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SINNER SURGES
ZVEREV TO RETAIN
AUSTRALIAN
OPEN TITLE

INBRIEF

HM THANKED BY
CHINESE PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, in reply to His Majesty's cable on the victims of the earthquake that struck Tibet in southwestern China. In his cable, the Chinese President expressed his sincere appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan's heartfelt sentiments, wishing His Majesty good health and well-being. He also wished the Omani people continuous peace and prosperity.

MoHUP CUTS REAL
ESTATE SERVICE FEE

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) on Sunday announced amendments to some real estate service fees with a view of achieving value-added and enhancing the investment environment in the real estate sector. The amendments covered 85 government services including simplifying and merging the fees of 47 services, cancelling the fees of 11 services, reducing the fees of 8 services, and creating 14 new services.

DETAILS ON P2

ATTACK ON SAUDI
HOSPITAL IN SUDAN

The Sultanate of Oman has condemned and denounced the attack on the Saudi Hospital in the city of Al Fashir, the Republic of Sudan, expressing its heartfelt condolences and sympathy to the Sudanese government and families of the victims.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Sunday, Oman stressed the need to respect international humanitarian law and spare civilian, medical facilities and their personnel the impacts of armed conflicts. Oman called upon all parties to resort to dialogue to resolve differences, in order to preserve the supreme interests of Sudan.



SAYYID THEYAZIN GRACES RAFO ANNUAL DAY CELEBRATION

HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Sunday presided over the Royal Air Force of Oman's (Rafo) annual day celebration, which falls on January 25 every year, and the graduation of officer cadets, limited service officer cadets and university officers, who all completed the respective training courses. The ceremony took place at the military parade grounds at Ghala Base and Sultan Qaboos Air Academy. On this occasion, the Rafo performed a military parade that demonstrated the skill of its personnel and highlighted the great attention accorded to the Rafo by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.

DETAILS ON P2

EMIR OF QATAR BEGINS
STATE VISIT ON TUESDAY

TO EXPAND AREAS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

SHAIKH TAMIM BIN HAMAD AL THANI, Emir of the State of Qatar, will pay a state visit to the Sultanate of Oman with effect from Tuesday (January 28).

The Diwan of Royal Court issued a statement to this effect reading as follows: “Based on the Royal keenness of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, to expand areas of cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar in a manner that brings about more prosperity and development for the two countries and further benefit their two peoples, Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, will pay a state visit to the Sultanate of Oman with effect from Tuesday (January 28).

“During this visit, the two countries will discuss matters of common interest, with the prime aim of realising their aspirations for a brighter and more prosperous future. The two countries will also engage in consultations about various issues of relevance to developments on the regional and international arenas.

“May Allah the Almighty grant the wise leaderships of the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar success in their endeavours to achieve the good of the two countries, the Arab and Muslim nations.”

BILATERAL RELATIONS

The Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar continue promoting their distinguished relations in various areas in a manner that serves their interests, under the wise



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

leaderships of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani.

A new track for bilateral relations between the two countries will be launched on Tuesday when the Emir of Qatar begins his state visit to Oman. This path reflects the commitment of the two countries to push these distinguished relations to wider horizons in all fields, constituting a new turning point in the course of relations and pushing bilateral economic and trade relations between the two sides towards more fruitful cooperation.

Data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicate



Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani

that the volume of trade exchange between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar reached RO 1,113.3 million by the end of 2023, of which RO 284.7 million were the value of Omani exports to the State of Qatar and RO 828.6 million the value of Omani imports from Qatar.

The volume of trade exchange between the two countries reached about RO 950.8 million by the end of November 2024, of which RO 205.9 million were the value of Omani exports to Qatar, representing 0.9 per cent of the total value of Omani exports, and RO 754.9 million were the total value of Omani imports from Qatar, representing 5 per cent of the total imports. SEE ALSO P3

Thousands await return to north Gaza

CAIRO: Tens of thousands of Palestinians waited, blocked on the road, to return to their homes in northern Gaza on Sunday, voicing frustration after Israel accused Hamas of breaching a ceasefire agreement and refused to open crossing points.

A day after a second exchange of Israeli captives held in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, the holdup underlined the risks hanging over the truce between the group and Israel.

US President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, will travel to Israel on Wednesday to oversee the Gaza ceasefire, Israel's Channel 13 reported on Sunday, citing two Israeli officials.

In central Gaza, columns of people were waiting along the main roads leading north, some in vehicles and some on foot, witnesses said.

“A sea of people is waiting for a signal to move back to Gaza City and the north,” said Tamer al Burai, a displaced person from Gaza City. “This is the deal that was signed, isn't it?”

“Many of those people have no idea whether their houses back home are still standing. But they want to go regardless, they want to put up the tents next to the rubble of their houses, they want to feel home,” he said via a chat app.

On Sunday, witnesses said many people had slept overnight on the Salahuddin Road, the main thoroughfare running north to south



Ahmed Badie, a Palestinian who spent 19 years in prison out of a 40-year sentence and who was released by Israel, embraces his relatives' children as they greet him at their family home in Qalandia, south of Ramallah, on Sunday. — AFP

and on the coastal road leading north, waiting to pass the Israeli military positions in the Netzarim corridor running across the centre of the Gaza Strip.

Al Awda Hospital officials said one Palestinian was killed and 15 others wounded by Israeli fire, from soldiers apparently trying to prevent people coming too close along the coastal road. The Israeli military said it was looking into the report.

Cars, trucks and rickshaws were overloaded with mattresses, food, and the tents that served as shelters for over a year for those in

the central and southern areas of the enclave. Under the agreement worked out with Egyptian and Qatari mediators and backed by the United States, Israel was meant to allow Palestinians displaced from the north to return to their homes.

But Israel said that Hamas' failure to hand over a list detailing who of the captives scheduled for release were alive or to hand over Arbel Yehud, an Israeli woman taken captive from her kibbutz home during the attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 meant it had violated the agreement.

SEE ALSO P6

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



Sayyid Badr receives message from Tajikistan foreign minister

SAYYID BADR RECEIVES TAJIK OFFICIAL

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received here on Sunday Zubaydullo Zubaydov, Envoy of Sirojiddin Muhriddin, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan. The envoy conveyed a message to the Foreign Minister dealing with bilateral relations and means of enhancing them, as well as reviewing areas of partnership and exchanging expertise to serve mutual interests. The meeting was attended by several officials from both sides. — ONA

MoHUP CUTS REAL ESTATE SERVICE FEES



The fees for registering sales contracts was reduced to 1 per cent from 2 per cent for individuals and Omani companies. — ONA

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning on Sunday announced amendments to some real estate service fees with a view of achieving value-added and enhancing the investment environment in the real estate sector. The amendments covered 85 government services including simplifying and merging the fees of 47 services, cancelling the fees of 11 services, reducing the fees of 8 services, and creating 14 new services. The fees for registering sales contracts was reduced to 1 per cent from 2 per cent for individuals and Omani companies. The fees for selling real estate through Islamic banks was slashed to 0.5 per cent and fees for registering real estate mortgages was set at a maximum of 0.5 per cent. The decision canceled agricultural land registration fees and land allocation fees through electronic auctions. Certain categories were exempted from real estate ownership fees including low-income earners and citizens whose income of less than RO 300, persons with disabilities, beneficiaries of the family income support benefit, beneficiaries of the housing assistance programme and retirees with a monthly income below RO 300. The new amendments help motivate citizens to use digital platforms to complete their transactions thus reducing paperwork and enhancing the accuracy and speed of completing services. — ONA

Sayyid Theyazin graces Rafo Annual Day ceremony

HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Sunday presided over the Royal Air Force of Oman's (Rafo) annual day celebration, which falls on January 25 every year, and the graduation of officer cadets, limited service officer cadets and university officers, who all completed the respective training courses. The ceremony took place at the military parade grounds at Ghala Base and Sultan Qaboos Air Academy.

On the auspicious occasion, the Rafo performed a military parade that demonstrated the skill of its personnel and highlighted the great attention accorded to the Rafo by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.

Upon the arrival of HH Sayyid Theyazin to the celebration ground, the graduates gave the military salute and the Rafo band played the Royal Anthem. Then, HH Sayyid Theyazin inspected the front column of the graduates' column.

After that, the front column of the graduates presented an infantry parade — headed by the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy's banner, passing in front of the dais, to the accompaniment of bands playing military music. Then, the column moved forward in the parade formation.

Sayyid Theyazin then handed over the Sword of Honour to Flying Lieutenant Al Waleed bin Khalid al Maamari, who won the overall first place at the Basic Officer Candidates Course. He also honoured Air Lieutenant Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Riyami, who won first place at the level of the Course for Limited Service and University Officer Recruits.

This was followed by protocols of the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy's banner handover from the graduating batch to the batch currently undergoing training, whose members swore to keep the Academy's banner fluttering high.

Then, the graduating officers chanted the anthem of the Royal Air Force of Oman, took the oath of loyalty, pledged allegiance and proclaimed thrice: 'Long live His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.'

Then, a number of fighter aircraft of



the Royal Air Force of Oman presented an airshow in the sky of the celebration square, demonstrating Rafo's high level of modernisation, its armament, training and human capabilities. The overall display reflected the great attention accorded to the Rafo by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander. Then, the Rafo band played the Royal Anthem. After that, the commander of the

graduates' column asked HH Sayyid Theyazin permission to dismiss. The graduates' column quitted the parade ground, passing in front of the dais. Then, the Rafo Band played a variety of military melodies that reflected the perfect musical performance that distinguishes its members and the modern musical equipment and instruments with which it has been equipped. — ONA

Royal Air Force of Oman fetes officers



MUSCAT: Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo), handed over diploma certificates in military sciences and Royal Patents to the officers who graduated from the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy (SQAA) on the occasion of the graduation ceremony of the Basic Officer Candidate Course and the Limited Service and University Officer Candidate Course at the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy (SQAA) and Gala Air Base, on

Sunday. Rafo Commander congratulated the graduating officers on their performance in the military parade they presented during the graduation ceremony which reflects the military capabilities and skills they acquired during the training period. He congratulated them on gaining the Royal trust of His Majesty the Supreme Commander as officers in the Royal Air Force of Oman, urging them to continue to exert more effort and dedication in performing

their work duties, wishing them success and prosperity. The occasion was attended by a number of senior officers of the Royal Air Force of Oman. As part of Rafo's celebration of its annual day which falls on the 25th of January of each year, Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) on Sunday honoured the air bases winners of various competitions and activities for the year 2024. The commander of Rafo

handed over the cups to the air bases that won first place in cultural and sports activities, the traffic education competition and other competitions held in 2024 at the Cultural Centre Theatre at Ghala Base and the Sultan Qaboos Air Academy. He congratulated the winning air bases that urging everyone to keep up their hard efforts and wished them more success. The honouring ceremony was attended by a number of senior officers of the Royal Air Force of Oman. — ONA

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TOWARDS ECONOMIC INTEGRATION



THE UPCOMING MEETING
OF HIS MAJESTY SULTAN
HAITHAM BIN TARIK
AND SHAIKH TAMIM
REFLECTS A COMMITMENT
TO STRENGTHENING
FRATERNAL BONDS

A NEW TRACK FOR
BILATERAL RELATIONS
BETWEEN THE TWO
COUNTRIES WILL BE
LAUNCHED ON TUESDAY
WHEN THE EMIR OF QATAR
BEGINS HIS STATE VISIT TO
OMAN

THE VISIT WILL PROVIDE
AN OPPORTUNITY TO
EXCHANGE VIEWS ON
GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND
ALSO CONTRIBUTE TO
OPENING NEW VISTAS OF
MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

THE Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar continue promoting their distinguished relations in various areas in a manner that serves their interests, under the wise leaderships of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani. A new track for bilateral relations between the two countries will be launched on Tuesday when the Emir of Qatar begins his state visit to Oman. This path reflects the commitment of the two countries to push these distinguished relations to wider horizons in all fields, constituting a new turning point in the course of relations and pushing bilateral economic and trade relations between the two sides towards more fruitful cooperation.

The common visions that unite the two countries are reflected in the continuous political coordination, whether at the regional level between the GCC countries, the Arab League, or at the global level

through international organisations. Their role in backing all that would achieve stability in the region and the world through peaceful dialogue and understanding to resolve conflicts is evident. This was clearly demonstrated through the convergence of stances and coordination between them, and the continuous consultation regarding regional and international issues, most notably the Palestinian cause.

The Omani-Qatari Joint Committee, which was established in 1995, contributes to enhancing joint cooperation between the two countries by exploring various aspects of cooperation, finding possible opportunities, and setting up investment projects that serve their common interests. The committee held 23 meetings until last year.

Data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information indicate that the volume of trade exchange between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar reached RO 1,113.3 million by the end of 2023, of which RO 284.7 million were the value of Omani exports to the State of Qatar and RO 828.6 million the value of Omani imports from Qatar.

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Qatari investments in the Sultanate of Oman witnessed a growth of 12 per cent by the end of 2023, reaching RO 730 million, compared to RO 651.9 million in 2022. Omani exports to the State of Qatar until October 2024 amounted to about RO 140.2 million, while the total imports of the Sultanate of Oman from the State of Qatar until October 2024 amounted to about RO 708.7 million Omani riyals.

After analysing the data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information, it becomes clear that the trade balance until October 2024 was in favour of the State of Qatar, as the value of Qatari investments by the end of the third quarter of 2024 amounted to about RO 488.3 million, and the number of Qatari companies investing in the Sultanate of Oman reached 15. In contrast, the value of direct Omani investments in the State of Qatar increased from RO 4.1 million in 2022 to RO 4.3 million in 2023.

Sayyid Ammar bin Abdullah al Busaidy, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the State of Qatar, said that the upcoming state visit of Shaikh Tamim to Oman is an

important step that reflects the distinguished relations between the two countries and contributes to enhancing joint cooperation in all fields, whether political, economic or cultural.

He affirmed that the visit would open new horizons for boosting the strategic partnership between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar, as they enjoy a long history of fruitful cooperation at various levels, and have been and continue to be a successful and distinctive model of bilateral relations.

He added that the Omani-Qatari relations reflect the shared future vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani. The two leaders seek to expand the horizons of joint cooperation between the two countries in various economic fields, in a manner that serves the interests and well-being of their peoples, affirmed the Ambassador.

He explained that a joint investment fund named "Al Hosn Investment Company" was established in 2007 between the Omani and Qatari sides. It is a closed joint-stock company headquartered in Muscat, and a partnership between Qatar Holding Company, affiliated with Qatar Investment Authority, with a 50 per cent share, and Oman Investment Authority with a 50 per cent share.

The ambassador said that the company invests in projects from various sectors, including banking, industry, communications and technology, food, healthcare, education, tourism, oil and gas.

He stated that in a bid to activate cooperation between businessmen from both sides, the Omani-Qatari Businessmen Council was established under the umbrella of Oman Chamber of Commerce and



**SAYYID AMMAR
BIN ABDULLAH
AL BUSAIDY**

Ambassador of the
Sultanate of Oman
to the State of Qatar



SHAIKH
MUBARAK BIN
FAHAD
AL THANI

*Ambassador of the
State of Qatar to the
Sultanate of Oman*

COMMON VISIONS
THAT UNITE OMAN
AND QATAR ARE
REFLECTED IN
CONTINUOUS
POLITICAL
COORDINATION
THROUGH
INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS

THE VOLUME OF
TRADE EXCHANGE
BETWEEN THE
SULTANATE OF OMAN
AND QATAR REACHED
ABOUT RO 950.8
MILLION BY THE END
OF NOVEMBER 2024

QATAR HAS
BECOME A STRATEGIC
PARTNER FOR OMAN
IN MANY FIELDS,
AND DISTINGUISHED
RELATIONS HAVE
CONTRIBUTED TO
ENHANCING THE
MOVEMENT OF
INTER-TRADE

Industry and Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry to boost trade relations and open areas of joint investment between the two countries.

The ambassador added that Qatari investments in the Sultanate of Oman varied between converting industries in the food and pharmaceutical security industries, and other sectors including education, banking, communications and technology at the level of investment authorities, and the construction, wholesale trade, tourism, logistics, mining, real estate, communications, insurance and others.

As for cooperation between the two countries in the field of renewable energy, Ambassador Al Busaidy pointed out that the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Qatar have a unified vision regarding encouraging investment and setting up clean energy projects, as the Sultanate of Oman attracts major companies to set up projects related to producing green hydrogen and generating clean electricity through solar and wind energy, so the two countries can set up joint projects in this regard.

At the end of his statement, Ambassador Al Busaidy affirmed that Oman and Qatar are working continuously to enhance cooperation in facing global and regional challenges, whether political, economic or environmental. Joint efforts include maintaining regional security, sustaining natural resources, and addressing the challenges of climate change, he added. The two countries, said the Ambassador, are also keen on joint cooperation in facing health, educational and social challenges.

Shaikh Mubarak bin Fahad al Thani, Ambassador of the State of Qatar to the Sultanate of Oman, noted that bilateral relations between the two countries are witnessing remarkable growth and development in all fields, especially in joint investments. He added that there are many Qatari investments in the Sultanate of Oman, including the Karwa Motors project and the Qatari Diar Ras Al Hadd project.

The Qatar ambassador said that the state visit of Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, to the Sultanate of Oman is receiving great attention at the official and popular levels. It would constitute an important chapter in the history of bilateral relations between the two countries and the exchange of common interests in all fields.

He indicated that the visit would provide an opportunity to exchange views on global challenges and current issues. It would also contribute to opening new vistas of mutual understanding and strategic partnerships between Oman and Qatar, as well as pushing these partnerships toward higher levels by boosting constructive bilateral cooperation.

Shaikh Mubarak said that during the visit, several agreements and memoranda of understanding would be signed between the two countries. This move would provide vast opportunities for cooperation in various fields between companies and businessmen and the establishment of joint investments with economic returns for the benefit of the peoples of both countries.



OMAN

SHORT TAKES



64 donors came forward to donate blood organised by NTR Trust Oman in Bausher on Friday.

BLOOD BANK CALLS FOR URGENT BLOOD DONATION

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, JAN 26

The Central Blood Bank in the Wilayat of Bausher has called on donors to donate blood units, especially blood types (O-ve) and (A-ve), as the need for blood units has risen over the last week. In an appeal, a statement further says that if one’s blood type is one of these two types, they should approach the Central Blood Bank and donate blood at the earliest, as there is a dire need for blood units.

Blood donation hours at the Central Blood Bank (Bausher) are from Saturday to Thursday from 8 am to 8 pm, and on Friday from 8 am to 2 pm. “The appeal is made because of an increase in the demand for the same due to a drop in blood donation during the past few weeks. Hence, all donors are urged to come forward and help save lives,” the appeal further said.

Anyone who meets the eligibility criteria can donate blood between these timings at the Bausher Blood Bank. Willing donors can call or WhatsApp 94555648, or dial 24591255 and book a slot to participate in the national blood donation drive.

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According to Ministry of Health statistics, the demand for blood units per day in all hospitals and clinics is around 150 units, whereas the average supply stands at 100 units, resulting in a shortfall of nearly 50 per cent. On average, the demand for blood and its components has been steadily rising by 10 per cent to 15 per cent, and in the recent past, it has jumped fourfold, according to the CBB. The cases that require blood units or one of its components are mostly surgery cases, RTAs (Road Traffic Accidents), other accidents related to the workplace or home, malignant blood diseases, bone marrow failure, some cases of genetic blood diseases, some cancerous tumours, and some cases of childbirth. “In light of these, NGOs are urged to conduct more blood donation camps, while the DBBS itself is organising various blood donation camps from time to time. These are in cooperation with private organisations,” a representative from the Blood Bank told the Observer.

Meanwhile, several organisations and other regional as well as professional bodies have been conducting blood donation camps, mostly over the weekends, in support of the drive. A blood donation camp was organised by the voluntary group NTR Trust Oman at the Central Blood Bank, Bausher, on Friday. Around 64 donors donated blood on the occasion.

DHOFAR COUNCIL REVIEWS DEVELOPMENT PLANS

SALALAH: The Municipal Council of Dhofar Governorate held a meeting on Sunday to discuss ongoing and future plans, exchanging views and proposals that underscore the Council’s commitment to driving development in line with Oman Vision 2040. The meeting, chaired by His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, reviewed key indicators and the work of the Council’s main committees, highlighting achievements and activities from 2024, as well as field visits and



The meeting chaired by Governor of Dhofar reviewed key indicators

meetings with governmental and private entities. The Council focused on initiatives by the Social Affairs

Committee aimed at enhancing community solidarity through awareness programmes for various societal groups. Additionally, the Health and Environmental Affairs Committee presented efforts to address environmental challenges and improve health services, emphasising plans to promote health and environmental awareness. A proposal was also presented to establish an integrated service station by Dhofar Municipality to cater to the land transport and freight sector’s needs in one central location. — ONA

India’s 76th Republic Day celebrated with pride

THE Embassy of India in Muscat celebrated the 76th Republic Day of India with immense patriotic fervour and enthusiasm. The event witnessed the participation of over 500 members of the Indian community and friends of India in Oman.

Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, along with his spouse, Divya Narang, commenced the ceremony by laying a floral tribute at the statue of Mahatma Gandhi, honouring his enduring legacy of peace and non-violence.

The celebration continued with the unfurling of the National Flag by the Ambassador, followed by the singing of the National Anthem performed by students from the Indian School Al Ghubra. The Ambassador also read excerpts from the President of India’s Republic Day address, which reflected on India’s remarkable progress, commitment to democratic values, and aspirations for the future.

Patriotic songs presented by the students further elevated the festive spirit, while attendees donned tricolour sashes, distributed as a token of pride and love for the nation. The ceremony also recognised the winners of the

The celebration continued with the unfurling of the National Flag by the Ambassador, followed by the singing of the National Anthem performed by students from the Indian School Al Ghubra.



Amit Narang, Indian Ambassador unfurled the Indian flag and addressed the audience.

‘Bharat Ko Janiye Quiz’ from Oman, an initiative by the Government of India aimed at connecting diaspora youth with India’s rich cultural heritage, history, and achievements. The quiz garnered enthusiastic participation from the Indian community in Oman. As part of the celebrations, the Embassy also hosted a grand reception last evening. ISG CELEBRATES: Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG) highlighted India’s journey as a Republic, reflecting on 75 years of progress, while embracing the theme of the year,

‘Swarnim Bharat- Virasat aur Vikas,’ which translates to Golden Heritage and Development. The event began with a warm welcome from Aanya Goyal and Mohammad Ayaan of class 11, extending greetings to the distinguished guests, school management committee members, parents, teachers, and students. The audience was reminded of the day’s significance, commemorating the adoption of India’s Constitution in 1950, and was encouraged to step into the 76th year with renewed pride and hope.

Workshop on sustainability, innovation begins

MUSCAT: A workshop to develop a guide for promoting sustainable development concepts in schools began on Sunday organised by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in collaboration with Unesco’s Regional Office for the Gulf States and Yemen. The four-day event, held at the Grand Hormuz Hotel, coincides with the celebration of the International Day of Education under the theme, ‘Artificial Intelligence and Education: Preserving Human Will in an Automated World.’

The workshop, sponsored by Majid bin Said al Bahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial Affairs, focuses on integrating sustainable development into education and drafting a guide for implementation. Experts from Unesco, education officials, and teachers are participating to discuss AI literacy,



Unesco, education officials, and teachers are participating to discuss AI literacy.

responsible technology use, and strategies to empower schools for a sustainable future. The event highlights Oman’s efforts to align its educational strategies with global sustainable development goals. Dr Intisar bint Abdullah Ambusaidi, Director General of the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers, emphasised the vital role of teachers

in achieving these goals and fostering professional growth. Meanwhile, Dr Mahmoud bin Abdullah al Abri, Secretary of the Omani National Commission for Education, stressed the importance of integrating ethical and effective AI practices in education to ensure fairness and accessibility. Unesco programme expert Dr Anas Bouhlal shared insights on global initiatives such as the AI Ethics Recommendations Project and the Future of Education Initiative, while Dr Saud bin Saif al Ameri from the Ministry of Education outlined Oman’s AI integration efforts, including training programs, certified AI trainers, and innovative applications in schools. The workshop aims to produce a draft guide that empowers schools to lead sustainable development efforts. — ONA

Oman marks International Day of Education with AI focus

MUSCAT: Oman, represented by the Ministry of Education (MoE), celebrated the International Day of Education on January 24, aligning with the United Nations’ aim to achieve quality and inclusive education. The theme for this year’s celebration was ‘Artificial Intelligence and Education: Challenges and Opportunities.’ Dr Mahmoud al Abri, Secretary, Omani National Commission for Education, highlighted

Oman’s commitment to digital transformation, noting that AI integration into education is crucial for economic and social progress. Efforts include AI-driven curriculum digitisation projects, interactive digital content, and the establishment of specialised chairs in AI at local universities. The Ministry of Education is also actively collaborating with international entities to implement AI technologies in teaching,



The Ministry’s focus on AI in education is evident through development of AI-enabled classrooms

evaluation, and management, making strides in both educational infrastructure and AI training programmes. This initiative is part of Oman’s broader efforts to harness AI for sustainable educational development, with numerous AI-based programmes and innovations aimed at enhancing teaching and learning experiences. Through partnerships with the private sector and ongoing research

initiatives, Oman is positioning itself as a regional leader in AI-powered education. The MoE’s continued focus on AI in education is evident through various initiatives, including the development of AI-enabled classrooms, the establishment of AI labs in schools, and the launch of research initiatives in collaboration with the Unesco Chair for Artificial Intelligence at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

SHORT TAKES



The Saturday market will serve as an organised outlet for local products

AL AWABI MARKET OPENS TO BOOST LOCAL BUSINESSES

AL AWABI: The Saturday Market officially opened in Al Awabi, Al Batinah South Governorate, under the supervision of the Wali of Al Awabi's Office and the Municipality Department. The market aims to empower productive families, small and medium enterprises and local farmers by providing a platform to showcase and sell their goods.

Dr Hamoud bin Ali al Marshoudi, Wali of Al Awabi, emphasised that the market will serve as an organised outlet for local products, offering a unified space for residents and visitors alike to purchase fresh, locally-produced goods. — ONA

CHINESE EMBASSY CELEBRATES CHINESE SPRING FESTIVAL



MUSCAT: The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Muscat hosted a vibrant celebration to mark the traditional Chinese Spring Festival, one of the most important cultural events in China. Ambassador Liu Jian commended the longstanding relationship between China and Oman, emphasising the shared commitment to peace and regional stability.

The Spring Festival, which has a history of over 4,000 years, is celebrated with colourful folklore performances including Chinese dance, art and music, reflecting the deep cultural heritage of China. The event, held at the Diplomatic Club, was attended by dignitaries from Oman, as well as members of the Chinese community, highlighting the strong diplomatic ties between the two nations. — ONA

Heritage meets innovation at Masirah Winter Forum

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 26

MASIRAH Island is hosting the 'Masirah Winter Forum,' an event that beautifully bridges the past and present. The forum provides visitors with a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the island's rich heritage, explore traditional crafts, and engage with the vibrant small and medium enterprise (SME) sector that is playing a crucial role in supporting the local economy and achieving the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The forum serves as a dynamic platform to showcase the island's unparalleled tourism potential while simultaneously highlighting the value of preserving traditional crafts that have been passed down through generations. The event underscores the critical role of SMEs and productive families in bolstering Oman's economic sustainability, promoting entrepreneurship, and empowering local communities.

Adel bin Khadem al Zar'i, a member of the organising committee, emphasised the forum's key objectives, stating that the event aims to 'highlight the tourism components of Masirah Island, as well as showcase the popular heritage and crafts that reflect the island's history and culture.' Al Zar'i pointed out that the forum celebrates the essence of Omani heritage while offering visitors a chance to connect with the island's rich traditions, including its marine arts, which are integral to Masirah's cultural identity.

The forum also provides a significant boost to productive families and job seekers by creating opportunities for them to display their handmade products and gain practical experience in a broader market setting. "This event not only helps participants generate additional income but also allows them to expand their entrepreneurial skills," Al Zar'i noted. These efforts align with Oman's strategic vision to empower its citizens and foster economic growth.

Jokha bint Salem Al Araimiyah,



The forum features traditional dances, and chants that celebrate Masirah's rich maritime heritage

Visitors to the Masirah Winter Forum are treated to a fascinating journey through the island's history and culture. In the heritage village, attendees can explore a wide range of family-made products, including intricately designed incense burners, kohl sticks, textiles, and perfume

President of the Omani Women's Association in Masirah, highlighted the forum's role in empowering Omani women and supporting productive families. "By involving Omani women in such events, we contribute to raising economic awareness within the community while enhancing the role of small and medium enterprises," Al Araimi said. She stressed that these platforms provide a unique opportunity for participants to showcase their products, generate income, and explore future job prospects.

Visitors to the Masirah Winter Forum are treated to a fascinating journey through the island's history and culture. In the heritage village, attendees can explore a wide range of family-made products, including intricately designed incense burners, kohl sticks, textiles, and perfume, which Oman is famous for. Artisans demonstrate their skills on-site, offering an educational and immersive experience that blends tradition with creativity.

Moza al Amri, one of the forum's participants, expressed her excitement about being part of the event. "Such forums provide us with golden opportunities to showcase our products to a larger audience, exchange experiences with fellow

artisans, and learn from their expertise," she said.

Beyond handicrafts, the forum also features vibrant cultural displays of marine arts, traditional dances, and chants that celebrate Masirah's rich maritime heritage. These performances vividly narrate stories of the sea, fishing, and trade, captivating audiences with their authenticity and historical significance.

The Masirah Winter Forum is more than just a cultural celebration — it is a cornerstone for economic development and community empowerment. By providing a platform for productive families and SMEs, the forum contributes to diversifying Oman's economy and achieving the broader goals of Oman Vision 2040. Events like these are instrumental in supporting local industries, creating job opportunities, and enhancing entrepreneurship within the Sultanate.

The forum also shines a spotlight on the role of Omani women in fostering economic growth. By participating in such events, women entrepreneurs and artisans are empowered to expand their reach, improve their economic standing, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.



Ministry of Health

Announcement

The Ministry of Health (Al Buraimi Hospital) invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tender:

Tender Ref.	Description	Last Date for Collection of Bidding Document	Last Date for Submission of Tenders	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non Refundable)
187/ 2025	Agreement providing gardening, agriculture & irrigation system maintenance services at Buraimi Hospital	Before 2 PM On 13/02/2025	Before 10 AM On 10/03/2025	Specialized companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the Second degree	10 R.O Small & Medium Enterprises 25 R.O Local Companies 25 R.O International Companies

Please note the following:

- Companies wishing to participate in the Tender can purchase the tender documents electronically through the website (etendering.tenderboard.gov.om), provided that they are registered in the system.
- Companies must submit their bids electronically via the above-mentioned website, provided that a Bid Commitment Declaration, and bids received without the required Declaration will not be considered.
- The concerned entity is not obligated to accept the lowest bid or any other bid.
- For inquiries related to the above tender, please contact through the website of the Esnad system for electronic tendering: (etendering.tenderboard.gov.om)

جامعة الشرقية
A' SHARQIYAH UNIVERSITY



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

The Tender Committee at A' Sharqiyah University is pleased to invite companies experienced in the tender below:

Tender details:

Tender No.	Description	Document Collection Deadline	Bids Submission Deadline	Document Fees	Remarks
ASU/05/ 24/25	Supply and Installation of Appliances for Student Accommodation Buildings at A' Sharqiyah University Campus in IBRA	03/02/2025	17/02/2025	50.00 OMR	The company must be classified as grade one and above

- Specialized companies interested in this tender can obtain the tender document during working days from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM.
- Bids must be submitted in closed, sealed envelopes with red wax, addressed to the Tender Committee at A' Sharqiyah University, Ibra. The envelopes should clearly indicate the tender subject and reference number but must not display the bidders' names.
- The main submission envelope should contain the following:
 - A separate sealed envelope with the technical proposal (1 original copy, 1 copy, and 1 soft copy on a USB flash drive).
 - A separate sealed envelope with the commercial proposal (1 original copy, 1 copy, and 1 soft copy on a USB flash drive).
- Required appliances with quantities are mentioned in the attached QR Code.
- Companies that hold Riyadh certificate are exempted from tender document fees.
- A' Sharqiyah University is not obligated to accept the lowest bid.
- ASU general terms and conditions of tenders shall apply on all submitted bids.
http://www.asu.edu.om/downloads/purchase_terms_conditions.pdf
- For further details, feel free to contact us via phone at 25401115/25401116, or by email at [azza.rashid@asu.edu.om]



WORLD

SHORT TAKES



A UN armoured vehicle, an Israeli military jeep, ambulances, as well as a Lebanese army armoured vehicle are parked, in Borj El Mlouk. — AFP

ISRAELI FORCES KILL 15 PEOPLE IN SOUTH LEBANON

BEIRUT: Israeli forces killed 15 people in south Lebanon on Sunday as a deadline for their withdrawal passed and thousands of people tried to return to their homes in defiance of Israeli military orders, Lebanese authorities said. Israel said on Friday it would keep troops in the south beyond the Sunday deadline set out in a US-brokered ceasefire that halted last year’s war with Hezbollah, saying Lebanon had not yet fully enforced terms requiring the Lebanese army to be deployed.

Lebanon’s US-backed military, which reported one of its soldiers among those killed by Israeli forces on Sunday, has accused Israel of procrastinating in its withdrawal. Lebanon’s health ministry said 15 people were killed and another 83 wounded in numerous locations in the south, as a result of what it described as Israeli attacks on citizens while they were trying to enter their still-occupied towns. President Joseph Aoun, Lebanon’s head of state, called on the people of the south to exercise self-restraint and trust in the Lebanese military. — Reuters

YOON INDICTED AS ‘RINGLEADER OF AN INSURRECTION’



South Korea impeached president Yoon Suk Yeol (C) stands as he attends the fourth hearing of his impeachment trial, at the Constitutional Court in Seoul. — AFP file photo

SEOUL: South Korean prosecutors indicted impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol on Sunday for being the “ringleader of an insurrection” after his abortive declaration of martial law, ordering the suspended leader to remain in detention. Prosecutors said in a statement they had “indicted Yoon Suk Yeol with detention today on charges of being the ringleader of an insurrection”. He has been held at the Seoul Detention Center since his arrest, and the formal indictment with detention means he will now be kept behind bars until his trial, which must happen within six months.

The indictment was widely expected after a court twice rejected requests by prosecutors to extend his arrest warrant while their investigation proceeded. “After a comprehensive review of evidence obtained during investigations (prosecutors) concluded that it was only appropriate to indict the defendant,” they said in a statement. — AFP

TARGETING MILITARY

27 Nigerian soldiers killed in suicide attack



At least 27 Nigerian soldiers were killed in a suicide attack in the northeast. “The suicide attack killed 27 soldiers, including the commander, and left several others seriously injured,” a military officer said, making this one of the deadliest suicide attacks targeting soldiers. “It was dark, which made it difficult for the troops to have a clear view of the surroundings,” said another officer about the attack which happened around 20:30 GMT. — AFP

INTENSE COMBAT EDGES TOWARD KEY DRC CITY AS UN PLANS URGENT MEETING

GOMA: Intense combat between Congolese forces and Rwandan-backed fighters on Sunday edged closer to the major city of Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo as the UN Security Council prepared an emergency meeting. As the fighting intensified, both the DRC and Rwanda withdrew their diplomats from each other’s capitals.

The resource-rich eastern provinces of North and South Kivu have been plagued by conflicts

for three decades, with the M23 emerging as one of the most powerful armed groups in recent years. M23 has seized vast swathes of the east of the DRC since 2021, displacing thousands and triggering a humanitarian crisis.

In the city centre, heavy detonations have been echoing since dawn on Sunday, according to correspondents in Goma. Combat helicopters of the Congolese army circled in the sky. Cars and motorbikes were still

circulating, but most businesses were closed.

As the fighting draws closer, new columns of displaced people have arrived in the city. On Saturday, three countries — South Africa, Malawi and Uruguay — announced the deaths of a total of 13 soldiers serving as peacekeepers in the conflict zone, where the UN forces, known as MONUSCO, and a southern regional peacekeeping force called SAMIDRC, have been supporting DRC’s military. — AFP

Thousands wait to return to northern Gaza homes

TENS of thousands of Palestinians waited, blocked on the road, to return to their homes in northern Gaza on Sunday, voicing frustration after Israel accused Hamas of breaching a ceasefire agreement and refused to open crossing points. A day after a second exchange of Israeli hostages held in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, the hold-up underlined the risks hanging over the truce between the Palestinian groups and Israel, longtime adversaries in a series of Gaza wars.

In central Gaza, columns of people were waiting along the main roads leading north, some in vehicles and some on foot, witnesses said. “A sea of people is waiting for a signal to move back to Gaza City and the north,” said asked Tamer Al Burai, a displaced person from Gaza City. “This is the deal that was signed, isn’t it?” “Many of those people have no idea whether their houses back home are still standing. But they want to go regardless, they want to put up the tents next to the rubble of their houses, they want to feel home,” he said.

On Sunday, witnesses said many people had slept overnight on the Salahuddin Road, the main thoroughfare running north to south and on the coastal road leading north, waiting to pass the Israeli military positions in the Netzarim corridor running across the centre of the Gaza Strip. Cars, trucks and rickshaws were overloaded with mattresses, food,



This aerial photo shows displaced Gazans gathering in an area in Nuseirat to return to their homes in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. — AFP

Many people had slept overnight on the Salahuddin Road, the main thoroughfare running north to south and on the coastal road leading north, waiting to pass the Israeli military positions in the Netzarim corridor running across the centre of the Gaza Strip.

and the tents that served as shelters for over a year for those in the central and southern areas of the enclave.

Under the agreement worked out with Egyptian and Qatari mediators and backed by the United States, Israel was meant to allow Palestinians displaced from the north to return to their homes. But Israel said that Hamas’ failure to hand over a list detailing who of the hostages scheduled for release were alive or to hand over Arbel Yehud, an Israeli woman taken hostage during the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 meant it had violated the agreement. As a result, checkpoints in central Gaza would not be opened to allow crossings into the north, it said in a statement. Hamas issued a statement blaming Israel for the delay and accusing it of stalling.

On Saturday, US President Donald Trump instructed the US military to release 2,000-pound bombs that his predecessor Joe Biden had ordered to be withheld from delivery to Israel over concern about their impact on the civilian population of Gaza. He also called on Egypt and Jordan to take on more Palestinians from Gaza either temporarily or permanently, and saying “we should just clear out the whole thing”.

“It’s literally a demolition site, almost everything is demolished and people are dying there,” he told reporters after a call with Jordan’s King Abdullah. Reacting to the remarks, an official of Hamas, the Palestinian militant group that runs Gaza, echoed longstanding Palestinian fears about being driven permanently from their homes. — Reuters



GREEK PROTESTERS DEMAND JUSTICE

ATHENS: Tens of thousands of Greeks protested outside parliament in Athens on Sunday to demand justice for the 57 people who died nearly two years ago in the country’s worst railway disaster. Protesters held banners reading: “We won’t forget” and “I have no oxygen” — echoing a woman’s last words in a call to emergency services that was published by local media last week.

Brief clashes broke out between police and some protesters after the largely peaceful demonstration, which was one of the biggest to be held in the capital in recent years. Similar protests were held in other cities in Greece. A judicial investigation is still in progress over the head-on collision of a freight train and a passenger train packed with students just before midnight on Feb. 28, 2023. — Reuters

RELATIONS BOOST

Iran, Afghanistan call for ties in Kabul talks



Iran and Afghanistan called for increased cooperation during a trip to Kabul by Tehran’s foreign minister, the highest-level Iranian official to visit the Afghan capital since the Taliban’s takeover in 2021. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with his Afghan counterpart, Amir Khan Muttaqi, and Taliban government Prime Minister Hassan Akhund during a one-day visit to discuss relations between the countries. — AFP

STRATEGIC HEADQUARTERS

Sudan army chief visits central Khartoum



Sudanese army chief General Abdel Fattah al Burhan visited its strategic headquarters in central Khartoum in his first appearance there since government forces claimed to have broken a months-long siege by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Burhan praised the “resilience and sacrifices” of soldiers who defended the army’s General Command for 20 months, vowing to “eradicate” the RSF and pursue its fighters. — Reuters

CONTROVERSIAL PLAN



A drone view shows an Italian coast guard vessel departing with migrants, in Shengjin, Albania. — Reuters file photo

ITALY RESUMES
MIGRANT TRANSFERS
TO ALBANIA

ROME: Italy’s navy on Sunday was taking 49 migrants it picked up in international waters to detention facilities in Albania, the interior ministry said, resuming a plan to curb sea arrivals mired in legal controversy. Giorgia Meloni’s government has built two reception centres in Albania, the first such deal involving a European Union nation diverting migrants to a non-EU country.

The ministry said a patrol vessel was heading to Albania with 49 migrants onboard while further 53 who were also picked up, and who presented their passports to avoid immediate relocation, were in Italy awaiting the verification of their status. The transfer represents a new attempt by the government to enforce its policy after judges in Rome questioned its validity and ordered the first two batches of migrants detained in Albania to be moved to Italy. The controversy surrounding the plan, which Meloni sees as a cornerstone of her government’s aim to limit immigration, revolves around a ruling by the European Court of Justice last year, which was not related to Italy. — AFP



MACRON’S POPULARITY HITS NEW LOW

French President Emmanuel Macron’s popularity dropped to a new low since his first election in 2017. Just 21 per cent of respondents to the Ifop poll published in the Journal de Dimanche newspaper expressed satisfaction with the president. His popularity has sunk even lower than it did during the 2019 stand off with the “yellow vests” movement that saw weekly anti-Macron protests that lasted more than a year. — AFP

BRAZIL SLAMS
US AFTER
DOZENS OF
DEPORTEES
ARRIVE
HANDCUFFED

SAO PAULO: Brazil’s government expressed outrage after dozens of immigrants deported from the United States arrived by plane in handcuffs, calling it a “flagrant disregard” for their rights. The foreign ministry said it would demand an explanation from Washington over the “degrading treatment of passengers on the flight”.

The spat comes as Latin America grapples with US President Donald Trump’s

return to power bringing a hard-line anti-immigration agenda, promising crackdowns on irregular migration and mass deportations.

When the plane landed in the northern city of Manaus, Brazilian authorities ordered US officials to “immediately remove the handcuffs,” the justice ministry said in a statement. Justice Minister Ricardo Lewandowski told President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of “the flagrant disregard for

the fundamental rights of Brazilian citizens,” the statement said. Brazil will request “explanations from the US government about the degrading treatment of passengers” on the Friday night flight, the foreign ministry said on X. The government said 88 Brazilians were aboard the aircraft.

The flight was originally destined for the southeastern city of Belo Horizonte, but encountered a technical issue forcing it to land in Manaus. — AFP

Zelensky says Trump could
end Ukraine war in talks

US President Donald Trump could fulfil his promise to end the war in Ukraine, but only if he includes Kyiv in any talks, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said. Zelensky also said the terms of any deal that might arise under Trump were still unclear - and might not even be clear to Trump himself — because Russian President Vladimir Putin had no interest in ending the war. Trump, who took office last week, promised during his election campaign to end the war within his first 24 hours in the White House, without saying how. Aides have since suggested that a deal could take months.

Ending the war would not be possible unless Trump includes Ukraine itself in any negotiations, Zelensky told reporters alongside Moldova’s president, Maia Sandu, a visiting ally. “Otherwise it will not work. Because Russia does not want to end the war, while Ukraine wants to end it,” he said. In a separate interview broadcast later on Saturday, Zelensky said he believed Trump truly wanted to see an end to the war, nearing the three-year mark next month. “For now, we don’t know how this will happen because we don’t know the details,” Zelensky told Italian journalist Cecilia Sala, who was released this month after being detained for 21 days in Iran. “I believe President Trump himself does not know all the details. Because I would say so much depends on what sort of just peace we can achieve. And whether Putin wants, in principle, to stop the war. I believe he doesn’t want to.”

Kyiv, long worried about the prospect of its fate being decided by bigger powers without its participation, has said it is working to arrange a meeting between Zelensky and Trump. Addressing journalists earlier alongside Sandu, Zelensky said he believed European allies should also be included in any future peace talks. “As for what the set-up of the talks will be: Ukraine, I really hope Ukraine will be there, America, Europe and the Russians,” Zelensky said. “Yes, I would really want that Europe would take part, because we will be members of the European Union,” he said. Ukraine and Moldova both submitted applications to join



People walk past a street exhibition displaying destroyed Russian military vehicles, in Kyiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

the EU days after Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian air defences downed 50 of 72 drones launched by Russia overnight and attacked one of Russia’s largest oil refineries, Ukraine’s military said on Sunday. Military and civilian authorities did not immediately report casualties or damages. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Russia had used 1,250 aerial bombs, over 750 attack drones and more than 20 missiles to attack Ukraine over the past week. “Only determination can stop such terrorists. We are constantly working with our partners to strengthen our defence capabilities and to reduce Russia’s ability to terrorise Ukraine,” Zelensky said on Telegram messenger. “Long-range capabilities are crucial. Sanctions

are essential. Lowering the price of oil is important. The key is to act in unity and protect lives with resolve,” he added. Kyiv’s general staff said on Sunday its forces attacked Russia’s Ryazan oil refinery again last night and explosions and fire were reported in the target area.

Russia’s Defence Ministry said on Sunday that its air defence systems destroyed 15 Ukrainian drones over Russia and two sea drones in the Black Sea. It said eight drones were downed over the Ryazan region, six drones were destroyed in the Kursk region and one drone was hit over the Belgorod region overnight. Ryazan governor Pavel Malkov said on Sunday there were no casualties in the latest drone attacks but authorities were still estimating the damage. — Reuters

Belarusians vote in election to extend Lukashenko’s new term

MINSK: Belarusians voted on Sunday in an election set to hand President Alexander Lukashenko a seventh term, prolonging his three-decade authoritarian rule. Lukashenko — a 70-year-old former collective farm boss — has been in power in reclusive, Moscow-allied Belarus since 1994. Speaking after casting his vote in the capital Minsk, the self-avowed “dictator” dismissed critics of his rule and said he could release political prisoners as long as they asked him for a pardon. Lukashenko suppressed mass protests against his rule after the last election in 2020. He has since allowed Moscow to use Belarusian territory to attack Ukraine in 2022.

Exiled opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who ran against Lukashenko in 2020, dismissed Sunday’s vote as a “farce”. “What is happening in Belarus today is a farce,” she told reporters in Warsaw, branding Lukashenko “a criminal who has seized power” and calling for the release of all political prisoners and free and fair elections.

In a press conference, Lukashenko called



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko casts his ballot at a polling station in the capital Minsk. — AFP

his country a “brutal democracy” and said “we don’t put pressure on anyone and we won’t silence anyone”. He also dismissed the idea of speaking to exiled opponents like Tikhanovskaya. “What would I have to talk to them about?” he said. He said exiles had made their own choices, adding that “we didn’t push anyone out of the country”.

The other candidates running against Lukashenko have been picked to give the election an air of democracy and few know who they are. In Minsk, 74-year-old pensioner Nadezhda Guzhalovskaya, who described herself as a “patriot”, voted for Lukashenko due to a lack of other options. “Maybe everything here is not perfect, we don’t have democracy,” admitted Guzhalovskaya. But Irina Lebedeva said that “thanks to our president there is peace in this country,” repeating the government’s narrative, which also accuses the 2020 street protest leaders of sowing chaos.

While Lukashenko once carefully balanced his relations between the European Union and Moscow, since 2020 he has become politically and economically reliant on

Russia. Kaja Kallas, the EU’s top diplomat, called the election a “sham” in a posting on X on Saturday and said “Lukashenko doesn’t have any legitimacy”.

Lukashenko on Sunday said he was not bothered whether or not other countries would recognise the result of the election, saying “it is a matter of taste”. Known as “Europe’s last dictator” — a nickname he embraces — Lukashenko’s Belarus has retained much of the Soviet Union’s traditions and infrastructure. At his press conference on Sunday, he dismissed rumours that he was planning to hand over to one of his three sons. He said his youngest son Nikolai “could not imagine in his worst dream” that he could be president and “none of my sons could”.

He said it was up to a “new generation” to take over, with the strongman — who has promoted a macho image of himself — saying a woman should not lead Belarus. “It’s not a job for a woman. I’m totally against a woman doing this job. A woman can’t be a dictator but we have quite a few men who could be leaders,” he said. — AFP

OPINION

Podcasts redefine the art of long-form audio



SANDHYA
RAO MEHTA

WE are now all familiar with the power of long-form podcasts to influence public policy and thought. They are now considered responsible for determining election outcomes in more than one case. If audiobooks are rising in popularity, podcasts have far overtaken them in reach and influence.

The popularity of podcasts has skyrocketed in the last few years. From its rise in 2014, it is projected to be a \$5 billion industry in 2025, making it one of the largest forms of audio content in the industry. The traditional audiobook market is somewhat stagnant at \$6 billion.

In many ways, podcasts are like audiobooks. They both use the power of the human voice to convey emotions, humour, nuance and depth. A good narrator brings life to a text – whether fiction or non-fiction. Much depends on the rapport established between the narrator and the audience. The voice is the link between the content, the speaker and the listener.

But the similarity ends there. Audiobooks are just that – they are versions of established

books being read aloud. They are not subject to change, editing, or newer versions. There are specific reasons why podcasts are becoming so popular: access to technology, the variety of available content, and the way that information consumption is changing. The charm of podcasts lies in the way that they combine storytelling, entertainment and education. It is a different way of consuming audio content. While audiobooks narrate traditional and emerging works, podcasts are interactive and speak to the specific concerns of the individual.

Podcasts are truly accessible in the way that audiobooks are not. They do not require subscriptions or any kind of purchase. Most of them are free to access, with many offering paid membership with other perks as premium content.

This is truly a game-changer because everybody has access to this information, opinions, and debates. Most importantly, podcasts offer an alternative to traditional media, which has been the object of much scepticism in recent years. Run by large media houses with their commercial

Podcasts offer an alternative to traditional media which has been the object of much skepticism in recent years

interests, they were seen as reflecting a limited point of view. Although audiobooks are good to listen to on a long journey to and from work, they tend to be limited in that they are passive and unidirectional. Podcasts, on the other hand, are interactive, include humour and wit and tackle a variety of subjects.

Another reason podcasts win over audiobooks, although both offer slightly similar formats, is the connection between the speaker and the listener. Podcasters are speaking off a written script but are also intensely aware of their audience and tweak and customise their content based on their audience. An audiobook, based on an already written and published book, has no opportunity for course correction.

Podcasts are the new ways in which people are getting information in their own languages and on topics of their own interest. They speak to the changing views of an international audience and are able to innovate and reinvent themselves as the need arises. That makes them more relevant to a generation on the go.

FIRE-RAVAGED
LA BRACES FOR
TOXIC RAIN RUNOFF

ANN SAPHIR

Wearing a respirator, goggles, gloves and white protective booties, Shaun Kearney gazed at his house in Sunset Mesa, a coastal community next to Pacific Palisades. It survived the fires destroying Los Angeles, but the weekend forecast is for a different problem: rain.

Kearney needs to seal a hole in the roof to stop precipitation that he fears will be laced with toxins. The hazardous chemicals belched from burning homes and cars are at the forefront of Kearney’s mind as he thinks about recovery and rebuilding, which he believes will take years.

Most of the neighbouring homes were built before 1979, when asbestos was freely used in construction, and those houses were reduced to ash.

“Even though our house is still standing, we obviously can’t live here,” said the fashion business executive, the CEO of Harry Styles’ “Pleasing” brand.

“It will be worse when they start removing the debris—that’s my biggest concern.” The fires, which began on January 7 and are still not fully contained, have killed 28 people and damaged or destroyed nearly 16,000 structures. The rain will bring cleaner air and improve fire-fighting conditions, but some authorities have expressed concern that rain overall will make things worse. Fire “ripped through homes, vehicles, electronics, plastics, chemicals, furniture, and countless everyday materials, creating a dangerous mix of toxins,” LA Council member Traci Parks warned residents as she announced efforts to contain the runoff.

“When it rains, they flow into our gutters, storm drains... eventually our beaches.” On Friday, workers placed concrete barriers, typically used to control highway traffic, along the Pacific Coast Highway and in Palisades neighbourhoods above the coastline to prevent landslides like those that killed 21 people and caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage after a fire seven years ago in Santa Barbara County.

Other workers put cloth covers and straw barriers around storm drains to filter out pollutants and slow water flow. Trucks hauled away burned-out cars, many of which are toxic messes. The work is far from done: hulls of incinerated cars line roadsides and fill driveways, and many drains appeared unprotected.

The forecast for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday is light rain. Still, the US Geological Survey says that short, intense rain can trigger debris flows, with a map showing that much of the area of the Palisades and Eaton fires would have a high likelihood of hazard with a 15-minute burst of rain dropping between a quarter and half an inch.

— Reuters

How UK government will seek to charm Trump

BRITAIN’S Labour government hopes to stay in US President Donald Trump’s good books by mobilising the royal family and a former spin doctor dubbed the “Prince of Darkness”.

Trump’s affection for his mother’s ancestral home, Scotland, where he owns two golf resorts, and a mooted second state visit to the UK could also help maintain good relations, observers say.

“He’s liable to be buttered up, right? So anything you can throw at him (will help),” Steven Fielding, a politics professor at the University of Nottingham, said.

From the Russia-Ukraine war and possible trade tariffs to differences over climate change and China, the US-UK “special relationship” looks set for a rollercoaster ride over the next four years.

Trump’s unpredictable nature threatens to derail UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s overarching ambition for his premiership -- to fire up Britain’s anaemic post-Brexit, post-Covid economy.

Added to the mix are unflattering comments about Trump made by senior Labour figures in the past, and recent verbal attacks on Starmer by Trump ally Elon Musk, the world’s richest man.

Now a British charm offensive is under way, highlighted by Buckingham Palace revealing on Monday that King Charles III had sent a personal message of congratulations to Trump on his second inauguration.

Trump is known to be a big fan of the royal family. Heir-to-the-throne Prince William was dispatched to Paris last month, where he chatted with Trump on the sidelines of the reopening of Notre Dame cathedral.

“A good man, this one!” Trump said of William, adding: “He’s doing a fantastic job” as the prince laughed.

The Times reported this week that senior royals were being lined



Trump’s unpredictable nature threatens to derail UK Prime Minister Starmer’s overarching ambition for his premiership



PETER HUTCHISON

The writer is UK news and politics reporter at AFP

up to visit the United States to boost relations with Trump.

That may be in 2026, when America celebrates the 250th anniversary of the signing of its declaration of independence.

The late Queen Elizabeth II hosted Trump and his wife Melania in 2019, when they were last in the White House, and the British government may be tempted to roll out the red carpet for another state visit.

Trump’s son Eric has already said his golf-mad father plans to visit Scotland this summer for the opening of a new golf course at his club near the northeastern city of Aberdeen. Trump’s mother Mary Anne MacLeod was from the northwestern Isle of Lewis.

Crucial to smooth relations with the Trump administration will likely be Peter Mandelson.

His work as Labour’s director of communications in the 1980s helped set the party on its way to three consecutive election wins under then prime minister Tony Blair.

The UK government has nominated him as its next ambassador to the US, although Trump still needs to approve the appointment, and there is

speculation that he could block it.

Mandelson is renowned for his powers of persuasion and, as a former European commissioner for trade, would bring considerable deal-making experience to Washington.

“What Trump respects is power and he will know that Mandelson is obviously a powerful player within British politics,” Patrick Diamond, a special adviser to Mandelson when Labour was last in government, said.

Centre-left Labour has spent recent months trying to build bridges with the US Republican’s team. Senior figures have love-bombed Trump with compliments to try and atone for previous unflattering comments.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy, who once called Trump a “tyrant in a toupee”, this week praised his “incredible grace”, recalling a dinner he and Starmer had had with Trump in New York in September.

“I think strategically they have to (row back) because Trump isn’t a particularly forgiving man,” said Evie Aspinall, director of the British Foreign Policy Group think tank.

— AFP

A journey of repose from earth to heavens



ABDULAZIZ
AL JAHDHANI

The writer is author,
translator and
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professional

CHALLENGES are unpredictable part of life as they come in many forms, both big and small. No matter how significant or minor they may seem, obstacles are something we encounter every single day. It is a simple truth that we should always remember! While not all challenges are severe, they all require our attention, time, and effort.

However, this is the beauty of life; every new day brings its own surprises, which can be either uplifting or frustrating. What truly matters is how we respond to the different challenges.

How we handle them is what defines whether we overcome them or let them defeat us. Some days, multiple challenges may arise, from issues at work to difficulties in our personal lives, or even financial struggles. Other times, the attitudes of those around us can also be a source of irritation.

Just as no two days are same, we are the ones who ultimately control how we face each day, regardless of what happens around us. Adopting a positive mindset and finding the learning in every experience is key to overcoming difficult and disappointing moments. Although managing our reactions, attitudes, and emotions is never easy, we should always strive to embrace life's moments to the fullest.

One of the most powerful stories from history that reflects this is the Ascension of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), also known as Al Isra and Al Miraj. This event, which took place during one extraordinary night, was a divine journey arranged by Allah.

The first part of this journey, Al Isra, took Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on the back of a winged, mule-like creature named Buraq, from Mecca to Jerusalem in Palestine. There, he led the past Prophets in prayer. In the second part of the journey, the Prophet ascended to Heaven, where Allah instructed him on the obligation for Muslims to pray five times a day, an essential pillar of Islam.

The story of Al Isra and Al Miraj is described in the Holy Quran in these verses: “Glory to Him who carried His beloved by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our wonders! He it is who is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. Remember when We said to you that your Lord encompasses mankind in His knowledge. Nor did We make the vision We showed you except as a test to people, as also the accursed tree in the Quran.”

It is believed that this sacred journey was not only a physical one, but also a spiritual experience, with the Prophet travelling through a realm of high spirituality. During this ascension from earth to heavens,

Muslims worldwide observe this occasion on the 27th of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic Calendar. Al Isra and Al Miraj is one of the most significant events in the Islamic history

the Prophet encountered past Prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. It is also stated that the Angel Gabriel accompanied the Prophet during part of the journey.

The ascension involved seeing both Heaven and Hell and receiving new revelations from Allah. By the end of the night, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had returned to Mecca, where his journey began.

It is important to note that this ascension was not the end of the Prophet's life; he lived for another 10 years after this event. This journey served as a source of relief for the Prophet, especially after the loss of his wife Khadija and his uncle Abdul Motalib, two people who had provided him with critical family support.

Muslims worldwide observe this occasion on the 27th of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic Calendar. Al Isra and Al Miraj is one of the most significant events in the Islamic history.

The anniversary of this miraculous journey serves as a reminder of the importance of patience when facing life's challenges. It teaches people to embody the strength shown by the Prophets of Allah, who faced immense struggles with their people.

Despite the hardships, they spared no effort to guide their followers and share the messages of Allah.

GERMANY’S ASYLUM SERVICES IN THE SPOTLIGHT AFTER KNIFE ATTACK

PIERRICK YVON

With Germany reeling from another deadly knife attack by a migrant suspect, experts warned that the inability of asylum seekers to access mental health services has added to their existing vulnerabilities.

Last Wednesday’s stabbing in Aschaffenburg, which claimed the lives of a man and a two-year-old boy, is the latest in a series of high-profile violent crimes committed by asylum seekers that have fuelled a bitter debate over immigration. With national elections coming up on February 23, both Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democrats and the opposition conservatives have promised a new asylum crackdown in response to the events in Aschaffenburg. The hardline response of politicians however risks overlooking the difficult questions raised about the support offered to asylum seekers, experts said.

The suspect in Wednesday’s attack, a 28-year-old Afghan man with a history of mental health troubles, was transferred by authorities to a psychiatric institution after his arrest.

His profile was similar to that of the presumed perpetrator of another knife attack in Mannheim in May, which left a policeman dead. He too was an Afghan asylum seeker with a mental disorder.

The suspects in both cases probably had “serious psychological problems, regardless of whether they have been migrants or not”, said Ulrich Wagner, psychology professor at Phillips University Marburg. ++But conditions for asylum seekers in Germany, already burdened by war and exile, could “massively encourage” their mental health issues, Wagner said.

“This is not meant to excuse such acts, but it is about finding causes so that something like this can be prevented,” Wagner said. Asylum seekers in Germany were housed in shared accommodation with “practically no private space, no privacy”, he said.

Most of them were also barred from taking jobs, which would “bring structure to life”.

At the end of 2023, the federal and regional governments agreed a plan to reduce the period that asylum seekers have to wait for their applications to be processed and to potentially enter the job market to six months.

Currently, the time that migrants spend in administrative limbo can stretch to several years.

The stressful conditions in this transition period can “cause psychological damage” on already “vulnerable” migrants, Wagner said. The various “difficult procedures” and levels of German bureaucracy faced by migrants could also lead to frustration, he said.

Media coverage of previous attacks was also liable to breed copycats, as potential perpetrators in the same situation “get the idea they could do something like this, too,” Wagner said.

— AFP

Ensuring Europe’s supply of critical minerals

THE European Union’s plan to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 has an Achilles’ heel: the EU relies on external sources — particularly Chinese companies — for 70-90 per cent of the massive amount of critical raw materials needed to manufacture wind turbines, solar cells, batteries and other green technologies. This dependency poses a serious risk: China’s recent ban on exports of gallium, germanium, antimony and other dual-use materials to the United States suggests that it could take similar action against Europe, especially in light of EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles.

The new European Commission has rightly put critical raw materials at the top of its agenda. Fortunately, it will not be starting from scratch. Last year, the EU adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act, which calls for the bloc to extract 10 per cent, process 40 per cent, and recycle 25 per cent of what it consumes annually by 2030, and limits the share of any external supplier to 65 per cent. To meet the CRMA’s targets, the Commission must focus on coordinating funding, engaging in resource diplomacy with Africa, and establishing secondary material partnerships.

Mining is a capital-intensive industry, and overseas upstream activities require public support in terms of both equity and debt. The CRMA anticipates mobilising finance from various sources, including the EU’s Global Gateway initiative and the European Investment Bank. Some member states have also established their own national funds. Germany launched a €1 billion (\$1.04 billion) raw-materials fund, while Italy introduced a €1 billion “Made in Italy” fund for critical minerals, and France dedicated €500 million under its 2030 investment plan to enhance domestic industry’s resilience to disruptions of the metal supply chain.

But while several public-finance streams are available, the funding landscape is scattered and not well aligned, creating confusion. Moreover, there are no explicit rules governing how the Critical



The new European Commission has rightly put critical raw materials at the top of its agenda.



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Raw Materials Board, which was established to support the CRMA’s implementation, designates projects as “strategic” and thus eligible to receive EU funds. The European Commission can address these issues by streamlining existing funding lines, which would ensure that national and EU finance work in tandem to achieve the best results and scale, and by establishing timelines for decision-making, which would provide clarity for corporate investment in upstream, midstream and downstream assets.

The CRMA must also establish partnerships with resource-rich countries that deliver quick and tangible results. Bolstering ties with African countries, which hold some 30 per cent of the world’s mineral resources, will be especially important. But, compared to other regions, investment in mineral exploration on the continent remains low, and China funds most of it. The EU’s resource diplomacy should focus on lowering investment barriers while helping African partners move into higher-value-added activities, such as downstream processing, and invest in industrial upgrading.

AfricaMaVal, an EU-funded project promoting sustainable partnerships and responsible mining on the continent, should become a vehicle for linking European and African

firms and addressing extraction needs. Building on comprehensive assessments of mining prospects across Africa, and taking into account the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills of local workforces, AfricaMaVal can identify new business opportunities along the value chain. This could evolve into a joint investment platform for the sustainable production of critical raw materials. The European Commission would thus be doing what it does best: catalysing private investment towards its policy goals, which, in this case, is building the infrastructure and clean-energy systems required for future mining projects. Lastly, the Commission should address the CRMA’s major blind spot: the lack of domestic feedstock to meet its recycling targets. Global competition for secondary materials is already stiff, as evidenced by businesses’ increasing efforts to secure enough steel scrap. Recycling input rates — the share of total demand — are just 3 per cent for light rare-earth elements and zero for battery-grade lithium. Establishing secondary-materials partnerships with emerging economies, which have rapidly growing markets for cell phones, laptops, and other appliances, would boost the EU’s supply of recycled critical raw materials, particularly rare-earth elements.

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SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Seeb vs Ahli Sidab

AL BASHAYER, SEEB SECURE MAJOR WINS IN 2024-2025 OMAN BASKETBALL LEAGUE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 26

Al Bashayer secured an important victory over Nizwa with a score of 71-50, topping the standings in the final rounds of the 2024-2025 Oman Basketball League with 8 points, while Nizwa remained at 5 points. In the second match, Seeb defeated Ahli Sidab 77-50, raising their points tally to 7, while Ahli Sidab stayed at 4 points. The matches were played at the secondary hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher. In the first match, Al Bashayer earned a well-deserved victory over Nizwa, dominating three quarters of the game.

Despite Nizwa's strong start in the first quarter, their performance in the remaining quarters fell short, allowing Al Bashayer to secure the win. The triumph was attributed to Al Bashayer's focused players, including standout performances from Said al Saadi, Hadeed Bait Bakhit, Ahmed al Halhali, Slavine Kopkovic, and Osama al Riyami. On the other hand, Nizwa's standout players included Ajayi Tonyan and Qasim al Qasimi. Nizwa started the game strong, leading the first quarter 12-11.

However, Al Bashayer quickly regained control and showcased superior offensive and defensive tactics in the second quarter, scoring 15 points to Nizwa's 8, ending the first half with a 26-20 lead. The third quarter saw heightened competition, with both teams scoring more points compared to the first half. Al Bashayer extended their lead by scoring 24 points to Nizwa's 17, concluding the quarter with a 50-37 advantage. In the final quarter, Al Bashayer maintained their offensive dominance, adding 21 points to Nizwa's 13, finishing the game with a 71-50 victory.

An international refereeing team officiated the game, including Ahmed Darwish al Balushi as the lead referee, Thani al Khalasi as the second referee, and Mazin al Hilali as the third referee. The table officials were Munira al Numani, Musa al Siyabi, and Fatima al Harthiy, under the supervision of international technical observer Eng Younis al Zadjali.

AHLI SIDAB MATCH

In the second match, Seeb claimed a decisive victory over Ahli Sidab with a score of 77-50. The game began with Ahli Sidab displaying strength, taking the lead in the first quarter, but Seeb quickly adjusted and dominated the rest of the match. Seeb's victory was driven by standout performances from Kelly Jordan, Rashid al Zuhaihi, Romeo Wilfred, Muawiya al Harthy, and Mazin al Hadidi.

For Ahli Sidab, notable players included Gilly Key, Adel al Balushi, and Khalid al Hashli. Ahli Sidab led the first quarter with 17 points to Seeb's 16. However, the second quarter saw a shift in momentum as Seeb improved their defence and offence, scoring 13 points to Ahli Sidab's 6, ending the first half with a 29-23 lead.

In the third quarter, Seeb extended their lead by scoring 25 points to Ahli Sidab's 19, making it 54-42. The final quarter saw Seeb in complete control, adding 23 points to Ahli Sidab's 8, securing a dominant 77-50 victory.

The match was officiated by a team of referees led by international referee Issam al Siyabi, with Rashid al Mushaifri as the second referee and Ali al Salmani as the third referee. The table officials were Maryam al Zadjali, Yaqoub al Nadabi, and Hafidh Awlad Ahmed, under the supervision of international technical observer Younis al Zadjali.

RCC, Hamid and Al Zaree claim top honours in annual Oman camel races



WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JANUARY 26

BINT SAMHA, owned by the Royal Camel Corps (RCC), Hamloulah, owned by Hamid al Amri, and Sultanah, owned by Mohammed al Zaree, clinched the first cars and daggers in the main rounds of the 'Hagayeg' category.

The event, part of the 22nd edition of the annual camel races for the 2024-2025 season, runs from January 25 to 30 at the Wilayat of Suhar camel race track. Organised and supported by the Oman Camel Racing Federation (OCRF), the six-day competition will feature 100 rounds with participation from camels representing the Sultanate of Oman and the GCC.

This year's event will award over 1,000 prizes, including 24 cars, 15 daggers, 6 icons, silver and gold swords, and cash prizes for the top ten winners.

The opening day on Saturday morning witnessed 15 rounds dedicated to the 'Hagayeg' category—two-year-old camels racing over a distance of 4 km—with cash prizes for the top ten winners.

On the second day, 15 rounds were held in the morning session for the same category, followed by 8 rounds in the afternoon. Prizes for the afternoon rounds included 8 cars, 3 daggers, and 2 icons.

SECOND-DAY MORNING COMPETITION RESULTS:

Round No, Camel name, Owner, Duration
1 Al Shahiniyah, Hamad bin Musallam al Jadhaafi, 06:15.80
2 Al Zoud, Mahmoud bin Musallam al Junaibi, 06:20.06
3 Samsam, Awadh bin Said al Khateri, 06:20.30
4 Samha, Said bin Ahmed al harsosi, 06:22.28
5 Entibah, Rashid bin Obaid al Wahibi, 06:14.90
6 Walad Ehtimam,



Royal Camel Crops, 06:23.12
7 Hothur, Hamad bin Salem al Ghafeeli, 06:28.16
8 Al Ayen, Hamad bin Salem al Ghafeeli, 06:26.84
9 Al Shared, Asaad bin Amer al Amri, 06:24.68
10 Jamail, Humaid bin Hamed al Amri, 06:24.52
11 Al Tayr, Said bin Al Abed al Zuraqi, 06:27.94
12 Heshmah, Said bin Ali al Maalaiki, 06:28.18
13 Shaheen, Thiyab bin Thafaer al Muqbali, 06:27.98
14 Seyoof, Awad bin Ali al Balushi, 06:26:42
15 Adeeb, Bader bin Suliman al Maskari, 06:26.56

THE SECOND-DAY AFTERNOON COMPETITION RESULTS:

Round No, Camel name, Owner, Duration
1 Bint Samha, Royel Camel Crops, 06:10.04
2 Hamloulah, Hamid bin Hamad al Amri, 06:14.68
3 Kafaa, Badr bin

Hamad al Zaree, 06:13.60
4 Sultanah, Mohammed bin Al Abed al Zaree, 06:14.64
5 Al Fayz, Talib bin Said al Wahaibi, 06:13.58
6 Mahabah, Yasser bin Salim Al Dowaki, 06:20.10
7 Moaaned, Nasser bin Salim al Dhawani, 06:17.36
8 Amjad, Ali bin Salim al Wahaibi, 06:19.12

The third day will witness 18 rounds with cash prizes for the 'Laqaya' category, for three-year-old camels over a distance of 5 km, while in the afternoon the category will conclude with 7 rounds, offering 7 car prizes, three daggers, and two icons.

The Oman Camel Racing Federation announced certain participation conditions, which are limited to purebred camels, with the use of blood stimulants, stimulating substances, or electric shocks strictly prohibited.

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE



Liverpool's Cody Gakpo scores their fourth goal. — Reuters

Liverpool, Arsenal win as Forest thrashed by Bournemouth

LIVERPOOL, England: Liverpool and Arsenal kept up their race for the Premier League title with victories over relegation-threatened opposition on Saturday, but the charge of third-placed Nottingham Forest faltered as they were hammered 5-0 by surging Bournemouth.

Liverpool cruised to a 4-1 win over Ipswich Town, while Arsenal overcame the loss of defender Myles Lewis-Skelly to a harsh straight red card to beat Wolverhampton Wanderers 1-0. Six points clear of the Gunners on 53 points, Liverpool came roaring out of the traps at Anfield with Cody Gakpo scoring one goal and creating another for Mohamed Salah, sending his side in 3-0 up at the break. Gakpo netted a second in the 66th minute as Ipswich wilted, and though they managed to pull a late goal back through Jacob Greaves, the Reds held on for a convincing victory.

"Everyone is in good form, but we have to keep going," Gakpo told the BBC, quickly putting aside an excellent performance that added three more points to their total. Arsenal had to work a lot harder for their victory after Lewis-Skelly was sent off in the first half of their clash with Wolves, but substitute Riccardo Calafiori grabbed the winner with a superb half-volley in the 74th minute. "It was clearly not a red card.

I saw him (Lewis-Skelly) at halftime, and he was so disappointed for the team, but in the end, we won, so nothing happened," Calafiori told Sky Sports. Nottingham Forest had won plenty of plaudits during their recent eight-game unbeaten run in the league, but it came to a shuddering halt away to Bournemouth as Dango Ouattara grabbed a hat-trick en route to a 5-0 win for Andoni Iraola's side. Bournemouth's 11-game unbeaten run has seen them rise to sixth in the table on 40 points, four behind Forest.

"It's always difficult when you are in the Premier League, you are facing the best teams in the country. The players are giving everything, and they are getting good results," Iraola told the BBC. "There will be a moment when we do not do this, (but) I think the supporters understand this, and they enjoy not only when we win, but all they ask is we give everything, and that's what we try to do," he added. Newcastle United, beaten 4-1 by Bournemouth last week, bounced back with a 3-1 win at Southampton, with Swedish striker Alexander Isak netting two first-half goals for the visitors after Jan Bednarek gave the Saints the lead in the 10th minute.

Southampton remain bottom of the table on six points. They are eight points behind 19th-placed Leicester City. Ipswich are 18th with 16 points, behind Wolves on goal difference. New Everton boss David Moyes celebrated his 700th Premier League game as a manager by steering his side to a 1-0 victory away to Brighton & Hove Albion, putting some daylight between his side and the rest of the relegation candidates as they moved up to 16th spot on 23 points. — Reuters



Seeb Club claims 3rd spot at Arab Men's Volleyball Club Championship

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 26

SEEB Club finished in third place at the 43rd Arab Men's Volleyball Club Championship, which concluded in Qatar on Saturday night. Oman's representative club at the Arabian Volleyball meet managed to defeat Qatar's Police SC by 3-1. The scoreline of the sets ended as follows: 25-22, 25-23, 25-20 and 25-21.

Oman's other representative in the tournament, Al Salam Club, completed the tournament in sixth place following their loss against Libyan Asswehly SC by the same result, 3-1, in the fifth and sixth playoff. The match sets finished at 25-23, 17-25, 25-20 and 21-25.

Seeb players began the match strongly against Qatar's Police SC, taking the first set 25-22. Saud al Maamari and his teammates then dominated, winning the



following set by a three-point gap with the same score before the opponent bounced back in the third set, winning 25-20. In the concluding set, Seeb players, under the guidance of domestic coach Jamal al Maamari, confirmed their triumph, sealing the victory at 25-21. In the last edition of the tournament, the opponent had won against Seeb in the third and fourth playoff. Seeb's Ismail al Hedi won the best player award in the position of No 2.

In the semifinal of the Arabian tournament, Seeb suffered a 3-2 loss against

Egypt's Al Ahli SC, while Egypt's Zamalek SC were crowned champions of the tournament following their 3-0 win over Zamalek SC in the concluding match.

Seeb head coach, Jamal al Maamari, said: "This is the second time we have won the bronze medal in the Arabian tournament. Our target was to win a better position, but I hope to represent the team much better in the forthcoming editions. It was a golden participation for Seeb Club in this event, and great thanks to Seeb's board directors for their continuous support," he concluded.

Mazoon Dairy ties up with SABCO Sports to launch 'Mazoon Kids Run'

MUSCAT: Mazoon Dairy has announced signing a partnership agreement with SABCO Sports to launch the 'Mazoon Kids Run,' scheduled to take place on February 22 at Al Mouj Muscat, in the Wilayat of Al Seeb.

The agreement was signed by Nadia bint Nasir al Hamziyah, Marketing Director at Mazoon, and Ali bin Sulaiman al Ajmi, Acting General Manager of SABCO Sports. Nadia al Hamzi stressed in her statement that the 'Mazoon Kids Run' is an important part of the company's strategy to

advance public health and create a sustainable, healthy community.

She stated, "Through this initiative, we aim to instil a culture of sports among children and youth and highlight the importance of adopting a healthy lifestyle from an early age."

The Marketing Manager explained that interested participants can register for the 'Mazoon Kids Run' through the Muscat Run's official website. For his part, Ali al Ajmi said he was proud to be working with Mazoon Dairy on this initiative, noting that sports play a vital role in



the upbringing of future generations and raising awareness about the importance of physical activity.

The goal of the 'Mazoon Kids Run' is to give kids of all ages an entertaining and educational

sporting experience while fostering the values of health and physical activity under the slogan "Health is Everyone's Responsibility."

The run will feature two races: the first will cover a distance of 1 km for children aged 7-8 years, while the second will cover a distance of 2 km for children aged 9 and 10 years. With features like timekeeping for each participant, event T-shirts, road closures for their safety, and special medals for the winners, all participating kids will have a wonderful experience similar to that of professional runners.



A U S T R A L I A N O P E N F I N A L (M E N)

SINNER SURGES ZVEREV TO RETAIN AUSTRALIAN OPEN TITLE



Italy's Jannik poses with the trophy alongside Germany's Zverev. — Reuters

A CLINICAL JANNIK SINNER swept past Alexander Zverev to retain his Australian Open title on Sunday and cement his status as the world's dominant player, becoming the first Italian to win three Grand Slams.

The 23-year-old came through a tense battle between the world's top two players 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 on Rod Laver Arena, raising his arms in the air and looking to the sky in celebration.

In doing so he became the first Italian, man or woman, to win three Grand Slams, surpassing Nicola Pietrangeli's two.

The victory also thrust him alongside Andre Agassi, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic as the only men to successfully defend their Melbourne Park titles this century.

But it proved more misery for Germany's Zverev, who remains one of the world's best players never to taste Grand Slam glory, falling short once again in his third big final.

Ice-cool Sinner proved to be a tower of mental strength in Australia, with his defence coming against the backdrop of an ongoing doping case after he twice tested positive for traces of the steroid clostebol last year.

Hanging over his head has been a World Anti-Doping Agency

appeal against his exoneration, with the global body seeking a long ban.

A hearing is scheduled at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) for April.

But he cast all the worries aside to notch a 19th career title and extend his incredible win streak to 21 matches.

Last year, Sinner needed five sets to tame Daniil Medvedev and win his first Grand Slam, but it never looked like going the distance this time.

He opened with a statement ace and won his first two service games to love, with Zverev struggling to get himself into the contest.

The German fought back to save two break points and hold for 2-2, serving his way out of trouble.

He began to find his radar, taking four points off the next Sinner serve in a game that went to deuce twice as the rallies built.

Zverev saved three break points but had no answer to a fourth when he was beaten by a blazing passing shot to slump 5-3 behind.

Sinner took the set in 46 minutes and kept the pressure on in the second as cracks began to appear in his opponent's game.

The Italian has a phenomenal ability to turn recovery shots into momentum-changing ones and he raced 15-40 clear on the Zverev serve at 1-1. — AFP

Italy's Jannik poses with the trophy after the final. — Reuters



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STRATEGIC APPROACH



Oman Air underwent a 24 per cent reduction in organisational structure, yielding annual financial savings of RO 18 million.

RIGHTSIZING SEES OMAN AIR FLEET REDUCED TO 32 AIRCRAFT IN 2024

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 26

NATIONAL carrier Oman Air has reduced its fleet size to 32 aircraft as of 2024-end as part of its transformation strategy aimed at boosting operational efficiency and profitability. As a result of a ‘rightsizing’ exercise, the fleet strength has been downsized by 29 per cent compared to the 2023 level and a significant 40 per cent versus the 2019 level.

Earlier this week, wholly state-owned released its 2024 performance highlights, showcasing remarkable strides in financial sustainability, operational excellence and commercial success as part of its ongoing transformation journey initiated in 2023. The airline’s comprehensive initiatives have resulted in significant progress, strengthening its position in the Middle East’s aviation sector while contributing to the nation’s economy.

One of the standout aspects of Oman Air’s transformation was its strategic approach to fleet management. This move was a deliberate measure to optimise operational efficiency and profitability.

By focusing on high-demand, profitable routes and retiring older, high-operating-cost planes, Oman Air effectively reduced its operational costs while maintaining high service standards. Despite the reduction in fleet size, the airline transported 5.4 million passengers in 2024, a figure reflecting a strategic realignment rather than a decline in capacity.

Oman Air reported an operating loss of RO 24 million (EBITDA) for 2024, reflecting a substantial 40% improvement compared to 2023. Similarly, EBIT improved by 40% versus 2019 levels and 25% compared to 2023, totalling RO 76 million. This achievement underscores the success of the fleet modernisation strategy and other efficiency-driven initiatives.

Additionally, financial liquidity received a boost, enabling the airline to settle RO 45 million in long-overdue payables without resorting to borrowing. This reinforces Oman Air’s commitment to enhancing financial sustainability.

Operationally, Oman Air maintained a notable on-time performance rate of 92%, placing it among the top two airlines in the Middle East and Africa. The Omanisation rate also increased by 5%, reaching 79% in 2024, reflecting the airline’s dedication to empowering Omani talent.

The airline’s commercial focus on point-to-point traffic also paid off, with the segment contributing to 40% of total revenue in 2024, a significant increase from 27% in 2019.

Average fares increased by 9% compared to 2019, with the load factor reaching 75%, up 1% from 2023.

Oman Air underwent a 24% reduction in organisational structure, yielding annual financial savings of RO 18 million. This restructuring prioritised the replacement of expatriates with Omani nationals, further raising the Omanisation rate to 81%. These efforts, combined with the streamlined fleet, have positioned the airline to support the growth of tourism and the national economy.

Asyad Shipping foresees \$2.7 billion in investments

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 26

ASYAD Shipping, the ocean-going maritime transportation arm of Oman’s integrate logistics business Asyad Group, envisions investments totalling between \$2.3 billion and \$2.7 billion in the development and expansion of its shipping fleet over the medium term.

Muscat-headquartered Asyad Shipping, which recently announced its intention to float 20 per cent of its issued share capital for public subscription on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), also expects to benefit from the maritime shipping requirements of a future green hydrogen industry currently in the early stages of development in Oman.

According to the wholly state-owned corporation, the new investments will be driven by two key factors: growing shipping demand and the need for replacing aging assets across its presently 89-strong shipping fleet. Dominated initially by crude tankers and LNG carriers, the fleet now includes a diverse mix of product tankers, gas carriers, dry bulk carriers and containerships.

The potential for growth is set out in the company’s newly published ‘Intention to Float’ document.

“With planned investments of \$2.3 billion to \$ 2.7 billion in the medium term, which will be funded through a combination of internal company sources and external bank financing, the Company aims to capitalise on market dynamics while maintaining a strong focus on sustainable growth, profitability and enhancing shareholder value,” it stated.

Underpinning the strong market outlook for Asyad Shipping are a number of key factors, according to the company. Already



Asyad Shipping currently operates a diversified fleet of 89 vessels.

an important player in the carriage of crude oil and refined petroleum fuels from Oman to overseas markets,

Asyad Shipping hopes to capitalise on predictions of stable growth in global oil production and consumption in the foreseeable future. Bolstering this outlook, it says, are expanding refining capacity and demand for refined products.

Also promising is the LNG segment where it continues to play a dominant role. “In the LNG market, expanding infrastructure and the growth of end-user markets continue to drive robust demand, with the majority of vessels already secured under contracts,” it noted.

In addition to liquid cargoes, such as crude oil, LNG, LPG and other refined products, the company also handles chemicals and an array of dry bulk commodities linked to Oman’s thriving metallurgical sector.

Crucially, as the country’s “preferred partner for strategic Omani clients”, Asyad

Shipping also stands to benefit from strong economic and project growth in Oman.

This outlook is particularly promising in the emerging green hydrogen sector, which is set to ignite significant demand for capacity suited for the transportation of green ammonia, green methanol and other derivatives of green hydrogen.

Likewise, Asyad Shipping’s Liner Shipping segment, operated through its subsidiary Asyad Line Co (ASL), continues to expand as well. The service connects Omani ports to strategic markets in the GCC, China and Southeast Asia, while also providing value-added services such as storage, transportation and customs clearance.

“With one of the largest globally diversified fleets, Asyad Shipping is competitively positioned to supply high-growth markets, such as Asia, the Middle East and North Africa through its fleet of 89 vessels, with a total aggregate capacity of more than 9.5 million DWT as of 30 September 2024,” it added.

Khazaen Food City hosts 37 projects to boost food security

BARKA: Khazaen Economic City in Al Batinah South Governorate has become a vital player in Oman’s food security strategy, with 37 local and international food security projects established by the end of 2024. These projects represent a total investment of RO 164 million (\$427 million) and aim to enhance self-sufficiency while reducing dependency on food imports.

Eng Salem bin Sulaiman al Dhahli, CEO of Khazaen Economic City, highlighted the “Food City” project as a flagship initiative. “Food City is designed to develop food security infrastructure, attract investment and establish Oman as a regional leader in food production and export,” he stated.

The “Silal” central market for vegetables and fruits is another key initiative, serving as a global platform for marketing, distributing, storing and exporting Omani agricultural products. These projects, part



These projects represent a total investment of RO 164 million (\$427 million) and aim to enhance self-sufficiency while reducing dependency on food imports.

of Oman’s broader economic diversification efforts, integrate food production, logistics and supply chain management to achieve operational efficiency and reduce waste.

Several partnerships with local and international investors have accelerated Khazaen’s progress. The Yasmina Al Sharq project, for instance, is the largest food manufacturing

hub in the region, focusing on innovative production processes. Other significant projects include:

Omani Bio-Products: Specialising in animal feed and aquatic life production.

Salalah Mills Company: Producing baked goods and frozen foods.

Zircon Food Industries: An integrated facility for refining,

sorting and packaging rice, sugar and spices.

Modern Gulf Trading and Marketing Company: A key player in food and beverage production.

Sun Age: Focused on juices and beverages.

Faisal Al Rashdi International Projects: Oman’s first factory for fresh and frozen healthy meals.

The CEO emphasised that Khazaen Economic City’s strategic focus on attracting food industry investments will position it as a regional hub for food security.

“By fostering partnerships and enhancing supply chains, Khazaen is advancing Oman’s capability to achieve food self-sufficiency while supporting value-added exports,” Al Dhahli said.

With its expanding portfolio, Khazaen is set to play a pivotal role in bolstering Oman’s food production capabilities, reducing reliance on imports and contributing to the national economy. — ONA

ADVERTORIALS

SWIFTSERVICE



The bank has developed a wide-ranging suite of products tailored to meet the diverse needs of its customer base.

95% OF BANKDHOFAR CUSTOMERS WERE SERVED IN LESS THAN 10 MINUTES

MUSCAT: BankDhofar, the second largest bank in the Sultanate of Oman in terms of the number of branches, announced that it has achieved serving 95% of its customers in its various branches spread across the Sultanate of Oman within less than 10 minutes, which reflects BankDhofar’s continuous efforts to satisfy customers and respect their valuable time.

BankDhofar’s readiness to provide its banking services to its customers from all segments of society by reducing waiting hours in branches to no more than 10 minutes from entering the branch until the service begins indicates BankDhofar’s commitment to achieving excellence in providing banking services through its 131 branches spread across the Sultanate of Oman, which keeps the bank close to its customers, provides easy access to a comprehensive range of financial services and responds to various inquiries and comments.

This initiative does not only highlight the bank’s focus on efficiency but also its understanding of the fast-paced nature of modern life, where time is of the essence. By minimising wait times and streamlining processes, BankDhofar aims to provide a seamless banking experience that leaves customers feeling valued and appreciated.

The bank has developed a wide-ranging suite of products tailored to meet the diverse needs of its customer base. Whether catering to youth, ladies, priority banking customers, or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), BankDhofar’s relationship banking model is designed to enhance the financial well-being of its customers.

Each product and service offering are carefully crafted to address the unique requirements of different customer segments, ensuring personalised solutions that contribute to their financial success.

Through this step, the bank ensures that every customer interaction is marked by speed, efficiency and a personalised approach, reinforcing BankDhofar’s position as a leading provider of exceptional financial services in Oman.

By fostering loyalty and a sense of belonging, BankDhofar continues to build lasting relationships that go beyond financial transactions, supporting the growth and prosperity of the communities it serves.

As a technology-driven institution, BankDhofar continues to lead in leveraging advanced technology to enhance customer experience, safety and convenience. A prime example of this is the recent launch of “Dhofar Pay” and “Samsung pay”, “Apple Pay” an innovative services that allows customers to make payments by simply swiping their smartphones at POS terminals, further simplifying the banking experience.

NBO NAMED BEST BANK FOR DIGITAL BANKING SERVICES IN OMAN 2024

MUSCAT: National Bank of Oman (NBO) has been named Best Bank for Digital Banking Services in Oman 2024 by the Global Banking and Finance Review. This prestigious accolade highlights NBO’s commitment to delivering pioneering digital banking solutions and underscores its dedication to enhancing customer experiences through innovation, advanced technologies and a customer-centric approach.

To simplify the customer

experience digitally, NBO has introduced a range of innovative digital services. These include digital onboarding, allowing customers to open accounts seamlessly through the app and a hassle-free digital credit card application service available to both NBO and non-NBO customers. This service complies with KYC requirements, eligibility criteria and utilises digital signatures in line with Central Bank of Oman guidelines.



Additionally, NBO has enhanced its app with e-KYC functionality, enabling existing customers to update their Know

Your Customer (KYC) details directly, improving efficiency and eliminating the need for branch visits. Another notable addition to NBO’s digital offerings is the introduction of Apple Pay, Samsung Wallet and Garmin Pay. These advanced digital payment solutions provide customers with secure, contactless payment options, elevating the overall payment experience. Additionally, the introduction of Digital Corners across 12 locations,

including Oman’s first at the head office in Al Athaiba, has further enhanced convenience. These Digital Corners offer round-the-clock services such as account openings, debit card issuance and cash and cheque transactions. A key highlight was the launch of the first-of-its-kind Eid note dispensing machines across five locations in Oman, further demonstrating its commitment to providing a seamless digital banking experience.

BYD’s powerful SEAL now with exclusive benefits

CUSTOMERS

looking to make the most of the world’s leading electrifying automotive experiences in the BYD SEAL can benefit with service 3 years/60,000 kms EV battery charger, first year insurance and exclusive gift coupon from RO 200 – RO 450. The offer that began on December 210, 024, will last until February 8, 2025. (Conditions apply. For details please visit any BYD showroom).

The BYD SEAL is a cutting-edge electric sedan that perfectly blends performance and style. Designed to appeal to the growing demand for premium electric vehicles, the BYD SEAL represents a significant leap forward in the future of mobility.



The BYD SEAL is a cutting-edge electric sedan that perfectly blends performance and style.

Powered by BYD’s revolutionary Blade Battery technology, the SEAL offers an impressive mileage that makes every journey truly remarkable. Its dual-motor all-wheel-drive

system delivers exhilarating acceleration, achieving 0-100 km/h in just 3.8 seconds. Drawing inspiration from the ocean, the BYD SEAL’s aerodynamic design enhances

performance and energy efficiency while exuding elegance. Its sleek silhouette, bold front grille and LED lighting details make appealing from every angle. The spacious interior is impressive as it is functional. Equipped with BYD DiPilot, an advanced driver assistance system, the SEAL ensures safety and convenience with features such as lane-keeping assist, adaptive cruise control and automatic emergency braking. The intuitive infotainment system, powered by a large touchscreen interface, offers seamless connectivity with smartphones, navigation and entertainment options. Customers are invited to experience the electrifying performance and innovative features of the SEAL at the BYD showrooms at Wattayah, Al Mouj and Mall of Oman.

ahlibank signs master service agreement with PDO

MUSCAT: As part of its commitment to provide tailored banking services that foster economic progress, ahlibank has sign a strategic Master Services Agreement with Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) as one of its Primary Banking Partners. The signing ceremony, held on 19 January 2025, marked the beginning of a collaborative relationship aimed at streamlining operations and enhancing financial efficiency for one of the leading companies in Oman’s energy sector.

On behalf of ahlibank, Zaliya al Balushi, GM – Head of Corporate Banking, signed the agreement, officially designating ahlibank as a trusted banking partner. This collaboration brings a range of services tailored to meet the specific needs of PDO. Among these offerings, ahlibank will provide a dedicated B2B platform, allowing PDO to manage banking transactions seamlessly, with a focus on efficiency and security. The platform will serve as a

centralised hub for corporate payments, supplier settlements and bulk disbursements, ensuring real-time tracking and fund reconciliation, ultimately enhancing PDO’s banking operations. PDO is offered a comprehensive range of B2B services, facilitating seamless processing of HR-related operations and providing online, real-time access to banking data, while ensuring efficient banking experience. Furthermore, The Bank extends an array of innovated digital solutions to corporate clients,

enabling direct integration of enterprise systems with the bank. These services encompass transfers, payments, credit card and cheques management. This collaboration embodies the commitment of both organisations to leverage modern technology to achieve operational excellence and enhance efficiency in banking operations. Under this partnership, ahlibank will provide advanced, hassle-free digital banking solutions via its mobile banking app or through Internet banking.

National Finance paves way for growth at 2nd Finance and Insurance Forum

MUSCAT: Demonstrating its dedication to being a trusted Partner for Growth, National Finance the Sultanate of Oman’s leading finance company, participated in the prestigious Second Finance and Insurance Forum – Partnership & Integration, hosted by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), Al Batinah North Governorate branch. The event was held under the patronage of HH Sayyid Mohammed bin Salim al Said, with the esteemed presence of Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), alongside other prominent



The event underscored the critical role financial institutions play in supporting the sustainable development of startups, SMEs and large corporations.

dignitaries, C-suite executives and industry experts. Centred on the themes of Partnership and Integration, the forum provided a dynamic platform for in-depth discussions focused on the power of collaboration across sectors to drive business growth, foster innovation and elevate the quality of products and services. The event underscored the critical role financial institutions play in supporting the sustainable development of startups, SMEs and large corporations. Moreover, the discussions provided valuable perspectives on how the finance and insurance

sectors can enhance their customer-centric offerings by adapting to evolving needs and expectations. Tariq al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer of National Finance, stated, “We are immensely proud to participate in the Second Finance and Insurance Forum, an invaluable initiative by OCCI that fosters dialogue and collaboration within the finance and insurance sectors. The insightful discussions and sessions provide a wealth of knowledge on supporting startups and leveraging digital advancements and FinTech to enhance product offerings and improve customer experiences.”

BUSINESS

SHORT TAKES



The total value of fish landed across artisanal, commercial and coastal fishing reached RO 348 million.

ARTISANAL FISHING YIELDS OVER 477,000 TONNES IN SEPT 2024

MUSCAT: Artisanal fishing in Oman produced 477,312 tonnes of fish by the end of September 2024, marking an 11.6% increase from 427,589 tonnes during the same period in 2023.

The total value of fish landed across artisanal, commercial and coastal fishing reached RO 348 million, according to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Al Wusta Governorate led with 164,816 tonnes of artisanal landings, followed by Al Sharqiyah South Governorate with 137,971 tonnes and Al Batinah South and North Governorate with a combined 61,532 tonnes.

Dhofar Governorate contributed 49,249 tonnes, Musandam Governorate 37,061 tonnes and Muscat Governorate 26,683 tonnes.

Small surface fish dominated artisanal fishing with 237,614 tonnes, followed by large surface fish (134,337 tonnes) and demersal fish (85,475 tonnes).

Sharks accounted for 7,673 tonnes, crustaceans and molluscs 7,849 tonnes and other fish 4,364 tonnes. — ONA

MSX INDEX CLOSES DOWN 1.10 PER CENT



MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) Index 30 closed yesterday at 4553.31 points, down 50.5 points and 1.10 per cent compared to the last trading session of 4603.84 points.

The trading value amounted to RO 1,584,339, down by 55.2 per cent compared to the last trading session of RO 3,539,160.

The report issued by Muscat Stock Exchange indicated that the market value decreased by 0.620 per cent from the last trading day and amounted to approximately RO 27.63 billion.

The value of non-Omani purchases in the stock exchange amounted to RO 69,000, representing 4.36 per cent, while the value of non-Omani sales amounted to RO 398,000, representing 25.11 per cent, while the net non-Omani investment decreased by RO 329,000, representing 20.75 per cent. — ONA

CEO TALK

Driving innovation, talent development in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, JAN 26

WITH a vision to foster innovation and empower local talent, Mashreq — a leading financial institution in the Middle East — is deepening its commitment to Oman by establishing a local presence.

In an exclusive interview with the Observer, Ahmed Abdelaal, Group CEO of Mashreq, outlined the bank's strategic approach, emphasising digital transformation, talent development and sustainability as key drivers of its contribution to Oman's economic growth.

"We've been privileged to serve the Omani market for decades from afar and this long-standing relationship has given us a solid understanding of its dynamics, needs and opportunities. Establishing a physical presence in Oman is a natural next step to enhance our ability to serve the market and contribute to its growth," Abdelaal said.



Our aim is to groom local talent, provide them with global exposure and bring that expertise back to Oman. This strategy reflects our commitment to contributing to the development of the local financial sector.

AHMED ABDELAAL
Group CEO,
Mashreq

LEVERAGING OMAN'S ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

Abdelaal emphasised Oman's strategic importance within Mashreq's regional network, citing the country's potential in key sectors such as energy, logistics, manufacturing and infrastructure.

"Oman complements our GCC presence significantly. This is a very important market with significant potential across a multitude of sectors. Our goal is to leverage this promising economy to support Omani corporates pursuing international activities, as well as international businesses investing in Oman," he explained.

This expansion aligns with

Mashreq's broader objective of strengthening trade and investment corridors between Oman and global financial hubs, including New York, London, and Hong Kong.

"We aim to provide tailored trade finance and market solutions that enable Omani businesses to grow both domestically and internationally," Abdelaal added.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AT THE CORE

Mashreq's commitment to digital transformation is at the heart of its strategy. "Digital is hardwired into our DNA," Abdelaal said.

"We've been recognised as the Best Digital Bank in the Middle East for four consecutive years and we aim to bring this cutting-edge expertise to Oman.

Our innovation extends beyond consumer banking to corporate and SME solutions, enabling businesses to thrive in an increasingly digital world."

The bank plans to introduce artificial intelligence (AI) and open banking solutions to Oman, fostering collaborations with local fintechs and telecommunications providers.

"We aspire to be a change agent in digital transformation here, just as we've done in other markets. Open banking and banking as a service are central to our road map," he said.

EMPOWERING OMANI TALENT

Abdelaal underscored Mashreq's focus on nurturing local talent as a cornerstone of its operations in Oman. "The majority, if not almost the entire team in Oman, consists of Omanis.

Even before establishing our presence here, we invited Omani professionals to join our global ACE programme, which exposes top graduates to best-in-class financial

training and international market exposure," he said.

Mashreq also plans to provide international mobility opportunities for Omani employees.

"Our aim is to groom local talent, provide them with global exposure, and bring that expertise back to Oman. This strategy reflects our commitment to contributing to the development of the local financial sector," Abdelaal noted.

COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is another key pillar of Mashreq's approach in Oman.

Abdelaal highlighted the bank's "Climb2Change" initiative, which raises awareness about climate change and promotes environmental stewardship.

"We hope to introduce similar programmes in Oman, aligning with the country's strategic push towards a green economy. Supporting sustainability is not just a CSR activity for us but a critical part of our business strategy," he explained.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN OMAN

Abdelaal outlined key benchmarks for assessing Mashreq's success in Oman over the next five years.

"For us, success is about delivering a differentiated client experience, investing in technology and digitisation, and introducing cutting-edge solutions that enhance businesses' ability to grow. We also aim to build a thriving fintech ecosystem here, similar to our efforts in other markets," he said.

With a robust plan in place, Mashreq's expansion into Oman is poised to play a pivotal role in the country's economic transformation, underscoring the bank's commitment to innovation, sustainability and talent development.

Gulf forum advances commercial arbitration

MANAMA: The inaugural Gulf Law and Arbitration Week commenced in Manama, aiming to tackle challenges in investment legislation and dispute resolution across GCC countries.

Organised by the Gulf Commercial Arbitration Centre, the event runs until January 30 and serves as a platform to enhance the economic landscape through legal cooperation and expertise exchange.

Jassim bin Mohammed al Badawi, Secretary-General of



The event serves as a platform to enhance the economic landscape through legal cooperation and expertise exchange.

the GCC, highlighted the forum's role in aligning Gulf arbitration practices with regional and international standards.

Saleh bin Hamad al Sharqi, Chairman of the GCC Commercial Arbitration Center, emphasised the centre's efforts to modernise arbitration systems to meet evolving market demands.

Dr Kamal bin Abdullah al Hamad, the centre's Secretary-General, noted that strategic reforms aim to improve predictability, governance and leadership quality in Gulf arbitration. The forum is expected to strengthen the region's economic and legal infrastructure. — ONA

GCC trade ranks sixth globally in goods volume

MUSCAT: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have ranked sixth globally in the volume of trade in goods, according to the 2023 Foreign Trade Report issued by the GCC Statistical Centre (GCC-Stat).

The region accounted for 3.4% of the global trade in goods, with a total value of \$1.5 trillion in 2023, marking a 4% decline compared to the previous year.

The report also highlighted the GCC's strong position in the global merchandise trade balance index, ranking third with a surplus of \$163.7 billion. This, however, represents a significant drop of 57.1% from the \$381.3 billion recorded in 2022.

In terms of commodity exports, the GCC ranked fifth worldwide, contributing 3.1% to



The region accounted for 3.4% of the global trade in goods, with a total value of \$1.5 trillion in 2023, marking a 4% decline compared to the previous year.

global exports.

The total value of exports reached \$823.1 billion in 2023, down 14.5% from \$962.6 billion in 2022.

Conversely, the region's merchandise imports increased by 13.4%, totalling \$659.3 billion, placing the GCC ninth globally in the merchandise imports index.

Oil exports, a cornerstone of GCC trade, saw a notable decrease of 20.5%, falling to \$525.5 billion in 2023 from \$661.1 billion in 2022.

China remained the GCC's top trading partner in 2023, with a total trade volume of \$297.9 billion, far exceeding India's \$150.4 billion. China accounted for 19.2% of the GCC's total exports, valued at \$158.3 billion,

a 16.8% decline from 2022.

On the imports side, China supplied 21.2% of the GCC's total merchandise imports, valued at \$139.6 billion, up 10.8% from the previous year.

The report further noted that the GCC's trade in goods (excluding intra-GCC trade) declined by 4% in 2023, reaching \$1.48 trillion. While exports declined, imports grew, reflecting shifting trade dynamics within the region.

The GCC continues to demonstrate resilience and strategic importance in global trade, with its top rankings in key indices and robust trade relationships, particularly with China, underscoring its pivotal role in international markets.

OPINION

Harnessing seaweed: Oman’s path to carbon neutrality by 2050



**DR KHALID
AL SUBHI**

The writer is a Research Assistant at the Centre of Excellence in Marine Biotechnology, Sultan Qaboos University.

AS global temperatures continue to rise, the urgency for effective climate change mitigation strategies has never been more pressing. With the Sultanate of Oman striving for carbon neutrality by 2050, innovative approaches are being explored, including cultivating seaweed in coastal waters.

Global warming, primarily driven by the increased levels of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere — especially carbon dioxide (CO2) — poses significant threats across various sectors. Governments worldwide are responding with strategies to reduce carbon emissions, limit fossil fuel use and enhance carbon sequestration.

In 2022, the International Energy Agency (IEA) reported that Oman emitted approximately 74.92 million tonnes of CO2, ranking it as the 7th highest emitter in the Middle East and 45th globally. Alarminglly, Oman’s CO2 emissions per capita were recorded at 16.372 tonnes, placing it 5th in the region. Recognising the gravity of the situation, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin

Tarik has initiated measures to combat climate change, including a national plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2025.

One promising avenue being explored is the large-scale cultivation of seaweed, a natural carbon sink. Studies indicate that suitable ocean areas for seaweed aquaculture cover around 48 million km² — approximately 11% of the total ocean area.

The potential carbon sequestration from seaweed farming could reach a staggering 72 billion tons annually, potentially surpassing global carbon emissions.

Countries like China already investing in seaweed farming to meet aggressive carbon neutrality targets. Research suggests that to fulfill its 2060 goal, China would need to cultivate 450,000 km² of high-yield seaweed species. However, the cultivation of other species may require significantly greater areas, underscoring the importance of selecting the right type of seaweed for effective carbon capture.

Further studies in the UK and Scotland underscore seaweed’s carbon sequestration

Global warming, primarily driven by the increased levels of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere — especially carbon dioxide (CO2) — poses significant threats across various sectors.

capabilities, with findings suggesting an average organic carbon uptake of 8.75 g C/m² per year and annual absorption of approximately 1.73 tonnes of carbon per seaweed patch.

For Oman, the expansion of seaweed farming presents an opportunity not only to address carbon emissions but also to enhance coastal resource management.

However, challenges remain. The effectiveness of blue carbon trade negotiations is currently hampered by a lack of data regarding the carbon sequestration potential of coastal ecosystems. Gathering this essential information is crucial for Omani stakeholders looking to engage in international negotiations.

In conclusion, as Oman positions itself to achieve carbon neutrality, the cultivation of seaweed could become a cornerstone of its climate strategy. By investing in research and leveraging the vast potential of its coastal areas, Oman could lead the way in innovative solutions to one of the most pressing global challenges of our time.

JAPAN RATES’ FATE RESTS ON TRUMP-ISHIBA TIES

HUDSON LOCKETT

Another 0.25 percentage-point hike to Japanese rates has come and gone without markets batting an eye. That is surely the point of the central bank’s drive to normalise monetary policy. With wages and prices on the up, Citi economists have pencilled in two more hikes in June and December.

That would take rates to 1% by the end of the year “barring escalation in trade wars and sharper yen appreciation,” they hedge.

There’s the rub: Japan’s annual trade surplus with the US is 8.6 trillion yen (\$55 billion). That puts pressure on Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to convince President Donald Trump not to ratchet up tariffs on Japanese goods, which Goldman Sachs analysts warn would have a “significantly negative” impact on exports.

Ishiba has a tough act to follow: the late Shinzo Abe launched a charm offensive after Trump’s first election, using time spent playing golf and grabbing burgers to convince the president there was no conflict between the two countries’ national interests.

Commentators in Tokyo have suggested Ishiba hit the driving range ahead of his first trip to Washington, currently expected in February.

Whether the ramen-loving, model-ship aficionado can reproduce Abe’s bonhomie with Trump is not clear. But there is plenty he can offer to mollify the self-proclaimed “tariff man”.

He can point to the role of Masayoshi Son’s SoftBank in funding Stargate, the new joint venture with OpenAI and Oracle slated to invest \$500 billion in AI infrastructure. Japanese corporations announced \$42 billion of US acquisitions last year, per Dealogic, more than any other country.

Despite Washington blocking Nippon Steel’s \$14 billion takeover of US Steel, such investment inflows are primed to continue as Japanese companies seek new sources of growth in the American market.

Ishiba, a former defence minister, can also point to an increase in his country’s military budget to show he agrees with Trump that Japan should play a bigger role in its own protection.

Last month his cabinet approved a record 8.7 trillion yen defence budget, including 940 billion yen for a missile system using US-made weapons.

And the prime minister can offer to further limit the sale of advanced machinery and equipment to China.

It would reduce revenue at chip-equipment makers like Tokyo Electron, but that pales against the hit of across-the-board tariffs. Ishiba could do worse than remind the returning president he’s got bigger fish to fry — and that Japan can help.

— Reuters

Critical analysis of Oman Budget 2025

ON the fifth of January 2025, Oman’s state budget was published in the official Gazette. Oman Budget 2025 laid the foundation for economic growth and stability — the Budget 2025 reflects a clear alignment with Oman Vision 2040. The budget has significant implications for the country’s diversification efforts. It supports budget allocation for oil sectors focusing on tourism, manufacturing, renewable energy and logistics.

The Oman budget also focuses on investments in education and healthcare. This is vital to develop skilled workers for innovation and economic growth.

The budget approach aims to bring structural changes to Oman’s economy in the long run by increasing the contribution to the non-oil sector, reducing oil price fluctuations and supporting the emergence of industries and economic shifts to enhance fiscal stability and improve credit rating.

One of the budget’s main aims is to achieve consistency with the financial framework of the 10th five-year plan.

The main goals of the budget for 2025 are to implement financial stability and developmental plans and programmes, support urban movements and continue to provide government subsidies for utilities, food and other services.

Overall, the budget is cautious and balanced to achieve diversification, welfare, health and financial stability. The budget is based on two major assumptions: the first is \$60.00 per barrel and the second is 100,000 thousand barrels of oil production daily.

Speedy diversification and consistent policies are required to ensure the implementation and success of the budget. Also, the reduction in development expenditure by 20% compared to 2024 is concerning.

This move could hinder — long-term economic growth. Global oil prices remain volatile due to geopolitical tensions in significant oil-producing regions, demanding a shift to renewables.

There could also be a need for change in OPEC+ production agreements. Any substantial deviation in oil prices could affect Oman’s oil revenue, constituting a significant portion of the budget. According to the IMF estimates, a global economic slowdown would



Overall, the budget is cautious and balanced to achieve diversification, welfare, health and financial stability.



**DR MYTHILI
KOLLURU**

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Sector Wise Budget Allocation		
Sector	Allocated Amount (RO) billion	Description
Defense Security	3.07	Funding for national defense and security initiatives.
Civil Ministries	4.57	Expenditures for various civil ministries, including administration and public services.
Social Protection Programs	0.577	Support for vulnerable groups through social allowances and financial assistance.
Electricity Subsidy	0.520	To ease the financial burden on citizens by subsidizing electricity costs.
Water Sanitation	0.194	Investments aimed at improving water supply and sanitation services.
Fuel Subsidies	0.035	Subsidies to stabilize petroleum product prices for consumers.
Essential Commodities	0.015	Support for essential food items to ensure food security for households.
Transport Sector	0.082	Investments in transportation infrastructure to enhance mobility and economic activity.
Waste Management Sector	0.059	Initiatives focused on environment-friendly waste management practices.
Housing and development loan interest subsidies	0.025	Support housing development through subsidies.
Development Expenditure	0.900	Allocated for developmental projects across civil ministries, consistent with the previous year’s budget.
Public Debt Services	0.915	Expenses for servicing public debt

Source: PwC (2025). Oman Budget 2025: Key Highlights.

result in modest growth globally in 2025. This projection could affect Oman’s economy.

This reduces demand for Oman exports, affecting inward FDI and tourism if global travel is affected.

Global inflationary trends could also influence Oman’s domestic prices, affecting Omani’s purchasing power.

The Middle East region continues to face geopolitical turbulence and unpredictability, which could also impact the budget execution for 2025.

The precarious situation could dampen investor confidence, shift trade agreements, alter bilateral relations among nations and affect international business relationships. Climate change and increased

extreme weather could require additional infrastructure and disaster management spending.

The focus on sustainability could also affect demand for fossil fuels, affecting oil revenue. Climate change and sustainability could call for additional new investments in renewable energy.

Oman’s Budget 2025 is balanced, focusing on growth and diversification with fiscal prudence. Complex, multifaceted global economic and geopolitical factors will influence the successful implementation of the budget.

The key factors ensuring its success are flexibility in implementation and consistent monitoring of international trends and external challenges.

ART/LIFE



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HEALTH

Seafood as a Source of Omega-3s: Key to Better Health

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Dr Moza is a food safety consultant and a board member of the Oman Consumer Protection Association

Omega-3 fatty acids are widely recognised as “healthy fats” due to their extensive benefits for overall health and well-being. These essential fats cannot be produced by the body and must be obtained through diet. The primary types of omega-3 fatty acids that provide significant health advantages include eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and alpha-linolenic acid (ALA).

EPA, a 20-carbon fatty acid, is predominantly derived from marine sources, being plentiful in seafood such as mackerel, sardines, tuna and salmon, alongside certain shellfish and algae. DHA, another aquatic omega-3 with 22 carbon atoms, is similarly found in these types of fish. ALA, on the other hand, is a plant-based omega-3 containing 18 carbon atoms, typically sourced from foods like flaxseed, soybeans, chia seeds, walnuts and canola oil.

The omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), especially EPA and DHA from marine sources, are noted for their superior bioavailability, meaning they are easily absorbed and utilised by the human body. This quality renders them more beneficial than plant-based omega-3 sources like ALA. Fatty fish, particularly those from cooler waters, are not only rich in these advantageous fatty acids but also represent one of the most effective means of ensuring adequate omega-3 consumption. Although ALA serves as a precursor for the body’s conversion into EPA and DHA, this conversion process is inefficient, producing only modest amounts of these critical long-chain PUFAs. Therefore, to fully benefit from EPA and DHA, obtaining these fatty acids directly via seafood is advantageous.

Omega-3 fatty acids are crucial components of cell membranes throughout the body and play significant roles in maintaining health. They are particularly effective in promoting cardiovascular health, regulating blood pressure, lowering triglycerides, alleviating joint inflammation and supporting cognitive functions as well as the health of both the brain and eyes. Additionally, omega-3s are believed to help prevent and alleviate conditions like dementia, depression, asthma, migraines, diabetes and various endocrine disorders.

Moreover, omega-6 and omega-9 fatty acids provide health benefits when consumed in appropriate proportions. These are mainly found in vegetable oils (such as soybean, corn and sunflower oils), processed foods and certain nuts and seeds. The suggested ideal ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids is between 1:1 and 2:1, but modern diets often display a disproportionately high omega-6 content. Some ratios can reach up to 1:24, potentially leading to enhanced inflammation and increased risks of cardiovascular diseases and other health issues.

Research has emphasised the importance of omega-3 consumption across various populations. A notable study conducted in Oman, titled “Fatty Acid Profile and Selected Chemical Contaminants in Yellowfin Tuna from the Arabian Sea,” published in April 2015, assessed the omega-3 content of yellowfin tuna from the region, recommending its inclusion in a healthy diet. Additionally, a 2012 study examined the connection between DHA levels and autism spectrum disorder in Omani children, suggesting that increasing omega-3 intake could foster cognitive development and alleviate autism symptoms.

QUICK FEATURES



FESTIVAL

Artists perform during the street Performance ‘Mo y la Cinta Roja’ by l’Homme Debout, during the 32nd version of the International Festival Teatro a Mil, in Santiago. — AFP



FILM

Bollywood actress Rashmika Mandanna attends the trailer launch of her upcoming historical action Hindi-language film ‘Chhava’ in Mumbai. — AFP



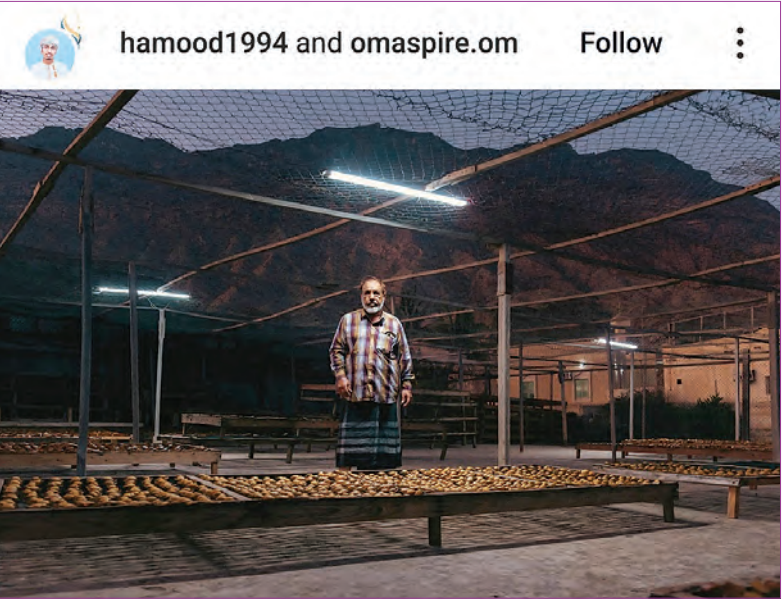
FASHION

A model presents a creation for the KidSuper Menswear Ready-to-wear Fall-Winter 2025/2026 collection as part of the Paris Fashion Week, in Paris. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Appreciating Local Culture



Bountiful Gift from the Sea

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Poland says purchased rare ‘treasure’ Chopin manuscript



POLAND ON Thursday announced it had purchased a rare manuscript of a ballad by Frederic Chopin, a score whose exhibition will coincide with this year’s prestigious piano competition named after the composer. The manuscript for Ballade No 4 in F minor was previously in private hands before Poland finalised a deal to buy it last year.

“This is a treasure,” Poland’s Culture Minister Hanna Wroblewska said to reporters in Warsaw’s Chopin Institute, adding that original manuscripts by the French-Polish composer are “very rare”. The Institute has bought the four-paged manuscript using state funds but said the price could not be disclosed due to a clause in the contract.

“This manuscript is in excellent condition. It has been kept for over 100 years in optimal conditions,” said the Chopin Institute’s Seweryn Kuter curator.

Born in 1810 in Zelazowa Wola, near the Polish capital,

Frederic Chopin fled his homeland just before the 1830 uprising against the occupying forces of Tsarist Russia.

The composer later lived in the Austrian capital Vienna before moving to Paris, where he died aged 39 after years of poor health — but his music remains a symbol of Poland’s long struggle for freedom.

The score will be displayed at the June opening of a Warsaw exhibition that runs until the end of October, coinciding with the final stages of the Frederic Chopin International Piano Competition.

Held each five years since 1927, the competition brings top pianists from around the world to Warsaw. In October, its organisers said Russian pianists would only be allowed to enter the competition under a neutral flag and if they did not support Moscow’s aggression in Ukraine.

Host country Poland staunchly supports Kyiv’s efforts to fend off the invasion.

— AFP



With new ‘Aida’ staging, Met tries out grandiose opera for the contemporary age

“AIDA” has long epitomised opera at its most extravagant — think sweeping sets, luxurious costumes and even real-live horses, an experience intended to transfix the audience with grandeur.

A beloved version of that scale helmed the Met for more than three decades — so staging a new production of “Aida,” a tale of love, war and loyalty set in ancient Egypt, was a tall order.

“Because Aida is so big and so expensive... I did definitely feel the pressure of that,” director Michael Mayer said in a recent interview of his production that premiered this month, adding that “I knew that there were audiences who wanted the big spectacle.”

Verdi’s “Aida” also has long faced criticism of Orientalism, that it offers an exoticised, reductive view of Egypt through an othering Western lens.

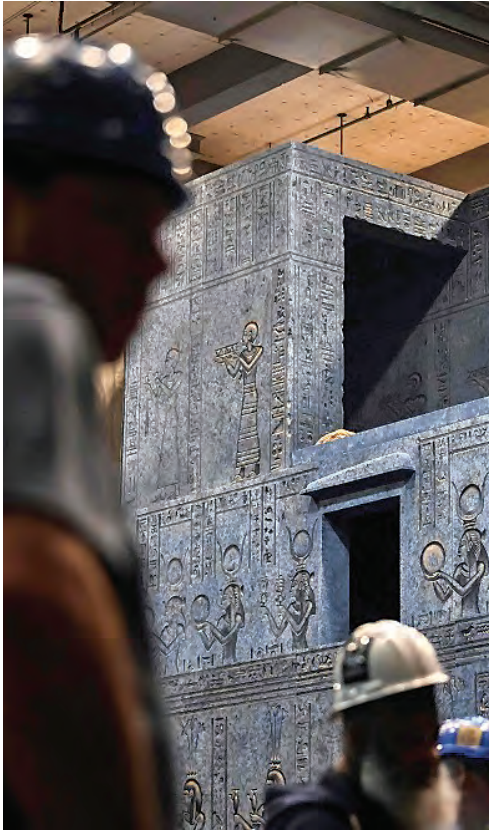
Addressing that was among Mayer’s tasks — to “acknowledge, even in a gentle way, the kind of imperialism and colonialism associated with a kind of fetishisation of ancient Egypt,” he said. “When you look at the history of Grand Opera, you see a lot of operas that are set in exotic locales,” he said, citing “Aida” along with “Madama Butterfly,” set in Japan, and “Turandot,” set in China, as prime examples.

“There’s the sense that that those cultures could be fetishised. We appreciate the beauty of them, but in modern times now, I think we’re all much more conscious of Orientalism, colonialism and imperialism; and the idea that these cultures were taken apart and re-appropriated — and potentially inappropriately so,” Mayer said.

“And I think that contemporary audiences are not going to just swallow it hook, line and sinker, without some kind of acknowledgement that there’s a complexity involved.”

— ‘FRESH AND NEW’ —

Mainstream critics of the new



production have been, well, critical — but refreshing a pillar of traditional opera is a delicate balance, Mayer said.

And part of that balance is toeing the line between reaching new opera-goers and satisfying the old guard — or, how to revamp a traditional opera for a contemporary age, without losing what made it adored to begin with.

And on top of that, it has to have staying power — a staple of the repertoire that can satiate audiences for seasons to come.

Mayer’s approach to the piece involves presenting it through the eyes of a team of archaeologists unearthing an ancient tomb, before the tale of star-crossed lovers, warring empires and treason unfolds in full color.

At one point, the archaeologists are seen looting the tomb of its treasures, a reminder of the colonial context.

“I feel like my job was to be able to deliver the beautiful spectacle that audiences who love that about ‘Aida’

could get” he said, while also aiming to “contextualise it.”

“My dream is that I can give everyone enough that it will turn them on, maybe for the first time,” said Mayer, a director who in addition to working in opera has long worked on Broadway.

“I feel like if someone’s coming to the opera for the first time and they’re seeing this ‘Aida,’ and they’re like, ‘Oh my God, that’s like a Broadway show on crack, I can’t wait to come back’ — then I feel like mission accomplished,” he said.

Capturing the hearts of those audiences is vital for the art — and the bottom line of institutions like the Met.

“The future of the opera in America is really in the hands of the young people,” Mayer said.

“They have to feel like they’re seeing something fresh and new,” he continued, “and not living their fear, which is that they’re going to go and see a museum piece that has nothing to say to them and has nothing to say to the moment that we’re in.” — AFP

FEATURES

YOU HAVE
UNTIL
FEBRUARY 27
TO ENJOY
THE FUN OF
RAHALLA
FESTIVAL



BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

WITH ITS sweeping dunes and stunning landscapes, Rimal Al Sharqiya has seamlessly transformed into the ultimate destination for winter activities and vibrant festivities. Despite its arid essence, this popular Omani destination has blossomed into a hub of adventure and cultural celebration, attracting travellers eager to explore its unique offerings.

At the forefront of this transformation is the highly anticipated Rahalla Festival, taking place from 9 January to 27 February 2025, in the Al Sharqiyah North Governorate. Hosted by the Omran Group, in partnership with Taiseer Platforms and with the support of the Office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah North and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, this festival has become a centrepiece of Oman's winter celebration.

With a perfect blend of heritage, adventure and entertainment, the Rahalla Festival beckons visitors to immerse themselves in what Oman can offer.

The festival is a vibrant affair, featuring a dynamic marketplace adorned with 20 traditional tents that showcase the craftsmanship of 28 skilled artisans. This Heritage Zone immerses attendees in Omani culture, featuring live demonstrations of traditional crafts, engaging games and captivating performances that celebrate the region's rich history.

Designed with visitor engagement in mind, the festival boasts a bustling Plaza Area, serving as a central hub with diverse winter seating arrangements and an array of cosy cafés and restaurants, all contributing to a warm, inviting atmosphere.

One of the festival's standout attractions is the Meat Grilling Festival, a culinary experience that tantalises guests with traditional Omani flavours and an assortment of grilled delicacies.

For outdoor enthusiasts, the Camping Exhibition presents an interactive showcase of camping gear and accessories, making it a perfect stop for those drawn to the great outdoors. Families can also rejoice in the free camping area, equipped with safe shared facilities, fostering a deep appreciation for nature in a secure setting.

The Rahalla Festival is not only a feast for the senses but also a celebration of community spirit. Over 20 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), alongside more than 20 local families, have participated in the festival, contributing their products and skills to enhance this collaborative event. Remarkably, the festival has also created 74 temporary jobs, recognising 28 artisans with special rewards



for their invaluable contributions.

With numbers that speak volumes, more than 10,000 visitors have flocked to the Rahalla Festival, reveling in its unique attractions. The impressive infrastructure, including the luxurious tents and festival setup, materialised in just two months and ten days, culminating in an unforgettable 29-day celebration filled with continuous activities and entertainment.

The festival stands as a testament to the synergetic efforts of 14 Omani SMEs, specialising in luxury tent production, furniture crafting, decorative installations and supplies for both the boutique tents and carnival areas. This collaboration not only enriches the festival experience but also underscores the potential for economic growth and innovation within the local community.

As winter settles over the GCC, the deserts come alive in 2025. These events are transforming arid landscapes into bustling hubs of activity, attracting locals and tourists eager to experience the festive atmosphere.

In Saudi Arabia, the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival celebrates the time-honoured

tradition of camel racing. This grand event not only features thrilling races but also exhibitions and cultural displays, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the richness of Saudi heritage.

The Al Dhafra Festival, held in the dunes of the UAE, welcomes visitors with its spectacular camel beauty contests, traditional arts and crafts. This festival highlights Emirati customs while inviting tourists to partake in exciting competitions.

In Qatar, the Qatar International Food Festival showcases the country's culinary delights, set against the stunning backdrop of the desert. Visitors can enjoy a blend of local and international flavours, alongside entertainment and cultural performances.

But in Oman, from captivating cultural experiences to delectable culinary delights and exhilarating adventures for families, the Rahalla Festival is redefining winter tourism in Oman. This event not only shines a spotlight on the Sultanate of Oman's natural beauty and cultural treasures but also serves as a powerful reminder of the strength of collaboration and innovation in propelling the tourism sector to new heights.