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CHAMPIONS

His Majesty concludes 3-day state visit to Belgium

Oman, Belgium to boost cooperation

THE Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium affirmed their intention to boost bilateral cooperation in key economic sectors including maritime activities and cooperation between ports, energy transformation and green hydrogen production.

This was stated in a joint communique issued on the occasion of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's state visit to Belgium. It reads as follows: "From December 2-4, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sultan of Oman, undertook a State Visit to the Kingdom of Belgium at the invitation of His Majesty the King of the Belgians, marking a significant milestone in the enduring friendship and cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium.

"The visit highlights the strong and longstanding ties between the two nations, rooted in mutual respect, shared values, and a commitment to peace and prosperity, as affirmed during the official visit of Their Majesties the King and Queen to the Sultanate of Oman in February 2022.

"The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium underscore their intention to strengthen bilateral cooperation across key economic sectors. Acknowledging the potential for growth, both countries continue exploration for opportunities for collaboration in fields such as maritime activities and cooperation between ports, energy transition and green hydrogen, trade, and service industries, as well as life sciences, technological innovation and aerospace.

"The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium look forward to enhancing bilateral cooperation on investments and the creation of joint investment opportunities. Both countries are currently negotiating with the intention to reach a mutually profitable extension of the Port of Duqm concession, to further anchor their economies ties. They pledge to facilitate dialogue, promote investor-friendly policies and explore avenues for growth across the aforementioned key mutually beneficial sectors.

"In the spirit of advancing knowledge and innovation, the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium are committed to deepening academic cooperation and fostering greater cultural exchange. Both nations recognise the value of collaborative research, mutually beneficial exchange programmes and joint initiatives that will build stronger ties between

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik left the Kingdom of Belgium on Wednesday evening after a three-day state visit. His Majesty was seen off at Brussels Military Airport by Vice Admiral Jan De Beurme, Representative of the King in the Kingdom of Belgium, Tinne Van der Straeten, Minister of Energy, some Belgian officials and members of the Omani embassy in Belgium.

their people.

"The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium reaffirmed their dedication to fostering peace and stability in the conflict zones in the world. Recognising the critical importance of dialogue and diplomacy, both nations expressed a shared commitment to constructive engagement in addressing regional and international challenges.

"The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom

of Belgium look forward to build upon this fruitful relationship, united in their commitment to a peaceful, prosperous, sustainable and interconnected future for all.

"The Sultanate of Oman wishes to convey warm thanks to the Kingdom of Belgium for their matchless hospitality.

"This statement serves as a testament to the strong partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium." — ONA

HIS MAJESTY'S
VISIT A MILESTONE
IN ENDURING
FRIENDSHIP

AFFIRMS
INTENTION TO
BOOST BILATERAL
RELATIONS

COOPERATION
IN MARINE SECTOR,
ENERGY AND
GREEN HYDROGEN

BOTH COUNTRIES
TO EXPLORE WIDER
OPPORTUNITIES IN
VARIOUS FIELDS

LOOK FORWARD
FOR FORGING
MORE JOINT
INVESTMENTS

OMAN, BELGIUM
AGREE TO FOSTER
GREATER CULTURAL
EXCHANGE

HM VISITS BELGIAN PORT OF ANTWERP

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, accompanied by King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians, visited the building of the Port of Antwerp on Wednesday, as part of His Majesty's state visit to the Kingdom of Belgium. **DETAILS ON P4**

HM VISITS QUEEN ELISABETH MUSIC CHAPEL

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, accompanied by King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians, and his spouse Queen Mathilde Marie Christine Ghislaine, Queen of the Belgians, visited Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in the Wallonia region. **DETAILS ON P3**

His Majesty concludes



HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq left the Kingdom of Belgium on Wednesday evening after a three-day state visit. His Majesty was seen off at Brussels Military Airport by Vice Admiral Jan De Beurme, Representative of the King in the Kingdom of Belgium, Tinne Van der Straeten, Minister of Energy, some Belgian officials and members of the Omani embassy in Belgium.

Upon his departure, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq sent a cable of thanks to King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians and his spouse Queen Mathilde Marie Christine Ghislaine, Queen of the Belgians.

In the cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere appreciation for the warm welcome and hospitality.

His Majesty lauded the outcomes of his meeting with the King, as it was an opportunity to discuss the friendship relations between the two countries and means of boosting them in various spheres to serve interests of the Omani and Belgian peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan wished the King and the Queen good health, well-being and success to achieve further aspirations of progress and prosperity for the Belgian people.

During the visit, His Majesty the Sultan was accompanied by a high-ranking official delegation that comprised HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq 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 Hamad bin Said al Aufi, Head of the Private Office, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Rua bint Issa al Zadjaliyah, Ambassador of Oman to Belgium. — ONA



state visit to Belgium



HM visits Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel

MAI AL ABRİ
BRUSSELS, DEC 4

HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, alongside King Philippe Leopold Marie, King of the Belgians, visited the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in the Wallonia region on Wednesday.

Upon their arrival, they were received by the Governor of Wallonia and the Mayor of Namur city.

The Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel is a renowned institution that has played a significant role in fostering musical talent.

Founded in 1939, it was established by Queen Elizabeth of Belgium to promote the arts, particularly classical music.

The Chapel has since become an iconic venue for classical performances and a centre for training young musicians from around the world.

During their visit, His Majesty the Sultan and the King were treated to several musical compositions, showcasing the rich cultural heritage and exceptional talent nurtured at the Chapel.

After that, a private luncheon was held at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in honour of His Majesty the Sultan and the accompanying delegation, in the presence of the King and Queen of the Belgians.

Then His Majesty the Sultan presented a musical instrument as a gift for the centre.

The Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel continues to support the careers of emerging musicians, particularly through its prestigious competitions, which have launched the careers of many famous artists.

Accompanying His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik during the visit was the official delegation, which further strengthened the cultural ties between Oman and Belgium.

The visit highlighted the importance of cultural exchange and the shared appreciation for the arts between the two nations.



HM visits Belgian Port of Antwerp



HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, accompanied by King Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians, visited the building of the Port of Antwerp on Wednesday, as part of His Majesty's state visit to the Kingdom of Belgium.

Upon his arrival at the facility, His Majesty

the Sultan was received by the Governor and Mayor of Antwerp, the CEO of the port and some Belgian officials.

During the visit, His Majesty was briefed on the importance of the port, its strategic location and future plans.

The meeting touched on areas of cooperation in the sectors of renewable

energy, green hydrogen and liquefied natural gas transportation, as well as ways of consolidating partnership in the ports and logistics sector.

Then, His Majesty the Sultan and the King signed the Visitors Book.

After that, a photo was taken for His Majesty the Sultan, the King, the official delegation

from both sides, and a number of officials and CEOs.

At the end of the visit, the administration of Antwerp Port presented His Majesty the Sultan with a commemorative gift.

On his turn, His Majesty presented them with a ship model as a commemorative gift.

— ONA



SHORTTAKES

HIS MAJESTY GREETES KING OF THAILAND

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to King Maha Vajiralongkorn of Thailand on his country’s National Day. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to King Vajiralongkorn. His Majesty also wished the people of Thailand further progress, prosperity and stability.

INFORMATION MINISTER RECEIVES GCC OFFICIAL



Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, with Shaikh Mubarak Fahad Al Jaber Al Ahmad al Sabah

MUSCAT: Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, received in his office on Wednesday Shaikh Mubarak Fahad Al Jaber Al Ahmad al Sabah, Director-General of the GCC Joint Programme Production Institution (GCCJPPI), who is currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting dealt with various areas of cooperation in developing media programmes that highlight issues of common concern to GCC states. The meeting was attended by Mohammed bin Said al Balushi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Information, and other officials from the Ministry of Information. During the visit, Shaikh Mubarak al Sabah toured Oman News Agency (ONA), the News Centre, the Digital Studios Complex and the Directorate-General of Electronic Media. — ONA

LAUNCH OF DUQM-1 POSTPONED



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and the National Space Services Company (NASCOM) have postponed the launch of the scientific rocket “Duqm-1” — scheduled on Wednesday — due to bad weather. The ministry and the company explained in a joint statement that the rocket will be launched when weather conditions improve. The statement affirmed that there would be no direct media coverage of the launch of Duqm-1 rocket, since it is the first experimental launch. The statement advised members of the public to undertake precautionary measures during the target time. — ONA

54 km of ride in tribute to National Day and promotion of healthy living

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 4

A group of 13 passionate riders rode from Al Qurum roundabout to Al Mouj roundabout and back last month, sending out strong messages of healthy living commemorating Oman’s 54th National Day. “We are aiming at sending out the importance of healthy living commemorating Oman’s 54th National Day and to encourage the environmental protection carried out by Oman today along with a campaign against the use of carbon which needs to

be completely reduced,” said Abdul Aziz, coordinator of the Malayalee Riders Group. The ride was organised to further promote cycling. In January, in connection with the 70th Republic Day of India, the Malayali Riders completed 75 km of cycling. “Our ride calling for healthy living on a special occasion like the national Day wouldn’t have been possible without the support of the local authorities and the cycling signs on the streets, especially on the November 18 Street, were really helpful,” Aziz said.



Malayalee Riders Group during the ride last month

Silal market officially opens

STAFF REPORTER
BARKA, DEC 4

THE Central Fruits and Vegetables Market Silal in the Wilayat of Barka was officially opened under the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, on Wednesday. Silal Market is a national and international marketplace for trading vegetables and fruits and a marketing outlet for home-grown agricultural products by agricultural firms and individual farmers. The project implementation took over four years starting from the planning stage back in 2020, then designing the general plan, signing an agreement for shifting storage and wholesale facilities from the Mawaleh Central Fruits and Vegetables Market to the new market located in Khazaen Economic City in May 2021. The construction work began in May 2022 leading and commercial operations commenced in June this year 2024. Khalid al Khatib, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Silal, said: “We commend the efforts undertaken by the government, civil and private institutions, as well as companies affiliated with the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) to implement this project. The Silal market is the outcome of joint efforts made by the Oman Infrastructure Investment Fund (Rakiza) owned by OIA with a 60 per cent share, Salem and Partners (25 per cent), Khazna Logistics with (10 per cent) and Al Kalbani International Investment (5 per cent).” Othman bin Ali al Hattali, Operations Manager at Silal Market, said: “We are really proud of the market’s modern, integrated facilities that are designed and implemented according to the highest international specifications and standards. The market has central cooling areas, a wholesale market, dry warehouses, sorting and packaging workshops, a customs



Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, inaugurates Silal in Barka on Wednesday



inspection platform, agricultural quarantine, a food safety laboratory, stalls for selling and marketing local products, administrative offices for wholesalers as well as other service facilities. Since the start of the trial operation in the market at the end of June this year, the single inspection station has been able to deal with more than 7,000 trucks from different countries of origin, and the market received more than 800 local trucks daily from governorates and wilayats of the Sultanate of Oman. The market is visited by about 5,000 people daily.” The daily trading volume at Silal Market exceeds 5,000 tonnes of local and imported vegetables and fruits with a loss rate of less than 5 per cent thanks the the market’s efficient cooling system. Silal Market provides more than 300 direct jobs for nationals as well as 450 indirect jobs. Al Hattali said.

Sohar University hosts scientific forum

STAFF REPORTER
SUHAR, DEC 4

Highlighting the importance of scientific research and international partnerships, Sohar University hosted the 15th International Scientific Forum. This groundbreaking event, the first of its kind in Oman, was held under the theme “University Innovation and Comprehensive Development” in collaboration with the international scientific platform Arid. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of Al Batinah North, with the forum gathering 1,200 scholars, researchers and experts from around the globe. The forum received 133 scientific research submissions, of which 104 were accepted. The opening ceremony began with a speech by Dr Hamdan al Fazari, Vice-Chancellor of Sohar University, who stated: “Our partnership with the



The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of Al Batinah North, with the forum gathering 1,200 scholars, researchers and experts from around the globe.

‘Arid’ scientific platform reflects our commitment to supporting scientific research and staying aligned with the accelerating global technological advancements. Innovation and entrepreneurship are fundamental pillars for building a knowledge-based economy

that fosters societal prosperity and development.” This was followed by a keynote address from Dr Saif al Suwaidi, General Supervisor of the forum and CEO of Arid, who remarked: “Comprehensive development and university innovation are the central

themes of this year’s forum. Here, scholars and researchers from diverse disciplines convene to discuss the role of universities as key drivers of development by promoting social responsibility, managing knowledge, and fostering innovative solutions aimed at human advancement and societal growth.” The main speaker, Prof Yousef al Suwaidi, emphasised in his address: “The International Scientific Forum has always been a beacon that brings together elite scientists, thinkers and researchers from across the Arab world. They discuss the latest trends and advancements in various scientific fields, including humanities, social sciences, applied sciences, health sciences, engineering and development. The forum sessions aim to enhance the exchange of expertise and shape innovative solutions that serve the interests of our communities and nations.”

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Protesters hold anti-Sara Duterte placards (C) and portraits of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos during a rally in front of the Congress building in Manila. — AFP

PHILIPPINE VP
FACES SECOND
IMPEACHMENT



SARA DUTERTE

Philippine Vice President

MANILA: Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte was hit with a second impeachment complaint on Wednesday, as she faces probes over an alleged death threat against President Ferdinand Marcos and use of government funds. The daughter of former president Rodrigo

Duterte has been engulfed in political turmoil after her alliance with Marcos spectacularly collapsed ahead of next year’s mid-term elections.

Wednesday’s complaint filed by activists, teachers, former congressional members and others accused Duterte of betraying public trust for the alleged misuse of millions of dollars in public funds while she was education minister, left-wing coalition Makabayan said.

Under the country’s constitution, impeachment proceedings cannot be started against the same person more than once within a year, meaning the House of Representatives, where the two complaints were filed, will have to choose one or consolidate them. The latest complaint adds to Duterte’s legal woes as she faces a probe into her alleged death threat against Marcos and another inquiry into her use of government funds. — AFP

DEATH TOLL RISES
TO 29 IN SOUTHERN
THAILAND FLOODS

BANGKOK: More than 30,000 people have been forced to flee their homes due to severe flooding in southern Thailand, where the death toll climbed to 29, officials said on Wednesday. More heavy rain is forecast in the area, where over 155,000 households have already been affected by flooding, according to the Thai government’s public relations department.

Five southern provinces have been hit -- Pattani, Narathiwat, Songkhla, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung -- forcing more than 33,000 people to leave their homes, the spokesperson for Thailand’s ministry of public health said in a statement. Disaster response teams were working to drain floodwater and evacuate flood victims to dry areas, the country’s disaster agency said on its Facebook page on Wednesday morning. The death toll now stands at 29, up from 25 reported on Tuesday.

The Thai Meteorological Department warned that a weather system moving from the South China Sea across Malaysia and the Andaman Sea was expected to bring heavy rain and further flooding to southern Thailand. — AFP

BEATS RECORD

China reports warmest autumn ever



China reported its warmest autumn this year since records began decades ago, its National Climate Centre announced on Wednesday. “During this year’s autumn season (September 1 to November 30), the national average temperature was 11.8 degrees Celsius, 1.5 degrees higher than the average year, the highest ever since 1961,” the centre said. In China this autumn, most regions experienced temperatures 1 to 2 degrees Celsius above average. — AFP

SYRIAN
MILITARY
BATTLES
FIGHTERS IN
THE NORTH OF
HAMA CITY

AMMAN: Intense air strikes and the arrival of pro-government reinforcements drove gunmen back overnight from the edge of Hama, a major city whose fall would pile pressure on government, both sides said on Wednesday. Fighters have staged their biggest advance in years over the past week, seizing Aleppo and much of the surrounding countryside. By Tuesday, they had all but reached the Hama outskirts a third of the way between Aleppo and Damascus.

UN Syria envoy Geir Pedersen warned the Security Council that the situation was “extremely fluid and dangerous”, adding that Syria faced danger of “further division, deterioration and destruction”. Any prolonged return of fighting in Syria risks further destabilising a region roiled by conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon.

State media and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said there had been intense fighting over Jabal Zain Al Abidin,

a hill 5 km northeast of Hama and overlooking a major road into the city.

The rapid gunmen advances have concerned Syria’s allies saying it would strongly support efforts to “restore constitutional order”. Iraqi fighters this week moved into Syria in support of Assad, whose government has started a new conscription push with checkpoints in Damascus and eastern Deir Al Zor signing up young men to join the army, residents said. — Reuters

Protestors demand exit of
South Korean president

THOUSANDS of protesters marched on President Yoon Suk Yeol’s office in the South Korean capital on Wednesday evening, joining a push by the country’s opposition to impeach the leader after his extraordinary but short-lived imposition of martial law. Yoon’s shock bid to suspend civilian rule for the first time in over four decades -- before being overturned by lawmakers in a night of drama -- plunged South Korea into deep turmoil and alarmed its close allies. The future of Yoon, a conservative politician and former star public prosecutor who was elected president in 2022, is now highly uncertain.

Live feed video showed thousands of protesters marching towards Yoon’s office in central Seoul after staging a rally in Gwanghwamun Square. South Korea’s opposition parties -- whose lawmakers jumped fences and tussled with security forces to vote down the martial law -- filed a motion to impeach Yoon.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol violated the constitution by declaring martial law in a move aimed at evading criminal investigations, according to an impeachment motion. Yoon “gravely and extensively violated the Constitution and the law” the motion filed by opposition parties says, adding that the imposition of martial law was “motivated not by national security concerns but by an intent to evade investigations into criminal allegations involving President Yoon and his family”. The opposition holds a large



The nation’s largest umbrella labour union called an “indefinite general strike” until Yoon resigns. Even the leader of Yoon’s own ruling party described the attempt as “tragic” while calling for those involved to be held accountable



People call for the resignation of S Korea president as they take part in a protest. — AFP

majority in the 300-member parliament and needs only a handful of defections from the president’s party to secure the two-thirds majority needed to pass the motion. The DP has also filed charges of “insurrection” against the president, some of his ministers and top military and police officials -- which can carry a penalty of life imprisonment or even death. The nation’s largest umbrella labour union called an “indefinite general strike” until Yoon resigns. Even the leader of Yoon’s own ruling party described the attempt as “tragic” while calling for those involved to be held accountable. Seoul’s stock exchange closed down more than one per cent on Wednesday as markets were roiled by the turmoil.

In his late-night television announcement, Yoon declared martial law, citing the threat of

North Korea and “anti-state forces”. More than 280 troops, some flown in by helicopters, arrived at parliament to lock down the site. But 190 lawmakers defied rifle-carrying soldiers to force their way into parliament to vote against the move.

This left Yoon with no choice but to retract his decision and call off the military in another television address six hours later. Under the constitution, martial law must be lifted when a majority in parliament demands it. Yoon had said that his imposition of martial law was to “safeguard a liberal South Korea from the threats posed by North Korea’s communist forces and to eliminate anti-state elements plundering people’s freedom and happiness”. Yoon did not elaborate on the North’s threats, but the South remains technically at war with nuclear-armed Pyongyang. — AFP



ISRAELI FORCES KILL 20 IN GAZA

CAIRO: Israeli tanks pushed into northern parts of the Khan Yunis area in the south of the Gaza Strip on Wednesday and Palestinian medics said Israeli air strikes had killed at least 20 people across the enclave. Residents said tanks advanced one day after the Israeli military issued new evacuation orders, saying there had been rocket launches from the area. With shells falling near residential areas, families left their homes and headed westwards towards the humanitarian-designated area of Al Mawasi nearby. Medics said 11 people were killed in three air strikes on areas in Gaza, including six children and one medic. Five of the dead had been queuing outside a bakery, they said. — Reuters

LANDMARK AGREEMENT

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan reach border deal



Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on Wednesday announced a border demarcation deal, potentially ending decades of territorial disputes. The 970-kilometre border, part of which was not demarcated, is among the most mountainous in the world. The deal, reached by Bishkek’s and Dushanbe’s powerful secret service chiefs, comes almost two years after an intense and bloody border conflict killed around 100 people in September 2022. — AFP

TRUCE ROUTE

Myanmar group calls for talks with junta



A second major Myanmar group has said it is ready for Beijing-mediated talks with the junta to end more than a year of renewed fighting that has ravaged areas along the Chinese border. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA) has fought the Myanmar military for more than a decade. “From today onwards we will cease fire immediately, and will not actively attack the Myanmar army,” the MNDA said. — AFP

LASTINGPROJECT



US President Joe Biden(C) pose with African leaders, during a tour of a Carrinho facility, near Lobito, Angola. — Reuters

PRESIDENT BIDEN MEETS AFRICAN LEADERS IN ANGOLA

LOBITO: US President Joe Biden met African leaders in the Angolan port of Lobito on Wednesday to advance a plan to extend a railway that could channel critical minerals from Congo and Zambia to the West via Lobito. The United States has provided a \$550 million loan to support the Lobito venture, which involves refurbishing an existing railway through Angola and extending it into Congo's mining heartland as part of the first phase.

No date has been given for its completion yet, while a second phase that would link Lobito to Zambia via a new railway line is still at the preparation stage, with an aim to break ground in 2026 according to Washington.

The presidents of Angola, Congo and Zambia and the vice president of Tanzania joined Biden for a summit in Lobito on the last day of his first and only trip to Africa as president. The second phase of the project envisions extending the Lobito corridor railway through Zambia. — Reuters



BRITAIN, QATAR TO SIGN AGREEMENT

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani shake hands at Downing Street, in London. Britain and Qatar were set to sign a memorandum of understanding to promote cooperation in financial services, with a focus on the development of sectors such as fintech and green finance. — Reuters

French government risks falling in no-confidence vote

PARIS: France's government on Wednesday faced a no-confidence vote that could spell the end of Prime Minister Michel Barnier's administration, plunging the country into uncharted waters. The toppling of the Barnier government after just three months in office would present President Emmanuel Macron with the unenviable choice of picking a viable successor with over two years of his presidential term left.

The National Assembly lower

house is due to debate two motions brought by the hard left and the far right in a standoff over next year's austerity budget, after the prime minister on Monday forced through a social security financing bill without a vote. The motion brought by the far-right National Rally (RN) of three-time presidential candidate Marine Le Pen is expected to be rejected. But Le Pen has said her forces would back the left's motion, giving it enough numbers to pass in an evening vote that could topple a

French government for the first time in more than 60 years.

Barnier said he believed his government could still survive. "I want this and it is possible," Barnier said on television late on Tuesday. He accused Le Pen of "trying to get into a kind of bidding war" in their talks.

The turmoil follows a snap parliamentary election called by Macron in the summer that tried and failed to halt the march of the far right. — AFP

Scholz: Early to consider peacekeepers in Ukraine

GERMAN Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Wednesday it was too early and "inappropriate" to discuss whether Berlin would in future send troops to a possible peacekeeping force in Ukraine. He also stressed that, as Ukraine's war with Russia rages on, it was "out of the question that we would send troops or German soldiers to Ukraine in the current situation".

Scholz was addressing speculation which had followed comments by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at a meeting with her Nato counterparts in Brussels on Tuesday. Asked about a possible future multinational peacekeeping force in Ukraine, Baerbock said: "We will of course also support everything that serves peace in the future with all our strength from the German side." This was interpreted by some as leaving the door open to German participation in such a hypothetical force.

But Scholz emphasised that Baerbock was speaking about "what might happen in a future post-war period and was trying to avoid saying yes or no".

Speaking in parliament, he added that "it was totally inappropriate for us to speculate on what might happen after a negotiated ceasefire".

Foreign ministry spokesman Sebastian Fischer told a regular press conference that Baerbock's comments had been "exaggerated" in some media reports. There was "currently no indication" that Russia was willing to enter into talks, Fischer said, meaning that discussions over what a peace deal could look like were premature.

Germany has been Kyiv's second biggest supplier of military aid since Russia launched its full-scale attack of the country in February 2022. However, Scholz has refused to send long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine, saying that this could lead to a direct conflict between Russia and Nato.

Ahead of an early parliamentary election expected at the end of February, Scholz has emphasised his cautious stance on Ukraine, in contrast to the leader of the main opposition CDU/CSU Friedrich Merz, who has advocated sending Ukraine the Taurus



A view shows apartment buildings damaged by a Russian military strike, in the front line city of Vuhledar in Donetsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters file photo

missiles.

Meanwhile, Nato chief Mark Rutte said on Wednesday that Russia was giving support to North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes in exchange for Pyongyang sending troops to fight in the war with Ukraine.

He urged NATO members to send enough arms to Ukraine to change the course of the conflict as Russian forces make gains along the frontline.

"In return for troops and weapons, Russia is providing North Korea with support for its missile and nuclear programmes," Rutte told journalists after a meeting of Nato foreign ministers.

"These developments could destabilise the Korean Peninsula and even threaten the United States."

Ukraine and its allies say North Korea

has sent soldiers to Russia to fight alongside Moscow's forces in the Kursk region.

Rutte has stressed the risk the alliance between Moscow and Pyongyang poses to the United States ahead of Donald Trump's return to office.

Washington's allies are trying to find ways to convince Trump that it is in his interest to keep up US support for Ukraine.

The volatile Republican has cast doubt on continuing vast US military aid to Kyiv and promised to cut a quick deal to end the war.

"The increasing alignment of Russia and its allies highlights the global nature of the threats we face, including the escalating dangers of the ongoing war in Ukraine," Rutte said.

The situation on the battlefield is looking increasingly grim for Ukraine as Trump's inauguration comes near. — AFP

Georgia police raid opposition offices as PM vows to curb protests

TBILISI: Georgian police raided the offices of opposition parties on Wednesday after the government vowed to crack down on those organising pro-EU protests, deepening a political crisis engulfing the Black Sea nation. Tbilisi has been rocked by turmoil since the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory in an October 26 parliamentary election which opposition groups decried as rigged.

Tens of thousands have taken to the streets to protest against the alleged fraud, with Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's announcement last Thursday that Georgia would not hold EU membership talks until 2028 sparking uproar and a fresh wave of rallies. Around 300 people have been detained and dozens, including protestors and police, injured in intense clashes outside the parliament building in central Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister

Kobakhidze vowed to crack down on what he called "radical" political forces responsible for organising the protests. "It is clear to everyone that these violent actions are entirely coordinated by the radical opposition... No one will escape accountability, including the politicians hiding in their offices," he said. Moments after, Georgian police beat and arrested the leader of the Akhali liberal opposition party, while conducting a raid on the offices of the Droa party, live TV showed.

Droa leader Elene Khoshtaria said on X: "They are now in our party office, searching. Likely hoping to find something to charge some of our members with trumped-up charges." Police also raided offices of the Youth Organisation of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party, one of the party leaders, Levan Khabeishvili, told journalists. UNM in a statement



Anti-government protesters launch fireworks towards police during mass demonstrations, in central Tbilisi. — AFP

accused the Georgian government of launching "all-out terror and repressions against opponents".

Over six consecutive nights of protest, demonstrators have hurled fireworks at riot police, who have deployed water cannon and tear gas and charged at protesters. Thick grey fog from the tear gas canisters has blanketed Tbilisi's central

Rustaveli Avenue, with several of the rallies lasting until dawn. At least 15 people were admitted to hospital after the latest demonstrations on Tuesday night, authorities said on Wednesday. In the face of international condemnation of overuse of police force, Kobakhidze has refused to back down. He said the state would take "all necessary measures" to quash the "revolution" being plotted by the pro-Western opposition. Several demonstrators, including journalists, have been hospitalised after being brutally detained and, they allege, beaten in custody by the security forces.

Pro-EU President Salome Zurbishvili accused Georgian Dream of closing "shops selling protective gas masks, protective goggles, and helmets, leaving peaceful protesters deprived of their elementary protection." Some protesters have come to the rallies equipped with gas masks. — AFP

OPINION

A bird lost forever and the urgent call to save those still here



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI

The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

I woke up to the soft tones of my virtual assistant speaker, its automated voice blending with the hum of the morning. As I stood at the sink brushing my teeth, a news headline cut through the routine: “The slender-billed curlew has been declared officially extinct.”

I froze, toothbrush in hand, as a wave of unexpected grief washed over me. How could I feel such a profound loss for a bird I’d never seen, perhaps never even thought of before? Yet, there it was—a species gone forever, a silent departure that spoke volumes about our world. Growing up, I remember learning about the dodo, a bird so entwined with the concept of extinction that it became a cautionary tale.

We’d wonder how people of the past could have allowed such a creature to disappear. Those stories felt like distant history, lessons from another time. But now, in our lifetime, we are witnessing another extinction. The slender-billed curlew—a marvel of migration spanning thousands of kilometers from Siberia to the Mediterranean—has vanished. This loss isn’t confined to its habitat; it ripples across continents, a shared tragedy that underscores the fragility of life and the irreversible consequences of inaction.

As I absorbed the news of the curlew’s extinction, my thoughts turned to the birds here in Oman that face similar threats. At ESO, we have witnessed firsthand the fragility of species like the Egyptian and Lappet-faced vultures. Their survival, too, hangs by a thread, highlighting the universal need for conservation. Since 2012, we have been dedicated to understanding and protecting these birds. By fitting satellite trackers on juvenile vultures, we’ve uncovered vital insights into their migratory patterns, feeding habits, and the growing threats they face—from habitat destruction to poisoning. Each data point tells a story of resilience against mounting challenges, mirroring the struggles that ultimately claimed the slender-billed curlew.

But conservation is not merely about technology or data; it’s about people and the choices we make every day. We engage with local communities, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the natural world. After all, these birds are more than symbols; they are essential to the health of our environment. Vultures, for instance, prevent the spread of disease by cleaning up carrion—a service that benefits us all. The extinction of the slender-billed curlew

Rather than dwell on what cannot be changed, perhaps it’s time to focus on what we can still protect.

is an illustration of what can happen when warnings go unheeded. It compels us to reflect on our relationship with nature and consider the legacy we are leaving behind. Rather than dwell on what cannot be changed, perhaps it’s time to focus on what we can still protect. In the wake of this loss, I find a renewed sense of purpose.

The silence left by the curlew’s departure is a call to listen more closely to the world around us. Every action we take—from supporting conservation efforts to making environmentally conscious choices—writes the next chapter in the story of our planet. The morning I learned of the curlew’s extinction began like any other, but it left me with a profound realization. As I stepped out into the day, the usual sounds seemed different, charged with new significance. The chirping of common birds, the rustling of leaves—all reminders that while we have lost one voice, many others still sing. It’s up to us to ensure they continue to do so.

The story of the slender-billed curlew doesn’t have to be just an ending; it can be a beginning. A beginning of heightened awareness, of deeper commitment, and of collective action to protect the wonders that remain.

UNITED NATIONS SEEKS \$47 BILLION FOR AID IN 2025

NINA LARSON

The UN appealed on Wednesday for more than \$47 billion to deliver vital aid next year, warning surging conflicts and the climate crisis will leave hundreds of millions of people in need.

“The world is on fire,” the United Nations’ new humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher told reporters in Geneva, acknowledging he was looking ahead to 2025 with “dread”.

With brutal conflicts spiralling in places like Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, and as climate change and extreme weather take an ever-heavier toll, the UN estimated that 305 million people globally will need some form of emergency assistance next year.

“We are dealing with a poly-crisis right now globally, and it is the most vulnerable people in the world who are paying the price,” Fletcher said, warning that swelling inequality combined with the convergence of conflict and climate change had created a “perfect storm” of needs.

Launching the Global Humanitarian Overview, Fletcher acknowledged that the UN and its partners would not be able to reach all of those in need.

The annual appeal by UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations is seeking \$47.4 billion for 2025 — slightly less than the appeal for this year — which it said was enough to provide assistance to the 189.5 million most vulnerable people.

“There’s 115 million that we won’t be able to reach” with this plan, Fletcher acknowledged.

Pointing to significant “donor fatigue” hitting humanitarian operations around the world, he stressed the need to lay out a “realistic” plan, which will require prioritisation and making “really tough, tough choices”.

“We’ve got to be absolutely focused on reaching those in the most dire need, and really ruthless,” he said.

As of last month, only 43 per cent of the \$50-billion appeal for this year had been met.

Underfunding has this year seen an 80-per cent reduction in food assistance in Syria, cuts to protection services in Myanmar, and diminished water and sanitation aid in cholera-prone Yemen, the UN said. The single biggest barriers for assisting and protecting people in armed conflict, though, were the widespread violations of international law.

2024 has already been the deadliest year for humanitarian workers, surpassing last year’s toll of 280 killed. The global humanitarian system “is overstretched, it’s underfunded and it’s literally under attack”, Fletcher said.

“We need a surge in global solidarity.” Fears meanwhile abound that Donald Trump’s looming return to the presidency in the United States — the world’s biggest humanitarian donor -- could see aid agency budgets cut rather than raised next year. — AFP

Human interaction is now a luxury good



JESSICA GROSE

The author is an opinion writer at The New York Times. Her new book is ‘Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood’

because it sapped her energy — dealing with the glitchy tech frustrated her — and wasted her time.

Pugh’s timely book reveals the hidden ways that technology is making many jobs miserable for both workers and consumers, at a moment when artificial intelligence continues its unregulated incursion into our lives.

The pro-tech argument I often hear in my reporting on education and mental health therapy is that it’s “better than nothing” for people who would otherwise not have access to services. Which is to say: Emotional support through a chatbot is better than no support at all, and A.I. tutoring is better than no tutoring at all. Too many people accept these arguments as true without considering the social cost of cutting out everyday human interaction and the financial and environmental cost of the technology itself. A.I. chatbots don’t come for free.

We’re increasingly becoming a society where very wealthy people get obsequious, leisurely human care, like concierge medicine paid out of pocket, private schools with tiny class sizes and dead tree books, and apothecaries with personal shoppers. And everybody else might receive long wait times for 15-minute appointments with harried doctors, a public school system with overworked teachers who are supplemented by unproven apps to “personalize” learning and a pharmacy with self-checkout.

Or, as Pugh puts it, “being able to have a human attend to your needs has become a luxury good.”

As I was reading her book, I had a minor revelation about the growing lack of trust in various American institutions. Overall trust in institutions is at historic lows, according to Gallup, and the picture is one of declining faith over the past 40 years.

That’s roughly the same period in which technology has accelerated and replaced or bowdlerized a lot of low-stakes human interaction, otherwise known as “weak ties,” like the ones you have with a grocery store clerk you see regularly or even the

We’re increasingly becoming a society where very wealthy people get obsequious, leisurely human care, like concierge medicine paid out of pocket, private schools with tiny class sizes and dead tree books, and apothecaries with personal shoppers.

primary care physician you see once a year.

I wondered if having to interact with an extremely stressed person who is being rated on how many customers she sees a day or, alternatively, talking to a malfunctioning robot that keeps asking us if we’re human is making many of us feel like our institutions don’t care about us at all.

I called Pugh to see if she thought my theory — that the loss of connective labor was a factor in the breakdown of institutional trust — held any water. She did, and she told me a story about a postal worker who had heard her on a podcast and got in touch with her. The postal worker was retiring, and the people who lived in the neighborhood she worked in threw her a little party.

“She said she felt so moved, and she talked about how she didn’t feel like those kinds of relationships are that possible anymore because of the time pressure” workers are under, Pugh told me. So she was in a kind of double mourning — for the relationships she made, but also because she thought that as a society that prefers to get packages dropped off without even making eye contact, we were losing those kinds of everyday connections entirely.

I asked Pugh if there was any hope in pulling back from this dystopian, inhuman future. She assured me that a world where we are applying “Moneyball”-style statistical analysis to the soul work of hospital chaplains is “not inevitable.” Even with all the “extraordinary advances” of interactive technology (the refinement of large language models like Chat GPT), “humans lose interest in interacting with machines after a while, partly because of machine predictability.”

Most of us still crave the spontaneity that comes from talking to human beings, especially at our most vulnerable. If we don’t value care work now, we might be paying the cost during our final moments, as the chaplain has to rush off from our bedside to mark down the time she spent holding our hands.

— The New York Times

Youth shaping new dynamics of communication



SONIA AMBROSIO

The writer is journalist, academic and researcher in media studies

WHEN intellectuals, experts, and visionaries come together to share their ideas on how the world of media is changing, there are takeaways. I closely followed the three-day conference programme on artificial intelligence (AI) revolution present and future recently organised by the Mass Communication Department of Sultan Qaboos University’s College of Arts. While interested in learning about new approaches to AI in media, I paid more attention to students’ involvement with the event.

As with most conferences, not all presentations were innovative, but they provided diverse perspectives. Interestingly, a participant pointed out that academics portrayed AI as an obstacle. The observation showed how limited some scholars view the shifting of the media environment.

As the conference ended, I reflected on human capital and the digital economy. I felt optimistic as the gathering served as a real-world laboratory for ambitious media professionals and freelancers.

Watching boys and girls interact with one another and with guests while creating media content as a result of presentations, I witnessed an improvement in their knowledge, abilities, and attitudes.

I observed how far journalism and media education have advanced in Oman over the last 15 years. From timid to audacious and adventurous behaviours, boys and girls are shaping a new dynamic of communication and socialisation. These qualities are

advantageous as Oman develops its own generative AI model based on cultural and historical content. Within this context, 100 young Omanis are to be trained in artificial intelligence, with sessions held in both Oman and China. The Internet has become the backbone of the entire economy and a necessity for individuals. It has turned into a socialised experience, with young people watching, reading, or listening to whatever they want, whenever they like.

The increasingly commercialised nature of web technologies has demonstrated that information has become the number one commodity, with digital capitalism acting as the centre of economic and social activities. Young people have nurtured new opportunities for relatively open forms of self-expression, relative economic empowerment, and global connectedness.

Since 2011, social media has expanded significantly in the region. Youth swiftly adopted social media sites, but older generations and governments were slow to accept them, citing dismissive tendencies, general scepticism, and technophobia. More recently, governments have not only accelerated their engagement with social media and implemented technological improvements but also encouraged education.

In addition to the social and cultural changes and challenges young people face, particularly those coming from highly conservative backgrounds, they are subject to competing and often conflicting messages

The Internet has become the backbone of the entire economy and a necessity for individuals. It has turned into a socialised experience

from their parents, educational institutions, the television industry, and the interlaced economic, technological, and cultural forces of globalisation. They recognise, however, that media and technology are powerful instruments, and they are eager to explore them.

Young people have become considerably more aware of the world, and Omani youth are no exception. They have recognised that they are at the centre of discussions concerning education, consumerism, and socialisation. They feel empowered by an ever-expanding set of technologies that enable them to commercialise their creativity and engage in various global issues.

As information and communication technologies have become “natural” components of the current social world, the distinction between real and virtual is meshed. We live in a hybrid society that is increasingly virtual as innovations broaden our views and bring transformations.

Their interactions with the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence have crossed the traditional boundaries of genre and immediacy. This presents a challenge to the conventional top-down approach of socialising. The youth are active actors in cultural changes.

Yet, to better assess the Omani youth culture, we need to explore their complex relationship with the media and the use of technologies. Studies suggest that Omani youth spend up to 15 hours each day on social platforms.

SOUTH KOREA UPHEAVAL SHOWS DEMOCRACY’S RESILIENCE

SHAUN TANDON

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s brief imposition of martial law marks a new warning for the worldwide fragility of democracy, even in a country hailed as a model of political transformation.

Yoon’s overnight attempt to shut down political activity, censor media and lock out opposition lawmakers stunned South Korea’s longtime ally, the United States, which said it had no advance warning and issued a statement of concern. South Korea’s transition to elected rule since a mass uprising in 1987 had been seen as so thorough that the United States increasingly spoke of its ally as a global partner. Meanwhile Seoul is billed as a new, ideal hub for international media.

President Joe Biden had even chosen Yoon as the host in March of his final Summit for Democracy — a signature initiative of the outgoing US leader, who sought to champion liberal values globally, in an unstated repudiation of Donald Trump, who returns to the White House next month. But observers, while stunned by Yoon, said there were warning signs.

Danny Russel, a top US diplomat for Asia under former president Barack Obama and who earlier served in South Korea, pointed to the deadlock in parliament where the opposition repeatedly sought impeachments against Yoon’s administration. Yoon’s move “was a complete surprise to me (but) yes, there were very obvious structural forces at work,” he said.

“There is a radically polarised political scene in Korea. The opposition has been pursuing scorched-earth political obstruction tactics,” he said. But he pointed to the quick, large-scale protests that erupted after Yoon’s declaration as a sign of a vibrant civil society ready to defend democracy. “One certainly would hope that this would serve as a wake-up call to both the ruling conservative party and the progressive opposition that both sides have gone too far and that there needs to be some process of reconciliation, of dealing with legitimate differences and grievances.”

Yoon himself had earlier shown signs of authoritarianism. In a national address last year, Yoon raged against supposed communists who have “disguised themselves as democracy activists, human rights advocates or progressive activists.” A prosecutor, Yoon narrowly won the 2022 election on a platform of economic reform and advocated close ties with the United States as well as historic rival Japan. But his popularity swiftly slid and the opposition won the National Assembly. — AFP

Anticipating Trump’s foreign policy...

PREDICTION is always difficult, but doubly so

in the case of the US president-elect. Donald Trump not only speaks loosely and changes his positions often; he also considers unpredictability to be a useful bargaining tool. Still, one can try to get a sense of what his foreign policy will look like from his campaign statements, his high-level appointments, and his first term.

In Washington, it is often said that “personnel is policy.” But while we already know whom Trump wants for key positions, the problem is that their stated views sometimes conflict with each other. With Trump making every effort to avoid the traditional Republicans who hemmed him in during his first term, the common denominator among his choices this time is personal loyalty. But even this quality does not help us predict policy.

Consider the question of China. Trump’s choices for Secretary of State and national security adviser — Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Michael Waltz, respectively — are well-known “hawks” who see China as a dominant threat that demands a strong response. We also know from his campaign that Trump is eager to introduce new tariffs on imports from allies, with even higher tariffs on goods from China.

With Trump already announcing plans to slap tariffs on imports from Mexico, Canada, and China, we should certainly expect some new levies to be imposed. But the tariffs’ rates, duration, and exemptions remain uncertain and subject both to domestic political pressures and Trump’s personal whims. As his designee for Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, recently said, “I think a lot of what he’s doing is to escalate to de-escalate, and my goal for his administration would be to save international trade.”

Equally uncertain is how Trump



Equally uncertain is how Trump might respond to retaliation by America’s trade partners.

might respond to retaliation by America’s trade partners. If tit-for-tat trade wars drive tariffs and prices higher, the return of inflation may trigger a domestic political backlash. Since Trump prides himself on his dealmaking prowess, he may seek compromises. Would he offer his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, weaker US support for Taiwan in exchange for a trade deal that he could hold up as a victory? Some of America’s Asian allies worry about precisely this scenario.

Judging by Trump’s campaign statements and previous term in the White House, we should also expect him to devalue multilateralism and alliances. He has promised to withdraw again from the Paris climate agreement, and to increase domestic production and exports of oil and gas. While the price of renewable energy has been declining in the US, it remains to be seen whether his policies will cancel out that beneficial market effect by reducing these industries’ relative cost competitiveness.

In the Middle East, Trump’s campaign statements were unconditionally supportive of Israel, and he still takes pride in having negotiated the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between

Israel and four Arab countries.

Turning to Europe and Nato, Trump said during the campaign that he would end the war in Ukraine “in one day.” We know that will not happen; but there is deep uncertainty about how he will try to negotiate an armistice. One possibility is to reduce assistance to Ukraine and weaken its bargaining position so that it must accept Russian terms. Or Trump could temporarily extend support for Ukraine while moving toward a “Korean solution.”

In the latter scenario, the current front line would become a demilitarised zone staffed by United Nations or European peacekeepers whom Russia would have to force out if it wants to restart the war. Ukraine could continue to assert sovereignty over areas like the Donbas, but it most likely would be unable to join Nato; instead, perhaps some subset of countries (“friends of Ukraine”) could offer to come to its aid if Russia violated the demilitarised zone. It is unclear whether Trump will use his bargaining power vis-à-vis Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian President Vladimir Putin to produce such a compromise.

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JOSEPH S NYE, JR

The writer is Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, is a former US assistant secretary of defense and the author of Do Morals Matter?

SPORTS

SECOND TEST



RAHUL READY TO BAT ANYWHERE FOR INDIA

ADELAIDE: KL Rahul said on Wednesday he will bat “wherever” as India face a conundrum in the second Test against Australia with the expected return of Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill.

The 54-Test veteran opened in the first Test at Perth, which India won by 295 runs, alongside Yashasvi Jaiswal in the absence of skipper Rohit, who stayed home for the birth of his second child.

Number three Gill also missed the match with a thumb injury, but both are set to return for the day-night clash starting in Adelaide on Friday, leaving selectors with a headache.

Rahul and Jaiswal shared a 201-run second innings opening partnership in Perth that proved pivotal in securing victory with both again set to pad-up.

Devdutt Padikkal and Dhruv Jurel appear likely to make way for Rohit and Gill, but who bats where remains to be seen.

“I’ve been told, but I’ve also been told not to share it,” Rahul told reporters when asked if he knew what position he would be batting in Adelaide. “I just want to be in the playing XI. Fit me in wherever. I want to go out there and bat and play for the team.

“Luckily for me I have batted in different positions,” he added. — AFP

TELYBOYZ BOX CRICKET FROM TODAY

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 4

Telyboyz, a group of like-minded youngsters promoting fitness and well-being through sports, has announced the sixth season of its Box Cricket Cup which will begin on Thursday at the Oasis Cricket Club in Ghala.

The two-day event is being held as part of the 30th-anniversary celebrations of Telyboyz and nine teams will face each other in the matches.

While matches on Thursday will begin at 8 pm and conclude at 11.30 pm, matches on Friday, including the final, are scheduled to be held from 2 pm to 11.30 pm.

The organisers said that the games, where a group of players known for their excellence in Thalassery’s tennis ball cricket will face off against each other, are expected to be nothing short of thrilling.

“Teams from Thalassery and Dubai, along with players from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain are participating in the mega event which is one of the perfect testaments to how camaraderie can be celebrated in all its glory. The final is scheduled for Friday evening,” Thafsi Kannur, a key organiser, told the Oman Observer.

He further said that alongside the matches, food stalls featuring Thalassery’s unique culinary delights will also be set up, adding to the vibrant atmosphere. Entry to the Oasis Cricket Club in Ghala is free for the public.



Top drifters to vie for Red Bull Car Park Drift King crown

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 4

THE stage is set for an electrifying showdown as 25 top drifters from 16 countries converge in Muscat to compete for the prestigious title of Red Bull Car Park Drift King. The World Final will take place on Friday at the Muscat Drift Arena, located within the Oman Automobile Association (OAA). Doors will open at 3:30 pm with the high-octane action kicking off at 5:45 pm.

Motorsport enthusiasts and drifting aficionados can look forward to a night of intense competition with the world’s elite drifters putting their skills to the test on one of the most challenging circuits in the event’s history. Among the competitors are Oman’s own Haitham al Hadidi, as well as regional stars and Red Bull athletes like Ahmad Daham (UAE), Ali Makseed (Kuwait) and Hisham al Khatib (Egypt), all vying for the ultimate crown.

FOUR OMANIS IN FRAY

Following a qualification round held on November 8 at the Ibri Arena, four Omani drifters have earned their spots in the World Final including: Ahmed al Amri, Ali al Balushi, Haitham al Hadidi and Tariq al Shaihani. Oman’s strong representation is set to rekindle memories of their dominant performance in 2016 at Port Sultan Qaboos in Muttrah, when Omani drifters swept the podium, claiming first, second and third places.



The drivers during an interactive session at the Oman Automobile Association.

“The Sultanate of Oman holds a special place in CPD’s legacy, with Omani drifters dominating the podium back in 2016. Competitors know they are up against fierce local talent this year.

ABDO FEGHALI

The Red Bull Car Park Drift series kicked off earlier this year at Kuwait Motor Town and spanned 16 countries to identify the best drifters. Participants from different countries as diverse as Georgia, South Africa, Estonia, Bulgaria, Mauritius and Azerbaijan will join competitors from across the Middle East, including Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq and Oman.

DESIGNED FOR THRILLS

Drifting legend and Guinness World Record holder for the longest drift, Abdo Feghali, is serving as the lead drifter for the event. Speaking ahead of the World Final, Feghali expressed his excitement as he said: “This is the time of year when the world’s best car park drifters come

together in one place, and this year is particularly special. After a pause in hosting the Car Park Drifting World Final due to events in the region, we are thrilled to be back with the highest number of participants ever.

“The track I have designed this year is one of the fastest and most challenging layouts in CPD history, promising intense action and unforgettable moments.”

“The Sultanate of Oman holds a special place in CPD’s legacy, with Omani drifters dominating the podium back in 2016. Competitors know they are up against fierce local talent this year.”

“Fans, media and everyone attending will witness an electrifying event.

I can’t wait to see who will be crowned the CPD World Champion in Oman very soon,” he signed off.

Ding, Gukesh tied past halfway mark in world chess

SINGAPORE: Defending world chess champion Ding Liren and teenage challenger Gukesh Dommaraju played to a fifth consecutive draw on Wednesday, with neither player taking the lead after eight games.

Both players were deadlocked at 4.0 points each in the first-ever World Championship encounter between two Asian players, as the 14-match tournament went past the halfway mark.

For the second game in a row, Gukesh appeared to give up a strong position during the middle-game by playing a series of inaccurate moves.

However, the Indian teenager rejected Ding’s offer of a draw after 41 moves and played some attacks during the endgame in an attempt to get a result.

But the Chinese grandmaster fended off the offensive and the players eventually shook hands on another draw after 51 moves.

Gukesh admitted that he was not aware of his perilous position when he rejected the draw and immediately put Ding under check.

“I didn’t think I was in much danger,” said the 18-year-old, who played with the black pieces.



“I always thought that in my position, maybe I would have some chances but it was just a misjudgement of the position.”

Ding for his part rued his inability to press home his advantage.

“Today during the game, I didn’t realise that I was

winning at some point,” said the 32-year-old.

“I think he missed some important details which let me get back into the game but before that he was totally outplaying me again.

“Actually I didn’t feel too nervous during the game but I felt uncomfortable out of the

At his age, Gukesh is the youngest player in history to compete in the World Championship and he is looking to surpass Garry Kasparov as the youngest undisputed world chess champion.

open.”

Game nine of the series will take place at Resorts World Sentosa on Thursday.

Ding, who beat Russia’s Ian Nepomniachtchi to become the world champion in Kazakhstan last year, defeated Gukesh in 42 moves in the opening game.

But the Indian teenager drew level by winning game three as Ding lost on timing after he was unable to play his first 40 moves in 120 minutes.

The first player to get 7.5 points will be declared the winner.

Tie breaks will take place if the players are tied on seven points after 14 games.

At his age, Gukesh is the youngest player in history to compete in the World Championship and he is looking to surpass Garry Kasparov as the youngest undisputed world chess champion. — AFP

SPORTS

SAJID OMITTED



PAKISTAN RECALL AZAM FOR SOUTH AFRICA TOUR

LAHORE: Pakistan recalled former skipper Babar Azam on Wednesday for the away Test series and white-ball matches against South Africa starting next week, but there was no place for spinner Sajid Khan.

The 30-year-old star batsman Azam was dropped following defeat in the first Test against England in October and rested for the ongoing limited-over series against Zimbabwe.

Pakistan will play three Twenty20 internationals in South Africa starting from December 10, followed by three one-day matches and two Tests.

Fast bowler Mohammad Abbas also returns to the Test side after last playing in 2021.

Off-spinner Sajid misses out despite taking 19 wickets in the 2-1 home Test series win over England, with selectors taking into consideration the less spin-friendly pitches in South Africa.

“We have adopted a horses for courses policy to ensure squads are well-balanced and leaving out Sajid was an extremely difficult decision,” Aaqib Javed, a senior member of the selection committee, said in a Pakistan Cricket Board statement.

Sajid’s spin partner Noman Ali, who took 20 wickets against England, is the only spinner for the Tests in Centurion and Cape Town. The first Test starts on December 26.

Javed said fast bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi has been picked only for the white-ball matches to manage his workload.

Opener Fakhar Zaman is still out because he has yet to regain form and match fitness, said Javed.

— AFP

Pakistan squads for South Africa tour:
Tests: Shan Masood (captain), Saud Shakeel, Aamer Jamal, Abdullah Shafique, Babar Azam, Haseebullah Khan, Kamran Ghulam, Khurram Shahzad, Mir Hamza, Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Rizwan, Naseem Shah, Noman Ali, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha
ODIs: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Haris Rauf, Kamran Ghulam, Mohammad Hasnain, Muhammad Irfan Khan, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Sufiyan Muqeem, Tayyab Tahir, Usman Khan
T20Is: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Abrar Ahmed, Babar Azam, Haris Rauf, Jahandad Khan, Mohammad Abbas Afridi, Mohammad Hasnain, Mohammad Irfan Khan, Omair Bin Yousuf, Saim Ayub, Salman Ali Agha, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Sufiyan Muqeem, Tayyab Tahir, Usman Khan



Bangladesh players celebrate a West Indies wicket on the fourth day of the second Test.

Taijul spins Bangladesh to series-levelling win

TAIJUL Islam snared five wickets for the 15th time in a Test innings to lead Bangladesh to a series-levelling 101-run victory over the West Indies on the fourth evening of the second and final Test at Sabina Park on Tuesday.

After Jaker Ali’s Test-best innings of 91 lifted the tourists to 268 all out in their second innings and left the home team with a daunting victory target of 287, left-arm spinner Islam broke the back of the Caribbean side’s effort with five for 50 as they were dismissed for 185 in the day’s final session.

Fast bowler Nahid Rana, whose maiden five-wicket haul in the first innings pulled Bangladesh back into contention, had the satisfaction of administering the final rites when he yoked last man Shamar Joseph for his only wicket of the innings.

“It’s a great feeling to win a Test match abroad which we don’t often do and all the boys really put in a tremendous effort,” said player-of-the-match Islam.

Seamers Taskin Ahmed and Hasan Mahmud took two wickets each with Taskin emerging as the leading wicket-taker in the brief series with 11 victims to his name.

Kavem Hodge top-scored for the West Indies with 55, while captain Kraigg Brathwaite played with unusual adventure at the top of the order in contributing 43 off 63 deliveries.

But they lost wickets at regular intervals



Bangladesh’s Taijul Islam receives the player-of-the-match award.

and eventually succumbed in just 50 overs as Bangladesh swiftly avenged the 201-run mauling they endured in the first Test in

Antigua a week earlier.

“We wanted to be positive and I thought we started well but obviously we couldn’t carry it through to the end of the day,” said a rueful Brathwaite.

This was Bangladesh’s first Test victory in the West Indies since their 2-0 sweep over a depleted Caribbean side in 2009.

Earlier, Ali’s belligerent innings, which occupied 106 deliveries and was embellished by eight fours and five sixes, tilted the balance heavily in favour of Bangladesh as the highest successful run-chase in a Test at Sabina Park was the 212 achieved by the West Indies over Sri Lanka in 2003.

Such was the extent of the 26-year-old right-hander’s dominance of the morning that he contributed 62 of the 75 runs added by the tourists after resuming at the overnight position of 193-5.

Alzarri Joseph and Kemar Roach took three wickets each for the West Indies, Joseph ending Ali’s quest for a maiden Test hundred when he was last out, caught at deep midwicket a half-hour before lunch.

— AFP

BRIEF SCORES:
Bangladesh 164 (Shadman Islam 64; Jayden Seales 4-5, Shamar Joseph 3-69) and 268 (Jaker Ali 91; Kemar Roach 3-36, Alzarri Joseph 3-77) v West Indies 146 (Nahid Rana 5-61) and 185 (Kavem Hodge 55; Taijul Islam 5-50)
Result: Bangladesh won by 101 runs
Series: Series drawn 1-1

Bahrain’s Al Ahli overwhelm Al Bashayer in WASL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 4

Al Bashayer, representing Oman, suffered a heavy defeat against Bahrain’s Al Ahli team, losing 90-52 in the West Asia Super League (WASL) match at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on Tuesday night.

The match began with a relatively balanced first quarter, but the tide soon turned in favour of the visiting Al Ahli team. The Bahraini side shone with its professional players leading the scoring effort, including Thomas Richard, Jackson Dawney and Jordan Stephens. For Al Bashayer, Bassam al Busaidi, Slavik Kobekov and Shaker Smith spearheaded the scoring attempts.

The opening quarter was relatively even, with Al Ahli drawing first blood through a successful shot by Haitham Issa. Al Bashayer quickly equalised through Bassam al Busaidi, setting the stage for an intense back and forth as both teams traded points. Al Ahli’s professionals, led by Thomas Richard and Jackson Dawney, displayed exceptional skill in executing organised attacks. Despite Al Ahli’s slight edge, Al Bashayer managed to stay within reach, ending the quarter trailing by just three points, 16-13.

The game shifted dramatically in the second quarter as Al Ahli asserted control. Al Bashayer struggled with accuracy, missing several easy opportunities under the



Al Bashayer and Al Ahli players in action during the West Asia Super League.

— Amir Al Hamhamy

basket. Capitalising on these errors, Al Ahli’s Jordan Stephens scored four consecutive points, gradually widening the gap. Although Al Bashayer fought back with efforts from Slavik Kobekov and Bassam al Busaidi, Al Ahli’s professionals shone in executing free throws and three pointers. By half-time, Al Ahli led comfortably, 44-30.

Al Bashayer opened the third quarter with a basket from Bassam al Busaidi, followed by a response from Jordan Stephens of Al Ahli. Shaker Smith added two points for Al Bashayer, keeping the deficit at 12 points. Both teams exchanged baskets in a series of offensive plays, but Al Ahli maintained their dominance, finishing the quarter ahead 65-44.

The final quarter followed a similar pattern, with Al Bashayer missing several scoring opportunities while Al Ahli continued to capitalise on their chances. Early in the quarter, Al Ahli extended their lead through a free throw by Thomas, while Slavik Kobekov responded with a three-pointer for Al Bashayer to narrow the gap to 77-49. However, Al Bashayer’s inability to convert opportunities allowed Al Ahli to further extend their lead, sealing the game with a decisive 90-52 victory.

The game was officiated by international referees Ahmed Shwaili from Iraq (head referee), Hamad Fawzi from Jordan (second referee), and Taha al Hashadi from Yemen (third referee).

SPORTS



India and Pakistan players fight for the ball during the Men's Junior Asia Cup final at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat, Muscat.

INDIA EMERGE JUNIOR ASIA CUP CHAMPIONS

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

INDIA edged out Pakistan 5-3 in the final to emerge champions in the Men's Junior Asia Cup Oman 2024 hockey championship at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat on Wednesday night.

Star player Araijeet Singh Hundal struck four goals for India in the pulsating final between the traditional rivals of the game.

The match started with Pakistan taking the lead in the third minute itself with a field goal from Hannan Shahid. India equalised in the next minute when Araijeet Singh Hundal struck from a penalty corner.

In the second quarter, India came out strong to net two goals. Araijeet Singh gave India lead in the 18th minute from a penalty corner.

Dilraj Singh's field goal in the next minute put India in a two-goal cushion at 3-1.

At the stroke of the half-time, Sufyan Khan brought Pakistan back to the match with a goal from a penalty corner. India led Pakistan 3-2 at the break.

Pakistan started from where they left off in the third quarter by pushing hard for their equalising goal. Sufyan was clinical from another penalty corner as Pakistan made the score level at 3-3 in the 39th minute.

The equaliser forced India to make some rapid counter-attacks but Pakistan goalkeeper Muhammad Janjua stood firm to deny India.

India, coached by goalkeeping great PR Sreejesh, made a brilliant return in the fourth and last quarter.

HOT FORM

Araijeet Singh was in hot form as he put India in the lead in the 47th minute to make it 4-3. Pakistan also pushed for a goal in the quarter but Indian goalkeeper Sharda Nand Tiwari rose to the occasion along with some boisterous defending by his teammates.

Araijeet Singh made the result beyond doubt



with another stunning goal, his fourth, from a penalty corner in the 54th minute.

India also earned more penalty corners towards the end but Pakistan defended well to avoid further goals.

The final moments were also well executed by the Indian players who had good control of the game.

Indian defence was also spot on their task as they conceded only two penalty corners to Pakistan compared to seven earned by India in the final.

In the placement matches, Japan beat Malaysia 2-1 to finish third in the tournament. Bangladesh finished fifth after beating China 6-3 to round off the top six teams of the tournament who qualified for the FIH Men's Junior World Cup 2025 in India.

Thailand edged South Korea 3-2 in the shoot-out after 2-2 in full time and finished seventh.

Hosts Oman ended in ninth spot while Chinese Taipei were last in the 10-team tournament.





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STRONG RELATIONS



The UAE remained Oman's leading trade partner for non-oil exports.

MERCHANDISE EXPORTS OF OMAN SURGE BY 10%

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 4

Oman's merchandise exports recorded a robust 10 per cent growth, reaching RO 18.241 billion by the end of September 2024, compared to RO 16.590 billion during the same period in 2023, according to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

This growth was primarily driven by oil and gas exports, which surged to RO 12.406 billion, reflecting a remarkable 21.5 per cent increase. Meanwhile, non-oil exports declined by 14.1 per cent, amounting to RO 4.534 billion, whereas re-exports demonstrated impressive momentum, rising by 18.1 per cent to RO 1.3 billion.

Merchandise imports also experienced a significant rise, increasing by 10.9 per cent to total RO 12.178 billion by the end of September 2024, compared to RO 10.979 billion in the same period last year.

The United Arab Emirates remained Oman's leading trade partner for non-oil exports, with a value of RO 943 million, reflecting a 14.1 per cent increase. Saudi Arabia followed with RO 602 million, although this represented a 22.3 per cent decline.

For imports, the UAE continued to dominate with RO 2.922 billion. Imports from China, however, stood out with a remarkable 63.1 per cent surge, totalling RO 1.294 billion. Additionally, Kuwait recorded the highest percentage increase, with imports soaring by 248.3 per cent to reach RO 1.230 billion.

Oman and Belgium forge pact on green hydrogen

AS part of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's state visit to Belgium, the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to further strengthen their collaboration in green hydrogen.

The MoU, signed between Hydrom Oman (Hydrom) and the Belgian Hydrogen Council (BHC), sets the stage for enhanced cooperation across the hydrogen value chain, reflecting the shared commitment of both nations to advance the global hydrogen economy.

Held in the presence of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the signing ceremony brought together business leaders, policymakers and industry representatives from both nations to underscore joint efforts to align policies, promote knowledge exchange and technological advancements, as well as explore opportunities across hydrogen production, infrastructure, transportation and utilisation.

"This MoU represents a defining moment in the partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Belgium, advancing our shared ambition to shape the future of the global hydrogen economy," said Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Chairman of Hydrom.

"Oman's potential capacity as a hub for green hydrogen production, combined with Belgium's role as a promising hydrogen-based industrial hub and strategic connection point to European markets, will strengthen energy security and create a seamless hydrogen supply chain.

Together, we aim to accelerate the world's transition to clean energy by fostering innovation and building the infrastructure needed to connect producers and markets worldwide."

The MoU builds on 46 years of strong bilateral relations between Oman and Belgium, underpinned by key milestones in the green energy sector.

These include the signing in 2023 of a 47-year Project Development Agreement between Hydrom and the Hypport Duqm



project, an international alliance between Oman's OQ Alternative Energy and Belgium's DEMA, aimed at producing and exporting green hydrogen.

This was further supported by the 2023 declaration of intent between the Ministry of Energy and Minerals in the Sultanate of Oman and the Ministry of Energy in the Kingdom of Belgium to advance hydrogen certification and trade frameworks.

Tom Hautekiet, Chairman of the Belgian Hydrogen Council, remarked, "This agreement represents a significant step forward in strengthening our cooperation with Oman, a key partner in the global hydrogen supply chain.

By leveraging Oman's competitive renewable energy resources and Belgium's strategic position as a hydrogen hub for Europe, we are creating a powerful platform for innovation, investment and growth in the hydrogen economy.

Together, we aim to build a sustainable energy future, unlocking

new opportunities for our industries, researchers and policymakers."

The first joint milestone under the MoU will focus on key areas of collaboration including knowledge sharing, technology development, and infrastructure planning for hydrogen production, shipping and terminal facilities.

It will also expand on pathways to broader cooperation with other European countries as a part of the MoU promise to address legislative challenges and explore new opportunities for research and development.

Under the visionary leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Oman continues to strengthen its position as a pioneer in hydrogen innovation. His Majesty's engagement with business leaders during the signing highlights the Sultanate of Oman's commitment to fostering international partnerships that drive sustainable development and advance technological progress.

Oman steps up cybersecurity efforts with Data Protection Law

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 4

OMAN is making significant strides in data protection and cybersecurity, aligning its digital transformation journey with the introduction of the Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL). This was a key message delivered by Iman al Sulaimi, Ambassador PM of Oman IT Society (OITS), during the CYSEC Oman 12th Global Edition Summit and Awards held yesterday in Muscat Governorate.

Speaking to a packed audience of policymakers, technology experts and industry leaders, Al Sulaimi highlighted the critical importance of safeguarding personal data in an age where artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies rely heavily on user information.

"How many of us accept cookies or



By raising awareness, we can ensure that these technologies benefit everyone, fostering trust and security across society

IMAN AL
SULAIMI
Ambassador PM,
OITS

policies without knowing how our browsing information is being tracked? Almost all of us. Yet, many are unaware of how vulnerable our data is," she said, underscoring the risks of data misuse, privacy breaches, and lack of transparency in digital ecosystems.

The Personal Data Protection Law, introduced by Oman, mandates explicit consent for data collection and ensures proper safeguards are in place to

protect personal information. This legal framework aligns with global standards like the EU's GDPR, which Al Sulaimi noted as a benchmark for privacy protection.

"Oman's PDPL is a step forward in creating a safer digital environment, but regulations alone aren't enough. It's up to individuals to know their rights and understand how companies use their personal data," she added.

Al Sulaimi also emphasised the broader societal impact of emerging technologies, including education, healthcare and employment, while cautioning against risks such as cybercrime and data breaches.

"By raising awareness, we can ensure that these technologies benefit everyone, fostering trust and security across society," she said.

The OITS is at the forefront of such efforts, having organised 30 workshops this year

on AI, cybersecurity, and other cutting-edge topics. Over 1,200 participants have benefited from insights into best practices and technological trends

. Looking ahead, the society plans to expand its focus to include IoT, blockchain, VR and robotics, while creating a competency bank to develop skilled ambassadors across Oman.

"Our ambassadors have led initiatives to educate the public and raise awareness about emerging technologies. Even small efforts can inspire others and create a big impact," Al Sulaimi noted, underscoring the role of local communities in driving innovation and supporting Oman's digital economy. With these initiatives, Oman is positioning itself as a leader in digital security and technological advancement, ensuring a sustainable and secure digital future for its citizens.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



The store pays homage to Seeb Football Club’s legacy.

VODAFONE OMAN UNVEILS FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND CONCEPT STORE IN AL SEEB

MUSCAT: Under the auspices of HH Sayyid Malik bin Shihab al Said, Vodafone Oman officially inaugurated a first of its kind concept store in the Wilayat of Al Seeb. Designed to celebrate its partnership with Al Seeb Football Club as the ‘Official Sponsor’ of its first football team, the new store offers a unique retail experience that merges telecommunications services with a vibrant space inspired by the passion and legacy of ‘The Emperor’ of Omani football.

The store pays homage to Al Seeb Football Club’s legacy through football-inspired décor, interactive displays, and a showcase of team memorabilia, ensuring customers can immerse themselves in the spirit of the club while enjoying Vodafone’s services and latest technologies. Commemorating the opening, the digital operator hosted a series of fun-filled, fan-centric activities, offering guests a unique chance to meet and engage with the Al Seeb Football Club stars.

“Our new store is a reflection of Vodafone Oman’s dedication to bringing technology and community closer together,” said Eng Bader al Zidi, Vodafone Oman CEO. “This isn’t just about offering services—it’s about creating a space where customers can experience the best of Vodafone while connecting with the passion and pride that defines Al Seeb Football Club.

MASERATI CELEBRATES GRANTURISMO 110 ANNIVERSARIO

MUSCAT: 110 years of performance, design, craftsmanship, uniqueness and technology, Maserati celebrates a major milestone with the special series of an iconic model from the House of the Trident: “GranTurismo 110 Anniversario”.

Maserati GranTurismo is so much more than a car: it is an icon, a lifestyle that perfectly embodies the brand’s spirit, a model that can combine sporty performance with comfort suitable for long distances and luxury. It also looks ahead into the future, taking on for the first time in Maserati history a 100% electric powertrain, in the Folgore version.

The GranTurismo Folgore is becoming the leading light in the “110 Anniversario” special series – in a limited edition of the same number of units as the years of the House of the Trident, symbol of an ideal bridge between the brand’s past, present and future.

Heritage and innovation thus come together to create exclusive content made possible by the Fuoriserie Customisation Programme.

Bank Muscat inaugurates first branch in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, inaugurated its first branch in the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The opening of the new branch came in line with the Bank’s strategic initiative to expand its branch network and enable customers to benefit from the banking services and facilities offered, wherever they are.

The new branch is designed to elevate the banking experience by

integrating modern safety, security and technological solutions.

This inauguration underscores the Bank’s commitment to providing high-quality services in a comfortable environment, allowing customers to process their transactions efficiently and securely.

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar branch will be an addition to the 20 branches already operating in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Bank Muscat currently takes immense pride in its expansive network of branches reaching a total

13TH EDITION OF MIJEX OPENS AT OCEC

MUSCAT: The 13th edition of the Muscat International Jewellery Exhibition (MIJEX), one of the GCC’s most prestigious luxury goods events, opened today at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

The opening ceremony took place on December 3, 2024, under the auspices of Lujaina Mohsin Haider Darwish, Former Member of the Consultative Assembly in Oman.

From December 3 to 7, the event,

organized by OCEC in partnership with VEGA Inter Trade Exhibitions, promises a spectacular display of jewellery and luxury accessories, reaffirming Oman’s position as a hub for high-end craftsmanship and trade in the region.

Over the next 5 days, the exhibition will feature over 50 exhibitors from 10 countries, including Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Turkey, Lebanon, India, Singapore, and

Thailand. Visitors can explore an impressive collection of jewellery, authentic gemstones, pearls, diamonds, and gold ornaments, alongside cutting-edge designs and timeless classics.

This year’s sponsor, Amaar Jewels, a renowned luxury brand and pioneer in lab grown diamonds, with a strong presence in Kuwait and the UAE, is set to expand its footprint by opening a branch in Oman.

Dodge Durango R/T the ultimate SUV for families

THE Dodge Durango R/T is the ultimate SUV for families who crave the perfect combination of power, comfort, and versatility. Whether it’s for everyday commuting or long weekend trips, the Durango R/T brings sheer strength and remarkable performance while ensuring your family’s safety and convenience.

The Dodge Durango R/T is powered by a 5.7L HEMI V8 engine that generates a commanding 360 horsepower and 390 lb.-ft. of torque.

With an eight-speed automatic transmission and available all-wheel drive, this SUV delivers smooth acceleration and outstanding towing capacity. It can go from 0 to 60 mph in just 6.2 seconds, showcasing its performance-oriented speed and sheer power.

Whether navigating urban streets, towing a trailer, or venturing off the beaten path, this SUV has the strength and precision to handle it all.

With seating for up to seven passengers, the Durango R/T sets the standard for family-friendly SUVs. It features multiple seating configurations and offers up to 85.1 cubic feet of cargo space, ensuring

With an eight-speed automatic transmission and available all-wheel drive, this SUV delivers smooth acceleration and outstanding towing capacity



The Dodge Durango R/T is powered by a 5.7L HEMI® V8 engine.

ample room for both passengers and gear.

The luxurious leather-trimmed seating, ventilated and heated front seats, and foldable third-row offer exceptional comfort, while the Harman Kardon audio system with 19 speakers keeps everyone entertained throughout the journey.

Equipped with the Uconnect 5 NAV system and a 10.1-inch touchscreen display, the Durango R/T ensures that navigation and media controls are always at your fingertips.

It also features Apple CarPlay,

Android Auto, and wireless charging, allowing you and your passengers to stay connected while on the move.

The Durango R/T is equipped with advanced safety features designed to protect your family, including:

Full-speed forward collision warning plus; blind spot and cross path detection; lane departure warning plus; adaptive cruise control with stop; parksense front and rear park assist.

These cutting-edge features, along with enhanced airbags and braking systems, offer peace of mind for every journey.

AWASR-sponsored MENOG 24 Forum opens in Muscat

MUSCAT: The Middle East Network Operators’ Group and Peering Forum (MENOG 24) opening ceremony took place yesterday, December 4, at the Grand Millennium Hotel in Muscat, Oman.

Hosted by AWASR, a leading Omani telecommunications provider specialising in high-speed fibre-optic broadband services, the event brought together leading experts, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss advancements in Internet infrastructure, exchange insights, and foster collaboration across the Middle East.

Eng Adnan al Alawi, CEO of AWASR, stated: “We were honoured to host the opening



MENOG 24 serves as a vital platform to explore the latest developments in Internet technology and best practices.

ceremony of MENOG 24 in Muscat. This event provides an important platform for addressing the challenges and

opportunities facing the internet in the Middle East. By fostering collaboration between experts, policymakers, and stakeholders,

we can build a future-proof internet that supports the region’s digital transformation journey.”

Eugen Comendant, CCO of AWASR, added: “AWASR is committed to driving digital innovation in Oman and the broader Middle East. By hosting MENOG 24, we aim to contribute to the development of a robust and resilient internet ecosystem that empowers individuals and businesses alike.”

Organised by the RIPE NCC, the Regional Internet Registry (RIR) for Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia, MENOG 24 serves as a vital platform to explore the latest developments in Internet technology and best practices.



The new branch is designed to elevate the banking experience.

of 186.

Furthermore, the Bank owns more than 900 ATMs, CDMs and multi-use machines distributed across the Sultanate of Oman.

Strategically located amidst key commercial hubs, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar branch offers a comprehensive range of banking services tailored to meet diverse customer needs, including a variety of personal, housing and auto financing options, as well as the ability to request debit, credit and prepaid cards, and open accounts,

benefit from safety deposit lockers, as well as, financial services via ATMs, CDMs, including withdrawals, check deposits and bill payments.

Besides, the branch caters to the needs of people with disabilities, offering accessible facilities and self-service banking devices.

On this occasion, a number of customers in the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar commended this step taken by the Bank, considering that the new branch will represent a vital addition to enhance customer accessibility to banking services.

BUSINESS

NURTURINGTALENT



Innovators recognised at the Innovation Take-off Awards event.

INNOVATION TAKE-OFF AWARDS
RECOGNISE
CREATIVE TALENT

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, DEC 4

THE recent “Innovation Takeoff Event,” held in the presence of prominent dignitaries, highlighted the Mohammed al Barwani (MB) Group of Companies’ efforts to recognise and reward creativity and excellence across various industries. The event showcased a practical application of innovation in the Omani context, demonstrating the Group’s commitment to nurturing talent and aligning its initiatives with Oman’s broader developmental goals. The event, attended by Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, and Dr Ghazi al Rawas, Dean of Research at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), underscored the critical role innovation plays in driving Oman’s progress. With nearly 50 employees honoured for their contributions, MB Group’s approach reflects a commitment to fostering a workplace culture that values creativity and problem-solving. Speaking to the Observer, Rahma al Barwani, Manager of the Innovation Hub Centre, explained the broader significance of this initiative, “The importance of what we do lies in how we help employees innovate. Their ideas and projects are what propel industries forward, improve safety, and with the potential to add value to the economy through new IP in the future. Importantly, we also play a role in improving the employee’s experience, and instilling a strong sense of pride in our people.” This perspective underscores how empowering employees not only benefits the organisation but also contributes to Oman’s socio-economic development. By fostering innovation, MB Group is helping create solutions that align with Oman Vision 2040 goals while strengthening the country’s competitive edge globally. The event celebrated 12 innovative ideas approved for development under the 2024 Innovation Cycle. These ideas include initiatives aimed at safety digitalisation, waste reduction, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) improvements. Such projects hold potential to address some of Oman’s pressing challenges, such as enhancing workplace safety standards, minimising industrial waste and promoting environmentally responsible practices.

Dow champions circular economy solutions

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 4

JIM Fitterling, Chairman and CEO of Dow, delivered a compelling address at the GPCA conference, articulating a forward-looking vision for the chemical industry while emphasising the importance of sustainability, innovation, and collaboration. In his remarks, Fitterling skilfully bridged the past, present, and future of the industry, offering a road map for transformation in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Fitterling opened by acknowledging Dow’s nearly 50-year history in the Middle East, a region where the company has forged deep ties and invested over \$30 billion in joint ventures. This commitment, he noted, has enabled Dow to train thousands of local operators and engineers, laying a strong foundation for the company’s extensive footprint in the region.

From packaging to energy markets, Dow’s state-of-the-art facilities, including the innovation centre in Saudi Arabia, exemplify how partnerships and investments drive progress.

This history underscores the symbiotic relationship between the region’s growth and Dow’s advancement.

“Thanks to our collaboration with GPCA and our industry peers,” Fitterling emphasised, “the future is bright.”



Energy transition is one of the dual mandates shaping the future of the chemical industry: decarbonising manufacturing while meeting increasing customer demand.

JIM FITTERLING
Chairman and CEO of Dow

Fitterling identified the energy transition as one of the dual mandates shaping the future of the chemical industry: decarbonising manufacturing while meeting increasing customer demand. He underscored that, despite global decarbonisation goals, fossil fuels remain a central part of the energy landscape.

With energy consumption projected to double or triple by 2050 due to innovations like AI, reconciling energy demand with sustainability is a complex but critical challenge.

Dow’s strategic response, branded “Decarbonise and Grow,” is a clear road map for achieving carbon neutrality while driving profitability.

Fitterling highlighted the Alberta Path2Zero project as a prime example of this vision in action. The initiative involves creating the world’s first net-zero ethylene and derivatives complex, powered by hydrogen and advanced carbon capture technologies. By 2030, Dow aims to grow its earnings by \$3 billion while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 5 million metric tonnes annually.

Fitterling pivoted to the topic of plastics, a cornerstone of modern life. He outlined the essential role plastics play in sectors like transportation, healthcare, and food security, while candidly addressing public concerns about plastic waste.

With demand for plastics continuing to rise, the challenge lies

not in the material itself, but in its disposal and recycling.

“Globally, less than 10% of plastic is recycled,” Fitterling noted, emphasising the need for systems to capture and repurpose plastic waste. While some advocate for production bans, he argued that such measures are neither realistic nor effective.

Instead, Dow is championing circular economy solutions, aiming to transform 3 million metric tonnes of waste into renewable products annually by 2030. From advanced recycling facilities in the US and Europe to waste collection initiatives in Kenya, these efforts underscore Dow’s leadership in this space.

Fitterling underscored the critical role of governments in enabling innovation. He called for an “all of the above” energy strategy, advocating for the inclusion of natural gas, hydrogen, and nuclear alongside renewables. He cited Dow’s collaboration with X-energy to deploy small modular nuclear reactors in Texas as an example of how advanced technology can drive decarbonisation while meeting industrial needs.

However, Fitterling also highlighted the barriers posed by inconsistent or overly prescriptive policies. “When policymakers decide one type of energy is right and another is wrong,” he warned, “progress stops.” He urged governments to adopt flexible, market-based approaches to incentivise sustainable investments.

SOHAR Port expands operations with new depot

SOHAR Port and Freezone has announced the inauguration of Allied Ondock Container Services LLC, alongside the signing of a \$2.6 million expansion agreement. This development enhances the port’s container depot capabilities to meet the rising demand for advanced logistics solutions in the region.

The initial container depot spans three hectares, with the contract signed in June 2023. The newly inked expansion will add another two hectares, further bolstering operational efficiency and capacity.

Allied Ondock, a subsidiary of Singapore-based Allied Container Group, specialises in container depot services, including repair, inspection, and cleaning. The additional plot will increase warehousing capacity, enabling



seamless operations for over 20 shipping lines calling weekly at SOHAR Port. Emile Hoogsteden, CEO of SOHAR Port, highlighted the strategic importance of the project: “The inauguration of Allied Ondock’s operations marks a transformative step for Oman’s economy.

By enhancing our logistics capabilities, we are not only connecting businesses to global markets but also positioning Oman as a key player in international trade.

This partnership will drive economic diversification, support Oman’s Vision 2040, and benefit the wider community.”

Allied Ondock’s integration of advanced technologies will streamline container handling, reducing turnaround times and elevating service quality.

Lim Kian Chin, Owner of Allied Ondock, expressed his optimism: “By introducing our advanced solutions to SOHAR Port, we aim to enhance the port’s competitiveness and provide a superior edge to its tenants. This partnership empowers shipping lines to optimise operations and improve efficiency.”

Former Omani oil minister recognised with 6th GPCA Legacy Award

MUSCAT: Dr Mohammed bin Hamed al Rumhy, who headed the Minister of Oil & Gas (later rebranded as Ministry of Energy and Minerals) from 1997 to 2022, was recognised with the 6th GPCA Legacy Award, ‘Al Rowad’, in a special award ceremony on December 2, 2024 during the 18th Annual GPCA Forum at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Muscat.

Dr Al Rumhy was cited for his tremendous contribution to developing and significantly growing the downstream petrochemical and chemical sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

During a star-studded award ceremony Dr Al Rumhy was presented with a special trophy by Eng Abdulrahman al Fageeh, CEO, SABIC and Chairman, GPCA, and Dr Abdulwahab al Sadoun, Secretary-General, GPCA. Dr Al Rumhy delivered a moving acceptance speech following a special recognition video that narrated his lifetime achievements and included



Dr Mohammed al Rumhy (centre) receiving the award on Monday.

special tributes from regional and global leaders.

In his role as Minister of Oil & Gas, and subsequently Minister of Energy and Minerals, Dr Al Rumhy was instrumental in securing natural gas feedstock, which fuelled Oman’s downstream

journey in the early 2000s. Dr Al Rumhy played a pioneering role in developing Oman’s Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) sector, including modernising and constructing new facilities to strengthen its position on the global market. He grew Oman’s petrochemical industry

in the areas of methane-based operations, olefins, polyolefins and aromatics.

Dr Al Rumhy was the driving force behind the consolidation and integration of Oman’s downstream and upstream industry, including the creation of OQ Group in 2019, a mammoth national consolidation effort that involved the integration of nine Omani companies into one big conglomerate with operations spanning the entire value chain.

During his 25-year legacy, Dr Al Rumhy enacted a series of strategic reforms which maximised efficiency, encouraged investment and modernised Oman’s sector to align with global standards. He left a lasting legacy which inspired generations and helped to build Oman into the powerhouse it is today.

Dr Abdulwahab al Sadoun, Secretary-General, GPCA, commented: “Dr Mohammed al Rumhy dedicated his life to developing the energy industry in

Oman.

He made an enormous contribution not just to Oman, but also to the international energy community as a well-respected and consulted member of OPEC. Among his closest circles, he is known for his exceptional humility and contagious sense of humour. His impactful leadership has touched the lives of many over a span of 25 years.

He left a lasting mark on Oman’s petrochemical industry and raised a competent generation of leaders who followed in his footsteps. We are proud to bestow Dr Al Rumhy with the GPCA Legacy Award and congratulate him on receiving this honour.”

Now in its 6th edition, the GPCA Legacy Award takes place on an annual basis and honours individuals, who have made extraordinary contributions to foster and strengthen the chemical industry in one or more of the GCC states.

OPINION

Philippines gears up to issue Islamic sukuk



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

THERE are a number of foreign countries that have preceded Islamic countries in embracing Islamic banking over the past five decades.

One such example is the Republic of the Philippine where the first Islamic bank dates to 1973. Then President, Ferdinand Marcos, issued a decree to establish the first Islamic bank with an initial capital of 100 million pesos to provide financial services to several Philippine provinces that are home to large Muslim populations.

This led to the opening of branches of Islamic banks to provide banking services in accordance with Islamic principles.

The Philippine government is now considering issuing Islamic Sukuk as part of its 2025 financing strategy, indicating a continued push to expand Islamic finance in the country.

A recent survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) found strong interest in Islamic banking products. The survey, which covered 450 individuals and 50 business leaders, found that 86% of respondents were open to using Islamic savings accounts, with many expressing strong interest in such products.

The data also shows that there is growing interest from foreign players looking to establish Islamic banking operations in the

country. According to Arifa Ala, Assistant Governor for Financial Supervision at the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), sukuk that complies with Islamic law by avoiding interest-based transactions is now gaining global attention as an alternative investment vehicle in the Philippines.

While no specific amount has been set for sukuk issuance, discussions are underway for the Philippine government to tap this market in 2025, with the possibility of issuing peso-denominated bonds in addition to international offerings.

For its part, BSP is working to integrate Islamic finance into the broader banking sector, with a focus on improving financial inclusion and stimulating economic growth. Since the opening of the country's first Islamic bank, the central bank has made great strides in fostering a supportive environment for Islamic banking.

This move comes at a time when the Philippines is achieving a remarkable economic achievement according to 2023 data, topping the Southeast Asian countries with a growth rate of 5.6%, while the government is working to raise expectations to range between 6% and 7% in the coming years.

This bodes well for the Philippine economy and confirms its flexibility and ability to face global challenges. Today, there are two Islamic

The Philippine government is now considering issuing Islamic Sukuk as part of its 2025 financing strategy, indicating a continued push to expand Islamic finance in the country.

banks operating at full capacity in this regard, while the country's regulatory framework for Islamic banking allows the creation of Sharia-compliant financial products and services, attracting the attention of investors worldwide.

The growth of Islamic banking services in the Philippines will witness further developments in the presence of many Filipino workers working in a large number of Islamic and Arab countries, which helps Islamic banking institutions attract these customers and enhance their savings and deposits in these institutions.

It also contributes to improving the business of economic sectors in the Philippines, including the financial services sector, which grew by 9% in 2023, as these developments are expected to drive economic growth in the country.

The economic growth achieved in the Philippines today is due to the return of life to normal and the resumption of commercial activities on a large scale after years in which the world witnessed financial, banking, and real estate problems in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This necessitated the injection of huge investments into public infrastructure in addition to enhancing the rapid prosperity of digital financial services in the world.

SOUTH KOREA CURVEBALL ADDS NEW 2025 RISKS

AN abortive coup in South Korea was probably not on anyone's bingo card for 2024. Great Power tensions have tended to dominate. Enter President Yoon Suk Yeol, who shocked the world by declaring martial law on Tuesday night, only to make an embarrassing U-turn just hours later after both his own and opposition parties forced their way into parliament to vote down his decree.

The crisis in the \$2 trillion economy, a major US ally and chipmaking hub, may seem just a domestic issue. But it may yet reverberate in Asia and beyond.

Internecine infighting between Yoon and the opposition-controlled legislature has been building for months. The latest standoff was over the president's proposed budget, which would have increased funding to the presidential office, the police and other bodies. Yoon's approval rating has tanked amid an election-meddling scandal involving his wife, the latest controversy surrounding his tenure. To justify calling in the soldiers, Yoon accused his opponents of "anti-state" activities, including paralysing his administration "through repeated impeachments, legislative manipulation and budget manipulation".

Heads must surely roll. The main opposition Democratic Party says it will pursue charges of treason and impeachment against Yoon; the president's party is calling for his cabinet to resign and for the defence minister, who supported the decree despite scoffing at the possibility just months ago, to be sacked.

The Korean won tumbled to a two-year low against the US dollar on Tuesday night and the benchmark KOSPI index opened down 2% the following morning. Deals like a share sale from the KKR-backed HD Hyundai Marine Solution have been yanked.

It's possible the fallout ends there. Yet the longer-term damage to investor confidence may be harder to reverse. Even before the political crisis, the export-dependent economy looked vulnerable to slowing global demand; last month, Citi analysts revised down South Korea's 2025 GDP growth forecast to 1.6%, from 1.8%, mostly due to risks of US trade tariffs. The KOSPI 200 is down 9% this year - the worst performance among benchmark stock-market indices worldwide.

Yoon's imminent impeachment may also reshape dynamics in the region. The president has pushed for deeper ties with Japan and the United States and wants to reduce the country's trade dependence on China.

US President-elect Donald Trump's protectionist agenda may force Yoon's successor to rethink the country's allegiances. — Reuters

Conflicting views on growth of UK economy

WHILE the newly elected Labour Prime Minister, Kier Starmer, has been clear on his priorities, with the growth of the economy at the top, there has been a difference in the opinion of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and some leading economists as well as the former Tory Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, on the issue of the economy.

The UK economy has received a hefty upgrade from the IMF, but the organisation's top economist had warned about the possible risks of big policy changes in the recent budget.

Analysts at the fiscal watchdog expect the UK to grow 1.1 per cent in 2024, up from a previous forecast of 0.7 per cent. Among rich economies only Spain received a larger increase.

This time last year, the IMF predicted the UK would be the worst-performing economy in 2024, but its latest forecasts put it in line with France and ahead of Germany, Japan and Italy.

The IMF expects growth to pick up to 1.5 per cent next year. It predicted that "falling inflation" and interest rates would stimulate domestic demand.

The up grade would have been a boost for the chancellor Rachel Reeves when she was preparing her first Budget, but Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, the IMF's chief economist, cautioned that doing "too much too quickly" on tax rises and spending cuts might have an "adverse impact on growth."

Reeves is reportedly seeking to raise £40 bn through a combination of tax hikes and cuts, which many economists have warned risks causing damage to the UK's growth outlook. Gourinchas had stressed that there was still a need for rich economies "to bring debt levels down."

He said: "If you are not doing that, that's when you find yourself potentially later on the mercy of market pressures.

That will force an adjustment that is uncontrolled to a large extent, at which point you have very few degrees of freedom. So you don't want to get in that position."

Reeves had welcomed the



Customers shop at a fruit and vegetable stall at Portobello Road in London. — Reuters



ANDY JALIL

The author is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

forecasts, but stressed there was more work to do to encourage growth.

The UK economy, however, received a rare downgrade after economists at the EY Item Club, lowered its growth forecast for this year and next. The consultancy predicted that the UK would grow 0.9 per cent this year, down from the 1.1 per cent expansion it projected this summer.

The downgrade for 2025 was larger, with EY anticipating that the economy would grow 1.5 per cent, down from its previous estimate of 2.0 per cent.

EY's reduction, which came from a higher base, was largely driven by changing assumptions around consumer spending, reflecting the latest estimates of the household savings ratio.

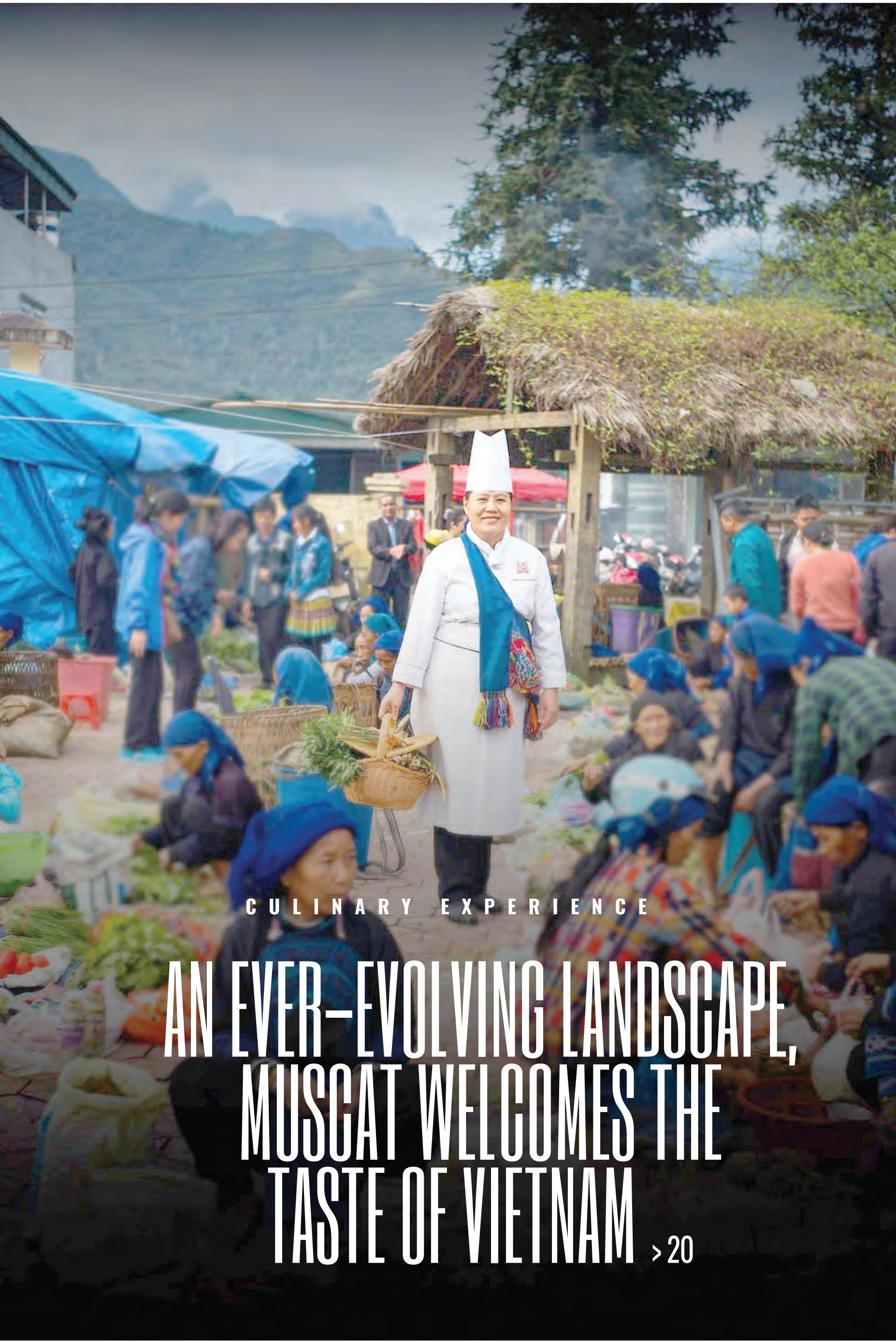
Back in September, the Office for National Statistics had published updated estimates of the savings ratio in the first half of the year,

revising down its estimates to 10.0 per cent from 11.1 per cent previously. However, many forecasters, including the IMF and the OECD have bumped up their predictions in recent months reflecting the UK economy's surprisingly strong start to the year.

Meanwhile, former (Conservative) chancellor Jeremy Hunt, has been critical of the increase in employer national insurance contribution (NIC) in the recent budget. Expecting that Labour was planning to do so he had said that it would be an "absolute disaster" for Britain's economy as it would dampen growth and investment.

Treasury officials had suggested increasing employer national insurance contributions in 2022 when Hunt was chancellor, following the fallout from Liz Truss' mini-budget. But he said: "I rejected it because of the damage it would do to business investment and job creation".

ART/LIFE



CULINARY EXPERIENCE

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AUCTION

Two-sided Van Dyck work, Einstein letters on sale at Christie’s Classic Week



AN ANTHONY van Dyck portrait of a horse with a hidden landscape on the reverse will go under the hammer next week during Christie’s “Classic Week” events, where it could fetch up to \$3.80 million.

“Andalusian Horse” is the 17th-century Flemish artist’s earliest grand-scale depiction of a lone horse, according to the London auction house.

“It has the added interest of having a second painting on the back, a sketch of a landscape which was only revealed back in 2000 when the old lining canvas was removed, and that is his only surviving landscape sketch,” Clementine Sinclair, Christie’s head of London Old Master Paintings, said.

The artwork, on offer at the December 3 “Old Masters Part I” sale, has a 2 million-3 million pounds (\$2.54 million-\$3.80 million) price estimate.

Christie’s hosts a series of live sales from Monday and ongoing online sales as part of its Classic Week.

Prints by Dutch master Rembrandt go on sale on December 5, led by “Christ crucified between the two Thieves: ‘The Three Crosses,’” a depiction of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, with an estimate of 800,000-1.2 million pounds.

A Beethoven music sketch leaf for the string quartet in C, Op. 59 No 3, with his cancellations and corrections (100,000-150,000 pounds) and letters physicist Albert Einstein wrote to his first wife Mileva Maric are among the highlights of the “Valuable Books and Manuscripts” auction on December 11. The letters, dating 1898 to 1903 and showcasing some of Einstein’s early scientific thinking, have a price estimate of 700,000-1 million pounds.

An Einstein robotic head and a first edition of J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone” are on offer in the online “Science Fiction and Fantasy” sale.

That sale is led by “The Dune Bible”, a storyboard prepared for Alejandro Jodorowsky’s doomed 1970s film adaption of sci-fi epic “Dune”. It has an estimate of 250,000-350,000 pounds. — Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



FASHION

Models present creations from the Ferragamo Spring/Summer 2025 collection during Fashion Week in Milan, Italy. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

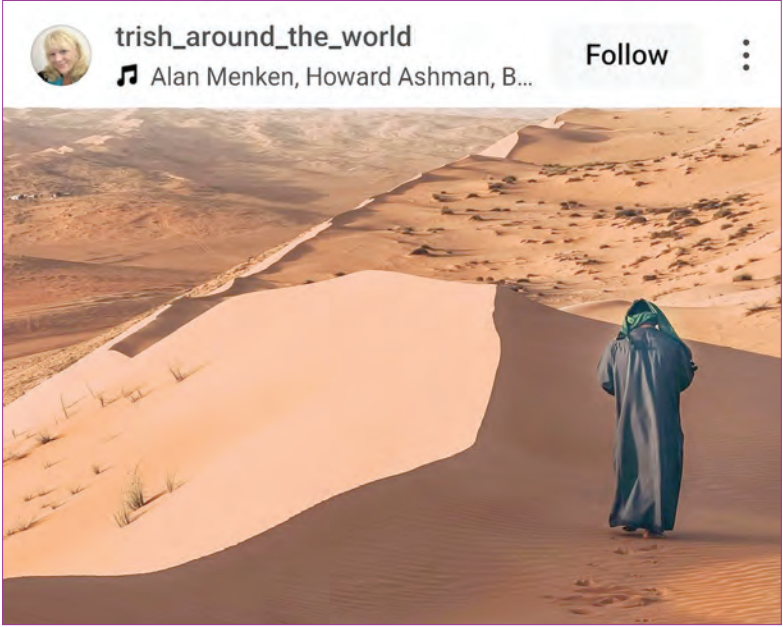
Rihanna poses on the red carpet of The Fashion Awards 2024 at the Royal Albert Hall in London, Britain. — Reuters



FILM

US actress Angelina Jolie attends The Gothams 34th Annual Film Awards at Cipriani Wall Street in New York. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Exploring the Desert



Beauty of Remote Places

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‘Meeting with the past’, Greek family keeps ancient instruments alive



IN EVROPOS, a village in northern Greece, Danis Koumartzis carves out the wooden sound box of a traditional lyre before covering it with animal hide and attaching nine strings that when plucked resemble the sound of a modern day guitar.

Koumartzis, 41, is continuing a family tradition focusing on making replicas of ancient Greek musical instruments based on old images of frescoes and vases going back centuries.

“It all started with our father, he started it initially as a hobby. He used to make other kinds of instruments, mainly Greek traditional instruments,” Koumartzis said at his workshop, whose walls are covered with pictures of ancient instruments and their modern-day replicas.

“At some point, about 12 years ago, we dared and made

the first replica instrument, an ancient Greek musical instrument, which was a lyre of Hermes,” he said, referring to the Greek god who, according to legend, invented the instrument.

The instruments are bought by professional musicians, composers, academics and collectors, and have been used in films, including the recent remake of the classic Hollywood movie Ben Hur.

Those who play the instruments today see them as a window to the past.

“In some way, the lyre, as an emotion, creates a feeling that is otherworldly,” said Giorgos Tsomeidis, 22, a student of the ancient Greek lyre in the city of Thessaloniki.

“Ancient Greek music, for me, is a way of initiation, I would say, a meeting with the past, and through it you can also open gates to the future.” — Reuters



A hilarious preview as ROHM showcases highlights from La Fille du Régiment

BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS KHALID AL BUSAIDI

ONE THING was certain about the forthcoming production of La Fille du Régiment, judging by Saturday’s Lunchtime Recital in the Opera Galleria: it will be hilarious.

Not simply an opéra-comique in the traditional French style, it was a dramatic synopsis of the taste of things to come at the Royal Opera House Muscat on 5th and 7th December, presented by the understudies of the Opera di Monte-Carlo in what promises to be an extremely amusing theatrical presentation of Donizetti’s opera buffa.

Annunziata Vestri as La Marquise broke the ice, portraying the ‘Grande Dame’ to perfection. Her comic facial expressions complemented her rich, warm mezzo timbre in the brilliantly haughty opening solo from Act 1, “Pour une femme de mon nom.”

Baritone Georgii Sinarevskii and soprano Nicole Wacker formed a conspiratorial pair, appearing from behind pillars in “La Voilà. Mordieu qu’elle gentille!” Wacker’s agile, acrobatic, and capricious frivolity as Marie contrasted beautifully with the deep sincerity and gravity of Sinarevskii’s Sulpice. The chemistry between them developed into humorous banter, contrasting with the bossy Marquise, and descended into parody by the end, in true Donizetti fashion.

La Marquise marched poor Marie to the back of the Galleria for her “Chacun le Sait, Chacun le dit,” a more lyrical coloratura aria in waltz time, swinging along and reaching her very high tessitura in conclusion.

True romance is about to be unveiled as the dapper yet serious



Pierluigi D’Aloia appears as soldier Tonio, only to be mocked by an unkind Marie in the duet “Quoi! Vous m’aimez...?”. D’Aloia’s passionate declarations of love evoke comparisons to the vocal demands placed on Don José from Bizet’s Carmen, showcasing his remarkable control in the sustained high register. Their voices blend well, leading to a convincing mutual declaration of love by the end.

“Ah! Mes amis, quel jour de fête” is powerful in true tenor-hero style as he addresses his friends, joyful and in love, in a charming ¾ aria. D’Aloia directs his joyful song to the pianist – a formidable Francesco Barbagelata, who has

played continuously throughout – as he hits top octave leaps with clean precision and finally disappears into the audience.

In response, Marie’s doleful aria, “Il faut partir! - Suis-moi!” opens with a plaintive lament in 6/8, giving Wacker the opportunity to demonstrate the pathos in her tonal palette, including her impossibly high sustained coloratura at the end.

Moving on to Act 2, an extended trio featuring the baritone and two women had the audience roaring with laughter. Vestri resumes her dramatic dame persona, organising the others as if she were a singing teacher in a Gounod pastiche. Sulpice interjects with some pattern nonsense, colluding with Marie and further annoying La Marquise in an utter spoof. The musical battle between the women anticipates the singing lesson between Phantom and Christine, though with facial expressions and theatrical slapstick like no other.

The subsequent aria only serves to illustrate the sheer stamina required – and demonstrated – by Ms Wacker in a complete change of mood with the lyrical, passionate “C’en est donc fait.” Her agility and accuracy, combined with unflinching intonation in sustained passages within her high tessitura, are even more incredible given the demands of the trio. If the understudies are this good, the full-scale production next weekend will be excellent beyond imagination.

It may be said that the acoustics in the Galleria are almost too sympathetic and generous; the singers, trained to project in opera houses, become quite loud and overpowering at times.

Finally, the well-known and cheerful quartet “Suivez noi! Ils viennent la sauver - Salut à la France” was so good that they performed it twice – as an encore for the audience to sing and clap along!

FEATURES

BY YERU EBUEEN

IN RECENT years, Oman has transformed into a rich mosaic where every tradition has the opportunity to flourish. Known for its welcoming atmosphere, Oman has seen an influx of expatriates who call the country their second home. This multicultural environment has not only enriched the daily lives of its residents but has also significantly influenced its culinary scene.

The gastronomic landscape in Oman reflects this cultural convergence, blending local Omani flavours with the culinary traditions of various countries. Indian spices, Lebanese mezze, and dishes from diverse subcontinental nations intermingle with the regional palate. Recently, Omani cuisine has begun to embrace the fresh and bold tastes of Asian cooking, notably with the impending popularity of Vietnamese food. While still carving out its niche, Vietnamese cuisine is poised to leave an impact on Oman's food scene with its vibrant dishes that speak volumes about the country's heritage.

Vietnamese cuisine is characterised by its balance of flavours, reliance on fresh ingredients, and meticulous crafting of dishes that tell a story of the region's history and culture. The infusion of herbs, sumptuous soups, and aromatic grilled dishes are crafted with care and creativity. The culinary journey through Vietnam is as diverse as the country itself, with influences from its mountainous north to its lush southern coasts.

Innovative entrepreneurs in Oman are keen to diversify this burgeoning food landscape. They spearhead pop-up events that introduce residents and visitors alike to tantalising culinary experiences. Such events invite the local community to savour diverse dishes, highlighting the significance of cultural exchange and food appreciation.

Among these culinary pioneers is Chef Madame Binh, a prominent figure in Vietnam's gastronomic world. Her restaurant, Luk Lak, has established a formidable reputation in Vietnam's vibrant culinary landscape, particularly among enthusiasts of Vietnamese cuisine. Located in the heart of Hanoi, this premium restaurant is renowned for its innovative approach to traditional dishes, blending authenticity with contemporary flair. Since opening in 2018, Luk Lak has earned accolades for its exceptional quality, unique flavours and ability to source the finest local ingredients.

The restaurant's commitment to excellence is underscored by its Bib Gourmand status awarded by the Michelin Guide, a distinction that recognises establishments for providing good quality and good value cooking. This recognition has solidified Luk Lak's place among the finest dining options in Vietnam, attracting both locals and tourists eager to experience its culinary offerings.

Chef Madame Binh, the driving force behind Luk Lak, is praised for her impressive talent and her dedication to showcasing the diverse flavours of Vietnamese cuisine. With over 25 years of experience in the culinary field, including at one of Hanoi's top five-star hotels, she has crafted a menu that takes diners on a gastronomic journey through Vietnam, celebrating its regional diversity. Signature dishes, such as grilled catfish marinated in galangal and pigeon sticky rice wrapped in aromatic lotus leaves, exemplify her ability to infuse traditional recipes with creativity and seasonal ingredients.

"I am very happy to be in Muscat, as this is my team's first time in the country," Chef Binh shared. "The warm welcome has been touching." She noted that her exploration of Oman has revealed a commitment to sustainable sourcing, with local Omanis dedicated to providing the highest quality



AN EVER-EVOLVING LANDSCAPE, MUSCAT WELCOMES THE TASTE OF VIETNAM



ingredients. In a significant leap for Omani food lovers, Shades Events, in collaboration with W Muscat, is bringing the Luk Lak pop-up experience to the country from December 1 to 10. This event promises to showcase the best of Vietnamese cuisine, allowing attendees to experience beautifully curated dishes that encapsulate the essence of provincial Vietnam. Luk Lak is recognised for its exceptional quality; the dishes feature aromatic flavours, with highlights like grilled catfish marinated in galangal and pigeon sticky rice infused with fragrant lotus leaves sourced from Hue City. These culinary creations offer a journey through the regions of Vietnam, making dining at Luk Lak not just a meal, but an adventure. "We hope to provide a memorable pop-up experience for everyone," the Luk Lak team expressed. "We look forward to Oman experiencing the best of what Vietnam can offer. Thank you, Omani friends, for embracing us with open arms." Bringing this experience to Oman has been dramatic but ultimately rewarding, reflecting the dynamic nature of Oman's culinary evolution. As the pop-up unfolds, attendees can expect to traverse the rich flavours of Vietnam, experiencing the warmth and hospitality embedded in each dish. Chef Madame Binh's intense dedication to ensuring that every meal meets her high standards will ensure that this pop-up is not just another event but a significant culinary milestone for both countries. If you're looking for something new to try in Oman's still-growing food scene, consider trying the Luk Lak popup not just for the unique experience but also to experience Vietnam without leaving the country.