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LOOKMAN SECURES NIGERIA THIRD PLACE OVER EGYPT

INBRIEF

9.1% RISE IN JABAL AL AKHDHAR VISITORS



The Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate received 222,151 visitors in 2025, up from 203,629 in 2024 — a 9.1-per cent increase, according to figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Omani visitors topped the list with 82,142, followed by Saudis (14,957), Emiratis (1,588), Kuwaitis (1,441), Qataris (779) and Bahrainis (699). Visitors from other Arab nationalities stood at 9,902. **DETAILS ON P3**

OMAN TO SHOWCASE TOURISM POTENTIAL



The Sultanate of Oman will participate in the FITUR 2026 International Tourism Fair, opening on Wednesday in Madrid, as part of its efforts to expand global outreach and strengthen sustainable tourism partnerships. The exhibition will focus on emerging trends, innovative technologies and sustainable tourism models shaping the global industry. Oman’s pavilion will feature participation from tourism institutions, hospitality companies, hotels and strategic sector partners. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism aims to promote Oman’s tourism offerings, highlight new destinations and products; and engage with Spanish and international tour operators to boost visitor arrivals. **DETAILS ON P15**

Study calls to restore humanities in higher education

MUSCAT: A recently-conducted study called for the restoration of humanities in the higher education system, being a fundamental pillar for a balanced and sustainable knowledge-based economy.

In their study, published in the *Journal of Arabian Studies* under the title ‘Reimagining the Knowledge Economy: A Critical Call to Reposition the Humanities in Omani Higher Education’, Dr Maryam bint Ali al Hinaiyah,

Professor of Intercultural Communication, and Prof Mohammed bin Ali al Balushi, Professor of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, assert that prevailing discourses on the knowledge-based economy often reduce concepts of progress and innovation to scientific and technological aspects only disregarding humanities and

social sciences, despite their pivotal role in developing critical thinking, promoting ethical values and consolidating cultural identity.

The study pointed to the gap between national strategic directions, as outlined by Oman Vision 2040 and the Cultural Strategy 2021–2040, which emphasise the importance of national identity, culture and creativity, and the actual practices

in higher education institutions, which tend to prioritise scientific, technological and business disciplines.

The study revealed that the humanities maintain a significant presence, particularly in the fields of education, society and culture. However, this presence is gradually declining compared to engineering and technical disciplines, especially among students studying abroad. **DETAILS ON P2**

EUROPEAN leaders on Sunday slammed US President Donald Trump’s threat of tariffs over their opposition to his designs on Greenland, warning transatlantic ties were at risk.

Several European countries — including Denmark, of which Greenland is an autonomous territory - emphasised they “stand united” against Trump’s vow on Saturday to hit them with tariffs of up to 25 per cent unless Greenland is ceded to the United States.

“Tariff threats undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral,” Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden warned in a joint statement.

The European Union, which clinched a deal with Washington in July for most EU exports to face a 15-per cent US levy, has called an extraordinary meeting of its ambassadors in Brussels on Sunday.

France’s President Emmanuel Macron will ask the EU to activate a never-before-used “anti-coercion instrument” against the United States if Trump makes good on his tariff threat, Macron’s aides said.

The bloc’s weapon - dubbed its trade “bazooka” - allows for curbing imports of goods and services into the EU, a market of 27 countries with a combined population of 450 million.

Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire to seize Greenland since returning to the White House for a second term. His rhetoric towards that goal has hardened since he ordered a military operation against Venezuela early this month to capture its leader, Nicolas Maduro. Trump and his administration

EUROPE HITS BACK AT TRUMP
TARIFF THREAT OVER GREENLAND



Military personnel from the German Armed Forces Bundeswehr wait to board the Icelandair flight leaving Nuuk airport for Reykjavik on Sunday. — **AFP**

French President Macron will ask the EU to activate “anti-coercion instrument” against the US if Trump makes good on his tariff threat

have argued that Greenland coming under US rule would serve American “national security”.

He and his aides have also argued that Denmark - although a Nato ally - would be unable to defend Greenland should Russia or China ever seek to invade.

Denmark and several of its

European Nato allies responded by recently sending small numbers of military personnel to Greenland for an exercise, to which the United States was also invited.

Some German soldiers were seen boarding a flight on Sunday to leave Greenland after completing a recon mission. — **AFP**

Nasa moves rocket to launch pad ahead of moon mission

KENNEDY SPACE CENTRE: Nasa on Sunday rolled out its towering SLS rocket and Orion spacecraft as it began preparations for its first crewed mission to the Moon in more than 50 years.

The manoeuvre, which takes up to 12 hours, will allow the US space agency to begin a string of tests for the Artemis 2 mission, which could blast off as early as February 6.

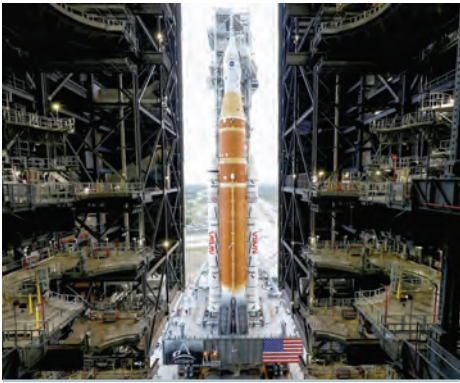
The immense orange and white Space Launch System rocket and the Orion vessel were slowly wheeled out of the Vehicle Assembly Building at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, and painstakingly moved 6.5 km to Launch Pad 39B.

If the tests are all satisfactory, three Americans and one Canadian will head to the Moon sometime between February 6 and the end of April — they will not land, but instead fly around Earth’s satellite.

The mission — which would last about 10 days — would be a huge step towards Americans once again setting foot on the lunar surface, a goal announced by President Donald Trump in his first term.

“We’re making history,” Artemis 2 mission management team chair John Honeycutt told a press conference on Friday.

US astronauts Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover and Christina Koch,



Nasa’s next-generation moon rocket, the SLS rocket with the Orion crew capsule, rolls from the Vehicle Assembly Building to the launch pad at the Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on Sunday. — **Reuters**

along with Canada’s Jeremy Hansen, were on site for the rocket’s rollout.

“I’m actually pretty pumped to see that,” Hansen told reporters. “In just a few weeks, you’re going to see four humans fly around the moon, and if we’re doing that now, imagine what we can do next.”

Glover added: “We’re swinging for the fence, trying to make the impossible possible.”

The uncrewed Artemis 1 mission took place in November 2022 after multiple postponements and two failed launch attempts.

Nasa hopes to put humans back on the Moon as China forges ahead with a rival effort that is targeting

2030 at the latest for its first crewed mission. Its uncrewed Chang’e 7 mission is expected to be launched in 2026 for an exploration of the Moon’s south pole, and testing of its crewed spacecraft Mengzhou is also set to go ahead this year. Nasa is hoping that the Moon could be used to help prepare future missions to Mars. But the programme has been plagued by delays.

The US space agency surprised many late last year when it said Artemis 2 could happen as soon as February — an acceleration explained by the Trump administration’s wish to beat China to the punch. — **AFP**

OMAN



SHORT TAKE



The festival is accompanied by activities at Al Buraimi Oasis Square. — ONA

WINTER EVENTS
DAZZLE WITH
AL BURAIMI
LIGHTS FESTIVAL

AL BURAIMI: Al Buraimi Lights Festival, currently underway in the Wilayat of Al Buraimi, offers an innovative visual experience and highlights the historical and cultural landmarks of Al Buraimi Governorate in a modern and creative style. Light and projection displays have transformed several prominent locations into interactive platforms that reflect the cultural identity with a contemporary spirit.

The displays are distributed across four main landmarks: Al Buraimi Gateway, Al Hilla Fort, Al Khandaq Fort and Al Buraimi Oasis (City Centre).

The festival is accompanied by activities at Al Buraimi Oasis Square, including: the Wamdat Idrak (Glimpse of Awareness) exhibition specialising in lighting, an open-air theatre for artistic performances and folk troupes, musical concerts, booths for local artisans and producers, electronic and electric games, face painting and a food court, all of which provide a comprehensive experience suitable for all ages.

The Al Buraimi Winter Festival is aimed at positioning the governorate as a focal point and attractive tourist destination during the winter season. The programme was characterised by its diversity with a clear focus on the current events being held at Al Buraimi Park, which proved to be a major magnet for visitors. Al Buraimi Governorate is also preparing to host a motorsports championship as part of the Al Buraimi Winter Festival programme. — ONA



‘Zaree Khasab’ tourism project in Musandam highlights Omani heritage

KHASAB: The ‘Zaree Khasab’ project in Musandam Governorate embodies a unique tourism experience that merges the charm of the location with the depth of cultural memory.

The project seeks to enhance the governorate’s position on the global tourism map by providing interactive cultural content that showcases local heritage in a manner that resonates with diverse cultures.

Eng Iman al Salti, the project owner, said the project was established in 2012 with a vision rooted in the belief that true tourism allows visitors to interact with the soul of a place and its people. Launched as a corporate social responsibility initiative by OMRAN Group, the project initially focused on empowering 50 local women through training programmes in hospitality, entrepreneurship, and the English and Italian languages,



The project was established with a vision rooted in the belief that true tourism allows visitors to interact with the place and its people. — ONA

thereby building their capacities to engage in tourism and cultural activities.

She added that, based on this foundation, the project works to transform the tourist from a passive recipient into an active participant in the cultural details of Musandam through sensory experiences based on touch, observation and direct practice.

Al Salti stated that the project offers an integrated tourism

experience that combines the introduction of the governorate’s cultural heritage with support for the local economy.

A key feature of this experience is the sale of souvenirs and handicrafts made by Musandam artisans; each piece carries a story inspired by the governorate’s marine and mountainous environments, becoming a “cultural ambassador” that travels with the visitor across the globe. — ONA

OMANI SECURES RARE VIDEOS FROM 1970S FROM BRISTOL ARCHIVES

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 18

Abdulwahab al Busaidy, board member of the Oman Astronomical Society (OAS) and a passionate stargazer, has secured rights to a rare collection of videos from the Bristol Archives, donated by Sir Donald Hawley, who was the first British ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman between 1971 and 1975.

Al Busaidy says he was so enthralled after hearing about the collection and travelled all the way to the Bristol Museum to take a look at them.

“I was so excited about the



Abdulwahab al Busaidy

collections and wanted to see the videos shot during our childhood days, and I decided to travel to the UK just to see them. I was then granted permission to use them,” Abdulwahab told the Observer. “I

am in talks with the authorities to give these collections a better public view,” he added.

Sir Donald Hawley’s collection, kept at the Bristol Museum, consists of 47 rolls of film of various lengths, reflecting his extensive career and travels as a colonial diplomat and lawyer. The earlier films show his time in the United Arab Emirates (the then Trucial States) and include visits around the area, both official and unofficial. There are shots of ceremonies including the celebration of Eid, ceremonial dances and the recognition of Shaikh Rashid Bin Said as Ruler of Dubai. The films show similar scenes in Muscat and

Oman generally, where Hawley held office as British Ambassador. These films include footage of Oman National Day celebrations, visits and parades, and tours around the country.

Remaining films cover Hawley’s time in Egypt and Iraq, with footage of visits to many archaeological sites. There are also a number of reels showing scenes in Malaysia, recording Hawley’s last posting overseas. The footage is interspersed with family and domestic scenes, such as the marriage of Donald Hawley to Ruth Howes, and shots of their children in various countries and settings.

Restore humanities in
higher education: Study



The study called for embracing educational and research policies that promote integration between the humanities and scientific disciplines. — ONA

A RECENTLY-CONDUCTED study called for the restoration of humanities in the higher education system, being a fundamental pillar for a balanced and sustainable knowledge-based economy.

In their study, published in the Journal of Arabian Studies under the title ‘Reimagining the Knowledge Economy: A Critical Call to Reposition the Humanities in Omani Higher Education’, Dr Maryam bint Ali al Hinaiyah, Professor of Intercultural Communication, and Prof Mohammed bin Ali al Balushi, Professor of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, assert that prevailing discourses on the knowledge-based economy often reduce concepts of progress and innovation to scientific and technological aspects only disregarding humanities and social sciences, despite their pivotal role in developing critical thinking, promoting ethical values and consolidating cultural identity.

The study pointed to the gap between national strategic directions, as outlined by Oman Vision 2040 and the Cultural Strategy 2021–2040, which emphasise the importance of national identity, culture and creativity,

and the actual practices in higher education institutions, which tend to prioritise scientific, technological and business disciplines.

The study revealed that the humanities maintain a significant presence, particularly in the fields of education, society and culture. However, this presence is gradually declining compared to engineering and technical disciplines, especially among students studying abroad.

The study concluded by emphasising that investing in humanities contributes to preparing generations that possess technical competence alongside cultural and ethical awareness, thereby strengthening the path of comprehensive and balanced development in the Sultanate of Oman.

Dr Maryam bint Ali al Hinaiyah, Assistant Professor of Intercultural Communication, in the Department of English Language and Translation at Sultan Qaboos University, said: “The study is part of an extended intellectual project that began within a research grant since 2022, and aims to rethink the position of humanities and the knowledge production system in higher education institutions. On an academic level, the project stems

from a profound and systematic critique of neoliberalism, which has redefined education as a purely economic tool, where the value of knowledge is measured by its profitability, not by its contribution to building individuals or society.”

Prof Mohammed bin Ali al Balushi, Professor of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, explained that humanities play a pivotal role in restoring humanity to the centre of the cognitive process.

These disciplines do not treat elements as readily available data, but rather as phenomena imbued with meaning, requiring understanding before application and interpretation before implementation.

He went on to say that the presence of history, anthropology, archaeology, philosophy, and other humanities disciplines within the higher education system trains students and researchers to interpret the cultural contexts they engage with, and to grasp the relationship between material and intangible heritage, between place and memory and between development and meaning. — ONA

SHORT TAKES



19 Omani artists presented contemporary works in the exhibition.

OMANI ART AMBASSADORS SHINE AT COLOURS OF THE EAST EXHIBITION

MANAMA: Oman’s Art Ambassadors team made a strong cultural statement as guest of honour at the ‘Colours of the East International Art Exhibition’ 2026, which opened in Manama in celebration of Bahraini Diplomatic Day under the auspices of Sayyid Faisal bin Harib al Busaidy, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The exhibition, one of the region’s most prominent international art events, brought together artists from more than 30 countries, showcasing a rich diversity of styles and schools that reflect the breadth of global artistic expression.

The Omani Art Ambassadors’ participation highlighted Oman’s growing cultural presence on the international stage. Nineteen Omani artists presented contemporary works inspired by Omani heritage, identity and modern creative vision, enriching the exhibition’s visual landscape and strengthening artistic dialogue between cultures.

A key highlight was the launch of the team’s international travelling exhibition ‘Marafea’, whose name draws inspiration from ports as meeting points that connect peoples and cultures. The project aims to carry Omani art to multiple cultural destinations inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman, positioning art as a bridge for dialogue and human connection.

In a speech delivered on behalf of the team, visual artist Samia bint Salem al Gharibiyah said that ‘Marafea’ reflects the team’s vision of presenting Omani art as a cultural bridge between nations, and that choosing Bahrain as the first stop carries deep historical and cultural significance.

Dr Saud bin Nasser al Hunaini, head of the Omani Art Ambassadors team, said the guest-of-honour participation represents an important milestone, reflecting international confidence in the artistic calibre of Omani creators. He noted that the travelling exhibition is part of a strategic vision to strengthen Oman’s artistic presence globally and enhance the role of art as soft power for cultural dialogue. — ONA

JABAL AL AKHDHAR VISITOR NUMBERS RISE 9.1% IN 2025



Omani visitors led the arrivals with 82,142 numbers.

AL JABAL AL AKHDHAR: The Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate recorded 222,151 visitors in 2025, up from 203,629 in 2024 — a 9.1 per cent increase, according to figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Omani visitors led the arrivals with 82,142, followed by Saudis (14,957), Emiratis (1,588), Kuwaitis (1,441), Qataris (779) and Bahrainis (699). Visitors from other Arab nationalities numbered 9,902, while foreign nationals formed the largest share at 110,643.

The growth has been driven by the availability of quality hotel facilities, rest houses and tourist lodges, along with a strong calendar of events. Al Jabal Al Akhdhar’s reputation as a leading eco-and adventure-tourism destination — offering valley walks, cave visits and mountain climbing — has also enhanced its appeal, while giving visitors a chance to experience the local culture of its mountain villages. — ONA

AL MUGHSAIL ROAD AND BRIDGE IN DHOFAR TO BE COMPLETED BY SEPTEMBER

SALALAH: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) said that the construction of the Al Mughsayl road and bridge in the Wilayat of Salalah is ahead of schedule and is expected to be completed in September.

The project complements the Raysut-Al Mughsayl Road project. Designed to high-quality specifications, it ensures uninterrupted traffic flow even during heavy rains.

The project is also important for the tourism industry due to its proximity to numerous tourist sites in Dhofar Governorate.

The overall cost of the project exceeds RO 9 million and it includes the construction of a 630-metre-long concrete bridge supported by 20



The 630-metre-long concrete bridge is projected to cost over RO 9 million.

pillars and two 13-metre-high side piers. The bridge has six decorative arches ranging in height between 35.9 metres and 45.9 metres. Additionally, parking areas are being constructed on both sides of the road, along with a footbridge and an underpass to facilitate access to other tourist sites. The MoTCIT

said that the project complements efforts aimed to enhance the efficiency of the road network in Dhofar Governorate and improve connectivity between Salalah and the western wilayats of the Dhofar Governorate. With a height of 13 metres, Al Mughsayl bridge is able to withstand severe weather conditions.

Al Mughsayl Road and Bridge project will improve traffic flow from Salalah to the wilayats of Rakhout and Dhalkout in western Dhofar Governorate.

It will also serve as a route to the border crossing with the Republic of Yemen as well as boost tourism due to its proximity to the Marneef Cave, Al Mughsayl fountains and Al Mughsayl waterfront.

Students transform waste into opportunities

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, JAN 18

YOUNG INNOVATORS from Al Batinah North are demonstrating that environmental responsibility can begin in school corridors and evolve into solutions that benefit society.

Through the environmental initiative ‘A Green Society, Without Loss’, students are placing sustainability, innovation and waste reduction at the heart of creative learning.

The initiative, organised by the General-Directorate of Agricultural and Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources in Suhar, in cooperation with the General-Directorate of Education in Al Batinah North, encourages schools to rethink food waste and agricultural surplus by transforming them into value-added, eco-friendly products.

This year’s projects stood out for their practicality, creativity and potential for long-term impact, moving well beyond awareness campaigns to present solutions with genuine market potential.

Khalda al Khatri, supervisor of the initiative, said the programme was designed to shift students’ mindsets from consumption to innovation. “We wanted students to see waste not as an endpoint, but as a starting point for creativity,” she said.

“The projects we witnessed reflect a deep understanding of environmental responsibility and offer practical examples of the knowledge-based economy being implemented in schools, which aligns closely with Oman Vision 2040.”

Among the most notable innovations was a project developed by students of Al Safaa School in Suhar, where discarded cucumbers



The projects for this year stood out for their practicality, creativity and potential for long-term impact.

were transformed into a natural aromatic oil. Marketed under the name CUCO FRESH, the product demonstrated how simple agricultural waste could be repurposed into environmentally friendly alternatives to chemical-based products.

Another standout project came from Al Ghaizain School, which secured second place with an initiative focused on converting surplus cucumbers into organic compost to improve soil quality and reduce agricultural waste.

The project impressed judges with its clear implementation plan and measurable environmental benefits.

Rahma al Ajmi, who leads the second-place team from Al Ghaizain School, said the experience reshaped how students view everyday waste. “We realised that food waste affects not only the environment but also the economy,” she explained.

“Our project aims to support sustainable agriculture while reducing household and farm waste. This competition gave us the confidence to believe that our ideas can truly make a difference.” Beyond competition, the initiative has strengthened collaboration between students, teachers and local communities, reinforcing sustainability as a shared responsibility.

Participating schools documented their projects through videos and detailed reports, ensuring that innovation was matched with learning, reflection and accountability.

As these student-led solutions continue to gain attention, ‘A Green Society, Without Loss’ is emerging as more than a school competition.

It is evolving into a platform for nurturing environmentally conscious citizens capable of transforming local challenges into sustainable national opportunities.

‘Ji’ spring in Sadah rejuvenated to boost tourism

SADAH: The Directorate General of Agricultural, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar Governorate has completed the maintenance and rehabilitation of the ‘Ji’ spring in the Wilayat of Sadah, one of the governorate’s rare natural springs.

This initiative is part of ongoing efforts to safeguard water resources, in coordination with the Office of the Wali of Sadah.

Located just 20 metres from the coast between the Hadbin area and the Niabat of Hasik, the ‘Ji’ spring remains unaffected by tides or high waves during the Khareef season, making it a unique natural feature.

Shaikh Ahmed bin Ali al Daree, Wali of Sadah, confirmed that the supplementary phase of the project is underway. This includes constructing parking areas, landscaping, and installing informational and directional signage to



The spring is a unique hydrogeological phenomenon fed by deep underground aquifer.

enhance visitor experience. He emphasised that these efforts align with broader plans to develop Sadah’s tourism and environmental assets in a sustainable and organised manner.

Engineer Ali bin Bakhit Bait Saeed, Director of the Water Resources Department at the Directorate, highlighted the

spring’s historical importance as a primary water source for local residents, abalone divers, and livestock, while also supporting local wildlife.

He described the spring as a unique hydrogeological phenomenon, fed by a deep underground aquifer protected from saltwater intrusion, ensuring a

continuous flow of fresh, high-quality water. The maintenance work included site cleaning, basin restoration, reinforced concrete repairs, construction of staircases and walkways for visitor safety, stone retaining walls, and a drainage outlet.

In 2025, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) completed rehabilitation work on 12 water springs across Dhofar Governorate, with active community involvement.

— ONA



SHAIKH AHMED BIN ALI AL DAREE

Wali of Sadah



ADVENTURE NIGHTS AT WADI AL KHOUDH

WADI AL KHOUDH HAS EMERGED AS MUSCAT NIGHTS’ ADRENALINE HUB, BLENDING EXTREME OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES WITH A FAMILY-FRIENDLY FESTIVAL ATMOSPHERE



IDRIS AL BALUSHI

SINCE its launch, Muscat Nights has drawn visitors from across the Sultanate of Oman with a rich mix of venues and experiences that transform public spaces into vibrant hubs of culture, entertainment and community life. Among this season’s standout destinations is Wadi Al Khoudh, a venue that has carved a distinctive identity by putting outdoor adventure and extreme activities at the heart of the festival experience.

Located between Al Khoudh and Maabela, Wadi Al Khoudh blends dramatic natural scenery with high-energy entertainment.

Designed as an open-air

destination for the whole family, it reflects Muscat Nights’ wider ambition to revitalise domestic tourism, encourage community participation and support small local businesses. Food stalls, SME kiosks and live performances create a festive atmosphere that is both welcoming and dynamic.

At the centre of the action is the Adventure Zone, one of the most popular attractions at Muscat Nights. Built around movement, exploration and challenge, it delivers a range of adrenaline-fuelled experiences including ziplining, quad biking, rope courses, paintball, laser tag, archery, target shooting, scooter rides and remote-control car circuits, alongside physical challenge trails that build teamwork and confidence.

All activities are professionally managed under strict safety protocols, ensuring excitement and security go hand in hand.

Balancing the thrills are family-friendly attractions such as a mini zoo, sensory play areas, face painting, Hot Wheels experiences and classic carnival games, allowing visitors of all ages to share the same space while enjoying experiences tailored to their interests.

For many families, the setting itself enhances the experience. “The outdoor setting along the valley, with the cool breeze and open space, makes the night feel peaceful yet full of life,” said Kamla al Farsi, a mother visiting Muscat Nights. “I’ve visited several venues, but this one truly stands out for its atmosphere and adventure rides. The children especially love the bumper cars, archery and the zipline.”

Twelve-year old Numair al Riyami described conquering the long zipline as his highlight. “I was nervous at first, but seeing the whole venue from above made it worth it,” he said. “After that, I felt brave enough to try the climbing wall and even ride the biggest horse. It was the best feeling ever,” he concluded.

Undergraduate student Waleed al Balushi said the venue appeals to all age groups. “The virtual-reality racing simulator was intense – you feel every turn and brake,” he said. “And the mini zoo was a surprise. Interacting with snakes and giant lizards was unbelievable.”

Open from 5 pm to 11 pm on weekdays and until midnight at weekends, with fireworks lighting up the sky every weekend at 8.30 pm, Wadi Al Khoudh continues to energise Muscat Nights – proving that in this valley, adventure truly takes centre stage.



SHORT TAKES



The new park reflects Nakhal’s commitment to creating integrated recreational spaces.

NAKHAL PUBLIC PARK REOPENS IN A NEW LOOK

NAKHAL: Nakhal Public Park in Al Batinah South Governorate was officially reopened after the completion of major development and renovation works, under the auspices of Nasr bin Hamoud al Kindi, Secretary-General of the Royal Court Affairs.

The project, one of the governorate’s most prominent service and leisure developments this year, reflects Nakhal’s commitment to creating integrated recreational spaces that cater to all segments of society.

Spanning about 50,000 square metres, the park was completed at a cost exceeding RO 459,000, with total investment surpassing RO 550,000. The 16-month project upgraded all facilities to the highest standards of quality, safety and sustainability. The revamped park features expansive green areas, shaded walking paths and seating, children’s play zones and an open-air theatre for cultural and community events. Visitors can also enjoy a waterfall and dry fountain area, prayer rooms for men and women with restrooms; and two commercial kiosks offering various services.

Shaikh Khalifa bin Saleh al Busaidy, Wali of Nakhal, said the project is a qualitative addition to the state’s recreational infrastructure and underscores ongoing efforts to enhance quality of life and strengthen social and tourism activity. Project Manager Engineer Balqis bint Hamad al Subhi said the park was developed to the highest standards of quality and safety; and is expected to become a key leisure destination for residents and visitors alike.

On the investment side, the park includes an equestrian area, an electric games zone and a motorcycle area, supporting diverse recreational options and local investment opportunities.

— ONA



AL TAHAIM WINTER SEASON RETURNS FOR ITS THIRD EDITION FROM JAN 21

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The third edition of the Al Tahaim Winter Season is set to launch from January 21 to February 7, promising an enhanced winter experience that blends culture, recreation and family-friendly activities.

The organising committee has finalised all logistical and technical preparations, transforming this year’s season from a series of events into a comprehensive winter attraction.

The programme features innovative design and a variety of activities that combine cultural heritage with open-air tourism, offering visitors seamless transitions between entertainment, education



and leisure in a setting that reflects Al Tahaim’s unique character.

Mohammed bin Ali bin Amer Akaak, Wali of Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan and the Chairman of the Organising Committee, said the third edition follows best practices in tourism season planning, execution and experience design. “Our focus is on innovative content, integrated events and diverse activities to

create an exceptional experience that exceeds expectations”, he added. He noted that the season is fully supported by the private sector, including Oman LNG and Oman India Fertiliser Company, highlighting the private sector’s role in boosting tourism and maximising economic and social impact. Visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman are invited to enjoy a winter wonderland where every detail — from venue to events — enhances the overall experience.

The festival also emphasises sustainability and the promotion of Omani identity, leveraging the governorate’s natural environment to appeal to all age groups while supporting tourism and the local economy.

1st annual tourism security symposium on January 19

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

GLOBAL experts in tourism security, hospitality safety and risk management will converge in Oman for the first annual symposium on the Security of Tourism Facilities 2026, a landmark event aimed at enhancing safety and sustainability across the country’s fast-growing tourism sector.

Held under the auspices of Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, the symposium is organised by Security and Safety Services and will take place from Monday, January 19, to Tuesday, January 20, at Kempinski Hotel, Al Mouj.

Recognised as one of the most specialised tourism security events on the 2026 calendar, the symposium will bring together senior security leaders, international consultants, policymakers and top executives from the hotel and hospitality industry.

The two-day forum is designed as a high-level knowledge-sharing platform to transfer global expertise, localise international best practices and support the sustainable growth of Oman’s tourism ecosystem.

The symposium will be led by Brig Gen (Retd) Saeed bin Suleiman Al Asmi, Chief Executive Officer of Security and Safety Services. With more than three decades of experience in policing operations and national security policy development, Al Asmi is widely recognised for his contributions to critical infrastructure protection, preventive security strategies and institutional sustainability frameworks.

Joining him is Kate Ainslie, a globally respected hospitality safety and security specialist with extensive experience working with major international brands including Hilton and Soho House. Kate is known for her expertise



The main theme of the symposium is positioned as a strategic link between risk management and technological innovation.

in regulatory compliance and for fostering strong safety cultures within hotel operations, supported by advanced academic training in terrorism and security studies.

Another key international participant is Steven Thompson, a leading authority in tourism and aviation security with over 20 years of consultancy experience advising governments, airport authorities and port operators worldwide.

Steven will share insights on maintaining robust security standards while preserving a seamless visitor experience, in line with ICAO and IATA international frameworks.

The symposium will also welcome Callum Anderson, a senior tourism and hospitality operations leader with more than 25 years of experience managing international airports and high-density travel environments.

Anderson is particularly recognised for his leadership in post-Covid-19 recovery strategies, driving operational and financial excellence while enhancing traveller confidence and satisfaction.

Adding further depth to the discussions is Michael O’Neill, CSyP, Managing Director of Optimal Risk Group and one of the world’s foremost certified security professionals. With a background that bridges military service and

private-sector leadership, Michael brings extensive expertise in risk management, organisational resilience and security policy development in complex and high-risk environments. He is also an influential member of the British Security Institute.

National perspectives will be highlighted through the participation of Yousef bin Rashid al Mafrigi, Acting Director of Human Resource Development for the Heritage and Tourism Sectors at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

Al Mafrigi will present a paper titled ‘Enhancing Hotel Security to Achieve a Safe Tourism Environment’, emphasising the importance of institutional policies, workforce development and public-private partnerships in strengthening security preparedness.

A central theme of the 2026 symposium is Smart Tourism Security, positioned as a strategic link between risk management, technological innovation and economic sustainability.

Sessions will explore the role of advanced technologies, data analytics and modern governance frameworks in building resilient tourism infrastructure. International studies indicate that smart security systems can reduce operational risks by up to 35 per cent, while simultaneously improving guest satisfaction and investor confidence.

The symposium forms a key pillar of its 2026 strategy to build an advanced security knowledge ecosystem.

The initiative aims to strengthen Oman’s tourism sector through qualified human capital, innovative security solutions and effective international collaboration.

The symposium marks an important milestone in positioning Oman as a regional model for integrating security, technology and economic sustainability — reinforcing its reputation as a safe, resilient and investment-attractive tourism destination.

IndOman International Film Festival 2026 in Muscat from Feb 2 to 8

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The IndOman International Film Festival (IIFF) 2026 was officially launched with a Curtain Raiser ceremony in Muscat, setting the stage for a landmark celebration of cinema and cultural collaboration between India, Oman and the wider region. Held under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and in partnership with

the Embassy of India in Oman, the festival marks 70 years of India–Oman diplomatic relations and highlights cinema as a powerful bridge for creative exchange and industry partnership.

The ceremony was inaugurated by G V Srinivas, Ambassador of India to Oman, with the Arab Film Industry International Convention theme jointly launched with Agis Loizou, Ambassador of Cyprus and Chair of the EU Group.



G V Srinivas, Ambassador of India to Oman, opened the ceremony along with Sudha Sha, Festival Director and others.

Organised by Seventh Art Creations under the leadership of Festival Director Sudha Sha, IIFF 2026 will run from February 2 to 8 in Muscat, featuring international screenings, industry forums, training programmes and co-production opportunities, with a strong focus on collaboration, talent development and positioning Oman as a regional hub for film, culture and creative tourism.

A key highlight of the Curtain

Raiser was the launch of the collaborative film programme, Learn & Shoot With Masters — Anthology Initiative, inaugurated by master directors Meera al Macki and Nilanjana Sha, along with Gernot Weidner, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Austria.

The initiative will train over 500 emerging talents across key disciplines of filmmaking, with selected stories moving into production.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Syrian army members stand inside the Euphrates Dam, in Tabqa. — Reuters

SYRIAN FORCES SEIZE MAJOR EASTERN OIL, GAS FIELDS

DAMASCUS: Syrian troops fighting Kurdish-led forces seized the Omar oil field, the country’s largest, and the Conoco gas field in the eastern Deir Al Zor province as allied tribal forces advanced in the oil-rich area along the border with Iraq, officials and security sources said on Sunday. The takeover of the oil fields that lie east of the Euphrates River — a main source of revenue for the Kurdish-led forces — was a major blow to the group.

Syrian government officials said the oil wealth the militia had controlled to sustain its self-administered region had deprived the state of much-needed resources. Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa said last week it was unacceptable for a group to control a quarter of the country and hold its main oil and commodities resources. The Syrian army pressed ahead into areas of northeast Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), despite US calls to halt its advance.

Syrian government officials said the advances effectively brought most of Deir Al Zor province - the country’s main oil- and wheat-producing area along the Euphrates - under their control. Late on Saturday, the army also took control of the northern city of Tabqa and its adjacent dam, as well as the major Freedom Dam, formerly known as the Baath Dam, west of Raqqa. — Reuters

INDONESIA FINDS WRECKAGE OF MISSING PLANE

JAKARTA: Indonesian authorities said on Sunday they had located the wreckage of a fisheries surveillance plane that went missing in South Sulawesi province on the slope of a fog-covered mountain and had recovered the body of one of the 10 people on board. The ATR 42-500 turboprop owned by aviation group Indonesia Air Transport (IAT) lost contact with air traffic control on Saturday at about 1:30 pm local time around the Maros region in South Sulawesi.

On Sunday morning, local rescuers found the wreckage in different locations around Mount Bulusaraung in the Maros region, said Andi Sultan, an official at South Sulawesi’s rescue agency. The mountain is roughly 1,500 km (930 miles) northeast of the sprawling island nation’s capital, Jakarta. “Our helicopter crews have seen the debris of the plane’s window at 7:46 am,” Sultan said. “And around 7:49 am, we discovered large parts of the aircraft, suspected to be the fuselage of the plane,” he said, adding the tail of the plane was also seen at the bottom of the mountain slope.

Personnel have been deployed to the locations where the wreckage was discovered, Sultan said, adding the search was hampered by thick fog and mountainous terrain. On Sunday afternoon, rescuers found a crash victim’s body in a ravine around 200m from Mount Bulusaraung’s peak, Sultan said. The status of the other nine people on board was not yet known. — Reuters

NATIONWIDE BLAZES

Chile declares emergency over wildfires



Chilean President Gabriel Boric declared a state of emergency for two southern regions where raging wildfires have forced about 20,000 people to evacuate their homes. Firefighters were battling 19 blazes across the country, 12 of which were in the regions of Nuble and Biobio, south of the capital Santiago. “In the face of the ongoing serious fires, I have decided to declare a state of natural disaster for the Nuble and Biobio regions,” the left-wing president said. — AFP

SUDANESE PUT THROUGH ‘HELL’ AS ADVANCED WEAPONS FUEL WAR

PORT SUDAN: Nearly three years of war have put the Sudanese people through “hell”, the UN’s rights chief said on Sunday, blasting the vast sums spent on advanced weaponry at the expense of humanitarian aid and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Speaking in Port Sudan during his first wartime visit, UN Human Rights commissioner Volker Turk said the population had endured “horror and hell”, calling it “despicable” that funds that “should

be used to alleviate the suffering of the population” are instead spent on advanced weapons, particularly drones.

More than 21 million people are facing acute food insecurity, and two-thirds of Sudan’s population is in urgent need of humanitarian aid, according to the UN.

In addition to the world’s largest hunger and displacement crisis, Sudan is also facing “the increasing militarisation of society by all parties to the conflict, including

through the arming of civilians and recruitment and use of children”, Turk added.

He said he had heard testimony of “unbearable” atrocities from survivors of attacks in Darfur, and warned of similar crimes unfolding in the Kordofan region — the current epicentre of the fighting. Testimony of these atrocities must be heard by “the commanders of this conflict and those who are arming, funding and profiting from this war”, he said. — AFP

Iran considers restoring Internet after shutdown

IRANIAN authorities have said they are considering “gradually” restoring Internet access after imposing an unprecedented communications shutdown 10 days ago, which rights groups say masked violent protests that killed thousands. Demonstrations sparked in late December by anger over economic hardship exploded into protests widely seen as the biggest challenge to the Iranian leadership in years. Iranian officials have said the demonstrations were peaceful before turning into “riots” and blamed foreign influence, namely from Iran’s foes, the United States and Israel.

Government officials have said calm has been restored, with schools reopening on Sunday — Iran’s weekend falling on Thursday and Friday — after a week of closure. Late on Saturday, the Tasnim news agency reported “the relevant authorities announced that Internet access would also be gradually restored”, but gave no further details. Citing an unnamed “informed source”, the agency said local messaging applications “will soon be activated” on Iran’s domestic Intranet.

On Sunday morning, it was able to connect to the Internet from its Tehran office, though the vast majority of Internet providers and mobile Internet remain cut. Outgoing international calls have been possible since Tuesday, and text messaging was restored on Saturday morning. For days, text messages and international phone



Iranian FM Abbas Araghchi attends a press conference with Iraqi FM Fuad Hussein in Tehran. — Reuters

Outgoing international calls have been possible since Tuesday, and text messaging was restored on Saturday morning. Iran has since been relying on its Intranet, which has supported local media websites, ride-hailing apps, delivery service and banking platforms

calls — and at times even local calls — were cut off. Iran has since been relying on its Intranet, which has supported local media websites, ride-hailing apps, delivery service and banking platforms.

Despite the restrictions, information had still filtered out, with reports of atrocities emerging, according to rights groups. Amnesty International said it had verified dozens of videos and accounts in recent days.

Norway-based rights group Iran Human Rights (IHR) says it has verified the deaths of 3,428 protesters killed by security forces, confirming cases through sources within the Islamic republic’s health and medical system, eyewitnesses and multiple independent sources. Iran’s supreme leader said

on Saturday that authorities “must break the back of the seditionists”, whom he accused of killing thousands during the wave of protests that were brutally repressed in the country.

The demonstrations were sparked by anger over economic hardship that exploded into the biggest protests against the Islamic republic in more than three years. But demonstrations have subsided after the crackdown that rights groups say left thousands of people dead under an Internet blackout that has lasted more than a week. Schools were set to resume on Sunday, the ISNA news agency said, following a one-week closure, with postponed university exams set to be held in a week.

Authorities have said demonstrations they condemn as “riots” had been controlled and calm returned, with state-aligned media reporting thousands of arrests. “The Iranian nation must break the back of the seditionists just as it broke the back of the sedition,” supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told supporters during a televised address. “We do not intend to lead the country to war, but we will not spare domestic criminals,” he added, saying “international criminals” were “worse”.

On Sunday, Iran’s judiciary spokesman Asghar Jahangir reiterated that swift trials would be held. “All those who played a decisive role in these calls for violence, which led to bloodshed and significant damage to public finances, will not be spared,” he said. — AFP

MASSIVE FIRE IN KARACHI DESTROYS SHOPPING CENTRE



KARACHI: Firefighters in Pakistan’s largest city were fighting to extinguish a massive blaze on Sunday that has killed six people and reduced parts of a shopping mall to rubble in Karachi’s historic downtown. Videos showed flames rising from the building as firefighters laboured through the night to stop the fire from spreading in the dense business district. Hundreds of people had gathered around the building, including distraught store owners whose businesses had turned to ash.

The fire erupted on Saturday night, with rescue services receiving a call at 10:38 pm reporting that ground floor shops at Gul Plaza were ablaze. “When we arrived, the fire from the ground floor had spread to the upper floors, and almost the entire building was already engulfed in flames,” Rescue 1122 spokesperson Hassanul Haseeb Khan said. Police surgeon Dr Summaiya Syed said six bodies had been brought to Karachi’s Civil Hospital and 11 people who had been injured. — Reuters

MOUNTAINS VICTIMS

Austria deadly avalanche brings toll to 8



An avalanche killed three Czech skiers in central Austria, police said, bringing the total to eight killed in the country’s Alps. An avalanche swept away three of a group of seven Czech ski tourists in the Murtal district in Styria province, burying them completely, police said in a statement. “Emergency responders were able to locate and partially dig out the buried victims,” they added. “Despite immediate rescue efforts, the three individuals were found dead.” — AFP

BORDER INCIDENTS

4 neutralised in incident on Afghan border



Tajikistan officials on Sunday said they “neutralised” four “terrorists” who crossed over from neighbouring Afghanistan in an area where deadly incidents have been on the rise in recent weeks, state media reported. According to Tajik security services, “four terrorists were neutralised” after they refused to put down arms in the southern Khatlon region. Tajik authorities have reported at least five deadly incidents on the mountainous border. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



A worker starts a power generator in the town of Borodianka, Ukraine. — AFP

RUSSIA OFFICIALS
BLAME UKRAINE
FOR POWER CUTS

MOSCOW: More than 200,000 homes in Russian-occupied southern Ukraine were left without power following a Ukrainian army attack, the Moscow-installed authorities said on Sunday. “Following an enemy attack on the region’s energy infrastructure, a large part of the Zaporizhzhia region has been left without electricity,” Moscow-installed official Yevgeny Balitsky said on Telegram. According to Balitsky, the attack cut power to 213,000 customers and 386 localities in the Zaporizhzhia region. Vladimir Saldo, the Moscow-installed governor of the neighbouring Kherson region, said on Saturday evening that a Ukrainian strike had hit an electrical substation, causing outages in 14 towns and 450 villages. He later said that emergency repair work had restored power. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last week declared a “state of emergency” for the sector and said work was under way to increase the country’s electricity imports. “The situation in the energy system remains difficult, but we are doing everything we can to restore all services as quickly as possible,” he said on Sunday. According to Ukraine’s air force, Russia launched 201 drones overnight from Saturday to Sunday, 167 of which were shot down. Two people were killed, Zelensky said. — AFP

HAITI STARTS ANTI-GANG OPERATION



Haitian security forces are conducting a large-scale operation in gang-controlled areas, with a strike targeting the home of a major gang kingpin, the Haitian National Police said. A drone attack in the capital Port-au-Prince targeted one of the homes of Jimmy Cherizier, known as “Barbecue,” who is leader of the Viv Ansanm criminal gang coalition, the communications officer for the national police said. Drone explosions could be heard throughout the day. Haitian police say they hope to “regain control of the capital in the short term” thanks to a series of “intensive operations” carried out since the end of December. — AFP

PORTUGAL
PRESIDENTIAL
VOTE WIDE
OPEN AS FAR-
RIGHT SURGE
EXPECTED

LISBON: Portugal started voting on Sunday in the first round of a presidential election in which a far-right candidate could for the first time make it to a run-off, but with the final result hard to call. Polls predict Andre Ventura, leader of the far-right Chega (“Enough”) party, could top the first round but would lose round two, regardless of which of the other candidates he faces there. This would be the first time in four decades that a candidate has not won outright in the first-round

ballot, which requires securing more than 50 per cent of the vote. Among the record 11 candidates standing, only five have a realistic chance of making it to the decisive vote on February 8 to succeed conservative incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. In addition to Ventura, 43, they are: Socialist Antonio Jose Seguro, 63; liberal European Parliament lawmaker Joao Cotrim Figueiredo, 64; right-wing government candidate Luis Marques Mendes, 68; and

Henrique Gouveia e Melo, a retired admiral who led Portugal’s Covid vaccination campaign. Pollsters predict any of the four of Ventura’s potential rivals would trounce him in a second-round vote. Chega won 22.8 per cent of the vote and 60 seats in a general election last May, overtaking the Socialists to become the biggest opposition party. European Union and eurozone member Portugal, a country of nearly 11 million inhabitants. — AFP

Trump’s Greenland prompt
calls for counter-measures

THE European Union faced calls on Sunday to implement a never-before-used range of economic counter-measures known as the “Anti-Coercion Instrument” as part of the bloc’s response to US President Donald Trump’s tariff threats against European allies over Greenland. Trump vowed on Saturday to implement a wave of increasing tariffs on EU members Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Finland, along with Britain and Norway, until the United States is allowed to buy Greenland, escalating a row over the future of Denmark’s vast Arctic island. All the countries, already subject to tariffs of 10 per cent and 15 per cent, have sent small numbers of military personnel to Greenland. Cyprus, holder of the rotating six-month EU presidency, summoned ambassadors to an emergency meeting in Brussels on Sunday, which EU diplomats said was due to start at 5 pm.

A source close to French President Emmanuel Macron said he was working to coordinate a European response and was pushing for activation of the Anti-Coercion Instrument, which could limit access to public tenders in the bloc or restrict trade in services in which the US has a surplus with the EU. In social media posts late on Saturday, Bernd Lange, the German Social Democrat who chairs the European Parliament’s trade committee, and Valerie Hayer, head of the centrist Renew Europe group, echoed his call, as did Germany’s engineering association on Sunday. However, some EU diplomats said now was not the time to escalate the situation. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, closer to Trump than some other EU leaders, described the tariff threat on Sunday as “a mistake” and told a briefing during a trip to Korea that she had spoken to Trump a few hours earlier and told him what she thought. She planned to call other European leaders later on Sunday. Italy has not sent troops to Greenland. Asked on Sunday about how Britain would respond to new tariffs, Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy said allies needed to work with



Greenlandic PM Jens-Frederik Nielsen takes part in a demonstration, in Nuuk. — AFP

the United States to resolve the dispute. “Our position on Greenland is non-negotiable ... It is in our collective interest to work together and not to start a war of words,” she told Sky News. The tariff threats do though call into question trade deals the United States struck with Britain in May and the European Union in July. The limited agreements have already faced criticism about their lopsided nature, with the United States maintaining broad tariffs, while their partners are required to remove import duties. The European Parliament looks likely now to suspend its work on the EU-US trade deal struck in July. The assembly had been due to vote on removing many EU import duties on January 26-27, but Manfred Weber, head of the European People’s Party, the largest group in parliament, said in a post on X late on Saturday that approval was not possible for now.

Trump’s threat came just as the European Union was signing its largest ever free trade agreement, with South American bloc Mercosur, in Paraguay. Von der Leyen said that the agreement sent a very strong signal to the rest of the world. “We choose fair trade over tariffs. We choose a productive, long-term partnership over isolation,” she said. The Netherlands’ foreign minister on Sunday said that US President Donald Trump’s threat to impose new tariffs on European allies until they agree to sell Greenland to the United States is “blackmail”. “It’s blackmail what he’s doing ... and it’s not necessary. It doesn’t help the alliance (NATO) and it also doesn’t help Greenland,” David van Weel said in an interview on Dutch television. Trump has insisted he will settle for nothing less than full ownership of Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, which he has said is vital to US security because of its strategic location and mineral deposits. Leaders of both Denmark and Greenland have said the island is not for sale and does not want to be part of the United States. — Reuters

Pentagon readies 1,500 troops to possibly deploy to Minnesota

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon has ordered about 1,500 active-duty soldiers to prepare for a possible deployment to Minnesota, the site of large protests against the government’s deportation drive, US media reported on Sunday. The army placed the units on prepare-to-deploy orders in case violence in the northern state escalates, the Washington Post reported, citing unnamed defence officials, adding that it is not clear whether any of them will be sent. The White House told the Post in a statement that it is typical for the Pentagon “to be prepared for any decision the President may or may not make.” The Pentagon and the White House did not immediately respond to requests from Reuters for comment. President Donald Trump threatened on Thursday to use the Insurrection Act to deploy military forces if officials in the state do not stop protesters from

targeting immigration officials after a surge in Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. “If the corrupt politicians of Minnesota don’t obey the law and stop the professional agitators and insurrectionists from attacking the Patriots of ICE, who are only trying to do their job, I will institute the INSURRECTION ACT,” Trump posted on his Truth Social platform. The soldiers subject to deployment specialise in cold-weather operations and are assigned to two US Army infantry battalions under the 11th Airborne Division, which is based in Alaska, the Post and ABC News reported. Confrontations between residents and federal officers have become increasingly tense in Minneapolis, Minnesota’s most-populous city, after an ICE agent fatally shot Renee Good, a US citizen and mother of three, on January 7 as she was driving away after being ordered to



Members of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) stand guard. — Reuters

exit her car. Trump, a Republican, has sent nearly 3,000 federal agents from ICE and Border Patrol to Minneapolis and neighbouring St Paul since early last week, as part of a wave of interventions, mostly to cities run by Democratic politicians. He

has said troop deployments in Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, DC, Memphis and Portland, Oregon, are necessary to fight crime and protect federal property and personnel from protesters. But this month he said he was removing the National Guard from

Chicago, Los Angeles and Portland, which have faced legal setbacks and challenges. Local leaders have accused the president of federal overreach and of exaggerating isolated episodes of violence to justify sending in troops. Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, against whom the Justice Department has opened a criminal investigation, has mobilised the state’s National Guard to support local law enforcement and emergency management agencies, the state Department of Public Safety posted on X on Saturday. The Insurrection Act is a federal law that gives the president the power to deploy the military or federalise National Guard troops inside the US to quell domestic uprisings. The law can be invoked when there are “unlawful obstructions, combinations or assemblages or rebellion” against federal authority. — Reuters

OPINION

2026 world literature: New books reflect a changing planet



SANDHYA
RAO MEHTA

The writer is
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Sultan Qaboos
University

AS the new year meanders on in often unpredictable ways, books offer the surety we crave. Of course, writers also reflect the world in which we live, but this is done with a more distant, objective eye, unlike the instant noises on social media.

The last year was momentous for non-western literary works, with such high-ticket novels like Kiran Desai’s ‘The loneliness of Sonia and Sunny’, and Arundhati Roy’s ‘Mother Mary comes to me’ cutting across geographical borders to become bestsellers. 2026 is also offering an exciting range of novels and short stories for those who like to spend time understanding and appreciating the world around us.

Geentanjali Shree, an International-Booker winning novelist, is releasing a collection of short stories entitled ‘Once elephants lived here’, exploring her previous themes of resilience and loss in a world of transition. The collection is translated by Daisy Rockwell. Another anthology of short stories is ‘The Penguin book of the international short story’ which includes such notables

as Haruki Murakami, Salman Rushdie and Han Kang. According to the publishers, the anthology aims “to provide a tour of modern fiction beyond the Western canon”.

There is also a graphic novel by Sarnath Banerjee called ‘Absolute Jafar’, exploring the author’s quest for belonging and identity as an Indian-Pakistani child living in Berlin.

A number of Arabic works of fiction and poetry are also planned for translation and release this year.

‘A mask the colour of the sky’ was written by Basim Khandagji, who won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, for his novel written in prison. This just-translated novel follows the life of a Palestinian archaeologist, Nur, who tries to understand life on the other side of the security fence.

‘Mariam, It’s Arwa’, by debut Egyptian novelist Areej Gamal, showcases the author exploring her city Cairo, as it transforms and takes new meanings and shape.

An anthology of select poetry, ‘The Palestinian wedding’, is a bilingual work that celebrates Palestinian resilience and joy in times of crisis. Poets included here are Tawfiq

Readers are looking
for something
that reveals and
reflects the world in
which we live and
offer ways to make
meaning in it

Zayyad, Walid al Halis, Salma al Jayyusi and Mahmoud Darwish.

The collection is arranged around the themes of revolution, belonging and resistance, testifying to the enduring spirit of Palestinians across the world.

For those with a penchant for technology, Yuval Harari’s ‘Nexus: A brief history of information networks from the stone age to AI’ and Mustafa Suleyman’s ‘The coming wave’ are both still very relevant to understand the larger implications of the AI revolution and its connections to our world today.

For motivation and inspiration, ‘Atomic habits’ by James Clear and ‘Talk’ by Alison Wood are still trending for their focus on habit formation and public speaking.

There is a whole range of books to choose from as the year unfolds. There is something for everyone, be it fiction, history, graphic novels or memoirs. As international trends suggest, readers are looking for something that reveals and reflects the world in which we live and offer ways to make meaning in it. Reading itself is a large leap forward.

UN WARNS OF
HUNGER CRISIS
IN WEST AND
CENTRAL AFRICA

Around 55 million people in violence-racked west and central Africa face acute food insecurity this year, and some are on the verge of famine in northern Nigeria, the United Nations said.

Violence across the region has triggered a hunger crisis that is being exacerbated by aid cuts, the UN’s World Food Programme said.

WFP said it had had to slash its food assistance in the area as funding dries up.

In west and central Africa, “a staggering 55 million people will be facing acute food insecurity in the upcoming lean season between June and August 2026”, Jean-Martin Bauer, WFP’s food security and nutrition analysis director, told reporters in Geneva.

Those people are in the crisis, emergency and catastrophe phases of hunger - the three worst of five levels used to assess food insecurity.

The number of people in emergency conditions has doubled since 2020, to three million, he said.

And 15,000 people in certain areas of Borno state in northeastern Nigeria are in the catastrophe phase - the first time this level has been reached in a decade.

“This is a group that’s one step away from famine,” Bauer said, speaking from WFP’s headquarters in Rome.

“That does mean that people are dying... people are starving.”

The conflict has killed more than 40,000 people and displaced around two million others in the northeast and spilled into neighbouring countries.

Bauer said the last rainy season in west Africa, which ended in October, was relatively favourable and crops in the region were doing well.

“This is not due to the climate. The vulnerabilities we’re seeing in west and central Africa right now are really due to violence,” he stressed.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has heavily slashed foreign aid, while other key donor countries have also been tightening their belts.

Bauer said last year, WFP stopped providing assistance to around 300,000 children in Nigeria due to funding cuts, and in Cameroon, it might need to cut services to 500,000 due to lack of resources.

In Nigeria, WFP is planning on providing aid to 72,000 people next month - compared to a monthly reach of about 1.3 million in 2025.

“The funding cuts are exacerbating the problem,” said Bauer.

He said the situation had “gotten so bad that in some places we can talk about a humanitarian vacuum, as humanitarian agencies have withdrawn from the front line”. — AFP

Oman’s vision: Protecting
jobs in the age of AI shift

HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has taken important measures to protect young Omanis in particular from the growing risk that artificial intelligence poses to jobs and long-term employment security.

These steps deserve to be seen in a wider context, because the pace of technological change is accelerating faster than many governments seem prepared to handle.

Not long ago, I wrote about the need to prepare for the coming wave of AI and its impact on employment. Those concerns have only intensified. Across the world, governments speak confidently about innovation and efficiency, yet some do far too little to address the social consequences of AI, especially the risk of widespread job losses.

AI will bring real benefits. Productivity may rise, services will improve and costs may fall. But I would ask you to consider those whose jobs are already disappearing globally.

It is unrealistic to believe that a supermarket cashier replaced by an automated checkout will easily find another secure role. New jobs will emerge, but not in sufficient numbers, not quickly enough and not suitable for everyone.

Societies need time to adapt to change on this scale. Work is about more than income. It provides dignity, structure and social stability. When jobs vanish too quickly and without protection, frustration and tension inevitably follow. That is why jobs must be protected where possible, while realistic alternatives are created that people can genuinely move into.

The transition will not be smooth. Many workers are already anxious about the future and that anxiety is justified.

Roles based on routine tasks are especially vulnerable. Paralegals conducting basic legal research, bank clerks, call centre staff and similar workers will, over time, be



KARIM
EASTERBROOK

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School Principal
and Author

The recent
regulations
introduced by
His Majesty to
protect Omani jobs
provide greater
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particularly young
people entering the
workforce



AI will bring real benefits as services will improve and costs may fall.

replaced by AI systems.

Simply telling people to retrain offers little reassurance unless there is a clear plan, proper training and real opportunities at the end of it. This places a clear responsibility on governments.

Workers can be asked to adapt, but in return, they deserve confidence that their leaders are acting to reduce the impact of AI, not ignoring it.

Where governments take meaningful action, they should be given the time and trust needed to make those measures work.

In this respect, Oman stands out. The recent regulations introduced by His Majesty to protect Omani jobs provide greater security for citizens, particularly young people entering the workforce.

The announcement of new vocational courses and training opportunities for all Omanis is especially encouraging, as these are likely to lead to employment that AI cannot easily replace.

The commitment to creating 60,000 new jobs in 2026 further

reinforces this approach. I recognise that restricting certain roles to Omani citizens only may cause disappointment among expatriates. However, reserving specific jobs for Omanis is a practical way to soften the long-term impact of AI-driven unemployment and give Omanis time to adjust.

When we compare many other countries, it is striking how little is being done. These governments may come to regret their inaction as unemployment rises and social pressures increase. By contrast, giving people time to adapt is not resistance to progress, but a sign of foresight. None of us welcomes change. We prefer stability and familiarity. Yet nothing remains the same forever and pretending otherwise only makes disruption more painful when it arrives.

AI is transforming the world at an extraordinary pace and Oman is fortunate to have a leader who recognises this reality and is acting to protect its people, preserve social stability and secure a resilient future.

When a broken heart receives heaven’s call



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHAMI

The writer is author,
translator and a
communications
professional

AMONG the most profound moments in Islamic spiritual history is the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This day is known as Isra and Miraj. This day marks an extraordinary journey that stands as a miracle beyond human comprehension. Likewise, it reflects a timeless source of meaning, comfort and guidance for believers navigating hardship, faith and purpose!

The Ascension occurred during one of the most difficult periods of the Prophet’s life, often called the Year of Sorrow. During that year, he had lost his beloved wife Khadijah, his greatest supporter and source of comfort, and his uncle Abu Talib, his protector in a hostile society.

Therefore, rejection, grief and isolation weighed heavily upon him. It was in this moment of deep human weakness that the Almighty Allah honoured him with a journey unlike any other. This sacred journey reminds humanity that divine closeness often follows profound struggle.

The journey started with the Isra, the miraculous night travel from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. This travel carried powerful meaning for it connected sacred spaces, affirmed the unity of prophetic tradition, and elevated Jerusalem as a spiritual centre. From there began the Miraj, the Ascension through

the heavens.

There, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encountered earlier prophets — Adam, Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and others — each greeted him with honour. These meetings symbolised continuity, one message, one God, delivered through many messengers at different times.

At the peak of this Ascension, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reached a closeness to Allah unmatched by any human being. Words fail to capture that nearness, and perhaps that is intentional. The Ascension reminds us that not all truths are meant to be fully explained; some are meant to be experienced with humility and faith.

In a world that often demands proof for everything, Miraj teaches that belief also rests on trust in divine wisdom beyond the limits of reason. One of the most lasting gifts of the Ascension was the command for the five daily prayers to all Muslims. Unlike other obligations revealed on earth, prayer was given in the heavens. This elevates prayer from ritual to spiritual ascent. Each prayer becomes a personal Miraj for the believer — a moment to step away from worldly burdens and stand in the presence of Allah.

It is not a burden imposed, but a mercy granted, refined through compassion when the number of prayers was reduced, emphasising Allah’s understanding of human capacity. The Ascension also reframes how believers view hardship. The Prophet was

One of the most lasting gifts of the Ascension was the command for the five daily prayers to all Muslims. Unlike other obligations revealed on earth, prayer was given in the heavens

lifted to the heavens not at the height of worldly success, but at the depth of sorrow.

This teaches that pain is not rejection, and difficulty is not a sign of divine anger. On the contrary, moments of brokenness may be gateways to profound spiritual elevation. The Almighty Allah sees, hears and responds sometimes in ways beyond imagination.

In today’s world, where people struggle with anxiety, loss and a sense of spiritual distance, the message of Isra and Miraj remains deeply relevant. It invites reflection on balance: between earth and heaven, effort and trust, grief and hope. It reminds us that while our bodies remain grounded, our souls are capable of rising through sincerity, prayer and remembrance.

Eventually, the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is not merely a historical event to be commemorated. It is a living reminder that faith is a journey, closeness to Allah is possible and no darkness is permanent. Just as the Prophet rose beyond the limits of the world, believers too are called to rise above despair, above ego and towards heavenly light.

Isra and Miraj whispers to every wounded soul: your pain is seen and your tears are counted. When the world feels too heavy, remember — the path upward often begins in the depths. You may not see the sky open, but every sincere prayer lifts a piece of you beyond despair.

UK’S LABOUR READIES FOR EU RESET FIGHT

PETER HUTCHISON AND MARIE HEUCLIN

Britain’s so-called Brexit wars dominated parliament for years. Now the Labour government is bracing for new battles as it eyes legislation to move closer to the European Union.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer immediately set about repairing and rebuilding relations with the 27-member bloc after winning the July 2024 election that ousted the Conservatives after 14 years in power.

He hopes a deeper relationship with European neighbours can help fire up Britain’s insipid economy and inject life into a premiership that has so far been deeply unpopular with the public.

His Labour government is preparing to introduce a bill that would provide a legal framework for his much-touted “reset” of relations with the EU. Despite Labour’s crushing majority in parliament, the move is expected to be fiercely opposed by the right-wing opposition parties - the Conservatives, who took Britain out of the EU, and hard-right Reform UK, which leads opinion polls.

“Bring it on,” a UK government official said, referring to likely “Brexit betrayal” claims from the Tories and Reform’s leader, arch-Euroscptic Nigel Farage. The move also risks splitting open divisions within Labour, including over whether the party should breach a manifesto promise not to rejoin the EU customs union.

Last year, Starmer struck an economic agreement with EU leaders that aims to boost trade by easing red tape on food and plant exports.

They also agreed to work on a new electricity deal that would integrate the UK into the EU’s internal electricity market, with the intention of lowering energy costs.

The agreements form part of Britain aligning itself with EU rules in certain areas. The bill has not been published yet but the government official, who asked not to be named, said it would provide a “mechanism” for an alignment.

“The bill will provide the powers to adopt the rules and set out the role parliament will play in that,” the official said.

The government hopes to introduce the legislation in the spring or summer, meaning it could coincide with the 10th anniversary of the Brexit referendum, which was held in June 2016.

Three years of bitter parliamentary wrangling about what Britain’s relationship with the EU should look like post-departure followed the vote, ultimately leading to the resignation of Theresa May as prime minister. The deadlock was broken when her successor, Boris Johnson, won a landslide general election victory in December 2019 to force through the exit. Opinion polls regularly now show that most Britons regret the razor-thin vote to leave the EU and view the Brexit project as a failure, something Starmer hopes can work in his favour. “Labour members are almost wholly united in wanting to see some of the damage done by the Tory-Farage Brexit exposed and fixed,” said one supportive Labour MP. — AFP

Central Asia’s road to stability through peace

If asked to name a place that is finding its way towards peace and growth after decades of political turmoil, few would think of the Fergana Valley, the fertile basin shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Yet this part of Central Asia now offers a lesson in how conflict can give way to stability, even in historically tense regions.

Such examples are increasingly valuable in today’s world. In 2024, there were 61 ongoing state-based conflicts, the most since records began in 1946. Battlefield deaths from the fighting in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, and other theatres totalled around 129,000.

To be sure, while the lowering of tensions in Central Asia brings new opportunities for economic development and stable politics, it also invites increased pressure from major powers that are competing for influence. There is a risk that competition between the United States, China, Russia, Europe, India, and others will reignite old frictions. Nonetheless, the improved climate reflects deliberate political and social choices, demonstrating that cooperation can be strengthened from the ground up.

Home to around 15 million people, the Fergana Valley is one of the most densely populated parts of Central Asia. Owing to overlapping ethnic ties, contested frontiers, and pressures on land and water, it was long seen as a potential flash point. It was the site of the 1990 Osh riots in Kyrgyzstan, among the bloodiest ethnic clashes of the late-Soviet era. Then came recurring border skirmishes and localised violence. Hundreds were killed in the ethnic clashes in Osh and Jalal-Abad (another Kyrgyz city) in 2010, as were dozens in 2021 and more than a hundred in 2022.

But conditions have improved markedly since then. Borders have become points of connection rather than division. After being closed for seven years, the main crossing between Osh and Andijan (in Uzbekistan) reopened in 2017, reviving trade, reconnecting families and marking a turning



The lowering of tensions in Central Asia brings new opportunities for economic development and stable politics.



DAN SLEAT

The writer is Senior Policy Adviser on Russia and Ukraine at the Tony Blair Institute

point in cross-border relations. Natural resources, once a source of friction, are increasingly being managed cooperatively.

Central Asian governments’ management of water supplies and usage has been a major test. In 2023, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan signed a road map for a hydroelectric and water-management project centred on a major new dam on the Naryn River, in southern Kyrgyzstan. The project is designed to expand renewable energy and regulate downstream water flow, both politically sensitive issues that have sparked disputes in the past. At the same time, it shows how a joint initiative to realise shared infrastructure can turn a zero-sum conflict over water into a collective investment in stability.

The region’s leaders have also begun to formalise this strategic shift in other ways. In early 2025, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed a landmark border-demarcation agreement, soon followed by the presidents of all three Fergana Valley states meeting to sign a declaration of friendship and agree on a final tri-border point.

Of course, these developments do not erase past grievances or remove risks. Water scarcity, climate stress, local disputes and other challenges remain. The progress towards better relations has been uneven across the valley. Disparities in infrastructure, energy access and economic opportunity still generate

tensions between communities, and some border districts remain heavily militarised. The durability of recent agreements will depend on whether local concerns can be addressed alongside regional diplomacy.

Diplomatic success so far has depended as much on daily interactions as on political agreements. Since the reopening of key crossings in 2017, cross-border trade between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has risen more than sevenfold, and more than a million people now cross the border each month for work, shopping, or family visits. These flows of people and goods have created social and economic ties that make large-scale confrontation more distant and harder to imagine. As Kyrgyzstan’s president, Sadyr Japarov, put it, “A close neighbour is better than a distant relative.”

Still, the same openness also creates vulnerabilities, from trafficking activities to migration shocks. Demographic pressure and unemployment among young continue to test social stability, and climate-driven changes to the Syr Darya river system could sharpen competition over water in the coming decade. These factors make the Fergana Valley story a fragile achievement, not a settled one. Fortunately, the recognition of such pressures has itself been key to sustaining cooperation and avoiding complacency.

The Fergana experience offers lessons for other regions grappling with conflict. The stability has lasted because cooperation began at the level of markets, small businesses and individual travellers; it was not simply declared through high-level political agreements. Linking borders and resources has turned potential disputes over water and energy into shared interests. Clear, mutually recognised boundaries have helped keep borders open and reduce the risk of flare-ups. In a fragmented international order, the ability to work across borders and manage shared resources is a strategic asset.

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SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



Rising Talent at Basketball Festival. — Ammar al Musafir

HIGH STANDARDS AT BASKETBALL DEVELOPMENT FESTIVAL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The second edition of the Basketball Athlete Development Centres Festival concluded yesterday at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, organised by the Oman Basketball Association, amid an enthusiastic atmosphere and wide participation that included 119 male and female players, alongside 16 coaches representing the accredited centres. The festival reflected the growing interest and strong turnout for youth development programmes.

The event witnessed notable interaction from participants, with activities featuring applied training sessions, competitions and friendly matches between the centres. These competitive elements aimed to assess players’ technical and physical abilities and monitor their skill development, while providing greater opportunities for game exposure and experience within a well-organised competitive environment.

The closing ceremony included the launch of the official kit for the Athlete Development Centres, a step that strengthens the unified identity of the centres and reinforces concepts of belonging and professionalism among players and technical staff, as part of the Association’s efforts to advance the youth development system.

In this context, Abu Bakr al Jahwari, Vice-Chairman of the Association and Head of the Centres Supervision Committee, said the festival is part of a long-term plan implemented by the Association to build a strong base of national talent. He expressed his appreciation to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for its continuous support, noting that such backing represents a key pillar in the success of youth development programmes and in preparing talents to represent national teams in the future.

Meanwhile, Abdullah Hashim, Technical Director of the Basketball Athlete Development Centres, stated that the festival aims to unify training methodologies across centres and enhance the quality of technical work in line with best modern training practices. He explained that the festival served as an important platform to measure technical progress and evaluate development pathways, while also providing opportunities for the exchange of expertise among technical staff, outcomes expected to positively impact national team levels in the future.

For her part, Wafaa Zaghdood, coach of the national women’s team and supervisor of the Muscat Athlete Development Centre, noted that the festival displayed a good technical level among both male and female players. She added that the competitive atmosphere and solid organisation contributed to achieving the festival’s technical and educational objectives, emphasising that attention to these age groups reflects a clear vision for building a well-prepared and aware sporting generation.

The OBA continues to implement its programmes aimed at developing youth categories, contributing to the formation of a promising generation capable of representing national teams and strengthening Oman’s basketball presence in upcoming competitions.

MUSCAT NIGHTS CHESS: TOP CONTENDERS IN TIGHT RACE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 18

THE Muscat Nights International Chess Championship continued to deliver high-level competition as the fourth round concluded with the race for the top spots remaining wide open in both the Above 2000 and Under 2000 rating categories.

ABOVE 2000 CATEGORY
Round 4 featured pivotal matches that reshaped the standings, most notably the draw between India’s Pa Iniyan and Türkiye’s Akbas Umut, as well as the draw between India’s Leon Luke Mendonca and Iran’s Radin Yadegar. Both results kept the players firmly within the leading group. Among the standout victories, Egypt’s Ahmed Adly defeated Belarusian Kirill Stupak, while Türkiye’s Adar Tarhan claimed an important win over France’s Loic Travadon, reaffirming his strong presence in the title race. By the end of the round, the top of the standings was tightly packed on 3.5 points, shared by Akbas Umut Ata, Pa Iniyan, Pranesh, Radin Yadegar, Ahmed Adly, Adar Tarhan, and Russia’s Mikhail Mozharov, setting the stage for even more tense and decisive rounds ahead.

UNDER 2000 CATEGORY
In the Under 2000 category, Round 4 produced clear and decisive results, highlighted by Uzbekistan’s Shakhnoza Sabirova defeating Iran’s Seyed. Syria’s Laith Mulhem recorded an important win over Iraq’s Jaafar Shlaka, strengthening his position at the top of the standings, while Iran’s Farhoud Fathi Tavani overcame Oman’s Emad al Balushi in a closely contested encounter that eventually swung in the Iranian player’s favour. On the Omani front, Ahmed al Makhmari continued his positive progress with a valuable victory over Saeed Fadel, while fellow Omani Abdulmalik al Sabti drew with Palestine’s Radwan Mahmoud in a tactically disciplined match that limited opportunities and made a draw the logical outcome for both players. After Round 4, five players maintained a perfect score of four points: Laith Mulhem (Syria), Farhoud Fathi (Iran), Shakhnoza Sabirova (Uzbekistan), Ali Khalaf (Kuwait), and Mohammed al Zaabi (UAE). Immediately behind them is a large group on 3.5 points, led by several players including Omanis Ahmed al Makhmari and Abdulmalik al Sabti, along with Mohammed bin Khalfan al Saeedi, keeping



Round 4 featured pivotal matches that reshaped the standings. — Photos by Muath al Shukaili



Round 4 featured pivotal matches that reshaped the standings. **Picture Right:** Open battle for the lead in Muscat Nights Chess Championship.



the race for the top positions wide open ahead of the decisive stages. The course of the round confirmed that the championship has entered a phase where fine margins are decisive: a single draw can change several positions, while one win can propel a player into medal contention. International arbiter Ruqayya Al Balushi said the championship is a valuable technical and organisational experience, highlighted by the participation of around 270 players and the presence of numerous international masters. She noted the increase in Omani participation compared to the first edition, describing it as a positive sign of the game’s growing local base, and expressed her hope to see Omani players on the podium, particularly with the evident improvement in performance.

Moanes al Siyabi shines at 12th Al Rahba Horse Race

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
BARKA, JAN 18

Al Rahba Racecourse in Wilayat Barka hosted the 12th horse racing event organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation and Racing, represented by the Oman Horse Racing Club, in front of a strong crowd and amid intense competition. The spotlight was firmly on jockey Moanes bin Salem al Siyabi, who delivered an outstanding performance by securing a notable double victory in the opening races. The race meeting consisted of eight races, including five for Purebred Arabians, two for Thoroughbreds, and one for locally bred horses, with all races reflecting high technical standards and closely fought competition.



A shot from the heat race. **(Right)** Honouring the winners of the sixth round — Pictures by Mohammed al Balushi

The opening race, Jabal Shams, for Purebred Arabians over 1,200 metres, was won by Amaniya al Faisal under the guidance of Moanes al Siyabi, while E H Ghida finished second and Jeff came in third. Al Siyabi continued his impressive form in the second race, Jabal Haat, also

over 1,200 metres, steering Ghawash Al Shahania to first place ahead of Al Dastoor, with Reem Al Bawadi finishing third. In the third race, Jabal Koor, for Thoroughbreds over 1,200 metres, Rouge Fox claimed victory, followed by Al Hajjaj in second place and Razeen

Dubai in third. The fourth race, Jabal Al Akhdhar, over the same distance, saw Kalraad dominate to secure the top spot, ahead of Justic Protocol and Exact Order. The fifth race, Jabal Hafeet, for locally bred Purebred Arabians over 1,600 metres, was won by Wahaj Al Wafi, with Al Shaham H2 finishing second and Boss Al Numan third. In the sixth race, Jabal Eteen, over 1,600 metres, Al Mudhafaar E S claimed first place, followed by Nebras and Baraq Muscat. The seventh race, Jabal Musht, over 2,000 metres, was won by Emperor Lotus, ahead of AJS Antar and Cyrus de Ghazal. The meeting concluded with the eighth race, Jabal Samhan, over 2,000 metres, where Al Rabih claimed victory, followed by Abu Theila and Saint Maury.



2026

TO BE A TURNING POINT FOR BADMINTON AND SQUASH IN OMAN

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 18

DR ABDULRAHIM BIN MUSALLAM AL DROUSHI, Chairman of the Oman Racket Sports Committee (ORSC) affirmed that 2026 will be a pivotal year for badminton and squash in the Sultanate of Oman, driven by a comprehensive local and international agenda and ambitious development programmes underpinned by tangible figures and accelerated growth achieved within a short timeframe since the committee’s establishment in last two years and half.

Al Droushi told *Observer* in an exclusive interview that ORSC developed an integrated calendar for 2026 featuring a wide range of domestic and international championships in badminton and squash. “The agenda will maintain a strong focus on youth development through accredited training centres in Muscat, alongside a planned geographical expansion with the opening of two new training centres in additional governorates, aimed at broadening participation and building a new generation of athletes,” he said.

“The agenda will go beyond competition, encompassing a series of impactful community initiatives, most notably “Badminton for Women” and “Outdoor Badminton”, in addition to increasing the number of coaching and refereeing courses to qualify national cadres and elevate them to regional and international standards. Special attention is also being given to national team players through overseas participation and structured domestic and international training camps,” ORSC chief added.

WIDER REACH AND CLEAR STRATEGY
On the spread of racket sports, Al Droushi responded:” The committee’s board adopted a clear and progressive strategy from the outset, beginning with schools through badminton dissemination programmes, before expanding to parks, beaches, and public spaces. This approach significantly widened the sport’s reach across different segments of society.”

“ORSC strengthened its presence in summer programmes through initiatives such as “Our Summer is Squash”, alongside summer activities implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth across various governorates.

The next phase will see badminton and squash included in the annual calendars of additional government and private institutions, while continuing to organise age-group championships based on carefully structured technical



The ceremony honouring the outstanding participants in the championship was held under the auspices of the Minister of Education, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah.



classifications over the coming two years,” he mentioned.

FIGURES REFLECT ACCELERATED GROWTH
Al Droushi expressed pride in the achievements realised in just two and a half years, highlighting the steady expansion of the participation base. “In 2024, ORSC organised its first clubs championship with 11 clubs, a number that rose to 15 clubs in 2025. Expectations for 2026 indicate participation could reach 26 clubs, positioning badminton competitions



among the largest club-based events under a single sporting umbrella in Oman,” he clarified.

“In squash, participation reached nine clubs in recent championships, with projections to increase to 14 clubs during the current year, reflecting growing interest in the sport. ORSC organised 13 sporting events over two years, including two prominent international championships including: the West Asia Junior Badminton Championship and the Oman Squash Championship as part of the Professional Squash Association (PSA) Tour,” he mentioned.



The agenda will maintain strong focus on youth development through accredited training centres alongside a planned geographical expansion with the opening of new training centres aimed at broadening participation and building a new generation of athletes

**DR
ABDULRAHIM
BIN MUSALLAM
AL DROUSHI**
ORSC

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SPORTING ACHIEVEMENTS
Regarding athlete preparation, Al Droushi responded that the committee’s focus centred on youth categories through training centres supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. “To date, three training centres have been established, contributing 85 per cent of national team players who participated in recent international competitions. A great achievement by Omani squash players, who secured third place at the West Asia Championship in Iraq, in addition to the significant progress of Walid al Nairi, ranked among the world’s top 1,000 squash players, serving as an inspiring model for emerging athletes in Oman,” he said.

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT
Al Droushi underscored the committee’s strong emphasis on developing referees, coaches and administrators. “Through the “Shuttle Time” programme, 60 teachers and 20 internationally accredited tutors were qualified, contributing to the scientific and structured introduction of badminton in schools.

In coaching, the number of Omani coaches holding Level 1 Badminton World Federation (BWF) certification increased from three to nine within two years. Officiating also advanced significantly, with more than 44 line judges and 16 court referees, including nine internationally and regionally accredited officials.

Administratively, 24 officials and 52 volunteers took part in organising the West Asia Junior Championship 2024, while 2025 saw the participation of over 40 administrators and 80 volunteers in ORSC activities, as part of a strategy to build national expertise in organisation, media, marketing and public relations,” he added.

PARTNERSHIPS BEHIND THE SUCCESS
Al Droushi attributed much of the committee’s rapid success to effective partnerships with international and regional federations. “Engagements with the Badminton World Federation and the Asian Badminton Confederation resulted in technical and logistical support, as well as approval to host the West Asia Junior Championship. Further partnerships were established with the Malaysian and Iranian Badminton Federations to enhance technical and officiating standards, alongside squash collaborations with the Kuwaiti Federation for joint training camps and with the Iranian Federation in junior development programmes,” he said.

CHALLENGES AND FORWARD VISION
Addressing challenges, Al Droushi explained that limited participation and engagement were among the initial obstacles. “ORSC investments in school sports and the “Shuttle Time” programme helped overcome these challenges by facilitating talent identification and integration into training centres. The challenge of organising a greater number of championships was mitigated through sponsorships and the organisational legacy built from hosting international events.

The upcoming phase will witness an increase in competitions supported by self-financing mechanisms, participant fees, and expanded opportunities for sports investment,” he said.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH AND APPRECIATION
Al Droushi concluded by emphasising that the ORSC adopts a holistic vision that views badminton and squash as community sports, investment drivers, and long-term developmental pathways for youth.

“This approach has begun to yield positive results at both local and regional levels. My sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the General Directorate of Care and Development, the Athlete Preparation Programme, as well as all partners, sponsors, and sports media, affirming that the achievements realised are the product of integrated efforts within Oman’s sporting ecosystem,” he ended.

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



Oman Rally 2026 begins with Middle East champs

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The Oman International Rally 2026 will officially get underway from the city of Sohar for the second consecutive year, hosting the opening round of the Middle East Rally Championship (MERC). The rally will take place on Friday and Saturday, January 23–24, preceded by a Super Special Stage on Thursday, January 22, attracting widespread public and media attention.

The rally is organised by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA) in cooperation with the Sohar Entertainment Festival and with the support of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Al Batinah North Governorate and Toyota Oman. The event marks the return of high-octane rally action to Sohar’s challenging gravel stages, which are known for producing intense competition across all categories.

The entry list features a stellar lineup, led by 20-time Middle East Rally Champion Nasser al Attiyah of Qatar, who will compete in a Škoda Fabia alongside his Spanish co-driver Carrera Caneda. Also headlining the field is Omani driver Abdullah al Rawahi, returning to competition after recovering from injuries sustained in a previous rally accident in Lebanon. Al Rawahi, navigated by Jordanian Atta Al Hamoud, will be aiming to secure his third MERC title on home soil and in front of his supporters.

Several prominent regional drivers are also taking part, including Nasser bin Khalifa al Attiyah, Bader al Fayez, Ihab al Shorfa, Hamza Bakhashab, Rashid al Muhannadi, Mohammed al Marri, Shadi Fakih, Jassim al Maqhwī, Shaker Juwaihān, Sami Fleifel, Saneem, Mohammed al Shorfa, Raya Dagher and Farah Zakaria, in addition to Omani driver Zakaria al Amri with co-driver Mohammed al Mazroui, and a strong contingent of local competitors. Notably, the rally will witness the absence of talented driver Abdullah al Zubair.

The competition will begin with a 3-kilometre Super Special Stage at the Sohar Entertainment Centre, followed by a demanding schedule of special stages including Ar Rusaya, Al Rassah, Al Uwaymah, Al Akeek, Yanbu and Rahab, with repeated loops and designated service areas, culminating in the crowning of category winners and the overall round champion at the Sohar Entertainment Centre.

The rally is organised under the supervision of the Oman Automobile Association, chaired by Brigadier Jamal bin Said al Tai, with Sulaiman al Rawahi, General Manager of the Association, overseeing operations, Anwar al Zadjali in charge of rally management, and Hani Shaaban handling administrative operations.



Nigeria’s Ademola Lookman scores a penalty during the penalty. — Reuters

Lookman secures Nigeria third place over Egypt

ADEMOLA LOOKMAN converted the spot-kick that gave Nigeria a 4-2 penalty shoot-out victory over Egypt after a 0-0 draw on Saturday in the Africa Cup of Nations third place play-off.

Victory for the Super Eagles in Casablanca followed the disappointment of losing shoot-outs that cost them chances to compete at the 2026 World Cup and in the 2025 AFCON final.

Nigeria lost on penalties to the Democratic Republic of Congo last November in a play-off for a place in the World Cup intercontinental play-offs.

Then, three days ago, they lost another shoot-out to fail against hosts Morocco in an AFCON semi-final.

Success maintained a perfect Nigerian record in third place AFCON matches after seven previous play-offs victories.

Before Lookman scored, Fisayo Dele-Bashiru missed the Eagles’ first kick, then Akor Adams, captain Moses Simon and Alex Iwobi scored.

Premier League pair Mohamed Salah and Omar Marmoush both had kicks saved by Stanley Nwabali before Ramy Rabia and Mahmoud Saber scored.

Egypt made six changes and Nigeria five to the teams that started semi-final losses to Senegal and hosts Morocco respectively three days ago.

Captain Salah started for the Pharaohs while traditional first



Egypt’s Mahmoud Saber scores a penalty during the penalty. — Reuters

choices in goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy and forward Marmoush were among the substitutes.

Attackers Victor Osimhen and Lookman, both former winners of the annual African player of the year award, sat on the bench for Nigeria.

Most Moroccans in a crowd that nearly filled the 45,000-capacity Stade Mohammed V backed Nigeria. They whistled whenever Egypt gained possession and when coach Hossam Hassan was shown on the big screen.

This support for the Super Eagles was attributed to the great rivalry between Morocco and Egypt, both at national team and club levels.

GOALS DISALLOWED

Nigeria initially, then Egypt had spells of dominance in a goalless opening half on a cloudy evening in the Moroccan commercial capital.

Paul Onuachu thought he had broken the deadlock on 36 minutes as he deflected the ball with his head past goalkeeper Mostafa Shobeir.

However, a VAR review by the Moroccan referee revealed Onuachu had accidentally struck Hamdy Fathy with an elbow. The goal was disallowed and the Nigerian yellow-carded.

Lookman was introduced by coach Eric Chelle for the second half, replacing Onuachu, and he had the ball in the net in the opening minute of the second period.

However, the goal was ruled out for offside.

Nigeria started after the break with a series of attacks. Following a largely uneventful first half, Shobeir the son of former Egypt goalkeeper Ahmed Shobeir was forced to make several saves.

Salah seldom threatened and when he did cut in with the ball, the potential danger was quickly averted. Marmoush came on as the play-off passed the hour mark to try and boost a blunt strike force.

In quick succession, Adams, then Marmoush threatened to score, but neither could deliver the finishing touch under pressure from opponents. Salah then disappointed when offered a scoring opportunity from a free-kick outside the box. He hit the ball straight into the wall and it was swiftly cleared. — AFP

WTT Contender Muscat 2026 table tennis tourney kicks off today

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The preliminary rounds of the WTT Contender Muscat 2026 officially will get underway on Monday marking the start of the prestigious international table tennis event hosted in the Sultanate of Oman. The tournament is organised by the Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) in cooperation with the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) and World Table Tennis (WTT).

The six-day championship will bring together nearly 200 Men and Women players representing 34 countries from across the globe, including: Australia, China, Chinese Taipei, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Italy, Kazakhstan, Moldova,

Nepal, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Türkiye, the United States, Wales, Malaysia, Jordan, South Korea beside the hosts Oman. The tournament will conclude on Saturday, with all matches taking place at the main hall of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

The OTTA completed all technical and organisational preparations to host the event. These included upgrading the main competition hall, installing international-standard flooring and tables, enhancing lighting systems, ensuring high-speed internet connectivity and meeting all technical requirements. The organising committee went beyond the minimum standards approved



Hamid Shams WTT Star Contender Muscat 2025

by WTT, aiming to deliver an exceptional organisational edition, while all tournament committees worked closely to provide the best possible facilities for participating delegations and athletes.

Players and officials have been arriving in Muscat over the past few days through Muscat International Airport with many athletes began the training sessions at the training hall for their final preparations.

Athletes will compete across several categories. Two dedicated warm-up and training halls have been allocated to ensure smooth match operations and optimal player readiness.

The championship will feature an impressive lineup led by Lin Shidong of China, currently ranked World No. 2, alongside his

compatriots Liang Jingkun (7) and Xiang Peng (11). Other players including: Benedikt Duda (12) and Patrick Franziska (21) of Germany, Darko Jorgic (14) of Slovenia, Kanak Jha (22) of US, Jonathan Groth (25) of Denmark and Tomislav Pucar (27) of Croatia. In the women’s singles, top-ranked players including Shi Xunyao (13) of China, Cheng I-Ching (21) of Chinese Taipei, He Zhuojia (30) of China, Zeng Jian (37) of Singapore, Do Hoi Kem (40) of Hong Kong, Dina Meshref (42) of Egypt and Linda Bergström (43) of Sweden.

The tournament will also see the participation of several Oman national team players including: Muhannad al Balushi, Badar al Jassasi, Ahmed al Riyami, Mohammed al Mutawa and Bilal al Rashdi.

BUSINESS



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SHORT TAKES



Oman's delegation was led by Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

OMAN HIGHLIGHTS MINING INVESTMENT POTENTIAL IN RIYADH

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals participated in the fifth International Mining Conference in Riyadh, one of the world's leading platforms for discussions on mining development, mineral supply chains and sustainability.

The conference brought together delegates from more than 100 countries, including ministers, policymakers, industry experts and representatives of major international mining companies and organisations.

Oman's delegation was led by Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, who said Oman's participation reflects the rapid progress of its minerals sector and its commitment to adopting global best practices.

Al Hadhrami noted that the sector has achieved key milestones, including the start of copper and silica concentrate production and the development of mineral resources such as chromium, gypsum, limestone, salt and laterite.

He highlighted ongoing efforts to attract local and foreign investment, supported by the digitisation of sector management through the "Taqah" digital services platform, which streamlines licensing, investment competition, monitoring and revenue collection under principles of transparency and equal opportunity.

Further developments include the rollout of ready-to-operate concession areas via smart digital platforms and the establishment of a specialised company to regulate mineral trading, improving governance and market efficiency.

Tax reforms to drive Oman's revenue growth

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 18

Tax revenues are projected to rise to RO 2.531 billion in 2030, up from RO 1.990 billion estimated for 2026, reflecting both the Omani government's drive to diversify its revenue base and the impact of ongoing tax reforms and administrative modernisation.

Several of these reforms have drawn praise from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In its 2025 Article IV Consultation, the Fund welcomed steps to restructure the Oman Tax Authority (OTA), introduce advanced compliance risk management tools, and prepare for the introduction of Personal Income Tax (PIT) on high-income earners from 2028.

Noting recent progress, the IMF reported: "Tax revenues rose by 3 per cent in Q3 2025, driven by expanded registrant numbers and improved compliance.

Key initiatives include establishing a comprehensive taxpayer registry, implementing risk-based compliance measures and upgrading IT systems to close collection gaps. E-invoicing is set to be completed by end-2026, while interim measures on human capital and process improvements align with IMF recommendations".

Oman is now in the third year of a four-year Tax Administration Modernisation Programme, which includes plans to establish a dedicated Compliance Risk Management Unit within the restructured OTA.

At the same time, the IMF

“Tax revenues rose by 3 per cent in Q3 2025, driven by expanded registrant numbers and improved compliance. Key initiatives include establishing a comprehensive taxpayer registry, implementing risk-based compliance measures and upgrading IT systems to close collection gaps. E-invoicing is set to be completed by end-2026, while interim measures on human capital and process improvements align with IMF recommendations.

INTERNATIONAL
MONETARY FUND

جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY

Corporate Income Tax
Excise Tax VAT Personal Income Tax
Digital Tax Stamp VAT e-Invoicing

Oman is now in the third year of a four-year Tax Administration Modernisation Programme.

has emphasised that sustaining revenue gains will require faster progress in strengthening OTA staffing, modernising IT systems, completing the taxpayer registry, enhancing performance monitoring and fully operationalising risk-based compliance.

The Fund also underscored that timely rollout of VAT e-invoicing in 2026, alongside expansion of the digital tax stamp, will be critical to improving compliance and collections.

A central plank of Oman's evolving tax framework is the new Personal Income Tax (PIT) law, due to take effect in 2028. The IMF estimates PIT revenues at around 0.3 per cent of non-hydrocarbon GDP in the early years of implementation and describes the reform as a "milestone in revenue diversification and fiscal sustainability" under Oman Vision 2040.

The PIT applies a 5 per cent rate

on net annual income above RO 42,000 (about \$109,000), targeting roughly the top 1 per cent of earners.

It covers income from employment, self-employment, investments and capital gains (excluding the primary residence), while allowing deductions for housing, education, healthcare, charitable contributions and work-related expenses. Residents are taxed on worldwide income; non-residents on Oman-sourced income.

The IMF noted that by focusing on high earners and incorporating socially oriented deductions, the PIT strengthens progressivity, improves perceptions of fairness and reduces fiscal vulnerability to oil price swings.

Also significant is Oman's adoption of Pillar Two-aligned rules from 2025, including a Qualified Domestic Minimum Top-up Tax (QDMTT) and an Income Inclusion Rule (IIR).

EU and Mercosur sign trade deal after 25 years of negotiations

ASUNCION: Top officials from the EU and the South American bloc Mercosur signed a free trade agreement on Saturday in Paraguay, paving the way for the European Union's largest-ever trade accord after 25 years of negotiations.

The agreement, designed to lower tariffs and boost trade between the two regions, must now gain the consent of the European Parliament and be ratified by the legislatures of Mercosur members Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa joined the presidents of Mercosur countries at Saturday's ceremony, with the exception of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who sent his foreign minister.

The deal received the green light from most European



Authorities of the European Union and the South American bloc Mercosur pose during the signing ceremony of a free trade agreement in Asuncion, Paraguay. — Reuters

nations last week, despite concerns from farmers and environmental groups, who fear a surge of inexpensive South American imports and increased deforestation.

Von der Leyen, who met with Lula before heading to Asuncion

for the signing, said the deal would create the largest free trade zone in the world.

"This agreement sends a very strong message to the world. It reflects a clear and deliberate choice. We choose fair trade over tariffs. We choose a productive, long-term partnership over isolation", she said on Saturday.

Just before the ceremony on Saturday morning, US President Donald Trump vowed to impose increasing tariffs on eight European nations if the United States is not permitted to purchase Greenland.

"This agreement will help both our blocs navigate an increasingly turbulent political environment without abandoning our values, marking a true milestone in shoring up our economic security", Costa said.

While Mercosur officials have expressed reservations about certain regulations within the

pact, Lula affirmed on Friday in Rio de Janeiro that it will unlock greater opportunities and stimulate more trade and investment for both parties.

Brazil's government said in a statement that the deal is "emblematic of Lula's efforts to expand and diversify markets", adding that South America's largest economy is also negotiating agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Canada and Vietnam, besides the expansion of a tariff-preference pact with India.

Trade between the EU and Mercosur, which encompasses a market of 700 million people, reached a value of 111 billion euros in 2024.

European Union exports mainly consist of machinery, chemical products and transport equipment, whereas Mercosur's exports are concentrated in agricultural goods, minerals, wood pulp and paper. — Reuters

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



The new endowment plan combines the security of life insurance with a disciplined savings strategy.

BANKDHOFAR
LAUNCHES
ENDOWMENT PLAN

MUSCAT: BankDhofar is proud to announce the launch of Dhofar Insurance Company’s Endowment Plan, a unique savings and protection product designed to meet the evolving financial needs of individuals and families across the Sultanate of Oman.

Provided through BankDhofar’s robust bancassurance partnership, the new Endowment Plan combines the security of life insurance with a disciplined savings strategy, offering customers a powerful tool to secure their financial future while building long-term wealth.

It is a dual-purpose financial solution that guarantees a payout at maturity alongside a varied bonus structure. It safeguards families against the financial impact of death or disability while helping policyholders accumulate savings for important life goals such as education, retirement, or other milestones.

Commenting on the Endowment Plan, Ashraf bin Khalid al Battashi, Head — Products, Segmentation, Cards & Bancassurance at BankDhofar said, “We understand the importance of securing a stable financial future for families across Oman.

The launch of Dhofar Insurance’s Endowment Plan marks a significant milestone in offering our customers a comprehensive solution that combines protection with disciplined savings”.

The product combines long-term financial growth with stability and protection through a package of flexible and distinguished features. These include a guaranteed return at maturity, where the customer receives 100% of the insured amount at the end of the policy term — making it an ideal tool for organised, goal-based saving.

Additionally, the plan offers a premium waiver in case of death: if the insured person passes away, the family is exempted from paying the remaining premiums and they receive the full maturity benefit — ensuring income continuity without additional financial burden.

The product also provides multiple premium payment options (monthly, quarterly, semi-annual, annual, or one-time payment), starting from just RO 50 per month, along with instant liquidity through the ability to obtain a secured loan of up to 80% of the surrender value to meet emergency needs.

Other benefits include enhanced protection through optional add-ons such as immediate family support, monthly family income, guaranteed premiums in case of disability, as well as annual and final bonuses — with cumulative annual bonuses and final maturity bonuses calculated based on the performance of the investment fund.

“As the saying goes, ‘In times of abundance, plan for tomorrow. The wise build a future today, securing peace of mind and prosperity for years to come’. This plan is a testament to our commitment to offering innovative solutions that protect our customers’ wealth and their loved ones”.

OAB marks the
International
Day for People
with Disabilities

MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) proudly participated in the third edition of the Village of Happiness Carnival, held in celebration of the International Day for People with Disabilities at the Civil Aviation Authority.

The event was held under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Minister of Economy and with the gracious presence of HH Sayyidah Hujaija bint Jaifer al Said, Chairperson of the Association for Children with Disabilities. The



event brought together families, organisations and community members in a shared celebration of inclusion and wellbeing.

The Village continues to serve as an important platform that highlights social integration and the value of creating supportive environments for people with disabilities. OAB’s participation reflected its ongoing commitment to initiatives that strengthen community bonds and promote equal opportunities across society.

Kia Carens: A practical
7-seater MPV for mobility

AS small and medium enterprises continue to grow and diversify, the need for reliable, flexible and cost-effective mobility has never been greater. The Kia Carens 7-seater MPV is designed to meet these everyday business demands, offering practicality, space and efficiency in a single, well-balanced vehicle.

With its spacious three-row layout, the Kia Carens adapts easily to multiple business applications. It is well-suited for SMEs, warehouses, coffee shops, bakeries, laundries and service-based businesses that require dependable transportation for staff movement or goods delivery. The flexible seating configuration also makes it an ideal solution for school children pick-up and drop services, ensuring comfort and safety during daily commutes.

The Carens combines passenger comfort with functional cargo capacity, allowing businesses to configure the vehicle according to operational needs. Its refined ride quality, ease of driving and efficient performance make it suitable for frequent city use, while maintaining low running and maintenance requirements — a key consideration for cost-conscious businesses.

To further enhance its value proposition, Kia is offering the Carens under a year-end



With its spacious three-row layout, the Kia Carens adapts easily to multiple business applications.

big saving offer, making it an even more attractive choice for businesses planning to expand or upgrade their fleet, offer benefits — cash gift ranging from RO 300 to RO 1,100, free insurance and registration & a free service package up to 30,000 km/3 years .

This limited-time offer significantly reduces the overall cost of ownership, allowing businesses to invest confidently in a vehicle that supports both daily operations and long-term growth.

With its versatile design, practical features and strong value benefits, the Kia Carens 7-seater MPV stands out as a reliable

mobility partner for businesses across sectors — delivering space, efficiency and peace of mind, every working day.

The vehicle’s flexible seating layout adds to its appeal for business use. The rear two rows of seats can be folded to create ample cargo space, allowing owners to carry supplies, packages or essential materials with ease. When required, the Carens can be configured back into a full 7-seater, making it equally suitable for personal or family use. In addition to its business utility, the Kia Carens offers comfort and convenience for everyday driving.

UTAS-Salalah signs MoC with Crowe Oman

MUSCAT: University of Technology and Applied Sciences — Salalah (UTAS–Salalah) has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) with Crowe Oman to support student training, research and mentoring in the fields of accounting and auditing.

The MoC was signed at the UTAS–Salalah campus by Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Shahri, Assistant Vice-Chancellor of the University and Jim Joseph Itty, Partner at Crowe Oman.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Shahri stated “In line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, this cooperation aims to establish a



high-quality education system through strong collaboration between academia and industry.

Partnerships between academic institutions and industry play a vital role in fostering research, developing advanced practical skills, maximising national capabilities, nurturing talent and innovation; and strengthening a culture of

entrepreneurship among students and the wider community”.

Echoing these sentiments, Jim Joseph Itty said “As representatives of the accounting profession, we clearly understand the gap between employer expectations and the capabilities of job seekers. Crowe Oman is committed to working towards

the empowerment of local talent and enhancing their professional readiness”.

Commenting further, Dr Davis Kallukaran, Managing Partner of Crowe Oman, said: “As we complete 30 years of operations in Oman, we are pleased to extend our support in mentoring and grooming Omani accounting students from local educational institutions”.

Also attending the signing ceremony, Gibu Chacko, Resident Partner of Crowe Salalah, added, “Our presence in Salalah reflects our commitment to ensuring that our professional services reach businesses across the Dhofar region with a strong personal touch”.

Lulu launches Dream Drive 2026, celebrating Oman’s renewed renaissance

MUSCAT: Lulu Hypermarket Oman has ushered in the New Year with the launch of its much-anticipated Dream Drive 2026, a campaign aimed at rewarding customers while celebrating moments of national pride and togetherness across the Sultanate of Oman.

Launched in the spirit of Oman’s renewed Renaissance, the campaign coincides with the fifth Accession Day of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and leads into the holy month of Ramadhan. Running from January 11 to March 21, 2026, Dream Drive 2026 brings excitement, gratitude and celebration to shoppers nationwide.

As part of the campaign,



Running from January 11 to March 21, 2026, Dream Drive 2026 brings excitement, gratitude and celebration to shoppers nationwide.

customers stand a chance to win eight MG RX9 Luxury 4WD vehicles (2026 model) as grand prizes, along with 40 other attractive

gifts, including smart TVs, cooking ranges, refrigerators, washing machines and air fryers from Ikon.

The promotion is valid across all Lulu outlets in Oman as well as on Lulu’s online platform.

Participation is simple and convenient. Customers who spend RO 10 or more in a single bill can automatically enter the electronic raffle by providing their mobile number at checkout.

Eligible shoppers receive confirmation via WhatsApp or SMS, and raffle coupons can be viewed through the Lulu App under the e-bills section. A total of eight electronic draws will be held during the campaign period.

Commenting on the launch, Shabeer K A , Director of Lulu Hypermarkets — Oman, said the campaign reflects Lulu’s strong bond with the people of Oman.

“Dream Drive 2026 holds special significance as it coincides with the fifth Accession Day of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, symbolising Oman’s continued progress and stability.

As a brand that has grown alongside the nation, we are honoured to celebrate this important occasion with our customers. As we approach Ramadhan, the campaign also reflects the values of gratitude, generosity and togetherness”.

SHORT TAKES



Oman's pavilion will feature participation from tourism institutions, hospitality companies, hotels and strategic sector partners.

OMAN SHOWCASES TOURISM AMBITIONS AT FITUR 2026

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman will participate in the FITUR 2026 International Tourism Fair, opening next Wednesday in Madrid, as part of its efforts to expand global outreach and strengthen sustainable tourism partnerships.

The exhibition will focus on emerging trends, innovative technologies and sustainable tourism models shaping the global industry. Oman's pavilion will feature participation from tourism institutions, hospitality companies, hotels and strategic sector partners.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism aims to promote Oman's tourism offerings, highlight new destinations and products; and engage with Spanish and international tour operators to boost visitor arrivals. The participation will also see the launch of new partnerships and promotional programmes with global stakeholders.

Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, Official Spokesperson of the Ministry and Director General of Tourism Promotion, said Oman's presence at FITUR aligns with ongoing efforts to diversify tourism products, leverage international expertise and strengthen the global competitiveness of the sector.

He noted that the exhibition provides valuable exposure to innovative tourism technologies and detailed market studies presented by global tourism communication companies, helping Oman better target priority source markets.

Spain remains an important source market for Oman, with visitor arrivals from Spain reaching about 10,749 between January and November 2025. — ONA

Karwa supplies 900 vehicles to Oman market

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 18

KARWA Motors produced and supplied around 900 vehicles of various types to the local market in 2025, reinforcing Oman's drive to build a domestic automotive manufacturing base and reduce reliance on vehicle imports.

Dr Ibrahim bin Ali al Balushi, Chief Executive Officer of Karwa Motors, said the achievement reflects the company's strategy to establish a national automotive industry capable of meeting local demand while supporting industrial diversification.

School buses accounted for the bulk of production, with 822 units delivered under the national school vehicle replacement programme, in line with international safety standards and approved local regulations.

In addition, the company supplied 100 buses to public and private sector entities as part of integrated transport solutions designed for corporate operations and mass transit.

Karwa Motors also delivered 30 specialised buses for the oil and gas sector, manufactured to meet stringent safety standards set by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO).

Dr Al Balushi said the deliveries demonstrate growing confidence in locally manufactured vehicles and



The achievement reflects the company's strategy to establish a national automotive industry capable of meeting local demand while supporting industrial diversification.



DR IBRAHIM BIN ALI AL BALUSHI
CEO, Karwa Motors

local supply chains, Karwa Motors signed four cooperation agreements with Omani companies to develop an integrated local supply ecosystem covering industrial components, technical services and logistics.

underline the capability of Omani industry to deliver high-quality transport solutions. As part of efforts to strengthen

In addition, the company supplied 100 buses to public and private sector entities as part of integrated transport solutions designed for corporate operations and mass transit.

The agreements aim to increase local content, improve manufacturing efficiency, reduce dependence on imports and enable national companies to participate in specialised industrial value chains, supporting long-term sector sustainability.

Shahla bint Salem

al Zadjaliyah, from Procurement and Logistics at Karwa Automotive, said the partnerships followed a detailed assessment of local suppliers' capabilities and reflect the company's commitment to building resilient supply chains and long-term strategic relationships with qualified national firms.

Karwa Motors said the agreements form part of its phased plan to localise knowledge, transfer technical expertise and enhance the competitiveness of Omani automotive products in domestic and regional markets, in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Trump vows tariffs on eight European nations over Greenland

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Saturday vowed to implement a wave of increasing tariffs on European allies until the United States is allowed to buy Greenland, escalating a row over the future of Denmark's vast Arctic island.

In a post on Truth Social, Trump said additional 10% import tariffs would take effect on February 1 on goods from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and Great Britain — all already subject to tariffs imposed by Trump.

Those tariffs would increase to 25% on June 1 and would continue until a deal was reached for the US to purchase Greenland, Trump wrote. Trump has repeatedly insisted he will settle for nothing less than ownership of Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark.

Leaders of both Denmark and Greenland have insisted the island is not for sale and does not want to be part of the United States.



People protest against Trump's policy towards Greenland in front of US consulate in Nuuk, Greenland. — Reuters

A poll of US residents this week found that less than one in five respondents support the idea of acquiring Greenland.

The president has repeatedly said Greenland is vital to US security because of its strategic location and large mineral deposits; and has

not ruled out using force to take it. European nations this week sent military personnel to the island at Denmark's request.

"These Countries, who are playing this very dangerous game, have put a level of risk in play that is not tenable or sustainable", Trump wrote.

Protesters in Denmark and Greenland demonstrated on Saturday against Trump's demands and called for the territory to be left to determine its own future.

The countries named by Trump on Saturday have backed Denmark, warning that the US military seizure of a territory in Nato could collapse the military alliance that Washington leads.

"The president's announcement comes as a surprise", Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen said in a statement. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer was unusually blunt in condemning Trump's threat, saying on X that his country would raise the issue

directly with Washington.

"Applying tariffs on allies for pursuing the collective security of Nato allies is completely wrong", Starmer said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa said in separate but identical posts on X that the European Union stood in "full solidarity" with Denmark and Greenland.

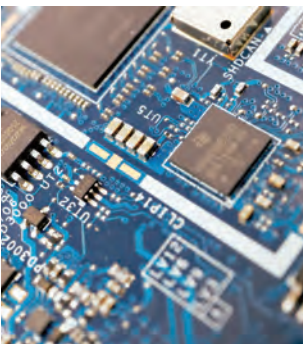
"Tariffs would undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral. Europe will remain united, coordinated and committed to upholding its sovereignty", they said.

Officials from Norway, Sweden, France and Germany reiterated support for Denmark on Saturday and said tariffs should not be part of Greenland discussions.

Cyprus, which currently holds the EU presidency, said it has called for an emergency meeting of ambassadors from the union's 27 countries on Sunday. — Reuters

TRADE DIPLOMACY

Seoul seeks chip tariff relief



South Korea will negotiate with Washington for favourable tariff terms on memory and advanced computing chips. Seoul cited existing trade commitments guaranteeing no worse treatment than competitors.

Officials said recent US tariffs would have limited impact on Korean firms, including Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix, the world's leading memory producers. — Reuters

LEGAL DISPUTE

Musk seeks massive OpenAI damages



Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX and Tesla, is seeking up to \$134 billion from OpenAI and Microsoft, arguing he is owed wrongful gains from his early backing. A court filing says OpenAI gained up to \$109.4 billion and Microsoft up to \$25.1 billion.

Musk says his funding, reputation and expertise were critical to OpenAI's creation, ahead of his upcoming federal trial. — Reuters

ENERGY SECURITY

US-Slovakia civil nuclear pact



The United States and Slovakia signed an agreement to deepen civil nuclear cooperation, aiming to cut reliance on Russian-designed reactors. The deal includes plans for a 1,200-megawatt US-designed unit at Jaslovské Bohunice.

Bratislava has been in talks with Washington and Westinghouse to expand nuclear capacity. Officials said the project would strengthen long-term European energy security. — Reuters

OPINION

Banks plan trader hiring spree with uplift in business



ANDY JALIL
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The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

INVESTMENT

banks are poised to step up hiring and raise bonuses within their markets’ businesses as they reap the benefits of a sustained uplift in trading revenue. Banks are likely to allocate higher budgets to expand their roster of senior traders and award bigger payments this year, according to London-based head hunters and executives.

“I think it is going to be a little bit like post-Covid in 2021, or maybe even going back to 2009, 2010, when things were very robust on that front”, said Canice Hogan, chief executive of macro focused executive search firm Shadowbound.

Banks’ total market revenue for last year is expected to reach \$259 billion — the highest figure since 2009, according to research firm Crisil Coalition Greenwich. “Many people are quite excited about 2026”, said one trading executive at a European investment bank. “What’s going on globally and geopolitically has made this year a very interesting space and I think we can expect that to continue.

Equities have been a stand-out asset class for banks last year. Annual revenue from the area is projected to gain 17 per cent to

a record \$94 billion, helped by an AI stock boom and a surge in demand for prime broking services among banks, hedge fund clients.

Macro traders are also eyeing a strong 2026. This year’s haul from fixed income, currencies and commodities is projected to hit \$165 billion — the highest figure since 2009, according to Coalition Greenwich. Fixed income is more reliant on human traders than equities, where the vast majority of deals are made electronically.

“Rates generally have been quite volatile, particularly inflation and interest rates — there’s been opportunity to make money there”, said Kumaran Surenthirathas, managing director at fixed income-focused headhunting firm Rosehill Search. “Probably the other main area of expansion is the private markets space, private credit in particular”.

Hogan cited a “shortage of senior people” at banks as a possible driver for hiring in fixed income. “Teams are smaller and there’s less of a bench almost everywhere since the hedge funds have been very active lifting out of the banks”.

The potential for strong trading revenue across the sector could create a “perfect storm”, according to Hogan, as big banks,

Banks are likely to allocate higher budgets to expand their roster of senior traders and award bigger payments this year, according to London-based head hunters and executives.

their smaller rivals and the booming hedge fund industry all vie for senior talent.

Bank of America and Nomura are among firms to lose senior macro traders in London to hedge funds over past year”, according to reports. “The sell-side talent pool is getting strained by the buy-side”, said one European markets executive at a large US bank.

“Rising trading revenues don’t just lift bonuses — they accelerate mobility”, said Joseph Leung, managing partner at executive search firm Aubreck Leung.

He added: “As top performers jump to rivals and the buyside, banks face gaps they must move quickly to fill or they’ll hand their competitors an open lane”.

Year-end bonuses for equities sales and trading professionals are projected to rise by 15 per cent to 25 per cent, compared with 5 per cent to 15 per cent in fixed income, according to a November report by Wall Street compensation consultants Johnson Associates.

“Bonuses won’t be in line with (profit and loss), but the main players could be 5 to 10 per cent higher depending on which area you are in”, Hogan said on fixed income. “If you’re in rates you probably could be 8 per cent to 10 per cent up. If you’re in FX it might be 3 per cent to 5 per cent.

WALL STREET DYNAMIC DUO ACHIEVES THE IMPOSSIBLE

STEPHEN GANDEL

Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley have valuation gaps that challenge even their formidable investment bankers.

The Wall Street duo delivered sparkling quarterly results on Thursday and for the first time are trading at multiples of book value that exceed their pre-financial-crisis levels. What’s impressive, albeit befuddling, is that they are far less profitable now.

A deal-making rebound helped propel both financial behemoths at the end of 2025. Goldman’s bottom line increased 12%, from a year earlier, to \$4.6 billion, buoyed by stock trading and advisory fees despite suffering a 3% revenue dip related to the sale of its Apple credit card business to JPMorgan.

Goldman’s bottom line increased 12%, from a year earlier, to \$4.6 billion, buoyed by stock trading and advisory fees despite suffering a 3% revenue dip related to the sale of its Apple credit card business to JPMorgan.

Morgan Stanley’s net income did even better, jumping 19%, to \$4.4 billion.

There’s probably more to come, looking through the investment prism. Goldman, led by David Solomon, now trades at 2.7 times its expected book value over the next 12 months, using LSEG data, while Morgan Stanley under Ted Pick commands 3.1 times.

Regulatory rollbacks will ease capital requirements and boost returns, but neither bank is likely to achieve its former performance.

Goldman generated nearly a 15% return on equity last year and Morgan Stanley more than 16%, compared to 27% and 23%, respectively, in 2007.

Stellar profitability isn’t the only gauge; reliable earnings deserve appreciation, too. Both investment banks have prioritised steadier profit with less choppiness from buying and selling stocks, bonds and commodities.

The idea that they are sufficiently steeled to warrant such a big valuation premium, however, is dubious.

The case is better for Morgan Stanley, which now generates nearly 55% of its revenue from managing other people’s money. Goldman describes 45% of its top line as “durable”, but about two-fifths of that designated proportion comes from its trading division.

Banks balked that shoring up the financial system by forcing them to hold more capital would restrain credit and punish shareholders. And yet lending continues apace, even with borrowing costs higher, while Morgan Stanley’s stock price has more than doubled over the past five years and Goldman’s tripled.

Their valuations reflect this stellar alignment, but to presume it will persist would be a cosmic error. — Reuters

World’s first: Australia’s teen social media ban

DECEMBER 9-10, 2025, Australia became the first country in the world to both pass and enforce a nationwide ban on social media for under-16s. During November 2025, Australia issued the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act.

This Act sets the minimum age for access across all social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, X, Facebook, Reddit, Twitch, Kick and Threads, etc, at 16.

The Australian government will fine these platforms up to \$49.5 million Australian Dollars if they continue to allow underage users to remain active on their platforms or grant new users under-16 access.

The Australian Prime Minister initiated this landmark law in the hope that this reform would change lives and allow Australian children to have a childhood.

This decision was driven by several key alarming metrics and the repeated narratives of youth mental health trends, public pressure and online harm data.

Thousands of complaints per year about cyberbullying, online abuse of children and exposure to harmful, violent content via algorithms and the presence of platform design features to maximise screen time, steered the Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, to enforce the social media ban for under-16s.

In the one month of enforcement, all social media platforms have removed or deactivated roughly 4.7-5 million teen accounts.

Most of these platforms have rolled out age-verification procedures, such as ID uploads, facial recognition and other checks. To date, they have had a smooth technical rollout.

After five weeks of the ban, initial reactions from parents, children, authorities and the rest of the world reflect a spectrum of emotions. Many parents are in a state of frenzy about how to handle their children after the Online Safety Amendment Act came into effect.

Some parental reactions are that kids are ‘completely addicted’, to ‘very distressed’. Some parents claim it has increased conflict at



Facebook, Instagram and TikTok apps seen on a smartphone in front of an Australian flag, in this illustration. — Reuters

This decision was driven by several key alarming metrics and the repeated narratives of youth mental health trends, public pressure and online harm data.



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

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

home, while others say the ban is a sigh of relief.

Children worry that some of their friends might use VPNs and adopt various methods to bypass age restrictions, leaving them out of the social network.

Some teens have reported feeling unexpectedly much better, as there is now no pressure to be ‘always on’ and others have stated that they got more sleep, more sport and more in-person socialising.

The world watches to learn and perhaps adopt the Australian example for protecting the wellbeing and mental health of youth.

The world stands divided in thought, with many critics questioning and worrying about the enforcement, social media disconnect and privacy issues surrounding age verification, whereas supporters advocate the monumental decision as it supports the healthy, sustainable development of youth and protects their mental health.

The ban has drawn global attention, with several nations expressing their intention to follow a similar path tailored to their own contexts.

Countries such as Malaysia, Denmark and Norway have expressed their intent to implement a social media ban in the future. Denmark plans to impose a social media ban for under-15s with parental exemptions, which is currently in the legislative phase.

Many parents who have lost their children welcome this landmark decision from the Australian government and they strongly advocate that children must be educated about online dangers before the age of sixteen.

This is the world’s first enforcement of an under-16 social media ban and the world watches the only live experiment that shows immediate platform regulatory changes, but with mixed human experience. The real effect will be generational and difficult to assess in a few weeks.

Though it is too early to conclude on the real outcomes of wellbeing, this is a conscious, Herculean and commendable effort that etches the beginning of cognitive freedom from digital imprisonment for children in Australia and maybe a possibility for children around the world.

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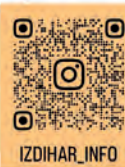
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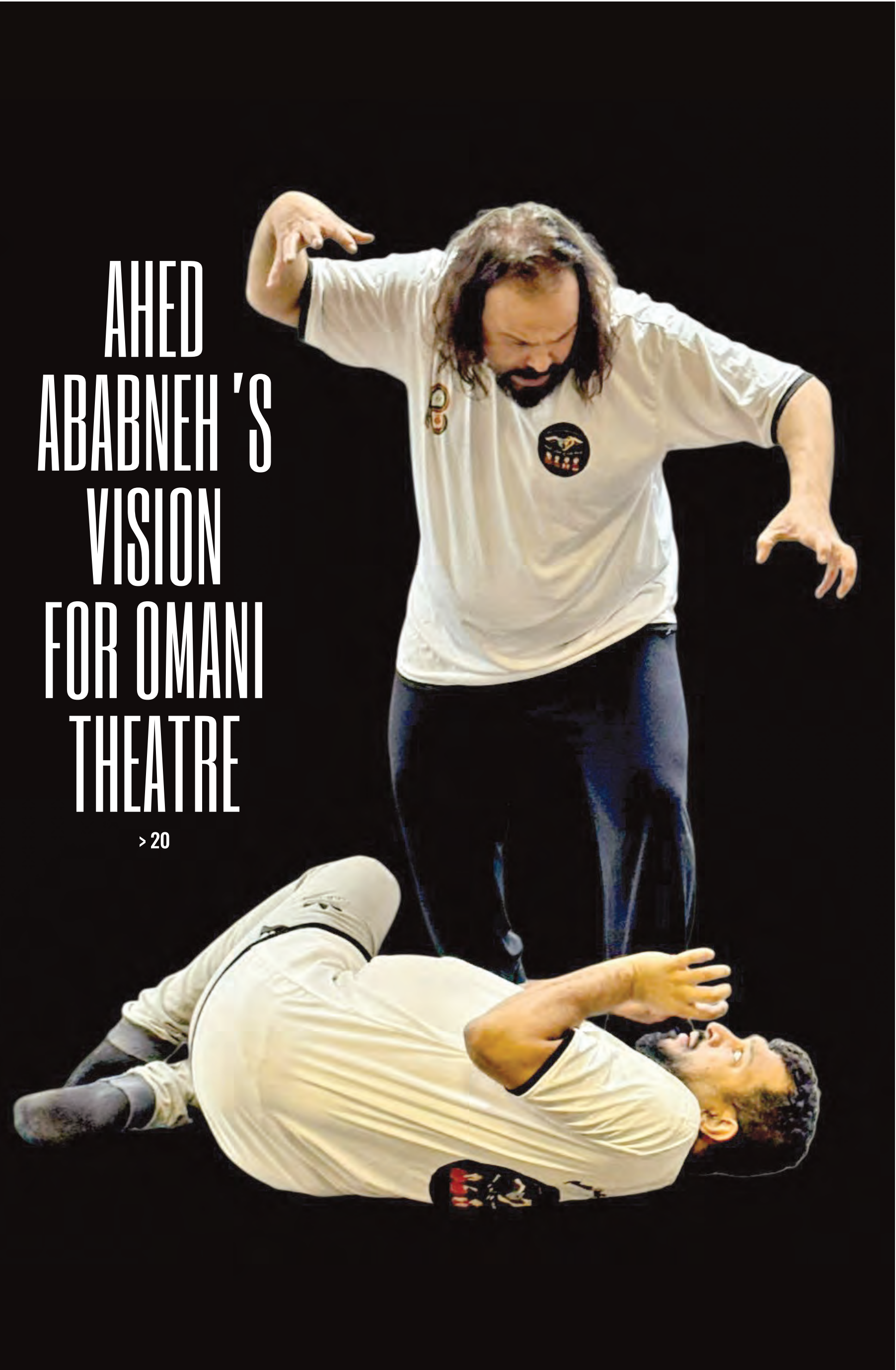
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ART/LIFE



AHED ABABNEH'S VISION FOR OMANI THEATRE

> 20

MUSICALMAGIC

INDIAN MUSIC STAR PERFORMS IN MUSCAT



KABEER YOUSUF

Within the cool, starlit night at the Muscat Club, nestled between the Al Wadi Al Kabir mountains, the air warmed to the stomping rhythm of Indian singer Yumna Ajin, whose spellbinding performance headlined Chandrika Vasantham – The Spring of the Crescent – last week.

Yumna captured the audience's hearts with her melodious vocals, opening with the evocative "Ya Aali, Reham Wali...", before taking listeners on a musical journey that blended pop, classical, bhajans, Bollywood, folk, ghazal and Sufi influences. Singing effortlessly in English, Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam, she drew rousing applause from a packed stadium.

One of the evening's highlights was her seamless Qawwali-Hindi-Malayalam mega mix, which had the crowd crooning along as the concert rolled into midnight, creating an unforgettable atmosphere for music lovers in the city.

With over 700 stage shows worldwide, Yumna is no stranger to big audiences. Her musical journey includes appearances on reality shows such as Indian Idol Junior and Sa Re Ga Ma Pa L'il Champs, with her selection as one of the top ten finalists on Indian Idol Junior standing out as a major milestone.

Prominent singers Shafi Kollam and Rehna expressed their delight at being part of the evening, sharing the stage with veteran Mappilapattu performers. Emerging stars Shweta Ashok and Nikesh Millennium, who have already made waves in the industry, also delivered electrifying performances that kept the energy high at the Al Wadi Al Kabir Stadium.

Adding to the festive spirit were Shafeel Kannur and Alia Abdul Razak, who brought Chandrika's vision alive for its readers and viewers in Oman, ensuring a fun-filled spring celebration for the thousands who stayed until midnight to soak in the music and magic.

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



LIFESTYLE

Visitors pick tulip flowers for free at a picking garden at Museumplein park on National Tulip Day in Amsterdam. — AFP



TRADITIONS

A 'Schoene' (Beautiful) costumed member of the yodel group 'Spitzli Schueppel' takes part in the traditional 'Silvesterchlausen' (Saint Sylvester's Day festivities) in Urnasch, eastern Switzerland. — AFP



FESTIVAL

Acrobats of the Chinese National Acrobatic Troupe perform with hoops on the stage of the Capital Grand Circus during the gala of the 16th Budapest International Circus Festival in Budapest. — AFP

INSTA PICKS



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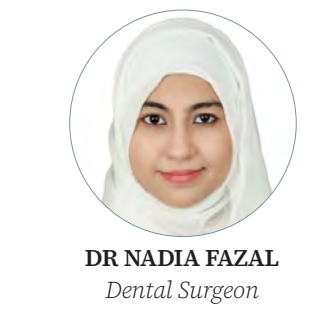


Twilight Hour

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WHY DENTAL CARE MATTERS DURING PREGNANCY



Maintaining oral health during pregnancy is not just important for the mother; it also plays a crucial role in the baby's development and long-term wellbeing.

Hormonal fluctuations, changes in metabolism and altered dietary habits can increase the risk of gum inflammation, infections and other dental issues. Pregnancy gingivitis, affecting around 60 per cent of expectant mothers, can cause swelling, tenderness and bleeding gums. Left untreated, it may progress to periodontitis — a disease that weakens the bone supporting teeth — or lead to benign gum growths known as pyogenic granulomas.

Poor oral health has been linked to serious pregnancy complications. Bacteria from untreated gum disease can enter the bloodstream, triggering inflammation that may lead to premature labour or affect fetal development. Morning sickness, frequent vomiting and pregnancy cravings expose teeth to acids and sugars, making enamel more vulnerable to decay. For mothers with gestational diabetes, oral

care becomes even more critical, as elevated blood sugar increases the risk of gum infections and slows healing, creating a cycle that can affect both mother and baby.

Pregnancy is often surrounded by advice, not all of it accurate. Some women believe gum bleeding and swelling are normal and will disappear after delivery, but these conditions are manageable with proper care. Another common myth is that dental treatment is unsafe during pregnancy. In fact, routine check-ups, cleanings, X-rays with proper shielding and most essential treatments are safe and often recommended.

Because every small habit matters, expectant mothers can protect their oral health by visiting the dentist early, brushing twice daily with fluoride toothpaste, rinsing with water or fluoride mouthwash instead of brushing immediately after vomiting, choosing healthier snacks like calcium-rich foods and fresh fruits, controlling plaque through regular flossing and staying hydrated to neutralise acids and reduce bacterial growth.

A healthy pregnancy starts with a healthy mouth. By understanding the facts, dismissing myths and embracing timely dental care, expectant mothers are not just protecting their smile — they are building a stronger foundation for their baby's future.

SAVANNAH CHIMPS OFFER NEW CLUES TO HUMAN ORIGINS



BECCA MILFELD

A SHRIEK broke the dawn on the savannah, followed by more screeches and the rustle of branches: The wild Fongoli chimps were bidding each other good morning in the dry, scraggly Sahel.

The rare chimpanzees — who live in the bush of hot, southeast Senegal rather than the forest as is more common — exist on the extreme edge of what is possible for their species.

Their unusual way of living offers clues into humans' own evolutionary past, while their adaptations to the heat appear timely in a world where temperatures are on the rise.

Soaking in pools, cooling off in caves and even wielding spears: The 35 wild chimps of the Fongoli community have adapted to the environment with behaviours that defy their species' conventional norms.

Now, 25 years after starting her pioneering research on savannah chimps, which had never before been habituated to observers, primatologist Jill Pruetz has a wealth of data.

The study's longevity allows for a deeper dive into the Fongoli community's behaviours, relationships and how they learn from one generation to the next.

"Until they were habituated to observers so we could follow them around and take data, we only knew chimpanzees from forested areas", Pruetz said, who spent two days following her and her team as they tracked the primates in the bush.

The Fongoli chimps, who live on a 100-square-kilometre home range, are only one group of savannah chimps in the region but for years the only one to be studied.

On a recent morning, A J, Raffy, Diouf and ambitious young Pistache sat at the top of a baobab, plucking a breakfast of fruit that they cracked open with a whack-whack-whack against the branches.

Screeching, or "pant-hooting" as their vocalisations are known, they communicated with other members nearby.

Pruetz and her team of Senegalese researchers follow the group's adult



Researcher Nazaire Bonnag (R) and primatologist and director of the Fongoli Savanna Chimpanzee Project Dr Jill Pruetz observe West African chimpanzees on the Fongoli home range in the Kedougou region. — AFP

males, which currently number 10, choosing one each day to track from dawn to dusk. The females, however, are not followed in order to keep them more wary of poachers.

The males' strict hierarchy spans from Cy, the alpha, down to Siberut, the oldest and lowest-ranking despite his superb hunting skills.

Since the social apes spend much of their time together, Pruetz is still able to observe the females and their young.

It is the females who have proven the most groundbreaking members of the clan: They are the only non-human animal to systematically use tools to hunt.

It is a behaviour Pruetz and her researchers have observed almost 600 times.

After whittling sticks into spears, usually with their teeth, the females hunt bush babies during the rainy season, impaling the small primates as they shelter in tree holes.

With the heat index reaching 49 degrees Celsius in the hot season, life on the savannah can be gruelling.

The Fongoli chimps "have to deal with the hottest area that we've studied chimps in" Pruetz said and must "minimise energy expenditure" during the dry season.

They are the only wild chimps in the world known to soak, taking dips

in natural pools. They additionally "use caves to rest in, because the caves are cooler", Pruetz said.

The savannah woodlands that are the Fongoli chimps' habitat are similar to those that human ancestors lived in some six or seven million years ago.

By looking at chimps, which along with bonobos are humans' closest living relatives, perhaps we "can help confirm some of the hypotheses about how those really early hominins, or bipedal apes, behaved", Pruetz said.

While the Fongoli chimps' many adaptations mean they are able to deal with "high heat stress", Pruetz said, "we're not sure that with climate change they can continue to do that".

While they have traditionally co-existed alongside humans on their home range, a new threat has emerged: a gold rush which has ushered an increase in both artisanal and industrial mines.

Papa Ibnou Ndiaye, a wildlife researcher and professor at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, said studying the Fongoli chimpanzees allows "the local administration to have accurate information to make informed decisions for the conservation of Senegal's biodiversity". — AFP

FEATURES



AHED ABABNEH’S VISION FOR OMANI THEATRE



FOR Italian director and playwright Ahed Ababneh, theatre is not merely a stage framed by lights and curtains. It is a deeply human space where reality is reshaped through silence, movement and imagination and where stories rise from heritage to speak a universal language.

Ababneh, who has worked extensively in the Sultanate of Oman for more than seven years, describes the local theatre scene as a ‘creative renaissance’ — a dynamic fusion of tradition and modern aspiration. From psychodrama workshops with the Amateur Stage Theatre Group to productions inspired by Omani folklore, he believes Oman offers an inexhaustible well of symbols, rituals and visual narratives for contemporary theatre-makers.

“My reading of Omani theatre is not simply an observation of reality”, he says, “but a vision of an aesthetic awakening. What makes this experience special is the harmony between authenticity and ambition. Omani culture is rich with stories, gestures and performative rituals that give the playwright endless creative possibilities”.

Ababneh notes that institutional support, combined with the passion of amateur and university theatre groups, has created a vibrant theatrical ecosystem. Today’s Omani audience, he says, is an “active recipient” — thoughtful, curious and emotionally engaged, seeking intellectual wonder rather than fleeting entertainment.



He believes Oman has all the elements needed to become a major theatrical hub in the Arab world and beyond. “Development does not mean importing ready-made models”, he explains. “It means adapting global approaches and integrating them into the Omani context, building a theatre that speaks locally and resonates globally”.

Central to this vision is what he calls ‘laboratory theatre’ — a space for rigorous artistic training, dramaturgical depth and experimentation, where young talents learn to craft performances that combine discipline with imagination.

For Ababneh, theatre is also an ethical space — one that embraces

inclusion and breaks down barriers. His work with performers with disabilities, particularly in deaf theatre, has been among the most transformative experiences of his career.

“When we speak about theatre for people with disabilities, we are not talking about charity”, he says. “We are talking about a necessary creative act that redefines beauty and humanity. Difference becomes an added aesthetic value”.

As director of the Oman Deaf Theatre Company’s production The Conflict, Ababneh explored what he calls “the democracy of the body”, where silence becomes full of meaning and movement becomes poetry. “Here, the body is the text, the music and the rhythm. Every

gesture is a visual word charged with emotion”, he reflects. Sensory scenography — light, shadow and colour — replaces sound, creating a deeply immersive theatrical language that transcends spoken words.

Ababneh sees theatre as the “aesthetic dissection table” of society — a space where pain, hope and contradiction are explored through symbolism rather than slogans. True theatre, he insists, does not preach or deliver political manifestos. Instead, it transforms social issues into powerful visual metaphors that invite reflection and interpretation.

“A successful performance is an open text”, he explains. “Each audience member discovers their own truth within it. Beauty is the vehicle of the message and methodology is what ensures that beauty carries meaning”.

For Ababneh, creativity must be guided by scientific methodology. In directing, acting and dramaturgy, structure and discipline turn raw talent into professional artistry. “Theatre is the architecture of the soul and the architecture of beauty”, he says. “Without methodology, we stumble in the dark”.

This philosophy draws heavily on his Italian theatrical roots, particularly the traditions of Commedia dell’arte, physical theatre and visual scenography. Italian theatre, he explains, taught him how the body can speak behind the mask, how light can shape meaning and how folklore can be transformed into universal art through rigorous craft.

Ababneh believes Arab theatre must engage with global experiences — not through imitation, but through creative assimilation. “Our distinctiveness lies in our spirit”, he says. “The approach is the body that carries this spirit”.

By localising global methodologies and grounding them in Arab stories, myths and social realities, he sees a future where Omani and Arab theatre speak confidently on the world stage, using the latest technologies while preserving a renewed cultural identity.

Children’s theatre, he argues, is one of the most urgent frontiers for development in the Arab world. Too often reduced to simplistic instruction, it should instead be a space of empowerment, imagination and artistic excellence.

“We are shaping the visual memory of an entire generation”, Ababneh says. “Children’s theatre should be the most dazzling, the most professional and the most imaginative — because it is an investment in the future of the Arab intellect”.

From heritage to innovation, silence to movement and local stories to global stages, Ahed Ababneh’s vision places Oman at the heart of a new theatrical journey — one where art becomes a bridge between cultures and a mirror of the human soul. — ONA



From psychodrama workshops and folklore-inspired performances to pioneering deaf theatre and children’s theatre, I believe Oman is experiencing a ‘creative renaissance’ that can position it as a regional and international hub for meaningful, inclusive and visually powerful theatre

AHED ABABNEH
Italian director and playwright