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SUNRISE 06:46 AM
PRAYER TIMINGS
FAJR 05:26 AM
DHUHR 12:12 PM
ASR 03:12 PM
MAGHRIB 05:32 PM
ISHA 06:48 PM

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ISSAM BRACE
BRIGHTENS
OMAN'S SEMIS
HOPES

INBRIEF

HIS MAJESTY MAKES
PHONE CALL TO KING
OF BAHRAIN

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday made a telephone call to King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain. During the call, the two leaders discussed several topics and developments of mutual interest to the two countries. — ONA

HM RECEIVES CABLE
FROM PRESIDENT
OF MAURITANIA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in response to His Majesty's cable of greetings on the occasion of the 64th anniversary of his country's independence. In the cable, the President of Mauritania expressed his appreciation for His Majesty's heartfelt sentiments, wishing him good health and happiness. He also wished the Sultanate of Oman further progress and prosperity, stressing his keenness to continue developing relations between the two countries. — ONA

AL AMERAT CLAIM HM HOCKEY CUP



Al Amerat Club were crowned with their first title of His Majesty's Hockey Cup in its 54th edition, after defeating Salalah Club 3-1. Ahli Sidab Club secured third place after defeating Al Nasr Club 3-0 in matches held at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat. HH Sayyid Harib Thurwaini al Said was the chief guest for the final. **DETAILS ON P12**

Oman beat Qatar to
boost semifinal hopes

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Oman stunned Asian champions Qatar 2-1 in their second match to boost their hopes for a semifinal place in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at the Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium in Kuwait City on Tuesday night. It was Qatar, who took the lead very early after Almoez Ali netted in the second minute past Oman goalkeeper Ibrahim al Mukhaini. Issam al Subhi found the equaliser for Oman in the 20th minute when he coolly converted a penalty given for a foul on him in the Qatari penalty

box. The wily forward continued his golden touch for Oman as he struck his second goal of the match and third of the tournament in the 52nd minute. The second goal rattled the Qatari side as they could only regroup towards the final stages of the match. In the concluding stages, the Red Warriors held on for a crucial win. With the win, Oman emerged on top of Group A with four points from two matches ahead of the UAE-Kuwait match. Oman will take on UAE in their last match of Group A on December 27. **MORE DETAILS ON P10**



STAR
OF THE DAY
ISSAM AL SUBHI

OMAN
2
QATAR
1

26th
Gulf Cup

App-based taxis gaining
acceptance as prices drop

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, DEC 24

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION in the Sultanate of Oman is gradually catching up with the rest of the world and the region as digital transformation accelerates in the country. The taxi sector, in particular, has evolved, thanks to the efforts of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, with street taxis being replaced by app-based cab bookings. In an interview with the Observer, a top official from a leading taxi company stated, "Initially, taxi operators were hesitant to work with us on a commission basis with fixed fares. However, today, we have hundreds of drivers working under different companies because customers have embraced the system, preferring not to negotiate or haggle with drivers over fares." With more owners joining these companies, the waiting time for a taxi to arrive has also decreased from an average of



The app-based service is now available in major tourist destinations such as Salalah and Khasab.

10 to 15 minutes to around five to seven minutes, depending on the location and time of day. Payments can also be made online through debit and credit cards. The official added that with over half a dozen companies operating in the

sector, fares have significantly decreased due to competition compared to the early days of Otaxi, which introduced the service in the country in 2014. The app-based service is now available in other major tourist destinations such as Salalah and

Khasab. The evolution of the taxi sector is further evident as Otaxi recently announced a partnership with technology company Yango Group, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology. This partnership aims to enhance mobility services, especially in taxis, through digital infrastructure. Additionally, a new parcel delivery service will be allowed through the Otaxi app, enabling fast deliveries of groceries, food and personal packages. Taxi riders have noted that fares from the airport are still a grey area, leaving room for unauthorised operators. These issues can be resolved through negotiations that would benefit everyone. The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has announced plans to evaluate the public transport network in the country through a consultancy, responsible for assessing current public transport services within and between major cities, as well as neighbouring countries.

Global hunger crisis deepens as major nations skimp on aid

IT'S A SIMPLE but brutal equation: The number of people going hungry or otherwise struggling around the world is rising, while the amount of money the world's wealthiest nations are contributing towards helping them is dropping. The result: The United Nations says that, at best, it will be able to raise enough money to help about 60 per cent of the 307 million people it predicts will need humanitarian aid next year. That means at least 117 million people won't get food or other assistance in 2025.

The UN also will end 2024 having raised about 46 per cent of the \$49.6 billion it sought for humanitarian aid across the globe, its own data shows. It's the second year in a row the world body has raised less than half of what it sought. The shortfall has forced humanitarian agencies to make agonizing decisions, such as slashing rations for the hungry and cutting the number of people eligible for aid. The consequences are being felt in places like Syria, where the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN's main food distributor, used to feed 6



Palestinians gather to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen, amid a hunger crisis, as the Israel-Gaza conflict continues, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza.

million people. Eyeing its projections for aid donations earlier this year, the WFP cut the number it hoped to help there to about 1 million people, said Rania Dagash-Kamara, the organisation's assistant executive director for partnerships and resource mobilisation. Dagash-Kamara visited the WFP's Syria staff in March. "Their line was, 'We are at this point taking from the hungry to feed the starving,'" she said in an interview. UN officials see few reasons for optimism at a time of widespread

conflict, political unrest and extreme weather, all factors that stoke famine. "We have been forced to scale back appeals to those in most dire need," Tom Fletcher, UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, said. Financial pressures and shifting domestic politics are reshaping some wealthy nations' decisions about where and how much to give. One of the UN's largest donors - Germany - already shaved \$500 million in funding from 2023 to 2024 as part of general belt tightening. — Reuters

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The agreement aims to enhance advertising infrastructure in the governorate. — ONA

AGREEMENT SIGNED FOR OPERATION OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

AL RUSTAQ: Al Batinah South Governorate on Tuesday signed an investment agreement to the tune of RO 2 million with Fikra Company for the installation and operation of digital and printed advertising platforms in various wilayats of the governorate, for a period of five years.

The agreement aims to enhance advertising infrastructure in the governorate and facilitate promotional services for institutions and individuals, in addition to supporting local development efforts by introducing modern technical solutions. The signing of the agreement reflects the efforts of Al Batinah South Governorate to enhance partnership with the private sector and attract investments that support sustainable development and achieve economic and social prosperity. — ONA

OMAN-KUWAIT FORUM EXPLORES INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES



KUWAIT: The discussion panels of Oman-Kuwait Economic Forum, held in Kuwait, explored the reality of the converting industries sector, the integration of supply chains, real estate, hotel development and food security in the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait.

The forum and the accompanying exhibition are organised by the Supervisory Team for the Promotion of Omani Products (OPEX), represented by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates “Madaym”. These events are held in cooperation with Kuwait’s Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry. — ONA

OMAN EMBASSY IN CAIRO MARKS WORLD ARABIC LANGUAGE DAY

CAIRO: The Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, marked the World Arabic Language Day, which falls on December 18 every year with a celebration entitled Ahmed bin Majid Salon, on Tuesday.

Delivering a speech at the event, Abdullah bin Nasser al Rahbi, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt and Permanent Representative to the League of Arab States, said: “We meet today, in the salon of Ahmed bin Majid, the Arab navigator and scholar who sailed around the world on board a ship. Today, we sail through the Arabic language, the language that was described by the Egyptian writer Abbas Al Aqqad as a poetic language and we say that it is a living, creative and renewed language. The Omanis carried the Arabic language on their ships spreading it throughout the world and building a bridge with Africa.” — ONA

Drying clothes on balcony is illegal: Muscat Municipality

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

HANGING CLOTHES on the balcony or drying clothes outside the house in such a way it is creating an eyesore to the onlookers and passers-by is an offense, the Muscat Municipality has reiterated.

It is in the view that drying clothes on balconies can affect the beauty and the aesthetic appearance of Muscat and to maintain the city’s charm, the civic body has urged all to abide by the regulations, which discourage such practice. Hanging laundry on the balconies of buildings is considered a violation by law, and such offense can be punished with a fine between RO 50 and RO 5,000 or imprisonment for a period of not less than 24 hours and not more than 6 months, or one of those two penalties, according to Article No 14 of Muscat Municipality Law.



As per Article (32) of Local Order No 92/23 for the organisation of buildings in Muscat Governorate and the requisites to be taken into account for drying clothes on balconies of residential buildings overlooking public streets should be as per the following:

1) Municipal laws do not permit hanging out laundry on balconies except after installing covering elements such as Mashrabiya or wooden mesh with the Municipality permission.

2) The perforation of the mesh should be no more than 1.50 cm x 1.50 cm wide, and the concrete openwork should have a depth of at least 10 cm and perforations no more than 7 cm2.

3) Any multi-storey residential building with more than three residential units must provide a balcony for each residential unit to dry clothes, depending on the architectural conditions of the unit, to be covered with one of the covering materials or elements.

4) It is not allowed to use a metal mesh as a covering element for openings in buildings (balconies or windows) “These warnings are pursuant to maintain the aesthetic urban facade of the capital, and Muscat Municipality prioritises the way city is seen by the people, citizens, residents and visitors, and we would like to urge all to the importance of adhering to the requirements when drying laundry on balconies of houses and buildings,” a source at the Muscat Municipality said.

TENDERS WORTH RO 8M AWARDED FOR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN DAKHLIYAH



NIZWA: The Internal Tenders Committee in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate awarded tenders worth over RO 8 million for development projects in the municipal sector at its meeting held on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah. The move comes within the context of the governorate’s strategy to upgrade municipal services in all the wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

During its meeting, the Committee discussed the construction of internal roads in the wilayats of Samayil, Bahla, Izki and Adam, paving Al Najid-Wadi Andam road in the Wilayat of Samayil, developing the Misfat Al Abriyeen neighbourhood in the Wilayat of Al Hamra, developing the gateway to Jabreen and Basya in the Wilayat of Bahla, developing the Bahla market and lighting Al Kharm intersection in the Wilayat of Bahla.

Once completed, the projects will boost the governorate’s economy and bring about a qualitative shift in municipal services in the governorates. — ONA

Christians in Oman to mark Christmas today

KABEER YOUSUF
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Christians living in the Sultanate of Oman are celebrating Christmas at their homes and churches, greeting each other and wishing happiness as they welcome Santa Claus today.

Children, along with their parents, were busy arranging trees. They began to enact the role of Santa Claus, the legendary figure who is the traditional patron of Christmas, bringing gifts to children days before December 25.

Prior to Christmas, hotels and shopping malls in Oman have been in a festive mood to tap into the holiday season. Several flights carrying tourists from regional destinations and other continents have been arriving in Oman. For hotels in Oman, Christmas decorations have been a tradition for many decades. They were all decorated in red and competed with each other to erect the biggest Christmas tree in town. Many conducted winter markets where visitors could stroll through for their favourite clothes, accessories, or cakes.

“We took part in the celebrations by distributing Christmas cakes to our patrons, customers and believers across the country,” Sonam Dorje, General Manager of Global Money Exchange, said.

Oman’s leading hotels have reported a surge in bookings and rooms of various grades,



thanks to online booking domains, tour operators and outreach offices in other

countries.

One inevitable part of the celebrations is carols, choir

singing and music.

An interchurch Christmas Carol Singing Competition was recently held under the auspices of Father Saverios Thomas for the first time at the Marthasouni Church auditorium.

Named ‘Halel 2k24,’ the competition saw the participation of more than 250 blessed choir singers from different choirs of various churches from across the country, formed into 9 groups, with an in-house choir adding cream to the cake.

Symphony Music Band, a group of music lovers led by popular musician Roy Georginteen, organised a carol service with the participation of about twenty singers. The musical feast put on by the symphony band received overwhelming praise from the audience, Francis Thalachira, coordinator of the band, said.

During the holidays, domestic tourism will be reflected in people visiting local destinations just a short drive away. They can immerse themselves in historic museums, bask in the sunlight of Jabal Shams, take a dip in the blue turquoise waters of Al Sharqiyah, and spend a holiday in the misty Dhofar.

“Domestic tourism will greatly benefit during the festive season, Christmas, and New Year as there is a sense of ‘revenge travel’ happening across the world,” said Ramsheed, from Capital Travel and Tourism.

URBANPLANNING



The meeting was chaired by Yahya al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South

MEETING REVIEWS
DEVELOPMENT
PROJECTS IN AL
SHARQIYAH SOUTH

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
SUR, DEC 24

The Municipal Council of South Al Sharqiyah South Governorate convened its 10th meeting of 2024, chaired by Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South and Chairman of the Council, and focused on topics related to development projects, environmental initiatives, and sustainable urban planning.

The council reviewed the progress of several ongoing projects aimed at improving infrastructure and services in the governorate, including the proposal to establish a dedicated market for small businesses and artisans in the Wilayat of Sur. Another major project discussed was the extension of Al Ashkharah Park in Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, designed to enhance recreational and tourism facilities. The meeting hosted officials from the General Directorate of Housing and Urban Planning, who presented an overview of residential plans in the Wilayat — discussions centered on challenges such as excavations, landfills, and the provision of essential services.

The council emphasised the importance of addressing these issues to ensure sustainable urban development that meets the needs of the growing population. The council also welcomed a presentation by Amlak Resources on their Amlak Green Initiative in Al Ashkharah, which is focused on improving environmental quality and promoting sustainability, involving expanding green spaces and planting native trees such as coconut, sidr, and ghaf. The project is a collaborative effort involving the governorate, government entities, and private partners, showcasing a strong commitment to environmental preservation. The Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MoEM) presented its digital platform, “Taqa,” which aims to enhance the quality of services, attract investments, and improve transparency through automation. The platform’s 2024 achievements include offering tenders for mining sites to local and international investors, streamlining the issuance of mining licenses, and enabling exploration permits. Future enhancements planned for 2025 were also discussed, aiming to further digitise the sector and support economic growth.

The council’s Health and Environmental Affairs Committee proposed establishing a dedicated authority to oversee and manage coastal areas within the governorate. This initiative aims to ensure the sustainable use of beaches, protect marine ecosystems, and develop facilities that support tourism and environmental preservation. The proposal also outlined the authority’s roles, including planning coastal protection projects, assessing risks, and implementing solutions aligned with Oman Vision 2040. The council reviewed various legal and administrative issues, including a report from the Legal Affairs Committee addressing violations by mobile food trucks and cafés. The council emphasised the importance of regulating these businesses to balance economic opportunities with compliance with municipal laws.

‘BAIT AL OUD’ ARCHAEOLOGICAL
LANDMARK IN AL RUSTAQ

TEXT & PHOTOS BY: YAHYA
AL SALMANI

In the middle of a green agricultural oasis lies “Bait Al Oud”, one of the oldest historical houses in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq. The history of this house dates back more than 260 years and tells important historical and social stories for the people of the village of ‘Al Khutwah’. Humaid al Rajhi, an archaeologist, explains that “Bait Al Oud” was built by Rashid bin Khamis al Rajhi. The total area of the house is 300 square metres and its height reaches 12 metres. This ancient house consists of two floors

in addition to a large tower that includes many defensive weapons. The house has been restored several times, the last of which was in 2018. The restoration process took into account the design principles of ancient architecture. It was recently converted into an archaeological exhibition that reflects the scientific and cultural movement that this village witnessed during that period of time. The house consists of five corners. The first corner is dedicated to archaeological artefacts such as coins, weapons and silverware. The second corner displays old doors and windows with their beautiful decorations. The third



corner is dedicated to palm fronds and agricultural materials that were used by ancient Omanis in their daily lives. The fourth corner is dedicated to manuscripts and historical documents, the oldest of which dates back to 1196 AH, as well as examples of rock inscriptions. The fifth corner contains household tools specific to the old Omani house that are used on a regular basis, such as pottery, copper utensils such as trays and cooking utensils. Today, this archaeological landmark attracts many tourists and those interested in the details of the social history of the Sultanate of Oman. This project also contributes to enhancing the tourism movement in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, which hosts dozens of archaeological and historical sites.

15 Omanis part of first
space rocket launch team



The experiment culminated in the successful launch of the first experimental rocket from Oman’s territory.

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN launches its first experimental space rocket from its territory with the participation of 15 Omani engineers and technicians.

The launch of the first experimental rocket, “Duqm-1” took place on December 5 in Al Wusta Governorate, 170 km from the Duqm Special Economic Zone at Etlāq Spaceport, a project by the National Aerospace Services Company (NASCOM). National cadres including 15 Omani engineers and technicians worked closely in all stages of the project, from planning to implementation, where they led the mission to success as a result of their experience and skills through direct collaboration with international partners.

The participation of the Omani team in launching the experimental rocket from the space launch port in the Hitam area south of the Wilayat of Al Duqm helped develop the team’s capabilities in rocket engineering and spaceport operations, as this experience represented an exceptional opportunity to qualify a new generation of Omani engineers, encourage them, increase their interest in the fields of science and technology, invest in building national expertise and capabilities, lay the foundations for sustainability in the space sector in the Sultanate of Oman and enhance



the Sultanate of Oman’s readiness to keep pace with future opportunities in this field.

The project was led by His Highness Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al Said, Founder & CEO of NASCOM, who played a pivotal role in setting a clear vision for developing the space sector in the Sultanate of Oman, in line with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to enhance national capabilities by building local competencies and international partnerships that contribute to supporting the sector and establishing an infrastructure that supports its sustainability.

His Highness Sayyid Azzan also stressed during this historic event that since the beginning of work on the Duqm-1 mission, an emphasis has been on achieving tangible progress in the space sector, with a focus on developing scalable Omani capabilities and enhancing the Sultanate of Oman’s position as a reliable partner in regional and international projects, noting that the

experiment represented an exceptional opportunity to qualify a new generation of Omani engineers and arouse the interest of young people in the fields of science and technology.

“This investment in building national capabilities lays the foundations for the sustainability of the space sector in the Sultanate of Oman and enhances Oman’s readiness to meet future challenges in this field,” he added.

Dr Subaih bin Rahman al Saadi, Academic Adviser for Space and Astronomy Sciences, explained that the morning of December 5 was an exceptional moment for the Sultanate of Oman in the field of technology and space. The experiment culminated in the successful launch of the first experimental rocket from the Sultanate of Oman’s territory, which dazzled the advanced world in this field.

Al Saadi also stressed that the Sultanate of Oman would become the focus of the world’s attention in launching space rockets, given its strategic space location, due to its proximity to the equator, which reduces the cost of rockets reaching different orbits in the depths of space. Thus, our beloved Sultanate of Oman records the first step in its scientific, research and technical journey and the first step to establishing the first spaceport in the region to launch space rockets and satellites, meeting scientific and commercial research needs in the field of space launch and scientific and commercial investment locally and internationally.

Majlis Ash’shura, CBO discuss electronic payment services

MUSCAT: The Economic and Financial Committee of the Majlis Ash’shura met on Tuesday with a number of officials from the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to discuss the fees imposed by the bank on shop owners for electronic payment services.

The meeting began with a presentation by the Central Bank specialists, during which they discussed the payment system in place in the Sultanate of Oman over the past 20 years. The presentation highlighted the role of the Central

Bank of Oman in payment systems and services, as well as key services and systems launched in 2024.

The presentation also covered the evolution of the digital payment system from its inception, the expansion of electronic payment services, the benefits of using electronic payment services for customers and their objectives.

Additionally, the presentation introduced the global IBAN system used in Oman, highlighting its importance and benefits in credit operations.

The discussion then shifted to the modern electronic authorisation system and its role in speeding up and facilitating installment payment processes. The role of electronic services in combating money laundering, tax evasion and illicit trade was also addressed.

At the end of the presentation, a set of statistics and figures on payment systems from 2022 to October 2024 was shared, showing the volume of transactions through retail payment systems, the Real-Time Gross Settlement (RTGS)

system and ongoing transactions within the Omani local network channels.

Following the presentation, an in-depth series of discussions took place between the committee members and the Central Bank officials. The focus of the discussion was on the fee rates for using banking services within the electronic payment process, the justifications for imposing these fees and the method of calculating fees for electronic payment services, interchange fees and fees charged by

the Central Bank of Oman.

The members of the committee emphasised the need for transparency regarding the fees imposed on electronic payment transactions.

They also pointed out the necessity of continuously developing the electronic payment system to facilitate business processes, which would positively impact the development of various commercial activities and contribute to economic prosperity in the Sultanate of Oman.



Photos by Khalfan al Ruzaiqi

Celebration of Omani heritage at Muscat Nights festival

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

THE MUSCAT NIGHTS FESTIVAL, returning this year in an enhanced format, brings the spotlight to the Heritage Village at Al Amerat Park, a centrepiece of cultural celebration. This vibrant village presents Oman's rich and diverse heritage through a renewed lens, captivating citizens, residents, and tourists alike. Designed to immerse visitors in the traditions of Oman, the Heritage Village is a meticulously crafted experience, taking guests on a journey through time. By showcasing the distinct environments Omanis historically inhabited — desert, agricultural, and coastal — the village paints a vivid portrait of the Sultanate of Oman's cultural diversity and legacy. As visitors step into the Heritage Village, they

are greeted by a captivating scene that narrates the story of Omani creativity and perseverance across generations. Each area within the village is dedicated to a unique aspect of ancient life. There are detailed displays of traditional Bedouin tents and handicrafts offering insights into desert life. For agriculture, farming tools and setups depict the rural lifestyle of Oman's farmers. Coastal exhibitions highlight seafaring traditions, from fishing techniques to shipbuilding craftsmanship. Artisans bring Oman's ancestral professions to life, showcasing their skills in crafting intricate wooden doors, spinning textiles, and creating silver jewellery, daggers, and traditional handkerchiefs. Visitors can also witness the art of rose water distillation, incense making, and crafting with palm fronds — practices

deeply rooted in Oman's history and identity. The Heritage Village buzzes with cultural and artistic performances. Folkloric groups from various governorates present traditional songs and dances such as Razha and Aazi, reflecting Oman's artistic richness. The air, filled with the aroma of incense and frankincense, enhances the experience, while visitors savour authentic Omani cuisine prepared with care. One of the core objectives of the Heritage Village is to bridge generations, allowing youth to connect with their ancestors' way of life. Through interactive displays and activities, children learn about the professions and traditions that shaped Omani culture. This initiative goes beyond entertainment, fostering a sense of national pride and encouraging visitors to delve deeper into Oman's history. It

Visitors can also witness the art of rose water distillation, incense making, and crafting with palm fronds — practices deeply rooted in Oman's history and identity. The Heritage Village buzzes with cultural and artistic performances.

also imparts values such as patience, creativity, and hard work, hallmarks of Oman's enduring civilization. The Muscat Nights festival transcends recreation, serving as a cultural and educational platform. The Heritage Village plays a pivotal role in preserving Oman's heritage and inspiring its transmission to future generations, strengthening the collective sense of identity and citizenship. Every detail within the Heritage Village tells a story — from engravings on wooden doors to the scent of handmade incense — testifying to Oman's love for its heritage and the dedication to showcasing its identity on the global stage. As visitors flock to this cultural hub, the Heritage Village stands as a testament to Oman's ancient civilization, a bridge connecting the past and the present, and a promise of preserving its legacy for generations to come.

SHORT TAKES



The newly unveiled logo symbolises unity, progress and deep connection.

WAYANAD PRAVASI COLLECTIVE UNVEILS OFFICIAL LOGO

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

THE Wayanad Pravasi Collective, a community group formed with the motto of helping each other in times of necessity by a group of enthusiastic Wayanad natives in Oman, officially unveiled its logo at a vibrant ceremony held at the Imperial Kitchen Restaurant recently. Formed with the aim to bring the people from Wayanad living across Oman together, offering support and creating opportunities, the group has now hundreds of like-minded people dedicated to extending helping hands and sharing knowledge and empowering each other. “What started as a simple WhatsApp group to connect with fellow Wayanad natives has now transformed into a group of good samaritans, dedicated to bring together the people from the district living and working in Oman and provide them with the support, guidance and opportunities they need to thrive. By focusing on education, healthcare and promoting tourism, we aim to strengthen ties between Oman and Wayanad while uplifting our people,” said Linu Sreenivas, chairman of the group. He further said that the newly unveiled logo symbolises unity, progress and the deep connection between the Wayanad expatriate community in Oman and their homeland.

Use RAP materials for pavement construction

“ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE USE of RAP Materials for Pavement Construction in Oman: A Review” by principal investigator Husam al Dughaishi, Lecturer at the College of Engineering and Architecture at the University of Nizwa, is one of the innovative research projects of the past couple of years that aims to improve sustainable infrastructure in the Sultanate of Oman. Researcher Husam al Dughaishi stated that the Sultanate of Oman has experienced rapid development over the last thirty years and has constructed environmentally friendly and sustainable infrastructure while it continues to find economical alternative resources to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040. However, he mentioned that the primary concerns are preserving natural resources and reducing the impact of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions on the environment. Through this research project, Al Dughaishi aimed to encourage the sustainable use of reclaimed asphalt pavement (RAP) materials in pavement construction and focus primarily on employing RAP materials in new pavement projects. He explained that currently, new construction projects utilise a significant percentage of demolished asphalt pavement to save costs and natural resources. However, the key issue that arises when mixing RAP into new asphalt mixtures is the effects on the mixtures’ resistance to permanent disfigurements, such as fatigue cracks, that influence asphalt



The Sultanate of Oman has experienced rapid development over the last thirty years and has constructed environmentally friendly and sustainable infrastructure while it continues to find economical alternative resources to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

HUSAM AL DUGHAISHI Researcher



This study addressed the primary concerns regarding the use of RAP in asphalt pavements.

mixture performance. Husam further added that numerous studies have assessed the impact of using RAP in asphalt mixtures and found that RAP increases the stiffness of asphalt mixtures, and thus improves rutting resistance at high temperatures. Nevertheless, the findings for thermal and fatigue cracking were found to be contradictory. This study therefore addressed the primary concerns regarding the use of RAP in asphalt pavements and aimed to encourage highway agencies and academic researchers in the Gulf countries to develop frameworks for the practical usage of RAP in the construction of sustainable pavement systems. The main findings of this research project revealed that the design and manufacture of a high-quality RAP mixture is more challenging than conventional asphalt and thus should be done by experienced pavement engineers, and that the RAP mixture design is dependent on the standards, scope of application and the impact of RAP technologies on the environment and economy.

Moreover, Al Dughaishi maintained that assembling homogeneousness in RAP material quality checks is essential and should be carried out from the commencement phase of old pavement reclamation to its final paving. He added that the CIR method is often used for rehabilitation and construction work because it consumes less energy, emits fewer greenhouse gases, and is more cost-effective than other on-site pavement recycling methods. The RAP application encouragements as a value are used as a granular base material for roadways, airport runways, shoulders, engineered fill, and culvert backfill. This research project was published under MDPI’s Recycling journal, which is a well-regarded, open-access journal in the field of sustainable recycling, waste management, and material recovery. The research team consisted of Husam al Dughaishi, Abdulrahman Milad, Jawad al Lawati, Munder Bilema, Ali Mohammed Babalghaith, Nuha S Mashaan, and Nur Izzi.

Integrated urban growth, strategic development discussed

BALQEES AL ORAIMI MUSCAT, DEC 24

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, in partnership with the Office of the Governor of Al Wusta, hosted a workshop titled ‘Urban Strategy Execution Approach for Al Wusta Governorate’. The event was graced by Shaikh Ahmed bin Musallam al Kathiri, Governor of Al Wusta, and Dr Mohammed bin Ali al Muttawa, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning for Urban Planning, along with local governors, municipal council members and representatives from both public and private sectors.

The workshop focused on aligning strategic projects with the governorate’s urban strategy, ensuring cohesive planning through an integrated spatial framework. It emphasised directing investments to optimal locations and fostering guided urban growth to drive economic and social development. Key sessions included a presentation on the National Urban Strategy for Al Wusta, detailing its implementation programmes and associated projects. Working groups explored critical themes such as environmental sustainability, climate change adaptation, strategic urban development and effective management of natural resources. The urban strategy envisions Al Wusta as a future hub for renewable energy,



with interconnected centres promoting economic and social growth. Duqm is set to evolve as a global economic gateway, bolstered by its ports and business infrastructure, while Haima is planned as a regional hub offering comprehensive services for both public and private sectors. Leveraging Al Wusta’s geographical advantages, the strategy aims to accelerate the transition to renewable energy while preserving ecosystems and efficiently managing natural resources. Additionally, the governorate is positioned as a sustainable tourism destination, integrating its unique landscapes with cultural heritage. The workshop concluded

with the signing of strategic project agreements for Al Wusta, underscoring the commitment to the governorate’s development. The agreements were signed by Shaikh Ahmed bin Musallam al Kathiri, Governor of Al Wusta and Dr Mohammed bin Ali al Muttawa, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning for Urban Planning. This initiative represents a significant step towards realising the goals of Oman Vision 2040. It fosters collaboration between government entities and private stakeholders, aligning projects to meet community aspirations and strengthening Al Wusta’s role as a pivotal governorate within Oman.

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Announcement of the tender TND GSI G3 0003/12/2024 for the supply of Forklift 5 TON

GS INIMA (AL GHUBRA) LLC has been awarded with the Engineering, Procurement and Construction of AL GHUBRAH III IWP in Oman, for CAPITAL DESALINATION COMPANY S.A.O.C.

Omani companies are invited to quote their most competitive price for the supply of **Forklift 5 Ton Lifting Capacity**.

To participate in the bidding please send copy of CR, copy of VAT certificate and copy of SME card (if any), via e-mail: **ghubrah.3.site@inima.com**, **subject: TND GSI G3 0003/12/2024** by **27th December 2024** 1:00 PM.

A reply with bid documents will be sent to candidates on the same day.

Bid closing date: **5th January 2025** 1:00PM



ANNOUNCEMENT

UPDATING SUPPLIERS & CONTRACTORS DATA IN 'VENDOR MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF NAMA GROUP'

Nama Group would like to draw the attention of all contractors and suppliers dealing with the Group to update their data in the I-Supplier Registration System (www.nama.om). Kindly diligently respond to any notifications and emails you receive in this regard.

Please be informed that starting from **January 1, 2025**, suppliers and contractors who have not completed their profile data will not be allowed to participate in tenders. In addition, the Group companies will not be able to complete financial procedures of suppliers from issuing purchase orders (PO) and pay dues.

For further clarifications and inquiries, please contact the Procurement Departments of the respective Group subsidiary or via the following email:
Fatma.AIMahrouqi@holding.nama.om

Thank you for your cooperation.



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WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Protesters attend a rally against South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol, in Seoul.

OPPN POSTPONES
DECISION TO
IMPEACH ACTING
PRESIDENT



HAN
DUCK-SOO

SEOUL: South Korea's opposition said on Tuesday it would hold back a decision to impeach acting president Han Duck-soo until later in the week. The opposition Democratic Party earlier said it would introduce an impeachment motion

against Han on Tuesday to protest against the interim leader's refusal to sign into law special bills to investigate his impeached predecessor. "We have decided to exercise patience, taking into account the sentiments of the people, and wait until the 26th (Thursday) to determine whether our demands are met," floor leader Park Chan-dae said. The party originally set Christmas Eve as the deadline for Han to promulgate two special bills investigating suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived imposition of martial law, as well as graft allegations surrounding his wife, Kim Keon Hee. The conservative leader was stripped of his duties by parliament on December 14 following his brief declaration of martial law 11 days earlier, which plunged the country into its worst political crisis in decades. — AFP

CHINA ANNOUNCES
JAPAN'S FOREIGN
MINISTER VISIT

BEIJING: Japan's Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya is set to visit China today for talks with local counterpart Wang Yi, as Tokyo acknowledged "challenges and concerns" in relations. The visit will be Iwaya's first to China since becoming Japan's top diplomat earlier this year. He told reporters in Tokyo that "China represents one of the most important bilateral relationships for us". "Between Japan and China, there are various possibilities but also multiple challenges and concerns," he said. "Both countries possess the heavy responsibilities for the peace and stability of our region and the international community," he added. China's foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said Beijing "was ready to work with Japan... to focus on common interests, strengthen dialogue and communication, deepen practical cooperation (and) properly manage differences". Beijing will "strive to build a constructive and stable China-Japan relationship that meets the requirements of the new era", she added. "The Chinese side attaches great importance to the foreign minister's visit, and Chinese leaders will meet with the foreign minister," she said. — AFP

FIRE
BETWEEN
DRC ARMY
AND ALLIES
KILLS AT LEAST
SEVEN

GOMA: An exchange of fire between the Congolese army and an armed group fighting alongside it has killed up to eight civilians in the country's troubled east, sources said on Tuesday. The Congolese armed forces (FARDC) have been fighting to recover territory, backed by groups of gunmen known as Wazalendo. But on Monday, fire was exchanged between the Congolese army and Wazalendo in a village in North Kivu province just outside the provincial capital

Goma. "The inhabitants of the village... were unpleasantly surprised by exchanges of fire between Wazalendo and FARDC based in this village on December 23," civil society leader Thierry Gasisiro said. He said that "seven people were shot dead, four people were injured and several damages were recorded", adding it is unknown what led to the exchange of fire or whether it was a mistake. "We are shocked by what has happened,"

Gasisiro added. A local official said there had been eight civilian fatalities as well as four deaths from the ranks of Congolese army and one Wazalendo fighter. A military source said under condition of anonymity that seven civilians had been killed including four women and one child. The source added that the bodies of two Wazalendo had also been recovered. President Felix Tshisekedi last week replaced the army chief as part of a reshuffle within the armed forces. — AFP

Armed groups have agreed
to disband: Authorities

SYRIA'S NEW AUTHORITIES announced on Tuesday that they had reached an agreement with the country's groups on their dissolution and integration into the regular defence forces. Photos published by the state-run SANA news agency showed the country's new leader, Ahmed al Sharaa, surrounded by the heads of several armed factions. The meeting "ended in an agreement on the dissolution of all the groups and their integration under the supervision of the ministry of defence", said a statement carried by SANA and the authorities' Telegram account.

On Sunday, Sharaa had said the new authorities would "absolutely not allow there to be weapons in the country outside state control". Last week, the military chief of Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al Sham — the group that spearheaded the offensive that toppled president Bashar al Assad — said that Kurdish-held areas would be integrated under the new leadership, and that "Syria will not be divided". Thirteen years of civil war in Syria has left more than half a million people dead and fragmented the country into zones of influence controlled by different armed groups backed by regional and international powers.

More than 25,000 Syrians have returned home from Türkiye since Bashar al Assad was overthrown by HTS rebels, Türkiye's interior minister said on Tuesday. Türkiye is home to nearly three million refugees who fled the civil war that broke out in 2011. "The number of people returning to Syria in the last 15 days has exceeded



People celebrate the lighting of the Christmas tree in the Damascus countryside, Syria. — AFP

Photos showed the country's new leader, Ahmed al Sharaa, surrounded by the heads of several armed factions. The meeting ended in an agreement on the dissolution of all the groups and their integration under the supervision of the ministry of defence.

25,000," Ali Yerlikaya told the official Anadolu news agency. Ankara is in close touch with Syria's new leaders and now focussing on the voluntary return of Syrian refugees, hoping the shift in power in Damascus will allow many of them to return home. Yerlikaya said a migration office would be established in the Turkish embassy and consulate in Damascus and Aleppo so that the records of returning Syrians could be kept. Türkiye reopened its embassy in Damascus, nearly a week after Assad was toppled by forces backed by Ankara, and 12 years after the diplomatic outpost was shuttered early in Syria's civil war. Yerlikaya said one person from each family will be given the right to enter and exit three times from January 1 to July 2025 under regulations to be drafted upon Erdogan's instructions. Syrians

returning to their country will be able to take their belongings and cars with them, he added. Meanwhile, Qatar called on Tuesday for the quick removal of sanctions on Syria following the ousting of president Bashar al Assad by armed groups. "We call for intensified efforts to expedite the lifting of international sanctions on Syria," foreign ministry spokesperson Majed al Ansari told a regular briefing. Qatar's call came a day after a high-level delegation visited Damascus. The Qatari embassy there reopened on Sunday, ending a 13-year rift between the two countries. "Qatar's position is clear," Ansari said. "It's necessary to lift the sanctions quickly, given that what led to these sanctions is no longer there and that what led to these sanctions were the crimes of the former regime." — AFP



PALESTINIANS UNITE IN PEACE DEMANDS

BETHLEHEM: Missing for a second consecutive year were the decorations, bustling tourists and crowds of pilgrims that were staples of Christmases past, reflecting the sombre mood as the war between Israel and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip drags on. "This year we limited our joy," Bethlehem mayor Anton Salman said. "We want to focus on the Palestinian reality and show the world that Palestine is still suffering from the Israeli occupation, still

suffering from the injustice." Prayers, including the church's famed midnight mass, will still be held in the presence of the Catholic Church's Latin Patriarch, but the festivities will be of a more strictly religious nature than the festive celebrations the city once held. Despite the gloomy mood, some Christians in the Holy Land are finding refuge in prayer. "Christmas is a feast of faith... We're going to pray and ask God to end our suffering," Salman said. — AFP

FACTORY BLAZE

12 die in blast at Türkiye explosives plant



A powerful blast ripped through an explosives plant in northwestern Türkiye on Tuesday killing 12 people and injuring five others, officials said. Footage showed shards of glass and metal scattered outside the plant, where ambulances stood by. "According to initial reports, 12 employees died and five were taken to hospital with injuries as a result of the explosion" in the Karesi district of Balıkesir province, local governor Ismail Ustaoglu said. — AFP

PROMOTING RADICALISM

Police dismantle terror propaganda cell



Italian police said they had dismantled a cell which promoted terror propaganda online, with five suspects of foreign origin targeted including their alleged leader. Four of the suspects are accused of having "formed a terrorist association of group inspiration" through which they promoted IS group. The fifth was said to be undergoing a radicalisation process under the guidance of his sister, who grew up in Bologna and who was the main suspect. — AFP

DEFENDED DEMOCRACY

President Sandu sworn in for a second term



Thousands of people demonstrated in Athens and other cities as a general strike against the rising cost of living shut down public services and part of the transport network. Some 15,000 people marched in the capital, while another 4,000 demonstrated in Greece's second city Thessaloniki. The Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) said the strike was a "riposte to the government's refusal to take measures workers. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



Tourists watch a cargo ship transit through the Panama Canal in Panama City. — AFP

PANAMA LEADERS REJECT TRUMP’S THREAT OF CANAL TAKEOVER

PANAMA CITY: The status of the Panama Canal is non-negotiable, President Jose Raul Mulino said in a statement, after Donald Trump’s recent threats to reclaim the man-made waterway. The US president-elect on Saturday had slammed what he called unfair fees for US ships passing through the Panama Canal and threatened to demand control of the waterway be returned to Washington.

Mulino dismissed Trump’s comments, saying “Every square metre of the Panama Canal and its adjacent areas belongs to Panama and will continue belonging to Panama”. He reiterated in a statement — also signed by former presidents Ernesto Perez Balladares, Martin Torrijos and Mireya Moscoso — that “the sovereignty of our country and our canal are not negotiable.” The canal “is part of our history of struggle and an irreversible conquest,” read the statement, which the four politicians had signed after a meeting at the seat of the Panamanian government. “Panamanians may think differently in many aspects, but when it comes to our canal and our sovereignty, we all unite under the same flag.” — AFP



LONDON WALL ILLUMINATES PAIN AT CHRISTMAS

Volunteers hang lights on The National Covid Memorial Wall, dedicated to those who lost their lives to Covid-19, on the bank of the River Thames in London, ahead of the fifth anniversary of the pandemic. UK families of some 240,000 people who died from Covid-19 have hung festive lights on a London wall, a symbol of love, anger and pain ahead of another Christmas overshadowed by loss. — AFP

LE PEN SAYS DAYS OF NEW FRENCH GOVT NUMBERED

PARIS: Far-right leader Marine Le Pen said on Tuesday that the days of France’s new government are already numbered, predicting an early presidential election in a few months. Le Pen, 56, spoke a day after President Emmanuel Macron named a new government under Francois Bayrou, his fourth prime minister of the year, to drag the second-largest EU economy out of political crisis.

“This moment of temporary political fluctuation... will come to an end as soon as the people,

through their sovereign will and collective intelligence, decide to do so,” she said in a Christmas Eve video posted on X. “They will then choose a new path to follow, that of revival and recovery,” Le Pen added, a Christmas tree behind her. That moment will come “as soon as the institutions allow it. That means, as we are all aware, soon -- very soon, in a few months at most,” she said.

France has been mired in political deadlock since Macron gambled on snap elections this summer in the hopes of bolstering his authority.

The move backfired, with voters electing a parliament fractured between three rival blocs. Le Pen now has unprecedented power over French politics.

By joining forces with the hard left, Le Pen’s far-right National Rally party toppled Bayrou’s predecessor Michel Barnier earlier this month. Many predict the centrist will also struggle to survive. Le Pen is seen by many as having her best ever chance to win the French presidency in 2027 after three unsuccessful attempts. — AFP

Russian cargo ship sinks in sea after explosion

A RUSSIAN CARGO SHIP called Ursa Major sank in the Mediterranean Sea overnight after an explosion ripped through its engine room and two of its crew are still missing, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday. The vessel, built in 2009, was controlled by Oboronlogistika, a company that is part of the Russian Defence Ministry’s military construction operations, which had previously said it was en route to the Russian far eastern port of Vladivostok with two giant port cranes lashed to its deck. The Foreign Ministry’s crisis centre said in a statement that 14 of the ship’s 16 crew members had been rescued and brought to Spain, but that two were still missing. It did not say what had caused the engine room explosion.

Russia’s embassy in Spain was cited by the state RIA news agency as saying it was looking into the circumstances of the sinking and was in touch with the authorities in Spain. Oboronlogistika and SK-Yug, a company LSEG lists as part of the group and the ship’s direct owner and operator, declined to comment on the sinking. Both entities were placed under sanctions by the United States in 2022 for their ties to Russia’s military as was the Ursa Major itself. Unverified video footage of the ship heavily listing to its starboard side with its bow much lower down in the water than usual was filmed on December 23 by a passing ship and published on Russia’s life.ru news outlet on Tuesday.

Spain’s Maritime Rescue Service said it had received a distress signal from the Ursa Major on Monday when it was located about 57 miles off the coast of Almeira. It said it had contacted a ship nearby which had reported bad weather conditions, a lifeboat in the water, and said the Ursa Major was listing to the starboard side. Two vessels and a helicopter had been sent to the scene and the 14 surviving crew members taken to the Spanish port of Cartagena. It cited the crew as saying that the ship had been carrying empty containers as well as the two port cranes on deck. A Russian warship had later arrived on the scene, it said, and taken charge of rescue operations.

Oboronlogistika, the ship’s ultimate



Survivors of the sinking of Russian cargo ship Ursa Major stand on the deck of a Spanish Maritime Rescue ship upon arrival at the port of Cartagena, Spain. — Reuters

owner, said in a statement on December 20 that the ship, which LSEG data showed was previously called Sparta III among other names, had been carrying specialised port cranes due to be installed at the port of Vladivostok as well as parts for new ice-breakers. Two giant cranes could be seen strapped to the deck in the unverified video footage. LSEG ship tracking data shows the vessel departed from the Russian port of St. Petersburg on December 11 and was last seen sending a signal at 2204 GMT on Monday between Algeria and Spain where it sank.

On leaving St. Petersburg it had indicated

that its next port of call was the Russian port of Vladivostok, not the Syrian port of Tartous which it has called at in the past.

Separately, Ukraine’s HUR military intelligence service - which tracks Russian ship movements - had said in a post on its official Telegram channel on Monday that a different Russian cargo ship, called Sparta, had temporarily run into technical problems off the coast of Portugal. HUR said in an update that the Sparta’s crew had fixed the problem however and that the ship was en route for Syria to collect military equipment and ammunition after the fall of close Russian ally Bashar al-Assad. — Reuters

German president urges unity after ‘dark shadow’ of market attack

BERLIN: Germany’s president said on Tuesday that a deadly car-ramming attack on a Christmas market had cast a “dark shadow” over this year’s celebrations but urged the nation not to be driven apart by extremists. In his traditional Christmas address, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier sought to issue a message of healing four days after the brutal attack in the eastern city of Magdeburg killed five people and left over 200 wounded. Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, 50, was arrested on Friday at the scene of the attack in which a rented SUV ploughed at high speed through the crowd of revellers, bringing death and chaos to the festive event. “A dark shadow hangs over this Christmas,” said the head of state, pointing to the “pain, horror and bewilderment over what happened in Magdeburg just a few days before Christmas”. He made a call for national unity as a debate about security and immigration is flaring again: “Hatred and violence

must not have the final word. Let’s not allow ourselves to be driven apart. Let’s stand together.” In a post on X, Chancellor Olaf Scholz also recognised that Germany was living through “rough times” but added: “We are a community with a shared future and we are strong”.

The leaders’ words came a day after the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) held what it called a memorial rally for the victims in Magdeburg, where one speaker demanded that Germany “must close the borders”. Nearby an anti-extremist initiative was held under the motto “Don’t Give Hate a Chance”. Steinmeier recognised that there was a “great deal of dissatisfaction about politics” in Germany but insisted that “our democracy is and remains strong”.

The attacker’s motive still remains unclear, days after Germany’s deadliest attack in years. He had in many online posts voiced views,



People look at flowers and candles left as a tribute for the victims of the ‘Alter Markt’ Christmas market, in Magdeburg. — Reuters

anger at German authorities and support for far-right conspiracy narratives of Europe. News outlet Der Spiegel reported he wrote on social media platform X in May that he expected to die “this year” and investigators found his will in the

BMW used in the attack in which he stated that everything he owned was to go to the German Red Cross.

The attack has fuelled an already bitter debate on migration and security in Germany, two months before national elections and with

the AfD riding high in opinion polls. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser warned the far-right party, which has enjoyed a string of recent local election successes, against seeking to gain politically from the attack. “Any attempt to exploit such a terrible act and to abuse the suffering of the victims is repulsive,” she told the Funke media group.

The Magdeburg event had been shielded by barricades, but the attacker managed to exploit a five-metre gap when he steered the car into the site and then raced into the unsuspecting crowd. Steinmeier offered his condolences to relatives of those injured and killed “in such a terrible way” — when the attack killed a nine-year-old boy and four women aged 45 to 75. “You are not alone in your pain,” he told the hundreds of affected families. “The people throughout our country feel for you and mourn with you.” — AFP

OPINION

Cash rich but life poor - finding abundance in balance



HYESHA BARRETT

The writer is a Master Life Coach and an NLP practitioner based in Muscat

Our ever increasing money driven world that often equates wealth with happiness, the notion of ‘cash rich yet life poor’ rings increasingly true for many. Driven by financial pursuits and the belief that hefty pay checks mean contentment, the opposite is gradually proving to be more true.

Wealth and richness don’t always align in the way we think.

Often measured in terms of resources, investments and material possessions, financial wealth typically refers to the amount of money or tangible assets a person owns.

However, wealth does not always guarantee health - and without well-being, even the richest individuals can feel a profound sense of emptiness, and poor in terms of life satisfaction.

Those who enjoy lucrative jobs, substantial investments or successful businesses often reap the rewards that external validation provides - however, often silently grappling with a sense of emptiness or dissatisfaction in their personal lives.

At the surface, financial security and abundance can be a source of pride and

privilege. Society celebrates success stories of those who have amassed considerable wealth.

Nonetheless, beyond the allure of financial stability lies a deeper quest for fulfilment and true happiness. Many individuals become so entrenched in their pursuit of cash, they neglect other essential areas of life.

Real richness equates to a broader and more profound sense of abundance, as it refers to the quality and depth of one’s life experiences, supportive relationships, mental health and self-actualisation - all of which foster a sense of belonging and emotional support.

People often chase after what society dictates wealth to be. It’s not uncommon for those with a cash-rich mindset to work long hours, striving for higher pay or promotions.

This relentless pursuit can lead to burnout, isolation and feelings of disconnection.

The irony is that while they may have the financial means to enjoy life’s offerings, such as luxury vacations, gourmet dining or high-end experiences, they often find themselves unable to fully appreciate or engage in these pleasures, due to their overwhelming work commitments.

Wealth often creates a mindset focused on accumulation, while richness is nurtured through gratitude and mindfulness

This creates a paradox as despite the wealth, these individuals may remain unfulfilled, chasing after an elusive sense of purpose.

It is moreover essential to re-evaluate priorities. Reflecting on what brings genuine joy can illuminate the path towards a more balanced life - one which money alone cannot provide. As the old adage goes “money cannot buy happiness” after all.

Being cash rich but life poor is a common struggle that highlights the necessity of balancing financial pursuits with the quest for deeper meaning and satisfaction.

Wealth often creates a mindset focused on accumulation, while richness is nurtured through gratitude and mindfulness.

In recognising the difference between wealth and richness, it becomes clear that a fulfilling life is about balance.

It’s perfectly valid to pursue financial goals and work towards being materially secure, all the while focusing on the richness of our relationships, experiences and personal growth.

By concentrating on what truly matters, we can cultivate a life that is financially secure and profoundly fulfilling.

MOBILE CINEMA BRINGS BIG SCREEN TO TUNISIANS

FRANCOISE KADRI

Like many of his fellow Tunisians, 23-year-old Amine Elhani has never been to the cinema, but now, thanks to a mobile theatre touring the country, he can finally enjoy the big screen. The bright red truck of CinemaTdour, or ‘moving cinema’, has transformed parking lots and factory grounds in underserved towns and neighbourhoods across the North African country into pop-up theatres.

In the central town of Djemmal, dozens of workers unloaded the expandable truck, easily setting up a fully equipped outdoor movie theatre with 100 seats. “The screen is huge, and the sound effects are amazing,” said Elhani, who had so far only watched films on his phone or computer.

He had “never had the chance to go to a movie theatre”, he said. “It’s a fantastic experience, especially because I’m watching with friends.”

Movie theatres are scarce in Tunisia, numbering at just 15 and largely concentrated in major urban hubs.

Recognising this gap, CinemaTdour was launched in May by private cultural network Agora and nonprofit Focus Gabes, with funding from private donors.

“We wanted a way to reach as many viewers as possible, in a short time and on a limited budget, while offering them an authentic cinematic experience,” project director Ghofrane Heraghi said.

Mobile cinemas have long existed in other countries, but Heraghi said CinemaTdour was “unique” for turning a truck into a full-fledged theatre.

Without government funding, CinemaTdour relies heavily on partnerships with private companies to cover costs like film rights, maintenance and staffing. The truck itself was purchased on credit for about one million Tunisian dinars, Heraghi said, with annual operating expenses of around 500,000 dinars.

For 10 days in Djemmal, residents could watch films for free thanks to a partnership with German car parts manufacturer Draxlmaier, which has a factory in the town.

Jihene Ben Amor, Draxlmaier’s communications manager in Tunisia, said the company wanted to “contribute to the development” of remote and underserved regions where it operates. For many workers, earning up to 1,000 dinars a month, the cost of tickets and the journey to a main city with a movie theatre can be prohibitive. “Having this cinema right outside their workplace also gives workers a sense of pride and belonging,” said Ben Amor.

After Djemmal, CinemaTdour set up in Hay Hlel, an impoverished neighbourhood of the capital Tunis. Many children gathered around the pop-up theatre, eager for their turn.

Yomna Warhani, 11, was beaming with excitement, anticipating her first ever movie screening. “I can’t wait to see what it’s like inside and what films they’ll show,” she said.

— AFP

GCC satellites and affordable Internet for all

THE information revolution has reshaped our world, transforming the way we work, communicate and access knowledge. Over the past three decades, the Internet has broken barriers, creating a global network where information — whether vital or trivial — is at our fingertips.

Yet, the promise of universal connectivity remains elusive. While broadband and satellite Internet services are becoming more accessible to the privileged, approximately 2.6 billion people worldwide are still offline, representing one-third of the global population.

This inequality is not just an economic or technological gap — it is a fundamental issue of human rights. Recognising this, several global megatrends in the Internet service industry point towards an urgent need to rethink how we deliver connectivity. These trends also reveal an opportunity for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to lead by establishing a community-based satellite Internet service provider that is affordable, scalable and globally competitive.

In 2010, Iceland became one of the first nations to recognise Internet access as a fundamental human right. This declaration underscored the principle that in an increasingly digital world, connectivity is as essential as clean water or electricity. Other nations have followed suit, integrating Internet access into their development agendas.

This trend reflects a broader realisation: access to the Internet is not just a tool for communication but a lifeline for education, healthcare and economic opportunity. As the concept of digital rights gains traction, more countries are likely to adopt policies recognising Internet access as a universal right. The GCC, with its forward-looking visions such as Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030, is well-positioned to champion this movement.

Satellite Internet is another transformative trend. Once dominated by a handful of players, the industry is witnessing the rise of new competitors. Elon Musk’s Starlink, which aims to provide high-speed Internet globally, is a



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prime example of the potential — and challenges — of this technology. As of 2024, Starlink has connected over 2 million users globally, many in remote or underserved areas.

In response, the European Union launched IRIS² (Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnection and Security by Satellite), a project designed to provide secure and reliable satellite connectivity across Europe. Unlike Starlink, IRIS² aligns with the EU’s stringent data protection standards under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This development underscores the importance of regional alternatives that prioritise local needs, data sovereignty and cybersecurity.

For the GCC, which is heavily reliant on foreign technology providers, this is a moment of opportunity. A GCC-based satellite Internet provider could cater to regional demands while addressing critical issues such as data privacy, affordability and service reliability.

The third megatrend is the democratisation of Internet service provision. Across the globe, municipal councils and cooperatives are stepping in to provide Internet services, challenging the monopolies of traditional providers. By focusing on community-driven solutions, these initiatives have improved service quality, reduced costs and bridged the digital divide.

For example, municipalities in the US and Europe have launched publicly owned broadband networks, delivering faster and cheaper services than private

providers. Such models demonstrate the power of local solutions in meeting global challenges.

The GCC countries have the resources, vision and technological infrastructure to pioneer a regional satellite Internet provider. By pooling expertise and investments, a GCC-based initiative could achieve the scale needed to compete globally. It could also address the specific needs of the region, such as connecting remote desert communities, supporting disaster response, and enabling digital transformation in sectors like education and healthcare.

Furthermore, this initiative could enhance regional integration, aligning with the broader goals of the GCC. A collaborative effort to democratise Internet access would not only benefit the region’s citizens, but also position the GCC as a leader in the global digital economy.

Connectivity is no longer a luxury - it is a necessity. As the Internet becomes increasingly central to our lives, ensuring universal access must be a priority. The global trends of recognising Internet access as a right, advancing satellite technology and democratising service provision present a compelling case for the GCC to act.

By establishing a community-based satellite Internet provider, the GCC can bridge the digital divide, empower its citizens and set an example for the rest of the world. The right to remain connected is not just a slogan - it is a call to action. Let us seize this moment to build a future where no one is left offline.

A reflection on hope, peace, joy and love



SAMUEL KUTTY

The writer is a freelance journalist and author who has worked in India and Gulf countries

FESTIVALS have long been significant in all human cultures, although the oldest festivals were religious. They are occasions with national, cultural and religious focus and play an important role in our social lives.

History shows that ancient Greek and Roman societies relied heavily on festivals, both communal and administrative. The word festival was originally used as an adjective from the late 14th century, deriving from Latin via old French. In Middle English, a “festival day” was a religious holiday.

Christmas is one such festival celebrated differently by millions around the world to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a time of happiness, warmth and togetherness.

Christmas comes from “Christ’s Mass,” or “Cristes Maesse.” The word “Christ,” originally spelled as “Crist,” comes from the Greek word “Khristos,” which is a translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” meaning “anointed.” The word “messe” is related to the Latin word “missa,” which is connected to the tradition of midnight Mass or the Eucharist.

Over the centuries, different cultures have blended it with their own histories and values. Beyond the familiar traditions like Santa Claus, a fir tree, caroling and gift-giving, a number of countries bring their own unique twists — both old and new, to the

celebrations.

In Christian households, preparations for Christmas begin on the first day of December. They illuminate their houses with stars and decorate trees. To add to the festive atmosphere, they create giant Christmas trees, huge stars and light displays.

While general businesses offer massive discounts, cafes and restaurants often adapt their menus and create inviting spaces to encourage customers to linger and savor the holiday spirit.

While this discusses Christmas and its celebrations, it is equally important that the true meaning of Christmas — peace on earth — always remains in the hearts of all human beings. Unfortunately, peace has become an elusive thing today. The Christmas season has now become a momentary fulfilment!

Against this backdrop, what we see in the world are wars, conflicts and chaos. People harbour hatred towards one another. Domestic violence is pervasive. Injustice still exists and people continue to live in fear.

As I type this, it pains me to see images of particularly children experiencing unimaginable suffering in war-torn countries. The situation is dire in Palestine, Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and Sudan, among other places. There is no escape from the pain and sorrow!

In Bethlehem, which is revered as the

It pains me to see images of children experiencing unimaginable suffering in war-torn countries. The situation is dire in Palestine, Ukraine, Iraq, Syria and Sudan, among other places as there is no escape from the pain and sorrow!

birthplace of Jesus, the blockade imposed by Israel has turned it into an open-air prison. There is no tree adorned with decorations and nor is there any carol or other festivities.

Leaving this aside, people in Gaza are unable to bury their loved ones. They lack time and space to mourn or process the magnitude of their loss. Israel has created a catastrophic humanitarian situation that is likely to worsen as disease and famine ravage Gaza’s population.

As the world slows down for Christmas and the New Year, beyond the celebrations, let’s extend generosity, compassion and selflessness. Let’s also strive to heal divisions embrace peace and yearn for a world where people take care of one another.

Let’s support the Palestinians’ demand for universal values like justice, dignity and freedom is genuine. The next generations should not endure what they are experiencing right now.

Both religious and political leaders, regardless of their creed, should come forward without any bias to provide objective guidance to their followers, ensuring peace in those conflict-ridden countries. We must transform the world into a better place and change our stars together.

After all, the heart of Christmas lies in the act of giving, extending beyond mere gifts wrapped in ribbons!

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS FOR NICHE PERFUMES

KATELL PRIGENT

They don’t advertise and they are largely unknown to the general public but niche perfumes are able to command prices of hundreds of dollars from men and women seeking to stand out. Produced in small batches with high-quality, natural or rare ingredients, niche perfumes are becoming big business even while retaining their exclusive nature.

“We’ve had absolutely incredible growth,” said Julien Sausset, director of Parfums de Marly, a France-based niche fragrance producer.

The company posted more than 50 per cent sales growth in 2023 and expects more than 40 per cent growth this year to \$600 million in sales. “People don’t want to smell like others anymore. They want to free themselves, affirm their identity,” Sausset said.

Producers use high concentrations of unconventional ingredients to give their perfumes unique and complex scents, such as amber, bergamot, cedarwood, pink peppercorn, or rhubarb. Niche perfumes account for 10 to 12 per cent of the overall market, according to Sausset. It will likely continue to expand as it is growing at 13 per cent per year while mass market perfumes are growing between three and five per cent.

Present in more than 80 countries, Parfums de Marly does most of its business in the US, where a small bottle will set you back at least \$250.

It plans to open a boutique in Paris near the Champs-Elysees in a neighbourhood known as the Golden Triangle for its high concentration of luxury shops. “What is important is to have a place where you can have your own salespeople do some storytelling and present the products,” Sausset said.

The brand was created in 2009 by Julien Sprecher, an aficionado of the 18th century, when modern perfumery was created.

The name comes from the Chateau de Marly, located near Versailles, where Louis XV was known to throw lavish parties.

Niche perfumes tap into that sense of luxury.

Julie El Ghouzzi, who wrote a book on the luxury industry, said the sector developed in reaction to the popularisation of perfumes in the 1990s, when many brands seemed to resemble one another.

Some perfumers wanted to do something different, to “blow up the notion of masculine and feminine and developed perfumes around high-end ingredients, using the names of these ingredients and not brands,” she said.

These independent perfumers “didn’t have the money to order custom bottles, so they used rectangular ones for all their perfumes. And it worked,” said El Ghouzzi.

Their success drove luxury houses like Dior and Cartier to imitate them with simple bottles to signal the product was niche, she added.

— AFP

World needs ocean-based solutions for climate change

FOLLOWING the recent 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku, we are confronted with one pressing question: What’s next? With countries set to submit early next year their updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the 2015 Paris climate agreement, the world has an opportunity — and a responsibility — to take transformative action to address the climate crisis. The ocean must be central to this effort.

Nobody understands this better than small island developing states (SIDS) like Palau. For us, climate policy is not some abstract debate about hypothetical future risks; it is a fight for survival. Already, coral reefs are undergoing bleaching; storms are becoming increasingly frequent and destructive; and droughts are undermining food security. Rising sea levels threaten not just our land, but also our culture, our way of life and our very existence.

To date, international support for climate action has fallen far short of meeting developing countries’ needs. SIDS collectively receive less than 2 per cent of global climate finance, even as they oversee 30 per cent of the world’s territorial waters. It is a striking imbalance, especially given the ocean’s enormous untapped potential to help mitigate climate change.

The ocean is our planet’s largest carbon sink, absorbing 25 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions and a staggering 90 per cent of the excess heat generated by a warming atmosphere. According to a 2023 report, ocean-based climate solutions can get us as much as 35 per cent closer to our emissions-reduction targets for 2050, on a pathway that limits the global temperature increase to 1.5° Celsius. And mitigating climate change is just the beginning; a healthy ocean plays a pivotal role in creating sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable communities worldwide.

Consider nature-based solutions like the restoration of mangroves, seagrasses and coral reefs. Beyond



The ocean absorbs 25 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions and a staggering 90 per cent of the excess heat generated by a warming atmosphere.



ILANA SEID

The writer is Palau’s Ambassador to the UN and Co-Chair of the Steering Committee for the Blue Economy and Finance Forum

sequestering carbon, these ecosystems act as natural defences against rising seas and extreme weather and they form the basis of local livelihoods. In Palau, marine protected areas safeguard biodiversity, support sustainable fisheries and bolster the tourism industry.

So far, the ocean — including the ecosystems it supports — has largely been treated as an afterthought in global climate strategies, sidelined in favor of more visible priorities like renewable energy and curbs on emissions. The High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy has revealed that many of its member countries — which together govern half the world’s territorial oceans — have yet to integrate the ocean fully into their NDCs.

This omission represents a vital opportunity, which countries should seize as they prepare their NDC submissions before the February deadline. Putting the ocean at the centre of our climate strategies would transform it from a silent victim of global warming into an active force for mitigation and resilience-building.

The Blue Economy and Finance Forum takes place in June, one of the “special events” that will set the stage for the third UN Ocean

Conference in Nice. The BEFF aims to unlock financing for ocean-based solutions, particularly biodiversity-positive investments that simultaneously support economic development and climate goals. But, as we saw at COP29, public budgets are already stretched thin. Mobilising private capital alongside public investment is thus essential to drive meaningful change.

To understand why, look no further than the shipping industry, which emits more carbon than all but six countries. Critical pieces of the net-zero puzzle are already in place for the industry. Shipping companies are planning their low-carbon transitions. The technologies they need — in particular, “green fuels” like green methanol and ammonia — have been developed. And producers are ready to increase output, while continuing to innovate.

And yet scaling up production has proved difficult, because investors still view crucial green technologies as too risky.

This mismatch between ambition and funding underscores the need for creative financing solutions, such as government-backed guarantees or blended-finance instruments.

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26

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SPORTS

26TH

ARABIAN GULF CUP

Issam al Subhi brace brightens Oman’s semifinal hopes



WALEED AL JAHWARI
KUWAIT, DEC 23

OMAN BOOSTED their semifinal hopes in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup with a thrilling 2-1 win against Qatar at Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium on Tuesday night. Just two minutes from the start, Qatar took the lead when striker Almoez Ali beat the Oman defence to put the ball into the right side net past Oman goalkeeper Ibrahim al Mukhaini.

In the 15th minute, Al Mandhar al Alawi tried to make a difference but the Qatari defence obstructed him without making a mistake.

But five minutes later Oman’s Issam al Subhi was fell by a Qatari player inside the box to earn a penalty.

Issam converted the penalty to draw the match 1-1.

Oman made two good moves in the 25th



minute through Al Mandhar al Alawi and Issam al Subhi that created panic in Qatari defence.

In the 38th minute, Oman’s Abdulrahman al Mushaifri missed a close chance.

Oman’s Abdulrahman al Mushaifri and Al Mandhar al Alawi received yellow cards in the first half.

First half ended 1-1, with Oman taking 54 per cent of possession compared with 46 per cent for Qatar.

Oman took lead with only four minutes into the second half.

Issam al Subhi secured an amazing goal from a cross sent by Al Mandhar al Alawi to net it with his right foot.

In 49th and 69th, Qatari strikers tried twice to reach the Omani net but was unsuccessful.

The Oman team tried many attacks but they did not translate into a third goal to end the match with Oman winning 2-1.

Rasheed Jaber, Oman head coach, made many changes, by replacing Abdullah Fawaz with Abdulrahman al Mushaifri, and Motaz Saleh with Al Mandhar al Alawi and Khalid al Breiki with Issam al Subhi in the final stages of the match.

Issam was selected as the best player of the match.

The match was officiated by Ammar Abdulrahman (Iraq), assisted by Abdulrahman Al Omari (KSA) and Mohannad Qasim Issa (Iraq). Wathiq Modallal Obaid (Iraq) as first assistant, Ahmad Sabah Qasim (Iraq) as second assistant, Meler Halil Umut (Turkey) as fourth official, the Video Assistant Referees (VAR) were Fu Ming (China) and Ahmad Kazim Kati (Iraq).

On Friday, Oman will face UAE and at the same time Kuwait will take Qatar within the third round.

In Group B, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen, Bahrain (3 points) will face Iraq (3 points), then Saudi Arabia will meet Yemen, both have a point each.

Pics by Hussain al Maqbali

FEBRUARY 23



'ICC Champions Trophy' during its unveiling ceremony at the National Stadium in Karachi on November 21, 2024. — AFP

DATE FOR INDIA-PAK CHAMPIONS TROPHY MATCH ANNOUNCED

DUBAI: Bitter rivals Pakistan and India will square off in the Champions Trophy in Dubai on February 23 as the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced the schedule on Tuesday.

The tournament runs from February 19 to March 9 and will be split between host country Pakistan and neutral venue Dubai.

India refused to travel to Pakistan due to security fears and political tension.

"The eight-team tournament will feature 15 matches, and will be played across Pakistan and in Dubai," announced the ICC.

The competing teams are divided into two groups with defending champions Pakistan, India, New Zealand and Bangladesh in Group A while Group B comprises South Africa, Australia, Afghanistan and England.

The final announcement came after a month-long stand-off with the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) initially adamant it host all the matches.

But after the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) refused to change its stance the PCB finally agreed, though they reached a compromise as Pakistan will play at a neutral venue in any event hosted by India until 2027.

Pakistan, who won the title in 2017, will open the event with a match against New Zealand in Karachi on February 19 while India play Bangladesh in Dubai the following day.

The first semifinal will be held in Dubai on March 4 while Lahore will stage the second the next day.

But there are two venues announced for the final, subject to India's qualification.

"Lahore will also host the final on March 9, unless India qualify, in which case it will be played in Dubai," said the ICC. — AFP

MATCH SCHEDULE

- February 19: Pakistan v New Zealand, Karachi, Pakistan
- February 20: Bangladesh v India, Dubai
- February 21: Afghanistan v South Africa, Karachi
- February 22: Australia v England, Lahore
- February 23: Pakistan v India, Dubai
- February 24: Bangladesh v New Zealand, Rawalpindi
- February 25: Australia v South Africa, Rawalpindi
- February 26: Afghanistan v England, Lahore
- February 27: Pakistan v Bangladesh, Rawalpindi
- February 28: Afghanistan v Australia, Lahore
- March 1: South Africa v England, Karachi
- March 2: New Zealand v India, Dubai
- March 4: Semifinal 1, Dubai
- March 5: Semifinal 2, Lahore
- March 9: Final, Lahore (unless India qualify, when it will be played in Dubai)
- March 10: Reserve day



Muscat Club players receive the Junior Oman Handball League trophy.

Muscat club clinch junior handball league title



ADIL AL BALUSHI

MUSCAT, DEC 24

Muscat club grabbed the title of the 2024/2025 Oman Handball League for juniors after defeating the rivals Seeb 28-17 in a tight encounter on Tuesday night at the indoor courts of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Nizwa club managed to earn the bronze medals as they beat Al Oruba by 33-26 in the third and fourth playoff at the same venue.

Coach Majid al Hasani's boys delivered a top game to emerge champions of this season as they began the match strongly in the opening half.

They dominated the game and managed to break the defending line of the opponent

to end the first set by 15-9 In the second half, they capitalised on their momentum and exploited their opponents' mistakes to extend their lead and seal a decisive 28-17 victory.

Speaking after the match, the head coach of Muscat club congratulated his players for the outstanding show. "I am proud of my players for their relentless effort and commitment. This achievement reflects the team's dedication at the junior level. Our club is one of the key contributors to the national team, and we will continue striving to uphold this contribution," he said.

"The team managed to begin the match strongly with a significant 11-point gap and that gave the team motivation to deliver

much more in the rest of the match. I am very proud that we completed this season undefeated," he concluded.

Dr Amer bin Humaid al Touqi, Director of Sports Associations at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, was the chief guest in presence of Moosa bin Khamis al Balushi, Chairman of Oman Handball Association (OHA), and dignitaries. After completion of the concluding match, the chief guest awarded the medals and trophies to the top placed teams.

On the other hand, the matches of the top tier handball league also began as Oman club played against Muscat while Seeb took on Al Shabab. Nizwa and Ahli Sidab met each other in another game.

Embiid ejected in Sixers' win over Spurs, Magic beat Boston

NEW YORK: Philadelphia's Joel Embiid was ejected after confronting a woman referee in the 76ers' 111-106 victory over San Antonio in a wild Monday of NBA action.

An expected big-man showdown between Cameroonian Embiid and France's Victor Wembanyama ended late in the first half, leaving Tyrese Maxey to produce 32 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists in sparking the win.

"It's big time," Maxey said of getting the win for Embiid. "We're learning to play without him... We've got to change the game, come a little faster, play a little harder and gain rebounds."

Embiid came onto the court after the game and hugged Maxey after

the guard's late surge with a steal, dunk, 3-pointer and free throw in a game-ending 9-3 win to deliver the home triumph.

"It's love, man," Maxey said. "That has been my big brother for a long time."

Chaos started 3:47 into the second period when Wembanyama tumbled to the court after contact with Philadelphia's Andre Drummond, who was ejected for a second technical foul. It was later overturned upon a video review to a 'Wemby' flop foul, allowing Drummond back into the game.

Embiid was whistled for his third foul by referee Jenna Schroeder after charging into Wembanyama with 2:59 remaining in the first half and, after heated complaints to her,



Philadelphia 76ers' Joel Embiid controls the ball against Jeremy Sochan.

Embiid was issued two technical fouls and ejected.

That sparked even more ire from Embiid, who ripped off the facial protective mask he wore for a sinus fracture and yelled his displeasure while being physically restrained from confronting the officials.

He exited after only nine points in 14 minutes.

"It was a wild first half," 76ers coach Nick Nurse said.

NBA blocked shots leader Wembanyama finished with 26 points, nine rebounds and eight blocked shots for the Spurs. He swatted away four in the first quarter, three in its final 30 seconds, on his way to a career-best seven in the first half.

An injury-hit Orlando Magic

squad stunned the reigning NBA champion Boston Celtics 108-104, with German Tristan da Silva's 18 points leading a balanced attack for the hosts to pull off the upset despite 35 points for Boston by Jaylen Brown.

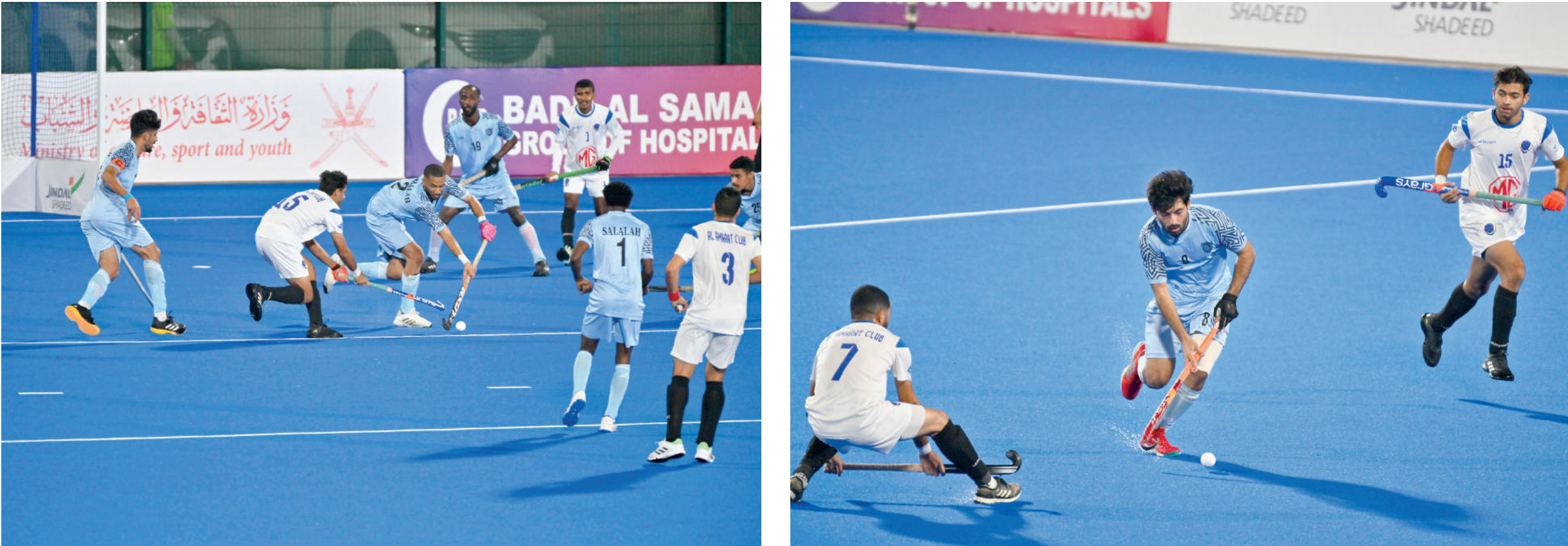
"This one's for Mo," said Orlando's Johnathan Isaac, paying tribute to centre Mo Wagner, who suffered a season-ending left knee injury on Saturday.

NBA season leader Cleveland improved to 26-4, matching the best 30-game start in club history, with a 124-113 home victory over Utah.

The Cavs, on a five-game win streak, improved to 16-1 at home as Darius Garland had 23 points while Donovan Mitchell and Evan Mobley each added 22. —AFP



Al Amerat players celebrate with the trophy after beating Salalah in the the final of His Majesty's Cup hockey championship at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat. — Pics by Faisal al Balushi



Al Amerat clinch maiden HM Cup

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

AL AMERAT CLUB were crowned with their first title of His Majesty's Hockey Cup in its 54th edition, after defeating Salalah Club 3-1. Ahli Sidab Club secured third place after defeating Al-Nasr Club 3-0 in matches held at the Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat. HH Sayyid Harib Thuwaini Al Saïd was the chief guest for the final.

The first quarter began with clear dominance from Al Amerat players, who pressed hard to control the game and claim the championship title. On the other hand, Salalah players were forced to retreat into defence due to Al Amerat's high-pressure strategy.

Al Amerat created several dangerous opportunities early in the match, but Salalah's goalkeeper and defenders skillfully blocked them. Al Amerat's pressure paid off in the fourth minute when they were awarded a penalty corner, which Ahmed al Nofli successfully converted to score the first goal.

Salalah players then tried to equalise and had two chances from penalty corners near the end of the first quarter, but Pakistani player Rana Ashraf missed both. The quarter ended with Al Amerat leading 1-0.

In the second quarter, Al Amerat continued their strong performance, with Ahmed al Ajmi firing a powerful shot that was saved by Salalah's goalkeeper in the first minute.

Salalah responded quickly, earning another penalty corner, but Pakistani player Imad also missed the opportunity. Salalah maintained their offensive efforts to equalise, while Al Amerat relied on counterattacks, which bore fruit in the fifth minute when Pakistani player Abdulhanan Shahid scored the second goal.

Despite continued pressure from Salalah, they failed to create significant threats to Al Amerat's goal. In the 11th minute, Al Amerat extended their lead with a third goal scored by Egyptian player Ahmed Mohammed. The first half ended with Al Amerat leading 3-0.

Salalah entered the third quarter with enthusiasm and energy, earning their fourth penalty corner, but they missed it once again, continuing

to squander chances. Al Amerat focused on organised defence and counterattacks, while Salalah maintained their offensive pressure in search of reducing the deficit. In the eighth minute, Salalah came close to scoring through a penalty corner taken by Rana Ashraf, but it failed to find the net. Both teams exchanged attacks until the end of the quarter, which ended with Al Amerat maintaining their 3-0 lead.

In the final quarter, Salalah intensified their efforts to narrow the gap and earned a fifth penalty corner in the eighth minute, but missed it yet again. Al Amerat's goalkeeper, Fahd al Nofli, continued his stellar performance, keeping a clean sheet until the final seconds when Salalah's Abdulrahman Naseeb scored their

lone goal from a penalty corner. The match concluded with Al Amerat winning 3-1.

Al Amerat Club were crowned champions, receiving the championship trophy along with 30 gold medals and a financial prize of RO 40,000. Salalah Club finished in second place, earning a prize money of RO 25,000, while Ahli Sidab secured third place and a financial prize of RO 15,000.

As for the individual awards, Mohammed Ali from Al Amerat became the tournament's top scorer with 8 goals. The Best Goalkeeper award went to Amjad Abdullah al Hosni from Salalah Club, while the Best Player award was claimed by Maytham Saïf al Wahibi from Ahli Sidab Club.

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Oman joins Arab Cybersecurity Council

RIYADH: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology, along with the Cyber Defence Centre, participated in the inaugural meeting of the Arab Cybersecurity Ministers Council, held earlier this week in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The meeting was attended by the heads of delegations from Arab countries, as well as the Secretary-General of the Arab League.

The Omani delegation was led by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology.

In his speech, the Undersecretary emphasised that the establishment of the Arab Cybersecurity Ministers Council builds on successful initiatives and efforts aimed at fostering development and collaboration to

address the growing challenges in cybersecurity and safeguard against risks and threats.

He also highlighted that the council seeks to seize opportunities to strengthen the digital economy and drive innovation.

Additionally, he underscored the importance of investing in and localising the cybersecurity industry, which can contribute to building a secure digital economy and creating an attractive,

innovative business environment.

The meeting covered several key topics, including the draft constitution of the Arab Cybersecurity Ministers Council, the appointment of the Secretary-General and members of the executive office, as well as the council's structure and operational framework.

The preparation of the Arab Cybersecurity Strategy was also discussed, alongside the council's logo and identity, and a number of

programmes and initiatives.

In 2022, the Sultanate of Oman launched the Cybersecurity Industry Programme with the aim of establishing a specialised cybersecurity industry to achieve economic diversification under the goals of Oman Vision 2040. The programme is part of the National Programme for Digital Economy, which aims to raise the contribution of the sector to the local GDP from 2% currently, to 5% by 2030, and 10% by 2040. — ONA



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C invites interested companies to participate in the following tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Site Visit Date	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/ 2024/017-2	Consultancy Service, Design and Supervision for construction of fifth floor of Nama Electricity Supply Company	05/01/2025	14/01/2025	Specialist	06/01/2025	26.250
NESC/ 2024/020-2	Conduct International Benchmark Study for Electricity Utility Retail Business and reflect recommended improvements in the Company's Business plan	05/01/2025	14/01/2025	Specialist	-	26.250
NESC/ 2024/024	Provide Printing Material	05/01/2025	14/01/2025	Specialist	-	26.250
NESC/ 2024/025	Framework agreement to Supply Recognition Items	05/01/2025	14/01/2025	Specialist	-	26.250
NESC/ 2024/026	Organizational Restructuring and Succession Planning for Nama Electricity Supply Company	05/01/2025	14/01/2025	Specialist	-	26.250

The table below shows the instructions for participation:-	
Participation	- Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply). - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure, please visit www.supply.nama.om, under NESC VENDOR / E-Tender.
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent to procurement@supply.nama.om, using the inquiry form found in the tender document (05) Five working days before bid submission date. - Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.
Tender Submission	Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER and supplier guidelines available at NESC Website www.supply.nama.om, under NESC VENDOR / E-Tender.
Guarantee	- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of not less than Ninety (90) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF PROCUREMENT COMMITTEE, Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C. - The hard copy of the bid bond should be deposited in the Tender Box at the Nama Electricity Supply Company Main Office at Wilayat Al Seeb, before 10:00 AM on the day specified for bid submission or any extended deadline. - Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected.
Terms and Conditions	- The Tender shall be valid for a period of (90) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof. - If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date. - NESC is not bound to accept the lowest Tenderer. - Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Organization - NESC gives priority to award the projects to SMEs companies. - Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.
Incentives and exemptions	- Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from bid bond requirements. - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from registration fees on business opportunities platform and supplier registration with Nama Group.

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TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C invites interested companies to participate in the following tender:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/ 2024/022	Providing digital screens and billboard services for Nama Supply Company	02/01/2025	12/01/2025	Specialized Companies	52.5

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -	
Participation	- Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply) - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure, please visit https://supply.nama.om, under NESC vendor / E Tender
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OMAN

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The all-new Kia EV6 is an all-electric crossover with all-wheel drive (AWD), engineered to deliver an extraordinary driving experience. In just 4.5 minutes of charging, the EV6 can gain 100 km of range with the ultra-fast (800V) charging system.

INSPIRING JOURNEYS WITH ALL ELECTRIC KIA EV6

As global habits shift toward sustainable energy and eco-consciousness, the demand for electric vehicles (EVs) is surging. With zero carbon emissions and noiseless acceleration, EVs are becoming a preferred choice worldwide. Kia is leading the charge, expanding its portfolio from traditional models to the next generation of electric vehicles.

The Kia EV6 is more than just a car—it represents the future of driving. Merging sustainability, advanced technology, and luxury, the EV6 is designed to meet the evolving demands of today’s drivers.

Part of Kia’s e-mobility lineup, the all-new Kia EV6 is an all-electric crossover with all-wheel drive (AWD), engineered to deliver an extraordinary driving experience. Built on Kia’s Electric-Global Modular Platform, the EV6 offers ultra-fast charging, making long trips and daily use more convenient than ever.

In just 4.5 minutes of charging, the EV6 can gain 100 km of range with the ultra-fast (800V) charging system. For more substantial charges, it takes less than 18 minutes to go from 10% to 80%, allowing you to spend more time on the road.

For added convenience, Kia provides a home AC charging unit with a 5-year warranty at no extra cost.

Additionally, Kia offers a comprehensive warranty: 5 years or 105,000 km (whichever comes first) on conventional parts and 8 years or 160,000 km (whichever comes first) on the battery system.

With a top speed of 188 km/h, the EV6 AWD’s synchronous motors accelerate from 0 to 100 km/h in just 3.5 seconds, delivering 239 kW of power. The cabin of the EV6 is both luxurious and sustainable, featuring vegan leather and recycled PET materials.

The spacious interior ensures comfort, with extra storage in the front trunk for bags and shoes, as well as ventilated relaxation seats. The optional Meridian premium sound system offers an immersive audio experience through its 14-speaker setup.

The EV6 is equipped with cutting-edge technology, including a 12.3” Navigation and 12.3” Cluster LCD, 64-colour Ambient Mood Lighting, and a panoramic curved display that enhances the interior’s sleek design.

These features provide seamless navigation and entertainment for a truly immersive journey.

Safety is a top priority with advanced Driver Assistance Systems, including Highway Driving Assist, Forward Collision-Avoidance Assist, Blind-Spot Collision-Avoidance Assist, Safe Exit Assist, and Rear Cross-Traffic Collision-Avoidance Assist.

Kia’s introduction of the EV6 to the region marks a significant step towards greener, cleaner transportation for a better tomorrow.

Ready to embrace the future of mobility? Visit Kia Muscat showroom for a test drive (Contact: 93204360) and join the change.

AL MOUJ MUSCAT SECURES TWO PRESTIGIOUS ACCOLADES

Muscat: Al Mouj Muscat, Oman’s premier lifestyle destination, has achieved a double victory at the Arabian Property Awards 2024–2025, marking its fourth recognition at these esteemed awards. The ceremony, held recently in Dubai, honoured Juman 1 in the Apartment/Condominium Development category and the Community Hub for Mixed-Use Architecture.

Nasser al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, expressed pride in



Al Mouj Muscat honoured at Arabian Property Awards 2024–2025 for Juman 1 and Community Hub.

the achievement, stating, “We are immensely proud to receive these esteemed awards for Juman 1 and the Community Hub.

This recognition is a testament to our unwavering dedication to pioneering developments that enhance quality of life while redefining industry standards.

Accolades such as these inspire us to continue shaping spaces that not only embody luxury and innovation but also nurture a sense of belonging and inclusivity.”

Malabar Gold & Diamonds wins best jewellery award

MALABAR Gold & Diamonds, the world’s sixth-largest jewellery retailer with over 375 showrooms across 13 countries, has been named the Best Jewellery Brand of the Year 2024 by Arabian Stories.

Najeeb K, Regional Head of Malabar Gold & Diamonds in Oman, received the award from HH Sayyidah Dr Taghreed bint Turki al Said, founder of Learn & Inspire, in the presence of Muhasin P, Branch Head of Malabar Gold & Diamonds, and other well-wishers.

“We are honoured to receive the Best Jewellery Brand of the Year Award for the second consecutive time from The Arabian Stories. With 12 world-class showrooms and more in the pipeline, this recognition highlights Malabar Gold & Diamonds’ position as the most preferred jewellery brand in Oman, trusted by both citizens and residents.

A recipient of Oman’s Most Trusted Brand awards since 2016, Malabar Gold & Diamonds currently operates 12 showrooms across Oman, including in Muscat, Seeb, Barka, Salalah, Sohar, Muthra Souk, Ibri, Nizwa, and Al Khoud.



Malabar Gold & Diamonds representatives accepting the award

Barka, Salalah, Sohar, Muthra Souk, Ibri, Nizwa and Al Khoud.

Since its inception in 1993, Malabar Group has made Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) a core commitment, dedicating 5% of its net profits toward various social causes in every region of operation.

The group believes that the most successful companies are those

that integrate sustainability and responsibility into their business practices.

Malabar Group’s ESG initiatives focus on health, housing, hunger eradication, education, the environment, and women’s empowerment, and the company continually strengthens its goals to remain socially conscious and responsible.

Ford Trucks Oman delivers 40 vehicles fleet

MUSCAT: In a significant move, Ford Trucks Oman has delivered a fleet of 40 Ford F-line 1833 CC (Crew Cab) trucks to Al Tasnim Group, a prominent Omani conglomerate. The versatile trucks, equipped with cargo bodies and cranes, will support critical operations for PDO, enhancing the company’s ability to efficiently transport goods to PDO sites.

This delivery highlights Ford Trucks’ commitment to empowering Omani businesses with innovative solutions focused on performance, reliability, and safety.

The Ford F-line 1833 CC is



MHD ACERE (Automotive, Construction Equipment, and Renewable Energy) is a division of the Mohsin Haider Darwish Group, known for its robust portfolio of world-class automotive brands.

known for its robust design, superior load capacity, and advanced features, making it the ideal choice for demanding

applications in the oil and gas sector.

The partnership further solidifies Ford Trucks Oman’s

position as a trusted partner in Oman’s industrial and energy sectors, showcasing its ability to provide high-performance solutions tailored to the region’s unique challenges.

Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, commented, “At Ford Trucks Oman, we are proud to support Omani businesses like Al Tasnim Group in achieving operational excellence. This milestone delivery of 40 Ford F-line 1833 CC trucks underscores our unwavering commitment to offering reliable and efficient solutions designed to meet the demanding needs of the oil and gas sector.

Khimji Ramdas EPS launches pioneering motor rewinding facility

MUSCAT: In a move set to establish a new benchmark in comprehensive repair and maintenance services in the region, Khimji Ramdas Engineering Products & Services (KR EPS) recently inaugurated its state-of-the-art motor rewinding workshop in Ghala, Muscat.

This milestone was marked by the presence of the Khimji Ramdas Group’s directors and senior officials, underscoring the company’s commitment to advancing technological innovation and customer-centric solutions.

Equipped to handle a wide

array of AC and DC motors, high-voltage (HV) and low-voltage (LV) equipment, and transformers, the facility combines world-class technology with a team of highly skilled professionals.

This initiative reflects KR EPS’s strategic focus on delivering efficient and cost-effective solutions that align with the long-term growth and operational goals of Oman’s industrial sector.

Speaking on the occasion, Hitesh Akarte, Chief Operating Officer of the Infrastructure Cluster at Khimji Ramdas, said, “Industries across the



The facility combines world-class technology with a team of highly skilled professionals

region depend on reliable, well-maintained equipment to sustain operations. The inauguration of

our motor rewinding workshop underscores our dedication to providing customer-focused solutions that enhance the performance and longevity of critical assets while driving operational efficiency. Supported by tailored engineering services, our facility aims to empower businesses with dependable maintenance solutions designed to meet their evolving needs.” He added, “By offering localised, advanced services, we not only address the technical needs of our customers but also contribute to their ability to

thrive in an increasingly demanding market. Our approach combines technical excellence with a deep understanding of our clients’ priorities, ensuring that every solution we provide drives value, resilience, and sustainability for their operations.” Highlighting the facility’s technical capabilities, Mohammed Iliyas, Head of KR EPS, remarked, “Motor rewinding, a highly technical process involving the precise replacement of worn or failed stator windings, demands extensive expertise and unwavering attention to detail.

GCCPROJECTS



Director of the National Centre for Measurement and Calibration and Chairwoman of the Gulf Technical Committee for Standards, Fayza bint Hamad al Musharifiyah

GSO REVIEWS 15 KEY PROJECTS FOR GCC REGION

MUSCAT: The Gulf Technical Committee for Standards and Metrology convened in Muscat yesterday to review 15 key projects set for implementation across the GCC region.

Hosted by the Directorate General for Standards and Metrology at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion, the meeting was attended by representatives from all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states.

According to an ONA report, the projects under review span various sectors, including agricultural irrigation systems, solar energy technologies, and petroleum measurement standards. Once approved, these initiatives will help integrate regional standards and promote greater consistency across the GCC countries.

Fayza bint Hamad al Musharifi, Director of the National Center for Measurement and Calibration and Chairwoman of the Gulf Technical Committee for Standards, emphasized Oman's pivotal role in aligning Gulf standards with international and local benchmarks. She noted that these efforts are essential for promoting regional trade and fostering sustainable economic development through knowledge sharing and the adoption of best practices.

Al Musharifi also reiterated the GCC member states' commitment to furthering economic and industrial integration, with a strong focus on advancing projects that enhance Gulf standards and metrology.

A significant portion of the meeting focused on projects related to digital transformation and artificial intelligence, particularly initiatives involving industrial robots and electric vehicle charging infrastructure. The committee emphasized the importance of maintaining high standards of metrology and technical precision in these areas.

Further discussions also covered the development of advanced calibration technologies and remote sensing solutions, including projects aimed at improving the measurement of microwave radiation in space, which will enhance the region's scientific capabilities. — ONA

State Council reviews economic zones draft law

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

THE State Council held the opening of the fifth session of the second session of the eighth term of the Council to discuss the “Draft Law on Special Economic Zones and Free Zones” yesterday in Muscat.

The session was headed by Sheikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the Council, in the presence of the honorable members of the Council and the Secretary-General.

The draft law aims to unify the system of guarantees, benefits, incentives, exemptions, and facilities granted to economic activities and helps develop income tax exemption policies to be an attractive element for strategic projects in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Shura Council referred the draft law on special economic zones and free zones to the State Council on November 13, 2024. In this context, the Economic and Financial Committee held a number of meetings and hosted specialists from the General Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to answer questions about the draft law.

The draft law included 49 articles and 6 chapters, with four new articles added by the Shura Council. It was agreed to amend two articles of the draft law with the Shura Council, and a new article was added by the Shura Council. However, there was disagreement with 20 articles of the draft law, and three new articles were added by the Shura Council.

The number of articles approved by the Shura Council and the Economic and Financial Committee without amendment was 27 articles, as stated in the draft law.

Dr Dhafer bin Awad al Shanfari, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee, stated in his speech that the development of legislation and regulation of special and free economic zones is an extension of the results of the country's economic and industrial policies that began in 1970.

The establishment of free zones also came through the issuance of the Free Zones Law pursuant to Royal Decree No. (56/2002), which is considered an important legal nucleus in the process of developing these zones.



A significant aspect of the discussion focused on proposed changes to income tax exemption policies.

According to UNCTAD statistics in the World Investment Report 2019, the growth and spread of economic and free zones have been steadily increasing in recent years, reaching about 5,400 special economic zones before the Covid-19 crisis.

This law addressed general provisions that organize and determine incentives, benefits, and facilities for the operating entity and operating companies, and mechanisms for the transfer of goods to and from these zones.

He also added that the project aims to unify the legislative system for these areas so that they are under one umbrella, ensuring the consistency of the provisions of the applicable legislation and regulations, and facilitating the Authority's exercise of its supervisory and regulatory role.

This undoubtedly ensures, on the other hand, the unification of investment procedures in all existing areas or those that will be established in the future, and grants the Authority sufficient flexibility in dealing with future expansion in establishing economic zones and free zones.

It also determines the regulatory frameworks for projects within them and how to obtain the necessary licenses, permits, and approvals to carry out their activities. The project also provides a new regulation related to real estate development projects, which are considered an addition to the various economic sectors in special economic zones and free zones.

Al Shanfari added that the draft law seeks to develop income tax exemption policies to be an attractive element for strategic projects, as the tax exemption period has been amended to be for a period not exceeding ten years, extendable for two similar periods,

and is closely linked to the size of the project and its added value. It aims to unify the guarantees, benefits, incentives, exemptions, and facilities granted to economic activities in special economic zones and free zones together, while distinguishing between economic zones when required.

According to UNCTAD statistics in the World Investment Report 2019, the growth and spread of economic and free zones have been steadily increasing in recent years, reaching about 5,400 special economic zones before the Covid-19 crisis. The same source indicates that these zones have increased by more than a thousand zones (SEZs) annually in the last five years, indicating the frenzied competition to establish these zones internationally.

“There is no doubt that competition for investment and attracting foreign investment has recently accelerated, as all countries share in this proposal and participate in attracting investment, especially strategic investments. It has become necessary for countries to take this path in strengthening these legislations and laws to attract investment and make it of strategic value. Attracting investment adds value to small and medium enterprises and also facilitates knowledge transfer. Therefore, it has become necessary for this law to include part of the incentives and part of this development.

These laws have also become a differential advantage by establishing economic cities. Through these economic cities, the legislator found it necessary to integrate some other legislations concerned with real estate development that would help develop these areas,” said Dr Amer bin Nasser al Mutaani, Vice Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee.

It is worth noting that the draft law emphasizes the importance of having an integrated legislative umbrella and avoiding overlaps between the legislative laws regulating free and private zones and industrial zones, in order to attract foreign investments and develop and advance local industries.

The session concluded its work by reviewing the General Secretariat's report on the Council's bodies and activities.

OQ raises \$2.5 billion from OQEP & QQBI IPOs

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 24

OQ, the integrated energy group of Oman, raised around \$2.5 billion from initial public offerings (IPOs) of two of its subsidiaries OQ Exploration & Production (OQEP) and OQ Base Industries (OQBI) during the fourth quarter – one of several financial milestones that that have underscored the state-owned firm's strong fiscals in 2024. On Tuesday, December 24, 2024, international ratings agency Fitch Ratings revised OQ's outlook to Positive from Stable, while affirming its Long-Term Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at ‘BB+’.

Driving this ratings revision, it said, were a number of factors, most notably OQ's strong links with the Omani government through its parent holding company Oman Investment Authority (OIA).

This is evident from the significant support received from the government in the form of equity injections, asset transfers,

shareholder loans and debt guarantees, Fitch noted.

The ratings upgrade comes on the heels of a similar revision of the Outlook on Oman's sovereign rating last week. Citing an improvement in finances, Fitch revised its outlook on Oman to “positive” from “stable,” – a move that puts the Sultanate on track to be rated as investment grade by all three major rating agencies.

“OQ's rating is constrained by that of Oman (BB+/Positive), as underlined by its strong links with its ultimate sole shareholder, the Omani state, in line with Fitch's Government-Related Entities (GRE) Rating Criteria and Parent and Subsidiary Linkage (PSL) Rating Criteria.

OQ is fully owned by the state via Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and was established to strengthen and centralise Oman's oil and gas industry,” said Fitch in its commentary on OQ's latest rating revision.

Referencing OQ's successful IPOs of the current quarter, Fitch noted



OQ joint venture Duqm Refinery posted a significant increase in net processing capacity in 2024.

that the group, while raising sizable proceeds, continues to retain its majority stakes in OQEP and QQBI post-IPOs.

The proceeds generated from these IPOs are expected to go towards debt prepayment, dividends, and also certain strategic growth projects such as expanding its gas network capacity and fuel storage.

In another notable highlight, OQ

generated over \$3.9 billion of EBITDA in 2023, from working-interest upstream production of 227k barrels of oil equivalent per day (boepd).

OQ subsidiary OQEP has investments in a portfolio of 14 oil and gas assets, producing hydrocarbons (working interest) that represented around 14 per cent of the country's total oil, gas and condensate production in 2023. Also of note is

OQ's track record in prepaying debt by using cash flow generation and proceeds from asset sales. The group achieved a net debt repayment of about \$1.3 billion in 2023, effectively slashing its debt to \$9.5 billion at end-2023. This figure is projected to further decline to about \$8 billion by end-2024, said Fitch.

Reinforcing its strong fiscal position is its controlling interests in a number of key assets.

“OQ is the main downstream company owning all domestic refining assets producing transport fuels for the Omani market and is tasked with increasing the value per barrel of extracted oil by further expanding its refining and petrochemical assets. It is also the exclusive operator of Oman's domestic natural gas transportation infrastructure. In 2022 OQ was appointed the national champion for clean energy and green hydrogen by the government and is the main developer of Oman's alternative energy projects,” Fitch added.

OPINION

Bankers struggle with wealth: dealmakers’ difficulties



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

BANKS ARE UPping their efforts to sell more investment banking services to their wealthy clients, but dealmakers familiar with such plans warn they are likely to run into obstacles.

A host of top banking names are looking to maximise the links between their dealmakers and their wealth managers to boost margins from key clients. Among them is Goldman Sachs, which is considering paying referral bonuses to investment bankers and traders who send business to its private bank.

Meanwhile, Morgan Stanley is boosting the payouts it offers advisors who refer clients to other segments of the company. UBS formed Universal Global Banking over the summer to “create a single cross-divisional team dedicated to servicing the traditional corporate finance needs of (global wealth management) clients and their companies”.

Citigroup’s European wealth boss James Holder recently said that “making all of the firm available whichever part of the franchise you work in” was a “cultural imperative” for the bank.

Citi’s wealth head Andy Sieg and banking boss Vis Raghavan are trying to take cooperation “to another level”, he added.

But these types of initiatives have proved tough to execute. Credit Suisse pushed plans under multiple former chief executives to try to capture more of the lucrative Swiss

wealth market.

“It’s not easy to do,” said Lord Sebastian Grigg, former head of Credit Suisse’s UK investment bank and a Goldman Sachs partner. “Or rather, it’s easy to announce and a good idea because it broadens a relationship with a client and broadens responsibility if something goes wrong – which it can do. But the actual bonus idea tends to get rebalanced in overall compensation.”

A former Bank of America dealmaker said that referral bonuses were chopped and changed during their time at the bank. Although they could be worth tens of thousands of pounds, they were often not enough to offset the potential risk of damaging the client relationship if advice from the wealth arm turned sour.

Julius Baer International chief executive David Durlacher said earlier this year, specialist private banks such as his “only have to obsess about one thing” so often have an advantage in terms of quality over wealth managers at universal banks. Another former operations expert with multiple banks said teams across different business lines would often waste resources building the same products.

Clients would also get frustrated when as many as four different teams pitched to them. A dealmaker who worked at Rothchild, which is known for its strong wealth presence, said there was no direct financial incentive to

refer clients across when he was there, but it would be reflected in performance reviews.

“We just weren’t good at it,” he said, adding that bankers placed into specific roles as an intermediary between divisions often faced a “career graveyard”.

Others note the mindset of dealmakers and financial advisors can differ significantly, the former is often transaction, while the latter needs to focus on longer-term issues.

Meanwhile, Vanguard, the world’s second largest asset manager which is known for its low-cost index funds, said its advice and wealth management business was “among the fastest growing offers” in a competitive market.

Vanguard will spin out its wealth and advice operation into a standalone division as the passive investment giant looks to grab a bigger slice of the wealth market.

The move represents the \$10tn asset manager’s largest restructuring in more than a decade. It marks a major shift under new chief executive officer Salim Ramji, who took the helm in May.

“For nearly five decades, Vanguard has been a positive force in democratising investing, our goal is to further democratise our advice and wealth management offerings for our clients through enhanced technologies and offers – with the same client zeal that Vanguard has long been known for,” Ramji said in a statement.

GERMANY’S ENERGY TRANSITION AND LINKS WITH OMAN



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The author is a Germany-based journalist and frequent visitor to the Sultanate of Oman who writes for a number of German and European media platforms

Lighting the home, cooking, running the computer, charging the smartphone... we all realise that this doesn't work for free and that the electricity doesn't come from the socket.

However, the fact that energy should be produced in a climate-friendly and sustainable way so that less CO2 is emitted is not as consistently on the agenda everywhere as it is in Germany.

We want to become independent of fossil fuels - and that fits in with Oman's goals of finding alternatives to oil and gas. The plan: Germany wants to cover at least 80 per cent of its electricity consumption from renewable energies by 2030 and become climate-positive by 2045. Net-Zero is Oman's goal for 2050.

So far, so good... But there's a twist: too little renewable energy (wind power and solar energy) is currently available, which is driving up the costs of the energy transition and causing electricity prices in Germany to rise... Hard to imagine in this country, where air conditioning is running even in deserted hotel rooms or the light is on in the bathroom.

In Germany, we educate ourselves to switch off all energy sources when we leave a room - saving energy means saving money. This has been especially true since the last nuclear power plant was taken off the grid in April 2023.

But where will the energy come from in the future? Green hydrogen plays a major role in this respect: as an energy storage and carrier, it is intended to compensate for fluctuations that occur when electricity is generated from renewable energy sources. To this end, Germany is looking for partners in countries with abundant renewable energy sources.

Australia, Brazil and Morocco are among them - and in the Middle East, Oman in particular has a lot to offer as an important hydrogen partner. However, there is a catch here too, and that is that many Germans, including those in business and politics, take a critical view of the MENA region.

There are concerns about political stability, human rights issues and the environmental impact that large-scale hydrogen production could have.

In this respect, it is not just about producing green hydrogen - it is also about proving that this is done in a socially and environmentally sustainable way.

Unlocking the potential of seaweed farming in Oman

In the heart of Dhofar Governorate, where the rich tropical climate meets the Arabian Sea, a hidden treasure lies along the southern coast of Oman — seaweed. With an abundant variety thriving in the coastal areas of the wilayats of Mirbat, Sadah and Taqah, the region presents a unique opportunity for the development of a sustainable seaweed industry.

Each summer, the southwest monsoon, known locally as “khareef,” breathes life into the waters of the Dhofar coast, stirring up wave action and promoting nutrient-rich upwelling. This natural phenomenon allows the dominant macroalgae to flourish, providing a seasonal bounty that typically lasts until late November.

Recent studies illustrate the remarkable capacity of Omani waters to support substantial seaweed growth, particularly in upwelling regions. However, they also reveal a notable absence of macroalgae in the Sea of Oman compared to the denser and more diverse life found along the Arabian Sea. While high temperatures, salinity levels, and low nutrient availability pose challenges, surveys indicate the presence of over 400 species across brown, red, and green algae categories, most notably in tidal mud flats and mangrove ecosystems. Globally, the seaweed market is booming, having skyrocketed to a staggering 35.8 million tonnes and valued at over \$6 billion in 2019, driven mainly by Asia. Seaweed has made its mark across various sectors, from culinary uses to pharmaceuticals and cosmetics.

The versatile marine plant is celebrated for its nutritional benefits, including essential dietary supplements and natural medications. Moreover, seaweed products such as alginates, carrageenans, and agar play critical roles in industries ranging from food to cosmetics.

In Oman, despite the thriving global seaweed farming industry — which accounts for 97% of production, primarily through aquaculture — local efforts



Demand for seaweed is growing globally, fuelled primarily by the biofuel industry. — Reuters



DR. KHALID AL SUBHI

The writer is a Research Assistant at the Center of Excellence in Marine Biotechnology, Sultan Qaboos University

seem to lag behind. With 80% of seaweed harvested going directly or indirectly toward human consumption, there is an immense opportunity to harness local marine resources for economic diversification. By leveraging sustainable farming practices, Oman could integrate seaweed cultivation into its existing aquaculture systems, promoting environmental stewardship and enhancing food security.

Beyond economic prospects, seaweed farming offers critical environmental benefits. It plays a vital role in carbon sequestration and supports the restoration of marine ecosystems. By adopting seaweed farming, Oman can contribute positively to climate action while also improving

water quality and fostering marine biodiversity. As the world increasingly recognises the benefits of seaweed, Oman has a strategic opportunity to develop a robust seaweed industry that aligns with national goals.

With proper investment and cultivation practices, the extensive coastline of the Dhofar Governorate could become a leader in sustainable seaweed production, creating jobs and innovative solutions for both economic and environmental challenges.

The time is ripe for Oman to embrace the potential of seaweed. As the global market grows, the Omani coastline could become a beacon of sustainability, contributing to a greener economy and healthier marine ecosystems.

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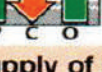
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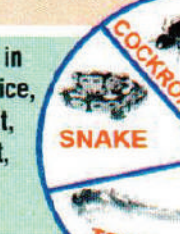
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ART/LIFE



A R T

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TRAVEL

New section of Emperor Nero’s ‘Golden House’ reopens



A SECTION of Ancient Roman Emperor Nero’s vast underground Domus Aurea (Golden House) was reopened to the public on Friday after extensive restoration and repair work to protect the nearly 2,000-year-old site from water damage.

The inauguration came as Rome is preparing for an influx of tourists during the 2025 Roman Catholic Holy Year, or Jubilee, during which the Eternal City expects as many as 32 million arrivals.

Visitors to Nero’s palace will be welcomed through a new entrance on the western side, leading to a wide hall known as the “Neronian portico” and then to rooms still bearing traces of their original colourful frescoes, mosaics and marbles.

The spectacular residence was built in 64 AD after a great fire destroyed most of what was then central Rome, the one through which Nero infamously, and probably apocryphally, is said to have fiddled.

It was rediscovered in the 15th century, and Renaissance painters including Raphael and Michelangelo would study its frescoes by lowering themselves on ropes through holes made in the ceiling, still visible today.

One room that reopened on Friday includes a graffiti by one of these artists, Pinturicchio, who scribbled his name as “Pintorichio”.

Another area, the Nymphaeum, features a vault decorated with seashells and a central mosaic showing Ulysses.

Nero’s palace was named after the gold leaf covering some of its walls, and was part of a complex that once included an artificial lake where the Colosseum now stands. It is said to have contained a 120-foot (36.6 metre) statue of the emperor.

The ruins now lie below a park next to the Colosseum. They survived because they were covered up and filled with rubble to serve as the foundation of baths built by the later Emperor Trajan.

Conservation authorities, however, face a constant battle with water infiltration from the ground above the palace, a problem that has led to repeated and prolonged closures of the monument over the past decades. — Reuters

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



TRAVEL

A person looks at part of the full-scale reproduction of frescos found at the cave of Pont-D’Arc also known as the Chauvet cave in Vallon Pont D’Arc. — AFP



FILM

Bollywood actress Wamiqa Gabbi attends the Grand Christmas Bash promotion for her upcoming Hindi-language film ‘Baby John’, in Mumbai. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A man bakes at a restaurant in Damascus while somewhere, a lightning offensive was taking place ousting president Bashar al Assad and ending five decades of Baath rule in Syria. — AFP

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Giant Redheaded Centipedes Are Venom Mixologists



A GIANT centipede’s many wriggling legs might be creepy. But the pair of legs not used for walking may be the most frightening. More than 430 million years ago, the two legs nearest the mouth evolved into sharp pincers that contain venom glands. Within those glands are microscopic factories capable of manufacturing multiple toxic compounds. Giant centipedes, which, just like spiders, are arthropods, use these tools to hunt prey — everything from crickets to snakes. But they also make for a juicy snack for other animals, forcing them to defend themselves with the same poisonous pincers. In a paper published in the journal Nature Ecology & Evolution, scientists revealed that the redheaded centipede — a species of giant centipede roughly

the length of a ballpoint pen — is a toxic mixologist, capable of tailoring its venom recipe depending on whether it’s attacking prey or defending itself. The toxins reserved for the centipedes’ predators appear designed to cause pain, the researchers found. The findings also may hint that venoms produced by other animals might be more complex than were previously understood. To collect venom, scientists most often zap an animal with a nonlethal amount of electricity. The pulses contract the animals’ muscles, which squeezes out the venom. This technique is believed to release venom with all its toxic molecules, said Vanessa Schendel, who is a venom biologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and an author of the new study.— ANDREW CHAPMAN / NYT



The Search for van Gogh’s Lost Masterpiece

ON MAY 15, 1990, Vincent van Gogh’s “Portrait of Dr. Gachet” made history at Christie’s in Manhattan, auctioned for a staggering \$82.5 million. Purchased by a Japanese paper magnate, it became the most expensive painting sold at auction at that time. Created in June 1890, just weeks before van Gogh’s tragic suicide, the painting is steeped in emotion, reflecting what van Gogh described as the “heartbroken expression of our time.” Experts believe its current value might exceed \$300 million. For much of the 20th century, the portrait was showcased at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, lent by a private collector before its record-breaking sale. However, since then, the whereabouts of this iconic artwork have remained shrouded in mystery. Art curators struggling to locate the portrait have nearly given up, prompting the Städel Museum to create a podcast dedicated to its search. Those tracing the painting’s journey have uncovered that the 1990 buyer faced financial turmoil, leading to the painting passing to an Austrian financier before being sold privately in 1998 to an undisclosed party. Since then, its trail has gone cold. Despite the art market’s inherent secrecy, a small group of auction house representatives, art dealers and advisers continuously track such masterpieces. Reporters from The New York Times have attempted to trace the history of the Gachet since the 1998 sale, reaching out to insiders connected to the auction and exploring leads from New York to a picturesque Swiss villa by Lake Lugano. Many experts encountered have been equally puzzled about the painting’s fate. Some speculated it resides with a wealthy private family in Europe. This raises a vital question: Should collectors of renowned artworks share them with the public, especially as museums struggle to compete



with billionaires for extraordinary pieces? For centuries, the story of Gachet began in Auvers-sur-Oise, France. Van Gogh arrived in the village on May 20, 1890, seeking inspiration before his untimely death. There, he met Dr. Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, a physician fond of art, and began painting in the doctor’s garden, creating both the portrait and still lifes. Van Gogh gifted a replica of the portrait to Gachet, which is currently displayed at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. Gary Tinterow, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, emphasises van Gogh’s humanistic spirit in this artwork. After van Gogh’s death, the portrait passed through several hands, including his brother Theo and eventually to a German count. In 1911, the Städel Museum acquired the painting, where it remained until the rise of the Nazis, who confiscated it in the late 1930s. The painting’s path led it to German banker Franz Koenigs, and later to Siegfried Kramarsky, a Jewish banker who immigrated to New York, where the painting intermittently graced the Met until it was loaned indefinitely in 1984. After the 1990 auction, Ryoei Saito, the winning bidder and chair of Daishowa Paper Manufacturing

Co., faced legal troubles that resulted in his collection being sold off, including the Gachet. It eventually fell into the hands of Wolfgang Flöttl, but as his financial situation worsened, the painting was sold privately in a transaction that remains undisclosed. Speculation regarding the current owner has abounded, with names like Guido Barilla emerging but later denied in a podcast exploring the portrait’s history. Some insiders suggest the painting is held by an affluent Italian family, the Invernizzis, based in Switzerland, linked to the Galbani cheese empire. Although rumours persist about their ownership, the family denies possessing the artwork. Michael Findlay, an expert from Christie’s, remains unsure of the painting’s whereabouts, cautioning against assumptions that the mystery is solved. He indicated that the Gachet may have changed hands since its last known sale in 1998. As the search for “Portrait of Dr. Gachet” continues, it stands as a symbol of the complex relationship between private collectors and public access to cultural treasures. The world awaits an answer to the question of this iconic masterpiece’s elusive current home, with its profound history echoing in the art community. — NYT

FEATURES

BY NAJAH AL RIYAMI

THIS SEASON in Muscat has been characterised by a remarkable array of artistic initiatives, signalling a positive evolution for the country. Over the past three months, Oman's capital has hosted Raneen, an initiative designed to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the breathtaking coastline and architecture of Muttrah. Additionally, a series of art exhibitions have taken place, including a significant event at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, the Affordable Art Show, and a thoughtfully curated exhibition at Bait al Muzna. These events have beautifully showcased the talents of both local and international artists.

The art season is far from over, as Stal Gallery's Contemporary Edition 2024 is set to open this December and will run through to January 2025. This highly anticipated exhibition features esteemed artists such as Idris Al Hooti, Hassan Meer, Heather Ford, Anwar Sonya, and Abdellah El Haitout.

Renowned for fostering dialogue in contemporary art, this exhibition promises a vibrant showcase of diverse creative expressions. Although it may not receive extensive marketing, it is undoubtedly worth exploring, not only for the talented artists involved but also for the unique contemporary works that offer compelling narratives and fresh perspectives for art enthusiasts.

Heather Ford's work invites viewers into a harmonious interplay of cool blues and warm, bold hues.

The geometric composition of interlinked faces in various shades of blue and white evokes imagery of the ocean, wind, and cool winter months. In contrast, a trio of stylised, interconnected faces in shades of red, orange, and yellow infuses the artwork with a glowing, almost radiant energy.

Idris Al Hooti uniquely fuses abstraction and portraiture, presenting a central figure against a vibrant, pixelated backdrop. The woman, depicted with elongated features and minimal facial details, exudes a sense of calm and mystery.

Warm hues of orange, red, and maroon dominate the composition, contrasted by cooler shades of teal, blue, and purple. She appears to look beyond, her gaze an ambient whisper directed towards the viewer, all set amidst a foundation of concrete structures.

The symmetrical and ethereal aspects of the piece impart a contemplative, almost spiritual quality, inviting introspection. The juxtaposition of organic softness against the rigid geometric forms in the background reflects the merging of urbanisation—a blend of tradition and abstraction that tells a deeper story of the harmonic contrasts in humanity today.

The playful and nostalgic artwork of Hassan Meer resonates with childhood dreams and cherished moments. Its vivid, childlike imagery intertwined with abstract elements invites exploration. Inspired by children's drawings, Meer studied their artistic expressions and integrated them into his paintings. By blending professional techniques of colour and texture with childlike forms, he crafts a unique visual language that bridges innocence and sophistication.

When asked about his work, Meer reflects, "My artwork is a reflection on the spiritual state of being, an exploration that captures the delicate, untainted essence of childhood. For over twenty years, I have utilised this style, continually drawing inspiration from its simplicity and depth."



STAL GALLERY'S CONTEMPORARY EDITION ADDS MORE EXCITEMENT TO LOCAL ART SCENE



The artist added, "I am captivated by the freedom of employing childlike icons and shapes alongside vibrant colours to evoke a sense of spirituality—profound, innocent, and transformative. To me, abstraction is a realm of boundless expression—a language where shapes and colours convey emotions and weave stories rich with layered meanings. It is a space where form transcends the tangible, creating a dialogue that resonates deeply within the soul."

Meer ended, "Through this harmonious blend of innocence and abstraction, my work offers an expressive journey—inviting viewers to perceive the world through a lens of light, wonder, and spiritual reflection."

Beyond this exhibit, it is commendable that Oman is carving a distinct niche that emphasises quality over quantity. Local art organisers are dedicated to elevating artistic standards, curating exhibitions that not only highlight Omani talent but also align with the best practices seen in the region.

This way, Oman is steadily building its reputation by focusing on the caliber of its exhibits with organisers further aiming to enhance the quality of artistic dialogue and showcase Omani talent on a global stage. This commitment to quality not only boosts the confidence of Omani and Oman-based artists but also has the potential to attract international attention and tourism, enriching the local economy. By nurturing its artistic environment, Oman is positioning itself as a serious player in the evolving tapestry of contemporary art in the Gulf region.