

OMAN

دولة عمان

DAILY

Observer

WHEN CHATS GO VISUAL



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PAGES 20 BAISAS 200

SUNRISE 06:42 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 05:21 AM

DHUHR 12:07 PM

ASR 03:08 PM

MAGHRIB 05:28 PM

ISHA 06:44 PM



INBRIEF

HM GREETES BAHRAIN KING, CHILE LEADER

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes. His Majesty prayed to Allah the Almighty for the return of this happy occasion on King Hamad and the people of Bahrain, having achieved further accomplishments and aspirations. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President-elect José Antonio Kast on being elected as his country's President. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes of success to Jose Antonio Kast in leading the people of Chile towards the achievement of further progress and prosperity.

HM CONFERS ORDER UPON ILO CHIEF



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik conferred the Order of Appreciation upon Gilbert Hounbo, Director-General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This honour recognises the ILO official's efforts and contributions in multiple fields to advance international cooperation. The order was presented by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, during his reception of the distinguished guest at Muaskar Al Murtafaa. The ceremony was attended by Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, and Idris bin Abdulrahman al Khanjari, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations and Other International Organisations in Geneva.

MUSANDAM SCHOOLS SHIFT TO ONLINE

The Ministry of Education has announced that all government, private and international schools in Musandam Governorate will shift to distance learning on Tuesday. This precautionary measure has been taken due to forecasts of heavy rainfall, with accumulations potentially reaching up to 60 millimetres, in parts of the governorate beginning at dawn on Tuesday. The announcement was made based on information provided by the National Centre for Emergency Management. The centre has warned of heavy rains accompanied by strong winds over the governorate, with anticipated rainfall.

HM confers Oman Civil Order upon UN Chief

A N T Ó N I O G U T E R R E S V A L U E S O M A N ' S W I S E D I P L O M A T I C E F F O R T S



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has conferred Oman Civil Order (First Class) upon António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) during an audience at Al Barakah Palace. The honour was bestowed in recognition of the UN Chief's distinguished diplomatic and political role, as well as his sustained efforts in supporting conflict resolution and advancing international peace and security. In his turn, the UN Secretary-General

expressed his sincere appreciation for the honour. He also valued the Sultanate of Oman's constructive and wise diplomatic efforts in backing dialogue and mediation, as well as its contribution to conflict resolution regionally and internationally with a spirit of responsibility and cooperation. The UN Secretary-General underscored the importance of the continued partnership with the Sultanate of Oman in a bid to serve

stability and peace internationally. The meeting was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamed bin Said al Aufi, Head of Private Office of His Majesty the Sultan, Hussain bin Ali Abdullatif, Adviser at the Private Office, Gilles Michaud, UN Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security and Hans Grundberg, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Yemen. — ONA
SEE ALSO P2

UKRAINIAN NEGOTIATOR SAYS 'REAL PROGRESS' IN TALKS WITH US

BERLIN: "Real progress" has been achieved during two days of talks with a US delegation in Berlin on ending Russia's war in Ukraine, Kyiv's negotiator Rustem Umerov said on Monday. "Over the past two days, Ukrainian-US negotiations have been constructive and productive, with real progress achieved," Umerov said on social media. "We hope we will reach an agreement that will bring us closer to peace by the end

of the day," he added, though his office later said this did not mean an accord was close. Umerov's press service told reporters that "no deal is expected by the end of the day." "It was meant that by the end of the day, we hope to finally align our positions," it added in comments to journalists. Umerov's statements came as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky continued talks in Berlin with US President Donald Trump's

envoys aimed at ending the war that started with Russia's attack in 2022. Kyiv hopes to convince Washington that a ceasefire must be agreed without prior territorial concessions to Russia. Details of the plan, which was revised after earlier negotiations with the Ukrainians in Geneva and Florida, are not yet public, but according to Zelensky, it involves territorial concessions by Kyiv.
SEE ALSO P7

RO 150m sugar refinery in Suhar to boost food security

SUHAR: The inauguration of the Oman Sugar Refinery (OSR) factory was celebrated on Monday at Sohar Port and Freezone. This is a significant industrial project for the food security sector in the Sultanate of Oman, with an investment exceeding RO 150 million. The inauguration was held under the auspices of Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance. Zayed bin Ahmed al Habsi, representative of Oman Sugar Refinery Company, said that the opening of the OSR factory at Sohar Port is an important national achievement as it is the first sugar refinery in the

Sultanate of Oman. He described it as a strategic step in supporting the food security and reinforcing the Sultanate of Oman's direction towards localising food industries and reducing reliance on imports. Eng Salim bin Abdullah al Ghafeeli, Director-General of Food Security at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said that the sugar factory aligns with the national directives aimed at localising transformative food industries and reducing external dependence. This contributes to achieving food



The inauguration of the factory was held under the auspices of Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance.

stability and supporting economic diversification. He added that such projects help raise the efficiency of supply chains and ensure the sustainable availability of essential food commodities under all circumstances. The chief guest and the attendees then toured the factory and were briefed on the production lines and stages. The project is built on an area of 20 hectares at Sohar Port. The factory successfully completed its trial operation phase and met the Tier 2 standards according to European specifications, preparing for a

gradual transition to commercial operation by January 2026. The factory employs an advanced European refining system which contributes to increasing production efficiency and ensuring high quality across all operations. The factory's production capacity is one million tonnes annually of refined sugar, supported by extensive storage infrastructure, including 500,000 tonnes of raw sugar and 70,000 tonnes of refined sugar. These advanced capabilities contribute to solidifying Oman's position as a regional hub for sugar processing, distribution, and re-export. — ONA

OMAN

UN VALUES IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIP WITH OMAN



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وزارة النقل والاتصالات وتقنية المعلومات
Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

إعلان مزايمة استثمارية
Investment Announcement

Investment Announcement No: (7/2025)
Bidding for the Development of Open-Source Office Software Solutions for Units of the State Administrative Apparatus

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology announces the launch of the following Bidding for local companies and investors specializing in the software sector are invited to submit investment proposals for the development of office software applications for word processing, presentation creation, and spreadsheet management, based on open-source technologies. These applications should be ready for deployment and use across various workplaces and meet general standard office requirements in different work environments, and particularly within government entities. This initiative aims to support technology localization efforts and enhance national digital sovereignty.

NUMBER	DOCUMENT PURCHASING DATE	CLARIFICATION PERIODS	CLOSING DATE	DOCUMENT FEES
7/2025	16/12/2025 to 20/01/2026	21/01/2026 to 04/02/2026	17/03/2026 12:00 AM	100 Omani Rials (non-refundable)

- Document fee should be paid by bank transfer only to the Ministry's account number 0423076490490027 Bank Muscat
- The payment receipt must be sent to investment@mtcit.gov.om
- The bidding document will be shared via email
- The Investment proposals must include all the requirements mentioned in the Bidding document
- The Investment proposal must be valid for at least 12 months and should be signed and stamped
- All investment proposals should be sent as PDF to investment@mtcit.gov.om
- For any other inquiries, you can reach us via the following contact details:

PHONE NUMBER	E-mail
24685340 24685341 24685091	investment@mtcit.gov.om

INTERNAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

[www.mtcit.gov.om](#)

@mtcitoman

Oman celebrates 80 years of UN



MUSCAT: The Foreign Ministry today commemorated the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN). The ceremony was held in the presence of António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations and Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister.

The event reaffirms the Sultanate of Oman's unwavering commitment to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and its steadfast support for the Organisation's vital role in advancing international peace and security, upholding the rules of international law, and fostering multilateral cooperation to tackle common global challenges.

Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs, delivered an address. He highlighted the esteemed position and central role of the United Nations within the global order and underscored the critical importance of collective action and international coordination in resolving political, humanitarian and developmental issues. He also articulated Oman's consistent foreign policy approach, grounded in dialogue, diplomacy, respect for state sovereignty, and the promotion of mutual understanding among nations.

The ceremony was hosted at the Ministry's headquarters. Attendees included HH Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University for International Cooperation, under-secretaries, the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, representatives of United Nations offices accredited to the Sultanate of Oman, and officials from the Foreign Ministry. — ONA



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SHORTTAKES



The sessions targeted students from public, private schools, special education schools and social integration schools.

UNICEF OMAN HOLDS DIALOGUE SESSIONS FOR STUDENTS

IBRA: Acting in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah North, Children First Association and the Ministry of Education, the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) organised dialogue sessions for children as part of the programme of World Children’s Day which takes the theme ‘My Day, My Rights’ this year.

Held under the auspices of Mahmoud bin Yahya al Thuhli, Governor of Al Sharqiyah North, the event was attended by HH Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at SQU, and Sumaira Chowdhury, Unicef Representative in the Sultanate of Oman.

The dialogue sessions targeted students from public and private schools, special education schools and social integration schools.

The dialogue sessions focused on listening to the opinions of the students, answering their queries and outlining children’s rights related to education, health, the environment and climate change.

The dialogue sessions also elaborated on how students could contribute to promoting children’s rights and education in their social environments. — ONA

Al Dakhiliyah highlights abilities and inclusion

AMAL AL RIYAMI
MANAH, DEC 15

THE Directorate-General of Social Development in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate organised a celebration to mark the International Day of Persons with Disabilities at the Oman Across Ages Museum in the Wilayat of Manah under the theme ‘Building Inclusive Communities for Persons with Disabilities to Promote Social Progress’. The event was held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Ali bin Said Zabanoot, Wali of Adam.

The celebration brought together officials, families, and community members in an atmosphere filled with sincerity, warmth, and genuine human connection, reflecting the values of inclusion and social solidarity. The event highlighted the importance of empowering persons with disabilities and recognising their abilities as active contributors to society.

Khamis bin Said al Amri, Director of the Department of Persons with Disabilities, said: “Observing this day aims to raise awareness about disability issues and change prevailing perceptions.

The role of innovation in shaping a fair and accessible world, creating inclusive environments, is essential to ensuring equal opportunities and meaningful participation for all.”

The event featured a series of moving performances, including a poetry recital titled ‘My Beloved Homeland’ by student Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Shukailli from Al Wafa Centre for the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities in Bahla. The centre also presented a performance entitled ‘Happiness Syndrome’, showcasing students with Down syndrome in a heartfelt and joyful display.

A visual presentation highlighted the



The celebration brought together community members to reflect values of inclusion.

services provided by Al Wafa Rehabilitation Centres and their role in empowering persons with disabilities to become productive and engaged members of society.

Al Wafa Centre in Nizwa presented a national performance titled “Azm” (Determination), featuring students with autism.

The Wali of Adam honoured individuals who achieved top positions at the governorate level during the Sixth Annual Festival for Persons with Disabilities.

Ahmed bin Salim al Harthy, a visitor to the celebration, said: “What we witnessed today was far more than a ceremony. It was a powerful human message that showed us how honesty, innocence and determination can overcome any barrier when people are given the chance to shine.”

The celebration reaffirmed Al Dakhiliyah Governorate’s commitment to promoting inclusive development, strengthening community awareness, and fostering a society where diversity is embraced and everyone is given the opportunity to thrive.

Dhofar University marks 21st graduation with 1,332 students



SALALAH: Dhofar University celebrated on Sunday in Salalah the graduation of 451 students from the College of Commerce and Administrative Sciences, awarding bachelor’s and diploma degrees as part of its 21st graduating class.

The ceremony was held in the university’s conference hall, attended by university officials, faculty and guests.

Dr Amer bin Ali al Rawas, President of Dhofar University, delivered a speech emphasising that the graduation of this class reflects the university’s ongoing commitment to preparing qualified national cadres, both academically and practically. — ONA

Bahrain marks National Day today

MUSCAT: The Kingdom of Bahrain will celebrate on Tuesday its 54th National Day and the 26th anniversary of King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain assuming the reins of power, which falls on December 16 of every year.

The Kingdom of Bahrain celebrates this national occasion while witnessing pioneering developmental achievements and a comprehensive modern renaissance under the leadership of King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa.

Omani-Bahraini relations are witnessing continuous development in various fields, based on a shared historical legacy and a wise leadership



vision that strengthens paths of cooperation and integration between the two countries.

Dr Juma bin Ahmed al Kaabi, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the Sultanate of Oman, said

that the outstanding achievements realised in the comprehensive development journey are considered a milestone in Bahrain’s ancient civilisation history and an exceptional model for growth and development, achieving economic growth, financial stability and sustainable development.

He added that the Kingdom of Bahrain’s celebration of its National Day embodies an occasion to express loyalty, fidelity and gratitude to the wise leadership, pride in the achievements of the comprehensive development journey, and the continuation of the march towards further prosperity and stability. — ONA



Tender

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madaayn) announces the following Bid:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
M.T.A/ 1/2025	Installation and Operation of Digital Advertising and Informational Screens within Madaayn Industrial Cities	21-12-2025	4-1-2026	Installation and Operation	First and above	None

Interested and specialized companies are invited to obtain the tender documents and submit their bids in accordance with the approved terms and conditions.

• **Location for Obtaining Tender Documents and Submitting Bids:**
Knowledge Oasis Muscat (KOM) – KOM 4 – Fourth Floor

• **Timings:**
During official working hours and in accordance with the timelines specified in the tender documents.

• **For inquiries, please contact:**
Email: [ali.said@madaayn.om](#)
Telephone: +968 2444 9637

Note: Bidders must comply with Omanization requirements specified by Ministry of Labour.



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SPOTLIGHT

WHEN CHATS GO VISUAL

THEY RELY ON SHARED CULTURAL CONTEXT, WHICH CAN CAUSE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

STICKERS ACT AS A NEW VISUAL LANGUAGE, OFTEN REPLACING FULL SENTENCES IN CASUAL CHATS

IDRIS AL BALUSHI

WHEN MALAK AL HADHRAMI, a mother and primary school teacher, noticed that her 14-year-old son replied to her messages using only WhatsApp sticker memes, she initially found it amusing. His responses were expressive and often humorous. Over time, however, the habit became frustrating. The stickers felt impersonal, even dismissive, leaving her wondering whether meaningful communication was being replaced by quick visual reactions.

Malak’s experience reflects a wider shift in digital communication. Stickers, once playful additions to text messages, are increasingly functioning as a language of their own.

Across Oman and beyond, WhatsApp conversations are now filled with visual cues that can express laughter, frustration, empathy, or sarcasm—often without a single typed word.

According to Dr Najma al Zidjaly, Associate Professor of Sociolinguistics and Intercultural Communication at Sultan Qaboos University, stickers have fundamentally reshaped how people communicate online. “They replace sentences,” she explains. “Instead of typing a long explanation, one sticker can convey the same meaning quickly and effectively.”

Yet, stickers are not always welcomed as substitutes for text. “When someone communicates only through stickers, it can be frustrating, especially in serious conversations,” Malak says. Dr Najma agrees, noting that stickers depend heavily on shared cultural understanding. Without

that context, messages can appear vague, dismissive, or even rude. Adding a psychological dimension, Fatma al Amri, a member of the Omani Socialists Association, explains that stickers meet emotional needs such as belonging, humour and emotional release. “A single sticker can compress complex feelings and signal group identity,” she says. Dr Najma describes stickers as multimodal communication tools, combining visual and linguistic elements. “Images are a form of language,” she notes. “Stickers communicate emotion, tone and intention in ways similar to words.”

In Oman, stickers have also taken on social significance. During the pandemic, they were used to spread public awareness messages and encourage safety practices. “They carried serious meaning and civic responsibility,” Dr Najma explains.

So, are stickers replacing written language? Not entirely. Instead, they are reshaping how people communicate informally. “This is an evolution of visual language,” Dr Najma says. “Young people still understand the difference between casual digital communication and formal writing.”

For now, stickers remain largely informal tools that enhance expression and connection. The real challenge lies in encouraging balanced communication — knowing when a sticker is enough and when words are necessary. Stickers may express emotion instantly, but, as Fatma points out, words still give meaning depth and clarity.



Images are a form of language. Stickers communicate emotion, tone and intention much like words do.

DR NAJMA AL ZIDJALY,
Associate Professor of Sociolinguistics and Intercultural Communication, SQU

POPULAR AMONG YOUTH, STICKERS OFFER FAST EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND GROUP IDENTITY

CONSTRUCTION OF AL NAMA HOSPITAL IN AL MUDHAIBI AT 49%

AL MUDHAIBI: Construction work on Al Nama Hospital in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate stands at 49.2 per cent.

Eng Yousuf Yaqoub Amboali, Director-General of Projects and Engineering Services at the Ministry of Health, said that the project constitutes part of the ministry's efforts to develop health infrastructure and enhance the integration of medical services in the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. Amboali added that the hospital is being set up at a total cost of RO 56 million and that it is scheduled to be completed by October 31, 2026. — ONA



Indian Social Club Oman

TENDER NOTICE

Expression of Interest

The Indian Social Club Oman would like to invite specialised companies dealing with rock breaking and levelling of the ground at our land in Amerat.

Topography survey and contour plan with krooki can be collected from our office at Darsait on or before 20th December 2025.

The quotation must be submitted on or before the office hours on 25th December 2025.

ISC Oman

RAM concludes Capacity Building Programme

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

UNDER the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, the Royal Academy of Management (RAM), in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy, has concluded the Governorates' Planning and Economic Capacity Building Programme, marking a strategic shift in national development from service management to proactive economic shaping.

Implemented in line with the Royal Vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, the programme sought to cultivate a new generation of national leaders equipped with economic foresight, analytical depth, and adaptive capacity to respond effectively to global and regional economic transformations at the governorate level.

The programme focused on strengthening strategic economic thinking among national leaders, enabling them to interpret geo-economic shifts, reassess development priorities and design future-ready economic pathways. It addressed the accelerating



About 50 participants took part in the Governorates' Planning and Economic Capacity Building Programme.

The programme marked a strategic shift in national development from service management to proactive economic shaping

transformations redefining leadership, competitiveness, and development models, both globally and within Oman.

Dr Ali bin Qassim al Lawati, President of the Royal Academy of Management (RAM), said the programme embodies the Royal Vision of His Majesty which places empowered, future-ready leadership at the heart of national development. He noted that Oman's current and forthcoming development phases demand leaders capable of both managing institutions and understanding the complexities of the global and regional economic environment.

Dr Al Lawati stressed that the programme was designed as an integrated foundational platform rather than a conventional training initiative, enabling

participants to reassess local and global economic realities and engineer sustainable development pathways that go beyond short-term interventions.

Highlighting the pace of global economic transformation, Dr Al Lawati said national resilience is no longer determined solely by resources, but by leadership equipped with economic foresight — leaders capable of interpreting complex shifts and transforming challenges into sustainable development opportunities.

Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, said the programme reflects an integrated government approach to advancing decentralisation and strengthening the role of governorates in shaping their development agendas.



It is with great sadness that OMRAN Group
mourns the passing of
Mohammed Khamis Al Ghufaili
Chief Operations Officer

On behalf of the Group,
we extend our deepest sympathy and
condolences to his family and loved ones.

May almighty Allah grant the departed soul eternal
peace and give strength to his family during this difficult time.



WORLD

SHORT TAKES



A Palestinian man holding the national flag gestures at the entrance of the Nur Shams refugee camp. — AFP

ISRAEL TO DEMOLISH 25 RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS IN WEST BANK CAMP

TULKAREM: The Israeli army is to demolish 25 residential buildings in the north West Bank’s Nur Shams refugee camp later this week, local authorities said on Monday. Abdallah Kamil, governor of the Tulkarem governorate where Nur Shams is located, said he was informed of the planned demolition by the Israeli defence ministry body COGAT. COGAT, which is in charge of coordinating civilian affairs in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, did not respond to AFP’s requests for comment.

Faisal Salama, head of the popular committee for Tulkarem camp, which is near Nur Shams, said the demolition order would affect 25 buildings holding up to 100 family homes. “We were informed by the military and civil coordination that the occupation will carry out the demolition of 25 buildings on December 18, on Thursday,” he said.

In early 2025, Israel’s military launched a wide-ranging and still ongoing operation it says is aimed at rooting out Palestinian armed groups from refugee camps in the northern West Bank — including the Nur Shams, Tulkarem and Jenin camps. The operation displaced all the residents and more than 30,000 have yet to return home. During the operation, Israel has destroyed hundreds of houses in the dense network of alleys that make up the camps to create easy access for its troops stationed inside. — AFP

BANGLADESH TO AIRLIFT WOUNDED LEADER AFTER ELECTION SHOOTING

DHAKA: Bangladesh’s interim government said it would fly a leader of the 2024 uprising, a candidate in upcoming elections, for treatment in Singapore after he was critically wounded in an assassination attempt. Masked attackers shot student leader Sharif Osman Hadi on Friday as he left a mosque in the capital Dhaka, wounding him in the ear. The shooting took place one day after authorities announced a date for the first elections since the student-led uprising that overthrew the autocratic government of Sheikh Hasina.

In a statement late on Sunday, the interim government said it will pay for Hadi to “be flown to Singapore for better treatment”, and that an “air ambulance and a team of doctors are on standby.” Hadi is a senior leader of the student protest group Inqilab Mancha and has been an outspoken critic of India — Hasina’s old ally where the ousted prime minister remains in self-imposed exile. Hundreds of protesters gathered in Dhaka on Monday to condemn the shooting.

Police said they had launched a manhunt for the attackers who shot Hadi, releasing photographs of two key suspects. Interim leader Muhammad Yunus said on Saturday that the shooting was a premeditated attack carried out by a powerful network, without providing a name. — AFP

HUMANISM & MERCY

Azerbaijan to pardon thousands in amnesty



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has proposed a mass amnesty that may affect more than 20,000 people. Aliyev submitted a draft amnesty act to Azerbaijan’s parliament, describing the initiative as a gesture of “humanism and mercy” following the 2023 recapture of the breakaway Karabakh region from Armenian forces. According to the report, the proposal would free 5,000 inmates and about 15,000 would see their sentences or penalties reduced or lifted. — AFP

AID CUTS CAUSING REFUGEES ‘UNNECESSARY PAIN’, SAYS UN

GENEVA: A wave of “drastic, irresponsible” aid cuts this year have inflicted unnecessary pain on refugees, who are being vilified while their suffering is exploited by traffickers and politicians, the United Nations said on Monday. Outgoing UN refugees chief Filippo Grandi said this year had been a perfect storm of successive crises for the world’s forcibly displaced people, who were estimated to number 117.3 million people in mid-2025. He condemned the “unending

atrocities” committed in Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza and Myanmar, but also the “sudden, drastic, irresponsible and short-sighted collapse of foreign assistance... inflicting so much unnecessary pain in its wake”. Opening a biennial Global Refugee Forum Progress Review in Geneva, Grandi condemned a global context “in which hate is allowed to increasingly spread racist divisions”. This year has been one where “refugees were frequently vilified,

scapegoated in so many places, with their suffering cynically used by traffickers for profit, and their situation by politicians to gain votes”, said Grandi, the head of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR. The three-day gathering in Geneva brings together more than 1,800 participants to try to find solutions for millions of displaced people worldwide. Geneva-based UNHCR, like many other UN agencies, has been clobbered by international aid cuts. — AFP

Cambodia says Thailand bombs heritage province

CAMBODIA

accused Thailand on Monday of striking deep inside its territory, bombing the province that is home to the centuries-old Angkor temples — the country’s top tourist draw — for the first time in a reignited border conflict. Five days of fighting in July killed dozens of people before a truce was brokered and then broken within months, part of a long-standing conflict rooted in the colonial-era demarcation of the countries’ 800-kilometre frontier.

Renewed fighting between the Southeast Asian neighbours this month has killed at least 31 people, including soldiers and civilians, and displaced around 800,000, officials said. Each side has blamed the other for instigating the fighting, claiming self-defence and trading accusations of attacks on civilians.

Cambodia, which is outgunned and outspent by Bangkok’s military, said Thai forces had expanded their attack “deep into” Cambodian territory on Monday. Cambodia’s defence ministry said in a statement that a Thai fighter jet had bombed “near a displaced civilians camp in the area of Srei Snam district, Siem Reap province”.

The area is located less than a two-hour drive from the the Angkor temple complex and its top tourist attraction, the Unesco heritage site Angkor Wat. Cambodia’s Information Minister Neth Pheaktra said it was the “furthest that the Thai military has struck into Cambodian territory” during the renewed clashes — more than 70 kilometres



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Trucks containing petrol are stranded at Chong Mek checkpoint on the Thailand-Laos border. — Reuters

from the border and far from a disputed area. The minister said it was also the first time Thailand’s military had bombed areas of Siem Reap province. The bombing forced hundreds of already displaced families to flee an evacuation site, he added.

Cambodia relies heavily on its tourism sector, which, as in many nations, is still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic years. Foreign tourist arrivals to Cambodia last year topped 6.7 million, the highest annual total on record, tourism ministry data showed. But arrivals from July to September this year were down by about a third compared to 2019, the year before the pandemic.

Monthly ticket sales to the Angkor archaeological park were down at least 17 per cent year-on-year from

June to November, according to data from operator Angkor Enterprise. Chhay Sivlin, president of the Cambodia Association of Travel Agents, said that some tourists who planned to visit Cambodia via a Thai border crossing have cancelled plans or changed routes to go through neighbouring Vietnam or Laos.

She said the reports of bombing in Siem Reap province made “some tourists who have booked their trips already worry very much”. Some have cancelled travel plans while others have asked to delay their trip, she added.

Meanwhile, Thailand’s military said on Monday that it has stopped fuel shipments passing through a border checkpoint with Laos because of fears they were being diverted to Cambodia. — Agencies

FLASH FLOOD KILLS DOZENS IN MOROCCO TOWN

SAFI: A flash flood in a Moroccan coastal town killed at least 37, local officials said on Monday, as search and rescue operations continued. Drought-hit Morocco often faces severe weather, but Sunday’s flooding in Safi is already the deadliest such disaster in at least a decade. A muddy torrent swept cars and bins from the streets in Safi, which is around 300 kilometres (186 miles) south of the capital Rabat.

Fourteen survivors are being treated at Mohammed V hospital in the town, and two of them are in intensive care, according to local officials updating the overnight toll. Schools have been closed for at least three days and mud and debris clog the streets. At least 70 homes and businesses in the historic town centre were flooded and 55-year-old shopkeeper Abdelkader Mezraoui said the retail economy had been devastated. As the waters receded, they left behind a landscape of mud and overturned cars. Onlookers watched Civil Protection units and local residents working to clear debris. — AFP

FLOODS CONTROL

Indonesia to revoke 22 forestry permits



Indonesia will revoke more than 20 forestry permits across the country, the forestry minister said, after deadly floods and landslides devastated parts of the island of Sumatra. Environmentalists and experts have pointed to the role forest loss played in flash flooding and landslides that this month killed more than 1,000 people and washed torrents of mud into villages. More than 100,000 hectares covered by the cancelled permits were on Sumatra. — AFP

ROAD TRAGEDY

Bus plunges into ravine in Colombia, killing 17



At least 16 high school students celebrating their graduation and a driver were killed when the bus they were travelling in plunged into a ravine in northwest Colombia. The group of students — aged 16 to 18 — from a school in Bello, near Medellin, were travelling from a Caribbean beach on Colombia’s coast. Twenty more were injured in the 40-metre plummet. Officials were still working to determine how many of the victims were minors. — AFP

SHORTTAKES



US director Rob Reiner

US POLICE PROBE DEATHS OF ROB REINER AND WIFE

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles police were investigating the deaths of Hollywood star Rob Reiner and his wife as an “apparent homicide”, as condolences poured in for the director behind hits like “When Harry Met Sally”. Reiner and Michele Singer Reiner were found dead in their Los Angeles mansion with what appeared to be stab wounds, US media reported.

The deaths of the “Princess Bride” director and his wife drew condolences from California political heavyweights like ex-vice president Kamala Harris. Los Angeles police did not confirm the identity of the deceased but said homicide detectives were dispatched to the Reiners’ home. “At this time, no further details are available as this is an ongoing... investigation, into an apparent homicide,” the Los Angeles Police Department said on social media.

LAPD deputy chief Alan Hamilton subsequently told reporters “the Los Angeles Police Department is not seeking anyone as a suspect or as a person of interest, or in any other manner, and we will not be doing that until we conduct our investigation and we move forward”. “I’m not going to confirm whether someone’s being investigated at this time or not. We’re going to try to speak to every family member that we can get to the facts of this investigation,” he added. — **AFP**

FRANCE ’S LOUVRE MUSEUM CLOSED



The Louvre in Paris was closed on Monday after staff began a rolling strike to demand better working conditions and urgent renovations, disrupting access at the world’s most-visited museum at one of the busiest times of the year. After unions warned of a strike last week, the museum remained shut at the usual opening time of 9 am on Monday, shortly before a vote confirming the walkout. Some 400 out of the museum’s 2,200 employees supported the labour action. — **Reuters**

THOUSANDS OF ROMANIANS PROTEST AGAINST JUDICIAL ABUSES

BUCHAREST: A sixth day of protests calling for a clean-up of the Romanian judiciary was expected, after thousands took to the streets of the capital Bucharest and other cities on Sunday to support judges and prosecutors denouncing systemic abuses.

Roughly 700 Romanian judges and prosecutors have signed an open letter on social media complaining of “profound and systemic dysfunction” in the justice system.

President Nicusor Dan responded by announcing he would hold consultations with members of the judiciary on December 22, saying

that when so many magistrates complained of “an integrity problem in the justice system, things are very serious”. The letter came after an independent media outlet Recorder, aired a documentary last week that alleged that chief judges, who are politically backed, use legal loopholes for unethical practices, including questionable acquittals, and that judges or prosecutors who complain often face disciplinary action.

Judges on Romania’s judicial watchdog said the documentary was an attempt to destabilise the justice system.

Roughly 10,000 people marched

in Bucharest late on Sunday, chanting “Justice not corruption,” “We see you,” and “Independence not obedience.” Thousands of protesters also gathered in other cities across Romania. “At the moment, the most visible impact in society is that trust in the Romanian justice system and that something can still be done (about it) is completely missing,” said Liviu, a 28-year-old physicist. Legal experts have said a series of changes in 2022 that gave chief judges on the judicial watchdog unchecked powers over their subordinates opened the way for the abuses now being complained of. — **Reuters**

US-Ukraine talks resume, territorial stakes remain

UKRAINIAN

President Volodymyr Zelensky pushed on with high-stakes talks in Berlin on Monday with US President Donald Trump’s envoys aimed at ending the war with Russia, but thorny territorial questions remained unresolved. Trump’s special envoy Steve Witkoff said on X that “a lot of progress” had been made during a meeting on Sunday that also involved the US president’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. Ukraine, battling a gruelling war since Russia’s attack in February 2022, hopes to convince the United States that a ceasefire must be agreed without prior territorial concessions to Russia.

However, an official briefed on the talks said on Monday that US negotiators still want Ukraine to cede control of the eastern Donbas region as a condition of peace talks with Russia, a red line for Kyiv. Russian President Vladimir “Putin wants territory,” the official said, adding that the United States was demanding that Ukraine “withdraw” from the regions — and that Kyiv was “not agreeing” to this demand. “It’s a bit striking that the Americans are taking the Russians’ position on this issue,” the official added. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, hosting the crisis diplomacy in Berlin, was to meet Zelensky before they were to be joined in the evening by European leaders and the heads of Nato and the European Union in a show of support for Ukraine. Central Berlin has been turned into a high-security zone with road closures for motorcades and police snipers on rooftops, dog patrols on the streets and anti-drone units surveying the skies. One dignitary, Finnish President Alexander Stubb, known to have close relations with Trump, on Sunday met with Kushner in Berlin, his office said, and held talks with Zelensky on Monday.

Trump has pushed strongly for an end to the war, but an initial 28-point plan last month was seen as heavily favouring Russia’s position by Kyiv and its European



German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (L) welcomes Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky at the presidential Bellevue Palace in Berlin. — **AFP**

allies. Ukraine has since presented counter-proposals and Zelenksy said on Sunday his country was ready to compromise on its desired Nato membership, provided it received solid security guarantees in return.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists on Monday on the Nato point that “this issue is one of the cornerstones and requires special discussion”. He added that Russia was expecting the United States to “provide us with the concept that is being discussed in Berlin today”.

German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul voiced cautious optimism, tempered with worries about whether Putin would back away from his demands. “I believe the negotiations have never been as serious as they are now. They are being conducted very intensively,” Wadephul said. “But whether it will be successful, we won’t know until the end of the week. Of course, every effort is worthwhile in this historic situation to finally end this terrible dying and bring this war to a close.

“What we still don’t know is whether Vladimir Putin truly has a genuine will to end this war.” Zelensky was to meet German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then join Merz at a Ukrainian-German business conference before both gave a joint press

conference. In the evening they were to have dinner with European leaders including Britain’s Keir Starmer, Italy’s Giorgia Meloni, Poland’s Donald Tusk and Finland’s Stubb. France’s Emmanuel Macron will also attend, according to Berlin, as well as NATO chief Mark Rutte and European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen. Zelensky has said that — although there was no strict deadline to finalise an agreement — Washington wanted to have the contours of a deal ready by Christmas. The Ukrainian president said on Sunday: “The most important thing is that the plan should be as fair as possible, first and foremost for Ukraine, because Russia started the war.”

The EU must take “very important” decisions on funding Ukraine at a crunch summit this week, but talks over using frozen Russian assets are getting harder, the bloc’s top diplomat said on Monday. “We are not there yet, and it is increasingly difficult, but we’re doing the work and we still have some days,” EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas told journalists. “We will not leave the meeting before we get a result,” she added.

The European Union’s 27 leaders will gather in Brussels on Thursday to try to hammer out a plan to finance Kyiv for the coming years. — **AFP**

Australia to toughen gun laws as it mourns deadly Bondi attack

SYDNEY: Australia’s leaders agreed to toughen gun laws after attackers killed 15 people at a Jewish festival on Bondi Beach, the worst mass shooting in decades, decried as antisemitic “terrorism” by authorities. Dozens fled the tourist hotspot in panic as a father and son fired into crowds packing the Sydney beach for the start of Hanukkah on Sunday evening.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese convened a meeting of the leaders of Australia’s states and territories in response on Monday, agreeing with them “to strengthen gun laws across the nation”. Albanese’s office said they had agreed to look into ways to improve background checks for firearm owners, non-nationals from obtaining gun licences and limit the types of weapons that are legal.

Mass shootings have been rare in Australia since a lone gunman killed 35 people in the tourist town of Port Arthur in 1996, which led to

sweeping reforms that were long seen as a gold standard worldwide. Those included a gun buyback scheme, a national firearms register and a crackdown on the ownership of semi-automatic weapons. But Sunday’s shootings have raised fresh questions on how the father and son — who public broadcaster ABC reported had possible links to the Islamic State group — obtained the weapons. Albanese called it “an act of pure evil, an act of antisemitism, an act of terrorism on our shores”.

World leaders expressed revulsion, with US President Donald Trump condemning the attack. The gunmen opened fire on an annual celebration that drew more than 1,000 people to the beach to mark the Jewish festival. They took aim from a raised boardwalk looking over the beach, packed with swimmers cooling off on the steamy summer evening.

Carrying long-barrelled guns,



Mourners gather at a tribute in memory of the victims of a shooting at Bondi Beach, in Sydney. — **AFP**

they peppered the beach with bullets for 10 minutes before police shot and killed the 50-year-old father. The 24-year-old son was arrested and remains under guard in hospital with serious injuries. Hours after the shooting, police found a homemade bomb in a car

parked close to the beach, saying the “improvised explosive device” had likely been planted by the pair.

Wary of reprisals, police have so far avoided questions about the attackers’ religion or ideological motivations. Misinformation spread quickly online in the wake

of the attacks, some of it targeting immigrants and the Muslim community. Police said they responded to reports on Monday of several pig heads left at a Muslim cemetery in southwestern Sydney.

A brave few dashed towards the beach as the shooting unfolded, wading through fleeing crowds to rescue children, treat the injured and confront the gunmen. Footage showed one man, identified by local media as fruit seller Ahmed al Ahmed, grabbing one of the gunmen as he fired. The 43-year-old wrestled the gun out of the attacker’s hands before pointing the weapon at him as he backed away.

A team of off-duty lifeguards sprinted across the sand to drag children to safety. “The team ran out under fire to try and clear children from the playground while the gunmen were firing,” said Steven Pearce from Surf Life Saving New South Wales. — **AFP**

OPINION

New five-year plan models to enhance flexibility, responsiveness



EDITORIAL

FROM January 2026, Oman is embarking on a significant restructuring of its national development strategy with the Eleventh Five-Year Development Plan (2026-2030), transforming from a traditional five-year cycle to an agile 2+2+1 model. This new approach aims to enhance flexibility and responsiveness to emerging challenges and rapid global changes.

The 2+2+1 model for the 11th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030) involves distinct phases: the first two years (2026-2027) will focus on a government working plan, followed by another working plan for 2028-2029 and a final evaluation phase in 2030.

Oman became the first Gulf nation to adopt Five-Year Plans in 1976 as a disciplined mechanism to achieve comprehensive development across key sectors. The move is designed to prioritise both economic growth and development through distinct pathways, and the future Five-Year Plans could potentially include annual planning components.

The first three plans, from 1976 to 1990, were all infrastructure-focused as the country needed hospitals, schools, roads, among others. After Covid-19, the government began rethinking the planning process to better adapt to emerging challenges.

Accordingly, the 11th Five-Year Plan reflects this renewed mindset that it will shape the evolution in planning two key

frameworks — Oman Vision 2040 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — whose alignment with the Five-Year Plans is seen as essential. The 11th Five-Year Plan concludes in 2030, the midpoint in implementing Oman Vision 2040 and the target year for achieving the SDGs. Given these shared milestones, the new structure is designed to integrate two complementary pathways: one emphasising economic development through value addition in diverse projects, and another addressing broader developmental priorities, with a particular focus on Duqm.

Key discussions surrounding the 11th Five-Year Plan have taken place at various governmental levels. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik chaired a Council of Ministers meeting where the outcomes of the 10th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) were reviewed, and the objectives of the 11th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030) were discussed.

His Majesty emphasised the importance of achieving higher economic growth, diversifying income sources, and addressing challenges in employment and training initiatives, while also directing efforts towards sustainable development goals and economic stability. The new planning methodology, including the potential for annual planning components, underscores Oman's commitment to agility and effective resource allocation. This strategic evolution aims to foster sustainable growth and

This strategic evolution aims to foster sustainable growth and balanced development, inviting investors and businesses to align with new government priorities and capitalise on Oman's evolving economic landscape. The emphasis on collaboration across government entities, the private sector, and civil society organisations is crucial for developing a comprehensive framework that supports Oman's development journey and addresses the evolving requirements of Oman Vision 2040, a comprehensive national blueprint designed to transform the Sultanate of Oman into a developed nation across economic, social, environmental and governance domains by the year 2040. This strategic framework, initiated under the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos and continued by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, aims to diversify the economy away from its reliance on oil, foster a globally integrated and prosperous society, and ensure sustainable growth.

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The vision is structured around four foundational pillars: People and Society, Economy and Development, Sustainable Environment, and Governance and Institutional Performance. Health is a top priority under the “People and Society” pillar.

Oman's journey under Vision 2040 serves as a valuable case study for other nations aiming for economic diversification, sustainability and global integration, emphasising the importance of continued commitment, adaptability and engagement with global partners.

KAST: WHO IS CHILE’S NEW FAR-RIGHT PRESIDENT?

PAULINA ABRAMOVICH

Jose Antonio Kast has become Chile’s president on his third attempt, bringing the far right to power by pledging a “firm hand” on security and order. The 59-year-old lawyer and father of nine has vowed to deport hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants, mostly Venezuelans. His message struck a chord with voters who worry about insecurity, even though data shows crime rates are not as dire as is commonly believed.

Born in Santiago, Kast studied law at the city’s Catholic university and has been a politician for 30 years. His legislative achievements were limited to passing laws allowing the construction of statues, granting a nun a Chilean passport and laws regulating lotteries. A staunch Catholic, he broke from Chile’s mainstream conservative party in 2016 to found the more radical Republican Party.

He has also expressed admiration for the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, a general who was responsible for the deaths of more than 3,000 Chileans. The youngest of 10 siblings, he inherited a successful sausage business from his German immigrant parents. During the campaign, Kast has appeared behind bulletproof glass and admitted to carrying a revolver.

Still, biographer Amanda Marton described him as “sober, pragmatic, calm compared to other far-right leaders.” Unlike Brazil’s former president Jair Bolsonaro, Argentina’s current leader Javier Milei or the US President Donald Trump, Kast is seen as reserved and cautious. “He’s far more conservative and lacks charisma,” said Robert Funk, a political scientist at the University of Chile.

Supporters say a calm demeanour is part of his appeal. “He doesn’t insult or provoke,” said retiree Maria Eugenia Rosas, 69, in the central city of Temuco. But former colleagues describe him as authoritarian: “You’re with him or against him,” recalled journalist Lily Zuniga.

A campaign spokesperson praised his persistence and work ethic, arguing he can be flexible when needed. In his winning run, Kast downplayed his conservative agenda and focused on security and migration. Analyst Claudia Heiss disagrees: “He hasn’t” moderated, she said. Kast has warned undocumented migrants: “Pack your things and leave.”

His rise comes amid a conservative wave sweeping Latin America and after Trump’s re-election in the United States. — AFP

A typeface falls victim in the push against diversity

MICHAEL CROWLEY & HAMED ALEAZIZ

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio waded into the surprisingly fraught politics of typefaces last week with an order halting the State Department's official use of Calibri, reversing a 2023 Biden-era directive that Rubio called a “wasteful” sop to diversity.

While mostly framed as a matter of clarity and formality in presentation, Rubio's directive to all diplomatic posts around the world blamed “radical” diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility programmes for what he said was a misguided and ineffective switch from the serif typeface Times New Roman to sans-serif Calibri in official department paperwork.

In an “Action Request” memo obtained by The New York Times, Rubio said that switching back to the use of Times New Roman would “restore decorum and professionalism to the department’s written work.” Calibri is “informal” when compared to serif typefaces like Times New Roman, the order said, and “clashes” with the department’s official letterhead.

Rubio's directive, under the subject line “Return to Tradition: Times New Roman 14-Point Font Required for All Department Paper,” served as the latest attempt by the Trump administration to stamp out remnants of diversity initiatives across the federal government.

Then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken ordered the 2023 typeface shift on the recommendation of the State Department's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which

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Rubio has since abolished. The change was meant to improve accessibility for readers with disabilities, such as low vision and dyslexia, and people who use assistive technologies, such as screen readers. Calibri, sometimes described as soft and modern, is typically considered more accessible for people with reading challenges thanks to its simpler shapes and wider spacing, which make its letters easier to distinguish. Blinken's move was applauded by accessibility advocates. But Rubio's order rejected the grounds for the switch. The change, he allowed, “was not among the department's most illegal, immoral, radical or wasteful instances of DEIA,” the acronym for diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. But Rubio called it a failure by its own standards, saying that “accessibility-based document remediation cases” at the department had not declined.

“Switching to Calibri achieved nothing except the degradation of the department's official correspondence,” Rubio said. He noted that Times New Roman had been the department's official typeface for nearly 20 years until the 2023 change. (Before 2004, the State Department used Courier New.)

Echoing President Donald Trump's call for classical style in federal architecture, Rubio's order cited the origins of serif typefaces in Roman antiquity. Those typefaces, which are used by The New York Times, include small strokes at the edges of many characters.

Admirers say those flourishes make letters look more elegant and

make them easier to distinguish from one another, even though they can also create a sense of clutter.

Serif typefaces are “generally perceived to connote tradition, formality and ceremony,” Rubio's order said, adding that they were used by the White House, Supreme Court and other state and federal government entities, as well as in the script on the side of Air Force One.

Many diplomats are unhappy with changes Rubio has made to the department's structure and leadership, and have reported badly damaged morale within their ranks. But the Biden administration's move to Calibri prompted some grumbling from some traditionalists who preferred Times New Roman. Blinken also changed the standard font size, from 14-point to 15-point, requiring extra keystrokes that some diplomats found annoying.

According to a separate memo sent to department employees, the return to Times New Roman takes effect immediately and all templates for official documents are to be updated to remove the offending Calibri font.

The only exceptions are documents prepared for international treaties and for presidential appointments, which are required to use Courier New 12-point font, the memo said.

Since taking over the State Department in January, Rubio has systematically dismantled DEI programmes in line with President Donald Trump's broader instructions to all federal agencies. The Trump administration says the goal is to return to purely merit-based standards. — NYT

Facing the unknown...



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is a senior editor of Observer

Do you feel we can hardly relate to the lifestyle people once had? When things were predictable and people knew what to expect. In an age defined by rapid change – from global politics to climate patterns to digital disruptions – uncertainty has become a constant companion. What was once an occasional disruption now shapes everyday decision-making. For young people planning careers, for families navigating economic swings, and for communities responding to unexpected challenges, the unknown is no longer a distant threat but a daily reality. The question isn't how to avoid uncertainty, but how to build resilience around it. Before we react, we must reflect. If we are thinking of job security, people in war zones are thinking of a safe place to sleep. Each sunrise is a gift. But change is unavoidable. Everyone in the world has to face it, as no one is invincible. Many people in the world prepare themselves with plans B and C. Then there are others who look at life with a sense of adventure. A friend said she has been hearing so much bad news that she has begun to wonder what is going on. “If you look closely, we can see that everyone is unstable,” she said. Everyone

seems to have their own struggles. She said that it has been a while since she gave up on plans and decided to go with the flow. She lives for today, she noted. Then there are people who look for adventures. Mark Evans is a known explorer and was awarded an MBE in 2011 for his outdoor journeys to connect cultures and promote dialogue between future leaders. I remember meeting him after he crossed the desert in 49 days with his counterparts from Oman in 2016. They crossed the sand desert on foot and by camel. And here I was, able to meet him on the shore of Al Qurum as he arrived kayaking from Musandam. He will continue his journey all the way to Dalkut in Dhofar. Sure enough, he is thinking about the marine environment and climate change during this expedition, Oman 3165. Life teaches many things, and it is with experience we learn more than we can through books. But the ones who learn from experience can write a book. Some of Mark's publications are Mark Evans, 55 days - a coastal navigation of Oman; Mark Evans, Desert Voices - a 28-day journey through the Empty Quarter of Oman; Connecting cultures - intercultural dialogues in the desert of Oman, The University of the

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Desert - using wilderness in Oman to bridge the cultural divide, International Journal of Wilderness, etc. So does it mean we should move out of our comfort zone and seek? The phrase ‘Seek and you will find’ reminds us that the motivation ought to come from within. When the motivation is teamed up with resilience, there is no end to inspiration. We feel we can never give up. But what is important is to be goal-oriented, and that is to complete a thought by taking action. If thoughts continue to flow in and out without any action, they become meaningless. As another friend pointed out about the time-wasters - this particular group is the one who appear on the websites that are meant for selling used items.”All the details are given on the website, but they will call up to ask the same mundane questions. And they never close a deal,” said the friend. Do we really have the time to waste? Not if we have goals. And in order to have goals, we need to know what we want in life, and for this, we need to listen to ourselves, for which we require me time. It may be quite an exciting experience to face the unknown.

SMALL FIRMS JOIN CHARGE TO BOOST EUROPE’S WEAPON SUPPLIES

MARIE-MORGANE LE MOEL

European nations have committed themselves to huge hikes in spending on weapons, with giant defence firms reaping the early rewards - but the signs are that smaller companies and investors are now beginning to mobilise. European countries spent 343 billion euros (\$403 billion) on defence last year, a tenth consecutive annual increase, which is set to rise to 381 billion euros this year, according to the European Defence Agency. Added to the general trend, Nato members have all agreed to increase spending to reach five per cent of their economic output by 2035. Giant firms from France's Dassault and Italy's Leonardo to Germany's Rheinmetall have already announced a slew of orders to deal with the rising demand. With their order books filling up, ripple effects are spreading down the supply chain. Factem, which makes sound equipment used by jet pilots as well as gear for civilian uses, is one of roughly 4,500 small and medium-sized defence companies in France. The company, based in Bayeux in the north of the country, has 80 employees and generates 17 million euros in sales each year. “Several years ago, the defence industry wasn't in fashion,” chief executive Alain Dulac said. “Today, banks and the financial sector are more or less willing to support us.” But the change is gradual, he said, and not all defence firms are benefitting yet. Nevertheless, the movement across Europe is clear. Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto recently told Sole 24 Ore newspaper that raising defence spending was “a prerequisite for peace in Italy”. Britain, meanwhile, is aiming to hike its spending from 60.2 billion pounds (\$80.5 billion) last year to 73.5 billion pounds by 2028. Earlier this year, Nato nations pledged to gradually increase defence spending to reach five per cent of gross domestic product by 2035, with 3.5 per cent going on core defence spending and another 1.5 per cent on infrastructure. If European members meet the 3.5 per cent target, their defence spending would double to around 770 billion euros, according to a report by the EY-Parthenon consulting firm and DekaBank. However, small and medium-sized companies often lack the capital to invest in expansion of facilities and the development of new products. The head of a German firm that supplies Rheinmetall, who spoke to AFP anonymously, said the question of financing was essential. Growth has been so strong that profits are likely to double this year and he would like to build another production facility. “But in Germany, the banks traditionally don't like to lend to this sector,” he said. Instead, he has begun to test the waters with investment funds dedicated to the defence industry. The French public sector investment bank Bpifrance recently created a fund for individual investors that aims to raise 450 million euros. — AFP

Building an effective club for sovereign borrowers

One of the most promising ideas in the Seville Commitment (Compromiso de Sevilla), which heads of state and government adopted in July, is the creation of a platform for borrower countries, supported by existing institutions and facilitated by a United Nations secretariat. This simple but potentially transformative concept could shift the balance of information and influence, which has long favoured creditors. By allowing borrower countries to discuss technical issues and debt challenges, access capacity-building assistance, and coordinate their actions, the platform would amplify their voice in the global financial system. While creditor coordination has long been institutionalised – through the Paris Club, the London Club, and industry-led efforts such as the Institute of International Finance – borrower countries have often been discouraged from sharing information, leading to ad hoc exchanges. Establishing a borrowers' club is therefore a political signal: it recognises that enabling the Global South to speak with one voice can benefit financial stability. Whether such a platform becomes a durable institution will depend on its members' ability to translate rhetoric into practical cooperation. This is not the first attempt at borrower coordination, and lessons should be drawn from past efforts, which began during the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s. Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and other countries in the region explored forming a “debtors' club,” supported at the time by UN Trade and Development and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. The result was the Cartagena Group, formed in June 1984 by 11 Latin American countries accounting for 75 per cent of regional debt. The group highlighted the external origins of the crisis – including then-US Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker's interest-rate hikes – and argued for shared debtor-creditor responsibility and debt workouts that focused more on socioeconomic



Many developing countries' debt burden has become more onerous.



HOMI KHARAS

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MAHMOUD MOHIELDIN

The writer is UN Special Envoy on Financing Sustainable Development and Co-Chair of the Expert Group on Debt

development than austerity. Their proposals were sent to the 1984 G7 leaders' summit in London, only to be rejected in favour of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's case-by-case approach based on financial programming. Subsequent attempts have faced similar barriers: Africa's Committee of Ten initially influenced international institutions' approach after the 2008 global financial crisis, but has since faded in prominence. More recent initiatives, such as the Sustainable Debt Coalition, established during the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference in Egypt, and proposals by the V20 Group (which represents the world's most climate-vulnerable countries), have linked debt to climate breakdown, but remain fragmented. Meanwhile, many developing countries' debt burden has become more onerous. The proliferation of lenders has made creditor coordination more difficult, and simultaneous external shocks – including capital flight, slow global growth, and trade disruptions – have further eroded borrowers' fiscal space. During Europe's post-2008 sovereign-debt crisis, the inadequacy of existing tools led to the creation of new institutions such as the European Stability Mechanism. No such innovations exist for developing countries. Of course, the G20's Debt Service

Suspension Initiative (DSSI) offered temporary relief for low-income countries during the pandemic, but private and multilateral creditors largely did not participate, limiting its impact. And while the G20's Common Framework for Debt Treatments was designed to provide relief to countries in debt distress, only Zambia, Chad, Ghana, and Ethiopia have used the mechanism for debt restructuring, with others citing concerns about timeliness and outcomes. The IMF-World Bank Global Sovereign Debt Roundtable has identified promising strategies to address liquidity challenges – including a more flexible “three-pillar approach” that combines reform, financing, and restructuring – but implementation remains slow. These piecemeal initiatives, which have largely disappointed, should inform the design of a borrowers' club under the Seville Commitment. The governance structure must accommodate diverse debt profiles and complex political realities, and the funding model must guarantee institutional independence and protect decision-making from creditor influence. The secretariat must be capable of generating credible data and countering misperceptions that inflate borrowing costs for developing countries. ©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS

DE GRAM SHINES



De Gram claimed the silver at the eighth International Arabian Horse Beauty Show 2025 in Saudi Arabia.

ROYAL CAVALRY WINS SILVER AT ARABIAN HORSE BEAUTY CHAMPIONSHIP IN SAUDI ARABIA

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Royal Cavalry achieved a new international success after the mare ‘De Gram’ claimed the Silver Champion title for mares, finishing second at the eighth International Arabian Horse Beauty Show 2025, hosted by the King Abdulaziz Arabian Horse Centre in Saudi Arabia. The prestigious event spanned five days and featured elite competition. ‘De Gram’ secured the silver following a strong performance against top class Arabian horses, earning high praise from the judging panel for her outstanding conformation, elegance and overall presentation reflecting the advanced standards of horses representing the Royal Cavalry. The Gold Champion title was awarded to the mare ‘Eco Anastazja’, owned by Horizon Stud, while the Bronze Champion title went to ‘Nouf Athbah’, owned by Athbah Stud. The International Arabian Horse Beauty Show is considered one of the most prominent events in the discipline. It officially commenced last Tuesday and featured the participation of 844 horses, representing some of the finest Arabian bloodlines, with wide attendance from owners, breeders, experts and horse enthusiasts from around the world. This achievement further adds to the Royal Cavalry’s distinguished record, as it has previously delivered notable performances and podium finishes in several regional and international Arabian horse beauty championships, reaffirming its strong presence on the global stage and its role in showcasing the excellence of Omani Arabian horses.

Oman badminton tournament for clubs to begin on Thursday

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Oman Racket Sports Committee (ORSC) is all set to organise the second edition of the Oman Badminton Championship for Clubs in the senior category. The three days event will take place on Thursday and will conclude on Saturday at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher and is expected to attract wide participation from clubs representing various governorates. This event will continue its efforts to strengthen competitive badminton at club level across the Sultanate of Oman. The tournament will feature two main events at senior level, singles and doubles, providing players with an opportunity to compete at a high technical standard in a structured and competitive environment. A total of 15 clubs are confirmed to participate in the championship, including Al Amerat, Al Kamil Wal Wafi, Bausher, Oman Club, Seeb, Al Shabab, Sohar, Majees, Salalah,



A total of 15 clubs are confirmed to participate in the championship.

Masirah, Qurayat, Ibri beside other clubs. The upcoming event will build up on the success of the inaugural edition which concluded

with exciting final matches. In the men’s doubles final, Oman Club’s pair Akram al Hajri and Indian player Toshar Kumar claimed

the title after defeating Bausher Club’s duo Khalil al Darmaki and Indonesian player Mashiri Fashirousi in straight games. In

FIVE-STAR SEEB THRASH SAHAM TO GO TOP

SOHAR, BAHLA SECURE KEY VICTORIES IN JINDAL LEAGUE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

SEEB Club asserted their dominance with an emphatic 5–1 victory over Saham at Seeb Sports Stadium, in the closing match of Round 7 of the Jindal Football League. Seeb started the match with clear attacking intent and came close to opening the scoring early through Mamadou. The breakthrough came in the fifth minute when Mohammed Ramadan headed home from a corner delivered by Ali al Busaidy, before Abdulaziz al Maqbali doubled the lead four minutes later with another header from a cross. Seeb maintained their attacking pressure as Saham struggled to create any real threat, and Zahir al Aghbari made it 3–0 in the 32nd minute with a powerful shot into the right corner, giving Seeb a comfortable lead at half-time. Early in the second half, Saham pulled one back in the 54th minute through Mohsen Jawhar with a long-range strike. However, Seeb quickly regained control, and Abdulmajid al Balushi added the fourth goal in the 79th minute after a well-executed counter-attack, beating both the defender and the goalkeeper. The match also saw Saham’s Abdulaziz al Khaldi sent off for bringing down a Seeb attacker as the last defender. Substitute Marwan Taib completed the scoring with Seeb’s fifth goal in the 89th minute. The win lifted Seeb to 16 points at the top of the standings on goal difference ahead of Al Nahda, while Saham remained seventh with 10 points.

SOHAR MOVE INTO THIRD PLACE Sohar claimed an important 2–1 victory over Oman Club in their match at the Sohar Sports Complex. The first half was evenly contested, with Oman Club enjoying slight superiority but failing to convert their chances, as the half ended goalless. In the second half, Sohar took the lead in the 47th minute when Amir Alaa converted a penalty, before scoring his second goal in the 61st minute



Bahla continued their positive run with a thrilling 3–2 victory over Ibri.



Seeb and Saham players fight for the ball.

following a one-on-one situation. Oman Club reduced the deficit in the 65th minute through Bassam al Shein, but Sohar managed the remainder of the match well to secure the win. The match also saw a red card shown to Sohar’s assistant coach due to unsporting behaviour. With this victory, Sohar moved up to third place with 13 points, while Oman Club remained sixth on 10 points.

BAHLA EDGE IBRI Bahla Club continued their positive run with a thrilling 3–2 victory over Ibri at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex. Bahla opened the scoring in the 17th minute through Majed al Shukaili, before Ibri equalised via Bisan Jacques, ending the first half level. In the second half, Bahla made the most of their chances against the run of play, as Abdul Salam al Shukaili scored twice in the 70th and 73rd minutes. Ibri pulled one back in the 88th minute through Bisan Jacques, but Bahla held firm in the closing stages. The win lifted Bahla to 12 points in fifth place, while Ibri remained second from bottom with just one point.

SPORTSMEDICINE



The Second Sports Sciences Forum served as a specialised scientific platform to discuss several key themes related to professional practice, most notably pain management, rehabilitation, sports injuries and nutrition.

SPORTS SCIENCES FORUM SEEKS TO ENHANCE ATHLETE MEDICAL CARE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, represented by the Directorate General of Sports Care and Development within the Department of Sports Medicine and Sports Sciences, organised the Second Sports Sciences Forum on Monday at the Intercity Hotel Muscat, under the auspices of Hisham bin Juma al Sanani, Director General of Sports Care and Development at the Ministry.

The forum was attended by around 60 medical professionals, specialists and researchers in sports medicine, rehabilitation and physiotherapy, representing a number of institutions linked to the sports sector in the Sultanate of Oman. The event was held as part of the Ministry’s efforts to strengthen the scientific approach and enhance the quality of medical services provided to athletes.

The forum comes as a continuation of the success achieved by its first edition and reflects the Ministry’s commitment to building an integrated sports sciences system focused on developing national competencies, exchanging expertise and raising awareness of the importance of sports medicine and sports sciences in supporting athletic performance, preventing injuries and improving rehabilitation programmes based on modern scientific principles.

The Second Sports Sciences Forum served as a specialised scientific platform to discuss several key themes related to professional practice, most notably pain management, rehabilitation, sports injuries and nutrition, in addition to highlighting the importance of providing an appropriate environment for rehabilitation programmes in line with advances in modern treatment methods and in support of athlete safety. The forum also featured specialised scientific papers that presented the latest developments in sports sciences and sports medicine, contributing to linking theory with practice and equipping medical professionals with modern scientific tools to enhance the quality of therapeutic and rehabilitation services.

In addition, the forum witnessed the signing of several memoranda of understanding and cooperation agreements between the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and a number of academic and professional institutions, aimed at supporting the training of physiotherapy students, promoting scientific research, exchanging expertise and building specialised national competencies in sports medicine and sports sciences. The event also marked the launch of the first national specialised research study entitled ‘Project for the Preparation of the National Policy for Post-Anterior Cruciate Ligament Surgery Rehabilitation’, representing an important step towards organising rehabilitation programmes within a unified national scientific framework that contributes to improving the quality of rehabilitation care, reducing recurrent injuries and supporting athletes’ safe return to competition.

Dr Salem al Ghailani, Director of the Department of Sports Medicine and Sports Sciences, affirmed that the forum reflects the Ministry’s commitment to developing professional practices in sports medicine and enhancing the efficiency of practitioners, noting that it also included the signing of a cooperation agreement with the University of Nizwa to strengthen academic partnership and support scientific research. Meanwhile, Khalil al Busaidy, Head of the Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Section, explained that the forum came with a renewed approach and addressed integrated scientific themes, including the launch of the national policy for post-ACL injury rehabilitation, the effect of caffeine on physical performance, motivational interviewing during rehabilitation, wound care and the importance of neuromuscular training in sports rehabilitation.



Argentina’s footballers Lionel Messi (2L), Rodrigo De Paul (R) and Uruguayan footballer Luis Suarez (L) pose for a photograph with International Cricket Council (ICC) Chairman Jay Shah during his GOAT Tour at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi on Monday. — AFP

Messi promises to return as mania peaks in Delhi

FOOTBALL superstar Lionel Messi ended his whirlwind tour of India on Monday with a lap of honour in New Delhi, thrilling thousands of fans and thanking them for “all the love and support”.

The 38-year-old Argentine great greeted chanting supporters at a nearly packed Arun Jaitley Stadium, usually home to cricket, with fans dressed in Argentina jerseys waving flags and shouting his name.

“It was beautiful to receive all the love and support. I knew it was there, but to receive it first-hand was, well, amazing”, Messi told the crowd, speaking in Spanish, saying he will “definitely be back”.

Clad in a pink jersey and black trousers, Messi enthralled the audience with his charm as he kicked footballs into the crowd and obliged star-struck delegates and fans with selfies.

Messi and his fellow stars played football with children before being presented with a T20 World Cup ticket and an Indian jersey by the chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC) Jay Shah. India — a nation of 1.4 billion — are a cricket powerhouse, but struggles on the football pitch and are 142nd on the Fifa rankings.

Former India football captain Bhaichung Bhutia took the stage with Messi, who signed Argentine jerseys for the Indian star



A fan takes a selfie with Lionel Messi as he arrives during his GOAT Tour at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on December 13. — AFP

and his family. His final stop in India went smoothly after a chaotic opening day on Saturday, when fans vandalised a stadium in the city

of Kolkata, where his brief presence left the crowd frustrated.

Heavy security left fans struggling to catch a glimpse of him. Many had paid more than \$100 for tickets, and they broke down barricades and stormed the pitch after the superstar abruptly left the arena.

In New Delhi on Monday, thousands of excited fans dismissed hazardous choking air pollution to see their hero.

“I’m very excited to see Messi, I have been watching him since my childhood”, said 29-year-old fan Sumesh Raina.

Messi, who is in India as part of his so-called GOAT Tour along with his Inter Miami teammates Luis Suarez and Rodrigo de Paul, seemed unperturbed by the toxic air.

He looked in good spirits as he kept up his energy with fans and football enthusiasts in his 35-minute stay at the stadium.

Messi had also visited the cities of Hyderabad and Mumbai, where he met cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar and Indian football star Sunil Chhetri.

The footballer won his second consecutive Major League Soccer Most Valuable Player award last week after propelling Inter Miami to the MLS title and leading the league in goals.

The former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain forward will spearhead Argentina’s defence of the World Cup in June-July in North America. — AFP

Oman handball team faces UAE in friendly matches

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Oman national handball team will play an international friendly match on Tuesday, against the UAE in Dibba Al Hisn, Sharjah. The two sides will meet again on Wednesday, as part of a short external training camp running from December 15 to 18.

The team arrived in Sharjah on Monday as part of its preparations for the 22nd Asian Men’s Handball Championship, scheduled to be held in Kuwait from January 15 - 29, 2026. The tournament also serves as a qualifier for the 2027 IHF World Men’s Handball Championship in Germany.

Oman have been drawn into Group A, alongside Asian champions Qatar and South Korea, in what is considered one of the strongest groups in the tournament.



Following the conclusion of the Sharjah camp, the national team will resume its daily training sessions at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the supervision of head coach Nabil al Balushi and assistant coach Ahmed Ambusaidy. In early January, the team will play two additional friendly matches between January 2 and 4, facing the UAE and Guinea at the same venue.

The current squad includes 22 players, as part of the technical staff’s ongoing evaluation process ahead of the final

selection for the championship. Nabil al Balushi stated that the preparation programme is progressing according to plan, emphasising that the friendly matches against the UAE come at an ideal time to assess the players’ physical and technical levels, as well as team cohesion. “The focus is on improving fitness and strengthening all departments of the team.”

He acknowledged the strength of their group rivals, particularly Qatar and South Korea. “The squad combines experience with youth and these friendly

matches will play a key role in determining the final lineup for the Asian Championship.”

Oman will open their campaign with a high profile clash against Qatar on January 16, followed by a second match against South Korea on January 18. According to the tournament format, the top two teams from each of the four preliminary groups will advance to the final round, forming eight qualified teams divided into two groups, Final standings will determine the teams that secure qualification spots for the 2027 World Championship.

The official draw placed the 15 participating teams into four groups: Group B includes Bahrain, Iraq, China, and Jordan; Group C features host nation Kuwait alongside the UAE, Hong Kong, and India; while Group D consists of Japan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Australia.

SPORTS



The trio completed 346 laps of the demanding 5.281 km Yas Marina circuit narrowly behind the triumphant Capital RT by Motopark Mercedes trio.

AL ZUBAIR & CO TAKE SECOND IN PULSATING RACE IN ABU DHABI



The Ferrari 296 GT3 trio led the race after nine hours and dominated the opening session.

AN UNSCHEDULED pit stop to rectify a brake issue cost Al Manar Racing's Al Faisal al Zubair and the British racing duo of Chris Froggatt and Ben Tuck potential victory in a pulsating 15th edition of the Gulf 12 Hours at the Yas Marina circuit in Abu Dhabi, UAE, on Sunday night.

It could so easily have been a monumental victory for the Ferrari 296 GT3 trio, who led the race after nine hours and dominated the opening session before a five-second speeding penalty in the pit lane and the pit stop cost them valuable time. They still delivered a mightily impressive result for Al Manar Racing and the Dubai-based Dragon Racing team to finish in second place.

The trio completed 346 laps of the demanding 5.281 km Yas Marina circuit narrowly behind the triumphant Capital RT by Motopark Mercedes trio of Denis Remenyako, Adam Christodoulou and Mikhail Aleshin. Grove Racing by Getspeed's father and son duo of Stephen and Brenton Grove and Jules Gounon rounding off the podium places in a Mercedes-AMG GT3, albeit a

lap behind their rivals. Optimum Motorsport and Inward Motorsport wrapped up the top five with 14 cars finishing the race.

With mixed feelings after the finish, Al Zubair said: "Bitter-sweet. Second place is great for the first race in the Ferrari. I am very happy with it. Dragon did a great job all weekend. It's just a bit tough knowing that we were the car to beat the whole weekend. We led at the eight-hour mark and it was unfortunate that we had a brake fluid leak and we had to change the calipers.

"The car was very nice. I enjoyed it a lot. It was very different to the BMW and the Mercedes but I am very happy overall. High-speed feels a lot more aero and the drivability was more enjoyable, I would say. I felt comfortable from the get-go and had good team-mates with me. As a team, we did a great job. All these endurance races are full push all the time. We approach them as sprints."

Froggatt took the wheel for the first time at the start of the race and was in podium contention throughout his stint before handing over to Al Zubair with the Al Manar by Dragon car holding fifth place.

Al Zubair settled in quickly and managed to find his way to the front of the field.

With the yellow flag raised and the safety car on the track with 2 hours 14 minutes of the opening eight-hour stint remaining, Al Zubair was at the helm of the Ferrari and led the entire field from Winward Racing's Gabriele Piana and third-placed Denis Remenyako in the Capital RT by Motopark Mercedes.

Racing resumed with 155 laps completed and Al Zubair began to pull away from Piana before pitting after 160 laps to be replaced by Tuck. He settled into second place behind Piana with just under two hours in the clock, but regained the lead when Marvin Dienst replaced Piana in the Windward Racing hotseat.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

The Briton went on to finish the opening 223-lap section with a 12.931-second advantage over Dienst to give the Al Manar Racing by Dragon trio the bragging rights after eight hours. The Herberth Motorsport Porsche retired after 25 laps and was joined six laps later by the second of the Winward Racing

entries and Inception Racing after 147 laps.

The starting order for the second four-hour part of the race was determined by the finishing order for part one. Therefore, Froggatt started on pole for Al Manar Racing by Dragon with Winward Racing in second, ahead of Capital RT by Motopark, Grove Racing by Getspeed and Optimum Motorsport. Sixteen of the 20 starters completed part one.

A speeding penalty proved costly for the Al Manar Racing by Dragon trio in the second section and, despite Froggatt leading through the restart, they slipped back to third after the brake pit stop and then moved back up to second place with Al Zubair and Tuck driving through the tense final two sessions.

A pair of open one-hour practice sessions got competitive proceedings underway on Friday. Al Manar Racing by Dragon ran the Ferrari 296 GT3 for 17 laps in the opener and carded a best run of 1min 54.403sec. The trio were third quickest in session two, albeit with a slower quickest lap of 1min 55.381sec.

Three additional free practice sessions were held on Saturday.

Grove Racing by Getspeed set the pace in the first one with a best lap of 1min 52.770sec. The Al Manar by Dragon crew were down in 10th with a best run of 1min 53.947sec.

The Capital RT by Motopark Mercedes clocked a fastest run of 1min 53.696sec in free practice two with Al Manar by Dragon running a best tour of 1min 54.651sec. Grove Racing by Getspeed was again at the top of the standings in session three, where the Al Manar by Dragon Ferrari was classified in seventh with a run of 1min 53.894sec.

But it was the qualifying sessions that mattered the most. Pole position for the first eight-hour section of the 12-hour race went to the Inception Racing Ferrari of Brendan Iribe, Frederik Schandorff and Ollie Milroy.

When the times of the individual drivers were collated, Al Zubair, Froggatt and Tuck were delighted to qualify in second position with Rinat Salikhov, Piana and Dienst moving into third on the grid in the Winward Racing Mercedes.

The Al Manar Team returns to action at the Michelin 24H Dubai on January 16-18.



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SHORTTAKES



The Muttrah Teleferik project in Muscat is a major new tourism and urban-experience initiative.

MUTTRAH TELEFERIK INVITES INVESTORS TO DEVELOP TOURISM FACILITIES

SAEED AL MASHARFI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

AHEAD of its anticipated launch in 2026, the Muttrah Teleferik cable car project is opening up investment opportunities in a range of complementary public amenities aimed at enhancing its appeal as a fully integrated tourism destination. The operator is inviting investors to develop facilities such as seaside cafés, panoramic restaurants, retail outlets, souvenir and handicraft shops featuring Omani specialties, art spaces, family cafés, outdoor retail areas, viewing decks and a museum, in addition to essential services including telecommunications and banking. These amenities are intended to enrich the visitor experience and strengthen the project’s overall tourism and commercial value.

The Muttrah Teleferik project in Muscat is a major new tourism and urban-experience initiative currently being developed by Sabeen Investments in the historic Muttrah area.

Conceived as a landmark attraction, the project introduces a cable-car system that will connect the Muttrah Corniche with the surrounding hills overlooking the bay.

The cable-car route will extend for roughly three kilometres and feature three primary stations, designed to serve passengers while also offering viewing platforms and lifestyle amenities.

The Muttrah Port Station, located close to the Corniche and fish market, will serve as the main access point. The Mountain Top Station, the largest of the three, will offer sweeping 360-degree views of the mountains, harbour and sea; and is planned to host leisure facilities including dining outlets, entertainment venues and an open-air theatre.

Oman unveils RO 11.1 bn water investment plan

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 15

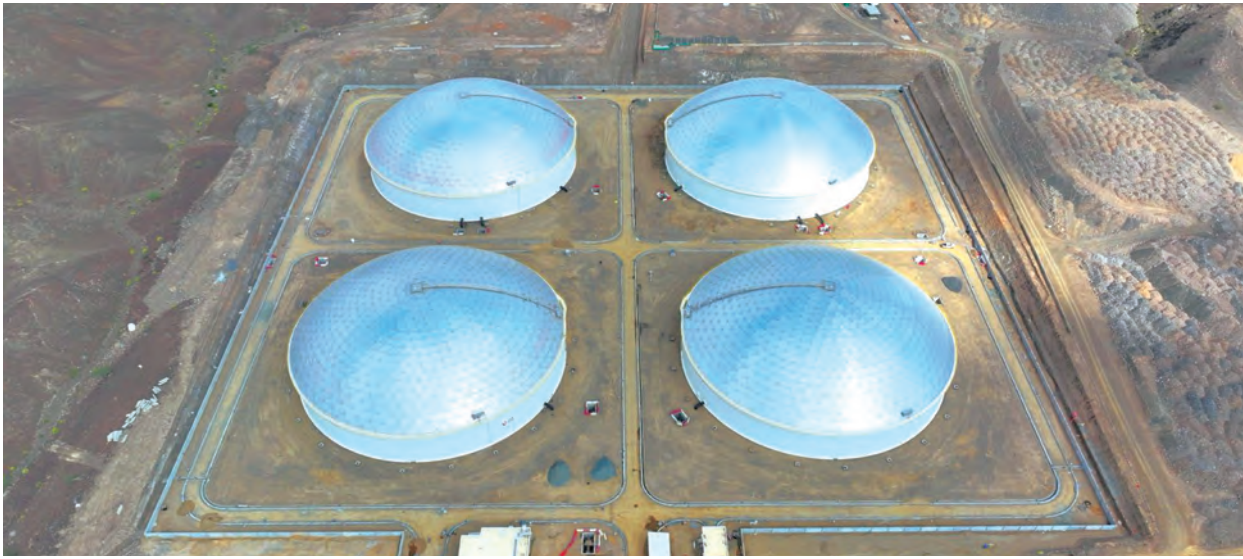
NAMA Water Services (NWS), the primary operator of water and wastewater services across the Sultanate of Oman (excluding Dhofar), has unveiled a colossal long-term investment strategy, committing an estimated RO 11.1 billion (approximately \$28.8 billion) up to 2050 to secure the nation’s water future.

This comprehensive capital expenditure (CAPEX) programme is directly aligned with the ambitious goals of Oman Vision 2040 and is designed to manage the demands of a population projected to double over the next 25 years.

The Integrated Master Plan (IMP) aims to achieve near-universal water supply coverage and dramatically improve wastewater treatment capacity across the NWS service area, which already serves over 90% of Oman’s current population.

This was presented by Eng Abdulhakeem bin Amur al Dhuqli, Master Planning and Strategic Investments Manager at Nama Water, during the Water Majlis 2025 by Oman-German Friendship Association (OGFA) with Nama Water Services. The scale of the investment underscores the national priority placed on resilient infrastructure to support economic diversification and sustainable urban growth, treating all water resources fairly and equitably.

In the immediate future, NWS has earmarked a significant RO 666 million expenditure for its 2025-2027 CAPEX Programme. This three-year allocation provides a clear picture of the initial focus,



The scale of the investment underscores the national priority placed on resilient infrastructure to support economic diversification and sustainable urban growth.

In the immediate future, NWS has earmarked a significant RO 666 million expenditure for its 2025-2027 CAPEX Programme. This three-year allocation provides a clear picture of the initial focus, with RO 453.3 million dedicated to water projects and RO 212.7 million committed to wastewater infrastructure.

with RO 453.3 million dedicated to water projects and RO 212.7 million committed to wastewater infrastructure.

This initial wave of investment encompasses more than 225 projects combined, with over 113 projects focused on water supply and over 112 on wastewater treatment and network expansion.

The strategy is being implemented through a structured approach that assesses infrastructure needs against water demand and wastewater generation projections, ultimately guiding investment plans that include options for Public-Private Partnerships (PPP).

The near-term expansion will deliver a tangible boost to service levels for citizens and businesses. The 2025-2027 water programme is set to add over 8,000 km of new network length, significantly enhancing distribution and reaching underserved communities.

Furthermore, the plan calls for the construction of 202 new reservoirs with a combined

capacity exceeding 1.8 million cubic metres (Mm³) and 90 new pumping stations to ensure efficient water transport. This infrastructure drive is expected to connect over 162,000 new water customers.

Concurrently, the wastewater programme will see the construction of 28 new Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) of various scales, coupled with over 1,500 km of new network lines, serving more than 42,000 new wastewater customers in this period.

The Integrated Master Plan, extending to 2050, is explicitly designed to accommodate the exponential demographic shift, as Oman’s population is projected to reach approximately 9.2 million people.

The total required CAPEX of RO 11.1 billion will fund a total of 410 projects. Notably, the largest portion of the long-term investment, RO 7.2 billion, is allocated to wastewater projects, highlighting a strategic intent to dramatically modernise and expand the sewage system.

Oman’s 44.01 launches region’s first cement plant mineralisation project

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

OMANI carbon mineralisation company 44.01, has announced the launch of the first pilot project to mineralise carbon dioxide from a cement plant, in collaboration with Holcim, in Al Fujairah, UAE.

The pilot project aims to capture five tonnes of carbon dioxide per day from cement production and permanently store it underground through in-situ mineralisation, where the CO₂ will be stored in the underground rock formation where it will mineralise, “providing a natural, safe and permanent method of geological carbon storage”.

The project, according to a 44.01 spokesperson, builds directly on technology first developed and demonstrated in Oman.

“By applying our Omani mineralisation expertise to a first-of-its-kind project with Holcim, we’re showing how in-situ



Executives representing 44.01, Holcim and other partners at the agreement signing.

mineralisation can help decarbonise hard-to-abate industries like cement. It’s also our first agreement to store emissions from the cement industry — a major step towards scaling our home-grown solution into a global market”, the spokesperson said.

The project will be implemented in

collaboration with NT Energies, a joint venture between Technip Energies and NMDC Energy, deploying Shell CANSOLV carbon capture solutions through the alliance between Shell Catalysts & Technologies and Technip Energies.

Commenting on the announcement, Chief Executive Officer of 44.01, Talal Hasan, highlighted the role industrial partnerships can play in accelerating decobransation.

“This partnership shows that industrial companies can play a leading role in permanent carbon removal. Working with Holcim, FNRC and NT Energies, we are demonstrating a practical and scalable path to decarbonisation that can be replicated worldwide”.

Ali Said, Chief Executive Officer of Holcim in the UAE and Oman, said the project reflects Holcim’s commitment to innovation-driven decarbonisation.

“This project demonstrates how innovation and collaboration can accelerate

progress towards net-zero. This pilot to decarbonise our cement plant is another example of how we are building progress for people and the planet.

Our partnership with 44.01 reinforces our shared commitment to pioneering sustainable solutions and showcases what is possible when industry leaders work together to drive meaningful, scalable impact”.

Benoit Verdier, Chief Executive Officer of NT Energies, said the project marks a regional first: “This is a first of a kind in the Middle East.

We are proud to be collaborating with 44.01 and Holcim to implement a carbon capture pilot for this pioneering decarbonisation project in the hard-to-abate sector”.

Meanwhile, 44.01 confirmed that the mineralisation programme in Oman is progressing through active collaboration with relevant ministries and authorities.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES



Founded by visionary restaurateur Marios George in 2004, Nozomi quickly became one of London's preeminent destinations.

NOZOMI MUSCAT BRINGS NEW RHYTHM OF LIFESTYLE DINING

MUSCAT: Nozomi, the renowned award-winning contemporary Japanese lifestyle restaurant and celebrity hot spot, is set to open its doors on December 16 for a soft opening, followed by a grand opening in January at Muscat's best address, The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort. Founded by visionary restaurateur Marios George in 2004, Nozomi quickly became one of London's preeminent destinations. Over the years, it has expanded its reach with iconic outposts in Doha, Qatar and in Riyadh and Al Khobar in Saudi Arabia with pop-ups previously held in both Monaco and Cannes.

Each evening at Nozomi Muscat unfolds as an immersive experience elevated by a carefully curated world-music selection that evolves through the night where exceptional dining blends seamlessly with sophisticated social energy.

Each location is celebrated for its unique dining experience, blending contemporary Japanese cuisine with a vibrant, music-driven atmosphere, embodying the spirit of movement and modernity. At Muscat, guests will discover the restaurant's distinctive philosophy, offering modern Japanese dishes infused with subtle European influences. The sushi sits at the heart of the Nozomi journey, elevated into a true art form.

Each piece is crafted with meticulous precision and presented with striking elegance. From delicate nigiri to premium seafood rolls layered with exceptional ingredients, the sushi selection embodies the mastery, refinement and visual beauty that define Nozomi. The thoughtfully curated menu features the brand's signature highlights, from its acclaimed black cod and melt-in-the-mouth Wagyu beef to world-class lobster tempura and inventive vegetarian options with the highest standards of quality and creativity. The restaurant will also introduce Nozomi Teppanyaki, an interactive dining concept where master chefs use the finest ingredients to create a dedicated cuisine and an à la carte Teppan menu with theatrical flair. Each evening at Nozomi Muscat unfolds as an immersive experience elevated by a carefully curated world-music selection that evolves through the night where exceptional dining blends seamlessly with sophisticated social energy. With its alluring atmosphere and signature sense of rhythm, Nozomi is set to become one of Muscat's most coveted destinations for local and international guests.

GENETCO APPOINTS NEW CEO

MUSCAT: General Electric and Trading Company LLC (Genetco), one of Oman's longstanding corporations, announced the appointment of Eng Wael bin Ahmed al Lawati as Chief Executive Officer. This comes as Genetco, which represents leading global brands across consumer products, business solutions, engineering services, and facility management, continues to strengthen its portfolio, modernise operations and expand strategic partnerships in line with the company's long-term plans. The Board selected Eng Wael for his



ENG WAEL AL LAWATI
CEO, Genetco

demonstrated ability to lead complex organisations, build high-performing teams and deliver sustainable growth in competitive and rapidly changing markets. Murtaadha bin Hassan Ali, Chairperson of the Board

said: "Eng Wael al Lawati brings balanced leadership, deep corporate understanding and a steady approach to decision-making that aligns with Genetco's values and ambitions. The Board places full confidence in his ability to guide Genetco's next phase of growth while reinforcing our positioning and ensuring continued excellence". Eng Wael is well regarded within Oman's business community for his collaborative style, strategic clarity and ability to guide organisations through periods of change.

24 winners. 26 more Yaris up for grabs!

THE joy continues to spread across Oman as Saud Bahwan Automotive the distributor for Toyota vehicles announced the latest group of winners in its historic 50th Anniversary Mega Celebration. With every raffle draw, more customers are turning their Toyota purchase into a life-changing experience, driving home a brand-new Toyota Yaris. Marking five decades of partnership between Saud Bahwan Automotive and Toyota, the campaign celebrates a golden journey of trust, quality and customer happiness. Alongside the chance to win one of 50 brand-new Toyota Yaris cars, customers also enjoy unmatched benefits including 50% VAT covered, 5 years/ 50,000 kms service, 50% insurance covered and RO 50 worth Thiqah Loyalty Points.

This time, the list of winners features individuals and companies from across Oman; each representing a unique story of loyalty and trust in Toyota. Asad bin Juma al Sadi from Nizwa, who purchased a Land Cruiser Pick-Up, expressed his delight saying, "For us in Nizwa, Toyota is more than a vehicle, it is part of our daily life. My Land Cruiser Pick-up has been my dependable work partner and now to win a Yaris feels amazing. It is truly a proud moment".



This time, the list of winners features individuals and companies from across Oman.

Rawnaq Al Duqum Trading, represented by Fahad bin Said al Saad, who purchased a Land Cruiser Pick-Up, said, "Our business relies on vehicles that can perform under tough conditions and Toyota has never let us down. Winning the Yaris in this special 50th anniversary year is a wonderful bonus". Majan International Petroleum Services LLC, who purchased an Urban Cruiser, said, "Our team depends on Toyota vehicles for their performance and dependability.

This win is a joyful reminder that trust and loyalty always pay off. We are happy to be part of Toyota's golden celebration". Alya bint al Rawahiyah from Nizwa, who purchased a Corolla, said with joy, "My first ever car was a Toyota and it has always been part of my milestones. Winning a Yaris during Toyota's 50th anniversary campaign makes this purchase even more memorable, it feels like being part of something special".

GCET celebrates graduation of its eighth cohort

MUSCAT: Under the auspices of Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality and with the participation of Professor Sir Steve West, Vice-Chancellor, President and Chief Executive Officer of the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, the Global College of Engineering and Technology (GCET) celebrated the graduation of its eighth cohort on Wednesday, December 10, 2025, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre in Madinat Al Irfan, Muscat. The total number of graduates exceeded 730 male and female



The total number of graduates exceeded 730 male and female graduates from 14 different academic programmes.

graduates from 14 different academic programmes at the bachelor's and master's levels in engineering and technology. One of the graduates of the eighth cohort, Hamza bin Hamad al Hawqani, expressed his pride and joy at reaching this milestone, saying: "Today is nothing but the result of years of hard work and dedication, a long-awaited dream. It is a day in which we celebrate a journey of learning and knowledge, a day in which we crown our efforts with success. Reaching this moment renews our determination to build this

nation and fuels the aspirations that shape Oman's bright future". Another graduate, Zainab bint Othman al Balushiyah, added: "Our educational journey in this distinguished institution has been exceptional and unique, filled with unforgettable memories and continuous support from all the college staff throughout every stage of our studies. I truly felt the encouragement and motivation from everyone to achieve my ambitions, foster innovation, entrepreneurship and excellence in academic life and creative ideas."

Himam Carnival promotes inclusion for persons with disabilities

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities in social and sporting activities, Bank Muscat launched one of its key corporate social responsibility initiatives, Himam Carnival 2025. The second edition of the carnival was organised following the success of last year's event and the positive feedback from participants with disabilities and their families. This year's carnival featured the participation of over 500 persons with disabilities, bank employees and their families; and included a range of activities, creating an inclusive and engaging environment. The initiative



This year's carnival featured the participation of over 500 persons with disabilities, bank employees and their families.

included running races suitable for all participant groups, as well as a dedicated entertainment area offering games, competitions and food stalls. The event coincided with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities celebrated every December. The carnival concluded with the recognition of 36 winners who secured the top three positions in the various races. Initiatives directed towards persons with disabilities play a crucial role in promoting inclusion by providing equitable opportunities for participation across different fields. Creating supportive and accessible environments enables individuals to fully utilise their

abilities. Such initiatives also raise community awareness, foster a culture that embraces diverse abilities and help nurture talent, ultimately generating broader social impact through empowerment and improved quality of life for all. Bank Muscat's commitment to inclusion is reflected in its broad range of initiatives, from enhancing accessible banking services to ongoing community and sustainability programmes. These efforts reinforce the role of institutions in supporting society; aligning with Oman Vision 2040, particularly its focus on community empowerment and partnerships to ensure a dignified and sustainable quality of life for all.

SHORTTAKES



OQBI's integrated complex at Salalah produces methanol, ammonia and LPG

OQBI INKS AMMONIA OFFTAKE PACT WITH DEEPAK OMAN

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

OQ Base Industries (SFZ) SAOG (OQBI) — a subsidiary of OQ Group — has announced the signing of a long-term Ammonia Offtake Agreement with Deepak Oman Industries LLC (SFZ).

Under the agreement, publicly-traded OQBI will supply ammonia to Deepak Oman Industries for use in value-added chemical manufacturing. The contract spans up to ten years, with an option to extend for an additional three years, ensuring a reliable and sustainable feedstock supply to support Deepak Oman's operations.

"This agreement underscores OQBI's commitment to supporting Oman Vision 2040, fostering industrial diversification and promoting value-chain localisation within the Sultanate of Oman's petrochemical sector", said Ihsan al Jandal, Chief Operating Officer, OQBI.

"It further demonstrates OQBI's ongoing efforts to enable sustainable growth, enhance in-country value and strengthen strategic partnerships across Oman's energy and industrial ecosystem", he added in a filing to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

Deepak Oman Industries, backed by Deepak Nitrite Limited — one of India's leading chemical manufacturers — is setting up an integrated chemicals facility at Salalah Free Zone. The plant will produce inorganic chemical products, including calcium chloride and sodium nitrate, using locally available inputs such as ammonia and limestone.

Hydrogen project set for commissioning by Q4 2026

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 15

PHASE 1 of Oman's first green hydrogen project — a commercial-scale venture promoted by India's ACME Group — is slated for commissioning before the end of 2026, marking a major milestone in the Sultanate of Oman's transition to low-carbon fuel production.

Senior representatives from the Indian renewable-energy leader were in Muscat recently to highlight ACME Group's selection of Oman as its global destination of choice for its first commercial-scale green hydrogen investment. They shared their perspectives during the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) 2025 event held in Muscat recently.

According to Arnava Sinha, Executive Vice President, ACME Group, the project's entire first-phase output of 100,000 tonnes per annum (tpa) of green ammonia produced at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) is committed to the European market starting early 2027.

He credited Norwegian fertiliser major Yara for its long-term offtake agreement, which helped secure the bankability of the project.

"We are grateful to Yara for recognising the project's potential and agreeing to a binding 15-year contract for the full first-phase production of 100,000 tonnes of green ammonia. This enabled



Tank capacity taking shape at Duqm SEZ as part of ACME Group's green ammonia project.

favourable financing and the project is now progressing well. The first RFNBO-compliant green ammonia from Oman should reach Europe in early 2027", he said.

Sinha also highlighted the strategic importance of Oman as the launchpad for ACME's green hydrogen ambitions. "We are an Indian company, but it is significant that we chose Oman for our first flagship green ammonia project.

Although we also have projects in India, our move into green molecules began with a conscious decision to make Oman our starting point. As a renewable-energy developer, we looked for a location with exceptional renewable potential and Oman stood out.

We also wanted a straightforward development path with collocated renewable power, electrolyzers and the ammonia loop — something

we found in Al Duqm. Just as important was the strong and supportive government framework, which placed Oman ahead of many other countries", he noted.

Providing an update on project execution, Anil Kumar Taparia, Chief Operating Officer — Green Hydrogen/ Ammonia, said: "Our project in Oman is progressing well, having passed 50% completion. Most engineering work is done, licences for the synthesis loop and electrolyser orders are in place and equipment has begun arriving on site. The most challenging civil task — managing cliff works to bring pipelines from a 90-metre elevation down to the sea — has been completed. We are confident that by Q1 2027 we will produce our first green molecule from Oman".

Taparia added that the company is in discussions with

multiple end users as Oman builds towards a green hydrogen corridor, including with integrated energy group OQ and other government institutions coordinating renewable-energy transmission and hydrogen infrastructure.

"From our project perspective, green hydrogen is the primary product, which we convert to green ammonia mainly for logistical reasons. Globally, long-term demand is ultimately for hydrogen itself.

Over the next decade, as liquefaction and transport technologies mature, we expect hydrogen demand to surge. We are excited about this trajectory and believe Oman can become a pioneer in large-scale green hydrogen projects. We are fully committed to supporting this national initiative", he added.

Sumit Sinha, Associate Vice President, ACME Group, who has been involved with the project since its inception in 2022, added: "We began with the feasibility study, then developed the basic design package with Linde, KBR and others, engaging with suppliers across the supply chain for electrolyzers, process units, hydrogen storage, compressors and more.

Because this is a new concept, there was initial skepticism, but after three to four years of development, things have taken shape. Support from governments has been crucial: the Indian government is financing the project and the Omani government has provided infrastructure and enabling regulations".

Water Majlis 2025 puts spotlight on Oman's water security

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 15

THE Water Majlis 2025, organised by the Oman German Friendship Association (OGFA), brought together senior decision-makers, technical experts and private sector leaders to advance dialogue on Oman's long-term water security and turn cooperation into practical outcomes.

Held in Muscat under the auspices of HH Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said, Chairman of OGFA, the event formed part of Oman Water Week and was conducted in collaboration with Nama Water Services, with support from the German Water Partnership and IntercityHotel Muscat.

The Majlis served as a public-private platform to discuss strategic investments, technology transfer and innovation in the water sector, at a time when Oman faces rising demand, climate pressures and the need for more efficient infrastructure.

Discussions focused on priority areas including reducing non-revenue water, pipeline rehabilitation, treated effluent reuse and the application of digital and AI-powered solutions to improve system performance.

Opening the event, HH Sayyid Tarik



Held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said, Chairman of OGFA, the event formed part of Oman Water Week and was conducted in collaboration with Nama Water Services, with support from the German Water Partnership.

highlighted the fundamental importance of water, noting that it is "a resource that shapes every nation's destiny" and urging participants to look beyond short-term solutions.

"Water is both challenge and opportunity," he said, adding that regions which manage it wisely become "centres of stability, innovation and cooperation". His remarks set the tone for a Majlis that emphasised long-term planning, resilience and partnership.

Drawing on Oman's heritage, the OGFA Chairman referenced the aflaj irrigation system as a symbol of stewardship and fairness, while also pointing to modern desalination and network investments as evidence of how science and innovation can address scarcity. He underscored that Oman Vision 2040 provides a clear framework for sustainable growth, with the water sector playing a central role in economic and social development.

HH Sayyid Tarik also highlighted the role of Nama Water Services in reshaping the national water landscape, particularly through long-term capital investment programmes.

"This is sustainability translated into daily decision-making", he said, stressing that success will depend on collaboration across sectors and borders. Germany, he noted, remains a trusted partner, recognised for its technological excellence and reliability in the water sector.

Beyond presentations, participants agreed that the true value of the Water Majlis lay in building connections that can lead to concrete projects. A key outcome of the discussions was the proposal to establish a dedicated water taskforce to drive German-Omani cooperation forward, helping to convert dialogue into pilot

projects, joint research, capacity-building initiatives and investment opportunities.

Innovation and human capital were also central themes. HH Sayyid Tarik described Oman's young engineers and scientists as "the country's most powerful renewable resource", emphasising that combining local expertise with international experience can deliver solutions that are both locally grounded and globally relevant.

He called on stakeholders to focus not only on technology, but also on nurturing talent and skills for the future.

Concluding the Majlis, the OGFA Chairman urged participants to move decisively from discussion to action. "Progress emerges not in isolation, but through collective effort", he said, expressing hope that the Water Majlis 2025 would lead to lasting partnerships and transformative innovations that secure a sustainable water future for Oman and beyond.

By convening government entities, utilities, technology providers and financiers, the Water Majlis reinforced Oman's commitment to water security as a strategic national priority, while positioning international cooperation as a key enabler of resilience, efficiency and long-term sustainability.

ENERGY TRANSITION

Vietnam switches on first LNG plants



Vietnam has inaugurated its first LNG-powered power plant complex, marking a major step in diversifying energy supplies with cleaner fossil fuels.

The Nhon Trach 3 and 4 plants in Dong Nai province carry a \$1.4 billion investment and 1.6-gigawatt capacity. Developed by PetroVietnam Electricity, the project secured nearly \$1 billion in financing without state guarantees since its 2022 launch. — ONA

POLICY SUPPORT

China sets measures to steady investment



China's National Development and Reform Commission has unveiled new measures to stabilise investment growth in 2026, underscoring efforts to support sustainable economic development.

The National Development and Reform Commission said steps include using government investment funds, moderately raising central budget spending and deploying policy-based financial tools. — ONA

MARKET SIGNALS

Japan business sentiment hits 4-year high



Japanese manufacturers' business sentiment rose to a four-year high in December, bolstering expectations of a near-term Bank of Japan rate hike. The BOJ's tankan survey showed the headline index at plus 15.

Firms expect conditions to weaken ahead, citing US tariffs and domestic demand, highlighting uncertainty over how far borrowing costs may rise in the coming quarters. — Reuters

OPINION

The left-field risk for 2026 is rates going up



JON SINDREU

The writer is the London-based global economics editor for Breakingviews. He was previously a reporter and a columnist for the Wall Street Journal.

AMONG the avalanche of 2026 outlooks that banks have sent to their clients in recent weeks, few contain the possibility that global interest rates could trend up, rather than fall or stay the same. Derivatives markets put the chance of tighter policy at the end of next year at 0% in the US and just 30% in Europe, even as some rate-setters sound increasingly hawkish. Recent policy shifts in Japan and Australia suggest investors should take the risk seriously. Cries for tighter monetary policy are getting louder. On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve cut rates by 25 basis points and pencilled in one more reduction in 2026. Yet dissent is growing: six of the 19 officials who submitted forecasts wanted no cut and three expected rates to rise by the end of next year. Outside of the US, the signals are even clearer: European Central Bank board member Isabel Schnabel recently suggested

the next move will be a hike. This seemed unlikely when the ECB's own projections showed inflation falling below target, but President Christine Lagarde said this week that the euro zone's economic prospects will be revised up. Investors aren't fully buying it yet. Bets on where rates will average over the next year have started to tick up in some major economies, but the moves are small and largely relate to pricing out further easing. In the US, most brokerages assume borrowing costs will fall another 50 basis points, as do traders. One exception is Japan, where derivatives suggest a 75% probability of a rate hike this month. But it's a unique situation: the Bank of Japan has barely tweaked its ultra-loose monetary policy since the pandemic and is now reacting to a large, inflationary fiscal expansion. The most striking U-turn is in Australia, where markets have shifted from expecting cuts to believing policy will get much tighter

Outside of the US, the signals are even clearer: European Central Bank board member Isabel Schnabel recently suggested the next move will be a hike.

at breakneck speed. With central banks often moving in lockstep, it could set a trend. Indeed, similar bets are starting to spread to Sweden and Canada, which have so far only signalled plans to stand pat. Borrowing costs are still unlikely to rise enough to derail stocks next year. In many Western economies, unemployment is edging up, wage growth is cooling and inflation expectations remain anchored. These are signs that policy isn't overly loose. In the near term, though, central banks are under immense pressure: headline inflation is sticky and above target, growth is coming in stronger than expected, fiscal policy is stimulative in countries like Germany and housing markets are rebounding in places like Australia and Sweden. Even in the US, where the president is lobbying for easy money, the bar for a sudden hawkish pivot may be lower than investors think. A global increase in rates could be the hidden danger for markets. — Reuters

SCOTT BESSENT WILL BE THE REAL NEXT FED CHAIR

GABRIEL RUBIN

CENTRAL bank independence, like all other forms of institutional integrity, is out of vogue in Washington. Its top proponents and defenders are leaving the scene, replaced by committed partisans and the monetarily heterodox. The upcoming retirement of Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell gives President Donald Trump a chance to change course from his much-rueed 2018 decision to appoint the central banker. Scott Bessent's tight grip on the selection process means that, whoever gets the job, the US Treasury Secretary will effectively be in the chair. Trump has repeatedly and vocally criticised Powell, whom he blames for not lowering interest rates fast enough, calling him a "numbskull" and "Too Late" and handed Bessent responsibility for reviewing candidates. When Breakingviews Predictions went to press the president said he had narrowed the list to one name — and did not deny to reporters that the preferred candidate was National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett. Bessent has used the opportunity to flesh out his institutional critique of the Fed in essays and public commentary — essentially creating a policy framework to backstop Trump's complaints about interest rates. He continues to pay lip service to the importance of Fed independence, but then makes clear that his definition does not match the popular one. In a recent essay in an academic journal, Bessent made the case that the central bank has deviated from its former role. In the 2007-9 financial crisis and then during the 2020 pandemic, the Fed invented tools that have vastly expanded its role in the economy, with little democratic legitimacy or oversight. Nowhere is that more evident, Bessent argues, than in the Fed's balance sheet, which stood at \$6.6 trillion in early November. It has repurposed asset purchase programmes for crisis situations into yet another tool of stimulative policy that privileges asset holders like homeowners and equity shareholders. As part of this critique, Bessent writes that the Fed has consistently overestimated the effects of fiscal stimulus and underestimated the growth effects of tax cuts and deregulation. The Fed's mission creep extended further into financial regulation following the crisis and the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act, Bessent says, as well as into issues like gender equity and climate. Though Bessent stops short of advocating a specific structural solution, other critics argue for revisiting the Fed-Treasury Accord of 1951. That handshake deal permitted the Fed to control its own balance sheet, unwinding the wartime arrangements that handed the Treasury the reins. It was the most important step towards an independent central bank since Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, opens new tab stepped down from the Fed's Board of Governors in 1932 — the last holder of that office to serve at both institutions simultaneously. — Reuters

Why electricity will decide industrial future

AS automation and AI transform manufacturing, energy — not labour — has become the decisive input. If the last century rewarded cheap hands, the next will reward abundant, reliable electrons. Oman is well positioned to turn power into prosperity — exporting not only molecules, but also metals, data and ideas. Across the twentieth century, nations competed primarily on wages. Factories migrated to wherever labour was cheapest and logistics stitched the world into a vast assembly line. That era is ending. Automation, robotics and artificial intelligence have pushed the labour share of manufacturing sharply down. The new binding constraint is electricity — firm, scalable, cost-stable power that runs machines and, increasingly, trains models. In the coming decade, competitiveness will be determined less by how many hands you can hire and more by how many megawatts you can marshal. Look at the global scoreboard. China sits atop the league of electricity producers, adding the equivalent of a major European economy's consumption in new power each year. The United States remains a giant, yet many of its most attractive industrial regions face grid congestion and long interconnection queues. India is rising fast but must first meet massive domestic needs. Meanwhile, countries with firm, low-carbon baseload — France with nuclear, the Nordics with hydro — are quietly converting surplus electrons into export advantage. The lesson is simple: power availability, stability and price increasingly shape where the next wave of industries will land. The biggest demand catalyst is the 'compute shock'. Data centres and AI clusters are no longer a marginal load; they are fast becoming the new baseload. A traditional rack might draw a few kilowatts; AI racks can draw tens of kilowatts each and whole campuses now seek hundreds of megawatts — today, not five years from now. Technology firms are hunting the world for places that can deliver immediate capacity, credible green composition and headroom to scale to gigawatt campuses. Where abundant power is available at predictable prices, investment follows. Oman enters this moment with



Oman enters this moment with structural advantages. Our power system is modern, well-regulated and increasingly diversified.



DR YOUSUF HAMED AL BALUSHI
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The writer is founder and CEO - Smart Investment Gateway, economists, board adviser & business transformation mentor.

On a per-person basis, Oman enjoys significantly higher electricity availability than many larger manufacturing economies, which means we possess true 'energy headroom' — the ability to host new industries without compromising household and commercial supply.

structural advantages. Our power system is modern, well-regulated and increasingly diversified. Generation has grown steadily while efficiency and tariff reforms have moderated demand growth. Utility-scale solar and wind are now part of the mix, backed by reliable gas-fired capacity and a strengthening transmission backbone. On a per-person basis, Oman enjoys significantly higher electricity availability than many larger manufacturing economies, which means we possess true 'energy headroom' — the ability to host new industries without compromising household and commercial supply. Crucially, the outlook points to a widening surplus window. On current trajectories, installed capacity is set to outpace peak demand through the latter half of the decade, creating several gigawatts of theoretical surplus by 2030 even after prudent reserve margins. That is not an accounting curiosity; it is a development instrument. Energy can be treated as a raw material — converted into higher-value exports in metals, chemicals and digital services. In other words, instead of merely exporting fuels, Oman can export embodied electricity. This is where 'dark industries' highly automated, lights-out operations enter the picture. ata centres for AI training and cloud services are the quintessential dark industry: capital-intensive, power-hungry and employment-light on the floor but heavy in indirect benefits (construction, maintenance, connectivity, cloud ecosystems). Electro-intensive materials including aluminium and advanced copper products fit the same logic: they turn low-cost, reliable electricity into globally

traded goods. Green hydrogen and ammonia, produced via electrolysis, convert surplus daytime solar into exportable molecules. Desalination and cold-chain logistics, timed to renewable peaks, strengthen food and water security while soaking up cheap power. To capture this opportunity, we should move from potential to bankability. Four practical steps will accelerate investment. First, offer guaranteed 24/7 clean-power products in our industrial zones — renewables bundled with storage and firming gas — sold through transparent long-term contracts (PPAs) tailored to electro-intensive users and hyperscalers. Second, deepen the wholesale market and wheeling framework so large buyers can source dedicated renewable supply on contract while using the grid as a highway. Third, fast-track transmission projects and hybridise existing gas plants with grid-scale batteries to improve ramping and reserve margins. Fourth, develop true power-ready land parcels at Suhar, Al Duqm and Salalah, with pre-permitted sites, substation access, water and fibre — so investors can move from MOU to ground-break without delay. Policy design matters. Green-premium products can steer flexible loads, such as AI training jobs and electrolysis, towards midday solar peaks, lowering system costs and emissions. Co-location synergies, data centers next to hydrogen parks, for example — allow shared interconnection, backup and heat-recovery options. Clear, bankable sustainability attributes (hourly matching, credible certificates) will ensure that Omani electrons meet the strict decarbonisation commitments of global clients. The outcome is an ecosystem where firm, clean power is the calling card and industrial users are the anchor tenants funding grid expansion for everyone. This agenda aligns squarely with Oman Vision 2040. By monetising electrons at home, we retain more value from our gas, accelerate renewable deployment and build a platform for high-productivity jobs in engineering, digital operations and advanced manufacturing. It is also a sober, responsible path: abundant clean power reduces the carbon intensity of our exports and strengthens our licence to operate in an increasingly carbon-conscious marketplace.

Oman hosts workshop on international labour standards

MUSCAT: A three-day regional workshop titled “International Labour Standards: Building Local Policies and Capacities” commenced in Muscat on Monday, bringing together experts from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) alongside government officials, private sector representatives and specialists from Oman and across the region.

Organised by the Ministry of Labour, the workshop was inaugurated under the auspices of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour.

The programme aims to support the alignment of national legislation with international labour standards, strengthen institutional capacity in labour policy formulation and promote



The programme aims to support the alignment of national legislation with international labour standards.

the exchange of regional best practices to improve work environments and social protection systems.

Addressing the opening session, Khalid bin Salim al Ghammari,

Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, said the workshop comes at a time of profound global changes in employment patterns, professions and labour relations.

These shifts, he noted, require balanced policies that support economic growth while safeguarding workers’ rights. He stressed that international labour standards form a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive development.

Al Ghammari highlighted Oman’s strategic partnership with the ILO, which he said is rooted in a shared belief that people are at the centre of development.

This cooperation aligns with Oman Vision 2040 and the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals, particularly Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth.

He added that Oman has ratified five international labour conventions and recently modernised its legislative framework through the new Labour Law and the Social Protection Law, issued under Royal Decrees No 53/2023 and No 52/2023, respectively.

He also outlined the Ministry’s focus on empowering the national workforce through skills development programmes, digital solutions and data-driven policy tools, noting that the workshop reflects the Ministry’s commitment to capacity building and future-focused dialogue.

— ONA

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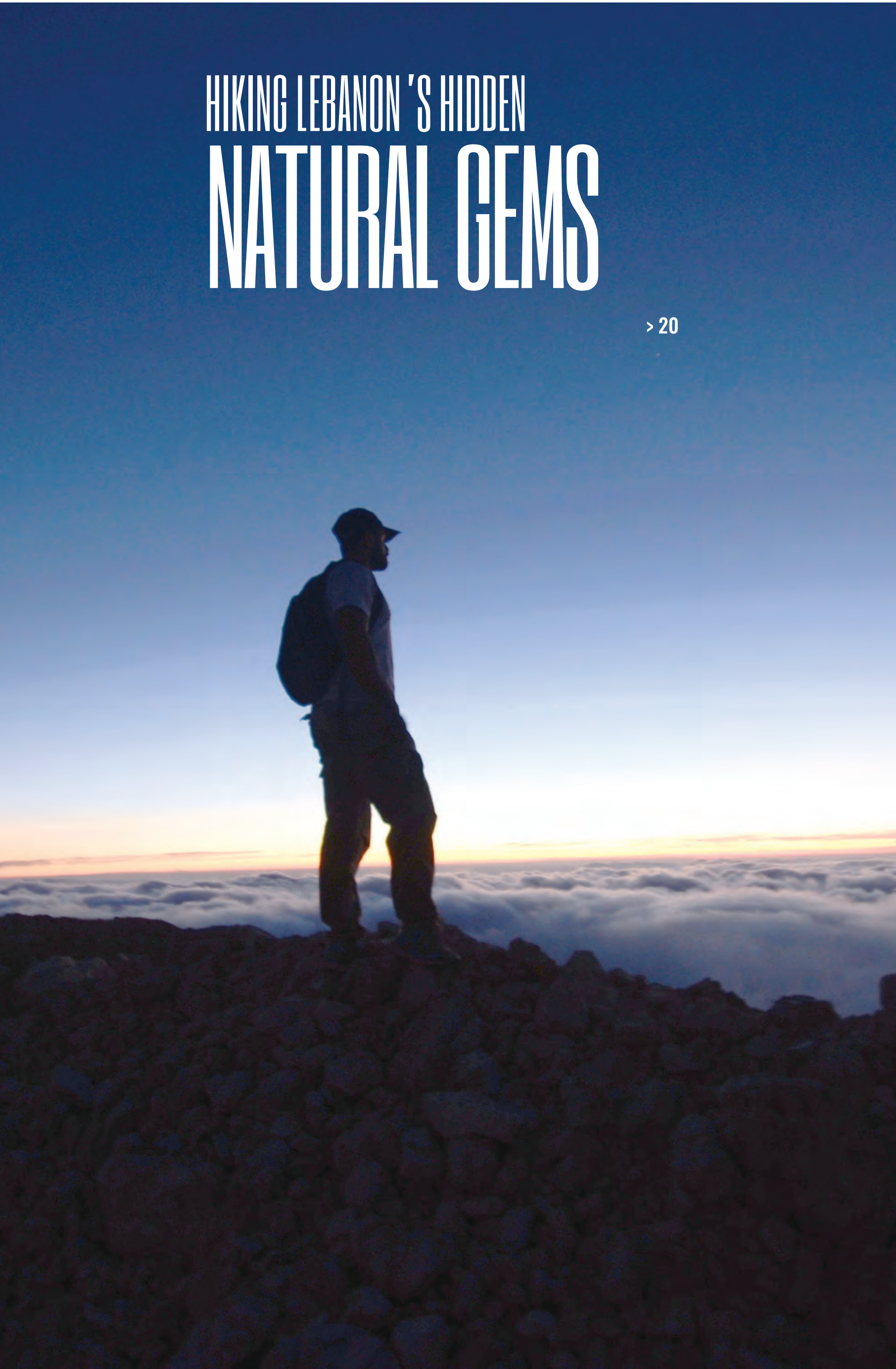


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CREATIVE PROJECTS

ANGLO-FRENCH STAR JANE BIRKIN GETS NAME ON BRIDGE OVER PARIS CANAL



Anglo-French singer and film star Jane Birkin was honoured on Saturday by the city she made her home after Paris named a footbridge over one of its canals after her.

Birkin's daughters, singer Lou Doillon and actor and singer Charlotte Gainsbourg, were among the guests who attended the ceremony for their mother, who died in 2023 at the age of 76.

"The Jane Birkin footbridge — it's poetic", said Gainsbourg, her voice thick with emotion. "She would have loved it so much".

The Jane Birkin Footbridge spans the Canal Saint Martin in Paris's 10th arrondissement, or district.

"It could be the bridge that connected her to England and brought her hurrying back to France, her adopted country", Gainsbourg told those gathered for the ceremony.

"This morning my son asked me if my mother was still dead", said Doillon. "So I told him, 'Yes, but today she's becoming a bridge', — and it's great to be able to say that.

"The tranquility, the silence and the reverence of the cemetery really didn't suit her", she added.

Gainsbourg, Doillon and Birkin's grandson Roman de Kermadec together unveiled the bridge's new name plate, which reads: "Jane Birkin Footbridge (1946-2023) singer, actor, director".

Birkin came to Paris from London in the 1960s. Her duet with Serge Gainsbourg, "Je t'aime... moi non plus", became a massive hit, the first of several.

In cinema, she appeared in films including Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 classic "Blowup".

She subsequently worked with a string of major directors, including Agnes Varda and Bertrand Tavernier. — AFP



QUICK FEATURES



EVENTS

US actress Amanda Seyfried attends the Los Angeles premiere of "The Testament of Ann Lee" at the Linwood Dunn Theatre. — AFP



HONOUR

Actors, directors and producers, Carl Reiner and son Rob Reiner, show their hands after putting them in cement during their Hand and Footprint Ceremony. — Reuters



LIFESTYLE

An Afghan vendor selling balloons waits for customers along a road in Kabul. — AFP

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Canada, Mexico are new 2026 ‘Year of Culture’ partners



The initiative fosters long-term relationships between Canada and Mexico through cultural, educational, business and exchanges

The 2025 Year of Culture with Argentina and Chile concluded during the Polo AlMarsa Years of Culture Championship Trophy, with the initiative announcing Canada and Mexico as next year’s partner countries.

The 2026 collaboration coincides with the FIFA World Cup 2026™, co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the United States — the same tournament that inspired the creation of the Years of Culture initiative.

The partnership aims to highlight football’s power to connect cultures and will feature programmes as legacy projects from previous Years of Culture events.

Launched in 2012, the initiative fosters long-term relationships between partner

nations through cultural, educational, business and creative exchanges.

Each Year of Culture includes exhibitions, festivals, trade fairs, residencies, academic exchanges and public events, creating lasting legacies and stronger international ties.

Since its founding, Years of Culture has established partnerships with Japan (2012), the United Kingdom (2013), Brazil (2014), Türkiye (2015), China (2016), Germany (2017), Russia (2018), India (2019), France (2020), the United States (2021), the MENASA region (2022), Indonesia (2023) and Morocco (2024).

Qatar is currently celebrating a Year of Culture with both Argentina and Chile (2025).



John Howe poses at La Tour du Fantastique (The Tower of the Fantastic) new museum in Neuchatel, western Switzerland. — AFP

The art of Tolkien
illustrator John Howe



Illustrator John Howe drawing at La Tour du Fantastique (The Tower of the Fantastic) new museum in Neuchatel. — AFP

JOHN Howe, the illustrator who brought J R R Tolkien’s universe to life, is now inviting the world into his mind’s eye by setting up his studio in a medieval prison-turned-museum in Switzerland.

The 68-year-old is famed for his interpretation of Tolkien’s literary work, which ultimately saw him serve as a concept artist on film-maker Peter Jackson’s movie trilogies “The Lord of the Rings” and “The Hobbit”.

A lover of mythology and legends, the internationally acclaimed illustrator has also worked on video games and a television series.

The heroic or mysterious figures he draws, such as Gandalf, Treebeard, Saruman or Legolas, often emerge from darkness, bluish shadows, golden glimmers or greenish hues.

Around 270 of his works will be exhibited for a year in this new museum, of which he is one of the founders.

In the studio — which will remain open after the exhibition closes — visitors will be able to talk with Howe and watch him create: a challenge he doesn’t shy away from.

“It’s people who keep us going, after all”, he said.

“We thought we’d offer the public a little glimpse... into my mind”, he said, voicing a desire to share his

perspective and his method.

‘Cascade of images’

The exhibited works represent only a tiny fraction of his output.

Whether standing or sitting, “I draw all the time”, the Canadian-born, naturalised Swiss illustrator said.

“At first, it’s a need, then a vocation, a profession and then, little by little, it defines you”, and becomes “a reason for being”, he said.

At around 12 years old, he discovered Tolkien and his epic fantasy trilogy “The Lord of the Rings” at the library — though he jokingly regrets having had to start with the second volume, as the first wasn’t available.

A few years later, he immersed himself once again into Tolkien’s world, a re-reading that brought forth “a cascade of images” from his pencils because, according to Howe, the English writer is one of those “wonderful authors who offer a plethora of images to the reader”.

Middle Ages ‘fan zone’

Howe, who has become one of the masters of medieval fantasy, is passionate about history, which he considers “an important ingredient” in constructing his imagery.

His drawings blend historical meticulousness and epic imagination with a keen sense of architectural and mythological detail, creating an often dark and majestic atmosphere, borrowing from the Middle Ages.



Illustrator John Howe drawing at La Tour du Fantastique (The Tower of the Fantastic) new museum in Neuchatel. — AFP

“The Middle Ages is the world’s biggest fan zone”, he said.

“It’s a territory inhabited, on the one hand, by very serious people — archaeologists, philologists, historians, scientists — and on the other hand, by the artists, like nomads, who wander through it with only one goal: to tell stories”.

This self-described “storyteller” is not afraid of a blank page.

His characters and landscapes are created with hatching strokes, which he then colours in.

“The images are out there in the world. You have to go and find them”, he said. — AFP

FEATURES



HIKING LEBANON’S HIDDEN NATURAL GEMS

DR KHALED ABDUL MALAK

HIKING through the Al Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve in Mount Lebanon, the ecotourism expert followed a trail that led to the top of the hills covered by Lebanon’s emblematic millennium cedar trees.

After walking for hours, the group reached the summit where they had a treat for the eye and the soul.

A breathtaking panoramic view of the Bekaa valley to the east and the Mediterranean coastline to the west unfolded in front of their bewildered eyes.

“I have been trekking for the last 37 years. Love of nature has always called me”, said Bishara with a big smile. “I like to share with people the hidden natural beauties of the country and make them understand the importance of respecting and protecting such treasures”.

Varied terrain, scenic vistas, and historic environs combine to create unique hiking and trekking opportunities in Lebanon, an activity that has become increasingly popular among Lebanese and foreigners in need of a break from Beirut’s concrete jungle.

The Al Shouf Cedar Reserve, which stretches over 550 square kilometres at an altitude of 1,200-1,950 metres above sea level, is among Lebanon’s most attractive trekking spots, with highly preserved flora and fauna. Located deep inside the Druze heartland of the Shouf, the area was preserved during the 1975-1990 civil war by the special efforts of Druze leader Walid Jumblat.

Declared a nature reserve in 1996, it is the country’s largest protected environment and only biosphere reserve, containing 500 plant species, of which 50 are endemic to Lebanon. It also has 2 million trees of 24 species and harbors 200 types of birds, 32 species of mammals, and 27 species of reptiles.

“I enjoy spending the night outdoors in this 5-billion-star hotel listening to the wind”, Bishara said while looking at the stars above.

“We have to teach our children how to love, respect and enjoy real values and protect Mother Nature”, he said.

The sky turned orange and then purple as the sun went down behind thick clouds over the Mediterranean. The dim lights of the remote villages in the Valley sparkled from afar, as the full moon rose from behind the anti-Lebanon chain of mountains.

Bishara served the trekkers Lebanese cheese sandwiches before starting the descent to the gate of the reserve. The light of the moon was strong enough to walk without headlamps.

“I am sure that anyone would enjoy this kind of trip. People need to come out of their daily habits and enjoy the simple joys of life”, said Bishara.

Jabal Moussa, Arabic for ‘Moses’ mountain’, is another paradise for nature lovers, located



Trekking through Lebanon’s Al Shouf Cedar and Jabal Moussa reserves, hikers discover panoramic views, rare wildlife and a lesson in conservation, guided by passionate ecotourism experts

in the Kesrouan-Jbeil area north of Beirut. Surrounded by two small rivers — Nahr Ibrahim and Nahr Ed Dahab — Jabal Moussa spans an area of 12 million square metres at altitudes of 300-1,600 metres above sea level.

It is a green island amidst the sea of concrete that Lebanon has unfortunately become”, said Cesar Abi Khalil, co-founder of the reserve and member of the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa.

Trekkers have the choice of six trails with varying steepness, difficulty and distance. One trail is about a one-hour walk, another is two hours, whereas the longest, which goes around the mountain, takes up to five or six hours.

The reserve, which hosts a number of endemic plants and is home to many mammals, including hyrax, wolves, wild boars and hyenas, is also a sanctuary for migrating birds. Its mascot, ‘Tabsoun’, is a particular type of castor that is only found there.

A particularly difficult trail starts from the valley and leads up the mountain, following goat tracks that snake through a splendid forest of oak, pine, wild pear and wild apple trees.

On the way, trekkers can admire the remains of a Roman staircase and inscriptions dating to the second century AD.

The sanctuary came into being thanks to the initiative of a group of environment activists led by Pierre Doumit, a wealthy naturalist.

In addition to preserving the ecology, the creation of the reserve attracted more visitors to the area, benefitting the local communities. Many residents turned their homes into guesthouses and others into inns where visitors can taste traditional cuisine. The association also set up a common kitchen where traditional food is sold.

The reserve has attracted more than 6,000 visitors in a couple of years. “People are now coming here especially to visit Jabal Moussa, injecting some life and economic activity in the region”, he added.

There are many trekking clubs and tour operators that run guided outings throughout Lebanon, ranging from leisurely day hikes to longer multi-day treks.

