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PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR 05:30 AM

DHUHR 12:18 PM

ASR 03:20 PM

MAGHRIB 05:40 PM

ISHA 06:55 PM

INBRIEF

3 NEW E-SERVICES
VIA OMAN BUSINESS
PLATFORM

Acting in cooperation with Muscat Municipality, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion launched the “Lease Contracts Service” via Oman Business Platform. On the platform, the ministry also launched the Financial Reports Service and the Interactive Guide Service for trade names. The overall aim is to facilitate business activities and encourage investors to establish projects that support the national economy and enhance economic activity. Undertaken in cooperation with relevant government and private establishments, the step will help improve the business environment and apply the best international practices. The ceremony was held under the auspices of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat. Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry, said that the launch of the new services was in pursuance of action to implement a comprehensive digital transition initiative.

DETAILS ON P13

CANADA PM TRUDEAU
SAYS HE WILL RESIGN



JUSTIN TRUDEAU
Canada's Prime Minister

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Monday that he intends to step down as leader of the ruling Liberals after nine years in office but will stay on in his post until the party chooses a replacement. Trudeau, under heavy pressure from

Liberal legislators to quit amid polls showing the party will be crushed at the next election, said at a news conference that parliament would be suspended until March. That means Trudeau will still be prime minister on January 20 when US President-elect Donald Trump takes office. Trump has threatened to impose tariffs that would cripple Canada's economy.

WHITE BLANKET



A view of the Washington Monument as snow falls during a winter storm in Washington, DC, on Monday. A massive storm system dumped heavy snow and freezing rain on large swaths of the eastern United States on Monday, disrupting travel and work for millions of Americans from the Ohio Valley to the capital Washington. — AFP

Oman to
celebrate
HM’s
Accession
Day on
Jan 11

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN will celebrate on Saturday His Majesty the Sultan's Accession Day, which falls on January 11 every year. Oman's Renewed Renaissance has achieved accomplishments whose course was drawn out by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The accomplishments, made in harmony with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040, were shaped through administrative, financial, commercial and investment operations that also featured the modernisation of legislation, laws, governance, integrity, accountability and auditing systems. Over the past five years, His Majesty the Sultan has restructured the State's Administrative Apparatus and transformed the system of legislation and laws. As a result, the Sultanate of Oman has enjoyed remarkable progress that has directly revamped various areas of development, with as many as 470 Royal Decrees issued



since His Majesty the Sultan assumed the reins of power. Experts in legal affairs affirmed that the approach of His Majesty Sultan Haitham is consistent with Oman Vision 2040, designed to keep pace with recurrent developments in the global arena. Jamal bin Salim al Nabhani, Spokesman of the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs,

said that the promulgation of modern laws and legislation since His Majesty's Accession Day has demonstrated progress in various aspects of political, social and economic life in the Sultanate of Oman. He added in a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA) that this legislation reflects the developments countries are undergoing. SEE P2

Egyptian minister lauds Oman’s wise policy

MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, on Monday received Dr Badr Abdel Aati, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration in the Arab Republic of Egypt. During the meeting, the guest minister conveyed greetings and best wishes from the Egyptian leadership to the leadership of the Sultanate of Oman, along with their wishes for further progress and prosperity for the Omani people. The minister underlined the attention given by the Egyptian leadership to the distinguished relations with Oman in various spheres. He reviewed regional developments, stressing the importance of collaborative



HH Sayyid Fahd receives Dr Badr Abdel Aati in Muscat on Monday.
PHOTO BY MOHAMED AL RASHDI

efforts to mitigate their repercussions. HH Sayyid Fahd welcomed the guest and his accompanying delegation. He reviewed the march of bilateral relations, which stem from the advanced ties binding the two leaderships and peoples. In turn, the Egyptian minister lauded the wise and balanced policy pursued by the Sultanate of Oman, as well as its effective role in backing efforts for understanding and positive dialogue among countries to maintain regional security and stability. He highlighted the importance of the talks he conducted with officials in Oman, noting their positive contribution to enhancing joint cooperation. — ONA

SULTANATE
OF OMAN
ACCORDS
SPECIAL
ATTENTION TO
EQUESTRIAN
SPORTS

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman attaches great importance to equestrian sports and lends constant support to participants in horse races organised by the Royal Horse Racing Club and Oman Equestrian Federation, as well as jockeys from the Royal Cavalry who compete in various international events. Royal Horse Racing Festivals have become a cultural asset for the Sultanate of Oman. These festivals were first held at Madinat Al Adiyat racing track and initially focused solely on horse racing. Over time,

they have expanded to include a variety of equestrian sports and skills performed between races. These festivals have contributed to the development of horse racing competitions, with winners receiving prestigious trophies, including His Majesty the Sultan's Cup. They have also helped to raise the standards of horse riders, both male and female. The festivals have encouraged Omani citizens, horse owners, coaches, and jockeys to participate in the races, prompting horse owners to select purebred

Arabian horses for competition and raising interest in horse breeding within the Sultanate of Oman. Royal Horse Racing Festivals are presented using advanced technology, combining historical originality with modern-day advancements. This reflects the enlightened vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, who has given great attention to horses and those involved in equestrian sports. His support has encouraged the sport to thrive and reach global standards. — ONA

Oman drives progress with legislative and social reforms

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman will celebrate on January 11, Saturday, His Majesty the Sultan's Accession Day, which falls on January 11 every year. Oman's Renewed Renaissance has achieved accomplishments whose course was drawn out by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

The accomplishments, made in harmony with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040, were put to shape through administrative, financial, commercial and investment operations that also featured the modernisation of systems of legislation, laws, governance, integrity, accountability and auditing.

During the past five years, His Majesty the Sultan has restructured the State's Administrative Apparatus and transformed the system of legislation and laws. As a result, the Sultanate of Oman has enjoyed remarkable progress that directly revamped various areas of development, with as many as 470 Royal decrees issued since His Majesty the Sultan assumed the reins of power in the country.

Experts in legal affairs affirmed that the approach of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik was consistent with Oman Vision 2040, designed to keep pace with recurrent developments in the global arena.

Jamal bin Salim al Nabhani, Spokesman of the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, said that the promulgation of modern laws and legislation, since His Majesty's Accession Day, has shown developments in various aspects of political, social, and economic life in the Sultanate of Oman. He added that this legislation reflects the developments that countries are going through. The State's Administrative Apparatus has been restructured in an integrated manner, including public legal entities, through the Royal Decrees issued to define the jurisdictions of these units and approve their organisational structures.

Al Nabhani explained that the first Royal Decree issued during the era of the Renewed Renaissance was No 2/2020 amending (Annex No 3) attached to the Law on the State's Flag, Emblem, and National Anthem. It was followed by many Royal Decrees that included the promulgation and updating of a large number of laws and legislation in line with the Renewed Renaissance, most notably Royal Decree

No 6/2021 on the promulgation of the Basic Law of the State, which paved the way for a new phase in the stages of building a state of law and institutions in Oman.

He stressed that the issuance of the Royal Decrees and laws was accompanied by many regulations and decisions of a legislative nature issued by the units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and other public legal entities. These regulations and decisions stipulate governing and implementing many aspects that were stated in the Royal Decrees and laws. He explained that the laws regulating economic activities in Oman have received adequate care and attention in updating them in line with the rapid developments witnessed by the country, including the promulgation of the Securities Law, the Labour Law, the Public Debt Law, the Bank Deposit Protection Law, and the Law on the Expropriation for Public Benefit, in addition to restructuring the bodies responsible for regulating economic activities such as the Board of Governors of the Central Bank, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and the Financial Services Authority.

SOCIAL PROTECTION FUND

As for the legislation governing social activities in the country, he said that they have passed through a comprehensive modernisation phase, as Royal Decree No 50/2023 on the promulgation of the Bylaw of Social Protection Fund, and Royal Decree No 52/2023 on the promulgation of the Social Protection Law, come as the general law governing the services and care provided by the state to individuals in Oman. Pursuant to Royal Decree No 50/2023, all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus concerned with retirement and social protection were restructured into one apparatus namely the Social Protection Fund. According to the Social Protection Law, the legislation related to social protection was unified, in addition to the Social Security Law.

Sariya bint Khalfan al Hadiyah, Member of the State Council and Member of the Legal Committee of the Council, said that since His Majesty the

Sultan's Accession Day, the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed an update in existing legislation and the promulgation of new laws aimed at enhancing comprehensive and sustainable development and establishing the necessary legal frameworks to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

She told ONA that the new laws issued and the updates to the existing legislation have all contributed to the development of many sectors in line with the objectives of the vision and Oman's Renaissance, which reflect the farsighted vision of the wise leadership of His Majesty the Sultan for the future of Oman.

RENEWED RENAISSANCE

She added that a set of laws have been issued that reflect the road map for Oman's Renewed Renaissance, and support the strategic goal of promoting sustainable development, maintaining local and international security and peace, and achieving prosperity and social well-being for the Omani people and residents on this homeland. She pointed out that these laws included the Foreign Capital Investment Law, which aims to attract foreign investments, enhance the business environment in the Sultanate of Oman, and streamline investment procedures in line with economic development plans. She affirmed that these laws aim to attract more investments and contribute to diversifying the Omani economy and reducing dependence on oil as a major source of revenue, as well as promoting the Sultanate of Oman as a country attractive to foreign investment.

She also affirmed that the issuance of the new Media Law aims to regulate media activities in the country, promote transparency and democratic values and build a 'responsible media community'.

She added that the issuance of the Media Law was in implementation of the provisions of the Basic Law of the State. She pointed out that the new law reflects a commitment to enhance media freedom. The new Media Law explicitly stipulates that media freedom is guaranteed in accordance with the Basic Law of the State, she said, noting that this

includes the freedom of opinion, the right of individuals to practice media activities and obtain information, as well as the right of media professionals not to disclose their sources, she explained.

She concluded by saying that the laws promulgated and updated during the reign of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik have greatly contributed to enhancing development in the Sultanate of Oman and support the partnership between the government, the private sector, and civil society to achieve development goals. These laws function as essential tools for achieving sustainable development and promoting social justice. The Omani citizen is part of this development process through the active participation in various sectors.

Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Saadi, member of the Majlis Ash'shura and Head of the Legislative and Legal Committee at the council said that the new economic legislation has played a pivotal role in improving the business environment in the Sultanate of Oman, by providing incentives for foreign and local investments. This added Al Saadi, has contributed to enhancing economic growth opportunities and diversifying sources of income.

SOCIAL BALANCE

He told ONA that the legislation contributed to achieving the goals of economic sustainability by encouraging innovation, developing education and enhancing the role of oversight to ensure the optimal use of national wealth and resources.

He pointed out that the social legislations also reflect Oman's commitment to enhancing citizens' rights, supporting social balance and empowering eligible groups to benefit through social security programmes. These also provide a legal framework that enhances transparency and equality, in a manner that maintains national cohesion and achieves social solidarity. Al Saadi affirmed that the new laws are consistent with the themes of Oman Vision 2040, which focus on sustainable development, education and governance. He noted that the laws and legislation have contributed to consolidating the position of Oman as a stable and attractive destination at both the regional and international levels.

— ONA



ISSUANCE OF 470 ROYAL DECREEES MODERNISING LAWS, INCLUDING THE BASIC LAW OF THE STATE, SOCIAL PROTECTION LAW, LABOUR LAW

COMPREHENSIVE RESTRUCTURING OF THE STATE’S ADMINISTRATIVE APPARATUS AND PUBLIC LEGAL ENTITIES

UNIFIED SOCIAL PROTECTION UNDER THE SPA, PROMOTING CITIZENS' RIGHTS, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, AND QUALITY OF LIFE IMPROVEMENTS

NEW MEDIA LAW GUARANTEEING MEDIA FREEDOM, TRANSPARENCY, FOSTERING A RESPONSIBLE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

SHORT TAKES

OMAN AND EGYPT
BOOST RELATIONS

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received on Monday Dr Badr Abdel Aati, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration in the Arab Republic of Egypt. The meeting reviewed the deep-rooted and fraternal relations binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt. The two sides stressed the common desire to enhance the bilateral cooperation in various political, economic and cultural fields to serve the joint interests.

The two ministers exchanged views on a set of regional and international issues of common concern. They also discussed the current regional situation and the escalating challenges, with a focus on developments of the Palestinian issue and the ceasefire endeavours in the Gaza Strip. The two sides also underlined the importance of enhancing dialogue as a means to achieve stability and back international efforts aimed at finding peaceful and sustainable solutions to conflicts, in a way that ensures security and development for the peoples of the region.

SHURA CHIEF
RECEIVES
THAILAND, JORDAN
AMBASSADORS

Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash-Shura, received Warunee Pan Krajung, the newly appointed Ambassador of Thailand to Oman on Monday.

During the meeting, the chairman welcomed the ambassador and commended the strong and friendly ties between Oman and Thailand, emphasising the importance of further enhancing and expanding these relations across various fields to serve the interests of both nations.

The ambassador expressed her satisfaction with the distinguished level of relations between the two countries and their effective role in fostering higher levels of cooperation. She extended her best wishes for Oman’s continued progress and prosperity under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

Al Maawali also received **Tharwah Hamad al Nuaimat**, Ambassador of Jordan to Oman.

During the meeting, discussions centred on strengthening the strong bilateral relations between the two nations across various fields. The two sides also exchanged views on recent regional and international developments of mutual interest. The chairman expressed his deep appreciation for Jordan’s role in fostering cooperation between the two countries.

ROP OFFICERS
RECEIVE ACADEMIC
CERTIFICATES

MUSCAT: The Royal Oman Police (ROP) handed over academic certificates to graduate officers on Monday. The graduation ceremony was held under the auspices of Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, as part of the ROP’s annual day celebrations which falls on January 5.

The Inspector General of Police and Customs honoured the excelling officers, handed over academic certificates and honoured the supervising trainers. The event was attended by a number of senior ROP officers and members of the teaching and training staff at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences. — ONA

ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER
RECEIVES EGYPTIAN FM

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, on Monday received Dr Badr Abdel Aati, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration of the Arab Republic of Egypt, currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two

sides reviewed bilateral relations and aspects of joint cooperation between the two countries. They also discussed means of promoting relations in various areas to serve joint interests. The meeting was attended by the Ambassador of Egypt to Oman. — ONA



Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani holds talks with Dr Badr Abdel Aati

Isnad system transforms
access to govt tenders

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

THE SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES Development Authority (SMEDA) inaugurated its first dialogue session of 2025, continuing its initiative to foster the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through the Isnad system for government tenders.

The session, attended by Halima bint Rashid al Zariyah, Chairperson of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA), Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, representatives of relevant government agencies, and SME owners, emphasised the Authority’s commitment to promoting partnerships, improving the business climate for SMEs and formulating supportive policies.

The dialogue addressed four main themes. The Isnad Platform: An electronic system for managing government tenders, ensuring transparency and systematic competition. Policies and Legislation: Discussions aimed at refining legal frameworks to benefit SMEs. Local Content Enhancement: Strategies to prioritise local businesses in tenders. Incentives and Legislation: Mechanisms to motivate and support



The session emphasised SMEDA’s commitment to promoting partnerships.

“We identified challenges faced by entrepreneurs and developed an action plan to address them. A specialised workshop on local content will further explore these issues.

**ENG BADR
BIN SALIM
AL MAAMARI**

entrepreneurs. In one of the key discussions, Eng Badr bin Salim al Maamari highlighted, “We identified challenges faced by entrepreneurs and developed an action plan to address them. A specialised workshop on local content will further explore these issues. We’re also working on solutions to broaden tender categories for SMEs, ensuring equitable opportunities.”

Halima bint Rashid al Zariyah added, “This session provided valuable insights into tender mechanisms and areas for improvement. Entrepreneurs’ feedback is pivotal in refining systems and overcoming challenges. We’re committed to advancing electronic platforms for awarding contracts.” As part of the initiative, SMEDA,

in collaboration with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board, introduced a comprehensive guide to assist SMEs in registering and utilising the Isnad platform effectively. This dialogue session builds on six impactful sessions held last year, addressing themes such as financing SMEs, food security, health, tourism, economic zones and the postal sector. Each session witnessed active participation, underscoring the Authority’s role in empowering entrepreneurs across diverse fields.

Through its dialogue series, SMEDA continues to champion the growth of SMEs, ensuring their integration into Oman’s economic fabric and creating a thriving ecosystem for entrepreneurial innovation.

Oman, Djibouti sign air agreement

MUSCAT: Represented by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), the Sultanate of Oman on Monday signed an air transport agreement with the Republic of Djibouti for enhancing bilateral cooperation in the field of air transport and facilitating the movement of passengers and goods between the two countries.

The agreement was signed by Eng Nayef bin Ali al Abri, Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), and Diyauddin



CAA signs air transport agreement with the Republic of Djibouti

Saeed Ba’Makhramah, non-resident Ambassador of the Republic of Djibouti to the Sultanate of Oman. Oman has so far inked agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in the field of air transport with more than 130 countries around the world. The pacts will promote Oman as a regional air transport centre and enhance its ability to interconnect various global markets. — ONA

ACFE Oman welcomes new president, leadership team

MUSCAT: The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE) Oman Chapter has announced the election of Haitham bin Humaid al Raisi as its new president. A prominent fraud and financial crime expert, Al Raisi brings extensive experience to his role, having previously served as the chapter’s Membership Director. Throughout his distinguished career, Al Raisi has showcased exceptional leadership in conducting financial crime investigations and implementing effective fraud risk management programmes within the banking sector.

In an inaugural address, Al Raisi has shared his vision for ACFE Oman, with a strong focus on empowering young Omani professionals. “Our primary objective is to equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills necessary to support Oman’s development goals,” he stated. “By fostering a culture of fraud prevention, raising awareness and promoting ethical practices, we aim to build a more informed and responsible society. Engaging young professionals is key to driving sustainable growth and meaningful change.”



Haitham bin Humaid al Raisi, President, ACFE Oman Chapter

Al Raisi also emphasised ACFE Oman’s commitment to providing comprehensive training programmes, professional development opportunities and initiatives aimed at enhancing public awareness about fraud prevention. Under his leadership, the chapter aims to strengthen its role in combating financial crimes and fostering ethical business practices across Oman. Joining Al Raisi is a newly elected team of board members who will guide the chapter’s initiatives for the upcoming term: Fathiya al Maskari: Vice-President, Afrah

al Ghafri: Secretary, Sultan al Hamdani: Treasurer, Dr Iram Ansari: Director of Training, Research and Development, Waleed al Abri: Director of Membership, Amal al Kaburi: Director of Sponsorship, Hassan Ahmed: Director of Media and Programmes, and Jose Chacko: Adviser. This dynamic team of professionals brings a diverse array of expertise and is well-positioned to lead ACFE Oman into a successful and impactful future. Together, they aim to uphold the chapter’s mission of combating financial crimes and promoting ethical excellence within the community.



EXPLORING THE HERITAGE EXPERIENCE

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, JAN 6

MUSCAT NIGHTS festival offers a captivating blend of attractions, but this year, the exceptional weather has added a special charm to the event.

Al Amerat Public Park has become a hub of activity, hosting stage shows, exhibition tents, a Heritage Corner, traditional food, and much more, drawing a steady flow of visitors daily.

For those seeking a cultural journey, the Market of Artisans offers a unique experience. Here, visitors can witness the craftsmanship of silversmiths, carpenters, and wood and leather artisans.

Among them is Islam al Aرامي, who builds exquisite miniature ships that

have become prized collector's items.

Speaking to the Observer, a tourist remarked, "I've set my mind on this ship — it will make a fantastic gift. I just need to figure out the packing to take it home."

The market also features a shop specialising in Omani musical instruments. Khamis al Rushaidi creates handmade drums, including the traditional standing drums and a rare treasure: the conch shell trumpet. Known locally as Jim or Yim, the conch shell is one of the world's oldest musical instruments.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Shihi, from the Wilayat of Khasab, Musandam Governorate, shared its significance: "The size of the hole on the shell determines the sound - the wider the

hole, the louder the tone, and softer when narrower."

The history of this instrument is well-documented, with the National Museum showcasing its origins. The earliest conch shells used as musical instruments were discovered at the Ras Al Hamra archaeological site in Muscat Governorate, dating back to 5000-4000 BCE (Late Stone Age).

According to the museum's display: "Among all the large shells uncovered over the grave coverings at Ras Al Hamra, a few were carefully perforated on the spiral zone to serve as horns or trumpets. They were blown during funeral ceremonies and abandoned on graves afterward. Ethnographic evidence from the Mediterranean to Polynesia indicates similar use of large gastropods

Muscat Nights festival not only entertains, but also enriches visitors with glimpses of Oman's rich heritage and traditions

as trumpets in funerary rites."

Today, the conch shell continues to hold a revered place in Omani folk music, particularly in Maidan performances by folklore bands. Beyond its musical legacy, the conch shell is also believed to offer therapeutic benefits, such as reducing stress, improving breathing and enhancing lung function.

The conch's universal appeal is highlighted by institutions like the Met Museum, which states, "Although it has always served as a very effective signalling device and was often used as a war trumpet, the conch achieved exalted status as a sacred instrument."

Muscat Nights festival not only entertains, but also enriches visitors with glimpses of Oman's rich heritage and traditions.

SHORT TAKE



The park has an area of 35,000 square metres with green spaces and kiosks

SHINAS MARINE PARK PROJECT COMPLETE

SUHAR: Al Batinah North Municipality has announced the completion of Shinas Marine Park, a vital project that aims to provide a recreational environment and a social outlet for visitors as the municipality seeks to enhance tourism and entertainment infrastructure in Al Batinah North Governorate.

Eng Alia bint Salah al Attar from the Projects Department at Al Batinah North Municipality, who is in charge of the project, said: “We are proud of the completion of Shinas Marine Park which is a new addition to the tourism and entertainment infrastructure in the Wilayat of Shinas.

The project is part of efforts aimed to improve the quality of life in the governorate and provide a safe and convenient environment for visitors. We are quite sure that the park will become a distinctive tourist destination and an important entertainment spot in the governorate.”

Occupying an area of 35,000 square metres, the park includes several main components such as the green spaces, 10 sites designated for investment including 5 commercial kiosks and two electric games areas, two marine games areas on the beach, a café, toilets, car parks and a games area dedicated to wheelchair users.

The development of Shinas Marine Park constitutes an important step towards enhancing tourism and entertainment diversity in the Wilayat of Shinas.

The facility contributes significantly to improving the quality of life for residents and visitors of the governorate while providing economic and investment opportunities that support young people and owners of small and medium enterprises.

Sohar University kicks off annual development week

SUHAR: Sohar University launched its Annual Staff Development Week on Monday organised by the Human Resources Department. The event saw active participation from the university’s management, academic and administrative staff. The programme aims to provide comprehensive training and development opportunities for all staff members.

The week commenced with a presentation by Dr Hamdan al Fazari, Vice-Chancellor of Sohar



Staff development week commenced with a presentation by Dr Hamdan al Fazari

University, who highlighted the university’s achievements during the first semester, and outlined aspirations for the upcoming second semester.

Dr Huda Abu Hamedha, Chair of the ISAR Committee, followed with updates on the university’s ongoing preparations for institutional accreditation.

Adding to the enriching start, Prof Ghassan al Kindi, Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, presented insights on the university’s latest

advancements in research and innovation.

Throughout the week, the programme will feature a diverse array of training workshops and lectures tailored to enhance the skills of academic, administrative and senior management staff.

The event will culminate with a comprehensive induction programme for all new staff members joining the university, ensuring they are well-prepared to integrate into Sohar University’s vibrant community.

UTAS Academic Board holds 2025’s first meeting

THE Academic Board of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) on Sunday held its first meeting of the current academic year (2024-2025). The meeting was chaired by Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, Chairman of the UTAS Board.

The Board discussed a proposal on modern policies aimed to secure sensitive data and assets, besides setting guidelines and procedures to ensure the confidentiality, integrity and availability of information. This reflects UTAS commitment to implement the best practices in information security and enhance cybersecurity.

A risk management policy endorsed by the UTAS Board at the meeting was aimed at maintaining institutional performance, upgrading the university’s ability to deal with potential challenges and raising awareness of university members about security measures.

The Board approved the formation of an Audit and Review Committee that will oversee the tasks of the Internal Audit Department with the prime aim of enhancing administrative governance and achieving greater transparency in financial,



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, chairs the first meeting of UTAS Academic Board

administrative and academic operations.

The meeting discussed measures for the admission of children of non-Omani university employees in accordance with specified criteria.

This was aimed at providing appropriate educational opportunities and unifying related procedures, including issuing travel tickets and other measures to ensure equal educational opportunities.

Within reference to its decisions during a meeting held on May 26, 2024, the Board commended measures undertaken to implement procedures related to the Master’s programmes at the UTAS and it considered applying the same during the current academic year (2024-2025).

As many as 6,292 male and female students graduated at the UTAS in the current academic year. — ONA

MoE marks World Braille Day with focus on inclusion, innovation

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Education (MoE), through the Directorate-General of Special Education and Continuous Learning, commemorated World Braille Day on January 4, underscoring the significance of Braille in enabling the participation of individuals with visual disabilities in education and public life.

In collaboration with Al Noor Association for the Blind, the Ministry organised a special exhibition. The event, inaugurated under the auspices of Shanoona al Habsi, Unicef Representative, and Assistant Director-General of the Directorate-General for Special Education and Continuous Learning, featured contributions from the Al Noor Association for the Blind and Omar bin Al Khattab Institute for the Blind.

The ceremony was attended by Ministry officials and professionals in the field of visual impairment.

The exhibition showcased the evolution of Braille, emphasising its importance in the lives of visually impaired individuals. It featured modern educational tools, technologies facilitating Braille learning and interactive activities that allowed visitors to experience Braille writing and reading firsthand. Additionally, student projects and innovations highlighted the creative potential of students with visual disabilities.

The Ministry reaffirmed its commitment to Braille as a



A special exhibition was organised by the Ministry of Education along with Al Noor Association for the Blind

fundamental educational tool by providing Braille curricula, training specialised teachers and introducing advanced teaching technologies. Initiatives and programmes promoting Braille aim to integrate visually impaired students into mainstream education while fostering partnerships with local and international organisations to uphold the rights of individuals with disabilities.

By celebrating World Braille Day,

the Ministry seeks to raise public awareness about Braille’s role in societal integration and education.

The exhibition highlighted advancements in Braille learning, including innovations like science book drawings created using thermal transducers.

It also showcased tools that enhance visual clarity for students with visual disabilities, promoting inclusivity and accessibility in education.

مستقبلنا
Moving Forward
with Confidence

رؤية عمان
2040

Ministry of Social
Development

Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender:-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non-retundable)	
					Small and Medium Companies	Local Companies
4/2025	Providing cleaning services for the building of the Cerebral Palsy and Physical Disability Center in Al Khoudh	Companies specialized in the field of cleaning, laundry and pest control services and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third or fourth degree.	Sunday 26-01-2025 02:00 PM	Sunday 16-02-2025 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>). On **Tuesday 07/01/2025**.

❖ For Inquiry, please contact though the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).
“The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry”

www.mosd.gov.om

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Security personnel stand guard at headquarters of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China. — Reuters

CHINA’S XI VOWS ‘BATTLE AGAINST CORRUPTION’

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday vowed an “all-out battle against corruption” as top leaders convened in Beijing for an annual planning session of the country’s top disciplinary agency. “We must always maintain our tenacity and perseverance... and resolutely fight the tough, protracted and all-out battle against corruption,” Xi said, according to state broadcaster CCTV. The Chinese leader has overseen a wide-ranging campaign against official corruption since coming to power just over a decade ago.

Proponents say the policy promotes clean governance, but others say it also serves as a means for Xi to purge political rivals. In November, the ruling Communist Party suspended a top military official and placed him under investigation for “serious violations of discipline,” a common euphemism for corruption. On Monday, Xi called corruption “the biggest threat” to the Communist Party, adding that “the fight against corruption remains grave and complex.” Instances of corruption continue to occur, he told the party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection’s meeting, adding that eliminating conditions that fuel graft remains a difficult task. — AFP



Israeli security and rescue personnel at the scene of a shooting attack, in the West Bank. — Reuters

3 ISRAELIS KILLED IN NORTHERN WEST BANK SHOOTING

TEL AVIV: Three Israelis were killed on Monday and several injured in a shooting attack on a car and bus near the settlement of Kedumim in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Israel’s national ambulance service Magen David Adom (MDA) said. Monday’s attack comes amid a diplomatic push for a deal to end the 15-month-old war in Gaza and return Israeli captives home and may pose another obstacle to sealing such a deal before US President-elect Donald Trump takes office on January 20.

The West Bank has been transformed by the rapid growth of Jewish settlements since Netanyahu returned at the head of a far-right nationalist coalition two years ago. During that time, a surge in settler violence has led to US sanctions. Since the October 7, 2023, attack by Palestinian Hamas fighters on southern Israel that triggered the war in Gaza, the violence in the West Bank has spiralled, with hundreds of Palestinians and dozens of Israelis killed. — Reuters

BID GRANTED

Malaysian ex-PM Najib wins appeal



A Malaysian court granted ex-premier Najib Razak’s bid to access a royal document that should allow him to serve his sentence at home, in a rare win for the disgraced former leader at the heart of the country’s biggest scandal. The Court of Appeal on Monday ruled that a lower court dismissal of Najib’s request to confirm the document’s existence be overturned and sent back to the High Court. — Reuters

OVER 30 MILLION IN NEED OF AID IN WAR-TORN SUDAN, SAYS UN

PORT SUDAN: More than 30 million people, over half of them children, are in need of aid in Sudan after twenty months of war, the United Nations said on Monday. The UN has launched a \$4.2-billion call for funds, targeting 20.9 million people across Sudan from a total of 30.4 million people it said are in need in what it called “an unprecedented humanitarian crisis”. Sudan has been torn apart and pushed to the brink of famine by the war that erupted in April

2023 between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Tens of thousands of people have been killed and more than eight million internally displaced, which, in addition to 2.7 million displaced before the war, has made Sudan the world’s largest internal displacement crisis. A further 3.3 million people have fled across Sudan’s borders to escape the war, which means over a quarter of the country’s pre-war population,

estimated at around 50 million, are now uprooted. Famine has already been declared in five areas in Sudan and is expected to take hold of five more areas by May, with 8.1 million people currently on the brink of mass starvation. Both the army and the RSF have been accused of using starvation as a weapon of war. For much of the conflict, the UN has struggled to raise even a quarter of the funds it has targeted for its humanitarian response in the northeast African country. — AFP

Blinken confident in South Korea democracy

SOUTH KOREAN investigators sought an extension of a warrant to arrest impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol, as visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed confidence in the key Asian ally’s handling of the political turmoil. Investigators probing Yoon over his December 3 martial law proclamation failed to serve an arrest warrant on Friday, blocked by presidential security service guards who formed a human chain to prevent access to Yoon. The arrest warrant, the first for a sitting president, was due to expire at midnight on Monday. Investigating authorities said in a statement on Monday they had requested an extension of the warrant in court, but declined to say how long the extension will last. Yoon, who has been impeached over his martial law declaration, is also under criminal investigation for possible insurrection.

The brief six-hour martial law declaration plunged one of Asia’s strongest democracies into uncharted territory with the impeachment of not only Yoon, but also the prime minister who become acting president. Yoon’s action drew a rare rebuke from officials in Washington including Blinken’s deputy, Kurt Campbell, who has said it was “badly misjudged.” Speaking after his meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, Blinken said Washington had expressed “serious concerns” to Seoul over some of the actions Yoon took over the course of his martial law declaration. But the events



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, right, attend a joint press conference following their meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul. — Reuters



Investigating authorities said in a statement on Monday they had requested an extension of the warrant in court, but declined to say how long the extension will last. Yoon is also under criminal investigation for possible insurrection

unfolding since then have reflected South Korea’s brand as a democratic success, “which is remarkably strong,” Blinken said at a news conference.

“The response that we’ve seen, and that we expect to continue to see, is one that is peaceful and fully consistent and in accordance with the constitution and the rule of law.” Yoon was impeached by parliament on December 14 and suspended from presidential duties. The Constitutional Court is trying the case to decide whether to remove him from office permanently or reinstate him. The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), which is leading the criminal insurrection probe into Yoon, had sent a notice to police requesting them to take over execution of the arrest warrant.

A police official said at a news briefing that police believed there was a legal dispute over such a transfer and would discuss it with the CIO. Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer advising Yoon, said the bid to transfer the execution of the arrest warrant is effectively an admission by the CIO that its probe and the warrant were “illegal”. The unprecedented attempt to arrest an incumbent president has intensified duelling rallies by those supporting Yoon, with the “Stop the Steal” slogans popularised by US President-elect Donald Trump voters, and those calling for Yoon’s punishment. A group of hardcore Yoon supporters led by Christian pastor Jun Kwang-hoon held a news conference and described the fight for Yoon as an “international battle” for freedom. — Reuters



FOUR ABDUCTED KENYANS FREED

NAIROBI: Four young Kenyan men who disappeared last month in a spate of abductions targeting government critics were freed on Monday, local media and rights groups said. Among the four released was 24-year-old college student Billy Mwangi, found in northeastern Embu town “looking frail”, according to the Daily Nation newspaper. Police did not respond to a request for comment on Monday. They have previously denied involvement in abductions but have shown little sign of investigating the disappearances. Rights groups blame a shadowy unit drawn from intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies. — AFP

CALL FOR TRIAL

Bangladesh issues 2nd warrant for Hasina



A Bangladeshi court has issued a second arrest warrant for exiled former leader Sheikh Hasina, this time for her alleged role in enforced disappearances. Dhaka has already issued an arrest warrant on charges of crimes against humanity for Hasina. Tajul Islam, chief prosecutor of the domestic International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), said the second warrant relates to enforced disappearances during her rule. Bangladesh asked India to send Hasina back to face trial. — AFP

GUSHING WATERS

Indians trapped inside flooded coal mine



Around a dozen Indian miners were trapped inside a coal mine in the northeastern state of Assam after water flooded the shaft. “The coal mile is located very remotely,” local police superintendent Mayank Jha said, confirming the flooded mine and that the men were trapped in Umrangshu in Dima Hasao region. At least 27 workers had entered the mine, with many managing to escape as gushing waters swamped the pit workings. — AFP

DRAMATIC REVERSAL



Austria's President Alexander van der Bellen speaks to media, at the presidential Hofburg Palace in Vienna. — AFP

AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT TASKS FPO LEADER WITH FORMING GOV'T

VIENNA: Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen tasked the leader of the far-right Freedom Party (FPO) on Monday with forming a coalition government after a centrist bid to assemble one without the FPO collapsed unexpectedly over the weekend. The announcement marks a dramatic reversal for the president, a former leader of the left-wing Greens who has long been critical of the FPO and has clashed with its leader Herbert Kickl, but few options remained to Van der Bellen after the centrists' failure to forge a coalition.

The eurosceptic, Russia-friendly FPO won last September's parliamentary election with 29 per cent of the vote. It will now enter talks with its only potential partner, the conservative People's Party (OVP), seeking to lead a government for the first time since it was founded in the 1950s under a leader who had been a senior officer in Hitler's elite paramilitary SS. "I have... tasked him with launching talks with the People's Party to form a government," Van der Bellen said in a televised address after meeting Kickl. — AFP

BIDEN TRAVELS TO NEW ORLEANS



A woman looks at a makeshift memorial for the victims at Bourbon street days after a US Army veteran drove his truck into the crowded French Quarter on New Year's Day in New Orleans. President Joe Biden will travel to New Orleans to offer comfort to the community after the incident that killed 14 people and injured dozens on New Year's Day. Biden said that he would deliver a personal message to the loved ones of those killed if he got to meet with them alone. — Reuters

JAPAN PM SAYS BLOCKED US STEEL DEAL COULD HIT INVESTMENTS

TOKYO: Japan's prime minister on Monday urged Washington to dispel concerns that a decision by Joe Biden to block Nippon Steel's takeover of US Steel could impact future investments. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba said the veteran Democrat's decision had sparked worries over future Japanese investments in the world's largest economy. "It is unfortunately true that there are concerns being raised within Japan's industrial world over future Japan-US investment," Ishiba told reporters.

"It's something we have to

take seriously." Japan and the United States are each other's top foreign investors. "It would be inappropriate for the Japanese government to comment on the management of an individual company that was under review as per US domestic law... but we will strongly call on the US government to take steps to dispel these concerns," said Ishiba. "They need to be able to explain clearly why there is a national security concern, or else further discussions on the matter will not work," he added.

Nippon Steel and US Steel filed

suit on Monday over President Joe Biden's decision to block the Japanese giant's proposed acquisition of its American rival, accusing his administration of "illegal interference" in the huge transaction.

The companies said in a statement that they initiated the legal action in the US court of appeals in Washington challenging the review process for the acquisition, claiming Biden had improperly used his influence and blocked the deal "for purely political reasons." — AFP

European leaders hit back in Musk meddling row

EUROPEAN leaders expressed growing frustration with tech billionaire Elon Musk on Monday, as a major row escalated between members of Britain's government and US president-elect Donald Trump's key ally. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer slammed those "spreading lies and misinformation" following days of incendiary posts by Musk on his X platform over historical offences against children in northern England. Musk, who is set for a role in Trump's administration, then accused the centre-left Labour leader of being "deeply complicit in the mass assaults" and "utterly despicable".

European leaders including French President Emmanuel Macron have also weighed in against Musk. He said the SpaceX boss was "directly intervening in elections", including in Germany where Chancellor Olaf Scholz has condemned the Tesla boss for backing an extreme-right party. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said on Monday he found it "worrying" that someone with so much wealth and influence was getting involved in the politics of European countries.



Britain's PM Keir Starmer gives a speech as he visits a healthcare provider in Surrey, in Epsom, Britain. — Reuters

to individualise this to Elon Musk" but said "a line has been crossed" with some of the online criticism. "Those that are spreading lies and misinformation as far and as wide as possible, they're not interested in victims, they're interested in themselves," Starmer told reporters, without naming Musk. "I'm prepared to call out this for what it is. We've seen this playbook many times: the whipping up of intimidation and threats of violence, hoping that the media will amplify it."

The scandal involved the widespread abuse in northern English towns, including Rochdale, Rotherham and Oldham. A series of court cases eventually led to the conviction of dozens of men, mostly of South Asian origin.

The victims were vulnerable, mostly white, girls. Subsequent official reports into

how police and social workers failed to halt the abuse in some cases found that officials turned a blind eye to avoid appearing racist. None of the probes singled out Starmer for blame or found that he had tried to block prosecutions.

Musk claimed on Monday that Starmer and former prime minister Gordon Brown were among those complicit in the crimes. Scholz on Saturday condemned Musk for "erratic" comments after the billionaire labelled the German leader an "incompetent fool" and came out in support of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) ahead of snap elections on February 23. Musk surprised many people in Britain on Sunday when he appeared to U-turn on his support for Brexit cheerleader Nigel Farage, saying his anti-immigration Reform party "needs a new leader". — AFP

Macron urges 'realistic' expectations from Ukraine on territory

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron called on Ukraine on Monday to have "realistic" expectations on territory as its fight against the Russian attack heads into a fourth year, saying he saw no "quick and easy solution" to the conflict. Outlining France's foreign policy for the coming year, Macron also took aim at Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of social media platform X and close ally of US President-elect Donald Trump, accusing him of supporting "a new international reactionary movement". Russia, which attacked Ukraine in February 2022, is currently occupying about a fifth of its territory.

"There will be no quick and easy solution in Ukraine," Macron said in a speech to French ambassadors gathered at the Elysee Palace. But he also warned that Ukrainians needed to have "realistic discussions on territorial issues", clearly urging

Kyiv for the first time to consider territorial concessions. Trump has promised to bring a swift end to nearly three years of fighting, without offering any concrete proposals for a ceasefire or peace deal. Both sides are looking to secure a better position on the battlefield before Trump's January 20 inauguration.

"The United States of America must help us to change the nature of the situation and convince Russia to come to the negotiating table," Macron said. Europe will have to offer "security guarantees" for Ukraine, he added. "The new American president knows himself that the United States has no chance of winning anything if Ukraine loses," Macron said. He also warned that the credibility of Western countries would be "shattered" if they agreed to compromise on Ukraine because of "fatigue". "A capitulation by Ukraine cannot be



French President Emmanuel Macron delivers his speech to French ambassadors posted around the world, at the Elysee Palace in Paris. — AFP

good for Europeans and Americans," the French president said.

Trump has described US assistance to Ukraine as wasteful, with his aides suggesting leveraging US assistance to force territorial concessions to Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky

expressed optimism in an interview published on Sunday with US podcaster Lex Fridman that Trump will be able to force Russia into peace talks and end the war. Macron also said the West must not be naive about the new authorities in Syria after the ousting of Bashar al-Assad,

and promised France would not abandon Kurdish fighters. "We must regard the regime change in Syria without naivety," Macron said after Islamist-led forces toppled Assad last month, adding France would not abandon "freedom fighters, like the Kurds" who are fighting extremist groups in Syria.

Macron also accused Musk, the world's wealthiest man who has secured unprecedented influence thanks to his proximity to Trump, of intervening in elections, including Germany's snap legislative polls next month.

"Ten years ago, who could have imagined it if we had been told that the owner of one of the largest social networks in the world would support a new international reactionary movement and intervene directly in elections, including in Germany," Macron said while adding Trump "knows he has a strong ally in France". — AFP

OPINION

Celebrating five years of progress and pride



THIS week on January 11, the Sultanate of Oman will mark the fifth anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s accession to the throne. This occasion not only commemorates a significant milestone in Oman’s history, but also serves as an opportunity to reflect on the remarkable achievements and transformative changes that have taken place under his leadership.

His Majesty’s vision for Oman, encapsulated in Oman Vision 2040, has guided a series of reforms aimed at modernising the country’s governance, economy and social welfare. It is evident that his leadership has ushered in an era marked by significant reforms across multiple sectors.

From administrative restructuring to legislative modernisation and economic diversification efforts, these achievements align closely with Oman Vision 2040’s objectives for sustainable development. One of the most notable accomplishments during his reign has been the comprehensive restructuring of the State’s Administrative Apparatus.

This initiative involved issuing approximately 470 Royal Decrees that have significantly revamped various sectors of governance. The promulgation of key laws such as Royal Decree No 6/2021, which updated Basic Law of the State, marks a pivotal moment in Oman’s legal framework.

This law lays down principles for governance and aims to build a robust state based on law and institutions. Additionally, recent laws concerning economic activities — including updates to the Securities Law, Labour Law, and Public Debt Law — demonstrate a proactive approach to aligning Omani legislation with global standards and practices.

His Majesty the Sultan has placed significant emphasis on economic diversification as a means to reduce reliance on oil revenues and foster sustainable growth. The Council of Ministers has reported positive outcomes from efforts made in 2024 towards consolidating non-oil revenues and expanding the productive base of the economy. These initiatives are crucial for enhancing resilience against global economic fluctuations.

His Majesty’s directives have focused on reinforcing partnerships between government entities and the private sector. By encouraging local industries and minimising dependence on imports through policies like the National Local Content Policy, Oman is positioning itself to enhance its export capabilities while supporting domestic production.

His Majesty’s directives have focused on reinforcing partnerships between government entities and the private sector. By encouraging local industries and minimising dependence on imports through policies like the National Local Content Policy, Oman is positioning itself to enhance its export capabilities while supporting domestic production.

In addition to economic reforms, there has been substantial progress in social welfare legislation aimed at improving citizens’ quality of life.

The establishment of unified frameworks for social welfare illustrates this commitment.

Such legislative advancements reflect His Majesty’s dedication to fostering comprehensive development that addresses both economic needs and social welfare concerns.

Looking ahead, it is anticipated that continued focus on these areas will further enhance Oman’s position within the global arena while ensuring that its citizens benefit from ongoing progress in governance and quality of life.

FREE-MEAL PROGRAMME TO COMBAT STUNTING

AGNES ANYA

Indonesia launched an ambitious \$4.3 billion free-meal programme to combat stunted growth due to malnutrition, a key election promise of President Prabowo Subianto.

Prabowo has pledged to provide nutritious meals free to tens of millions of schoolchildren and pregnant women, saying it would improve their quality of life and boost economic growth.

“This is historic for Indonesia for the first time conducting a nationwide nutrition programme for toddlers, students, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers,” presidential spokesman Hasan Nasbi said. At least 190 kitchens run by third-party catering services opened nationwide, including some run by military bases, and were busy preparing meals from midnight before distributing them to schoolchildren and pregnant women.

Second-grader Khalifa Eldrian beamed after finishing his free lunch of rice, chicken, vegetables, and a banana at an elementary school in East Jakarta.

“I’m happy because the food was delicious... I can concentrate more when studying,” he said. The government has allocated 10,000 rupiahs (62 US cents) per meal and has a budget of 71 trillion rupiahs (\$4.3 billion) for the 2025 fiscal year. It is set to deliver meals to almost 83 million people by 2029. Stunting affects 21.5 per cent of children in the archipelago of some 282 million people. The Southeast Asian nation aims to reduce the rate to five per cent by 2045.

Staff in a kitchen in Bogor, West Java, had worked tirelessly since just after midnight.

“We serve different menus every day, it has to be different so children won’t get bored,” staff member Ayu Pertiwi said.

Ayu said they were able to serve fairly nutritious meals such as eggs and fish even with the limited budget, although meat would likely only be served twice a month.

“We can still create various menus, but the options are limited. For us, the most important thing is the meal is nutritious,” she said.

The programme was met with scepticism from experts and the public when it was first announced during last year’s election campaign.

Tan Shot Yen, a Jakarta-based nutritionist and doctor, said trials late last year were mostly conducted in urban centres and assessments were not made available to the public.

She said the government needed transparent monitoring and robust food safety management to prevent hazards and the inclusion of unhealthy processed products, such as instant noodles and sausages. “I hope this programme is not just a temporary charitable effort to fulfil political promises,” she said.

“To continue it for the long term, the government should focus not only on funding but also on empowering communities so (recipients) are not simply reliant on free meals once a day while struggling to find food for the other two meals,” she said.

Prabowo has championed the programme since the presidential campaign and his team has said the poorest and most remote areas of the Southeast Asian archipelago would be prioritised. — AFP

Oman’s AI landscape in 2024 and a vision for 2025

BY the end of 2024, I had been closely following developments in digital progress especially in the field of artificial intelligence in Oman, analysing its strides in this crucial area. I can confidently say that we have surpassed the expectations I held in 2023.

Oman’s digital path is clearly outlined in the draft of its national AI programme, supervised by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology in collaboration with various government sectors involved in AI and digital transformation. As 2024 drew to a close and 2025 dawned, numerous digital achievements began to materialise.

Around two months ago, I attended a talk by Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT), who proudly highlighted accomplishments worthy of mention.

I will briefly mention some of them here as an invitation for Omani institutions and individuals to maintain and even increase digital engagement. Reviewing what we have achieved helps us identify the strengths we need in the current new year and share proposals we believe should be implemented without delay.

2024 had been remarkable for Oman’s digital scene. Early this December, Oman advanced five positions globally in the Government AI Readiness Index compared to the previous year, reaching 45th place according to the UK-based consulting firm Oxford Insights. In space-related endeavours, which connect closely to AI, Oman successfully launched its first satellite and conducted a test launch of its experimental rocket ‘Duqm-1’, putting the Sultanate of Oman among the first in the Middle East to send rockets into outer space.

At the close of 2024, and with support from the Ministry of Economy, the MoTCIT finalised a cooperation agreement with the World Economic Forum to establish the Fourth Industrial Revolution Centre in Oman. As the sixth centre of its kind in the Middle East and



2025 may see AI usage in government institutions and making further advances in space technology



DR MUAMAR BIN ALI AL TOBI

The writer is an academic and researcher

the twenty-second globally, it is scheduled to begin operations during the first quarter of 2025.

In terms of investment, the Oman Investment Authority acquired a stake in xAI, an AI-focused company owned by Elon Musk. This rising digital firm aims to build the smartest AI model worldwide. Recently, xAI announced the creation of a large-scale big-data centre in the US and launched its new model, ‘Gork-2’, which will compete with other generative AI models like ChatGPT. These promising ventures illuminate the path for Omani digital investment, helping develop both the local digital economy and Omani talent, whether directly or through subsidiary start-ups.

Alongside these tangible projects in 2024, Oman is preparing to strengthen its digital economy further.

Late the previous year, a workshop was held to refine policies for attracting foreign investment in Oman’s digital sector through the Digital Cooperation Organisation, in partnership with the MoTCIT, the World Economic Forum, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

It was not easy to enumerate all of Oman’s digital achievements last year, but these examples reflect starting points for broader developments in the current year. Growth indicators in the digital economy and Omani digital transformation projects confirm that we are moving along a carefully charted path. With global digital

progress - especially in AI on the rise, and with our local, regional and international engagement, as well as our improved global ranking in AI, I anticipate an even greater leap this year. This may include expanding AI usage in government institutions, attracting more investment and global partnerships, and making further advances in space technology. Plans indicate three more rocket launches in the current year, and we may yet see results surpassing our current expectations.

To enhance this sector’s effectiveness, we must double efforts to develop national capabilities, both in theory and practice, across all digital domains. This should begin with school and university curricula, which need specialised courses that address the fundamentals of AI from logical and mathematical perspectives and incorporate advanced programming (such as Python), algorithm design and intelligent models.

Establishing these courses is as important as other core subjects like languages and sciences. I have seen a well-developed AI curriculum in a neighbouring country’s school system, distinguished by robust theoretical and practical content in polished Arabic, making AI and its sciences more accessible to Arab communities.

This call serves as a national partnership, complementing the significant efforts educational institutions undertake at every level to adapt to our fast-evolving digital environment.

Everyone is talking about it — the new virus



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?
Ask this question to anyone, or listen in to an ongoing conversation, and you will soon hear the topic is on HMPV, Human Metapneumovirus. The outbreak and its news have created alarm throughout the world because the world is going through the syndrome of “once bitten, twice shy.” According to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the virus was first discovered in 2001, but there is evidence that it might have been circulating even before that. It can cause respiratory diseases such as bronchitis or pneumonia. Naturally, the ones most prone to it are the young, the elderly, and those whose immunity might have been affected by other health issues. It is likely we will become more alert about washing hands, avoiding touching eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands, and avoiding close contact with people who have cold-like symptoms. Covering the mouth and nose while coughing or sneezing will also

be emphasised. And what about disposable glasses, plates and cups?
Maybe we just need more environmentally friendly alternatives. The fear has set in. I remember my friend telling me about it, and I thought to myself, “We have just begun the new year.”
Does this mean we will be more cautious in crowded places? Will masks and hand sanitisers become trendy again?

RESILIENCE
The fear has surfaced again. Resilience is what we need, but our minds harbour many doubts. We have begun to Google and research the virus. What we need is awareness. We will probably work on our immunity again and revisit breathing exercises.
The world is changing, and just when we think we have seen it all, surprises arise. This is all the more reason for us to stand up and face challenges.

Resilience is what we need, but our minds have many doubts. We have begun to Google and research the virus. What we need is awareness

What we also need is mental strength, which starts with controlling our thoughts. We learnt that last time around. Mental health experts told us that we were being overexposed to information and that sometimes we cannot detach from negative thoughts.
We learnt then, and we know now, that we need to embrace nature. It is not just the information we read, but sometimes the images we encounter in life haunt us even at a subconscious level.
The link between sleep and immune function is of great importance. Many suffer from sleepless nights, carrying the exhaustion that leads to other problems. The chain is endless.
We must remember to read and talk for awareness, but not let concern dominate our minds and thoughts.
A peaceful mind might be just what the doctor prescribes for now. Anxiety will not help, but faith can provide inner strength.

N KOREA FIRES MISSILE AS BLINKEN TOURS ASIA

HIEUN SHIN AND SHAUN TANDON

North Korea on Monday fired a missile as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited South Korea, where he warned Pyongyang was working ever more closely with Russia on advanced space technology. Blinken’s trip came as investigators sought to arrest conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who entrenched himself in his residence after being impeached for a failed attempt to impose martial law.

Blinken, who had planned to encourage South Korea to maintain Yoon’s policy of enhancing cooperation with Japan, was in talks in Seoul when North Korea fired a ballistic missile that fell into the sea. The missile flew around 1,100 km, the South Korean military said.

“Today’s launch is just a reminder to all of us of how important our collaborative work is,” Blinken said, pointing to increased three-way exercises and intelligence-sharing on North Korea. Blinken and his South Korean counterpart, Cho Tae-yul, condemned the launch at a joint news conference, where the outgoing US top diplomat warned that Russia was stepping up support for North Korea as a reward for its help fighting Ukraine. North Korea “is already receiving Russian military equipment and training. Now we have reason to believe that Moscow intends to share advanced space and satellite technology with Pyongyang,” Blinken said. Blinken also renewed concern that Russia, a veto-wielding UN Security Council member, would formally accept North Korea as a nuclear state, which would be a major blow to the global consensus that Pyongyang must end its programme. US and South Korean intelligence believe that North Korea, late last year, sent thousands of troops to fight against Ukraine and has already suffered hundreds of casualties. In Tokyo, where Blinken heads later on Monday, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba voiced alarm that North Korea’s “technology has been improving”. The nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan also held a phone call on Monday to condemn the launch, the news agency Yonhap said. The test comes two weeks before the inauguration of US president-elect Donald Trump, who in his last term sought to woo North Korea with unique personal diplomacy.

Trump, who once threatened “fire and fury” against North Korea, went on to meet three times with leader Kim Jong Un and said they “fell in love”. President Joe Biden offered a more traditional formula of working-level talks focused on ending North Korea’s nuclear programme. Blinken defended the outgoing administration’s approach, saying it had reached out to North Korea and only got “more and more provocative actions, including missile launches”. The tensions are “not for want of seeking engagement and trying to find a way forward through diplomacy,” he said. Blinken visited by coincidence on the anniversary of the violent January 6 riot at the US Capitol by Trump’s supporters after he refused to accept defeat to Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Blinken, whose hotel was within earshot of rowdy protests by supporters and opponents of Yoon, steered clear of taking sides in the bitterly divided country. He repeated US concern over Yoon’s brief imposition of martial law on December 3 and saluted the “democratic resilience” of South Korea, without commenting on attempts to arrest the president. — AFP

Critical and constructivist schools of thought

BY NASSER AHMED AL ABRI

CRITICAL AND constructivist approaches offer a sophisticated lens for understanding the dynamic interplay between the state and national security by highlighting the roles of identity, norms, and discourse. These approaches draw extensively from disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. For example, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the renowned French philosopher and sociologist, championed functionalist structuralism, positing that society is organised around social rules that regulate behaviour. Similarly, Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), a prominent American sociologist, argued that social actions are shaped by the agency of individuals and their interaction within a framework of shared values, beliefs, and symbols.

In the context of international relations, constructivism fundamentally challenges the notion of security as a purely objective condition, asserting instead its inherently social and human dimensions. The late 1980s marked a pivotal moment as constructivist social theory gained prominence in the field, directly challenging rationalist and positivist approaches that dominated traditional security paradigms. Constructivists argue that both realism and liberalism fail to address critical dimensions of security, particularly by treating the state as the sole actor in international relations and neglecting the profound impact of social, historical, and non-state dynamics.

Barry Buzan’s seminal work, *People, States and Fear*, revolutionised the understanding of security by broadening it to encompass societal and individual dimensions, asserting that national security is inextricably linked to human security. Building on this foundation, the Copenhagen School, led by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, introduced the *Securitisation Theory*, which examines how issues are framed as existential threats necessitating extraordinary measures. This approach expands the analytical scope of security studies to address limitations inherent in traditional state-centric frameworks.

However, critical and constructivist approaches have faced criticism for their abstract nature and limited applicability to policy-making. Their conceptual



A member of forces loyal to the new Syrian government waves in the town of Busra in Syria’s southern Daraa province. Critical and constructivist approaches struggle to provide actionable solutions for power politics, military aggression, and hybrid warfare, as seen in conflicts like Ukraine-Russia or crises in Syria and Yemen.

As the global security landscape evolves, the integration of critical and constructivist insights into policy-making becomes increasingly vital

depth often challenges policymakers to translate theoretical insights into actionable strategies. Despite these challenges, the post-Cold War period saw these schools usher in transformative shifts, questioning traditional security models and emphasising the multi-faceted nature of modern threats.

The concept of human security, as articulated in the 2024 United Nations Report, underscores the need to prioritise the protection of individuals from economic, health, and environmental vulnerabilities. This paradigm shift aligns with the growing recognition that state security cannot exist in isolation from the well-being of its citizens. Such a perspective acknowledges that modern security threats — ranging from pandemics and climate change to cyberattacks and economic instability — demand holistic strategies that extend beyond military considerations.

STATE BEHAVIOUR
Alexander Wendt, a leading figure in constructivist theory, underscores the power of shared norms and ideas in shaping state behaviour. In his influential book *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt provides a compelling example of the social construction of security threats. He argues that the perceived threat of 500 British nuclear weapons to the United States is far less than that posed by five North Korean nuclear weapons. This disparity arises not from the physical nature of the weapons but from the social context and relational meaning attributed to them. The example underscores the importance of understanding security as

a construct rooted in identity, relationships, and historical context.

Critical and constructivist perspectives have reshaped the understanding of security by integrating non-traditional and transnational threats, such as cyberwarfare, terrorism, climate change, and economic disruptions. However, this broader scope complicates the prioritisation of threats and resource allocation, as states must navigate the delicate balance between addressing conventional military challenges and emerging global risks.

Critical and constructivist approaches in security studies have broadened the field by focusing on identity, norms, and social constructs. However, these schools face challenges in addressing the practical dynamics of contemporary conflicts. They struggle to provide actionable solutions for power politics, military aggression, and hybrid warfare, as seen in conflicts like Ukraine-Russia or crises in Syria and Yemen. The critical and constructivist schools have profoundly influenced modern security studies, moving beyond state-centric models to embrace a more comprehensive understanding of security.

As the global security landscape evolves, the integration of critical and constructivist insights into policy-making becomes increasingly vital. States must adopt adaptive strategies that address not only military threats but also socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities. By doing so, they can achieve a more balanced and sustainable security framework that prioritises both state sovereignty and human well-being.

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



OMAN BEACH SOCCER TEAM BACK TO ACTION

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

Oman beach soccer team will be back to action on Sunday as they commence a domestic preparatory camp at the sands court at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in the Wilayat of Bausher. The camp will conclude on January 23. This camp is part of the team’s preparation for the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2025, which will take place in Pattaya from March 20 to 30, 2025. Oman’s team aims to rekindle the memories of the 2015 AFC Beach Soccer Championship when they were crowned champions. In the upcoming edition, they will vie for the Asian title alongside Bahrain, Malaysia and Vietnam in Group D. The Asian event will serve as qualifiers for the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup, with the top three teams from the Asian continent securing berths for the tournament in Seychelles in 2025.

During the camp, the national team, headed by experienced and long-serving coach Talib Hilal, will play two crucial friendly matches against Saudi Arabia in Muscat. The tentative dates for the matches are set for January 19 and 22 in the Wilayat of Bausher. This local gathering will provide the coaching staff with an opportunity to finalise the initial squad who will represent Oman in the upcoming assignment in Thailand. The coaching staff will also implement various technical and tactical training sessions to ensure the players are in peak form.

The AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2025 is expected to be highly competitive, as Asia’s top nations are participating in this event. The hosts Thailand are in Group A with Kuwait, Lebanon and India, while three-time winners Japan will face China, Saudi Arabia and Iraq in Group B. Titleholders Iran will aim for their fourth title as they compete in Group C with two-time champions United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan and Indonesia. All 16 participating teams are divided into four groups, with the top two finishers from each group advancing to the quarter-finals.

Oman’s national beach soccer team, ranked 11th internationally, will aim to relive the success of the 2015 AFC Beach Soccer Championship, which was held at Katara Beach in Qatar. Oman defeated Japan in the final to be crowned champions, while both teams, along with third-placed Iran, qualified for the 2015 Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup.



Al Bashayer open OBL finals with win over Nizwa

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

AL BASHAYER CLUB kicked off the final round of the 2024–2025 Oman Basketball League with a well-deserved victory over Nizwa Club at the secondary hall of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in the Wilayat of Bausher. With this 65-41 win, Al Bashayer earned two points, while Nizwa gained one point.

The match witnessed a competitive performance, with Al Bashayer dominating all four quarters thanks to their collective teamwork and individual player skills. Standout performances from Al Bashayer players, including professional Samkelo Brian, Saeed al Saadi, Osama al Riyami and Hadeed Beit Bakhit, played a key role in securing the victory.

Al Bashayer started strong, relying on swift attacks and precise shooting. Slavine opened the scoring with four points under the basket following excellent passes from his teammates, while Nizwa responded with a remarkable three-pointer by Agassil Tanyon. Al Bashayer continued their offensive pressure, capitalising on Nizwa’s defensive weaknesses, adding 15 more points through the brilliance of Samkelo Brian and Saeed al Saadi. The first quarter ended with Al Bashayer leading 19-10.

In the second quarter, Al Bashayer maintained their strong performance, extending their lead thanks to excellent coordination among players. Hadeed Beit Bakhit scored several points from long-range shots, while Osama al Riyami contributed by making crucial passes and accurate shots. On the other hand, Nizwa attempted to regain balance through counterattacks, but Al Bashayer’s solid defence prevented them from significantly narrowing the gap. Al Bashayer scored 23 points in this quarter compared to Nizwa’s 14, finishing the first half with a 42-24 lead.

The third quarter was relatively calm compared to the previous ones, as Al Bashayer focused on defence to maintain their lead. The team scored nine points, with Slavine and Samkelo Brian excelling in ball possession and executing fast breaks. Nizwa, despite their efforts to reduce the deficit, managed only seven points due to offensive errors and missed opportunities. The third quarter ended with Al Bashayer leading 51-31.



Entering the final quarter with high confidence, Al Bashayer continued to deliver a strong team performance. They added 14 points, with consistent contributions from Samkelo Brian and Hadeed Beit Bakhit. Meanwhile, Nizwa’s players doubled their efforts but managed only 10 points, hindered by Al Bashayer’s tight defence, which closed spaces and thwarted Nizwa’s attempts to narrow the gap. The match concluded with Al Bashayer securing a 65-41 victory.

The match was officiated by international referees Issam al Siyabi (first referee), Thani al Khalasi (second referee) and Ali al Salmani (third referee). The table officials included Maryam al Zadjali, Mahmoud al Ajmi, and Fatima al Harthy.

S Africa beat Pakistan by 10 wickets, win series 2-0

CAPE TOWN: South Africa made light work of a modest target of 58 to claim victory against Pakistan by 10 wickets at a sun-bathed Newlands on Monday, wrapping up the series 2-0 inside four days of the second and final test.

Pakistan had held up the home side’s victory charge with a second innings score of 478 having been asked to follow on, their effort led by captain Shan Masood’s fine 145 on a docile wicket.

But seamer Kagiso Rabada (3-115) and spinner Keshav Maharaj (3-137) kept chipping away at the Pakistan wickets, aided by some poor shot selection.

David Bedingham was promoted to open in the South African second innings after double-centurion from their first, Ryan Rickelton, sustained a hamstring strain.

Bedingham raced to 44 from 30 balls to see his side to victory in 7.1 overs. “The result is very



Pakistan’s Saud Shakeel (R) plays a sweep shot as South Africa’s wicketkeeper Kyle Verreynne (L) reacts during the fourth day of the second international Test cricket match in Cape Town on Monday. — AFP

satisfying, it was good old test cricket. There was something in it for the bowlers with the new ball and then the wicket really flattened out,” South Africa captain Temba Bavuma said.

“It was a good experience that will hold us in good stead as a team. Certain parts of the game we let go, but all those

learnings will make us better.”

South Africa have won their last seven tests in a row, their second best run of victories behind a nine-game winning streak between 2002-2003.

It is perfect preparation for their appearance in the World Test Championship final against Australia at Lord’s from June 11-15.

Pakistan resumed the fourth day on 213 for one, though they were effectively two down after in-form batter Saim Ayub fractured his ankle while fielding on the first day.

Despite the wicket offering little to the bowlers in terms of seam or turn, South Africa picked up two wickets in the morning session, as Khurram Shahzad was caught by Maharaj at point off seamer Marco Jansen for 18.

Rabada bowled Kamran Ghulam for 28, a delivery that nipped back off the wicket and crashed into the off-stump.

The home side took the new ball shortly after lunch and that brought two more wickets, including the key scalp of Masood, who was trapped leg before wicket by 18-year-old fast bowler Kwena Maphaka, South Africa’s youngest ever test player.

Saud Shakeel scored 23 before he was caught at second slip by Aiden Markram off Rabada. — Reuters

SHORTTAKES



Manchester United's Amad Diallo scores their second goal past Liverpool's Alisson Becker. — Reuters.

DIALLO EARNS MAN
UTD DESERVED DRAW
AT LIVERPOOL

LIVERPOOL: Amad Diallo struck a late equaliser as Manchester United made a mockery of their recent form to hold Premier League leaders Liverpool to a thrilling 2-2 draw at Anfield on Sunday.

It looked as though Ruben Amorim's United would go home empty-handed despite a vastly-improved display but Diallo swept in a shot in the 80th minute to earn his side a point.

United had gone ahead in the 52nd minute when Lisandro Martinez powered home a ferocious shot from a tight angle.

But an off-key Liverpool responded seven minutes later with Cody Gakpo curling home a stunning equaliser before Mohamed Salah put the hosts ahead from the penalty spot.

After Diallo's leveller, both sides had chances to win in a frantic finale with United's Harry Maguire spooning a glorious chance over the crossbar with the last kick of the game.

As the fans made for the exits on a freezing afternoon, it was United's who were happiest after watching a display that offered hope of better things to come in 2025.

Liverpool remain in control of the title race with 46 points from 19 games, six ahead of Arsenal with a game in hand as they seek to equal United's 20 English crowns. United moved up a place to 13th with 23 points.

Based on the current form and confidence levels of the two teams, many of the United fans who made the trip on a grim afternoon might have feared a mauling similar to March 2023 when a rampant Liverpool put seven goals past their arch-rivals.

United had lost five of their last six league games and relegation has even been aired as a possibility.

But Amorim's side produced a courageous display as they went toe to toe with Liverpool.

Luis Diaz fired over for the hosts early on and Alexis Mac Allister was then denied by United keeper Andre Onana. Ryan Gravenberch was also a whicker away from giving Liverpool the lead with a shot that skimmed off the saturated surface and flew past the post.

But United were not about to lie down and take their punishment. They breached Liverpool's high line with ease and on one occasion Diogo Dalot was released down the left and his cross was inviting for Amad Diallo but he mistimed his header. Rasmus Hojlund should have done better before the break but shot straight at Alisson.

United's positivity was rewarded soon after the interval as Trent Alexander-Arnold, poor all game, gave the ball away and Bruno Fernandes picked out Martinez to lash an unstoppable shot past Alisson. — Reuters



32 teams to take
part in Eights Football
Championship

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE, Sports and Youth conducted the draw ceremony for its 2025 Eights Football Championship for Government Institutions. The event took place at the main hall of the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the auspices of Sayyid Idris al Busaidy, Director-General of Administrative and Financial Affairs. The championship will commence on January 19 and run until February 12.

Eight Groups

The draw placed the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources; the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation; the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs; and Muscat Municipality in Group 1.

Group 2 includes the Secretariat-General of the Supreme Judicial Council, the Ministry of Interior, the National Centre for Statistics and Information, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Group 3 features the Environment Authority, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and the Royal Court Affairs.

Group 4 comprises the Majlis Ash'shura, the Central Bank of Oman, the National Records and Archives Authority, and the Ministry of Economy.

Group 5 includes the Ministry of Finance, the Civil Aviation Authority, the Consumer Protection Authority, and the Ministry of

Energy and Minerals.

Group 6 comprises the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development, Authority for Public Services Regulation, the State Audit Institution, and the Ministry of Labour.

Group 7 features the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the Royal Academy of Management, the Royal Court Affairs, and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

Finally, Group 8 includes the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Information, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.

TOURNAMENT FORMAT

The draw ceremony included a detailed explanation of the tournament format. Hilal al Badi, a representative of the OFA, explained that the teams in each group would compete in a single-round league system. The top two teams from each group will advance to the second round, which will follow a knockout format leading to the final match. Winning teams will earn three points, while a draw will grant one point, and losing teams will receive no points.

In the event of a tie in the knockout stages, matches will proceed directly to penalty shootouts, with each team taking five alternating penalties. If the tie persists, sudden-death penalties will decide the winner. For group stage ties, criteria such as head-to-head results, points in common matches, goal difference, goals scored, and overall tournament goal difference

will be applied. If necessary, a draw will be conducted.

ORGANISATIONAL DETAILS

Tournament Director Ibrahim al Shibli noted that this is the first edition of the championship, exclusively dedicated to government sectors. He highlighted that the 32 participating teams represent a variety of ministries, authorities and government bodies, and the draw resulted in eight groups with four teams each. The tournament will kick off on January 19 at Al Amal Club grounds.

Al Shibli emphasised that the championship aims to foster camaraderie and networking among state administrative staff, provide participants with an opportunity for recreation and enhance mutual understanding among government institutions. This is particularly important following recent structural reforms in government organisations. The initiative responds to a longstanding demand from these institutions and represents a unique identity for the government sector.

The championship enjoys support from key partners, including the Oman Football Association, which will provide referees and oversee technical aspects, and the Royal Oman Police, responsible for security.

Al Shibli also revealed that approximately eight matches would be held daily from Sunday to Wednesday, involving 16 teams per day. Matches will take place from 6:00 pm to 9:30 pm, with two separate fields, Field A and Field B, allocated for group competitions.

Kasatkina, Badosa roll into Adelaide 2nd round

ADELAIDE: World number nine Daria Kasatkina swept into the Adelaide International second round on Monday but Paris Olympic silver medallist Donna Vekic crashed to her third straight loss of the season. Spain's Paula Badosa also narrowly avoided defeat, battling for nearly three hours to complete a 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 7-5 comeback win over American Peyton Stearns.

"I'm so tired, I went through all the emotions," said Badosa, a former world number two, now ranked 12.

Russia's Kasatkina, runner-up at the last two editions of the Australian Open warm-up event, broke Australia's Olivia Gadecki five times to advance 6-2, 6-3.

"I think Adelaide is the tournament I've played most in my career," said

the 27-year-old, who made six WTA finals last year and won two titles.

"It's the beginning of the season, I'm happy to be back. "My tactic today was to turn on my legs and win as many points as possible and play aggressively when I had the chance." The match featured four service breaks in the first five games as third seed Kasatkina got re-acquainted with the Memorial Drive centre court. She will next face last year's Australian Open and Wimbledon junior runner-up Emerson Jones, a wildcard entry who scored an impressive 6-4, 6-0 win over China's Wang Xinyu.

Croatia's Vekic, a Wimbledon semifinalist last year, saw her Australian Open build-up go from bad to worse with a 6-2, 6-3 defeat to Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva.



Badosa rolls into Adelaide 2nd round

The world number 19 was also beaten in two group matches in Perth at the United Cup. Victory moved Putintseva into a second-round clash against either American fourth seed Danielle Collins or Tunisian wildcard Ons Jabeur, a three-time Grand Slam finalist. "Today I played great, I was focused all the way through," said Putintseva.

"We've played so much and know each other's games well. There are no secrets on the court." In other matches, 2021 US Open finalist Leylah Fernandez was eliminated by Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova in three sets, with her reward a clash against American world number eight Emma Navarro, who had a bye. The first Grand Slam of the year begins in Melbourne on Sunday. — AFP



Paris St Germain players celebrate with the trophy after winning the French Super Cup. — Reuters

Dembele strike earns PSG French Super Cup victory



A stoppage-time goal by forward Ousmane Dembele earned Paris St Germain a 1-0 win over AS Monaco in the French Super Cup on Sunday as the Ligue 1 champions lifted the trophy for the third consecutive season.

Record 13-time winners PSG, who faced last season's Ligue 1 runners-up Monaco after the Parisians had won both the league and the French Cup, won the competition for the

11th time in the last 12 years.

In a lively encounter at Doha's Stadium 974, made from 974 recycled shipping containers for the 2022 World Cup, PSG had 27 chances — nine of them on target — without breaking the deadlock.

But Dembele ensured the game did not go to penalties when he sealed the win for the French champions two minutes into injury time, netting inside the far post after

Fabian Ruiz fed him with a neat pass across the face of the goal.

Summer signing Desire Doue was close to giving PSG the lead in the ninth minute but hit the bar while Lee Kang-In was denied by Monaco goalkeeper Philipp Koehn with an effort from distance in first-half stoppage time.

Dembele and Vitinha also tested Koehn in the opening 45 minutes while Monaco's Maghnes Aklouché

and Takumi Minamino forced Gianluigi Donnarumma into saves, with the PSG keeper returning to the side after recovering from a face injury .

No goals were scored in the first half of a French Super Cup for the first time since 2010 when Olympique de Marseille beat PSG 5-4 on penalties after the match ended goalless.

PSG, who beat Nantes and

Toulouse in the previous two editions, won 4-2 at Monaco last month in Ligue 1 with Dembele scoring a second-half brace.

Four-time winners Monaco last lifted the trophy in 2000. They were runners-up in 2017 and 2018, losing both times to PSG.

PSG return to league action next Sunday when they host St Etienne while Monaco visit lowly Nantes on Friday. — Reuters

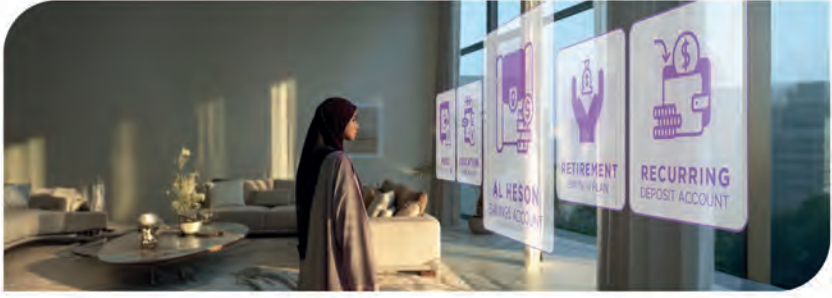


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China was the top importer, receiving 264.456 million barrels.

OMAN'S OIL EXPORTS REACH 282.1M BARRELS

MUSCAT: Oman exported 282.192 million barrels of oil by November 2024, accounting for 84.8 per cent of total production, with an average price of \$81.8 per barrel.

Preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information revealed a 0.4 per cent decrease in exports compared to November 2023, alongside a 5.1 per cent drop in total production to 332.693 million barrels.

Crude oil production fell by 6.5 per cent to 254.629 million barrels, while condensate production totaled 78.064 million barrels.

China was the top importer, receiving 264.456 million barrels, a 1.5 per cent increase from 2023. Korea imported 5.769 million barrels, up 51.7 per cent, followed by Japan with 4.456 million barrels, a 49.8 per cent decline. Exports to India rose 10.6 per cent to 3.004 million barrels.

Meanwhile, international oil prices yesterday hovered at their highest since October 2024 as investors eyed the impact on global fuel demand from colder weather in the Northern Hemisphere and Beijing's economic stimulus measures.

Brent crude futures rose 15 cents, or 0.2%, to \$76.73 a barrel, after settling on Friday at its highest since 14 October 2024.

US West Texas Intermediate crude gained 22 cents, or 0.3%, at \$74.18 a barrel after closing on Friday at its highest since 11 October 2024. — **ONA**

New services to enhance Oman's competitiveness

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

THE Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), in partnership with Muscat Municipality, unveiled three digital services on the Oman Business Platform on Monday, January 6, 2025. The services include the Rental Contracts Service, the Financial Reports Service and the Interactive Trade Name Guide.

The event, held under the auspices of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, was attended by prominent officials, including Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion; Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance and Chairman of the Financial and Economic Committee in the Council of Ministers; Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality; Dr Saleh bin Said Masan, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Commerce and Industry; Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion.

In his speech, Dr Saleh bin Said Masan highlighted MoCIIP's strides in digital transformation through the Oman Business Platform. He outlined several recent initiatives, including the launch of automatic licensing, investment licenses, video documentation for transferring commercial registry ownership, issuance of certificates of origin for Arab countries, Singapore and EFTA countries, investor data updates, patent and industrial design registrations and Salalah Free Zone licenses.

The platform also boasts integration with 32 government entities for data exchange and 14 entities for licensing



A large gathering of dignitaries and officials attended the inauguration of the new digital services newly added to the Oman Business Platform.

procedures, ensuring a streamlined and unified approach to business management.

Dr Masan emphasised the transformative potential of the newly launched services. The Rental Contracts Service integrates lease contract registration with economic activity licensing, providing a single, streamlined platform for investors.

The Financial Reports Service enables businesses to submit annual financial data electronically, while the Interactive Trade Name Guide simplifies the process of selecting and registering trade names for new businesses.

"These services aim to accelerate and enhance business procedures, creating a more efficient and organised environment for entrepreneurs and investors," said Dr Masan.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, lauded the initiative for its ability to save time and effort, enhance transparency and reduce human errors.

By integrating seamlessly with public and private entities, the services ensure reliability and efficiency in managing rental contracts.

"These advancements will strengthen Oman's competitiveness in the business and investment sectors while aligning with the government's commitment to streamlining litigation processes through real-time data sharing with judicial authorities," Al Humaidi added.

Nasra bint Sultan al Habsiyah, Director General of Commerce at MoCIIP, highlighted the platform's role in Oman's digital transformation journey. She noted that the Oman Business Platform recorded 446,792 commercial registrations and completed 122,145 transactions by the end of the third quarter of 2024, a 17.43 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2023.

The launch of these services aligns with Oman's vision for a knowledge-based economy. Supported by the National Digital Society Strategy and eGovernment initiatives, this vision emphasises capacity building, infrastructure development and trust through effective legislation.

Abundant green spaces signature feature of Sultan Haitham City

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

A remarkable 3 million sq metres of the total area of Sultan Haitham City have been earmarked for a diverse array of parkland features and green spaces, underscoring the emphasis on sustainability in the design of this landmark urban development, according to a key official of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

Jamal al Hadi, Media Advisor to the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, shed light on the remarkable efforts behind Sultan Haitham City, an innovative project that integrates the principles of environmental sustainability with urban planning.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Al Hadi noted that the design concept is based on 'The Park' model — one of four planning models reviewed by the Ministry. The Park model revolves around the idea of creating a central park as the heart of the project, he said.

Highlighting the scale of the project, Al Hadi stated that approximately 3 million square metres of the city's total area has



Jamal al Hadi, Media Advisor to the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, addressing local media at the site of Sultan Haitham City development.

been dedicated exclusively to green spaces. These spaces are not just scattered gardens but strategically designed areas offering a fully immersive natural experience for residents and visitors alike.

One of the city's most distinctive features is the valley path, which runs through the

city.

According to Al Hadi, this valley has been carefully rehabilitated to preserve its natural character while making it suitable for public use. Enhancements include vegetation and water resource management, ensuring the valley contributes both aesthetically and environmentally to the city.

Al Hadi emphasised that the project strives to harmonise urban development with environmental conservation.

Extensive green areas have been integrated into residential zones, with pathways connecting the central park to the city's neighbourhoods.

This unique design ensures a seamless balance between nature and urban life, significantly elevating the quality of life for city inhabitants.

When asked about the city's green spaces in comparison to others, Al Hadi proudly pointed out that the central park in Sultan Haitham City is the largest of its kind in Muscat Governorate, with green areas extending to every corner of the city.

"The park's size and design cater not only to today's needs but also anticipate growth for the next hundred years," Al Hadi noted.

"We've created a model where future urban expansion won't compromise green spaces."

The city's design reflects Oman's broader commitment to environmental and urban planning standards. Al Hadi explained that Sultan Haitham City was conceptualised to be not only environmentally friendly but also to offer a health-oriented environment, encouraging physical activities, recreation and social engagement for residents and visitors.

Commenting on Oman's plans for the future, Al Hadi revealed that Sultan Haitham City is just the beginning of a larger vision for smart cities across the Sultanate of Oman. These future developments will adopt similar principles, balancing urbanisation with sustainability.

"In other locations, especially coastal areas, projects will integrate natural elements such as lagoons and coastal features, ensuring that environmental characteristics are preserved," he said.

Also on Monday, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning marked the inauguration of the Sarooj Oasis Project, one of several residential schemes that will materialise across Sultan Haitham City.

ADVERTORIALS

EXPERIENCEOMAN



The workshop aims to introduce students to Oman’s experience in achieving sustainable development within the tourism sector.

OMRAN WELCOMES GWU STUDENTS FOR WORKSHOP ON SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

MUSCAT: As part of its role in enhancing the tourism sector in the Sultanate of Oman, the Oman Tourism Development Company (Oman Group) hosted a delegation from George Washington University (GWU) for a dedicated workshop on sustainable tourism.

The event took place at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, with the participation of 15 students from the university’s Business Arabic Programme and their faculty members.

The workshop aims to introduce students to Oman’s experience in achieving sustainable development within the tourism sector while highlighting Oman Group’s pivotal role in enhancing Oman’s presence on the global tourism map and in turns, supporting its economic growth.

The programme included a presentation by Dr Salim al Flaiti, Head of HR Business Partners at Oman Group, showcasing the Group’s sustainable tourism projects.

This was followed by an interactive discussion session, providing students with the opportunity to engage and ask questions.

Commenting on the event, Dr Al Flaiti said: “This workshop is part of our ongoing efforts to raise international awareness about Oman’s tourism potential.

Through this initiative, we aim to acquaint the next generation of leaders with our vision for sustainable development and showcase our projects as a model for balancing economic growth with the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage.”

Renaad al Sarhani, Human Capital Generalist at Oman Group, expressed her delight in organising this event, stating: “Collaborating with international academic institutions like George Washington University reflects the Group’s commitment to fostering cultural and academic exchange.

It also provides us with an opportunity to present an authentic perspective on the positive transformation taking place in Oman’s tourism sector.”

In addition to participating in the workshop, the students had the opportunity to explore Oman’s renowned cultural and tourist landmarks, including some Unesco-listed heritage and natural sites.

KR ESHRAQA FOUNDATION CONCLUDES SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY COMPETITION

MUSCAT: The Khimji Ramdas’ (KR) Eshraqa Foundation, has successfully concluded its social responsibility competition, an initiative aimed at promoting voluntary work and cultivating leadership and teamwork skills among students.

Held over five weeks, the programme engaged 50 male and female students from 10 government schools in Muttrah, fostering their creativity and encouraging them to develop actionable ideas for social responsibility projects. The



The programme engaged 50 male and female students from 10 government schools in Muttrah.

competition was structured around a series of workshops and activities designed to educate and inspire participants. The programme featured interactive workshops, including an introduction to social responsibility and sessions on creative thinking, teamwork and marketing skills led by industry experts.

Students worked on implementing their project ideas, guided by field visits and mentorship from the Eshraqa team and a dedicated judging committee.

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For Lexus enthusiasts, its innovative vehicle lineup includes the luxury crossover SUVs; Lexus RX and Lexus UX.

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In the sedan category, the Lexus ES offers various trims with different performance outputs including the Lexus ES 250 and ES350 in gasoline-powered powerful engines of 2.5L, 16-valve, DOHC and

3.5L, 24-valve V6 engines paired to an 8-speed Shift transmission.

Bringing in new experiences, the ES300 is also available with Hybrid capabilities, the ES300h features a powerful dual-motor setup with hybrid capabilities.

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Amouage introduces Purpose 50 Exceptional Extrait

MUSCAT: As a vital component of Oman’s heritage and identity, Frankincense has always been important to Amouage. The ancient material has featured in several of the House’s compositions over the years and in 2023, it took on an especially totemic form in Purpose Eau de Parfum.

Composed by Quentin Bisch, under the direction of Chief Creative Officer Renaud Salmon, the scent is a sincere and heartfelt expression of the totality of a frankincense tree, from roots to branches to leaves and, of course, the precious resin that flows through the bark, waiting to be tapped and extracted.

Using the sharpness of Pink Pepper, the shimmering heat of Papyrus and the grounding quality of a special, sand-grown variety of Vetiver to highlight and emphasise the many facets of Frankincense, Purpose Eau de Parfum presents the material in memorably larger-than-life fashion.

A year later, as part of their constant conversations about their work and the art of perfumery, Salmon and Bisch wondered if there were any uncharted territories they could find within the expansive world of



The scent is a sincere and heartfelt expression of the totality of a frankincense tree.

Purpose. “It’s not that we felt we wanted to fix something in the Eau de Parfum,” explains Salmon, “or that something was missing from it. But we found ourselves constantly going back to the scent and thinking about it — as though it was calling out to us for further exploration. Finally, after many discussions, we had a clear vision of where we wanted to take Purpose next. We had to make an Extrait.”

Although it is unquestionably grand and far-ranging in terms of its tone and proportions, Purpose Eau de Parfum also possesses a purist, almost minimalist quality, in the sense that it focusses single-mindedly on the entirety of the frankincense tree.

In order to re-frame the scent in Extrait form, Bisch decided he would need to delve beneath the surface of the soil and get to grips with the roots.

“In one sense,” he says, “I wanted to give greater depth to the fragrance, but that’s a slightly superficial way of explaining what I hoped to achieve. My aim was to re-anchor the composition, to re-root it — to make its connection with the earth and the land even stronger and more profound.”

BUSINESS

SHORT TAKES



The CBO set the repo interest rate at 5 per cent and the discount rate at 5.5 per cent for these bills.

TREASURY BILLS WORTH RO 45 MILLION ALLOCATED

MUSCAT: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) announced that RO 45 million worth of government treasury bills were allocated this week.

Of this, RO 20.35 million was for a 28-day maturity period, priced at an average of RO 99.695 per RO 100. The average discount rate was 3.97541 per cent, and the return averaged 3.98757 per cent. Meanwhile, RO 24.65 million was allocated for a 91-day maturity period, with an average price of RO 98.932. The discount rate averaged 4.28224 per cent and the return was 4.32845 per cent.

The CBO set the repo interest rate at 5 per cent and the discount rate at 5.5 per cent for these bills. Treasury bills, issued by the Ministry of Finance, serve as short-term, secure investments for commercial banks, with CBO acting as the issuance manager.

These bills offer liquidity through discounting or repurchase (repo) transactions with the CBO. They also help guide short-term interest rates in the local financial market and provide smooth financing options for government expenses. — **ONA**

STRENGTHENING MARKET OVERSIGHT AT SILAL MARKET

MUSCAT: The Consumer Protection Authority, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, conducted a joint inspection campaign at the Central Fruits and Vegetables Market (Silal).

This initiative is part of ongoing efforts to enhance market monitoring and ensure consumer rights are upheld across Oman.

The campaign focused on assessing market conditions, verifying the availability and pricing of goods, and ensuring suppliers maintain quality standards for consumers. Officials reviewed product affordability, market stability and the adequacy of goods to meet consumer demand.

This visit is one of several joint inspections aimed at fostering stronger collaboration between government entities to enhance field monitoring of markets and commercial centers. Additionally, the campaign provided an opportunity for direct engagement with consumers and suppliers to address concerns and promote transparency.

The Authority reaffirmed its commitment to protecting consumers from unfair practices, preserving their rights and working closely with government partners to ensure a fair and stable market environment.

GCC INFLATION RATE RISES BY 1.5 PER CENT

MUSCAT: Inflation in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries rose by 1.5 per cent by the end of September 2024, compared to the same period in 2023, according to the Gulf Statistical Center.

Kuwait recorded the highest inflation rate at 2.8 per cent, followed by Saudi Arabia at 1.7 per cent. Qatar reported 0.8 per cent, while Oman and Bahrain each recorded 0.4 per cent. The increase was driven by a 5.7 per cent rise in housing prices, 2.6 per



Oman recorded 0.4 per cent inflation.

cent in culture and entertainment, 1.8 per cent in goods and services, 1.5 per cent in restaurants and hotels, and 1.0 per cent in both food and beverages and education.

However, transportation costs fell by 3 per cent, furniture and household equipment by 2.3 per cent, tobacco by 1.2 per cent, communications by 0.9 per cent, and clothing and footwear by 0.8 per cent. Health group prices remained unchanged. — **ONA**

TotalEnergies lifts Oman LNG cargo under new pact

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 6

GLOBAL multi-energy group TotalEnergies is set to take delivery of a shipment of LNG from Oman LNG’s Qalhat complex — the first such cargo under a new 10-year-long supply agreement formalised by the two parties last year.

Under the agreement, inked last April, Oman LNG has committed to supplying the French-based energy giant with around 800,000 metric tonnes per annum of LNG for a period of ten years starting from 2025.

Announcing the maiden shipment in a post on Sunday, Sergio Giorgi, TotalEnergies Country Chair Oman, commented: “What a better way to start 2025 for TotalEnergies in Oman. Our first LNG cargo from a 10- years’ offtake contract with Oman LNG has finished loading and will sail to provide Omani power to other places in the world.”

Significantly, the start of the new LNG offtake arrangement adds a new dimension to TotalEnergies’ expanding relationship with the Sultanate of Oman, presently encompassing energy trading, upstream oilfield investment and operation, and renewable energy investment and development.

Also contributing to its sizable footprint in Oman are partnership interests in Petroleum Development Oman (4 per cent) and Oman LNG. TotalEnergies is also playing a lead role in the development and operation of a first-ever LNG bunkering project currently in the early stages of implementation at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

The LNG offtake agreement also reinforces TotalEnergies longstanding partnership with majority-owned Oman LNG which, following a multi-year debottlenecking



The LNG carrier Cool Explorer at Oman LNG’s Qalhat export terminal (Picture credit: TotalEnergies)

and rejuvenation programme, has lifted its capacity to 11.4 million metric tonnes per annum. TotalEnergies has a 5.54 per cent stake in Oman LNG. It holds an indirect interest in Qalhat LNG (2.04 per cent) through its stake in Oman LNG.

In a statement to mark the initial offtake deal reached in November 2023, Julien Pouget, Senior Vice President Middle East & North Africa, Exploration & Production at TotalEnergies, commented: “We are pleased to extend our partnership with Oman LNG. This LNG contributes to our supply of Europe and Asian markets and strengthens our integrated and flexible global portfolio, in line with TotalEnergies’ ambition to increase its LNG production and long-term purchases by 50 per cent by 2030.”

On the upstream front, TotalEnergies has a 26.55 per cent interest in Block 10, a 22.5 per cent interest in Block 11 and an 80 per cent

interest in Block 12, which it operates as well. Earlier in 2024, the French firm signed a Final Investment Decision (FID) for the Marsa LNG project in joint venture with OQ (20 per cent).

Its presence in the renewable energy space has grown as well in recent years.

In 2022, TotalEnergies entered into an agreement with Veolia to build a 17 MWp capacity solar power plant to support the daytime energy needs of the Sharqiyah Desalination Plant.

More recently, it signed agreements with OQ Alternative Energy (OQAE) to develop 300 MW of renewable energy projects in Oman. They comprise a 100 MW North Solar project at Saih Nihaydah, and Riyah-1 and Riyah-2, representing two 100 MW wind power projects located on the Amin and West Nimr fields in south Oman. Output from these projects will be supplied to PDO under long-term supply contracts.

MUSCAT STOCK EXCHANGE GAINS 10 POINTS

MUSCAT: Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) general index 30 yesterday gained 10.3 points, comprising a rise by 0.23% to close at 4,580 points, compared to the last session, which stood at 4,569.70 points.

The trading value yesterday stood at RO 6,391,566, comprising a rise by 1.7%, compared to the last session, which stood at RO 6,284,270.



The report released by MSX pointed out that the market value

went down by 0.062% to reach about RO 27.95 billion.

The report added that the value of shares bought by non-Omani investors reached RO 507,000, comprising 7.93%. The value of shares sold by non-Omani investors reached RO 399,000, comprising 6.25%. The net non-Omani investment rose by 1.69% to RO 108,000. — **ONA**

Egypt and Oman to strengthen economic and trade ties

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 6

Egypt and Oman launched their first-ever business forum aimed at bolstering economic and trade cooperation between the two nations. Held with the participation of senior officials and business leaders from both sides, the event marks a significant step in enhancing long-standing bilateral relations that have spanned over five decades.

The forum, attended by a distinguished group of ministers, ambassadors, and private sector representatives, focused on exploring opportunities for investment and trade collaboration. It comes in the wake of renewed



Minister Qais Al Yousef with Dr Badr Abdel Aati at the press conference. — **Picture by Abdul Wahed Al Hamdani**

momentum in Egyptian-Omani relations, spurred by recent leadership visits that have further solidified ties.

In his remarks, the Egyptian ambassador to Oman highlighted

the growing economic partnership, noting that Egyptian investments in Oman reached \$345 million in 2023, while Omani investments in Egypt stood at \$550 million.

“The deep-rooted partnership between our two nations reflects a shared commitment to growth and development,” he said.

The forum also announced plans for the next Egyptian-Omani Business Forum, set to take place in Cairo this April, in tandem with the upcoming joint committee meetings.

Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion Qais Al Yousef called for activating the Egyptian-Omani Business Council, stressing its role in easing collaboration between businesses.

He also highlighted areas of

potential integration, particularly in energy, mining, and ports, where both nations can leverage their geographic and strategic advantages.

These relate to energy, which is a promising area for cooperation with significant opportunities. For mining has potential for localised industries and knowledge exchange.

Finally, ports strengthen ties between Egyptian and Omani ports, with companies like Maersk playing a vital role.

The minister also underscored the importance of utilizing free trade agreements to increase the flow of goods and investments between the two countries. The forum emphasised the strategic geographic positioning of both nations. Egypt serves as a gateway

to African markets, while Oman provides access to Asia, making the partnership an economic bridge between continents.

Egyptian officials reaffirmed their commitment to improving the investment environment for Arab and foreign businesses. Measures include tax incentives, reducing bureaucratic obstacles, and streamlining procedures to attract new investments, aiming for foreign investments to account for 65 per cent of Egypt’s GDP.

The forum concluded with optimism about the future of Egyptian-Omani relations. Officials expressed confidence that the Cairo forum in April will act as a pivotal platform to deepen economic ties and promote mutual growth.

Desalination: Balancing resource demands with responsibility



NAJAH
AL RIYAMI

The author is a Media and Communication Master's graduate skilled in diverse writing formats, specialising in storytelling, branding, and in-depth journalism

DESALINATION has continued to play a significant role in Oman's potable water supply, coming far from the first desalination plant commissioned in 1976, its infrastructure has expanded exponentially to meet growing demands.

Today, the Sultanate of Oman produces approximately 400 million cubic metres of desalinated water (as of 2022) — a significant increase from 279.6 million cubic metres in 2016 — to meet about 86 per cent of the country's water needs. Oman is effectively the second largest player in the GCC in desalinated water usage.

The Middle East accounts for 90 per cent of the world's thermal energy used in desalination and as the demand for water continues to rise due to population growth, the effects of climate change alongside growing energy consumption of desalination raises concerns about its environmental and economic sustainability.

To address these challenges, increasingly efficient and sustainable desalination technologies continue to be explored and implemented.

This is evident in Oman's desalination journey, reducing the number of its plants from 94 (47 seawater and 47 brackish water facilities) to 13 plants, whilst increasing its

capacity to improve energy consumption and efficiency.

Today, Oman's 13 contracted desalination plants collectively produce over 1.15 million cubic metres of water daily — a significant shift from the 94 plants in 2011 that produced a total of 196 million cubic metres annually.

The reduction in the number of plants, paired with the increase in production capacity reflects Oman's shift towards more efficient desalination facilities.

The Barka IV plant, for example, commenced operations in 2018, to produce up to 281,000 cubic metres of water daily; accounting for approximately 23 per cent of Oman's water supply and serving nearly one-third of Muscat's population.

The use of advanced reverse osmosis technology has helped achieve record low energy consumption with the use of an ultra-modern energy recovery process. The plant increased Oman's national water capacity by 20 per cent and is projected to grow by around 6 per cent per year.

The Ghubrah III desalination plant, planned to commence production in the first quarter of 2027, is expected to be the Sultanate of Oman's largest desalination plant.

It is equipped with over 23,000 units of SW 440 GR G2 seawater reverse osmosis membranes for a capacity of up to 315,000

The Middle East accounts for 90 per cent of the world's thermal energy used in desalination and as the demand for water continues to rise due to population growth, the effects of climate change alongside growing energy consumption of desalination raises concerns about its environmental and economic sustainability

cubic metres per day. The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that the Middle East's energy demand for desalination will double by 2030, reflecting an increasing dependence on this energy-intensive technology to sustain water supplies in one of the world's driest regions.

Concerns of these growing energy demands are also addressed with the potential of solar powered desalination plants, as explored in Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia.

While underway, scaling these solutions require substantial investment and technological innovation.

For example, November 2023 saw Oman inaugurate its largest solar photovoltaic (PV) system dedicated to a desalination plant at the Sharqiyah Desalination Plant in Sur. A 17-megawatt peak (MWp) solar farm generates over 32,000 megawatt-hours (MWh) of green electricity annually to cover 100 per cent of the plant's daytime energy consumption.

Balance is key as the Sultanate of Oman steps forward with investments in advanced desalination technologies; effectively addressing the conflicting challenges of growing water demands alongside energy consumption in a way that not only ensures reliable water supply, but also aligns with our global sustainability goals.

US 7-ELEVEN IPO WILL INVITE MORE UNWANTED SUITORS

In 1987 Southland Corporation, the Dallas-based operator of 7-Eleven then facing rumours of a Canadian takeover attempt, announced plans to move the company into private hands — namely those of its founding family.

Now the Ito clan behind the American chain's current Japanese parent could end up listing those convenience store operations in their own bid to maintain control. It's an imperfect solution to a pressing problem. The initial public offering of Seven & i's North American assets would seek to raise more than 1 trillion yen (\$6.3 billion), following the proposed 9 trillion yen, roughly \$57 billion, management buyout of Seven & i holdings led by the group's founding Ito family, Bloomberg reported last month, citing sources.

Prior to Couche-tard's approach, the only planned IPO by Seven & i's management was that of its superstores business in Japan.

That would help to pare down loans of 6 trillion yen planned to help finance the leveraged buyout and, by doing so, make the deal more palatable for the Japanese banks including Mizuho Financial and Sumitomo Mitsui Financial backing the bid intended to fend off a takeover approach from Canada's Alimentation Couche-Tard.

Prior to Couche-tard's approach, the only planned IPO by Seven & i's management was that of its superstores business in Japan. This suggests listing

the US unit is mainly a result of Couche-Tard's takeover bid, rather than a strategic move with long-term benefits for the group. What's more, any new listing is likely to trade at a valuation discount to its unwanted suitor.

The simplest yardstick for comparison is Seven & i's global convenience store segment, given annual results show the US business accounts for 95 per cent of that segment's external revenue.

The international business will generate EBITDA of 563 billion yen for the financial year ending February 2025, per Visible Alpha. On Couche Tard's multiple of 11, 7-Eleven US would be worth about \$38 billion.

That would require Seven & i to sell about 17 per cent of the business to hit the reported fundraising target.

But with profit margins lagging those of its rival-turned-suitor, it would probably command a lower multiple and need to sell more shares.

So while the promise of a listing may comfort banks financing a buyout and help to speed Seven & i's exit from public markets, it risks creating a microcosm of the struggle that the family is contorting itself to avoid: Public scrutiny of its prized assets will increase and more unwanted suitors may emerge. — Reuters

Be aware of high mobile bills from up in the sky

A FEW days ago I received a call from my dad about Uncle Badru, who has recently returned from a thrilling vacation experience with his family. Uncle Badru, a retired professional who has been traveling frequently, ensures that he takes along his smart devices (mobile phone, tablet, etc.) that are also filled with Netflix movies and series downloaded for offline viewing.

His recent trip, however, was a nightmare. Specifically due to a high mobile phone bill that he received after returning from the trip.

Obviously, the bill was higher than usual. Upon investigating the matter a little further, we learned that the reason for his high bills was due to inflight roaming charges that many people and travellers are not aware of. What happened exactly, how it works and how one can avoid this issue is the focus of my article today.

Uncle Badru received a high mobile phone bill due to inflight roaming. Luckily, he had a maximum amount limit set on his phone via the telecom operator (else it would have been a disaster).

Inflight roaming is a service that allows travellers (passengers) to use their mobile phone and/or SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) enabled tablets for calls, texts messages (SMS) and even access/surf the information superhighway (the internet) while on the flights up in the sky.

Modern flights are equipped with devices (cell base stations) that use satellites to establish connections and offer regular communication services to their passengers.

You may be familiar with international roaming service, in which you depend on cellular towers (when you travel outside your main country) to establish a connection on land.

When you're up in the sky in the air, you would depend on satellites to establish the same communications.

This is known as inflight roaming, where a number of modern flights these days offer it as a service to their travellers. The problem, however, is that not many people



When you're up in the sky in the air, you would depend on satellites to establish the same communications. Image for illustration only.



TARIQ
AL BARWANI

The author is the founder of Knowledge Oman

and specifically passengers, know about. So how does it work? When you embark on a flight that has an inflight roaming service, your smart device (both mobile phone and SIM-enabled tablet) would automatically connect to the inflight roaming (if your smart device is not set on airplane mode).

You would be able to make and receive calls, send SMS text messages and also connect to the internet (for movies, social media, games and the like) while you're up in the sky, as if you're on the ground/land. The communication/connectivity would be via the aircraft's on-board base station to the satellites orbiting the earth, which would then relay signals between the aircraft and the ground stations, ultimately integrating with the telecom network on the ground to establish the end-to-end communication.

Why is it expensive? Simply because operating those satellites costs high and these costs are passed to you, as a customer/consumer.

Also, there are few providers that offer this service today — more demand, less supply and as a result, a high price, which you end up barring as a customer.

It is important to note that inflight roaming is not the same as an airline's Wi-Fi. Airline Wi-Fi has been there for ages and in order for

one to connect to the service, he/she would need to turn on Wi-Fi on their smart devices, connect and yet only be able to utilise the service once they opt in by paying using their credit card (or mode of payment accepted by the airline).

They are usually cheaper and prices are also predictable (known by the travellers and passengers beforehand). With inflight roaming, you and your family may incur heavy bills for connecting automatically without being aware. If there is no limit set on your connection, then expect a bomb when you receive the bill.

Uncle Badru is not alone and his recent painful experience with the high mobile phone bill is common to many travellers as well.

I trust millions of people in Oman travel every year and the potential of attaining similar experience is high.

Hence, we should all take this as a lesson by understanding what and how inflight roaming works in order to avoid the same result.

Many phones (without airplane mode turned on) connect to these networks automatically without the user's consent. Next time before you embark on a flight for a journey, make sure you check your smart device settings and ensure Airplane mode is turned on. Stay safe and continue flying.

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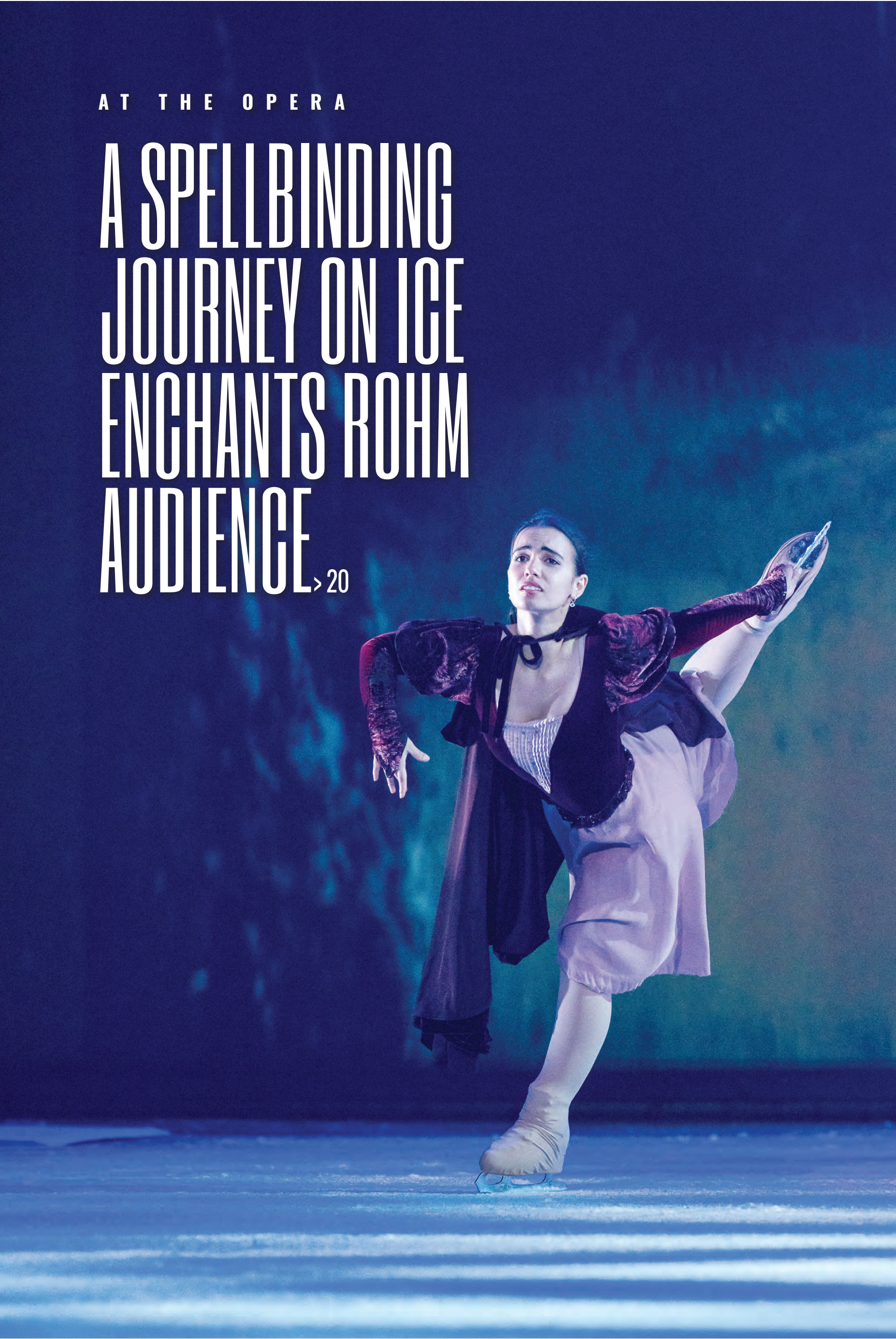
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ENTERTAINMENT

Demi Moore on winning first acting award: ‘I’m just in shock’



DEMI MOORE won her first acting award in a career spanning five decades on Sunday, scooping a Golden Globe for the body-horror film “The Substance”.

The 62-year-old beat Amy Adams, Cynthia Erivo, Mikey Madison, Karla Sofia Gascon and Zendaya to win best actress in a musical or comedy film, a category that had been considered very competitive.

“I’m just in shock right now,” Moore said in her acceptance speech. “I’ve been doing this a long time, over 45 years. This is the first time I’ve ever won anything as an actor and I’m just so humbled and so grateful.”

Moore, who began her acting career in the early 1980s, is known for films like “St. Elmo’s Fire”, “Ghost”, “Indecent Proposal” and “Striptease”.

Visibly surprised by her win, she said she had once been told by a producer 30 years ago that she was a “popcorn actress”.

“At that time, I made that mean that this wasn’t something that I was allowed to have, that I could do movies that were successful, that made a lot of money, but that I couldn’t be acknowledged,” Moore said.

“I bought in and I believed that; and that corroded me over time to the point where I thought a few years ago that maybe this was it, maybe I was complete, maybe I’ve done what I was supposed to do.”

Moore, who was twice nominated for a Golden Globe in the 1990s, said she received the script for “The Substance” when she was at “a low point”.

“And the universe told me that you’re not done,” she said, adding her thanks to writer-director Coralie Fargeat and co-star Margaret Qualley.

In the movie, Moore plays an ageing TV fitness instructor who signs up for a mysterious medical regime that promises to create the perfect version of herself. — Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



FESTIVAL

People from the Miao ethnic group attending a cultural new year celebration as part of the Lu Sheng (traditional wind instrument) festival in Congjiang county, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, in southwestern China’s Guizhou province. — AFP



FILM

Indian artist Ranjit Dahiya (2L) paints a wall mural of legendary Bollywood actor and film-maker Raj Kapoor to mark his 100th birth anniversary, in Mumbai. — AFP



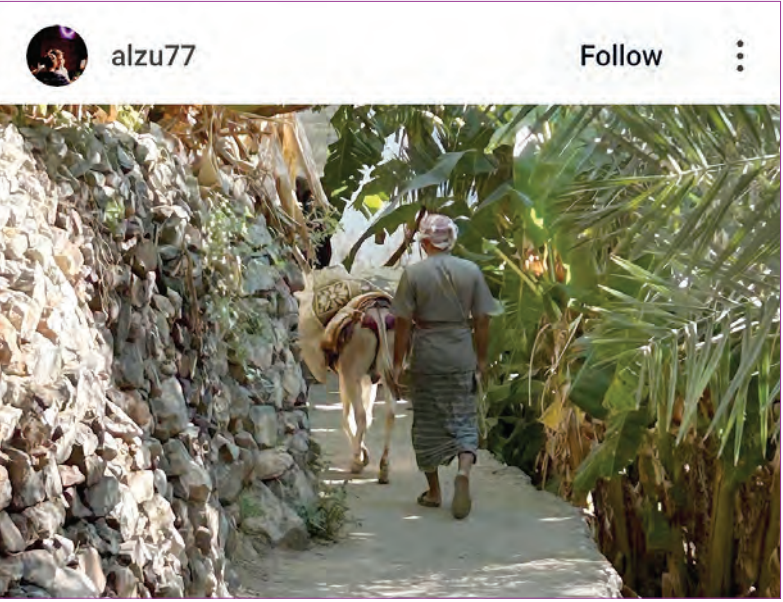
ENTERTAINMENT

Dutch singer Dick Annegarn will perform a series of concert from January 8 to 15, 2025 at L’Europeen Parisian venue. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Underwater Treasure



Beauty of Remote Places

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Tuna ‘as fat as a cow’ goes for \$1.3 million at auction in Japan



A MASSIVE bluefin tuna on Sunday sold for some \$1.3 million at the first auction of the season at Tokyo’s popular fish market, the second highest amount ever achieved, according to the Kyodo news agency.

The eye-watering sale of the 276-kilogramme specimen is fuelling hopes among the Japanese that the country will continue to recover from its economic downturn, the agency reported.

The tuna was caught on Saturday off the coast of Oma on the northern tip of the island of Honshu, one of Japan’s premier tuna fishing areas.

“It was as fat as a cow,” 73-year-old fisherman Masahiro Takeuchi was quoted as saying by Kyodo, describing the moment he saw the giant

tuna hanging from his long line.

According to Kyodo, in 2019 a bluefin tuna fetched the equivalent of\$2.1 million — the highest price ever recorded since 1999 when records began.

Prices then fell during the coronavirus pandemic, it said.

The relatively high sums that are achieved at the traditional New Year’s auction are not primarily due to the quality of the fish.

Instead, the PR spectacle has been designed to kick off the new financial year.

“The year’s first tuna brings good luck. We want to make people smile with food,” Shinji Nagao, president of a sushi restaurant operator who purchased the fish together with an intermediary, was quoted assaying by Kyodo. — dpa



‘Emilia Perez,’ ‘The Brutalist’ win at diverse Golden Globes

SURREAL NARCO-MUSICAL “Emilia Perez” and epic immigrant drama “The Brutalist” were the big winners at the Golden Globes on Sunday, as prizes were shared widely across an international crop of movies at the year’s first major showbiz awards gala.

French director Jacques Audiard’s Mexico-set “Emilia Perez” took four prizes, including best comedy or musical film, while “The Brutalist” was named best drama and also picked up best actor for Adrien Brody, who plays a Hungarian Holocaust survivor.

“Emilia Perez,” about a drug lord, had entered the night with the most nominations at 10.

It won for best non-English language film and best original song, while Zoe Saldana took best supporting actress honours, nudging out her co-star Selena Gomez.

“You can maybe put us in jail, you can beat us up, but you never can take away our soul, our resistance, our identity,” said Karla Sofia Gascon, the film’s star.

She added: “Raise your voice... and say, ‘I won. I am who I am, not who you want.’”

Big wins at the Globes can help movies earn new audiences and build vital momentum toward the Oscars in early March.

Sunday also proved an important night for “The Brutalist”, which shrugged off concerns over its sprawling runtime to earn best director for Brady Corbet.

“I was told that no one would come out and see it,” said Corbet, of his epic about a Jewish architect who survives Nazi persecution and emigrates to the United States.

“No one was asking for a three-and-a-half hour film about a mid-century designer... but it works,” he added.

In one of the night’s biggest upsets, Brazil’s Fernanda Torres won best actress in a drama film for “I’m Still Here”, which chronicles a family ripped apart by the country’s military dictatorship in the 1970s.

- COMEBACKS -

Brody’s win was one of the night’s



remarkable career comebacks, more than two decades after he became the youngest ever Oscar best actor winner for “The Pianist,” in which he also played a Holocaust survivor.

“There was a time not too long ago that I felt that this may be a moment never afforded to me again,” he said.

“This story... is very reminiscent of my mother’s, and my ancestral journey of fleeing the horrors of war and coming to this great country.”

And there was another late-career triumph for Demi Moore, who won best actress in a comedy for body horror flick “The Substance”, which takes a satirical and often grotesque look at the pressures placed on women by society as they age.

Accepting her prize, Moore reflected on how decades ago, she had been told by a Hollywood producer that she was “a popcorn actress.”

“I bought in, and I believed that,

and that corroded me over time,” said the now 62-year-old “Ghost” star.

But “I had this magical, bold, courageous, out-of-the-box, absolutely bonkers script come across my desk called ‘The Substance’, and the universe told me that ‘you’re not done.’”

- OZEMPIC -

The always controversial Globes are in year two of a revamp, following a Los Angeles Times expose in 2021 that showed that the awards’ voting body — the Hollywood Foreign Press Association — had no Black members.

Now under new ownership, and with the HFPA disbanded, organisers were hoping to capitalise on a ratings bump registered last January.

Comedian Nikki Glaser hosted the ceremony, kicking off the gala with an irreverent, well-received monologue.

“Welcome to the 82nd Golden Globes, Ozempic’s biggest night,” she quipped, referring to the weight-loss drug that has proven wildly popular in famously looks-conscious Hollywood.

Among the dramas, “Conclave”, a fictionalised account of high-stakes Vatican horse-trading, depicting how the death of a pope sends the church’s various factions into battle for its future, took the award for best screenplay.

Kieran Culkin won best supporting actor for Jesse Eisenberg’s awkward road trip comedy “A Real Pain”, about mismatched American cousins retracing their European roots.

Latvian movie “Flow”, a surreal dialogue-free odyssey about a group of animals forced to work together as they drift in a boat through a flooded world, won best animated film.

The show also honours the best in television, with big wins for historical epic “Shogun”, showbiz comedy “Hacks” and limited series “Baby Reindeer.” — AFP

FEATURES

BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

THE much-anticipated New Year's show, "Beauty and the Beast on Ice", was brought to The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) for three performances last weekend by the UK-based company, "The International Ice Stars". It was a sparkling success and spectacular experience for all those who attended, young and old, animating this traditional fairy-tale with enchanting, magical effects.

The stage of ROHM was transformed into a real skating rink. Stage sets magnified the charm of the production in the form of four projected backdrops depicting the Enchanted Castle Gardens, the Village Square, Beauty's House and Inside the Castle.

The company commissioned an original score from the talented Italian composer Silvio Amato to enhance the dramatic and emotional intensity of the narrative. It was a superb soundtrack, blending semi-classical styles with Spanish and Russian elements. There were touches of Broadway shows mixed with rhythmic fairground music; Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev classical ballet meets John Williams' film scores.

To add to the splendour of the fantasy, costumes in velvets and satin, designed by Licia Furieri, glistened in the light as dancers spun, twirled and leapt in fluid movement, all directed by Giuseppe Arena, considered to be among the most innovative ice choreographers today. Figure skating on ice is a balletic form, fusing the accuracy of classical synchronisation with gymnastics and acrobatics. Some gestures are necessarily affected by the weight — and sharpness — of the blades, such as leaping, lifting and spinning partners, and there were a few inevitable slips on the ice during this winter extravaganza.

Adding to the awe of this production were fire-breathers, juggling and twirling live flames on ice to amaze the audience, played by the enchantress herself and Anastasiia Bardanova. Aerial skaters, like high wire acrobats walking on air, were seamlessly interspersed with the celebrations. The Belarusian athlete Krystina Kipinava and Chilean circus artist Javier Miura twisted themselves above the stage on suspended aerial straps in the two acts' finales, to resounding applause.

The tale began in falling snow at the castle gates as the mysterious enchantress dressed in black and puce, danced by fiery, dynamic Russian figure skater, Viktoriia Mikhailova, cast her curse on the arrogant prince.

The shift to the village square and market was as swift and smooth as the entrance of 5 townswomen in colourful garb, speeding across the ice in a thrilling, dazzling display. One of Beauty's sisters was dressed in red (Canadian figure skater, Jennyfer Labelle), the other in blue (Russian ice skater, Irina Tkachuk) — always perfectly coordinated in motion. Beauty's Brother was spellbinding with his incredible flexibility and back flips, displaying an athletic whirlwind throughout the evening, exquisitely performed by Russian dancer, Artem Khramov.

Another principal male and nemesis of the Beast was Beauty's father, played superbly by the experienced and energetic Philadelphia-based figure skater and contemporary dancer, Isaac Lindy. He is dressed in deep burgundy velvet matching Beauty's, and perhaps this connection symbolises the intense and special, protective bond between father and daughter.

Father's scene at the atmospheric Castle gates is utterly memorable. Five pairs of woodland creatures, dressed entirely in green emerge as father watches the mystical fantasy to a romantic classical waltz. The castle under a full moon is highly evocative and other-worldly as father plucks a white



A SPELLBINDING JOURNEY ON ICE ENCHANTS ROHM AUDIENCE



rose as requested by Beauty. The gates open to a ghastly wood and the enraged Beast appears, wearing a mask and wild hair. His athletic approach to the role began here, spinning theatrically from prince to Beast and back, skated impressively by Russian principal performer, Ratibor Shirokov.

Unique and central to this visit to Muscat was the star of the show, Omani-British elite skater, Amani Fancy, returning to where her story began when she first fell in love with ice. Her performance was truly breath-taking as her petite, nimble figure fulfilled the role of Beauty in every sense. Particularly poignant were her duets with the Beast in Act 2, their complementary forms perfectly synchronised as they danced inside the castle, falling in love to a classical romantic score.

The Finale was the perfect climax to the performance. The subdued colours of the castle interior underwent a transformation into a surreal, bright pink palace, symbolising love's true power over fear. The five couples of the Corps de Ballet were dressed in matching pink courtiers' costumes exploring their most virtuoso ensemble dancing, girls lifted above boys' shoulders like fairy trophies. Beauty and her prince entered in pure white as bride and groom in a mesmerising 'pas de deux'. Amani spun in endless pirouettes and numerous tricky leaps – never losing her footing.

The couple on the high wire gave a grand display of agility and strength, the enchantress demonstrated her most impressive spinning technique and one by one the members of Beauty's family gave startling cameo solos — as if one needed further proof of their outstanding talent in this splendid beginning to 2025.