

O M A N
Observer
D A I L Y



VOL. 44, NO. 248
PAGES 20 BAISAS 200

SUNRISE 05:31 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 04:07 AM

DHUHR 12:18 PM

ASR 03:39 PM

MAGHRIB 07:00 PM

ISHA 08:20 PM



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MARQUEZ WINS CZECH GP SPRINT AFTER PENALTY SCARE

INBRIEF

HM GREETS
PRESIDENT OF
COLOMBIA

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Gustavo Petro of the Republic of Colombia on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes to President Petro and his friendly Colombian people, wishing the country lasting stability and growth; and hoping that the relations of cooperation and friendship between the two countries would see further progress and development. — ONA

OMAN AIRPORTS IN
TALKS FOR GLOBAL
EXPANSION

MUSCAT: Oman Airports is actively working to strengthen the Sultanate of Oman's aviation sector by attracting new international carriers and positioning Muscat International Airport as a regional hub.

Eng Ahmed bin Saeed al Amri, CEO of Oman Airports, revealed that discussions are underway with Wizz Air to operate direct flights from European cities, including Budapest, to Oman. He expressed optimism that these routes would be launched soon.

In a move to strengthen ties with Asia, Oman Airports is also coordinating with the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Oman to offer incentives to China Eastern Airlines for potential direct flights from Shanghai or Guangzhou to Muscat. **REPORT ON P17**

SWEET WELCOME



Cilia Flores, wife of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro, carries Gloryannys Machado, one of the children of Venezuelan migrants who arrived on a deportation flight from the United States at Simon Bolivar International Airport in Maiquetia. **REPORT ON P6**



36 AID-SEEKING
CAZANS KILLED

The mother of Hesham Ifsifs, who was killed in Israeli fire while seeking aid near a distribution point, according to medics, mourns over his body, at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis on Saturday. — **Retuers**

EARLIER REPORT ON P5

SYRIA STRUGGLES TO
ENFORCE CEASEFIRE

CLASHES RAGE IN DRUZE REGION AS 940 PEOPLE KILLED

SECTARIAN clashes escalated in Syria's predominantly Druze region of Sweida on Saturday, with machine gun fire and mortar shelling ringing out after days of bloodshed as the Islamist-led government struggled to implement a ceasefire.

Reuters reporters heard gunfire from inside the city of Sweida and saw shells land in nearby villages. There were no immediate, confirmed reports of casualties.

The government had said security forces were deploying in the southern region to try to keep peace and urged all parties to stop fighting after nearly a week of factional bloodshed in which hundreds have been killed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, said clashes since last week around Sweida had killed at least 940 people. Reuters could not independently verify the toll.

Interim President Ahmed al Sharaa said "Arab and American" mediation had helped restore calm, before the clashes escalated. He

The fighting is the latest challenge to the control of Al Sharaa's Islamist-dominated government, which took over after rebels toppled autocratic president Bashar al Assad in December.



Fighters cross Walga town in Sweida on Saturday. — **AFP**

criticised Israel for air strikes during the week.

The fighting is the latest challenge to the control of Al Sharaa's Islamist-dominated government, which took over after rebels toppled autocratic president Bashar al Assad in December. It started last week as clashes between the Druze and Syrian Bedouin tribes.

Government forces then arrived to try to quell tensions, clashing with Druze gunmen and attacking

the Druze community. Saturday's violence once again pitted Druze against Bedouin, witnesses said.

The fighting has drawn in neighbouring Israel, which carried out air strikes in southern Syria and on the Defence Ministry in Damascus this week while government forces were fighting with the Druze. Israel says it is protecting the Druze, who also form a significant minority in Israel. — **AFP**

Omani youths bring traditional flavours to life during khareef

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, JULY 19

As the Khareef Dhofar Season draws thousands of visitors to the mist-covered hills and green valleys of Dhofar Governorate, a new kind of local energy is rising — not just from the earth, but from the youths of the governorate, who are seizing the season's momentum to showcase their culinary heritage and earn extra income.

Across Salalah and surrounding wilayats, visitors can now find dozens of pop-up food stalls run by

young Omanis offering traditional dishes such as madhbi, maqadeed, ma'jeen, mashakeek and freshly baked Omani bread.

For many, these are more than just meals — they're cultural encounters served hot, by the very people who grew up with these recipes.

What makes this year different is the surge in part-time initiatives by university students and recent graduates. With support from families and small business licences, many are turning their skills in traditional cooking into



Whether they are grilling madhbi over hot stones or preparing ma'jeen the traditional way — by slow-cooking preserved meat in rendered fat — they are carrying forward practices passed down through generations

seasonal income streams. Their stalls — often set up near tourism hotspots like Ittin Plain, Ayn Razat and Haffa — combine fresh ingredients, authentic techniques and a warm welcome that has quickly become a highlight of many visitors' trips.

"I never imagined I'd run a food stall", said one young vendor, flipping skewers over glowing coals. "But people love trying something real — something from here. And it helps me save for my studies." The appeal goes beyond economics. **TURN TO P2**

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The festival celebrated the significance of Omani traditions and the prized purebred camels

CAMEL BEAUTY SHOW ENDS IN JAALAN

JAALAN BANI BU HASSAN: The second edition of the Al Hiran Camel Beauty Contest concluded in the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate. The contest drew broad participation from camel owners and heritage enthusiasts. The two-day festival celebrates the significance of Omani traditions and the prized purebred camels of the region.

Festival supervisor Khamis bin Hamad al Awaisi noted strong community engagement and emphasised the event’s role in preserving cultural identity. He highlighted that this edition builds on the success of the inaugural event.

In the open ‘Winter’ race for young camels, ‘Watan’, owned by Saeed bin Jumaa al Sunaidy, clinched first place. ‘Mahana’, owned by Ghaleb bin Saeed al Rashidi, came in second, while ‘Mubashara’, owned by Nasser bin Saleh al Harsosi, secured third. — ONA

Omani youths bring traditional flavours to life during khareef

FROM PAGE 1

For many young Omanis, these ventures offer a platform to preserve and promote their cultural identity. Whether they are grilling madhbi over hot stones or preparing ma’jeen the traditional way — by slow-cooking preserved meat in rendered fat — they are carrying forward practices passed down through generations.

Visitors are drawn not only by the rich flavours but by the experience itself. Watching the preparation of food outdoors, breathing in the aroma of spices and charcoal; and eating under open skies brings a unique charm that restaurants often cannot match.

Dhofar Municipality and local tourism authorities have welcomed the growing presence of youth-led food initiatives, viewing them as part of a wider effort to boost community participation in the tourism economy. Several temporary stalls have received permits and hygiene support; and young vendors are being encouraged to adopt eco-friendly practices as well — including using biodegradable packaging and managing waste responsibly.

Beyond the income, the experience is building confidence, skills and entrepreneurship. Many young vendors say the Khareef Dhofar Season has opened their eyes to future possibilities — from launching permanent food businesses to participating in national food festivals.

As Khareef Dhofar Season 2025 reaches its peak, these small stalls tell a bigger story — of ambition, heritage and youths rising with the season.

AI, EQ CONVERGE AS SQU SUMMER SCHOOL OPENS IN DHOFAR TODAY

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, JULY 19

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has launched the third edition of its Summer School for Faculty Members, highlighting the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Emotional Intelligence (EQ) in higher education.

Held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Mohsin al Ghassani, Chairman of Dhofar Municipality, the six-day programme runs from July 20 to 25, at the Rotana Hotel Salalah. Organised by SQU, the initiative aims to foster academic development and promote

educational tourism during Khareef Dhofar Season. This year’s theme, ‘Integrating Emotional and Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education’, has drawn 50 academic participants from six universities.

The opening ceremony featured welcoming remarks, a vision-setting video and keynote speeches from Dr Mahmood al Maawali, a leading expert in emotional intelligence and educational leadership and Dr Rajiv Jhangiani, an internationally recognised scholar in open education and ethical AI.

A key highlight of Day One will be a panel discussion on “Fostering Future Societies through Emotional

and Artificial Intelligence”. It delved into how EQ can enhance the ethical and human aspects of AI in academic settings. Throughout the week, attendees will engage in interactive sessions, case studies and practical workshops designed to equip faculty members with innovative, human-centred teaching strategies.

On Day Four, participants will embark on a cultural and heritage tour across Dhofar — reinforcing the link between academic exchange and local identity, while offering informal learning opportunities in the region’s rich natural surroundings.

Oman joins key African climate talks in Nairobi

THE Sultanate of Oman actively participated in the 20th session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) held in Nairobi, Kenya, under the leadership of Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of Oman’s Environment Authority and President of the 7th United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA).

Marking the 40th anniversary of AMCEN, the conference celebrated four decades of regional environmental progress in sustainable development, biodiversity protection, climate action and pollution control. Dr Abdullah praised AMCEN’s historic achievements and its pivotal role in unifying Africa’s environmental agenda and strengthening its global voice.

During the event, Dr Abdullah emphasised the robust partnership between AMCEN and UNEA, highlighting cooperation aimed at achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and Africa’s Agenda 2063. He outlined future plans focusing on scientific policymaking, sustainable climate financing, AI-driven



environmental monitoring and promoting inclusive green transformations.

On the sidelines, Dr Abdullah engaged in high-level discussions with representatives from the Group of 77 and China, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, focusing on preparations for UNEA’s seventh session and key environmental initiatives, including the global plastic pollution treaty.

The Sultanate of Oman’s participation underscores its ongoing commitment to regional and global environmental cooperation and sustainable development. — ONA

Oman’s National Innovation Index team holds meeting

MUSCAT: The National Team for Improving Oman’s Performance in the Global Innovation Index (GII) held its 21st meeting, chaired by Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Research and Innovation; and Head of the National GII Team.

The meeting reviewed the outcomes and recommendations from the recent workshop on the simulation system for international indicators for policymakers in the Arab region, organised by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). The team discussed the use of simulation tools and methodologies for analysing various indicators, aimed at identifying gaps and formulating strategic scenarios to enhance Oman’s performance



in the Global Innovation Index.

Additionally, the team evaluated the progress of the medium-term strategic plan and discussed procedural steps to support the work of the policies and initiatives team, as well as the data management team.

The GII team is one of the national teams established under the National Competitiveness Committee. Its primary objective is to improve Oman’s standing in the Global Innovation Index through a unified national effort that actively engages stakeholders

within the innovation ecosystem. This effort is conducted in collaboration with the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, the National Centre for Statistics and Information; and other relevant entities.

The team regularly assesses innovation performance reports to identify strengths and weaknesses; and develops strategies aimed at boosting Oman’s ranking.

These efforts include strengthening the national innovation system across areas such as infrastructure, digital transformation, education, research and development, intellectual property, business environment; and human capital development. It also fosters collaboration across key sectors to align innovation with sustainable development goals. — ONA

Tanuf’s grape project bears fruit, boosts food security in Al Dakhiliyah

NIZWA: A grape cultivation project in Tanuf village, located in the Wilayat of Nizwa in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, is emerging as a model for food security and agricultural innovation in Oman. Backed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the project receives technical support and expert guidance aimed at enhancing productivity and quality.

Spanning one and a half acres, the project’s first phase features around 1,000 carefully selected grape seedlings suited to the region’s

climate. This season, it has yielded approximately 3 tonnes of high-quality grapes, with production expected to grow as more vines reach maturity.

Issa bin Saif al Riyami, the project owner, said that the first phase cost over RO 16,000, covering infrastructure, modern irrigation systems, trellises, nurseries and ongoing technical operations.

He noted that grape varieties were imported from Syria, Lebanon, Italy, Spain and Finland to ensure resilience to pests and suitability for



local conditions. Tanuf’s fertile soil and favourable climate make it ideal for grape cultivation, positioning it as one of Oman’s leading grape-producing regions.

“This project is part of a broader vision to invest in natural resources and contribute to national food security”, Al Riyami said.

“It aims to diversify agricultural output, create jobs and revive traditional farming with modern techniques”.

Marketing is underway through local outlets, with grapes retailing at

RO 2 per kilogramme. Plans are also in place to expand the cultivated area, introduce new varieties and develop facilities for sorting and packaging. Al Riyami is exploring future investments in value-added processing industries, such as juices and raisins, to enhance economic returns and open up export opportunities.

The project continues to be closely supported by the ministry, reinforcing its potential as a replicable success story in sustainable agriculture. — ONA

SHORT TAKES



Over 18 local institutions showcased a wide range of high-quality dates, date derivatives and other products

DATE FESTIVAL
DRAWS CROWDS IN
AL BATINAH SOUTH

WADI AL MAAWIL: The first Al Batinah South Omani Date Festival 2025 was held in the Wilayat of Wadi Al Maawil in the Al Batinah South Governorate, bringing together date farmers, local producers and heritage enthusiasts for a vibrant two-day celebration. The event aims to stimulate the local economy during the summer season and promote agricultural and heritage tourism in the governorate.

Held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Agriculture, the festival reflects national efforts to promote agricultural sustainability and economic diversification.

Organised as part of wider efforts to strengthen the agricultural sector, the festival provided a vital platform for marketing Omani dates and related products. More than 18 local institutions from across the governorate took part. — ONA



The training camp is being held under the supervision of the Department of Innovation and Science Olympiad

TRAINING CAMP
BEGINS AHEAD OF
N-SCIENCE OLYMPIAD

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Education has launched a central training camp for the national team preparing to participate in the International Nuclear Science Olympiad, to be held in Bangi, Malaysia, from July 31 to August 5.

Now in its second edition, the camp is being held under the supervision of the Department of Innovation and Science Olympiad; and includes four top-performing students from the governorates of Muscat, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Batinah South.

The programme includes intensive theoretical and practical training in nuclear science, such as solving Olympiad-style problems, conducting experiments in nuclear physics, tackling complex multi-step questions and strengthening critical thinking and analytical skills.

The training is designed to simulate the actual Olympiad environment, preparing students to compete at an international level with confidence and scientific rigour. — ONA

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, JULY 19

The Health-Promoting Schools initiative has made remarkable progress in Al Batinah North Governorate. The programme integrates health and well-being into every aspect of school life, aiming not only to enhance students’ physical and mental health but also to promote a broader culture of wellness that reaches families and

the wider community. Moving beyond traditional academic instruction, the initiative encourages schools to cultivate healthy habits, support emotional well-being and foster clean, active and inclusive environments. It also emphasises strong partnerships between schools, families and local communities to sustain these efforts. Three schools from Al Batinah North Governorate stood out for

their outstanding contributions, earning national recognition for their innovative health-focused initiatives. Omama bint Hamza School (Grades 9–12) in Al Khabourah secured first place in the gold category at the national level. Principal Dr Moza al Hosni noted, “We addressed the pressing issue of student obesity through a series of creative initiatives such as a Health Garden, Glass Classroom, Green

Leaf Cafeteria, Fitness Walkways, Relaxation Rooms and personalised efforts like the My Health Journey booklet for students”. She added that digital outreach — including a YouTube channel and an X account titled Your Happiness Matters — helped extend health education beyond the classroom. Jumayel bin Khamis School in Al Suwaiq also shone brightly, winning first place in the silver category. Under the leadership

of Khalid al Kayoumi, the school implemented impactful projects such as the Jumayel Health Tent, the Date Initiative, the Longest Health Corridor and a fully equipped school gym to promote active living. These efforts have yielded measurable results. Schools reported a decline in student absenteeism due to illness, increased physical activity and greater awareness around nutrition and mental health.

OMAN AT ARABOSAI-ASOSAI JOINT MEETING IN AZERBAIJAN

BAKU: The Sultanate of Oman participated in the first joint meeting between the Arab Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (ARABOSAI) and the Asian Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (ASOSAI), being held from July 18 to 19 in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The Sultanate of Oman’s delegation is headed by Zahra bint Mohammed Ridha bin Mohammed al Lawatiyah, Deputy to the Chairman of the State Audit Institution for Audit on Corporations, Investments and Companies.

During the meeting, visual presentations were displayed by the Knowledge Building Committee, the Capacity Building



Baku meeting reviews the experiences of supreme audit institutions

Committee, the Financial and Administrative Affairs Committee; and the Institutional Development Committee. The presentations

reviewed the tasks assigned to each committee and ways for developing joint action between ARABOSAI and ASOSAI.

The meeting also reviewed the experiences of supreme audit institutions on the response to climate change through auditing as well as utilising artificial intelligence in auditing. The Sultanate of Oman’s participation underscores its continued commitment to actively contributing to international efforts to strengthen the principles of auditing and accounting; and to exchanging expertise with counterpart institutions. This supports the development of the financial audit system and contributes to achieving the best practices adopted by the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI). — ONA

Oman Broadband wins
Global GIS Award

OMAN Broadband Company has won the prestigious ‘Special Achievement in GIS (SAG)’ award during its participation in the Esri 2025 Conference, the largest global event for geographic information system (GIS) technology. The conference is held annually in San Diego, California, bringing together leading institutions and companies in the field.

This prestigious award is presented by Esri, the world leader in GIS software, to organisations demonstrating exceptional excellence in applying geospatial technology to deliver innovative solutions, enhance decision-making processes and address complex technical challenges.

Oman Broadband stood out among hundreds of thousands of companies worldwide thanks to its innovative initiatives that have significantly advanced its geospatial systems and



Eng Khalfan bin Mohammed al Amri, General Manager of Network Planning and Technology, received the award

The prestigious award is presented by Esri to organisations demonstrating exceptional excellence in applying geospatial technology

revolutionised fiber optic network management. These technologies have enabled the company to achieve operational efficiency and enhance its capabilities in digital transformation. The award was received by Eng Khalfan bin Mohammed al Amri, General Manager of Network Planning and Technology at the

company, from Jack Dangermond, Founder and President of Esri, during the official ceremony held as part of the conference. Expressing his pride in the achievement, Engineer Khalfan stated: “This recognition reflects the company’s commitment to leveraging the latest GIS technologies to support digital transformation and national infrastructure. We dedicate this achievement to Oman and its visionary leadership, reaffirming our commitment to developing innovative solutions that enhance the country’s position in the telecommunications and IT sectors”. This international achievement underscores the Sultanate of Oman’s leadership in utilising advanced technologies to foster national development. It highlights the competence of Omani talent in achieving excellence at regional and global levels, contributing to enhanced digital connectivity and broadband infrastructure across the Sultanate of Oman.

SQU partners with Elevatus to digitise hiring

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyouusef

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has partnered with Elevatus, a leading AI recruitment solutions provider, to enhance and streamline its hiring processes as part of a broader digital transformation in human resources.

This strategic move will fully automate and govern SQU’s recruitment cycle, enabling faster, data-driven hiring decisions, real-time analytics access and improved operational efficiency.

Hilal al Suleimani, HR Director at SQU, described



the collaboration as a major milestone in the university’s digital journey. “By automating our recruitment process and integrating advanced candidate assessment tools, we’re saving valuable time while increasing

efficiency. Elevatus’ AI-powered solutions align perfectly with our broader institutional goals”, he said. Elevatus, already a trusted partner across Oman’s education, public and

private sectors, is known for empowering organisations with tools like automated CV screening, smart candidate matching and advanced video assessments. Nadin Zureikat, Chief Revenue Officer at Elevatus, stated, “Sultan Qaboos University is a symbol of academic excellence. We’re proud to support their future-ready recruitment transformation through our AI-driven platform”. The partnership reflects SQU’s forward-thinking approach and Oman’s ongoing commitment to digital excellence in education and governance.

Al Batinah North schools win national praise for health initiatives

SPOTLIGHT



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KHAREEF COASTLINE POSES HIDDEN DANGERS

AHMED AL KAABI

AS the khareef season sweeps into Dhofar Governorate, Salalah transforms into a dreamlike destination – its cool mist, emerald hills, and gentle drizzles drawing thousands of visitors from within Oman and beyond. While nature offers an enchanting spectacle, khareef also brings serious seasonal hazards, particularly along the coastline.

Every year, Salalah's beaches, including Mughsail, Dahariz and Raysut, experience powerful sea currents, rough waves, and strong southwesterly winds. Authorities such as the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority and the Civil Aviation Authority issue regular warnings during this time, urging visitors to stay away from the water, as conditions are dangerous for swimming or any marine activity.

Mughsail Beach, famous for its blowholes and dramatic scenery, becomes treacherous during khareef. Its undercurrents, though unseen, are powerful enough to sweep swimmers out to sea. Dahariz Beach, a family favourite due to its easy access from the city, also sees an uptick in wave activity and related incidents. Raysut Beach, with its open sea exposure, becomes one of the riskiest spots for water-related accidents.

Strong khareef currents make beaches unsafe

Keep children away from the shoreline

Enjoy views safely from elevated spots



The sea may look calm, but dangerous rip currents can pull even adults under in seconds – invisible and fast-moving, they pose a serious threat, especially to kids and inexperienced swimmers.

ANAS AL BALUSHI
Fisherman,
Barka

A FAMILY CONCERN

Despite repeated warnings, some families continue to allow children to play at the water's edge. This practice, experts warn, is extremely risky.

Anas al Balushi, a fisherman from Barka visiting Salalah, shared: "Families must remain vigilant. The sea may appear calm, but hidden undercurrents can pull even adults in seconds. We always sit far from the shore, and never let our children go near the water. It's not worth the risk."

He also mentioned the danger of 'reverse pull currents' - fast-moving rip currents that are hard to spot but extremely hazardous, especially to children and inexperienced swimmers.

SAFETY WITHOUT SACRIFICE

While beach activities like swimming are best avoided, visitors can still enjoy Salalah's coastal beauty safely. Elevated boardwalks, cliffside views, and protected zones allow for scenic photography and nature appreciation without endangering lives.

Officials emphasise that the allure of khareef must be matched with awareness and responsibility. By respecting safety guidelines and keeping children at a safe distance from the water, families can ensure a joyful, incident-free holiday.

WIDEINVESTIGATION



Former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol arrives at a court in Seoul. — Reuters file photo

FORMER PRESIDENT
YOON INDICTED FOR
ABUSE OF POWER

SEOUL: Disgraced South Korean ex-president Yoon Suk Yeol was indicted for abuse of power on Saturday over his declaration of martial law last year, as investigators widened an insurrection probe. Last week, Yoon was detained again after an arrest warrant was issued over concerns he might destroy evidence in the case.

The prosecution “indicted former President Yoon Suk Yeol on charges including abuse of power and obstruction of special official duties”, prosecutor Park Ji-young told reporters on Saturday. Park said Yoon also did not follow the required procedure to declare martial law, including holding a meeting with all cabinet members of the government.

Yoon was also charged with “drafting and discarding a false document” that stated the prime minister and defence minister had endorsed martial law. Yoon has refused to attend questioning since he was detained, but appeared in court on Friday at a hearing to argue for his warrant to be cancelled. — AFP



BANGLADESH’S LARGEST
PARTY HOLDS MEGA RALLY

DHAKA: Hundreds of thousands of supporters of Bangladesh’s main party rallied on Saturday, demanding an overhaul of the electoral system as the country gears up for polls next year. The Jamaat-e-Islami party has gained significant momentum since the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a popular uprising last year.

During her tenure, Hasina took a hardline stance against Jamaat, even cancelling its registration as a political party. Last month, the Supreme Court restored the party’s registration, paving the way for its participation in elections slated for next April. — AFP

Six local officials detained
over Iraq’s deadly mall fire

BAGHDAD: Iraq has detained six local officials and suspended other public employees following a fire that killed 61 people at a shopping mall earlier this week, authorities said on Saturday. The blaze, which broke out late on Wednesday in a newly opened shopping mall in the eastern city of Kut, is the latest fatal disaster in a country where safety regulations are often ignored.

After an initial investigation, the interior ministry said “there was clear negligence among several officials and employees” in Kut, located around 160 kilometres southeast of Baghdad. It added that three local officials, including the head of civil defence in Kut, had been detained, and 17 employees suspended from work until further notice.

The Commission of Integrity, an anti-graft body, said later that security forces had detained three more officials “over the violations that led to the fire” at the Corniche Hypermarket Mall, including the head of the violations department at Kut’s municipality. Officials say their investigation is ongoing, and the number of detainees may change.

Safety standards in Iraq’s construction sector are often ignored, and the country — its infrastructure weakened by decades of conflict — frequently experiences fatal fires



A cleaning operation starts outside the charred building in Kut. — AFP

and accidents.

Fires increase during the blistering summer as temperatures approach 50 degrees Celsius.

The cause of the mall fire was not immediately known, but one survivor said that an air conditioner had exploded on the second floor before the five-storey building was rapidly engulfed in flames. Several people said that they lost family members — and in some cases whole families — who had gone to shop and dine at the mall days after it opened. — AFP

Israeli fire kills Gazans
near two aid centres

GAZA’S civil defence agency said on Saturday that Israeli fire killed over 26 people and wounded more than 100 near two aid centres, in the latest deaths of Palestinians seeking food. Deaths of people waiting for handouts in huge crowds near food points in Gaza have become a regular occurrence, with the territory’s authorities frequently blaming Israeli fire. Civil defence agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal said the deaths happened near a site southwest of Khan Yunis and another centre northwest of Rafah, both in southern Gaza, attributing the deaths to “Israeli gunfire”.

In response, the Israeli military said it “identified suspects who approached them during operational activity in the Rafah area, posing a threat to the troops”. Soldiers called for them to turn back and “after they did not comply, the troops fired warning shots”, it said, adding that it was aware of the reports about casualties. “The incident is under review. The shots were fired approximately one kilometre (more than half a mile) away from the aid distribution site at nighttime when it’s not active,” it said in a statement.

GHF said reports of deaths near



A woman caresses a child’s head as Palestinians wait at a food distribution point in the refugee camp. — AFP

its sites were “false”. “We have repeatedly warned aid-seekers not to travel to our sites overnight and early morning hours,” it wrote on X. Media restrictions in Gaza and difficulties in accessing many areas mean AFP is unable to independently verify tolls and details provided by the civil defence agency and other parties.

The war in Gaza, sparked by the deadly attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, has created dire humanitarian conditions for the more than two million people who live in the coastal territory. Most people have

been displaced at least once by the fighting, and doctors and aid agencies say they were seeing the physical and mental health effects of 21 months of war, including more acute malnutrition.

The World Food Programme said nearly one in three people in Gaza were not eating for days at a stretch and “thousands” were “on the verge of catastrophic hunger”. The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said it had enough food for all of Gaza for more than three months but it was blocked from being delivered. — AFP

Powering
Dhofar



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Dhofar Generating Company SAOG

PO Box: 1571, PC: 211, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman.
www.dgcoman.com

BOARD OF DIRECTORS' REPORT

The Board of Directors is pleased to present the performance of your company, Dhofar Generating Company SAOG (DGC or "Company") for the half year ended 30 June 2025.

At the core of our Company lies an unwavering commitment to safety. For over a decade, we have maintained an impeccable safety track record with zero Lost Time Incidents (LTIs). Our team remains ever vigilant, never granting safety a day off. Under the guidance by the Board, we uphold safety principles and ambitious goals.

This dedication to safety directly impacts our operational performance. Our assets boast an extraordinary reliability factor of over 99.54%. This excellence ensures not only smooth operations but also enables us to meet our financial obligations.

Overview
The business achieved excellent commercial availability factors of 99.54% and 99.02% during the first half of the year for the 273MW and 445MW power plants respectively. From a financial perspective, the contractual revenue is highly seasonal during the calendar year, with higher revenue in the summer period compared to the winter period. Summer months include April, May, June, September and October. The financial results are reflective of the business's contractual arrangement and are in line with expectations.

The Annual Performance Test for 273MW and 445MW was successfully completed for the Contract Year 2025-2026.

Plant performance during the period

	273MW		445MW	
	2025	2024	2025	2024
30 June				
Reliability Factor	99.54%	99.19%	99.02%	99.25%
Load Factor	28.96%	24.97%	61.91%	56.84%
Energy Exported (GWh)	341	295	1174	1098

273MW OCGT Power Plant

During the first half of 2025, our OCGT plant demonstrated exceptional performance. The forced outage factor was at 0.46%, significantly better than the 2024 figure of 0.81%. Additionally, the load factor exceeded the corresponding period in 2024, aligning with grid demand.

445MW CCGT Power Plant

In Q2 2025, our CCGT plant achieved a remarkable reliability factor of 99.02%. While this slightly decreased from the 2024 value of 99.25%, it remains highly dependable. The load factor for this plant is closely tied to grid demand and follows instructions from the load dispatch center.

Plant performance is a direct result of the operator's proficient approach towards operations, maintenance and HSE principles.

Maintenance activities during the period

The second quarter of the year falls within the summer period during which the business is required to be fully available. The Annual Performance Test for the Year 2025-2026 was conducted in March 2025 successfully. The team kept its focus on preventive and predictive activities during the quarter to ensure high availability of equipment. The operator has ensured that all required permits were valid during the period.

Financial highlights

	Six Months Ended	
	30-Jun-25	30-Jun-24
Income Statement in OMR '000		
Total revenues	32,551	30,077
Operating costs	(27,068)	(24,410)
Gross profit	5,483	5,667
Other costs	(3,889)	(3,952)
Profit after tax	1,594	1,715
Profit per share - Bz/share	7	8

Revenues

The revenue for the first half has increased by OMR 2.5 m due to higher fuel revenue on account of higher load compared to the corresponding period in 2024.

Operating Costs

Operating cost has increased by OMR 2.7 m mainly due to higher fuel cost on higher load and higher LTSA costs compared to the corresponding period in 2024.

Other Costs

Other costs are lower by OMR 0.06 m mainly due to lower finance cost.

Net profit after Tax

Net profit is reflective of the variances noted above.

Balance Sheet OMR '000	Period Ended 30-Jun-2025	Year Ended 2024
Total assets	192.3	191.3
Net shareholder's equity	54.8	54.7
Paid up capital	22.2	22.2
Cash	5.5	3.3
Current ratio	1.2	1.1
Gearing ratio	2.5	2.5
Net assets per share - OMR	0.247	0.246

Cash flows and Dividends

The Company has met its obligations to the lenders by the timely debt service of OMR 5.8 m during the period. Interest payments are monthly while principal payments are due in July and January of each year.

The Cash Sweep Mechanism under the financing agreements commenced from 31 July 2021 impacted the ability of the Company to make any future dividend distributions.

The Cash Sweep Mechanism will remain effective until the balloon amount is fully prepaid, which is expected to continue for the remaining term of Power Purchase Agreement (i.e. expiring on 1 January 2033).

The above restricts the Company to make any dividend distributions unless the Cash Sweep Mechanism is reversed, which is subject to (1) arrangement of acceptable Backstop DSRA LC, and (2) unanimous approval of project lenders.

Future outlook

The Dhofar Grid is experiencing a substantial increase in demand due to emerging industries in the Dhofar region as seen throughout 2025. The demand is expected to continue in the future. This increase in demand has triggered a revision in the maintenance regime for the 273MW plant to ensure safe and reliable operations. The upcoming quarter will fall in the summer period under the PPA. The Company and operator will continue their proactive approach towards plant operations to ensure a high reliability factor which is of paramount importance for all stakeholders.

Acknowledgement

The Board would like to thank the entire team for its diligent efforts which has resulted in the excellent performance. Finally, the Board of Directors would like to conclude by expressing their immense gratitude for the privilege of the vision, guidance, wisdom and crucial support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and His Government.

The financial statements were approved and authorised for issuance in accordance with a resolution of the Board of Directors on 17th July 2025

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30 JUNE 2025

	30-Jun-25	31-Dec-24
	RO	RO
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	132,057,645	134,059,390
Right of use assets	1,605,347	1,630,045
Finance lease receivable	30,334,057	31,674,585
Trade and other receivables	2,676,309	2,870,308
Prepayments of connection charges	969,850	932,551
Derivative financial instrument	629,363	1,366,552
Total non-current assets	168,512,571	172,533,431
Current assets		
Inventories	5,402,572	5,501,376
Finance lease receivable	3,339,812	3,205,488
Trade and other receivables	9,088,553	5,822,260
Advances and prepayments	266,102	483,858
Derivative financial instrument	177,513	385,438
Cash and cash equivalents	5,547,664	3,339,639
Total current assets	23,822,215	18,739,059
TOTAL ASSETS	192,334,786	191,272,490
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
EQUITY		
Share capital	22,224,000	22,224,000
Legal reserve	1,225,563	1,225,563
Retained earnings	31,332,836	29,738,356
Equity before hedging reserve	54,782,399	53,187,949
Hedging reserve	685,844	1,489,192
Total equity	55,468,243	54,677,141
LIABILITIES		
Non-current liabilities		
Term loan	97,325,935	100,368,951
Lease liabilities	1,862,956	1,941,257
Deferred tax liabilities	12,726,463	12,635,411
Provision for decommissioning costs	5,296,553	5,142,287
End of service benefits	72,609	67,401
Total non-current liabilities	117,284,516	120,155,307
Current liabilities		
Term loan	8,213,026	8,008,830
Lease liabilities	22,259	21,049
Trade and other payables	11,346,742	8,410,163
Total current liabilities	19,582,027	16,440,042
Total liabilities	136,866,543	136,595,349
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	192,334,786	191,272,490
(Net assets per share (RO)	0.250	0.246

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME
For the period ended 30 June 2025

	Half Year ended		Quarter ended	
	30-Jun-25	30-Jun-24	30-Jun-25	30-Jun-24
	RO	RO	RO	RO
Revenue	32,550,817	30,076,601	20,654,727	19,413,992
Operating costs	(27,067,843)	(24,409,874)	(15,429,494)	(14,056,638)
Gross profit	5,482,974	5,666,727	5,225,233	5,357,354
General and administrative expenses	(638,098)	(457,404)	(280,157)	(158,975)
Profit before interest and tax	4,844,876	5,209,323	4,945,076	5,198,379
Finance income	141,100	89,824	72,610	43,669
Finance cost	(3,158,707)	(3,206,266)	(1,661,386)	(1,547,002)
Profit before tax	1,827,269	2,092,881	3,356,300	3,694,846
Income tax expense	(232,819)	(377,449)	(146,782)	(196,382)
Profit for the period	1,594,450	1,715,432	3,209,518	3,498,464
Other comprehensive income:				
Items that are or may be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss				
Fair value of cash flow hedge adjustments - gross	(566,861)	1,747,027	(209,261)	381,019
Reclassification to profit or loss - gross	(378,255)	(945,146)	(109,027)	(412,890)
Deferred tax on change in fair value of cash flow hedge	141,768	(135,283)	47,744	4,780
Other comprehensive (loss)/income for the period - net of tax	(803,348)	766,598	(270,544)	(127,091)
Total comprehensive income for the period	791,102	2,482,030	2,938,974	3,471,373
Basic and diluted earnings per share (RO)	0.007	0.008	0.014	0.016

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Residents look at an apartment building hit by a Russian drone strike in Odesa. — Reuters

RUSSIA LEAVING UKRAINIANS STRANDED, SAYS FM

KYIV: Ukraine’s foreign minister accused Russia on Saturday of deporting Ukrainians into Georgia and leaving them stranded there without proper documents, hundreds of miles from their home. Andrii Sybiha said Russia was stepping up the expulsions of Ukrainians — many of them former prisoners — over the southern frontier, rather than sending them directly over its border with Ukraine. That amounted to Russia “weaponising the deportation of Ukrainian citizens,” he added on X. “Since June, Russia has significantly increased the number of deported Ukrainian nationals, mostly former convicts, to the border with Georgia,” Sybiha wrote. “As a result, dozens of people, many of whom lack proper documentation, have been stuck in the transit zone.” Sybiha said 43 citizens, including former political prisoner Andrii Kolomiyets, have been transported from Georgia to Ukraine via Moldova, but more people remain in “difficult conditions” at the border. Sybiha called on Russia to transport them to the Ukrainian border instead. Earlier on Saturday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he had discussed the matter with Sybiha. — Reuters

MIGRANTS FREED FROM EL SALVADOR REACH VENEZUELA



Venezuelan migrants get off a plane at Simon Bolivar International Airport in Maiquetia. — AFP

MAIQUETIA: Hundreds of Venezuelans swept up in President Donald Trump’s immigration dragnet reached home after their release from a maximum security Salvadoran jail as part of a prisoner swap with the United States. The 252 men were accused of being gang members and flown to the notorious CECOT “anti-terror” jail in March. There, they were shackled, shorn and paraded before cameras — becoming emblematic of Trump’s immigration crackdown and drawing howls of protest. On Friday, after months of legal challenges and political stonewalling, the men arrived at an airport near Caracas, with several walking down the steps with their arms raised and one even kissing the tarmac. The Trump administration said they were released in exchange for 10 Americans or US residents held in Venezuela, and “political prisoners,” who number 80, according to El Salvador President Nayib Bukele. The migrants’ return to Venezuela sparked tearful celebrations among family members who had heard nothing from them in months. The Americans and US residents released in Venezuela were taken to San Salvador on their way to the United States. — AFP

EXTREME WEATHER

5 dead, 2 missing after rain in South Korea



Landslides and floods triggered by torrential rain swept into South Korean villages on Saturday, killing at least five, the national fire agency said. Heavy rain unleashed multiple landslides in southern Sancheong county, officials said. “At least two people have been reported missing, two people are in cardiac arrest and five people were killed,” the national fire agency said in a statement, adding that 16 people have been rescued. — AFP

TENSIONS RISE AS LULA BLASTS US OVER VISA SANCTIONS

BRASILIA: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called a US decision to impose visa bans on officials involved in former President Jair Bolsonaro’s trial “arbitrary” and “baseless,” and said foreign interference in the judiciary was “unacceptable.” In a statement on Saturday, the leftist leader said the action violated fundamental principles of respect and sovereignty between nations. In an escalation of tensions between US President Donald

Trump and the government of Latin America’s largest economy, Washington imposed visa restrictions on Friday on Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, his family and other unnamed court officials. The visa bans were a response to the Supreme Court’s decision to issue search warrants and restraining orders targeting Trump ally Bolsonaro, who is accused of plotting a coup to overturn the results of a 2022 election he

lost. “I am certain that no form of intimidation or threat, from anyone, will compromise the most important mission of Brazil’s powers and institutions, which is to permanently defend and uphold the democratic rule of law,” said Lula. Solicitor general Jorge Messias, the top judicial official for Lula’s executive branch, said in a statement posted on X late Friday that Prosecutor General Paulo Gonet was also targeted by the ban. — Reuters

DR Congo, M23 armed group sign ceasefire deal

THE Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda-backed armed group M23 signed a ceasefire deal on Saturday to end fighting that has devastated the country’s mineral-rich but conflict-torn east. The two sides signed a declaration of principles whose terms include a “permanent ceasefire”, after three months of talks in Qatar. It follows a separate peace deal between the Congolese and Rwandan governments signed in Washington last month. Rich in natural resources, especially lucrative minerals, eastern DRC has been wracked by conflict for more than three decades, creating a humanitarian crisis and forcing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes.

Thousands were killed in a lightning offensive by the M23 in January and February, in which the group seized vast swathes of territory, including the key provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu. In the agreement signed in Doha, the warring parties agreed to “uphold their commitment to a permanent ceasefire”, including refraining from “hate propaganda” and “any attempt to seize by force new positions”. The deal includes a road map for restoring state authority in eastern DRC, and an agreement for the two sides to open direct negotiations toward a comprehensive peace agreement. Congolese presidential envoy Sumbu Sita Mambu and M23 permanent secretary Benjamin Mbonimpa shook hands after



Sumbu Sita Mambu, a high representative of the head of state in the DRC (L), and armed group M23 executive secretary Benjamin Mbonimpa (R) exchange documents, in Doha. — AFP

In the agreement signed in Doha, the warring parties agreed to uphold their commitment to a permanent ceasefire, including refraining from hate propaganda and any attempt to seize by force new positions

signing the deal at a ceremony in the Qatari capital. The M23 had insisted on seeking its own ceasefire deal with Kinshasa, saying the DRC-Rwanda deal signed in Washington in June left out various “problems” that still needed to be addressed. The two sides said the new deal aligned with the Washington agreement, which US President Donald Trump at the time called the start of “a new chapter of hope and opportunity” for the region. The African Union hailed the new agreement as a “significant development”, saying: “This... marks a major milestone in the ongoing efforts to achieve lasting peace, security, and stability in eastern DRC and the wider Great Lakes region.” Congolese government spokesman Patrick Muyaya said

the deal took account of the DRC’s “red lines”, including “the non-negotiable withdrawal of the M23 from occupied areas followed by the deployment of our institutions”, including the armed forces. He said the comprehensive peace agreement would follow “in the coming days”. The two sides agreed to implement the deal’s terms by July 29 at the latest, and to start negotiations toward a comprehensive agreement by August 8. Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi are due to meet in the coming months to solidify the Washington peace deal, whose terms have not yet been implemented. Questions remain over an expected side deal on economic issues. — AFP



MANY DIE AS VIETNAM BOAT CAPSIZES

HANOI: At least 27 people died after a tourist boat capsized in stormy weather in Vietnam’s Halong Bay on Saturday, state media reported. The boat, carrying 53 people, tipped over at around 2 pm local time, as Storm Wipha approached the country across the South China Sea. Strong winds, heavy rainfall and lightning were reported in the area. Most of the tourists were from the capital, Hanoi, local newspaper VnExpress reported. There was no official announcement on the nationality of the tourists as emergency crews kept looking for survivors. Rescue teams found 11 survivors and recovered 27 bodies, eight of them children, the state-run Vietnam News Agency said, citing local authorities. Storm Wipha, the third typhoon to hit the South China Sea this year, is projected to make landfall along Vietnam’s northern coast early next week. The weather linked to the storm also disrupted air travel. Noi Bai Airport said nine arriving flights were diverted to other airports, and three departing flights were temporarily grounded on Saturday. — Reuters

SAFE REUSE

Fukushima soil delivered to Japan PM office



Dozens of bags of mildly radioactive soil collected from near the stricken Fukushima nuclear plant were delivered to the Japanese prime minister’s office. Authorities scraped a layer of contaminated soil from swathes of land in Fukushima to reduce radiation levels. A vast quantity of soil has been stored at facilities near the Fukushima Daiichi plant, with the government setting a 2045 deadline for its transfer elsewhere in the country. — AFP

ATTACK ON INFRASTRUCTURE

Singapore faces ‘serious’ cyberattack



Singapore announced it was battling a “serious” cyberattack against its critical infrastructure. The attack, a kind of Advanced Persistent Threat (APT), poses a serious danger to the city-state, Coordinating Minister for National Security K Shanmugam said in a speech. An APT refers to a cyberattack where an intruder establishes unauthorised access to a target. “I can say that it is serious and it is ongoing. And it has been identified to be UNC3886.” — AFP

The New York Times

This dinosaur probably tweeted more than it roared



ASHER ELBEIN

The author is a journalist and fiction writer

SINCE the 1930s, dinosaurs have rumbled, snarled and roared on film. But the fossilised inspirations for these cinematic characters have preserved little evidence for any such dramatic voices. In a paper published last week in the journal *PeerJ*, researchers announced the discovery of a fossilised herbivorous dinosaur from China preserving a surprisingly birdlike throat. It provides a clue that the origins of birdsong might go as far back as the beginning of dinosaurs themselves. The 2-foot-long dinosaur, which the researchers named *Pulaosaurus*, was discovered in 163-million-year-old rocks in northeastern China, said Xing Xu, a palaeontologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing and an author of the paper. The largely complete skeleton offers a strong anatomical view into the fleet-footed, beaked animal, an early member of the family that later produced “duck-billed” hadrosaurs and horned dinosaurs.

The Jurassic period formation that produced *Pulaosaurus* is also the source of other dinosaur discoveries like the feathered proto-bird *Anchiornis*, the tiny, batlike *Yi qi* and the feathered herbivorous dinosaur *Tianyulong*. Unlike those animals, *Pulaosaurus* is not preserved with obvious soft tissues that could help better explain

its living appearance. “On some parts of the fossil, we thought we’d found very thin filaments, but we can’t confirm that,” Xu said.

The team did note interesting formations in the stomach region of the fossil but hasn’t determined what those are. “They could be stomach contents — food eaten by this dinosaur, or organs, or maybe even eggs within the body,” Xu said. The most interesting remains were found within the throat. In vertebrates, vocal organs play an important role in protecting the airway and helping produce everything from simple hisses and grunts to speech. In most living reptiles, these tissues are composed of cartilage, and can produce simple bellows, grunts, groans and chirps. Modern birds have vocal organs made up partially of delicate bones, allowing them to make much more complicated sounds — including, in some cases, mimicking human speech.

The anatomy of dinosaur vocal organs has long been a mystery. “Even when you have a dinosaur skeleton preserved, you don’t always have these isolated bones preserved with other skull elements,” Xu said. “They’re very thin bones, very delicate and hard to preserve.” The first report of a non-bird dinosaur with fossilised vocal organs — the armoured ankylosaur *Pinacosaurus*, which lived millions of years after *Pulaosaurus* — arrived only in 2023. While *Pinacosaurus*

Researchers announced the discovery of a fossilised herbivorous dinosaur from China preserving a surprisingly birdlike throat. It provides a clue that the origins of birdsong might go as far back as the beginning of dinosaurs themselves.

lacked the distinct voice box seen in birds, the researchers concluded, its bony larynx was large and mobile enough to possibly help produce birdlike noises. *Pulaosaurus* seems to have had a similar vocal setup, Xu said, albeit one that was less developed.

Pulaosaurus and *Pinacosaurus* belong to dinosaur families separated from each other by millennia of evolution. Each is also distant from the lineage that produced modern birds. While it’s possible that they evolved independently in different lineages, Xu said, the presence of similar vocal organs in distinct groups suggests that birdlike vocals might have emerged with dinosaurs’ earliest ancestors, over 230 million years ago.

For now, the more complex vocal machinery found in everything from parrots to penguins remains unknown in non-bird dinosaurs. But they might turn up one day in a well-preserved fossil, Xu said. It’s even possible that they already have and were simply misidentified, as the tiny, delicate bones are easy to miss. “We hope that in the future we can find more specialised structures relating to sound so we can do research on how dinosaurs produced their voices,” Xu said. So what did *Pulaosaurus* sound like? Did it twitter, squeak, or chirp like a baby crocodile? “We don’t know,” Xu said. “It could be some strange noise. It’s hard to predict.”

3 deputies killed in explosion at Los Angeles training centre



JESUS JIMÉNEZ

The writer is a reporter, covers news across Southern California



TIM ARANGO

The writer is a Los Angeles correspondent for the New York Times



SHAWN HUBLER

The writer is the Los Angeles bureau chief for The New York Times

THREE sheriff’s deputies were killed in an explosion at a law enforcement training centre in Los Angeles, local and federal officials said. The deaths were the largest loss of life for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department from a single episode since 1857, authorities said. It was not immediately clear what caused the blast, which occurred at the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s Biscailuz Training Academy centre in East Los Angeles. A state official familiar with the investigation, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the investigation, called the explosion a tragic accident that appeared to have stemmed from the handling of on-site explosives.

There was no threat to the area, and the explosion was an isolated episode, said Sheriff Robert Luna. He added that the explosion at the training centre occurred around 7:30 am Pacific time. No one else was injured by the blast, he said. The sheriff’s department identified the deputies as Joshua Kelley-Eklund, Victor Lemus and William Osborn. They were all assigned to the arson explosives unit, the department said in a statement.

Kelley-Eklund joined the sheriff’s department in 2006 and served as a training officer and in the narcotics bureau before becoming an arson and explosives investigator in 2022, according to the statement. Lemus joined the department in 2003 and served as a K-9 handler before becoming an arson and explosives investigator last year. Osborn began his career with the department in 1992 and had been with the arson and explosives detail since 2019. Members of that bomb

squad unit regularly handle dangerous situations or items, with an average of about 1,110 calls per year, Luna said. “They are fantastic experts,” he said, “and unfortunately, I lost three of them today.”

The three deputies had responded to a call in Santa Monica to assist police there with explosive devices that had been found, according to Nicole Nishida, a spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Department. The Sheriff’s Department said it was not clear if those devices were the ones responsible for Friday’s explosion. But homicide investigators were seeking a search warrant for the Santa Monica location and had evacuated residents there, Nishida said.

A Los Angeles County official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the investigation said the three deputies had been alone when the explosion occurred, leaving few witnesses to shed light on the cause. A bomb squad from the Los Angeles Police Department rendered the scene safe by late Friday morning, Luna said, allowing investigators to begin to gain access to the site. “We have to go back, investigate what happened from the very beginning, and we’ll get there,” he said.

Investigators with the FBI, as well as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and detectives with the county sheriff’s department were among those working at the site. Luna called the site of the explosion an “active crime scene” and said homicide investigators were there. On Friday afternoon, a long procession of black-and-white sheriff’s cruisers and officers on motorcycles snaked up and then down a hill on a street near the training center, escorting three medical examiner vans from the site that were believed to contain



Firefighters and law enforcement officers take part in a procession as the remains of three sheriff’s deputies in Los Angeles.

A long procession of black-and-white sheriff’s cruisers and officers on motorcycles snaked up and then down a hill on a street near the training centre, escorting three medical examiner vans from the site that were believed to contain the remains of the fallen deputies

the remains of the fallen deputies. Residents waving American flags looked on.

The training facility, named for Eugene Biscailuz, a long-serving sheriff who helped organise the California Highway Patrol and was its first superintendent, lies east of downtown Los Angeles. The site hosts, among other county offices, the sheriff’s Special Enforcement Bureau, a specialised unit that provides a range of tactical, rescue and counterterrorism support services throughout the county, including an explosives detail.

Several people who live near the training centre said in interviews that they had not heard an explosion. Mandie Rios, who lives a couple of blocks from the centre, was still groggy with sleep on Friday morning when she heard what sounded to her like a moving truck’s door being slammed shut. A little later, she turned on the television and heard the news of the blast. Friday’s explosion came more than two years after a deadly episode at

a training facility for the sheriff’s department. In November 2022, 25 recruits at an academy near the city of Whittier were injured while on a run after a driver going the wrong way ran into them. One of the recruits later died from his injuries, and the driver was charged with vehicular manslaughter and reckless driving.

The handling of explosives by police officers and sheriff’s deputies in Los Angeles has led to problems in the past. In June 2021, 17 people were injured when part of a cache of illegal fireworks blew up in South Los Angeles. Those technicians worked for the Los Angeles Police Department, not the county sheriff’s department. Ten of the injured were law enforcement officers. The explosion also caused extensive damage to more than 20 homes and over a dozen businesses. The Los Angeles Police Department said personnel had incorrectly estimated the weight of the fireworks, and the city agreed to pay more than \$21 million to settle claims by residents.

OPINION

How to boost motivation to exercise



**DR HAMED
AL SINAWI**

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at SQU Hospital

must admit that I am running out of excuses every time my eldest son asks me, “When are you coming with me to the gym?”. Sometimes I say I have a Zoom meeting or need to complete a report, but we both know these are not valid reasons to skip exercising.

Maintaining motivation to sustain physical activities is a challenge for most people and a topic of interest for psychologists and sports specialists.

Recent scientific studies showed that physical inactivity is estimated to affect a third of the global adult population and is linked to the onset and worsening of physical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, as well as mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

On the other hand, increasing physical activity is associated with improvement in physical and mental health.

Unfortunately, scientists were unable to study the long-term effects of physical activities because of the lack of motivation experienced by people who participated in such studies.

Despite the above information, many of us still struggle with staying motivated to start exercising, and those who do start have difficulty continuing. So, what can you do to motivate yourself to exercise?

Psychologists suggest that you start by defining why you are exercising. Do you want to live a healthy lifestyle, or do you mainly want to lose weight for a wedding or an upcoming holiday? This step will give you a personal or emotional investment in your goals.

Sometimes you may have busy schedules at work, and by the time you get home, you are too exhausted to change and drive back to the gym. So, keep a bag in your car with a change of workout clothes and a pair of shoes so you don’t have to go home to get them.

I am not a big fan of people who post their gym photos on social media, but it was interesting to learn about a study that reported that posting gym selfies can provide support, accountability, and even healthy competition in online groups, which can eventually help adhere to an exercise routine.

Signing up with a personal trainer can

boost your motivation and provide you with a personalised work-up plan that is appropriate for your age and body and can give you results.

Some trainers can recommend a diet plan that is suitable for your workouts, however, such a trainer comes with extra cost and may not be flexible to accommodate your preferred exercising time.

Fortunately, there are fitness apps that can design workouts that focus on different fitness goals.

For example, cardio on Monday, strength training on Wednesday, and so on. These apps can also track your progress and give you feedback. From a psychological perspective, talking to like-minded people can be a huge motivating factor, which is why having a ‘gym buddy’ who can help you stay on track and exchange tips from their personal experience can be of help.

Finally, there will be days when you don’t feel like exercising because you are physically tired or have work to do. You may take it as a break to boost your energy to get back on track.

Keeping up motivation to exercise is a challenge for most people and a topic of interest for psychologists and sports specialists

Disinformation catalyses anti-migrant unrest in Spain

SONIA GONZALEZ, CRISTINA ALONSO & LUCIA DIAZ

The rare anti-migrant violence that recently rocked a Spanish town demonstrated how online disinformation feeds xenophobic hate speech, which leapt from screens to real life with the support of politicians, experts said.

Last weekend’s unrest in the southeastern town of Torre Pacheco pitted far-right groups against immigrant residents, mainly of Moroccan origin, but a heavy police presence prevented serious confrontations. The altercations were sparked after a 68-year-old pensioner said three men of North African origin attacked him without provocation on July 9. Two days later, the conservative-led city council organised a protest against insecurity, which quickly escalated when far-right groups joined with hostile slogans against immigrants.

That day, and for several nights, riots broke out in the streets of the southeastern city of 40,000. Authorities have arrested 14 people, including three suspected of involvement in the attack on the retiree. Also among those detained is the leader of the far-right ‘Deport Them Now’ group, who allegedly called for a “hunt” of migrants on social media. The sudden outbreak of violence took Spain by surprise but anti-migrant discourse had already been brewing, partly due to disinformation circulating on social media.

The digital verification team in Spain has debunked many false claims linked to immigrants, mostly concerning public benefits they supposedly receive and alleged attacks by foreigners on Spanish customs.

For Alexandre Lopez Borrull, a professor in communication and information science at the Open University of Catalonia, disinformation in such cases is “the fuel and the spark at the same time”. The narrative “is fuelled over a long period of time” and when a specific event occurs, it can act as a spark in scenarios like the one that played out in Torre Pacheco, he said.

A video purporting to show the assault on the pensioner, along with a list of alleged attackers, quickly circulated online. Elisa Brey, a sociology professor at Madrid’s Complutense University, likened the phenomenon to criminals setting off wildfires. “It’s hot, there’s a temperature alert, and an arsonist passes by and throws a match. That is what happens with disinformation,” she said.

Experts also emphasised the role of politicians, particularly the far-right Vox party, in fanning the flames of anti-migrant rhetoric.

Vox has long connected immigration to crime and recently proposed, echoing other EU political parties and far-right activists, that some migrants be deported as part of a broad “remigration” plan.— AFP

Colon cancer can strike younger than you think

LIKE me, you may have had or might face cancer someday. I consider myself fortunate to be in Oman, where thanks to an excellent team of Omani doctors, I am now cancer-free.

The cancer I had was in the lower digestive system, specifically in the colon. It’s a topic many shy away from because it’s embarrassing to talk about, but for me it was a wake-up call. When I received the diagnosis, I experienced disbelief. I had always joked that I planned to go quickly, possibly with a heart attack. However, the reality set in during a visit to my consultant, because I felt unusually fatigued. He suggested I undergo an endoscopy and colonoscopy, which I initially thought was over the top.

In the UK, my NHS GP might have simply prescribed iron tablets, as GPs there often have to operate within strict financial constraints that prioritise budgets over thorough diagnostics — an issue rooted in the broader failings of our health service. In Oman, I was fortunate to see highly qualified specialists. My Omani consultant gave me a knowing smile when I mentioned my concerns about his cancer related questions. The day before my colonoscopy I fasted and took the liquid laxative. Under deep sedation (which I advise always to accept) I then had the colonoscopy.

The gastroenterologist, a well-respected and familiar face, entered the room during my recovery. He told me there was nothing wrong up there — my stomach was fine — but that “down there”, he found something “sinister”. The word “sinister” caught my attention. I thought of its Latin root meaning “left”, but since I was no longer teaching Latin I decided not to elucidate. I inquired instead if he was suggesting something malignant. Yes, he confirmed — cancer. I asked if it was serious, but he could only say it was quite well-hidden. It was surreal, as if I’d



If you’re over 45, I strongly recommend getting a colonoscopy. Early detection offers nearly 100 per cent curability. It’s a serious health risk, but it’s also one that can be effectively managed if caught early.



**KARIM
EASTERBROOK**

The author is Former School Principal Cambridge UK

entered a new world.

Everything else, my book writing, writing for the Observer, my UK property business, all became insignificant compared to this news.

That week was filled with Google searches about survival rates, treatments and prognoses. The prognosis for colon cancer can be grim, especially if it’s aggressive. My biopsy confirmed I had an aggressive form, one that was out to get me.

The day of surgery arrived. I wasn’t afraid, knowing I was in good hands. My surgeon was renowned in Oman and internationally. He initially planned for a laparoscopy, but because the tumour was large, he had to open me up. I discovered that the true extent of a cancer’s stage can only be known post-op after the pathology report.

On the day I sat waiting to hear the results, I felt faint with nerves, low iron or both. I was about to learn whether I faced stage 1, 2, 3, or 4 cancer. By then, I had become an expert googler on colon cancer.

The moment came. The surgeon, surprisingly, started chatting about life in general. I pressed him on my stage, I needed clarity. He simply waved his hand dismissively and said, “Oh, Stage Zero.” Stage Zero? I’d never heard of that.

Like a rattlesnake curled up, ready to strike, it hadn’t moved. Colon cancer is becoming more common, even among younger people. If you’re over 45, I strongly recommend getting a colonoscopy. Early detection offers nearly 100 per cent curability. It’s a serious health risk, but it’s also one that can be effectively managed if caught early.

Live your life: Because survival is not enough



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

SURVIVAL is defined as the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of ordeal or difficulty and its nature being directly proportional to its intensity and its possible consequences. For example, you will see many young people in European society wearing t-shirts emblazoned with “I survived 7 nights in Ibiza”, which can be seen as a joke, droll, whimsical, or even sarcastic, depending upon your knowledge and understanding of Ibiza and its reputation. But it beggars no comparison whatsoever to the anguish of surviving a car crash, a shark attack, an earthquake, or a battle. While at one end of the scale an extended hangover is as bad as it gets, the others are truly traumatic events, in which to not survive is to perish. German-born philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who himself lived a ‘challenging’ life. His father, a pastor, died of excruciating pain from a diseased brain, when the boy was only four and his younger brother also died only six months later, only two years old. Nietzsche was plagued by eyesight difficulties, migraines, debilitating indigestion, respiratory difficulties and significant mental issues; and by his mid-twenties was an invalid. Yet his philosophies and observations demonstrate remarkable clarity and he wrote that, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering”. In doing so, he warned us that difficulties, suffering and survival are all

part of life and as such must be faced with purpose. Dave Pelzer, author of ‘A boy Called ‘It’, about his experiences as a mistreated child, writes: “You can be a victim or a survivor. It’s a mindset”. In doing so, he virtually rationalises the stabbings, burnings, beatings and abuse by his alcoholic mother, any one of which would draw bitterness and vitriol from anyone, yet, even in the face of his father’s passivity, Pelzer found a perspective that allowed him to focus on his way forward, his way out, of such callous brutality. He did survive! I guess, when confronted by situations that can be harmful, or even hurtful, you don’t always, but sometimes you must make a choice. To confront the ‘challenge’, mitigate its effects, fight like a tiger, or surrender? We just don’t know, do we? But our responses will be, to a certain extent, be coloured by our previous experiences and our own homespun philosophies like “not being bitten by the same dog twice”, or “living to fight another day”. Reassuringly, the great tactician and militarist Sun Tzu, once wrote that mankind, confronted with annihilation, will survive; plunged into deadly situations, they will live; and that when we are most exposed to danger, most of us will survive. Another factor in survival is survivor’s guilt, the response to events that we experience when we survive what others did not. This phenomenon is identified as a post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, a

We have been told that for civilisation to survive, we must cultivate relationships, the ability of all people to live together, at peace

common anxiety disorder and an observable manifestation of tension and distress that sympathy cannot erode. It often manifests itself in solitude and a lack of communication and interaction, so has proven difficult to treat. The North Sea Piper Alpha oil rig disaster saw 167 die and 61 survive; and Professor David Alexander of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, interviewed 36 of those survivors and found to his horror that, scarred as they were, mentally, many had difficulty finding employment following the disaster, as some offshore employers regarded them as “Jonahs — bringers of bad luck, who would not be welcome on other rigs and platforms”. Imagine, even trying to reconcile your experiences, to be bludgeoned with such medieval thinking. It’s almost beyond comprehension... almost. Yet, Alexander also stated that some are stronger than before the tragedy. “They’ve learned things about themselves, their values and many relationships are now stronger as they find strengths they didn’t know they had and heroism”. We have been told that for civilisation to survive, we must cultivate relationships, the ability of all people to live together, at peace. However, in our imperfect world there are always those who will be covetous enough to prefer instability within relationships, societies, cultures and faiths. For that shallow few, survival is naught but a clarion call to greed.

Pullout from Sweida exposes Al Sharaa’s shaky leadership

BEIRUT: Under Israeli bombardment and diplomatic pressure, Ahmed al Sharaa pulled troops from Syria’s Druze heartland — a move that exposes the interim leader’s weakness just as he sought to assert control. Since seizing office in December after ousting longtime autocrat Bashar al Assad, Al Sharaa has worked to recast himself from extremist to statesman, even earning praise from US President Donald Trump as a “tough guy”. But in the early hours of Thursday, he was forced to announce the withdrawal of troops from the Druze-majority city of Sweida, framing it as an effort to avoid confrontation with Israel and prevent further destabilisation in a country still reeling from 14 years of war. In his Thursday speech, Al Sharaa praised the “effective intervention of American, Arab and Turkish mediation, which saved the region from an unknown fate”. That followed Israeli air strikes targeting the Syrian military headquarters and the vicinity of the presidential palace in Damascus. It also came amidst diplomatic pressure from the US. Gamal Mansur, a researcher specialising at the University of Toronto, said he believed “the withdrawal was imposed on the authorities due to the imbalance of power caused by Israel’s presence”. Syria “was forced to retreat because its position in Sweida was not that strong and it was unable to retain the land in Sweida without a high price that would force a second Israeli intervention”, he said. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said the ceasefire in Syria was “obtained by force” and “not by demands, not by pleas”. Heiko Wimmen, project director for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon at International Crisis Group, said Al Sharaa’s pullback showed he was “making a further step towards accepting that Israel basically projects power onto the doorstep of Damascus”. Al Sharaa and his government have been pushing for unified control of the country from Damascus, with the various armed factions, often tied to ethnic or religious identities, merged into the state’s armed forces. That goal was undermined by the events in Sweida, which remains outside Damascus’s direct control and major sectarian clashes like the coastal massacres in March, during which more than 1,700 mostly Alawite civilians were killed. Additionally, the Kurds in northeastern Syria are still demanding a decentralised system despite repeated rejections by Damascus. Bedran Ciya Kurd, a senior official in the autonomous administration, said on Thursday that Damascus should “review” its attitude towards minorities. Syria’s Kurds may be in a stronger position after the Sweida clashes, according to Wimmen, who said there was now a “big question mark” over the idea of full integration with Damascus. — AFP

After Gaza duty, Israeli soldiers kill themselves

DANIEL Edri returned to Israel alive. He had served as a reservist in Gaza and southern Lebanon. When the missions ended, he carried no visible wounds. Yet he returned home unable to sleep, unable to escape the memories. He spoke to his mother about the smell of bodies and the civilians he had seen dying. He asked for psychiatric care but was refused. On July 5, he drove to a remote place and set himself on fire inside his car. Gaza didn’t kill him — the war followed him home. Since Israel launched its campaign on Gaza in October 2023, at least 28 Israeli soldiers have died by suicide. The official figure for 2024 alone reached 21 — the highest annual number in more than a decade, according to Israeli and international media, including France24. Most of these soldiers served in Gaza or along the Lebanese front. Many were reservists — ordinary citizens turned into soldiers, instructed to destroy, then left to live with what they did. Their return is not marked by honour. They come back carrying psychological burdens that continue long after the fighting stops. Those who operated bulldozers to flatten neighbourhoods, those who launched drones at apartment buildings, those who entered homes with rifles — they are returning home with something that military training cannot manage: conscience. The Israeli military describes these suicides as being within expected norms. Yet even within Israeli society, there is growing doubt. Public trust in the army’s transparency on suicide cases has declined sharply. According to France24, it dropped from 46 per cent in 2020 to 38 per cent in 2021. Behind the numbers lies a much deeper issue — one Israel’s leaders would rather not confront. According to Israeli health ministry projections, more than 14,000 soldiers will require long-term medical or psychological



Israeli citizens march with banners and signs during a protest against the war in Gaza, calling for the refusal of army service in Tel Aviv. — AFP

treatment as a result of this war. Many are already being treated for post-traumatic stress, severe anxiety and depression. Most are young men in their early twenties. They were trained to carry out orders. They were not prepared to face what those orders meant. The damage they inflicted on Gaza is undeniable. Thousands of civilians have been killed. Entire families have been erased. Hospitals, mosques, schools and residential blocks have been levelled. These were not anonymous strikes. They were carried out by individuals with names, ranks — and now, silent trauma. When a soldier kills himself after returning home, it is not simply a private tragedy. It is a consequence of the very structure that sent him. Inside Gaza, people count their dead by the hundreds and thousands. In Israel, the war is beginning to claim soldiers through their own hands. These are not accidents. They are outcomes. An army that demands destruction cannot remain untouched by it. What began on the front lines has continued inside the minds of Israeli soldiers returning home. Israel has long invested in its

military. It prides itself on discipline, technology and control. What it cannot control is what happens when the violence comes home. These suicides expose a contradiction: the state believes it can wage war without limits and still expect its soldiers to return to normal life. The deaths show otherwise. The responsibility for each suicide lies with every level of command — from the soldier on the ground to those who designed the campaign. When a soldier takes his own life, it exposes the moral emptiness of the structure he served. The war continues. So will these deaths. They are no longer confined to Gaza. They are no longer anonymous. Israel’s army is absorbing a cost it does not fully acknowledge: the slow internal erosion of those it trained to obey. The rifles have been set down, but the memory of what they did remains loaded. Daniel Edri will not appear in Gaza’s statistics. His name will not be among those buried in Gaza. Yet his story belongs to this war — a reminder that violence spreads beyond borders and returns in forms like silence, shame and the weight of actions that cannot be undone.



BADR AL DHAFRI

The writer is head of proofreading and translation at Oman Daily Observer

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Britain’s Roger (L) and his 4x400 teammates Mark, Iwan and James. — Reuters

BRITISH MEN COLLECT WORLD RELAY GOLDS 28 YEARS LATE

LONDON: Britain’s men’s 4x400m relay team were presented with their gold medals from the 1997 World Championships at London’s Diamond League meeting on Saturday having been elevated from silver after the belated disqualification of the US team.

The US were stripped of the title won in Athens when Antonio Pettigrew confessed in 2008 to doping between 1997 and 2003. The US also lost their 2000 Olympic title.

A laborious process of investigation, appeal and reallocation followed, culminating in Saturday’s presentation by World Athletics President Seb Coe to Roger Black, Iwan Thomas, Jamie Baulch, Mark Richardson and Mark Hylton (who ran in the heats).

The former athletes were giving a rousing welcome by the 60,000 sellout crowd, who then stood for a very belated national anthem.

“We’re proud to be able to give these athletes their moment in front of a home crowd. It’s a chance to recognise not just their talent, but the values they stood for. This medal means even more because of how long they’ve waited for it”, said Cherry Alexander, UK Athletics’ strategic lead for major events.

Pettigrew was found dead at the age of 42 in 2010 in his locked car in the United States, with an autopsy report saying he died by suicide after an overdose.

Earlier on Saturday, the British government confirmed its support for bids to host the 2029 World Athletics Championships, last held in London in 2017 in a regularly sold-out Olympic Stadium.

“Bringing the World Athletics Championships to the UK would be a moment of great national pride, building on our global reputation for hosting memorable sporting events that showcase the very best talent”, Prime Minister Keir Starmer said in a statement. — Reuters

Seeb, Al Shabab set for Super Cup clash in Salalah



Seeb team during training session



Al shabab player, Juma al Habsi

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JULY 19

THE Oman Football Association (OFA) announced the new season 2025/2026 will kick off on Saturday with the highly anticipated Super Cup match between Seeb Club, reigning champions of the Omantel League and Al Shabab Club, holders of His Majesty’s Cup. The prestigious curtain-raiser will be held at Al Saada Sports Stadium in Salalah.

The decision to host the match in Salalah followed the city’s successful organisation of the Super Cup in its 2022 edition, in which Seeb defeated Al Nahdha 2-0 at the same venue. The southern city offers favourable weather conditions during the summer months and boasts ready infrastructure, making it a prime destination for top-level domestic football.

The Super Cup match is expected to

provide both teams with critical match practice ahead of the upcoming Four-Team Tournament in Salalah, which will run from July 27 to August 3. The high-profile pre-season event will feature Seeb, Al Shabab, Al Nahdha (Omantel League runners-up) and Salalah-based giants Dhofar and Al Nasr. The tournament will offer competitive preparation for clubs representing Oman in external and domestic competitions.

Al Shabab Club, led by head coach Hassan Rustam, kicked off their preparations for the new season on July 10. The team has seen a mix of new signings and contract renewals as they aim to build on their recent success. Among the new arrivals is Jameel al Yahmadi, returning to his team after some successful seasons in Qatar, alongside Juma al Habsi and Salah al Dohani. Key renewals for Al Shabab include: Hatim al Roushdi, Sami al Ajmi, Musab al Maamari, Yaqdhan

al Shanfari, Islam al Hinai, Rashid al Hosni, AbdulMalik al Badri, Mohammed al Ghafri, Yousef al Malki, Mahmood al Khusaibi, Ahed al Hudaifi, Mahmood Mabrook, Majid al Saadi, Badar al Alawi and Yassin al Shyiadi.

On the other side, Seeb Club have begun their pre-season under newly appointed Romanian coach Valeriu Tița, starting official training on July 6. The club is focused on squad stability and reinforcement as they look to defend their league crown. Among the club’s new signings are: Marwan al Siyabi who returned after a season with Al Nasr, Abdullah Fawaz, Oman national team midfielder signed for one year, and Musab al Shaqsi, striker from Bahla Club. Renewed contracts were handed to several key players, including: Mohammed al Musallami, Ali al Busaidy, Tamim al Balushi, Ahmed al Rawahi, Zaher al Aghbari and Motasim al Wahaibi.

Sport Spark 2025 begins at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JULY 19

The activities of the “Sport Spark 2025” festival have kicked off in the indoor halls of the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), under the auspices of Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality. The festival will continue until August 16, attracting a wide range of participants from various age groups and sporting interests, offering a comprehensive community sports experience under an air-conditioned roof amidst the high summer temperatures. The event is being held in Exhibition halls 1 and 2, providing a healthy and comfortable environment that allows everyone to enjoy practicing sports and attending various activities.

Following the great success of the previous edition of “Sport Spark”, which attracted more than 50,000 participants, the festival returns this year with a more dynamic and inclusive programme. The event aims to promote fitness, wellness

and community engagement in the face of the high summer temperatures in Oman by providing high-quality, air-conditioned sports facilities and a comprehensive engaging atmosphere.

The event is organised by OCEC in collaboration with the Muscat Governorate, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omran Group and Sabco Sports. Sponsored by Sohar International, the 2025 edition introduces a first-of-its-kind experience in Oman. The festival’s programme includes 20 indoor sports, including football, basketball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, indoor golf and indoor hockey. This year, the addition of indoor golf and hockey is a first, alongside the return of boxing after its success in the previous edition. These games cater to both athletes and enthusiasts alike, encouraging the integration of various groups in both recreational and sporting environments.

The festival is not limited to traditional sports only but also includes a range of exciting new activities, such as the launch



Ahmed al Humaidi during an inspection tour of Sport Spark

of the “Muscat Night Run” in collaboration with the Muscat Marathon, scheduled for August 1, where participants will have the opportunity to Run on two distinctive routes of 2.5 km and 5 km. The second season of the “Phygital E-Gaming” championship will also see thrilling Fifa competitions, supported by the Omani Electronic Games Committee. Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, confirmed that the

event meets the community’s need for indoor sports activities during the summer, pointing out that it offers a unique and distinguished experience for all age groups from 6 to 45 years old. He emphasised the importance of utilising the centre’s facilities during this period, noting that the festival’s space has doubled this year with increased support from the private sector, reflecting optimism for a broader and brighter future for the event in the coming years.

Said al Shanfari, CEO of the Oman OCEC, explained that this year’s edition is more diverse and expansive, with new sports such as golf and pickleball, complemented by a rich daily schedule and an expanded academy for children. He highlighted that the organisation involves more than 200 young people, reflecting the spirit of teamwork and community interaction. He also emphasised the importance of media promotion for the event, particularly through social media platforms and influencers; and mentioned that the strategic location of the centre in the heart of Muscat greatly contributed to attracting attendees and participants.

It is worth mentioning that the festival welcomes visitors daily from 8 am to 11 pm, creating a daily scene full of sports, entertainment and community participation.

For bookings, registration and more information, visit the Sports Spark official website [www.sportsparkoman.com](#) or follow @SportSparkOm on social media.

SHORT TAKES



Scottie Scheffler tees off on the first hole during the second round. — Reuters

SCHEFFLER
DEFENDING LEAD AS
MCILROY POWERS
INTO BRITISH OPEN
CONTENTION

PORTRUSH, UNITED KINGDOM: Scottie Scheffler started his British Open third round with a one-shot lead as Rory McIlroy sparked his title bid into life at Royal Portrush on Saturday.

World number one Scheffler is one stroke ahead of Matthew Fitzpatrick as he bids for a first Claret Jug, which would complete the third leg of a possible career Grand Slam, on 10-under par for the tournament.

Home favourite McIlroy, starting the day seven strokes off the pace, quickly made his move with three birdies in his first four holes.

A huge roar greeted a curling, 36-foot birdie putt on the first green, before the Northern Irishman tapped in for another birdie on the second.

A towering iron shot into the fourth continued the momentum, dragging the Masters champion to within four shots of Scheffler before the leader had even teed off.

Fitzpatrick, on nine-under overall, is a shot ahead of 2023 champion Brian Harman and China's Li Haotong, who make up the penultimate group.

Other early movers on Saturday included American Russell Henley, who was six-under par through 14 holes and also minus six overall.

Last year's runner-up Justin Rose, who lost to McIlroy in a play-off at the Masters in April, surged into the mix as well with four birdies in the space of five holes to get to six-under.

Reigning champion Xander Schauffele is six strokes behind Scheffler after his front nine, after an eagle on the par-five seventh kept him just about in touch.

Tommy Fleetwood, who finished second to Shane Lowry the last time the tournament was played at Portrush, was fighting to keep his hopes alive at four-under early into his back nine.

Scheffler will still be a strong favourite to close out his fourth major victory.

The American arrived at Portrush following a run of 10 successive top-10 finishes, featuring three wins including the PGA Championship. — AFP



Marquez (1st L) followed by Francesco Bagnaia compete during the qualifying. — AFP

Marquez wins Czech GP
sprint after penalty scare

DUCATI'S MARC MARQUEZ took a record-extending 11th sprint win of the MotoGP season at the Czech Grand Prix on Saturday, but the Spaniard's celebrations were briefly put on hold during an investigation for tyre pressure infringements.

Marquez and factory Ducati teammate Francesco Bagnaia were both forced to slow down during the race and surrender first and second place due to low tyre pressure, or risk incurring an eight-second penalty.

Six-times champion Marquez relinquished his lead but was able to overtake KTM's Pedro Acosta with two laps remaining and cross the finish line first, with MotoGP later confirming that no further action would be taken against Marquez.

Acosta's teammate Enea Bastiani ended in third.

Asked if he had done enough to avoid a penalty, Marquez said: "Yeah, we did it. For that reason, I'm smiling. So it's true that it was super towards the limit. And yeah, we're riding comfortable."

"Then I saw that the pressure was not enough. I tried to push some laps on the brakes, but I saw that was too much risk to get on that correct pressure. And then I decided to wait".

"I just stayed super close to Acosta to increase the temperature. And then when I saw the temperature was already inside the



Spanish MotoGP rider Marc Marquez celebrates the winning. — AFP

rules, pressure was inside the rules, then I pushed in the last few laps". Marquez leads the riders' championship table with 356 points, with his second-placed younger brother Alex, who finished 17th after a disastrous start, 95 points behind on 261.

Pole-sitter Bagnaia finished seventh after he was overtaken by Trackhouse Aprilia rider Raul Fernandez in the final lap. Reigning MotoGP champion Jorge Martin ended in 11th on his return to competition after suffering a collapsed lung and bruised ribs in a crash in Qatar in April. — Reuters

England defender Morgan still buzzing after wild shootout win

ZURICH: England defender Esme Morgan said on Saturday it had been difficult to sleep since her team's "ridiculous" come-from-behind quarter-final victory over Sweden with its wild penalty shootout that will not be soon forgotten.

With the defending champions facing Italy in the semi-finals on Tuesday, the 24-year-old was still buzzing from Thursday's chaotic night in Zurich that featured injuries, a bloody nose, a mysterious note and a wacky shootout that will go down as one of the worst but one of the most memorable ever.

"Obviously that was ridiculous really, to sum it up in one word", Morgan said.

The one negative on the night was captain Leah Williamson limping off with an ankle injury, but Morgan said the team were optimistic she would be available to face Italy.

"She seemed in very high spirits



England's Esme Morgan celebrates after winning. — Reuters

this morning", she said.

Morgan was one of coach Sarina Wiegman's 70th-minute substitutes in the Sweden game. "Apparently my mom was sobbing when I came on, bless her", she said.

The television camera spotted Morgan handing a note to fellow defender Lucy Bronze. Morgan joked later on Instagram that the note said "Save us GOAT".

The 33-year-old Bronze was huge in England's victory, scoring in the 79th minute and then hastily unwrapping her taped hamstring to smash home the winning penalty in the shootout.

"We are all inspired by her mentality, she's a freak really in that she just has so much passion, energy, fight and she infects everyone else with it", Morgan said.

"That note might as well have said that because that's apparently what she read on it. She put her shoulders

back and played like: 'I'm not letting us go home'".

IMPRESSIVE KELLY

Chloe Kelly was also impressive as a late substitute and was one of three England players who found the back of the net in the shootout with her oddball run-up — she lifts one hip high, does a little skip, before firing with her right. "Chloe said afterward that she made eye contact with the goalkeeper (Jennifer Falk) and the keeper was smirking at her and she just started laughing", Morgan said. "The composure in that moment to be so free and at ease and confident to be able to laugh just shows what a brilliant player she is".

Morgan also praised keeper Hannah Hampton who made two saves in the shootout despite a bloody nostril stuffed with gauze thanks to an errant elbow earlier.

— Reuters



Dutch rider Thymen Arensman cycles to the finish line to win the 14th stage. — Reuters

ARENSMAN CLIMBS TO MISTY TOUR DE FRANCE WIN AS POGACAR EXTENDS LEAD

DUTCH rider Thymen Arensman climbed to victory on the gruelling stage 14 of the Tour de France in the Pyrenees on Saturday as defending champion Tadej Pogacar extended his overall race lead.

Double Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel, who had been third overall, pulled out of the race on the day's first climb, the daunting 2180m altitude Tourmalet.

The Belgian Soudal Quick-Step rider appeared exhausted after Friday's uphill time trial.

Arensman attacked on the third of four mountains on a colossal climb day while Slovenian Pogacar outsprinted Jonas Vingegaard for second, just over a minute behind the winner.

Crossing the line in the mist at 1840m altitude, Arensman flung himself to the ground exhausted after taking a first win on this Tour for British team Ineos.

The 25-year-old produced a virtuoso climb amidst suffocating packs of near hysterical fans who had waited all day for the peloton to pass.

Behind him, Pogacar fought off a string of attacks from his arch rival, Vingegaard on a day the Slovenian never looked like attacking for the win. Winner of the past two stages Pogacar pounced for the line from 50 metres with his trademark kick, gaining another six seconds on the Dane.

Pogacar, overall race winner in 2020, 2021 and 2024, now leads Vingegaard by 4min 13sec with

Crossing the line in the mist at 1840m altitude, Arensman flung himself to the ground exhausted after taking a first win on this Tour for British team Ineos.



Dutch rider Thymen Arensman celebrates on the podium. — AFP

Florian Lipowitz moving into third place at 7min 53sec. Pogacar praised Arensman as “the strongest of the breakaway and strongest of the race”.

“That was one hell of a ride from him. You could only see 20m ahead,” said the race leader.

“I was quite scared racing down the Tourmalet, I was behind Arensman and he just disappeared into the fog,” said Pogacar.

BIATHLON TO WHITE JERSEY
Lipovitz rode on Pogacar's wheel until Dane Vingegaard, who won Tour titles in 2022 and 2023, had attacked late on. The 25-year-old Red Bull rider Lipowitz took the best young rider's white jersey and is a rising force in cycling, which he came to late after switching from the winter sport

biathlon, a mixture of shooting and cross-country skiing.

“When I came here I had no pretensions of taking the white jersey, so I'm really happy,” said the quietly spoken 6ft 4in (1.93m) German.

“The crowds were so encouraging, it makes you want to ride faster.”

Ireland's Ben Healy climbed back up to ninth as the EF rider who led the race, arriving in the Pyrenees, rode all day with the Pogacar clique.

Frenchman Lenny Martinez led over the first three mountains and has the polka dot King of the Mountains jersey. After three days in the Pyrenees, the riders next have a hilly stage 15 over 169.3km from Muret to the medieval fortified town of Carcassonne. — AFP

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MARGINAL INCREASE

Power generation saw a 3-per cent increase, with usage rising to 5.810 billion cubic metres.

ASSOCIATED GAS OUTPUT IN OMAN JUMPS 11 PER CENT

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman recorded a marginal increase of 0.3 per cent in total natural gas production and imports, reaching 22.716 billion cubic metres by the end of May 2025, according to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

This growth was primarily driven by a significant 11.1 per cent rise in associated gas production, which reached 5.177 billion cubic metres, up from 4.658 billion cubic metres during the same period in 2024.

This growth was primarily driven by a significant 11.1 per cent rise in associated gas production, which reached 5.177 billion cubic metres, up from 4.658 billion cubic metres during the same period in 2024.

However, non-associated gas production, including imports, fell by 2.5 per cent to 17.538 billion cubic metres.

In terms of consumption, gas use in industrial projects dropped by 6 per cent to 11.458 billion cubic metres. In contrast, power generation saw a 3-per cent increase, with usage rising to 5.810 billion cubic metres.

Consumption in oil fields and related industries, including mining and cement production, surged by 13.3 per cent to 5.333 billion cubic metres. Additionally, industrial zones recorded a 7-per cent increase in gas consumption, reaching 113.8 million cubic metres.

— ONA

Sur Hydrogen Cluster study in Oman advances

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JULY 19

THE Sur Hydrogen Cluster and Energy Transition Study – an initiative designed to support the decarbonisation of major industries in the Sur industrial hub – is set to enter the detailed feasibility stage, according to Oman LNG, the lead player spearheading the project.

At the heart of the initiative is a comprehensive plan to integrate large-scale renewables and green hydrogen production, enabling a range of industrial, petrochemical and energy projects operating in Sur to achieve their Net Zero goals.

During its preliminary stage, the Sustainable Energy Research Centre (SERC) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), along with the Oman Hydrogen Alliance (Hy-Fly), assessed the technical, economic and partnership frameworks required to position Sur as a hydrogen export and low-carbon fuel hub aligned with Oman's national energy transition ambitions.

Also participating in the initiative are Phoenix Power Oman (operator of Sur IPP), Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO), OQ Gas Networks, OQ Alternative Energy and Madayn – the authority administering Sur

In addition to the cluster initiative, Oman LNG is also weighing schemes to support its energy transition, energy efficiency and decarbonisation goals.

Industrial City.

Sharing an update on the initiative, Oman LNG stated: “We recently held a framing session with our key partners – Oman India Fertiliser Company SAOC (OMIFCO), OQ Gas Networks (OQGN) and OQAE – to shape the Sur Hydrogen and Energy Transition Cluster Study.

“We are now finalising the scope of work, which will be followed by the tendering process for a detailed feasibility study, expected to commence in the second quarter of 2025, with the Oman Energy Association (OPAL) managing the tender. This initiative is part of our broader commitment to advancing Oman's position as a leader in green hydrogen

and energy transition.”

The project envisions the use of renewable energy to produce green hydrogen, which will serve as a fuel resource for project stakeholders.

This shift will displace significant volumes of natural gas currently used as fuel and feedstock by Sur-based industries.

The freed-up gas could then be redirected by Oman LNG for liquefaction and export. An output of around 487 tonnes per day of low-carbon hydrogen is anticipated if and when the Sur Hydrogen Cluster is fully implemented.

In addition to the cluster initiative, Oman LNG is also weighing a host of schemes to support its energy transition,

energy efficiency and decarbonisation goals.

“Key initiatives for the year include developing a FEED package for the power import project, finalising green power sourcing concepts with a robust commercial model and conducting comprehensive assessments to enhance energy efficiency,” the majority state-owned company noted in its 2024 Sustainability Report.

Furthermore, the company has conducted a techno-economic analysis of opportunities linked to proposals such as solar photovoltaic (PV) power generation capacity, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) capacity and flare gas recovery.

Oman LNG is working closely with OQ Alternative Energy to explore optimal renewable energy sourcing.

Additionally, a new Energy Efficiency Improvement Programme was launched this year to enhance or maintain the high thermal efficiency of Oman LNG's triple-train complex at Qalhat.

“This initiative will focus on identifying practical ways to increase efficiency and sustain our top-tier results. We are currently finalising the delivery plan for this programme, which underscores our ongoing commitment to operational excellence and responsible energy use,” the company added.

Asyad Drydock serves over 800 global clients, sets new record in 2024

DUQM: Asyad Drydock, a key member of the Asyad Group, achieved a record-breaking year in 2024, completing 232 projects – the highest annual number since the facility began operations in 2011.

With this milestone, the total number of completed projects has now surpassed 2,000.

Ahmed bin Ali al Balushi, CEO of Asyad Drydock and Infrastructure Services, revealed that the drydock has served more than 800 clients from 70 countries outside the Sultanate of Oman, showcasing its growing reputation and the trust placed in its technical and operational capabilities.

He emphasised the drydock's growing contribution to the economic development of the Duqm Special Economic Zone.

By attracting major international marine repair and maintenance projects, the facility is generating employment, strengthening support services, and drawing further industrial and logistics investments – cementing Duqm's status as a leading regional maritime hub.

Al Balushi further highlighted the company's strong commitment to in-country value (ICV). In 2024, Asyad Drydock awarded contracts worth RO 8.4 million to SMEs and RO 11.1 million to other local companies,

With this milestone, the total number of completed projects has now surpassed 2,000.

accounting for 82 per cent of all contracts awarded. The company's spending on local procurement reached RO 14 million, including RO 5.8 million on services and RO 2.3 million on locally manufactured goods.

As part of its supplier development programme, the company also shifted

purchases worth over RO 414,000 from international to local suppliers, particularly in areas like industrial diving and technical material supplies, further reinforcing Oman's national supply chain.

In terms of quality and sustainability, the company achieved notable milestones,

AHMED BIN ALI AL BALUSHI
CEO of Asyad Drydock and Infrastructure Services.

including securing American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) certification for the repair of megavessel propeller blades, adopting environmentally friendly painting techniques and deploying robotic hull cleaning technologies.

Revenues for the first half of 2025 rose by 15 per cent year-on-year, reflecting continued financial improvement. Al Balushi confirmed that the company is advancing its expansion strategy, with a strong focus on digital transformation, skills development and international partnerships.

He added that Asyad Drydock is also exploring new business areas, especially within the oil and gas sectors. The company aims to provide offshore platform services and expand into key international markets such as Africa, Japan and the United States.

These efforts are expected to attract more vessels to Duqm and elevate customer satisfaction. — ONA

ADVERTORIALS

SEAMLESSINTEGRATION



This step represents a continuation of the Bank’s commitment to facilitating seamless integration of top-notch digital solutions for institutions.

BANK MUSCAT AND OMANTEL ANNOUNCE ACTIVATION OF WEB PAYMENT SOLUTION

MUSCAT: In a move to advance Oman’s digital financial ecosystem, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, and Oman Telecommunication Company (Omantel), the first and leading provider of integrated telecom and technology services in Oman, have announced the activation of a state-of-the-art Web Payment API solution, marking a strategic step in delivering seamless enterprise payment experiences.

On this occasion, the two organisations signed the partnership agreement in the presence of Ahmed bin Faqir al Balushi, Deputy CEO, Bank Muscat, and Aladdin Bait Fadhil, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel.

This step represents a continuation of the Bank’s commitment to facilitating seamless integration of top-notch digital solutions for institutions. Further to the launch of API Banking last year, the Bank strengthened its partnership with various institutions and companies by implementing several ERP API services.

Besides, this integration enables Omantel’s corporate customers with accounts at Bank Muscat to settle payments directly through Omantel’s Business Self-Service Portal, streamlining the process, improving reconciliation and enhancing overall user experience with secure, real-time transactions.

The initiative reflects a shared commitment to digitising Oman’s enterprise landscape and creating secure, efficient and future-ready services. The collaboration leverages Bank Muscat’s advanced API capabilities and Omantel’s powerful digital infrastructure to deliver tangible value to customers.

Ahmed bin Faqir al Balushi, Deputy CEO, Bank Muscat, said: “We are thrilled to announce the activation of our Web Payment API with Omantel, our first telecom partner to integrate this advanced solution.

“This partnership serves as an extension to our efforts to offer seamless, secure services that simplify the banking experience for corporate customers. Through such strategic collaborations, we will continue to deliver customer-focused digital solutions tailored to evolving business needs.”

Eng Aladdin Bait Fadhil, Chief Commercial Officer at Omantel, said: “We are proud to be the first telecom to integrate Bank Muscat’s Web Payment API, a step that aligns with our strategy to elevate digital engagement for our enterprise customers.

“This solution improves the way our customers manage payments and enhances the accuracy and speed of our internal reconciliation processes. Real-time updates and immediate confirmations offer a smoother, more reliable experience for corporate customers. This partnership reinforces our role in delivering innovative, customer-focused digital services in the telecom space.”

ISLAMIC FINANCE ASSETS IN OMAN REACH RO 9 BILLION

MUSCAT: The total assets of Islamic banks and windows in the Sultanate of Oman reached around RO 9 billion by the end of May 2025, accounting for 20% of the overall banking sector’s assets, according to figures from Central Bank of Oman. This marks a 17.5% increase compared to the same period in 2024, highlighting the growing



This marks a 17.5-per cent increase compared to the same period in 2024.

role of Islamic finance in the country. Financing provided by Islamic banks rose by 12.3% to approximately RO 7.2 billion. Deposits with Islamic banking entities also increased substantially, climbing 16.6% to around RO 7 billion by end of May, reinforcing the segment’s strong momentum in Oman’s financial sector. — ONA

Malabar Gold & Diamonds unveils Mojawhraty

MALABAR Gold & Diamonds, the 5th largest jewellery retailer globally with over 400 showrooms across 13 countries and a name synonymous with trust, quality and timeless craftsmanship, has unveiled Mojawhraty by Malabar, the brand’s latest retail concept dedicated exclusively to Arabic jewellery.

In the GCC region, Mojawhraty by Malabar has launched 6 showrooms; 2 showrooms in the UAE at Dalma Mall & Ajman City Centre, 2 showrooms in Bahrain at Bahrain City Centre and Bab Al Bahrain, and 1 showroom each in the KSA and Oman.

The second showroom of Mojawhraty by Malabar in the UAE at Dalma Mall was inaugurated by Chairman of Malabar Group, M P Ahammad, in the presence of Vice-Chairman, Abdul Salam K P; MD-International Operations, Shamlal Ahamed;

Senior Director of Malabar Group, Mayankutty C; Director of Finance & Admin, Ameer CMC; Head of Manufacturing, Faisal A K; Business Head of Arabic Value Chain, Sherif Abdelmonem Meligy Hassanin, other senior management team



The launch of Mojawhraty by Malabar marks a significant step in establishing a distinct presence in the traditional and contemporary Arab jewellery space.

members from Malabar Gold & Diamonds, customers and well-wishers.

“It is with great pride and pleasure that we unveil Mojawhraty by Malabar to the discerning lovers of Arabic jewellery.

“As part of Malabar Gold & Diamonds’ vision to become the world’s No 1 jewellery retailer, expanding our design portfolio across diverse cultural and value chains is a key focus.

“The launch of Mojawhraty by Malabar marks a significant step in establishing a distinct presence in the traditional and contemporary Arab jewellery space. With six showrooms across the GCC and more on the horizon, we are confident that

Mojawhraty by Malabar will be welcomed with open arms by jewellery lovers in the region,” commented Malabar Group Chairman, M P Ahammad.

At Mojawhraty by Malabar, each piece of jewellery is meticulously crafted by master artisans and is available in responsibly sourced 18K, 21K and 22K gold, alongside an exclusive range of ornaments featuring certified natural diamonds.

The curated brand portfolio showcases several in-house collections that are reflective of Arabic artistry and the evolving tastes of the modern Arab consumer. Every purchase is also covered under the Mojawhraty Promise, which

includes 100% value on diamond exchange, exclusive usage of tested and certified natural diamonds, assured lifetime maintenance, guaranteed buyback and more.

“We are thrilled to introduce Mojawhraty by Malabar to our valued Arab customers, whose patronage has always been integral to our success in the region,” said Abdul Salam K P, Vice-Chairman of Malabar Group.

“The rich legacy of Arabic jewellery and its profound cultural relevance has long inspired us. With Mojawhraty, we have created a distinct platform that will offer customers an immersive and personalised retail experience focused exclusively on Arabic design traditions.

“By utilising our globally renowned artisanship to craft jewellery that will be welcomed by Arab consumers of all design sensibilities, our goal is to evolve this brand into the most trusted and preferred name in Arabic jewellery segment.”

Mojawhraty by Malabar has charted an ambitious expansion plans for the coming years, aiming to bring the Mojawhraty experience to a broader clientele of discerning jewellery lovers.

SOHAR ISLAMIC LAUNCHES UNIFIED TRANSACTION BANKING PLATFORM

MUSCAT: In alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and its commitment to promoting financial inclusion, Sohar Islamic — Sohar International Islamic Window — has announced the launch of its online Unified Transaction Banking Platform for its Wholesale Banking Clients.

This platform offers Cash Management and Trade Finance solutions, serving as a comprehensive solution for corporate and institutional clients’ everyday banking needs.

It provides convenient features such as auto reconciliation, supply chain finance, liquidity management, receivables management, digital trade finance and payment processing. Incorporating global technology trends, these online unified transaction banking services



It offers cash management and trade finance solutions.

align with the bank’s ongoing digitalisation strategy. Fahad bin Akbar al Zadjali, Head of Sohar Islamic at Sohar

International, emphasised the bank’s dedication to innovation and staying ahead of the curve: “The demand for 24/7, easily accessible and on-the-go banking solutions is crucial in today’s ever-changing world.

“With the support of the Omani government, which has acted as a significant catalyst for change, we have witnessed enhanced business and industry collaborations, secure channels establishment, and more effective governance.

“At Sohar Islamic, we recognise the importance of leading industry transformation. Our agility, disruptive technologies and commitment to innovation set us apart. By embracing digitalisation, we provide exceptional customer service to wholesale banking clients while contributing to the broader goal of a paperless world.”

Sajeel Bashiruddin, Chief Technology and Digital Officer at Sohar International, stated, “Our digital strategy is centred around building intelligent systems that are resilient, interoperable and built for scale.

“In a fast-evolving financial environment, it is essential to design platforms that are not only secure but also adaptable to the complexities of modern business. Through a modular architecture, design and advanced integration capabilities, we are laying the foundation for a future where banking services become embedded within our clients’ operational ecosystems.

“This approach supports long-term digital transformation while reinforcing our role as an innovation-led institution shaping the next era of banking in Oman.”

Amouage welcomes its latest addition: Luban Al Akhdar

MUSCAT: Although all forms of perfumery are special in their own right – offering very particular riches and rewards – it could be argued that none is as romantic as the attar.

The most ancient example of scent-creation, it has travelled from one century to the next, accumulating layer upon layer of cultural wisdom. Although it has always maintained its connection with history, it has also succeeded



Amouage welcomes an extraordinary new scent, Luban Al Akhdar.

in remaining relevant at all times, adapting to the needs and tastes of each passing generation.

“I find attars absolutely fascinating,” says Amouage’s Chief Creative Officer, Renaud Salmon. “On the one hand, they come to us as very ancient constructions, and so they possess some of the simplicity that we associate with the past. But on the other, they are incredibly complex, and they require very precise skills and technical know-

how if they are to be created properly and beautifully. It’s this extreme contrast that makes them so enjoyable and satisfying to work on.”

In 2021, Amouage revisited this age-old practice of fragrance composition by releasing an entirely original collection of resplendent attars. Since then, the range has evolved, delving into unexplored landscapes of creativity. Now, in 2025, it goes through yet another shift, appropriating a revitalised,

more contemporary aesthetic and welcoming an extraordinary new scent, Luban Al Akhdar.

In addition, Leather Sadah, which had until recently been an exclusive release, is being placed in the main collection with the remaining attars, enabling its sensual charms to be enjoyed by an even wider audience.

The main point of difference between attars and nearly all other types of perfume is that they contain no unscented material.

BUSINESS

SHORTTAKES



Transaction fees collected grew to RO 30.9 million.

OMAN REAL ESTATE
TRANSACTIONS
EXCEED RO 1.1 BN

MUSCAT: The total value of real estate transactions in Oman reached approximately RO 1.113 billion by the end of May 2025, reflecting a 10-per cent decline from RO 1.237 billion recorded in the same period last year, according to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Despite the overall drop, transaction fees collected grew by 13.5 per cent to RO 30.9 million, compared to RO 27.2 million in 2024. Sale contract values rose by 17.3 per cent to RO 536.3 million, even though the number of contracts declined by 2.6 per cent to 27,302.

Mortgage contract values dropped significantly by 26.1 per cent to RO 572.7 million across 9,140 contracts, compared to RO 774.5 million from 8,596 contracts last year. Swap contracts also fell, with 538 deals worth RO 4.6 million, down from 583 contracts valued at RO 5.2 million. — ONA

OQBI POSTS RO 22.7
MILLION IN PROFITS
FOR H1 2025

SALALAH: OQ Base Industries (OQBI) has reported robust profit growth in the first half of 2025, with consolidated net profit surging to RO 22.75 million, a remarkable increase from RO 4.1 million in the same period last year.

Preliminary unaudited financial results highlight a strong performance across key metrics, underpinned by improved operational efficiency and disciplined cost management. The company succeeded in reducing overall expenses while maintaining steady revenue growth, reflecting its strategy for sustainable expansion.

Revenues for H1 reached RO 112.37 million, up by 7.7 per cent from RO 104.3 million recorded in the same period of 2024. Total expenses fell to RO 89.62 million, marking a 10.5-per cent reduction from RO 100.18 million a year earlier. — ONA

MOBILE
SUBSCRIPTIONS
IN OMAN
SURPASS 8
MILLION

MUSCAT: Mobile subscriptions in the Sultanate of Oman have exceeded 8.1 million, according to the latest data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

This reflects a 15.2-per cent rise by the end of May 2025 compared to the same period in 2024, underscoring the rapid digital transformation taking place across the country.

The number of active postpaid

mobile subscriptions rose by 5.6 per cent to reach 1,239,509, while prepaid subscriptions grew by 3.1 per cent to 5,335,847. Notably, Internet of Things (IoT) subscriptions surged by an exceptional 118.7 per cent, reaching 1,554,999.

In terms of mobile broadband usage, active subscriptions reached 5,414,124, marking a continued expansion in digital connectivity. Fixed broadband also witnessed

modest growth, with active subscriptions increasing by 2.6 per cent to 588,015. Fibre optic services grew by 11.4 per cent to 339,279 and fixed 5G subscriptions rose 2.1 per cent to 215,850. However, fixed 4G subscriptions fell sharply by 38.1 per cent to 19,654, while digital subscriber line (DSL) services declined by 50.8 per cent to just 11,806. Satellite subscriptions also dipped slightly by 2.1 per cent to 653. — ONA

Raysut Cement reports
strong H1, global gains

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JULY 19

RAYSUT Cement Company (RCC) Group, Oman's largest cement producer, has reported a significant financial turnaround in the first half of 2025, marking a major step in its transformation into a resilient and forward-looking industry leader.

The Group's consolidated revenue rose by 30.8% to RO 41.3 million, while net losses were reduced by 38% compared to the same period in 2024.

This performance reflects a successful strategy implemented across its operations, including key contributions from its UAE-based subsidiary Pioneer Cement Industries and its growing presence in the Maldives.

Pioneer Cement Industries (PCI), a wholly owned subsidiary of RCC in the UAE, has become a central pillar in the Group's recovery. PCI's capacity utilisation surged to 88% in the first half of the year, up from just 40% during the same period in 2024. This turnaround is attributed to improved operational discipline and a renewed commercial focus.

PCI succeeded in attracting bulk cement customers in the



This performance reflects a successful strategy implemented across its operations.

UAE and increased its monthly sales by an average of 50,000 metric tonnes.

It also developed premium clinker products with higher margins and introduced a smart pricing mechanism to enhance competitiveness.

In an interview with the Observer, Acting CEO Dr Hilal bin Saif al Dhamri highlighted the importance of these strategic gains. "Pioneer Cement's recovery is a textbook example of how operational excellence and smart market positioning can deliver real results," he said. "We have restored its reputation

and repositioned it as a high-performing, quality-driven asset within our Group."

RCC's strategic expansion into the Maldives has also paid dividends. Its 75%-owned subsidiary, Maldives Raysut Cement Company, has become a preferred supplier for major

infrastructure projects in the island nation.

The Group now holds a 35% share of total cement imports to the Maldives. Despite logistical hurdles typical of island markets, the company introduced efficient distribution models and launched specialised marine-



DR HILAL
BIN SAIF AL
DHAMRI

Acting CEO of Raysut
Cement Company

MSX gains 51 points amid strong earnings

MUSCAT: The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) continued its upward trend last week, posting a gain of 51 points to close at 5,654 points, buoyed by positive earnings results from listed companies for the first half of 2025.

This marks the fourth consecutive week of growth for the exchange, driven largely by improved financial performance and increased investor confidence.

The financial sector index rose by 5 points, while the services sector added 7 points. The Shariah index remained steady at 449 points. In contrast, the industrial sector index fell by 70 points, pulled down by losses in companies such as Oman

Flour Mills, Al Maha Ceramics, Voltamp Energy, and others.

Trading activity surged, with the number of executed transactions rising by 14 per cent to 10,600, up from 9,290 the previous week. The value of trades remained high, totalling RO 82.4 million, as investment funds and institutions injected more liquidity into the market.

Market capitalisation increased by RO 206.7 million, reaching RO 28.643 billion by the end of Thursday's session. OQ Base Industries led trading activity with a value of RO 21.9 million, accounting for 26.5 per cent of the total. Asyad Shipping and Bank Muscat followed,



This marks the fourth consecutive week of growth for the exchange.

with trades worth RO 15.1 million and RO 14.4 million, respectively.

A total of 42 securities gained in value, 29 declined and 16 remained unchanged. Muscat Insurance topped the gainers, rising 20.3 per cent to 794 baisas. Oman Oil Marketing rose by 11.9 per cent to 750 baisas, and Dhofar Food and Investment climbed 11.2 per cent to 79 baisas.

Oman Education and Training gained 10 per cent to 1,320 baisas, and Salalah Port Services added 8.3 per cent to 260 baisas. Among the losers, National Aluminium Products dropped 15.8 per cent to 85 baisas, while International Financial Investments

fell 11.7 per cent to 135 baisas. Al Madina Investment declined 8.8 per cent to 41 baisas, and Oman Flour Mills dropped 7.6 per cent to 469 baisas.

In corporate developments, Asyad Shipping announced the arrival of a new 308,000-tonne crude oil tanker, "Qurayyat", as part of a \$206-million deal to acquire two tankers. The second vessel is expected soon.

Liva Group, a major insurance company, has restructured its debt portfolio, consolidating loans into a new RO 63 million credit facility with Bank Sohar International, aiming to cut borrowing costs and improve capital allocation. — ONA

GENIUS ACT

Trump signs stablecoin law



US President Donald Trump on Friday signed a law to create a regulatory regime for dollar-pegged cryptocurrencies known as stablecoins, a milestone that could pave the way for the digital assets to become an everyday way to make payments and move money.

The bill, dubbed the GENIUS Act, passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 308 to 122. — Reuters

MONEY LAUNDERING

Google, Meta executives summoned in India



India's financial crime fighting agency has summoned executives of tech giants Google and Meta to its headquarters on Monday as it investigates accusations of money laundering on online betting apps, two sources said.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) is investigating whether the platforms eased the way for promotion and wider reach of betting apps through advertisements, sources said. — Reuters

NATIONAL INTEREST

Japan to hold more trade talks in US



Japan's top tariff negotiator, Ryosei Akazawa, said on Saturday he planned to visit Washington next week to hold further ministerial-level talks with the United States.

"I intend to keep on seeking actively an agreement that is beneficial to both Japan and the United States, while safeguarding our national interest," Akazawa told reporters in the western region of Osaka. — Reuters

OPINION

Dhofar: From seasonal escape to sustainable destination



QASIM AL MAASHANI

The writer is the head of business and politics section at Oman Observer.

DHOFAR is no longer just Oman's monsoon hideaway. A quiet transformation is underway — one that aims to shift the governorate from a three-month seasonal destination into a vibrant, sustainable tourism hub active year-round.

With upgraded infrastructure, flagship investments and an emerging vision aligned with Oman Vision 2040, Dhofar is preparing for its next chapter.

FOUNDATIONS IN PLACE

Roads have been expanded, Salalah Airport upgraded, and municipal services improved to better serve both residents and the growing number of visitors. In areas like Salalah, Taqah, Mirbat and Dhalkout, we're seeing new hospitality projects, retail developments and expanded urban services — laying the groundwork for a richer tourism offering.

Official data reflects this shift. Tourism contributed RO 2.7 billion to Oman's GDP in 2024, with Dhofar playing a key role — especially during the khareef season. Still, the governorate's impact remains modest compared to its potential.

Meanwhile, outbound travel by Omanis and residents reached RO 1.8 billion — a strong indication that domestic destinations like Dhofar could capture more of that spending if they delivered the right experiences. More than 3.8 million tourists visited Oman in 2024, with over half arriving from the United Arab Emirates.

That market — familiar, affluent, and right

next door — remains under-leveraged.

TWO PROJECTS, ONE DIRECTION

Among the most promising signs of Dhofar's evolution are two standout developments: Janaen Salalah, a 5.5-million square metre agritourism destination developed by Omran Group, is designed to blend farming, hospitality and environmental learning.

Coconut and papaya plantations will sit alongside eco-lodges, educational trails, a local produce village and spaces for cultural exchange. It is a model that fuses sustainability with lifestyle — rooted in place, yet globally relevant.

Just a few kilometres away in the Ittin Plain, the award-winning Boulevard al Rathath is preparing to offer something entirely different: a 470,000 m² leisure and entertainment district inspired by the interplay of mist, water and the Omani identity.

With a total investment of RO 40 million, the project includes the "Grand Souq", botanical gardens, canal-side restaurants, suspended walkways, open-air theatres and retail experiences — all built around a central theme of nature in motion. The first phase will be funded by the Ministry of Finance with RO 10 million, with the remaining capital coming from the private sector.

Together, the two projects are expected to attract more than 1 million visitors annually and generate over 1,500 jobs, helping diversify Dhofar's economy while creating lasting value for local communities.

Both are firmly aligned with Oman Vision

In areas like Salalah, Taqah, Mirbat and Dhalkout, we're seeing new hospitality projects, retail developments and expanded urban services — laying the groundwork for a richer tourism offering.

2040's pillars: economic diversification, sustainable cities, private sector empowerment and local value creation.

THE MISSING PIECE: INTEGRATION

Despite such gains, the governorate's tourism landscape remains fragmented. Activities during khareef are not yet unified under a central brand or management body. Events are often organised in silos, and promotional campaigns — though well-intentioned — lack the consistency, identity and storytelling power required to position Dhofar competitively on the global map.

If Dhofar is to become a true four-season destination, we must move from infrastructure to orchestration — from building roads and hotels to building narratives, partnerships and systems that hold everything together.

FOUR PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

1. Establish a central tourism authority in Dhofar to plan, brand and coordinate all tourism seasons — khareef and beyond.
2. Boost investment in eco-, cultural and adventure tourism in underutilised protected areas, while maintaining environmental integrity.
3. Launch a unified digital platform for booking, navigation, real-time updates and feedback — making every visitor's phone a smart travel companion.
4. Empower local communities not just as workers, but as owners and storytellers, bringing Dhofar's identity to life through food, crafts, hospitality and heritage.

UK'S DEREGULATION DRIVE FOSTERS WRONG TYPE OF RISK

LIAM PROUD

RACHEL REEVES reckons the City of London needs more dynamism. Britain's finance minister is probably right. But some of her latest reforms, including weaker rules for banks, may raise the risk of economic harm.

Reeves's latest bundle of policy proposals — dubbed the Leeds Reforms after the British city where she unveiled them — follows a similar speech last year at the Mansion House dinner, the preferred forum for the chancellor to flaunt her pro-finance credentials.

On Tuesday evening, she told City grandees that regulation was a "boot on the neck" of growth, and talked up a range of measures to cut red tape on the financial sector, which accounts for 9% of UK economic activity.

Many of the planned reforms are sensible. Watchdogs like the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the Bank of England's Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) will face new clear deadlines on how quickly to approve new firms and senior managers.

Separately, banks may be allowed to alert customers to the fact that money in their cash accounts could be earning higher returns in the stock market, a practice stamped out after the 2008 crisis.

Reeves is also considering further changes to tax-free savings accounts, which could in theory include nudging more people into equities.

The common thread is that Britain's weighty edifice of rules and regulations has left too much money sitting on the sidelines, harming both savers and the competitiveness of United Kingdom capital markets. It's a broadly correct diagnosis.

A recent Aberdeen report found that Brits had the smallest percentage of their wealth in equities and mutual funds among the Group of Seven wealthy countries.

Other elements of Reeves's reform push, however, could create the wrong type of risk. She touted bank supervisors' decision to raise the balance sheet threshold beyond which lenders must issue loss-absorbing debt to protect depositors to £40 billion (\$54 billion), from £25 billion.

That's odd since the failure of US lender Silicon Valley Bank in 2023 arguably demonstrated the dangers of not having such a buffer.

Supervisors are also extending the implementation deadlines for other global bank-capital tweaks and will report back to Reeves on broader levels of equity among lenders. She wants to ensure that the overall framework strikes the "optimal balance to deliver resilience, growth and competitiveness". — Reuters

Employment: policies, progress and prospects

OMAN is currently going through an extensive national transformation as outlined in Vision 2040 which seeks to diversify the economy, reduce reliance on hydrocarbons and promote sustainable development.

One of the most defining features of this transformation is the integrated framework designed around the strategic goal of generating employment opportunities for Omanis and increasing local content in all economic activities.

Oman's development agenda also places critical importance on "local content", which can broadly be referred to as the value added of the workforce, goods and services employed in a specific industry.

It is my intention in this article to examine the evolving landscape of employment in Oman, local content policies and laws, sectoral performance, the role of SMEs, skill development programmes, as well as the impending challenges and prospects of the economic transformation.

Oman's inclusive economic resilience vision is being supported by government programmes and hard data, and this is what the paper seeks to present.

NATIONAL LOCAL CONTENT POLICY (2024-2030)

In 2024, the Council of Ministers approved the national local content policy (2024-2030) as a guiding document aimed at embedding Omani goods, services and labour into the economy.

Maximising the in-country value (ICV) generated from public and private sector investments is one of the main objectives under the policy.

It also supports Oman Vision 2040 on economic diversification, social inclusion and sustainability.

The policy is built on four strategic pillars:

- Supply Chain Development:



To foster sustainable job creation, Oman has established targeted Omanisation goals tailored to particular sectors.



DR HILAL AL SAWAI

The writer is local content, sustainability and innovation expert.

Sponsoring local Omanis by both the government and private sectors as suppliers and contractors.

- **Workforce Development:** Equipping Omanis through strategic educational programmes, vocational trainings and practical job placements.
- **Innovation and Technology Transfer:** Improving the national capabilities through partnering in R&D and knowledge transfer as well as through licensing.
- **Entrepreneurship and SMEs Participation:** Supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through finance, mentorship and contract allocation.

The policy requires the ministries and large corporations to embed the ICV framework into their tendering processes. This also includes provisions for workforce, procurement from Omani suppliers and local subcontractor employment.

OMANISATION STRATEGY

Legal Changes: To boost Omanis' employment opportunities, the country introduced several

new labour laws and ministerial decisions.

The most impactful include:

- Labour Law No 53/2023: Introduces new rules on employment contracts, termination and conflict resolution.
- Ministerial Decision No 501/2024: Broadened the scope of occupations reserved for Omanis and added fines for breaches.
- **Workforce Localisation Plans:** Companies must file annual plans detailing the number of Omanis employed (or to be employed), their distribution by gender, salary, training and outlined promotion pathways.

Non-licenced firms may be penalised with fines, or barred from public tenders.

Omanisation Sector Goals: To foster sustainable job creation, Oman has established targeted Omanisation goals tailored to particular sectors.

These depend on the strategic value and labour intensity of each sector: Banking & Insurance (60-70%), Manufacturing (35-40%), Retail/Wholesale (20-25%), Oil & Gas (40-50%), Tourism & Hospitality (30-35%) and Construction (15-20%).

These benchmarks are met through mandatory quotas, regular audits and integration into the licensing and visa issuance processes.

The private sector is the backbone of Oman's economy, with a workforce of more than 1.7 million. Nevertheless, the share of Omanis working in it is very small in proportion to foreign workers.

Employment in the Public Sector: As noted earlier, the public sector continues to be the biggest employer of Omanis, with more than 90 per cent coming from the local population out of a total of 195,902 employees.

Focused on increasing the number of Omanis in the private sector, the government has also implemented new policies and training initiatives directed at the sector.

ART/LIFE



L I F E S T Y L E

AN OMANI MAKE-UP ARTIST'S JOURNEY FROM OMAN TO INTERNATIONAL RUNWAYS

> 20

ENTERTAINMENT

Unreleased Beyoncé music stolen during Cowboy Carter tour in Atlanta, police say



TWO MEN who identified themselves as a choreographer and a dancer for Beyoncé told police in Atlanta that hard drives containing unreleased music, concert set lists and footage plans for shows were stolen from their rental SUV last week during a stop on the singer's Cowboy Carter tour, authorities said.

The men, Christopher Grant and Diandre Blue, told officers that they parked their rented 2024 Jeep Wagoneer for about an hour in a parking garage at the Krog Street Market on July 8, according to a police report.

Someone broke the vehicle's rear window while it was unattended and made off with two suitcases that the men said had their belongings in them, police said.

"Grant also advised that he was carrying some personal, sensitive information for the musician Beyoncé," according to the police report, which the Atlanta Police Department posted on its website on Monday.

According to the report, the stolen items included a set of hard drives, which had some unreleased music on them; set lists for past and future concerts; and footage plans for one of the singer's upcoming shows. The hard drives also contained watermarked music, a digital identifier used by recording artists for copyright purposes and to prevent piracy. A 13-inch MacBook Air was also reported stolen.

It was not immediately clear whether the hard drives had been stored inside the two suitcases. A value of \$1, which appeared to be a place holder, was assigned in the police report to each of the stolen hard drives.

Two officers dusted the vehicle for fingerprints, which yielded two very light prints, according to investigators, who said that security cameras had recorded the break-in.

A pair of AirPods Max headphones, which were stolen and can be tracked via GPS, led officers to a person described in the report as suspicious.

"At this time, the suspect remains outstanding, and their identity is not yet available for release," Officer John Predmore, an Atlanta police spokesperson, said in an e-mail.

The break-in was reported on Monday by Atlanta television station WSB. The area where it happened is part of the Krog district, a mixed-use collection of landmark properties and a food hall.

A representative for Beyoncé did not immediately respond to a request for comment. — NYT

Q U I C K F E A T U R E S



TRAVEL

Tourists are pictured at the Giant's Causeway, a Unesco World Heritage Site, near Bushmills in Northern Ireland. — AFP



MUSIC

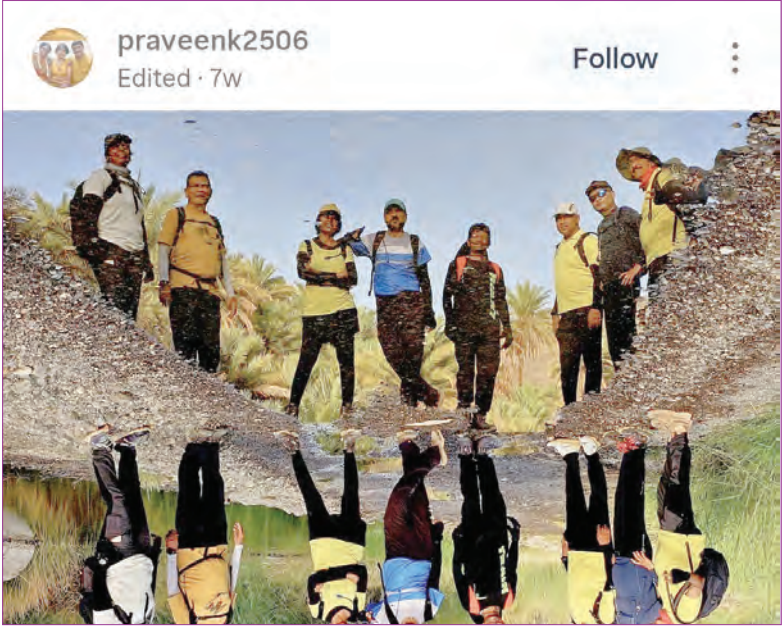
Vanessa Williams arrives for a special performance of the musical "Just For One Day", marking the 40th anniversary of the 1985 fundraiser Live Aid, at the Shaftesbury Theatre, in London. — Reuters



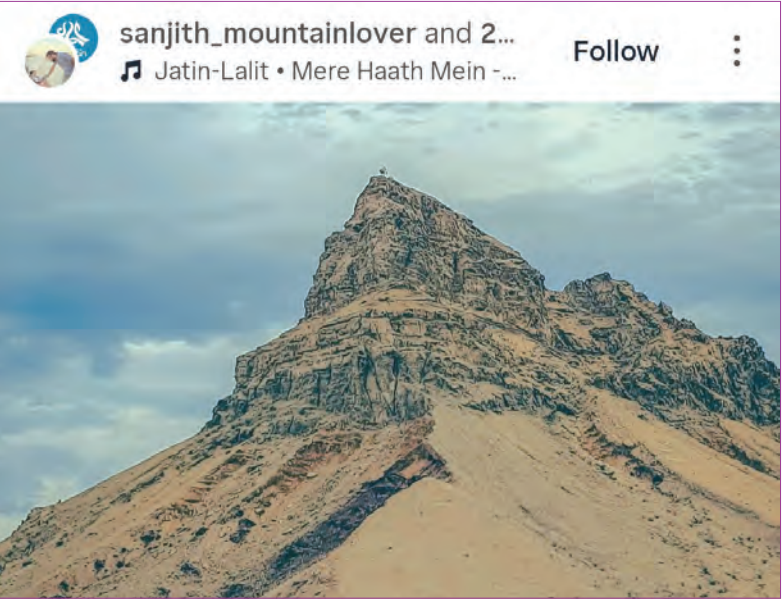
FASHION

A model presents a creation by designer Rami Al Ali as part of his Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2025-2026 collection show in Paris, France. — Reuters

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



A Matter of Perspective



Beauty of Remote Places

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West Bank ‘plane chalet’ helps aviation dreams take off



QAFFIN: A guest house in the shape of a plane would stand out anywhere in the world, but in the occupied West Bank devoid of airports, Minwer Harsha’s creation helps aviation dreams take flight.

“So many kids want to come”, said 27-year-old Harsha, who built the guest house in the hills of the northern West Bank, within view of the separation barrier between Israel and the Palestinian territory. “And that’s the goal: since we don’t have planes or airports, people come here instead”, he said. Harsha said he designed the concrete plane himself, with a master bedroom in the cockpit and a children’s bedroom in the tail.

The price tag, between 1,000 and 2,000 shekels (about \$300-\$600) per night, is out of reach for most Palestinians, particularly as unemployment soars due to the war in Gaza. He has nonetheless been pleased with the reactions to his chalet, having initially faced scepticism. “I wanted to bring something unique, something new to the area and to Palestine”, Harsha

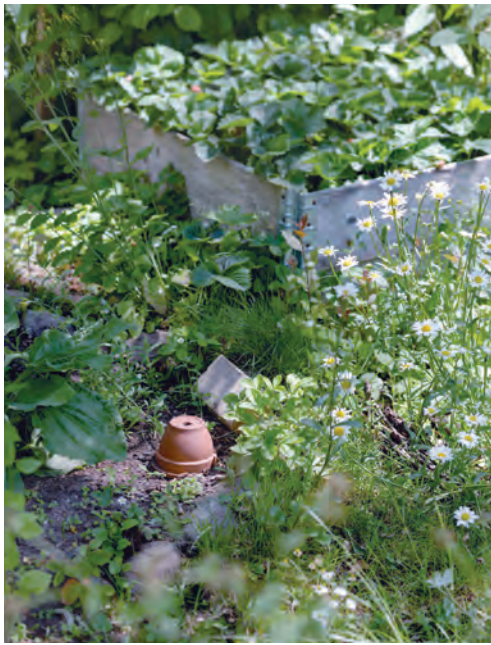
said of the unit, which opened a month ago. Since its launch, his red and white concrete plane has become a local landmark, featuring in local media and on social networks. Harsha said he originally wanted to place a Palestinian flag on his chalet and call it the “Palestinian Queen”, but avoided such signs out of caution. The guest house is located in the West Bank’s Area C, which covers more than 60 per cent of the territory and is under full Israeli control. “I just made it look like a plane. I avoided politics entirely because of the hardships our people are going through”, he said. “We’re a people who are constantly losing things — our land, our rights, our lives”.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967 and frequently demolishes homes it says are built without permission in the mostly rural Area C.

Though no airport currently services the Palestinian territories, both the West Bank and Gaza once had their own terminals, in east Jerusalem and the southern Gaza city of Rafah, respectively. — AFP



Sweden’s secret to well-being? tiny urban gardens



ON AN unseasonably warm June morning in Stockholm, Stina Larsson, 98, stood among fragrant lilacs, lilies and lavender, inspecting the garden that she has tended for more than 40 years. Rabbits had been nibbling the nasturtiums, she noticed, and there were weeds that needed pulling.

Larsson’s garden, situated on a postage stamp of land beside the Karlbergs Canal, is one of more than 7,000 garden allotments, known as koloniträdgårdar, in Stockholm. The gardens, established as part of a social movement around the turn of the 20th century, offer city dwellers access to green space and a reprieve from crowded urban life.

Though most are modest in size — Larsson’s garden is about 970 square feet — koloniträdgårdar are prized for providing a rare kind of urban sanctuary, a corner of the city where residents can trade pavement for soil and the buzz of traffic for birdsong.

The garden programmes were specifically designed to improve the mental and physical health of city dwellers, said Fredrik Björk, a lecturer at Malmö University who specialises in environmental history.

“The idea was that a working-class family would be able to spend the summer there and work together but also have some leisure and fun,” Björk said on the phone from his own koloniträdgård in Ärtholmen, a garden association in Malmö that

dates back to the 1940s. The health benefits of gardening are well established, both for the physical activity and for the time spent in nature. Cecilia Stenfors, an associate professor of psychology at Stockholm University, said her research shows that those who frequently visit green spaces, whether a forest or a koloniträdgård, “have better health outcomes, in terms of fewer depressive symptoms, less anxiety, better sleep and fewer feelings of loneliness and social isolation.”

These positive effects can be particularly pronounced in older people and can help combat symptoms of age-related mental and physical decline. Maja-Lena Säfström, 80, who owns a cotton-candy-pink cottage in a garden association outside of Uppsala, said she had seen many wellness benefits from having a koloniträdgård.

“When you’re in an apartment, you don’t move much, but if you have a garden, you move around in a different way, and that makes you feel better,” she said. Garden associations can also help foster social connection, Säfström explained, giving residents a chance to meet other people with similar interests.

Rising interest in koloniträdgårdar, particularly among younger Swedes, has led to an increase in prices in recent years. Björk said cottages in his association can sell for over 1 million Swedish kronor (about

\$105,000). In Stockholm, however, prices are regulated to help ensure the gardens remain affordable, said Katrin Holmberg, a board member of Stockholm Koloniträdgårdar.

“It’s a great leisure activity for people; it’s healthy, and you’re outdoors a lot,” she said. “I think the city understands that, as well as the fact that it contributes to biodiversity in urban areas.”

Stockholm residents who can’t afford to buy their own plot can still enjoy the benefits of the koloniträdgårdar, which are all open to the general public to enjoy. But for those who wish to own a garden of their own, the biggest obstacle, apart from the price tag, is availability.

There are more than 50,000 plots across Sweden, but demand far outpaces supply. Eriksdalslundens Koloniträdgårdsförening, an association of 143 plots on the southern island of Södermalm that is among the most popular garden colonies in central Stockholm, has over 1,100 people on the waiting list. And the wait times can be incredibly long. One couple I spoke to, Bengt and Susanne Kopp, were on a waiting list for 17 years before they were finally able to buy a cottage in 2023.

For many Swedes like the Eklundhs, a koloniträdgård is more than just a storybook cottage and thriving garden. It’s also an active hobby with wide-ranging health benefits and a restorative escape from the city without ever needing to leave it. — NYT

FEATURES



AN OMANI MAKE-UP ARTIST 'S JOURNEY FROM OMAN TO INTERNATIONAL RUNWAYS

BY SIHAM AL SAIDI

IN THE shimmering limelight of international fashion weeks, Khadija al Naimi's name has become synonymous with elegance, precision and perseverance. Her journey from a small town in Al Batinah North to a celebrated make-up artist featured at London and Paris Fashion Weeks exemplifies the extraordinary ability of passion, resilience and talent to transcend borders and stereotypes.

Breaking into the world of professional make-up artistry is rarely a straightforward path. Globally, aspiring make-up artists often face numerous obstacles — a saturated market, the need for a foundational skill set, establishing a unique signature style, and navigating the unpredictable landscape of fashion and beauty. In Oman, where the beauty industry is still evolving, these hurdles are even more pronounced. Khadija's story resonates with many who have had to overcome societal expectations, limited resources and the struggle for recognition.

“Starting out was tough,” Khadija recalls. “There weren't many recognised make-up artists in Oman, and breaking into the international scene seemed impossible at first. It took years of dedication, continuous learning and resilience.” Her journey underscores a universal truth: success in this field demands more than talent — it requires relentless perseverance and a willingness to continually adapt.

ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION: FORMAL TRAINING AND CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

One of the common requirements for success, both locally and globally, is formal education complemented by ongoing professional development. According to industry standards outlined by recognised organisations like the International Make-Up Association (IMA) and professional development platforms such as MasterClass and



Coursera, a successful make-up artist must master a comprehensive skill set that includes colour theory, anatomy, skin care, and specialised techniques for different face shapes and skin types.

Khadija's commitment to excellence saw her seeking professional training across Lebanon, Bahrain and other countries, learning advanced techniques that most aspiring artists only dream of mastering. Such international exposure not only honed her technical skills, but also broadened her stylistic horizons, enabling her to adapt to various cultural aesthetics and client needs.

In the high-stakes environment of Fashion Week, a make-up artist's skill set is scrutinised more intensely than ever. During these global events, artists must deliver flawless looks at lightning speed, often under extreme pressure and with models and clients from diverse backgrounds. The requirements are exacting: impeccable skin finishing, innovative styles that complement runway concepts and the ability to evolve

swiftly as trends change.

Fashion Week is a career-defining platform — an opportunity to showcase technical mastery and creativity to industry leaders, designers and potential clients worldwide. For Khadija, her successful participation in London Fashion Week four times and her recent appearance at Paris Fashion Week not only validated her skills, but also positioned her as an international talent.

FROM LOCAL SALONS TO GLOBAL RECOGNITION

Khadija's endeavours reflect this commitment. Starting from humble beginnings in her family's home, she transformed her hobby into a full-fledged career through persistent learning and refining her craft. Her decision to pursue specialised training internationally allowed her to develop a signature style defined by elegance, meticulousness and versatility — attributes highly prized in the fashion industry.



Today, her brand, Dar Al Khaleej, boasts multiple salons and a thriving bridal boutique, Dar Al Khaleej Royal. Her work has earned her awards for Best Beauty Salon in Al Batinah North and Best Make-up Artist in Oman. Despite her accomplishments, Khadija remains grounded, continually seeking new opportunities to expand her expertise and influence.

Her excellence as the Best Make-up Artist in Oman and for her salon's outstanding services exemplify how industry acknowledgement can propel careers further. Such accolades reinforce her reputation both locally and regionally, creating opportunities for collaborations with renowned designers and international ventures.

For Khadija, her repeated appearances at London Fashion Week and her recent debut at Paris Fashion Week exemplify her rising global stature. She exemplifies the emerging new breed of African and Middle Eastern make-up artists making their mark worldwide. Her journey from humble beginnings to participating in the world's most prestigious fashion events highlights the importance of skill, resilience and industry recognition.