

19

RAMADHAN 1446 AH

WEDNESDAY

MAR 19, 2025

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR

04:57 AM

DHUHR

12:20 PM

ASR

03:45 PM

MAGRIB

06:22 PM

ISHA

07:33 PM

INBRIEF



COMMUNITY IFTAR IN IZKI

A community Iftar organised by the residents of Harat Al Ain at Bayt Al Ain in Izki turned out to be a perfect community engagement event where people from different walks of life gathered together and exchanged good vibes. Organised by the local people, everyone was encouraged to bring their Ramadhan dishes to share with their loved ones in this special gathering. This beautiful neighbourhood sets the perfect Iftar mood with its stunning natural surroundings - towering mountains, flowing aflaj and lush date palms - as well as its enchanting traditional architecture.

PHOTO BY FIRAS KHALIL SAIF AL TOOBI

Oman calls for an end to Israeli aggression

Air strikes kill over 400 in Gaza, ceasefire on brink

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN has denounced the air strikes launched by the Israeli occupation forces on the Gaza Strip since Monday.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Tuesday, the Sultanate of Oman affirmed that these systematic crimes against the Palestinian people constitute a clear and blatant violation not only of the ceasefire agreement signed in January but also of all international norms and international humanitarian law. It requires urgent intervention by the international community to put an end to this brutal aggression against humanity, protect civilians and hold the occupying state of Israel accountable for its actions.

Earlier, Israeli air strikes pounded Gaza and killed more than 400 people, Palestinian health authorities said on Tuesday, in an onslaught across the enclave that ended weeks of relative calm after talks to secure a permanent ceasefire stalled.

Israel and Hamas accused the other of breaching the truce, which had broadly held since January, offering respite from war for the two million inhabitants of Gaza, where most buildings have been reduced to rubble.

Hamas accused Israel of jeopardising efforts by mediators to negotiate a permanent deal to end the fighting but the group made no threat of retaliation.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he ordered strikes because Hamas had rejected proposals to secure a ceasefire extension during faltering talks.

The strikes hit houses and tent encampments from the north to the south of the Gaza Strip, and Israeli tanks shelled from across the border line, witnesses said. Gaza's health ministry said 404 people had been killed in one of the biggest single-day tolls since the war erupted.

"It was a night of hell. It felt like the first days of the war," said Rabiha Jamal, 65, a mother of five from Gaza City, who said her building shook as the explosions began.

Families in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip and eastern areas of Khan Younis in the south fled their homes, some on foot, others in cars or rickshaws, carrying some of their belongings after the Israeli military issued evacuation orders warning the areas were "dangerous combat zones".

Egypt and Qatar, mediators in the ceasefire deal along with the US, condemned the Israeli assault.

The UN emergency relief coordinator, Tom Fletcher, said the "modest gains" made during the ceasefire had been destroyed.



Palestinians made their way to flee their homes, after the Israeli army issued evacuation orders for a number of neighbourhoods on Tuesday. — Reuters

He said humanitarian aid and commercial essentials must be allowed to enter Gaza. Israel has halted aid deliveries into Gaza for over two weeks, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis.

In Gaza, witnesses said Israeli tanks shelled areas in Rafah in the south. Bewildered children sat next to bagged-up belongings, ready to flee north again having returned to Rafah with the ceasefire.

In hospitals strained by 15 months of bombardment, piles of bodies in white plastic sheets smeared with blood were stacked up as casualties were brought in. The health ministry said many of the dead were children, and 562 people were injured.

Among the Hamas officials killed in the air strikes were Essam Addalees, the de facto head of the Hamas government, Ahmed Al-Hetta, deputy justice minister and Mahmoud Abu Watfa, the head of the Hamas-run security services, Hamas said. SEE ALSO P5

Putin agrees to stop hitting Ukrainian energy targets for 30 days

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed on Tuesday to a proposal by US President Donald Trump for Russia and Ukraine to stop hitting each other's energy infrastructure for 30 days and gave a corresponding order to the Russian military, the Kremlin said.

The Kremlin said in a statement that the two leaders had a "detailed and frank exchange of views" on Ukraine during a phone call in which Putin had said that a resolution of the conflict must be "comprehensive, sustainable and long-term", taking into account Russia's own security interests and the root causes of the war.

The two leaders discussed a US proposal for a 30-day ceasefire, to which Ukraine agreed last week. The Kremlin said Putin had raised "significant points" about monitoring such a truce and preventing it from being used by Ukraine to mobilise more soldiers and rearm itself.

"It was emphasized that the key condition for preventing the escalation of the conflict and working towards its resolution by political and diplomatic means should be a complete cessation of foreign military assistance and the provision of intelligence information to Kyiv," the Kremlin



This combination shows Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump.

said. Meanwhile, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Europe should be included in peace talks on his arrival in Helsinki on Tuesday.

"Europe must be at the negotiating table, and everything that concerns European security must be decided together with Europe," Zelenskiy wrote on social media platform Telegram.

On Wednesday, the Ukrainian leader will meet Finnish President Alexander Stubb and arms makers to discuss investments in Ukrainian weapons production and other efforts to end the war, according to Zelenskiy and the Finnish president's office. Finland's finance,

defence and foreign ministers will participate in Wednesday's presidential palace meeting.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned on Tuesday that Russia had massively expanded its military-industrial production capacity in preparation for "future confrontation with European democracies." Speaking to Trump late on Monday, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer "reiterated that all must work together to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to secure a just and lasting peace," the British leader's spokesperson said.

— Agencies

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The three-day event will include panel discussions and specialised workshops focused on presenting innovative solutions and modern trends

EIGHTH OSHRM HR CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN APRIL

MUSCAT: The 8th annual OSHRM Conference on “Leadership in the Open Space” will be held in Muscat in April. The conference will feature a select group of international experts and decision-makers from both within and outside the Sultanate of Oman.

The three-day event will include panel discussions and specialised workshops focused on presenting innovative solutions and modern trends in leadership and talent management.

Dr Ghaleb bin Saif al Hosni, Chairman of the Omani Society for Human Resource Management, stated, “The conference offers a platform for HR leaders in Oman to exchange ideas and stay updated on the latest trends in the industry. We are excited to host speakers who will share success stories and inspire innovation and change within organisations.”

This year’s conference will focus on forward-thinking leadership, emphasising the importance of adapting to market trends and technological advancements. It will explore topics such as sustainability, well-being at work, organisational culture, diversity and leadership development.

In addition to the conference sessions, an international exhibition will showcase the latest tools and solutions in the human resources sector. — ONA

EXPAT ARRESTED FOR MURDER IN SALALAH



SALALAH: The Dhofar Governorate Police Command has arrested an Asian expatriate for the murder of a fellow national in the Wilayat of Salalah.

According to the Royal Oman Police statement, the crime was committed following a dispute between the two individuals. The police have completed legal procedures against the suspect, and the case has been referred to the relevant judicial authorities. The Royal Oman Police has urged the public to report any suspicious activities and to remain vigilant.

Oman Hikers making the most of Ramadhan evenings

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

Oman Hikers, a group of passionate hikers who continuously explore Oman’s mountainous terrain, are taking full advantage of the late evenings during the holy month by embarking on prominent hikes.

With the participation of young adventurers who leave no stone unturned in their exploration of the country, the group is becoming increasingly popular. Several groups of people from Oman and the

surrounding region are conquering the various Omani peaks across the country.

Approximately 60 people from Oman Hikers recently went on a hike in Wadi Kabir after Iftar as part of their bi-weekly hiking spree around the Muscat area. According to Mohammed Rahees, the hiking leader, all the participants, including men, women and children, thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Mohammed Rahees, a veteran hiker who guides passionate climbers day and night, mentioned that the Oman Hikers Group has



778 members. There is a significant amount of curiosity among hikers from the GCC region and beyond, both for solo and group hikes in Oman. The country offers diverse hiking options.

“Hiking is gaining more popularity now, especially at night when the climate is ideal for the sport. We receive numerous queries and requests from all over the country,” said Mohammed Rahees, who assists and educates people on reaching the peaks.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) recently organised

a 41-km long trail for the public, catering to the increasing demand and tourism potential for hiking.

The trail, named “Challenge and Discover”, was a mountain hike spanning from Wadi Bani Khalid to Wadi Tiwi. It was an exemplary showcase of planning and execution by the ministry.

“It was a formidable challenge, knowing it would test our physical and mental limits. What we didn’t anticipate was the depth of the memories and lessons we would carry from this adventure,” said Mohammed.

Muscat shines as a top Middle East destination

LIJU CHERIAN
@lijucherianoman

OMAN’S capital, Muscat, has been hailed as an ‘incredible city’ and one of the ‘best destinations in the Middle East,’ according to Emily Wright, World News Reporter at the Daily Express.

“Muscat is a stunning city surrounded by mountains and desert, with an eclectic blend of modern shopping centres and historic fortresses,” Wright noted in her recent report.

She highlighted the city’s warm climate, adding, “At 30°C in March, it’s the perfect destination for those looking to escape the lingering winter chill.” Despite its breathtaking landscapes and rich history, Muscat remains one of the lesser-explored gems of the Arabian Peninsula.

“For those craving a city that boasts a blend of natural wonders, historic landmarks and modern charm, this incredible city in the Middle East ticks all the boxes,” Emily wrote. Tucked between the rugged Hajar Mountains and the Arabian Sea, Muscat has long been a gateway for Indian Ocean mariners, yet it has remained relatively under the radar for international tourists.

“The city is now opening its doors to visitors with a range of new resorts,” she observed, pointing to Oman’s efforts to position itself as a prime travel destination. Muscat, home to around 1.7 million people as of 2023, spans approximately 1,400 square miles, making it the largest city by area on the Arabian Peninsula.

With a history dating back to the



Tourists who have visited Muscat are quick to praise its charm.

“For those craving a city that boasts a blend of natural wonders, historic landmarks and modern charm, this incredible city in the Middle East ticks all the boxes

EMILY WRIGHT
World News
Reporter at the
Daily Express

1st century CE, it has served as a vital port linking the East and the West. “It has a unique architectural blend influenced by Persian, Portuguese and Ottoman rule,” Emily explained.

Among the city’s must-see landmarks, she highlighted the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, ‘one of the most stunning mosques in the region,’ as well as the Ruwi Mosque and the historic Muttrah Souq.

Oman’s tourism sector is gearing up to rival its neighbours, with new luxury resorts set to open along its pristine coastline. “The Nikki Beach Resort and Spa in Yiti Bay — frequented by celebrities like Madonna and Jude Law — is set to open this year,” Emily revealed.

She also mentioned the upcoming luxury Anantara Bandar Al Khairan Resort, scheduled for 2026, featuring beachfront villas. Muscat’s climate makes it an ideal winter

escape, with temperatures in March averaging between 20°C and 30°C. By May and June, the mercury soars to around 40°C. “Now is the best time to visit,” Emily suggested.

With direct Oman Air flights from London Heathrow to Muscat International Airport taking just under eight hours, British travellers can reach the city for as little as £438 (about RO 206) return. Tourists who have visited Muscat are quick to praise its charm. “We were mesmerised by the city’s spotless streets and vibrant souqs,” one visitor shared on TripAdvisor. Another, who visited the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, called it ‘one of the most breathtaking mosques in the world.’ “As Oman continues to position itself as a key player in Middle Eastern tourism, Muscat is no longer a hidden gem - it’s a destination waiting to be explored,” she concludes in her report.

Oman pays great attention to retired

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

The Sultanate of Oman pays great attention to the retired people and strives to provide them with everything they need in various fields, offering social support to improve their quality of life and ways to integrate them into society.

Shedding light on the role of the Social Protection Fund (SPF) in achieving this goal, Malik bin Salem al Harthy, Director-General of Benefits at SPF, emphasised that retirement benefits and social benefits play a vital role in addressing the challenges faced by the elderly by providing sustainable financial support, alongside programmes that promote their integration into society.

He added that the fund’s role is



MALIK BIN SALEM AL HARTHY

not limited to providing financial benefits alone, but also seeks to continuously develop the social protection system in line with economic changes. He explained that, in early 2025, pensions for the elderly were increased for the first time in implementation of the Social Protection Law. He noted that this increase was in response to the needs of retirees, taking into account inflation and economic variables to ensure continued effective support.

Al Harthy emphasised that financial stability plays a fundamental role in promoting the psychological and social well-being of this group, as it helps reduce anxiety about the future and gives them the opportunity to engage in society and participate in various activities, which positively impacts

their mental health.

Regarding programmes complementing retirement benefits, Al Harthy noted that the Social Protection Law guarantees every Omani who reaches the age of senior citizens a monthly benefit of RO 115, even if they have no previous employment history. He also explained that there are other initiatives that help the elderly remain in the labour market, so that reaching retirement age does not hinder those who wish to continue contributing and benefit from their experience.

Al Harthy revealed a major digital transformation taking place within the fund, including the launch of advanced electronic services to facilitate access to benefits. As many as 172,672 elderly people benefited as of the end of February 2025.

SHORT TAKES



AGREEMENT SIGNED TO BUY MEDICAL DEVICES IN BURAIMI

AL BURAIMI: The Directorate-General of Health Services in Al Buraimi Governorate on Tuesday signed an agreement with Ooredoo to finance the purchase of modern medical equipment for Al Buraimi Hospital and Al Buraimi Health Complex. According to the agreement, the General Surgery Department at Al Buraimi Hospital will be supplied with an advanced surgical laser device for the treatment of some gastrointestinal diseases. The agreement also deals with the procurement of a shockwave therapy device for Al Buraimi Health Complex as part of efforts to enhance the quality of health services in the facility. — ONA

AGS MUSCAT STUDENTS ACHIEVE TOP RANKINGS



Toppers of A'soud Global School

MUSCAT: A'soud Global School (AGS) Muscat celebrated its students' outstanding achievements in the June 2024 Cambridge IGCSE and A Level examinations, securing top rankings in Oman. The Cambridge IGCSE and A Level exams are internationally recognised qualifications that prepare students for higher education and careers. AGS students who earned prestigious awards include: Siddharth Sofin – First Place in Oman for Best Across Nine Cambridge IGCSE Subjects; Sabrina Algifari – Second Place in Oman for Best Across Eight Cambridge IGCSE Subjects; Arthur Kunc – High Achievement Award in Oman for Cambridge IGCSE Physical Education; Aayah Adil Mohamed Hassan Taqi – High Achievement Award in Oman for Cambridge IGCSE Sociology; Oussama Abdelkrim Sayede – High Achievement Award in Oman for Cambridge IGCSE Foreign Language French; and Malak Hiroko Ai Denman – High Achievement Award in Oman for Cambridge International AS Level History. These results highlight AGS's commitment to academic excellence. Principal Lee Davies stated: "At AGS, our students have regularly been the recipients of Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards, which reflects their dedication and that of their teachers. Special congratulations must go to Siddharth for achieving the highest scores across nine IGCSE subjects – a remarkable feat." The results underscore AGS's commitment to academic excellence, providing students with the skills and knowledge to excel in higher education and beyond. The school's dynamic learning environment and experienced faculty play a pivotal role in nurturing student success.

CMYF BLOOD CAMP ON FRIDAY



Chiru Mega Youth Force (CMYF), a voluntary organisation, is conducting a blood donation camp on Friday from 8.30 am to 1 pm. It will be held at Bausher Central Blood Bank, opposite to the Royal Hospital. CMYF founder-president Ramdas Chandaka called upon all humanitarians to participate in this noble cause of saving others' life.

Responses of ministers and officials reviewed

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

During its meeting on Tuesday, the Majlis Ash'shura office reviewed the response from the Minister of Education regarding the inquiry about the vocational and technical education project. The response indicated that the ministry's implementation of vocational and technical education stems from His Majesty the Sultan's directives calling for the development of education at its various levels and types. This initiative aligns with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 and the School Education Law, which emphasises the importance of providing students with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to pursue specialised education and enter the labour market. The meeting also addressed the response from the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs concerning the inquiry about the Omani pilgrims' camp for the 1446 AH Haj season. The response noted that the ministry has held official meetings this year with specialists from the Ministry of Haj and Umrah of Saudi Arabia to discuss the current state of the Omani camp in Mina and Arafat and opportunities for



The meeting was chaired by Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, on Tuesday

its improvement. Efforts are underway to gradually enhance its infrastructure until the comprehensive strategic project, currently being developed by the Saudi authorities, is implemented. The office reviewed the response from the Chairman of the Oman Investment Authority regarding the inquiry about certain financial and administrative matters of companies affiliated with the Authority. The office also examined the response from the Governor of Al Batinah North to the inquiry about building permits on land distributed in wadis. The response indicated that work is underway to halt the issuance of building

permits on lands located in wadi and reefs. Furthermore, the General Directorate of Housing and Urban Planning in the governorate has been directed to stop allocating residential land to citizens in these areas, in coordination with the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources. During the meeting, the members considered several follow-up tools. These included reviewing a question directed to the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning regarding violations by some engineering consultancy offices. They also examined an inquiry addressed to the Chairman of the Environment Authority about protecting natural resources

from pollution and depletion, and another to the Chairperson of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority concerning support for small and medium enterprises to boost the tourism sector. Additionally, they looked into an inquiry directed to the Chairman of the Oman Investment Authority regarding delays in services provided by be'ah Company. This took place during the eighth regular meeting chaired by Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, with the presence of members and Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of the Majlis Ash'shura.

IFTAR UNITES OMANI, BANIAN COMMUNITIES

MUSCAT: A heartwarming Iftar gathering was hosted at Al Falaj Hotel on Sunday, bringing together members of the Omani and Banian communities in a spirit of unity and celebration. The event fostered cultural exchange and strengthened the bonds of friendship through shared traditions and hospitality. Guests enjoyed a delightful spread of traditional Iftar delicacies while engaging in warm conversations and reflecting on the values of



togetherness and generosity. The evening was marked by joy, mutual respect and the spirit

of Ramadhan, reinforcing the enduring connection between the two communities.

SQU researcher's project wins national award for new method of banana quality control

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

In a significant achievement that highlights the growing role of Omani women scientific research, Dr Mai Khalfan al Dairi, a research assistant at Sultan Qaboos University, has won the 11th National Research Award in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Her pioneering project, titled 'Banana Fruit Bruise Detection Using Fractal Dimension-Based Image Processing', not only brought her national recognition, but also spotlighted the invaluable contribution of Omani women in advancing science and technology. Dr Al Dairi's research aims to improve the quality control of bananas, a fruit that is highly susceptible to bruising during transport and storage. By leveraging advanced image processing techniques, Dr Al Dairi's project helps farmers, traders and consumers alike by providing a more accurate and efficient method for assessing the quality of bananas and mitigating the economic losses caused by bruising. Dr Al Dairi and her research team conducted a series of simulated



Winning the National Research Award has been a profound recognition of my dedication to addressing one of the real-world challenges through research... This award symbolises not only personal achievement but also the impact of our work on advancing knowledge and contributing to sustainable agricultural practices."

DR MAI
KHALFAN
AL DAIRI

drop impact tests to evaluate the severity of bruising and the factors that contribute to its intensity. They used a sophisticated image processing technique to assess bruises, along with other parameters like colour changes. This analysis allowed them to determine the exact extent of damage and to explore how various conditions, such as drop height and storage temperature, affected the quality of the bananas. The findings revealed that bananas stored at improper temperatures suffered from exacerbated bruising, which resulted in weight loss, reduced firmness, and significant changes in sugar and acidity. Such changes ultimately made the fruit less appealing to consumers. The research underscores the importance of maintaining optimal storage conditions to preserve the visual and nutritional qualities of bananas, which is essential for the long-term success of the agricultural industry. Dr Al Dairi's research has direct implications for the agricultural sector, particularly for banana farmers and traders in Oman and beyond. By accurately detecting bruising and assessing its severity,

her project provides valuable insights into how to minimise post-harvest losses and enhance the quality of the fruit before it reaches consumers. The study's findings are significant, not just from a scientific perspective, but also from an economic standpoint. Bananas are an important commodity in Oman, and quality control plays a critical role in determining the fruit's market value. By improving the detection and assessment of bruises, farmers and traders can better understand the condition of the fruit and take appropriate steps to preserve its quality during storage and transportation. She hopes that her work will motivate other women to pursue careers in STEM fields and to engage in research that addresses local and global challenges. "Winning the National Research Award has been a profound recognition of my dedication to addressing one of the real-world challenges through research," Dr Al Dairi said. "This award symbolises not only personal achievement but also the impact of our work on advancing knowledge and contributing to sustainable agricultural practices."

RAMADHAN



Public Iftars foster communal solidarity



AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 18

AS THE SUN sets and the call to Maghrib prayer echoes through the air, people gather in mosques for Iftar. This deeply rooted tradition fosters a sense of unity and social cohesion. However, in recent years, this practice has gradually declined. Now, efforts to revive it are gaining momentum, restoring the mosque's role as a central gathering place during the holy month.

Sultan bin Suleiman al Rawahi says, "The communal Iftar in mosques was supported by the mosque endowments and local donations. Some people would even donate their turn in irrigating their crops using the falaj, while others contributed from mosque endowments dedicated to Ramadhan feasts. Even if the prayer is over in a place other than his residence, he can break his fast in the nearest mosque."

Ismail al Busafi said:" This gathering brings people together. There is also an Iftar for women. Previously, Iftar consisted of coffee and dates only, and after the Isha prayer, meat and other foods were served.

In the past, communal Iftar was more than just sharing a meal. It was an opportunity for neighbours to bond. People would bring whatever food they had like dates, water, and soup in an atmosphere filled with warmth and companionship.

Today, despite the decline of this tradition due to changes in lifestyles, some local communities and volunteer groups are organising communal Iftar to keep it alive. In several areas, residents have started organising communal Iftar gatherings in mosques, with families preparing and serving meals to worshippers, reviving the Ramadhan spirit of togetherness.

Among the group Iftars organised in Al Dakhiliyah were those in Al Aqur, Al Sharjah Mosque, Izki, the Al Ghafat village and Al Shirijah in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. The Soual neighbourhood organised a group Iftar in the Al Obbad mosque, with more than fifty people attending.

One of the reasons behind the decline of this practice is the modern pace of life, which has led many to prefer breaking their fast at home with their families. Additionally, some mosques saw an increasing number of non-fasting individuals, mainly non-Omanis, gathering

for the free meals, which discouraged some locals from continuing the tradition.

One of the organisers of these renewed Iftar gatherings, Abdullatif al Hinaï, emphasises the significance of these events, saying: "The communal Iftar in Al Ghafat is one of the most cherished traditions that the villagers have upheld for years. It is a time when everyone comes together in an atmosphere of warmth and cooperation, reinforcing the values of social solidarity and the Ramadhan spirit. The gathering is filled with a sense of unity among people of all ages, from the elderly to the young, as they break their fast in a joyful Ramadhan setting."

"This initiative serves as a model for teamwork and community collaboration, reflecting the noble objectives that both teams strive to achieve through their charitable and social initiatives," he added. In recent days, some mosques have witnessed youth-led initiatives to provide communal Iftar meals, supported by individual donations or charitable organisations. These efforts give hope that this cherished tradition may retain its place in Omani society.

PHOTOS BY SAMI AL HINAI



SHORT TAKES



People search for survivors in the rubble of a building destroyed in an Israeli strike in Jabalia, in the northern Gaza Strip. — AFP

GAZANS PLUNGED BACK INTO CHAOS

GAZA: Mourners cried over the bodies of their loved ones with drones buzzing overhead early on Tuesday, as a wave of Israeli strikes plunged Gazans back into chaos. “They opened the fire of hell again on Gaza,” said Ramez al Amarin, 25, a displaced Palestinian who lives in a tent in the southeast of Gaza City. “There are bodies and limbs on the ground, and the wounded cannot find any doctor to treat them,” he added. Amarin said he transported several of his neighbours’ children to hospital but there were no beds for them.

Outside the Al Ahli Hospital, which was already functioning at reduced capacity due to Israel blocking the entry of humanitarian aid to the territory, dozens of bodies had been lined up. The bare feet of the dead protruded from under some of the shrouds, while relatives sat alongside them and held their heads in their hands and cried. Amarin said he didn’t “expect the war to return because (US President Donald) Trump said he doesn’t want wars”.

Overnight, Israel unleashed its most intense strikes on the Gaza Strip since a fragile ceasefire commenced on January 19, with the health ministry in the territory reporting more than 400 people killed. Israel has vowed to continue fighting in Gaza until all hostages held in the Palestinian territory are returned, with Prime Minister Netanyahu’s office saying the operation was ordered after Hamas’s “repeated refusal to release our hostages”. Hamas accused Netanyahu of deciding to “resume war” after an impasse in truce negotiations and warned that a return to fighting could be a “death sentence” for the hostages that Palestinians are still holding alive in Gaza. The initial phase of the ceasefire took effect in January, largely halting more than 15 months of fighting which devastated the Gaza Strip. The war, sparked by October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, has displaced almost the entire population of Gaza and triggered widespread hunger while destroying or damaging more than 69 per cent of the territory’s buildings according to the United Nations.

Israel announced in early March that it was blocking all aid into the strip and a week later cut off electricity supplying the territory’s main water desalination plant. — AFP

PALESTINIAN MEDICAL FACILITIES OVERWHELMED

GENEVA: The Red Cross said many Gaza medical facilities were “overwhelmed” on Tuesday following a deadly wave of Israeli strikes, while the World Health Organization reported medicines running short. The health ministry in the Palestinian territory said the bodies of 413 people had been received by Gaza hospitals, after Israel unleashed its most intense strikes since a ceasefire came into effect on January 19. The truce largely halted more than 15 months of fighting in Gaza triggered by October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.

Colleagues in the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) were reporting early on Tuesday that “many medical facilities are literally overwhelmed across Gaza”, Tommaso Della Longa, spokesman for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said at a briefing in Geneva. He said that PRCS teams had been responding to the attacks overnight and as of 7:00 am local time, “they have responded to 150 fatalities and 179 injured people; children were among the casualties”. Della Longa said medical facilities were being overwhelmed both by the number of patients and the pressure on dwindling supplies. “There are shortages of food, supplies and fuel,” he said, adding that PRCS teams were assessing the impact of fuel shortages on ambulance services and the ability of first responders to reach those in need. — AFP

GAZA UNDER FIRE AGAIN

The United Nations and countries around the world condemned the strikes, while the families of Israeli hostages pleaded with Netanyahu to halt the violence.

UN chief Antonio Guterres was “shocked” by the renewed strikes, while UN rights chief Volker Turk said he was “horrified”.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas called for the international community to “compel” Israel to end its “aggression” in Gaza



People sit as Palestinians make their way to flee their homes, Gaza. — Reuters

ISRAEL’S DEADLY STRIKES ON GAZA DREW GLOBAL CONDEMNATION

on Tuesday, as it said it had “no alternative” other than to resume military operations in order to bring home hostages. The strikes, by far the deadliest since a truce took effect in January, killed more than 400 people, according to the health ministry in Palestinian Gaza. Israel vowed to continue fighting until all the hostages seized by Palestinian militants were returned, while Hamas, which has not responded militarily so far, accused it of attempting to force it to “surrender”.

Netanyahu warned Hamas this month of consequences it “cannot imagine” if it did not free the hostages still in Gaza, and Israeli media has reported on a scheme aimed at ramping up pressure on Hamas dubbed the “Hell Plan”. “Without the release of our hostages, Israel has no alternative but resuming military operations,” Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said. The White House said Israel consulted US President Donald Trump’s administration before launching the strikes, while Israel said the return to fighting was “fully coordinated” with Washington.

The United Nations and countries

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi said in a statement that the strikes were part of “deliberate efforts to make the Gaza Strip uninhabitable and force the Palestinians into displacement”

around the world condemned the strikes, while the families of Israeli hostages pleaded with Netanyahu to halt the violence. Netanyahu’s office said the operation was ordered after “Hamas’s repeated refusal to release our hostages, as well as its rejection of all of the proposals it has received from US Presidential Envoy Steve Witkoff and from the mediators”. “Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength,” the statement said.

US National Security Council spokesman Brian Hughes blamed Hamas, saying it “could have released hostages to extend the ceasefire but instead chose refusal and war”. Hamas said Israel had “decided to overturn the ceasefire agreement”, calling it “a decision to sacrifice the occupation’s prisoners and impose a death sentence on them”. Hamas said the head of its government in Gaza, Essam al Dalis, was among several officials killed. The group’s leader, Sami Abu Zuhri, said the aim of the strikes was “to undermine the ceasefire agreement and attempt to impose a surrender agreement, writing it in the blood of Gaza”.

In the southern Gaza Strip, footage showed people rushing stretchers with wounded people, including young children, to hospital. Bodies covered with white sheets were also taken to the

hospital’s mortuary. Mohammed Jarghoun, 36, was sleeping in a tent near his destroyed house in Khan Yunis when he was awakened by huge blasts. “I thought they were dreams and nightmares, but I saw a fire in my relatives’ house. More than 20 martyrs and wounded, most of them children and women.” Ramez al Amarin, 25, described carrying children to hospital southeast of Gaza City. “They unleashed the fire of hell again on Gaza,” he said of Israel.

Families of Israeli hostages in Gaza called for a protest in front of Netanyahu’s residence, with a campaign group accusing him and other officials of dodging meetings with them “because they were planning the explosion of the ceasefire, which could sacrifice their family members”.

UN chief Antonio Guterres was “shocked” by the renewed strikes, a spokesperson said, while UN rights chief Volker Turk said he was “horrified”. Britain and France both called for the renewed hostilities to end. Iran denounced the wave of attacks as a “continuation of the genocide and ethnic cleansing” in the Palestinian territories. Russia and China warned against an escalation, while Egypt, Qatar, Jordan and Türkiye condemned the violence. — AFP

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan Takeshi Iwaya speaks to the media in La Malbaie, Quebec. — AFP

S Korea, Japan, China foreign ministers to meet in Tokyo

TOKYO: The top diplomats for China, South Korea and Japan will meet in Tokyo this weekend for talks, the countries said on Tuesday. Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya said the three “important neighbours have a great influence on, and responsibility for, the peace and prosperity of the region and the international community”. “To promote future-oriented cooperation, we would like to hold a frank exchange of views and discussions on the cooperation between the three countries, and the regional situation,” he told reporters.

A trilateral working dinner will be held on Friday between Iwaya and his South Korean and Chinese counterparts, Cho Tae-yul and Wang Yi, before the talks on Saturday. Seoul’s foreign ministry said the trilateral ministerial would be the 11th of its kind. The last such meeting was in November 2023 in the South Korean port city of Busan. Japanese public broadcaster NHK said the three ministers were expected to discuss cooperation in areas “such as people-to-people exchanges, economic cooperation and measures to combat the falling birthrate.” — AFP

POLICE DISPERSE MOZAMBIQUE PROTEST, 14 DEAD



A man pleads with Mozambican policemen during demonstrations in Matola, Maputo. — AFP

MAPUTO: Two people were shot dead in Mozambique’s capital on Tuesday when police opened fire on a crowd marking a day of protest called by the country’s main opposition leader. Photographs showed two separate bodies lying under blankets in pools of blood in the Matola area of Maputo. The clashes broke out as opposition leader Venancio Mondlane called for a day-long national shutdown.

Journalists said police arrived to disperse the gathering and opened fire, killing two people. Two local civil society groups also said police had opened fire. Mondlane came second in the October presidential election, where various international observer missions noted many irregularities. He claims he was cheated of victory and called months of demonstrations in which more than 350 people were killed by police.

Earlier this month, at least 14 people were injured when police dispersed an opposition march with live ammunition. Mozambique’s Centre for Democracy and Development said that the police’s Rapid Intervention Unit had fired live rounds at one of its teams covering protests in the city. — AFP

CRYPTO SCAM

Ghana president’s X account hacked



Ghana’s President John Mahama’s verified X account was hacked for 48 hours, with cybercriminals using it to promote a fraudulent cryptocurrency project. The breach, which began on Saturday, was first noticed on Sunday when the compromised account started posting endorsements for Solanafrica, falsely claiming to be “led by Ghana’s President John Mahama to make payments across Africa free using the Solana blockchain.” — AFP

DEADLY MECHANICAL FAILURE

Plane crash off Honduran island kills 12



At least 12 people died when a small plane crashed into the sea while taking off from a Caribbean island off Honduras, officials said. The Lanhsa airlines plane departed at nightfall from Roatan, one of the central American country’s main tourist destinations, heading for the port of La Ceiba, on the mainland. The aircraft “made a sharp turn to the right of the runway and fell into the water”, civil aviation official Carlos Padilla said. — AFP

BUDGETS REFORM

Vietnam to reduce provinces for cutting costs



Vietnam is planning to reduce the number of provinces by half and slash commune-level authorities by up to 70 per cent. Interior Minister Pham Thi Thanh Tra said that the merging and reduction of provinces is scheduled before August this year. The plan “would reduce the number of provincial-level administrative units by about 50 per cent and reduce the number of grassroots-level administrative units by about 60-70 per cent”. — AFP

DUTERTE FILING FOR ASYLUM IN NETHERLANDS, SAYS SPOKESMAN

MANILA: A lawyer for Rodrigo Duterte who has been speaking for the family since the former Philippine president’s shock arrest and transfer to The Hague has announced plans to file for asylum in the Netherlands. Harry Roque, who served two stints as Duterte’s presidential spokesman, left the Philippines in September after being cited for contempt for refusing to attend hearings into offshore gambling sites used as fronts for criminal activities.

He re-emerged at Duterte’s side last week after the ex-president was flown to the International Criminal Court to face a crimes against humanity charge. “I’m filing formally for asylum here in the Netherlands,” Roque told a Facebook live press briefing on Tuesday. “I am confident that I can prove political persecution through unjust prosecution,” he said, referencing an arrest warrant issued by a congressional committee. Roque, one of five Philippine

lawyers currently on the ICC’s “list of counsel” able to represent defendants at the tribunal, has said he expects to be part of the former president’s defence team. “I cannot come home. I have to defend my president as a member of the list counsel of the ICC at the Hague,” he said. Presidential palace spokeswoman Claire Castro said on Tuesday that Roque’s asylum bid would have “no effect on the cases he is facing”. — AFP

Ansar Allah carries new attack on US warships

YEMEN 'S

Ansar Allah said on Tuesday they carried out their

third attack on American warships in 48 hours, following US strikes on group that sparked. The group also condemned Israel’s wave of strikes on Gaza, which the health ministry in the territory said killed more than 400 people, vowing to escalate their own operations in support of ally Hamas. They had targeted ships in the Red Sea after the start of the Gaza war and until a January ceasefire, claiming solidarity with Palestinians. But last week, they threatened to renew attacks on Israeli shipping over Israel’s aid blockade on the Palestinian territory, triggering the first US strikes on Yemen since President Donald Trump took office in January.

In their latest retaliation, the Yemeni group said on Telegram on Tuesday that they fired missiles and drones at the USS Harry S. Truman, calling it the “third in the past 48 hours” on the fleet in the northern Red Sea.

Local media said fresh US strikes hit the Hodeida and Al Salif regions on Monday and Sanaa early on Tuesday — hours after tens of thousands demonstrated in the capital. There were also large crowds in Saada, the birthplace of the movement, and demonstrations in Dhamar, Hodeida and Amran on Monday. The protests came after Washington launched its fresh campaign of air strikes on Yemen beginning on Saturday, killing 53 people and wounding 98 according

In their latest retaliation, the Yemeni group said on Telegram on Tuesday that they fired missiles and drones at the USS Harry S. Truman, calling it the “third in the past 48 hours” on the fleet in the northern Red Sea



Images of a fireball exploding

to the health ministry. Washington has vowed to keep hitting Yemen until the gunmen stop firing on shipping, with Trump warning he will hold Iran accountable for their attacks. “Every shot fired by the Yemenis will be looked upon, from this point forward, as being a shot fired from the weapons and leadership of IRAN,” Trump posted on social media. Tehran called his statement “belligerent”.

In a televised interview with Fox News, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the Yemeni does “not exist” without Iran. “Without Iran, there is no threat of this magnitude,” he said. “They created this Frankenstein monster, and now they got to own it.” Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi condemned the US strikes and said Washington had “no authority” to

dictate Tehran’s foreign policy. On Saturday, the capital was hit by heavy strikes, including in northern districts. US National Security Adviser Michael Waltz told ABC News that Saturday’s strikes “targeted multiple group’s leaders and took them out”. The Pentagon said on Monday it had struck 30 targets in its ongoing campaign in Yemen.

The United Nations urged both sides to “cease all military activity”, while expressing concern over threats to resume their Red Sea attacks. Before this weekend’s targeting of the US carrier group, the Yemeni group had not claimed any attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since January 19, when the ceasefire in Gaza began. Trump has warned them that “hell will rain down upon you” if it does not stop its attacks. — AFP

HOSPITALISED POPE CALLS FOR PEACE

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis, hospitalised for a month with pneumonia, called on Tuesday for an end to war in a letter to Italy’s leading newspaper, and urged the media to “serve the truth”. Emphasising the need for responsible journalism in a time of conflict, the 88-year-old Catholic leader pushed for keeping a cool head, noting that the media had a duty to “feel the full importance of words”. “They are never just words: they are facts that build human environments. They can connect or divide, serve the truth or use it,” Francis wrote to the Corriere della Sera. “We must disarm words, to disarm minds and disarm the Earth.” — AFP



SHORT TAKES



Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams wave at the hatch of a SpaceX Crew Dragon capsule. — Reuters

NASA ASTRONAUTS HEAD HOME ON SPACEX CAPSULE

WASHINGTON: NASA astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams departed the International Space Station early on Tuesday morning in a SpaceX capsule for a long-awaited trip back to Earth, nine months after their faulty Boeing Starliner craft upended what was to be a roughly week-long test mission. Wilmore and Williams, two veteran NASA astronauts and retired US Navy test pilots, strapped inside their Crew Dragon spacecraft along with two other astronauts and undocked from the orbiting laboratory at 1.05 am ET (0505 GMT), embarking on a 17-hour trip to Earth.

The four-person crew, formally part of NASA’s Crew-9 astronaut rotation mission, is scheduled for a splashdown off Florida’s coast later on Tuesday at 5:57 pm ET. “Crew-9 is going home,” said commander Nick Hague from inside the capsule as it slowly backed up and away from the station for what a NASA official described on the live webcast of the event as “the trip downhill.” Hague said it was a privilege to “call the station home” as part of an international effort for the “benefit of humanity.” The NASA official said the weather conditions for the splashdown were expected to be “pristine.” — Reuters

MIGRANTS EVICTED FROM THEATRE



French police evicted more than 400 migrants on Tuesday who had been squatting inside the Gaité Lyrique theatre in central Paris for more than three months. Officers began their operation shortly before 6 am at the theatre, where hundreds of demonstrators had gathered to protest against the eviction. Since December 10, the migrants, including many unaccompanied minors, had occupied the concert and arts venue as part of their demands for shelter, leading the Gaité Lyrique management to suspend its operations on December 17. — Reuters

POLAND, BALTICS SIGNAL INTENT TO WITHDRAW FROM LANDMINES TREATY

VILNIUS: Poland and the Baltic states on Tuesday took a first step towards quitting a treaty banning anti-personnel mines, citing an increased security threat from Russia following its attack of Ukraine. The defence ministers for the four EU and Nato member states, which all share a border with Russia, said in a joint statement that military threats “have significantly increased”. “In light of this unstable security environment marked by Russia’s

aggression and its ongoing threat to the Euro-Atlantic community, it is essential to evaluate all measures to strengthen our deterrence and defence capabilities,” the statement said. “We... unanimously recommend withdrawing from the Ottawa Convention,” it said, referring to the anti-landmine treaty. “Despite our withdrawal, we will remain committed to international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians during an armed conflict,” it added.

Poland’s Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz called the move “a very strong political declaration showing how determined we are to defend our homeland.” “Finland is also considering such a decision, so I think that soon all the countries... in the northeastern region of Nato’s flank will make a similar decision,” Kosiniak-Kamysz said. The treaty bans signatories from acquiring, producing, stockpiling or using anti-personnel mines. — AFP

Russian drone attack cuts power in central Ukraine

THOUSANDS of people in central Ukraine were left without electricity on Tuesday following a countrywide Russian attack involving more than 130 drones that damaged critical infrastructure. Kyiv and Moscow have recently escalated cross-border drone and missile attacks despite a US-led proposal for a 30-day ceasefire to Russia’s attack of Ukraine. The governor of the Zaporizhzhia region, which the Kremlin claims as part of Russia, said around 3,000 people were cut off from the grid following the attack, which he said damaged critical infrastructure. The governor of the neighbouring Dnipropetrovsk region, on which Russian forces have been closing in, said the barrage resulted in a fire at another critical infrastructure facility.



Novice Ukrainian soldiers are trained by Spanish military instructors in the Toledo Training Coordinantion Center in Toledo, Spain. — AFP

In Kyiv, authorities said the debris from a downed Russian drone landed in the courtyard of a school at the beginning of the school day. Pupils were in shelters at the time of the attack, they added. The Ukrainian air force said it had downed 63 out of 137 Russian drones. Russia’s defence ministry meanwhile said that 46 Ukrainian drones used in overnight attacks had been neutralised.

The strikes, which targeted several regions of Russia, wounded six people, according to local authorities.

The attacks came shortly before Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump were due to hold talks on a potential ceasefire to the fighting in Ukraine. Russia’s forces occupy swathes of its neighbour’s territory.

The 46 Ukrainian drones were “destroyed or intercepted” over the regions of Belgorod, Bryansk and Kursk near the Ukraine border, as well as over Orlov, the ministry said. In the city of Belgorod, a man was seriously wounded by falling drone debris, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

Five people were wounded in Kursk when drones struck near a truck transporting bread, interim governor Alexander Khinstein posted on Telegram.

Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin will

hold a highly-anticipated phone call on Tuesday to discuss the Ukraine war, with Kyiv and its European allies demanding that Russia agree to an unconditional US-proposed ceasefire.

Washington and Moscow have expressed optimism about recent talks but it remains to be seen if Trump can convince Putin to agree to a US-proposed 30-day ceasefire, more than three years into Russia’s attack.

Kyiv has agreed to halting fighting, but Putin instead set a string of conditions, with European countries criticising him for not committing to an immediate ceasefire. Many in Europe worry Trump -- who has for years expressed admiration for Russia -- will cede to Putin’s demands.

Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the leaders will discuss Ukraine and the “normalisation” of US-Russia ties, with Trump’s previous call to Putin ending the Kremlin chief’s isolation during the Ukraine attack.

Kyiv urged Russia on Tuesday to accept to the ceasefire. “It is time for Russia to show whether it really wants peace,” Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga said. “We expect the Russian side to unconditionally

agree to this proposal.”

Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelensky has warned Putin does not want peace and is trying to achieve a better position militarily ahead of any halt in fighting. Putin has said that a ceasefire only benefits Kyiv and Moscow hinted on Tuesday that it was sceptical.

“It’s been a week since the moment of the (ceasefire) proposal,” Putin aide Yuri Ushakov told the Kommersant newspaper. “And what do we see? The biggest Ukrainian drone attack on Russian territory in history,” he said, referring to an attack on the Moscow region last week. But Ushakov added that “we are not losing hope”, adding: “They (Putin and Trump) need to speak.”

Russia has attacked Ukraine with near daily barrages of drones and missiles for more than three years, occupying swathes of southern and eastern Ukraine and pressing a grinding advance in recent months.

Ukraine said Russia attacked with 137 drones ahead of the call, with Kyiv Mayor Vitaliy Klitschko saying some debris fell on a school in the capital. Zelensky said over the weekend that any discussions over territory should take place at the negotiating table only after a ceasefire. — AFP

Germany approves huge spending boost for defence, infrastructure

BERLIN: German lawmakers on Tuesday voted for a colossal defence and infrastructure spending package proposed by chancellor-in-waiting Friedrich Merz following concern over the US stance on the Ukraine war and Europe’s security. Local media have labelled the plans — which could pave the way for more than one trillion euros in spending over the next decade — as a fiscal “bazooka” for Europe’s top economy. The hastily drawn plans, which represent a radical departure for a country traditionally reluctant to take on large amounts of debt or to spend heavily on the military, were passed with 513 votes in favour and 207 against.

Speaking to parliament ahead of the vote, conservative Merz said it was vital to strengthen the country in light of Russia’s “war of aggression against Europe”. “It is a war against Europe and not just a war against the territorial integrity

of Ukraine,” Merz said. Merz’s CDU/CSU and their likely future coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD), plan to exempt defence spending from Germany’s strict debt rules and to set up a 500-billion-euro fund for infrastructure investments over 12 years.

As well as boosting domestic investments, the spending package is expected to clear the way for an extra three billion euros of support for Ukraine in 2025. Ahead of the vote, European stocks rose and German investor sentiment posted its biggest increase in over two years in anticipation of the spending boost. Merz, 69, had urged lawmakers to approve the measures at a time when US President Donald Trump’s outreach to Russia and hostility towards Ukraine have shaken Europe and cast doubt over the future strength of transatlantic ties.

Merz said strong relations with



Friedrich Merz (C), leader of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, and officials raise hands during a vote at a session of the Bundestag, in Berlin. — AFP

the US were “indispensable” but Europe needed to do more to ensure its own security and Germany should play a leading role. The spending boost is “nothing less than

the first major step towards a new European defence community” that could also include non-EU members like Britain and Norway, he added. Defence Minister Boris Pistorius,

from the SPD of outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, justified the mega-spending by saying “we are facing a new era for Europe, for Germany, for Nato, and for future generations”. He argued that boosting defence on the continent would strengthen the transatlantic alliance in the long term “and place it on two legs, namely North America and Europe”.

Merz’s conservatives, who won an election in February, agreed the plans to boost Germany’s under-resourced military and ailing economy as part of their initial coalition talks with Scholz’s SPD in early March. But instead of waiting until the new government is formed, the parties agreed to seek approval for the plans from the outgoing parliament. Even in the outgoing assembly, the CDU/CSU and SPD needed the support of the Greens to help them reach the two-thirds majority required to modify the debt brake. — AFP

OPINION

Why you do what you do: The hidden science of habits



DR KHALFAN AL HARRASI

The author is an academic and researcher

WE wake up, brush our teeth, sip coffee and check our phones, all without a second thought. These routines feel automatic and woven into our daily lives. But beneath these simple behaviours lies a fascinating interplay of neuroscience, psychology and biology that shapes who we are, how we think and even our long-term success.

Research suggests that over 40 per cent of our daily actions are habitual. The reason? Our brains are wired for efficiency. By automating repeated actions, the brain conserves cognitive energy, allowing us to focus on more complex tasks. Neuroscientists have linked habit formation to the basal ganglia, the brain region responsible for motor control, emotions and procedural learning. This explains why breaking a habit is so difficult. However, by understanding the mechanisms behind habits, we can rewire our routines to improve productivity, health and overall well-being.

Have you ever wondered why you instinctively check your phone upon waking or reach for a snack when stressed? These actions follow a neurological pattern known as the habit loop: a cue triggers the habit, the routine is the behaviour itself, and the reward is the satisfaction or relief the behaviour provides. For instance, waking up serves as the cue, grabbing the phone is the routine

and the dopamine hit from notifications acts as the reward. Understanding this cycle is key to harnessing habits for positive change while breaking free from negative routines.

The automatic nature of habits stems from the basal ganglia, a part of the brain that strengthens neural pathways when a behaviour is repeated. Over time, the brain no longer needs to actively think about the action; it becomes second nature. Research shows that even if we consciously decide to stop a habit, its neural wiring remains intact. This explains why experienced drivers can navigate familiar routes without much thought and why bad habits persist despite our best intentions.

Every habit, big or small, shapes our brains, bodies and lives. Science reveals that our repeated behaviours, from morning routines to social media usage and eating patterns, are governed by dopamine, cortisol and cognitive reinforcement. One of the most powerful insights from neuroscience is that habit formation is not about willpower; it's about structuring our environment to align with how the brain naturally functions. The habit loop explains why certain behaviours feel automatic and why breaking bad habits can be challenging. Researchers, however, advocate habit substitution, replacing an unwanted habit with a new behaviour that satisfies the same cue and reward.

The brain is constantly rewiring itself through neuroplasticity, meaning that every habit we reinforce strengthens certain neural pathways while weakening others. By making small, intentional changes we are not just modifying behaviour; we are actively reshaping our brains for a better future.

For example, a smoker who reaches for a cigarette when stressed experiences a cue, which is stress. This triggers the routine of smoking. The reward is relaxation. To break the habit, the cue and reward should remain, but the routine must change. Swapping smoking for deep breathing, herbal tea, or chewing gum can provide similar relief while reinforcing healthier neural pathways. This process, known as synaptic pruning, allows the brain to eliminate unused connections and strengthen desirable ones.

The brain is constantly rewiring itself through neuroplasticity, meaning that every habit we reinforce strengthens certain neural pathways while weakening others. By making small, intentional changes (whether it's drinking water first thing in the morning, setting boundaries with digital distractions, or practicing deep breathing during stressful moments) we are not just modifying behaviour; we are actively reshaping our brains for a better future.

The question isn't whether habits influence our lives; it's how we use them. Are your habits serving you, or are they unconsciously controlling you? Every action we repeat shapes the brain, so the real challenge is choosing which habits to strengthen today. By understanding the hidden science behind our everyday behaviours, we can take control of our habits and, ultimately, our lives.

Trump treatment of Columbia puts US universities on edge

SHAHZAD ABDUL

Hit by massive funding cuts and a crackdown on student protesters, Columbia University is under fire from US President Donald Trump, putting the world of higher education on tenterhooks.

The arrest of student activist Mahmoud Khalil has crystallised concerns over freedom of speech under the Republican leader's administration — and fuelled warnings that Trump is out to quell dissent.

Khalil, a US permanent resident with Palestinian roots, recently earned a graduate degree from the prestigious Ivy League school in New York. But he was detained in early March by plainclothes immigration agents over his role in the student movement protesting Israel's war on Gaza. Trump has vowed Khalil's detention is the first in a line of arrests to come.

Columbia's student movement has been at the vanguard of protests that have exposed deep rifts over the war. Activists call them a show of support for the Palestinian people. Trump condemns them as anti-Semitic, and says they must end.

The president has cut \$400 million in federal funding from Columbia on the questionable grounds that the institution has not adequately protected Jewish students from harassment.

Experts say the move aims to send a message to other universities: fall in line or face the consequences. "Columbia has been placed in an impossible position," Lynn Pasquerella, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, said. "We can be sure that the other 60 higher education institutions that have been targeted for a perceived failure to comply with federal mandates are paying close attention to Columbia's response."

Columbia's interim president, Katrina Armstrong, acknowledged the "critical moment for higher education" in a recent statement. US universities are still reeling from a furor over pro-Palestinian protests that has felled several institutions' presidents since the Gaza war began, including at Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia itself.

"The stakes are high not only for Columbia, but for every college and university in this country," Armstrong said, vowing a commitment to "open dialogue and free debate" as well as "efforts to combat hate and discrimination on campus."

Beyond that cautious official position -- which has come under criticism from various sides — Columbia is making moves. — AFP

Do we age steadily, or in bursts? What experts say

FOR many people, aging feels like it happens in stops and starts. After a period of smooth sailing, one day, seemingly out of the blue, you have achy knees.

"You wake up in the morning and you suddenly feel old," said Dr Steve Hoffmann, a computational biology professor at the Leibniz Institute on Aging in Jena, Germany. "That's sort of the takeaway."

It turns out there may be a scientific basis for this experience. By analysing age-related markers, such as proteins and DNA tags in the bloodstream, some scientists are coming to understand that aging in adulthood is not a linear process, but perhaps one that jumps significantly at certain points in one's life. Here's what they've learned so far, and what it could ultimately mean for your health and life span.

What does 'nonlinear aging' look like? Scientists have long suspected that aging may happen in bursts, but they only began using molecular signals to measure the pace of aging in the past decade or so.

A widely covered Stanford study published last year tracked several molecular changes associated with aging in blood samples gathered from 108 adults between ages 25 and 75. By comparing samples from different subjects of different ages, it found that people seemed to age more rapidly around age 44, and again around 60. The clusters of changes in the first spike appeared to be mostly related to fat, as well as muscle function, and the second spike mostly to immune dysfunction and muscle function.

The first spike could help explain why people seem to have more trouble starting in their 40s, and why they become more prone to illness in their 60s,



MOHANA RAVINDRANATH

By comparing samples from different subjects of different ages, it found that people seemed to age more rapidly around age 44, and again around 60. The clusters of changes in the first spike appeared to be mostly related to fat, as well as muscle function, and the second spike mostly to immune dysfunction and muscle function.

said Michael Snyder, a professor of genetics at Stanford Medicine and study co-author.

Also last year, a study on mice co-written by Hoffmann found that sudden chemical modifications to DNA occurred in the rodents' early-to-midlife and again in mid-to-late life, suggesting there were three discrete stages of aging.

And in a 2019 study looking at the blood plasma of over 4,000 people, scientists reported there were significant jumps in concentrations of proteins associated with aging in the fourth, seventh and eighth decades of life.

Other experts think aging doesn't necessarily happen in short spurts, but rather in longer phases. Steve Horvath, who is widely considered to have pioneered the biological aging tools known as epigenetic clocks, said a 2013 study he conducted found that the rate of aging follows a steep curve from early childhood until puberty, but becomes linear after age 20. (Horvath is now principal investigator at Altos Labs, a biotechnology company focused on improving cell health and slowing aging-related disease.)

There's also early data suggesting that certain organs — such as the heart or brain — may age faster than others, said Tony Wyss-Coray, a professor of neurology and neurological sciences at Stanford University who was an author of the 2019 study. Whether they happen in phases or spurts, it's not yet clear how all of these molecular changes actually contribute to aging and age-related disease. Still, these types of findings could offer more insight into the biology underlying well-known shifts in middle age, such as slowing metabolism, said Allison Aiello, a professor of epidemiology

at the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center.

In practice, it could mean that people could be more targeted in managing their health, focusing on specific changes and conditions that correlate with their particular age, said Aditi Gurkar, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh's Aging Institute.

WHAT'S NEXT?

These findings are "quite interesting, but I would say preliminary," said Dr Eric Verdin, the president and chief executive at the Buck Institute for Research on Aging. And it brings up a whole series of questions, he said: "What's happening? Which organ or collection of organs is causing these big changes?"

There are other open questions, including if the changes vary from individual to individual, and how much lifestyle and behaviour may contribute, since there's increasing evidence that certain events — like pregnancy, trauma and adversity or even a COVID infection — can also accelerate biological aging.

Experts said they're eager to answer these questions with longitudinal studies that track changes over a person's lifetime. That method would account for differences in environment or lifestyle among subjects.

So far, researchers are only "touching the surface" of how molecular changes relate to aging, said Dr Luigi Ferrucci, the scientific director of the National Institute on Aging. By learning more, he added, they can help people live better longer and head off disease. "Instead of declining at 70, we can try to make it decline at 75, and gain five years of good life." — NYT

Why are we wasting food while millions face hunger?



SAMUEL KUTTY

The writer is a freelance journalist and author who worked in Oman and India

It is unfortunate that we waste food indiscriminately in a world where millions face the dire threat of famine. The situation worsens during social occasions such as festivals, weddings and births, when people prepare excessive amounts of food to showcase their wealth and social status.

Ramadhan is a religious observance and one of the most sacred periods for Muslims, having a significant social and economic impact. During this time, consumer behaviour shifts, leading to an increased desire to purchase food items, often exceeding actual needs.

Unlike traditional Ramadhan tables, there has been a significant increase in the variety of food in recent times. This change is primarily attributed to the influence of specialised cooking channels and the desire to showcase culinary skills.

This social pressure compels people to serve a variety of foods, contributing to increased waste. Families are not shopping according to their actual food needs, and product advertising tempts them to purchase more than necessary. The absence of reuse or recovery options, combined with the inadequate policies and regulations for managing food waste, makes it more convenient to dispose food in garbage bins.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Food Waste Index Report 2024, which monitors global and national food waste generation, households are the largest contributors,

accounting for 60 per cent of the total. The estimated global food waste amounts to 631 million tonnes.

Unfortunately, the UNEP points out that “more than one billion meals’ worth of food are thrown out by households each day. This amounts to more than one meal per day for every person facing hunger around the world.”

Figures from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) indicate that approximately 1.3 billion tonnes of food produced globally are wasted each year.

Separately, the United Nations World Food Programme released a report detailing its global forecasts for 2025. The report indicates that 343 million people in 74 countries are suffering from severe food insecurity, representing a 10-per cent increase compared to the previous year. These figures are approaching the record high established during the pandemic.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region ranks among the highest globally in food waste, with an annual total of 9 million tonnes, which equates to approximately 91 kg per person each year. This is particularly notable given the region's relatively small populations compared to countries with high population densities and limited resources.

According to estimates from the Arab Monetary Fund, food import bills in Arab countries reached \$100 billion in 2023. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are the largest consumers among Arab nations,

The absence of reuse or recovery options, combined with the inadequate policies and regulations for managing food waste, makes it more convenient to dispose food in garbage bins

with food imports totalling \$61 billion in 2023, an increase from \$30 billion in 2016.

Data from the Federation of Arab Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture indicates that the Arab region imports 90 per cent of its food requirements. The report suggests that Arab countries will need to invest \$144 billion by 2030 to meet the nutritional needs of their populations.

It is important to recognise that food waste extends beyond what consumers scrape off their plates or allow rotting in their refrigerators. It is influenced by a multitude of factors, including crops left unharvested in the fields, food that spoils during transportation and all other products that fail to reach retail stores.

Surprisingly, food waste is a pervasive problem worldwide, affecting even affluent nations. Despite variations in income levels, there is little difference in the average amount of household food waste among high-income, upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income countries.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the government places a high priority on food security and supply, implementing a comprehensive range of plans and programmes aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of achieving zero hunger by 2030.

Data be'ah reveals that Oman generates approximately 560,000 tonnes of food waste annually. These numbers, statistics and imbalances necessitate a genuine commitment and official resolve that reflect the serious intentions of countries.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HUMAN BODY IN DEEP SPACE?

ISSAM AHMED

Bone and muscle deterioration, radiation exposure, vision impairment — these are just a few of the challenges space travellers face on long-duration missions, even before considering the psychological toll of isolation.

As US astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams prepare to return home after nine months aboard the International Space Station (ISS), some of the health risks they’ve faced are well-documented and managed, while others remain a mystery.

These dangers will only grow as humanity pushes deeper into the solar system, including to Mars, demanding innovative solutions to safeguard the future of space exploration.

Despite the attention their mission has received, Wilmore and Williams’ nine-month stay is “par for the course,” said Rihana Bokhari, an assistant professor at the Center for Space Medicine at Baylor College.

ISS missions typically last six months, but some astronauts stay up to a year, and researchers are confident in their ability to maintain astronaut health for that duration.

Most people know that lifting weights builds muscle and strengthens bones, but even basic movement on Earth resists gravity, an element missing in orbit.

To counteract this, astronauts use three exercise machines on the ISS, including a 2009-installed resistance device that simulates free weights using vacuum tubes and flywheel cables.

A two-hour daily workout keeps them in shape. “The best results that we have to show that we’re being very effective is that we don’t really have a fracture problem in astronauts when they return to the ground,” though bone loss is still detectable on scans, Bokhari said.

Balance disruption is another issue, added Emmanuel Urquieta, vice-chair of Aerospace Medicine at the University of Central Florida. “This happens to every single astronaut, even those who go into space just for a few days,” he said, as they work to rebuild trust in their inner ear.

Astronauts must retrain their bodies during Nasa’s 45-day post-mission rehabilitation programme. Another challenge is “fluid shift” — the redistribution of bodily fluids towards the head in microgravity. This can increase calcium levels in urine, raising the risk of kidney stones.

Fluid shifts might also contribute to increased intracranial pressure, altering the shape of the eyeball and causing spaceflight-associated neuro-ocular syndrome (SANS), causing mild-to-moderate vision impairment. Another theory suggests raised carbon dioxide levels are the cause.

But in at least one case, the effects have been beneficial. — AFP

America’s ‘HIP’ economy

WHILE headlines scream about America’s \$35.5 trillion national debt and President Donald Trump’s drive to “drain the swamp” in Washington, three factors are reshaping the US economic terrain. I call them the “HIP” factors — health, information and power — and they could confound the doom-mongers.

For decades, Americans have been putting on pounds and waddling towards a health disaster. The US adult obesity rate climbed from 30.5 per cent in 2000 to more than 41.9 per cent in 2020, increasing the risk of health problems such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. But in 2023 something remarkable happened: the obesity rate fell by 0.4 percentage points — the first drop in at least a decade. That is more than one million Americans stepping back from the brink of danger (and the need to buy bigger clothes).

Many are attributing this decrease to the revolutionary GLP-1 medications like Ozempic and Wegovy. Initially developed to treat diabetes, these drugs have proved stunningly effective for weight loss, capturing public attention and investor confidence. Morgan Stanley expects the global weight-loss drug market, valued at nearly \$15 billion in 2024, to balloon to \$77 billion by 2030. This innovation could drastically cut healthcare costs while extending life expectancy and fostering a healthier workforce.

But it’s not just drugs. Wearable tech like Apple Watches and Fitbits can now track everything from heart rate to blood oxygen level, empowering individuals to take control of their well-being. US Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F Kennedy, Jr, a 71-year-old who flaunts his toned physique in shirtless-workout videos, aims to “Make America Healthy Again.”

That could include reinstating the Presidential Physical Fitness Test that his Uncle Jack championed and president Barack Obama later eliminated. When I was a kid, the annual event encouraged us to practice pull-ups and 50-yard

headlines scream about America’s \$35.5 trillion national debt and President Donald



The US adult obesity rate climbed from 30.5 per cent in 2000 to more than 41.9 per cent in 2020.



TODD G BUECHHOLZ

The writer is a former White House director of economic policy under president George H W Bush and managing director of the Tiger hedge fund. He is the author of New Ideas from Dead Economists (Plume, 2021), The Price of Prosperity (Harper, 2016), and co-author of the musical Glory Ride

dashes. Many kids today wouldn’t recognise a pull-up, but they all know Pop-Tarts.

The information revolution has turned the economics of knowledge on its head. In 1959, the soul singer Sam Cooke recorded “Wonderful World”, crooning “Don’t know much about history, don’t know much biology” — no wonder, given that a set of encyclopedias cost thousands of dollars back then. Today, the marginal cost of accessing virtually unlimited information is zero, owing to the Internet and platforms such as Coursera and Khan Academy. Enrolment in “massive online open courses” surged from 300,000 to 220 million in 2021. A teenager in Appalachia can study coding or Dante from professors at elite institutions for free, reducing barriers to education. According to the World Bank, every additional year of schooling increases lifetime earnings by an average of 10 per cent. AI is accelerating this trend. The technology holds immense potential as an educational tool, particularly for customising learning.

Moreover, while critics worry about AI displacing jobs, large

language models like ChatGPT and Claude are already boosting productivity, with small businesses deploying them for marketing, customer service, and even product development.

Lastly, there is power: energy costs, a perennial drag on household budgets, have decreased dramatically. The price of crude oil has fallen roughly 40 per cent from its 2022 peak, with West Texas Intermediate crude now hovering around \$66 per barrel. This decline has lowered gasoline prices, with the national average dropping to \$3.09 per gallon as of March 10, from a high of \$5.02 in June 2022. That could save the average American family some \$1,200 per year on energy expenditure — a significant boost to disposable income.

To meet the growing energy needs of data centres, tech companies like Amazon and Google are developing small modular nuclear reactors and energy-storage systems that can ensure a more reliable supply of wind and solar power. We should marvel at firms that reinvent themselves amid economic turmoil.

©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS

QUARTERFINAL DRAW



RONALDO’S AL NASSR TO FACE YOKOHAMA, AL HILAL MEET KOREA’S GWANGJU

JEDDAH: Cristiano Ronaldo’s Al Nassr have been drawn to face Yokohama F Marinos from Japan in next month’s quarterfinals of the Asian Champions League Elite with fellow Saudi Pro League side Al Hilal to take on tournament debutants Gwangju FC of South Korea.

Al Ahli, the third club from Saudi Arabia to reach the last eight, will play Thailand’s Buriram United and Japanese outfit Kawasaki Frontale will face Al Sadd from Qatar. All four quarterfinals will be played in Jeddah as part of a centralised competition that will also see the Saudi Arabian port city hosting the semifinals and final.

Al Hilal, winners of the title on a record four occasions, will meet Gwangju in the opening game of the finals phase on April 25. Yokohama F Marinos, who were runners-up last year, play Al Nassr and Al Ahli face Buriram United on April 26 with Kawasaki to take on Al Sadd on April 27.

The semifinals will be played on April 29 and 30, with the final to be held at the King Abdullah Sports City on May 3. — Reuters

Asian Champions League Elite Quarterfinal Draw:
Al Hilal (Saudi Arabia) v Gwangju FC (South Korea)
Al Ahli (Saudi Arabia) v Buriram United (Thailand)
Yokohama F Marinos (Japan) v Al Nassr (Saudi Arabia)
Kawasaki Frontale (Japan) v Al Sadd (Qatar)

Oman U23s open West Asia campaign against Saudi

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE OMAN Olympic team kicks off its participation in the sixth West Asian U23 Championship on Wednesday with a match against Saudi Arabia at 11:30 pm at the Seeb Sports Stadium. The tournament, hosted in Muscat from March 19 to 25, serves as preparation for the Asian qualifiers in September. Three other matches will also take place: Jordan will face Kuwait at 8:30 pm, Syria will play against Lebanon at 11:30 pm at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, and Bahrain will meet the UAE at 8 pm at Seeb Stadium. The teams are divided into four groups, with two teams in each group. The winners of the quarterfinals will advance to the semifinals, while the other teams will compete in placement matches to determine rankings from third to eighth place.

During the pre-tournament press conference held on Tuesday, Oman head coach Badr al Maimani welcomed all participating teams, wishing them a competitive and fruitful tournament. Regarding Oman’s preparations, Al Maimani stated that despite the limited time, the team had undergone good preparations. He expressed strong confidence in his players and their ability to deliver an outstanding performance.

Al Maimani emphasised that the tournament represents an important opportunity, especially following a long break for the Olympic team. He highlighted an agreement with the Oman Football Association to build a strong team for the future that will serve as a key feeder to the senior national team. He concluded by saying, “We will give our best in this tournament to achieve positive results.”

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia’s head coach, Luigi Di Biagio, acknowledged the difficulty of facing Oman, noting that the host team would exert maximum effort to secure positive results on home ground and in front of its fans. He added, “Our goal in this tournament is to perform at our best and advance as far as possible. Beyond competing for the title, we are also focused on improving our players by playing a series of strong matches.”

Jordan’s head coach expressed his



gratitude to the Jordanian Football Association for granting him the opportunity to lead the team in the championship. He mentioned that preparations for the match against Kuwait had gone well, despite the limited information available about their opponents due to changes in their squad. Nonetheless, he affirmed that the team trained in a positive atmosphere and that the players were eager to deliver a strong performance.

The Jordanian coach added that the team held a one-week training camp before the tournament, during which the coaching staff focused on increasing team cohesion and enhancing tactical aspects. He pointed out that the West Asian Championship provides a valuable opportunity to assess the team’s readiness and prepare for future competitions.

Kuwait’s head coach, Emilio Peixe, stated that the West Asian Championship is the team’s first official test, as the coaching staff has been working on building a new squad. This makes the tournament an ideal opportunity to evaluate player performance and prepare for the final qualifiers in September.

Peixe noted that the team underwent a short preparatory period and that the coaching staff did not have sufficient



statistics on the participating teams due to changes in their line-ups. Nevertheless, he stressed that the team aims to give its best in the tournament and make the most of the matches to improve performance and team chemistry.

BAHRAIN AND UAE FOCUSED
Bahrain head coach Hisham al Damiqi stated that his team faces a tough match that requires a strong performance, acknowledging that the opponent is well-prepared with notable tactics and skills. However, he expressed complete confidence in his players, emphasising that the Bahrain Football Association had provided the necessary support, boosting the team’s ambition to advance as far as possible in the tournament. He highlighted the significance of the West Asian Championship due to its technical value, as the team will play three matches. He stressed that the encounter against the UAE would be decisive, with the team aiming for victory and qualification to the next round.

For his part, the UAE’s head coach mentioned that his team had previously faced Bahrain and was aware of their strength and the challenge of competing against them. However, he confirmed that the UAE team had prepared well for the championship, with the main objective being to progress as far as possible while focusing on evaluating player performance and improving their skills through competitive matches.

Syria head coach Imad al Din expressed his gratitude to the Oman Football Association for their hospitality and warm welcome. He noted that the Syrian team had suffered from a four-month break due to recent events in Syria but was determined to perform well.

PICS BY: ABDULWAHID AL HAMADANI

Asian Cup-bound Oman U17s take on Russia in friendly today

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE Oman Under-17 national football team will play a crucial preparatory game against Russia on Wednesday as part of the team’s warm-up plan for the AFC U17 Asian Cup which will be scheduled in Saudi Arabia during April 3-20, 2025. The friendly match will take place at Al Rustaq Sports Complex and the encounter will start at 10 pm.

Three more other key friendly games are scheduled for the junior Red Warriors this month as the team will duplicate another match against Russia on Friday at the same venue. The other two encounters are fixed against Vietnam on March 25 and 28 and the venue will be decided later.

Wednesday’s warm-up game against Russia will be a real challenge for the national team boys of head coach Anwar al Habsi as the opponent is one of the strong developed junior teams in the world. The Russian team features many top skilled players



The Oman Under-17 team will play preparatory games against Russia and Vietnam.

and the Oman team boys will get the chance to have a tough competition and test their skills and performance ahead of their challenge in Asian assignment.

Coach Anwar will give the chance to many players in this friendly match and will evaluate the players physical and tactical performance to ensure their readiness for their Asian event.

Oman will vie in the AFC Asian Cup besides Iran, Tajikistan and

North Korea in Group D while the hosts, Saudi Arabia, will play against Uzbekistan, Thailand and China in Group A. Asian heavyweights Japan will compete against Australia, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates in Group B, while North Korea will take on Yemen, Afghanistan and Indonesia in Group C. The 16 qualified teams for the Asian Cup are divided into four groups, with the two top teams from



each group advancing to the quarterfinal stage. The AFC U-17 Asian Cup will act as a qualifier for the Fifa U17 World Cup Qatar 2025, which will feature eight Asian teams for the first time at the newly expanded 48-team annual tournament.

DOMESTIC CAMP
The junior Red Warriors are undergoing a domestic camp in Al Musannah as they started their

training sessions on Sunday. The team will continue their warm-up sessions until end of the holy month of Ramadhan as the team will travel later to Saudi Arabia for the Asian event. Oman will target to reach further in the knockout stage of the Asian championship.

In the previous month, the national team took part in the Hat-trick U17 international tournament which was organised in the UAE. The Oman U17 national football team suffered two defeats at the event against South Korea and Saudi Arabia. Oman junior team boys started their campaign in the warm-up event at Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE with a match against Saudi Arabia, which Saudi won 2-1. Then, in the second match Oman boys suffered a 6-1 loss against South Korea. The team concluded their matches in the tournament with a 1-1 draw against Australia. The international preparatory event was a key part of Oman’s technical programme to gear up for the main assignment at the AFC U-17 Asian Cup.

SHORTTAKES



Messi was left out of Argentina’s squad for the world champions’ clash against Uruguay on Friday, which is followed by a showdown with Brazil on March 25.

MESSI OUT INJURED AS ARGENTINA SEEK TO SEAL WC PLACE

MONTEVIDEO: Lionel Messi will miss Argentina’s World Cup qualifiers this month after suffering a groin strain in Inter Miami’s victory over Atlanta at the weekend, his club confirmed on Monday.

Messi was left out of Argentina’s squad for the world champions’ clash against Uruguay on Friday, which is followed by a showdown with Brazil on March 25.

Inter Miami said in a statement that a scan had revealed Messi suffered a “low-grade injury in the adductor muscle” in the 2-1 win on Sunday. The statement gave no timetable for Messi’s return.

“His clinical progress and response to treatment will determine his availability for competition,” Inter said.

After missing three games for Inter earlier this month, the 37-year-old returned with a goal off the bench in a CONCACAF Champions Cup win.

Argentina, the defending World Cup champions, can ensure qualification for next year’s tournament in their next two games.

They lead the 10-team South American qualifying group by five points ahead of the game with Uruguay in Montevideo.

The top six teams qualify directly for the World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada. The seventh-placed team is currently Bolivia with 13 points.

After 12 rounds, Messi is the top scorer in the competition with six goals.

Argentina are also without injured Roma striker Paulo Dybala and River Plate full-back Paulo Montiel.

Brazil will be without 33-year-old Neymar, who has suffered a thigh injury and has had to postpone his return to the national team, who are fifth, seven points behind Argentina. — AFP

PSM RAMADHAN CRICKET REACHES QUARTERFINAL STAGE



Rahat Computers beat Nazimabad XI by 9 wickets.

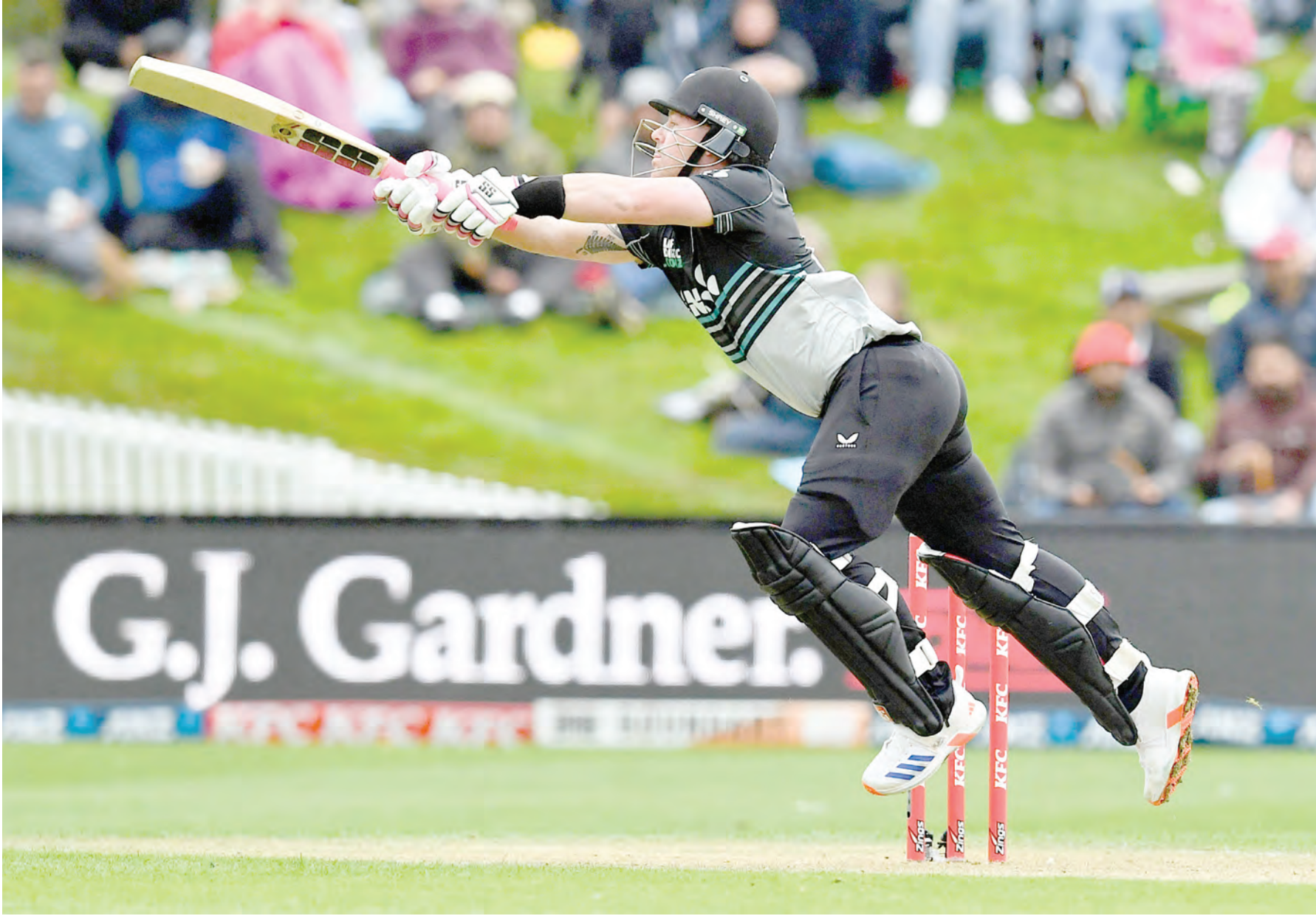
MUSCAT: The PSM Ramadhan cricket reached the quarterfinal stage with Jazz Boys, Rahat Computers and Pizza Modoo booking spots in the last eight of the tournament on Monday night.

In the first match, Jazz Boys beat Lahore by 37 runs. Batting first, Jazz Boys scored 124 for 4 in 8 overs. Hasnain Ali with 24 runs not out and Zakaria with 24 runs were the main contributors for the Jazz Boys.

In reply, Lahore Kings could only reach 88 for 7 wickets in 8 overs. Izhan Butt scored 28 from 8 balls. Jazz Boys’ Usman, who took 2 wickets in 2 overs, was adjudged the man of the match.

In the second match, Rahat Computers defeated Nazimabad XI by 9 wickets. Nazimabad scored 103 for 3 wickets with Sultan Ahmed scoring 44 runs in 21 balls.

In reply, Rahat computers scored 103 in 6.4 overs for one wicket. Usman remained not out with 47 runs in 15 balls and was declared the man of the match. In the third match, Pizza Modoo were declared winners after opponents Ravi Fighters failed to turn up.



New Zealand’s Tim Seifert plays a shot during the second Twenty20 international against Pakistan at University of Otago Oval in Dunedin on Tuesday. — AFP

Big-hitting Kiwis crush Pakistan for 2-0 lead

NEW ZEALAND’S openers went on a six-hitting blitz on Tuesday to thrash Pakistan by five wickets and go 2-0 up in their Twenty20 series.

The home side reached 137-5 with 11 balls to spare in Dunedin to take control of the five-match series after Pakistan posted 135-9 off 15 overs in a rain-reduced second match.

New Zealand’s highlight was a ferocious opening stand between Tim Seifert and Finn Allen in which seven of the first eight scoring shots were sixes.

Remarkably, Seifert played out a maiden off Shaheen Shah Afridi’s opening over before Allen cleared the small University Oval boundary three times in the second over, bowled by Mohammad Ali.

Seifert then smashed 26 off Afridi’s second over, including four sixes.

Seifert, who top-scored with 44 in the nine-wicket win in Christchurch on Sunday, departed on 45 off 22 balls.

Allen fell soon afterwards for 38 off 16, with the openers hammering five sixes each.

White-ball specialist Allen said both batsmen are naturally big-hitters and took a simple mindset into the run chase.

“We just looked to be positive, try and get



New Zealand’s Tim Seifert (L) and Finn Allen bump fists during the second Twenty20 match.

ahead of the chase early and make it easy for our middle order to finish it off,” said Allen, who was confident they could run down the target.

“It’s kind of hard to assess in a 15-over game but defending out here is pretty tough. Those are small boundaries so the ball tends to fly a bit here, so I think maybe 170 would have been competitive.”

Four New Zealand wickets fell in the space of four overs midway through the chase before Mitch Hay’s unbeaten 21 made the outcome safe.

Earlier, captain Salman Agha top-scored with 46 off 28 balls, launching a recovery after Pakistan were sent in and lost opener Hasan Nawaz without scoring for the second time in the series.

They were 19-2 in the fourth over before the skipper embarked on a knock that featured four fours and three sixes.

Shadab Khan was aggressive in the middle order with 26 off 14 balls and Afridi was not-out 22 off 14. Four New Zealand bowlers took two wickets, including seamer Ben Sears and all-rounder Jimmy Neesham, who were both recalled, in place of Tim Robinson and Kyle Jamieson.

New Zealand can wrap up the series if victorious in game three in Auckland on Friday. — AFP

De Villiers backs balanced RCB to break IPL duck

NEW DELHI: Team balance and Virat Kohli’s reassuring presence in the top order have convinced AB de Villiers that his former club Royal Challengers Bengaluru can win their maiden Indian Premier League title this year.

One of the league’s most glamorous sides often boasting some of the most explosive batters in the world, RCB made three finals but fell short on each occasion to remain an IPL under-achiever.

They will enter their 18th season under a new captain, Rajat Patidar, while Englishman Phil Salt will be Kohli’s opening partner.

“I really think they made

some incredibly good moves in the (player) auction,” De Villiers, who spent 11 seasons with RCB, told an online press conference on Tuesday.

“It’s an incredibly good, balanced team.

“Look at the batting line-up — it’s pure power, then a mix of power and control.

“I do feel this squad has got what it takes to go all the way.”

Liam Livingstone, Jacob Bethell and Tim David beef up RCB’s middle order while Australia’s Josh Hazlewood will combine with the crafty Bhuvneshwar Kumar in the pace department.

De Villiers said Kohli had been subject of “unnecessary

criticism” over his strike-rate and said the veteran batter had plenty to offer.

“He might have called retirement on T20 internationals but I feel there’s plenty left in the tank for Virat, especially with that batting lineup RCB he’s got this season,” the South African said.

“I don’t think Virat is going to feel a lot of pressure. He can just really go out there and play what he sees in front of him, and that is when Virat is at his absolute best when he plays the situation.”

Salt’s aggression will take the pressure off Kohli and let him control the innings as the team’s “batting captain”, De

Villiers said.

“All Virat needs to do is keep doing what he’s been doing for so many years — control the game,” he added.

“He’s got the best instinct of any player out there. He knows when to up the ante a bit and when to lower it, when to take more risk and when to take less risk.

“I think he needs to be the captain of the batting department in this tournament, and really just keep things together and play smart cricket.”

Bengaluru will take on champions Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL opener on Saturday. — Reuters

SPORTS



Denver Nuggets' Aaron Gordon (32) dunks the ball above Golden State Warriors' Quinten Post (21) during the first quarter at Chase Center. — **Imagn Images**

Gordon powers Nuggets to snap Warriors' streak

AARON GORDON scored 38 points as the Denver Nuggets shrugged off the absence of Nikola Jokic to halt the Golden State Warriors' seven-game winning streak with a 114-105 victory over their NBA Western Conference rivals on Monday. A dazzling display from Gordon inspired what was ultimately a comfortable win for Denver, who were missing regular starters Jokic and Jamal Murray from their line-up.

The absentees were barely felt by Denver though, who startled the Warriors early at San Francisco's Chase Center and led for most of the game.

The Warriors threatened to stage a late rally after slashing the Nuggets' fourth-quarter lead from 15 points to three points, but Denver pulled away in the closing stages to secure a deserved win.

Gordon finished with 38 points, six rebounds and three assists while Michael Porter Jr provided offensive support with 21 points, 10 rebounds and five assists.

The Warriors were always chasing the game after failing to threaten from long range, making just eight of 33 three-point attempts. Jimmy Butler led the Golden State scorers with 23 points.

Warriors coach Steve Kerr lambasted his side's "awful" performance.

"We played poorly out of the gate and never found

a rhythm and they played great," Kerr said. "The right team won. We didn't deserve that. We were awful."

Denver improved to 44-25 to remain in third place in the West. The Warriors dropped to 39-29 and are sixth in the standings.

LAKERS, ROCKETS WIN

The Los Angeles Lakers are just behind Denver in fourth place in the West after a 125-109 blowout over the San Antonio Spurs.

With LeBron James still injured, Austin Reaves led the Lakers scoring 30 points while Luka Doncic had 21 points with nine rebounds and 14 assists.

Elsewhere, the in-form Houston Rockets staged an incredible second-half comeback to defeat the Philadelphia 76ers, overturning a 25-point third-quarter deficit to win 144-137 in an overtime thriller.

The struggling Sixers — who received another gloomy injury bulletin with news that Paul George would miss the remainder of the regular season — stunned Houston after outscoring the hosts 44-28 in the first quarter.

After leading 78-57 at half-time, the Sixers stretched their advantage to 25 points early in the third quarter.

But Jalen Green and Dillon Brooks led a dramatic turnaround as the Houston Rockets suddenly began to find their shooting range, outscoring the Sixers 45-24 in

the third quarter.

The Rockets knotted the score at 131-131 with 3.9secs remaining, before dominating overtime to bring up their seventh straight win to remain second in the Western Conference on 44-25, 12.5 games behind leaders Oklahoma City.

Quentin Grimes led Philadelphia with 46 points including eight three-pointers, while Green and Jabari Smith Jr topped the Houston scoring with 30 points apiece.

There was another overtime thriller in Minnesota, where Obi Toppin finished with 34 points, 10 rebounds and two assists to lead the Indiana Pacers to a 132-130 win over the Timberwolves. Anthony Edwards led the Wolves scoring 38 points.

In New York, 28 points from Mikal Bridges powered the Knicks to a 116-95 defeat of the visiting Miami Heat.

The Knicks, who improved to 43-24 to remain third in the Eastern Conference rankings, effectively decided the contest after blitzing Miami 41-15 in the third quarter, stretching the lead to 27 points early in the fourth before cruising home.

Miami fell to 29-39 and are ninth in the East.

The Detroit Pistons continued their pursuit of the Knicks in the East with a 127-81 thrashing of the New Orleans Pelicans in the Big Easy. — **AFP**

A DRIVE OF BLESSINGS

CHERY

FUN TO DRIVE

ARRIZO 8
(L6L Comfort)
Starting From **Ro 8,175***

ARRIZO 6 PRO
(Basic)
Starting From **Ro 5,500***

ALL NEW
ARRIZO 5 (STD)
Starting From **Ro 4,275***

TIGGO 7 PRO MAX
1.5 (Comfort)
Starting From **Ro 6,600***

TIGGO 8 PRO MAX
2.0 (Luxury)
Starting From **Ro 10,300***

GRAND RAFFLE*
ARRIZO 5 1.5L STD
ALL NEW
Raffle Date: 21 April 2025

ASSURED GIFT***
Fuel Card – 100 LTR

ENGINE WARRANTY
10 Years / 1,000,000 Kms
Not applicable on Arrizo 5

14
OUT OF TOP
50 CHINESE
GLOBAL BRAND
BUILDER

Tiggo 8 SUV
Tops 2023
China Automotive
User Satisfaction
Index

10 POWER
10 POWER
10 POWER
10 POWER

SERVICE® : up to 5 Years / 60,000 kms
(whichever is earlier)

INSURANCE*** : 1 Year Comprehensive

REGISTRATION® : 1 Year

VAT 5% Extra on Prices

NEW WORLD AUTOS LLC
P O Box 3168, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman
Tel.: +968 24578000, Fax: +968 24561631, C. R. No. 1347521,
Wattayah - Mawaleh - Sohar - Salalah
E-mail: sales@new-worldautos.com

For Test Drives & Bookings
Call / Whatsapp
24579541
92616598

Campaign Period: 17.02.2025 – 17.04.2025. Benefits applicable for all purchases except Government Organizations & Ministries. * The indicated vehicle prices are starting prices for specified model grades & are Cash price after considering applicable Cash Gift with 5% VAT charged extra on indicated prices. ** Grand Raffle: Anyone buying a Chery vehicle during this campaign period will be eligible to participate in Grand Raffle draw to win 1 unit of the all-new Chery Arrizo 5 1.5L STD. Tentative date of Grand raffle draw: 21st April, 2025. ***Assured Gift: Anyone buying a Chery vehicle during this campaign period will be eligible for a Fuel Card (100 Ltrs M95). @ Free Service upto 5 Years / 60,000 kms Service (whichever is earlier) covering 7 services with the first & second service at 5,000 kms & 10,000 kms and then 5 services at 10,000 kms service interval based on normal operating conditions on all Chery models. ## Comprehensive 1 Year Insurance (Oman only) on all Chery models. Insurance benefit under the campaign would be given up to the extent applicable for Private vehicles only. Additional premium as per Insurance norms will have to be paid by the RAC, Taxi & Driving School Company. *Cash gift in lieu of insurance* Cash Gift is given in Lieu of Insurance only as applicable for respective models. In case customer chooses Insurance (as applicable), he/she will not be eligible for "Cash gift in lieu of insurance" offer. \$ Free 1st year Registration for all Chery models. Vehicles may include dealer-installed items. For further details & to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Chery showroom. Pictures and colors shown above are for illustrative purposes only. Campaign will not be applicable for ministry and government deals/supplies



MUSCAT
STOCK
EXCHANGE
4,362.037

BUSINESS

CRUDE OIL
OMAN \$73.09
BRENT \$71.83
LIGHT \$68.14



YOUR JOURNEY
BEGINS HERE

EASY AUTO FINANCING WITH BANKDHO FAR

VISIT YOUR NEAREST BRANCH
AND APPLY TODAY!



بنك ذوفار
BankDhofar

2479 1111

www.bankdhofar.com

Major strategy to boost job creation: Baowain



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, with senior colleagues at the media briefing.

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE Ministry of Labour has unveiled a comprehensive strategy aimed at boosting employment opportunities, enhancing workplace efficiency and integrating digital solutions into human resource management. Announced during the Ministry's annual conference under the theme “Governed Environment: Sustainable Economy,” the ambitious operational plan for 2025 aims to unlock 45,000 job opportunities, among other initiatives designed to strengthen Oman's labour market and empower its workforce.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, said, “Many job seekers need professional development, vocational education, career pathways and technical training. They need guidance, mentorship and the skills necessary to integrate into the workforce effectively. If they are not adequately prepared, they won't be able to interact with employers and the work environment.”

The Ministry's strategy is a multi-faceted employment plan that targets both job creation and skills development. Dr Baowain revealed that the 2025 plan will provide training and qualification opportunities for 11,000 job seekers, 10,000 government job placements and 24,000 employment opportunities in the private sector.

The Ministry is also focusing on on-the-job training, employment-linked training programmes and wage support, ensuring that Omani job seekers are equipped with the necessary skills to thrive in diverse fields.

Special emphasis is being placed on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), startups and self-employment, in alignment with Oman's broader economic diversification goals.

To improve government efficiency and workplace culture, the Ministry has introduced the “Individual Excellence” system across 67 government entities, incorporating 45 new features designed to enhance performance evaluation and the overall work experience.

A new government unit evaluation system has also been launched, measuring operational efficiency, leadership standards and employee satisfaction.

These measures aim to ensure greater transparency, productivity and a positive work environment in the public sector.

A key pillar of the Ministry's agenda is the integration of digital solutions into human resource management. The Ministry has secured funding for the pilot phase of the “Smart Management” project, which is being developed in partnership with the private sector. Additionally, three experimental applications will be launched to explore artificial intelligence (AI) solutions, improve visual identity branding and create a comprehensive knowledge base for the labour sector.

The “Waiting List” initiative, another innovative programme, is designed to facilitate intelligent job matching through smart digital systems.

Dr Baowain reaffirmed the Ministry's commitment to adopting global best practices in digital transformation, ensuring that Oman's labour market remains competitive, efficient and adaptable to future challenges.

The National Employment Programme (NEP) was a major highlight of the conference, as it aims to align educational outputs with labour market demands through comprehensive data analysis, sector-based governance and innovative policy reforms.

Employment Governance Committees have been established in 17 key economic sectors, including food security, tourism, logistics, IT, energy, healthcare, sports, education, media and financial services.

These committees will work towards sector-specific Omanisation strategies, ensuring that qualified Omanis take up leadership and technical roles in priority industries.

Additionally, the NEP has introduced a suite of digital tools to improve labour market efficiency. The “Tawteen” platform serves as a job-matching tool linking job seekers with employers across various industries, while the “Marsad” platform provides real-time labour market insights to policymakers.

Meanwhile, the “Khuta” platform is Oman's first national career guidance portal, designed to help young Omanis make informed career decisions.

The Omanisation of leadership roles is a top priority for the Ministry, he said. As part of this initiative, 2,800 mid-level and executive positions have been successfully Omanised across the country's industrial zones in collaboration with the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).



TENDER NOTICE

Oman Water & Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) hereby announces the following Tenders:-

Tender No.	Description	Eligibility	Tender Fee (RO)	Last Date of Sale Tender Documents	Bid Submission Date
T/2684052/ 2025	Transporting (227M³/Daily) of water from the Tankers Filling Station Al-Jarda in Al-Mudhaibi to the Tankers Filling Station Wadi Saqat in Samail in Dakhiliyah Governorate	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	RO. 50/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	28/04/2025
T/2691088/ 2025	GIS survey and mapping services for Water & Wastewater in North Zone (A): Musandam, Buraimi, Al Batinah (North), and Ad Dhairah Governorates	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	R O.1500/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	05/05/2025
T/2691087/ 2025	GIS survey and mapping services for Water & Wastewater in South Zone (B): Al Batinah South, Ad Dakhliya, Ash Sharqiyah (North & South) and Al Wusta Governorates	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	RO. 2500/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	05/05/2025
T/2690106/ 2025	Renewal of IT Service Desk Support Personnel	Local Companies registered with the Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	RO. 50/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	28/04/2025
T/2693096/ 2025	Supply & Delivery of Water Meter Security Seal & Non-Return Valve for Smart Water Meters to the Main Warehouse	Local Companies registered with the Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	RO. 50/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	28/04/2025
T/2692087/ 2025	Consultancy Services for Non- Domestic Wastewater Study	Local Companies registered with the Government Tender Board and International Companies specialized in the works mentioned	RO. 100/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	05/05/2025
T/2693095/ 2025	Construction of Water Distribution Networks and House Connections for Bisyra 1, Tawy Al-Nisf South, Al-Dinana, Qarn Al-Taayih and Al-Ghadifat Villages in Bahla Wilayat	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	R.O. 500/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	12/05/2025
T/2694094/ 2025	Construction of Water Distribution Networks and House Connections in Al Rumail and Qasirah in Wadi Bani Khalid Wilayat	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	R.O. 500/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	12/05/2025
T/2694090/ 2025	Construction of Water Distribution Networks and House Connections in Al Hijari and Suhaila in Al Khaboura Wilayat	Small and Medium Enterprises (Riada Card Holder) registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	Free	10/04/2025	12/05/2025
T/2694092/ 2025	Construction of Water Distribution Networks and House Connections in Qasbiat Al Hawassana, Qasbiat Al Busaeed and Khor Rasa in Al Khaboura Wilayat	Local Companies registered with Government Tender Board and specialized in the works mentioned	R.O. 500/- (Plus 5% VAT) Non-refundable	10/04/2025	12/05/2025

The tender documents can be obtained from the e-tendering page (Supplier Login) from this announcement date. The applicants shall pay the tender fee by logging into their (I-supplier Page).

Applicants who are not registered shall register through the following link: <https://owwsc.nama.om/Business-with-Us/ Vendor-Registration> in order to receive the login credentials of the Supplier portal.

All applicants who have paid the tender fee shall have access to the Tender Documents through Nama Water Services e-tendering page (Supplier Login <https://nws.nama.om/en-us/Business-with-Us/Supplierlogin>). All participating companies shall submit a Bid Bond of 1% of the bid value in a sealed envelope. Bid Bonds must be obtained from a local Bank registered in the Sultanate of Oman addressed to Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) Chairman of Tender Committee not later than 2:00 pm on the bid submission date.

The bid along with all required documents shall be uploaded through Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (Nama Water Services) e-tendering page not later than 2:00 pm on the date specified above. For more details refer to Tender Page of our website www.owwsc.nama.om & in case of general queries you may contact us through the email ID of tender@owwsc.nama.om

ADVERTORIALS

DHOFAR ISLAMIC
CHARTS AMBITIOUS
GROWTH PATH



MOHSIN SHAIK

Head of Investment
Banking & Capital
Markets at Dhofar
Islamic

MUSCAT: Having firmly established itself in Oman’s fast-growing Islamic banking and finance sector in 2024, Dhofar Islamic — the Islamic banking arm of BankDhofar — is gearing up for a milestone year in 2025.

At the heart of its ambitious agenda is the launch of its first-ever Sukuk programmed, a substantial RO 250

million issuance structured in multiple series.

According to Mohsin Shaik, Head of Investment Banking & Capital Markets at Dhofar Islamic, the Sukuk issuance will represent a defining moment in the bank’s growth journey.

“This initiative underscores our commitment to expanding Sharia-compliant financial solutions and strengthening our position as a leading player in Islamic finance. Over the past year, we have made significant strides in areas such as Sharia advisory, IPO management, wealth management, corporate banking, retail banking and SME financing. The Sukuk programme will further accelerate our momentum.”

Reflecting on the past year, Mohsin acknowledged the challenges posed by global economic trends, particularly rising interest rates set by the US Federal Reserve, which impacted banking profitability across both conventional and Islamic segments.

“Despite these challenges, we delivered a strong performance in 2024, driven by solid results across our four key business units: Corporate Banking, Retail Banking, Treasury and Investment Banking. We continue to see robust demand for Islamic financial products and our success last year has set the foundation for sustained growth in 2025.”

A key highlight of Dhofar Islamic’s 2024 achievements was its appointment as the Sharia Advisor for the OQBI IPO — marking its foray into IPO issuance management. By structuring the IPO in compliance with Sharia principles, Dhofar Islamic successfully attracted a significant number of investors. This experience has positioned the bank strongly for future IPO advisory roles.

Wealth Management and Investment Solutions Building on its expertise in wealth management, Dhofar Islamic aims to provide structured investment solutions for individuals looking to optimise returns.

“Many clients currently hold their money in fixed deposits or Islamic CASA accounts, but we offer diversified investment solutions tailored to their risk appetite,” Mohsin said.

Dhofar Islamic provides access to Sukuk funds, equity funds and balanced portfolios through partnerships with leading global Islamic asset managers. Additionally, it facilitates direct Sukuk purchases and custodial services, ensuring clients have a broad spectrum of Sharia-compliant investment opportunities.

While innovation remains central to Dhofar Islamic’s strategy, Corporate and Retail Banking continue to form the core of its operations. The bank supports corporate clients in transitioning their commercial activities to Sharia-compliant models, with a specialised Corporate Banking team excelling across key sectors which is in line with Oman Vision 2040.

On the retail front, Dhofar Islamic offers a growing suite of Sharia-compliant products, including home financing, Islamic credit cards and savings accounts. “Awareness of Islamic banking is increasing in Oman and we see rising demand for Sharia-compliant financial solutions,” Mohsin noted.

OXY OMAN HOSTS GENERAL MANAGER’S HSE FORUM

MUSCAT: Oxy Oman recently held its annual General Manager’s HSE Forum in Muscat, bringing together colleagues and service providers to celebrate and reflect on Health, Safety and Environmental (HSE) achievements in 2024 and discuss goals for 2025.

Oxy Oman’s senior leadership congratulated the attendees for achieving the best HSE performance in the company’s four decades operating in the Sultanate of Oman and detailed substantial investments towards improved welfare and well-being, including the creation of activity centres, recreational fields and OPAL certification of all personnel camps in Oxy Oman concessions in 2024.

The importance of Oxy Oman’s Zero-Harm value and culture — which prioritises the safety and well-being of all employees and service providers — were a recurring theme throughout



The highlight of the event was the annual awards presentation.

the forum and were included within the ongoing HSE Focus Areas for 2025, encouraging everyone to embody this value in every aspect of their work.

The highlight of the event was the annual awards presentation, which recognised the outstanding safety performance of excelling service providers. The company awards included categories such as Zero-Harm, Zero Road

Traffic Accidents and Better Mousetrap (BMT) innovations.

Companies were celebrated for their top-tier safety performance and contributions to a safer workplace. This year, Oxy Oman also unveiled a new award to recognise individuals for their exceptional contributions towards Zero-Harm culture.

Steven Lauver, President and General Manager of Oxy Oman, remarked, “The General Manager’s HSE Forum is a testament to our unwavering commitment to health, safety and environmental excellence. It is through the collective efforts of our colleagues, partners and service providers that we continue to strive for a remarkable safety performance and foster a culture of Zero-Harm. We look forward to building on these successes in 2025 and beyond.”

Chery’s SUV range now
with Ramadhan benefits

GET hold of amazing driving experiences with the impressive Chery SUV range.

Own any Chery SUV and get exclusive Ramadhan campaign benefits. The benefits include a chance to win an all-new Chery Arrizo 5 (STD) sedan, up to 5 years/60,000 km service, 1-year comprehensive insurance, 1-year registration, assured fuel card gifts and an unparalleled 10-year/1,000,000 km engine warranty.

This exclusive campaign is valid until April 17, 2025. (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Customers can visit any Chery showroom for exact details.)

The Tiggo 8 PRO MAX is a marvel of engineering and design that redefines the standards of modern driving. Combining cutting-edge



This exclusive campaign is valid until April 17, 2025.

technology, luxurious comfort and exhilarating performance, the Tiggo 8 PRO MAX is tailored for those who love exciting moments on their journeys.

The Tiggo 8 PRO MAX boasts a 2.0L Turbocharged Engine paired with an advanced 7-speed Dual Clutch Transmission (DCT), delivering a seamless driving experience.

With 254 horsepower and an impressive 390 Nm of torque,

this SUV is built to conquer highways and rugged terrains alike. Its All-Wheel Drive (AWD) system ensures unparalleled stability and control, making every drive a thrilling adventure. Chery Tiggo 8 is starting from RO 10,300.

Chery’s popular SUV, the Tiggo 7 Pro Max, continues to redefine the driving experience with its blend of luxury, technology, and performance. The Tiggo 7

Pro Max is available with two engine options. The 1.6-liter turbocharged engine delivers an impressive 197 HP paired to a 7-speed DCT that ensures a smooth and dynamic ride. The 1.5T engine has the maximum power of 154 HP, the maximum torque of 230N.m. This is paired to a 9-speed CVT. Chery Tiggo 7 is starting from RO 6600.

The Chery Tiggo 4 Pro continues to redefine the driving experience with a blend of performance, advanced technology and modern aesthetics. The Chery Tiggo 4 Pro stands out with its dynamic and stylish exterior. The Tiggo 4 Pro boasts an efficient yet powerful engine, available in both 1.5L naturally aspirated and 1.5L turbocharged options, delivering the perfect balance between performance and fuel economy.

Both are paired to a 9-speed automatic transmission. Chery Tiggo 4 Pro is starting from RO 5700.

OAB LAUNCHES RAMADHAN 2025 MARKABATI CAR LOAN CAMPAIGN

MUSCAT: In a move that reflects its commitment to providing innovative financial solutions to its customers, Oman Arab Bank (OAB) has announced the launch of its special Ramadhan Markabati Car Loan campaign.

The initiative aims to meet the needs of individuals and families by offering flexible financing terms and competitive interest rates.

The digital campaign for the “Markabati” car loan from Oman Arab Bank started on February 24 and will continue until March 31.

The bank offers flexible repayment terms of up to 10 years, helping improve personal financial management and saving time and



effort. It also provides customers with the opportunity to obtain financing for purchasing new or used

cars with attractive interest rates, reaching some of the lowest rates in the market, contributing to easing the financial burden on customers during the holy month.

The campaign also targets customers with existing car loans by offering easy refinancing options to help reduce interest costs and improve loan terms.

Juma al Fulaiti, Deputy Head of Retail Banking at Oman Arab Bank, stated: “We are committed to meeting the needs of our customers by providing innovative and accessible financing solutions. With the spirit of Ramadhan in mind, this campaign offers individuals and families the opportunity to purchase

or upgrade their vehicles or even refinance their current loans under improved terms.”

The campaign targets individuals aged 21 to 65, including young professionals, first-time car buyers and families looking to upgrade their vehicles. The bank is also focusing on customers who wish to refinance their current car loans to benefit from better interest rates and reduced financial burdens.

Oman Arab Bank’s Ramadhan Markabati Car Loan offer will be available from February 24 to March 31, allowing customers to take advantage of these competitive offers and enhance their financial experience.

Advisory council appointed for the Wadi Dawkah Unesco heritage site

MUSCAT: The frankincense trees have flourished in Wadi Dawkah, in Dhofar, southern Oman, for thousands of years, with their relationship to humanity tracing back to antiquity. And yet, there remain many secrets to uncover in order to truly understand, nurture and preserve them.

For Amouage, this translates into taking concrete and purposeful actions grounded in scientific research conducted by highly specialised partners. In this context, the Wadi Dawkah Scientific Advisory Council was established as a key

mechanism to support Amouage’s ambition to transform the site into a global reference for sustainable, ethical and transparent sourcing of natural ingredients for perfumery.

The Scientific Advisory Council brings together international specialists and best-in-class Omani experts. It is composed of: Dr Khalid al Farsi, horticulture expert, Suaad al Harthy, Executive Director at Environment Society of Oman, Dr Laila al Harthy, botany expert and Thomas Andro, Vice-President — Responsible Sourcing at DSM-Firmenich.



Dr Khalid al Farsi, horticulture expert.

The role of the Council is to provide scientific rigor. This involves a series of meticulous

baseline studies, not only related to the frankincense tree itself, but also the environment it thrives in.

The results of these analyses will enable the establishment of guidelines for day-to-day practices: understanding the current environment in all its aspects is essential to determine the best direction for the preservation and future development of Wadi Dawkah.

“Wadi Dawkah, a Unesco World Heritage site, is a habitat for Boswellia sacra (the frankincense tree), which is considered an

integral part of Oman’s culture and heritage.

The site hosts thousands of Luban trees, the majority of which have grown naturally for many years. It has become essential to enhance sustainable efforts in the cultivation and production of frankincense in the region. The aim of this council is to provide scientific advice on various sustainable aspects, such as maintaining site biodiversity, improving plant establishment and cultivation practices, and fostering community engagement.” said Dr Khalid al Farsi, horticulture expert.

BUSINESS



OCCI's 3rd Ramadhan Evening forum focused on how the significance of financial and tax policies in driving sustainable growth.

OCCI FORUM HIGHLIGHTS ROLE OF FINANCIAL POLICIES IN UNDERPINNING ECONOMIC GROWTH

FAISAL AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE OMAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held on Monday, March 17, 2025, an insightful discussion on the role of financial policies in supporting sustainable economic growth and enhancing the business environment.

The event, held as part of the Chamber's Ramadhan Evening series, was titled "Taxes and Their Impact on Economic Development." It was attended by a host of prominent figures, including Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, Shaikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

Shaikh Faisal began the evening with a keynote address, emphasising the importance of taxes as a key financial tool for financing public expenditure. He explained that taxes are not merely a source of revenue but are also pivotal in driving economic development and guiding the economy towards growth and stability.

He emphasised that directing tax revenues to infrastructure and services would boost the business environment, living standards and investment. However, he warned that imbalanced tax policies could reduce incentives for work and investment, leading to capital flight and economic slowdown. Over-taxation could also drive investments to countries with lower rates, while tax evasion would hinder development project financing.

Shaikh Faisal further highlighted that fair and equitable tax policies encourage compliance and enhance the business climate, which is crucial for sustainable economic growth.

HH Dr Adham bin Turki al Said, Chairman of the Chamber's Economic Committee, presented a paper on the impact of financial and tax policies in Oman.

HH Dr Adham outlined the country's financial policy framework, which includes development and industrial strategies. These strategies have seen the government invest in infrastructure, establish free zones to attract foreign investment and promote non-oil sectors, all while controlling public spending.

HH Dr Adham discussed the impact of tax policies on economic growth and investment, noting increased foreign investment and diversification. However, he highlighted challenges like global oil price fluctuations, which make growth fragile. He called for a clear, balanced financial and tax policy that considers both economic and financial dynamics.

Integrated clusters key to fuelling Oman's economic diversification

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE establishment of an integrated economic cluster model is key to achieving economic diversification, attracting investments and supporting employment creation, according to Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy.

In an interview with *Oman Arabic*, the sister Arabic paper of *Oman Daily Observer*, Dr Al Maawali said the clusters in question are part of the government's National Economic Diversification Strategy, incorporated within the TANWEEA programme, under the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025).

Shedding light on the programme, the Under-Secretary said: "The national economy, guided by objectives set out in Oman Vision 2040, aims to achieve an economic transformation by focusing on diversification based on technology, knowledge and innovation.

To accelerate the pace of economic



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

diversification, Oman, under the supervision of the Ministry of Economy, has launched the National Programme for Diversification (TANWEEA), which focuses on enhancing the contribution of non-oil sectors to the national economy.

The programme emphasizes promising sectors such as tourism, manufacturing and technology, aiming to create a significant shift towards a knowledge-based economy driven by innovation and global competitiveness. This strategy strengthens Oman's ability to adapt to global economic changes and achieve economic sustainability."

The TANWEEA Programme, Dr Al Maawali stated, serves as a strategic pillar in Oman's

efforts to achieve economic diversification and strengthen the national economy as part of Oman Vision 2040.

It promotes integration between different economic sectors through policies and executive programmes that attract new investments and identify promising investment opportunities, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Besides supporting Oman's Tenth Five-Year Plan, TANWEEA also aligns with the goals of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, focusing on utilising Oman's comparative advantages and developing underutilised sectors.

Among the programme's key outcomes is the launch of strategic projects, such as the economic and financial framework study conducted by the Ministry of Economy regarding Oman's transition away from oil and gas by 2050.

The study aims to set supportive policies for developing promising sectors like fisheries, mining industries and green hydrogen, alongside developing integrated infrastructure

initiatives such as ports and logistics supply chains.

Additionally, the programme proposes the establishment of five integrated economic clusters in various regions to boost development and attract investments. The first is the Najd Agricultural Cluster in Dhofar, which aims to establish an agricultural-industrial food city to enhance food security.

Announced in 2023, the initiative is spearheaded by OIA's investment arm Oman Food Investment Holding Company (Nitaj), in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

The cluster aims to develop a comprehensive economic system by integrating all industrial, logistical and agricultural facilities.

Likewise, the Duqm Logistics Cluster within the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), seeks to leverage Duqm's deep-sea port, airport, road infrastructure combined with its proximity to Middle Eastern, East African and Indian markets, to attract global investments in logistics and industry.

Masterplan of Phase 1 of Fisheries & Food Industries Complex ready

DUQM: The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) has completed the first phase of the detailed master plan for the Fisheries and Food Industries Complex as part of its efforts to encourage investment in the sector and localise a number of new projects. The complex spans an area of 750 hectares, equivalent to 7.5 square kilometres.

Eng Ahmed bin Ali Akaak, CEO of SEZAD, stated that the complex can accommodate 60 facilities. He added that the zone's administration has considered future expansion in the detailed design, should there be a need for further development.

He added that the recently completed first phase of the detailed master plan covers an area of 95 hectares. The Fisheries and Food Industries Complex aims to encourage investment in the sector and ensure that service corridors do not overlap with roads, factories and other facilities within the complex.

The final master plan for the Fisheries and Food Industries Complex, covering both the first and second phases, includes numerous service and logistical buildings and facilities. Among the key features are the cold

chain complex, the red meat industries complex, the public utilities services complex, the central market, outlets for fresh product sales, residential-commercial buildings, administrative offices, commercial buildings and recreational service facilities.

The commercial and administrative services area will be located outside the complex's boundaries near the main entrance.

This area will feature several buildings and services, including the administrative complex, retail stores, the grand mosque, a guesthouse, public service centres, a fuel station, a truck weighing station and vehicle service centres.

The main entrance to the complex will be designed to reflect the identity of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

Significantly, the multipurpose fishing port will play a vital role in the operation and development of the complex located just 3 km away. The site benefits from multiple access points, facilitating traffic movement as well as the import and export of products.



ENG AHMED BIN ALI AKAAK
CEO of SEZAD

Power sector reforms unlock benefits for Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 18

THE liberalisation and privatisation of Oman's electricity sector over the past two decades have delivered significant benefits, including attracting substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), enhancing supply security and quality, reducing technical losses, and accelerating the transition to renewables, according to a senior official at the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR).

Eng Hilal al Ghaithi, Director of Energy, highlighted that sectoral reforms initiated in 2005 — and rooted as early as 1999 when Oman became the first in the region to legalise wholly private-owned Independent Power Projects (IPPs) — have transformed the country's electricity market.

Speaking at a webinar hosted by the British-Omani Society, he explained that before 2005, the government fully operated and regulated the electricity sector as a vertically integrated entity overseeing generation, transmission, distribution, and customer services, including subsidy calculations.

However, concerns over service quality, supply security, and generation capacity prompted a restructuring policy in 1999. Following years of preparation, a 2004 Royal Decree paved the way for privatisation, introducing an independent regulator and segmenting operations among private and government-owned entities.

Crucially, the reforms aimed to foster competition and improve efficiency while curbing government subsidies, which had surged to RO 700 million annually at their peak. Liberalisation also attracted private investment, with FDI in power generation alone reaching \$11 billion, complemented by an additional \$11 billion in transmission,



Oman became the first in the region to legalise wholly private-owned Independent Power Projects.



DR HILAL AL GHAITHI
Director of Energy, APSR

distribution, and networks.

The benefits are evident in system efficiencies, Dr Hilal noted. Pre-reform electricity losses of 25% have dropped to 8.5% as of last year, translating to cumulative cost savings of \$350–400 million.

This was achieved through an incentive-based regulatory framework that encouraged networks to minimise system losses.

Reforms also paved the way for renewable energy adoption. Regulations enabling investments in solar rooftop systems were introduced alongside net billing incentives for customers exporting surplus power to the

grid.

Large-scale solar and wind power projects align with Oman Vision 2040 targets, aiming to generate 30 per cent of total capacity from renewables by 2030 — equivalent to 8–9 GW.

These investments are already making an impact, Dr Hilal noted. "To date, we have successfully commissioned around 1.5 GW of renewables, contributing 6–7% of total generation. Recently, renewables accounted for up to 40 per cent of our daily energy mix in the main system."

Additionally, liberalisation has strengthened Oman's regional interconnection capacity. A second interconnector project with the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) will increase net electricity transfer capacity between Oman and the GCC to around 2 GW.

"This will enhance our renewable energy penetration and allow us to export surplus power to neighbouring countries," Dr Hilal added.

OPINION

Bridging the gap between academia and entrepreneurship



FAARAH ANWAR

The writer is a Pakistan-based researcher and financial analyst.

OMAN'S commitment to transforming student graduation projects into innovative startups marks a significant milestone in integrating academia with entrepreneurship. Through targeted initiatives, the Sultanate of Oman aims to foster economic diversification by equipping students with the tools to turn academic research into commercially viable businesses. With a focus on cutting-edge fields such as fintech, water technologies and emerging digital solutions, this strategic effort strengthens Oman's role in global problem-solving while enhancing its economic resilience. A key component of this vision is the "Upgrade" programme, initially launched in 2018 to support the development of ICT startups. Originally designed to encourage innovation in smart city solutions, IoT applications, e-government services and information security, the initiative has evolved to include broader technological sectors. By expanding its focus, Oman continues to invest in a knowledge-driven economy, ensuring that its graduates contribute to sustainable development and technological advancement. The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has now opened registration for the 8th edition of the Upgrade programme, running until May 31, 2025. This edition includes three competition

tracks: Emerging Technologies, Water and Financial Technologies (Fintech). Winning teams will receive incubation, specialised training and business development support to help bring their ideas to market. Eligible applicants must be final-year students or recent graduates from higher education institutions in Oman. Applications must be submitted electronically through the Oman Research Portal. The Upgrade programme assesses 300+ student projects annually, aiming to convert at least 1% into successful startups. It collaborates with TRC, Omantel, SAS for Entrepreneurship, Riyada and Ibtikar Development Oman. The 2024-2025 cycle offers seed funding, business incubation, networking opportunities and international internships, empowering young entrepreneurs to scale their ventures. The initiative is supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation in collaboration with key public and private sector partners, including Omantel, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Public Authority for SME Development, Nama Water Services, Daleel Petroleum, the Industrial Innovation Academy, the Central Bank of Oman; and the National Bank of Oman. After registration, a jury of programme partners selects the best projects for further development.

With a focus on cutting-edge fields such as fintech, water technologies and emerging digital solutions, this strategic effort strengthens Oman's role in global problem-solving while enhancing its economic resilience.

Beyond startup incubation, Oman is actively integrating AI and advanced digital technologies into its national agenda. The National Programme for Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Digital Technologies (2024-2026), led by MoTCIT, aims to position Oman among the top 50 AI-ready nations. The Oman AI Summit 2025 will further strengthen collaboration between industry leaders and policymakers, reinforcing Oman's commitment to a digitally competitive future. The Upgrade programme follows a three-stage evaluation process, where experts select the most promising student-led startups for incubation. Participants receive extensive business and marketing mentorship, with key stakeholders — including the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Omantel, the Oman Technology Fund (OTF), the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth; and the Authority for SME Development — offering financial, commercial and strategic support. Twelve projects have already transformed into thriving startups, fostering self-employment and strengthening Oman's entrepreneurial ecosystem. By fostering innovation and equipping students with essential resources, Oman is paving the way for a knowledge-driven future. As digital transformation accelerates globally, initiatives like Upgrade play a crucial role in positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a leader in the evolving digital economy.

CHINA STOCKS RALLY IS A WORRYING FLIGHT TO SAFETY

BY HUDSON LOCKETT

HONG KONG: Chinese retail investors appear to be regaining some of their long-lost risk appetite in local stocks. That should be a welcome sign that efforts to restore confidence in the economy are finally having an impact. On closer look, however, the recent equities boom should worry Beijing.

The problem is punters' lack of appetite for Chinese stocks writ large, as the benchmark CSI 300 index of top Shanghai- and Shenzhen-listed stocks is up less than 2 per cent year to date.

A minor rally from official vows to boost consumption, which pushed the gauge into positive territory for the year last week, has since fizzled after details were released.

Instead, money is flowing into Hong Kong's stock market, where the Hang Seng Index has risen more than a fifth this year — the best performance among major indices globally. That's driven mostly by mainland traders: net purchases this year have totalled HK \$386 billion (\$49.7 billion), per figures from Hong Kong's Stock Connect trading scheme, already an increase of 190 per cent on the first full quarter of 2024.

Much of those flows have been into large tech listings like Alibaba and Tencent after AI start-up DeepSeek released its low-cost large language model, fuelling hopes that China is catching up with the West.

The hype looks justified, especially now that Beijing has thrown its weight behind the trend. But Western tech giants have yet to revolutionise their own businesses, or bottom lines, through AI, suggesting any benefits to their Chinese rivals will also take time to manifest — and retail investors are not the patient type. That is one strike against the rally's staying power.

The second is that the Hong Kong rally appears to be partly driven by a desire to minimise exposure to the mainland's currency risk. US President Donald Trump has already raised tariffs on Chinese exports by 20 percentage points this year and more levies are expected for many of America's top trading partners on April 2, once a review of reciprocal tariffs is complete.

Beijing has kept the yuan steady at around 7.2 per dollar so far this year but Trump's standing threat to raise levies on Chinese goods to 60 per cent has stoked expectations of inevitable devaluation to cushion the blow to the country's export-reliant economy.

Against this backdrop, Hong Kong's stock rally looks more like a bet against China's economy than a vote of confidence. — Reuters

AgriFish Fund unlocks sustainable solutions

THE Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund aims to preserve and develop agricultural, livestock and fisheries resources, enhance institutional and human capacities; and promote innovation and investment to achieve sustainable food security. To realise these objectives, the fund has established several programmes under which it finances various projects. These programmes are generally categorised into two main groups: specialised programmes and joint programmes.

SPECIALISED PROGRAMMES Among the key specialised programmes developed by the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund is a dedicated programme for the development and expansion of aquaculture. Aquaculture in Oman provides effective solutions to address contemporary environmental challenges, including climate change and overfishing, which have threatened fish stocks and led to declining yields in traditional fisheries. Commercial aquaculture was introduced in the Sultanate of Oman in 2003 and has since become a critical component of fisheries sector development, significantly boosting production. Another specialised programme focuses on the use of non-traditional water sources in agricultural production. This includes the utilisation of treated wastewater, desalinated water, produced water from oil extraction and artificial rainfall. Scientific studies conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources have demonstrated that treated wastewater can safely be used for cultivating seasonal fodder crops and grain crops for seed production. These studies confirmed that the treated water and the resulting crops were free from microbial activity and that heavy metal concentrations remained within safe limits as per



To realise these objectives, the fund has established several programmes under which it finances various projects.



HANAN AL SULAIMI

The writer is Executive Director - Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund

Omani standards. Given that date palms are the most widely cultivated crop in Oman in terms of both area and production volume, a specialised programme has also been established for their development. Dates hold significant economic, environmental and social value due to their deep cultural connection with Omani heritage. The programme aims to enhance the role of date palms in food security by improving productivity and advancing processing techniques for date-based products.

JOINT PROGRAMMES The Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund has also launched several collaborative programmes in partnership with private sector institutions and local communities. One of the key initiatives in this category is the Innovation Programme, which promotes innovation in agricultural, livestock and fisheries applications. Innovation plays a fundamental role in diversifying, improving and localising production systems while enhancing services and marketing strategies. The programme has helped address challenges facing agricultural, livestock and fisheries

production by integrating advanced technologies and supporting applied scientific research. As a result, the programme has significantly increased the value-added of various products and optimised the use of local resources. Another notable joint programme focuses on enhancing the role of rural and coastal women in agricultural, livestock and fisheries development. This initiative offers specialised training packages tailored to women, helping them improve product quality and develop effective marketing solutions. By doing so, the programme has empowered women to contribute actively to economic and social development. Additionally, the fund has implemented programmes aimed at developing local feed industries for livestock and fisheries. The availability of animal feed is one of the major challenges affecting the growth of livestock production and aquaculture. Historically, Oman has relied on imported raw materials for feed production, leading to high production costs and market instability due to fluctuating global prices. To address this issue, the fund has invested in local feed industry development by utilising agricultural and fishery byproducts — such as palm tree residues and sardines — as key inputs. These initiatives have improved feed availability, reduced production costs and decreased reliance on imports. In summary, the programmes implemented by the Agricultural and Fisheries Development Fund — whether specialised or joint — have played a vital role in overcoming challenges facing agricultural and food production sectors in Oman. These initiatives have strengthened local producers, supported food security and provided sustainable solutions to pressing issues such as climate change, water scarcity and agricultural pests affecting crop yield and quality.

CLASSIFIEDS

ALL SEASON AYURVEDA CLINIC
The most efficient and authentic Ayurvedic Treatment & Medicine, Panchakarma, Yoga, Kalari, Massage Dhara etc.... Rehabilitation, Marma Therapy & Post Delivery Care
Zaher Building, 1st Floor, Flat 8A, Al Khuwair Service Road, Near Al Zawawi Mosque & Burger-King
Tel: 24475280, GSM: 95371664, 92504980, Website: www.siddhayur.com



PTC Rent A Car
Travel & Tours

Daily, Weekly, Monthly Car Rental Available

9345 3444

PEST CONTROL
Al-Basheq Grey Trad. & Cont. LLC

100% Professional & Competitive rate!!!



Anti Termite, Cockroaches, Bed Bugs, Ants, Rodent on monthly, yearly or one time service.
All We use quality products which approved by Oman Ministry
E-mail: albasheqgrey@gmail.com
Web: www.albasheqoman.com
CALL US : 9145 22 33

**UMP**
UNITED MAWA PROJECTS

Auditors & Accountants
• Audit & Accounting • CFO Services • Secondment
• VAT & Tax Return Filing • VAT Refund Assistance
Contact: 92182750 • Email: contact@umpauditors.com

Driving School
Special offers for those wishing to learn driving in (Aziba - Khwair Qurum - Ruwi Al Amirat)
Contact No: 99074072



SIT. WANTED

INDIAN male MBA , 20 years experience in Oman & GCC in Project sales/ Dealer market in All construction materials including Cables & Accessories having D/L looking for the post of Sales Manager/ Assistant Manager.
Contact: 00968 78099493

SIT. WANTED

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

B. COM. 35 years of experience in accounts, sales coordinator, admin, HR, personal assistant, document controller with Oman D/L, looking for a job.
Contact: 92558734

SEEKING a new Job / Logistics & supply chain professional with 10-plus years experienced in Export & Import of Sea, Land & Air transport modes (Email: nouchimp1986@gmail.com, Mob: 79820286)

ACCOUNTS/ Finance: Indian male (MBA Fin) having more than 19 years of experience in Oman accounts & finance looking for suitable placement, NOC available and can join immediately.
Contact: 92076716

MASTER'S graduate in MSc Global logistics, operations & supply chain management from London, seeking a full-time job in Oman. Possess 2 years of sales executive experience in London and 1 year as a purchase executive in Oman. Holding a valid Oman D/L. Contact: 77231865, email: finan8157@gmail.com

INDIAN Male, Storekeeper / Document Controller 2+yrs of experience in GCC, Completed BCA, ready to join immediately. Email: swamierzhasouth@gmail.com
GSM: +968 71818173

FINANCE Manager, CA,CPA,20 years experience (Oman& India). Financial reporting, Budgeting, Taxation, Financial modelling, Feasibility, Valuation. Available to join immediately.
92148608

INDIAN male (Mechanical Engineering) with 3 years experience in Diesel engine works (Gensets/ Engines), 2 years in Machine Maintenance, seeks job.
Contact: 78022420

A SUDANESE resident in Salalah, BSc of administrative sciences with 21 years of experience in the fields of (sales/ management/ logistics and fleet).
Contact: +968 98510880.

INDIAN male 14 years experience light/ heavy driver. Looking for suitable opening currently in Oman.
Contact: 77050986/ 91280205, email: kokkadmou@gmail.com

ACCOUNTANT with 5 years expertise in Accounts Payable, Receivables, Financial Reporting, VAT, Payroll, and Bank & Cash Reconciliation. Actively looking for new opportunities.
Contact: 79791746
Email: Ibrahimsaw52@gmail.com

SIT. WANTED

MECHANICAL ENGINEER (8+ yrs exp, Indian Male) Planning, MEP, QA/QC certified. Elevator & construction industry background.
Contact: 92712939, anwarmhdas@gmail.com

INDIAN Male /10+ years of experience in Sea, Air & Land shipments/ Looking for Sr. Logistics operations role. Aware of Incoterms & international procedures.
MOB: 79820286
EMAIL: nouchimp1986@gmail.com

ACCOUNTANT with overs 6 years of experience Detail-Oriented Financial Professional: Expert in Accounting, Audit Prep and Expense Management.
Contact: +968 78320801, Ready to join immediately.

CHIEF accountant, MBA finance 9+ years experience in financial statework auditing, budgeting, VAT, tax, fixed assets, reconciliation, payroll. Seeking a full/ part time position in a senior role. 93988825 .

INDIAN Female, M-Tech in Environmental Engineering, B-Tech in Civil Engineering. 7 years of Teaching experience as Asst. Professor, 2 years of professional experience in civil construction and soil investigation. Seeking suitable job, now in Muscat.
Contact: 95136664, 79620397
Email: mayakrish.1804@gmail.com

PLANNING Engineer, PMP. Indian male 11 years experience in Construction Projects. Well versed with Primavera P6 Software, strong communication skills, Interpersonal skills, EDT Claims, Recovery schedules, project control. Having Omani Driving Licence.
Contact: 78002582
Email: engineer4planning@gmail.com

WJ Towell Group Company



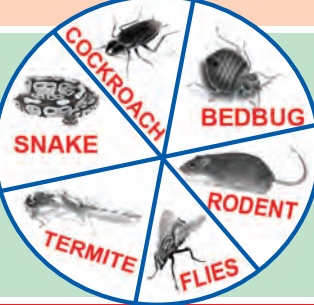
Quality car rentals at competitive prices.
Muscat 9014 6672, 9679 0684
Sohar 9731 6218 Salalah 9429 9325
www.orbit-oman.com

Fleet of 2,000 vehicles
Choose from a wide range of brands & models
PDO, OXY and BP spec vehicles available
Attractive rates for short-term & long-term lease

**ORBIT**
Car Rental & Lease

**PEST CONTROL OMAN CO. L.L.C.**

Supply of Pesticides, Gel (Cockroaches), Public Health Chemicals, Agriculture Chemicals, Snake Repellent, Rodent Baits and other insect repellent from UK & USA



PROFESSIONALS in Pest Control Service, Bedbug Treatment, Rodent Treatment, Snake Treatment and Termite Treatment [Pre & Post Construction]
Tel: 24787606, 24787503
Direct Line: 24786077
GSM: 99382355, 99172309
pcomctom@omantel.net.om
P.O. Box 565, Al Wadi Al Kabir 117, Sultanate of Oman

SIT. WANTED

ACCOUNTANT/ AUDITOR Indian Female, 3+ yrs exp. in Accounting & Auditing. Expertise in IFRS, GAAP, VAT, Financial Mgmt & Compliance. Contact: 7841408, fzahrasr@gmail.com

LOOKING for part time OR full time Accounts/ Finance job. 20yrs experience in Muscat. Upto finalization & Audit. Please contact: 92065499

Experienced in Industrial Sales & Marketing - 78501743

SALES & Marketing Expert, Indian Having D/L- 78501743

SENIOR accountant - Indian male above 11 years' experience (9years in Oman) NOC & D/L available. Contact: 78109909. Email: shinsjohn@gmail.com
29 years old Indian female, MBA holder with 2 years experience. Seeking a suitable position. Currently in Muscat on visit visa. Contact: 78641071, shazashakeel@gmail.com

FOR RENT

IN Ruwi, 2 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, hall, kitchen, with car parking. RO 150 monthly only.
Tel: 94402003.

10000 sqm open yard available for rent in Jifnain. Please contact: 99853040.

SIT. VACANT

SALES executive Male, with driving License
Contact sangita@dhiyahilal.com
+968 93559800

Urgently Required

A reputed company in Oil & Gas sector in Oman seeking **Experienced and knowledgeable**

SENIOR SALES ENGINEER

Requirements:

- Male, Mechanical Engineer in early 30's.
- Oman driving license.
- 5 to 7 years Oman oil & Gas industry experience.
- Responsible, Self-motivated, strong leadership and excellent interpersonal skill.

E-mail your CV: **hrmuscat888@gmail.com**

Urgently Required

A reputed Company in Oman seeking Smart and **Qualified**

Finance & Administration Manager

Requirements:

- Male, age in the early 40's
- 10 years of Managerial experience in Oman/GCC
- Strong leadership, high integrity and good attitude
- Knowledge of Finance/IT/Admin
- Oman Driving License

The applications are to be sent to the following email address: **hroman007@gmail.com**

WE ARE HIRING

Leading manufacturing company (HEAVY TRUCK BODIES, TRAILERS & PDO) in Oman seeking suitable candidates.

- SALES EXECUTIVE
- PRODUCTION MANAGER (GRADUATE MECHANICAL ENGINEER)
- DESIGN ENGINEER (GRADUATE MECHANICAL ENGINEER)
- WELDING SUPERVISOR
- PAINTING SUPERVISOR
- FABRICATORS
- WELDERS

Email us your CV: **sm@alhykal.com**

CHANGE OF NAME

I Abdul Waheed, holder of Indian Passport No. V0628471. Son of Abdul Lateef having permanent residence Pura Pirai, Kalwari, Basti, up, India. (Complete postal address in India) and presently residing in P Box: 2264, PC: 130 Al Athaibah, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. (Complete postal address in Oman) intend to change my name from Abdul Waheed (old name), to Abdul Waheed Khan (new name) for all practical purpose. Any objection towards my name change may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P.Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.

To advertise in Ministry of Information channels



To advertise

71455532- 71455531- 71455530
adv@omaninfo.om
izdihar_info izdihar.info



Ramadhan

4

BASIC
RAMADHAN
GUIDES

FATWA

HIS EMINENCE SHAIKH
AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI
Grand Mufti of Oman



A person drank water accidentally during Imsak. He realised this during Al Fajr. What should he do?

If he was aware that the period of Imsak has already begun, he should make amends for that slip on the same day.



HADITH GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Abu Dharr, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that he heard the Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, saying: "No man accuses another of impiety or disbelief except that it (the accusation) rebounds on him if the one accused is not as he said".

QURAN VERSE OF THE DAY



*We have given you plenty.
So pray to your Lord and
sacrifice. He who hates you
is the loser.*
(Al Kawthar)



DUA SUPPLICATION TO ALLAH

O Allah, on this day, awaken me with the blessings of its early mornings. Illuminate my heart with the brightness of its rays, let every part of my body follow its effects, by Your light, O the illuminator of the hearts of those who know.



NIZWA 'S RAMADHAN CELEBRATION IS A TRUE SPECTACLE

BY YERU EBUEN

NIZWA, often celebrated as the 'Pearl of Islam', boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage that dates back to the 6th and 7th centuries AD. As Oman's capital during this period, it played a pivotal role in the early development of Islam, nurturing a deep connection with its doctrines and traditions. The city is home to numerous revered mosques, each standing as a testament to its Islamic legacy. Among these are the Sultan Qaboos Jama, the Soal Mosque from the 2nd century AH (9th century AD), Ash-Shawathinah Mosque in Uqr, and Ash-Sharja Mosque, which attract visitors and pilgrims alike. In 2013, Nizwa was designated as the Capital of Islamic Culture, recognising its historical importance and its ongoing contribution to the cultural fabric of Oman.

Today, Nizwa is undergoing a remarkable resurgence, emerging as a vibrant hub for cultural events that celebrate the rich heritage of Oman. This week, on the night of the 14th of Ramadhan, the city's streets came alive with merriment as families gather to participate in what is arguably the biggest Qaranqasho event of the year. For many, this celebration is a cherished tradition passed down through generations.

Qaranqasho, a term derived from the Arabic word for "sound of drums," marks a unique cultural festivity during the holy month of Ramadhan. This joyful event holds a special place for

children, who eagerly roam the neighbourhoods, singing traditional songs and knocking on doors in anticipation of treats. The gifts they receive, typically in the form of sweets or coins, serve as tokens of appreciation from their neighbours, creating memories that linger long after the festivities have ended. For Omanis, this annual tradition evokes nostalgia, as many recall their own childhoods spent in similar delight.

Alongside Qaranqasho, Tahlula has also emerged as one of the most significant celebrations in Nizwa recently. This ancient Omani tradition allows children to meet and recite prayers, expressing their joy as they roam through neighbourhoods under the guidance and support of their families and community. The atmosphere is intimate and festive, enhancing the sense of togetherness that defines these celebrations.

To honour the children, a series of competitions and unique programmes are organised, showcasing their talents and emphasising their special place within the community. Locals contribute to the festive spirit by giving gifts and flowers, adding a delightful vibrancy to the occasion. As both Qaranqasho and Tahlula come into focus, the community gathers as a unified body, ensuring that children are raised with respect and in a God-fearing manner, embracing the essential lessons they must learn early in life.

While Qaranqasho may be unfamiliar to outsiders, it has grown into a major event in urban centres across Oman, including Muscat, where malls and corporations have embraced its

spirit, organising extravagant celebrations that reflect the traditions. Children take centre stage, proudly donning traditional garments that embody their cultural heritage, while beautifully decorated malls twinkle with fairy lights, Arabic lanterns and oversized crescent moon decorations strung through trees and windows.

The atmosphere is electric, enhanced by the rhythm of drums that echo into the night, reviving Nizwa's rich heritage. Elder members of the community reminisce, inspired by the joy reflected in the children's faces, which reminds them of their own festive experiences as youngsters. After receiving prizes during Qaranqasho, children return home excitedly comparing sweets and coins, dreaming of the new toys they might purchase for Eid.

Celebrations like Qaranqasho and Tahlula are vital to the social tapestry of Oman, providing a sense of continuity and strengthening community bonds. It is heartening to witness these traditions flourish, growing larger, more dynamic and more inclusive in promoting communal joy and heritage. For those wishing to experience the essence of Ramadhan, a visit to Nizwa during this festive period is not to be missed. The city embodies the spirit of the holy month, offering a glimpse into the beautiful interplay of tradition and modernity.

As the excitement of this year's Qaranqasho fades, the prospect of vibrant celebrations looms in the coming year. Mark your calendars to immerse yourself in the heartwarming festivities and cultural splendour that Nizwa generously shares with its visitors.



Practical advice to take advantage of the power of early morning worship

BY MAZOUN AL GHAILANI

DURING Ramadhan, the fast begins with the first daily prayer, Al Fajr, before sunrise. In these moments, when our concentration and energy are at their peak, we meditate on the spiritual riches bestowed upon us as a gift from Allah. It is no surprise that the early morning feels especially unique, as we find ourselves under the care of the Creator, enveloped in the mercy of Allah's providence for the day ahead. Spending an hour each morning in His presence can transform us in ways we never imagined.

Many people struggle to wake up early, with some praying Fajr before returning to sleep. Consequently, we miss out on the spiritual treasures that the early hours provide. Staying awake after the Fajr prayer to engage in an intimate session of worship in the presence of Allah can greatly strengthen our holy relationship with Him.

The Albukoor initiative was launched by Nooralhuda Alhudaib, co-founder of the Albukoor initiative and co-author of the Albukoor book. Its aim is to provide individuals with the necessary tools to worship easily and to help them overcome the obstacles they face. To date, the initiative has benefited approximately 2,000 people.

Named Albukoor, which means "the early morning" in Arabic, the initiative seeks to facilitate ritual worship through knowledge and innovative collective support, particularly focusing on the Fajr prayer and the worship associated with it during these blessed early hours. Nooralhuda Alhudaib articulates this vision clearly: "The idea behind the initiative is to make ritual worship more accessible through knowledge and support."

The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad, said: "O Allah, bless my nation in its early mornings." This highlights the importance of cherishing early morning moments filled with worship, experiencing spiritual calm and reassurance as we

prepare to face the day. "The early morning I refer to isn't about being part of a 5 AM or 4 AM club; it's about setting our intentions towards the most significant meanings in life. If I rise, pray Fajr, engage in remembrance (Dhikr), recite the Quran and focus calmly on a task I love, I will receive the blessings that accompany this time, which the Prophet prayed for," Nooralhuda shared.

The initiative outlines four stages of early morning prayer to deepen the believer's connection with the Creator. The first stage involves performing the Fajr prayer on time, along with its Sunnah Rakahs.

Following this, the believer sits comfortably on their prayer rug, reciting and repeating the after-prayer and morning remembrances. At this initial stage, ensuring that the Fajr prayer is performed on time is crucial, laying the foundation for progressing through the rest of this enlightening journey.

"The second stage is the night prayer, Tahajjud, performed during the last sixth of the night, just before the call to the Fajr prayer. Even if it's just the Witr prayer, along with seeking forgiveness and making supplications, this virtuous prayer will help us perform the Fajr prayer on time," Nooralhuda noted. Numerous Quran verses extol the virtues of praying at night, such as in Surah Adh-Dharyat (51:18): "And in the hours before dawn, they were (found) asking (Allâh) for forgiveness."

She emphasised, "The third stage is the most crucial, as it ensures the continuity of morning spiritual worship: staying awake until sunrise. This was customary for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the noble companions, who would remain in their places of prayer until the sun rose, engaged in the remembrance of Allah and recitation of the Quran."

The fourth and final stage is about sustaining the habit of waking up at the same time throughout the year, avoiding any delays in winter, even when the sun rises later. This consistency fosters the continuation of

the same acts of worship.

The changing meal schedules and social commitments during Ramadhan often disrupt sleep. Nooralhuda highlighted the significance of understanding Albukoor as a religious obligation, emphasising that waking up early is a natural human instinct rather than a burden. She remarked, "The sun rises for us to awaken and the night for us to sleep. How could one disregard such a vital religious duty and jeopardise their biological clock?"

She advises against drinking coffee after Iftar, suggesting that families take a break after Taraweeh and strive to wake refreshed for Tahajjud and Suhoor, while extending Tahajjud before Fajr, as this time is replete with exceptional merit and great reward. She also clarified misconceptions surrounding Albukoor, such as the belief that waking up early decreases sleep. Instead, it shifts sleep hours; for instance, one might sleep from 10:00 PM to 4:00 AM, gradually adjusting as needed. These ideas are explored in her book, Albukoor.

"Negative habits can derail our efforts; for instance, some mothers set aside the night for relaxation once the family is asleep, but this often extends due to social media and unhealthy eating habits, making it difficult for them to wake up for the Fajr prayer. I also recommend gathering the family during the day instead of at night and avoiding caffeine after noon, as it can disrupt sleep," she shared.

To learn more about the Albukoor initiative and its objectives, you can follow them on Instagram @albukoor. This platform offers valuable insights and updates that can support your spiritual journey and help incorporate the principles of worship and community into your daily life, especially during the blessed month of Ramadhan.

By embracing these practices, you can enrich your experience, deepen your connection to faith and discover the numerous spiritual rewards that await you in the early hours of the morning.

RAMADHAN TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

Thieboudienne, Tchebou community feasts and prayer gatherings in Senegal

In Senegal, Ramadhan is a vibrant celebration of faith, culture and community ties. As Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, anticipation builds for the evening meal, where "Thieboudienne," a savoury dish of fish and rice, is commonly served. Families and neighbours often come together for "Tchebou" gatherings, where large quantities of food are shared, reinforcing the bond of kinship and generosity. The evenings are filled with collective prayers at mosques, fostering a sense of unity and spiritual growth. Senegalese culture thrives during this month, with lively conversations, music and cultural exchange taking centre stage. Acts of charity are deeply ingrained, as festivals encourage helping those in need through food distribution and support initiatives. Ramadhan in Senegal is a profound blend of faith, fellowship and the celebration of culinary heritage — an enriching experience that deepens communal ties.

DAILY HEALTH TIPS TO REMEMBER



Monitor Blood Sugar Levels

For individuals living with diabetes, Ramadhan poses unique challenges due to fasting and dietary changes. Monitoring blood sugar levels is critical to ensure safety and prevent complications during the holy month. If you are diabetic, work with your healthcare provider to create a tailored plan to manage your blood sugar. This may involve adjusting your medication schedule or modifying your diet to accommodate fasting hours. Keeping glucose monitoring devices handy will help you stay on top of your levels. Consider consuming low-glycaemic index foods during suhoor to prevent spikes and manage hunger. After iftar, a balanced meal with proteins, healthy fats and fibre can help maintain blood sugar levels. Stay hydrated to support metabolic function.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN ISLAM



1071 CE: The Battle of Manzikert

The Battle of Manzikert witnessed the Seljuk Turks' significant victory over the Byzantine Empire, opening Anatolia to Turkic settlement. This event marked a turning point in the struggle for dominance in the region and laid the groundwork for the eventual rise of the Ottoman Empire. The Seljuk victory not only shifted the balance of power but also facilitated the spread of Islam into Asia Minor, influencing the demographic and cultural landscape.

FEATURES

Rare iconic movie posters to be auctioned in US



DOZENS OF rare posters from some of the 20th century’s most iconic films will go under the hammer this month as an American collector relinquishes some of his most precious possessions.

The 500 posters and lobby cards from classic films such as “King Kong”, “Casablanca” and “2001: A Space Odyssey” have been exhibited in recent weeks in London, New York and Chicago.

Collected over half a century by real estate agent Dwight Cleveland, they are to be auctioned by Heritage showrooms in Dallas on March 27 and 28.

“I cherish every single one of them because every one of them was hand-picked,” said Cleveland, 65.

“These are commercial art. They were intended to grab us by the lapels and yank us into a movie theatre and say, ‘See this film!’”

But this was also “important art” that went beyond just advertising, he argued.

The posters and cards, which would have been displayed in cinema foyers, span around 125 years of film history. Many of the images date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

But after 50 years “it’s getting harder and harder to find anything to add to the collection”, said Cleveland.

“I don’t feel like there’s anything else I can do and give to this hobby,” he added.

Some of the posters will do better at auction than others, he said, including the one for the 1933 version of “King Kong” showing actor Fay Wray in the grip of the beast.

It has an estimated guide price of \$40,000 to \$80,000.

PASSION

“The collection of Cleveland’s artwork featured in Heritage’s March auction truly represents the finest pieces available,” remarked Joe Maddalena, Heritage’s vice president. Cleveland, who emphasises his passion for art over a film background, recounts how his fascination began during school.

His art teacher showcased film posters and lobby cards, sparking both admiration and playful teasing among his classmates due to the uniqueness of the collection. The pivotal moment came in 1977 when Cleveland was captivated by a lobby card from the 1929 film “Wolf Song,” leading him to spend 18 months collecting items to trade for it. This ignited his enduring passion for collecting.

His impressive collection has been displayed in prestigious venues, including the Norton Museum of Art in Florida, with upcoming exhibitions in San Diego, Los Angeles and New York. Following the auction, which is expected to raise one million dollars, Cleveland will still possess around 10,000 lobby cards and 500 posters for possible future donations or auctions. —AFP



Ethiopia’s ancient instrument finds new healing role

BIRUKTAWIT TASEW’S fingers glide over the strings of the begena, producing a deep, hypnotic sound. Along with six fellow musicians, she breaks into a solemn religious melody, holding their audience spellbound.

One of the country’s oldest instruments, the begena was once reserved for the elite — and effectively banned during the Marxist Derg government between 1974 and 1991.

But it is experiencing a resurgence among Ethiopia’s artistic community.

Ermias Haylay, 23, started playing as a teenager and founded a school to train students. He now performs regularly in retirement homes and hospitals to bring “a bit of joy” after seeing its therapeutic effects.

Biruktawit is one of his students who often plays with the group at a nursing home in Addis Ababa. The begena “is medicine for the soul”, said Biruktawit, 23, who has been playing the instrument for about a year.

Legend has it that the instrument was brought over from Israel in the 10th century BC by Menelik I, Ethiopia’s first emperor, who received it from King David.

For centuries, the instrument’s music has accompanied the prayers and meditations of monks of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which represents about 40 per cent of Ethiopia’s 120 million people.

That association with religion meant it fell from favour as the country turned towards communism, but it has slowly returned.

Resembling a harp or a large lyre, trapezium-shaped and about a metre tall, it has 10 strings — traditionally made from sheep’s intestines — that symbolise the Ten Commandments.

It is plucked with the left hand, either bare or with a plectrum, while players wear a netela — a traditional white cloth — draped across the chest for men and in the form of a veil for women.

BEGENA THERAPY

At Grace Nursing Home for the elderly, the begena brings healing.

Sitting in a small courtyard where residents gather to listen to the soothing melodies, 60-year-old Solomon Daniel Yohanes gently shakes his head in his wheelchair as the tunes fill the air.

Yohanes has been a resident for two years and said the begena has “brought him peace”.



“When you’re looking for God, you look for him in different ways and I see the begena as God speaking in his own voice,” he said.

Natnael Hailu, a doctor and co-founder of the institution, admits to being “shocked” to see his patients “forget their pain and drift into sleep” to the tune of the instrument.

“It calms their heart rate, lowers their blood pressure and soothes them. More than any other instrument, begena therapy has a real calming effect,” he said.

Gene Bukhman, a cardiologist and lecturer at Harvard University who attended one of the performances, said, the begena’s melodies could have a positive influence on people suffering from chronic illnesses.

POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Ermias, who founded the Eman Begena School, started playing when he was 15 but admits he was not immediately convinced.

“I found it smelled bad since some parts come from sheep,” he said. But he soon came to love its “spiritual aspect”. His trips to nursing homes and hospitals has even led to him playing during surgeries.

Before long, he noticed “extraordinary changes” in patients with Alzheimer’s, dementia and autism. “They became very calm,” he said. Demands for the lessons have been booming and he hopes to open schools around the world to help more patients. — AFP