

OMAN
عمان
DAILY

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SUNRISE 06:29 AM
PRAYER TIMINGS
FAJR 05:10 AM
DHUHR 11:59 PM
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MAGHRIB 05:25 PM
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SENEGAL, MALI
ENTER AFCON
QUARTERS

INBRIEF

HM’S GREETINGS TO SWISS PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to President Guy Parmelin of the Swiss Confederation on being elected as his country’s President. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments to President Guy Parmelin in leading the people of the Swiss Confederation towards the realisation of further progress and stability. His Majesty also wished the bilateral cooperation and partnership relations further growth in all spheres.

OMAN WELCOMES YEMEN DIALOGUE

The Sultanate of Oman welcomed the invitation to engage in dialogue among all southern components within the Republic of Yemen, to be hosted by the brethren in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The statement by the Foreign Ministry said that this initiative contributes towards achieving the necessary consensus under a comprehensive political settlement, in accordance with the legitimate aspirations of the brotherly Yemeni people.

‘GULF SHIELD 2026’ EXERCISE BEGINS

The activities of the ‘Gulf Shield 2026’ exercise began on Sunday in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the participation of the Royal Air Force of Oman. This joint aerial exercise, conducted by the air forces of the GCC countries, aims to elevate military readiness levels and develop joint action mechanisms to achieve the highest degrees of coordination and integration in operational environments, following established best practices. **SEE ALSO P3**

Royal Decrees ratify agreements with countries

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday issued two Royal Decrees.

Royal Decree No 3/2026 on ratifying the agreement between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Spain on mutual visa waiver for holders of diplomatic, special and service passports, signed in Madrid on November 5, 2025.

Article (1) ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. Royal Decree No 4/2026 on ratifying the Air Services agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire, signed in Montreal on September 22, 2025.

Article (1) ratifies the aforementioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this decree.

Article (2) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — **ONA**

OMAN AFFIRMS SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW

VENEZUELA MILITARY RECOGNISES VP AS ACTING PRESIDENT

In view of recent developments concerning the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Foreign Ministry reaffirmed the fundamental principles of the Sultanate of Oman’s policy in full support for international law and Oman’s respect for the sovereignty and independence of states.

In a statement to this effect, the Foreign Ministry urged all parties involved to exercise maximum restraint and to empower dialogue to prevent further escalation and achieve reconciliation in a manner that serves the Venezuelan people’s security, stability and safety, as well as their legitimate choices.

The Foreign Ministry



A woman shows damage in a residential building, a day after the US launched a strike on Caracas, Venezuela, on Sunday. — **Reuters**

reiterated its full support for any efforts exerted by the United Nations to safeguard international security and peace.

Meanwhile, Venezuela’s military on Sunday recognised Delcy Rodriguez, deputy to ousted president Nicolas Maduro, as the country’s acting leader, after US forces extracted the former head of state to face trial.

Amid uncertainty following the leftist president’s dramatic capture, Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez appeared to throw his weight behind Rodriguez, who US President Donald Trump had earlier indicated was a figure Washington could work with.

SEE ALSO P7





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SHORTTAKES

MOL WORKSHOP
HIGHLIGHTS
NATIONAL SYSTEM
INNOVATION



SAFIA BINT
ABDULLAH
AL HARTHIYAH

Al SEEB: The Ministry of Labour (MoL) held the 4th edition of a workshop on the 'National System for Institutional Innovation and Change Management'. Held in the Wilayat of Al Seeb, the workshop was attended by 100 participants

from government units and private sector establishments.

Safia bint Abdullah al Harthiyah, an administrative development specialist at the Ministry of Labour, said, “The workshop constitutes an ambitious initiative that has been implemented by the Ministry of Labour since 2022 as part of its contributions to achieve the goals of the Oman Vision 2040.” Safia added that the “National System for Institutional Innovation and Change Management” seeks to empower competencies, turn challenges into opportunities and establish a flexible corporate culture that is capable of immediately responding to global developments.

The workshop included video presentations with a detailed explanation of the “National System for Institutional Innovation and Change Management”, a Research Excellence Initiative, a practice of behavioural insights, waste reduction in the Sultanate of Oman within the context of Kaizen’s approach to human resource development, in addition to elaborations about health, safety and security in the work environment.

The workshop aims to enhance integration among different sectors by designing an effective system for exchanging knowledge and transferring the best administrative practices, to keep pace with modern global approaches. — ONA

PAKISTANI MILITARY DELEGATION VISITS MSC



MUSCAT: A delegation from the Pakistan Naval Academy, led by Commodore Amer Iqbal, visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) on Sunday. Upon their arrival at the centre’s headquarters, the delegation was received by Commodore Adil bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Head of the Maritime Security Centre. — ONA

MoHUP hands over 17 housing units in Kamzar

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning on Sunday handed over housing units in the Khuwair residential scheme in Kamzar village, Wilayat of Khasab, and granted residential land to eligible recipients.

The handover ceremony was attended by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, and Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam.

In all, 17 housing units were delivered to eligible citizens as part of the social housing programme, reflecting the ministry’s commitment to providing suitable housing for citizens. In addition,

30 residential plots were granted to citizens according to the approved grant system within the scheme.

Eng Rehab bint Salem al Mayahiyah, Director-General of Social Housing and Projects at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, said that the Kamzar village scheme embodies the ministry’s approach to addressing housing challenges in villages through flexible housing solutions to reduce migration of families from their original areas.

“Social housing programmes are not limited to providing housing units since they are based on a comprehensive vision aimed at improving the quality of life and empowering families socially. This is achieved by integrating housing with comprehensive urban



17 housing units were delivered to eligible citizens as part of the social housing programme.

planning and essential services, thus ensuring long-term housing sustainability,” she said. She emphasised that implementing social housing projects in locations such as the village of Kamzar reflects the ministry’s commitment to delivering housing services to various governorates and villages despite geographical and logistical

challenges in line with the objectives of balanced development and Oman Vision 2040. The project included the reclamation of 148 residential plots, in addition to three government-owned plots allocated for a school, a mosque and a health centre, with a total area of approximately 143,000 square metres. It also included the construction of an internal road

network exceeding 2,757 metres in length, a 3,630-metre mountain road and a 370-metre coastal road.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning also signed 8 investment usufruct contracts in the industrial and commercial sectors as part of the Kamzar village residential scheme, with an overall investment value of RO 460,000 on an area of 5,520 square metres.

Meanwhile, a joint meeting was held on Sunday in Musandam Governorate under the chairmanship of Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam, in the presence of Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, and members of Majlis Ash’shura and the Municipal Council of Musandam Governorate.

ROP marks Police Day with
celebrations, achievements



ROP Shooting Team secured third place in the Sultan’s Armed Forces Shooting Championship

KABEEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 4

THE Royal Oman Police (ROP) celebrates Police Day, observed annually on January 5, with a series of ceremonial events, graduations and activities highlighting its achievements in security, public service and national development.

Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, will patronise the annual Police Day celebrations, while the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa will host the graduation of officer cadets and a skills development course for officers. Renowned for its continuous digital transformation and service modernisation, the ROP is widely regarded as one of the world’s leading police forces. Its efforts have earned international recognition, translating into 35 accolades from various countries.

Highlighting the achievements of the Police Sports Federation, Colonel Abdullah bin Salem al Buraiki, Director of the Federation, said the ROP Shooting Team secured third place in the Sultan’s Armed Forces Shooting Championship, third place in the Arab Police Shooting Championship in both men’s and women’s categories in Tunisia, first place in the women’s category and second place in the men’s category at the 43rd Annual Shooting Championship in the UAE,



ABDULLAH BIN
SALEM AL BURAIKI

Director of Police
Sports Federation

The ROP
is widely
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leading police
forces, earning
international
recognition

and second place in the Gulf Police One-Armed Shooting Championship held in Kuwait. He noted that Police Day is not only a celebration of the ROP’s establishment and security achievements, but also an occasion to recognise its contributions to supporting national development, including sports.

“The Federation aims to equip police personnel with comprehensive athletic skills through regular sporting activities, specialised training courses and participation in domestic and international competitions. This strategy has progressed steadily and has been positively reflected in the results achieved,” Al Buraiki said.

On international cooperation, he stressed that the Federation is committed to strengthening partnerships and exchanging expertise with Arab and global police sports federations.

“This enhances international cooperation, develops sports methodologies and allows the Federation to benefit from best practices in police sports management,” he added.

Oman’s Police Sports Federation is a member of the International Police Sports Union, the Arab Police Sports Federation and the Gulf Police Sports Federations.

Sports analyst and journalist Waleed al Khafif praised the Federation as a valuable pillar of Omani sports and an important source of talent for local clubs. He said the ROP, through its sports

federation, plays a pivotal role in strengthening the national sports ecosystem.

“These achievements align with a comprehensive national vision that views sport as a tool for building character and promoting values of fair competition, belonging and excellence,” he said.

In addition to logistical support, the Police Sports Federation follows precise technical and administrative planning, including securing facilities, equipment, medical and first aid services, and transportation for participating teams.

Col Al Buraiki noted that the Federation also adopts modern technologies, including electronic refereeing systems for sports and cultural competitions, enhancing accuracy, fairness and organisational efficiency.

The ROP maintains strong cooperation with national sports institutions and Omani clubs by exchanging expertise and facilitating advanced training for coaches and administrators. The Federation also contributes players, coaches and referees to national teams, while many police officers actively participate in local club competitions.

Special emphasis is placed on women’s sports, with support extended to women’s participation in athletics, shooting, table tennis and cultural activities, as well as empowerment in sports management and leadership roles within the police sports system.

SHORT TAKES

RAFO PARTICIPATES IN ‘GULF SHIELD 2026’ EXERCISE



RIYADH: The activities of the ‘Gulf Shield 2026’ exercise began on Sunday in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the participation of the Royal Air Force of Oman. This joint aerial exercise, conducted by the air forces of the GCC countries, aims to elevate military readiness levels and develop joint action mechanisms to achieve the highest degrees of coordination and integration in operational environments, following established best practices. — **ONA**



Mobility and movement aids topped the list of distributed equipment.

3,319 DEVICES
DISTRIBUTED TO
BENEFICIARIES

AL RUSTAQ: The ‘Sahhil Hayatahum’ (Ease Their Lives) initiative, implemented by the Ihsan Association branch in Al Batinah South Governorate, has continued its humanitarian mission of supporting the elderly and individuals with disabilities.

Between 2015 and 2025, the initiative focused on providing and distributing prosthetic and assistive medical devices to enhance the quality of life for its beneficiaries.

Statistical data shows that the initiative has reached a total of 2,251 beneficiaries across various wilayats in Al Batinah South, consisting of 1,135 females and 1,116 males.

During this period, 3,319 medical devices were distributed to address diverse health and rehabilitation needs.

Mobility and movement aids topped the list of distributed equipment, including 760 wheelchairs, 700 medical beds, 140 walkers, 35 electric wheelchairs and 30 crutches. — **ONA**

OMAN, JORDAN
REVIEW DEFENCE
ACADEMIC TIES



Brigadier Nael Mohammed al Shqeirat holds talks with Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon.

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies, received in his office on Sunday a delegation from the Royal Jordanian Command and Staff College, headed by Brigadier Nael Mohammed al Shqeirat.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Mohammed bin Ahmed al Mushaikhi, Commandant of the Joint Command and Staff College. During the meeting, several matters of mutual interest were discussed, particularly in academic fields. The Jordanian delegation visited the Joint Command and Staff College at the Academy, where they were received by Brigadier Mohammed bin Ahmed al Mushaikhi.

During the visit, the delegation viewed a visual presentation about the college and its diverse training and educational programmes. This was followed by a tour of the college’s facilities, including its various departments, systems and equipment.

The delegation also visited the National Defence College at Bait Al Falaj, where they were received by Air Commodore Yasser bin Ali al Rahbi, Assistant Commandant of the National Defence College. — **ONA**

MOBILE SERVICE SUBSCRIPTIONS RISE BY 9.6%

MUSCAT: The total number of mobile service subscriptions in Oman increased by 9.6 per cent, reaching 8,009,723 subscriptions compared to 7,307,140 during the same period in 2024, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated that prepaid mobile subscriptions accounted for the largest share of the total, reaching 5,152,342 subscriptions by the end of November 2025, recording a growth of 2.0 per cent compared to the same period last



Data shows that prepaid mobile subscriptions accounted for the largest share of the total subscriptions by Nov 2025 end.

year. Postpaid mobile subscriptions rose by 1.8 per cent to reach 1,268,345. Notably, Machine-to-Machine (M2M) Internet of Things subscriptions recorded a significant surge of 57.5 per cent, totalling 1,589,036 subscriptions.

Regarding fixed communication services, the total number of fixed broadband Internet subscriptions reached 597,114 by the end of November 2025, an increase of 3 per cent compared to the same period in 2024.

Fibre-to-the-Home (FTTH) technology subscriptions rose by

10.8 per cent to 354,014. Fixed 5G subscriptions saw a slight growth of 1 per cent, while fixed 4G subscriptions declined by 54.5 per cent and ADSL subscriptions dropped by 36.1 per cent.

Furthermore, the data showed that the total number of fixed telephone lines reached 411,065, a 1-per cent increase from the previous year.

Meanwhile, international Internet bandwidth capacity expanded by 14.8 per cent to reach 4,102,219 Mbps by the end of November 2025. — **ONA**

Dar Al Atta’a delivers 200th house, repairs 3,070 homes

SAUD AL ANSARI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

DAR Al Atta’a Association concluded 2025 by delivering its 200th house, marking a significant milestone in its donor-supported efforts to provide safe housing for low-income and underprivileged families across Oman.

The association celebrated the completion of its 100th house in 2021, and by the end of 2025, the total number of houses constructed reached 200 in various governorates and wilayats. In parallel, Dar Al Atta’a has carried out maintenance work on more than 3,070 houses nationwide.



House sizes typically range up till 270 square metres, with construction costs estimated between RO 27,000 and RO 30,000.

This achievement underscores the association’s expanding role in addressing the lack of independent housing, particularly among orphans and other vulnerable groups, through its Maskani Ma’mani (My Home, My Safety) programme. The initiative focuses on both construction and maintenance, driven by the belief that a stable home is the cornerstone of family security and dignity.

Over the years, Dar Al Atta’a staff have worked tirelessly to deliver projects on the ground. Following the milestone of 100 houses in 2021, the association set a goal of completing 200 houses by the end of 2025 — a target that was successfully achieved and marked during a closing ceremony attended by board members and staff, who shared in the beneficiaries’ joy.

In June 2025, the association also inaugurated the Hayy Al

Dar Al Atta’a has also carried out maintenance work on more than 3,070 houses nationwide

Atta’a (Al Atta’a Neighbourhood) project, handing over 36 modern housing units in Sanaa Bani Ghafir, Al Khabourah. The project features solar power systems, water purification facilities, and integrated residential infrastructure and is regarded as one of the association’s most advanced housing initiatives. It also represents the first environmentally friendly residential neighbourhood developed by a charitable organisation in Oman.

Eng Ahmed al Balushi, Director of the Maskani Ma’mani programme, said that despite the challenges associated with charitable housing work — such as site selection, field visits and application assessments — the happiness witnessed when families receive a new or renovated home makes every effort worthwhile. He noted that

alongside constructing 200 houses, the association has maintained over 3,070 homes since its establishment, contributing significantly to national efforts to promote family stability. Al Balushi added that construction progresses more rapidly when beneficiary families already own land, with projects prioritised based on urgency and registration order. House sizes typically range between 180 and 270 square metres, with construction costs estimated between RO 27,000 and RO 30,000.

He concluded by expressing gratitude to the people of Oman for their strong spirit of solidarity and generosity, and extended special thanks to private-sector institutions for their continued support of the association’s humanitarian initiatives.

Protecting fish stocks a national priority as Oman steps

MUSCAT: Protecting fish stocks in Oman remains a national priority due to their critical role in supporting the national economy, ensuring food security and sustaining the livelihoods of thousands of artisanal fishermen.

To preserve this vital natural resource, Oman has enacted comprehensive legislation, strengthened monitoring mechanisms and enhanced cooperation between official bodies and fishing communities to combat harmful practices and promote sustainable fishing.

Dr Hussein bin Mohammed al Musqati, Director of the Fisheries Development Department in Muscat at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said the ministry places strong



Strong emphasis is laid on regulating fishing tools because of their direct impact on the marine environment and fish stocks.

emphasis on regulating fishing tools and practices because of their direct impact on the marine environment and fish stocks.

He noted that the misuse of certain fishing equipment outside approved regulations

can increase bycatch and lead to serious ecological imbalances.

He explained that coastal fishing nets are among the traditional fishing methods widely used in several governorates, including Al Batinah North, Al Batinah

South, Muscat, Musandam and Dhofar.

These nets have been used by artisanal fishermen for generations in accordance with inherited customs. Coastal net fishing relies on fixing nets close to shore to take advantage of fish movement with sea currents, primarily targeting small surface fish such as sardines and other seasonal species.

Dr Al Musqati stressed that adherence to approved regulations allows fishermen to release non-targeted catches, while failure to comply with technical specifications, designated areas or fishing seasons can result in the capture of unintended species, threatening the ecological balance. — **ONA**



CULINARY TRADITIONS TAKE CENTRE STAGE

THE FOOD FESTIVAL AT MUSCAT NIGHTS COMBINES TRADITIONAL OMANI FARE WITH CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL FLAVOURS, MAKING IT ONE OF THE EVENT’S MAIN ATTRACTIONS



IDRIS AL BALUSHI

AT the heart of Muscat Nights in Al Qurum Natural Park, the Food Festival has emerged as one of the most vibrant and unifying attractions, drawing crowds with aromas, flavours, and stories that reflect both Oman’s heritage and its openness to the world.

More than a collection of food stalls, the festival plays a fundamental role by transforming the park into a space of cultural exchange, family gathering and shared experience.

From traditional Omani dishes prepared with time-honoured techniques to international flavours inspired by global trends, the Food Festival acts as a bridge between generations and cultures. Visitors wandering through Al Qurum Natural Park are met with the sight of bubbling pots, sizzling grills and carefully plated desserts, each stall offering a glimpse into a different culinary story.

International stalls range

from Lebanese to African, Asian and British, each presenting an authentic taste from their homeland, giving visitors the opportunity to experience a remarkable culinary extravaganza all under one roof.

For Omani halwa maker Ibrahim al Saifi, who has been practising his craft for over sixteen years, the festival represents continuity and pride. Standing beside his copper pot, he speaks of halwa not simply as a dessert, but as a symbol of identity. “After sixteen years of making Omani halwa, I still feel the same pride every time I stir the pot,” he said. “This is more than a sweet, it is a story of patience, heritage, and generosity. Being part of a national food festival gives me joy, because it allows me to share a taste of our culture with people from across Oman and beyond.”

His presence highlights the festival’s role in preserving traditional crafts while presenting them to new audiences in a lively, contemporary setting.

The Food Festival also serves as an entry point for visitors



experiencing Muscat Nights for the first time. Tourist Leena Sulaiman described how food guided her journey through the event. “As soon as I entered Muscat Nights, the first place I headed to was the food festival,” she said.

“I truly believe food is the best representation of a rich culture, it tells stories you can taste.” Sampling dishes such as shuwa fries and karak tea allowed her to form a deeper connection with the place. “They tasted so unique and delicious, and truly enriched my experience which helped me connect deeply with Oman and its people.”

Beyond heritage and tourism, the festival reflects how local initiatives are keeping pace with evolving tastes.

Abdullah al Shibli, a high school English teacher from Al Batinah North Governorate visiting with his family, noted the diversity on display.

“I was truly impressed by the sheer number of international foods offered at the food festival,” he said. “What surprised me the most was seeing so many authentic dishes from different cultures under one roof.” He also pointed to the creative energy of the stalls, which blend nostalgia and modern trends, from Chips Oman paired with cheesy sweet corn to tiramisu pudding inspired by viral TikTok reels.

Together, these experiences underscore the Food Festival’s central role within Muscat Nights. It is a place where tradition meets innovation, where families, tourists and artisans gather, and where Al Qurum Natural Park becomes a living table that reflects Oman’s cultural richness, hospitality and evolving culinary landscape.

The festival ensures every visitor has the chance to savour these flavours and stories, making it an essential highlight of the festivities.

Muscat Nights runs daily from 4 pm to 10 pm throughout the month of January at different venues across Muscat.



WORLD

SHORT TAKES



People sit as news broadcast with footage of a North Korean missile test, in Seoul. — AFP

N KOREA FIRES BALLISTIC MISSILES IN FIRST TEST OF 2026

SEOUL: North Korea fired multiple ballistic missiles off its east coast on Sunday, Seoul’s military said. The first launch of the year came just hours before South Korea’s leader headed to China for a summit that is expected to feature ties with the North. Seoul’s defence ministry said it had detected “several projectiles, presumed to be ballistic missiles” fired from near the North Korean capital Pyongyang around 7:50 am. The missiles flew approximately 900 kilometres, the military said, adding that South Korea and ally the United States were “closely analysing the specifications” while “maintaining a full readiness posture”. Seoul’s Office of National Security convened an emergency meeting following the launch, which a presidency statement said “constitutes a provocative act in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions”. Japan’s defence ministry also said it had detected a possible ballistic missile, noting that two projectiles reached an altitude of 50 kilometres and flew distances of 900 and 950 kilometres respectively. “North Korea’s nuclear and missile development threatens the peace and stability of our country and the international society, and is absolutely intolerable,” Japan’s Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi told reporters. In a statement shared by Pyongyang’s state media on Sunday, the North Korean foreign ministry condemned the US attack on Venezuela as a “serious encroachment of sovereignty”. “The incident is another example that clearly confirms once again the rogue and brutal nature of the US,” it said. — AFP

OVER 30 KILLED, SEVERAL KIDNAPPED IN CENTRAL NIGERIA

LAGOS: Armed gangs have raided a village a north-central Nigerian state, where hundreds of schoolchildren were abducted late last year, killing more than 30 people and kidnapping several others, police said on Sunday. Know locally as “bandits”, the gangs invaded Kasuwan Daji village in Kabe district of Niger State and set a market ablaze, before looting shops for food. “Over 30 victims lost their lives during the attack, some persons were also kidnapped,” during the raid on Saturday, Wasiu Abiodun, Niger police spokesman said. Several pictures and video footage showed that some of the victims had their hands tied to their backs before they were killed. Gangs regularly carry out mass kidnappings for ransom and loot villages in the parts of northwest and northcentral Nigeria. Niger state has been one of the hardest hit in recent months. The attack took place less than 20 kilometres from Papiri village where the students and teachers were snatched from their school. The Catholic church in the area put the death toll at more than 40, a much higher toll than that given by police. “Reports indicate the bandits operated for hours with no security presence,” the Catholic Church in Kontagora said on its Facebook page. — AFP

MOUNTING MISERY

Power outage after drone strikes in Sudan



The power supply was cut on Sunday following drone strikes in the Sudanese city of El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan state, as fighting raged in the oil-rich southern region. “El Obeid power station... was attacked by drones, leading to a fire in the machinery building, which led to a halt in the electricity supply,” the electricity company said. Army-aligned forces had announced that they had retaken several cities south of El Obeid. — AFP

ONGOING SEARCH

Indonesia rescuers find Spanish man’s body



Rescuers retrieved the body of a Spanish tourist who had been missing since a tourist boat sank in rough seas off eastern Indonesia more than a week ago, an official said. Fathur Rahman, head of the local search and rescue agency, said a body was found floating in waters near Rinca Island, around 2 kilometres from the site of the accident on December 26. Authorities have confirmed the victim’s identity, 44-year-old Fernando Martin Carreras. — AFP

SKY STRIKES

Lightning kills 2, injures 150 in South Africa



Lightning struck 150 people gathered at a festival north of South Africa’s capital Pretoria, killing two. The incident occurred near the village of Mathibestad, about 70 kilometres from Pretoria, where a traditional celebration is held every year. The North West health department said 150 patients came to a health clinic after being struck by lightning during the event, adding that two died and 13 were in critical condition and transferred to another health facility. — AFP

SYRIAN KURDISH LEADER IN DAMASCUS FOR TALKS ON MILITARY INTEGRATION

DAMASCUS: Syrian Kurdish leader Mazloum Abdi was in Damascus on Sunday for fresh talks with officials on integrating his forces into those of the central military, the Kurds’ armed forces said. Abdi signed a deal in March with Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa to merge the Kurds’ semi-autonomous administration into the government by the end of 2025, but differences between the two sides have held up its implementation. “A delegation from the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is currently meeting with

officials from the Damascus government in the Syrian capital, as part of discussions related to the military integration process,” the Kurdish-led SDF said in a statement, adding its commander-in-chief Abdi was among them. The SDF controls large swathes of Syria’s oil-rich north and northeast, and with the support of a US-led international coalition, was integral to the territorial defeat of the IS group in Syria in 2019. Despite his agreement to merge with the new government, Abdi has repeated calls for decentralisation,

and tensions between the Kurds and the government have occasionally erupted into clashes. Syria’s foreign minister later said the government was studying the Kurds’ response. That same month, Abdi said that “all efforts are being made to prevent the collapse of this process” and that he considered failure unlikely. Türkiye, an important ally of Syria’s new leaders, sees the presence of Kurdish forces on its border as a security threat and has publicly called for them to be integrated into the state. — AFP

Ukraine’s allies in Kyiv for talks on plan to end war

SECURITY

advisers from Ukraine’s top allies met in Kyiv for talks on a US-brokered plan to end the war with Russia, days after Kyiv announced a deal was “90 per cent” ready. Officials from 15 countries, including Britain, France and Germany as well as representatives from Nato and the European Union, joined the meeting, the first of several planned for the new year. US special envoy Steve Witkoff also joined virtually, a Ukrainian official said, though the United States’ large-scale military attack on Venezuela earlier in the day overshadowed proceedings. A follow-up summit of European leaders was expected to take place in France on Tuesday, according to Ukraine. “National security advisers from European countries have arrived in Kyiv,” Ukraine’s chief negotiator Rustem Umerov said in a post on Telegram. He announced in a later post that the meeting had started. “The first part of the meeting focused on framework documents, including security guarantees and approaches to the peace plan, as well as the sequence of further joint steps,” he said. Diplomatic efforts to end Europe’s deadliest conflict since World War II have gained pace in recent weeks, though both Moscow and Kyiv remain at odds over the key issue of territory in a post-war settlement. Russia, which occupies around 20 per cent of Ukraine, is pushing for



Rescuers work at the site of a struck apartment building, in Kharkiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

Diplomatic efforts to end Europe’s deadliest conflict since World War II have gained pace in recent weeks, though both Moscow and Kyiv remain at odds over the key issue of territory in a post-war settlement

full control of the country’s eastern Donbas region as part of a deal. But Kyiv has warned that ceding ground will embolden Moscow and said it will not sign a peace deal that fails to deter Russia from attacking again. Speaking at a press conference on Saturday evening, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that if diplomacy to end the war failed, his country would continue to defend itself. “If Russia blocks all of this — and as I said, it depends on our partners — if our partners do not compel Russia to stop the war, there will be another path: to defend ourselves,” he said. Saturday’s meeting capped a week

marked by deadly strikes, as well as a Russian claim — denied by Ukraine — that Kyiv had launched drones at a residence of President Vladimir Putin in an unsuccessful attack. Russia accused Kyiv of firing drones at a hotel and cafe in the Moscow-held part of Ukraine’s southern Kherson region early on Thursday, killing what it said were 28 people celebrating the New Year. Ukraine says it was a military gathering. A woman and a three-year-old child died in a Russian missile strike on Ukraine’s second-largest city of Kharkiv late on Friday, according to the region’s governor. And early on Saturday, Russian bombardment of a Kyiv-held part of the southern Kherson region left two people dead, according to the region’s governor. Russia made bigger advances on the battlefield last year than in any other year since it launched its war in 2022, according to an analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War. As the year kicked off, Zelensky announced sweeping changes to his top circle, naming a new chief of staff and defence minister on Friday while announcing plans on Saturday to replace several regional leaders. Russia launched its attack of Ukraine in February 2022, describing it as a “special military operation” to prevent the expansion of Nato — a war aim that Kyiv has called a lie. Moscow has since fired on Ukrainian towns and cities in daily drone and missile attacks while waging battles that have reduced entire urban areas to rubble. — AFP

ISRAELI FORCES KILL THREE PALESTINIANS IN GAZA

GAZA: Israeli forces shot and killed at least three Palestinians in separate incidents in the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunis, local health authorities said. Medics reported that the dead included a 15-year-old boy, a fisherman killed outside areas still occupied by Israel in the enclave, and a third man who was shot and killed east of the city in areas under Israeli control. Israel has carried out repeated air strikes since a ceasefire took effect in October, saying they are aimed at preventing attacks or destroying militant infrastructure. Gaza’s health ministry says 420 Palestinians have been killed since the ceasefire began, while gunmen have killed three Israeli soldiers. Israel’s military assault on Gaza has killed more than 71,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza health ministry, and led to accusations of genocide and war crimes that Israel denies. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES



South Korea President Lee Jae Myung (R) and his wife Kim Hea Kyung (L) board their plane to depart for China at Seoul Air Base. — AFP

SOUTH KOREA’S PRESIDENT LANDS IN CHINA

BEIJING: South Korea’s President Lee Jae Myung arrived in China on Sunday, eager to boost economic ties with Seoul’s largest trading partner while keeping a lid on potentially explosive issues. Lee is the first South Korean leader to visit Beijing in six years.

Lee, accompanied by a delegation of business and tech leaders, hopes to expand economic cooperation in meetings with President Xi Jinping and other top officials. And he hopes to possibly harness China’s clout over North Korea to support his bid to improve ties with Pyongyang. Seoul has for decades trodden a fine line between China, its top trading partner, and the United States, its chief defence guarantor.

Lee said in an interview with Chinese state broadcaster CCTV on Friday that he “clearly affirms” that “respecting the ‘one-China’ principle and maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia are very important”. On economic ties, Lee has called for South Korea and China to work towards “more horizontal and mutually beneficial” trade. — AFP

GREEK AIRPORTS HALT FLIGHTS



Airports across Greece suspended arrivals and departures after unspecified issues affecting radio frequencies. Authorities said they were investigating the cause. Some overflights using the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) were being serviced but restrictions were in place on airport operations for safety reasons, Greece’s civil aviation authority said. Flight trackers showed Greek airspace was largely empty. State broadcaster ERT said airport arrivals and departures were suspended at 9:00 am local time, reporting from a departures terminal at Athens’s Eleftherios Venizelos airport crowded with travellers. — Reuters

UK’S EMBATTLED STARMER VOWS TO SEE OUT FIVE-YEAR TERM

LONDON: Keir Starmer insisted in an interview on Sunday he will complete his five-year term as UK prime minister amid speculation his centre-left Labour party could oust him after upcoming local elections. Starmer, who won power in July 2024, also argued Britain should pursue further alignment with the EU single market, saying it was in the country’s “national interest” to get “closer” to the bloc.

A decade after Britons voted narrowly to leave the EU, the stance

is likely to draw criticism from Brexit advocates like Nigel Farage, whose hard-right Reform UK party has led in the polls for the past year. The anti-immigration party is predicted to make big gains in local elections in Scotland, Wales and parts of England in May, and is on course to win the next general election due by August 2029.

In a lengthy BBC interview, Starmer warned Britain “will be torn apart in a toxic way” if Reform wins power, as he vowed to lead

Labour into “the fight of our times” against Farage’s “very right-wing proposition”. “I was elected in 2024 with a five-year mandate to change the country, and that’s what I intend to do,” he said. Starmer argued multiple leadership changes under his predecessor Conservatives caused “utter chaos”. “Nobody wants to go back to that. It’s not in our national interest. We know from that evidence what happens if you go down that chaotic path, and I’m not going to take us back to that.” — AFP

Maduro sits in US custody as loyalists vow defiance

VENEZUELA’S

topped leader Nicolas Maduro was in

a New York detention centre on Sunday awaiting drug charges after President Donald Trump ordered an audacious raid to capture him, saying the US would take control of the oil-producing nation. The image of the 63-year-old Maduro blindfolded and handcuffed en route to the US has stunned Venezuelans and was Washington’s most controversial intervention in Latin America since the invasion of Panama 37 years ago. Maduro, who wished his captors a “Happy New Year” on arrival, is due to appear in a Manhattan court on Monday.

With memories of painful US interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, many world leaders were staggered at Trump’s move, even though Maduro’s standing was low given his autocratic rule and substantial evidence of vote-rigging.

At home, Maduro allies were still in charge and have denounced his “kidnapping” as part of an imperialist oil grab. Streets were far quieter than usual as Venezuelans anxiously discussed what would come next. Some stocked up on essentials but many simply hunkered indoors. “I’ve just taken the dog out and it feels like an abandoned city, people are shut inside,” said Alejandra Palencia, 35, a psychologist in the city of Maracay. “There is fear and uncertainty.”

Trump said the US would for now manage the South American nation of about 30 million people plus its oil reserves, the largest in the world. But he gave few details of how. “We will run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition,” he told a press conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort, hailing the extraordinary extraction of Maduro just as he was at the door of a safe room. To the disappointment of Venezuela’s opposition and diaspora, Trump has given short shrift to the idea of 58-year-old opposition leader Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado taking over, saying she lacked support.

Trump says Maduro masterminded



Protestors take part in a demonstration against the US operation, in front of the US Embassy in Madrid. — AFP

the flow of drugs into the US and was illegitimately in power due to vote-rigging. He denies those claims and top officials in Caracas have demanded his release, accusing the US of an imperial lust for Venezuela’s oil and mineral riches. “There is only one president in Venezuela, and his name is Nicolas Maduro,” said Delcy Rodriguez, who took over Venezuela’s interim presidency, in a defiant message to the US despite Trump’s assertions she was open to working with them. “We will never again be a colony of any empire.”

US Special Forces swooped in on helicopters to seize Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, under darkness in the early hours of Saturday after strikes on military installations in Caracas and elsewhere. While many Western nations oppose Maduro and say he stole the 2024 election, there were many calls for the US to respect international law and resolve the crisis diplomatically.

There were also questions over the legality of seizing a foreign head of state. Democrats said they were misled at recent Congress briefings and demanded a plan for what is to follow.

Trump said major US oil companies would move back into Venezuela and refurbish badly degraded oil infrastructure, a process experts said could take years. “We’re not afraid of boots on the ground,” he added. A plane carrying Maduro landed near New York City on Saturday night, and he was helicoptered to the city before being taken to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. In a hallway at the US Drug Enforcement Administration, he wished those around him a “goodnight, Happy New Year”. Indicted in 2020 on charges including narco-terrorism conspiracy, Maduro is expected to make an initial appearance in Manhattan federal court on Monday.

— Reuters

Swiss identify 24 victims of New Year fire at ski resort

GENEVA: Authorities investigating a New Year’s blaze in the Swiss resort of Crans-Montana have identified 24 of the 40 people killed, including 11 minors and six foreign nationals, police said on Sunday, as its owners were probed for negligent manslaughter. A heavy pall of grief hung over the town as hundreds of people walked in silence to a chapel of rest near the scene following a memorial service for the victims of an inferno which also left 119 people injured — many badly burned — and left the local community distraught. “The world’s media are focused on our resort. We thank them for seeking the compassion which the families of the injured and deceased so desperately need,” said Bishop Jean-Marie Lovey of Sion during the service — one of a number planned.

Switzerland has declared a national day of mourning for January 9, with all the church bells in the country poised to ring at

2:00 pm (13:00 GMT). A moment of silence is also planned. “Many of the victims were apprentices, high school students, and university students,” said Pastor Gilles Cavin, representing the Reformed Church of Switzerland at the memorial mass.

Local police, who had already identified eight Swiss victims, earlier announced they had identified 10 more Swiss nationals — four women and six men aged 14 to 31, as well as two 16-year old Italians, a 39-year old Frenchman, a 16-year old dual national of Italy and United Arab Emirates, an 18-year old Romanian and an 18-year old Turk. The fatalities identified to date include 11 minors.

With Crans-Montana a popular destination for international tourists, many foreign nationals are among those hurt in the blaze. They include 71 Swiss nationals, 14 French — the French foreign ministry gave a



Firefighters from the Municipality of Crans-Montana react as they gather around a makeshift memorial. — AFP

tally of 16 on Saturday — 11 Italians, four Serbs, a Belgian, a Bosnian, one person from Luxembourg and also a Pole and a Portuguese.

At the memorial mass Pastor Cavin told a packed church that

“we are here to say that in the face of the unspeakable, in the face of the brutality of death and suffering, we refuse to look away. We are here to express our compassion, our solidarity.” The church was packed

well before the start of the mass, which was broadcast on a giant screen outside.

A criminal investigation has been opened against the pair. They are charged with manslaughter by negligence, bodily harm by negligence and arson by negligence. Investigations will focus on whether safety standards were respected. Video footage which has emerged from the tragedy shows young people desperately trying to flee the scene, some breaking windows to try to force their way out.

One video shared on social media showed the low wooden ceiling catching fire and the flames spreading quickly, as revellers continued to dance.

Looking at the images of the event, experts suggested the “highly flammable” foam may have caused a flashover — a near-simultaneous ignition of everything in an enclosed space. — AFP

OPINION

Resolutions as a commitment to a shared future



SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The writer is an Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

WITH the onset of the New Year, many resolutions are doing the rounds: reading more, spending less time on digital devices, losing weight, and sleeping better. These are laudable personal goals.

Sticking to them can be challenging, as there is a reason why they are resolutions to begin with. They are not part of our everyday life.

When we set goals, we are not just ticking bullet points. We are actually choosing to be a different person, choosing habits and routines that determine who we want to be and how we want to be seen.

Resolutions often fail, not because we are intrinsically weak, but because they have been articulated vaguely or too abstractly to be implemented. ‘Be healthier’ or ‘change my lifestyle’ are too general to be itemised. Such resolutions need to be broken down further into doable bits.

Another reason for failure is because we are too ambitious in our goals. Again,

leaning on a support system rather than assuming that we can achieve everything on our own could be high on the learning curve.

For resolutions to succeed, it is important to just follow some simple steps:

Make them specific and grounded: Rather than saying ‘I will read more’, it is better to state exactly what that means. It could be ‘I will read for half an hour everyday’. That is more specific, less abstract.

Build a system, not just a goal: Systems make for daily habits, which are more sustainable. Exercising more is a favourite goal for many of us. However, the system behind it is based on scheduling a time, or determining a friend to work out with. That will ensure that the goal will be achieved more realistically.

Start small: There is no need to make grand resolutions that are unachievable. It is better to stick to small, consistent acts and habits that compound over time. That cake slice can change into a bite size, but not eating it at all may be too ambitious.

The right way to see New Year resolutions is to view them as a commitment to broader values and a shared future

Create accountability: That one person can be a friend, a colleague, or even a boss. Sharing resolutions makes the experience more communal and increases accountability. It makes it more difficult to under-achieve.

In fact, not all resolutions are made to succeed. Rather than viewing failure as proof of weakness, it can be seen as feedback, an invitation to adjust methods, timelines, or expectations.

Most importantly, it helps if our resolutions are based on more than just our own achievements. Involve a partner or a community and soon, the stakes will be higher. In this sense, achievements become participatory, with others having a stake in a shared future.

In fact, the right way to see New Year resolutions is to view them as a commitment to broader values and a shared future. It is only then that they become about issues larger than us, with a possibility to add value to our world, and a greater possibility to succeed.

SWITZERLAND FIRE INQUIRY TARGETS FOAM

The soundproofing foam covering the ceiling of a Swiss ski resort that went up in flames on New Year’s Eve, killing 40 people, is being closely scrutinised by investigators.

The question of whether safety standards were respected has been debated since the fire broke out at Le Constellation in Switzerland’s glitzy resort town Crans-Montana at around 1:30 am on Thursday, as the venue was crammed with young partygoers.

Beatrice Pilloud, the lead prosecutor in Switzerland’s southwestern Wallis canton, told reporters that the leading hypothesis was that “sparklers or Bengal candles attached to champagne bottles and lifted too close to the ceiling” of the resort’s basement had ignited the deadly blaze.

One video shared on social media showed the low ceiling — covered with soundproofing foams — catching alight and the flames spreading quickly, as revellers continued to dance, unaware of the death trap they were in.

Once they realised, panic set in.

“The investigation is indeed focusing on the installation of this foam”, and it will have to determine whether this soundproofing material “is compliant” and whether it “caused the fire or not”, Pilloud said.

For Freddy Rigaux, a former professional firefighter in France and a court-appointed expert, the material visible in videos shared online corresponds to products that are “easily, even very easily, flammable”.

It clearly did not meet the so-called M1 fire-resistance standards required for ceilings in public buildings in France, he said, explaining that M1-rated materials are combustible, but not flammable.

“They will degrade under the effect of heat, but will not produce flames, particularly flaming droplets as seen in the video,” he said.

When soundproofing foam is not treated with flame retardants, fire can spread very rapidly, the expert explained.

According to Romain Amisse, another court-appointed fire expert, the fumes emitted when such material burns are toxic, especially in very confined spaces, as is the case in the Le Constellation’s packed basement.

He said the Swiss tragedy was reminiscent of the Cuba Libre fire, which killed 14 people in Rouen, northern France, in 2016.

In Crans-Montana, “you have pretty much the same situation, with highly flammable foam on the ceiling that produces a lot of smoke”, he said.

David Zenouda, the vice-president of the Union of Trades and Industries in the Hotel and Catering Sector in Paris, said using the type of foam seen in the Crans-Montana images for soundproofing a venue was “inconceivable”. — AFP

The NeuCyber Matrix and the next global frontier

WHILE the West spent 2025 watching Elon Musk’s Neuralink with a mix of awe and scepticism, a different kind of ‘Matrix’ was being built in Beijing.

Following a sweeping multi-ministry directive issued this past July, China has rapidly moved BCI technology from the lab to the bedside, completing a series of successful semi-invasive implantations at Peking University First Hospital.

In the original 1999 film, ‘plugging in’ meant surrendering to a machine. In 2025, it has become the centrepiece of a state-led industrial race to bridge the gap between human grey matter and silicon, turning the human brain into the next critical square on the global chessboard.

The results make science fiction look like yesterday’s news.

One patient, confined to the stillness of a spinal cord injury for five years, recently stood up. With axillary crutches and a system dubbed the ‘NeuCyber Matrix,’ he walked. After ten months, the signals remain crisp, the neural channels steady. It is a glimpse into a future where the ‘unfixable’ becomes a matter of engineering.

But this is not just a medical miracle. It is a geopolitical gambit.

In July 2025, seven of China’s central government bodies - an apparatus that usually moves with the subtlety of a tectonic plate - jointly released guidelines to propel the BCI industry.



DR IMRAN KHALID

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Beijing’s state-led NeuCyber Matrix is more than a medical breakthrough — it is a strategic move, positioning the human brain as the next contested square on the global industrial chessboard



dread of ‘mind control.’ Yet the reality, as explained by Dr Minmin Luo, director of CIBR, is far more modest.

While the human brain boasts 86 billion neurons, our most advanced devices can only listen to about a thousand channels. Imagine trying to understand the nuances of a Taylor Swift concert by eavesdropping through a keyhole with a single microphone. We aren’t reading thoughts; we are decoding patterns.

Medicine has taken the lead precisely because of this technical modesty. At Xuanwu Hospital, a patient paralysed for fourteen years used a wireless BCI to independently drink a glass of water. That is not philosophy - it is dignity.

The global race is unfolding in divergent styles. In the United States, the charge is led by the swashbuckling private sector.

Neuralink captured the zeitgeist in 2024 when a participant controlled a computer cursor with nothing but intention - a triumph of venture capital and ‘breakthrough’ regulatory pathways.

China, meanwhile, is taking the ‘it takes a village’ approach - if the village were a highly coordinated, state-led industrial cluster. Europe, by contrast, has adopted the role of moral tutor, prioritising

ethics and data protection over commercialisation.

Yet the hurdles are stubbornly biological. Neural signals drift. Devices must last decades, not fiscal quarters. And looming above all is the ‘ick’ factor: the risk that neural data - the most intimate expression of identity - could be harvested, anonymised, or sold. Mental privacy must be treated as inviolable.

The stakes are not just clinical. They are geopolitical. Whoever masters the interface between grey matter and silicon will not only restore dignity to patients but also command a new frontier of industrial and strategic power.

Beijing’s ‘Matrix’ is not just about footsteps in a hospital corridor - it is about positioning the human brain as the next contested square in the global order.

And in this contest, the measure of success will not be the number of patients who walk again, but the number of patients, enterprises, and industrial ecosystems that march in lockstep with state directives.

The thud of footsteps in Beijing echoes far beyond the hospital - it reverberates in Washington, Brussels and Silicon Valley, where policymakers must decide whether they are prepared to compete in a race that is as much about sovereignty as it is about science.

No dream is silly, none is impossible



ABDULAZIZ AL JAHDHAMI

The writer is an author, translator and a communications professional

THE YEAR ends the way a long chapter does, closing with a pause. Streets shine with celebrations, calendars turn to their final page, and people everywhere reflect on who they were and who they hope to become. The turning of the year is not just a change of date; it is an invitation to carry your dreams forward – not as wishes, but as living plans that deserve space in the months ahead.

Dreams have a strange way of following us. They stay in the background during busy days and pop up late at night when the world goes quiet. They remind us that life is not meant to be lived on autopilot. Some dreams are bold and obvious, like a lighthouse in the distance. Others are subtle, more like a compass quietly guiding you in a certain direction. Both are equally powerful.

As the new year kicks off, many people feel pressure to reinvent themselves overnight. Dreams and wishes are written with dramatic promises, only to fade by February. However, chasing your dreams is not about sudden transformation. It is about commitment and choosing your goal even when excitement goes slow. The magic of growth lives in ordinary days that don't feel special, but shape who you are becoming.

Every dream comes with resistance. Fear

will question your ability, and doubt will remind you of past failures, while comfort will ask you to stay exactly where you are. These voices are not signs that you should stop; they are signs that you are standing at the edge of change. Growth has always required stepping into uncertainty, trusting that clarity will meet you along the way.

Looking back on the past year can feel complicated. There may be pride in what you achieved and disappointment in what slipped through your hands. However, the story of your life is not written in single-year chapters. What feels unfinished now may simply be preparation; planted seeds often take time before they break the surface.

Chasing your dreams in the new year also means redefining success, which is not only found in praise or milestones. It is found in the mornings, you choose discipline over distraction; in the evenings, you keep going when quitting would be easier. These moments rarely receive attention, but they are the backbone of every meaningful achievement.

Comparison is one of the greatest thieves of momentum. The world constantly shows you highlight reels of other people's lives, making it easy to believe you are behind. But growth is not synchronised as some people

As the new year kicks off, many people feel pressure to reinvent themselves overnight. Dreams and wishes are written with dramatic promises, only to fade by February.

bloom early; others grow slowly and deeply. Your journey is not late; it is yours, and you set its pace.

The new year offers permission to let go of the belief that you missed your chance. Let go of labels placed on you by others or by your past self. You are allowed to change direction, to want something different, to grow beyond old limitations. Dreams evolve because people do.

Community matters, but so does self-trust. Seek voices that inspire you, but learn to listen to your own as well. On days when encouragement feels far, your belief in your own effort can be enough to carry you forward.

As the clock changes, don't rush your journey. Take small and cautious steps and repeat them until you get on track. Write your dreams down, revisit them often, and give yourself grace when the road feels rough.

One year from now, you will stand at another ending, another beginning. The most important question will not be whether everything worked out perfectly, but whether you honoured your dreams by chasing them. The new year is wide open, so walk into it with curiosity, courage and the confidence that you are becoming more than you were, one day at a time.

TRUMP TAKES POLITICAL GAMBLE IN VENEZUELA REGIME CHANGE

SEBASTIAN SMITH

Donald Trump crowed over the US military triumph in Venezuela on Saturday, but his sudden enthusiasm for intervention abroad puts him in a political minefield back home.

Trump has railed against US entanglements abroad for years.

When he branded the post-9/11 Iraq invasion ‘a stupid thing’ a decade ago, he was setting out a central tenet of the nationalist, isolationist MAGA ideology that would win him the White House.

So Saturday’s operation by special forces to swoop into Caracas and seize Venezuela’s leader Nicholas Maduro was doubly risky.

The service members in the complex assault - including troops ferried in by helicopter, jets bombing sites around the city, and an armada of Navy ships off the coast - got away without losing a single soldier. But for Trump, the domestic political risks are only just starting. Not surprisingly, Democratic Party leaders swiftly attacked.

The senior Democratic senator, Chuck Schumer, called the operation “reckless.”

“Second unjustified war in my life time. This war is illegal,” Senator Ruben Gallego, an Iraq veteran, said. “There is no reason for us to be at war with Venezuela.”

Many in the Republican Party that Trump dominates came out to applaud. The White House spokeswoman ramped up enthusiasm with a social media post in the early hours of Saturday featuring strong arm, fist and fire emojis.

And Senator Tom Cotton was quickly on board.

“I commend President Trump and our brave troops and law-enforcement officers for this incredible operation,” he said.

Mike Johnson, the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives and a key cog in the Trump political machine, quickly sought to scotch questions over the military operation’s legality.

“Today’s military action in Venezuela was a decisive and justified operation that will protect American lives,” he said.

Johnson made clear there’d be no rush for Congress to meet and debate. Trump administration officials are “working” to set up briefings only next week, he said. But there are signs of disquiet among Republicans. Soon after news first broke that the extraordinary raid on Caracas was under way, conservative Senator Mike Lee wrote on X that he was looking “forward to learning what, if anything, might constitutionally justify this action.”

There had been no “declaration of war or authorisation for the use of military force,” he noted. A short while later, Lee was back on team Trump, saying he’d spoken with Secretary of State Marco Rubio and had been reassured that the operation was simply to execute Maduro’s arrest.

That “likely falls within the president’s inherent authority.”

But Marjorie Taylor Greene, a MAGA firebrand and longtime Trump booster who recently fell out with the president, was far less forgiving. — AFP

The post-2025 world order

US President Donald Trump’s designation by various publications as one of the most influential people of 2025 is not surprising. But it is nonetheless striking: rather than being honoured for his leadership – for, say, resolving crises or consolidating institutions – Trump is being recognised for shattering norms, upending alliances, spearheading economic fragmentation and ushering in a transactional form of international politics.

In past decades, the United States could harden its policies without relinquishing its role as the ultimate guarantor of the post-World War II order. No more. While America’s retreat from global leadership was arguably a long time coming, Trump has now cemented and operationalised it. As he attempts to leverage the country’s hard-won influence to reap immediate rewards (not least for himself and his inner circle), he actively sabotages international cooperation and undermines the rule of law.

US trade policy is no longer a means of maximising the shared benefits of openness, but rather an instrument of economic and geopolitical pressure. Alliances are assessed not according to intangible factors, such as shared values and geopolitical interests, but in terms of immediate returns. Cooperative frameworks focused on long-term stability and prosperity are being replaced by bilateral deals that reflect a narrow understanding of reciprocity. Strategic engagement, which blended hard and soft power, gave way to short-sighted coercion. The “shining city upon a hill” became the schoolyard bully.

This shift did not unfold in a vacuum. While responses to Trump’s foreign policy varied, most chose adaptation over confrontation. Some actors endured the blows they were dealt, in the hopes that Trump would not continue to target those who did not challenge him. Others balanced acceptance, even appeasement, with quiet efforts to build resilience. Countries like Brazil and India neither bowed to nor directly challenged Trump, seeking instead to preserve their autonomy and identify opportunities created by this new post-postwar order. China took this a step further. Having long sought to decenter the West in international politics, Chinese leaders saw in the



Countries like Brazil and India neither bowed to nor directly challenged Trump.



ANA PALACIO

The writer is a former minister of foreign affairs of Spain and former senior vice-president and general counsel of the World Bank Group, is a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University

Trump-induced disruption of 2025 an opening: a world unsettled by America’s withdrawal from global leadership would be inclined to embrace a new champion of stability and continuity. By positioning itself accordingly, China has emerged as the principal beneficiary of the turmoil.

In September, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a Global Governance Initiative, based on the premise “that all countries, regardless of size, strength and wealth,” must be “equal participants, decision-makers, and beneficiaries in global governance.” The GGI, together with the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiative (2022), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (2023), sends a clear message: China wants to lead the way in creating a more stable, pluralistic global order capable of facilitating shared progress. This is not a liberal project, and China has not sought to position it as such. Instead, it focuses on supporting international cooperation in critical areas – such as advancing the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and “peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries” – while respecting countries’ sovereignty and rejecting narratives of the “superiority of certain civilisations.”

Crucially, China packages this vision not as an entirely new order that will emerge from the rubble of the postwar order – which would imply a period of chaos for which few have an appetite – but rather as

a natural evolution of the existing system. Far from a revolutionary power, China wants to be viewed as a reliable force for continuity, prosperity, and respectful coexistence.

When contrasted with Trump’s capricious, self-serving, and coercive behaviour, this prospect is highly appealing, particularly in the Global South. And this contrast has been on stark display. Consider the October meeting between Trump and Xi at South Korea’s Busan airport: while Trump appeared eager to close a deal, even if it meant shifting the goalposts, Xi offered selective concessions while displaying the confidence to walk away from an unfavourable offer.

Unlike China, which found ways to benefit from Trump’s presidency in 2025, Europe found itself increasingly exposed. Not only can it no longer count on the US to fulfil its Nato commitments and backstop European security. By openly favouring Russia in negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, Trump has contributed to a more dangerous European security environment. There are even reports that the Trump administration hopes to convince some countries to leave the European Union. But Europe cannot simply throw its weight behind the Chinese-led world order that Xi is touting. While Europe does not share America’s animosity towards China, it cannot ignore the country’s role in sustaining Russia’s war in Ukraine technologically, economically, and diplomatically.

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SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Sayyid Sulaiman emphasised that hosting the tournament represents an important milestone for Omani football.

OFA, WAFF DISCUSS HOSTING WEST ASIA CHAMPIONSHIP

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Oman Football Association held a coordination meeting with the West Asian Football Federation (WAFF) to discuss the details of Oman hosting the 10th WAFF Men’s Championship, scheduled to take place in August 2026. Sayyid Sulaiman bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Chairman of the Oman Football Association (OFA), welcomed the WAFF delegation, which included Khalil al Salem, Secretary-General, and Abeer al Rantisi, Director of Competitions.

This visit comes as part of a series of coordination meetings between WAFF and the Oman Football Association in preparation for hosting the men’s championship, which is regarded as one of the largest and most prestigious regional tournaments and represents a key competitive platform for national teams.

During the meeting, organisational and technical aspects related to the tournament were reviewed, including stadium arrangements, hotel accommodations, and infrastructure, as well as mechanisms for joint coordination between the two federations to ensure the success of the event, one of the region’s most prominent competitions.

Sayyid Sulaiman emphasised that hosting the tournament represents an important milestone for Omani football and an opportunity to showcase the Sultanate of Oman’s capabilities in organising major sporting events. He stressed the Oman Football Association’s commitment to providing all the elements needed for success, reflecting a shared vision and unified goals to develop football in West Asia.

He also noted that staging the tournament in Oman is part of the close cooperation with WAFF in areas of football development and the exchange of administrative and technical expertise, which will have a positive impact on participating national teams and the region as a whole.

For his part, Al Salem praised the efforts of the Oman Football Association, expressing his confidence that the championship will be delivered to a high organisational standard, given Oman’s strong capabilities and advanced infrastructure, which will help present an outstanding model for hosting the tournament in a manner befitting its sporting history and leading status.

Al Salem added that this step reflects the active role played by the Oman Football Association and reaffirms its firm commitment to supporting the West Asian Football Federation’s journey and strengthening its presence on the continental and international stage. He also commended the close cooperation between the two federations, which represents a key pillar in ensuring the success of this major event.



During the meeting, organisational and technical aspects related to the tournament were reviewed.

Oman Club secure late win over Dhofar in HM’s Cup

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

DHO FAR

Club suffered a narrow home defeat after Oman Club claimed a crucial 1–0 victory in the first leg of the His Majesty’s Cup quarterfinal, played on Saturday evening at Al Saada Sports Complex in Dhofar, in a match marked by intensity and fine margins.

Dhofar made a strong start and imposed early pressure, dominating possession and creating several clear scoring opportunities, the hosts squandered three gilt edged chances in the opening stages, while Oman Club’s goalkeeper produced two outstanding saves to keep his side in the contest and deny Dhofar an early breakthrough.

After the 30th minute, the tempo of the match gradually slowed as both teams became more cautious, with play largely confined to midfield, Oman Club showed greater attacking intent in the closing moments of the first half, but neither side managed to find the net and the opening period ended in a goalless draw.

The second half saw a more balanced contest, with both teams trading attacks and looking for an opening goal while maintaining defensive discipline, as the match appeared to be heading towards another stalemate, Oman Club struck decisively in the 85th minute, Majid Al Balushi rose highest to meet a well delivered corner kick, powering a header into the net to score the only goal of the match.

Oman Club successfully defended their slender advantage in the closing minutes, securing a valuable away victory that strengthens their position ahead of the second leg, Dhofar, meanwhile, will be looking to overturn the deficit when the



Dhofar player controls the ball during the match against Oman Club.

two sides meet again.

OTHER RESULTS:
Elsewhere in the competition, Al Nahda

defeated Sur 2–0 on the same day. On Friday, Al Seeb edged past Saham 3–2, while the match between Al Nasr and Sohar ended in a goalless draw.

Seeb, Majees gear up for Arab Clubs Volleyball

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Al Seeb and Majees will represent Oman at the 44th Arab Clubs Men’s Volleyball Championship in Tunis from January 8 to 18, competing against the top club teams from across the Arab world in one of the region’s most prestigious volleyball events.

The official draw, held in the Kingdom of Bahrain, placed Al Seeb in Group A alongside Iraqi North Refineries, Tajnanet of Algeria, Al Suwaihli of Libya, Espérance Sportive de Tunis, and Qatar SC. Group B includes Al Shurta of Qatar, Al Ittihad of Libya, Al Muharraq of Bahrain, Omani Majees, ES Sahel of Tunisia, and Al Quwa of Palestine.

The tournament kicks off on Thursday, January 8, with three strong matches in Group A: Al-Seeb vs Qatar SC, North Refineries vs Espérance de Tunis, and Tajnanet vs Al Suwaihli. In Group B, Al Shurta opens its campaign against AlQuwa of Palestine, Al Ittihad faces ES Sahel, and Al Muharraq meets Majees.

The Al Seeb delegation is headed by Dr Hamoud al Hassani. The technical and administrative staff includes Ammar al Zadjali (administrator), Jamal al Maamari (head coach), Badr al



Seeb player prepares the ball for his team-mates.

Subhi and Ayman al Hassani (assistant coaches), Sinan al Shuhoumi (physiotherapist), Badr al Siyabi (accompanying referee), Saeed al Harbi (photographer), and Abdullah al Lahouri (specialist). The squad consists of 14 players. Meanwhile, the Majees Club delegation is led by Hashim al Farsi. The technical and administrative team includes Abdullah al Barmani (administrator), Nicolas Voznouka (head coach), Ali bin Khalfan al Kindi and Abdulaziz bin Ahmed al Qasimi (assistant

coaches), Hussain bin Ali al Ajmi (physiotherapist), and Hilal bin Rashid al Mufraji(accompanying referee), along with 13 players. Al Seeb head coach Jamal al Maamari credited the club’s recent achievements to the strong support of the Board of Directors, led by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, and his son, HH Sayyid Malik, as well as all board members. He emphasised that success is the result of a fully integrated

system that involves the administration, coaching staff, players, and supporters.

He added that Al Seeb has become a major force in domestic and international competitions and a proud ambassador of Omani volleyball, thanks to its strong performances in Gulf, West Asian, and Arab tournaments. He noted that the team is accustomed to competing against elite Arab clubs.

Regarding the group stage, Al Maamari said it is very strong but familiar, explaining that the initial objective is to qualify for the second round before pushing deeper into the competition. He also confirmed that the team held a closed training camp after the end of the domestic league, focusing on physical, technical and tactical preparation.

On the other hand, Majees player Hamad bin Khamis al Maamari said he is proud to represent his club in this major Arab event, describing it as both an important milestone and a big responsibility. He added that Majees aims not only to participate but to compete strongly and showcase the progress of Omani volleyball, stressing that all players are determined to deliver positive results and leave a lasting mark on the championship.

SHORTTAKES



Naomi Osaka

OSAKA WINS AFTER RADUCANU PULLS OUT OF UNITED CUP

PERTH, Australia: Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka got her 2026 season off to a winning start for Japan in the United Cup, after Great Britain’s Emma Raducanu pulled out of their singles clash with a fitness issue in Perth on Sunday. Raducanu has struggled with form and fitness problems since her US Open triumph in 2021, but she rediscovered her rhythm in a run to the Miami Open quarterfinals last year before ending her season prematurely due to physical issues.

But despite Osaka’s win, GB took the match 2-1 with a deciding mixed doubles victory.

Osaka was too strong for GB reserve and 276th-ranked Katie Swan, winning 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 as Raducanu watched from the sidelines.

“I’m proud of how I fought,” Osaka said. “I’d never played here, it was tough.”

GB captain Tim Henman said Raducanu, the 2021 US Open champion, could appear later in the event.

“I don’t think she’s necessarily out of this tournament just yet. So we’re keeping our fingers crossed,” said Henman.

Billy Harris, standing in for the injured Jack Draper, began with a 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 defeat of Shintaro Mochizuki.

“It’s great to get the first win, even if there were some shaky bits. I closed it out well at the end,” said Harris.

Great Britain sealed the match when Neal Skupski and Olivia Nicholls defeated Yasutaka Uchiyama and Nao Hibino 7-5, 4-6, 10-7.

In Sydney, Alexander Zverev clinched victory for Germany against The Netherlands as the world number three demolished Tallon Griekspoor 7-5, 6-0. Eva Lys beat Suzan Lamens 6-2, 6-2 and Germany also took the doubles for a 3-0 sweep.

Playing his first match of 2026, Zverev dropped just seven points in a commanding second set.

“The first set, it was tough to get rhythm,” said Zverev. “Once I got the chances, I did well and I’m very happy with the win.”

The 18-nation mixed-team event in Perth and Sydney is a warm-up for the Australian Open which begins on January 18. — AFP



Emma Raducanu



Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry (30) defends Utah Jazz forward Brice Sensabaugh (28) during the fourth quarter at Chase Center. — Imagn Images

Curry lifts Warriors in return, Brown scores 50

GOLDEN State star Stephen Curry scored 20 of his 31 points in a dazzling third quarter to propel the Warriors to a 123-114 NBA victory over the Utah Jazz on Saturday.

Curry, back after missing a game with a sprained left ankle, had just nine points in a first half that saw the Warriors trailing 65-58 at the break. But he exploded in the third period, when Golden State out-scored Utah 42-31 to take control, never trailing in the final frame.

“We played great defence for most of that quarter, which gave us some transition opportunities, too, and I was able to get out and run,” Curry said. “Thankfully shots went in and gave us a lot of momentum.”

Curry made six of 12 three-point attempts and handed out five assists with one steal.

Jimmy Butler, back after missing one game because of illness, and Quinten Post added 15 points apiece for the Warriors, who had been blown out on their home floor on Friday by Oklahoma City with Curry, Butler and Draymond Green all sidelined.

Green also returned to action but was ejected minutes into the second quarter when he received two quick technical fouls for arguing with officials.

“I don’t know what he said to the ref, but the consensus in the locker room was there wasn’t enough to get thrown out,” Curry said.

Boston forward Jaylen Brown had a big night, scoring 50 points as the Celtics halted the Clippers’ six-game winning streak with a 146-115 victory in Los Angeles.



Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry (30) looks to pass as Utah Jazz forward Kyle Filipowski (22) defends during the second quarter at Chase Center. — Imagn Images

Brown connected on 18 of 26 shots, including six of 10 from three-point range, and was backed up by 29 points from Derrick White in the wire-to-wire victory.

“Tonight (was) just one of those special nights where the ball just felt like every shot was going in,” Brown said.

“I’m happy we got the win,” he added after a victory that capped a 4-1 road trip. “I’m ready to go home.”

Kawhi Leonard and John Collins led the Clippers with 22 points each. Portland guard Deni Avdija delivered a triple double

of 29 points 11 rebounds and 10 assists, and Donovan Clingan added a career-high 24 points and 12 boards as the Trail Blazers beat the short-handed Spurs 115-110 in San Antonio. Luke Kornet led the Spurs’ scoring with 23 points. Julian Champagne added 20, and De’Aaron Fox had 19. Coach Mitch Johnson said Wembanyama — recovering from a hyperextended left knee — is expected to travel with the team for their game in Memphis on Tuesday.

MAVS DOWN ROCKETS

The Dallas Mavericks snapped their four-game skid — and halted Houston’s four-game winning streak — with a 110-104 victory over the Rockets. Anthony Davis scored 26 points with 12 rebounds and five blocked shots while Max Christie connected on four of his six three-point attempts on the way to 24 points for the Mavericks.

Kevin Durant scored 34 points for the Rockets, who saw All-Star centre Alperen Sengun limp out in the opening minutes with a sprained right ankle. The Philadelphia 76ers, fuelled by 36 points from Tyrese Maxey, beat the Knicks 130-119 in New York to push their winning streak to three games.

Rookie VJ Edgecombe and star big man Joel Embiid added 26 points apiece, Embiid adding 10 rebounds in a convincing victory.

Jalen Brunson scored 31 points to lead New York. Karl-Anthony Towns returned from a one-game absence due to illness to score 23 points and grab 14 rebounds, but the Knicks slumped to a third straight defeat. — AFP

Late Olmo and Lewandowski goals give Barca 2-0 win at Espanyol

BARCELONA: Late goals from Dani Olmo and Robert Lewandowski earned LaLiga leaders Barcelona a hard-fought 2-0 victory over Espanyol in the Catalan derby on Saturday, with goalkeeper Joan Garcia playing a key role against his former club.

Barca extended their lead atop the Spanish standings with 49 points, seven clear of second-placed Real Madrid, who host Real Betis on Sunday. Espanyol remain fifth on 33.

In a physical and tightly contested match Espanyol came close to opening the scoring on several occasions

but it was Barcelona who struck four minutes from time when Olmo produced a superb finish into the far corner after a pass from Fermin Lopez.

Lopez then surged down the right flank to set up Lewandowski in the 90th minute, providing his second assist of the night as Barcelona sealed the win and silenced a fervent RCDE Stadium.

A gutsy Espanyol were the more threatening side for long stretches, pressing aggressively and carving out several clear chances, but they were repeatedly denied



Barcelona’s Dani Olmo celebrates scoring their first goal. — Reuters

by Garcia, who was unfazed by the hostile reception from his former supporters.

OUTSTANDING SAVES

The Barcelona goalkeeper produced a string of outstanding saves, denying Pere Milla with a point-blank header in the first half before stopping Roberto Fernandez twice in quick succession and stretching low to keep out a curling effort from Carlos Romero as the hosts piled on pressure.

Barcelona struggled to impose themselves for much of the contest, dominating possession without a cutting

edge, but the match swung following changes from coach Hansi Flick, who introduced Lewandowski, Olmo and Lopez in the second half, substitutions that added energy and proved decisive.

Before the breakthrough, Espanyol goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic had kept his side level, pushing away a header from Jules Kounde before producing a point-blank save to deny Eric Garcia in a derby shaped by fine goalkeeping at both ends. Barcelona will look to carry their momentum into Wednesday’s Spanish Super Cup semi-final against Athletic Bilbao. — Reuters

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Napoli's Noa Lang in action with Lazio's Mario Gila — Reuters

NAPOLI DEFEAT LAZIO TO KEEP PACE IN TITLE RACE

ROME: First-half goals from Leonardo Spinazzola and Amir Rrahmani helped Napoli claim a 2-0 victory at Lazio on Sunday in a heated contest that featured three red cards.

The result left Napoli one point adrift of leaders AC Milan, who are on 38 points, while Inter sit third on 36 ahead of their match against Bologna later on Sunday.

Despite being hampered by the absence of a number of injured players, including Kevin De Bruyne, Romelu Lukaku and Billy Gilmour, Napoli appeared largely in control as they patiently built their attacks.

Napoli seized control in the 14th minute when a teasing cross drifted to the back post, where an unmarked Spinazzola fired a volley home to give the visitors the lead.

Antonio Conte's side underlined their dominance in the 32nd minute when a free kick was floated into the box and Rrahmani headed into the bottom corner to double the visitors' lead.

Napoli came close to stretching their advantage just minutes later when Eljif Elmas rose to meet a delivery but his header crashed against the crossbar.

Napoli's injury concerns deepened in the second half when David Neres was seen limping off. The stoppage sparked a brief flashpoint between the two sides, ending with yellow cards for Rrahmani and Lazio's Tijjani Noslin.

Lazio's afternoon unravelled further in the 81st minute when Noslin was sent off for a clumsy challenge on Alessandro Buongiorno.

Tempers flared again minutes before full time as Lazio's Adam Marusic and Napoli's Pasquale Mazzocchi became embroiled in a heated confrontation, prompting Napoli coach Antonio Conte to intervene in an attempt to separate the pair. Both players were subsequently shown red cards. — Reuters



Napoli's Kosovo defender #13 Amir Rrahmani (front) celebrates with team-mates after scoring his team second goal during. — AFP



Napoli's Amir Rrahmani scores their second goal. — Reuters



Mali's forward #17 Lassine Sinayoko scores his team's first goal from the penalty spot. — AFP



PAPE GUEYE

SENEGAL, MALI ENTER AFCON QUARTERS

GUEYE scored twice as much-fancied Senegal came from behind to beat Sudan 3-1 on Saturday and seal a place in the quarterfinals of the Africa Cup of Nations, while 10-man Mali edged Tunisia in a dramatic penalty shoot-out.

Champions in 2022, Senegal are seen as the biggest threat to hosts Morocco's dreams of winning a first AFCON title in half a century.

It would have been a huge shock had the Lions of Teranga lost in Tangiers to a Sudan side almost 100 places beneath them in the Fifa rankings.

Sudan reached the Cup of Nations knockout stage for just the second time since lifting the trophy in 1970 despite the country being ravaged by civil war for almost the last three years.

However, an upset was on the cards when Aamir Abdallah, a semi-professional who plays for an Australian second-tier club in Melbourne, curled in a superb early opener.

Nevertheless Senegal, who took four points out of a possible six against Sudan during qualifying for the 2026 World Cup, came back to lead by half-time thanks to a brace by Villarreal's Pape Gueye.

Former African player of the year Sadio Mane set up Gueye to equalise just before the half-hour mark and the same player struck again in stoppage time at the end of the opening period to make it 2-1.

Senegal introduced Ibrahim Mbaye with the game inside the final quarter and the Paris Saint-Germain teenager made sure of the victory in the 77th minute as he latched onto a long pass and beat goalkeeper Monged Abuzaid at his near post for 3-1.

Pape Thiaw's team had already come from behind to draw with the Democratic Republic of Congo during the group stage and Gueye said the victory showcased their fighting spirit.

"We showed against Congo that we are capable of coming from



Sudan's defender #25 Sheddy Barglan fights for the ball with Senegal's forward #10 Sadio Mane. — AFP

behind in a game and that is what we did tonight, so we are very happy," remarked the midfielder.

"It means a lot. It shows how good the spirit in the camp is. It was a very difficult match. We played against Sudan before and they made life hard for us.

"But we managed to keep our focus and score when the chances came along."

SHOOT OUT DRAMA
They will now stay in Tangiers to face their West African neighbours Mali in the last eight next Friday after the Eagles prevailed 3-2 on penalties against Tunisia following a 1-1 draw at the end of 90 minutes and extra time.

Mali, who have never won the Cup of Nations, looked to be in trouble when full-back Woyo Coulibaly was sent off in the 26th minute at the Mohammed V Stadium

in Casablanca for a nasty challenge on Hannibal Mejbri.

Tunisia then appeared to have won the tie when substitute Firas Chaouat headed them in front in the 88th minute, but Mali were rescued by Lassine Sinayoko's 96th-minute penalty — awarded following a handball — which set up extra time.

With no further goals scored on a rainy night, the match went to penalties and Mali captain Yves Bissouma, the Tottenham Hotspur midfielder, blazed their first kick over the bar.

However, Ali Abdi then missed for Tunisia and Mali goalkeeper Djigui Diarra helped definitively swing the momentum his team's way with saves to deny Elias Achouri and Mohamed Ali Bem Romdhane.

El Bilal Toure, the Besiktas forward who had failed to score a penalty in the same stadium in a draw against Zambia in the group stage, then stepped up to convert the kick that took Mali through to the next round.

"Before the game I said my team were already heroes and now there is no other word after we played for so long with 10 men," said Mali coach Tom Saintfiet.

"Every player fought for their country and did everything to stay in this competition."

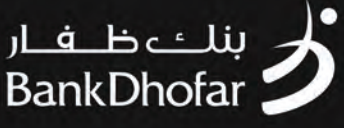
The last-16 action continues on Sunday in Rabat when hosts Morocco take on a Tanzania side who are appearing in the knockout phase of an AFCON for the first time.

South Africa then face five-time African champions Cameroon across the Moroccan capital in the late kick-off. — AFP



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SHORTTAKES

10TH PLAN ACHIEVES
STRONG PROJECT
DELIVERY RATE

SAEED AL MASHARFI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The completion rate for projects and programmes stipulated for implementation during the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) has surpassed the 97% mark. This commendable delivery rate highlights effective planning and execution, while remaining aligned with Oman Vision 2040 and its long-term development goals, according to Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy.

He stressed that the continuation of some projects into the next phase is expected and



DR SAID BIN
MOHAMMED
AL SAQRI
Minister of
Economy

does not affect future projections. “It is natural for some projects to be completed while others carry over into the upcoming Five-Year Plan.

This continuity will not affect expectations for the plan’s performance or its overall outlook”, he noted.

Dr Al Saqri highlighted the steady momentum maintained throughout the Tenth Five-Year Plan.

He said: “The completion rate of development projects has been strong and the level of project approvals — both in terms of the development budget and development spending — has also been positive. At the start of the Tenth Five-Year Plan, approved development projects stood at around RO 6 billion.

Today, approved projects have reached approximately RO 11 billion. This shows that implementation has never slowed; projects have continued at a steady pace. Naturally, many projects have been completed, while others will carry over into the Eleventh Five-Year Plan”.

Commenting on the review of the Tenth Five-Year Plan, Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, said that the plan was evaluated by an independent international body to ensure objectivity and transparency.

11th Plan prioritises
manufacturing, tourism

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

TOURISM, manufacturing and the digital economy have been identified as the key priority economic sectors under Oman’s Eleventh Five-Year Development Plan (2026–2030), according to the Ministry of Economy.

At a media briefing last week, Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, outlined the criteria used to select the priority sectors.

“The criteria for selecting sectors included the sector’s comparative advantage, its ability to enhance localisation, its capacity to access global markets and export, its ability to support diversification, its capacity to create employment opportunities and its contribution to growth and economic linkages”, he shared.

“Based on these criteria, the key sectors were identified as tourism, manufacturing industries and the digital economy”, he added.

According to the Plan, the manufacturing sector was selected due to its role as a major source of exports and a generator of both direct and indirect employment, supported by strong linkages with other sectors including mining, food security, logistics; and education and vocational training.

The Plan states that it will “prioritise export-oriented industries based on technology and knowledge; and those linked to the green economy”.

The digital economy was chosen for its role in providing high-quality employment opportunities, fostering



The criteria for selecting sectors included the sector’s comparative advantage, its ability to enhance localisation, its capacity to access global markets and export, its ability to support diversification, its capacity to create employment opportunities and its contribution to growth and economic linkages.

DR NASSER
BIN RASHID AL
MAAWALI
Under-Secretary
of the Ministry
of Economy



The manufacturing sector was selected due to its role as a major source of exports and a generator of both direct and indirect employment.

innovation, enhancing the competitiveness of national industries and improving processes across various economic sectors, thereby supporting their integration into the global economy.

Al Maawali noted that the digital economy “appears for the first time as a key sector”, with expected average growth of 10.8 per cent during the plan period.

Tourism was identified as a priority sector due to its high potential for job creation and its contribution to economic diversification through strong linkages with multiple economic sectors.

The Plan places emphasis on diversifying tourism activities and attracting a wide range of international events, including recreational, sporting, scientific

and cultural events.

Al Maawali stressed that prioritising three sectors does not imply neglecting others, noting: “When we say there are three key sectors, this does not mean that other sectors are neglected; rather, it means that economic focus is concentrated on these sectors to drive growth”.

The Plan identified a number of enabling and supporting sectors aimed at sustaining economic growth and achieving comprehensive development. These include food security, mining, renewable energy, transport and logistics; and education and health.

In addition to the prioritised sectors, the Plan allocates RO 400 million annually to strategic programmes supporting broader economic and social development.

Gas deals to lift Oman’s net gas revenues in 2026

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Net gas revenues are projected to rise by 10.4 per cent to RO 1.961 billion in fiscal 2026, up from an estimated RO 1.777 billion in 2025, marking a notable increase driven largely by a series of landmark gas agreements signed by the Integrated Gas Company (IGC).

As Oman’s sole aggregator and supplier of natural gas, IGC recently concluded multiple long-term deals with domestic gas producers and industrial end-users, strengthening revenue visibility and supply security.

According to the Ministry of Finance, net gas revenues of just under RO 2 billion in 2026 will account for 17 per cent of total public revenue for the year. The ministry attributed the higher revenue outlook to the signing of 17 new Gas Sale and Purchase Agreements by IGC, alongside the annual 3 per cent increase in gas



Net gas revenues of RO 1.961 bn account for 17% of total public revenue in Fiscal 2026.

sale prices built into the pricing framework.

In November 2025, the wholly state-owned IGC signed 19 strategic gas agreements and memoranda of understanding, aimed at optimising Oman’s gas value chain and ensuring the sustainable management of the Sultanate of Oman’s natural gas resources.

These included 14 gas sales

agreements valued at more than RO 3.4 billion, expected to unlock over RO 2 billion in new capital investments across downstream and industrial projects.

In parallel, IGC secured strategic gas purchase agreements with key upstream producers, including Occidental Oman (covering concession areas 62 and 65) and Energy Development Oman (concession area 6).

Additional MoUs were signed with OQ Group affiliates, covering gas supply to the Duqm Petrochemical Complex and initiatives linked to OQ Alternative Energy, reinforcing the alignment between gas allocation and Oman’s broader industrial and energy transition ambitions.

According to IGC CEO Abdulrahman al Yahyaei, the agreements span allocations to the fertiliser, petrochemical, pharmaceutical, food processing and mining sectors, effectively doubling the volume of gas dedicated to industrial development in the country.

“Our mandate is to maximise government revenue, support economic diversification, introduce efficiency and decarbonisation measures across the gas value chain and generate in-country value”, Al Yahyaei said in a recent interview with *The Energy Year*.

He noted that since 2024, IGC

has rolled out several reforms, most notably a new gas allocation framework aligned with national criteria set by Invest Oman. These criteria include GDP contribution, Omanisation, job creation, in-country value, decarbonisation and market development.

The framework, Al Yahyaei explained, is designed to reinforce IGC’s broader mission of supporting sustainable growth and economic diversification in line with Oman Vision 2040.

While gas supply to existing industries will continue to be prioritised to ensure production continuity, new projects will be assessed based on gas efficiency, emissions intensity and alignment with energy transition objectives.

“The goal is to attract industries that consume less gas, maintain lower emissions, and are capable of transitioning over time to alternative energy sources such as green hydrogen and other cleaner fuels”, he said.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



The official presentation event for the Omani Business Delegation to the Forum was held at the Brazil Embassy last week.

HIGH-LEVEL
DELEGATION TO
ATTEND 1ST
OMAN-BRAZIL
TRADE FORUM

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 4

A high-level delegation represented by top officials from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) will attend the 1st Oman-Brazil trade forum to be held in Brazil in May 2026.

The official presentation event for the Omani Business Delegation to the Forum was held at the Brazil Embassy last week, a number of Omani businessmen and trade partners attended and registered their business interests.

This event is addressed to Omani entrepreneurs and business leaders interested in establishing direct, face-to-face contacts with Brazilian suppliers from various sectors, visiting factories and farms, exploring concrete import opportunities and engaging with Brazilian authorities.

The presentation is promoted by the renowned Brazilian law firm Marcelo Lucas Advocacia, with institutional support from the Embassy of Brazil in Oman and the Embassy of Oman in Brazil. A coffee break will be offered during the presentation and registration session.

Marcelo Lucas, Head of the official delegation of Oman to the 1st Oman-Brazil Business Forum briefed on the possibilities of Omani businessmen and investors about the first-of-its-kind event to be held in major cities of Brazil.

Omani entrepreneurs will be given an opportunity to be face-to-face with real sellers from various sectors of the Brazilian economy, to visit factories and farms; and to get concrete opportunities for importing Brazilian products and participate in meetings with Brazilian authorities.

The bilateral relations between Oman and Brazil have been growing since 1974 with the establishment of the diplomatic ties and are focused on enhancing trade, investment especially in renewable energy, agriculture, mining and political dialogue for global peace and stability. Marked by high-level visits and increasing economic cooperation, with Oman serving as Brazil’s gateway to Asia and Africa, bilateral trade has seen substantial growth, with significant expansion in agriculture, food products, mining and renewable energy sectors.

The bilateral cooperation extends to tourism, with recent ministerial visits exploring enhancements in this sector, highlighting shared cultural heritage and experiences.

Dhofar Islamic and Al Madina Takaful form strategic partnership

MUSCAT: Dhofar Islamic, the Sharia-compliant window of BankDhofar, has announced a landmark strategic bancatakaful alliance with Al Madina Takaful, Oman's leading provider of ethical and Sharia-compliant insurance solutions.

The partnership marks a significant step forward in expanding integrated Islamic financial and protection offerings across the Sultanate of Oman.

Under the agreement, Dhofar Islamic will distribute Al Madina Takaful's comprehensive portfolio of retail and SME protection products through its nationwide branch network and advanced digital channels. Customers will benefit from seamless access to Sharia-compliant coverage spanning, motor, home, medical, travel, personal accident, SME &

Oman’s MSX tops GCC
markets in 2025 rally

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 4

THE Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) closed 2025 as the clear outperformer among Gulf equity markets, capping a year marked by strong gains, rising liquidity and a broad-based recovery across sectors.

Oman’s benchmark index delivered a standout performance at a time when regional markets showed sharply divergent trajectories, underlining the MSX’s re-emergence as a preferred destination for investors seeking growth and value.

According to Vision Capital and Kamco Invest, Oman ranked as the best-performing stock market in the GCC in 2025, significantly outpacing its regional peers.

While the MSX 30 Index surged by 28.2 per cent for the year, most other Gulf markets posted far more modest gains and one major market ended the year in negative territory.

The performance gap was stark. Saudi Arabia’s equity market recorded a year-to-date decline of 12.8 per cent, making it the weakest performer in the GCC in 2025.

Abu Dhabi’s market posted a gain of 6.1 per cent, while Dubai advanced by 17.2 per cent, supported by selective strength in real estate and services-linked stocks. Qatar saw only a marginal increase of 1.8 per cent over the year, Bahrain rose by 4.1 per cent and Kuwait emerged as the second-best performer in the region with a gain of 21.2 per cent, though still well below Oman’s pace.

Against this regional backdrop, the MSX’s rally appears even more pronounced. The index followed a modest gain of just 1.4 per cent in 2024 with a sharp acceleration in 2025, reaching its highest level since May 2016 on December 12.

Although the market eased slightly towards the end of the year, it closed at 5,866.8 points, firmly consolidating its position as the GCC’s top-performing exchange. Market volatility earlier in the year makes the recovery all the more notable.

The MSX 30 Index fell to a low of 4,223.83 points in early April 2025 before rebounding



Oman’s benchmark index delivered a standout performance at a time when regional markets showed sharply divergent trajectories.

strongly to reach an annual peak of 5,985.66 points in mid-December. This represents a recovery of nearly 39 per cent from the year’s trough, reflecting sustained buying interest and a decisive improvement in investor sentiment.

Sector-level data confirms that the rally was not confined to a narrow segment of the market. All three main sectors on the MSX ended the year in positive territory.

The Industrial Sector led the advance, surging by 48.9 per cent to close at 7,846.45 points, supported by strong gains in manufacturing, utilities and energy-related stocks.

The Services Sector followed with a rise of 38.0 per cent, ending the year at 2,405.16 points, while the Financial Sector gained 28.3 per cent to close at 9,908.9 points, reflecting renewed strength in banking shares.

Individual stock performance was equally striking. National Aluminium Products topped the gainers’ list after its share price surged by 175 per cent during the year.

Phoenix Power and Voltamp Energy also posted exceptional gains of 167.2 per cent

and 157.8 per cent, respectively. On the downside, Financial Services Company recorded the steepest decline, with its share price falling by 63.1 per cent, followed by Barka Water and Power and Oman Chlorine, which declined by 44.7 per cent and 43.2 per cent. Trading activity on the MSX expanded sharply in tandem with the market rally.

The total value of shares traded jumped to RO 5.0 billion in 2025, compared to RO 1.2 billion a year earlier. Trading volumes also rose significantly, with 25.1 billion shares exchanged during the year, up from 6.4 billion shares in 2024.

Bank Muscat led the market in terms of value traded, with RO 888.4 million worth of shares changing hands. Sohar International Bank and OQ Base Industries followed, while Sohar International Bank topped the volume chart with nearly 5.2 billion shares traded.

Together, these trends underline how Oman’s equity market not only outperformed the GCC in returns, but also regained depth and liquidity, setting a strong base heading into 2026.

OIB HONoured AS BEST NEW BANK FOR FINANCIAL SERVICE — OMAN

MUSCAT: Oman Investment Bank (OIB) has been recognised as the Best New Bank for Cross Border Financial Service, Oman 2025 at the International Business Magazine Awards in recognition of the bank’s expanding role in enabling seamless financial connectivity and supporting clients’ regional and international ambitions.

Hosted by International Business Magazine, a renowned global publication recognised for spotlighting excellence across the financial and business landscape, the annual gathering brings together leading institutions to celebrate innovation, performance and sector leadership.

This recognition reflects the bank’s continued progress in strengthening its international offering across advisory, capital markets, trade finance and



transaction banking. Through these capabilities, it supports cross market integration and facilitates investment opportunities across major regional corridors.

Commenting on the award, Mohammed al Habsi, Acting Chief Executive Officer, said: “We are proud to receive this recognition. It reinforces our commitment to supporting clients’ growth across borders with solutions that are innovative, reliable and designed to create lasting value”.

As the bank continues to expand its footprint, it remains focused on contributing to Oman Vision 2040 by advancing financial innovation, supporting economic diversification and enhancing the Sultanate of Oman's position as a gateway to regional and international markets.



The partnership marks a significant step forward in expanding integrated Islamic financial and protection offerings across Oman.

Corporate solutions, fully embedded within the bank’s financing and service ecosystem. For Dhofar Islamic, the collaboration enhances its value proposition by integrating Takaful

solutions alongside its financing and deposit products.

This enables the bank to offer holistic financial well-being packages, allowing customers to enjoy protections. The alliance is expected to deepen customer engagement and foster long-term loyalty through a unified, end-to-end Sharia-compliant offering. Amor bin Said al Amri, Chief Islamic Banking Officer, said: “This partnership reflects our unwavering commitment to delivering holistic Islamic financial solutions that safeguard our customers’ future while adhering to the highest standards of Sharia compliance.

By integrating Takaful into our banking journey, we are creating a seamless experience that empowers customers with choice, convenience and confidence.

This strategic alliance is not just about distribution — it is about shaping the future of ethical finance in Oman”.

Usama al Barwani, Chief Executive Officer of Al Madina Takaful, added: “This collaboration establishes a powerful distribution channel by leveraging Dhofar Islamic’s expanding customer base, strong brand trust and robust digital infrastructure. Through the bank’s relationship managers and online platforms, Al Madina Takaful will be able to deliver its family, general and corporate solutions with greater reach and accessibility”.

Beyond commercial synergies, the partnership supports Oman’s broader objective of strengthening its Islamic finance ecosystem by fostering closer collaboration between banking and Takaful institutions.

SHORTTAKES



The award aims to encourage government and private entities to adopt innovative and effective solutions in the field of energy efficiency.

MOEM LAUNCHES ENERGY EFFICIENCY EXCELLENCE AWARD

MUSCAT: In a step aimed at stimulating innovation and enhancing energy-use efficiency across both the public and private sectors, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MoEM) has launched the energy efficiency excellence award, in support of the transition towards environmental and economic sustainability, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The Ministry affirmed that the award aims to encourage government and private entities to adopt innovative and effective solutions in the field of energy efficiency. Government entities include all ministries, authorities, institutions and municipalities, in addition to public hospitals and government universities, while private entities include universities, companies and establishments across various industrial, commercial, residential and service sectors.

The award is presented under two main categories: Best Project in the Government Sector and Best Project in the Private Sector, in recognition of initiatives that contribute to excellence and innovation in the field of energy efficiency. The award requires participating projects to align with the national directions of Oman Vision 2040 in sustainable development and to contribute to achieving net zero.

In addition, the project must have been fully implemented in previous years or have been in operation for a minimum of six months, with verified actual performance data available.

The Ministry explained that submitted projects undergo a comprehensive technical and environmental evaluation focusing on the efficiency and sustainability of the implemented solutions.

CEOTALK

Visionary leadership in Oman’s banking sector

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 4

ALSALT al Kharusi, Country Head of Mashreq Oman, is steering the Sultanate of Oman’s corporate banking landscape with a leadership style that blends global expertise, local insight and a people-first approach.

In an exclusive interview with the Observer, he shared how his approach to leadership is shaping both his organisation and the wider banking sector in Oman.

With over two decades of experience in corporate and institutional banking, Al Kharusi has held senior positions at Oman Arab Bank and HSBC Bank Oman.

“What has always inspired me is the opportunity to create meaningful impact — supporting business growth, enabling clients to realise their ambitions and contributing to national economic priorities”, he said.

He added that leading Mashreq Oman presented a unique opportunity to marry global banking standards with a client-centric, forward-looking culture.

Al Kharusi has built Mashreq Oman from scratch, establishing operations, defining a strategic road map and introducing tailored corporate banking solutions. He emphasised that leadership is about more than operational success.

“These milestones are about building enduring partnerships, supporting Oman Vision 2040 economic diversification and enabling sustainable growth for businesses, communities and the nation”, he said.

For Al Kharusi, leadership



What has always inspired me is the opportunity to create meaningful impact — supporting business growth, enabling clients to realise their ambitions and contributing to national economic priorities.

ALSALT AL KHARUSI
Country Head, Mashreq Oman

is inseparable from culture. He describes people as “our greatest asset” and stresses that fostering trust, collaboration and professionalism is central to long-term success.

He leads with transparency, empowers his teams and recognises achievements, creating a culture where employees feel valued and motivated. “By aligning individual growth with the bank’s mission, we strengthen motivation, pride and performance”, he explained.

Overcoming challenges has been a key part of his journey. Market volatility, regulatory shifts and evolving client expectations tested the organisation during its early stages.

“Launching Mashreq Oman involved assembling a high-calibre team, designing compliant and efficient processes; and ensuring we delivered excellence from day one. By fostering collaboration, empowering our people and maintaining disciplined execution, we navigated these challenges successfully”, Al Kharusi said.

Al Kharusi’s approach goes beyond traditional leadership. He believes in nurturing talent and prioritising long-term value over short-term gains. “True leadership is about steady perseverance: nurturing talent, fostering trust and prioritising long-term value”, he said.

This philosophy not only strengthens his organisation but also influences the wider corporate banking sector by demonstrating how leadership can drive innovation, client-centricity and sustainable growth.

Looking ahead, Al Kharusi sees significant opportunities for Oman’s banking industry in sectors such

as manufacturing, infrastructure, trade, logistics, technology and renewable energy.

“The banking industry is evolving towards sustainability, digital transformation and tailored corporate solutions. Leaders must embrace these changes while remaining focused on responsible finance and long-term partnerships”, he said.

For aspiring leaders, Al Kharusi offers clear guidance: continuous learning, integrity and adaptability are key.

“Ambition is important, but it must be balanced with realistic execution and a client-first mindset. Digital readiness and agility are no longer optional in today’s world”, he emphasised. His philosophy highlights how strong, people-focused leadership can transform both an organisation and the wider sector it operates in.

Balancing leadership demands with personal growth, Al Kharusi maintains disciplined time management, prioritises wellbeing and stays connected with family and community.

Delegating responsibility and empowering leaders ensures resilience while preventing burnout. “Continuous learning, through education, networking, mentorship and reflection, supports personal growth and enhances leadership capacity, benefitting both the individual and the organisation”, he noted.

Through his leadership style, AlSalt al Kharusi is demonstrating how visionary, people-centred management can shape the future of corporate banking in Oman, making the sector more resilient, innovative and aligned with the nation’s long-term economic priorities.

Policy gaps hold back Oman’s rooftop and industrial renewables

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Oman’s clean-energy programme is advancing through competitive utility-scale tenders, but the next wave of growth will depend on whether the Sultanate of Oman builds a clear policy framework for commercial, industrial and residential renewables, Hariprasad Gantjala, Lead Renewables and Emerging Technologies at ONEIC and Technical Director at Takhzeen Oman, said.

In an exclusive interview, Gantjala said the main constraint holding back wider deployment is not land, grid capacity or financing, but the absence of a clear policy framework for C&I and residential renewables”, he said.

“The biggest bottleneck for open renewable projects in Oman is the absence of a clear policy framework for C&I and residential renewables”, he said.

While utility-scale projects are well supported through Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (Nama PWP) tenders,



HARIPRASAD GANTJALA
Lead Renewables and Emerging Technologies at ONEIC and Technical Director at Takhzeen Oman.

he said non-utility projects still lack key mechanisms such as net-billing, wheeling and standardised interconnection requirements.

“This policy gap — not land, grid, or financing — prevents scalable, bankable C&I and rooftop deployment”, he added.

Gantjala said Oman’s grid is moving “in the right direction”, but the next stage of renewable expansion will require the system to become more flexible, not only bigger.

“The next phase is about flexibility — not just adding more solar or wind”, he said.

He pointed to priorities that include better forecasting and dispatch tools, stronger transmission in areas of growing demand, consistent interconnection standards and

quicker operating reserves. Internationally, he said, markets that scale renewables fastest are those investing in flexibility alongside generation.

Battery energy storage systems (BESS) are attracting global attention as grids adapt to intermittent renewables.

In Oman, Gantjala sees the most realistic near-term opportunities in hybrid projects that combine solar with storage and in industrial and commercial users where reliability and power quality directly affect costs and operations.

“Storage scales quickly once the revenue model is clear”, he said.

He said frameworks that recognise the value of services such as peak shaving, grid support, reducing curtailment and providing reserves or frequency response would turn market interest into a pipeline of bankable projects.

On financing, Gantjala said investor requirements are broadly consistent across markets: credible offtake arrangements or PPAs, clear grid-connection scope and timelines, robust EPC and operations

structures, realistic yield assumptions and disciplined risk allocation.

He said common developer mistakes include underestimating early technical work such as grid studies and interconnection requirements; and over-optimism on schedules and performance assumptions.

“Capital is available, but it goes to projects that are technically solid and commercially clear”, he said.

Gantjala said the fastest way to accelerate Oman’s clean-energy pipeline is to make grid connection faster and more predictable, backed by published standards, transparent timelines and earlier visibility on network upgrades and curtailment approaches.

He added that the global transition is increasingly shaped by “flexibility markets” — including storage, demand response and grid digitalisation — and Oman will benefit by strengthening the “plumbing” of the energy transition.

“If Oman strengthens connection clarity and flexibility mechanisms, investment and delivery will follow”, he said.

OIL POLICY

Opec+ set to hold output



Opec+ is set to keep oil output steady at Sunday’s meeting despite political strains among key members, delegates said.

The group, pumping about half of global supply, is expected to maintain its pause on output hikes after prices fell over 18% in 2025, the sharpest annual drop since 2020, amidst persistent oversupply concerns globally and regionally. — Reuters

POLITICAL CRISIS

Venezuela oil exports at standstill



Venezuela’s oil exports have ground to a halt as political turmoil deepened, sources said, with port captains failing to authorise loaded tankers to depart.

The paralysis follows a US-declared oil embargo and Washington’s move to oversee a political transition, leaving vessels and ships stranded, storage near capacity and raising the risk of forced output cuts across key producing regions. — Reuters

EV COMPETITION

BYD overtakes Tesla in EVs



Tesla has lost its title as the world’s top electric vehicle maker to China’s BYD after annual sales fell for a second year.

Competition, expiring US tax credits and brand backlash hit demand, even as global EV sales jumped 28%, raising doubts over Tesla’s core auto recovery as focus shifts to robots and autonomous driving ambitions. — Reuters

OPINION



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The writer is an assistant professor at the marketing and management department of the College of Banking and Financial Studies.



KV CH MADHU SUDHANA RAO

The writer is AI researcher based in the USA.

Rethinking data security in the AI era

OUR digital lives are now powered by artificial intelligence (AI), which powers chatbots, virtual assistants, search engines; and even financial and medical services. Although AI systems seem intelligent and practical, their intelligence depends on extremely fragile data. The concern now is not whether AI can think, but whether our data is secure as it learns and becomes increasingly integrated into our daily lives, both personally and professionally.

How can we protect sensitive information in the AI era? is currently the most crucial question. We disclose bits of personal information each time we use an AI application, whether it's for translation, resume writing, or answering questions. Sensitive information such as names, phone numbers, bank account details, or even biometric data may be included in these inputs. Many consumers are unaware that once data is entered, it may be retained, used to train future models, or unintentionally disclosed due to system weaknesses. Therefore, everyone who interacts with AI systems has a responsibility to protect critical information, not just engineers and companies. People have the right to know how their data is used, stored and shared under data privacy laws. However, in reality, people frequently compromise their privacy for convenience. The first digital safety tip is still the same:

until you are certain of AI products' data protection rules, never provide them with sensitive information. Cyberattacks on AI systems can have serious consequences. Large-scale data breaches might result from hackers exploiting flaws in data storage or model training procedures. For instance, a single breach may reveal the financial and personal information of thousands of users, leading to identity theft, economic crime, or reputational harm. The enormous datasets that AI systems handle make them attractive targets. When prompted, a corrupted AI model may inadvertently replicate some of its training data, creating a "data leak". Because of this, experts caution that if the model isn't sufficiently protected, even a harmless question to an unverified AI chatbot may divulge information from prior users. AI tools are designed to process information, not defend it by default. While major providers like OpenAI, Google and Microsoft invest heavily in encryption and secure data handling, no system is entirely immune. Hence, the safest data is the one never shared. The Golden Rule is, 'Don't Overshare'. Users must exercise digital discipline. Avoid sharing:

- Personal identification numbers (such as national ID or passport numbers)
- Bank details or credit card numbers
- Passwords or OTPs
- Confidential business documents
- Health records or medical data

Cyberattacks on AI systems can have serious consequences. Large-scale data breaches might result from hackers exploiting flaws in data storage or model training procedures.

Shallow AI is another potential danger. "Shallow AI" describes systems trained for superficial tasks, such as text generation or pattern recognition, that imitate intelligence without thorough knowledge. Although helpful, these systems cannot match the strong security and ethical foundations of enterprise-grade AI. Shallow AI often operates with little oversight and can misuse or misinterpret input data, leading to biased results or unintentional disclosure. The risk of unapproved AI tools has increased dramatically as generative AI has grown. Numerous "free" or unapproved AI apps have surfaced online. Many imitate trustworthy tools while surreptitiously gathering user information. For example, in 2024, several fake chatbots posing as "ChatGPT Pro" were collecting login credentials and private messages for phishing scams. The guideline is straightforward: don't utilise an AI tool if it doesn't explicitly disclose its data policy or request needless authorisation. Select verified systems that adhere to accepted security requirements at all times. AI is changing the way we work, live and think, but privacy and trust must not be sacrificed in the process. Our best defence against this digital revolution is awareness. Instead of starting with a firewall, cybersecurity starts with a mentality. Vigilance is now a prerequisite for intelligence in the AI era.

US BATTERY AUTONOMY WILL UPEND EV HIERARCHY

KATRINA HAMLIN

In 2026, US battery supply will outstrip demand, ending dependency on imports. Former President Joe Biden's policies set the changes in motion and successor Donald Trump may take the credit. But the real winners are Korea's LG Energy Solution, Samsung SDI and SK On, who will be better able to take on China.

US demand for lithium-ion batteries, used to power cars and store energy, has been accelerating, but domestic supply failed to keep pace: consequently, for storage alone, the country has imported more than \$100 billion in batteries and components since 2021, according to S&P Global, roughly half of which came from China.

Increasing reliance on the People's Republic — total lithium-ion battery shipments grew 15-fold in the decade to 2024, per International Trade Centre data — worried policymakers.

Biden's 2022 Inflation Reduction Act flipped the script. The scheme awarded generous credits for local investment and production, slashing battery-making costs by 30%, the Centre on Global Energy Policy estimates.

Setting up factories was especially enticing for Korean giants, since Chinese rivals, including the world's largest battery maker Contemporary Amperex Technology, were effectively excluded. Now, the country could see an oversupply of lithium-ion batteries as soon as 2026.

South Korean producers have invested some \$20 billion to build out capacity, per S&P and will account for more than two-fifths of the growth in production between 2025 and 2029, Benchmark Minerals estimated in 2024.

The US was LGES's largest market by sales in the first half of 2025 and SK On expects to have more than doubled its capacity there in that year, compared with 2024.

That's feeding through to earnings. LGES and Samsung will turn a 2025 loss to a 2026 net profit of \$700 million and nearly \$400 million, respectively, according to Visible Alpha. SK Innovation's battery subsidiary SK On needs longer to reach profitability, but revenue will increase around 50% in the year ahead. — Reuters

Boom time for boutiques with M&A bounce

BOUTIQUE investment banks hiked pay and hired senior dealmakers as a rebound in M&A (Mergers and Acquisitions) work in 2025 had set them on course for a stellar year. The elite boutiques that work with big banks on large M&A deals have posted healthy upticks in fees during the third quarter and pointed to an appetite to add talent ahead of what is expected to be a bumper year. The third quarter has proven particularly lucrative for boutiques. Evercore posted a record \$1 billion in revenue, which was up 41 per cent on 2024; Moelis's income was up 34 per cent to \$356.9 million for the period; while PJT Partners unveiled a record third quarter revenue \$447.1 million. "Our backlogs right now are as high as they've ever been", John Weinberg, chief executive of Evercore, told analysts during its third quarter earnings call. "Almost every sector that we cover seems to have real activity. The larger deals started earlier: "We're seeing mid-sized deals really build and frankly, across the board, in terms of the industry sectors, large and small deals are being considered". Boutiques had embarked on a hiring spree in 2024 even as bigger rivals remained cautious about adding talent amidst muted deal activity. Many had pointed to recruitment over 2025 and beyond. "We continue to add talent as we invest in our strategic advisory franchise and the firm more broadly", said Paul Taubman, chief executive of PJT Partners, during its Q3 results. "As a result of our active recruiting efforts, our headcount overall has increased 7 per cent from a year ago". The sharp rebound in fees for boutiques in 2025 relieves some of the pressure faced by them coming into the year. Their counter-cyclical recruiting spree, combined with the fact that M&A dealmakers typically take up to 18 months to get up to speed in a new role, left them with



ANDY JALIL
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Wall street executives pointed to the return of "animal spirits" as the fuel for the recent deal boom. M&A volumes increased 40 per cent to nearly \$4 trillion in 2025, according to data provider Dealogic, pushed by a surge in mega-deals in the US.



Traders work on the floor at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), New York City. — Reuters

elevated costs. Analysts keenly watch 'compensation ratios' — how much ratio is eaten up by pay — when boutiques report their numbers. Boutiques' compensation costs increased in 2025, as new hires and bigger bonus accruals have pushed up expenses. But the rise in their revenues has meant their compensation ratios have remained more or less the same. Evercore's compensation costs increased 27 per cent to \$1.7 billion during the first nine months of the year, while Moelis hiked pay by 24 per cent to \$712.6 million and PJT Partners by 13 per cent to \$801.3 million. "We are continuing to hire talent at all levels and plan to build this business into a market leader", said Moelis chief executive Navid Mahmoodzadegan. "If you look year-over-year our MD count has gone from 157 at this point last year to 170 today. And when you look at that, the gross number of MDs is roughly split half and half between internal promotes and external hiring". Evercore's Weinberg said the bank was focused on expanding in Europe: "We have built out Europe significantly. We are feeling very optimistic about Europe. In terms of activity level, they did have a record quarter. It was broadly across sectors. We are seeing a growing strength". Wall street executives pointed to the return of "animal spirits" as the fuel for the recent deal boom. M&A volumes increased 40 per cent to nearly \$4 trillion in 2025, according to data provider Dealogic, pushed by a surge in mega-deals in the US. Privately, dealmakers point to several potential risks that could derail activity. These include geopolitical factors such as the ongoing trade war and the conflict in Ukraine. While Taubman said he was optimistic about the outlook, he pointed to speed bumps that could scupper activity: "Continuing geopolitical uncertainty, a weakening labour market, stubbornly high interest rates and tariff dislocations, coupled with concerns of an AI bubble have the potential to derail this pickup in activity levels".

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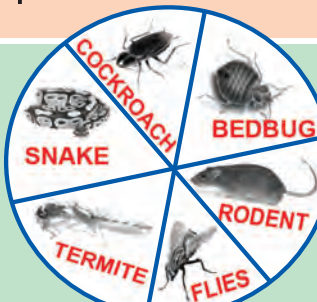
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ANNOUNCEMENT

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SIT. VACANT

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ART/LIFE



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ROHM'S DAZZLING NEW YEAR CONCERT

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EUROPEAN CULTURE

TRENČÍN, OULU SELECTED AS EUROPEAN CAPITALS OF CULTURE FOR 2026



The European Capitals of Culture programme is designed to celebrate the distinct arts, history and traditions that define each host city and its surrounding area.

The cities of Trenčín in Slovakia and Oulu in Finland have been officially designated as the European Capitals of Culture for the year 2026. The announcement places both cities at the centre of a major European cultural initiative that seeks to highlight creativity, heritage and cultural expression across the continent. Each year, the European Union selects specific cities for this title as part of a long-standing strategic programme aimed at showcasing the vast cultural diversity found within Europe's regions.

The European Capitals of Culture programme is designed to celebrate the distinct arts, history and traditions that define each host city and its surrounding area. Through this designation, selected cities are encouraged to present cultural programmes that reflect their identity while also emphasising shared European values. The initiative provides an opportunity for cities to bring local culture into a broader European spotlight and to strengthen cultural dialogue across borders.

Trenčín and Oulu will take over the title from the 2025 European Capitals of Culture, which included Chemnitz in the German state of Saxony, as well as the cross-border twin cities of Nova Gorica in Slovenia and Gorizia in Italy. This succession reflects the programme's commitment to geographic balance and cultural variety, ensuring that different regions of Europe are represented over time.

As European Capitals of Culture, Trenčín and Oulu are expected to serve as platforms for artistic expression and cultural engagement throughout 2026. The title emphasises not only established cultural heritage but also contemporary creativity, encouraging communities to reflect on their cultural identity and future direction. The programme also aims to foster greater public participation in cultural life, drawing attention to local traditions while inviting broader European audiences to engage with them.

By naming Trenčín and Oulu as European Capitals of Culture for 2026, the European Union continues its effort to underline the importance of culture as a unifying force. The designation highlights culture as a key element of social connection, shared understanding and mutual appreciation across Europe's diverse regions.

— ONA

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



HOLLYWOOD

Elle Fanning attends the 37th Annual Palm Springs International Film Festival in Palm Springs, California, US.
— Reuters



AWARDS

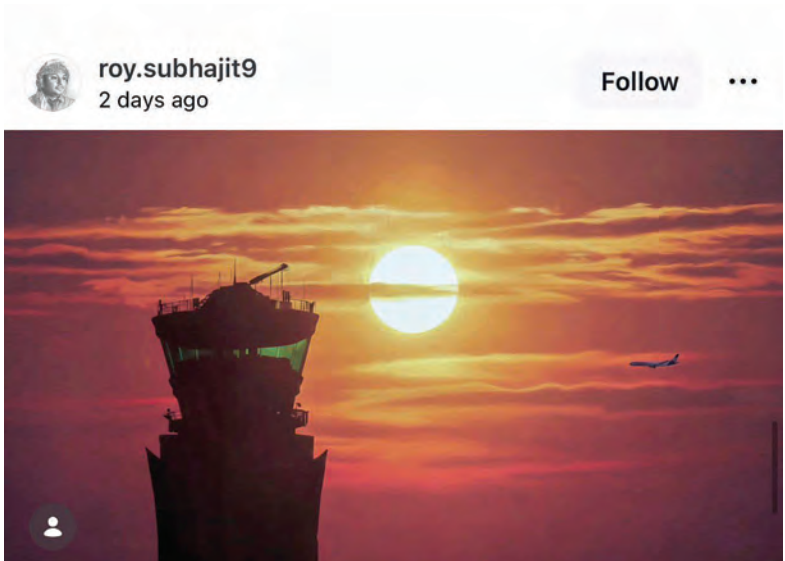
Denmark's rider Michael Moerkoev poses next to a bust representing him as he is welcomed into the Sports Hall of Fame.
— AFP



SNOWY SEASON

People walk their dog as cold weather warnings are extended across much of the UK and into next week by Britain's Met Office, in Cargan, Northern Ireland.
— Reuters

INSTA PICKS



Muscat’s watchtower paints a canvas of aerial wonder



A rare Arabian wolf captured in shot in Salalah.

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India unveils Buddha gems after century abroad



The Piprahwa gems is a collection of more than 300 precious stones and ornaments believed to have been buried with relics of the Buddha at a stupa site in northern India.

Sacred ancient gems linked to the Buddha were unveiled on Saturday in India for the first time since their colonial-era removal.

The Piprahwa gems, a collection of more than 300 precious stones and ornaments believed to have been buried with relics of the Buddha at a stupa site in northern India, were formally displayed at an exhibition in New Delhi. “This historic event marks the reunification of the Piprahwa gem relics of Lord Buddha, repatriated after 127 years”, the Ministry of Culture said in a statement.

It said that they are on display “for the first time” since British excavations in 1898 unearthed them and they were subsequently scattered across the world.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who opened the exhibition in New Delhi, said it was a “very special day for those passionate about history,

culture and the ideals” of the Buddha.

The Buddha — who renounced material wealth to embrace and preach a life of non-attachment — founded a religion that now has more than 500 million adherents.

Born in what is now Nepal, he spent much of his life in northern India.

The gems, believed to date back to around 200 BC, were unearthed in 1898 by British colonial engineer William Claxton Peppe in Piprahwa, in Uttar Pradesh state.

Indian authorities said an inscription on one of the caskets unearthed with the treasure confirmed the contents — which include bone fragments — as “relics of the Buddha”.

While the majority were handed over to colonial authorities and some were housed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, Peppe kept a treasure trove of jewels. — AFP



Craig’s death at 54 marks the loss of one of Africa’s last great super tuskers.

CRAIG, AFRICA 'S LEGENDARY SUPER TUSKER, DIES AT 54

KENYA and the global conservation community are mourning the death of Craig, one of Africa's last surviving super tusker elephants, whose towering presence, immense ground-sweeping tusks and gentle temperament made him a living symbol of wildlife protection success.

Craig, the iconic bull elephant of Amboseli National Park, died on Saturday at the age of 54, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) confirmed. Conservationists said he died of natural causes, having lived a full life in the wild under sustained protection.

“Early this morning, Amboseli National Park — and indeed the world — lost a true icon,” KWS said in a statement shared on X. “Craig, the legendary super tusker famed for his immense tusks and calm, dignified presence, has passed on.”

Craig belonged to an exceptionally rare class of elephants known as super tuskers — adult male elephants whose two tusks each weigh more than 45 kilograms. So long were Craig’s tusks that they nearly scraped the ground as he walked, making him instantly recognisable across

Amboseli’s vast savannahs.

Only a handful of such elephants are believed to remain in Africa, largely due to decades of poaching driven by the illegal ivory trade. Craig’s survival into old age placed him among the continent’s most valuable living natural treasures.

“Fewer than a handful remain today, making him a living monument to Africa’s natural heritage,” the Kenya Wildlife Service noted.

Beyond his size, Craig was deeply admired for his remarkably calm and composed nature. Rangers and visitors alike recalled how he would often pause patiently, allowing tourists time to photograph and film him without aggression or fear.

“His imposing appearance combined with his gentle behaviour made every encounter unforgettable,” conservationists said.

Amboseli National Park — a mosaic of savannah woodland, grasslands and wetlands near the Tanzania border — is a favourite destination for safari travellers. Craig stood out as one of its most beloved attractions, a magnet for visitors and wildlife researchers alike.

Craig’s impact extends beyond his physical presence. During his

lifetime, he fathered numerous calves, ensuring that his strong genetic lineage and calm temperament continue across generations.

“Through his offspring, his presence will be felt long after his passing,” KWS said, adding that his life was a testament to the effectiveness of long-term conservation strategies.

The Amboseli Trust for Elephants confirmed that Craig died naturally and expressed gratitude to park authorities, rangers and local communities who helped ensure he lived out his life undisturbed.

Craig’s longevity reflected Kenya’s broader conservation gains. According to official figures, the country’s elephant population has grown from 36,280 in 2021 to 42,072 in 2025, reversing years of decline caused by poaching.

Kenya’s national parks and reserves now attract more than two million visitors annually, with iconic wildlife like Craig playing a crucial role in sustaining tourism revenues and community livelihoods.

However, conservation challenges remain. In some protected areas, such as Mwea National Reserve, elephant populations have grown so rapidly that relocation programmes were required to protect fragile ecosystems.

Craig’s fame extended well beyond Kenya. In 2021, he was adopted as an ambassador by East African Breweries’ Tusker brand, a move designed to spotlight elephant conservation and mobilise public support. The term “tusker,” often associated with the popular Kenyan lager, fittingly describes adult male elephants with large tusks — a coincidence that further elevated Craig’s international profile.

— Agencies

FEATURES

GEORGINA BENISON

THE Royal Opera House of Musical Arts rang in the New Year early on Wednesday with a strong and powerful performance from the Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra. Sixty of their finest musicians graced the stage with not one, but two internationally renowned soloists to make this concert a very special occasion. Dressed in formal black, they plunged into an Armenian double-bill of formidable calibre under world-class conductor, Sergey Smbatyan, with Khachaturian's well known mighty Waltz, 'Masquerade Suite'.

It was brilliantly performed; a romp through wonderful orchestral swells meticulously articulated, with joyous playing from the percussion. There were delicate lyrical moments from the strings leading to a rollicking conclusion. What a whirlwind to start!

Khachaturian's 'Sabre Dance' was just splendid; short and fiery, the brass and percussion let rip — to the audience's delight — and featured some high woodwind shrieks with Xylophones sabre-rattling to keep everyone on their toes.

Between the two, American-Korean violinist Elli Choi appeared on stage in chic black-and-white couture to perform the contemporary Ukrainian composer, Alexei Shor's fifth Violin Concerto. The RBSO opened in a Nationalistic vein using fanfare elements from the brass and percussion.

The soloist was able to demonstrate her stunning virtuoso technique as well as her warm, expressive quality in lyrical sections. She was never drowned in Shor's well-balanced orchestration, though his musical language is neo-classical tonal, reflecting little influence from his Russian 20th century predecessors. The harp (Ema Mitarai) introduced the Slow Movement, then soloist and woodwind joined in a tender, filmic mode.

An interesting interlude from tubular bells and brass recalled John Williams' film writing, then harp flourishes and horn countermelodies from Charnrit Rerngronasa brought the movement to a soft ending over lovely rich chords. A return to the mood of the first movement added strident glockenspiel and piccolo interjections, the soloist barely pausing in this stylistically eclectic, light-hearted composition.

Choi returned to the stage to perform the fiendishly difficult solo part in Franz Waxman's 1946 arrangement of Bizet's beloved themes, 'Carmen Fantasy'. It exploits every challenging technique the fiddle is capable of — high register, leaps, glissandi, arpeggiated fills — all at breakneck speed which Elli Choi executed with finesse and faultless technique.

The tone quality she coaxed from her 1840 Vuillaume instrument was breath-taking and especially poignant in the 'Card Trio'. She flew through rapturous flourishes in excruciatingly demanding passages, running the gambit of Carmen's emotional spectrum through the violin's range of possibilities. 'Seguidilla' was exceptionally tricky but Choi did not skip a beat — and all off by heart in a stunning climatic finale to Part One!

A deceptively gentle introduction from harp and woodwinds to Borodin's well-known chestnut, 'Polovtsian Dances' from 'Prince Igor' dissolved into the famous, 'Stranger in Paradise' theme, played beautifully by oboe (Thanit Kaewrack) over gorgeous string textures. The orchestra excelled as they attacked the compelling off-beat dance, loud and rhythmic, with some powerful lower brass making it hard to sit still. A reminder of the 'Stranger' theme was interrupted by rude tuba blasts, vibrating to an intense tutti ending — and rousing applause.

The second soloist of the evening was certainly not playing second fiddle. The grand piano was rolled centre stage and Uzbek superstar, Behzod Abduraimov — sans



ROHM'S DAZZLING NEW YEAR CONCERT

The ROHM welcomed the New Year with a spectacular concert as the Royal Bangkok Symphony Orchestra joined forces with world-class soloists and conductor Sergey Smbatyan. The evening offered a richly layered celebration — a fitting musical farewell to 2025 and a stirring prelude to the year ahead



PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

score — leapt straight into Rachmaninov's 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini'.

Exceedingly virtuosic technique is required of the soloist and Abduraimov surpassed the challenge at every turn. The 35-year-old performed with unwavering confidence and dexterity, demonstrating incredibly fast finger work yet depths of emotional sensitivity in the slow sections. There came a lovely romantic Variation bearing Rachmaninov's lush signature, then his jazz influences apparent in the harmony and syncopated, off-beat Variation.

The impossibly beautiful 18th Variation drew gasps as Abduraimov gave a passionate interpretation of the intimate lyricism with broad sweeping gestures in the solos. Rachmaninov makes great use of the oboe/cor anglais timbre in his orchestration, juxtaposing the full orchestral force with light, nimble solo passages.

The applause was so tremendous that Behzod returned to perform an explosive conclusion with Liszt's third 'Grandes Études de Paganini'. His rippling, dazzling finger technique left the audience spellbound. What fantastic programming, giving hope for what 2026 may bring and what better way to end it than with Strauss's ever popular 'Radetzky March' — which of course everyone could clap along to, bidding the old year 'Adieu'!.