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PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR

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MAGHRIB

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ISHA

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omanobserver.com



IN BRIEF

HM GREETINGS
TO BANGLADESH
PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Mohammed Shahabuddin of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, on the occasion of his country’s Independence Anniversary.

In his cable, His Majesty expressed his best wishes to President Shahabuddin and the people of his country for further progress and prosperity.



OMAN’S PAVILION AT
EXPO 2025 OSAKA TO
REFLECT CULTURE

The Sultanate of Oman is all set to participate in Expo 2025 Osaka, Japan. Oman’s pavilion will occupy an area of 1,763.22 square metres and showcase 33 activities. At a press conference held on Tuesday, the General Commission for the Sultanate of Oman’s Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka said that the pavilion’s design is inspired by Oman’s natural and environment and the diversity of the country’s terrain. Being one of the outcomes of the Belarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design, the design of the pavilion reflects Omani people’s adaptation to their natural surroundings. It focuses on the three basic elements of land, water, and people. **SEE ALSO P3**

GDP at fixed prices exceeds RO 38.3 billion

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman’s gross domestic product (GDP) at fixed prices rose by 1.7 per cent to RO 38.30 billion (at market prices) by the end of the fourth quarter of 2024, compared to RO 37.67 billion during the corresponding period of 2023. This was evidenced by preliminary data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

According to the NCSI, the added value of oil activities fell by 3 per cent, registering a total of RO 11,847.3 million by the end of the fourth quarter of 2024, compared to RO 12,209.7 million by the end of the fourth quarter of 2023. The contribution of oil activities accounted for 29.0 per cent. The added value of crude oil activities amounted to RO 9,973.7

million - down by 3.0 per cent, while natural gas activities grew by 5.4 per cent, registering a total of RO 1,837.7 million.

The added value of non-oil activities grew by 3.9 per cent, registering RO 27,869.9 million by the end of the fourth quarter of 2024, compared to RO 26,834 million by the end of the corresponding period in 2023.

By the end of the fourth quarter of 2024, the value of overall industrial activities stood at RO 8,395.9 million compared to RO 7,993.4 million by the end of the fourth quarter in 2023. The value of activities of agriculture, forestry and fishing posted a total of RO 987.4 million, while the value of service activities stood at RO 18,486.5 million. — ONA

Israel resumes air strikes
killing 23 Palestinians

M i l i t a r y i s s u e s n e w e v a c u a t i o n o r d e r s f o r G a z a n s

ISRAELI STRIKES across the Gaza Strip killed at least 23 Palestinians on Tuesday, local health officials said, as the Israeli military expanded evacuation orders to tens of thousands of residents across the enclave.

The Israeli military resumed its campaign against Hamas in Gaza a week ago, shattering a two-month ceasefire. Since then, nearly 700 people, mostly women and children, have been killed, Palestinian health officials say.

Most of Gaza’s 2.3 million population has already been displaced by the fighting multiple times during nearly 18 months of war and is facing worsening shortages of food and water after Israel suspended aid deliveries earlier this month. On Tuesday, the Israeli army told residents in all northern border towns to evacuate, saying Palestinian rockets had been fired at Israel from the area.

The affected towns include Jabalia, Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and Shejaia in Gaza City. Orders were also issued for areas in Khan Younis and Rafah in the south.

“For your safety, you must move immediately south to known shelters,” the military said in its orders to residents in Jabalia, the largest of Gaza’s historic refugee camps. Palestinian and United Nations officials say there are no safe areas in the Gaza Strip. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the renewed offensive aimed to pressure Hamas into releasing the remaining 59 captives it is holding in Gaza. About 24 of them are believed to be still alive.

Hamas, which accuses Israel of abandoning the January 19 ceasefire deal, said it was cooperating with a new effort, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, to restore calm and conclude the three-phase ceasefire agreement.



An old woman reacts as Palestinians make their way to flee their homes, after the Israeli army issued evacuation orders, in Jabalia, on Tuesday. — **Reuters**

According to some Hamas sources, there has been no breakthrough.

Meanwhile, the United Nations is cutting its international staff in Gaza by around a third, a UN spokesperson said on Tuesday, citing safety concerns.

“We are trying to reduce the number of international staff by about one third and this is really because the Secretary-

General (Antonio Guterres) doesn’t have the power of guaranteeing the safety of UN staff,” UN spokesperson Alessandra Vellucci told a Geneva press briefing, saying that this meant around 30 of 100 international staff. The agencies affected included the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization and the UN children’s agency, she added. — Agencies

Oman’s population will be between 8 to 11 million by 2040

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) estimates indicate that the population of the Sultanate of Oman by 2040 will be between 8 and 11 million.

According to the centre’s “Population Projections in the Sultanate of Oman 2025-2040” report, the total Omani population is expected to reach 3 million this year, gradually increasing from 3.3 million in 2030 to approximately 3.9-4.3 million in 2040.

According to the report, the total

population of Oman reached 2.28 million by the end of 2024. The centre expects the total population to reach between 2.7-3.8 million by 2030, and approximately 7.3 million by 2040. The report outlined three scenarios for the population of Oman by 2040. The first scenario projected the total population to reach 8 million, the second scenario projected it to reach between 9.4-9.7 million, and the third scenario projected the total population to reach between 11.2-11.6 million. The report predicted that the total

population of Muscat Governorate would reach 2.3 million by 2040, an increase of 858,000 people compared to 2024. It is estimated that the total population of Al Batinah North Governorate will reach 1.3 million people in 2040, compared to 952,000 people in 2024.

The centre stated that Al Batinah North Governorate had the highest population growth among Omanis, at 227,000, while Muscat Governorate had the highest population growth among expatriates, at 680,000. Al Wusta

Governorate is expected to record the lowest population growth among Omanis, at 7,000 people, and Musandam Governorate had the lowest population growth among expatriates, at 13,000.

The centre emphasised that the process of predicting the size and characteristics of the population and knowing its growth trends during a specific time period and spatial region is considered one of the scientific and practical foundations upon which planning and policy-making processes are based, as this

prediction or extrapolation is made using several practical methods and based on population data that ensure high accuracy of the outputs from the population data during the specified projection period.

Population projections aim to provide future estimates of the size, characteristics, and trends of expected population growth during the projection period. They are calculated on the basis of assumptions built on scientific foundations and previous studies of the trends.

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy with Osman Saleh in Asmara.

OMAN, ERITREA
EXPLORE MORE
COOPERATION

ASMARA: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, held a meeting with Osman Saleh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea, in Asmara on Monday. The meeting discussed the cooperation relations between Oman and Eritrea, and means of promoting them in various sectors, such as mining, marine resources, transportation and logistics, information technology and banking.

The two ministers exchanged views on a set of regional and international issues of common concern. They stressed the importance of coordination and consultation to maintain security and stability, and achieving comprehensive development. The meeting was attended by Saleh bin Mohammed al Saqri, Head of the African Department at the Foreign Ministry, and some officials. — ONA

BIDS INVITED FOR
CAFE AT QURUM
BEACH ROAD

MUSCAT: As part of its efforts to expand investment opportunities in tourism projects, Muscat Municipality announced a tender for the management and operation of a cafe in the Qurum Beach Road area.

The investment is sought from companies specialised in operating tourism projects or international restaurants, as well as firms that own a brand and wish to invest in this location.

The duration of the contract is 15 years. The location runs parallel to Qurum Beach, which stretches 4km along the Muscat coastline.

Muscat Municipality will work with consultants to redesign the Qurum Beach Road.

Oman resident
feted with Sudan’s
Presidential Medal



MUSCAT: Oman resident Saad Kassis-Mohamed (pictured), Chairman of the WeCare Foundation, has been awarded the Sudan Presidential Medal, Order of the Republic, in recognition of his exceptional contributions to sustainable development and humanitarian initiatives. One of Sudan’s highest national honours, the medal acknowledges individuals whose work has significantly advanced the nation’s social and economic progress.

Kassis-Mohamed has also been named to the Forbes 30 Under 30 list in the Social Impact category, celebrating his leadership in sustainable finance, ethical business and philanthropy.

Born and raised in Oman, Kassis-Mohamed has developed strong personal and professional ties within Oman. Under his leadership, WeCare Foundation has actively collaborated with Omani government agencies and organisations to drive sustainability initiatives aligned with Oman Vision 2040. These include pioneering renewable energy projects, educational programmes and community development schemes aimed at fostering long-term social progress.

“Saad Kassis-Mohamed’s unwavering commitment to ethical finance and social transformation has positively impacted communities in Sudan and beyond,” said Dr Hadiya Osman, Sudan’s Under-Secretary, Ministry of Social Development.

Midday work permit applications open from April 6

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour, represented by the Occupational Safety and Health Department, has announced the opening of applications for midday work permits.

These permits are designated for establishments providing essential and public services in 2025. The application window will open from April 6 to May 22. This initiative aims to regulate work



during peak heat hours while ensuring the continuity of critical services. Businesses in sectors classified as essential must submit their requests within the specified period to obtain the necessary permits for midday operations.

The ministry emphasised compliance with occupational safety standards to protect workers during high-temperature conditions.

Eid Al Fitr preparations
under way with shopping



Eid is the joy of children and parents make sure they feel the beauty of this day through gifts, going to parks and visiting relatives.

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

AS Eid Al Fitr approaches, markets and shops are filled with families looking for Eid essentials, from new clothes to the finest Omani sweets.

Said al Maamari, owner of a traditional shop in Nizwa Souq, said, “The markets turn into a popular festival before Eid, as people rush to buy traditional clothes, such as the Omani dishdasha, in addition to gifts for children.” At home, women gather to prepare delicious traditional dishes as well as Omani sweets, a symbol of Omani hospitality.

Children are the luckiest during Eid, receiving gifts from their families and relatives and proudly wearing their new clothes. In some areas, special activities are organised for children, such as traditional games and horse and camel races, which add a special flavour to the Eid.

Salem al Maharbi, a father of three from Muscat, said, “Eid is the joy of my children.

I make sure they feel the beauty of this day through gifts, going to parks and visiting relatives.”

Eid in Oman is not complete without charitable works and social solidarity. Many people visit the needy and offer them gifts and food. Charitable organisations also organise programmes to support needy families, distributing food and clothing to those in need.

Suad al Balushi, a volunteer at a charitable organisation, explained, “Eid is not just about family joy; it is an occasion to spread love and giving. We make sure everyone feels the warmth of Eid, especially those in need of support.”

In Oman, Eid Al Fitr remains an occasion that blends the spirituality of faith with the joy of family gatherings and social interaction and hence requires good preparation. It is a time when ancient customs are renewed and the bonds between members of society are strengthened, in a wonderful humanitarian picture that reflects authentic Omani values.

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has intensified its market monitoring and inspection campaigns on shops and shopping centres in line with the increasing demand during preparation for Eid Al Fitr. These campaigns focus on monitoring shops and shopping malls, controlling prices, and ensuring that prices are posted and inspected on goods and services to avoid manipulation. And with the increasing reliance on e-commerce, CPA also monitors online accounts through a specialised team in the e-commerce department, where business behaviour and practices are monitored and any violations are identified. It also cooperates with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to address reports and complaints related to e-commerce sales.

CPA advised consumers to only deal with websites and online accounts licensed by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and to ensure the reliability of offers and products before purchasing.

Jabal Shams Grand Canyon Project set to start

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate has invited tender for the implementation of the first phase of the Jabal Shams Grand Canyon Project in the Wilayat of Al Hamra.

The first phase will include implementing site levels and preparing the land for construction works, road plans and service networks, establishing reception and administration buildings, basic facilities and public utilities. The last date for purchasing documents is April 20, 2025 and the last date to submit documents is May 27, 2025.

Jabal Shams Grand Canyon Project in Al Hamra spans 148,000 square metres with an investment value of RO 7.7



The master plan encompasses several key features, including a recreational area, a glass walkway, a tourist resort, a zipline and a hiking trail.

million.

The master plan encompasses several key features, including a recreational area, a glass walkway, a tourist resort, a

zipline and a hiking trail. It will include geological exhibitions, a rock garden and an adventure centre.

Additionally, the project

will see the establishment of a coffee farm, fruit orchards, a summer camp and a garden for seasonal activities. Kiosks selling seasonal products, a theatre of 500 seating capacity, and an information centre will also be developed.

Situated at an altitude of 3,000m above sea level, the project will offer a recreational area that will offer children’s games, creative workshops, and a 200m zipline offering tourists an exhilarating blend of adventure and exploration.

A 97m long and 2.5m wide glass walkway will offer visitors a sensation of floating in the air, and 12 kiosks in a public square will offer a variety of local products, including fresh fruits, vegetables, traditional sweets and souvenirs.

SHORT TAKES



OK Nuri stands for Oman-Korea Nuri (an Arabic word for “light”) and is a voluntary club of Omani fans of Korean culture.

KOREAN EMBASSY HOSTS JOINT IFTAR WITH OK NURI

MUSCAT: The spirit of the holy month of Ramadhan echoed through the Iftar celebration that was co-hosted by the Korean Embassy in Muscat and the OK Nuri at the Embassy hall last week. The OK Nuri stands for Oman-Korea Nuri (an Arabic word for “light”) and is a voluntary club of Omani fans of Korean culture.

The OK Nuri has been instrumental in promoting people-to-people exchange and cooperation between the two countries. Hiba al Housni, President of the OK Nuri Club, shared that the members are delighted to collaborate in co-hosting the annual Iftar event.

The annual Iftar is the fourth in its series with the theme of “Sharing and Caring”, that is intended to capture the significance and value of Ramadhan. By this gathering, the Korean and Omani participants shared their reflection on the essence of compassion, benevolence, generosity and devotion of Ramadhan.

They all enjoyed the Iftar by sharing a variety of Korean and Omani food that showcases the rich culinary tradition of both countries. They also exchanged their perspectives on cultural dialogues and exchanges between Korea and Oman that are deepening between the two people. They reaffirmed their dedication to friendship, building on the successful commemoration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2024 that marked a pivotal milestone in the partnership, paving the way for continued growth.

ICAI OMAN HIGHLIGHTS ROLE OF WOMEN POWER

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef



DR SIHAM AL HARTHY

Dr Kiran Bedi, India’s first female IPS (Indian Police Service) officer and former Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry, delivered the opening speech at the celebration of International Women’s Day by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India

(ICAI) Oman Chapter, paying tribute to the incredible women shaping the world of finance, business and leadership. Dr Siham al Harthy, Chairperson of the Tourism Committee at the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), was the guest of honour at the engaging and impactful events, aimed at bringing the community together based on an effort to foster creativity and collaboration among children and women. Dr Bedi engaged herself in a vibrant and interactive session with children. She shared her incredible life journey through her graphic novel, making it a fun and engaging learning experience for the young audience. She encouraged children to embrace discipline, resilience and ethical values, inspiring them to adopt positive habits that lead to success.

The event, attended by Priti Paras Savla, Central Council Member of ICAI, witnessed an incredible turnout of professionals, members, and esteemed guests, making it a truly remarkable gathering. The celebration concluded with a special Ramadhan Iftar, fostering a spirit of unity, cultural harmony and community bonding.

The Chapter has consistently set benchmarks in thought leadership, technical sessions, industry networking and CSR initiatives. With each event, the Chapter continues to reinforce its commitment to professional excellence, community engagement and empowerment. The Chapter remains dedicated to organising enriching initiatives that create a lasting impact on both professional and social fronts.

MOHT IMPLEMENTS RESTORATION, MAINTENANCE PROJECTS IN SUWAIQ

AL SUWAIQ: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) is actively carrying out multiple restoration and maintenance projects aimed at preserving and rehabilitating historical and archaeological landmarks in the Wilayat of Al Suwaiq, Al Batinah North Governorate. This initiative aligns with the ministry’s ongoing commitment to safeguarding Oman’s rich cultural heritage across various wilayats and governorates.

Hassan bin Sulaiman al

Jabri, Director of the Heritage and Tourism Department in Al Batinah North, highlighted that the directorate is undertaking a series of restoration efforts, focusing on key historical sites that reflect Oman’s architectural and cultural legacy.

Among the key projects is the recently completed Al Maghabsha Wall, which underwent extensive restoration, including repairs to its walls, towers and internal components. Additionally, significant work is being carried



The Al Maghabsha Wall features cylindrical towers emphasising strategic and defensive significance.

out to restore the Al Hilal Wall, with completion anticipated within the current year. The project encompasses the renovation of walls and the maintenance of towers, ensuring structural stability and

long-term preservation.

The Al Maghabsha Wall, which dates back to the reign of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy (1807–1856 AD), is characterised by its rectangular fortress-like design. Measuring 45 metres in length and 44 metres in width, it features four cylindrical towers, each spanning three floors, emphasising its strategic and defensive significance.

Meanwhile, the Al Hilal Wall, constructed in the 13th century AH (19th century AD), showcases a square-shaped structure with an elevated entrance comprising two floors, which historically served as a vantage point for guarding and surveillance. The structure also houses two large cannons, underscoring its defensive role in the region’s history. — ONA

Expo 2025 Osaka: Oman’s pavilion opens on April 6

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

OMAN’S PAVILION at Expo 2025 Osaka will officially open on April 6. The pavilion, with its theme of “Extended Connections”, reflects the Sultanate of Oman’s relationships with various continents around the world. Expo 2025 Osaka will begin on April 13 and continue until October 13, 2025, in Japan’s Osaka, under the theme “Designing the Future Society for Our Lives”, with the participation of more than 155 countries with an estimated 28.2 million visitors anticipated to attend.

The Oman Pavilion Management Team unveiled the details of the event during a press conference held in Muscat on Tuesday. Reem al Shanfari, a member of the Oman Pavilion Management Team, showcased the design and concept of the Omani Pavilion, which spans an area of 1,763.22 square metres, with a construction area of 668 square metres. The pavilion draws inspiration from Oman’s diverse natural landscapes and the deep-rooted connection between its people and the environment. The design revolves around three core elements: land, water and people, and is one of the distinguished outcomes of the Bilarab Bin



Reem al Shanfari, a member of the Oman Pavilion Management Team, showcased the design and concept of the Omani Pavilion in Muscat on Tuesday. Photo by Faisal al Balushi

For the first time, Oman is offering students the opportunity to volunteer at the pavilion. The selection process was based on strict criteria, most notably proficiency in the Japanese language.

Haitham Award for Architectural Design.

Al Shanfari presented the six prominent themes for Oman participation in Expo 2025 Osaka: communication and interaction, tourism, investment opportunities, cultural identity, and international relations and partnerships.

These themes align with the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040, aiming to promote the nation as a global hub for tourism and investment, and to spotlight Oman’s advancements in green economy and sustainable development.

A special focus will be placed on the development of the education sector through collaboration with global academic and research institutions. The pavilion aims to showcase Oman’s vision for a sustainable future, paving the way for new international partnerships.

For the first time, Oman is offering students the opportunity to volunteer at the pavilion. Al Shanfari added that a large number of students had applied, but the selection process was based on strict criteria, most notably proficiency in the Japanese language.

Oman’s pavilion will host more than 33 activities from April 6 to October 13.

Ibrahim Bani Araba, a member of the technical committee of the Omani Pavilion, said that the event is a significant opportunity to enhance cultural and technological exchange with countries around the world, highlight the cultural and economic progress of Oman. The press conference included a showcase of the digital platform accompanying the Sultanate of Oman’s pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka. This platform is an extension of the pavilion, where visitors will be able to interact with a wide range of new content from various participating entities using extended reality and artificial intelligence technologies.

Oman debuts at London Design Biennale

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman is set to make its first-ever appearance at the prestigious London Design Biennale 2025, a global platform celebrating creativity and innovation in design. Representing Oman at this renowned event is ‘Memory Network’, an artwork by Omani architect and designer Haitham al Busafi, which will be showcased on June 5. This participation is a significant step in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth’s broader efforts to highlight Oman’s cultural heritage and artistic contributions on the international stage. It aligns with the Sultanate of Oman’s Cultural Strategy 2021-2040, aimed at transforming Oman’s cultural landscape into a hub of creativity and innovation.

Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture, emphasised the importance of Oman’s participation, stating that it provides a valuable opportunity to present the nation’s rich



The Biennale serves as a platform for cultural dialogue

cultural identity through contemporary design. He noted that the London Design Biennale serves as a platform for cultural dialogue, fostering collaborations between Omani and international designers while allowing Oman to engage with a global audience.

To ensure a compelling and well-curated presence at the event, the Ministry has commissioned the Zawraq Collective to oversee Oman’s pavilion. The collective selected Haitham al Busafi as the lead designer, entrusting him with the creative direction of the pavilion.

At the heart of Oman’s showcase is ‘Memory Network’, a piece inspired by the country’s deep-rooted pottery heritage. The artwork explores the intellectual transition from tangible heritage to digital preservation, raising thought-provoking questions about the evolving notions of value and the legacy we leave behind for future generations. By incorporating traditional influences into a contemporary design narrative, ‘Memory Network’ captures the essence of Oman’s past while reflecting on its future.

Founded in 2016 by Sir John Sorrell and Ben Evans, the London Design Biennale is a globally recognised platform that brings together designers, cultural institutions and creative thinkers from around the world. The event fosters cross-cultural collaborations and highlights the role of design in shaping a sustainable and interconnected world. Since its inception, the Biennale has attracted top-tier international talent, with countries and institutions presenting groundbreaking design concepts that spark meaningful conversations about innovation and progress.

Oman’s participation in this event reaffirms its growing influence in the arts and design sector, demonstrating its commitment to using culture as a tool for international engagement and sustainable development. By joining the global dialogue on design, Oman continues to position itself as a key player in cultural diplomacy and artistic expression. — ONA

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

WITH Eid Al Fitr approaching, children's joy multiplies, and one of the most prominent aspects of this joy is indulging in sweets, which are considered an essential part of Eid traditions. Their happiness with sweets isn't limited to what's offered at home but rather what they buy which are often high in sugar and fats.

However, behind this high demand lies important questions regarding the safety of these products and their impact on children's health especially given the variety available and the lack of consumer awareness among some families.

Dr Hussain al Masroori, Director-General of Food Safety and Quality Centre, emphasised the crucial difference between "safe food" and "healthy food", pointing out that the issue doesn't lie in the type of food itself, but rather in the pattern, manner and rate of consumption.

He stated that most sweets available in Omani markets are safe in terms of food safety being free from physical, chemical and microbiological contaminants but whether they are healthy or not is a subjective matter that varies from person to person.

Dr Al Masroori spoke about the procedures followed to ensure the safety of both imported and locally produced sweets. He explained that the Food Safety and Quality Centre is responsible for ensuring that all imported food products comply with the approved standards in the Sultanate of Oman. He noted that this task is carried out through a series of inspection and examination stages at border entry points, starting with the verification and review of accompanying documents.

INSPECTION

The procedures also include an inspection of the products to check transportation conditions, the accuracy of food labelling, the integrity of the packaging and the overall condition of the shipment. If any concerns or suspicions arise, a decision is made either to reject the shipment or to grant conditional release, which involves collecting samples for necessary laboratory tests. He added that the centre also relies on a risk assessment programme, which involves randomly sampling shipments.

Regarding locally produced products, he pointed to the ongoing collaboration with the municipal sector. The centre, in coordination with regulatory authorities in municipalities free zones, monitors food establishments.

"There is continuous coordination between the food safety and quality departments across various governorates, municipal departments and the Consumer Protection Authority to conduct joint inspection campaigns that ensure the safety of products in circulation," he said, adding that if non-compliant products are found at entry points, immediate action is taken either rejecting or destroying the products.

When buying sweets for children, Dr Al Masroori urged parents to distinguish between a safe product and a healthy one, clarifying that all products entering the Omani market or produced locally must be safe according to regulations and inspections, but that doesn't mean

they are beneficial for all children from a health perspective. He noted that some products contain high levels of sugar, calories, or oils which may not be suitable for some children, especially those with chronic illnesses or allergies. He stressed the importance of reading the nutrition label on the packaging to understand ingredients and sugar and calorie content.

NATURAL FOODS

He also emphasised the importance of considering children's age-specific needs, saying: "A three-year-old child's consumption should not match that of an older child. It's important to determine the appropriate daily or weekly amount. Eating sweets is not necessarily harmful if done in moderation, but natural foods remain the better option, especially for children," he said.

Dr Alya al Kindi, an emergency medicine specialist, pointed out that excessive sweet consumption can cause health issues in children, even though they need a moderate amount of sugar as an energy source. Among the most common issues

When buying sweets for children, parents need to distinguish between a safe product and a healthy one. All products entering the Omani market or produced locally must be safe according to inspections regulation, but that doesn't mean they are beneficial for all children from a health perspective.

is tooth decay caused by acid buildup from bacteria. Sweets also contribute to weight gain and obesity due to their high caloric content, increasing the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease.

She highlighted that high sugar intake can also weaken the immune system, cause digestive disturbances

and lead to mood swings and energy crashes. Dr Alya added that excessive sugar consumption can disrupt healthy eating habits and impair calcium absorption and bone health. Dr Alya stressed the importance of educating families about the harms of excessive sweet consumption during Eid and encouraged practical steps to reduce children's intake. She advised limiting the availability of sweets at home and offering healthy alternatives like fruits and natural juices.

REGULATE SUGAR

She emphasised the need to regulate when sweets are consumed and avoid offering them as a reward, as this reinforces psychological attachment to them. Additionally, she recommended promoting healthy behaviours such as brushing teeth after meals and staying physically active during Eid.

Regarding the ingredients used in sweets, Dr Alya advised avoiding products with harmful additives like artificial colours, sweeteners and preservatives — including tartrazine, aspartame, sodium benzoate and hydrogenated fats — due to their potentially negative effects on children's health.

She noted that the maximum recommended sugar intake for children aged 2 to 18 should not exceed 25 grammes per day, but recent studies have shown that over 81 per cent of children exceed this limit, raising concerns about early-onset obesity and increased body mass index.



GAZA

SHORT TAKES



Pro-Palestinian protesters take part in a rally against Israel's operations, in Athens. — Reuters

ISRAEL SLAMMED FOR PLAN TO ENABLE PALESTINIANS' DEPARTURE

GAZA: Plans by Israel for a new authority to facilitate the departure of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip were criticised by Israeli activists as well as by Jordan and Germany. A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier confirmed that the Security Cabinet had approved a proposal to set up an authority, under the Defence Ministry, tasked with “preparing the voluntary departure of residents of the Gaza Strip to third countries in a safe and controlled manner.”

It comes after US President Donald Trump proposed to resettle Gaza’s population of more than 2 million to Arab countries and convert the war-torn coastal strip into a Middle East “riviera”, a vision that has been widely rejected by Israel’s Arab neighbours, including Egypt which borders Gaza.

The Israeli campaign group Peace Now condemned the move, labelling it “an indelible stain on Israel” in an English-language post on X. “When life in a certain place is made impossible by bombing and siege, there is nothing ‘voluntary’ about people leaving,” the organisation wrote.

The German Foreign Office said it had not yet examined the Israeli proposal but that it was potentially alarming. “If this involves setting up an authority with the aim of permanent expulsion of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, that is unacceptable and must be condemned,” a spokesman said in Berlin. The German government also expressed sharp criticism of Israel’s decision to recognise 13 West Bank settlements seen as illegal under international law. “We sharply condemn this decision,” a Foreign Office spokesman said. “We reject Israel’s settlement policy, as it is contrary to international law and obstructs any chance of a two-state solution by blocking a viable Palestinian state,” he added.

Jordan strongly condemned Israel’s settlement policies, including the plan to facilitate migration from Gaza, with the Foreign Ministry in Amman saying they amount to forced displacement. All measures directed against the presence of Palestinians on their land constitute a blatant violation of international law, the ministry said.

Jordan is one of the countries that has taken in the largest number of refugees per citizen, particularly Palestinians and Syrians. — dpa

HAMAS RELEASES VIDEO OF TWO ISRAELI HOSTAGES

TEL AVIV: Hamas’s armed wing released a video on Monday showing two Israeli hostages held in Gaza since the Palestinian fighters’ attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The roughly three-minute video, whose exact recording date could not be verified, shows the two men sitting on the floor speaking in Hebrew to the camera, addressing a hostage who has already been freed and asking him to recount his experiences in captivity in order to speed up their release.

It was identified the two men

as Elkana Bohbot and Yosef Haim Ohana. Bohbot’s family reacted to the video with a statement appealing to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump to secure the hostages’ release.

“Imagine this is your son, the father of your grandchild, waiting to see daylight, hearing (Israeli army) bombs, and living in constant fear for his life,” the statement said. “The video is a sign of life, but we want Elkana alive at home and the return of everyone,” it added.

In the footage, the two men

talk about the danger they have faced since the resumption of Israeli air strikes on Gaza last week. In addition to reprising its intense bombardment of Gaza, Israel has also resumed ground operations. The renewed attacks came after weeks of disagreement with Hamas over how to extend a ceasefire that took effect on January 19. Of the 251 hostages seized during October 7, 2023 attack, 58 are still held by Gaza militants, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead. — AFP

Israel presses Gaza attack with new evacuation calls

GAZA: An Israeli air strike killed a journalist working with Al Jazeera and the military issued fresh calls to evacuate parts of Gaza’s north, as Israel pressed its renewed bombardment and ground operations in the Palestinian territory. Israel resumed intense air strikes across Gaza last Tuesday, followed by ground operations, after talks on extending a ceasefire with the Palestinian group Hamas reached an impasse. On Monday evening, Israeli military spokesman Avichay Adraee issued “an early warning before a strike” in the northern area of Jabalia. “...organisations are once again returning to and firing rockets from populated areas... For your safety, head south toward the known shelters immediately,” Adraee said on X, after issuing similar warnings for the northern towns of Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun.

Earlier, Gaza’s civil defence agency said an Israeli drone strike on Monday afternoon killed Hussam Shabat, who was working with Al Jazeera, near a petrol station in Beit Lahia. Mahmud Bassal, spokesman for the agency, said air strikes had targeted more than 10 cars, including Shabat’s, in various parts of Gaza. “Hussam Shabat, a journalist collaborating with Al Jazeera Mubasher, was martyred in an Israeli strike targeting his car in the northern Gaza Strip,” an alert from the broadcaster said, referring to its live Arabic channel. Footage from the scene in Beit Lahia showed Palestinians gathering around the car, which had an Al Jazeera sticker on its windscreen. A body could be seen on the ground nearby.

According to the US-based

Fresh calls to evacuate parts of Gaza’s north, as Israel pressed its renewed bombardment and ground operations

730 people had been killed since Israel resumed bombardments on March 18, including 57 in the past 24 hours

The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate said more than 206 journalists and media workers had been killed since the start of the war



Palestinians mourn members from the Abu al Rous family during the funeral at the Bureij. — AFP

Committee to Protect Journalists, Israel’s military in October accused Shabat and five other Palestinian journalists of being militants, which he denied. Hundreds of people attended Shabat’s funeral held at Beit Lahia’s Indonesian Hospital, praying over his body, which still wore a press flak jacket. The civil defence agency said a media worker from Islamic Jihad-affiliated Palestine Today TV, Muhammad Mansour, was killed in a separate air strike in Gaza’s south.

In a statement, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate called the deaths of Shabat and Mansour “a crime added to the record of Israeli terrorism”. It said that more than 206 journalists and media workers had been killed since the start of the war, which was triggered by attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

Israel’s retaliatory campaign has killed at least 50,082 people in Gaza, mostly civilians, according to

the territory’s health ministry. The health ministry said on Monday that 730 people had been killed since Israel resumed bombardments on March 18, including 57 in the past 24 hours. Militants also seized 251 hostages on October 7, 58 of whom are still in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead. Hamas’s armed wing released a video on Monday showing two Israeli hostages — identified as Elkana Bohbot and Yosef Haim Ohana — describing the danger they have faced since the resumption of intense Israeli strikes. Bohbot’s family reacted to the video with a statement appealing to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump to secure the remaining hostages’ release. “Imagine this is your son, the father of your grandchild, waiting to see daylight, hearing (Israeli army) bombs, and living in constant fear for his life.” — Reuters

UN cuts international staff due to safety concerns

GENEVA: The United Nations is cutting its international staff in Gaza by around a third, a UN spokesperson said on Tuesday, citing safety concerns. “We are trying to reduce the number of international staff by about one third and this is really because the Secretary-General (Antonio Guterres) doesn’t have the power of guaranteeing the safety of UN staff,” UN spokesperson Alessandra Vellucci told a Geneva press briefing, saying that this meant around 30 of 100 international staff. The agencies affected included the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization and the UN children’s agency, she added.

The United Nations said on Monday it is reducing its international staff numbers in Gaza after Israeli strikes in the enclave that have killed hundreds of civilians, including United Nations personnel. UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric



A man and paramedic assist an injured man to exit an ambulance upon arrival at the Indonesian Hospital in Beit Lahia. — AFP

told a regular news briefing the move was taken for security and operational reasons and would involve the withdrawal of about 30 of the 100 or so international staff currently in Gaza.

“What we’re doing is reducing the number of international staff members by about one third this

week, maybe a bit more likely to come. It’s a temporary measure. We hope to have people return to Gaza as soon as practicable,” he said. He stressed that the UN was not leaving Gaza. “The Secretary-General has taken the difficult decision... even as humanitarian needs soar and our concern over the protection of civilians intensifies,” he said. “The organisation remains committed to continuing to provide aid that civilians depend on for their survival and protection.”

Dujarric said that based on information currently available, strikes that hit a UN compound in Deir Al Balah on March 19, killing a Bulgarian UN worker and leaving six others - from France, Moldova, North Macedonia, the Palestine territories and the United Kingdom - with severe injuries, came from an Israeli tank.

— Reuters



Recall

TOYOTA YARIS

RECALL DATE: 26/03/2025

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production*	#Number of Affected Commodities
Toyota Yaris	August 3/ 2022 through January 4/ 2024	92

*Not all vehicles in this production period, are affected
#Subject to revision, based on the information received from the manufacturer, from time to time.

Recall consequence

Subject vehicles are developed mainly by Daihatsu and manufactured by Toyota and equipped with a side airbag installed alongside the seatback frame of each front seat. The side airbag is designed to deploy during certain crashes by supplying an electric current to the side airbag through a wire harness connector. If force is applied to the connector portion of the side airbag as the occupant sits in the front seat, the wire harness connector may dislodge. If this occurs, the SRS airbag warning light will illuminate, and the side airbag will not deploy in the event of certain crashes.

Recall Action

To install the connector cap of front seat side airbag



To check the serial number of the affected items, please visit the Recall and Warnings website by scanning the QR code.



وزارة الداخلية
SAUDI BAWANI

Contact details: Toll free : 80073000
Working days: Sunday - Thursday
Working Time 8:00 - 17:00hrs.



الرجاء الاتصال بـ ٨٠٠٧٣٠٠٠

التاريخ: ٢٦ مارس ٢٠٢٥

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Members of the M23 rebel group stand guard, in Bukavu. — Reuters

MSF CONDEMNS SURGE OF VIOLENCE IN DR CONGO

KINSHASA: Doctors Without Borders (MSF) on Tuesday said civilians were suffering “horrific” wounds in a new surge in violence in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo’s turbulent Ituri province. Gold-rich Ituri has long been hit by conflict between ethnic group as well as attacks by the IS-linked group, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). It lies just north of North and South Kivu provinces, where the Rwanda-backed M23 armed group has seized large tracts of territory in recent months.

The medical charity, known by its French acronym MSF, said it had seen “a renewed spike in atrocities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo’s Ituri province, where its medical teams are providing care for civilians with horrific injuries”. Citing UN figures, it said violence had displaced around 100,000 people since the beginning of the year, with attacks killing more than 200 people in January and February alone. More than half of the victims of violence that MSF treated at its clinic in the provincial capital, Bunia, up until mid-March were women and children, it said. — AFP

ISRAEL STRIKES HIT BASES IN CENTRAL SYRIA, KILL FOUR



An Israeli military vehicle rides on the Golan Heights side of the ceasefire line with Syria. — Reuters

BEIRUT: Israeli shelling killed four people in southern Syria on Tuesday, Syria’s state news agency reported, after the Israeli military said its troops had clashed with militants there who had opened fire on them. On Tuesday, the Israeli military said militants in southern Syria opened fire towards Israeli troops, without specifying whether the Israeli troops were within Syrian territory when they were targeted. The Israeli military said its troops returned fire and that an Israeli warplane struck the militants. It gave no details on casualties but said “hits were identified”.

Syria’s state news agency said Israeli tank fire on Koya, a town in the southern province of Daraa, had killed four people and wounded others, including a woman. A Syrian security source said the death toll was expected to rise. Earlier, Israel said it had attacked two military bases in Homs province in central Syria. The European Union’s foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas warned on Tuesday that Israel’s strikes into Syria “risk further escalation”. — Reuters

ACCESS GRANTED

Bangladesh to secure Starlink Internet deal



Bangladesh’s interim leader said a deal with Elon Musk’s SpaceX-owned satellite Internet network Starlink is expected to be reached within three months to provide Internet services across the South Asian country. Muhammad Yunus has said the deal would provide a reliable Internet service that could not be disrupted by any future political upheaval. “If Starlink is launched, no government will have the ability to shut down Internet access.” — Reuters

NECESSARY MEASURES

Bosnia investigates wanted Serb leader trip



Bosnia launched a probe into Serb leader Milorad Dodik travelling to Serbia despite being subject to an arrest warrant on accusations of flouting Bosnia’s constitution. “All necessary measures... to determine the circumstances and manner in which President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik crossed the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Serbia are being taken,” police said. — AFP

RENEWED INSECURITY

South Sudan opposition decries arrests



South Sudan’s opposition said on Tuesday that several key political figures had been arrested, a day after one of its army bases was bombed as international concern mounts over the risk of a return to civil war. The renewed insecurity in the world’s young4st has prompted concerns from regional partners, with Uganda — which has a long history of intervening in South Sudan — deploying troops to the capital Juba this month. — AFP

TRUMP DISMISSES SECURITY LEAK OVER YEMEN STRIKES AS A ‘GLITCH’

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Tuesday shrugged off security concerns after top officials texted a group chat, which accidentally included a journalist, plans for strikes on Yemen’s rebels. Trump, who took office in January, told NBC News in a phone call that it was “the only glitch in two months, and it turned out not to be a serious one,” adding his national security adviser Michael Waltz had “learned a lesson.”

It was said that top Trump

administration officials texted a group chat including a journalist plans for strikes on Yemen’s rebels, an extraordinary security breach that shocked Washington’s political elite. US President Donald Trump announced the strikes on March 15, but The Atlantic magazine’s editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg wrote on Monday that he had hours of advance notice via the group chat on Signal, which included Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth and Vice-President JD Vance.

“The message thread that was reported appears to be authentic, and we are reviewing how an inadvertent number was added to the chain,” National Security Council spokesman. The White House said Trump “continues to have the utmost confidence in his national security team,” after the US president earlier said he did not “know anything about” the issue. Hegseth took no responsibility for the security breach as he spoke to reporters late on Monday. — AFP

Unesco site evacuated as S Korea wildfires spread

INHABITANTS

of a Unesco-listed village were ordered to evacuate while a historic Buddhist temple was burned to the ground as South Korea scrambled to contain worsening wildfires, which are tearing across the country’s southeast. More than a dozen different blazes broke out over the weekend, with four people killed as dry windy weather hampered efforts to contain one of the country’s worst-ever fire outbreaks, prompting the government to transfer thousands of prisoners.

Early on Tuesday, acting Interior and Safety Minister Ko Ki-dong said the wildfires had “so far affected approximately 14,694 hectares (36,310 acres) with damage continuing to grow”. The extent of damage makes the fires collectively the third largest in South Korea’s history. The worst was an April 2000 blaze that scorched 23,913 hectares (59,090 acres) across the east coast. “Strong winds, dry weather and haze are hampering firefighting efforts,” Ko told a disaster and safety meeting.

The government declared a state of emergency in four regions, citing “the extensive damage caused by simultaneous wildfires” and thousands of people have been ordered to evacuate. “The wind was so strong that I couldn’t stand still,” Kwon So-han, a 79-year-old resident in Andong said. “The fire came from the mountain and fell on my house. “Those who haven’t experienced it won’t know. I could only bring my body.”



Houses catch fire as a wildfire devastates the area, in Uiseong, South Korea. — Reuters

More than a dozen different blazes broke out over the weekend, with four people killed as dry windy weather hampered efforts to contain one of the country’s worst-ever fire outbreaks, prompting the government to transfer thousands of prisoners.

Late on Tuesday, authorities in Andong issued an emergency alert to residents of the historic Hahoe Folk Village -- a Unesco-listed world heritage site popular with tourists -- as the blaze drew closer. “The Uiseong Angye wildfire is moving in the direction” of that area, the alert said. “Residents are requested to evacuate immediately.”

In Uiseong, the sky was full of smoke and haze, AFP reporters saw, with the Korea Forest Service saying that the containment rate for the fire in that area had decreased from 60 to 55 per cent on Tuesday.

Early in the morning, workers at the Gounsa Temple, which was more than a thousand years old, were attempting to move valuable

artefacts and cover up Buddhist statues to protect them from possible damage. “We used fire retardant blankets,” Joo Jung-wan, a Gyeongbuk Seobu Cultural Heritage Care Center worker said.

Hours later, an official at the Korea Heritage Service said that the temple had been burnt down. “It is very heartbreaking and painful to see the precious temples that are over a thousand years old being lost,” monk Deung-woon said.

Around 3,500 inmates from correctional facilities in the southeastern county of Cheongsong and Andong are being transferred to nearby prisons, Yonhap news agency reported, citing the justice ministry. — AFP

TÜRKİYE BRACES FOR MORE PROTESTS



ISTANBUL: More than 1,400 people have been arrested in connection with the mass protests that have swept Türkiye since March 19, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said on Tuesday.

“To date, 1,418 suspects have been detained in illegal demonstrations held since March 19, 2025,” he wrote on X. Seven journalists detained for covering the mass protests that have gripped Türkiye were granted conditional release on Tuesday as the nation braced for another day of unrest over the arrest of a top opposition figure. A court ordered the conditional release of seven out of eight journalists who had been arrested in Istanbul before dawn on Monday. — AFP

SHARP TAXES



US President Donald Trump listens as Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth speaks in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

TRUMP TO IMPOSE
TARIFFS ON BUYING
VENEZUELAN OIL

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump announced on Monday steep tariffs on imports from countries buying Venezuelan oil and gas, a punitive measure that could hit China and India, among others, and sow fresh global trade uncertainty.

Since returning to the White House in January, Trump has unleashed tariffs on US allies and foes alike, attempting to strong-arm both economic and diplomatic policy.

The latest across-the-board 25 per cent levies targeting direct and indirect buyers of Venezuelan oil can take effect as soon as April 2, according to an order signed on Monday by Trump.

The US secretary of state, in consultation with other government agencies, is authorised to determine if the new levy will be imposed.

These could hit China and India, with experts noting that Venezuela exports oil to both those countries, and to the United States and Spain.

Trump told reporters on Monday that the 25 per cent tariff would be on top of existing rates.

Caracas called the measure a “new aggression” by Washington.

“They can sanction and impose tariffs on whatever they want, what they cannot sanction is the love and patriotism of the Venezuelan people,” President Nicolas Maduro said during an event broadcast on radio and television.

“We call on the US to stop interfering in Venezuela’s internal affairs (and) abolish the illegal unilateral sanctions,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun told a regular news conference. In February, Venezuela exported about 500,000 barrels of oil per day to China and 240,000 barrels to the United States, experts said.

Trump has dubbed April 2 “Liberation Day” for the world’s biggest economy, already promising reciprocal tariffs tailored to each trading partner in an effort to remedy practices that Washington deems unfair. He earlier signalled sector-specific duties coming around the same day — but the White House said on Monday it might take a narrower approach.

In his Monday announcement on Truth Social involving Venezuela, the president cited “numerous reasons” for what he called a “secondary tariff.”

He accused Venezuela of “purposefully and deceitfully” sending “undercover, tens of thousands of high level, and other, criminals” to the United States. — AFP

Breakthrough in
French toddler
death mystery
as grandparents
arrested

MARSEILLE: A lengthy investigation into the mysterious death in 2023 of a French toddler took a surprise turn on Tuesday when police arrested the boy’s grandparents on suspicion of murder.

The death of Emile Soleil, a boy of two-and-a-half who went missing in a French Alpine village in July 2023, had remained unexplained even after some of his remains were discovered nine months later.

Prosecutors at the time said the

cause of his death could have been “a fall, manslaughter or murder”.

In a sharp turn of events, Vedovini and his wife were arrested on Tuesday morning on suspicion of “voluntary homicide”, Aix-en-Provence chief prosecutor Jean-Luc Blachon said in a statement sent to AFP.

Contacted by AFP, the couple’s lawyer, Isabelle Colombani, said she had no comment, having “only just heard” about the development.

Two other members of the family

were also arrested, prosecutors said.

Their identity was not revealed but Blachon said they were “adult children” of the Vedovinis.

Speculation that a development in the case was imminent resurfaced earlier this month when investigators returned to the village.

Tuesday’s arrests were the result of fact-finding “over recent months”, the prosecutor told reporters.

He said forensic police were examining “several spots in the area”. — AFP

Russia, US study outcome
of talks on Ukraine war

MOSCOW and Washington are analysing the outcome of US-Russian talks in Saudi Arabia, the Kremlin said on Tuesday, but it gave no details of discussions which both sides said would focus on a potential naval ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. Russian and US delegations met in Riyadh on Monday and Ukraine’s national broadcaster Suspilne cited a source as saying Ukrainian and US officials would meet in the Saudi capital on Tuesday.

Washington portrayed Monday’s talks as a step in President Donald Trump’s effort to end the war. Ukraine and its European allies worry that Trump could seal a deal with Putin that gives in to Russian demands and undermines their security.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the Russian and US delegations, who had been looking into the feasibility of some kind of a deal on the safety of ships in the Black Sea and other issues, had reported back to their capitals.

“You see, we are talking about technical negotiations that go deep into details. Therefore, of course, the content of these negotiations will definitely not be published. This should not be expected,” Peskov told reporters.

“Secondly, I repeat once again, the reports back to the capitals are now being analysed. Only then will it be possible to talk about some understandings.” He said there was no talk of a three-way meeting involving Russia, the United States and Ukraine.

There were also no immediate plans for a further conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump, but such a conversation can be promptly organised if needed, Peskov said.

When Trump and Putin spoke last week, the Russian leader declined a proposal by the US president for a full 30-day ceasefire in Ukraine, but agreed to a moratorium on attacking Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Ukraine says it is ready to join a limited energy ceasefire if it is properly documented.

OVERNIGHT ATTACK



Russia’s President Vladimir Putin meets with the Governor of the Krasnodar region Veniamin Kondratyev at the Kremlin in Moscow. — AFP

Fighting has continued while the talks take place in Saudi Arabia, three years after Russia sent its army into Ukraine. Ukraine’s air force said Russia had launched 139 drones and an Iskander-M ballistic missile during an overnight attack that wounded two people in the central Poltava region and damaged storage facilities in the Kyiv region.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said on Monday Russia should end what he called its war on civilians instead of making “hollow statements about peace.” Russia accused the Ukrainian military of deliberately targeting two Russian journalists who were killed along with their driver and three other people in an artillery strike in eastern Ukraine.

Kyiv has yet to comment on the incident. The discussion on a naval truce is part of a push by the US to agree a wider 30-day ceasefire and pave the way for talks on a full peace agreement.

Putin has demanded that Ukraine, in any peace deal, abandon hopes of joining Nato and withdraw entirely from four regions

claimed by Moscow. Ukraine has ruled out territorial concessions.

Ukrainian officials met US officials in Saudi Arabia on Sunday but were not present at Monday’s talks. A White House source said progress was being made in the Riyadh talks and a “positive announcement” was expected “in the near future.” Trump, who ran for president last year on promise to solve the conflict quickly, on Monday listed other issues he said were on the table.

“We’re talking about territory right now. We’re talking about lines of demarcation, talking about power, power plant ownership,” he said.

The White House says the initial aim of the Saudi talks is to secure a maritime truce in the Black Sea, allowing the free flow of shipping.

Maritime battles have been a comparatively limited facet of the war since 2023, after Ukrainian attacks drove Moscow to move its navy far from contested waters, making it possible for Ukraine to reopen ports and resume exports. — Reuters

Germany’s far right targets greater influence in new parliament

BERLIN: Germany’s new parliament sits for the first time on Tuesday, with a record number of MPs from the far-right AfD expected to lay claim to several senior positions in the chamber.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) came second only to the conservative CDU-CSU alliance, which is currently in negotiations to form a government with the Social Democrats (SPD) of outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Julia Klöckner of the CDU is expected to be elected as the new president of the Bundestag after it convenes from 11:00 am (10:00 GMT).

The AfD scored 20.8 per cent of the vote in February’s election, almost doubling the number of lawmakers it has in the lower house, with 152 of the 630 seats.

As the second-largest party, the AfD would typically be entitled to various senior positions, including

influential roles in parliamentary committees.

However, other parties have previously organised to keep the AfD out from such positions to maintain a long-held “firewall” against allowing the far right into positions of power.

“We will claim all the rights and all the positions we are entitled to as the second-largest group in the parliament,” Bernd Baumann, the head of the AfD’s parliamentary group, said.

“If our political opponents continue to try to deprive us of our rights and our posts, they will be ignoring the will of more than 10 million voters who have made us the largest opposition group,” he said.

The AfD wants to nominate a vice-president of the parliament, as well as the presidents of several committees.

It is also demanding a place on a parliamentary body responsible for



Julia Klöckner, newly elected President of the Bundestag. — AFP

overseeing Germany’s intelligence services.

Several chapters of the AfD are under surveillance by intelligence services as they have been classified

as right-wing extremist. SPD lawmaker Lars Castellucci argued that while “the parliamentary participation of the AfD must be guaranteed”, precautions must

be taken with regard to parties “when there are doubts about their compliance with the constitution”.

The conservatives have been more cautious with their censure, with the CDU’s Patrick Schnieder pointing out simply that “every candidate must submit to a democratic election” for parliamentary posts.

Parliamentary procedure gives every party in the Bundestag a vice-president, but the AfD, which has returned deputies since 2017, has so far failed to get the votes to have their candidates elected.

With respect to the committees, the parties typically decide among themselves who is allocated the head of which group.

As the expected main opposition in the Bundestag, with almost a quarter of the seats, the AfD will receive a greater share of state financing for parties, be allocated more staff and get more speaking time. — AFP

OPINION

For some to love you, some must loathe you



HYESHA BARRETT

The author is a Master Life Coach and NLP Practitioner based in Muscat

THE desire to be loved, accepted and validated is deeply rooted in human nature. It stems from so many sources, mainly from the desire to belong and feel understood. From childhood, we learn to seek approval, to adjust ourselves (in our speech and demeanour), all to ensure we are palatable to those around us.

We learnt to convince ourselves that if we are kind enough, agreeable enough, if we tread lightly and offend no one, we might escape the sting of rejection. Yet, in doing so, we delude ourselves, not realising that what makes us remarkable is rarely what makes us universally liked.

Life has a way of offering us lessons we often resist learning. Perhaps one of the difficult pills to swallow is if you are to be truly loved, you must be equally willing to be loathed. The very traits that make you magnetic to some, will inevitably repel others. It's a life principle many struggle to embrace. We often dim our light and curtail

our feelings, just to make others happier and comfortable.

When we choose to live aligned with our truth, we will automatically unsettle others. Not because we intend to, but because our existence becomes a mirror. It reflects what others dare not confront within themselves.

People project their insecurities, fears and unhealed wounds onto others. One's confidence might trigger another's self-doubt. Our joy might highlight someone's misery. Your success could remind others of their failures. When we understand this, we stop internalising rejection and see it for what it truly is — someone else's battle, not ours.

Understand that some will love you precisely for the same reasons others cannot stand you. When you dare to shine brightly, you illuminate the darkness others would rather avoid, and some will hate you for it.

Trying to please everyone is a guaranteed route to self-betrayal. When we dilute our personality, beliefs or dreams just to be

Pursue what lights you up. Live loudly. Some will mock, but others—your tribe, your people—will see you, hear you, and love you all the more for it.

satisfactory to all, we ultimately sacrifice the essence of who we are. Ironically, the more we try to be liked by everyone, the less truly loved we feel. Love, real love, comes from being fully seen, flaws and weaknesses. That level of connection is only possible when you stop performing for the crowd, and start showing up as yourself.

There is a quiet dignity in standing your ground, in knowing that you are neither here to be understood by all, nor loved by all. You are here to live fully, honestly, and without apology. It is, after all, the only way to live a life worth remembering.

So, speak your truth. Pursue what lights you up. Live loudly. Some will mock, but others — your tribe, your people — will see you, hear you, and love you all the more for it. Isn't that the kind of life worth living?

In the end, it is not the approval of the crowd that shapes the measure of a life, but the courage it took to live honestly. So let's embrace the discomfort of being truly seen, by both friend and foe.

Follow cyber hygiene for online safety

As we experience rapid transformation and growth in digital technology, our reliance on digital platforms has become essential in daily life.

Cyber hygiene is an essential behavioural trait every user must know and follow in online engagements. It involves all technical and functional precautionary practices followed by individuals and organisations to ensure the necessary security to protect and safeguard data and other digital assets. These behavioural practices serve as the first line of defence against cyberattacks like phishing. These are aimed at deceiving



HEAMA AL HASHMI

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individuals and disrupting electronic data systems to obtain sensitive information such as passwords, banking details, and other confidential data. Such attacks often occur through fake websites that appear to be from trusted sources. Attackers exploit weak security gaps in e-mail systems, outdated software, or careless user behaviours, such as quickly clicking on suspicious links without verifying their authenticity and downloading malicious files onto their systems. Attackers exploit these vulnerabilities to lure victims into revealing personal user information and stealing sensitive banking data.

Users can take caution and avoid potential phishing attacks when they agree to follow individual cyber hygiene practices. For this, as a first step it is essential to regularly update software, such as operating systems and antivirus programmes, to ensure there are no vulnerabilities. Second, necessary caution should be exercised with messages containing suspicious links. Therefore, it is important to avoid clicking on those links or downloading attachments until their source or authenticity is verified. It is advisable to refrain from sharing banking or personal information on social media platforms.

In the event of such an attack, there are several quick steps to contain it. Passwords for all accounts must be changed immediately.

Second, technical support should be sought by reporting the attack to help close the compromised systems. The recent cyber security reports issued by relevant authorities in Oman reveal a considerable increase in the number of reported cyberattacks in 2024 compared to the previous year.

The identified issues coincide with the growing use of modern technologies across various sectors. Phishing attacks have mainly targeted individuals and small to medium-sized businesses, which are more vulnerable than larger corporate companies.

To ensure a secure digital engagement, all users should remain vigilant and follow proper cyber hygiene practices and safety protocols.

AI in classrooms: Five risks and real solutions

IN 1983, a US report titled A Nation at Risk sparked a revolution in education. Today, a new challenge looms: generative AI.

Unesco estimates 244 million children worldwide lack access to schooling, while those in classrooms face a paradoxical disruptor — AI tools like ChatGPT, which 67 per cent of university students now use for assignments (Stanford University, 2023).

Yet history reassures us: education adapts. When calculators entered schools, critics warned of collapsing math skills. Instead, they became tools for deeper exploration. Similarly, generative AI need not undermine learning — if we act decisively.

Every semester, I discuss with my students the exciting challenge of how we can benefit from the emerging generative AI tools, such ChatGPT and Deepseek, in improving problem solving and critical skills instead of treating them as the place to go for quick and easy answers. Here are five risks AI poses to education, paired with proven solutions and success stories from Oman and beyond.

The first risk is short-cutting critical thinking. Generative AI's instant answers risk replacing deep analysis with quick fixes.

At King's College London, a 2023 study showed a 32-per cent improvement in diagnostic accuracy compared to traditional methods, after professors partnered with students to design AI-generated simulations for medical training, analyse synthetic patient data and practice diagnoses in risk-free environments.

In Oman, educators noticed students increasingly relying on tools like ChatGPT to draft essays without engaging with core concepts. Here, the solution is to integrate AI as a Collaborative Tool. Oman's Ministry of Education partnered with Microsoft in 2022 to pilot "AI Co-Lab", a programme training teachers to design assignments where students



KHALID ALSAIFI AL HURAIBI

The writer is an innovator and an insights storyteller

Oman's AI Co-Lab, Saudi Arabia's credential reforms and Bahrain's policy agility prove that AI can elevate education when met with creativity, not fear.

debate AI-generated content. For example, high schoolers in Muscat use ChatGPT to draft essays on climate change, then work in teams to identify biases, gaps and inaccuracies in the text. After one year, students in the programme scored 28 per cent higher on critical thinking assessments than peers in traditional classrooms, proving AI can fuel, not replace, intellectual excellence.

The second risk is outdated accreditation systems. Traditional grading often fails to measure AI-augmented skills like prompt engineering or ethical AI use. What is the solution? Modernise accreditation frameworks. Saudi Arabia's Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) now requires universities to embed AI literacy into degree programmes.

At King Saud University, students earn micro-credentials for mastering AI tools in research, with employers like NEOM and Aramco prioritising these badges in hiring.

Another risk is the lecture vs AI Knowledge Gap; Why attend lectures when AI delivers facts faster? One solution could be to prioritise hands-on learning. MIT's "Introduction to AI" course reduced lecture hours by 50 per cent, assigning students to build AI tools addressing real-world issues, like optimising solar grids in rural India. Post-course surveys noted a 27-per cent rise in conceptual understanding.

Similarly, the UAE's Mohammed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) slashed lecture hours by 40 per cent, redirecting time to AI-driven projects. Students in Abu Dhabi recently designed a ChatGPT-powered tutor for Arabic grammar, which reduced errors in primary school writing assignments by 33 per cent during trials.

A risk that I face every semester is the fact that teachers are left behind. Many of us educators lack training to harness AI effectively.

What I hope educational ecosystems do is to invest more in teacher empowerment. For example, Finland's "AI Educator Grants" award RO 5,000 to teachers developing AI-enhanced lesson plans. One recipient created a ChatGPT-powered debate coach for Helsinki High School, improving students' argumentation skills by 35 per cent in six months. Also, Qatar's "TeachTech" initiative upskills educators through AI workshops led by Carnegie Mellon University.

In Doha, physics teachers now use AI to simulate complex experiments, cutting lab preparation time by 50 per cent while boosting student engagement.

The fifth, and last but not least risk is the policy Lag. Bureaucratic delays leave schools unprepared for AI's pace. Here, there is no solution better than fostering agile leadership. Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative partnered with Google to launch AI "sandboxes" in 30 schools, where teachers test tools like Gemini for personalised feedback. Early data shows a 22-per cent reduction in administrative tasks, freeing educators to mentor. Bahrain's National AI Strategy allocates 20 per cent of its education budget to AI pilot programmes. Whereas, the University of Bahrain, administrators and tech firms co-developed an AI plagiarism detector tailored to Arabic texts, reducing cheating incidents by 45 per cent in 2023.

The GCC's proactive stance offers a blueprint. Oman's AI Co-Lab, Saudi Arabia's credential reforms and Bahrain's policy agility prove that AI can elevate education when met with creativity, not fear. As the global edtech market surges towards RO 156 billion by 2025 (HolonIQ), schools worldwide must learn from these pioneers. The lesson? AI is not a threat, it is the next chapter in education's endless story of reinvention.

Another Eid amid death and destruction in Gaza



SAMUEL KUTTY

The writer is a freelance journalist and author who worked in Oman and India

AS the holy month of Ramadhan comes to a close, the situation in Gaza remains catastrophic, leaving no room for celebration as Eid Al Fitr approaches. The population of Gaza is on the brink of famine and starvation, and they will spend Eid without any food at all.

Eid Al Fitr is a time of celebration for Muslims following a month of fasting, during which families and friends gather to share large meals.

It is also customary for children to receive money or gifts from their elders.

Sadly, this year's Eid, which is typically a time of joy, will instead be marked by mourning and trauma for many families in the Gaza Strip, as they struggle to secure basic necessities. The sounds of children playing in the streets have been replaced by the cries of those trapped beneath the rubble.

Reports indicate that nearly 500 individuals, including children, women and the elderly, have been killed since the attacks began on March 18. Many others have sustained injuries, and more individuals remain trapped under the rubble. At the same time, reports quoting the Palestinian Ministry of Health indicate that at least 50,021 Palestinians have been confirmed dead and 113,274 wounded in Israel's war on Gaza. The Gaza Government Media Office has updated its death toll to more than 61,700, stating that

thousands of Palestinians missing under the rubble are presumed dead.

Most of Gaza's 2.1 million residents have been displaced, many multiple times. An estimated 70 per cent of buildings have been damaged or destroyed, while healthcare, water and sanitation systems have collapsed. Additionally, there are significant shortages of food, fuel, medicine and shelter.

Reacting to the attack, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk stated, "Israel's continued use of military force will only exacerbate the suffering of a Palestinian population already enduring catastrophic conditions."

The International Criminal Court has described the situation unfolding in the Gaza Strip on January 26, 2024, as a plausible case of genocide, with gruesome consequences.

According to a report issued by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel on March 13, 2025, Israel has committed a wide range of violations against Palestinian women, men, girls, and boys throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory since October 7, 2023.

These factors represent a significant aspect of the mistreatment of Palestinians and are integral to the unlawful occupation and persecution of Palestinians as a collective

Sadly, this year's Eid, which is typically a time of joy, will instead be marked by mourning and trauma for many families in the Gaza Strip, as they struggle to secure basic necessities. The sounds of children playing in the streets have been replaced by the cries of those trapped beneath the rubble

group. "The evidence gathered by the Commission indicates a troubling rise in gender-based violence," stated Navi Pillay, Chair of the Commission.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory has concluded that, since October 7, 2023, Israel has committed at least three acts constitutive of genocide in Gaza.

Amnesty International's research conducted last year found sufficient evidence to conclude that Israel has committed, and continues to commit, acts of genocide against Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip.

The organisation stated that Israel has engaged in actions prohibited under the Genocide Convention, with the specific intent to destroy the Palestinian population in Gaza.

No doubt, Gaza is being devastated before the eyes of the world.

This is evident from the statement made by Islamic Relief Worldwide, which declared that "the latest Israeli atrocities across Gaza must be the final red line for governments to immediately halt all arms sales to Israel."

The world stands with Joyce Msuya, Acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, in demanding that atrocities in Gaza must end. However, this cannot be achieved through words alone; it requires urgent and unequivocal action.

CHEWING GUM RELEASES MICROPLASTICS INTO MOUTH

DANIEL LAWLER

Chewing gum releases hundreds of tiny plastic pieces straight into people's mouths, researchers said on Tuesday, also warning of the pollution created by the rubber-based sweet.

The small study comes as researchers have increasingly been discovering small shards of plastic called microplastics throughout the world, from the tops of mountains to the bottom of the ocean -- and even in the air we breathe.

They have also been discovered microplastics riddled throughout human bodies -- including inside our lungs, blood and brains -- sparking fears about the potential effect this could be having on health. "I don't want to alarm people," Sanjay Mohanty, the lead researcher behind the new study, said.

There is no evidence directly showing that microplastics are harmful to human health, said Mohanty of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

The new pilot study instead sought to illustrate yet another little-researched way that these mostly invisible plastic pieces enter our bodies -- chewing gum. Lisa Lowe, a PhD student at UCLA, chewed seven pieces each of 10 brands of gum; Then the researchers ran a chemical analysis on her saliva.

They found that a gramme of gum (0.04 ounces) released an average of 100 microplastic fragments, though some shed more than 600. The average weight of a stick of gum is around 1.5 grammes.

People who chew around 180 pieces of gum a year could be ingesting roughly 30,000 microplastics, the researchers said. This pales in comparison to the many other ways that humans ingest microplastics, Mohanty emphasised.

For example, other researchers estimated last year that a litre (34 fluid ounces) of water in a plastic bottle contained an average of 240,000 microplastics. The most common chewing gum sold in supermarkets is called synthetic gum, which contains petroleum-based polymers to get that chewy effect, the researchers said.

However, packaging does not list any plastics in the ingredients, simply using the words "gum-based". "Nobody will tell you the ingredients," Mohanty said. The researchers tested five brands of synthetic gum and five of natural gum, which use plant-based polymers such as tree sap. "It was surprising that we found microplastics were abundant in both," Lowe said.

The gum shed almost all of the microplastics during the first eight minutes of chewing, she added. David Jones, a researcher at the UK's University of Portsmouth not involved in the study, said that manufacturers should be forced to give more specific ingredients than just "gum-based".

Jones said he was surprised that the researchers found certain plastics not known to be in gum, suggesting they could have possibly come from another source. But the overall findings were "not at all surprising", he added. — AFP

Financial inclusion must reach the last billion

AT its most basic level, the goal of economic development is to eradicate poverty. By that metric, significant progress has been made: the number of people living in extreme poverty fell from 1.9 billion in 1990 to an estimated 615 million today, largely owing to supercharged economic growth in the world's most populous countries in Asia.

But just as the last miles of a marathon are said to be the hardest, the progress made so far is insufficient to carry anti-poverty efforts across the finish line. Now that the fastest population growth is occurring in countries where poverty remains entrenched, and the globalisation engine is no longer as powerful as it once was, growth alone is unlikely to be enough. Moreover, escaping poverty is just one step towards true prosperity. To extend the ladder of opportunity to all and integrate the poor into dynamic economic activities, we need alternative and complementary approaches.

Here, bolstering financial inclusion would help, because poverty is not just about how much a person earns. It is about what their earnings can buy them. Lowering the cost of goods and services, and thereby making them more accessible to those who have little, can thus reduce poverty. While advanced-economy governments often provide basic services, that is not the case in the Global South, where benefits are limited in scope. In many Global South countries, basic goods and services are sometimes more expensive for the poor, and it is often costlier to reach this segment of society because they purchase only small quantities of products.

Financial firms have been particularly effective in overcoming these barriers. By lowering the costs of services and expanding access to them, they have demonstrated how inclusion can drive broader development. To explore the thresholds where individuals gain access to financial services, World Data Lab, supported by the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, combined its consumption



The number of people living in extreme poverty fell from 1.9 billion in 1990 to an estimated 615 million today.



WOLFGANG FENGLER

The writer is a former lead economist at the World Bank, is CEO of World Data Lab

models with the World Bank's Findex database.

Our research finds that increasing financial inclusion, which ranges from basic mobile money wallets to full-fledged banking services, disproportionately benefits the poor. We focused on the world's six billion adults -- people aged 15 and older, who are more likely to be economically active -- and split them into six buckets of one billion each, according to consumption level.

The poorest billion people, who spend less than \$5 per day, used to be excluded from financial services -- their economic lives were built solely on cash payments. But over the last decade, a silent revolution in mobile money and digital payments has taken place, particularly in India and African countries. As a result, more than one-third of the world's poorest billion adults now have access to financial services.

These gains have been propelled by the interplay of the income-growth effect, whereby more people have crossed income thresholds that make them "bankable", and the price effect, whereby the cost of delivering financial services to the un-banked has fallen.

In 2015, around 3.4 billion people had access to financial services. Back then, the "price point" for

entering the financial system (at 2017 purchasing power parity) was approximately \$8 per day. That left two billion people -- nearly 40 per cent of the world's adult population at the time -- excluded. Over the last decade, economic growth has created a larger global middle class. At the same time, the cost threshold for accessing financial services has dropped substantially, owing to technological innovations such as mobile money and digital banking.

The combination of these two forces has enabled an additional 1.4 billion people -- some 800 million from the income-growth effect, and another 600 million from the price effect -- to gain access to financial services since 2015. The average global threshold for entering the financial system has dropped to \$5 per day. This lower entry barrier, reflecting the impact of digital money systems, has significantly improved the inclusion of poor people. Among the best-performing countries, especially in Africa, financial services can be offered at a price point of \$2 per day -- below the extreme poverty line of \$2.15 per day. The progress made over the past decade proves that financial inclusion can be achieved with the right mix of innovation, investment and collaboration.

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SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



World Athletics Head Britain's Sebastian Coe (C) poses with Chinese and Polish athletes as he attends the closing ceremony of the Indoor World Athletics Championships in Nanjing, in eastern China's Jiangsu province. — AFP

WORLD ATHLETICS APPROVES SWAB TEST TO DETERMINE FEMALE GENDER

PARIS: World Athletics said on Tuesday it had approved the introduction of a cheek swab test to determine if an athlete is biologically female.

Sebastian Coe, the head of the international track and field federation, said the decision taken by the body's decision-making council was a "really important" way of protecting the female category. "It's important to do it because it maintains everything that we've been talking about, and particularly recently, about not just talking about the integrity of female women's sport, but actually guaranteeing it," Coe said in a press conference after the World Indoor Championships in Nanjing, China.

"We feel this is a really important way of providing confidence and maintaining that absolute focus on the integrity of competition."

World Athletics added that it had not fixed a date for the introduction of the measure, "but it is expected to be in place for the World Championships in Tokyo this year".

Coe said the decision to introduce the swab testing was taken after a wide consultation on the proposal. "Overwhelmingly, the view has come back that this is absolutely the way to go," although he added that the swab test was not considered to be overly intrusive.

He said he was confident that the policy could stand up to legal challenge, but added: "You accept the fact that that is the world we live in."

"I would never have set off down this path to protect the female category in sport if I'd been anything other than prepared to take the challenge head on. We've been to the Court of Arbitration on our DSD (difference of gender development) regulations. They have been upheld, and they have again been upheld after appeal. So we will doggedly protect the female category, and we'll do whatever is necessary to do it."

Coe announced the policy a week after finishing third in the race to be the new president of the International Olympic Committee, won by Kirsty Coventry, the former Olympic swimmer from Zimbabwe. — AFP

AUSTRALIA TO BUILD NEW STADIUM FOR 2032 OLYMPICS

SYDNEY: Australia will build a 63,000-seat stadium for the 2032 Olympics in Brisbane, officials said on Tuesday as they confirmed the storied 'Gabba' cricket ground would be demolished after the event.

Queensland Premier David Crisafulli detailed a slew of Olympic upgrades that included the new Brisbane Stadium in the heart of the city and an aquatic centre that could host 25,000 fans.

"Finally, Queensland has a plan. The time has come to just get on with it. And get on with it, we will," Crisafulli said. He said the new stadium would replace the ageing Brisbane Cricket Ground — nicknamed the 'Gabba' for its Woolloongabba location — once the Games were over. "The vision our government has beyond the Games also includes the Gabba coming down to make way for urban renewal," Crisafulli said. "Wouldn't it be amazing to see the Australian cricket team win gold at an Olympic final?" — AFP

Seeb emerge Super Cup champs for fourth time



Seeb and Al Salam players in action during the Super Cup match. — PICS BY ABDULWAHID AL HAMADANI



Seeb captain receives the trophy.



Seeb players celebrate with the trophy.

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

SEEB CLUB were crowned the volleyball Super Cup champions on Monday after defeating Al Salam Club by three sets to one, in a match held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the auspices of Captain Pilot Nasser al Salmi, Chief Operating Officer of Oman Air. With this victory, Seeb continued their dominance by securing the title for the fourth consecutive edition.

The match started with high intensity from both sides. Seeb took an early lead through a successful serve from Majid al Shibli and offensive brilliance by Saud al Maamari. However, Al Salam quickly regained composure, relying on powerful spikes from Adam al Jaradi and impressive attacking and passing from their foreign player, Graciano. Despite Seeb's attempts to close the gap, repeated errors in serving and defence gave Al Salam the upper hand. They clinched the first set 25-17 with a calm and organised performance.

Determined to bounce back, Seeb entered the second set with clear intent. Yet it was Al Salam who again started strong, scoring three consecutive points through Graciano. Seeb then began to find their rhythm, capitalising on Al Salam's individual errors to narrow the gap. Bogdan shone with his offensive strikes, supported by a solid blocking wall formed by Ismail al Haidi and Youssef al Shukeili.

Adam al Jalbubi and Younis al Amri imposed a fast-paced offensive rhythm that turned the tide. Seeb dominated the latter part of the set and won 25-18, levelling the match.

The third set was evenly matched from the start, with both teams exchanging points. Seeb took the lead thanks to the continued brilliance of Adam al Jalbubi and Younis al Amri, but Al Salam fought back, equalising through Al Jaradi and Graciano. The set featured thrilling moments, including a tie at 18 points and a brief lead by Al Salam in critical moments. However, Seeb showed their championship spirit, taking advantage of Al Salam's serving errors. After a long exchange of points, Seeb sealed the set with an exciting 32-25 win, moving closer to clinching the title.

FOURTH SET
Both teams entered the fourth set with caution and intense focus. But Seeb displayed superior mental readiness, opening the scoring through Ismail al Haidi and Bogdan. They maintained an organised performance on both defence and offence. Adam al Jalbubi continued to impress, widening the gap with his powerful strikes.

Despite Al Salam's efforts to stage a comeback through Al Jaradi and Graciano, Seeb maintained their lead thanks to team spirit and tactical discipline. In the final moments, they capitalised on Al Salam's mistakes to finish the set 25-21, officially

crowning themselves as Super Cup champions.

Seeb coach Jamal al Maamari expressed his happiness with the title win, attributing the victory to the players' readiness and the constant support from the club's management. "The players delivered when it mattered most, and the administration provided an ideal working environment that helped us succeed," he said.

Al Maamari said the team faced challenges after participating in the Arab Championship, but noted that competing with strong teams helped elevate their performance. He credited the technical staff and mental focus for helping the team regain form and overcome that phase.

He also affirmed that Seeb aim to achieve even more titles, stating, "We've won all four Super Cups so far, and now our goal is the league and the ministry Shield."

He thanked all team members and praised Al Salam's performance, describing them as a strong and experienced team, especially with several national team players in their ranks.

Al Maamari concluded, "This is my 13th title with Seeb in six seasons, and the ambition to win more championships continues."

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) was used multiple times during the match to review key plays, including a crucial point in the third set. The reviews added tension but ensured fair decisions.

LONG-RUNNINGCASE



Former Fifa president Sepp Blatter reacts as he leaves the courthouse after the verdict over a suspected fraudulent payment, in MuttENZ near Basel, on Tuesday. — AFP

BLATTER AND PLATINI CLEARED IN FIFA GRAFT CASE

MUTTENZ, Switzerland: Former Fifa president Sepp Blatter and ex-Uefa chief Michel Platini on Tuesday were acquitted on appeal by a Swiss court in a long-running corruption case that shattered their careers as the most powerful figures in world football. Blatter, 89, and Platini, 69, listened in silence as the Extraordinary Court of Appeal clerk in the town of MuttENZ, near Basel, read out a decision identical to the one handed down in 2022, which had initially cleared them.

Prosecutors had requested suspended sentences of 20 months for the pair, but charges of fraud, for which they risked five years' imprisonment, as well as disloyal management, breach of trust and forgery of documents were all dismissed.

After almost 10 years of legal proceedings, a final appeal is still possible before the Swiss Supreme Court, but only on limited legal grounds. The prosecutors' office said in a statement it "will decide about how to further proceed".

"The persecution by Fifa and some Swiss federal prosecutors for 10 years is now over," Platini told reporters. "Today my honour is restored, and I'm very happy."

Platini, a former France captain and manager, said he felt "from the start" that the purpose of the affair was to prevent him "from being president of Fifa". "I know that for my enemies, it was time that was important... They kept me out for 10 years," continued Platini, whose downfall cleared the way for the election in early 2016 of Gianni Infantino as Fifa boss.

Blatter and Platini returned to court earlier this month on charges stemming from a delayed payment of two million Swiss francs (1.8 million euros) Fifa made to Platini in 2011 for consultancy services. "After two acquittals, the federal prosecutor's office must also admit that this criminal procedure has definitively failed. Michel Platini must finally be left alone in criminal matters," said Dominic Nellen, Platini's lawyer.

The case began in 2015 when Blatter quit as head of Fifa in a corruption crisis. Blatter and Platini were initially acquitted by the Swiss Federal Criminal Court in June 2022, but the Swiss Attorney General's office immediately appealed that verdict.

The defence and prosecution agreed that Platini did advise Blatter between 1998 and 2002, during the Swiss administrator's first term at the head of Fifa, and that in 1999 the two men signed a contract agreeing an annual remuneration of 300,000 Swiss francs, to be "paid in full by Fifa".

Blatter and Platini said that at the start they agreed orally. Blatter called it a "gentlemen's agreement". — AFP

Ashutosh blitz helps Delhi down Lucknow in thriller

ASHUTOSH Sharma hammered a remarkable unbeaten 66 to snatch Delhi Capitals a thrilling one-wicket victory over Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL on Monday. Ashutosh, an impact substitute on debut for Delhi, lifted his new team from a precarious 65-5 to achieve their target of 210 with three balls to spare in Visakhapatnam. Needing 22 off the final two overs and six off the last six balls with one wicket remaining, Ashutosh stood strong and hit the winning six.

Delhi were 7-3 in the second over and had lost half their side for 65 when Faf du Plessis got out on 29 in his first match for the franchise.

New captain Axar Patel hit a quickfire 22 and Tristan Stubbs smashed 34. "Be prepared for it now," a smiling Axar said after the close win. "It's going to be like this only under my captaincy. Things will be up and down a little."

When Stubbs was bowled by Manimaran Siddharth, the ball after hitting consecutive sixes, the game looked up with Delhi 113-6 and requiring 97 runs off 7.3 overs.

But Ashutosh and IPL debutant Vipraj Nigam, who hit 39 off 15 balls, struck flurry of boundaries to revive the chase with a partnership of 55 off 22 balls.

Nigam fell in the 17th over and Lucknow lost two more wickets but Ashutosh justified the faith of new mentor Kevin Pietersen, who had predicted during the innings break that the big-hitter would come up with something special.

Ashutosh sparked in his first IPL campaign last year for Punjab Kings in a finisher's role, but initially showed restraint on Monday as he reached 20 from his first 20 deliveries. When wickets fell around him he opened his shoulders, clubbing 46 from the final 11 balls he faced.

With six needed off the final over, number 11 Mohit Sharma narrowly avoided being stumped when the ball brushed his pad as he stepped out of his crease and Lucknow captain Rishabh Pant could not take the ball cleanly behind the stumps.

The batters managed to scramble a single off the next delivery, leaving the stage clear for Ashutosh to seal a dramatic win by smashing Shahbaz Ahmed for his fifth six.

MID-INNINGS COLLAPSE

Earlier, Lucknow posted 209-8 batting first despite losing a flurry of wickets after an 87-run stand between Mitchell Marsh and Nicholas Pooran.

Australia all-rounder Marsh attacked from the off in his first competitive outing after a back injury which forced him to miss the recent Champions Trophy.

Marsh, who is playing in this IPL only as a batter, hit six fours and six sixes in his 36-ball 72. He lost his opening partner Aiden Markram early but then put on a brilliant partnership with Pooran, who struck 75 off just 30 deliveries.

Pant flopped on his first outing for



Delhi Capitals' Ashutosh Sharma celebrates after the match as Lucknow Super Giants' Rishabh Pant looks dejected in the Indian Premier League at ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium, Visakhapatnam, India. — Reuters

Lucknow, facing his former team Delhi for whom he played in eight IPL seasons.

Pant was dismissed for a six-ball duck off Kuldeep Yadav's left-arm wrist spin.

Pant parted ways with Delhi and Lucknow signed him for a record \$3.21 million in the November auction.

Mitchell Starc bowled Pooran to trigger a mid-innings Lucknow collapse.

"I think our top-order batters played really well and I think it was a pretty good score on this wicket," said Pant. "As a team, we are looking to take positives from every match and as a team, we are looking to learn from it." Starc, who missed the Champions Trophy for personal reasons, took three wickets, while Kuldeep returned impressive figures of 2-20 in his four overs. — AFP

Australia beat China to tighten hold on WC qualifying

HANGZHOU, China: Australia took another stride towards qualifying for the 2026 World Cup on Tuesday with Tony Popovic's side handing China a 2-0 defeat in Hangzhou as Group C rivals Saudi Arabia were held to a 0-0 draw by already-qualified Japan at Saitama Stadium.

South Korea's struggles on home soil continued, meanwhile, as Hong Myung-bo's side were held to a 1-1 draw by Jordan in Suwon in Group B.

The top two finishers in each of Asia's three preliminary groups advance directly to the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico with the teams in third and fourth progressing to another round of qualifiers.

Australia made it six points out of six in the current window with

victory over China as first-half goals from Jackson Irvine and Nishan Velupillay earned another Socceroos success following Thursday's 5-1 win against Indonesia.

Irvine put his side in front after 16 minutes when he stepped inside onto his left foot to fire into the bottom corner beyond Wang Dalei.

The Shandong Taishan goalkeeper was to blame for the visitors' second 13 minutes later, fumbling Velupillay's bobbling shot from the edge of the penalty area over his own line.

The win moves Australia to 13 points from eight matches, consolidating their hold on second place in the group behind Japan and taking them three points ahead of third-placed Saudi Arabia.



Australia's Jackson Irvine (R) scores a goal against China. — AFP

"We came with a top mentality into this camp and we knew what was at stake, two massive games for us," said Irvine. "It's been a massive team effort to get these two results."

Hajime Moriyasu's Japan side dropped points for only the second

time in the preliminaries as the Samurai Blue were unable to find a way through a disciplined Saudi Arabia defence.

Daizen Maeda went closest when he hit the post in the ninth minute after Daichi Kamada's perfectly-weighted through ball released the Celtic man behind the visitors' backline. There was more frustration for the Koreans, who drew at home for the third time in the current phase of qualifying but continue to lead Group B.

Lee Jae-sung put the hosts in front after five minutes when he rushed into the six-yard box to push Son Heung-min's corner over the line but Jordan were level by the half-hour mark.

Mousa al Tamari saw his initial

shot saved by Jo Hyeon-woo but the rebound looped up towards Mahmoud al Mardi and his strike was deflected past the keeper off the back of Korean defender Kwon Kyung-won.

The result moves South Korea to 16 points, three ahead of Jordan with third-placed Iraq a further point behind ahead of their meeting with Palestine later on Tuesday.

Kuwait will face Oman in the same group.

Iran could secure their place at the World Cup with Amir Ghalenoei's side needing a draw against Uzbekistan when the teams meet in Tehran later on Tuesday in Group A as North Korea play the United Arab Emirates and Kyrgyzstan host Qatar. — Reuters

SPORTS



Alexander Zverev (GER) hits a backhand against Jordan Thompson (AUS) on day seven of the Miami Open. — **Imagn Images**



Emma Raducanu (GBR) celebrates after her match against Amanda Anisimova (USA) on day seven of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium.



Jasmine Paolini (ITA) serves against Naomi Osaka (JPN) on day seven of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. — **Imagn Images**



Taylor Fritz (USA) reaches for a forehand against Denis Shapovalov (CAN) on day seven of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium.



Alex de Minaur (AUS) reacts after winning a point against Joao Fonseca (BRA) on day seven of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. — **Imagn Images**

De Minaur ends Fonseca challenge, Zverev through

AUSTRALIA'S Alex de Minaur put an end to Brazilian talent Joao Fonseca's challenge at the Miami Open, outlasting the 18-year-old 5-7, 7-5, 6-3 in an enthralling contest.

Attendance on stadium court had been sparse throughout Monday, but the Hard Rock Stadium turned into a mini-Maracana Stadium for Fonseca's match, complete with Brazilian flags and football-style chanting.

Fonseca brought his energetic brand of ultra-attacking tennis, but De Minaur was up to the challenge, coping with both the blistering forehands and the partisan crowd.

Such was the dominance of Fonseca's raucous support that the referee switched to Portuguese for his appeals for quiet.

But De Minaur won six of the final seven games to move into the fourth round, keeping his cool even when the crowd, at times, disrupted his serve preparation.

"Mentally I was ready for this match, I knew I was not only going to play an incredible talent like Joao, playing with immense confidence and nothing to lose but also an incredible crowd that was on his side from the first point until the last," De Minaur said.

"One of my biggest strengths is my mentality and that is what got me the win today," he added.

Top seed Alexander Zverev recovered from a slow start to power into the fourth round of the Miami Open with a 7-5, 6-4 win

against Australia's Jordan Thompson.

The German was 4-1 down in the first set but then went on a roll, winning eight of the next nine games to progress.

Zverev lost in the opening round at Indian Wells, but with Carlos Alcaraz already out in Miami he will fancy his chances of adding to his list of seven Masters 1000 titles.

Third-seed Taylor Fritz also moved into the fourth round beating Denis Shapovalov of Canada 7-5, 6-3.

The American let slip a 5-2 lead in the first set but regained control with his serve proving too much for Shapovalov.

In the women's draw, third-seed Coco Gauff's bid ended with a 6-4 6-4 loss to Poland's Magda Linette. Top-seeded Aryna Sabalenka eased her way into the last eight with a 6-4, 6-4 win over last year's winner Danielle Collins of the USA.

Next, Sabalenka will be up against ninth seeded Olympic gold medallist Zheng Qinwen who reached her second consecutive WTA 1000 quarterfinal, with a straight-set win over Ashlyn Krueger.

"I'm super happy to get this win in straight sets and happy with the level I played today," said Sabalenka.

"She's a tough opponent, and we had a lot of tough and tricky matches in the past. So I was very happy to get through this one," she added.

PAOLINI SINKS OSAKA

Italy's Jasmine Paolini enjoyed a 3-6, 6-4, 6-4 comeback win over Naomi Osaka in 2 hours and 15 minutes.

Since her comeback from maternity leave 15 months ago, Osaka has been showing some signs of getting back towards her best but Paolini was the first top 10 player Osaka has faced this year.

"I don't think that I can say that I've played a lot of matches against top players like this in a while," said Osaka.

"The way she plays kind of catches me off guard, simply because of her height. I didn't know she could hit like that," she added.

Emma Raducanu continued her impressive form in Miami, cruising to a 6-1, 6-3 victory in 69 minutes over American Amanda Anisimova, who had eliminated Indian Wells winner Mirra Andreeva on Sunday.

It is the first time Raducanu has won four straight WTA Tour main draw matches in a row since her US Open triumph in 2021. She will face American Jessica Pegula next.

Raducanu, who has brought in some old faces from the early days of her career for this tournament, said she was benefitting from their presence.

"I'm really happy with how things are on and off the court right now and just so happy that's able to transfer onto the match court," she said.

Alexandra Eala, the 19-year-old from the Philippines who upset Australian Open champion Madison Keys on Sunday, was handed a place in the quarterfinals after her fourth round opponent, Spain's Paula Badosa, pulled out with a lower back injury.

In the last eight, Eala will face second seed Iga Swiatek who battled past Ukraine's Elina Svitolina 7-6 (7/5) 6-3. — **AFP**

BUSINESS

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FUELPPOWER

The field is located in the Shengli Jiyang National Shale Oil Model Zone in Shandong Province

CHINA DISCOVERS FIRST SHALE OIL FIELD WITH OVER 100M TONNES

Beijing: Sinopec, China's largest oil refiner, has announced the discovery of two major shale oilfields in the east of the country with combined proven reserves of 180 million tonnes, after the discovered reserves in the Xinxing shale oil field in eastern China underwent review and registration by the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources.

Sinopec affirmed that these reserves represent the first batch to be confirmed under the shale oil reserve estimation rules, which took effect last January, making the Xinxing field the first shale oil field in China to surpass the 100-million-ton reserve threshold.

The field is located in the Shengli Jiyang National Shale Oil Model Zone, operated by Sinopec in Shandong Province, eastern China, with data indicating that geological reserves exceed 140 million tonnes, while recoverable technical reserves are estimated at 11.36 million tonnes.

In addition, Sinopec continues to intensify shale oil exploration and development, achieving major breakthroughs across multiple sites as part of a strategy to enhance China's energy security and reduce reliance on crude oil imports. — ONA

Oman to market 11 new oil & gas blocks in 2025

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

EXPLORATION & PRODUCTION (OQEP), one of Oman's largest oil and gas firms, has been tapped by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to assist in the joint marketing of as many as 11 new concession blocks envisaged for launch as part of multiple bid rounds during 2025. The new mandate underscores majority state-owned OQEP's increasingly prominent presence in Oman's vital upstream energy sector.

The company currently oversees a high-quality portfolio of 15 upstream oil and gas assets in Oman, ranging from those in the development and production phase to others being appraised for commerciality or undergoing exploration programmes.

The list includes six producing assets, which contributed a significant 228k barrels of oil equivalent per day (boepd) of hydrocarbons in 2024 –equivalent to around 14 per cent of Oman's total oil and gas production.

Publicly-traded OQEP's additional role in the marketing of Oman's open acreage coincided with the unveiling last month of a new Licensing Round offering three onshore concessions — Block 43A, Block 66 and Block 36.

In a filing to the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) at the time, the company disclosed that the licensing round was launched in collaboration with OQEP, as well as Scotiabank — Canada's leading international bank and financial services provider.

“This announcement comes as part of the cooperation framework between OQEP



The Ministry of Energy and Minerals has announced the launch of new investment opportunities in the oil and gas Blocks 36, 43A and 66 in cooperation with OQEP and Scotiabank, with 11 additional blocks underway in 2025, which aims to bring new investments in the exploration and production sector in Oman.

AHMED AL AZKAWI
CEO, OQEP



Upstream facility of OQEP.

and the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, which aims to bring new investments into the exploration and production in Oman. On this occasion, OQEP would like to express its greatest gratitude to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals for its trust in OQEP,” Ahmed al Azkawi, CEO — OQEP, stated in the filing.

Elaborating on the scale of this collaboration with the Ministry, the CEO revealed in the company's 2024 Annual Report that it would assist in the marketing of a further 11 open concession areas in 2025.

“The Ministry of Energy and Minerals has announced the launch of new investment opportunities in the oil and gas Blocks 36, 43A and 66 in cooperation with OQEP and Scotiabank, with 11 additional blocks underway in 2025, which aims to bring new investments in the exploration

and production sector in Oman. The award is subject to requisite formalities including new concession agreements and new partnerships,” Al Azkawi stated in the MDA report.

Working alongside the Ministry and OQEP in the marketing of the new Omani acreage is Toronto-based Scotiabank, billed as a global leader in oil and gas M&A advisory, with specialised finance and technical professionals dedicated to the energy sector.

More recently, OQEP added its 15th asset — Block 54 — to its expanding upstream portfolio. It follows the signing by the Ministry of an Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA) with the partnership of OQEP (with a 60 per cent operating interest) and London-based Genel Energy (with 40 per cent non-operating interest) to develop the 5,632 km2 concession in Al Wusta Governorate.

Oman-Vietnam JV eyes strategic investments in Cambodia's growth sectors

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

Vietnam Oman Investment (VOI), a joint venture between Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and the State Capital Investment Corporation of Vietnam (SCIC), is exploring new investment opportunities in Cambodia, signalling its intent to expand beyond Vietnam into Southeast Asia's emerging markets.

On March 18, 2025, VOI representatives — Dr Giao Nguyen, CFA (CEO) and Harith al Khadhoori, (Investment Manager, seconded from the Oman Investment Authority — met with senior officials from Cambodia's Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) to discuss potential cross-border collaboration.

Welcomed by Neak Oknha Datuk Dr Othsman Hassan, Senior



VOI representatives with senior officials from Council for the Development of Cambodia.

Minister of the Royal Government of Cambodia and Senera Sar, Deputy Secretary General of the Cambodian Investment

Board (CIB) under CDC, VOI gained insights into Cambodia's investment environment and key growth sectors. The discussions

highlighted the country's openness to full foreign ownership across industries, a trusted land ownership framework and a pro-investor regulatory environment.

VOI expressed strong interest in agriculture, logistics, infrastructure and cashew processing — sectors that align with its expertise and investment strategy. The firm also sees potential in supporting Cambodia's food security initiatives and enhancing regional trade connectivity. “Delegated by OIA to explore opportunities in Southeast Asia, we at VOI expressed our commitment to building long-term, impactful partnerships in Cambodia's growing economy,” the fund stated.

Founded in 2008, VOI has invested approximately \$300 million in Vietnam across high-growth sectors, including high-tech agriculture, infrastructure,

renewable energy, healthcare, pharmaceuticals and education. Its approach combines financial backing with strategic support, helping portfolio companies scale and innovate.

In 2023, VOI allocated \$100 million for public equity investments, deploying \$34.6 million into five new investments by December. Its private equity portfolio, comprising 13 projects, reported a 5.2% internal rate of return (IRR) and an investment multiple of 1.75x as of mid-2023.

By expanding into Cambodia, VOI seeks to replicate its Vietnam success story, leveraging its experience to tap into new opportunities in one of ASEAN's fastest-growing economies.

The move also reflects Oman's broader interest in strengthening economic ties across the region, reinforcing its role as a strategic investor in Asia.

ADVERTORIALS

SEVENSTAGE PURIFICATION



The advanced bottling system automates the entire process—from purification to packaging—minimising human intervention.

OMAN’S FIRST FULLY AUTOMATED HOTEL BOTTLING PLANT SETS SUSTAINABILITY BENCHMARK

MUSCAT: JW Marriott Hotel Muscat has set a new standard for sustainable hospitality by becoming the first hotel in Oman to install a fully automated water bottling plant. Developed in partnership with Lucerne Waters, a leader in sustainable water solutions, this initiative enhances efficiency, purity, and environmental responsibility in the industry.

The advanced bottling system automates the entire process—from purification to packaging—minimising human intervention while ensuring the highest standards of hygiene and precision. The water undergoes a seven-stage filtration process, including UV treatment, ozonation, reverse osmosis, and mineral enrichment, delivering exceptional purity and taste. A six-stage bottle sterilisation process, enhanced by a UV tunnel, guarantees hygiene, while precision batch and expiry date printing enhance quality control and traceability.

Beyond elevating guest experience, this initiative represents a significant step toward sustainability. By eliminating approximately 730,000 plastic bottles annually, JW Marriott Hotel Muscat prevents an estimated 19,700 kilograms of plastic waste and reduces CO₂ emissions by 49,250 kilograms per year.

“This state-of-the-art bottling plant reflects our unwavering commitment to sustainability and innovation,” said Juliana Salla, General Manager of JW Marriott Hotel Muscat. “By partnering with Lucerne Waters, we are not only enhancing the guest experience but also setting a new benchmark for eco-conscious hospitality in Oman.”

With this pioneering initiative, JW Marriott Hotel Muscat leads the way in sustainable luxury, offering guests a responsible and refined approach to hydration while reducing environmental impact.

Sohar International and Al Mouj Walk support local SMEs

MUSCAT: Reinforcing its commitment to the growth and prosperity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Sohar International partnered with Al Mouj Walk to offer more than 50 local entrepreneurs a platform to showcase their products, thereby fostering business development and community engagement.

The event, dubbed as “Sohar International Souq — Layali Al Mouj” was held from Thursday, March 20 to Saturday, March 22, providing a vibrant marketplace where creativity, passion and commerce converged.

To enhance both vendor and customer experiences, Sohar International provided an integrated network of POS systems, ensuring secure and seamless transactions throughout the event.

Commenting on the initiative, Abdulwahid al Murshidi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International stated, “At Sohar International,



NESTO UNVEILS ‘FUN TO DAY’ GAME CENTRE AT BILAD MALL

MUSCAT: Nesto proudly announces the grand opening of its latest entertainment venture, the ‘Fun To Day’ game centre, at Nesto Bilad Mall, Mabellah, Muscat.

The exciting new gaming hub was officially inaugurated by Al Sayyid Khalid Mahfoodh Salim al Busaidi, in the esteemed presence of Nesto Directors, Haris Palollathil and Mujeeb VTK.

Designed to offer a thrilling experience for families and gaming enthusiasts, ‘Fun To Day’ boasts a diverse range of arcade games, virtual reality experiences, and interactive entertainment suitable for all age groups. With state-of-the-art gaming technology and a fun-filled atmosphere, the centre aims to become a premier destination for



The centre aims to become a premier destination for leisure and recreation in Muscat.

leisure and recreation in Muscat. Speaking at the event, Al Sayyid Khalid Mahfoodh Salim al Busaidi highlighted the importance of such entertainment spaces in enhancing community engagement and providing quality recreational activities. The Nesto leadership reaffirmed their commitment to expanding innovative experiences that cater to customers of all demographics. The launch event was marked by an enthusiastic response from visitors, with families and children enjoying the wide range of games and attractions. ‘Fun To Day’ game centre is now officially open to the public, promising endless fun and excitement for everyone.

Own a Toyota Camry with Ramadhan benefits

THIS Ramadhan, own the stylish Camry and benefit with exclusive offers. As part of the campaign, customers can enjoy service ranging from 5 years / 50,000 kms (whichever is earlier), 1 year comprehensive insurance and Scratch & Win Prizes including iPhone 16 Pro Max, Apple Watch Ultra 2, Golden Seven Package, 3M Nano Ceramic Coating, 3M Colour Stable Type 2 Films and a chance to win 1 out of 2 brand-new Toyota Prado SUVs.

The campaign will end on 24th April 2025. (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Customers can visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom for exact details.)

Since its debut in 1982 and evolution over nine generations, the Toyota Camry has been embraced around the world for its outstanding performance, alluring design and renowned quality and value.



The Toyota Camry has been embraced around the world for its outstanding performance.

With its advanced yet seamless technology, modern styling, and an all-new Toyota Hybrid System, this model introduces a level of refinement that exceeds expectations, further cementing the Camry’s reputation as a class-leading vehicle.

The Camry is built around the Toyota New Global Architecture (TNGA-K) platform. This delivers excellent body rigidity and a low centre of gravity, guaranteeing a more rewarding driving experience.

To achieve a more exciting driving style, the new Toyota Camry comes with a choice of two powertrain options, including a 2.5-liter four-cylinder in line VVTi-e engine that produces 201 hp and 240 nm of torque and is paired with an eight-speed Multimode automatic transmission; and an electrified hybrid powertrain, which combines a petrol engine and two electric motors delivering a combined power of 226 hp.

It is also paired with an Electronically Controlled Continuously Variable Transmission (ECVT) delivering heightened driving pleasure. Drivers can also customize their Camry’s drive feel to suit their specific tastes with standard selectable NORMAL, ECO and SPORT driving modes, along with an additional EV mode for HEV drivers. These options allow drivers to customize their Camry’s driving experience, achieving a driving sensation which feels more refined and connected to the road conditions. The Camry features a sleek, energetic and eye-catching exterior and feature-rich interior to promise an emotionally engaging driving experience. The front of the vehicle showcases a lowered Hammer Head design, accentuated by a broad lower grille that gives the Camry a wide and solid presence with an aggressive stance. For any further details & to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Saud Bahwan Automotive Showroom.

TASTE OF HAKKASAN MENU: A JOURNEY THROUGH FLAVOUR, ELEGANCE

MUSCAT: Hakkasan Muscat at The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort invites guests to embark on a captivating culinary journey with the launch of “Taste of Hakkasan” menu.

This specially curated dining experience masterfully blends signature Cantonese flavours with refined craftsmanship offering a true reflection of Hakkasan’s culinary journey.

Set within a sophisticated and alluring atmosphere, where modern luxury converges with timeless



Cantonese tradition, Hakkasan provides the perfect backdrop for memorable moments with family

and friends. Available from the first day of Eid Al Fitr, the “Taste of Hakkasan” presents a carefully curated menu, where guests can begin their culinary journey with a choice of delicate dim sum combinations, rich traditional soups, or fresh crab bites. The main courses highlight a bold fusion of Asian and Omani influences, featuring Spicy Curry Prawn Balls with Lily Bulb and Almond, Omani hammour with Lao Gan Ma sauce and a comforting Tofu, Aubergine and

Shiitake Mushroom Claypot Bake, accompanied by seasonal sides. To round off the experience, a selection of fruity, sour and decadent parfaits and sorbets provides the perfect sweet finale. The menu itself is a celebration of flavour, craftsmanship and atmosphere embodying the spirit of unforgettable dining experiences. Guests are invited to indulge in Hakkasan Muscat’s exquisite culinary journey, where every visit promises to leave a lasting impression.



The event, dubbed as “Sohar International Souq — Layali Al Mouj,” provides a vibrant marketplace where creativity, passion and commerce converged.

we recognise that SMEs are the backbone of a thriving economy, driving innovation, job creation through supporting and empowering local talents and competencies to achieve

sustainable growth. Through initiatives such as Sohar International Souq — Layali Al Mouj, we are committed to creating valuable opportunities for entrepreneurs to expand their reach, build strong networks and position themselves for long-term success. It is through such efforts that we reaffirm our role as a catalyst for socioeconomic progress, creating a more resilient and prosperous future for all.” The event acted as a platform for the SMEs to showcase a diverse range of local products across multiple sectors, ranging from food and beverage, to fashion, health and cosmetics products and electronics, offering visitors an opportunity to explore a diverse selection of local brands with ease and convenience ahead of the Eid Al Fitr celebrations. Sohar International was also present

throughout the souq’s duration where they hosted the visitors to introduce them to the extensive range of financial services and solutions that the bank provides for various customers. In addition to the main exhibition showcase, the souq also included fun activities for children as well as draws with valuable prizes for the visiting guests. The “Sohar International Souq — Layali Al Mouj” exemplifies the bank’s strategic approach to community engagement, serving as both a platform for local entrepreneurs and a catalyst for economic resilience. By integrating business growth with meaningful interactions, Sohar International reinforces its commitment to fostering a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem while strengthening its role as a key driver of sustainable economic development.

BUSINESS

GME MARKS FIRST
TRADE ON ACE



RAID AL SALAMI
Managing Director of
GME

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

GULF Mercantile Exchange (GME), the leading international energy futures and commodities exchange in the Middle East, announced the first trade on its Alternative Crude Ecosystem (ACE).

This innovative platform allows market participants to trade multiple crude grades seamlessly through the exchange.

For the first time, Oman, Al Shaheen, Basrah Medium, Basrah Heavy, Dubai, Murban, and Upper Zakum, are all accessible on a single platform as differentials against the GME Oman sour crude futures benchmark. The milestone trade involved 500 contracts of Oman Crude Oil for delivery in May 2025.

ACE provides traders with a groundbreaking opportunity to engage in bilateral trading of various Middle Eastern crude grades against GME Oman Futures. This functionality enhances market efficiency by enabling participants to execute multiple Over-the-Counter (OTC) crude transactions as differentials, further strengthening the role of GME Oman as a key benchmark.

“The first ACE trade represents a significant evolution in the region’s crude trading landscape,” said Raid al Salami, Managing Director of GME. “For the first time, market participants can access a seamless, transparent, and efficient platform that integrates both futures and OTC trading. This empowers traders to optimize their portfolios, manage exposure across multiple crude grades, and capture new opportunities in an evolving energy market.”

With this latest offering, GME continues to reinforce its position as a global leader in energy trading, providing innovative solutions that meet the needs of the market while upholding the integrity and reliability of the GME Oman benchmark.

FSA SUSPENDS
SOME ACTIVITIES
OF FINANCIAL
CORPORATION

MUSCAT: The Financial Services Authority has issued administrative Decision No. 20/205 suspending some activities of Financial Corporation Company (SAOG) permanently and issued compulsory instructions to the company.

The move was made to enhance compliance and ensure the integrity of the financial markets. The decision was issued for breaching the Securities Law and the Executive Regulation of the Capital Market Law No. 1/2009 for failing to adjust its situation under Decision No. 5/2024 as well as failing to comply with the instructions issued by FSA on August 25, 2024.

Accordingly, FSA suspended the company from carrying out brokerage activity, marketing non-Omani securities, and research and advice activity permanently. The decision also included obliging the company to take a set of procedures within not more than three months from the date of the decision.

The company was directed to deal with all the complaints filed by the consumers and enable them to disposition their portfolios, further instructing the company to restructure the internal control systems to ensure compliance with the regulations and appoint qualifies staff to assume responsibilities.

DEPLETED RESOURCES

Gas prices in the European Union decline



Gas prices in the European Union have declined since mid-February, as the heating and winter seasons draw to a close. Oil Price, a platform specialising in energy and oil, reported on Tuesday that a group of EU member states emphasised that EU storage targets should be more flexible. The platform added that with EU storage depleted at its fastest pace in seven years after a cold winter, the summer refill season presents many challenges.

ENTREPRENEURIAL TRAINING PROGRAMME IN JABAL AL AKHDAR

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 25

THE Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority has announced the launch of a specialised training programme in collaboration with Outward Bound Oman, designed to equip entrepreneurs with essential business and leadership skills.

The initiative, titled “Outward Bound Oman for Entrepreneurs,” will take place in the picturesque Wilayat of Jabal Al Akhdar in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Set against the dramatic backdrop of Oman’s Green Mountain, the programme aims to empower entrepreneurs by developing their strategic planning abilities, enhancing their leadership potential, and fostering stronger professional networks among participants.



Outbound Oman’s training centre in Al Jabal Al Akhdar.

The training is open to entrepreneurs and small business owners who meet specific criteria. Eligible participants include those who hold an official Entrepreneurship Card, enterprises supported by the SMEs Development Authority, and businesses that have benefited from the

Authority’s funding programmes. The programme will be delivered in four separate cohorts, each accommodating 15 participants. The sessions are scheduled to take place from 14 to 17 April, 28 April to 1 May, 12 to 15 May, and 26 to 29 May 2025. Participants will benefit from a comprehensive experience that includes transportation, accommodation, meals, and the necessary training materials. Each session will begin from designated collection points to ensure smooth coordination and accessibility. With a focus on hands-on learning and outdoor challenges, the initiative aims to build confidence, resilience, and business acumen in real-world scenarios. Entrepreneurs interested in taking part must register by March 30, 2025 via the official link.

India eyes tariff cut on
over half of US imports



Under the deal, India is open to reducing tariffs on 55 per cent of US goods it imports that are now subject to tariffs ranging from 5 per cent to 30 per cent,

NEW DELHI: India is open to cutting tariffs on more than half of US imports worth \$23 billion in the first phase of a trade deal the two nations are negotiating, two government sources said, the biggest cut in years, aimed at fending off reciprocal tariffs.

The South Asian nation wants to mitigate the impact of US President Donald Trump’s reciprocal worldwide tariffs set to take effect from April 2, a threat that has disrupted markets and sent policymakers scrambling, even among Western allies.

In an internal analysis, New Delhi estimated such reciprocal tariffs would hit 87 per cent of its total exports to the United States worth \$66 billion, two government sources with knowledge of the matter told Reuters. Under the deal, India is open to reducing tariffs on 55 per cent of US goods it imports that are now subject to tariffs ranging from 5 per cent to 30

per cent, said both sources, who sought anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to the media. In this category of goods, India is ready to “substantially” lower tariffs or even scrap some entirely, on imported goods worth more than \$23 billion from the United States, one of

the sources said. India’s trade ministry, the prime minister’s office and a government spokesperson did not reply to mail seeking comments. Overall the US trade-weighted average tariff has been about 2.2 per cent, data from the World Trade Organization shows, compared

with India’s 12 per cent. The United States has a trade deficit of \$45.6 billion with India. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s US visit in February, the two nations agreed to start talks towards clinching an early trade deal and resolving their standoff on tariffs. New Delhi wants to strike a deal before the reciprocal tariffs are announced and Assistant US Trade Representative for South and Central Asia Brendan Lynch will lead a delegation of officials from United States for trade talks from Tuesday.

The Indian government officials warned that cutting tariffs on more than half of U.S. imports hinges on securing relief from reciprocal tax.

The tariff cut decision was not final, with other options under discussion such as sectoral adjustments of tariffs and product-by-product negotiations rather than a wide cut, said one of the officials. — Reuters

OIL RISES ON SUPPLY CONCERNS AFTER VENEZUELA TARIFFS



The monthly average price of Omani crude oil for March delivery reached \$80.26 per barrel.

MUSCAT/WASHINGTON: The official price of Oman oil for May delivery reached \$74.44 on Tuesday, March 25. The price of Oman oil increased by 93 cents compared to Monday’s price of \$73.51.

The monthly average price of Omani crude oil for March delivery reached \$80.26 per barrel, an increase of \$7.10 compared to February delivery.

Meanwhile, international oil prices rose on Tuesday for a fifth day on expectations that global supply may tighten after the US announced tariffs on countries that buy Venezuelian crude, although Opec+ plans to go ahead with an output hike in May limited gains.

Brent crude futures were up 46 cents, or 0.6%, at \$72.74 a barrel by 10:23 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude climbed 41 cents, also 0.6%, to \$69.49.

Both benchmarks rose more than 1%

on Monday after US President Donald Trump announced a 25% tariff on countries importing oil and gas from Venezuela. Oil is Venezuela’s main export and China, which is already the subject of US tariffs, is its largest buyer. “Oil firmed up on the latest tariff moves by the US, although gains were capped by reports of Opec+ moving to increase output

further in May,” said Panmure Liberum analysts in a note. The Trump administration also on Monday extended a deadline to May 27 for US producer Chevron to wind down operations in Venezuela. The withdrawal of Chevron’s licence to operate could reduce production in the country by about 200,000 barrels per day, according to ANZ analysts. Meanwhile, Opec+, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies including Russia, will likely stick to its plan to raise oil output for a second consecutive month in May, sources said, amid steady oil prices and plans to force some members to reduce pumping to compensate for past overproduction. Last week, the US issued new sanctions intended to hit Iranian oil exports. — Agencies

NEW CALL

25% tariffs on Venezuelan oil importers



US President Donald Trump announced an additional 25 per cent tariff on any country that buys oil or gas from Venezuela, adding that he would soon announce tariffs on cars, aluminium and pharmaceuticals. Trump said in press statement at the White House on Monday that the United States would impose tariffs on cars, pharmaceuticals and aluminium in the “very near future.”

FX LEVEL

Chinese Yuan declines against the dollar



The Chinese Yuan declined against the dollar during Tuesday’s trading, with the People’s Bank of China’s reference rate reaching 7.1788 yuan per dollar, down 8 Chinese pips from yesterday’s level of 7.1780 yuan. According to the Xinhua News Agency, Chinese regulations allow the yuan to rise or fall by 2% below the central bank’s reference rate on each trading day in the spot foreign exchange market.

OPINION

Will India be hit by reciprocal tariffs?



R
MADHUSOODANAN

The writer is the Executive Advisor to the Board, Global Money Exchange, Muscat

RECIPROCAL tariffs refer to the Trump administration's policy of imposing taxes on imported goods at the same rate that foreign countries impose on American goods. President Trump believes that the US is being treated unfairly in global trade, creating an imbalance in tariffs. Simply put, his stance is: if they charge us, we charge them. The key question now is whether India will gain or suffer from this move. The State Bank of India (SBI), in a special report, suggests that India could benefit in an increasingly uncertain global trade environment. However, some economists warn that the Indian economy may face significant challenges. Let's examine both perspectives.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT ON INDIA
The US will impose reciprocal tariffs from April 2, making Indian exports more expensive and affecting key sectors like pharmaceuticals, textiles, IT services, automobiles, and chemicals. Higher tariffs could erode India's price advantage in generic drugs, make textiles less competitive, and impact IT outsourcing. Automobiles and chemicals which are already facing tight margins, may struggle further in global markets. This move will add to the challenges Indian exporters face amid intense global competition. According to trade data, India exported \$60

billion worth of goods to the US between April and December 2024 and maintained a trade surplus. However, the new tariff structure could reduce Indian exports by \$7-\$10 billion annually impacting GDP growth, employment, and currency stability. Economists estimate that India will be among the hardest-hit countries due to the significant difference — around 10 percentage points — between the average import duties of the two nations. In the short term, these tariffs may adversely affect India's economy fueling inflation.

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE
SBI's report suggests that India may not be significantly impacted and could even benefit from the shifting trade landscape. The report highlights that long-term trends indicate a potential slowdown in US GDP growth, exports, and consumption. Experts believe India has the resilience to navigate these challenges, thanks to its vast, young workforce, which can be leveraged for value-added manufacturing and services, enhancing global competitiveness. The Reserve Bank of India's Report on Currency and Finance (RCF), released in July 2024 projects that India will emerge as a global leader in skilled manpower supply over the next 10-15 years. Therefore the skill upgradation of Indian youth is necessary for both domestic and

The key question now is whether India will gain or suffer from this move. The State Bank of India (SBI), in a special report, suggests that India could benefit in an increasingly uncertain global trade environment.

global reasons. India has rich resources, which have to be channeled effectively to match the manufacturing standards of China. Currently, manufacturing contributes about 13 per cent to India's GDP - significantly lower than China's however, efforts are underway to diversify exports and reduce specific market reliance. This challenge also presents an opportunity to attract investments, enhance competitiveness, and decrease import dependency. To mitigate the impact of reciprocal tariffs, India can expand trade with Europe, Southeast Asia, and Africa, reducing dependence on the US.

A CROSSROADS FOR INDIA'S TRADE FUTURE
The impact of reciprocal tariffs on India is complex and depends on several factors. While Indian exporters face uncertainty, India also has an opportunity to strengthen its domestic industries, diversify export markets, and use diplomatic channels to mitigate potential risks. This move may also be considered a blessing in disguise. Trump's policies may create short-term pain - slower growth, job cuts, and a weaker rupee - but they also serve as a wake-up call for India to become more self-reliant and globally competitive. The coming years will determine whether India can turn this challenge into a strategic advantage.

CHINA'S LNG IMPORT PLUNGE COMES AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME FOR EUROPE

BY RON BOUSSO

LONDON: China's imports of liquefied natural gas have sputtered this year, freeing up volumes that are helping Europe restock its rapidly dwindling supplies following a harsh winter. China's LNG imports are expected to drop by 22% in the first three months of the year compared to 2024 to 15.8 million metric tonnes, the lowest level since 2020 for the period, according to analytics firm Kpler. The decline is due to a confluence of factors, including reduced demand for residential heating in northern China driven by warmer weather, weaker industrial demand, higher domestic gas production and increased pipeline gas imports. It might be tempting to connect this decrease in energy imports to the escalating trade war between China and the United States. President Donald Trump has imposed several rounds of tariffs on Beijing, which has retaliated by placing its own duties on US imports, including a 15% tariff on LNG. And US LNG did make up only 1%, or 62,000 tonnes, of China's total LNG imports in March, compared with 3%, or 188,000 tons, in January, Kpler showed. But there is limited evidence to suggest that the burgeoning trade war has weighed on Chinese economic activity or energy imports – or even that it is responsible for the country's reduced reliance on US gas. Rather, lower imports from the US most likely stem from the fact that the vast majority of US cargoes are sold without any restrictions on their final destination, a feature not offered by other suppliers such as Qatar or many Australian producers. This means that if Chinese traders do not require all the US LNG volumes they committed to buy, they can resell these cargoes to third parties, such as European buyers. Imports in the first quarter of the year have fallen to their lowest since 2020.

JUST IN TIME
In any event, the sharp deceleration in Chinese buying comes at an opportune time for Europe, as winter is nearing its end in the Northern Hemisphere, meaning the region needs to refill its gas inventories. The need is especially acute this year. A colder than usual winter coupled with the termination of the last major pipeline delivering Russian gas into the region has led to a sharp draw in Europe's stocks, which stood at just 33.9% of capacity by March 21, far below last year's 60%, according to data from Gas Infrastructure Europe. — Reuters

Tourism sector recovery: New business opportunities

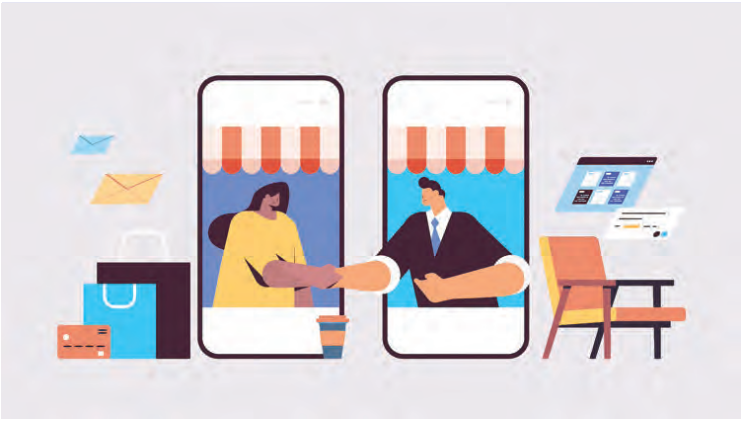
AS the economy increasingly diversifies under Oman Vision 2040, the tourism sector is a key pillar of growth. The post-pandemic recovery has created significant opportunities for Omani businesses to benefit from the resurgence of global travel. But in that competitive market, personalised marketing is the way to go — we have described a strategy that increases customer engagement by customising services and experiences to personal preferences.

HOW OMAN'S TOURISM INDUSTRY IS BOUNCING BACK
Thanks to its unique mix of cultural heritage, raw landscapes and style of luxury hospitality, Oman is often a bucket list destination in the Middle East. Now, with the government's push to develop its infrastructure, promote sustainable tourism and attract foreign capital, the sector is primed for a strong rebound. International visitor numbers are increasing, along with domestic tourism and open new avenues for local businesses to innovate and grow. There are several opportunities in different areas of the tourism ecosystem:

EXPERIENTIAL TRAVEL SERVICES
Contemporary travellers want more than sightseeing; they want to experience. Clearly, Omani companies would be able to devise packages of cultural adventure and eco-tourism that showcase the country's vast heritage and natural beauty. For example, personalised itineraries, private guided tours and unique local experiences can help businesses stand out.

SMART HOSPITALITY SOLUTIONS
Integrate AI & data analytics for hotels, resorts and homestays to do personalised, data-driven solutions for guest experience. Visitors can be provided with personalised room preferences, targeted offers, on-demand virtual concierge services and more, increasing overall customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

LOCAL HANDICRAFTS AND RETAIL
The growing demand for eco-friendly and ethically produced tourism drives with the desire for authentic, locally produced goods. At the same time, handicraft businesses can use e-commerce and



Personalised marketing is the way to go. Image for illustration only.

social media tools to reach a global audience that craves personalised souvenirs and bespoke products.

FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY
More footfall in restaurants and food outlets through personalised dining experiences, chef-curated menus and AI-driven recommendation systems. Local farms can partner with tourism businesses to help shaft farm-to-table concepts, which are attractive to environmentally conscious travellers.

WELLNESS AND LUXURY TOURISM
Wellness tourism: spa retreats and wellness resorts are in demand. Finally, the wellness + relaxation segment — this is where Omani businesses can cater to this segment of wellness travellers, by providing wellness packages tailored to their needs, traditional Omani-exclusive treatments and even alternative healing experiences.

HOW PERSONALISED MARKETING COULD CHANGE THE GAME FOR OMANI COMPANIES
With the rise of digital transformation, personalised marketing is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. With customer data, businesses can customise promotions, services and communication to align with what consumers desire.

HOW DOES PERSONALISED

MARKETING WORK?
Data-driven insights: AI and machine learning tools can identify an individual customer's behaviour, preferences and past interactions to craft targeted marketing campaigns. This data can be used by hotels, airlines and travel agencies to provide bespoke packages and unique offers. *Customised communication:* Instead of generic advertisements, businesses have instant access to travellers, allowing them to contact travellers with unique emails, push notifications and chatbot interactions that appeal to their particular interests. *Social media engagement:* Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are important in influencing people's travel decision making. Influencer marketing, interactive content and geo-targeted advertisement are some of the strategies that enterprises in Oman can use to attract customers and retain them. *Loyalty and reward programmes:* Vendor-specific discounts, offers and membership rewards foster repeat visits and long-term customers. Inclusion, it seems, goes both ways — and travellers are more inclined to return to businesses that acknowledge their tastes and deliver personalised experiences. *Challenges and way forward:* While opportunities are many, Omani businesses struggle to adopt and implement personalised marketing strategies. Concerns about data privacy, the adaptation of technology and investment in digital tools continue to hinder the transition, however, enterprises can adopt digital marketing and innovations with the help of strategic partnerships, government assistance and upskilling the local talent.

CONCLUSION
Oman's burgeoning tourism market opens up huge opportunities for local businesses, but they must embrace modern marketing strategies to reap the rewards.

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Does excessive yawning during prayer invalidate it and what should one do if he needs to yawn during prayer?

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HADITH

GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

The Prophet said:

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QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY



“And why should we not rely upon Allah while He has guided us to our [good] ways. And we will surely be patient against whatever harm you should cause us. And upon Allah let those who would rely [indeed] rely.”

(Surah Ibrahim-12)



DUA

SUPPLICATION TO ALLAH

O Allah, on this day, grant me a share in its nawafil (recommended prayers), honour me by attending to my problems, make closer the means to approach You, from all the means, O One who is not preoccupied by the requests of the beseechers.



EMBRACING THE SACRED NIGHTS OF RAMADHAN

BY BUTHINA AL RIYAMI

AS THE HOLY

month of Ramadhan unfolds, a profound spiritual energy envelops the hearts of Muslims worldwide. This month is particularly significant, but it is the final ten nights that hold the deepest reverence, believed to encompass Laylat Al Qadr — the Night of Decree — which is more rewarding than a thousand months. During these cherished nights, Muslims intensify their acts of worship, dedicating themselves to prayer, recitation of the Quran and remembrance of Allah (dhikr).

This sacred atmosphere emanates from the heart of each Muslim to the tranquil corners of the mosque, which is meticulously prepared to welcome worshippers seeking spiritual fulfilment. Across Oman, mosques transform into welcoming sanctuaries where believers — each in their unique way — experience a profound sense of devotion and community.

In Oman, mosques throughout the country are thoughtfully arranged to embrace the worshippers during these blessed nights, creating an environment of compassion and

spiritual grounding.

LATE-NIGHT TAHAJJUD

Tahajjud, a voluntary prayer observed in the late hours following Isha and before Fajr, offers an intimate connection to Allah.

During the last ten nights of Ramadhan, mosques across Oman frequently organise special Tahajjud sessions, featuring extended recitations from the Quran, striving to complete the entirety of the Quran by the end of this significant period.

As opposed to the quieter times of the year when Tahajjud is often performed individually, these nights witness mosques bustling with fervent worshippers — young and old — standing shoulder to shoulder in a powerful display of unity. The atmosphere is charged with the collective yearning for forgiveness, guidance and mercy, as individuals share their innermost desires with Allah in hushed whispers.

ITIKAF: A SPIRITUAL RETREAT

Itikaf is a practice wherein worshippers take refuge in the mosque for concentrated devotion, prayer and reflection. This practice involves disconnecting from the distractions of daily life

to focus solely on faith and worship. During the last ten days of Ramadhan, mosques across the nation prepare spaces for Itikaf, from the majestic Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat to modest community mosques, each becoming a sanctuary for spiritual retreat. Certain mosques designate specific areas to ensure a tranquil environment, as the tradition of Itikaf during these sacred days is deeply ingrained in Oman's rich Islamic heritage.

The serene ambience, resonating with the recitation of the Quran, heartfelt supplications (dua) and an overarching sense of peace and purpose, enables worshippers to engage in Itikaf — whether for the entirety of the last ten days, a day, or more. This practice transcends mere ritual; it serves as a vital spiritual reset — an invaluable opportunity to fortify their connection with Allah.

The final nights of Ramadhan present an extraordinary chance for deep spiritual introspection and a closer bond with Allah. The concerted efforts made to accommodate and facilitate these sacred nights reflect the dedication of Omanis, ensuring that this period is observed with devotion, serenity and a profound sense of unity within the community.



Can we sustain the culture of giving and volunteering throughout the year, beyond Ramadhan?

BY BALQEES ALORAIMI

OMANI society is renowned for its rich traditions of generosity and solidarity, a spirit that shines particularly brightly during Ramadhan. During this sacred month, volunteer teams and charitable organisations actively mobilise to support those in need through various initiatives, such as distributing Iftar meals, providing food baskets, renovating homes; and aiding orphans and struggling families.

Mazna al Balushi, a dedicated volunteer with a charitable team in Muscat, reflects:

“Volunteering during Ramadhan transcends mere charity; it is a profound spiritual journey that deepens our sense of social responsibility. The joy we feel when witnessing the smiles of those we help is indescribable. These moments truly highlight the value of giving.”

The range of volunteer initiatives during Ramadhan is vast, encompassing the distribution of Iftar meals to those observing the fast, the setting up of communal Iftar tables and the organisation of campaigns to collect and distribute clothing and essential supplies for families in need. One of the most notable projects run by Omani charities is the “Iftar Saim” initiative, managed by various volunteer teams across the governorates. Each day, Iftar meals are delivered to workers and those in need

at places such as mosques, hospitals and workplaces.

Additionally, blood donation campaigns thrive during Ramadhan, with many citizens and residents eager to contribute blood to alleviate shortages in hospitals, especially as donor numbers tend to decrease during fasting hours.

While charitable work is deeply ingrained in Oman’s societal fabric, the extensive involvement of young people in volunteer activities is particularly remarkable. Volunteering during Ramadhan has evolved into a significant aspect of youth identity, with young individuals making up a substantial portion of volunteer teams and playing crucial roles in organising and coordinating various initiatives.

Abdulrahman al Yahyaei, a young volunteer in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, shares:

“Volunteering fills me with a sense of achievement and joy. Whether distributing Iftar meals or helping to organise charity campaigns, I believe I am playing a part in fostering a more united and compassionate society.”

He adds, “Ramadhan is a wonderful opportunity for us all to engage in giving without expecting anything in return. Every good deed we undertake strengthens the spirit of cooperation and love within our community.”

Volunteer initiatives in Oman are not confined to individual efforts; they benefit from significant institutional backing from both public and private sectors. Many companies

and government institutions actively encourage their employees to take part in volunteer campaigns, offering logistical and financial support to charitable teams.

The Ministry of Social Development and charitable organisations are also instrumental in coordinating volunteer work, providing necessary licenses for initiatives and ensuring that aid reaches those in need in a transparent and efficient manner.

In addition to its societal advantages, volunteering positively impacts the volunteers themselves, enhancing their well-being and mental satisfaction while allowing them to connect with diverse members of the community. It also aids in the development of personal skills, including leadership, communication and teamwork, making the experience rewarding on multiple levels.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the month of Ramadhan remains a unique occasion to embody the values of generosity and compassion, as individuals and organisations alike are eager to bring joy to the hearts of those in need. With a growing number of volunteer initiatives each year, Omanis are demonstrating that charitable work is not merely a religious obligation but an integral part of their cultural and social identity.

As the holy month draws to a close, a pressing question lingers: Can we sustain the culture of giving and volunteering throughout the year, beyond Ramadhan?

RAMADHAN TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

France celebrates vibrant Ramadhan amidst growing Muslim Community

With 5 million Muslims and around 2,500 mosques, France witnesses a lively celebration of Ramadhan each year. The holy month is marked by communal Iftars held in public spaces, where families and friends come together to break their fast after sunset. Traditional foods such as dates, harira and various regional dishes like couscous are lovingly served. Many mosques organise lectures and Quran recitations, providing spiritual nourishment alongside the physical. Local councils and charitable organisations actively contribute by providing meals and hosting events to enhance intercultural dialogue and understanding. Initiatives like “Ramadhan tents” offer free Iftar meals to those in need, promoting charity and community support. This collaborative spirit makes Ramadhan a time for reflection, unity and sharing experiences among both Muslims and non-Muslims, enriching the multicultural fabric of France.

DAILY HEALTH TIPS TO REMEMBER



Prioritise family time

Ramadhan is an excellent time to prioritise family connections and strengthen bonds through shared experiences. The month’s essence is felt through communal meals, shared prayers and meaningful conversations. Make it a point to have Iftar meals together, using this time to connect, share reflections about the day and discuss spiritual goals. Creating traditions, such as nightly family prayers or reading together, can enhance spiritual growth and deepen relationships. Encourage open dialogue about each family member’s fasting experiences, fostering a culture of support. Additionally, consider engaging in community service together, reinforcing the values of generosity and compassion inherent in Ramadhan. Prioritising family time cultivates love and joy.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN ISLAM



1967 CE: The Six-Day War

The Six-Day War between Israel and several Arab nations, including Egypt and Jordan, resulted in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. This conflict had profound implications for the Muslim world and the Palestinian cause, leading to a sense of collective grievance among Muslims regarding the status of Jerusalem and the plight of Palestinians. The war intensified nationalist movements within Palestine and prompted a reevaluation of strategies among Arab nations.

FEATURES

French museum uncovers in storage picture by Renaissance woman master



A PROVINCIAL museum in northern France on Friday showed off a picture now attributed to one of the greatest women painters of the Italian Renaissance, Lavinia Fontana, but which had for decades languished in its storage.

The picture — “Portrait of a Gentleman, his Daughter and a Servant” — will now be a centre piece of the collection of the musee de la Chartreuse in Douai in northern France.

Lavinia Fontana, who lived from 1552-1614, is seen as one of the very first women to make a career out of painting in Western art and an outstanding representative of the Italian Renaissance style in her own right.

The picture shows three figures from a well-to-do family, shown dressed in the fashion of the time which is painted in intricate detail.

It shows a father, dressed in black and wearing a voluminous pleated collar, sitting in an armchair, while his daughter, wearing a similar collar, hands him some flowers.

In the background, a maid places a basket of fruit beside them.

In 2024, the museum launched a programme to study and restore its collection of Italian paintings, with the support of a committee of experts.

Among them was Philippe Costamagna, a specialist in Florentine and Roman art, who spotted the painting in a storage room.

“People told me ‘it’s a northern painting,’ and I said ‘no, it’s an Italian painting, Bolognese in spirit from A to Z. Everything is reminiscent of it: the little girl with the little flowers, the strokes on the collar and on the sleeve,” he said.

Previously attributed to the Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Pourbus (1523-1584), the work has finally been re-attributed to Lavinia Fontana.

“The painting is in excellent condition; it hasn’t been badly restored in the past, so it hasn’t been distorted. The restoration will enhance it,” said Costamagna.

The almost square canvas was bequeathed to the Douai museum in 1857. Restoration is required before it can be included in the permanent collection, the museum said.

Lavinia Fontana, who was born in Bologna but died in Rome, grew up in a scholarly environment and was taught to paint by her father Prospero Fontana.

As a trailblazing woman painter, she was a precursor to the great Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi who was born in 1593 and whose bold work is currently the subject of a landmark retrospective in Paris that opened this week. — AFP



Tom Cruise, Superman and ‘Avatar’ hold keys to 2025 box office

TOM CRUISE takes on what may be his final “Mission: Impossible,” a new Superman will wear the red cape and the record-setting “Avatar” sci-fi series will return to movie theatres this year.

Those films and more are giving cinema operators hope that the long recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic will continue in 2025. Five years after the start of the health crisis, moviegoing has not fully rebounded.

Box office receipts totalled \$8.6 billion last year in the United States and Canada, 25% below the pre-pandemic heights of \$11.4 billion in 2019.

The film industry was disrupted again in 2023 when Hollywood writers and actors went on strike.

“That complex matrix of filmmaking, where everyone wants the best talent and the best actors and the best sets, it takes a long time to get that running again,” said Tim Richards, founder and CEO of Europe’s Vue Cinemas. “2025 is going to feel the tail end of that.”

Top names in the movie business will gather at the annual CinemaCon convention in Las Vegas early next month to talk about the state of the industry.

The conference draws executives from Hollywood studios and multiplex operators such as AMC Entertainment, Cinemark and Cineworld as well as owners of single theatres in small towns.

At the Academy Awards this month, “Anora” filmmaker and best director winner Sean Baker delivered a “battle cry” for filmmakers, distributors and audiences to support theatres.

“The theater-going experience is under threat,” he said, noting that the number of screens shrunk during the pandemic.

“If we don’t reverse this trend, we’ll be losing a vital part of our culture,” Baker added.

Shawn Robbins, Director of Movie Analytics at Fandango and founder and owner of Box Office Theory, said the movie business was adjusting to “a new normal.”

“Event movies are increasingly drivers of the business,” Robbins said. “There’s even more weight on their shoulders in terms of box office dollars.”

Moviegoers still turn out for big-budget films, Robbins said, but have shown they are happy to wait to watch others at home.



“It is very common knowledge that a lot of movies will be available to stream within three to eight weeks, whereas it used to be a minimum of three months,” he said.

‘AVATAR’ AS TIPPING POINT?

Among the big hitters coming to theatres this year are “Mission: Impossible – The Final Reckoning,” a movie that may be Cruise’s last appearance in the long-running action franchise. “One last time,” he says in the trailer. The film will debut over the US Memorial Day weekend in May, along with Walt Disney’s live-action version of animated classic “Lilo & Stitch.”

Brad Pitt plays a Formula 1 driver in the June release “F1,” and in July, Warner Bros will release its new “Superman” movie directed by “Guardians of the Galaxy” filmmaker James Gunn and starring David Corenswet.

From Marvel, the anti-hero team “Thunderbolts” will kick off the summer



moviegoing season in early May, followed by “The Fantastic Four” in late July.

Around the November and December holidays, offerings include the second part of musical box office phenomenon “Wicked,” animated sequel “Zootopia 2” and “Avatar: Fire and Ash,” the third film in James Cameron’s “Avatar” series. The first “Avatar” is the highest-grossing movie of all time and the second movie ranks third.

Robbins projected 2025 would end with a slight increase in domestic box office receipts compared with last year, “maybe flirting with \$9 billion.” He said it is unclear when ticket sales will return to pre-pandemic levels.

Richards said he believed the new “Avatar” would kick off “an extraordinary three to five years” for cinemas.

“We’re going to see (Avatar) as the tipping point,” Richards said. “2026 has got an extraordinary number of great films.”

— Reuters