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NAPOLI BEAT BOLOGNA TO LIFT ITALIAN SUPER CUP

HIS MAJESTY GIVES AUDIENCE TO SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTER

OMAN , SAUDI ARABIA EXPLORE PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday gave audience to Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, at Al Barakah Palace.

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Prince Faisal conveyed greetings of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister. He also conveyed their best wishes of good health and well-being to His Majesty and further progress and prosperity for the Omani people.

On his turn, His Majesty the Sultan asked Prince Faisal to convey his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes of good health and well-being to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the Crown Prince and Prime Minister. His Majesty also wished the Saudi people further progress and prosperity.

The audience explored prospects for cooperation between the two countries in various fields in light of the meetings of the Omani-Saudi Coordination Council and its efforts aimed at strengthening the robustness of bilateral relations. This is in

pursuance of the directives of the two countries' monarchs.

The Saudi minister highlighted a set of ongoing regional and international developments and the perspectives of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia concerning them, while he listened to the views of His Majesty the Sultan on the matter.

The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Aufi, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan, and Ibrahim Saad Bishan, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

HM gets message from Tanzanian President



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik receives Mahmoud Thabit Kombo, Minister of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation of the United Republic of Tanzania.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from President Samia Suluhu Hassan of the United Republic of Tanzania, dealing with the bilateral relations between the two countries.

The message was delivered when His Majesty gave an audience on Tuesday at Al Barakah Palace to Mahmoud Thabit Kombo, Minister of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation of the United Republic of Tanzania.

During the audience, the

minister conveyed the greetings of the Tanzanian President and her best wishes of good health and success to His Majesty the Sultan.

He also conveyed the Tanzanian President's wishes of further progress and prosperity to the Omani people. His Majesty, in turn, asked the guest to convey his greetings and best wishes of happiness and success to the President. His Majesty also wished the Tanzanian people continued development and growth. SEE ALSO P2

OMAN WELCOMES YEMEN PRISONER EXCHANGE DEAL

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman welcomed the agreement signed in Muscat regarding the exchange of prisoners in Yemen. Oman praised the positive spirit that prevailed throughout the negotiations, which took place from December 9 to 23. Oman commended the cooperation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the efforts of the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and all parties involved in the negotiations.

Oman notes that these collective efforts contributed to reaching this significant humanitarian agreement, expressing hope that it will create the necessary conditions to address other outstanding issues related to the situation in the Republic of Yemen. Meanwhile, Hans Grundberg, the United Nations (UN) Special Envoy to Yemen, has expressed his profound gratitude to the Sultanate of Oman for hosting the pivotal negotiations in Muscat that culminated in the signing of a prisoner exchange agreement for Yemen. In a statement issued by his office, the envoy lauded Oman's diplomatic efforts, underscoring the critical humanitarian significance of the deal. TURN TO P3

Oman-India CEPA not to affect Omanisation

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion affirmed that the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) concluded with the Republic of India does not affect the policies of Omanisation. The ministry said that the agreement is subject to all applicable laws and regulations in the Sultanate of Oman to ensure that priority in employment is accorded to the national cadre, without exception. This was unveiled during a media briefing held by the ministry in Muscat on Tuesday.

During the briefing, the ministry pointed out that the CEPA will contribute in expanding the prospect of commercial exchange and enhancing regional economic integration. It added that the agreement also constitutes an important channel for diversifying non-oil revenues and enhancing the attractiveness of investment.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, reaffirmed that the Sultanate of Oman retains its full sovereign right to apply anti-dumping and countervailing measures. He added that the agreement allows Oman to take protective measures to counteract proven or suspected harm/damage in practices that affect local industries.

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE Speaking on the occasion, Al Yousef said that CEPA with India will give the Sultanate of Oman a comparative advantage till such time that other GCC states enter into similar agreements. This makes the swift implementation of the agreement a direct strategic and economic gain, he observed.

Al Yousef pointed out that the agreement as a whole constitutes a strategic step, supports the competitiveness and diversification



QAIS BIN MOHAMMED AL YOUSEF
Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment

“Oman retains its full sovereign right to apply anti dumping and countervailing measures. The agreement allows Oman to take protective measures

of the national economy, enhances the attractiveness of Oman as an investment destination, opens up vistas for diversifying the base of production, empowers small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and generates employment opportunities for citizens.

Al Yousef said that the CEPA also constitutes an integrated framework for liberalising trade in goods by eliminating or cutting down customs duties, regulating non-tariff barriers, facilitating import and export procedures and establishing precise rules to protect national products.

The CEPA also offers Omani products preferential access to a market of over one billion people — and this will in turn enhance national exports, consolidate their global presence and contribute to enhancing the status of Oman as a regional logistics and industrial hub and a strategic gateway to Asian markets. TURN TO P3

HM, Saudi official explore prospects of cooperation



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HM receives written message from Tanzanian President



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from President Samia Suluhu Hassan of the United Republic of Tanzania, dealing with the bilateral relations between the two countries. The message was delivered when

His Majesty gave an audience on Tuesday at Al Barakah Palace to Mahmoud Thabit Kombo, Minister of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation of the United Republic of Tanzania. During the audience, the minister conveyed the greetings of the Tanzanian President and

her best wishes of good health and success to His Majesty the Sultan. He also conveyed the Tanzanian President's wishes of further progress and prosperity to the Omani people. His Majesty, in turn, asked the guest to convey his greetings and best wishes

of happiness and success to the President. His Majesty also wished the Tanzanian people continued development and growth. The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Aufi,

Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan. From the Tanzanian side, attendees included Maulidah Hassan, Adviser to the President, and Abdullah Abas Kilima, Ambassador of the United Republic of Tanzania to the Sultanate of Oman. — **ONA**

SHORT TAKES

HIS MAJESTY GREETES LIBYAN LEADER

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Mohamed al Menfi of the Libyan Presidential Council on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes to President Dr Mohamed and the Libyan people. His Majesty also wished Libya further security and stability and to achieve aspirations of progress and growth at all levels.



‘NATION’S READINESS 2025’ EXERCISE BEGINS IN MUSCAT

MUSCAT: The national exercise ‘Nation’s Readiness 2025’ commenced on Tuesday in the Governorate of Muscat. Organised by the National Committee for Emergency Management (NCEM) in cooperation with relevant authorities, the exercise will span two days.

Colonel Zayed bin Hamad al Junaibi, Head of the National Emergency Management Centre, said that the exercise aims to raise the efficiency of response teams, promote coordination among various entities involved in emergency management and achieve effective measures to protect lives and public property at a national level. Colonel Zayed added that the exercise includes simulations of several emergency hypotheses, such as managing responses to extreme weather events, implementing and coordinating safety manoeuvres and validating approved national plans and measuring the speed of response and decision-making under diverse conditions.

The exercise involves the various sectors of the NCEM and the Subcommittee for Emergency Management in Muscat Governorate, with support from military and security forces and other relevant stakeholders. — ONA

STATE COUNCIL DISCUSSES THREE DRAFT LAWS

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

THE State Council on Tuesday discussed the drafts of the National Geospatial Data and Information Law, the Unified Industrial Regulation Law for the GCC States, and the draft Amendment to the Unified Customs Law for the GCC States.

The Council reviewed a study by the Education and Research Committee titled ‘Enhancing the Quality of Educational Attainment and Mastery of Competencies and Skills in School Education in the Sultanate of Oman: An Analytical and Legislative Study.’

These discussions took place during the fourth session of the third regular sitting of the eighth term, presided over by Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council.

In his opening speech, the Chairman urged the permanent and special committees to expedite their studies and proposals to ensure they are ready for discussion in upcoming sessions.

He expressed his confidence that the constructive discussions would yield the desired results.

The Council discussed the Legal Committee’s opinion on the ‘National Geospatial Data and Information Draft Law’ in which Sultan bin Matar al Azizi, Chairman of the Committee, explained that the draft law aims to establish a comprehensive framework for developing national policies, standards, and technical specifications governing the collection, production, exchange, and dissemination of national geospatial data and information.

Dr Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Rashdi, a member of the State Council’s Legal Committee, stated that the draft law on national geospatial data and information aims to achieve several objectives. “This law will clearly contribute to regulating urban planning in the Sultanate of Oman and will open up broad new horizons for investment in the field of geographic data and information, in line with Oman Vision 2040.”

Meanwhile, Dr Amer bin Nasser al Mutani, a member of the State Council’s



Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, presides over the session on Tuesday.

Economic and Financial Committee, said: “The draft Unified Industrial Regulation Law is a unified Gulf legislative framework concerned with regulating the industrial sector in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and unifying industrial policies to enhance economic integration among member states.

The law’s importance at this stage stems from its role in supporting industrial investment, raising the competitiveness of Gulf industries, and keeping pace with modern industrial transformations, thus contributing to economic diversification and creating sustainable growth opportunities.”

The law will provide a clear and continuous regulatory environment by regulating licensing and expansion procedures and protecting investor data, thereby enhancing confidence and encouraging industrial investment.

Regarding the draft Unified Customs Law, Ali bin Mubarak al Amri, a member of the State Council’s Economic and Financial Committee, stated that the draft amendments to the Unified Customs Law for the GCC countries were discussed. He indicated that the amendments to this law are an important strategic step to improve the efficiency of customs performance to

keep pace with global changes.

The session concluded with a discussion of a study conducted by the Education and Research Committee, entitled ‘Enhancing the Quality of Academic Achievement and Mastery of Skills in School Education. Dr Abdullah bin Mohammed al Sarmi, Chairman of the Education and Research Committee, explained that the study aims to determine the reality of the quality of academic achievement and mastery of skills among students in the Sultanate of Oman, based on national and international test indicators, and to evaluate the policies and efforts made by the Ministry of Education in this field across various educational stages, while benefiting from the best international practices.

Dr Rashid bin Saif al Mahrazi, a member of the Education and Research Committee, stated that the study undoubtedly stems from the focus of Oman Vision 2040 on the ‘People and Society’ pillar, which emphasises education, learning and scientific research.

The study reviewed the efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of education, specifically enhancing academic achievement and mastery of study skills.

Oman-India CEPA not to affect Omanisation

FROM P1

Al Yousef added that the CEPA represents an important step forward in boosting economic cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of India by opening new channels of investment and trade. He said that related negotiations were based on specialised studies, including an economic study prepared by ‘Deloitte & Touche’, which affirmed the economic feasibility of the CEPA and the pact’s ability to enhance added value and support the competitiveness of Omani exports in global markets. Al Yousef said that the negotiations took place in five main tours from 2023 to 2025. He added that, under the CEPA, the Sultanate of Oman obtained an advanced rate of trade liberalisation to the tune of 97.4 per cent of the total volume of Omani goods in existing exports, while total access to Indian markets stood at about 77.8 per cent,



with special liberalisation for a number of goods of strategic importance to national industries.

In return, Oman granted the Indian side gradual customs liberalisation according to clear-cut timetables, amounting to 99.22 per cent in a manner that fits with national economic policies and requirements for protecting local industries. For his part, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the

the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), said that to maximise the Omani private sector’s gains from the CEPA, the OCCI would send trade delegations to India and receive Indian trade delegations, in addition to organising workshops in different governorates of Oman (in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion) to outline the terms of the agreement. — ONA

Oman welcomes Yemen prisoner exchange deal

FROM P1

The statement confirmed that the conflict parties concluded intensive discussions held in Oman from December 9 to 23, successfully reaching an agreement on a new phase for the release of conflict-related detainees from all sides.

Commenting on the outcome, the UN Special Envoy stated, “Securing an agreement on another phase of detainee releases is a positive and crucial step that will help alleviate the immense suffering of detainees and their families across Yemen.”

He further emphasised that the “effective implementation of the agreement will require the sustained engagement and cooperation of the parties, coordinated regional support, and continuous efforts to build on this progress towards securing further releases.”

The Office of the UN Special Envoy reaffirmed its steadfast commitment to continuing its role in facilitating the implementation of the detainee exchange, in full accordance with established humanitarian principles.

Jasem Mohammed al Budaiwi, GCC Secretary-General, has welcomed the

agreement that was signed in Muscat on Tuesday for the exchange of prisoners in Yemen.

Al Budaiwi commended the efforts of the Sultanate of Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to Yemen, and the International Committee of the Red Cross in reaching this agreement. Al Budaiwi expressed the hope that this agreement would contribute to strengthening the march of peace and stability in the Republic of Yemen, alleviate the humanitarian suffering . — ONA

جهاز الضريبة
Tax Authority

رؤية عمان 2040
Oman Vision 2040

Announcement

The Tax Authority draws the attention of producers and importers of soft drinks to the following decisions:

» Suspend the customs obligation of applying the Digital Tax Stamp on soft drinks.

» Postpone the local obligation of applying the Digital Tax Stamp on soft drinks, which was scheduled to commence as of 1st January, 2026, until further notice.

These decisions come within the framework of the Tax Authority’s commitment to support procedural smoothness and to ensure the technical and operational readiness of companies, importers, and traders for the optimal implementation of the system.

The Tax Authority emphasizes that:

The decision is strictly limited to soft drinks.

This postponement does not result in any change to the implementation of the DTS system on other excise goods subject to the system.

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SHORT TAKES



The meeting explored various areas of military cooperation between the two countries. — ONA

RAO COMMANDER RECEIVES QATARI MILITARY OFFICIAL

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Matar bin Salim al Balushi, Commander of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO), received on Tuesday at his office in Muaskar Al Murtafaa Maj Gen Rashid Mohammed al Hajri, Commander of the Military Police Forces of the State of Qatar, and his accompanying military delegation.

During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views and discussed several topics of mutual interest. They also explored various areas of military cooperation between the two countries.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Abdulkadhim bin Ibrahim al Ajmi, RAO Director-General of Administration and Human Resources, and Brigadier Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, RAO Director-General of Supplies and Housing. It was also attended by the Military Attaché at the Embassy of the State of Qatar in Muscat. — ONA

RAFO COMMANDER RECEIVES SAUDI MILITARY OFFICIAL



The two sides exchanged views on several military topics of mutual interest. — ONA

MUSCAT: Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), received on Tuesday at his office in Muaskar Al Murtafaa Lt Gen Turki bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force, and his accompanying military delegation.

During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views on several military topics of mutual interest. The meeting was attended by a number of senior officers from the Royal Air Force of Oman. — ONA

Medical City for Military, Security Services marks 2nd Scientific Research Day

MUSCAT: The Medical City for Military and Security Services marked its second Annual Scientific Research Day. The event, held under the theme “Empowering Minds... Enriching the Future,” was conducted under the auspices of Brigadier (Doctor) Saqr bin Zayed al Busaidy, Assistant Head of the Medical City for Military and Security Services for Medical Affairs.

The ceremony, held at the Military and Security Services Pension Fund on Tuesday, commenced with a visual presentation titled “Towards Research Leadership: From Vision to Achievement.” The presentation highlighted key scientific research in medical studies. Following



Marking this day aims to strengthen and enrich medical environments by promoting relevant scientific and applied research within the healthcare sector. — ONA

this, the Commandant of the Medical City School for Military and Security Services delivered an address emphasising the vital role

of scientific research in advancing public health. The event featured scientific and panel discussion sessions covering a range of medical fields and specialisations. A specialised exhibition in medicine and scientific research was also organised, showcasing a selection of scientific studies and medical research projects.

In conclusion, the chief guest of the event honoured the guest speakers and the winners of the scientific research competition. Marking this day aims to strengthen and enrich medical environments by promoting relevant scientific and applied research within the healthcare sector. — ONA

Data governance, policies, talent keys to AI security

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, DEC 23

THE DEVELOPMENT in AI security is advancing every day, but so are the sophistication and skills of hackers threatening information security across the globe, according to the participants of the Oman AI Security Conference.

It was inaugurated by Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in Muscat on Tuesday.

In his keynote address, Said bin Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA Group, highlighted that the importance of technology depends on how much organisations invest in people.

In an exclusive interview with Observer, Al Mandhari said, “AI security is not anymore the security of infrastructure. It is the trust of data models, and all this comes with trusted, talented, and accountable people to serve the purpose. Therefore, the governments have to invest in talents, and the talents will make the difference in how AI security can be achieved. This is sovereignty, and sovereignty requires good investment in people. Only your own people can achieve the sovereignty countries are looking for.”

Artificial intelligence is not only accelerating innovation across industries, governments, and economies, but it is also reshaping the cyber threat landscape at an unprecedented speed. Alongside AI-driven attacks, the emerging reality of



post-quantum computing now challenges the very foundations of traditional data security.

The co-founder and CEO of Securado, Krishnadas KT, explained that the AI Security Conference (AISEC) 2025 stands as Oman’s premier executive forum, dedicated to propelling the national agenda for artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

“This conference is not about technology, but it is about responsibility. Responsibility for how AI has been governed and processed. Most of the time when data is fed to AI, it can neither be deleted or erased and this poses a big threat to society. It is not a problem for the industry but is a problem for human privacy,” said Krishnadas.

So the objective is to create awareness for the society to have the right controls in place before they get into the use of AI. Data governance is one of the biggest challenges that is being faced at the moment.

Almost every AI is built on data.

“It is transforming data into knowledge. Once it is learned, we cannot remove it. So what is being fed into the data and

LLModels? No governance policies exist as of today,” pointed out Krishnadas.

Cybersecurity was once built to respond. Today, the response alone is no longer enough. We believe security must be predictive, adaptive, and intelligent. This belief led to the creation of the Digital Vaccine, an evolution of Managed Security Services (MSSP) designed for an AI-first, quantum-ready world.

“Much like a biological vaccine, Digital Vaccine continuously identifies new and unknown attack patterns, learns from every attempted breach, and builds defence mechanisms before damage occurs,” he explained.

The urgency is real, according to the experts, because post-quantum risks will soon render many of today’s encryption methods ineffective, exposing sensitive data that was once considered secure. At the same time, AI-powered cyber threats are becoming autonomous, faster, and more targeted-operating at machine speed and scale.

As Oman accelerates its digital transformation, the

question is no longer if cyber risks will evolve, but how prepared we are to face them, noted the CEO of Securado.

According to the organisers, the conference is very committed to responsibly leveraging Artificial intelligence to protect digital environments, enhance cyber defences, and promote ethical innovation in alignment with Oman Vision 2040.

Speaking on cybersecurity in the age of AI, Raed Abudayyeh from Palo Alto Networks explained how quickly hackers are able to hack and grab information.

“Five years ago, this was in weeks. Three to four years ago, it was done in 48 hours. Now it is in minutes. They go from your network all the way to getting data out. So attackers are leveraging AI massively,” Abudayyeh explained.

Dr Fatma al Maqbali, representing the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, speaking on building cyber-resilient governments in the age of AI, noted the issues that need to be looked into are the speed of AI threats Vs. policy threats, skills in AI cybersecurity, and dependence on external vendors. Looking at the road-map for Oman, she said, “In the short term: AI risk assessment; in the medium term: policy and skills; and in the long term: it is adaptive cyber governance.

Two panel discussions were held - “Reimagining tomorrow- C Suite’s strategies for AI powered transformation” and “The Changing Threat Landscape: AI Risks and Opportunities.”

Empowering 600 citizens in life-saving skills

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, DEC 23

As part of a forward-looking approach to community safety and human capital development, Mawarid launched ‘Monqidh’ (Rescuer) initiative, a large-scale first aid training programme aimed at equipping citizens with life-saving skills and strengthening emergency preparedness across the Wilayat of Al Khabourah.

The initiative, the first of its kind in the area, has been implemented in cooperation with the Office of the Wali of Al Khabourah and executed by Al Khabourah Health Complex.

It officially commenced in December and will continue for three months. The initiative targets the training of 600 individuals

through approximately 20 specialised workshops, delivered in a mix of public venues, schools, and key community gathering spaces to ensure broad accessibility and impact. Shaikh Yousef bin Hassan al Balhaf, Wali of Al Khabourah, stressed that the initiative reflects a strategic investment in people and community resilience. He noted that building awareness of first aid is no longer optional, but a societal necessity.

“Monqidh contributes to creating a conscious and prepared community capable of responding effectively to emergency situations,” he said. “By empowering citizens with essential first aid skills, we are enhancing their ability to act confidently in critical moments, whether at home, in public places,



The programme officially commenced in December and will continue for three months.

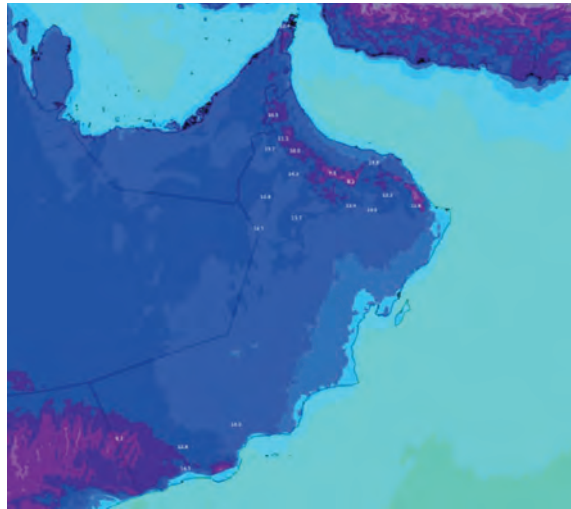
or at work, until professional medical teams arrive.” From the private sector perspective, Jack Yosteh, representing Mawarid, emphasised that the initiative aligns

with the company’s commitment to social responsibility and sustainable community development. He explained that immediate and correct first aid intervention

during the first minutes of an emergency can significantly reduce complications and save lives.

“Training community members to deal with critical injuries before the arrival of specialised authorities can make the difference between life and death,” he said, adding that such initiatives create long-term social value beyond their immediate outcomes. The programme has already received positive feedback from participants and the wider community. By bringing together public institutions, the private sector, and the local community, the Monqidh Initiative stands as a practical model for preventive health awareness and community empowerment, reinforcing the idea that saving lives begins with knowledge.

SHORTTAKES



FROST FORMATION ON MOUNTAINS

MUSCAT: Oman Meteorology has indicated the probability of frost formation on mountain peaks from Tuesday, high and medium clouds advection over most of the northern governorates, and a chance of low clouds along the coastal areas of the Arabian Sea and the Sea of Oman, with chances of isolated rain.

Frost is a covering of ice crystals on the surface produced by the deposition of water vapour to a surface cooler than 0°C .

The deposition occurs when the temperature of the surface falls below the frost point. Similarly, dew forms when the air or surface temperature falls below the dew point temperature. Minimum temperatures can drop to between 20 °C and sub-zero levels.

MOHT WARNS AGAINST TANUF ARCH ROPE SWINGS



MUSCAT: *The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has advised against using rope swings at the Tanuf Arch in the Wilayat of Nizwa, due to the significant danger they pose to visitors because of the geological formations. The ministry emphasised the importance of adhering to licensed and approved adventure tourism activities only and warned that any violations will be subject to legal action in accordance with applicable regulations.*

Forum seeks to enhance food safety

BARKA: Al Batinah South Municipality on Tuesday started a two-day municipal health forum in the Wilayat of Barka, as part of the Municipality's efforts to enhance institutional integration in food safety and develop the overall municipal work system.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South.

The forum deals with key challenges and opportunities in the municipal sector and reviews efforts made in the areas of food safety, public health, waste management, municipal inspection and digital transition.

The forum also explores modern initiatives and smart technologies that contribute to raising the efficiency of municipal performance and improving the quality of services provided to the community.

The opening ceremony included visual presentations featuring the progress of municipal action in Al Batinah South Governorate. — ONA

Collaboration needed on antimicrobial resistance

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 23

CONTINUED collaboration among clinicians, laboratories and policymakers is the need of the hour in order to address the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), according to a seminar, which was held recently.

Speaking to the Observer, Dr Amina al Jardani, AMR Coordinator and Consultant at the Central Public Health Laboratories (CPHL), emphasised that rapid detection and timely clinical decisions remain 'crucial to preserving the effectiveness of life-saving antimicrobials'.

“Oman has been actively tackling antimicrobial resistance (AMR) through high-level global conferences as AMR causes hundreds of deaths annually in Oman,” she said, adding that national efforts focus on improving national surveillance and data sharing, as seen in recent workshops and Oman’s One Health Approach strategy involves linking human, animal and environmental health to control resistance.

Over 120 healthcare professionals from



Over 120 healthcare professionals from across Oman attended the AMR Update 2025.

across Oman attended the AMR Update 2025. Dr Azza al Rashdi spoke about Oman's AMR surveillance findings and national efforts and achievements on combating AMR. Dr Meher Rizvi of SQU spoke about advances in diagnostic technologies and Dr Wafa al Tamtami from the Medical City for Military and Security Services shared local experiences integrating rapid testing into clinical workflows. The conference, themed 'Detect Early, Treat Early', featured presentations from leading experts on national AMR trends, breakthroughs in

rapid diagnostics and practical strategies to reinforce surveillance programmes. Sessions also covered the detection of critical resistance mechanisms such as ESBL, MCR-1 and carbapenemase production, along with discussions on *Candida auris*, an emerging pathogen of growing concern.

With antimicrobial resistance recognised worldwide as one of the most urgent public health threats, the event marked another step forward in supporting national efforts to preserve antibiotic effectiveness and improve patient outcomes.

شركة سياحة الصحراء س.م.ع
SAHARA
P.O. Box 311, Muscat, Postal Code 100, Sultanate of Oman

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2025

On behalf of the Board of Directors,
I am pleased to submit the unaudited
financial statement of the company for
the financial year ended on November
30, 2025, along with related reports.

The revenue is RO 13,982,980 as against RO 13,262,280 in the corresponding period of the previous year whereas net Profit after taxes for the period is RO 2,723,491 as against RO 2,890,192 in the last year.

The total shareholders fund increased from RO 28,641,956 at the end of November 2024 to RO 29,384,620 at the end of November 2025 and as a result of this growth, the net assets per share has recorded R.O.3.709.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express the most sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Bin Taimour Al Said for his wise leadership and generous support to the private sector. Furthermore, I would extend our gratitude to his government for their cooperation and assistance with special mention to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion, Muscat Stock Exchange, and Financial Services Authority.

I conclude this report by expressing our appreciation to the shareholders, Petroleum Development Oman, our bankers, and customers for their valued support and cooperation.

For and on behalf of the Board of
Directors,

TALAL BIN QAIS AL ZAWAWI
CHAIRMAN

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Financial Position		
as at 30 th November, 2025		
	2025	2024
	RO. '000	RO. '000
Fixed Assets	13,429	14,664
Current Assets		
Inventories	31	39
Trade & Other Receivables	6,192	6,272
Receivable from related party	41	41
Bank and Cash	13,815	11,368
	20,079	17,720
Total Assets	33,508	32,384
Current liabilities		
Trade and other Payables	836	661
Payables to related parties	2,392	2,341
Lease liability	-	23
Tax liability	473	304
	3,701	3,329
Long-term liabilities		
Lease liability	-	-
Deferred Tax liability	395	389
Employees' end of service benefits	27	24
	422	413
Total Liabilities	4,123	3,742
Net Assets	29,385	28,642
Shareholder's Fund		
Share Capital	7,923	7,923
Legal Reserve	2,641	2,641
Retained Earnings	18,821	18,078
Total Shareholders' Equity	29,385	28,642

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Comprehensive Income		
For 12 months ended 30 th November, 2025		
	2025	2024
	RO. '000	RO. '000
Turnover/Revenue	13,983	13,262
Gross Profit	3,318	3,470
Other Income	471	444
Administration & General Expenses	(580)	(507)
Operating Profit	3,209	3,407
Finance Charges	(6)	(7)
Profit before taxation	3,203	3,400
Taxation	(480)	(510)
Net Profit attributable to ordinary shareholders	2,723	2,890

The complete accounts in either Arabic or English will be delivered to any shareholder within 7 days of receipt of the request. Such request may be sent to the Board Secretary, Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.), P.O.Box: 311, Postal Code -100, Muscat.

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of Tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ before 10:00 am Wednesday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) Per set
4738/2025/ MOH/ HQ-387	Supply of Surgical Consumable Items	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10,500 • LO: 25,500
4748/2025/ MOH/ HQ-388	Supply of Surgical Items (Orthopedic)	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 18 • LO:90
4749/2025/ MOH/ HQ-389	Supply and Installation of CCTV System at Al Masarah Hospital in Muscat Governorate	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in Excellent,First	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4750/2025/ MOH/ HQ-390	Supply and Installation of Medical Air Plant for the Royal Hospital	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4772/2025/ MOH/ HQ-392	Supply of Pharmaceutical	25-12-2025	14-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 27
4775/2025/ MOH/ HQ-393	Supply of Consumables Items (Breast Cancer Surgery & Biopsy)	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4797/2025/ MOH/ HQ-397	Supply of Pharmaceutical	25-12-2025	14-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4798/2025/ MOH/ HQ-398	Provision of Consultancy Engineering Services (Design and Supervision) for Proposed Urgent Care Unit at Fayadh Health Center in Governorate of Buraimi	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in First & Second	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4799/2025/ MOH/ HQ-399	Supply and Installation of Laboratory Refrigerators for the Royal Hospital	25-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4819/2025/ MOH/ HQ-400	Supply of Pharmaceutical (Microbiology) for the Royal Hospital	31-12-2025	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4820/2025/ MOH/ HQ-401	Supply & Installation of Medical Furniture for the Royal Hospital	31-12-2025	28-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4834/2025/ MOH/ HQ-402	Supply of Laboratory and Consumable Items for the Royal Hospital	31-12-2025	28-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
4836/2025/ MOH/ HQ-403	Supply of Surgical Items for Respiratory Item for Royal Hospital	31-12-2025	28-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25

- Tenders should be submitted on line on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accept or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200. Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



People take part in a protest organised in Dhaka. — AFP

DHAKA SUMMONS INDIAN ENVOY AS PROTEST ERUPTS

DHAKA: Bangladesh on Tuesday summoned the top Indian envoy as fresh protests erupted outside its high commission in New Delhi over the mob lynching of a worker in Dhaka. The garment worker was accused of blasphemy and lynched on December 18 as anti-India sentiment rises in the neighbouring nation. Seven suspects have been arrested over the killing. On Tuesday, hundreds of demonstrators converged near Bangladesh’s High Commission in New Delhi, waving saffron flags and banners.

Earlier on Tuesday, Bangladesh’s foreign ministry had summoned Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma to express “grave concern” over previous protests outside its visa centres. In its statement, the ministry cited “regrettable incidents” and vandalism outside its visa centres in New Delhi and Siliguri last week. India has dismissed reports of vandalism as “misleading propaganda”.

Ties between the neighbours have deteriorated since ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the pro-democracy uprising last year and sought refuge in India. — AFP

SYRIA, SDF AGREE TO DE-ESCALATE AFTER ALEPPO VIOLENCE



A boy walks with a woman, carrying his belongings, Aleppo. — Reuters

DAMASCUS: Syrian government forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces agreed to de-escalate in the northern city of Aleppo, after a wave of attacks that both sides blamed on each other left at least two civilians dead and several wounded. Syria’s state news agency SANA, citing the defence ministry, said the army’s general command issued an order to stop targeting the SDF’s fire sources. The SDF said in a statement later that it had issued instructions to stop responding to attacks by Syrian government forces following de-escalation contacts.

The Syrian health ministry said two people were killed and several were wounded in shelling by the SDF on residential neighbourhoods in the city. The injuries included two children and two civil defence workers. The violence erupted hours after Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said during a visit to Damascus that the SDF appeared to have no intention of honouring a commitment to integrate into the state’s armed forces by an agreed year-end deadline. — Reuters

THAI-CAMBODIA BORDER MEETING IN DOUBT OVER VENUE ROW

BANGKOK: Thailand on Tuesday rejected a request by Cambodia to hold bilateral talks in a neutral country, leaving a planned meeting to negotiate an end to deadly border clashes in doubt. The nations’ long-standing border conflict reignited this month, shattering an earlier truce, killing more than 40 people and displacing over 900,000 on both sides, officials said. The clashing neighbours on Monday agreed to negotiate truce terms this week, but Cambodia asked Thailand to

hold the talks in a neutral venue, Malaysia’s capital. Thailand’s defence ministry, however, said on Tuesday that the bilateral border committee meeting would go ahead in Thailand’s Chanthaburi province from Wednesday as planned. “We guarantee Chanthaburi is safe. This province is the original plan for hosting the GBC (General Border Committee) even before the fighting started,” Thai defence ministry spokesperson Surasant Kongsiri told reporters.

Surasant said officials from the border committee would meet from Wednesday to Saturday, adding that whether the meeting happened or not depended on Cambodia. A Cambodian government spokesman said that he had no updated information on the meeting venue. The conflict stems from a territorial dispute over the colonial-era demarcation of their 800-kilometre border and a smattering of ancient temple ruins situated on the frontier. — AFP

Israel signals to stay in Gaza, build new outposts

DEFENCE

Minister Israel Katz on Tuesday vowed Israel will remain in Gaza and pledged to establish outposts in the north of the Palestinian territory, according to a video of a speech published by Israeli media. His remarks, reported across Israeli media, come as a fragile US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas holds in Gaza. Mediators are pressing for the implementation of the next phases of the truce, which would involve an Israeli withdrawal from the territory.

Speaking at an event in the Israeli settlement of Beit El in the occupied West Bank, Katz said: “We are deep inside Gaza, and we will never leave Gaza — there will be no such thing.” “We are there to protect, to prevent what happened (from happening again),” he added, according to a video published by Israeli news site Ynet. Katz also vowed to establish outposts in the north of Gaza in place of settlements that had been evacuated during Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the territory in 2005. “When the time comes, we will establish in northern Gaza, Nahal outposts in place of the communities that were uprooted,” Katz said, referring to military-agricultural settlements set up by Israeli soldiers. “We will do this in the right way and at the appropriate time.”

Katz’s remarks were slammed by former minister and chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot, who accused the government of “acting against the



People walk amid shelters at the Nuseirat camp for displaced Palestinians. — AFP

Katz’s remarks come as a fragile US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas holds in Gaza. Mediators are pressing for the implementation of the next phases of the truce, which would involve an Israeli withdrawal from the territory

broad national consensus, during a critical period for Israel’s national security.” “While the government votes with one hand in favour of the Trump plan, with the other hand it sells fables about isolated settlement nuclei in the (Gaza) Strip,” he wrote on X, referring to the Gaza peace plan brokered by US President Donald Trump.

The next phases of Trump’s plan would involve an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the establishment of an interim authority to govern the territory in place of Hamas and the deployment of an international stabilisation force. It also envisages the demilitarisation of Gaza, including the disarmament of

Hamas, which the group has refused. On Thursday, several Israelis entered the Gaza Strip in defiance of army orders and held a symbolic flag-raising ceremony to call for the reoccupation and resettlement of the Palestinian territory.

In a devastated village near Khan Yunis city, recent Israeli drone and artillery strikes shattered the tenuous sense of peace delivered by a ceasefire that has largely held since October 10. Residents say the strikes have targeted neighbourhoods east of the so-called Yellow Line — a demarcation established under the truce between Israel and Hamas. — AFP



INDIA TO PROVIDE \$450M TO CYCLONE-RAVAGED SRI LANKA

COLOMBO: India has committed \$450 million in humanitarian assistance to help Sri Lanka recover from the devastating damage caused by Cyclone Ditrwah, foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said on a visit to the country. The cyclone killed more than 640 people when it swept across the South Asian island last month, causing floods and landslides that inflicted about \$4 billion in damage.

Jaishankar, who is on a two-day visit, told a media briefing in Colombo he had handed a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dissanayake, committing to a “reconstruction package of \$450 million”. While \$350 million will take the form of “concessional lines of credit”, the remaining \$100 million will be given as grants. Jaishankar also noted the 1,100 tonnes of relief material, along with medicine and other necessary equipment, sent to India’s southern neighbour in the cyclone’s immediate aftermath. — AFP

POLITICAL DEMANDS

Tunisia’s powerful union chief resigns



Nourredine Taboubi, head of Tunisia’s most powerful labour union, resigned on Tuesday, union sources said, a month before a planned nationwide strike. Taboubi’s departure could weaken the UGTT labour federation, which is widely seen as the last strong bastion of democratic civil society in the North African country. The UGTT had no immediate comment on Taboubi’s reported exit. — Reuters

MILITARY OPERATIONS

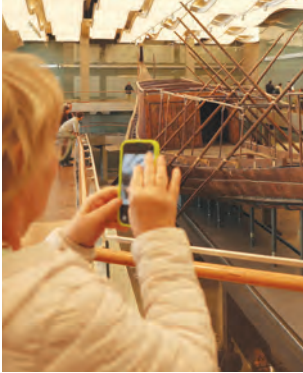
18 kidnapped Colombian soldiers released



The 18 Colombian soldiers who were kidnapped while conducting an operation against the ELN guerrilla group have been released, according to the Ombudsman’s Office. Residents handed over the soldiers to a humanitarian commission made up of representatives from the Catholic Church and the Ombudsman’s Office, according to a social media post by the state agency in charge of protecting human rights. — AFP

SOLAR VESSEL

GEM begins live restoration of ancient boat



Egypt began a live restoration of King Khufu’s ancient solar boat at the newly-opened Grand Egyptian Museum on Tuesday, over 4,000 years after the vessel was first built. The 4,600-year-old boat was built during the reign of King Khufu, who also commissioned the Great Pyramid of Giza. The vessel was discovered in 1954 in a sealed pit near the pyramids, but its excavation did not begin until 2011 due to the fragile condition of the wood. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



A man walks as Danish flag flutters next to Hans Egede Statue in Nuuk, Greenland. — Reuters file photo

PM OF GREENLAND:
OUR DECISIONS
ARE MADE HERE

COPENHAGEN: Greenland’s prime minister on Tuesday stressed that decisions about the autonomous territory’s future would be made on the island, after US President Donald Trump reiterated that the United States needed Greenland for “national security”. “Greenland is our country. Our decisions are made here,” Jens-Frederik Nielsen said.

“We need Greenland for national security. Not for minerals,” Trump told a news conference in Palm Beach, Florida, on Monday. “We have to have it,” the president said, adding that Landry “wanted to lead the charge”. On his appointment, Landry immediately vowed to make the Danish territory “a part of the US”.

In his post, Nielsen said he was “sad” after hearing Trump’s renewed desire to take over Greenland. “Such words reduce our country to a question of security and power. That is not how we see ourselves, and that is not how we in Greenland can or should be described,” Nielsen said. — AFP

LOUVRE INSTALLS BARS OVER ROBBERY



The Louvre Museum on Tuesday installed metal bars over the windows of the Apollo Gallery, where thieves broke into the Paris landmark to make off with crown jewels in a recent daylight robbery. “This is one of the emergency measures decided after the theft,” the museum’s deputy administrator Francis Steinbock said. Early in the morning, workers on the gallery balcony helped position a large grille hoisted by a crane to secure it to the gallery’s tall French door windows. — AFP

LOCALS
SOUND ALARM
AS BIJAGOS
ISLANDS
SLOWLY
SWALLOWED
BY SEA

BIJAGOS: Turquoise waves splash against the white sand beaches of the Bijagos archipelago, where locals fear rising sea levels will swallow their islands whole. Off the Atlantic coast of tropical Guinea-Bissau, the Unesco World Heritage Site is home to colonies of sea turtles, hippos, sharks, manatees, and nearly 850,000 migratory birds. The archipelago hosts several sacred sites as well as artisanal fisheries relied upon by some 25,000 inhabitants.

Made up of 88 islands and islets — of which only about 20 are permanently inhabited — the archipelago stretches more than 10,000 square kilometres. “Every year, we lose up to 2 metres of the beach,” said Antonio Honoria Joao, administrative assistant and community organiser at Guinea-Bissau’s Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Marine Areas (IBAP). He was in Bubaque, one of the archipelago’s most populated islands with nearly 5,000

inhabitants. Joao said the island was “in danger”. “Fifty years ago, the beach was very wide,” he said. Climate change and rainwater runoff that triggers landslides are at the heart of the problem, IBAP’s Joao said. But he also condemned human factors such as the island’s rampant urbanisation and the dumping of waste on beaches, which weakens the coast against the rising sea increased vegetation cover and rockier coasts have meant some islands are better protected than others. — AFP

‘Massive’ Russian strikes
hit Ukraine energy sites

LARGE-SCALE Russian strikes killed at least three people and cut power to thousands in freezing winter temperatures across Ukraine on Tuesday, officials said, as US-led talks to end the nearly four-year war faltered. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the pre-Christmas strikes showed that the Kremlin had no intention of ending the attack it launched in February 2022. Russia attacked with 635 drones and 38 missiles, Ukraine’s air force said.

The strikes came a day after a Russian general was killed in a car blast in Moscow and after both sides held separate talks in Miami with US officials on ending the war in Miami. There has been no sign of an imminent breakthrough in the diplomatic push. Zelensky said a four-year-old child was killed in the central Zhytomyr region, where a Russian drone struck a residential building.

Workers were scrambling to repair energy infrastructure hit in the attack, he said, which forced emergency power cuts across several regions in frigid winter weather. “An attack ahead of Christmas, when people simply want to be with their families, at home, and safe. An attack carried out essentially in the midst of negotiations aimed at ending this war,” he said, adding: “Putin still cannot accept that he must stop killing.”

Russia’s army said it had launched a massive strike using long-range drones and hypersonic missiles at military and energy sites. The head of Ukraine’s Zhytomyr region, Vitaliy Bunechko, said a girl born in 2021 succumbed to her wounds after her building was hit. “Doctors fought to save her life, but in the end they were unable to do so,” he said on Telegram. There were also deaths in the Kyiv and Khmelnytskyi regions.

The southern Black Sea region of Odesa was also targeted again — as Russia steps up its attacks on the important port city. Olena Dolhachova, a 40-year-old maths teacher there, said she had to resort to candles to do her work. “There are attacks every



Emergency responders work at the site of a Russian drone strike, in Kyiv. — Reuters

week. Just when power is restored, all our schedules are disrupted again, we are left without electricity, without stability, sitting in the dark for two or three days,” she said. “It is very difficult.” Ukrainian authorities say the intensifying strikes are an attempt to completely destroy Ukraine’s maritime logistics. Dolhachova said power outages often mean her students cannot study in online classes. “Despite everything, we are working, we are teaching... We are not giving up,” she added.

Anastasiia Kulakivska, an Odesa beauty salon manager, said “seven days without electricity has become the norm in Odesa.” “The house gets very cold very quickly,” she said, describing trying to keep her medicine at the right temperature without a fridge and using a generator for her family’s needs. “It’s about health,” she said. “For example, when your child is sick, you need to plug in an inhaler, and it can’t run on batteries.”

Ukraine’s prime minister Yulia Svyrydenko said energy facilities in the west

of the country were most affected by the strikes.

Meanwhile, Zelensky said on Tuesday several draft documents, including on security guarantees, had been prepared after talks between US and Ukrainian officials on ending Russia’s war in Ukraine. US officials held talks in Miami at the weekend with Ukrainian and European delegations, and had separate talks in Florida with Russian representatives as Washington tests the scope for a settlement after nearly four years of war.

Kyiv, under US pressure to quickly secure peace, has sought to balance out an initial proposal widely seen as favourable to Moscow demanding it cede more territory and restrict its military capabilities. “They worked productively with envoys of President (Donald) Trump and several draft documents have now been prepared,” Zelensky wrote on X after being briefed by Ukrainian negotiators Rustem Umerov and Andrii Hnatov. — Agencies

Trump urges ‘smart’ Venezuela’s Maduro to step down

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said it would be “smart” for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro to step down, as US naval forces pressed a blockade on the South American country’s oil wealth. Venezuela’s key ally Moscow, however, expressed its “full support” for Maduro’s government, as Washington has dialled up military operations and threats against Caracas.

Asked by reporters at his Florida home if Washington’s threats were designed to force Maduro to leave office after 12 years, Trump said: “That’s up to him, what he wants to do. I think it would be smart for him to do that.” But he added: “If he wants to do something — if he plays tough, it’ll be the last time he’s ever able to play tough.” Firing back just hours later, Maduro said that Trump would be “better off” if he focused on domestic problems rather than threatening Caracas.

“He would be better off in his own country on economic and social issues, and he would be better off in the world if he took care of his country’s affairs,” Maduro said in a speech broadcast on public television. The pledge from Moscow, which is embroiled in the war in Ukraine, came on the eve of a UN Security Council meeting on Tuesday to discuss the mounting crisis.

In a phone call, the foreign ministers of the allied nations blasted the US actions, which have included strikes on alleged drug-trafficking boats and the seizure of two oil tankers. A third ship was being pursued, a US official said on Sunday. “The ministers expressed their deep concern over the escalation of Washington’s actions in the Caribbean Sea, which could have serious consequences for the region and threaten international shipping,” the Russian foreign



Donald Trump speaks after announcing the US Navy new Golden Fleet initiative, Florida. — AFP

ministry said of the call between Sergei Lavrov and Venezuelan counterpart Yvan Gil. “The Russian side reaffirmed its full support for

and solidarity with the Venezuelan leadership and people in the current context,” it added in a statement. US forces have since September

launched strikes on boats that Washington claims, without providing evidence, were trafficking drugs in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean. More than 100 people have been killed — some of them fishermen, according to their families and governments. The latest strike hit a “low-profile vessel” in the eastern Pacific Ocean, killing one occupant, the US military said on Monday.

Last week, Trump also announced a blockade of “sanctioned oil vessels” sailing to and from Venezuela. Trump claims Caracas is using oil money to finance “drug terrorism, human trafficking, murder and kidnapping.” Caracas, in turn, fears Washington is seeking regime change, and has accused Washington of “international piracy.” Moscow’s statement said Lavrov and Gil agreed in their call to “coordinate their actions on the international stage, particularly at the UN.” — AFP

OPINION

When positivity becomes a quiet form of harm



HYESHA BARRETT

The writer is a Master Life Coach and NLP Practitioner

TOXIC positivity refers to the tendency to prioritise positive thinking at the expense of emotional truth. It is the belief that difficult emotions should be minimised, reframed, or moved through as quickly as possible, often before they have been fully felt or understood. Unlike healthy optimism, toxic positivity does not make room for the full emotional experience. Instead, it places subtle pressure on people to feel better, rather than to feel honest.

In adult relationships, toxic positivity often shows up in small, well-intentioned ways that are easy to overlook. A partner shares frustration and is met with “Try to stay positive.” A friend expresses grief and hears “Everything happens for a reason.” Someone names burnout and is told “At least you still have a job.” These responses are rarely meant to dismiss. They usually come from care, discomfort, or a genuine desire to help. Yet they can leave the receiver feeling unseen, misunderstood, or emotionally cut off at a vulnerable moment.

For the person offering toxic positivity, the behaviour often stems from their

own relationship with discomfort. Many people were taught, explicitly or indirectly, that strong emotions are overwhelming, unsafe, or unproductive. Positivity becomes a coping strategy. By reframing quickly, they avoid sitting with feelings that trigger anxiety, helplessness, or old emotional wounds stored in the body. The intention is often regulation, not invalidation. However, avoidance disguised as encouragement still carries relational consequences.

From the perspective of the person receiving toxic positivity, the impact can be quietly damaging over time. When emotions are consistently redirected rather than acknowledged, the nervous system learns that certain feelings are unwelcome or inconvenient. Over time, people may stop sharing altogether, not because the emotions disappear, but because the relationship no longer feels emotionally safe. Connection weakens, replaced by surface-level interactions, emotional self-censorship, and quiet withdrawal.

There is also a physiological cost. Emotions that are not acknowledged remain active in the body. The mind

People do not need to be lifted out of their feelings to feel better. They need to be met inside them. When we allow space for discomfort without trying to brush it away, something softens.

may adopt positive narratives, yet the nervous system stays unsettled and alert. This mismatch can lead to emotional exhaustion, resentment, chronic tension, or a persistent sense of being unsupported even within close relationships.

Handling toxic positivity begins with awareness on both sides. For the person offering it, the work involves building tolerance for emotional discomfort. This means listening without fixing, allowing feelings to exist without rushing toward solutions, and recognising that presence is often more regulating than reassurance. For the person receiving it, it can help to name what is needed and to ask clearly for listening, rather than advice.

At its core, this is not about rejecting positivity, but about restoring emotional honesty. People do not need to be lifted out of their feelings to feel better. They need to be met inside them. When we allow space for discomfort without trying to brush it away, something softens. The body exhales. Trust deepens. Relationships become places where truth can land gently, where emotions are not rushed or managed, and where being real is enough to belong.

Social media as source of informal education

Education has always been linked with institutions like schools, universities and training centres. However, nowadays with digital age, education is not in a classroom. Social media networks have



IMAN QASIM AL SHARQI

The author is a trainer and researcher

grown to be one of the most powerful informal education systems in our era that have shaped the way people think, act and perceive the world. As opposed to conventional education, social media is not based on pedagogical principles. Algorithms rather than teachers determine what content is popularised, recycled or pushed to the periphery. The visibility elements are propelled by engagement metrics and not accuracy, depth, or social value. Consequently, emotionally powering and simplified information tends to become more noticeable in comparison to subtle and evidence-based information.

This informal education is very strong among the youth. To several people, social media has become the main source of information regarding mental health, politics, religion, relationships, and self-development. Although there are good things that this democratisation of information has brought, it has also contributed to the blurring of the line between expertise and opinion. Raising beliefs and behaviours with no responsibility is the role that the influencer who is not educated takes. In addition, social media does not merely relay information, but it actually reorganises thinking patterns. Videos that are of short length do not demand deep thinking but quick and immediate viewing. It strengthens certain versions by repetition, and personalisation algorithms restrict the exposure to different versions.

From an educational perspective, this is what can be termed as a hidden curriculum. Social media instils values, norms, and assumptions which either come in the form of repetition, visibility, and social validation. However, the vast majority of users do not have enough media literacy to be sceptical of sources, detect bias, or even know how algorithms influence their views. This is a loophole that exposes learners to misinformation and manipulation.

The presence of content creators makes the situation even more problematic. Most creators are driven by business forces, and they use sponsorships and monetisation of the platforms. The value of education is prone to conflict with the market value and thus over-simplifying or sensationalising. The question in this respect is no longer whether social media educates or not, but whether it is responsible for its education.

The secret of job security is well-being at work

JOB security is essential for individual well-being and organisational stability, influencing employee performance, skill development, and job satisfaction. In today's dynamic business environment, a lack of job security can negatively impact mental health and clarity of roles.

According to Amy Edmondson, psychological safety is crucial for motivation and effective teamwork. Therefore, organisations must prioritise creating supportive environments that foster both psychological and operational safety for their employees.

Additionally, the rapid pace of organisational change, digital transformation, and economic uncertainty has heightened employees' concerns about stability and continuity at work. This uncertainty affects how individuals perceive their roles and influences their trust in leadership and commitment to the organisation. Consequently, job security has become a strategic priority that directly impacts human capital sustainability and long-term organisational success.

For decades, psychologists have utilised various theories to explain the drivers of human behaviour, with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs being one of the most well-known (1943). This theory describes a progression from basic physiological needs to self-actualisation. Job security clearly falls within the safety category of this hierarchy, as employees need a sense of stability, emotional support, and protection from income loss.

When the need for safety is not met, individuals often experience increased stress and anxiety, impairing their focus and creativity. In organisational settings, this can lead to disengagement, resistance to



DR REEM MOHAMED KHAMIS AL HASHAR

The writer is a consultant in corporate well-being

change, and decreased collaboration among employees. Therefore, ensuring job security is vital for promoting higher-level psychological needs, such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation, in the workplace.

Researcher George Engel (1977) introduced the biopsychosocial model, which connects psychological, social, and biological dimensions in shaping an individual's overall health and well-being. This model offers valuable insights into the relationship between job insecurity and its effects on mental health. It suggests that such insecurity may also play a significant role in increasing the risk of physical injuries and illnesses in the workplace. From this perspective, job insecurity serves as a chronic stressor that disrupts psychological balance, strains workplace relationships, and triggers stress responses, which in turn increase burnout and health risks. This makes ensuring job security an essential preventive priority.

A study by Pires, M. L (2025) demonstrated that job insecurity is directly associated with deteriorating mental health and reduced professional engagement. It also showed that self-confidence serves as a vital individual psychological resource that supports adaptation, while leadership support functions as an organisational resource that can either enhance well-being or contribute to its decline, depending on leadership style and practices.

In the same context, recent analyses underscore the significant role leadership plays in shaping the work environment. An article by Mukunda (2024) shed light on the potential negative effects of leaders with psychopathic traits, noting that while some possess strong communication skills and impression-management abilities,

these traits may coexist with a lack of empathy. Such leaders, when placed in positions of authority, can pose a direct threat to employees' psychological safety and to organisational stability.

According to Blair's study (2005), scientific data indicate that individuals with psychopathic traits show reduced responses to negative stimuli due to diminished activity in the amygdala — the brain region responsible for processing fear and punishment. Although they may possess a cognitive ability to read others' emotions, they lack emotional empathy because of dysfunctions in affective brain circuits. This imbalance is reflected in their leadership styles and can lead to harmful practices in work environments, particularly in the absence of effective organisational regulation or oversight.

Consequently, such neurological and emotional deficits can translate into decision-making patterns that prioritise control, power, and short-term outcomes over employee well-being. In environments where accountability mechanisms are weak, these leadership behaviours may normalise fear, silence, and job insecurity, ultimately undermining trust and long-term organisational resilience.

In light of the above, job security is a critical component of developing robust organisations. It necessitates leadership that comprehensively understands employee needs and makes informed decisions to enhance the professional experience. Investing in job security leads to improved performance, fosters creativity, and encourages innovation. Consequently, this investment results in healthier workplaces that are well-prepared to address challenges and achieve sustainable success.

Christmas 2025 is more than just a celebration...



SAMUEL KUTTY

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

EACH YEAR, people around the world celebrate Christmas on December 25. Its history is intertwined with vibrant traditions that are both fascinating and rich in religious significance, cultural activities, and a blend of age-old customs.

Everything began in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago with the birth of Jesus. Although the exact date is unknown, December 25 was chosen, possibly because winter celebrations were already significant in Europe.

The date was officially recognised by Pope Julius I in 350 AD and formalised in 529 AD by Roman Emperor Justinian. Over time, it evolved from a modest religious observance into the significant occasion known today. Each nation has infused its unique character throughout the years.

Trees, lights, and Santa Claus — elements that seem commonplace today — were once novel concepts. Families gather for special meals, exchange gifts, attend church services, and participate in community celebrations that emphasise peace, goodwill, and charitable giving.

When it comes to the origin of the word Christmas, it has its roots to the term “Christ’s Mass” or “Cristes Maesse.” The word “Christ,” originally written as “Crist,” is derived from the Greek term “Khristos,” which translates

the Hebrew word “Messiah,” meaning “anointed.” The term “messe” is related to the Latin word “missa,” referring to the tradition of the midnight Mass or the Eucharist.

However, Christmas 2025 is more than just a celebration; it is also a unique calendar event. The year ending in “25” creates a visually pleasing and rare repeating “25” pattern — one that has not occurred in exactly 100 years.

The date is exciting people because of the unique combination of the day, month, and year. Social media is already buzzing with posts using the hashtag #251225, which has become a trend. People are creating special posts, cards, and collectibles to celebrate this day. Many individuals consider it lucky and are making plans to commemorate it in a meaningful way.

“Although the spirit of the festival remains the same as always —happiness, family, celebration, and love — this time the date itself adds a special extra magic. Such rare patterns often attract people to the mathematics and history of the calendar,” opines a report on the online platform Tezzbuzz.

According to a report by NDTV, the last time Christmas fell on 25/12/25 was in 1925, and it will not occur again until 2125. This specific date alignment is considered a rare calendar event, so you will have to wait 100 years to see this exact number pattern again.

The date is exciting people because of the unique combination of the day, month and year. Social media is already buzzing with posts using the #251225, which has become a trend

Experts in the field of numerology, a belief system rather than a science, note that the pattern is considered meaningful. The date can be viewed as a palindrome, which some believe functions as an “energetic mirror, highlighting emotional patterns or bringing cycles to closure.

“25/12/25 is a palindrome date; it reads the same forwards and backwards. In numerology, this symmetry is not merely decorative — it is meaningful,” says a report by AstroSure.

According to the astrology app Neo Astro, numerology numbers provide insight into how dates influence the collective mood. For Christmas 2025, the focus is strongly on the numerology number 25.

“From a spiritual point of view, repeating numbers often signifies moments for reflection. Christmas 2025 falls near the end of the year, which already encourages review and gratitude. This rare date strengthens this feeling. It suggests closure of long cycles and the preparation for fresh intentions,” a report in the app states.

Although 25/12/25 stands out as a once-in-a-lifetime Christmas due to the rare convergence of numbers, the spirit of the festival remains unchanged — happiness, love, and a deeper opportunity for reflection. Of course, the season promises to make the celebrations of 2025 truly unforgettable.

AI DATA CENTRES ARE FORCING DIRTY ‘PEAKER’ POWER PLANTS

LAILA KEARNEY

In Chicago’s working-class Pilsen neighbourhood, a 60s-era oil-fired power plant rises up from an industrial lot behind Dvorak Park, which in warmer weather is packed with children climbing on its colourful playground and zooming down slides.

The rarely-used eight-unit Fisk power plant owned by Houston-based NRG Energy was scheduled to retire next year. But then came artificial intelligence.

Prices shot up in the country’s biggest power market - PJM Interconnection - as electricity requests from data centres exceeded existing supplies, sounding the alarm over power shortfalls, and making Fisk and other plants like it suddenly profitable.

“We believe there’s an economic case to keep them around, so we withdrew the retirement notice,” said Matt Pistner, senior vice-president of generation at NRG, of Fisk’s eight power-generating units.

The Fisk power plant is among a growing number of so-called “peaker” electric generating units being pressed into duty across the US as the nation’s electrical with growing demand from data centres powering Big Tech’s investments in artificial intelligence.

Peakers, which are meant to run only in short bursts during periods of spiking electricity demand, help stave off blackouts by supplying power on a moment’s notice. But there’s a trade-off: these often decades-old, fossil-fuelled facilities emit more pollution when they are running and cost more to produce electricity than continuous power plants.

A Reuters analysis of filings with the country’s biggest power grid shows that about 60 per cent of oil, gas and coal power plants slated for retirement in PJM postponed or cancelled those plans this year. Most of the plants averting shutdowns are peaker units.

The Fisk peakers were built on the site of a now-defunct coal-fired electricity generating station that operated for over a century. After years of fierce opposition by local residents, the coal plant shut more than a decade ago, but eight peaking units that run on petroleum oil continue to operate on the site.

“When we found out that the coal plant was closing but there was still going to be power produced at the site, it was very disappointing,” said Jerry Mead-Lucero, a longtime advocate for the closure of the Fisk coal station who spent most of his adult life in Pilsen. Following the coal plant closure, pollution plummeted, but it didn’t vanish. Sulphur dioxide ranged from about 2 to as much as 25 tonnes per year from the site, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, as the eight-unit peaker plant occasionally lumbered to life to feed the grid. — Reuters

A model that can keep multilateralism alive

FEW WOULD deny that there has been a shift away from multilateral cooperation in recent years. As the world becomes more multipolar, geopolitical tensions are hampering efforts to devise common solutions to shared problems, and rising nationalism and fiscal crises within many traditional donor countries are threatening the institutions on which multilateralism depends. As a realist, I recognise that today’s world is more dangerous than the one we inhabited not so long ago. But I am also confident that possibilities for long-term global collaboration remain. I have seen firsthand that multilateral cooperation often delivers results that otherwise would not be attained. My confidence stems from my experience as the chair of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. As my five-year tenure draws to a close, I find myself reflecting on what has underpinned Gavi’s success over the past 25 years and what this experience can teach us about adapting multilateralism for a rapidly changing world.

The first lesson may sound simple, but it is too often forgotten: Always be mission-driven. Gavi exists to save lives and protect health by expanding access to vaccines in lower-income countries. It is this clarity of purpose that has helped halve child mortality in 78 countries and protect every one of us against the threat of infectious diseases. Nor is there any secret to our success. We have done it by uniting a multitude of public and private stakeholders, many with divergent interests, behind a common purpose.

Gavi has always been a coalition of the willing, bringing together national governments, United Nations agencies, philanthropies, vaccine manufacturers, innovators, development banks, research institutions, and civil society. With its diverse skill set, expertise, and political clout, it has protected over half the world’s children against preventable diseases in any given year, as well as providing the world with core competencies during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, when we led the global vaccine response.

In a more multipolar world, similar approaches will be needed



Gavi exists to save lives and protect health by expanding access to vaccines in lower-income countries.



JOSÉ MANUEL BARROSO

The writer is a former president of the European Commission and prime minister of Portugal, is Chair of the Board of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance

to drive progress in other areas where the provision of public goods (conflict resolution, education, health security, equitable access to AI) is too important to be held hostage by adversarial politics and sectional interests. That leads me to the second key lesson: Be mission-driven, but country-led. Gavi was founded in the spirit of partnership, not paternalism. Promoting national self-reliance has always been at the heart of its mission. Countries pay more toward the cost of their vaccine programmes as their national incomes rise, up to the point where they can fully sustain their own immunisation services. Some countries have even transitioned from recipients to donors.

This responsiveness to country needs has made us relentlessly focused on innovation. In 2024, Gavi embraced the historic introduction of malaria vaccines because we recognised how unjust it was that so many countries, particularly in Africa, had to wait so long for such a breakthrough. The same year, Gavi also launched a financial innovation, the First Response Fund, to provide surge financing for the procurement of mpox vaccines, saving precious time that otherwise would have been lost raising additional funding.

Today, Gavi is directing the same innovative zeal towards the

future rollout of vaccines against tuberculosis, the world’s deadliest infectious disease. It is also advancing a new initiative, the African Vaccine Manufacturing Accelerator, with strong backing from the European Union and other donors, to support the African Union’s ambitions for regional high-value manufacturing. I predict we will see a far greater role for, and collaboration between, regional economic and political blocs as the key drivers of multilateralism in the years ahead.

Every coalition needs strong governance and leadership. That is why Nelson Mandela was chosen as Gavi’s first chair. But ensuring that the interests of every stakeholder remain aligned is no simple task, and this insight was not lost on me when I was approached for the role in 2020. I was honoured, and I could not help noticing that the Gavi board had 28 seats, the same number of member states whose interests I sought to align when I was president of the European Commission.

Throughout my tenure at Gavi, I have been guided by the enduring wisdom of Jean Monnet, a leading postwar advocate of European unity: “Nothing is possible without people, but nothing lasts without institutions.” Gavi is truly a unique institution. Not only is it a broad, inclusive alliance of national and international, as well as public and private, entities; it is also an international organisation that has managed to avoid paralysis and inertia, unlike some major intergovernmental bodies. It has done so by maintaining a laser focus on protecting children – even in war zones where the only respite from fighting came from the need to vaccinate populations.

Countries will always have reasons to disagree, but if anything can elevate the cause of peace above extreme national interest or ideology, it is the protection of children. Throughout my life, I have been at the heart of many seismic changes, from the Carnation Revolution in my native Portugal in the 1970s to the effort to advance peace, reconciliation, and democracy in Europe (for which I had the great honour of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the EU). ©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS

GCC JUNIOR GOLF



Oman's Yusuf al Rumhy won the under-13 individual title with 161 strokes. — **Faisal al Balushi**

UAE, GULF TEAMS SHINE AS AL RUMHY CLAIMS U13 TITLE

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

The GCC Junior Golf Championship, held at Ghala Golf Club, concluded on Tuesday with high level competition and outstanding performances across all age categories, highlighting the steady development of golf among GCC nations and the growing depth of young talent in the region.

In the ladies team championship, the United Arab Emirates claimed first place with a score of +7, finishing ahead of Saudi Arabia (+83) in second place, Bahrain (+101) in third and Oman (+201) in fourth.

The girls' under-16 team championship also saw the UAE dominate, securing first place with +1, followed by Saudi Arabia (+63), Kuwait (+155) and Oman (+164). In the boys under-16 team championship, Qatar topped the standings with +33, edging Bahrain (+41) in second place. The UAE (+45) finished third, followed by Saudi Arabia (+71), Kuwait (+112) and Oman (+134.)

Meanwhile, the under-13 team championship witnessed strong performances from Bahrain, who secured first place with +61, while Oman finished second with +72, ahead of the UAE (+85), Saudi Arabia (+88) and Kuwait (+151).

Jamie Camero of the UAE claimed the ladies' individual title with a total score of 147 strokes, followed by compatriot Lara al Khatib in second place with 149 strokes and Fay al Balushi in third with 161 strokes. Omani golfer Nada Mir was the top local performer, finishing fourth with 163 strokes. In the girls under-16 individual championship, Anka Matyio of the UAE secured first place with 144 strokes, while Sarah Abu Bakr, also of the UAE, finished second with 148 strokes and Asia Salem claimed third with 152 strokes.

YOUSUF WINS U13 TITLE

The under-13 individual title went to Omani golfer Yusuf al Rumhy, who delivered an impressive performance to win first place with 161 strokes, ahead of Mohammed Waheed of Bahrain (172 strokes) and Khalifa al Fatakhla of Bahrain (177 strokes).

Speaking after his victory, Yusuf al Rumhy expressed his delight, saying: “Winning this GCC championship at Ghala Golf Club is a great motivation for me. It encourages me to keep developing my game and to represent Oman at regional and international tournaments in the future.”

In the boys' under-16 individual championship, Daniel Sokolov of Qatar captured the gold medal with 139 strokes, followed by Khalid Sadiq of Bahrain in second (157 strokes) and Abdullah Darwish of the UAE in third with 163 strokes.

Meanwhile, UAE national team player Sarah Abu Bakr highlighted the importance of the event, stating: “The competition was very strong, and the level of play was high. Participating in this championship helped me gain valuable experience and further improve my performance ahead of upcoming challenges.”

The championship concluded with widespread praise for the organisation and technical standards.

Seeb blank Bahla to go top as Al Shabab beat Al Nasr

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

SEEB recorded a valuable 2-0 victory over their guests Bahla in the match held at Seeb Sports Stadium, part of the postponed fixtures of Round Five of the Jindal Football League.

The game began at a lively pace from both sides before Seeb took control of proceedings, applying sustained pressure on Bahla's defensive areas, while the visitors relied on defensive organisation and closing down spaces.

Bahla nearly opened the scoring early through Abdul Salam al Shukaili, but goalkeeper Ahmed al Rawahi reacted calmly and diverted the ball for a corner.

Seeb responded with a well-constructed attack that ended with Ali al Busaidy threading a precise pass to Salah al Yahyai, who calmly placed the ball into the net to score the opening goal in the 17th minute.

Seeb maintained their dominance, while Bahla attempted to threaten on the counter-attack, most notably through a powerful effort by Abdulsalam al Shukaili that narrowly cleared the crossbar.

In the 36th minute, the referee awarded Seeb a penalty after a handball inside the area. Abdulaziz al Muqbali stepped up to take it, but his effort sailed over the bar. Minutes later, however, Al Muqbali made amends by following up a well-delivered cross from Omar al Malki to score the second goal in the 43rd minute. No further incidents occurred during stoppage time, and the first half ended with Seeb leading 2-0.

At the start of the second half, Seeb continued with an attacking approach despite being forced into an early substitution as the injured Abdulaziz al Muqbali was replaced by Marwan Taib. Bahla, meanwhile, dropped deeper into their own half and focused on counter-attacks.

Both teams exchanged attempts without any change to the scoreline before the referee blew the final whistle to confirm Seeb's 2-0 victory.

With this result, Seeb moved to the top of the standings with 22 points, while Bahla remained fourth with 15 points.



Seeb's Saleh al Yahyai tries to move past Bahla players during the Jindal League.

AL SHABAB THUMP AL NASR

In another postponed Round Five fixture, Al Shabab claimed a 3-0 victory over their guests Al Nasr at the Seeb Sports Stadium.

Al Nasr started the match with early pressure, but Al Shabab's solid defensive organisation and the excellent performance of goalkeeper Abdulmalik al Badri prevented any breakthrough. As the match progressed, Al Shabab gradually regained control. The first half saw chances at both ends, including a Maliko Kenian effort in the 20th minute that went just wide, and an attempt by Awadh al Shuhri in the 22nd minute that was safely gathered by Al Shabab's goalkeeper. In the 28th minute, Geulson Lima capitalised on a defensive mistake to score the opening goal for Al Shabab, sending his side into the break with a 1-0 lead.

In the second half, Al Shabab continued to enjoy the upper hand, while Al Nasr

searched for an equaliser. Both coaches made several substitutions in an effort to influence the game. Maliko Kenian doubled Al Shabab's advantage in the 66th minute after finishing a rebound inside the penalty area. Minutes later, Al Shabab goalkeeper Abdulmalik al Badri was forced off injured, with international goalkeeper Ibrahim al Mukhaini coming on in the 69th minute.

Before the final whistle, Maliko Kenian struck again in the 74th minute to seal the win and confirm Al Shabab's dominance. Six minutes of stoppage time were added without further goals, and the match ended with a convincing 3-0 victory for Al Shabab. The win lifted Al Shabab to 15 points and up to fifth place, with a postponed match still to be played against Bahla. Al Nasr remained on 16 points in third place after suffering their second defeat of the season.

Oman remain in 79th spot in final Fifa ranking of 2025

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Oman national football team maintained its position at 79th place in the latest Fifa Men's World Ranking, released on Monday as the final ranking of the year. The Red Warriors closed the year with a total of 1,313.46 ranking points, reflecting a period of competitive international action and mixed results on the regional stage.

The latest ranking comes shortly after Oman's participation in the Fifa Arab Cup, which took place and recently concluded in Doha city, and marked the team's most recent international appearance.

Oman exited the tournament at the group stage after finishing third in Group B with four points, missing out on a place in the knockout rounds. Oman opened their campaign at Arab Cup with a hard-fought goalless draw against the eventual champions Morocco, one of



Oman showed a spirited performance at the recent Fifa Arab Cup.

Africa's strongest national teams. The Red Warriors then suffered a narrow 2-1 defeat against Saudi Arabia in the second group match, despite delivering a competitive performance especially in second half.

In their concluding fixture, Oman ended their campaign on a positive note with a 2-1 victory over Comoros.

Although the win against

Comoros boosted morale, the overall results were not enough to significantly alter Oman's position in the global rankings, leaving the team unchanged at 79th place as the year draws to a close. The ranking total of 1,313.46 points underlines a year of transition for the national side, which has seen the introduction of new players alongside experienced campaigners.

SPAIN ON TOP, MOROCCO 11TH

At the Arab level, Morocco continued to lead the regional rankings, occupying 11th place globally after their consistent performances and strong showing in international competitions including the Arab Cup. Jordan emerged as one of the biggest movers among Arab nations, climbing to 64th place following a series of positive results, including a strong run in regional tournaments and ending as runners up of the Arab Cup.

At Asian level, Japan maintained their status as Asia's top-ranked side after securing 18th spot and followed by Iran (19) as the second-highest ranked Asian side with South Korea in 22nd spot. Spain managed to end the year at the top of the Fifa Men's World Ranking for the first time since 2013. This is the seventh time for Spain as they finished the year as the planet's football's side to beat as this figure was only bettered by Brazil, who have managed it on 13 occasions.

SHORT TAKES



The ISSF president praised the high level of organisation of the Arab Shooting Championship in Muscat.

OOC VICE-CHAIRMAN RECEIVES ISSF PRESIDENT

MUSCAT: Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Vice-Chairman of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC), received Luciano Rossi, President of International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), along with his accompanying delegation, during their official visit to the Sultanate of Oman.

The meeting discussed a number of topics related to the sport of shooting, including an overview of the current status of the sport at both the local and international levels. The two sides also explored ways to enhance mutual cooperation between OOC and the ISSF, with the aim of developing shooting sports, upgrading technical and administrative capacities and supporting athlete development programmes.

The meeting also addressed Oman's hosting of the Arab Championship for Air and Bullet Weapons Shooting, currently taking place with the participation of 14 Arab countries. In this context, the ISSF president praised the high level of organisation and the efforts made to ensure the success of the championship, affirming that hosting such events reflects the advanced position Oman has attained on the map of regional and international sports event hosting.

For his part, Dr Abdullah emphasised Oman Olympic Committee's commitment to support shooting, expanding its grassroots base and continuing cooperation with the International Shooting Sport Federation in a manner that serves the aspirations of Omani athletes and enhances their presence in international competitions.

REGISTRATION OPENS FOR OMAN OPEN 2026 RUBIK'S CUBE CHAMPIONSHIP

MUSCAT: Speed-cubers and puzzle enthusiasts across Oman are invited to register for the Oman Open 2026 Rubik's Cube Championship, the largest official World Cube Association (WCA)



is expected to attract participants from across Oman as well as overseas, creating a vibrant and competitive atmosphere that celebrates problem-solving, precision, focus and innovation. Designed to be inclusive, the event is open to cubers of all experience levels — from first-time participants to seasoned speed-cubing professionals. Beyond the excitement of competition, Oman Open 2026 aims to inspire young people by promoting logical thinking, perseverance and a lifelong love of learning. Organisers say the event reflects a growing interest in mind sports and puzzle-based learning, which encourage cognitive development and creativity among students and youth.

With limited slots available and strong interest anticipated, early registration is strongly advised. Organisations wishing to support the event through sponsorship opportunities or on-site stalls are invited to scan the QR code provided to register their interest. Registration opens on January 10, 2026; the competition will be held on April 18, 2026, at Cheltenham Muscat, with registration available through the World Cube Association website.



Oman's overall performance across the tournament reflected a team on the rise.

Oman women's run in GCC T20I tourney ends in final

Hosts display skill and promise across the six-nation tournament at Oman Cricket Academy ground in Al Amerat, with UAE emerging as champions

OMAN concluded a competitive campaign in the GCC Women's T20I Championship 2025 recently at the Oman Cricket Academy ground.

The hosts, led by Priyanka Mendonca, reached the final, reflecting growth, resilience and a promising future for women's cricket in the country.

Competing against the other five GCC nations from December 12 to 19, Oman shrugged off their opening loss to the eventual winners UAE to bounce back and win the next four games on the trot.

The final saw Oman post 84 for 7 in 20 overs, with Fiza Javed top-scoring with 17. The UAE's disciplined attack, led by Katie Thompson (2 for 10) and Esha Oza (2-21), curtailed Oman's scoring.

The visitors chased down the total comfortably, reaching 85-1 in 12.3 overs, anchored by Samaira Dharnidharka (38) and Theertha Satish (25), with Oman captain Priyanka taking the lone wicket (1-26).

Reflecting on the campaign, Priyanka said, "Reaching the final itself shows how much we have progressed as a team. The preparations were good and the girls responded well throughout the tournament. The UAE is a very strong side with experienced players and more exposure at the international level. For us, the key



Oman's overall performance across the tournament reflected a team on the rise.

takeaway is that we need to play more matches at this level to keep improving."

Oman's journey to the final was marked by commanding performances. After an initial 10-wicket defeat to the UAE, the team rebounded emphatically, posting 203 for 3 against Saudi Arabia in a 167-run win, the tournament's highest total.

SUCCESSFUL CHASES

Successful chases followed against Bahrain (9 wickets), Kuwait (9 wickets), and Qatar (6 wickets), showcasing Oman's balance in batting and bowling.

The decisive win over Qatar highlighted the contributions of all-rounders Priyanka and Jayadhanyha Gunasekar, with Gunasekar scoring a composed 32 and

Priyanka anchoring the innings with an unbeaten 37. Oman's fielding and bowling discipline also proved vital in controlling the games and limiting opponents' scoring opportunities.

Oman women's team coach Desmond Berhardt said: "This experience provided valuable exposure and competitive cricket, which was highly beneficial. The introduction of DRS for the first time added an interesting element and tested the players' decision-making skills."

He added: "The girls played fearless cricket, and their results underlined it. I am extremely proud of the team, especially how they recovered after the opening loss to the UAE. We went on to win four consecutive games before losing to the UAE in the final. We saw significant improvement across all areas of their game. We recognise there are still areas that require attention, and this experience will certainly build confidence moving forward."

While the UAE's dominance in the final underscored the experience gap, Oman's overall performance across the tournament reflected a team on the rise.

The 2025 GCC Women's T20I Championship was not just about the title, it was a week of learning, growth, and promise for Oman's women cricketers on the regional stage.

Oman impress as air pistol events conclude

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 23

Shooters from the Sultanate of Oman delivered strong performance in several 10 metre air pistol events at the Arab Shooting Championship, which continues to bring together national teams from across the Arab world.

In the men's individual 10m air pistol, Omani shooter Ismail bin Nasser al Abri claimed the gold medal after a composed display, finishing ahead of Ahmed al Sheikh of Bahrain, who took silver, while Ahmed al Amiri of the United Arab Emirates secured the bronze.

Oman also topped the men's team standings, winning gold ahead of Saudi Arabia in second place, while Bahrain



Oman's Ahad bint Younis al Balushi won the gold in the girls' youth U17 10m air pistol event. Reem Abdullah al Ketbi of the UAE finished second. Oman's Rafal bint Hilal al Harthy earned the bronze. **RIGHT:** Oman topped the men's team standings, winning gold ahead of Saudi Arabia in second place, while Bahrain finished third — Abdulwahid al Hamadani



finished third.

In the women's individual competition, Salma Abbas al Mas of Qatar won the gold, followed by Moza Ali Abdulrahim of Bahrain in second. The bronze medal went to Duaa Rahmatullah Habib, also representing Qatar.

At the team level, Bahrain claimed gold in the women's event, with Qatar taking silver and Oman securing bronze.

The girls' youth U17 10m air pistol event saw Oman's Ahad bint Younis al Balushi take gold, while Reem Abdullah al Ketbi of the UAE finished

second. Another Omani shooter, Rafal bint Hilal al Harthy, earned the bronze.

In the boys' youth U17 category, Mahmoud bin Salim al Daraei of Oman won the gold, with Mohammed Kamel al Kaabi of the UAE taking the silver and

Saud Ahmed al Ali, also from the UAE, securing the bronze. The results underscored Oman's growing presence in the championship, which continues over the coming days with further competitions in air and pellet shooting disciplines.

SPORTS

MATCH-WINNERS



Zimbabwe's defender #15 Teenage Hadebe challenges Egypt's forward #10 Mohamed Salah during the Africa Cup of Nations Group B match at Adrar Stadium in Agadir, Morocco. — AFP

SALAH, FOSTER TAKE EGYPT AND SOUTH AFRICA TO AFCON GROUP B SUMMIT

RABAT: Premier League pair Mohamed Salah and Lyle Foster were match-winners as Egypt and South Africa began their Africa Cup of Nations (Afc) Group B campaigns with victories in Morocco on Monday.

Unsettled Liverpool star Salah struck in the first minute of added time to snatch a 2-1 win for record seven-time champions Egypt over gallant Zimbabwe in Agadir.

Earlier, second-half dominance by one-time title-holders South Africa paid off when Burnley striker Foster netted on 79 minutes to deliver a 2-1 victory over Angola in Marrakesh.

The stage is now set for a top-of-the-table showdown between the Pharaohs and Bafana Bafana in Agadir on Friday. They have met three times in Afcon tournaments, with Egypt winning twice.

Salah, whose unhappiness at being a substitute recently at Liverpool led to an outburst against manager Arne Slot, worked tirelessly for an Egyptian team rattled at falling behind.

Prince Dube scored on 20 minutes and one of the title favourites had to wait until the 63rd minute for Omar Marmoush from Manchester City to equalise. Relentless pressure from the Pharaohs paid off in the first of five additional minutes when the perseverance of Salah grabbed them all three points.

SOUTH AFRICA DOMINATE

Earlier, South Africa dominated the second half against Angola in Marrakesh and Foster scored in 79 minutes to deliver a 2-1 victory in the same mini-league.

The winner came after Tshepang Moremi had a goal ruled offside and Mbekezeli Mbokazi rattled the crossbar with a shot that rebounded into play.

Oswin Appollis put 2024 Afcon bronze medallists South Africa ahead on 21 minutes and, as Angola took control, they levelled through Show after 35 minutes. Victory ended a six-match winless run in their opening Afcon match since 2006 by South Africa. The win also confirmed their dominance over Angola with three victories and two draw in five Afcon meetings.

Belgian coach Hugo Broos, who guided Cameroon to the Afcon title in 2017, admitted he was unhappy with the first-half Bafana performance.

“We had to avoid losing tonight because next up for us are Egypt. We led in the opening half and then we fell asleep,” said Broos.

“We let Angola back into the game so we put something right during half-time. In the second half we applied more pressure, there is more movement and we had chances.”

Mali coach Tom Saintfiet admitted that conceding a late equaliser in a 1-1 Group A draw with Zambia in Casablanca was “very painful”.

After El Bilal Toure had a first-half penalty saved by Willard Mwanza, Mali took the lead on 61 minutes through Lassina Sinayoko. But as two Mali defenders stood still when the ball was crossed two minutes into added time, Patson Daka pushed forward to head the equaliser. — AFP



South Africa's #09 Lyle Foster (L) celebrates scoring his team's second goal next to #04 Teboho Mokoena and #08 Tshepang Moremi during the Group B tie against Angola at Marrakesh Stadium. — AFP



Napoli players and coach Antonio Conte celebrate on the podium as Giovanni Di Lorenzo lifts the Supercoppa Italiana trophy. — Reuters

Napoli beat Bologna to lift Italian Super Cup



Napoli's Matteo Politano celebrates with the Supercoppa Italiana trophy.



Napoli's Italian defender #22 Giovanni Di Lorenzo lifts the trophy on the podium after the Italian Super Cup final match. — AFP



Napoli's Stanislav Lobotka in action against Bologna.

NERES SCORES TWICE, SECURING NAPOLI'S 2-0 VICTORY OVER BOLOGNA

NAPOLI WIN THIRD SUPER CUP, FIRST SINCE 2014

SERIE A PRESIDENT HINTS AT FORMAT CHANGE FOR NEXT SUPER CUP

NAPOLI LIFTED the Italian Super Cup with a 2-0 win over Bologna in Riyadh on Monday, David Neres netting both goals to earn the league champions a deserved victory over the toothless Coppa Italia winners.

Neres opened the scoring with a stunning strike from distance six minutes before the break and found the net again in the 57th minute when Bologna were caught trying to play out of defence. “We came here as champions of Italy, we wanted this trophy and we showed it with a great performance,” Napoli forward Matteo Politano told Mediaset. “We could have scored a few more goals but we are happy with the victory.” Napoli, who beat holders AC Milan 2-0 in Thursday's semi-final, won their third Super Cup and first since 2014 while Bologna, who overcame Inter Milan 3-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw on Friday, failed at their first

attempt to win the trophy. Eljif Elmas had an early opportunity for Napoli but dragged his shot wide from just outside the six-yard area. Bologna keeper Federico Ravaglia parried away a Scott McTominay cross-shot as Napoli continued to pile on the pressure while Bologna struggled to create any chances. Leonardo Spinazzola was next to try for Napoli. Ravaglia got a hand to his chipped effort allowing Lewis Ferguson back to clear the danger, but the opening goal was worth waiting for.

NERES SCORES WITH CURLING STRIKE

Neres collected a throw-in before drifting inside where the Bologna defence stood off, leaving him all the time in the world to line up his shot from outside the area and he whipped a curling strike into the top corner.

Ravaglia was in action shortly after halftime, denying Rasmus Hojlund and tipping over Amir Rrahmani's header from

the resulting corner before Neres netted his second goal.

Ravaglia played a weak pass to Jhon Lucumi, Neres pounced to intercept the ball and chipped the onrushing keeper from a wide angle to all but seal the win. The victors had further chances, but Bologna never looked like finding a way back, and Antonio Conte and his Napoli substitutes were waiting to celebrate long before the final whistle. “Conte is our leader and we follow him until death,” Politano added. “Now we celebrate and then we will think about the championship.”

This was the third edition of the Italian Super Cup under the new format with four teams involved, but Serie A president Ezio Simonelli hinted that it could be the last.

“Maybe next year we will return to the original spirit of the Italian Super Cup with a one-off game,” Simonelli told Mediaset before kick-off. — Reuters

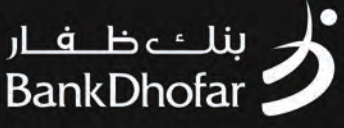


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Oman and Egypt explore zone cooperation

MUSCAT: Oman and Egypt have discussed strengthening cooperation in special economic zones, free zones and industrial cities, as part of efforts to deepen economic integration between the two countries.

The talks were held during a meeting between Shaikh Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) and Lieutenant General Engineer Kamel Abdel Hadi al Wazir, Egypt's Deputy Prime Minister for Industrial Development and Minister of Industry and Transport.

The two sides reviewed investment opportunities across economic and free zones in both



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Mechanisms to facilitate the movement of goods and industries between economic, free and industrial zones in Oman and Egypt were also discussed, with the aim of boosting bilateral trade.

countries and explored prospects for developing joint cooperation to encourage the establishment of new economic projects in a range of sectors.

Discussions also covered the exchange of expertise and technologies to enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of these zones for investors.

The meeting examined ways to maximise the use of production chains and raw materials available in existing factories, with a focus

on strengthening industrial integration and increasing value-added manufacturing.

Mechanisms to facilitate the movement of goods and industries between economic, free and industrial zones in Oman and Egypt were also discussed, with the aim of boosting bilateral trade.

Both sides stressed the importance of sustained coordination and joint action, as well as identifying partnership opportunities to further strengthen economic ties between the two brotherly nations. The meeting was attended by Yasser Mohamed Ahmed Shaaban, Ambassador of Egypt to the Sultanate of Oman, along with a number of officials from both sides. — ONA

\$50m investment to boost PET waste recycling

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 23

IN a significant boost for efforts to recycle PET plastics — currently estimated to account for roughly half of all plastic waste ending up in landfills — an agreement has been signed for the establishment of a modern, integrated recycling facility at Salalah Free Zone in Dhofar Governorate, with total investment of up to \$50 million across multiple phases.

According to Salalah Free Zone, Next Generation Recycling Solutions will develop the plant on a 15,000-square-metre site to produce high-quality, hot-washed, food-grade rPET flakes — cleaned and shredded fragments of recycled polyethylene terephthalate used as a secondary raw material in the manufacture of new plastic products.

“The project represents a long-term investment exceeding \$50 million, to be implemented in multiple phases over a 30-year period, covering capacity expansion of existing PET recycling lines, development of collection facilities across Oman and the potential future recycling of other plastic polymers such as HDPE and LDPE”, the free zone authority said in a statement.

The project is intended to support the growth of an integrated industrial ecosystem while leveraging Salalah’s strategic logistics position as a key export hub serving European and US markets, in line with Oman Vision 2040, it added.

Next Generation Recycling Oman was established through a strategic partnership with a leading Indonesian recycled PET producer founded in 2019 in Tangerang’s Periuk district. The partner’s PET flakes and granules are supplied to global textile and food-packaging markets across the Middle East, Europe and the US, contributing to the reduction of plastic and microplastic pollution.

While the circular economy concept has gained increasing traction in Oman, PET waste recycling efforts have so far made only a limited impact on the scale of the



Representatives from Next Generation Recycling with officials of Salalah Free Zone at the agreement signing recently.

challenge. PET waste in the Sultanate of Oman mainly comprises single-use water, soft drink, juice and edible oil bottles, along with clear food containers and some household and personal-care packaging.

These are generated largely by households, retail outlets, offices and the hospitality sector, with much of the waste still disposed of through mixed municipal streams.

Initiatives such as reverse vending machines to encourage bottle collection and reduce landfill waste have been introduced, particularly in Muscat, but nationwide segregation, collection and recycling infrastructure remains limited. As a result, PET recycling is not yet sufficiently scaled or comprehensive to manage the country’s growing waste stream effectively.

However, with the government prioritising circular economy and recycling objectives in line with Oman Vision 2040 and Net Zero targets, a number of local SMEs have begun investing in commercial-scale facilities to address the PET waste challenge.

Among them is Green Muscat Investment and Development Company, which has announced plans to establish a 200-metric-tonnes-per-day PET waste processing plant in Al Batinah North Governorate, close to SOHAR Port and Freezone. Recycled PET flakes from the plant will be targeted at multiple industries, including packaging and textiles.



TENDERS 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	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/2025/043	Customer Satisfaction Incentives Audit	31/12/2025	11/01/2026	Specialist	26.250
NESC/2025/044	Design and Implementation of Customer Satisfaction Survey	11/01/2026	22/01/2026	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 (or highest) Tenderer. - A certificate confirming a minimum Omanization level of 30% within the organization is obligatory , bidder who fails to submit this certificate will result in exclusion from the tender evaluation process. - 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 Omanization. - 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.



Nama Electricity Supply Company SAOC
PO Box 1239, PC 131, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: +968 24250800 | CR 1/71235/7
records@supply.nama.om | [www.supply.nama.om](#)



ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



Asyad extends its clean-energy initiatives across Oman's ports.

ASYAD UNVEILS ITS FUTURE LOGISTICS PROJECTS AT GHSO

MUSCAT: Asyad Group has unveiled a series of forward-looking projects that enhance the readiness of Oman's national logistics infrastructure to support the green hydrogen economy. The announcement came during the Group's participation in the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman 2025, held in Muscat from December 1-3 under the auspices of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and in partnership with Hydrom.

These projects include the development of an AI-driven digital platform that integrates operational data across the logistics network, enabling instant decision-making that enhances transport efficiency and reduces emissions. The Group is also advancing digital simulation solutions for routing wind-turbine components.

This ensures equipment safety and precise scheduling, along with the establishment of smart warehouses equipped with IoT systems and predictive analytics to optimise inventory management and minimise waste.

Asyad extends its clean-energy initiatives across Oman's ports, upgrading their readiness to handle, store and export low-carbon fuels, including green ammonia, methanol and liquid hydrogen.

Furthermore, the Group is developing green-fuel bunkering corridors, positioning Oman as one of the first providers of advanced clean-fuel solutions. These projects reflect a broader transformation towards a smart, AI-enabled logistics ecosystem that supports the value chain of green hydrogen and clean energy.

Commenting in the announcement, Essam al Sheibany, Vice President of Sustainability at Asyad Group, stated: "For us, green hydrogen is a strategic catalyst that redefines the logistics sector's contribution to Oman's economy.

We are developing an integrated ecosystem capable of empowering industrial growth, attracting global investment and accelerating Oman's transition towards a low-carbon economy". He added: "Our collaboration with local and international partners paves the way for a new phase in which Oman advances confidently into the clean energy era - one driven by national talent ready leading this transformation". During the summit's panel discussions, Asyad Group leaders shared strategic insights on the logistics sector's growing role in enabling the hydrogen economy.

Dr Abdullah al Abri, Vice President of Sustainability at SOHAR Port and Freezone, opened the session by highlighting the port's readiness and the integration of its industrial ecosystem to support hydrogen projects. He was joined by Reggy Vermeulen, CEO of Port of Duqm, who underscored Al Duqm's significance as a future export hub for green molecules and a key corridor linking Oman to global markets.

RIYADH AIR APPOINTS KHIJMI'S TRAVEL & TOURISM AS PARTNER IN OMAN

MUSCAT: Riyadh Air, Saudi Arabia's digitally native national carrier, has officially appointed Khimji's Travel & Tourism as its exclusive Distribution and Sales Partner for the Sultanate of Oman.

The strategic agreement, unveiled during the Dubai Airshow 2025, serves as a cornerstone of the airline's aggressive regional expansion plan, designed to enhance connectivity across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

This partnership unites Riyadh



Air's cutting-edge aviation vision with Khimji's Travel & Tourism's

deep-rooted legacy in the Omani market.

As the airline prepares to redefine global travel with its modern fleet and sustainability-first mindset, this collaboration ensures that travellers in Oman have seamless access to the Kingdom's new world-class carrier.

The alliance is expected to boost business and tourism opportunities between the two nations, offering Omani travellers direct access to Riyadh Air's growing global network.

Kia unveils its year-end big savings offer in Oman

KIA Oman has announced its exciting year-end big savings offer, providing exceptional value across popular models including the Sportage L, K8, Sonet and K4. The campaign runs until January 22, 2026 and is designed to make owning a Kia in Oman more rewarding than ever.

Customers can enjoy unbelievable savings of RO 1,700 – 2,700 on the Sportage L, RO 1,500 on the K8 and RO 1,300 on the Sonet. In addition, every purchase includes 3 years or 30,000 km of complimentary service (for EVs: 4 years or 60,000 km, whichever comes first), along with 1-year insurance and registration (Terms & conditions apply; visit your nearest Kia showroom for details).

The year-end big savings offer reflects Kia's commitment to delivering exceptional value, convenience and peace of mind to our customers. With significant cash savings, inclusive service and insurance coverage, every Kia owner can enjoy a seamless and rewarding ownership experience.

The Sportage L combines bold design, advanced technology and exceptional space. Available in two trims, the 2.0T MPI 4-cylinder AWD with 233 HP and the 1.5T 4-cylinder with 197 HP, both mated to an 8-speed transmission, the Sportage L delivers performance, fuel efficiency and reduced emissions. Additional comfort comes from



The campaign runs until January 22, 2026 and is designed to make owning a Kia more rewarding than ever.

adjustable front and rear seats, a panoramic sunroof and a sporty D-shaped steering wheel.

The cabin offers seamless connectivity with dual 12.3-inch integrated cluster and infotainment system, wireless charging for smartphones and advanced technology features. Safety and convenience are enhanced through the Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) like Smart Cruise Control and Blind-Spot Collision Warning.

The K8 sedan stands out for its bold design and modern luxury, delivering an executive-class driving experience. Powered by a 3.5-litre GDI Smartstream engine paired

with an 8-speed automatic transmission generating 296 HP at 6,400 rpm, it offers smooth and dynamic performance.

Inside, the cabin features ventilated seats with lumbar support, a memory seating system and a panoramic sunroof. Advanced technology includes a 12.3-inch infotainment system with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, Bluetooth with voice recognition, a 14-speaker Meridian surround sound system, wireless charging trays, remote engine start and keyless entry. Safety remains paramount with ADAS, including Forward Collision-Avoidance Assist, Surround View Monitor and Front and Reverse Parking Assist.

Madayn holds workshop on sustainable recycling practices

MUSCAT: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates "Madayn", represented by Al Wadi Al Kabir Industrial City in collaboration with EFP Oman, organised a workshop titled 'Recycling Towards a Sustainable Environment'.

The workshop aimed at promoting sustainable recycling practices and their environmental and economic benefits, highlighting the role of industrial cities in advancing sustainability and encouraging innovative initiatives and effective partnerships in recycling and waste management.

Eng Ali bin Salim Al Maashani, Director General of Al Wadi Al Kabir Industrial City, highlighted Madayn's key role in supporting and implementing environmental sustainability practices across its industrial cities through the adoption of clear waste management policies, encouraging investors to adopt recycling solutions and providing the necessary infrastructure to



The workshop highlights the role of industrial cities in advancing sustainability.

enable safe and efficient waste segregation.

Al Maashani also underscored Madayn's commitment to integrating sustainability into its strategic plans, strengthening circular economy practices, supporting recycling and industrial waste-focused initiatives and raising environmental awareness among investors and employees through workshops and targeted programmes, all while adhering to best international practices.

"Recycling is more than an environmental measure; it is a comprehensive approach that reduces waste, optimises resource use, lowers carbon emissions, creates new investment opportunities in green industries, enhances the competitiveness of industrial cities, improves operational efficiency and supports the Sultanate of Oman's sustainability goals", Al Maashani added.

Bank Muscat explores the future of mobility with partners in Suhar

MUSCAT: As part of its ongoing efforts to strengthen partnerships across various sectors, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, organised a special event in Suhar, Al Batinah North Governorate, for its partners, including agents, companies and specialised automotive showrooms in the governorate.

The event featured a workshop titled "From Horsepower to Innovation: The Next Era of Mobility", delivered by Abideen al Balushi, Presenter, Suhaib Shaashaa, Co-founder of ArabGT and Karim Deeb, Co-founder and Presenter at ArabGT.

On this occasion, Saleh bin Mohammed al Maaini, Deputy



The Suhar event follows a series of similar engagements held in other governorates.

General Manager of Capital Regions at Bank Muscat, said: "Organising this annual gathering reaffirms the importance of the Bank's successful partnerships and collaboration in delivering the best services to customers, as Bank Muscat continues its journey of growth and development year after year.

We are proud of the achievements realised in this sector and appreciation for the positive feedback and continued trust in the Bank's products and services. This emphasises the Bank's commitment to further strengthening these partnerships to continue delivering excellence".

Radhiya bint Hassan al Lawatiyah, Head of Sales at Bank Muscat, noted: "This event is one of the

initiatives implemented by the Bank to strengthen partnerships with its valued customers and has become an important platform for supporting sales objectives in the automotive sector across Oman.

The Suhar event follows a series of similar engagements held in other governorates. We extend our appreciation for the long-standing partnerships that have contributed to delivering competitive services, facilities and benefits to customers over the years".

During the workshop, the speakers highlighted key trends shaping the future of the automotive sector, focusing on innovation, evolving mobility technologies and the transformation of driving experiences.

SHORTTAKES



An employee works inside a steel factory in Blytheville, Arkansas. — Reuters

US ECONOMIC GROWTH LIKELY REMAINED STRONG IN THIRD QUARTER

WASHINGTON: The US economy likely grew at a brisk clip in the third quarter, driven by solid consumer spending and business investment, but momentum appears to have since faded amidst the rising cost of living and recent government shutdown.

The Commerce Department’s initial estimate of third-quarter gross domestic product on Tuesday is also expected to show the economy was supported by lower imports, which helped to curb the trade deficit. Much of the anticipated acceleration in consumer spending was the result of a rush to buy electric vehicles before the September 30 expiration of tax credits.

The data was delayed by the 43-day government shutdown and is now outdated. It will likely confirm what economists call a K-shaped economy in which higher-income households are doing well, while middle- and lower-income are barely staying afloat. Surveys suggest consumer spending, the economy’s engine, is being driven by higher-income households, thanks to a stock market boom that has inflated household wealth.

Big businesses have mostly managed to withstand the blow from President Donald Trump’s sweeping tariffs, which have increased costs and are investing in artificial intelligence, reinforcing the economy’s foundation, economists said. In contrast, smaller businesses have been hit hard, they added.

“It was a good quarter, but that is not going to be sustained in the fourth quarter”, said Brian Bethune, a professor at Boston College. “Household budgets are squeezed, the average household, they are just barely keeping their nose above water in terms of real wage gains”. — Reuters

Oman unveils sea-to-shelf investment initiative

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 23

OMAN has unveiled a new investment drive aimed at transforming its fisheries sector from a largely resource-based activity into an integrated, value-added manufacturing industry anchored in Al Duqm.

The initiative underscores the government’s push to deepen industrial activity around natural resources while strengthening food security and export capacity.

The initiative is designed to position the Sultanate of Oman as a regional hub for advanced fisheries and fishing industries, fully aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

Titled “From Sea to Manufacturing: Leading Opportunities Shaping the Future of Fisheries and Fishing Industries in the Sultanate of Oman”, the initiative is being led by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) in coordination with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ).

It focuses on integrating fishing operations directly with downstream processing, packaging and manufacturing activities, thereby maximising the economic value derived from marine resources.

At the heart of the announcement is the Duqm Fisheries Industrial Zone, which has been earmarked as the focal point for a new wave of fisheries-related investments.

A suite of opportunities is being offered to local and international investors, each combining processing facilities



The initiative is designed to position Oman as a regional hub for advanced fisheries and fishing industries.

with guaranteed access to raw materials through regulated fishing licences.

This integrated model is intended to reduce supply-chain risk, ensure consistent throughput for factories and encourage long-term capital investment.

The investment opportunities span a broad range of species and processing activities. These include canning factories for sea bream and grouper under both coastal and commercial fishing licences, as well as sardine and tuna canning facilities linked to coastal fishing rights.

Additional projects include a demersal fish canning factory tied to commercial fishing licences using lines and cages; and a demersal fish fillet factory operating under coastal licences.

The portfolio also features a processing and packaging factory for tuna and squid, supported by coastal enclosure-based fishing licences.

A key attraction for investors lies in the scale of resource access on offer. Fishing licences associated with these projects come with annual quotas ranging from 6,000 to 30,000 tonnes, providing the volume certainty needed for industrial-scale processing.

By linking quotas directly to manufacturing facilities, the authorities aim to discourage raw fish exports and instead promote local processing, job creation and export of higher-value finished products.

The incentive package accompanying the initiative is equally robust. Investors will benefit from income tax exemptions for an initial period of 10 years, with the possibility of renewing this exemption twice. Customs duties will be waived on imports and re-exports; and factory equipment will also enjoy tax exemptions, significantly reducing upfront capital costs.

Operational incentives further strengthen the investment case. Projects will have access to a special electricity tariff designated

for food security activities, alongside technical and operational support from relevant authorities.

From a land and legal perspective, investors will be granted land use rights for up to 50 years, renewable, within a transparent and clearly defined regulatory framework designed to enhance investor confidence.

Strategically, the initiative reinforces Al Duqm’s growing role as a multi-sector industrial hub. Already positioned as a centre for heavy industry, logistics and energy, Al Duqm is now being developed as a cornerstone of Oman’s blue economy.

The fisheries initiative complements existing infrastructure at the port and within the special economic zone, offering proximity to export routes and regional markets across Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

The application window for interested investors opens on December 22, 2025 and will run until February 20, 2026.

UK softens stance on farm tax after months of protests

LONDON: Britain’s government said on Tuesday it would scale back its plan to raise more tax from farmers, following months of protests since the introduction of an inheritance tax charge on farms was announced in 2024.

From April, the threshold for individual inheritance tax relief will rise to £2.5 million (\$3.4 million) from £1 million, significantly reducing the number of farms and agricultural business owners facing higher tax bills, the government said. “We have listened closely to farmers across the country and we are making changes today to protect more ordinary family farms,” Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds said in a statement.

“It’s only right that larger estates contribute more, while we back the



Protesters drive tractors through Westminster during the farmers community demonstration against the Labour government’s new agricultural policy, in London, Britain. - Reuters file photo

farms and trading businesses that are the backbone of Britain’s rural communities,” she said.

Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers Union, said the original proposals represented

a “pernicious and cruel tax” that his organisation had fought for 14 months. “I am thankful common sense has prevailed and government has listened,” Bradshaw said. “From the start, the government said it was trying to protect the family farm and the change announced today brings this much closer to reality for many.”

The move represents the latest policy reversal by Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s government.

In July, it backed down on plans to cut welfare spending, and in June it scaled back a proposal to reduce subsidies on energy bills for the elderly.

Under the revised rules, 100 per cent relief will apply up to the new £2.5 million threshold, with 50 per cent relief on assets above the new level. Spouses or civil partners will

be able to pass on up to £5 million worth of farm assets between them, the statement said.

The government estimated that around 85 per cent of estates claiming agricultural property relief in the 2026/27 year, including those that also claim for business property relief, will pay no more inheritance tax as a result of the changes.

The original announcement in 2024, which ended an exemption from inheritance tax for agricultural families from next year, triggered protests in London by tractor-driving farmers that have continued regularly. The government had said the measure was intended to raise revenue to help pay for strained public services. Farmers warned it would destroy family farms and cut food production. — Reuters

TRADE DISPUTE

China slaps EU dairy tariffs



China will impose provisional tariffs of 21.9% to 42.7% on selected European Union dairy products from Tuesday, covering cheeses, milk and cream, the Commerce Ministry said.

Beijing said investigations found EU subsidies seriously harming China’s dairy industry. The move follows last week’s anti-dumping duties on certain EU meat imports after a probe launched in August 2024. — ONA

SAFE HAVENS

Gold hits record on tensions



Gold climbed to record highs as investors sought safety after the United States moved to seize more tankers carrying Venezuelan crude. Spot gold rose to \$4,467.66 an ounce, while silver neared \$69.

Gold is up about 70% this year on geopolitical tensions, central bank buying and expectations of lower interest rates in the United States, with silver up 140%. — ONA

ENERGY MARKETS

Oil dips on mixed signals



Oil prices edged lower as markets balanced geopolitical risks against weak fundamentals, despite fears of supply disruption linked to Ukraine attacks and US moves on Venezuelan crude. Brent slipped to \$61.94 a barrel and WTI to \$57.87.

Analysts said 2025 trading reflects sluggish demand and oversupply, with brief rallies driven mainly by geopolitical headlines. — Reuters

OPINION

Because “AI said so” — that is what I am worried about!



**TARIQ
AL BARWANI**

The writer is strategic adviser, businessman and motivational speaker.

MY last week’s article, “I Am Worried About Our Future — No Thanks to AI”, received a mixed response from the readers. My concern (which continues to be the same) is on the fear that as Artificial Intelligence (AI) grows stronger, we, as humans, will grow weaker.

I argued that our dependency on AI, where we outsource our thinking to algorithms, will ultimately let our mental muscles (strength and effectiveness) decline.

Some of the readers accepted and shared their unease, while others disagreed and stated that AI is the reason why they now can write, think and also do work they never were able to have done yesterday (before AI).

Question: Can they do the work if there is no AI tomorrow? Also, do they really understand the work or just blindly accept it because “AI said so”?

That’s my worry and that’s what I hope to clarify in my article today with real-world practical examples.

First, let us look at a technologist, specifically a software developer. He/she uses AI to generate complex code. On the surface, the output is perfect. It is fast, sleek

and efficient. However, that developer doesn’t understand the underlying logic behind the AI-generated working code.

When the system fails or any error occurs, they won’t be able to debug, fix and find out the problem. Why? Because they blindly took whatever was generated by AI. The case applies the same to a structural designer who uses AI for blueprints.

Second, have you noticed that today most people depend on their mobile phone digital map (GPS) to navigate from one place to another? I personally would avoid driving in Dubai without a GPS-enabled device

Over 2 decades ago, we used our mental maps to navigate everywhere (this includes Dubai with my parents).

Today, if our mobile phone battery is low or dies ultimately, we panic because we have outsourced our sense of direction to a satellite. Do you see where my worry is coming from?

Third, look at how many people today use “ChatGPT” to draft a simple new message or a response, be it for personal or work.

Furthermore, today we see everyone posting on social media networks (the majority on LinkedIn) with ideas, opinions,

Let us look at a technologist, specifically a software developer. He/she uses AI to generate complex code. On the surface, the output is perfect. It is fast, sleek and efficient. However, that developer doesn’t understand the underlying logic behind the AI-generated working code.

comments, etc. (something they never did before).

All this is happening because of AI and all this will certainly end if there is no AI. The same applies to graphic designers and multimedia experts who depend on creative AI generative applications to produce creative output.

Again, blindly depending on AI as the ultimate solution is my worry.

To conclude my article this week, I would like to emphasise that my concern is not on what AI can do, but on what we as humans will become (lazy, less critical, dependent and ultimately dumb). Technology is a tool and a powerful one.

But a tool should extend your reach, not replace your mind and hand. We need to remain the owners of intelligence, not just the operators of it.

If we do not, the future I am worried about is not the one where machines will take over the world (as the Terminator movie illustrated); NO, but a future where they don’t have to because we’ve forgotten how to run it ourselves. Until we catch up again next week, don’t just do “what AI says”, be vigilant and be safe.

DONALD TRUMP WILL BAIL OUT CRYPTO HOLDERS IN 2026

LIAM PROUD

WHEN fraudulent cryptocurrency exchange FTX collapsed in 2022, unleashing turmoil in digital-asset markets, no one in the White House thought it was their problem.

The administration of President Joe Biden viewed bitcoin and other blockchain-based assets with suspicion, while watchdogs studiously maintained a firewall between the volatile crypto business and mainstream financial institutions.

The setup couldn’t be more different heading into 2026. Donald Trump and his family are deeply enmeshed with crypto. A loss of confidence in a major stablecoin could impair the US Treasury market. If another FTX-style meltdown happens in the coming year, expect the current occupant of the Oval Office to step in.

Crypto proponents already have a lot to thank Trump for. The total value of digital tokens including bitcoin, ether and the like surged by \$1.2 trillion in the 12 months following his 2024 election victory

The administration has championed the sector and prioritised legislation that gave a sound legal footing to dollar-backed assets known as stablecoins.

Media calculated in October that the wider Trump Organisation generated \$802 million of income in the first half of 2025 from its crypto ventures. If the recent selloff in bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies gathers pace, the commander-in-chief and his clan have strong motivations to help out.

There’s no shortage of triggers that could precipitate a bailout. The most dramatic would involve a run on a stablecoin like Tether’s USDT, which had about \$180 billion of tokens in late November.

The dollar-pegged coin is backed by assets like short-term American government debt and is redeemable for greenbacks. Whether that would be true in a total meltdown is an open question, however.

According to its September reserve report, the company that issues the tokens had an equity buffer of about \$7 billion. The implication is that if its assets lost 4% of their value customers’ dollar-denominated tokens would no longer be fully supported by dollar reserves, unless the parent company stepped in to help out.

That margin of safety might not suffice in a full-on crisis.

Consider what happened to Circle Internet’s USDC in 2023, when Silicon Valley Bank failed while holding 8% of the stablecoin’s reserves as deposits.

The token traded below a dollar on secondary markets — a situation known as “breaking the buck”. By comparison, some of Tether’s reserves seem conspicuously volatile. — Reuters

China delays production of self-driving cars

EARLY this year, Chinese automakers enthusiastically announced that they would soon be mass-producing and selling self-driving vehicles.

Most of those plans have now been delayed after a deadly crash that drew broad public attention. China’s regulators finally gave the go-ahead last week to only two of the nine automakers that had submitted plans to sell self-driving cars.

And the approvals by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology were narrowly tailored to allow little more than further testing, not mass production.

Beijing Automotive Group and Changan Automobile in Chongqing will be allowed to operate self-driving taxis on three stretches of highway in each company’s hometown, the ministry said and the taxis will not be allowed to change lanes while under computer control. On any other road, the taxis will need to be under the control of a driver.

The limited programmes represent a recognition by the Chinese government that objectives set nearly five years ago, to begin mass production for sale to the general public by the end of this year, were too ambitious.

China’s regulators began to pull back after a crash of a Xiaomi SU7 in late March killed three women, all university students. News of previous accidents involving assisted driving had been suppressed by China’s censors.

But news of the March crash, on a highway in central China’s Anhui province, spread quickly and widely. Questions swirled over whether drivers or automakers could be held legally responsible for such crashes.

According to Xiaomi, the car was moving at 72 mph in assisted-driving mode when it detected that its lane had been closed because of construction.

The car issued an audible warning: “Please be aware of obstacles ahead”. The driver took control of the vehicle, which crashed one second later into a concrete barrier, according to the company.

The public discussion of the tragedy prompted China’s Ministry of Public Security to get involved.



A Changan Automobile assembly line in Chongqing, China. — NYT



**KEITH
BRADSHER**

The writer is an American business and economics reporter and the Beijing bureau chief of The New York Times.

The ministry issued a statement warning that the assisted-driving technology available on mass-produced cars in China was not the same as fully automated driving. It warned motorists against having conversations that might distract them.

“The risky behaviour of playing with mobile phones, sleeping, chatting and eating after turning on the assisted-driving function not only violates road traffic safety laws and regulations, but also poses serious threat to the safety of other road users”, the ministry said. Three levels of assisted or driverless technology are being debated in China.

So-called Level 2 technology helps steer the car, but drivers are required to keep their hands on the wheel and eyes on the road. This is already widely available in China, including on the SU7 that crashed.

But a report aired by state television last summer found that none of the domestic manufacturers’ systems were as reliable as those of Tesla, the American automaker that is popular in China.

Under Level 3 technology, drivers do not need to keep their hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, but must be in the driver’s seat and ready to take control of the car. Level 4 involves robot taxis with no drivers at all; passengers sit in the back seat and may be blocked by

a partition from even reaching the empty front seats.

More than a dozen Chinese cities, notably Wuhan, are testing robot taxis.

Days before the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology approved the two limited taxi services for Level 3, Geely Auto, China’s second-largest automaker, had tried to reassure regulators and the Chinese public about traffic safety. On December 12, Geely opened the world’s largest automotive safety testing centre in Ningbo.

Jerry Gan, CEO of Geely, said his company had already begun shipping some of its Zeekr cars with the hardware needed for Level 3 operations.

“This represents the highest safety standard for assisted driving for the L3 era”, he said. China’s state-run television followed the Xiaomi crash with a report in July that was widely viewed on Chinese internet.

Tests of Level 2 technology on 36 car models from 20 brands had found that slightly fewer than half the cars could safely avoid a crash when they encountered trucks near a construction site at night, the report stated.

Only the two Tesla models in the test had assisted-driving systems that were reliable in a wide range of safety situations.

— The New York Times

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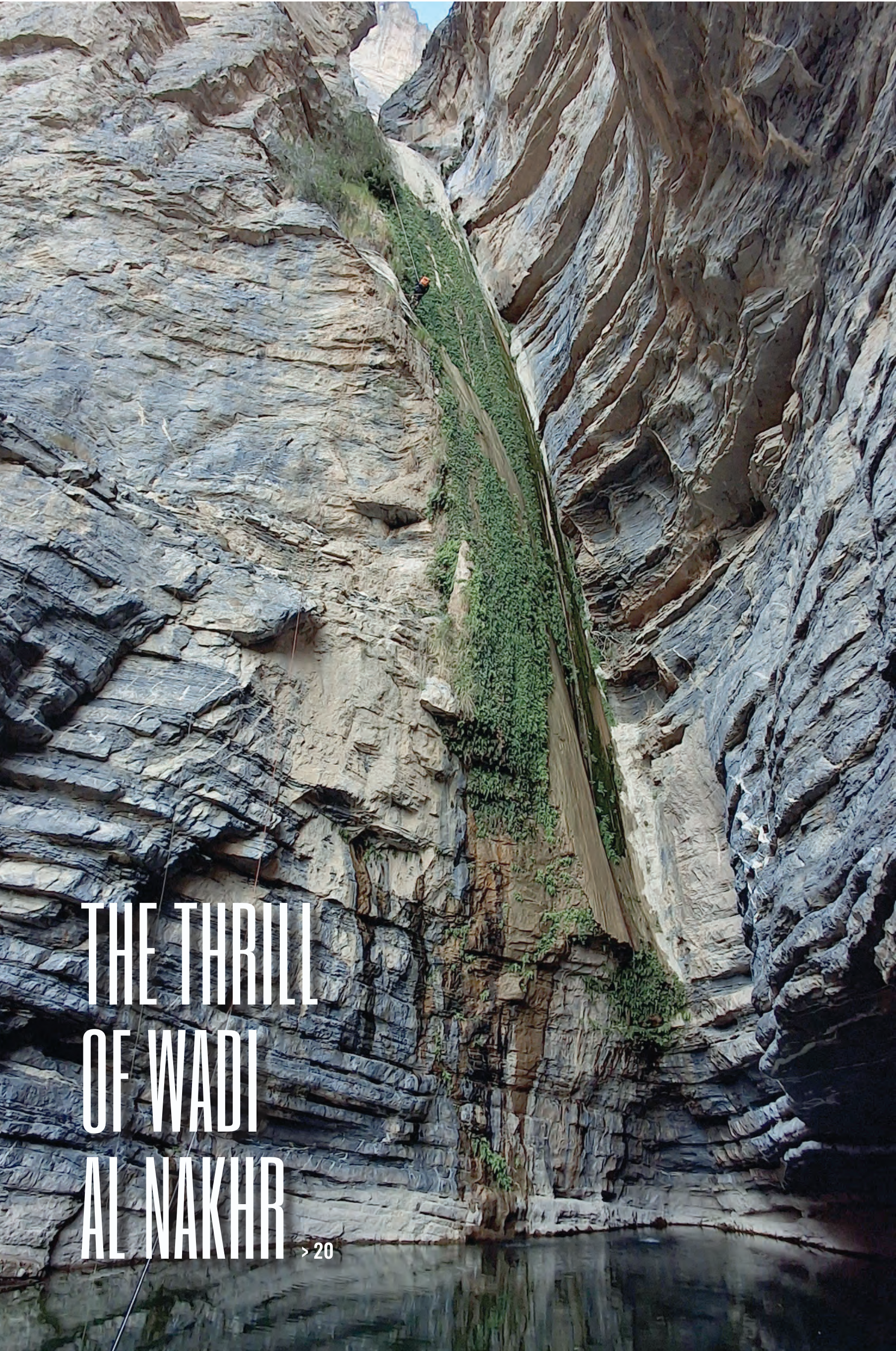


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ART/LIFE



THE THRILL OF WADI AL NAKHR

> 20

ONLINE SHIFT

OSCARS TO STREAM EXCLUSIVELY ON YOUTUBE FROM 2029



The Oscars will be shown only on YouTube from 2029, the Academy said on Wednesday, in a radical gambit for a movie industry that remains wary of streaming platforms even as viewing habits shift online.

The new five-year deal means Hollywood’s most prestigious awards ceremony will be viewable exclusively online for the first time, ending a decades-long relationship with US broadcaster ABC.

The decision will allow the Academy Awards to reach “the largest worldwide audience possible — which will be beneficial for our Academy members and the film community”, said Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences CEO Bill Kramer and President Lynette Howell Taylor in a statement.

The annual Oscars, which celebrate the year’s top achievements in film and draw the world’s biggest A-list stars, are regularly watched by around 20 million Americans and millions more globally.

ABC’s latest contract to broadcast the show had been due to end in 2028, with the 100th Academy Awards. The Disney-owned channel will continue to air the Oscars up until then.

But the new deal with Google-owned YouTube represents a bold new direction for the show at a time when audiences increasingly watch all types of content online.

Streamers owned by Silicon Valley firms have lured top talent away from traditional Hollywood studios with massive contracts — despite filmmakers’ concerns that they rarely show movies on the big screen in theatres for extended runs.

Streamers have also gradually gained wider acceptance at the Academy Awards, where Apple won best picture for “CODA” in 2022.

The SAG Awards, another important Hollywood awards gala which recently rebranded as The Actors Awards, have already moved to Netflix.

YouTube accounts for the biggest share of television viewing time in the United States of any streaming platform, dwarfing even Netflix.

Proud home:

An ABC Entertainment spokesperson said: “ABC has been the proud home to The Oscars for more than half a century.

“We look forward to the next three telecasts, including the show’s centennial celebration in 2028 and wish the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences continued success”.

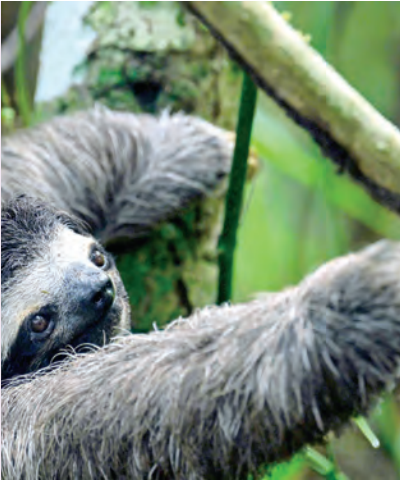
The most recent Oscars were viewed by 19.69 million people — the highest in five years — as the ceremony was shown live simultaneously on Disney’s streamer Hulu along with ABC. The Academy Awards telecast regularly topped 40 million just over a decade ago. — AFP

QUICK FEATURES



HOLIDAYS

A woman take photos of Christmas decorations during the Pingtung Christmas Festival in Pingtung. — AFP



ANIMAL PLANET

A three-toed sloth hangs from a branch in Metropolitan Natural Park, a protected area in Panama City. — AFP



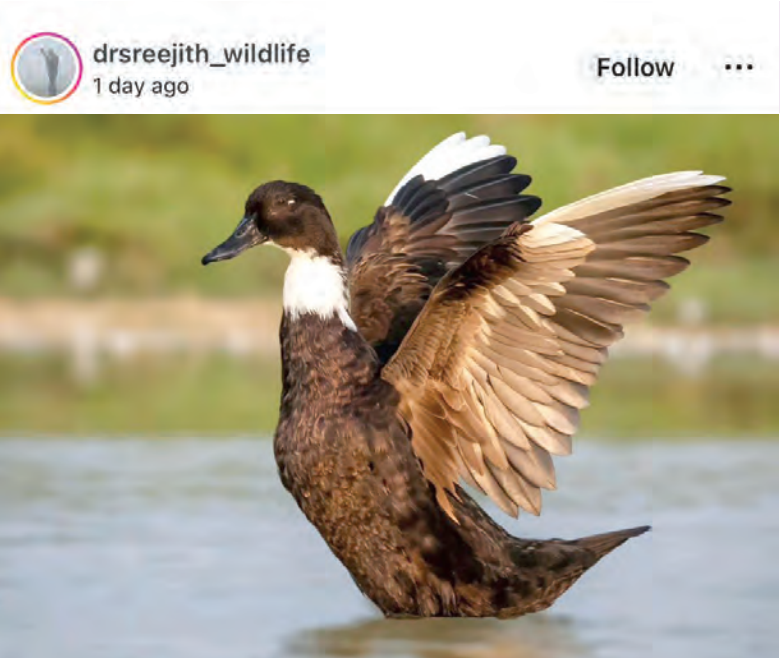
MUSIC

US singer-songwriter Barry Manilow performs during the Recording Academy and Clive Davis’ Salute To Industry Icons 50-Year Anniversary of the pre-Grammy gala at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills. — AFP

INSTA PICKS



Green and serene.



A splendid water dancer captured

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YALDA FESTIVAL BRINGS
IRANIANS TOGETHER

TEHRAN: Iranians of all religions and walks of life mark the ancient Persian festival of Yalda on Sunday, though many say economic hardships fanned by international sanctions will put a damper on this year’s celebrations.

Yalda falls on the winter solstice and is characterised by family gatherings and the eating of nuts, sweets and fruits.

“We mostly spend time with our families, our grandparents, aunts, cousins”, Maral Bagherpour, a smiling 16-year-old student, said in northern Tehran’s Tajrish Bazaar.

“We take fal-e Hafez, we drink tea or coffee. My grandma sings for us sometimes”, she said.

“Taking fal-e Hafez” is a popular tradition that entails using the works of renowned 14th century Persian poet Hafez, an all-time favourite in Iran, to try to divine the future and deal with difficult situations.

“On Yalda night the whole family gets together in my grandparents’ house. We reminisce about the good old days and eat nuts and fruits that are in season”, said Mary Goudarzi, 37.

However, rampant inflation and a sharp depreciation of the national currency against the dollar have diminished people’s purchasing power to really push the boat out for Yalda.

In early December, the central bank announced annual inflation was running at 41 per cent.

On Saturday, the US dollar was trading at around 1.32 million rials on the informal



Iranians celebrate with Yalda decoration in northern Tehran. — AFP

market — almost double the rate at the same time last year.

“Unfortunately, because of recent events such as the war and the dollar price that’s rising sharply, people’s purchasing power has fallen a lot”, said Goudarzi, an interior designer.

“That’s why you can’t really see many of the items we used to see in previous years on every table”, she said while shopping for Yalda.

In June, Israel launched an unprecedented attack on Iran, striking military and nuclear sites as well as residential areas, killing more than 1,000 people including nuclear scientists and military commanders.

The attack triggered a 12-day conflict in which Iran responded with drones and missiles targeting Israel and in which the United States joined Israel and hit Iranian nuclear sites.

Some shopping centres in Tehran put up decorations for Yalda, including artificial trees adorned with hanging pomegranates or displaying huge plates of fruits linked to the festivities. — AFP



TRAFFIC stops and hallways clear as the diva arrives, her attendants escorting her backstage ahead of her rendition of the role she’s perfected over years of delighting audiences.

“You’ve got this, Wanda”, one opera manager says as she heads inside.

Before the show, she gets a quick pedicure touch-up — her hooves tend to pick up hay and debris.

Wanda is, after all, a donkey. She’s played roles in classic New York Metropolitan Opera productions including “La Boheme” and “The Barber of Seville” since 2022.

In Act II of “La Boheme” — Puccini’s popular if heartbreaking portrayal of 19th-century Paris — Wanda joins hundreds of performers including diners, shoppers and vendors.

The donkey pulls the colourful cart of Pargignol, who peddles toys to children in the spectacular street market scene that also literally features a horse-drawn carriage.

But Wanda and her colleague Max — the elegant brown horse who takes the stage after the donkey exits — are pros, calmly hitting their marks.

Their handlers don cloaks alongside the animals during the performance, while Wanda’s costume includes a magenta cone hat with multi-coloured gems and a frilly collar. As they wait in a holding area for their cues, Max usually naps, handler Angelina Borello said.

Wanda gets visits and pets from people including actor Gregory Warren, who plays Pargignol.

“I think it comforts them a little bit just to know who’s there and who’s dressed like a clown”, Warren said.

“She’s very chill. It’s a lot of fun”.

“It adds an energy, I think especially for the kids on the stage, to get to see a live animal in action in the middle of it all”.

Wanda debuted at the Met after her predecessor Sir Gabriel retired to Maryland, where he lives on a farm as a companion to a mare whose partner passed.

When she’s scheduled for several opera roles in a short period, Wanda lives at stables in the New York borough of the Bronx to minimise her time on the road.

When she has longer stretches off, she resides in upstate New York.

She also has regular gigs in

When the diva
is a donkey



Palm Sunday processions in Manhattan.

“She’s fabulous”, said Nancy Novograd, the owner of the agency All Tame Animals.

Animals well-disposed to show business have similar qualities as people born to perform, Novograd said.

On any given day, Novograd’s agency might be working on a commercial shoot with horses on the beach or waxworms appearing in a television show.

Stage manager Hester Warren-Steijn said the logistics of working with live animals is an intricate dance — much like everything else backstage at the Met, home to a complex revolving stage with hydraulic lifts.

There’s always a Plan B in case something goes awry, she said. The occasional allergy to equine hair crops up — those singers stay away to protect their voices.

Warren-Steijn said part of the job of including animals

onstage at the Met is ensuring that “they are well-treated” and “taken care of”.

Animal rights advocates over the years have protested the use of live animals in stage productions, especially in Europe.

The German arm of PETA notably convinced the Berlin State Opera in 2022 to stop using guinea pigs in several performances of Wagner’s “Ring Cycle”.

At the Met, Warren-Steijn said the live animals in beloved productions like “La Boheme” are part of the grandeur and world-building that “this company does so well”. “People want to see it”, she said. “This is the Met at its Mettiest”.

According to Novograd, some animals simply aren’t right for performance. When that’s the case, it’s quickly evident to her and the trainers she works with.

When “it’s overwhelming”, she said, “they should not be working”. — AFP

In Act II of “La Boheme” — Puccini’s popular if heartbreaking portrayal of 19th-century Paris — Wanda joins hundreds of performers including diners, shoppers and vendors.

FEATURES

DR KHALED ABDUL MALAK

It was last Wednesday when my friend Rami called me to ask if I could guide them through Wadi Al Nakhr to cross this spectacular canyon starting from Jabal Shams and ending in Wadi Ghul. It had been six years since the last time I took a group of five friends and thrill-seekers from Dubai on this extraordinary adventure. This route was opened by my Masters, Patrick and Nathalie Cabiro, back in 2001. The descent involves 12 drops ranging from 25 to 80 metres high.

We agreed with Rami, Françoise and Hamoud to meet at the exit of Wadi Al Nakhr at 4 pm in order to drive up to Jabal Shams, spend the night in a guesthouse and start our fantastic journey early the next day. Before I reached the meeting point, Rami and Hamoud dropped one of the cars inside the wadi in the village of Al Nakhr to avoid walking 7 kilometres to exit the wadi. We all drove up to Jabal Shams in Rami's car. As usual, Françoise was the logistics person who would drive the car down from the mountain the next day late afternoon to meet us when we finished our descent from Jabal Shams.

On our way to the mountain, we had a spectacular show of the sun setting between Jabal Al Kawr and Jabal Misht. It was almost dark when we reached the house we had rented for the night. After a delicious dinner brought by my companions, we packed our backpacks with all our climbing gear, snacks and water to be ready to start early in the morning. We woke up at 4:45 the next day to have breakfast, aiming to hit the track at 6 am. I estimated our journey would take around 10 hours.

The starting point was only 1 kilometre away from the house. Just before leaving, we checked the weather predictions, which were okay with no rain expected. Françoise drove us to our starting point and we started moving at 6:35. We agreed to meet her at the exit around 5 pm.

At this time of the day, the temperature was around 6 degrees Celsius! We started our descent on the Via Ferrata (metallic cable fixed in the rock to secure the climber) and did our first drop of 45 metres. At this time, the sun was already rising behind the mountain.

We reached the abandoned village of Sab Bani Khamis at 8 am and headed East, following the ridge of the left bank of the canyon towards our second drop. Once I fixed my rope on the anchor, installed my descender, I started sliding down the 70m drop. Hamoud was second, followed by Rami. From this point, we had another 4 drops to finish abseiling a total of almost 140 metres of cliff.

On the way down to reach the canyon's bed, I kept a surprise for my two friends, which was the visit to 'Kahf Al Faras', the Mare's cave in Arabic. This cave can be seen from the balcony walk that leads to Sab Bani Khamis and looks like a very tiny entrance at the bottom of the cliff.

My friends were very impressed by the size of the cave. The height of the entrance is around 25m and the access is a very steep, slippery ground. Once inside, the roof is 45m high. I measured the size of the chamber with my laser device, which showed 75m x 55m. After our short visit to Al Faras, we started scrambling down the scree until we reached the canyon's bed very close to the bottom of the Great Arch under the terraces of Sab Bani Khamis, a massive free drop measuring 385 metres that I first did in 2010 with my Romanian friend Mihai Catrinar and the second time in 2017 with Steve Backshall, a BBC TV star, along with Aldo Kane and my friend Justin Halls.

I named this drop Shaikh Al Majaneen (The shaikh of the crazies), a title given to me by my best Omani friend, Abou Hmeid, related to my passion for adventure. The following part of the canyon was superb, involving many abseils, with the most beautiful being an 80m green waterfall ending in a crystal clear pool.

We reached the car left by my friends in Al Nakhr village at 5:30 pm and drove out from the canyon to meet Françoise. We stopped at Al Hamra and had a delicious dinner before hitting the road back to Muscat, which we reached around 10 pm.

Exhausted but extremely happy, I was already thinking about my next trip.

THE THRILL OF WADI AL NAKHR

AFTER A SIX-YEAR GAP, A VETERAN CANYONER RETURNS TO WADI AL NAKHR FOR A DEMANDING DESCENT FROM JABAL SHAMS TO WADI GHUL — A JOURNEY OF HIDDEN CAVES AND UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS

