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INBRIEF

ENHANCING
FOOD SECURITY

Al Sharqiyah North Governorate witnessed extensive developmental activity throughout 2025 in the agricultural, livestock and water sectors, manifested in a package of projects and achievements implemented and supervised by the General Directorate of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in the governorate. These efforts come within the strategic framework of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to enhance food security, develop water resources, and support farmers and breeders in alignment with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. **DETAILS ON P5**



OO GROUP REPORTS
RO 641M NET PROFIT

OQ Group reported a net profit of RO 641 million for 2025, up 25 per cent year-on-year. The result reflects the strength of its integrated business model and disciplined performance amid continued volatility in global energy markets. Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation increased by 23 per cent to RO 1.348 billion, driven by strong execution across the value chain and a sustained focus on operational excellence. These results reinforce OQ's ambition to strengthen its position as a global energy company that delivers strong financial returns while advancing the energy transition. The Group continues to align its strategy with Oman Vision 2040, supporting the development of a diversified and sustainable economy. **DETAILS ON P15**

INFLATION RISES BY
3.6% IN MARCH

The general Consumer Price Index (CPI) in the Sultanate of Oman posted a rise of 3.6 per cent in March, compared to the corresponding month in 2025. Data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) showed that the average inflation rate during the first quarter of this year (January to March 2026) rose by 2.3 per cent. The data showed that the segment of "miscellaneous personal goods and services" topped the list of groups that experienced the highest price rises.

HM, UK Premier discuss regional developments



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday received a telephone call from Sir Keir Starmer, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK).

During the call, they discussed the latest developments in the region and their implications for security and stability, particularly following the conclusion of negotiations held in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan without reaching an agreement, and what this necessitates in terms of intensifying international efforts to prevent further escalation of tensions.

The two sides exchanged views on ways to contain escalation and address the root causes of the crisis in a manner that strengthens stability and safeguards the interests of the region's countries. They affirmed the importance of continued international coordination and support for efforts aimed at de-escalation and the pursuit of peaceful and diplomatic solutions, grounded in the principles of international law. — ONA



Mideast prepares for
more fighting as talks fail

LEBANON SAYS 5 DEAD AS ISRAEL POUNDS COUNTRY'S SOUTH

A SENSE of dread spread across the Middle East after talks between the US and Iran collapsed, as fears of renewed fighting rattled an already tense region with Donald Trump ordering a naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz. Following more than 20 hours of talks in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, US Vice-President JD Vance admitted the yawning differences between the US and Iran proved to be insurmountable for the moment.

Questions about what would come next and whether the two sides would continue to respect a two-week ceasefire were anybody's guess as both the Iranian and American delegations departed Pakistan without a deal.

"Things could change at any moment," said Aishah, a 32-year-old economic consultant based in Doha. "It's more about taking each day as it comes."

The failure of the talks however did not surprise many in the region. In Iran, a brief spell of hope that talks would end the hostilities between the long-time foes was quickly dashed.

"I really wanted them to make peace," said Mahsa, a 30-year-old employee of an export company in the Iranian capital.

"It's been almost 45 days now



Relatives mourn over the bodies of four members of the Saeed family killed in an Israeli strike in the village of Srifra, at the Al Kharab mosque in Tyre, Lebanon, on Sunday. — Reuters

that I've seen everyone stressed. It's a bad situation." Elsewhere in the Middle East, the negotiations' failure only seemed to guarantee more uncertainty.

Meanwhile, world figures urged the United States and Iran to keep negotiating after marathon Washington-Tehran talks in Islamabad ended on Sunday without a deal to end the war in the Middle East. "It is imperative that the parties continue to uphold their commitment to cease fire," said Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, whose government hosted the talks and acted as a mediator.

Diplomacy is "essential" to resolve the war in the Middle East, a European Union spokesman said. Noting failed US-Iranian talks hosted by Pakistan, EU foreign affairs spokesman Anouar El Anouni said "we salute Pakistan for its mediation efforts" and added Brussels would contribute to further efforts to reach a settlement in coordination with its partners. Russian President Vladimir Putin told his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian that he was ready to help mediate efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East, the Kremlin said.

SEE ALSO P6 & 7

Energy ministry offers 5 new oil, gas concession areas

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Energy and Minerals announced the offering of five concession areas in the oil and gas sector for competition among local and international petroleum companies. This comes as part of its efforts to enhance the optimal utilisation of natural resources with efficiency and innovation, ensure their sustainability, and support the growth of the national economy in

line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The offered concession areas (12, 16, 55, 42 and 45) are distributed across a wide geographical area with significant geological potential.

The ministry affirmed that the offering of these areas comes as part of its ongoing approach to enhancing an attractive investment environment based on the principles of transparency and equal



opportunities, thereby contributing to attracting quality investments, transferring modern technologies, and maximising the added value of the oil and gas sector.

The ministry said that the application process goes through several stages, including reviewing the available opportunities, registering and submitting the required documents, obtaining the technical data, and then submitting

proposals through the designated platform before the deadline.

The ministry invited companies interested in participating to review the tender details through the tender website via the QR Code. Registration will commence on April 12 and continue until September 30, with results to be announced following the completion of the technical and financial evaluation of the submitted bids. **DETAILS ON P13**

OMAN





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SHORTTAKES



Wheat cultivation in Al Najd area constitutes a major initiative in promoting agricultural sustainability. — ONA

WHEAT HARVEST IN FULL SWING

THUMRAIT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is engaged in harvesting wheat crop in Al Najd agricultural area, as part of the 2025/2026 agricultural season in the Dhofar Governorate. As many as 51 farms participate in harvesting the crop in an area of 6,408 acres. The step reflects a trend of constant expansion in wheat cultivation and the consolidation of the Sultanate of Oman’s food security strategy.

Eng Said bin Musallam al Kathiri, Director of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources in Thumrait, said that the varieties of wheat this season include the types known as Najd 1, Najd 2, Australian wheat, Qurayat 110, Qurayat 226 and Qurayat 308—which all proved to be suitable for environmental conditions in the region.

Al Kathiri told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the harvesting season would continue for two months. He pointed out that the ministry is lending support to farmers by providing modern machines, offering technical support, in addition to enabling Oman Mills Company to receive the output, which is likely to exceed 8,000 tonnes during this season from all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

EMPLOYMENT EXHIBITION KICKS OFF



AL BURAIMI: The 6th edition of an employment exhibition codenamed ‘Furas’ (Opportunities) kicked off on Sunday at the University of Buraimi in Al Buraimi Governorate. More than 30 government departments and private sector establishments are taking part in the three-day exhibition, which is organised by the University of Buraimi in cooperation with Al Buraimi Governor’s Office and the Office of the Ministry of Labour. — ONA

KABEER YOUSUF

MUSCAT, APRIL 12

The Maritime Traditions Committee in Muscat recently held a meeting to address the issues encountered by fishermen and to explore ways to improve maritime activities and fishing.

The meeting, chaired by Ali bin Said al Saeedi, Wali of Muscat, Wali of Muscat, aimed to monitor maritime conditions and organise fishing activities. Relevant authorities and committee

members attended, with fishermen sharing their concerns and discussing potential solutions.

“Among the various issues related to organising maritime activities that were discussed, the Yenkit and Al Harathi Marina project initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources was a key topic,” Al Saeedi said.

During the meeting, concerns about Al Jissah, organisational matters, and service issues were addressed.



A field visit was recently conducted to strengthen coordination between government entities.

The Committee also reviewed its recent work, identified challenges and proposed solutions.

“The committee has

and protect maritime resources in the wilayat,” he added. Furthermore, a field visit to the Darsait-Aint Marina project was conducted to discuss the challenges faced by fishermen and strengthen coordination between government entities.

The visit, attended by representatives from the Wali of Muttrah Office, specialists from the General-Directorate of Fishing Ports, the Fisheries Development Department at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water

Resources, and members of the Maritime Traditions Committee, allowed local fishermen to share their concerns.

Various observations were made regarding sailing safety, beach entry and exit procedures, and the impact of climate change on fishing activities. During the visit, the creation of a contingency plan to address extreme weather conditions was discussed to enhance safety measures for fishermen and reduce risks during adverse weather.

Humpback whales documented in Masirah Island

MASIRAH: Specialists at the Environment Center in the Wilayat of Masirah, Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, have successfully spotted and documented two humpback whales in the marine area located northeast of the island.

The sighting, recorded during ongoing field surveys and environmental monitoring, captured an active ‘feeding’ state, reflecting the high biological value of this geographical range, specifically within the boundaries of ‘Sector One.’

This observation is part of the



The new documentation will help strengthen scientific database.

centre’s continuous efforts to track endangered species and document their natural behaviour within the wilayat’s waters.

‘Sector One’ and the northeastern region possess significant

environmental importance due to their unique characteristics. These waters serve as a rich feeding ground not only for whales but also for sea turtles, making the area a vital hub for biodiversity.

The region is characterised by an integrated ecosystem, where the open marine space provides a necessary habitat to ensure the survival of these creatures through an abundance of food. The significance of the site lies in its combination of migratory corridors and intensive feeding activity, necessitating ongoing precise monitoring and scientific documentation.

This new documentation will contribute to strengthening the scientific database concerning the marine range. — ONA

UMC launches continuous improvement projects

OHOOD AL JILANI

MUSCAT, APRIL 12

THE University Medical City (UMC) achieved significant milestones last year by implementing 12 continuous improvement projects. These projects saved in excess of RO 11.7 million, increased operational efficiency by over 45 per cent, and boosted patient satisfaction to over 90 per cent. The UMC’s achievements in 2025 included expanding digital transformation, automating operational services, implementing emergency recovery systems, and continuing construction work on the Center of Excellence for Developmental Paediatrics.

Last year the UMC finalised its organisational structure, invested in developing first-and second-tier leaders with the participation of 133 candidates in 44 leadership and training programmes. This is in addition to the appointment of several leaders as directors general across various directorates, and the implementation of governance practices, performance enhancement and decentralisation.

The Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre (SQCCCRC), introduced eight new treatment services and twelve advanced diagnostic technologies, including the use of artificial intelligence in



The achievements included expanding digital transformation, automating operational services and implementing emergency recovery systems.

These projects saved in excess of RO 11.7 million, increased operational efficiency by over 45 per cent, and boosted patient satisfaction to over 90 per cent

radiotherapy planning. The Centre also implemented infrastructure development and service quality improvement projects, including establishing colposcopy and endometrial examination clinics, installing over 60 medical devices, establishing a specialised upper limb reconstruction clinic within the Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation Department, and introducing a carbon dioxide infusion pump for diagnostic procedures.

As for the National Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Centre, it achieved significant milestones in 2025, most notably a successful first-of-its-kind CAR-T cell therapy procedure, expanding the bone marrow transplant unit to 21 isolation rooms, introducing advanced genetic diagnostic technologies, launching a specialised psychiatric clinic within the paediatric haematology and bone marrow transplant unit and

introducing a dental clinic.

The University Hospital introduced 11 new treatment services, 11 advanced diagnostic and laboratory technologies, 14 projects to improve service quality and develop medical infrastructure as well as 6 patient safety initiatives. The hospital focused on improving the quality of services and patient safety through multiple initiatives such as equipping and operating 7 operating rooms as part of the expansion of operating rooms, increasing the capacity of the emergency units by 82 per cent for adults and 35 per cent for children, establishing a children’s emergency unit, activating the evening clinic for the paediatric health department, restarting the mammography service after a two-year hiatus, expanding the genetic and developmental medicine clinic by 50 per cent to 6 rooms, starting cochlear implant surgeries and activating a specialised clinic for auditory rehabilitation.

Officials address challenges faced by fishermen

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Growth at Scale Advancing the Energy Future

Key Highlights

Financial Performance

Disciplined Growth Delivering Strong Financial Outcomes

1.348 Bn
EBITDA
+23% YoY

641 Mn
Net Profit
25% YoY

BBB-
Investment Grade Rating
Stable Outlook (S&P & Fitch)

National Value

Driving In-Country Value and Empowering Omani Businesses

610 Mn
Total Spend

117 Mn
SME Spend

467 Mn
Local Procurement Spend
19% YoY

Oman Investment Authority
ICV Award - Rawabit Forum

Industrial Development

Expanding Oman's Downstream Manufacturing Base

لدائن
LADAYN

9 Factories
Commenced Production under Ladayn in 2025

11 Investment Agreements

27 Mn
Industrial Investments

Operational Scale

Reliable Operations Sustaining Large-Scale Energy Production

93 Mn Barrels
Crude refined in 2025
Record Annual Throughput

317 K Tonnes
Polypropylene Production (PP1 & PP2)

8.37 Mn Barrels
Record Monthly Refining Throughput

1 Mn+ Tonnes
Polymer Production
Exceeding Annual Target

Energy Transition

Scaling Renewable Capacity and Future Energy Systems

740+ MW
PPAs signed for 3 utility-scale projects

Up to **25% Equity**
Back-In Commitments in All NPWP Tendered Renewable Energy Projects

Largest Wind Turbines Delivered to Oman
for Riyah1 and Riyah 2 wind projects

People & Capability

Building National Talent and Future Leadership Capability

132,062 Hours
Learning & Development

182 Leaders
MASAR Leadership Programme

1,039 Internship
Opportunities in 2025

87%
Omanisation Rate

Safety & Workplace

Embedding a Culture of Safety and Organisational Commitment

47 Mn
Safe Manhours

Zero Fatalities
For the Third year in a row

New OQ Headquarters
1,200+ Employees Relocated

Social Investment

Supporting Communities and Creating Lasting Impact

12 Mn
Contribution Value

256 Initiatives

Innovation & Future Energy

Advancing Energy Innovation

13 Startups
Selected for the Pre-Accelerator Track

210+ Hours
Mentorship

19,000
Milestone Based Grant per Startup

4 Startups
Startups Selected for the Accelerator Track

50 Workshops
Delivered

Strategic Partnerships and Agreements

- > **Integrated Gas Company (IGC)**
Five strategic agreements and one memorandum of cooperation aimed at securing long-term gas supply and supporting downstream industry expansion
- > **Royal Vopak**
Agreements to develop and operate a world class energy infrastructure in Duqm
- > **Mawarid Turbines**
Memorandum of Understanding to establish the region's first wind turbine manufacturing plant in Duqm
- > **State Oil Marketing Organization**
Agreements to develop a 10 Mn BBL crude storage facility at Ras Markaz and collaborate on international crude marketing of Iraqi crude



SPOTLIGHT



BALQEES AL ORAIMI

FOLLOWING RECENT rainfall across Muscat and several wilayats in Oman, residents have reported a noticeable rise in fly activity in some residential areas. While the rains brought much-needed relief from high temperatures and contributed positively to water reserves, they have also triggered an unwelcome environmental side effect – a surge in fly populations.

Environmental experts say this increase is both seasonal and expected.

Rainfall creates ideal breeding conditions due to higher humidity and the presence of moist organic matter. Damp food waste and household garbage provide fertile ground for flies to lay eggs, accelerating their life cycle and

leading to a rapid rise in numbers within days. Flies are particularly attracted to decomposing organic material. After rainfall, improperly managed waste can become exposed or dispersed, especially in areas where drainage systems are overwhelmed or disposal practices are inconsistent.

This combination of moisture, food sources and warm conditions creates a highly favourable environment for flies to thrive.

Beyond being a nuisance, flies pose public health risks. They are known carriers of bacteria and pathogens, increasing the likelihood of contamination when they come into contact with food or living spaces.

Their presence in markets and commercial areas can also affect hygiene standards and environmental quality.

INCREASED HUMIDITY AND WET WASTE ACCELERATE FLY BREEDING

FLIES CAN SPREAD BACTERIA AND CONTAMINATE FOOD AND SURROUNDINGS

PROPER WASTE DISPOSAL AND ELIMINATING STAGNANT WATER ARE ESSENTIAL

Muscat Municipality confirmed that such increases are a natural response to environmental changes, particularly higher humidity and the availability of breeding sites.

The municipality stressed that addressing the issue requires collective effort, especially in maintaining proper waste management and avoiding the exposure of garbage in open areas.

Municipal teams have intensified field operations, including pest control campaigns and monitoring of potential breeding sites, particularly in areas with water accumulation or runoff. Public awareness efforts are also being strengthened to encourage residents to maintain cleanliness during and after rainfall.

Experts highlight that simple preventive measures at the household level can make a

significant difference. These include disposing of waste regularly, sealing garbage bins and avoiding leaving food uncovered. Cleaning outdoor spaces after rainfall helps eliminate breeding grounds.

Residents are also advised to remove stagnant water, even in small amounts, as it can attract various insects. Installing window screens and using safe pest control methods can further reduce indoor fly presence.

As weather patterns evolve and rainfall becomes more variable, such environmental challenges may recur. Balancing the benefits of rain with its side effects will require sustained awareness and coordinated action.

Maintaining a clean and healthy environment ultimately depends on shared responsibility between authorities and the public.

SHORT TAKES



Maintenance projects for aflaj aim to preserve the physical infrastructure and ensure continued water delivery to farmlands. — ONA

MAINTENANCE OF 34 AFLAJ SYSTEMS COMPLETED

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has completed maintenance work on 34 falaj systems and water springs across various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman during the first quarter of the current year 2026.

According to statistics issued by the Aflaj Department at the Directorate General of Water Resources Management within the ministry, covering the period between January and March 2026, the completed projects include: 4 projects in Musandam Governorate, 5 in Al Buraimi Governorate, 1 in Al Batinah North Governorate, 4 in Al Batinah South Governorate, 4 in Muscat Governorate, 2 in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, 5 in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, 5 in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, and 4 projects in Dhofar Governorate.

The ministry further confirmed that during the first quarter of this year, maintenance work has commenced on additional aflaj and water springs, including 1 project in Muscat Governorate, 2 in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, 1 in Al Batinah South Governorate, 3 in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, 1 in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, and 1 project in Dhofar Governorate.

The aflaj term refers to heritage irrigation systems, which remain vital for agriculture, food security, and cultural identity. Maintenance projects for aflaj aim to preserve the physical infrastructure and ensure continued water delivery to farmlands. — ONA

FISH LANDING IN FINS SUPPORTS FOOD SECURITY



The project includes construction of breakwaters to protect boats.

QURAYAT: The Fish Landing Center project in Fins village, located in the Wilayat of Qurayat in Muscat Governorate, is considered one of the key initiatives supporting food security. The project is being implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources as part of its ongoing efforts to develop the infrastructure of the marine fishing sector and support fishermen.

Eng Ahmed Said al Rashdi, Director of the Rehabilitation and Maintenance Department at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, stated that the project is estimated to cost RO 3 million.

It includes the construction of breakwaters to protect boats, a boat slipway, and the development of an investment area of approximately 10,000 square metres to support fisheries-related activities.

Al Rashdi added in a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA) that the project also encompasses the implementation of infrastructure works, including electricity and water networks as well as internal roads. The project is expected to be completed by mid-2027.

He noted that the project will contribute to improving the working environment for fishermen, enhancing the efficiency of landing operations, and boosting local economic activity, thereby supporting food security and the development of the fisheries sector in Fins village. — ONA

CPA tightens product rules to enhance transparency

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

IN AN INCREASINGLY dynamic marketplace defined by rapid consumption and a growing diversity of products, transparency has emerged as a cornerstone of consumer protection and public trust. In this context, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) continues to strengthen its awareness efforts, emphasising the need for clear and accurate product information to support informed purchasing decisions.

A recent advisory issued by the Authority outlines three essential elements that suppliers must clearly disclose on all products.

Foremost is the origin, nature and type of the product — details that go beyond basic identification to help consumers assess quality and suitability. Knowledge of a product's country of origin, for instance, often plays a decisive role in shaping consumer preferences, particularly in light of differing international manufacturing and safety standards.

Equally important is the inclusion of clear instructions for use and necessary precautions. This requirement is closely tied to consumer safety, as inadequate or unclear guidance may lead to misuse, potentially resulting in health risks or material damage.

The Authority underscores that supplier responsibility extends beyond product availability to ensuring safe and proper usage.



Content and presentation remain critical benchmarks in evaluating supplier practices.

CPA emphasises need for clear and accurate product information to support informed purchasing decisions

The third key element is the transparent display of pricing — an essential consumer right. Clear pricing not only prevents misleading practices but also promotes fair competition and enables consumers to compare options and make informed financial decisions.

The Authority noted that ensuring product information is clearly disclosed and easily readable is fundamental to protecting consumer rights and reducing improper market practices. It added that inspection campaigns and awareness initiatives will continue to be intensified to ensure compliance with approved standards.

Clarity, however, goes beyond the mere presence of information. The CPA stresses that details must be presented in a legible and accessible manner. Small fonts or ambiguous wording can undermine

Al Ansab-Al Jifnain road project 79% complete

MUSCAT: The Al Ansab-Al Jifnain dualisation project undertaken by the Muscat Municipality is around 79 per cent complete and is expected to be completed by the end of the third quarter of 2026.

The project includes paving of roads, upgrading service roads, converting existing roundabouts into bridges and tunnels, constructing box culverts, creating new intersections,



The project includes converting existing roundabouts into bridges and tunnels.

and extending and protecting utilities.

The 2026 Budget has focused on the completion of several important road projects that are vital to the tourism, logistics and other economic sectors of the Sultanate of Oman. An amount of RO 2.7 billion was allocated for the implementation of about 2,525 kilometres of main and internal roads across governorates.

Agricultural sector projects enhance food security

IBRA: Al Sharqiyah North Governorate witnessed extensive developmental activity throughout 2025 in the agricultural, livestock, and water sectors, manifested in a package of projects and achievements implemented and supervised by the General Directorate of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in the governorate.

These efforts come within the strategic framework of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to enhance food security, develop water resources, and support farmers and breeders in alignment with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

Dr Abdulaziz bin Ali al Mashikhi, Director-General of Agricultural Wealth and Water Resources in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, stated that the economic data achieved in the governorate for 2025 showed that the average total agricultural production over the past three years reached 1,267,000 tonnes.

He noted a 7 per cent growth in the area used for fruit cultivation, totalling 841 acres with a total production of 4,633



The Model Grape Farms Project contributes to strengthening the food and water security system. — ONA

tonnes. Additionally, the area of model fruit farms reached 503 acres, while the area of grape fields over the past three years reached 27 acres, and fig fields reached 66 acres. The area dedicated to vegetables accounted for 25.2 percent of the total, covering 989 acres with a total production of 51,295 tons.

He added that the total area of date palm crops grew by 1.3 per cent to reach 8,359 acres, with an expected total production of 50,236 tonnes. He emphasised that Al Sharqiyah North Governorate ranked fifth nationally in date production with 50,236 tonnes, representing 12 per cent of

Oman's total, with 1,003,072 palm trees. Furthermore, the governorate ranked first among the governorates of Oman in the production of “Mabsali” dates (Busr), with a production of 11,620 tonnes, while the number of Mabsali palms in the governorate's wilayats reached 136,112 trees.

The Director-General affirmed that the governorate is witnessing rapid growth in enhancing food security and the contribution of agriculture to the national economy through farmers, the offering of investment opportunities, and the use of modern technologies and greenhouses. The plant sector in the governorate grew by 3 per cent last year, and the governorate achieved 100 per cent self-sufficiency in certain agricultural and animal products, such as dates, cucumbers, honey, and eggs.

He mentioned that the Model Grape Farms Project contributes to strengthening the food and water security system by cultivating 100 acres of grapes, bringing the growth index of grape cultivation areas. — ONA

C E A S E F I R E H O L D S A M I D C A L L S F O R D I P L O M A C Y

US TEAM LEAVES AFTER
FAILED TALKS

The entire US negotiating team has left the failed Iran talks in Islamabad, a US official, leaving nobody in the Pakistani capital to pursue back-channel discussions.

IRAN SAYS
NO TRUST

Iran's parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who took part in peace talks with the US in Islamabad, said that Washington was 'unable' to win Tehran's trust during the discussions.

US ATTEMPTING TO
'DICTATE' TERMS

Iran's former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who led his country's delegation at 2015 nuclear talks, blamed the failure of negotiations on US attempts to 'dictate' its terms.

UK
DISAPPOINTED

UK health minister Wes Streeting said it was 'disappointing' that negotiations between the US and Iran in Islamabad had stalled, and criticised Trump's 'incendiary' rhetoric during the conflict.

KEY SAUDI
PIPELINE BACK

Saudi Arabia's energy ministry said that its key east-west oil pipeline and other facilities had been restored following attacks by Iran on infrastructure across the Gulf.

TEHRAN DOWNPLAYS
NO-DEAL FINISH

Iran's foreign ministry said no one had held any expectation that talks with the US could have reached an agreement within one session after the negotiations in Islamabad stalled.

AUSTRALIA: TALKS
MUST CONTINUE

"The priority now must be to continue the ceasefire and return to negotiations," Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said in a statement, adding it was "disappointing that the Islamabad talks have ended without agreement".

EU SAYS DIPLOMACY
'ESSENTIAL'

EU foreign affairs spokesman Anouar El Anouni said "we salute Pakistan for its mediation efforts" and added Brussels would contribute to further efforts to reach a settlement in coordination with its partners.

UPHOLD CEASEFIRE
AGREEMENT

Pakistan's foreign minister insisted that Washington and Tehran must uphold a ceasefire agreement, after marathon talks between the two sides to end the war in the Middle East ended without a deal.

PUTIN READY
TO MEDIATE

Russian President Vladimir Putin told his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian he was ready to help mediate efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East, the Kremlin said.

TALKS FAIL AS WORLD URGES RESPECT FOR TRUCE



People walk past a wall mural along the roadside in Tehran. — AFP

IRAN AND the United States failed to strike a deal on Sunday to end the war in the Middle East, but there was no immediate return to hostilities and world leaders quickly urged both sides to pursue the diplomatic route to peace. US Vice-President JD Vance left Pakistan after the talks — the highest-level meeting between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic revolution — and warned that Washington had made Tehran its "final and best offer" for a deal. "We leave here with a very simple proposal," he said. "We'll see if the Iranians accept it."

During a refuelling stop in Germany's Ramstein Air Base for Air Force 2, a US official told reporters that no members of the US negotiating team stayed behind in Islamabad, including chief negotiators Steve Witkoff and President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Russia's President Putin called Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian to offer his services to the diplomatic effort

Iran's parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said his negotiating team had "put forward constructive initiatives but ultimately the other side was unable to gain the trust of the Iranian delegation in this round of negotiations".

Iranian and US reports said the two sides were unable to agree on who would control the Strait of Hormuz skipping lane nor whether Tehran would have the right to enrich uranium under any deal.

The failure of the talks will raise concerns that a return to fighting could drive world energy prices higher and further damage shipping and oil and gas facilities in the Gulf, while civilians in the region were concerned that air strikes could resume with no political endgame in sight.

"We feel despair and hopelessness. We are tired of this uncertainty," said Nahid, a 60-year old housewife in Tehran,

contacted. Saudi Arabia's energy ministry said on Sunday its key east-west oil pipeline was back in service after it was damaged in earlier strikes, and Qatar's transport ministry said it was lifting some restrictions on Gulf shipping.

Pakistan, which hosted the talks and whose leadership had ushered the rival sides to the table, said it would keep facilitating dialogue and urged both countries to continue respecting the temporary truce.

"It is imperative that the parties continue to uphold their commitment to ceasefire," Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said. An EU spokesman said diplomacy would be "essential" to securing peace and hailed Pakistan's mediation efforts, while Russia's President Vladimir Putin called Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian to offer his services to the diplomatic effort.

"Vladimir Putin emphasised his

readiness to further facilitate the search for a political and diplomatic settlement to the conflict, and to mediate efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace in the Middle East," the Kremlin said, in its read-out of the call.

Iran and the US had entered the talks mediated by Pakistan with maximalist positions, with Washington piling pressure by saying it had sent minesweeping ships through the vital Strait of Hormuz maritime route.

Signs of strain in the negotiations appeared when Iranian media accused the United States of making "excessive demands" over the strait, through which one-fifth of the world's oil transited before its effective closure by Iran during the war. Iran's demands for any agreement to end the war include unfreezing sanctioned Iranian assets and ending Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. — AFP

TRUMP ORDERS US NAVAL BLOCKADE OF HORMUZ



US President Donald Trump arrives at Miami International Airport in Florida. — Reuters

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Sunday ordered a US naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz in response to Iran's "unyielding" refusal to give up its nuclear ambitions during failed peace talks in Islamabad.

While acknowledging that the marathon negotiations in Pakistan had gone "well" and "most points were agreed to," Trump said Tehran had refused to concede on the issue of its nuclear programme.

"Effective immediately, the United States Navy, the Finest in the World, will begin the process of blockading any and all Ships trying to enter, or leave, the Strait of Hormuz," Trump said on his Truth Social platform.

"Any Iranian who fires at us, or at peaceful vessels, will be Blown to hell!" Trump suggested that "other countries" would be involved in the

blockade effort, without specifying.

US Vice-President JD Vance left Pakistan without a deal after weekend talks with a team led by Iran's parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf — the highest-level meeting between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Tehran's delegation also included Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. The talks were meant to solidify a fragile two-week ceasefire with a final deal to end the conflict that has engulfed the Middle East, leaving thousands dead and roiling global markets. But no conclusions were reached.

"We leave here with a very simple proposal, a method of understanding that is our final and best offer. We'll see if the Iranians accept it," Vance told reporters. — AFP

Strike kills infant in Lebanon during father's funeral

Wrapped in bloodied bandages, Aline Saeed, seven, barely survived the Israeli strike on her home in south Lebanon last week. She was there to bury her father as hopes of a truce spread across the region, but a new strike killed her infant sister and other relatives.

The strike on the Saeed family home in the village of Srifa took place on Wednesday, the first day of a US-Iran ceasefire that many in Lebanon hoped would apply to their country, too. Instead, Israeli strikes killed more than 350 across Lebanon and left the Saeed family with four more relatives to bury.

"They said it was a ceasefire. Like all these people, we went up to the village. We went to the casket to read the prayers and walk home... suddenly we felt like a storm was landing right on us," said Nasser Saeed, Aline's 64-year old grandfather, who also survived.

On Sunday, he joined other relatives in the southern port city of Tyre to pick up the bodies wrapped in green cloth. One of them, a fraction the size of the rest, contained his granddaughter Taleen, Aline's sister.

She had not yet turned two. With bandages to his head and right hand and scratches on his face, Saeed mourned in silence as the women around him turned their faces up to the sky and screamed in agony.

The latest war in Lebanon began on March 2, when Hezbollah fired onto Israeli positions. Israel has since escalated its air and ground campaign in the country where its operations have killed more than

- More than 160 children in Lebanon killed in Israeli strikes
- Family thought they could hold funeral during truce
- Israeli strike killed four more relatives, including infant girl



A jeep drives past a destroyed building at the site of an Israeli strike that targeted the southern Lebanese village of Al Bazouriyah. — AFP

2,000 people, including 165 children and nearly 250 women.

Wednesday was one of the deadliest days in Lebanon's recent history.

"This isn't humanity. This is a war crime," Saeed said at the hospital where Aline's mother, Ghinwa, was still being treated.

"Where are the human rights? If a child — a child! — is wounded in Israel, the whole world jumps up. Are we not people? Are we not humans? We're like them!" he said.

Asked about the incident, the Israeli military said it was looking into the report of the Srifa strike.

Taleen was born in 2024, in the last round of fierce clashes between Hezbollah and Israel.

"She was born in the war and died in the war," said Mohammed Nazzal, Ghinwa's father.

Iran wants a ceasefire for Lebanon as part of talks with the United States, which concluded on Sunday without a breakthrough. But Israel wants to

pursue talks with Lebanese officials through a separate track.

Heavy bombardment on Lebanon has continued, with nearly 100 people killed on Saturday. Dr Abbas Attiye, head of emergency operations at Tyre's Jabal Amel hospital, said last week's bombardment was one of the heaviest in recent years and many of the patients arriving at his hospital were children.

"The challenges we're facing now are the numbers of wounded that come at the same time, within the same 30 minutes or hour," Attiye said.

Meanwhile, Pope Leo XIV expressed his closeness to the people of Lebanon on Sunday, saying there was a "moral obligation" to protect them while calling on warring parties to seek peace.

"I am closer than ever, in these days of sorrow, fear, and unconquerable hope in God, to the beloved Lebanese people," the pope told the crowd at St Peter's Square following his Regina Coeli prayer.

"The principle of humanity, inscribed in the conscience of every person and recognised in international law, entails the moral obligation to protect the civilian population from the atrocious effects of war," he said.

On Saturday during a prayer for peace, the soft-spoken Leo made one of his most pointed criticisms yet of the war, imploring leaders to end the violence.

"Stop! It is time for peace! Sit at the table of dialogue and mediation, not at the table where rearrangement is planned and deadly actions are decided!" he said.

"Enough of the idolatry of self and money! Enough of the display of power! Enough of war!" — AFP/Reuters

UK minister says 'disappointing' no breakthrough in talks

LONDON: UK government minister Wes Streeting on Sunday said it was 'disappointing' that negotiations between the United States and Iran in Islamabad had stalled, adding that US President Donald Trump's earlier social media comments had been 'incendiary'.

"It's obviously disappointing that we haven't yet seen a breakthrough in negotiations and an end to this war in Iran that is a sustainable one,"

Streeting told Sky News.

"As ever in diplomacy, you're failing, until you succeed. So while these talks may not have ended in success, that doesn't mean there isn't merit in continuing to try," the health minister added.

Streeting also criticised Trump's rhetoric during the crisis.

"Over the course of the past week, President Trump has said some pretty bold... incendiary, provocative,



Wes Streeting

outrageous things on social media," he said.

CONTINUE TO JUDGE TRUMP

"I don't think it's controversial to say posting on social media a threat to end the Iranian civilisation, really... (is) quite extraordinary," he added.

Trump and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer have traded barbs over Iran, with Trump complaining the British leader "hasn't been supportive" of

the war in the Middle East and also remarking that "this is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with".

Streeting said the UK would continue to judge Trump by what he did rather than what he said.

"Ultimately, the only way in which we're going to clear this situation up is to reach agreement with Iran, one that puts nuclear weapons beyond its ambitions and reach," he added. — AFP

OPINION

The incalculable loss of intangible heritage in times of war



DR SANDHYA
RAO MEHTA

The writer is
Associate Professor,
Sultan Qaboos
University

BENEATH the rubble of buildings that once were schools, residencies, hospitals, universities and other sites of normal life, there lie humans who have been bombed, living out their daily routines. As much as the loss of these lives is shocking and poignant, it also points to more long-lasting consequences: the loss of history, memory and cultural ties that bind people together. In war, these are the lesser-known, but no less valuable losses. Tangible treasures consist of historical buildings that remind us of the past. Intangible treasures are those that make up a community. They are songs, community practices, rituals, music and dance that make up a society and breathe life into it. Without it, a society is just mechanical and without a soul. Beyond physical loss, communities caught in the throes of war lose their traditions, languages and cultural practices that are tied to them. Cultural heritage plays an important role

in shaping identity and connecting people to their past. When these elements are lost, the disconnect from history, the past and the future is almost certain. The widespread displacement of civilians in parts of the Middle East, that is continuing even today, has created a sense of loss of home and identity. For many people, home is not just a place but a symbol of memories, culture and belonging. Losing it can lead to feelings of grief and disorientation. Even when people find safety elsewhere, the emotional connection to their home remains strong. The efforts of people to reach out and find more about their past homes and lost lives will remain a moving project through the coming years. Postcolonial researchers have often pointed out how colonisation erased memory of past cultural heritage, creating entirely new spaces of colonial knowledge. In Gaza, over the last three years, cultural historians have been referencing the sense of instant erasure. This comes in the form of vast, quick and thorough removal of all sites of cultural memory, including libraries which

The widespread displacement of civilians in parts of the Middle East has created a sense of loss of home and identity

house books of knowledge and practices, and music institutions that showcase musical instruments and records of festive songs. Without them, there will be no memory of the rich cultural heritage associated with this region. Artists living in and outside Gaza have spoken movingly about the multiple losses which they are enduring. Not only is there physical loss of family and loved ones, but there is also the loss of actual art that they produced over the years and which remains central to their artistic identity. Artist Shareef Sarhan references this as “the loss of the artist’s soul”. While physical destruction in times of war is highly visible, the non-material losses are often deeper and longer-lasting. Psychological trauma, broken social ties and loss of cultural heritage can affect societies for generations. Accepting and understanding these invisible consequences is essential to rebuilding peace and helping communities recover after a conflict. Only by addressing such impacts of intangible loss can true healing and stability be achieved.

LUNAR MISSION
DRAWS FLOOD
OF CONSPIRACY
THEORIES

MANON JACOB & ANUJ CHOPRA

From false claims that a historic lunar fly-by was staged in a movie studio to unfounded narratives that footage of the crew was AI-generated, the Artemis II mission has been clouded by a blizzard of misinformation. The falsehoods - circulating across tech platforms including X, TikTok and Facebook - have also added fresh fuel to a longstanding conspiracy theory that Nasa’s 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing was faked. Hashtags such as “fake space” and “fake Nasa” have gained traction online since Nasa’s lunar fly-by sent astronauts farther from Earth than any human before. Among the falsehoods was an image, viewed over a million times on X, purporting to show the Artemis II crew floating before a green screen and facing film cameras - suggesting their mission was staged in a studio, but in reality bore the hallmarks of AI manipulation. Some users also shared a video showing text appearing through the mission’s official mascot as purported proof the flight was staged. But a digital forensics expert said fact-checkers that the anomaly was the result of a failed text overlay by a news station that had syndicated the official feed. Unfounded claims that the Artemis II mission detected a mysterious moving object on the moon’s surface also racked up millions of views across platforms. The misinformation spread as four astronauts - preparing on Friday for a high-stakes re-entry and splashdown - captivated the world with stunning visuals from their fly-by of the Earth’s natural satellite from aboard the Orion spacecraft. Once confined to the Internet’s fringes, conspiracy theories have moved squarely into the mainstream amid growing mistrust of public institutions and traditional media. Scientific achievements such as the lunar mission present “very easy content for conspiracy influencers,” said disinformation researcher Mike Rothschild. “There are some people whose reflexive reaction to any kind of major event is to claim it’s fake and staged, no matter what it is,” Rothschild said. Many of them “pass themselves off as experts because it’s somehow more believable to their followers than just going with ‘the official story.’” The trend underscores a Wild West Internet landscape that is largely bereft of guardrails as false narratives erode digital trust. Several tech platforms have gutted trust and safety teams and scaled back moderation, making them what researchers call a hotbed for misinformation.

— AFP

Thank you, Spain

SEVERAL years ago, I had an opportunity to present a research paper at an international conference hosted by one of Spain’s most prestigious universities. It was my first visit to the country, and through that experience, I encountered aspects of Spanish culture that brought me closer to the Spanish people, both academically and socially. I came away with a tangible sense of Spain’s history and of its cultural and political characteristics. What I found, above all, was a gracious and respectful way of engagement, practised by Spaniards, both government and people alike, towards others, including Arabs. Although, as in many academic gatherings, I met a large number of researchers from across the world, including many from Western countries, I also witnessed a human dimension that is seldom conveyed to us. The dominant narratives we receive, through various channels, often construct largely negative images, whether of Islam and Arabs in the West, or of Western societies and governments as perceived from our side. These partial portrayals create the impression of an enduring hostility and unresolved animosity between cultures, an image that has become deeply embedded in our collective consciousness. Yet, the moment people meet, through conferences, exchanges and other forms of engagement, these assumptions begin to dissolve. Other, more authentic realities emerge, revealing a web of human connections that transcend political and religious divisions. This is something I have observed repeatedly during academic visits and conferences in various parts of the world. Many of those we assume, particularly in the West, to stand in opposition to us, especially regarding Arab and Islamic causes, often prove to be quite the opposite. This is the broader context in which I wish to reflect on Spain’s humanitarian stance,



DR MUAMAR BIN
ALI AL TOOBI

The writer is an
Omani academic and
researcher

A closer reading of Spain’s historical trajectory reveals several factors behind its continued engagement with the Palestinian cause. Among these is the presence of a broad Spanish political and intellectual current that views the Palestinian issue through the lens of international law

as a significant and influential Western European nation. While my academic visit alone could not fully reveal the historical depth of Spain’s relationship with Arab causes, nor the extent of its principled positions, recent global developments, most notably the ongoing war of annihilation in Gaza, have brought Spain’s stance into sharper relief. Spain has chosen, as both a government and a people, to align itself with justice and with the oppressed. It is for this reason that I wish, in this article, to highlight Spain’s honourable positions, positions that deserve recognition, appreciation and gratitude. Before doing so, however, it is important to situate this stance within its historical roots. The relationship between Spain and the Arab causes is neither new nor linear; it has been shaped by shifting political dynamics and international pressures, particularly with regard to the Palestinian question. This relationship can be traced back to the era of General Francisco Franco. Following the establishment of Israel in 1948, Spain refrained from recognising the new state for a variety of reasons, among them the international political transformations of the time. The Franco regime was then largely isolated in the aftermath of the Second World War due to its uneasy alignment outside the victorious Allied bloc. At the same time, there existed within Spain a significant popular base that opposed the creation of Israel and expressed notable support for the Palestinian cause. As a result, Spain’s official recognition of Israel was delayed until 1986, more than 38 years after its establishment. Even then, this recognition may be understood, at least in part, as pragmatic, linked to Spain’s integration into European frameworks and its pursuit of economic and political benefits, rather than as a full internal endorsement of diplomatic normalisation. A closer reading of Spain’s historical trajectory reveals several factors behind its continued

engagement with the Palestinian cause. Among these is the presence of a broad Spanish political and intellectual current that views the Palestinian issue through the lens of international law, albeit one that is inconsistently applied, and a principled rejection of occupation. The Spanish left, with its substantial popular base, has also played a significant role in shaping public discourse, embedding Palestine within a moral and rights-based framework. Additionally, Spain’s own historical sensitivity to questions of colonialism and identity remains influential, as does its Mediterranean position, which ties the stability of the Arab East to its own strategic security. Spain’s record includes numerous positions that merit acknowledgement. Among them is its support for South Africa in the case it brought against Israel before the International Court of Justice, as well as its recognition of the State of Palestine in 2024. Equally significant is the official and personal position of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who has withstood considerable American and Western pressure in expressing both official and personal solidarity with the Palestinian cause and other humanitarian issues. In January 2025, he reaffirmed before Spanish ambassadors that Spain would not abandon its principles, citing the recognition of Palestine despite international pressure as a clear example. His remarks, which the Israeli government viewed as a serious challenge, led to the summoning of the Spanish ambassador after he stated that Spain possesses neither nuclear weapons, nor aircraft carriers, nor vast oil reserves, yet remains committed to defending the Palestinian cause and opposing what it considers to be acts of genocide in Gaza, while continuing to exert political and moral pressure against what it sees as a grave violation of international law.

(The original article was published in Oman Arabic on April 12)

On the mountain’s top, we meet ourselves



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHAMI

The writer is author, translator and communications professional

THE MOUNTAINS of the Sultanate of Oman have always inspired something deep within us. They rise with rooted and unshaken dignity! The mountains of Oman do not announce themselves. They do not rush, they do not follow trends and they do not seek attention. And perhaps that is why they have always reflected the right essence of Omani identity: strength guided by control and freedom shaped by values.

Today, these mountains have watched generations pass at their base, and they remain unchanged by passing trends or shifting conversations. Yet today, something new is appearing along their slopes: a growing presence of Omani women among hikers and climbers, stepping into landscapes that demand strength, patience and determination.

These Omani women are eager to experience the power of nature firsthand. Their steps on these rugged paths tell a story of ambition, curiosity and a desire to engage with the world beyond tradition. It is a powerful sight indeed and that deserves recognition.

However, true progress is never just about presence, it is about purpose. Because Oman has always understood progress differently. It is not measured only by how far we move forward, but by how firmly we remain

attached while doing so. The question, then, is not whether women can climb because they already do, and with remarkable capability. Our society is built upon values that have long defined its harmony: modesty, respect, and clear social boundaries shaped by Islamic principles and cultural heritage. These values are not barriers to participation. They are the framework that gives participation meaning, direction and dignity.

Thus, when people gather in the mountains — far from cities, far from structure — the responsibility becomes greater. In fact, in open spaces where rules are less visible, values must become even more conscious. This is not a call to step back, but to step forward with awareness.

The mountains themselves remind us of this truth. They are breathtaking, but they are also demanding. Every climb carries risk, and every path requires preparation. Weather shifts without warning, terrain deceives the eye, and distance can turn a small mistake into a serious consequence.

There have been tragic moments where lives have been lost, including Omani women whose journeys ended far too soon in these landscapes. Their stories are not warnings meant to discourage the ambition of their counterparts, but reminders that nature requires respect equal to admiration.

And yet, even in this reality, there is space for hope. Because what we are witnessing

Omani women are eager to experience the power of nature firsthand. Their steps on these rugged paths tell a story of ambition, curiosity and a desire to engage with the world beyond tradition

is not a conflict between tradition and participation, but an opportunity to align both more thoughtfully.

Women-only hiking groups, for example, are not limitations on freedom, but expressions of it within a culturally supportive space. Structured training, certified guides, and well-prepared expeditions transform risk into readiness and enthusiasm into capability. Even in mixed settings, when approached with clarity, respect and defined boundaries, participation can reflect both modern engagement and cultural foundation.

This is what balanced progress looks like; it is not rejection, not excess, but improvement. Because the goal is not simply to reach the summit, but to ensure that every step upward strengthens both skill and identity.

The mountains of Oman will remain as they always have — silent witnesses to every journey taken upon them. They do not judge how we climb, but they do reveal how prepared we are when we do. Possibly, that is their greatest lesson. That true height is not only measured in altitude, but in awareness, responsibility and the values we carry as we rise. In the end, the mountains of Oman do not answer debates about who belongs and who does not. And as more footsteps trace these rugged paths, one thing becomes clear: the view from the top has not changed, but those reaching it certainly have.

HUNGARY’S FORMER INSIDER PROMISING CHANGE IN POLLS

ANDRAS ROSTOVANYI

Just a few years ago, Peter Magyar applauded Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s speeches from a front row seat. Today, he is the nationalist leader’s most serious challenger in his 16 years in power. “They called me the ‘eternal opposition’ within (Orban’s party) Fidesz,” he said soon after bursting into prominence in 2024.

A skilful communicator — on social media but also on the campaign trail — the 45-year-old conservative has promised change, vowing to dismantle “brick by brick” Orban’s whole political system to which he had deep ties until recently.

People who know Magyar say he is a perfectionist with a short temper who will apologise for his shortcomings.

He has toured the nation almost non-stop over the past two years, promising to curb graft and fix public services, propelling his Tisza party to the top of voter opinion polls. His status as a former government insider contributed to his rise, according to Andrzej Sadecki, lead analyst at the Warsaw-based Centre for Eastern Studies.

“He sounds more convincing to some former Fidesz voters when he says the system is rotten from within,” the expert said.

“In a way, Magyar is like Orban 20 years ago without all the baggage, the corruption and the mistakes made in power.”

Born into a family of prominent conservatives, Magyar was fascinated with politics from an early age. During his university years, he met Judit Varga, whom he married and who later became justice minister under Orban.

After a stint in Brussels, where Magyar served as a diplomat dealing with EU matters, the family moved back to Hungary. Magyar then headed the state’s student loan provider and sat on the board of multiple other state companies.

Magyar and Varga, who have three children, divorced in 2023. In early 2024, Magyar — who until then had been largely unknown to the public — shot to prominence during anti-government protests. Although Magyar brushed off a question about his political aspirations back then as a “bad (idea), even as a joke”, weeks later, he organised his first rally, attracting tens of thousands.

Magyar quickly became seen as “courageous, action-orientated and willing to take personal risks”, Veronika Kovesi, media expert at Budapest-based ELTE university, said.

His social media messaging “emotionally resonated” with his followers, granting him an “unparalleled organic reach”, said Kovesi, adding many supporters see him as a “hero, tirelessly fighting for them”.

The former insider took over the previously unknown Tisza party so he could legally run in the 2024 European elections, leading it to second place behind the ruling coalition.

As his popularity has skyrocketed, Magyar has faced a “tsunami of hatred and lies” as he put it, ridiculing some claims and denying others. — AFP

Migrants weigh return home in energy crunch

DOMESTIC MIGRANTS in India, who often travel thousands of kilometres for work, are weighing up whether to leave New Delhi for good as energy resources choked by the Middle East war dwindle.

Black market prices of cooking gas cylinders have soared beyond what labourers living hand-to-mouth can earn and, even if energy flows resume soon, they worry it could take weeks for the impact to filter down to them.

Crouched over smoky fires at dawn, using wood shavings to cook a breakfast of flat bread chapatis, dozens of construction workers say they are ready to return home.

“We will just leave when (the) money finishes,” said Milan Kumar Mondal, who will make the 1,100-km journey home to Katihar in Bihar state, when the last of his savings runs out.

India has more than 450 million internal migrants, according to the last census in 2011 and government estimates, forming the backbone of its informal economy. Many move seasonally from poorer states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to cities in search of construction, factory and daily wage work.

The South Asian nation, heavily dependent on imported energy, including roughly 60 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) needs, has seen supply chains strained by the war.

And while the government says there is no overall LPG shortage and is ensuring the most vulnerable receive cooking gas, migrants in informal settlements say they are left out.

Government rules mean a household can have only one registered LPG connection. For domestic migrants, that is back in their home village. Incomes are volatile and savings are minimal, making them particularly vulnerable to sudden price spikes or supply disruptions.

Mondal earns around Rs 600-700 (\$6.50-7.50) a day for construction work but, with LPG prohibitively



A migrant worker prepares to cook food on a wood-fired earthen stove at her rented shanty in New Delhi. — AFP



UZMI ATHAR

The writer is South Asia correspondent with AFP

The South Asian nation, heavily dependent on imported energy, including roughly 60 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas needs, has seen supply chains strained by the war

expensive, he is barely breaking even.

Prices of cooking gas have surged by as much as five times on the black market, the only source he can access without formal paperwork.

“Earlier cooking gas was Rs 80-90 (\$0.86-0.97) per kilogramme... Now it is Rs 300-400, even 500 (\$5.40),” Mondal said.

Workers’ union leader Rajiv Kumar Pandit said swaths of migrant workers had left the city already.

“The situation is very bad,” he said. “Wages are irregular, gas is not available and prices are extremely high.”

Ramesh Kumar Mahto, also from Bihar, is ready to return home once he is paid. “I don’t think I will return to Delhi,” he said. “The crisis has made savings uncertain,” he said.

Many initially turned to firewood gathered from city forests or wood shavings from construction sites, but even the cost of that has now nearly doubled.

“We were cooking on firewood for the first 15 days of the crisis,” said Suresh Kumar from Bhagalpur district, noting that they cannot cook when it rains. “Now, even wood

has become expensive.”

Electric stoves are not an option, since their power connection in tight-packed rooms is often only strong enough for a single charging point.

“If we use a heater or induction stove, the fuse goes off, the wiring burns,” Kumar said.

Food stalls are unaffordable - or mean the worker spends all that they earn. “A labourer needs three meals a day because the work is heavy - lifting stones, working on multi-storey buildings,” construction worker Lalu Singh said.

“If we spend almost everything on food, what is left? It is better to go home and be with your family”.

Work is uncertain back in their villages — farming on leased land or daily wage labour — but living costs are lower and families share expenses.

Naseema, in Delhi’s Noor Nagar district, gathers wood from scrubland to cook for her six children and husband.

“If we can manage with the wood, we will,” she said. “After that, what option do we have — than to return back to our village?”

SPORTS



Salalah retain Oman Bowling title; Al Adawi clinches Masters crown

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

SALALAH CLUB were crowned champions of the Oman Bowling Committee Clubs League for the 2025/2026 season after a dominant and consistent campaign that underlined their technical strength throughout the competition. Masirah finished second, while Seeb took third after a close battle that continued until the final rounds. Salalah also shone in the Masters event, with Musab al Adawi claiming first place, followed by teammate Hassan al Kharousi in second. Sultan al Jabri of Masirah came third, while Marwan al Zadjali of Bausher finished fourth. The closing ceremony was held at the Bowling Centre in Seeb under the auspices of Jaber bin Mohammed al Shaibi, Director of National Teams Affairs at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in the presence of Said bin Rashid al Qatabi, Chairman of the Oman Bowling Committee. This season's league featured more than 90 male and female players representing 15 clubs from across Oman. The competition was held over 15 rounds from October 10 until April 11, reflecting the growing standard of bowling in the Sultanate of Oman. Salalah sealed the title with 108 points after leading the standings from the early rounds and maintaining their edge until the end. Masirah finished second with 84 points, edging Seeb on total pinfall after both teams ended level on points. Al Amerat also closed the season on 84 points in fourth place,



National team player Musab al Adawi capped Salalah's impressive campaign by winning the Masters title. — Pictures by Saleh al Sharji



A bowler in action during the final rounds of the Oman Bowling Clubs League.

highlighting the intensity of the contest among the leading clubs. On the individual stage, national team player Musab al Adawi capped Salalah's impressive campaign by winning the Masters title. The event began with the top 16 players before narrowing down to the decisive rounds featuring Al Adawi, Sultan al Jabri, Hassan al Kharousi and Marwan al Zadjali. In the final, Al Adawi defeated Al Kharousi 214-185 to secure the title, while Sultan al Jabri secured third place. Saif al Farsi, board member of the Oman Bowling Committee, said the league produced positive outcomes on several levels, including stronger competition, improved technical readiness and the emergence of promising players for future club and national team duties. He added that the full league format gave all clubs equal chances to compete and helped measure consistency over a long season. Al Farsi also praised the participation of women's teams and junior categories, describing it as an important step in widening the game's base and supporting its long-term development in Oman. For his part, Al Adawi said winning the league and Masters titles was not easy given the close standard among clubs and players. He noted that the Masters competition was one of the toughest phases of the season and said the title came through strong preparation, sustained effort and backing from Salalah Club. Jaber al Shaibi praised the technical level of the league and said the close margins until the final stages reflected the growing value of the competition on the domestic sporting calendar.

Ibri edge Bahla in vital win; Al Nahda draw with Al Rustaq

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

The second day of round 20 in the Jindal League produced two important results at opposite ends of the table, with Ibri securing a valuable 1-0 victory over Bahla, while Al Nahda was held to a goalless draw by Al Rustaq. **IBRI EDGE PAST BAHLA** Ibri claimed a precious 1-0 win over Bahla at Nizwa Sports Complex in a match marked by intensity and strong competition for all three points. Ibri were the better side in the opening half and imposed themselves well on the game, creating several dangerous chances. They also had the ball in the net once, only for the effort to be ruled out for offside. Their pressure eventually paid off in the



Ibri players in action during their hard-fought victory over Bahla.

25th minute when Philip Akah found the breakthrough to hand his side a deserved lead before the interval. The second half saw Bahla push

harder in search of an equaliser, but Ibri remained disciplined and organised at the back. The match became even more demanding for the home side after Abdullah

bin Mohammed al Felaiti was sent off in the 52nd minute, yet Ibri responded with determination and defensive resilience to protect their advantage until the final whistle. The result also reflected Ibri's recent defensive improvement, with the side managing to keep a clean sheet despite playing with 10 men for much of the second half. Bahla, meanwhile, fell short of expectations and was unable to break down a compact and well-organised Ibri defence despite their increased pressure after the break. The victory lifted Ibri to 17 points in 11th place, moving them temporarily away from the danger zone, while Bahla remained sixth on 31 points. **AL NAHDA FRUSTRATED BY AL RUSTAQ** At Al Rustaq Sports Complex, Al

Nahda were forced to settle for a 0-0 draw against Al Rustaq in another round 20 fixture. Neither side was able to find the net in the first half, despite both teams creating chances and showing attacking intent. The same pattern continued after the interval, with the two sides searching for the breakthrough but lacking the final touch in front of goal. In the end, the match finished goalless, leaving Al Nahda with another costly slip in their pursuit of the leading pack. The draw moved Al Nahda up to 32 points in fourth place, while Al Rustaq advanced to eight points but remained at the foot of the table. For Al Nahda, the result meant a fourth straight match without a win, while Al Rustaq at least came away with a point in their ongoing fight to avoid the drop.

SHORT TAKES



The win was the 2nd in a row for the Japanese driver after his career first in Kenya last month.

KATSUTA CLAIMS CROATIA RALLY, SEIZES WRC LEAD

PARIS, France: Takamoto Katsuta won the Croatia Rally for Toyota and took the world championship lead on Sunday after Hyundai’s overnight leader Thierry Neuville crashed with victory in his grasp. The win was the second in a row for the Japanese driver after his career first in Kenya last month.

Neuville had led by 1 minute 14.5 seconds going into the final leg and was set for Hyundai’s first victory of the season when he hit a concrete block and smashed the car’s front right suspension with only a few kilometres remaining.

The Belgian tried to continue but had to stop before finishing 20th.

Katsuta was handed the win instead with Finnish teammate Sami Pajari moving up to second, 20.7 seconds behind. New Zealander Hayden Paddon finished third for Hyundai.

The Japanese has 84 points, with team-mates Elfyn Evans and Oliver Solberg on 74 and 68 respectively.

Welshman Evans and Sweden’s Solberg crashed out on Friday, returning on Saturday to fight for the points handed out in the final Power Stage and from the Super Sunday classification. — Reuters



Competitive top six finish in bronze cup for al Harthy at Paul Ricard.

AL HARTHY IMPRESSES AT PAUL RICARD 6HR

OMANI DRIVER Ahmad al Harthy produced an impressive performance on his full-time return to the GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup, helping Oman Racing by Century Motorsport secure sixth place in the Bronze Cup during the season-opening six-hour race at Circuit Paul Ricard in France on Saturday.

The opening round of the 2026 campaign began at 6 pm local time, with Al Harthy taking the start in the No.42 BMW M4 GT3 EVO alongside new team-mates Javier Sagrera and Calan Williams. The team started ninth in the Bronze Cup after recording an average lap time of 1m55.217s in qualifying.

Al Harthy made an immediate impact in the opening stint, avoiding early drama and climbing steadily through the field. After an early Safety Car period following a first-lap collision, he continued to gain ground, moving into fourth in class by lap nine and then into the top three before the end of the opening hour.

A strong first pit stop by Oman Racing by Century Motorsport allowed Al Harthy to remain in the car for a double stint, and he soon resumed his charge. Around 20 minutes into the second hour, he passed the No.991 BMW to move into second in Bronze, and shortly afterwards inherited the class lead when the leading Mercedes-AMG pitted.

Al Harthy stayed at the front for a



Ahmad al Harthy, Javier Sagrera, Calan Williams combine strongly in France.

significant spell, delivering an outstanding double stint and handling traffic well as conditions grew darker.

He eventually handed over from the Bronze Cup lead with just under four hours remaining.

Sagrera took over and briefly retained the class lead before slipping back in a tightly contested battle, while Williams completed the final phase of the race and brought the car home in sixth place in class at the chequered flag.

Al Harthy said the team could be pleased with its performance in the opening race of the season.

“It was a really good start to the race and I was very happy with the pace of the car. To move from P9 to the lead was very promising,” he said. “The team did a great job and we had a strong car throughout the race.

“P6 was the best we could do in the end. We had to serve some longer pit stops due to blue flag issues under the new system, but overall it is a very respectable result. Thanks to the team and all our partners for their support.”

Al Harthy is backed by OQ, Omantel, Oman LNG, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and BMW Oman back Al Harthy.

The second round of the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup will take place at Monza, Italy, with testing and free practice scheduled from May 28 to 30 and the three-hour race on May 31.

Oman age-group chess championship concludes in Muscat

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

The Oman Individual Chess Championship for Age Groups 2026, organised by the Oman Chess Committee, concluded at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher after three days of strong competition and promising performances from young players representing different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

Held from April 9 to 11, the tournament attracted 151 male and female players and was conducted under the Swiss system over seven rounds, with a time control of 45 minutes for each player plus a 30-second increment per move. The format provided a balanced technical test, combining quick decision-making with accuracy and



Winners and organisers pose for a group photo after the conclusion of the tournament.

consistency across the rounds.

The championship came to a close under the patronage of Eng Said bin Mohammed al Harthy, Director of Social Investment Programmes, with the final rounds producing intense battles for the top places as several standings were decided only in the closing stages of the competition.

In the under-8 category,

Mohammed al Ghafri of Al Amerat Club claimed first place, while Mohammed al Maqbali of Salalah finished second and Salman Najwani of Salalah came third.

In the under-10 category, Sultan al Jabri of Nakhal secured the title, followed by Haitham al Ghafri of Al Amerat in second place and Ahmed al Jabri of Nakhal in third.

Majd al Riyami of Salalah won the under-12 title, with Yousef al Maawali of Masirah taking second place and Mamoon al Rubaie of Salalah finishing third.

In the under-14 division, Mohammed al Rahbi of Salalah took first place, while Mohammed al Balushi of Masirah came second and Abdulrahman al Jabri of Nakhal finished third. The under-16 title went to Mohammed al Mahrouqi of Salalah, ahead of Ammar al Hatmi of Salalah in second place, while Shihab al Shibli of Nakhal claimed third. The final results underlined the strong presence of players from Salalah, Nakhal, Masirah and Al Amerat Club, reflecting the growing reach of the game across Oman and the continued efforts to identify and develop talent from an early age.

Muslim al Wadhahi, member

of the Oman Chess Committee, said the championship delivered good technical standards and strong competition across all age categories, noting that the large turnout reflected the steady development of chess in Oman.

He said the committee places special importance on age-group competitions as they form the foundation for building future national teams capable of competing at higher levels. He added that such tournaments help sharpen players’ skills, strengthen their competitive experience and reveal more promising talent from across the governorates. Al Wadhahi also said the Oman Chess Committee remains committed to implementing its plans and programmes aimed at expanding the game’s base and organising more events.

SPORTS



SINNER

BEATS ALCARAZ
TO WIN MONTE
CARLO MASTERS
TITLE

ITALIAN BECOMES
SECOND TO WIN
SUNSHINE DOUBLE AND
MONTE CARLO IN SAME
SEASON

SINNER
RECLAIMS
WORLD NUMBER
ONE RANKING
FROM ALCARAZ

SINNER CLAIMS
FIRST MASTERS
CLAY TITLE
AND EIGHTH
OVERALL

WE CAME HERE TRYING TO
GET AS MANY MATCHES AS
POSSIBLE, GETTING GOOD
FEEDBACK BEFORE OTHER BIG
TOURNAMENTS COMING UP.
TODAY WAS A HIGH LEVEL FROM
BOTH OF US.

JANNIK SINNER

JANNIK SINNER beat Carlos Alcaraz in straight sets to win the Monte Carlo Masters for the first time on Sunday and reclaim the world number one ranking from his Spanish rival.

Sinner downed Alcaraz 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 to capture his third ATP 1000 title of the year after completing the "Sunshine Double" last month with victories in Indian Wells and Miami.

The 24-year-old Sinner joins Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal as only the third player to win four successive ATP 1000 titles. He also triumphed in Paris at the end of last season.

"We came here trying to get as many matches as possible, getting good feedback before other big tournaments coming up. Today was a high level from both of us," Sinner said.

"It was a bit windy, a bit breezy. Different conditions from what the tournament has brought. The result is amazing. Getting back to No.1 means a lot for me... I am very happy to win a big title on this surface, I haven't done it before and it means a lot to me."

It was the first meeting between Sinner and Alcaraz since the Italian



Italy's Jannik Sinner celebrates with the trophy as Spain's Carlos Alcaraz celebrates with the runners-up trophy after their final match. — Reuters

The 24-year-old Sinner joins Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal as only the third player to win four successive ATP 1000 titles. He also triumphed in Paris at the end of last season.

prevailed at the ATP Finals in November.

Sinner, who is now 7-10 in his career against Alcaraz, will return to the top of the rankings Monday for the first time this year.

He has won his last 17 matches and becomes the first man since Djokovic in 2015 to win the first three ATP 1000 titles of the season.

"It is impressive what you are achieving right now," Alcaraz said to Sinner during the trophy ceremony. "Just one man had won the 'Sunshine Double' and Monte Carlo and you are the second."

Alcaraz had won his past 17 matches on clay, dating back to last season when he lifted titles in Rome and at Roland Garros.

He jumped out to a 2-0 lead when Sinner pushed a forehand long in blustery conditions, but the Italian broke back in the following game as he gradually found his rhythm.

The Spaniard fought off a break point in the fifth game and three more at 4-4, but Sinner's greater consistency paid off in the tie-break, which he secured when Alcaraz hit a double fault down set point.

Alcaraz won a sensational rally to break Sinner's serve early in the second set, but the second seed continued to put pressure on his opponent and rallied from 3-1 down, taking the last five games to clinch the biggest clay-court title of his career. — AFP

MUSCAT
STOCK
EXCHANGE
8,179.207

BUSINESS

Oman opens five new energy blocks

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

THE Ministry of Energy and Minerals has launched a new bidding round offering five oil and gas concession areas to local and international investors, as part of efforts to enhance resource utilisation and sustain sector growth.

The blocks — numbered 12, 16, 55, 42 and 45 — are spread across a wide geographical area and are understood to hold promising geological potential.

The offering forms part of a broader strategy to unlock additional hydrocarbon resources while supporting economic diversification objectives under Oman Vision 2040.

The Ministry said the initiative reflects its continued commitment to fostering a transparent and competitive investment environment.

By opening new acreage, it aims to attract high-quality investments, facilitate the deployment of advanced technologies and maximise in-country value across the energy



The blocks — 12, 16, 55, 42 and 45 — span a wide geographical area and are understood to hold promising geological potential.

sector. A structured application process has been outlined, beginning with the review of available opportunities, followed by registration and submission of required documentation.

Qualified bidders will then gain access to technical data before submitting proposals through a dedicated digital platform ahead of the closing deadline.

Registration for the tender has opened and will remain available until September 30, 2026. The Ministry noted that results will be announced after completing a comprehensive technical and financial evaluation of all submitted bids.

The latest round underscores the Ministry's focus on strengthening partnerships with

international energy companies while maintaining momentum in upstream exploration and production.

It also reinforces the Sultanate of Oman's positioning as a stable and attractive destination for energy investment, with a policy framework centred on transparency, efficiency and long-term sustainability.

Refinery output climbs 11.1% by February

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman recorded an 11.1% increase in total refinery output by the end of February 2026, compared with the same period last year, according to preliminary data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Production gains were broad-based across key refined products, reflecting stronger throughput and improved operational performance.

Motor fuel output rose by 10.8% in February compared with January, signalling sustained demand momentum.

Regular (91) gasoline production increased by 10.3% year-on-year to 2.97 million barrels, although sales edged down by 0.8% and exports declined sharply by 26.7%. Premium (95) gasoline output rose by 11.4% to 2.51 million barrels, with sales climbing 6.2%. — ONA

Construction work on Oman’s JBB wind IPP to start in Q3

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

Construction work is set to commence in the third quarter of this year on the 120 MW Jaalan Bani Bu Ali (JBB) Wind Power Project in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate — the first of a new wave of utility-scale wind farms designed to bolster wind energy’s contribution to Oman’s renewable energy transition.

Overseeing the development of this venture — the first grid-connected wind-based Independent Power Project (IPP) in Oman’s Main Interconnected System — is Saba Jalan Wind Power SPC, led by veteran Omani renewable energy executive Yahya al Rawahi.

In exclusive remarks to the Observer, Al Rawahi shed light on the diversified consortium of international and local partners that signed key agreements with offtaker Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (PWP) as part of a 20-year power purchase agreement last December.

“The project company, Saba Jalan Wind Power SPC, brings together three strong institutional shareholders. EDF — one of the world’s leading energy companies — holds a 49 per cent stake, Al Khadra Partners (part of the Hind Bahwan Group) holds 26 per cent; and OQ Alternative Energy (OQAE), the renewables arm of OQ Group, holds the remaining 25 per cent.

This is a well-balanced partnership that combines international expertise with strong local and regional roots”, the CEO said.

According to the executive, preparatory works and mobilisation activities have already commenced at the project site.

The main construction phase will be executed by a consortium of experienced Chinese engineering firms: the East China Electric Power Design Institute (ECEPDI), China Power Engineering Consulting Group International Engineering (CPECC) and China Energy Engineering Group Hunan Power Construction (HPCC).

“Together, they bring deep technical expertise in large-scale power infrastructure and we are confident in their ability to deliver this project to the highest standards”, he noted.

Significantly, key hardware for the wind farm — including wind turbines and



Consortium of experienced Chinese engineering firms to undertake project execution.

blades — will be supplied by Goldwind, one of the world’s leading wind energy technology companies. “Goldwind’s proven track record in delivering reliable, high-performance turbines makes them an ideal partner for the environmental conditions of Al Sharqiyah South”, said Al Rawahi.

Day-to-day operations will be overseen by Saba Jalan Wind Power, working in close coordination with specialist O&M partners — reflecting a hybrid model that ensures both accountability and access to world-class operational expertise throughout the life of the asset, he stated.

Highlighting the significance of the project for Oman’s net-zero strategy, the CEO said: “The JBB Wind project represents far more than a power generation facility — it is a statement of intent.

Oman is serious about its clean energy ambitions and projects like this are the building blocks of a sustainable, diversified energy future aligned with Oman Vision 2040”.

“What makes this project particularly exciting is the calibre of the partnerships underpinning it — bringing together world-class expertise from across the globe, united by a shared commitment to delivering clean, reliable energy for Oman. As CEO of Saba Jalan Wind Power, I am honoured to lead this endeavour and look forward to the journey ahead as we work together to make this a landmark project for the Sultanate of Oman”, he added.

According to Nama PWP, the JBB Wind Farm is expected to be connected to the grid by Q3 2027.

Empowering the Future of SMEs in Oman: A First Strategic Partnership for Growth



THE SME Development Fund (INMA) is the first to sign a strategic cooperation agreement with **CXDA Oman** to enhance access to financing for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Sultanate, in a move aimed at strengthening the national entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The initiative will integrate advanced, AI-driven financial technology to streamline funding processes, improve transparency, and increase efficiency in the delivery of capital to SMEs. The collaboration is aligned with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, supporting economic diversification and the development of a more resilient, private sector-led economy.

Sheikh Salah Hilal Al Maawali, Chief Executive Officer of INMA - SME

Development Fund, stated that the partnership will reinforce the fund’s role as a key enabler of Omani entrepreneurship by accelerating business growth and enhancing contributions to national GDP.

Ahmed Qader Al Balushi, Chief Executive Officer of CXDA Oman and Chairman of Towers International Group, highlighted that the company’s platform will strengthen financial inclusion by making SME financing more accessible and technologically advanced.

Under the agreement, INMA - SME Development Fund, will continue to serve as the primary financing entity, while CXDA Oman will provide the technical infrastructure required to manage and optimize funding processes, ensuring more effective support for Omani enterprises.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



Fauchon Muscat offers guests an elegant dine-in experience alongside its refined retail selection for gifting and takeaway.

THE ST REGIS AL MOUJ MUSCAT RESORT WELCOMES FAUCHON

MUSCAT: The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort, Muscat’s best address, welcomes Fauchon, the renowned Parisian Maison, marking the arrival of one of France’s most celebrated gastronomic institutions. Nestled within this luxurious setting, Fauchon elevates everyday indulgence into unforgettable moments. Serving as the brand’s flagship in the region, its Oman home enhances the resort’s curated collection of world-class dining experiences with an iconic expression of French culinary heritage.

Fauchon Muscat offers guests an elegant dine-in experience alongside its refined retail selection for gifting and takeaway. Within its sophisticated Parisian-inspired setting, guests can enjoy handcrafted pâtisserie, artisanal chocolates, gourmet teas and signature delicacies, inviting guests to linger over the rituals of French taste and craftsmanship.

Guests can discover some of Fauchon’s most beloved creations, including its iconic éclairs, delicate macarons, premium chocolates and gourmet preserves, each reflecting the Maison’s signature balance of tradition, creativity and refinement. From a leisurely coffee and pâtisserie moment to selecting beautifully presented gifts, Fauchon brings a distinctly Parisian sense of occasion to the resort experience.

“Welcoming Fauchon reflects our continued commitment to curating globally respected culinary maisons”, said Manuel Levonian, General Manager of The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort. “This opening brings a distinctive Parisian elegance to our dining portfolio, establishes a new standard for luxury pâtisserie and gourmet retail in the GCC; and further reinforces the resort’s position as Muscat’s foremost luxury lifestyle destination”.

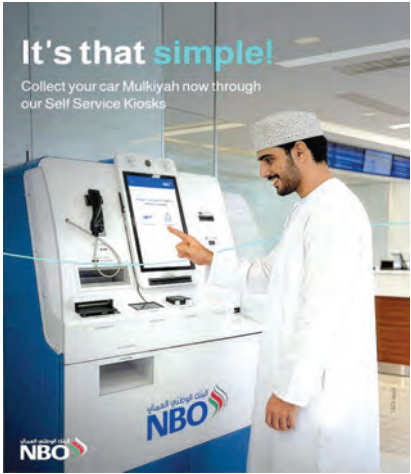
Founded in Paris at the historic Place de la Madeleine, Fauchon represents more than a century of savoir-faire, shaped through close partnerships with artisan producers and the expertise of its in-house chefs. Celebrated for reimagining classic French recipes with precision and contemporary flair, the Maison brings the spirit of Parisian gastronomy to destinations around the world.

With this latest addition, The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort continues to strengthen its position as a destination where internationally celebrated concepts come together, shaping the future of luxury dining in Muscat. For reservations or inquiries, please contact +968 2271 1111.

NBO AND ROP INTRODUCE TRAFFIC SERVICES AT SELF-SERVICE KIOSKS

MUSCAT: The National Bank of Oman has signed a strategic agreement with the Royal Oman Police to offer selected traffic services through the Bank’s self-service kiosks, making access to essential services easier and more convenient for customers.

As part of the agreement, customers will be able to complete a range of Royal Oman Police traffic services at NBO self-service kiosks located at selected branches. These services include printing vehicle registration cards (Mulkiya) and



driving licences, paying traffic fines and accessing traffic-related enquiries, reducing the need for separate visits to traffic service centres.

By integrating traffic services into NBO’s existing self-service network, the initiative helps simplify everyday transactions while maintaining high standards of security and efficiency. It also reflects a shared focus on improving service accessibility and supporting digital service delivery in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Sohar International commits to Omani talent

REINFORCING a track record of backing Omani talent that carries national ambition onto the global stage, Sohar International has signed a two-year platinum sponsorship with Omar al Ghailani, continuing its support for the nation’s leading freediving athlete as he advances his international competitive journey.

This two-year agreement builds on an earlier collaboration between the bank and Al Ghailani, transitioning into a longer-term commitment aligned with his evolving career.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Abdulwahid bin Mohamed al Murshidi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, stated, “Freediving places individuals in an environment where exceptional levels of control, focus and mental discipline are required to perform under highly demanding conditions, reflecting the resilience and determination needed to achieve excellence over time.

At Sohar International, we believe that investing in Omani talent is an investment in the nation’s future. Recognising and



Sohar International has signed a two-year platinum sponsorship with Omar al Ghailani.

empowering ambitious individuals who strive for distinction represents a fundamental pillar of our commitment to supporting national progress.

Championing high-performing Omani talent is not a peripheral consideration for us; it is a strategic priority that reflects our role as a national institution contributing to the advancement of the Sultanate of Oman across multiple dimensions. Our renewed partnership with Omar underscores our ongoing commitment to supporting his aspirations and enabling his continued success on both the local and international

stage, while reinforcing the presence of Omani excellence globally”.

Omar al Ghailani added, “Sohar International’s continued backing plays an important role in enabling athletes to prepare and compete at a high level with focus and consistency. This partnership reflects a shared commitment to discipline, progression and representing Oman with purpose.

Having that level of confidence and support from the bank allows me to approach each phase of my journey with greater clarity and intent”.

Bank Muscat hosts financial markets seminar

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, reinforced its commitment to customer empowerment by organising a specialised seminar dedicated to global financial markets.

The event brought together prominent decision-makers, financial professionals and key representatives from a wide range of institutions and companies across Muscat Governorate.

The seminar forms an integral part of the Bank’s broader strategy to foster meaningful dialogue with its customers,



The seminar forms an integral part of the Bank’s broader strategy to foster meaningful dialogue with its customers.

offering a dedicated platform to explore the evolving dynamics of global markets and their direct implications on day-to-

day business operations. True to its mission of enabling informed financial decision-making, Bank Muscat leveraged

this initiative to provide attendees with an in-depth perspective on the opportunities and challenges shaping today’s financial and business environment.

Discussions spanned a broad range of topics centred on the latest regional and global developments, economic shifts and the outlook for the international financial markets.

The seminar served as another unique platform for the Bank’s customers to decipher the economic impacts of recent geopolitical events and assist informed decision making in their own business domains.

BankDhofar champions inclusive banking across Oman’s communities

MUSCAT: BankDhofar has emerged not just as a leading financial institution in Oman but as a driving force for inclusive banking — crafting products, services and initiatives that ensure financial access and empowerment across demographic groups, socioeconomic segments and regions of the Sultanate of Oman.

Through a combination of innovative technology, tailored offerings and community-focused programmes, the bank extends its reach far beyond traditional banking to serve all communities, supporting financial inclusion in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Financial inclusion begins with accessibility. BankDhofar has significantly expanded its physical

footprint, operating over 140 branches nationwide — making it the second-largest network in Oman and enhancing the availability of banking services across urban, rural and remote areas.

These branches offer a full suite of services, enabling customers from diverse backgrounds — including youth, women, children and high-net-worth individuals — to access financial products easily.

To reach customers who may still face geographical or mobility barriers, the bank introduced ‘Bank on Wheels’ — a mobile, fully equipped branch that brings banking services directly to underserved communities. This initiative ensures that individuals with limited access to a physical



The bank extends its reach far beyond traditional banking to serve all communities, supporting financial inclusion in line with Oman Vision 2040.

branch — such as the elderly, those in remote areas, or people with mobility challenges — can perform essential banking transactions, open accounts, apply for loans and receive financial guidance without leaving their communities.

BankDhofar’s product portfolio adopts a life-cycle approach to financial inclusion, with tailored solutions designed to serve diverse segments of society

. The bank supports women’s economic participation through specialised banking products and dedicated services that promote financial independence — an approach that has earned recognition for excellence in financial inclusion and women’s wealth management.

Demonstrating its commitment to accessibility, BankDhofar introduced Oman’s first Braille debit card, enabling visually impaired customers to manage their finances with greater independence and dignity.

The bank also offers dedicated accounts for children and youth, helping families cultivate sound financial habits from an early age and easing young people’s entry into the formal financial system.

For entrepreneurs, BankDhofar provides SME-focused accounts and digital platforms tailored to business needs, including payroll solutions, simplified onboarding and international transfer capabilities, reinforcing the role of SMEs in inclusive economic growth.

SHORTTAKES



The recognition is a testament to the national workforce.

OMANI COMPANY AMONG TOP IN GLOBAL FOOD SAFETY AUDIT

MUSCAT: Oman Refreshment Company (SAOG) has scored 945 out of 1,000 in the latest American Institute of Baking International (AIB) Quality and Food Safety Audit, placing its Muscat facility among the top-performing manufacturing sites globally.

“Everything we do comes back to the people and communities we serve across Oman,” said Moosa bin Mohammed al Raisi, Board Member at Oman REFCO.

“This recognition is a testament to our national workforce. They take genuine pride in what they do, and it comes through in the quality of care and professionalism they bring every day. It also echoes the ambitions of Oman Vision 2040 to improve quality of life, competitiveness, and sustainability, priorities we hold ourselves to across the organisation.”

Conducted by AIB International, one of the world’s leading food safety auditing bodies, the assessment covered a range of criteria including hygiene, sanitation, pest management, facility maintenance, employee practices and food safety programmes.

The unannounced nature of the assessment offers a clear snapshot of how sites operate under normal conditions, with Oman REFCO’s score reflecting the consistency and attention to detail across its operations.

SEZAD investments reach 6.394 billion in 2025

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 12

THE Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) continues to strengthen its position as a key investment and industrial hub, supported by cumulative committed investments reaching RO 6.394 billion as of 2025. Recent performance indicators point to steady advances in infrastructure, investor activity and private sector-led projects.

According to Duqm Economist, the zone is increasingly shifting from infrastructure build-out to sustained economic output.

SEZAD’s investment landscape remains diversified, with 360 commercial and 65 industrial projects underpinning its growth.

During the period under review, 14 new investment agreements valued at RO 94.34 million were signed, alongside 17 new investment applications across industrial, fisheries, tourism and service sectors. Licensing activity also remained strong, with 427 economic licences issued, reflecting continued investor interest in Duqm.

Administrative efficiency has improved through the One-Stop Shop, which continues to streamline procedures for investors. A total of 506 commercial registrations were issued, while 610 public services were delivered.

In addition, 32 building permits were granted for industrial, commercial and tourism developments; and 1,562 visas and work permits were processed to support project execution.

These measures are aimed at enhancing the overall business



The investment landscape remains diversified, with 360 commercial and 65 industrial projects underpinning its growth.

environment and accelerating project timelines.

Infrastructure development remains central to SEZAD’s strategy. Key achievements include the completion of a 13-kilometre internal road network in the Commercial District, connected to nine external roads and seven signalised intersections. Road works covering 1.08 square kilometres, including stormwater drainage and sewage systems, have also been completed, strengthening operational readiness across the zone.

Connectivity has been further enhanced through the opening and dualisation of major roads linking Duqm Airport, the refinery and heavy industries complex; and Ras Markaz oil storage terminal.

Internal road networks in the Sai Commercial District have been completed, while work has commenced on a dual carriageway connecting the tourism area with the fishing port and food industries complex. Public parks covering 13,000 square metres have also

been developed, alongside landscaping and urban greening initiatives.

Progress across ongoing infrastructure projects remains high. Sai Street and Tourism Street have reached 79 per cent completion, while the agricultural nursery stands at 63 per cent. Phase 1 of National Road (NR32) is 89 per cent complete and community facilities under the Lifestyle Project have been fully delivered.

Meanwhile, dualisation of Sultan Said bin Taimur Road (Southern) and roads in the Light and Medium Industries Area have each reached 98 per cent completion, with Phase 2 of NR32 at 63 per cent. Private sector projects continue to advance.

Maysan Square Duqm has recorded 57.8 per cent completion in Phase 1 and 20 per cent in Phase 2. The Jindal Duqm Green Steel Project has achieved 26.9 per cent progress in its steel plant and 34.4 per cent in its export jetty.

The ACME green hydrogen and ammonia project stands at

50 per cent completion, with future production capacity expected to reach 3,300 metric tonnes per day.

In the renewable energy segment, the Mawarid wind turbine manufacturing project is progressing, with investments exceeding RO 70 million. The facility is expected to produce up to 100 turbines annually, with a generation capacity ranging between 800 and 1,000 MW; and is scheduled for commercial operations between 2026 and 2027.

Trade activity through Duqm Port highlights the zone’s growing economic role, with imports reaching RO 1.67 billion and re-exports totalling RO 591.1 million. Exports stood at RO 165.5 million, signalling expanding logistics activity.

Aviation indicators also showed growth, with 65,075 passengers handled at Duqm Airport, representing a 6.5 per cent increase compared to 2024. A total of 349 passengers were transferred to other destinations, underlining the airport’s emerging role in regional connectivity.

OQ Group posts 641 million net profit in 2025

MUSCAT: OQ Group delivered a robust financial performance in 2025, reporting a net profit of RO 641 million, up 25 per cent year-on-year, underpinned by strong operational execution across its integrated energy portfolio.

Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA) rose by 23 per cent to RO 1.348 billion, reflecting improved efficiencies and resilience amidst ongoing volatility in global energy markets.

Total assets reached approximately RO 13 billion by year-end, highlighting the Group’s disciplined financial management, including cost optimisation and capital structure improvements.



Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA) rose by 23 per cent to RO 1.348 billion.

Domestic expenditure increased by 19 per cent to RO 467 million, with around RO 117 million directed towards small and medium enterprises, reinforcing OQ’s role in supporting local supply chains and private sector development.

The Group also advanced its social investment agenda, implementing 256 initiatives valued at RO 12 million. These programmes focused on healthcare, education, environmental stewardship, youth development and community engagement, aligning with national development priorities.

On sustainability, OQ achieved 100 per cent of its 2025 carbon

reduction targets, maintaining progress towards its longer-term goal of reducing emissions by 25 per cent by 2030.

Operational safety performance remained strong, with more than 47 million work hours completed without fatalities for the third consecutive year, alongside a reduction in lost-time injuries to record low levels.

In a further boost to investor confidence, OQ secured an investment-grade credit rating of BBB- with a stable outlook, underscoring the strength of its financial position and the durability of its cash flows as it continues to expand and diversify.

— ONA

POLICY OPTION

BoJ weighs yen boost to curb inflation



Japan’s trade minister said Bank of Japan (BoJ) policy could be used to strengthen the yen to help contain inflation driven by rising oil prices. A stronger currency may reduce import costs, particularly for energy and food.

Bank officials indicated interest rate hikes remain under consideration, with the country’s inflation nearing the 2 per cent target and real interest rates still relatively low. — Reuters

PLANT RECOVERY

Saudi restores pipeline capacity after attacks



Saudi Arabia has restored full capacity on its East-West oil pipeline to about seven million barrels per day following recent attacks. Authorities said affected facilities have resumed operations, reinforcing supply reliability.

The pipeline remains a critical export route amidst the Strait of Hormuz closure, with recovery efforts ongoing at key oilfields impacted during the conflict. — Reuters

SUPPLY DIVERSIFICATION

Korea nears Kazakhstan oil supply deal



South Korea is close to securing crude oil supplies from Kazakhstan as it seeks to diversify energy sources amidst Middle East disruptions.

Officials said details will be announced soon following recent talks. The strategic move aims to reduce reliance on regional imports, which account for the majority of the country’s supply and strengthen long-term energy security. — Reuters

OPINION

ESG shift: From compliance to strategy



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The writer is an Assistant Professor at the Marketing and Management Department, CBFS.

THOUGH ESG can be traced back to earlier periods, when it was mostly about ethical investing, like saying no to tobacco, weapons, or anything that seemed or felt morally questionable, its official presence began in 2004, with the UN report “Who Cares Wins”, which first popularised the term ESG, which then became mainstream from 2010 to 2020.

Now, ESG frameworks actively scrutinise companies’ products and their broader impact on people and the planet.

Over the years, ESG standards and certifications have helped drive a shift from ethical investing to values, and then to the drivers of values, among all stakeholders. ESG is an evolution of management thinking, not a passing cloud.

Fundamentally, ESG has three areas: environmental (emissions, resource use and climate risk); social (labour, supply chains, community impact and human rights); and governance (board structure, CEO compensation, audit quality and shareholder rights).

Some corporate illustrations reflect the changing narrative; nearly four-fifths of Unilever’s major agricultural products are now sourced sustainably and the company is making quantifiable progress towards its net-zero and nature-positive 2039 goals.

Patagonia has started sharing comprehensive climate-risk and emissions data, including the water and chemical footprints of its textile operations, in an effort

to continue referring to itself as “carbon neutral” and its most recent climate targets centre on net-zero by 2040 and science-based reductions through 2030.

ESG has now created a second-order system of rules, data, governance and greenwashing dynamics that exposes less-prepared firms to ESG disclosure through evidence-based metrics, audit trails and external assurance.

ESG stance has grown from a voluntary narrative to a regulated information system.

Today, emissions make up 88% of the total business emissions, but still, firms lack a robust reduction target, which is a major blind spot for organisations.

Corporate emissions are classified into three “scopes” in climate reporting: Scope 1: direct emissions from a company’s own operations, such as its factories, offices and company vehicles; Scope 2: indirect emissions from the electricity and heat it purchases; and Scope 3: all other emissions in the value chain, including transportation, customer use of the product, end-of-life disposal and emissions embedded in purchased raw materials and supplier activities.

Scope 3 emissions account for the majority of a company’s carbon footprint but are poorly managed and quantified, making this the largest blind spot.

When investors and regulators rely on this data, inaccurate and inconsistent Scope 3 reporting becomes a systemic threat.

Simultaneously, greenwashing has progressed beyond straightforward

Over the years, ESG standards and certifications have helped drive a shift from ethical investing to values and then to the drivers of values, among all stakeholders. ESG is an evolution of management thinking, not a passing cloud.

marketing spin to encompass net-zero planning. Newer analytical work is beginning to quantify this risk, demonstrating that lobbying against aggressive climate policy frequently correlates with inadequate transition plans and that the exclusion of Scope 3 and excessive dependence on low-quality offsets are reliable red flags.

ESG is now acting as a gatekeeper for credit, not just equity capital. As banks and lenders in key markets increasingly incorporate ESG profiles into credit evaluations, companies with weaker ESG data and governance will face higher borrowing costs.

Lastly, the political pushback against ESG is not the end of the story; rather, it is part of its progress. While some governments are strengthening disclosure requirements and stepping up enforcement against greenwashing, others are restricting the vocabulary and instruments of ESG.

ESG is moving from a corporate trend to a more permanent, albeit contentious, aspect of how markets function as a result of this tug-of-war, driving it out of soft, values-based arguments and into the more difficult areas of regulation, litigation and fiduciary obligation.

Though it began as an investor perspective, finance-enforced, it will influence how businesses operate and how stakeholders and corporate ecosystems make their choices. In the future, ESG will be part of the core reporting infrastructure. Companies will be required to integrate ESG into strategy, supply chains, product design and HR.

SALAMAIR MOVE COULD REDEFINE OMAN’S AVIATION ECONOMICS

MOHAMMED BIN ISSA AL BALUSHI

THE Omani government’s acquisition of SalamAir may prove to be about far more than ownership. At stake is the future shape of the Sultanate of Oman’s aviation model: whether it continues to allow two national carriers to compete across a limited market, or shifts towards a more coordinated structure designed to serve wider economic goals.

The government announced in late March that it had completed the acquisition of SalamAir, while stating that both Oman Air and SalamAir would continue to operate as separate brands.

That makes this more than a corporate development. It is a strategic question tied to tourism, connectivity, fiscal discipline and Oman’s broader diversification agenda.

Much of the early reaction has focused on two immediate concerns: whether the timing is right, given the continuing restructuring pressures facing Oman Air and whether reduced competition could eventually push fares higher.

Both are legitimate questions. But the bigger issue is whether the current market structure is efficient enough to support the country’s long-term ambitions.

Oman’s aviation sector has developed around two different business models. Oman Air operates as a full-service carrier, while SalamAir was built as a low-cost airline targeting more price-sensitive travellers. In principle, the distinction is clear.

In practice, however, any overlap in routes, markets or network planning can weaken returns and strain resources, especially in a market that does not enjoy the scale of some larger Gulf neighbours.

That is where the economic argument for acquisition becomes more compelling. In smaller markets, parallel competition between two nationally linked carriers can create duplication rather than value.

Aircraft deployment becomes less efficient. Route economics come under pressure. Operating costs rise while yields are diluted. The end result is not always stronger consumer choice, but weaker commercial performance.

Seen in that light, a government acquisition of SalamAir would not necessarily have to mean the loss of its identity or operating model.

The more rational outcome would be a dual-brand structure under clearer strategic direction, with each airline assigned a more defined role. SalamAir could continue serving the low-cost market, particularly across regional and short-haul routes, while Oman Air focuses on full-service travel, higher-yield passengers and strategically important long-haul connections.

That kind of separation would matter.

When consensus becomes a leadership risk

CONSENSUS is one of the most valued outcomes in organisational decision-making. It signals alignment. It suggests that a direction has been examined from multiple perspectives and found to be sound. It makes implementation easier, because the people responsible for executing a decision were part of making it. For all of these reasons, leaders invest significant time and energy in building it.

What is rarely examined is when consensus stops being a sign of good process and starts being a sign of something else entirely a signal not that the best answer has been found, but that the organisation has lost its capacity to find it.

The risk embedded in consensus is structural, not intentional. It does not require bad faith or intellectual dishonesty from anyone involved.

It requires only the normal human dynamics that operate in every group: the desire to maintain relationships, the discomfort of sustained disagreement, the social pressure to align with the apparent direction of the room and the cognitive ease of accepting a position that others have already accepted.

These dynamics are present in every organisation. In some organisations, they are powerful enough to make genuine dissent functionally impossible — not because dissent is formally prohibited, but because the conditions that would make it safe and productive do not exist. A leadership team that always agrees has not found the truth. It has found the path of least resistance.

The most dangerous form of consensus is the kind that forms around a leader’s stated or implied preference. When the most senior person in a room signals even subtly, even unintentionally — what outcome they are hoping for, the group’s capacity for independent



The risk embedded in consensus is structural, not intentional.



KAMLA AL RAHBI

The writer is a leadership and business strategist.

The most dangerous form of consensus is the kind that forms around a leader’s stated or implied preference. When the most senior person in a room signals even subtly, even unintentionally — what outcome they are hoping for, the group’s capacity for independent analysis is immediately compromised.

analysis is immediately compromised. Information gets filtered through the question of whether it supports or challenges that preference. Dissenting views that would have been raised in a more neutral environment are softened or withheld. The process looks like deliberation. The outcome is predetermined.

This pattern is not unique to any particular culture or organisational type. It appears wherever authority is concentrated and where the costs of disagreeing with senior leadership — even implicitly, even socially outweigh the benefits. What varies is the degree to which organisations acknowledge it and design against it.

The consequences extend far beyond any single meeting or decision. Organisations that consistently produce false consensus develop a systematic bias towards confirming existing directions rather than genuinely evaluating them.

They become less able to detect early signals of strategic problems, because the people closest to those signals have learned that raising them is costly and rarely changes outcomes.

They become less innovative, because genuine innovation requires the tolerance for ideas that initially seem wrong and organisations optimised for consensus have low tolerance for anything that disrupts alignment.

The quality of an organisation’s

decisions is determined largely by what its people feel safe to say when they disagree with the direction of the room. Leaders who want to break this pattern face a genuine challenge.

The behaviours that produce false consensus are often the same behaviours that make leaders feel effective — the ability to build alignment quickly, to move a group towards a decision efficiently, to project confidence that brings others along.

Slowing this process down, creating space for dissent, actively seeking perspectives that challenge the emerging direction these feel, in the moment, like inefficiency. They are, in reality, the conditions that make good decisions possible.

The practical changes required are specific. Decision processes need to separate the generation of options from the evaluation of them, so that ideas are developed fully before they are judged.

Leaders need to withhold their own preferences until others have spoken, not as a performance of openness but as a structural protection against the dynamics that follow when preferences are stated early. Organisations need to reward the people who surface problems and present contrary evidence not merely tolerate them, but actively signal that this behaviour is valued.

None of this means that consensus is the wrong goal. Genuine consensus the kind that emerges after real alternatives have been examined and real disagreements have been worked through — is among the most valuable outcomes a leadership team can produce.

It combines the analytical strength of multiple perspectives with the commitment that comes from genuine participation. The problem is not consensus itself. It is the substitution of the appearance of consensus for the substance of it.

An organisation capable of honest disagreement is an organisation capable of honest thinking.

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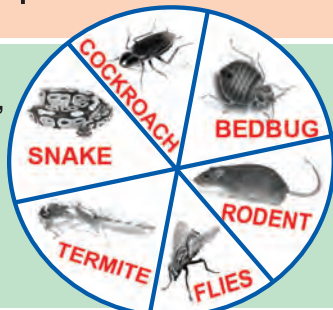
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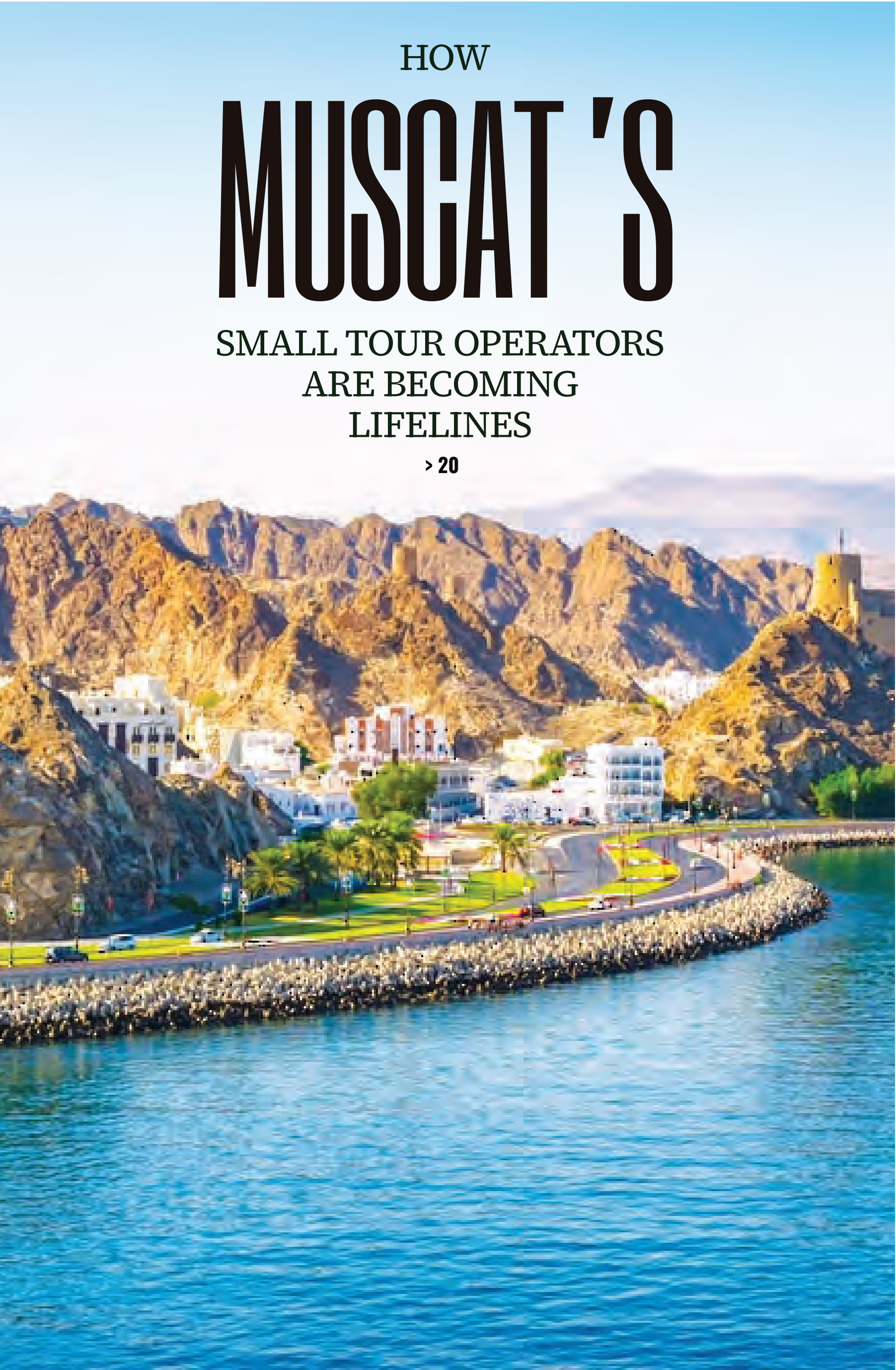
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ART/LIFE



HOW MUSCAT 'S SMALL TOUR OPERATORS ARE BECOMING LIFELINES

> 20

K-POP **REKINDLED**

BTS KICK OFF WORLD TOUR AFTER LANDMARK SEOUL COMEBACK



Fans of K-pop boy band BTS, known as ARMY, wait in line to enter the concert venue ahead of the band's first world-tour concert "ARIRANG" in more than three years, at Goyang stadium in Goyang.
— Reuters

South Korean K-pop superstars BTS have launched their world tour, building on the success of their comeback album ARIRANG and a landmark performance in central Seoul.

The seven-member group reunited on stage last month after completing mandatory military service, marking their first full-group appearance in years.

Their Seoul performance, held near Gyeongbokgung Palace, drew over 100,000 fans, while a Netflix livestream attracted an estimated 18.4 million viewers globally.

The tour will span 85 shows across 34 cities, beginning in Goyang, hometown of leader RM and is expected to rival the scale and revenue of major global tours.

Fans gathered in Goyang despite rainy weather, with the city lit in purple, symbolising BTS's fanbase, ARMY. Attendees came from around the world, highlighting the group's international reach. Some fans described the difficulty of securing tickets, while others travelled long distances just to attend.

The tour will visit cities including Tokyo, Manila, Toronto and Buenos Aires, marking the largest number of shows for a South Korean act. Members emphasised the importance of reconnecting with audiences worldwide and experiencing different cultures after their long break.

The album ARIRANG, named after a traditional Korean folk song about longing and separation, reflects the group's artistic growth and deeper self-exploration.

Experts note that BTS has moved beyond themes of youth struggles into more mature and introspective storytelling.

The group continues to break records, becoming the first K-pop act to top the US Billboard 200 for two consecutive weeks with this album, while also dominating global streaming charts.

Their sustained success is notable in an industry where many artists struggle to regain momentum after military service.

Analysts say BTS's impact extends beyond music, contributing significantly to South Korea's cultural influence worldwide.

With tens of millions of followers across platforms, their success is largely attributed to strong fan engagement and a sense of personal connection with their audience, making their global rise uniquely powerful.

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



MUSICAL FESTIVAL

US singer songwriter Sombra performs on the Outdoor Theatre stage during the 2026 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California.
— AFP



RED CARPET

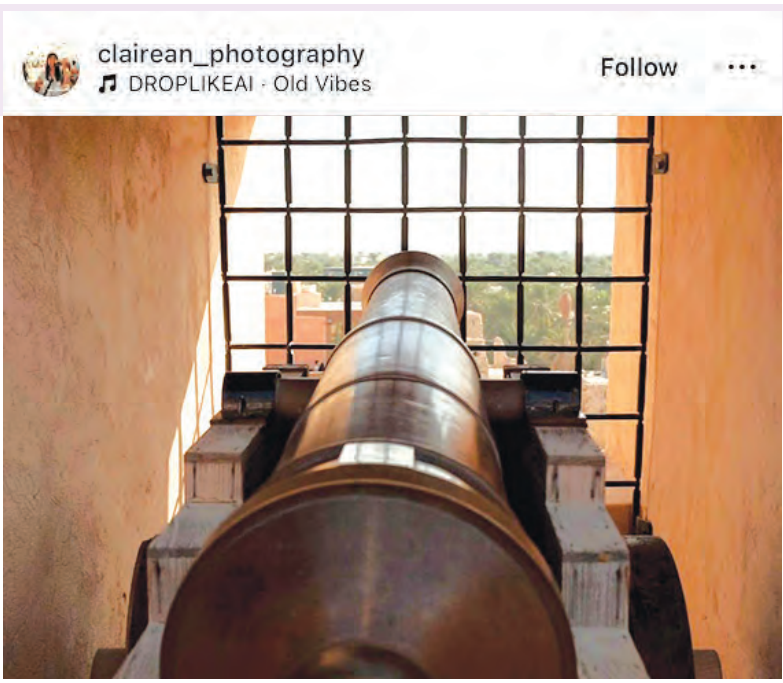
US actress Olivia Munn attends Apple TV's "Your Friends & Neighbors" screening at PaleyFest LA at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP



TRIBUTE

Asha Bhosle, the voice of Bollywood for eight decades, passes away at age 92.
— Reuters

INSTA PICKS



Remnants of the past in Nizwa Fort



The Arabian red fox in full form

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JACKSON BIOPIC SHOWS
FRANCHISE THRIVING
DESPITE ABUSE CLAIMS

The biopic *Michael*, released 16 years after the death of Michael Jackson, highlights the enduring power of the artist’s global brand despite long-standing controversies. Produced by Lionsgate, the film is expected to generate around \$700 million worldwide, potentially ranking among the most successful music biopics alongside *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

The film is part of a larger, thriving Jackson franchise. *MJ: The Musical* has attracted strong audiences since 2022, while *Michael Jackson ONE* continues to run in Las Vegas. Jackson also remains a dominant commercial force, frequently topping *Forbes* lists of highest-earning deceased celebrities and maintaining massive listenership on Spotify.

Experts believe the biopic could further strengthen his commercial appeal, driven by a loyal global fanbase.

Some analysts note that his brand has become more stable since his death, no longer affected by the controversies that once surrounded him.

During his lifetime, Jackson’s career was marked by both extraordinary success and public scrutiny.

Incidents such as the 2002 Berlin balcony episode, when he dangled his baby over a hotel railing, drew heavy criticism. In the 2003 documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*, his remarks about sharing his bed with children reignited allegations of child abuse.

Although acquitted in a 2005 criminal trial, allegations persisted, with further civil cases filed after his death.

He was never convicted in



US actor Jaafar Jackson poses for photographers as he arrives on the red carpet for the world premiere of the Michael Jackson biopic “Michael” at the Uber Eats Music Hall in Berlin. — AFP

criminal or civil court.

Reports suggest these controversies are largely absent from the new biopic, which was produced with the involvement of his family.

Observers say this reflects a broader trend in Hollywood, where difficult aspects of celebrity lives are often downplayed. Others argue that Jackson’s legacy may have been less affected because he died before movements like #MeToo reshaped public accountability.

Despite ongoing debate, his legacy remains powerful, sustained by global influence, loyal fans and continued commercial success. — AFP



People attend the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — Reuters

Coachella kicks off
with headliners
Sabrina Carpenter,
Bieber and Karol G

THOUSANDS of fans gathered in the California desert for the hotly anticipated Coachella Festival, which kicked off on Friday with pop princess Sabrina Carpenter in the headliner spotlight.

The star-studded line-up — which also features headliners Justin Bieber and Colombia’s Karol G — will grace the stage in Indio on two consecutive weekends, kicking off the US music festival circuit for 2026.

Under Coachella’s desert sun, music fans donned cowboy boots, short shorts and glitter galore for the festivities.

Friday’s acts include standout emerging talent Teddy Swims, girl group KATSEYE and electronica pioneer Moby.

The opening night’s highlight though is Carpenter, who promised “the most ambitious show” of her career in an interview with *Perfect Magazine*.

Fans were treated to slushies and selfie opportunities at “Sabrina Carpenter’s Pit Stop” — a gas station installation that featured the pink van from her “House Tour” video, released this week.

“It’s so much more special when you can immerse yourself in and physically touch the concept an artist is trying to sell”, said Lina Luaces, Miss Universe Cuba, as she posed in one of the vintage cars on display.

Once inside, the festival’s events will play out on nine stages and closing out the first day will be Italian DJ Anyma, who is set to premiere his new production, “ÆDEN”.

BIEBER FEVER

The party continues across Coachella’s nine stages on Saturday, with a heavy dose of yesteryear’s biggest stars.

The 90s are back with industrial



Colombian singer and songwriter Karol G



US Artist Sabrina Carpenter



International popstar Justin Bieber

rock band Nine Inch Nails, who will team up with German producer Boys Noize for a performance and the aughts will be repped by New York City rockers the Strokes — who are slated to release a new album in June after a six-year hiatus.

But peak nostalgia may hit like a bout of “Bieber fever”, on the heels of the 32-year-old singer’s comeback at the Grammy Awards this year, with hits such as “Sorry” and “Where Are U Now”.

‘TROPICOQUETA’

Sunday’s cherry on top will be reggaeton star Karol G, the first Latina to headline the festival.

The winner of eight Latin Grammy Awards made her Coachella debut in 2022 with a performance that paid tribute to Latin music icons such as Selena, Celia Cruz and Daddy Yankee.

For this year’s show, the “Provenza” singer is expected to embrace the “Caribbean showgirl” aesthetic of her latest project, “Tropicocoqueta”.

Sunday also promises the festival debut of K-pop kings BIGBANG, who are celebrating their 20th anniversary with a highly anticipated return to the international stage.

Also appearing will be the godfather of punk Iggy Pop and British DJ and producer Fatboy Slim, who dominated the electronic music scene in the 1990s.

Other acts include Major Lazer, indie-pop band Foster the People and British singer, dancer and visual artist FKA twigs.

The festival will close with a screening under the stars of the first episode of the third season of “Euphoria”, the HBO high school drama series starring Zendaya, returning to television after four years.

Coachella will also be streamed live on YouTube. — AFP

FEATURES



YERU EBUEEN

In recent weeks, social media feeds and travel forums have taken on a distinctly urgent tone. The questions arrive in waves, often stripped to their essentials: “Is it possible to get from Dubai to Oman?” “How do I reach Muscat Airport?” “Anyone driving Dubai to Muscat tonight?” “Can I share a ride?” Beneath each query lies a quiet anxiety, travellers caught in unfamiliar terrain, navigating disrupted routes, closed airspaces, or sudden changes to regional mobility.

What has emerged in response is not merely a market adjustment, but a grassroots network of small and medium tour operators in Muscat stepping into roles far beyond conventional tourism. These operators, often family-run, agile and deeply local, are now facilitating critical movement for stranded visitors and uncertain travellers attempting to chart a way home.

Across Facebook groups, WhatsApp threads and travel forums, requests for transport have become near constant. One Dubai-based travel agency recently posted a call for partnerships, seeking “licensed travel agencies in Oman” capable of handling border-to-airport transfers, emphasising the need for “professional, safe and reliable service for tourists.” Elsewhere, travellers coordinate ad hoc carpools, splitting the cost of private drivers for overnight journeys to catch early morning flights out of Muscat.

In this shifting landscape, operators like Marhaba Oman Tours have found themselves at the intersection of service and support. Known previously for curated cultural experiences, from pottery sessions and farm-to-table dining with Omani families to seasonal rose harvesting in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, the company has adapted swiftly. While continuing to offer immersive local experiences, it has also responded to a surge in logistical needs, assisting travellers with transport coordination and on-the-ground guidance.

“We can offer you a unique local experience”, the company notes in its outreach, but increasingly, that “experience” now includes helping visitors navigate uncertainty — whether that means arranging transport, advising on routes, or simply providing reassurance in an unfamiliar environment.

HOW MUSCAT'S SMALL TOUR OPERATORS ARE BECOMING LIFELINES

What has emerged in response to the ongoing conflict in the world, namely in the gulf region, is not merely a market adjustment, but a grassroots network of small and medium tour operators in Muscat stepping into roles far beyond conventional tourism. These operators, often family-run, agile and deeply local, are now facilitating critical movement for stranded visitors and uncertain travellers attempting to chart a way home.

Alongside them, independent operators such as Ahmed al Habsi, who has been actively promoting transport services between Oman and the UAE, are playing a similarly vital role. His offering is direct and practical: “Available transportation from Oman to UAE and vice versa... offering safe travel with experienced drivers, ensuring a comfortable and reliable journey throughout the trip”.

In another context, such services might be considered routine. Today, they are anything but.

For many travellers, particularly those unfamiliar with Oman’s geography or transport systems, these operators provide more than mobility, they offer clarity. The journey from the Oman border to Muscat International Airport, for instance, can be daunting without local knowledge. Timings, checkpoints, documentation and road conditions all require a level of familiarity that most visitors simply do not possess.

This is where Muscat’s smaller operators excel. Unlike larger, more rigid travel infrastructures, they operate with a degree of flexibility that allows them to respond in real time, coordinating last-minute pickups, adjusting routes and even facilitating shared rides among strangers bound by similar urgency.

There is, undeniably, a commercial dimension to this. Increased demand has created new revenue streams for operators who might otherwise rely on seasonal tourism. Yet to frame this solely as opportunism would miss the broader picture. What is unfolding is a form of informal resilience, a locally driven response to regional disruption, where business and humanitarian instinct converge.

In many ways, these operators are acting as cultural intermediaries as much as logistical ones. They are the first point of contact for travellers seeking reassurance, the translators of local systems and, increasingly, the quiet architects of safe passage.

As one traveller posted while searching for a ride to Muscat for a 2 am flight, “Happy to split costs”. It is a simple line, but it captures the moment, a collective improvisation, where strangers, drivers and small operators come together to navigate uncertainty.

And in that space, Muscat’s tour operators are not just moving people. They are holding the line between confusion and continuity.