

O M A N

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ISLAMIC ORNAMENT
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MOSQUES

Royal Decree on Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority

HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK on Monday issued Royal Decree No 31/2026 on the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority.

Article (1) states that the text of Article (1) of Royal Decree No (3/2013) — on the establishment of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority — shall be replaced with the

following text: “An authority to be named ‘Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority’ shall be established and shall be accorded legal personality and financial and administrative autonomy.”

Article (2) stipulates that the amendments attached to this decree shall be applied to the System of

the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority promulgated by Royal Decree No (68/2014).

Article (3) states that the Chairman of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority shall issue the regulations and decisions necessary for the implementation of the System of the Civil Defence and Ambulance

Authority — after the approval of the board of directors of this authority — within a period of not more than 6 months from the date of enforcement of this decree. Till such time, the existing regulations and decisions shall continue to be enforced without prejudice to the provisions of this decree.

Article (4) cancels Article (2) of the aforementioned Royal Decree No (68/2014), and all that contradicts this decree or the attached amendments or contravenes their provisions.

Article (5) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from the day following its date of publication. — ONA

INBRIEF

HM’S GREETINGS TO PRESIDENT OF CHINA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China, on the Lunar New Year. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments to President Xi Jinping and the Chinese people on this occasion, hoping that it would be a year of goodness, achievements and progress. His Majesty the Sultan also commended the deep-rooted relations and fruitful cooperation between the two countries.

BANGLADESH’S YUNUS RESIGNS

Bangladesh’s interim leader Muhammad Yunus stepped down on Monday in a farewell broadcast to the nation before handing over to an elected government. “Today, the interim government is stepping down,” the 85-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner said. “But let the practice of democracy, freedom of speech, and fundamental rights that has begun not be halted.” Bangladeshi voters endorsed sweeping democratic reforms in a national referendum, a key pillar of Yunus’s post-uprising transition agenda, on the same day as the elections.



SEASONAL DECORATIONS

A Palestinian girl holds a Ramadan lantern at a market where seasonal decorations are sold in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday. — Reuters

OMAN, IRAN FMS MEET AHEAD OF IRAN-US TALKS

O m a n r e a f f i r m s a p p r o a c h i n s u p p o r t i n g d i a l o g u e

SAYYID

BADR BIN HAMAD AL BUSAIDY, Foreign Minister, met in Geneva

with Dr Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to discuss preparations for the second round of Iranian-American talks, scheduled to be held indirectly on Tuesday in Geneva.

During the meeting, both sides emphasised the importance of working to promote understanding and consensus to reach an agreement that meets the goals and aspirations of the parties to these negotiations. Sayyid Badr affirmed the Sultanate of Oman’s steadfast approach in supporting dialogue and diplomacy, and its keenness to continue contributing to efforts supporting security, peace and stability to spare the region and its people the scourge of wars and conflicts, expressing his high appreciation for the trust that the parties place in the Omani mediation in this regard, a responsibility that the Sultanate of Oman takes very seriously and with great attention.

A number of officials from both sides attended the meeting.

Meanwhile, the Iranian foreign minister met with the UN nuclear watchdog chief on Monday, ahead



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, met in Geneva with Dr Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

“The Sultanate of Oman supports dialogue and diplomacy, and is keen to continue contributing to efforts supporting security, peace and stability.

SAYYID BADR BIN HAMAD AL BUSAIDY
Foreign Minister

of talks between Washington and Tehran aimed at resolving a nuclear issue, with few clear signs of compromise from either side.

The US and Iran renewed negotiations earlier this month hoping to tackle their decades-long issue over Tehran’s nuclear programme.

Oil prices were little changed on Monday, with investors weighing the market implications of upcoming US-Iran talks aimed at de-escalating frictions against a backdrop of expected Opec+ supply increases.

However, Washington has sought to expand the scope of talks to non-nuclear issues such as Iran’s missile stockpile. Tehran says it is only willing to discuss curbs on its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief and won’t accept zero uranium enrichment. It says its missile capabilities are off the table.

Speaking during a visit to Hungary on Monday, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said reaching a deal with Tehran would be hard.

“I think that there’s an opportunity here to diplomatically reach an agreement that addresses the things we’re concerned about. We’ll be very open and welcoming to that.”

Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said he was in Geneva to “achieve a fair and equitable deal”. “What is not on the table: submission before threats,” Araqchi said on X.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry said Araqchi had discussed cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as Tehran’s technical point of view regarding nuclear talks with the US during his meeting with IAEA head Rafael Grossi.

The IAEA has been calling on Iran for months to say what happened to its stockpile of 440 kg of highly enriched uranium. — Agencies

Ramadhan as per astronomical calculations

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Sultanate of Oman will not be waiting to see the crescent moon to begin Ramadhan this year. This year, the date has been set as per astronomical calculations.

In an exclusive interview with the Observer, Yousuf bin Hamad al Rahbi, Director of the Astronomy Department at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, said the scientific basis for sighting the crescent, and clarified the difference between astronomy and astrology, outlining the conditions used to



Yousuf bin Hamad al Rahbi

determine the start of the Hijri months.

He stressed that astronomy provides a scientific and reliable framework for determining the beginning of lunar months,

ensuring accuracy and clarity in religious and civil observances across the Sultanate of Oman.

Nothing has changed in Oman’s policy, he noted. The Sultanate of Oman relies on astronomy, in cases of impossibility, such as the current situation, where the crescent moon cannot be sighted. This was the case previously, but when there is a possibility of sighting the crescent moon, the committees meet as usual, and they announce the crescent on the 29th. This is the only instance where it is announced, but not observed. The crescent is announced early when it

is impossible to see, as is the case with the beginning of Ramadhan.

“This year, we also announced it previously, and it is in the month of Jumada Al Akhirah; we also announced it with a sufficient period. Whenever there is no possibility of sighting the crescent, we will announce in advance the beginning of the new month, and whenever there is a possibility of sighting, we will announce it. Meetings will be held on the 29th of every Hijri month. Oman has not changed its methodology for sighting the crescent,” he noted.

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SHORT TAKES

The session was held under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. — ONA

STATE COUNCIL
DISCUSSES DRAFT
PLANNING LAW

MUSCAT: The State Council on Monday discussed the “Draft Urban Planning Law” during its 6th session of the third regular annual sitting of the 8th term. The session was held under the chairmanship of Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council.

In his opening speech, the Chairman of the State Council stated that the session includes the discussion of several topics, foremost of which is the “Draft Urban Planning Law” and the report of the Economic and Financial Committee concerning it, which was referred by the Council of Ministers in accordance with the provisions of Article (49) of the Law of the Council of Oman. He added that the session also covers proposals submitted by the standing committees regarding topics they intend to study during the current annual sitting of the eighth term. He emphasised the efforts exerted by the members to achieve a unified vision on draft laws, underscoring the harmony and joint cooperation with the Majlis Ash’shura to serve the public interest.

Dr Dhafer bin Awadh al Shanfari, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee at the State Council, explained that the importance of studying the “Draft Urban Planning Law” lies in defining the foundations of sustainable urban planning and the general principles that government and non-government entities, as well as various segments of society, must adhere to across national, regional and local planning levels. — ONA

BARKA
ENDOWMENT
FUND
LAUNCHES
‘SAKHA’
PROJECT

BARKA: Barka Endowment Fund on Monday launched ‘Sakha’ endowment project. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

The event included a visual presentation highlighting the Fund’s vision, mission, and key achievements over the past period.

The event was attended by Sayyid Tariq bin Mahmoud al Busaidy, Wali of Barka, some members of the State Council, shaikhs and dignitaries from the Wilayat of Barka. — ONA

The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. — ONA

Bahrain Royal visit to
bolster relations: OBFA

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, FEB 16

THE visit of His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain, to the Sultanate of Oman represents a significant milestone in the deep-rooted bilateral relations between the two countries, according to the Omani-Bahraini Friendship Association.

Speaking to the Observer, Rudhaina bint Amer al Hajri, President of the Omani-Bahraini Friendship Association (OBFA) opined that the visit embodies the profound historical ties and enduring fraternal bonds that unite the two brotherly peoples.

“This Royal visit reflects the keenness of both leaderships

RUDHAINA
BINT AMER
AL HAJRI
President of the
Omani-Bahraini
Friendship
Association

to build upon their shared achievements and propel relations towards broader horizons of cooperation and integration in various political, economic and cultural fields, in line with the developmental visions of both countries and to strengthen their mutual interests,” she said.

The Omani-Bahraini Friendship Association commended the consolidating foundations of genuine brotherhood, enhancing the joint Gulf Cooperation Council efforts, and supporting all endeavours that contribute to achieving stability, development and prosperity in the region.

Al Hajri emphasised that the Omani-Bahraini relations represent a leading model of fraternal integration, manifested in institutional cooperation, cultural exchange

and community initiatives that strengthen ties between the people of both countries.

She noted that the next phase requires intensifying joint programmes, particularly in the cultural, youth and educational fields, to solidify the popular support for these relations and ensure their sustainability across generations. Rudhaina affirmed that relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain will remain a firm model of sincere brotherhood and constructive cooperation.

She stressed the Association’s commitment to continuing its role in strengthening cultural and social ties between the two brotherly countries, in line with the aspirations of both leaderships and serving the interests of both peoples.



هيئة الخدمات المالية
FINANCIAL SERVICES AUTHORITY



Tender Announcement

Financial Services Authority announces the following tender :-

Tender name	Tender Number	Release the RFP	Last date for Purchase of RFP	Last date of Submitting the proposal	Tender fees in OMR
Preparing a business continuity management plan for the Financial Services Authority	FSA 003/2026	16 February 2026	25 February 2026 03:00 PM	5 March 2026 02:00 PM	25 Non Refundable

- Specialized companies interested in participating in the above tender must deposit the tender fee into bank account, and submit payment receipt of the tender along with a copy of the commercial registration certificate and the contact details of the authorized person to the Services & Public Relations Department e-mail : Admin@fsa.gov.om, hence, we shall provide you with Tender document by e-mail.
- All participating companies must provide a bank guarantee, issued by locally registered bank not less than 2 % of the tender value addressed to FSA , the bond shall be valid for 90 days from the submission of the proposal.
- All bids shall be submitted in tender box at the headquarters of the Financial Services Authority, located in Airport Heights.
- FSA is not obliged to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without any justifiable reasons.



Bank account information :-

Name of beneficiary : Financial Services Authority

Account no : 0423019706330018

Bank : Bank Muscat- Corporate Branch- CBD

SWIFT code : BMUSOMRXXXX

Please attach a copy of the deposit receipt

For inquiries, please contact :-

E-mail : Tenders@fsa.gov.om

Telephone Number : 24823299, 24823133

Timing : 8:00 am to 3:00 pm

Workdays : Sunday to Thursday.



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بيانات
معلومات

Fees doubled for firms failing
Omanisation targets

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Ministry of Labour has revised its expat work permit rules, introducing a graded fee structure that doubles work permit fees for firms failing to meet Omanisation targets while rewarding compliant companies with discounts. Added benefits will include bids for government and private tenders and contracts.

Under the revised expat work permit framework, companies are classified into three categories based on compliance indicators, including Omanisation ratios and actual labour requirements.

Firms in the green category will receive a 30-per cent discount on expat work permit fees. Companies falling within the yellow or red categories due to non-compliance with Omanisation benchmarks will face double work permit fees, reinforcing what officials described as a system combining incentives with discipline.

Companies falling within the yellow or red categories due to non-compliance with Omanisation benchmarks will face double work permit fees.

The process has been integrated into the online licensing platform, enabling firms to automatically receive fee reductions once the required Omanisation levels are achieved, without additional procedures.

Payment of the fees stipulated in the regulation will be made after the Ministry of Labour approves the application for the issuance of a work permit or the application for the issuance or renewal of a work practice licence.

A fine of RO 10 shall be imposed on the employer for each month of delay, whether in renewing the licence or registering the worker's data.

However, the total amount of the fine shall not exceed RO 500 for each worker. Moreover, the period of delay shall be calculated either from the date of the worker's arrival or from the date of expiry of the licence, as the case may be. The fine will be imposed separately for each worker in respect of whom the violation has occurred.

SHORT TAKES



The training programme will engage 16 students, aged 10 to 16. — ONA

MOSD AND OMAN SAIL SIGN MOU

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) and Oman Sail signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) designed to empower Omani youth through a specialised life skills training programme which will lean on the lessons of sailing to inspire personal skills development, communication and teamwork.

The agreement was signed by Dr Khamis bin Salim al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail and Sayyidah Maani Abdullah al Busaidi, Director General of Family Development at the Ministry of Social Development. The training programme will

The primary objective of this initiative is to equip Omani youth with essential life skills that foster self-confidence

engage 16 students, aged 10 to 16, who have been selected by the Ministry of Social Development.

Dr Khamis said, “The primary objective of this initiative is to equip Omani youth with essential life skills that foster self-confidence and creativity. By integrating

maritime activities with personal development workshops, the programme aims to expand the horizons of the participants and provide them with a supportive environment to explore their potential. Oman Sail is proud to undertake such an important role in shaping the next generation of resilient and capable Omani citizens.”

Sayyidah Maani emphasised the importance of such community partnerships in achieving social goals. She said, “This agreement represents a vital step in our mission to provide comprehensive support and empowerment for children in our care.”

“By teaching the youth how to communicate effectively and work as a team, we are giving them the keys to unlock a brighter, more independent future.”

“The Ministry looks forward to working with our trusted partner Oman Sail and witnessing the positive impact this unique training will have on the students’ personal growth and outlook,” she added. — ONA

FORUM ENHANCES SERVICE EFFICIENCY



‘Your Appointment, Your Time’ programme successfully reduced waiting times.

MUSCAT: The Muscat Health Leadership Forum, held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, featured the presentation of a comprehensive package of qualitative initiatives that have enhanced healthcare service efficiency and elevated patient experience.

Foremost among these initiatives was the ‘Your Appointment, Your Time’ programme, which successfully reduced waiting times and increased adherence rates to appointments in specialised clinics, reaffirming that patients’ time is a priority and service quality remains central.

Healthcare teams also showcased a range of institutional improvement projects, the implementation of Lean methodology, digital transformation efforts in nursing, as well as patient flow management systems. In addition, sustainability initiatives, scientific research, and disease prevention programmes were highlighted.

The Leadership Forum serves as a platform for exchanging expertise and presenting success stories achieved by healthcare professionals, contributing to the advancement of a more efficient and sustainable healthcare system.

RAM concludes cultural leadership programme

MUSCAT: The Royal Academy of Management (RAM), in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), concluded the ‘Leadership in Cultural and Creative Industries Programme’ under the auspices of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture.

The programme targeted a select group of leaders from Oman’s cultural and creative sector, aiming to equip them with the knowledge and leadership capabilities necessary to transform the cultural landscape into a sustainable



economic driver. Dr Fathiya bint Abdullah al Rashdi, RAM’s Vice-President for Programme Affairs, described the programme’s conclusion as a significant milestone in RAM’s mandate to develop national leadership capacity, stating that it “reflects our commitment to developing leaders who can translate cultural ambition

into measurable economic value, while creating lasting impact that supports the growth of Oman’s creative economy.”

Hilal al Sabti, Supervisor of the Cultural and Creative Industries Leadership Programme, said, “The initiative undertook an important role in strengthening participants’ leadership capabilities and

expanding their knowledge and understanding of policy, regulation, and investment opportunities within the cultural and creative sector.”

Maryam bint Nasser al Kharbooshi, Director of cultural identity department at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, stated that investment in the cultural and creative industries extends beyond contributing to gross domestic product, serving instead as a strategic instrument for preserving national identity and cultural heritage by presenting Omani cultural products, in their diverse forms, to global audiences.

‘Virtual Labs Project’ to be implemented in schools

SAUD AL ANSARI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

THE Ministry of Education has launched the central training programme for the ‘Virtual Labs Project’, implemented by the Directorate General of Curriculum Development in cooperation with the project’s executing company. The initiative marks the official rollout of the project in the educational field and reinforces the Ministry’s digital transformation efforts in education.

The Virtual Labs Project simulates practical experiments for students from Grade 2 to Grade 12 across all science subjects through an interactive digital environment. It enables students to conduct experiments flexibly and conveniently inside or outside school using smartphone and tablet applications or computers, in addition to access through the Epic Games Store via Microsoft Launcher.

The training programme targets specialists in science laboratories and information and communication technology from educational directorates and the Ministry.

It aims to prepare decentralised teams in the educational directorates to transfer the impact of training to end users in schools — teachers and students.

Dr Afaf bint Ali al Lawati, Director of the Department of Applied Science Curriculum Development, affirmed that the project contributes to improving the quality of education and learning outcomes. She noted that the clarity of experimental results helps students reach conclusions faster and more accurately while also developing their technical skills.

She said, “Virtual labs allow students to conduct experiments anytime and anywhere, giving them the opportunity to



The initiative reinforces digital transformation efforts in education.

engage with experiments that are difficult to implement in school laboratories, while emphasising that they support and complement — not replace — real laboratories.”

Badr bin Hamoud al Hasani, Assistant Director of the Department of Applied Science Curriculum Development and Director of the Virtual Science Labs Project, explained that the project is one of the Ministry’s key digital transformation initiatives. It provides virtual simulations of practical experiments aligned with the Omani science curriculum through 17 interactive applications covering Grades 2 to 12 in general science, physics, chemistry and biology.

He said, “The implementation of this training programme represents the official launch of the project in schools. It targets 70 specialists from educational directorates and the Ministry in science laboratories and ICT, with the aim of forming teams that will transfer knowledge and training to the

educational field.”

Hanan bint Salim al Maawali, a member of the Virtual Labs technical team and Science Lab Technician at Baraka bint Tha’labah School, stated that the team has been working since the early stages of the project in cooperation with the implementing company to prepare and upload experiments and related files in line with the Omani science curriculum, covering Grades 1 to 8.

She said, “We developed the virtual experiments to match the Omani curriculum so students can view any prescribed experiment virtually. Virtual labs do not replace real laboratories but enhance them, especially in experiments that are difficult to conduct, potentially hazardous, or limited by shortages in laboratory tools or chemicals.”

She explained that virtual labs have enabled students to perform experiments and participate in analysing results and drawing conclusions more easily, while saving time and effort for both teachers and students.

Al Batinah North emerges as key tourism hub

SUHAR: Al Batinah North Governorate continues to strengthen its position as one of Oman’s most promising winter tourism destinations, drawing large numbers of visitors from within Oman and abroad.

Spanning the foothills of Al Hajar Mountains and the coast of the Sea of Oman, the governorate blends history, geology and natural beauty, offering an integrated tourism experience that combines culture, adventure and leisure.

During the winter season, from November to the end of April, visitor numbers surge as tourists explore the governorate’s mountains, wadis, beaches and heritage sites. Officials say the growing tourism infrastructure has enhanced the governorate’s readiness to welcome guests.

Hassan bin Sulaiman al



Al Batinah North’s geological diversity has created distinctive natural formations.

Jabri, Director of the Heritage and Tourism Department in Al Batinah North, said the number of tourism and hospitality establishments reached 97 by the end of 2025, providing around 1,700 hotel rooms. These include 15 hotels, 40 guest houses, 24 green lodges, 17 hotel apartments and one rest house. In addition, 17 hotel tourism projects are either operational

or under implementation, alongside several investment opportunities across the governorate.

He noted that Al Batinah North’s geological diversity — shaped by mountains, plains, valleys and coastline — has created distinctive natural formations. Among the most notable are the pillow lava “ophiolite rocks” in Wadi Al Jizi

in Suhar and ancient copper mining sites such as Dahwa in Saham and Umm Al Safafir in Shinas, which highlight the area’s long-standing civilisational heritage.

Ali bin Darwish al Ajmi, Head of the Tourism Promotion Department, said the governorate features numerous public parks and recreational sites that support domestic and environmental tourism. Popular adventure trails include Wadi Al Jahawer, Wadi Al Hawasna, Shida Village Trail, Wadi Haybi Trail, Al Khad Village Trail and Halhal Bani Ghaith Village Trail, attracting hiking and climbing enthusiasts.

Meanwhile, Khamis bin Nasser al Aufi, Head of the Department of Antiquities and Museums, said castles and forts remain major attractions during winter. — ONA

CHRONIC STRESS, DEADLY RISK



Long-term stress increases risk of heart disease, weakened immunity and mental health disorders



Workplace pressure and social expectations are major drivers of chronic strain



Experts stress the need for early intervention and institutional support

BALQEES AL ORAIMI

In today's fast-moving world, pressure has become a near-constant presence. From demanding jobs and financial responsibilities to social expectations and digital overload, prolonged stress is increasingly shaping daily life.

While short-term pressure can enhance performance, sustained stress carries serious consequences that extend beyond temporary discomfort, quietly evolving into a significant public health concern.

Chronic stress — persistent pressure without adequate recovery — disrupts both physical and psychological well-being.

Unlike sudden crises, it develops gradually and often goes unnoticed until symptoms become pronounced.

"Many people do not realise they are living under chronic stress until clear physical or psychological symptoms appear," said Dr Ahmed bin Naser, a consultant psychiatrist. By that stage, he noted, the body has already endured prolonged strain, making recovery more difficult.

Physiologically, long-term stress keeps the body in a constant state of alert. Elevated cortisol and adrenaline levels disturb normal functions, affecting the cardiovascular system, metabolism and immune response.

Over time, this imbalance increases the risk of hypertension, heart disease, sleep disorders, digestive problems and recurring infections. Mental health consequences, including anxiety, depression and impaired concentration, are also closely linked to sustained pressure.

Workplace demands remain one of the primary sources of chronic stress. Extended working hours, job insecurity and high performance expectations can initially drive

productivity but often lead to burnout and declining efficiency.

Said bin Mohammed al Balushi, a human resources manager, observed that continuous work-related stress affects both individuals and organisations. "Chronic pressure contributes to lower productivity, higher absenteeism and increased burnout," he said, adding that companies prioritising employee well-being and realistic targets achieve more sustainable outcomes.

Beyond professional life, social expectations and modern lifestyles add further strain. Rapid urbanisation, rising living costs and constant digital connectivity have blurred boundaries between work and personal time.

The pressure to succeed and meet family obligations often accumulates quietly, particularly among young professionals and caregivers.

Maryam bint Khalid al Rashdi, a family counselling specialist, noted that prolonged stress frequently spills into home life. "Sustained pressure can strain relationships and create emotionally charged environments," she said, emphasising the importance of open communication and emotional support within families.

Experts agree that addressing chronic stress requires more than individual coping strategies. While exercise, rest and structured routines are beneficial, institutional policies promoting balance and psychological safety are equally vital. Integrating mental well-being into public health planning is increasingly recognised as essential prevention.

As modern life accelerates, recognising and addressing long-term stress becomes urgent.

Pressure may be inevitable, but through awareness, supportive systems and collective action, its lasting impact can be reduced.

Chronic pressure contributes to lower productivity, higher absenteeism and increased burnout.

SAID BIN MOHAMMED AL BALUSHI
HR Manager

SHORTTAKES



The research chairs are envisaged to help in exchanging local and international experiences. — ONA

MoE SYMPOSIUM
FOCUSES ON
RESEARCH CHAIRS

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Education (MoE) on Monday organised a national symposium titled “Engineering the Future of Research Chairs in the Sultanate of Oman”. The symposium was held under the auspices of Dr Jokha bint Abdullah al Shukaili, Chairperson of Oman Authority for Quality Assurance of Education.

The symposium aimed to discuss the role of research chairs as platforms for generating knowledge, guiding innovation and supporting sustainable development in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The research chairs are envisaged to help in exchanging local and international experiences and developing practical frameworks for building a knowledge-based economy and meeting the goals of comprehensive development in Oman. The symposium targeted public and private higher education institutions, university vice chancellors, directors of research centres, heads of research chairs funding entities and researchers. — ONA

Ramadhan as per astronomy norms

FROM PAGE 1

He pointed out that for almost 13 years, he has been following this pattern. In the year 1434, it was also announced that it would be impossible to see the crescent moon approximately two weeks before the 29th of Shaaban. But now, social media is full of this topic more than before. Therefore, this is an approach that Oman has followed for many years, meaning that nothing has changed in the approach.

When it is impossible to see the crescent moon, the crescent moon is announced and the committee does not meet?

But when visibility is possible, the committee will meet and make an announcement on the 29th. “Astronomical calculations are not astrology. This is astronomy, not astrology. There is a clear difference,” he noted.

When asked what distinguishes modern astronomy from older practices, he replied, “In the past, people relied on astrology. Today, we depend on mathematics, astronomical calculations, geometry and circular motion. Because of this, astronomical calculations are now very precise and give real, accurate values.”

What are the main conditions for determining whether the crescent can be seen?

He replied that there are several conditions. The first is conjunction, when the sun and the moon come into the same alignment. This is the starting point.

What comes after conjunction?

“The second condition is the angular distance between the sun and the moon. This distance must exceed a specific limit.”

So what is the required angular distance for observation?

“Through a telescope, the distance between the sun and the moon must be more than six degrees.

With the naked eye, it must be greater, around seven and a half degrees. This is a recognised astronomical standard.”

When asked if angular distance alone is enough, he said, “No. Another important factor is the time after sunset. With a telescope, the moon must remain above the horizon for at least 20 minutes after sunset. With the naked eye, a longer period is required.”

“If the time is less than that, we cannot see the crescent. In such cases, observation is not possible.”

The age of the crescent is very important. From conjunction to sunset, the crescent should usually be at least 15 hours old. If it is younger than that, seeing it becomes impossible.

In regard to calculations used in practice, he said, “We carry out planning in advance to know whether sighting is possible or not. If calculations show it is impossible, we do not go out for observation and the month is completed as 30 days.”

And if sighting is possible?

“If there is a possibility, observation teams are sent to several locations. We have many designated observation points, equipped with telescopes and instruments.”

GCC healthcare sector expands with 882 hospitals

MUSCAT: The health sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is witnessing a significant expansion, reflecting the volume of government investment and the development of health infrastructure in recent years.

Data from the GCC Statistical Centre indicates clear growth in health facilities and services provided to all segments of society. By the end of 2024, the total number of hospitals reached approximately 882, an increase of 176 hospitals during the 2014–2024 period, driven by both public and private investment. According to the report issued by

the GCC Statistical Centre, the total number of hospital beds reached 127,600, with government-owned beds accounting for 73 per cent of that total.

The total number of government health centres and complexes reached approximately 3,400 facilities in 2023. This reflects the expansion of primary and specialised care services and their geographical distribution to meet the needs of the population. Hospital bed capacity recorded notable growth, rising to 124,900 beds in 2022, compared to 111,200 beds in 2018, representing an average annual growth rate of 2.4 per cent. — ONA

Shura calls for expanding
social protection coverage

MOHAMED AL BATTASHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

THE Majlis Ash’shura continued its discussion of the Ministry of Social Development’s statement for the second consecutive day, with members calling for expanded social protection coverage and stronger measures to empower people with disabilities in the labour market.

The deliberations took place during the eleventh regular sitting of the third annual convening of its tenth term (2023–2027), held on Monday under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash’shura.

Al Maawali emphasised the importance of strengthening cooperation between legislative and executive institutions to enhance social protection systems, empower vulnerable groups and support national development priorities.

The members emphasised the importance of enhancing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities through coordinated efforts with the Ministry of Labour and relevant institutions. They highlighted the need to establish supportive employment pathways that would enable individuals facing social and economic challenges to integrate into the labour market, improve their financial independence and contribute actively to national development.

Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, affirmed that



Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar

the ministry has shifted from traditional welfare models to empowerment-based approaches aimed at enhancing self-reliance and enabling beneficiaries to actively participate in national economic and social development.

The council called for expanding the scope of beneficiaries under the social protection system to include additional eligible groups, particularly job-seekers and individuals with limited income. Members also stressed the importance of strengthening programmes that support families benefiting from the Family Income Benefit by coordinating with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority and the Oman Investment Authority to develop sustainable, income-generating projects that promote economic self-reliance.

Discussions further addressed the role of civil society institutions, with members

proposing the development of Omani women’s associations into broader family-focused organisations aligned with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

They also highlighted the need to strengthen volunteer programmes, enhance institutional capacity, and direct financial support towards sustainable community initiatives that generate long-term social and economic impact.

Members underscored the importance of strengthening preventive social programmes, including the establishment of integrated digital databases to monitor social indicators and support evidence-based policymaking. They also proposed introducing structured family counselling programmes for couples preparing for marriage to promote family stability and reduce social challenges.

Members also called for the introduction of mandatory family counselling programmes for couples intending to marry, similar to premarital medical examinations, in light of statistics indicating a noticeable increase in divorce rates among newlyweds.

Improving the quality of life for elderly citizens was another key focus, with members calling for expanded home-based healthcare and social support services in cooperation with the Ministry of Health. They also emphasised the importance of expanding Al Wafaa Centres across various governorates and equipping them with specialised facilities and qualified personnel to support persons with disabilities, including children with autism.

Tender Notice for the sale of used and unused Cables

Tender No. AW/T/PH2/01/2026

Al Watanyiah United Engineering and Contracting Co. LLC hereby announce a Tender for the sale of used and unused Cables, as described in the table below, on an “as is, where is” basis. Those wishing to submit a Bid must obtain the Tender documents from the Company’s Head Office (HO) in Ghala Industrial Area after paying the specified Tender Fee in the Company’s Bank Dhofar account: 01040605344006 (IBAN NO: OM080250001040605344006).

S. No.	Tender for the Sale of	Location	Tender Fee (RO)	Earnest Money Deposit (RO)	Period for purchase of Tender	Last date for submission of offer
1	Used and unused High Tension (HT) and Low Voltage (LV) armored and unarmored cables, instrumentation cables, fiber optic cables, earth cables, and wires of various sizes and lengths.	Ghala	300/-	10% of the Total Bid Value	16/02/2026 To 01/03/2026	11/03/2026 5.00 PM

- The last date for submission of Bids accompanied by an Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) issued by any local bank in Oman (equivalent to 10%) of the total Bid value is on Wednesday, 11th March, 5 PM, detailed date on the above table.
- The EMD must be valid for 30 days from the last date of submission of the Bid and the original EMD along with the Bid must be submitted in the tender box at the reception of our Head Office at Ghala, Muscat, Oman on or before the date and time mentioned above.
- Contact details: 2450 2581 / 82 - Extn. 149 / 150. GSM: 9294 7637 / 7722 8166

Recall

TOYOTA & LEXUS

LAND CRUISER 300 & LX700h

RECALL DATE: 17/02/2026

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production*	#Number of Affected Commodities
Toyota Land Cruiser300 Lexus LX700h	2024-2025	90

Recall consequence

The subject vehicles are equipped with a specific engine ECU Due to improper programming of learning conditions for fuel injection, the ECU may incorrectly detect abnormal fuel pressure even when it is normal during engine warm-up. This will lead to the engine warning light illuminating and the vehicle entering a failsafe driving mode in which the vehicle can still be driven with limited motive power and vehicle speed approximately 60km/h.

Recall Action

To reprogram the engine ECU.
Note: This Campaign is set to expire on September 30, 2028

QR Code

To check the serial number of the affected items, please visit the Recall and Warnings website by scanning the QR code.

SAUDI BAHWAN

تونس

Contact details: Toll free - 80073000
Working days: Sunday - Thursday
Working Time: 8:00 - 17:00 hrs

www.sba.gov.sa

Consumer Protection Authority

80079009 - 80077997 خط المستهلك

التاريخ : فبراير 2025

الاصدار : 04

الرمز: SOP-093-03

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Iranian FM Araqchi meets with IAEA Director General Grossi in Geneva. — Reuters

IRAN FM MEETS IAEA CHIEF AHEAD OF NUCLEAR TALKS

DUBAI: Iran’s foreign minister met with the UN nuclear watchdog chief on Monday, ahead of talks between Washington and Tehran aimed at resolving a decades-long nuclear dispute. “I think that there’s an opportunity here to diplomatically reach an agreement that addresses the things we’re concerned about. We’ll be very open and welcoming to that. But I don’t want to overstate it either. It’s going to be hard. It’s been very difficult for anyone to do real deals with Iran, because we’re dealing with radical Shia clerics who are making theological decisions, not geopolitical ones.” Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said he was in Geneva to “achieve a fair and equitable deal”. “What is not on the table: submission before threats,” Araqchi said.

Iran says its nuclear programme is solely for civilian purposes and is ready to assuage concerns regarding nuclear weapons by “building trust that enrichment is and will stay for peaceful purposes.” Iran’s Foreign Ministry said Araqchi had discussed cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as Tehran’s technical point of view regarding nuclear talks with the US during his meeting with IAEA head Rafael Grossi. — Reuters

NEPAL LAUNCHES FIRST POST-UPRISING NATIONAL POLLS

JHAPA: Nepali candidates launched campaigning on Monday for next month’s parliamentary elections, the first since deadly anti-corruption protests toppled the previous government in 2025. In the key battleground of Jhapa-5 — a constituency in Nepal’s eastern plains with the world’s highest peaks on the horizon — a head-to-head political fight dominating the campaign was already heating up.

The ousted former prime minister’s bid to return to power — 73-year-old Marxist leader KP Sharma Oli — is being challenged on his home turf by a rapper-turned-mayor casting himself as a symbol of youth-driven political change, 35-year-old Balendra Shah. Both Oli and Shah kicked off campaigning in Jhapa on Monday, wooing voters to their cause.

“This election will draw the future of the country,” Sushila Karki, who is serving as interim prime minister until the March 5 vote, said ahead of the start of campaigning. Two weeks of campaigns will see a host of new, younger candidates promise to offer change, challenging veteran politicians who say they provide stability and security.

Nearly 19 million people have registered to vote, including 800,000 taking part for the first time. They will elect members to the 275-seat House of Representatives, the lower house, with 165 via a direct vote and 110 through proportional representation. More than 3,400 candidates are competing in the direct vote, 30 per cent aged under 40. Campaign banners and party flags are already being strung up in towns, with a string of rallies planned as candidates seek to woo voters.

— AFP

ISRAELI APPROVAL OF WEST BANK LAND REGISTRATION DRAWS OUTRAGE

TEL AVIV: Israel’s government has approved a process to register land in the West Bank as “state property”, drawing condemnation from Arab nations and critics who said it would accelerate annexation of the Palestinian territory. Arab nations Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Jordan criticised the move as illegal under international law. The measure is “aimed at imposing a new legal and administrative reality in the occupied West Bank” that would undermine peace efforts in

the region, Saudi Arabia’s foreign affairs ministry said in a statement. The European Union called on Israel to reverse the move. “This constitutes a new escalation after recent measures already aimed at extending Israeli control,” EU foreign affairs spokesman Anouar El Anouni said. “We reiterate that annexation is illegal under international law.” The Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority called for international intervention to prevent the “de

facto beginning of the annexation process and the undermining of the foundations of the Palestinian state”. Israeli anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now called the measure a “mega land grab”. Jonathan Mizrachi, the NGO’s co-director, said that the move would attribute new resources for land registration. “There was a lot of ambiguity regarding the land, and Israel decided now to deal with it,” Mizrachi said. — AFP

India hosts AI summit as global concerns increase

A global artificial intelligence summit kicked off in New Delhi on Monday with big issues on the agenda, from job disruption to child safety, although some attendees warned the broad focus could make concrete commitments from world leaders less likely. While frenzied demand for generative AI has turbocharged profits for many tech companies, anxiety is growing over the risks that it poses to society and the environment. The five-day AI Impact Summit aims to declare a “shared roadmap for global AI governance and collaboration”. It is the fourth annual gathering addressing the problems and opportunities posed by AI, after previous international meetings in Paris, Seoul and Britain’s wartime code-breaking hub Bletchley.

Touted as the biggest edition yet, the Indian government is expecting tens of thousands of visitors from across the sector. That includes 20 national leaders and 45 ministerial-level delegations, who will rub shoulders with tech CEOs including Sam Altman of OpenAI and Google’s Sundar Pichai. “The AI Impact Summit will enrich global discourse on diverse aspects of AI, such as innovation, collaboration, responsible use and more,” Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on X. It is “further proof that our country is progressing rapidly in the field of science and technology,” and “shows the capability of our country’s youth”, added Modi, who will inaugurate the event later on Monday. At the busy conference site, panels and roundtables were held on topics ranging from how AI



Workers install the national flags of participating countries in the ‘India AI Impact Summit 2026’, in New Delhi. — AFP

The five-day AI Impact Summit aims to declare a shared roadmap for global AI governance and collaboration. It is the fourth annual gathering addressing the problems and opportunities posed by AI, after previous international meetings in Paris, Seoul and Britain’s wartime code-breaking hub Bletchley

can make India’s treacherous roads safer to how South Asian women are engaging with the technology. But whether Modi and the likes of France’s Emmanuel Macron and Brazil’s Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will take meaningful steps to hold AI giants accountable is in doubt, said Amba Kak, co-executive director of the AI Now Institute. “Even the much-touted industry voluntary commitments made at these events have largely been narrow ‘self regulatory’ frameworks that position AI companies to continue to grade their own homework,” she said. The Bletchley gathering in 2023 was called the AI Safety Summit, but the meetings’ names have changed as they have grown in size and scope. At last year’s AI Action Summit in Paris, dozens of nations signed a statement calling for efforts

to regulate AI tech to make it “open” and “ethical”. The United States did not sign, with Vice President JD Vance warning that “excessive regulation... could kill a transformative sector just as it’s taking off”. The Delhi summit has the loose themes of “people, progress, planet” -- dubbed three “sutras”. AI safety remains a priority, including the dangers of misinformation such as deepfakes. “There is real scope for change” although it might not happen fast enough to prevent harm to minors, said AI Asia Pacific Institute director Kelly Forbes, whose organisation is researching how Australia and other countries are requiring platforms to confront the issue.

Organisers highlight this year’s AI summit as the first hosted by a developing country. “The summit will shape a shared vision for AI that truly serves the many, not just the few,” India’s IT ministry has said. Last year India leapt to third place — overtaking South Korea and Japan — in an annual global ranking of AI competitiveness calculated by Stanford University researchers. But despite plans for large-scale infrastructure and grand ambitions for innovation, experts say the country has a long way to go before it can rival the United States and China. Globally, AI could threaten jobs in industries from software development and factory work to film-making, with India’s large customer service and tech support sectors. Shares in the country’s outsourcing firms have plunged in recent days, partly due to advances in AI assistant tools. — AFP

CYCLONE GEZANI LEAVES 59 DEAD IN MADAGASCAR

ANTANANARIVO: At least 59 people died when Cyclone Gezani struck Madagascar, the disaster management office said on Monday, as it assesses the impact of the second tropical storm to hit the Indian Ocean island nation this year. The cyclone displaced 16,428, while 15 people remain missing, 804 were injured and 423,986 were classified as affected by the disaster, the National Bureau for Risk and Disaster Management (BNGRC) said.

Gezani barrelled through the country just 10 days after Tropical Cyclone Fytia killed 14 people and displaced over 31,000, according to the United Nations’ humanitarian office. At its peak, Gezani had sustained winds of about 185 km per hour, with gusts rising to nearly 270 km per hour - powerful enough to rip metal sheeting from rooftops and uproot large trees. — Reuters

RELEASED FROM CUSTODY

Syrian Kurdish authorities release 34 Australians



Syrian Kurdish authorities released 34 Australian relatives of IS group who had been held in the Roj camp, the camp director said. “Today, we are handing over 11 families who hold Australian nationality to their relatives, who have come from Australia to collect them,” said the camp’s director, Hakmieh Ibrahim. “These families are the last Australians in the Roj camp,” she added, noting that the camp still houses “2,201 people of around 50 nationalities”. — AFP

EXCEPTIONAL INFLOWS

Moroccans return home as waters recede



Moroccan authorities began organising the gradual return of residents to the city of Ksar El Kebir and other flood-hit northwestern areas as weather conditions improved. Authorities backed by the army had helped evacuate 188,000 people since early February to protect them from overflowing river waters that swept across 110,000 hectares in the northwest. Most residents of Ksar El Kebir, 213 km north of Rabat, are now allowed to return home. — Reuters

DEADLY STRIKES

Drone attack on Sudan market kills 28



A drone strike on a crowded market in central Sudan has killed 28 people and wounded dozens more, a rights group said, without specifying who was responsible for the attack. Several drones struck the Al Safiya area market outside the North Kordofan town of Sodari, according to Emergency Lawyers. “The attack occurred when the market was bustling with civilians, including women, children and the elderly,” the group said, warning that their toll was preliminary. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



The regional train derailed due to an avalanche in Goppenstein, southern Switzerland. — AFP

SWISS TRAIN
DERAILS, INJURING
FIVE PEOPLE

GOPPENSTEIN: A regional train derailed early on Monday in southern Switzerland, police said, injuring five people with more than two dozen evacuated. The accident near the town of Goppenstein occurred as the region is under its second highest avalanche warning, a level four out of five. “According to initial findings, an avalanche may have crossed the tracks shortly before the train passed,” police stated, adding that the public prosecutor’s office has opened an investigation.

At the time of the incident, around 7:00 am, 29 people were on board the train, police said. “Five people were injured. One of them was taken to hospital,” police said, adding that the rest of the passengers had been taken to safety. Heavy snow was falling in the village, located at an altitude of 1,216 metres.

The train was not immediately visible. Goppenstein, a key loading and unloading hub for road and rail transport, is located at the exit of the Lotschberg rail tunnel. The train derailed as it was exiting the tunnel, police said. Police advised journalists not to remain at the scene due to the high risk of avalanches in the area. — AFP

GREENLAND 'S POSTS WARMEST JANUARY



Greenland’s capital Nuuk registered its warmest ever January — beating a record that stood for 109 years — as temperatures soared across the Arctic island’s west coast, the Danish Meteorological Institute said. While Europe and North America experienced a cold snap in January, Nuuk registered an average monthly temperature of 0.1C, a whopping 7.8C above the average for the month of January over the last three decades. That is 1.4 degrees above the previous record for Nuuk from 1917. The Arctic region is on the frontline of global warming, heating up four times faster than the rest of the planet since 1979. — AFP

KREMLIN
REJECTS
ASSESSMENT
NAVALNY DIED
OF POISONING

MOSCOW: The Kremlin said that it “strongly rejected” an assessment by five European countries that Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny died from poisoning two years ago, as his supporters marked the anniversary of his death in prison.

Navalny, a charismatic anti-corruption campaigner who rallied hundreds of thousands to the streets in protest at the Russian leadership, was President Vladimir Putin’s fiercest domestic opponent for years.

He died in an Arctic prison colony in February 2024 while serving a 19 year sentence for “extremism”, a charge that he and his supporters say was punishment for his opposition work.

Britain, Sweden, France, Germany and the Netherlands issued a joint statement on Saturday saying they believed he had been poisoned with epibatidine — a toxin found in poison dart frogs — and that the Russian state had the “means, motive and opportunity”

to administer it.

“We naturally do not accept such accusations. We disagree with them. We consider them biased and baseless,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters during a daily briefing call. “In fact, we strongly reject them,” he added.

Russian authorities designated Navalny and his organisation “extremist” before his death, and anyone who mentions him or his exiled anti-corruption foundation are liable for prosecution. — AFP

Rubio hails ties with Orban
ahead of Hungary election

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio hailed Viktor Orban’s leadership during a visit to Budapest, ahead of elections threatening the nationalist prime minister’s hold on power. Rubio’s visit is the final stage of a whirlwind trip to Europe that also saw him address the Munich Security Conference and visit another right-wing ally, Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico.

US President Donald Trump has made no secret of his high regard for Orban, saying in a social media post on Friday that the prime minister had produced “phenomenal” results in Hungary. But Orban, 62, has a fight on his hands for the April 12 legislative elections in Hungary.

“I can say to you with confidence that President Trump is deeply committed to your success because your success is our success,” Rubio said during a joint press conference with Orban after their meeting. “The president has an extraordinarily close relationship to the prime minister, he does, and it has had tangible benefits,” he said.

Orban said the government “will be created after the election in Hungary based on the intention of the Hungarians.” “Sometimes I lose, sometimes I win,” said Orban, who returned to power in 2010. “So don’t be afraid what will be if we are not winning because it’s regularly happened here,” he added. In a speech on Saturday, Orban insisted he would keep up his fight against “pseudo-civil organisations, bought journalists, judges, politicians” — echoing similar Trump tirades in the United States. He also took aim at the “oppressive machinery of Brussels”, another jibe at the European Union’s leadership, with whom he has long been at loggerheads on a host of issues.

Hungary’s opposition leader Peter Magyar vowed at an election rally on Sunday to end corruption, rebuild the economy and restore the freedoms his party accuses nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban of curtailing. “Not only has the Hungarian economy not taken off, but it has hit a dead end,” Magyar told a rally in Budapest, a day after the prime minister used his state of the nation speech to vow a continuation of his tough policies.



Hungary’s PM Viktor Orban shakes hands with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (L) after a joint press conference in Budapest. — AFP

Orban is in the firing line of the EU’s leadership for what they say is his silencing of critical voices in the judiciary, academia, the media and civil society. They also accuse him of going after minorities. Adding to tension with the EU is the close relationship he has maintained with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin — another thing he has in common with Trump. European Commission spokesperson, Paula Pinho, told reporters at a press briefing that it was “up to the United States government to decide whom, when, and how they support — or not”.

Rubio arrived in Budapest on Sunday for the talks on Monday, before flying back to Washington. The decision to visit Fico and Orban, two nationalist leaders close to both Trump and Putin — and out of step with the EU consensus — sends a clear diplomatic message. In his speech on Saturday to the Munich Security Conference, Rubio called on Europe to join Trump in his fight to defend Western civilisation from the threat of mass immigration. He tried, too, to reassure European leaders over the US

position on Nato, and on Greenland — with mixed success.

But if his main message was that Europe should get behind the vision of the US president, in Bratislava on Sunday he stressed: “We’re not asking Europe to be a vassal of the United States. “We want to be your partner. We want to work with Europe. We want to work with our allies.” Orban is one of several leaders to have announced he will travel to Washington this week for the inaugural meeting of Trump’s controversial “Board of Peace” — which critics see as an instrument designed to undermine the UN Security Council.

Orban became a hero to many Trump supporters for his hostility to migration during the Syrian refugee crisis a decade ago. He has made several visits to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. Energy was also on the agenda in Monday’s talks, just as it was in Slovakia. When Orban visited the White House in 2025, Trump granted Hungary an exemption from sanctions imposed on Russian oil and gas imports over Moscow’s attack on Ukraine. — AFP

German foreign minister slams France over defence spending

BERLIN: German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul criticised French defence spending on Monday, calling for Paris to do more to turn calls for European security sovereignty into concrete capabilities. The comments marked the latest crack in relations between the two European giants. French President Emmanuel Macron “repeatedly and correctly refers to our pursuit of European sovereignty,” Wadephul told public broadcaster Deutschlandfunk. “Anyone who talks about it needs to act accordingly in their own country.”

European Nato members are under pressure from the United States to build up their defence spending. Though they pledged last June to raise their defence and security-related outlays to five per cent of GDP by 2035, Wadephul said progress in Europe so far had been lacking. “Unfortunately, efforts in the French Republic have also been insufficient to achieve this so far,”

Wadephul said. “France, too, needs to do what we are doing here with difficult discussions.”

Germany last year exempted most defence spending from constitutionally enshrined debt limits and current budgets foresee Berlin spending more than 500 billion euros (\$593 billion) on defence between 2025 and 2029. Under financial pressure, France has less room for manoeuvre. The country has the European Union’s third-highest debt burden as a proportion of GDP after Greece and Italy, almost twice the 60 per cent ceiling set in EU treaties.

France and Macron needed to be ready to take difficult decisions, Wadephul said, including possible welfare cuts, to build the “breathing space needed”. “That is a call that goes out to all European countries,” Wadephul said. “We will have to hold very open, very honest discussions about this here in our



German FM Johann Wadephul speaks during the 62nd Munich Security Conference (MSC). — AFP

European family.”

Wadephul’s call comes amid strains in the Franco-German alliance, traditionally the motor of European cooperation. Germany has slapped down Macron’s repeated

calls for so-called Eurobonds to boost investment, fearing common EU debt would lead to open-ended subsidies of EU member states with weak finances. Wadephul reiterated that Germany was also opposed to the proposal when it comes to defence spending, adding that Nato member states had last year agreed to reach the five per cent spending goal by their own efforts.

“We must also say to all our European partners — in a spirit of friendship but with clarity — that what was promised, the five per cent, were commitments to national contributions,” he said. “We are looking forward to and eagerly await another speech by the French president, I believe on the 27th of this month, where he will comment on strategic issues,” Wadephul added.

Nerves are also fraying over plans by Paris and Berlin for a next-generation European fighter jet, where German industry and unions

have accused French aerospace firm Dassault of seeking to dictate the terms of the project. In other recent disagreements, France wanted to block an EU trade deal with a group of South American countries, backed by Germany. Paris also opposed a push by Berlin and Rome to water down a planned EU ban on new petrol and diesel cars by 2035.

Meanwhile, Germany will extend temporary border controls by a further six months, the interior ministry said, calling the measures necessary in the absence of “functional European migration policy”. Spot-checks introduced in September 2024 will now be in force until at least mid-September 2026, having already been twice extended, ministry spokesman Leonard Kaminski said. “Local authorities are still overwhelmed,” he said. “We have to do more here so that we get to a situation that is sustainable for our country, for our society.” — AFP

OPINION

Iran-US talks: Oman never loses hope for peace



OMAN CONTINUES to champion peace and diplomacy, steadfast in its commitment to regional stability. As tensions simmer between Iran and the US, Oman emerged as a crucial hub for dialogue, hosting indirect talks aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear deal.

The recent rounds of talks have seen Oman playing a delicate balancing act, leveraging its unique relationships with both Tehran and Washington. Oman's strategic position and diplomatic finesse have made it an indispensable mediator, trusted by both parties to navigate the complex web of negotiations.

Iran has expressed Tehran's readiness to finalise a deal, while the US has reaffirmed its commitment to ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon, while also acknowledging the need for diplomacy.

Oman's role extends beyond mere hosting; it is a testament to the country's broader vision for regional peace and security. As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Oman has consistently advocated for dialogue and cooperation, often taking a more conciliatory approach towards Iran compared to some of its regional counterparts.

The stakes are high, with implications not just for Iran and the US, but for the entire Middle East. A successful deal could pave

the way for broader regional de-escalation, potentially easing tensions between Iran and its Gulf neighbours, and addressing issues like maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz.

However, challenges persist. The US has expressed concerns over Iran's missile programme and its support for regional militias, while Iran insists on lifting sanctions and guarantees for its nuclear programme. Oman's diplomatic efforts are aimed at bridging these gaps, fostering an environment where both sides can find common ground.

Oman's commitment to peace is not new. It has long been a voice of moderation, pushing for conflict resolution through dialogue. Its efforts in facilitating talks between the US and Iran are a continuation of this policy, reflecting a deep-seated belief in diplomacy as the most effective tool for addressing regional challenges.

As the talks continue, Oman remains optimistic, never losing hope for a peaceful resolution. The Sultanate of Oman's leadership, under His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, has made regional stability a priority, recognising that peace is essential for Oman's own security and economic prosperity.

As the international community watches anxiously as these talks unfold, a breakthrough could herald a new era of

The path ahead is fraught with challenges, but Oman's unwavering commitment to peace and diplomacy offers a glimmer of hope. As the world watches, one thing is clear: Oman will continue to push for dialogue, never losing sight of a more peaceful and stable region.

regional stability, with Oman at the forefront of diplomatic efforts. As it is always said, Oman does not take sides; it take initiatives. In the complex geopolitics of the Middle East, Oman's unwavering hope for peace is a beacon of optimism.

Oman's efforts to facilitate dialogue between Iran and the US are commendable, showcasing its commitment to regional stability. A successful deal could indeed pave the way for broader cooperation and economic growth in the region.

For Oman, regional stability matters and a deal could ease tensions and pave the way for broader regional cooperation. Oman's approach showcases the effectiveness of dialogue in conflict resolution. This is in addition to economic benefits of which peace could unlock economic opportunities for Oman and the wider region.

The path ahead is fraught with challenges, but Oman's unwavering commitment to peace and diplomacy offers a glimmer of hope. As the world watches, one thing is clear: Oman will continue to push for dialogue, never losing sight of a more peaceful and stable region.

Oman's unique position and diplomatic approach make it an ideal mediator. Its consistent advocacy for dialogue and cooperation within the GCC is a testament to its vision for a more peaceful Middle East. The challenges are undeniable, but Oman's optimism is inspiring.

New world for users and brands as ads hit AI chatbots

The introduction of advertisements and sponsored content in chatbots has spawned privacy concerns for AI users as brands scramble to stay relevant in a fast-changing online environment.

ChatGPT developer OpenAI began showing ads in chatbot conversations for free and low-cost users to start balancing its hundreds of billions in spending commitments with new revenue sources.

It swiftly came in for mockery from rival Anthropic, which has staked its reputation on safety and data security.

Anthropic's advertisement broadcast during last week's Super Bowl showed a man asking advice from a conversational AI, which then shoeorns advertising copy for a dating site into its otherwise relevant response. OpenAI boss Sam Altman shot back that the clip was "clearly dishonest".

Beyond OpenAI, Microsoft has been running contextual ads and sponsored content in its Copilot AI assistant since 2023.

AI search engine Perplexity has been testing ads in the United States since 2024, while Google is also testing ads in the AI "overviews" its namesake search engine has been offering since last year.

Google has repeatedly denied wanting to run ads in its Gemini chatbot, with Demis Hassabis — head of the search giant's DeepMind AI arm — saying that ads "have to be handled very carefully". "The most important thing" in AI is "trust in security and privacy, because you want to share potentially your life with that assistant," he added.

OpenAI has sought to reassure users that ChatGPT's responses will not be modified by the ads, which are shown alongside conversations rather than being integrated into them.

It has also promised not to sell user data to advertisers. AI companies are "concerned that selling ads will scare away users," said Nate Elliott, an analyst with US data firm Emarketer.

AI assistants could account for up to two per cent of the online advertising market by 2030, HSBC bank analysts suggested in a report.

Many brands are already prioritising visibility on the new channel, including US supermarket chain Target and software maker Adobe.

Beyond buying a spot on users' screens, companies are also pushing for their products to appear in chatbots' organic responses.

The practice is known as GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation) — an evolution of the Search Engine Optimisation strategy during the era of Google's dominance over the web. — AFP

How fast can AI change the workplace, cut jobs?

THIS PAST week the Internet became radicalised about the progress of artificial intelligence by, appropriately enough, an online essay with an assist from AI. In his viral piece "Something Big Is Happening," Matt Shumer compared the current AI moment to the early days of Covid-19, when people didn't realise how completely their world was about to change. Except this time, instead of a virus, the agent of transformation is a technology increasingly capable of replacing white-collar workers en masse.

The essay offered a reader-friendly (AI-shaped pieces are very reader friendly!) explanation of what the people driving the development of artificial intelligence have believed for a while. Imagine the effects of automation and outsourcing on blue-collar labour, except inflicted on the professional class and compressed into just a few traumatic years.

People need to understand the part of this argument that's absolutely correct: It is impossible to look at the AI models we have now, to say nothing of what we might get in six months or a year, and say that these technological tools can't eventually replace a lot of human jobs. The question is whether people inside the AI hype loop are right about how fast it could happen, and then whether it will create a fundamental change in human employment rather than just a structural reshuffle.

One obstacle to radical speed is that human society is a complex bottleneck through which even the most efficiency-maxing innovations have to pass. As long as the efficiencies offered by AI are mediated by human workers, there will be false starts and



ROSS DOUTHAT

The writer is an author and New York Times columnist

Every great innovation has yielded fears of mass unemployment, and every time we've found our way to new professions, new demands for human labor that weren't imaginable before.

misadaptations and blind alleys that make pre-emptive layoffs reckless or unwise.

Even if firings make sense as a pure value proposition, employment in an advanced economy reflects a complex set of contractual, social, legal and bureaucratic relationships, not just a simple productivity-maximising equation. So many companies might delay any mass replacement for reasons of internal morale or external politics or union rules, and adapt to AI's new capacities through reduced hiring and slow attrition instead.

I suspect that the AI insiders underestimate the power of these frictions, as they may underestimate how structural hurdles could slow the adoption of any cure or tech that their models might discover. Which would imply a longer adaptation period for companies, polities and humans.

Then, after this adaptation happens and AI agents are deeply integrated into the workforce, there are two good reasons to think that most people will still be doing gainful work. The first is the entire history of technological change: Every great innovation has yielded fears of mass unemployment, and every time we've found our way to new professions, new demands for human labour that weren't imaginable before.

The second is the reality that people clearly like a human touch, even in situations where we can already automate it away. Economist Adam Ozimek has a good rundown of examples: Player pianos have not done away with piano players, self-checkout has not eliminated the profession of cashier, and millions of waiters remain in service in the United States because an automated

restaurant experience seems inhuman.

But here we come to the crucial issue with artificial intelligence: It is less inhuman than any prior technological development; indeed, by its nature, it simulates the human in a way that power looms and steel mills and PowerPoint software never did. So the unanswered question hanging over all these scenarios is how much that imitation shapes its capacity to replace human labour and our willingness to accept that replacement.

It's easy to assume, in other words, that people will always prefer human waiters and human musicians and a human doctor to give us a medical diagnosis — unless we're entering a world where people are increasingly habituated to interactions with simulated people, adapt their own humanity to the simulated version and come to prefer the simulation to the messier reality of flesh and blood.

In Silicon Valley, a somewhat socially maladroitness realm, most of the discussion about a potential AI takeover focuses on the power of digital intelligence to supplant our own. The most important factor may not be raw intelligence but the social personae through which AI is mediated, and (without entering the debate about whether AI could be really conscious) how intensely people relate to AI agents as though they were conscious beings, just like us.

The more they do, the more profound the implications for labour and employment. And the more profound the implications for larger questions about human power and agency — which we're more likely to give over, with potentially existential consequences, to an AI that we imagine not as a tool but as a friend.

Welcoming the crescent...



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is senior editor of Observer

THIS is an important week in the year of 2026 because we will see the commencement of the holy month of Ramadhan. This year we also know the date in advance and will not be waiting for the moon sighting because the astronomers know it cannot be sighted due to certain conditions, but astronomical calculations help them determine the moon's status, and they can declare if it is going to be 29 or 30 days.

Had the wonderful opportunity to meet and interview astronomy expert Yusuf Hamed al Rahby. The office features images of the space and moon, a big screen depicting the positions of the moon and earth and other planets, and a big telescope. The notepad on the table doesn't have phone numbers but degrees of latitude noted down. Subjects that assist him — mathematics and physics.

I was first introduced to Kamal and Hilal. Kamal is the full moon, and Hilal is the thin crescent. And they shape Al Hijri calendar. Unlike the Gregorian calendar, the lunar calendar monitors the moon continuously.

I had always wondered about earth years and 365 days and 6 hours, and not to forget the leap years. And here I was learning more about the lunar calendar and how the alignment of the moon and sun and the distance between them are important.

So if you have been so busy with daily life, this is a wonderful opportunity to look up at the celestial beings and feel grounded.

You must have realised at some point in time that while the moon is always “there,” several factors can make it physically impossible to see from earth. In Oman, at times the moon can be seen during the daytime.

According to experts, the most common reason is the age of the moon. After the conjunction (when the moon is exactly between the earth and the sun), it takes time for the moon to move far enough away to reflect a visible sliver of sunlight.

But here is why the moon often stays hidden — the moon could be too young. If the sun's glare is too high, we might miss the tiny crescent. Clouds and fog can keep it hidden. The tilt of the earth also means that certain latitudes have better viewing angles during different times of the year.

Then, of course, even light pollution can interfere.

It is amazingly wonderful to have the moon as a grounding factor. Maybe it can help us be mindful and keep our minds focused and provide time to unfocus from the daily deeds.

Come the holy month of Ramadhan, and we will see many changes and at the same time seek changes to bring improvements in life.

According to experts, the most common reason is the age of the moon. After the conjunction (when the moon is exactly between the earth and the sun), it takes time for the moon to move far enough away to reflect a visible sliver of sunlight

The month motivates people as they practice the power of will through fasting.

This spiritual exercise fosters self-discipline, patience, and control over desires, essentially training the mind and body to overcome physical, mental, and emotional cravings. And each year, the opportunity arrives.

The companies have already adorned with decorations, and Muscat Municipality has artworks displayed outdoors, making the ambience even more festive. The togetherness of visits and thoughtfulness are here.

It is predominantly a personal soul-searching journey, but it can also make us ponder ways we can improve ourselves individually and collectively. The journey can include learning, developing, giving, and even being better and contributing members of society.

The experts recommend focusing on patience and kindness and avoiding bad habits. How do we know what our bad habits are?

Family members and friends can be our mirrors, but even they might hesitate not to hurt us. We must learn to take constructive criticism to develop ourselves further for our own good.

Wishing everyone Ramadhan Mubarak.

TALIBAN GOVT SHAKES UP AFGHAN MEDICINE MARKET

AYSHA SAFI

Afghanistan's decision to overhaul its medicine market was meant to improve quality and boost domestic production, but industry specialists say the swift changes have led to a litany of problems.

The Taliban authorities announced in November that the decades-long dependency on medicine imports from Pakistan would soon end, a step taken after deadly border clashes with their neighbour.

After the ban came into effect this month, finance ministry spokesman Abdul Qayoom Naseer said that the government urged all importers to find “alternative and legal” sources to replace Pakistani supplies.

Despite a three-month grace period to end existing contracts and clear customs, the shift presents a huge challenge for a country which had imported more than half its medicine from Pakistan.

“Some of the prices have increased, some of them are short (unavailable), it has created a lot of problems for people,” said Mujeebullah Afzali, a pharmacist in the capital, Kabul.

Drugs now have to come from elsewhere, increasing transit time and transport costs, and adding logistical complexities.

The pharmacist said he had begun importing medicine through the Islam Qala crossing on the Iranian border, “which increased the transportation fee 10 to 15 per cent”.

Transport costs used to account for six to seven per cent of total spending on medicine, but this has now risen to 25 to 30 per cent, said a person directly involved in the pharmaceutical industry, speaking on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

He estimated that the overall losses to business owners had already reached millions of dollars.

“If a medicine was short in the market before, a call was made to Pakistan, and the medicine was delivered in two to three days,” he said. Whether legally or not, it was “delivered quickly”, he added.

The illicit trade in pharmaceuticals was a key driver for the overhaul, according to the health ministry. “The biggest problem with Pakistani medicine was that we used to receive counterfeit and fake medicines,” ministry spokesman Sharafat Zaman said.

He acknowledged it will take some time to shift the market, saying that officials were working with Iran, India, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Türkiye, China and Belarus to source medicine.

“India was second in the market, which means that now, through Indian medicines, we can cover the percentage needed,” Zaman said.

And domestic production of 600 medicines has “solved the problems” of many patients, he said.

Afghanistan already produces a variety of serums including antibiotics, according to manufacturer Milli Shifa Pharmaceutical.

The company makes 100,000 bottles daily and “can double the capability” if demand merits, CEO Nasar Ahmad Taraki said. — AFP

Foreign workers face violence in Croatia

LAJLA VESELICA

WHEN DD left his home in India for Croatia last year, he expected his food delivery work to be hard, with long hours and low pay. He did not expect to be spat at in the street.

Twice last year the 27-year old from Chandigarh was abused by groups of young people while working. Some spat at him, others shouted at him to “go back to your own country” as they tried to steal his delivery bag.

For the young foreign worker, one of the tens of thousands drawn to the EU nation every year, it was a rough welcome — but one he said is increasingly common among his colleagues.

As Croatia struggles with growing staff shortages, particularly in its key tourism sector, experts warn its badly needed foreign workers are left vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

“I just came to work and live peacefully,” DD, who asked to be referred to only by his initials, said. “We are not stealing jobs.”

Croatia has one of the five fastest-declining populations in the European Union, losing nearly 400,000 people over the past decade, according to the World Bank.

The shortages have driven a steady rise in the number of workers arriving from Asia - particularly since Croatia joined Europe's passport-free Schengen zone in 2023.

Last year, four out of 10 work and residency permits were issued to Nepalis, Filipinos, Indians and Bangladeshis, mostly in the tourism, catering and construction industries.

It is a dramatic change for a largely conservative society with extremely limited experience of immigration from outside Europe.

According to the last census, more than 90 per cent of Croatia's 3.8 million people are ethnic Croats, while about 80 per cent are Roman Catholic.

In WhatsApp groups used by DD's fellow delivery riders, many share stories of almost weekly attacks, with the worst reporting broken



A foreign delivery rider at work in downtown Zagreb. — AFP

As Croatia struggles with growing staff shortages, particularly in its key tourism sector, experts warn its badly needed foreign workers are left vulnerable to violence and exploitation

jaws and cracked ribs.

While national crime data does not break down rates by victims' nationality, the number of crimes against Nepali nationals rose sharply in 2024, outpacing the roughly 50-per cent growth of its diaspora in Croatia. Comparable increases were recorded among Indian, Filipino and Bangladeshi nationals.

But food delivery company Wolt said many attacks on its delivery riders, which are committed mainly by opportunistic young people, went unreported. Most foreign workers arrive through private agencies or employers that usually offer little support, according to unions.

Some employers also offer overcrowded and unsafe housing at hefty rates.

Delivery rider Hasan, who did not give his surname for fear of losing his job, said he had been charged 270 euros (\$319) a month for an “unliveable” room shared with five other men.

Breaches of arbitrary rules, such as a visitor ban, could attract hefty “fines” from his previous employer, who leased him the room.

“It's pure extortion,” said the 27-year-old from India.

He was also expected to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

“You are like their slaves.”

As migrant numbers grow, public attitudes appear to be hardening.

An Institute for Migration Research (IMR) survey found that more than 60 per cent of Croatians were dissatisfied with the presence of foreign workers, up from 46 per cent a year earlier.

Fears over a potential rise in crime rates, impacts on local wages, job losses and cultural differences were among the top complaints of those surveyed.

“When people feel their livelihoods are threatened, support for radical positions is more likely,” sociologist Ivan Balabanic said.

Some right-wing politicians have seized on the issue to push anti-immigrant rhetoric and portray foreign workers as part of a plot to “replace” European populations.

The conservative government, which has condemned the violence against foreign workers, recently moved to improve protections but also to require language tests for long-term workers.

DD said most Croatians were “generally friendly”, but without the ability to speak the local language, he had struggled to fit in.

Balabanic said politicians needed to stop treating the issue as “taboo” and discuss the need for foreign workers candidly.

“This is our reality and must be acknowledged as such.” — AFP

SPORTS

TITLE RACE



The league features the participation of 100 male and female players representing 15 clubs.

SALALAH MAINTAIN LEAD IN OMAN CLUBS BOWLING LEAGUE

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

Salalah continue to lead the Clubs Bowling League, organised by the Oman Bowling Committee at Seeb Bowling Centre, as the competition enters its decisive stages following the conclusion of rounds 10, 11 and 12. The league features the participation of 100 male and female players representing 15 clubs, with competition intensifying amid closely-matched performances and a heated battle at the top of the standings.

In Round 10, dominant victories marked most encounters. Salalah defeated Al Nasr 8–0 to reinforce their title ambitions, while Bausher overcame Qurayat 8–0. Seeb defeated Al Bashayer 8–0, Oman Club beat Al Musannah 8–0, Jaalan overcame Sohar 8–0 and Ahli Sidab defeated Al Mudhaibi 8–0. The most balanced match saw Masirah and Al Amerat share points in an exciting 4–4 draw.

Round 11 witnessed continued strong performances, as Ahli Sidab thrashed Jaalan 8–0 and Oman Club overcame Sohar by the same score. Al Amerat secured a 6–2 victory over Al Musannah, Masirah defeated Al Bashayer 8–0, and Seeb beat Qurayat 8–0. In one of the key clashes, Salalah edged Bausher 6–2, while Al Nasr blanked Al Ittifaq 8–0.

Round 12 further shaped the title race. Bausher defeated Al Ittifaq 8–0, and Salalah continued their impressive form with an 8–0 victory over Seeb. Masirah beat Qurayat 8–0, Al Bashayer overcame Al Musannah 8–0, Al Amerat blanked Sohar 8–0, Ahli Sidab beat Oman Club 8–0 and Al Mudhaibi secured an 8–0 win over Jaalan.

In the overall standings after Round 12, Salalah top the table with 86 points, followed by Masirah in second place with 74 points and Seeb third with 68 points. Al Amerat sit fourth with 64 points, level with Ahli Sidab in fifth. Bausher are sixth with 60 points and Al Mudhaibi seventh with 54 points.

Al Nasr rank eighth with 48 points, followed by Oman Club in ninth with 38 points. Jaalan are 10th with 32 points, level with Al Bashayer in 11th. Al Ittifaq stand 12th with 20 points, Al Musannah 13th with 16, Qurayat 14th 14, while Sohar remain at the bottom in 15th place with just two points.

The upcoming rounds are expected to be decisive in determining the league title and final standings.

Seeb crowned Ministry Shield basketball champs

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

SEEB CLUB were crowned champions of the 16th edition of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Basketball Shield for the 2025–26 season after defeating Al Bashayer 75–66 in the final. Al Bashayer finished runners-up, while Nizwa secured third place following a 70–39 victory over Masirah in the third-place play-off.

The final was held at the sub-hall of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the auspices of Hisham al Sinani, Director-General of Sports Care and Development, in the presence of AAbu Bakr bin Ahmed al Jahwari, Vice-Chairman of Oman Basketball Association (OBA).

The match was intense from the outset, with Seeb asserting early dominance in the first quarter through the movement of Rasheed al Zahaibi and the sharp finishing of Abdulrahman al Shaibi, who scored crucial points, in addition to a three-pointer from Mazen al Hadidi, giving Seeb a 22–11 lead at the end of the first quarter.

Seeb maintained their advantage in the second quarter, with continued contributions from Al Shaibi and a three-pointer by Hassan al Farraji, to head into half-time leading 36–27 despite efforts from Ibrahim Thomas and his team-mates to narrow the gap.

In the third quarter, Al Bashayer mounted a strong comeback, cutting the deficit to just two points through baskets by Hadeed Bait Bakhit, Ibrahim Thomas, Osama al Riyami and Bassam al Busaidy to make it 50–48. However, Seeb regained composure and closed the quarter ahead 55–51.

AL BASHAYER FIGHT BACK
The final quarter reached peak drama as Al Bashayer equalised at 55–55 through Abdulredha al Battashi and Bassam al Busaidy. The teams exchanged the lead, with Al Bashayer moving ahead for the first time after a three-pointer from Dmonta Harris made it 63–61. Nevertheless, Seeb’s experience proved decisive. Jawad Adekoya scored vital points, while Marwan al Hadidi added a crucial three-pointer alongside a key basket from Rasheed al Zahaibi, sealing a 75–66 victory and the title.

Hisham al Sinani said the final was tight, with Seeb’s experience deciding key moments despite Al Bashayer briefly leading.



Seeb players celebrate with the Ministry Shield trophy. Pictures by Abdulwahid al Hamadani



Al Bashayer players with their runners-up medals.

TECHNICAL QUALITY
Al Jahwari praised the final’s high technical quality, noting the tournament’s success was clear in performance, attendance and organisation. He said the close gap between Seeb and Al Bashayer shows rising competition that benefits the national team.

He added that using neutral Gulf referees boosts fairness and revealed the OBA will launch its first Sports Preparation

Centres League with six centres to widen competition and discover new talent.

Rasheed al Zahaibi said Seeb used the league setback as motivation and responded by winning the Ministry Shield.

Said al Saadi said Al Bashayer accepted the loss in good spirit, stressing their season was still successful after winning the league, while Seeb’s focus proved decisive in the final.

Muscat beat Sohar to retain beach handball Youth League title

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

Muscat Club successfully defended their Oman Beach Handball Youth League title for the 2025-26 season after defeating Sohar 2-0 in Sunday’s final at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher. The concluding match was held under the auspices of Adil bin Khamis al Zurai, Chairman of Masirah Club, and attended by Moosa bin Khamis al Balushi, Chairman of the Oman Handball Association (OHA), along with board members.

With this victory, Muscat secured back-to-back titles, reaffirming their dominance at the youth level. The champions lifted the trophy and received gold medals, while Sohar claimed silver and Al Oruba finished third



Muscat secured back-to-back titles, reaffirming their dominance.

to earn bronze medals. The final showcased promising technical standards, reflecting the steady development of beach handball among youth categories. Muscat asserted control from the outset, capitalising on strong physical preparation and tactical discipline to win the first set 22-10. They



Sohar players pose with their silver medals.

maintained their composure and collective performance in the second set, sealing it 22-12 to clinch the match 2-0 overall.

The Youth Beach Handball League forms part of the OHA’s broader strategy to expand grassroots participation and nurture emerging talent. Beach

handball has become a key pillar within the association’s development programme, particularly with national teams competing in Asian and World Championships. The league serves as a vital platform for building a sustainable talent pipeline for future national squads.

A total of 12 clubs participated in this season’s competition: Muscat, Masirah, Salalah, Al Ittihad, Sohar, Al Shabab, Al Oruba, Al Musannah, Al Rustaq, Al Khabourah, Al Salam and Khasab. Teams were divided into three groups before progressing to the knockout rounds that culminated in a competitive final between Muscat and Sohar.

LONG-TERM PLANNING
Muscat coach Majid bin Hamad al

Wahaibi described the tournament as highly competitive, praising the technical level displayed by young players. He noted that the club’s success stems from long-term grassroots planning and early talent development, expressing confidence that this generation will contribute significantly to Oman’s national teams.

Adil al Zurai commended the OHA for organising a strong youth competition and emphasised the importance of investing in age group categories as the foundation of Omani sport.

The event concluded with the official award ceremony, where the top three teams were honoured and commemorative gifts were exchanged in recognition of the successful staging of the championship.

T20 WORLD CUP



England's Will Jaks watches the ball after playing a shot at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata. — AFP

ENGLAND SURVIVE
ITALY SCARE TO
REACH SUPER EIGHTS

KOLKATA: England survived a scare to qualify for the Super Eights at the T20 World Cup on Monday as Italy's swashbuckling chase of 203 fell agonisingly short in a pulsating match in Kolkata. Will Jaks scored the fastest T20 World Cup fifty for England as they made 202-7, their highest total of the tournament so far, and eventually won by 24 runs. Italy, the lowest-ranked team in the tournament, were on track to pull off a sensational upset when Grant Stewart and Jaspreet Singh blasted 21 off Adil Rashid's final over, the 18th of the chase, including three sixes. That left 30 needed off 12 balls, but it proved too much and Italy were all out off the last ball of the match for 178. "We haven't played our best cricket, but at the end of the day, we've made it through and we're heading to Sri Lanka, so we can be happy about that," said England captain Harry Brook. Most of England's batsmen got good starts after Brook won the toss and chose to bat. But only Jaks capitalised as Italy kept chipping away with regular wickets. He reached his fifty off 21 balls to beat Eoin Morgan's 25-ball effort against the West Indies in Kandy in 2012. "It's been a little bit of a trend so far in this competition," said Brook. "We haven't managed to string along the scores that we'd like to do as a batting unit, but that's part of T20 cricket. "It's a fickle game. One day you can smack a hundred and the next day you can get out first ball." Jaks took the game by the scruff of the neck after England stuttered to 105-5 in the 13th over. He put on 54 in 25 balls with Sam Curran (25) for the sixth wicket and 35 in 16 balls with Jamie Overton (15) for the seventh. — AFP

AFGHANS BEAT UAE
TO KEEP HOPES ALIVE



Afghanistan's Azmatullah Omarzai celebrates his team's win at the Arun Jaitley Stadium. — AFP

NEW DELHI: Afghanistan clung to their fading hopes of making the Super Eight stage of the Twenty20 World Cup after Azmatullah Omarzai's all-round brilliance fashioned their five-wicket victory against the United Arab Emirates in a Group D match on Monday. The outcome sent group leaders South Africa, who have six points from three games, into the Super Eight alongside defending champions India and two-time winners West Indies. New Zealand, with four points ahead of their final group match against bottom-placed Canada on Tuesday, look primed to claim the second Super Eight spot from Group D. Sohaib Khan (68) led a spirited recovery to power UAE to a respectable 160-9 after being put in to bat. Omarzai, who claimed 4-15 with the ball, returned to hammer 40 not out off 21 balls to secure 2024 semifinalists Afghanistan's first win in this year's tournament with four balls to spare. "Always important to have a win at the World Cup and let's hope for the best in the rest of the competition," Afghanistan captain Rashid Khan said. "We still have a little bit of hope that we can make it to the next stage. We just need to come up with a positive mindset. "Even if we don't make it to the next round, we want to play with the same brand of cricket and make our nation proud." — Reuters

Al Mashari's red proves
turning point in final

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

AL Nahda clinched their second HM Cup title after securing a decisive 2-0 victory over Oman Club in a thrilling final that took place on Saturday night at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Under the guidance of newly appointed head coach Andre Jasmins, Al Nahda produced a performance defined by tactical discipline, mental resilience and clinical execution. On the grand stage, the players demonstrated superior composure and efficiency to deservedly lift the coveted trophy. The domestic experienced coach Abdulaziz al Riyami analysed the tactical elements behind Al Nahda's triumph, highlighting the structured approach adopted by the champions. "Al Nahda entered the final with a clear 4-2-3-1 formation," Al Riyami said. "The team emphasised attacking personality and high pressing to regain possession quickly. They maintained an excellent balance between defensive solidity and offensive intent, while managing the tempo like a side experienced in high-stakes encounters." Oman Club, led by coach Driss El Mrabet, adopted a 4-4-2 system. "Oman Club initially deployed a high defensive line before occasionally retreating into a compact mid-block to close spaces," Al Riyami explained. "Their approach relied on tactical discipline and quick transitions, with long direct balls played behind Al Nahda's defensive line."

DEFINING MOMENT
The defining moment of the contest came late in the first half when Oman Club captain Mohammed al Mashari was shown a red card. "The dismissal of Al Mashari was more than just a numerical disadvantage," Al Riyami noted. "It deprived Oman Club of leadership and the crucial midfield link, resulting in physical and mental strain on the remaining players. Al Nahda immediately capitalised on the momentum shift and intensified their pressure." Al Nahda's breakthrough came shortly before half-time following a well-constructed attacking sequence. A penetrating move through the centre was switched to the flank, where Ahmed al Kaabi delivered a precise cross that forced Oman Club defender Basil al Rawahi into an own-goal under sustained pressure.



The second goal arrived late in the match, again stemming from high pressing.



Abdulaziz al Riyami

CLINICAL EDGE
Al Riyami emphasised that Al Nahda's attacking philosophy was built on positive possession and effective wing play. "Their defensive transitions were equally impressive. They executed immediate counter-pressing upon losing the ball, preventing Oman Club from building structured attacks," he said. Following the red card, Oman Club

dropped into a low defensive block but struggled to withstand the continuous pressure. "Their reliance on long balls became predictable and was effectively neutralised by Al Nahda's organised defensive line," he added. Transitions proved to be Al Nahda's strongest weapon. Their rapid switch from defence to attack repeatedly unsettled Oman Club's structure. The second goal arrived late in the match, again stemming from high pressing. A defensive error forced under pressure allowed substitute Mohammed al Ghafri to finish clinically, sealing the victory and extinguishing any hopes of a comeback. "Al Nahda used corners effectively as sustained pressure tools," Al Riyami explained. In contrast, Oman Club failed to capitalise on their limited corner opportunities and struggled defensively when facing Al Nahda's deliveries."

COACHING DECISIONS
Al Nahda's technical management proved decisive in closing out the match. "Coach Andre Jasmins managed the game intelligently, making calculated substitutions to secure the result and reinforce midfield stability. The changes slowed the tempo and effectively killed the game," Al Riyami said. "In contrast, Oman Club's substitutions were largely attacking and reactionary following the red card, but they failed to penetrate Al Nahda's defensive solidity."

Shaima, Asher sizzle in Thailand Karate Cup 2026

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

Team Shito-Ryu Oman Karate Do Kai reaped rich rewards at the prestigious Thailand Karate Cup 2026 with their two athletes accounting for five medals on Monday. Shaima al Shali won two gold and a silver while Asher Mathew Bibine clinched a gold and a silver medal at the Rotana Hall of the Bundit University Indoor Stadium in Bangkok. The athletes competed under the training of Shihan Bava Ahamed. Talented Shaima claimed both gold medals in the under-18 black belt category for kata and kumite to assert her supremacy in the age category. She also claimed a silver in the highly competitive Female Open Age category. Her strength, technical mastery and indomitable spirit stood as a shining testament to perseverance and elite training at the Shito-Ryu Oman Karate Do Kai. Asher also rose to the



Team Shito-Ryu Oman Karate Do Kai won five medals at the Thailand Karate Cup 2026 on Monday.

occasion in the boys' section as the two dedicated students at the Shito-Ryu Oman made history in the highly competitive international championship with extraordinary courage, discipline and the true spirit of Karate-Do on a global stage. Asher won the gold in the under-12 black belt category and claimed a silver in the under-15 black belt in kumite competition. Asher delivered a remarkable performance and proudly secured the silver medal in the higher age section of under-15. His precision, focus and

unwavering determination exemplified the highest standards of martial arts excellence. The team management of International Shito-Ryu Karate Centres in Oman, extended their congratulations. "On behalf of the entire karate community, we extend our most sincere and heartfelt congratulations to our champions and the entire leadership team. Your achievements inspire not only Oman but the global martial arts fraternity. May this victory mark the beginning of even greater triumphs ahead," a statement said. Team Shito-Ryu Oman Karate Do Kai technical team included Shihan Bava Ahamed (team head coach), Sherly Mathew (team manager) and Renshi Haleen Sree Hruday (team coach). "Their guidance, discipline and unwavering belief in their students have elevated Team Shito-Ryu Oman Karate Do Kai to international acclaim," the management statement added.

SPORTS

NISSANKA HITS 100 NOT OUT
OFF 52 BALLS WITH FIVE SIXES
AND 10 FOURS

SRI LANKA 'S NISSANKA LEAVES AUSTRALIA ON BRINK OF T20 WORLD CUP EXIT

SRI LANKA'S PATHUM NISSANKA scored the first century of the 2026 T20 World Cup on Monday to put his side into the Super Eights and leave Australia on the brink of elimination.

Nissanka scored 100 not out off 52 balls with five sixes and 10 fours as Sri Lanka, chasing Australia's 181, reached 184-2 with two overs to spare in Kandy to win by eight wickets.

A victory by Zimbabwe over Ireland in Group B on Tuesday, or against Sri Lanka on Thursday, would eliminate the 2021 champions.

If Zimbabwe lose both, Australia will need to beat Oman in their final match on Friday by a big margin to get through on net run rate.

"We're in the lap of the God now I think," said Australia captain Mitchell MAarsh.

"Lot of emotions in the room right now. Haven't been at our



Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka celebrates after scoring a century. — AFP



Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis (L) and Pathum Nissanka run between the wickets during the 2026 ICC Men's T20 World Cup group stage match against Australia at Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy. — AFP

best. Disappointed bunch at the moment."

Nissanka was involved in a 97-run stand off 66 balls with Kusal Mendis for the second wicket with the wicketkeeper-batsman posting his third fifty in the competition.

Nissanka became the first Sri Lankan to score two hundreds in T20 internationals.

After Mendis's dismissal, Nissanka and Pavan Rathnayake put on 76 off 34 balls to see Sri Lanka to victory.

Nissanka played some glorious cover drives off the spinners and played some elegant flicks against the quicks.

Sri Lanka came into the World Cup after a 3-0 drubbing at the hands of England, but have gained momentum and have won all three games so far.

Australia's campaign has been plagued by injuries.

Their captain Marsh, who missed the first two games, returned and gave them a rollicking start by scoring 54.

Marsh and Travis Head (56) scored 104 runs off 51 balls for the first wicket.

With Australia eyeing a total in excess of 200, Sri Lanka's slow bowlers kept them to 181 with leg-spinner Dushan Hemantha picking up 3-37.

Australia collapsed as they looked for quick runs, losing their last six wickets for 21 in 24 balls. — AFP



50TH ANNIVERSARY

TOYOTA'S

BIGGEST

EXCITEMENT



1

GRAND RAFFLE



SUPRA GR

5

RAFFLE



Urban Cruiser GL

VAT

ON US

0% INTEREST

FOR 3 YEARS

SERVICE

10 YEARS / 100,000 KMS

5 YEARS / 50,000 KMS

INSURANCE

1 YEAR

THIQAH LOYALTY

POINTS WORTH RO 50

REGISTRATION

1 YEAR



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BUSINESS

CRUDE OIL
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SHORT TAKES



'Alama' is designed to accelerate franchising activity and expand opportunities for entrepreneurs across Oman

FRANCHISE FINANCE BOOST FOR SMES AND BUSINESSES IN OMAN

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), through its Franchise Centre, has partnered with the Development Bank to launch "Alama", a dedicated financing product designed to accelerate franchising activity and expand opportunities for entrepreneurs across Oman.

Launched under the auspices of Shaikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) at the Chamber's Muscat headquarters, the initiative stems from an agreement signed during the Omani-Saudi Franchise Exhibition last year.

The programme aims to enable entrepreneurs to acquire franchise rights and support local brand owners seeking to scale their businesses.

Franchising is increasingly viewed as a low-risk pathway into entrepreneurship, allowing investors to operate under established brands and tested operational models.

By providing targeted funding, the Alama product seeks to reduce business failure rates, strengthen SME participation in the retail and services sectors; and stimulate private-sector growth aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

Shaikh Faisal emphasised that the initiative reflects OCCI's strategy to expand quality financing channels for the private sector and empower entrepreneurs to enter the franchising ecosystem with greater confidence.

He noted that the collaboration represents a strong model of institutional integration supporting national entrepreneurship objectives.

According to officials, the financing programme was developed following extensive studies conducted by OCCI's Franchise Centre, which identified strong demand among entrepreneurs for franchise-specific financial products tailored to the sector's operational requirements.

The initiative is also expected to support the international expansion of Omani brands while attracting recognised global franchise concepts to the domestic market.

The Development Bank confirmed that the programme offers financing of up to RO 100,000, with a return rate of 3 per cent, repayment periods of up to seven years and grace periods of up to 12 months.

New industrial observatory to drive smart industry in Oman

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion is spearheading a major initiative to modernise Oman's industrial sector through the Industrial Observatory project. This notable platform aims to transform the Sultanate of Oman's industrial system into a smart, data-driven engine of economic growth, in line with Oman Vision 2040 and the country's broader economic diversification goals.

In an interview with the Observer, Ibtisam bint Mohammed al Alawi, Director of the Industrial Observatory project and Head of the Industrial Analysis Department, explained that the Observatory will act as a unified digital platform



IBTISAM
BINT
MOHAMMED
AL ALAWI

Director of the
Industrial
Observatory
project.

that collects, analyses and presents industrial data in real time. By delivering accurate, evidence-based insights, the platform will enable policymakers to make informed decisions, encourage investment, stimulate innovation and strengthen collaboration between industry and academia. The Industrial Observatory is designed to support industrial policy, foster innovation and improve competitiveness and sustainability, positioning the industrial sector as a key driver of economic diversification and investment attraction. It will also provide valuable data to researchers, local stakeholders and international organisations, supporting studies, research and informed decision-making. Among the platform's main features is the ability to conduct annual industrial surveys, allowing companies

to submit their data and ensure it is verified and audited. A digital dashboard provides a comprehensive view of the industrial sector, with customisable options to explore specific data. Users can also search for companies and their products based on industry type, product classification and geographic location. The Observatory offers access to reports and economic indicators, including Omanisation levels, value added, exports and imports, while also connecting users to key industrial platforms such as Made in Oman. The platform further supports automation initiatives, highlights investment opportunities in high-demand sectors; and provides analysis and guidance for companies facing financial challenges. It also facilitates access to industrial incentives, helping companies leverage

available support to grow and improve performance. Al Alawi noted that the Observatory ensures the integrity of its data through careful auditing and review by authorities such as the National Centre for Statistics and Information. She highlighted that the platform's strategic value lies in providing decision-makers with real-time insights and accurate analyses, supporting effective planning and policymaking under the Industrial Strategy 2040. The Ministry emphasises collaboration with the industrial sector to align the Observatory with private sector capabilities and ensure seamless data integration across stakeholders. A key component of the project is the use of artificial intelligence to enhance industrial indicators, strengthen sector performance and support Oman's vision for a knowledge-driven, competitive and sustainable industrial economy.

22.4 bn investments in Oman economic zones



The authority said it signed 325 new investment agreements in 2025 across the special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

THE Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) said new investments in special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities exceeded RO 1.4 billion in 2025, lifting total committed investment to RO 22.4 billion, a 6.8% increase compared with 2024.

The figures were presented at a media briefing on Monday, February 16, 2026, chaired by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

The authority said it signed 325 new investment agreements in 2025 across the special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities.

It said its strategy is focused on maintaining a business-friendly environment, offering targeted incentives and maximising the added value of projects, while leveraging free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships.

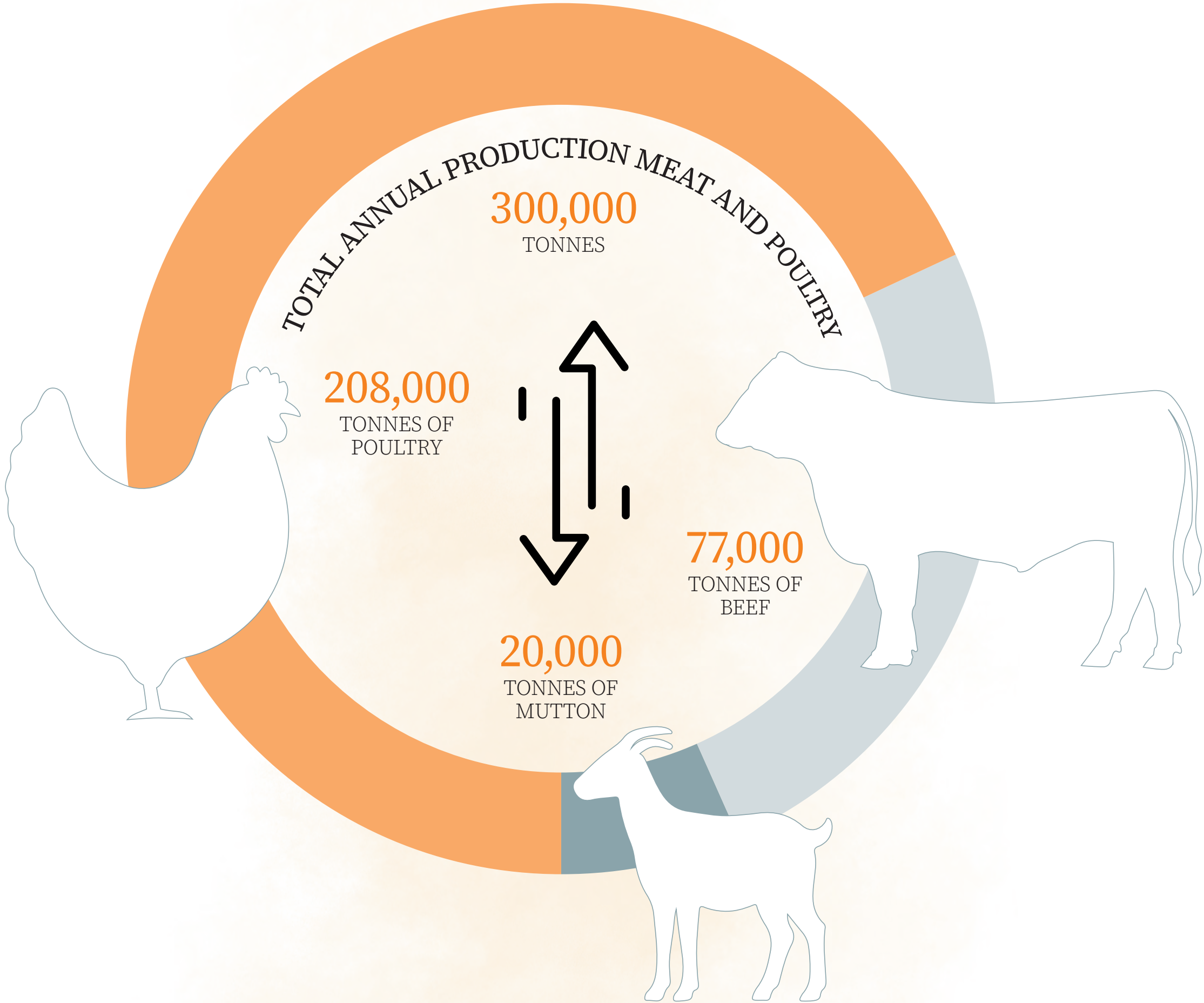
OPAZ also said it strengthened its international presence by joining the World Free Zones Organisation. Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al

The authority said it signed 325 new investment agreements in 2025 across the special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities. It said its strategy is focused on maintaining a business-friendly environment, offering targeted incentives and maximising the added value of projects, while leveraging free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships.

Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, said the authority engaged with over 500 companies last year as part of efforts to increase foreign investment. He added that a strategic projects tracking platform is monitoring projects from negotiation through to the signing of usufruct agreements and the start of construction, with 294 projects registered by end-2025 in sectors including renewables, petrochemicals, food and fisheries; and minerals. In Al Dhahirah Special Economic Zone, OPAZ highlighted phase-one works for main roads and drainage channels, including 11 agreements between the main contractor and SMEs valued at RO 5.7 million, with completion at around 14.9% by end-2025. For Al Rawdah Special Economic Zone, it said it signed a development and operations agreement with Mahdha Development Company to implement phase one over 14 square kilometres, with the site handed over to the developer, the master plan approved and tenders issued for drainage works and project supervision. On employment, OPAZ said zones under its supervision

provided 4,467 job opportunities for Omanis in 2025, above a 2,500 annual target. It said total Omani employment reached 30,780 out of approximately 85,000 workers, a localisation rate of 36%, with 4,774 SMEs operating in the zones. The authority said an updated OMap Platform was launched as a central reference for spatial data and master plans across zones, offering interactive 2D and 3D maps to support decision-making and speed up procedures. It added that Madayn presented the RABT platform to connect local suppliers with industrial procurement and tender needs. One-stop-shop outputs for 2025 included 2,509 economic activity licences, 1,125 public service licences, 2,605 commercial registrations, 131 environmental licences and 225 environmental permits. It also cited 419 investor visas, 7,114 work permits and 284 building permits. On governance and service performance, OPAZ said it achieved 75% in an institutional excellence evaluation, obtained ISO 9001:2025 certification and automated 25 internal and external services. It also said the Tajawob platform handled 167 requests by end-2025.

FROM FOOD IMPORTS TO A GLOBAL EXPORT HUB



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 16

THE RECENTLY announced strategic partnership between the Oman Food Capital, the food investment arm of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA), and Brazilian food giant JBS is more than a commercial agreement. It represents a shift in how nations approach food security, now regarded as equally strategic as medicine, energy, and political stability, and a cornerstone of economic sovereignty, according to one of Oman’s leading food investment experts.

Saleh al Shanfari, Chairman of the Food Security Committee at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), made this observation in a recent post. He was referring to last week’s partnership, which entails an investment of \$150 million — equivalent to about RO 57.7 million — aimed at raising the annual production capacity of two key meat and poultry facilities in Oman to 300,000 tonnes. Of this total, 208,000 tonnes of poultry will come from the Ibri plant of A’Namaa Poultry Company, while approximately 77,000 tonnes of beef and 20,000 tonnes of mutton will be produced at the existing facilities of Al Bashayer Meat in Thumrait.

Al Shanfari noted that this production increase would reduce dependence on imports and strengthen the local market with more competitive pricing and higher-quality products. Beyond domestic self-sufficiency, the partnership aims to position Oman as a global export platform for halal food products.

Leveraging JBS’s logistics capabilities and worldwide distribution network, Oman could serve as a regional operational base, a hub for high-quality production, and a launchpad for exports to markets across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. This would place the Sultanate among key players in a rapidly expanding halal food market.

Technology transfer is another central benefit. As a global leader in food production, JBS’s partnership with national companies such as Al Bashayer and A’Namaa, supported by the OIA, is expected to introduce modern processing, packaging, and livestock-production techniques into Oman. The initiative is also likely to enhance food safety, quality standards, and operational efficiency across current and future facilities. Such investments typically localise knowledge and expertise, fostering broader industry development.

From an economic perspective, the partnership is expected to generate more than 3,000 direct jobs over the next five years across the production chain. The agreement also signals confidence from a major global company in Oman’s investment environment, potentially encouraging other international firms to enter the food sector and strengthening the ecosystem around it.

Al Shanfari highlighted local value creation as a key priority. He argued that the partnership can increase value added within Oman by enhancing integration among companies under the OIA and expanding domestic manufacturing rather than relying on exporting raw materials or importing finished products. This could stimulate

“ Production increase would reduce dependence on imports and strengthen the local market with more competitive pricing and higher-quality products. Beyond domestic self-sufficiency, the partnership aims to position Oman as a global export platform for halal food products

SALEH AL SHANFARI
Chairman of the Food Security Committee at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI)

downstream industries and foster a wider network of suppliers and services supporting the sector.

Sustainability is also embedded in the partnership’s structure. JBS will hold a majority stake of around 80% in the joint venture, which reduces operational financing pressure on the government while ensuring the national companies operate under a commercially driven management model prioritising profitability and long-term continuity.

Looking ahead, Al Shanfari sees the partnership as a magnet for other global food companies seeking a base in Oman. The Sultanate’s strategic location along major sea, air, and land routes makes it attractive for firms aiming to serve regional markets efficiently, particularly when a large operator demonstrates that production, cold-chain logistics, and export execution can meet international standards.

At its core, Al Shanfari’s message is that Oman is treating food as a strategic national commodity. The partnership addresses capacity expansion, export ambitions, technology transfer, job creation, deeper local value chains, and financial sustainability through a commercially driven structure. The real test will be whether these goals are translated into on-the-ground results, combining national resilience objectives with the discipline needed to compete in regional and global food markets. Nevertheless, he expressed confidence that the strength and expertise of both the OIA and JBS would ensure all objectives are achieved.

SHORTTAKES



The agreement focuses on implementing OPAL's professional licensing framework.

OPAL-TAKAMUL PACT STRENGTHENS SKILLS CERTIFICATION

MUSCAT: The Oman Energy Association (OPAL) has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia's Takamul Holding Company to enhance professional accreditation systems, develop competency verification mechanisms and raise workforce standards across Oman's energy and industrial sectors.

The agreement focuses on implementing OPAL's professional licensing framework while introducing advanced digital solutions to assess and verify workers' skills prior to entering the Omani labour market.

The partnership aims to strengthen labour market regulation, support Omanisation targets and ensure that recruited professionals meet internationally recognised competency benchmarks. By integrating Takamul's expertise in digital testing platforms and professional assessment systems, the collaboration will enhance the reliability and efficiency of skills verification processes across multiple occupational categories.

OPAL officials highlighted that the initiative represents a key step towards building a transparent, competency-based professional environment that aligns workforce qualifications with sectoral requirements.

The agreement also promotes regional cooperation by enabling smoother transfer of technical expertise and professional standards across GCC markets.

Under the cooperation framework, both parties will work on integrating approved occupational standards into the examination system, developing question banks aligned with industry requirements and exploring the establishment of accredited testing centres in labor-sending countries. These centres will operate under unified operational controls and quality assurance frameworks to ensure consistent assessment outcomes. — ONA

Clusters advance across Oman's economic zones

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 16

LARGE scale infrastructure, industrial and renewable-energy projects continued to advance across Oman's economic zones in 2025 as authorities accelerated the development of specialised industrial clusters and new economic hubs aimed at strengthening manufacturing capacity and logistics competitiveness.

In a media briefing, Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), said work progressed on several new special economic zones, including the Al Dhahirah zone, where Phase I infrastructure works — including roads and drainage networks — moved forward alongside agreements with small and medium enterprises supporting construction activities.

The Al Rawdah Special Economic Zone also entered its development phase following the signing of a development and operations agreement with Mahdha Development Company covering an initial development area of approximately 14 square kilometres.

Infrastructure development also advanced at the Muscat International Airport Free Zone, where about 72 per cent of internal roads and basic service networks were completed, improving readiness for logistics-focused investment projects.

In the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, consultancy contracts



Sector-focused economic clusters formed a central pillar of the ongoing project pipeline.

were awarded to prepare the detailed master plan for a 31-square-kilometre coastal tourism area designed to attract international tourism and lifestyle-related investments.

Sector-focused economic clusters formed a central pillar of the ongoing project pipeline. These include the Integrated Cold Chain Economic Cluster in Al Duqm, supporting fisheries and food export industries; the Integrated Aluminium Cluster in Sohar Industrial City; and feasibility studies for a mining-focused economic cluster in Shaleem and Al Hallaniyat Islands. Additional studies are

underway to establish a silica and mining industries complex in Al Duqm to maximise the value of the region's mineral resources.

Major renewable-energy and heavy-industry investments also progressed during the year. A RO 70 million wind turbine component manufacturing project was launched in Al Duqm, while a large-scale solar cell and module manufacturing project was initiated in Sohar Free Zone. At the same time, the green hydrogen and green ammonia projects in Al Duqm continued to advance, with the early phases moving steadily

towards production targets.

Industrial expansion was further supported by supply-chain integration initiatives led by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) through the RABT digital platform, designed to link local suppliers with industrial operators and strengthen domestic value chains.

Meanwhile, the Green Steel Plant being developed by Jindal Steel in Al Duqm surpassed 30 per cent completion, highlighting the scale of ongoing heavy-industrial investments shaping the next phase of Oman's industrial growth.

New JV to set up \$24m gypsum plasterboard project in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 16

A new joint venture formed through a partnership between Kunooz Oman Holding SAOC, a leading Omani mining company and Etex NV, a Belgium-headquartered global leader in lightweight construction solutions, has unveiled plans to establish a gypsum plasterboard manufacturing plant in the Sultanate of Oman with an initial investment of €22 million (approximately \$24 million).

Last month, the two parties signed agreements to jointly support gypsum-based activities in Oman. As part of these agreements, Etex also acquired a 25% stake in Kunooz Gypsum Company LLC, a subsidiary of Kunooz Oman Holding.

Announcing the JV's investment plans in the Sultanate of Oman,



The new plasterboard manufacturing plant will add value to Oman's prolific gypsum resources (For illustration only).

Kunooz Oman Holding said: "The partnership combines Kunooz Oman's strong resource base and regional expertise with Etex's advanced technology, manufacturing capabilities and global market reach.

As part of the collaboration, the parties will establish a new gypsum plasterboard manufacturing facility with a shareholding structure of 51% for Etex and 49% for Kunooz Oman Holding, with an estimated first-phase investment of €22 million".

The company added in a post: "The joint venture will be supported by long-term gypsum supply agreements serving both local production and international export markets.

Aligned with Oman Vision 2040, the partnership will drive downstream value creation, industrial diversification and employment, while positioning

Oman as a regional hub for high-value gypsum products".

Significantly, the deal represents Etex's first operational presence in Oman.

Founded in 1905, the company specialises in lightweight and sustainable construction solutions, with a strong portfolio spanning fibre cement, plasterboard, insulation, roofing and modular building systems.

It operates more than 190 sites in 45 countries, with total revenues estimated at €3.78 billion in 2024.

Salalah-based Kunooz Gypsum is already a major player in Oman's gypsum mining industry, with two mining areas currently covering a total of 55 hectares.

Minerals Development Oman (MDO), the state-owned mining and minerals investment arm of the Oman Investment Authority, holds a 20% stake in Kunooz Oman Holding.

ECONOMIC STRAIN

Japan's Q4 growth barely rebounds



Japan's economy grew an annualised 0.2% in the fourth quarter, missing expectations and underscoring fragility under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. The weak rebound follows a revised 2.6% contraction, as domestic demand remains subdued amidst cost-of-living pressures.

The Bank of Japan signalled continued rate normalisation, complicating efforts to sustain recovery through targeted fiscal stimulus. — Reuters

DIPLOMATIC STAKES

Iran flags economic incentives in talks



Iran said potential energy, mining and aircraft deals could form part of a renewed nuclear agreement with the United States, as both sides prepare for further negotiations.

The talks seek to ease decades of tension over Tehran's nuclear programme. The United States has reinforced its regional military presence, warning of sustained action if diplomacy collapses. — Reuters

POLICY DEBATE

EU pushes faster reform path



European Union (EU) leaders are considering a two-track approach to break a long-standing economic reform deadlock and boost competitiveness.

At an informal summit, France and the European Commission urged progress by June on the stalled Capital Markets Union. The initiative aims to mobilise large-scale investment, though national interests continue to slow integration efforts. — Reuters

OPINION

What should be our responsibility to the next generation?



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The writer is strategic adviser, businessman and motivational speaker.

LAST week, I shared a personal reflection on the possible impact of AI on the future generation (and my grandchildren). The reflection was based on a vivid dream where I sat in a garden surrounded by my grandchildren, only to realise that whenever a question arose, the immediate response was to consult AI instead of thinking, wondering, or exploring.

What got me worried was not the presence of advanced technology (AI per se), but the possibility that the future generations might grow up in a world where their own curiosity and mental effort are quietly replaced by instant answers (and machines).

I wrote about my conversation with my daughter (Daniya), who confirmed that this reality is already happening. Students today use AI for studying, writing, problem-solving and even everyday communication.

This may be happening not out of them being lazy, but because it has become normal to some very big extent. As a technologist, I emphasised that my concern is not about resisting innovation. I believe deeply in progress.

My worry is about what happens when young minds rely so heavily on intelligent tools that they rarely experience the productive struggle that builds judgment, creativity and resilience. So the question is, “What can we do, and what is our responsibility?” Protecting future generations

does not mean limiting access to technology or creating fear around AI. Instead, it requires intentional guidance by teaching young people and our kids how to live alongside intelligent tools without surrendering their own intelligence.

First, we must teach our kids to think before they use AI. Children should be encouraged to attempt answers, form opinions and challenge problems before turning to AI. Whether in classrooms or at home, we should ask simple questions like, “What do you think?” or “How would you solve it?” This small habit reinforces ownership of thought and builds confidence in their own reasoning.

Second, we should normalise struggle. Today speed and efficiency are celebrated, but learning has never been meant to be easy. Struggling with a math problem, revising an essay multiple times, or figuring something out through trial and error develops “learning” endurance. When AI removes all difficulty, we must consciously reintroduce healthy challenges so our children experience the satisfaction of earning understanding. It should not be about the speed, which can come and be developed with experience later.

Third, we need to teach critical thinking and verification as core life skills. AI can produce convincing answers, but not all answers are correct or even complete. Children should learn to question outputs, compare sources and ask deeper questions.

Protecting future generations does not mean limiting access to technology or creating fear around AI. Instead, it requires intentional guidance by teaching young people and our kids how to live alongside intelligent tools without surrendering their own intelligence.

Instead of seeing AI as an authority, they should see it as a collaborator whose suggestions require human judgment as well.

Fourth, if we as parents and/or teachers constantly refer to technology without reflection, our children will do the same.

Demonstrating curiosity by reading, discussing ideas, thinking aloud and occasionally choosing to solve problems without digital help sends a powerful signal about the value of independent thought. We need to be role models!

Fifth, we should preserve spaces for imagination. Unstructured play, creative hobbies, storytelling and meaningful conversations will surely help our minds stay fresh (and not depend on AI). I can tell you for a fact that when I was bored, that’s when I ended up creating innovative projects. Protecting time away from constant digital assistance is not a step backward; it is, in fact, an investment in human potential.

To conclude my article this week, let me note that intelligent machines will no doubt shape the future. That is not something to be afraid of.

However, a future filled with passive consumers of knowledge and/or creators/inventors that depend entirely on technology is something we must be afraid of. If we guide our children with intention, ie, teaching them to think deeply, question boldly and use technology wisely, we can ensure that the next generation grows up not just with powerful tools but with powerful minds.

INSURANCE MARKET SUSTAINABILITY: A CALL FOR MEASURED AND TRANSPARENT ACTION



MURTADHA M J IBRAHIM AL JAMALANI

The writer is an insurance expert & economist researcher

RECENT insurance market index year 2023- 2024 statistics indicate a concerning deterioration in key performance indicators. This trend raises important questions about underwriting discipline, profitability quality, capital strength and overall market resilience.

The responsibility to address these structural challenges is shared between the Oman

Insurance Association and the Financial Services Authority, as the industry body and regulatory authority respectively.

Coordinated leadership, policy alignment and measurable corrective actions are now essential.

From a governance and regulatory perspective, the following questions require clear answers:

1. What corrective measures are being implemented to restore underwriting profitability and technical performance?
2. How is capital adequacy being strengthened to ensure long-term solvency?
3. What steps are being taken to enhance market discipline and risk management standards?
4. How will transparency and disclosure standards be improved to rebuild investor confidence?

Sustainable growth cannot be achieved through premium expansion alone. It requires:

- Balanced portfolio construction
- Prudent reserving practices
- Strong corporate governance
- Effective supervision and enforcement
- Market-wide strategic alignment

Furthermore, all strategic initiatives, reform measures and performance benchmarks must be transparently communicated to shareholders and stakeholders through the Muscat Stock Exchange.

Transparency is not optional — it is a cornerstone of market confidence and long-term sustainability. The insurance sector is a reflection of the broader economy. Its stability and growth are vital to national financial resilience.

Therefore, proactive, measurable and publicly disclosed action plans are not merely desirable — they are imperative.

Oman’s maritime legacy: Reclaiming reliability

SOME nations inherit geography; Oman inherited a vocation. Long before “globalisation” became fashionable, Omani seafarers were stitching together the Indian Ocean economy — from East Africa to India and the Gulf, guided by wind, tide and trust.

That legacy was never only romantic. It was an operating system: navigation, commerce and mediation built on one idea that still matters more than ever — reliability.

Today, reliability is harder to defend. Escalations around the Red Sea and the Gulf have reminded the world that chokepoints can no longer be treated as stable assumptions.

For Oman, the question is not whether maritime trade will remain central — it will — but whether Oman can again be seen as the region’s most dependable logistics and maritime platform as the global order fragments.

Maritime remains the backbone of globalisation: around four-fifths of world trade by volume moves by sea.

Yet the economics of shipping have changed. The Suez–Red Sea route traditionally carries about 12% of seaborne-traded oil and around 8% of global LNG. When insecurity rises, carriers re-route, schedules slip, inventories rise and costs are passed down the chain.

The same material highlights a detail policymakers should treat as a macroeconomic fact: diversions around the Cape of Good Hope can add roughly 10–14 days to Asia–Europe voyages and around \$1 million in additional fuel costs per round trip. That is before counting the knock-on effects on working capital and port congestion. In such conditions, insurance and war-risk premiums stop being technicalities and become a pricing mechanism for global trade. Maritime security becomes an economic variable.



Omani seafarers were stitching together the Indian Ocean economy — from East Africa to India and the Gulf, guided by wind, tide and trust.



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The writer is founder and CEO - Smart Investment Gateway, economists, board adviser & business transformation mentor.

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The Berlin workshop agenda framed maritime resilience in a modern way: not merely as threat response, but as the intersection of security, trade flows, energy systems and digital infrastructure, with a focus on guardrails and early-warning practices that reduce miscalculation. Oman should adopt the same lens. Maritime leadership today is measured by the ability to absorb shocks and restore normality quickly.

Oman is well-positioned to offer a “reliability proposition”. It faces the Indian Ocean, sits beside the Strait of Hormuz and lies on the doorstep of Asia–Europe traffic. But the advantage is not only geography. It is credibility: a tradition of pragmatic diplomacy, broad acceptance across competing blocs and a clear interest in keeping sea lines open for all.

In a world shaped by US–China rivalry and shifting supply chains, credibility is a tradable asset.

Reclaiming maritime leadership requires a modern agenda that is measurable and investable. Three priorities stand out.

First, treat maritime security as economic policy. Oman should champion a national reliability agenda with clear service-level commitments: incident communication protocols; trusted procedures for rapid rerouting; and performance metrics that signal continuity to carriers, insurers and investors.

Security planning must be tied to commercial outcomes — time-to-recover after disruption, port turnaround reliability and the ability to handle surge volumes.

Second, build resilience “by design” through data, redundancy

and governance. Oman should have a “corridor risk map” that combines geopolitical triggers, shipping patterns, insurance pricing signals and exposure of critical infrastructure such as ports, pipelines and subsea cables.

Oman can lead regionally by convening public and private actors around a shared risk picture and agreed thresholds that trigger operational decisions.

Early warning should blend AIS, satellite data and private feeds, backed by practical “rules of the road” and deconfliction channels.

Third, make ports into industrial ecosystems, not merely transit points. Oman’s ports outside immediate chokepoints, particularly Sohar, Salalah and Duqm, can be positioned as continuity nodes for transshipment, maintenance, bunkering, storage and value-added logistics when routes are disrupted.

The prize is not only throughput; it is clustering. Ship repair, cold chain, packaging and re-export; and light manufacturing turn maritime activity into jobs, exports and capabilities that support Oman Vision 2040.

A maritime reset cannot be built on ports alone. A hub is only as strong as its hinterland connections.

Oman should accelerate practical road-and-rail connectivity into GCC markets, especially links that reduce inland bottlenecks and make Omani ports the natural gateways for regional distribution. Sequencing matters: stable segments deliver quick wins, while higher-risk links demand longer timelines and stronger safeguards. Multimodal redundancy, sea–road–rail options should be designed from the start.

Oman should read the global map of corridors with discipline. Connectivity initiatives are multiplying, but Oman’s best tradition is to work with all major players rather than bet exclusively on one bloc.

The objective is simple: keep Oman a dependable bridge for trade, investment and services between Asia, Africa and Europe, even as geopolitics becomes more fragmented.

CLASSIFIEDS

SIT. WANTED

SALES professional with 5 yrs Experience in Medical sector. Graduate, Available in Muscat. akhilmanu777@gmail.com Contact: 76323324

INDIAN electrical engineer more than 20 years experience in "MEP" construction field in Oman seeks suitable job. Contact: 92919281

ACCOUNTS/ SALES Indian male (b com) having 2+ years of experience in India accounts sales looking for suitable placement, join immediately. Contact: 76324360

15+ experience in building material, project sales & Trade market, deal with corporate project customers, looking for a suitable job. Contact 78384283

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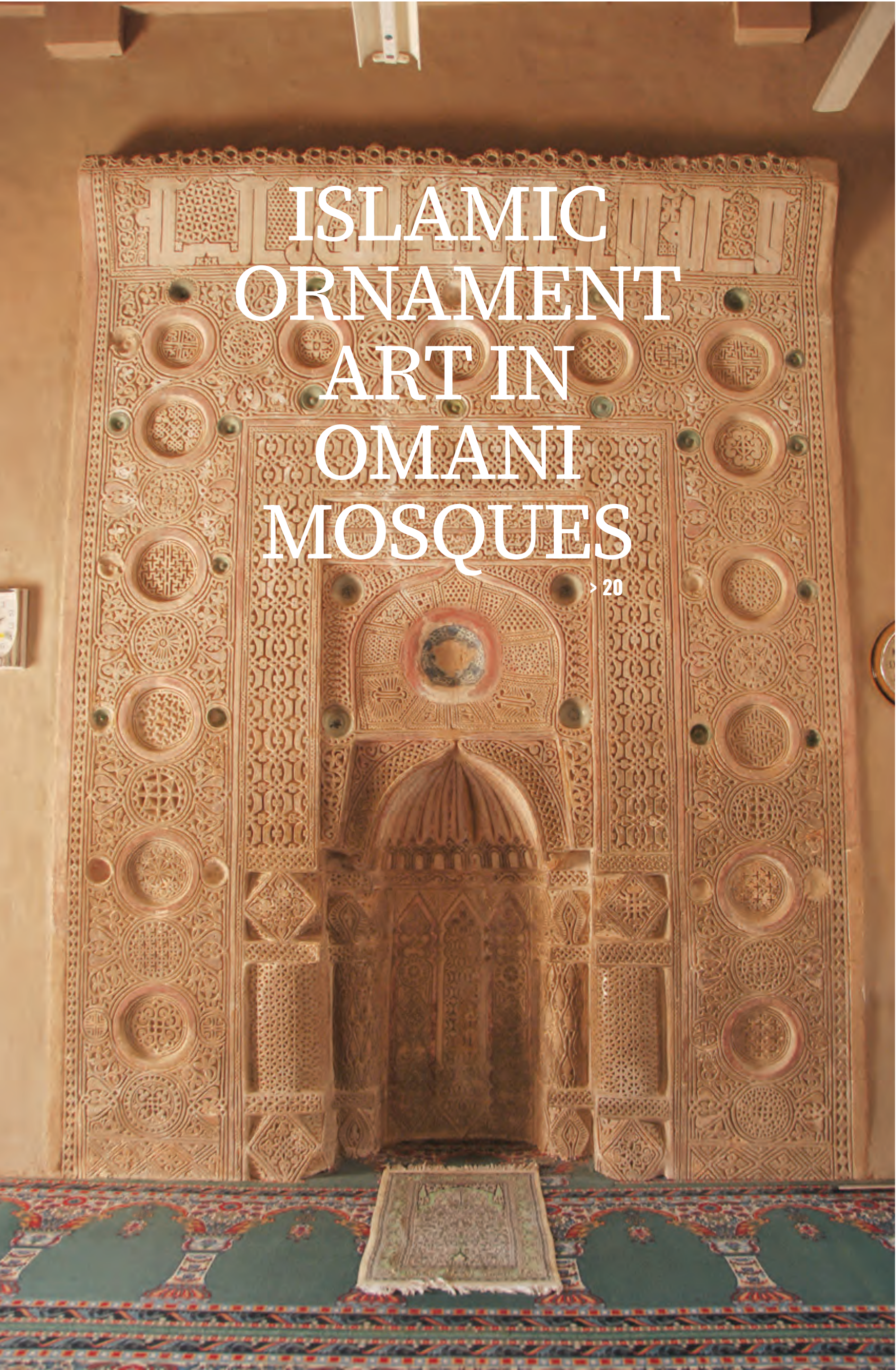
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ART/LIFE



ISLAMIC ORNAMENT ART IN OMANI MOSQUES

> 20

FOUR-DECADE CAREER

YEOH TEARS UP AS SHE GETS BERLINALE LIFETIME AWARD



BERLIN: Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh was visibly moved when she was honoured for her lifetime achievement during the opening of the 76th Berlin International Film Festival last week. “Please allow me this one personal moment,” the 63-year-old, who won an Oscar for “Everything Everywhere All at Once” in 2023, told the audience in the German capital as she collected the festival’s Honorary Golden Bear award.

“A part of me is still that young girl who simply wanted to make her parents proud,” Yeoh said, fighting back tears. “I think of them now, of the quiet, very quiet faith they placed in me when I was not always certain of myself.” “My father is no longer to see this moment. But I carry him with me. His discipline, his steadiness, his belief that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. If he could see me standing here tonight holding this golden bear, I know he would smile.” Yeoh, whose speech was met with standing ovations, had fond thoughts for Berlin, saying the city had welcomed her early on.

The festival, known as the Berlinale, stands for courageous storytelling, for films that ask difficult questions and trust the audience to find the answers, she said.

This year’s Berlinale runs until February 22, with US star Pamela Anderson, actor Ethan Hawke, and British musician Charli xx expected to make appearances during the festival.

More than 330,000 cinema tickets were sold at last year’s event.

German director Wim Wenders heads this year’s jury at the 10-day event, one of the world’s leading cinema showcases.

This year’s opening film was the drama “No Good Men,” telling the story of a camerawoman working in Afghanistan. Director Shahrbanoo Sadat fled her native country in 2021 and now lives in Hamburg.

The star of hits such as “Wicked” and “Crazy Rich Asians” recounted how Berlin was the first festival to invite her to sit on a jury in 1999, an experience that she said opened her eyes to filmmaking beyond Hong Kong.

Yeoh, who rose to fame during the heyday of Hong Kong action films in the 1980s and 1990s, will be the first Asian woman to receive the honour, joining past laureates including Martin Scorsese and Tilda Swinton.

She came to the attention of global audiences with the 1997 James Bond film “Tomorrow Never Dies” followed three years later with the martial arts classic “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.” Winning an Oscar for “Everything Everywhere All at Once” in 2023 was a blessing, said Yeoh, but that award is just for her performance in one movie.

“A lifetime achievement award is about your path, your journey, your career over the last, I guess, almost 40 years and how I’ve been resilient and stubborn,” said Yeoh. — **dpa and Reuters**

QUICK FEATURES



TRADITIONS

Revellers attend a traditional carnival in Roztoky village. The festival marks the beginning of Lent and is the equivalent of Carnival in Catholic parts of Europe. — **AFP**



ENTERTAINMENT

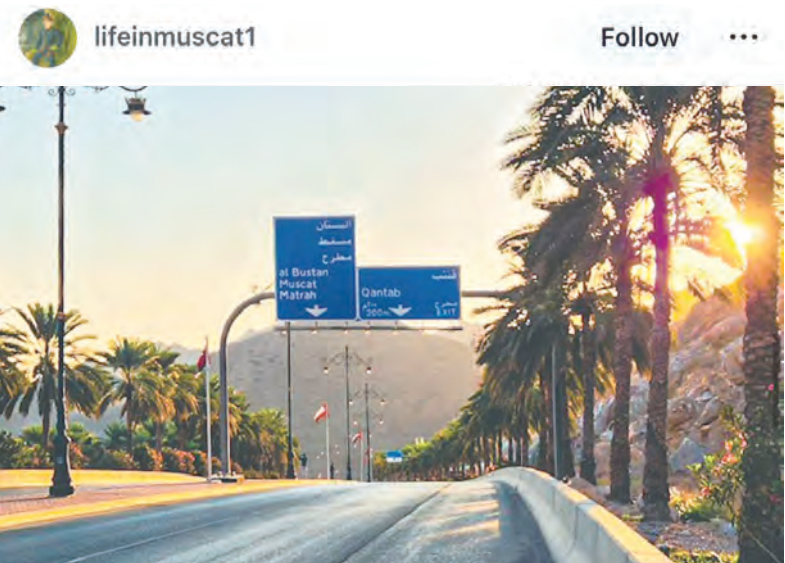
Cast member Pamela Anderson poses during a photocall to promote the movie ‘Rosebush Pruning’ at the 76th Berlinale International Film Festival. — **Reuters**



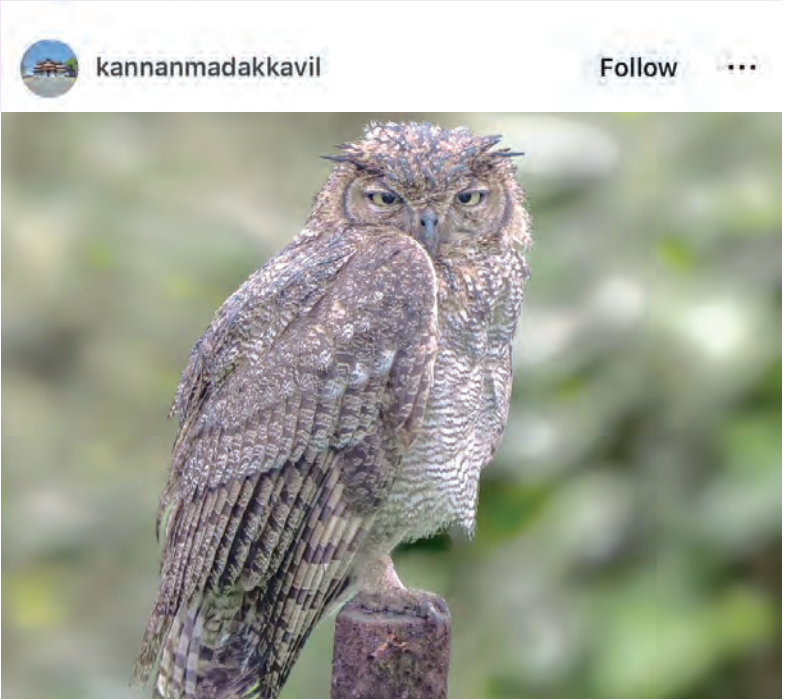
TOURISM

Snowboarders climb the Todorka peak in the Pirin Mountains. Bulgaria generates more than 13% of its GDP from low-cost tourism in its three main ski resorts and seaside resorts located along the Black Sea. — **AFP**

INSTA PICKS



Muscat roads during quiet mornings



The Arabian Eagle Owl’s Dead Stare

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ARCHAEOLOGISTS FIND 10,000-YEAR-OLD ROCK ART SITE IN EGYPT’S SINAI



Archaeologists have discovered a 10,000-year-old site with rock art in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, the country’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities said on Thursday.

The previously unknown site located at the Umm Irak Plateau has a 100-metre-long rock formation whose diverse carvings trace the evolution of human artistic expression from prehistoric times to the Islamic era.

The Supreme Council of Antiquities “has uncovered one of the most important new archaeological sites, of exceptional historical and artistic value”, the ministry said in a statement.

Its chronological diversity makes it “an open-air natural museum”, according to council secretary-general Hisham El Leithy.

The natural rock shelter’s ceiling features numerous drawings in red pigment of animals and symbols, as well as inscriptions in Arabic and

the Nabataean language.

Some engravings “reflect the lifestyles and economic activities of early human communities”, the ministry said.

Inside, animal droppings, stone partitions and hearth remains confirm that the shelter was used as a refuge for a long time.

These “provide further evidence of the succession of civilisations that have inhabited this important part of Egypt over the millennia”, Tourism and Antiquities Minister Sherif Fathi said.

He described the discovery as a “significant addition to the map of Egyptian antiquities”.

The site is located in the south of the Sinai Peninsula, where Cairo is undertaking a vast mega-project aimed at drawing mass tourism to the mountain town of Saint Catherine, a Unesco World Heritage Site and home to Bedouin who fear for their ancestral land. — AFP



Los Angeles museum unveils ‘Ponyo’ exhibit by Hayao Miyazaki

AN immersive new exhibit devoted to “Ponyo,” Hayao Miyazaki’s hand-drawn 2008 fantasy film about a goldfish-like girl yearning to be human, invites visitors, especially children, into his world through more than 100 original materials and hands-on animation tools.

The show, opening on Saturday at the Academy Museum in Los Angeles, showcases rare artwork and production sketches from Studio Ghibli, the animation house Miyazaki co-founded, along with an interactive station that introduces young visitors to the basics of stop-motion film-making.

“Ponyo’ is a very special film in Hayao Miyazaki’s filmography,” Academy Museum senior exhibitions curator Jessica Niebel said at the exhibit on Thursday.

“First of all, children are very close to his heart, and he likes to make movies for a young audience. ‘Ponyo’ is probably the movie that’s geared towards the youngest audience within his body of work,” she added.

Miyazaki, 85, is renowned as one of the world’s greatest animators, often nicknamed “the Walt Disney of Japan.”

“Ponyo,” based on the 1837 Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale “The Little Mermaid,” tells the story of a young goldfish-like princess by that name who flees from the ocean and is helped by a 5-year old human boy named Sosuke. As they bond, Ponyo desires to become a human girl.

The exhibit includes hand-drawn art boards with bold ocean blues and sketches from Miyazaki himself of meaningful moments in the movie.

An interactive animation table offers visitors a chance to create their own stop-motion animation sequences and wade into the creative process.

For Niebel, the table is a way to introduce film-making to children.

“I feel like film-making is such a large process and it’s such a big thing. I don’t know that children know and realise they can start out early,” she said. “They can make their own little films already when they’re still very young. And these tables invite them to do just that.”

Beyond the beauty of the art, Niebel hopes people will understand why honouring hand-drawn human work is so vital in an era of artificial intelligence.

Studio Ghibli was co-founded by Miyazaki and his longtime friends and collaborators Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki in 1985.

— Reuters



FEATURES

RUQAYA AL KINDI

IN the Sultanate of Oman, mosques are not merely places of prayer; they are artistic masterpieces reflecting the serene spirit of Islamic ornamentation. Geometric and floral patterns, alongside Arabic calligraphy, adorn mihrabs, windows, doors and ceilings in a harmonious blend that reflects centuries of creativity.

Islamic decoration in Oman’s historic mosques developed through cultural exchange with other Islamic lands. Since Islam entered Oman in the ninth year of the Hijra, Omanis engaged in conquests and maritime trade, encountering architectural styles unfamiliar in the Arabian Peninsula. As Ali bin Said al Adawi, Senior Archaeologist at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, explained, these encounters gradually introduced decorative richness to Omani mosques, particularly on the qibla wall where the mihrab stands as both visual and spiritual focal point. Over time, the mihrab evolved from a simple directional niche into an aesthetic composition enriched with inscriptions and refined calligraphy.

From the ancient mosques of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate — Manah, Adam, Nizwa, Bahla and Izki — and those in Al Batinah and Al Sharqiyah North Governorates, to modern mosques in Muscat Governorate, visitors embark on a visual and spiritual journey through Islamic art in its finest details.

Geometric decoration forms a central feature. Simple shapes — triangles, squares, circles and stars — interlace into precise, repetitive patterns suggesting harmony and divine order. As Ali noted, the emergence of intricate structures from simple forms mirrors a universe governed by a single will. This repetition evokes infinity, inspiring contemplation and serenity.

Floral motifs, or arabesque, flow across walls, columns, pulpits and doors. Intertwining branches and leaves transform stone and wood into delicate expressions of beauty, symbolising unity of existence and divine infinity.

Calligraphic decoration speaks directly to the soul. Quran verses and inscriptions merge sanctity with artistry, connecting worshippers to their religious heritage.

Among the most remarkable examples is the historic Bahla Mosque, opposite Bahla Fort, built in the first century AH, with a tenth-century AH mihrab renowned for its scale and decoration. Its giant mihrab — the longest decorated example in old Omani mosques — bears inscriptions documenting regional history. The So’al Mosque in Nizwa houses one of the oldest surviving stucco-carved mihrabs, dating to 650 AH (1252 AD).

Research by Dr Naima Benkari of Sultan Qaboos University confirms a distinct Omani school of stucco-carved mihrabs. Emerging around the 13th century AD, flourishing in the 16th century and fading by the early 19th century, this tradition synthesised influences from Persia, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and Iraq into a unique local expression.

A defining feature of Omani mihrabs is the prominent Kufic inscription of the Shahada crowning many 16th-century examples, surrounded by floral and geometric motifs. Another hallmark is the “outer frame” of successive tangential circles filled with carved patterns or inlaid with blue and green ceramic plates. This framing element structures the entire mihrab and is characteristic of 16th-century works.

Embedded ceramic plates — many introduced through trade with Ming China — are another distinctive element. Of the 22 mihrabs studied by Dr Naima, 20 include ceramic dishes depicting abstract florals, plants and occasionally birds or imaginary creatures. While this practice existed elsewhere, its systematic use in Oman marks a local specificity.

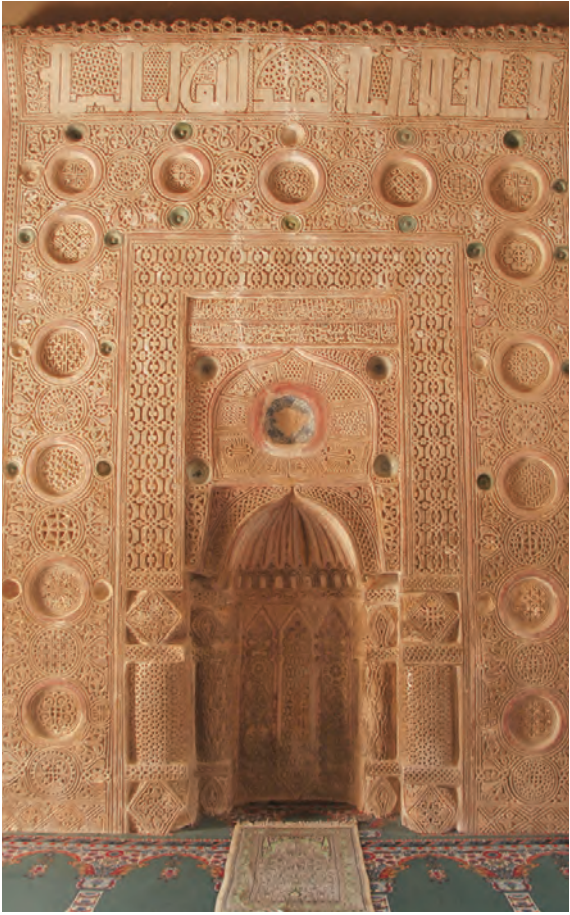
Carved friezes often crown the mihrab, while inscriptions record decoration dates, artisans’ names and historical context. Unlike other regions, Quran verses in Oman are frequently concentrated within the mihrab itself.

Traditional techniques relied on wooden molds, cast gypsum and direct hand carving on stucco. Craftsmen engraved designs onto molds, poured gypsum to capture floral and geometric forms, then assembled the pieces onto the mihrab. Calligraphy, including the Shahada and artisans’ signatures, was carved directly by hand. Decorative craftsmanship was historically passed through generations, though modern digital tools are increasingly used.

Dr Naima’s study shows that stucco-carved mihrabs in Oman span six centuries, with the 16th century marking their peak in quality



ISLAMIC ORNAMENT ART IN OMANI MOSQUES



and richness. Al Dakhiliyah Governorate — particularly Manah — was central to this artistic development.

While historic mihrabs were densely ornamented, modern mosques often favour abstract geometry and contemporary materials such as aluminium, acrylic and glass. Smart lighting and modern muqarnas further expand decorative vocabulary.

Mosques established by the Royal Court Affairs, including the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosques, exemplify this synthesis of heritage and modernity, integrating local motifs with classical Islamic design while preserving tradition.

Today, Oman continues to safeguard its decorative heritage. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism undertakes restoration and documentation initiatives, including relocating the mihrab of Al Awaina Mosque in Wadi Bani Khalid to the National Museum. Through preservation, integration of traditional elements into contemporary design and support for artisans, Oman ensures that its Islamic decorative arts endure for future generations.