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SUNRISE 05:40 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 04:21 AM

DHUHR 12:10 PM

ASR 03:37 PM

MAGHRIB 06:36 PM

ISHA 07:50 PM

His Majesty begins Russia visit

HM, PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN TO HOLD OFFICIAL TALKS TODAY



HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK on Monday visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Garden in the Red Square in Moscow.

This took place within the context of His Majesty’s current state visit to the Russian Federation. Upon His Majesty’s arrival, he was received by Lieutenant General Yevgeny Seleznev, Commandant of Moscow, and some Russian official figures. During the visit, His Majesty placed a wreath of flowers at the memorial.

Earlier in the day, His Majesty the Sultan arrived in Moscow on a two-day state visit to the Russian Federation. An official reception was held at Vnukovo International Airport in Moscow in a manifestation of a warm welcome for His Majesty the Sultan.

At the foot of the ramp, His Majesty the Sultan was received by Maxim Reshetnikov, Minister of Economic Development, some officials in the Russian Federation and members of the Omani Embassy in Moscow. After that, His Majesty the Sultan inspected the Guard of Honour.

Then, His Majesty proceeded to the dais of honour where the Royal Anthem of Oman and the National Anthem of the Russian Federation were played. His Majesty the Sultan will be accorded an official reception protocols on Tuesday at the Kremlin Palace in the Russian capital, Moscow. His Majesty will meet with President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, as the two leaders will conduct official talks. — ONA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Garden in the Red Square in Moscow.

SEE ALSO P2 AND 3

HM SENDS CONDOLENCES TO VATICAN ON POPE’S DEATH

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to Cardinal Kevin Farrell, Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, on the demise of Pope Francis. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sympathies to the people of the Vatican and Christians all over the world. Pope Francis died on Monday aged 88, prompting mourning across the

Christian world for the energetic reformer who inspired devotion from Catholics but riled traditionalists during a 12-year papacy. Mourners gathered, many in tears, in St Peter’s Square, where just a day earlier the frail-looking pontiff had greeted worshippers on Easter Sunday, having recently left hospital following a 38-day battle with pneumonia. SEE ALSO P7

Five ‘future cities’ to boost real estate

MUSCAT: The Ministry of of Housing and Urban Planning is implementing policies that align with the National Spatial Development Strategy and the five-year plans derived from Oman Vision 2040. This was stated by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, when the

Majlis Ash’shura hosted him during its session on Monday as part of the second regular convening of its tenth term. The minister emphasised that urban planning serves as the primary tool for the strategy, ensuring optimal resource utilisation through modern mechanisms underpinning national projects. These include five future

cities including Sultan Haitham City, Al Thuraya City, Sohar Future City, Salalah Future City and Nizwa Future City, spanning a total area of 39 million square metres. Additionally, 22 integrated residential neighbourhood projects are under way, with the number expected to rise to 30 this year. SEE ALSO P4

HM'S VISIT UNDERLINES ADVANCED



MOSCOW: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik arrived in Moscow, on a two-day state visit to the Russian Federation. An official reception was held at Vnukovo International Airport in Moscow, in a manifestation of warm welcome for His Majesty the Sultan. At the foot of the ramp, His Majesty the Sultan was received by Maxim Reshetnikov, Minister of Economic Development, some officials in the Russian Federation and members of the Omani Embassy in Moscow. — ONA



HIS MAJESTY VISITS TOMB OF UNKNOWN SOLDIER IN MOSCOW



MOSCOW: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Garden in the Red Square in Moscow. This took place within the context of His Majesty's current state-visit to the Russian Federation. Upon His Majesty's arrival, he was received by Lieutenant General Yevgeny Seleznev, Commandant of Moscow and some Russian official figures. During the visit, His Majesty placed a wreath of flowers at the memorial. — ONA



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RELATIONS BETWEEN OMAN, RUSSIA

HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK left on Monday heading to the Russian Federation on a two-day state visit, during which he will meet with President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation. The visit, made in response to an invitation by the Russian President, underlines the advanced relations between Oman and Russia.

His Majesty the Sultan was seen off at the Royal Airport by HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, Sayyid Mohammed bin Sultan al Busaidy, Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, Nasr bin Hamoud al Kindi, Secretary-General of the Royal Court Affairs, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, Shaikh Al Fadhl bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, Lt Gen Said bin Ali al Hilali, Head of the Internal Security Service, Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, Maj Gen Matar bin Salim al Balushi, Commander of the Royal Army of Oman, Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman, Rear Admiral Saif bin Nasser al Rahbi, Commander of the Royal Navy of Oman and Maj Gen Musallam bin Mohammed Jaaboub, Commander of the Sultan's Special Force.

His Majesty the Sultan is accompanied during the visit by a high-ranking official delegation comprising HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Auli, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshiddi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority, Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Jamal bin Hassan al Mousawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum and Hamood bin Salim al Towaiya, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Russian Federation.

May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan in his journeys, grant him good health and wellbeing and guard him as a source of pride for his people! — ONA



Oman-Russia relation... towards broader horizons

BAIQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

In a world characterised by rapid changes and shared challenges, culture remains one of the most important tools for bringing people together and fostering deep understanding that transcends geographical borders and political barriers.

From this perspective, cultural cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and Russia represents an inspiring model of how soft power can be used to build strategic partnerships based on mutual respect and cultural diversity.

Cultural relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Russia are not new. Rather, their roots go back decades, when both countries recognised the importance of cultural understanding as a fundamental

step towards developing more comprehensive relations.

Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1985, the cultural dimension has received ample attention and care, manifested in the organisation of art exhibitions, folklore performances and academic seminars that highlight the rich heritage of both nations.

Russia, with its deep literary history and stunning musical heritage, has found inspiration in Omani culture, rich in maritime traditions and folklore. In turn, Omani cultural institutions have shown particular interest in exploring the philosophical and artistic dimensions of Russian culture, from Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to Chagall and Tchaikovsky.

Furthermore, efforts are underway to translate classical Russian literature into Arabic in a contemporary dialect that appeals to modern readers. Meanwhile, the Russian literary scene is seeing new translations of works by prominent Omani writers such as Sulaiman al Maamari and Badriya al Badri, introducing Russian readers to the uniqueness of Omani literature.

As for the future relations, opportunities look promising, especially with the emergence of digital technology as an effective tool for promoting cultural exchange. Launching joint online platforms, organising virtual seminars and producing bilateral documentaries could contribute to expanding cultural understanding between the two peoples.

Moreover, new areas of cooperation, such as intangible heritage, cultural tourism and the creative industry, could open up broad horizons for joint initiatives, especially considering the growing interest of young people in both countries in global cultures.

Cultural cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and Russia represents more than just an exchange of knowledge and arts; it is a civilisational message affirming that pluralism is not a threat, but rather an enrichment, and that openness to others does not mean the dissolution of identity.

In a turbulent world searching for new commonalities, Oman and Russia continue to set an example through their cultural partnership.

OMAN

GREETINGS

HM RECEIVES
CABLE FROM GREEK
PRESIDENT

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Konstantinos Tasoulas of the Hellenic Republic. In the cable, the President expressed his appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan’s heartfelt sentiments to him on the occasion of being elected as his country’s new President. He also underscored the importance of bolstering bilateral relations and cooperation in various fields to serve the interests of the two countries’ peoples. — ONA



The lab comprises advanced facilities, including special chambers for organic and inorganic chemistry. — ONA

ENGINEERING
RESEARCH LAB
OPENED AT UTAS
SALALAH

SALALAH: A chemical engineering research laboratory was opened at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Salalah on Monday under the auspices of HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar.

The lab embodies the existing partnership between academic and industrial sectors and reflects the national drive to support the system of research and innovation in the Sultanate of Oman.

The lab comprises advanced facilities, including special chambers for organic and inorganic chemistry, a research meeting hall and an applied research station.

The opening ceremony included a visual presentation about the laboratory’s components and objectives.

On the sidelines of the ceremony, a programme for cooperation between the UTAS and Dhofar Governorate was signed by HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, and Dr Said bin Hamad al Rubaie, Vice-Chancellor of UTAS.

The cooperation programme seeks to support partnerships in scientific, social and developmental fields. It also focuses on enhancing integration among state institutions and grooming national cadres.

The programme also provides for training the governorate’s employees, offering consultation, benefiting from UTAS expertise and capabilities, supporting research and using the outcomes to develop projects and programmes in the governorate, among other objectives.

The cooperation programme aims to support practical training programmes for UTAS students in the governorate’s institutions, promote innovation and entrepreneurship, develop SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and activate cooperation in the fields of environment and sustainability, digital transition and artificial intelligence (AI). — ONA

MOHT
REVIEWS
TOURISM
PREPARATIONS
FOR
KHAREEF
SEASON 2025

SALALAH: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) on Monday reviewed its preparations to regulate the operations of hotel and tourism establishments during the Khareef Dhofar Season of 2025. The ministry’s goal is to enhance the services provided to visitors and to review new laws and regulations, with the active participation of a number of licensed hotel and tourism establishments in Dhofar Governorate. An introductory workshop, organised by the ministry at the

multimedia hall of Al Baleed Archaeological Park in Salalah, addressed key topics such as the importance of quality hotel services, complaints handling mechanisms, the Zaer system, and tourism promotion through distinct packages and appealing offers for the khareef season. The participants were also introduced to the Tajawub platform, dedicated to receiving complaints and inquiries about the services provided. Khalid bin Abdullah al Abri, Director-General of the Directorate-General of Heritage and

Tourism in Dhofar Governorate, emphasised that the annual session organised by the ministry aims to achieve the highest quality standards and offer the best services to visitors. The session was attended by officials from licensed hotel and tourism establishments in the governorate, which currently has 80 licensed establishments. This number is expected to rise to 120 by the end of 2025. This highlights the ongoing appeal of the season, which runs annually from June 21 to September 21. — ONA

Shura meeting reviews
housing, urban initiatives

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

ON MONDAY, the Majlis Ash’shura hosted Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, during the ninth regular session of the second regular session of the tenth term. The session focused on the ministry’s statement, which covered several key initiatives aimed at shaping the future of Oman’s urban and housing landscape.

Dr Al Shueili presented the ministry’s ongoing projects and highlighted five key areas in the statement: the National Urban Development Strategy, the programmes of the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), legislation and laws regulating the urban and housing planning sector, digital transformation and simplified procedures, and addressing future challenges and opportunities in developing sustainable cities and integrated urban neighbourhoods.

In his speech, Dr Al Shueili emphasised that the ministry is working in alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and the National Strategy for Sustainable Development. The urban strategy is being integrated with the directives of the five-year plans, ensuring that urban growth and development meet the aspirations of Oman’s future. He stressed the ministry’s commitment to achieving balanced urban growth while promoting environmental sustainability and the diversification of the economy.

Badr al Jabri, a member of Majlis Ash’shura, noted that housing is one of the most critical issues affecting



Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili outlined key initiatives aimed at shaping the future of urban and housing landscape

The ministry launched 85 digital services, boosting its digital transformation rating from 58% in 2022 to 80% in 2024. It has allocated 216 housing units within integrated residential neighbourhoods and plans to allocate an additional 1,000 units in the Sultan Haitham City.

citizens’ daily lives. He highlighted that providing adequate and diverse housing options for citizens is a core mission of the ministry. The ministry aims to ensure that all segments of society have access to suitable housing through various programmes, such as ‘Choose Your Land’, ‘Buy Your Land’, and integrated residential neighbourhoods.

A significant part of the ministry’s efforts involves fostering effective partnerships between the public and private sectors. The ministry has successfully registered 90 developers for real estate development projects and granted 20 licences for such projects between 2022 and 2024. These initiatives have led to an investment value of RO 500 million for integrated residential and neighbourhood projects. The ministry’s efforts in this area aim to ensure sustainable urban growth while strengthening the economy.

In line with its focus on innovation and efficiency, the ministry has made substantial progress in its digital transformation. As of 2024, approximately 85 automated services have been introduced, facilitating citizens’ access to essential services through electronic platforms. This transformation has seen a leap in the ministry’s performance, with a

rating increase from 58 per cent in 2022 to 80 per cent in 2024.

The ministry’s commitment to sustainability is reflected in its push to develop smart cities that align with the latest sustainability standards. Dr Al Shueili explained that the ministry is working to ensure that future cities are built on advanced technology and integrated residential neighbourhoods, which will enhance the ability of governorates to accommodate population growth in a modern and sustainable manner.

To ensure efficient land use, the ministry has planned and prepared 49,018 plots for various uses, including residential, commercial and industrial purposes. Between 2021 and 2024, 69,963 plots of land and residential units were distributed under the Housing Options Programme, benefiting thousands of citizens. The ministry has allocated 216 housing units within integrated residential neighbourhoods and plans to allocate an additional 1,000 units in the Sultan Haitham City. This extensive distribution of residential options aims to support family stability and social cohesion.

The ministry has also focused on maximising the role of the real estate market by facilitating transparent and competitive land use services. Between 2022 and 2025, 2,189 plots of land for commercial, residential, industrial and agricultural use will be offered, further stimulating economic activity and attracting investment. The ministry has already processed 375,132 transactions, amounting to over RO 10 billion in value between 2021 and 2024.

OMAN MARKS WORLD CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION DAY

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman on Monday joined the international community in celebrating World Creativity and Innovation Day, which falls on April 21 every year.

Oman’s participation in the event reflects its keenness to promote the culture of innovation across various state institutions, in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

A celebration to this effect was organised by the Ministry of Labour in Muscat Governorate



The ceremony included a visual presentation and a dialogue session

under the auspices of Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development.

Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit announced the launch of two national initiatives: ‘National Competencies in Corporate Innovation’ and ‘Certified Innovation Professional.’ The initiatives seek to upgrade the capabilities of Omani cadres operating in the field of innovation. — ONA

World Heritage Day marked with spotlight on resilient heritage

AMAL AL RIYAMI
MANAH, APRIL 21

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, in collaboration with the Oman Across Ages Museum, marked World Heritage Day with a celebration in the Wilayat of Manah, held under the theme ‘Resilient Heritage in the Face of Disasters and Conflicts’. The event highlighted innovative projects and sustainable investments in heritage preservation.

Graced by Shaikh Dr Faisal bin Ali al Zeedi, Wali of Manah, the event brought together officials,

experts and culture enthusiasts for a day of reflection, presentations and discussions on protecting and revitalising Oman’s heritage.

Opening the ceremony, Moza bint Suleiman al Wardiyah, Assistant Director-General for Museum Affairs, stressed the importance of this global occasion in preserving the cultural legacy of nations - a reflection of human identity, history and memory.

The programme featured several inspiring case studies. Abdullah bin Nasser al Othmani, founder of KMKAN in Bahla, shared how his heritage guesthouse and café



World Heritage Day was marked under the theme ‘Resilient Heritage in the Face of Disasters and Conflicts’

preserves the soul of old Bahla while offering modern hospitality.

Ishaq al Sharyani from Bawareq National Company outlined the transformation of Harat Al Aqur in Nizwa. With limited initial funds, his team restored over 1,200 square metres of the historical wall and surrounding areas.

Abdullah bin Nasser al Shuraiqi, Director of Al Jurf Al Sharqi Company, spoke about the revival of the 500-year-old Soujrah Heritage Village in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, now a thriving cultural destination with over 50,000 visitors and strong community engagement.

Eng Mohammed bin Zahir al Nabhani of Bawader Global Company shared success stories from Nizwa Fort, Oman’s most visited heritage site, which has hosted over 80 major events, 700 traditional performances, and benefited more than 7,000 individuals and small enterprises.

The event closed with a message from the organisers of Oman Across Ages Museum, emphasising that heritage preservation goes beyond restoration. It’s about engaging communities, fostering knowledge and building resilience for the future.

SHORTTAKES



The forum included a panel discussion with library directors and experts.

FORUM DISCUSSES
DIGITAL REVOLUTION
IN LIBRARIES

AL MUSANNAH: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Al Musannah on Monday hosted the second edition of its university library forum under the title 'Libraries and Information Institutions in the Era of Digital Revolution: The Transformation of Present and Future'.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Shaikh Ahmed bin Ali al Habsi, Wali of Al Musannah.

The forum served as a key knowledge platform to enhance the role of libraries in keeping pace with digital transformation and adopting artificial intelligence (AI) tools. It addressed contemporary issues and facilitated the exchange of expertise among specialists, contributing to shaping a more advanced future for this vital sector.

The event featured several research papers discussing diverse topics, including 'Ethics of Using AI in Scientific Research'. Successful experiences in implementing AI in libraries and information institutions were also highlighted, with contributions from the Ministry of Education and Sultan Qaboos University.

State Council reviews
draft laws on state dues

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

ON Monday, the State Council, chaired by Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, convened to discuss the draft laws on the collection of state dues and the rights of persons with disabilities during the seventh session of the second term of the eighth legislative period.

The session commenced with speeches by the Council Chairman and Salim bin Musallam Qatan, Vice-President of the State Council, followed by discussions on the two key draft laws referred by the Council of Ministers. These discussions aimed to enhance the efficiency and outcomes of the legislative process, aligning with the nation's vision and public interest.

Dr Dhafer bin Awad al Shanfari, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee, outlined the need for a comprehensive legal framework to address the shortcomings of the previous system governing state dues.

The new law, which updates a nearly 30-year-old system, seeks to ensure a more efficient, transparent, and modern approach to collecting government dues while balancing the rights of the state and debtors. The law is expected to significantly strengthen the state's financial resources, benefiting public services and development projects.



Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili chaired meeting of the State Council to discuss draft laws on state dues and the rights of persons with disabilities

Regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, Dr Mohammed bin Said al Hajri, Chairman of the Social and Cultural Committee, explained that the draft law guarantees civil, social, cultural, and other rights for persons with disabilities. The law aims to ensure their integration into society, promoting equal opportunities and non-discrimination. This law aligns with international conventions signed by Oman and represents a shift towards sustainable and integrated care, focusing on empowerment and equality for individuals with disabilities.

Dr Rashid bin Salem al Masroori and Dr Abdul Karim bin Ali al Lawati further emphasised the importance of these laws in protecting public funds and ensuring the rapid collection of state

dues, as well as advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in accordance with international standards. The session concluded with the review of the General Secretariat's report on the Council's activities.

The discussions also underscored the importance of these draft laws in shaping a more robust legislative framework in Oman. The proposed updates to the state dues collection system aim to modernise government financial procedures, enhancing efficiency and transparency.

Similarly, the draft law on disability rights is expected to have a transformative impact on the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities.



Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos Private School
JOB VACANCIES

Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos Private School (bilingual) is hiring teachers for the following vacancies for the academic year 2025 -2026:

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Ministry of Social Development

Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender :-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non-retundable)	
					Small and Medium Companies	Local Companies
150/2025	Providing and installing a meeting system in the meeting room of the Office of His Excellency the Undersecretary	Companies specialized in information technology services and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third or fourth grade	Thursday 01-05-2025 02:00 PM	Sunday 11-05-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O
153/2025	Cleaning the National Autism Center building in Al Khoud	Companies specialized in cleaning, laundry, and pest control services, registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third, or fourth grade.	Sunday 11-05-2025 02:00 PM	Sunday 01-06-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O
154/2025	Hosting the Ministry's AI chat system	Companies specialized in information technology services and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third or fourth grade	Thursday 01-05-2025 02:00 PM	Sunday 11-05-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O
155/2025	Hosting the Ministry's domain and email servers and official systems	Companies specialized in information technology services and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third or fourth grade	Thursday 01-05-2025 02:00 PM	Sunday 11-05-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O
156/2025	Consulting services (design and supervision) for the establishment of an Autism Spectrum Disorder Center for Care and Rehabilitation - Al-Khoud	Companies specialized in consulting offices and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board with an excellent or first class.	Tuesday 06-05-2025 02:00 PM	Wednesday 21-05-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at theTender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>). On **Tuesday 22/04/2025**

❖ For Inquiry, please contact though the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).

“ The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry”

www.mosd.gov.om

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines Romeo Brawner Jr delivers a message, in Quezon City. — Reuters

PHILIPPINES, US LAUNCH JOINT COMBAT DRILLS

MANILA: More than 14,000 Filipino and American soldiers kicked off annual military exercises on Monday for a “full battle test” between the two defence treaty allies in the face of regional security concerns. The annual “Balikatan” (shoulder-to-shoulder) exercises will run for three weeks until May 9, showcasing an array of US weapons that include the NMESIS anti-ship missile system and HIMARS rocket launchers.

The Philippines will test its own modern missiles in live-fire exercises with American counterparts, according to a summary shared with media. Lieutenant General James Glynn, the exercise director for the US side, described this year’s drills as “full battle tests” where capabilities of both forces will be measured in multiple scenarios. Exercises include defending against missile threats, preventing invasions at sea, and sinking a decommissioned Philippine navy vessel in a maritime strike test. About 9,000 US soldiers and 5,000 Filipino troops are participating this year, officials said. Small contingents from Australia, Japan, Britain, France and Canada are also participating and 16 other countries have signed up as observers. — Reuters

IRAN’S TOP DIPLOMAT TO VISIT CHINA TODAY



Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi attends a press conference, in Moscow. — Reuters

TEHRAN: Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi will visit China on Tuesday, foreign ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said on Monday, ahead of a third round of nuclear talks between Tehran and Washington. In a trip to Moscow last week, Araqchi said that Tehran always closely consults with its friends, Russia and China, over the nuclear issue.

“It is natural that we will consult and brief China over the latest developments in Iran-US indirect talks,” Baghaei said, adding that Beijing can play a constructive role in this process. Long-time foes Iran and the US started negotiations earlier this month with the aim of placing limits on Tehran’s nuclear programme.

“The policy of maximum pressure is not just against Iran but also other countries and goes against freedom of trade. In the case of China, sanctions also seek to disrupt south-south cooperation,” Baghaei said. “China and Iran have maintained exchanges and contacts at all levels and in various fields. With regard to the specific visit mentioned, I have no information to offer at the moment,” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said on Monday regarding Araqchi’s upcoming visit. — Reuters

EL SALVADOR OFFERS TO SWAP US DEPORTEES WITH VENEZUELA

SAN SALVADOR: Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele offered Venezuela a trade of 252 Venezuelans deported to his country by the United States for an equal number of political prisoners held by President Nicolas Maduro’s regime. The offer followed a broadside from President Donald Trump against US Supreme Court judges who on Saturday ordered a halt to removals like that of the Venezuelans, which the administration has carried out

under an obscure wartime law. “I want to propose to you a humanitarian agreement calling for the repatriation of 100 per cent of the 252 Venezuelans who were deported,” Bukele wrote to Maduro on X. The prisoners would be sent “in exchange for the release and handing over of an identical number from among the thousands of political prisoners that you hold,” he added. The Salvadoran leader, who was hosted at the White House last week, said that

“all the Venezuelans we have in custody were detained as part of an operation against gangs like Tren de Aragua in the United States.” The US is paying Bukele’s government to imprison them in the country’s notorious CECOT prison outside the capital San Salvador. Late on Sunday, Venezuela’s Attorney General Tarek William Saab described Bukele’s prisoner exchange offer as “cynical,” demanding a “complete list” of the detained migrants. — AFP

Medic killings ‘summary executions’: Gaza officials

GAZA’S civil defence agency on Monday accused the Israeli military of carrying out “summary executions” in the killing of 15 rescue workers last month, rejecting the findings of an internal probe by the army. The medics and other rescue workers were killed when responding to distress calls near Gaza’s southern city of Rafah early on March 23, days into Israel’s renewed offensive in the Palestinian territory. Among those killed were eight Red Crescent staff members, six from the Gaza civil defence rescue agency and one employee of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, according to the UN humanitarian agency OCHA and Palestinian rescuers.

“The video filmed by one of the paramedics proves that the Israeli occupation’s narrative is false and demonstrates that it carried out summary executions,” Mohammed al Mughair, a civil defence official, said, accusing Israel of seeking to “circumvent” its obligations under international law. Following the shooting, the Red Crescent released a video recovered from the phone of one of the victims. It does not show executions, but it does directly contradict the version of events initially put forward by the Israeli military. In particular, the video shows clearly that the ambulances were travelling with sirens, flashing lights and headlights on. The military had claimed the ambulances were travelling “suspiciously” and without lights. The incident drew international



Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a tent camp sheltering displaced people in Gaza City. — Reuters

It is invalid and unacceptable, as it justifies the killing and shifts responsibility to a personal error in the field command when the truth is quite different

NEBAL FARSAKH

condemnation, including concern about possible war crimes from UN human rights commissioner Volker Turk. An Israeli military investigation into the incident released on Sunday “found no evidence to support claims of execution” or “indiscriminate fire” by its troops, but admitted to operational failures and said it was firing a field commander. It said six of those killed were militants, revising an earlier claim that nine of the men were fighters.

The dead, who were buried in sand by Israeli forces, were only recovered several days after the attack from what the UN human rights agency OCHA described as a “mass grave”. The Palestine Red Crescent Society denounced the report as “full of lies”. “It is invalid and unacceptable, as it justifies the killing and shifts responsibility to a personal error in the field command

when the truth is quite different,” Nebal Farsakh, spokesperson for the Red Crescent, said.

The Israeli investigation said there were three shooting incidents in the area on that day. In the first, soldiers shot at what they believed to be a Hamas vehicle. In the second, around an hour later, troops fired “on suspects emerging from a fire truck and ambulances”, the military said. The probe determined that the fire in the first two incidents resulted from an “operational misunderstanding by the troops”. In the third incident, the troops fired at a UN vehicle “due to operational errors in breach of regulations”, the military said.

Reserve Major General Yoav Har-Even, who led the investigation, accepted that troops had committed an error. “We’re saying it was a mistake. We don’t think it’s a daily mistake,” he said. — AFP



J D VANCE MEETS INDIAN PM

US Vice President J D Vance met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi after a red carpet welcome in New Delhi on Monday, as India bids for an early trade deal to stave off punishing tariffs.

Modi’s office said that there had been “significant progress in the negotiations” with the two countries negotiating the first tranche of a trade deal. New Delhi hopes to secure relief within the 90-day pause on tariffs announced by US President Donald Trump this month. Vance’s four-day visit comes two months after Modi held talks at the White House with Trump, who unveiled 26 per cent tariffs on India. — Reuters

OVERNIGHT RAIDS

Deadly strikes kill at least 12 in Yemen



Yemen’s Ansar Allah said on Monday that US air strikes on Sanaa killed at least 12 people and wounded 30, with a military spokesperson later claiming attacks on US aircraft carriers and Israel. The Saba news agency cited the ministry as saying the dead and injured had come from overnight strikes on a market and a residential zone in Sanaa’s Farwa district. Other raids were reported in the central province of Marib. — AFP

HORRIFYING SITUATION

30 die in paramilitary shelling in Sudan



Paramilitary shelling of Sudan’s besieged city of El Fasher, in the western region of Darfur, has killed more than 30 civilians and wounded dozens more, activists said on Monday. The attack involved “heavy artillery shelling” and targeted the city’s residential neighbourhoods, said the local resistance committee, one of hundreds of volunteer groups coordinating aid across Sudan. The UN’s humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher described the situation in the region as “horrificing”. — AFP

MUTUAL BENEFITS

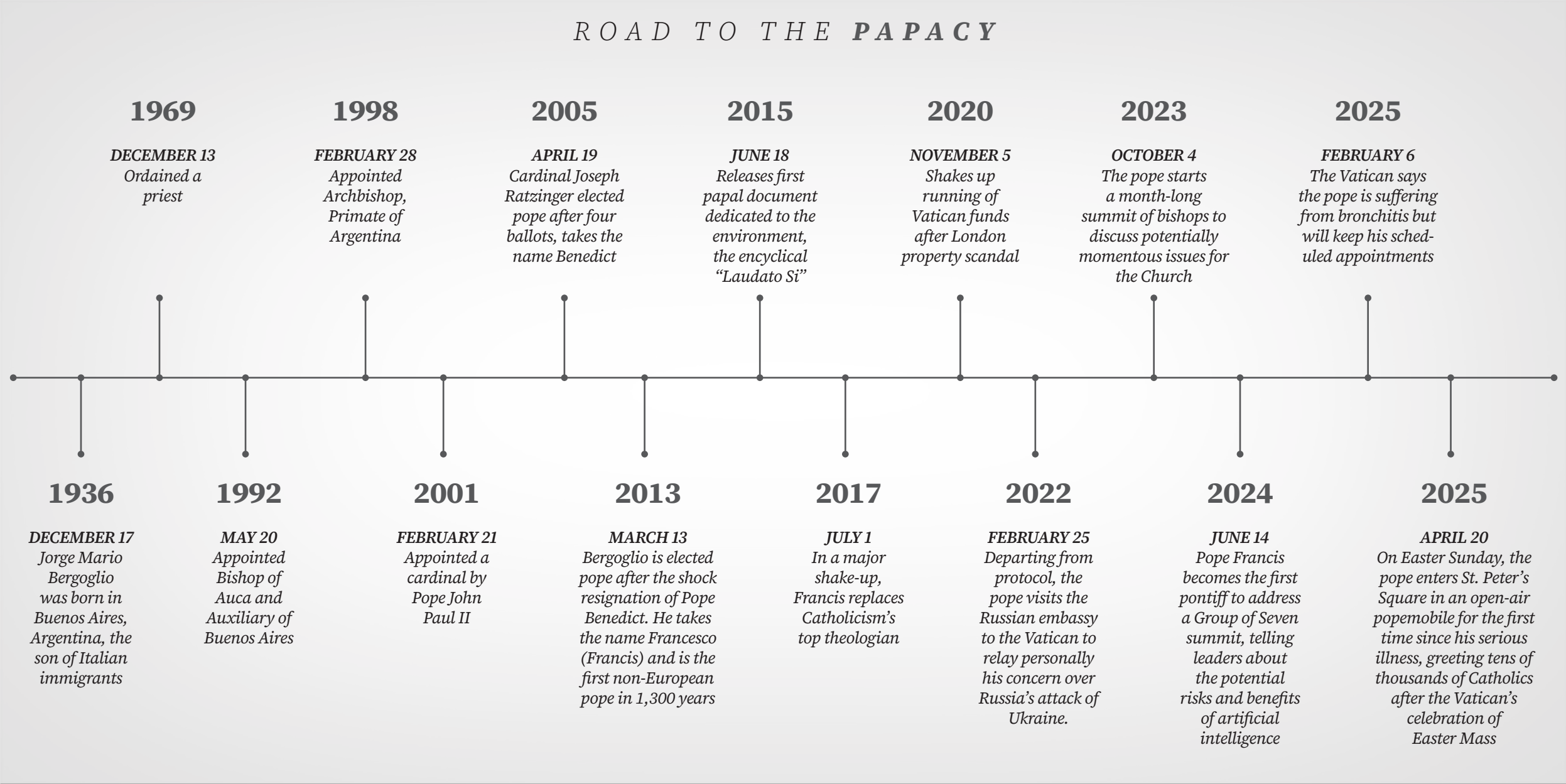
South Korea braces for tough US talks



South Korea’s acting President Han Duck-soo said on Monday he expected trade talks with the United States this week in Washington to be the start of meaningful cooperation. Han said that South Korea’s ministers of finance and industry are meeting US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and USTR representative Jamieson Greer on April 24 at 8 am. Seoul will make an “all-out effort” to find a mutually beneficial solution. — Reuters



POPE FRANCIS 1936 - 2025



POPE FRANCIS, FIRST LATIN AMERICAN PONTIFF, DIES



Pope Francis frees doves at the Istanbul's Holy Spirit Cathedral as part of a three-day trip in Türkiye. — AFP



Pope Francis opens the Holy Door to mark the opening of the Catholic Holy Year, or Jubilee, in St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican. — Reuters

POPE FRANCIS, the first Latin American leader of the Roman Catholic Church, has died, the Vatican said on Monday, ending an often turbulent reign marked by division and tension as he sought to overhaul the hidebound institution. He was 88, and had suffered a serious bout of double pneumonia this year, but his death came as a shock after he had been driven around St. Peter's Square in an open-air popemobile to greet cheering crowds on Easter Sunday. "Dear brothers and sisters, it is with profound sadness I must announce the death of our Holy Father Francis," Cardinal Kevin Farrell announced on the Vatican's TV channel. "At 7:35 this morning the Bishop of Rome, Francis, returned to the house of the Father."

The Vatican said a ceremony planned for Sunday, April 27, when Carlo Acutis was to become the first Catholic saint of the millennial generation, had been postponed. Francis had on Sunday made his first prolonged public appearance since being discharged on March 23 from a 38-day hospital stay for pneumonia. In an Easter Sunday message read aloud by an aide as the pope looked on from the main balcony of St. Peter's Basilica,



Pope Francis blesses a child as he visits the refugee camp of Saint Sauveur in Bangui, Central African Republic. — Reuters

the pontiff had reiterated his call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. At the Vatican, locals, tourists and pilgrims visiting for Easter expressed their shock and grief.

Doctors had prescribed two months of rest when the pope left hospital last month but he appeared on a number of occasions and met Britain's King Charles in April and had a brief meeting on Sunday with visiting US Vice-President JD Vance. "My heart goes out to the millions of Christians all over the world



Argentina's cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, elected Pope Francis I (3rdL) addresses the crowd on the balcony of St Peter's Basilica's, at the Vatican. — AFP

who loved him," Vance said on X.

Other world leaders were reacting to the pope's death with praise for his efforts to reform the worldwide church and offering condolences to the world's 1.4 billion Catholics. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni mourned the departure of "a great man, a great shepherd". European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "He inspired millions, far beyond the Catholic Church, with his humility and love so pure for the less fortunate."



People pay their respects inside The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood, in London. — AFP

Jose Ramos-Horta, the president of East Timor, where Francis visited in September 2024 as part of the longest foreign trip of his papacy, said the pope "leaves behind a profound legacy of humanity, of justice, of human fraternity".

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected pope on March 13, 2013, surprising many Church watchers who had seen the Argentine cleric, known for his concern for the poor, as an outsider. He sought to project simplicity into the grand role

and never took possession of the ornate papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace used by his predecessors, saying he preferred to live in a community setting for his "psychological health". He initiated changes within the Vatican, emphasizing transparency, accountability and financial reform, and appointed more women to senior posts in its hierarchy.

While he struggled with internal dissent, Francis became a global superstar, drawing huge crowds on his many foreign travels as he tirelessly promoted interfaith dialogue and peace, taking the side of the marginalised, such as migrants.

Unique in modern times, there were two men wearing white in the Vatican for much of Francis' rule, with his predecessor Benedict opting to continue to live in the Holy See after his shock resignation in 2013. Benedict, a hero of the conservative cause, died in December 2022.

Argentines held a special Mass and lit candles on Monday, mourning in shock for their countryman Pope Francis, who has died after battling a serious illness in recent months. — Reuters

OPINION

Economic cooperation anchors Oman-Russia partnership



THE diplomatic relationship between Oman and Russia has been characterised by mutual respect and cooperation since its establishment. And as both nations celebrate their 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s state visit to Russia marks a significant milestone in enhancing bilateral relations.

The visit is particularly noteworthy as it represents the first time an Omani Sultan has officially visited the Russian Federation. This high-level engagement underscores both countries’ commitment to deepening their strategic partnership across various economic, cultural and educational sectors.

Trade relations between Oman and Russia have seen substantial growth in recent years. By the end of 2024, the trade volume reached approximately RO 133.108 million, with Oman exporting metal products and fertilisers while importing food items and machinery from Russia.

The visit comes at a time of growing engagement between the private sectors of Oman and Russia through meetings and events, including Oman’s participation as a guest of honour at the 27th St Petersburg

International Economic Forum and activities of the Omani-Russian Business Council.

Economic collaboration has become a cornerstone of Omani-Russian relations. The establishment of joint ventures and special economic zones in Oman aims to attract Russian investments, further solidifying economic ties.

Oman’s strategic location, with access to open seas and year-round navigable warm waters, provides Russia with an ideal opportunity to export its products through Omani ports, which are close to emerging markets in Asia, Africa and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The promising cooperation opportunities exist in food security, including the potential establishment of large wheat and grain silos in Oman for export to regional and international markets. Other investment opportunities lie in technology, petrochemicals and tourism, with Russia being a promising tourism market.

In regard to cultural ties, Oman and Russia have been strengthening them through various initiatives. The establishment of partnerships between major museums in both countries facilitates cultural diplomacy.

The creation of joint ventures and special economic zones is designed to attract Russian investments, further strengthening the economic partnership between the two nations

For instance, exhibitions showcasing Omani heritage have been held at prominent Russian institutions. This cultural exchange not only promotes mutual understanding, but also attracts tourism from both nations.

His Majesty’s visit to Russia signifies a pivotal moment in Oman-Russia relations, reflecting a shared vision for enhanced cooperation across multiple domains.

This visit is expected to lay the groundwork for future collaborations that will benefit both nations economically and culturally.

Diplomatic relations between Oman and Russia were established in 1985, but the ties have deepened significantly.

Politically, both nations share common views on several regional issues, including the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Oman’s unique position as a mediator allows it to facilitate dialogue among conflicting parties, which aligns well with Russia’s diplomatic goals.

High-level visits between officials from both countries have increased frequently, enhancing mutual trust and cooperation on security matters. As both nations navigate an increasingly complex global landscape, their collaboration is set to deepen further.

THE ARGENTINE PONTIFF WHO NEVER RETURNED HOME

LUCILA SIGAL

Argentines long waited for Pope Francis to visit the homeland he left in 2013 to become the head of the Roman Catholic Church. With his death on Monday at the age of 88 after a long illness, those hopes for his return end unrealised.

Francis made more than 45 international trips during his papacy, including the first by any pope to Iraq, the UAE, Myanmar, North Macedonia, Bahrain and Mongolia. But the one-time Archbishop of Buenos Aires never returned to Argentina, where he divided opinion but gained the moniker of the ‘slum pope’ for his focus on the poor and spending time in the capital’s tough urban neighbourhoods, or ‘villas’.

“One of the great curiosities of his papacy was the fact that, unlike his predecessors, Francis never visited his native country,” Jimmy Burns, author of the 2015 biography ‘Francis, Pope of Good Promise’, said weeks before his death.

Burns said he believed Francis did not want to be seen siding either with the left-leaning Peronists or the conservatives in the country’s polarised political environment. “Any visit would try and be exploited by one side or the other, and he would unwittingly fuel those divisions,” he said.

Many in Argentina anticipated a visit to the country shortly after Francis took office and visited Brazil. There was again chatter about a trip last year. But in both cases the visit never materialised.

Guillermo Marco, spokesman for the pope when he was Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, said it had been a ‘wasted opportunity’ for Argentina. Francis, he said, had a ‘tango soul’ - a reference to the music and dance that has its origins in the back streets of Buenos Aires.

“He would have liked to (come) if he could have made a simple trip, let’s say, where he came to visit the people he loves and, I don’t know, celebrate a mass for the people,” said Marco, who retained a close relationship with Francis. In September last year, the pope had told journalists he had wanted to go to Argentina, saying “they are my people,” but that “various matters had to be resolved first”.

“It is with profound sorrow that I learned this sad morning that Pope Francis, Jorge Bergoglio, passed away today and is now resting in peace,” President Javier Milei wrote on social media platform X. Some said Francis should have visited regardless of the political environment.

“The chorus is divided. There are those who say that he should have come anyway because it would have helped close the political rift a little,” said Sergio Rubin, Argentine journalist and co-author of papal biography “The Jesuit”. — Reuters

In praise of books that whisper secrets

EVEN before I turned five, I ran away from home — not in rebellion, but in search of magic. I had heard there was a bookstore nearby, and I simply had to find it. I remember the sunlight bouncing off the pavement as I marched, determined, towards the promise of books. When my frantic mother finally caught up to me, I pulled her into the Muttrah store and pointed at the book I had come for: it had a golden cover and a majestic golden lion. I did not know how to read properly yet, but I knew this book belonged to me.

To celebrate the 29th Muscat International Book Fair, I find myself reflecting on this early memory, one of many that shaped my lifelong love affair with books. For me, books have never been just stories — they are living things, secret-keepers, whisperers of wisdom, and sometimes, unexpected friends. I do not believe I find books. I believe books find me.

Over the years, I have dreamt of building a library of what I call “unforgotten books” — books that carry the secrets of the universe, books that heal, books that speak in esoteric languages only the soul understands. Some are ancient texts, some are quietly published treasures and others are the small, unassuming volumes I stumble upon in forgotten bookstores or the free book stands I adore in the US and elsewhere. I wander through these spaces like a traveller moving through a sacred land, letting the titles and textures guide me. Sometimes, quite literally, a book falls at my feet. That’s when I know it’s meant to come home with me.

There is a particular kind of joy in finding a book no one else seems to notice. Once, in a dimly lit American used bookstore tucked between a bakery and a hardware store, I found a dusty copy of a book



DR NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

The writer is Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

Books are my litmus test for wellness, my mirrors and my medicine and dream of building a quiet room filled with these magical books



29th Muscat International Book Fair is from April 23 to May 3

about ancient symbols and healing practices. It had no price tag, and when I brought it to the counter, the shopkeeper said, “This one? It’s been sitting there for years. Take it.” That book would later provide comfort during one of the most emotionally trying times of my life. How did it know?

Books also have a curious way of diagnosing me. On most nights, I end the day curled up with a mystery novel. But on nights when I can’t bring myself to read — when even the familiar promise of suspense and resolution cannot soothe me — I know something is wrong. That’s when I stop and listen: What is the unease beneath the surface? Books are my litmus test for wellness, my mirrors and my medicine.

Some people chase fame or fortune. I chase golden lions and forgotten manuscripts. I dream of

building a quiet room filled with these magical books, a sanctuary where others might also come to find the texts that call out to them. It won’t be the kind of library that focuses on bestsellers or rankings. It will be a place for books that have waited patiently, often for decades, to share their wisdom with the right reader.

As the 29th Muscat International Book Fair invites us once again to celebrate the written word, I celebrate not only the books that line the shelves of glossy stores but also the ones buried in cardboard boxes, hidden in corner shops, or left behind on benches with handwritten notes inside. These are the books that carry golden threads of mystery, healing and soul.

And somewhere out there, I believe, another child is running towards a bookstore, searching for her own golden lion.

Who will now speak for the poor and migrants?



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is senior editor of Observer

EVERY time we say goodbye to an international personality, we notice a change in the world dynamics.

The world mourned for Pope Francis with a heavy heart, as he had been a person who was able to connect with people from different walks of life and nationalities.

His compassion for mankind, no matter what their belief and faith were, connected people across the world.

He spoke relentlessly for the poor, victims of war, refugees, and migrants. While their issues might have been addressed in meetings, Pope Francis spoke for them with hope. Just with his presence and words, he was able to generate interfaith unity.

He had a background in chemistry, taught literature and psychology in college, and attained a doctorate in theology. He has been referred to as the people's pope, maybe for his acceptance of all or even for his willingness to let people take selfies with him, but he also won the title, Person of the Year by Time in 2013.

He had received America's highest civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, from President Biden in January 2025.

In the future, when we look at this day in history, it will be stated that this was the day when the world lost Pope Francis in the year 2025, but along with that bit of history would also be a memory of the values he stood for.

Even in his last address on Easter Sunday,

he was concerned about the suffering of people.

In a speech, he spoke about receiving very serious and painful news from Gaza and how unarmed civilians were being subjected to bombings and shootings. And he urged, 'Let's pray for peace.'

He wanted the world to recognise the sufferings of the refugees and migrants. Not all leaders stood by his stand, but they all mourned his departure.

He had a mission, and he took it seriously. He spoke on behalf of Planet Earth too.

Pope Francis had written a letter addressed to every person on this planet, urging all to protect the Earth, 'Our common home.'

In the letter, he had written, "The Earth is God's gift to us, full of beauty and wonder, where the fruits of the Earth belong to everyone."

We enjoy the sunrises and sunsets, not realising how many are able to enjoy the same experiences across the earth. Peace on Earth and peace of mind are interlinked. People might migrate because of unrest that could be natural or man-made.

St Peter Square is being filled with visitors like any other occasion, but this time there will be the media, and everyone knows in their hearts that this is a day that is going to be etched in history as the world takes in the news of the Pope's passing, whom they had just seen the previous day, on Easter.

The pope stood by his mission throughout his life, but for the rest of the world, it could

The pope stood by his mission throughout his life, but for the rest of the world, it could be momentary wisdom that he imparted throughout

be momentary wisdom that he imparted throughout. However, with dedicated concerns and measures taken, lives could be made better from each home to society to nations and the world as a whole.

The voices of sufferers may not be heard, as they may not have a platform to express their concerns and experiences, but some listeners do seek to hear them and understand their plight.

Days before his departure, the Pope had visited a prison, a clear indication that no one should be forgotten.

It makes us wonder about judging others and branding them forever. It is also an inspiration and realisation of how important hope is - in giving and possessing the thoughts of hope.

We often tend to forget that each day starts with sunshine filled with opportunities. Our emotions tend to rule our minds, not realising the simple logic that when we are stuck in circumstances, we can try to change our situations.

So when the suffering grows, some might think of crossing land and sea, not knowing the invisible lines of borders are prevalent in order to maintain regulations.

It can be a never-ending debate, but if they have peace on their land, guaranteeing safety and resources, as well as opportunities, people would not really want to suffer and take risks.

People are in search of a better life and means to provide for their families.

INDIANS BATTLE RESPIRATORY ISSUES AND SKIN RASHES

TORA AGARWALA

Two-year-old Sumaiya Ansari, a resident of India's Byrnihat town which is ranked the world's most polluted metropolitan area by Swiss Group IQAir, was battling breathing problems for several days before she was hospitalised in March and given oxygen support.

She is among many residents of the industrial town on the border of the northeastern Assam and Meghalaya states - otherwise known for their lush, natural beauty - inflicted by illnesses that doctors say are likely linked to high exposure to pollution.

Byrnihat's annual average PM2.5 concentration in 2024 was 128.2 micrograms per cubic metre, according to IQAir, over 25 times the level recommended by the WHO.

PM2.5 refers to particulate matter measuring 2.5 microns or less in diameter that can be carried into the lungs, causing deadly diseases and cardiac problems. "It was very scary, she was breathing like a fish," said Abdul Halim, Ansari's father, who brought her home from hospital after two days.

According to government data, the number of respiratory infection cases in the region rose to 3,681 in 2024 from 2,082 in 2022. "Ninety per cent of the patients we see daily come either with a cough or other respiratory issues," said Dr J Marak of Byrnihat Primary Healthcare Centre.

Residents say the toxic air also causes skin rashes and eye irritation, damages crops, and restricts routine tasks like drying laundry outdoors. "Everything is covered with dust or soot," said farmer Dildar Hussain.

Critics say Byrnihat's situation reflects a broader trend of pollution plaguing not just India's cities, including the capital Delhi, but also its smaller towns as breakneck industrialisation erodes environmental safeguards.

Unlike other parts of the country that face pollution every winter, however, Byrnihat's air quality remains poor through the year, government data indicates.

Home to about 80 industries - many of them highly polluting - experts say the problem is exacerbated in the town by other factors like emissions from heavy vehicles, and its "bowl-shaped topography".

"Sandwiched between the hilly terrain of Meghalaya and the plains of Assam, there is no room for pollutants to disperse," said Arup Kumar Misra, chairman of Assam's pollution control board. The town's location has also made a solution tougher, with the states shifting blame to each other, said a Meghalaya government official who did not want to be named.

Since the release of IQAir's report in March, however, Assam and Meghalaya have agreed to form a joint committee and work together to combat Byrnihat's pollution. — **Reuters**

Trump pushes official limits in first 100 days

WITH Donald Trump back in the White House you never know what you're going to get. Will he berate a foreign leader? Rock the global markets? Take vengeance against his foes?

But there has been one constant behind the chaos of his first 100 days -- Trump is pushing US presidential power to almost imperial limits.

"I think the second term is just more powerful," the 78-year-old Republican said during a recent event. "They do it -- when I say do it, they do it, right?"

Trump has been driven by a sense of grievance left over from an undisciplined first term that ended in the shame of the 2021 US Capitol riots after his election defeat to Joe Biden. And while Trump freed hundreds of those attackers from jail on his first day back in office, he is taking no prisoners when it comes to consolidating the power of the White House.

"Trump 2.0 is far more authoritarian-minded and authoritarian in its actions than Trump 1.0," political historian Matt Dallek of George Washington University said.

Trump has also stepped up the sense of an endless reality show in which he is the star, as he signs executive orders and takes questions from reporters in the Oval Office almost daily. That slew of orders has unleashed an unprecedented assault on the cornerstones of American democracy -- and on the world order. "We have seen certainly not in modern times such a sustained attack to unwind constitutional safeguards," added Dallek.

Controversially aided by Elon Musk, the world's richest man, Trump has launched a drive to get a federal government he regards as part of a liberal "deep state."

He has invoked a centuries-old wartime act to deport migrants to a mega prison in El Salvador -- while warning that US citizens could be next. He has dug in for a confrontation with judges and



US President Donald Trump speaks at the National Republican Congressional Committee's "President's Dinner" at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC on April 8. — **AFP**



DANNY KEMP

The writer is White House Correspondent for AFP

forced a string of punishing deals on law firms involved in previous criminal or civil cases against him.

He has cracked down on the media -- which he still dubs the "enemy of the people" -- and limited access to news outlets covering him at the White House.

And he has launched an ideological purge, cutting diversity programmes, targeting universities and even installing himself as head of a prestigious arts centre.

The US Congress, which is meant to have ultimate control over the government's purse strings, has been sidelined. Republicans have abetted his power grab while crushed Democrats have struggled to muster a response.

"We are all afraid," Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski said recently. "The president appears indifferent to formal -- even constitutional -- checks on his power," added Barbara Trish, professor of political science at Grinnell College.

On the foreign stage Trump has made territorial claims over Greenland, Panama and Canada -- asserting a sphere of influence that echoes Russian President Vladimir Putin's expansionist bent.

Trump is meanwhile backed by a court of true believers. Aides with often fringe views, like vaccine-sceptic health secretary Robert Kennedy, take turns to praise him at cabinet meetings.

"Compared to the first term, the president has completely surrounded himself with aides who not only facilitate but in some cases catalyse his brazen power moves," added Trish.

But Trump's comeback has highlighted some familiar themes.

Trump is closing out his first three months with approval ratings well below all other post-World War II presidents -- except for himself, in his first term, according to Gallup.

And there are signs of the same volatile leader the world saw from 2017 to 2021.

Trump's wild televised meltdown in the Oval Office with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky -- abetted by hawkish Vice President JD Vance -- deeply alarmed allies who were already unnerved by his pivot to Russia.

Then there was his introduction of sweeping global tariffs -- only to reverse many of them after tanking global markets proved to be the only real check on his power.

SPORTS

AHF CUP



Oman and Hong Kong players in action.

OMAN EYE THIRD STRAIGHT VICTORY AGAINST UZBEKISTAN

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

Oman national hockey team will play its third group stage match in the Men’s and Women’s AHF Cup 2025, facing Uzbekistan at the hockey stadium in Jakarta, Indonesia on Tuesday.

The team enters the match with high hopes of continuing its strong run and boosting its chances of qualifying for the advanced stages. With two important victories already under its belt, the team carries significant momentum and confidence in both its collective and individual performances.

Oman are ranked second in Group A with 6 points, having scored six goals and conceded only two. Oman began their tournament journey with an impressive 3-1 win over Singapore, highlighted by a standout performance from Fahad al Lawati, who netted a hat-trick to secure three valuable points. The first goal came in the sixth minute after a well-organised attack finished with a powerful strike by Al Lawati. He doubled the lead in the 15th minute with a penalty corner conversion. In the third quarter, the star player completed his hat-trick in the 35th minute with a precise pass received inside the circle. Singapore’s only goal came in the 41st minute via a penalty corner, as Oman wrapped up a well-deserved win.

In their second appearance on Sunday, Oman faced a tough challenge against Hong Kong and managed another 3-1 victory.

After a goalless first quarter, Oman applied constant pressure on Hong Kong’s defence. This effort paid off in the 35th minute when Rashid al Fazari received the ball inside the circle and fired it into the net, giving Oman a 1-0 lead. The score remained the same after the third quarter.

The final quarter was packed with action. Mohammed al Noufali extended the lead to 2-0 in the 48th minute with a powerful finish from a well-orchestrated move. Hong Kong pulled one back quickly in the 52nd minute through Ishtiaq Ahmed. However, just two minutes later, Ayman Madiid sealed Oman’s dominance with a brilliant third goal in the 54th minute.

OMAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE BOARD ELECTION TODAY

MUSCAT: The election of the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) Board of Directors for the 2024–2028 term will be held on Tuesday during the OOC General Assembly for the year 2025 at the JW Marriott Hotel – Al Irfan.

The General Assembly will be attended by the members of the OOC Board of Directors, members of the General Assembly, a representative from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in addition to the candidates for membership in the Board of Directors for the 2024–2028 electoral term.

The election of the new Board of Directors of the OOC for the upcoming term will be based on the final list approved by the Election Committee.

HH Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al Said is expected to be elected by acclamation as Chairman of the Committee, and Prof Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi as Vice-Chairman.

A number of members are also set to be elected by acclamation according to the categories stipulated in the statutes: Taha bin Suleiman al Kishry and Abdullah bin Mohammed Bamkhalaf as members of the boards of Olympic sports federations, in addition to Yousuf bin Awadh Bait Saleem representing non-Olympic sports federations, Khalifa bin Hamad al Jabri representing athletes after being elected by the Oman Athletes’ Committee, and Sayyidah Sana bint Hamad al Busaidiyah representing women’s sport.

Top sportspersons of 2024 honoured by Ministry



Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, accompanied by Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, presented the awards.

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

THE Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth felicitated more than 450 athletes, coaches, and administrative staff for their great efforts in various sporting disciplines for the previous year.

The Omani athletes won a total of 309 medals across various Gulf, regional and international championships and the ceremony took place at the Sheraton Hotel on Monday under the auspices of Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, in the presence of officials, dignitaries and representatives of all sports national teams. The annual awards ceremony is part of the ministry’s effort towards encouraging athletes to strive for more success and achievements in future competitions.

This year’s edition recorded the honouring of more than 450 athletes representing 12 sports associations and 15 committees and covered more than 28 national teams. Oman paddler pair Talya al Rawahi and Salma al Nasri were honoured following their bronze medal in table tennis doubles event in the GCC Youth Games in UAE last April.

“I am happy to attend this event for the first time and to receive an award as a recognition for my last achievement. This will motivate me to deliver more and accomplish more achievement in the forthcoming events. I will work hard to raise my country’s flag high in the upcoming events,” Salma said.

Oman Soca football team was among the top sporting teams honoured during the event besides national hockey team, paralympic team, bodybuilding team, athletics team, shooting team, university sports team and along with several individual athletes who won medals in different tournaments.

Hisham bin Juma al Sinani, Director-General of Sports Welfare and Development at the ministry, delivered a speech praising the athletes’ accomplishments and the continuous support from the ministry. “Last year, our national athletes managed to earn 309 medals and this is a result of dedicated efforts by sports associations, committees, and technical teams with the support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the guidance of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth. Later, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, accompanied by Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth, presented the awards. The honouring list featured the national football team which won second place at the first Gulf Youth Games in UAE. Oman



Soca team claimed the title in the Soca World Championship hosted in Oman in November last year. Taqa Club Soca team managed to earn the top place in the Gulf Soca Championship in last September. Oman national hockey team claimed third place in the Hockey5s World Cup hosted early last year.

ATHLETICS TEAM

The athletics team was honoured for multiple achievements including Arab U-23 Championship in Egypt (July 6–9, 2024), The first Gulf Youth Games in the UAE (April 15–21, 2024), The Asian Indoor Championships in Iran (Feb 15–20, 2024), The West Asian Championship in Iraq (May 29 – June 1, 2024).

Oman basketball team bagged bronze medal at the Gulf Youth Championship in March last year in Muscat. Beach volleyball team A took first place at the 30th Arab Beach Volleyball Championship in Tunisia in September while Beach volleyball teams A & B claimed first and second spots at the West Asian Championship in Jordan last May.

The cycling teams were recognised for the Gulf Youth Games (April 22–30, 2024) and the Green Mountain Mountain Biking

Race in Oman (August 23, 2024).

The shooting teams were honoured for participation in the Asian Rifle and Air Gun Championship in Jakarta, Indonesia (January 4–16, 2024), the Arab Shotgun Championship in Kuwait (November 9–16, 2024) and the seventh Arab Women’s Clubs Games in Sharjah (February 1 – December 7, 2023).

The water sports teams were feted for their performances following their achievements in the Gulf Youth Games in Abu Dhabi (May 28–31, 2024) and the second and third Arab Junior Championships in Qatar and Egypt.

The weightlifting and bodybuilding teams were honoured for their results in the Asian Weightlifting Championship in Uzbekistan (January 31 – February 11, 2024), the Arab Weightlifting Championship in Qatar (December 26–30, 2024), World and Arab Bodybuilding Championships in Iran, Bahrain and Oman.

Others in the list included billiards and snooker teams, for participation in Arab and Gulf youth events. University sports teams delivered an outstanding show as they got first and third in football and beach volleyball at Arab and Asian competitions. Oman bowling team was feted for performance in the 54th Singapore International Open (June 1–9, 2024). The paralympic team made achievements in Asia and West Asia cycling and youth championships.

The Oman fencing team earned honours for participating in the Asian Cadet Championship in Hong Kong (August 22–25, 2024), the Asian League Championships in UAE and Uzbekistan, the Arab Women’s Clubs Games and Arab Championships in Bahrain, the West Asian Championship in Jordan (August 29 – September 2, 2024) and Gulf Youth Games in the UAE (April 26 – May 1, 2024).

The karate team won medals at the West Asian Championship in Sharjah while Deaf futsal team won first place at the Gulf Friendship Championship in Bahrain (December 21–26, 2024). Oman Squash team grabbed third spot in West Asia Squash Championship in Iraq (October 29 – November 3, 2024). The national golf team claimed second place in various GCC tournaments for U13, U16, and U18 categories. Table tennis and school sports teams made an impression in Gulf and international school events. The skating team won second and third places in ice hockey championships in UAE.

The marine sports team made achievements in the fifth Freediving World Championship (October 2–10, 2024, Greece), AIDA Freediving Pool Championship in Lithuania (June 24–28, 2024), Arab sailing events in Bahrain and Kuwait and Youth sailing competitions in the UAE (April 16–21, 2024).

GROHE SPA EXHIBITION



AL FANAR GROUP TO ORGANISE 5K RUN TODAY

NAJAH AL RIYAMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

In a dynamic blend of wellness, innovation and community spirit, Al Fanar Group is launching the much-anticipated Grohe Spa Exhibition with a 5-kilometre running event, inviting fitness enthusiasts and families alike to take part in a unique celebration of movement and luxury. The race will take place on Tuesday from 6 pm to 7 pm, starting at City Centre Al Seeb and ending at the picturesque Gardens of Al Sahwa Towers.

Open to participants of all ages and backgrounds, the event underscores the shared values of health, sustainability and community, which lie at the heart of both Al Fanar Group and Grohe.

“The inspiration came from the desire to promote wellness and an active lifestyle while also showcasing the luxurious and innovative offerings of the Grohe Spa,” said an event organiser. “Combining these two elements creates a unique experience that encourages community participation and highlights the importance of both physical health and relaxation.”

The scenic route has been carefully designed to energise and inspire, featuring cheering zones, multiple water stations and an atmosphere charged with community enthusiasm. With categories recognising top male and female runners as well as participants over 40, the race welcomes competitive spirit while maintaining its inclusive ethos.

Located within City Centre Al Seeb, the Grohe Spa Exhibition is a first-of-its-kind experience in the Gulf region. Merging cutting-edge technology with sustainable design, the exhibition highlights Grohe’s commitment to redefining the modern spa experience. Visitors will experience smart water innovations, eco-friendly spa concepts and a curated selection of luxurious wellness products that aim to transform everyday routines into moments of indulgence.

Participants in the run can look forward to more than just a personal best. All registered runners will receive exclusive event t-shirts and commemorative medals. Cash prizes and honorary awards will be given to the top three male runners, top three female runners and top three runners aged 40 and above. “Winners can expect exciting prizes,” teased the organiser, adding that surprises will be revealed at the event’s closing ceremony.

This event is not a one-off, but part of a broader vision. “Yes, there are plans to continue organising community events that focus on wellness and active living,” confirmed the team behind the initiative. “The goal is to foster an ongoing culture of health and fitness within the community.”



Mumbai Indians’ Suryakumar Yadav celebrates after reaching his half century. — Reuters

Rohit, Surya on song as Mumbai hammer CSK

INDIA CAPTAINS Rohit Sharma and Suryakumar Yadav struck unbeaten half-centuries to power Mumbai Indians to a nine-wicket thrashing of Chennai Super Kings in a battle of IPL heavyweights on Sunday. India’s Test and ODI skipper Rohit struck form in this edition of the T20 tournament with 76 and national T20 leader Suryakumar smashed 68 off 30 balls at Mumbai’s Wankhede Stadium.

The two put on 114 runs to steer the five-time champions to chase down 177 with 26 balls to spare in a dominant performance.

Rohit, 37, came in as impact substitute in the chase and put on 63 runs with Ryan Rickleton, who fell for 24 off Ravindra Jadeja, to lay the foundations of Mumbai’s third straight win. Five-time winners Chennai, led by MS Dhoni after regular skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad pulled out injured mid-season, crashed to their sixth defeat in eight matches to stay bottom of the 10-team table.

Rohit struggled for form until this knock with just 82 runs in his previous six innings but found his groove with trademark flicks and pulls.

He reached his fifty in 33 balls but Suryakumar was in a hurry and his knock included some audacious shots behind the wicket raised his half-ton in 26 deliveries.

Rohit and Suryakumar smashed 11 sixes between them.

Chennai reached 176-5 after attacking half-centuries from Shivam Dube, who made 50, and Jadeja, who hit an unbeaten 53.



Mumbai Indians’ Rohit Sharma in action. — Reuters

Invited to bat first, Chennai lost opener Rachin Ravindra for five off left-arm medium-pace bowler Ashwani Kumar before 17-year-old Ayush Mhatre took to the crease as the youngest to play for the five-time winners.

Mhatre smashed Ashwani for a four and two sixes and kept up his batting blitz till his departure on 32 off 15 balls.

Jadeja was promoted to number four and after opener Shaik Rasheed departed for 19, put on 79 with fellow left-hander Dube as the

two rebuilt the innings and then hit back.

Dube took on New Zealand quick Trent Boult in one over and then combined with Jadeja to smash 24 runs from the 16th over.

Pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah pulled things back for Mumbai with two wickets in one over including Dube and then Dhoni for four and returned figures of 2-25 in his four.

Jadeja kept up the pace and finished strongly in a 16-run 20th over where he raised his first 50-plus score in his last 14 IPL innings, but the effort went in vain. — AFP

Oman step up WCL 2 preparations with series against Kerala

MUSCAT: In an effort to provide Oman players quality games that will serve as ideal tune-up to the tri-nation series of ICC Men’s Cricket World Cup (CWC) League 2 (2024/27) in the USA next month (May 17-27), Oman Cricket will host the Kerala state team over a four-match limited-overs series from April 21 at the Oman Cricket Academy ground. Oman’s recent form in the ICC Men’s Cricket World Cup League 2 has been promising.

Oman are currently placed fourth in the WCL 2 standing comprising eight nations with 18 points from 16 games.

The USA lead the standing with 22 from 16 while the Netherlands are second with 20 from similar number of matches. Canada are third with 20 points from 16 games followed

by Oman and Namibia (14 from 20 games). The visiting Kerala side, which finished as Ranji Trophy — India’s premier domestic red-ball competition — runner-up this season, will be up against an ICC side for the first time.

Kerala will be led by wicketkeeper-batter Mohammed Azharuddeen, but the squad will miss star Indian cricketer Sanju Samson, who is involved with IPL. The team is coached by former Indian cricketer Tinu Yohannan.

Mendis welcomed the Kerala team to Oman. “We are pleased to host the Kerala team, the finalist of Ranji Trophy this season for a four-match friendly series. The team has quality players and we are keen to play against such good sides as we prepare



Kerala team

for our USA tour next month.”

He added: “This series is ideal for our boys as they have been undergoing rigorous training over the past few weeks. The boys will gain confidence ahead of our USA tour of WCL 2 that will also feature Canada. We will also play another strong Indian state team of Karnataka later this month and the two series will provide our boys the needed warm-up and hopefully we can get good results.” “We’re treating these matches with the same seriousness as international fixtures,” he said.

Mendis added that the Oman team management sees the series as a platform to test combinations and assess form. “This will help our selectors and coaching staff make key decisions on the final 15 before

the League 2 tournament. We’re also happy to build sporting ties with teams like Kerala and encourage these exchanges.”

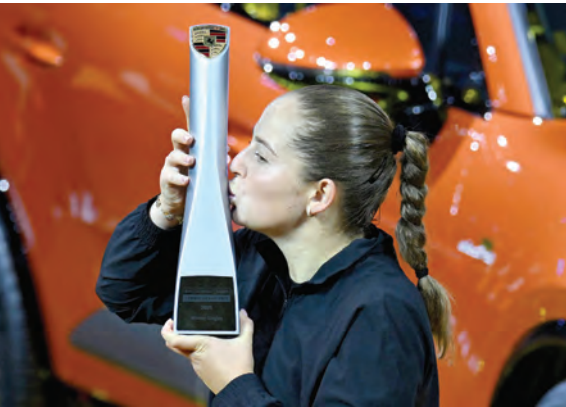
Oman Chairman’s XI will be led by Jatinder Singh.

Oman team: Jatinder Singh, Aamir Kaleem, Pruthvi Machhi, Hammad Mirza, Mohammad Nadeem, Sufyan Mehmood, Shakeel Ahmed, Jay Odedra, Samay Shrivastava, Wasim Ali, Vinayak Shukla, Hassnain Ali Shah, Muhammad Imran, Mujib Ali, Sandeep Goud, Ashish Odedara, Hashir Dafedar, Mohammed Bilal Shah, Muzahir Raza, Ubaidullah.

Match schedule: April 21: First match, 2 pm; April 23: Second match, 2 pm; April 25: Third game, 2 pm; April 27: Fourth and final match, 10 am.

SPORTS

FIRST ON CLAY



Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko celebrates with the trophy in front of the winner's car after winning the final match against Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka. — AFP

OSTAPENKO STUNS SABALENKA TO WIN STUTTGART TITLE

STUTTGART, GERMANY: Unseeded Jelena Ostapenko crushed world number one Aryna Sabalenka 6-4, 6-1 on Monday to win the claycourt title in Stuttgart for her first singles trophy of the year.

It was the Latvian's first title on clay since her 2017 French Open Grand Slam victory while Sabalenka has now lost four finals on Stuttgart's clay after losing the showcase match in 2021-23.

The world number one was no match for her opponent's fierce baseline power while struggling with her first serve throughout.

"Congrats Aryna on a great week," Ostapenko said. "I think you hate me now because you wanted this car so bad," she said in reference to a sponsor's offer of a luxury sports car for the tournament winner. "Every time I come here I enjoy it so much and thanks everyone for making this week amazing for me. I am really happy today," she said.

In her first claycourt tournament since last year's French Open, the Belarusian was broken in the very first game.

World number 24 Ostapenko, who also ousted world number two Iga Swiatek earlier in the tournament, earned another three break points at 4-2 but could not convert any of them with the Belarusian hanging on.

Sabalenka finally carved out her first break only to be broken straight back before Ostapenko clinched the first set.

In the second set the pair traded early breaks but the Latvian powered through, winning 16 of 18 points to break Sabalenka twice and race to a 5-1 lead.

Another erratic Sabalenka service game handed Ostapenko two match points and made sure of her first singles title when she fired a sensational crosscourt forehand winner on a second serve to put down a marker ahead of next month's French Open. — Reuters



Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko celebrates after winning the final against Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka.



Winner Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko (R) and Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka pose with the trophies after the final match of the Women's Tennis Grand Prix WTA tournament in Stuttgart. — AFP



Ahmad al Harthy and team-mates celebrate on the podium.

Ahmad and Co earn first FIA WEC podium of 2025

Pole qualifying Team WRT squad just misses LMGT3 win in Italy by 0.3s

Oman's Ahmad al Harthy sets up possible victory with superb double-stint

Stunning final hour from Kelvin van der Linde almost delivers Rd2 success

No 46 BMW M4 LMGT3 team-mates climb to sixth in class championship

FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP driver Ahmad al Harthy celebrated his first podium finish of the 2025 campaign at Imola in Italy on Sunday, April 20, as the Omani and team-mates Valentino Rossi and Kelvin van der Linde just missed LMGT3 victory by a mere 0.3 seconds after six hours of racing.

Starting the 6 Hours of Imola from a fantastic LMGT3 pole position, after a superb performance in qualifying and Hyperpole, the Team WRT squad rightly focused on challenging for the win, and during an excellent double-stint from Al Harthy at the beginning the aim remained firmly on target.

Rossi was every bit as competitive during the middle phase of the race, but an unfortunate penalty linked to contact with a Ferrari with just over a couple of hours to go impacted their bid. With a huge amount to do from the tail of the top 10, van der Linde was electrifying during the closing stages and stormed back up into second place thanks to some inspired strategy calls as well from the team.

Thrilled to line-up on pole at the start of round two of the FIA WEC season, OQ Group, Sohar International, Omantel, Oman LNG, BMW Oman, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and Experience Oman partnered racer Al Harthy launched well to keep the pack behind at bay.

The gap at the front ebbed and flowed during the early laps, as the Team WRT car and the chasing No.21 Vista AF Corse Ferrari 296 pulled clear of the next group. With 30 minutes complete the Omani's advantage stood at just over two seconds and although this was reduced later in the opening hour, the Ferrari managing to get ahead, Al Harthy's first pit-stop went as well as it could.

When the order shook-out the No 46 BMW was leading again and by an increased margin of six seconds, but after a Safety Car period in hour two the Ferrari again filled Al Harthy's mirrors. Stops were soon required once more and the majority of the field visited pitlane, while the Omani stayed on track before then pitting late in hour two from the lead.

Rossi climbed behind the wheel at the driver change and when the order settled he was third in LMGT3. After a Full Course Yellow period the Italian focused on

6 Hours of Imola LMGT3 Race Result:

1. Richard Lietz / Ryan Hardwick / Riccardo Pera
(Manthey 1ST Phorm / Porsche 911 GT3 R LMGT3)
2. Ahmad al Harthy / Valentino Rossi / Kelvin van der Linde
(Team WRT / BMW M4 LMGT3)
3. Esteban Masson / Arnold Robin / Finn Gehrtsitz
(Akkodis ASP Team / Lexus RC F LMGT3)
4. Jose Maria Lopez / Clemens Schmid / Petru Umbrarescu
(Akkodis ASP Team / Lexus RC F LMGT3)
5. Davide Rigon / Thomas Flohr / Francesco Castellacci
(Vista AF Corse / Ferrari 296 LMGT3)
6. Charlie Eastwood / Rui Andrade / Tom Van Rompuuy
(TF Sport / Corvette Z06 LMGT3.R)

2025 FIA WEC LMGT3 Driver Standings (after Rd2):

1. Ben Keating / Daniel Juncadella / Jonny Edgar, 44 pts
2. Arnold Robin / Finn Gehrtsitz, 33 pts
3. Gregoire Saucy / James Cottingham / Sebastien Baud, 27 pts
6. Ahmad al Harthy / Valentino Rossi / Kelvin van der Linde, 19 pts

2025 FIA WEC LMGT3 Team Standings (after Rd2):

1. TF Sport (Corvette Z06 LMGT3.R), 44 pts
2. Akkodis ASP Team (Lexus RC F LMGT3), 33 pts
3. United Autosports (McLaren 720 S LMGT3 EVO), 27 pts
6. Team WRT (BMW M4 LMGT3), 19 pts

pressuring the sister Team WRT BMW M4 and he duly passed to move into second place. Reducing the gap to the leading No 87 Akkodis ASP Team Lexus, when it pitted Rossi moved through with just over three hours to run.

In hour four, the bid for victory seemed all-but gone when a tangle between Rossi and the No 21 Ferrari at Rivazza ultimately led to a stop-go penalty for the No 46 BMW. South Africa's van der Linde had an unenviable task to try and battle back from the bottom end of the top 10 during his double stint at the end, but he and the team strategists rose to the challenge superbly.

Showing immense commitment, Van der Linde scythed his way through back into the podium placings and after moving to second he piled pressure on the ultimately victorious No 92 Manthey 1ST Phorm Porsche 911 GT3 R during the closing stages. Swarming all over the Porsche, only 0.3 seconds was the difference at the chequered flag.

AHMAD AL HARTHY:

"What a race! My stint was amazing, we were doing a lot to make sure we were in the right position for the final few hours of the race. Leading Imola for such a long time was tough and challenging, so I was really pleased to give Vale the car in P1. Due to what happened on the track things started moving around, it was definitely one of the most emotional races for all of us.

"At one point we were leading, at another point we're P10, and then to finish on the podium in P2 was an amazing result after an unbelievable recovery.

That goes down to all of the drivers and the team for working incredible strategy calls at the right time. I'm really so glad to be on the podium, Imola has always been so good to me. Now we work for the next round at Spa.

"I want to say a huge thank you to all of my partners, all the people who believe in this project. This is what it's all about, we are on the podium steps of the FIA World Endurance Championship! It's sometimes hard for that to sink in and to realise what we've achieved."

There are only three weeks to wait until the third round of the FIA World Endurance Championship, the TotalEnergies 6 Hours of Spa-Francorchamps, which will take place on Saturday, May 10, at the world-famous Belgian circuit.

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The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Dr Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmood al Said.

GLOBAL EXPERTS GATHER IN MUSCAT TO TACKLE FOOD SAFETY CHALLENGES

MUSCAT: The 7th Oman International Food Safety and Quality Conference and Exhibition kicked off on Sunday at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, drawing more than 500 specialists from 32 countries. The event features the presentation of 26 scientific papers focused on advancing food safety and quality standards.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Dr Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Secretary-General of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

In his keynote address, Dr Hussein al Masroori, Director General of the Food Safety and Quality Centre at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, emphasised Oman’s growing strategic focus on food safety as part of its national vision to enhance public health and quality of life.

He noted the Ministry’s efforts — together with public and private sector partners — to build an integrated and sustainable food safety system, raise public awareness and keep pace with global developments in food technology.

“This conference serves as a strategic platform for shaping policies, launching initiatives and exchanging ideas with regional and international experts to strengthen Oman’s food safety infrastructure,” he said.

Professor Samuel Godefroy, President of the International Union for Food Science and Technology and CEO of the World Organisation for Food Science and Legislation, described the event as a vital venue for global collaboration on the challenges facing agricultural and animal production. — **ONA**

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

PRIVATE sector investment in Oman’s economic zones, free zones and industrial cities surged significantly in 2024, reaffirming the nation’s growing appeal as a competitive regional hub for industry, logistics, clean energy and commercial ventures.

Oversight by the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has been pivotal in creating an enabling environment that attracted a total of 325 investment agreements during the year.

According to *Duqm Economist*, collectively, these agreements represent committed private investments exceeding RO 1.9 billion across six major jurisdictions.

The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) led the way with RO 1.15 billion in private sector investments. Although the overall declared figure was RO 300.48 million, the breakdown of sectoral allocations revealed a much higher total, underscoring Duqm’s strategic importance.

The clean energy sector attracted RO 288.77 million, bolstered by mega-scale hydrogen and renewable energy projects. Tourism recorded a massive inflow of RO 850 million — likely reflecting commitments for resorts and leisure infrastructure — while industrial, residential-commercial and agricultural



A total of 325 investment agreements were signed in 2024.

projects added further diversity.

In total, 22 agreements were formalised within SEZAD.

SOHAR Port and Freezone followed with RO 712.58 million in committed investments across just nine agreements, demonstrating the large scale of individual projects, particularly in the industrial and logistics domains.

Industrial activity accounted for RO 630.38 million, while logistics saw RO 82.2 million in capital inflows — strengthening Suhar’s position as a manufacturing and distribution powerhouse.

Salalah Free Zone secured RO 567.81 million from 16 agreements, with industrial investments comprising the lion’s share at RO 563.69 million. Commercial activities brought in an additional RO 4.13 million, pointing to auxiliary service

developments supporting core industries.

Al Mazunah Free Zone, though smaller in scale, registered RO 745,000 in private investment through eight agreements.

Industrial activity dominated, securing RO 700,000, with the remainder directed to commerce. Despite the modest figures, Al Mazunah remains strategically relevant due to its location near the Yemeni border and its focus on cross-border trade. Khazaen Economic City (KEC) attracted RO 80.99 million from 39 agreements. The pharmaceutical sector took the lead, drawing RO 40 million — an indicator of growing interest in localised medicine manufacturing. Industrial ventures attracted RO 26.14 million, while food and logistics sectors saw investments of RO

11.6 million and RO 3.25 million, respectively.

Madayn, Oman’s Public Establishment for Industrial Estates, recorded RO 244.81 million in private sector investments through a remarkable 218 agreements. Industrial activities led with RO 210.25 million, followed by commercial projects (RO 27.14 million), real estate (RO 3 million) and technology, logistics and service-oriented investments.

Notably, RO 1.5 million remained unspecified, suggesting ongoing negotiations or multipurpose allocations.

This robust investment performance not only reinforces investor confidence in Oman’s strategic geographic location and infrastructure but also aligns closely with Oman Vision 2040 goals.

Newly launched Dhamani platform to ease insurance claims

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

THE recently inaugurated Dhamani platform marks a major leap forward in the digital transformation of Oman’s healthcare and insurance sectors. Designed as a national digital information exchange, the platform facilitates seamless, real-time communication between healthcare providers and insurance payers.

Speaking exclusively to the Observer, Dr Hatim al Lawati, Digital Economy Consultant at the Financial Services Authority (FSA), emphasised that Dhamani is not a standalone system but a comprehensive infrastructure for streamlining claims processing.

“Previously, there was a lot of fluctuation and delay, some claims took up to two years to process,” Dr Al Lawati said.

“Today, with Dhamani, claims can be submitted immediately after treatment and insurance companies are required to respond within 45 days. The process is faster, more transparent and significantly reduces administrative hassle.”



Beyond efficiency, Dhamani plays a critical role in combating fraud, waste and abuse (FWA), common challenges in health insurance systems.

He also noted that the platform’s operational footprint is minimal. “It is efficient enough to be managed with as few as three workstations,” he added. “It greatly improves speed and ease for both patients and hospitals.”

Through integration with healthcare providers’ Health Information Systems (HIS), Dhamani enables instant claim submission by hospitals, polyclinics, clinics,

medical centres and soon, independent pharmacies.

Once a patient receives treatment, the system can automatically transmit the claim to Dhamani, which then delivers all relevant data, medical reports, attachments, approvals, diagnoses, costs and bills, directly to insurance companies.

This digital workflow enables payers to act quickly, either approving, rejecting, returning the claim for clarification, or requesting missing information, within a short timeframe.

“Healthcare providers have up to 45 days to submit a claim after the patient receives treatment,” Dr Al Lawati explained. “If the claim is returned by the insurer, it can be resubmitted within 30 days. Once accepted, the payer is obligated to process payment within another 45 days. This structured timeline ensures swift and smooth claims handling.”

Beyond efficiency, Dhamani plays a critical role in combating fraud, waste and abuse (FWA), common challenges in health insurance systems.

“Fraud involves submitting false claims for treatments that never occurred. Abuse

refers to intentionally over-treating patients, for example, prescribing unnecessary medications or requesting unrelated tests.

Waste relates to redundant or repeated services, like duplicate lab tests within or across hospitals,” Dr Al Lawati said. To reduce FWA, the platform implements several robust measures.

“First, we are standardising CPT codes, also known as medical protocols, so all providers use consistent procedures for specific illnesses. This allows regulators and insurers to quickly spot irregularities and potential abuse.”

“Second, all transactions on Dhamani are fully digital and transparent, allowing regulators to set automated rules to detect suspicious patterns. For example, if a medicine prescribed only for women is issued to a male patient, the system can flag it immediately.”

“Third, the FSA is deploying business intelligence (BI) and artificial intelligence (AI) tools to analyse data, detect fraud and manage risk. These technologies empower both payers and the regulator to monitor claims comprehensively and protect system integrity.”

ADVERTORIALS

STUNNING RANGE



The Festive Edition features a stunning range of jewellery crafted in 22K gold, diamonds and precious gemstones.

KAREENA KAPOOR KHAN LAUNCHES FESTIVE EDITION JEWELLERY COLLECTION

MUSCAT: Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewellery retailer in the world with a global presence of over 390 showrooms across 13 countries, proudly unveiled its much-anticipated Festive Edition Jewellery Collection. The collection was officially unveiled by Bollywood icon and brand ambassador of Malabar Gold & Diamonds, Kareena Kapoor Khan at a function held in Dubai, UAE. The Festive Edition features a stunning range of jewellery crafted in 22K gold, diamonds and precious gemstones, capturing the essence of tradition blended with contemporary charm. The collection is spread across Malabar’s most

For those seeking a modern touch, the collection also includes captivating designs in 18K gold. The designs in the Festive Edition jewellery is available across all Malabar Gold & Diamonds showrooms globally.

sought-after exclusive brands and collections including Mine, Aanika, Era, Precia, Ethnix and Divine. For those seeking a modern touch, the collection also includes captivating designs in 18K gold. The designs in the Festive Edition jewellery is available across all Malabar Gold & Diamonds showrooms globally.

Shamlal Ahamed, MD-International operations, Malabar Gold & Diamonds said: “At Malabar Gold & Diamonds, our commitment has always been to deliver designs that resonate with the aspirations of our customers.

The Festive Edition is a tribute to the cultural vibrancy and the joyous spirit of the festive season. With a rich blend of traditional motifs and modern elegance, this collection is thoughtfully curated to offer something special for everyone.

We are honoured to have our brand ambassador Kareena Kapoor Khan unveil this special collection. Her timeless charm and grace perfectly embody the beauty of this collection.”

To further enhance the value of their purchase, customers can take advantage of Malabar Gold & Diamonds’ exciting “Gift of Gold” offer. As part of this festive promotion, shoppers will receive free gold coins with every purchase of diamond or precious gemstone jewellery exceeding AED 3,000 / QAR 3,500 / RO 300 / BHD 300 / KWD 250 / SAR 3,000.

Last few days to Lexus’ offer with incredible benefits

MUSCAT: Grab the best Ramadhan deals in town with Lexus Oman's incredible offer to own a premium Lexus vehicle. Now get the chance to enjoy Lexus’ luxury range with up to 10 years/100,000 km of stress-free service benefits, along with first-year free registration and win the latest iPhone 16 Pro Max by participating in the raffle draw before the offer ends on April 24, 2025. Visit your nearest Saud Bahwan Automotive Showroom and explore Lexus’ luxurious high-performance sedans, SUVs and hybrids. Make every memory count and experience the finest Japanese craftsmanship and latest technological advancements. Designed for the young at heart, the IS is available in two trims: the Lexus IS300 and IS350 F Sport. The IS300 offers an exhilarating response with a turbocharged 2.0L 4-cylinder engine delivering 241 HP at 5,800 rpm. The IS also has a



Visit your nearest Saud Bahwan Automotive Showroom and explore Lexus’ luxurious high-performance sedans, SUVs and hybrids. powerful 3.5L V6 engine F-Sport trim. Made for the trendsetter and the go-getters to experience class beyond aesthetics. The Lexus ES boasts remarkable efficiency with smooth handling that makes every journey a breeze.

CFA OMAN HONOURS CHARTERHOLDERS AT AWARDS CEREMONY

MUSCAT: CFA Oman hosted a Charter Awards Ceremony recently, at a prestigious venue in Muscat. The event celebrated the achievements of new CFA Charterholders who have successfully completed the globally recognised CFA Programme. Ahmed bin Ja’afar bin Salim al Musallami, Governor of the Central Bank of Oman, attended as the Chief Guest. In his speech, he acknowledged the growing number of CFA Charterholders in Oman and praised the increasing participation of young Omani professionals. He highlighted the CFA designation as a globally respected standard in the investment industry and emphasised the importance of ethics, professionalism and



continued contribution to Oman’s financial sector and economy. He also encouraged employers to support such professional qualifications within their institutions. Vikas Kumar, the President of CFA Oman

reflected on the organisation's growth since its establishment in 2019 under the sponsorship of the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS). He noted that membership has expanded by over 75%, reaching 71 members, with over one-third being Omani nationals and a growing representation of women. He expressed optimism about the future, citing nearly 200 candidates from Oman currently enrolled in the CFA Programme. The President also acknowledged the support of founding sponsors Sohar International and Jabreen Capital, whose contributions have been instrumental in the society’s development. CFA Oman presented a token of appreciation to CBFS for the continuous support.

Jetour Oman opens new branch in Suhar

JETOUR Oman, a brand synonymous with adventure, innovation and premium driving experiences, proudly announces two exciting milestones — the grand opening of its new branch in Suhar and the launch of its highly anticipated plug-in hybrid model, the Jetour T2 PHEV. As part of MHD Automobile’s strategic expansion, the new Suhar facility reinforces the brand's commitment to making world-class automotive solutions more accessible to customers across the Sultanate of Oman. This state-of-the-art branch is designed to deliver an exceptional sales and service experience, showcasing Jetour’s latest models in a premium environment. To mark the occasion, customers can now experience the all-new 2025 Jetour T2 Plug-In Hybrid — a cutting-edge vehicle



Jetour Oman also launches its highly anticipated plug-in hybrid model, the Jetour T2 PHEV.

that blends high performance with eco-friendly technology. In this exciting new addition to the Jetour lineup, innovation meets efficiency. Powered by the 5th-generation ACTECO 1.5TGDI High-Efficiency Hybrid Special Engine, the Jetour T2 PHEV offers an ideal balance of power and fuel economy.

It combines a turbocharged petrol engine with an intelligent hybrid system, delivering impressive acceleration, low emissions and extended electric driving range — perfect for the modern Omani driver who seeks both performance and sustainability. The Jetour T2 PHEV also

boasts advanced features such as an all-terrain intelligent 4WD system, multiple driving modes and a futuristic cockpit with a high-resolution infotainment display, smart connectivity and enhanced safety tech, ensuring a smooth, confident and connected drive across Oman's diverse landscapes. Commenting on the occasion, Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, stated: “The launch of the Suhar branch alongside the introduction of the Jetour T2 PHEV is a testament to our ongoing mission to drive innovation and convenience for our customers. We are proud to expand our footprint in Oman while offering products that reflect the future of mobility — powerful, eco-conscious and engineered for exploration.” Jetour continues to solidify its position as a preferred choice for both adventure-seekers and urban drivers alike.

NBO OFFERS SUPPLEMENTARY CREDIT CARD FEATURE ON NBO APP

MUSCAT: The National Bank of Oman (NBO) has announced launching a new feature on its NBO app, enabling customers to easily and securely request Supplementary Credit Cards for their family members. This digital innovation reflects NBO’s commitment to enhance customer convenience while promoting financial empowerment across families. With just a few taps through the app, NBO credit cardholders can now relax and share the benefits of their primary credit card — such as cashback rewards, airport lounge



access, 50% VOX Cinema discount, complimentary travel insurance and free chauffeur services and more — to their family members without the need to visit a branch, manage spending limits and track the status of applications in real-time. “We’re excited to introduce this new capability that combines family support with cutting-edge digital convenience,” said Maha al Raisi, Assistant General Manager and Head of Products at NBO. “Our goal is to empower our customers to provide their loved ones with financial flexibility and offer family members access to

exclusive benefits catering to their lifestyles.” From his end, Dr Ali Salim al Shukaili, Assistant General Manager — Head of Digital & E-Channels at NBO, said: “Our goal with this launch is to make credit card sharing as seamless and secure as possible for our customers. By introducing this fully digital service, we’re not only enhancing customer experience but also reducing dependency on in-branch visits; empowering families with financial flexibility while keeping the primary cardholder fully in control.”

BUSINESS

MODERNAPPROACH



Oman spearheads a key regional workshop in Muscat, uniting GCC leaders and global experts to develop a unified framework for measuring living standards and advancing social protection across the Gulf.

KEY WORKSHOP TO SHAPE GCC UNIFIED LIVING STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

FAISAL AL AJMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

OMAN has taken centre-stage in a key regional initiative to redefine social security and enhance quality of life across the Gulf, as a high-level workshop opened today in Muscat to discuss minimum standards for decent living and modern approaches to social protection.

Hosted under the auspices of Dr Laila hint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, the four-day workshop gathers more than 60 policymakers, statisticians and international experts to discuss how GCC countries can align and enhance their social security systems.

Intisar hint Abdullah al Wahaibiyah, Director General of the Statistical Centre for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), said: “As you know, the GCC countries have achieved advanced levels in human development and sustainable development indicators.

Our goal through this workshop is to express and reflect the prosperity, quality of life and well-being in our Gulf countries — by developing a unified scientific Gulf framework that can measure this and support policy-making in a way that strengthens our countries’ regional and international standing,” she stated.

The event, organised by the GCC Statistical Centre — headquartered in Muscat — and the Executive Office of the Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs in the GCC, reflects Oman’s growing leadership role in regional development policy and data-driven reform.

Oman’s commitment to evidence-based policymaking and regional cooperation has positioned it as a key driver in shaping a unified vision for welfare and sustainable development in the Gulf.

Mohammed bin Hassan al Obaidli, Director General of the Executive Office, noted that the outcomes of the Muscat workshop will inform a unified report on minimum living standards, to be presented at the upcoming Second World Summit for Social Development.

“The report will reflect the true scope of the Gulf states’ efforts in this field and reinforce their global development commitments,” he added.

Dr Marco Ranzani, Economist in the Poverty Global Practice at the World Bank, remarked on the matter saying: “We believe this workshop is a significant step for GCC countries, as it marks the first attempt to establish a common framework for measuring living standards across the region.” Dr Ranzani continued: “We’ve been invited to share international methodologies and we will present the World Bank’s approach along with suggestions and ideas to support the GCC’s efforts moving forward.”

MARKET EXPECTATIONS

BoJ likely to keep rate-hike signal intact



The Bank of Japan is expected to signal next week that risks from higher US tariffs won’t derail a cycle of rising wages and inflation seen as crucial to keep raising interest rates

The assessment, to be included in its quarterly outlook report due on May 1, will underscore the BoJ’s desire to keep alive market expectations of further interest rate hikes — even though the timing of its next move could be months away. — Reuters

BLOC ATTEMPT

EU to tweak methane rules for US gas



The European Union is looking at ways to make it easier for US gas exports to comply with its methane emissions rules, as the bloc attempts to avert a trade war with US President Donald Trump.

The EU is working on its offer for trade negotiations with the United States, to attempt to avoid Trump’s planned tariffs — with both sides signalling that energy could form part of a broader trade deal. — Reuters

TRADE RHETORIC

China warns against striking trade deals



China on Monday accused Washington of abusing tariffs and warned countries against striking a broader economic deal with the United States at its expense, ratcheting up its rhetoric in a spiralling trade war between the world’s two biggest economies.

Beijing will firmly oppose any party striking a deal at China’s expense and “will take countermeasures in a resolute and reciprocal manner,” its Commerce Ministry said. — Reuters

Future Fund Oman team courts Chinese investors

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

A team of officials representing Future Fund Oman (FFO), an investment vehicle launched by Oman Investment Authority (OIA), recently toured a number of Chinese cities to explore potential manufacturing and industrial partnerships with leading players in China.

During the visit, spanning five cities over multiple weeks, the Omani team interacted with executives of strategic businesses operating in the high-tech, semiconductor, electric vehicle, venture capital and project finance sectors, according to Rashid al Hashmi, Senior Manager — Future Fund Oman.

Al Hashmi, who led the visit, commented: “Oman is open for serious industrial partnerships — and China’s innovation powerhouses are listening.

Over the past weeks, I had the privilege of leading Future Fund Oman’s delegation across China and Hong Kong, engaging with some of the region’s most strategic manufacturers,



FFO team members pictured during their visit to a Chinese tech firm.

robotics pioneers and sovereign partners,” he added in a post.

The delegation’s travel itinerary included “deep-dive” tours of China Electronics Corporation (a \$9.5 billion revenue leader in servers, semiconductors and AI), UB Robotics (a leading manufacturer of humanoid robots and smart service robots); Shenzhen Capital (China’s top state-backed venture capital with assets of over \$60 billion under management) and U-Power (an EV platform developer

progressing towards a manufacturing hub).

The tour also included a visit to the Export-Import Bank of China where the delegation conducted a strategic dialogue on project finance.

Additionally, a high-level meeting was held with the Provisional Governor of Guangdong Province to explore industrial cooperation and capital mobility between Oman and the Greater Bay Area.

“Across every engagement, we reinforced FFO’s role as a gateway to Oman’s diversified

industrial future — backed by Oman Vision 2040, world-class infrastructure and access to GCC, Africa and US markets (via FTA),” Al Hashmi noted, adding that the Fund is now gearing up inbound delegations from China, which opens up the potential for R&D linkages and capital-matching exercises.

FFO was established in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance with a capital of \$5.2 billion, allocated over five years from 2024 to 2028.

Last November, FFO announced its first batch of approved investment projects in November with a combined value exceeding \$2 billion. The projects include \$1.6 billion committed by foreign investors and \$571 million contributed by FFO. The approved projects span ten key sectors, including technology, manufacturing, tourism, renewable energy and electric vehicles.

In addition, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and startups will play a prominent role, with investments targeting food, health, financial technology, e-commerce and more.

MSX holds dialogue on promising companies market

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

MUSCAT Stock Exchange (MSX) recently convened a meeting with brokerage firms to explore the development of its new “Promising Companies Market,” a platform designed to attract private and family-owned businesses, SMEs and startups with a minimum market value of RO 500,000.

The initiative aims to provide these companies with access to diverse financing options through the capital market, helping them expand and adopt robust governance standards to ensure long-term sustainability.

The meeting brought together heads of brokerage departments from across the sector, alongside officials from MSX.

Key discussion points included the conceptual framework of the new market, listing mechanisms, disclosure obligations, the role of intermediaries; and technical and regulatory considerations.

Badr bin Hamoud al Hinai, Chief Operating Officer at MSX, emphasised the strategic importance of engaging brokerage firms: “The Muscat Stock Exchange is committed to forming strong partnerships with brokerage firms due to their essential role in boosting market efficiency. This dialogue reflects our broader commitment to fostering a more advanced and integrated investment environment.”

He added that the new market represents a milestone in creating a secure and agile platform for SMEs to secure funding, highlighting the role of intermediaries in



The meeting brought together heads of brokerage departments from across the sector, alongside officials from MSX.

raising awareness, supporting listings and connecting companies with investors.

Majida al Hinai, Director of the Incentive Programme Initiative under the National Programme for Financial Sustainability and Financial Sector Development (Estidama), gave an in-depth presentation on the new platform.

She outlined the key features, including listing requirements, qualified investors, the role of brokers and the listing process itself.

“This market is tailored to the unique needs of promising companies, offering a flexible and regulated environment that facilitates disclosure and operational efficiency,” said Al Hinai. “It supports the objectives of the Estidama programme by enhancing economic diversification and giving entrepreneurs more effective access to financing.” The session concluded with a call for greater coordination among all stakeholders to ensure the success of the Promising Companies Market.

GME INKS MOU WITH SHANGHAI FUTURES EXCHANGE

MUSCAT: Gulf Mercantile Exchange (GME), the leading international energy futures and commodities exchange in the Middle East and the Shanghai Futures Exchange (SHFE) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a framework for strategic cooperation between the Middle East and China’s derivatives markets.

The MoU aims to enhance collaboration in key areas including product cooperation, exchange of market development insights, research support and investor education initiatives. The agreement reflects a shared commitment to enhance market transparency and support the evolution of regionally relevant commodities benchmarks.

Raid al Salami, Managing Director, GME, said: “We value our cooperation with Shanghai Futures Exchange. This MoU is an important step in building greater alignment between China and the Gulf in the commodities trading space. By sharing knowledge, expertise and vision, we can pave the way for more regionally relevant benchmarks, greater market transparency and stronger investor engagement across both regions.”



Representatives of GME and Shanghai Energy Futures at the MoU signing.

OPINION

How to stop mobile phones from listening and tracking you



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The writer is the founder of Knowledge Oman

My article last week on whether smartwatches are spying on people (their users) triggered a lot of discussion. I received calls, emails and instant messages with feedback; and some also shared their experience on the same. What I also contributed and shared during the conversations, as a personal opinion, was that every smart device, which obviously has a microphone and embedded GPS receivers, may do exactly the same.

Practically, most of the smart devices today carry those two components as part of the mechanics and build of the device, so you can talk/record or identify the location of the device.

Well, I decided to focus my article today on sharing the exact steps that one needs to follow in order to stop a mobile phone from listening and tracking.

Obviously, the same can be followed with any smart device that uses an operating system (Google's Android, Apple's iOS, or Huawei's Light or Harmony) and has a similar interface and settings that are universal and applicable to all (with little differences, of course).

To give a brief background on the subject and for those who missed my article last week, there is a feeling that smart devices (watches, phones, tablets, TVs, wristbands, etc) are spying on us. Something that you speak about (or even

think of to some extent) pops up on your device as a form of promotion some moments later.

How that happens is mostly via utilising two components of the device, ie, the embedded microphone and sensors/receivers (GPS for the location, for instance).

This has caused a lot of concerns to many people about their privacy (a word I feel would sooner or later vanish as far as our world progresses digitally).

How do they do it? These smart devices constantly collect data on the user's location, surroundings and movements, which are first held on the device and then later sent to the cloud/internet for storage and analysis.

This data is often packaged and sold to third parties for targeted advertisement or other marketing purposes. In 2023 itself, Apple sold approximately 40 million smartwatches.

This number has most probably increased as the adoption of the Apple Watch became more widespread.

The same applies to Google Android- and Huawei-based smartwatches. So what can you do today in order to stop smart devices (starting with mobile phones) from listening and tracking you? Let me share the steps.

Simply remove and disable microphone and location access from applications you deem should not have such access.

In 2023 itself, Apple sold approximately 40 million smartwatches. This number has most probably increased as the adoption of the Apple Watch became more widespread. The same applies to Google Android- and Huawei-based smartwatches. So what can you do today in order to stop smart devices (starting with mobile phones) from listening and tracking you?

On Apple iOS devices, just go to Settings, then scroll down to Privacy & Security from the menu and finally click on Microphone and Location Services to see which apps have access.

Set access to "never," "ask next time," or "while using the app," depending on what you wish to do. For Android devices, go to Settings, then Privacy and finally click on the Permission Manager.

Check both the microphone and location separately and ensure you disable access for apps that don't need it as well. That's it; you will now block third-party apps from listening (via microphone) and being able to track you (via GPS/location).

To conclude my article this week. I would like to emphasise that the steps shared today will surely help and protect you from being tracked; nevertheless, this would only work at the application layer.

You would not know if the operating system itself continues to do so (which is something I believe would always remain unless you physically remove the components, ie, the microphone and related sensors).

The world, thanks to the information superhighway, has become smaller, yet reaching, listening and finding us, wherever we are, has become easier and faster too. Until we catch up again next week, stay safe and be alert.

BUYOUT BARONS ARE FINANCE NOW, FOR GOOD AND ILL

JONATHAN GUILFORD

PRIVATE equity is supposed to be patient when public markets panic. Yet for shareholders in Blackstone, KKR, Apollo Global Management and Carlyle, it's proving hard not to get swept up.

The buyout barons, now self-styled as alternative asset managers, claim to represent a new and in many ways superior answer to traditional financial business models. The stock market, though, hasn't reflected that idea during the recent tariff-induced turmoil.

Private-capital groups like to argue that they're relatively insulated from market swings like the one unleashed by US President Donald Trump's April 2 announcement. Buyout managers, for example, re-mark their asset valuations coolly quarter-by-quarter, ignoring daily gyrations.

And their portfolios are tilted towards services-based industries like information technology and healthcare, which should be less sensitive to trade wars.

In 2023, some 30% of private equity's assets sat in IT, according to MSCI. They're also light on tariff-sensitive consumer and materials businesses — and increasingly invested in long-term, steady, inflation-protected infrastructure assets like toll roads and data centres.

Meanwhile, debt-market dislocations tend to boost the managers' private-credit arms, which now account for more assets than the traditional buyout divisions of Stephen Schwarzman's Blackstone, Henry Kravis' KKR and Marc Rowan's Apollo.

A similar shutdown in liquid financing markets in 2022 turbocharged the alternative debt providers: buyout deals now use direct lenders rather than bank underwriters by a ratio of over 8 to 1, boutique adviser Configure Partners reckons.

Despite it all, the quartet's shares have fallen by 12% to 24% since "Liberation Day" — worse than the S&P insurance and banking indexes, which are down 5% and 10% respectively.

In other words, when stock-market investors are gripped by fear, Schwarzman and Kravis's firms trade much like the rest of the financial system — or worse.

There are good reasons for this. As Carlyle boss Harvey Schwartz noted in his annual letter last week, the number of US private firms has multiplied six-fold to more than 6,000 over the last two decades, meaning that buyout shops inevitably reflect a broader swathe of a now-slowing economy. Carlyle also reckons that private credit is a \$1.8 trillion market, equivalent to 10% of the total credit extended by all US commercial banks.

The sheer size makes it unlikely that direct lenders would be able to dodge any wave of corporate defaults. So does the fact that private credit has spread from its mainstay of leveraged buyouts and mid-sized corporate lending into various types of asset-based finance, stretching from securitised student loans to buy-now-pay-later products and beyond. — Reuters

Forging stronger economic ties with Russia

OMAN is currently undergoing a significant economic transformation, driven by the ambitious goals of Oman Vision 2040. As Oman strives to diversify its economy and achieve sustainable growth, establishing strong international partnerships is crucial. The developing relationship between Oman and Russia presents a valuable opportunity, built on shared benefits and strategic planning.

Recent trade figures from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NC SI) highlight Oman's active trade landscape and key sectoral priorities.

Oman's exports include a variety of products, demonstrating the nation's capacity for producing specialised, high-value goods. Simultaneously, Oman imports essential commodities, indicating a need to diversify its export base and develop strategic trade partnerships.

This is where enhanced collaboration with Russia becomes important. While current trade volumes may be modest, there is a strong foundation and significant potential for growth.

Russia's growing agricultural exports, particularly wheat and barley, can effectively support Oman's food security objectives, making agricultural trade a key area of focus.

In parallel, Oman's unique products can find valuable markets within Russia's large consumer base.

Beyond commodities, Russia's strengths in energy, infrastructure and industrial technology align well with Oman's diversification plans.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) between the two countries is also showing positive momentum, with Russian companies increasingly interested in Oman's hydrocarbons and construction sectors.

Oman's strategic location, investor-friendly policies and improving business environment are attracting international investors. The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) is playing a vital role in encouraging foreign investment and facilitating partnerships that support Oman Vision 2040's goals for economic diversification.

Energy cooperation presents a particularly compelling opportunity.



A general view of an oil terminal of the Transneft — Kozmino Port near the far eastern town of Nakhodka, Russia. Image for illustration only. — Reuters



DR YOUSUF HAMED AL BALUSHI
yousufh@omaninvest-gateway.com

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

While both nations are significant players in the global energy sector, there is potential for collaboration in renewable energy projects, energy efficiency technologies and gas-to-chemicals ventures.

Russia's advanced capabilities in engineering and energy technology could support Oman's energy transition, contributing to the development of a more sustainable and resilient energy sector in the country.

Infrastructure development is another area of mutual interest. Oman's plans to develop advanced ports, logistics hubs, smart cities and industrial zones require expertise that Russian firms can offer in construction, heavy machinery and engineering.

This collaboration can contribute to Oman's economic diversification by expanding into high-value manufacturing and services, which are critical components of Oman Vision 2040.

Tourism is an area with untapped potential. As Oman establishes itself as a premier destination that combines cultural experiences, adventure and sustainability, the growing number of Russian middle-class travellers represents a valuable market.

Oman's beautiful beaches, cultural heritage sites and eco-tourism offerings are attractive to Russian tourists seeking unique travel experiences. Strengthening

tourism ties can also promote cultural exchange, interpersonal connections and business opportunities in the hospitality and service sectors.

Oman's neutral foreign policy, which emphasises dialogue and practicality, positions the nation as a trusted partner for Russia and the broader Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. In an interconnected world, Oman's role as a facilitator enhances its attractiveness as an investment destination and trade hub.

Russia, in turn, provides Oman with a gateway to Eurasian markets and opportunities for technological collaboration beyond the Gulf region.

Looking forward, the private sector must play a central role in driving this partnership. While government initiatives create a supportive environment, private enterprises are essential for implementation and growth.

To transform potential into tangible results, it is necessary to foster business forums, joint ventures, sector-specific conferences and connections between Omani and Russian SMEs.

Businesses in technology, agriculture, construction and tourism should actively pursue partnerships that extend beyond simple transactions, aiming to develop long-lasting ecosystems of cooperation.

Oman Vision 2040 is not only a national strategy but also an invitation to global partners to participate in creating a future of shared prosperity.

For Russia, the opportunity lies in contributing to Oman's economic development, innovation and regional influence.

For Oman, leveraging Russian expertise, markets and investments can accelerate progress towards a resilient, diversified and globally competitive economy.

Ultimately, the strength of the Oman-Russia relationship depends on mutual trust, shared goals and the recognition that these new collaborations can provide both growth and strategic resilience in an evolving global landscape.

Oman and Russia, while distinct in their histories, share common aspirations for the future and have the opportunity to chart a course that benefits both nations and the wider region.

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Taghribat al Qafer: A story where water speaks louder than words



BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

THERE ARE stories that entertain and then there are stories that stay with you. Quietly, deeply, like a whisper from the land itself. Taghribat Al Qafer, by the Omani writer Zahran al Qasmi, is one of those stories.

At the heart of the novel is a man named Al Qafer, who isn't your typical hero. He doesn't go off to fight battles or chase glory. Instead, he carries something much more unusual: a gift, or perhaps a curse. He can hear water flowing beneath the ground. This rare ability sets him apart from his community. People don't understand him and over time, he becomes increasingly isolated, lost in a world of unseen currents and silent echoes.

Through Al Qafer's quiet journey, Al Qasmi invites us to reflect on something we often take for granted: water. In this story, water becomes more than just a physical element; it is memory, mystery and life itself. It flows through the narrative like a character of its own, present even in its absence.

What makes Taghribat Al Qafer so powerful is its simplicity. The language is gentle yet full of emotion. The scenes are grounded in the Omani landscape, with its wadis, its villages and its falajes. And yet, the themes extend beyond the borders of any one country. Loneliness, connection, fear of change and our fragile relationship with nature are feelings many of us can relate to, especially in today's world. Zahran al Qasmi has long been a familiar name in Omani literary circles, with a body of work that spans poetry and fiction. However, this novel in particular has brought him international recognition. In 2023, Taghribat Al Qafer won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, often referred to as the Arabic Booker Prize. It is the first time an Omani novel has received this prestigious award — a proud moment not just for Al Qasmi, but for Omani literature as a whole.

The beauty of this novel lies not only in the story it tells but in how it makes us feel. It reminds us to listen: to each other, to the land and even to the silence. Because sometimes, what we don't say speaks louder than anything.

Taghribat Al Qafer isn't a loud novel. It won't shock or dazzle. But it will move you — gently, like water carving its path through stone.

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



LIFESTYLE

A woman from the religious Kakai minority of Iraqi Kurdistan poses for a photo during a celebration of “Giving day” in the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Halabja. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Guinean Reggae singer Mohamed Mouctar Soumah, known as Takana Zion, performs during the 17th Anoumabo Urban Music Festival (FEMUA) in Abidjan. — AFP



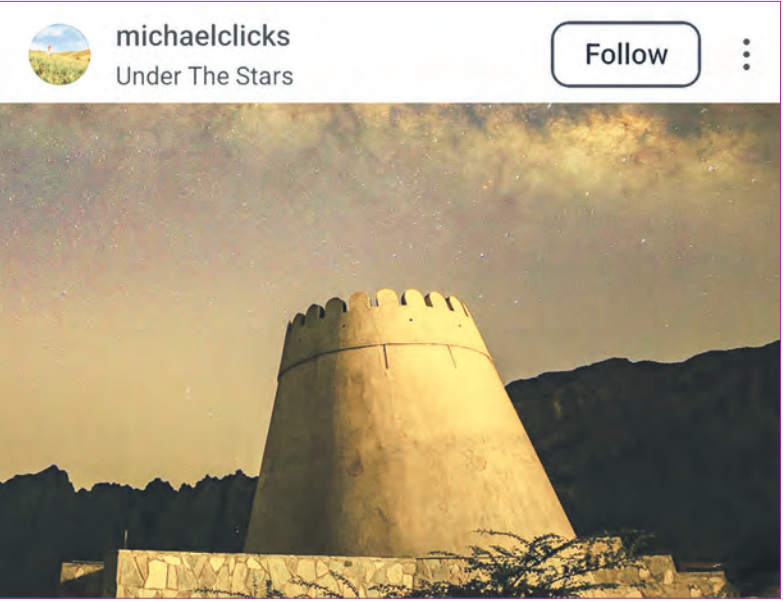
CULTURE

Technicians install the Cambodian bronze depicting “The Reclining Vishnu” from West Mebon, a temple at Angkor, following it's restoration. — AFP

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Bare-knuckle tradition steps into Madagascar’s urban spotlight



MADAGASCAR’S centuries-old bare-knuckle combat sport “moraingy” is punching above its weight in the capital Antananarivo, as fighters and fans gather to celebrate a martial art once reserved for warriors and rural communities.

The traditional barefoot combat, where fighters wrap their hands in fabric and employ almost any move to defeat opponents, drew enthusiastic crowds recently to a tournament showcasing talent from across the island nation.

“I’m interested to see what’s being done, what moraingy will be like in 2025,” said fan Seth Rabemanantsoa. “That’s where I can see what developments are taking place, because there are young people from the north of Madagascar here. They told me that there’s ‘moraingy watsa’ (fighting without kicking) and their moraingy with kicks.” Dating back to the 17th

century, moraingy originated on Madagascar’s west coast as war training and an initiation rite. With no written rulebook and matches ending based on audience reaction, organisers are now working to formalise the sport while preserving its cultural heritage.

In moraingy, as in many traditional bare-knuckle sports, fighters wrap their fists in cloth for minimal protection and symbolic value — a far cry from modern gloves. The wraps offer little cushioning, serving mainly to stabilise hand bones and prevent cuts, while leaving punches raw and unpadded.

Fighter Jean Julien Rabemiandrisoa embodies the sport’s traditional values of respect despite its fierce nature.

The tournament saw fighters taunting each other before bouts, coaches offering ringside advice and victorious competitors collecting money from appreciative fans.



N Ireland designer Jonathan Anderson takes helm at Dior Men

FRENCH FASHION giant Dior named the highly-rated designer Jonathan Anderson as creative director of Dior Men on Thursday.

Anderson, 40, quit Loewe last month after more than a decade in which he turned around the fortunes of the heritage Spanish brand.

The Northern Irish designer — an influential tastemaker with many A-list fans — made the previously rather sleepy label, best known for its handbags, hot.

Fashion mogul Bernard Arnault, whose LVMH conglomerate owns both Dior and Loewe, broke the news at a shareholders meeting in Paris.

“I can tell you that the next Christian Dior men’s fashion show, which will take place in June (in Paris), will be created by Jonathan Anderson,” he said.

There had been much speculation that Anderson, renowned for his creative flights of fancy, might take over both Dior’s men’s and women’s collections, which some observers had seen as needing fresh impetus.

Dior womenswear designer Maria Grazia Chiuri has presided over years of growth since taking over from Raf Simons in 2016, with her modernisation and feminist activism helping attract new customers. Revenues are estimated to have more than tripled on the Italian’s watch.

Anderson replaces British designer Kim Jones at Dior Men. He stepped down at the end of January after seven years, also with a strong



commercial track record, having introduced a younger streetwear-influenced look to the classic looks of the label.

— TRICKY MARKET —

But Anderson’s arrival comes at a time when the luxury industry as a whole is facing increasingly tricky market conditions, with a slowdown in China and an escalating global trade war causing concern.

The move is part of a major reshuffling of top jobs at fashion brands after a round of resignations and forced departures.

A long list of labels are either bedding in new designers or looking for fresh talent including Chanel, Celine, Fendi, Givenchy, Gucci, Dries Van Noten and Tom Ford.

The success of Dior’s clothing and leather goods division is of crucial financial and dynastic importance to LVMH owner Arnault, one of the world’s wealthiest men.

He placed his daughter Delphine in charge of Dior Couture in February 2023.

Anderson, the son of former Irish rugby international Willie Anderson, is known as a low-key figure, who often appears dressed casually at the end of his shows.

He trained at the London College of Fashion and began his career in Prada’s marketing department before launching his own brand, JW Anderson, in 2008.

During his time at Loewe, he launched a new modern classic bag — the Puzzle — and dressed celebrities from Beyonce to Rihanna. — AFP

FEATURES

BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

CHILDREN OF all ages were treated to a rare experience last weekend as the Royal Opera House Musical Arts presented a contemporary re-imagining of the 12th-century legend of “Robin Hood,” performed by the Petruzzelli Theatre Foundation Bari, Italy.

Billed as ‘a family opera in one act by Michele Dall’Ongaro,’ this new ROHM interpretation is a remake of the original May 2023 premiere in Bari.

Designed to captivate, especially for children, Dall’Ongaro’s accessible musical language draws from various Western musical styles, blending classical opera forms with lush, Romantic choruses and arias. The modest orchestra of twenty-six musicians, including a piano, was directed sensitively by world-renowned Maestro Pietro Mianiti throughout the hour-long performance.

Librettist Vincenzo de Vivo aimed to achieve a nostalgic, ‘Olde English’ feel in the text, inspired by historical sources like Dumas and Walter Scott, as well as familiar representations, including the 1938 Errol Flynn film. It was unique to hear a libretto sung in lyrical Italian about an English tale while following the archaic translation projected overhead.

In addition to public performances, the Education Outreach team invited students aged 8-14 from local schools, including those as far as Al Dakhiliyah Governorate and the Wilayat of Suhar, for six matinee shows last week. This initiative aimed to engage students with live theatre, inspiring plans for a Drama Workshop at an international school in Muscat.

The production opened with a lively overture, rich in eclectic references. As the curtain rose, projections of dancing lights illustrated the chorus playfully dangling their legs. A vibrant atmosphere of quintessentially English May Day celebrations unfolded, featuring Morris dancers, Molly dancers and Maypole artists creating an idyllic scene. Enormous puppets resembling a wild boar, sheep and ox disguised Robin’s companions. Marcel Sijm’s direction often echoed elements of English Pantomime, including caricature and slapstick humour.

Amidst the festivities, Robin Hood emerged, splendidly portrayed by the youthful tenor Pierluigi D’Aloia. The scene began with Robin’s enchanting ballad, welcoming spring, accompanied by a hymn-like chorus of villagers. The 32-strong choir from the Petruzzelli Theatre Company played a vital role, both musically and narratively.

The formidable Friar Tuck was portrayed by Albanian baritone Gezim Myshketa, while Simone Alberghini’s Sheriff of Nottingham added a comical spin, parodying a rogue on a child scooter. Robin and his merry men, dressed in green, were depicted as revolutionaries, delivering vibrant protest anthems.

Scene 2 transitioned effortlessly thanks to Giuseppe Pugliese’s lighting effects to Maid Marion’s dance studio in Nottingham Castle, where she practised with her gymnastics instructor. Armenian soprano Maria Sardaryan beautifully embodied Marion, singing a melodic aria filled with longing for Robin, mirrored in a duet with mezzo-soprano Loriana Castellano, who played the nurse. The Sheriff’s arrival introduced a comedic Opera Buffa Trio, showcasing Rossini’s influence.

The scene soon displayed a stunning emerald representation of Sherwood Forest, ingeniously created with thousands of green balloons. This element, designed by Sanne Danz, drew gasps from the audience. Blue lighting created an enchanted atmosphere



A contemporary re-imagining of a quintessentially English tale



as Robin and Marion reunited. In safety harnesses, the couple ascended on trapeze swings, delivering a captivating duet accompanied by a joyful trumpet solo from Massimiliano Campoli. Their romantic moment was interrupted by Little John, sung by tenor Roberto Covatta, with a warning of danger. An intense Ambush Scene unfolded against an ominous backdrop of hanging nooses, as the Sheriff relished the idea of executing the outlaws, displayed through a parody of Prokofiev’s musical style. Just in time, a Deus ex Machina intervened, heralding a rousing Chorus of Liberation — a triumphant moment leading to King Richard the Lionheart’s grand entrance. Dressed dramatically in gold and pink feathers, he addressed the deceit in Nottingham, bringing the legendary tale to a powerful conclusion.