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INBRIEF

ANCIENT OMANI MANUSCRIPT ENTERS UNESCO PROGRAMME

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) has included the Omani manuscript Al Nuniyah Al Kubra (The Great Nuniyah) written by Omani navigator Ahmad ibn Majid, to the Unesco's Memory of the World Programme as the second Omani manuscript to be listed in the programme. Al Nuniyah Al Kubra is one of the most important Omani manuscripts in the field of navigation and oceanography. It documents valuable information about the movement of ships and international shipping lines in ancient times. Scholars before Ahmad ibn Majid divided the Earth into seven regions in the northern hemisphere before Ahmad ibn Majid's Al Nuniyah Al Kubra added seven more regions in the southern hemisphere.

DETAILS ON P5

PUTIN DECLARES UNILATERAL EASTER TRUCE IN UKRAINE



A Ukrainian prisoner of war reacts after a swap in an undisclosed location in Ukraine. — Reuters

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN declared a unilateral 30-hour Easter ceasefire in Ukraine on Saturday, after Washington said it could abandon peace talks within days unless the Moscow and Kyiv show they are ready to stop the war.

Putin ordered fighting to stop as of 6 pm Moscow time (15:00 GMT) on Saturday until midnight on Sunday night.

“Based on humanitarian considerations... the Russian side announces an Easter truce. I order a stop to all military activities for this period,” Putin told Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Russia’s General Staff, at a meeting televised on Saturday.

“We assume that Ukraine will follow our example. At the same time, our troops should be prepared to repel possible violations of the truce and provocations by the enemy, any aggressive actions,” Putin added.

But shortly after the announcement, around an hour before it was due to take effect, air raid sirens rang out in Kyiv. **SEE ALSO P6**

HM TO VISIT RUSSIA ON MONDAY

LEADERS TO EXCHANGE VIEWS ON REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES



HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK will go on a state-visit to the Russian Federation on Monday.

A statement was issued by the Diwan of Royal Court to this effect. It reads as follows: “In response to an invitation received by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation, His Majesty the Sultan will go on a state-visit to the Russian Federation on April 21-22.

The visit comes within the context of promoting relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Russian Federation in a manner that meets aspiration of the two countries. The visit will discuss areas of cooperation between the two countries in various spheres and means of boosting them to serve the joint interests.

During the visit, the two leaders will exchange views on a set of current regional and international issues.

His Majesty the Sultan will be accompanied during the visit by a high-ranking official delegation comprising HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of

the Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Aufi, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority, Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Jamal bin Hassan al Mousawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum and Hamood bin Salim al Towaiya, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Russian Federation.

May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan in his journeys and grant him good health and wellbeing!” — ONA

US, Iran talks enter new phase, next round in Muscat

ROME: A spokesperson for Oman's Foreign Ministry confirmed that Saturday's meetings in Rome between Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Abbas Araghchi and US Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff, mediated by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Oman's Foreign Minister, resulted in an agreement by both parties to transition to the next phase of negotiations. These talks aim to reach a fair, lasting and binding agreement, ensuring Iran's to be completely free of nuclear weapons and the full lifting of sanctions,

while preserving its right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

The spokesperson added that dialogue and clear communication remain the only path to achieving a mutually credible understanding and agreement that serves the interests of all parties at both the regional and international levels. It was also confirmed that the next round of talks will be held in Muscat in the coming days.

Meanwhile, Iran and the United States agreed to task experts to



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, with Antonio Tajani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, in Rome on Saturday.

— Reuters

start drawing up a framework for a potential nuclear deal, Iran's foreign minister said, after the second round of talks.

At their second indirect meeting in a week, Abbas Araqchi negotiated for almost four hours in Rome with Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff, through Omani foreign minister.

Trump, who abandoned a 2015 nuclear pact between Tehran and world powers during his first term in 2018, has asked Iran to reach a new deal swiftly. **TURN TO P6**



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OMAN AND RUSSIA... 40 YEARS OF DISTINGUISHED RELATIONS



UNDER the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Sultanate of Oman continues to develop areas of cooperation and partnership with various countries around the world.

His Majesty's state visit to the Russian Federation tomorrow (Monday) is one such milestone aimed at maximising the common interests between the two countries, particularly in economic, trade, investment, energy and renewable energy sectors.

The anticipated summit between His Majesty the Sultan and President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation at the Kremlin in Moscow reflects the desire of the two nations to advance their shared interests by developing strategic partnerships. This is especially significant as the two countries mark the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations on September 26, 1985.

The political relations between the two countries have been characterised by sincerity and transparency regarding several contemporary regional and international issues, reaching a level of mutual trust in consultations and exchanging viewpoints. This dynamic has been reflected through phone calls between the two countries' leaders, visits by high-level official delegations and other reciprocal official exchanges, in addition to ongoing political and parliamentary consultations held regularly in Muscat and Moscow, the foremost of which was the meeting between HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth and President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation in Moscow. During the meeting, President Putin emphasised promising areas of cooperation between the two countries, particularly in energy and tourism sectors.

By the end of 2024, the trade volume between the Sultanate of Oman and the Russian Federation exceeded approximately RO 133.108 million (equivalent to over \$346 million). Oman's key exports include metal products, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium products, while Russian

imports consist of iron products and food items such as vegetables.

As of 2024, the number of registered companies with Russian shareholding in Oman reached about 277, with a total capital exceeding RO11.6 million (84.6 per cent of the total invested capital in these companies). These companies operate in wholesale and retail trade, professional and scientific activities, information and communications, construction, accommodation and food services, transportation and storage, mining and quarrying, administrative and support services, arts and entertainment; and financial activities.

Hamood bin Salim al Towaiya, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Russian Federation, affirmed to Oman News Agency (ONA) that His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's state visit to Moscow holds great significance as it is the highest level of diplomatic visit between heads of state and government. This marks the first visit by an Omani Sultan to the Russian Federation and represents a historic step reflecting Oman's commitment to strengthening ties with Russia.

He added that the visit will open new avenues for bilateral cooperation in various economic, trade, cultural, tourism and educational fields, serving as a launchpad for a new era of collaboration between Oman and Russia, benefiting both nations. The current regional and international developments will also provide an opportunity for the two countries' leaders to discuss and exchange views on global challenges.

He noted that the two nations share long-standing diplomatic relations, established on September 26, 1985. The Soviet Embassy opened in Muscat in 1987, after being represented by a non-resident ambassador for two years. In 1991, Oman officially recognised the Russian Federation as the legal successor to the Soviet Union.

The ambassador stated that the two countries' celebration of the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations highlights the depth of their ties, as they seek to boost economic, trade, cultural and educational cooperation.

He pointed out that trade and economic cooperation between



HAMOOD
BIN SALIM
AL TOWAIYA

Oman's
Ambassador to the
Russian Federation



OLEG
VLADIMIROVICH
LEVIN

Russian
Ambassador
to Oman

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million)



Oman and Russia has seen significant growth in recent years, bolstered by economic agreements. Russia is a major market for Omani exports, including dates, fish, aluminium, perfumes and construction stones, while Russian exports to Oman consist of wheat, fertilisers, machinery, coal briquettes and metal processing equipment. This visit will accelerate and expand trade exchanges; and open doors for new opportunities in vital sectors like renewable energy and heavy industries.

The ambassador added that last year (2024), the Russian Export Center visited Oman with a delegation representing 39 Russian companies under the "Made in Russia" brand. Participants explored the Omani market through a session titled "Russia and Oman: New Opportunities and Prospects for Cooperation." Additionally, Oman participated as a guest of honour in the 27th St Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2024, promoting its economic potential and investment opportunities. Oman has also actively engaged in other Russian economic forums, including the Kazan Economic Forum "Russia and the Islamic World," which brings together representatives from Islamic nations to discuss economic cooperation.

He pointed out that the trade volume between Oman and Russia by the end of 2024 reached approximately RO 133.108 million (over \$346 million).

He said that the visit will witness the signing of 10 agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in various fields, including a mutual visa waiver for ordinary passport holders and a protocol to establish the Omani-Russian Joint Committee, among others in fisheries, trade, media, diplomacy and climate. These agreements will strengthen bilateral relations and open new cooperation avenues in trade, energy, education and tourism, fostering economic growth.

The ambassador added that tourism is another sector with significant expansion potential between Oman and Russia. Oman's rich cultural heritage, natural beauty and scenic landscapes attract Russian tourists. The visa waiver agreement to be signed during the visit will further boost tourism cooperation.

The number of tourists travelling between the two countries has been increasing annually, with around 11,000 Omani visitors to Russia in 2024 (a 70 per cent increase from 2023) and approximately 44,000 Russian tourists visiting Oman in the same year.

He pointed out that both nations also aim to strengthen educational and cultural ties through student exchange programmes, academic collaboration and museum partnerships.

Oleg Vladimirovich Levin, Russian Ambassador to Oman, underscored the significance of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's state visit to Russia, stating that it will open new vistas for discussions on priorities and explore fresh cooperation pathways in diverse fields.

He said that the visit presents an ideal opportunity to deepen trust between the two nations' leaders and create favourable conditions for strengthening cooperation in trade, energy, investment, infrastructure, culture and tourism. Such high-level visits unify perspectives on pressing international issues and facilitate the signing of key agreements, he added.

He pointed out that the visit coincides with the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations, which have seen continuous growth across multiple sectors. Both nations are expanding cooperation beyond traditional raw material trade to explore investment opportunities in energy, agriculture, tourism and culture.

The Russian ambassador added that Oman and Russia are looking to implement joint ventures in logistics, infrastructure and high-tech sectors, leveraging Oman's strategic geographic location and Russia's technological resources.

He added that key cooperation areas include energy, logistics, infrastructure, agriculture, food security, culture and tourism. Both nations are exploring joint oil and gas exploration projects, port modernisation, logistics and agricultural production. In tourism, Russian interest in Oman is growing, while Russia remains an attractive destination for Omanis. He pointed out that both countries recognise the importance of transitioning to sustainable energy and exploring joint projects in solar technology. -- ONA

SHORT TAKES



The heritage and culture of Oman are not just owned, but lived.

OMAN TO SHOWCASE RICH CULTURAL LEGACY TODAY

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

The Sultanate of Oman will be showcasing its rich cultural heritage and civilisational legacy on World Heritage Day (WHD), an occasion established by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) to raise awareness about the value of cultural heritage and the urgent need to protect it from natural and human-induced threats. The event will be held on Sunday.

Every year on April 18, the world celebrates WHD and this year's theme is 'Heritage under Threat from Disasters and Conflicts: Preparedness and Learning from 60 years of ICOMOS Actions.' Oman joins this global celebration with the deep conviction that heritage is not just a remnant of the past, but a bridge connecting generations, grounding national identity and shaping a sustainable future, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

"Oman has its own unique identity in terms of culture, heritage and language. Oman's language is present everywhere and deeply ingrained. The heritage and culture of Oman are not just owned, but lived

MoHT said.

Throughout history, the Sultanate of Oman has held a significant place on the map of Arabia as a vibrant crossroads where caravans converged, stories were woven and cities rose from stone and soil, pulsing with wisdom and life.

This legacy lives on in architecture that tells the tales of its builders, not just through beauty, but through purpose. Ancient systems passed through generations, aflaj waters that seem to pause time, the aroma of morning coffee, silent cooperation and gatherings built on kindness.

OMAN, IRAQ DISCUSS TELECOM TIES

BAGHDAD: Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, met on Saturday in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, with Her Excellency Dr Hiyam al Yasiri, Minister of Communications of the Republic of Iraq. During the meeting, they discussed opportunities and prospects for cooperation between the two countries in the field



of telecommunications, ways to enhance joint work between the two nations, exchange expertise, stimulate investment and business opportunities in the telecommunications sector. — ONA

Oman at International Journalism Festival in Italy

HAMMAM AL BADI
PERUGIA, ITALY

THE Sultanate of Oman marked its presence at this globally renowned media gathering, with Oman Observer attending the event that unfolded over five days in the Italian city of Perugia from April 9 to 13.

Held in the medieval heart of Umbria, the festival is widely considered one of the most significant gatherings of journalists, media professionals, and digital innovators from around the world. This year's edition featured an expansive programme of workshops and discussions, many of which were delivered by distinguished journalists, editors, AI engineers and media strategists who explored the latest developments shaping the future of journalism.

Throughout the festival, the sessions — delivered in both English and Italian — focused on a wide array of topics ranging from digital media innovation and ethical challenges in reporting, to the impact of artificial intelligence on newsrooms and the future of investigative journalism. One of the most notable aspects of the festival is its open-access philosophy: all sessions and workshops were offered free of charge, creating a unique space for knowledge-sharing without barriers.

Among the many sessions attended during the festival, one particularly compelling workshop was titled "Investigating and Reporting on AI 'Nudifying' Sites and Non-Consensual Intimate Imagery." The session addressed the alarming rise of technology-facilitated abuse and the journalistic responsibility to uncover and report on these developments.

Experts from 404 Media and Bellingcat, along with a journalist from The Guardian, shared insights into how AI is being used to manipulate images without consent and how the media can respond through ethical reporting and raising public awareness.

Equally impactful was the session "Behind the Scenes: How AI is Reshaping Local News," where media leaders and technologists from organisations such as Microsoft, Nota and the Philadelphia Inquirer delved into the transformation of local journalism through automation and machine learning. The discussion provided a glimpse into how AI tools are



This year's edition featured an expansive programme of workshops and discussions that explored the latest developments shaping the future of journalism.

being integrated into news production and distribution, reshaping newsroom roles and workflows in the process.

Environmental journalism was another strong focus this year. One standout session, "Climate Change and the Amazon: The Run-up to COP 30 Belém — and Beyond — While Amplifying Local Voices," explored the intersection of climate coverage and community storytelling. Daniel Nardin of Amazonia Vox emphasised the importance of including indigenous and local perspectives in reporting on deforestation and global climate negotiations.

Oman Observer also joined a powerful conversation on rebuilding journalistic credibility in an age of misinformation during "Rebuilding Trust in the News Ecosystem." This session brought together leaders from the Associated Press, The Marshall Project and regional newsrooms in the US to examine how transparency, accountability and community engagement can repair fractured trust between the public and the press.

Security and press freedom were also central themes. At "Journalists Under Fire,"

attendees heard firsthand accounts from reporters and editors working in high-risk regions, highlighting the daily dangers faced by journalists and the increasing importance of institutional support and international solidarity. Panelists from Latin America, Africa and the US underscored the urgency of protecting journalism in authoritarian environments.

In another illuminating session, "Going Independent: How Journalists Are Building Audiences and Growing Businesses Across the World," founders of media startups shared their strategies for building sustainable, audience-first news operations. One of the festival's most inspiring sessions was "How to Find and Execute the Scoops That Can Rock the World." Moderated by senior investigative editors from ProPublica, ICIJ, the BBC and other international watchdogs, this session unpacked the anatomy of major global exposés — from sourcing and verification to collaboration across borders. It provided practical takeaways on how newsrooms can continue to pursue high-impact journalism in an era of shrinking resources and legal threats.

Wheat harvest season: Promising yields despite challenges

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

The governorates of the Sultanate of Oman are currently experiencing the peak of the 2025 wheat harvest season in April and May, with positive indicators regarding the quality and productivity of the crop, despite some challenges faced by farmers.

Wheat is considered a strategic crop of both nutritional and economic importance and is cultivated across various wilayats (provinces) in Oman, where harvesting activities are progressing rapidly.

This year, several wilayats have reported good production levels, thanks to the ongoing efforts of farmers; and the technical and

advisory support provided by the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources. These efforts are combined with a continued push to expand cultivated areas and improve the quality of wheat varieties.

Harvesting has commenced in a number of wilayats, including Shinas in Al Batinah North Governorate, Mahadha in Al Buraimi Governorate, and Yanqul in Al Dhahirah Governorate. Additionally, several villages in the Wilayat of Bahla such as Al Ghafat, Al Jilah, Bilad Sayt, Saih al Maashi and Wadi Quriyat have also begun harvesting activities.

Hamdan al Qassabi, a farmer from Wadi Quriyat in Bahla, shared his experience this season, noting that the wheat growing season



This year, several wilayats have reported good production levels, thanks to the ongoing efforts of farmers.

this year was good in terms of both quantity and quality. He emphasised that the people of the wilayat continue to cultivate wheat

annually despite the challenges they face.

Al Qassabi explained that the cultivated area this year did not exceed two acres, yet they were able to produce around one and a half tonnes of wheat. He attributed the limited cultivated area to water scarcity, which he identified as the greatest challenge facing farmers in the region. He also pointed to a shortage of labour during the harvest period as an additional obstacle.

He added that farmers in Bahla are keen to grow wheat due to its high nutritional value and significance as a strategic crop. This season, they cultivated the "Koli" variety, a traditional Omani strain passed down through generations known for its high suitability to the

region in terms of quality, ability to meet household needs and the valuable agricultural byproducts it provides.

Regarding government support, Al Qassabi mentioned that there was no assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture this year for wheat cultivation, prompting farmers to rely entirely on their own resources. Due to the limited quantities produced, the harvest is marketed and sold directly at the local level.

Various varieties of Omani wheat are cultivated, including the "Koli" variety, as well as others such as Al Saraeea, Al Maysani, Al Hamira, Al Jareeda, Al Walidi, and Al Shuweira. These varieties contribute to the diversity of production and support local food security.

SPOTLIGHT

Children are especially vulnerable to heatstroke because their bodies are still developing and less efficient at controlling heat.

REQUIRING STUDENTS TO WEAR HATS DURING RECESS OR PE

STUDENTS MUST BE TRAINED TO TAKE QUICK STEPS IF THEY FEEL UNWELL OR SEE A CLASSMATE SHOWING SIGNS OF HEATSTROKE

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

AS SUMMER temperatures are rising significantly across many parts of Oman, heatstroke emerges as one of the most serious health risks facing children — especially school students who spend part of their day outdoors during recess or physical activities.

Despite the seriousness of this condition — which in some cases can lead to unconsciousness or even death — awareness remains limited, both among students and, at times, even among school staff. This underscores the urgent need to integrate preventive education into school activities, involving teachers, health staff, and parents in a comprehensive strategy to protect students from this silent danger.

Heatstroke occurs when the body is exposed to high temperatures and can no longer regulate its internal heat, usually due to excessive sun exposure or intense physical activity. This leads to a dangerous increase in body temperature — above 40°C (104°F) — and may cause serious complications like fainting, seizures or damage to vital organs.

Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to heatstroke because their bodies are still developing and less efficient at controlling heat. Additionally, their excitement during play often prevents them from noticing early signs of fatigue or dehydration.

Suad al Balushi, a physical education teacher, said, “Every year at the start of summer, we notice signs of fatigue and dizziness among students after PE classes. Some cases have even progressed to fainting.

RESCHEDULING OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES TO COOLER HOURS OR MOVING THEM INDOORS

REQUIRING STUDENTS TO WEAR HATS DURING RECESS OR PE

That’s when we realised that hydration alone isn’t enough—we need to teach our students when to stop and when to seek help.” She added: “This year, we started short awareness sessions for young students explaining what heatstroke is and how to recognise it. The results were remarkable — students became more aware and cautious during outdoor activities.” Salim al Rashdi, a school health specialist, said, “Managing extreme heat during the school day — especially during morning assembly or breaks—is a real challenge. The school must adapt schedules and limit outdoor activities during peak hours. But just as important is teaching students to take responsibility for their own health.” Maysoun al Harthi, principal of an elementary school shares her school’s experience: “We added a weekly health segment to our school broadcast called ‘Stay Safe This Summer’ focusing on sun-related risks. We saw impressive engagement—students started reminding one another to rest, drink water, or stay in the shade.” Dr Kawther al Yazeedi, a paediatrician, stresses the family’s responsibility. “Parents should make sure their children drink enough water before school and understand the dangers of playing in direct sunlight. Simple measures like packing a water bottle and a sun hat can make a big difference in preventing serious health issues,” she said.

Instilling awareness about heatstroke among school students isn’t just about protecting them during summer — it’s also about teaching them body awareness, personal responsibility, and how to act in emergencies. It builds a generation of health-conscious individuals who are better equipped to care for themselves and others.

ARE SCHOOLS TAKING STEPS TO PREVENT HEATSTROKE?

HEATSTROKE OCCURS WHEN THE BODY IS EXPOSED TO HIGH TEMPERATURES AND CAN NO LONGER REGULATE ITS INTERNAL HEAT, USUALLY DUE TO EXCESSIVE SUN EXPOSURE OR INTENSE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.



WORLD



Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani meets with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi at the Italian Foreign Ministry in Rome, Italy, on Saturday. — Reuters

US, Iran talks enter new phase, next round in Muscat

FROM PI
Iran says it is willing to discuss limited curbs to its atomic work in return for lifting international sanctions.
Speaking on state TV after the talks, Araqchi described them as useful and conducted in a constructive atmosphere.
“We were able to make some progress on a number of principles and goals; and ultimately reached a better understanding,” he said.
“It was agreed that negotiations will continue and move into the next phase, in which expert-level meetings will begin on Wednesday in Oman. The experts will have the opportunity to start designing a framework for an agreement.”
The top negotiators would meet again in Oman on Saturday to “review the experts’ work and assess how closely it aligns with the principles of a potential agreement,” he added.
Echoing cautious comments last week from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, he added: “We cannot say for certain that we are optimistic. We are acting very cautiously. There is no reason either to be overly pessimistic.”
There was no immediate comment from the US side following the talks.

Sayyid Badr and Antonio Tajani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, emphasised the importance to continue coordination and supporting diplomacy and dialogue to address challenges and achieve security, stability and prosperity for all

Earlier, Sayyid Badr and Antonio Tajani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, emphasised the importance to continue coordination and supporting diplomacy and dialogue to address challenges and achieve security, stability and prosperity for all.
Media and political circles are anticipating the outcome of the talks that would de-escalate tensions and

enhance stability. In a notable development, the Iranian currency has recovered about 20 per cent of its total value against foreign currencies over the past week on positive news from the first round of Iran-US talks hosted by the Sultanate of Oman.
Rafael Grossi, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), visited the Iranian capital, Tehran, following the first round of talks, affirming the IAEA’s support for the Iran-US talks. Grossi stated that the IAEA keeps contact with the US negotiator to explore how the agency can serve as a bridge between Iran and the United States and help achieve a positive outcome in the negotiations.
Ahead of the second round of Iran-US talks in Rome, Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Seyyed Abbas Araghchi visited Moscow where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The Iranian Foreign Minister confirmed that his visit to Moscow was aimed at consulting on the ongoing talks with the United States. — Agencies

AFGHAN PM CONDEMNS PAKISTAN’S ‘UNILATERAL’ DEPORTATIONS

KABUL: Afghanistan’s prime minister condemned on Saturday the “unilateral measures” taken by Pakistan to forcibly deport tens of thousands of Afghans since the start of April. Pakistan has launched a strict campaign to evict by the end of the month more than 800,000 Afghans who have had their residence permits cancelled, including some who were born in Pakistan or lived there for decades.
Pakistan’s top diplomat Ishaq Dar flew to Kabul for a day-long

visit on Saturday where he held discussions with Afghan Taliban officials, including Prime Minister Hasan Akhund and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. “Rather than collaborating with the Islamic Emirate on the gradual repatriation process, Pakistan’s unilateral measures are intensifying the problem and hindering progress toward a solution,” Akhund said during his meeting with Dar. He urged the Pakistani government to “facilitate the dignified return of

Afghan refugees”, according to a statement on X.
Earlier, foreign minister Muttaqi “expressed his deep concern and disappointment over the situation and forced deportation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan”, the ministry’s deputy spokesperson Zia Ahmad said on X. Ahmad added that Dar had reassured officials that Afghans “will not be mistreated”. Afghans in Pakistan have reported weeks of arbitrary arrests, extortion and harassment by authorities. — AFP

Russia’s Putin declares Easter truce in Ukraine

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin declared a unilateral Easter ceasefire in Ukraine, ordering his forces to end hostilities at 6 p.m. Moscow time on Saturday until the end of Sunday. President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Ukrainian air defence units were repelling an attack by Russian drones on Saturday, saying that showed true Moscow’s attitude to Easter and the lives of people. “Based on humanitarian considerations ... the Russian side announces an Easter truce. I order a stop to all military activities for this period,” Putin told his military chief, Valery Gerasimov, at a meeting in the Kremlin. “We assume that Ukraine will follow our example. At the same time, our troops should be prepared to repel possible violations of the truce and provocations by the enemy, any aggressive actions,” Putin added.
US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio had said on Friday the United States would walk away from efforts to broker a Russia-Ukraine peace deal unless there are clear signs of progress soon. The full-scale war began when Putin ordered thousands of Russian troops across the border into Ukraine on February 24, 2022.
Putin has said repeatedly that he wants an end to the war. He has demanded that Ukraine must officially drop its ambitions to join NATO and withdraw its troops from the entirety of the territory of four Ukrainian regions claimed by

“We assume that Ukraine will follow our example. At the same time, our troops should be prepared to repel possible violations of the truce and provocations by the enemy, any aggressive actions”
VLADIMIR PUTIN



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Chief of the General Staff of Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov in Moscow. — Reuters

Moscow. Kyiv has broadly rejected those terms as tantamount to surrender.
Meanwhile, Russia’s Defence Ministry accused Ukraine on Saturday of attacking Russian energy facilities 10 times over the past 24 hours. The US brokered a 30-day moratorium in March between Ukraine and Russia against strikes on each other’s energy infrastructure. Both sides have repeatedly accused the other of violating it. On Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, when asked if the energy moratorium was over, said it had already been a month but that no orders from the president had been received to change Russia’s position.
Over the past few weeks, Trump officials have acknowledged privately that the chances of a quick

peace deal in Ukraine have grown elusive. Rubio’s comments, three European diplomats said, reflected growing frustration in the White House over Russian intransigence to end the war. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said some progress on a peace settlement had already been made but that contacts with Washington were difficult. He said Russia was striving to resolve the conflict while ensuring its own interests. Moscow remained open to dialogue with the United States, he added.
US officials were also frustrated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s comment this week that Trump’s special envoy, Steve Witkoff, was “spreading Russian narratives,” and said that was not helpful to the process, one US official said. — Reuters



GAZANS FLEE FIRE AND FAMINE

KHAN YUNIS: With food scarce in the besieged and war-battered Gaza Strip, some desperate families have turned to eating sea turtles as a rare source of protein. “The children were afraid of the turtle, and we told them it tasted as delicious as veal,” said Majida Qanan, keeping an eye on the chunks of red meat simmering in a pot over a wood fire. “Some of them ate it, but others refused.”
After 18 months of devastating war and an Israeli blockade on aid since March 2, the United Nations has warned of a dire humanitarian situation for the 2.4 million inhabitants of the Palestinian territory. The heads of 12 major aid organisations warned on Thursday that “famine is not just a risk, but likely rapidly unfolding in almost all parts” of the territory. — AFP

PENITENTIARY UPRISING

100 inmates make prison break in Chad



More than 100 inmates escaped a Chad prison during a shoot-out that left three dead, and wounded a state governor visiting the facility, officials said on Saturday. The break-out occurred late Friday when an uprising happened in the high-security penitentiary five kilometres from the town of Mongo, in the centre of the country. A Mongo official confirmed there were three dead, and put the total number of escaped prisoners at 132. — AFP

REFRAIN TENSIONS

EU commissioner urges restraint in Serbia



The EU’s enlargement commissioner, Marta Kos, called all sides in Serbia to “refrain from further tensions” as protests against corruption were held in the country. “I am following closely the situation in Serbia and call upon everyone to refrain from further tensions,” Kos wrote on X. “To exit the political impasse and divisions in society, Serbia should step up efforts to fight corruption and advance rule of law reforms,” she said. — AFP

RIVER DISASTER

At least 143 dead in DR Congo boat fire



At least 143 people died and dozens more went missing after a boat carrying fuel caught fire and capsized in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hundreds of passengers were crowded onto a wooden boat on the Congo River in northwest DRC when the blaze broke out, according to Josephine-Pacifique Lokumu, head of a delegation of national deputies from the region. The disaster occurred near Mbandaka at the confluence of the Ruki. — AFP

The New York Times

Officials blame mistake for sending letter to Harvard



MICHAEL C BENDER

The writer is a New York Times political correspondent



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HARVARD University received an emailed letter from the Trump administration that included a series of demands about hiring, admissions and curriculum so onerous that school officials decided they had no choice but to take on the White House. The university announced its intentions on Monday, setting off a tectonic battle between one of the country's most prestigious universities and a US president. Then, almost immediately, came a frantic call from a Trump official.

The April 11 letter from the White House's task force on specific agenda, this official told Harvard, should not have been sent and was "unauthorised," two people familiar with the matter said.

The letter was sent by the acting general counsel of the Department of Health and Human Services, Sean Keveney, according to three other people, who were briefed on the matter.

It is unclear what prompted the letter to be sent last Friday. Its content was authentic, the three people said, but there were differing accounts inside the administration of how it had been mishandled. Some people

at the White House believed it had been sent prematurely, according to the three people, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly about internal discussions. Others in the administration thought it had been meant to be circulated among the task force members rather than sent to Harvard.

But its timing was consequential. The letter arrived when Harvard officials believed they could still avert a confrontation with President Donald Trump.

Over the previous two weeks, Harvard and the task force had engaged in a dialogue. But the letter's demands were so extreme that Harvard concluded that a deal would ultimately be impossible. After Harvard publicly repudiated the demands, the Trump administration raised the pressure, freezing billions in federal funding to the school and warning that its tax-exempt status was in jeopardy.

A senior White House official said the administration stood by the letter, calling the university's decision to publicly rebuff the administration overblown and blaming Harvard for not continuing discussions.

"It was malpractice on the side of Harvard's lawyers not to pick up the phone and call

Some people at the White House believed it had been sent prematurely. Others in the administration thought it had been meant to be circulated among the task force members rather than sent to Harvard.

the members of the task force who they had been talking to for weeks," said May Mailman, the White House senior policy strategist. "Instead, Harvard went on a victimhood campaign."

Keveney could not be reached for comment. In a statement, a spokesperson for the task force said: "The task force, and the entire Trump administration, is in lock step on ensuring that entities who receive taxpayer dollars are following all civil rights laws." Harvard pushed back on the White House's claim that it should have checked with the administration lawyers after receiving the letter.

The letter shocked Harvard not only because of the nature of the demands but because it was sent when the university's leadership and the lawyers it hired to deal with the administration thought they could head off a full-bore conflict with Trump.

Harvard's corporation and senior leaders were briefed on Gruenbaum's assertion that the letter should not have been sent. The briefing left many on Harvard's side convinced that the letter had been a mistake, three people familiar with the matter said. Harvard officials were shocked that such an important letter could be sent by mistake.

A FIREBALL NEAR MEXICO LIT UP THE SKY, THE INTERNET



AIMEE ORTIZ

The author is a reporter for The New York Times covering breaking news

For a few brief moments on Wednesday, a bright fireball lit up the predawn skies near Mexico City. The display awed residents and online viewers alike as videos of the object quickly spread. The glowing object was a bolide, according to The Associated Press. Bolides are fireballs that explode in a bright flash, often with visible fragmentation, according to the American Meteor

Society. Whereas a meteorite is a space rock that reaches the ground, a bolide is "just the luminous phenomenon" associated with the object's atmospheric entry, said Jérôme Gattacceca, editor of The Meteoritical Bulletin of the Meteoritical Society, an organization that records all known meteorites.

Meteors that are brighter in our sky than Venus are called "fireballs," Gattacceca said. While meteors and fireballs are common, bolides are less so — though "still not rare," he said. This echoes what Guadalupe Cordero Tercero, a researcher at the UNAM Institute of Geophysics and head of the Mexican Meteor Network project, told UNAM Global Magazine.

It's "estimated that every two and a half days an object at least 1 meter in diameter enters the Earth's atmosphere," Cordero Tercero said, according to the magazine. However most of these objects fall into the ocean or uninhabited areas, so they often go unnoticed. Denton Ebel, a curator of meteorites at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, said that while he had seen only some footage of the fireball and heard stories, "it sounds really exciting." Meteors are "not as uncommon as many people think," Ebel said, but they are being reported more frequently because of fireball networks, which are cameras parked atop buildings that capture the objects as they enter the atmosphere.

UNAM Global Magazine also reported that the fireball roared after streaking across the dark sky. A sonic boom is associated with its breaking apart, Gattacceca said. "This noise is usually a good indicator that the object fragmented at relatively low altitude and that meteorites actually reached the ground," he added. The rumbling can sound almost like a freight train, Ebel said.

Meteors are all created by space rocks hitting the atmosphere at high speed, Gattacceca said, and most of these space rocks originate from the asteroid belt. Their high velocity means that small rocks, even the ones as small as a walnut, will "generate a fireball because of its elevated speed," Gattacceca said. The object's dazzling display caught the attention of many of the more than 22 million people who live in Mexico City, who had nothing to fear.

US Supreme Court blocks deportation of migrants

THE Supreme Court temporarily blocked the Trump administration early on Saturday from deporting another group of Venezuelan migrants accused of being gang members under the expansive powers of a rarely invoked wartime law. "The government is directed not to remove any member of the putative class of detainees from the United States until further order of this court," the court said in a brief, unsigned order that gave no reasoning, as is typical in emergency cases. Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito dissented.

More than 50 Venezuelans were scheduled to be flown out of the country — presumably to El Salvador — from an immigration detention center in Anson, Texas, according to two people with knowledge of the situation. The ACLU in recent days has secured court orders barring similar deportations under the law, the Alien Enemies Act, in places including New York, Denver and Brownsville, Texas.

The situation in Anson was urgent enough that ACLU lawyers mounted challenges in three different courts within five hours. The lawyers started with an emergency filing in US District Court in Abilene, Texas, in which they claimed that officers at the Bluebonnet Detention Center in Anson had started distributing notices to Venezuelan immigrants informing them that they could face deportation as soon as Friday night.

They asked Judge James Wesley Hendrix, who is overseeing the case, to issue an immediate order protecting all migrants in the Northern District of Texas who might face deportation under the Alien Enemies Act. When Hendrix did not grant their request quickly the lawyers filed a similar request to the US Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit in New Orleans.

The lawyers then filed an emergency petition to the Supreme Court, asking the justices to step in and issue an immediate pause on any deportations because many of the Venezuelan men had "already been loaded on to buses, presumably headed to the airport." Immigration lawyers have been playing a high-stakes game of cat and mouse with the federal government since President Donald



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Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) takes questions from reporters during a news conference following his trip to El Salvador at Dulles International Airport in Dulles.

Trump issued a proclamation last month invoking the Alien Enemies Act as a way to deport immigrants he claims are members of Tren de Aragua, a violent Venezuelan street gang. The law, which was passed in 1798, has been used only three times before in US history, during periods of declared war.

The efforts by groups like the ACLU to stop deportations under the act were complicated this month by a Supreme Court ruling that found that anyone subject to the statute needed to be given the opportunity to challenge their removal, but only in the places where they were being detained.

The decision by the justices set off a hunt for anyone who might fall under the authority of Trump's proclamation. The ACLU, hoping to come up with a system for determining where those people might be, has asked a federal judge in Washington to issue a nationwide order forcing the government to provide 30 days' notice to anyone in the country before officials seek to remove them under the Alien Enemies Act.

During a hearing on Friday evening in front of the judge in Washington, James E Boasberg, Lee Gelernt, a lawyer for the ACLU, said that he was prepared to file what amounted to preemptive lawsuits in all of the more than 90 federal judicial districts across the country

in an effort to ensure that no Venezuelan migrants were deported without hearings under the act.

Drew C. Ensign, a lawyer for the Justice Department, gave his word that no flights were scheduled to depart from the Bluebonnet center on Friday night or Saturday morning, adding that the migrants there would be given at least 24 hours' notice before they were deported.

Boasberg is now considering opening a contempt investigation into whether the administration violated his order. But he declined on Friday night to issue a new order stopping deportation flights from northern Texas, in part because of jurisdictional concerns that other courts were already mulling the same question. This latest iteration of the fight over the use of the Alien Enemies Act began on Wednesday when the ACLU filed suit in Abilene on behalf of two Venezuelan migrants being held at the Bluebonnet facility, asking Hendrix to shield them against deportation. But the judge denied the request, largely because lawyers for the Justice Department told him that the men had not yet been scheduled for removal from the country. But then on Friday, other Venezuelan migrants at the detention center were informed that they were facing imminent deportation, court papers say.

OPINION

Balancing boundaries and compassion in elderly care



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

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I recently participated in a panel discussion about how to care for an elderly parent. The event was attended by healthcare workers, caregivers and concerned family members who shared their experiences of caring for elderly parents.

What stood out to me was how deeply personal the topic is and how many people quietly struggle with the responsibility of caring, especially when caregiving is done by one person.

In Middle Eastern cultures, caring for an elderly parent is not just a moral duty, it's a cultural and religious expectation. The Quran reminds us, "And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment... say not to them (so much as) 'uff' and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word" (Surah Al Isra, 17:23).

And the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, once said that after prayer, the most beloved deed to Allah is being good and dutiful to one's parents. These teachings highlight how deeply rooted this responsibility is in our faith, not just as an act of service, but as an act of worship.

In contrast, Western societies often normalise the idea of elderly parents moving into care homes when they can no longer live independently. In many Arab countries, however, this is still considered taboo and against religious beliefs. Even when the ageing person needs full-time and support, adult children take on this responsibility at home while juggling other duties such as bringing up their own children, progress in their careers, and manage their personal lives.

Sometimes care giving presents complex ethical challenges. One caregiver in the audience shared a painful situation about her father who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease yet insisted on continuing to drive his car. He had frequent episodes of confusion which made him forget where he parked his car or drive aimlessly and losing the way to return home. The family was reluctant to take away his car keys as it felt like taking away his dignity and independence. But at the same time allowing him to continue driving posed serious safety risks. Navigating such a situation requires honest conversations,

Caring for an elder person should never be a solo journey. Involving siblings, extended family or even professional help at home can ease the burden

medical guidance, and sometimes, difficult decisions that may go against the parent's wishes.

During the panel, we discussed the importance of early planning and not just waiting until a crisis hits, like a fall or sudden hospitalisation. Proactive communication allows families to approach care with clarity and compassion, respecting both the parent's wishes and the caregiver's capacity.

Many people feel guilty or ashamed to reach out for help even when they feel stressed. But care giving, no matter how noble, should never be endured alone.

Sharing responsibilities among siblings, involving extended family, or hiring trained professionals can make a significant difference in maintaining the caregiver's own health and emotional resilience.

Caring for an elderly parent is one of the most profound acts of love - but it also requires wisdom, boundaries, and support. As our population ages, these conversations need to happen more often and more openly - not just within families, but in our communities as well.

MYANMAR TOWNS
HIT BY FIGHTING
DESPITE TRUCE

Two Myanmar towns on a lucrative trade route to Thailand have been besieged by fighting despite a truce declared after last month's massive earthquake, residents said.

A 2021 coup sparked a multi-sided civil war between Myanmar's military, pro-democracy guerillas and ethnic rebel groups that have long been active in the country's fringes.

Four years of conflict have spurred mass displacement and poverty, and much of the fighting has focused on trade routes where combatants run tollgates to bolster their war chests.

The junta and numerous opposition groups declared a ceasefire to ease relief efforts after a 7.7-magnitude quake hit central Myanmar on March 28, killing more than 3,700 people.

However, three eastern Myanmar residents said fighting has been raging for days around the junta-held towns of Kyondoe and Kawkareik, which sit on a highway leading to the western Thailand border town of Mae Sot.

A resident from an outlying village, who asked to remain anonymous, said the towns had been under attack by "combined forces" from different rebel groups since before Sunday.

"There were air strikes and artillery shots around our village since two days ago," they added. "We have no place to hide."

A resident living a short distance from Kyondoe said their village had been occupied by members of the anti-coup People's Defence Force.

"We are hearing the sounds of air strikes and artillery shooting. We cannot flee to other places now," they said. "We are really scared."

A third resident from Kyondoe, 50 kilometres from the Thai border, said they fled two days ago alongside many neighbours from surrounding villages "to avoid heavy fighting".

The junta said after the earthquake that it would honour a truce until April 22, but would still retaliate against attacks.

As many as 60,000 people are living in tent encampments after the quake, according to United Nations figures. Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun accused several rebel groups on Wednesday evening of breaching the truce in recent days, including near Kyondoe and inside Kawkareik.

AFP could not reach Zaw Min Tun for further comment on Thursday.

Monitors agree that the post-quake truce has not been held but junta chief Min Aung Hlaing is reportedly due to make a rare trip abroad on Thursday to meet Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and discuss an extension.

Malaysia is this year's chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations bloc. Asean has in the past barred junta officials from its summits over a lack of progress on a peace plan. — **AFP**

Asean should expand to
counter Trump's tariffs

WHEN US President Donald Trump finally unleashed his long-threatened tariff blitz, the scale and scope were far worse than most governments expected. It came as no surprise that China would be the hardest hit, but the punishing duties imposed on most Asian countries were a profound shock. Fortunately, with financial markets reeling, Trump announced a 90-day pause on most of these "reciprocal" tariffs just hours after they took effect. Asian governments benefiting from this reprieve must now use the time they have gained to forge a more unified response and take bold initiatives that give them more leverage with the United States.

Consider that the tariff rate initially imposed on my country, Sri Lanka, which is only a few years removed from a political and economic crisis that forced our president to flee and pushed the economy to the brink of collapse, was a whopping 44 per cent. Given that the US is Sri Lanka's largest export market by far, Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs would deliver a massive blow to the country's recovery when (I hesitate to say "if") they are imposed.

Other Asian countries fared little better, and a few were hit even harder, with rates of 49 per cent for Cambodia, 48 per cent for Laos, and 46 per cent for Vietnam. So onerous were these proposed duties that one might wonder whether Trump is compensating for his avoidance of military service in the Vietnam War by waging economic warfare on the countries of Indochina that were involved in that conflict. Now that the Vietnamese government – which swiftly raised the white flag by offering to eliminate all tariffs on US imports – has agreed to start trade talks during the pause, Trump must already think that he has won.

Vietnam's attempt to appease Trump will yield few, if any, benefits for the country, because Trump



The Asean Summit that Malaysia is hosting in May will provide a venue for advancing this agenda.



R M
MANIVANNAN

The writer is Chairman of Supreme Global Holdings

never negotiates in good faith. Worse, the country's actions are setting a high bar – at least in the eyes of the US administration's trade negotiators – for what its partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) will now be expected to deliver.

But the current Asean chair, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, can still marshal the full power of the bloc to present a unified front and develop policy initiatives that can help shield members from the economic disruption caused by Trump's tariffs. This would be consistent with Anwar's efforts as Asean chair to deepen economic integration within the bloc and forge closer commercial links with the Gulf Cooperation Council and with other Asian economies.

The Asean Summit that Anwar is hosting in May will provide a venue for advancing this agenda. The assembled leaders will likely talk about diversifying trade partnerships – one of the best things any country or bloc can do when facing the kind of pressure that the US is applying. But they should

also look for other ways to advance regional cooperation and enhance their economies' resilience.

Here, Asean can take a page out of the European Union's playbook, despite not pursuing the same goal of an "ever closer union": expansion as a way to enhance stability along its borders. Perhaps the clearest example is the EU's "big bang" enlargement of 2004, when it admitted ten countries, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe. The bloc's continued outreach to the Balkan countries and Ukraine, as well as its efforts to stimulate economic development in North Africa, are of a piece with this strategy.

Asean has already embarked on accession negotiations with Timor-Leste, which, if admitted (as many expect), would be the bloc's poorest member by far. But membership would help Timor-Leste diversify its economy and allow it to work with new partners. It would also diminish lingering antagonism with Indonesia, which occupied Timor-Leste for more than 20 years, following independence from Portugal. ©**Project Syndicate**, 2025

The dull, even boring, Easter chronicles



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

THIS weekend is celebrated widely within Christianity as Easter, which sets out to commemorate the passing of the Son of God and the events of the following days that established the religion upon which roughly a third of the global population has established its society and beliefs.

A brief description of Easter is that it sets out to mirror the final days of the saviour, Jesus Christ, with the observance of ‘Lent’ the forty days prior to Easter, as reflective of his self-imposed desert exile, where he fought the temptations of evil, only to return to civilisation to dine on Maundy Thursday, partaking in what was a traditional Passover meal, taking bread and wine with his disciples, before being betrayed to the Romans. The next day, observed as Easter, or ‘Good’ Friday, marks Jesus’ crucifixion, his death on the wooden cross and his burial in a cave.

Fear of recriminations kept many away on the Saturday, while today, Easter Saturday is observed as a family, community and reflective day by those with religious obligations. The following day, Easter Sunday, several of Jesus’ disciples visited the burial tomb to find it empty, with people saying he was alive, not dead, but was preaching nearby, having been resurrected. In recent times, the giving of Easter Eggs celebrates the

renewal of life, as written in either history, legend, or romance, depending upon one’s level of belief.

Personally, the thought of basing one’s entire life, way of life, way of thinking, upon romanticism is a pleasantry that is difficult to justify. However, if my neighbour, my colleague, even my foe, have the strength and resilience to sustain their existence, both now and later, upon such unlikely tenets, then more power to them and may they be rewarded for their strength of disposition and probity.

I, on the other hand, must trust that my good intentions and sense of purpose will eventually surpass my callow requirement for pragmatism over faith.

Easter Monday is very much a day without celebration in the Catholic Church, according to its definitive document, the ‘Pascales Solemnnetatis,’ which encourages prayers and devotion. It is generally observed as a National Holiday, in England, Wales, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa, where it is labelled as a ‘Family Day.’

In a more religious sense, it is observed in significance as ‘Tweede Paasdag’ or a ‘Second Easter Day,’ in the Netherlands; Dygnus Day, or Wet Monday, by the Polish and Czech communities globally; in an Emausgang ‘walk’ in Austria; as a refreshing ‘Sham Ennesim’ in Egypt; in Ireland by many as

A brief description of Easter is that it sets out to mirror the final days of the saviour, with the observance of ‘Lent’ the forty days prior to Easter, as reflective of his self-imposed desert exile

commemorating the Easter Rising of 1916; in Italy as ‘Pasquetta’ or ‘Monday of the Angel; in much of America and Australia long-standing sports events take place; while in Spain, the ‘Easter Mona’ sweet is a traditional favourite.

And what about Easter Eggs? Who doesn’t like Easter Eggs? What kid has never made themselves sick from eating too many Easter Eggs? None and googling ‘Easter Eggs,’ and gets 8 million hits! Easter Eggs go back... 60,000 years, to when Ostrich eggs were decorated in Mesopotamia, to mark the death and rebirth of prominent individuals. Gold and silver eggs were uncovered in the tombs of Ancient Sumerians recently and academically, there are those who see the three parts of the egg, the shell, yolk and albumen as representative of the Catholic Trinity.

Less exotically though, eggs were not allowed to be consumed during the feast of Passover, so they were boiled, painted and given to children as toys and decorations, then, based on the Latin “Omne vivum ex ovo,” or ‘all life comes from an egg,’ the humble egg was appropriated as an entrepreneurial master stroke, 200 years ago in Europe and just like that and like everything, Easter became commercialised. Oh well, I guess I’ll just have another one of those decadent little crème eggs then... everyone else is.

MONEY, POWER AND VIOLENCE IN PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

CECIL MORELLA

Philippines election hopefuls like mayoral candidate Kerwin Espinosa have to ask themselves whether the job is worth taking a bullet. The country’s elections commission, Comelec, recorded 46 acts of political violence between January 12 and April 11, including the shooting of Espinosa.

At a rally this month, someone from the crowd fired a bullet that went through his chest and exited his arm, leaving him bleeding but alive. Others have been less lucky.

A city council hopeful, a polling officer and a village chief were among those killed in similar attacks in the run-up to mid-term elections on May 12. Comelec said “fewer than 20” candidates have been killed so far this campaign season, which it notes is a drop.

“This is much lower, very low compared to the past,” commission spokesperson John Rex Laudiangco said, citing a tally of about 100 deaths in the last general election.

Analysts warned that such violence will likely remain a fixture of the Philippines’ political landscape. The immense influence of the posts is seen as something worth killing for.

Holding municipal office means control over jobs, police departments and disbursements of national tax funds, said Danilo Reyes, an associate professor at the University of the Philippines’ political science department.

“Local chief executives have discretion when it comes to how to allocate the funding, which projects, priorities,” he said. Rule of law that becomes weaker the farther one gets from Manila also means that regional powerbrokers can act with effective impunity, said Cleve Arguelles, CEO of Manila-based WR Numero Research.

“Local political elites have their own kingdoms, armed groups and... patronage networks,” he said, noting violence is typically highest in the archipelago nation’s far north and south.

“The stakes are usually high in a local area where only one family is dominant or where there is involvement of private armed groups,” Arguelles said. “If you lose control of... city hall, you don’t just lose popular support. You actually lose both economic and political power.”

In the absence of strong institutions to mediate disagreements, Reyes said, “confrontational violence” becomes the go-to.

Espinosa was waiting for his turn to speak at a campaign stop in central Leyte province on April 10 when a shooter emerged from the crowd and fired from about 50 metres away, according to police. Police Brigadier General Jean Fajardo said this week that seven police officers were “being investigated” as suspects. Convictions, however, are hard to come by. While Comelec’s Laudiangco insisted recent election-related shootings were all making their way through regional court systems, he could provide no numbers. — AFP

Development finance needs mindset change

THE fourth United Nations International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Seville, Spain, from June 30 to July 3, will consider a hotly debated topic: how development-finance institutions (DFIs) can mobilise more socially beneficial private investment in the countries where they operate.

Many have pointed to the shortage of “bankable projects” as the main barrier to mobilising private-sector capital. They are not wrong: under the traditional demand-led business model, DFIs can invest only in companies that want to raise capital and meet certain financial and impact criteria. But a new report by ODI Global shows that some DFIs are taking a more proactive approach when a development need is not being met by a suitable business that seeks capital. They are starting commercial ventures of their own. Earlier this year, for example, British International Investment (of which one of us is CEO) sold Ayana Renewable Power, an Indian energy company that BII founded in 2018, for \$2.3 billion. In less than a decade, Ayana added, or was in the process of adding, a renewable-energy capacity of 4.1 gigawatts to a country that desperately needs it. Creating a new business from scratch, such as Ayana, is at one end of the spectrum of more entrepreneurial approaches identified by the report, which also includes setting up new intermediaries and forming joint ventures with existing firms to push them in a more development-oriented direction.

While some observers lament that blended finance has not scaled as rapidly as hoped, others are concerned that it has sacrificed development impact to mobilise private capital. But impact and scale are not in opposition. The huge investments needed to decarbonise middle-income economies are certainly effective. And the 12 ventures featured in ODI Global’s report have already achieved significant scale, deploying more than \$4 billion of capital from DFIs



Many have pointed to the shortage of “bankable projects” as the main barrier to mobilising private-sector capital.



LESLIE MAASDORP

The writer is CEO of British International Investment



HANS PETER LANKES

The writer is Managing Director of ODI Global

and raising \$3 billion from private investors.

That said, sponsoring new commercial enterprises is more about impact than mobilising as much private capital as possible with the fewest public dollars, partly because it is riskier than the standard DFI model. The absence of businesses in a market segment implies that the returns on offer are relatively unappealing. But these investments may only require a longer timeframe. In such cases, DFIs and other development institutions often have the patience to wait for a business to prove itself. The ventures that ODI Global studied are on the path to profitability, but it is admittedly a long, narrow road for some (Ayana attracted private co-investors unusually quickly). DFIs should therefore take this route only when they identify an urgent unmet development need and have exhausted other possibilities.

The potential for achieving development goals through DFI-sponsored ventures does not receive enough attention — especially from government shareholders, whose support is integral to developing the new mandates and tools that such efforts would require. Tellingly, the organisations responsible for the ventures in ODI Global’s report —

BII and Norfund (the Norwegian DFI) — are exceptionally flexible and can support long time horizons for risk-taking. BII also has the ability to take a controlling stake in companies, whereas most DFIs can take only a minority stake.

To be sure, the leaders of DFIs are often uncomfortable with this idea, arguing that they know how to choose management teams to support, not how to run companies. But they must not undersell themselves. DFIs employ investment professionals who can identify a market opportunity and evaluate a business plan. After deciding to create a new venture, they can hire talent with complementary skills — as BII and Norfund have done.

Despite internal concerns about staffing, it is the organisational constraints preventing DFIs from becoming entrepreneurial that are the more pressing problem. Shareholders must change the rules under which DFIs and development banks operate to allow them to establish companies. They should also develop solutions, similar to the World Bank’s Private Sector Window, that increase their risk-bearing capacity. But even if they don’t, DFIs can overcome these obstacles by finding creative ways to share the risks and responsibilities.

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SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Mohammed al Mazroui

AL MAZROUI, SOOMAR READY FOR QATAR OFF ROAD RALLY

OMANI co-driver Mohammed al Mazroui will set in the co-driver seat when he participates in the first round of the Qatar off road Championship with Emirati Driver Noura al Jassasi in a Can-Am Mavericks T2.

Al Mazroui has extensive experience as a navigator in the roads and stages of the Gulf rallies, having been an assistant and navigator for many Omani competitors in the Sultanate of Oman's rallies and the Middle East rallies in Qatar, Jordan and other rallies in the region. The experience of the other navigator, Taha Soomar, in international participations with various drivers will also play an important and vital role in leading his team towards the appropriate tracks in the rally and achieving the first places if possible, as Soomar's experience as a navigator is close to twenty years.

The last participation of navigator Mohammed al Mazroui with driver Zakaria al Amari was in the Qatar International Rally 2025, where he and Al Amari were able to lead the Group (N) category in a Subaru Impreza , with successful navigation from Mohammed al Mazroui. Al Mazroui, who also has extensive experience on Can-Am cars as a driver and navigator, seeks to achieve a distinctive result in his first participation with the Emirati driver Noura al Jassasi As for navigator Taha Soomar, his last participation was also in Qatar with competitor Abdullah al Zubair in the Qatar International Rally. He previously worked with champion Khaled Soomar and other competitor from Jordan, including Shaker Juwaihnan and others.

Regarding this participation, which is Al Mazroui's first race with competitor Noura al Jassasi, who is participating for the first time in Qatar off road rallies, he said, "I am happy, first of all , to participate in the Qatar off road Rally and its first round. The Qatar Rally is not new to me, and I have participated in many events here, especially the Middle East Championship. I have good experience in the local stages.

As for the competitor Taha Soomar, he confirmed that he hopes to succeed in this participation and to help the competitor Ahmed al Mohannadi to achieve a positive and distinctive result in this race, He also hopes that everyone will emerge safe after the end of the round, and he hopes to stand on the podium.



Taha Soomar

OHA launches U-15 Hockey League



The rules prohibit dangerous individual skills such as the FLICK when players are positioned in front of the goal.

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

THE 2025 JUNIOR HOCKEY U-15 (Hockey5s) League kicked off on Friday, April 18, at the Al Amerat Club hockey field, in a competitive event attended by 17 clubs from various governorates across Oman. The league is designated for players born in 2010 and 2011.

The list of participating clubs includes: Ahli Sidab, Seeb, Oman, Ittihad, Salalah, Al Nasr, Al Salam, Al Nahda, Qurayat, Mirbat, Nizwa, Saham, Sohar, Al Amerat, Muscat, Masirah and Dhofar. The teams have been divided into three main groups based on geographic location.

The first day of the competition featured Group 1, which includes clubs from the Muscat and Al Dakhiliyah governorates. Ten teams were divided into two sub-groups: Ahli Sidab, Seeb, Nizwa, Oman, Qurayat, Al Amerat and Muscat. Matches for this group are being played at the Al Amerat Club hockey field.

The league adopts a single-round format within each subgroup. The top team of subgroup (A) plays the second-placed team of subgroup (B) and vice versa, to

determine the finalists.

QURAYAT SHINES... AL AMERAT SECURES TWO WINS IN A STRONG GROUP
In Group (A), Ahli Sidab began their campaign with back-to-back victories — defeating Muscat B 2-0 and then Al Amerat 3-2 in a closely contested match. Qurayat A delivered an impressive offensive performance, thrashing Nizwa B 9-0 and continued their dominance with a 5-1 win over Muscat B. Al Amerat also had a strong showing, defeating Nizwa B 7-0. By the end of the day, Qurayat A led the standings with 6 points, tied with Ahli Sidab, while Al Amerat placed third with 3 points. Muscat B and Nizwa B remained without points.

QURAYAT B LEADS GROUP B... EXCITING DRAW BETWEEN AL SEEB AND MUSCAT
In Group (B), Qurayat B claimed a key 2-1 victory over Nizwa A. Muscat A routed Oman Club with a commanding 8-1 win — one of the largest scorelines of the day. Nizwa A bounced back with a 5-1 win over Oman Club. In a thrilling contest, Seeb drew 4-4 with Muscat A after a tightly matched game. However, Seeb had lost their first match to Qurayat B 1-0.

At the end of the day's action, Qurayat B topped the group with 6 points, followed by Muscat A with 4 points and Nizwa A with 3 points.

REGULATIONS TO ENSURE A HIGH-QUALITY AND SAFE TOURNAMENT
The Oman Hockey Association (OHA) established a set of technical and administrative regulations to ensure the tournament runs professionally and safely. Each team consists of 10 players (5 on the field and 5 substitutes). A maximum of two coaches are allowed outside the field during matches. Games are played in two halves of 10 minutes each, with a 5-minute break between halves. In the event of a draw, Article (39) of the competition regulations is applied. The rules prohibit dangerous individual skills such as the FLICK when players are positioned in front of the goal, to maintain participant safety. The Challenge play is permitted during penalty strokes under specific conditions. No player or official may participate without an official accreditation card from the federation and all participants must wear a standardised uniform and protective gear.

SHORTTAKES



Poland's Iga Swiatek in action during her quarter final match against Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko. — Reuters



Jessica Pegula of the US in action during her quarter final match against Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova. — Reuters

Swiatek and Pegula knocked out of Stuttgart Open

BERLIN: Polish world number two Iga Swiatek was knocked out of the Stuttgart Open quarter-finals by Jelena Ostapenko on Saturday, after third-ranked Jessica Pegula was eliminated earlier in the day.

Ostapenko, ranked 24 in the world, won 6-3, 3-6, 6-2.

Swiatek has now lost a remarkable six times to the Latvian in six attempts, with Saturday's loss the first on clay.

Swiatek, a two-time winner of the tournament, came into the match with an 11-1 record on the Stuttgart clay.

But Ostapenko won the first four games and broke Swiatek's serve three times to win the opening set. Swiatek fought back to send the match to a final set, but Ostapenko regained control, winning 12 of the opening 15 points on the way to victory.

Ostapenko will face Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova in the semi-finals on Sunday, with the final on Monday.

Earlier on Saturday, Alexandrova continued her underdog run by dumping out Pegula in straight sets. Alexandrova, who knocked out rising star Mirra Andreeva on Thursday in the last 16, beat the American 6-0, 6-4.

Pegula reached the final at the Miami Open in March and won the Charleston Open earlier in April but did not have an answer against her opponent, who is ranked 22nd in the world.

After failing to win a game in the first set, the 31-year-old American saved three match points at 5-2 down in the second. She fought off two more at 5-4 but could not hold on.

Alexandrova's five WTA top-10 wins are the equal most in 2025 with Andreeva and American Madison Keys. Later on Saturday, world number one Aryna Sabalenka faces Elise Mertens. A beaten finalist three times in a row from 2021 to 2023, Sabalenka has never won in Stuttgart. — AFP

Barca make stunning return to beat Celta Vigo

BARCELONA

pulled off a stunning comeback from two goals down to beat Celta Vigo 4-3 on Saturday and move seven points clear of Real Madrid in the La Liga title race.

The Catalans trailed 3-1 inside the final half-hour after a Borja Iglesias hat-trick for the visitors but Dani Olmo scored and then Raphinha struck twice, including a 98th minute penalty, to snatch three essential points for the leaders.

Champions Real Madrid, second, host Athletic Bilbao on Sunday, with a Clasico showdown still to come in May.

Barcelona coach Hansi Flick, who railed against his team's intense schedule on Friday, rested teenage star Lamine Yamal for the first time in 2025, although he was later needed from the bench after Iglesias' treble.

The Catalans took the lead after 12 minutes when Ferran Torres, starting in place of the 17-year-old, strolled into space and with the defence standing off, drilled past Vicente Guaita from the edge of the box.

Celta Vigo swiftly hit back, skewering Barcelona's high defensive line three minutes later.

Pablo Duran escaped on the right with the defence stranded and his cross was turned home by Iglesias into an empty net, after goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny dived fruitlessly to try to intercept the ball.

Raphinha whistled over a free-kick and La Liga's top goalscorer Robert Lewandowski hammered wildly off-target as the Catalans looked to restore their lead.

At the other end Szczesny made a double save from Ilaix Moriba and Iker Losada.

Celta, flying high in La Liga and in contention for European football next season, were finding plenty of joy going forward.

Claudio Giraldez's team took the lead early in the second half after a mistake by Frenkie de Jong, who ceded possession sloppily in a dangerous area, allowing Iglesias to find an angle and drive a low effort beyond the reach of Szczesny.

With Barcelona on the attack Celta hit them again with Sergio Carreira playing Iglesias into an ocean of space behind the high line. The striker galloped through and beat the retreating Szczesny with ease.

Inspired by substitutes Yamal and Olmo, Barcelona battled back, showing the attacking verve their rivals Real Madrid lacked in midweek as they sought their own comeback against Arsenal in the Champions League.

Raphinha nudged a pass through for Olmo to beat Guaita and rouse the Olympic stadium crowd from its sullen stupor. Four minutes later the Brazilian winger scored himself, heading home as Yamal crossed into the danger area from the right flank. — AFP



FC Barcelona's Raphinha celebrates scoring their fourth goal with Pau Victor. — Reuters

Norris leads McLaren one-two in Saudi Arabian GP practice

JEDDAH: Formula One leader Lando Norris led Oscar Piastri in the expected McLaren one-two in Saudi Arabian Grand Prix practice on Friday while Yuki Tsunoda crashed his Red Bull.

Norris and his teammate, separated by three points at the top of the championship, resumed normal service in the second session after Alpine's Pierre Gasly was surprise pace-setter in the first.

The Briton lapped the super-fast floodlit Corniche circuit with a best time of one minute 28.267 seconds, 0.163 quicker than Australian Piastri.

"I think at the minute we feel confident but the others are not far behind," said Norris.

"I was probably hoping for a bigger gap than what we had today. We know we're fast, we know we have a great car

Norris tops second practice in McLaren one-two

Gasly fastest in first daytime session

Tsunoda crashes, Red Bull teammate Verstappen third



McLaren's Lando Norris ahead of practice. — Reuters

but certainly not as comfortable as what we would like."

Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen lapped third fastest, 0.280 off the pace, before teammate Tsunoda brought red flags out with nine minutes remaining.

The Japanese, drafted in from Racing Bulls in a straight swap with Liam Lawson, clipped the kerb at the final corner and put his car in the wall. He was able to step out and walk away.

"I just turned in too much and clipped the wall and inside wheel. I had damage after that and just had no control," said Tsunoda.

"It is frustrating because the pace was looking good, so it's a shame but also a positive, as I was getting the car in a good window."

When practice resumed, there was only enough time for practice starts.

"Compared to Bahrain, the grip levels and set up of the car is completely different so it is very difficult to compare to last week, but it is still clear that we want to be faster," said Verstappen.

The Dutch driver, winner in Japan, was only sixth fastest in Bahrain last weekend — a race won by Piastri from pole with fastest lap.

Mercedes' George Russell was seventh in the second session, and sixth in the first, on what he said had been a "slightly messy day".

"We didn't manage to get too many clean laps in, owing to both traffic and a few efforts where we didn't quite the tyres in the right window," Russell said. — Reuters

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Punjab Kings' Marco Jansen takes a catch to dismiss Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Kohli. — Reuters

BOWLERS AND WADHERA SHINE AS PUNJAB BEAT BENGALURU

BENGALURU, INDIA: Punjab Kings bowlers steamrolled through the Royal Challengers Bengaluru's batting order to secure a five-wicket victory in a rain-reduced IPL match on Friday.

Punjab won the toss and chose to bowl. Arshdeep Singh, Marco Jansen and Yuzvendra Chahal each picked up two wickets to restrict Bengaluru to 95-9 at the Chinnaswamy Stadium in a 14-overs-a-side game.

Nehal Wadhera was the star of the Punjab innings, smacking an unbeaten 33 off 19 balls to help clinch the victory.

Punjab skipper Shreyas Iyer called Jansen's bowling "lethal".

"Variety is the spice of life and we are here to experience all kinds of games," Iyer said.

Bengaluru started disastrously, losing openers Phil Salt (4) and Virat Kohli (1) cheaply. Sharp bowling from Punjab ensured that wickets continued to fall, with batters Liam Livingstone(4), Jitesh Sharma (2) and Krunal Pandya (1) barely registering a presence. Rajat Patidar tried to steady his side, hitting 23 runs off 18 balls. When the Bengaluru skipper was dismissed his team were a precarious 42-6 at the end of the eighth over.

Tim David was defiant amid the batting collapse with an unbeaten 50 off 26 balls.

David, who smacked three sixes in the final over, dragged his team to 95-9, giving them something to fight for.

Mumbai's openers made a better start. Priyansh Arya hit 16 and Prabhsimran Singh 13, with the team ending the fourth over at 33-2.

Australian seamer Josh Hazlewood briefly offered hope to Bengaluru fans, striking twice in the eighth over to send back Shreyas Iyer (7) and Josh Inglis (14).

But clinical batting by Wadhera helped Punjab seal the game with 11 balls to spare.

"I think we could have done far better as a batting unit," said Patidar.

"The bowling unit is doing pretty well. We have confidence on our bowling unit," Patidar added, noting that sometimes the batting "clicks" and "sometimes it doesn't".

Bengaluru continued their home losing streak this season. Punjab and Bengaluru will face each other again on Sunday. — AFP



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his semifinal match against France's Arthur Fils. — Reuters

Alcaraz and Rune race into Barcelona final

CARLOS ALCARAZ cruised into his third Barcelona Open final with a 6-2, 6-4 victory over Arthur Fils on a breezy Saturday and will face Holger Rune, who demolished Karen Khachanov.

Eight days earlier, in the Monte Carlo quarterfinals, Frenchman Fils had won the first set and forced Alcaraz to fight for victory.

On Saturday, the Spaniard took control from the start, breaking serve in the third and fifth games of the opening set as Fils struggled with the swirling conditions.

"I started the match really focused on my game and being in a good position every time to hit the right shots," Alcaraz said after the win.

Alcaraz broke again in the third game of the second set and only stuttered when he squandered his first two match points with a double fault and a wild drive, before clinching victory.

"The wind was really tough," Alcaraz said. "It wasn't about playing fantastic tennis, brilliant, brilliant shots. It was about making the shots you had to do and no more than that. I did it pretty well."

After winning in Monte Carlo last week, Alcaraz remains perfect on clay this season. He has not lost in Barcelona since 2021. He won the tournament in 2022 and 2023 before missing last year's event with an arm injury.

"Being in a final in Barcelona again means a lot in front of my people, in front of my friends," Alcaraz said.

"It has been really fun and a great week. Let's see if tomorrow we'll end with a trophy. It's going to be really tough. I'm super excited."

Earlier, world number 13 Rune outclassed

Khachanov 6-3, 6-2.

The 21-year-old Dane did not face a break point in the first set, but broke to love in the seventh game and broke again in the ninth.

Khachanov, ranked 27th, suffered another break in the second game of the second set, with Rune consolidating for a 3-0 lead.

The Russian, 28, saved two break points in the sixth game but Rune broke again in the ninth, wrapping up his victory with a passing shot to reach the final for the first time.

"It was definitely a very good match from my side, I played very smart I think and put him under lots of pressure," said Rune.

The Dane offered huge variety in his shots and hit 20 winners to 13 unforced errors.

"I knew I had to play well again, I was keeping my pace on my shots well, mixing it up well and doing most things right today, so I'm very happy," continued Rune. — AFP

Heat, Grizzlies take final spots in the NBA playoffs

WASHINGTON: Tyler Herro scored 30 points as the Miami Heat reached the NBA playoffs with a thrilling 123-114 overtime defeat of the Atlanta Hawks in their Eastern Conference play-in clash on Friday.

The Heat, which recovered from a 10-game losing streak in March to reach the play-in, will now face top-seeded Cleveland Cavaliers in the opening round of the playoffs.

Miami become the first tenth-seed to reach the NBA playoffs via the play-in and they did so via two wins on the road, having also won in Chicago on Wednesday.

In Atlanta, Miami dominated the opening half, leading by 17 points before going in 62-53 up at the interval. But the Hawks fought back superbly, taking the lead 91-88 with 7:36 left. Atlanta then opened up a 98-92 advantage before Miami came back again only for Trae Young to level the game with 1.1 seconds remaining after a driving lay-up.

But the Heat saved their best for last with Davion Mitchell making three three-pointers in overtime and Herro adding two more.

"Two competitive teams, fighting for the last spot in the playoffs. That was exactly what you saw. Both teams were deserving. I loved how my team fought," said Herro.

"Every single run that they made, we answered. And I feel like this entire season has really built us up for this point.

The Cavaliers will start as heavy favourites in the best-of-seven series which gets underway in Cleveland on



Miami Heat guard Tyler Herro (14) passes behind Atlanta Hawks guard Dyson Daniels (5) during the second half at State Farm Arena. — Reuters

Sunday. Young top-scored for Atlanta with 29 points while Onyeka Okongwu scored 28 and grabbed 12 rebounds.

The final spot in the Western Conference playoffs was secured by the Memphis Grizzlies which beat the Dallas Mavericks 120-106.

Despite dealing with an ankle problem, Ja Morant scored 22 points and made nine assists for the Grizzlies who will face the first seeded Oklahoma City Thunder in the first round. For Dallas, the defeat concludes a miserable season which included the departure of star Luka Doncic to the Los Angeles Lakers.

Anthony Davis, who moved to Dallas in that controversial trade, received medical treatment for injury problems throughout the game but led the team with 40

points and nine rebounds.

Memphis led by 15 points at the end of the first quarter and although Dallas fought back in the third, they never truly threatened the Grizzlies.

Morant indicated that the painkillers had worked for his sprained ankle.

"I couldn't feel it. That's why I was out there," he told ESPN.

"(We are) the underdogs. Obviously, we go on to face a tough team in OKC, but we have all the confidence in ourselves and (are) ready to go Sunday. "It's a big challenge. Obviously, you know, we all have seen them, you know, over this season. Very well-rounded team. We have to be very sound defensively. Very disciplined and just play our type of basketball," he added. — AFP

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Construction work underway at ACME's green hydrogen and ammonia project in Duqm SEZ.

ACME GROUP RECEIVES \$140M INITIAL FUNDING FOR OMAN GREEN AMMONIA PROJECT

AL DUQM: India's ACME Group has announced that it has received \$140 million as the first instalment of the funding allocated for its Oman green hydrogen and green ammonia project, which amounts to \$540 million. The project is currently being implemented in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), with a total investment of approximately \$750 million.

The funding secured by the group represents 75 per cent of the total project cost, in a step that reflects growing global interest and confidence in investing in SEZAD.

Dr Said bin Khalifa al Quraini, Director-General of the Investment Development Sector at the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) and official spokesperson for the Authority, stated that securing this funding for ACME's project in Duqm highlights the international confidence in the projects underway in the area and reinforces Duqm's investment appeal.

He added in a press statement, "ACME's project is one of the strategic initiatives in the green hydrogen sector and marks the first project of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman to secure the necessary funding and sign a long-term off-take agreement. This strengthens Duqm's leadership in the green hydrogen industry and supports the national strategy to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and the government's broader energy transition goals."

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

OMAN'S

Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) is advancing its 2025 investment strategy with bold reforms aimed at enhancing the country's investment climate and global competitiveness.

Speaking to the Observer, Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, outlined key achievements, including a targeted outreach to 200 companies resulting in several Letters of Intent, and the launch of the Oman Exports Platform to boost export visibility.

Looking ahead, the ministry is preparing to host the Advantage Oman Forum to attract global investors. Additionally, 22 new investment opportunities will be unveiled across the governorates, supported by localised strategies and partnerships with consulting firms.

"We reviewed today, during the ministry's media briefing, the major outcomes of 2024 in the field of investment promotion, with emphasis on the execution of our targeted company outreach strategy," Al



'We anticipate the announcement of 22 new investment opportunities across various governorates during the year,' Under-Secretary Ibtisam al Farooji

Farooji said.

According to the under-secretary, the ministry formed a specialised technical team in collaboration with stakeholders from key economic diversification sectors and the Invest in Oman platform. This joint effort aimed to identify and engage high-potential companies across multiple sectors.

"We successfully targeted around 200 companies, resulting in the signing of several Letters of Intent with interested investors. These were subsequently handed over to the relevant teams to facilitate processing, negotiation and follow-up," she explained.

Among the ministry's

standout achievements in 2024 was the launch of the Oman Exports Platform, a digital initiative designed to boost the visibility and competitiveness of Omani exports in global markets.

"The platform includes a comprehensive website offering open data to guide exporters into targeted international markets, along with an interactive digital interface that connects Omani exporters with global buyers," Al Farooji noted.

She stressed that the Oman Exports Platform has become a key tool to empower local exporters, enabling them to expand their reach through structured data and digital connectivity.

Turning to the ministry's agenda for 2025, Al Farooji emphasised that a cornerstone initiative is the comprehensive evaluation of Oman's Foreign Capital Investment Law. "We have already taken the first step by launching a new interactive feature on the Invest in Oman platform. This tool invites investors to review and provide feedback on the provisions of the law and its executive regulations," she said. "It marks a vital preliminary step towards assessing the law's overall effectiveness in attracting foreign capital and improving the business environment."

This participatory approach reflects the ministry's commitment to engaging stakeholders in shaping policy, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the legal and regulatory framework governing foreign investments.

In addition, MoCIIP plans to elevate Oman's global investment profile by hosting the Advantage Oman Forum later this month.

The forum will bring together CEOs and top-tier executives from around the world who are exploring investment opportunities in Oman's priority sectors, particularly those linked to economic diversification.

The under-secretary also reviewed the performance of the Invest in Oman Lounge over the past two years.

Oman's new foreign trade centre to bolster 2025 investment drive

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

OMAN has taken a decisive step to strengthen its global trade footprint with the launch of the new Centre for Strategic Partnerships and Foreign Trade. Announced under the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the centre is a cornerstone of Oman's 2025 investment strategy and a practical move to accelerate diversification under the Oman Vision 2040 agenda.

The mandate is clear: Break down trade barriers, revitalise dormant agreements and unlock new markets for Omani exports.

More than just a trade push, this is about building meaningful international partnerships and turning Oman into a hub for foreign capital. "Oman knows that economic resilience depends on integration with global markets. This new centre gives the Sultanate of Oman a sharper edge in trade negotiations and a mechanism to secure better terms for its exporters.

This centre gives Oman the capacity to negotiate better market access in jurisdictions where access is currently restricted," said Pankaj Khimji, Foreign Trade Adviser at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.



PANKAJ KHIMJI
Foreign Trade Adviser at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

For non-oil sectors — from metals to fisheries — this is timely. As global trade tilts towards regional blocs, Oman is signalling it won't be left behind.

The centre's focus: modernise existing FTAs like the Oman-US deal, pursue new ones with growth markets in Asia and Africa, and deepen engagement with global trade bodies like the WTO and UNCTAD.

Trade diplomacy alone isn't the endgame — investment is. "We're not just talking about trade; we're talking about encouraging FDI, expanding exports and building long-term partnerships," Khimji noted.

Better trade terms can attract global firms looking for regional bases. Oman's recent FDI growth — up 17.6 per cent in five years to RO 26.7 billion by late 2024 — reflects reforms that have reshaped the investment landscape. The 2020 Foreign Capital Investment Law allowing 100% foreign ownership, plus the Invest Oman one-stop

shop, has laid the groundwork.

The new centre is expected to work closely with these tools to bring in targeted investments across strategic sectors. Negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India are already in motion, promising gains in services, goods and capital flow. Similar deals with Southeast Asia and East Africa are on the radar. If executed well, Oman could become a competitive export base with privileged market access.

This isn't just about trade or investment — it's about economic transformation. Oman Vision 2040 aims to lift non-oil GDP to 90 per cent by 2040. To get there, Oman needs to open doors for its industries and draw in global expertise and funding.

Over the next five years, policymakers are zoning in on sectors with real export potential: metals, green manufacturing, logistics. The goal is to develop specialised clusters and then use trade agreements to sell those strengths globally.

Progress is already visible. Billions are flowing into free zones and industrial estates, from food processing to renewables. The centre's job is to align external trade opportunities with these domestic growth engines. Oman's strategy unfolds in a competitive GCC landscape. The UAE

has led the way with CEPAs, aggressively locking in trade ties with major economies. Saudi Arabia is leveraging oil wealth to drive mega-projects and reposition itself economically. Oman's approach is different: more measured, more focused on enabling private-sector growth through targeted deals and investor-friendly reforms.

What Oman offers is stability, neutrality and geography. Positioned between Africa, Asia and the Gulf, and trusted by multiple powers, Oman can be a gateway to a complex region. That's a selling point no amount of capital can replicate.

Bilateral deals, like CEPA with India, offer flexibility while GCC-wide pacts remain under negotiation. Oman is making sure it isn't stuck waiting for collective decisions — it's acting now to secure its own trade future. Benefits on the horizon

If Oman plays this right, the upside is significant:

- Higher export revenues: More markets, fewer trade barriers and stronger demand for Omani goods.
- Stronger FDI flows: Preferential trade access could bring manufacturers and service providers to Oman, feeding into regional supply chains.
- Revived trade deals: Existing agreements like the Oman-US FTA can be better leveraged for real export gains.

ADVERTORIALS



The national carrier has been working closely with stakeholders to realign its workforce.

OMAN AIR
RESTRUCTURES
WORKFORCE, BOOSTS
OMANISATION IN
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By reducing its expatriate workforce by 487 positions and replacing them with Omani professionals, the company increased its Omanisation rate to 79.4%, up from 74.8% in 2023.

CON KORFIATIS
Oman Air CEO

This included generous end-of-service benefits, priority consideration for job openings within the airline and the wider aviation sector, and tailored recruitment assistance. To cushion the impact of the transition, the airline committed RO 15 million to support affected staff and ensure financial continuity.

"In a move aligned with national employment goals, the airline significantly ramped up its Omanisation efforts. By reducing its expatriate workforce by 487 positions and replacing them with Omani professionals, the company increased its Omanisation rate to 79.4%, up from 74.8% in 2023," Con Korfiatis, CEO of Oman Air.

Out of 415 employees whose roles were made redundant, 74 have been reassigned within Oman Air, while another 87 have secured opportunities elsewhere in the aviation sector. The remaining 293 opted for voluntary exit packages offering compensation covering 12 to 24 months. The company remains in active coordination with the Ministry of Labour and the General Federation of Oman Trade Unions to find suitable pathways for the remaining affected staff who have yet to select an option.

Con Korfiatis, CEO of Oman Air, expressed pride in the airline's ability to redeploy a large segment of its workforce. He reiterated the airline's commitment to not only reinforcing Oman's aviation sector, but also to contributing meaningfully to the country's broader socioeconomic development.

MUSCAT: Oman Air has reached a major milestone in its ongoing human resources restructuring drive, a central pillar of its broader transformation aimed at long-term financial stability and operational sustainability. Over the last 18 months, the national carrier has been working closely with stakeholders to realign its workforce in accordance with global aviation standards and the company's evolving strategic priorities. As part of this restructuring, Oman Air rolled out a comprehensive support programme for affected employees.

CBFS hosts
international
conference
on banking,
finance and
business

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing commitment to research and academic excellence, the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) will host the 3rd International Conference on Banking, Finance and Business – ICBFB 2025, which will be held from April 22 to 24, 2025, at its Bausher campus in Muscat. The conference theme, "Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Banking and Finance: Opportunities and

Challenges", reflects the transformative changes being driven by AI in the global financial sector. The conference's primary objective is to create a forum for academics, researchers, doctoral students and business professionals to exchange research insights and experiences and explore new directions for industry-relevant innovation and policy recommendations. The conference will highlight

issues related to AI-driven opportunities, challenges and global practices relevant to the development of the banking, finance and business sectors. Dr Zahran bin Salim al Salti, Dean of the College, expects that the conference outcome and recommendations will provide insightful directions for effective policies, plans and strategies in the days to come for banking, finance, economics and business practices across the globe.

Abraj Energy posts 5.1%
revenue growth in 2024

ABRAJ Energy Services reported a 5.1% year-on-year increase in revenue for 2024, reaching RO 7.3 million, driven by its strong focus on operational excellence, workplace safety, and sustainable value delivery across local and regional markets. Reaffirming its leadership in health and safety, Abraj marked a major industry milestone with three consecutive years of zero lost-time injuries (LTI) across all operating units. Six of its rigs surpassed ten years without an LTI, while thirteen achieved five years of "Goal Zero" status. These accomplishments earned the company recognition from key clients and regulatory bodies, including Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) and the Oman Energy Association



Abraj marked a major industry milestone with three consecutive years of zero lost-time injuries (LTI) across all operating units.

(OPAL). Globally, Abraj topped safety performance rankings among 79 Shell International rigs, further strengthening its global standing. "In 2024, Abraj reinforced its position as a trusted oil

and energy services provider, underpinned by a robust safety culture and operational efficiency," said Eng Saif bin Said al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services. "Our teams achieved over 99% production drilling time,

improved rig movement efficiency by 13% and maintained an impeccable safety record — all of which reflect our operational resilience and the dedication of our workforce." In drilling and maintenance services, the company reported a 99.6% operational efficiency rate. It captured a 16% market share in cement support services and 30% in integrated fracturing services, supported by advanced systems and service integration strategies tailored to client needs. Abraj also made major strides in promoting in-country value (ICV), contributing over RO 423.5 million to the national economy since 2020. In 2024 alone, its ICV contribution reached RO 61 million, including RO 16 million directed to small and medium enterprises.

ARABIAN CAR MARKETING COMPANY SUPPORTS ROP'S
'DRIVING WITHOUT A PHONE' INITIATIVE

MUSCAT: Arabian Car Marketing Company, the distributor for Ford and Lincoln vehicles in Oman, reinforced its commitment to road safety by encouraging drivers to put the phone down, focus on the road ahead and enjoy smart drives with the SYNC technology. This support actively endorses the Royal Oman Police's initiative – 'Driving without a phone' and aims to promote safe journeys on the road. With mobile phone led distractions remaining a key contributor to road incidents, the message behind 'Driving without a phone' only assists to raising awareness. Arabian Car Marketing strongly believes that change comes through creating awareness, promoting greater responsibility and usage of innovative technology that assists on-road safety. One such innovation is SYNC, Ford and Lincoln's advanced voice-activated system, available across their newest models. Designed



to help drivers remain focused, SYNC offers hands-free control of essential functions such as making or receiving calls, replying to text messages, accessing navigation and managing entertainment, all without taking hands off the wheel or eyes off the road. This makes SYNC an ideal tool in supporting

the goals of the ROP's 'Driving without a phone' movement. More than a technological advancement, SYNC stands out as a meaningful safety feature that enables drivers to stay responsibly connected. Especially in unavoidable or urgent situations, SYNC allows communication through voice-activated, hands-free commands, helping reduce distractions and reinforcing the importance of staying focused on the road. Sharing his thoughts, a spokesperson from Arabian Car Marketing Company said, "We believe that innovation should always serve a greater purpose, which in our case is safety while driving. Ford and Lincoln's SYNC technology is a testament to that philosophy. "It empowers drivers to stay connected without compromising on safety, using voice-activated, hands-free features that assist users to focus on what matters most; the road ahead!"

Bank Muscat: Multiple successes in enhancing digital transformation

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, places significant emphasis on digital transformation to achieve excellence in the banking sector and offer innovative services that meet the needs of individual and corporate customers. By adopting the latest technologies and keeping pace with the rapid developments in the realm of financial technology, the Bank continues to update and improve its services, aiming to provide customers with a secure, efficient and effective banking experience when initiating their banking transactions. With the rapid evolution of the digital sector, it has become essential for the banking sector to play a leading role in offering banking solutions that facilitate customers' businesses. In this context, Bank Muscat is one of the first banking institutions to embrace the latest digital solutions, ensuring customers have access to innovative banking services that allow them to conduct transactions in a



The Bank continues to update and improve its services, aiming to provide customers with a secure, efficient and effective banking experience when initiating their banking transactions.

seamless and secure manner. To highlight the latest developments in this area and as part of a series of media visits which the Bank periodically organises, Bank Muscat held a media meet with a group of journalists and media representatives, with the aim to introduce them to the Bank's digital

banking solutions and information technology services. The event comes to highlight the Bank's dedication to embracing digital transformation concepts as part of its strategy focused on providing the best digital banking services to customers. The media meet featured two presentations outlining the Bank's roles in fields of digital banking as well as information technology. During the detailed presentation on the Bank's digital banking, the audience were introduced to the digital facilities offered to them through the Bank's Internet Banking and Mobile Banking platforms. These include services like opening banking accounts, applying for and renewing debit cards, and requesting for credit cards, as well as payment, money transfer and investment solutions. Further to that, the audience were introduced to the services recently fed into the Bank's platforms such as the Eidiya payment online feature through QR code. The Bank's role in implementing

information technology projects and leveraging digital technologies and modern information systems for customer service was highlighted during the IT-focused presentation, addressing different subjects including the Bank's strategy in investing in information technology and its achievements in implementing IT projects and programmes. Focus was also placed on the project innovation aspects which the Information Technology Division at Bank Muscat implements. This media meet provided an opportunity for the audience to have conversations with the Bank's officials and strengthen partnership with various media outlets which stand as an important component of the Bank's growth and success. Speaking about the media visit, Abdullah bin Hamood al Jufaili, Assistant General Manager, Digital Banking at Bank Muscat, expressed his appreciation and gratitude to all media institutions and journalists for their ongoing collaboration.

BUSINESS



These opportunities are available through the Tatweer platform and span more than 70,000 sqm.

SIX INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES UNVEILED AT JABAL SHAMS WATERFRONT PROJECT

NIZWA: Al Dakhiliyah Governorate has launched six new investment opportunities worth over RO 5 million as part of the Jabal Shams Waterfront Project in the Wilayat of Al Hamra. These opportunities are available through the Tatweer platform and span more than 70,000 square metres.

The new offerings include a mix of tourism, agriculture and entertainment ventures, reflecting efforts to diversify the local economy and promote investment in key sectors.

Among the opportunities presented are: A fully serviced 3-5 star tourist resort (1,400 sqm), a fixed-structure tourist camp (20,440 sqm); An adventure centre (10,012 sqm), a coffee farm (15,752 sqm), a fruit farm (9,830 sqm) and a recreational slide attraction.

Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, noted that the Jabal Shams “Grand Canyon” project was selected by the main committee for the 2024 governorates’ development project competition. A tender for the first phase — covering infrastructure works — was floated in March. The second phase tender, which includes an administrative building, geological exhibition and Adventure Academy, is set to be launched later this year.

Additional attractions planned for the second phase include: A public square and open-air theatre, remote workspaces for business and meetings, a health walkway for mountain walking and running events, a café perched near the cliff edge, a suspension bridge and zipline, 18 kiosks across the site and a multi-purpose hall.

— ONA

Sohar Port launches first carbon capture project

JOMAR MENDOZA
SUHAR, APRIL 19

It is a milestone moment for industrial sustainability in Oman, the SOHAR Port and Freezone formally launched its first carbon capture and utilisation (CCU) initiative — a project that underscores the Port’s growing role in the nation’s Net-Zero ambitions and signals a new era of industrial collaboration.

The agreement, signed during the Oman Water Week, between Sohar Energy and Investment LLC, Sohar Operation Services LLC, and SOHAR Port and Freezone represents a pioneering step in the deployment of advanced carbon capture technology at the Sohar 4 Independent Water Project (IWP) Desalination Plant.

The initiative is the first of its kind in the Port and sets a precedent for circular economy models in the region.

Under the agreement, local SME Sohar Energy and Investment will capture CO₂ emissions from industrial sources, refine them into food-grade quality and supply this to Sohar Operation Services.

The carbon dioxide will then be used in post-treatment processes at the Sohar 4 IWP Desalination Plant, owned by



The initiative is the first of its kind in the Port and sets a precedent for circular economy models in the region.

Myah Gulf Oman Desalination Company SAOC, to improve water quality and operational efficiency.

In an exclusive interview with *the Observer*, Abdullah al Sadi, General Manager at Sohar Operation Services, described the project as a turning point not only for their operations but for sustainable industrial growth across the region.

“This agreement marks a transformative milestone for

Sohar Operation Services and the Sohar 4 IWP Desalination Plant,” said Al Sadi. “By integrating advanced carbon capture technology, we are not only enhancing our operational efficiency, but also setting a benchmark for sustainable industrial practices in Oman.”

Al Sadi emphasised the tangible benefits of using food-grade CO₂ in the plant’s processes: “The food-grade CO₂ provided by Sohar Energy and Investment LLC will be utilised in our post-treatment operations to improve water quality and process efficiency.

“This integration allows for more precise control of water chemistry, resulting in higher quality desalinated water that meets stringent standards.”

Beyond technical gains, the collaboration reflects broader goals of economic diversification and SME empowerment, key pillars of Oman Vision 2040.

“Partnering with Sohar Energy and Investment LLC, a local SME, underscores our dedication to Oman’s economic diversification and SME empowerment objectives,” noted Al Sadi.

“By working closely with innovative local enterprises, we help drive technological advancement, create new value chains and support the growth of Oman’s knowledge-based

economy.”

As the landlord and enabler, SOHAR Port and Freezone is playing a key role in supporting the infrastructure and policy framework to encourage such innovations.

The initiative is aligned with Oman’s ambitious Net-Zero 2050 strategy, positioning SOHAR Port and Freezone as a model for other industrial zones in the region.

“As a key operator within the SOHAR Port and Freezone, we are committed to leading by example in sustainability and decarbonisation,” said Al Sadi.

“Our participation in this carbon capture initiative demonstrates our proactive approach to reducing emissions and fostering sustainable industrial collaboration.”

The model could be replicated across other facilities in the Sultanate of Oman. “This project directly supports Oman’s Net-Zero 2050 vision by capturing and utilising CO₂ emissions, thereby reducing the overall carbon footprint of our operations,” he added.

“Given the success and innovation demonstrated here, we anticipate that similar initiatives will be adopted across other facilities, further advancing Oman’s decarbonisation journey.”

Oman to host major global energy regulators’ conference

MUSCAT: Oman will host the annual conference of the Regional Association of Energy Regulators on May 5–6, marking the first time the event will be held in the Middle East.

The conference is expected to attract over 250 international energy experts, policymakers and

academics from around the world.

The event reflects Oman’s rising profile in the global energy sector and the growing trust in its regulatory and legislative frameworks — especially as the nation pushes forward with its clean energy transition and sustainability goals.

The two-day gathering will feature

high-level dialogue sessions, interactive workshops and bilateral meetings.

Topics on the agenda include enhancing regulatory efficiency, attracting investment in renewables and exploring the impact of emerging technologies on the energy landscape. — ONA

Renewables-based energy gateway proposed for Masirah Island

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 19

A PAIR of leading Dutch firms has unveiled a proposal for meeting the energy requirements of Masirah, the biggest island off Oman’s east coast, with a mix of renewables-based energy resources.

Dutch engineering and consultancy firm Witteveen+Bos, together with Van Oord, a leading global maritime contractor headquartered in the Netherlands, are behind an initiative, dubbed ‘Masirah Energy Gateway’ that envisages the supply of green electricity harnessed from tidal, wind and solar energy.

An overview of this globally unique initiative was presented during the CEO Business Roundtable held as part of the state visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the Netherlands last week.

Witteveen+Bos Managing Director Wouter Bijman described the proposed project as an ‘energy bridge’ spanning the 20 km distance between Masirah Island and the Omani mainland.



The Masirah Energy Gateway project, promoted by Witteveen+Bos in collaboration with Van Oord, envisions the integration of tidal, wind and solar energy to supply the Island with sustainable clean energy. Picture for illustration only.

“Every year, 2,200 Gigawatt-hours of sustainable energy will be generated with a combination of tidal, wind and solar energy. “This globally unique megaproject fits in

seamlessly with the sustainability Oman Vision 2040; the electricity generated can also serve as an energy source in the production of green hydrogen,” Witteveen+Bos stated in a post.

Representatives of Witteveen+Bos were recently in Muscat as part of a contingent of Dutch firms participating in the just-concluded Oman Water Week 2025 forum. The consultancy firm is among a number of Dutch businesses currently engaged in strengthening Oman’s water sector as part of the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP) initiative.

At a state dinner held in honour of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s recent visit to the Netherlands, both countries highlighted their strategic partnership spanning a number of key areas, including green hydrogen and advanced water solutions.

A joint communique issued at the conclusion of the visit also underlined the importance of cooperation in water technology, climate adaptation and resilient infrastructure – areas that also represent the core strengths of Dutch technological expertise.

Significantly, Witteveen+Bos is also a member of the Oman Netherlands Strategic Taskforce which is overseeing the implementation of the Oman Netherlands Water Roadmap, which seeks to identify joint priorities for the next two years. Implementation is being done in close coordination with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Muscat, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and Nama Water Services Group.

The proposed Masirah Energy Gateway, if and when approved for implementation, will complement a newly launched initiative by the Omani government to extend the country’s main electricity grid to Masirah Island via the installation of a first-ever undersea cable.

National grid operator Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) is overseeing the implementation of the RO 72 million interconnection project, which aims to supplant diesel-powered electricity currently supplying the island, with gas-powered, and potentially even renewables powered, electricity from the mainland.

WATERED MEASURES

China shipbuilders rip Trump’s US port fees



China’s shipbuilders on Saturday blasted as “short-sighted” US port fees announced by President Donald Trump’s administration on China-linked ships, a measure aimed at the nation’s shipbuilding industry.

Trump signed an order aimed at reviving US shipbuilding and reducing China’s grip on the global shipping industry. His government watered the measures down by shielding domestic exporters and vessel owners. — Reuters

DEAL STRIKE

UK PM Starmer discussed trade with Trump



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke with US President Donald Trump, discussing trade between the two nations among other subjects including the situation in Ukraine and Iran, a Downing Street spokesperson said.

Britain is hoping to strike a deal with Trump after he imposed 10% tariffs on most imports of British goods to the United States and a higher 25% rate on imports of cars, steel and aluminium. — Reuters

PRIVILEGED ACCESS

Ukraine to wrap up mineral deal talks



Kyiv said it aims to complete talks about a deal with Washington on jointly exploiting Ukrainian mineral resources, an agreement Ukrainian officials hope will go some way to firming up softening US support for them in their war with Russia.

Washington has signalled it expects to have privileged access to Ukraine’s natural resources by way of repayment for US military support for the country over the past three years. — Reuters

OPINION

The trillion-dollar burden of the obesity crisis



DR SEEMA SANGRA

The writer is a media faculty member and Programme Leader for the Media Studies Department, Amity University Dubai.

ACCORDING to newly published obesity data, the global costs of overweight and obesity are predicted to reach US\$ 3 trillion per year by 2030. Paradoxically, this is the deadline for combating hunger and achieving good health. There is a proverb that if you do not change your direction, you reach the same destination, and if we do not change our direction now, the global costs of overweight and obesity will reach US\$ 18 trillion by 2060! Once considered a problem of wealthy nations, obesity is now rising in low- and middle-income countries, driven by unhealthy diets that include processed foods, high sugar and fat intake. Sedentary lifestyles accompanied by increased screen time and constant exposure to media messages about junk food especially to children, is not helping the situation. As 37 million children under 5 were overweight in 2022. Africa saw a 23% increase in overweight children under 5 since 2000, and nearly half of overweight young children live in Asia alone. “Just 7-8 years ago. I would see only one or two obese children in my clinic. Today, nearly 50% of my young patients struggle with obesity, a startling shift that demands urgent attention”, says Dr Arun CS Menon,

an Endocrinologist with a reputed medical hospital in the Middle East. The growing obesity in children is also reflected in the Global World Obesity Atlas data, which says that 88% of children with overweight and obesity will be living in Low and Middle Income Countries by 2035. Typically, obesity is linked with affluent societies, but the data says that the shift is inevitable, which is a huge concern, as these countries do not have adequate health infrastructure to support the implications of any such situation. There is a strong link between growing obesity with the parallel growth of the processed fast food industry and unhealthy eating culture across countries where obesity is turning into a pandemic. In the Obesity World Index, the US tops the list, including Islands like American Samoa in the higher income group category, but in the same income group, Japan is the least obese country with a 7.63% obesity rate in comparison to 79.29% in the US. The credit goes to the cultural practices and the government’s intervention with initiatives like Shokuiku. In the month of June, schools and communities throughout Japan come together for “Shokuiku Month,” a national campaign promoting the value of nutritious food and highlighting how school lunches influence children’s diets while strengthening

Once considered a problem of wealthy nations, obesity is now rising in low- and middle-income countries, driven by unhealthy diets that include processed foods, high sugar and fat intake.

regional food networks. On the other hand, the US also tops the list of most processed food consumers with 58% of ultra-processed food in adult diets which contains additives, colouring and sweeteners. Child diets are no different in such countries. Such lifestyles are supported by consistent advertisements by the fast food industry. “Food marketing targeting children plays a powerful role in shaping their consumption patterns. Also, what is popular in wealthy nations is often considered more desirable by developing countries,” says Mohammed Firoz, a media sociologist. Several studies have demonstrated that ads for unhealthy products promote poor dietary habits from an early age. This contributes to rising childhood obesity rates, a major preventable factor in developing obesity-related diseases in adulthood Evidence and data of obesity statistics demand immediate government intervention in high-obesity regions through policies, marketing regulations- such as banning child-directed junk food ads - scaled nutrition education like Japan’s Shokuiku, and integrated preventive healthcare. Inaction will continue to fuel chronic diseases, strain healthcare systems, and reduce life expectancy. The time to act is now -for our health, future generations, and our economy!

CHINA’S US BOND HOLDINGS ARE GOING NOWHERE FAST

HONG KONG: With China and the United States engaged in a full-on trade war, anxious investors are asking which side can press its financial advantage given Beijing’s vast holdings of US Treasuries. In truth the situation is more of a fraught equilibrium both sides have an interest in maintaining. Commentators in Chinese state media have for years argued their government should use the debt to pressure Washington, whereas this week US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said those holdings - estimated at \$1.1 trillion by Brad Setser of the Council on Foreign Relations - provide no leverage whatsoever. Investors who watched a searing sell-off last week drive the benchmark 10-year yield as high as 4.59% aren’t so sure. Clients are peppering money managers with questions about a long-feared doomsday scenario: China weaponises its holdings, dumping some or all of them to push up American interest rates, either to gain leverage in trade negotiations or punish US President Donald Trump for slapping triple-digit levies on Chinese goods. These concerns have been heightened by a shift in recent years by Beijing to diversify foreign exchange reserves. Yet it needs a large pool of dollar debt on hand to sell if the yuan’s exchange rate starts tumbling. Granted, the People’s Bank of China has been wary of directly selling Treasuries to this end since 2015, when it burned through most of its reserves fighting runaway depreciation. But its alternative measures to manage its currency would pack little punch without the ultimate backing of the Treasuries holdings. Even a limited paring down of these, delivered as a warning shot, would pose a serious danger. It would be difficult to arrange confidentially, and word of any sale would stoke fears of a total divestment and trigger a panic in global markets that would torch the value of China’s remaining dollar-denominated holdings. That would drive up the yuan’s relative value, delivering another blow to Chinese exporters. Then there is the question of what China would do with the proceeds. Bessent has argued the Chinese central bank would have to buy the yuan, which would strengthen that currency - but it could simply hold the dollars accrued from Treasury sales instead. It could also opt to pile into other bond markets in Europe or Japan, though whether those governments would welcome purchases is another matter. Yet, Bessent’s broader point stands: weaponising Treasuries would be at best both dangerous and difficult for China. The gloves might one day come off if the People’s Republic lets its currency float freely, but President Xi Jinping has expressed a strong desire to keep the yuan stable. For now, China’s holdings of American debt will hamper more rapid financial decoupling - even if Beijing and Washington might prefer otherwise. — Reuters

Enhancing ICV through strategic data management

THE Sultanate of Oman has embraced In-Country Value (ICV) development as one of the cornerstones of wealth retention in the economy and continues to seek methods for economic diversification. Taking root first in the oil and gas sector, ICV has since expanded into the areas of health, education and infrastructure, in accordance with Oman Vision 2040. Oman has ICV policies in every sector of the economy. Infrastructure development is perhaps one of the most vital enablers of ICV. An economy that is able to innovate through proper resource allocation will certainly reap the benefits of refined data governance skills. Empowering the businesses and workforce in every economy through data is an emerging player in all markets. ICV frameworks implementation demands smooth operational processes. Implementation of these frameworks reciprocally depend and influence ICV performance.

IMPORTANCE OF DATA MANAGEMENT IN DEVELOPING ICV In the realm of value creation which needs constant monitoring for enhancement, data is of utmost significance. Data management includes acquiring, storing, organising and using data efficiently. In ICV data management enables the: Performance monitoring of ICV is tracked with high transparency; Informed policies and procurement actions are taken on evidential grounds; Claims management and accountability can be benchmarked; and Gaps and opportunities can be identified.

MAJOR ASPECTS OF DATA MANAGEMENT: • Data Collection: Capturing real time accurate data from contractors, vendors and government systems. • Data Storage: ICV related data can be stored in secure digital platforms or cloud services. • Data Integration: Data from different regions, sectors and ministries is brought together for a holistic view.



Data will become increasingly central to ICV in Oman.



DR HILAL AL SAWAI

A specialist in local content/In-country value, the writer is the Acting Director-General of Local Content, previously assigned to the General Secretariat of the Tender Board.

- Data Analysis: BI, dashboards, and AI are utilised to detect several trends.
- Data Governance: Policies pertaining to ensuring quality, privacy and ethical usage of data. ICV data management use cases:
 - Evaluation of local content contribution of suppliers is done through vendor management platforms.
 - Omanisation as well as future labour needs is monitored through HR analytic.
 - Assessing the value of local goods/ services utilised are done through procurement dashboards.
 - ICV obligations of contractors is monitored through reporting and monitoring systems.

DATA MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES: Implementing a data-driven ICV for Oman’s economy development has multiple challenges which includes the following: • Diverse Organisational Silos: The Ministry of Energy and Minerals, the Ministry of Health are two completely different sectors and organisational silos which do not share information. Data collected by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals may not be accessible to the Ministry of Health, and limits coordinated ICV planning. • Data Quality Control and Uniformity: Without a pre-defined reporting structure or auditing mechanisms within the organisation, trivial errors can spiral out of control. This results in the incomplete or misleading data sets and inaccurately reported metrics that will eventually mislead performance evaluations. • Privacy and Cybersecurity: The

privatisation of sensitive financial and employment information increases the possibility of unauthorised access for the exposed financial and employment datasets. • Basic Data Interpretation Skills: Filling in the gap within the reality supported by numbers requires skilled personnel – something that is currently amiss in most local businesses and government agencies. • Inadequate IT Infrastructure: Reporting and real-time data exchange require sophisticated IT infrastructure which is currently lacking from some small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and rural regions.

TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS Creation of National Data Platforms: An internationally used best practice for centralising national databases is the use of national data platforms. Oman would greatly benefit from having: A unified ICV database which all ministries and stakeholders can access; and Integration with eTendering, eProcurement portals, and other national employment platforms. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning: AI is capable of: Prognostic evaluation of procurement patterns, Aligning local capabilities and anticipated future requirements of the projects, Analysing Omanis youth’s training needs and ICV reporting fraud prevention using anomaly detection. Cloud Based Solutions support Enabling up-to-date information sharing between all agencies, Analytics and data entry by remote SMEs, and Cost effectiveness in terms of infrastructural expenses and increased flexibility for growth. Capacity Building: Focuses on Data science, Business intelligence tools (Power BI, Tableau), Data governance, Data ethics, and other related fields developing training programmes, workshops, or academic courses to be integrated. Blockchain for ICV Auditing: Permits the creation of ICV records on a blockchain, making them nonchangeable, which builds trust and decreases compliance malpractice by providing reliable and open record of ICV transactions.

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INDIAN male, age 28, MCA. Looking for a sales or any other suitable job. Contact no : 92032455, mail id : [ragul.rag143@gmail.com](#)

CHIEF accountant, MBA finance, 9+ years experience in financial statements, auditing, budgeting, VAT, tax, fixed assets, reconciliation, payroll. Seeking a full-time or part-time position in a senior role. Contact: [akramhaniffa@yahoo.com](#) / 93988825.

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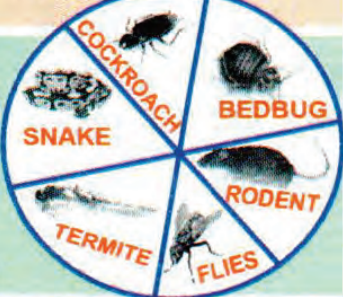
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ART/LIFE

A R T

AN ARTIST 'S BOLD REIMAGINATION OF THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH AT STAL GALLERY > 20



ENTERTAINMENT

Philippine film legend Nora Aunor dies aged 71



NORA AUNOR, considered by many Filipinos as their country's greatest actor and singer, has died aged 71, the government and her family said on Thursday.

Proclaimed a "National Artist for Film and Broadcast Arts" by the Philippines in 2022, the once child snack vendor will be honoured with a state funeral.

"It is with deep sorrow that we announce the passing of Nora Aunor, our beloved mother, celebrated television and movie actress," her adopted daughter Lotlot de Leon announced on Thursday on her Instagram page.

The cause of death, which took place on Wednesday, was not disclosed.

Aunor starred in 170 films and got her first break when cast in 1967's "All Over the World", a typical teen comedy of the era.

With a darker skin tone compared to the half-Caucasian actors that dominated local cinema at the time — Aunor brought a relatability to audiences, earning her the nickname Ate guy, or big sister guy.

She would become a sensation as part of a studio-manufactured "love team" with actor Tirso Cruz III. Together they were known as "Guy and Pip".

Critical acclaim followed nearly a decade later with starring roles in the dramas "Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos" (Three Years Without God) and "Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamo" (Once a Moth), both released in 1976.

Aunor also recorded hundreds of songs, including 1971's "Pearly Shells", said to be one of the Philippine's top-selling singles ever.

President Ferdinand Marcos described her as "a gift to the Filipino nation", and the government's National Commission for Culture and the Arts said she would receive a state funeral.

"Throughout her splendid career that spanned more than 50 years, she was our consummate actress, singer and film producer," Marcos said. "Her golden voice was a balm for all. Her genius was a gift to the Filipino nation." — AFP

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



LIFESTYLE

Lee Tsang-Yu, chairman of Char Ming Agriculture, touches flowers inside one of his orchid farms in Tainan, Taiwan. — Reuters



FILM

Bollywood actor Tiger Shroff reacts as he attends a screening of his upcoming Indian film 'Kesari Chapter 2' in Mumbai. — AFP



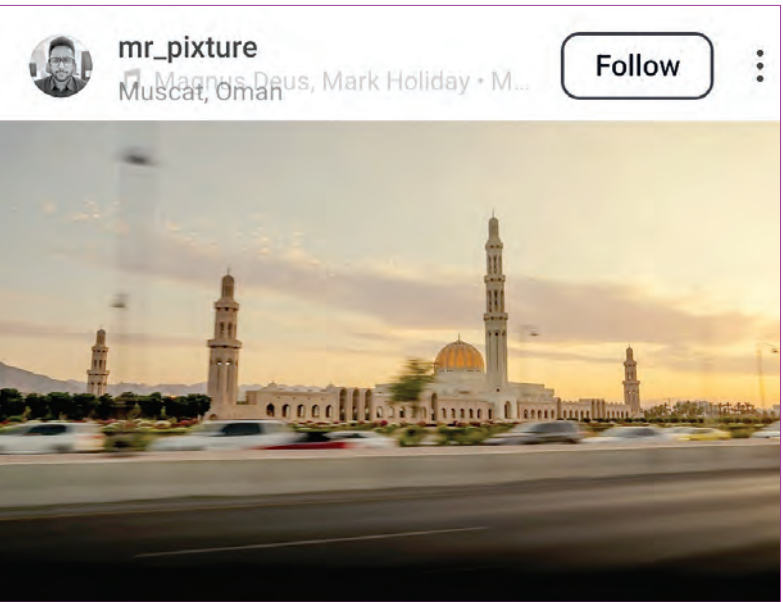
ENTERTAINMENT

French singer and composer Matthieu Chedid also known as "M" and Malian singer and songwriter Fatoumata Diawara pose during a photo session in Paris. — AFP

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Ryan Gosling to star in new ‘Star Wars’ film



AFTER HIS SCENE-stealing turn as Ken in the 2023 blockbuster hit “Barbie”, Oscar-nominated actor Ryan Gosling is taking on another huge pop culture franchise: the “Star Wars” universe.

Gosling will star in the upcoming “Star Wars: Starfighter”, due for release in May 2027, Lucasfilm announced on Friday at the Star Wars Celebration event in Japan.

The film, to be directed by Shawn Levy, will be set about five years after the events of 2019’s “Star Wars: Episode IX — The Rise of Skywalker”, Lucasfilm, a subsidiary of Disney, said in a statement.

Fans cheered as Gosling and Levy made a surprise appearance at the Japan event to confirm the project, which will begin production later this year.

The film will be “an entirely new adventure featuring all-new characters set in a period of time that has not been explored on screen yet,” the company said.

Wearing a baseball hat with

the slogan “Never Tell Me The Odds”, Gosling said: “I think it’s just exactly the advice that we need as we embark on this journey.”

“The Force is a mysterious thing. But I think as I’m here, I feel like the Force is the fans,” the Canadian actor said to cheers. “I think all we can hope for is that — may the fans be with us.”

Levy acknowledged the daunting nature of joining a franchise with a rabid fan base.

“You take on ‘Star Wars’, you take on something that’s this beloved — it’s intimidating. You’re scared, you’re nervous, you want to get it right,” the Canadian film-maker said.

“But we have a feeling that with this story, with this collaboration, we can get it right.”

The standalone film will come a year after “The Mandalorian & Grogu”, an expansion of the popular Disney+ streaming series starring Pedro Pascal due out in 2026. — AFP



Gustavo Dudamel: the superstar conductor building bridges to pop

AS THE FULL moon rose, conductor Gustavo Dudamel’s signature theatrics were projected with a front-facing view to a spellbound audience, his baton whipping his orchestra into Richard Wagner’s legendary “Ride of The Valkyries”.

It was perhaps an unlikely spectacle at Coachella, but one that generated a huge, enthusiastic crowd — and was befitting of a maestro who has become a bona fide celebrity.

“WERK!” shouted one young audience member at Dudamel, as he and the Los Angeles Philharmonic began what was seen as one of the festival’s most memorable performances.

Under Dudamel’s direction for the past 17 years, the LA Phil has cultivated an air of cool, fostering a relationship with pop and celebrity especially during the ensemble’s summer series at the Hollywood Bowl.

So it was only natural that the 44-year-old take his act to California’s Coachella, one of the world’s highest-profile music festivals that in recent years has gained a reputation for buzzy surprises and eclectic line-ups.

The orchestra delivered, launching into a mesmerising set that included classics like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, film themes like John Williams’ “Imperial March” from “Star Wars”, and a genre-spanning array of guests including country star Maren Morris, Icelandic jazz-pop singer Laufey, LA’s own Becky G and EDM DJ Zedd.

The grand finale saw Dudamel’s baton conjure bars from one LL Cool J, a genre-blending pas de deux that mirrored a rap battle.

“This place represents a culture,” Dudamel said of the festival in a backstage interview with AFP, ahead of his and the Phil’s first performance, which they will reprise on Saturday during Coachella’s final weekend.

“This is what I believe is the mission of art, this identity,” he explained. “The identity of a new generation, hungry for beauty.”



- ‘CATHARSIS’ -

Over the years, some observers have marvelled over — or criticised — Dudamel’s ties with Hollywood and his efforts to unite the classical world with music of the Hot 100 variety.

But for the conductor — whose talent was shaped by Venezuela’s illustrious “El Sistema” musical education programme — working across genre is “the most natural thing,” he said.

In his youth, “my father had a salsa band, and I grew up listening to that and going to the orchestra, and it was always very natural to just enjoy music — whatever it was, a bolero, a rock band,” Dudamel

recalled.

“There are different styles of music, but music is one.”

Johanna Rees, the vice-president of presentations at the LA Phil, one of the most prestigious orchestras in the United States, says cross-genre collaborations are in part about drawing in fresh audience members.

“It could be considered an entry point,” she said, “exposing the orchestra to these younger, newer audiences so they can come back and check out more things and discover orchestral concerts on their own.”

A lot of audience members at Coachella, she predicted, were “seeing an orchestra for the very first time.”

“It’s quite awesome, in the most literal sense of that word, to see how everybody can come together and make this music completely without the genre.”

Some in the classical music world have balked at this notion, considering it a dilution, or cheapening, of the art form.

But such criticism misses the expansive possibilities ingrained in the process of collaboration, Rees said: “We’re not creating orchestral wallpaper behind a band.”

“It’s hearing the music in a different way. It’s not dumbing it down,” she added. “It’s just making it another version of itself.”

The prime sunset slot at Coachella serves as a capstone ushering in Dudamel’s final year of his nearly two-decade run in Los Angeles — the product of “years of dreaming, and breaking walls, and connecting more not only with styles of music but with different people’s identities,” he said.

It’s an ethos the maestro aims to bring to the eminent New York Philharmonic when he officially assumes his post as that company’s next director in the 2026-27 season.

And it’s vital, he said, in a moment of boiling political turmoil.

“We need these spaces of catharsis,” he said, to “connect to the power of a tool of humanity that is music.” — AFP

FEATURES

BY NAJAH AL RIYAMI

STAL GALLERY opened its latest exhibition on April 13 in Muscat, presenting “Gilgamesh: Symbols and Connotations” by acclaimed Iraqi artist Dr Sabeeh Kalash. Held under the auspices of Said al Saqlawi, President of the Omani Society for Writers and Literati, the event brought together artists, writers and cultural enthusiasts for an evocative evening where ancient myth met contemporary vision. The exhibition runs until April 22.

Rooted in the cultural wealth of Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh: Symbols and Connotations presents the world’s oldest epic through a strikingly modern visual language. “This exhibition unfolds the timeless Epic of Gilgamesh through the expressive strokes of a contemporary brush,” Kalash explains. “Inspired by Mesopotamian heritage, the works portray Gilgamesh not merely as a legendary king, but as a universal symbol of humanity’s eternal search — for meaning, friendship, transcendence and immortality.”

Each painting offers a poetic exploration of key moments from the epic: Enkidu’s creation, the battle in the Cedar Forest, the Great Flood, the serpent and the quest for eternal life. These themes emerge through symbolic forms, abstract compositions and layered visual metaphors that invite deep reflection. Kalash’s artistic vision is as personal as it is historical. “The inspiration behind Gilgamesh: Symbols and Connotations was born from a profound connection to the cultural legacy of Mesopotamia — the cradle of civilisation and my ancestral land,” he shares. “The epic offered a timeless mirror reflecting the essence of human existence: the struggle with mortality, the thirst for knowledge, the power of friendship and the eternal quest for meaning.”

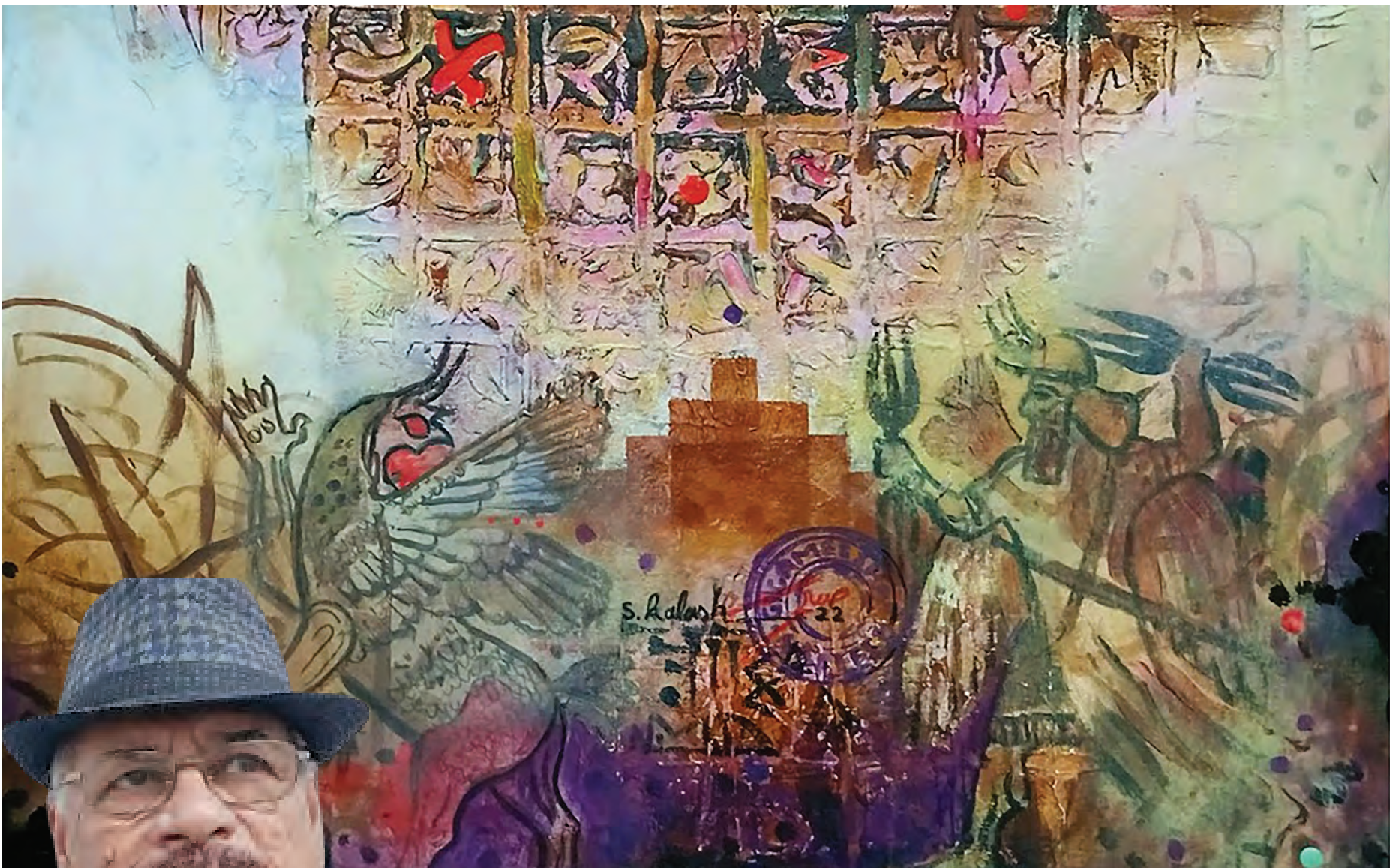
What sets this collection apart is how Kalash treats the myth as a living narrative that still resonates today. “Amidst the noise of modern life and the fragmentation of identity, Gilgamesh emerged as a symbol of continuity, introspection and resilience,” he notes.

That introspection is tangible across the canvases, many of which resemble ancient ruins brought to life — etched with bull horns, faded inscriptions and fractured forms. One piece features a kneeling, blue-hued figure caught mid-transformation, surrounded by symbolic orbs and grids. Another overlays winged beasts and warriors with stamp-like motifs and vibrant colour, echoing the epic’s chaos and complexity.

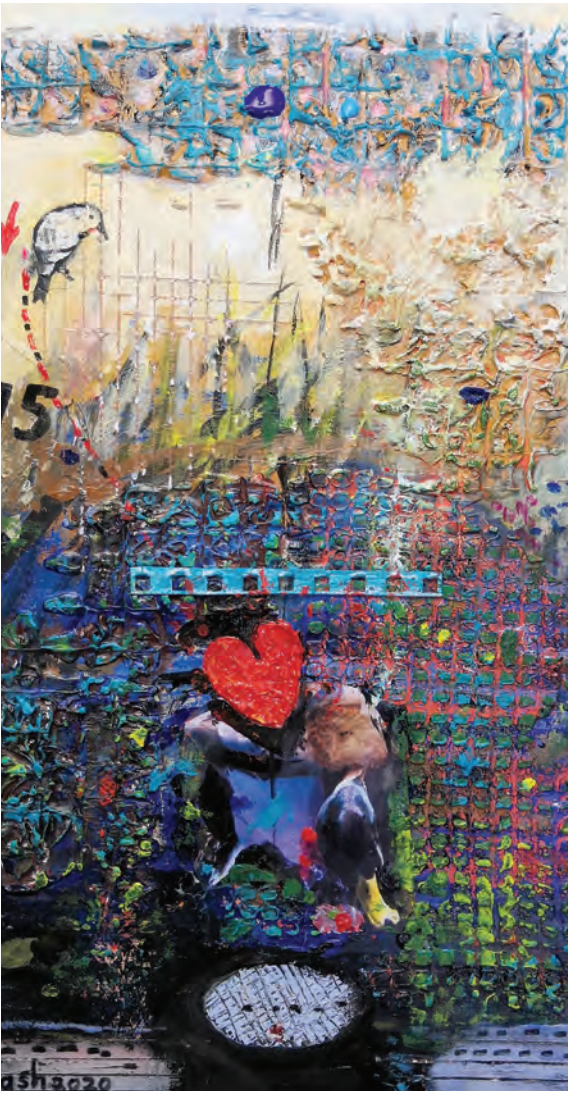
“The creative process was fuelled by personal experiences of exile, longing and the search for belonging — parallels to Gilgamesh’s own journey of loss and discovery,” Kalash reflects. “Each canvas became a meeting point of memory and imagination — a conversation across centuries.”

Dr Sabeeh Kalash, born in Baghdad in 1948, is one of the Arab world’s most respected contemporary artists. He holds a PhD in Contemporary Art History from Sorbonne University in Paris and has taught at leading institutions including the University of Baghdad, Yarmouk University, Al Mustansiriya University and Sultan Qaboos University, where he chaired the Art Education Department until 2014. His work — shown in over a dozen countries — is widely recognised for exploring themes of memory, mythology and identity. In 2020, he received first prize in Oman’s international art competition on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Presented at Stal Gallery, known for fostering cross-cultural dialogue through



An artist’s bold reimagination of the Epic of Gilgamesh at Stal Gallery



contemporary art, this exhibition offers more than an artistic reinterpretation — it is a thoughtful excavation of meaning and myth. Gilgamesh: Symbols and Connotations reflects the enduring power of storytelling and the timeless relevance of the human journey.

The exhibition is open to the public until April 22 at Stal Gallery, Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos, Muscat. Visitors are invited to step into a world where memory and myth converge — where the figure of Gilgamesh walks again, not through ancient clay tablets, but across canvases alive with colour, symbolism and emotional depth.