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Bahrain King’s visit to boost partnership

STATE VISIT REFLECTS STRONG TIES BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

KING Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain will pay a state visit to the Sultanate of Oman with effect from Tuesday (January 14). The Diwan of Royal Court issued a statement to this effect, reading as follows: “King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain will pay a state visit to the Sultanate of Oman, with effect from Tuesday (January 14). The visit comes in response to an invitation from His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. “The two leaders will explore some aspects of joint interest and various topics that contribute to promoting the joint Gulf action. They will also exchange views on the regional and international developments. “May the Almighty Allah grant success to the two leaderships for the good of their peoples, and the Arab and Islamic nations!” The Sultanate of Oman and the sisterly Kingdom of Bahrain are looking forward to further partnerships that reflect the strong ties between the two countries. The Omani-Bahraini summit, to be held on Tuesday at Al Alam Palace, under the leadership of His

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa

Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa, is an embodiment of this historical depth, strategic cooperation and continuous coordination. Omani-Bahraini relations represent a model to be emulated in the journey of the Gulf Cooperation Council, especially since the roots of these ties extend to decades and were built on solid foundations of brotherhood and mutual understanding. These relations were further enhanced by the historical trade ties in pearl fishing and frankincense trade, which were popular between the two countries and peoples. Sayyid Faisal bin Hareb al Busaidy, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Kingdom of Bahrain, said in a statement that King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa will be a dear guest of the Sultanate of Oman, its leadership, government and people. The ambassador added that the historical visit of the King of Bahrain to Oman embodies the depth of the advanced and close bilateral relations and translates the nature and strength of the relationship between the two wise leaderships and their brotherly peoples in various spheres. — ONA

INBRIEF

HM GREETINGS TO CROATIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Zoran Milanovic of the Republic of Croatia, on the occasion of re-electing him as a President of the Republic for a new presidential term. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his best wishes of success to President Milanovic in leading the Croatian people of towards further progress and development. His Majesty also lauded the advanced ties between the two countries and the promising areas of cooperation and partnership.

SUCCESS OF ‘STUDENT FESTIVAL’ HAILED

The Secretariat-General of National Celebrations has expressed appreciation and gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the recent student festival themed ‘Oman’s Renewed Renaissance.’ In a statement to this effect, the Secretariat-General of National Celebrations valued the efforts, cooperation and keenness of all those who took part in the student festival and made it a success. It observed that such enthusiasm embodied loyalty to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, incarnated the spirit of belonging to the homeland and manifested national unity in a candid, ardent manner. — ONA

‘Breakthrough’ Gaza truce deal in final phase

DOHA/CAIRO: Mediators gave Israel and Hamas a final draft of a deal on Monday to end the war in Gaza, an official briefed on the negotiations said, after a midnight “breakthrough” in talks attended by envoys of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The official said the text for a ceasefire and release of captives was presented by Qatar to both sides at talks in Doha, which included the chiefs of Israel’s Mossad and Shin Bet spy agencies and Qatar’s prime minister. Steve Witkoff, who will become US envoy when Trump returns to the US presidency next week, attended the talks, the official said. A US source said the outgoing Biden administration’s envoy Brett McGurk was also there. “The next 24 hours will be

A Palestinian man carries a girl injured in Israeli strikes, into Al Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza City on Monday. — AFP

pivotal to reaching the deal,” the official said, characterising the draft as the outcome of a breakthrough reached in the early hours of Monday.

Israel’s Kan radio, citing an Israeli official, reported on Monday that Israeli and Hamas delegations in Qatar had both received a draft, and

that the Israeli delegation had briefed Israel’s leaders. Israel, Hamas and the foreign ministry of Qatar did not respond to requests for confirmation or comment. Officials on both sides, while stopping short of confirming that a final draft had been reached, described progress at the talks. “The negotiation over some core issues made progress and we are working to conclude what remains soon,” a Hamas official said on Monday, asking not to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said the negotiations were being coordinated between Biden’s and Trump’s teams. “There is progress, it looks much better than previously.” **SEE ALSO P6**

LEBANON PICKS NEW PM

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun on Monday picked international jurist Nawaf Salam to form a government and pull it out of economic crisis. A majority of Lebanese lawmakers endorsed Nawaf Salam, the presiding judge at the ICJ.

6.8 quake prompts Japan tsunami alert

TOKYO: A 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck off southwestern Japan late on Monday, causing small tsunamis in the area but no major damage was reported. The quake was detected around 18 km off the Kyushu region around 9:19 pm, according to the US Geological Survey. The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) initially warned of possible tsunami waves of up to one metre high and urged people

Japan initially warned of possible tsunami waves.

to stay away from coastal waters. However, several smaller

tsunamis of only around 20 centimetres were detected at ports in the region, the weather agency said. Live television feeds on Japanese television showed calm seas, as well as vessels operating normally and traffic running smoothly. Only minor damage occurred, including a broken window at a train station and objects falling off shelves in a few stores, local media reported. — AFP

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



AL SHRAIQI RECEIVES ARAB INTERIOR MINISTERS COUNCIL CHIEF

MUSCAT: Lt Gen Hassan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, on Monday received Dr Mohammed Ali Koman, Secretary-General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed some topics of common interest and discussed means of enhancing cooperation among member states of the Secretariat-General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council. — ONA

OMAN AND CUBA HOLD POLITICAL CONSULTATIONS



The session explored means of promoting the joint cooperation. — ONA

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Cuba held in Muscat on Monday the first round of the political consultations session. During the session, the Omani side was chaired by Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Political Affairs, while Gerardo Peñalver, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba chaired his country’s side. The session explored means of promoting the joint cooperation and the existing relations. It underlined the two countries’ keenness to boost cooperation in all areas. The two sides also discussed a set of regional and international issues. The session was attended by Vladimir Andres Gonzalez, Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba to the Sultanate of Oman and minister plenipotentiary Dr Hanan bint Ibrahim al Shihiyah, Head of America Department at the Foreign Ministry. It was also attended by several officials from both sides. — ONA

Oman and Iran to enhance economic cooperation, boost investment

MUSCAT: Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held a meeting on Monday that brought together members of the Omani-Iranian Business Council and the heads of sectoral committees at the chamber. The two sides discussed efforts to strengthen economic and investment relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran. They also explored ways to develop trade exchange between the two countries and enhance cooperation in key economic sectors, including logistics services. The meeting reviewed the investment opportunities



The Omani-Iranian Business Council held a meeting at the chamber office.

available in both countries and the mechanisms for enhancing mutual benefits from these opportunities

to achieve common interests. It also stressed the importance of boosting public-private partnerships to

implement economic projects that benefit both the economies of Oman and Iran.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) underlined the importance of continuing cooperation between the two countries to achieve their economic aspirations. He emphasised that such meetings are crucial for exchanging ideas, driving progress in joint initiatives, and fostering constructive dialogue to strengthen economic relations between the two sides. The meeting was attended by Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry. — ONA

King of Bahrain’s state visit extension of solid relations

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousof

THE visit of King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, King of the Kingdom of Bahrain, to the Sultanate of Oman at the invitation of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday is a continuation of the approach of brotherhood and solidarity between the two countries that have long civilisations and maritime traditions. Speaking to the Observer, Rudaina bint Amer al Hajriyah, Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of the Omani-Bahraini Friendship Association, said that the visit is an extension of the strong, solid, and deep-rooted relations that extend deep into history. “The bilateral relations of the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain are among the oldest relations that link two countries, since the civilisations of Majan and Dilmun, and are based on a set of foundations and pillars,” said Rudaina. According to her, the foremost of which is the ties of kinship, brotherhood, and love that bind the two brotherly peoples, and derive their strength and continuity from the constants and common denominators

that unite the two countries and the two brotherly peoples. “The bilateral relations are the extrapolation of the keenness of the two countries’ monarchs to develop areas of cooperation between the two countries in all fields.” The Omani-Bahraini relations have witnessed successive developments and qualitative leaps at all levels, reaching the peak of their prosperity at the present time, making them a model to be emulated for international relations, and a unique example of what relations between countries should be. Al Hajri said that the Royal visit comes in a related context of communication between the leaders of the two brotherly countries, and embodies the keenness to continue the existing cooperation between the two countries in various fields including economic, scientific, cultural, health and other fields, and to push it to broader horizons for the benefit of the people of



RUDAINA BINT AMER AL HAJRIYAH

the two countries. Rudaina noted that the existing relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain have been crowned with many successes and that the recent announcement of the Omani-Bahraini Friendship Society came to form a new bridge of love and brotherhood, reflecting the level of cohesion and strong relations between the two brotherly peoples. “The Society will play a role in strengthening bilateral relations through youth, sports, cultural, social, and economic programmes, and seek to increase trade exchange and enhance investment opportunities, tourism, and other areas that support relations and enhance joint cooperation.” This is part of the Society’s objectives, which revolve around developing and strengthening relations between the two countries in the cultural, social, economic, scientific, youth and sports aspects, through organising social meetings, seminars, lectures, art and science exhibitions, publishing in newspapers and magazines, advertisements in radio and television programs, organising press conferences, and coordinating with the relevant authorities in both countries, issuing periodicals and other publications.

NEW SOUTH AFRICA HONORARY CONSUL IN MUSCAT

MUSCAT: Ambassador Najib bin Yahya al Balushi, Head of the Protocol Department, at the Foreign Ministry, officially handed over the consular licence to Lujaina bint Mohsin bin Haider Darwish, appointing her as the Honorary Consul of the Republic of South Africa in Muscat. During the ceremony, Najib bin Yahya extended his best wishes to Lujaina bint Mohsin for the success in her new role, emphasising the importance of her work in strengthening the bilateral relations between Oman and South Africa. He expressed confidence that her efforts would contribute significantly to enhancing cooperation between the two nations. — ONA

ITEC Programme strengthens India-Oman ties

QASIM AL MAASHANI MUSCAT, JAN 13

In a significant stride towards bolstering bilateral relations and fostering mutual growth, India’s Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme awarded training slots to 125 Omani professionals in 2024. A special event held in Muscat celebrated this milestone, underscoring the importance of capacity-building initiatives in strengthening ties between the two nations. The Indian Ambassador to Oman highlighted the programme’s pivotal role in professional and economic collaboration, alongside



Indian Ambassador and Shaikh Faisal al Rawas at the ITEC programme event

dignitaries such as Shaikh Faisal al Rawas, Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI). His presence underscored the programme’s alignment with Oman Vision 2040. Established in 1964, the ITEC programme serves as a cornerstone of India’s development assistance strategy. Offering over 14,000 scholarships annually in diverse fields — agriculture, IT, management, SMEs, and biotechnology — it benefits professionals from partner countries globally. The Indian Ambassador described the programme as “a celebration of one of

the most important bilateral relationships,” emphasising capacity building, development cooperation, and mutual growth. Drawing inspiration from India’s ancient philosophy that views the world as one family, he highlighted the collaborative spirit of the initiative, fostering an enriching exchange of knowledge and experiences. With its emphasis on shared learning and professional networking, the ITEC programme continues to strengthen India-Oman relations, empowering professionals and bridging communities for a brighter, united future.

SHORT TAKES



Sayyid Hamoud holds talks with Dr Mohammed Ali Koman

SAYYID HAMOUD DISCUSSES SECURITY WITH ARAB OFFICIAL

MUSCAT: Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, received in his office on Monday Dr Mohammed Ali Koman, Secretary-General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, who is currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two sides exchanged views on topics scheduled for discussion in the agenda of the upcoming meeting of the Council of Arab Interior Ministers, in addition to reviewing ways to develop joint Arab security cooperation in various security fields. The meeting was attended by Eng Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Interior and Maj Gen Abdullah bin Ali al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations. — ONA

PAKISTANI OFFICIAL VISITS MARITIME SECURITY CENTRE



Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the tactical roles carried out by the centre. — ONA

MUSCAT: Commodore Rashid Mahmood Sheikh, Commander of the Training Mission of “TABUK” and “RAHNAWARD” Ships in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and his accompanying delegation visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC) on Monday. They were greeted upon their arrival at the MSC by the Acting Head of the MSC. Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre to ensure the safety of the Omani maritime environment. They also toured the centre’s facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties. — ONA

Oman to make historic debut at Geneva Invention Expo

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

Oman is set to participate for the first time in the esteemed Geneva International Exhibition of Inventions, which will be held in Geneva from April 9-13. This marks a significant milestone for the Sultanate of Oman as it joins a global platform that brings together over 1,000 innovations from around the world. The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation has selected four exceptional projects to represent Oman at the exhibition, following a meticulous evaluation process held at the Muscat Innovation Complex. The projects were chosen from a pool of 36 submissions, all of which underwent careful scrutiny by a panel of experts. The four projects selected to represent Oman at this prestigious event are: Car Air Conditioner Cleaning and Sterilisation System by Mahmoud bin Mohammed al Hinai Language Project by Lian bint Saeed al Rahbiyah



Four exceptional projects were selected to represent Oman following a meticulous evaluation process.

Mobile Application: Scientific Traveller by Dr Huda bint Ali al Hosniyah Etienne Project by Muayyad bin Sameer al Balushi These projects, which span a variety of fields including technology, health, and environmental solutions, highlight the creativity and innovation present within Oman’s youth. The aim of Oman’s participation is to provide a platform for its innovators to connect with investors, entrepreneurs, and experts from across the globe. This

Summit discusses future of education, technology

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

OMAN marked a significant milestone by hosting the inaugural Innoxera Summit 2025, a global platform dedicated to advancing innovations in education and learning technologies. Held in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE), this landmark event brought together a distinguished assembly of education leaders, tech innovators, and key development companies. The summit, which took place under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education, underscores Oman’s commitment to advancing education through cutting-edge technology, positioning the country as a leader in digital learning in the region. The Innoxera Summit 2025, the largest of its kind in the region, attracted top industry players such as Intel, Microsoft, ALECSO, Omantel, MHD, and the Global Information Technology Company, among others. These global leaders gathered to discuss the transformative role of technology in education and to explore new pathways for integrating advanced digital tools into the learning process. The summit serves as a crucial meeting point for innovators, educators, and decision-makers dedicated to preparing future generations for success in an ever-evolving digital landscape. Eng Mohammed al Madani, CEO of Classera, expressed his pride in sponsoring the event. In his opening speech, Al Madani described the summit as a turning point for digital learning in the region, noting that Classera’s partnership with the MoE exemplifies a global model for collaboration in smart education. He added, “This partnership enables us to empower future generations with the digital tools they need to realise their ambitions, in line with Oman Vision 2040.” Dr Sultan al Kindi, Acting Director-General of Vocational and Technical Education, MoE, emphasised the summit’s significance as a platform for enhancing



The Innoxera Summit discussed the transformative role of technology in education.

The first phase will launch in 140 schools for the 2024-2025 academic year, with further expansion planned for subsequent years. By 2025-2026, the project aims to reach 1,287 schools nationwide, ensuring that Omani students have access to high-quality digital learning environments.

education technology, introducing a range of projects and initiatives that are set to shape the future of learning. One of the major highlights of the summit was the unveiling of the ‘Tamkeen’ project, a groundbreaking platform designed to enhance digital literacy and increase the availability of high-quality Arabic educational content. A collaboration between Omantel, Classera, and Almentor, the Tamkeen

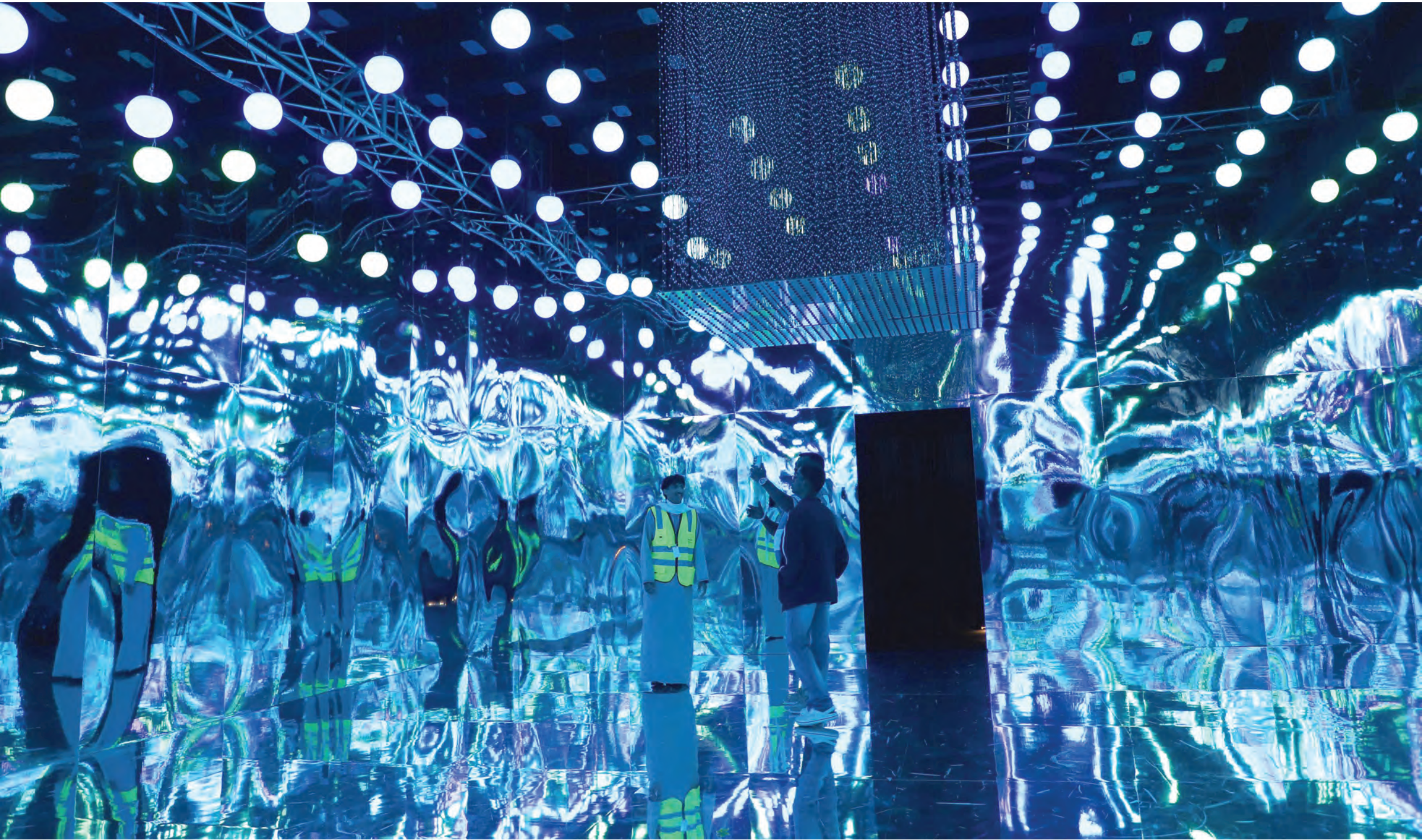
collaboration between the public and private sectors in education and technology. The summit’s success follows a string of global editions held over the past six years, which have continuously brought together a network of education and technology leaders to explore new horizons in the field. The Oman edition of the Innoxera Summit reaffirmed its role as a leader in the field of

project aims to bridge the digital divide and empower Arabic-speaking communities with the tools they need to succeed in the global digital economy. Aligned with Oman Vision 2040, the Tamkeen platform seeks to expand access to educational resources in Arabic across various sectors, supporting the development of a knowledge-based society. Eng Alaa Aldeen bin Abdullah Bait Fadhel, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel, highlighted the project’s significance: “At Omantel, we believe that investing in digital knowledge is essential for building a sustainable future. Through our partnership in the ‘Tamkeen’ project, we aim to promote the Arabic language as a powerful tool for innovation and development, in line with Oman Vision 2040.” Another notable initiative introduced at the summit was the E-Learning Platform project, an ambitious educational reform led by the MoE. Ali al Adi, Director of the E-Learning System and Digital Repository Project, provided an update on the platform’s progress. The project, which will be rolled out in phases, aims to digitally transform education in Oman by integrating advanced educational tools into classrooms across the nation.

BAHLA SPORTS MARCH SHOWCASES CULTURAL RICHES

BAHLA: The Wilayat of Bahla in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate hosted an engaging sports march to introduce its rich tourist, natural, and heritage landmarks. Organised by the Office of the Wali of Bahla in cooperation with the Bahla Charity Team, the event aimed to promote domestic tourism, encourage physical activity, and enhance the cultural identity of the wilayat. The march utilised the cooler winter weather as an opportunity for participants

to explore the wilayat’s attractions, including historical and natural sites. The initiative brought together the Endurance March Team of Bahla Sports Club and the Bahla Equestrian Association, fostering a strong sense of community spirit. Sultan bin Nasser al Nabhani, Head of the Bahla Charity Team, revealed that the first edition of the march witnessed remarkable participation, drawing nearly 8,000 young individuals and 200 women from various governorates. — ONA



Experience life between reality and fantasy

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

FOR the first time in the Sultanate of Oman, the ‘Digital World’ event and the ‘Hybrid Show’ experience combine live show performances with digital broadcasting technologies, offering Muscat Nights visitors a unique blend of traditional live entertainment and modern technological innovations. Technology is advancing at an extraordinary pace, and the entertainment sector is adopting emerging technologies to create innovative visitor experiences. The event occupies a 2,000-square-metre area, guiding festival visitors on

a journey from reality to imagination, allowing them to embark on a technological adventure filled with artificial intelligence. It features nine specially designed rooms, each providing a distinct world to explore. Mohsen al Hajri, CEO of Golden Melodies Company, the organiser of the event, stated that it is accessible to those visiting Al Amerat Park during the festival for a nominal fee of RO 1. The hybrid show includes nine rooms, each offering visitors a unique experience. As guests transition seamlessly from one room to another, families and friends alike immerse themselves in a world that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. The show begins in the reception

room, where a holographic character greets visitors with a warm smile. The virtual character introduces the experience, saying: “Welcome to Liminality. I am your guide on this journey between worlds. But before we begin, let me explain what Liminality means. It is the space between things, the intervals. It is the moment when you cross from one state to another — where boundaries blur and everything seems possible.” Adel al Balushi, Marketing Manager at Golden Melodies, elaborated: “In this exhibition, you will explore two worlds. First, the tangible world, which is the reality you can experience with your senses — a world shaped by gravity, light, and the earth’s terrain.

The hybrid show includes nine rooms, each offering visitors a unique experience. As guests transition from one room to another, families and friends alike immerse themselves in a world that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy

Here, you will find material and tangible things, a world you can see, feel, and understand. The other world is imagination, where reality fades and abstraction begins. In this space, we rely on theories, equations, and concepts that challenge daily experiences. Here, we transcend perception and enter a world where imagination reigns.” The Hybrid Show is a special event that merges live performances with cutting-edge digital technologies, offering visitors an unparalleled experience through digital media, virtual reality, and augmented reality. The Muscat Nights festival has become a distinctive highlight of the capital, Muscat.

SHORT TAKES



Medical team at Khoula Hospital conducted four surgeries to treat wide-neck cerebral aneurysms

KHOULA PERFORMS FOUR ANEURYSM SURGERIES

MUSCAT: A specialised medical team at Khoula Hospital succeeded in conducting four surgeries to treat wide-neck cerebral aneurysms, using modern medical devices as an alternative to traditional complex open surgical procedures.

Dr Ahmed bin Hamoud al Habsi, Neuro-Interventional Radiologist at Khoula Hospital, said that the advanced devices have a variety of advantages, including ease of use and high accuracy in guiding the treatment process and reducing the risks associated with traditional surgical procedures. The devices also eliminate the need to use blood-thinning medications when using stents, said Dr Ahmed, noting that this reduces potential complications.

He pointed out that the new devices fully treat aneurysm in the neck, thus offering an opportunity to treat a wider range of cases of cerebral aneurysms, both haemorrhagic and non-haemorrhagic. He pointed out that the team plans to treat 20 additional cases over the next two years. For his part, Dr Rashid bin Mohammed al Alawi, Director General of Khoula Hospital, described the achievement as an advanced step in providing specialised medical care in line with the latest international standards. — ONA

CONFERENCE ON HEART DISEASES



MUSCAT: C K Birla Group of Hospitals, in collaboration with Muscat Family Physicians' Group and Global Treatment Services, hosted an International Medical Conference on 'Recent Advances in Interventional Cardiology & Cardiac Surgery' on January 10 at City Seasons Hotel in Muscat.

The event featured renowned experts including Dr Hamoud al Kindi, Head of Cardiac Surgery at Royal Hospital, and Dr Manoj Kumar Daga and Dr Joy Shome from B S Birla Heart Hospital, Kolkata.

Key topics discussed included advancements in cardiac surgeries, heart failure treatments, robotic surgery, and non-invasive aortic valve replacements. The conference was attended by 50 leading medical professionals and followed by an interactive session. Dr Hamoud emphasised the importance of cooperation between government and private health sectors in improving healthcare services in Oman.

BAHLA'S CULTURE SHOWCASED AT PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION

BAHLA: The fifth annual photography exhibition 'Sur' was held in the Wilayat of Bahla, bringing together 35 photographers from Bahla and across Oman. The three-day event, organised by the Bahla Photography Team, celebrated the wilayat's heritage and natural beauty through the lens of talented photographers.

The exhibition was inaugurated by Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shammakhi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport,



Communications and Information Technology for Transport.

Visitors were treated to 55 stunning photographs showcasing Bahla's handicrafts, historical landmarks and breathtaking landscapes.

Eng Abdullah bin Said al Rubkhi, Head of the Bahla Photography Team, emphasised the exhibition's role in spotlighting Bahla's cultural and historical significance, including its ancient castle, fortified walls and lush oasis. — ONA

Reem Gazelles back to its home in Empty Quarter

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, JAN 13

THIS week, a group of Reem Gazelles has been successfully relocated to Dhofar as part of a major reintroduction programme aimed at restoring their presence in the Empty Quarter.

The Environment Authority (EA) organised a workshop in the Wilayat of Maqshin, situated in the northeastern corner of Dhofar Governorate, to introduce the community to the resettlement project.

The programme's first phase includes releasing 54 gazelles in Maqshin, a Wilayat chosen for its abundant vegetation and tree cover, making it ideal for monitoring and supporting the gazelles.

The initiative is a critical step in preserving the historical and cultural heritage of Oman, as the Reem Gazelle once roamed these areas freely. The move is also significant in advancing 'Oman Vision' 2040 by promoting ecotourism and ensuring the sustainability of natural resources. The Reem Gazelle, previously vulnerable due to illegal poaching and habitat loss, is now being supported in its natural



Reem Gazelle's reintroduction to the Empty Quarter marks historic conservation effort

The programme's first phase includes releasing 54 gazelles in Maqshin, a Wilayat chosen for its abundant vegetation and tree cover

environment.

Under the auspices of Shaikh Hilal bin Ali al Maamari, Wali of Maqshin, the workshop was attended by key figures including Eng Sulaiman bin Nasser al Akhzami, Director General of Nature Conservation at the Environment Authority, as well as Walis, Majlis Ash'shura members, and local

community leaders.

The workshop not only discussed the history of the Wilayat but also raised awareness about the importance of wildlife conservation and urged local communities to support and protect the wildlife. Future phases will see further releases in the Al Sharqiyah North and Al Wusta governorates.

Sharpshooters show marksmanship at contest

AL AWABI: The traditional weapons shooting competition, held across Oman's governorates, concluded in the Wilayat of Al Awabi, Al Batinah South Governorate. Organised as part of the 'Try South Al Batinah 2025' Festival by the Governor's Office, the three-day event showcased exceptional marksmanship and skill.

The final day saw thrilling qualifiers among the top teams, culminating in the following results:

In the Plate Throwing Competition, the first place went to Nakhal Shadhun Team, second to Shabak Team and third to Bin Musayyib Team.

In the Pioneers competition, the first place went to Sulaiman



Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura, distributed the prizes to winners

bin Khalfan al Hatmi, second place to Saeed bin Juma al Rasbi and the third to Hamid bin Ali

al Jahafi.

In the Juniors competition, the first place was bagged by

Hamoud bin Mohammed al Humaidi, second by Salim bin Khamis al Siyabi and third spot by Mahmoud bin Salim al Darei.

In the Individuals Competition, the first place was bagged by Khaseeb bin Saeed al Siyabi, second spot by Ahmed bin Hamed al Kathiri and the third by Sultan bin Ahmed al Darei.

The event concluded with a ceremony attended by Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura, who crowned the winners. The ceremony was graced by Eng Masoud bin Saeed al Hashimi, Governor of Al Batinah South, and other distinguished officials. — ONA

Omani innovator creates bus safety device to protect students

KHASAB: Driven by the need to prevent tragic school bus incidents, Omani innovator Khalid bin Mohammed al Kamzari has created a groundbreaking monitoring device designed to enhance the safety of students during transit. This cutting-edge invention aims to prevent accidents caused by students being inadvertently left behind in school buses.

Speaking about the innovation,



KHALID BIN MOHAMMED AL KAMZARI

Al Kamzari explained that the device uses an integrated system with advanced sensing and communication technologies.

The system monitors student movement inside the bus and sends instant notifications via phone call and SMS to bus owners if a student is detected inside after the bus is parked. The notifications include critical details such as the bus's location and the time of the alert.

The device has been successfully



The device uses an integrated system with advanced sensing and communication technologies

tested on buses at Qadi Basic Education School in Musandam Governorate. Its capabilities include periodic reporting on potential detention cases, helping bus owners improve safety protocols and reduce risks.

Al Kamzari emphasised that the device offers practical, real-time solutions to protect students and provides peace of mind for parents. By enabling immediate action in emergencies, the innovation significantly reduces response times and enhances overall safety. — ONA

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



South Korean FM Cho Tae-yul (R) and Japanese FM Takeshi Iwaya (L) attend a joint press conference, in Seoul. — AFP

JAPAN’S FM HOLDS TALKS IN SOUTH KOREA

SEOUL: Japan’s foreign minister held talks in South Korea with top officials on Monday as the Asian neighbours seek to strengthen ties before the inauguration of US President-elect Donald Trump. Takeshi Iwaya met counterpart Cho Tae-yul for discussions in the capital Seoul, the South Korean foreign ministry said, with the two later holding a news conference.

Cho said the ministers had “expressed strong concerns over North Korea’s nuclear and missile development”, in particular Pyongyang’s growing military ties with Moscow, including troop deployments. The talks also focused on trilateral cooperation with mutual ally the United States — before Trump, who has previously questioned the US’s Asian security alliances, takes office on January 20. The three nations have bolstered security cooperation in recent years, including sharing information on North Korean missile launches. Tokyo and Seoul’s bilateral ties would also continue to be developed “under any circumstances”, with diplomacy to “remain consistent and unwavered”, he added. — AFP



Commander-in-Chief of Iran’s Army, Abdolrahim Mousavi visits drones during a ceremony of the joining new drones. — AFP

RUSSIA, IRAN TO SIGN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP PACT

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian will hold talks in Russia on January 17 after which they will sign a long-awaited comprehensive strategic partnership pact, the Kremlin said on Monday. The two leaders will discuss options for further expanding ties between Moscow and Tehran, including in the trade and investment, transport and logistics, and humanitarian spheres, the Kremlin said. Putin and Pezeshkian will also talk about regional and international issues, it added.

Russia has cultivated closer ties with Iran and other countries hostile towards the US, such as North Korea, since the start of the Ukraine war. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in October that Moscow and Tehran intended to sign the strategic partnership pact which would include closer defence cooperation. The United States accused Tehran in September of delivering close-range ballistic missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine, and imposed sanctions on ships and companies it said were involved in delivering weapons. — Reuters

OPENING CONNECTIONS

India opens strategic tunnel to China



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a strategic Himalayan road tunnel, pushing access northwards towards border zones with China and Pakistan. The Z-Morh or Sonmarg tunnel, stretching 6.4 kilometres beneath a treacherous mountain pass cut off by snow for between four to six months a year. It helps connect Kashmir with Ladakh, acting as a stepping stone in opening the Srinagar-Leh Highway all year round for supplies. — AFP

NEW LEBANON PRESIDENT STARTS CONSULTATIONS ON NAMING PRIME MINISTER

BEIRUT: New Lebanese President Joseph Aoun began parliamentary consultations on Monday to designate a prime minister tasked with forming a government desperately needed to tackle major challenges in the crisis-hit country. Caretaker premier Najib Mikati and Nawaf Salam have emerged as the frontrunners. The first round of talks ended shortly before midday with 12 independent lawmakers backing Salam, seven picking Mikati, and two others choosing

neither of them. Aoun was then to meet the main parliamentary blocs in the afternoon.

The consultations, a constitutional requirement, follow Aoun’s election last week amid foreign pressure for swift progress. The eastern Mediterranean nation had been without a president since October 2022, run by a caretaker government amid a crushing economic crisis compounded by all-out war. Salam’s backers view the judge and former ambassador

to the United Nations as someone impartial able to carry out much-needed reforms. They see Mikati as part of an old political system that Iran-backed Hezbollah has within its grip.

According to Lebanon’s constitution, the president designates the prime minister after talks with all political parties and lawmakers in parliament. By convention, he chooses the candidate with the most votes during these consultations. — AFP

Final draft of Gaza truce deal presented to parties

MEDIATORS gave Israel and Hamas a final draft of a deal on Monday to end the war in Gaza, an official briefed on the negotiations said, after a midnight “breakthrough” in talks attended by envoys of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The official said the text for a ceasefire and release of captives was presented by Qatar to both sides at talks in Doha, which included the chiefs of Israel’s Mossad and Shin Bet spy agencies and Qatar’s prime minister. The official said Steve Witkoff, who will become US envoy when Trump returns to the US presidency next week, attended the talks. A US source said the outgoing Biden administration’s envoy Brett McGurk was also there. “The next 24 hours will be pivotal to reaching the deal,” the official said, characterising the draft as the outcome of a breakthrough reached in the early hours of Monday.

Israel’s Kan radio, citing an Israeli official, reported on Monday that Israeli and Hamas delegations in Qatar had both received a draft, and that the Israeli delegation had briefed Israel’s leaders. Israel, Hamas and the foreign ministry of Qatar did not respond to requests for confirmation or comment. Officials on both sides, while stopping short of confirming that a final draft had been reached, described progress at the talks. A senior Israeli official said a deal could be sealed within a few days if Hamas replies to a proposal. A Palestinian official close to the talks said information from Doha was “very promising”, adding: “Gaps were being narrowed and there is a big push toward an



Palestinians displaced by conflict sheltering at a school queue to fill up their water containers from a cistern in Khan Yunis. — AFP

Officials on both sides, while stopping short of confirming that a final draft had been reached, described progress at the talks. A senior Israeli official said a deal could be sealed within a few days if Hamas replies to a proposal

agreement if all goes well to the end.” The United States, Qatar and Egypt have worked for more than a year on talks to end the war in Gaza, so far fruitlessly.

Both sides have agreed for months broadly on the principle of halting the fighting in return for the release of captives held by Palestinian detainees held by Israel. However, Hamas has always insisted that the deal must lead to a permanent end to the war and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, while Israel has said it will not end the war until Hamas is dismantled. The official said talks went until the early hours of Monday, with Witkoff pushing the Israeli delegation in Doha and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani pushing Hamas officials to finalise an

agreement. The head of Egypt’s general intelligence agency Hassan Mahmoud Rashad was also in the Qatari capital as part of the talks, the official said.

Trump envoy Witkoff has travelled to Qatar and Israel several times since late November. He was in Doha on Friday and travelled to Israel to meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday before returning to Doha. Biden also spoke by phone with Netanyahu, stressing “the immediate need for a ceasefire in Gaza and return of the hostages with a surge in humanitarian aid enabled by a stoppage in the fighting under the deal,” the White House said.

Bloodshed continued in Gaza on Monday, with Israeli military strikes killing at least 21 people, medics said. — Reuters



CELEBRATIONS IN SUDAN’S WAD MADANI

WAD MADANI: Civilians and soldiers celebrated in Wad Madani, the capital of Sudan’s El Gezira state, after it was recaptured by the Sudanese army from the paramilitary Rapid Support Services, marking a possible turning point in a devastating near two-year civil war. The army’s ability to regain full control of the state would be pivotal in its attempts to choke the RSF’s supply lines to Khartoum and the army-controlled eastern half of the country.

The swift takeover comes after weeks of advances by the army in surrounding villages, equipped in recent months with fresh armaments and new recruits to allied forces. — Reuters

CONTESTED POLL RESULTS

Mozambique opens parliament amid protest



Mozambique swore in its new parliament with the streets of the capital deserted after the opposition leader called for a strike to protest the result of highly disputed elections. Two opposition parties boycotted the opening ceremony, saying they did not accept October election, while the incoming president, Daniel Chapo, called for unity after months of deadly unrest. Police blocked main roads to the area during the ceremony. — AFP

NATIONAL CALL

Philippine sect rallies over VP impeachment



More than a million members of an influential sect gathered in the Philippine capital opposing steps to unseat Vice President Sara Duterte. Crowds wearing white shirts flocked to Manila’s Quirino Grandstand for the “national rally for peace”, organised by Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), or Church of Christ. The powerful sect opposes moves to impeach Duterte, a former ally of President Ferdinand Marcos, in the House of Representatives. — AFP

JOINTROADMAP



Head of Austria's Freedom Party Herbert Kickl and the head of People's Party Christian Stocker address the media in Vienna. — Reuters

AUSTRIAN FAR RIGHT AND CONSERVATIVES REACH BUDGET DEAL

VIENNA: Austria's far-right Freedom Party and the conservative People's Party said that after three days of coalition talks they had reached a deal on bringing the budget deficit back within the European Union's limit. Freedom Party (FPO) came first in a parliamentary election in September with about 29 per cent of the vote but was not tasked with forming a government until a centrist attempt to do so without the FPO collapsed a week ago. The first order of business in its coalition talks with the People's Party (OVP) was how to bring the budget deficit back within the EU limit of 3 per cent of economic output. "We have taken a fundamental decision and developed a joint roadmap to avert an EU excessive deficit procedure against Austria," FPO leader Herbert Kickl said in a statement after a press conference with OVP leader Christian Stocker. Weak growth in the economies of important trading partners helped push Austria into a second year of recession last year, denting the country's tax take. — Reuters

GERMANY CONTENTS ELECTIONS



Election billboards of Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) featuring German Federal Chancellor and candidate Olaf Scholz (L) and Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) party featuring its leader and candidate Friedrich Merz are pictured in Luenen, western Germany, prior to a public discussion in the town hall with Chancellor Scholz. — AFP

SPAIN URGES 'PEACEFUL' SOLUTION TO VENEZUELA CRISIS

MADRID: Spain's foreign minister on Monday called for a "democratic and peaceful" solution to Venezuela's "crisis", days after Nicolas Maduro was sworn in for a third term as president. "There is clearly a serious crisis in Venezuela, we must unite Venezuelans and help them reach a political, negotiated, democratic and peaceful solution," Jose Manuel Albares told public broadcaster TVE. Maduro was sworn in on Friday after claiming victory in an election on July 28

last year. The US and much of Latin America recognise opposition leader Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia as the legitimate winner and have accused Maduro of staging a coup. Relations between Spain and its former colony have been tense for months. A Spanish minister called the Maduro government a dictatorship in September, prompting Venezuela to recall its Madrid ambassador. Venezuela was also angered when Spain decided to give asylum to Gonzalez Urrutia in

September, and has accused Madrid of interfering in its affairs. Albares said on Monday that Spain did not recognise the legitimacy of the July vote but wanted to maintain a "permanent dialogue with the Venezuelan government and the opposition". Venezuela's National Electoral Council said Maduro won 52 per cent of the vote, but it did not publish the exact tallies. The opposition, which has published its tallies, claims that Urrutia secured over 67 per cent of the vote. — AFP

Russia: Ukraine targeted gas pipeline to Türkiye

RUSSIA accused Ukraine on Monday of launching a drone attack on the infrastructure of a major gas pipeline that carries Russian supplies to Europe via Türkiye. The allegation comes amid an escalating energy row between the two countries, almost three years after Russia launched its full-scale military offensive. Kyiv halted the transit of Russian gas via Ukraine on January 1 — ending decades of energy cooperation that had brought billions of dollars to both countries — in a bid to cut off revenue for Moscow's army. The United States last week rolled out fresh sanctions on Russia's oil sector.

The Russian defence ministry said Ukraine had fired nine attack drones on Saturday at a gas compressor station in the village of Gai-Kodzor, near Russia's southern coast on the Black Sea. The site is across from the annexed Crimean peninsula —heavily targeted by Kyiv throughout the three-year conflict. It said the facility was part of the TurkStream pipeline and accused Ukraine of trying to "cut off gas supplies to European countries". "All the drones were shot down," the defence ministry said in a statement published on Monday on its Telegram channel. "As a result of falling fragments of one drone, a building and equipment of a gas measuring station suffered minor damage," it added, saying there was no disruption to supply and the facility was working as normal. TurkStream runs for 930 kilometres under the Black Sea from the Russian resort city of Anapa to Kiyikoy in northwestern Türkiye, before connecting to overground pipelines that run up through the Balkans to Europe.

After the claimed attack, EU member Hungary, which receives Russian gas via the route, called on its "security and operability" to be "respected by all". "The security of energy supply is a sovereignty issue, so any action that threatens the security of our energy supply must be seen as an attack on sovereignty," Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said. Austria and Slovakia had contracts for Russian gas via the now-cancelled Ukrainian transit route, with both countries saying they



Sappers carry an unexploded shell as they inspect an area for mines near the town of Chasiv Yar in Donetsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters

had secured alternative supplies. The Kremlin on Monday also accused the United States of "destabilising" the world energy market through fresh sanctions on Russian oil producers. The United States and Britain on Friday announced sanctions against Russia's energy sector, including oil giant Gazprom Neft and 180 ships it says are part of Moscow's "shadow fleet", just days before outgoing President Joe Biden leaves office. "Such decisions cannot but lead to a certain destabilisation of the global energy market," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. The 27-member EU has been reducing its dependence on Russian gas since Moscow launched its full-scale military offensive on Ukraine in February 2022. Despite imports via pipeline having fallen, several European countries have increased their purchases of

Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG), which is transported by sea. A delegation from the country was in Moscow on Monday, a day after Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico of lying and arrogance over the transit dispute. On the battlefield, Russia claimed its forces had captured the village of Pishchane, southwest of the Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk, which Moscow is pressing to capture. Both sides are looking to secure the upper hand in the fighting ahead of US president-elect Donald Trump returning to office next week. The Kremlin on Monday said there were no "substantive preparations" for a meeting between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, a week after Trump said such a meeting was being arranged. — AFP

Death toll from Los Angeles fires rises as dangerous winds loom

LOS ANGELES: Firefighters were battling massive wildfires on Monday that have ravaged Los Angeles and killed at least 24 people, with officials warning of incoming dangerous winds that could whip up the blazes further. The fires ripped through the United States' second-largest city for the seventh day, reducing whole communities to scorched rubble and leaving thousands without homes. Massive firefighting efforts have stanchied the spread of the Palisades Fire, which was looming toward upscale Brentwood and the densely populated San Fernando Valley. But conditions are set to dramatically worsen, with "extreme fire behavior and life threatening conditions" over the coming days. Winds up to 110 kilometers per hour mean a "particularly dangerous situation" will be declared from Tuesday, said National Weather Service meteorologist Rose

Schoenfeld. Those gusts could fan flames and whip up embers from existing burn zones into new areas, firefighters warned. Los Angeles County Fire Department chief Anthony Marrone said his department had received resources including dozens of new water trucks and firefighters from far afield and was primed to face the renewed threat. There was frustration for evacuees who were told they would not be returning home until at least Thursday when winds subside. Some have queued for hours in the hope of getting back to homes they fled to pick up medication or a change of clothes. But Sheriff Robert Luna said escorts into those areas were being suspended on Sunday because of the winds and dangerous conditions among the wreckage, as well as the need to retrieve victims' bodies. Teams with cadaver dogs were carrying out grid searches



Firefighters work to clear a firebreak on a hillside covered with retardant as the Palisades Fire, burns in Mandeville Canyon, Los Angeles. — Reuters

with the grim expectation that the confirmed death toll would rise. Several more arrests of looters were

made, including one burglar who had dressed as a firefighter to steal from homes. The Palisades Fire

has consumed 23,700 acres (9,500 hectares) and was just 13 per cent contained. Video footage showed "fire tornadoes", red-hot spirals that occur when a blaze is so intense it creates its own weather system. But containment of the 14,000-acre Eaton Fire in Altadena had improved, figures showed, with 27 per cent of its perimeter controlled. The County of Los Angeles Medical Examiner published a list of fatalities without giving details of any identities. Eight of the dead were found in the Palisades Fire zone, and 16 in the Eaton Fire zone, the document said. The total number of residents under evacuation orders dropped to around 100,000, from a peak of almost 180,000. President-elect Donald Trump has accused officials of incompetence, even though a heroic firefighting operation has operated 24/7 since the first flames erupted. — AFP

OPINION

Oman and Bahrain seek to cement the aged relationship



The first visit of a head of state in 2025 to the Sultanate of Oman by King Hamad bin Issa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain on Tuesday underlines the deep-rooted ties between these two GCC countries.

It may be noted that His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s visit to the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2022 saw the signing of several agreements.

That visit witnessed the signing of 24 agreements in the fields of security, maritime transport, freedom of maritime navigation, the development of port transport, cooperation between the Bahrain Centre for Strategic, International, and Energy Studies and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the field of studies and research, in addition to the agreement to establish an Oman-Bahrain holding company in investment fields.

The agreement granted the Sultanate of Oman the right to sovereignty over the information of its subscribers in the provided electronic services and cloud computing centres located in the Kingdom of Bahrain and granted the Sultanate of Oman the status

of an accredited partner of the Goods At Consolidator (GAC) for Freight Services.

The Joint Ministerial Committee between the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman was established in 1992 to activate all initiatives and mutual proposals between the governments of the two countries and to frame them in a package of agreements, memoranda of understanding, and joint work programmes that cover various important sectors.

The Joint Business Council between the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the two countries, as well as the Bahraini-Omani Friendship Society, play complementary coordination roles to enhance bilateral cooperation and work to develop it in a way that meets common aspirations.

Tuesday’s visit of the Bahraini King will seek to achieve further cooperation, integration, and harmony in all spheres in light of the two countries’ common visions, namely Oman Vision 2040 and Bahrain Vision 2030. According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the

Today’s visit of the Bahraini King will seek to achieve further cooperation, integration, and harmony in all spheres in light of the two countries’ common visions, namely Oman Vision 2040 and Bahrain Vision 2030.

volume of trade exchange between Oman and Bahrain was RO 247.1 million in 2023 and around RO 131.1 million in the nine months of 2024.

The Omani exports to the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2023 were about RO 41.6 million. The number of companies with Bahraini shares increased by the end of October 2024 to 315 from 296 in 2023.

Of these, Bahraini investment in these companies was RO 27.7 million or 80.1 per cent of the total invested capital.

This visit, the ambassador affirmed, will constitute a milestone for the fraternal relationship and bilateral cooperation under the farsighted vision of the two leaderships.

The trade and economic relationship between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain is an old relationship that extends back to the port of Samharam and Dilmun. The Oman-Bahrain Friendship Association was established to build a new bridge of affinity, reflecting the level of harmony and fraternal relations binding the two countries’ peoples.

STARMER OUTLINES PLAN TO MAKE UK WORLD LEADER IN AI

ANDREW MACASKILL

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer says he wants the UK to become the world leader for artificial intelligence, promising to create special zones for data centres and encouraging more graduates to study technology-focused courses.

Starmer will say he wants to put AI at the heart of his ambition to grow the economy, while the government will claim if the technology is fully adopted it could increase productivity by 1.5 per cent a year, worth an extra \$57 billion, annually over a decade.

Ahead of a speech in London by Starmer on AI, the government said it will adopt all the 50 recommendations set out in the report “AI Opportunities Action Plan” by venture capitalist Matt Clifford, submitted to the government last year.

This includes making it easier to build data centres by accelerating planning permission and giving them energy connections. The first such centre will be built in Culham, Oxfordshire, home to Britain’s Atomic Energy Authority.

“Our plan will make Britain the world leader,” Starmer was quoted as saying in a statement issued by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

“That means more jobs and investment in the UK, more money in people’s pockets.”

Countries across the world are competing to turn their countries into AI hubs, while balancing the need for some restrictions on the technology.

Britain is the third-largest AI market in the world behind the US and China, when measured by indicators such as investment and patents, according to Stanford University.

However, the Labour government’s decision to set out the highest tax-raising budget since 1993 has damaged some business confidence and the Bank of England estimated last month that the economy did not grow in the last quarter.

Starmer will also say that AI has the power to transform the lives of people, including speeding up planning consultations, helping small businesses and driving down admin for teachers so they can concentrate on teaching.

“And in a world of fierce competition, we cannot stand by,” he will say. “We must move fast and take action.”

Meanwhile, half the public in the United Kingdom think that US-based entrepreneur Elon Musk is having a negative impact on British politics following his slew of attacks on Starmer and other figures in the country’s ruling Labour Party. The South African-born billionaire has spent much of the past week using his social media platform X to attack the prime minister over his opposition to another national inquiry into grooming gangs.

In other posts he has expressed support for the populist Reform UK party, but called for its leader Nigel Farage to step aside and asked his 212 million followers whether the US should “liberate” the UK from what he called its “tyrannical government.”

Musk has also been reported to be looking into ways to help remove the prime minister from office and was previously said to be considering a large donation to Reform UK, something senior figures in the party have now dismissed. — Reuters

How linguistic landscapes can create an identity

THE recent Royal Directive to name the important national roads of Oman with significant personalities of Oman’s history gives an important insight into the role of appropriately naming public infrastructure projects such as roads to create national identity.

That names are important is generally known.

Just how important is not usually considered, except by linguistics and scholars in the Humanities. One such scholar, Moaz Azaryahu states that ‘street names conflate urban space and the symbolic realm of cultural signification’. Simply put, road and street signs reflect the cultural importance of the persons with whom it is associated, and becomes an intangible sign of national pride.

Names are important ways in which history is understood and shared. They promote recognition by being used in everyday situations. As an example of the current names proposed: the recollection span will be immediate when they are used in multiple spheres like maps, books, oral conversations and of course, the ubiquitous digital sphere and social media.

Aligning a frequently used public space with historically significant figures unites people with a common knowledge and purpose. It gives a sense of lineage to young students who feel pride in the knowledge of a shared past. It also gives a sense of design and purpose to a nation which is proud of its historical roots.

Such endeavours are common across the world. In the postcolonial context, countries in Asia and Africa undertook major changes in names of localities, buildings and public structures like airports to reflect the new identities of the countries as they emerged from the shadows of empire. Similarly, buildings, roads and other structures are often renamed to showcase the changing demographics and global realities of the 21st century. This is usually done by signposting in more than one dominant language to accommodate and facilitate tourism and business.

A recognition of the past is an equally relevant move to place a nation within the framework of a continuing tradition. This allows citizenry and visitors to place a nation firmly within a historical



The extent to which we are rooted in the culture and knowledge of the past reflects the surety with which the future is approached



SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The writer is Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

continuum. It also allows for a broader understanding of a nation within the framework of a valiant past instead of being viewed as a static entity.

As we all know, our past determines our future. The extent to which we are rooted in the culture and knowledge of the past reflects the surety with which the future is approached. Celebrating one’s roots is thus an important way of acknowledging the glories of the past which will pave the way for the ambitions of the future.

Invoking the great people of Oman’s past centres their contribution to the civilisational glories that are central to Oman’s history. They are also ways in which individual contributions of great national leaders are understood as part of a larger vision that is shared by the community.

We often ignore, or are unaware of the importance of the everyday aspects of our lives: the areas where we live, the signs which inform us of these areas, and the roads on which

we drive. These are a part of our daily lives, often invoked without thought. This is exactly why they matter.

National identity is created in many ways. There are tangible symbols like national flags and symbols, like the Khanjar, for instance, in Oman. But identity is also created in intangible ways through songs, traditions or rituals which are handed down through the generations. Street names are such examples as well. They add to national identity and pride, as well as show the path to understanding the past.

Language is always around us, in ways that we may not be aware. But that is exactly the importance of names — we invoke them when we may not be aware, but they have a recollection that is beyond that of history books.

Naming streets after great Omani rulers is one of the ways in which history will be imparted in a shared manner. It is also a way in which the past indicates the path to the future.

Let’s coexist with the nature



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

The writer is senior editor of Observer

REEM gazelles are an inspiration in Arabic poetry. They are graceful and quick, with eyes that capture your breath. No wonder so many poets bring them into their lines and verses. They like to be in herds because it keeps them protected. However, poaching and capturing them have threatened the population of sand gazelles. This week, we are going to witness something wonderful — the reintroduction of 54 sand gazelles into the Empty Quarter from the Wilayat of Maqshin. The desert is their natural environment, their playground. However, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has given them the status of Vulnerable. Their legs are slim and seem tender, but watch them go, and you will notice they run into the horizon in a flash. Climate change and habitat loss have also impacted their population. It is known that if a person manages to obtain a gazelle at a young age, they can be tamed, which is one of the reasons people want to capture them. Hunting was common before the 1970s, but today, there is greater awareness about the importance of preserving wildlife. They are

a heritage, and nature evolves too, adapting to changes to protect them. It was fascinating to read this report that came out in the early 2000s. In 2006, Science Daily reported: “A fascinating new study from the July/August issue of Physiological and Biochemical Zoology reveals that gazelles in the deserts of Saudi Arabia have evolved the ability to shrink oxygen-demanding organs such as the liver and heart, allowing them to breathe less.” Maybe humans have been adapting too, using their minds to create devices to beat the heat. Of course, we are creatures of habit and inclined to follow trends. Oman has beautiful wadis, some of which may not have pools of water but are rich in greenery. Walking through one such scenic spot, it was a delight to see families of wild donkeys grazing along but pausing to watch the intruder who was enjoying the walk and photography. Suddenly, there was some quick movement in the bush. For the first time, I saw a sand partridge with its family. The sand partridge was gathering its family and rushing off. The guide explained they are the first to leave a site if they spot anyone. They walked away quickly.

Climate change and habitat loss have also impacted their population. And it is known that if a person manages to obtain a gazelle at a young age, they can be tamed

Now, what does the IUCN say about the sand partridge? “The sand partridge is listed as ‘Least Concern’ by the IUCN. The sand partridge has a large range and is deemed common and stable in the regions it resides in.” The sand partridge can lay anywhere from 5 to 14 eggs. Even though they are referred to as game birds, they have managed to sustain their population. It is indeed beautiful to coexist. These animals and birds were not in cages or behind fences. Instantly, I felt admiration for the people who live in this area. They have been happily coexisting, with children respecting the birds and animals. No one chases or teases them. This stretch of wadi has a natural road that runs through it, yet the partridges walked comfortably with their families. It was such a pretty sight that the camera was all but forgotten. Some moments and scenes are just for the soul. So this month, once again, the Empty Quarter will witness the grazing of the Reem gazelles. Later, more families will be released in Rimal Al Sharqiya. It is indeed a beautiful moment to cherish.

TRUMP’S ‘CROWD’ OBSESSION TO BE TESTED AT INAUGURATION

TIM REID

On the morning after Donald Trump’s first inauguration in January 2017, acting National Park Service director Mike Reynolds was at home preparing breakfast when he received a call from the new president. Trump, a Republican, was unhappy with photographs published by media outlets suggesting his inauguration crowd in Washington’s National Mall was smaller than the one that had gathered for former Democratic President Barack Obama’s swearing-in ceremony in 2009, according to two people familiar with details of the call.

Trump ordered Reynolds and the Park Service - which oversees the National Mall — to provide new images from its own photos taken that day to correct the perception that Trump’s inaugural crowd was smaller than Obama’s. The NPS later forwarded new photos to the White House. With President-elect Trump’s second inauguration a week away and his fixation with attendance numbers at his public events undiminished, crowd size is going to be front and centre again for Trump, media outlets and crowd-size experts monitoring the ceremony. One person familiar with thinking inside the Park Service said there are concerns that the agency might again be caught in the middle of an inauguration crowd-size controversy, should its images of the number of attendees on the National Mall on January 20 appear unflattering to Trump.

Rachel Reisner, the Trump inaugural committee’s communications director, did not address questions about how many people they expected in the National Mall next week.

“The team is putting the finishing touches together for what will be an unforgettable string of events. The Inaugural events will draw supporters, industry leaders, and diplomats of all backgrounds to Washington DC,” Reisner said in a statement.

The NPS stopped giving crowd-size estimates for events on the Mall in 1996, after facing a lawsuit over its estimate for the Million Man March, a 1995 political protest.

The Park Service will be taking photographs of next Monday’s event, although not for crowd size estimates.

Media outlets including Reuters have also received permission to take photos from the top of the 555-foot-high Washington Monument, in the centre of the Mall, which will give an overview of the entire inaugural crowd.

A Reuters photo from atop the Washington Monument at Trump’s first inauguration was one of the key images that appeared to show fewer people in attendance that day than at Obama’s first inauguration. Crowd-size experts estimate the number of people on the National Mall for Obama’s first inauguration was between 800,000 and 1 million. Trump drew about a third of that total in 2017, they say. Democratic President Joe Biden’s 2021 inauguration was a much smaller event as it took place amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Crowd size was an ongoing preoccupation for Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign. He repeatedly said his crowds were larger than those of his Democratic opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris. — Reuters

Sleeping in storms...

THE years 2020-2024 are ones that many of us will remember for a lifetime - years that changed everything. The global Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting economic collapse reshaped our lives in ways we could never have predicted. They were years filled with uncertainty, fear, and isolation, but they also sparked moments of profound reflection and transformation. For me personally, these years were marked by many accolades, but also by many challenges — both personal and professional — all of which held glimpses of silver linings.

In the midst of these struggles, I found myself reflecting on a powerful lesson I had learned years ago from Mitch Albom’s book Have a Little Faith: A True Story (2009). The lesson about “sleeping in storms” stayed vivid in my mind as the world grappled with the chaos of 2020-2024. The story tells of a wealthy landowner who hires a man with only one qualification — his ability to “sleep in storms.”

The man’s calmness and poise in the face of danger become the key to survival, offering a powerful metaphor for navigating life’s most challenging times. The calmness is tested a few weeks later when a mighty storm hits. The landowner gets up in a panic, while the hired man remains undisturbed.

The owner checks the animals, the wheat bales, the grain. The animals are safe; the wheat, secure; the grain, dry. Everything is safe and secure. In that moment, he realises the true meaning of the phrase: The man who can sleep in a storm is someone who is well-prepared and trusts that all will be well, even when the world around them is chaotic.

The moral of the story is this: If you speak the truth, practice compassion — for yourself and others — honour and love those who are close to you, and act in alignment with your deepest faith and values while respecting the differences in others, then when it is time for you to face challenges (or when it is time to leave the world), you will have no regrets, no remorse, and no unfinished business.

This is the essence of living a life without fear, with courage and integrity, knowing you have done your best to navigate the complexities of existence in a way that brings peace to your heart and those around you.



The global Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting economic collapse reshaped our lives in ways we could never have predicted.



DR NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

The writer is Associate Professor, Sultan Qaboos University

It means living authentically, standing firm in your convictions, but also remaining open to growth and understanding. The life you lead, when guided by these principles, will be one where the weight of the world’s challenges feels lighter because you are grounded in what truly matters.

That is my wish for all of you in 2025: a year where you embrace the path of righteousness — not in the sense of perfection, but in the sense of intentionality and mindful action. A year full of the right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration - the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhist teachings, which, when practiced, lead to the cessation of suffering.

These eight components are not simply a set of ideals - they are practical tools that, when woven into the fabric of daily life, allow us to rise above suffering and find balance amidst chaos.

So, as you move forward into 2025, I hope you do so with the confidence that, by living in accordance with these principles, you will be equipped to face any storm that may come your way.

When you embrace this path, you can meet life’s challenges with calm and clarity, knowing that you are grounded in the values that will sustain you.

And when the inevitable storms hit, just like me, you too will find peace and stillness, able to sleep through them, knowing that you are prepared — no matter what comes.

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



WTT CONTENDER MUSCAT 2025 ACTION BEGINS TODAY

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

The main draw competitions will begin on Tuesday at the WTT Contender Muscat 2025, as top-ranking players take to the tables accompanied by some of the most exciting breakout talents of the WTT Series. World No. 3 Japan’s Tomokazu Harimoto will take on Iran’s Navid Shamas in the opening match for the last 32 round, while Simon Gauzy from France will play against Alvaro Robles from Spain in another tight encounter. Nigerian Quadari Aruna will meet Yan-Cheng Huang from Chinese Taipei.

Indian paddler Harmeet Desai will seek a slot in the last 16 round when he faces Wong Chun Ting from Hong Kong in a strong match. This round will also feature other top seeds, including Germany’s Dimitrij Ovtcharov, Nigerian Quadari Aruna, and China’s Xiang Peng. Top women seeds include Japan’s Satsuki Odo, Brazil’s Bruna Takahashi, and France’s Prithika Pavade. In the women’s doubles, Czech pair Sabina and Izabela defeated Hong Kong’s Su Tsz and Doo Hoi 3-1 to secure a slot in the main draw. France’s Charlotte and Leana beat Sarvinoz (Kosovo) and Andrea (Czech) 3-0.

Chinese paddlers Shi Hunyao and Wang Xiaotong beat Katarzyna and Zuzanna (Poland) 3-0, while Hong Kong’s Kong Tsz Lam and Lee Hoi Man blanked Sweden’s Filippa Bergand and Christina 3-1. Hong Kong paddler Kua Min Ho said that his participation at the WTT Contender Muscat is a significant opportunity to enhance his skills and compete against top players from around the globe.

“These events play a pivotal role in nurturing young players and opening new horizons for them. Participating in this championship represents a great challenge and a great opportunity to broaden my experience in the game by competing with outstanding players from different countries. My goal is not only to achieve good results but also to benefit from the overall experience, identify my strengths, and work on improving my weaknesses.”

On the other hand, Chinese player Xu Su Yu said her preparation for this championship has been intense.

“I am continuously working on developing my technical and physical skills. This tournament presents unique challenges, and I see it as a fantastic opportunity to measure the progress I have made and assess my ability to face players with diverse experiences and playing styles.”



Seeb, Dhofar clash for Oman Super Cup today

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

ALL eyes of Omani football fans are on the Rustaq Sports Complex on Tuesday, where the Oman Super Cup final will be held between Seeb Club, the Oman Professional League champions, and Dhofar Club, the winners of His Majesty the Sultan’s Cup.

The match will take place under the auspices of Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South. Seeb Club approaches the match with high ambitions to secure their first title of the season, buoyed by a streak of positive results.

The team have played 11 matches without defeat, drawing only once. Coach Nikola Djurovic emphasised during the press conference that the match is a one-off championship open to all possibilities, stressing its importance and the team's determination to win. Djurovic confirmed that Seeb are fully prepared for the match.

The coach added that Seeb are not facing any significant absences, with both Amjad al Harthy and Ahmed al Khamisi available for the final, further strengthening the team for this decisive clash. Seeb player Omar al Maliki acknowledged the difficulty of the match against an experienced and prestigious opponent like Dhofar, emphasising the importance of mental focus and thorough preparation.

He highlighted the team’s aim to build on last season’s efforts and secure a new title. Winning the Super Cup is one of the team’s primary goals this season, alongside competing for league and cup titles. Al Maliki concluded by noting that the match will be highly anticipated by fans of both teams, which increases the players’ motivation to deliver their best performance and claim the title. On the other hand, Dhofar Club, currently competing in the First Division, seek to prove their worth and display their strength. Dhofar have played 17 matches this season, winning 10, drawing 4 and losing 3.



During the press conference, coach Musabeh Hashel affirmed the team’s readiness for the clash, noting that there are no injuries among the players. He acknowledged the strength of their opponent, which boasts exceptional players and technical stability, but expressed confidence in Dhofar’s ability to secure victory.

The coach stressed the importance of small details in deciding such matches, emphasising that individual duels on the pitch would play a crucial role in determining the winner. “This will be a significant encounter, perhaps our best this season.”

He also highlighted Dhofar’s prestigious status as a club that consistently competes for championships, reflecting its history and reputation. Meanwhile, player Hamad al Habsi acknowledged the challenges posed by the match, pointing out the balance between the two teams based on their previous encounters.

Al Habsi expressed optimism for a positive outcome despite the difficulties, explaining that the team had played only one friendly match due to circumstances, but it was sufficient to prepare for the final. He added, “We have prepared well for the match, focusing on mental aspects to deliver the best performance.”

Oman Sail to host IODA Optimist Championship

MUSCAT: Oman Sail has been chosen to host the 2025 IODA Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship, to be organised in collaboration with the Oman Marine Sports Committee and International Optimist Dinghy Association (IODA).

The event is scheduled to take place from October 25 to November 1, at Oman Sail’s Mussanah Sailing School and will welcome sailors from across Asia and Oceania to the Sultanate of Oman for a week of high-level competitive sailing.

The Mussanah Sailing School was designated a Category A High Performance Centre by the Asian Sailing Federation (ASAF) earlier this year, signifying the facility’s capability to host international regattas, training and development clinics, and local, regional and national sailing events.

The venue has built a long history of hosting impressive sailing events, including the 2021 Youth Sailing World Championship, the 2021 49er, 49erFX and Nacra 17



World Championships, and 13 editions of the annual Mussanah Race Week, amongst others.

This will also be the second time Mussanah has hosted the IODA Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship following the successful staging of the event in 2019, where 141 sailors from 21 nations participated. Dr

Khamis bin Salim al Jabri, Oman Sail CEO, said, “It is a great honour for Oman Sail to be chosen to host the 2025 IODA Asian and Oceanian Championships for the second time.

Our Mussanah Sailing School has become an important regional hub for sailing, not just for our own teams but also as a world-class

competition venue, and its status was recently reinforced by the Asian Sailing Federation with our sailing school being recognised as a Category A High Performance Centre.” He added, “We look forward to welcoming the best Optimist sailors from across both regions to Oman once more, sharing our unique hospitality and culture, and providing a world-class venue in which to make lifelong connections and take the next step in their flourishing sailing careers.”

Oman Sail’s Optimist team recently competed in the 2024 edition of the IODA Optimist Asian & Oceanian Championship in Hong Kong, China, where all five of the sailors secured top-half finishes in their fleets. Tamim al Balushi finished 10th overall in the Gold Fleet.

Teammate Hasan al Wahaibi also performed very well, finishing in 13th place overall, while Firas al Nabhani and Khamis al Mashaikhi finished 28th and 40th respectively, and Hadeel al Mushaifri finished 41st in the women’s competition Silver Fleet.

SHORT TAKES



STRONG START TO TENNIS CHAMPIONSHIP

The first day of the Asian and International U-14 Tennis Championship and the West and Central Asia Regional Qualifiers, organized by the Oman Tennis Association, witnessed strong competition among players. The tournament is being held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher, with the participation of 45 men and women from 13 countries competing to earn international ranking points.

The first day's results included a victory for the Kazakh player over Bahrain's Mohammed Nasser 6-3 and 4-3. Oman's Moataz al Mazroui advanced to the second round of the tournament. Bahraini player Ali al Khayyat defeated Kazakh player Akmad 6-4, 6-3, while Kuwaiti player Saud al Sabah triumphed over Qatar's Abdulrahman al Naimi 6-1 and 6-4.

In the girls' competition, Lebanon's Lina secured a dominant victory over Bahrain's Lara Basel 6-0 and 6-0. Oman's Azan al Busaidi lost to Yemen's Mohammed al Awadi 6-3, 6-2. Syrian player Karim defeated Jordan's Omar Istambouli in one of the tournament's standout matches 6-3, 4-6 and 6-2.

The tournament's chief referee, Bahraini Ahmed al Hawaj, expressed his satisfaction with the excellent organisation of the championship. He praised the OTA for their thorough preparations, highlighting the importance of this event for young players striving to earn international ranking points through two key tournaments. These competitions are crucial for developing future tennis talents in Asia.

Al Hawaj noted that the association successfully provided all necessary support for the participating delegations and players. Unlike in many countries where accommodations are typically managed by hotels, Oman has showcased a fully Omani team managing this tournament, reflecting the impressive capabilities and expertise of the association in organising such events.

Regarding the technical aspects, Al Hawaj highlighted the outstanding performance of several players, predicting a promising future for them. He also expects the competition to become more intense in the coming days as players fully adapt to the tournament atmosphere. Most participants have been well-prepared technically, which reflects the federations' commitment to nurturing their players. Both the International and Asian Tennis Federations aim to develop such talents to shape the future of tennis.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic reacts during his first round. — Reuters

Djokovic joins Alcaraz and Sinner in second round

NOVAK DJOKOVIC survived a scare in his quest for tennis history before following Carlos Alcaraz and defending champion Jannik Sinner into the second round of the Australian Open on Monday.

But Greek former finalist Stefanos Tsitsipas and home favourite Nick Kyrgios both fell at the first hurdle, with the combustible Australian going out swearing and in pain.

In the women's draw, Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff powered through with minimum fuss as they launched their bids to dethrone two-time defending champion Aryna Sabalenka.

Another winner was two-time Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka, who defeated France's Caroline Garcia 6-3, 3-6, 6-3.

On a blockbuster second day in Melbourne, Djokovic lost the first set to 107th-ranked American Nishesh Basavareddy in the prime-time evening match on Rod Laver Arena.

But the Serbian great, hoping to roll back the years and win an 11th Australian Open and record 25th Grand Slam singles title, recovered to ease through 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-2.

In front of new coach and former rival Andy Murray, Djokovic struggled to raise a smile in the immediate aftermath.

"At the end it was great but I think he was the better player for a set and a half," said the 37-year-old.

Italian world number one Sinner was warmly welcomed on Rod Laver Arena before defeating Chile's Nicolas Jarry 7-6

(7/2), 7-6 (7/5), 6-1.

Sinner is playing under a cloud after twice testing positive for traces of a steroid in March.

He denies wrongdoing and was cleared by tennis authorities, but the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) appealed and is seeking to ban him for up to two years.

"I was curious to see how it was. You never know what's happening," he said about the reception.

"I was happy about the crowd," added Sinner, who has not tasted defeat since losing to Alcaraz in the Beijing final in October.

Alcaraz, a four-time Grand Slam champion but never a winner in Melbourne, had a couple of hairy moments before seeing off Kazakhstan's Alexander Shevchenko, 6-1, 7-5, 6-1. "This is a tournament I really want to win one day, hopefully this year," said the 21-year-old Spaniard.

There was disappointment for home fans as the colourful but temperamental Kyrgios, only recently back from 18 months out with injury, lost 7-6 (7/3), 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) to Britain's Jacob Fearnley.

Kyrgios spoke to physios multiple times in the second set after wincing in pain while serving and fired expletives at his coaching box.

The 11th-seeded Tsitsipas became the first major casualty when Alex Michelsen blasted past him 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4.

The 26-year-old Greek, who played Djokovic in the 2023 final at Melbourne Park, never looked comfortable against the 42nd-

ranked American.

"It just sucks in a way that I'll be hanging around for quite a while now before my next tournament comes in," said Tsitsipas.

Two-time US Open semi-finalist Frances Tiafoe vomited twice on court before pulling through in five sets against Frenchman Arthur Rinderknech.

The women's draw provided few upsets on day two. Red-hot world number three Gauff laid down a marker as she swept aside former Melbourne champion and fellow American Sofia Kenin.

Gauff is unbeaten this year after leading the US to United Cup glory and eased past the 2020 Australian Open winner 6-3, 6-3 in 80 minutes.

"I knew it was going to be difficult, but you know, I'm happy with how I played," said Gauff, the 2023 US Open champion.

World number two Swiatek defeated Czech doubles specialist Katerina Siniakova 6-3, 6-4 to get her tournament up and running.

The Pole has won five Grand Slams but her best performance at Melbourne Park is the semi-finals in 2022.

"For sure it wasn't an easy first round, so I'm happy that I'm through," said Swiatek.

US Open finalist Jessica Pegula, the seventh-seeded American, blew away home player Maya Joint 6-3, 6-0.

Victoria Azarenka, the 2012 and 2013 champion, was a notable early loser as the Belarusian went down 6-2, 7-6 (7/2) to Italy's Lucia Bronzetti. — AFP

SQU to host 10th GCC Universities Sports Tournament

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) will organise the 10th Sports Tournament of GCC Universities and Higher Education Institutions from January 18 to 24.

The formal opening ceremony will be on Jan 19, under the auspices of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

The biennial event aims to foster unity and strengthen bonds of brotherhood among students from universities and higher education institutions across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations. This edition will feature a range

of sports, including athletics, swimming, football, 3x3 basketball, volleyball, badminton, and table tennis. Competitions are being held at various venues, such as the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, Seeb Sports Stadium, and the Military Technological College. The event provides a platform for students to showcase their athletic talents, with the potential to represent their countries on an international stage.

The tournament also aims to enhance students' sense of belonging and pride in their institutions. By competing on a regional level, students gain exposure to different cultures and educational environments, fostering a sense of unity and mutual respect. The tournament's slogan, 'Our



The tournament is expected to draw significant attention, with hundreds of students from GCC universities and higher education institutions participating.

Gulf, Our Legacy', reflects the deep-rooted connections and shared heritage of the Gulf nations. The event is seen as a crucial step in strengthening regional cooperation through sports, which is increasingly recognised as a powerful tool for diplomacy and cultural exchange.

HH Sayyid Theyazin underscored the role of sports in building a cohesive and resilient society. "Sports bring us together, transcending borders and fostering a spirit of brotherhood and fair competition.

This tournament not only celebrates athletic excellence but also the unity and shared history of our Gulf nations."

The tournament is expected to

draw significant attention, with hundreds of students from GCC universities and higher education institutions participating. The event serves as a testament to the GCC's commitment to nurturing young talent and providing them with opportunities to excel in both academics and sports.

Sultan Qaboos University has long been a proponent of integrating sports into its educational framework, recognising the holistic benefits of sports in developing well-rounded individuals.

The university's investment in hosting such a prestigious event underscores its commitment to fostering an environment where students can thrive both academically and athletically.

SPORTS



BARCA SMASH REAL MADRID TO WIN SPANISH SUPER CUP

BARCELONA hammered rivals Real Madrid 5-2 in a wild Spanish Super Cup Clasico final in Saudi Arabia on Sunday to win the first trophy of the Hansi Flick era. Kylian Mbappe put Madrid ahead, but a dominant Barcelona hit five in response before their goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off in the second half.

Madrid were hoping to avenge their 4-0 home defeat by Barcelona in October's La Liga Clasico, but instead were left battered and bruised by their arch-rivals in Jeddah. After Mbappe's opener, Lamine Yamal levelled, and Robert Lewandowski sent Barcelona ahead from the penalty spot, with Raphinha bagging a brace and Alejandro Balde also on target. Rodrygo Goes pulled one back for Madrid with a free-kick, but they could not capitalise further on their numerical advantage in a humiliating defeat for the European champions.

"I think today is a good day because we beat one of the best teams in the world, for the second time this season, Real Madrid, and this is unbelievable," Flick said. "We won a title here and we are really happy... today is a day to look positively at this team." Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team's poor defending was the main reason for the heavy defeat. "We defended badly, and that cost us the game — they found their goals quite easily," Ancelotti told Movistar.

"We're sad, like all our fans. It's disappointing, and we don't have to hide that... we have to look forwards; there's nothing else we can do." Despite a strong Barcelona opening salvo, it was Real Madrid who took the lead in



Raphinha controls the ball during the Spanish Super Cup. — AFP

the fifth minute with Mbappe's brilliant goal on the counter-attack.

The French forward, frustrated numerous times by the offside flag in the league defeat by the Catalans, broke loose on the halfway line after Vinicius won the ball back and, after bursting into the area, clipped past Szczesny. It took a stunning individual goal from 17-year-old Yamal to level the scoreline, with the Spanish winger cutting in from the right before stroking home a low finish inside the near post in a similar style to former Barca great Lionel Messi, to whom he is often compared. Barcelona kept pushing and moved ahead through Lewandowski's penalty after Eduardo Camavinga arrived late and carelessly clattered Gavi. Raphinha soon added Barcelona's third with a header from Kounde's cross from deep, and they grabbed their fourth before half-time on the break.

Yamal and Raphinha combined, and the latter slipped in Balde, who slotted past Courtois. Barcelona continued in the same vein after the break, and Raphinha netted the fifth with a neat dribble and finish after Marc Casado played him in.

The Catalans were reduced to 10 men when Mbappe sped in at the other end, rounding goalkeeper Szczesny, who brought him down outside the area, and after a VAR review, was dismissed. Rodrygo, who earlier hit the post, rifled home the free-kick past Szczesny's replacement, Inaki Pena. Mbappe brilliantly teed up Jude Bellingham, but the England international was denied by a superb Jules Kounde challenge in stoppage time. The French forward also came close to scoring again himself on a fine individual display, but Pena tipped away his effort. — AFP

BUSINESS

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NOTABLEINCREASE



Muscat International Airport accounted for the bulk of this growth, with 11,737,391 passengers traveling on 88,000 flights.

PASSENGER TRAFFIC AT OMAN AIRPORTS CLIMBS 3.1 PER CENT

MUSCAT: Passenger traffic at Oman’s airports rose by 3.1 per cent by the end of November 2024, reaching 13.28 million passengers across 98,933 flights. This marks a notable increase from the 12.87 million passengers recorded during the same period in 2023, according to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Muscat International Airport accounted for the bulk of this growth, with 11,737,391 passengers traveling on 88,000 flights, reflecting a 2.7 per cent rise in passenger numbers and a 1.4 per cent increase in flights. Of these, 79,675 were international flights carrying 10,647,982 passengers, while 8,327 were domestic flights transporting 1,089,409 passengers.

Salalah Airport saw 1,417,947 passengers by the end of November 2024, a 5.5 per cent increase compared to the previous year. However, the number of flights decreased by 2 per cent to 9,751. The airport handled 4,693 international flights with 612,994 passengers and 5,058 domestic flights with 804,953 passengers.

Passenger traffic at Suhar Airport reached 66,531 passengers across 610 flights, while Duqm Airport recorded 55,545 passengers on 570 flights.

Indian nationals topped the list of passengers at Muscat International Airport, with 153,557 travellers, split almost evenly between 76,852 arrivals and 76,705 departures.

Omani nationals followed, with 115,871 passengers (57,058 arrivals and 58,813 departures) and Pakistani nationals ranked third, with 49,438 passengers (24,115 arrivals and 25,323 departures).

The steady rise in passenger numbers reflects the continued recovery and growth of Oman’s aviation sector, driven by increased connectivity and demand. — ONA

Oman launches national local content laboratory

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

OMAN has taken a significant step towards securing its economic future with the launch of the National Local Content Laboratory. This ambitious initiative was inaugurated on January 13, 2025, at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

The event brought together leaders from the public and private sectors, including Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy and Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board. Over 43 organisations participated in this effort to strengthen local industries, enhance workforce skills and diversify the national economy.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Al Saqri highlighted the lab’s objectives and its focus on major economic sectors.

“This laboratory aims to increase in-country value (ICV) across several critical sectors that have been carefully studied,” he explained.

“These include the health sector, the construction sector and the provision of electricity and water services. Additionally, the lab will evaluate ways to enhance local content in the procurement processes of civil and defence forces.”

Dr Al Saqri emphasised the importance of these efforts in strengthening Oman’s economic sustainability, noting that boosting local content in such key areas will



More than 43 organisations are participating in the effort to strengthen local industries, enhance workforce skills and diversify the national economy. Picture: Abdul Wahed al Hamdani

not only support national industries but also create jobs and foster innovation across Sultanate of Oman.

Over the next two weeks, the laboratory will focus on reducing Oman’s dependence on imports by promoting local industries and encouraging innovation. It aims to create opportunities for Omani businesses and entrepreneurs while aligning with the Oman Vision 2040.

The laboratory is designed to transform Oman’s economy by prioritising local resources, industries and workforce development. It will focus on vital sectors such as energy, minerals, construction, health, defence, electricity and water.

By reducing reliance on imported goods and promoting Omani-made products, the initiative aims to build a more self-sufficient economy that can thrive both locally and globally.

The key objectives include crafting policies that encourage the use of

local resources, developing workforce skills through partnerships with educational institutions and enabling Omani businesses to expand their global reach. It also seeks to foster collaboration with international partners to showcase Omani products on the global stage.

During the launch event, Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari emphasised the laboratory’s alignment with the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. He stressed the importance of local content in building a sustainable and resilient economy.

“His Majesty has placed local content at the heart of Oman’s economic vision. This laboratory is a key step towards realising that vision by building a system that prioritises transparency, efficiency and fairness.

Our focus is on maximising the use of national resources and creating meaningful opportunities for the Omani people,” Al-Maamari said.

Eng Ghalib bin Ali al Hinai, Head of the National Local Content Office, highlighted the laboratory’s goals.

These include increasing direct investment, achieving self-sufficiency in key goods and strengthening the contribution of non-oil sectors to Oman’s GDP. He also stressed the importance of raising Omanisation rates and creating more jobs for Omanis across industries.

“This is more than just an economic initiative,” Al Hinai said. “It’s about building a legacy of resilience and opportunity for the future.”

The National Local Content Laboratory is built on collaboration between the government, private sector and civil society.

By fostering partnerships, the initiative hopes to create effective policies, introduce innovative solutions and implement training programmes to develop a skilled and competitive workforce.

MoCIIP issues ministerial decision to streamline governance

NASRULLAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 13

THE Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has issued a new ministerial decision aimed at enhancing administrative and regulatory frameworks across the Sultanate of Oman.

Published in the Official Gazette, the decision highlights Oman’s dedication to transparency, accountability and compliance with national directives and international standards.

Anchored in Royal Decree No 18/2019 and Ministerial Decision No 146/2021, this directive continues Oman’s strategy to strengthen governance and streamline administrative processes. The updated guidelines



The new decision aims to create a more accessible and robust regulatory environment. Image for illustration only.

are designed to align operations with global best practices, ensuring greater efficiency and clarity across various sectors.

The decision outlines several key objectives, including the establishment of procedural consistency among administrative bodies, improving public access to regulatory guidelines and ensuring compliance among government entities, businesses and other stakeholders. These measures aim to create a more accessible and robust regulatory environment.

Effective immediately from January 13, 2025, the decision represents a vital step in advancing Oman Vision 2040 goals, prioritising sustainable development and innovative governance.

The Ministry has encouraged all stakeholders to familiarise themselves with the new regulations and ensure a smooth

transition to compliance.

This ministerial decision reflects Oman’s proactive approach to governance, paving the way for a more efficient, transparent and globally competitive regulatory landscape. Further details and clarifications are expected to be provided in the coming days to support the successful implementation of the new measures.

The newly implemented service operates within a robust legal framework, ensuring compliance with established regulations and directives. These measures aim to uphold the efficiency and integrity of the system while streamlining procedural and operational standards for stakeholders.

As stipulated under Article 7, all entities leveraging the service

must provide accurate information and adhere to mandatory updates, reflecting the commitment to transparency and accountability.

Additionally, the integration of technological and administrative systems has been prioritised to enhance collaboration among stakeholders. The registration process, governed by Clause 3, emphasises precision and adherence to strict timelines, ensuring seamless operation within the new system.

To support this transition, stakeholders will benefit from sessions, equipping them with the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate the updated processes effectively. This initiative underscores the importance of capacity building in fostering long-term success and adaptability.

ADVERTORIALS

CONCERTED BID



Iranian artist Mahnoush Abbasgholy (Mia) will be attempting to paint a 40-metres (40mts x 120cms) artwork in seven days, which when completed will help her enter into the Guinness Book of World Records.

SPARKLES OF OMAN: RECORD-BREAKING ART FOR CHARITY

MUSCAT: Oman's fifth anniversary celebrations of its Renaissance Day will witness a historic event featuring a celebrated, internationally known, artist who is all set to make a concerted bid to enter the Guinness Book of World Records with an attempt to create a sizable painting in a painting marathon.

Iranian artist Mahnoush Abbasgholy (Mia), in her individual 'paint-athon', will be attempting to paint a 40-metres (40mts x 120cms) artwork in seven days, hoping to paint over 15 hours a day, completing the painting in over 100 hours, which when completed will help her enter into the Guinness Book of World Records.

This ground-breaking live, seven-days' event, titled 'Sparkles of Oman', will be held at Al Bandar lawn area of Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah from January 15 to 21. Residents of Oman are invited to witness this historic event, set to place the Sultanate of Oman on the world map.

The theme of the 'Sparkles of Oman' painting will capture Oman's mesmerising landscapes, city lights, beaches, mountains and will depict a glowing interpretation of Omani landscape, culture and heritage.

"It will be a vibrant journey through the Sultanate of Oman's breath-taking scenery using a medium of contemporary art, weaving gold and silver leaf into the panoramas, adding texture and vibrant colours," Abbasgholy explained.

"It will be a sparkling tribute to Oman through art," she added. The finished painting will later be auctioned off to benefit the non-governmental organisation, Children First Association.

The opening ceremony, on January 15 at 10.30am onwards, of the grand event will be held under the auspices of Sayyid Khalid bin Hamed bin Hamoud al Busaidi, chairman of Sabco group of companies and Shaikh Ahmed bin Suwaidan Aal Balushi, chairman of Al Balushi Investments.

The closing ceremony, on January 22 at 5.30pm onwards, will be held under the patronage of Her Highness Dr Mona bint Fahad Al Said, assistant vice chancellor – external cooperation – Sultan Qaboos University and the chairperson of Children First Association and Sheikh Ahmed bin Suwaidan Al Balushi.

MHD ACERE unveils luxury SUV Hongqi HS5

MHD ACERE is proud to unveil the new Hongqi HS5, a luxury SUV that redefines the standards of elegance, performance, and comfort. This remarkable vehicle seamlessly blends exceptional performance capabilities with a luxurious driving experience, embodying Hongqi's distinctive oriental vision.

DYNAMIC AND ATTRACTIVE DESIGN

The new Hongqi HS5 is a testament to Hongqi's identity, featuring a luxurious and dynamic design. At the forefront, a striking large grille with eight vertical chrome lines is centered by the iconic Hongqi logo, creating a modern yet authentic character.

The front is further enhanced by the unique and elegant LED headlights, exuding sophistication and cutting-edge style.

Flowing lines extend gracefully from the front to the rear, offering a cohesive and integrated appearance.

At the rear, horizontally-stretched LED taillights emphasize the vehicle's wide stance and are accented by a chrome line, adding a touch of distinction to its dynamic profile.

HIGH-PERFORMANCE ENGINE

Under the hood, the new Hongqi HS5 is powered by a robust 2.0-liter turbocharged engine, delivering an impressive 252 horsepower and a maximum torque of 380Nm.

Paired with an advanced 8-speed automatic transmission, the SUV



The new Hongqi HS5 is a testament to Hongqi's identity, featuring a luxurious and dynamic design.

This remarkable vehicle seamlessly blends exceptional performance capabilities with a luxurious driving experience, embodying Hongqi's distinctive oriental vision.

offers a driving experience that is both powerful and seamless.

SPACIOUS AND LUXURIOUS INTERIOR

Step inside the new Hongqi HS5 to discover a world of modern luxury.

Designed to meet the aspirations of the discerning driver, the vehicle features a spacious cabin with refined aesthetics and advanced technology.

Highlights include:

- A 12.3-inch driver information display for intuitive control.
- A premium 12-speaker Bose surround sound system

for an immersive entertainment experience.

- Exquisite materials and thoughtful design elements that elevate comfort and sophistication.

Commenting on the launch, Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, said: "The new Hongqi HS5 exemplifies the essence of luxury and performance that our customers in Oman desire.

With its distinctive oriental vision, state-of-the-art features, and unmatched driving dynamics, the HS5 sets a new benchmark for the luxury SUV segment. We are thrilled to bring this exceptional vehicle to the Omani market."

DHOFAR ISLAMIC LAUNCHES DEBIT CARDS FOR YOUTH, LADIES, AND MINORS

MUSCAT: Dhofar Islamic, the Islamic banking arm of BankDhofar, has announced the launch of debit cards tailored for youth, ladies, and minors.

These cards are designed to address the diverse needs of customers while adhering to Islamic Sharia principles.

The debit cards provide customers with instant and secure access to their accounts 24/7 through the extensive ATM network.

Cards are issued immediately at branches, are internationally recognised, and come with robust security features.



The debit cards provide customers with instant and secure access to their accounts 24/7 through the extensive ATM network.

Bilal Faiz al Raiisi, AGM Cards and Bancassurance at BankDhofar, emphasized that Dhofar Islamic prioritizes its customers by offering services and facilities that align with Islamic Sharia principles.

He explained that the cards were developed to cater to the daily financial needs and aspirations of youth, women, and minors, providing them with greater financial flexibility and convenience.

Dhofar Islamic's product portfolio, approved by the Sharia Supervisory Board, is designed to meet the demands of modern, fast-paced lifestyles.

Bank Muscat contributes to economic & social development

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Hatham bin Tarik's Accession Day is a celebrated occasion that profoundly signifies the continued development in Oman's renewed Renaissance.

Since January 11, 2020, the government has provided clear insights into achieving sustainable development and fostering social well-being while safeguarding and enhancing national achievements. This vision not only paves the way for a prosperous future but also ensures a thriving society for generations to come.

With the increasing role of the banking sector in supporting national economy and achieving financial stability, His Majesty Sultan Hatham bin Tarik called for strengthening financial inclusion, supporting small and medium enterprises, and diversifying income sources to work towards achieving an equitable economic balance.

He emphasized the importance of innovation and creativity to enhance efficiency and facilitate services offered to all customers.

In response, the financial sector played a pivotal role in achieving these goals. Local banks, including Bank Muscat – the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman – exerted every effort to support HM's directives and implement the national vision.



Bank Muscat plays an active role in implementing various initiatives and programmes aimed at contributing to social and economic development.

As one of the largest financial institutions in Oman, Bank Muscat plays an active role in implementing various initiatives and programmes aimed at contributing to social and economic development. The Bank's efforts encompass various sectors, including:

National Human Development

Bank Muscat is committed to invest in various innovative initiatives to offer further learning and development opportunities to Omani youth.

The Bank works according to a strategic

plan that aims to widen the horizons of Omani youth and enable them to sharpen their skills.

Annually, the Bank identifies all needs across its various departments and branches, considering all developments and requirements for human resources in diverse banking specialties. During 2024, Bank Muscat provided 401 job opportunities, achieving around 92% Omanisation with over 4350 employees working in the different branches across Oman.

In recent years, the Bank has focused on cultivating an ideal work environment by enhancing employee experience and engagement, as well as supporting career development. This commitment positively impacts the level of services offered to customers.

Commending these efforts, Bank Muscat was honoured with the global prestigious award "Best Places to Work for 2024" presented from "Best Places to Work", a prestigious global institution in the United Kingdom.

With regard to the training aspect, the Bank provided more than 637 training opportunities for male and female students in corporation with various educational institutions.

This annual initiative aims to provide better opportunities for students to develop their skills in their respective specialties, especially

those related to financial and banking sector.

Supporting Institutions and Corporates

Bank Muscat places great importance on developing services and facilities tailored to the needs for government institutions and corporates. It demonstrates an unwavering commitment to delivering customized solutions, innovative technology and seamless services that empower businesses to thrive in a dynamic economic environment.

The Bank is keen to enhance the efficiency of its electronic services to reduce costs and expedite transaction completion. Digital transformation has become essential for institutions, especially with the latest developments in the digital services. The Bank has contributed to the success and development of many government institutions and corporates across various sectors by providing customized banking solutions.

In addition, the Bank offers financing programmes specially designed to support entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises. These programmes provide consulting and technical services that promote project sustainability, enhance competitiveness, and facilitate growth, recognizing their role as the backbone of the national economy.

BUSINESS

KEY PARTNERS



A number of leading UAE industrial entities are backing this year's edition of ADSW.

ADSW 2025 PLEDGES TO ACCELERATE GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

AHMED AL KAABI
ABU DHABI, JAN 13

The Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week — the UAE’s initiative to accelerate sustainable development — has announced its key partners for the 2025 edition. Under the auspices of Shaikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE, ADSW 2025 will be hosted by Masdar and take place from January 12 to 18 in Abu Dhabi. It will bring together global leaders to advance impactful sustainability initiatives.

The distinguished partners for ADSW 2025 include the Department of Energy (DoE) as the principal partner, ADNOC and World-Wide Technology (WWT) as strategic partners, Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA) and EMSTEEL Group as associate partners, and Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) as the opening ceremony associate partner. These partnerships will be instrumental in fostering cross-sector collaboration and accelerating sustainable systems transformation.

With the theme ‘The Nexus of Next: Supercharging Sustainable Progress,’ ADSW 2025 aims to leverage collective intelligence through dynamic discussions and dedicated platforms.

The event will bring together government leaders, industry experts, entrepreneurs, youth and other stakeholders to fast-track sustainable development and promote economic, social and environmental advancement. The UAE’s visionary leadership will be highlighted, showcasing its ability to drive global change and shape a sustainable, inclusive and resilient future.

Dr Abdulla Humaid al Jarwan, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Department of Energy, emphasised the significance of ADSW, stating: “Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week reflects our commitment to addressing global sustainability challenges and creating growth opportunities.

By transforming the energy sector through progressive policies and regulations, the Department of Energy is setting global benchmarks. Collective action is essential for accelerating energy transformation and ensuring a prosperous, sustainable future.”

Oman’s OPAZ to target new petrochemical investments

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 13

THE Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) is preparing to launch a drive to attract industrial investments specifically in the petrochemicals sector, with the aim of harnessing opportunities linked not only to the now operational Duqm Refinery, but also to an ambitious petrochemicals complex planned downstream of the refinery.

According to a key official of OPAZ, petrochemicals still remains a priority sector for targeted investment despite a strategic shift towards more emerging economic sectors and technologies, notably green energy based downstream industries and Artificial Intelligence. Also in its sights for local and international investment are: Food and fisheries industries, Green steel and iron (downstream), Medical and pharmaceutical industries, and Green energy (downstream).



The proposed petrochemicals complex will source its feedstock requirements from the Duqm Refinery.

“In 2025, the Authority plans to launch a programme specifically to attract petrochemical industries,” said Dr Said bin Khalifa al Quraini, Director General of Investment Development at OPAZ. “As the zones develop in the coming years, we will continue to attract investments in other high-value sectors, such as Information

and Communication Technology (ICT), heavy machinery and equipment manufacturing, and recycling industries.” This emphasis on petrochemicals, made in an interview featured in the latest edition OPAZ’s newsletter Duqm Economist, underscores the potential for robust new investments that seek to

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 13

THE Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) first Automatic Invoice Verification System (AIVS) has been launched in the Sultanate of Oman by Infoline LLC, a subsidiary of Omantel, and a leader in IT-enabled digital transformation, for Nama Power & Water Procurement Company. Developed in collaboration with Kreate Technologies SPC, this advanced system automates the invoice verification process, significantly reducing errors and saving time. Nama Power & Water Procurement Company (Nama PWP) — the single procurer of power and water capacity and output in the Sultanate of Oman — plays a critical role in ensuring adequate electricity and water production capacity in Oman at the lowest economic cost.

The newly implemented AIVS platform revolutionises invoice processing by cross-referencing invoices with signed agreements, ensuring compliance before integrating with enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems like Oracle or Systems Applications and Products (SAP).

Key features of AIVS include real-time invoice verification for improved accuracy, seamless ERP integration for efficient processing, automated dispute management with ticket generation for quick issue resolution and business intelligence dashboards offering insights to enhance decision-making.

Operational across 25 power and water plants in Oman, the system demonstrates



This system automates the invoice verification process, significantly reducing errors and saving time.

Infoline’s ability to deliver complex, large-scale platforms tailored for efficiency and accuracy.

“We are thrilled to introduce this transformative solution for Nama Power & Water Procurement Company. AIVS is set to revolutionise how invoices are processed, saving time, cutting costs and enhancing accuracy for our clients,” said Mohamed al Maskari, CEO of Infoline LLC.

Highlighting the importance of automation, Ahmed Salim al Abri, CEO of Nama Power & Water Procurement Company, stated: “Automation is at the heart of Nama’s efforts to ensure business excellence and continuity. We are proud to collaborate with Infoline, a local company, to deliver this innovative solution. This partnership reflects

our belief in the capability of local entities to drive technological advancements.”

Commenting on the operational benefits, Mohamed Basim al Qabtan, Senior Engineer at Nama, said: “The AIVS has significantly improved our invoice processing efficiency.

The real-time verification and seamless ERP integration have saved us countless hours and minimised errors.”

Since its inception in 2004, Infoline has established itself as a leading provider of ICT solutions in Oman, delivering state-of-the-art digital transformation services across government, utilities, telecommunications and private sectors. Through AIVS, the company underscores its commitment to advancing technological innovation and supporting Oman’s digital future.

GOVERNMENT TREASURY BILLS TOP RO 26 MILLION

MUSCAT: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced that the total value of government treasury bills allocated this week exceeded RO 26.25 million.

According to a statement by the CBO, treasury bills with a 28-day maturity were valued at RO 5 million, priced at an average of RO 99.700 per RO 100, with a discount rate of 3.91071 per cent and an average return of 3.92248 per cent.

Bills with a 91-day maturity totalled RO 13 million, priced at an average of RO 98.942, with a discount rate of 4.24548 per cent and an average return of 4.29090vper cent. For 182-day bills, the allocation reached RO 8.25 million, priced at an average of RO 97.826, with a discount rate of 4.36043 per cent and an average return of 4.45737 per cent.



Treasury bills with a 28-day maturity were valued at RO 5 million.

The CBO also noted that the interest rate for repurchase (repo) operations with the central bank on these bills is 5.00 per cent, while the discount rate for treasury bill facilities stands at 5.50 per cent.

Treasury bills, issued by the Ministry of Finance and managed by the CBO, are a short-term, secure financial instrument designed to provide investment opportunities for licensed commercial banks. These bills offer high liquidity, allowing banks to discount them or conduct repo transactions with the CBO or among themselves in the inter-bank market.

In addition to serving as a tool for short-term government financing, treasury bills also provide a benchmark for local financial market interest rates. — ONA

maximise downstream value creation from commodities produced by Duqm Refinery and a future petrochemical complex currently in the feasibility study phase.

The partnership of OQ, Saudi Arabia’s SABIC (one of the world’s largest petrochemicals companies) and Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI), is currently exploring the viability of establishing a full-fledged petrochemicals hub at Duqm SEZ downstream of the Duqm Refinery.

The proposed petrochemicals complex will source its feedstock needs from Duqm Refinery, which was brought into operational early in 2024 with a capacity of 230,000 barrels per day.

OPAZ, which oversees all of Oman’s SEZs, free zones, industrial cities and specialised parks, has so far attracted around RO 20.10 billion in investments across its portfolio as of 2024-end, said Dr Al Quraini.

A further 250 prospective projects, distributed across various manufacturing and industrial sec-

tors, are currently being ‘tracked’ before they can be converted into solid, confirmed investments.

They include 48 initiatives linked to renewable energy and green hydrogen and 41 in the industrial sector, he noted.

Further with the goal of capitalising on the overall value proposition offered by its diverse investment hubs, OPAZ is also targeting investments in emerging sectors, including Artificial Intelligence and crypto-mining, said the official.

“The Authority is working to attract investments in artificial intelligence, including drone technologies and aquaponics. It is also developing the AI Zone in Duqm to serve as a research hub, contributing to transforming the Wilayat of Al Duqm into a smart city.”

Additionally, in line with the goal of adopting advanced technologies, the Authority has successfully localised cryptocurrency mining investments in coordination with relevant authorities, he added.

How to get unstuck and back in action



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is the founder of Knowledge Oman

LAST year, we looked at a number of ways that you can start the year with a bang — from forming ideas, creating projects out of those ideas, putting them in a plan, executing and finally celebrating the success. It’s 2025 and almost 2 weeks have passed already.

Nevertheless, though you may have started to work on some of those ideas formed into projects, you somehow feel stuck. For some reason, something is holding you back and you’re not sure how to progress. Does this scenario sound familiar? I will tell you why.

The reason you are feeling stuck and don’t seem to have the positive momentum to get things done is probably due to lacking three important things: First is clarity (ie, what you really want to do), second is a clear plan (ie, how you will do it) and lastly is a purpose (ie, why you’re doing it in the first place).

I trust this is what prevents most people from progressing and, of course, drains their/your energy, which as a result prevents you/everyone else from taking action. I have been there and understand literally what you may be going through.

Recently, I came across an intriguing viral video along with some of the readings I do on personal productivity; hence, I have decided to focus my article this week on steps that one can follow in order to get unstuck and back into action.

First, you need to identify your core values. For example, ask yourself, “What

really drives your choices and defines you?” The answers you get will help you align your actions with values, which would ultimately make you feel satisfied. Once you have your values, set specific goals that align with them — avoid vague goals such as “I want to be happy,” “I want to be successful,” “I want to be rich,” and/or “I want to be strong.” Your goals need to be SMART — ie, specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed.

Before you can move forward, it is important you understand the reason why you feel stuck.

Knowing your current position, your future destination and the ultimate goal is the most important thing, as it forms your clarity. With this in mind, written somewhere visible for you to follow-up, you will have a focus on what you are willing to achieve.

Secondly, set a vision by visualising your goal. You can do this by asking yourself what images resonate with your aspirations and how the goal looks, feels and sounds like. Such a vision will truly inspire you to move forward. This activity will help turn your dream into a tangible aspiration.

Next, develop a plan of action.

This can be done by asking yourself what are the steps needed in order to achieve those desire goals.

Put those steps as your plan of action. Try and break those goals into smaller actionable tasks and ensure you put a

The reason you are feeling stuck and don't seem to have the positive momentum to get things done is probably due to lacking three important things: First is clarity (ie, what you really want to do), second is a clear plan (ie, how you will do it) and lastly is a purpose (ie, why you're doing it in the first place).

timeline for each one of them. Trust me, most actions fail due to not having timelines.

On a regular basis, ensure you check to see if your actions are aligned with your values. This will help you stay motivated so as to refrain from getting stuck. Alignment will help you ensure that everything you do contributes to your ultimate purpose.

Lastly, take action. All those ideas, projects, plans, etc., will mean nothing if there is no execution. As the saying goes, “Actions speak louder.”

Start small but do something today/now and trust me, the first part may be harder, but the moment you commit and see some results, there will be no one to stop you from achieving profound results. Always ask yourself, “What small steps can I take today?”

This may help you get the ball rolling.

Losing momentum, falling behind sometimes and missing goal posts is common — it happens to me, to you and to almost every successful person that you may admire. Ask them and you will realise the same.

One needs to know that progress can be attained by regularly reviewing oneself and following steps shared in the article today, starting by having clarity, identifying core values and creating a tangible vision along with actions that align with value. Every step taken forward is a step closer to your vision. Start today and get back in action. You can do this!

TRUMP AND MUSK’S ALLY-BULLYING WEAKENS THE WEST

HUGO DIXON DONALD

Trump was always going to throw his weight around with US allies. The incoming president was expected to threaten not to defend friendly countries from Russia or China unless they increased military spending and to impose tariffs on their exports if they did not buy more American goods.

Few, though, predicted that Trump would hint at using military force to expand US territory to include Greenland and the Panama Canal, while using economic power to annex Canada, even before he is formally sworn in. Nor had many factored in the chance that Elon Musk, the world's richest man who gave \$259 million to help elect Trump, would wade aggressively into European politics, calling the UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer “evil” and supporting the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which opposes European unity and military aid to Ukraine.

The incoming president was expected to threaten not to defend friendly countries from Russia or China unless they increased military spending, and to impose tariffs on their exports if they did not buy more American goods.

Even if the threats do not go beyond rhetoric, this bullying of allies will weaken the West in three ways. First, Trump’s intimidation of Greenland and Canada — both fellow members of Nato — will create distrust within the alliance that has been the bedrock of Western security since World War Two.

Second, Trump’s threats of military force — even if he doesn’t mean them seriously — undermine the case against Russia’s war of Ukraine. The US and its allies have argued forcefully that big powers do not have the right to grab chunks of their neighbour’s land.

Now that the former reality TV host is threatening to do the same, he lacks any principle to argue against Putin’s empire-building or, for that matter, a possible Chinese war of Taiwan.

Third, Musk’s interventions may have helped the AfD, which is gaining ground in opinion polls ahead of next month’s German general election. It would not be surprising if France, where the political situation is unstable, also catches the multi-billionaire’s attention.

Musk draws his power not just from his wealth and control of the social media platform X, but also from his influence over Trump and his role in the incoming administration as co-chair of a task force to slash government spending. If the Tesla boss is able to shift the political needle towards the far-right in any large European country, the continent would become more divided just when it needs to come together to beef up its defences and improve competitiveness. — Reuters

Trial over Apple App Store ‘surcharge’ opens in UK

APPL**E** was accused on Monday of abusing the dominant position of its app store at the start of a court trial in the UK, with plaintiffs seeking £1.5 billion pounds in damages. The complaint, filed in May 2021, accuses Apple of breaching European and UK competition laws by “its exclusion of any other app stores from iOS devices” like iPhones and iPads.

The case, which Apple has called “meritless”, has been brought by Kings College London academic Rachael Kent and the law firm Hausfeld & Co.

At the opening of the trial, the plaintiff’s lawyer Mark Hoskins outlined that the case is being brought by Kent “on behalf of all iOS mobile device users”.

“By virtue of its terms and conditions, Apple has excluded all competition,” he said, outlying the issue at the centre of the case.

The complaint claims that some 20 million Apple users may have been overcharged by the company “due to its ban on rival app store platforms”.

The complainants said a “30 per cent surcharge” that the company “imposes” on apps purchased through Apple’s App Store comes at “expense of ordinary consumers”.

The trial is set to last seven weeks at the Competition Appeal Tribunal in London.

At the heart are accusations that Apple used the App Store to exclude competitors, forcing users to use its system and boosting profits in the process.

“The 30 per cent surcharge relates to most of the applications that you’re going to be using when you’re downloading and making in-app purchases on the App Store,” Kent said, citing dating platform Tinder as an example.

However, it does not apply to applications offering physical products such as the delivery services Deliveroo and Uber Eats, the academic said.



People walk past an Apple store in London. - Reuters



OLIVIER DEVOS

The writer is a journalist at AFP

Any user who purchased applications or subscriptions in the British version of the App Store between October 1, 2015 and November 15, 2024 may be entitled to compensation from Apple, said Kent, a lecturer in the digital economy.

The claim seeks total estimated damages of £1.5 billion.

According to British law, in this type of class action, all potentially affected persons are included in the procedure by default, and may benefit from possible compensation, unless they voluntarily opt out.

When contacted by AFP, Apple referred to a 2022 statement, in which it said 85 per cent of the applications on the App Store are free.

“We believe this lawsuit is meritless and welcome the opportunity to discuss with the court our unwavering commitment to consumers and the many benefits the App Store and Apple’s valuable technologies have delivered to the UK’s innovation economy,” the statement added.

The company also insists that

the commission charged by the App Store is “very much in the mainstream of those charged by all other digital marketplaces”.

Investigations and complaints against Apple have multiplied around the world in recent years, particularly regarding its app store.

The American behemoth is the subject of another complaint worth £785 million related to rates charged to app developers. Last June, the European Commission accused Apple of breaching its digital competition rules by preventing developers from “freely steering consumers to alternative channels” other than the App Store.

Apple then agreed to relax its rules, announcing in August that iPhone and iPad users in the European Union could delete the App Store and use competing platforms.

“They’re responding to these investigations and also being told what to do. I don’t think they’re going to do it voluntarily, which I think is why it’s really important to bring these collective actions,” said Kent. — AFP

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ENTERTAINMENT

Joyful musical ‘Titanique’ puts Celine Dion centre stage



IMAGINE IF singer Celine Dion had been on the Titanic, survived and wanted to revisit her version of events. That is the premise of the musical “Titanique” that has opened in London’s West End.

Featuring Dion’s back catalogue, the show’s light-hearted tone is a break with previous more sombre accounts of the story of the ocean liner that hit an iceberg and sank in 1912.

It blends elements from the plot of the 1997 movie version, which starred actors Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio as lovers Rose and Jack, and other pop culture references.

Tye Blue, who directs and also wrote the musical along with actor and writers Constantine Rousouli and Marla Mindelle, describes it as “a joy machine”.

The story is told through the eyes of the character Celine Dion, played by Lauren Drew.

“This is very much a love letter to Celine Dion... paying homage to her and her craft and her strength,” Drew said after coming off stage. “It’s completely embodying her kookiness, her craziness and her talent. So I just I love that I get to do that every night.”

Blue said Dion’s team came to see the show after it opened in New York and that “they loved it” and “kind of unofficially gave us their blessing”.

Last year Dion returned to the live stage with a performance at the Olympics opening ceremony in Paris.

The 56-year-old singer said in late 2022 that she had been diagnosed with a rare neurological disorder called stiff-person syndrome that causes muscle spasms.

The music from the show includes ballads such as “Titanic’s” award-winning hit “My Heart Will Go On” and Eric Carmen’s “All by Myself” that Dion released in 1996.

“Titanique” is playing at the Criterion Theatre until March 2025. Other versions of it are playing in Sydney, Toronto and Montreal, and another is set to open in France in April. — Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



ENTERTAINMENT

Pakistani education activist and producer Malala Yousafzai attends the Los Angeles premiere of “Bread and Roses” at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. — AFP



FILM

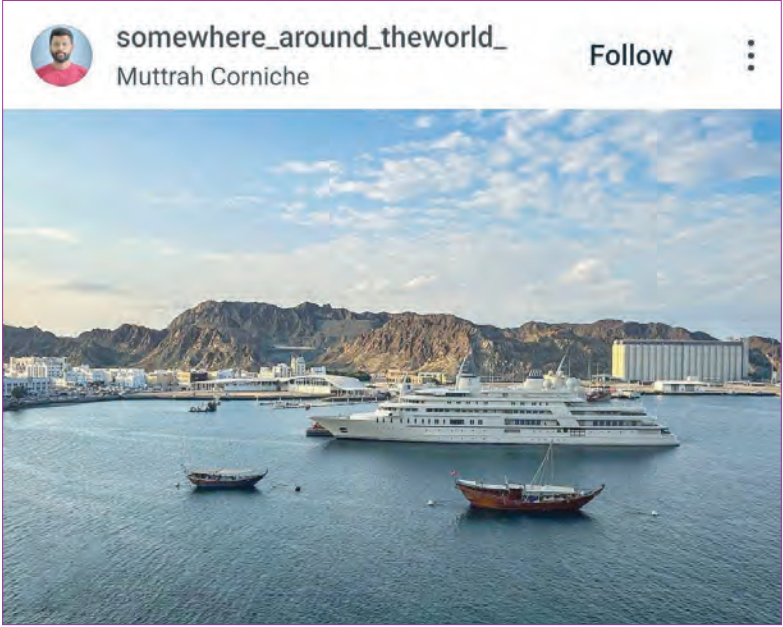
Cast member Jennifer Lopez attends a photo call for the film “Unstoppable” during AFI Fest, in Los Angeles, California, US. — Reuters



LFIESTYLE

A boat sailing on Songhua River as visitors gather to see the frost-covered trees on the riverbank in Jilin, northeast China’s Jilin province. — AFP

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Tokyo museum offers visitors ‘flashback’ to defunct technology



TUCKED AWAY in a corner of central Tokyo, the Extinct Media Museum lives up to its name. From Betacam videotapes to floppy disks and vintage Sony devices, the museum is a showcase for old cameras and telecom equipment, including a 1916 Japanese-made “Lily” still camera, its oldest exhibit. Amidst the three-roomed museum’s cluttered shelves, visitors like 59-year-old Mika Matsuda can rewind to the past and the gadgets that were once in everyday use. “It is fascinating not only for generations unfamiliar with these items, but also for those who lived through those times,” Matsuda said on Saturday. “Seeing these pieces feels like I’m having a flashback of our own lives. It reminded me of how things were back then — I used to have so much fun,” she said.

Opened in January 2023, the museum was founded on the belief that all media equipment, except for paper and stone, will eventually “die out,” explained deputy museum curator Barbara Asuka. The museum regularly accepts donations from museum-goers like Hisashi Ito, who brought in a small hand-held watch and cassette tapes from his personal collection on Saturday. “Even if I keep these gadgets at home, they will probably just be thrown away when I die. It’s better to share them and let people enjoy them,” the 56-year-old car designer said. The Extinct Media Museum’s hours vary, according to its website, with general admission priced at around 2,000 yen (\$12.70). Tickets for donors and students are 1,000 yen. — Reuters



Tunisian rehab barge offers hope for vulnerable sea turtles

ON A BARGE hundreds of metres off the Kerkennah Islands in southern Tunisia, a group of students watches intently as Besma, a recovering sea turtle, shuffles towards the water and dives in. The barge, used to treat injured loggerhead turtles, is the first floating rehabilitation centre for the species in the Mediterranean, its organisers say. Harboured netted enclosures underwater, it allows the threatened species to receive care in saltwater, its natural habitat. “It is important that the sea turtles recover in their natural environment,” said Hamed Mallat, a marine biologist who heads the UN-funded project. “We place them in a space that’s large enough for them to move and feed more comfortably,” he added. Mallat, a member of the local Kraten Association for Sustainable Development and the International Sea Turtle Society, founded the project last month and said the rehab barge was refashioned from a sunken aquaculture cage. It can hold up to five sea turtles at a time, each in its own enclosure and spans 150 square metres (1,610 square feet) at the surface, with netting below to allow the convalescing animals to reach the sea floor. The loggerhead sea turtle, also known as *Caretta caretta*, is considered a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Every year, around 10,000 loggerheads are caught by trawlers and in fishing nets in the waters off Tunisia.

— ‘EDUCATIONAL VALUE’ — Life Medturtles, an EU-funded sea life conservation project, estimates that more than 70 per cent of sea turtle deaths in the Mediterranean are caused by gillnets — large nets



used for mass fishing. It is often the fishermen themselves who bring the injured turtles to the barge, said Mallat. The project is also an opportunity to teach younger generations about preserving sea life, he added. “This is a direct application of the things we study,” said 24-year-old Sarah Gharbi, a fisheries and environment student at the National Agronomic Institute of Tunisia (INAT). “It’s also a first interaction with marine species that we usually don’t see as part of our study or in our laboratories. It’s something new and enriching.” Her teacher, Rimel Ben Messaoud, 42, said the barge’s “educational value” was in giving students a first-hand experience with marine life conservation. Due to rising sea temperatures, overfishing and pollution, a number of marine species have seen their migratory routes and habitats shift over time. Mallat said the project could help study those patterns, particularly



among loggerhead sea turtles, as Besma now bears a tracking device. “It gives us a significant advantage for scientific monitoring of sea turtles, which is somewhat lacking in scientific research in Tunisia,” he said. Mallat said he also hoped to attract the islands’ summer tourists to raise awareness about the vulnerable species. — AFP

FEATURES

BY YERU EBUEN

OVER THE weekend, the stunning shores of Jumeirah Muscat Bay transformed into a vibrant atmosphere as swimming enthusiasts and athletes gathered under the canopies of tents scattered across the area.

The excitement in the air was infectious; laughter and friendly banter filled the space as participants reconnected with old friends and met new ones. The sound of the surf mingled with the rhythmic thump of pumping hearts, as nerves and exhilaration intertwined ahead of the day's challenges.

Early that Friday morning, competitors assembled for pre-race briefings, during which the rules were laid out and the scenic yet challenging course was outlined. The familiar mixture of camaraderie and competition permeated the atmosphere as seasoned athletes shared tips with newcomers, fostering a sense of community that defines open-water swimming.

As swimmers listened attentively, they felt the pulse of excitement — the day's swim was not just a test of endurance, but also a celebration of nature, resilience and shared passion.

With each participant's heart racing in anticipation, the bay beckoned them to plunge into its cool depths. Muscat Bay, with its crystal-clear waters revealing glimpses of curious marine life below, invited swimmers to embrace the adventure. Whether gliding through calm areas or navigating the occasional wave, each stroke propelled competitors closer to their personal goals.

Open-water swimming, which entails swimming in natural bodies of water such as oceans, lakes and rivers, features various competitions that cater to both amateurs and seasoned athletes.

Events can range from short sprints to gruelling marathon distances, with participants navigating unpredictable currents and variable visibility. Competitive open-water swimming not only provides a physical challenge but also invites swimmers to connect with nature, making it a unique sporting experience.

As part of this burgeoning trend, Oman played host to OMSWIM 3.2, the country's inaugural Olympic 10 km marathon swim. Held from January 10-11, 2025, at Jumeirah Muscat Bay, the event welcomed over 200 competitors from various corners of the globe.

Swimmers had the opportunity to choose from several race categories: 1.5 km, 2.5 km, 5 km and the main event, a challenging 10 km marathon swim. The competition attracted both local enthusiasts and international participants, creating a vibrant atmosphere filled with camaraderie and support.

PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Among the competitors, seasoned athletes and first-time swimmers shared their personal motivations for participating. Max Gelinas, the eventual 10 km champion, expressed his determination: "While the bay is perfect for such an activity, there are areas where water visibility is really low. I just had to keep pushing forward, guided by the nearby organising crew." His enthusiasm echoed throughout the community, and Max's story exemplified the dedication and resilience found in many participants.

Christina Popma arrived all the way from abroad, drawn by a friend's recommendation. "Coming to Oman was worth the trip to participate in this open swim. It was super exciting to experience this unique environment," she shared. Christina, along with other competitors, emphasised the camaraderie fostered by the event, highlighting the welcoming nature of Oman's swimming community.

The event not only provided an outlet for athleticism but also served as a bridge connecting participants from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Local businesses benefited as swimmers and their families explored the region and youth swimming clinics were organised to engage the local community, encouraging the next generation to take to the water.



OPEN WATER SWIMMING LURES ATHLETES AND ENTHUSIASTS TO MUSCAT BAY



Organisers worked tirelessly to ensure the event's success, coordinating everything from safety protocols to environmental considerations. A briefing dome tent was set up to inform participants of race rules and course details, while safety boats patrolled the waters, ready to assist any swimmer in need. The logistics behind hosting such a large-scale event in a natural setting highlight the dedication of the organising teams and volunteers who contributed to an extraordinary experience.

As the main event commenced, the starting arch loomed large, instilling awe in the swimmers. Spectators cheered as competitors dove into the water, their splashes marking the beginning of an exciting contest. Refreshment areas catered to onlookers, further fostering a festive atmosphere. Swimmers rang a bell to signify the completion of their laps, echoing their triumphs back to the cheering crowd.

THE GLOBAL TREND OF OPEN WATER SWIMMING

Open-water swimming is gaining momentum as a popular sporting trend, both in Oman and worldwide. The sport offers a unique blend of competition, adventure and connection to nature. As more swimmers gravitate towards exploring natural waters in stunning settings, Oman finds itself at the forefront, showcasing its pristine landscapes and inviting climate.

Globally, participation rates in open water events are on the rise, as communities foster engagement with aquatic sports. Events like OMSWIM place Oman prominently on the map for open water enthusiasts, ensuring that the Sultanate of Oman is recognised as a premier location for such competitions.

Support for events like OMSWIM is crucial for Oman, as they highlight the nation's commitment to promoting sports tourism and diversifying its economy. By spearheading initiatives that draw international participants and elevate local talent, Oman can enhance its reputation in the open water swimming community. With continued efforts, Oman is poised to become a distinguished destination in the world of open water swimming, attracting more athletes and enthusiasts alike to its shores.

