

OMAN
عمان
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Focus on growth: HM

- HM PUSHES FOR NATIONAL LOCAL CONTENT POLICY TO FOSTER OMANI INDUSTRIES, ENCOURAGE LOCAL PROJECTS AND MINIMISE IMPORTS
- THE NATIONAL GENOME AND HUMAN DATA CENTRE TO BE SET UP FOR EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF TREATMENT OF HEREDITARY DISEASES
- THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR OPHTHALMOLOGY AND EYE SURGERY TO BE SET UP TO INTRODUCE LATEST TECHNOLOGIES AND RELATED RESEARCH
- LAUNCHING A NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR EARLY DETECTION OF THE MOST COMMON CANCER CASES AMONG WOMEN BY ESTABLISHING 7 EARLY DETECTION UNITS

HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik presided over a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday.

At the outset of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan gave thanks and praise to the Almighty Allah for the bounties He bestowed on the Sultanate of Oman. He prayed to the Almighty Allah that 2025 be a year of successive accomplishments. He hoped that the new year would see the realisation of the aspirations that he drew out over the past five years of Oman's Renewed Renaissance that ushered in a brighter future for the loyal people of Oman. He prayed to the Almighty to endow all with full health, well-being and further bounties.

His Majesty the Sultan commended the efforts being exerted by the Council of Ministers, its committees and different government units as they shoulder their respective responsibilities and undertake their roles.

He also expressed appreciation for the achievements and contributions which, he said, gave impetus to the march of growth and upgraded the tracks of comprehensive development witnessed by the Sultanate of Oman at all levels.

His Majesty the Sultan reviewed the local conditions. The Council of Ministers listened to the assessment of economic and social conditions in the country over the year 2024. It took note of the positive outcomes achieved in this respect, thanks to the efforts made by all departments in the areas of economic diversification, consolidation of non-oil revenues and the expansion of the productive base of the economy.

TURN TO P2



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik presides over a meeting of the Council of Ministers at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday.

Decrees ratify budget, restructure CBO

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Wednesday issued nine Royal Decrees reading as follows:

Royal Decree No (1/2025) on the ratification of the State's General Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman. Article (1) ratifies the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2025 according to the tables attached to this decree. Article (2) instructs all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and other public legal entities to implement the provisions of this decree, each within the scope of its prerogatives. Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2025.

Royal Decree No 2/2025 on the promulgation of the Banking Law. Article (1) states that the Banking Law attached to this decree shall be enforced.

Article (2) stipulates that the Central Bank of Oman shall issue the regulations, decisions, instructions and circulars necessary for the implementation of the law attached to

- State's General Budget for the Fiscal Year 2025 approved
- The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) to be independent
- New Banking Law comes into effect
- Ahmed al Musallami appointed CBO Governor
- Two advisers for Private Office appointed
- Head of the Special Medical Affairs Unit at the RCA named

this decree. Till such time, the existing regulations, decisions, instructions and circulars shall continue to be effective, without prejudice to the provisions of the attached law.

Article (3) states that the licences, permits and approvals issued by the Central Bank of Oman prior to the implementation of the attached law shall continue to be valid until their expiry and that the renewal of the same shall be in accordance with the provisions of the attached law. The provisions of the attached law and the regulations and instructions of the Central Bank of Oman shall govern all activities and operations of those for whom the abovementioned licences, permits and approvals have been issued. Those concerned must adjust their status in accordance with the provisions of the attached law within six months from the date of its enforcement. The Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman may extend the aforementioned duration for more periods, not exceeding two times.

TURN TO P3

HM GIVES AUDIENCE TO PRESIDENT OF WORLD BANK



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik with Ajay Banga, President of the World Bank Group, at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday. Report on P3

OMAN

HM presides over Cabinet meeting



FROM PAGE 1

This, the Council of Ministers observed, reflected positively on the national economy and helped achieve a number of economic and social priorities, provide the requirements of expansion in government services offered to the community and consolidate spending on projects of various sectors, including education, health and social welfare.

In this context, and, with reference to the growth of the actual contribution of promising economic activities to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a tangible rise in the added value of non-economic activities and, with the aim of doubling efforts and reinforcing the non-oil trade balance, His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to the Council of Ministers to continue focusing on positive factors that enhance economic growth, back the role of the private sector in its drive to benefit from opportunities of partnerships made available through programmes and projects implemented by the government — while at the same time engaging in strategic economic and commercial partnership agreements that the Sultanate of Oman concluded recently with other countries of the world.

His Majesty the Sultan also laid emphasis on the significance of implementing the National Local Content Policy with the aim of enhancing Omani industries, encouraging the establishment of local projects, minimising dependence on imports, augmenting the volume of exports and supporting related productive industries.

After listening to a briefing on the State's General Budget for fiscal year 2025 — the last budget in the current Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), as well as the general framework for preparation of the 11th Five-

Year Plan (2026-2030), the Council of Ministers gave directives to the authorities concerned to follow up the implementation of the current plan, assess the extent to which its goals have been achieved, state the challenges posed to its programmes and complete the remaining projects of the current five-year plan.

The Council of Ministers also stressed the fact that the 11th Five-Year Plan should include specific programmes and projects for implementing the priorities and indices of Oman Vision 2040 as planned, while at the same time bearing in mind the need to boost the growth of projects that are expected to provide added value to the national economy and generate jobs for Omani citizens.

After studying the most outstanding efforts made by different government departments during 2024 and the objectives of 2025 and, after the Council of Ministers listened to a briefing about the efforts exerted by the Central Bank of Oman, the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, the Tax Authority, Oman Investment Authority, the State Audit Institution, His Majesty the Sultan stressed the importance of pressing ahead with cooperation and coordination among the departments concerned in a manner that consolidates economic growth, generates employment opportunities for Omani citizens and reflects positively on the improvement of the Sultanate of Oman's indices at all levels.

On the other hand, and, following a briefing on accomplishments made in the health sector — deemed one of the top national priorities — His Majesty the Sultan expressed his satisfaction over the positive outcomes in this regard. He lauded the role of the Ministry of Health and its achievements and thanked

THE 11TH FIVE-YEAR-PLAN SHOULD INCLUDE PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE PRIORITIES AND INDICES OF OMAN VISION 2040

BOOSTING THE GROWTH OF PROJECTS THAT ARE EXPECTED TO PROVIDE ADDED VALUE TO THE NATIONAL ECONOMY AND GENERATE JOBS FOR OMANIS

EXPANDING NUCLEAR MEDICINE SERVICES BY ESTABLISHING A RADIOISOTOPE PRODUCTION FACILITY AND A NUCLEAR PHARMACY FOR CANCER PATIENTS

all personnel of the health sector for their valuable efforts in offering the best healthcare services.

In this context, and, in further consolidation of specialised health services, the Council of Ministers approved the establishment of the National Genome and Human Data Centre (Genome Oman) in the Ministry of Health with the aim of establishing a genetic database of Omani society and expanding areas of research in this domain that would improve early diagnosis of treatment targeting hereditary diseases.

The Council of Ministers also gave directives to set up a National Centre for Ophthalmology and Eye Surgery that accommodates all related services and keeps pace with the growing demand of society for this service.

The centre is envisaged to introduce the latest technologies in diagnosis and treatment and to conduct related research.

The Council of Ministers also gave directives to launch a national programme for early detection of the most common cancer cases among women by establishing 7 early detection units covering all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, in addition to expanding nuclear medicine services by establishing a radioisotope production facility and a nuclear pharmacy to cover the rising demand for radiopharmaceutical isotopes to diagnose and treat patients with cancer.

After the Council of Ministers listened to a briefing about the Social Protection Scheme that was established with the aim of providing social care and support, enhancing social solidarity, protecting entitled segments and achieving social and economic stability in society, His Majesty the Sultan stressed the importance of the competent authorities to follow up over the performance of the

Scheme and all its programmes, while at the same time assessing them on an ongoing basis.

Following a briefing about the progress made within the National Employment Programme — and the efforts and initiatives made by the competent authorities to address the challenges posed to the programme — the Council of Ministers laid emphasis on the integration of efforts among the departments supervising the economic sectors that generate employment opportunities. The Cabinet advised those departments to devise appropriate plans and mechanisms for 'replacement and localisation' in those sectors in a manner that accelerates the employment of the national workforce, notably job-seekers.

After reviewing a number of social phenomena, the challenges facing the population structure and their social, economic and cultural impacts, and related demographic developments that may affect some aspects of life, His Majesty instructed the Council of Ministers to conduct necessary studies and develop specific programmes and policies tailored to find appropriate solutions to all challenges in this regard.

As part of His Majesty the Sultan's review of relations with Arab and friendly countries, he spoke about the good outcome of visits and meetings that took place over the past period. His Majesty stressed the significance of the Sultanate of Oman's maintaining cooperation with all countries and in all fields to help achieve common interests in a manner that is consistent with Oman's steadfast principles.

At the conclusion of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan spoke about various aspects of interest to the nation and citizens. He gave his noble directives in this regard, wishing all further success and prosperity. — ONA



HM, World Bank chief explore ties



HIS Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik gave an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday to Ajay Banga, President of the World Bank Group.

The audience discussed a set of economic and developmental topics. It also explored various aspects of cooperation between the departments concerned in the Sultanate of Oman and the World

Bank Group. Additionally, the audience reviewed the march of latest economic developments in the Sultanate of Oman. It also discussed means

of expanding prospects of partnership with the World Bank Group particularly at the level of exchanging expertise, sharing knowledge, developing capabilities of national competencies and

means of supporting the World Bank's role and initiatives in the region. The audience was attended by Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance. — ONA

Royal Decrees ratify budget, restructure CBO

FROM PAGE 1

Article (4) cancels the Banking Law issued by Royal Decree No 114/2000, as well as all that contradicts the attached law or contravenes its provisions.

Article (5) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and shall be effective from the day following its date of publishing.

Royal Decree No 3/2025 on the promulgation of the System of the Central Bank of Oman.

Article (1) states that the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) shall have a legal personality and shall enjoy financial and administrative independence in a manner that empowers the CBO to exercise its duties, functions and tasks and achieve its objectives. The CBO shall be governed by the provisions of the System attached to this decree.

Article (2) states that the headquarters of the Central Bank of Oman and its main treasuries shall be in the Governorate of Muscat. Under a specific decision, the Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman may establish branches, treasuries, offices and other facilities within the Sultanate of Oman or abroad to carry out its missions, functions and tasks.

Article (3) stipulates that the organisational structure of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) shall be approved in accordance with the appendix attached to this decree. The establishment, amendment and cancellation of administrative divisions in the structure shall be made under a decision by the Governor of the Central Bank of Oman, after the approval of the CBO's Board of Directors and the authorities concerned.

Article (4) states that wherever the phrases “Board of Governors” and “Chief Executive Officer” appear in the laws and Royal Decrees, the phrases shall be replaced with the phrases “Board of Directors” and “Governor”, as appropriate.

Article (5) cancels all that contradicts this decree and the attached system or contravenes their provisions.



Article (6) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of its issue.

Royal Decree No 4/2025 on the Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman.

Article (1) appoints HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman, along with his existing grade and financial allocations.

Article (2) states that the following shall be members in the Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman: Minister of Economy as Deputy Chairman; Governor of the Central Bank of Oman; Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance; Chairman of the Financial Services Authority; Sayyidah Rawan bint Ahmed bin Thabit al

Busaidy; Dr Said bin Mubarak bin Said al Mahrami; Dr Khalfan bin Mohammed bin Khalid al Barwani; and Dr Jamil bin Darwish bin Jamil al Shaqsi.

Article (3) cancels all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

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

Royal Decree No 5/2025 on appointing a Governor for the Central Bank of Oman.

Article (1) appoints Ahmed bin Ja'afar bin Salim al Musallami as Governor of the Central Bank of Oman, with the rank of Minister.

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

Royal Decree No 6/2025 on amending some provisions of Royal Decree No 64/83 on the establishment of the College of Banking and Financial Studies.

Article (1) states that the name “Board of Directors of the College of Banking and Financial Studies” shall be amended to “Board of Trustees of the College of Banking and Financial Studies” wherever the name appears in the aforementioned Royal Decree No 64/83.

Article (2) states that text of Article (4) of Royal Decree No 64/83 shall be replaced by the following text:

“The Board of Trustees of the College of Banking and Financial Studies shall be formed by a decision of the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Oman after the approval of

the Board — from an odd number of not less than 5 members, including the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the Deputy Chairman and 2 members representing the banking sector.”

Article (3) cancels all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article (4) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and shall come into effect on the day following the date of its publication.

Royal Decree No 7/2025 on appointing advisers in the Private Office.

Article (1) appoints Hussein bin Ali bin Abdul Latif as Adviser in the Private Office, with the rank of Minister.

Article (2) appoints Sayyid Dr Sultan bin Ya'arub bin Qahtan al Busaidy as Adviser in the Private Office, with the rank of Minister.

Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 8/2025 on approving the Organisational Structure of the Royal Court Affairs.

Article (1) approves the Organisational Structure of the Royal Court Affairs in accordance with the appendix attached to this decree.

Article (2) cancels all that contradicts this decree, or contravenes its provisions.

Article (3) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 9/2025 deals with promotion to the rank of “Major General” and the appointment of a Head of the Special Medical Affairs Unit at the Royal Court Affairs.

Article (1) states that Brigadier Dr Saif bin Zahir bin Saif al Salmi shall be promoted to the rank of “Major General” and appointed as “Head of the Special Medical Affairs Unit at the Royal Court Affairs”.

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



MUSCAT NIGHTS — A FESTIVAL OF VIBES



VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, JAN 1

MUSCAT Nights festival, which opened on December 23, has completed its first week and has significantly enhanced the city's nightlife.

According to official estimates, over 250,000 people visited various festival venues in the first five days until December 28. It is expected that

this number will increase in the new year, especially with arrangements for visitors to watch the Gulf Cup final between Oman and Bahrain.

The daily events at Muscat Nights continue until 11 pm on weekdays and midnight on weekends.

With the pleasant weather, the city's night venues are bustling with visitors of all ages. Al Naseem Public Park is the largest venue, offering ample space for visitors to enjoy the night with friends and family.

Main attractions at Al Naseem Public

Park include electric games for children, halwa-making stalls, traditional Omani performances starting at 5 pm and fireworks. The park has been renovated, especially the restrooms and benches, giving it a fresh look.

While activities are limited compared to other venues, it remains a popular spot for residents of Muscat, Barka and other parts of Al Batinah South Governorate.

Organisers have strategically spread out Muscat Nights across the capital, ensuring that residents from all corners

With the pleasant weather, the city's night venues are bustling with visitors of all ages. Al Naseem Public Park is the largest venue, offering ample space for visitors to enjoy the night with friends and family

of the city have access to at least one venue during the event. A live kitchen selling Omani snacks and sweets is a major draw, as it is a staple in all festivals.

"Omani foods and sweets are only easily available during heritage events, as there are limited shops or restaurants selling authentic Omani food prepared openly in front of others," noted one visitor.

A performance by the Mounted Police Command is scheduled at Al Naseem Public Park on January 17.

SHORT TAKES

HM RECEIVES CABLES OF THANKS FROM SAUDI KING, CROWN PRINCE

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received two cables of thanks from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister in response to His Majesty’s congratulatory cable on the occasion of the Kingdom winning a bid to host the 2034 Fifa World Cup.

In the cable, King Salman and Prince Mohammed expressed their appreciation for His Majesty’s heartfelt sentiments, wishing him good health and happiness. They also wished the Omani people further progress and prosperity.

— ONA

TRA SETS LIMIT FOR EMPLOYING EXPATS IN NETWORK OPERATION CENTRES

MUSCAT: The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has issued a decision to determine the percentage of employment of non-Omanis in Network Operations Centres (NOC).

The decision, which addresses TRA licensees, seeks to raise the efficiency of national cadres, enabling them to manage this vital sector in line with the Authority’s strategy and the approaches of Oman Vision 2040.

The decision sets the aforementioned percentage at a maximum of 6 per cent of the total number of employees in these centres.

The licensees who have not yet achieved the above-mentioned percentage are granted a period of up to 8 months to adjust their status in line with the specified percentage.

The decision also instructs the licensees to submit a clear-cut Omanisation plan that will be reviewed and approved by the TRA. It also requires the licensees to submit monthly follow-up reports on the implementation of their respective plans.

The reports have to indicate the progress made in achieving this percentage, as per the TRA decision.

— ONA

EA’s electronic platform to evaluate, improve performance

KABEER YOUSUF
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In various classifications and divisions within the Environment Authority (EA), institutional performance will be evaluated and encouraged to improve thanks to an electronic platform. This platform helps evaluate and improve performance based on the axes and priorities of the Oman Environment Strategy, which aligns with Oman Vision 2040. The launch took place under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority.

The platform is designed to align with the sectoral objectives of relevant entities that intersect with the institutional objectives of the EA. It provides the advantage of monitoring the extent to which these objectives are achieved by measuring and evaluating performance through specific indicators and targets.

The new system to evaluate institutional performance within the institution via an electronic platform consists of three sub-systems. Additionally, it includes a window for



The platform is designed to align with the sectoral objectives of relevant entities that intersect with the institutional objectives of EA.

presenting improvement and developing ideas. These sub-systems are the Strategy Performance Management System, the Operations Performance Management System and the Project Performance Management System.

Salah bin Salem al Hajri, Director of the Quality Department at the Environment Authority, explained that the strategy performance management system is responsible for feeding the sub-systems and entering basic data for other performance measurement systems. These systems include the project performance management system and the operational performance management system, which consists of 17

processes.

Furthermore, the system was developed to enable officials and employees to create and approve goals and measurement indicators. They can also create scheduled activities specified by various measurement tools. This will allow them to verify activities and conduct evaluations according to the specified schedule.

The system will calculate the overall performance of operational processes and projects to achieve the strategy’s goals according to the weight that was established. The project performance management system was also developed to create tasks and stages of project implementation within the institution.

SAYYID BADR, SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER DISCUSS TIES

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister made a phone call with Assad Hassan al Shaibani, Foreign Minister of the interim Syrian government.

The Foreign Minister reaffirmed the Sultanate of Oman’s steadfast position in supporting the will of the



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister.

Syrian people, preserving Syria’s sovereignty and unity, as well as strengthening the historical ties between the Omani and Syrian peoples.

He also stressed the importance of maintaining mutual cooperation and supporting efforts for development and stability in Syria and the region.

— ONA

RO 26 million projects to come up in Al Sharqiyah S

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

AL Sharqiyah South Governorate has signed several contracts in the municipal sector worth RO 26.3 million during the Investment and Partnership Forum organised by the Department of Small and Medium Enterprises Development in partnership with the Governorate and Sur Industrial City (Madayn). The forum was held under the auspices of Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, aiming to enhance infrastructure and achieve urban and economic development in the various wilayats of the governorate.

Dr Al Maawali stressed that these projects reflect the governorate’s commitment to achieving balanced development in all its wilayats.

The signed contracts included the construction of a 149.2 km internal road network in the wilayats of Sur, Al Kamil W’al Wafi, Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan, Jaalan Bani Bu Ali and Masirah. These projects aim to improve connectivity between the interior regions and enhance ease of movement, which contributes to supporting urban development and stimulating economic activities.

The contracts also included improving mountain roads in the Wilayat of Sur in the areas of Qaab, Abbat, Al Manqal and Al Jila village

These projects aim to improve connectivity between the interior regions and enhance ease of movement, which contributes to supporting urban development and stimulating economic activities.



in the Niyabat of Tiwi, as well as rehabilitating and developing road paths within the Wilayat of Sur.

This reflects the governorate’s keenness to improve the road network to meet the needs of the population and enhance sustainable development. The most prominent of these projects are: Developing the waterfront in the Niyabat of Al Ashkharah on an area of 74,172 square metres, which will include integrated entertainment and sports facilities. Lighting the coastal road from Ras al Hadd to Al Ashkharah using modern lighting technologies to improve night services and enhance traffic safety.

Al Suwaih Park in the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali will include tourist facilities, a children’s play area and spaces designated for camping, making it an integrated entertainment destination. Developing the tourist facility in the Saiq area in the Wilayat of Al Kamil W’al Wafi. Contracts were also signed to establish the Al Shamkhiya

Multipurpose Centre in the Wilayat of Masirah, which will host cultural and social activities, in addition to designing and implementing a new park in Falaj al Mashaikh in the Wilayat of Jalan Bani Bu Hassan to provide service and entertainment facilities for residents.

The projects included improving lighting in the Wilayat of Masirah by installing modern lighting poles, in addition to replacing decorative lighting poles on the road leading to the old market in the Wilayat of Sur.

Work is also underway to design a 1.9 km long Al Barr Path and Walkway Project in the Wilayat of Sur, which will include walking and cycling paths, in addition to sports and entertainment facilities.

The governorate signed four contracts for establishing a commercial residential project in the Sur slaughterhouse and investments at Al Barr Park in the Wilayat of Sur and the Al Suwaih Park, apart from establishing a café in Al Ashkharah Park.

سلطنة عُمان
وزارة النقل والاتصالات وتقنية المعلومات
Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

إعلان مزاييدة استثمارية

Investment Announcement

Investment Announcement No. 1/2025

Bidding for the Development, Management and Operation of a Water Taxi Service

The Internal Investment Committee of the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology announces the launch of the following Bidding for local and international companies and investors specialized in developing, managing and operating of Water Taxi Service in the Sultanate of Oman. Interested parties are invited to submit investment proposals in accordance with the terms outlined in this announcement and as detailed in the tender documents and attachments.

NUMBER	DOCUMENT PURCHASING DATE	CLARIFICATION PERIODS	CLOSING DATE	DOCUMENT FEES
1/2025	02/01/2025 to 09/02/2025	09/02/2025 to 23/02/2025	06/04/2025 12:00 PM	100 Omani Rials (non-refundable)

- Document fee should be paid by bank transfer only to the Ministry’s account number **0325001361300017** Bank Muscat
- The payment receipt must be sent to **investment@mtcit.gov.om**
- The bidding document will be shared via email
- The Investment proposals must include all the requirements mentioned in the Bidding document
- The Investment proposal must be valid for at least 12 months and should be signed and stamped
- All investment proposals should be sent as PDF to **investment@mtcit.gov.om**
- For any other inquiries, you can reach us via the following contact details:

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

INTERNAL INVESTMENT COMMITTEE

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WORLD

SHORTTAKES



A young woman holds the Flag of Syria as people celebrate the New Year near Umayyad Square in Damascus. — AFP

SYRIA’S NEW INFO MINISTER PROMISES FREE PRESS

DAMASCUS: Syria’s minister of information in the country’s transitional government said that he is working towards a free press and committed to “freedom of expression”, after decades of tight control under the country’s former rulers. “We are working to consolidate freedoms of the press and expression that were severely restricted” in areas controlled by the former government of Bashar al-Assad, said the minister, Mohamed al-Omar.

“There was a heavy restriction on freedom of the press and expression under the regime which practised censorship. In the period to come, we are working on the reconstruction of a media landscape that is free, objective and professional,” Omar said.

Diplomats from around the region and from the West have made contact with Syria’s new rulers, who have also vowed to protect the country’s religious and ethnic minorities. “We don’t want to continue in the same way, that is, have an official media whose aim is to polish the image of the ruling power,” Omar said. — AFP



Police cordon off the intersection of Canal Street and Bourbon Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans. — AFP

10 people dead as man drives pick-up truck into crowd in New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS: A man “hellbent on creating carnage” drove a pickup truck at high speed into a crowd of New Year revellers in New Orleans on Wednesday, killing at least 10 people and injuring more than 35. Police said the incident took place at around 3:15 am in the heart of the city’s famous French Quarter, which was packed with people celebrating the arrival of 2025.

Investigators have found a suspected improvised explosive device at the scene of a deadly ramming, the FBI said on Wednesday. “We are working on confirming if this is a viable device or not,” Special Agent Alethea Duncan said in a statement to a news conference.

CBS News television reported witnesses saying the truck rammed into the crowd before its driver jumped out and started exchanging gunshots with police. A white truck crashed through a barricade “at a high rate of speed,” witnesses Jim and Nicole Mowrer said to CBS. Policing was heavy over the New Year’s, according to the city, as authorities braced for big crowds. — AFP

HOST GENEVA

Iran to hold nuclear talks on January 13



Iran will hold nuclear talks with France, Britain and Germany on January 13 in Switzerland, media reported on Wednesday. “The new round of talks between Iran and three European countries will be held in Geneva on January 13,” said Kazem Gharibabadi, Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs. Iran’s diplomat Abbas Araghchi said his country was “ready for fair and honorable negotiations” with the West. — AFP

FINAL FAREWELL

Trump says will attend Carter’s funeral



President-elect Donald Trump said he would attend next week’s state funeral for Jimmy Carter, the former US president who died on Sunday and predicted that only House Speaker Mike Johnson could win the vote for the House’s top job. “I do. I’ll be there. We were invited,” Trump said. Trump was also asked what message he had for Republicans who have not followed his lead and backed House Speaker Johnson’s re-election bid. — Reuters

NEW YEAR DISASTER

5 dead in Germany fireworks accidents



Five people died across Germany and a police officer was seriously injured from accidents linked to the powerful fireworks Germans traditionally set off to celebrate the new year, police said in a preliminary count. Some 13 law enforcement officers were injured as a result of the accidents this year, including one seriously, police spokesman, Florian Nath, said. Some 330 people were detained in the capital Berlin overnight, police added. — AFP

SOUTH KOREA TO SEND JEJU AIR CRASH BLACK BOX TO THE UNITED STATES

SEOUL: South Korean investigators, probing a Jeju Air crash which killed 179 people in the worst aviation disaster on its soil, said on Wednesday they will send one of the retrieved black boxes to the United States for analysis. The Boeing 737-800 was carrying 181 people from Thailand to South Korea when it issued a mayday call and belly-landed before hitting a barrier and bursting into flames, killing everyone aboard except two flight attendants pulled from the burning

wreckage.

South Korean and US investigators, including from Boeing, have been combing the crash site in southwestern Muan since the disaster. “The damaged flight data recorder has been deemed unrecoverable for data extraction domestically,” said South Korea’s deputy minister for civil aviation, Joo Jong-wan. “It was agreed today to transport it to the United States for analysis in collaboration with the US National Transportation

Safety Board.”

Joo earlier said both of the plane’s black boxes were retrieved and for the cockpit voice recorder “the initial extraction has already been completed”. “Based on this preliminary data, we plan to start converting it into audio format,” he said, meaning investigators would be able to hear the pilots’ final communications. The second black box, the flight data recorder, “was found with a missing connector”, Joo said. — AFP

Gaza rescuers say 15 killed in New Year strike

GAZA’S civil defence agency said on Wednesday that an Israeli air strike in the territory’s north killed at least 15 people, marking what the rescuers called the New Year’s first deadly attack. “The world welcomed the New Year with celebrations and festivities, while we witnessed 2025 begin with the first Israeli massacre in the town of Jabalia just after midnight,” civil defence agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal said. “Fifteen people were martyred and more than 20 were injured” in the strike on a house where displaced people were living, he said. The Israeli military, when contacted, said it was looking into the reported strike. Since October 6, the military has been conducting a major land and air offensive in northern Gaza, particularly targeting Jabalia and its adjacent refugee camp.

On Monday, United Nations rights experts said the “siege” appears to be part of an effort “to permanently displace the local population as a precursor to Gaza’s annexation”. Bassal said those living in the house were members of the Badra, Abu Warda and Taroush families who had sought refuge there. Nearly all of Gaza’s 2.4 million people have been displaced at least once since the start of the war on October 7 last year. The dead and injured from the strike in Jabalia were moved to Al-Mamadani hospital, said rescuer Mohammed, who provided only his first name. “They were pulled out from beneath the rubble of the targeted house,” he

“

Since October 6, the military has been conducting a major land and air offensive in northern Gaza, particularly targeting Jabalia and its adjacent refugee camp



Palestinian children inspect the damage at the site of an Israeli strike the previous night, in Jabalia. — AFP

said. A relative said rescuers were still searching for any survivors. “The house has turned into a pile of debris,” said Jibri Abu Warda, adding that the strike occurred. He said the explosions shook the area, and rescuers reached the targeted house only in the morning. “It was a massacre, with body parts of children and women scattered everywhere. They were sleeping when the house was bombed,” Abu Warda said. “No one knows why they targeted the house. They were all civilians.”

The military assault, which began on October 6, has since expanded across northern areas of the Palestinian territory and last week targeted a major hospital which is now empty of its staff and patients. On Friday, the military raided Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia,

describing it as “one of the largest” operations targeting militants since the start of the war. The raid and arrest of the hospital’s director have drawn global attention to Gaza’s broken health care system.

The World Health Organization, Amnesty International and others have called for the immediate release of the director, Hossam Abu Safiyeh, 51, a paediatrician.

A report published on Tuesday by the United Nations Human Rights Office said “insufficient information” has been made available to substantiate “vague” Israeli accusations of military use of hospitals. A separate Israeli strike on Wednesday targeted a group of people in the Al-Manara neighbourhood of Khan Yunis, in Gaza’s south, killing at least four people, civil defence said. — AFP

MAYOTTE FAMILIES LEAVE SHELTERS

MAMOUDZOU: Two weeks after a devastating cyclone hit the French Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte, the atmosphere at Le Manguier school in the capital Mamoudzou is tinged with sadness and resignation.

As December and the old year drew to a close, faces were tense, with everyone aware that the centre — and 20 other emergency shelters like it in the capital — were shutting. They opened their doors on December 13, the day before Cyclone Chido hit and have since been home to nearly 12,500 people. High winds flattened many of the shanty towns in which some 100,000 to 200,000 people lived. — AFP

JUSTICE RALLIES



Students hold up their phones with flashlights during a New Year's Eve protest, in Belgrade. — Reuters

SERBIA ENTERS NEW YEAR WITH PROTESTS OVER TRAGEDY

BELGRADE: Thousands of students marched in Belgrade and two other Serbian cities during a New Year's Eve protest that went into on Wednesday, demanding accountability over the fatal collapse of a train station roof in November. The accident in the city of Novi Sad occurred on November 1 at a newly renovated train facility, killing 14 people — aged six to 74 — at the scene, while a 15th victim died in hospital weeks later.

Public outrage over the tragedy has sparked nationwide protests, with many blaming the deaths on corruption and inadequate oversight of construction projects. In Belgrade, university students held a protest march through the capital city's centre late on Tuesday, where local authorities had organised New Year's Eve celebrations. Alongside the Belgrade march, students in Nis, a university centre in the south of the Balkan country, also held a march to disrupt concerts. Residents gathered at the central city square at the invitation of students. — AFP



KIM ATTENDS CELEBRATIONS

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends an event to celebrate the New Year, in Pyongyang. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his daughter Ju Ae attended the celebrations including fireworks and an ice dancing display. Senior North Korean officials joined them in watching the events. — Reuters

HUNGARY OFFICIALLY DENIED A BILLION EUROS OF EU FUNDS

BUDAPEST: Hungary has officially been denied a billion euros of European Union funds that had been frozen because of corruption, the EU said, the first time the bloc has enforced such a move. Brussels in 2022 began "conditionality" proceedings against Hungary, seeking to block disbursements because of alleged infringements linked to public procurement as well as a lack of control and transparency. Budapest did undertake reforms that allowed

some funds to be unblocked, but a total of 19 billion euros remain frozen.

Under timelines laid out in the EU's conditionality regulation, "the first tranche of suspended commitments", which amounted to 1.04 billion euros, expired at the end of 2024 without the suspension being lifted, the commission said late on Tuesday. That meant that Hungary lost that funding.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban has strengthened his grip on power,

allowing some of his allies to become spectacularly rich.

In July, the European Commission concluded in a report that Hungary did not meet EU democratic standards, notably on corruption, political financing, conflicts of interest and media independence. "They constantly try to take the money of Hungarians by a variety of means and a variety of methods," Orban said in December, threatening to veto the EU's budget to pressure it into relenting. — AFP

In a rare attack, Russian drones strike central Kyiv

RUSSIA launched an aerial attack on the centre of Kyiv in the first hours of 2025, killing two people and drawing fresh anger from officials towards Moscow. The attack — a rare strike on the heart of the Ukrainian capital — came just hours after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky vowed in a New Year's message that he would do everything possible to bring the war to an end over the next 12 months. Ukraine's state emergency services said two were killed, six wounded and four pulled from the rubble after Russian drones were fired towards the capital. Local officials said the damage was caused by falling debris, suggesting the drones had been intercepted. Journalists in the city heard multiple powerful explosions early on Wednesday morning.

Ukrainian officials said the Russian drones targeted the capital's Pechersky district, home to the presidential palace and government quarter. Apartment blocks were hit and Ukraine's central bank said one of its buildings in the city centre was damaged in the attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly threatened to strike at the heart of Kyiv in recent weeks — an attack he said would be a response to Ukraine firing US-supplied weapons on Russian territory.

Zelensky blasted the Russian drone attack. "Even on New Year's night, Russia only cares about hurting Ukraine," he said in a post on Telegram. A total of 111 Russian drones were fired at Ukraine overnight, with 109 either shot down or disabled by Ukraine's air defence systems, the Ukrainian air force said. Both sides have ramped up their aerial attacks over the last two months, seeking to gain an upper hand in the conflict ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump coming to power later in January.

Meanwhile, Russia's gas transit to Europe via Ukraine stopped on Wednesday, Moscow and Kyiv said, ending a decades-long arrangement and marking the latest casualty of the war between the neighbours. Russian gas has been supplied to Europe via pipelines crossing Ukraine since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 in an arrangement that earned revenues for Moscow from the



Firefighters work at a site of a building damaged during a Russian drone strike, in central Kyiv. — Reuters

gas and for Kyiv from the transit fees. The latest transit contract expired on Wednesday, with Ukraine opting not to extend the deal following Russia's 2022 attack.

Kyiv hailed the end of Russian gas transit as a "historic event," and said it would deal a blow to Russia's finances and its war machine. But Moscow casts it as Ukraine shooting itself in the foot and frustrating its partners in eastern Europe that rely on Russian supplies. Slovakia, one of those countries, has slammed the move, but it has been welcomed by others inside the EU, including Poland. Russian gas accounted for less than 10 per cent of the European Union's

gas imports in 2023 — down from more than 40 per cent before the war. But some of the bloc's eastern members are still heavily reliant on Russian imports.

Talk of a possible end to the three-year conflict has risen up the agenda following Donald Trump's victory in the US Presidential election. The incoming Republican has vowed to end the fighting within hours, though has not laid out how he plans to do that. Moscow wants full control of four eastern and southern Ukrainian regions it claims to have annexed, while Kyiv has ruled out territorial concessions for peace. — AFP

South Korea investigators vow to execute Yoon arrest warrant

SEOUL: South Korean investigators said on Wednesday they would execute an arrest warrant for Yoon Suk Yeol over his declaration of martial law by the deadline of January 6, as the impeached leader vowed to fight to the bitter end. Supporters and opponents of Yoon, who was suspended from office by lawmakers over his attempt to subvert civilian rule last month, have been camped outside the compound where he has been holed up for weeks, fending off investigators' efforts to question him. The Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) requested the warrant after Yoon failed to report for questioning a third time, but it has been unclear whether they could execute it as the Presidential Security Service have previously refused to comply with search warrants.

Yoon has remained defiant and late on Wednesday appeared to

suggest he would refuse to hand himself over in a statement shared with supporters camped outside his residence in Seoul. "The Republic of Korea is currently in danger due to internal and external forces threatening its sovereignty and the activities of anti-state elements," he said in the statement, his lawyer Yoon Kab-keun confirmed. "I vow to fight alongside you to the very end to protect this nation," he added, saying he was watching the hundreds-strong protest on a YouTube live stream.

Jo Seoung-lae, a lawmaker for the opposition Democratic Party said in a statement that Yoon's message was "highly inappropriate", calling him "delusional" and accusing him of trying to incite clashes. CIO chief Oh Dong-woon said on Wednesday the warrant would be executed "within the deadline", which is on Monday, January 6. "We aim for a smooth process without major disturbances,



A supporter of impeached South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol holds a placard showing a picture of the president as supporters gather near the presidential residence. — AFP

but we are also coordinating to mobilise police and personnel in preparation," he said to reporters. He also warned that anyone trying to block authorities from arresting Yoon could themselves face

prosecution.

Yoon's legal team have filed for an injunction to block the warrant and claimed on Wednesday the arrest order was "an unlawful and invalid act". The suspended president's

die-hard supporters raced to Seoul to support him. Outside the presidential compound dozens of people — some in elaborate costume — could be seen chanting, singing and hurling vitriol at police. As night fell pro-Yoon protesters waved glowsticks and anti-impeachment placards. South Korean officials have previously failed to execute arrest warrants for lawmakers — in 2000 and 2004 — due to party members and supporters blocking police from entering for the seven-day period the warrant was valid.

On Wednesday, the majority of Yoon's remaining staff, including his chief of staff and special advisors, all tendered their resignations to the country's acting president — who rejected them, calling instead for unity. "This is a time for everyone to come together for the stability of the livelihood of the people and national affairs," acting president Choi Sang-mok said. — AFP

OPINION

How power of open data drives environmental progress



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI

The writer is environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

As we step into a new year filled with possibilities, it feels fitting to begin this column by focusing on a topic that has the potential to shape Oman’s future in profound ways: open environmental data. New beginnings call for fresh ideas, and few concepts hold as much promise for innovation, collaboration, and sustainability as the idea of making environmental knowledge accessible to all. This is not just about sharing information but about unlocking opportunities, inspiring creativity, and building a more resilient future.

Imagine a fisherman in the Wilayat of Sur, Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, checking real-time data to plan a sustainable catch, a renewable energy startup in the Wilayat of Al Duqm, Al Wusta Governorate, leveraging shared information to design groundbreaking solutions, or a student in Muscat analysing emissions data for a science project that sparks global recognition. These scenarios are not far-fetched dreams but achievable realities when environmental data is open, transparent, and actionable.

The Sultanate of Oman is already taking steps in this direction, and the possibilities ahead are immense. Globally, open environmental data has proven its value time and again. Platforms like Google

Earth Engine allow researchers to monitor forest cover and track climate changes with unparalleled accuracy.

In Europe, shared data ecosystems enable countries to tackle environmental challenges together. In South East Asia, community-driven initiatives are using open data to advocate for equitable policies and effective solutions. These examples highlight a universal truth: access to data drives accountability, innovation, and meaningful progress. For Oman, this represents a moment of opportunity and leadership. Oman Vision 2040, with its focus on sustainability and innovation, sets the stage for the country to lead in this space.

The Environment Authority’s initiatives, combined with digital platforms like the Oman Open Data Portal, create a strong foundation for collaboration. With over 355 datasets from 30 entities, the portal is a treasure trove of information that gives policymakers tools to craft targeted strategies, entrepreneurs the insights to explore new opportunities, and educators the resources to inspire the next generation of environmental leaders.

By tapping into this wealth of data, Oman is building a bridge to a sustainable future. Oman’s unique position in the Arabian

By making data accessible, Oman can attract foreign investments, develop cutting-edge technologies, and strengthen its role as a regional hub for sustainability. The economic and social benefits of such an approach are vast, and the time to act is now.

Peninsula, with its rich biodiversity and ambitious green initiatives, makes it an ideal leader in the global movement for open environmental data. By making data accessible, Oman can attract foreign investments, develop cutting-edge technologies, and strengthen its role as a regional hub for sustainability. The economic and social benefits of such an approach are vast, and the time to act is now. This vision, however, requires more than just creating platforms. It demands a shift in mindset, where data is viewed not as a resource to be guarded but as a tool to be shared. Citizens must be aware of its availability and value, and stakeholders must work together to ensure its quality and relevance.

These are not obstacles but opportunities to build a culture of transparency and shared responsibility. The promise of open environmental data is transformative. It is a chance to shape a future where sustainability and innovation thrive side by side. This is not just a new beginning for data; it is a new beginning for how we think about progress, collaboration, and the environment.

With the tools already in place and the will to lead, Oman can be poised to create a brighter, greener, and more inclusive future for all.

End of Russian gas via Ukraine sparks unease in Eastern Europe

ELENA COVALENCO

Ukraine’s decision to turn off the taps keeping Russian gas flowing via its territory to Europe has already sown trouble in the continent’s east, with Moldova declaring a state of emergency and Slovakia threatening Kyiv with retaliation. Under a five-year deal signed in 2019 Ukraine had allowed Russia to pipe gas to Europe via its territory.

But that agreement is set to expire in the new year with Kyiv unwilling to extend it as a result of Moscow’s attack. Although Europe has fought to wean itself off dependence on Russian gas since President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022, several eastern European states still look to Moscow for much of their energy needs. That represents an ongoing income stream for the Kremlin which Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky wishes to dry up. Almost a third of the Russian gas sold to Europe is transported via Kyiv’s territory, said Phuc-Vinh Nguyen, head of the Jacques Delors Institute’s Energy Centre. The remainder is transported via a pipeline under the Black Sea to Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, or else by shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG). But Tuesday’s data from Ukrainian operator OGTU showed deliveries via the only entry point for Russian gas into Ukraine dropping to zero as of January 1, 2025. The situation is at its most critical in Moldova, which borders Ukraine and has to contend with Russian-backed separatists at home. The tiny nation had already introduced a 60-day state of emergency earlier this month in anticipation of Kyiv’s expected cut. Then on Saturday, Russia’s Gazprom announced it too would halt gas deliveries due to a dispute over debt, sparking furious accusations of “oppressive tactics” from Moldova’s prime minister. In the capital Chisinau, where most of the festive light displays will be snuffed out, some residents voiced their fear of what comes next. “It’s terrible, nobody knows what’s going to happen. I’ve bought some candles and a generator,” Cristina, a 21-year-old student who refused to give her surname, said to AFP. Gazprom had already reduced its deliveries to Moldova since the beginning of the war, with the Russian company solely supplying the unrecognised breakaway state of Transnistria. But the Moscow-backed region’s power station still provides some two-thirds of the electricity consumed across the country.

“The Kremlin has once again resorted to energy blackmail in order to influence the 2025 parliamentary elections and undermine our European path,” said Moldova’s President Maia Sandu. The pro-European politician was reelected in November after a vote marred by accusations of Russian interference. Sandu offered humanitarian aid for the residents of breakaway Transnistria, who would otherwise find themselves without heating in the depths of midwinter. But the local authorities refused, said Alexandru Flenchea, a former government official and conflict resolution expert specialising in the region. — AFP

Luck and logic in superstitions

EVER found yourself avoiding a black cat, nervously knocking on wood, or tossing salt over your shoulder after a spill? Congratulations: you’re human. Superstitions, those quirky, irrational beliefs, have been humanity’s awkward companions for centuries. Even in our age of smartphones and space travel, we still hold onto these age-old rituals, just in case.

Because, hey, who wants to tempt fate? Take the classic “walking under a ladder brings bad luck.” Sure, it sounds like nonsense today, but it has both historical and practical roots.

In ancient Egypt, ladders formed a triangle, symbolising the sacred trinity. Walking through one was like announcing, “I disrespect sacred geometry!” Meanwhile, on the practical side, strolling under a ladder increases your chances of a paint can hitting your head.

Practicality and mysticism — an unbeatable combo for scaring people into compliance. Modern psychology even backs this up.

Studies show we avoid “culturally taboo” actions, even when we know better. It’s like telling yourself that eating chocolate at midnight won’t ruin your diet but still not risking it because what if? In Western lore, black cats get a bad rap — cross your path, and doom shall follow.

But hop over to Japan or Scotland, and they’re considered lucky. The discrepancy likely traces back to the Middle Ages when black cats were accused of moonlighting as witches’ familiars. (Tough gig for a feline just trying to nap in peace.)

Here’s where it gets interesting: believing in bad luck can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you expect bad things, you’re more likely to notice every stubbed toe and spilled coffee as proof. In Arab cultures, black cats also carry a mystical edge, often linked to jinn.

Ancient folklore and religious tales wove black animals into the fabric of the supernatural, leaving us with cats that are, frankly, more misunderstood than villains in Disney movies. The next time someone knocks on wood, know that they’re summoning the spirits of ancient pagan trees. No, really. Pagans believed protective spirits



Even in our age of smartphones and space travel, we still hold onto these age-old rituals, just in case. Because, hey, who wants to tempt fate?

lived in trees, and a quick knock would call for their help. Today, it’s less about spirits and more about reducing anxiety.

Say you just bragged about your flawless driving record, knocking on wood feels like a little insurance policy against tempting fate. Interestingly, psychologists have found that superstitions spike during stressful times, such as job interviews, exams, or, say, watching your

favourite football team blow a lead. They offer comfort, even when we know they’re as effective as using a spoon to cut steak. From rabbit’s feet to four-leaf clovers, lucky charms work not because of magic but because they make us feel confident.

A University of Cologne study showed that carrying a lucky charm improves performance — thank you, placebo effect! Confidence, it turns out, is half the battle, whether you’re presenting in a meeting or attempting to parallel park without hitting the kerb. Then there’s the infamous Friday the 13th. A study once reported a rise in accidents on this day, likely because people were so anxious they became clumsy. Proving, once again, that fear can trip us up — literally.

Superstitions are as diverse as the people who hold them.

In Europe, crossing your fingers for luck and throwing salt over

your shoulder are time-honoured traditions. In Asia, the number 4 is avoided like the plague because it sounds like “death.” Chopsticks stuck upright in rice? A no-go because it mimics funeral incense. In Africa, owls have long been linked to bad omens, and pregnant women are advised to avoid night time outings — practical advice wrapped in cultural storytelling.

Meanwhile, South Americans start the New Year in yellow underwear (for prosperity, not fashion) and avoid sweeping someone’s feet to keep their marriage prospects alive. If nothing else, superstitions offer a colourful window into cultural quirks. While science may roll its eyes at these beliefs, superstitions tell a deeper story about humanity. They reflect our universal desire for control and comfort in an unpredictable world.

When life feels like a game of chance, tossing salt, knocking on wood, or carrying a lucky charm feels like a way to tip the odds in our favour, even if the odds are purely psychological. So, the next time you catch yourself avoiding cracks in the pavement, just embrace it; you’re losing nothing anyway.

Superstitions remind us that no matter how far we’ve come with science and technology, a part of us still craves a little “magic”. And honestly, the world could use more of that.



DR KHALFAN AL HARRASI

The author is an academic and researcher

Understanding security dilemma - part 2

NASSER AHMED AL ABRI

THE first part of this article explored foundational literature on the “security dilemma” within security studies and international relations, focusing on realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and Henry Kissinger.

A case study of US-Iran tensions in the Middle East illustrated how states prioritise their national interests to achieve desired outcomes, often shaping foreign policies that include the use of hard power when deemed necessary. Today, we delve into two pivotal themes shaping discourse on the security dilemma — offensive and defensive realism — critical frameworks in understanding international politics and security studies.

A. Offensive realism

Offensive realism argues that states are driven to maximise their power to ensure security, often pursuing regional or global hegemony due to inherent mistrust of other states’ intentions.

John J Mearsheimer, a leading proponent, contends in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics that the anarchic international order compels great powers to seek dominance, as mere survival is insufficient in a competitive global arena. For instance, China’s actions in securing regional hegemony and deterring potential challengers in the South China Sea — such as militarising artificial islands and expanding

its naval power — can be interpreted by other great powers, including the US and its allies, as a clear example of an offensive approach. Similarly, Türkiye’s foreign policy under President Erdoğan reflects offensive realist tendencies. Over the past decade, Türkiye has sought to expand its regional influence through military interventions in Syria and Libya and assertive actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, underscoring a strategy aimed at achieving strategic advantages and securing dominance within its sphere.

B. Defensive realism

Defensive realism, while sharing the anarchic system’s emphasis on fostering distrust, argues that the pursuit of power is tempered by the significant costs and risks associated with overreach. It advocates for measured strategies that prioritise security without provoking counterbalancing alliances or unnecessary conflicts. Robert Jervis, a key figure in defensive realism, used the concept of the security dilemma to analyse Cold War dynamics and ethnic conflicts, emphasising that ambiguity in state intentions can exacerbate mistrust. However, adopting defensive strategies can mitigate conflict risks.

Stephen Walt extended this framework with his “Balance of Threat” theory, highlighting how states assess threats based on power mobilisation, geographic proximity, and perceived intentions. His work examines questions such as:

What drives countries to support one another’s policies or territorial integrity?

The security dilemma remains central to understanding state behaviour in an anarchic international system, with offensive and defensive realism offering distinct but complementary perspectives.

How do states choose between potential threats when seeking external support?

How do great powers select weaker states to protect, and how do weaker states decide whom to accept as protectors?

Walt’s work underscores the importance of alliances in managing security concerns, while Glenn Snyder examined alliance dynamics within multipolar systems, addressing the dilemmas of overcommitment and abandonment.

As the concept of power evolved, the late 20th century saw the rise of soft power, developed by contemporary realist Joseph Nye. Nye advocated for using soft power to enhance national influence through cultural appeal, diplomacy, and persuasion.

Emerging elements such as technology, data control, and digital media have further redefined the parameters of national power in contemporary international relations.

In short, the security dilemma remains central to understanding state behaviour in an anarchic international system, with offensive and defensive realism offering distinct but complementary perspectives.

While realism underscores the challenges posed by distrust and competition, evolving concepts like soft power and the integration of economic and technological dimensions reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of power in the modern era.

Together, these frameworks provide critical insights for navigating the uncertainties of global security and international politics.

BIDEN TRIES TO BOLSTER LEGACY IN FINAL DAYS IN OFFICE

ANTOINE BOYER

Like prior lame-duck US presidents, Joe Biden has been racing to complete unfinished business in an attempt to bolster his legacy — and protect his signature policies — before handing over the keys to the White House.

With archrival Donald Trump returning to power, Biden’s work to protect his administration’s official actions, and his own reputation, has taken on added impetus, experts say.

“Departing presidents often try to both accomplish as much as they can prior to leaving office and also shape public opinion of their administration,” Robert Rowland, a University of Kansas communications professor, said.

“There are many examples of intense lame-duck periods,” particularly when power changes from party to party, said Julian Zelizer, a history professor at Princeton University.

Biden, whose rare public appearances have shown him visibly physically diminished, is no exception to the rule. His recent decision to commute the sentences of 37 of the 40 federal death row inmates triggered the wrath of his Republican adversary. In response, Trump has vowed to seek to have even more defendants sentenced to death.

“Biden is scared by what he fears President Trump may do,” said Rowland.

The outgoing president had previously granted 39 presidential pardons and commuted sentences for nearly 1,500 people, with the White House hailing it as “the largest single-day grant of clemency in modern history.” “All presidents use their power to pardon or commute sentences at the end of their presidencies,” Wendy Schiller, a Brown University political science professor, said.

Zelizer said the judicial actions may be motivated by Biden seeking to “honour some of the promises he made during his campaign on criminal justice.” One of his most notable decisions, however, was to pardon his son, Hunter Biden, who he said had been subjected to unfair treatment by the courts and prosecutors.

The move provoked strong criticism from Trump and Republicans, but also from close Democratic allies. Rowland said the pardon has “definitely had a major negative impact” on Biden’s reputation, adding impetus to his final days’ work to shape public opinion of his outgoing administration.

Another one of Biden’s pledges was to take action on student debt owed by millions of Americans. Days before Christmas, the outgoing president announced student debt cancellation for 55,000 public service workers.

That brought “the total number of individuals who have been approved for student debt relief under my Administration to nearly 5 million people through various actions,” Biden said.

— AFP

Musk national security risk

It is now fair to ask the question: Is Elon Musk a national security risk?

According to numerous interviews and remarks, Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency co-leader, Vivek Ramaswamy, once appeared to believe he was. In May 2023, Ramaswamy went so far as to publicly state, “I have no reason to think Elon won’t jump like a circus monkey when Xi Jinping calls in the hour of need,” a reference to China’s leader. In a separate X post targeting Musk, he wrote, “the US needs leaders who aren’t in China’s pocket.”

Ramaswamy has since walked back his numerous public criticisms of Musk, but he was right to raise concerns. According to news reports, Musk and his rocket company, SpaceX, face federal reviews from the Air Force, the Defence Department’s Office of Inspector-General and the under-secretary of defence for intelligence and security for failing to provide details of Musk’s meetings with foreign leaders and other potential violations of national-security rules.

These alleged infractions are just the beginning of my worries. Musk’s business ventures are heavily reliant on China. He borrowed at least \$1.4 billion from banks controlled by the Chinese government to help build Tesla’s Shanghai gigafactory, which was responsible for more than half of Tesla’s global deliveries in the third quarter of 2024. China does not tend to give things away. The country’s laws stipulate that the Communist Party can demand intelligence from any company doing business in China, in exchange for participating in the country’s markets. This means Musk’s business dealings in China could require him to hand over sensitive classified information, learned either through his business interests or his proximity to President-elect Donald Trump. No federal agency has accused him of disclosing such material, but as Ramaswamy put it, China has recognised that US companies are fickle. He added, “If Xi Jinping says ‘jump,’ they’ll say, ‘How high?’”

Musk’s relationship with China’s



LT GEN RUSSEL L. HONORÉ

led Task Force Katrina after the devastation of New Orleans and, after retiring from the Army, led a review of security at the US Capitol after January 6, 2021

The fact that Musk spent a quarter of a billion dollars to help re-elect Trump does not give the incoming White House the licence to look the other way at the national security risks he may pose.



Tesla CEO and X owner Elon Musk

leaders could prove a problem for America’s national security given that SpaceX has a near monopoly on the United States’ rocket launches. The United States is in an intense space race with China. In a May interview, Maj Gen Gregory J. Gagnon, the deputy chief of space operations for intelligence at the US Space Force, said that there has never been a buildup comparable to what the Chinese are attempting in space — not even during World War II — and that “an adversary arming this fast is profoundly concerning.” The last thing the US needs is for China to potentially have an easier way of obtaining classified intelligence and national security information.

Musk already has a history of pleasing the Chinese Communist Party. He heaped praise on Xi to commemorate the party’s 100th anniversary. In 2022, earning thanks from Chinese officials, he went to bat for the party by arguing that Taiwan should become a special administrative region of China.

In May 2023, Musk also reportedly told Qin Gang, then the Chinese foreign minister, that Tesla opposed the US decoupling from China, stating that US and Chinese interests are “intertwined like conjoined twins.” Although claiming to be a free-speech advocate, Musk was the first foreigner to contribute an article to China Cyberspace,

a magazine that is run by the Communist regime’s Internet censorship agency.

Chris Stewart, a Republican former congressman and senior member of the House Intelligence Committee, whom Trump reportedly considered nominating as director of national intelligence, once pushed for closed-door briefings on Musk’s China ties. Trump’s choice for secretary of state, Senator Marco Rubio, who previously accused Tesla of covering up for the Chinese Communist Party, introduced a bill to prevent Nasa and other federal agencies from giving contracts to companies linked to China or Russia.

The question now is whether the incoming Trump administration will take this risk seriously.

Musk is one of Trump’s top advisers. Trump may have gone so far as to reject a bipartisan congressional budget measure because it did not have Musk’s stamp of approval. In November, after his election, Trump travelled to Texas to watch Musk’s Starship launch. That is fine, but doing nothing to ensure America’s space apparatus remains secure from potential vulnerabilities would not be. The Musk-China concerns might be just the beginning. In a November letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland and the Pentagon’s inspector-general, two Democratic senators asked that they investigate Musk’s “reliability as a government contractor and a clearance holder” because of his reported conversations with Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials. In a separate letter, the senators asked the Air Force secretary, Frank Kendall, to reconsider SpaceX’s “outsized role” in America’s commercial space integration. Kendall wrote back stating that, while he was legally prohibited from discussing Musk’s case, he shared their concerns.

If the federal investigations demonstrate deep connections to China and Russia, the federal government should consider revoking Musk’s security clearance. It should already be thinking about using alternatives to SpaceX’s launch services. — NYT

SPORTS

SPORTS DIPLOMACY



Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to Kuwait, with Abdulrahman al Mutairi, Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs in Kuwait.

OMAN’S AMBASSADOR ORGANISES SPORT GATHERING IN KUWAIT

WALEED AL JAHWARI
Kuwait City, Jan 1

Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, the Sultanate of Oman’s Ambassador to Kuwait, organised Omani Sablah Diwaniya in Kuwait (sporting gathering event) on Tuesday.

The event was in the presence of Abdulrahman al Mutairi, Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs in Kuwait.

Al Kharousi said: “The Omani Sablah Diwaniya in Kuwait has a sporting character dedicated to the sports community of the Gulf Cup.”

“We are happy with this gathering between GCC countries, Iraq and Yemen.”

“The tournament has covered a journey of more than half a century, and it is an indicator of the cohesion, as competition is a legitimate right for all, and it is a beautiful event.”

“Kuwait’s organisation is wonderful, and all matters were facilitated easily. We praise the activities and events accompanying the tournament, and we cannot forget the dazzling opening show that witnessed the launch of the 26th Gulf Cup.” Al Kharousi concluded, “This sporting activity came as a conclusion to the year 2024, which is full of events in Kuwait.”

Abdulrahman al Mutairi said: “We are happy with the very special impression of all the participants, media and fans who attended the matches. We always aspire for the best and hear comments and suggestions from many experts and specialists to develop sport events and present a beautiful image of Kuwait.”

Al Mutairi continued, “We will soon announce the celebration of Kuwait as ‘Capital of Arab Culture and Media 2025’, and this will be a different version because Kuwait combines being the capital of culture and media in one year for a minister who holds two portfolios.”

“The opening will be on February 13 in the presence of the Arab ministers of information, as well as a closing ceremony.”

Brilliant Bahrain continue fine run to reach final

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

BAHRAIN shattered the dreams of hosts Kuwait with a lone goal and reached the final of 26th Arabian Gulf Cup in Kuwait City late on Tuesday.

Mohammed Marhoon netted the winner in the 75th minute of the tense semifinal at the Jaber Al Ahmed International Stadium.

Hamad al Shamsan won a free kick for Bahrain on the right wing. Komail al Aswad’s curling kick was headed down by Amine Benaddi in front of the goal and Marhoon wasted no time in tapping into the top right corner of the Kuwait goal.

Kuwait pushed hard for an equaliser in the closing stages, but Bahrain held on to secure victory.

Bahrain will take on Oman, who beat Saudi Arabia 2-1 in the first semifinal, in the title-clash on January 4.

Like in the Oman match, Bahrain were also down to 10 players when midfielder Mahdi al Humaidan was sent off for a second yellow card after a bad foul on Kuwait’s Hamad al Harbi.

Bahrain head coach Dragan Talajic praised his team’s discipline and ability to adapt after the red card.

“I’m very happy for the players and the team. We played a great match, especially in the second half. We were very disciplined and we managed to score the winning goal,” the Croatian coach said after the match.

“We had to play very smart because we were down to 10 men for most of the match. We were able to defend well and counterattack effectively.”

Commenting on the final against Oman, Talajic expects it to be tough.

“We are now looking forward to the final against Oman. It will be a tough match, but we are confident that we can win.

Kuwait coach Juan Pizzi expressed disappointment with the result but praised his players for their efforts.

“I’m disappointed with the result. We had a good first half and created some good chances, but we didn’t take advantage of them.”

“The red card changed the game. We had to play defensively for most part of the second half,” the Spaniard added.



Kuwait’s Mohammad Daham in action with Bahrain’s Mohamed Marhoon. — Reuters



Bahrain’s Mohamed Marhoon scores their first goal against Kuwait during the second semifinal of 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium in Kuwait City, Kuwait. — Reuters

Red Warriors reach seventh Gulf Cup final

WALEED AL JAHWARI
KUWAIT CITY, JAN 1

The Red Warriors reached the final of Gulf Cup for the seventh time after beating Saudi Arabia in the semifinal on Tuesday night.

Oman will meet Bahrain in the title-clash on Saturday.

Oman national team players, led by coach Rasheed Jaber, put up exciting performances and fought until the last moment, as the brilliance was clear in all the matches. Oman’s Arshad al Alawi received the best player award against the Saudi team.

Arshad was able to open the scoring from a direct free kick, and connected the playing lines with calmness and focus in passing.

Issam al Subhi received the best player award against Qatar.

Issam is a candidate for the top scorer of the 26th edition with three goals, equal with Saudi striker Abdullah al Hamdan and Kuwait’s Mohammad Daham.

Al Subhi still has a chance to increase his tally in the final match against Bahrain.



Oman’s Arshad al Alawi receives the best player award.

Ibrahim al Mukhaini received the best player award in the UAE match when he saved a penalty in critical time to help the team to be in the semifinal.

Oman midfielder Salah al Yahyaei was not fit enough to play in the tournament, although there

is a possibility of his presence in the final match.

Omani striker Al Mundher al Alawi, who played the most prominent role in the attacks and playmaking in the Omani attack, received a red card in the first half of the semifinal.



Recall



Recall Date: 02/01/2025

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production	Number of Affected Commodities
Dunlop – 285/60R18 116V GRANDTREK PT5	2023 – 2024	250

Recall consequence

The tyres did not meet the requirements of the GSO53/2007 high speed performance test. The test results indicate failures in the bead area of the tyres occurring between 1 and 14 minutes at a speed of 230 km/h. The defect poses a safety concern, as high speed driving may lead to serious accidents.

Recall Action

A recall plan to replace the tyres with GRANDTREK AT22 tyres at no cost to customers.

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



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SPORTS

GULF CUP



Algerian international referee Mustapha Ghorbal

ALGERIAN
REFEREE GHORBAL
NOMINATED TO
OFFICIATE FINAL

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

Algerian international referee Mustapha Ghorbal is among the top nominees to officiate the final match of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup between Oman and Bahrain on Saturday.

Another two candidates in the list include Qatar’s Abdulrahman al Jassim and Iraq’s Muhannad Qasim. The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) officials shortlisted for the match between the Egyptian Mahmood Ashoor and Chinese Fu Ming.

Algerian referee Ghorbal recently officiated Qatar and Kuwait match in the group matches of the Gulf Cup which ended by a 1-1 draw. He managed to deliver a strong performance with no significant controversies.

He was assisted by his compatriots Djawad Ghorbal and Akram Zoughni while Turkish referee Halil Umut Meler served as the fourth official. The VAR technology was managed by Saudi referee Abdullah al Shahrani and assisted by Tunisian Haythem Kirat.

Ghorbal is ranked as one of the leading and premier referees in the African continent. He became an international referee in 2014. He was among the Best Referee in the World for 2024 according to a list released by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS).

In 2024, he had officiated the first leg of the Champions League final between ES Tunis and Al Ahly at the Hamadi-Agrebi Stadium in Rades. Another major milestone for the African referee is that he had officiated the final match of the 57th edition of the Algerian Cup in 2024 which featured between MC Alger and CR Belouizdad, concluding with a score of 0-1.

Qatar’s Abdulrahman al Jassim is one of the top referees in Asia. He was one of the referees in the Fifa World Cup Qatar 2022 as he had officiated the third-place playoff between Croatia and Morocco which ended for the latter by 2-1. In that match, Qatari referee was assisted by compatriots Taleb al Marri and Saoud Ahmed al Maqaled.



Oman’s Arshad al Alawi takes a free kick during the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup semifinal against Saudi Arabia in Kuwait City.

Jaber hails players’ focus
after red card in semifinal

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

OMAN head coach Rasheed Jaber praised his players’ resilience after being down to 10 players in the crunch semifinal against Saudi Arabia in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup.

“The focus of the players helped us maintain our performance until the end of the match. The most challenging moments were after the red card and the goal scored by the Saudi team, which restored confidence to the Saudi players,” the Omani coach told a post-match press conference.

At the Jaber Al Mubarak Al Hamad Stadium, Omani striker Al Mundher al Alawi was sent off with a red card by Turkish referee Halil Olmut in the 34th minute after a foul on Saudi’s star player Salem al Dawsari.

The players deserve credit for the outstanding performance in a difficult situation, Jaber said.

“The match was difficult, but the players were focused and made a great effort, which they should be commended for.”



Oman head coach Rasheed Jaber before the match against Saudi Arabia. — Reuters

“During the half-time break, I spoke to the players about our ability to overcome and succeed despite the challenges, and that was evident in the second half.”

The Oman team is committed to make the fans happy, the coach added.

“We dedicate ourselves to making our fans happy, and the players gave their all to win

the game,” the Omani coach said.

The coach said the Omani players displayed great professionalism during the match.

“We didn’t take any time-wasting tactics when we played almost 70 minutes with 10 players. We are committed to sportsmanship and professional attitude,” Jaber concluded.

‘OUR FAULT’

Saudi Arabia’s head coach Herve Renard expressed dissatisfaction with the loss, acknowledging, “The loss is our fault and no one else’s fault.”

The French coach highlighted the defensive lapses, particularly regarding the second goal conceded.

“In the second goal, we did not defend well, the defence was completely out of place,” he told reporters.

He emphasised the necessity of defensive enhancements, especially with upcoming World Cup qualifiers.

“We must improve on the defensive level if we want to succeed in the World Cup qualifiers, and not give the opponent this large number of opportunities.”

Shastri wants two-tier Test system after MCG blockbuster

SYDNEY: Former India coach Ravi Shastri called on Wednesday for a two-tier structure in Test cricket with relegation and promotion to ensure the survival of the red-ball game.

His comments follow the blockbuster fourth Test between India and Australia that drew a record 373,691 spectators to the Melbourne Cricket Ground over five enthralling days.

That beat the previous record of 350,534 at the same ground during the 1936-37 Ashes series against England, when Donald Bradman ruled the sport and Tests were played over six days.

Shastri, now a commentator, said he could not remember “a bigger advertisement for Test cricket” and said it proved the five-day game continued to hold its own in the face of ever-increasing T20 franchise cricket.

But the 62-year-old said it also reinforced his view that for Test

cricket to survive, the biggest teams needed to be playing each other more often.

“To break crowd records that have stood for nearly a century... is testimony to the fact that when the best teams play, the toughest and best format of the game is still alive and thriving,” he said in a column for *The Australian* newspaper.

“It was also a sound reminder to the ICC (International Cricket Council) that the best should play the best for Test cricket to survive.

“I will say that there’s too much of a clutter otherwise.

“This match further emphasises why we need a two-tier system with the top 6-8 teams and then include promotion and demotion. You will not get these kinds of crowds if you don’t have two proper teams playing.”

The ICC has been contemplating a two-tier system for years to keep the format competitive but the plans have never got off the ground.



Signage of the current total attendance of 351,104 people is displayed on the big screen, a new MCG Test attendance record. — AAP/Reuters

A proposal for a de facto premier league featuring the top seven sides was on the agenda of the world governing body in 2016.

It was scrapped after the powerful Indian board led a backlash.

While India stand to gain from playing more matches against teams

such as England and Australia, the BCCI said at the time the cost to smaller cricketing nations was too great.

FIVE-DAY FORMAT

Shastri also said the Melbourne game proved that Tests should remain five days, amid chatter that they should be reduced to four to help streamline schedules.

“The theatre in the end on (day five) Monday was further proof of why we need five days for a classic Test match,” he said.

“However, if you don’t create a two-tier system, you’ll continue to have unmatched teams up against each other and then it’s very unlikely they’ll be able to take a game into the fifth day.

“Then there’ll always be talk of four-day Tests.”

Australia won the Test by 184 runs deep into day five and lead the series 2-1 heading into the final clash in Sydney this week. — AFP

SPORTS

BRISBANEINTERNATIONAL



Grigor Dimitrov

NAVARRO STUNNED AS DJOKOVIC-KYRGIOS DOUBLES RUN ENDS

BRISBANE, Australia: Australian wildcard Kimberly Birrell stunned second seed Emma Navarro on Wednesday while the doubles act of Novak Djokovic and Nick Kyrgios came to a shuddering halt at the Brisbane International.

But it was all smiles from defending men's champion Grigor Dimitrov, who powered into the quarterfinals in straight sets.

In the opening match on Pat Rafter Arena, Birrell matched world number eight Navarro stroke-for-stroke to put a dent in the American's Australian Open preparations.

Navarro had a stellar 2024, going deep in all four Grand Slams including a run to the semifinals of the US Open.

She was expected to brush aside the challenge of 26-year-old Birrell, who has never broken into the top 100 in her 10 years on the WTA Tour.

But the Australian, who trains at the Queensland Tennis Centre and is ranked 113, was not intimidated and delighted her home crowd with a nerveless display.

Birrell, who will face 35th-ranked Russian Anastasia Potapova in the last 16, said she embraced the role of underdog.

"I guess it's kind of like one of those situations where you have no choice, you just have to go for it," she said.

Dimitrov continued his love affair with Brisbane by easing past another Australian wildcard, Aleksandar Vukic, 6-2, 7-6 (7/5).

The Bulgarian world number 10 raced through the first set then held off Vukic as the Australian raised his game in the second.

"I'm starting to find my game but I think there is still a lot to do," said Dimitrov.

Djokovic and Kyrgios teamed up for a rare doubles appearance this week, but after winning a close first round were stopped by top seeds Michael Venus of New Zealand and Croatia's Nikola Pietrangeli 6-2, 3-6, 10/8. — AFP



Poland players celebrate after beating Czech Republic in the United Cup in Sydney.

Kazakhstan sink holders Germany at United Cup

PERTH, Australia: Elena Rybakina's Kazakhstan dumped defending champions Germany out of the United Cup on Wednesday with world number two Alexander Zverev sidelined by an arm injury barely a week away from the Australian Open.

The upset in Perth sent the Kazakhs into the semifinals of the 18-nation tournament.

In Sydney, women's world number two Iga Swiatek led Poland into the last eight by winning a rematch of her 2023 French Open final against the Czech Republic's Karolina Muchova.

Britain also progressed to the quarterfinals with Katie Boulter's dominant 6-2, 6-1 victory over Australia's Olivia Gadecki enough to guarantee they won their group.

Sixth-ranked Rybakina earned the first point for Kazakhstan, with the 2022 Wimbledon champion hammering Laura Siegemund 6-3, 6-1. Zverev then withdrew from his clash against Alexander Shevchenko at the last minute with a bicep strain, leaving the 254th-ranked Daniel Masur to face him.

He put up a brave fight but Shevchenko was

too strong, powering home 6-7 (5/7), 6-2, 6-2 despite a medical timeout in the second set, complaining about difficulty breathing.

"I was struggling in this heat, it was so rough," said the world number 78, who upset Stefanos Tsitsipas in group play on Monday.

"I had a headache and my head was spinning. But I wanted to win this one."

"After (losing) the first set I knew I had to shorten the rallies and play aggressively, tee off on the ball. I just kept pushing after the first set and I'm really happy about it."

Five-time Grand Slam winner Swiatek scored a battling victory over Muchova, coming out on top 6-3, 6-4 after teammate Hubert Hurkacz was upset in three sets by Tomas Machac.

Swiatek returned to partner Hurkacz and outlast Muchova and Machac in the deciding mixed doubles 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 to keep their tournament alive. Playing her first event since news broke in late November that she served a one-month ban for a doping violation, Swiatek dropped serve to go 2-1 behind in the first set against Muchova.

But she won the next three games to reassert control and wrapped up the contest comfortably.

"Honestly, I love playing against Karolina because she always brings precision and intensity and a little bit of a different game than most of the girls," Swiatek said.

"So for sure it's a challenge. I'm happy that even though I lost my serve when I thought it's going to be easier, I'm happy that I got my intensity even higher in the last two games to break again."

Swiatek and Muchova had played three times before and they all went three sets, with the Pole winning two including her memorable Roland Garros triumph.

Boulter dominated Gadecki from the start, showing more consistency and depth from the baseline, needing just 70 minutes to secure victory. "I'm just so happy to get through this rubber, I'm not going to lie," she said.

Her Australian fiance Alex de Minaur crushed Billy Harris 6-2, 6-1 in the men's singles, but it was in vain with Britain already through. — **AFP**

سنة جديدة سعيدة ٢٠٢٥

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2025



Poland's Iga Swiatek (right) and Hubert Hurkacz in action against the Czech Republic.



Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina plays a backhand return against Laura Siegemund of Germany.

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New guidelines for govt contracts

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

In a move to strengthen fiscal discipline and streamline the management of financial commitments, the Ministry of Finance has issued Circular No (5/2024), detailing a comprehensive framework for signing contracts and managing the state's financial obligations.

The directive comes in light of Royal Decree No (59/2024) and reflects the government's commitment to ensuring transparency, accountability and efficiency in public spending.

The circular outlines a series of measures aimed at curbing financial mismanagement and fostering better control over

contractual and financial practices across all government ministries and units. This initiative marks a pivotal step in enhancing Oman's fiscal governance as it aligns with the broader objectives of sustainable economic development.

One of the cornerstones of the directive is the emphasis on adhering to approved budgets. The ministry has explicitly prohibited the tendering or awarding of any projects or contracts that create new financial obligations without confirming adequate allocations in the operational or capital budgets.

This measure aims to prevent overspending and ensure that financial resources are allocated efficiently and responsibly.

To reinforce the integrity of

government contracts, the directive mandates compliance with a set of contractual requirements.

Ministries and government entities are required to include guarantees and follow banking procedures, particularly concerning guarantees for government projects. These provisions align with Decision No (169/2023) issued by the Tender Board, ensuring that contracts meet stringent regulatory standards.

Moreover, entities are obligated to submit copies of contracts to the Ministry of Finance for approval before they are signed.

This additional layer of oversight ensures that all contracts are reviewed for fiscal compliance, reducing the risk of irregularities or mismanagement.

The ministry's directive also highlights the need for meticulous planning. Government units must prepare and submit annual project plans to the Ministry of Finance, detailing timelines for project implementation.

This initiative aims to avoid delays, ensuring that projects are completed on schedule and within budget. In addition, entities are required to submit reports for development projects exceeding RO 500,000, further emphasising the importance of transparency in managing large-scale investments.

In a bid to promote local economic growth, the circular requires that all contracts include provisions for local content.

By mandating the integration of local businesses and resources

into government projects, the directive supports Oman's strategy of fostering sustainable economic growth while benefiting local industries. The role of internal audit units is crucial under this new framework. These units are tasked with ensuring compliance with the directive's provisions, conducting regular reviews, and submitting observations to the Ministry of Finance on a quarterly basis.

Such measures underscore the ministry's commitment to holding government entities accountable and ensuring that public funds are managed with the utmost integrity.

The issuance of this circular reflects Oman's vision for a more transparent and accountable financial system.

Korea-Oman JV inks green ammonia production pact



High-level executives of Korea's LUPRO Inc and Oman's Bait Muscat for Development and Investment at the recent agreement signing.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 1

South Korea based global green energy corporation LUPRO Inc has signed agreements with Omani firm Bait Muscat for Development and Investment to support the establishment of a major green ammonia project at Duqm SEZ in the Oman's southeast. Under the agreements signed in Seoul recently, the LUPRO-Oman joint venture commits to supplying LUPRO Inc with 5 million tonnes of green ammonia under a long-term sales contract valued at \$4.5 billion.

High-level executives from LUPRO and Bait Muscat for Development and Investment attended the agreement signing in Seoul last month.

Bait Muscat for Development and Investment was represented by Dr Mohammed bin Hamed al Rumhy, Chairman (who retired in 2022 as Oman's Minister of

Energy and Minerals). Also in attendance was Oman's Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, Zakariya bin Hamad al Saadi. "The project will be implemented in Al Duqm area as part of efforts to enhance international cooperation and support Oman's endeavours in developing clean and sustainable energy," said the Foreign Ministry in a news post on its website on Monday.

Seoul-headquartered LUPRO Inc has interests across the hydrogen-based green energy value chain, encompassing green hydrogen and green ammonia manufacturing, fuel cell power generation, and hydrogen convergence projects.

It has announced joint ventures with firms in Thailand, India, United Arab Emirates and Japan, among other countries, to help create global-scale green energy resources.

In an earlier post, LUPRO stated that its LUPRO-Oman joint venture aims to produce

1 million tonnes of green hydrogen ammonia a year at Al Duqm, utilising green electricity from a 2GW renewable energy complex.

"We plan to expand the supply of hydrogen energy resources, which is an essential resource for responding to the climate crisis facing the world and achieving carbon neutrality, to domestic as well as Asian and global markets, said Kim Se-ho, CEO of LUPRO.

In an interview with South Korea's OBS TV, LUPRO CEO noted that construction work on the green ammonia project in Al Duqm would commence in 2025.

"The Omani government is promoting the green energy business as a national strategic business, and in particular, for the green hydrogen and green ammonia business, it has created the infrastructure in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm and provided tax exemptions for decades," he stated.

Celebrating 50 Years of Excellence and Commitment in Oman

Since 1975, Al Ansari has been dedicated to building a legacy of trust, innovation, and exceptional service. As we celebrate five decades of operations, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our valued customers, partners, and employees who have been an integral part of our journey. Together, we look forward to a future filled with new opportunities and continued success.

"This milestone is a testament to the unwavering trust and support of our community. Thank you for being part of our journey. Here's to shaping the next 50 years together."

KIRAN ASHER

FOUNDER & GROUP MANAGING DIRECTOR

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OMAN

DIGITALPAYMENTS



E-mandate for Direct Debit transactions operates on a one-time mandate basis replacing the physical Direct Debit Mandate.

BANK MUSCAT INTRODUCES E-MANDATE FOR DEBIT TRANSACTIONS

MUSCAT: As part of the Bank's full suite of digital services and solutions, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has announced the launch of the new E-mandate for Direct Debit transactions, implemented for the first time through its Internet Banking platform for the Bank's government and corporate customers.

The service operates on the basis of a one-time authorisation called "Direct Debit Mandate" as a secure and seamless solution for processing recurring and periodic payments. Among other use cases, the E-mandate service is an innovative and technology driven alternative to handling post-dated cheques. The launch of the service came in alignment with the Bank's customer-centric vision "To serve you better, every day" and it underscores its commitment to providing customers with innovative banking solutions backed with the recent technological developments, aiming to meet the evolving customer needs.

E-mandate for Direct Debit transactions operates on a one-time mandate basis replacing the physical Direct Debit Mandate, where customers may authorise a direct debit order to the Bank (beneficiary) to pay their dues, whether of fixed or variable value, for a pre-specified period.

Customers can activate this service through the Bank's Internet Banking to access the E-mandates originated by beneficiaries, and then accept or reject the mandate based on their needs.

Customers will be requested to electronically sign the e-mandate after confirming their request.

The digital E-mandate for Direct Debit offers several advantages and benefits, including streamlined automated payment processing, sending notifications to both the beneficiary and the payer during the process of establishing the E-Mandate, eliminating the hassle of handling physical mandate forms, a simple and operationally efficient method for both the beneficiary and the payer to manage, periodic repetitive and future payments, flexibility to handle variable or fixed payments with revocable or irrevocable authorisation based on the arrangement between the parties, and enabling the beneficiary to easily initiate the E-mandate through digital channels for easy acceptance by the payer.

Abraj Energy secures top HSE excellence awards

ABRAJ Energy Services, Omani's Leading Oil and Gas services provider, has been honoured with two distinguished awards at the ASSP GCC HSE Excellence Awards 2024 in Kuwait. The adjudication panel recommended Abraj for the Gold Award for HSE Excellence in the Oil & Gas category, recognising its leadership in occupational health and safety practices.

Additionally, Abraj received the Silver Award for Best HSE Initiative, recognising its innovative contributions through the Abraj CCTV Support Centre (Abraj Eyes), which plays a key role in advancing workplace safety and environmental responsibility by providing enhanced surveillance and real-time monitoring solutions.

The awards ceremony took place on December 19, 2024, under the auspices of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) and its subsidiaries, along with international regulatory bodies.

Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, stated, "This milestone reflects our deep commitment to integrating occupational health and safety principles into every aspect of our operations. It reinforces our reputation as leaders in workplace safety and operational excellence. It fills us with immense pride as we continue to set the standard of excellence in the Gulf region's private sector."

Abraj's HSE achievements have earned widespread recognition, including a commendation from Kuwait Chevron during their recent



Abraj has solidified its position in the oil and Energy sector through a series of remarkable achievements in 2024.

Recognised for leadership and innovation in HSE practices across the oil and gas sector

visit to an Abraj rig in the Wafra Oil Field.

The delegation acknowledged the company's exceptional safety standards and innovative practices, further reinforcing Abraj's reputation as an operational excellence and safety leader within the oil and energy industry.

Abraj has solidified its position in the oil and Energy sector through a series of remarkable achievements in 2024, including successfully executing a pioneering fracturing project in Nimr Oil Field, commencing operations at Wafra

Oil Field in Kuwait, and launching the HSE Practitioner Program in collaboration with Oman Energy Association (OPAL).

The ASSP GCC HSE Excellence Awards, organised annually by the American Society of Safety Professionals (ASSP) Kuwait Chapter, celebrate leadership and excellence in HSE practices among private sector organisations in the Gulf region. They aim to highlight successful business models of organisations that uphold HSE management as a business value and excel in performance.

Ooredoo Oman best cloud provider in Middle East

MUSCAT: Ooredoo Oman has been honoured as the Best Cloud Provider (Operator) Middle East at the Telecom Review Excellence Awards 2024.

This prestigious accolade, presented during the 18th Telecom Review Leaders Summit, highlights Ooredoo's position as a leader in cloud services and reflects its commitment to delivering transformative solutions across the Sultanate of Oman.

Ooredoo has been a long-standing, trusted provider of cutting-edge cloud services, offering reliable, scalable, and secure hosting solutions to regional and global customers. Backed by managed ICT services experts, Ooredoo operates state-of-the-art data centres in Oman, ensuring full compliance with local data residency requirements while providing businesses with the tools to thrive in an increasingly



Ooredoo has been a long-standing, trusted provider of cutting-edge cloud services, offering reliable, scalable and secure hosting solutions to regional and global customers.

digital world.

The award was collected on behalf of Ooredoo Oman by Saoud al Riyami, Chief Business and Wholesale Officer at Ooredoo, and Asaad al Sadi, CEO of d2c. Under the theme "Global, Regional, Digital," the Telecom Review Leaders' Summit gathered thousands of C-level executives, government officials, and ICT industry leaders, solidifying its reputation as one of the industry's most anticipated gatherings.

Looking ahead, Ooredoo will continue to innovate and invest in advanced technologies, ensuring businesses are equipped to embrace the future.

"This recognition inspires us to push boundaries, drive transformation, and deliver greater value, supporting Oman Vision 2040 for a truly digital and dynamic future," said Al Riyami.

OQ launches Oman's largest private cloud ERP deployment

OQ, a global investment energy group, announced recently the official launch of e-Symphony, its large-scale project to implement RISE with SAP on a private cloud.

This initiative marks a groundbreaking transition of OQ's One ERP platform into a cloud-based environment—opening doors to enhance operational efficiency, advanced analytics, and data-driven decision-making across OQ's operations. Maryam al Shaibani, Vice-President of OQ Corporate IDS, commented, "This milestone signals more than a technological upgrade; it heralds a new era of innovation, where collaboration, real-time analytics, and agility underpin every aspect of our operations. Moving our core business platform to the cloud



OQ's long-standing partnership with SAP spans multiple implementations, including SAP SuccessFactors, SAP Concur, and SAP Integrated Business Planning, demonstrating the organisation's commitment to comprehensive digital transformation.

reinforces our commitment to setting new benchmarks of excellence, both within OQ and across the region."

RISE with SAP on a private cloud gives OQ the flexibility to scale seamlessly, reduce infrastructure costs, and minimise system downtime. As an end-to-end cloud offering, it delivers faster implementation cycles, automated updates, and real-time data insights—critical for agile decision-making and resource optimisation.

By integrating mission-critical functions into a single, secure platform, OQ can respond swiftly to evolving market demands at an unprecedented scale.

OQ's long-standing partnership with SAP spans multiple implementations, including SAP

SuccessFactors, SAP Concur, and SAP Integrated Business Planning, demonstrating the organisation's commitment to comprehensive digital transformation.

Congratulating OQ on this major achievement, Sergio Maccotta, Senior Vice-President, SAP Middle East and Africa - South, said, "OQ's successful deployment of RISE with SAP in a private cloud stands as a testament to its leadership in digital transformation and the company's critical role in advancing Oman's economic ambitions.

By leveraging cutting-edge technology and actionable insights, OQ is not just enhancing its operational efficiency—it is actively shaping an innovation-led future for the country.

INTERNATIONAL

CHINA



The sun sets behind the chimneys of the Total Grandpuits oil refinery, southeast of Paris, France. — Reuters

OIL PRICES POST 3% ANNUAL DECLINE, SLIPPING FOR SECOND YEAR IN A ROW

HOUSTON: Oil prices fell around 3 per cent in 2024, slipping for a second consecutive year, as the post-pandemic demand recovery stalled, China's economy struggled, and the US and other non-OPEC producers pumped more crude into a well-supplied global market.

Brent crude futures on Tuesday, the last trading day of the year, settled up 65 cents, or 0.88 per cent, to \$74.64 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled up 73 cents, or 1.03 per cent, to \$71.72 a barrel. The Brent benchmark settled down around 3 per cent from its final 2023 closing price of \$77.04, while WTI was roughly flat compared to last year's final settlement. In September, Brent futures closed below \$70 a barrel for the first time since December 2021. This year, Brent broadly traded below the highs seen in the past few years as the post-pandemic demand rebound and price shocks of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine began to fade.

Oil is likely to trade around \$70 a barrel in 2025 due to weak Chinese demand and rising global supplies, offsetting OPEC+-led efforts to stabilise the market, a Reuters monthly poll showed on Tuesday.

A weaker demand outlook in China, in particular, forced both the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the International Energy Agency (IEA) to cut their oil demand growth expectations for 2024 and 2025.

The IEA projects the oil market entering 2025 in surplus, even after OPEC and its allies delayed their plan to start raising output until April 2025 against a backdrop of falling prices.

US oil production rose by 259,000 barrels per day to a record high of 13.46 million barrels per day (bpd) in October, as demand surged to the strongest levels since the pandemic, according to data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) on Tuesday.

Output is expected to rise to a new record of 13.52 million bpd next year, the EIA said.

Economic, Regulatory Outlook

Investors will be watching the Federal Reserve's interest rate-cut outlook for 2025 after Fed policymakers this month projected a slower path due to stubbornly high inflation. Lower interest rates generally spur economic growth, which drives energy demand. Some analysts believe supply could tighten next year depending on President-elect Donald Trump's policies, including those on sanctions.

He has called for an immediate ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine war and may reimpose a "maximum pressure" policy towards Iran, which could have major implications for oil markets.

Russian gas era in Europe over after Kyiv ends transit

RUSSIAN gas exports via Soviet-era pipelines running through Ukraine came to a halt on New Year's Day, marking the end of decades of Moscow's dominance over Europe's energy markets. The gas had kept flowing despite nearly three years of war, but Russia's gas firm Gazprom said it had stopped at 0500 GMT after Ukraine refused to renew a transit agreement.

The widely expected stoppage will not impact prices for consumers in the European Union, unlike in 2022, when falling supplies from Russia sent prices to record highs, worsened a cost-of-living crisis, and hit the bloc's competitiveness.

The last remaining EU buyers of Russian gas via Ukraine, such as Slovakia and Austria, have arranged alternative supplies. Hungary will keep receiving Russian gas via TurkStream, which runs two pipelines under the Black Sea.

Transnistria, a breakaway pro-Russian region of Ukraine's neighbour Moldova, also reliant on the transit flows, cut off heating and hot water supplies to households early on Wednesday.

The European Commission said the EU had prepared for the cut-off. "The European gas infrastructure is flexible enough to provide gas of non-Russian origin," a spokesperson for the Commission said.

"It has been reinforced with significant new LNG (liquefied natural gas) import capacities since 2022." Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the EU has slashed its



A gas worker walks between pipes in a compressor and distribution station of the Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhgorod gas pipeline, some 30 km (19 miles) from the south-western Russian city of Kursk. — Reuters

The widely expected stoppage will not impact prices for consumers in the European Union, unlike in 2022, when falling supplies from Russia sent prices to record highs,

dependence on Russian energy by buying more piped gas from Norway and LNG from Qatar and the United States.

Ukraine, which refused to extend the transit deal, said Europe had already made the decision to abandon Russian gas. "We stopped the transit of Russian gas. This is a historic event. Russia is losing its markets; it will suffer financial losses," Ukraine's Energy Minister German Galushchenko said in a statement.

Cost to both sides

Ukraine now faces the loss of some \$800 million a year in transit fees from Russia, while Gazprom will lose close to \$5 billion in gas sales.

Russia and the former Soviet Union spent half a century building

up a major share of the European gas market, which at its peak stood at around 35 per cent, but the war has all but destroyed that business for Gazprom.

The Yamal-Europe pipeline via Belarus has also shut, and the Nord Stream route across the Baltic Sea to Germany was blown up in 2022.

Combined, the various routes delivered a record high 201 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas to Europe in 2018. Russia shipped about 15 bcm of gas via Ukraine in 2023, down from 65 bcm when the last five-year contract began in 2020. In Transnistria, an employee at local energy company Tirasteploenergo said that it had cut off heating and hot water supplies to households, and she did not know when they would resume. — Reuters

Bitcoin more than doubles in 2024

BENGALURU: Bitcoin more than doubled in 2024, driven by the US markets regulator's approval for exchange-traded funds tied to its spot price and optimism over easing regulatory hurdles, with Donald Trump set to return to the White House.

The world's largest and most well-known cryptocurrency hit \$100,000 earlier this month, a milestone that has ignited 'animal spirits' among supporters of the once-nascent asset class.

A more than 120 per cent surge in bitcoin this year and a nearly 50 per cent jump in ether, the second-largest cryptocurrency, have propelled the sector's market value to roughly \$3.5 trillion, according to CoinGecko data.

More gains are in store for 2025, according to analysts.

"We remain convinced \$100,000 is not the final milestone. We expect Bitcoin to hit a cycle-high of \$200,000 in late 2025," analysts



Representation of the bitcoin cryptocurrency and a price chart are seen in this illustration. — Reuters

at brokerage Bernstein wrote in a client note earlier this month.

MicroStrategy, a software firm that has become the world's largest corporate holder

of bitcoin, has seen its shares surge nearly five-fold in 2024.

The stock, which joined the benchmark Nasdaq-100 index recently, is now seen as a proxy for bitcoin, with its movement closely tied to sentiment towards the digital asset. Several smaller companies are following its playbook and allocating portions of their cash to bitcoin.

"We expect bitcoin to emerge as the new-age premier 'store of value' asset, eventually replacing gold over the next decade and becoming a permanent part of institutional multi-asset allocation and a standard for corporate treasury management," the Bernstein note said.

Much of the optimism began in January when the US Securities and Exchange Commission approved the first ETFs to track the spot price of bitcoin, marking a watershed moment for the broader crypto industry. — Reuters

Wall St edges up as AI boom, rate cuts power bull run in 2024

BENGALURU: Wall Street's major indexes opened higher in the final trading session of 2024, extending a more than two-year-long bull run fuelled by post-pandemic economic resilience, optimism over lower borrowing costs and a boost from the AI revolution.

The S&P 500, Dow and Nasdaq are near record highs and are set for their second consecutive year of gains. A nearly 100-basis point cut in interest rates in 2024 by the Federal Reserve and a rally in technology stocks in anticipation of boost to corporate profits from artificial intelligence have catapulted equities to record highs in 2024.

The tech, communications services and consumer

discretionary stocks have advanced more than 30 per cent this year.

Although AI poster-child Nvidia's more than 170 per cent surge this year was smaller compared with last year, the rally helped the company notch \$3 trillion in market value, while Tesla reclaimed \$1 trillion level. At 09:53 am, the Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 79.15 points, or 0.19 per cent, to 42,652.88, the S&P 500 gained 7.91 points, or 0.13 per cent, to 5,914.28 and the Nasdaq Composite gained 9.12 points, or 0.06 per cent, to 19,497.96.

Nvidia was down 0.5 per cent, while the Elon Musk-led automaker added 1.1 per cent. Moves are expected to be influenced by thin volumes ahead of New Year's holiday



A street sign for Wall Street is seen outside the New York Stock Exchange in Manhattan, New York City. — Reuters

on Wednesday. A majority of the 11 S&P 500 sectors traded higher, led by energy stocks on higher crude prices.

Toward the end of the year, risk-taking improved as Donald Trump's presidential win boosted bets that he would deliver on his promises to ease regulations, cut taxes and raise tariffs to help domestic businesses.

His win also powered small-cap stocks. The Russell 2000 clinched a record high and was set for a second straight year of gains with a nearly 10 per cent increase.

Bank shares are up nearly 35 per cent this year.

However, equities hit a rough patch in December, putting the S&P 500 on course for its biggest

monthly decline since April, due to higher yields on Treasury notes at a time when equity valuations are stretched and the Fed is cautious.

The yield on benchmark 10-year note eased to 4.5 per cent as inflationary concerns linked to Trump's policies raises chances of the Fed moderating its rate cuts in 2025. "Any further gains in equities are unlikely until there is more clarity about what the incoming administration's tax and tariff policies will look like," said Raffi Boyadjian, lead market analyst at brokerage XM. "How earnings expectations evolve in the coming months will also be crucial for Wall Street, particularly for tech and AI stocks." — Reuters

OPINION

GCC states witnessing skewed population growth trends



HAIDER AL LAWATI
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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI

THE GCC countries are witnessing many developments in a number of sectors, especially in the population sector, which is growing significantly and leaving many contradictions in the Gulf society.

According to the figures of the GCC Statistical Centre, in the month of July 2022, the total population of the GCC countries reached 57.3 million people, constituting 0.7 per cent of the total world population of 7.8 billion people at the time.

The increase in the population of the GCC countries during the past three years was 1.3 million people.

The current population growth is accompanied by a gap in the demographic structure in favour of expatriates because of their annual increase which occupied the high percentage to reach today in some GCC countries to 90 per cent for expatriates compared to 10 per cent for GCC.

Some studies in this regard indicate that the percentage of citizens constituted in previous decades was between 60 per cent to 90 per cent for nationals, but it declined to the current percentages in favour of expatriates who came to work here since the beginning of the seventies of the last century from various countries of the world, especially

from the Asian continent.

It is expected that 90 per cent of the GCC population will live in cities by 2050, while all GCC countries seek to build more housing units to accommodate them over the next four decades.

However, today there are thousands of young Gulf citizens on their way to work in various economic sectors adopted by the Gulf governments in order to reduce the number of expatriate workers and to adjust the current percentages in the total and percentages of the population.

Data from Arthur D. Little, a management consulting firm, indicates that there is a new vision and approach to urban development in the Gulf countries, which will redefine the paths of economic development in the region during the next phase, which requires reconsidering traditional infrastructure planning and presenting a new perspective so that development becomes an incentive for sustainable growth led by local communities.

From this standpoint, the GCC countries are working to provide economic opportunities by pumping billions of dollars to focus on integrated community development, and presenting a new model for economic development that relies on the participation of local communities,

In the month of July 2022, the total population of the GCC countries reached 57.3 million people, constituting 0.7 per cent of the total world population of 7.8 billion people at the time

youth, and taking into account the cultural orientations of the people of the GCC countries, unlike the previous traditional approach.

The new comprehensive model is based on integrating sustainability and flexibility into urban transformation.

This development will undoubtedly create radical transformations that are not only related to building cities, but also to creating a vital economic system that grows from the heart of local communities.

It is expected that urban growth will be rethought with the increase in the population of cities in the Middle East by 30 per cent, which will increase the demand for housing, infrastructure, and comprehensive development, with the possibility of building more vibrant and economically viable urban cities according to the plans that the Gulf governments are working to implement.

At the same time, the institutions sponsoring these projects are working to integrate and develop the workforce and support small and medium-sized enterprises and local participation within this framework so that each housing unit becomes more than just a place to live, but rather becomes an incentive for opportunities, education and long-term economic contribution.

CHINA’S LEADER NODS TO ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

China’s top leader, Xi Jinping, veered momentarily from his usual talking points in a New Year’s address to acknowledge the challenges of the country’s faltering economy and vow that the government was working to usher in the next phase of growth.

“The current economic operation is facing some new situations, there are challenges from the uncertainty of the external environment and pressure from the transformation of new and old drivers, but these can be overcome through hard work,” Xi said in a speech televised on state broadcaster CCTV.

“Everyone should be full of confidence,” he said.

Even the indirect reference to the economy’s troubles is unusual in an address from Xi, who uses these annual speeches to trumpet the government’s accomplishments over the previous year.

In recent weeks, China has become more vocal about the need to take measures to bolster its economy.

The country’s leaders in recent months have pledged to increase public borrowing, spend more and cut interest rates to try to lift consumer spending, a stubbornly weak spot.

China’s economy has struggled to rebound after the Covid-19 pandemic, dragged down by widespread problems in its real estate sector and an unrelenting fall in prices.

China is also facing the prospect of squaring off with President-elect Donald Trump, who has threatened to impose tariffs on foreign goods, which could mean even greater levies on US imports from China.

At a separate New Year’s event earlier Tuesday, Xi said the economy grew “about 5 per cent” in 2024, meeting the government’s stated target from the start of the year.

He said the overall operation of the economy is “stable and steady.”

Xi’s confirmation of China’s 5 per cent target for gross domestic product, a measure of economic activity, raised questions about the validity of those figures.

“China’s 2024 claim that GDP growth was on track to meet high targets was impossible to reconcile with increasingly frantic efforts to prop up a flagging economy all year long,” the Rhodium Group, a consulting firm, wrote in a report Tuesday.

The increasingly bold measures from the government, such as loosening its monetary policy for the first time in 14 years, do not square, Rhodium argued, with the moderate growth that the 5 per cent target would indicate.

Rhodium estimates that China’s economy grew between 2.4 per cent and 2.8 per cent in 2024. It estimated that China can reach between 3 per cent to 4.5 per cent growth in 2025, and would reach the high end of that range only “if everything falls in Beijing’s favour.”

Analysts have said that the Chinese economy is too reliant on exports and policymakers must do more to bolster domestic demand.

— New York Times

Money from risky loans. What could go wrong?

IN the fall of 2015, in the back booth of the retro Putnam Restaurant in Greenwich, Connecticut, Craig Packer, a partner at Goldman Sachs, sat across from Doug Ostrover and listened to an audacious pitch.

Ostrover, then 52, had recently left the investment colossus Blackstone and was mulling a dramatic midcareer effort to build a firm from scratch, one that would take on some of the biggest names in global finance. Quit your job, the billionaire financier told Packer, and join me. As Packer, 48, later recalled, Ostrover wanted to create a firm that would lend money to highly indebted, risky businesses willing to pay hefty interest rates for fast cash. If it succeeded, the new enterprise and its founding partners could dominate a new financial playing field with the potential for huge profits.

Ostrover’s pitch (one he would also make to Marc Lipschultz, a two-decade veteran of KKR who would eventually become another founder of the nascent firm) was to leap into the business of “private credit,” a simple-sounding term that belies its complexity — and its risk.

The new venture would not be a bank but would operate almost like one — without the regulatory restrictions and government oversight that had made traditional banks skittish about this market.

Unlike a bank, the firm would be amassing money not from individual depositors, whose savings are protected by the federal government and can be withdrawn at will, but from institutions like insurance companies and pension funds.

Thus, the new firm would be legally permitted to finance tricky, highly speculative companies without reporting the details of such activities publicly.

During the next several months, Ostrover, Packer and Lipschultz agreed that the venture offered them a great opportunity — but only if they started at a gigantic scale, \$10 billion or so.

A bet that size would be a game-changing move in the world of private credit, where small, shady lending shops did backroom financing deals for even shadier



Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who is chair of the Senates banking committee and has warned that private credit funds operate in the shadows, talks to reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington. — NYT



ROB COPELAND

The writer is a finance reporter for the New York Times



MAUREEN FARRELL

The writer is a finance reporter at the New York Times

fledgling companies.

Eventually, the three men raised \$12 billion, undercutting their would-be competitors by promising big pension funds and others low investment fees if they backed the new firm. Large investors — including Brown University’s endowments, New Jersey’s pension fund, Michael Dell’s investment firm and Iconiq Capital — were given stakes in the firm, essentially making them owners of the new enterprise. Interest rates had been low since the 2007-08 financial crisis, so pension funds and other institutional investors were desperate to find ways to earn higher returns on their investments.

The debt markets, Ostrover told prospective clients, were much stabler than stocks or commodities.

And the firm, then called Owl Rock Capital, took the unusual step of setting itself up with so-called permanent investor capital that it would hold even longer than a typical private equity fund, where investors tie up money for a few years or even a decade.

This would allow it to make increasingly long-term loans. In return, clients were offered the prospect of far higher returns than they could earn with more conventional investments.

Nearly a decade after its founding, Blue Owl Capital — as the firm was renamed — is succeeding. The firm, which went public in 2021 through a merger, is one of the biggest private lenders on Wall Street, managing more than \$235 billion of investors’ money. Blue Owl has both caught and created a wave that has brought a change to Wall Street. Over the past few years, roughly \$1.8 trillion has been raised by private credit investment firms, including rivals Ares and Apollo Global.

That money has been lent to highly indebted companies in sectors like software, insurance and health care.

“We’re financing many of the same companies that used to go to the public markets,” Packer said.

Looking in from the outside are major banks like Goldman and JPMorgan Chase, whose executives now worry they are ceding lucrative financing to less-regulated rivals.

At a closed-door Goldman management committee meeting this summer, the top brass debated a hard truth: The investment bank was increasingly falling behind in private credit, namely in arranging big-ticket loans for corporations, because the newcomers were willing to give out the money at easier terms.— The New York Times

ART/LIFE



CHANGINGWORLD

Oman poised to embrace 2025 as the year of well-being



BY SHADDAD AL MUSALMY

Shaddad is a seasoned Omani journalist and currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors.

AS WE STEP into a new year, the Sultanate of Oman is poised to embrace 2025 as a year dedicated to well-being. This vision aligns with the broader goals set forth by Oman's leadership, emphasising social development, economic growth, and cultural enrichment.

The commitment to fostering well-being among its citizens and residents reflects a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between individual well-being and national prosperity.

One of the cornerstones of Oman's vision in 2025 is robust economic growth. The government has been actively diversifying its economy away from oil dependency through initiatives such as Oman Vision 2040, which aims to enhance sectors like tourism, fisheries, and logistics. By investing in infrastructure and creating job opportunities, Oman is not only improving its economic landscape but also enhancing the quality of life for its citizens. A stable economy fosters a sense of security and optimism among the populace, which is essential for cultivating happiness.

In addition to economic measures, social development plays a crucial role in promoting well-being. The Omani government has prioritised education and healthcare reforms aimed at improving access and quality.

By ensuring that all citizens have access to quality education and healthcare services, Oman is laying the groundwork for a healthier, more educated society that can contribute positively to national development.

Oman's rich cultural heritage is another vital aspect of its strategy for well-being in 2025. The government recognises that cultural identity plays a significant role in individual fulfilment. Efforts are being made to promote traditional arts, crafts, and festivals that celebrate Omani culture while also encouraging tourism. By preserving its heritage and promoting cultural activities, Oman not only strengthens national pride but also enhances community bonds among its citizens.

The path towards well-being in Oman also involves active community engagement. The government encourages citizen participation in decision-making processes through forums and public consultations.

This inclusive approach ensures that the voices of all citizens are heard, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership over their communities. When people feel valued and involved in shaping their society, it leads to greater satisfaction with life.

As we look forward to 2025, it is clear that Oman is committed to creating an environment where well-being can flourish through economic stability, social development, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and community engagement.

Each citizen has a role to play in this collective journey towards well-being by embracing these values individually and collectively. With these concerted efforts from both the government and citizens alike, there is every reason to believe that 2025 will indeed be remembered as a landmark year for well-being in Oman. Till next, Happy New Year 2025.

BRIEF FEATURES



FESTIVAL

Tar Barrel Men process through the streets of Allendale carrying torches and flaming barrels in the annual Allendale Tar Barrel festival in Allendale, northern England. —AFP



CELEBRATION

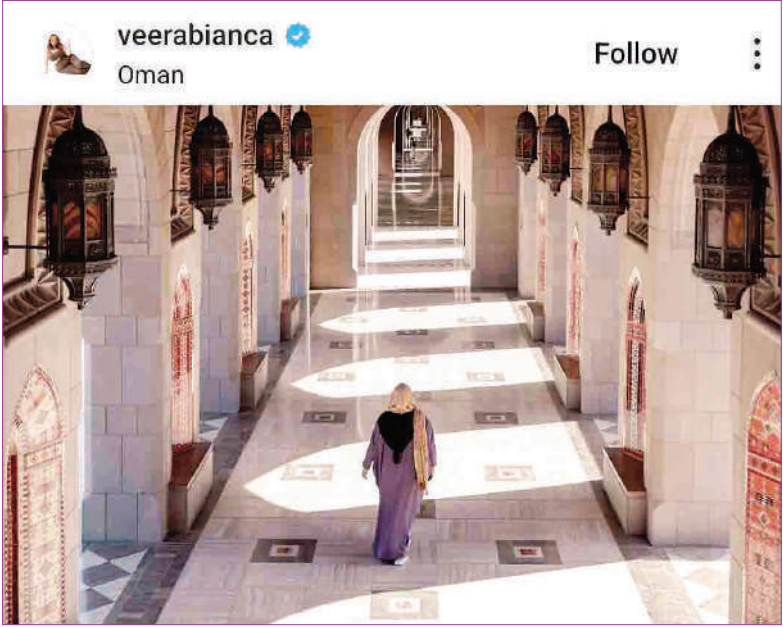
People walk at the Sheikh Zayed Heritage Festival as they await the New Year's Eve fireworks and drone show in Abu Dhabi. —AFP



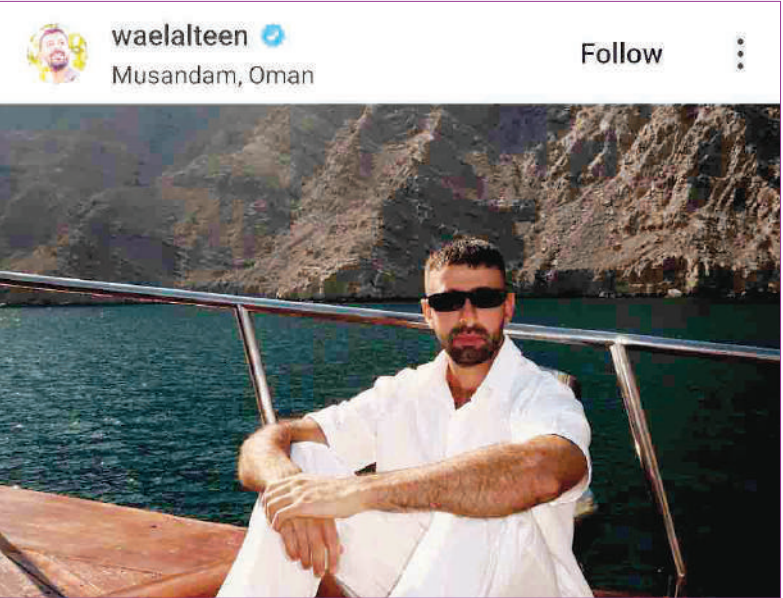
CULTURE

A Sadhu, or a Hindu holy man, applies ash on his face at the revamped Dashashwamedh Ghat on the banks of the river Ganges, ahead of the Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Prayagraj. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Oman's Iconic Structure



Beauty of Remote Places

SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. To be selected, follow us on Instagram and every time you upload or share your photos, make sure to tag us and use #OmanObserver and #BeAnObserver.

Merlin Entertainments closes three sites in Türkiye including Madame Tussauds



UK-HEADQUARTERED Merlin Entertainments said on Tuesday it was closing three attractions in Türkiye including a local branch of the famous Madame Tussauds wax museum. The firm, which operates many theme parks worldwide, is also closing its Legoland Discovery Centre in the country and a Sea Life aquarium, a spokesperson for the group said. The three sites, all located in Istanbul, would permanently shut their doors on Tuesday, the company said, citing poor commercial performance. The marine animals housed at the aquarium would be transferred to other attractions, it added. Türkiye has seen continuous double-digit inflation since the end of 2019, hitting family budgets for leisure activities. Merlin saw its results slip

into the red in 2023, posting an annual net loss of 217 million pounds (272 million dollars) compared to a profit of 89 million pounds a year earlier. The group was bought in 2019 by a consortium including Denmark's billionaire Kristiansen family, which controls the Lego group. The company, whose attractions boast more than 60 million visitors each year in 23 countries, manages the London Eye Ferris wheel in the British capital, the Madame Tussauds wax museums and the Legoland parks as well as several parks based around the children's cartoon character Peppa Pig. Merlin announced last month it would develop attractions themed around the blockbuster Minecraft video game, the first of which will be in the United States and Britain. —AFP



Strangers in the night: Celebrating 2025 in New York city

TENS OF thousands of partygoers from around the world braved freezing temperatures and driving rain overnight on Tuesday to ring in the new year in New York's famed Times Square. "I really wanted to live this experience in New York. It's once in a lifetime," said Jennifer Lopez, who hails from the Dominican Republic but now calls Long Island home. The passage to the new year in the "Big Apple" has taken place since 1907 in Manhattan, at the intersection of Broadway and 42nd Street -- a crossroad illuminated day and night by the signs of theatres, music halls, and giant digital advertising screens. The colourful event attracts New Yorkers, other Americans, and foreigners in the tens of thousands every December 31. Elizabeth Anderson, a 32-year-old Mexican now living in Australia, was making her third trip to New York, where she met her husband 11 years ago. New Year's Eve in Times Square is "on the bucket list", she said. The highlight of the evening was the descent of the Times Square ball, a 60-second countdown as a geodesic sphere -- illuminated and covered in crystal -- descended a 20-metre pylon. The ball's lights went out briefly for a fireworks display as the crowd cheered and strangers hugged and kissed. More than a ton of confetti fluttered from the roofs of buildings surrounding the intersection. Frank Sinatra's classic "New York, New York" and Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" followed.

EXPERIENCE IT IN PERSON "A lot of people told me 'don't go, it's crowded,'" said Ruchit Patel, who came from India. "I grew up watching it on TV. I wanted to experience it in person." Recent new year celebrations in Times Square have been muted and sometimes marred by tragedy. In 2020-2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic that killed tens of thousands of New Yorkers and



brought the city to its knees, it was observed in a virtually empty Times Square. The following year, the crowd was limited to 15,000 people, all masked and vaccinated. In 2022-2023, a 19-year-old American attacked police officers with a machete. He was sentenced last May to 27 years in prison for "attempted assassination of American agents in the name of jihad", according to the courts. The New York Police Department (NYPD) Chief Jessica Tisch said up to a million partygoers would be supervised by a "huge number of police officers".



The big crowd was not enough to scare away Norquan Tirick Goldson, a New Yorker living in California. "What's better than starting the new year with strangers from all over the world?" he said. The city put on a fireworks display at midnight in Lower Manhattan that exploded above the Statue of Liberty after rain had stopped. —AFP

FEATURES

BY YERU EBUEEN
PHOTOS FROM ESO

IMAGINE standing on the edge of a sun-drenched cliff in Oman, where the rugged terrain meets the endless blue of the Arabian Sea. As you gaze upwards, a magnificent Steppe Eagle soars effortlessly on thermals, a symbol of nature's raw beauty and resilience.

This isn't just a picturesque scene; it epitomises what makes Oman uniquely special as a sanctuary for raptors. Over 39 species of these incredible birds call this vibrant country home, from the endangered Egyptian Vulture to the striking Lappet-faced Vulture. As the world faces an ecological crisis, Oman emerges as a critical player in global conservation efforts, safeguarding species vital to our planet's health.

Raptors, or birds of prey, are more than just awe-inspiring creatures; they are essential players in Earth's ecosystems. Think of them as nature's guardians, regulating prey populations and maintaining the balance of the food chain. Their presence is a sign of environmental robustness. In Oman, raptors are woven into the very fabric of cultural heritage, especially falcons, which command respect and admiration as symbols of strength and tradition.

However, this harmony is at risk. Globally, raptors are under siege, battling against habitat loss, climate change and human interference. In Oman, the situation mirrors these global challenges. Rapid urban expansion and agriculture threaten the natural habitats where these majestic birds thrive. Illegal hunting persists, particularly affecting the falcon population, while issues such as electrocution from power lines and pesticide poisoning exacerbate their plight.

Oman's diverse landscapes play host to an impressive range of raptors. From the sleek Peregrine Falcon to the graceful Osprey, each species brings its own charm to the skies. The Egyptian Vulture, with its striking appearance and vital role in the ecosystem, serves as a poignant reminder of the urgency of conservation efforts. Local enthusiasts and researchers have documented countless encounters with these birds, inspiring a growing community dedicated to their protection.

**HEROES IN CONSERVATION:
OMAN'S BOLD STEPS**

Despite the challenges, hope shines through the efforts being made to conserve Oman's raptors. Since the early 1970s, local birdwatchers have taken a keen interest in observing these birds, leading to the establishment of the Oman Bird List, which documents over 531 species. Recent research efforts have focused on threatened species, including the Sooty Falcon (*Falco concolor*) and the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). An eight-year study led by the Office for Conservation of the Environment has yielded valuable insights into the breeding territories and threats faced by these species. Their team has fitted satellite trackers to juvenile vultures, revealing fascinating insights into their migratory journeys. Imagine knowing precisely where these majestic birds go and how they adapt to changing environments!

In a previous interview, Dr Fatima al Mansoori, a wildlife biologist at ESO, remarked, "Understanding the migration patterns and populations of these raptors is crucial. We've tracked 17 Egyptian Vultures around Muscat, revealing a much larger resident population than previously expected." This groundbreaking research has



THE RAPTORS OF OMAN: GUARDIANS OF THE SKY



been made possible through partnerships with local and international organisations, including the Omani Environment Authority and the Bernd Meyburg Foundation for Raptor Research and Conservation.

"We're making progress, but there's still much work to do," noted Dr Al-Mansoori. "Implementing community-driven initiatives and flyway conservation strategies will be essential to ensure the survival of these magnificent species." Government initiatives have also turned the tide, notably with the 2020 ban on diclofenac — a harmful drug for vultures and eagles. This proactive move is a clear indication that Oman is taking significant steps towards raptor preservation.

Community engagement is at the heart of these conservation projects. The launch of the bilingual "Raptors of Oman" booklet is a testament to this commitment, bridging knowledge gaps and inspiring the younger generation to appreciate and protect these magnificent birds. ESO's educational outreach rests on the belief that informed communities are empowered communities.

The conservation of raptors in Oman is an essential part of maintaining biodiversity and ecological health. Continued cooperation between local and international entities will be necessary to enhance conservation strategies and raise public awareness regarding the significance of raptors in the ecosystem.