebrates. — Reuters

REAL MADRID TO
FACE LEGANES,
VALENCIA HOST
BARCELONA

MADRID: Real Madrid will take on lowly local rivals Leganes while Barcelona are set to travel to Valencia in the Copa del Rey quarterfinals, following the draw on Monday.

Atletico Madrid will host Getafe in another Spanish capital derby while Real Sociedad will take on fellow Basque side Osasuna. The matches will be played between February 4-6.

The draw left open the possibility of a Clasico between old rivals Real and Barca in the cup final, something that has not happened for over a decade.

Real and Barca have met in the Copa del Rey final on 18 occasions with Real leading the rivalry with 11 wins over seven from the Catalans, including their last encounter, a 2-1 triumph in the 2014 final at Valencia.

However, Barcelona have thrashed Real both times they've met the current season, delivering a 4-0 win at Santiago Bernabeu in LaLiga in October and a 5-2 victory in the Spanish Super Cup final in Saudi Arabia last week.

Real are top of the LaLiga standings with 46 points, two ahead of Atletico Madrid in second, with third-placed Barcelona trailing by seven points. — Reuters



Barcelona's Spanish forward 19 Lamine Yamal. — AFP

Yamal symbol of rising
Barca for Champions

BARCELONA 'S last visit to face Benfica ended in a heavy thumping on the way to Champions League group stage elimination in 2021, but with young starlet Lamine Yamal propelling a team on the rise, hopes are far higher for the Catalans this time around.

The Blaugrana, second in the group standings behind leaders Liverpool, can seal progression to the last 16 on Tuesday at the Estadio da Luz, avoiding the new play-off phase.

Ronald Koeman's side were heading towards their nadir and the coach was sacked soon after their 3-0 defeat in Lisbon, with his successor Xavi Hernandez able to steady the ship somewhat before walking away in 2024 as Barca still struggled to shine.

The coach did help teenager Yamal blossom into a key player and now the 17-year-old is the symbol of Hansi Flick's exciting side who have already proven they can beat the best in Europe.

Barcelona have thrashed reigning Champions League holders Real Madrid twice this season already in La Liga and the Spanish Super Cup, as well as swatting aside German giants Bayern Munich earlier in the

group phase.

Financial problems still trouble Barcelona, as evidenced by the recent Dani Olmo registration debacle, but on the pitch Flick's side, at their best, are capable of producing majestic football.

Yamal has been crucial to that, showing no sign of slowing down or hitting a ceiling after inspiring Spain to their Euro 2024 triumph last summer.

The silky winger, often compared to all-time Barcelona great Lionel Messi who also came through the club's La Masia youth academy, is playing on a level matched by few others in world football at present.

"Yes, he is," said his team-mate Gavi, when asked if Yamal was the world's best player. "Well, after Lionel Messi, he's the best."

- 'Big talent' -

Yamal's skill and speed makes him Barcelona's biggest threat, racking up nine goals and 13 assists in 25 games across all competitions, although on the left wing Raphinha has enjoyed a stunning season so far and been vital in front of goal.

The Brazilian winger, linked with a departure last summer, has fought to show his importance and struck 20 times, as well as providing 11 assists in 29 appearances.

Gavi has returned from a long-term injury strongly, Pedri is in career-best form in

midfield, while 17-year-old centre-back Pau Cubarsi is also important in defence.

However Yamal's impact on the team's play is hard to replace when the forward is missing, as evidenced by a handful of games which he missed injured or was benched in for a rest.

Without the winger starting, Barcelona lost against Osasuna, Real Sociedad, Celta Vigo, Las Palmas and Atletico Madrid in La Liga, slumping to third in the table having led for several weeks.

"I think in great matches you see big talent and he's showed it many times," said Barcelona coach Hansi Flick after a Yamal tour de force against Real Betis in the Copa del Rey last week. "He's on a really good (path)."

With Yamal named in the line-up Barcelona have lost just twice this season, while winning 19 times and drawing twice.

One of the defeats came against Monaco in the Champions League in September, with Barcelona winning their next five in Europe after that.

Yamal and Barcelona will seek another victory in Lisbon to guarantee progress as part of the top eight and, a decade after they last lifted the trophy, show the five-time winners should be counted among Europe's elite. — AFP

Football tourney for government institutions begins

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth's 2025 Government Institution's Eights Side Football Tournament kicked off on Sunday, with the participation of 32 government institutions representing various sectors in Oman. The tournament matches are held daily at Al Amal Sports Club from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM.

The tournament aims to strengthen social ties among government sector employees, encourage them to engage in physical activities, and raise awareness about the importance of sports as an integral part of daily life, ultimately contributing to improved physical and mental health for employees.

First Day Highlights

In group 1, Muscat Municipality

topped the group after a 3-0 victory over the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs (MoJLA). The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) secured second place with a 2-1 win over the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation. And in group 2, the General-Secretariat of the Supreme Judiciary Council narrowly defeated the Ministry of Interior (MoI) 1-0, while the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) beat the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) by the same scoreline.

While in group 3 the Ministry of Education (MoE) triumphed over the Environment Authority (EA) 4-2, while the Royal Court Affairs team overcame the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY) 2-0.

In group 4, the Ministry of Economy (MoE) led the group after



defeating the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) 2-0, followed by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), which secured a 1-0 victory over the Majlis Ash'shura.

Saud Ambusaidi, Assistant Director-General for Sports Activities, stated, "The tournament, with the participation of 32 teams representing various government institutions in Oman, aims to foster a competitive yet friendly environment, enhance camaraderie among employees, and promote physical activity as an essential aspect of health and well-being." He emphasised the tournament's role in providing employees with an opportunity to release stress, bond with colleagues, and engage in their favourite sports in a supportive setting.

Ambusaidi added, "Many employees are passionate about

football but rarely find the time to develop their skills or participate in clubs due to work pressures. This tournament allows them to enjoy their favourite sport, showcase their talents, and improve in an organized and motivating atmosphere."

Regarding organisation, Ambusaidi explained that preparations took around four months, including coordination with committees and drafting regulations to ensure the smooth running of the event. He highlighted the pivotal role of partners such as the Oman Football Association, the Ministry of Labour (MoL), and the Royal Oman Police (ROP) in the tournament's success.

The participating teams are divided into eight groups, each comprising four teams. The top two teams from each group will advance to the second round.

SPORTS



Denmark's Holger Rune in action during his fourth round match against Italy's Jannik Sinner. — Reuters

SINNER, DE MINAUR REACH QUARTERFINAL IN MELBOURNE

MELBOURNE: Jannik Sinner battled dizzy spells on Monday to reach an Australian Open quarterfinal against Alex de Minaur, admitting a long interruption when he accidentally broke the net was “big, big luck”.

The world number one and defending champion dropped a set before coming home 6-3, 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 against Danish 13th seed Holger Rune on Rod Laver Arena.

Sinner struggled in the hot Melbourne conditions, his hand visibly shaking and his heart rate taken in the third set before he left court for a medical timeout.

There was then a bizarre 20-minute delay when Sinner demolished the metal brace that secures the net to the floor with a thunderous serve early in set four.

“I was lucky today that... 20 minutes off court, you know, trying to get back physically, putting some cold water in my head, it was very helpful. It was big, big luck to me today.” Sinner is bidding to defend a Grand Slam title for the first time after beating Daniil Medvedev in the final last year. His win put him into a clash against home hope De Minaur, who brushed past American Alex Michelsen 6-0, 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 to make his maiden Australian Open



Australia's Alex de Minaur in action during his fourth round match against Alex Michelsen.— Reuters

quarterfinal.

De Minaur wiped the floor with Michelsen in the opening set, but his serve then faltered

and he was forced to a close tiebreak after the American staged a fightback.

But De Minaur broke with a forehand

winner in the sixth game of the third set and pulled away for the win.

“It means the world,” said De Minaur.

“There’s nothing I want to do more than play well here in Australia. So glad I finally made the quarterfinals.

“But let’s go for bigger and better things.”

As temperatures rose above 30 Celsius (86 Fahrenheit), Sinner assumed control against Rune by breaking to love.

Sinner’s serve was iron-clad and there was no sniff for the Dane, who went a set down in 33 minutes.

But a Sinner double-fault in the eighth game of set two handed Rune a break, allowing him to hold and level the match as he began to find his rhythm.

It was the second set Sinner had dropped in the tournament, having not done so in 13 previous matches.

Sinner clung on to hold in an epic game three in the third set, which included a remarkable 37-shot rally that he won to save break point.

He gave Rune another break point at 2-2 with a double bagel, but again saved, yet he was labouring. — AFP

Swiatek crushes Lys to reach Melbourne quarters

MELBOURNE: Iga Swiatek showed no mercy as she ended “lucky loser” Eva Lys’s historic run at the Australian Open on Monday, the world number two marching into the quarterfinals 6-0, 6-1.

There was to be no happy ending to Lys’s incredible story against the ruthless five-time Grand Slam champion from Poland, who will meet either Emma Navarro or Daria Kasatkina for a place in the semifinals.

“There’s a lot to improve. I don’t feel like I’m in my peak yet,” said Swiatek, who has dropped only two games in her last two matches.

“For sure, matches like that give me confidence and I feel like I’m

playing a good game.”

Swiatek has a patchy record in Melbourne, only reaching the semifinals once, in 2022, but warned she was in the mood this year.

“I usually didn’t feel comfortable at the Australian Open with my game,” she said.

“But this year it’s a bit better. So I’m just enjoying being on the court and off the court as well.

“Because for sure I have an amazing time here, and hopefully it’s gonna last even longer.”

Lys fleetingly threatened another shock when she created two break points in the opening game, but Swiatek stepped up her pace to save both.



From then on the result was inevitable and the former world number one showed the gulf in class as she flattened the German in an hour.

Swiatek conceded just 10 points in an opening set that lasted 24 minutes.

When Swiatek took a 3-0 lead in the second, an embarrassing “double bagel” 6-0, 6-0 scoreline loomed.

But Lys finally managed to hold her serve and raised her arms in celebration with her beaming smile eliciting a massive ovation from the packed Rod Laver Arena.

The 23-year-old Swiatek has been in imperious form, dropping just 11

games in her four wins at Melbourne Park. For world number 128 Lys it was the end of what she called “an insane story”.

She made the last 16 after getting a reprieve into the main draw, having losing in qualifying, when 13th seed Anna Kalinskaya withdrew minutes before her opening match.

Had Lys advanced she would have become the first lucky loser in history to reach the quarterfinals of a Grand Slam tournament.

But the 23-year-old had already made history by reaching the fourth round at Melbourne Park, a feat not achieved by a women’s lucky loser since the tournament moved there in 1988. — AFP



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OMAN’S BANKING SECTOR RECORDS ROBUST GROWTH IN Q4 2024

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

OMAN’S banking sector has once again demonstrated its resilience and adaptability, closing 2024 with a strong performance that underscores its pivotal role in the nation’s economic landscape. Preliminary results for the fourth quarter paint a picture of robust growth across key financial metrics, reflecting both prudent management strategies and growing consumer confidence.

The performance of major banks has not only contributed to financial stability but also highlighted the sector’s readiness to support Oman’s broader economic ambitions under Oman Vision 2040.

The total assets of Omani banks continued their upward trajectory, with Bank Muscat, the sector’s leader, reporting a 2.7% increase to RO 14.04 billion. This steady growth was complemented by the notable performance of Bank Nizwa, which posted a significant 17.3% rise in total assets, reaching RO 1.89 billion.

The figures reflect a sector-wide commitment to strategic asset management and effective resource allocation.

Customer deposits have also shown remarkable growth, underscoring the trust placed by consumers in Omani banks. Bank Dhofar recorded a 14.1% increase in deposits, totalling RO 3.76 billion, while Bank Nizwa outperformed its peers with 23.8% growth. These results highlight the increasing popularity of Islamic banking services and the sector’s ability to attract and retain a diverse customer base.

Net profits after tax provided further evidence of the sector’s strong financial health. Sohar International emerged as a standout performer, with net profits surging by 42.5% to RO 100.2 million.

Similarly, Ahli Bank posted a remarkable 48.1% growth in profits, reaching RO 30.4 million. Such figures underscore the banks’ ability to balance growth with profitability, even amidst a challenging global economic environment.

The sector also reported steady growth in operating profits despite rising expenses. For instance, Bank Muscat achieved a 5.4% increase in operating profits, reaching RO 333.4 million.

Meanwhile, improved credit quality was evident in the reduced provisioning for financing. Bank Dhofar, for example, reported a 24.8% decrease in provisions, signalling better risk management and a stronger financial position.

588MW Manah 2 solar IPP inaugurated in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 20

SEMBCORP Industries (Sembcorp) celebrated a significant milestone with the inauguration of its Manah 2 Solar Independent Power Project in Oman. Officially opened by His Highness Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, the project is a landmark achievement in Sembcorp’s global renewables portfolio.

With a peak capacity of 588MW, it is not only Sembcorp’s largest solar farm worldwide but also its first greenfield renewable energy venture in the Middle East.

The inauguration ceremony witnessed prominent dignitaries, including Singapore’s Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Dr Maliki Osman.

“Sembcorp’s successful completion of the Manah 2 Solar Power Project ahead of schedule is a testament to its commitment to supporting Oman’s renewable energy and Net-Zero targets,” Dr Osman said.

“This project also reflects the strong collaboration between Singapore and Oman, showcasing the capabilities of Singaporean companies on a global stage.”

Vipul Tuli, CEO of Middle East and Chairman, South Asia, Sembcorp Industries, underscored the project’s significance.

“Manah 2 marks a major step in Sembcorp’s contribution to Oman’s energy transition goals. As our largest utility-scale solar project globally, it supports Oman Vision 2040 by delivering clean energy to approximately 60,000 households and reducing carbon emissions by nearly 720,000 tonnes annually. Completing this ahead of schedule highlights our commitment to excellence and sustainability.”

Backed by a 20-year power purchase agreement with Nama Power and Water Procurement Company, the Manah 2 Solar Power Project will generate 1.5 million

The Manah 2 Solar Power Project will generate 1.5 million MWh of clean energy annually.

As our largest utility-scale solar project globally, it supports Oman Vision 2040 by delivering clean energy to approximately 60,000 households and reducing carbon emissions by nearly 720,000 tonnes annually.

VIPUL TULI
CEO of Middle East and Chairman, South Asia, Sembcorp Industries

MWh of clean energy annually. This is a critical contribution to Oman’s target of sourcing 30 per cent of its energy from renewable sources by 2030.

Spanning 6.8 million square metres in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, the project utilises over 1 million bi-facial photovoltaic solar panels, capturing sunlight from both sides to maximise energy yield.

This innovative technology, combined with a waterless solar panel cleaning system, ensures sustainability and operational

efficiency. The project is integrated with Sembcorp’s proprietary NetZeroOS, a digital energy asset management platform for real-time monitoring and predictive analysis. This enhances asset efficiency while minimising operational risks.

The Manah 2 project extends its impact beyond clean energy generation. It has created local employment opportunities, improved infrastructure such as roads, and driven in-country value, aligning with Oman’s broader economic diversification efforts.

Sembcorp’s sustainability journey in Oman began with the Salalah Independent Water and Power Plant in 2009, a benchmark project in energy efficiency. With Manah 2, Sembcorp reinforces its reputation for delivering world-class projects that align with cost, quality and timelines.

Manah 2 Solar Power Project exemplifies the synergy between innovation and sustainability. As Oman accelerates its transition to renewable energy, projects like Manah 2 are pivotal in achieving the Oman Vision 2040 and decarbonisation goals.

Oman’s first sustainable marine fish farming project launched

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 20

THE Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has announced the start of work on a unique marine farmed fish project that harnesses Recirculating Aquaculture System (RAS) technology to meet stringent sustainability standards – a first in the Sultanate of Oman.

Conceived as a pilot initiative, the 8-tonne capacity project is being built at Al Musannah in Al Batinah South Governorate with a focus on the farming of Sea Bream (*Sparus aurata*).

The small-scale project, financed with support from the ministry’s Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund, is being implemented by the Aquaculture Development Center

Land-based fish farms operating on Recirculating Aquaculture Systems technology reduce the amount of water and space needed for aquaculture. Picture for illustration only.

at the Ministry’s Directorate-General of Fisheries Research, according to a key project official.

“As a principal investigator of the project, we are pleased to start implementing a project in the Sultanate of Oman for the first time with a water recycling

system and to produce up to 8 tonnes of marine farmed fish, as this technology is being applied in saltwater farms for the first time in Oman,” said Adel al Balushi, Aquaculture Specialist at the Aquaculture Centre.

“Starting from the stage

of supplying and installing equipment, (it progresses) to the trial operation stage and then to the actual operation for one production cycle,” he stated in a recent post.

RAS are land-based aquaculture facilities that reuse water by cycling it through a series of filtration and treatment units with a limited addition of make-up water.

The highly sustainable nature of these operations reduces the amount of water and space needed for aquaculture.

According to Al Balushi, the pilot will herald the introduction of new aquaculture technology to support the cultivation of diverse fish species in sustainable farms.

The facility will also serve as a vehicle for conducting training workshops to help foster interest

in sustainable aquaculture within the fishing community and among entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, the project is expected to spawn the growth of SME-sized fish farming initiatives that will provide employment opportunities for young Omanis.

Importantly, a number of environmental benefits are associated with Recirculating Aquaculture System (RAS) technology based farms.

For one, they are an effective solution to the environmental impact of climate change on the fish farming sector.

Furthermore, as a super-intensive fish farming system, water resources are utilised with high efficiency. The system also eliminates the need for biological additives, potentially harmful chemicals and waste disposal.

ADVERTORIALS

EXPERIENTIALDRIVE



The day-long adventure to the scenic Sifa Way provided participants with the perfect opportunity to explore the stunning capabilities of their Jetour T2 vehicles.

JETOUR TRIBE
WINTER EDITION:
A THRILLING DAY
TRIP TO SIFA WAY

MUSCAT: MHD Automobile LLC, a leader in Oman's automotive industry, proudly announces the successful completion of the Winter Edition of the Jetour Tribe, an exclusive experiential drive that brought together an impressive community of around 100 Jetour T2 owners.

The day-long adventure to the scenic Sifa Way provided participants with the perfect opportunity to explore the stunning capabilities of their Jetour T2 vehicles while enjoying the camaraderie of fellow Jetour enthusiasts.

Building on the success of the inaugural Dhofar Khareef Edition, this Winter Edition marked another milestone in MHD Automobiles' commitment to creating extraordinary experiences for its valued customers.

Starting from the Jetour Showroom in Azaiba, the convoy of Jetour T2 vehicles embarked on a picturesque drive that combined breathtaking landscapes with adrenaline-pumping moments. Designed to cater to drivers of all experience levels, the meticulously planned route showcased Oman's diverse terrain, reinforcing the Jetour T2's reputation as a vehicle built for adventure.

Commenting on the event, Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD Automobiles LLC, said, "The Winter Edition of the Jetour Tribe is a testament to our dedication to fostering a vibrant community of Jetour T2 enthusiasts. We are proud to bring our customers together for such unforgettable experiences that celebrate their passion for exploration and adventure."

The Jetour T2, powered by a 2.0-litre 4-cylinder petrol engine delivering 254 horsepower and 390 Nm of torque, performed exceptionally throughout the trip.

Whether cruising along the scenic coastline or conquering rugged terrain, the vehicle showcased its versatility and reliability, ensuring participants enjoyed a dynamic and comfortable driving experience.

NATIONAL
FINANCE
STRENGTHENS
ESG
COMMITMENT

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to responsible business practices, National Finance, the Oman's leading finance company, recently launched its Sustainability Report, offering an in-depth overview of its current ecological footprint and future initiatives.

Guided by a robust Sustainability Strategy Framework, the company emphasises its dedication to embedding ethical principles into every facet of its operations. With a vision to lead as a provider of



comprehensive financial and leasing solutions, while upholding exemplary sustainability standards, National Finance's strategy is built on four core pillars - Environment, Social, Operations, and Governance. This holistic approach reflects the company's mission to drive sustainable economic growth,

empower communities, and reduce environmental impact, cementing its position as a trailblazer in fostering lasting and impactful change.

Tariq Sulaiman al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer of National Finance, stated, "Sustainability is a fundamental pillar for resilient and forward-thinking organisation. At National Finance, we view this framework as a road map for shaping a future where economic success is intricately tied to environmental stewardship and social progress."

SOHAR drives sustainable growth for Oman

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 20

SOHAR PORT and Freezone (SOHAR) marked a banner year in 2024, solidifying its role as a cornerstone of Oman's economic transformation during its annual Business Reception themed "Connecting Commerce, Creating Opportunities." The event celebrated SOHAR's vital contributions to Oman Vision 2040, showcasing record-breaking achievements in investment, operations, and sustainability.

Total investments at SOHAR have now surpassed \$30 billion, with 2024 alone contributing over \$4 billion through landmark projects.

Among these were the establishment of a \$1.35 billion polysilicon production facility, the largest of its kind in the Middle East, a \$1.6 billion LNG bunkering project powered by solar energy, and a \$600 million iron ore concentration plant, Oman's first.

These developments underscore SOHAR's leadership in advancing industrial innovation and renewable energy.

Operational performance reached new heights, with more than 3,000 vessel calls recorded in 2024. General cargo throughput increased by 77 per cent compared to the previous year, container volumes grew by 15 per cent, and ship-to-ship operations rose by 19 per cent.

SOHAR Freezone also demonstrated significant progress,



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with land occupancy climbing to 85 per cent, driven by strong demand.

The Freezone attracted \$1.8 billion in investments through nine agreements covering 130 hectares of land, further cementing its status as a hub for global business.

Commenting on these milestones, SOHAR CEO Emile Hoogsteden described the Port and Freezone as a catalyst for Oman's economic diversification and global competitiveness.

"As we mark two decades of growth, we take pride in how SOHAR has become an integrated industrial and logistics ecosystem that attracts forward-thinking investments. Moving forward, we will continue to align our efforts with Oman Vision 2040, fostering

sustainable development and exploring new opportunities to position Oman on the global stage," he said.

Acting CEO of SOHAR Freezone, Mohammed al Shizawi, emphasised the Freezone's role in enabling businesses to thrive in an interconnected global environment.

"Our investments in infrastructure, technology, and incentives ensure that all tenants, whether new or established, can unlock their full potential while contributing to Oman's economic development.

The strong demand for land and facilities reflects the confidence businesses place in SOHAR Freezone as a hub for innovation and growth," he noted.

Pact signed to collaborate on smart city initiatives in Oman

MUSCAT: Oman Broadband Company, a leading provider of fibre optic infrastructure services in the Sultanate of Oman, and ST Engineering's Urban Solutions business, a leading provider of smart city solutions, have entered into a landmark cooperation programme to collaborate on smart city initiatives in Oman.

Supporting the digital transformation objectives and strategic ambitions of Oman Vision 2040, the collaboration will focus on developing an advanced digital infrastructure that meets future requirements, solutions that improve quality of life for residents and enhance the sustainability of the Sultanate of Oman.

The ceremony was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Maj Gen Idris bin Abdulrahman al Kindi, Secretary-General of the National Security Council, and Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs. It was also attended from the Singaporean side by K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister of Law, and Dr Mohamed Maliki Osman, Second Minister for



Under the programme, Oman Broadband and ST Engineering Urban Solutions will jointly explore and collaborate on smart city initiatives to enhance urban and community development in Oman.

Foreign Affairs, Syed Nouredin Bin Syed Hassim, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Singapore in Muscat and several officials and diplomats from both sides.

Under the programme, Oman Broadband and ST Engineering Urban Solutions will jointly explore and collaborate on smart city initiatives to enhance urban

and community development in Oman. Oman Broadband will provide cutting-edge fibre-optic infrastructure to enable digital transformation, while ST Engineering Urban Solutions will contribute its expertise in the areas of smart mobility, smart utilities and smart city operations platforms, to provide integrated

smart city solutions that enable urban efficiencies and advance sustainability.

Through this collaboration, Oman Broadband Company aims to enhance its leadership in the telecommunications and digital infrastructure sector, paving the way for a more advanced and sustainable technological future in the Sultanate.

The programme comes as part of the Sultanate of Oman's efforts to support its vital sectors with the latest smart technologies and innovative solutions that make the Sultanate of Oman a regional hub for technology and knowledge.

Commenting on the Cooperation Programme, Eng Sultan bin Ahmed al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Broadband Company, said "The Cooperation Programme with ST Engineering Urban Solutions represents a significant step towards developing the digital infrastructure in Oman.

This program aims to accelerate digital transformation by sharing technology and knowledge to the Sultanate of Oman, which in turn contributes to achieving qualitative leaps in the fields of smart cities and innovative technical solutions."

"We are committed to supporting the aspirations of Oman Vision 2040 by promoting innovation and localising technology.

Through this programme, we seek to build strong partnerships with global technology leaders such as ST Engineering Urban Solutions, to develop an integrated digital system that serves various development sectors. This includes infrastructure and smart solutions that enhance the efficiency of cities and improve the services provided to residents," he added.

Al Wahaibi further emphasised that this cooperation programme serves as a critical starting point for developing advanced technologies to ensure the sustainability of cities in Oman. He highlighted the implementation of smart systems for managing energy, data, and digital infrastructure as essential components of the programme.

He stressed the fact that this partnership not only focuses on technological advancement but also on empowering Omani human resources to acquire new skills which in turn helps in positioning Oman as a regional hub for technical innovation.

BUSINESS

FOCUSSECTOR



Trade between Oman and Singapore has seen significant growth in recent years.

OCCI TO HOST OMANI-SINGAPOREAN BUSINESS FORUM ON JANUARY 22

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 20

THE Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) is set to host the Omani-Singaporean Business Forum on Wednesday, January 22, 2025, at the Sheraton Muscat Hotel.

The forum aims to advance economic and trade relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore, focusing on strategic sectors such as oil and gas, renewable energy, logistics, technology, infrastructure and urban planning.

The forum will serve as a pivotal platform for investors, producers, exporters, importers, trading firms and government entities to explore new avenues of economic collaboration.

Key objectives include fostering partnerships in vital industries, identifying commercial opportunities, and supporting projects that align with sustainable growth goals.

Bilateral meetings between business leaders from both nations will further focus on forging sector-specific alliances.

Trade between Oman and Singapore has seen significant growth in recent years.

By September 2023, the bilateral trade value stood at RO 576.4 million, while total trade volume in 2022 surpassed RO 1 billion, up from RO 553 million in 2021.

In 2022, Oman recorded a trade surplus of RO 653 million, a notable increase from RO 329 million in the previous year. Omani exports to Singapore were predominantly chemical industries (50%), base metals (44%), and petroleum derivatives like methanol and polypropylene.

Imports from Singapore primarily included metal products (37%), machinery and electrical equipment (32%), and chemical products (9%).

Investment and Joint Ventures

Oman hosts over 24 Singaporean companies, operating in sectors such as transport, professional services, oil and gas, technology, and clean energy.

These companies brought total investments of approximately RO 55.8 million by the end of 2022.

STARTUP SECURES OMAN’S LARGEST PRE-SEED FUNDING ROUND

MUSCAT: Sampo AI, a pioneering startup specialising in dynamic pricing solutions for e-commerce, has announced the successful closure of its pre-seed funding round, raising \$750,000.

This milestone marks the largest pre-seed investment in Oman.

The round was co-led by Omantel Innovation Labs and Waad VC, with participation from Hexnture and several prominent Saudi angel investors. The investment underscores strong confidence in Sampo AI’s innovative approach and its potential to reshape the regional e-commerce landscape.

Founded in July 2024, Sampo AI leverages cutting-edge artificial intelligence to empower e-commerce businesses with smarter pricing strategies. The platform analyses user behaviour, purchase patterns, and conducts A/B testing to optimise pricing decisions.

Its proprietary database, which includes over 10 million regional products, delivers precise market insights, enabling businesses to stay competitive in a fast-evolving landscape.

The funding will accelerate Sampo AI’s expansion into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, markets ripe for technological innovation in e-commerce.

Additionally, the company plans to enhance its AI-driven tools to address the unique challenges of local markets, helping businesses maximise profitability and growth.

“We are incredibly proud to represent Oman as a hub for innovation in the Middle East. This funding not only validates our mission but also empowers us to redefine how e-commerce businesses approach pricing strategies,” said Saif al Essai, Co-Founder and CEO of Sampo AI. “With the backing of Omantel, Waad VC, Hexnture, and other visionary investors, we are poised to make a lasting impact in the region’s e-commerce ecosystem.”

153 green inns licenced in Oman by 2024

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 20

THE Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has stated that the number of licensed green inns in the Sultanate of Oman reached 153 by the end of 2024. These inns are distributed across various governorates, with Al Batinah South Governorate ranking first in terms of the highest number, followed by Al Dhahirah Governorate. The ministry affirmed that its upcoming plans aim to align with the goals for the heritage and tourism sector under Oman Vision 2040.

It is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the strategies and programmes related to the vision’s objectives, comparing them with achieved statistical indicators to ensure the successful implementation of tourism initiatives.

By addressing the needs of the next phase and keeping pace with global developments across all fields, one of the ministry’s key plans for green inns focuses on improving the quality of approval procedures for establishing these inns. This involves collaboration with relevant authorities and emphasising the quality, diversity, and sustainability of the project components.

Ahmed bin Khamis al Saadi, Director of the Investor Services Department at the Ministry of



Set in natural and rural settings, these eco-lodges play a significant role in developing local communities.

Heritage and Tourism, stated, “Green inns are increasingly popular with both tourists and investors. They are a suitable option for accommodation and relaxation for individuals and families, given the unique tourism experiences they offer.

Additionally, they serve as a source of income for citizens wishing to invest in this sector.”

Al Saadi explained that a set of specific standards for green inns is currently being developed in collaboration with relevant authorities.

These standards are designed to match the scale and momentum of the tourism movement in Oman, ensuring the necessary regulations and requirements are met.

This will guarantee a high-quality experience for visitors.

He added that in the future, these inns could be classified based on their available facilities, the activities they provide, sustainability practices and adherence to quality standards.

This initiative is part of the ministry’s ongoing efforts to modernise and enhance the green inn sector.

EASIER LICENSING PROCEDURES

Al Saadi further noted that the ministry has ensured the

licensing fees for green inns are lower compared to other hospitality activities, with a fee of RO 250 for a five-year licence.

The ministry also coordinates with financial institutions to support project owners when required. Additionally, it collaborates with relevant authorities to simplify the licensing procedures, encouraging potential investors to engage in this activity.

Al Saadi highlighted that, since the launch of eco-lodges, heritage inns, and guesthouses in the first quarter of 2015, the MoHT has conducted a series of awareness workshops in various governorates of Oman.

Mashreq expands corporate banking footprint to Oman

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 20

MASHREQ, one of the leading financial institutions in the MENA region, has announced its entry into Oman, seeking to strengthen its position with a range of personalised financial services tailored for the Sultanate of Oman’s evolving corporate and public sectors.

This strategic move underscores Mashreq’s intent to contribute to Oman Vision 2040, with ambitions to fuel economic diversification and elevate Oman’s position in the global financial landscape.

Mashreq’s entry into Oman comes amid growing demand for financial solutions aligned with regional and global market trends.

The bank’s proven track record of industry-leading initiatives and adaptability solidifies its role as a significant growth partner in the region. It was recently named the fastest-growing banking brand in the Middle East by Brand Finance’s



Mashreq’s entry into Oman comes amid growing demand for financial solutions aligned with regional and global market trends.

2024 Banking 500 rankings and has consistently secured Euromoney’s “Market Leader in the Middle East” title for trade finance and cash management from 2019 to 2023.

Ahmed Abdelaal, Group CEO of Mashreq said “Oman’s strategic

location and its dynamic economic landscape make it essential to Mashreq’s international growth ambitions.

Our goal is to support Oman’s economic objectives through tailored financial solutions that not

only enhance regional integration but also reinforce Oman’s influence in the global financial ecosystem.

Our commitment is to high-growth markets, leveraging trade, investment and corporate banking opportunities while delivering an exceptional client experience built on convenience, accessibility, and ESG-driven initiatives.”

Tarek El Nahas, Group Head of International Banking at Mashreq, noted, “Our expansive international footprint grants our clients access to some of the most strategically vital markets in the region.

By combining global reach with deep local expertise, we navigate regulatory landscapes with agility, offering solutions that drive financial efficiency and resilience. This approach empowers clients to optimise their cross-border operations, capturing opportunities essential to long-term success in today’s competitive market.”

AlSalt bin Mohammed al Kharusi, Mashreq’s Country Head for Oman,

remarked, “With over five decades of global innovation, Mashreq’s expansion into Oman reinforces our dedication to being a strategic partner in the nation’s economic development.

Our focus is on fostering a resilient generation of entrepreneurial talent and supporting the growth of a dynamic, knowledge-driven economy. We are fully committed to supporting Oman’s national priorities, advancing growth, and contributing to a sustainable, prosperous future for generations to come.”

Mashreq’s entry into Oman will bring a comprehensive suite of banking services, including treasury, global transaction banking and sustainable finance. Through its innovative approach and robust operational structure, the bank aims to unlock value in critical sectors like tourism, logistics, manufacturing and renewable energy, in line with Oman’s economic objectives.

Trump’s return adds twist to Western firms’ Russia exit dilemma



ALEXANDER MARROW

Chief companies correspondent for Russia, the writer covers Russia’s economy, markets and the country’s financial, retail and technology sectors.

HOLD or fold? That is the dilemma facing the hundreds of Western companies still operating in Russia as Donald Trump returns to the White House with a promise to end the Ukraine conflict while Moscow’s tougher exit conditions make it costlier to leave.

Many companies, including Renault, McDonald’s and Heineken have left Russia since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022, usually taking hefty writedowns and selling their assets at steep discounts demanded by the Kremlin.

Others have stayed. Makers of food and hygiene products, such as PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble and Mondelez have maintained a presence citing humanitarian reasons. European lenders Raiffeisen Bank International and UniCredit remain ensnared by profits stuck in Russia and the need for exit approval from Moscow.

Russia tightened its exit terms in October to encourage businesses to stay, demanding discounts of at least 60% on exit transactions and a 35% “voluntary contribution” to Russia’s budget from the deal price, termed an “exit tax” by Washington. Reuters spoke to 15 lawyers, bankers, advisers and business people involved in dozens of Western corporate exits from Russia for this story.

They said that companies still present would be carefully watching what Trump, who will be sworn as president of the United States on Monday, can deliver and adjusting their plans accordingly. Some requested anonymity to speak freely.

“Trump’s election victory adds another layer of uncertainty for multinationals with assets in Russia,” said Ian Massey, Head of Corporate Intelligence.

“While the Kremlin continues to ratchet up the costs of leaving the Russian market, Trump may reduce the costs of staying, creating a kind of stasis.” It is far from clear what Trump can accomplish in his second term, with his advisers now conceding the conflict will take at least months to resolve.

Yet his mere arrival may give some companies the political cover to stay on in Russia, while others could see prospects for potential sanctions relief as an opportunity to leave.

“We might see some sanctions being dialled down if the new administration is able to negotiate a settlement of the conflict in Ukraine,” said Alan Kartashkin, Partner at Debevoise and Plimpton. That could unfreeze some foreign-owned assets stuck in Russia, unlocking another wave of exit deals, he said.

Companies already reluctant to leave may be more likely to wait things out, said an

Russia tightened its exit terms in October to encourage businesses to stay, demanding discounts of at least 60% on exit transactions and a 35% “voluntary contribution” to Russia’s budget from the deal price, termed an “exit tax” by Washington.

M&A investor who has worked on dozens of deals. Another person, who has advised on over 100 exits, said Trump’s return may also cause those looking to cut ties with Russia to change plans and decide to stay.

Alexei Yakovlev, director of the finance ministry’s financial policy department, said in December that negotiations on exit deals were ongoing, without naming specific companies.

Asked whether Trump’s arrival may pause exits or see some companies return, he said: “That’s beyond our understanding.”

A lot has changed since the relative free-for-all in dealmaking of 2022, six of the people said, particularly in terms of navigating the whims and demands of the exit committee.

Russia’s government is keen to protect the federal budget and close loopholes that allowed local buyers to snap up assets on the cheap. deals now require valuations by independent appraisers selected by Russia’s economy Ministry, and auctions for assets between local buyers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin must approve deals over 50 billion roubles (\$488 million) and buyers must demonstrate economic grounds for any deal, such as showing how their failure to buy a particular factory might cause a drop in output.

— Reuters

DAVOS BECOMES WORLD’S MOST EXCLUSIVE WATCH PARTY

PETER THAL LARSEN

The Swiss town of Davos will this week host what amounts to an exclusive watch party for the season premiere of Donald Trump’s second term. The annual gathering of the World Economic Forum (WEF), held in the alpine resort each January, presents itself as a place where the world’s political, business, and financial leaders meet to solve big problems.

This year, though, the 2,750 delegates will spend most of their time monitoring the US president’s return to the White House.

Irrespective of developments in communications technology – and growing awareness of the environmental cost of long-distance travel – thousands of politicians, executives, investors, bureaucrats, and journalists make the yearly trip to the Swiss Alps.

In many ways, the conflag started by Klaus Schwab more than five decades ago is a testament to the global jet set’s enduring desire to rub shoulders. Irrespective of developments in communications technology – and growing awareness of the environmental cost of long-distance travel – thousands of politicians, executives, investors, bureaucrats, and journalists make the yearly trip to the Swiss Alps.

Once there, they’ll squeeze into overheated conference rooms and crowded cocktail

parties to discuss corporate deals, the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and the latest developments in artificial intelligence.

The gathering has proved remarkably resilient to the backlash against global elites exemplified by Trump’s first electoral victory in 2016. Baseless online conspiracy theories, and public antipathy to the creature known as “Davos Man”, have so far failed to dent the WEF’s allure. In the year to June 2024, the organisation pulled in revenue of almost 440 million Swiss francs – a quarter more than in 2019.

This week, however, the snow-booted delegates’ attention will be fixed on one man almost 7,000 kilometres away. Trump is due to be sworn in at the United States Capitol on Monday, after which he intends to issue a flurry of executive orders and directives ranging from energy to immigration.

These moves could shake financial markets and change the fortunes of economies, industries, and companies around the world. Financiers and corporate executives, many of whom have so far discounted the president’s promises of blanket tariffs and mass deportations as campaign rhetoric, will be glued to their screens as the policy details trickle through. The former reality-TV host is set to reinforce the spectacle by making a virtual appearance in front of the Davos crowd on Thursday. — Reuters

Net-Zero commitments: Greenwashing or progress?



DR SUAAD JASSEM

The author is an assistant professor at Finance and Accounting department at College of Banking and Financial Studies



These commitments seek to align companies with international climate targets, such as the 1.5°C global warming target outlined in the Paris Agreement.

BUSINESSES worldwide have made bold Net-Zero pledges in recent years, promising to cut or offset their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by a given date.

These commitments seek to align companies with international climate targets, such as the 1.5°C global warming target outlined in the Paris Agreement.

These promises have brought up an important question, though: Are businesses accomplishing their sustainability objectives, or are they just “greenwashing” to improve their reputation?

As Oman strives towards Oman Vision 2040, which strongly emphasises sustainability and economic diversification, this question becomes even more pertinent.

Measures like the new ESG criteria from the Muscat Stock Exchange are increasing the need to ensure that sustainability pledges are impactful and believable.

The International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) introduced two ground-breaking frameworks, IFRS S1 and IFRS S2, which offer a critical lens through which to assess whether net-zero pledges are progress or just fancy words.

IFRS S1 AND S2’S FUNCTION IN PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY

General Requirements for

Financial Disclosures Associated with Sustainability (IFRS S1): A thorough framework for disclosing sustainability-related risks and opportunities is established by IFRS S1. Its main goal is to make sure that these disclosures are pertinent, consistent with financial reporting, and in line with the requirements of investors.

With a focus on governance, strategy, risk management, and analytics, IFRS S1 gives businesses a solid basis on which to show how their net-zero pledges complement their overarching business goals.

IFRS S2: Disclosures Concerning the Climate

Particularly, climate-related risks and opportunities are covered by IFRS S2. Building on the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) guidelines, it mandates that businesses reveal:

- **GHG emissions in scopes 1, 2, and 3:** These offer a thorough understanding of a business’s direct and indirect emissions.
- **Scenario analysis:** Showing how companies are getting ready for various climate futures.
- **Goals and metrics:** Showing advancement towards objectives for reducing emissions. By ensuring that businesses report on their Net-Zero efforts accurately and credibly, these

standards lower the possibility of greenwashing.

REAL PROGRESS VS. GREENWASHING: HOW GREENWASHING TAKES PLACE?

The practice of inflating or creating fake sustainability initiatives to improve a company’s image is known as “greenwashing.”

Typical strategies include:

- Writing sustainability reports ambiguously or deceptively.
- Ignoring severe environmental effects in favour of trivial projects.
- Aiming for net-zero goals without a well-defined plan or quantifiable indicators.

Applying IFRS Guidelines to Stop Greenwashing

IFRS S1 and S2 offer resources to deal with these problems by:

1. **Requiring Governance and Oversight:** Businesses must reveal how their boards manage opportunities and risks associated with sustainability, guaranteeing responsibility at the highest level.
2. **Demanding Data Integrity and Comparability:** Standardised reporting on climate risks and GHG emissions enables stakeholders to evaluate the performance of various businesses and sectors.
3. **Emphasising Materiality:** Businesses must reveal

information that is significant to their operations in order to make sure that their Net-Zero pledges are in line with their key competencies and financial results.

OMAN’S CONTRIBUTION TO ESG ADVANCEMENT

Sustainability is emphasised as a key component of national development in Oman Vision 2040.

One important step in encouraging businesses to incorporate international standards like IFRS S1 and S2 into their reporting procedures is the Muscat Stock Exchange’s (MSX) recent implementation of ESG reporting requirements.

By doing this, Oman can:

- **Draw in Foreign Investment:** Open ESG reporting meets the demands of international investors and makes Oman a more desirable location for sustainable investments.
- **Encourage Accountability:** IFRS standards make sure Omani businesses support their sustainability pledges with quantifiable results.
- **Boost Global Competitiveness:** By implementing IFRS S1 and S2, Omani businesses are positioned as leaders in sustainable business practices, as ESG becomes an increasingly important issue in global markets.

EXAMPLES OF ADVANCEMENTS AND DIFFICULTIES

Shell is a good example. Shell offers comprehensive disclosures on emissions objectives and progress in its sustainability reports, which are in line with GRI and increasing IFRS requirements.

Shell exhibits a dedication to accountability and openness by including climate-related risks in their financial reporting.

LESSONS FOR BUSINESSES IN OMAN

Omani companies can adapt their ESG strategy to local settings while taking inspiration from world leaders.

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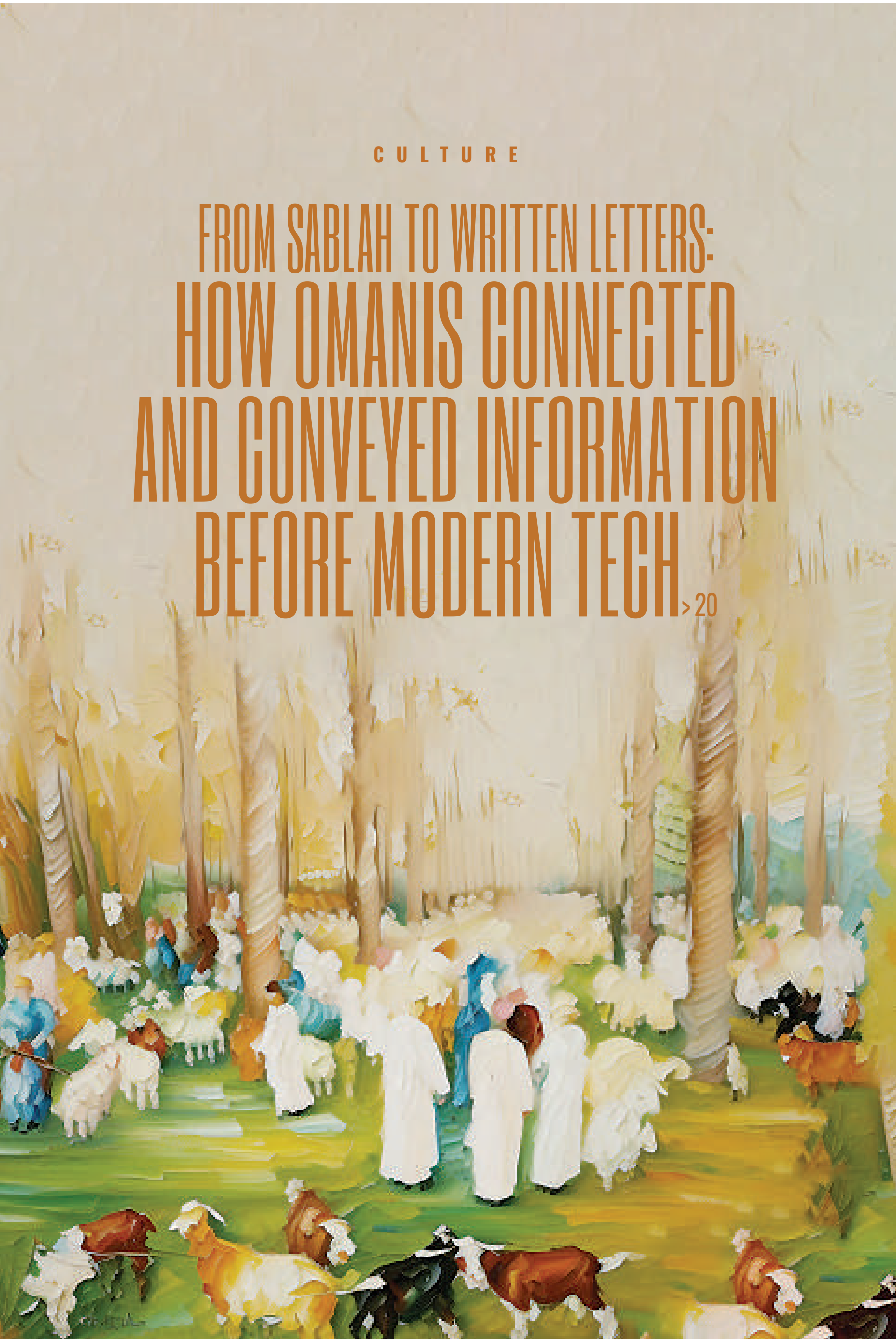
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ART/LIFE



CULTURE

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ENTERTAINMENT

Ambani venture to livestream Coldplay show in Ahmedabad



BRITISH rock-band Coldplay has partnered with Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani’s broadcast venture to livestream one of its two upcoming concerts in Ahmedabad, as international artists step up efforts to reach Indian fans.

Tens of thousands of people are set to attend the Coldplay concert in the western state of Gujarat on January 26, with tickets selling out within minutes of going on sale last year.

The Coldplay announcement is one of the first major partnerships since Ambani’s Reliance Industries and Walt Disney merged their Indian media assets last year in a \$8.5 billion deal that created the country’s biggest entertainment company.

The performance will be streamed on Disney+ Hotstar, the biggest streaming app by users in India.

“Coldplay’s biggest ever show will stream LIVE from Ahmedabad across all of India,” the band said in a video post on X on Friday.

The events market in India is going through a major shift, with young, well-to-do Indians’ appetite for entertainment growing fast and attracting global music stars like Dua Lipa, Ed Sheeran and Maroon 5.

Streaming apps are also hugely popular and millions of people use them to watch content including Hollywood and Bollywood movies and sports, especially the Indian Premier League cricket tournament.

Coldplay will play three concerts in Mumbai from Saturday, before heading to Ahmedabad for shows on Jan. 25 and Jan. 26. The concerts are part of their globally acclaimed Music of the Spheres World Tour.

“I am ready to pay a premium, if needed, to the platform for live streaming the concert,” said Deekshitha Devdas, a doctor, who failed to get tickets for any of Coldplay’s Indian shows.

“It would be very comfortable for someone like me, who is pregnant, to enjoy the show with my family from the comfort of my living room.” —Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



FILM

US director James Mangold attends the Italian Premier of the movie “A Complete Unknown” at the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome. —AFP



EVENTS

Starting January 24, 2025, the French singer Sylvie Vartan who formed a legendary couple with Johnny Hallyday will give her three final concerts in Paris, entitled “Je tire ma reverence” (“I take my leave”). —AFP



LIFESTYLE

People shop for Spring Festival couplets to prepare for the upcoming Lunar New Year, the year of the Snake in Taipei. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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‘Mufasa’ claws its way back atop North America box office



DISNEY’S “Mufasa: The Lion King” topped the North American box office on a long holiday weekend after ceding the top spot a week earlier, analysts said on Sunday.

The animated film earned an estimated \$15.5 million for the period from Friday to Monday, which is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations said.

Two new releases -- Sony’s “One of Them Days” and Universal’s “Wolf Man” -- took over the second and third spots.

Analyst David A. Gross predicted a “very profitable run” for “One of Them Days, which stars Keke Palmer and singer/songwriter SZA as roommates scrambling to pay rent or face eviction after a boyfriend spends their money. The film earned an estimated \$14 million over the holiday weekend.

“This is an excellent opening for an original Black

American comedy,” he said, boosted by “sensational critics reviews and an excellent audience score.”

Horror film “Wolf Man,” starring Christopher Abbott and Julia Garner, came in below analysts’ expectations, with \$12 million over four days.

As the start of a new horror series and as a remake of the 1941 classic starring Bela Lugosi, gross called the box office take “weak.”

In fourth spot, down one spot from last weekend, was Paramount’s animated “Sonic the Hedgehog 3” at \$10.3 million.

And in fifth, hanging strong in its eighth weekend out, was “Moana 2” at \$8.4 million.

Those numbers propelled the Disney blockbuster past the \$1 billion mark globally. It is the studio’s third 2024 release to hit the billion-dollar club after “Deadpool and Wolverine” and “Inside Out 2.” —AFP



Fashion world in flux for men’s week in Paris

MEN’S FASHION Week kicks off in Paris on Tuesday, with a number of top labels bedding in new designers or looking for fresh inspiration in an increasingly tough luxury market.

“This season feels a bit different from usual due to the shuffle of artistic directors in recent months,” Adrien Communier, fashion editor at GQ France, said.

Lanvin is set to return after a two-year hiatus, presenting Peter Copping’s debut collection as the artistic director of France’s oldest couture house.

Margiela in December, and Chanel unveiled their new creative director, Matthieu Blazy, only a month ago.

The schedule this week is set to be slightly lighter than last year, with 37 runway shows and 30 presentations showcasing the autumn-winter 2025-2026 collections.

“Even with a few no-shows, Paris remains by far the most abundant and creative of the Fashion Weeks,” said Alice Feillard, men’s buying director at luxury Paris emporium Galeries Lafayette.

Insiders also point to Willy

Other top luxury labels that are highly dependent on Asian spending like Dior Homme and Hermes will feature in the Paris lineup, alongside Japanese brands Kenzo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, and Mihara Yasuhiro.

As in previous seasons, Saint Laurent is not part of the official lineup, though the Anthony Vaccarello-led brand is expected to hold a show in Paris shortly after men’s Fashion Week.

In terms of men’s looks, experts say the aesthetic dominance of streetwear is fading, with designers



After completing his first show in September, Valentino’s new artistic director, Alessandro Michele, will return for haute couture week, which follows immediately after the men’s January 21-26 Fashion Week.

One of the most anticipated shows will be on Sunday by invogue French designer Simon Porte Jacquemus, whose Jacquemus brand is making its return to the official calendar after a five-year absence.

Notably absences include Givenchy, whose new chief designer Sarah Burton has reserved her first collection for the women’s Fashion Week in March, as well as Loewe, whose artistic director Jonathan Anderson is rumoured to be on the way out.

Hedi Slimane left his role as artistic director at Celine in October, John Galliano quit Maison



Chavarria’s Friday event as one to watch. The California-based designer, who helms his eponymous brand in addition to serving as vice president of design at Calvin Klein, is known for his oversized streetwear inspired by basketball and baseball.

WORKWEAR

Louis Vuitton will kick off the event on Tuesday evening with the presentation of Pharrell Williams’ fourth collection, with the front rows of celebrities set to scrutinised as much as the clothes, as usual.

Like all major fashion brands, Louis Vuitton is looking to trade through tricky conditions, with demand from the crucial Chinese market weakening due to a housing market downturn and low economic growth in the Asian powerhouse.



increasingly focused on a “casual tailoring” aesthetic, emphasising suits and structured pieces with a relaxed twist.

A major trend from the spring-summer 2025 collections was dubbed “workwear.” Trench coats, Barbour-style jackets, duffle coats, leather jackets and loafers are all set to be prominent on the runways.

“There’s a classic, slightly dandy but chic, elegant, and casual silhouette emerging,” said Feillard from Galeries Lafayette.

“There’s a need for comfort and elegance,” added Communier from GQ. Outdoor-inspired styles, featuring technical fabrics and trekking gear, are also set to continue.

When it comes to colours, brown has dominated for two seasons, and Communier expects it to remain a key shade this year. —AFP

FEATURES

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI
Instagram: @ruqaya.alkindi

BEFORE the modern renaissance era in the Sultanate of Oman, which began when the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970, modern means of communication were not available. However, people's daily routines and social lifestyles greatly contributed to enhancing interaction among individuals, thus facilitating the conveyance of news and knowledge.

People began their day with the Fajr prayer, performed before sunrise. “Men perform the prayers in mosques spread throughout Omani neighbourhoods. Thus, people find an opportunity to convey important news and share the conditions of others, such as if someone is ill, the birth of a child, the death of someone, or any other significant news. People gather five times daily to perform prayers at different times throughout the day,” explained Salim al Yaqoubi, an Omani who witnessed the period before and after the Renaissance (from the Wilayat of Ibri, Al Dhahirah Governorate).

Communication before the Renaissance was largely based on direct meetings and daily interactions among people. “The Omani Sablah provided an ideal space for society's members to express their opinions, share experiences and ideas, discuss important issues, and convey social, economic, and political news, which helped spread awareness within the community,” he noted.

Every Omani house, even today, has a designated place for men to gather and another for women (Sabla). Additionally, there is usually a public Sabla in most villages to serve the common interests of the people. Historically, men and women gathered, mostly during the day, to chat and enjoy each other's company while eating dates and drinking coffee.

Gatherings were also held in public places, such as squares or under large trees, where people of various ages and backgrounds would come together to exchange conversations and stories across diverse fields, including history, heritage, and the social and political events that Oman has experienced.

The Omani Sablah was also an effective means of intergenerational communication and community building at a time when modern media were not available. He noted, “The presence of different age groups, including the elderly, contributes to preserving cultural heritage, customs, and traditions and promoting social values in Omani society. Folk stories and proverbs were shared, and advice was exchanged on various aspects of life, helping to convey experience, wisdom, and knowledge from one generation to the next.”

The falaj system and agriculture played a pivotal role in organising social life by establishing many customs and social systems associated with them in Omani neighbourhoods, villages, and cities. Thus, they were fundamental to social interaction and effectively facilitated the conveyance of news.

A 2021 report from the University of Nizwa emphasised the importance of community cooperation during the dates and wheat harvest seasons, highlighting how shared chants and customs foster enthusiasm among villagers in their work. The report also explored the social significance of the falaj system, which requires significant collaborative effort right from its construction. To dig and build the water channels that supply irrigation to farms, beneficiaries must work together, creating strong bonds of solidarity. The maintenance of the falaj is another area where teamwork is essential, particularly following rainfalls that can damage the channels, thereby enhancing community interaction.

The study pointed out that specific areas within the falaj channels are allocated for



FROM SABLAH TO WRITTEN LETTERS: HOW OMANIS CONNECTED AND CONVEYED INFORMATION BEFORE MODERN TECH

particular uses, encouraging communal gatherings where villagers can exchange news and learn about each other's lives. The Sharia area, the initial point where the falaj surfaces, is reserved for drinking water, with its purity and clarity untainted by pollution or human use.

Moreover, the falaj channels extend into residential areas and farmlands, taking into account various social dimensions, such as the provision of designated spots for washing and bathing, with separate facilities for men and women. There are also areas for washing clothes and household items where women frequently gather, as well as designated places for bathing the deceased.

Maintenance needs for the falaj are communicated through various means, including the traditional practice of beating drums. When maintenance is completed, villagers often celebrate with a feast, further reinforcing their social connections. Additionally, the falaj system generates various job opportunities, particularly for women, such as supervising grain grinding with a water mill, enriching both community ties and the sharing of information.

Another role assigned to women was guarding the falaj, where a group of them would stand near the falaj when women gathered to wash and bathe, monitoring the area to prevent waste from being thrown into the falaj water. Men also played a role in maintaining and cleaning the falaj. Additionally, both women and men shared the task of transporting drinking water from the falaj's Sharia to their homes. These gatherings were effective means of enhancing interaction and sharing news among the community in the absence of modern communication methods.

Gunfire was also a common means of announcing urgent news. “A cannon or rifle would be fired to convey urgent information



such as fires and deaths. This was an effective way to inform a large number of people at once,” Salim noted.

Written letters served as another vital means of communication, particularly among Omani expatriates working abroad and their families in Oman. As he shared, “Sometimes, it would take months for a letter to arrive due to limited means of transportation, but it was an effective way to reassure loved ones and convey news. Letters were often entrusted to anyone travelling to the Sultanate of Oman or returning from abroad.”

The telegraph represented the fastest way to communicate news between the government and its representatives in the wilayats and subsequently to citizens. “The telegraph office was situated in the Wali's headquarters (the wilayat representative's office), which was often located in forts. The telegraph operated by encoding letters with electrical pulses and sending them through

wires to another office where they were printed. The employee would decode known signals and symbols, translating them into letters that conveyed the intended message. These messages were generally brief.”

News was also communicated through written or verbal messages transmitted by individuals, which often took a considerable amount of time to deliver. Similar delays applied when conveying government news and decisions to the populace.

Even without modern technology, Omanis were adept at nurturing profound connections within their communities, ensuring that information flowed freely and that traditions were preserved across generations. This foundation of communication laid the groundwork for the remarkable transformations that would come with the advent of modern communication technologies, forever changing the landscape of information exchange in Oman.