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PAGES 20 | BAISAS 200

SUNRISE 06:46 AM  
PRAYER TIMINGS  
FAJR 05:29 AM  
DHUHR 12:26 PM  
ASR 03:38 PM  
MAGHRIB 06:01 PM  
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BRUNSON NETS 42  
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## ROYAL DECREE ESTABLISHES INDEX FOR PROMISING STARTUPS

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued three Royal Decrees. Royal Decree No (18/2025) promulgates the establishment of an index for promising startups.

Article (1) states that a sub-index to be named “Promising Startups Index” shall be established at Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX).

Article (2) stipulates that the Financial Services Authority shall undertake the tasks of supervision and audit of the companies listed in the Promising Startups Index.

Article (3) states that the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Financial Services Authority shall issue the regulations and decisions necessary for the implementation of the provisions of this Decree, as well as the incentives granted to the companies listed in the Promising Startups Index, through coordination with the departments concerned.

Article (4) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No (19/2025) ratifies an agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the Government of the Republic of Maldives on mutual visa waiver for holders of diplomatic, special, service and official passports, signed in Muscat on December 11, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the aforesaid agreement as per the version attached to this Decree.

Article (2) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No (20/2025) ratifies an agreement between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the Government of Mongolia on mutual visa waiver for holders of diplomatic, official, special and service passports, signed in Muscat on December 9, 2024.

Article (1) ratifies the aforesaid agreement as per the version attached to this Decree.

Article (2) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

## SAYYID FAHD HAILS ITUC’S ROLE



HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Tuesday received Luc Triangle, Secretary-General of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). The guest is currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman to attend a symposium titled “Towards a more sustainable social dialogue,” organised by the General Federation of Oman Workers. HH Sayyid Fahd expressed the Sultanate of Oman’s appreciation for the constructive role undertaken by the ITUC in encouraging cooperation among trade unions in countries across the world.

HH Sayyid Fahd pointed out that the Sultanate of Oman pays great attention to supporting the three parties in the production process—the government, represented by the Ministry of Labour; business owners, represented by Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and workers, represented by the General Federation of Oman Workers—in order to enable each party to fulfil its responsibilities in serving the objectives defined by the Omani Labour Law. The prime aim is to enhance the work environment and conditions for all workers in the state’s sectors. **DETAILS ON P3**

PHOTO BY MOHAMMED AL RASHDI

# HM gives audience to Kuwait’s First Deputy PM



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave an audience to Shaikh Fahad Yousef Saud al Sabah, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior in the State of Kuwait. During the audience, the guest conveyed a verbal message to His Majesty the Sultan from Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait. The message dealt

with means of enhancing the distinguished relations between the two countries to serve their joint interests.

The audience also reviewed areas of military and security cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait and means of promoting them in a manner that maintains stability and security in both countries and the wider region. The

audience was attended by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs; Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior; Dr Mohammed bin Nassir al Hajri, Ambassador of Kuwait to Oman; and Major General Hamed bin Manahi al Mutairi, Assistant Under-Secretary for Criminal Security Affairs at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2

## TALKS START ON SECOND PHASE OF GAZA CEASEFIRE DEAL

CAIRO: Talks have started on the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire deal, the spokesperson for the Palestinian group Hamas said on Tuesday. The first phase of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas went into force on January 19 after 15 months of war and involved a halt to fighting, the release of some Israeli captives and the freeing of some Palestinian prisoners.

Phase two of the three-phase deal is intended to focus on agreements on the release of the remaining captives and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza. “Contacts and negotiations on the second



Palestinians wait to receive aid at a distribution point in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on Tuesday.

phase have begun,” Hamas spokesperson Abdel-Latif al-Qanoua said, without providing further

details. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said earlier on Tuesday that Israel was preparing to send a high-level delegation to the Qatari capital, Doha, to discuss the continued implementation of the deal. Netanyahu was due to hold talks with US President Donald Trump on Tuesday, with the focus likely to be on the ceasefire.

The initial six-week truce, agreed with Egyptian and Qatari mediators and backed by the UN, has remained largely intact, but prospects for a durable settlement are unclear.

SEE ALSO P6

# 97.9 per cent of cases filed in 2024 settled

KABEER YOUSUF  
@kabeeryousef

The Public Prosecution Department said 97.9 per cent of the cases filed in 2024 were settled. The cases were termed closed through final settlement or referral or issuance of penal order.

The success rate stands at 97.6 per cent for cases in which the court followed the actions of the public prosecution, either by condemnation or by upholding the decisions for filing.

This was unveiled at the annual press conference on

Tuesday. Speaking at the press conference, Attorney General Nasr bin Khamis al Sawa’i said that 32 of the rulings pertaining to public funds were issued in 2024 and 2025.

Crimes involving violation of Labour Law topped the list of crimes reported in the country in 2024, and as many as 12,407 cases were reported in this category, followed by cases involving bounced cheques (9,699), according to the Public Prosecution Department.

Other types of crimes which were reported in the country included cases involving public

funds and money laundering in 2024 stood at 192, including 33 cases of felony and 159 cases of misdemeanour, while the number of false cheques and fraud cases stood at 132.

He said that the country saw a rise in the number of cases reported to the Public Prosecution in 2024 by 29.5 per cent compared to the same in 2023. The total number of cases filed in 2024 stood at 46,359, including cases of violations, administrative complaints and other incidents.

He added that 25 per cent of the cases that were referred to

the courts in 2023 were settled and related fines stood at RO 1.43 million, while instances of restitution and confiscation stood at RO 15.407 million - together making a total of RO 16,841,410.

The public prosecution appointed 73 public prosecution members specialised in juvenile cases to operate in various governorates of Oman, said Al Sawa’i, noting that steps are underway to raise the number in future. He added that, despite the rise in number of cases, the achievement rate stood at 97.9 per cent. **TURN TO P2**

OMAN

# HM gives audience to Kuwait’s First Deputy Prime Minister



**MUSCAT:** His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Tuesday to Shaikh Fahad Yousef Saud al Sabah, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior in the State of Kuwait. During the audience, the guest conveyed a verbal message to His Majesty the Sultan from Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmed Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait. The message dealt with means of enhancing the distinguished relations between the two countries to serve their joint interests. The audience also reviewed areas of military and security cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait and means of promoting them in a manner that maintains stability and security in both countries and the wider region. The audience was attended by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs; Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior; Dr Mohammed bin Nassir al Hajri, Ambassador of Kuwait to Oman; and Major General Hamed bin Manahi al Mutairi, Assistant Under-Secretary for Criminal Security Affairs at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior. — **ONA**

## SHORT TAKES

### HEAD OF MEDICAL CITY RECEIVES TURKISH OFFICIAL



**MUSCAT:** Eng Odai bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Medical City for Military and Security Services, received on Tuesday Gen Metin Gürak, Chief of the General Staff of the Republic of Türkiye, and his accompanying delegation. During the meeting, both sides discussed several matters related to the medical and healthcare fields. The guest and his delegation also toured the departments and facilities of the Medical City for Military and Security Services. — **ONA**

## 97.9% of cases filed in 2024 settled, Muscat registers largest number

FROM P1

Al Sawa'i affirmed the department's readiness to handle false claims filed via social media sites that target Oman's "national fabric or accomplishments", noting that vigilant teams are monitoring social media sites that publish such false or forged content.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Rashid bin Obaid al Kaabi, Assistant Attorney General, said that the number of crimes against children in 2024 grew to 1,325 cases, including harassment, physical assault, other forms of violence and exposing the underaged to juvenile delinquency.

The number of cases filed with the department in 2024 grew by 22.5

per cent over the figures of 2023. The total number of cases filed in 2024 (46,359) included 43,957 cases of misdemeanour, 2,281 felonies and 121 reports of violations, administrative complaints and other incidents.

The number of defendants during the past year stood at 58,858, among them 89.2 per cent were men, 1.8 per cent were minors and 46.8 per cent were foreigners. The number of defendants registered a rise of 23.5 per cent over 2023 figure.

Muscat Governorate registered the largest number of cases (20,852 cases), followed by Al Batinah North Governorate (7,500 cases) and Dhofar Governorate (4,457 cases).

Statistics show that 32,856 cases were forwarded by the Royal Oman



Nasr Khamis Al Sawa'i, Attorney General

Police (ROP), followed by 5,757 cases from the department's e-services portal and 4,142 cases from the Ministry of Labour.

Labour lawsuits topped the list of five most common crimes during 2024 (a total of 12,407 cases), followed by false cheque crimes (9,699 cases), foreign residency law

crimes (9,154 cases), fraud crimes (5,343 cases) and theft and extortion crimes (4,002 cases).

As many as 21,414 rulings were issued in 2024, up by 20.1 per cent over the figures of 2023, of which 17,547 rulings were carried out. Settled rulings in 2024 registered an increase of 13 per cent over 2023 figures.

The total number of cases received electronically by the department during 2024 stood at 45,538, up by 24 per cent over 2023 figures. The number of judicial orders amounted to 261,650 against 83,305 investigation reports conducted in 2024.

**MODERN TECHNOLOGY**

Al Sawa'i pointed out that

modern technology, like Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and other tools of modern times, helped chart out the department's course of action, making decisions closer to accuracy. Despite the rise in the number of cases, the achievement rate grew to 97.9 per cent.

**RATIO**

Men constituted the largest number of defendants with 89.2 per cent of the total, equivalent to 58,858, out of which 1.8 per cent were minors and 46.8 per cent were foreigners. Women comprised 10.8 per cent of the total. However, there has been a rise in the number of defendants by 23.5 per cent when compared with 2023 figures.

## 144 specialist physicians graduate from OMSB

OHOOD AL JILANI  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

Oman Medical Specialty Board (OMSB) celebrated the graduation of the 16th batch comprising 144 specialist physicians on Tuesday.

The graduation ceremony also witnessed the honouring of doctors from the academic staff and resident doctors who excelled in their fields, as well as graduates who made local and international achievements. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Oman Medical Specialty Board, at the Al Irfan Theatre of the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Ajmiyah, CEO of Oman Medical Specialty Board, said that this graduation constitutes a gateway to a new world full



The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health. — **Photo by Khalfan al Rusaiki**

of responsibilities, stressing that the graduates carry the torch of knowledge and contribute to the advancement of the healthcare system in the Sultanate of Oman. Addressing the graduates, Al Ajmi said: "You will enter a challenging environment; however, it is teeming with opportunities for giving and humanity, so be ambassadors of goodness

and knowledge. OMSB will continue to achieve its goals and implement its educational and training plans. Since its establishment to the present day, a total of 1,508 specialist doctors have graduated in speciality and fellowship programmes.

Based on our vision for the future of medical education, OMSB is participating in the

preparation of the 11th five-year plan for the health sector, which will commence in 2026.

The plan will focus on expanding specialised programmes and enhancing the utilisation of technology and artificial intelligence in advanced medical education with the aim of raising the efficiency of clinical training to ensure the graduation of medical cadres capable of keeping pace with global developments.

Recognising the importance of the digital economy in shaping the future of the health sector, we are keen on adopting initiatives aimed at building national capabilities in digital medical technologies and enhancing research and innovation in the fields of digital health, in line with the national strategy directed towards an economy based on knowledge and innovation."

SHORT TAKES



The two sides explored means of boosting joint cooperation between the two countries.— ONA

GENERAL AL NUMANI  
RECEIVES TURKISH  
CHIEF OF STAFF

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office on Tuesday Gen Metin Gürak, Chief of the General Staff of the Republic of Türkiye. Al Numani lauded the bilateral relations between Oman and Türkiye. They explored means of boosting joint cooperation in a manner that enhances the security of both countries. The meeting was attended by Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF). It was also attended by the ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye to the Sultanate of Oman.

DEFENCE OFFICIALS  
RECEIVE PAKISTANI  
CHIEF OF AIR STAFF



MUSCAT: Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Za’abi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Defence, on Tuesday received Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmad Babar, Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan’s Air Force, and his accompanying delegation. During the meeting, both sides discussed several military matters of mutual interest that aim to boost military cooperation.

Meanwhile, Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo), received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmad Babar, Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan’s Air Force, and his accompanying delegation. During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views on several matters of common concern.

Moreover, Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), received in his office today Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmad Babar, Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan’s Air Force, and his accompanying delegation. — ONA

SAYYID  
FAHD  
RECEIVES  
SECRETARY-  
GENERAL OF  
ITUC

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received on Tuesday Luc Triangle, Secretary-General of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

The guest is currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman to attend a symposium titled Towards a More Sustainable Social Dialogue, organised by the General Federation of Oman Workers. After welcoming the guest, HH Sayyid Fahd expressed the Sultanate of Oman’s appreciation for the constructive role undertaken by the ITUC in encouraging cooperation among trade unions worldwide.

He also underlined the Sultanate of Oman’s full cooperation with the ITUC through the General Federation

of Oman Workers, which seeks to protect workers’ interests, raise their productive efficiency, consolidate work values, develop their skills, refine their capabilities, and enhance their professional level. HH Sayyid Fahd pointed out that Oman places great importance on supporting the three parties to the production process — the government, represented by the Ministry of Labour; business owners, represented by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI); and workers, represented by the General Federation of Oman Workers.

This support aims to enable each party to fulfil its responsibilities in achieving the objectives defined by the Omani Labour Law, with the prime goal of improving the work

environment and conditions for all workers in the country. The meeting reviewed cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the ITUC and explored ways to strengthen it across various areas.

It also examined the potential for exchanging expertise in a manner that serves workers’ interests and contributes to sustaining the positive rates of comprehensive and sustainable development in Oman. For his part, the Secretary-General of the ITUC expressed his gratitude for the well-organised preparations for the symposium.

He affirmed that Oman is one of the leading countries in regulating trade union work and protecting workers’ rights. — ONA

Forum highlights role of  
dialogue in labour reforms

FAISAL AL AJMI  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

THE ‘Towards a More Sustainable Social Dialogue’ forum concluded on Tuesday with key recommendations aimed at strengthening labour policies, enhancing economic stability and fostering inclusive social dialogue.

Organised by the General Federation of Oman Workers (GFW) in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), the event brought together government officials, business leaders and trade union representatives to discuss strategies for a more sustainable labour market.

The forum underscored the importance of structured social dialogue in balancing the interests of the government, employers and workers. Experts highlighted that clear and fair labour regulations not only improve job security and workplace conditions but also boost Oman’s global competitiveness and attractiveness for investment.

However, several challenges remain, including governance gaps, procedural hurdles and limited community participation.

While Oman has gradually institutionalised social dialogue through trade unions and the Joint Dialogue Committee, gaps in implementation persist. The lack of a dedicated administrative office, specialised personnel, and



The forum underscored the importance of structured social dialogue in balancing the interests of the government, employers and workers.

Experts highlighted that clear and fair labour regulations not only improve job security and workplace conditions but also boost Oman’s global competitiveness and attractiveness for investment

governance mechanisms continues to hinder progress.

Additionally, Oman’s new Labour Law introduces key committees for dispute resolution, but stakeholders noted that legislative and procedural barriers still limit their effectiveness.

Another key concern is the restricted involvement of the broader community in policy discussions. Without a national framework ensuring fair representation, social dialogue risks being dominated by select stakeholders rather than reflecting the interests of the wider workforce.

To address these challenges, the forum put forward several strategic recommendations.

Stakeholders called for the establishment of a dedicated office for the Joint Dialogue Committee, which would provide the necessary oversight and expertise to implement social dialogue

initiatives effectively. Expanding stakeholder representation was also recommended to ensure that labour market policies reflect the perspectives of diverse groups, including workers, employers and civil society.

Furthermore, participants emphasised the need to address legal and procedural shortcomings in order to streamline dispute resolution mechanisms and improve governance structures. A national framework should also be developed to enhance community participation in shaping labour policies, ensuring that a broad range of voices contribute to decision-making.

Additionally, the forum encouraged Oman to align its labour regulations with international best practices by ratifying key global conventions, strengthening the country’s commitment to fair and transparent employment standards.

Second ‘Bahla Fort Winter’ festival kicks off with folk performances

AMAL AL RIYAMI  
BAHLA, FEB 4

Under the auspices of Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, the second edition of the ‘Bahla Fort Winter Festival’ was inaugurated at the historic Bahla Fort. It will continue until February 14, running daily from 4.00 pm to 10.00 pm.

This year’s edition comes with a renewed vision aimed at enhancing domestic tourism and promoting Omani culture among visitors.

“The festival is one of the leading celebrations in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. It is an annual event that takes place at the Bahla Fort, serving as a tribute to the cultural and tourism heritage of the Wilayat of Bahla. The festival focuses on showcasing the historical, cultural, and touristic landmarks of Bahla Oasis and its historic fort, which is the first Unesco World Heritage



Visitors will also have the opportunity to explore exhibitions featuring traditional crafts and handmade artefacts, showcasing Bahla’s crafts.

site in Oman,” said Ali bin Ahmed al Shaqsi, General Manager of Al Marasim Tourism and Investment Company, which oversees the

management and operation of Bahla Fort. One of the highlights of the festival is an interactive pottery-making experience designed for



both adults and children, as well as a dedicated art workshop for girls.

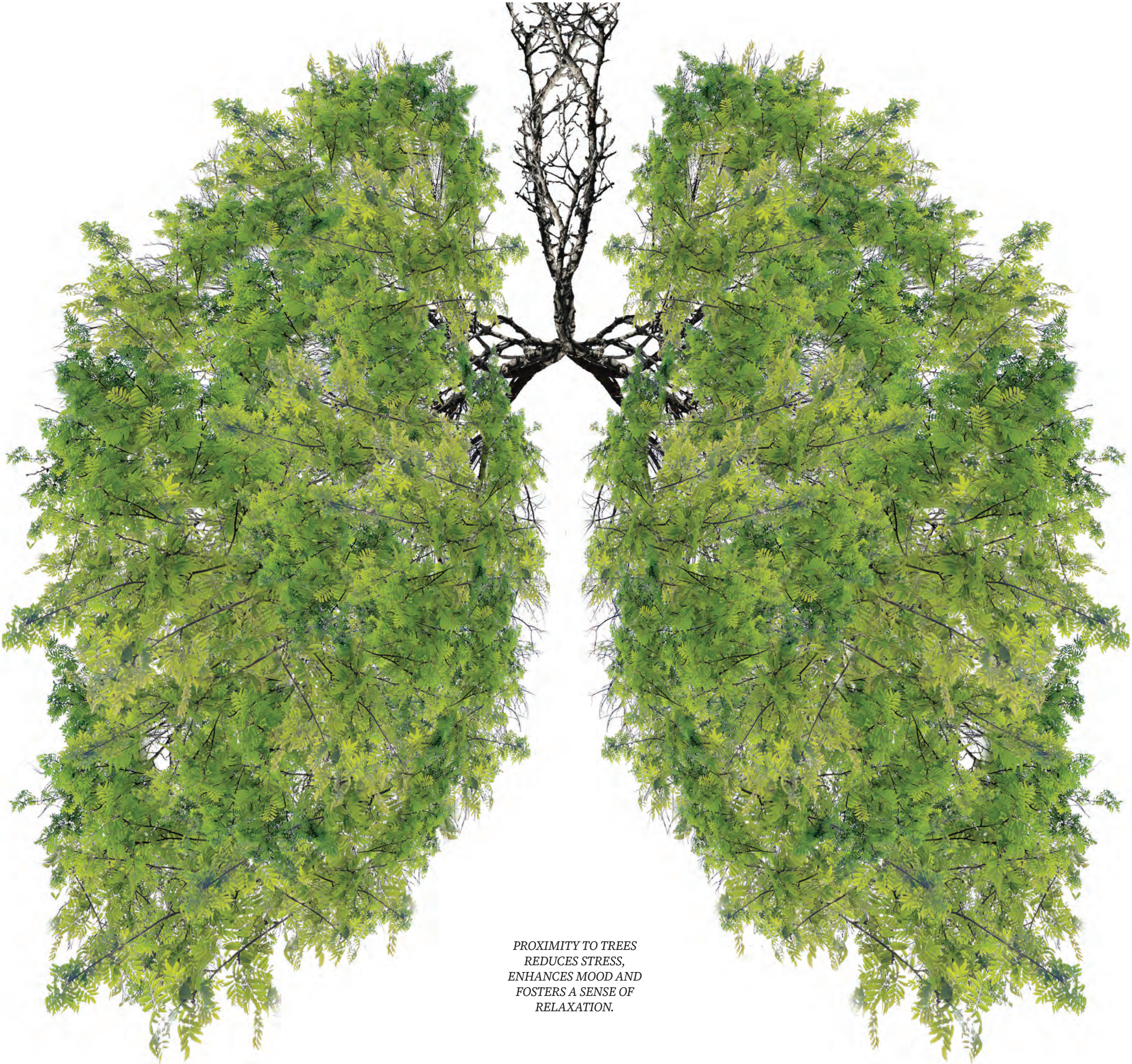
Moreover, the festival includes a vibrant marketplace offering

local products such as silverware, perfumes, traditional clothing, incense and children’s toys.

Al Shaqsi emphasised that the festival represents a collaborative community effort, providing a platform for local families and small businesses to showcase and sell their products. During the opening ceremony, a visual presentation was shown about the historic Bahla Grand Mosque and its readiness to welcome visitors. This was followed by patriotic performances of Al Hamasiyah art, presented by Mohammed al Shukaili with the participation of Fahm al Badi Al Hamasiyah band. The evening also featured a poem by the poet Ibrahim bin Ali al Shaibani, celebrating the rich heritage of Oman.

This event is part of the Bahla Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum, in collaboration with the OCCI’s branch in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

SPOTLIGHT



PROXIMITY TO TREES  
REDUCES STRESS,  
ENHANCES MOOD AND  
FOSTERS A SENSE OF  
RELAXATION.

# Afforestation breathes life into cities

Improves air quality — Enhances health — Reduces heat — Boosts biodiversity — Increases economic value

BALQEES AL ORAIMI  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

**TREES** ARE the lungs of modern cities, playing a crucial role in enhancing the environment, improving air quality and promoting overall well-being. With increasing urbanisation, afforestation in residential areas has become a necessity rather than a luxury. Trees act as natural air purifiers, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. In areas affected by heavy traffic and industrial pollution, they help reduce toxic emissions and improve air quality. Environmental specialist Ahmed al Maawali emphasises, “Trees are a practical solution to combat urban pollution and absorb harmful substances from the air.” Studies show that tree-lined neighbourhoods experience fewer

respiratory illnesses, such as asthma and allergies. Trees also serve as dust and dirt insulators, minimising the harmful effects of air pollutants. Beyond health benefits, green spaces contribute to mental well-being. Research indicates that proximity to trees reduces stress, enhances mood and fosters a sense of relaxation. Fatima al Rashedi, a resident of a green neighbourhood, shares, “Walking among trees helps me relax and forget daily pressures.” Urban areas often suffer from the ‘heat island effect,’ where concrete structures absorb and retain heat. Trees provide natural shade, cooling down surrounding areas and reducing the reliance on air conditioning. Muscat Municipality has launched afforestation initiatives to lower temperatures and cut energy consumption in residential areas. Trees support a wide range of living organisms,



*Trees are not just decorative but essential for maintaining ecological balance*

**DR KHALID AL GHAILANI**  
Environmental science expert

providing shelter and food for birds, insects and other wildlife. Dr Khalid al Ghailani, Professor of Environmental Science, highlights, “Urban trees are not just decorative but essential for maintaining ecological balance.” Green neighbourhoods are more attractive to investors and potential homeowners, increasing property values. Well-planned afforestation initiatives can transform residential areas into vibrant, livable spaces, fostering social interaction and strengthening community bonds. Afforestation in residential areas is not just an aesthetic enhancement but an environmental and economic necessity. Expanding green spaces improves air quality, reduces temperatures, supports biodiversity and enhances the overall quality of life. Municipalities must continue their afforestation efforts and encourage community participation in creating greener, healthier cities.

SHORT TAKES



Sydney Innovation Challenge

ISG STUDENT EXCELS IN SYDNEY INNOVATION CHALLENGE

**MUSCAT:** It’s a moment of pride for Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG) and the Sultanate of Oman. Hanisha Manish Chawla, of Class 12 has secured the third place in the prestigious Sydney Innovation Challenge, organised by the University of Sydney. Representing Oman as its sole participant, Hanisha competed against a global pool of innovators, showcasing remarkable ingenuity and problem-solving skills.

Hanisha’s project, “AquaRevive” addressed a pressing global issue, earned widespread praise from a distinguished panel of judges for its creativity, practicality and potential for real-world impact. The achievement was made possible with the invaluable guidance of Jayal Tharakan, the student’s mentor, who played a crucial role in refining and shaping the project.

Expressing gratitude, the student said, “Being the only representative from Oman was both an honour and a challenge. I am immensely thankful to my Principal, Papri Ghosh, who has always encouraged me to strive for the best and my mentor, Jayal Tharakan, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout this journey.”

The Sydney Innovation Challenge is renowned for encouraging young minds of Classes 11 and 12 to tackle global challenges through innovative solutions. This year, the challenge was to come up with a business plan regarding UNSDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation. Hanisha’s project mechanism — “AquaRevive” revolved around collecting polluted water and converting it into purified water sustainably. Moreover, AquaRevive can also distribute clean water to areas with water scarcity.

This outstanding accomplishment by Hanisha Manish Chawla and ISG serves as an inspiration for other students to embrace opportunities on international platforms, strengthening Oman’s presence in the global innovation front.

KNOWLEDGE OMAN JOINS TEDX TO INSPIRE CHANGE

Knowledge Oman, a leading community-knowledge sharing platform in the Sultanate of Oman, in collaboration with TEDx talk, an independently organised event of the world-renowned TED series, is all set to inspire change via a event titled “Voice of Change”.

The event is scheduled to take place on April 19, 2025 at the iconic venue of Bait Al Zubair. The event will be supported by Orbit Events Management, a prominent name for value added event management.



A formal MoU was signed between Knowledge Oman Founder, Tariq al Barwani and Orbit Leading Projects Director Nasser al Kindy

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Tariq bin Hilal al Barwani and Orbit Leading Projects Director, Nasser al Kindy, representing license holders of the TEDx Al Qurum, in the presence of Knowledge Oman President, Balqeas al Hasani and Orbit Leading Projects CEO, G Ramesh. The partnership underscores a shared vision of fostering intellectual growth, innovation and dialogue within Oman’s vibrant community.

‘Youths with Vitamin D deficiency on the rise’

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

**ON** an alarming note, doctors have said that they are receiving an increasing number of patients, predominantly young people, with Vitamin D deficiency. This is concerning in the long run, as the lack of Vitamin D, which is essential for many of the body’s functions, can lead to a variety of ailments.

According to a report released by the Ministry of Health (MoH), almost 70 to 80 per cent of the population is Vitamin D deficient. This trend is not unique to Oman, as it is a global issue. Even people who spend time outdoors are deficient in Vitamin D.

In Oman, both Omanis and expats have been approaching hospitals after experiencing bone and muscle pain and even cardiac issues, all related to Vitamin D deficiency.

In a recent medical camp where around 500 patients, including citizens and expats, underwent full-body check-ups, 95 per cent of cases were diagnosed with Vitamin D deficiency or insufficient levels.

Dr Mizun Tufail Rahman explains that one of the main factors contributing to this issue is the lack of sunlight exposure. Additionally, the clothing choices, especially among women, are preventing the absorption of UV rays from the environment.

Dr Dilip Singvi, a Specialist in Internal Medicine, points out that the climate in Oman, where the sun is intense for most of the year, discourages people from going

To increase Vitamin D levels, individuals can seek sunlight exposure, especially in the morning or evening, aim for sunlight exposure between 10am and 2pm, particularly in winter, consume Vitamin D-rich foods like fish, eggs, dairy products, mushrooms and fortified foods and consider supplements under the guidance of a doctor or dietitian



According to a report released by the Ministry of Health (MoH), almost 70 to 80 per cent of the population is Vitamin D deficient.

outdoors during the day for sun exposure.

He warns that inadequate sun exposure can lead to chronic liver and kidney diseases, malnutrition, certain cancers and hinder the metabolism of Vitamin D. Consuming a diet rich in Vitamin D3, including dairy products, cereals and eggs, is essential.

Mini Padikkal, a clinical nutritionist, noted that many cases of fatigue, hair loss, infections, weak immune systems, joint pains and unexplained fatigue are linked to Vitamin D deficiency. To address this issue, Padikkal emphasises the importance of sunlight exposure.

The Oman National Nutrition Survey also highlights the prevalence of Vitamin D deficiency in the region and stresses the importance of a healthy lifestyle to reverse this trend.

To increase Vitamin D levels, individuals can seek sunlight exposure, especially in the morning or evening, aim for sunlight exposure between 10am and 2pm, particularly in winter, consume Vitamin D-rich foods like fish, eggs, dairy products, mushrooms and fortified foods and consider supplements under the guidance of a doctor or dietitian. Also, consulting a healthcare professional is recommended to address Vitamin D deficiency effectively.

‘AI an opportunity to expand professional horizons’

BALQEES AL ORAIMI MUSCAT, FEB 4

Amidst discussions and scientific sessions, various universities in the Sultanate of Oman attended the “International Conference on Artificial Intelligence: Applications, Innovation and Ethics”, the Observer caught up with with several students who expressed their enthusiasm and aspirations to benefit from this valuable opportunity.

Yousef al Kharousi, a student in the College of Electrical Engineering at Sultan Qaboos University, affirmed that the conference is a golden opportunity for him to gain updated information on artificial intelligence from prominent experts. “I am excited about this conference as it allows me to engage with scientists specialising in artificial



Students expressed their enthusiasm and aspirations to benefit from AI.

intelligence from around the world. In my field, we require this advanced knowledge to tackle modern technological challenges in the industrial sector and future applications of this technology,” he said.

Yousef added, “After participating in the workshops, I believe that I will be able to implement this knowledge in new projects

that enhance our capabilities in utilising artificial intelligence practically. The conference covers topics such as education, industry and energy, all of which are areas where I aspire to apply these technologies.”

Sarah al Hussainiyah, a student in the College of Computer Science at Middle East University, emphasised the conference’s significance in enhancing her understanding of how artificial intelligence can be utilised in vital areas like healthcare and education.

“I have always been curious about how artificial intelligence can enhance people’s lives. This conference opens new horizons for me to comprehend how this technology can be integrated into areas such as education and medicine, which are of great societal interest.”



Recall

KIA

RECALL DATE: 05-02-2025

| Brand of Commodity | Year of Production* | #Number of Affected Commodities |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Soul (AM)          | 2010-2013           | 20                              |
| Sportage (SL)      | 2010-2013           | 1911                            |
| Cadenza (VG)       | 2009-2016           | 232                             |
| Carens (RP)        | 2012-2018           | 16                              |
| Quoris (KH)        | 2012-2017           | 39                              |

Recall consequence

On some Soul (AM) - 2010-2013, Sportage (SL) - 2010-2013, Cadenza (VG) - 2009-2016, Carens (RP) - 2012-2018, Quoris (KH) - 2012-2017 produced within specific production date range, The HECU (ABS) unit in the engine room may experience an internal electrical short circuit due to overcurrent fuse and thereby increasing the possibilities of an engine compartment fire while the vehicle is driven or while parked. Illumination of MIL or ABS lamp may happen and burning/melting smell from the engine compartment may occur. The estimated defect ratio is 1%. However, Kia is conducting this recall as preventive measure to avoid the risk.

Recall Action

Verify affected vehicles as per the VIN list, Replace HECU (ABS) unit fuse kit as per KMC recommendation. All affected vehicles will be inspected and repaired at no expense to the vehicle owner.

To check the serial Numbers of the affected commodities, please visit the website for Recalls & Warnings: <http://recall.paep.gov.om>

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WORLD

SHORT TAKES



European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos (L), flanked by Moldovan President Maia Sandu (R), addresses media, at the Moldovan Presidency headquarters in Chisinau. — AFP

250M EUROS TO BOOST MOLDOVA’S ENERGY SECURITY

**CHISINAU:** The European Union said on Tuesday that it would support Moldova with 250 million euros this year to help bolster the country’s energy security. Russia’s Gazprom halted supplies to Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria on January 1 over a debt dispute with the Moldovan government.

The aid announced on Tuesday is part of a two-year plan aimed at “decoupling Moldova from the insecurities of Russian supply of energy and fully integrating it in the EU energy market,” the European Commission said in a statement. “Russia is blackmailing Moldova with energy, just like it once tried with the EU. Our comprehensive strategy... will put an end to this,” European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen wrote on X. After a press briefing in Chisinau, the EU’s Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos wrote on X that “A stronger economy and energy security are key for Moldova’s prosperity in Europe”. Moldova’s President Maia Sandu hailed the new funding, saying the EU was “always... here to support us in difficult situations”. — AFP

S KOREA’S YOON IN COURT AGAIN FOR HEARINGS



South Korea’s impeached president Yoon Suk Yeol attends the fifth hearing of his impeachment trial, at the Constitutional Court in Seoul. — AFP

**SEOUL:** South Korea’s impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has been arrested and suspended from duties over his declaration of martial law, was in court again on Tuesday for hearings that will decide whether to officially remove him from office. The former prosecutor plunged democratic South Korea into political turmoil when he declared martial law on December 3, suspending civilian rule and sending soldiers to parliament. His attempt to impose martial law only lasted around six hours as the opposition-led parliament defied troops to vote it down, and later impeached him over the move. Yoon suggested at the hearing that even if he had ordered the arrest of MPs to prevent them from voting down his decree, it would not legally matter because it had not been carried out. “Debating whether I had given the (arrest) order or not when nothing had happened felt like chasing the shadow of the moon on the river,” he said. During Tuesday’s hearing, two former military commanders and an ex-spy agency official testified as witnesses. — AFP

TRADE WAR LOOMS

Stoltenberg named Norway finance minister



Former Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg was named Norway’s new finance minister, taking on the key role with a possible transatlantic trade war looming on the horizon as the Labour government lags in the polls. Stoltenberg stressed the importance of “doing everything we can to protect ourselves against the creation of trade barriers against Norway”. An economist by training, Stoltenberg has previously served as minister of industry in the 1990s and then as finance minister. — AFP

JAPAN PRIME MINISTER TO MEET TRUMP THIS WEEK IN US

**TOKYO:** Japan’s Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba will meet President Donald Trump on a visit to the United States this week, top government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi said on Tuesday. “If circumstances permit, he will visit the United States from February 6-8 and hold (his) first face-to-face Japan-US summit meeting with President Trump in Washington DC,” Hayashi said. “Through this visit we hope to build a strong relationship of trust with the new

US administration and take the US-Japan alliance to new heights,” he added. The Nikkei business daily reported that Ishiba wants to discuss increasing imports of US shale gas with Trump — chiming with the president’s pledge to “drill, baby, drill”. Ishiba is also expected to discuss a bid by Nippon Steel to buy US Steel blocked by previous president Joe Biden, according to public broadcaster NHK. Citing national security concerns, Biden blocked Nippon Steel’s \$14.9 billion

acquisition of US Steel last month, a highly unusual move that irked officials in Tokyo. Ishiba intends to ask Trump to visit Japan at the earliest opportunity, local media reported. Ishiba held a brief telephone call in November with then-president-elect Trump, and had reportedly unsuccessfully sought to meet with him before his inauguration in January. Last week, Ishiba stressed the importance of close ties with the United States for regional stability. — AFP

UNRWA: Jenin refugee camp faces catastrophe

**THE** JENIN refugee camp in the occupied West Bank is heading in a “catastrophic direction”, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees said on Tuesday, adding that residents had “endured the impossible”. The Israeli military launched a major offensive in the West Bank on January 21 aimed at rooting out Palestinian armed groups from the Jenin area. On Sunday, the army said that it had killed at least 50 people since it launched the operation, while the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah said Israeli forces have killed 70 people in the territory since the start of the year. The operation has also seen troops levelling buildings in a refugee camp adjacent to Jenin.

“The camp is going into a catastrophic direction,” UNRWA spokeswoman Juliette Touma told reporters in Geneva. “Large parts of the camp were completely destroyed in a series of detonations by the Israeli forces. It is estimated that 100 houses were destroyed or heavily damaged,” she said, speaking from Amman. “The residents of this particular camp have endured the impossible.” She added: “This detonation that happened on Sunday was when children were supposed to go back to school. “When it comes to UNRWA, 13 schools in the camp and the surrounding areas continue to be closed. That affected 5,000 kids in that area.” Touma said UNRWA’s services inside Jenin camp have been interrupted for several months and stopped completely in early December.

UNRWA said it received no prior warning of the detonations, as contact between staff and Israeli

“The camp is going into a catastrophic direction,” UNRWA spokeswoman Juliette Touma told reporters in Geneva. “Large parts of the camp were completely destroyed in a series of detonations by the Israeli forces. It is estimated that 100 houses were destroyed or heavily damaged.”

PALESTINIAN HEALTH MINISTRY



Smoke billows from the site of several explosions during an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin. — AFP

authorities is no longer permitted. After Israel accused UNRWA of providing cover for Hamas militants, legislation severing ties with the agency came into force on Thursday — a move likely to hamper the agency’s vital services after 15 months of war in Gaza. The agency is banned from operating on Israeli soil, and contact between it and Israeli officials is also forbidden.

The office of Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas denounced an Israeli operation in the occupied West Bank as “ethnic cleansing” on Monday, with the health ministry saying Israeli forces killed 70 people in the territory this year. In a statement, spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh said the Palestinian presidency “condemned the occupation authorities’ expansion of their comprehensive war on our Palestinian people in the West Bank to implement their plans aimed at displacing citizens and ethnic cleansing”.

Meanwhile, a gunman attacked

an Israeli military checkpoint in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, fatally wounding two soldiers before troops shot him dead, the military said.

The shooting took place in the morning at a military post in Tayasir in the northern part of the West Bank, the military said in a statement. Two other soldiers were “severely injured” in the attack, while six were slightly wounded.

Palestinian group Islamic Jihad praised on Tuesday’s attack on the checkpoint, saying “the resistance will continue until the occupation is defeated”.

Israeli troops or settlers have killed at least 884 Palestinians in the West Bank, many of them militants, since the start of the war, according to the Palestinian health ministry. At least 32 Israelis have been killed in Palestinian attacks or during Israeli military operations in the territory over the same period, according to Israeli official figures. — AFP



UN RIGHTS COUNCIL TO MEET ON DRC

**GENEVA:** The UN Human Rights Council announced on Tuesday it would hold an urgent session on the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, which is gripped by violence. Friday’s special session will focus on “the human rights situation in eastern DR Congo”, council spokesman Pascal Sim told reporters in Geneva. He said the DRC requested the session on Monday. The council is the United Nations’ top rights body and was not due to meet until late February. Last week, the armed group M23 and Rwandan troops seized Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu — a mineral-rich region in the DR Congo’s east that has been blighted by war for over three decades. Fighting has stopped in the city of more than a million but clashes have spread to the neighbouring province of South Kivu, raising fears of an M23 advance to its capital Bukavu. — AFP

INDEPENDENCE ANNIVERSARY

Lanka president vows to end corrupt image



Sri Lanka’s leftist president marked the anniversary of independence from Britain on Tuesday with a pledge to change the impoverished island nation’s image as a “corrupt” country. “We are committed to transforming Sri Lanka’s global image from a country known for corrupt governance,” he said in a message to the nation. — AFP

TARIFF DELAY

Mexico deploys troops on US border



Mexico began on Tuesday the 10,000-strong border troop deployment it had promised US President Donald Trump in exchange for delaying a 25-percent tariff on exported goods, President Claudia Sheinbaum said. “The deployment has already started,” she told reporters a day after announcing a last-minute deal with Trump to tighten measures against illegal migration. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen leaves the helicopter after her visit to the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin. — Reuters file photo

DANISH PM VISITS UK AMID GREENLAND TENSIONS

COPENHAGEN: Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen was due on Tuesday to meet UK counterpart Keir Starmer, as she seeks European support to counter US President Donald Trump’s remarks about taking over Greenland. The meeting in London will focus on “security in Europe”, according to Frederiksen’s office. While the statement did not specifically mention Greenland or the United States, Frederiksen was quoted saying: “We need a stronger Europe that contributes more to Nato and stands more on its own.” “At the same time, we must do our part to maintain the transatlantic partnership that has been the foundation for peace and prosperity since World War II,” Frederiksen added.

On Monday, Frederiksen insisted Denmark was “one of the United States’ most important and best allies”. Last week, she visited Paris and Berlin to seek backing from the European Union’s traditional powerhouses against Trump’s threats. A day after Trump was sworn in as president, Greenland Prime Minister Mute Egede insisted that Greenlanders “don’t want to be American”. — AFP



5 WOUNDED IN SCHOOL SHOOTING

A police officer walks towards a police vehicle near the Risbergska School in Orebro, Sweden. Five people were shot and wounded at a school in the central Swedish city of Orebro on Tuesday, police said, urging the public to stay away from the area as a large operation was underway. Images from the scene showed a large police presence with multiple ambulances and emergency vehicles outside the school. “The extent of the injuries is unclear. The operation is ongoing,” police said. — AFP

AMERICAN VP VANCE TO ATTEND PARIS AI SUMMIT

PARIS: US Vice-President JD Vance will join top tech players in Paris next week at an artificial intelligence summit billed by France as a “wake-up call” for Europe in the global race for AI. Vance, whose attendance was confirmed on Tuesday by a French diplomatic source, China’s Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the highest-profile of representatives from 80 countries to mingle with players from across the sector on February 10 and 11.

The event will take place in the French capital’s sumptuous Grand Palais, built for the 1900 Universal Exhibition. In the run-up, French President Emmanuel Macron will visit research centres applying AI to science and health, before hosting scientists and Nobel Prize winners at his Elysee Palace residence on Wednesday. A wider science conference will be held at the Polytechnique engineering school on Thursday and Friday.

“The summit comes at exactly the right time for this wake-up

call for France and Europe, and to show we are in position” to take advantage of the technology, an official in Macron’s office told reporters. In recent weeks, Washington’s announcement of \$500 billion in investment to build up AI infrastructure and the release of a frugal but powerful generative AI model by Chinese firm DeepSeek have focussed minds in Europe.

The two superpowers are in the midst of a trade war. France must “not let this revolution pass it by”, Macron’s office said. — AFP

Attacks on Ukraine grid pose nuclear risk: IAEA

INTERNATIONAL

Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief

Rafael Grossi arrived in Kyiv on Tuesday and inspected an electricity distribution substation, warning that attacks on Ukraine’s power grid could pose a risk of nuclear accident by disrupting supply. “I’m at Kyivska electrical substation - an important part of Ukraine’s power grid essential for nuclear safety,” Grossi wrote on X. “A nuclear accident can result from a direct attack on a plant, but also from power supply disruption.” Grossi posted pictures of him visiting the substation alongside Energy Minister German Galushchenko, and being showed what appeared to be defences against Russian strikes.

Moscow has regularly bombarded Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, including substations, throughout its three-year attack, although it has avoided direct strikes on Ukraine’s nuclear plants. Grossi said he would visit Russia later this week to discuss the situation in Ukraine and the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Russia captured the plant, Europe’s biggest nuclear power station, soon after its forces went into Ukraine in February 2022. “It’s essential that I, in the discharge of my obligations keep channels of communication constantly,” Grossi told a news briefing.

Last week, the IAEA said in a statement that Grossi would visit Kyiv for high-level meetings to ensure nuclear safety in the war that Russia started in February 2022. In September, Ukraine and the IAEA agreed that the agency’s experts would monitor the situation at key Ukrainian substations in addition to monitoring nuclear plants. More than half of the electricity consumed in Ukraine is generated by three nuclear power plants. Russian missile and drone attacks on substations threaten the plants’ stable operation, according to Ukraine’s nuclear inspector’s office.

The Kyivska substation allows excess capacity from Ukraine’s west to be transferred to central regions thanks to the



International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi (R) and Ukrainian Energy Minister German Galushchenko (L) visit energy infrastructure facility, Ukraine.

Rivne-Kyiv transmission line which extends for hundreds of km (miles), helping with power supply to Kyiv and the surrounding region. “An increasingly fragile grid poses a growing risk to all NPPs”, Grossi said on X, referring to nuclear power plants.

Meanwhile, a Russian strike killed five civilians and injured more than 30 in the town of Izium in Ukraine’s northeastern Kharkiv region, partially destroying the city council building, officials said on Tuesday. Russian forces hit the town’s central district using a ballistic missile, governor Oleh Syniehubov said on Telegram, citing preliminary information. A 15-year-old girl was among the injured and three people were undergoing surgery after the strike, he added. “This brutality cannot be tolerated. Maximum pressure must be applied to Russia - through military force, sanctions, and diplomacy - to stop the terror and protect lives,” President Volodymyr Zelensky said on X. Rescuers continued to work at the site, he added.

Syniehubov said there were no military facilities in the area. The missile directly hit the administrative building and damaged another one, as well as residential blocks, he added. Izium was occupied by Russian forces at the start of Moscow’s full-scale attack of Ukraine, now approaching its three-year anniversary, and sustained widespread destruction. After the town was liberated, Ukrainian officials said they found mass graves and accused Russia of war crimes, which Moscow denies.

Ukraine has brought home 12 children who were forcefully taken by Russia, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s chief of staff said. “As part of the initiative of the President of Ukraine Bring Kids Back UA, it was possible to return home 12 children who were under the pressure of the Russian occupation,” Andriy Yermak wrote on his Telegram messaging app. The Bring Kids Back UA programme under Zelensky says it is an initiative to return home all children forcefully deported from Ukraine. — Reuters

Thousands leave as fresh tremors shake Greece’s Santorini

SANTORINI: Thousands of people were leaving the Greek island of Santorini by sea and air for a third day on Tuesday, as an unprecedented series of earthquakes shook the top travel destination. Some 6,000 people have already left the island, known for its spectacular cliffside views and a dormant volcano, which has been hit by hundreds of tremors since last week, officials said. A quake with a magnitude of 4.9 hit early on Tuesday morning amid other smaller tremors. No injuries or damage were reported on Santorini and the neighbouring islands of Anafi, Ios and Amorgos, which have also been affected by the seismic activity. Experts say the region has not experienced seismic activity on this scale in recent history and do not know how long it will last.

“This is the first time this is happening, we have not seen it before,” Athanasios Ganas,

research director at the national observatory’s institute of geodynamics, told state TV ERT. He noted that the area had been hit with over 40 earthquakes with a magnitude of over 4.0 in the past 72 hours. Santorini lies atop a volcano which last erupted in 1950 -- but an experts’ committee on Monday said the current phenomenon was “not linked to volcanic activity.”

According to the Greek coastguard, over 4,600 people have left the island by ferry since Sunday alone. The country’s leading air carrier Aegean Airlines said it had flown nearly 1,300 people out of Santorini on Monday, with another eight flights able to carry 1,400 passengers scheduled for Tuesday. Ferry services to Santorini have also been increased.

Schools on all four islands have been shut as a precaution until Friday, prompting many locals with children to leave until the situation



A member of an emergency response crew enters a tent, during increased seismic activity on the island of Santorini, Greece. — Reuters

stabilises. Some tourists currently on the island say they are not overly concerned. “I’m not so worried

about the earthquake or volcano because I came from Tokyo,” said Water Saito, a 43-year-old economist

who spent a day on the island. He noted that the tremor levels in Santorini are negligible compared to the earthquakes experienced in Japan. Roger Beauchamp from Arizona called the tremors “tiny.” “We’ve been feeling them all day, little light ones. So we’re not afraid of them,” he said. The head of Greece’s earthquake planning and protection authority, Efthymios Lekkas, has said that an earthquake of 6.0 magnitude was unlikely. “The residents of Santorini should feel safe. There must not be panic,” he told Mega TV on Tuesday.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Monday also appealed for calm, whilst admitting that the phenomenon is “very intense”. Santorini attracted about 3.4 million visitors in 2023. European travel agents said foreign visitors to Santorini at this time of year were minimal, with bookings expected in the spring. — AFP

OPINION

Trump’s double standards on democracy



DR RASHID AL BALUSHI

The writer is Associate Professor of Linguistics, Sultan Qaboos University

**JANUARY** reminds us of the attack on the US Capitol building in the same month in 2021, which was both unprecedented and unexpected, since the US is “the home of democracy”, where people decide on who to run the state, through elections. And once the people have spoken, all contestants have to accept the results of those elections. As in sports, you have to accept the rules and abide by them, regardless of the results. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the 2020 elections, when President Donald Trump refused to accept the results and concede. What was more disastrous is that he and his team members kept talking about “widespread fraud” and “stolen elections”, which incited many supporters to riots. It is legitimate to doubt whether Trump and his supporters would have acted differently if he had lost the 2024 elections. But ‘thank God (for the Americans)’, he did not! In other words, accepting the results of the elections only when they are in our favor is a sign of double standards, a practice that is counter to justice, justice being another principle of the democratic doctrine. When Trump won in 2016 and also in 2024, he and his followers accepted the

results, but when someone else won, he and his followers refused to accept the results. If an athlete rejected the results after an opponent won the game, the athlete would have been suspended, but the “American democracy” would still permit an angry loser to participate in future contests; how lawful! My point is that Trump and his team — and this is what incited his followers — do not really believe in democracy, simply because they do not support it unless it is in their favor. When it is in other people’s favor, American or other, they withdraw their support of it, and the examples of US opposing democracy or supporting pro-US dictatorships are so many that they cannot be mentioned in one article. We all know that Trump himself should know better; he was miraculously saved from two assassination attempts last year, by someone who, just like Trump, does not approve of some democratic practice, which is, in this case, people’s right to run for public offices. Trump has recently revealed dictator like intentions to violate the sovereignty of some countries. Do these intentions and statements belong to democracy in any way. Absolutely not. In Trump’s version of democracy, the masses are being driven, either to attack the

For democracy to be good to the Americans, as well as to others, people must first be good to democracy, be fair in applying it, regardless of time, place, and involved people.

Capitol, or to believe that they can aspire to possess other people’s properties. And to further breach justice and democratic norms, one of the first things Trump did after assuming office in 2025 is pardoning the rioters who attacked the Capitol four years ago; doesn’t this indicate that they did it for him, and thus he is directly responsible for January 6? This pardon can have even more serious implications; basically, he is ready to pardon any similar behavior against democracy and justice, as long as he is the beneficiary. The thing about the attack on the Capitol is that it should have revealed to the US and the world political institutions that Trump’s approach to democracy is the famous saying: “my way or the high way”, which is not much different from dictator practices. These incidents are a sign that Americans and others should expect more irrational behavior if they continue to follow a double-standard policy with regard to the application of democracy. Noam Chomsky is reported to have said: “If we don’t believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don’t believe in it at all”. Therefore, for democracy to be good to the Americans, as well as to others, people must first be good to democracy, be fair in applying it, regardless of time, place, and involved people.

SUDAN’S RSF FALTERS AMID BLUNDERS, SUPPLY SHORTFALLS

Sudan’s paramilitary Rapid Support Forces are losing ground to the army due to strategic blunders, internal rifts and dwindling supplies, analysts say. The regular army has made major gains, seeming to reverse the tide of a nearly two-year war that has killed tens of thousands of people and uprooted more than 12 million. Last month, the army surged through central Sudan, reclaiming the Al-Jazira state capital of Wad Madani before setting its sights on Khartoum. Within two weeks, it shattered RSF sieges on key Khartoum military bases, including the General Command headquarters, and overran the Al-Jaili oil refinery, the country’s biggest, just north of the capital. Cameron Hudson, a senior fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies’ Africa programme, said while “the RSF outperformed at the start of the war because it was more prepared”, its weaknesses were now showing. After nearly two years of fighting, the RSF’s supplies have dwindled and its recruitment efforts have faltered. Many of its members lack formal military training, making them increasingly vulnerable in prolonged combat, Hudson said. According to a former general in the Sudanese military, the army has broadened its fighter base, mobilising volunteers, allied militias and other branches of the security apparatus. One “critical” addition to the army’s operations has been reinstating the Special Operations Forces, part of state intelligence, he said. The special forces, who are trained in urban warfare according to the former general, have helped reverse what Rift Valley Institute fellow Eric Reeves called the army’s “cowardly willingness to engage only in ‘stand-off tactics’, namely artillery and aircraft strikes”, particularly in the capital. The RSF meanwhile has overstretched its resources and exposed vulnerabilities in its military strategy, analysts say. More than 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) separate RSF strongholds in Darfur — the vast western region nearly entirely under their control — from Khartoum, the fiercely contested metropolis. Darfur’s strong tribal networks have supplied troops to the RSF, while crucial support from abroad has funnelled through the region’s borders with Chad and Libya, experts and the UN have said. But attempting to expand their control into central and eastern Sudan, the paramilitaries have “stretched themselves too thin”, said Reeves, a veteran Darfur expert. — AFP

Role of humanity in AI age

**TWO** weeks ago, I interviewed Marc Andreessen, the venture capitalist and leading figure of the nascent tech right, for the “Matter of Opinion” podcast; this week I interviewed Steve Bannon, the vintage MAGA populist. There is a surface unity in President Donald Trump’s coalition on the issues of this executive-order-dominated moment, from antiwokeness to deportations to reshaping the administrative state, but profound philosophical tensions underneath. And the tech-populist tension is potentially one of the deepest, with implications that extend far beyond one presidential administration. To Andreessen, joining with Trumpism and the right is an opportunity for Silicon Valley to slip free of both the ideological shackles imposed by woke progressivism and, more important, the regulatory shackles that the Biden administration wanted to impose on rapidly advancing frontier technologies, artificial intelligence above all. To Bannon, the idea of Silicon Valley unbound is, first, a variation on the kind of neoliberal globalism that Trump campaigned against in 2016, and second, a potentially dystopian path to a post-human future, where the elite aspires to a cyborg existence and machine intelligence makes ordinary human beings increasingly obsolete. I think you can tell which vision feels more secure about its influence in the Trump White House right now by the fact that Andreessen conspicuously declined my invitation to pick fights with other right-wing factions, whereas Bannon entered our interview spoiling for a battle with the tech “oligarchs” and their “technofeudalism.” For now, the populists are having their way on various issues, but not on anything related to reigning in Silicon Valley. The Trump inauguration may have paraded the lords of tech like defeated generals in a Roman triumph, but Trump himself seems



ROSS DOUTHAT

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That’s what I feel like we’re groping for as a species: a way through this perilous social-technological moment, in which the digital age is accepted in some form but also tamed, mastered, humanised; in which the dynamist impulse is honored, not rejected, but also somehow channeled toward better ends than what some of the Silicon Valley post-humanists envision; in which the old ways of being human are remade in forms that are more resilient against both virtual blandishments and competition from machines.

eager to work with all of them, and to push more and more chips (so to speak) into the AI race especially, whatever post-human perils it might hold. How this dynamic changes will depend on many factors, but above all on the question of just how far and fast AI can go. And without definitely answering that question, it’s really important for lay readers to understand that many of the people intimately involved with AI expect it to go very fast and very far indeed, toward a godlike superintelligence and some sort of marriage of human and machine. Bannon’s dystopian warnings may sound paranoid, but they point to possibilities that are actually close to what a lot of very smart people in Silicon Valley confidently expect. Right now, two premises guide my sense of the human situation. First: The virtual age and its advances are making a lot of normal human ways of life and cultural forms seem obsolete, and this sense of obsolescence is only going to increase with the spread of AI, regardless of whether it achieves some sort of machine-god breakthrough. That obsolescence is not, emphasis not, manifesting itself first and foremost in a crude economic fashion, where robots take everybody’s jobs. That stage may come, but for now the dangers are more sociological and spiritual: People are still working (albeit perhaps with less enthusiasm), but increasingly they aren’t dating and marrying and having children, making real-life friends and forming communities, and experiencing and transmitting culture in the ways that were normal even 20 or 50 years ago. The fertility crash around the world has many causes, but at a deep level I suspect it reflects a sense that normal ways of human life, whether in Chile or South Korea or Seattle, are now somehow unimportant or foredoomed. But second: The virtual and AI age

is also connected to the major forms of dynamism in human affairs — the aspirations to go to Mars or build a new supersonic jet or figure out a cure for cancer — and attempts to create sealed-off zones that protect older ways of life from the threat of obsolescence just don’t seem to work. Whether the sealing off is socialist or populist, secular-humanist or Catholic, it still yields stagnation and decline, empty cradles and emptying provinces, at best a cozy form of anomie and at worst outright despair. Separation can work if you really seal things off: The Amish, at least, aren’t going to become obsolete. But Europe as a social-democratic fortress of traditional architecture, good food and short work weeks probably isn’t going to make it. Hungary and Poland as redoubts of nationalist Christianity probably aren’t going to make it. My own New England as a hygge home for aging liberal humanists who don’t much care for tech is going to diminish and be overshadowed by the more Promethean America of the Sun Belt. So what does this mean for the human race? Let me steal, not for the first time, an idea from Frank Herbert’s “Dune” saga, in which his morally complicated messiah figures discern with psychic powers what he calls a “Golden Path” for humanity — a perilous road between extinction and stagnation, a narrow way into a better future. That’s what I feel like we’re groping for as a species: a way through this perilous social-technological moment, in which the digital age is accepted in some form but also tamed, mastered, humanised; in which the dynamist impulse is honored, not rejected, but also somehow channeled toward better ends than what some of the Silicon Valley post-humanists envision; in which the old ways of being human are remade in forms that are more resilient against both virtual blandishments and competition from machines. More, as they say, to come. — NYT

# Placing youth at the centre of development



SAMUEL KUTTY

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

THE job market in the Sultanate of Oman has evolved in recent years thanks to the ambitious role the country’s education has been playing under Oman Vision 2040 objectives. Demographic analysis suggests that youth under the age of 29 years represent almost 60 per cent of the Omani population. By 2030, the country will see about 40,000 young people below the age of 24 entering the job market as first-time job-seekers. What is more significant is that 94 per cent of Omani girls receive education, helping boost women’s employment. Women now comprise 32 per cent of the total Omani workforce. Oman’s leadership under His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik realises that the country’s young human capital is its best economic asset. As a result, Oman Vision 2040 has kept youngsters at the centre of every development goal while emphasising the need for their education. “Youth are the wealth of a nation, its inexhaustible resource and the arms that build it. They are its present and future. We will always listen to them, and sense their needs, interests and aspirations, which will definitely be accorded the attention that they deserve,” His Majesty said in his speech on February 23, 2020. The accomplishment of his vision comes as the National Innovation Strategy to develop a knowledge-based society and talented national cadres, which will focus

on converting knowledge into economic revenue. The government has already started several programmes, including a training system for professional development, diversification of its sources and linking them to the job market, the establishment of scientific research centres, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the curricula and supporting innovative start-ups. The vocational and technical education allows students to enrol after completing the tenth year of school. The system focuses on providing students with the knowledge and skills needed for employment or entry into the higher education system, where they can get more training. What is to be remembered is that the success of all initiatives depends on how effectively education helps identify and promote the skills of the young Omani students. Reports suggest that a strong workforce could mean a higher unemployment rate in the future. A recent report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast that around 550,000 Omanis will enter the workforce within the next eight years, creating a need for increased employment opportunities, particularly in the private sector. Oman’s reliance on the public sector as a primary employer is unsustainable, the report states, especially given fiscal constraints and efforts

The success of all initiatives depends on how effectively education helps to identify and promote the skills of young Omani students. A strong workforce could mean a higher unemployment rate in the future

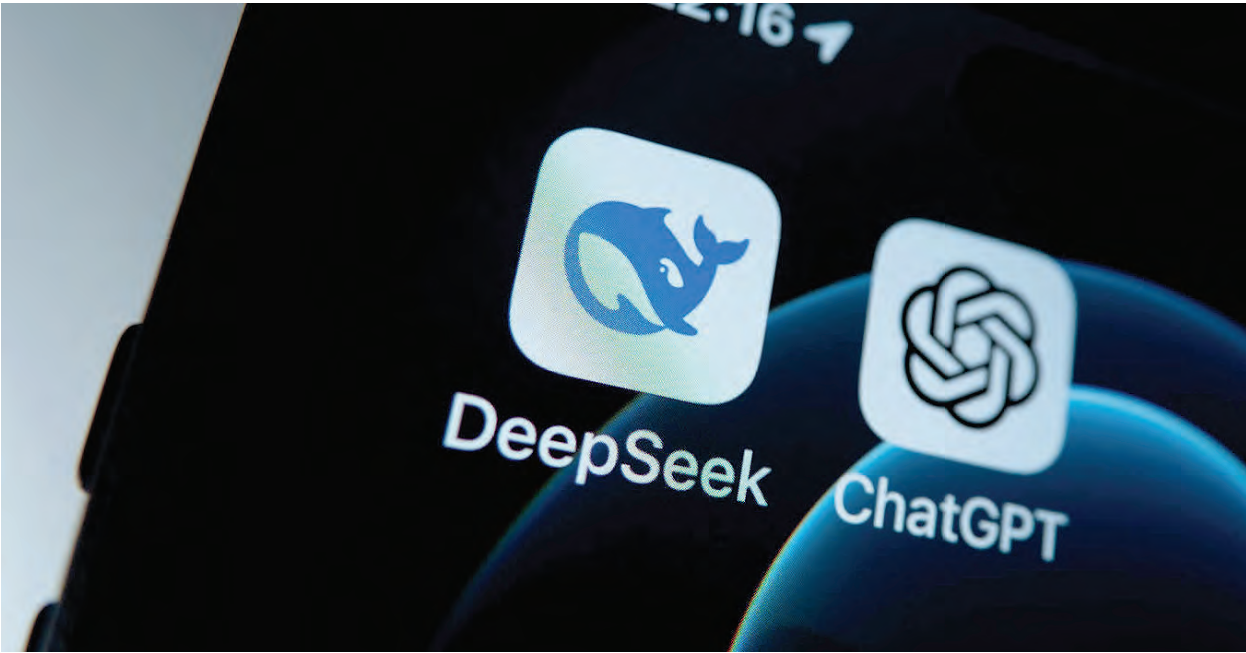
to reduce the country’s dependence on hydrocarbon revenues. While the private sector has expanded, it continues to rely heavily on low-cost expatriate labour, which accounts for 86 per cent of private-sector jobs. “While 56 per cent of the Omani workforce finds employment within the private sector, public sector jobs remain a favourable destination for Omanis given the continued job security, higher remuneration, and more relaxed work arrangements,” the report points out. However, the report stated that employment among Omanis in the private sector is more diversified, with significant participation in the construction, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. But looking ahead, the report said Oman’s economic diversification under Oman Vision 2040 will create high-skilled job opportunities for Omanis. Thus, Oman is doing all the right things to ensure that it creates the most conducive environment for prosperity and development. The government is keen to learn from the experience of other nations in encouraging a strong start-up sector. The leadership believes that a vibrant start-up community is central to the country’s ambitious plans for growth and sustainable development goals. Subsequently, several start-ups have arrived in the Omani industrial scene in the recent past.

## FRANCE PITCHES AI SUMMIT AS ‘WAKE-UP CALL’ FOR EUROPE

Daxia RojasFrance will host top tech players next week at an artificial intelligence summit meant as a “wake-up call” for Europe as it struggles with AI challenges from the United States and China. Players from across the sector and representatives from 80 nations will gather in the French capital on February 10 and 11 in the sumptuous Grand Palais, built for the 1900 Universal Exhibition. In the run-up, President Emmanuel Macron will, on February 4, visit research centres applying AI to science and health before hosting scientists and Nobel Prize winners at his Elysee Palace residence on Wednesday. A wider science conference will be held at the Polytechnique engineering school on Thursday and Friday. “The summit comes at exactly the right time for this wake-up call for France and Europe, and to show we are in position to take advantage of the technology,” an official in Macron’s office told reporters. In recent weeks, Washington’s announcement of \$500 billion in investment to build up AI infrastructure and the release of a frugal but powerful generative AI model by Chinese firm DeepSeek have focused minds in Europe. France must “not let this revolution pass it by”, Macron’s office said. Attendees at the summit will include Sam Altman, head of OpenAI—the firm that brought generative models to public consciousness in 2022 with the launch of ChatGPT. Google boss Sundar Pichai and Nobel Prize winner Demis Hassabis, who leads the company’s DeepMind AI research unit, will also attend, alongside Arthur Mensch, founder of French AI developer Mistral. The Elysee has said there are “talks” on hosting DeepSeek founder Liang Wenfeng and has yet to clarify whether X owner Elon Musk—who has his own generative initiative, xAI—has accepted an invitation. Nor is it clear who will attend from the United States and China, with the French presidency saying only “very high-level” representatives will come. Confirmed guests from Europe include European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The tone of the AI summit will be “neither catastrophising nor naïve,” Macron’s AI envoy Anne Bouverot said. Hosting the conference is also an opportunity for Paris to showcase its own AI ecosystem, which includes around 750 companies. Macron’s office has said the summit will see the announcement of “massive” investments along the lines of his annual “Choose France” business conference, at which €15 billion (\$15.4 billion) of inward investment was pledged in 2024. Beyond the economic opportunities, AI’s impact on culture, including artistic creativity and news production, will be discussed in a side event over the weekend. Debates open to the public, such as that one, are aimed at showcasing “positive use cases for AI” to “stoke confidence and speed up adoption” of the technology, said France’s Digital Minister Clara Chappaz. — AFP

# A Sputnik moment for AI?

AFTER the release of DeepSeek-R1 on January 20 triggered a massive drop in chipmaker Nvidia’s share price and sharp declines in various other tech companies’ valuations, some declared this a “Sputnik moment” in the Sino-American race for supremacy in artificial intelligence. While America’s AI industry arguably needed shaking up, the episode raises some difficult questions. The US tech industry’s investments in AI have been massive, with Goldman Sachs estimating that “mega tech firms, corporations, and utilities are set to spend around \$1 trillion on capital expenditures in the coming years to support AI.” Yet for a long time, many observers, including me, have questioned the direction of AI investment and development in the United States. With all the leading companies following essentially the same playbook (though Meta has differentiated itself slightly with a partly open-source model), the industry seems to have put all its eggs in the same basket. Without exception, US tech companies are obsessed with scale. Citing yet-to-be-proven “scaling laws,” they assume that feeding ever more data and computing power into their models is the key to unlocking ever-greater capabilities. Some even assert that “scale is all you need.” Before January 20, US companies wereunwillingtoconsideralternatives to foundation models pretrained on massive data sets to predict the next word in a sequence. Given their priorities, they focused almost exclusively on diffusion models and chatbots aimed at performing human (or human-like) tasks. And though DeepSeek’s approach is broadly the same, it appears to have relied more heavily on reinforcement learning, mixture-of-experts methods (using manysmaller, moreefficientmodels), distillation, and refined chain-of-thought reasoning. This strategy reportedly allowed it to produce a competitive model at a fraction of the cost. Although there is some dispute about whether DeepSeek has told us the whole story, this episode has exposed“groupthink”withintheUSAI



DeepSeek is building on years of advances in the US (and some in Europe).



DARON ACEMOGLU

The writer is a 2024 Nobel laureate in economics and Institute Professor of Economics at MIT, is a co-author of Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty

industry. Its blindness to alternative, cheaper, more promising approaches, combined with hype, is precisely what Simon Johnson and I predicted in Power and Progress, which we wrote just before the generative-AI era began. The question now is whether the US industry has other, even more dangerous blind spots. For example, are the leading US tech companies missing an opportunity to take their models in a more “pro-human direction”? I suspect that the answer is yes, but only time will tell. Then there is the question of whether China is leapfrogging the US. If so, does this mean that authoritarian, top-down structures (what James A Robinson and I have called “extractive institutions”) can match or even outperform bottom-up arrangements in driving innovation? My bias is to think that top-down control hampers innovation, as Robinson and I argued in Why Nations Fail. While DeepSeek’s success appears to challenge this claim, it is far from conclusive proof that innovation under extractive institutions can be as powerful or as durable as under inclusive institutions. After all, DeepSeek is building on years of advances in the US (and some in Europe). All its basic methods were pioneered in the US. Mixture-of-experts models and reinforcement learning were developed in academic research institutions decades ago; and it was

US Big Tech firms that introduced transformer models, chain-of-thought reasoning, and distillation. What DeepSeek has done is demonstrate success in engineering: combining the same methods more effectively than US companies did. It remains to be seen whether Chinese firms and research institutions can take the next step of coming up with game-changing techniques, products, and approaches of their own. Moreover, DeepSeek seems to be unlike most other Chinese AI firms, which generally produce technologies for the government or with government funding. If the company (which was spun out of a hedge fund) was operating under the radar, will its creativity and dynamism continue now that it is under the spotlight? Whatever happens, one company’s achievement cannot be taken as conclusive evidence that China can beat more open societies at innovation. Another question concerns geopolitics. Does the DeepSeek saga mean that US export controls and other measures to hold back Chinese AI research failed? The answer here is also unclear. While DeepSeek trained its latest models (V3 and R1) on older, less powerful chips, it may still need the most powerful chips to achieve further advances and to scale up. ©Project Syndicate, 2025

# SPORTS

MERC ROUND 2



Zakaria al Amri during a race.



Abdullah al Rawahi in action.

## OMAN RALLY DRIVERS READY FOR QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY

**MUSCAT:** The second round of the Middle East Rally Championship will begin this weekend in Qatar, with the participation of Omani drivers Abdullah al Rawahi, Zakaria al Amri and Abdullah al Zubair. The trio seek to achieve positive results after the conclusion of the first-round competitions that took place in the Wilayat of Suhar, in which Qatari champion Nasser al Attiyah won the title.

After the first round of the championship, Abdullah al Rawahi occupies eighth place in the overall championship standings, while Abdullah al Zubair leads the Merc 2 group with 30 points, followed in second place by Zakaria al Amri with 24 points.

Omani star Abdullah al Rawahi hopes to return to the podium this time in Qatar after he was forced to withdraw from the first day of the Oman International Rally in the Wilayat of Suhar. He was able to enter the rally on the second day via the Super Rally and achieved the fastest time in four of the six stages the next day.

Al Rawahi mentioned that he was hoping to be crowned in his country's rally, but circumstances forced him to withdraw on the first day of the competition, and the result he achieved was not satisfactory for him or his team.

He said, "for the Qatar Rally, it is more difficult for us than for the home drivers. They are more familiar with the type of stages, for example, Nasser al Attiyah and other locals. They enter and exit stages in their own ways, but we have to take careful notes of the stages. We hope that the organising committee will be more careful about this point in the stages. Last year, we got third place in Qatar, and we aim for a better position this time."

Zakaria al Amri also faced problems with the car from the first day, especially in the turbo system, which prevented him from competing for the overall top positions in the rally.

He said, "we have complete knowledge of the Qatar Rally and its stages. There are some differences in the stages and some difficulty in navigation, but our goal is to win the category so that we can go to the third round in Saudi Arabia while remaining at the top of our category. I have a good and well-known navigator, Mohammed al Mazroui, and we have previously competed in many races together. We wish success to everyone. We thank all those who supported us in the championship."

## Al Bashayer race to offer top prizes in 79 rounds



The annual festival attracts a large number of camel owners and trainers across the GCC countries.

**WALEED AL JAHWARI**  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

**THE** EIGHTH EDITION of the Al Bashayer festival for Purebred Arabian Camel Racing 2025 will continue for six days with Oman and GCC participants competing in 79 rounds for valuable prizes including 20 cars, three daggers, three guns, seven cups and the golden and silver swords.

The prestigious camel festival will be held at Al Bashayer Square in the Wilayat of Adam from February 10 to 15.

The race is considered one of the most important sporting events held annually in the Sultanate of Oman, attracting a large number of camel owners and trainers across the GCC countries. The annual event is supported by His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

HH Sayyid Asaad pointed out that the festival seeks to enhance the status of equestrian sports in the Sultanate of Oman in line with Royal directives to protect Omani heritage and to establish an integrated sports environment that encourages emerging generations to adhere to original customs and traditions.

HH Sayyid Asaad said: "The annual Al Bashayer Festival for Arabian Camel Racing is considered one of the most prominent camel race festivals in Oman and GCC countries, which is supported by the government of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The event is to encourage young people to adhere to values, customs, traditions and heritage."

"Al Bashayer Festival of camel racing was and still is one of the most important sporting, cultural and social forums in Oman and GCC countries because of the honourable sporting competition and shared cultural values that are evident in the spirit of love and brotherhood between camel owners and trainers," he added.

### SIX-DAY EVENT

The first day, February 10, will be for the 'Hagayeg' category, two years old, for 4 km. Nineteen races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top ten. In the afternoon, there will be 8 main races with cars, a cup, and a gun as prizes for the winner and cash prizes for the top 10.

The second day, February 11, will be for the 'Lagaya' category, three years old, for 5 km divided into 15 races in the morning with a cash prize for the top 10. Seven main races will start in the afternoon, with five cars, two cups and a gun for the winners and cash prizes up to 10th place.

The third day, February 12, will be



The camel festival will be held at Al Bashayer Square in the Wilayat of Adam from February 10 to 15.



The concluding ceremony will be held after the final day's races on February 15. — **File picture**

for the 'Yathaa' category, 4 years old, for a 6 km race. Eleven races will be in the morning with cash prizes for the top 10. Four main races will be in the afternoon, and the winners will receive four cars, two cups, and a gun, in addition to the cash

prizes for the top ten.

On the fourth day morning, February 13, four races will be for the 'Thanaya' category, 5 years old, for a distance of 8 km with a dagger in the main round. Four races are allocated for the 'Al Hawl' category, 6 years and above, with a dagger for the main winner. Both categories will have cash prizes for the top 10.

The afternoon competitions will be for human riders, with two races for 1,500 metres with cash prizes. The main race will be for 12 km. The winner will receive an SUV car and cash prizes for the top 10.

The concluding ceremony will be held on the final day, February 15, in the afternoon. The competition will include 4 main races for 8 km for the old category, with two races offering SUV car prizes and two cups for the winners. The winner of the fourth race will receive the golden sword and an SUV car, while the third race winner will get the silver sword and an SUV car.

GHALA GOLF CLUB



The 36-hole competition is one of the largest golfing tournaments in the region.

OVER 130 GOLFERS REGISTER FOR ASSARAIN CLASSIC ON FEB 7, 8

MUSCAT: The 29th Assarain Golf Classic, one of the most prestigious golf tournaments in Oman, will take place at the Ghala Golf Club on February 7 and 8. More than 130 golfers have registered for the tournament, as per the organisers.

According to a statement by the organisers, the Assarain Golf Classic, sponsored by Assarain Group of Companies, is a premium golfing event that gives amateur golfers the opportunity to participate in a professional tournament that meets international golfing standards. The Assarain Golf Classic is one of the largest tournaments organised by the Ghala Golf Club every year, in which a large number of players from all communities in Oman and from the Gulf Cooperation Council participate.

Ibrahim al Wahaibi, Director, Assarain Group of Companies, and the pioneer of the Assarain Golf Classic, said: “We support golf and are committed to helping the game flourish in Oman. We look forward to the 2025 edition of the Assarain Golf Classic and are confident that it will exceed expectations.”

“The 2025 Assarain Golf Classic is a highly anticipated golfing tournament, one that the entire golfing community in Oman looks forward to. The Classic, to be staged at the Ghala Golf Club, will witness the coming together of golfers of varying handicaps who will take on the challenge of taming the greens. Open to men, ladies and juniors, the Assarain Golf Classic 2025 is a highly awaited golfing tournament in Oman. This tournament sets a new standard every year, and I keenly look forward to it.”

The 36-hole competition is one of the largest golfing tournaments in the region and is open to all players with a verifiable handicap. Another not-to-be-missed attraction will be the colourful presentation ceremony planned for February 8 to felicitate the winners of different categories, where there are surprises waiting for the golfers!

The Assarain Golf Classic is supported by Hublot from Mistal and The Body Shop.



Duleep Mendis' men will play against the USA and Namibia in World Cup League 2 tri-series from February 8-18 at the Oman Cricket Academy ground.

Oman to face USA, Namibia in tri-series from Feb 8

OMAN are set to continue their quest for ICC Men's Cricket World Cup qualification with a highly anticipated tri-series at home, hosting the United States and Namibia from February 8-18 at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground.

Duleep Mendis-coached Oman will be looking to build on their momentum from a stunning clean sweep in November 2024 when they defeated both the Netherlands and the UAE, securing a 4-0 victory in the World Cup League 2 at home.

As the series kicks off, Oman are currently sitting in fifth place in the ICC World Cup League 2 standings with 14 points from 12 matches, having won six, lost four and two matches abandoned.

Their net run rate stands at -0.047, but their recent form has been strong, with four consecutive victories in their last five matches, including successive wins against the UAE and Netherlands in November.

With the USA and Namibia coming to Muscat, Oman will look to capitalise on their home advantage and make a solid push up the standings. Oman's last defeat was against hosts Canada on September 26, 2024.

Head coach Duleep Mendis has expressed confidence in the squad's preparations, with the team ready to take on table toppers USA (16 points) and Namibia (10 points) in the competition.

“We did brilliantly last time in November beating fancied Netherlands and UAE twice. The boys have prepared hard since December, and the domestic tournaments provided perfect pre-tournament exposure with the recent conclusion of the D50 and the introduction of two-day matches that helped them stay at the crease for longer periods,” said Mendis.

“Hopefully, the boys will come out with another good show and keep us in World Cup contention,” he added.

Mendis also stressed the importance of hard work and focus in the lead-up to the series, especially on improving fielding skills alongside batting and bowling.

The head coach is optimistic that this focus will result in another dominant display at home. “The boys have been training hard, and the focus was on fielding along with batting and bowling,” the former Sri Lanka great added. “We are ready for the challenge.”

Captain Jatinder Singh, who has been in stellar form during the D50 tournament, will lead the 15-member team. His leadership has been a key factor in Oman's recent success.

Mendis has called up new faces for the ODI team with the inclusion of Vinayak

Shukla, Hashir Dafedar, Hassnain Ali Shah and Muhammad Imran.

The players who got dropped from the squad that featured in November tri-series are Sandeep Goud, Muzahir Raza and Karan Sonavale. After the 50-over tri-series, Oman will face the USA in a three-match T20I series from February 20 to 23.

The standings heading into this crucial series have the USA in first place with 16 points from 12 matches, having won eight and lost four. Their net run rate stands at 0.428. Namibia, in contrast, are sitting in sixth place with 10 points from 12 matches, having won five and lost seven, with a negative net run rate of -0.180.

For Oman, the upcoming matches are crucial in their bid to qualify for the 2027 ICC Men's Cricket World Cup Qualifier.

With only the top four of the eight teams securing qualification, every match counts.

A successful series at home against the USA and Namibia could see Oman rise in the standings and strengthen their position.

**OMAN SQUAD:** Jatinder Singh (captain), Aamir Kaleem, Ashish Odedara, Hammad Mirza, Mohammad Nadeem, Sufyan Mehmood, Shakeel Ahmed, Jay Odedra, Samay Shrivastava, Wasim Ali, Vinayak Shukla, Hashir Dafedar, Hassnain Ali Shah, Muhammad Imran, Siddharth Bukkapatnam.

**FIXTURES (all matches begin at 10 am):** February 8: USA vs Namibia; February 10: Oman vs Namibia; February 12: Oman vs USA; February 14: Namibia vs USA; February 16: Oman vs Namibia; February 18: Oman vs USA.

Brunson nets 42 as Knicks bounce back, Thunder rout Bucks

NEW YORK: Jalen Brunson scored 42 points as the New York Knicks unleashed a late barrage to overwhelm the Houston Rockets 124-118 in the NBA on Monday.

The Knicks were humbled at home by the Los Angeles Lakers on Saturday and looked to be sliding to another defeat at Madison Square Garden as Houston powered into an 11-point lead early in the fourth quarter.

But Houston's double-digit lead was the cue for a New York scoring spree that saw the Knicks erupt for an astonishing 46-point fourth quarter that turned the contest on its head.

Brunson led the charge with 17 points in the fourth, putting the seal on the comeback with two late

free throws to wrap up a win that leaves New York third in the Eastern Conference standings.

Brunson received offensive support from Karl-Anthony Towns and Mikal Bridges, who both chipped in with 22 points apiece while Josh Hart also made double figures with 19 points.

Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau saluted his team's ability to dig themselves out of a hole and grab victory against the third-ranked team in the Western Conference.

“You have to win games different ways,” Thibodeau said. “We got in a hole but we found a way to win — I loved the way we responded in the fourth quarter. Whatever it was going to take, we were going to do.”

In other games, the Oklahoma



New York Knicks' Jalen Brunson (11) goes to the basket as Houston Rockets' Jalen Green (4) defends at Madison Square Garden. — **Imagn Images**

City Thunder took full advantage of an under-strength Milwaukee Bucks line-up to extend their lead at the top of the Western Conference with a thumping 125-96 victory.

The Bucks, missing Giannis Antetokounmpo, Damian Lillard, Brook Lopez, Khris Middleton and Bobby Portis, were buried by an avalanche of scoring from the Thunder, who led by as much as 44 points at one stage in the third quarter.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the rout with 34 points from just 22min 24sec on court, with Ousmane Dieng scoring 21 from the bench.

Oklahoma City improved to 39-9 with the victory and led the West from the second-placed Memphis Grizzlies, who moved to 34-16

with a 128-109 defeat of the San Antonio Spurs. Jaren Jackson Jr led the Grizzlies scoring with 31 points while GG Jackson finished with 27 from the bench, including four three-pointers. Ja Morant added 25 from 9-of-18 shooting.

French star Victor Wembanyama topped San Antonio's scorers with 27 points.

In Denver, Nikola Jokic grabbed his 23rd triple-double of the season with 27 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists as the Nuggets blew past the New Orleans Pelicans 125-113.

Michael Porter Jr was the offensive standout for Denver though with 36 points, including seven-of-12 from three-point range, while Jamal Murray contributed 20 points. — **AFP**

SPORTS

ATTACKINGMIDFIELDER



Spanish player Marco Asensio, rarely used at Paris Saint-Germain, has been loaned for the rest of the season to Aston Villa. — AFP

VILLA SIGN ASENSIO ON LOAN FROM PSG

LONDON: Aston Villa have signed Spanish attacking midfielder Marco Asensio on loan from Paris St Germain until the end of the season, the Premier League club said on Monday.

Asensio joined PSG as a free agent in July 2023 after over eight years with Real Madrid where he won three Champions Leagues and three LaLiga titles, and in his first season with the French club won the domestic double.

The 29-year-old, who has made 38 appearances for Spain, has scored two goals this season in 16 games for PSG, but Asensio has played just 18 minutes in the last eight league games for Luis Enrique’s side.

Asensio said working with Villa manager Unai Emery was a factor in his decision to move to the Premier League.

“I’m looking forward to being able to contribute to this club, to add to this team with eagerness and with lots of excitement,” he told Villa’s website.

“Unai is a coach that I’ve known for a while. He’s had a great career, he’s a top coach, he’s been key in me being able to come here because of his idea of how he wants to play football. I love it, it suits me perfectly.” Villa, who are eighth in the Premier League standings and qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League, host Tottenham Hotspur in the fourth round of the FA Cup on Sunday. England striker Marcus Rashford arrived at Villa on loan from Manchester United on Sunday. — Reuters

VILLA’S STYLE



RASHFORD EXCITED BY RETURN TO CL

BIRMINGHAM: Striker Marcus Rashford believes he can help Aston Villa enjoy a deep run in the Champions League after on Sunday joining on loan from Manchester United for the rest of the season. Rashford, capped 60 times by England, has endured a troubled season at United and has not played since mid-December but says he is ready to help Villa in multiple competitions.

Unai Emery’s side have qualified automatically for the Champions League last 16, host Tottenham Hotspur in the FA Cup fourth round next weekend and are eighth in the Premier League.

Asked about a return to Europe’s elite club competition, Rashford said: “Obviously, (it’s) the biggest competition for a club to be involved in.

“I’m sure it will be a new experience for me, playing for Villa in the Champions League. It’s always going to be a great moment, but the aims remain the same, to try and do our best to win it,” he told Villa’s website. “I’ve played a fair amount of games in the Champions League, so I feel like I’m experienced and know how to handle those types of situations.”

The 27-year-old Rashford, who joined United at the age of seven, has scored 138 goals in 426 appearances for the club, including more than 30 in the Champions League. He said Villa’s style of play attracted him to a move to the Midlands outfit. “I’ve had to choose somewhere where I feel my style of football is suited to, and can help them and help me rediscover and improve as a player,” Rashford said. — Reuters

Chelsea fight back to defeat West Ham, impress Maresca



Chelsea’s Pedro Neto celebrates scoring their first goal against West Ham. — Reuters

ENZO MARESCA hailed Chelsea’s mental strength as they came from behind to beat West Ham 2-1 and move into fourth place in the Premier League on Monday.

Maresca’s side trailed to Jarrod Bowen’s strike late in the first half at Stamford Bridge, sparking jeers from frustrated fans after a lethargic start.

But Maresca’s decision to send on Pedro Neto in the second half proved decisive as the Portugal forward bagged Chelsea’s equaliser.

As he has been so often over the last two seasons, Cole Palmer was the catalyst for the Blues’ 74th-minute winner when his cross deflected in off West Ham defender Aaron Wan-Bissaka.

After a disappointing run of one win in seven league games, Maresca was relieved to see Chelsea get back on track in spirited fashion.

“It is huge. Today was a tough game, especially mentally. When West Ham come here and sit back with 10 players behind the ball, it’s not easy. You have to be mentally strong and you need to be patient,” he said.

“We had more than 10 shots in the first

half. We had clear chances in the first half but unfortunately, we missed the target.

“With some changes the game changed. Overall we completely deserved to win.” Maresca has been concerned that his players were distracted by speculation over potential transfers in and out of Stamford Bridge leading up to Monday’s deadline day.

Relieved that the window would be closed after 23:00 GMT, the Italian can focus on leading Chelsea’s fight to qualify for next season’s Champions League via a top-four finish.

“It was a good weekend for us in terms of results and we knew today was even better,” he said. “We are there and hopefully we can be there until the end. Playing this kind of game in February, where we are still there, is an important statement.”

TURNING POINT

Maresca had dropped Chelsea keeper Robert Sanchez after his latest costly error in the defeat at Manchester City.

Sanchez’s replacement Filip Jorgensen delivered a solid display and Maresca said: “In this moment, Robert needs rest and Filip was very good.” It was a frustrating return to

the Bridge for West Ham manager Graham Potter, who was sacked in 2023 after less than seven months in charge of the Blues. Almost two years after his ruthless dismissal, Potter returned to management with the Hammers last month, but he has mustered just one win from his first five games in all competitions.

“We gave everything. It was relatively even in terms of chances. We come away with nothing in terms of the result but there was lots to be positive about,” Potter said.

“You look at the second half. The first goal was a bit of a turning point and we felt it was a foul, you need those things to go your way. We were doing well but we couldn’t quite hang on.” Potter was frustrated that a potential Levi Colwill foul on Bowen was not given in the build-up to Chelsea’s equaliser. But with West Ham sitting 10 points clear of the relegation zone, the former Brighton boss has breathing space to reshape the team in his style.

“The shape of the team was really good. You need a bit of luck. We felt unfortunate with the lead-up to the first goal but it wasn’t to be,” he said.

“The understanding of what we want to do is there, so we have to build on that.” — AFP



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ROBUST SURGE

The narrow money supply saw a robust rise of 22.1%, reaching RO 7.046 billion from RO 5.769 billion in the previous year.

OMAN’S LOCAL LIQUIDITY RISES BY RO 2.5 BILLION

MUSCAT: Oman’s total local liquidity surged by RO 2.5 billion by the end of November 2024, marking an 11% year-on-year increase to reach RO 24.827 billion, according to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Despite this growth, the total issued currency declined by 5.2%, standing at RO 1.505 billion compared to RO 1.588 billion in November 2023.

Meanwhile, the narrow money supply (M1) — which includes cash outside banks along with current accounts and demand deposits in local currency — saw a robust rise of 22.1%, reaching RO 7.046 billion from RO 5.769 billion in the previous year. The Central Bank of Oman’s (CBO) total foreign assets also experienced an 8.1% increase, reaching RO 7.041 billion, up from RO 6.516 billion a year earlier. Private sector deposits in commercial banks and Islamic windows rose by 9.2% to RO 20.639 billion, compared to RO 18.904 billion in November 2023.

Total loans and financing extended by commercial banks and Islamic windows grew by 4.2%, reaching RO 32.165 billion, up from RO 30.878 billion in the prior year. The average interest rate on loans also climbed by 3.3%, standing at 5.667%.

Meanwhile, the effective exchange rate index of the Omani rial dropped by 1.3% to 114.2 points, compared to 115.7 points in November 2023, reflecting fluctuations in currency valuation.

— ONA

Industrial sector drives Oman’s economic growth

THE industrial sector remains a key driver of Oman’s economy, contributing RO 4.09 billion to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at current prices by mid-2024, accounting for 19.5% of the total GDP. This growth is fuelled by the expansion of manufacturing industries, which contributed RO 2.19 billion (10.5% of GDP), significantly boosting economic activity and job creation.

Industry experts emphasise the crucial role of supply chains in enhancing production efficiency and product quality, which strengthens Omani industries’ competitiveness in both local and global markets.

Strengthening supply chain integration across sectors — especially with logistics and transportation — has further accelerated manufacturing growth and export potential.

Dr Ibrahim bin Ali al Balushi, CEO of Karwa Motors, highlighted that the rise in industrial output reflects the success of government policies aimed at economic diversification. He noted that Oman has worked to reduce reliance on oil by advancing various industries, including manufacturing, mining, petrochemicals and food production.

The government has facilitated this growth by developing specialised industrial zones such as Sohar Industrial City, Duqm Industrial Zone and the free zones in Salalah and Al Mazyouna.

These zones provide modern infrastructure, easing industrial operations and boosting the competitiveness of Omani-made products. Dr Al Balushi also stressed the importance of adopting Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, such as automation and artificial intelligence, to enhance production efficiency and market competitiveness.

He pointed out that Oman is prioritising the integration of small and large industries within supply chains, helping

The government has facilitated this growth by developing specialised industrial zones such as Sohar Industrial City, Duqm Industrial Zone and the free zones in Salalah and Al Mazyouna.



**DR IBRAHIM BIN ALI AL BALUSHI**  
CEO of Karwa Motors

SMEs play a vital role in the broader industrial landscape.

Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Alawi, General Manager of the General Company for Leather Industries, commended the collaborative efforts of the government and private sector in driving industrial success.

He noted that Oman’s diverse industrial base — including food, oil, mineral and leather industries — has gained a strong foothold in regional markets due to high-quality production standards. Oman’s natural resources, such as oil, gas and minerals, have been pivotal to the sector’s growth.

To maximise their potential, Al Alawi underscored the need to embrace modern technology, enhance innovation and integrate various industries to create a sustainable value chain.

Similarly, Azhar bin Hamoud al Hinai, Executive Director of United Plastics

Manufacturing & Bin Ahmed enterprises, emphasised that Oman’s industry holds immense potential for transformation through innovation and sustainability.

He pointed out that economic diversification has been central to the nation’s long-term development strategy, successfully reducing oil dependence through investments in aluminum, petrochemicals, mining and manufacturing.

To attract more investments, Oman offers competitive tax and customs incentives, including tax exemptions of up to 10 years in industrial zones and reduced import duties on raw materials. Financial institutions have also supported industrial expansion by offering soft loans to encourage new projects. — ONA

Furthermore, industrial zones are equipped with advanced infrastructure, including well-connected utilities, making Oman an attractive hub for both local and international investors. With continued government support, increased technological adoption and a focus on sustainable practices, Oman’s industrial sector is poised for further growth, reinforcing its role as a pillar of the national economy. — ONA

Oman builds constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment

JOMAR MENDOZA  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

TWO NEW constructed wetlands are being developed in Oman to enhance wastewater treatment in arid environments, offering a cost-effective and sustainable solution for local communities.

The projects, located in Al Jazir and Mahout in Al Wusta Governorate, will each treat 600 cubic metres per day of wastewater, serving approximately 4,000 residents.

The initiative is led by Nama Water Services, the public utility responsible for wastewater management in Oman, with Global Chemicals, an Omani company specialising in water treatment solutions, serving as the contractor.

The project falls under the Global Wetland Technology framework, with design input from IRIDRA and Ecobird, along

These constructed wetlands present a nature-based solution tailored to Oman’s arid conditions. Picture courtesy: IRIDRA

with external expertise from Dr Alexandros Stefanakis, a leading specialist in treatment wetlands.

**INNOVATIVE WETLAND DESIGN FOR COST-EFFICIENCY**  
The treatment systems

incorporate a two-stage process combining French Reed Beds (FRB) and Forced Bed Aeration (FBA).

The first stage, a vertical flow constructed wetland, integrates sludge accumulation and mineralisation, eliminating the need for separate sludge management and reducing operational costs.

The second stage, an aerated horizontal flow wetland, enhances treatment efficiency and ensures the final effluent meets Oman’s stringent water reuse standards.

In Mahout, an existing but non-operational wastewater stabilisation pond will be repurposed into a treatment wetland, maximising resource utilisation.

The treated wastewater will either be stored for reuse or safely disposed of in compliance with national environmental regulations.

**SUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT IN DESERT CLIMATES**

These constructed wetlands present a nature-based solution tailored to Oman’s arid conditions, minimising energy consumption compared to conventional wastewater treatment plants.

By leveraging natural filtration and aeration processes, the system is designed to withstand high temperatures while producing high-quality effluent suitable for safe discharge or reuse.

The project aligns with Oman’s water sustainability strategy, contributing to wastewater reuse initiatives that support environmental conservation and resource optimisation.

It also highlights the country’s commitment to adopting innovative water management solutions amid growing challenges related to water scarcity and population growth.

ADVERTORIALS

UNIQUE NEEDS



This account is a testament to Dhofar Islamic’s commitment to empowering youth.

DHOFAR ISLAMIC EMPOWERS FUTURE LEADERS THROUGH YOUTH SAVINGS ACCOUNT

MUSCAT: Dhofar Islamic Youth Account is designed to meet the unique financial needs of Omani youth to help them achieve their various ambitions and dreams to reach financial independence and build responsible future leaders.

This youth-oriented account is a testament to Dhofar Islamic’s commitment to empowering youth through flexible and convenient banking solutions that enable them to achieve financial independence from an early age, as it is specifically designed to meet the needs of youth between the ages of 18 and 23.

The Youth Account is a Shari’a compliant savings account (based on Mudarabah principles) specially crafted to cater to the unique needs of youth aged between 18 and 23 years.

It comes with no minimum balance requirement and allows free fund transfers through mobile payment service ensuring that young account holders can enjoy their banking experience without any extra fees.

This innovative youth-centric account is a testament to Dhofar Islamic’s commitment to empowering the youth with convenient and flexible banking solutions that enable financial independence from an early age.

Commenting on the launch of the Youth Account, Amor Said al Amri, DGM and Head of Retail Banking - Dhofar Islamic said, “Our Youth Account is designed to empower the young generation to learn essential money management skills, take control of their finances and build a strong financial foundation for their future. We are committed to providing them with the tools they need to start their career and achieve their financial goals.”

Dhofar Islamic is one of the leading Islamic windows in Oman setting the standard for the best customer experience within the banking industry in the Sultanate of Oman by adopting best international banking practices. It is also committed to following the best international practices in the Islamic banking sector.

Therefore, Dhofar Islamic is keen to meet the aspirations of its valued customers by providing offers and services that are compatible with the provisions of Islamic Sharia.

LAUFEN LAUNCHES NEW SHOWROOM IN AL GHUBRA

MUSCAT: Reflecting over 150 years of Swiss craftsmanship, Laufen blends elegance, precision, quality and functionality, setting the standard for luxury bathroom design. The newly launched showroom in Al Ghubra features a curated selection of Laufen products, from ceramic fixtures and faucets to bathtubs, furniture, mirrors, accessories and concealed installation systems — each reflecting a keen attention to detail.

Laufen’s designs are defined by a calm, understated aesthetic that emphasises simplicity and functionality without compromising style. The seamless fusion of modern technology and premium materials redefines bathroom interiors, offering both minimalist and traditional options that cater to a variety of design preferences.

The showroom introduces a new era of sophistication and sustainability, setting a benchmark



for bathroom spaces that are both glamorous and functional. Hitesh Akarte — COO Khimji Ramdas Infrastructure Cluster stated, “The Laufen showroom has enabled a bathroom experience for both body and soul. Today we are offering a holistic bathroom culture that emphasises sustainability, excellent design, innovation and technological leadership. All stemming from a long tradition of high quality craftsmanship.”

Development Bank backs ‘Duqm Now’ series

DEVELOPMENT Bank of the Sultanate of Oman will support a new business initiative aimed at accelerating Oman’s sustainable development. Launching on Wednesday, February 5, at 7:30 pm and organised by the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), Duqm Now will bring the business community together with industry leaders, policymakers and experts to showcase opportunities in key sectors aligned with Oman Vision 2040.

Taking place at the Crowne Plaza Hotel Duqm, the inaugural Duqm Now event entitled ‘Up and Down the Green Stream’ will explore renewable energy prospects for Oman’s small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), highlighting developments in solar, wind and green hydrogen projects.

Commenting on SEZAD’s Duqm Now series, Hussain al Lawati, CEO, Development Bank said: “We are delighted to support this initiative and look forward to the opportunities it will unlock, particularly for SMEs eager to harness the potential of



HUSSAIN AL LAWATI  
CEO, Development Bank

SEZAD. Development Bank remains strongly committed to funding SME ambitions, with our lending growing from RO 23.6 million in 2023 to RO 38.9 million in 2024 — a remarkable 64.8% increase.”

The CEO added: “Given that sustainable development is at the heart of Development Bank’s strategy, I am especially pleased to see this first session will focus on the possibilities of renewable energy. This sector is not only of immense importance to our economy but also to the achievement of Oman’s 2050 Net-Zero target.

With these factors very much in mind, Development Bank is already working to secure sustainable financing for green projects by collaborating with international

institutions such as the Green Climate Fund.” Duqm Now “Up and Down the Green Stream” will feature a panel of prominent industry figures, including Musab al Farsi, CEO, Nafath Renewable Energy; Dr Khalil al Hanashi, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Energy and Minerals; and Dr Firas al Abduwani, Director General, Renewable Energy & Hydrogen, Ministry of Energy and Minerals. The evening’s discussion will be moderated by Dr Mohammed al Mugheiry, Petroleum Engineering Commercialisation Manager, PDO.

The Duqm Now programme will roll out across 2025 with four focused sessions covering renewable energy, manufacturing-education partnerships, circular economy practices and sustainable petrochemical production. Each event is designed to generate practical solutions for participating organizations.

Duqm Now is free of charge to attend, conducted in Arabic and open to all. To secure a seat, email your name and contact details to duqm.now@duqm.gov.om

AHLIBANK LAUNCHES POS FINANCING PROGRAMME FOR SMES

MUSCAT: In line with its intuitive efforts to empower Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) through well-articulated solutions, ahlibank has recently announced the launch of its Point of Sale (POS) financing programme for SMEs.

The new programme is geared towards SMEs who are willing to use, or are already using, ahlibank’s POS machines, granting short/medium term loans against POS receivables for operating and capital expenditures.

As per the credit parameters, ahlibank’s new POS financing programme offers loans that



amount up to RO 150,000 for up to 36 months with daily repayment

tied to POS transactions.

The Bank also allows financing options of up to 30% of the last 12 months of POS turnover for operating expenditure and up to 70% for capital expenditure (which is capped at RO 150,000).

Customers are provided credit cards as a combined solution of up to 15% of the financing limits (capped at RO 10,000). Most notably, the financing programme is granted with quick approval and a timely disbursement process.

Commenting on the launch of the programme, Hassan Maqbool, AGM — Head of SME at ahlibank,

said, “At ahlibank, we recognise the role SMEs play in bolstering the economy. Our innovative approach reflects this, as we strive to offer tailor-made solutions to our SME customers with utmost excellence and efficiency. By empowering businesses with the essential tools needed to grow, we have played an active part in their journey, easing financial burdens and enhancing customer satisfaction. We are eagerly anticipating witnessing the impact the POS Financing Programme will have on SMEs and the broader Omani economy as a whole.”

OETC hosts CIGRE and GCC CIGRE committee meetings

MUSCAT: As part of its commitment to strengthening collaborative relations with various institutions, experts and specialists in the energy and electricity sector worldwide, and providing platforms for knowledge and experience exchange, Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) and GCC CIGRE recently hosted the Steering Committee Meetings of the International Council for Large Electric Systems (CIGRE) and the GCC Regional Committee for Large Electric System (GCC CIGRE).

The meetings took place from February 3-5, 2025 and attended by chairmen, CEOs and representatives from various Omani authorities and institutions, alongside more than 20 members of the CIGRE International Steering Committee from different countries.

The visit programme included a series of meetings with key sector officials and stakeholders, as well as field visits to Omani factories, grid



A key session held at OETC provided an overview of Oman’s and GCC’s electricity sector, its developments, structure and role.

stations and specialised centres.

A key session held at OETC provided an overview of Oman’s and GCC’s electricity sector, its developments, structure and the company’s role within the sector.

Additionally, the visit featured a tour in the OETC’s specialised centres, to gain insights into Oman’s experience in managing the electricity sector

and to learn from global best practices. Eng. Ahmed Abdullah al Rahbi, Corporate Affairs’ General Manager at OETC and Oman’s Representative in GCC CIGRE,

emphasized the significance of such meetings and periodic engagements with global institutions, experts and specialists to ensure that Oman remains up to date with sector advancements and innovations in various areas while applying the best industry practices.

Al Rahbi added: “We believe in the necessity of effective communication to achieve continuous development and improvement, ensuring we move in the right direction by implementing the latest technologies and best practices that drive Oman’s electricity sector forward.

As part of a vital industry, OETC is committed to participating in such global engagements to draw inspiration from international success stories, achieve the highest levels of quality and performance in the sector and enhance the reliability, security and sustainability of Oman’s electricity transmission network”.

BUSINESS



Oman oil price witnesses a decrease of \$1.44/barrel.

CRUDE PRICES FALL ON US AND CHINA TRADE CLASH

**MUSCAT:** The official price of Oman oil on Feb 4, for April delivery, reached \$77.41 per barrel. The price of Oman oil on Tuesday witnessed a decrease of \$1.44 compared to yesterday’s price, Monday, which amounted to \$78.85.

The monthly average price of Omani crude oil for February delivery reached \$73.16 per barrel, up 70 cents compared to the price for January delivery.

Meanwhile, international crude prices fell on Tuesday as US tariffs on China took effect and Beijing retaliated with its own tariffs, heightening trade war fears, while US President Trump delayed a decision on imposing steep levies on Canada and Mexico for a month.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude was down \$1.21, or 1.65%, at \$71.74 per barrel at 1044 GMT, while Brent futures were down 73 cents, or 1%, to \$75.05.

China’s Finance Ministry said it would impose levies of 15% on US coal and LNG, and 10% on crude oil, farm equipment and the small number of trucks as well as big-engine sedans shipped to China from the United States.

Separately, China’s Commerce Ministry and its Customs Administration said they were imposing export controls on some metals that are critical for electronics, military equipment and solar panels.

Pact to explore OCTG manufacturing in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU  
MUSCAT, FEB 4

**WHOLLY** Omani-government owned Energy Development Oman (EDO) has announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Sumitomo Corporation Middle East to explore the localisation of Oil Country Tubular Goods (OCTG) manufacturing in the Sultanate of Oman.

OCTGs are pipes and casings used in oil and gas drilling and production operations. Oman’s requirement of OCTGs – across its portfolio of upstream oil and gas operators – is estimated to run into several hundred million dollars per annum, underscoring the pivotal importance of OCTGs in sustaining hydrocarbon activities in the country.

EDO, by virtue of its 60 per cent ownership of oil resources and 100 per cent non-associated gas resources in Block 6 operated by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), is the largest consumer of OCTGs in Oman by far.

On Sunday, the energy company joined a number of public and private sector entities in the signing of agreements committing to support initiatives to advance the localisation of goods manufacturing across a number of key sectors.

The event, hosted by the Ministry of Labour and the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, marked the culmination of a months-long National Local Content Laboratory that yielded as many as 58 opportunities for local content development across multiple segments of the economy.

EDO’s MoU with Sumitomo Corporation was one of two pacts inked by the state energy firm on the occasion. It also initiated an agreement with Port of Duqm



Oil Country Tubular Goods (OCTG) for the oil and gas industry.

Company centring on the development of an energy supply and logistics hub in Al Duqm designed to improve supply chain efficiencies and support the growth of Oman’s energy sector.

Announcing the pacts in a post, EDO stated: “Proud to announce signing two Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) as part of our continuous efforts towards advancing Oman’s energy supply chain, supporting local industries, and contributing to the national economic diversification targets as part of Oman Vision 2040.”

As for its MoU with Sumitomo Corporation ME, it said the pact will “enable us to explore the establishment of an Oil Country Tubular Goods manufacturing facility in Oman.

This initiative aims to strengthen local manufacturing capabilities and reduce reliance on imports,” it added. “These agreements are part of EDO’s broader vision to develop a self-sustaining, resilient energy

ecosystem in Oman; one that not only meets domestic needs but also positions Oman as a regional leader in sustainable energy development,” Muscat-based EDO further noted.

Significantly, Sumitomo Corporation Middle East (SCME) is a longstanding supplier of OCTGs to Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). The supply arrangement began in 2003 when parent company Sumitomo Corporation, together with Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corporation (NSSMC), signed deals to provide high quality tubular goods to PDO, the largest producer of hydrocarbons in Oman.

A specialised storage area for OCTGs has since been established in Port of Duqm’s logistics zone as part of a ‘Mill to Well’ model designed to optimise supply chain efficiencies linked to the supply of these pipes to PDO.

Dhofar’s charter tourism grows, but local economy sees limited gains

QASIM AL MAASHANI  
SALALAH, FEB 4

**A SURGE** in charter flights has brought a growing number of tourists to Oman’s southern Dhofar Governorate, filling hotel rooms and boosting seasonal visitor numbers. However, local businesses and the broader economy have yet to see substantial benefits, with weak regulation, hidden trade and an unstructured tourism sector limiting the impact.

A series of field visits and close monitoring of the sector reveal significant gaps in how the economic potential of charter tourism is being harnessed.

While the influx of tourists has strengthened the hospitality industry, other key areas – including local markets, tour guiding services and tourism logistics – remain disorganised, preventing sustainable growth.

Despite the growing number of visitors, Dhofar’s local economy sees minimal direct benefits due to several factors. Foreign tour operators dominate the market with pre-packaged trips, restricting tourist spending beyond hotels and organised tours.

Additionally, weak integration with local businesses results in limited spending at markets, restaurants and small enterprises.

Furthermore, an over reliance on hotels, with little effort to diversify tourism into cultural experiences, local attractions, or community-led initiatives, further reduces economic impact.

“The numbers are impressive, but without a structured approach to ensuring tourists engage with the local economy, much of the revenue is lost before it even reaches Omani businesses,” said a local tourism consultant who declined to be named.



Charter flights into Salalah have been on the increase from various European markets.

**HIDDEN TRADE AND UNREGULATED MARKET ACTIVITY**

Dhofar’s traditional markets should be a key attraction for visitors, yet field research indicates that a large portion of market activity is controlled by hidden trade – businesses operated by non-Omanis under local ownership names.

This practice has undermined local entrepreneurship, reduced tax revenue and led to lower-quality goods and services for tourists. While authorities have taken steps to curb commercial concealment, enforcement remains inconsistent.

“The tourist footfall in local markets is increasing, but the financial benefits are not flowing to local traders as they should,” said an industry expert.

**TOUR GUIDING DEFICIENCIES**

Another major challenge is the lack of professional Omani tour guides. Most licensed guides are not full-time professionals but are used for regulatory compliance only, while unlicensed foreign guides dominate the field.

Field research highlights several key concerns: Inaccurate information

being given to tourists by untrained foreign guides; Weak regulatory oversight, allowing non-qualified individuals to operate; and Lack of incentives for Omani guides, limiting their engagement in the sector.

Without clear regulation and enforcement, the authenticity of Dhofar’s tourism experience is at risk, as visitors receive incomplete or misleading information about Oman’s history and culture.

**TOURISM LOGISTICS: UNSTRUCTURED, UNREGULATED**

Tourism logistics, including transport services, is another sector suffering from a lack of regulation and professional standards. Many operators function under informal arrangements, lacking proper offices, structured teams, or licensed vehicles.

Instead, individuals with private cars often serve as unofficial transport providers, which raises safety concerns and contributes to an inconsistent visitor experience.

Unregulated private vehicles operate without meeting tourism safety standards.

Besides, there is an absence of structured investment, leading to an

While the influx of tourists has strengthened the hospitality industry, other key areas—including local markets, tour guiding services, and tourism logistics—remain disorganized, preventing sustainable growth.

unsustainable tourism transport market. This can result in potential reputational risks, as tourists face unreliable and unprofessional services. “There is an urgent need for a regulated system that ensures quality standards in transportation services,” said a Dhofar-based tourism operator.

**POLICY GAPS AND PROPOSED REFORMS**

To maximise the benefits of charter flights, industry experts and local stakeholders point to several policy interventions that could improve regulation and economic returns:

- 1. Strengthening local business involvement:** To enhance local business involvement in tourism, foreign tour operators arranging charter trips should be required to form at least 50% partnerships with local enterprises.
- 2. Combatting hidden trade:** To prevent market manipulation, stricter commercial ownership laws should be enforced to eliminate hidden foreign control over local businesses.

Additionally, financial support

programmes can be introduced to empower young Omanis in establishing tourism-related enterprises, ensuring greater local participation and economic benefits.

- 3. Professionalising tour guiding:** To enhance the professionalism of tour guiding, all guides should be required to obtain mandatory licensing and training. Strict penalties must be enforced against unlicensed guides, especially foreign operators working without permits. Additionally, financial incentives can encourage Omanis to pursue full-time careers in tour guiding, ensuring higher standards and greater local involvement in the industry.
- 4. Regulating tourism transport services:** To regulate tourism transport services, licensing standards should be strictly enforced to ensure transport companies have proper offices and adequate staffing. Investment in well-structured tourism transport businesses should be encouraged, with incentives provided to support local operators.

Additionally, a centralised booking platform can be introduced to give tourists reliable access to professional and regulated transport services.

Dhofar’s increasing prominence as a charter flight destination presents a major opportunity for Omani tourism. However, as extensive field visits confirm, poor regulation and weak local engagement are preventing the sector from reaching its full potential.

If structural challenges remain unaddressed, Oman risks seeing high tourist numbers but minimal economic returns.

The solution lies in ensuring every link in the tourism value chain is designed to benefit the local economy, strengthening Dhofar’s position as a sustainable and well-managed tourism hub.

OPINION

New warnings on tax hikes for UK Chancellor



ANDY JALIL

The author is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

**CHANCELLOR** Rachel Reeves faced a fresh economic growth dilemma after being hit by the second worst borrowing figures in more than three decades. The Treasury was blindsided by monthly government borrowing figures that rocketed far beyond predictions.

According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the government borrowed £17.8 bn in December, well ahead of the £14.6 bn expected by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). That was the third highest December figure on record, behind 2019 and 2020, putting borrowing for the financial year to date at the second-highest level since records began in 1993.

The numbers — a sizeable uptick on the figures for November — have further stoked fears that the government is struggling to get borrowing under control over six months into its administration and in the wake of Reeve’s eye-watering £40 bn tax raid last October in her first Budget as Labour Chancellor.

Elliott Jordan-Doak, senior UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, said the Chancellor was already under pressure to clarify how she would meet the fiscal rules.

He said: “We expect the government to outline spending, reductions-back loaded

towards next Budget in October (2025), is also a good bet.”

All the more concerning for the Treasury is that the figures released in the last week of January did not include the sharp jump in the gilt yields seen in early January after a huge sell-off in UK government bonds.

Capital Economics estimates that the Chancellor’s headroom has been reduced from £10 bn to just £2 bn, as gilt yields are still higher than they were at the time of the Budget despite recovering from much of the turbulence in early January.

“Higher debt interest payments alone will make it a close call as to whether the Chancellor’s fiscal rules are met, even before considering other forecast revisions,” Matt Swannell, chief economic advisor to the EY Item Club, said.

The ONS figures will give further credence to the widespread belief that the government will need to unveil a slew of departmental cuts at its first spending review, due to complete in June.

Businesses have been told to brace for a “painful sequel to the autumn Budget” as fears mount over the outlook for the UK economy and a surge in government borrowing costs threaten to wipe out the Chancellor’s fiscal headroom. In a note to investors, Deutsche Bank warned that tepid growth towards the end of last year

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had raised the threat of further tax hikes from Rachel Reeves after her £40 bn raid in October. Growth in the UK economy is now likely to lag behind the Office for Budget Responsibility’s October projections after unexpectedly shrinking 0.1pc in October in the second consecutive monthly contraction, Deutsche Bank said.

“As a result of more borrowing and tax rises, we think, will be likely this year,” wrote Sanjay Raja, the chief UK economist. He added: “We think Chancellor Reeves will likely need to lift taxes at least one more time following last year’s historic tax raising event”.

Comments on further tax rise also came from another major European bank ING, where analysts said the Chancellor will have to do another “big top-up” of tax rises this parliament despite she previously vowed not to.

In its outlook for 2025, the Dutch lender said that Reeves’ controversial October Budget “is likely just the beginning of several more Budgets characterised by tax hikes.

The prediction comes despite the Chancellor appearing to rule out any further hikes this Parliament at November’s Confederation of British Industry (CBI) conference when she said that she would not be “coming back with more borrowing or more tax rises.”

TARIFF WHIPLASH FIRES UP CHINA STIMULUS GAMES

HUDSON LOCKETT

After implementing 25% tariffs on North American trading partners, Donald Trump suspended them two days later and raised the possibility of a similar stay for the People’s Republic. A hike of 10 percentage points on existing levies on Chinese exports took effect on Tuesday but the US President also warns this is merely an “opening salvo”. For policymakers in Beijing, it adds to their most-pressing headache:

when to ramp up measures to boost weak domestic consumption.

The Chinese government hit back shortly after the tariffs deadline passed, announcing an antitrust investigation into Alphabet’s Google, as well as levies of up to 15% on coal, liquefied natural gas, agricultural equipment and oil from the US, among other moves.

The Chinese government hit back shortly after the tariffs deadline passed, announcing an antitrust investigation into Alphabet’s Google, as well as levies of up to 15% on coal, liquefied natural gas, agricultural equipment and oil from the US, among other moves.

Overall, the retaliation looks soft, which shows good strategic sense. Should negotiations fail to deliver a reprieve, the hit to the sputtering Chinese economy should be manageable. Analysts at UBS estimate the 10% American tariff on Chinese

goods could knock about half a percentage point off GDP growth. Beijing’s opening gambit for negotiations might be focused on “restoring a trade agreement” signed in 2020 with the United States.

That so-called Phase One agreement, which eventually ended tit-for-tat tariff hikes, committed China to buying an extra \$200 billion in American goods and services, which it did not. A hawkish White House is unlikely to give Chinese negotiators extra credit for belatedly honouring an old deal.

Trump’s team may seek more substantial concessions that could extend beyond trade to, for example, helping bring an end to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Such a move may also be in Beijing’s self-interest because it would remove one obstacle to investments by Chinese companies in Europe.

If China balks at such demands, however, it should be prepared for escalating threats - Trump has warned of levies up to 100%. Beijing’s chief channel of response will again come courtesy of the renminbi’s exchange rate: analysts at Capital Economics reckon a 1.4% depreciation of the currency in trade-weighted terms would be enough to offset a 10% tariff increase.

But a big fall for the currency will limit the central bank’s capacity for more monetary easing, putting more pressure on the central government to rapidly ramp up fiscal stimulus instead.

— Reuters

From resource extraction to value creation



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

**OMAN** stands at a pivotal moment in its economic journey, where the strategic transformation of its natural resources could revolutionise its economic landscape. While the nation has made significant strides in sectors like oil and gas, which contributes 30% to GDP and 68% to 85% of government revenue, a vast reservoir of untapped opportunities awaits exploration and development.

The success story of Vale’s \$1.35 billion iron ore pelletising plant in Suhar demonstrates the transformative power of value addition. By processing raw iron ore locally, the facility has created hundreds of direct jobs and fostered a network of downstream industries.

Similarly, the petrochemical sector’s evolution, exemplified by the OQ8 refinery in Al Duqm, showcases how value addition can transform raw exports into high-value products.

However, current practices reveal missed opportunities.

Oman, the world’s largest gypsum exporter, ships this mineral primarily in raw form while importing finished



Oman, the world’s largest gypsum exporter, ships this mineral primarily in raw form while importing finished construction materials at premium prices.

construction materials at premium prices.

The fisheries sector, despite a 3,165 km coastline, exports unprocessed fish while importing value-added seafood products. This pattern represents not just lost economic value but exported job opportunities.

The potential for transformation is substantial. In the minerals sector alone, shifting from raw gypsum exports (\$500 million) to processed construction materials could generate \$2 billion in revenue.

The fisheries sector could triple its current \$700 million export value through processing and aquaculture development. The renewable energy sector promises 13,000 new jobs by 2030 through green hydrogen production and associated industries.

Strategic opportunities exist across sectors. The petrochemical industry could expand beyond basic refining to produce specialised chemicals and plastics.

The mining sector could establish processing facilities for copper, chromite and rare earth elements. The agricultural sector could develop food processing clusters, turning raw produce into high-value products for export.

Government initiatives like Oman Vision 2040 and the In-Country Value (ICV) programme provide a foundation for this transformation.

However, accelerated progress requires focused investment in infrastructure, technology adoption and skill development.

The establishment of specialised industrial parks, enhanced port facilities and research centres could catalyse this transformation.

Consider the ceramics industry’s success in Suhar, where processing local clay instead of exporting it raw created 200 direct jobs and 600 indirect positions. This model could be replicated across sectors, creating employment cascades through manufacturing, logistics, maintenance and support services.

The path forward requires strategic intervention in three key areas. First, infrastructure development must focus on creating integrated industrial clusters that facilitate value addition.

Second, human capital development through technical training programmes and industry-academia partnerships

must prepare the workforce for higher-value jobs.

Third, policy frameworks must incentivise value-added manufacturing while strategically managing raw material exports. Success stories from countries like Malaysia demonstrate the potential impact.

Malaysia transformed from a raw material exporter to a manufacturing hub, creating millions of jobs and sustainable economic growth. Oman, with its strategic location, established infrastructure and abundant resources, is well-positioned to achieve similar success.

Oman faces a defining moment. The nation can continue exporting its abundant natural resources in raw form, or it can embrace a new path — one where value creation fuels economic growth, job creation and long-term prosperity.

This transformation demands a shift in mindset, from mere resource extraction to a focus on adding value, developing downstream and upstream industries and strategically developing key sectors like green energy, agriculture and fisheries.

This strategic shift will unlock Oman’s immense potential for economic growth and job creation.

By processing raw materials into higher-value products, Oman can capture a larger share of the global market, generate increased revenue and create new employment opportunities.

The development of downstream and upstream industries will further enhance economic diversification, reducing reliance on raw material exports and building a more resilient economy.

This transition will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders. The government must continue to play a proactive role, investing in infrastructure, technology and human capital.

The private sector must embrace innovation and invest in value-added manufacturing. International partners can provide expertise and investment to support Oman’s transformation.

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# ART/LIFE



ENVIRONMENT

## Greenland ice sheet cracking open quicker than before, say scientists



THE WORLD’S second largest body of ice — the Greenland Ice Sheet — is cracking open quicker than previously, scientists have warned.

Using three-dimensional maps of its surface, researchers have found crevasses have got significantly wider and deeper at the sheet’s fast-flowing edges between 2016 and 2021.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Geoscience*, will be used to improve models about the future behaviour of the Greenland Ice Sheet.

The loss of ice on Greenland has been behind a sea level rise of around 14 millimetres since 1992, scientists have said.

If the entire Greenland Ice Sheet were to melt, sea levels could rise by seven metres, they said.

Study lead author Dr Tom Chudley, of Durham University’s Geography Department, said: “In a warming world, we would expect to see more crevasses forming.

“This is because glaciers are accelerating in response to warmer ocean temperatures and because melt water filling crevasses can force fractures deeper into the ice.

“However, until now we haven’t had the data to show where and how fast this is happening across the entirety of the Greenland Ice Sheet.

“For the first time, we are able to see significant increases in the size and depth of crevasses at fast-flowing glaciers at the edges of the Greenland Ice Sheet, on timescales of five years and less.

“With this dataset we can see that it’s not just that crevasse fields are extending into the ice sheet, as previously observed — instead, change is dominated by existing crevasse fields getting larger and deeper.”

The Greenland Ice Sheet is a massive body of ice covering approximately 1.7 million square kilometres in Greenland. It stores about 7 metres of potential global sea-level rise if fully melted. The ice sheet plays a crucial role in regulating climate patterns and ocean circulation. Climate change impacts it by increasing temperatures, leading to accelerated melting and ice loss. This results in rising sea levels, which threaten coastal communities worldwide and disrupt ecosystems. Protecting the ice sheet is vital for climate stability and limiting global warming effects. — PA Media/dpa

QUICK FEATURES



FASHION

A model presents a creation by Sonibel during the Simof 2025 (International Flamenco Fashion Show) in Seville. — AFP



FILM

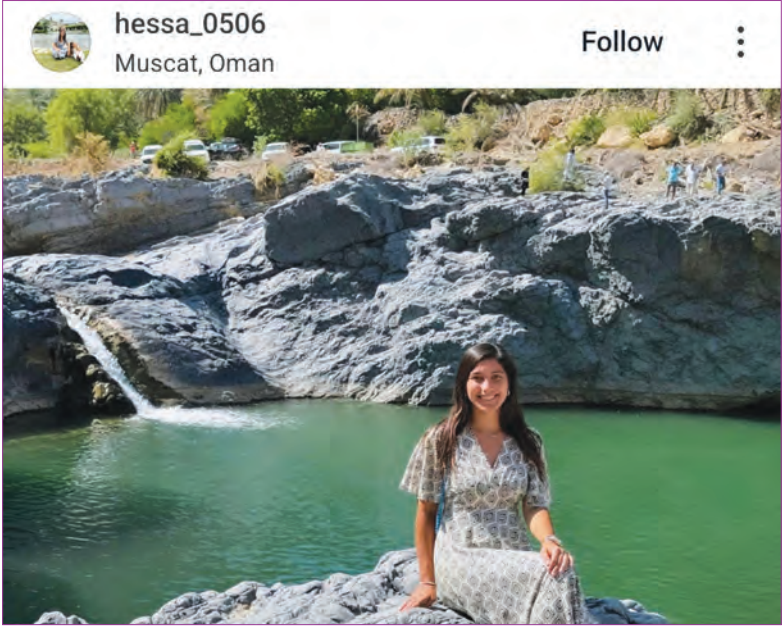
British actress Marianne Faithfull addresses a news conference at the 51st Berlinale International Film Festival. Faithful [and French director Patrice Chereau ] introduced their new movie “Intimacy”. — AFP



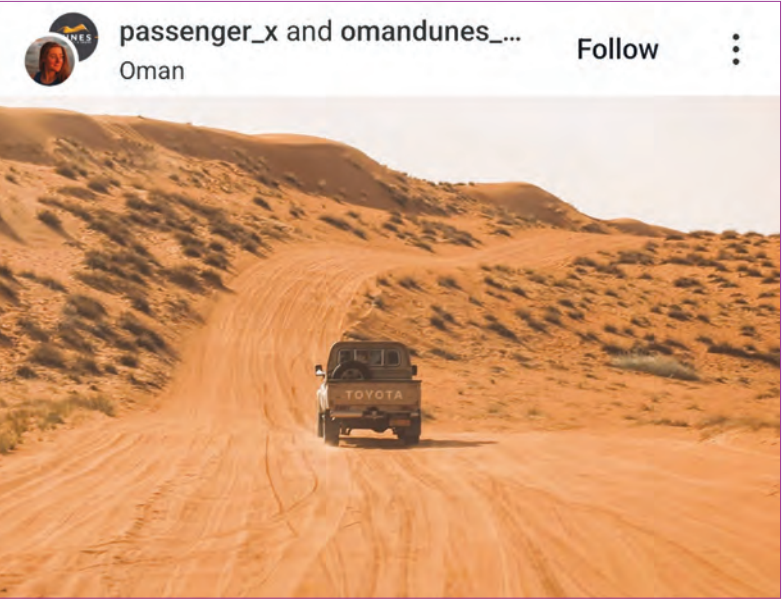
LIFESTYLE

A girl smiles as she writes on the wall of a Saraswati temple during the Shreepanchami festival, dedicated to the goddess of education Saraswati in belief that the goddess will help devotees excel in education, in Kathmandu, Nepal. — Reuters

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FOSSIL HUNDER STUMBLES UPON ‘UNUSUAL FIND’ IN DENMARK



A PIECE Of fossilised vomit, dating back to when dinosaurs roamed the earth, has been discovered in Denmark, the Museum of East Zealand said on Monday.

The find was made by a local amateur fossil hunter on the Cliffs of Stevns, a Unesco-listed site south of Copenhagen.

While out on a walk, Peter Bennicke found some unusual fragments, which turned out to be pieces of sea lily, in a piece of chalk.

He then took the fragments to a museum for examination, which dated the vomit to the end of the Cretaceous era some 66 million years ago.

According to experts, the vomit is made up of at least two different species of sea lily, which were likely eaten by a fish that threw up the parts it

could not digest.

“This type of find... is considered very important when reconstructing past ecosystems because it provides important information about which animals were eaten by which,” the museum said in a press release.

Paleontologist Jesper Milan hailed the discovery as “truly an unusual find”, adding it helped explain the relationships in the prehistoric food chain.

“Sea lilies are not a particularly nutritious diet, as they consist mainly of calcareous plates held together by a few soft parts,” he said.

“But here is an animal, probably some kind of fish, that 66 million years ago ate sea lilies that lived at the bottom of the Cretaceous sea and regurgitated the skeletal parts.” — AFP



A man wearing a costume poses at the booth of ‘Sid Meier’s Civilization VII’, a video game developed by Firaxis Games, during the media day at the Gamescom video games trade fair in Cologne in 2024. — AFP file photo

‘Civilization VII’ set for release on Friday

FANS HAVE waited more than eight years for the new instalment in heavyweight strategy game Civilization, with the release of the seventh instalment on February 11 promising to get budding philosopher-kings thinking more about the consequences of their actions.

At first glance, little has changed since the very first title released in 1991: players are presented with a top-down view of the game world in which they build up their society turn by turn from the Neolithic period to the modern era.

Virtual rulers can exert their will over opponents either by diplomacy or war -- a formula that brought sales over the whole series to 73 million by summer 2024, according to Take Two, parent company of publisher 2K Games. “Civilization” spawned a whole genre known to gamers as 4X, for its core gameplay activities: Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate. Comparable titles include Paradox Interactive’s starfaring “Stellaris” (2016) or French developer Amplitude’s “Humankind” (2021).

That range of alternatives is one reason why fans “don’t just want the same game with a new coat of paint, with fancier graphics,” Ed Beach, creative director for the Civilization franchise, told AFP in August at Germany’s Gamescom trade fair. “We need to do something new each time... something that is going to really improve the game.” Civilization is still developed by US studio Firaxis, which has run the franchise since its third instalment. Its seventh edition, available on PC and console, allows players to set any historically-inspired ruler at the head of any empire -- allowing Charlemagne to govern Egypt, for example.

A match is now divided into three acts, each wrapped up with a major crisis such as the collapse of an empire or a foreign invasion.

The way players cope with the challenge defines how their civilisation will adapt as they enter the next age.



Screenshot of Civilization VII’

‘THE HUMAN JOURNEY’

That is one way the developers wanted to confront player-governors with the consequences of their actions. “We’re not trying to say you have to play a certain way,” Beach said. “There are times I play as a very bad guy, and that’s an interesting way for me to look at the world and look at history as well.” Nevertheless, topics tackled in Civilization — such as climate change or the battle of democracy versus autocracy — are hot issues out in the everyday world. “It’s not getting political, it’s just we’re always thoughtful about what the human journey has been,” Beach said.

“The more our game can mirror that in interesting ways and let people adjust it and play with it and experiment with it, we think that it’s doing what it should do.” Civilization’s image as a “serious” game is a legacy of its origins on desktop computers, “at a time when the PC was a tool for work,” said Sebastien Genvo, a researcher specialising in video games at the University of Lorraine in eastern France. Firaxis itself brought in

historians to advise on keeping gameplay plausible and modelling civilisations in the new structure -- all while allowing the player as much freedom as possible.

RETURN OF SID MEIER

“Civilization doesn’t aim to teach you history,” Genvo said, even if the close attention to certain historical details may “awaken an interest” among players.

Hundreds of people have contributed to the development of “Civilization VII”, going back to before the Covid-19 pandemic. Among them has been Sid Meier, 70, the original creator of the series, whose name still features proudly in the game’s full title.

Meier had been “off doing other projects” during the development of the previous instalment, “Civilization VI”, Beach said. “He likes to experiment... he offered to prototype some of the early ideas for Civ VII,” he added. These included how units are moved around the map or the different military, scientific and cultural objectives players must achieve in each age. — AFP

FEATURES

BY ROSE BANGUIS-EBUEN

**AS THE** first light of dawn breaks over the Hajar mountains, the city of Nizwa awakens, pulsing to life with a palpable and mesmerising energy. Every Friday, this historic town transforms into a lively spectacle, with the famous Nizwa goat market at its heart. This weekly event is eagerly anticipated by local farmers and traders, while curious visitors prepare to immerse themselves in an authentic Omani experience. The air is infused with the scents of spices, livestock and the excitement of a new week beginning, creating an irresistible invitation for anyone willing to embrace it.

Upon arrival at the market around 6:30 am, the parking area buzzes with activity. Groups of men clad in pale dishdashas hurriedly unload Hilux pickup trucks filled with goats, while the distant sounds of bleating reverberate throughout the already vibrant atmosphere. The route to the market is often shared with makeshift stalls overflowing with goods — from textiles to colourful spices — evidence that this gathering is more than just a livestock fair; it is a lively intersection of culture and community.

Crossing the threshold of the circular goat market, one is immediately greeted by warm, rustic aromas reminiscent of rural life, intermingled with joyous laughter and the sounds of children at play. There is no formal entrance; instead, a natural flow of people navigates through small openings, showcasing the inviting nature of this environment. This is not merely a tourist attraction; it is a weekly ritual for the Omani people, an integral aspect of their livelihood and community.

Stepping further inside, visitors are enveloped by a tapestry of sights and sounds: men sip steaming cups of tea, donkeys bray in the background and goats of all shapes and sizes are tethered to red metal poles, their woolly coats glowing in the morning sun. An exhilarating charm fills the air as merchants call out to prospective buyers, their voices rising above the din, while bright-eyed children climb onto the roofs for a better view of the unfolding scene.

The market embodies a celebration of Oman's pastoral heritage. Captivated by the abundance on display, onlookers can observe scruffy goats with mischief in their eyes, fluffy kids frolicking under the watchful gazes of their owners and formidable rams swaggering about the arena. Many goats are known to fetch upwards of 300 OMR (around £750), heightening the level of respect for the transaction process, where proud owners showcase their livestock with practiced flair.

As the market continues, visitors may take a seat on raised ledges, watching friendly interactions unfold among local men. Greetings and laughter echo through the air, bridging any language barrier through shared enthusiasm for this unique gathering.

As the sun rises higher, excitement escalates. The goats are paraded in a dynamic spectacle, with traders showcasing their animals proudly. The atmosphere is charged with energy as men enthusiastically shout “huna, huna,” beckoning potential buyers. Observers can see traders examining the goats, inspecting various attributes that play a crucial role in the negotiations, where goats change hands for sums that may astound newcomers.



# THE ENCHANTING GOAT MARKET EXPERIENCE



The experience becomes even more exhilarating when cows — larger, more temperamental relatives of the goats — make an appearance. The crowd instinctively disperses when a hefty bull tries to escape, adding a dash of chaos to the scene. Laughter erupts as families scramble to dodge the antics of these unpredictable creatures, providing a stark contrast to the disciplined goats.

As the sun climbs higher in the sky, the energetic vibe of the market begins to wane. The morning bustle gradually gives way to an air of satisfaction, with families and traders wrapping up their

dealings. A low hum of conversation fills the air as people prepare to leave, glancing back at the marketplace one last time — an amalgamation of tradition, community and spirited commerce.

Before departing, many indulge in a local delicacy: karak tea, relished throughout Oman for its sweet, spiced warmth. This appealing beverage serves as the perfect way to round out the morning at the goat market. In this vibrant atmosphere, the deep sense of community embodied at the Nizwa goat market becomes clear — a beautiful experience that captures the essence of Omani culture, well worth the early start.