

O M A N
عمان
D A I L Y

Observer



VOL. 45, NO. 68
PAGES 20 | BAISAS 210

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INBRIEF

AL ISRA’A WAL MIRAJ
ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATED

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA), celebrated the Al Isra’a Wal Miraj Anniversary. The ceremony draws inspiration from the event’s faith-based, spiritual, and educational dimensions and the profound implications it holds for entrenching faith, reinforcing values of patience and steadfastness. The ceremony was held at the theatre of the Ministry of Information (MoI) under the auspices of Shaikh Ahmed bin Saud al Siyabi, Secretary-General of the Office of the Sultanate of Oman’s Grand Mufti. It featured a film titled ‘The Journey of Light and the Ascension of the Message.’
DETAILS ON P2

SURVEY UNEARTHES
RARE COLLECTIONS
AT WADI TANUF

Rare findings including a collection of beads and bone fragments, along with inscriptions in South Arabian script and rock carvings were unearthed during archaeological surveys and excavations at the Wadi Tanuf site in the Wilayat of Nizwa, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. The ministry, in cooperation with Japanese archaeological missions from the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, was involved in the excavations in these areas since 2018 and the latest discovery marks a milestone in the ongoing efforts in unearthing the remnants of a bygone generation. **DETAILS ON P2**

SPAIN SEEKS
ANSWERS AS TRAIN
CRASH KILLS 39

The Spanish government vowed on Monday to conduct a full investigation into the causes of a high-speed train collision that killed at least 39 people, with officials warning the death toll could rise as rescuers worked among the wreckage. The crash late on Sunday is Spain’s deadliest train accident since 2013, when 80 people died after a train veered off a curved section of track outside the northwestern city of Santiago de Compostela. The latest happened when a train operated by rail company Iryo travelling from Malaga to Madrid derailed near Adamuz in Andalucia. **DETAILS ON P7**

New amendments to expand motor vehicle insurance

MUSCAT: The Financial Services Authority has issued a decision approving new amendment to the Unified Motor Vehicle Insurance Policy. These amendments include a package of benefits and advantages aimed at expanding the insurance protection system for vehicle insurance policyholders and elevating the quality of services provided. The new improvements include setting specific timeframes for

claims settlement and facilitating their procedures. The new version of the policy also includes automatic coverage for material damages to the insured vehicle caused by natural disasters and weather conditions as automatic coverage for all motor vehicle insurance policies, including compulsory third-party insurance policies. The authority has worked with insurance and reinsurance companies to regulate the cost of

this new coverage in line with the expected level of risks. The new policy also entails the addition of a clause for compensation in case of delays in repairing the insured vehicle beyond the specified timeframes, according to controls to be issued later by the authority. It also introduces the option for cash compensation for the value of the damage resulting from an accident instead of having the

insurance company undertake the vehicle repair. The policy confirmed an amendment to the list of (consumable) spare parts that must be replaced with new ones without any depreciation deduction, bringing the total to 37 parts. The decision granted insurance companies a 30-day period from its publication date as the deadline for implementing the new amendments.

Oman, UK seek resolution
of ME issues through talks

D i p l o m a t i c t r a c k c a n r e v i v e I r a n n u c l e a r t a l k s

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN and the United Kingdom (UK) discussed bilateral friendship and cooperation between them and ways to enhance the strategic partnership in various political, economic, developmental and investment fields.

This included following up on the outcomes of the Strategic Dialogue Team and the Joint Working Group, and accomplishing the programmes and work tracks previously agreed upon by both sides, in a bid to serve common interests and broaden the prospects of bilateral cooperation. This came during a meeting held in London on Monday between Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and Yvette Cooper, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs of the United Kingdom (UK). On regional issues, the two sides exchanged viewpoints on a number of developments of mutual interest, including the situation in Yemen, Sudan and Iran.

The two ministers affirmed the importance of supporting efforts aimed at solidifying the truce in Yemen and enhancing pathways for comprehensive political dialogue. They also discussed developments in Gaza Strip and the need to redouble humanitarian efforts to alleviate the suffering

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, with Yvette Cooper, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs of the United Kingdom (UK), in London on Monday.

On Sudan, the two ministers addressed the tragic humanitarian situation and the necessity of exerting efforts to reach a cessation of hostilities and establish a truce faced by the population in the Strip, in addition to intensifying international efforts to reach a permanent ceasefire, supporting reconstruction endeavours, and reviving the peace process in accordance with the two-state solution and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Regarding the Iranian nuclear file, the two ministers affirmed the importance of creating conditions conducive to reviving the diplomatic track and resuming negotiations in a way that contributes to reducing regional tensions. As for Sudan, the two ministers addressed the tragic humanitarian situation and the necessity of exerting efforts to reach a cessation of hostilities and establish a truce that would allow UN relief agencies to perform their humanitarian tasks in the country. — **ONA**

Astro-tourism to bolster economy and jobs

MUSCAT: Omani Astronomical Society has announced the publication of its second research paper, which stands as the first comprehensive study of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman to address the astro-tourism sector, focusing on its current reality and future development prospects. The research paper, titled ‘Astronomical Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman,’ was published in the International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, issued by the Science Publishing Group. The study was prepared by

The study shed light on Oman’s rich astronomical heritage.

lead researcher Dr Ishaq bin Yahya al Shueili and Ali bin Amer al Shaibani from the Omani Astronomical Society’s Research Department. The study focuses on the natural, geographical, and cultural potential possessed by the Sultanate of Oman to develop astro-tourism as a sustainable, knowledge-based tourism model. The study confirms that astro-tourism encompasses the development of recreational and educational activities related to the universe and celestial phenomena. It further

contributes to disseminating scientific knowledge, developing human capital and supporting economic development in remote areas. The paper examines the current status of astro-tourism in Oman, emphasising that this sector represents a promising development opportunity, particularly in remote regions such as Jabal Shams, Rimal Al Sharqiyah and the Rub’ al Khali (Empty Quarter). These areas are characterised by dark skies, low levels of light pollution and a dry climate that provides clear night view. **TURN TO P2**

OMAN

ASTRO-TOURISM TO
BOLSTER ECONOMY
AND EMPLOYMENT

FROM PAGE 1

Furthermore, the study highlights Oman’s geographical advantages, such as its strategic location at the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, which grants it a diversity of terrain ranging from vast deserts to high mountain plateaus, providing ideal conditions for stargazing.

Dr Ishaq bin Yahya al Shueili stated: “This study is a first step towards placing the Sultanate of Oman on the global astro-tourism map. It highlights the unique geographical and cultural advantages that Oman possesses, such as maritime and agricultural heritage linked to astronomy, alongside the potential to establish world-class astronomical observatories in governorates such as Al Wusta and Dhofar.”

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), he added: “Astro-tourism contributes to bolstering the local economy by creating job opportunities for Omani youth, supporting sustainable development in rural areas, and disseminating scientific knowledge, while emphasising the importance of protecting the night-time environment from light pollution.”

The study also shed light on Oman’s rich astronomical heritage, including celestial navigation practices among Omani sailors, the use of stars as agricultural calendars in the Aflaj system, oral star maps within desert communities, and the integration of astronomy into traditional architecture such as castles and forts.

Additionally, the study compared the Sultanate of Oman with several successful international models in astro-tourism, such as the Coquimbo region in Chile. It proposed expanding Dark Sky Reserves and establishing Radio Quiet Zones (RQZs), thereby enhancing the Sultanate of Oman’s scientific and tourism value on an international level.

The paper noted significant events such as the AMADEE-18 Mars mission simulation in the Marmul desert in Dhofar Governorate, which highlighted Oman’s unique geological characteristics, as well as the annular solar eclipse in December 2020, which attracted over 300 observers from 12 countries to the Ras Al Ruways area (the eclipse path).

It is noted that this paper is the second for the Omani Astronomical Society, following its first research paper published in 2025 regarding aurora observations in the Sultanate of Oman, which documented the first sighting of the aurora in the Middle East from Jabal Shams.

OMAN
MARKS
AL ISRA’A
WAL
MIRAJ
ANNIVERSARY
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MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, celebrated the Al Isra’a Wal Miraj Anniversary.

The ceremony draws inspiration from the event’s faith-based, spiritual, and educational dimensions and the profound implications it holds for entrenching faith, reinforcing values of patience and steadfastness.

The ceremony was held on Monday at the theatre of the Ministry of Information under the auspices of Shaikh Ahmed bin Saud al Siyabi, Secretary-General of the Office of the Sultanate of Oman’s Grand Mufti. It featured a film titled “The Journey of Light and the Ascension of the Message.” The film presented a contemporary narrative style with artistic and



The ceremony falls within the framework of its commitment to commemorating religious occasions. — ONA

visual treatment, embodying the event’s grandeur and its stature in the Prophetic biography, and highlighted the timeless faith-based meanings and human values it encompasses, whose effects are reflected in the reality of the nation.

The ceremony, organised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, falls within the framework of its commitment to commemorating religious occasions in an institutional manner that combines authenticity and renewal, contributing to the enhancement of religious awareness, the consolidation of faith-based values, and connecting generations with the biography of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him). — ONA

Rare archaeological finds
unearthed at Wadi Tanuf

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 19

RARE findings, including a collection of beads and bone fragments, along with inscriptions in South Arabian script and rock carvings, have been unearthed during archaeological surveys and excavations at Wadi Tanuf in the Wilayat of Nizwa, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT).

The ministry, in cooperation with Japanese archaeological missions from the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, has been carrying out excavations at the site since 2018.

The latest discoveries mark a major milestone in ongoing efforts to uncover remnants of ancient settlements and enrich Oman’s national heritage inventory.

The findings were announced at a lecture titled ‘Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Wadi Tanuf’, presented by Japanese professor and geologist Dr Kondo Yasuhisa, who has been leading archaeological excavations of historic settlements in



Japanese geologist Dr Kondo has been leading archaeological excavations in Musandam Governorate and Tanuf in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Musandam Governorate and Tanuf in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The lecture reviewed the most significant results of the surveys and their implications for understanding the region’s cultural and landscape history.

“The new discoveries enrich our understanding of the region’s heritage,

traditions, culture and lifestyles of a bygone era. Oman has immense archaeological potential, which can be strongly integrated with tourism.

It has the capacity to become a regional hub for archaeology, sustainable tourism and cultural tourism,” Dr Kondo said.

He stressed the importance of publishing and publicising the results of years-long excavations to raise awareness of Oman’s rich cultural heritage and strengthen its global profile.

Prof Kondo, who has been actively involved in archaeological surveys in Arain in Tanuf, cave-side settlements in the Canyon area of Al Dakhiliyah and sites in Musandam, was recently conferred with the Japanese Foreign Minister’s Commendation for his contribution to strengthening bilateral relations through archaeology over the past 17 years.

The ongoing archaeological surveys are being conducted in cooperation with the MoHT and the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, with financial support from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).



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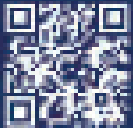
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SHORT TAKE



1,007,190 Emiratis visited the Sultanate of Oman until November-end, followed by 607,789 Indians.

EMIRATIS, INDIANS AMONG TOP FOREIGN VISITORS TO OMAN

MUSCAT: The top nationalities visiting the Sultanate of Oman until the end of November 2025 were Emiratis and Indians, among others, as the country recorded a 0.4 per cent increase to 3.51 million from 3.50 million in the same period in 2024.

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), 1,007,190 Emiratis visited the Sultanate of Oman until November-end, followed by 607,789 Indians, 112,127 Yemenis, 111,080 Saudis and 109,193 Germans.

The number of foreign visitors to the Sultanate of Oman increased 18 per cent to 366,483 in November 2025, compared to 310,462 in November 2024.

The hotel guests (three to five star) increased by 10.9 per cent in the 11 months of 2025 to 2,139,3000, while the room nights increased by 20.4 per cent to 3,290,613. The 3 to 5-star hotels employed 11,159 people in the 11 months of 2025, including 3,744 Omanis.

Oman-based photographer shines at Art Miami, wins global recognition

LIJU CHERIAN
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Fine art and conceptual photographer Rachel Eapen has etched Oman's name on the global art map after her work was featured in the 41st issue of Artmosphere magazine's special 'Art Miami Week 2025' edition, emerging as the only resident artist from the Sultanate of Oman to be showcased in the prestigious international publication.

The Muscat-based artist, also a Foodelia Award winner, described the recognition as "deeply humbling and profoundly meaningful", calling it a milestone that validates her quiet, introspective visual language in a fast-moving digital world.



RACHEL EAPEN

Three of her works – 'Veiled Fortitude', 'Glimpses of Grace' and 'Metamorphosis' – printed on archival paper, were selected through a curated process following the editor's encounter with her portfolio at World Art Dubai. The selection places Rachel among an exceptional group of international artists whose formal and conceptual diversity reflects the breadth of today's contemporary art scene.

"The editor at Artmosphere had previously seen my work at World Art Dubai, which led

to an invitation to submit a selection for consideration," Rachel told the Observer. "When three of my pieces were selected, it felt especially meaningful because the platform values depth and intent over trends. The feature was not just about individual images, but the story they collectively tell." Though her images are not literal depictions of place, Rachel says Oman is deeply woven into her visual language. "Living here has shaped my sensitivity to light, stillness and cultural depth Oman's landscapes, its calm and its respect for tradition have influenced my use of chiaroscuro, muted tones and symbolic elements. In that sense, the connection to Oman is felt rather than seen." Her journey to

Art Miami has been gradual and deeply rooted in exploration – both visual and emotional. The selected body of work examines identity, resilience and strength, using minimalistic compositions and conceptual approaches to create emotive images where vulnerability meets fortitude and silence often speaks louder than words.

"Personally, this recognition feels humbling," she said. "Being the only artist from Oman featured in this issue makes it even more meaningful – it feels like carrying a piece of this place into a global conversation. Professionally, it opens doors for dialogue, collaboration and greater visibility for conceptual photography emerging from the region."



Glimpse of grace



Echoes of a fragment

Islamic perspective views work as responsibility

THE Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, participated in the 36th International Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, hosted by the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The Omani delegation was led by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

In his address to the conference, the minister emphasised the depth of fraternal ties between the two nations and commended Egypt's consistent commitment to hosting discussions on Islamic issues and fostering joint Islamic action. He noted that the conference is being held at a critical juncture in human history, marked by accelerating technological transformations, evolving labour patterns, and the intertwining of ethical questions with the requirements of development and progress.

He stated that the choice of the conference theme reflects a deep awareness of the challenges facing contemporary societies, particularly regarding the ethics and future of professions amidst the growing reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI). He pointed out that the digital revolution has led to rapid shifts in the concepts of work and production, impacting the tools, values, standards and overall effect of professions on individuals and society.

He explained that the core challenge lies in preserving the essence of professions and safeguarding the status of the human being within new work systems. This ensures that



Oman on Monday participated in the international conference for Islamic affairs, hosted by the Arab Republic of Egypt. — ONA

technology remains a means of progress rather than a factor that threatens social balance, weakens justice or hollows out the spirit and value of work.

The minister noted that the Islamic perspective views work as a "trust and responsibility" (Amanah) before it is seen as a job or a means of production.

He stressed that this vision has never been confined to its time but possesses the flexibility to provide inspiration across different eras, especially in an age of rapid transitions in tools and contexts.

He remarked that civilisation is not measured by the power of means alone, but by the integrity of practice – the ethics of the physician, the honesty of the businessperson, the integrity of the judge, the precision of the

craftsman, and the responsibility of everyone performing their duties.

He noted that current technological shifts, led by AI, necessitate a re-evaluation of work tools and pose a deeper question regarding who will lead the course of labour in the future.

He further stated that the real danger does not lie in the development of technology itself, but in the decline of the human ethical role and the transformation of a profession from a mission and a responsibility into a mere soulless function.

He emphasised that true progress is measured not only by technical speed but by the ability of societies to govern this progress with values that enhance, rather than diminish, the human presence. — ONA



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

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

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/2025/043-2	Customer Satisfaction Incentives Audit	25/01/2026	05/02/2026	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	• Riyadh card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees • Riyadh card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from bid bond requirements. • Riyadh card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from registration fees on business opportunities platform and supplier registration with Nama Group.				



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‘E-SPORTS LEGENDS’ TENT THRILLS GAMERS



AFRAH AL BALUSHI

THE world of competitive gaming has taken centre stage at Muscat Nights, with the ‘E-sports Legends’ tent in Al Amerat Park drawing crowds of all ages through its immersive blend of virtual reality, simulation and competitive electronic games.

Part of the festival’s diverse entertainment offering, the sprawling 3,000-square-metre e-sports tent delivers an interactive journey powered by cutting-edge technology, transporting visitors into the heart of the digital gaming universe.

From the moment guests enter through a circular tunnel animated with e-sports visuals, they are led into a dynamic space packed with modern games for children and adults alike.

Adil al Balushi, Project Manager, E-sports Legends tent, thanked Muscat Municipality for giving Al Angham Al Thahabiya Company the opportunity to participate in Muscat

3,000 SQM,

THE TENT FEATURES 23 VR GAMES, PLAYSTATION, AND CAR SIMULATORS

WEEKLY COMPETITIONS OFFER CASH PRIZES UP TO

1,000

GAMERS OF ALL AGES ENJOY INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCES



Nights, noting that the tent features around 23 virtual reality games alongside PlayStation, Xbox and car simulation zones.

“The tent immerses participants in a fantasy world where they experience gaming first-hand,” he said.

“We host weekly weekend competitions with cash prizes, including Minecraft, Tekken 8, FIFA 26, Rocket League and Valorant, attracting strong participation from gaming enthusiasts.”

Winners of the competitions received prizes of RO 200 for first place and RO 100 for second place in Minecraft, Tekken 8, FIFA 26 and Rocket League, while the Valorant tournament offered RO 1,000 for first place and RO 500 for second place.

This year’s edition has introduced new experiences, including motorsport simulation games and the ‘smart world’ concept, allowing audiences to interact directly with electronic games – a major upgrade from last year’s purely digital car competitions.

Beyond entertainment, Muscat Municipality highlighted the economic and social impact of Muscat Nights, stressing its role in supporting Omani companies and job creation.

Al Angham Al Thahabiya Company, an Omani firm specialising in theatrical and visual productions, employs around 30 Omanis and is among the local enterprises benefiting from the festival.

The municipality reaffirmed that Muscat Nights continues to act as a key economic driver, increasing participation of Omanis and SMEs, promoting seasonal employment, professional development and expanding local economic impact.



Social protection high on Royal care agenda

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

THROUGH the Royal directives the social protection system has been strengthened, and the principles of social justice and economic stability have been firmly established.

Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, emphasised that His Majesty Sultan Haitham's keen interest in the social development sector reflects the national vision that places the individual and the citizen at the heart of its priorities and reinforces the concepts of social justice and community solidarity.

Over the five years, His Majesty issued a number of Royal Decrees and orders that strengthened the social protection system.

According to the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), in 2021, the initiative to support needy families was launched, providing monthly financial assistance for four months to 8,136 individuals, at a total cost exceeding six million Omani rials. The same year also saw the disbursement of additional social assistance payments to 6,304 beneficiaries at a cost of RO 288,000.

In October of the same year, further assistance was provided to 2,700 beneficiaries at a cost of RO 233,000. Also in 2021, Royal Decree No. (33/2021) concerning pension and social protection systems was issued, establishing a modern legislative framework that enhances the sustainability of social protection in the Sultanate of Oman.

In the year of 2022, the scope of social welfare expanded to include civil society organisations and people with disabilities. In January, Royal Directives were issued to provide financial support to 42 government and private rehabilitation centres for people with disabilities, totalling RO 420,000. Additionally, financial support was provided to 64 Omani women's associations and their branches, totalling RO 1.28 million. In April of the same year, an additional social security payment was disbursed to 73,115 beneficiaries in conjunction with the holy month of Ramadhan, at a total cost exceeding RO 7million. His Majesty



Over the five years, His Majesty issued a number of Royal Decrees and orders that strengthened the social protection system.

also directed the provision of school supplies and meals for the children of social security and low- income families for the 2022-2023 academic year. This initiative benefited 24,390 students, with total support reaching RO 1,671,200.

The year 2023 witnessed a clear strengthening of the role of civil and volunteer work. In January, His Majesty issued Royal Directives to provide financial support to volunteer teams affiliated with social development committees in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, in addition to supporting 15 charitable societies that support the Ministry's efforts in serving the community, with total support exceeding RO 9.275 million. Also in the same year, Royal Decree No. (52/2023) concerning the Social Protection Law was issued, representing a significant step in developing and enhancing the comprehensiveness of the social protection system, thus contributing to achieving social welfare through a methodology governed by justice for all segments of society.

In 2024, efforts continued to develop the institutional structure of the social development sector through the issuance of Royal Decree

The year of 2025 concluded with the issuance of Royal Decree No. 111/2025, regulating premarital medical examinations.

No. (14/2024), which defined the responsibilities of the Ministry and approved its organisational structure. Under this decree, social security responsibilities were transferred to the Social Protection Fund, the name of the Directorate General of Social Welfare was changed to the Directorate General of Partnership and Community Development and three new Directorates General of Social Development were established in the governorates of Muscat, Al Batinah South, and Al Sharqiyah North, in addition to the creation of seven social development centres in several wilayats (districts).

His Majesty's noble vision for the year 2025 was embodied in a series of Royal Decrees and directives that extended his ongoing support for citizens and the building of a stable social life. He ordered a Royal Grant of RO 178 million to support more than 100,000 citizens, in addition to extending social and insurance protection to citizens throughout 2025 by continuing to disburse existing social security pensions.

The year of 2025 concluded with the issuance of Royal Decree No. 111/2025, regulating premarital medical examinations. This decree aims to enhance family health and societal stability, aligning with national policies and directives that strengthen the position of the Omani family and solidify its cohesion and stability by providing a safe and healthy psychological environment that contributes to building a stable and informed society.

Warning over carbonated drink bottles

MUSCAT: The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has issued an official warning against the use of carbonated beverage-making bottles bearing expiry dates from January to October 2026, citing non-compliance with approved specifications and standards that may pose a risk to public health and safety.

The authority said the affected bottles could explode during use, potentially causing injury to consumers. The alert forms part of the CPA's ongoing efforts to protect the public from unsafe products in the market.

As a precautionary measure, the CPA has urged consumers to stop using the affected bottles immediately and to contact the company to arrange a free replacement.



CPA urges consumers to stop using the affected bottles immediately.

It also advised shoppers to exercise caution when purchasing products from online retail outlets and to ensure that all goods comply with approved specifications and safety standards.

The CPA reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening market surveillance and taking swift action against products that threaten consumer safety.



وزارة التنمية الاجتماعية
Ministry of Social Development

Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender:-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non-refundable)	
					Small and Medium Companies	Local Companies
33/2026	Supply and installation of surveillance cameras at the Child Care Center in Al-Khoud	Companies specialized in the field of supplying alarm, security and safety equipment and devices and registered with the Projects, Tenders and Local Content Authority with the excellent, first, second, third or fourth class	Sunday 08-02-2026 02:00 PM	Sunday 01-03-2026 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>), On **Tuesday 20/01/2026**.

❖ For Inquiry, please contact though the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).

"The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry"

www.mosd.gov.om

Symposium highlights tourism security as key to competitiveness

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The first symposium on the Security of Tourism Facilities, held under the auspices of Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, emphasised the critical role of integrated security in enhancing Oman's position as a safe and investment-attractive tourism destination.

Brigadier (Retd) Saeed bin Sulaiman al Asimi, CEO of Security and Safety Services, noted that tourism establishments are no longer merely service facilities but strategic components of national security and economic growth.

"Trust in the tourism sector is fragile amid global challenges. Resilient tourism facilities do not just prevent crises — they prepare for them

Seminars by international experts in security, risk management marked the event.

efficiently and professionally," he said, highlighting the importance of advanced security technologies, staff training, and clear emergency protocols.

Al Asimi stressed that security is now a strategic enabler of growth, contributing to operational excellence, improved visitor experience, and strengthened investor confidence. He also underlined the need for public-private partnerships, coordinated efforts, and information sharing, noting that the

symposium exemplifies such collaboration.

The event featured four specialised seminars by international experts in security, risk management, and guest experience, demonstrating the shift from traditional hotel procedures to comprehensive strategic security systems that underpin tourism competitiveness, economic sustainability, and national security.

During the opening, symposium partners — including the Ministry of Labour, Oman Airports, Muscat Media Group, and Oman Tourism College — as well as local and international speakers Yousef al Mufraji from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Michael O'Neill, Calum Anderson, Kate Ansley, and Stephen Thompson, were honoured for their contributions.

TENDER NOTICE



وزارة الزراعة والسمكية وموارد المياه
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources Announces the following Retender: -

Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales Start Date	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Companies that are Eligible to Participate	Tender Document Fee (R.O)
262/2025/ MAFWR/ HQ- 28 Recall - 1	Maintenance Works of An Nijayd Recharge Dam in Wilayat Ibri Governorate of AlDhahirah	Tuesday 13/1/2026	Sunday 25/1/2026	Wednesday 4/2/2026	Specialized companies registered with fourth grades	(10/-) Omani riyals for SMEs

Interested Companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board (in the above mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.

The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.

The Tenderer should attach Bid Commitment Declaration for local companies.

All correspondence pertaining to the tender inquiry must be online at e-tendering System.

All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: +968 24402244 or tenderhd@ptlc.gov.om.

TENDERS COMMITTEE
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



South Korea's President Lee Jae Myung (R) shakes hands with Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni (L) during their meeting in Seoul. — AFP

SOUTH KOREA, ITALY AGREE TO DEEPEN COOPERATION

SEOUL: South Korea and Italy agreed to expand cooperation in artificial intelligence, space and the defence industry, pledging to confront “global challenges” at a bilateral summit in Seoul. President Lee Jae Myung hosted Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni for the summit at his office in the first visit by an Italian leader to South Korea in almost two decades. Speaking alongside the far-right leader following their meeting, Lee said the two countries would “further expand the horizons of cooperation into advanced industries such as artificial intelligence, space, and aviation”. “In addition, we will pursue complementary cooperation in the defence industry based on each side’s strengths,” Lee added. South Korea has emerged as a major arms exporter in recent years as Central and Eastern European countries. But it has not supplied weapons to Ukraine due to a domestic policy preventing the provision of arms to countries at war. “The war in Ukraine also poses an extremely serious risk to Europe’s security in every respect,” Meloni said. “For that reason, we will continue to pursue new forms of cooperation at the global level,” she added. — AFP

VIETNAM PARTY BEGINS CONGRESS TO PICK LEADERS



HANOI: Vietnam’s ruling Communist Party convened to begin its twice-a-decade congress, where leader To Lam is looking to tighten his grip on power less than two years after assuming the top role. The Southeast Asian nation of 100 million people is both a repressive one-party state and a regional economic bright spot, where the Communist Party has sought to deliver rapid growth to bolster its legitimacy. Nearly 1,600 delegates representing the party’s more than five million members gathered on Monday for a sombre tribute to national hero Ho Chi Minh at his mausoleum in Hanoi, before attending a closed-door preparatory session of the party congress. The official opening ceremony will be broadcast live on Tuesday morning, state media said, with the party’s general secretary, Lam, widely expected to deliver a speech. Since he ascended to the role just 17 months ago, Lam has pursued an anti-corruption drive, thinned and streamlined bureaucracy, and accelerated infrastructure investment in reforms officials describe as a “revolution”. Analysts say Lam’s reach will depend on who else secures top posts and politburo positions during the week-long conclave, particularly from the more conservative military faction that opposes him. — AFP

EXTREME WEATHER

Nepal halts search after missing climbers



Bad weather forced Nepali rescuers to suspend the search for an Iranian climber missing for four days after an accident which killed a Nepali team member. Extreme conditions, including fierce winds, made rescue efforts impossible on the 8,481-metre high Mount Makalu. “A team of eight experienced climbers has been sent but the wind has been very strong and affected the search,” Madan Lamsal of expedition organiser Makalu Adventure said. — AFP

SYRIAN ARMY DEPLOYS IN DEIR EZZOR PROVINCE AFTER KURDISH WITHDRAWAL

DAMASCUS: Syria’s army deployed its forces in parts of the eastern Deir Ezzor province formerly controlled by Kurdish forces following their withdrawal from the area. After two days of rapid gains in Kurdish-controlled territory, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa announced on Sunday a deal with their leader, Mazloum Abdi, that includes a ceasefire and the integration of the Kurdish administration and forces into the central state.

The government pushed captured areas that came under Kurdish control during the fight against the IS group. In Deir Ezzor, a correspondent saw dozens of military vehicles heading to the east of the Euphrates river, which once separated Damascus-controlled areas to the west from the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces to the east. Lines of cars, trucks and motorcycles formed in front of a small bridge leading to the eastern

bank. Some people were also heading there on foot. “Our joy over liberation is indescribable,” Mohammed Khalil, a 50-year-old driver in Deir Ezzor, said. The Syrian army said in a statement that it “started the deployment” into the eastern Jazira region “to secure it under the agreement between the Syrian state and the SDF”. The agreement calls for the immediate handover of the provinces of the Arab-majority Raqa and Deir Ezzor provinces. — AFP

Japan PM eyes snap poll to seek stronger mandate

JAPANESE

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said on Monday she would dissolve parliament this week ahead of a snap election on February 8, hoping for a stronger mandate to push through her ambitious policy agenda. The country’s first woman leader is banking on her high poll numbers to lead the unpopular ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to victory. “Is Sanae Takaichi fit to be prime minister? I wanted to ask the sovereign people to decide,” she told a news conference. “Following the dissolution of the lower house on January 23, the schedule will be set for campaigning to start on January 27 and voting and counting held on February 8.”



Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi leaves after a press conference, in Tokyo. — Reuters

If elected, Takaichi pledged on Monday to cut a tax on food for a two-year period to “alleviate the burden” on people struggling with inflation. Takaichi’s cabinet approved a record 122.3-trillion-yen (\$768 billion) budget for the fiscal year from April 2026, and she has vowed to get parliamentary approval as soon as possible to address rising prices and shore up the world’s fourth-largest economy. “We have a responsibility to overcome the shackles of excessive austerity and take immediate action against the crisis at hand,” she told reporters. The LDP has governed Japan almost uninterrupted for decades, albeit with frequent leader changes. Takaichi was appointed premier in October, and her cabinet is riding high in the polls despite her party’s flagging popularity. The ruling bloc — which includes

Takaichi’s cabinet approved a record 122.3-trillion-yen (\$768 billion) budget for the fiscal year from April 2026, and she has vowed to get parliamentary approval as soon as possible to address rising prices and shore up the world’s fourth-largest economy

coalition partner Japan Innovation Party (JIP) — has only a slim majority in the powerful lower house of parliament. This could hamper the passage of her policy agenda, including “proactive” fiscal spending and boosting the defence budget. “If the LDP can get a majority by itself in the lower house, that’ll help her pursue policies” without concessions to other parties, said Sadafumi Kawato, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo. But opposition parties say Takaichi’s plan to dissolve the lower house risks delaying its passage, with Jun Azumi of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) saying it would “sacrifice livelihoods”. Masaaki Tokuno, a 64-year-old bicycle lot manager, said that “carrying out policies to tackle inflation should be first, before

holding the election”. A snap election may also help Takaichi break the deadlock in a spat with China, increasing her leverage by showing she has strong support at home, analysts said. China recently announced a broad ban on exports to Japan of “dual-use” goods with potential military applications and has reportedly been choking off exports of rare-earth products crucial for making everything from electric cars to missiles. Takaichi denounced on Monday “economic pressure tactics” impacting Japan, without explicitly referring to China. These are “aimed at forcing other nations to submit to demands, by controlling upstream materials in supply chains that the world relies on”, she said. Mikitaka Masuyama, dean of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, warned that if she wins, China could further intensify pressure on Takaichi. Beijing may want to send voters “the message that supporting a hawkish leader could lead to pain” through more trade controls or other means. According to a poll by the Asahi newspaper, 60 percent of people surveyed said they were worried about the impact of a worsening Japan-China relationship on the economy. Under Takaichi’s predecessor, Shigeru Ishiba, the LDP and its former long-term coalition partner Komeito lost its majority in both chambers in the past two national elections — most recently in the July upper house election. The July election led Ishiba to step down, while smaller parties gained support. — AFP



FUNDING CUT WORSENS YEMEN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

GENEVA: The UN warned on Monday that the humanitarian situation in Yemen is worsening and that gains made to tackle malnutrition and health would go into reverse due to funding cuts. “We are expecting things to be much worse in 2026,” Julien Harneis, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, told reporters in Geneva. Some 21 million people will need humanitarian assistance this year, an increase from 19.5 million the previous year, according to the UN. The situation has been aggravated by economic collapse and disruption of essential services including health and education, and political uncertainty, Harneis said. Funding Yemen traditionally received from Western countries was now being cut back, Harneis said, pointing to hopes for more help from Gulf countries. “It is certainly very clear that they’re (Saudi Arabia) very concerned and that they do want to do more, so we will explore that with them.” — Reuters

ILLICIT INDUSTRY

400 ‘freed’ by Cambodian scam networks



Cyberscam networks in Cambodia have freed more than 400 Indonesians this month, Jakarta said on Monday, after Phnom Penh announced a fresh crackdown on the illicit industry. Recent Cambodian law enforcement measures resulted in “many online scam syndicates... letting their workers go”, Indonesia’s ambassador to Cambodia, Santo Darmosumarto, said. “The embassy predicts many more will flow in from the provinces,” Santo said. — AFP

ROAD TRAGEDY

13 killed in South Africa bus collision



A minibus carrying students to school collided with a truck south of Johannesburg, killing 13 students. The crash happened near the industrial city of Vanderbijlpark, about 60 kilometres south of Johannesburg. Police said the driver of the minibus appeared to have lost control while attempting to overtake other vehicles. President Cyril Ramaphosa said everything must be done to enforce the rules of the road and ensure the quality of school transport services. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



Britain’s Prince Harry arrives outside the High Court in London. — AFP

HARRY ARRIVES AT COURT FOR BATTLE AGAINST NEWSPAPER

LONDON: Prince Harry arrived at London’s High Court for an anticipated nine-week trial into claims that a UK newspaper group unlawfully gathered information on him. In the last unresolved case after the British royal brought lawsuits against several UK newspaper publishers, Harry is jointly suing Associated Newspapers Ltd (ANL), the publisher of the Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday tabloids.

Harry, who is set to take the stand to give evidence on Thursday, entered the Royal Courts of Justice shortly after 10:00am, ahead of the opening of the trial at 10:30am. It is the third and final case brought against a British newspaper publisher by the prince, who is said to see holding the media to account as a personal mission. He has long blamed the media for the death of his mother Princess Diana, killed in a Paris car crash in 1997 while trying to shake off the paparazzi.

The seven accuse Associated Newspapers, publishers of the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, of allegedly carrying out or commissioning unlawful activities such as hiring private investigators to place listening devices inside cars. They also allegedly impersonated individuals to obtain medical information — a practice known as blagging — and accessed private phone conversations. — AFP

UKRAINIANS DEFY COLD AND STRIKES



Music blasts from speakers and lights strobe in the dark as revellers, clad in puffer jackets and bobble hats, brave Kyiv’s freezing cold at an outdoor party despite blackouts triggered by Russian strikes. Moscow has been pummelling Ukraine’s power grid with drones and missiles, plunging millions into darkness and cold as temperatures dip as low as -20C. Across the country, around 58,000 workers were racing to restore power, with additional crews deployed to the capital where, according to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the situation was “extremely tough”. — AFP

NORWAY PREPARING FOR PROPERTY REQUISITIONS IN WARTIME

OSLO: Thousands of Norwegians were to receive letters on Monday from the military informing them that their homes, vehicles, boats and machinery may be requisitioned in the event of war. “The requisitions are intended to ensure that, in a wartime situation, the armed forces have access to the resources necessary for the defence of the country,” the military said. Around 13,500 preparatory requisitions will be issued for 2026. The letters have no practical impact

in peacetime, the armed forces said, other than to let owners know that the military may take over their goods in the event of a conflict. The request is valid for one year, and roughly two-thirds of the letters sent in 2026 were renewals. “The importance of being prepared for crisis and war has increased dramatically in recent years,” the head of the military’s logistics organisation, Anders Jernberg, said in the statement. “Norway is in the most serious

security policy situation since World War II. Our society must be prepared for security policy crises and, in the worst case, war,” he said. “We are undertaking a major build-up of military and civil preparedness.” Norway, a Nato member considered the alliance’s eyes and ears in the Arctic, has, like the rest of Europe, beefed up its defence in recent years. The Scandinavian country shares a maritime border and 198-km land border with Russia in the Far North. — AFP

World is ‘not secure’ until US has Greenland: Trump

DONALD

Trump no longer needs to think “purely of peace” after being snubbed for a Nobel, the US president said in comments published on Monday, adding the world will not be safe until Washington controls Greenland. Trump has put the transatlantic alliance to the test with threats to take over Greenland “one way or the other”, with European countries closing ranks against Washington’s designs on the vast Danish territory.

German and French leaders denounced as “blackmail” weekend threats by Trump to wield new tariffs against countries which oppose his plans for the Arctic island, and said on Monday that Europe was preparing trade countermeasures. The European Union said it was holding an emergency summit on Thursday to weigh its response, and that while its priority is to “engage not escalate” it is ready to act if needed.

Greenland, for its part, said the tariffs threat does not change its desire to assert its own sovereignty. “We will not be pressured,” Greenlandic prime minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen said in a Facebook post, adding that the autonomous territory “is a democratic society with the right to make its own decisions”. But Trump had earlier doubled down, announcing in a message to Norway’s Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store that the world “is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland”.

The message — published on Monday and whose authenticity was confirmed by Store’s office — also saw Trump brush aside peace as a primary goal. “I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace,” he said, citing his failure to win the last year’s Nobel Peace Prize, despite openly coveting it. He said although peace would still be “predominant,” he could “now think about what is good and proper for the United States of America.”

Store said the statement had been received in response to a message from him and Finnish President Alexander Stubb, where they had “conveyed our opposition” to Trump’s tariff threats. Store also underlined that the Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded



This combination shows US President Donald Trump speaking during the House Republican Party (GOP) member retreat at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, and a photo of European Union flags in the Europa Building before a summit at the European Council in Brussels. — AFP

by the Norwegian government. “I have clearly explained, including to President Trump what is well known — the prize is awarded by an independent Nobel Committee,” he said in a written statement.

Trump has repeatedly said his country needs vast, mineral-rich Greenland for “national security”, despite the United States already having a base on the island and security agreements with fellow Nato ally Denmark. “Denmark cannot protect that land from Russia or China,” Trump said in his message to the Norwegian premier, doubling down on that sentiment in a post to Truth Social on Monday. Denmark’s defence minister Troels Lund Poulsen said on Monday steps had already been taken along with Nato allies to “increase military presence and training activity in the Arctic and the North Atlantic”. Lund Poulsen added that he and Greenlandic foreign minister Vivian Motzfeldt would be meeting with Nato chief Mark Rutte later on Monday.

This weekend, Trump said that from

February 1, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Finland would be subject to a 10-per cent tariff on all goods sent to the United States — a duty which could go higher. Germany’s Vice-Chancellor Lars Klingbeil slammed the move as blackmail, and said on Monday that Europe was preparing countermeasures. French finance minister Roland Lescure, speaking at a press conference alongside Kingbeil, agreed. “Blackmail between allies of 250 years, blackmail between friends, is obviously unacceptable,” Lecurse said. Klingbeil said Europe’s response could have three main strands.

First, the current tariff deal with the United States would be put on hold, he said. Second, European tariffs on imports from the United States, currently suspended until early February, could come into force. And thirdly the EU should consider using its toolbox of instruments against “economic blackmail”, he added. — AFP

At least 39 killed in Spain as two high-speed trains collide

ADAMUZ: At least 39 people died in southern Spain after a high-speed train derailed and collided with an oncoming one on Sunday night in one of the worst railway accidents in Europe in the past 80 years. The accident happened near Adamuz in the province of Cordoba, about 360 km (223 miles) south of the capital Madrid. It left 122 people injured, with 48 still in hospital and 12 in intensive care, according to emergency services.

“The train tipped to one side... then everything went dark, and all I heard was screams,” said Ana, a young woman who was travelling back to Madrid and was being treated at a Red Cross centre in Adamuz. Limping and wrapped in a blanket, her face covered with plasters,

she described how she was dragged out of the train covered in blood through a window by other passengers who had escaped.

Firefighters rescued her sister from the wreckage and an ambulance took them both to hospital. “There were people who were fine and others who were very, very badly injured. You had them right in front of you and you knew they were going to die, and you couldn’t do anything,” she said. The rescue operation was complicated by the remote location of the crash, which could only be accessed by a single-track road, making it difficult for ambulances to enter and exit, Iñigo Vila, national emergency director at the Spanish Red Cross, said.



Spanish Civil Guards work next to the trains, in Cordoba. — Reuters

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Transport Minister Oscar Puente were among those making their way to the crash site on Monday morning. Sanchez cancelled his trip to the World Economic Forum in

Davos, Switzerland after the accident. “The death toll has risen to 39 and is not yet definitive,” Puente said on X. There were around 400 passengers on the two trains, according to statements by the two operators of the

trains, Iryo and state-run Renfe’s Alvia. The Civil Guard said it had opened an office in Cordoba for relatives to provide DNA samples to help identify the dead.

The Iryo train, which was travelling at 110 kph, was en route from Malaga to Madrid, while the second train was heading towards Huelva at 200 kph. It was too early to talk about the cause, but it happened in “strange conditions”, Renfe President Álvaro Fernandez Heredia said on local radio station Cadena Ser, adding that “human error is practically ruled out.”

The Alvia train either collided with the final two carriages of the Iryo train that derailed, or with debris on the line, Heredia said. The Iryo train had lost a wheel that

has not yet been located. The collision happened about 20 seconds after the derailment, so there was no time to activate an emergency brake, he said. Problems with infrastructure at Adamuz, from signalling failures to issues with overhead power lines, have caused delays to high-speed trains between Madrid and Andalusia 10 times since 2022, according to a Reuters review of state-owned rail infrastructure administrator Adif’s X account.

The death toll is the highest from a train crash in Spain since 2013, when a train derailed in the city of Santiago de Compostela and burst into flames, killing 80 people and injuring 145. It’s among the top 20 deadliest in Europe in the past 80 years, according to Eurostat data. — Reuters

Oman high on diplomatic outreach amid global turmoil



OMAN has long distinguished itself in the tumultuous landscape of Middle Eastern geopolitics through its consistent pursuit of diplomacy, a strategic approach focused on mediation and de-escalation rather than direct confrontation. This diplomatic posture has become particularly crucial in recent years, as tensions between the United States and Iran have frequently threatened to erupt into wider regional conflict.

Alongside other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Oman has actively engaged in behind-the-scenes efforts to prevent such an escalation, recognising the profound and destabilising consequences a direct confrontation would have on the entire region.

The Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, share a collective apprehension regarding the potential for chaos that a US attack on Iran or the collapse of the Islamic Republic could unleash.

Oman's role in this intricate diplomatic dance is particularly noteworthy.

Oman has cultivated a reputation as a neutral and trusted mediator, a position it leverages to facilitate dialogue between otherwise adversarial parties. This 'niche diplomacy' involves focusing on specific, often sensitive, issues where its unique position can be most effective.

For instance, Oman has historically played a crucial role in facilitating prisoner exchanges and back-channel communications between the US and Iran, even during periods of heightened tension. Its consistent engagement with both sides has allowed it to act as a crucial conduit for messages and proposals, including those related to nuclear negotiations.

Oman has long hoped for a more comprehensive mechanism for dialogue with all states in the region.

This would strengthen the security efforts of the GCC. It would reflect the fact that Iran also has a real and legitimate stake in the security of the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia has also demonstrated a pragmatic approach, recognising that regional destabilisation would severely undermine its ambitious economic reform plans, such as Vision 2030, which require a stable environment for success. Riyadh has reportedly communicated to Washington its concerns about the repercussions of a military strike and has even indicated that it would not allow the US to use its airspace for such operations, aiming to avoid being drawn into a direct conflict.

This stance reflects a broader understanding among Gulf states that while they may desire a weakened Iranian leadership, the prospect of an abrupt regime change and the ensuing chaos is far more

In essence, a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of regional security drives the diplomatic efforts of Oman and other GCC states.

detrimental to their own security and prosperity.

Qatar also has a vested interest in maintaining regional stability and has actively participated in diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions.

The economic ties between Gulf states and Iran, particularly for countries like the UAE whose port of Dubai is a key trading hub, further underscore the shared desire to avert conflict.

The collective message from these Gulf nations to the US has consistently emphasised the potential for disrupted oil prices, damage to their reputations as safe havens for business and the risk of Iranian retaliation on their soil.

In essence, a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of regional security drives the diplomatic efforts of Oman and other GCC states.

They recognise that a military confrontation between the US and Iran would not only have immediate and devastating consequences, but would also create a vacuum that could be filled by more radical elements, further destabilising the region.

Their sustained engagement, often behind the scenes, represents a critical endeavour against escalation, demonstrating a commitment to dialogue and peaceful resolution even amidst profound geopolitical challenges.

UK, France mull social media bans for youth as debate rages

JULIEN DURY

Countries including France and Britain are considering following Australia's lead by banning children and some teenagers from using social media, but experts are still locked in a debate over the effectiveness of the move.

Supporters of a ban warn that action needs to be taken to tackle deteriorating mental health among young people, but others say the evidence is inconclusive and want a more nuanced approach.

Australia last month became the first nation to prohibit people under-16s from using immensely popular and profitable social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok and YouTube. France is currently debating bills for a similar ban for under-15s, including one championed by President Emmanuel Macron.

The Guardian reported last week that Jonathan Haidt, an American psychologist and supporter of the Australian ban, had been asked to speak to UK government officials. Haidt argued in his bestselling 2024 book "The Anxious Generation" that too much time looking at screens — particularly social media — was rewiring children's brains and "causing an epidemic of mental illness".

Canadian psychologist Candice Odgers wrote in a review of the book that the "scary story" Haidt was telling was "not supported by science". One of the main areas of disagreement has been determining exactly how much effect using social media has on young people's mental health.

Michael Noetel, a researcher at the University of Queensland in Australia, said that "small effects across billions of users add up".

"My read is that Haidt is more right than his harshest critics admit, and less right than his book implies," Noetel said. After reviewing the evidence, France's public health watchdog ANSES ruled last week that social media had numerous detrimental effects for adolescents — particularly girls — while not being the sole reason for their declining mental health.

Noetel led research published in Psychological Bulletin last year that reviewed more than 100 studies worldwide on the links between screens and the psychological and emotional problems suffered by children and adolescents. The findings suggested a vicious cycle. Excessive screen time — particularly using social media and playing video games — was associated with problems. — AFP

Honouring state's glorious past, trusting the present

THE disposition of the past week in Oman felt deeply personal as much as it was national. It was not only a period of remembrance, but also a moment of reaffirmation: of leadership, direction and collective purpose.

While the memory of the late Sultan Qaboos was respectfully present, the week was ultimately about the Oman of today under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

The late Sultan Qaboos remains an enduring reference point in Omani consciousness. As the founder of the modern state, his legacy of stability, unity and peaceful diplomacy continues to inform national identity.

Remembering him this week felt less like mourning and more like acknowledgement — recognition of a foundation firmly laid. Yet what stood out most was how naturally this remembrance coexisted with confidence in the present leadership, signalling a mature national transition rather than a nostalgic pause.

That confidence is anchored in His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's clear and deliberate approach to governance since ascending the throne in 2020. His leadership has been marked by successful structural reform and long-term planning, most notably through the implementation of Oman Vision 2040.

Unlike celebratory rhetoric, Oman Vision 2040 is pragmatic in tone: It prioritises economic diversification, fiscal sustainability, education reform, digital transformation, inclusion, social responsibility and institutional efficiency. Over the past few years, Omanis have witnessed tangible changes — from the restructuring of government bodies and ministries to renewed emphasis on accountability, productivity and



DR NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

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His Majesty the Sultan is celebrated because he exercises power with clarity, care and efficiency.

measurable outcomes.

What makes the current leadership resonate, at least for me, is its calm rationality. There is a noticeable shift towards systems rather than symbolism, towards policies that endure beyond moments.

Youth employment initiatives, investment in logistics and renewable energy, efforts to represent and support all sectors of society, including those with disabilities, and modernise education reflect an understanding that national dignity today depends on economic resilience tomorrow.

This week's atmosphere reflected that understanding: loyalty rooted not in emotion alone, but in trust (and hard work).

Equally striking was the growing public presence of Her Highness The Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi,

Spouse of the Sultan of Oman, whose role has introduced a new and meaningful dimension to public life. Her participation in key national events — particularly the inauguration of a hospital in Musandam — was deeply symbolic.

Healthcare is not only a service; it is a measure of how a nation values its people. Seeing the Honourable Lady engage directly with such initiatives reinforced a message of compassion grounded in action, not ceremony.

Personally, her visibility matters. As an Omani woman, I found her presence and communication quietly affirming: Women belong in spaces of influence, care and national responsibility. By honouring individuals who have served society and highlighting contributions often made away from the spotlight, she helped elevate values of service, humility and social responsibility — values Oman urgently needs as it navigates change.

What this past week ultimately revealed is a nation comfortable with continuity yet unafraid of renewal. The late Sultan Qaboos is remembered with gratitude. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik is celebrated because he exercises power with clarity, care and efficiency. And the Honourable Lady's role signals an evolving social imagination — one that sees leadership as relational, ethical and inclusive.

The strength of Oman lies precisely here: in the ability to honour its past without being trapped by it, to embrace reform without losing itself. This week reminded me that nationhood is not built through grand gestures alone, but through steady leadership, institutional care and a shared belief that the bright future is something we are actively shaping — together.

Empty houses filled with memories...



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
The writer is senior editor of Observer

THE empty walls echo even with the slightest rustle of the leaves. There was a time when the windows of the walls let out noisy conversations as well as laughter and giggles. The walls hid the sobs and whispers.

Life was being unveiled with all its heavy and light moments and the joyful moments of welcoming new members to the family. At times it was a newborn baby, and other times it was a wedding that saw the expansion of the family.

Between the walls of the house were celebrations of marriages and births. Marriages also meant the departure of one of the children to their new home and future.

The hunt for growth in a career meant the movement of youth to urban areas to ensure their place. It is often referred to as urbanisation. Young people gravitate towards big cities due to many reasons. Naturally, they want to look forward to everything that can support them in their growth. Urban environments look promising in terms of career opportunity, identity exploration, social belonging and high stimulation.

The urge to move out and explore results in rural flight, which is also referred to as

the rural-to-urban migration. The rural depopulation eventually leads to abandoned neighbourhoods. Every country experiences this situation. It could be looked upon as a side effect of development.

The people who are left behind in the old neighbourhoods are the elderly parents and maybe their dependent children.

My friend said that when she had the option to work near her home away from the city, she opted against it because she knew she would be forgotten and there would not be much she could look forward to.

Experience is growth. Each challenging situation, which we may not think of as a blessing when we are going through it, is a potential for our growth. Challenging situations urge us to come up with solutions. It might push us and stretch us out by testing our endurance, but this is when we learn of our hidden strengths.

The four walls are full of meaning as long as the dwellers are there. When it is vacant, the silence leaves an echo, leaving behind memories of days when it was a protector and a shelter. Without people living in them, houses tend to decay and are an open invitation for vandalism. People tend

Young people gravitate towards big cities due to many reasons. Naturally, they want to look forward to everything that can support them in their growth

to forget that it is a property with value for someone else.

In a world that is seeing increasing amounts of homelessness and hopelessness, abandoned neighbourhoods can be a solution provider.

Life would have to move on and find new meanings. Even nostalgia can be celebrated by making it serve a purpose.

In many parts of Oman, the old neighbourhoods are finding a revival by becoming part of tourism attractions. Heritage tourism is a travelling experience of a region's authentic history, culture and natural environment, encompassing tangible sites such as ruins and museums and intangible aspects such as traditions and festivals, aiming to educate, preserve and provide meaningful engagement with the past while benefiting local communities economically.

Old buildings attract tourism through their historical significance and cultural stories. For instance, the heritage homes in Al Hamra offer immersive experiences. Preserving them could make them cultural hubs and it could drive economic development through heritage preservation and management.

WHY JAPAN’S TAKAICHI IS GAMBLING ON AN EARLY ELECTION

TIM KELLY

Japan’s Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi announced plans on Monday to hold a national election on February 8, seeking to capitalise on her strong public polling in her first test at the ballot box since taking office in October.

Japan’s first female premier inherited a battered government, with her ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) having lost its majority in both houses of parliament after disgruntled voters punished it over rising prices and a funding scandal.

By calling a snap election now, she hopes to capitalise on a surge in public support for a new leader who has promised to spur economic growth, tackle cost-of-living concerns and tighten immigration rules. Some media polls have put the LDP’s support at more than 60 per cent, giving Takaichi an opportunity to restore its majority in the more powerful lower chamber.

A poll of 1,213 people published by public broadcaster NHK on January 13 showed she had the backing of 62 per cent of voters.

Even if she gets a lower-house majority, however, Takaichi will still have to govern with a minority in the upper house, which she cannot dissolve. Voters elect half its members every three years and the next election is not due until 2028.

A decisive victory would strengthen Takaichi’s hand within the LDP and reduce her reliance on smaller political parties to pass key legislation.

That, in turn, could allow her to push ahead with plans to boost government spending to revive economic growth and sharply increase defence outlays under a revised national security strategy amid heightened tension with powerful neighbour China. The shift could mark a further step from Japan’s post-war pacifist constraints, including a long-standing principle that bars nuclear weapons from its territory. With prices still rising and the yen’s value against the US dollar sliding, the cost of living is likely to dominate the election campaign.

In the NHK poll, 45 per cent of respondents said that was their main concern, followed by diplomacy and national security at 16 per cent.

Having already proposed record spending of \$770 billion for the next fiscal year, Takaichi also promised a temporary sales tax cut on food on Monday, further unnerving investors in one of the world’s most indebted industrial economies.

All 465 seats in the lower house will be contested, 289 in single-member districts and 176 through proportional representation. A simple majority requires 233 seats. The LDP now controls 199 seats in the chamber and governs with the support of its coalition partner the Japan Innovation Party, known as Ishin, which has 34 seats. The main opposition, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, has joined forces with the LDP’s former coalition partner Komeito to contest the election under a new Centrist Reform Alliance party. That brings their joint seats to 172.

Attention may also focus on how Takaichi fares against the far-right Sanseito Party, whose calls for tighter immigration controls siphoned votes from the LDP in last July’s upper house election, where it won 14 seats. — Reuters

The AI we need for making sustainable infrastructure



BERTRAND BADRÉ

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What would leveraging AI look like in practice?

shifting. As President Donald Trump seeks to reverse all his predecessor’s clean-energy policies, others are filling the leadership vacuum the United States has created. China, for example, has reoriented its Belt and Road Initiative towards “green, high-quality” development, pairing massive overseas transportation and energy investments with climate-resilience projects at home. It is pursuing large-scale desert reforestation and new renewables projects, even as coal, oil and gas projects still feature heavily in its overseas portfolio.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia, long synonymous with hydrocarbons, has launched a “green initiative” to funnel tens of billions of dollars towards solar and wind projects, green-finance frameworks, and new public-private partnerships. The Kingdom aims to generate half its electricity from renewables by 2030. And India has already hit its target of committing 50 per cent of its installed power capacity to non-fossil sources. It has also launched a National Green Hydrogen Mission, targeting annual production of five million tonnes by 2030, and has used global platforms such as the G20 and the United Nations Climate Change Conference to champion climate-resilient infrastructure and “green development pacts.”

The result is a fragmented map. While the world’s largest historical emitter is doubling down on fossil-fuel exports, emerging and middle-income economies are increasingly presenting themselves as voices of climate responsibility (even as they continue to navigate their own contradictions). In this

new landscape, the contest is not only over whose capital builds the next generation of ports, grids and railways, but whose data, standards and AI systems will guide those investments.

The next leader in infrastructure will focus on three immediate priorities. The first is to make the most of available data. Infrastructure know-how tends to be buried in PDFs, contracts and permit files. Governments, banks, and companies must uncover this hidden history to help all stakeholders avoid past mistakes and navigate new policy settings when governments abruptly rewrite the rules (as the US has done).

The second priority is to build AI tools for this specific purpose. What we need is not a generic chatbot, but models trained on materials science, logistics and local regulations. An AI that understands why projects fail can make success more likely.

Lastly, we must do a better job of sharing knowledge across borders. Instead of having each institution reinvent the wheel, we need a shared knowledge base so that lessons from a dam in India or a metro in Paris can improve projects everywhere.

Over the next decade, infrastructure will define not just climate adaptation, but global competitiveness. It is the muscle of the real economy. The countries that align their climate commitments, industrial policies and infrastructure pipelines with credible, data-driven intelligence will set the rules of the game for everyone.

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SPORTS

MUSCAT NIGHTS INTL



Iran’s Siavash Mozayani won the Muscat Nights International Snooker title.

MOZAYANI, GUL EMERGE SNOOKER, BILLIARDS CHAMPIONS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Iran’s Siavash Mozayani was crowned champion of the Muscat Nights International Snooker Championship after defeating Iraq’s Ali Hussein 4–3 in a thrilling match that went down to the decisive frames. Pakistan’s Nadeem Gul claimed the billiards title after a dramatic 13–12 victory over compatriot Qadeer Abbas.

The Muscat Nights International Billiards and Snooker Championship witnessed wide participation from elite players representing 20 countries. The awards ceremony was held under the auspices of Eng Ahmed bin Said al Amri, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, in the presence of Brigadier Jamal bin Said al Taie, Director-General of Financial Affairs at the Royal Oman Police, Khalid al Subhi, Chairman of the Oman Billiards and Snooker Committee (OBSC), Hisham al Sinani, Director-General of Care and Development at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, at the Arena Active Oman Hall at the Oman Automobile Association.

The snooker competition witnessed strong competition from the opening rounds through to the final. Iran’s Siavash Mozayani defeated Iraq’s Ali Hussain 4–3 in a closely contested final. Mozayani had reached the final after overcoming Nadeem Gul 4–3 in the semifinals, while Ali Hussain advanced to the final following a 4–1 victory over Iran’s Amir Hossein Bagheri Fard.

BILLIARDS RESULTS
The billiards competition was equally intense and competitive. In the final, Gul edged Qadeer Abbas 13–12, securing the title by the narrowest of margins.

The semifinals produced thrilling encounters, as Abbas advanced to the final after a convincing 11–6 win over Wissam Dakkak, while Gul reached the final following a tense 11–10 victory against Filipino player Allan Quartiero.

Following the finals, Engineer Ahmed al Amery, alongside Khalid al Subhi, crowned the winners. In the snooker competition, Siavash Mozayani claimed first place, with Ali Hussain finishing second. In billiards, Nadeem Gul secured first place, while Qadeer Abbas was runner-up.

Afghan player Mohammed Saleh was awarded the Highest Break of the championship with 137 points, while the Best Emerging Young Talents in Omani Snooker award was presented to Mohammed bin Qasim al Balushi, Khalid bin Al Waleed al Balushi, Ali Yaman bin Ali al Balushi and Ahmed Noman.

OBSC chief Khalid al Subhi said the second edition of the Muscat Nights International Championship was a major success, with 125 players from 18 countries taking part, reflecting the tournament’s growing international stature. He noted that positive feedback from players and delegations confirmed its strong organisational and technical standards, adding that the thrilling finals further enhanced the championship’s value.



Pakistan’s Nadeem Gul won the Muscat Nights International Billiards title.

Al Bashayer clinch fifth OBL title, Seeb second



Al Bashayer were crowned champions of the 2025–26 Oman Basketball League. — Hussein al Muqballi

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

AL BASHAYER were crowned champions of the 2025–26 Oman Basketball League, securing their fifth league title despite an 80–61 defeat to Seeb in the final round, thanks to their superior points tally.

Al Bashayer finished the season with 19 points, edging Seeb, who ended runners-up with 18 points. Nizwa claimed third place after defeating Salalah 77–66 to conclude the campaign with 14 points.

The closing match and award ceremony were held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the auspices of Mohammed al Darmaki, Director HR & Corporate Support at Daleel Petroleum LLC, in the presence of Eng Khalfan al Naabi, Chairman of the Oman Basketball Association, along with club officials and a large crowd of basketball fans.

Although Al Bashayer had already sealed the title in the previous round, Seeb delivered a strong performance in the final game, earning a morale-boosting victory marked by discipline and offensive efficiency.

Mamadu led Seeb’s scoring with 22 points, followed by Nouh al Ameri (16), Abdulrahman al Shuaibi (15) and Rashid al



Seeb beat Al Bashayer 80–61 in the final league match to take the runners-up spot.

Zahaibi (10). For Al Bashayer, Ibrahima Thomas recorded 17 points, while Hadid Bait Bakheet added 11.

The opening quarter ended level at 13–13 before Seeb gradually took control in the second quarter, heading into halftime with a 46–33 advantage. Seeb maintained their dominance in the third and fourth quarters to close out the contest at 80–61.

Following the final whistle, the patron of the ceremony and the OBA chairman

crowned the winners. Al Bashayer received the league shield and gold medals, Seeb were awarded the second-place shield and silver medals, while Nizwa claimed the bronze medals for finishing third.

OSAMA BEST PLAYMAKER
In the individual awards, Osama al Riyami of Al Bashayer won the best playmaker award, Rashid al Zuhaibi of Seeb was named best centre, Kingsley of Nizwa claimed the top-scorer award and Noah al Mahrouqi of Al Bashayer won the best three-point shooter award.

Eng Khalfan al Naabi congratulated Al Bashayer on their well-deserved title, praising the team’s technical level and discipline throughout the season. He also commended the strong performances of Seeb and Nizwa, noting that the intense competition reflects the continuous development of basketball in Oman.

Mohammed al Darmaki reaffirmed Daleel Petroleum’s commitment to supporting basketball, highlighting the role of private-sector partnerships in sustaining and developing sports in Oman.

Al Bashayer head coach Mahmoud Ambu Ali described the title as the result of collective effort and long-term planning, noting that the team’s focus will now shift to upcoming domestic competitions.

VAR system to make debut with HM’s Cup semis

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system will be implemented for the first time in the 2025-26 edition of the His Majesty’s Football Cup starting from the semifinal stage as part of the development of domestic football competitions in the Sultanate of Oman. The VAR system will be used in a total of five matches, including the four semifinal ties (first and second legs) and the final match to enhance officiating accuracy during the decisive stages of the prestigious tournament.

Abdullah bin Ali al Rashdi, board member of the Oman Football Association (OFA) and supervisor of the refereeing section, confirmed to Oman Observer that the decision followed the organisational success of the previous His Majesty’s Cup finals held in Ibra and Khasab over the past

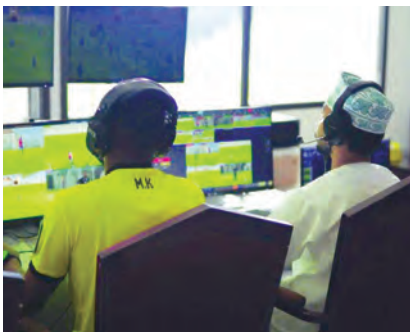


ABDULLAH AL RASHDI

OFA board member and supervisor of the refereeing section

two seasons.“ The OFA viewed the introduction of VAR as a progressive step aligned with international standards and part of a broader vision to modernise domestic competitions,” he added.

“The full VAR setup will be operational at Seeb Stadium for the two first-leg semifinal matches scheduled on Tuesday. The system will also be deployed for the return-leg fixtures, with installations ready at Al Buraimi Sports Complex and Al Sadaa Stadium



The VAR system will be used in a total of five matches, including the four semifinal ties (first and second legs) and the final match.

in Salalah. The full list of appointed referees and VAR officials for all matches will be announced in the due course,” he said.

Four clubs have secured their places in the semifinals of the competition: Seeb, Al Nasr, Oman Club, and Al Nahda, underlining the competitive nature of this year’s edition. The first leg matches of the semifinals will take place on Tuesday as Oman

Club will host Al Nasr at Seeb Stadium and the match will kick off at 5 pm. At the same venue, Seeb will take on Al Nahda and the match will start at 8 pm. The return legs are scheduled for January 29. Al Nahda will host Seeb at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex, while Al Nasr will welcome Oman Club at Al Saada Stadium with both ties expected to draw significant attention as the teams battle for a place in the final.

Historically, Dhofar Club remained the most successful side in the competition, topping the honours list with 11 titles, followed closely by Fanja with nine. Al Nasr and Ahli Sidab have each lifted the trophy five times, while Sur, Al Oruba and Seeb have claimed four titles apiece. Al Suwaiq have won the cup three times, with Oman Club and Saham sharing two titles each. Muscat, Al Tali’ah, Al Nahda and Al Shabab have each won the coveted trophy once.

SPECTATORAPPEAL



The Oman Basketball Association officials at the press conference. — Ammar al Musafir

OBA UNVEILS MUSCAT NIGHTS 3×3 TOURNEY DETAILS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Oman Basketball Association (OBA) has revealed details of the Muscat Nights International 3×3 Basketball Championship, scheduled for January 23–24 at Al Araiimi Boulevard. The announcement was made during a press conference held at the Oman Olympic Committee Hall, attended by OBA Chairman Eng Khalfan al Naabi, Said al Habsi, Acting Secretary-General, and several media representatives.

Eng Khalfan al Naabi affirmed that organising the championship comes as part of an initiative by Muscat Municipality to host an international tournament in cooperation with the OBA. He noted that the choice of Al Araiimi Boulevard reflects a strategic direction toward staging sporting events in vibrant, open venues accessible to the public, given their positive impact on tourism promotion and crowd engagement. He explained that the championship marks the launch of a future partnership with Muscat Municipality, whether through hosting upcoming international events or organising local tournaments in high-traffic locations across Muscat Governorate.

INTERNATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP
The international championship will take place on January 23–24, preceded by a local tournament on January 22 featuring teams from within the Sultanate of Oman, aimed at expanding community participation and promoting basketball. The OBA chief extended an open invitation to fans to attend the matches, stressing that the momentum of Muscat Nights events will give the championship strong spectator appeal.

Regarding private sector support, Al Naabi praised the contributions of sponsoring companies, commending Daleel Petroleum for supporting the Association by providing a 3×3 basketball court,, its second such contribution. He also revealed ongoing discussions to launch branded leagues targeting youth, juniors and cadets.

Hussein al Rumhi, Supervisor of Sports and Beach Activities at Muscat Nights, stated that the importance of the championship goes beyond the sporting aspect to include economic, tourism and cultural dimensions, through attracting international teams and audiences and stimulating tourism and commercial activity.

On the competition format, Said al Habsi explained that both the men’s and women’s tournaments will be held in a two-group format for each category, played in a single round-robin system, with the top two teams from each group qualifying for the knockout stages. The men’s competition features teams from Oman (A), Oman (B), Malaysia, India, Kenya, and the Philippines, while the women’s competition includes Oman (A), Oman (B), Iran, India and Kenya, giving it a strong and competitive international character.



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic in action during his first round match of Australian Open against Spain’s Pedro Martinez in Melbourne . — Reuters

Centurion Djokovic romps as Swiatek, Gauff move on

NOVAK DJOKOVIC began his latest bid for a record 25th Grand Slam crown with an emphatic straight-set victory on Monday as fellow Australian Open title contenders Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff also won but with less sparkle.

Three-time finalist Daniil Medvedev stayed alive, as did 40-year-old Stan Wawrinka, who rolled back the clock to reach the second round in his tournament farewell.

Serbian great Djokovic, 38, tamed Spain’s 71st-ranked Pedro Martinez 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena, a court where he has won a record 10 Australian Open crowns.

The world number four owns 24 major titles, equal for the most ever with Australia’s Margaret Court, but a 25th has remained agonisingly out of reach. His last came at the 2023 US Open with Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz sharing all eight since then.

“What can I say? I like the sound of it. Centurion is pretty nice,” he said after his 100th victory at the Australian Open. “I always give my best whenever I’m on the court. Obviously, history-making is a great motivation, and particularly in the last 5-10 years of my career.”

The 2014 champion Wawrinka lived to fight another day with a gutsy four-set victory. The three-time major winner is playing his last

The 2014 champion Wawrinka lived to fight another day with a gutsy four-set victory. The three-time major winner is playing his last season before retiring and gave his all to down Serbia’s Laslo Djere 5-7, 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) in front of a crowd willing him to victory.



Poland’s Iga Swiatek celebrates after winning her first round match against China’s Yue Yuan. — Reuters

season before retiring and gave his all to down Serbia’s Laslo Djere 5-7, 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) in front of a crowd willing him to victory. “The passion is still intact. But I’m not young any more, so I need to be careful also,” said the Swiss warhorse, who made his Australian Open debut in 2006.

Medvedev, runner-up in 2021, 2022 and 2024, warmed up for Melbourne with victory in Brisbane and ground to a 7-5, 6-2, 7-6 (7/2) opening round win over Dutchman Jesper de Jong. The famously feisty Russian said he was trying to be more “positive” on court. “So far I’m doing it well.”

Sixth seed Alex de Minaur, the big home hope, was also a straight-set winner on another hot day where temperatures reached about 30C and record crowds of more than 100,000 faced long queues to get into Melbourne Park. The tournament is over, however, for seventh seed Felix Auger-Aliassime, who retired from his match with cramp.

Auger-Aliassime won the opening set 6-3 against Nuno Borges but then lost the next two before calling time.

The same fate befell tearful compatriot Marina Stakusic, who was taken off in a wheelchair when she cramped up against home player Priscilla Hon.

In the women’s draw, six-time major winner Swiatek was made to work unexpectedly hard against Chinese qualifier Yuan Yue. The Polish second seed, who will complete a career Grand Slam of all four majors if she breaks her Australian Open duck, eventually saw off her spirited opponent 7-6 (7/5), 6-3. “I was a bit rusty at the beginning,” said Swiatek. “For sure many ups and downs, but overall I have some stuff to work on.”

Gauff beat Uzbekistan’s Kamilla Rakhimova 6-2, 6-3, but was also less than convincing at the start and struggled with her serve.

Gauff’s fellow American, fourth seed Amanda Anisimova, began with a ruthless win over Switzerland’s Simona Waltert, 6-3, 6-2. — AFP

Al Harthy, Paradine BMW miss class win, podium in 24H Dubai

DUBAI: Almost certain GT3 AM class victory and a stunning outright GT3 podium in the weekend’s Michelin 24H DUBAI cruelly slipped through the fingers of Ahmad al Harthy and the Paradine Competition team with only half an hour to run on January 18, as a result of late-race brake failure.

From GT3 AM class pole position, achieved with a fantastic combined performance from the Omani and team-mates Darren Leung and James Kellett in qualifying, the trio – plus fourth driver Anthony McIntosh – didn’t put a wheel wrong throughout the twice-round-the-clock encounter.

In the battle for the outright podium for 23 and a half hours with a perfect showing, and leading GT3 AM for the bulk of the race too, as the No

992 BMW M4 GT3 EVO headed into the final 30 minutes – with Kellett at the wheel – the front-left brake disc exploded, also puncturing the tyre.

Although the Briton managed to coax the car back to the pits, the damage caused was far too extensive for the team to be able to get the BMW back into the race in a safe condition. Having been third overall and leading GT3 AM at the time, the squad ultimately ended its race in the pits fourth in class and 16th position overall.

Qualifying on January 16, marked Al Harthy’s first competitive running of 2026 and in the opening session the OQ Group, Sohar International, Omantel, Oman LNG, BMW Oman and Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth supported driver was third



in GT3 AM and 12th overall.

Team owner Leung lapped strongly and at the end of session two the car was fourth in class on average times. Kellett took the third and final run and with a fabulous lap of 1m 56.591 seconds he secured GT3 AM pole on aggregate times, 12th on the overall grid. As the various strategies and pit-stop cycles played out, the BMW stayed in the thick of the overall podium battle and into the night phase of the race everything was working to plan. Still on course for AM victory and circulating within the top three overall on Sunday morning, with just two hours to go Al Harthy was in the class lead and a fantastic outright second position.

Driving beautifully, the Omani remained in the car into the final

hour before handing over to Kellett for the run to the flag. But with 30 minutes to go, as Kellett headed along the start-finish straight, the dreams of all at Paradine were shattered when the front-left brake disc exploded and shredded the tyre – bringing a cruel end to an otherwise supreme performance.

Ahmad al Harthy: “I’m speechless! From the start of the race we were so competitive, we wanted to win GT3 AM but our goal was actually the overall podium the whole time. It’s one of the longest 24 hour races I’ve done, the most stints – in total I think I completed nine hours. It’s so disappointing with the brake failure but I’m super-proud of everybody in the team to have done such an amazing job.”

SPORTS



Senegal players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) final match against Morocco at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat. — AFP

SENEGAL won the Africa Cup of Nations as Pape Gueye's extra-time winner sunk hosts Morocco 1-0 after a chaotic final that saw the eventual champions storm off the pitch late in the game.

Brahim Diaz could have won the trophy for Morocco with a controversial spot-kick in the 24th minute of added time at the end of normal time as ugly scenes broke out in the stands.

But Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy easily saved the weak attempted 'Panenka' chip by the Real Madrid winger, who was clearly distracted by the long delay that followed the penalty award.

The game at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium then went to extra time, and Gueye's brilliant 94th-minute strike handed them the title.

"We had a feeling of injustice. Just before the penalty we thought we should have had a goal and the referee didn't go to VAR," said match-winner Gueye, who added that Sadio Mane had urged the team to come back onto the pitch for the penalty.

"Sadio told us to come back on and we remobilised. Edouard then made the save, we stayed focused, got the goal and won the game."

The controversial penalty was awarded by Congolese referee Jean-Jacques Ndala right at the end of the eight added minutes in normal time following a VAR check for a challenge on Diaz by El Hadji Malick Diouf.

The Moroccan team vehemently protested to the referee to check the images, but the decision to eventually give the spot-kick was met with fury by Senegal and their fans.

As most of their players walked off the pitch, some Senegal supporters at the opposite end of the stadium threw chairs and other objects and attempted to get onto the field of play.

They were eventually contained by a large barrier of police and stewards, and their anger turned to delight when the penalty was saved.

The Senegal team had initially been riled by the referee's decision to disallow for a foul a goal scored by Ismaila Sarr in the second added minute.

SENEGAL
STUN HOSTS
MOROCCO TO
WIN AFCON
TITLE



Senegal's midfielder #26 Pape Gueye celebrates their victory at the end of the Africa Cup of Nations final against Morocco in Rabat. — AFP



Senegal's Sadio Mane, winner of the MVP trophy, alongside Morocco's Brahim Diaz, winner of the Golden Boot trophy, and Morocco's Yassine Bounou, winner of the best goalkeeper trophy, on stage after the match. — Reuters

GUEYE THE HERO

Diaz's penalty miss clearly galvanised Senegal, however, and they scored in the fourth minute of extra time to stun the crowd of 66,526.

Sadio Mane won possession in midfield and found Idrissa Gana Gueye, who released his namesake Pape Gueye.

The Villarreal midfielder advanced towards the box before beating goalkeeper Yassine Bounou with a superb strike into the top corner, leaving the hosts distraught.

They could still have forced a penalty shoot-out, with Nayef Aguerd heading against the crossbar in the second half of extra time.

But it was not to be for Morocco, who had been dreaming of winning the title in front of their own fans to end a 50-year wait to become African champions for just the second time.

It is Senegal's second Cup of Nations title in the last three editions, after they defeated Egypt on penalties in Yaounde in 2022 to win the trophy for the very first time.

They can now look forward to the World Cup, and will hope to

persuade star man Mane to play another Afcon after he declared that the final would be his last game at the tournament.

"The image we gave of African football was rather shameful. Having to stop the game for more than 10 minutes with the world watching is not very classy," said Morocco coach Walid Regragui, who urged his team to "come back stronger".

Any investigation into the disgraceful scenes will focus on the conduct of the Senegal team and their fans as well as any shortcomings by Moroccan organisers.

The incidents came at the end of a tense final low on goalmouth action — not surprising given the defensive strength of Africa's two top teams in the Fifa rankings.

Then came the late drama, with Senegal surviving the penalty award before Gueye became their hero — with the first goal scored by Senegal in an Afcon final after they had failed to find the net in any of their three previous appearances in the tournament's deciding game.

It was an agonising ending for Morocco, and many of their fans left the stadium before the final whistle on a cold and wet night. — AFP

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Oman polysilicon plant fully funded

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 19

UNITED Solar Holding (United Solar) on Monday has secured more than \$850 million in debt financing to complete funding for its \$1.6 billion, state-of-the-art polysilicon manufacturing facility in SOHAR Port and Freezone, positioning the Sultanate of Oman as a key player in the global solar supply chain.

The financing package includes \$480 million in term debt from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and partner banks, alongside over \$400 million in term debt and working capital facilities from local commercial banks. Oman Investment Authority's (OIA) Future Fund Oman has emerged as United Solar's largest shareholder, with an investment of about \$260 million.

The 100,000-metric-tonne plant, operated by United Solar Polysilicon (FZC) SPC, is expected to begin production in the first quarter of 2026. Once operational, it will be the Middle East's largest and only polysilicon manufacturing facility, capable of supporting around 40 gigawatts of solar module production annually.

Polysilicon produced at the facility will be fully traceable and compliant with leading international standards, including US Foreign Entity of Concern (FEOC) requirements, reinforcing its access to global markets.

Mulham al Jarf, OIA's Deputy President for Investment, said the financial close reflected strong international confidence in Oman and the project. "The successful financial close reflects a true team effort, supported



The package includes \$480 million in term debt from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and partner banks, alongside over \$400 million in term debt and working capital facilities from local commercial banks.

by the Omani government's agility and strong international confidence in Oman's economy, OIA as the largest shareholder and United Solar Polysilicon's ability to deliver a world-class project responding to the global energy transition", he said.

He added that the project would generate employment for Omanis, enable SMEs and lay the groundwork for further upstream and downstream renewable energy investments.

"It underscores the Authority's commitment to diversifying funding through partnerships with leading institutions such as the IFC and will drive expansion into solar cell and module production, amplifying its long-term economic impact", Al Jarf said.

Sam Zhang, Founder and Chairman of United Solar, described the milestone as pivotal. "With OIA and IFC's support, we are building the infrastructure needed to strengthen the global solar supply chain and ensure manufacturers have reliable access to high-quality, traceable polysilicon that

meets the world's most rigorous standards", he said.

Group CFO and Board Director Binyam Girogis noted that more than 80 per cent of the capital came from Omani institutions, regional and local banks; and the IFC. "This level and diversity of participation validates our investment thesis and underscores Oman's attractiveness as a destination for long-term industrial investment", he said.

Ashruf Megahed, IFC Regional Industry Head for Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Services in the Middle East and Central Asia, said the project would boost Oman's export capacity and industrial base.

Oman's new investment court to resolve disputes within 90 days

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 19

A new Investment and Commercial Court currently under establishment in the Sultanate of Oman will be mandated to adjudicate disputes within a 90-day timeframe, with more complex cases granted a possible 45-day extension.

According to Issa bin Hamad al Azri, Secretary-General of the Supreme Judicial Council, the time limits are designed to ensure the expeditious adjudication of commercial disputes — a cornerstone of Oman's commitment to enhancing its investment- and business-friendly environment.

Speaking to Duqm Economist, the newsletter of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), the official noted that swift adjudication of commercial cases will have a direct impact on improving the investment climate and preventing project delays or the prolonged freezing of capital. He added that shorter litigation timelines will also help reduce operational and legal costs borne by companies.

The Law of the Investment and Commercial Court, promulgated by Royal Decree 35/2025, regulates — among other objectives — litigation timelines to curb prolonged disputes. Article (28) requires cases to be adjudicated within a period not exceeding 90 days from the date of referral, with the possibility of an extension of up to



The new Investment Court aligns with Oman's strategy of building a more competitive economy

45 days for serious reasons.

A key underlying goal is to establish a specialised judicial framework capable of handling complex commercial cases related to foreign investment, international trade and modern commercial contracts, in line with Oman's strategy of building a more competitive economy. The Court will also seek to entrench standards of specialised justice, accelerate procedures and improve the quality of judgments through judges with deep expertise and strong legal backgrounds in the fields of commerce and investment, he stated.

The Supreme Judicial Council announced last December that it plans to establish primary and appellate chambers of the Investment and Commercial Court across various governorates of Oman.



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

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

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Tender Type	Tender Price (OMR)
NESC/2026/001	Consultancy Study for Electricity Supply/Load limit Management System features through AMI.	27/01/2026	09/02/2026	Specialized Companies	Local & International Tender	52.5

The table below shows the instructions for participation:-

Participation	- Local Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion may obtain Tender documents. - International companies and establishments not registered in the Sultanate may participate tender, provided they complete the registration in accordance with the prevailing regulations in the Sultanate within thirty (30) business day from the date on which they are notified of the acceptance of their bid. The companies interested to participate shall be specialized in " Consultancy services in the area related to the announced tender". - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply) - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure, please visit: https://supply.nama.om, under NESC vendor / E Tender
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent to Tender@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 https://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 at least One Hundred Twenty (120) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER COMMITTEE, Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C. - International companies may provide a bid bond issued by an internationally recognized bank, provided the bank has branches in the Sultanate of Oman. The bid bond shall be 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 at least One Hundred Twenty (120) calendar days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF MINOR TENDER 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 12:00 PM 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 (120) 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. - The TENDERER shall submit valid Omanization achievement certificate issued by The Ministry of Labor. Failure to meet this Omanization requirement will result in exclusion from the participation. This is only applicable for local Companies. - 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.

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BUSINESS FEATURE

OMAN'S
NEXT TEST

HOW
CREDIT
GROWS,
NOT HOW
MUCH

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

THE International Monetary Fund, in its Oman Article IV consultation released in mid-January 2026, says the Sultanate of Oman's next reform test is not whether credit grows, but how it grows, where it flows, why it is priced the way it is, when the financial system must prove its resilience under a softer oil cycle and how policy can support Oman Vision 2040 without weakening stability in Muscat and across the economy.

The IMF's starting point is broadly reassuring. It estimates Oman's economy grew by 1.6% in 2024 and accelerated to 2.3% year-on-year in the first half of 2025, driven by nonhydrocarbon activity, while inflation remained low at 0.9% in January–October 2025 after 0.6% in 2024. The Fund also estimates the overall fiscal balance stayed in surplus at 0.7% of GDP in 2025 and that central government debt declined to 36.1% of GDP by September 2025, even as the external picture softened, with the current account moving to a deficit of 1.1% of GDP in 2025 on weaker oil prices.

For a business audience, however, the IMF's most valuable contribution is not the macro snapshot. It is the emphasis on the "operating system" behind the headline results: the institutions and incentives that determine whether firms can access finance consistently, whether banks price risk properly and whether liquidity conditions remain predictable under Oman's exchange-rate peg. The Fund's message is that resilience is built less by one good year and more by the rules and tools that prevent boom-bust credit cycles.

The IMF says banks are sound, with ample capital and liquidity buffers and robust profitability, a conclusion reinforced through the Financial Sector Assessment Programme work referenced in the consultation. Yet the report also signals discomfort with a common policy temptation in periods of transition: pushing financial institutions to accelerate credit expansion in support of diversification while allowing risk governance to lag behind. The IMF Executive Board underlines that the Central Bank of Oman's expanded development mandate should remain anchored in the objectives of price and financial stability.

That warning is not abstract. In practice, it is about the incentives that shape lending decisions. If banks interpret development priorities as permission to underprice risk, relax underwriting, or lean too heavily into sectors that have not yet built robust cashflow histories, asset-quality problems tend to emerge later, often



The IMF says banks are resilient and fiscal discipline has strengthened, but the next reform phase hinges on risk pricing, liquidity management and the policy “plumbing” that keeps finance flowing through a softer oil cycle.

1.60% GDP GROWTH IN 2024



2.3% GROWTH IN H1 2025



0.9% INFLATION JAN - OCT 2025



1.1% CURRENT ACCOUNT DEFICIT IN 2025



0.7% FISCAL SURPLUS IN 2025



36.1% GOVT DEBT BY SEPT 2025



when liquidity tightens and the cost of funding rises. For SMEs, contractors and firms in newer non-oil segments, the danger is that credit looks abundant during the upturn but becomes scarce just as receivables rise and working-capital needs intensify. The IMF's call for stronger macroprudential frameworks, tighter supervision and improved crisis-management capacity is therefore directly linked to business confidence and investment planning.

The timing of the IMF's emphasis reflects the oil-price assumptions in its baseline. The report's table assumptions show an average crude export price of about \$70.6 per barrel in 2025 and \$62.1 in 2026, while projecting real GDP growth of 2.8% in 2025 and 3.8% in 2026–27, with nonhydrocarbon growth remaining robust through the medium term. This combination of steady non-oil expansion and softer oil prices is precisely when institutional strength matters most, because it tests whether diversification can proceed without relying on unusually favourable hydrocarbon conditions.

One of the IMF's most practical recommendations for businesses is also one of the least visible to non-specialists: implementing a Treasury Single Account and moving towards active liquidity management. The Fund reiterates that the peg remains appropriate and argues that improved cash management and liquidity operations would strengthen monetary policy transmission. In business terms, this is about predictability in funding conditions. Government cash flows are large enough to shape liquidity across the banking system. When public balances are fragmented across multiple accounts, liquidity can be uneven and harder to forecast, which can translate into short-term rate volatility, uneven bank funding costs and abrupt changes in loan pricing.

A well-executed Treasury Single Account consolidates government cash management and improves visibility, which can make system liquidity more predictable over time. That predictability matters for corporates negotiating interest rates, for SMEs managing working capital and for suppliers exposed to payment cycles. Even when the policy rate

is stable, the day-to-day liquidity environment influences how banks price credit, how tight they are on terms and how quickly they can respond to demand for financing.

The IMF also encourages readers to look beyond the headline fiscal surplus and focus on the nonhydrocarbon fiscal stance, pointing to improvements in the nonhydrocarbon primary deficit as an indicator of sustainability in an oil economy. For businesses, the relevance lies in continuity. A budget that becomes less dependent on oil windfalls tends to be more reliable for procurement planning, project pipelines and payment discipline. Yet the IMF couples that progress with a clear list of priorities aimed at locking in gains through stronger fiscal frameworks, better public investment management and budget execution; and continued reforms in revenue administration and subsidy design.

The report's overall message to the private sector is that the next competitive edge is credibility. The IMF acknowledges Oman's stronger fiscal position, improving debt dynamics and resilient banking sector, but it is effectively telling businesses and investors to watch how the system evolves rather than focusing only on current indicators. In the coming phase, the most commercially relevant signals will come from how prudential discipline is maintained while finance deepens, how quickly cash-management reforms improve liquidity predictability and whether capital markets deepen enough to broaden funding options beyond bank balance sheets.

Oman's reform journey, as the IMF presents it, is moving from outcomes to architecture. If that architecture is built well, it can lower uncertainty, stabilise financing conditions and support long-horizon investment decisions aligned with Oman Vision 2040, even when oil prices are less supportive. If it is built poorly, credit can expand in the short term but tighten abruptly later, undermining precisely the sectors that diversification policies aim to grow. The business takeaway is simple: Oman's next test is not whether money moves, but whether it moves predictably, transparently and safely, through every phase of the cycle.

SHORTTAKES



Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals; and Jean-Philippe Linteau, Ambassador of Canada to the Sultanate of Oman, at the forum

OMAN AND CANADA DEEPEN MINING TIES

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 19

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals organised the Oman–Canada Mining Business Forum at the Kempinski Hotel Muscat, as part of a two-day programme that combined forum sessions with a field visit for the Canadian delegation. The forum aimed to strengthen cooperation and partnerships between the Sultanate of Oman and Canada; and to showcase promising investment opportunities in the mining sector. The forum was attended by Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals; and Jean-Philippe Linteau, Ambassador of Canada to the Sultanate of Oman, along with senior officials from relevant government entities. The event was also attended by a high-level Canadian delegation representing economic sectors related to the mining industry, in addition to representatives of concession holders and mining companies operating in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as experts specialising in mining, downstream industries and sustainability. Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, affirmed that the forum serves as a vital platform for strengthening bilateral partnerships between Oman and Canada in the mining sector. He added that it supports the development of long-term strategic partnerships, while empowering the private sector and facilitating the transfer of knowledge, technologies and expertise between the two countries.

RO 2.109 bn budget boosts human development

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

BASED on the importance of the education sector as a cornerstone in human development and empowerment, the Omani government has given it significant attention, allocating approximately RO 2.109 billion in the 2026 State Budget to cover the expenses of the school and higher education sector. According to the 2026 State Budget Guide, the 10th Five-Year Development Plan’s development budget, in accordance with the matrix of development project priorities, achieved significant success over the past five years. The education sector received major attention as well, with the most prominent projects completed recently including the handover of 49 government schools across various governorates. Maintenance and renovation work was carried out, along with the addition of classrooms, lecture halls and laboratories to existing government schools. Furthermore, computer equipment was purchased, while older air conditioning units and school furniture were replaced. At the same time, construction is underway on 64 government schools in different governorates, with 22 schools scheduled for completion in 2026 and the remaining 42 schools to be completed this year. In higher education, the most notable projects completed over the past five years include maintenance and renovation of classrooms and specialised laboratories at Sultan Qaboos University. Maintenance and the addition



The education sector is a key driver of economic growth through the development of human capital and competences required by the labour market.

The education sector received major attention as well, with the most prominent projects completed recently including the handover of 49 government schools across various governorates.

of classrooms and specialised laboratories have also been carried out at various branches of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. Likewise, construction of the College of Law building at Sultan Qaboos University and the establishment of a branch of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Musandam Governorate are also set to commence. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik continues to support the education sector and one of the goals of the 2026 State Budget is focused on developing education, training and enhance scientific research and innovation. Sayyid Dr Munthir bin Hilal al Busaidy, Head of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit at

the Ministry of Economy, praised the Oman Vision 2040, which raises the bar for research ambitions to 2% of GDP through national initiatives and programmes that have already led to an increase in the number of researchers, research centres and active scientific incubators. The education sector in the Sultanate of Oman is a key driver of economic development by developing human capital and providing the skills required by the labour market. This is achieved through a focus on digital education, scientific research, developing future skills and updating curricula to meet the demands of the knowledge economy, thus supporting economic diversification and enhancing the Sultanate of Oman’s competitiveness.

Oman’s new ‘Global Pay’ app to advance digital payments

SAEED AL MASHARFI
MUSCAT, JAN 19

Global Money Exchange Co LLC (GMEC), Oman’s leading money exchange company, announced at a media briefing on Monday the launch of Global Pay, its new mobile application powered by Comviva’s mobiquity Pay platform. The launch aligns with Oman’s national digital transformation vision and reinforces GMEC’s commitment to delivering innovative, secure and inclusive digital financial solutions for daily life. The press meet was attended by Shaikh Sulaiman bin Abdulmalik al Khalili, Chairman of Global Money Exchange and representatives from Comviva, including Rajesh Chandiramani, CEO of Comviva. For this initiative, GMEC partnered with Comviva, a global leader in digital transformation solutions. Comviva is a subsidiary of Tech Mahindra and a member of the Mahindra Group. The Global Pay application



Executives at the launch of the ‘Global Pay’ digital app on Monday.

offers a comprehensive suite of digital financial services designed to simplify everyday transactions and enhance user convenience. Key features include seamless digital onboarding, instant wallet top-ups and the ability to send and receive money anywhere in Oman. The app also enables cross-border outward and inward remittances, allowing users to transfer funds internationally with ease. Additional functionalities include requesting money, cash deposits and

withdrawals, bill and education fee payments, as well as forex ordering, positioning Global Pay as a one-stop digital payment solution tailored to the evolving financial needs of individuals and communities. Speaking on the occasion, Shaikh Sulaiman bin Abdulmalik al Khalili, Chairman, Global Money Exchange said, “The Global Pay App enables secure and efficient local and international payment transactions. He added that the platform is PCI-DSS certified, underscoring

GMEC’s commitment to the highest standards of payment security and data protection. We believe that the Mobile application will be widely used by the Omani Nationals and expatriates”. Commenting on the platform’s security standards, Rajesh Chandiramani, CEO of Comviva, said that Global Pay operates on a highly secure digital infrastructure, noting that transactions worth nearly \$1 billion flow through the platform every day. He emphasised that handling such significant transaction volumes requires exceptionally robust security frameworks, adding that the platform is designed to meet the highest global standards to ensure the safety, reliability and integrity of all financial transactions. Subromoniyam K S — Managing Director, Global Money Exchange stated, “Customers can conveniently pay utility bills and educational fees without the need for a bank account,

thereby supporting broader financial inclusion”. He further noted that the platform enables merchants to accept QR-based payments from customers of any bank or service provider in Oman, ensuring full interoperability across the payment’s ecosystem”. Sonam Dorje — General Manager, Global Money Exchange said, “The Global Pay App is supported by a comprehensive customer support framework. Customers can visit any of our branches across Oman for assistance or contact a dedicated customer support helpline for prompt resolution of queries”. Madhusoodanan R — Executive Advisor to the Board, Global Money Exchange, stated that Global Money Exchange is the first money exchange company in Oman to have received a Payment Service Provider (PSP) licence and that this initiative strongly supports the Sultanate of Oman’s vision of a cashless economy.

DIGITAL INTEGRATION

India proposes linking BRICS currencies



India’s central bank has proposed that BRICS countries link their official digital currencies to make cross-border trade and tourism payments easier, two sources said. The Reserve Bank of India has recommended the proposal be included on the agenda for the 2026 BRICS summit. The initiative could reduce reliance on the US dollar as geopolitical tensions rise. — Reuters

POTENTIAL BENEFIT

Tesla poised as early Canada winner



Tesla is poised to be one of the first automakers to benefit from Canada’s move to remove 100% tariffs on Chinese-made EVs. Under the deal announced last Friday, Canada will allow up to 49,000 vehicles to be imported annually from China with a tariff of 6.1%. Half of the quota will be reserved for vehicles under 35,000 CAD. — Reuters

EXPORTS RESILIENT

China growth loses momentum



China met its 5.0% growth target in 2025, but economic momentum slowed, with fourth-quarter growth at 4.5%, the weakest since Covid-19 curbs ended. Exports remain resilient, while weak domestic demand, property stress and high local debt weigh on prospects. Growth in 2026 is forecast at about 4.5%. — dpa

OPINION

Will taxi drivers lose their jobs?



TARIQ
AL BARWANI

The writer is strategic adviser, businessman and motivational speaker.

OVER 15 years ago, getting a taxi would have required one to stand on the roadside, wave his/her hands under the sun, hope for an empty car to pass, slow down and then negotiate for a price before even sitting inside. I vividly recall walking from home for several minutes just to find one, let alone agreeing with the taxi driver on whether they would be able to take me to the destination I wished to go.

Today, thanks to uberisation (revolutionising the traditional taxi industry), you can easily download an app and get a taxi ordered (from virtually wherever they are), with the route, price and driver details all visible on the screen and that all by simply clicking a few taps on your smartphone.

Tomorrow even the driver may disappear altogether. The taxi will arrive on its own, drive itself and drop you off without having a human behind the wheel.

This is not science fiction but rather a reality in some parts of the world. Tech heavyweights like Google, Amazon, Tesla (in the US) and Baidu (in China) are already operating autonomous taxi services (robotaxis) in some fashion.

This may eventually lead to taxi drivers losing their jobs (and being replaced ultimately).

My article this week looks briefly at what

robotaxis are, how they work and whether the vision of replacing taxi drivers is a reality in the making. A robotaxi is a fully self-driving taxi that picks you up, drives you and drops you off without anyone behind the steering wheel.

It is an autonomous vehicle designed specifically to transport passengers like a regular taxi but with no human driver. It combines key technologies such as sensors, cameras, lidar/radar, GPS and artificial intelligence (AI) to see the environment, understand traffic and make driving decisions in real time.

Instead of a human looking at the road, the computer interprets everything around the car, from vehicles and pedestrians to traffic lights and even unexpected obstacles. Thanks to high-speed GSM networks (advanced 5G today and 6G tomorrow), response is even faster than any human could.

Briefly, the key technologies will help the taxi see, think and act without any human intervention.

As indicated in the beginning of the article this week, robotaxis are no longer science fiction today. Companies are already operating autonomous taxi services on public roads, carrying real passengers with no human driver behind the wheel.

Waymo, the autonomous driving arm of Alphabet (Google's parent company), runs

Today, thanks to uberisation (revolutionising the traditional taxi industry), you can easily download an app and get a taxi ordered (from virtually wherever they are), with the route, price and driver details all visible on the screen and that all by simply clicking a few taps on your smartphone.

a commercial robotaxi service in Phoenix, Arizona, where riders can book a self-driving car through an app and be taken to their destination autonomously.

Meanwhile, in China, Baidu's Apollo Go is offering paid robotaxi services across multiple cities, allowing passengers to order driverless rides through their smartphones.

Together, these examples show that robotaxis are no longer just test projects but rather active services today (though limited to specific locations to start with).

Obviously, the biggest apparent disadvantage is humans losing jobs (particularly driving the vehicles); however, robotaxis benefits include but are not limited to fewer traffic accidents (for human error causes most crashes) and lower transportation costs (without drivers, cost per ride would go down).

In addition, new roles would be created as a result, such as vehicle monitoring, fleet management, data analysis and AI maintenance, to name a few.

To conclude my article this week, should taxi drivers be worried? Yes, but not immediately, because change is coming. About a month ago, WeRide and Uber launched the Middle East's first fully driverless robotaxi commercial operations in Abu Dhabi, currently operating on Yas Island routes.

CHINA WIELDS A STEADIER BLADE OVER TECH GIANTS

ROBYN MAK

China's market watchdogs have a new target: online travel agent Trip.com. Following investigations into Alibaba and Meituan five years ago that shook investor faith in the country's tech sector, the State Administration for Market Regulation on Wednesday announced it is probing the New York- and Hong Kong-listed firm led by Jane Sun for monopolistic behaviour, erasing some \$8 billion, or 17%, from its market capitalisation.

Trip.com says it will co-operate with authorities, but it is a vulnerable target. The company's acquisitions over the past decade, including the purchase of a stake in peer Tongcheng Travel, have cemented its dominance.

Trip.com says it will co-operate with authorities, but it is a vulnerable target. The company's acquisitions over the past decade, including the purchase of a stake in peer Tongcheng Travel, have cemented its dominance.

Analysts at Bank of Communications International estimated Trip.com had a 56% share of the country's online travel bookings in 2024, per local media.

Thanks to a post-pandemic boom in domestic travel, its top line, which also includes international sales, is forecast to jump 14% this year, to 71 billion yuan

(\$10.1 billion), according to estimates gathered by Visible Alpha.

Impressively, its gross profit margin is expected to remain at 80% for the next five years, up from 72% a decade ago.

That level of pricing power has attracted the ire of both hotel and tourism groups plus other regulators, which are already scrutinising the sector amidst intensifying competition between the market leader and rivals Alibaba, Meituan and JD.com.

As recently as last month, for example, the Yunnan Provincial Tourism Homestay Industry Association called out Trip.com and peers for forcing mom-and-pop businesses to choose one online agency, as well as for raising commission rates and setting unfair conditions, among other complaints.

In the second half of last year, provincial antitrust regulators summoned Trip.com at least four times, local media reported.

An antitrust fine of up to 10% of domestic sales looms. Analysts at Citi reckon that translates to a maximum 4.9 billion yuan, roughly \$700 million, hit — or 23% of Trip.com's forecast 2026 net profit, per Visible Alpha estimates.

The bigger risk will be whether officials will tolerate the company's outsized profits at a time when Beijing is trying to spur consumption in the \$19 trillion economy. Trip.com's fortunes are also a sharp contrast to those of struggling hoteliers and state-owned airlines. — Reuters

The 11th Plan: Driving results through discipline

OMAN has never lacked ambition. What separates countries is not the ability to describe a destination, but the ability to build the road — with discipline, speed and trust. The Eleventh Five-Year Development Plan (2026-2030) matters because it is the second executive road map under Oman Vision 2040, arriving at a time when investors are selective and competition for capital is unforgiving.

The Plan targets around 4% average annual real GDP growth (at constant prices) and is organised into 190 strategic programmes aligned with Oman Vision 2040 priorities.

Crucially, it is staged: work programmes for 2026-2027 and 2028-2029, followed by a 2030 evaluation and preparation track for the Twelfth Plan. This is the right direction. It treats planning as a discipline of delivery: execute, measure, adjust and scale what works.

Oman also starts this phase with stronger macro credibility than in the recent past. The IMF reported inflation easing to 0.6% in 2024 and remaining contained at 0.9% during January-October 2025.

It also noted a fiscal surplus of 3.3% of GDP in 2024, a current account surplus of 3.2% of GDP and government debt at 36.1% of GDP by September 2025. For investors, these figures send a simple message: risk is being managed, not ignored.

The World Bank has highlighted the impact of Oman's Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (launched in 2020), including the reduction of public debt from around 68% of GDP to approximately 35% by 2024. This is old-school prudence and it is exactly what enables new-school diversification.

It is also reflected in market confidence: S&P Global Ratings raised Oman's long-term sovereign rating to BBB- (stable) in September 2024 and Reuters reported Moody's upgrade to investment grade (Baa3) in July 2025.

Now comes the practical question: where can the Eleventh Plan deliver the biggest 'economic multiplier' for business and jobs? I would prioritise three connected missions: (1) manufacturing and export capability, (2) corridor economics that turns geography into cash flow and (3) SME scale-up as the nation's productivity engine. Manufacturing



The Plan targets around 4% average annual real GDP growth (at constant prices) and is organised into 190 strategic programmes aligned with Oman Vision 2040 priorities.



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is where diversification becomes measurable. The World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook for Oman noted manufacturing was the fastest-growing sector, expanding by 8.3% in 2024. The task now is to turn momentum into clusters: a few globally competitive product families, anchored by major investors, supported by supplier development for local firms and backed by shared services such as testing laboratories and certification support.

Corridor economics is the natural partner of manufacturing. Ports and free zones become transformative only when they behave like a business product: fast movement (predictable customs), fast setup (land and utilities ready) and fast money (trade finance and reliable payment cycles).

Economic diplomacy can help pull demand into these corridors.

The India-Oman CEPA, signed on December 18, 2025, is a strong example: Reuters reported zero-duty access on over 98% of Oman's tariff lines for Indian exports and tariff reductions by India on around 78% of its tariff lines covering about 95% of Omani imports by value, with annual bilateral trade of more than \$10 billion.

But agreements must be operationalised through standards alignment, export readiness and business-to-business partnerships.

SMEs complete the picture — not as a slogan, but as the bridge between big investment and broad

employment.

The IMF's staff report projected real GDP growth of 2.6% in 2025, with non-hydrocarbon growth around 3.4%, rising towards 4.2% over the medium term as committed private investments are executed.

To convert that outlook into jobs, SMEs must be helped to scale: predictable procurement opportunities, prompt payment, working-capital guarantees and practical support to meet international standards.

Implementation is the real thought-leadership test. Five moves can raise execution without harshness.

First, create small 'delivery rooms' for each mission (manufacturing, corridors, SMEs) with empowered decision-makers and private sector problem-solvers, measured weekly on cycle times and investment mobilised.

Second, sequence early wins within 12-18 months that businesses can feel: registrations, permits, customs clearance and payment discipline.

Third, publish a pipeline of bankable projects with land readiness, utility availability and realistic timelines, paired with risk-sharing tools where needed. Fourth, launch an industry-led skills pact focused on certifications employers actually hire for.

Fifth, protect confidence through consistency: clear rules, transparent processes and dependable enforcement. One more element deserves a calm, mature national conversation: resilience. Oman has announced a personal income tax to begin in 2028 — 5% on annual income above RO 42,000, expected to affect roughly 1% of the population. Whether one likes taxes or not, the policy signal is straightforward: broaden revenues over time while keeping the burden limited, so the state can keep investing in services, skills and opportunity.

Ultimately, the Eleventh Plan is a chance to turn Oman Vision 2040 from promise into habit. Oman does not need to invent a new identity; it can revive an old strength: being a trusted crossroads of trade, investment and enterprise — but with modern institutions and modern delivery.

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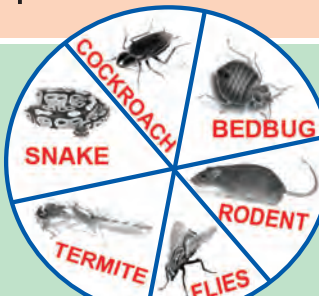
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ART/LIFE



WHERE THE MUDFLATS BREATHE: MALAAK AL LAWATI AND THE LIFE BENEATH OMAN 'S COAST

> 20

WORLD TOUR

BTS KICKS OFF COMEBACK TOUR IN APRIL



South Korean boy band BTS arrives for the 64th Annual Grammy Awards in Las Vegas. — **AFP**

K-pop megastars BTS will launch a comeback world tour from April, the band's label said.

South Korea's biggest musical act has been on self-described hiatus since 2022 as its members undertook national military service required of all men under the age of 30.

All seven members were discharged last year and the group announced a comeback for the spring of 2026.

Spanning 34 cities with 79 performances, it will be the largest-ever single tour by a K-pop group in terms of total shows.

The world tour — their first in four years — will kick off in South Korea's Goyang on April 9, with two additional concerts in the band's home country before moving on to neighbouring Japan, their label said.

They will then head to the United States and Europe, with the tour ending in March 2027 in Manila.

The band's label said that more cities will be announced, including additional stops in Japan and the Middle East.

The announcement followed the band's agency, HYBE, announcing on New Year's Day that they would release an album on March 20 before heading on tour.

The album will be BTS's first since the anthology "Proof" which became South Korea's bestselling record of 2022.

HYBE's shares traded higher at Wednesday's market open, rising around three per cent.

Before their military service, BTS generated more than 5.5 trillion won (\$3.7 billion) in South Korea per year, according to the government-backed Korea Culture and Tourism Institute.

The figure is equivalent to roughly 0.2 per cent of the country's total GDP.

BTS has expanded beyond their home nation to become a global musical phenomenon in recent years.

They hold the record as the most-streamed group on Spotify and became the first K-pop act to top both the Billboard 200 and the Billboard Artist 100 charts in the United States. — **AFP**

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



FLASHY CUSTOMS

Members of Orient Premier Tribe dance during the Sinulog Festival, which honours the Santo Niño (child Jesus), in Macau. — **AFP**



WINTER WEATHER

A man looks at seagulls on the "Promenade des Anglais" on the French riviera in the city of Nice. — **AFP**



FASHION

A model walks the runway during the Prada collection show as part of Men's Fall/Winter 2026-2027 Milan's fashion week. — **AFP**

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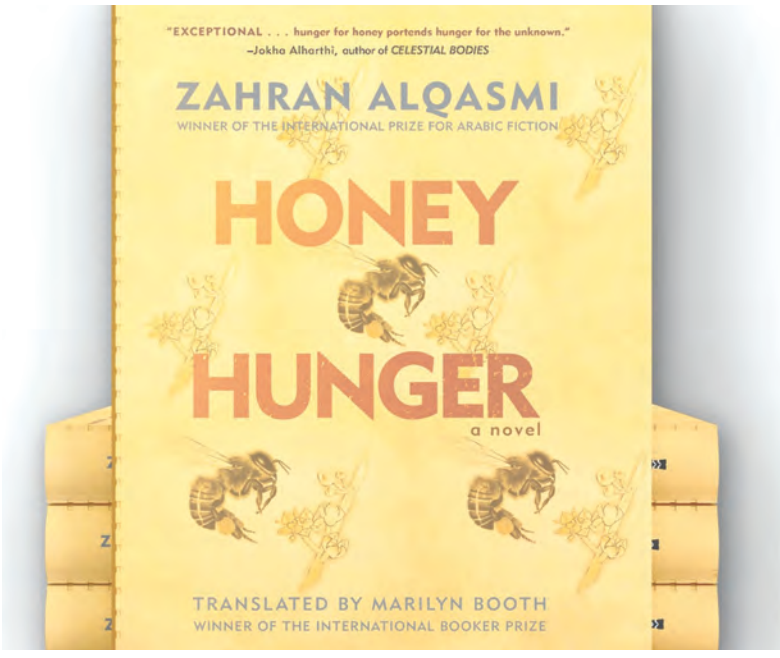
Young Omani girls representing their culture through smiles



Great White Pelican Soaring in Salalah

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OMANI NOVEL WINS BANIPAL PRIZE FOR LITERARY TRANSLATION



The novel uses honey as a symbol of desire and unfulfilled longing

The English translation of Omani poet and novelist Zahran al Qasimi’s work, ‘Honey Hunger’, by British translator Marilyn Booth, has won the Banipal Prize for Literary Translation. The translation was supported by the Cultural Club under the Omani Text Translation Programme.

The novel explores the theme of deprivation disguised as abundance, using honey as a symbol of desire and unfulfilled longing.

Following three friends on their journeys to collect mountain honey, the narrative also becomes a journey of self-discovery amidst Oman’s natural landscapes.

Al Qasimi’s poetic storytelling delves into Omani folk traditions, Bedouin life and the intricate world of bees and honey harvesting, while employing a reflective, allusive

style that engages readers’ imagination.

The book’s 13 chapters are each prefaced by ‘ta’wiba,’ traditional Omani folk poetry, giving the novel an authentic cultural rhythm. Through the characters’ travels, readers experience the nuances of ordinary life in Oman, the generosity of its people and the subtle interplay between nature and human consciousness.

Launched in 2019, the Cultural Club’s Omani Text Translation Programme aims to promote Omani literature internationally, making works like ‘Honey Hunger’ accessible to a global audience. The programme has become a strategic platform for bringing Omani voices to the world literary stage, strengthening the Sultanate of Oman’s cultural presence and encouraging further literary translation projects. — ONA



MEN’S FASHION WEEK IN PARIS: WHAT TO WATCH



MEN'S Fashion Week kicks off in Paris on Tuesday and from Véronique Nichanian’s farewell at Hermès to Jonathan Anderson’s latest Dior Homme show, several key moments are set to define the season.

Over six days, 66 fashion houses will present their Fall/Winter collections across 36 runway shows and 30 presentations. After a year of major creative shake-ups, this edition marks a period of relative stability, with newly appointed designers settling into their roles and refining their visions.

However, economic uncertainty continues to loom. Weak sales in recent years, particularly in China, have forced brands to reassess priorities. “We’re in the midst of an economic crisis and that has repercussions on creation”, said Marie Ottavi of Libération, predicting more pragmatic collections focused on commercial viability. Franck Nauertz of Le Bon Marché and La Samaritaine echoed the sentiment, noting a shift away from experimentation towards predictability.

One of the most emotional moments of the week will come on Saturday evening, when Véronique Nichanian presents her final menswear collection for Hermès



after 37 years. The 71-year-old designer leaves behind a brand defined by understated luxury and timeless masculinity. Her successor, London-based designer Grace Wales Bonner, has already been announced

and will debut her first collection for the house in January 2027.

Anticipation is also high for Dior’s menswear show on Wednesday afternoon, marking Jonathan Anderson’s second outing for Dior Homme. While his debut menswear collection was widely praised, his womenswear offering last October drew mixed reactions. Now, the Northern Irish designer faces growing expectations to solidify his creative direction. “There’s a lot of anticipation”, said Alice Feillard of Galeries Lafayette.

Among emerging names, French designer Jeanne Friot will stage her first official runway show on Tuesday afternoon. Known for her inclusive and socially engaged designs, Friot opens the week ahead of Pharrell Williams’s Louis Vuitton presentation. Italian designer Luca Magliano, winner of the 2023 Karl Lagerfeld Prize, will also make his runway debut, alongside newcomers ERL, KML, Sonia Carrasco and Ssstein.

Notable absences include Loewe and Saint Laurent, creating space for independent brands such as Lemaire, AMI and Rick Owens. Established names like Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto remain on the calendar, while Simon Jacquemus is set to close the week with a star-studded show at the Picasso Museum. — AFP

FEATURES



MALAAK AL LAWATI AND THE LIFE BENEATH OMAN’S COAST



IDRIS AL BALUSHI

FOR a long time, Malaak al Lawati thought fish were boring. “The sort of creatures you see at pet shops, admire for two seconds and never really think about again”, she admits. The ocean, despite always being close, felt distant, familiar, but unexplored. That quiet indifference ended with a book. Reading *The Soul of an Octopus* by Sy Montgomery changed how Malaak saw the sea entirely. As she turned each page, she learned about octopuses that used tools, solved puzzles, recognised people and even showed preference. “I remember putting the book down and thinking, Wait. Octopuses are pretty cool. What else am I missing?”

That question stayed with her. Living beside the sea her whole life yet knowing so little about it suddenly felt unsettling. “I realised I had been living next to the sea my whole life, but I barely knew anything about how the ocean worked, what animals lived there, or how important marine ecosystems are for our livelihoods”. That realisation pushed her to study marine biology at Bangor University in North Wales and eventually back home, to Oman’s coastlines.

Today, Malaak is a marine biologist and science communicator whose work centres on places most people never think twice about. One of them is Barr Al Hikman, a vast wetland in Al Wusta Governorate that she describes with awe. “Once you understand what actually goes on at Barr Al Hikman”,



she says, “you realise just how dramatically wild and awesome this place is”. Every winter, more than half a million migratory birds arrive there after flying thousands of kilometres from the Arctic and Central Asia. Exhausted and operating on a strict energy budget, they depend on Barr Al Hikman to survive. Malaak often explains it through a vivid analogy. “Imagine driving from Muscat to Salalah with no petrol stations, no restaurants, no rest stops. Migratory birds face the same problem, except their journey spans continents and running out of fuel doesn’t mean being stranded, it means death”.

At low tide, the sea retreats to reveal nearly 190 square kilometres of mudflat. To the human eye, it may

look empty. “But to a bird”, Malaak says, “it’s basically a massive buffet”. Beneath the surface, worms, crabs and shellfish thrive, feeding hundreds of thousands of birds at once. When the tide returns, surrounding sabkhas and dunes offer safe, elevated places to rest, digest and wait for the next feeding window.

Barr Al Hikman is not just a stopover. It is a biological engine. “It’s a mosaic of lagoons, mudflats, mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs, all put together into one highly productive coastal system”, Malaak explains. These habitats serve as nurseries for fish and crabs, feeding grounds for turtles, dolphins and whales; and the foundation of Oman’s fishing economy. “The fish and swimming crabs we depend on



Malaak is a marine biologist and science communicator whose work centres on places most people never think twice about. As a young Omani woman in marine science, she has navigated a field where opportunities are still limited.



begin their lives in places like Barr Al Hikman”. Each January, Malaak joins teams of scientists and bird ringers who spend days counting and tagging birds at the site. Ringing involves placing a small, lightweight band on a bird’s leg, linking it to an international database. “Over time”, she explains, “this allows us to reconstruct entire migration routes across continents”. These counts act as a health check. “When over half a million birds continue to choose this site every winter, it tells us the ecosystem is still functioning. If those numbers drop, it’s an early warning that something is wrong”.

Despite its remoteness, Barr Al Hikman is under increasing pressure. Tourism is growing, coastal development is expanding and climate change adds another layer of stress. “You might think such a remote place is safe from human impact”, Malaak says, “but that’s not true at all”. Without facilities or enforcement, even well-intentioned visitors can cause damage. “That pristine, vital ecosystem can be changed faster than it took centuries to form”.

Science alone, she believes, is not enough. Communication is essential. “When it comes to the environment, we have a huge invisibility problem”, Malaak says. “Finance, technology and tourism take the front stage, but the environment is the stage itself. Everything else relies on it”. Through her platform [@Naturelab.om](#), she translates research into accessible stories, helping people understand why wetlands, reefs and nesting beaches matter.

Her work has not gone unnoticed. Being featured on BBC Global Women was a turning point. “I felt humbled”, she says, “but more than anything, I was happy because it put a spotlight on Omani biodiversity and the people working to protect it”. The recognition amplified her advocacy, drawing more people into the conversation.

As a young Omani woman in marine science, Malaak has navigated a field where opportunities are still limited. “Oman sits at the intersection of three seas and relies heavily on the ocean”, she says, “yet marine science remains an untapped potential”. Rather than discouraging her, those gaps shaped her resolve. “Given the opportunity”, she adds, “Omani women are more than capable of working at sea, conducting research and leading conservation efforts”.

Looking ahead, Malaak’s hope is clear. “The choices we make today”, she says, “will define whether Oman safeguards its natural heritage or spends the future managing loss instead of resilience”.

For Malaak al Lawati, the ocean is no longer something to pass by without thought. It is a living system worth noticing, understanding and protecting; and she is determined to make sure others see it too.