

17

RAMADHAN
1446 AH
MONDAY
MAR 17, 2025

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PRAYER TIMINGS

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25 26 27 28

29

FAJR

04:59 AM

DHUHR

12:20 PM

ASR

03:45 PM

MAGHRIB

06:22 PM

ISHA

07:32 PM

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INBRIEF

HM GREETINGS TO IRELAND PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Michael Daniel Higgins of Ireland on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Higgins. His Majesty also wishes the people of Ireland further development and growth.

OMAN, IRAN TO ENHANCE BILATERAL COOPERATION



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received at his office Dr Abbas Araghchi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the meeting, the two ministers explored means of enhancing bilateral cooperation in various fields. They also exchanged views on regional and international developments. In light of current developments, the two ministers underscored the importance of preparing the conditions that support diplomatic solutions and using channels of dialogue and peaceful means to tackle issues and de-escalate tensions. The meeting was attended by officials from both sides. — ONA

OMAN CALLS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY IN YEMEN

The Sultanate of Oman voiced deep concern over the recent military escalation in the sisterly Republic of Yemen and its resulting humanitarian repercussions and civilian casualties. It expressed its regret over the ongoing military operations which worsens the suffering of the Yemeni people and increases instability in the region. In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Sunday, the Sultanate of Oman reiterated its firm stance calling for peaceful solutions through dialogue and negotiation warning of the repercussions of military action on the security and stability in the region. The Sultanate of Oman called for addressing the root causes of the crises through sustainable political solutions that ensure peace, stability, and development for the peoples of the region. It urged all parties to assume their responsibilities in maintaining peace and avoiding further escalation. — ONA

Israel kills 14 as truce talks hit by divisions

ISRAEL AND Hamas are set for more indirect talks on the Gaza ceasefire, but deep divisions persist between the two sides on the terms of the fragile truce.

Mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, the initial phase of the ceasefire took effect on January 19, largely halting 15 months of deadly fighting in Gaza triggered by October 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

That phase ended in early March, and though both sides have since refrained from all-out war, they have been unable to agree on the next stage of the ceasefire in the Palestinian territory.

Late on Saturday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed Israeli negotiators to continue the talks, his office said. He directed them to base the negotiations on what his office said was a proposal by US Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff that calls for the “immediate release of 11 living captives and half of the deceased captives”.

However, Witkoff told CNN on Sunday he had offered a “bridge proposal” that would see five living captives, including Israeli-American Edan Alexander, released in return for freeing a “substantial amount of Palestinian prisoners” from Israel jails. “I thought the proposal was compelling,” Witkoff said.

“The Israelis were informed about it and advised about it beforehand and after waiting for two or three days for Hamas... we got an unacceptable response.

“It was totally unacceptable. I think there is an opportunity for them but the opportunity is closing fast,” Witkoff said.

A Hamas official said the group was ready to release Alexander and the bodies of four



Palestinians gather for a mass Iftar meal in Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip on Sunday. — AFP

other Israeli-Americans.

Meanwhile, Israeli military strikes have killed at least 14 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours, the enclave's Health Ministry said on Sunday.

Palestinian officials say dozens of people have been killed by Israeli fire despite the January 19 truce that halted large-scale fighting in Gaza.

Gaza's Health Ministry said most of the latest deaths took place on Saturday when an Israeli air strike killed nine Palestinians including four journalists in the town of Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip. Salama Marouf, the head of the Gaza government media office, said the military's statement about the incident included the names of people who were not present. — Agencies

Oman committed to provide affordable food

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

The Sultanate of Oman on Sunday organised a symposium themed ‘The Right to Food’ to mark the Arab Human Rights Day, which falls on March 16 every year. The symposium, held at the Diplomatic Club, was aimed to raise public awareness about the importance of advancing human rights in accordance with international and

regional conventions. It also focused on the Sultanate of Oman's efforts to enhance food security and related national policies.

The symposium was held under the auspices of Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs. It was organised by Oman Human Rights Commission in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry.

The event highlighted national and regional legislation on ensuring

the right to food security. It underlined the Sultanate of Oman's role in supporting humanitarian issues, notably the rights of Palestinian people.

In a speech at the symposium, Saleh bin Yahya al Maskari, Head of the Global Affairs Department at the Foreign Ministry, said that the right to food is not only related to the availability of food but also to the diversity, affordability and accessibility to food.

“The worsening of the food crisis in the Gaza Strip due to Israel's closure of crossings and the occupation state's prevention of the entry of humanitarian aid to more than two million Palestinians in Gaza constitutes a flagrant violation of international conventions and treaties, as well as international humanitarian law which underscores the need to provide basic livelihood needs to civilians without obstacles,” Al Maskari added. **TURN TO P2**

Pacts for service provision at Sorouh projects

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning signed 24 cooperation agreements for the provision of infrastructure and services at the Sorouh Integrated Residential Neighbourhoods projects, at the headquarters of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), on Sunday.

The agreements represent part of the ministry's efforts aimed at developing integrated residential quarters and schemes. Three agreements were signed for each of Sorouh projects covering the construction of water and sewage networks, electricity distribution networks and the development of Internet infrastructure. These services will cover eight quarters of Al Azm, Al Samou, Al Noor, Al Luban, Majd, Al Ahd,



The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning signed 24 cooperation agreements.

Hisn Al Zain and Tital Al Nakheel.

Eng Hamad bin Ali al Nazwani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning for Housing, said that signing of the agreements constitutes

a pivotal step in the development of integrated residential neighbourhoods. He pointed out that cooperation with service providers reflects the ministry's commitment to implementing state-of-the-art infrastructure that enhances the attractiveness of modern residential quarters.

These agreements would accelerate the implementation of basic services, keeping pace with citizens' aspirations for a sustainable residential environment. Al Nazwani said that the signing of the agreements is in line with the Oman Vision 2040 which prioritises sustainability and quality of life. The signing of cooperation agreements between real estate developers and providers of electricity, water, and wastewater services. **SEE P2**

OMAN

OMAN COMMITTED TO PROVIDE FOOD AT AFFORDABLE PRICES

FROM PAGE 1

He emphasised that Oman pays great attention to food security, and is constantly working to strengthen food security system and accelerate the transition towards efficient agricultural food systems capable of withstanding global challenges.

For his part, Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of Oman Human Rights Commission, said that the celebration of the event affirms Arab countries’ commitment to the protection of human rights in line with regional and international conventions.

Dr Al Balushi said: “Choosing the right to food as a slogan to commemorate this year’s Arab Human Rights Day, is an affirmation of one of the most important fundamental human rights. Food is a fundamental right guaranteed by international agreements and treaties, and is an integral part of the human right to a dignified life and sustainable development.”

The symposium is aimed at raising awareness of the importance of the right to food as a fundamental right under international and regional human rights conventions, discuss the Sultanate of Oman’s efforts to promote food security and related national policies, highlight the humanitarian efforts undertaken by Oman, and highlight its role in supporting humanitarian issues, especially with regard to the Palestinians.

The celebration of Arab Human Rights Day affirms Arab countries’ commitment to international and regional human rights conventions and agreements, particularly the Arab Charter on Human Rights. It represents an opportunity to review and evaluate human rights achievements and challenges in the Arab world, and to promote dialogue with the aim of developing policies and legislation that guarantee human rights in Arab countries.

The symposium included working papers in which the first working paper, presented by Dr Saleh bin Hamad al Barashdi, Chairman of the Monitoring and Complaints Committee, addressed international and regional conventions related to the right to food. He reviewed the most prominent agreements and treaties that promote this right as a fundamental human right.

Al Barashdi stressed the importance of providing adequate food as part of the right to an adequate standard of living. He also addressed the Arab Charter on Human Rights, explaining the role of these conventions in promoting food security and ensuring access to healthy food.

In the second working paper, Eng Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Shukaili, Director of the Investment Department at the Directorate-General of Agricultural and Fisheries Marketing at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, discussed food security in Oman, the concept of food security and the link between Oman Vision 2040 and the ministry’s strategies, the components of the food production sector, and performance indicators. He stated that Oman ranked third among 113 countries according to the 2022 Global Food Security Index, ranking third in the Arab world and 35th globally.

Mohammed bin Ali al Musafir, CEO of Al Rahma Association, spoke about Al Rahma Association’s efforts to provide basic needs for individuals and families, empower individuals and families to be productive and active members of society, strive to achieve financial sustainability, and the association’s efforts in cooperation with the Oman Charitable Organisation for Gaza Relief. He also highlighted the association’s role in social care, family and psychological counselling and research and studies. Arab Human Rights Day is an occasion aimed at raising awareness of human rights in Arab countries and highlighting efforts to consolidate the principles of justice and equality.



SULTAN’S SPECIAL FORCE MARKS ANNUAL DAY

MUSCAT: The Sultan’s Special Force (SSF) on Sunday celebrated its annual day which falls on March 15 every year.

The ceremony, which saw the graduation of a new batch of soldier recruits, was held under the auspices of Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office.

Upon the arrival of the chief guest at Al Sumood Camp’s military parade ground, the Royal Guard of Oman’s band played the Royal Anthem. The column of the graduates gave the military salute to the chief guest. Gen Sultan al Numani inspected the front row of the column. Then, the graduates performed a military show, passing in front of the dais, and they gave the military salute to the chief guest.

Then, Gen Sultan al Numani handed over prizes to the top graduates. The graduates took the Oath of Allegiance and chanted thrice, ‘Long live His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander’

Later, the chief guest presented the ‘Medal of Excellent Service’ and the ‘Medal of Royal Commendation’ to senior officers, officers and non-commissioned officers from the SSF in appreciation of their dedication to the sacred national duty. — ONA

Pacts inked for service provision at Sorouh projects

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

THE Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning signed 24 cooperation agreements for the provision of infrastructure and services at the Sorouh Integrated Residential Neighbourhoods projects, at the headquarters of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), on Sunday.

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Eng Hamad bin Ali al Nazwani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning for Housing, said that signing of the agreements constitutes a pivotal step in the development of integrated residential neighbourhoods. He pointed out that cooperation with service providers reflects the ministry’s commitment to



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implementing state-of-the-art infrastructure that enhances the attractiveness of modern residential quarters.

These agreements would accelerate the implementation of basic services, keeping pace with citizens’ aspirations for a sustainable residential environment. Al Nazwani said that the signing of the agreements is in line with the Oman Vision 2040 which prioritises sustainability and quality of life.

Dr Mansour bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman

of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), emphasized that the signing of cooperation agreements between real estate developers and providers of electricity, water, and wastewater services, is a strategic step to enhance integration between relevant entities to ensure the provision of integrated and sustainable infrastructure for modern residential projects.

Al Hinai explained that the APSR, being the authority responsible for regulating the electricity, water, and wastewater sectors, endeavours to ensure efficient delivery of basic services as per the highest standards thus contributing to the creation of an advanced urban environment that supports urban development plans in the Sultanate of Oman. He noted that these agreements would boost the efficiency of residential project implementation by enhancing coordination between real estate developers and basic services providers to ensure the provision of reliable and sustainable services to new residential.

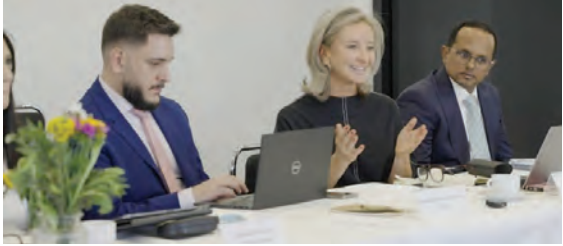
The signing ceremony was attended by the CEOs of Sorouh projects and representatives of Nama Water and Wastewater Company, Nama Electricity Distribution Company and Oman Broadband.

Visit Oman hosts roundtable at ITB Berlin

MUSCAT: Visit Oman, organised a high-level roundtable at the premiere travel industry event, ITB Berlin, by the Global Travel and Tourism Resilience Council. Maitha bint Saif al Mahrouqiyah, Oman’s Ambassador to Germany, attended the roundtable as the guest of honour.

The event welcomed senior executives from Trip.com, Sabre, Travelzoo, Mastercard, ICF and MMGY, representing some of the influential travel and tourism companies across Germany, France, China, the Middle East, the US and the UK.

Visit Oman shed light on the National Priorities of Oman Vision 2040 related to sustainability, the initiatives carried out to achieve Oman’s National Strategy for an Orderly Transition to Net-Zero, Oman’s first



net-zero energy city by 2025 (The Sustainable City Yiti), and local communities as a crucial component of sustainable tourism.

Dr Hashil al Mahrouqi, Chief Executive Officer of OMRAN Group, said, “Sustainability is a core pillar of our tourism development strategy, driving economic growth while preserving Oman’s natural and cultural heritage. Through our ESG framework, we integrate

responsible tourism principles to minimise environmental impact, empower local communities and enhance governance, ensuring long-term resilience.”

Shabib al Maamari, Managing Director of Visit Oman, said, “Our collaboration with the Resilience Council offers us an excellent opportunity to engage with and learn from global sustainability leaders. Recognising that over 80 per cent of travellers prioritise sustainable travel and seek authentic, eco-conscious experiences, our strategic focus is on accelerating the accessibility of Omani tourism offerings through digital distribution. By closely collaborating with our local partners, we are actively adapting our strategies to not only meet but exceed these evolving traveller expectations.”

Barka Biodiversity Centre boosts Oman’s wildlife conservation

BARKA: The Barka Biodiversity Centre stands as one of the Sultanate of Oman’s most significant environmental projects, dedicated to the protection of endangered wildlife and their successful reintroduction into their natural habitats. This initiative plays a vital role in the nation’s pursuit of sustainable development while safeguarding its rich environmental heritage.

Eng Salim bin Said al Maskari, Director of the Environment Department in Al Batinah South Governorate, emphasised that the centre serves as a comprehensive

platform for rescuing, rehabilitating and propagating local wildlife. It also contributes significantly to the education and scientific fields related to wildlife management. The centre provides medical care for wild animals, with a strong focus on endangered species, while raising community awareness about the importance of environmental conservation.

Spanning 33,000 square metres, the centre is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, including a veterinary clinic, breeding pens, and isolation cages for animal care. Since its establishment, the centre



The Centre plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of Oman’s unique wildlife

has successfully bred various wild animals such as the Arabian gazelle, the oryx and the sand gazelle, in addition to rehabilitating several bird species, including the Egyptian vulture, bald eagle and falcons.

The centre also includes a nursery for Omani wild plants, producing approximately 8,000 seedlings annually of local species such as samr, sidr, wild ghaf, shoa and markh. This nursery supports the national initiative to distribute ten million Omani wild tree seedlings, aimed at enhancing the nation’s vegetation cover and preserving its native plant species.

The Biodiversity Centre is a prime example of Oman’s commitment to preserving its natural resources and biodiversity. Through clear objectives and sustainable practices, the centre is paving the way for future generations to experience and benefit from natural heritage.

The Centre is a vital part of Oman’s commitment to preserving its natural heritage. By offering a sanctuary for endangered species and a platform for scientific research, it plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the country’s unique wildlife. — ONA



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SHORTTAKES



The incubator aims to provide a comprehensive service to SMEs

SMEDA UNVEILS
BUSINESS INCUBATOR
IN WILAYAT OF NIZWA

NIZWA: The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) officially inaugurated its business incubator in the Wilayat of Nizwa, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The launch, under the auspices of Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, marks a significant step in supporting entrepreneurship and enhancing Oman's innovation ecosystem.

The new incubator aims to provide a comprehensive suite of services to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including office spaces, mentorship, training, networking with investors, technical and administrative consulting, and financing opportunities. This initiative is designed to help entrepreneurs transform their ideas into successful projects, contributing to economic growth in the region.

The facility is a key addition to the local entrepreneurship landscape, aligning with Oman Vision 2040's goal of building a knowledge-based, innovative economy. The incubator will also support job creation and foster youth participation in economic development.

At the opening ceremony, attendees enjoyed a visual presentation and a tour of the incubator's ongoing projects. This development adds to SMEDA's portfolio of 26 public and specialised incubators across Oman, hosting a total of 129 enterprises and providing a national workforce of 243 employees. — ONA



The week featured activities, dialogue sessions and endowment projects

NIZWA HOSTS 9TH
GULF ENDOWMENT
WEEK

NIZWA: The ninth Gulf Endowment Week was inaugurated at Nizwa Fort under the theme 'Endowment and Community Building.' The three-day event is organised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs under the auspices of Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah.

The Gulf Endowment Week aims to raise awareness about the culture of endowments and their crucial role in fostering community development. The event highlights the impact of endowments in supporting key social sectors and strengthening community solidarity.

Ahmed bin Nasser al Harthy, Director of the Endowments and Treasury Department at the ministry, emphasised the importance of endowments in sustainable development, particularly in education, health and social sectors. He also underlined the ministry's efforts to promote endowments as a tool for sustainable development, urging community members to engage with and utilise available endowment opportunities.

The event is part of the ministry's ongoing efforts to promote endowments as a key driver of social and economic development, in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040. — ONA

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

AMID growing environmental challenges, preserving biodiversity and protecting plant species from extinction has become a pressing need. The Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Center (Mawarid), under the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, is at the forefront of this mission. The centre conducts annual field expeditions to collect and conserve plant samples, ensuring the protection of Oman's natural heritage, advancing genetic research, and fostering economic applications in various sectors.

Despite the demanding nature of this work, the Mawarid team remains committed to six key objectives. They are:

Biodiversity conservation: Climate change and human activity threaten several Omani plant species. To counter this, the centre collects and stores seeds in gene banks, securing their survival for future generations. Between 2018 and 2024, Mawarid carried out 81 field missions across 231 sites in 50 governorates, documenting 352 plant species - 18 of which are classified as endangered by the International Union for



DR MOHAMMED
BIN NASSER AL
YAHYAI

Mawarid's work safeguards Oman's rich biodiversity, enhances scientific research, and unlocks economic potential in agriculture



Biodiversity conservation remains a collective responsibility for the research teams at Mawarid

Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Adaptation research: Omani flora thrive in extreme environments, enduring high temperatures and prolonged droughts. By studying their genetic traits, researchers aim to enhance environmental sustainability and apply findings to improve agricultural productivity.

Economic potential: The Sultanate of Oman is exploring the commercial use of native plants in agriculture and industry. Mawarid is working on an agreement with the Oman Date Palm Development Company to cultivate select species for oil extraction and active ingredient production, boosting economic returns.

Seed conservation for climate

resilience: With the increasing frequency of natural disasters and climate fluctuations, preserving plant seeds is a strategic priority.

Scientific advancements: Plant genetic resources provide valuable material for research. Mawarid's studies have led to the publication of peer-reviewed papers on plants such as the Omani shua tree, chaste tree (Vitex agnus-castus L), beedman plant (Salvia macilenta Boiss.), and wild lavender (Lavandula subnuda), recognised for their medicinal and aromatic properties.

Community awareness: Oman is home to rare endemic plant species that form an integral part of its agricultural and cultural heritage. To raise awareness, Mawarid conducts scientific lectures, field visits, and media engagements, promoting the significance of genetic resources for environmental and economic sustainability.

Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Yahyai, Director of Mawarid Research Centre, said: "The world is changing at an unprecedented pace due to unsustainable human activities that disrupt ecosystems. Our genetic resources are vital for food, medicine, and well-being. Collaborating with national institutions, we strive to safeguard threatened and overlooked plant species while raising public awareness."

Deadline set for pvt
healthcare to join
Dhamani platform



MUSCAT: The Financial Services Authority (FSA) has issued a notice to all private healthcare complexes and clinics (providing health insurance services) regarding the requirement to connect and join the Dhamani electronic platform as per the electronic linkage regulation for the Health Insurance System, issued by the Authority's Decision 83/2023.

Article 2 stipulated that health insurance practitioners must carry out all health insurance transactions and exchange information through the platform from the date the policy is issued until its coverage ends.

FSA has issued a second reminder that the final deadline for submitting connection and onboarding requests to the platform is the end of March 2025 and emphasised that institutions failing to connect to the Dhamani electronic platform will be removed from the networks of healthcare service providers affiliated with insurance companies.

The Dhamani electronic platform represents a significant advancement in health insurance technologies due to its positive impact in expediting treatment approvals and facilitating direct payment processes for private healthcare institutions.



جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY



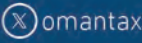
Announcement

The Tax Authority would inform taxpayers who are subject to Income Tax, and their fiscal year ends on **December 31, 2024**, to file their tax returns and pay their tax dues as follows:

- Establishments which are subject to (3%) of income tax shall file their tax returns no later than **March 30, 2025**.
- Taxpayers paying (15%) of income tax should file their tax returns no later than **April 30, 2025**.

All tax returns should be submitted according to the forms set for that purpose using the Tax Authority's online portal at www.taxman.gov.om

We hope all taxpayers comply with filing their tax returns on the deadline.

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taxoman

1020

RAMADHAN

Break the fast wisely — choose nutritious, balanced meals over binge eating

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

FASTING DURING the holy month of Ramadhan is a deeply spiritual experience for Muslims. However, for individuals with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, or kidney conditions, the decision to fast requires careful preparation and medical guidance. According to Dr Nisanth Kallinkeel, a specialist in internal medicine at NMC Specialist Hospital, Al Hail, most individuals with chronic conditions can observe fasting if they plan in advance.

STEPS FOR A SAFE FASTING EXPERIENCE: Consult your physician before Ramadhan to adjust medication doses, meal plans and exercise routines. Never stop life-saving medications without medical advice and monitor blood sugar levels regularly if you have diabetes. Always stay hydrated and avoid excessive caffeine, sugary drinks, or fatty foods.

“
Diabetes management requires medical fitness assessment, blood tests and family awareness of low/high blood sugar symptoms.

SUMAIRA FATIMA MIRZA
Dietitian

Break the fast wisely — choose nutritious, balanced meals over binge eating. Fasting may not be suitable for pregnant women with high blood pressure or gestational diabetes. Many chronically ill individuals experience guilt for not fasting. However, Islam emphasises intention and well-being, and those who cannot fast can still earn blessings through good deeds. Registered Dietitian Sumaira Fatima Mirza stresses the importance of portion control and a balanced diet during Suhoor and Iftar. Diabetes management requires medical fitness assessment, blood tests and family awareness of low/high blood sugar symptoms. Pregnant women should focus on high-calorie, nutrient-rich meals, including protein and healthy fats. Nutritious meal choices include oat soups, harees, lentil soup, lean meats, fresh fruits and laban. Post-Taraweeh snacks and good sleep enhance overall health during fasting. Dr Nisanth also highlights Ramadhan as an opportunity to quit unhealthy habits like smoking, leading to lifelong health benefits. With proper planning, medical advice and mindful eating, fasting can be a safe and fulfilling experience for many. However, when health is at risk, seeking alternative ways to observe Ramadhan spiritually is the best choice.



SAFE FASTING FOR
CHRONIC
CONDITIONS

SHORT TAKES



Essential food items to over 200 families were distributed

KO, TECHNO AID
OVER 200 FAMILIES
DURING RAMADHAN

MUSCAT: Knowledge Oman (KO) has partnered with Techno to distribute essential food items to over 200 families across Al Maabela, Al Amerat, Samayil, Nizwa and Saham. This initiative brought together KO team members, Techno employees and volunteers from the National University of Science and Technology, reinforcing the power of collaboration and community service.

Speaking on the partnership, Omar al Bahri, General Manager of Techno Plastic Industry, emphasised the company's commitment to corporate social responsibility: "At Techno, we strongly believe in giving back to the community. Partnering with Knowledge Oman has been a fulfilling experience, allowing us to extend support to families in need. This initiative reflects our commitment to making a positive difference, especially during Ramadhan."

Tariq al Barwani, Founder, Knowledge Oman (KO), highlighted the significance of giving back: "Through this initiative, we aim to uphold the values of solidarity and kindness that define our society. Seeing volunteers from different backgrounds come together to support families in need is a testament to the strength of community-driven efforts. We are grateful to Techno and our volunteers for making this possible."



US ENVOY VISITS
SHOMOUKH,
AL MOUJ CAMPUS

MUSCAT: Shomoukh, Al Mouj Campus had the honour of hosting Ana Escrogima, US Ambassador to Oman. The ambassador was warmly welcomed by students and taken on a comprehensive tour of the state-of-the-art campus. The visit commenced with a speech by Shaikh Julanda bin Salim al Hashmi, Vice-President of Global Education Services (GES Quality Education), highlighting the organisation's dedication to nurturing future leaders.

The GES team presented an overview of key initiatives and future projects aimed at enhancing educational experiences across Oman. "We are honoured to host Ana Escrogima and share our vision for the future of education. This visit emphasises the importance of international collaboration in shaping the next generation," said Shaikha Jinan bint Salim al Hashmiyah.

200
PARTICIPANTS
COMPETE
IN ADAMS
SONS QURAN
CONTEST

MUSCAT: The prestigious Adams Sons Quran Competition celebrated its 21st edition on March 13, Thursday, under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, along with esteemed dignitaries and scholars. Since its inception in 2004, the competition has been a beacon of inspiration, encouraging young individuals and adults to master the recitation and memorisation of the Holy Quran.

Ismail Mohamed Adam Al Saigh, Managing Director of Adams Sons Jewellery, in his welcome address highlighted the competition's enduring legacy.

The competition featured four categories, memorisation of the entire Quran, memorisation of 15 chapters, recitation for ages 15 and



The competition was held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari

above and recitation for ages 14 and below.

With an overwhelming response, around 200 participants from eight nationalities competed, showcasing their dedication to the Quran. A

distinguished panel of renowned Shaikhs from Oman meticulously evaluated the recitations.

Winners of the 21st edition are: memorisation of the entire Quran – Abdulrahman Al Basheer Harshah, memorisation of 15 chapters – Mohammed bin Khamis al Yaqoubi, recitation for ages 15 and above – Suhaib bin Hilal al Siyabi, recitation for ages 14 and below – Moaid bin Hilal al Hasani.

This year's significant milestone was the digital upgrade of the registration process, allowing participants to register online and select their preferred time slots for the first round. With an audience of over 300 attendees, including families and well-wishers, the event was a resounding success, fostering a deep sense of faith and unity.

Oman boosts vocational,
technical education

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, through the Directorate-General of Vocational and Technical Education, continues to enhance vocational and technical education, aligning it with labour market demands and the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.

As part of this initiative, the current academic year has seen significant developments across various disciplines, including business administration, information technology, and engineering and industrial specialisations.

Meanwhile, preparations are underway for the upcoming 2025-2026 academic year to welcome new students into these programmes.

To support students in private training institutions, the Directorate has distributed all second-semester textbooks for engineering and industrial specialisations, covering fields such as engineering maintenance, mechanical manufacturing, occupational health and safety, structural maintenance, lifting and lowering operations, welding and metal forming.

These curricula were developed under the supervision of the Oman Energy Association (OPAL) and underwent rigorous scientific and technical reviews by experts from the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education. Currently, efforts are focused on preparing grade 12 curricula for both semesters, ensuring continued progress in this educational track.

In anticipation of the 2025-2026 academic year, the Directorate has launched awareness and educational programmes across post-basic education schools in Muscat and Al Batinah North. These initiatives, carried out in collaboration with the Centre for Career Guidance and Student Counselling, aim to introduce students and parents to vocational and technical education opportunities.



The Directorate has distributed all second-semester textbooks for engineering and industrial specialisations

The programmes include school visits, career guidance sessions and participation in educational fairs such as the University Specialisations and Training Programmes Exhibition in Al Batinah North.

Additionally, the Directorate is preparing to showcase vocational and technical education at the 29th edition of the Muscat Book Fair to expand awareness among the broader community.

To ensure the effectiveness of these programmes, the Directorate has conducted technical evaluations of schools offering vocational and technical education, as well as private training institutions specialising in engineering and industrial fields.

These assessments aim to monitor educational progress and

optimise learning outcomes.

Also, ongoing discussions with key stakeholders address administrative and logistical matters, training institution contracts and alignment with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation to ensure transition for graduates into higher education and the workforce.

Oman is actively strengthening this educational track, positioning it as a cornerstone for developing skilled national talent and meeting the evolving needs of various economic sectors.

Through strategic partnerships with the private sector and academic institutions, vocational and technical education is fostering employment opportunities and driving sustainable development, in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Shinas Port achieves record growth in trade, cargo handling

SHINAS: Shinas Port, one of Oman's key strategic maritime hubs located in Al Batinah North Governorate, has recorded significant growth in 2024, strengthening its role in national and international trade.

Latest statistics reveal an impressive 41 per cent increase in the number of ships passing through the port, with a total of 707 vessels docking in the past year. The port also handled over 100,000 tonnes of goods, with a total trade value exceeding RO 11.5 million.

Khater bin Ali al Maamari, Executive Director of Shinas Port, noted that the increase in cargo volume underscores the port's growing importance in facilitating economic activities across various sectors.

He detailed the breakdown of imports, which reached 91,343 tonnes, including 21,665.98 tonnes of building materials, 4,083.07 tonnes of food products and 4,273.68 tonnes of general goods.

The port also facilitated the



The port handled over 100,000 tonnes of goods, with a total trade value exceeding RO 11.5 million

import of 15,815 livestock animals, equivalent to 469 tonnes.

Exports through Shinas Port totalled 11,676.12 tonnes, with major shipments comprising 461 tonnes of building materials, 33 tonnes of food items and 8,643 tonnes of general cargo.

The port also recorded significant livestock exports, with 70,761 animals weighing approximately 2,133 tonnes.

The substantial growth in trade activity at Shinas Port reflects

Oman's ongoing efforts to enhance its maritime infrastructure and logistical capabilities.

The port plays a crucial role in supporting national industries, streamlining trade and improving supply chain efficiency.

With increasing vessel traffic and cargo handling capabilities, Shinas Port is poised to further contribute to the country's economic diversification and strengthen its position as a leading trade gateway in the region. – ONA

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Demonstrators gather to support former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. — Reuters

BRAZIL’S BOLSONARO STAGES RALLY AHEAD OF POSSIBLE TRIAL

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil’s far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro, who could face trial for allegedly masterminding an attempted coup, is hoping for a major show of support at a rally in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. Bolsonaro, 69, has called for what he claims could be a million of his supporters to demonstrate on Rio’s famed Copacabana beach in a show of strength while he plans a comeback in elections next year. “Let’s send a message to Brazil and the world,” the 69-year-old said.

The rally’s stated purpose is to demand amnesty for hundreds convicted over the January 8, 2023 riots in the capital Brasília, when Bolsonaro backers stormed the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court. The demonstrators demanded that the military oust leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who had defeated arch-rival Bolsonaro in the October 2022 elections and had been sworn in just a week earlier. On March 25, Brazil’s Supreme Court will consider whether there is sufficient evidence to try Bolsonaro, who risks a prison term of more than 40 years. — AFP

TÜRKIYE CALLS ON EU TO LIFT SYRIA SANCTIONS



A child carried on shoulders cheers as crowds gather, in Homs, Syria. — AFP

ISTANBUL: Türkiye on Sunday called on the European Union to unconditionally lift sanctions on Syria, ahead of an international aid conference in Brussels to which the war-torn country’s new authorities have been invited. Ankara views such a step as necessary for a “peaceful transition” in the country, Türkiye’s foreign ministry said in a statement.

The European Union will host the ninth international conference in support of Syria. For the first time, representatives of Syria’s government -- the new interim authorities -- have been invited to attend. The event aims to raise international support for Syria’s transition and recovery after more than 13 years of civil war.

The European bloc on February 24 already announced an easing of sanctions on Syria’s energy, transport and banking sectors to relieve some of the challenges facing Ahmed al Sharaa, Syria’s interim president. But Europe and other powers remain wary over what direction Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) -- which spearheaded the lightning offensive that toppled Assad on December 8 -- may take Syria. — AFP

BORDERS UNREST

Azerbaijan says Armenia fired in borders



Azerbaijan on Sunday accused Armenian forces of shooting at Azerbaijani positions from the southern Syunik province of Armenia. Azerbaijan’s defence ministry said in a statement that Armenian forces had opened fire on Sunday morning from the Goris area. Armenia’s defence ministry said the statement from Azerbaijan was untrue. Baku and Yerevan said on Thursday that they had agreed the text of a peace agreement to end nearly four decades of conflict. — Reuters

BANGLADESH COURT UPHOLDS DEATH SENTENCE OF 20 STUDENTS IN MURDER CASE

DHAKA: A court in Bangladesh upheld on Sunday death sentences of 20 former university students convicted of murdering a fellow student in 2019 who had criticised the country’s former government on social media. Abrar Fahad, 21, a student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), was killed hours after publishing a Facebook post that criticised the then government of Sheikh Hasina for signing a water-

sharing treaty with India. Fahad was beaten for nearly six hours with cricket bats by a group of 25 students, all members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of former prime minister’s political party, the Awami League. The student wing was accused of creating a reign of terror on university campuses before Hasina was ousted last year following a student-led uprising. “I am satisfied. I hope the legal procedures will be completed soon,

and justice will be served,” Fahad’s father, Barkat Ullah, said. “I don’t want to blame the parents who sent their sons to the top university, but they got involved in bad politics. I would urge others to stay away from harmful activities,” he added. Fahad’s killing sparked nationwide protests, forcing Hasina to pledge the highest punishment for the perpetrators. Due legal process will be followed to implement the verdict, Attorney General Md Asaduzzaman told reporters. — AFP

US launches large-scale strikes on Yemen, 31 killed

US President Donald Trump launched large-scale military strikes against Yemeni group on Saturday over the group’s attacks against Red Sea shipping, killing at least 31 people at the start of a campaign expected to last many days. Trump also warned Iran that it needed to immediately halt support for the group. He said if Iran threatened the United States, “America will hold you fully accountable and, we won’t be nice about it!” The top Commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards reacted on Sunday by saying the Yemenis are independent and take their own strategic and operational decisions. “We warn our enemies that Iran will respond decisively and destructively if they take their threats into action,” Hossein Salami told state media.

The unfolding strikes - which one US official said might continue for weeks - represent the biggest US military operation in the Middle East since Trump took office in January. It came as the United States ramped up sanctions pressure on Tehran while trying to bring it to the negotiating table over its nuclear programme.

At least 31 were killed and 101 others injured in the US strikes, mostly women and children, Anees al Asbahi, spokesperson for the health ministry said in an updated toll on Sunday. The group’s political bureau described the attacks as a “war crime.” “Our Yemeni armed forces are fully prepared to respond to escalation with escalation,” it said in a statement.

Strikes also targeted military sites in Yemen’s southwestern city of Taiz,



People gather on the rubble of a house hit by a US strike in Saada, Yemen. — Reuters

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two witnesses in the area said on Sunday. Another strike on a power station in the town of Dahyan in Saada led to a power cut, Al Masirah TV reported early on Sunday.

The Yemeni group, an armed movement that took control of most of Yemen over the past decade, have launched scores of attacks on ships off its coast since November 2023, disrupting global commerce and setting the US military on a costly campaign to intercept missiles and drones that have burned through stocks of US air defences. A Pentagon spokesperson said that they have attacked US warships 174 times and commercial vessels 145 times since 2023. The Yemenis say the attacks are in solidarity with Palestinians over Israel’s war in Gaza with Hamas.

The US military’s Central Command, which oversees troops in the Middle East, described

Saturday’s strikes as the start of a large-scale operation across Yemen. The strikes on Saturday were carried out in part by fighter aircraft from the Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, which is in the Red Sea, officials said.

Iran’s foreign ministry condemned strikes on Yemen as a “gross violation of the principles of the United Nations Charter and the fundamental rules of international law”, in a statement shared by state media.

The Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said the US government had “no authority, or business, dictating Iranian foreign policy.” “End support for Israeli genocide and terrorism. Stop killing of Yemeni people,” he said in an X post early on Sunday. The group said it would resume attacks on Israeli ships, ending a period of relative calm with Gaza ceasefire. — Reuters



ISRAELI STRIKES KILL 14 GAZANS

Gaza: Israeli military strikes have killed at least 14 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours, the enclave’s Health Ministry said on Sunday, as Arab and US mediators work to shore up a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Palestinian officials say dozens of people have been killed by Israeli fire despite the January 19 truce that halted large-scale fighting in Gaza. Gaza’s Health Ministry said most of the latest deaths took place when an Israeli air strike killed nine Palestinians in the town of Beit Lahiya. Persistent bloodshed in Gaza underscores the fragility of ceasefire agreement mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States. — Reuters

GROWING VIOLENCE

Suicide attack in SW Pakistan kills 5



Gunmen drove a vehicle laden with explosives into a paramilitary convoy, killing at least five in southwestern Pakistan, just days after the same group hijacked a train and held hostages for 36 hours. Senior Superintendent of Police said more than 30 force members were wounded. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned the attack, which came as Pakistan deals with a growing security crisis in its regions bordering Afghanistan. — Reuters

CLIMATE HOTSPOT

Greece experiences weather ‘rollercoaster’



Greece is riding a weather “rollercoaster”, with temperatures spiking to a record high for March just ahead of a forecast bout of snow and frost, meteorologists said. The mercury soared to 31.4 degrees Celsius in the central town of Livadia -- the highest-ever recorded for March, according to National Observatory of Athens’ Meteo.gr. Across the country, other weather stations registered temperatures more typical of balmy May than the closing days of winter. — AFP

SHORT TAKES



Debris lies around damaged houses after a tornado touched down in Florissant, Missouri, US. — Reuters

AT LEAST 33 DEAD AS TORNADOES RAVAGE CENTRAL US

HOUSTON: At least 33 people have been killed and dozens more injured when tornadoes and violent storms raked across the central United States, as forecasters warned more severe weather was expected on Sunday. Local news showed roofs torn off homes and large trucks overturned.

The state police reported downed trees and power lines, as well as damage to buildings, with some areas severely impacted by “tornadoes, thunderstorms and large hail.” “It was the scariest thing I’ve ever been through, it was so fast, our ears were all about to burst,” Alicia Wilson, who was evacuated from her home in Missouri, told TV station KSDK.

Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders declared a state of emergency in response and said she had spoken with President Donald Trump. “He said to tell the people of Arkansas he loves them and he and his administration are here to help with whatever we need following last night’s tornadoes,” Sanders wrote on social media platform X. The National Weather Service (NWS) warned of “severe thunderstorms” from the Lower Great Lakes to the Southeast on Sunday. — AFP

CUBA BEGINS RESTORING POWER



Pockets of Cuba’s capital Havana saw the lights flicker back on though vast areas of the city and country continued without electricity on Sunday morning, after a nationwide grid collapse that knocked out power to 10 million people. Havana’s electric company said that approximately 19% of its clients in the city had seen power restored. Cuba’s energy and mines ministry said that it had fired up its Felton power plant, one of the country’s largest and a major benchmark for restoring power in the eastern provinces. — Reuters

TRUMP TARGETS VENEZUELA GANG WITH WARTIME ALIENS LAW

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump tried to invoke a law last used during World War II against Japanese residents to target a Venezuelan gang -- only to find his decision blocked by a judge. The US president had issued an order to deport alleged members of the Venezuelan drug gang Tren de Aragua, arguing he had a right to declare them “alien enemies” under a wartime act. But rights lawyers went to court and a federal judge ordered the administration not to

deport anyone until he has more time to consider the legality of the order.

In a proclamation, the White House declared that the transnational criminal organisation is closely linked to the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. “The result is a hybrid criminal state that is perpetrating an invasion of and predatory incursion into the United States,” the presidential statement said. Trump said Tren de Aragua

is “conducting irregular warfare against the territory of the United States both directly and at the direction, clandestine or otherwise, of the Maduro regime.”

The statement gives Trump’s Attorney General Pam Bondi 60 days to enact the ruling making all Tren de Aragua gang members “subject to immediate apprehension, detention and removal.” The detention and expulsion order will apply to all Venezuelan Tren de Aragua members. — AFP

Russia, US discuss ‘next steps’ to end Ukraine war

RUSSIA and the United States have discussed the “next steps” of how to end the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin said on Sunday, hours after Kyiv’s European allies urged Moscow to commit to an unconditional 30-day ceasefire. The United States this week proposed the halt in fighting in the more than three-year war after talks in Saudi Arabia, which Kyiv agreed to. Russian President Vladimir Putin has given no clear answer, instead listing a string of conditions and raising “serious questions” over the proposal.

Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelensky on Saturday accused the Kremlin of not wanting to end the war and warned that Moscow wanted to first “improve their situation on the battlefield” before agreeing to any ceasefire. Moscow said on Sunday that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov and that the pair had discussed “concrete aspects of the implementation of understandings” at a US-Russia summit in Saudi Arabia last month.

The February Riyadh gathering was the first high-level meeting between the United States and Russia since Moscow launched its attack. “Sergei Lavrov and Marco Rubio agreed to remain in contact,” the Russian foreign ministry said, with no mention of the US-suggested ceasefire. State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce said on Saturday that the pair had “discussed the next steps” on Ukraine. She also said Rubio and Lavrov “agreed to continue working towards restoring communication between the United States and Russia”.

The call came hours after the UK hosted a virtual summit on Ukraine, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer accusing Putin of “dragging his feet” on the ceasefire. “The ‘yes, but’ from Russia is not good enough,” Starmer said, calling for a stop to the “barbaric attacks on Ukraine once and for all”. Kyiv the next day said Russia launched 90 drones onto nine Ukrainian regions.

In his reaction to the ceasefire earlier this week, Putin said the initiative would benefit primarily Ukraine and not Russian forces, who he said are “advancing” in many



Firefighters work at the site of a building hit by a Russian drone strike, in Chernihiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

areas. He raised “serious questions” over the initiative. The proposal came as Russia -- which occupies swathes of southern and eastern Ukraine -- has had momentum in some areas of the front. It has ousted Ukrainian forces from parts of its Kursk region, where Kyiv hopes to hold onto Russian territory as a potential bargaining chip in any future negotiations. Putin said he wanted to discuss Moscow’s concerns with Trump in a phone call.

Zelensky said on Saturday that by not agreeing to the ceasefire, Putin was also going against Trump -- who has made overtures towards Russia -- and accused Moscow of trying to find ways not to end the war. He accused Putin of “lying about how a ceasefire is supposedly too complicated”.

Ukraine said on Sunday that one person was killed by a Russian drone strike on the city of Izyum -- in the Kharkiv region, which fell to Russia at the start of its Ukraine attack before being retaken by Kyiv’s forces.

Meanwhile, Russia on Sunday said it has

moved to safety 371 of its civilians from areas it retook from Ukrainian forces in its border Kursk region. Little was known on civilian life in the areas held by Ukraine since last summer and there has been some anger in Russia about the fate of those left behind under Ukrainian control and the lack of information from local officials. The civilians became trapped when Ukraine launched its surprise incursion in August 2024, more than two years into Russia’s offensive.

“In total since March 12th from liberated inhabited areas 371 people have been moved, including 14 children,” the acting Kursk region governor Alexander Khinshtein said on social media. Khinshtein said 220 of the civilians had been placed in temporary accommodation in the Kursk region, while the rest were staying with relatives. The Russian defence ministry published footage of mostly elderly people being taken by small vans from Sudzha and Kazachya Loknya, previously held by Ukraine. — AFP

Deadly fire at North Macedonia club kills 59, injures over 100

SKOPJE: Fire ripped through a packed club early on Sunday in the North Macedonian town of Kocani, killing 59 people and injuring more than 100, after sparks ignited the roof over a live event. Arrest warrants have been issued for four people in connection with the fire, said interior minister Pance Toskovski. State news agency Mia said that police have detained the owner of the club over the incident. One video from the event showed a band playing on stage flanked by two flares, the white sparks of which set the ceiling alight. Friends and family were separated in a panicked rush to the exits. As she tried to escape, Taseva fell to the ground and people trod over her, leaving her with an injury on her cheek. In the rush, she lost contact with her sister, who is still missing. “We can’t find her in any hospital,” she said.

Interior Minister Pance Toskovski confirmed that the fire, which

began at around 3 am (0200 GMT), was caused by “pyrotechnic devices” whose sparks triggered the blaze. About 148 people were hospitalised in Skopje, Kocani and surrounding towns, Health Minister Arben Taravari said at a press conference. Eighteen people were critically injured, Taravari said. North Macedonia’s MRT public broadcaster reported that 27 people were hospitalised at the Skopje City Hospital with severe burns, and another 23 were being treated at the Clinical Center. Among the injured were minors, it said. People searched for missing loved ones online and at hospitals across the country on Sunday.

Simeon Sokolov, 50, found his daughter Anastasija at the emergency ward of the September 8 hospital in the capital Skopje, where she was being treated for burns and smoke inhalation. “I just know that there are many children who



Emergency responders operate outside a hospital, in the town of Kocani, North Macedonia. — Reuters

have suffered,” he said. “Doctors are doing their job and the number is big.” Some patients were flown to neighbouring Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece for treatment, authorities from those countries said.

North Macedonia’s Public Prosecutor Ljupco Kocovski said five prosecutors would investigate the incident. “At the moment, orders have been issued for collecting of evidence” and some people were

being interviewed, Kocovski said, without elaborating. Firefighters doused the charred and smoking entrance to the “Pulse” club before dawn as ambulances rushed from the scene. Pictures showed the club’s corrugated iron roof burned through and collapsed in places, its interior wooden beams exposed and blackened.

North Macedonia Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski said on Facebook: “This is a difficult and very sad day for Macedonia! The loss of so many young lives is irreparable, the pain of the families, loved ones and friends is immeasurable.”

After visiting the injured in a hospital in Skopje, North Macedonia’s President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, dressed in black and fighting tears, said authorities were ready to do everything to help. “I simply cannot comprehend thi ... what a disaster, what a tragedy.” — AFP

OPINION

Online communities invigorate the spirit of Ramadhan



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Atime of prayer and spiritual reflection, Ramadhan has always been a period of community togetherness as families and friends gather to share meals, pray together and engage in spiritual invigoration. However, with many individuals and families living away from their homes owing to work, education and other compulsions, Ramadhan in the new millennium is being re-invented, with online forums becoming as popular as traditional ones. In Oman, many communities have extended families in other countries, and this makes a physical sharing of Ramadhan rituals difficult. However, there are ways in which technology has come together with faith to offer a unique religious and cultural experience. Shared religious content through digital reels on Tik Tok and Instagram are increasingly becoming popular. People routinely share Quranic recitations and educational videos on Ramadhan-related topics with children who may be studying in other countries as a form of education and cultural continuity. Also shared are the content of influential

scholars who offer daily reminders of supplications which help families staying away from each other to stay connected. Online lectures and virtual study circles also create a sense of community and allow for a shared sense of purpose. Virtual Iftars are another invention of the modern time. Families, divided by time and space, often come together over a shared digital space to share the joy of breaking the fast, even if some members of the family are still fasting. People staying away from home often find solace in sharing in the rituals of an Iftar preparation and arrangement via a Zoom or some other kind of social media streaming. This brings families together in a way that would have been impossible at an earlier time. In fact, even mosques in some countries live stream prayers to enable those who are physically apart to participate in this important experience. Charity is a central pillar of Islam and online platforms have made it possible to contribute and participate in select projects close to individuals. Crowdfunding for specific projects through social media

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campaigns make it easier for people to stay aware of causes across the globe and be personally supportive of activities in which it may be difficult to physically participate. Social media, for example has been extremely proactive in organising supplies for distribution of food and other essentials to Palestine through official organisations. Facilitating zakat through online forums have made it more possible for much needed resources to reach needy areas of the world. Online communities also offer emotional and mental support for those who may be alone and far from home. Negotiating fasting with a daily routine of work or study can be tough for many who then seek support from virtual sources. These platforms foster a sense of solidarity, reminding individuals that they are not alone in their journey. The spirit of Ramadhan has extended beyond physical spaces into becoming vibrant online communities, often replacing traditional social ties. They have re-defined how people observe and celebrate, making up for physical absences by using digital platforms to ensure an inclusive, engaging experience.

POPE FRANCIS STILL
REQUIRES THERAPY,
SAYS VATICAN

ALEXANDRIA SAGE

Pope Francis is improving but still requires various in-hospital therapies, the Vatican, even as it revealed the 88-year-old pontiff had laid plans to extend his years-long Synod process into 2028. The Argentine pope marked one month in Rome’s Gemelli hospital, where doctors for days have said his condition is stable and slowly improving after a critical period marked by breathing crises that risked his life. The Vatican cut short any speculation he could be released imminently, cautioning that, despite the progress, he still required therapies to be administered within a hospital environment. “The clinical conditions of the Holy Father have remained stable, confirming the progress shown in the last week,” the Vatican said in a bulletin on his health. “The Holy Father still requires hospital medical therapy, motor and respiratory physiotherapy; these therapies, at present, are showing further, gradual improvements,” it added. The Vatican has given no indication as to when Francis could be released from the hospital’s special papal suite on the 10th floor. But in a sign that Francis continues to work to cement his legacy for reform of the Church, the Vatican also said on Saturday he had approved from his hospital bed a new plan related to the Synod, a years-long global consultation that he has shepherded since 2021. The Synod, which focused on pressing issues affecting the future of the Catholic Church, ended in October, with the pope yet to reveal whether he will incorporate its findings into a papal document known as an apostolic exhortation. The extension announced on Saturday calls for a three-year consultation and evaluation period leading up to a new post-Synod assembly in 2028. “On March 11, the Holy Father definitively approved the start of a process of accompaniment and evaluation of the implementation phase by the General Secretariat of the Synod,” the Vatican said. The Vatican said the three-year consultation period would involve dioceses and episcopal conferences, as well as lay associations and other parties -- including women -- who have contributed to the Synod process until now. “It is of fundamental importance to ensure that the implementation phase serves as an opportunity to re-engage the people who have contributed and to present the fruits gathered from listening to all the Churches,” said the Vatican. Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech announced the start of the implementation phase in a letter sent on Saturday to bishops around the world. — AFP

Bread lines, drinking water:
Aid block sets Gaza back again

OUTSIDE

the Zadna Bakery in the central Gaza Strip one recent afternoon, the long lines of people waiting for bread were threatening to dissolve into chaos at any minute. A security guard shouted at the crowds that pushed towards the bakery door to wait their turn. But no one was listening. Just a few steps away, scalpers were hawking loaves they had gotten earlier that day for three times the original price. The sunset meal that breaks daylong fast during the holy month of Ramadhan was approaching, and across Gaza, bread, water, cooking gas and other basics were hard to come by — once again.

Lines had not been this desperate, nor markets this empty, since before the ceasefire took hold on January 19. The truce had allowed aid to surge into Gaza for the first time after 15 months of conflict during which residents received only a trickle of supplies. But no aid has gotten in since March 2. That was the day Israel blocked all goods in a bid to pressure Hamas into accepting an extension of the current ceasefire stage and releasing more hostages sooner, instead of moving to the next phase, which would involve more challenging negotiations to permanently end the war. Now, the aid cutoff, exacerbated by panic buying and unscrupulous traders who gouge prices, is driving costs to levels that few can afford. Shortages of fresh vegetables and fruit and rising prices are forcing people to once again fall back on canned food such as beans. Though the canned food provides calories, experts say, people — and children in particular — need a diverse diet that includes fresh foods to stave off malnutrition.



A man carries fruits and vegetables from relief aid back to his family in the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip. — The New York Times



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For the first six weeks of the ceasefire, aid workers and traders delivered food for Gaza residents, many still weak from months of malnutrition. Medical supplies for bombed-out hospitals, plastic pipes to restore water supplies and fuel to power everything also began to flow in. Data from aid groups and the United Nations showed that children, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers were eating better. And more centres started offering treatment for malnutrition, the UN said. These were only small steps towards relieving the devastation wrought by the war, which destroyed more than half of Gaza’s buildings and put many of its 2 million residents at risk of famine. Even with the sharp increase in aid after the truce began, Gaza health officials reported that at least six newborns had died from hypothermia in February for lack of warm clothes, blankets, shelter or medical care, a figure cited by the United Nations.

The reports could not be independently verified. Most hospitals remain only partly operational, if at all. Aid groups, the United Nations and several Western governments have urged Israel to allow shipments to resume, criticising its use of humanitarian relief as a bargaining chip in negotiations and, in some cases, saying that the cutoff violates international law. Instead, Israel is turning up the pressure. Last Sunday, it severed electricity supplies to the territory — a move that shuttered most operations at a water desalination plant and deprived about 600,000 people in central Gaza of clean drinking water, according to the United Nations. The Israeli energy minister has hinted that a water cutoff might be next. Some wells are still functioning in central Gaza, aid officials say, but they supply only brackish water, which poses long-term health risks to those who drink it. — The New York Times

Time to nourish souls rather than bodies



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It is true that our minds distinguish us from the metal machines around us. However, there is another unique component that deserves even more attention, our soul. It is the spark that fuels all our passions and desires, the hidden magic that connects us. For this reason, many people regard Ramadhan as a time for spiritual growth and reflection. It reminds them of the importance of nurturing both the body and the soul in a holistic cycle towards inner peace. Just as one nourishes the body, spiritual growth also needs to be cultivated. As the famous Muslim scholar Hasan al Basri once said: “O son of Adam! You are nothing, but a number of days. Whenever each day passes, a part of you has gone.” Ramadhan urges people to remember the importance of cherishing each moment, for it will never come again. Hence, one of the most profound psychological effects of fasting during Ramadhan is the enhancement of spiritual growth. Many individuals find that fasting allows them to connect more deeply with their faith. This connection often represents a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life. The practice encourages reflection on one’s actions and intentions, fostering a mindset of mindfulness, which refers to being present and fully engaged in the moment. This can lead to a more profound appreciation for everyday experiences. This heightened awareness can extend to

one’s relationships, prompting individuals to engage more compassionately with others. One must be cautious about their thoughts during this unique spiritual exercise. Therefore, fasting is an opportunity for Muslims to cleanse their hearts and minds, seek forgiveness for past mistakes and grow in their faith. During Ramadhan, Muslims engage in increased acts of worship, such as additional prayers, recitation of the Holy Quran and giving to charity. The act of fasting is intended to improve compassion for the less fortunate, as it allows individuals to experience hunger and thirst, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by those in need. Throughout Ramadhan, Muslims are encouraged to engage in spiritual reflection and personal growth by setting aside time for meditation, prayer and reflection. Many individuals use this month as an opportunity to reassess their lives, set new spiritual goals and strengthen their commitment to their faith. This can lead to lasting changes in behaviour and mindset, encouraging Muslims to carry the lessons learned during Ramadhan into their daily lives long after the month has ended. Ramadhan is a deeply spiritual time for Muslims, marked by increased devotion and a commitment to prayer. The act of fasting from dawn until sunset is not merely a physical challenge; it is a profound spiritual

Ramadhan urges people to remember the importance of cherishing each moment, for it will never come again. Hence, one of the most profound psychological effects of fasting during the holy month is the enhancement of spiritual growth

exercise that encourages Muslims to turn inward and assess their relationship with Allah. Ramadhan is the time of year when virtually everyone becomes more Allah-conscious. In fact, it is the only time when you see people mostly abandon their evil ways and adorn themselves with a coat of morality. Since the goal of Ramadhan is to become more religious, it serves as a training ground for individuals. One has a month to build good habits or break away from bad ones. The Almighty Allah prescribed Ramadhan to Muslims to rectify their actions and purify their souls with the goal of attaining piety. The reason for this prescription is to obtain physical, spiritual and mental benefits, which many Muslims either take for granted or may not even realise. Many report that the discipline cultivated during Ramadhan spills over into their daily routines, helping them establish healthier habits and make more conscious choices. Ramadhan is like rain, nourishing the seeds of good deeds. During this month of fasting, we should focus on nourishing our souls rather than our bodies. Ramadhan is a reminder that the journey of spiritual growth is continuous, offering a chance for Muslims to deepen their faith, purify their hearts and renew their commitment to living a life of righteousness and compassion.

UK FACES HARD CHOICES OVER DISABILITY COSTS

DAVID MILLIKEN

Britain’s government wants to tame its ballooning bill for supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions which, despite the cost, leaves many claimants distressed or struggling to find work. Annual spending on incapacity and disability benefits already exceeds the country’s defence budget and is set to top £100 billion (\$129 billion) by 2030 according to official forecasts, up from £65 billion now. Prime Minister Keir Starmer warned last week that the welfare arrangements he inherited from the previous government were “indefensible economically and morally” and he wanted to see more people back in work. His government is expected to propose changes next week. Broadcaster ITV has reported that the reform would include £6 billion of cuts, alarming some lawmakers from Starmer’s left-leaning Labour Party. Finance minister Rachel Reeves is keen to find ways to reduce the benefits bill as official forecasts due on March 26 may otherwise show the government will miss its debt-reduction goals. Welfare experts say the government will nevertheless struggle to ensure that a push for quick savings does not jeopardise longer-term efforts to boost employment. “Trust is very low,” said Louise Murphy, senior economist at the Resolution Foundation think tank, adding that many disabled people on benefits feared losing money or facing a tough time with a work coach if they considered employment. Asked about potential cuts, a spokesperson for Britain’s Department for Work and Pensions said it had “a duty to put welfare spending on a more sustainable path... through meaningful, principled reforms rather than arbitrary cuts to spending”. Chelsea Shubert, 23, is the type of person the government wants to encourage. Diagnosed with autism and living with anxiety, dyslexia and other conditions, she left school without key qualifications and received unemployment and disability benefits. In 2021, a government employment adviser urged her to do an unpaid six-month stint at a charity shop, which did not lead to a job. But she has now passed an English exam and began her first paid job as a school crossing guard in January. “It’s very rewarding and gets me out, even though it’s only half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening,” she said. Eventually she hopes to work with children for longer hours so she is not so reliant on benefits. “Being someone that’s living with a disability and a health condition, this world that we live in is horrible. There’s not enough support out there,” she said. Bad experiences with Britain’s benefits system are common, said Ben Baumberg Geiger, professor of social science and health at King’s College London. — Reuters

The key to universal energy access is green

OUR planet and its inhabitants are in trouble. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that to meet the targets of the 2015 Paris agreement and keep global warming below 2° Celsius (relative to pre-industrial levels), renewable energy must supply 70-85 per cent of the world’s electricity by 2050. In other words, renewable capacity must triple by 2030 to avert a climate catastrophe. Yet, despite the existential threat posed by climate change, a joint report released by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), World Bank, World Health Organization, International Energy Agency, and the United Nations Statistics Division paints a grim picture: the world is not on track to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal 7, which aims to “ensure affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.” As of 2022, 685 million people still lived without access to electricity, and 2.1 billion relied on polluting and hazardous cooking fuels. The problem is particularly pronounced in Africa, where 600 million people currently lack energy access. Electrification has not kept pace with population growth, and centralised power grids have consistently failed to reach those most in need. Consequently, many Sub-Saharan communities depend on expensive diesel generators. These carbon-intensive systems account for an estimated 360 gigawatts of electricity generation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), with annual fuel costs exceeding \$40 billion. Fortunately, it is not too late to change course. Distributed renewable energy (DRE) solutions, which include mini, metro and mesh grids, as well as small-scale household systems like photovoltaic (PV) solar panels and battery storage, are the key to ensuring electricity for all while meeting the world’s climate goals. Mini-grids, which often rely on renewable-energy sources like



As of 2022, 685 million people still lived without access to electricity.



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solar PV, are small-scale generators connected to localised distribution networks that can operate independently or link to main grids when available. Their scalability makes them well-suited for rural populations and enterprises such as farms, small factories and schools, as well as for bolstering urban networks. According to IRENA, more than 150 million people were served by off-grid renewable energy systems in 2023. Scaling DRE systems in LMICs is crucial to expanding energy access and decarbonising power grids. With their unmatched flexibility, these technologies are ideal for electrifying underserved communities, boosting small-business productivity, and strengthening national energy resilience and security. At scale, DRE has the potential to deliver electricity to an additional 500 million people and reduce carbon emissions by 1.2 gigatons by 2030. To accelerate the green transition and help close the energy access gap by 2030, IRENA, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, and the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet (GEAPP) are committed to deploying DRE

technologies such as mini-grids and standalone solar home systems in LMICs. Projects across the developing world have shown that DRE is more cost-effective than fossil fuels and better suited to decentralised energy distribution. A prime example is Energising Development (EnDev), a multi-donor partnership led by GIZ and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). Over the past 20 years, EnDev has provided energy access to more than 31.6 million people across Africa, Asia and Latin America at an average cost of just €12.2 (\$13.3) per person. Its success can be attributed largely to market-based support tailored to local needs, as well as to results-based financing. Given the systemic barriers preventing clean-energy companies from accessing adequate financing, GET.invest — which connects projects and companies with suitable financiers and is part of the Global Energy Transformation Programme — has mobilised €1.6 billion in funding for more than 130 DRE initiatives. One such initiative, OnePower Lesotho, has raised approximately €9 million to bring electricity to 30,000 people in remote mountainous regions. ©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



The agreement was signed by Eng Khalfan al Naabi, President of the OBA, and Malik al Khaldi, Chairman of Belltel Company

OBA AND BELLTEL SIGN AGREEMENT TO BOOST WOMEN’S BASKETBALL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

The Oman Basketball Association (OBA) has signed a cooperation agreement with Belltel Company to support the women's national team and players in basketball training centres. The agreement includes providing support for women's teams across various categories, as well as assisting training centre players according to technical requirements set by the Association. This initiative aligns with the federation's strategy to strengthen partnerships with the private sector, contributing to the development and advancement of women's basketball.

The signing ceremony took place at the OBA headquarters in the Oman Olympic Committee and Sports Association building. The agreement was signed by Eng Khalfan al Naabi, President of the OBA, and Malik al Khaldi, Chairman of Belltel Company. The event was attended by Said al Habsi, Chairman of the Competitions Committee and Acting Secretary-General, and Hiba al Naabi, Chairperson of the Women's Sports Committee at the OBA.

Malik al Khaldi, expressed his appreciation to the Oman Basketball Federation for the opportunity to support women's sports. He emphasised that the agreement aligns with the company's social responsibility efforts to support sports and youth development. He stated: “Our support for women's sports and basketball falls under our commitment to enhancing community sports, as sports programmes and activities play a vital role in societal development.” He further noted that this agreement marks an initial step, with the possibility of expanding support to include other basketball-related activities in the future, depending on available opportunities. Al Khaldi also highlighted that the company supports other sports Association, such as the Tennis Association and Athletics Association, encouraging other companies to contribute to the development of sports in Oman, given its positive impact on fostering a healthy sporting community.

Strengthening Women's Basketball Presence Hiba al Naabi emphasised that this partnership represents a significant step in the federation's efforts to enhance collaboration with various sectors, particularly the private sector, to achieve its goals of promoting and developing basketball. She explained that the agreement is an extension of the Association's ongoing efforts to establish strategic partnerships supporting various competitions over the past years.

She added that Belltel is one of the primary supporters of women's sports, having provided continuous support over the past three years. She stressed the importance of private sector contributions in advancing women's sports and called on other companies to engage in supporting basketball.

Al Naabi also revealed that the federation is currently in talks with several private sector companies to sponsor the upcoming Girls’ Basketball League, which is expected to launch in October. This initiative aims to further promote the sport across different age groups.

SEEB AND MAJEES SHINE IN OVL QUALIFIERS



Seeb and Masirah players in action

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

SEEB and **MAJEES** clubs secured important victories in the second stage of the final qualifiers for the Oman Volleyball League.

At the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, Seeb dominated Masirah with a straight-set victory (3-0).

The first set started with a balanced exchange between both teams, as Masirah attempted to keep up with Seeb's pace in the early points. However, Seeb soon imposed its dominance with powerful attacks and well-organised defence, securing the set 25-17.

In the second set, Masirah raised its level of play and delivered a more competitive performance, benefiting from improved first-ball reception and a varied offensive strategy. Despite this, Seeb's experience proved decisive in the crucial moments, allowing them to turn the set in their favour with a 25-22 win.

The third set saw Seeb take control from the start, capitalising on Masirah's defensive lapses. This gave them a clear advantage, leading to an easy 25-16 win and a straight-set victory.

In a thrilling five-set encounter at Al Amal Club Hall in Bausher, Majees overcame Al Bashayer with a hard-fought 3-2 victory.

The opening set was highly competitive, with both teams exchanging points until the final moments, where Majees narrowly secured a 27-25 win. However, Al Bashayer quickly responded in the second set, levelling the match with a 26-24 victory in a set that featured intense performances from both sides.

Majees regained control in the third set, capitalising on strong attacking plays and solid defensive positioning to claim the set 25-21.

However, Al Bashayer bounced back strongly in the fourth set, taking advantage of defensive errors from Majees to win 25-



From the match between Majees and Al Bashayer

20 and force a decisive fifth set.

In the tiebreaker, Majees asserted its dominance from the outset, quickly pulling ahead and widening the gap as Al Bashayer's performance declined. This allowed Majees to seal the set 15-8, earning a crucial victory in their first match of the second stage of the final qualifiers.

Majees is now preparing for a tough match against Seeb on Wednesday at Sohar Sports Complex, while Al Salam will face

Masirah on Friday at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher as part of the second stage of the final qualifiers for the Volleyball League.

At the end of the first stage's fourth round, Seeb topped the standings with 10 points, followed by Majees in second place with 8 points. Al Salam ranked third with 6 points, tied with Al Bashayer, while Masirah remained at the bottom with no points.

SHORT TAKES



THRILLING ACTION AT PSM RAMADHAN CRICKET TOURNAMENT

MUSCAT: The ongoing Pakistan School Muscat (PSM) Ramadhan softball cricket tournament witnessed another exciting evening on Sunday, with three matches decided in front of a large crowd at the PSM grounds.

The opening match saw Pizza Modo take on PSM Eagles in the evening session. Pizza Modo, batting first, posted an impressive total of 116 for 2 in 8 overs. Faisal Mujtaba played a stunning knock of 56* off just 26 balls, including 5 sixes and 4 fives. PSM Eagles, however, fell short in their chase and were restricted to 70 runs, falling 46 runs short of the target.

The second match featured OCT Ruwi against Ravi Fighters. Batting first, OCT Ruwi scored 76 runs, with Salman contributing 22 runs off 9 balls. Ravi Fighters chased down the target without losing a wicket, with Junaid’s explosive 35 runs off 16 balls, securing a dominant 10-wicket victory.

In the final match, defending runners-up Hala Cosmos faced off against Musa X1. After winning the toss, Musa X1 put Hala Cosmos to bat, who posted a competitive target of 111 runs. Shanit played a quickfire knock of 41* (17 balls, 6x6). However, Musa X1 chased the target in just 5.5 overs, with Safeer smashing a blistering 68 runs off 16 balls (9x6, 4x2) to seal the victory in an unexpected upset.

Additionally, three matches were played on March 13, where Tuskers X1, Lahore United and Nazimabad X1 triumphed and advanced to the next round.

Muntazir Zaidi (34 off 14 balls), Dilshad (4 wickets) and Bilal (41 runs) were among the standout performers. Dilshad also made history by taking the first hat-trick of the tournament.



NZ’s Finn (R) and Robinson celebrate their win. — AFP

New Zealand thrash Pakistan in 1st T20

CHRISTCHURCH: Pakistan slumped to a nine-wicket defeat in the first Twenty20 against New Zealand in Christchurch on Sunday after failing to defend a meagre score of 91.

The tourists began the five-match series in disastrous fashion, reduced to 11-4 at the end of the fifth over after towering paceman Kyle Jamieson ran amok with the new ball.

They were eventually dismissed for their lowest score in a T20 on New Zealand soil and the home side romped to 92-1 off just 10.1 overs.

Jamieson claimed three of the first four wickets to finish with 3-8 off four overs.

New ball partner Jacob Duffy returned later in the innings to sweep up the tail and, like Jamieson, claimed career-best T20 figures – 4-14 off 3.4 overs.

“We had some pretty favourable conditions,” player of the match Jamieson said of the Hagley Oval pitch which offered early movement.

“Myself and Duff, I’m sure we would take that pitch with us most places around the country if we could.

“You keep the seam upright and hit the deck and just let the conditions do the work.”

Pakistan never recovered from their top-order collapse, with only three players reaching double figures.

New captain Salman Agha scored 18 and put on 46 for the fifth wicket with top-scorer Khushdil Shah, who struck three sixes in his 32 off 30 balls.

Jahandad Khan scored 17 at a run-a-ball before the innings ended with eight balls still to be bowled.

Pakistan’s previous lowest T20 score in New Zealand was 101 in a 95-run loss in Wellington in 2016.

Opener Tim Seifert got New Zealand off to a flying start with 44 off 29 balls, striking seven fours and one six. Finn Allen on 29 and Tim Robinson on 18 completed the chase off the first ball of the 11th over.

Agha said Pakistan would need to adapt to what could be green conditions again for the second match in Dunedin on Tuesday.

“It was obviously difficult, they were bowling in the right area and there was swing and seam for them as well,” he said.

“But we didn’t bat up to the mark.

“Always in New Zealand, the new ball does a bit and we have the bowlers who can do that too. “We don’t have much time. We need to regather as quickly as we can.” — AFP

Norris holds off Verstappen to win Australian Grand Prix

MELBOURNE: Lando Norris kept his cool in a rain-hit and incident-packed season-opening Australian Grand Prix on Sunday to edge world champion Max Verstappen with Lewis Hamilton 10th on his Ferrari debut.

The pole-sitting Briton took the chequered flag by less than a second from the Dutchman, with Mercedes’ George Russell third after a chaotic race in Melbourne that saw three drivers crash before the end of the first lap.

With the safety car repeatedly forced into action after a slew of accidents on the wet Albert Park circuit, Norris held on to clock a fifth grand prix win and second in a row after topping the podium at the final race of 2024 in Abu Dhabi.

RB rookie Isack Hadjar, Alpine’s Jack Doohan and Williams’ Carlos Sainz — last year’s winner — all failed to finish the first lap on a

track made treacherous by earlier torrential rain.

Norris came into the season as favourite for the 2025 drivers’ title and cemented his status as the man to beat.

“It was amazing, a top race, especially with Max behind me. I was pushing, especially the last two laps — it was a little bit stressful, not going to lie,” said Norris.

“Tricky conditions, but there are the ones that are enjoyable and we ended up on top so I’m happy.”

Verstappen, who is aiming to become only the second driver to win five straight world titles after Michael Schumacher, was in the hunt early but an uncharacteristic error on lap 18 dented his chances until another safety car put him back in the frame.

“It was a difficult race, but at the end it was fun,” said the Dutch star.

“It was pushing, fighting for the



McLaren’s Norris celebrates on podium.

win but I’m just happy to bring it home, score good points and this is a good start for us.”

In the unpredictable conditions, with rain on-and-off, Mercedes’ Kimi Antonelli was an eye-opening fourth on his debut while Williams’ Alex Albon came an encouraging fifth.

Aston Martin’s Lance Stroll was sixth ahead of Nico Hulkenberg in

a Sauber. Ferrari’s Charles Leclerc came eighth, with Norris’ teammate Oscar Piastri and Hamilton rounding out the top 10.

Russell was content with third, given the circumstances.

“It was a great race to come home in P3. And well done to Lando, a race like that when you are leading is probably your worst nightmare,” he said. “I was quite enjoying it to be honest, hoping the two guys ahead made a mistake and I could slip through.”

While torrential rain eased for the main event, the tricky conditions were rammed home when Hadjar skidded and hit the wall on the formation lap and was out before the race even started.

The start was aborted and when the green lights finally came on, Norris, on intermediate tyres, made a clean jump and kept his position at the first corner.

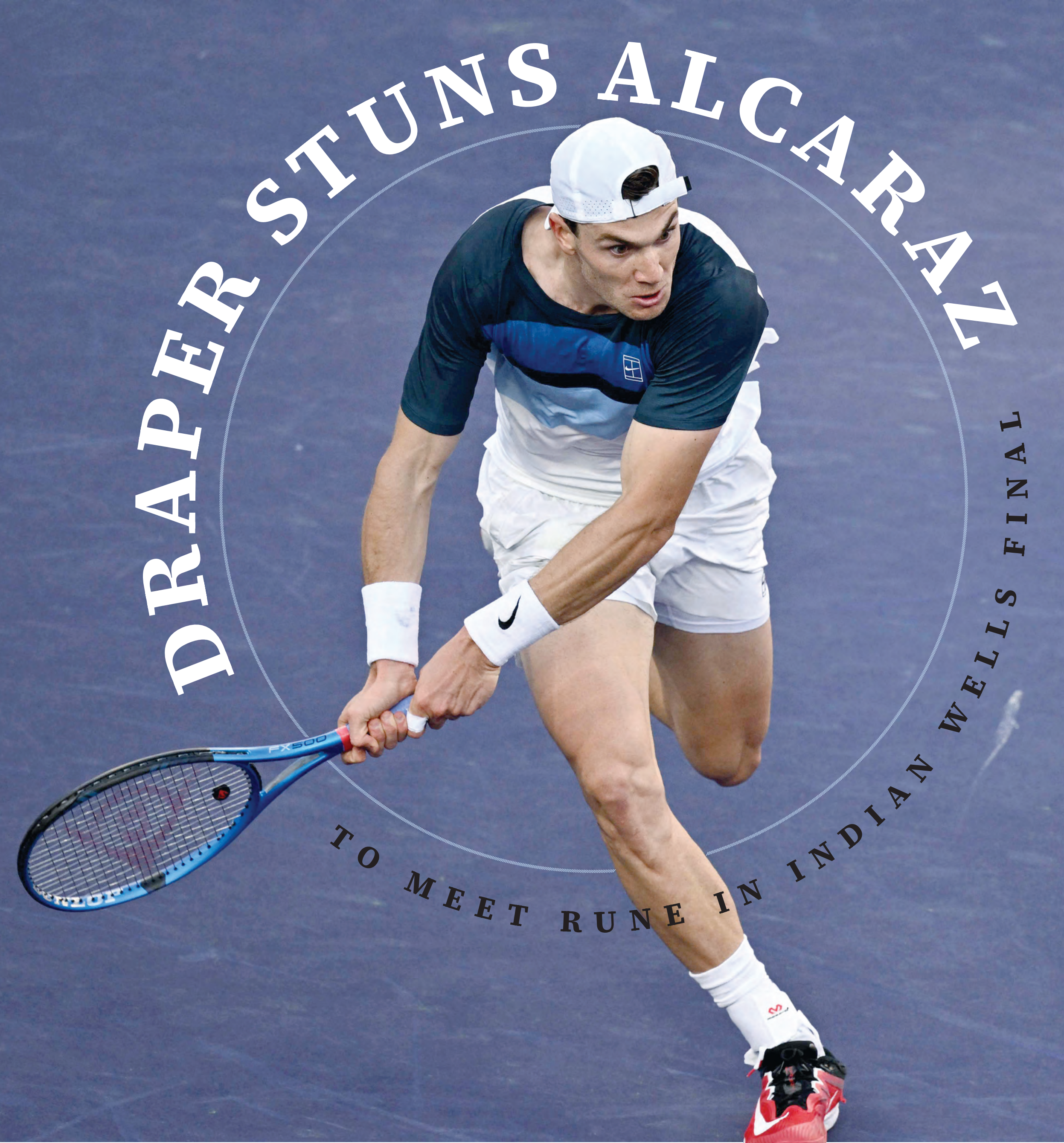
MAX PRESSURE

Verstappen also had a flying start and passed Piastri to go second while Leclerc moved up two places to fifth. But the race was interrupted minutes later when Doohan ploughed into the wall, then the experienced Sainz did the same on his Williams debut.

They restarted after a safety car with Norris holding his spot ahead of Verstappen and with Piastri they began pulling clear of fourth-placed Russell. With the track drying, the gap to Russell was eight seconds by lap 13. But with his tyres starting to wear, Verstappen brushed the gravel on lap 18 and Piastri flashed past back into second.

Norris and Piastri powered 18 seconds ahead of the Dutchman before Fernando Alonso put his Aston Martin into the wall on lap 34 and the safety car came out again.

— AFP



Draper returns ball to Alcaraz during semifinal. — AFP

BRITON JACK DRAPER upset the overwhelming favourite Carlos Alcaraz 6-1 0-6 6-4 to reach the Indian Wells final on Saturday, denying the Spaniard in his bid for a rare “three-peat” in the California desert.

Draper beat the world number three at Queen’s Club last year and had the winning formula again this time around, as the lefty relied on his lethal forehand to reach his first Masters 1000-level final, where he will face Denmark’s Holger Rune.

“It was a strange match. You know, honestly Carlos came out, he was a bit flat, I sensed that,” Draper said in televised remarks.

“Against top players in the world, they can change their momentum very quickly so I just got lost out there for 25 minutes and then in the

third, I came out, I was really proud of my competitiveness, my attitude and somehow managed to get over the line there in the end.”

Alcaraz had not dropped a set en route to the semifinal but gifted Draper a break with a double fault in the second game as he struggled to find his rhythm. The 13th seed converted on another break with a fine forehand winner in the sixth.

But the momentum flipped entirely in the second set, where Draper put up 15 unforced errors compared to just two in the first, as Alcaraz hit his stride and neutralised the only break point he faced in the first game.

“It kind of happened to me (in the second set) what happened to him in the first set. I got tired, I got low energy,” said Draper.

Alcaraz closed out the set with a superb backhand winner and looked

as though he would roll through the third with the crowd on his side.

But Draper, who retired due to injury in their last meeting at the Australian Open this year, was ready to go the distance this time around and made a perfect shot down the line past Alcaraz to convert on break point in the third game.

Draper sent an un-returnable backhand shot into the corner to go up another break in the seventh and was glad for the insurance as Alcaraz broke back in the next game.

The Briton closed it out with un-returnable serve, ending Alcaraz’s 16-match win streak at Indian Wells, and whacked a ball deep into the stands in celebration.

With the win, Draper will move into the top 10 for the first time in his career and would be ranked as high as seventh if he can take the title on Sunday.

He will face an in-form Rune, who beat the Russian Daniil Medvedev 7-5 6-4 after losing his last seven semifinal matches.

Rune, the number 12 seed, lost to Medvedev in the quarterfinals a year ago and the two were evenly matched in a gruelling opening set in which they traded early breaks and Rune battled through a marathon six-deuce eighth game to hold his serve.

Medvedev helped him to a break point with a fluffed shot at the net in the 11th game and the 21-year-old Dane carried the momentum into the second set.

Down 0-30 in the final game, Rune clawed his way back and forced a fatigued Medvedev into an error at the end of a 37-shot rally on the penultimate point before clinching victory with a powerful forehand winner.

“He’s a very difficult player to play. He makes you play uncomfortable shots,” said Rune.

“I tried to play as good as possible, making it difficult for him, trying to, you know, play different kind of shots to mix up the rhythm in the game.

“I think I did it well. I stayed very patient, very composed mentally. I’m very happy to get through.”

Rune beat Draper in their only previous meeting in Cincinnati last year. The Dane has more experience with three previous Masters 1000-level finals under his belt but said he expects an exciting fight for the trophy.

“He’s gained a lot of confidence. He’s been improving. He’s a lefty. Great serve. I think he’s been serving well this tournament. Yeah, he’s gonna be excited,” said Rune.

— Reuters



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STRATEGIC PROJECTS



Grain silos at Suhar — part of OFM Group assets.

OFM EXPANDS GLOBAL REACH TO STRENGTHEN FOOD SECURITY

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

OMAN FLOUR MILLS (OFM), one of the largest integrated food companies in the Sultanate of Oman, has launched a series of strategic projects, reinforcing its commitment to strengthening food security while expanding its global footprint. These initiatives form part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at securing strategic grain reserves, diversifying procurement sources and enhancing food product quality.

As part of its ambitious strategy to enhance global competitiveness, OFM has undertaken a series of strategic investments, from establishing Oman-Australia Limited, which works directly with farmers, to launching the Atyab International Services (AIS) in Uzbekistan for import quality control.

These initiatives reflect the company's vision to strengthen its international presence, support the national economy and meet growing market demands.

Oman-Australia Limited, operating in Australia, collaborates directly with farmers to secure wheat shipments, reinforcing Oman's strategic grain reserves and providing a competitive edge in international markets.

This initiative aims to ensure sustainable and reliable food resources by diversifying procurement sources and streamlining supply chains. Additionally, OFM continues to invest in strategic assets across the grain value chain, ensuring competitive pricing and supply stability for Oman.

In a key step towards achieving its strategic goals, OFM inaugurated the AIS in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. This facility brings OFM's expertise in food industry laboratory services to regional and international markets.

The lab is dedicated to monitoring the quality of imports and food products, reinforcing consumer trust in food safety standards both locally and globally. Furthermore, the laboratory supports exporters in Uzbekistan's food processing industry, enhancing their access to European, American and Asian markets.

Notably, AIS is the first of its kind by an Omani company in Central Asia and has achieved ISO 17025 accreditation in a remarkably short period, reflecting its commitment to upholding the highest global quality standards.

OFM continues to expand its investment portfolio, focusing on integration across the food value chain. Key initiatives include the acquisition of a feed mill and integration of frozen bakery operations, aligning with the company's broader expansion strategy.

The company is also conducting a market assessment for baby food products in Uzbekistan, alongside importing and cultivating millet seeds. Additionally, OFM is advancing a joint farming proposal aimed at improving agricultural productivity.

As part of its regional expansion plans, OFM is actively exploring opportunities to expand bakery operations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia while developing strategic industrial clusters to improve efficiency and foster innovation.

Asyad Group strengthens stake in Asyad Shipping

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

IN a decisive move to reinforce market confidence, wholly state-owned integrated logistics enterprise Asyad Group SAOC has acquired 21,591,628 shares of newly listed Asyad Shipping SAOG at an average price of RO 0.123 per share. The transaction, carried out through Ubhar Capital SAOC, Asyad's designated market stabiliser and liquidity provider, underscores the company's commitment to maintaining liquidity and price stability.

But what does this really mean for shareholders and the market? Oman Observer spoke to Ahmed al Maawali, an expert at Ubhar Capital, to break it down.

According to Al Maawali, the share buyback reflects Asyad's long-term vision for growth. "By repurchasing shares, the company is optimising its capital structure and reinforcing market



'By repurchasing shares, the company is optimising its capital structure and reinforcing market confidence,' says Ubhar Capital.

confidence. This not only improves liquidity but also stabilises share prices, sending a strong signal that Asyad Group believes in its long-term potential."

While speculation about further acquisitions is natural, Al Maawali clarified: "At this stage, there are no immediate plans for additional buybacks. However, the company is always monitoring market conditions and strategic

opportunities to ensure optimal capital allocation in line with its financial goals."

Given the strict financial oversight in Oman, Al Maawali reassured investors that the buyback process adhered to Financial Services Authority (FSA) regulations.

"The acquisition was conducted with full compliance, following all necessary approvals, disclosure requirements and

governance protocols to ensure transparency."

This strategic buyback is more than just a numbers game — it's about shaping the future.

Asyad Shipping remains committed to market stability and long-term growth, strengthening its position as a key player in the regional and international maritime sector, he added.

Last week, Asyad Shipping Company SAOG, a global leader in deep-sea transportation, successfully listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Wednesday, March 12, 2025, following the completion of its IPO.

The company raised around RO 128.1 million (equivalent to \$332.8 million) from domestic and international investors.

A total of 1,041,748,856 ordinary shares were offered to investors, representing 20 per cent of the company's total issued share capital.

The offer price was set at 123 baisas per share, with Asyad Shipping's market capitalisation at approximately RO 641 million (\$1.66 billion).

Oman's medical glove industry gears up for regional expansion

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

OMAN is set to strengthen its position as a regional hub for medical supplies with the upcoming launch of a state-of-the-art medical glove manufacturing facility in SOHAR Port and Freezone. The plant, expected to be commercially operational by Q2 2025, will be among the first operational entities within the SOHAR Port and Freezone medical cluster, aligning with Oman Vision 2040 for industrial diversification.

In an exclusive interview with Observer, Damith De Alwis, General Manager and Regional Head of Lalan Middle East, confirmed that construction is nearing completion, with all machinery and equipment already delivered to the site. "We will soon begin installation and commissioning work, ensuring that we remain on track for the planned launch," he stated.

MEETING GLOBAL
STANDARDS

Designed to meet the highest industry benchmarks, the facility will comply with ISO 13485 for medical devices, ISO



The plant is expected to be commercially operational by Q2 2025.

11135 for ETO sterilisation, ISO 9001 for quality management and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) requirements.

De Alwis emphasised that achieving these standards required extensive collaboration with local regulatory bodies.

"From the outset, we have worked closely with Adawaa Al Wataniya Pharmaceutical Consultancy and Oman's Ministry of Health to ensure that all processes align with global and industry regulations," he said.

"Additionally, we have sourced equipment from globally recognised suppliers and an experienced third-party technical team will conduct on-site calibration."

To further ensure operational excellence, key personnel from Sri Lanka — including a senior microbiologist, quality assurance and compliance manag-



DAMITH
DE ALWIS
General Manager
and Regional Head of
Lalan Middle East

specialist with over 24 years of experience to maintain the highest industry standards," De Alwis added.

INVESTING IN LOCAL TALENT The facility's commitment to Omanisation is reflected in its 45% local workforce target. To achieve this, the company has implemented structured training programmes to integrate Omani professionals into its

ers — will oversee the setup and training at the Suhar plant. "We have also brought on board a certified lead auditor and ETO sterilisation

operations.

"We've identified qualified Omani candidates and designed an intensive orientation programme to equip them with industry expertise," De Alwis stated. "Our Human Resources team will soon travel to Sri Lanka for specialised training before leading on-boarding sessions in Suhar."

This initiative aims to ensure that Omani recruits are well-prepared to meet global industry standards, enhancing the country's skilled workforce in the medical manufacturing sector.

EXPANDING BEYOND OMAN With growing demand for medical gloves across the Middle East and North Africa, the company is actively expanding its regional footprint.

"We already have a presence in the UAE and Türkiye, and we've recently set up a sales operation in Tunisia to strengthen our foothold in North Africa," De Alwis revealed. "Guided by comprehensive market research, we are committed to broadening our product portfolio from Oman to meet evolving industry needs."

ADVERTORIALS



This collaboration reflects Sohar International’s commitment to going beyond traditional banking.

SOHAR INTERNATIONAL SIGNS MOU WITH ARABIAN FALCON INSURANCE

MUSCAT: Reinforcing its commitment to delivering customer-centric financial solutions, Sohar International, Oman’s best bank, has partnered with Arabian Falcon Insurance Company to introduce a suite of exclusive insurance products.

Designed to provide both financial security and peace of mind, the newly launched Family Protection Plan and Life Protect offer comprehensive coverage at competitive rates, ensuring long-term financial well-being for customers.

This strategic collaboration reflects Sohar International’s commitment to going beyond traditional banking by integrating value-driven financial protection solutions. The partnership aims to empower individuals and families with accessible, innovative and inclusive insurance offerings that cater to their evolving needs.

Abdul Qader al Sumali, Chief Retail and Premier Banking Officer, at Sohar International, stated, “At Sohar International, we believe that financial well-being extends beyond wealth management — it is about creating a robust safety net that enables individuals to plan for the future with confidence.

Through this strategic alliance with Arabian Falcon Insurance Company, we are redefining the role of banks in delivering integrated financial protection. These exclusive insurance solutions ensure that our customers have seamless access to comprehensive coverage without the complexities traditionally associated with insurance products.

This partnership underscores our dedication to continuous innovation, providing meaningful solutions that support both individual aspirations and broader economic stability.”

The newly introduced Family Protection Plan (FPP) and Life Protect offer several key benefits, ensuring flexibility and affordability for individuals aged 18 to 64, with a maximum coverage age of 65. Coverage options range from RO 10,000 to RO 50,000, allowing customers to tailor their plans based on their financial protection needs. Customers wishing to benefit from these plans can visit the bank’s branches or contact the bank’s call centre.

Roland Zaatar, Chief Executive Officer of Arabian Falcon Insurance Company, commented, “Sohar International has consistently demonstrated a forward-thinking approach by integrating innovative financial solutions that add tangible value to its customers. We are pleased to partner with a bank that prioritises financial security and shares our commitment to accessibility and inclusivity. With these exclusive protection plans, we aim to simplify access to essential insurance services while upholding the highest standards of coverage, service and affordability.”

Amouage presents Decision and Existence

RENAUD Salmon, Chief Creative Officer at the House of Amouage, is no stranger to travel. “It is one of the most precious joys of my life,” he explains, “but I must admit that, quite often, my favourite journeys are the ones that take me to quiet, remote destinations.”

Jabal Shams — Arabic for ‘mountain of the sun’ — is the highest point in Oman, rising to around 3,000 m. Those wishing to reach its peak have to navigate a rugged, off-road track, before leaving their car and embarking on a four-hour trek on foot.

“When I arrived at the base of the mountain and started walking,” says Salmon, “something caught my eye. Across the terrain were what looked like conifers at first, but when I got closer to them, I saw they were juniper trees — their branches twisted into unusual shapes.”

The sight of the trees marked the first important moment in Salmon’s journey.

Junipers are amongst the most ancient, most revered species in this part of Oman. Many are survivors of the electrical storms that frequently occur in the region.

“It was an experience I can’t even begin to put into words. I knew I was connected to the earth and yet I also felt as though I was floating. The disorientation was profound and curiously serene and liberating.”



Finally, after months of trials and discussions, they arrived at a duo of majestic compositions: Decision and Existence.

Eventually, Salmon had to make his way back to the realities of the day-to-day world.

“But as I started the return drive, I was filled with complete certainty about one thing: my experience would somehow have to be expressed as perfume creations for Amouage.”

He shared his feelings about his trip with acclaimed perfumer Quentin Bisch. They began exchanging ideas on what an olfactory representation of Jabal Shams might smell like. Finally, after months of trials and discussions, they arrived at a duo of majestic compositions: Decision and Existence.

DECISION: The expression of a transformative moment

In keeping with Salmon and Bisch’s attempt to convey

the life-changing power of a conscious choice, the opening of Decision is extraordinarily piercing: an olfactory bolt of lightning banishing the darkness of uncertainty.

This striking effect is achieved through a combination of Bergamot, Juniper Berries, Frankincense and Myrrh.

The former lend a cool, woody quality — echoing the petrified bark of the trees — while the remainder project a flinty, citrusy, mineralic sparkle. The luminosity of the trio is arresting and unavoidable, compelling all around to take note of its might.

After this unequivocal beginning, the light appears to spread further, aided by the all-pervasive, gleaming effect of Atlas Cedarwood. When coupled with a deeply grounding, almost

surprisingly warm Vanilla in the base, the wood note captures the profoundly liberating effect of acceptance.

It imbues its wearer with the conviction that all of life is there for the taking — as long as one makes a determined attempt to surrender to its complexities. Uncompromising, distinctive and incandescent, the perfume captures the paradox that lies at the core of all of life’s most powerful decisions: it is focussed on its goal while remaining open to countless possibilities.

EXISTENCE: The serenity of endlessness

If Decision is a sharp beam of enlightenment, then Existence is the complete absence of lines, edges or angles: a space where the notion of material territories is non-existent.

This evocation of endlessness is achieved primarily through a heart-breaking lily of the valley note. Fashioned by Bisch into an entity that is suitably delicate and fragile, it is also possessed of a remarkable expansiveness, thanks to the addition of tender Frankincense.

As the scent develops, its embrace of the infinite becomes increasingly all-encompassing. An Aldehyde note enhances the impression of pristine whiteness. A Rose facet introduces a suggestion of living, breathing physicality.

And the use of Benzoin in the base conveys the idea that this landscape is firmly rooted to the complicated reality of the earth.

NBO AND INJAZ OMAN PARTNER TO EMPOWER OMANI YOUTH

MUSCAT: The National Bank of Oman (NBO) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Injaz Oman to empower Omani youth with essential financial literacy and entrepreneurial skills.

As part of this partnership, NBO will finance two flagship programmes, “More Than Money” and “The Company Programme and Competition”, designed to benefit 3,500 young Omanis across the Sultanate of Oman.

The More Than Money Programme aims to introduce school students to money management, earning income and making informed financial decisions, ensuring they develop financial responsibility from an early age.

Meanwhile, The Company Programme and Competition provides higher education students with hands-on experience in business planning, market research, product



As part of this partnership, NBO will finance two flagship programmes.

development and financial management, culminating in a national and regional competition judged by industry experts.

Through these initiatives, Injaz Oman aims to bridge the gap between academics

and real-world application, equipping students with critical thinking and business skills. This prepares the youth to become financially confident leaders ready to drive Oman’s economic growth.

NBO’s partnership with Injaz Oman reflects its dedication to providing young Omanis with essential knowledge and skills to succeed. By investing in these initiatives, the bank is fostering financial empowerment and preparing future leaders to contribute to Oman’s economic growth.

NBO’s sponsorship will enable the implementation of financial and business training workshops, mentorship sessions with industry professionals and hands-on learning experiences. The partnership aligns with NBO’s broader mission to contribute to Oman’s economic development by nurturing the next generation of financially responsible and innovative leaders.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds partners with Taageer Finance

MUSCAT: Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewellery retailer globally with over 380 showrooms across 13 countries, has tied up with Taageer Finance Co SAOG to offer an easy jewellery financing facility for customers in Oman.

This collaboration will enable customers in Oman to purchase jewellery from Malabar Gold & Diamonds with financial support from Taageer Finance Co SAOG, making exquisite gold & diamond jewellery from Malabar Gold & Diamonds more accessible.

Under this agreement, Omani customers can avail of tailored loan solutions to finance their jewellery purchases, with a maximum loan tenure of up to eight years. The financing process



Under this agreement, Omani customers can avail of tailored loan solutions to finance their jewellery purchases.

is designed to be hassle-free and flexible, allowing customers to choose repayment plans that best suit their financial needs.

This initiative is aimed at making jewellery ownership easier, especially for those looking to purchase jewellery for special occasions such as weddings, festivals and investment purposes.

Speaking about the partnership, Najeeb K, Regional Head of Malabar Gold & Diamonds — Oman, stated: “At Malabar Gold & Diamonds, our goal has always been to make jewellery shopping a seamless and rewarding experience.

Through our partnership with Tageer Finance, we are offering our customers in Oman a convenient and structured

financing solution that allows them to own their desired jewellery without financial strain. This initiative reflects our commitment to providing innovative and customer-friendly solutions while ensuring affordability and ease of purchase.”

With this initiative, Malabar Gold & Diamonds continues to strengthen its position as a customer-centric brand, providing not only exquisite jewellery but also value-added services that enhance the overall shopping experience.

Customers can visit their nearest Malabar Gold & Diamonds showroom in Oman to learn more about the financing options available and take advantage of this exclusive facility.

BUSINESS



The MoUs mark a significant step towards advancing Oman's digital transformation across the banking, energy and cloud services sectors.

MOUS SIGNED TO STRENGTHEN OMAN’S DIGITAL FUTURE

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman’s premier provider of managed cybersecurity and cloud solutions, Oman Data Park (ODP), announced the signing of three strategic Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) recently. The agreements, signed with First Abu Dhabi Bank (FAB), Oman National Energy Investment Company (ONEIC) and NTG, mark a significant step towards advancing Oman’s digital transformation across the banking, energy and cloud services sectors.

Eng Maqbool al Wahaibi, CEO of ODP, stated, “These partnerships reflect ODP’s unwavering commitment to empowering organisations with secure, scalable and cutting-edge cloud solutions. Whether in banking, energy, or enterprise technology, our mission is to equip businesses with the digital infrastructure they need to operate seamlessly and innovate confidently.

By continuously investing in next-generation technologies and fostering strategic alliances, ODP is shaping a more resilient, efficient and technology-driven future for Oman.”

As part of its commitment to ensuring business continuity in the financial sector, ODP has signed an MoU with First Abu Dhabi Bank to establish a state-of-the-art Disaster Recovery site at ODP’s highly secure Tier 3 data centre. This partnership ensures that FAB’s critical data and systems remain protected against potential disruptions, reinforcing the bank’s ability to maintain seamless operations under all circumstances.

Beyond the DR site, ODP is also developing a comprehensive Business Continuity Plan (BCP) Centre for FAB, allowing the bank to quickly transition its operations in case of an unexpected crisis.

This initiative strengthens operational resilience, enabling FAB to maintain service uptime and regulatory compliance while ensuring uninterrupted financial services for its customers.

In line with Oman’s national sustainability goals, ODP has entered a strategic collaboration with Oman National Engineering and Investment Company (ONEIC) to host a smart metering solution on its advanced cloud platform. This national-level project aims to revolutionise energy consumption monitoring across Oman by enabling real-time remote management of energy usage.

By leveraging ODP’s secure and scalable cloud technology, ONEIC will gain advanced capabilities in energy monitoring and data analytics, driving enhanced efficiency and sustainability in power consumption.

CEOTALK

Transforming leadership: The power of cultural shift

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

CULTURAL transformation is one of the most powerful drivers of business success, and Mohammed al Hinai, CEO of Marsh McLennan Oman, has made it a cornerstone of his leadership.

Since taking the helm in 2021, he has led a fundamental shift from a complacent mindset to a proactive, client-focused culture—an approach that has fueled double-digit growth for three consecutive years.

In an interview with Oman Observer, Al Hinai shared how this transformation, alongside strategic talent development and a commitment to continuous learning, has shaped both his leadership and the company’s trajectory.

Al Hinai’s leadership journey is one marked by continuous learning and strategic reinvention. From investment analysis in the oil and gas sector to managing mega projects with Rio Tinto Alcan in Montreal, and later completing an Executive MBA at INSEAD, he has cultivated a broad perspective on leadership.

REBUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Reflecting on his impact, Al Hinai identified the cultural transformation as a defining milestone. “When I joined in 2021, I recognised that there was a sense of complacency that needed to be addressed. We had to shift the mindset towards proactive client service and continuous improvement,” he said.

This cultural overhaul not only



I made it a point to push young professionals into high-stakes environments — getting them to lead presentations and manage key projects. Today, many of them are running major departments and that, to me, is a legacy worth building.

MOHAMMED AL HINAI
CEO of Marsh McLennan Oman

improved service delivery but also translated into sustained business growth. A key element of this transformation was prioritising a consultative approach over a purely transactional one.

“We moved beyond just providing insurance solutions—we embedded ourselves in our clients’ journeys, ensuring that risk management became an integral part of their business strategy,” Al Hinai explained.

A major focus was enhancing claims management, reinforcing the company’s role as a trusted advisor rather than just a service provider.

INVESTING IN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Beyond client relations, Al Hinai’s leadership philosophy is deeply rooted in talent development. Under his direction, Marsh McLennan Oman launched a Graduate Development Programme aimed at nurturing the next generation of industry leaders.

“Investing in young talent is one of the most impactful things we can do as leaders. We created an 18-month programme to bring in top graduates and equip them with the skills to drive our business forward,” he shared.

This focus on talent development extends beyond his current role. During his time at OQ and Oman Oil, Al Hinai ensured that young analysts and fresh graduates were given leadership opportunities early in their careers.

“I made it a point to push young professionals into high-stakes

environments—getting them to lead presentations and manage key projects. Today, many of them are running major departments, and that, to me, is a legacy worth building,” he said.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

The journey of transformation, however, was not without challenges. One of the biggest hurdles was shifting entrenched mindsets resistant to change.

“There is always hesitation when you try to disrupt the status quo. But by promoting accountability, curiosity, and adaptability, we gradually built a culture where innovation and service excellence became the norm,” he noted.

For aspiring CEOs, Al Hinai’s advice is clear: embrace discomfort and seek diverse experiences.

“Growth happens outside your comfort zone. Take on roles that challenge you, work with teams that push your thinking, and never shy away from calculated risks,” he advised. He also underscored the importance of resilience. “Every leader will face setbacks, but the key is to view them as learning opportunities rather than failures.”

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, Al Hinai envisions continued innovation and growth. As industries navigate increasing complexities—ranging from regulatory shifts to digital transformation—he believes risk advisory services will play an even more critical role.

AWASR WINS OOKLA’S ‘FASTEST INTERNET IN OMAN’ SPEEDTEST AWARD

MUSCAT: Awasr has marked another milestone in its journey as the Sultanate of Oman’s first specialised high-speed broadband internet service provider, with its winning of the Ookla Speedtest “Fastest Internet in Oman” award for the eighth year in a row.

Ookla is known as a global leader in connectivity intelligence that provides consumers, businesses and other organisations with data-driven insights to improve networks and connected experiences. Their Speedtest Awards ceremony, which took place



this year at the 2025 Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, once again served to reward fast internet speeds and coverage that service providers are delivering to their customers.

For 2024, and now for the eighth year in a row, Awasr were handed Ookla’s Fastest Internet in Oman award, as a result of achieving the fastest download and upload speeds in Oman for their customers.

Eng Adnan Mohamed al Alawi, Chief Executive Officer, Awasr, stated:

“It is once again an honour for our team to receive this prestigious award in 2025, which reflects our ongoing commitment to keep pushing the boundaries of high-speed broadband internet and faster connectivity in the Sultanate of Oman.

The award also reflects our ambition over the years to have a positive impact on the lives of people in all communities and in all sectors of society and industry, across Oman; while further supporting our nation’s digital transformation.”

Oman’s national shipping company to acquire six newbuild vessels by 2026-27

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 16

NEWLY-LISTED national shipping company Asyad Shipping recorded a net profit of RO 51.6 million for the year ended December 31, 2024, compared to net earnings of RO 39.5 million for the previous year.

Announcing its maiden financial report since its successful initial public offering (IPO) and subsequent listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) last week, Asyad Shipping Group — encompassing subsidiaries investing in ship owning companies, vessel charter hire, voyage activities and ship management activities — achieved an operating profit level of RO 86.90 million in 2024 compared to RO 65.6 million in 2023.

Majority state-owned Asyad Shipping currently operates a fleet of 86 vessels, of which 47 are owned or co-owned, 33 are chartered-in and 6 are under order.

The fleet comprises: 22 crude



Going forward in 2025, Asyad Shipping will continue its steady growth position in the regional market by expanding its fleet size across all segments.

tankers (including 16 VLCCs, four Suezmax vessels and two Aframax vessels); 32 products tankers (26 MRs, two LR2s, two methanol carriers, one small tanker and one small chemical tanker); 17 dry bulk carriers (four VLOCs, nine

Ultramax vessels, two Supramax vessels and two Kamsarmax vessels); 10 gas carriers (eight LNG carriers, one VLGC and one MGC) and Five container vessels (two Handymax vessels, one Handysize vessel, one Supramax vessel and

one Panamax vessel).

Significantly, six new vessels — currently under construction at Korean shipyards — are set to join the fleet over the next two years, said Abdulrehman Salim al Hatmi, Chairman of the Board of Directors — Asyad Shipping.

The new acquisitions will support the company’s growth and expansion into new markets, he noted.

“Going forward in 2025, the Company will continue the steady growth position in the regional market by expanding its fleet size across all segments. The company will follow its diversification plan of the fleet to offer more competitive activities in the industry.

Taking advantage of the change in rates, chartering contracts can be negotiated to increase the revenue of the company,” Al Hatmi stated in the Directors report published here on Sunday.

“Additionally, the Company is committed to achieving its long-term growth plans, with 6 vessels

under construction expected to be operational in 2026/2027.

Strategies and plans for fleet expansion and diversification are set to ensure the company is on the right path to achieving its vision.

The Company can extend its role to become a key player in the global supply chain realm, not only through seagoing transportation but also by integrating its services along the supply chain to maximise value, access cargo and generate additional sources of income,” he added.

The six newbuilds come on top of four newly built Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCC) that were acquired in 2024. The group’s total asset value at the end of 2024 stood at RO 1,085.0 million, compared to RO 1,164.6 million in 2023.

The net worth of the Company however increased from RO 443.8 million in 2023 to RO 469.3 million at the end of last year, as a result of the increase in profits for the year, the report added.

OPINION

London Stock Exchange sees market bouncing back



ANDY JALIL

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

THE chief executive of the London Stock Exchange (LSE) said most firms that switch their listings from the UK to US struggle to boost their share price. With London grappling with a number of firms departing, the Group’s CEO, David Schwimmer, ruled out offloading its flagship bourse as he insisted the market is bouncing back. Speaking after LSEG’s annual results, Schwimer said he would not sell or spin off the LSE and that it is a “core part” of LSEG’s strategy. Since joining from Goldman Sachs in 2018, Schwimmer has overseen LSEG’s transformation into a data and analytics powerhouse. The firm acquired Refinitiv for \$27 bn in 2021 and entered into a 10-year strategic partnership with Microsoft the following year. Data and analytics now comprise roughly half of LSEG’s revenue, compared with less than three per cent from equities. That has given rise to speculation over the future of the 223-year-old LSE, which has been hit by heavy outflows from UK stock funds, a dearth of IPOs and large firms seeking overseas listings. Schwimmer said that LSEG’s trading platforms create “a virtuous circle” within the wider group’s strategy, which is “to provide a financial markets infrastructure and data ecosystem across the trade life cycle, across

asset classes and on a global basis.” “If you are trading on our execution venues, you are creating data,” he said. “We provide that data to the market. The market uses that data to make decisions around more trading.” Schwimmer said the LSE is therefore “absolutely core to our strategy, core to our business and core to our brand” and that he is “very, very happy to have that business”. Stephen Yiu, a well-known retail manager building a stake in LSEG, said earlier this year that the firm should offload the London Stock Exchange and rebrand to reflect its transformation. He named Euronext and Deutsche Borse as potential bidders. Following the worst year for London IPOs since the financial crisis, Schwimmer reiterated his positive outlook for listings. “I still feel very comfortable about the pipeline and we can see a number of companies that are in preparation mode and evaluating their plans,” he said. “The market continues to be fairly subdued for IPOs on a global basis.” Schwimmer added that London remains one of the world’s largest markets by capital raised when including follow-on offerings. “This is a very healthy market, plentiful liquidity, lots of activity,” he said. The government has hurried to revamp

Data and analytics now comprise roughly half of LSEG’s revenue, compared with less than three per cent from equities. That has given rise to speculation over the future of the 223-year-old LSE, which has been hit by heavy outflows from UK stock funds, a dearth of IPOs and large firms seeking overseas listings.

the regularity rule book in the hope of making London a more attractive IPO venue, including an overhaul of listings rules last summer and plans for a private stock market called Pisces. Schwimmer said: “When you look at the facts, you look at the strength of the London market in terms of the broader capital raising, you look at the reforms and innovations that are coming to this market, I feel very good and very confident about the direction of travel. LSEG’s annual earnings slightly surpassed analysts’ estimates, with capital markets revenue soaring thanks to a strong performance from its Tradeweb platform for fixed income derivatives. LSEG said it has a “strong pipeline” of new products under development with Microsoft as the firm’s annual earnings met expectations. In its results statement, LSEG said its first products co-developed with the US giant are now generally available to customers and that it was preparing for “increased customer adoption” this year. In 2022, LSEG entered a 10-year strategic partnership with Microsoft — a move that saw it take a 4 per cent stake in the FTSE 100 group. Schwimmer said it had “reached an important milestone” in the partnership and that there was “a strong pipeline for 2025.”

EU’S BIG STARLINK HEADACHE IS TIME, NOT MONEY

BY JENNIFER JOHNSON

LONDON: As relations between Ukraine and the Trump administration sour, Kyiv has encountered a pressing problem: it relies on Starlink to help its military coordinate operations. The good news is that it wouldn’t break the bank to replace Elon Musk’s satellite operator with kit supplied by \$3 billion Anglo-French rival Eutelsat. The bad news is that executing such a switch would be highly complex — and couldn’t happen overnight. As things stand it doesn’t look like Musk will imminently axe Ukraine’s Starlink access, which is part funded by Poland. He just wants the world to know there would be devastating consequences if he did. In a March 9 post on X, formerly known as Twitter, the billionaire claimed Ukraine’s “entire front line would collapse” without links to his satellites. Though he went on to insist he’d never pull the plug, such episodes underline the case for using a satellite operator based in the European Union. At first glance, the costs of such a swap might appear to be a major barrier. Providing internet from space requires terminals on the ground to transmit satellite signals to end users and analysts estimate the price of one Eutelsat ground terminal is around \$10,000. Musk’s company, by comparison, offers terminals to Ukrainian consumers at less than \$600 each. Assuming each of Starlink’s 40,000 or so terminals in Ukraine is eventually swapped out with a Eutelsat one, the replacement drive would cost \$400 million before the internet is even switched on. Weighed against the EU’s \$17 trillion GDP this expense looks bearable, though. The European Commission is talking about mobilising 800 billion euros for defence, including 150 billion euros in loans for member states to spend on weapons. Throw in scope to raise pandemic-style joint debt at the EU level and the bloc should be both able and willing to fund a satcom switch for Ukraine. Yeah, this is like the kind of big puzzle, big problem with Europe is that Germany, its biggest faraway and its biggest economy, was not prepared to kind of put its fiscal foot down and go for growth in that way. What’s less clear is whether Eutelsat’s OneWeb constellation has the satellite heft to deliver a quality of internet comparable to Musk’s outfit. Eutelsat has around 650 satellites in low earth orbit, far less than Starlink’s 7,000-strong fleet. Calculations by investment bank Bryan Garnier suggest the OneWeb constellation could only offer Ukraine one or two dozen gigabits of data per second (GBPS), a rate sufficient to supply around 10,000 residential ground terminals. Eutelsat has a powerful satellite in farther-flung geostationary orbit that could help to fill the gap, but whether the result is connectivity on par with Starlink’s is uncertain. — Reuters

Insights on global challenges of 2025

THE global landscape is fractured and fragmented by geopolitical, environmental, societal, and technological dynamism and disruptions. The increasingly interrelated and non-linear complexities pose a grave challenge to the sustainability and resilience of global supply chains. The role of global supply chains as a fulcrum of trade stands at a juncture of jeopardy as the fundamental values of trust, predictability and dependability erode with escalating cross-border challenges and weakening political relationships. Though some risks are less prominent, the economic, societal and geopolitical interconnectedness cannot be dismissed. As we march forward into 2025, the ripple effects of these changes are unfolding. Drawing from the reports of the World Economic Forum, the United Nations and other global institutions, some insights into the world’s most pressing and significant challenges in 2025 will create a sense of urgency and awareness among various world stakeholders. Risk 1: Geopolitical tensions and state-based armed conflict are among the most severe challenges in the foreseeable future. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Russia, Palestine, Israel and Sudan are potent for escalation and destabilisation of regional and international contexts. State-based armed conflict also has the potential to disrupt trade routes and regional supply chain networks and derail global stability. This represents a paradigm shift in international risk assessment. Military conflict threatens international stability and human welfare. Geopolitical relationships are being shaped and redefined by raising geopolitical tensions. The geopolitical tensions have ripple effect on diplomatic relations, trade networks and security arrangements worldwide. Increasing trade restrictions and



Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by land, air and sea threatens to disrupt exports of commodities. For illustration only. — Reuters



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The writer is an assistant professor at the marketing and management department of the College of Banking and Financial Studies in Muscat.

retaliatory protectionist policies are medium-term barriers to global economic growth. Risk 2: Intensifying environmental challenges is the second significant risk the world will face in 2025. Climate change’s frequency and severity are catastrophic and affect critical infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing. Weather challenges would harm the earth’s ecosystem and biodiversity. Climate change has been identified as a challenge that “no economy or individual” can escape. By 2050, 216 million people will have to relocate within their countries due to worsening weather conditions. Research indicates a 50 per cent probability that global warming will exceed 3.5 degrees Celsius by 2100. Environmental degradation will endanger food security, water sources and human health. Risk 3: Misinformation and disinformation are significant risks that erode trust and complicate decision-making. Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence may amplify misinformation, which poses another challenge that threatens information integrity.

Risk 4: Societal polarisation is one of the immediate global risks that will fragment societies and dilute social cohesion and consensus. Polarisation is driven by misinformation that will hamper the effective functioning of democratic institutions and destabilise society. Societal fractures can lead to social instability, contributing to political and geostrategic volatility. Societies experiencing demographic changes are more susceptible to these challenges. Risk 5: Lack of economic opportunity and unemployment are other significant risks that could hamper inclusive growth and disrupt labour markets. The accelerated speed of technological advancement and automation is recalibrating and transforming businesses and creating both opportunities and challenges. According to the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report 2025, economic pressures are the key drivers of change in labour markets. Risk 6: The demographic patterns and shifts reflect overpopulation in emerging economies and aging populations in advanced countries but create distinct yet connected implications for societies and ecology. These demographic shifts profoundly impact labour markets, social support systems, migration patterns and political stability. Adapting to these changes requires innovative work, education, healthcare and inter-generational equity approaches. In conclusion, it is imperative to reiterate that addressing these interconnected challenges requires unprecedented global collective action across sectors and borders through innovation, adaptability and peace. The challenges we face in 2025 are deep-rooted and interconnected and can redefine societies, economies and our fragile relationship with nature. New collective thinking is urgently needed to mitigate these global challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

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INDIAN male MBA , 20 years experience in Oman & GCC in Project sales/ Dealer market in All construction materials including Cables & Accessories having D/L looking for the post of Sales Manager/ Assistant Manager. Contact: 00968 78099493

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CHIEF accountant, MBA finance, 9+ years experience in financial statements, auditing, budgeting, VAT, tax, fixed assets, reconciliation, payroll. Seeking a full-time or part-time position in a senior role. Contact: akramhaniffa@yahoo.com / 93988825.

B. COM. 35 years of experience in accounts, sales coordinator, admin, HR, personal assistant, document controller with Oman D/L, looking for a job. Contact: 92558734

SEEKING a new Job / Logistics & supply chain professional with 10-plus years experienced in Export & Import of Sea, Land & Air transport modes (Email: nouchimp1986@gmail.com, Mob: 79820286)

ACCOUNTS/ Finance: Indian male (MBA Fin) having more than 19 years of experience in Oman accounts & finance looking for suitable placement, NOC available and can join immediately. Contact: 92076716

MASTER'S graduate in MSc Global logistics, operations & supply chain management from London, seeking a full-time job in Oman. Possess 2 years of sales executive experience in London and 1 year as a purchase executive in Oman. Holding a valid Oman D/L. Contact: 77231865, email: finan8157@gmail.com

INDIAN Male, Storekeeper / Document Controller 2+yrs of experience in GCC, Completed BCA, ready to join immediately. Email: swamierzhasouth@gmail.com GSM: +968 71818173

FINANCE Manager, CA,CPA,20 years experience (Oman& India). Financial reporting, Budgeting, Taxation, Financial modelling, Feasibility, Valuation. Available to join immediately. 92148608

INDIAN male (Mechanical Engineering) with 3 years experience in Diesel engine works (Gensets/ Engines), 2 years in Machine Maintenance, seeks job. Contact: 78022420

A SUDANESE resident in Salalah, BSc of administrative sciences with 21 years of experience in the fields of (sales/ management/ logistics and fleet). Contact: +968 98510880.

INDIAN male 14 years experience light/ heavy driver. Looking for suitable opening currently in Oman. Contact: 77050986/ 91280205, email: kokkadmou@gmail.com

INDIAN Male /CPA, CMA, CA Finalist & BCOM/ 10+ years of Experience/ Currently Working as Finance Manager, Looking for Senior Management Roles in Finance. Contact: 78611653. Email: jobcpacma@gmail.com

ACCOUNTANT with 5 years expertise in Accounts Payable, Receivables, Financial Reporting, VAT, Payroll, and Bank & Cash Reconciliation. Actively looking for new opportunities. Contact: 79791746 Email: Ibrahimsaw52@gmail.com

SIT. WANTED

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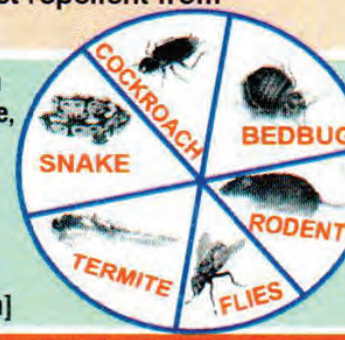
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Ramadhan

4

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If someone cannot fast, can he/she request another person to fast on his/her behalf?

If a person cannot fast, he/she should feed a needy person for each day he/she lost, but, generally, fasting on behalf of someone else is incorrect from the legality of fasting.



HADITH
GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported: When any one of you gets up in the morning in the state of fasting, he should neither use obscene language nor do any act of ignorance. And if anyone slanders him or quarrels with him, he should say: "I am fasting, I am fasting."

QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY



The Compassionate has taught the Quran. He created man. And taught him clear expression.

(Al Rahman, 1-4)



DUA
SUPPLICATION TO ALLAH

O Allah, on this day, grant me compatability with the good, keep me away from patching up with the evil, lead me in it, by Your mercy, to the permanent abode, by Your Godship, O the God of the worlds.



STUDENTS NAVIGATING THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING AWAY FROM HOME DURING RAMADHAN

BY BUTHINA AL RIYAMIYA

RAMADHAN, the sacred month of fasting and spiritual reflection, is a period eagerly anticipated by Muslims worldwide. It begins with the sighting of the crescent moon, heralding a month filled with deep faith, community spirit, and the comforting warmth of family reunions. In Oman, where over 245,000 students are enrolled in schools, universities, and colleges, this month holds profound significance. Among these, around 150,000 students attend higher education institutions, often finding themselves away from their families during this blessed month. Traditionally, Athar's family gathers at her grandparents' home to welcome Ramadhan, a cherished event she finds impossible to

recreate in her university life. The tranquil nights of Ramadhan awaken a special spirit on campus. With every sunset, students gather in communal spaces, transforming their environment into a haven of warmth and spirituality. "A palpable sense of peace wraps around the campus as the sun sets. The gentle breeze carries the recitations of the Quran, connecting us to something greater," Athar observes, highlighting the enchantment present even away from home. Amidst the struggles, the university goes to great lengths to support its students. Sultan Qaboos University actively fosters a sense of community, ensuring that even those far from their families can engage in meaningful experiences. The institution transcends mere academics by organising iftar gatherings, Quran recitation sessions, and providing designated prayer spaces for Taraweeh prayers, creating an atmosphere of unity amid diversity. Athar often finds solace in shared moments with her peers, preparing iftar together, and reflecting on their journeys. "My friend and I gather to prepare our iftar, sharing the meal before heading to the girls' prayer hall for Taraweeh," she says, illustrating the vibrant life pulsing through the campus during Ramadhan. Dr. Rayya Al Manthari, the Dean

of Student Affairs, understands the emotional landscape of these students and endeavours to bridge the gap of separation from family. This year, she has initiated a second series of communal iftar gatherings, inviting female students and staff to partake in these heartwarming meals, fostering connections and conversations that resonate with the spirit of Ramadhan. In these gatherings, laughter is abundant, and discussions flow freely, where students share their dreams, challenges, and aspirations in an atmosphere reminiscent of family dinners. These moments not only fulfill their spiritual needs but also cultivate an unbreakable bond among students, fostering resilience and promoting a sense of belonging in the heart of Oman's academic landscape during Ramadhan. As Oman's campuses transform with the spirit of Ramadhan, it is not just a time of fasting but a period of community, connection, and compassion. For students like Athar, who navigate the complexities of being away from home, finding a "home away from home" during this holy month is a cherished experience that reinforces their faith and enhances their academic and personal growth, reminding them of the significance of togetherness, even in the most challenging times.



Ramadhan in Japan: A Unique Cultural Celebration

BY KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

THE HOLY MONTH

of Ramadhan in Japan offers a truly unique experience, intertwining traditional practices with the hustle and bustle of modern life. Here, Muslims embrace the month with deep reverence, fuelled by local jamats and community gatherings that ensure daily iftar and suhoor are joyfully observed. However, the rhythms of everyday life continue, blending seamlessly with the sacredness of this special time.

According to estimates from Hirofumi Tanada, an expert on Muslim affairs and professor emeritus at Waseda University, Japan's Muslim population stands at approximately 350,000 as of early 2024.

To understand the essence of Ramadhan in Japan, one could speak to Naoki Maeno, known as Abu Hakeem Ahmad. As a scholar of Traditional Islamic Sciences and Director of the Japan Muslim Association, he provides remarkable insight into how Muslims in Japan navigate this holy month amidst a background of ever-increasing cultural diversity.

Maeno, one of the 15 directors and Imams of the Japan Muslim Association (JMA), is also a principal member of the Daawah and Education Committees for JMA and serves

as the Director of the Tokyo Camii Institute. Having embraced Islam in January 1994 at 18 after studying in Melbourne, he believes that while the Muslim community in Japan is smaller than in many countries, the spirit of Ramadhan thrives through the collective devotion of its members.

“In Japan, even though the Muslim population may be modest, Ramadhan is a wonderful opportunity for brothers and sisters to gather, share meals, and strengthen their bonds. Numerous local events and community activities take place throughout the month,” Maeno explains. His extensive education at institutions like the Abu Noor Islamic Institute and the Fath Islamic Institute equips him to continue sharing and enriching the community’s knowledge.

True to global traditions, mosques and Islamic centres across Japan host Iftar gatherings that bring people together to break their fast collectively. One of the month’s highlights is the Iftar dinner, fostering camaraderie and cross-cultural exchange.

“These events are open to both Muslims and non-Muslims, allowing everyone to engage with the spirit of Ramadhan and learn more about Islam. In major cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, Iftar meals attract a wonderfully diverse crowd,” Maeno notes.

During this holy month, mosques frequently organise a plethora of events. For instance, the Tokyo Camii hosts daily Taraweeh prayers

and special lectures, while other centres arrange Quran study groups, charitable activities, and outreach programmes that benefit society as a whole.

“Charity is paramount during Ramadhan. Many Muslims in Japan take this opportunity to donate to local charities, assist those in need, and join food drives. Some mosques and organisations also establish collections for the less fortunate or coordinate volunteering efforts, enabling the community to make a tangible impact,” Maeno adds, having served as Executive Director and Secretary General of the Japan-Saudi Arabia Society and Japan-Kuwait Society since April 2020.

Royal Iftar: Strengthening Bonds

On 14 March, Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru hosted an Iftar for ambassadors from Muslim countries in Japan, recognising Ramadhan as a valuable opportunity to strengthen ties with Islamic nations and reaffirm the country’s commitment to peace, harmony, and coexistence.

Ito Chinatsu from the Cultural and Defence Sections shares that this governmental Iftar has been an annual event since it was first held under then-Prime Minister Koizumi’s patronage.

In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Ishiba acknowledged the deepening trust and friendship between Japan and Muslim countries. He stressed the importance of enhanced cooperation at this historic juncture for the international community.

He also addressed the ongoing situation in the Middle East, expressing Japan’s desire to contribute to a peaceful resolution and emphasising the need for improved humanitarian conditions. Ishiba hopes this Iftar will further deepen friendly relations between Japan and Muslim nations.

The Prime Minister also highlighted the ‘Myakumyaku’ initiative and expressed hopes for broad participation in the upcoming Osaka/Kansai Expo.

Attending the Iftar alongside various dignitaries were representatives from 45 Muslim countries, including nations such as Algeria, Egypt, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and many more, all coming together to celebrate the spirit of Unity during this sacred month.

RAMADHAN TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

“Dolma” (stuffed vegetables), nightly gatherings and communal prayers in Iraq

In Iraq, Ramadhan is steeped in rich traditions and cultural heritage, celebrated with a profound sense of faith and community. Families eagerly prepare for iftar, often featuring “Dolma,” a delectable dish of stuffed vegetables simmered in aromatic spices, symbolising togetherness. As dusk falls, the call to prayer resonates through neighbourhoods, inviting worshippers to join in nightly prayers at mosques, fostering a sense of unity and devotion. Community gatherings after prayers are filled with joyful conversations, as families share stories, laughter and reflections on the Quran. The month of Ramadhan is also a time for charitable acts, with many Iraqis reaching out to support those less fortunate. Decorations illuminate homes, creating a festive atmosphere that signifies both celebration and spiritual reflection. In Iraq, Ramadhan serves as a reminder of faith, resilience and the importance of community bonds amidst challenging times.

DAILY HEALTH TIPS TO REMEMBER



Be Mindful of Salt Intake

During Ramadhan, being cautious about salt intake is essential for maintaining optimal health while fasting. Excessive salt consumption can lead to increased thirst, dehydration and potential health issues such as high blood pressure. When planning your meals for iftar and suhoor, focus on using herbs and spices to flavour your food rather than reaching for the salt shaker. Fresh herbs, garlic and spices like cumin or paprika can significantly enhance taste without the drawbacks associated with high sodium levels. Additionally, consider the hidden sources of salt in processed foods, including sauces, canned products and snacks. Reading labels can help you make informed choices. Opt for healthier alternatives, like unsalted nuts or baked vegetable crisps, to satisfy your cravings without overwhelming your body with salt.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN ISLAM



786-809 CE: The Reign of Harun Al Rashid

Harun Al Rashid’s reign is often seen as the pinnacle of the Abbasid Caliphate. His patronage of arts and scholarship led to unprecedented cultural flourishing. The era saw advancements in various fields, including mathematics, astronomy and medicine. Harun’s court became renowned for its opulence and cultural exchange, exemplified in tales of “One Thousand and One Nights.”

FEATURES

Hong Kong museum puts Picasso in cross-cultural dialogue



MORE THAN a century ago, Pablo Picasso smashed the Sacre-Coeur Basilica in Paris into a web of tangled lines on his canvas, deconstructing reality with the brushstrokes of a master cubist.

At a Hong Kong exhibition opening Saturday, that painting will be shown alongside a more literal form of destruction -- a "gunpowder drawing" by Chinese-born artist Cai Guo-Qiang -- as part of a cross-cultural exchange.

"Interest in (Picasso's) life and work hasn't subsided at all, including in Asia" in the half-century since his death, said Doryun Chong, artistic director and chief curator at the M+ museum.

The show will pair more than 60 masterpieces loaned from the Picasso Museum in Paris with around 130 works by Asian and Asian-diasporic artists.

Highlights include "Portrait of a Man" from Picasso's Blue Period, a 1937 horse head sketch for "Guernica" and "Massacre in Korea", a 1951 expressionist anti-war painting.

"Exhibitions on Picasso tend to be very monographic," said Chong, who co-curated the event.

"We felt that it's more productive for understanding Picasso... that we create these unexpected juxtapositions and dialogues."

Cecile Debray, president of the Picasso Museum in Paris, hailed the approach as being "decentred from the Western point of view".

The last major Picasso showcase in Hong Kong, a more straightforward affair, took place in 2012 and drew huge crowds.

In the intervening decade, Picasso's reputation has been dented by the #MeToo movement as critics decried his abusive treatment of wives and girlfriends.

"We are of course very open and honest about the rather disturbing aspects of his biography, but we also shouldn't let that determine the meanings of his whole career," Chong said.

Hong Kong officials have touted the four-month exhibition as part of "Art March", hoping that high-brow events at museums, fairs and auction houses can boost the city's international appeal.

Since opening in late 2021, M+ has seen more than eight million visitors -- a bright spot for Hong Kong's loss-making West Kowloon Cultural District.

Chong said the museum connects visual culture between Asia and the world, citing the example of how Picasso is placed next to self-taught local painter Luis Chan.

Chan, who drew ample inspiration from the Spanish master, was "of the older generation when formal training in art was not possible in Hong Kong".

"Still he felt connected to the centre of the art world at the time in Paris, and the very important figure in that context (that is) Picasso." —AFP



Bringing a Persian Epic to the World, With Help From 483 Puppets

ON A RECENT afternoon on 42nd Street in Manhattan, a mythological bird was preparing to take flight.

Backstage at the New Victory Theatre, a black-clad puppeteer put on an elaborately stylised mask and stepped into a beam of light, throwing the shadow of fluttering hands onto a large scrim.

Nearby, two other performers were gearing up to practice a sword fight. Then the music started and a crew of nine began a full run-through of "Song of the North," an elaborate shadow puppet staging of stories from the 10th-century Persian epic the "Shahnameh."

From the audience, the show unfolded like a seamless animation. But backstage, the next 80 minutes were half ballet, half mad scramble as the performers grabbed hundreds of different puppets, props and masks stacked on tables and, with split-second timing, jumped in and out of the light beams streaming from two projectors.

Leaning against a backstage wall was the show's creator, Hamid Rahmanian. His role? "Stressing out," he said.

Since premiering in 2022 in Paris, "Song of the North" (which is intended for audiences age 8 and older) has received enthusiastic reviews and played to packed houses on three continents. Its arrival in the heart of Times Square, where it begins a weeklong run March 15, is timed for Nowruz, the Persian new year celebration. It also coincides with the release of a new contemporary prose translation of the "Shahnameh" that Rahmanian produced in collaboration with scholar Ahmad Sadri — the first complete English version by Iranians, Rahmanian said.

The show is mind-dizzily complex, involving 483 puppets, 208 animated backgrounds, 16 character masks and costumes and nine performers who follow more than 2,300 separate cues.

But the idea behind it, Rahmanian said, is simple: to bring the richness of Persian culture to young audiences and adults whose views of Iran may be dominated by negative stereotypes.

"Everything about Iran is seen through the lens of politics," he said. "Iranian culture is a symphony. But in the West, we only hear the drumbeat."

With their projects gaining acclaim, Hamid and Melissa continued to explore innovative ways to bring the "Shahnameh" to life. Their passion for this epic fuelled their creativity, engaging local audiences while reaching



international platforms.

In 2024, they launched a tour showcasing "Song of the North" across various cities, drawing attention from art enthusiasts and educational institutions. Each performance became a celebration of Persian heritage, weaving themes of love, honour and forgiveness into captivating theatre.

As word spread, Hamid's work attracted collaborations with scholars and artists interested in Persian literature. They organised workshops discussing the "Shahnameh" and its relevance today, captivating diverse crowds eager to learn about these ancient tales and their moral lessons. Hamid's ability to make the stories accessible resonated deeply with many, sparking a newfound appreciation for Persian culture.

Emboldened by their success, the couple expanded their studio and welcomed new artists into their team. They launched a new project: an animated series based on lesser-known tales from the "Shahnameh," aimed at engaging younger audiences through a contemporary lens.

Amid rehearsals and brainstorming sessions, Hamid initiated community outreach programmes, inviting local schools to participate in workshops and performances to cultivate a love for storytelling in children. Their evolving journey garnered notable recognition, earning accolades for their unique theatrical approach and attracting invitations to film festivals and art

exhibitions.

In 2025, they launched a crowdfunding campaign to finance the animated series, receiving overwhelming public support. By mid-year, the project was officially greenlit, leading to intense production efforts.

Reflecting on their journey at a gala event in their studio, Hamid and Melissa invited patrons and friends to celebrate their achievements. They shared stories of their struggles and triumphs, expressing gratitude for the community they had built around their work. Hamid felt a profound sense of purpose, knowing their efforts not only honoured their heritage but also inspired others to cherish the power of storytelling.

Their dedication to the "Shahnameh" evolved into a lasting legacy that would educate and resonate for generations, emphasising the enduring impact of cultural narratives in the modern world.

The "Shahnameh," or Book of Kings, is said to be the longest poem ever written by a single author — twice as long as the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" combined. It was composed by Persian poet Abu Al Qasem Ferdowsi, who spent 33 years turning centuries of historical and mythological lore into more than 50,000 couplets.

In Iran, where many people give their children names of characters (Rostom, Sohrab), it remains a cultural touchstone. But growing up in Tehran, Iran, Rahmanian, now 56, was resistant to his father's admonitions to actually read it. —NYT