

HM greets Tunisia President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Kais Saied of the Republic of Tunisia on the occasion of his country's Republic Day. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health, happiness and a long life to President Kais Saied. His Majesty also prayed to Allah the Almighty for the return of this and similar occasions on President Saied at a time the people of Tunisia realise aspirations of further progress and prosperity.

SUNRISE - 05:34 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:10 AM

DHUHR - 12:18 PM

ASR - 03:41 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:58 PM

ISHA - 08:17 PM



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BEYOND



MUSCAT

OMAN WELCOMES UNITY OF PALESTINIAN FACTIONS IN BEIJING

The Sultanate of Oman's Foreign Ministry has issued a statement applauding the recent meeting of Palestinian factions in China and the subsequent signing of the "Beijing Declaration." The Ministry emphasised the crucial need for Palestinian unity, advocating for the empowerment of Palestinians through all political and diplomatic channels to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The statement highlighted Oman's support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. "This aligns with the aspirations of the Palestinian people for freedom and peace and the relevant resolutions of international legitimacy," the statement said.

KATHMANDU

NEPAL PLANE CRASH KILLS 18; CAPTAIN SURVIVES



A small passenger plane belonging to Nepal's Saurya Airlines crashed and caught fire while taking off from the capital Kathmandu on Wednesday, killing 18 people on board and leaving one survivor, the captain, officials said. "Only the captain was rescued alive and is receiving treatment at a hospital," said Tej Bahadur Poudyal, spokesman for Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport. The 50-seater plane, carrying two crew members and 17 technicians, was heading for regular maintenance to Nepal's new Pokhara airport, which is equipped with aircraft maintenance hangars, the officials said. Eighteen of those on board the CRJ-200 aircraft were Nepali citizens, with one engineer from Yemen, Saurya said. "Shortly after takeoff ... the aircraft veered off to the right and crashed on the east side of the runway," the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal said in a statement. **SEE ALSO P6**

JORDANIAN AMBASSADOR BIDS FAREWELL



Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Amjad Kuhewi, Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty. HH Sayyid Shihab thanked the ambassador for the efforts he exerted in enhancing bilateral relations, wishing him continuous success. On his turn, the ambassador lauded the strength of relations between Oman and Jordan. He also expressed his appreciation for the cooperation extended to him during his tenure in Oman.

30 NEW PROFESSIONS RESERVED FOR OMANIS

MoL TO UNVEIL DETAILS BEFORE DECISIONS COME INTO FORCE IN SEPTEMBER

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 24

To provide more jobs for citizens in the private sector, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) has listed 30 new professions where hiring expats will be prohibited. In a post on social media platform X, MoL announced a series of decisions aimed at regulating the labour market in a way that enables Omanis to find jobs suitable for them. MoL, however, has not specified the professions to be Omanised.

The ministry said it will unveil details of these decisions before it comes into force in September.

MoL said all units of the state's administrative apparatus and government companies should not deal with private sector establishments that do not adhere to the Omanisation targets. All private sector establishments must obtain a digital certificate from the MoL proving that they meet the work standards and requirements,



All private sector establishments must employ at least one Omani in the professions.

including the Omanisation targets prescribed by the government.

All private sector establishments must employ at least one Omani in the professions.

It also approved a financial package to raise the established Omanisation rates.

MoL will review work permit

fees to ensure that private sector establishments that are committed to Omanisation rates are incentivised and that fees are doubled for establishments that are not compliant.

It will also intensify follow-up and inspection campaigns to ensure that private sector establishments adhere to the

decisions regulating the labour market. The ministry called upon all companies to comply with the decisions that serve the public interest.

Last week, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) rolled out several initiatives to enhance Omanisation in transport, logistics, communications, and information technology sectors.

The ministry will allocate specific jobs exclusively to Omanis from 2025 until the end of 2027. For 2024, the targets are set at 20 per cent Omanisation in the transport and logistics sector, and 31 per cent in the communications and information technology sector.

The initial Omanisation rates for the transport and logistics sector will range between 20 per cent and 50 per cent starting in 2025, with a gradual annual increase until reaching 100 per cent.

Eliminate nuclear arms to ensure peace: Oman

GENEVA: The Sultanate of Oman affirmed its great interest in the nuclear non-proliferation system, especially the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its three pillars: nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

This came in a statement delivered by Ambassador Idris bin Abdulrahman al Khanjari, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations and International Organisations, at the meeting of the Second Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), held at the UNs Office in Geneva.

The voluntary accession by Arab countries to the treaty and their acceptance of subjecting their nuclear facilities to the comprehensive safeguards system of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is a categorical confirmation of their good intention to adhere to the international non-proliferation agenda, Al Khanjari said.

Al Khanjari said Oman endorsed the statements of the Arab Group and the Non-Aligned Movement, expressing its appreciation for the efforts of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and all the efforts aimed at preserving security and peace at the regional and international levels particularly the protection against the dangers of weapons of mass destruction as well as the endeavours aimed at putting an end to the nuclear arms race which poses a threat to human existence.

TURN TO P2

Arrive early to board flights at Muscat Airport from August 4

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Starting August 4, passengers using the Muscat International Airport have been advised to arrive earlier than usual owing to a change in the Passenger Boarding System (PBS) processing, according to the Muscat International Airport authorities.

Accordingly, the cut-off time

for passenger processing will be 40 minutes before the estimated time of departure (ETD), which was earlier 20 minutes.

Speaking to the *Observer*, a top official from the airport said that the new decision is part of its ongoing efforts to improve efficiency and enhance passenger experience and based on the circular issued on Tuesday, which detailed the implementation of the new PBS processing cut-off



The cut-off time for passenger processing will be 40 minutes before the estimated time of departure, which was earlier 20 minutes

time. "As part of our ongoing efforts to enhance passenger experience and operational efficiency at our airport, we have conducted a detailed review of the passenger journey from completing check-in procedures to reaching the departure gates. This review aimed to identify optimal timelines for completing check-in processes and avoid flight operation delays," the official said. **TURN TO P2**

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 41°C Min 33°C

SALALAH: Max 26°C Min 25°C

NIZWA: Max 46°C Min 29°C



Oman Post launches online document attestation service

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JULY 24

In collaboration with the Foreign Ministry, Oman Post has announced the launch of document attestation services, providing greater convenience for personal and commercial document verification.

The Oman Post said in an online statement that document attestation is a critical process for confirming the authenticity of original documents. Through this, Oman Post offers customers multiple options to access this service.

Document attestation services are temporarily stopped at the Foreign Ministry. They can now visit selected branches of Oman Post to complete their document authentication transactions.

In addition, Oman Post has launched an online service that allows customers to fill out an application and upload the documents needing authentication through a dedicated link on their website.

This new online feature aims to streamline the process and reduce the time and effort required for document verification.

Oman Post is also introducing a collection and delivery service to further enhance customer convenience.

Customers can have their documents picked up from their location or the nearest branch, authenticated, and then returned to them, ensuring a seamless and efficient experience.

With these new features, Oman Post continues to prioritise customer satisfaction and service efficiency in document authentication. Those who want to attest documents online, visit <https://www.omanpost.om/attestation-services>

Oman climbs Henley Passport Index rankings

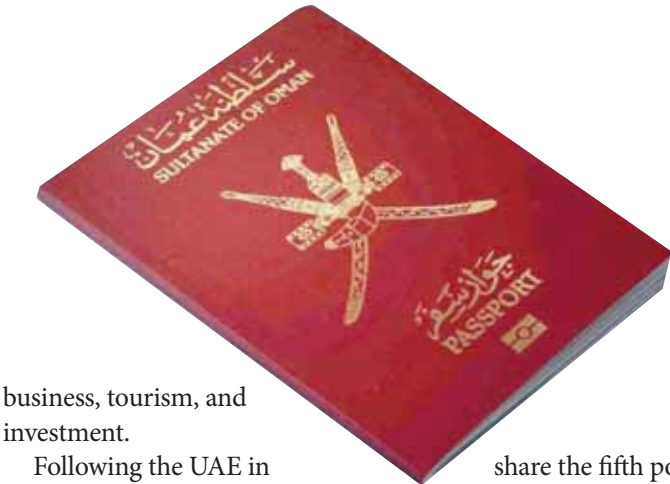
MIDHUN RAJ
MUSCAT, JULY 24

In a notable advancement, Oman has ascended seven places to secure the 58th position in the Henley Passport Index for the first half of 2024, based on official data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA).

Previously ranked 65th in 2023, Oman's passport now offers visa-free access to 86 destinations, up from 82. The Henley Passport Index evaluates passports worldwide by the number of destinations their holders can visit without requiring a prior visa.

This recent improvement highlights Oman's increasing global mobility and connectivity. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) achieved a significant milestone by entering the top ten for the first time.

Since the index's inception in 2006, the UAE has added an impressive 152 destinations, bringing its visa-free score to 185 and rising 53 places from 62nd to 9th position. Dr. Juerg Steffen, CEO of Henley & Partners, attributed this rapid ascent to the UAE government's concerted efforts to establish the country as a global hub for



business, tourism, and investment.

Following the UAE in the GCC rankings, Qatar holds the 46th position with visa-free access to 107 countries. Kuwait is ranked 49th, allowing visa-free travel to 99 destinations, while Saudi Arabia and Bahrain occupy the 56th and 57th positions, with access to 88 and 87 destinations, respectively. Globally, the Singaporean passport is deemed the most powerful, offering visa-free access to 195 countries. France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Spain share the second position with access to 192 destinations.

Austria, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Sweden rank third with 191 destinations. The United Kingdom, New Zealand, Norway, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland occupy the fourth spot with 190 destinations, while Australia and Portugal

share the fifth position with 189.

The United States has dropped to eighth place, granting visa-free access to 186 countries. India ranks 82nd, allowing citizens to travel to 58 countries without a visa, including popular destinations like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Pakistan is positioned at 100th with access to 33 countries, while Afghanistan remains at the bottom, with visa-free access to only 26 destinations. Christian Kaelin, chair of Henley & Partners, emphasised the growing disparity in global mobility. "The global average number of destinations travellers can access visa-free has nearly doubled from 58 in 2006 to 111 in 2024. However, the mobility gap between the top and bottom of the index is now wider than ever," he stated.



Forum delves into role of HR in achieving sustainable development

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, JULY 25

The Sultanate of Oman is taking a significant step towards a sustainable future by hosting the Human Resources and Sustainability Conference. Organised by the Ministry of Labour in partnership with the References Center for Organizing Conferences and Seminars, the two-day event aims to illuminate the critical role human resources play in achieving long-term economic, social, and environmental well-being.

The forum began on July 24, 2024 with an opening ceremony held under the auspices of Salim bin Musallam Qatan, Vice President of the State Council. In attendance were a diverse group of experts, researchers, and stakeholders. Through their combined knowledge and experience, the conference seeks to explore the latest advancements in human resources management practices that align with sustainability goals. A core objective is to highlight the critical importance of a skilled and adaptable workforce in propelling Oman towards a flourishing and sustainable economy.

Ahmed bin Ofit al Maashani, Director General of the Reference Foundation for Conferences and Seminars, said the forum aims to highlight successful developments and practices and discuss issues concerned with developing human resources and ensuring their sustainability. Various presentations will also focus on the importance of human resources and sustainability in the Sultanate

of Oman. Experts will present ideas and models for building strategy to activate future human resources roles and achieving sustainable development.

The conference delves into several key themes. One theme tackles the challenges and opportunities presented by globalisation. Discussions will explore how to ensure the sustainability of national and private institutions in this interconnected world. Another theme focuses on reengineering human resources management processes to prioritise sustainable practices. Attendees will examine how to best leverage artificial intelligence for talent management, employee development, and fostering a culture of social responsibility.

Mental health and skill development for the future workforce are also central themes. The conference will address strategies for promoting employee well-being and equipping individuals with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape. Additionally, the conference explores the concept of "green" human resources management practices. This includes examining how sustainable resource management strategies can be integrated within human resources departments and the positive impacts of such practices.

Learning from the experiences of developed countries in navigating the path to sustainable development is another key objective. The conference will provide a platform for knowledge exchange, allowing Omani participants to benefit from successful strategies implemented elsewhere.

ELIMINATE NUCLEAR ARMS TO ENSURE PEACE: OMAN

FROM PAGE 1

He noted that Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty obliges nuclear states to completely eliminate their nuclear weapons in exchange for the rest of the states not seeking to possess such weapons, pointing out that there is a stagnation in the implementation of the treaty especially after the failure of the previous two review conferences to adopt a final document by consensus.

The Permanent



Idris bin Abdulrahman al Khanjari, Permanent Representative of Oman to the UN and International Organisations

Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United

Nations and International Organisations reiterated that Oman believes that the optimal and permanent option to spare humanity the horrors of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction is the outright elimination of these weapons rather than their renewal and development. He noted that the international conventions should be fulfilled and multilateral action should not be marginalised in order to achieve international peace and security in a stable and sustainable manner. — ONA

Arrive early to board flights at Muscat Airport from August 4

FROM PAGE 1

"Therefore, starting from Sunday, August 4, the timing for processing passengers in the PBS (Passenger Boarding System) will be changed from 20 minutes to 40 minutes before the scheduled time of departure," he quoted the circular issued on Tuesday.

This new timing will be applicable to all those who are using the international flights and is based on the calculated maximum travel time from the check-in counter to the departure gate, which is averaged as 40 minutes and it will ensure

that passengers have sufficient time to complete all necessary pre-boarding procedures before boarding the aircraft.

"The new system will help optimise services and give an optimum timeline to check in and arrive at departure gate as this will avoid passengers missing flights. Since the time is calculated from the last check-in counter to the last departure gate they have calculated time taken to reach by different age group passengers and set 40 minutes as the optimum time to board the plane," said Sunil D'Souza, CEO, Travel Point.

Electric buses offer a greener public transport

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

Electric buses have huge potential to save the environment by cutting carbon emission to level zero and serve the society and community in a better way.

This was stated by Ali al Khadouri, Acting Chief Operating Officer for Buses at Mwasalat, which launched Oman's first electric bus at a high profile event in Salalah recently.

In an exclusive interview with the *Observer*, Al Khadouri highlighted the significant environmental benefits of electric buses. He emphasised the bus's potential to drastically reduce carbon emissions, which is a critical step towards sustainability.

"Electric buses have immense potential to save the environment



Ali al Khadouri, Acting Chief Operating Officer for Buses at Mwasalat

from carbon emissions," Al Khadouri stated. He explained that while a fossil fuel-powered bus emits 1.5 kg of carbon per kilometre, an electric bus emits none. This means that for every 300 kilometres travelled, an electric bus prevents 450 kg of carbon emissions from entering

the atmosphere.

Al Khadouri elaborated on the capabilities of these buses, noting that a fully charged electric bus can cover 350 kilometres. "There are two types of chargers available: A fast charger that fully charges the bus in 1.5 hours and a standard charger that takes 7 to 8 hours." "The best benefit of electric buses is their role in decarbonisation," Al Khadouri remarked. Mwasalat's current operations include plans to implement these buses at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) through an existing contract. The next steps involve collaboration with private sponsors and eventually integrating electric buses into the public transport system.

Despite their advantages, Al Khadouri acknowledged the primary challenge is the higher

cost of electric buses compared to fossil fuel buses. However, he pointed out that electric buses require significantly less maintenance, making them cost-effective in the long run. He is optimistic about future technological advancements that will reduce costs and improve accessibility.

In terms of specifications, the electric buses are 8.9 metres long, have 23 seats, and can accommodate 34 passengers, including standing passengers. They also include provisions for passengers with special needs, ensuring accessibility for all.

As Oman looks towards a greener future, the adoption of electric buses represents a significant stride in reducing the carbon footprint and promoting sustainable public transport.



OMANI HONEY EXHIBITION OPENS IN SALALAH

SALALAH: The ‘Omani Honey and Turmeric’ exhibition, organised by the General Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar Governorate, opened on Wednesday at Salalah Grand Mall in Salalah. The exhibition will continue until August 30.

Several farmers and beekeepers are participating in the exhibition with the aim of showcasing Omani honey, its varieties and other bee products. Additionally, the exhibition

aims to motivate and encourage farmers to cultivate turmeric in Dhofar Governorate, as it is a unique crop with added economic value.

Eng Rashid bin Said al Ghafri, Director-General of the General Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar Governorate, stated that the exhibition coincides with the khareef season. It seeks to highlight the beekeeping and turmeric cultivation sector,



encourage beekeepers and farmers, find marketing outlets for their products and generate economic returns for them.

Beekeeper Abdul Rahman bin Muhammad al Awaed emphasised the importance of participating in the exhibition to learn about new developments and benefit from the experiences of other beekeepers. He noted that their honey products are highly popular among citizens, residents, and visitors to the governorate.

The exhibition provides a platform for local farmers and beekeepers to showcase their products, engage with the public and exchange experiences. Visitors have the opportunity to taste and purchase the finest honey and turmeric products from the governorate.

The opening of the exhibition was sponsored by Nayef bin Hamid Fadhel, head of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry branch in Dhofar Governorate. — **ONA**

Khareef enables SMEs to capitalise on opportunities

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, JULY 24

This year’s khareef season activities at Wadi Darbat, one of the biggest attractions of the season, has seen a significant improvement in organisation, thanks to the tangible efforts of Dhofar Municipality, according to Yousef bin Mahad, a boat project owner.

Yousef highlighted that the organisation this year was much better compared to the previous year, which positively impacted the experience of visitors and tourists.

However, he drew attention to some challenges facing small and medium-sized enterprise owners, who are experiencing delays in obtaining licences.

Despite these challenges, Yousef noted that the turnout of tourists at Wadi Darbat’s various attractions was very good, emphasising that the service providers are committed to safety and quality standards.



ALL SMES OPERATING IN WADI DARBAT ARE WELL-ESTABLISHED ‘RIYADA’ CARD-HOLDING BUSINESSES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE LOCAL ECONOMY IN DHOFAR GOVERNORATE

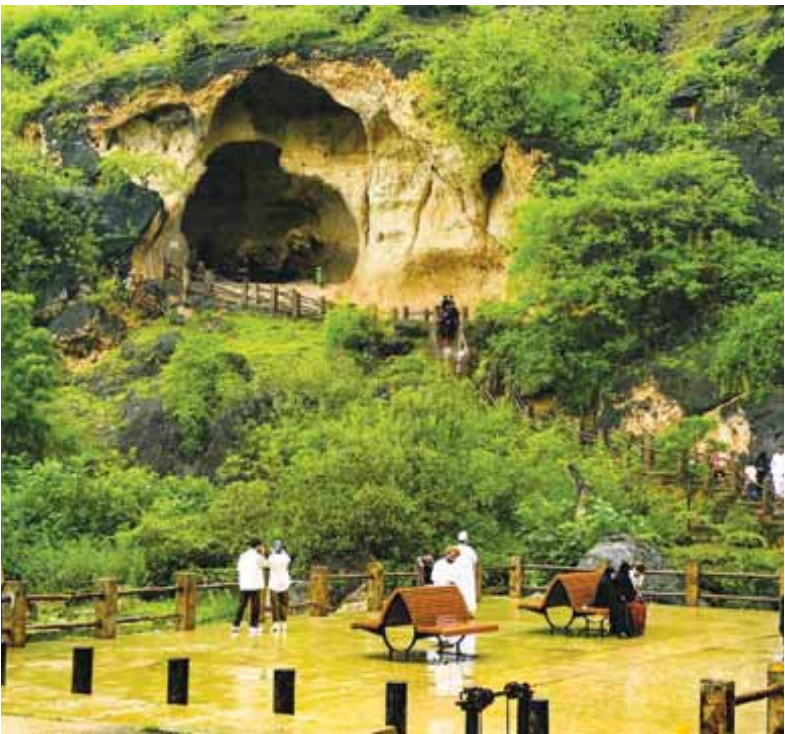
He added that all SMEs operating in Wadi Darbat are well-established ‘Riyada’ card-holding businesses that contribute to the local economy in Dhofar Governorate.

In this context, Yousef called on the responsible authorities to facilitate and simplify procedures to ensure the continuity of these projects and provide greater job opportunities for job-seekers.

Yousef affirmed that the khareef season in Salalah represents an excellent opportunity for job-seekers to engage in these temporary initiatives, enabling them to earn a good income while also highlighting the rich tourist potential of Dhofar Governorate.

Yousef appreciated the efforts of the Royal Oman Police and the Public Authority for Civil Defence for their constant presence in Wadi Darbat to ensure the safety of visitors and tourists.

It is worth noting that basic services in Wadi Darbat are nearly complete, providing visitors with a comfortable and safe tourism experience.



Ain Razat a unique tourist destination

SALALAH: Ain Razat is a popular tourist destination known for its diverse picturesque nature, stunning views and beautiful caves. Most of the springs in the Dhofar Governorate receive water from the rain that falls on the surrounding mountains, with levels increasing during the autumn season.

Located about 15 kilometres from the city centre of Salalah, Ain Razat is in the northeastern part of the Dhofar Governorate. It stands out for its proximity to the Razat Cave, lush green mountains, and clear water flowing through a valley from the spring.

In the heart of Ain Razat is a public garden with green spaces, trees and colourful roses. The tranquillity of nature and the multiple streams create a magical and picturesque

setting.

Ain Razat is one of the most abundant water springs in the Sultanate of Oman and a key tourist attraction in Dhofar Governorate. Dhofar Municipality has enhanced the surrounding area with a beautiful garden filled with shade trees, attracting visitors, travellers, school groups and photography enthusiasts.

The water from Ain Razat is of high quality and suitable for drinking, as well as irrigation for crops, trees and animals.

It is worth noting that there are 360 permanent and seasonal springs in Dhofar Governorate, spread across various mountains and valleys from the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands in the east to the Wilayat of Dhalkout in the west, with some springs even found in the Dhofar desert. — **ONA**



Ain Razat is one of the most abundant water springs in the Sultanate of Oman and a key tourist attraction in the Dhofar Governorate. — **ONA**



DRIFTING ON GREEN COVER IRRESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOUR



OMANI
TRAFFIC LAW
CLASSIFIES
DRIFTING
AS RECKLESS
DRIVING, A
CRIMINAL ACT
PUNISHABLE
BY ARREST
FOR
48
HOURS

VEHICLE
IMPOUNDMENT,
IMPRISONMENT
FOR
10
DAYS TO ONE
YEAR

FINES UP TO
RO 500,
AND THE POSSIBILITY OF
A THREE-MONTH DRIVING
LICENSE SUSPENSION

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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Harming green cover is an irresponsible behaviour, which needs to be tackled strictly. One such case was reported in the Dhofar Governorate where a Gulf tourist was seen drifting his car on a green landscape.

The governorate's Police Command detained the tourist after a video featuring him drifting his vehicle and damaging the lush green landscape in the Dhofar Governorate was circulated. Legal actions were also initiated against him.

Drifting, a popular but dangerous activity among young people, involves driving a car recklessly at high speeds. This hazardous behaviour is a significant traffic violation with numerous negative consequences. Drifting can result in fatalities, harm to individuals, fear, and significant material damage to both public and private property due to accidents. It creates chaos, breaches regulations, and disrupts traffic.

The misuse of green spaces, particularly during the khareef season in Dhofar, spoils the natural beauty and disrupts the enjoyment. The random driving of cars over green areas in plains and mountains kills grasses and plants, leading to the destruction of the vegetation cover. Additionally, some people cut tree branches and ignite fires for cooking, neglecting the availability of dry wood sold along tourist routes and causing further damage to the environment.

Drifting in green areas endangers the safety of individuals, wildlife, and plant life, distorting the local environment. The Environment Authority enforces legal measures per Article (21) of the Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Law, which prohibits any activity harmful to vegetation cover, including cutting, uprooting, or damaging trees, shrubs, or grass in public forests.

The issue of drifting extends beyond traffic and security; it is a national, social, family, and media concern. The Royal Oman Police are committed to addressing all forms of negligence that could endanger lives. They have warned that there will be no leniency in applying the law to reckless drivers, emphasising that such actions will result in strict legal consequences.

Omani Traffic Law classifies drifting as reckless driving, a criminal act punishable by arrest for 48 hours, vehicle impoundment, imprisonment for 10 days to one year, fines up to RO 500, and the possibility of a three-month driving license suspension.

Local reports highlight several causes of drifting: Boredom among youth, a desire for fame, negative peer influence, weak family oversight, and neglect by parents. The media and electronic games also play a role in promoting this dangerous activity.

With the growing concern over this phenomenon, Omani bloggers have suggested possible solutions on social media, such as designating specific areas for drifting under the supervision of specialised observers, away from residential neighbourhoods and at designated times.



Omani company develops robot to clean solar panels

MUSCAT: Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Development Laboratory (RAID), an Omani company, in cooperation with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), has developed a robot for cleaning solar panels, which saves water and time to ensure optimal performance of these panels.

Abdulahman bin Affan al Hajji, head of RAID, said that the solar panel cleaning robot is a unique innovation designed and

manufactured locally to clean vast solar farms with high efficiency, ensuring long life for these panels.

He added that the project aims to reduce risks resulting from manual cleaning operations, which enhances the performance of solar power plants and ensuring the safety of workers.

He stated that the robot relies on solar energy and uses sensors to collect data in its automated cleaning operations. The robot is



also distinguished by its ability to clean dry and wet according to the type of dirt, which ensures high efficiency in maintaining the cleanliness of solar cells.

Al Hajji added that the project aims to minimise human effort and avoid potential risks involved in manual cleaning operations

Al Hajji pointed out that the robot was tested at PDO and that the outcome was 'high efficiency'. The unit cleaned

more than 700 solar panels, with the robot emerging as an ideal device for operating in all weather conditions.

This, he observed, would ensure sustainability in performance, based on the fact that this technology contributes to reducing the volume of water used in cleaning, increasing the productivity of solar energy units and diminishing dependence on non-renewable energy sources.

New Yanqul fish market nears completion

YANQUL: The implementation rate of the new fish market in the Wilayat of Yanqul in the Al Dhahirah Governorate has exceeded 90 per cent. The project implementation is overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources with the funding provided by the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

Ibrahim bin Mohammed al Alawi, supervisor of the fish market at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said that the project is hoped to be completed by the end of this year, stressing the importance of this market due to its vital location in the Wilayat of Yanqul and its potential to promote the fish marketing sector and generate ample jobs opportunities for the people of the wilayat.

The new fish market has a total area of 1,366 square metres and contains 24 platforms for

selling fish, 12 tables for cutting fish, a hall for wholesale sales and an ice-making unit with a production capacity of up to five tonnes, a cold storage, and a platform for the loading and unloading of fish.

This is in addition to administrative offices for employees working in the market, a café, changing rooms as well as various facilities that meet the design of modern markets. Al Alawi added that the market has an area of 1,300 square metres earmarked for investment by local and international investors and entrepreneurs, the official said.

The new Yanqul fish market will be a destination for the villages of the Wilayat of Yanqul and neighbouring wilayats due to its location on the main road leading to the Wilayat of Suhar in Al Batinah North Governorate and the Al Buraimi Governorate. — ONA



The new market has a total area of 1,366 square metres and contains 24 platforms for selling fish. — ONA

Children with Down’s Syndrome to be trained in different jobs

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Children with Down Syndrome will be trained in various departments to empower them with working knowlege, thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Prakramika Vocational Institute, the Omani Down Syndrome Association (ODSA), and Khimji Eshraqa. The agreement provides free vocational training for a year.

Prakramika will provide the training in three phases along with a certificate of completion, while Khimji Eshraqa will fund the materials needed for the training. Products made by the children undergoing training will be sold with corporate support, and the proceeds will benefit ODSA.

Dr Gayatri Narasimhan, Founder and Director of Prakramika, Masoud al Hinai, Vice Chairman and Board member of ODSA and Mahmoud al Saqri, Head of KR - Eshraqa, signed the agreement in the presence of children, trainers, and other invitees.

An Eshraqa representative stated that this initiative is part of their ongoing corporate



social responsibility (CSR) efforts, with plans to support more initiatives that have a positive impact on society.

The agreement, effective from July 23, to May 31, 2025, establishes a partnership to

work collaboratively towards training ODSA students.

Trainers will provide training to students aged 15 and above in three phases, with a maximum of 15 students in each phase. Phase 1 involves

block printing for 2 months, Phase 2 focuses on digital work where children create their digital planner and bookmark for 2 months, and the final phase includes candle and soap making for 3 months. Upon completion, children will receive a certificate to enhance their employability and confidence.

Dr Gayatri stated, “We aim to empower children with Down Syndrome to take on both manual and digital jobs, making them more self-reliant.”

ODSA will sell the final goods produced by the students, and proceeds will support the association’s operations.”

Oman hosts regional forum for human rights institutions

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, JULY 24

The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC), in partnership with the National Human Rights Committee (NHRC), launched a regional forum under the patronage of His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, on Wednesday.

The two-day forum, themed “The Role of National Human Rights Institutions in Planning and Monitoring the Implementation of National Visions in Human Rights-related Fields,” will conclude on Thursday.

This important occasion is devoted to augmenting the function of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) in human rights promotion by means of planned strategy and vigilant oversight of national human rights visions.

Its goals are to address the obstacles that NHRIs in Arab nations confront, create a forum for the sharing of best practices and experiences, and develop all-encompassing suggestions to increase these organisations’



The forum’s agenda includes a number of in-depth discussion sessions that centre on the strategic roles that NHRI plays in human rights advocacy. — ONA

effectiveness in promoting human rights.

In a keynote address, Maryam bint Abdullah al Attiyah, Chairperson of the National Human Rights Committee (Qatar), said: “This forum exemplifies the Oman Human Rights Commission’s unwavering dedication to advancing human rights on all fronts. Oman Vision 2040, deeply rooted in human rights, reflects our commitment to fostering coexistence, tolerance, and respect for diverse cultures. Our collective efforts aim to integrate human rights

into national planning, ensuring that these principles remain at the heart of our development strategies.”

Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of the Oman Human Rights Commission, stated: “In today’s era, diligent work and continuous coordination are imperative to enhance human rights across all dimensions.

National human rights institutions play a vital role in providing recommendations to governments and ensuring the realisation of fundamental

human rights principles. This forum seeks to build capacities, align laws with human rights principles, and foster international cooperation to achieve our shared objectives.”

Prominent attendees include delegates from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), officials from international and regional human rights organisations, human rights experts, academics, and researchers, as well as representatives from NHRIs around the Arab world.

The forum’s agenda includes a number of in-depth discussion



sessions that centre on the strategic roles that NHRI plays in human rights advocacy, their crucial role in supervising the execution of national human rights strategies, the difficulties they face, and best practices to improve their operational capacities.

NHRIs are independent national organisations dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights within their domains.

They serve an essential role in monitoring human rights situations, advising governments

on topical matters, investigating allegations of human rights breaches, and raising public awareness about human rights.

For NHRI in the Arab world, this meeting offers a great chance to exchange ideas, talk about practical challenges, and create tactical suggestions to improve their advocacy work for human rights.

The outcomes of this forum are expected to significantly advance the advancement of human rights in Arab countries by fortifying NHRI’s strategic planning and monitoring skills.



ISRAEL LAUNCHES BRUTAL RAIDS IN GAZA

GAZA: Israeli forces carried out new raids in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, hours before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was due to address the US Congress.

The latest Israeli attacks destroyed homes in towns east of Khan Younis in southern Gaza and thousands of people were forced to head west to seek shelter, residents said.

The Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said it had received distress calls from residents trapped in their homes in Bani Suhaila, east of Khan Yunis, but were unable to reach the town.

Medics later said two Palestinians had been killed in an airstrike on Bani Suhaila, where the armed wing of the Palestinian group Hamas said fighters had detonated a bomb against an Israeli army personnel carrier.

Israel's military, which is trying to eradicate Hamas movement after the Oct. 7 attack on Israel, said it had been operating in areas from which fighters had been able to fire rockets into Israel and attack Israeli troops.

Gaza health officials said Israeli military strikes in the past 24 hours had killed at least 55 people, the latest casualties in a war that health authorities in the enclave say has killed more than 39,000 Palestinians.

Residents said they had been

ordered to head west towards a designated humanitarian area, but that the area was now unsafe. The Israeli military issued the evacuation orders on social media, and some residents received orders to leave by phone.

Israeli forces also launched out airstrikes on several areas of central and northern Gaza, including one on Al Bureij camp in central Gaza which health officials said killed nine people.

Some Palestinians who gathered at a hospital in Khan Yunis before funerals criticised the United States, Israel's most important international ally, for welcoming Netanyahu.

He was due to address Congress and to meet President Joe Biden at the White House on Thursday. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said he would meet Netanyahu in Florida on Friday.

"The United States is a main partner in what is happening in Gaza. We are being killed because of the United States. We are being slaughtered by American planes, American ships, American tanks, and American troops," said Kazem Abu Taha, a displaced resident from Rafah.

Israel has rejected accusations brought by South Africa at the UN's top court that its military operation in Gaza is a state-led genocide campaign against Palestinians. — **Reuters**



Women injured during Israeli bombardment arrive at the emergency ward at Al Nassr Hospital in Khan Yunis. — **AFP**

Crash at Kathmandu airport kills 18

KATHMANDU: Eighteen people were killed when a small passenger plane belonging to Nepal's Saurya Airlines crashed and caught fire while taking off from the capital Kathmandu on Wednesday, officials said.

The plane, carrying two crew members and 17 technicians, was going for regular maintenance to Nepal's new Pokhara airport, which opened in January last year and is equipped with aircraft maintenance hangars, they said.

"Shortly after takeoff... the aircraft veered off to the right and crashed on the east side of the runway," the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal said in a statement.

Nepal's prime minister, K P Sharma Oli, visited the crash site and asked people to "be patient" in a social media post, without elaborating. An emergency cabinet meeting was called to form a panel to probe the crash, a government spokesman said.

Eighteen of those on board the crashed 50-seater CRJ-200



A view shows wreckage of a Saurya Airlines plane that caught fire, in Kathmandu, Nepal. — **Reuters**

aircraft, with the registration 9N-AME, were Nepali citizens while one engineer was from Yemen, Saurya said.

"Only the captain was rescued alive and is receiving treatment at a hospital," said Tej Bahadur Poudyal, the spokesman for Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport.

Television visuals showed fire fighters trying to put out the blaze

and thick black smoke rising into the sky. Images also showed the plane flying a little above the runway and then tilting to its right before it crashed. Other visuals showed rescue workers examining the charred remains of the plane, strewn in lush green fields, and bodies being carried to ambulances on stretchers as residents looked on.

"The plane was scheduled

to undergo maintenance for a month beginning on Thursday ... It is unclear why it crashed," said Mukesh Khanal, marketing head of Saurya Airlines. Kathmandu airport was closed temporarily following the crash but reopened within hours, officials said.

According to Flightradar24 flight tracking, Saurya currently operates two CRJ-200 regional jets, a programme that was owned by Canada's Bombardier but which was bought by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in 2020. Saurya says it has another CRJ-200 in its fleet. Bombardier referred questions about the incident to Canada-based MHI RJ Aviation Group, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Located in the heart of the Kathmandu Valley, the country's main airport is ringed by mountains, affecting wind directions and intensity in the area and making takeoff and landing a challenge for pilots. — **Reuters**

Balloons hit Seoul's presidential compound

SEOUL: Trash-carrying balloons sent by North Korea hit the South Korean presidential compound on Wednesday, security officials said, prompting Seoul to mobilise chemical response teams in the escalating tit-for-tat propaganda war. It is the first time the South Korean leader's office in downtown Seoul, which is protected by scores of soldiers and a no-fly zone, has been directly hit by any of the thousands of trash-carrying balloons launched by Pyongyang since May.

"The chemical, biological and radiological (warfare) response team has safely collected the trash balloons," the presidential security service said. "After investigation, results have confirmed that there

were no danger or contamination of the object," it said.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff had earlier confirmed the North was once again sending the trash-carrying balloons, while Seoul city authorities also issued an alert on Wednesday morning. "If you find any fallen balloons do not touch them, and report them to the nearest military unit or police station," it said.

The presidential office had been monitoring the balloon in real time, and was aware of exactly where it would land. In response to the waves of balloons, South Korea on Sunday resumed "full scale" propaganda broadcasts from loudspeakers along the border, directed at North. — **AFP**



South Korean officials clean up the contents of a trash-carrying balloon sent by North Korea after it landed on a street in Seoul. — **AFP**

KARACHI

100,000 schools in Pakistan remain closed over heat

School summer holidays will be extended by two weeks in southern Pakistan because of high temperatures, affecting more than 100,000 schools, an education official said.

"We decided to close schools for an additional 14 days for the children's well-being," Atif Vighio said, a spokesperson at the education department in Sindh province. Planned power cuts, also known as load-shedding, happen frequently in Pakistan due to an ongoing power supply crisis. The



load-shedding varies from city to city, but they intensify in rural areas of Sindh. Pakistan struggled through a series of heatwaves in May and June, with temperatures peaking at more than 50. — **AFP**

MANILA

Typhoon dumps heavy rain on Manila

Heavy rain from Typhoon Gae-mi has flooded the Philippine capital Manila and nearby cities, forcing authorities to shut schools, offices and cancel flights. The storm has intensified seasonal monsoon rains, causing landslides and flooding over the past few days.

At least 12 people have died and more than 600,000 are displaced due to the storm. The Philippine coastguard said 260 passengers and 16 vessels were stranded in ports while airlines



cancelled 114 flights out of Manila. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr told the disaster relief agencies to provide assistance and prepare supplies for isolated communities on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

ALGIERS

Toxic emissions as strike worsens Yemen pollution

The Israeli strike on Yemen's port of Hodeida has released hazardous emissions and caused fuel spills, experts said, compounding environmental pollution already worsened by oil spills.

Parts of the port were still ablaze early on Wednesday, after an oil tank exploded overnight. Images from the harbour showed a thick plume of black smoke.

The Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS), a UK charity that monitors the environmental impact of conflict,



said: "The fire and associated spills will have generated hazardous emissions to the air and substantial ground contamination with pollution to the marine environment likely." — **AFP**



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In brief

■ LONDON



CLIMATE ACTIVISTS STAGE PROTESTS AT EUROPEAN AIRPORTS

A number of climate protesters were arrested at London's Heathrow Airport on Wednesday, as similar action took place across Europe. London's Metropolitan Police said nine activists were held for "conspiring to disrupt Heathrow Airport" and were taken into custody.

At Germany's Cologne Bonn airport, climate activists glued themselves on the runway on Wednesday morning, with flights grounded briefly before resuming.

In Norway, activists blocked the runway at Oslo airport, while Just Stop Oil said other groups took similar action in Spain and Finland. — AFP

■ BRUSSELS



EU WARNS SLOVAKIA AGAINST FOREIGN AGENT LAW FOR NGOs

The European Commission has warned Slovakia that it will launch immediate legal action if the government pushes ahead with a proposed law requiring NGOs that receive funding from abroad to label themselves "organisations with foreign support".

"I was in Bratislava and I was very clear," European Commission Vice-President Vera Jourova said. "If you follow the Hungarian example on the NGOs law, we will launch an infringement procedure immediately."

Hungary passed a similar law in 2017, but repealed it in 2021 after the European Court of Justice ruled it illegal. — Reuters

■ RIO DE JANEIRO



LULA RALLIES G20 COUNTRIES AGAINST WORLD HUNGER

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will launch an initiative to fight world hunger ahead of a meeting of G20 finance ministers in Rio de Janeiro.

Lula has made the issue a key priority of Brazil's presidency of the G20, along with taxing the super-rich, which will top the agenda on Thursday and Friday.

"The fight against inequality, the fight against hunger, the fight against poverty are all fights that cannot be done by one country," Lula told reporters.

A UN report said 733 million people had suffered from hunger last year — nine per cent of the world's population. — AFP

Ukraine tells China it is open to talks with Moscow



A man walks next to an office building of FSD (Fondation Suisse de Déminage), damaged during a Russian missile attack, in Mykolaiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

BEIJING: Ukraine's top diplomat told China's foreign minister at talks in the southern city of Guangzhou on Wednesday that Kyiv was open to talks with Russia if Moscow was prepared to negotiate in good faith, something he said he saw no evidence of for now.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba is the highest ranking Ukrainian official to travel to China since Russia's February 2022 attack and held talks with Foreign Minister Wang Yi for more than three hours, a Ukrainian source in the delegation said.

"Kuleba restated... that (Kyiv) is ready to engage the Russian side in the negotiation process at a certain stage, when Russia is ready to negotiate in good faith, but emphasised that no such readiness is currently observed on the Russian side," his ministry said in a statement.

China positions itself as neutral on the war, has declared a "no limits" partnership with Russia days before the 2022 attack and has hosted President Vladimir Putin for talks, most recently in May.

"The talks have just concluded. They lasted for over three hours in total, longer than



We support all efforts conducive to peace and are willing to continue to play a constructive role in bringing about a ceasefire and the resumption of peace talks

MAO NING

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson

planned. This was a very deep and concrete conversation," a Ukrainian source in the delegation said.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson told a regular press conference in Beijing that both ministers had talked up the need to take a long-term view on building bilateral ties and that China would "continue to

expand its food imports from Ukraine".

Mao Ning added that China was concerned by the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. She also said that both the Russian and Ukrainian sides had "to varying degrees signalled their willingness to negotiate".

"Although the conditions are not yet ripe, we support all efforts conducive to peace and are willing to continue to play a constructive role in bringing about a ceasefire and the resumption of peace talks," she added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in June Moscow would end the war if Kyiv retreated from and handed over the rest of four partially-occupied Ukrainian provinces, and dropped its Nato ambitions, an idea shot down in Kyiv as an absurd ultimatum.

Kyiv plans to hold a second international summit later this year to advance its vision for peace after an initial gathering in Switzerland in June drew dozens of delegations from around the world. Ukraine has said it would like its second summit to be hosted by a "Global South" country and that Russia should attend. — Reuters

UK's prime minister Starmer faces first grilling from MPs

LONDON: Keir Starmer faced his first House of Commons grilling as UK prime minister on Wednesday, after suspending seven of his own Labour MPs for rebelling over a controversial welfare policy. Starmer suspended the Labour rebels late on Tuesday after they backed a motion demanding the removal of the contentious two-child limit on benefits introduced by the previous Conservative government.

Their votes supporting ending the cap — introduced in 2015 and which restricts payments to the first two children born to most families — is an early test of Starmer's authority.

The new UK leader has warned there is "no silver bullet" to ending child poverty but acknowledged the "passion" of MPs who oppose maintaining the policy.

"The last Labour government lifted millions of children out of poverty, something we are very, very proud of," Starmer said at his first Prime Minister's Questions as UK leader, referring to ex-premier Gordon Brown who left office in 2010.

"And this government will approach the question with the same vigour with our new taskforce. Already we've taken steps," he added, referring to breakfast clubs in schools and abolishing no-fault evictions for

tenants.

Starmer's decision to suspend the whip from the group of left-wingers was seen as a show of ruthlessness from his new administration.

Late on Tuesday, MPs voted 363 to 103 to reject a Scottish National Party (SNP) amendment to scrap the two-child benefit cap, giving the government a majority of 260.

However, in addition to the seven who voted with the amendment, more than 40 Labour lawmakers recorded no vote, highlighting the level of unease within the centre-left party at the measure.

The vote tried to force a change to the government's legislative agenda for the coming months, which it laid out in last week's King's Speech.

Kim Johnson, a Labour MP for Liverpool, said she had voted with the government "for unity" but warned "the campaign will continue".

The SNP's Westminster leader Stephen Flynn said Labour had "failed its first major test in government" by choosing not to "deliver meaningful change from years of Tory misrule".

Defending the suspensions, Starmer's political spokesperson told reporters that defying the government on a King's Speech was "a serious matter". — AFP



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer leaves 10 Downing Street in central London. — AFP

Germany's Scholz says Harris could win US election

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz praised US Vice-President Kamala Harris as a "competent and experienced" politician who could well win the US election, but stopped short of endorsing her over Republican Donald Trump.

While Scholz's nearly two-hour long summer news conference touched on an array of topics including his own bid for re-election, the November 5 presidential vote in Germany's top trade and security ally dominated reporters' questions.

"The election campaign in the USA will certainly be exciting, now with a slightly new line-up and a new constellation," said Scholz.

"I think it is very possible that Kamala Harris will win the election, but the American voters will decide."

Scholz had been unusually direct in his endorsement of US President Joe Biden before the latter dropped his reelection bid last weekend and endorsed



People raise signs in support of US Vice-President Kamala Harris as she speaks at a campaign event, Wisconsin, US. — Reuters

Harris as the Democratic Party's candidate to face Trump in the November election.

Many German politicians are concerned about a possible return to the White House of Trump, who vows to impose higher tariffs on imports if elected and to put conditions on US support for members of the Nato military

alliance.

Germany was frequently the focus of Trump's ire during his first, 2017-21 term due to its trade surplus with the United States and low spending on defence, which it has however increased significantly since Russia's war of Ukraine.

Scholz said he had met Harris

several times.

"This is a competent and experienced politician who knows exactly what she is doing," he said. "She knows what she wants and what she can do."

The chancellor danced around a reporter's question about whether he had directly contacted Trump after the July 13 assassination

Many German politicians are concerned about a possible return to the White House of Trump, who vows to put conditions on US support for members of the Nato military alliance

attempt on the ex-president, instead saying he had "extensive contacts in other countries, always within the appropriate framework".

Scholz said he would work well with whoever won the November election in the US.

Separately Scholz assured that he would be standing for reelection in next year's federal vote as the candidate for his centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), despite weak poll ratings and a recent survey that showed just one third of SPD members wanted him. — Reuters

Lessons from the global CrowdStrike outage



Rumaitha Al Busaidi

In our interconnected world, a single flaw can disrupt the fabric of our digital lives. Last week’s CrowdStrike outage, triggered by a software update glitch, grounded nearly 3,500 flights and threw global logistics into chaos. Amidst this turmoil, we witnessed a fleeting yet profound environmental impact: clearer skies and cooler temperatures due to the absence of contrails. This phenomenon isn’t entirely new. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, with reduced movement, scientists observed similar effects: clearer skies and wider temperature ranges between day and night. These observations underscore the significant yet often overlooked impact our daily activities have on the climate, beyond the well-known greenhouse gases debate. The CrowdStrike incident underscores a critical lesson in cybersecurity. Rooted not in a cyberattack but a software update flaw, it highlights the need for rigorous testing and validation in software development. As digital infrastructure becomes as vital as physical infrastructure, robust cybersecurity measures and resilient systems capable of quick recovery are paramount.

This case draws a striking parallel between digital system integrity and ecosystem integrity. Just as a disruption in a digital network can cause widespread chaos, a disturbance in an ecosystem can trigger cascading effects impacting biodiversity, climate, and human well-being. Both systems require a balance of resilience and robustness. In nature, biodiversity ensures ecosystem resilience by providing multiple species that can fulfil similar roles, preventing total collapse if one species is lost. Similarly, in digital systems, redundancy and diversity in technology and providers can prevent widespread outages from a single point of failure. Moreover, promoting collaboration and information-sharing among stakeholders can help identify and address vulnerabilities more effectively. As Oman continues to embrace digital transformation, balancing innovation with resilience is crucial. Our strategic location and role as a logistics hub make us highly dependent on reliable digital systems. The CrowdStrike incident serves as a timely reminder that technological advancements, while beneficial, necessitate a proactive approach to cybersecurity and infrastructure resilience.

PRIORITISING RESILIENCE AND SECURITY IN OUR DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE IS ESSENTIAL FOR PROTECTING AGAINST DISRUPTIONS AND ENSURING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The outage, while an isolated technical failure, is a powerful reminder of the broader vulnerabilities and interconnectedness of our modern world. It also brings to light the environmental footprint of our digital infrastructure. Data centres, which form the backbone of our digital world, are significant consumers of energy and contributors to carbon emissions. Just as biodiversity ensures ecosystem resilience, sustainable practices in digital infrastructure can enhance system resilience and reduce environmental impact. For Oman, this incident is a call to action: prioritising resilience and security in our digital infrastructure is essential for protecting against disruptions and ensuring a sustainable future. As our reliance on technology grows, balancing innovation and resilience will be crucial for safeguarding our advancements and our environment. By learning from this incident and taking proactive measures, we can build a more secure, resilient, and sustainable future for Oman and beyond, and hopefully be a catalyst for stronger, more resilient systems, safeguarding our progress and our planet.

War, economic chaos defied drive to end hunger

Conflict, economic turbulence and extreme weather scuppered efforts to curb hunger last year, with around nine per cent of the world’s population affected, UN agencies said on Wednesday. About 733 million people may have faced hunger in 2023, a level that has held steady for three years after a steep rise following the Covid-19 pandemic, they said in a report. But the picture is uneven. While hunger affected one in every five people in Africa, compared with a global average of one in 11, Latin America and the Caribbean progressed and Asia stalled in the goal of eliminating undernourishment. The broader goal of securing regular access to adequate food for everyone also stalled in that period. Moderate or severe food insecurity, which forces people to occasionally skip meals, hit 2.33 billion people last year — almost 29 per cent of the global population. The report by the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, UNICEF, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization suggests the UN goal of a world without hunger by 2030 is fading further. Conflicts, climate chaos and economic downturns are already known as major drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition that combine with underlying factors including persistent inequality, the unaffordability of healthy diets and unhealthy food environments. But these major drivers are becoming more frequent and intense — and occurring concurrently more often — meaning more people are exposed to hunger and food insecurity, the report said. A healthy diet was unaffordable for more than one third of the world’s population in 2022, the report added, citing updated estimates. Here too regional inequalities were stark: more than 71 per cent of people in low-income countries could not afford healthy diets, compared with just over six per cent in high-income nations. According to David Laborde, an economist at the Food and Agriculture Organization and one of the report’s authors, the post-Covid economic rebound was unequal within and between countries. Wars and extreme weather events also raged unabated in 2023, but the world has failed to put in place a “Marshall Plan” to bolster funds earmarked for fighting hunger, he said. The UN agencies’ report, which was presented for a G20 summit in Brazil, suggested a major reform of financing food security and nutrition to alleviate the scourge. — AFP

‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy’



Karim Easterbrook

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Whilst running my schools in Cambridge and supervising my A-level students over a 25 year period I met a wide range of personalities and nationalities. Although most of my British students worked hard and achieved admission to some of the most prestigious universities, often going on to Cambridge, others had to be cajoled into attending their tutorials and completing their homework. I was able to identify with these “lazy” students. The most intelligent teenagers are sometimes the most rebellious and have discovered far more interesting things to do in life at their age other than listening to a boring teacher droning on about algebra or English grammar. As educators we should remember that we were once young before judging them. School can be a word synonymous with prison for some students. They often feel they have to complete their time before being given the freedom they crave. Any teacher who didn’t understand the need to make his tutorials interesting at my Cambridge schools soon lost his job because my students had the right to change a tutor if he was boring or inept. I started the first of my schools, St. Andrew’s College in Cambridge, with a school friend, William Duncombe. William now owns and runs Bartholomew’s College in Brighton. He has continued running his school using our educational philosophy. His students achieve first class exam results. We were both rebellious school students and we were both expelled from school. I was expelled a second time for refusing to wear a full school uniform. I am still shocked that any educationalist would even consider ruining a young person’s academic career for not wearing a school tie or for having hair longer than that arbitrarily decided by the school governors. Both William and I found the conformist ethos and philosophy of a traditional UK school not to our tastes. Neither of us have ever regretted being



expelled and we went on to become the youngest UK School Principals at the ages of 25. After university we were both determined to open a school which didn’t put so much emphasis on the way a student dressed or the length of his hair. We wanted a school which placed most emphasis on students achieving academic success whilst simultaneously being allowed to be themselves, to be individuals. It is one

IN FINLAND THEY REALISED THAT BY NOT OVER LOADING STUDENTS WITH HOMEWORK AND BY GIVING THEM SUFFICIENT FREE TIME AFTER SCHOOL TO SOCIALISE AND BE INDIVIDUALS, PUPILS AND STUDENTS ENJOYED THEIR STUDIES MORE AND WERE ACADEMICALLY MORE SUCCESSFUL.

of the reasons why our first school achieved distinction and achieved some of, and at times the best, exam results in the whole of the UK. In Finland they realised that by not over loading students with homework and by giving them sufficient free time after school to socialise and be individuals, pupils and students enjoyed their studies more and were academically more successful. By giving students more freedom to express themselves as individuals, school became for Finnish students less alien and a place of learning rather than somewhere which forced them to conform to trivial rules. In most international academic league tables Finland quickly became top. It was a brave Finish government which opted to change their traditional, conformist education system and I salute them.

The Finns realised that education isn’t just about what happens in the classroom. In fact the most enduring, rewarding and important education in a young person’s life takes place outside of school. In Finnish Primary Schools children are given no homework and given more time to play. Play is a more effective learning experience than anything that takes place in the classroom at this age. What all educationalists need to understand is that education is about many different infections, both good and bad. My British students were invariably the most rebellious and consequently the most interesting. Although at times I must admit they taxed my and my teachers’ patience. Far Eastern students were by far the most motivated. The pressures exerted on them by their families to obtain grade As in all their subjects outweighed anything else. Consideration was rarely given to the importance of developing their individuality and any time not given over to their studies was often thought by their parents to be laziness. These latter students invariably did achieve grade As and did go on to universities but rarely were they successful in entering Oxford and Cambridge. Oxbridge Admissions Tutors were not just interested in grade As. They wanted a student with a wide range of extracurricular interests. A well rounded student. I remember one of my top British A-level students telling me after being successfully interviewed by a Cambridge Admissions Tutor that most of his interview was taken up by discussing his ability to play the Scottish bagpipes. I also remember two excessively hard working Malaysian Chinese students visiting my office to ask advice on how they should spend their summer break back home before returning in September. Of course they wanted to know what books they should read and how to structure their studies. I told them to forget their academic studies for most of the summer, to go swimming and attend parties with their friends and above all to relax. They thought I was joking. I wasn’t joking and I still think my advice was given in both their personal and academic interests.

An issue of national security

The wounds are still bleeding, and they will continue for some time. The nation, as well as those who hold Oman in high regard, are in astonishment. There is disbelief, and there are questions.

It makes no difference whether it was referred to as an incident or a terrorist act. Whether it was a mass shooting or people caught in the crossfire, the fact is that people were killed. It happened around a religious site, but it could have happened anywhere, including public events, live music performance venues, or celebrations. The point is, it's happened.

Could the bloodshed have been prevented? It is a far-reaching question. No one discredits the swift military technical-operational response; after all, special forces are specifically trained for such situations. Could there have been an overlook that such events wouldn't occur in the country, or was there a failure to anticipate this? These are loaded and broad questions.

Tragedies can be viewed from multiple perspectives, and different groups will shape their narratives. Intellectuals, military personnel, experts, and the average Joe all have their opinions. These views do not necessarily have to conform to each other. It is normal to look at tragic events with different eyes. Nobody knows the truth. If there had been a full picture and information, the shooting would not have occurred.

Some chose to overgeneralise the event; others chose to raise the profile of the special forces. In contrast, there were others more inclined to demonise the criminals and speculate on the possible reasons for such a tragedy.

Families and friends are shedding tears for their loved ones, be the accidental victims, perpetrators, or military personnel in action. The injured, after recovery, will face sequels.

Then there is the lingering question of why the perpetrators opted to die rather than surrender. Dying as a martyr or facing jail



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THOSE MORE FAMILIAR WITH THE REGION AND ITS VOLATILITY EXPRESSED THAT IT HAS BEEN CLEAR THAT SOMETHING IN THIS VEIN WOULD HAPPEN UNDER OUR OWN EYES SOONER OR LATER

time and accountability for such a heinous attack? What motivated the perpetrators to commit such a deplorable act, causing pain to their families and the nation? It was an audacious decision to do a terrorist act in the heart of the capital and near a religious site. However, we can only scratch the surface of a soul in despair, and we do miss out on understanding those who have been indoctrinated by ideas; they can behave in unexpected ways.

People around the world read the international news about the shooting with incredulity; many could not understand the sketchy phrases published in the national news. However, those more familiar with the region and its volatility expressed that it has been clear that something in this vein would happen under our own eyes sooner or later. The approach of not wanting to debate or even to believe in probabilities does leave doors open for those willing to test the waters, and therefore, the failure to anticipate this.

Personal disputes and ideological or political radicalism, including hostility to a more open society with nightlife, bars and musical events, create fertile grounds in which segments of society can display dissatisfaction. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for the tragedy, even though many individuals have their own theories, as it is difficult to dismiss whatever circumstances led to the shooting.

A variety of narratives can be read on social media. Some are harmful and personal, others are religious, while yet others focus on media performance and politics. Pundits, speculators and opportunists all shared their perspectives. The string of ongoing personal insults and narrow thoughts show how individuals believe whatever they choose. It might also be an interesting social study.

Changes are underway, and they have significant implications for our future. A laissez-faire or intransigent response to street voices can feed people's emotional needs. People will always look for ways to soothe their quest.

TYPHOON SHUTDOWN



People walk past the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in heavy rain from weather patterns caused by Typhoon Gaemi in Taipei on Wednesday. Taiwan closed schools, suspended the stock market, and declared a typhoon holiday as Gaemi barrelled towards the island, bringing torrential rains and whipping winds to its northeast. – AFP

Language, literature and cultural identity

The evolution of language significantly influences our cultural identity. Changes in languages mirror the dynamic nature of human societies, representing the influences of migrations, conquests and cultural exchanges.

Recognising these shifts enables us to comprehend the complex layers of cultural identity and understand how historical events mold our methods of communication, exactly like trying to understand a tree by looking at its roots; the deeper we dig, the more we discover about its strength and foundation.

Indigenous languages play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity by conveying unique worldviews, traditions and knowledge systems.

These languages illustrate the lived experiences and environmental interactions of indigenous communities, adding depth and significance to their cultural practices.

The revitalisation and preservation of indigenous languages are imperative for maintaining the cultural diversity and heritage of these communities.

The loss of an indigenous language results in the loss of a substantial portion of the community's identity and cultural heritage, underscoring the significance of linguistic preservation. According to Unesco, more than 40 per cent of the world's estimated 6,700 languages are at risk of extinction.



Dr Khalfan bin Hamed al Harrasi

THE LOSS OF AN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE RESULTS IN THE LOSS OF A SUBSTANTIAL PORTION OF THE COMMUNITY'S IDENTITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE, UNDERSCORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LINGUISTIC PRESERVATION

Multilingual societies offer many advantages, including extended cognitive abilities, improved communication skills and increased cultural empathy.

Nevertheless, these societies also encounter obstacles such as language barriers, potential social division and the marginalisation of less dominant languages.

Implementing effective language policies and educational frameworks is imperative to tackle these challenges, as they facilitate the preservation of linguistic diversity while ensuring social unity and mutual respect among various language communities.

The significance of literature in the preservation of cultural heritage is profound, as it effectively captures the essence of long-past societies.

By offering invaluable insights into the beliefs, values and customs of ancient civilisations, literature provides a window into the minds of our ancestors and protects their narratives and philosophies for future generations.

An in-depth study of literature enables us to gain a comprehensive understanding of how early societies perceived the world, their deities and moral codes, ensuring the preservation of these cultural treasures. "Old is gold," and indeed, the wisdom contained in these

ancient texts certainly proves their worth by enriching our cultural heritage.

Literature serves as a reflective medium, capturing the values, norms and societal struggles of its time.

The saying "Art imitates life" is particularly applicable to literature, as demonstrated by works such as Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities," which offer vivid portrayals of the social, political and economic landscapes of their respective eras.

Literature, beyond being a form of artistic expression, exerts significant influence in both social commentary and efforts towards societal change.

Just like looking into a clear pond, literature shows us our own reflections, sometimes more clearly than we would like.

One form of literature is traditional storytelling, which plays a fundamental role in preserving and passing down cultural values, knowledge and history from one generation to the next.

These stories, often conveyed orally, encapsulate moral lessons, historical events and communal wisdom, serving as a vessel for the cultural heritage of a society. Traditional storytelling fosters a deep connection to cultural roots and ensures the perpetuation of

valuable cultural knowledge. It is a bit like passing down a family recipe; each generation adds its own touch but respects the essence of the dish.

Language and literature education play a pivotal role in shaping cultural awareness and fostering appreciation for diversity. "Knowledge is power," and this is particularly true in the context of education.

Exposing students to a wide range of literary works and linguistic traditions through education enriches their comprehension of diverse cultures and perspectives.

This exposure fosters empathy, critical thinking and an appreciation for the diverse range of human experiences. Additionally, teaching languages and literature from a variety of cultures is key to challenging stereotypes and prejudices, thus promoting an inclusive and well-informed worldview.

Education thus acts as a bridge between cultures, nurturing a generation of global citizens who are cognizant and respectful of cultural differences. Like planting seeds, with the right nurturing, they grow into a diverse and beautiful garden.

The impact of digital media on

language and cultural identity is profound, as it transforms the way we communicate and convey our thoughts.

Social media platforms, blogs and online forums enable the rapid dissemination of linguistic trends and cultural norms, giving rise to new dialects and modes of expression.

While digital media facilitates cultural exchange and the development of hybrid identities, it also presents challenges, such as the decline of traditional languages and the prevalence of global languages such as English.

In order not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater", we need to carefully balance the benefits of digital communication with the need to preserve linguistic diversity, thus keeping our cultural roots while embracing new technologies.

Preserving cultural identity through language and literature in the modern world faces numerous challenges.

Addressing these challenges requires proactive efforts to promote linguistic diversity, support cultural education and adapt traditional practices to contemporary contexts. By doing so, we can safeguard cultural identities while embracing the benefits of a connected world.



Saudi’s Al Ahli win goalball title, Al Noor third

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JULY 24

Saudi Arabia’s Al Ahli team beat Qatar’s Al Ethihad 9-4 to emerge champions in the Gulf Clubs and Associations Challenge Goalball Championship for the Blind. Oman’s Al Noor team secured third place after overcoming Bahrain’s Al Sadaqa 11-3.

The tournament, hosted by the Al Noor Association for the Blind in cooperation with the Oman Paralympic Committee, witnessed six teams compete in 19 exciting matches. The final matches were held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said.

The final match between Saudi Arabia and Qatar was a thrilling encounter. In the third minute, Waleed al Kaabi scored for Saudi Arabia. Qatar’s Ekrami Ahmed Madad equalised with a penalty kick, but Ibrahim Nasser quickly restored Saudi’s lead.

Saudi Arabia maintained their advantage despite Qatar’s efforts to equalise, Saudi Arabia’s coach requested a timeout to regroup, which resulted in a third goal from Ibrahim Nasser, ending



the first half with Saudi Arabia leading 3-1.

In the second half, Mubarak al Shehrani extended Saudi Arabia’s lead with a goal in the second minute. Ekrami Madad narrowed the gap by score a goal in the seventh minute. Ibrahim Nasser swiftly responded with Saudi Arabia’s fifth goal.

Saudi Arabia earned a penalty kick, which Ibrahim Nasser converted successfully. Followed by another goal from Madad for Qatar, kept the match intense.

However, Mubarak al Shehrani and Nasser added more goals, ending the game with a 9-4 victory for Saudi Arabia.

The third-place match between Oman’s Al Noor and Bahrain’s Al Sadaqa started cautiously. Khamis al Salti scored the first goal for Al Noor, followed by an equaliser from Bahrain’s Ali Asad. Goals were exchanged, with Al Noor leading 5-3 at half-time.

In the second half, Imad al Hajji scored early for Al Noor, while Bahrain missed several



opportunities, while Khamis al Salti and Al Hajji continued to add goals for Al Noor. Despite Bahrain’s attempts to catch up, Al Noor’s defence held strong, securing an 11-3 victory.

Dr Mansour al Touqi, head of Oman Paralympic Committee, said “We are celebrating today the honouring of the Goalball Knights for the Blind with the participation of 6 teams and more than 80 administrators, referees, and volunteers. The championship witnessed 19

exciting matches characterised by fair competition and the outstanding skills of the visually impaired, which showed a wonderful model of cooperation and integration.”

He added: “We conclude the championship with the fruits of the efforts of our youth to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040 in providing comprehensive sports care for people with disabilities. Omani cadres of both sexes have been trained to manage events efficiently, and we look

forward to hosting international and continental championships shortly.”

Dr Raed al Farsi, Chairman of Al Noor Association for the Blind, said: “We are celebrating today the crowning of the winners of the Gulf Clubs and Associations Challenge Championship for Goalball for the Blind, which represents the beginning of a series of joint championships and programmes between the associations of the visually impaired in the Gulf. I congratulate the winning teams that embodied the spirit of challenge and determination, and highlighted the meanings of cooperation and fair competition with their high levels and outstanding performance.”

HH Sayyid Fahr al Said presented awards to the sponsors, organisers, and volunteers, as well as to the tournament’s top scorer, Ekrami Ahmed Madad of Qatar. He then presented the championship trophy and gold medals to Saudi Arabia’s Al Ahli, silver medals to the Qatari team, and bronze medals to the Omani Al Noor team.

Summer sports forum held at Al Kamil W’al Wafi



KHALID AL BALUSHI
@khalid_albalushi94

The Women’s Cultural and Sports Committee at Al Kamil W’al Wafi Sports and Cultural Club organised the third edition of the Summer Sports and Cultural Forum themed “Sports and Health” in cooperation with the Department of Culture, Sports, and Youth in the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate as part of the summer sports programme

The forum activities will continue until August 29. The forum featured various sports activities such as badminton, karate, fitness, swimming, and other entertainment activities.

The forum also included many workshops and lectures on the art of colour blending and first aid. It also includes an opportunity to visit the “Future Beekeeper” initiative organised by the Department of Agriculture and Animal Wealth in the multi-purpose hall.

The forum is attended by 145 participants, aged between 6 and 17 years.

Abdulsalam bin Salim al Rashdi, a six-year-old, said that he joined the summer sports programme to pursue badminton. He expressed his deep love for this sport and his desire to continue practicing and mastering it.

Salma bint Ahmed al Seneidiyah, a nine-year-old, praised the summer sports programme where she learned karate which increased her self-confidence through self-defence classes. “I learned a lot from swimming lessons, learning essential water safety skills for enjoying swimming during family trips.”

Mahfouda bint Zayed al Rasbiyah, events chairperson, said “Holding such forums during the summer vacation is an important investment in developing the physical and psychological capabilities of our kids with the help of specialised trainers in the fields. The programme also serves as a source for discovering talents in both sports and cultural areas”.

Al Rasbiyah expressed her deep gratitude and appreciation to the administrative and technical team from the governorate at the forum for their support and assistance in making this programme successful.



CFI welcomes Lewis Hamilton as new global brand ambassador

DUBAI: CFI, the region's leading online trading provider, has proudly unveiled a transformative partnership with Seven-Time Formula 1TM World Champion Lewis Hamilton, as its newest Global Brand Ambassador.

This landmark multi-year agreement marks a pivotal moment for CFI, aligning the group with one of the most iconic figures in motorsport history. Known for his unwavering pursuit of excellence, innovation, and advocacy for diversity and inclusion, Hamilton's impact transcends sport. His dedication to pushing boundaries, both on and off the track, mirrors CFI's commitment to empowering traders worldwide with cutting-edge technology, inclusive opportunities and relentless support. Hamilton's drive for success and positive change makes him an ideal representative of CFI's values and mission.

As the global brand ambassador for CFI, Hamilton's influence will extend beyond representation. His success and dedication will inspire and engage CFI's global audience, highlighting the synergy between CFI's cutting-edge trading solutions and Hamilton's commitment to excellence both on and off the track. The partnership will also



further both parties' shared goal for a better, more equal future, with CFI making a donation to Hamilton's foundation, Mission 44 as part of the agreement.

Hisham Mansour, Co-founder and Managing Director of CFI, commented:

"Lewis Hamilton is not just a champion in his field but also a global icon who embodies the values of precision, perseverance and groundbreaking innovation, as well as a deep commitment to social justice and humanitarian causes. Having him onboard as CFI's new brand ambassador marks a new and exciting chapter in our journey. With a legacy spanning over 25 years and a

reputation marked by innovation and excellence, our partnership with Lewis is a natural fit, united by a commitment to breaking limits and achieving greatness. Lewis being a top figure in sports aligns perfectly with CFI being a leader in its field, making this partnership an ideal collaboration."

Lewis Hamilton added, "I'm excited to join CFI as their Global Brand Ambassador. This partnership aligns with our shared drive for excellence and innovation. Just as I strive for peak performance in everything I do, I am impressed by CFI's dedication to provide best-in-class tools and conditions for their clients.

Together, we aim to inspire and have a positive impact, and I'm looking forward to empowering their global community."

Beyond his achievements on the track, Lewis Hamilton is known for his commitment to creating a fairer, more inclusive future for young people around the world through his foundation, Mission 44.

The organisation invests in solutions that empower young people to overcome social injustice and succeed, leveraging Hamilton's personal experiences to create a positive impact. In line with these values, CFI reinforces its commitment to enhancing involvement in social responsibility initiatives and driving community engagement.

Partnering with Lewis Hamilton and making a commitment to Mission 44 reinforces CFI's dedication to excellence and innovation in trading. As the new global brand ambassador, Hamilton embodies the belief that success requires pushing beyond limits and stepping out of comfort zones. His life and career achievements align perfectly with CFI's mission to provide traders worldwide with unparalleled access to global financial markets, along with the necessary tools and support to excel.



Al Harthy ready for AWS Endurance Cup

Successful GT racing driver Ahmad al Harthy heads back to Europe just a few days from now for the third round of the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup, the midway point of the 2024 season for OQ by Oman Racing.

Travelling to the Nürburgring in Germany for the eagerly awaited three-hour race on Sunday, July 28, Omani sportsman Al Harthy is hoping to mount a bid for his best result of the GTWCE campaign so far along with Bronze class team-mates Sam De Haan and Jens Klingmann.

This weekend's action will be the fourth race meeting in just six weeks for Al Harthy, having been incredibly busy criss-crossing the globe competing in not only GTWCE Endurance Cup, but also the FIA World Endurance Championship where he races with Maxime Martin and Valentino Rossi.

Of course, the same Team WRT squad which fields the FIA WEC entry looks after the engineering of the OQ by Oman Racing No 30 BMW M4 GT3 as well. It is this continuity and consistency which Al Harthy hopes will help to deliver a strong weekend at the Nürburgring.

Heading to Germany off the back of an excellent top five result in FIA World Endurance little more than a week ago in Sao Paulo, Brazil, the Omani is aiming to bring some of that sparkle to the sister GTWCE campaign which has been mixed over the first two events.

Al Harthy and team-mates De Haan and Klingmann combined to produce a top six finish on debut in GTWCE during round one at Circuit Paul Ricard in France in April. Round two, the CrowdStrike 24 Hours of Spa in Belgium, was less fortunate when a mechanical problem forced retirement. Going into



It's been a very busy time over the past couple of months, a lot of travelling and a lot of racing, and now we're preparing for the next round of GTWCE in Germany

AHMAD AL HARTHY
GT racing driver

the coming weekend, the OQ by Oman Racing drivers are 14th in the Bronze class standings.

Supported by OQ, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman, Al Harthy is relishing being back at the Nürburgring for the first time since 2021 in the Endurance Cup when he raced to a top five result in the Pro-Am class with Giacomo Petrobelli and Maxime Martin.

2024 GTWCE Endurance Cup Bronze Class Standings (after Rd2)
1st Jef Machiels / Louis Machiels / Andrea Bertolini, 57pts
2nd Jonathan Hui / Chris Froggatt / Eddie Cheever, 43pts
3rd Tommaso Mosca, 39pts
4th Alexey Nesov / Dylan Pereira / Max Hofer / Andrey Mukovoz, 38pts
5th Kobe Pauwels / Job Van Uitert / John De Wilde, 34pts
14th Ahmad al Harthy / Sam De Haan / Jens Klingmann, 9pts

Al Zubair team all set for GT World Endurance

NÜRBURGRING, GERMANY: Oman's Al Faisal bin Khalid al Zubair, Austrian Dominik Baumann and Canadian Mikaël Grenier will represent the Al Manar Racing by Getspeed Team at the third round of the 2024 Fanatec GT World Challenge powered by AWS Endurance Cup at Germany's legendary Nürburgring during July 27 and 28.

After finishing second in the Gold Cup category at the opening round in France in their Mercedes-AMG GT3 Evo, the trio joined forces with Philip Ellis to claim a stunning Gold Cup victory at the flagship CrowdStrike 24 Hours of Spa at the end of last month.

That success has catapulted the trio into contention for both



The Al Manar Racing by Getspeed Mercedes-AMG GT3.

the Teams' and Drivers' titles and they arrive in the Rhineland-Palatinate region of western Germany trailing the Saintéloc Racing trio of Paul Evrard, Gilles Magnus and Jim Pla by a single point in both championships. 2 Seas Motorsport are 23 points adrift in third place.

Al Faisal said: "I am very

excited for the third round of the GT World Challenge Endurance. I am really looking forward to it. The momentum has been going great with second in the first round and first at Spa 24.

"Hopefully, we can carry on this momentum and take it to the Nürburgring with us. This weekend will be Mik (Grenier),

Dominik (Baumann) and myself. Philip won't be with us – he just joined for Spa 24. Hopefully we can have a good result for the team."

After bronze tests on Friday, the official two-hour free practice session gets underway at 10.00hrs (CET) on Saturday morning (July 27). Pre-qualifying then follows from 13.15hrs. There is a 50-car field across the Pro, Gold, Silver and Bronze racing categories.

Official qualifying for this year's round of the Fanatec GT World Challenge powered by AWS Endurance Cup will take place on a hectic Sunday (July 28) from 08.45hrs, with each driver permitted 15 minutes on the famous track in the Eifel mountains.

'Sports Spark' at OCEC kindles summer fun in Muscat

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JULY 24

The 'Sports Spark' event has kicked off at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC). The event is organised by OCEC and Muscat Governorate, with strategic support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY) to promote fitness and healthy lifestyle.

The event will run from July 25 to August 24 at OCEC halls and will include a variety of initiatives, sports events, competitions and special days throughout the month.

A preview was held to announce the launch of the event, which was attended by Said al Shanfari, OCEC CEO; Ahmed bin Mohammed al

Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality; and Saud bin Badr Ambusaidi, Assistant Director-General for Sports Activities at the MoCSY.

OCEC aims to create an indoor sports event for people to escape the summer heat. The event provides a unique opportunity to meet leading players and coaches, promotes wellness, improves fitness and reduces stress.

The event's sports range from football, cricket, volleyball, basketball, and more than 10 different sports activities. The event provides professional trainers to guide participants in each sport. In addition, the event includes a daily morning summer camp for children aged 6-14 years old, which runs until midnight each day, and activities



are available to participants upon registration on the Sports Spark website.

Al Humaidi said, "We are happy to see this beautiful event in the summer of Muscat. The

The event provides a unique opportunity to meet leading players and coaches, promotes wellness, improves fitness and reduces stress

most important thing is the presence of all these sports under one roof in a cool place that has all the amenities, including restaurants and entertainment venues. Attention is also paid to an important aspect, which is the health and safety aspect."

Al Shanfari said, "We are pleased to host such an event at the OCEC. The sports event is fully in line with our mission

to promote a healthy and active lifestyle in a safe environment that provides a variety of indoor sports and physical activity options, which enhances community participation. Many of these activities are also available for free, including the fitness corner and jogging track. I look forward to seeing everyone explore our facilities and register on our website to book an opportunity to engage in physical activity and sports."

Ambusaidi said, "The Sports Spark is a very wonderful event to spread the culture of sports and physical activity. The beauty of the event is that it takes place during the summer in a closed and air-conditioned place for all age groups of men and women."

ADIL AL BALUSHI
PARIS, JULY 24

Oman's athletes and swimmers will arrive at Olympic Village in Paris on Thursday to take part in the 2024 Paris Olympics, which will begin on Friday and will run until August 11.

The national shooting team arrived on Wednesday for training. The administrative team headed by Ali bin Salim al Busaifi, Oman's Chef De Mission, completed all the necessary arrangements at the Olympic Village.

Shaikh Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, Chairman of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) and head of Oman's delegation to 2024 Paris Olympic Games, affirmed that this participation continues the legacy of previous Olympic involvements that began since the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. He highlighted the significance of this involvement in showcasing the country's development and prosperity in sports. He urged the athletes to represent Oman honourably and achieve best results.

Al Zubair congratulated all who will have the honour of representing Oman at Paris Olympics, including sprinters Ali al Balushi and Mazoon al Alawi, shooter Said al Khatri, and swimmer Issa al Adawi (aquatics). He praised the significant efforts made by the athletes and their coaching teams and acknowledged the continuous and diligent follow-up by the Chairman of the Sports associations involved in all the preparatory and qualifying programmes.

The Chief of OOC pointed out that the Olympic Games are among the most essential sporting events where athletes aspire to participate and achieve the best records and personal milestones. He stated that these games provide an ideal environment to interact with the world's top athletes and compete

OLYMPIC VILLAGE WELCOMES ARRIVAL OF OMAN'S NATIONAL TEAMS



Ali bin Salim al Busaifi, Oman's Chef De Mission



Khalid al Zubair, Chairman of OOC

Official opening ceremony of the Olympics on Friday at the Seine River in Paris will feature attendance of several

Omani officials including Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth; Ahmed bin Mohammed al Orami, Oman's Ambassador to France; Shaikh Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, Chairman of OOC and head of the Omani delegation to the Paris 2024 Olympics; HH Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al Said, Vice-Chairman of OOC; and other officials

in the best facilities based on international standards.

Al Zubair thanked the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), led by His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said, for its support. He hoped this will contribute to elevating Oman's prowess in sports and raise the flag of Oman high in international arenas.

Al Zubair also thanked His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for his generous patronage and continuous support for the sports and youth sectors in Oman. Al Kishry arrives in Paris

Taha bin Suleiman al Kishry, Secretary-General of OOC and member of the official delegation of Oman at Paris Olympics, arrived in Paris on Tuesday. He reviewed the final preparations. He said that the administrative delegation will do their best to complete all preparations for the arrival of the athletes, technical and administrative staff. He commented on the significant efforts and continuous cooperation from the Omani Ambassador to France and the members of the Omani Embassy to ensure effective participation in the Olympics. He expressed his gratitude for their roles and their constant communication with the sports delegation during their stay in France for the Olympics.

Al Kishry said the official opening ceremony of the Olympics which will take place on Friday at the Seine River in Paris will feature attendance of several Omani officials including Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the MoCSY for Sports and Youth; Ahmed bin Mohammed al Orami, Oman's Ambassador to France; Shaikh Khalid Mohammed al Zubair, Chairman of OOC and head of the Omani delegation to the Paris 2024 Olympics; HH Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al Said, Vice-Chairman of OOC; and other

officials.

The Secretary-General of OOC delivered his best wishes to all the athletes and representatives of the national teams to achieve best results .

Ali bin Salim al Busaifi, Oman's Chef de Mission, praised the significant cooperation from the organisers of the Paris Olympics in completing all bookings and requirements well in advance of the arrival of the Omani delegation.

Al Busaifi appreciated the commitment of the national team representatives in providing all necessary data and information to complete various procedures related to accommodation, transport, and participation in the official opening ceremony. He urged all the national team members to follow procedures in place to ensure their safety within the Olympic Village. Al Busaifi held several meetings on Wednesday with the organisers from various departments to finalise all matters related to securing and receiving the national team representatives and ensuring their smooth entry into the Olympic Village.

Al Khatri gears up

Shooter Said al Khatri, who makes his Olympics debut, will compete in the Men's Trap shooting event at the Chateauroux Shooting Center on July 29 and July 30.

Swimmer Issa al Adawi, who will participate in his second consecutive Olympics after competing in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, will compete in the 100-metre freestyle event on July 30 at the Paris Aquatics Center. Sprinter Mazoon al Alawi, participating in her third Olympics after competing in the Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020 Olympics, will take part in the 100-metre race event on August 2 at Stade de France. Sprinter Ali al Balushi will make his Olympic debut on August 3 in the same event at the same venue.

Argentina beaten 2-1 by Morocco in chaotic opening

PARIS: A fan invasion in the opening match of the Olympic football tournament between Argentina and Morocco on Wednesday caused chaos, with Argentina eventually beaten 2-1 following a VAR review after play was suspended with the score tied at 2-2. Argentina's Cristian Medina scored deep in injury time to salvage what looked like a 2-2 draw, but the decision ruling out the goal was delivered about two hours after play was suspended when the teams re-emerged on to the pitch to finish the match in an empty stadium.

The teams played for three minutes and 15 seconds after VAR completed its review and disallowed the goal.

After order was restored in Saint-Etienne and the teams had left the field following the fan invasion, they discovered that the match had not been completed but suspended by officials.

The venue manager said the game had been interrupted, adding that a decision about whether the match would be completed was being discussed.

The teams re-emerged just before 7:00 pm local time and warmed up a second time so the final minutes could be played.

The gold medal winners in 2004 and 2008 were not at their best despite lining up with recent Copa America winners Julian Alvarez, Nicolas Otamendi and Geronimo Rulli.

Soufiane Rahimi put Morocco ahead after Achraf Hakimi set him up from the right following a superb passing move in the final seconds of the first half.

Rahimi doubled the advantage and netted his second from the penalty spot in the 49th minute before Giuliano Simeone pulled one back for Javier Mascherano's side in the 68th.

Medina then found the net



Morocco's Soufiane Rahimi (L) celebrates with Eliesse Ben Seghir (C) and Bilal El Khannouss. – AFP

16 minutes into stoppage time before fans stormed the pitch and objects were thrown at players as chaos erupted in the eastern French city.

Spain beat Uzbekistan 2-1 in their opening match of Group C at the Parc de Princes.

Spain, who struggled to hit their stride in the opening stages of the game, took the lead in the 29th minute against Uzbekistan with a close-range finish from Marc Pubill off Abel Ruiz's flick.

Uzbekistan, cheered on by an ecstatic crowd, equalised just before halftime thanks to Eldor Shomurodov's penalty following a VAR review for a Pau Cubarsi foul.

"For me, Uzbekistan were no surprise," Spain coach Santi Denia said. "We have achieved our objective, but it's been a very difficult game and now it is time to improve. That's my job, I have to transmit better." — **Reuters**



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Oil prices edge up off six-week lows

MUSCAT/ LONDON: The Oman oil price yesterday, for September delivery 2024, reached \$80.66 per barrel, comprising a drop by \$1.29, compared to the price on Tuesday which stood at \$81.95.

The average price of Oman oil (July delivery 2024) has stabilised at \$83.89 per barrel, thus \$5.41 per barrel lower than June delivery 2024.

Meanwhile, international oil prices edged higher on Wednesday but were still close to their lowest level in six weeks with few signs of the fuel consumption surge usually seen at this stage of the northern hemisphere summer.

Still, prices snapped three straight sessions of decline on falling US crude inventories and growing supply risks from wildfires.

Brent crude futures for September rose 71 cents, or 0.9 per cent, to \$81.73 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate crude for September increased 75 cents, or 1 per cent, to \$77.74 per barrel.

The likely reason for the wider sell-off has been the “diminishing hopes of demand resurrection,” with “an admission from refiners that the summer leap in consumption is simply not taking place”, said Tamas Varga of oil broker PVM.

US oil refiners are expected to report sharply lower second quarter earnings versus a year ago after a listless summer driving season weakened refining margins, energy analysts said.

Oil prices fell to a six-week low on Tuesday, with Brent closing at its lowest level since June 9 on ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas in a plan outlined by US President Joe Biden in May and mediated by Egypt and Qatar.

Prices also suffered due to continued concern that the economic slowdown in China, the world’s biggest crude importer, would weaken global oil demand.

Meanwhile, crude oil deliveries to India, the world’s third-biggest oil importer and consumer, slipped in June to their lowest since February, government data showed.

WTI lost 7 per cent over the previous three sessions, while Brent was down nearly 5 per cent.

Buoying prices, US crude oil, gasoline and distillate inventories fell for the fourth straight week in the previous week, according to market sources citing the American Petroleum Institute, reflecting steady demand in the world’s largest consumer of oil.

That would be the first time crude stocks in the US fell for four weeks in a row since September 2023. — **Agencies**

Draft regulatory framework on open banking unveiled in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JULY 24

Ahead of the formal introduction of Open Banking — a tech-driven service with the potential to transform the banking and financial services industry — the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has launched a public consultation process designed to garner stakeholder feedback on this landmark initiative.

Open Banking is a fintech-based platform operating on application programming interfaces (API) that enables conventional banks to collaborate with third-party payment service and financial service providers, thereby offering a smoother user experience for consumers.

On Tuesday, the CBO unveiled its draft Open Banking Regulatory Framework to allow for stakeholder deliberation and feedback on its key provisions before it is updated, approved and legislated into law.

The draft framework sets out the licensing criteria, process and ongoing obligations imposed on Open Banking Service Providers in relation to the provision of Open Banking Services and their marketing or promotion thereof.

Also made public by CBO is a technology framework to support Open Banking.

The technology framework is described as a “blueprint for enabling secure sharing of financial data and facilitates the development of innovative financial services and applications.

“It is a set of principles, standards and protocols that



The Open Banking Technology Framework includes strong data security measures, standardised APIs, consent management mechanisms and authentication protocols

THE OPEN BANKING TECHNOLOGY FRAMEWORK PROMOTES TRANSPARENCY, CUSTOMER CONTROL AND COMPETITION IN THE FINANCIAL SECTOR.

govern the way financial institutions and third-party providers interact and exchange data”.

According to the CBO, the Open Banking Technology Framework promotes transparency, customer control and competition in the financial sector.

“It allows customers to securely share their financial information with authorised third-party providers, such as fintech companies, to access a wide range of services and products.

“This framework relies on

the use of open application programming interfaces (APIs) that facilitate seamless data sharing between different systems and platforms.”

The key components of the Open Banking Technology Framework include strong data security measures, standardised APIs, consent management mechanisms and authentication protocols, the apex bank said.

“These elements ensure that customer data is protected and accessed only with explicit consent from the customer. Additionally, the framework promotes interoperability, enabling different financial institutions and service providers to collaborate and offer integrated services to customers,” it further stressed.

A number of local Omani bankers have welcomed the initiative. Haifa al Zadjali, Chief Compliance Officer (CCO) &

MLRO at HSBC Bank Middle East Limited, commented in a post: “This is an important innovation in the financial sector. Open Banking is a big step forward in managing and sharing data. It makes payments and financial transactions easier for clients.

“It’s quick, convenient and safer. Businesses offering open banking can provide a better payment experience for their customers, leading to higher conversion rates, better customer engagement, lower costs, faster payments and improved security.”

She further added: “By adopting Open Banking, we can create a more efficient, transparent and customer-focused financial system.

“Participating in this initiative can lead to significant improvements in service delivery and give early adopters a competitive advantage.”

Proposals invited for setting up tech start-up zone in Muscat

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JULY 24

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in collaboration with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), has announced a new investment opportunity targeting local and international companies and investors.

The initiative seeks proposals for establishing and managing specialised tech zones through the Tatwir platform (www.tatwir.om), under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

Investment announcement 2/2024 focuses on the development and management of a tech start-up zone, situated on a 36,233-square-metre plot in Airport Heights,



A 36,233 m2 plot in Airport Heights has been earmarked for a tech start-up zone.

Bausher.

This strategic location is designated to become a hub for emerging tech companies, providing a conducive environment for innovation and growth.

The project aims to attract both local and international investments.

This project is aligned with the National Programme for Digital Economy and Oman Vision 2040, aiming to position the digital economy as a cornerstone of the national economy.

The tech zones are designed to attract emerging tech companies from the region, offering a range of incentives to support their growth and international expansion. Investors interested in participating must register as a

commercial entity.

The investment process is divided into four stages: the purchase period, where investors can obtain detailed project information; the inquiry period for addressing questions; the bidding and submission period, where proposals are submitted along with any required security deposits; and the award period, where submissions are evaluated and the best offer is selected.

The Tatwir platform will facilitate communication and submission processes, with inquiries handled via WhatsApp or specified e-mail contacts during designated periods. This initiative underscores Oman’s commitment to fostering a robust digital economy and attracting international investments.

talabat Oman partners with OLA and Tashgheel

MUSCAT: talabat Oman is proud to announce its partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Oman Logistics Association and Tashgheel in a memorandum of understanding to introduce an unprecedented training programme aimed at providing employment opportunities for Omani nationals in the delivery sector.

The partnership includes a training programme equipping 20 job-seekers with the necessary skills for employment opportunities in the food delivery sector.

Oman Logistics Association (OLA) will oversee the training, in accordance with the Food Delivery Driver National Occupational Standard developed by the Logistics Sector Skills Unit.

In reference to the partnership,



Representatives of talabat Oman, Oman Logistics Association and Tashgheel sign the memorandum of understanding.

Stephane Berton, talabat Oman's Managing Director, expressed,

“This partnership underscores our dedication to nurturing

growth, generating employment prospects and empowering

THE PARTNERSHIP INCLUDES A TRAINING PROGRAMME EQUIPPING 20 JOB-SEEKERS WITH THE NECESSARY SKILLS FOR EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FOOD DELIVERY SECTOR

communities in Oman.

“With approximately 13,000 indirect employment opportunities already established in the country, this initiative reaffirms our commitment to sustaining this positive growth momentum.”

This initiative is part of Tashgheel's commitment to finding sustainable solutions for different sectors in Oman and creating employment opportunities for Omanis.

The programme aims to enhance freelancing opportunities for Omani youth in the food delivery services sector through registration with talabat and contracting with 3PLs to provide express delivery services.

Dr Abdulsallam Ambusaidi, Acting General Manager and Logistics Skills Sector Unit Manager, stated that this partnership underscores the government's commitment to empower Omani nationals by providing them with the necessary skills and opportunities to thrive in the rapidly growing delivery services sector.

Together, we are committed to building a sustainable framework that uplifts individuals and contributes to the overall advancement of Oman's workforce and economy.

OOMCO fuels khareef adventures with ‘Lets Dhofar’ campaign

MUSCAT: Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) launched its annual “Lets Dhofar” campaign to enrich the khareef season experience for visitors of Dhofar.

With new stations, enhanced services and added conveniences, OOMCO is fulfilling its promise to go the extra mile by providing outstanding fueling experiences that exceed customer expectations, ensuring convenience and comfort at all times.

To cater to the influx of visitors and tourists during the khareef season, OOMCO has introduced two mobile service stations in the Wilayat of Haima and Seih Al Khairat, providing greater access to fueling services.

In addition to new facilities and staff members, OOMCO has upgraded its existing stations



to enhance its services.

The Al Saada station now offers twelve fuel pumps, and the Salalah stations have been modified to serve vehicles on both sides of the pumps, significantly improving efficiency and reducing wait times.

“The khareef season is a significant period for Dhofar, attracting tourists from around the globe. We are dedicated to being their companion on the

road, delivering exceptional services that enhance their overall experience,” said Jaber bin Mansoor al Wahaibi, General Manager of Corporate Planning Business Development, International Retail & Marketing & Digital at OOMCO.

“Our latest upgrades and services are designed to ensure comfort, safety and convenience for every journey, but especially as visitors discover new paths during this exciting season.”

Ooredoo supports youth and family events of khareef Dhofar



MUSCAT: Ooredoo is underscoring its commitment to community engagement as the main sponsor of khareef

Dhofar 2024. Enriching the visitor experience during this celebrated festival, this year, the company is backing a variety of public and youth events designed to captivate and entertain festival-goers of all ages.

Khareef Dhofar, renowned for its unique blend of natural beauty and cultural festivities, will be taken up a gear, with Ooredoo providing unique and fun visitor experiences. There's a range of engaging activities that blend tradition with modern entertainment to boost the festival spirit.

One of the main attractions is the stage activities to be held every Friday for six weeks. But there's more! Head along to special events such as gaming and the ever popular Salalah Eat. It's all designed to create memorable experiences, providing a great blend of scenery, food, fun and festivities for everyone's khareef visit.

Meethaq Islamic Banking launches special credit cards offer

MUSCAT: To further enhance its pioneering role in providing the best banking offerings for customers, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has announced the launch of a new offer on its credit cards.

This offer includes an annual fee reversal for the first year for both primary and supplementary credit cards, valid until August 31, 2024.

This offer comes as part of Meethaq's strategy to provide special benefits to its credit card holders.

Meethaq's cards serve as a key instrument in advancing the adoption of electronic payment and streamlining various transactions, especially in situations where minimising cash usage is beneficial, such as travel.

Credit cards bring an added layer of convenience and security with their multiple features.

Meethaq Islamic Banking provides a diverse range of credit cards to cater to the various needs of its customers.

These include the Meethaq Lulu Credit Card, Visa Platinum Credit Card, Visa Gold Credit Card and Hafawa Visa Signature Credit Card. Customers can benefit from the Easy Payment Plan, which allows them to “buy now and



pay later”, repaying in fixed equal monthly instalments up to 12 months and with 0 per cent interest.

Additional benefits include free issuance of supplementary cards for family members and secure online shopping.

Accepted globally, Meethaq's credit cards enable customers to enjoy a world of offers and many other benefits.

On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager - Meethaq Personal Banking, expressed: “We are delighted with the positive response and feedback from our numerous customers, who

are keen to leverage the various benefits of credit cards. Meethaq is committed to providing a banking experience that aligns with customer expectations and global banking trends.

“I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all our valued customers for their continuous trust in Meethaq's products and services.

“I also invite all our customers to fully utilise the exclusive offer on Meethaq's credit cards and their various benefits, including travel benefits, especially with the advent of the summer holidays.”

Sohar Islamic expands network with 9 new branches

MUSCAT: In line with its ongoing expansion strategy aimed at serving a broader customer base and promoting financial inclusion, Sohar Islamic — Sohar International's Islamic Window — is pleased to announce the commencement of operations at its new 9 branches located in Al Buraimi Governorate and the wilayats of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, Al Mazyouna, Sinaw, Saham, Al Suwaiq, Al Amerat, Qurayat and Al Seeb.

These branches are designed to provide an exceptional banking experience to customers,

offering prime locations, spacious facilities, and ample parking for convenient access.

Abdul Wahid al Murshidi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer at Sohar International, emphasised the strategic importance of this expansion. “Our expansion reaffirms our commitment to providing inclusive and innovative banking solutions that cater to diverse customer needs.

“We are thrilled to extend our premium services to ensure easy access for our valued customers in these and neighbouring areas. With the bank remaining focused on balancing human interaction



with digitalisation, this network expansion aims to foster stronger relationships with customers, recognising the enduring value of personalised service.

“Our expanding network of branches and thoughtfully designed services reflect our dedication to delivering a delightful banking experience.”

With this network expansion, Sohar Islamic strengthens its remarkable network to 18 branches and 4 service centres across different governorates, reinforcing its preeminent standing in offering various Sharia-compliant services and facilities.

Equipped with a team of seasoned professionals, the new branches are dedicated to delivering efficient, responsive and personalised banking services.

Each branch features 24-hour access to fully functional ATMs and CDMs, enhancing customer

convenience. Sohar Islamic continues to bring banking closer to its customers with its growing network across the nation.

The new branches were strategically chosen due to the rapid development in these governorates, and the bank aims to play a crucial role in raising awareness about its innovative solutions.

As a progressive and customer-centric Islamic bank, Sohar Islamic leverages opportunities to positively impact economic development while helping customers make prudent financial decisions.

In brief



MSX 30 INDEX UP
BY 0.13 PER CENT

MUSCAT: The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) 30 index closed yesterday at 4,654.35 points, up 5.8 points or 0.13 per cent compared to the last trading session, which reached 4,648.53 points.

The trading value reached RO 4,121,574 an increase of 120.6 per cent compared to the last trading session, which amounted to RO 1,868,439.

The report issued by the Muscat Stock Exchange indicated that the market value increased by 0.062 per cent from the last trading day and amounted to approximately RO 24.43 billion. — **ONA**



GOLD PRICES STABILISE
AT \$2,409.66 PER OUNCE

MUSCAT: Gold prices stabilised in early Asian trading yesterday, as investors await US economic data that may affect the US Federal Reserve's decision regarding the timetable for reducing interest rates.

Gold settled in spot transactions at \$2,409.66 per ounce, while US gold futures rose 0.1 per cent, to \$2,410.50.

As for other precious metals, silver settled at \$29.21 per ounce, platinum fell 0.3 per cent to \$940.41 per ounce. — **ONA**

High-level OIA team tours Khazaen projects

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JULY 24

Khazaen Economic City recently hosted Abdulsalam al Murshidi, President of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), along with a high-level delegation from the Authority and its affiliated companies. The visit aimed to closely examine the city's business and investment landscape, as well as to explore opportunities for establishing high-value-added industries.

Khazaen Economic City exemplifies a successful public-private partnership, being the first initiative of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman dedicated to developing and managing economic cities.

This innovative model underscores the critical role of the private sector in driving economic growth in Oman.



Abdulsalam al Murshidi, President - OIA, pictured with officials representing various affiliates of the Authority, during a tour of Khazaen's projects.

In a short span, Khazaen has attracted over \$1 billion in investments from 17 countries, bolstering various economic sectors.

The city's ecosystem has proven particularly conducive to

growth in logistics, food, pharmaceutical, and industrial sectors, providing a robust environment for investors to expand their businesses and achieve commercial success.

Highlighting its strategic

appeal, Khazaen recently secured a significant investment from 4 Stars Technology and Electronics Company, which plans to establish a warehousing facility at the Khazaen Logistics Center.

This new facility will specialise in storing and distributing home electrical appliances, further cementing the centres reputation as a prime investment destination for logistics companies.

The Logistics Center offers state-of-the-art warehousing solutions for commercial, light, and medium industrial uses, tailored to meet the high demand in local and regional markets.

Khazaen Economic City also presents a wide array of investment opportunities.

The Industrial Zone & Freezone is designed to accommodate light and medium industries, including repairs, maintenance, packaging, assembly, and manufacturing.

The city's logistics and warehousing capabilities are anchored by Oman's first inland port, Khazaen Dry Port, which supports retail warehousing, cold storage, distribution, and freight forwarding.

Business opportunities in Khazaen include spaces for corporate offices, banks, IT parks, and data centres. The residential sector offers large-scale affordable housing projects, including villas, townhouses, and mixed-use developments.

Social infrastructure projects, such as schools, universities, clinics, hospitals, hotels, and recreational facilities, are also planned.

Additionally, retail and entertainment investments feature superstores, hypermarkets, outlet malls, automotive dealerships, and furniture showrooms, enhancing the city's comprehensive appeal.

GCC – Vietnam trade recorded at \$13.4 billion in 2022

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JULY 24

The volume of trade exchange the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council amounted to \$13.4 billion in 2022, according to recent data shared by the Council.

This figure represents a 22 per cent drop from the total value of \$17.2 billion recorded in 2021. Goods worth \$10.6 billion, accounting for 79 per cent of the total, represented imports from Vietnam.

It mainly comprised electrical machinery and equipment (60.4

per cent) valued at \$6.4 billion, followed by miscellaneous items worth \$2.3 billion representing 21.7 per cent of imports, and footwear valued at \$0.8 billion representing 7.5 per cent.

Other items imported from Vietnam included machinery and mechanical appliances worth \$0.5 billion (4.7 per cent of imports), clothing valued at \$0.4 billion (3.8 per cent), and mineral fuels and oils worth \$0.2 billion (1.9 per cent).

On the other hand, GCC exports to Vietnam totalled around \$2.8 billion in value. The majority of these were plastics and



GCC Secretary-General Jassim Muhammad al Budaiwi and Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Do Hung Viet after signing an MoU in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

plastic products valued at \$0.9 billion (32.1 per cent of exports), followed by electrical machinery and equipment valued at \$0.7

billion (25 per cent), mineral fuels, oils, and waxes worth \$0.5 billion (17.8 per cent), organic chemicals worth \$0.2 billion (7.1 per cent), tobacco and tobacco substitutes worth \$0.1 billion (3.6 per cent).

Miscellaneous items valued at \$0.4 billion (14.3 per cent) accounted for the rest of exports.

Last October, the GCC signed an MoU with Vietnam to further develop cooperation within the framework of consolidating and developing cooperation relations between the two sides, and finding wider areas for cooperation in issues of joint interest, in a way that serves the common good.

talabat : Pioneering the future of food delivery in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JULY 24

Leading food and grocery delivery platform in the Middle East — talabat —has been making significant strides in Oman by leveraging advanced technology and innovative business models.

In an exclusive interview with *Oman Daily Observer*, Stephane Berton, Managing Director of talabat Oman, delved into the company's strategic vision and its transformative role in the Sultanate of Oman's food delivery industry. Berton provided a comprehensive overview of talabat's innovative initiatives, safety measures, and long-term strategic roadmap that are designed to revolutionise food delivery in Oman.

talabat envisions itself as a trailblazer in Oman's tech scene, leveraging cutting-edge technology to redefine delivery experiences. "We are all about disrupting and blazing the trail in Oman's tech scene," Berton began.

"We've introduced innovative dining concepts like cloud kitchens in Oman, which are equipped with advanced technology to support stakeholders such as restaurateurs and food entrepreneurs."

Cloud kitchens, he explained, enable businesses to expand or launch virtual brands without the high costs associated with traditional dine-in facilities. This model offers a profitable, low-risk option for restaurant owners and caterers, thereby making talabat a pivotal player in shaping the future of food delivery in Oman.

Safety, quality, and reliability are cornerstones of talabat's service offerings. To ensure these, the company implements rigorous measures across its operations.

"Vendor selection and onboarding are critical processes for us," Berton noted. "We carefully select and onboard vendors based on strict criteria, including adherence to food safety regulations. This ensures that all products offered through our platform meet high safety and quality benchmarks."

Furthermore, talabat actively monitors customer feedback and ratings to continually assess service reliability. This feedback loop allows the company to promptly address any issues and maintain high customer satisfaction levels.

Technology and logistics play a significant role in talabat's operations. The company's robust technology infrastructure supports efficient order processing and tracking, ensuring timely and accurate deliveries.

"We continuously optimise our logistics operations to enhance reliability and minimise delivery times," Berton shared.

Safety protocols are also a priority, with talabat implementing safety training programmes for delivery partners, providing necessary equipment, and adhering to local traffic regulations.

Additionally, talabat works closely with governmental entities to ensure compliance with local laws and regulations governing food delivery and e-commerce operations in Oman.

"This commitment ensures that our services operate within legal frameworks, contributing to overall service reliability," Berton emphasised.

Looking ahead, talabat's long-term vision and strategic roadmap are geared towards sustained success and impactful



“We are proud that 80% of our team is Omani. Additionally, we provide economic opportunities for over 6,000 riders, helping them support their families.”

STEPHANE BERTON
Managing Director, talabat Oman

contributions to Oman. Innovation remains at the forefront of their strategy.

"We consistently invest in technological innovation," Berton stated. "By staying ahead of the curve, we can offer features and solutions that enhance convenience, speed, and overall satisfaction."

Data-driven decisions are another pillar of talabat's strategy. The company leverages data analytics to gain deep insights into customer behaviour and preferences, allowing them to tailor offerings, optimise processes,

and deliver a more personalised experience.

Customer feedback and insights are invaluable to talabat. The company actively seeks feedback from customers and partners through focus groups and surveys, which helps in identifying pain points, understanding evolving preferences, and driving necessary improvements.

Partnerships also play a crucial role in talabat's strategy. "We are constantly working with our partners to provide special discounts and services for our customers, improvising our

offerings and making it more affordable," Berton highlighted. Beyond technology and service excellence, talabat is deeply committed to community engagement and societal impact.

The company plays a significant role in job creation and boosting the local economy. "We are proud that 80% of our team is Omani," Berton said. "Additionally, we provide economic opportunities for over 6,000 riders, helping them support their families." Overall, talabat provides 14,000 direct and indirect jobs in Oman.

talabat's ecosystem includes 21 logistics partners and over 5,000 vendor partners, mostly Omani SMEs, thereby fostering local economic growth and resilience.

Sustainability is a core focus for talabat, evident in strategic initiatives to promote environmental responsibility and transparency in carbon emissions assessments.

From promoting behavioural changes to reduce waste to collaborating with vendors on sustainable packaging, talabat is dedicated to environmental conservation. Initiatives like the national tree planting project and partnerships with charitable organisations demonstrate the company's commitment to community welfare.

talabat's engagement with the local community extends to diverse initiatives supporting women and youth empowerment, financial literacy, and local businesses. Initiatives promoting small and medium-sized local enterprises drive new customer engagement and enrich the culinary landscape of Oman.

Charity and social responsibility are integral to talabat's ethos, with

substantial donations facilitated for charitable organisations, showcasing a commitment to making a positive impact in Oman. "Our platform supports good causes through the 'give back' in-app feature, allowing customers to donate to local and regional charities," Berton mentioned.

By collaborating with local authorities and regulators, talabat ensures compliance with regulatory standards and aligns with national development goals. Initiatives like the e-bike piloting programme and joint training programmes with local organisations demonstrate talabat's support for employment opportunities and skill development within the logistics sector. Participation in public consultations and adherence to regulatory frameworks underscore talabat's contribution to Oman's economy and society.

talabat's commitment to technological innovation, service excellence, community engagement, and environmental sustainability sets new benchmarks in the food delivery industry. By driving positive change through strategic initiatives and robust partnerships, talabat continues to make significant contributions to local economic growth, job creation, and sustainability in Oman.

Stephane Berton's insights reflect a company dedicated to making a difference across all aspects of its operations, shaping a more resilient and community-focused future. "We are committed to making a difference in every aspect of our operations, from technology and safety to sustainability and community engagement," Berton concluded.

Reasons that cause SMEs to stumble



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

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

The number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Sultanate of Oman continues to grow annually, with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority registering a total of 135,064 units by the end of 2023, compared to 104,141 enterprises in 2022, marking a 30 per cent increase.

The data also shows that the number of enterprises holding an entrepreneurship card totalled over 29,000 as of December 31, 2023, constituting 22 per cent of the total SMEs registered with the Authority.

Not all these enterprises

operate efficiently or continuously succeed; some even face failure due to various reasons. This phenomenon of faltering is not unique to small enterprises in Oman but is observed worldwide.

Although some small enterprises established in Oman and other Gulf countries are considered successful, some owners have failed to sustain them and have become debtors due to faltering operations and increasing bank indebtedness.

This issue needs to be addressed by promoting an investment culture among owners and incorporating relevant education in institutions, universities, and civil society

organisations.

Entrepreneurs and business owners must be aware of the principles required for starting and running such projects successfully.

Experienced businessmen believe that entrepreneurs must persevere through challenges, acknowledging that failure is possible. They suggest that government institutions should guarantee financing operations for small enterprises to help them stabilise and expand.

Literature on these projects indicates several reasons for the failure of SMEs, including lack of capital. Establishing these projects often requires daily liquidity over

long periods, necessitating cash to meet demands until the project is successfully established.

A comprehensive business plan is essential, covering the organisation's mission, strategy, financing, sales, marketing, financial expectations, and other elements.

Institutions must also provide significant credit to customers, manage delays in payment processes, and negotiate cash flow effectively.

Small enterprises need to understand their market competitors, manage accounting matters, reduce spending, and adopt efficient work methods.

Effective marketing is crucial

to reach diverse customers, and avoiding poor administrative and leadership practices is essential. Continuous updates and improvements are necessary.

Omani entrepreneurs and others must ensure that the economic feasibility study of a project aligns with the intended work. They need to understand the challenges, opportunities, financial capabilities, and market conditions in terms of supply and demand.

Continuous improvement of projects and products, attention to administrative and financial aspects, and the use of modern technologies to expedite operations are also important.

China stocks' 'policy put' is breaking down



People stand in front of an electronic stock board in the stock market of Shanghai, China. — Reuters

HUDSON LOCKETT

Chinese officials seem relatively untroubled about their country's property market dysfunction, judging from their own list of top priorities.

Of 60 policy goals from the recent Third Plenum leadership summit published on Sunday, the real estate sector is not mentioned until item 44 — and then in a single paragraph providing scant detail on how to address the top problem weighing on consumption in the \$17 trillion economy.

But if officials are content to leave the details for later, markets are less sanguine.

For investors, burned time and again by short-lived rallies spurred by hopes of policy support, the complexities of the China trade boil down to a simple reality: President Xi Jinping's crackdown on leverage has torpedoed home prices, triggered a confidence crisis among homebuyers and left a hole in the country's growth outlook that has yet to be fully filled.

The resulting drag has pulled down valuations for companies included in benchmarks such as the Shanghai Composite Index and Shenzhen Component Index.

This is why every time policymakers hint that they are going to start making big moves to help the real estate sector, equities surge higher. They have also reliably walked back those gains.

The most recent rally, which kicked off in March, has now fully unwound, leaving the country's CSI 300

PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S CRACKDOWN ON LEVERAGE HAS TORPEDOED HOME PRICES, TRIGGERED A CONFIDENCE CRISIS AMONG HOMEBUYERS AND LEFT A HOLE IN THE COUNTRY'S GROWTH OUTLOOK THAT HAS YET TO BE FULLY FILLED

stock benchmark flat since January, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index is up just 2%, giving up a bull run.

Cumulative net purchases of Chinese equities by offshore investors this year peaked at 96 billion yuan (\$13.2 billion) in May, and 80% of that amount has since flowed back out.

The 3% fall by the CSI 300 this week suggests markets have little faith that Beijing will fill in the blanks left by the new plenum communicate.

When details do emerge, they may not have the impact top cadres anticipate. Trading cycles are getting shorter and more volatile, says a strategist at one large European lender who prefers to remain unnamed.

He warns that officials' failure to shore up China's economy is undoing the old "policy put" of piling into equities in response to vows of imminent reform.

Fleeting rallies are likely to encourage hot money to jump in and out of the market to notch quick profits and avoid losses when officials make promises and then underwhelm on the follow through.

That is precisely the sort of volatile scenario for markets Beijing wants dearly to avoid.

— Reuters

Why paper checks refuse to die



RON LIEBER

The author is an American journalist for *The New York Times*, where he writes the "Your Money" column.

Target stopped accepting personal checks as a form of payment this month, which might inspire the following question: What took so long? Check fraud has more than doubled in recent years, and it costs at least \$1 for businesses to process each check they receive. Plenty of young adults have never even written one.

But if you haven't used a check in years and consider it a badge of honour, that may say a lot about where you live and what you pay for. In many industries, checks continue to be a popular form of payment, and sometimes they are required.

According to consumer survey data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, which tracks the percentage of payments that consumers make by check, the following industries receive the most check payments: Contractors, like electricians and plumbers, get 25 per cent of their payments by check.

Charitable and religious organisations are next at 22 per cent. Landlords, government taxing authorities and professional-service firms also receive double-digit percentages of their payments by check.

There are many pockets of commerce in which checks are required. Readers wrote in to complain about having to write checks for a number of things, like homeowners association dues and haircuts, along with dog shows and the occasional long-term insurance policy.

Some people actually like it this way, though they cite many different reasons. Feelings play a role, as do fees. Fear does, too. In short, it's complicated, so we won't be rid of checks anytime soon. Here are some of the main reasons

HANDSHAKE (OR A HUG)
"Checks are really a



It's hard to avoid hassle — or fraud — when you're required to pay with paper and ink.

CHECK FRAUD HAS MORE THAN DOUBLED IN RECENT YEARS, AND IT COSTS AT LEAST \$1 FOR BUSINESSES TO PROCESS EACH CHECK THEY RECEIVE. PLENTY OF YOUNG ADULTS HAVE NEVER EVEN WRITTEN ONE.

fundamental cultural signifier of relationship-based commerce," said Scott Anchin, the vice president of senior operational risk and payments policy for the Independent Community Bankers of America, which wants to reduce the number of check payments.

"It's almost like a handshake." Consider a collection plate at church. Sure, you could fill out a slip to pay by credit card. But there's a ritual associated with writing a check in the moment. "I want to feel the act of giving," said Anne Thomas, 65, who lives in State College, Pennsylvania, and works and volunteers in churches.

Then there are gifts. Sending money on a digital payment platform like Venmo feels like the opposite of an embrace, even if it includes emojis, and gift cards can be a pain to use. If you're sending a card through the mail with a monetary gift, a check may feel like the best option.

FEAR
For every person who has been a victim of check fraud, there is another who runs into crooks online.

Just one brush with a bad actor on Venmo or similar payment services like PayPal or Zelle — and any resulting

struggle to get the money back — can be enough to push people back to paper. And given the high volume of security breaches, plenty of people avoid storing their bank account information on some random website just to make it easier to pay fees a few times each year.

If you're new to online payments, the fear of adding an errant zero or missing a payment because of a misplaced click might outweigh the hassle and fraud risk associated with checks.

SIMPLICITY
This is where those pesky homeowners association dues come in. Imagine that your HOA is self-managed. Now imagine that you drew the short straw and are the treasurer this year.

You have a full-time job and family and friends that you like seeing. Then there are hobbies, and none of those hobbies include dorking out about electronic payment systems at the one local bank that will host your HOA's account without charging you fees, or researching other options.

There are just 10 homeowners in your hypothetical HOA, after all. And so it is simpler if people pay by check.

THE 3% STANDOFF
Rebecca Symmes, 71, just moved to Delaplane, Virginia, with her eye on retirement and fixing up her land. For this, she needed mowers, tractors, wood chippers and other gear.

Local vendors were fine with her using a credit card, which would have given her airline miles, but they wanted to charge a fee. "The fees ended up amounting to almost as

much as an airline ticket," she said. Instead, she wrote checks, because they cost nothing.

"What many credit card and debit card users don't realise is that the vendor is paying for their travel rewards points and cash back through the fees charged by the processing companies," said Laura Bair, 61, a hairdresser in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

After a particularly bad run-in with one of the processors, Bair went cold turkey on plastic. Now she takes only cash or checks.

THE \$1.50 NUDGE
In Queen Anne's County in Maryland, the service charge for processing a credit card payment is a 2.95 per cent flat fee. If you want to use what the county calls E-checks to pay directly from your bank account, it costs \$1.50. But paying by a traditional check is free, minus the postage stamp and whatever value you assign to the time required to find your checkbook and an envelope.

What gives with the surcharge for helping billers avoid paper or credit card fees? Michael A. McCreary, the director and operations manager for Atlanta at Pure Property Management, blames financial service providers for increasing the fees they charge firms like his.

But he also understands why they charge those fees, and his residents pay \$2.95 to make electronic payments directly from their bank accounts.

"While a great deal can be governed through software, there have to be human beings involved, so that's an expense on both ends," he said.

— The New York Times

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MUSIC

Brazilian singer Daniela Mercury performs at the 90 Music Festival at Marina da Gloria in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A student rides a bicycle along a street in Thulasendrapuram, the ancestral village of US Vice-President Kamala Harris, in India's Tamil Nadu state. — AFP



DANCE

A woman practises ribbon dancing during lunch time hours at the Ritan Park in Beijing.



FLOWER

An indigenous man holds a bouquet of flowers during a Mayan ceremony near Tecpan, Guatemala. — AFP



TRAVEL

A drone view of the City of London. — Reuters

art & life

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An Adventurous tale of journey across Oman and beyond

In a compact and economical Nissan Versa (Tiida) transformed into a mobile home, Muhannad al Kharousi embarks on adventures across Oman and beyond... P20

THE CHANGING WORLD



Shaddad al Musalmy

Shaddad al Musalmy is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com

Thank you ROP, security forces

AS OMAN CONTINUES to maintain peace as always, gratitude and accolades are pouring in for the Royal Oman Police (ROP) and the military and security services personnel for their incredible work in keeping the country safe while citizens and residents stay in the comfort of their homes.

The police and armed forces continue to courageously serve our country with commitment and sacrifices during difficult times.

Taking the Al Wadi Al Kabir issue as an example, these brave men quickly resolved the situation within a few hours that resulted in the deaths of five people, the martyrdom of a police officer, and the killing of the three perpetrators, in addition to injuring 28 people of different nationalities.

Among the injured were four individuals, including policemen

and Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority personnel, who were performing their national duty.

For this reason, I offer my gratitude for everything these brave men are doing to protect the public.

They do all this while we are in the comfort of our homes. Every single person from ROP and the security forces has been giving up a great deal of their time and have made significant sacrifices because of us. They deserve our appreciation and thanks for not only protecting citizens but also residents.

The recent attack in Al Wadi Al Kabir shocked many due to its rarity in Oman's otherwise peaceful context. However, this incident also highlighted the need for more vigilance against emerging threats while

underscoring the overall stability that Oman has enjoyed over decades.

Through this column, I will not hesitate to mention that Oman's foreign policy is characterised by its commitment to neutrality and non-interference in regional conflicts. Oman has maintained an independent stance and has acted as a mediator in several conflicts within the region.

Despite being surrounded by conflict zones, Oman has managed to maintain internal security effectively. The Royal Oman Police and the security forces are well trained and equipped to handle potential threats while ensuring public safety without heavy-handed tactics often seen in other regions.

Also, the diplomatic approach has earned Oman respect from both Western nations and Middle

Eastern neighbours alike. The country's role as a mediator reflects its broader commitment to peacebuilding through dialogue rather than confrontation.

In summary, Oman's status as a peaceful anomaly in the Middle East can be attributed to its leadership, cultural diversity coupled with tolerance among different sects of Islam, diplomatic neutrality in international relations and effective security measures against threats while maintaining civil liberties.

These factors collectively contribute to making Oman not just a peaceful country but also an inspiring model for conflict resolution and coexistence in a region marred by strife.

Until my next column, I assure everyone that you are in safe hands.



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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Wadi Darbat, Salalah, Oman



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Melodies of Oman mesmerise Saint Petersburg

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

At the 27th Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum held at the Hermitage Museum in Russia from June 5 to 8, the Sultanate of Oman, as the guest of honour, showcased its rich cultural heritage and traditions. The highlight of the event was the performance by Oman's music band, Scales Ensemble, which captivated the audience with a vibrant display of Omani culture.

Scales Ensemble, a talented musical group from Oman, consists of six skilled musicians who blend Arabic and Western music seamlessly. Their performance at the forum marked a significant moment as the band gained international recognition.

The event was organised by The Oman National Museum in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Moscow, and the State Hermitage Museum.

The Omani Cultural Evening was a testament to the strong ties between Oman and Russia and was chaired by Qais bin

Mohammed al Youssef, Oman's Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Maxim Reshetnikov, Russia's Minister of Economic Development.

The ensemble, featuring Yousef al Foori on flute, Younis al Siyabi on viola, Talal al Siyabi on percussion, Tahra al Balushi on violin, Farah al Balushi on qanun, and Zeyana al Rajihi on cello, created a unique blend of Western classical music with traditional Arabic sounds. Their innovative fusion sets them apart in the musical world.

Using instruments such as the oriental violin, qanun, and various oriental percussion instruments, alongside the flute, cello, and viola, Scales Ensemble produces a harmonious mix of classical and modern melodies. This unique combination enables them to perform in diverse styles, appealing to a broad audience.

"We were thrilled to represent Oman and deliver a perfect fusion of sounds at such a prestigious event. It was truly a dream come true," said Yousef al Foori, an acclaimed flutist and member of Scales Ensemble. He emphasised the band's flexibility in adapting to different occasions and venues.



The members of Scales Ensemble have experience of performances with royal bands in Oman, and got musical education in the UK and Egypt. They have showcased their talents

globally, performing at significant events in Europe and Asia. Three members have played with the prestigious Oman Orchestra, while the others have contributed to the Royal Group



for Oriental Music and Folklore, enriching the band's unique sound.

Scales Ensemble has represented Oman at events organised by UNESCO, UNICEF, and

numerous countries across Europe and Asia.

They serve as cultural ambassadors, sharing Oman's musical heritage with diverse international audiences.

KEVIN KWAN USED to do some of his best napping in jewellery stores.

This was decades before Kwan, 50, wrote his new novel "Lies and Weddings"; before the books in his "Crazy Rich Asians" trilogy became bestsellers; before it was announced that Jon M Chu, the director of the "Crazy Rich Asians" movie, would also direct its Broadway adaptation. It was even before Kwan's previous job as a photo editor for Elizabeth Taylor's 2002 book "My Love Affair With Jewelry."

"In the strangest way, jewellery has always been a part of my life," Kwan said on a recent video call. He recalled being "dragged to jewellery stores around the world" by his mother, grandmother and aunts. He grew up helping these women select precious stones — and occasionally falling asleep under stores' counters.

In "Lies and Weddings," characters gossip about a set of mothball-size pearls

Kevin Kwan's Art Deco Heirloom



Author Kevin Kwan, whose descriptions of jewels have become something of a trademark in his writing, in Beverly Hills, California, June 2024. (Maiwenn Raoult/The New York Times)

large that they are said either to cost millions or be fake. Descriptions of jewels have become such a trademark of Kwan's writing, he said, that strangers will often approach him to show off their jewellery.

In this interview, which has been edited and condensed, Kwan discussed his own jewellery — specifically, an art-deco-cut imperial jade ring that he doesn't wear but has held close to his heart ever since it was passed down to the author by an aunt who helped him develop his love of writing.

Q: Talk about this ring.

A: The ring belonged to my grandmother: a lozenge-shaped imperial jade piece, flanked on each side by three small diamonds. What really gives it its art deco style is the silver band; it has this detailing that looks like a ribbon that's been cinched. I think a jeweller would better be able to describe it.

When I opened the box for the first time and saw the ring, I gasped because it's a huge piece of imperial jade. They say jade has to be worn against your body because it reacts to the oils and the warmth, and that it actually gets greener the longer you wear it. This ring was such a beautiful, intense green.

Q: Which grandmother did this ring belong to? And how did it get passed down to you?

A: My paternal grandmother. Her name was Egan Oh. She gave it to my aunt, her middle daughter, whose name was Mary Kwan. And then Mary left it to me in her will. Mary very sadly passed away unexpectedly a few years ago. So it's lovely, but it's also bittersweet, because in one sense, I wish I never had this ring. But in another sense, it really connects me to my lineage in a very meaningful way. — NYT

AN ADVENTUROUS TALE OF JOURNEY ACROSS OMAN AND BEYOND



art & life

f X @omanobserver

THURSDAY | JULY 25 | 2024

BY SIHAM
AL SAIDI

In a compact and economical Nissan Versa (Tiida) transformed into a mobile home, Muhannad al Kharousi embarks on adventures across Oman and beyond. This mini caravan, equipped with all essentials, makes each journey unique and memorable. With a luxurious rooftop tent and a side canopy for sun and rain protection, Muhannad's vehicle is more than just transportation – it's a home on wheels.

Muhannad is not an ordinary traveller. He exhibits determination and resilience, showcasing the art of travel and survival in harsh conditions. His modified car boasts a 100-litre water tank,

travelled extensively across Oman and has also explored regions in the UAE and northern Saudi Arabia. He plans to continue his journey, discovering the beauty of Oman and reaching several international destinations.

One unforgettable experience Muhannad recalls is camping with friends in a remote area without cell service. After his friends left, he stayed to enjoy the sunset and take photos. When ready to leave, he found his car's tires flat with no spare or repair tools. Stuck in a remote area, he spent a challenging night alone, relying on food supplies to stay calm. The next afternoon, a group of young men passed by and noticed the flat tire. They fixed it in minutes, and Muhannad spent another night with them, forming new friendships. They never knew they saved him that day.

When asked about challenges, Muhannad mentions competition from Jeep owners who love challenging his mini caravan. "They enjoy seeing the mini caravan stuck in the sand, as if it's a competition between caravans and Jeeps! They often invite me to difficult terrains and revel when my caravan struggles. I've learned to be cautious about who I travel with."

Muhannad's goal is to show that anyone can enjoy travelling with the resources they have without spending excessively. They can save money on hotels and other travel costs while experiencing new adventures and learning valuable lessons. His longest trip was to northern Saudi Arabia, lasting over 20 days. "It was amazing to learn about Saudi culture, explore natural landscapes and exchange experiences with travellers from different nationalities."

Thankfully, Muhannad has not faced serious injuries or accidents during his travels. He only experienced minor health issues due to changing weather conditions, easily managed with basic medication like Panadol.

Muhannad's adventures in his mini caravan continue to inspire many. His journey embodies the spirit of adventure and the joy of discovering new places and meeting new people, all while living minimally and making the most of what one has.

shower, sink and a mini kitchen complete with drawers for tools and cooking supplies. A fridge keeps food and beverages fresh, ensuring Muhannad is well-prepared for his adventures.

His journey in the mini caravan began in 2018, exploring and discovering tourist spots in Oman. Reflecting on his travel experiences, he shares, "Every traveller can enjoy their journey with the available tools, no matter how simple. Most of my trips are solo, but I often meet other travellers and adventurers, exchanging experiences and discovering more of nature's beauty."

The concept of travelling in a mini caravan has garnered positive reactions from Muhannad's followers. "My followers have been a major motivation for me to continue. They tell me, 'You are unique, always discovering new spots for us. Even with a small car, you inspire us to travel.'"

"I feel joy and pride sharing my experiences and answering my followers' questions, which has positively impacted their lives," he added. Muhannad has