

OMAN
عمان
DAILY

Observer

VOL. 45, NO. 56
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SUNRISE 06:50 AM
PRAYER TIMINGS
FAJR 05:30 AM
DHUHR 12:18 PM
ASR 03:20 PM
MAGHRIB 05:40 PM
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LATEGAN LEADS
DAKAR, CHAMPION
AL RAJHI
WITHDRAWS



ROYAL VISIT SERVES AS A HIGH MARK OF APPRECIATION FOR RAFO

HM VISITS AL MUSANNAH AIR BASE



His Majesty the Sultan toured an exhibition where he was briefed about the latest military hardware and advanced machinery of RAFO.

HM BRIEFED ABOUT THE RAFO'S ADVANCED MILITARY CAPABILITIES

HIS MAJESTY TOURS VARIOUS FACILITIES AT AL MUSANNAH AIR BASE

STRATEGIC PLANS TO TRAIN NATIONAL PERSONNEL IN AERIAL MILITARY SYSTEMS

ROYAL VISIT AN APPRECIATION FOR RAFO'S ROLE AND COINCIDES WITH THE 67TH ANNIVERSARY

HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAITHAM BIN TARIK, the Supreme Commander, on Wednesday visited Al Musannah Air Base of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). Upon the arrival of the Royal motorcade at Al Musannah Air Base, His Majesty was received by Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), in addition to the Commander of Al Musannah Air Base and senior wing and squadron commanders.

During the visit, His Majesty, the Supreme Commander, listened to a briefing about the Royal Air Force of Oman, its advanced military capabilities, modern aerial assets and its pivotal national role.

His Majesty toured the various facilities at Al Musannah Air Base and inspected models of the specialised aerial systems of RAFO.

His Majesty the Sultan further toured an exhibition where he was briefed about the latest military hardware and advanced machinery of RAFO, as well as the strategic plans to train specialised national personnel in the maintenance and sustainability of aerial military systems.

At the conclusion of the visit, a commemorative photo was taken for His Majesty, the Supreme Commander, with the personnel of Al Musannah Air Base.

This Royal visit serves as a high mark of appreciation for the Royal Air Force of Oman and its personnel. It coincides with the 67th anniversary of RAFO's establishment. It highlights the continuous modernisation under the Renewed Renaissance, which has transformed the RAFO into a modern, integrated force.

RAFO does not only protect the nation's airspace, but also provides critical logistical support to other military units, security forces and civilian institutions.

The visit underscored the qualitative and quantitative achievements of RAFO that reflect the comprehensive development in the nation. — ONA

SEE ALSO P2&3

Omanisation in public sector stands at 91%

MOHAMED AL BATTASHI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

The Majlis Ash'shura on Wednesday hosted Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, during the Council's seventh session of the third ordinary sitting of its tenth term. The discussions focused on five main areas, including the ministry's policies, plans and programmes under the Tenth Five-Year Plan; labour laws governing the public and private sectors; employment and job creation; training and qualification; and digital transformation and electronic integration.

The session was chaired by



DR MAHAD
BIN SAID
BAOWAIN
Minister of Labour

Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, in the presence of the members and the Secretary-General of the Council.

During the session, the Minister of Labour outlined the ministry's key plans and detailed its achievements under integrated programmes designed to develop the labour market, expand employment opportunities and align workforce supply with demand.

The minister noted that the ministry has prioritised the development of policies and executive programmes within the Tenth Five-Year Plan, implementing a wide

range of operational initiatives, replacement schemes and nationalisation programmes. These efforts have resulted in quality employment opportunities and helped stabilise the national workforce across multiple sectors.

PRIVATE SECTOR

According to figures presented during the session, the total number of workers in the private sector reached 1.86 million as of October 2025. The Omanisation rate stood at 91.1 per cent in the public sector and 15.5 per cent in the private sector, while the number of employees subject to the Civil Service Law reached 188,796. **TURN TO P6**

'FALAH' WINS HIS MAJESTY THE SULTAN'S CUP



At the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said presided over the Annual Royal Cavalry Horse Race at the Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka on Wednesday, in an event organised by the Royal Court Affairs through the Royal Cavalry. **DETAILS ON P10**

HM’S VISIT TO AL MUSANNAH AIR



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the Supreme Commander, on Wednesday visited Al Musannah Air Base of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO). Upon the arrival of the Royal motorcade at Al Musannah Air Base, His Majesty was received by Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), in addition to the Commander of Al Musannah Air Base and senior wing and squadron commanders. — ONA



BASE APPRECIATION FOR RAFO





Achievement Bulletin

A Semi-Annual Bulletin on
Achievements Supporting Oman Vision 2040 Targets
Oman as a Global Logistics Hub...A Thriving Digital Economy



**Total Investment
Volume in the
Transport and
Logistics Sector**

OMR **2.3** billion
(from 2021 until
the end of 2024)

OMR **3.4** billion
(from 2021 until
the end of 2025)



**Digital Transformation –
Total Digitization of
Services**

1700 essential services
digitized out of 2.523
by the end of 2024

2277 essential services
digitized out of 2.523
by the end of 2025

Omanization in the IT Sector



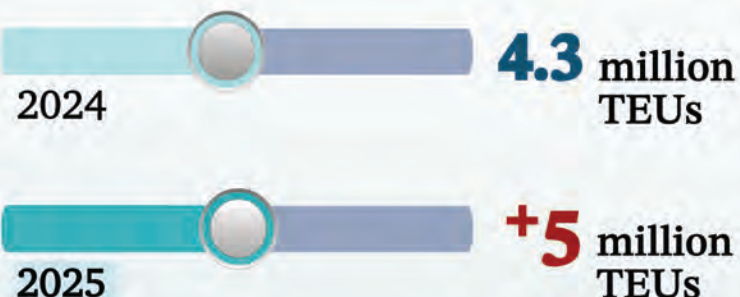
2024	38%
2025	45.5%

Omanization in the Transport and Logistics Sector

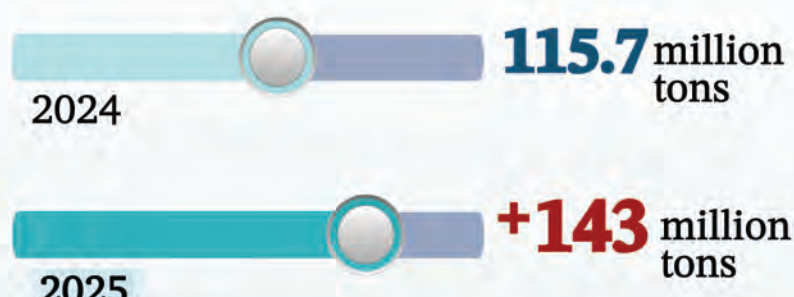


2024	20%
2025	21.6%

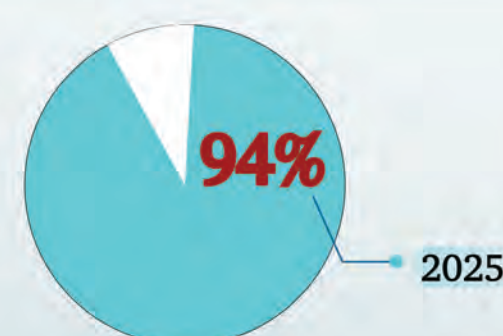
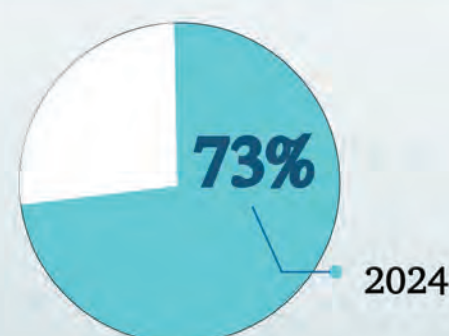
**Cargo and
Container
Movement**



**General Cargo
Movement**



**Performance Rate
of the National Digital
Transformation Program**



**Revenue
Growth Rate**

12.9%
Ports Sector

6.5%
Maritime Affairs Sector

18%
Land Transport Sector

**Project Implementation
Commitment Rate**

70%
(targeted for 2025)

85%
(achieved in 2025)



SHORT TAKES

Sayyid Badr holds talks with Venezuelan counterpart

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received a phone call from Ivan Gil Pinto, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. During the call, the two ministers discussed the latest developments related to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. They emphasised the importance of respecting international law and adhering to dialogue and diplomatic channels to preserve the sovereignty, independence and territorial unity of states. The Venezuelan minister expressed his country's appreciation for the steadfast positions of the Sultanate of Oman and its call to ensure security and peace for Venezuela and peaceful coexistence among nations. Sayyid Badr thanked his Venezuelan counterpart for his initiative, expressing his appreciation for the level of existing bilateral relations and welcoming Venezuela's intention to open a resident embassy in Muscat, noting the positive impact this will have in the context of enhancing areas of cooperation and supporting trade and economic partnership opportunities between the two friendly countries and peoples. — ONA

OMAN PARTICIPATES IN GCC MEETING



DOHA: The Sultanate of Oman participated in the 38th meeting of the General Secretariat of Documentation and Archive Centres in the GCC countries, hosted in the Qatari capital, Doha. The meeting discussed several topics on the agenda, including ways to enhance joint Gulf cooperation in the fields of documentation and archiving. — ONA

DEPUTY PM FOR DEFENCE AFFAIRS RECEIVES UAE AMBASSADOR



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Shaikh Mohammed bin Maktoum al Maktoum, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting reviewed the fraternal relations between the two countries and explored ways to enhance them. They also discussed several topics of common interest. — ONA

Oman, Egypt discuss regional developments

SAYYID Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, met on Wednesday in Cairo with Dr Badr Abdelatty, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emigration and Egyptian Expatriates of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The meeting was held within the framework of regular consultation and continuous coordination between the two nations to discuss ways to elevate bilateral relations and exchange views on regional issues of mutual concern. The two ministers reviewed existing cooperation relations and work programmes across various fields, exploring further opportunities for economic and investment partnerships to enhance mutual benefits and shared interests. On the political front, the ministers confirmed a convergence of visions and the integration of their efforts to stabilise security and stability in the region. They emphasised adherence to the rules of international law, the voice of wisdom and justice, and the utilisation of all available peaceful means to achieve reconciliation among all parties, in accordance with the supreme interests, sovereignty, and national security of states. Both sides reiterated their firm support



for the right of the Palestinian people to freedom, self-determination, and the establishment of an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital. They stressed the necessity of lifting the blockade on the Gaza Strip and other occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Jerusalem, allowing the immediate entry of all relief and humanitarian aid to facilitate reconstruction and the restoration of a dignified life for the residents. Regarding developments in the Republic of Yemen, both sides affirmed their support

for the Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue in Riyadh to reach a consensual settlement for the issue of southern Yemen. They aim for a comprehensive and sustainable political settlement that preserves the sovereignty, unity, and stability of Yemen, fulfilling the aspirations of its people for security and prosperity. The ministers also addressed the latest developments in the Republic of Sudan, emphasising the importance of supporting national institutions, halting fighting and escalation, protecting civilians, and facilitating the flow of humanitarian aid through UN agencies and specialised civil society organisations. They expressed support for efforts to reach a consensual political solution that preserves the rights and legitimate choices of the Sudanese people while ensuring the country's sovereignty and stability. In conclusion, the ministers expressed great pride in the strength of the historical and fraternal relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt. They reaffirmed a shared commitment to continue constructive coordination, consultation, and cooperation to serve common interests and enhance regional security, in implementation of the directives of the two countries' leaderships. — ONA

Renewed Renaissance: A nation advancing with humanity

MUSCAT: Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, has affirmed the profound commitment of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to prioritise all that serves the nation and its loyal citizens, underscoring His Majesty's dedicated and encompassing care for the citizens across every governorate of the Sultanate of Oman. Speaking as a guest on Oman Radio's 'Sabah Al Shabab' programme, the minister stated that the achievements and milestones realised in Oman over the past six years are a direct reflection of this Royal benevolence. These efforts, he noted, have materialised in tangible advancements across social, economic and financial spheres, with international indices and global research centres acknowledging the significant progress made by the Sultanate of Oman during this period. Dr Al Harrasi emphasised that His Majesty the Sultan consistently highlights, in his Royal addresses and meetings, the imperative to address detrimental social and cultural phenomena within the modern 'open space'. He elaborated that during a recent Council of Ministers meeting, His Majesty directed a



Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information.

comprehensive study and diagnosis of societal behavioural shifts to establish clear and governed policies and mechanisms. This directive, he explained, emanates from a civilised leadership vision deeply rooted in the welfare of the nation and its people. Addressing modern communication tools, the minister noted that while they have fundamentally transformed the world, this shift is not wholly negative. With proper utilisation, these platforms can become powerful instruments for nurturing, communication, self-development, social cohesion, and enhancing institutional performance. He pointed out, however, that negative ramifications have emerged within households and the broader society, contributing to

a widening generational divide. He stressed that while older generations may lack technical prowess, their wealth of life experience constitutes an indispensable foundation, even in the context of utilising advanced technologies and Artificial Intelligence. He clarified that the recent statement from the Council of Ministers is fundamentally aimed at safeguarding youth from potential adverse influences that could impair their current competencies and future potential. The minister observed that numerous nations have initiated regulations governing social media usage for individuals below a certain age. He clarified this does not constitute a wholesale prohibition of the Internet, but rather the sensible regulation of specifically harmful applications, while preserving access to educational and cultural resources. On the subject of Artificial Intelligence, the minister remarked that the era of Big Data and rapid processing presents immense opportunities alongside formidable challenges. He stated that His Majesty consistently identifies areas of risk while simultaneously illuminating the vast positive potential inherent in this field. — ONA

وزارة الصحة
Ministry of Health



Announcement

The Ministry of Health invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders: -

Tender Ref.	Description	Last Date for Collection of Tender Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on / Before 10:00 am Wednesday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) Per set
2/2026/MOH/HQ-1	Supply of Surgical Items (Neuroplastic)	22-01-2026	11-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 35
3/2026/MOH/HQ-2	Supply of Pharmaceutical for the Royal Hospital	19-01-2026	11-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
9/2026/MOH/HQ-3	Modification and Maintenance Works at Dibba Hospital and the Associated Buildings in Musandam Governorate	18-01-2026	11-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board Excellent, First	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
10/2026/MOH/HQ-4	Supply and Installation of Medical Equipment (Ventilators) for New Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah, Dhofar Governorate (Phase 5)	15-01-2026	21-01-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 29,800 • LO: 149
11/2026/MOH/HQ-5	Supply & Installation of Medical Equipment for Wadi Bani Khalid Hospital in North Sharqiyah Governorate	15-01-2026	04-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
12/2026/MOH/HQ-6	Supply and Installation of Loose Furniture for Ibra Health Center at North Al Sharqiyah Governorate	15-01-2026	04-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board Excellent, First	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
13/2026/MOH/HQ-7	Printers Rental for Various Health Establishment at Muscat Governorate	15-01-2026	11-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25
35/2026/MOH/HQ-8	Supply and Installation of Refrigerators for the Morgue for Various Health Establishment at Musandam Governorate	19-01-2026	18-02-2026	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	• SME: 10 • LO: 25

- Tenders should be submitted **online** on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200, Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

OMAN

OMANISATION IN PUBLIC SECTOR STANDS AT 91%

FROM PAGE 1

FINANCIAL SUPPORT
The minister also addressed the situation of job-seekers, noting that the number of active job-seekers stood at 73,319, with females representing 52.4 per cent and males 47.6 per cent. He said the ministry continues to align education outcomes with labour market needs through targeted training and qualification programmes.

He highlighted that the ministry has doubled financial support for private-sector job placement programmes from RO 50 million to RO 100 million. The national wage support initiative, he added, has allocated 15,000 positions for new labour market entrants, providing a subsidy starting from RO 200 per month for two years, with employers covering the remaining agreed wage. The employment contract must last at least as long as the government support period.

LABOUR MARKET
The minister said that the ministry oversees 14 labour market mandates, including legislative, cooperative, training, and vocational competencies. He highlighted the issuance of the Labour Law under Royal Decree No 53/2023, comprising 150 articles, along with 19 ministerial decisions regulating wage protection, workforce mobility, domestic workers, and occupational health and safety.

In the private sector, total workforce figures reached 1,859,206 workers as of October 2025, including 382,297 non-Omani workers, with Omanisation at 15.5 per cent. Regarding the Job Security System, total beneficiaries reached 7,111, of whom 4,402 returned to the labour market, while 660 remain active beneficiaries. Contract expiration accounted for 54.5 per cent of employment terminations.

The minister reaffirmed that digital transformation remains a core pillar of the ministry's work, with 80 per cent of services digitised, integration with over 40 government entities, and more than 28 million electronic transactions completed.

CONCERNS
During the discussion, the members stressed that workforce dismissals remain a major socio-economic concern, citing continued layoffs of nationals in private sector institutions and the lack of sufficient mechanisms to address their impact after job security benefits end.

The members called for stricter policies towards private sector institutions and stronger post-benefit employment alternatives.

Concerns were also raised regarding low Omanisation rates in private sector leadership roles, the adequacy of minimum wage levels, delays in issuing the executive regulations of the Labour Law and transparency in performance evaluation systems.

The members discussed the mandatory employment of an Omani worker for commercial registrations, questioning its real economic impact, especially on SMEs, and called for data-driven assessments of its outcomes.

The minister added that more than 200,000 job opportunities have been created for new job-seekers from 2021 through October of last year, including 68,033 positions in the public sector, 81,114 in the private sector and 50,925 training-linked placements across both sectors. Job rotation placements in the private sector totalled 161,938 during the same period.

WAGE SUPPORT
He said that approximately 1,380 private establishments benefited from the Omani's Wage Support Initiative between 2021 and 2025, leading to the employment of 4,610 national workers. As of the end of October, the number of Omani human resources and personnel managers in the private sector stood at 4,194.

The minister also reported that 5,868 job replacement opportunities were made available in the government sector from 2021 to 2025.

The Minister noted that approximately 27,229 individuals benefited from the Job Security System between 2020 and 2024, of whom 10,387 have since re-entered the workforce. — With ONA inputs

INTEGRATED HEALTH PROJECTS ENHANCE QUALITY SERVICE

A'RUSTAQ: The Directorate-General of Health Services in Al Batinah South Governorate implemented a package of diverse health projects during the third quarter of 2025.

These projects are part of strategic plans to develop health sector infrastructure, improve the efficiency of medical institutions, and enhance the level of care provided to citizens and residents across the governorate's wilayats.

Dr Nasser bin Abdullah al Shukaili, Director-General of Health Services in Al Batinah South Governorate, emphasised that these initiatives align with the



Projects are part of strategic plans to develop health sector infrastructure, improve the efficiency of medical institutions. — ONA

Ministry of Health's ongoing efforts to upgrade facility efficiency and bring diagnostic and therapeutic services closer to the community.

He noted that the projects follow an integrated approach focusing on maintenance, expansion and strategic new developments. — ONA

TO FOSTER OVERSIGHT AND PROMOTE GOOD GOVERNANCE

SAI's anti-graft unit raises trust in state institutions

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

IN alignment with national directives to promote the principles of integrity and transparency, combat corruption, and strengthen the values of accountability and good governance, a decision was issued to establish the Directorate-General for Integrity and Anti-Corruption by Shaikh Ghosn bin Hilal al Alawi, Chairman of the State Audit Institution (SAI).

The establishment of the Directorate affirms the Authority's commitment to its oversight role and its continuous efforts to enhance its organisational structure to meet national requirements and build trust in state institutions.

The Authority specified that the Directorate plays a crucial role in developing and implementing policies and procedures to prevent corruption, collecting and reviewing financial disclosure statements, and fostering institutional integrity while promoting a culture of integrity within the organisational work environment, whether in government entities, educational institutions, or the private sector.

The Directorate's organisational structure includes the International Agreements Department, the Complaints and Reports Department, the Financial Declarations Department, and the Awareness and



The establishment of the Directorate affirms the commitment to build trust in state institutions.

Institutional Integrity Department. The tasks of the Directorate include monitoring national and international commitments related to international agreements, ensuring compliance with the requirements of international and regional

agreements concerning integrity and anti-corruption efforts. The Directorate also works to implement the National Integrity Promotion Plan across various relevant units and entities.

RESPONSIBILITY
Additionally, it is responsible for receiving complaints and reports submitted to the Authority regarding financial and administrative irregularities, negligence, failure to perform public duties, or misuse of public funds.

The Sultanate of Oman has adopted a comprehensive legislative and administrative system aimed at safeguarding public funds, with integrity and transparency as fundamental principles in the management of these funds, in accordance with sustainable development strategies and relevant Omani legislation.

In the most recent statistics, the Sultanate of Oman has advanced 20 places in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index published annually by Transparency International in Berlin.

It now ranks 50th globally out of 180 countries and fourth among Arab nations, compared to 70th in 2023. Its score has also significantly improved, rising 12 points from 43 in 2023 to 55, reflecting Oman's dedication to adopting best practices in protecting public funds and enhancing efficiency.

Jihad al Raisi, MK Band to light up Al Seeb beach

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, JAN 7

This Thursday evening, the cool breeze of Sur Al Hadid at Al Seeb Beach will carry a unique melody as the celebrated MK Band joins forces with soulful vocalist Jihad al Raisi for the performance at 7.45 pm as part of Muscat Nights 2026.

The concert marks a significant milestone for the MK Band, an Omani ensemble that has successfully carved out a niche in the regional music scene since its inception.

The story of MK Band is one of organic growth and friendship. "We formed the band in 2018," says Saud al Balushi, a founding member. What started as a group of friends jamming on Muttrah Beach "just for fun" quickly evolved into a professional career.

Their big break came from a chance encounter: a marketing professional in the audience, drawn by the music, approached the group and asked if they could perform at corporate events.

"The plan to perform came from that moment, and we started to take it seriously," Al Balushi recalled while speaking to the Observer.



The concert marks a significant milestone for the MK Band, an Omani ensemble that has successfully carved out a niche in the regional music scene since its inception.

MK Band is known for a distinctive "East-meets-West" sound. They specialise in reimagining global hits through creative arrangements, blending including Western Pop & Soft Rock, and bollywood melodies and rhythms.

Their transitions are smooth, and their live energy is famously vibrant, making them a perfect fit for the diverse crowd expected at Al Seeb Beach.

Adding a profound layer to the performance is singer

Jihad al Raisi. A finalist in the prestigious Zee TV music competition and a recent recipient of the "Outstanding Achievement of the Year" trophy at the TAS Business Awards, Al Raisi is more than just a vocalist; he is a cultural bridge.

Since collaborating with MK Band post-Covid, Al Raisi has brought his incredible linguistic range to their repertoire. He performs in Arabic, English, Urdu, Punjabi, Baluchi, Sinhala, Spanish, and Algerian.

For Al Raisi, the upcoming concert is an opportunity to share his spiritual connection to sound. "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything," he says. "Everything in the universe has a rhythm."

Visitors to Muscat Nights at Al Seeb Beach can expect an evening that transcends boundaries, offering a world-class musical journey right on the shores of the Arabian Sea.

BAND MEMBERS

Saud al Balushi
band manager

Jihad al Raisi
singer

Muntasir al Balushi
drumer

Ayad al Balushi
bass guitar

Khamis al Balushi
guitarist

Ahmed al Balushi
lead guitarist

SHORT TAKES



A service member fires a missile during a military exercise, in Zaporizhzhia region. — Reuters

UKRAINE, US TO REVISIT CRITICAL ISSUES IN TALKS

KYIV: US and Ukrainian negotiators will revisit the thorny issues of territory and the fate of the occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, President Volodymyr Zelensky said, the most problematic points in peace talks to end Russia’s war. Kyiv is under US pressure to secure peace in the nearly four-year old conflict but is pushing back on Russian demands to cede its eastern Donetsk region and give up control of Europe’s largest nuclear facility. The delegations are in Paris for a third day of talks among Kyiv’s allies on peace and security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire with Russia, which has been cool on the US-backed process.

“We expect, in particular, that the most difficult issues from the basic framework for ending the war will be discussed — namely, issues related to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and territories,” Zelensky wrote on X, announcing a third session with the US team in two days. He added that he had ordered his team to discuss new leader-level talks involving the US and European allies.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sought progress on EU membership talks and tougher sanctions on Russia, making his case as Cyprus took over the European Union’s rotating presidency. Zelensky met Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides in Nicosia as Cyprus formally assumed the presidency, which runs for six months. “We are working to make as much progress as possible during this period on opening negotiating clusters and on Ukraine’s accession to the European Union,” Zelensky said. — Reuters

LEE SAYS URGED XI TO HELP CURB N KOREAS’S NUKES

SHANGHAI: South Korean President Lee Jae Myung said on Wednesday he had urged Chinese leader Xi Jinping to help him curb Pyongyang’s nuclear programme and suggested a freeze in its development of weapons of mass destruction was “feasible” with the right conditions. Lee’s visit to China this week was the first by a South Korean leader in six years, with Seoul seeking a broad reset in relations with its largest trading partner as well as help with the recalcitrant North.

Speaking to journalists in Shanghai as he wrapped up the visit, he said he had urged Beijing’s help in bringing Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.

He said he told Xi he would “like China to play a mediating role on issues related to the Korean Peninsula, including North Korea’s nuclear programme”. “All our channels are completely blocked”. “We hope China can serve as a mediator,” he added.

The Chinese leader urged Seoul to show “patience” with Pyongyang given how frayed ties between the two Koreas have become, Lee added. “For quite a long period, we carried out military actions that North Korea would have perceived as threatening,” Lee said. — AFP

EUROPE FACES TRANSPORT CHAOS AS DEADLY COLD SNAP PERSISTS

PARIS: Snow, ice and high winds brought transport chaos to swathes of Europe for a third day on Wednesday, with hundreds of flights cancelled and passengers stranded. Airports in Paris and Amsterdam were the worst affected, with the Dutch authorities saying more than 1,000 travellers had been forced to spend the night at Schiphol, one of Europe’s busiest hubs.

Six people have died in weather-related accidents as the continent reels from the most bitter cold snap

of the winter so far. Five of those deaths were confirmed in France on Tuesday, while a woman died in Bosnia as heavy snow and rain sparked floods and power outages across the Balkans.

More than 100 flights were cancelled on Wednesday at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport and 40 more at the French capital’s other main hub, Orly. Transport Minister Philippe Tabarot told local TV he was “hoping the situation returns to normal this afternoon”.

All public bus services in Paris and the surrounding suburbs were also suspended because of icy roads, with almost half of the country’s mainland on alert for heavy snow and black ice.

Belgium’s biggest hub, Brussels Airport, also confirmed 40 flight cancellations. Britain saw temperatures plunging with hundreds of schools shutting their doors in Scotland, where the authorities warned communities could be “cut off” by snow. — AFP

Trump weighs military option to claim Greenland

US President Donald Trump is discussing options including military action to take control of Greenland, the White House said, upping tensions that Denmark warns could destroy the Nato alliance. Trump has stepped up his designs on the mineral-rich, self-governing Danish territory in the Arctic since the US military seized Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro last weekend.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that “acquiring Greenland is a national security priority” for Trump to deter US adversaries like Russia and China. “The president and his team are discussing a range of options to pursue this important foreign policy goal, and of course, utilising the US military is always an option at the commander in chief’s disposal,” she said in a statement. The Wall Street Journal reported Secretary of State Marco Rubio told lawmakers that Trump’s preferred option is to buy Greenland from Denmark, adding the threats did not signal an imminent invasion.

Denmark has warned any move to take Greenland by force would mean “everything would stop,” including Nato and 80 years of close transatlantic security links. Any US military action against Greenland would effectively collapse Nato, since the alliance’s Article Five pledges that member states will defend any of their number that come under attack.

Greenland’s Foreign Minister Vivian Motzfeldt wrote on social media that they’d sought a meeting with Rubio throughout 2025 but



Danish navy vessel patrols the coastal area off the capital Nuuk, Greenland. — AFP

“it has so far not been possible.” Denmark’s Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen said meeting Rubio should “clear up certain misunderstandings.” And Greenland Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen insisted that the island was not for sale, and only its 57,000 people should decide its future. Allies have rallied around Denmark and Greenland while simultaneously trying not to antagonise Trump. The leaders of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain joined Denmark in a statement on Tuesday saying they would defend the “universal principles” of “sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of borders.” French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer both sought to play

down the row as they attended Ukraine peace talks in Paris alongside Trump’s envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner. “I cannot imagine a scenario in which the United States of America would be placed in a position to violate Danish sovereignty,” Macron said. French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said on Wednesday he believed the US was committed to Nato, but he suggested European leaders were prepared to strike back against potential US “intimidation.” The United States has 150 military personnel stationed at the Pituffik Space Base in Greenland.

Still steaming over Trump’s capture of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, US legislators spoke out against the idea of military action against Greenland on Tuesday.

In social media posts, Arizona Senator Ruben Gallego, a Democrat, vowed to introduce a resolution “to block Trump from invading Greenland,” saying the 79-year-old Republican simply “wants a giant island with his name on it. He wouldn’t think twice about putting our troops in danger if it makes him feel big and strong.”

In a sharp departure from the party’s typical partisanship, Republicans also pushed back against Trump’s military-backed expansionism.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Republican, told reporters on Tuesday night that he didn’t think it was “appropriate” for Washington to take military action on Greenland, Politico reported. — AFP

RING OF FIRE

Magnitude 6.4 quake strikes off Philippines



A 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of the southern Philippines on Wednesday, the United States Geological Survey said, but there was no tsunami warning or immediate reports of damage. The quake, first reported as a magnitude 6.7, hit at a depth of 58.5 kilometres about 27 kilometres east of the town of Santiago on the island of Mindanao, according to the USGS. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. — AFP

SCAMMING RING

Vietnam arrests 35 in \$350 mn fraud sweep



Police in Vietnam said they broke up a major online fraud ring, arresting 35 people accused of scamming victims out of \$350 million. The arrests took place on December 31 across five northern municipalities including the capital Hanoi, according to police in Hung Yen province. The “suspects were using advanced technology for fraud and online gambling”, police said. The gang had used social media to advertise goods for sale. — AFP

CLIMATE CHANGE

Norway sees hottest year on record in 2025



Norway recorded its hottest year ever in 2025, following a strong summer heatwave and an unusually mild winter that started late in the year, the Norwegian Meteorological Institute said. In another sign of climate change driven by human activity, the mercury hit 4 degrees Celsius in Longyearbyen, the main town of the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic, on December 22. A large part of northern Europe experienced an unusual heatwave in July. — AFP

OPINION

When climate finance moves slower than risk



RUMAITHA AL BUSAIDI

The writer is an environmental strategist and advocate for sustainable development

HAVE started to recognise the exact moment a climate conversation changes. It is when the language moves from aspiration to allocation, from pathways to payment. The room grows careful. Everyone knows what is coming. The future has a price, and the question is who carries it. In the Middle East and North Africa, this question is no longer theoretical. Heat stretches longer, water feels more contested and storms arrive with the kind of force that turns infrastructure into a memory. We talk often about ambition, and our region has plenty of it. The constraint sits elsewhere. It sits in the plumbing of finance, the channels through which capital is supposed to travel from global commitments to local protection. On paper, the world is finally mobilising real money. Climate Policy Initiative estimates around \$1.9 trillion in climate finance. Yet scale does not automatically translate into reach. The places most exposed still describe a familiar reality: funding that is slow, conditional, and uneven. In too many places, resilience stays a proposal, not a bridge. A regional briefing that tracks major international climate funds offers a sobering snapshot. It puts total approvals for MENA at about \$1.73 billion across 202 projects, with

only about \$101 million added in the most recent year it covers. These figures do not suggest a shortage of ideas. They show the friction that appears when vulnerability has to be translated into perfect paperwork, strict templates, and long sequences of approvals. This gap is where progress leaks away. The deeper issue is time. A climate hazard does not wait for a board calendar. Yet fund access can take years, and criteria can feel like a maze built for those who have walked it before. This becomes a sorting mechanism. Some countries learn the route and return again and again. Others remain outside, even when their needs are sharper. Oman offers one clear illustration of this tension, without turning the story into a single country’s grievance. In the Oman Climate Dialogues convened through the Environment Society of Oman, we have spoken openly about Cyclone Shaheen causing around RO 200 million in damages and Cyclone Gonu costing roughly \$4.5 billion in under forty-eight hours. We have also discussed sea level rise at roughly two to three millimetres per year and a decarbonisation bill in the range of \$400-500 billion over three decades. The Green Climate Fund has supported Oman through readiness and project

Climate ambition is present across MENA. The question now is whether the financial architecture will meet it with equal seriousness.

preparation, the early scaffolding that helps countries translate risks into fundable plans. Yet official board documentation records debate around an Oman proposal to strengthen the national multi-hazard early warning system, including disagreement over whether grant financing was justified. Early warning sits at the heart of public safety. If it still must defend itself like a commercial investment, the system is signalling what it values and what it expects countries to absorb. This is why the region keeps returning to the idea of a new model. MENA needs finance that treats adaptation as protection and protection as value. It needs instruments that strengthen resilience without tightening fiscal space and channels that move fast enough to matter. It also needs regional capital to build vehicles and platforms that fund what is essential even when it is not fashionable. A trillion dollars somewhere in the world is not success. Success is money reaching coastlines, farms, grids, and cities before the next shock arrives. Climate ambition is present across MENA. The question now is whether the financial architecture will meet it with equal seriousness.

SCHOLARS DRAWN TO CHINA’S SCIENTIFIC CLOUT, FUNDING

JING XUAN TENG

China’s government has long made efforts to tempt top scientists from abroad, but researchers say its institutions themselves are increasingly attracting talent thanks to their generous funding and growing prestige. State-backed initiatives like the Thousand Talents Plan have dangled fast-tracked hiring and bountiful grants to lure overseas experts in strategically important fields, as China and the United States vie for technological supremacy. But academics said the country is becoming a popular destination even among those not targeted by Beijing, especially at the start of their careers. “You hear about these amazing advanced labs and the government providing money for things like AI and quantum research,” said Mejed Jebali, an artificial intelligence PhD candidate from Tunisia at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. China’s official enticements have typically targeted eminent researchers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields that could help Beijing achieve its goal of becoming the global leader in technology and innovation. They included cancer expert Feng Gensheng, who left a tenured University of California role for Shenzhen Bay Laboratory, and German medical scientist Roland Eils, now part-time at Shanghai’s Fudan University. “It appears that a significantly greater number of overseas scientists — particularly those of Chinese origin — have returned to work in China compared with around 10 years ago,” said Futao Huang, a professor at Japan’s Hiroshima University. China’s reputation for academic prowess in many fields has become undeniable. Four of the top five leading research institutions in natural and health sciences in 2025 were Chinese, according to an index by the journal Nature. For academics of Chinese descent working in the United States, there are push factors, Hiroshima University’s Huang said. “The tightening of research security regulations, visa scrutiny, and political sensitivities in the United States has created uncertainty.” A 2023 study found that following a 2018 Trump administration policy to investigate potential Chinese spies in research, departures of China-born, US-based scientists increased by 75 percent. But challenges remain for those who relocate to China. Huang pointed to concerns over academic freedom and autonomy, and “geopolitical uncertainties that influence international perception and mobility decisions.” — AFP

Money, politics engines of progress in South Asia

MONEY

and politics are not enemies of development. In theory, they are among the most powerful tools a nation can possess. Money, when mobilised wisely, fuels growth, innovation and welfare. Politics, when guided by institutions and ethics, provides stability, direction and collective purpose. Yet in South Asia, the persistent question remains: are money and politics themselves the problem, or is it the mindset that governs how these tools are used? South Asia — comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh — is home to nearly a quarter of the world’s population. It carries immense human capital, cultural depth and natural resources. Yet the region continues to struggle with political instability, fragile institutions, debt stress, inequality and uneven development. The immediate questions arise: are these countries politically and economically stable? Have the root causes of instability been identified? And who bears responsibility — the system, the leaders, or society itself? From a political economy perspective, South Asia offers a textbook illustration of the tension between institutions and incentives. According to Douglass North’s institutional theory, long-term economic performance depends on the quality of political and economic institutions. Weak institutions create uncertainty, discourage investment and enable rent-seeking. In much of South Asia, political power has often been personalised rather than institutionalised. Politics revolves around individuals, families, or factions rather than rules, resulting in policy inconsistency and fragile governance. Afghanistan represents the extreme end of this spectrum.



MOHAMMED ANWAR AL BALUSHI

The author is with Middle East College

The challenge is not a lack of resources or ideas, but the courage to reform the way power and money interact. For a region that has given the world profound philosophies, sciences and cultures, the task ahead is not impossible — it is overdue.

Decades of conflict have dismantled state institutions, leaving little room for coherent economic policy. Without political stability, money loses its developmental function and becomes a survival tool, circulating through informal and aid-dependent channels. Classical growth theories — from Adam Smith to Solow — assume peace, property rights and predictable governance. Afghanistan reminds us that without these foundations, economic models collapse in practice. Pakistan and Sri Lanka illustrate a different but related dilemma: recurring political instability combined with fiscal mismanagement. Keynesian economics supports state intervention during downturns, but only when spending is productive and institutions are credible. India and Bangladesh, on the other hand, demonstrate how relative political stability can translate into economic momentum. India’s large market, democratic framework and gradual reforms align with endogenous growth theory, which emphasises human capital, innovation and scale. So, who is to be blamed for South Asia’s recurring instability? It is tempting to point fingers at politicians, colonial legacies, or global powers. While each has played a role, the deeper issue lies in the interaction between money and politics without institutional discipline. When political competition is financed through opaque money flows, policy becomes transactional. When public money is treated as political capital rather than a trust, development stalls. What, then, are the pathways forward? First, South Asian countries must strengthen institutions over personalities. Independent central banks, credible fiscal rules and

professional civil services are not luxuries; they are prerequisites. New institutional economics consistently shows that countries with rule-based governance outperform those driven by discretion. Second, political financing reforms are essential. Transparent funding of political parties reduces rent-seeking and policy capture. Without addressing the money – politics nexus, anti-corruption rhetoric remains symbolic. Third, economic diversification must be prioritised. Overreliance on debt, remittances, or a single export sector increases vulnerability. Structural transformation — moving up value chains, investing in technology and supporting SMEs — aligns with modern development economics and reduces political pressure during downturns. Fourth, human capital must be treated as a strategic asset. Education, health and skills development are not social expenditures alone; they are growth investments. Countries that neglect them eventually face political unrest and economic stagnation. Finally, regional cooperation needs revival beyond symbolism. South Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Trade, energy cooperation and knowledge sharing could transform political rivalries into economic complementarities, consistent with regional integration theory. South Asia stands at a crossroads between money and politics. Neither is inherently destructive. Both can be engines of progress if guided by institutions, ethics and long-term vision. The challenge is not a lack of resources or ideas, but the courage to reform the way power and money interact. For a region that has given the world profound philosophies, sciences and cultures, the task ahead is not impossible — it is overdue.

The game to establish a new global order...



SONIA AMBROSIO

The writer is a journalist, academic and researcher in media studies

ANOTHER historical moment unfolds: every day brings new events that heighten global anxiety, uncertainty, and mental health challenges. The year 2026 opens with intense global debate over the United Nations (UN) Charter as a direct result of the US forces’ incursion and abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The main concern is how these actions challenge existing international norms and contribute to growing psychological strain worldwide. I have been keeping a close eye on the developments in South and Latin America for over six months. Things were getting pretty ugly. The build-up to the geopolitical game plan was obvious, but it was unclear whether Brazil would be first on Trump’s strategy for the new global order. If the chaos in the Middle East is not enough, threats on Greenland, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, the Panama Canal, and Gaza, and let’s not forget the threats on Ukraine, then the Trump second administration is doing a great job. It is not that South American countries are without problems; they have issues, and these problems are complex. Wealth and inequality represent significant challenges across the continent. South America is a powerhouse of natural resources, such as agriculture, minerals, and water. As the military incursion into Venezuela made evident, the White House is reasserting

US dominance through military pressure, economic coercion, and selective alliance-building. The kidnapping of the president of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro, has divided Latin America. World leaders are unsure whether to condemn, praise, or ignore. So, many of them are just throwing into the air calls for respect for international law, emphasising the United Nations’ Charter, and soft diplomacy on sovereignty. China and Russia issued soft condemnations, while countries in South America are closing borders and raising force alerts. Trump-friendly leaders and supporters are celebrating the capture and bombardment of installations in Venezuela. Meanwhile, Trump-friendly fans and elected politicians across the region are urging Trump to ‘visit’ their countries to help remove their elected presidents, and that includes Brazilian politicians. Trump’s relations with Javier Milei, the president of Argentina, are based on camaraderie, with Trump lavishing money and praise on Argentina while also promising to make Argentina great again. Financial interests play on both sides of the court. The president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, is also in good graces with Trump. Bukele agreed to accept deportees from the United States and put them in his massive anti-terrorist prison, where tens of thousands of people have been held without due process. Both Argentina and El Salvador are seizing

As the military incursion into Venezuela made evident, the White House is reasserting US dominance through military pressure, economic coercion, and selective alliance-building

every opportunity to engage in business dealings with Trump and his associates. Then, there has been the fiasco with the Brazilian judiciary, tariffs, and political interference in favour of former president Jair Bolsonaro. These had the fireballs rolling. Trump’s relationship with Brazil has seen recent improvements; however, it remains uncertain when this relationship might deteriorate. Although one cannot predict the future, it is prudent not to dismiss the possibility that the Trump administration could seek to influence the Brazilian presidential election in 2026. Trump’s staunch commitment to prevent threats posed by drug traffickers or hostile regimes that could endanger US national security has been conceptualised under the claim that the US will use forces to eradicate the alleged threats. And so, Trump 2 is shaping the new world order. Leaders are highly cautious about disagreeing or confronting the unfolding of the new geopolitical situation. Consequently, Gaza’s plans aligned with Trump’s (Boulevard) objectives, have become a contentious issue for regional leaders. Recent geopolitical events have provided Moscow and Beijing with a rhetorical framework to justify their own ambitions. How far can one go? What country could be next? The options are clear. So, the question arises: what does being an ally truly mean in the actual context?

VIETNAMESE CAUGHT IN JAPAN’S ILLEGAL WORKER CRACKDOWN

TOMOHIRO OSAKI

For a decade, Vietnamese worker Minh did tough jobs like sandblasting ships and welding steel, helping address rapidly ageing Japan’s dire labour needs. But now, having overstayed his visa, he is in the crosshairs of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s promised crackdown on illegal workers. Minh, a pseudonym used to protect his identity, came to Japan in 2015 under its Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), which is billed as a way for foreign workers to learn skills to take back to developing countries. But critics say it also helps Japan get cheap workers who are vulnerable to debt and exploitation, with some of them deserting their jobs and falling into crime. “A lot of Japanese people look only at the surface - that foreigners committed crimes,” Minh, a former TITP intern living near Tokyo, said. “They don’t think about the root cause of it: how and why these foreigners got to that point.” Of the roughly 450,000 technical interns in Japan as of June, just under half were from Vietnam and worked across agriculture, construction and food processing. Many arrive heavily indebted with recruitment and brokerage fees - including Minh, who intended to work to pay off the \$7,500 he owed and send money to his family. But with opportunities scarce back home at the end of his three years, finding a welding job as an undocumented labourer proved much simpler. “Without foreign workers like us, there is no way Japan’s economy can function,” the 30-year-old said. Immigration levels in Japan remain low compared with other rich economies. But with an ageing population, one of the world’s lowest birth rates and labour shortages across industries, the number of foreign workers has hit record levels. That, along with dwindling salaries in real terms and higher living costs, has seen resentment towards foreign workers swell. “Anger at (Japanese people’s) own financial struggles is taken out on foreigners,” Jiho Yoshimizu, head of a Tokyo-based non-profit supporting Vietnamese nationals, said. Since taking office, Takaichi has vowed action, promising a policy package later this month that will reportedly include stricter visa management. The proportion of crimes committed by non-Japanese is low; 5.5 per cent of the roughly 190,000 people arrested in 2024 for penal code offences were foreigners, according to police. Separate police data shows that among foreigners arrested in 2024 - excluding those with permanent residency and others - Vietnamese topped the list at over 30 per cent, including for theft. The figures are partly explained by surging numbers of Vietnamese — up ninefold from a decade ago — who now make up a quarter of Japan’s 2.3-million-strong foreign workforce and are the biggest contingent. — AFP

Pandemic financing for middle-income countries

SIX years after the outbreak of Covid-19, the world is in danger of forgetting the lessons learned and repeating the same mistakes. The pandemic threat has not disappeared: studies suggest that the annual probability of another Covid-level event is 2-3 per cent. Experts estimate that future pandemics will cost the world more than \$700 billion, on average, every year. We were both in government when Covid-19 struck and had front-row seats to Operation Warp Speed, America’s fast-track programme for developing vaccines. By investing billions of dollars in early-stage candidates before regulatory approval, the United States and the United Kingdom enabled firms to expand factories while trials were under way. As a result, within a year of the pandemic’s start, the US was vaccinating vulnerable populations against Covid-19. According to some estimates, Operation Warp Speed would have paid for itself in averted mortality, morbidity, and output losses had it reduced the length of the pandemic in the US by even less than one day. We also saw the challenges that middle-income countries faced in their attempts to follow the same strategy. No middle-income country bought Covid-19 vaccines when Operation Warp Speed launched in May 2020. In fact, many of these countries were unable to submit orders until the following year, owing largely to multilateral development banks’ (MDBs’) criteria for financing. The World Bank, which launched its \$12 billion vaccine pledge in October 2020, initially required in-country regulatory authorisation, coupled with either World Health Organisation prequalification and approval by one WHO-recognised “stringent regulatory authority,” or approval by three SRAs in three different regions. No vaccines met these criteria until January 2021, which significantly slowed uptake. Indonesia had the fiscal flexibility to invest in vaccines in October 2020,



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No middle-income country bought Covid-19 vaccines when Operation Warp Speed launched in May 2020.

but only because the pandemic hit early in the year. We must do better next time. MDBs should offer at-risk financing that allows countries to borrow for investments in candidate medical countermeasures before regulatory approval. With commercial borrowing liable to be expensive during a pandemic, MDBs are the only institutions with financial resources that can match the scale of the challenge. Policymakers from middle-income countries must demand that MDBs make at-risk financing available as soon as the next pandemic strikes. A recent report by the G20 High Level Independent Panel on Financing the Global Commons for Pandemic Preparedness and Response calls on MDBs to issue guidance notes confirming their crisis-response facilities within the next six months. This would prevent foot-dragging during the crucial early days of an outbreak and ensure that MDBs meet the needs of middle-income countries. The report also recognises that middle-income countries require access to independent, non-political technical expertise when making such risky bets. Credible expert recommendations would help policymakers in these countries overcome any domestic regulatory and legal barriers. To facilitate

this process when lives are on the line and urgent action is needed, the World Bank should take the time now to recognise a panel of economists and health experts who are well-positioned to judge which medical countermeasures are worth betting on. But at-risk financing would be the real game changer, because it would ensure that middle-income countries could make early bets, too, and were not left waiting for vaccines and other medical countermeasures. Up to 75 per cent of the delay in vaccine deliveries to low- and middle-income countries during Covid-19 can be attributed to the fact that they signed deals later than high-income countries. As we saw with Covid-19 vaccines, when these bets succeed, businesses can reopen, kids can return to school, and social-welfare spending can return to more normal levels. But the sooner these effects kick in, the better. Middle-income countries should not have to wait for grant-funded vaccine donations that are too little, too late, especially when donor countries are scaling back foreign aid. The huge economic and educational benefits of gaining early access to lifesaving vaccines and therapeutics make them high-return investments, despite the risk that they may not work. ©Project Syndicate, 2026

SPORTS



RIYADH AL BALUSHI
BARKA, JAN 7

AT the behest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said presided over the Annual Royal Cavalry Horse Race at the Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka on Wednesday. The event was organised by the the Royal Court Affairs (RCA) through the Royal Cavalry.

The horse Falah was crowned winner of the His Majesty the Sultan's Cup, after claiming first place in the fifth and main race.

Falah, owned by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Harib al Said, triumphed in the Wilayat of Barka race for purebred Arabian horses over a distance of 2,000 metres. Royal Cavalry horses Saad and Sani Du Loup took second and third places respectively.

Trainer Ahmed al Balushi, who prepared Falah for the race, said the victory was the result of early and careful preparation.

"Falah was our top candidate for winning the most prestigious cup from the very beginning. We prepared him specifically for this major race."

Ahmed al Balushi praised the Royal Cavalry for the excellent organisation. He also expressed hope for an increase in the number of races allocated to local owners, as well as the introduction of races for thoroughbred horses to further develop the sport.

During the ceremony, HH Sayyid Bilarab officially unveiled the new visual identity of the Royal Cavalry's Annual Horse Race, designed as a permanent logo for future editions. The logo features the Royal Crown embodied by two facing horse heads, symbolising the Sultanate of Oman's deep rooted heritage in horsemanship and appears in dark purple and golden brown tones.

The event featured a variety of equestrian displays, including horseback archery, traditional performances associated with horse culture in Al Batinah South Governorate, and a special segment titled 'Insight of a Knight', showcasing the inspiring experience of a visually impaired Omani youth and his bond with horses. Additional displays included horse beauty shows and miniature horse carriage performances.

FALAH CROWNED WITH HM'S CUP AT ROYAL CAVALRY ANNUAL RACE



Adam bin Talib al Balushi on Falah, winner of the HM's Cup.



FIVE RACES
The Annual Royal Cavalry Horse Race featured five competitive races. In the opening race for over 1,200 metres, Al Muhaib claimed first under rider Ramla bint Khalil al Zadjaliyah, followed by Hamsa and Mabhoor. The second race saw Yasira, owned by the Royal Cavalry, secure first place, ahead of Amsila and Al Muqaddam. In the third race over 1,600 metres, Bakeer, owned by HH Sayyidah

Noora bint Mohammed al Said, took top honours, with Al Reem finishing second and RB Kinzman third. The fourth race, dedicated to locally owned horses, was won by Madhmoon of Al Reef Stud, followed by Dawi and Izmir De Carrier. The main fifth race concluded with Falah winning His Majesty's Cup, ahead of Saad and Sunny Du Loup.

IDEAL CONDITIONS
Trainer Majid al Farsi commented on the conditions, noting that the track surface was well suited for shorter distances and that the horses showed strong readiness. Meanwhile, Ishaq bin Hatem al Maamari, owner of Al Afaq Racing Stables, described the competition as challenging, explaining that most horses were accustomed to longer distances.

"The 1,600 metres race requires stronger acceleration, especially on a dirt surface where horses that usually run on turf compete." In a brief statement, Nasr bin Hamoud al Kindi, Secretary-General of the Royal Court Affairs, affirmed that horse racing and equestrian sports in Oman continue to receive strong support from His Majesty the Sultan, contributing to the preservation of purebred Arabian horse bloodlines and the promotion of equestrian culture across Oman. The event concluded with the awarding of prizes to the winners and the recognition of supporting entities, in an evening that highlighted Oman's rich equestrian heritage and ongoing efforts to develop horse racing and support owners, trainers and riders.

DECISIVEMATCHES



The Ministry of Information beat University Medical City 3–1 to boost their qualification hopes.

MoCSY EIGHTS CHAMPIONSHIP GAINS MOMENTUM

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

The second round of the 2026 Government Institutions Eights Football Championship, organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), continued to deliver excitement and fierce competition, with decisive matches played in the first four groups on Tuesday, at Al Amal Sports Club Stadium.

In one of the standout fixtures of the round, the Ministry of Information (MoI) secured an important 3–1 victory over University Medical City, strengthening their position in the race for qualification. In the other match, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) played out a 1–1 draw in a tightly contested encounter.

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) continued their attacking dominance with an emphatic 5–1 win over the Social Protection Fund, reinforcing their place at the top of the group, while the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) recorded a valuable 2–0 victory over the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA).

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY WIN
This group also produced a major surprise when Muscat Municipality stormed past the Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MoEM) with a 5–2 victory in an attacking contest. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY) claimed a 1–0 win over the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), boosting their chances of progressing.

In Group 1, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) earned a crucial 1–0 victory over the National Centre for Statistics and Information in a tactically disciplined match, while the University of Technology and Applied Sciences edged past the Authority for Projects, Tenders and Local Content with a 1–0 win in a closely fought encounter.

Speaking after the matches, Ahmed al Rahbi of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology said that the tournament represents an important fixture on the sporting calendar, noting that his team is competing with high ambitions this year after finishing as runners-up in the previous edition.

Omani duo back in Czech club after visa delay

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

A procedural visa oversight kept Oman’s professional footballers Khalid al Buraiki and Abdulrahman al Mushaifri away from competitive action for more than seven weeks, delaying their return to Czech side SK Artis Brno and exposing the hidden challenges faced by Omani players pursuing careers in Europe.

The two internationals only resumed full training with their Czech club last weekend after resolving complications related to their residency status, having initially entered Europe on a short-term Schengen visa rather than the long-stay visa required for professional athletes.

The issue dates back to the players’ arrival in Europe earlier this season, when both Al Buraiki and Al Mushefri entered the Czech Republic using a Schengen visa previously issued for a national team training camp in Spain. While the visa allowed short-term movement within Europe, it did not permit extended residence.

Despite beginning their professional journey with SK Artis Brno, the oversight went unnoticed until the players joined Oman’s national team in Qatar during the 2026 Fifa World Cup Asian Qualifiers playoff stage.

According to Issa al Noobi, a Fifa-authorised football agent, the problem surfaced during immigration procedures. “As everyone knows, any player who intends to stay in Europe for a long period must obtain a long-stay visa,” Al Noobi explained. “Unfortunately, this was not considered at the beginning. When the players were returning from Qatar, they were informed by immigration authorities that they had exhausted their 90 cumulative Schengen days and were required to remain outside Europe for another 90 days before re-entry.”

As a result, both players were forced to remain in Oman from November 12, 2025, missing team training, league fixtures and competitive continuity with their Czech club. The absence stretched



SK Artis Brno’s vice-chairman and general manager, Peter Kuba, along with the head coach Jiri Chytrý, travelled to Oman and spent the Christmas and New Year period in Muscat.



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ISSA AL NOOBI



With the visa issue resolved, Khalid al Buraiki and Abdulrahman Al Mushefri have now rejoined SK Artis Brno and resumed full training.

to 51 days, an extended period that could have significantly affected their form and standing within the squad.

However, coordinated efforts from multiple parties helped fast-track a solution through diplomatic efforts and club support.

Al Noobi praised the collective role played by both Czech and Omani authorities in resolving the issue.

“The club management worked

closely with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate the process through the Czech Embassy in Riyadh,” he said.

“At the same time, Oman’s Foreign Ministry in Muscat, in coordination with Oman’s Embassy in Riyadh, played a major role in completing the long-stay visa procedures.”

Their combined efforts eventually cleared the way for both players to return to the Czech Republic and rejoin their club.

TRAINING NEVER STOPPED
Despite being away from the team, Oman national team players Al Buraiki and Al Mushaifri remained under close professional supervision during their stay in Oman.

The club’s coaching staff provided daily fitness programmes, including morning and evening sessions, alongside a structured nutrition plan to ensure the players maintained peak physical condition.

The level of support extended beyond remote monitoring. SK Artis Brno’s vice-chairman and general manager, Peter Kuba, along with the head coach Jiri Chytrý, travelled to Oman and spent the Christmas and New Year period in Muscat.

The club officials met the players on December 18, 2025, reaffirming their commitment and ensuring a swift return once visa formalities were completed.

During their stay, the Czech delegation also visited Seeb Club and Al Shabab Club, holding discussions on potential cooperation and football development initiatives.

With the visa issue resolved, Al Buraiki and Al Mushaifri have now rejoined SK Artis Brno and resumed full training.

The team is scheduled to depart for a two-week training camp in Turkey, followed by another external camp in Portugal, as preparations intensify ahead of the league’s resumption in mid-February.

SK Artis Brno currently sit third in the league standings with 30 points, trailing leaders Brno (41 points) and second-placed Taborsko (36 points).

Bethell lifts England with maiden ton

SYDNEY: Jacob Bethell fulfilled his rich potential with a chanceless maiden Test century Wednesday as England built a fragile 119-run second-innings lead with two wickets remaining to give themselves a glimmer of hope in the final Ashes Test.

At the end of day four at the Sydney Cricket Ground, England had reached 302-8 with Bethell imperious on 142 not out and number 10 Matthew Potts yet to score.

England are desperate for another morale-boosting win after victory in the previous Test at Melbourne. Australia lead 3-1 and have already retained the Ashes.

It was the 22-year-old Bethell who kept their faint hopes alive after Zak Crawley fell early and first-innings centurion Joe Root departed cheaply.

He powered to his hundred off 162 balls by smashing a lofted drive over midwicket for four. “It’s pretty special, it’s not really sunk in yet. I haven’t really had time to kind of reflect on it,” Bethell told reporters.

Bethell had his parents in the stands and raised his bat towards them as he passed the milestone.



England’s Jacob Bethell in action during the fifth Ashes Test in Sydney. — Reuters

“To do that and have the family there was very special,” said the left-hander.

“My dad was a cricketer so he knows how it feels to be out there batting, but I don’t think that stops him from getting any less nervous.”

It was not just Bethell’s maiden Test ton but the only one he has scored in red-ball cricket, with his previous best 96 against New Zealand.

Bethell was recalled for Melbourne to replace the under-performing Ollie Pope, scoring a gritty 40 in difficult batting conditions.

He proved to be England’s rock, but soon saw wickets tumbling at the other end as Harry Brook was trapped lbw for 42 and Will Jacks caught without scoring in the space of three balls from part-time off-spinner Beau Webster.

“I certainly didn’t think I would (impact) with spin this game,” said Webster, who is more usually employed as a seamer, but returned figures of 3-51.

Webster believed the pitch had begun to take turn. “There was a bit of wear and tear there from Starcy’s footmarks,” he said. “And we managed to make the most of it in that session.” — AFP

Recall

Recall Date: 08/01/2026

Hyundai Creta & SantaFe

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production	Number of Affected Commodities
Hyundai Creta & SantaFe	2024 - 2025	421

Recall consequence

Several Countries has safety regulation that Unit must have a warning indicator after over speed 120 Km/h and our SU2id FL unit didn't has that feature

Recall Action

To update Cluster software and update Owner Manual for SU2id FL.

To check the serial Numbers of the affected commodities, please visit the website for Recalls & Warnings: <http://recall.pacp.gov.om>
Toll free No 80050003 on all working days between 8.00 AM to 1.00 PM & 2.00 PM to 5.00 PM with effect from Date 7/1/2026

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MUSCAT NIGHTS



OBSC Chairman Khalid al Subhi said the total prize pool for both tournaments amounts to RO 6,770.

OBSC LAUNCHES
TWO INTERNATIONAL
TOURNEYS IN MUSCAT

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

As part of the ongoing momentum witnessed by Oman's sports scene during the Muscat Nights season, the Oman Billiards and Snooker Committee (OBSC) has announced the organisation of two major international tournaments: the Muscat Nights International Snooker Championship and the Muscat Nights International Billiards Championship, scheduled to take place from January 14 to 18.

The announcement was made during a press conference on Wednesday in cooperation with the Muscat Nights 2026 organising committee at Active Oman Billiards and Snooker Hall, located at the Oman Automobile Association headquarters.

Khalid al Subhi, OBSC Chairman, confirmed that this year's edition carries a strong international dimension, with players representing 18 countries, including Oman, Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, the Philippines, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Eritrea. The number of participants has reached 124 players, compared to 92 in the previous edition.

TOP PRIZE MONEY
Al Subhi explained that the snooker championship will be a full ball (group system, best of 5). The top 2 will qualify for the round of 16 (no referees). While Round 16 to the finals (knockout best of 7) will be with the referees.

The Billiards Championship will be played in a '10-ball' alternate break system in the preliminary rounds (Race to 9) for the winner and loser sides, and the round of 16 will be a knockout system (Race to 11). The finals will be (Race to 13)

The total prize pool for both tournaments amounts to RO 6,770, divided as follows: RO 3,420 for the Snooker Championship, RO 3,350 for the Billiards Championship.

Meanwhile, Hussain al Rumhi, Supervisor of the Beach Events Committee at Muscat Nights, said the inclusion of the two tournaments fits perfectly within the festival's strategy to diversify its cultural, entertainment, and sporting offerings.

Boulbina takes Algeria
through, Diallo sparkles

ADIL BOULBINA and AMAD DIALLO stole the show as Algeria and Ivory Coast scored contrasting victories in Morocco on Tuesday to complete the Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinals line-up.

A stunning strike from substitute Boulbina with one minute of extra time remaining gave Algeria a 1-0 victory over the Democratic Republic of Congo in Rabat after an intense clash.

Diallo scored the opening goal and created the second as defending champions Ivory Coast overcame west African neighbours Burkina Faso 3-0 in Marrakesh.

While winger Diallo plays for Manchester United, who attract worldwide support, midfielder Boulbina lines up with Al Duhail in the relative obscurity of the Qatari league.

A mouth-watering quarterfinals line-up begins on Friday when Senegal face Mali and Cameroon tackle hosts Morocco.

On Saturday, Algeria face in-form Nigeria, then Ivory Coast take on record seven-time title-holders Egypt.

Among the eight survivors, only Mali have not won the competition at least once. They came closest in 1972, finishing runners-up to Congo Brazzaville.

The cagey clash between Algeria and DR Congo was edging towards a penalty shoot-out when Boulbina was released on the left in the 119th minute and advanced into the area before unleashing a vicious strike into the net.

The moment of magic sparked wild celebrations within the ground, with the majority of the 18,837 crowd backing Algeria.

Boulbina was an unlikely hero, making just his second cameo appearance off the bench at the tournament having been included in the squad after featuring for Algeria at the recent Arab Cup in Qatar.

"I have always dreamed of playing for the national team. It is the ambition of every Algerian to play for their country and do well," said Boulbina, who was in tears at the end.

"I had my chance and scored and the most important thing is that we won and qualified for the next round."

DR Congo can console themselves with the fact they have an intercontinental play-off to come in March, where a win against either New Caledonia or Jamaica will see them qualify for a first World Cup since 1974.

'DISAPPOINTED'
"We are obviously disappointed with the outcome. I thought it was a top-level game



Algeria's forward #27 Adil Boulbina celebrates with the player of the match trophy after the Africa Cup of Nations Round of 16 match against Democratic Republic of Congo in Rabat. — AFP

between two really good sides," said coach Sebastien Desabre.

"The players gave everything. We fought to the end but unfortunately it was not enough."

The match in Rabat, between two of the continent's leading nations, had the makings of the tie of the round but never quite lived up to its billing.

There was a lack of quality in the final third from both sides despite all the attacking talent on the pitch, with neither captain Riyad Mahrez nor the thrilling Ibrahim Maza lasting 90 minutes for Algeria.

In Marrakesh, Diallo sparkled as Ivory Coast became the first Afcon defending champions to reach the quarterfinals since 2010.

Diallo struck the opening goal and created the second for Yan Diomande before half-time. Substitute Bazoumana Toure completed the scoring in the closing minutes.

Since Egypt successfully defended the title in Angola 16 years ago, seven title holders have failed to reach the last eight.

Cameroon and Senegal made last-16 exits, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Algeria were eliminated after the group stage, and Egypt and Nigeria failed to even qualify for the tournament.

There was a sense of inevitability when the Ivorians went ahead on 20 minutes. Diallo powered his way past several defenders before striking the ball beyond goalkeeper Herve Koffi

Such was the control of the Elephants that it came as no surprise when they increased their lead on 32 minutes on a cold, dry night.

Diallo was the provider this time. Passing the ball across the box to 19-year-old Diomande, whose superbly bent shot gave Koffi no chance.

Substitute Toure scored his second goal in as many matches when he ran from his own half on 87 minutes, then slammed the ball past Koffi. — AFP

**AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS
RESULTS ON TUESDAY (AET
DENOTES AFTER EXTRA TIME):**

Last 16
In Rabat
Algeria 1 (Boulbina 119) Democratic Republic of Congo 0 — aet
In Marrakesh
Ivory Coast 3 (Diallo 20, Diomande 32, Toure 87) Burkina Faso 0

Lategan leads Dakar after Stage 4, champion Al Rajhi withdraws

AL ULA, Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia's Dakar Rally champion Yazeed al Rajhi declared an end to his title defence and withdrew on Wednesday as South African Henk Lategan dominated the fourth stage for Toyota and took over at the top.

Al Rajhi had been struggling from the start in his customer entry Toyota Hilux, and was already 19th when he withdrew with technical issues 234km into the 452km part of a two-day marathon stage around Al Ula. "Sadly, our Dakar 2026 journey ends here," he posted on Facebook. "We'll come back stronger next year."

The Saudi explained later that he had lost half an hour with two punctures and, with nearly half the

stage remaining until the bivouac and having to go slow with no further spare available, had called it a day. It ended a difficult year for the Saudi since he won last year, with Al Rajhi crashing in Jordan last April and breaking two vertebrae. He returned to competition only in September.

Lategan, last year's overall runner-up, took his fifth career stage win and led Qatar's Nasser al Attiyah by three minutes and 55 seconds.

"Yesterday, we had a total of nine punctures. It's unbelievable. I think that's a record in three days. I was lost," the factory Toyota driver said, his happiness tempered by missing his son's sixth birthday.

"I didn't know what to do on the



Team Nomade Racing's Thibault Boucherot looks on as Toyota Gazoo Racing's Henk Lategan and Brett Cummings drives past in the Stage 3 of the Dakar Rally 2026 in Al Ula. — AFP

rocks, whether to slow down or not, attack or not. Today I decided to forget all that and just go for it. It's a lottery anyway."

Al Attiyah, a five-time Dakar winner now with the Dacia Sandriders team, was second in the stage — more than seven minutes behind Lategan — to move up from 10th overnight.

"We did a good job, we're here, and I think we didn't lose too much time. It might even be good for our start position tomorrow," he said.

"We didn't need to push any harder; we're still some way back. The car is in good condition and we're happy."

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom was in third place overall with teammate

and four-time Dakar winner Carlos Sainz fourth and nearly 16 minutes off the lead. Ford's overnight leader Mitch Guthrie of the United States dropped to 13th.

SCHAREINA IN LEAD
In the motorcycle category, Spaniard Tosha Schareina took the lead for Honda from Australia's defending champion Daniel Sanders, who dropped to third on his KTM.

American Ricky Brabec was second. Schareina and Brabec finished the stage in a Honda one-two-three with American Skyler Howes third and Sanders fifth. "I made some silly mistakes in the navigation. After the refuel, I tried to push and make up time," said Sanders. — Reuters



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BUSINESS

CRUDE OIL
OMAN \$58.60
BRENT \$60.35
LIGHT \$56.61



SHORT TAKES



Established in 1983, cumulative industrial investments in Al Rusayl Industrial City exceeded RO 900 million by mid-2025.

FIRST OMANI INDUSTRIAL CITY LISTED ON MSX'S THIRD MARKET

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 7

Al Rusayl Industrial City — the first industrial cluster established in the Sultanate of Oman — has been formally listed on the Third Market of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), marking a significant step by state-owned Madayn, the authority overseeing Oman's industrial cities, to leverage capital market platforms to broaden investor participation and unlock value from strategic infrastructure assets.

In a recent administrative decision, the MSX approved the listing of Al Rusayl Industrial City Co SAOC, with a share capital of RO 500,000 divided into 500,000 shares.

The listing follows an earlier decision by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to convert the industrial city's legal status from a limited liability company into a closed joint-stock company.

Established in 1983, cumulative industrial investments in Al Rusayl Industrial City exceeded RO 900 million by mid-2025. Spanning approximately 11 million square metres, the city is among Oman's longest-established industrial hubs and has played a central role in supporting the Sultanate of Oman's non-oil economy for decades, hosting hundreds of projects across sectors including chemicals, building materials and logistics.

The stock market presence of Al Rusayl Industrial City Co SAOC enables both institutional and retail investors to participate financially in the performance and long-term development of the industrial estate, helping align private capital with national economic objectives.

The listing also sends a strong signal that industrial infrastructure can be structured and treated as an investible asset class, rather than solely as a government-managed resource.

Promising Omani Startups Programme hits milestone

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

HIS Highness Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, Honorary President of the 'Programme of Promising Omani Startups' (POPS), presided over the 'Afaq' ceremony marking the conclusion of the foundational phase of the Promising Omani Startups Programme, a national initiative designed to identify, support and scale high-potential Omani startups.

The event, held at the Royal Opera House Muscat, attracted a number of high-level Omani government officials and dignitaries.

Key quantitative and qualitative indicators of the programme's progress during the 2023–2025 period were presented, reflecting its impact in transforming innovative ideas into established startups, empowering entrepreneurs and building companies capable of growth and sustainability.

The ceremony also highlighted the contribution of startups to diversifying the national economy and enhancing local added value.

Statistics indicated that the number of promising technology- and innovation-based Omani startups reached 205, with a combined market value of approximately \$395 million, reflecting the programme's significant economic impact.

In addition, 549 job opportunities were created for young Omanis across various economic sectors through startup companies.

The Promising Omani Startups Programme is one of the most important national initiatives, implemented over a three-year period from 2023 to 2025, with the aim of driving a qualitative transformation in Oman's startup ecosystem based on advanced technology and



His Highness Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said presided over the 'Afaq' ceremony marking the conclusion of the foundational phase of the Promising Omani Startups Programme.

innovation.

Halima hint Rashid al Zariyah, Chairwoman of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (Riyada), stated: "Over the past few years, the startup ecosystem in the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the concept of empowerment and sustainable impact.

Governance and strategic guidance have played a pivotal role in ensuring the continuity of this trajectory through the supervisory committee, which has contributed to strengthening governance and aligning initiatives with national priorities".

She added that partners from both the public and private sectors have contributed to building an enabling environment that accelerates growth, opens markets and supports the transition from idea to impact.

The startup sector in Oman has also recorded strong digital indicators, reflecting rapid growth and transformation.

These include approximately 30,000 annual beneficiaries of initiatives promoting startup culture; 50 camps and hackathons annually; 3,000 registered startup project ideas; 310 student projects in innovation and technology; 300 events, workshops, training camps, knowledge sessions, games, stories and entrepreneurial education competitions; around 205 startups holding the Riyada Startup Card; 30 business incubators and innovation centres; 10 business accelerators; 32 government incentives and facilities activated for startups; seven crowdfunding platforms dedicated to startups and SMEs; 11 venture capital funds focused on startups and SMEs; and approximately RO 11.5 million in annual startup investments.

Moreover, 825 registered job opportunities were provided through startups, 78 Omani startups received investments during 2024–2025 and 22 startups achieved a market

valuation of \$5 million or more.

The ceremony also witnessed the launch of the sustainability plan for the Promising Omani Startups Programme, titled "An Innovation Journey That Begins with an Idea, Building a Sustainable Economy".

This marks the programme's transition from a phased implementation stage to institutional sustainability, through the adoption of a supportive governance model and a sustainability plan that ensures continuity of impact, maximises long-term economic returns and connects startups with real growth opportunities.

The role of partnerships between government entities, the private sector, investors and various components of the entrepreneurship ecosystem was also highlighted, alongside their contributions to advancing the programme's objectives.

The ceremony celebrated the entrepreneurs behind the startups, recognising them as the cornerstone of transforming ideas into tangible economic achievements.

900 Sanad centres create 2,350 jobs for Omanis

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

A forum celebrating 20 years since the establishment of Sanad Service Centres took place yesterday, Wednesday, January 7, in Muscat under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

The event was organised by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and was attended by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, alongside senior officials, government and private-sector representatives; and owners of Sanad Service Centres.

Established in 2006, there are currently around 900 Sanad Service Centres operating across the Sultanate of Oman, processing more than one million electronic transactions annually. The centres have contributed to the creation of approximately 2,350 job opportunities for Omani youth, supporting workforce participation and employment.

In his welcome address, Mohammed bin Salim al Mashaikhi, Director of the Sanad Services Centres Department at the MoCIIP, said, "This forum embodies the spirit of



Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, presided over the ceremony celebrating 20 years since the establishment of Sanad Service Centres in Oman.

partnership and integration; and reflects the efforts made to enhance service quality and strengthen the role of Sanad Service Centres in serving the community".

He added that the centres contribute to fulfilling community aspirations and expanding employment opportunities, noting, "Over twenty years of continuous work, Sanad Service Centres have succeeded in developing their service ecosystem, expanding the scope of their operations and adopting best practices to become an effective link between relevant

authorities and the community".

Al Mashaikhi highlighted the role of the centres in facilitating procedures and enhancing customer experience, stating, "Sanad Service Centres provide services that contribute to simplifying procedures, improving customer experience and strengthening the concept of partnership between the public and private sectors".

The event announced several key initiatives, including the launch of the On-the-Job Training Initiative in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour.

The initiative aims to provide more than 1,000 job opportunities for Omani youth, focusing on on-the-job training to develop practical skills and prepare participants for the labour market in line with its needs.

The Ministry also launched the Sanad Excellence Award, which aims to honour outstanding Sanad Service Centres, promote excellence, recognise best practices and enhance overall institutional performance among centres.

In addition, the Munjaz Card was unveiled, authorising Sanad Service Centres to complete transactions on behalf of beneficiaries with government and private entities.

The card is expected to speed up procedures, reduce administrative burdens; and improve

accessibility and efficiency of service delivery.

Moreover, the Sanad Service Centres Classification Initiative was launched to enhance service quality and raise excellence standards across centres. The initiative introduces clear performance and classification criteria, supports professional development pathways and aims to improve operational efficiency, encourage continuous improvement and strengthen the long-term sustainability of Sanad Service Centres.

The forum also unveiled the signing of five agreements with various entities. The first agreement was signed with the MoCIIP to establish technical integration between the Unified Government Services Portal and the Sanad electronic portal.

This was followed by an agreement with the Supreme Judicial Council to link its services with the Sanad electronic portal.

An agreement was signed with the Development Bank to integrate banking services with Sanad Centres. The forum also announced a programme with Bank Dhofar under the Government Banking Services initiative to link its services with the Sanad electronic portal, as well as a programme with private-sector technology company Aqari Platform to integrate its services with Sanad Centres.

SHORTTAKES



The Authority observes that companies and funds submit invitations too close to the publication deadline, leaving insufficient time for review.

FSA TIGHTENS
TIMELINE FOR
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
NOTICES

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 7

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) has instructed public joint-stock companies and investment funds to submit general assembly invitation announcements for the Authority’s approval at least seven working days before the start of the legally required publication period.

Under the Commercial Companies Law, the publication period must begin no less than 15 days before the scheduled meeting date.

The FSA said the additional lead time is needed to allow proper review of agenda items and to ensure compliance with applicable laws and regulations before invitations are circulated to shareholders.

The directive follows the Authority’s observation that some companies and funds have been submitting invitations too close to the publication deadline, leaving insufficient time for review.

In Circular No (6/2025), the FSA said the measure is part of ongoing efforts to strengthen regulatory standards for convening general assemblies, particularly during the annual general assembly season for most public joint-stock companies and investment funds whose financial year ends on December 31.

The Authority also stressed that invitations — including the agenda — must be submitted through approved channels, with all required documents fully completed. It added that all enquiries and correspondence related to general assemblies must be conducted exclusively via the officially designated email address.

CORPORATE TAKEOVER

BlueScope rejects \$9 bn takeover bid



BlueScope Steel has rejected a \$13.2 billion (\$8.9 billion) takeover bid from SGH and US-based Steel Dynamics, saying the offer significantly undervalued the company. Shares closed slightly higher at \$29.87, below the \$30 offer.

Chair Jane McAloon said the proposal was an attempt to buy BlueScope “on the cheap”. It marked the fourth approach since late 2024. — Reuters

ENERGY MARKETS

Oil slides on Venezuela deal



Oil prices fell after President Donald Trump said the United States agreed to import up to \$2 billion of Venezuelan crude, boosting supply expectations. Brent slipped to \$60.35 a barrel and WTI to \$56.61.

Traders cited ample global supply, with some cargoes potentially diverted from China following Washington’s deal with Caracas. Prices extended earlier losses on Wednesday. — Reuters

MONETARY POLICY

Australia inflation eases, rate risks



Australian inflation slowed in November, with consumer prices flat on the month and annual inflation easing to 3.4%, below forecasts.

However, core pressures remained sticky, keeping alive expectations of a possible rate hike. Investors still see a 33% chance the Reserve Bank of Australia could raise interest rates as early as February. The Australian dollar was little changed. — Reuters

Celebrate innovation with BYD Qin Plus DM-i flash sale

MUSCAT: BYD welcomes the New Year with a bold celebration of innovation, performance and sustainability, as the BYD Qin Plus DM-i headlines an exclusive Flash Sale running on January 7, 8 and 9.

As part of the New Year campaign themed “Welcome 2026 in Style — Celebrate Innovation”, customers can enjoy up to 26 per cent off (Terms & Conditions Apply) on selected BYD stock, making this an unmissable opportunity to step into the future of driving.

Engineered to redefine efficiency and everyday performance, the BYD Qin Plus DM-i is powered by BYD’s advanced Super Hybrid DM-i technology, delivering a refined balance of electric and gasoline power.

Designed for modern drivers who value sustainability without compromise, the sedan offers ultra-low fuel consumption, impressive range and a smooth, responsive



The BYD Qin Plus DM-i is powered by BYD’s advanced Super Hybrid DM-i technology.

driving experience.

With a remarkable fuel efficiency of 3.8L/100km, the Qin Plus DM-i comes with 1.5L Plug-in-Hybrid electric, producing 194 hp and accelerating from 0 to 100 km/h in just 7.3 seconds.

A total driving range of up to 990 kilometres ensures fewer stops and greater freedom on the road, making it ideal for both city commutes and long-distance journeys.

The exterior design reflects BYD’s signature Dragon Face design language, blending athletic presence with refined elegance. Sculpted lines, 17-inch alloy wheels and sleek LED taillights give the Qin Plus DM-i a confident and contemporary road presence.

Inside, the cabin offers a technology-driven, driver-focused environment featuring an 8.8-inch digital instrument cluster and a 10.1-inch rotatable touchscreen infotainment system with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity.

Voice activation through “Hi BYD” adds effortless control and enhanced convenience.

Safety remains a core focus, with the Qin Plus DM-i equipped with an advanced suite of intelligent driver-assistance systems. Features such as Automatic Emergency Braking, Lane Departure Warning and Adaptive Cruise Control work in harmony

with a high-strength body structure to ensure confidence and protection on every drive.

As the world’s largest New Energy Vehicle manufacturer, BYD continues to strengthen its presence in Oman through an expanding network of modern showrooms and advanced service centres.

The New Year Flash Sale further reinforces BYD’s commitment to making innovative, sustainable mobility more accessible to customers across the Sultanate of Oman.

For customers stepping into the electric revolution, BYD offers reliable after-sales support and a rewarding ownership experience with premium care-car services at designated venues.

Visit BYD showrooms at Al Wattayah, Al Mouj and Mall of Oman to experience the Qin Plus Plug-in Hybrid firsthand and get detailed insights.

OPINION

Why leaders repeat the same decisions



KAMLA AL RAHBI

The writer is a leadership and business strategist focused on decision-making, organisational clarity, and cognitive frameworks in complex environments.

ONE of the most misunderstood challenges in leadership and business today is not a lack of knowledge. Leaders are surrounded by information. They attend conferences, read reports, hire consultants and are constantly exposed to new strategies, tools and frameworks. Yet despite this abundance, the same decisions are often repeated even when their limitations and negative consequences are already visible.

This paradox is usually explained through familiar narratives: fear of change, resistance from teams, risk aversion, or weak courage. These explanations are comfortable but incomplete. In reality, many of the leaders who repeat ineffective decisions are neither uninformed nor incapable. They are often experienced, responsible and highly competent. The issue lies deeper than surface-level hesitation.

The real challenge is not what leaders know, but how decisions are formed beneath awareness.

Decisions are rarely made at the moment they appear to be. Long before options are consciously evaluated, an internal framework has already narrowed what feels acceptable, realistic, or safe. This framework is shaped by past successes, early career experiences and lessons that once protected the leader or the organisation. When left unexamined, it quietly governs future choices. Decisions then feel deliberate but are in fact automated responses to familiar patterns.

Paradoxically, the more successful a leader has been, the more powerful and

dangerous this automation becomes. Across organisations, it is common to observe leaders holding on to structures, processes, or leadership styles that were effective in an earlier phase but no longer align with current realities.

Markets evolve, technologies advance and workforce expectations shift. Leaders often sense declining engagement, rising turnover, or stagnating performance. Yet action is delayed, diluted, or endlessly postponed.

This hesitation is not driven by ignorance. It is driven by the mind's natural preference for stability. From a cognitive perspective, the brain is designed to preserve continuity, not to maximise growth or alignment.

Once a decision delivers an outcome that is “good enough”, it becomes registered as safe. Over time, that decision stops feeling like a choice and starts functioning as a default.

At that point, repetition is no longer conscious. It is procedural.

Consider organisations that hesitate to restructure teams or redefine authority despite clear performance gaps. On paper, the reasoning often sounds responsible: protecting culture, avoiding disruption, maintaining morale. In practice, however, the outcome is prolonged inefficiency, blurred accountability and the gradual departure of high performers.

The economic cost is rarely immediate or dramatic, but it accumulates steadily through lost productivity, delayed innovation and rising replacement costs.

What makes this pattern particularly difficult to challenge is the absence of visible failure. Results may remain acceptable,

The real challenge is not what leaders know, but how decisions are formed beneath awareness. Decisions are rarely made at the moment they appear to be. Long before options are consciously evaluated, an internal framework has already narrowed what feels acceptable, realistic, or safe.

allowing leaders to rationalise inaction while the gap between potential and performance quietly widens. Stability is preserved, but progress stalls.

This is where many leadership conversations fall short. The focus tends to be on motivation, decisiveness, or confidence. Yet meaningful change rarely comes from pushing harder or acting faster. It comes from questioning the internal logic that defines what feels possible in the first place.

A more revealing question is not, Why do I keep making this decision? but rather, what am I trying to protect by keeping it?

Often, the answer has little to do with external constraints. Leaders may be protecting an identity shaped by past success, a reputation built in a different organisational era, or a sense of control that once felt essential. In some cases, they are holding on to an outdated definition of success that no longer aligns with their current role or the organisation's evolving needs.

Until these internal frameworks are made visible, change feels like a threat rather than a recalibration. The mind interprets disruption as loss of certainty, status, or self-image even when the long-term benefits are evident. As a result, leaders remain loyal to decisions that no longer serve them, their teams, or their organisations.

This dynamic has become especially pronounced in today's economic and technological environment. Rapid transformation, artificial intelligence and shifting workforce expectations have exposed the limits of decision-making rooted in past assumptions.

CONTROLLING INFLATION REQUIRES SUSTAINED EFFORT



HAIDER AL LAWATI

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The writer is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI

All countries and governments around the world are keen to combat inflation.

This is what the Omani government has been doing for many years through the measures taken by the Central Bank of Oman in this regard, as inflation requires continuous control and avoidance over the long term.

Inflation is dangerous because it reduces the value of money for individuals and harms local economies.

Therefore, countries fight inflation to protect

citizens, aiming to stabilise their economic conditions and achieve sustainable development.

Recently, the Ministry of Economy issued a statement regarding inflation in Oman during 2025, explaining that the average inflation rate in the Consumer Price Index was less than 1% during the period from January to November of last year.

This represents a moderate path within the target range of the country's monetary policy. Inflationary pressures remain relatively limited both locally and globally, despite changes in global trade policies and the escalation of tariff impositions due to decisions by the US government.

However, these developments cast a shadow of uncertainty amidst concerns that they may lead to higher inflation in the coming period.

Inflation means a continuous rise in prices and a decline in the purchasing power of money. Governments combat inflation to protect citizens' incomes when prices rise, as people can no longer purchase the same needs with the same income.

This particularly affects low-income groups. Another objective is economic stability, as high inflation leads to economic instability and makes future planning difficult for individuals, companies and institutions.

Combating inflation also encourages investment, as investors prefer countries with low inflation where profits are clearer and more secure.

Moreover, it helps maintain the value of the local currency against foreign currencies and prevents the spread of unemployment and poverty, which otherwise lead to economic recession, the closure of companies and institutions; and an increase in layoffs and unemployment.

Lawyers turn attention to healthcare sector

PRIVATE healthcare in the UK is experiencing unprecedented growth as NHS (National Health Service) waiting lists soar and public services struggle to keep up. This surge in demand is also fuelling a flurry of legal activity, keeping lawyers busy.

Deals lawyers in the UK are generally the busiest and most important practices for most law firms, however, with the London Stock Exchange sinking to 23rd in IPO venue rankings, there has been a shift in the trend of lawyers' workloads towards highly concentrated areas.

This all comes as NHS waiting lists for elective treatments in England stand at over 7.4 million people. The lingering problems from the Covid-19 pandemic, along with mismanagement over the years, have contributed to the rapid decline in the public sector health services.

Not surprisingly, over the last few years, private healthcare in the UK has become increasingly accessible and popular. The insurance market has experienced a surge in activity, with individuals purchasing healthcare policies and businesses implementing health plans for their employees.

Recent industry data reveal a staggering 23 per cent year-on-year increase in demand for private healthcare services, along with data showing that hospital admissions through private insurance continue to rise.

Given that health secretary Wes Streeting called on the private sector to help tackle long waiting lists for treatment, the door for private money has certainly opened-up. Surge of private equity and M&As: After the overall UK M&A market had been characterised by lower deal volumes, the market is bracing for a major surge in M&A activity, as deals roar back to life.

However, the healthcare industry



ANDY JALIL

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Deals lawyers in the UK are generally the busiest and most important practices for most law firms, however, with the London Stock Exchange sinking to 23rd in IPO venue rankings, there has been a shift in the trend of lawyers' workloads towards highly concentrated areas.



Nurses react as they treat a patient at a hospital in Milton Keynes, Britain. — Reuters

has proven to be a busy sector.

The UK healthcare industry sector saw private equity involvement reach its highest level in 2024, with 57 per cent of deals in 2023, according to PwC data, significantly higher than the average for all industries. The BIG Four data broke it down, showing that PE interest in healthcare was up nearly 20 per cent since 2018.

The decline of the public health sector in the UK is providing lawyers, especially those in top firms, with fulfilling work in complex, highly regulated transactions. The firms that have an overlap of M&A, private, equity; and healthcare and life sciences practices are enjoying this booming part of the UK market.

Patrick Scott, private equity partner at Clifford Chance, explained that private equity investors are “looking to invest behind established and start-up healthcare enterprises to help them scale, invest in technological and AI advancements and ultimately help them meet the needs of their patients”.

IVF, AI and Care Homes: A significant portion of deal activity over the last year has been “add-on” acquisitions, where existing private equity-backed companies buy

smaller firms to consolidate and expand their service offerings.

However, it is not just the struggles of the NHS that has driven interest, as Scott noted, “the sector is supported by strong, structural tailwinds, including an ageing population with more complex health needs.

This can be seen in the deals over the last year, which included Mysa Care (backed by Downing) acquiring a supported living provider, the Partnership of Care, which operates 41 care homes.

While other healthcare issues, such as fertility, have seen a surge of interest from the private sector, with a focus on in vitro fertilisation (IVF) clinics. Back in November, PE-backed pan-European group FutureLife acquired the Bristol Centre for Reproductive Medicine (BCRM) to expand its UK footprint. The deal was FutureLife's broader strategy to become a leading provider of IVF and genetics services across Europe.

Scott explained that the sector expects healthcare investment to remain strong and as a result, “we will therefore continue to see significant M&A activity in healthcare services such as hospitals, technology, robotics and AI, IVF and pharma.

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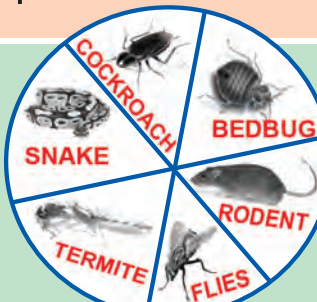
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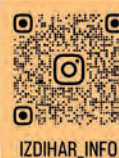
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ART/LIFE



SPARKLING SUCCESS OF ICE SPECTACULAR > 20

CHANGING WORLD

FIVE-YEAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN: ROAD MAP TO PROSPERITY



**SHADDAD
AL MUSALMY**
*The writer is a
Senior Editor at
Oman Daily Observer.*

Oman's Five-Year Development Plan (2026-2030) is a bold and ambitious road map for the country's future. Building on the successes of previous plans, this new strategy aims to drive economic diversification, promote sustainable growth and improve the quality of life for Omanis.

One of the key focus areas of the plan is economic diversification. Oman is keen to reduce its reliance on oil revenues and create a more diversified economy. The plan outlines initiatives to support entrepreneurship, innovation; and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which will help drive economic growth and create new opportunities for Omanis.

The plan also places a strong emphasis on infrastructure development. Plans are underway to improve transportation networks, including roads, airports and ports, which will enhance connectivity within the country and boost trade and commerce. The development of digital infrastructure is also a priority, with initiatives to promote e-government services and increase internet penetration.

Human capital development is another critical aspect of the plan. Oman is investing in education and training programmes to equip its citizens with the skills needed to compete in the global economy. The plan also focuses on healthcare, with initiatives to improve medical facilities and services; and promote healthy lifestyles.

Sustainability is a core theme of the plan. Oman is committed to reducing its carbon footprint and promoting environmental conservation. The plan outlines initiatives to increase the use of renewable energy, promote sustainable agriculture and protect natural resources.

The plan also recognises the importance of social development. Oman is committed to promoting social welfare and reducing poverty. Initiatives to support low-income families, promote gender equality and empower youth are key components of the plan.

The success of the plan will depend on effective implementation and collaboration between government agencies, private sector and civil society. With the right partnerships and a commitment to excellence, Oman is well-positioned to achieve its development goals and become a more prosperous and sustainable country.

As Oman embarks on this new development journey, it will be crucial to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared equitably among all citizens. The plan's focus on social development and poverty reduction is a step in the right direction and it's essential to continue to prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups.

QUICK FEATURES



ANIMAL PLANET
A lion is pictured during a photocall for the annual stocktake at ZSL London Zoo in central London. — AFP

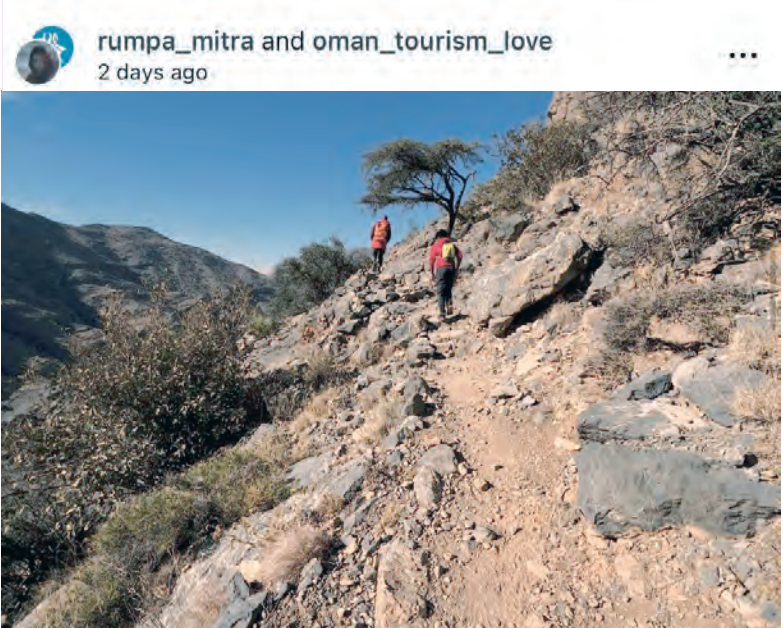


BOLLYWOOD
Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan attends the United in Triumph felicitation event hosted by the Reliance Foundation to honour the country's national cricket teams in Mumbai. — AFP

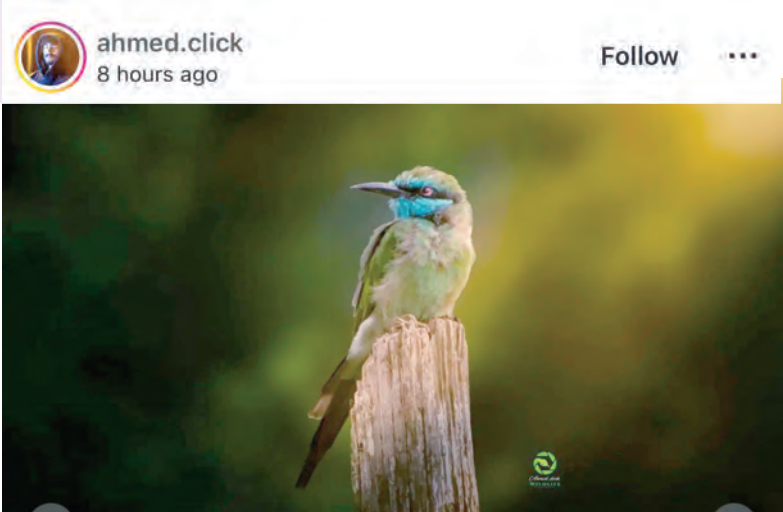


LIFESTYLE
People walk on the snow-covered Pont Iena bridge near the Eiffel Tower, as winter weather with snow and cold temperatures hits a large part of the country, in Paris. — Reuters

INSTA PICKS



The path to the summit



A stunning Omani Asian green bee-eater

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Chalamet boosts Oscar bid with Critics Choice Awards win



Timothée Chalamet accepts the Best Actor Award for “Marty Supreme”. — Reuters

Timothée Chalamet’s Oscars campaign earned a major boost on Sunday as he scooped the best actor prize for “Marty Supreme” at the Critics Choice Awards, the first major gala of this year’s Hollywood awards season.

He defeated rival Leonardo DiCaprio, whose raucous political thriller “One Battle After Another” took the night’s top prize for best picture, as well as best director and best adapted screenplay for Paul Thomas Anderson.

In “Marty Supreme”, Chalamet plays a 1950s table tennis champion consumed by grand ambitions.

Loosely based on a true story and benefitting from the Franco-American actor’s unique viral campaign, the film directed by Josh Safdie (“Uncut Gems”) has become an unlikely global hit.

“Josh, you made a story about a flawed man with a relatable dream”, said Chalamet.

“And you didn’t preach to the audience about what’s right and wrong; and I think we should all be telling stories like that, so thank you for this dream”.

The movie is loosely based on the life of table tennis star Marty Reisman, a man driven by the belief that he can achieve

fame and fortune through a sport little known in the United States.

The awards bestowed by North America’s largest critics’ group could give movie campaigns much-needed extra momentum as Oscars voting nears.

This year, it took the coveted first weekend of awards season usually occupied by the Golden Globes, which will take place in Beverly Hills next weekend.

Jessie Buckley won best actress for her tragic role as the wife of William Shakespeare in period drama “Hamnet”.

Jacob Elordi won best supporting actor for his portrayal of the Monster in “Frankenstein”, which also won three technical awards, while Amy Madigan won supporting actress for a villainous turn in horror flick “Weapons”.

“Sinners”, a period horror film also seen as a major contender for many of this season’s top prizes, had to settle for best original screenplay, young actor, score, and casting and ensemble.

In the show’s opening monologue, host Chelsea Handler paid tribute to the late Rob Reiner, “the nicest guy in Hollywood”. — AFP



The virtual museum now gives visitors a facsimile of the experience of walking through the institution’s galleries

Virtual museum preserves Sudan’s plundered heritage

DESTROYED and looted in the early months of Sudan’s war, the national museum in Khartoum is now welcoming virtual visitors after months of painstaking effort to digitally recreate its collection. At the museum itself, almost nothing remains of the 100,000 artefacts it had stored since its construction in the 1950s.

Only pieces too heavy for looters to haul off, like the massive granite statue of the Kush Pharaoh Taharqa and frescoes relocated from temples during the building of the Aswan Dam, are still present on site.

“The virtual museum is the only viable option to ensure continuity”, government antiquities official Ikhlass Abdel Latif said, during a recent presentation of the project carried out by the French Archaeological Unit for Sudanese Antiquities (SFDAS) with support from the Louvre and Britain’s Durham University.

When the museum was plundered following the outbreak of the war between the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023, satellite images showed trucks loaded with relics heading towards Darfur, the western region now totally controlled by the RSF.

Since then, searches for the missing artefacts aided by Interpol have only yielded meagre results.

“The Khartoum museum was the cornerstone of Sudanese cultural preservation — the damage is astronomical”, said SFDAS researcher Faiza Drici, but “the virtual version lets us recreate the lost collections and keep a clear record”.

Drici worked for more than a year to reconstruct the lost holdings in a database, working from fragments of official lists, studies published by researchers and photos taken during excavation missions.

Then graphic designer Marcel Perrin created a computer model that mimicked the museum’s atmosphere — its architecture, its lighting and the arrangement of its displays.



Online since January 1, the virtual museum now gives visitors a facsimile of the experience of walking through the institution’s galleries — reconstructed from photographs and the original plans — and viewing more than 1,000 pieces inherited from the ancient Kingdom of Kush.

It will take until the end of 2026, however, for the project to upload its recreation of the museum’s famed “Gold Room”, which had housed solid-gold royal jewellery, figurines and ceremonial objects stolen by looters.

In addition to the virtual museum’s documentary value, the catalogue reconstructed by SFDAS is expected to bolster Interpol’s efforts to thwart the trafficking of Sudan’s stolen heritage.

The war in Sudan has triggered a humanitarian catastrophe, killing tens of thousands and forcing more than 11 million people to flee their homes, with many seeking shelter in underdeveloped areas with scarce food and medicine. — AFP



FEATURES

GEORGINA BENISON

LAST weekend the stage of the Royal Opera House Muscat was transformed into a huge ice-skating rink for an enchanting performance of a winter extravaganza. Blankets were even provided, airline-style, against the cold! The Imperial Ice Stars, co-founded by Tony Mercer in Manchester in 2004, transported all generations into the spectacular experience of ‘Cinderella’ for three sold-out, awe-inspiring performances. A dramatic retelling of this much-loved fairytale was animated through the media of ballet, trapeze, Cyr wheel, circus, acrobatics — and of course, top-class ice skating.

The curtain rose to reveal an old town square somewhere in Siberia. The ‘Palace Theatre’ was centre stage surrounded by quaint houses and three clocks strategically placed. Immediately the square came alive with a cycling postman, an aerial balloon seller, couples spinning furiously, Cinderella herself flying high and giant illuminated cubes straight from the circus — all skating on ice. The vibrant costumes designed by Albina Gabueva were colourful and descriptive of the performers’ roles and status in the Jazz age — 1912. Stepmother, danced dramatically by the talented Olga Sharutenko, was a larger-than-life, magnificent maverick character in plum red, decadently wielding a long cigarette holder as she bossed her suffering husband about. Stepsisters in orange and pink were far from ugly, but together the trio became comic slapstick — as did the apron-wearing street buffoons whose gymnastic high jinks were just hilarious. Choreography was always perfectly synchronised with meticulous timing — like ballet — only much faster, with eye-watering leaps and spins!

Thrillingly intrepid aerial acrobatics saw men swinging partners high above their heads wearing heavy — and lethal — bladed boots. Males executed triple spins and pirouettes became dizzying spinning tops on ice. Chases took on cartoon proportions for speed and coordination.

The musical score, on a pre-recorded soundtrack, was excellent from start to finish. It used arrangements of Tchaikovsky’s ballet or original compositions by Tim Duncan and Yorkshire-born Edward Barnwell. It imitated Broadway Musicals, rich romantic film scores worthy of John Williams, jazz standards and even Tchaikovsky Waltz pastiche. The new and old blended perfectly, setting contrasting moods for each exciting scene.

The clocks became characters in themselves, speeding frenetically backwards as Fairy Godmother warns Cinderella of her curfew and later, during the ‘Dance of Thirteen O’clock’. Fairy Godmother was danced with acrobatic precision by Viktoria Lalomova, appearing in sparkly black on tall bladed stilts to prepare Cinders for the ball — receiving gasps of wonder from the stalls.

The set and lighting design by Australian Eamon D’Arcy and Paul Davison respectively, was phenomenal, evoking atmosphere and period without fussiness. When Cinderella met the Prince for the first time, dry-ice mist, blue lighting and warm yellow window-light created a dream-like quality as real water fell like rain onto their black umbrellas. The following ‘Invitation Dance’, with brightly coloured parasols provided a clever juxtaposition in light and mood. After impressive fire-stick juggling, six helpers assembled an LED-lit Stagecoach in front of the audience’s eyes to their amazement and delight.

Act 2 opened darkly with circus acrobats, five fire-jugglers -throwers and -spinners while Lalomova spun perilously above on her suspended aerial strap. Scene 2 was inside the Art Deco ‘Palace Theatre’ in metallic



SPARKLING SUCCESS OF ICE SPECTACULAR

A dramatic retelling of Cinderella was animated through the media of ballet, trapeze, Cyr wheel, circus, acrobatics — and of course, top-class ice skating.



silver and black hues, based on the real 1935 Manchester Gaumont Cinema.

Three male Principals provided a real ‘tour de force’ of skating skills, such as in a Riverdance- style Irish jig, as soloists or together. Cinderella’s father, danced superbly throughout by Ratibor Shirikov, appeared in tender scenes with his daughter, as a stooge to his wife and in an energetic ‘Pas de Trois’. The Prince’s friend — a Dandini/Alidoro character (Daniil Kiryakov and sadly missed in the programme credits) — was a dapper and athletic skater, alone or in ensembles. The Prince himself, danced by the talented Aleksandr Vdovin, had a demanding and virtuoso role, especially in the magical world of the ‘Masquerade Ball’ when Cinderella fits the shoe and they skate in matching powder blue costumes, spellbound in an impossibly beautiful ‘Pas de Deux’.

The title role was taken delicately throughout by the beautiful, flexible Ksenia Stepanova. She was everyone’s darling and required great stamina for her starring role. The final scene was a metaphor of being in love; as Stepanova took off on wires to fly ‘on Cloud Nine’ above her Prince he spins below, looking adoringly up.

The long choreographed Finale celebrated the sparkling success of the production with trapeze artists and curtain calls aplenty, ensuring that another fairytale-on-ice appears next winter for more people to enjoy the beautiful Royal Opera House Muscat.