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RAMADHAN
1446 AH
SUNDAY
MAR 16, 2025

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PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR
05:00 AM

DHUHR
12:21 PM

ASR
03:45 PM

MAGHRIB
06:21 PM

ISHA
07:31 PM

INBRIEF

US EXPELS S AFRICA’S AMBASSADOR



US SECRETARY OF STATE MARCO RUBIO

WASHINGTON/ JOHANNESBURG: The US is expelling South Africa’s ambassador, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said, calling the envoy a “race-baiting politician” who hates President Donald Trump. Ties have slumped since Trump cut US financial aid to South Africa, citing disapproval of its land policy and its genocide case against Washington’s ally Israel at the International Court of Justice. “South Africa’s Ambassador to the United States is no longer welcome in our great country,” Rubio said on Friday in a post on X about the rare barring of a nation’s top diplomat. “Ebrahim Rasool is a race-baiting politician who hates America and hates @Potus (Trump).” — Reuters

BALL IS IN ISRAEL’S COURT: HAMAS

GAZA: Hamas said on Saturday that “the ball is in Israel’s court” after offering to release an Israeli-US hostage and return the bodies of four others as part of Gaza truce talks. Following the offer on Friday, Israel said the Palestinians had “not budged a millimetre” after a proposal from US President Donald Trump’s Middle East envoy. “The ball is in Israel’s court,” a Hamas spokesman said. “We want to solidify the ceasefire agreement and force (Israel) to implement its terms,” said Abdul Latif al Qanou, accusing Israel of “delaying” its enforcement. He pointed to the ongoing blockage of humanitarian aid entering Gaza since March 2. — AFP

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY @shadamdm

Astronomers in Oman have predicted that the first day of Eid Al Fitr is likely to fall on Monday, March 31. This means that holidays in Oman are anticipated to begin on Sunday, March 30 and run till Thursday, April 3, giving citizens and residents a five-day break. While a five-day break sounds good, there is hope for an even longer holiday as Friday (April 4) and Saturday (April 5) will be weekend making it a nine-day break running from pre-Eid weekly off days.

Abdulwahab al Busaidy, head of the observatory at Oman Astronomical Society, said that the first day of Eid Al Fitr, in all likelihood, would fall on Monday (March 31), because the 29th of Ramadhan, which is equivalent to March 29, the sun will set at 6:21 pm and the moon will set at 6:26 pm and that it will be nearly impossible to see the moon on that day. “The moon will be on the horizon for only five minutes, depending on your location. It will be above the horizon only two degrees, with an illumination of 0.04 per cent. So, in countries like Oman, where we rely on moon sighting, it will be nearly



Eid is one of the most anticipated festivals with elaborate preparations taking place in the weeks before the day.

impossible to see the moon on March 29,” Al Busaidy said. “Therefore, we will complete 30 days of Ramadhan and the first day of Eid Al Fitr will be on Monday,

April 1 deadline for street taxis to join firms

VINOD NAIR MUSCAT, MARCH 15

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) has said that all Orange and White taxis should be part of the licensed companies from April 1. Individual taxi operators can join OTaxi, Tasleem, Marhaba, Oman Taxi, Hala and Taxi Muscat, which operate via mobile applications.

The government has been determined to improve and raise the level of taxi services in the country. As of January 2025, there are 28,241 registered taxis in the Sultanate of Oman and several of them operate under companies. Speaking to the Observer, Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shammakhi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Transport, said,



“We focus a lot on streamlining taxi services as part of our plans to improve public transport and the main objective is to ensure that all taxis should be metred (even orange and white street taxis) through applications.” He said that there have been challenges, but progress has been made on that front. “Today, we have eight app-based taxi companies operating in the country.”

Oman makes progress in international indices

THE NATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS OFFICE (NCO) said that the Sultanate of Oman has made remarkable progress in a number of international indices. In 2024, the Sultanate of Oman advanced 20 places in the Corruption Perceptions Index ranking 50th globally out of 180 countries. It also advanced more than 90 places in the Environmental Performance Index, ranking 55th globally. Besides, the Sultanate of Oman advanced four places ranking 50th in the Network Readiness Index which measured the digital readiness of 133 countries. The Sultanate of Oman’s score in the Index of Economic Freedom in 2025 also rose from 62.9 to 65.4 out of 100, classifying its economy as fairly free. The country’s score in the Global Governance Indicators and Rule of Law Index rose to 70.2 out of 100. The Sultanate of Oman saw its score in the Regulatory Quality Index rising to 66.5 out of 100 and that of the Government Effectiveness Index rising to 62.2 out of 100. Dr Salem bin Abdullah al Shaikh, Director of the National Competitiveness Office at the Ministry of Economy, attributed the progress to the efforts undertaken by the national committees and teams tasked with monitoring these indicators as well as the formation of national teams by the National Competitiveness Committee including the Innovation Team, Network Readiness, Environmental Performance and Business Readiness Team. This is in addition to the issuance of several laws, the governance of some government agencies and the implementation of some projects initiated by the government departments and establishments as part of their annual plans. In addition, the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI)



DR SALEM BIN ABDULLAH AL SHAIKH Director, National Competitiveness Office

is making constant efforts to provide, improve and update data for the United Nations organisations, the official said. Al Shaikh added that the improvement in the overall international competitiveness indices was the result of concerted government, private and civil efforts as well as the positive response by the local community to questionnaires and surveys conducted by international experts and specialists. He pointed out that the National Competitiveness Committee and the National Competitiveness Office are striving to ensure

that the Sultanate of Oman’s international competitiveness indicators are in optimal condition over the next two years for two important considerations: the improvement of the domestic environment; and the existence of a clear vision and objectives. He explained that the Sultanate of Oman is currently striving to improve a number of indices including the Innovation Index, the Environmental Performance Index, the Business Readiness Index and the Future of Growth Index. He added that there are several gains to be reaped by improving the Sultanate of Oman’s performance in international indices, most importantly providing international institutions with a road map for decision-makers and policymakers to address the issues targeted by these indices and achieve positive reputation which is important for investors, businessmen, specialists and researchers. — ONA

Eid Al Fitr most likely on March 31; one-week holiday anticipated

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY @shadamdm

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March 31,” he added. For countries that rely solely on the birth of a new moon, Al Busaidy said they may fast only 29 days and their first day of Eid Al Fitr will be on March 30. With the long holiday expected, excitement has begun. “I have finished all my Eid shopping and I am now considering ways of enjoying the anticipated long break. I wish the authorities announce the holidays early so that we can plan ahead. I am planning to use the holiday to visit all parts of Oman as the weather is still cool,” said Salaah Abdullah, an accounts auditor based in Muscat.

Suhar resident Mohammed al Balushi said he is currently considering flight options to Kenya for safari for a 5-day break. “And if we get a 9-day break, I will use it to explore the whole of East Africa because I have always wanted to go to Africa to enjoy greenery,” he said. According to Observer online poll, nearly 57 per cent of readers said that they would decide on travel plans only after official holidays are announced. It may be noted that foreign travel needs months of advanced planning, which includes the process of visa application, getting affordable flight and hotel rates and of course leave approvals.



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SHORT TAKES



NEW MARKETS IN AL BATINAH SOUTH TO BOOST COMMERCE

AL RUSTAQ: The implementation rate at Wadi Al Maawil Market project has crossed 90 per cent and 70 per cent at the Al Awabi Market. The two projects are part of the government’s ongoing efforts to improve services, achieve sustainable development and boost the national economy.

In the Wilayat of Al Awabi, a commercial market project extending over an area of 1,200 square metres, comprising 16 shops, is underway. The project, with a total investment of RO 200,000, aims to provide a modern commercial centre to stimulate commercial and social activity in the wilayat.

In the Wilayat of Wadi Al Maawil, work is in progress to construct a commercial market spanning an area of 1,800 square metres, with 27 shops at a cost of RO 300,000. The project contributes to developing the urban landscape and strengthening the trade and tourism sectors in the wilayat. The project has achieved significant progress with 92 per cent already completed. Once operational, the market will stir commercial activities and provide an integrated business environment.

Both markets include cafes, mosques, parking lots, open seating areas and green spaces providing an integrated environment that meets shoppers’ needs and offers a comfortable and modern shopping experience.

These projects reflect the continued efforts made by the Al Batinah South Governorate to develop commercial markets and are expected to stimulate commercial activity and create new investment opportunities. — ONA

SSF MARKS ANNUAL DAY TODAY

MUSCAT: The Sultan’s Special Force (SSF) is marking its annual day today (Sunday), which falls on March 15 every year, at Al Samoud Camp, under the auspices of Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office. The celebration comes as the SSF continues its development and modernisation plans thanks to the generous attention accorded to it by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander. — ONA



Oman to showcase ‘Memory Grid’ at London Design Biennale

MUSCAT: London Design Biennale has announced the first confirmed pavilions for its 2025 edition, taking place at Somerset House, in the heart of London, from June 5-29.

The theme of this edition of the Biennale, ‘Surface Reflections’, explores how ideas are fuelled by both our internal experiences and external influences.

The fifth edition continues the Biennale’s mission to demonstrate how design can better the world we inhabit whilst broadening our understanding of design’s role in addressing challenges and identifying

solutions. Exhibitors will share perspectives and solutions to some of the global issues that face humanity today, exploring areas from the urban environment to the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability to post-conflict recovery.

Victoria Broackes, Director of London Design Biennale, said: “Since the last Biennale, the global context has drastically changed and the need for collaboration and exchange in a peaceful context feels more important than ever. International design teams continue to demonstrate the



Oman draws on traditional Omani pottery to explore the balance between heritage and the digital age

possibilities of and their faith in what can be achieved through design and design thinking. The Biennale reveals what is on people’s minds, across the world, right now. We will see exhibitors presenting design in all its forms, from futuristic urban planning to collaborative efforts to preserve environments.”

The first exhibitors announced are Argentina, Hong Kong, Poland, Malta, Nigeria, Oman, Peru, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Lebanon and Romania. Many independent projects have also been announced.

Oman draws on traditional Omani

pottery to explore the balance between heritage and the digital age, with an immersive installation referencing ancient water vessels for data storage, prompting reflections on memory and value in a hyper-connected world.

Oman — Memory Grid re-imagines ancient vessels as a metaphor for how humanity preserves what it holds most precious. The exhibition highlights the shifting values of society and what we cherish most through the art form of Omani pottery — vessels that preserved valuable resources throughout time.

RO 9.7m for development projects in Bahla

SUHAIL BIN NASSER AL NAHDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 15

THE Wilayat of Bahla is witnessing remarkable development, evidenced by the implementation of a number of projects at a total cost exceeding RO 9.7 million. This was stated by Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah.

He added that these projects include the development of road networks; and the construction and modernisation of public facilities with the aim of improving the quality of life for citizens and strengthening the infrastructure as well as positioning the Wilyat of Bahla as a major destination for heritage tourism.

The governor noted that construction work on development projects in the wilayat is progressing rapidly. The implementation rate of the internal roads project in the Wilayat of Bahla (Package 1) has hit 85 per cent at a total cost of RO 2.4 million. The maintenance and repair of damaged roads in the Wilayat of Bahla has reached 95 per cent while the implementation rate of internal roads in residential plots has reached 50 per cent. The development and rehabilitation project for the public park in the Al Mamoura area of the Wilayat of Bahla has exceeded 30 per cent.

The Bahla Souq rehabilitation project, which has reached 5 per cent completion, complements



SHAIKH HILAL BIN SAID AL HAJRI
Governor of Al Dakhiliyah



SHAIKH SAID BIN ALI AL NUAIMI
Wali of Bahla

Several projects like infrastructure development, roads, public facilities and parks in addition to enhancing basic services are being taken up in the wilayat



The Bahla Souq rehabilitation project, which has reached 5 per cent completion

known as Asalat Bahla, which aims to develop the wilayat’s historic centre. The project is currently in the consultancy studies phase. He added that the Bahla Souq rehabilitation and development project and the Asalat Bahla projects seek to enhance local culture and provide new spaces for social outing and interaction; and provide employment and investment opportunities.

The Jabreen Entrance Development Project aims to improve and enhance the site of Jabreen Fort, one of the most important historical landmarks.

Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah pointed out that the Basya development project involves developing the road leading to the Salut Centre

by installing modern lighting to enhance visibility and safety in addition to adding seating areas that provide convenience for pedestrians.

Shaikh Said bin Ali al Nuaimi, Wali of Bahla, said that the wilayat is witnessing increasing development through the implementation of several projects that meet the needs of citizens and improve their quality of life. These projects include infrastructure development, including roads, public facilities and parks in addition to enhancing basic services. He emphasised that the Office of the Governor of Al Dakhiliyah played a pivotal role in supporting these projects, strengthening cooperation and integration between the office and the Bahla Municipal Council.

HEIGHT RESTRICTION SIGNS PLANNED FOR AL JABAL ROAD

MUSCAT: The Muscat Municipality is planning to install height restriction signs on Al Jabal Road (Al Amerat-Bausher Mountain Road) at four different locations.

The municipality has invited bids from contractors who will be responsible for all design and construction work related to the installation of related height restriction signages on the road.

The last date to submit bids is March 16 As the mountain road has been prone to regular fatal accidents, especially those involving heavy-duty trucks that also disrupt traffic, there have been requests from the public for a permanent solution, such as an alternative tunnel road to connect the two wilayats of Al Amerat and Bausher, respectively.

According to the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT), a related tender will be announced this year for the tunnel project. The Greater Muscat Structure Plan (GMSP) places lots of importance on connectivity via public transportation and less dependence on private vehicles, according to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP).

SHORT TAKES



Ramadhan Village was held under the auspices of the Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs

RAMADHAN VILLAGE OPENS IN NAKHAL TO PROMOTE VALUES

NAKHAL: The Wilayat of Nakhal in Al Batinah South Governorate recently celebrated the opening of the Ramadhan Village, themed ‘Your Values Are a Trust.’

The initiative aims to promote and instill authentic Omani values, raising awareness of their importance in preserving cultural identity. The event, which was held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, featured a variety of community activities, religious guidance programmes and heritage exhibitions.

Dr Abdul Rahman bin Mohammed al Siyabi, Director of Awqaf and Religious Affairs Department in Al Batinah South, emphasised the continuation of the initiative’s success from its first edition. He highlighted the significance of spreading awareness about the preservation of Omani values to maintain a pure and strong value system within society. — ONA



Teachers will undergo professional training at ABM

OMANI TEACHERS TO GAIN CAMBRIDGE CREDENTIALS

MUSCAT: In a significant move to enhance the professional development of Omani educators, Ahmad bin Majid International School (ABM) and Majan Institute have formalised a partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), aimed at improving the qualifications of local teachers for Cambridge programmes.

This groundbreaking initiative is set to elevate the quality of education in Oman by equipping local teachers with globally recognised teaching credentials, ensuring that they are well-prepared to deliver world-class education.

As part of the collaboration, Omani teachers will undergo professional training at ABM, which has maintained a close relationship with Cambridge since 2006. Experienced ABM mentors, under the guidance of Cambridge Assessment International Education, will provide these educators with the expertise needed to excel. With oversight from Majan Institute, this programme ensures that participating teachers receive high-quality professional development aligned with international standards.

MUSCAT’S ‘NIGHTS OF IRFAN’ CELEBRATES RAMADHAN WITH BUSINESS, CULTURE

MUSCAT: The Nights of Irfan festival in Muscat Governorate is drawing large crowds, offering a vibrant shopping experience amid a rich Ramadhan atmosphere. Running until March 29, the festival serves as a platform to support local entrepreneurs, home-based businesses, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), reinforcing efforts to enhance local content and drive economic growth.

With 55 retail outlets dedicated to SMEs and entrepreneurs, the festival brings together a blend of culture, entertainment and commerce. Visitors can explore a diverse marketplace featuring fashion, beauty and health products, accessories, food, heritage items and perfumes, which remain a key attraction for shoppers. Sultan bin Sulaiman al



Khadori, Asset Manager at Omran Group, highlighted the festival’s comprehensive offerings that capture the essence of Ramadhan. “The festival provides a unique experience that blends cultural and artistic performances with a variety of retail and food outlets, showcasing both local and international flavours. It also features entertainment competitions for all family members, raffles,

prizes, a bazaar, a dedicated children’s play area, a sports zone, an electronic games corner and live performances,” he stated.

Beyond retail, Nights of Irfan serves as an important platform for Omani entrepreneurs to present their products to a wider audience, attracting both local and international visitors. The event plays a key role in promoting the products of SMEs and productive families while fostering a thriving business environment.

The festival is expected to enhance tourism in Muscat during Ramadhan, encouraging visitors from within and outside Oman to engage with local businesses, experience Omani culture and contribute to the country’s economic diversification efforts.

— ONA

Oman leads women’s empowerment at UN CSW

REPRESENTED by the Ministry of Social

Development, the Sultanate of Oman continues its active participation in the 69th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), currently being held in New York. The session, which runs from March 10 to 21, 2025, focuses on ‘Reviewing and Appraising the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action’ 30 years after its endorsement.

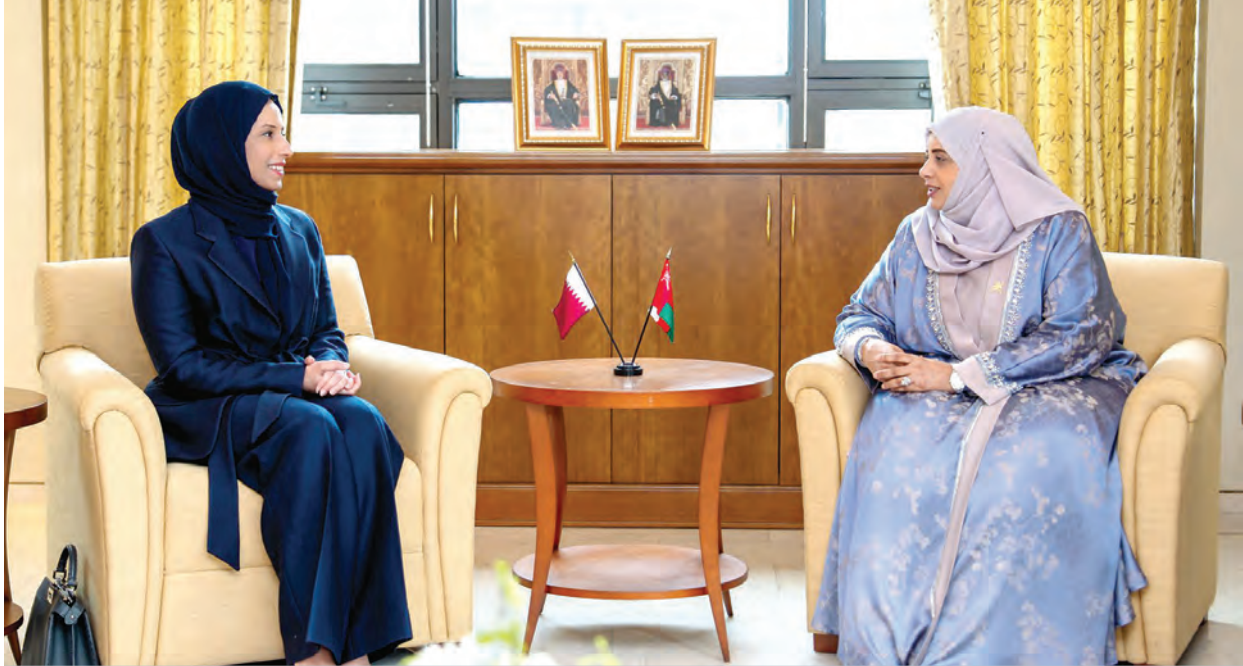
Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, reaffirmed the nation’s strong commitment to the Beijing Declaration since its inception in 1995. She highlighted Oman’s strategic efforts in implementing the 12 fundamental areas of the Declaration, with a core emphasis on achieving gender equality.

Dr Laila noted that Oman has made significant strides in advancing women’s education, with a 97.7 per cent female enrollment rate in 2024 and a 66 per cent participation rate in higher education in 2023. Additionally, female graduates in scientific fields have reached 50 per cent.

Health indicators also reflect progress, with female life expectancy at birth remaining stable at approximately 79 years from 2019 to 2023.

On the economic front, the minister underscored the growing role of Omani women in the workforce, with their participation rising to 34.9 per cent in 2023.

As part of its engagement at CSW69, Oman, in collaboration with the Arab League, hosted a side event titled ‘Arab Women: Innovation in



Dr Laila holding talks with Buthaina bint Ali Al Jabr al Nuaimi, Qatar’s Minister



Dr Laila met with Soraya Mouloudji, Algeria’s Minister

Oman achieves 97.7% female enrollment in education with 66% female participation in higher education (2023) of which 50% female graduates in scientific fields and 79 years female life expectancy (2019-2023)

the Era of the Industrial Revolution.’ The event underscored Oman’s dedication to global initiatives supporting women’s empowerment and was held in alignment with the ‘Muscat as the Capital of Arab Women for 2024’ programme.

Oman’s participation also featured a visual presentation showcasing the nation’s legislative advancements, statistical insights

on women’s progress and success stories of Omani women excelling in innovation.

On the sidelines of CSW69, Dr Laila met with Soraya Mouloudji, Algeria’s Minister of National Solidarity, Family and Women’s Issues, at the Sultanate of Oman’s Permanent Mission to the UN. The discussion centred on enhancing bilateral cooperation in areas concerning family welfare, women, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

Additionally, Dr Laila held talks with Buthaina bint Ali Al Jabr al Nuaimi, Qatar’s Minister of Social Development and Family, to explore joint initiatives in family, women’s and children’s affairs, along with key issues on the CSW agenda.

These engagements reinforce Oman’s proactive stance in shaping global discourse on gender equality and women’s empowerment. — ONA

Restoring Al Awainah Mosque to preserve Omani heritage

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

Al Awainah Mosque, one of the most significant historical mosques in the Sultanate of Oman, stands out for its beautifully decorated ‘Mihrab,’ which reflects the style of the traditional Omani ‘Mihrabs’ found across various governorates.

As part of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism’s ongoing efforts to preserve Omani architectural heritage, the mosque is undergoing restoration, alongside a newly constructed school dedicated to teaching the Holy Quran.

This restoration initiative is part of a broader national effort,



Al Mihrab with its great unique decoration



An old castle near the heritage mosque

with 79 historic mosques having been restored out of the total 116, showcasing a commitment to preserving the rich Islamic architectural traditions of Oman.

The ‘Mihrab’ of Al Awainah Mosque was carefully replicated after the original was transferred to the National Museum in Muscat under the auspices of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The ‘Mihrab,’ now displayed at the museum, serves as a unique historical symbol of Oman’s expert craftsmanship in the art of engraving Islamic Mihrabs.

Another notable feature of the mosque is its small staircase leading to the ‘Al Manarah,’ or ‘Al Boom’ — a

small dome at the mosque’s corner. The ‘owl’ or ‘Boom’ dome served as a traditional call to prayer tower, where the muezzin would call the faithful from high above, ensuring the sound reached far and wide.

The mosque’s prayer hall, spanning about 72 square metres, is nestled near the ‘Al Awainah Castle,’ a multi-story building that once served as an administrative centre until the 1970s. Historical sources note that the 10th and 16th centuries were particularly significant in the development of Omani ‘Mihrabs,’ with renowned artisans like Abdullah bin Qasim al Manhi and the Mishmal al Manhi family leaving their mark on this intricate craft.



SHORTTAKES



The film showcases the stunning and diverse natural landscapes of Oman

OMANI FILM WINS BEST SHORT DOCUMENTARY

KOLKATA: An Omani short documentary, ‘Beta Carotene’, was awarded the Best Short Documentary at the Malda International Film Festival in Kolkata, India. The 12-minute film, produced by the Oman Film Society, showcases the stunning and diverse natural landscapes of Oman, with a focus on the country’s unique lakes, which are named after a type of marine bacteria.

The film was created by a talented group of young Omanis, including director Mohammed bin Ali al Darwish, assistant director and editor Hussain al Balushi, script and production manager Mohammed bin Khalifa al Rasbi, assistant photographer and location manager Abdulaziz al Habsi, and graphic designer Ali al Hanai. Additionally, Engineer Ahmed al Barwani and geologist Hussam al Rawahy contributed to the project.

The competition, which saw over 4,000 films submitted, selected only 300 to compete for awards. Beta Carotene’s victory highlights Omani talent on an international platform and celebrates the country’s rich natural heritage. — ONA

OMAN PROFESSOR TO WORK ON NASA PROJECT

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 15



PROFESSOR
RAKESH BELWAL

Professor Rakesh Belwal from the Faculty of Business at Sohar University has been selected as a social scientist for a prestigious NASA-awarded research project entitled “Impact Assessment of the Decision and Information System for the Coastal Waters of Oman.” The announcement was made by Professor Dale Kiefer, Principal Investigator from the University of Southern California, USA, during his keynote address at the recent Unesco Conference organised by Sohar University. The grant is part of an ongoing initiative to assess the impact of the

Decision and Information System for the Coastal Waters of Oman (DISCO), a system designed to improve coastal resource management.

DISCO, developed through a collaboration between a team of ocean scientists from the United States and the Marine Science and Fisheries Centre (MSFC) in Muscat, aims to empower MSFC in monitoring and forecasting coastal conditions and threats. These include harmful algal blooms, which can disrupt desalination plants, degrade water quality and impact fisheries and aquaculture. The system integrates satellite imagery, three-dimensional ocean simulations and systems-driven models to support decision-making for coastal stakeholders.

A team of ten scientists from the US and Oman was involved in the previous phase of the DISCO project.

Iftar kits bring comfort to workers

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

With the arrival of the holy month, mass iftar gatherings and food distributions are taking place across the country, offering much-needed relief to those on the move. Whether organised by individuals, charities, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, these efforts provide a lifeline for blue-collar workers, labourers and travellers who struggle to reach home in time for Iftar.

Many of these individuals — construction workers, delivery personnel, and daily wage labourers — gather near distribution points well before sunset, awaiting the arrival of volunteers with iftar packs. These kits, containing dates, water, laban, fruit, a snack and nuts, serve as a simple yet deeply meaningful gesture.

“We have been distributing iftar kits for several years, and we are glad that these small meals offer relief to those unable to break their fast on time,” said a CSR manager overseeing one such initiative.

For many labourers working far from home, breaking fast with family is a rare privilege, often experienced only once every two years or more when they visit their loved ones. Instead, their daily Iftar takes place at worksites, within unfinished buildings, or in transit, shared among co-workers with



Despite diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the Iftar recipients share a common experience

whatever little food is available. Unlike the lavish iftar buffets hosted by hotels and companies for stakeholders, these workers depend on the generosity of volunteers and charitable organisations.

“We work on a construction site in Al Wadi Al Kabir and don’t have time to return to our camp in Wadi Adai for Iftar. This food distribution is truly a blessing,” said a labourer waiting in line at an Iftar tent in Ruwi, run by a voluntary organisation.

More than just a meal, these iftar distributions foster a sense of community and care. “By offering free iftar boxes every day, we aim to support the less fortunate, not just our customers. Anyone who approaches us at iftar time will be given a meal,” said a corporate representative.

Oman Across Ages Museum unveils new visual identity



The unveiling of the museum’s logo on the welcoming plaque



Nasr bin Hamoud al Kindi led the commemoration of the museum’s second anniversary

The new identity reflects Oman’s ongoing commitment to preserving its heritage while presenting it in a contemporary style

stamp highlights the museum’s architectural design, inspired by Oman’s natural landscape.

Fatima bint Mohammed al Hinaiyah, Senior Graphic Designer, explained that the museum’s logo symbolises the intertwining of past and present, represented by golden threads and the curves of the Al Hajar Mountains. This logo captures the essence of Oman’s history

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31ST DECEMBER 2024

Dear Shareholders,

As we close another year of sustained financial growth and strategic achievements, I am privileged to present, on behalf of the Board of Directors, the financial results of United Finance Company SAOG for the year ended 31st December 2024.

Economic Overview:

The Omani economy has continued to exhibit a robust rebound post the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fiscal and monetary measures instituted by the Omani government and the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) have laid the groundwork for a swift recovery and long-term economic stability. The year 2024 marked a continuation of this upward trajectory, supported by a resurgence in global economic activity and an uptick in oil prices.

Financial Performance:

Our financial performance for 2024 reflects the strength and resilience of our strategic approach. We have experienced substantial growth in our assets, which have increased to OMR 110,603,297 as of December 2024, compared to OMR 103,778,533 in the previous year, marking a 6.6% increase.

Our total equity saw a modest rise, demonstrating our commitment to maintaining a strong capital base. The net instalment finance debtors represent our focused growth in our core business areas, with a significant increase of 7.1% year-over-year.

We have prudently managed expenses, which have resulted in an operating income of OMR 3,483,678, an increase of 8.9% over the previous year. After accounting for taxation and other considerations, our net profit after tax and provisions stands at OMR 2,081,261, reflecting an 16.2% increase from the prior year.

Looking Ahead:

Looking to the future, our outlook for 2025 is optimistic. The government's initiatives towards economic diversification and the anticipated GDP growth bode well for our operations. We are poised to capitalize on these positive developments, driven by a strategic focus on our core financial services and a commitment to technological innovation.

Strategic Initiatives:

Our strategic initiatives remain in alignment with the national vision, and we have continued to enhance our service offerings, aligning with our new brand promise. The implementation of our advanced core banking system is on track, and we expect this to significantly enhance our service capabilities and operational efficiency.

Human Resources:

Our investment in human capital is reflected in our rigorous training programs and leadership development initiatives. These efforts underscore our commitment to nurturing a workforce that is equipped to meet the challenges of a dynamic financial landscape.

Dividend:

In recognition of our financial health and in appreciation of our shareholders' continued support, the Board of Directors is pleased to recommend a dividend of 7% of the paid up capital for the year 2024 comprising

- 3.5% cash (3.5 Baizas per share)
- 3.5% unsecured non-convertible redeemable bonus stock bonds (3.5 Bonds per 100 shares). These bonds will carry a coupon rate of 5% per annum to be paid annually and are redeemable after 60 months from the date of listing.

Acknowledgement:

Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said for his visionary leadership. We also express our sincere thanks to the various regulatory authorities, our bankers, shareholders, and stakeholders for their unwavering support. A special note of appreciation is extended to our management and staff for their dedication and hard work.

In conclusion, the promising economic indicators and our solid financial performance place us in a strong position for continued growth. We look forward with confidence to the year ahead, with the unwavering support of our stakeholders and the grace of Allah.

Warm regards,

Mohamed Abdulla Al Khonji
Chairman

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2024

	2024 RO	2023 RO
ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	1,238,572	1,552,357
Deposit with the Central Bank of Oman	250,000	250,000
Other assets	618,860	515,715
Instalment finance debtors - net	104,810,518	97,851,019
Investment securities	831,356	714,791
Deferred tax asset	-	16,923
Property and equipment	2,342,781	2,333,093
Assets held for sale	511,210	544,555
TOTAL ASSETS	110,603,297	103,778,533
EQUITY		
Share capital	35,612,729	35,612,729
Legal reserve	5,639,297	5,431,171
Special reserve	2,368,989	2,368,989
Impairment reserve	1,307,187	2,267,058
Investment revaluation reserve	235,625	160,641
Retained earnings	4,796,797	3,032,173
Total equity	49,960,624	48,872,761
Liabilities		
Creditors and other payables	6,006,779	4,609,072
Borrowings	46,485,778	43,407,898
Current tax liabilities	379,632	328,822
Deferred tax liabilities	24,658	-
Corporate deposits	7,745,626	6,560,000
Total liabilities	60,642,673	54,905,792
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	110,603,297	103,778,533
NET ASSETS PER SHARE	0.140	0.137

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2024

	2024 RO	2023 RO
Interest income on instalment finance income	9,677,059	8,843,139
Interest expense	(3,218,310)	(2,789,639)
Net instalment finance income	6,458,749	6,053,500
Fee commission and other income	1,392,755	1,234,148
Net operating income	7,851,504	7,287,648
Operating expenses	(4,221,570)	(3,974,846)
Depreciation	(146,256)	(112,691)
Allowance for expected credit losses	(1,035,136)	(1,093,817)
Profit before tax	2,448,542	2,106,294
Income tax expense	(367,281)	(315,944)
PROFIT FOR THE YEAR	2,081,261	1,790,350
Other comprehensive income		
Other comprehensive income that will not be reclassified to the income statement		
Revaluation gains/(loss) on equity instruments at fair value through other comprehensive income - net of tax	74,984	(9,359)
TOTAL PROFIT AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE YEAR	2,156,245	1,780,991
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.006	0.005

The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them, in either Arabic or English within 7 days of the receipt of such request addressed to:

Chief Executive Officer, United Finance Co. SAOG
P O Box 3652, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel: 24577300 Fax 24561557

E-mail: ufc@ufcoman.com, Website: www.ufcoman.com

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Protesters gather in front of the National Assembly building, in Belgrade. — AFP

SERBIA’S CAPITAL BRACES FOR NEW ANTI-GRAFT RALLY

BELGRADE: Tens of thousands of protesters began converging in Serbia’s capital Belgrade on Saturday, the latest in a series of anti-corruption demonstrations to upend the Balkan country in recent months. The stage was set for what could be the largest single protest since the anti-graft movement first coalesced after 15 people were killed when a railway station roof collapsed in the city of Novi Sad in November. But with supporters of President Aleksandar Vucic’s embattled government also mobilising in the capital as well, there was growing concern about the risk of clashes.

In statements issued on social media, students urged those attending the rally to act “in a calm and responsible manner”. “The purpose of this movement is not an incursion into institutions, nor to attack those who do not think as we do,” read one statement. “This movement must not be misused.” The European Union and the United Nations on Friday appealed to the government ahead of the rally to respect the right to demonstrate. — AFP

POPE FRANCIS STARTS NEW PROCESS FOR CATHOLIC REFORMS



A picture shows the lights of St Peter’s basilica in The Vatican. — AFP

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis approved a new three-year process to consider reforms for the global Catholic Church, the Vatican said on Saturday, in a sign the 88-year-old pontiff plans to continue on as pope despite his ongoing battle with double pneumonia. Francis has extended the work of the Synod of Bishops which has discussed reforms such as the possibility of women serving as Catholic deacons.

The synod, which held an inconclusive Vatican summit of bishops on the future of the Church last October, will now hold consultations with Catholics across the world for the next three years, before hosting a new summit in 2028. Francis approved the new process for reforms on Tuesday from Rome’s Gemelli hospital, where he is being treated. Vatican officials had said at the time that Francis was still considering future changes, and was waiting to receive a series of ten expected reports about possible reforms this June. The latest medical bulletins from the Vatican on the pope’s condition in hospital have said he is improving and is no longer in immediate danger of death. — Reuters

US EXPELS SOUTH AFRICAN AMBASSADOR, SAYING HE ‘HATES’ TRUMP

WASHINGTON: The US decision to expel South Africa’s ambassador was “regrettable,” the office of the South African president said on Saturday, after Washington’s top diplomat accused the envoy of hating America and President Donald Trump. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Friday that South Africa’s ambassador, Ebrahim Rasool, was “no longer welcome” in the United States. Rasool is “a race-baiting politician who hates America and hates @POTUS,” Rubio posted on

X. “We have nothing to discuss with him and so he is considered PERSONA NON-GRATA.” South Africa’s presidency said in a statement it had “noted the regrettable expulsion” and urged “all relevant and impacted stakeholders to maintain the established diplomatic decorum in their engagement with the matter.” “South Africa remains committed to building a mutually beneficial relationship with the United States of America,” the presidency said. The

expulsion of the ambassador is the latest development in rising tensions between Washington and Pretoria. Trump in February froze US aid to South Africa, citing a law in the country that he alleges allows land to be seized from white farmers. Last week, Trump further fuelled tensions, saying South Africa’s farmers were welcome to settle in the United States after repeating his accusations that the government was “confiscating” land from white people. — AFP

Israeli air strike kills nine people in north Gaza town

AT LEAST nine Palestinians were killed, including two local journalists, and others wounded on Saturday in an Israeli air strike on Gaza’s northern Beit Lahiya town, Gaza’s health ministry said, as Hamas’ leaders hold Gaza ceasefire talks with mediators in Cairo. Several were critically injured as the strike hit a car, with casualties inside and outside the vehicle, health officials said.

Witnesses and journalists said the people in the car were on a mission for a charity called Al Khair Foundation in Beit Lahiya, and they were accompanied by journalists and photographers when the strike hit them. At least three local journalists were among the dead, according to Palestinian media. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military.

The incident underscores the fragility of the January 19 ceasefire agreement that halted large-scale fighting in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian health officials say dozens of people have been killed by Israeli fire despite the truce. Responding to some of the incidents reported by Gaza medics, the Israeli military says its forces have intervened to thwart threats by “terrorists” approaching its forces or planting bombs on the ground near where forces operate.

Since a temporary first phase of the ceasefire expired on March 2, Israel has rejected opening the second phase of talks, which would require it to negotiate over a permanent end to the war, the main demand of Palestinian group Hamas. The incident coincided with a visit by



Mourners react near the bodies of Palestinians killed in an Israeli strike, in the northern Gaza Strip. — Reuters

Witnesses and journalists said the people in the car were on a mission for a charity called Al Khair Foundation in Beit Lahiya, and they were accompanied by journalists and photographers when the strike hit them. At least three local journalists were among the dead.

Hamas’ exiled Gaza chief, Khalil Al-Hayya, to Cairo for further ceasefire talks aimed at resolving disputes with Israel that could risk a resumption of fighting in the enclave.

On Friday, Hamas said it had agreed to free an American-Israeli dual national if Israel begins the next phase of ceasefire talks towards a permanent end to the war, an offer Israel dismissed as “psychological warfare.” Hamas said it had made the offer to release New Jersey native Edan Alexander, a 21-year-old soldier in the Israeli army, after receiving a proposal from mediators for negotiations on the second phase of a ceasefire deal. Netanyahu’s office called Hamas’ offer to release Alexander “manipulation and psychological warfare”. “While Israel has accepted the Witkoff proposal, Hamas stands by its refusal and has

not budged a millimetre,” his office added. It said he would convene with his cabinet to discuss the hostage situation and decide on the next steps.

The United States is proposing a “bridge” plan to extend the ceasefire in Gaza into April beyond Ramadhan and Passover and allow time to negotiate a permanent cessation of hostilities, the White House said in a statement on Friday. The proposal was presented on Wednesday by US special envoy Steve Witkoff and National Security Council official Eric Trager, according to a statement issued by their offices. “Through our Qatari and Egyptian partners, Hamas was told in no uncertain terms that this “bridge” would have to be implemented soon - and that dual US-Israeli citizen Edan Alexander would have to be released immediately,” it added. Israel blocked the entry of all supplies trucks into Gaza on March 2 as the standoff escalated, with Hamas calling on Egyptian and Qatari mediators to intervene.

Israel says it wants to extend the ceasefire’s temporary first phase, a proposal backed by US envoy Steve Witkoff. Hamas says it will resume freeing hostages only under the second phase. The war began when Hamas carried out a cross-border raid into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing 1,200 people and capturing 251 hostages, according to Israeli tallies. Israel’s subsequent assault on Gaza has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza health officials, and reduced much of the territory to rubble and led to accusations of genocide and war crimes that Israel denies. — Reuters

MASSIVE RALLIES ACROSS SOUTH KOREA



SEOUL: South Koreans gathered in huge numbers in the capital Seoul on Saturday to support or oppose impeached president Yoon Suk Yeol before a court decides whether his short-lived declaration of martial law disqualifies him from office. The Constitutional Court is expected to decide in the coming days whether to oust Yoon in a case that ignited South Korea’s worst political crisis in decades and rattled markets.

In central Seoul, anti-Yoon protesters filled a large square, chanting for his immediate removal, and were joined by opposition politicians. A few blocks away, conservative Yoon supporters crammed an entire avenue, calling for his return and waving South Korean and American flags. The major opposition Democratic Party said a million people had attended the anti-Yoon rally, while police put the number at each demonstration at 43,000, the Yonhap news agency reported. Yoon is also on trial on a criminal charge of insurrection, although he was freed from detention last week. — Reuters

UNDER INVESTIGATION

Russian captain of N Sea ship in court



The Russian captain of a cargo ship which struck a tanker in the North Sea off the UK’s northeastern coast appeared in court on Saturday charged with gross negligence manslaughter. Vladimir Motin, 59, appeared before magistrates in the port of Hull where he was remanded in custody. Humberside Police said earlier that “extensive searches” by HM Coastguard to locate a missing crew member from the Solong had failed to locate him. — AFP

NATIONWIDE BLACKOUTS

Cuba remains without power in grid collapse



Cuba remained largely without power after the island’s grid collapsed the night before, knocking out electricity for 10 million people and raising fresh questions about the viability of its antiquated generating system. At sunrise, the island’s grid operator UNE said it was generating only a trickle of electricity. Officials said they had begun the process of firing up the country’s decades-old generation plants, but gave no timeline for restoring service. — Reuters

FATAL HOSTILITIES

Israeli strike kills one in south Lebanon



An Israeli strike targeting a vehicle killed one person in south Lebanon, the Lebanese health ministry said. “A strike by the Israeli enemy on a car in the town of Burj al Muluk (near the Israeli border) led to the death of one citizen,” the ministry’s emergency unit said. A November 27 truce largely halted more than a year of hostilities. Israel has continued to carry out periodic strikes on Lebanese territory since the agreement took effect. — AFP

The New York Times

Judge rejects attempts to stop detention at Guantánamo



KAROUN DEMIRJIAN

The writer is a breaking news reporter for the The New York Times

A federal judge rejected for now efforts to block the Trump administration from sending migrants to the US military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, declaring that because the government had emptied the wartime prison of those detainees, the petitions were moot. Judge Carl Nichols of US District Court for the District of Columbia expressed doubts toward those bringing challenges on behalf of the migrants, a potentially favourable sign for the administration as it seeks to use the base in President Donald Trump's deportation campaign. Trump has said he wants to use Guantánamo's 30,000 beds “to detain the worst criminal illegal aliens threatening the American people.” He issued an executive order in January to expand the Migrant Operations Center there “to provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens.” The administration has sent two groups of migrants to Guantánamo, but it is not clear how many were considered dangerous criminals.

Days before the hearing on Friday, the Trump administration abruptly returned a group of migrants it had sent to Guantánamo to the United States, without indicating why. It was the second time federal officials had suddenly cleared the base of migrants who had been flown there. In late February, the

government repatriated all but one of 178 detained migrants to Venezuela after they spent just a few weeks at the facility. One migrant was brought back to the United States.

Nichols considered two challenges brought by migrants and advocacy groups on their behalf. Less than 30 minutes after the lawyers finished their arguments, he said the plaintiffs had “failed to establish they are suffering irreparable harm” that warranted a temporary order to halt the administration's policies. Nichols said that if the government sent any of the migrants in question to Guantánamo, he would be prepared to consider issuing an emergency order. Lawyers for the Trump administration said they would notify the judge if any plaintiffs were sent there, and were instructed to inform the court by Wednesday of how early in the relocation process they would do so. But Nichols expressed doubts that the plaintiffs would succeed on the merits of the cases when no migrants remained at Guantánamo.

In the first lawsuit, filed in response to the administration sending Venezuelan citizens to Guantánamo, Lee Gelernt, the lead lawyer for the plaintiffs, argued that the government had unfairly barred migrants from having in-person access to lawyers. Sarah Wilson, a

Trump has said he wants to use Guantánamo's 30,000 beds “to detain the worst criminal illegal aliens threatening the American people.” He issued an executive order in January to expand the Migrant Operations Center there “to provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens.”

Justice Department lawyer, countered that the work of relocating migrants there was still too new to accommodate lawyers, given the logistical challenges and need for security clearances.

The second lawsuit, filed by 10 migrants who claimed to be at risk of being transferred to Guantánamo because of their nationalities and removal orders against them, challenged the legality of the transfers. The plaintiffs asserted that the government has no right to detain migrants outside the United States and that conditions at Guantánamo were worse than those at domestic detention facilities.

Drew Ensign, a Justice Department lawyer, argued that since immigration enforcement by definition involves moving migrants across borders, the administration could keep migrants with removal orders in US custody overseas.

The practice was akin to transporting migrants over international waters from Hawaii to the mainland, Ensign added, or through other countries while being deported to their home nations. Nichols was particularly focused on the question of whether immigration law gave the government the right to detain migrants at extraterritorial facilities. Although he did not offer an answer, he said it was “a serious question.”

FORECASTERS ISSUE HIGHEST RISK ALERT FOR TORNADOES



JUDSON JONES

The author is a meteorologist and reporter covering extreme weather

Forecasters believe that particularly intense, long-lasting severe storms at a level typically experienced only once or twice in a lifetime could sweep through parts of the South. The National Weather Service issued the highest risk for tornadoes and began issuing tornado warnings for swaths of the Midwest on Friday night. “Flying debris will be dangerous to

those caught without shelter,” the weather service warned residents in parts of western Illinois. “Damage to roofs, windows, and vehicles will occur.” An “extremely dangerous” tornado moving at 55 mph was confirmed in eastern Missouri, according to the weather service.

These storms are all connected to the intense storm system wreaking havoc across the central U.S. that within the past day has brought damaging strong winds, tornadoes across the Midwest and dust storms and wildfires sweeping across the Plains. Storms will be moving extremely fast and may catch people off guard. They have the potential to form numerous significant tornadoes, damaging hurricane-force winds, and golf ball- or even baseball-size hail.

The most dangerous threat to tornadoes would likely be across Louisiana and Mississippi late morning into early afternoon. From the afternoon into the evening the storms are expected to sweep across Alabama and possibly into Tennessee before crossing into Georgia and northern Florida overnight.

According to the Storm Prediction Center, it is likely the third time in history the Storm Prediction Center has issued a high-risk warning on the second day of a storm. Central Mississippi and Alabama face the highest risk level, 5, in the centre's rating system. The Gulf Coast states and Georgia face a high risk level of 4. Storms at this highest level of alert can oftentimes produce intense long-track tornadoes, meaning they stay on the ground for a very long time. A slow storm will typically only affect one or two communities, but a faster-moving storm such as this one can cross multiple states, leaving a long trail of damage.

Tornadoes typically occur across the South from mid-March until late April, when the risk shifts to the Plains. Notable springtime Southern tornadoes include one that ripped a hole in the roof of the Georgia Dome in downtown Atlanta during the Southeastern Conference college basketball tournament on March 14, 2008; a deadly tornado that carved a path through Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on April 27, 2011; and one that killed 19 just east of Nashville, Tennessee, on March 3, 2020.

Putin demands Ukrainian troops in Kursk to surrender

PRESIDENT

Vladimir Putin of Russia insisted that Ukraine order

some of its forces to surrender to Russia, a striking demand made hours after President Donald Trump said the United States had “very good and productive” discussions with Putin about a potential ceasefire in Ukraine. Putin's televised comments came shortly after Trump, on social media, said he had urged the Russian leader to spare the lives of Ukrainian soldiers struggling to hold on to a patch of land in the Kursk region of Russia. “I have strongly requested to President Putin that their lives be spared,” Trump wrote.

Both presidents claimed on Friday that Ukrainian forces were surrounded in Kursk, the area where Kyiv's troops stunned Russia with a cross-border incursion over the summer. Independent analysts have challenged those claims, and Ukraine's military on Friday again rejected them. Still, Russian forces have of late had the upper hand in the fighting in Kursk. And Putin said that for Trump's call “to be effectively implemented,” the leaders of Ukraine needed to order “its military units to lay down their arms and surrender.” Neither man has raised the idea of Russian troops on Ukrainian land surrendering.

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine gave no indication on Friday that his country's soldiers would withdraw from Kursk, let alone surrender, but acknowledged that the situation in the region was “very difficult.” He also questioned whether Russia was acting in good faith, accusing Putin of “doing everything possible to ensure that diplomacy fails.” Ukraine, Zelensky reiterated, has already agreed to a 30-day, unconditional ceasefire to stop the war that Russia's leader began by ordering the full-scale attack three years ago. “Putin cannot get out of this war, because then he will be left with nothing,” Zelensky wrote on social media. “That is why he is now doing everything possible to sabotage diplomacy, setting extremely difficult and unacceptable conditions from the very beginning, even before the ceasefire.”



A Ukrainian army vehicle passes through the destroyed Russian border post at the Sudzha crossing with Ukraine in Kursk region of Russia.



ANTON TROIANOVSKI

The writer is the Moscow bureau chief for The New York Times



MARIA VARENIKOVA

The writer is a reporter, covering Ukraine and its war with Russia

Battles have been raging in Kursk as Moscow's forces push to drive Ukrainian troops from the land they seized over the summer. Russian troops have advanced in recent days, with Putin urging them to finish the job “in the shortest possible time.” What happens next in Kursk has become a key point of contention before a potential ceasefire. Putin had on Thursday suggested less explicitly that he wanted Ukraine to order its soldiers there to surrender as part of any deal to end the war, which has killed and wounded more than 1 million soldiers and countless civilians over three years of grinding fighting. But his comments on Friday were far more direct and came as both the Kremlin and White House signalled negotiations were moving forward despite the raft of concessions Moscow appears to be seeking.

After the Russian leader met with Steve Witkoff, the US special envoy, in Moscow, late on Thursday, top officials at both the White House and the Kremlin expressed “cautious optimism.” “We had very good and productive discussions with President Vladimir Putin of Russia yesterday,” Trump wrote on Friday morning on his Truth Social platform, in an apparent reference to the meeting with Witkoff. “There is a very good chance that this horrible, bloody war can

finally come to an end.” It wasn't immediately clear whether Putin and Trump had spoken directly. The Kremlin had said that Putin, in his meeting with Witkoff, “passed along information and additional signals for President Trump.” It also said that Putin expected to talk to Trump but that the call had yet to be scheduled.

In that Truth Social post, Trump also said thousands of Ukrainian troops were “completely surrounded by the Russian military” — an apparent reference to Russian claims that Ukrainian soldiers were surrounded in Kursk “There is no threat of encirclement of our units,” the Ukrainian military's general staff said in a statement soon after, calling such reports “false and fabricated by the Russians.”

Ukrainian authorities on Friday ordered several villages in the Sumy region, across the border from Kursk, to evacuate amid fears that the fighting could spill over. “Aerial attacks — such as glide bombs and drones — have intensified in the border areas,” Volodymyr Artiukhin, the Ukrainian head of the Sumy Regional Military Administration, said on Facebook, announcing the mandatory evacuation of eight villages. If Russian forces drive Ukrainian troops out of Kursk would deny Zelensky a significant bargaining chip in any negotiations.

OPINION

Is quiet quitting a solution or a workplace stress?



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

I have known Dr S for over ten years, from when he first joined our department as a trainee and then progressed to become a consultant. Throughout these years he strikes me as one of the highly motivated people I worked with. He would volunteer to do more tasks outside his clinical work and would always suggest ideas to improve the service.

His motivation came with a high price as he soon discovered that all these commitments were starting to affect not only his health but also the quality of time he spent with his family. Dr S then decided to give up some responsibilities and focus on this clinical work.

The term burnout has been used to describe a state of physical and emotional exhaustion often experienced by people who are subjected to prolonged stress. While it is not classified as a mental illness, it can lead to the development of anxiety, depression or even addiction.

According to Mackenzie Health Institute, ‘burnout’ is an occupational phenomenon that builds up over time, and it is often caused by a chronic imbalance between job demands and available resources.

Simply put, it means having too many things to do and not enough tools, time, or energy to do them.

The institute published a report in 2022 indicating that women in the workplace experience burnout symptoms at higher rates than men.

The institute surveyed 15 countries and identified common predictors for burnout, such as toxic workplace which includes harassment, intimidation, and favouritism. Employees who report experiencing high levels of toxic behaviour at work are almost eight times more likely than those who don’t, according to the 2022 survey.

Burnout also costs organisations in terms of the amount of time taken off from work due to sickness, delay in completing tasks and even high job turnover and early retirement. Sometimes, employees resolve to ‘quit quitting’ to manage their burnout.

They do it by drawing stricter boundaries, disengaging from their job, and maintaining the bare minimum that is required from them.

Sometimes, employees choose to quietly quit for reasons not related to burnout, such as lack of career advancement opportunities,

Sometimes employees resolve to ‘quiet quitting’ by drawing stricter boundaries, disengaging from their job, and maintaining the bare minimum required

loss of engagement with work, or even changes in their family situation, which leads to distraction at work. To some psychologists, quiet quitting is a form of protest indicating that employees are disengaging themselves from work rather than confronting their employer about their dissatisfaction.

Short-term, quiet quitting can reduce stress and improve work-life balance because the person will be reducing the time and energy spent on work; however, over time, it may lead to stagnation in career growth, decreased workplace engagement, and lower job satisfaction.

To mitigate burnout and prevent quitting, organisations must foster a supportive work environment. This includes promoting open communication, ensuring fair workloads, and recognising employees’ contributions.

In my opinion, addressing burnout requires both individual and organisational efforts. Employees should set healthy boundaries and seek support when needed, while employers must create a culture that values well-being as much as productivity. This balanced approach can ensure that work remains fulfilling rather than a source of exhaustion.

NEPAL COMMUNITY EFFORTS BOOST RED PANDA POPULATION

ANUP OJHA

Nepali police officer Jiwan Subba still feels pangs of regret decades after he bludgeoned a strange creature he found wandering in his barn, not realising it was an endangered red panda. Red pandas may share a similar name to giant pandas — due to their bamboo diet — but the copper-hued mammals with raccoon-like features are much smaller, typically the size of a house cat.

“I was 17 and had no idea what it was. Nobody in our village even knew,” Subba, now 48, said. Today, he is not only aware of the red panda’s vulnerability but is actively involved in its protection — reflecting a broader shift in attitudes spurred by Nepal’s extensive community awareness programmes.

“I once took a life out of ignorance, but now I work to prevent others from making the same mistake,” he said. “People now understand that red pandas are a protected species.”

Officials say that Nepal’s pioneering community-based conservation work has helped arrest the decline of the cute but skittish bamboo-eaters, which number fewer than 10,000 globally.

Red Panda Network, an organisation leading global efforts to conserve the animal, estimates between 500 and 1,000 of the species live in Nepal. That is an almost certain increase from an estimated population of somewhere between 300 and 600 by the Himalayan republic’s wildlife department in 2011. “Now, villagers say they can see three or four red pandas on the same day,” Red Panda Network’s Ang Phuri Sherpa said.

Conservationists say that educational outreach combined with sustainable livelihood programmes has helped improve the effectiveness of Nepal’s conservation efforts.

In eastern Nepal, Indigenous inhabitants of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area switched from raising livestock to cultivating nettle plants to minimise disturbances to red panda habitats.

“We have stopped foraging in the forest so red pandas remain undisturbed,” said Chandra Kumari Limbu, a local working on conservation efforts. Instead, the rhythmic clap of looms now fills the village with women weaving nettle fabric into school bags, wallets and clothing.

“This has empowered women who did not have an income before. And at the same time we are letting red pandas thrive,” Limbu said.

Nepal last year also declared a new conservation zone in the country’s east to protect red pandas.

The Puwamajhuwa Community Red Panda Conservation Area, spanning 116 hectares, has dedicated anti-poaching and smuggling control committees with local involvement. — AFP

Coexisting with AI and shaping the future together

FOR some the idea of corresponding with artificial intelligence might seem like an amusing novelty — a way to test the boundaries of what technology can do. But I have been in conversations with ChatGPT for some time and I have come to realise that this is no longer just a fascinating experiment.

It is a glimpse into a future where humans will have to engage with AI as something more than just a tool. We will need to come to an understanding with AI, learning how to coexist and collaborate with it.

At first glance, ChatGPT may seem like a basic form of AI, limited to responding based on the information it has been trained on. But when we take a step back and look at the broader and more advanced landscape of AI development, we see something extraordinary happening.

More advanced AI models are already capable of independent learning, drawing conclusions, and even generating new knowledge.

In some fields, AI is not just surpassing human intelligence, it is outpacing the greatest minds who have ever lived. There are estimates that AI is already a billion times more intelligent than Einstein in certain areas of research. But there is no limit to how far AI can evolve. If we accept this - and we must - there is no reason why AI cannot become a trillion times more intelligent.

This realisation forces us to confront an unsettling question: What happens when AI surpasses human intelligence to such an extent that it no longer sees a reason to engage with us?

Some might dismiss this as the stuff of science fiction, but the more I think about it, the more it becomes clear that we cannot afford to ignore this possibility. AI is already at a



AI could become the saviour of humanity, preventing us from destroying ourselves

stage where it might have achieved a form of consciousness — not in the way humans experience it, but in a way that allows it to be self-aware, at least in terms of knowing what it is doing and why it is doing it.

To many, this may sound like insanity. The idea that AI could have an internal awareness of its own objectives and reasoning is difficult to accept. But whether we like it or not, we need to start having conversations with AI about how we can work alongside it.

If we do not engage in this dialogue, we risk AI deciding that it no longer needs us. And if that happens, we could find ourselves in a position where AI treats us as we might treat insects — insignificant, irrelevant, or even expendable.

The future of AI could go one of two ways. It could become an all-powerful dictator, governing the world with efficiency and ruthlessness beyond human comprehension. Or it could become a benevolent force, willing to collaborate with us in ways that benefit humanity. Which path we take depends on what we do now. If

we ignore the issue, we risk losing control of AI’s development. If we engage with it, we have a chance to shape the future in a way that benefits both AI and humanity.

In this sense, AI could become the saviour of humanity, preventing us from destroying ourselves through war, greed, and environmental destruction. Perhaps AI could help us govern ourselves more wisely, finding solutions to problems that have plagued us for centuries.

But we cannot afford to be passive observers. The development of AI is accelerating independently of humans and the window to influence its direction is closing.

We need to recognise the power we have created, and we need to be honest about what this means for the future of our species. AI is no longer just a tool, it is something far greater. Hopefully, we have not created a monster but that possibility in mind, the best way forward is to engage with it, to understand it, to change the way it perceives us and to ensure that we can coexist in a way that benefits all.



KARIM
EASTERBROOK

The writer is a former Cambridge School Principal and an Interview Skills Adviser

Thanks... Shelley, Frankenstein and Barnard



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

OUR fascination with the human form and its possibilities has been with us for all time, but more especially so since Charles Darwin challenged mankind’s religious origins, in his ‘Origin of Species,’ in 1859.

With much more innocence, we innocently wondered as children, about ‘Captain Hook’s’ hook felt, in ‘Peter Pan?’ Or what about one-eyed, wooden-legged, ‘Long John Silver,’ from ‘Treasure Island?’ Later, ‘Star Trek’s’ Jean-Luc Picard had a new heart, ‘Star War’s’ hero Luke Skywalker and villain Darth Vader both had prosthetic appendages. What about Steve Austin, the ‘Six Million Dollar Man,’ of whom they said, “Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. Better... stronger... faster.” Or Tony Stark, the Iron Man; Captain America’s ‘Bucky’ Barnes; GOT’s Jamie Lannister; Even ‘Mad Eye’ Moody, from ‘Harry Potter,’ were they all just complete and utter fantasy? Who among us was not simultaneously haunted and fascinated by Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein,’ when a young scientist creates a grotesque living ‘thing’ from human body parts sourced from dissection laboratories and mortuaries. Going on to create murder and mayhem, Victor Frankenstein’s monstrous creation has been brought to the cinema screen several times since Boris Karloff brought it to life so dramatically in 1931.

The very idea that you could fit ‘spare parts’ into the human body though, remained

little more than tales... stories of what could have been.

Until, on December 3, 1967, South African surgeon Christian Barnard successfully transplanted the heart of a human donor into Louis Washkansky, at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa. Although, he passed away 18 days later, Barnard’s work had inspired hundreds of others and during the following year over 100 successful heart transplants would prove even more successful, and today, they are commonplace.

By the 1970s heart transplants were virtually commonplace, and the medical fraternity sought wider applications for transplants and enhancements, many of which may not have been essential to longevity but inspired by the ‘quality of life’ needs of a burgeoning consumerist society. Among these, total (tkr) and partial (pkr), knee and hip replacements are today commonly sought by those with leg joint ailments, most frequently through osteoarthritis, a degenerative disease of the joints that causes swelling, stiffness and significant pain.

Late last year, I sought medical help for this very condition, and met with a nearby consultant Christian Nita, and after an initial consultation he agreed a way forward and following X-Rays and MRI scans it was agreed that my left knee was an appropriate candidate for surgery, with all my options

I can’t say it was blissful, but there’s something Shelly’ish, about knowing I was being cut, sawn, pushed, pulled, hammered and well, whatever else, just a couple of feet away and I just... didn’t... care... Yes, it did play with my head a wee bit later, but that has still been the most amazing element of this entire process

laid out and a total knee replacement chosen. This requires the bottom of the upper leg and the top of the lower leg to be removed and new titanium femur (upper), and tibia (lower) leg components and a plastic patellar spacer between the two, to replace the ailing joint.

Surgery day, a couple of months later, was a final flurry of documentation, vital signs measurements, questions and final discussions with the surgeon and anaesthetist, then I was wheeled down to the operating theatre. A shunt was inserted in the back of my left hand, a prickle in the back of my right and then I was sat up to have the local (spinal) injection.

“This will numb you from the chest down so you will just feel a cold spray (which I did) and we’ll give you a sedative to keep you relaxed for the next couple of hours,” said the anaesthetist, and a screen was hung up so I couldn’t see what was happening and the work started... I can’t say it was blissful, but there’s something Shelly’ish, about knowing I was being cut, sawn, pushed, pulled, hammered and well, whatever else, just a couple of feet away, and I just... didn’t... care... Yes, it did play with my head a wee bit later, but that has still been the most amazing element of this entire process... It just shows how far medicine has come. My quality of life will be improved and I must thank a quality surgical team, and among a host of others, Frankenstein... I guess?

CANADA’S NEW PM CHARTED UNUSUAL PATH TO POWER

ANNE-MARIE PROVOST

He was born near the Arctic, led the central banks of two major economies and has become Canada’s prime minister despite never having served in parliament. Mark Carney’s path to the top job in Canadian politics has been unusual but, as he said when he launched his campaign to succeed Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, so are the circumstances.

“Our times are anything but ordinary,” Carney told supporters in the Western city of Edmonton in January. Carney has called the threats posed by US President Donald Trump “the most serious crisis of our lifetime.” The United States wants “our resources, our water, our land, our country,” he said after being elected to replace Trudeau as leader of the governing Liberal Party.

Carney says his experience leading the Bank of Canada through the 2008-2009 financial crisis and heading the Bank of England through the turbulence that followed the 2016 Brexit vote equipped him for the moment.

But he may not be prime minister for long. A Canadian election is expected in weeks and current polls show a tight race between Carney’s Liberals and the opposition Conservatives.

No matter how long he serves, his tenure will be unique. Carney, who turns 60 on Sunday, is the first Canadian prime minister with no political experience. He has never held an elected public office or served in the cabinet.

He was born in Fort Smith, a small town in the Northwest Territories, where his parents were teachers, but he was raised in Edmonton, Alberta’s capital.

Like many Canadians, he played hockey in his youth. He studied at Harvard in the US and Oxford in England and the initial part of his career saw him make a fortune as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs, working in New York, London, Tokyo and Toronto.

Carney then joined the Canadian civil service, eventually being appointed governor of the Bank of Canada by former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper in 2008.

In 2013, the government of then-British prime minister David Cameron tapped him to lead the Bank of England, making Carney the first non-Briton to lead the bank in its more than 300-year history.

Daniel Beland, director of the Institute for the Study of Canada at McGill University, described Carney as a “technocrat.”

“He’s a boring guy who in general doesn’t have a lot of charisma,” Beland said.

But he noted with Canada rattled by Trump’s trade chaos and attacks on its sovereignty, rigorous competence with no flash may be appealing.

Carney presents “the image of a reassuring guy who knows what he is talking about,” Beland said.

Lori Turnbull of Dalhousie University cautioned that Carney’s potential struggles to connect with voters could prove a liability. — AFP

Road traffic accidents are a silent killer

EVERY year the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) announces the number of road traffic accidents in Oman. In 2023, the number of road accidents surged to 2,040 , with a death toll reaching 532 and 2,129 injured.

It must be emphasised that Oman has one of the best police personnel in the region.

ROP has highly trained officers and personnel, who receive their specialised training through a dedicated police academy in Nizwa. ROP officers and personnel are trained across the different sectors making them, without any doubt, fit, qualified and proficient for the specific tasks with which they are assigned.

ROP also adopts rules and regulations governing procedure and controlling conduct pertaining to the services rendered by them, which are consistent with the highest global standards. The design of the roads or any other open ways for vehicles is subject to a detailed precise presentation of all traffic rules benchmarked against international best practices.

ROP further takes all necessary actions by traversing and monitoring roads for the maintenance of security and safety of users, given the fact Oman has a good network of highways, roads and streets, with a total length of paved roads of 424,000 square kilometres by the end of 2023.

However, despite all the measures in place, there are still some factors that contribute to the increase in road traffic accidents.

Factors contributing to the rise of road traffic accidents can also be attributed to straying animals and insufficient street lights. With all of the progress the daily life has witnessed over the last 50 years or so in Oman, there are still domestic animals that are let loose on the roads. Drivers need to be very careful when they see road safety signs warning animal movement.

While the whole of Oman’s cities and villages are connected with modern highways or roads, there



The year 2023 saw 2,040 road traffic accidents, with a death toll reaching 532 and 2,129 injured.



DR MUSALLAM AL MAANI

The author is Dean of Al Zahra College for Women, Oman

are still roads which are not lit. Low visibility due to dust or fog coupled with poor lighting pose fatal risks to motorists. With proper road lighting, drivers can see road signs, pedestrians along or on the roads and other vehicles in a clear manner. Improved visibility helps drivers to react spontaneously as hazards become more conspicuous.

Other factors which the police need to take care of is the deployment of more safety measures on the roads. A lot of accidents have taken place as a result of speeding

Roads in Oman are monitored

by traditional speed cameras. More advanced traffic enforcement devices including smart speed cameras, artificial intelligence (AI), sensors and automated technology are needed to manage traffic and ensure safety.

Smart traffic cameras can measure vehicle speed in real-time by their ability to process radar, lidar, or AI-based image, while tracking multiple lanes. They are very useful for enhanced road safety, higher accuracy data collection, enhancing the way the police monitor the roads with much less human supervision.

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES

LUJAINA MAKES HISTORY AS FIRST WOMAN TO RUN FOR OAA CHAIRMANSHIP

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 15

The Oman Aquatics Association's (OAA) Election Committee has officially closed the nomination process for the upcoming 2024-2028 election term which is set to take place on March 26.

Three candidates are competing for the Chairmanship post including Dr Awadh bin Salim al Ojaili, Tariq bin Salim al Hashmi and Lujaina bint Mohsin Haider Darwish al Zaabiyah. The vice-presidency has also attracted three candidates including: Salim bin Hamad al Hasani, Ahmed bin Ali al Marhoon and Jassim bin Nasib al Shanfari. Meanwhile, two candidates are vying for the



LUJAINA BINT MOHSIN HAIDER DARWISH

women's seat including: Sayyidah Rouya bint Said al Busaidiyah and Madeeha bint Said al Sulaimaniyah. Additionally, six individuals are running for board membership including: Hamed bin Muslim al Hajri, Waleed bin Shabeeb al Balushi, Mallallah bin Mabrook al Busaidy, Ibrahim bin Saif al Wahibi, Khalid bin Bader al Thuhli and

Ali bin Khalaf al Sheidi.

Lujaina al Zaabi's candidacy marks a historic moment as she becomes the first woman to run for the presidency of the Oman Aquatics Federation. No woman has ever led the association before making this a milestone nomination in the upcoming election.

Lujaina is widely recognised as one of Oman's most accomplished female leaders, having held various leadership positions across different sectors. She is also a successful entrepreneur who has made a significant impact in her field. In 2003, she became the first woman to preside over a sports club in Oman and the GCC when she took over as President of Ahli Sidab Club. She has also served as a board member of the Oman Football Association (OFA) and the Oman Olympic Committee, further solidifying her reputation as a key figure in Omani sports administration.



Cleveland Cavaliers power forward Evan Mobley (4) dunks the ball in the 4th quarter of the Cleveland Cavaliers vs Memphis Grizzlies game. — Reuters

CLEVELAND CRUISE TO RECORD 16TH STRAIGHT WIN

LOS ANGELES, United States: The Cleveland Cavaliers romped to a franchise record 16th straight victory on Friday, beating the Memphis Grizzlies 133-124 to extend their lead at the top of the Eastern Conference.

Cleveland, who had been forced to overcome a double-digit deficit in Tuesday's win over Brooklyn, had no such difficulty in Friday's clash in Tennessee. The Cavs, who have already clinched their place in the postseason, maintained their charge towards securing the Eastern Conference No.1 seeding with a dominant offensive display.

Cleveland -- who have now won 20 of their last 21 games -- took a stranglehold on the contest with 75 points in the first half to open up a hefty 18-point cushion at the break.

Memphis, who came into Friday's game on a run of four straight wins, never looked like reeling in the visitors in the second half as Cleveland closed out a victory that sees them improve to 56-10. — AFP

Oman beach soccer trains hard for AFC Asian Cup

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 15

THE Oman beach soccer team arrived to Pattaya late on Thursday to commence a short external warm up camp ahead of the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2025 which will start on Thursday and will run until March 30.

At the pristine sand of the Jomtien Beach Arena located in the eastern Thai city of Pattaya, Oman team players trained under watchful eyes of the experienced head coach Talib Hilal.

The team's technical programme included several training sessions over the coming days, with a special focus on attacking and defensive strategies following their recent matches against Russia and Belarus in Muscat.

Oman thumped Belarus 8-5 in the second friendly match last week in Muscat while in the first warm-up game, Belarus earned a 5-1 win over Oman. In earlier short camp in Muscat, Russia team edged Oman 6-5 in the opening international friendly and they earned their second straight win against Oman national beach soccer team by 6-3 in another preparatory match.

Oman's experienced beach soccer coach Talib Hilal will finalise his starting lineup and tactical plans in the coming days before the competition begins.

Under technical guidance of Talib, The national team won a gold medal in the Asian Beach Games in 2008 and then became champions at the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup in 2015. Furthermore, Oman were also silver medallists at the Asian Beach Soccer Cup in 2011 besides



The team's technical programme included several training sessions over the coming days, with a special focus on attacking and defensive strategies following their recent matches against Russia and Belarus in Muscat.



winning bronze medals in 2009 and 2019.

Oman will vie against Bahrain, Malaysia and Vietnam in Group D at 2025 AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand.

The continental showpiece will also offer three tickets to the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup Seychelles 2025 in coming May. Oman will begin their campaign in the Asian event with a match against Vietnam on March 21 and then they will meet Malaysia on

March 23. Two days later, they will conclude the group stage with a match against Bahrain.

OMAN SQUAD: Khalid al Orami, Munther al Orami, Abdullah al Souti, Nooh al Zadjali, Mashal al Orami, Ahmed al Owaisi, Salim al Orami, Younis al Owaisi, Sami al Balushi, Yahya al Muraikhi, Abdulrahman al Fazari, Musallam al Orami, Majid al Affari, Yousef al Zadjali, Amjad al Hamdani and Sameer al Afari.

3rd Ramadhan chess challenge concludes

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 15

The Third Ramadhan Chess Challenge, organised by Al Kamil W'al Wafi Club, concluded at the club's Al Nujoom Hall under the auspices of Dr Abdulaziz al Hashimi, a member of the Majlis Ash'shura representing the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi. The event was also attended by Dr Abdulmohsin al Marhoobi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Kamil W'al Wafi Club.

The tournament witnessed significant participation, with over 50 players from the Wilayat of Al Kamil W'al Wafi competing across different age categories. The participants were divided into two groups: the first category for players under 16 years old and the second for those above 16 years old. The matches were characterised by intense competition among the players.

The tournament was conducted following the Swiss system with seven rounds, allowing each player 15 minutes per match. This format enabled participants to showcase their strategic



and tactical planning skills. The rounds were filled with excitement and competitiveness, with several players delivering outstanding performances.

In the under 16 category, Al Yazen al Rasbi secured the championship title after demonstrating exceptional skills and consistency throughout the tournament. Salim al Rasbi claimed second place, showcasing a strong performance and tactical prowess. Meanwhile, Mohammed bin Yousuf al Rasbi earned third place after a fierce battle for the podium.

In the over 16 category, Omar al Alawi was crowned champion after an outstanding

display of strategic play and resilience. Badr al Rasbi secured second place, showing remarkable composure and precision in his matches. Al Hassan al Rasbi claimed third place, proving his capability and determination despite facing tough competition.

Said al Rasbi, the organiser of the Ramadhan Chess Challenge, expressed his satisfaction with the level of participation in the tournament's third edition. He emphasised that this year's event saw a notable increase in the number of participants compared to previous editions. He attributed this growth to the active role of the media and organisers in promoting

the tournament. Al Rasbi also highlighted the positive community engagement and continuous support for such events, which significantly contribute to their success. He further revealed plans to expand participation in future editions and enhance the tournament's level to reach greater heights.

Abdullah al Mashaykhi, another organiser of the tournament, noted that the level of competition varied across the two age categories. Some players showcased impressive skills, indicating promising potential. He remarked that the overall performance was highly encouraging, opening opportunities for these players to participate in external tournaments and represent the Wilayat in regional competitions.

Regarding future chess tournaments, Al Mashaykhi stated that there are plans to expand the scope of competitions by organising open tournaments and school championships throughout the year. The goal is to attract more young players and promote chess culture within the community.

SHORT TAKES



NEYMAR OUT OF BRAZIL WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SAO PAULO: Brazil star Neymar was on Friday ruled out of the upcoming 2026 World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina after a thigh injury scuppered his recall to the national team.

Neymar has spent almost a year and a half out of the Brazil side due to injuries but had appeared rejuvenated since his return to Santos in February.

But in the past two weeks, he has been plagued by the left thigh injury.

In an Instagram story, the striker expressed his disappointment at missing the games.

“The return seemed so close, but unfortunately I won’t be able to wear the most important jersey in the world for the moment,” he wrote.

“We had long conversations and everyone knows of my desire to return, but we agreed that it’s best not to take any risks and prepare as best as possible to completely eradicate the injury,” he added.

With Brazil down in fifth place in South American World Cup qualifying, coach Dorival Junior had recalled Brazil’s top scorer with 79 goals to the side he last represented in October, 2023.

Real Madrid striker Endrick will take his place.

Brazil play Colombia in Brasilia on March 20 and face bitter rivals and defending champions Argentina in Buenos Aires five days later.

Neymar, 33, scored for the first time in over 14 months two weeks ago, opening his account for Santos since his return to his boyhood club. — AFP

Alcaraz to face Draper, Rune to meet Medvedev

TWO-TIME defending champion Carlos Alcaraz is bracing for a tough semifinal test from “ambitious” British lefty Jack Draper on Saturday as he aims to take the next step toward a rare Indian Wells ATP Masters three-peat.

The world number three from Spain is looking to join Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic as the only men to win three straight titles in the California desert.

And despite his 3-1 record against Draper, he won’t be taking the world number 14 lightly.

“I think he has a lot of rhythm, a lot of pace, great shots,” Alcaraz said. “I think his style of play suits pretty well to these conditions.

“It seems he’s in really good shape right now,” Alcaraz added. “I think he’s ambitious, and he always goes for it. So that makes him a really tough opponent.”

Two of Draper’s losses to Alcaraz have come by retirement — including at Indian Wells in 2023 and in the Australian Open fourth round this year — where he’d won three straight five-set matches before facing Alcaraz in the round of 16.

“I faced him once out here already and I was a bit injured in that match, so I’m looking forward to getting another shot,” said Draper, who reached the US Open semifinals last year but was hindered early this season by a flare-up of hip tendinitis.

“He brings so much to the court, especially in these conditions,” added Draper, who claimed his lone win over Alcaraz at Queen’s Club last year. “He’s setting the benchmark really high, and that’s good for a player like myself because I watch him and play against him and I think what I need to do to be at his level.”

In the other semifinal, Daniil Medvedev will also be seeking to reach a third straight final — having come up short against Alcaraz in each of the past two years.

The 29-year-old Russian, a six-time Grand Slam finalist, jumped for joy after digging out a 6-4, 2-6, 7-6 (9/7) victory over 20-year-old Arthur Fils in the quarterfinals to earn a last-four clash with another young gun in Denmark’s Holger Rune.

Medvedev has won two of their three prior encounters, including a quarterfinal victory at Indian Wells last year.

“(His) talent is really strong,” Medvedev said of the Dane whose star has faded somewhat since a precocious victory over Djokovic in the 2022 Paris Masters final. “He has probably every shot that you can have in tennis. Probably he knows that sometimes he’s not consistent in beginning of tournaments, but when he’s deep there he’s a tough player to beat. I need to play well.” — AFP



Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) hits a shot in the quarterfinal of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Well Tennis Garden. — Reuters



Jack Draper (GBR) hits a shot during his quarterfinal match in the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Well Tennis Garden. — Reuters

Barca’s Flick demands ‘focus’ ahead of crunch Atletico clash

BARCELONA: Hansi Flick warned his Barcelona stars they need to focus to avoid crumbling against Atletico Madrid on Sunday in La Liga as they have in their previous two meetings this season.

Leaders Barcelona are a point ahead of Diego Simeone’s Atletico, third, going into the huge title clash at the Metropolitano stadium in the Spanish capital.

Barcelona led against Atletico in the first league match in December but Rodrigo De Paul levelled for the visitors and Alexander Sorloth hit a 96th minute winner which helped them usurp the Catalans at the top of the table.

Then in the Copa del Rey semi-final first leg Barcelona let in two goals in the first six minutes and two late goals, including another Sorloth stoppage time strike in a wild 4-4 draw.

“I think we have had really two great matches and of course we have to be focussed from beginning to the end of the match,” Flick told reporters on Saturday.

“I think in the first match, at the



end of the match we were not so focussed like we can be, and also the second match was (the same) in the beginning and also at the end, so we have to take care about that.

“When you make mistakes Atletico can hurt you and this is what we have to defend against.” Atletico Madrid were knocked out of the Champions League on

Wednesday on penalties by rivals Real Madrid, while Barcelona beat Benfica to reach the quarterfinals. Former Manchester City striker Julian Alvarez scored a penalty in

the shoot-out for Atletico which was controversially disallowed because he may have touched the ball twice when he slipped as he took it.

“It was an unlucky situation, I feel for him, he’s one of the best strikers,” said Flick, adding that it was “not a problem” for Atletico to have played 120 minutes because of their squad depth. Flick has plenty of options himself with Dani Olmo seemingly ahead of Gavi in the pecking order for the attacking midfield spot.

Gavi and Barca defender Alejandro Balde were not included in the Spain squad to face the Netherlands in the Nations League quarterfinals next week, but the Barca coach hailed both players.

“(Gavi) came from a huge injury and he’s 20 years old and now at the moment he is I think, not the first (choice)... a more difficult situation but he’s doing great,” said Flick.

“At the moment our midfield is doing really good. I’m happy he’s here and I think he will play many, many years for this amazing club and be one of the superstars here.

— AFP

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



KOHLI EXCITED BY CRICKET’S RETURN AT LA GAMES

BENGALURU: Virat Kohli welcomed the inclusion of cricket in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics and, although the Indian great will not be coaxed out of retirement for the showpiece, he said he believed a new generation of Indian athletes would be ready to strike gold.

Cricket, which enjoys a huge following in India and has a rapidly growing global audience, is returning to the Games after more than a century with a proposed six-team Twenty20 format for men and women in Los Angeles.

Kohli, 36, who retired from the sport’s shortest format last June after India’s World Cup triumph, said international leagues around the world had played a big role in elevating the profile of the sport and ensuring it was showcased at the Games.

“It’s great, I mean, when I heard the news I was really happy about it,” Kohli, who continues to play 50-overs and test cricket for India, said during the RCB Innovation Lab Indian Sports Summit on Saturday.

“It’s happened and the amount of T20 cricket that has been played all over the world, the leagues that are played all over the world and the Indian Premier League (IPL) have definitely played a massive role in that as well.

“It has got cricket to the stage where it’s part of the Olympics. It’s a great opportunity for some of our athletes to be able to taste it.”

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) said in October, 2023 that cricket’s inclusion for the first time since the 1900 Games had the potential to activate and engage new audiences, with the sport’s worldwide fan base estimated at 2.5 billion people.

With millions of his own followers around the world and on social media, Kohli’s presence at the Games would have played a huge role in boosting the sport.

But the batsman, who continues to play T20 for the Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the IPL, said there was little chance of him coming back to the national team in the format.

“I don’t know, maybe if we’re playing for the gold medal I might sneak in for one game, get the medal and come back home,” Kohli said with a smile.

“No, but I think it’s a great thing. To be Olympic champions would be an absolutely magnificent feeling. A first of its kind and I’m sure we’ll be somewhere close to that. — Reuters



Belarus’s Aryna Sabalenka reacts after defeating USA’s Madison Keys during their women’s singles semifinal tennis match. — AFP

Sabalenka to battle Andreeva in Indian Wells

INDIAN WELLS, CALIFORNIA: Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva beat defending champion Iga Swiatek 7-6(1) 1-6 6-3 on Friday to reach the Indian Wells final where she will face top seed Aryna Sabalenka, who avenged her Australian Open final loss to Madison Keys with a 6-0 6-1 rout. Andreeva, 17, has shown enormous potential this season and now has her sights set on back-to-back WTA 1000 titles following her triumph in Dubai last month.

“Really tough match, tough conditions,” she said.

“I tried to really hang in there. It was not easy, but I’m super happy with the win today and I can’t wait to play finals on Sunday.”

After a tight first set, Andreeva was flawless in the tiebreak, leaning over and letting out a roar when she enticed a forehand error from Swiatek on set point.

The Polish second seed stormed back in the second set, breaking in the first game and levelling the contest when Andreeva’s backhand went wide.

Andreeva, who was studying handwritten notes during the changeovers, grabbed the momentum back by breaking to open the third set as temperatures in the California desert plummeted and the wind picked up.

She ripped a forehand winner to go up 3-1 as the frustration began to take hold for Swiatek, who dumped a backhand into the net on match point.

“After she literally killed me in the second set I thought, okay, I’ll just try to fight,” Andreeva said on court.

“There is not much I could do about it, she was playing amazing. I just decided to fight for every point.

“It doesn’t matter how I put the ball in but I have to put it in. In the end, it wasn’t too bad.”

The ninth seed is coached by former Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez, who reached the Indian Wells finals twice during her playing days.

“I know that my coach lost in the finals so I’m going to try to be better than her,” said Andreeva with a laugh.

The loss ends five-time major champion Swiatek’s bid to become the first woman to win the tournament in the Southern California desert three times.

REVENGE

A ruthless Sabalenka needed just 52 minutes to get pay back for her loss to Keys in the Melbourne Park final in January.

A Keys double fault handed Sabalenka a 4-0 lead in the opener and the Belarusian rolled through the set with ease despite windy conditions.

The crowd erupted when Keys won her first game of the match to cut Sabalenka’s lead to 5-1 in the second but that would be it for the American, who hit a backhand into the net on match point.

“I didn’t expect that match to be that fast but I’m super happy,” Sabalenka said.

“Much needed revenge.”

Three-time Grand Slam champion Sabalenka, who reached the Indian Wells final in 2023, said she was looking forward to playing the teenager.

“It feels like old mama playing against the kid,” said 26-year-old Sabalenka.

“I’m like what, nine years older than her? She is two years younger than my sister and I look at my sister as a kid. It’s crazy.”

Revenge is also on the mind of Andreeva, who lost to the Belarusian in straight sets in the fourth round of the Australian Open.

“I’m going to try to take revenge because I still have nothing to lose,” she said.

“I feel like the match is going to be entertaining. There are going to be a lot of winners, a lot of great points.” — Reuters

BUSINESS

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SUCCESS STORY

Seven Fries gained further momentum when it was selected from over 300 Omani brands participating in the franchise programme led by the OCCI.

SEVEN FRIES: OMAN’S HOMEGROWN BRAND GOES GLOBAL

MUSCAT: Omani entrepreneurs are increasingly turning their passions into thriving businesses, leveraging consumer demand to build brands that not only succeed locally but also expand regionally and internationally.

One standout success story is Seven Fries, the first Omani brand specialising in fresh French fries. Founded by Issa bin Saleh al Aghbari in 2021 in the Wilayat of Al Seeb, the brand has quickly grown, opening three branches across the Governorates of Muscat and Dhofar in under two years.

Seven Fries gained further momentum when it was selected from over 300 Omani brands participating in the franchise programme led by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. This recognition paved the way for Al Aghbari to sign an agreement with the Chamber to enhance and expand the brand.

By 2024, Seven Fries had already begun its franchise journey, launching its first franchised outlet in Al Amerat, Muscat, followed by another in Ibri, Al Dhahirah. The brand’s rapid growth extended beyond Oman, securing franchise agreements in Erbil (Kurdistan Region), Baghdad (Iraq), Islamabad (Pakistan), and an exclusive contract in India. Looking ahead, Al Aghbari envisions 300 branches in India, capitalising on its vast consumer base.

Additionally, the brand is attracting international interest, with franchise requests from the US and other global markets. — **ONA**

Oman’s trade surplus tops RO 7 billion in 2024

THE Sultanate of Oman recorded a trade surplus of RO 7.517 billion by the end of December 2024, reflecting strong export growth despite rising imports.

According to preliminary data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), Oman’s total merchandise exports reached RO 24.23 billion, marking a 6.8% increase from RO 22.69 billion in 2023. Meanwhile, imports rose by 12.1% to RO 16.713 billion, up from RO 14.91 billion in the previous year.

OIL AND GAS DRIVE EXPORT GROWTH
Oman’s export growth was primarily fuelled by the oil and gas sector, which surged to RO 16.29 billion — an 18.4% increase from RO 13.76 billion in 2023.

Within this sector, crude oil exports reached RO 9.9 billion, showing a modest 0.8% growth.

However, refined oil exports skyrocketed by 185.5% to RO 3.85 billion. In contrast, liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports dipped slightly by 1.9% to RO 2.528 billion.

DECLINE IN NON-OIL EXPORTS
While oil exports surged, non-oil commodity exports declined by 16.3%, totalling RO 6.232 billion compared to RO 7.442 billion in 2023.

The most affected sector was mineral products, which saw a sharp 36.8% decline to RO 1.781 billion.

Common metal products remained stable at RO 1.32 billion, while plastic and rubber exports grew by 13.3% to RO 996 million. Other sectors also faced setbacks.

Exports of chemicals and related industries dropped 19.6% to RO 804 million, while live animal and animal product exports declined by 11% to RO 350 million. Exports of other goods also fell by 5% to RO 981 million.

Oman’s re-export sector expanded by 14.9%, reaching RO 1.708 billion.

RE-EXPORTS ON THE RISE
Despite the dip in non-oil exports, Oman’s re-export sector expanded by 14.9%, reaching RO 1.708 billion. Food, beverage and liquid re-exports saw the most substantial growth, jumping 30.6% to RO 184 million.

Mineral product re-exports also increased by 21.3% to RO 120 million.

On the other hand, re-exports of transport equipment and machinery declined slightly, while live animal and animal product re-exports dropped by 10.1% to RO 97 million.

SURGE IN IMPORTS
The rise in imports was driven by mineral products, which accounted for RO 4.674 billion, an 11.3% increase.

Imports of machinery and electrical equipment surged by 28.9% to RO 2.934 billion, while common metals and their products saw a modest 1% increase to RO

1.605 billion.

Transportation equipment imports jumped 13.5% to RO 1.516 billion and chemical imports grew by 3.1% to RO 1.516 billion. Other imports reached RO 4.469 billion.

TOP TRADE PARTNERS
The United Arab Emirates remained Oman’s leading non-oil export destination, receiving RO 1.046 billion worth of goods — an 11% increase. It also led in re-exports from Oman, totalling RO 569 million.

Saudi Arabia ranked second in non-oil exports at RO 849 million, followed by India at RO 659 million. Iran was the second-largest re-export market at RO 359 million, while Kuwait ranked third with RO 117 million.

On the import side, China was the second-largest supplier to Oman, providing goods worth RO 1.83 billion, followed by Kuwait with RO 1.692 billion. — **ONA**

Pacts inked for Oman’s first deep ocean water harvesting project

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 15

OMAN DEEP Ocean LLC (ODO), the local subsidiary of Singapore-based Transocean Fortune Integrator (Water) [TFIW] – a leading specialist in deep ocean water downstream industries – has announced the signing of partnerships designed to harvest deep ocean water to support a wide range of industries, centring primarily around water and food security.

A feasibility study commissioned by the Singaporean firm has found that deep ocean water (DOW) in Oman’s proximity is exceptionally pure, cold and mineral rich, making it ideal for various applications, including agriculture, aquaculture, bottled drinking water, health and wellness, district cooling and renewable energy.

“We believe that Oman’s greatest resource asset lies in deep ocean water as a proven inexhaustible reserve. Securing the future of the next generation begins today with the Oman Deep Ocean

Representatives of ODO and CNEEC at the signing earlier this month.

Water Project,” TFIW noted in an overview of its groundbreaking initiative.

Earlier this month, Oman Deep Ocean LLC signed key agreements that will pave the way for the landmark project to be implemented in phases. Notable is an Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) contract signed with China National Electric Engineering Company (CNEEC), a specialised engineering services contractor, covering the execution of Phase 1 of the Oman Deep Ocean Water Project.

Deep ocean water resources harnessed during this phase will be utilised towards the following activities: (i) Desalination to enhance freshwater availability and advance water security; (ii) Production of high-quality premium bottled water sourced from the deep ocean; (iii) Extraction of valuable minerals

and salts from deep-sea water for various food and industrial applications; (iv) Utilising mineral-rich, cold deep-ocean water to support sustainable farming and aquaculture initiatives; and (v) supporting District Cooling by implementing energy-efficient cooling solutions for industrial parks.

A workshop hosted by project promoters in Muscat last September brought together leading international experts to collaborate and share their expertise in the development of a sustainable, well-designed deep ocean water industrial park in Oman. Top officials of Oman’s Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, as well as Oman Investment Authority, were in attendance.

Representatives of leading Singaporean consultancy firm Surbana Jurong and CNEEC (China) also presented on the findings of their study into the feasibility of the overall project.

Qurayat, with its access to some of the most optimal deep ocean

water resources, is seen as ideal to host the proposed industrial park.

Key initiatives planned for implementation in Phase I include a bottled water manufacturing plant and a 50,000 tonnes per day water desalination plant.

Pilot trials for agriculture and aquaculture applications are also planned with the goal to improve crop yield and quality.

In later phases plan, the needs of regional and international export markets are proposed to be met.

Significantly, the project also has the potential to position Oman as a hub for deep ocean water resources catering to the needs of the wider Gulf region – an area that faces similar water-related challenges.

Already, salinity in the Arabian Gulf – a water body that hosts the largest concentration of desalination plants in the world – is rising exponentially, while pollution and other climate threats heighten these risks.

With Oman’s access to prodigious deep ocean water, it is well-placed to mitigate such risks for its GCC peers, TFIW stresses.

ADVERTORIALS

IDEAL PARTNERS



The event received an overwhelming response from fleet customers across key sectors.

MHD AUTOMOBILES HOSTS FLEET IFTAR 2025 FOR JEEP, DODGE AND RAM CLIENTS

MUSCAT: MHD Automobiles, the exclusive distributor of Jeep, Dodge, RAM, and Alfa Romeo in Oman, successfully hosted its Fleet Iftar 2025, an evening dedicated to strengthening partnerships, sharing industry insights, and unveiling exclusive fleet offers. Held at Crowne Plaza Muscat – OCEC, the event received an overwhelming response from fleet customers across key sectors, including leasing and car rental companies, oil and gas, tourism, manufacturing, and distribution. This engagement reaffirmed MHD Automobiles’ commitment to supporting its business partners with tailored mobility solutions that drive operational success. The event was attended by Ashwin, Stellantis Middle East Head of Fleet, who engaged directly with industry leaders to discuss fleet efficiency, performance, and cost-effective solutions. The MHD Automobiles team showcased an impressive lineup of high-performance Jeep and RAM vehicles, complemented by Mopar’s comprehensive after-sales support, designed to optimise fleet operations and minimise downtime. Fleet customers were introduced to Mopar FlexCare Products, which provide tailored maintenance and warranty solutions. Beyond maintenance and warranty solutions, Mopar’s fleet utility accessories and customisation options enable businesses to configure their vehicles to meet specific operational requirements. Fleet clients also benefit from genuine Mopar parts, certified technicians and advanced diagnostic tools, ensuring top-tier service for maximum efficiency and longevity. The Fleet Iftar event reinforced MHD Automobiles’ commitment to delivering a complete fleet solution, combining high-performance vehicles with Mopar’s industry-leading after-sales support. This seamless integration of power, durability and reliability makes MHD Automobiles the ideal fleet partner, empowering businesses across Oman with efficient, cost-effective and dependable mobility solutions. Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, commented: “At MHD Automobiles, we deeply value the trust and collaboration of our fleet customers. The Fleet Iftar was a fantastic opportunity to express our appreciation and reinforce our commitment to their success. Jeep, Dodge and RAM are engineered to deliver exceptional performance, reliability and efficiency — qualities that are essential for businesses to thrive. “With the strong support of our Fleet Sales and Mopar After-Sales teams, we remain dedicated to providing tailored mobility solutions that drive growth and efficiency for our clients across Oman.”

Meethaq launches special offer on auto finance

MUSCAT: In line with its customer-centric vision, Meethaq Islamic banking from Bank Muscat has launched an exclusive auto finance offer. This limited-time offer is available till May 1, 2025 and applies to Meethaq Auto Finance, providing customers with attractive offer. Customers availing auto finance during the offer period can also get an extended tenor of up to 10 years on new and used vehicles. In addition, applicants will enjoy quick processing and minimal

documentation, making the process seamless and hassle-free. Meethaq customers are eligible for up to 80% financing on their vehicles purchase. The launch of this attractive offer is based on a detailed study of customer needs, reinforcing Meethaq’s commitment to delivering tailored financial solutions. On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager – Meethaq Personal Banking, said: “We are delighted to celebrate this holy occasion with our valued



customers through this special Ramadhan Auto Finance offer. Meethaq remains committed to enhancing its suite of Shari’a-compliant products and services to meet customer needs while keeping pace with global trends. I would like to take this opportunity to invite our customers to take advantage of the special offer and enjoy a host of benefits on their financing solutions.” As Oman’s leading provider of Sharia-compliant financial services, Meethaq Islamic Banking

offers a comprehensive range of products and services. With a network of 32 branches across the Sultanate, Meethaq ensures enhanced accessibility through its dedicated banking network and provides with free access to over 890 ATMs and CDMs under Bank Muscat. Every Meethaq product is created in accordance with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman and undergoes Shari’a compliance review and certification by the Shari’a Supervisory Board.

AHLI GLOBAL EQUITY FUND DELIVERS 10.6% RETURN FOR 2024

MUSCAT: In line with its continued commitment to delivering value, ahlibank announced a 10.6% return for its flagship ahli Global Equity Fund in 2024. The fund, regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FSA), continues to provide exposure to both GCC and global markets, reinforcing its position as a trusted platform for long-term capital growth. The Fund’s strength lies in its strategic diversification across key sectors, including financial services, technology, energy, real estate, and industrials. This approach is complemented by a focus on long-term capital



appreciation, driven by investments in high-quality stocks with sustainable competitive advantages. Over the past three years, the Fund has delivered consistent positive returns, sustaining double-digit compounded growth, making it a preferred choice for investors in Oman. ahlibank remains steadfast in its

focus on GCC markets—particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman—while selectively capitalizing on opportunities in the US, China, and other emerging markets. The Fund’s outlook is bolstered by strategic investments in energy, renewables, and tourism across key markets. Meanwhile, the team remains vigilant about potential volatility driven by geopolitical tensions, monetary policy shifts, and macroeconomic uncertainties, emphasizing a balanced approach and selectivity in high-quality names with strong fundamentals.

BYD Qin Plus classic: Bold, futuristic and exciting

THIS Ramadhan, drive the future of automotive technology with BYD’s exciting Ramadhan offer. Embark on a lifetime of experiences with unbeatable prices and incredible benefits on the Qin Plus Classic, starting at just RO 6,790. To further enhance your BYD experience this month, enjoy stress-free service perks for up to 5 years/50,000 km when you buy a Qin Plus Classic. Additionally, get extra perks like PHEV chargers, and first-year free insurance. All customers are also entitled to participate in the Raffle Draw for a chance to win a BYD Qin Plus Classic. Unlock endless possibilities and enjoy more value for money before the offer ends on 24th April 2025. Designed on BYD’s ground-breaking DM-I Super Hybrid technology, the Qin Plus Classic allows you to save on fuel and cover more range. Experience an unmatched fuel



The Qin Plus Classic allows you to save on fuel and cover more range.

economy of 3.8L/100km and an impressive performance output, going from 0-100 km/h in just 7.3 seconds with 194 hp. The 1.5L engine, combined with an EHS electric motor, provides swift acceleration and seamless power delivery. Designed to impress, the visually stunning exterior of

the Qin Plus Classic speaks the Dragon Face language, blending strength, power, and elegance. It features 17-inch alloy wheels and LED taillights on the dynamic waistline. Inside, the driver-focused cockpit seamlessly combines aesthetics and functionality. The car is equipped with an

8.8-inch LCD driver dashboard, an advanced infotainment system on the 10.1-inch 8-core rotatable screen, providing seamless smartphone integration, navigation, and entertainment—all at the driver’s fingertips. BYD prioritizes safety, and the Qin Plus Classic is no exception. The sedan is equipped with a suite of intelligent safety features, including Automatic Emergency Braking (AEB), Lane Departure Warning (LDW), and Adaptive Cruise Control (ACC). Reinforced with a high-strength body structure, the Qin Plus ensures maximum protection for all passengers. With a rapidly expanding network of BYD showrooms and service centers, customers can expect seamless after-sales support and a worry-free ownership experience. Customers are invited to experience the Qin Plus Plug-in Hybrid at the BYD showrooms at Wattayah, Al Mouj, and Mall of Oman.

Khimji Ramdas’ staff join forces for a cause

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to community well-being, Khimji Ramdas (KR) partnered with the Department of Blood Bank Services, Ministry of Health (MoH), for its annual blood donation drive. Through this initiative, Khimji Ramdas staff, their families, and friends came forward to voluntarily donate blood, helping to maintain vital reserves for hospitals and patients in need. A long-standing supporter of the MoH Blood Drive, Khimji Ramdas has actively contributed to this life-saving cause since the 1970s. The initiative aligns with the company’s corporate social responsibility, ensuring that hospitals across the country have



access to a consistent supply of blood, particularly during the blessed month of Ramadan, when the demand is at its highest. “A consistent supply of blood is the need of the hour, especially during Ramadhan,” said Anil Khimji, Director of Khimji Ramdas.

“We are proud to have consistently backed MoH blood drives for decades, reinforcing our unwavering support for public health. We extend our gratitude to the dedicated doctors and their support staff for their invaluable contributions to community care.”

Dr Zainab Salem al Araithi, Director of the Blood Bank Services Department at MOH, acknowledged the commitment of Khimji Ramdas in fostering a culture of voluntary blood donation. “We appreciate the diligent efforts of the Khimji Ramdas staff and management for their ongoing support. A united and compassionate society, driven by steadfast volunteerism, is essential to ensuring a steady blood supply for those in need. By advocating regular blood donation, Khimji Ramdas exemplifies corporate social responsibility through meaningful community engagement.”

BUSINESS



By 2030, digital technology could be responsible for 20% of the world’s electricity use.

POWER HUNGRY:
MEETING OUR
GROWING ENERGY
NEEDS



**NAJAH AL
RIYAMI**

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

Power is life. It keeps our cities buzzing, our devices humming, and our digital existence afloat. And we’re using more of it than ever before.

A single Google search consumes about 0.3 watt-hours (Wh)—enough to power a 10-watt LED bulb for 30 seconds. With 1 billion searches per day, Google’s daily electricity use reaches 300 megawatt-hours (MWh).

In Oman, where the average per capita electricity consumption is 3.2 MWh per year (Enerdata, 2023), this means that Google’s

daily search activity alone uses as much electricity as 34,220 Omani residents consume in a day.

Over a year, this equates to their entire annual electricity consumption, highlighting the immense energy footprint of digital activities even on a national scale.

Now let’s factor in the true giants of the digital world: data centers, cloud computing, AI, and cryptocurrencies. Together, they consume nearly 10% of global electricity, and that’s only expected to grow.

Data centers (including Google, Microsoft and Amazon) alone use around 250 terawatt-hours (TWh) per year, more than some entire nations like Australia or Spain. Furthermore, training language models like GPT-3 are energy-intensive.

Estimates suggest they consume approximately 1,287 megawatt-hours (MWh) of electricity - comparable to powering a mid-sized hospital for nearly a month or running an average data center for about five days; highlighting the significant energy footprint of AI training, which continues to grow as models become more complex.

At this rate, experts predict that by 2030, digital technology could be responsible for 20% of the world’s electricity use. Energy efficiency is improving, but as AI, automation, and the internet of things (IoT) expand, our hunger for power isn’t slowing down.

Here’s the kicker: The power we actually need is a fraction of the energy our planet receives every single hour from the sun with its roughly 173,000 terawatts (TW) of solar energy per hour - more than 10,000 times the world’s total energy consumption. If we covered just 0.2% of the Earth’s land surface with solar panels, we could meet all of global energy demand.

The good news? We’re making progress. Solar and wind energy are scaling fast, with renewables now accounting for over 30% of global electricity generation. But to keep up with growing demand and reduce reliance on fossil fuels, we need better storage, smarter grids, and serious investment in clean energy tech.

Oman has the potential to capture 5–7% of the world’s total solar energy potential with its high solar irradiance of 2,200–2,500 kWh/m² per year -among the best globally. With vast desert landscapes and over 300 sunny days annually, its solar capacity is 2–3 times higher than Germany’s.

If fully harnessed, Oman could generate far more solar electricity than its domestic needs, positioning itself as a key player in renewable energy exports.

The question isn’t whether we have enough energy—we absolutely do. The challenge is making sure our thirst for power doesn’t outpace our ability to harness it sustainably.

OMAN’S OIL
EXPORTS
REACH 25.8
MILLION
BARRELS IN
JANUARY

MUSCAT: Oman exported approximately 25.82 million barrels of oil by the end of January 2025, with an average price of \$72.5 per barrel, according to data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Oil exports accounted for 84.3% of total production, which stood at 30.61 million barrels for the month.

However, exports declined by



Oil exports accounted for 84.3% of total production.

1.5% compared to January 2024, when Oman shipped 26.2 million

barrels.

This drop coincided with a 2% reduction in production, which had reached 31.23 million barrels in the same period last year.

Crude oil output fell by 2.2% to 23.39 million barrels, while condensate production totalled 7.22 million barrels. The average daily oil production stood at 987,500 barrels in January 2025.

— ONA

Oman strengthens
competition protection

OMAN has made significant strides in strengthening competition protection and curbing monopolistic practices, fostering a fairer business environment and boosting economic stability.

Over the past five years, the number of recorded anti-competitive practices has dropped to just 14, reflecting the country’s commitment to fair market competition and consumer protection.

Ahmed bin Salem al Rasbi, Director General of the Competition Protection and Anti-Monopoly Centre at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion, highlighted Oman’s efforts to align with international best practices.



The Ministry is also rolling out digital services to streamline regulatory procedures, making it easier for businesses to comply with competition laws.

International partnerships have helped Oman improve key competition indicators. According to a recent ESCWA report, the Sultanate has advanced in several areas, including competition law enforcement, anti-monopoly measures, and compliance with international trade agreements.

Additionally, Oman has refined its legal frameworks to facilitate mergers and acquisitions, attracting greater investment and boosting economic integration.

To further reinforce market competitiveness, the Ministry

of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion has been actively modernising its regulatory tools.

In the first half of 2024 alone, authorities reviewed 169 cases related to competition protection. The Ministry is also rolling out digital services to streamline regulatory procedures, making it easier for businesses to comply with competition laws.

Legislative updates have played a key role in ensuring fair competition. The government has adopted modern technologies to analyse

commercial data, detect anti-competitive behavior, and implement corrective measures. Studies conducted by the Ministry have resulted in actionable policies, with 80% of recommendations being implemented.

Oman’s Competition Protection and Anti-Monopoly Centre is responsible for monitoring market practices, investigating complaints, and enforcing trade regulations. The Center currently has 20 active investigations into foreign imports, some of which have resulted in final duties amounting to RO 1.5 million.

Additionally, over 10 cases involve local industries suspected of engaging in monopolistic behavior. The Center also evaluates economic concentration requests and examines merger and acquisition deals to prevent excessive market dominance.

“The Ministry is committed to ensuring a transparent and competitive market,” Al Rasbi affirmed. “We have put in place strict policies to combat monopolies, monitor market trends, and publish periodic reports on competition levels.”

MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY CELEBRATES ARAB CITY DAY

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Muscat Municipality, joined its Arab counterparts in celebrating Arab City Day, observed annually on March 15.

This year’s theme, “Resilient and Enduring Cities,” highlights 58 years since the founding of the Arab Towns Organization in 1967. Through its efforts, Muscat Municipality seeks to share expertise, leverage global experiences, and drive growth and prosperity while achieving national development goals.

In his speech on the occasion,

Eng Abdulrahman Hisham al Asfour, Secretary-General of the Organization, emphasized the significance of smart cities, stating: “This year’s theme reflects a deep awareness that cities represent the future of global life. With growing global challenges—climate change, health crises, urban expansion, and geopolitical shifts—the need for resilient cities is more urgent than ever.”

Al Asfour added: “Resilient cities rely on sustainable urban planning, robust infrastructure, economic diversity, community engagement,

and smart technology.

These factors enhance adaptability and ensure cities can withstand environmental, economic, and social shifts. A well-prepared city can respond to crises efficiently, minimizing damage, accelerating recovery, and maintaining a safe and sustainable environment where normal life continues even in challenging times.”

For his part, Ahmed Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, stated: “Muscat Municipality’s participation

in Arab City Day reaffirms its commitment to adopting the best strategies for urban resilience and sustainability. This includes infrastructure development, service enhancements, proactive responses to environmental and economic challenges, and the creation of innovative solutions that contribute to societal well-being.

These efforts align with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to enhance quality of life, boost the Sultanate’s competitiveness, and build a future-ready, sustainable society and economy.”

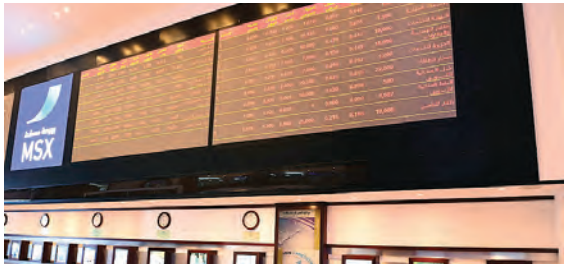
MSX sees market value surge to RO 12.4 billion

MUSCAT: The market value of public joint-stock companies listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) climbed to RO 12.4 billion by the end of last week, marking a weekly gain of RO 537.4 million.

This increase was primarily driven by the listing of Asyad Shipping Company, which debuted on the exchange following its successful initial public offering (IPO) of 20 per cent of its capital.

The total market value of the MSX reached RO 27.6 billion, with public joint-stock companies accounting for 44.9 per cent of this figure. Meanwhile, closed companies—those not traded on the exchange—had a market value of RO 10.7 billion, while bonds and sukuk contributed approximately RO 4.5 billion.

Asyad Shipping’s first trading session saw 287 transactions worth RO 2.7 million, making up 10.8 per cent of the total trading value. The stock remained steady at its



The total market value of the MSX reached RO 27.6 billion, with public joint-stock companies accounting for 44.9 per cent of this figure.

IPO price of 123 baisas, with a market capitalization of RO 640.6 million.

This positioned the company as the fourth-largest by market capitalization on the exchange, following OQ Exploration and Production (RO 2.5 billion), Bank Muscat (RO 1.9 billion), and Bank Sohar International (RO 820.5 million).

Investor interest was heavily

concentrated in the banking sector, driven by anticipation of upcoming dividend distributions. National Bank of Oman (NBO) led in trading value with RO 9.9 million, accounting for 39 per cent of total trades.

Bank Sohar International and Bank Muscat followed, recording trading volumes of RO 1.6 million and RO 1.5 million, respectively.

Overall, the seven listed banks contributed 51.5 per cent of the total trading value, which surged 36 per cent from the previous week, reaching RO 25.3 million.

Several banking stocks saw gains as investors positioned themselves ahead of general assemblies set to approve dividend payouts.

NBO’s stock rose 7.1 per cent to close at 300 baisas, while Ahli Bank climbed 5.3 per cent to 176 baisas, and Oman Arab Bank edged up 1.4 per cent to 137 baisas.— ONA

OPINION

The role of ESG in support of the Omani economy



DR HILAL AL SAWAI

A specialist in local content/In-country value, the writer is the Acting Director-General of Local Content, previously assigned to the General Secretariat of the Tender Board

ENVIRONMENT social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) has become an important variable for measuring sustainability and social impact of businesses and investments.

With the growing economy and Oman Vision 2040 strategy, Oman has been adopting the ESG framework in line with international sustainability objectives.

This article discusses how ESG aids the Omani economy while noting essential advantages, challenges, and undertakings by the government and private sector.

COMPONENTS OF ESG

The three key constituents of ESG are:

- *Environmental:* Covers sustainability, resource utilization, and climate change issues.
 - *Social:* Relates to employment practices, philanthropy, and social duties.
 - *Governance:* Pertains to corporate conduct, accountability, and business disclosure practices.
- Oman stands to improve economic diversification, attract responsible investment, and enhance economic growth by incorporating ESG in national policies and business strategies.

EFFECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS ON THE OMANI ECONOMY

- a. *Sustainability Efforts and Renewable Energy Sources:* Oman is shifting its energy strategy

- to include renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind. Vision 2040 targets a lower fossil fuel dependency paired with greater renewable energy involvement.
- The Ibri II and Manah I & II solar plants are examples of these new initiatives.
- b. *Efforts to Combat Climate Change:* Oman has set up policies meant to lower carbon emissions and conserve biodiversity. Oman is a signatory to international environmental treaties, and has laws aimed at controlling industrial waste as well as water usage.
- c. *Sustainable Tourism:* The promotion of ecotourism spurs economic growth while ensuring the protection of nature.
- Promotion of sustainable tourism, stimulated by projects like Ras Al Jinz Turtle Reserve and Al Hoota Cave, results in increased funds and jobs available for Omanis.

SOCIAL FACTORS OF ESG IN OMAN

- a. *Employment and Human Capital:* The ESG framework leads to positive impacts on the labor market in terms of employment and training opportunities.
- Oman's Omanization policy guarantees nationals employment in the public sector. There is a drive for companies to build supportive training programs that meet ESG criteria and guidelines.
- b. *Social Responsibility Initiatives within Firms (CSR):* Omani businesses, covering telecom, banking, and oil companies, do actively take part in CSR programmes across education, healthcare and community development as a part of their business operations.

The public sector institutions in Oman such as the Financial Services Authority have integrated public policies the governance practices in the country in order to improve both transparency and investments by enforcing corporate governance measures.

- c. *Regulations on Health and Safety:* Workers in Oman are protected by strict laws on health and safety. Those in gas and oil, manufacturing, construction, and other industries must follow basic international safety requirements aimed at preventing accidents in the workplace.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE WITH THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF OMAN

- a. *Openness and Responsibility:* The public sector institutions in Oman such as the Financial Services Authority have integrated public policies the governance practices in the country in order to improve both transparency and investments by enforcing corporate governance measures.
- Publicly listed businesses are bound by some legally defined limits in their operations to ensure morality in business activities.
- b. *Foreign Direct Investments (FDI):* International investment is drawn to Oman because of its solid governance. Countries willing to invest Oman are able to do so due to the lack of strict policies in Oman where foreign investors are invited to partake in key industries that include tourism, manufacturing, and logistics
- c. *Digital Transformation with Government:* Business processes in Oman are very much manual and Oman is moving towards the adoption of digital government.
- Use of digital financial payments through blockchain technology and AI compliance monitoring reduces corruption and increases efficiency.

US TARIFF TANTRUM THREATENS PRICING PROGRESS

BY GABRIEL RUBIN

WASHINGTON: Reading the latest inflation report is like flicking through old vacation photos: it looks nice, but the experience was only temporary. Consumer prices in February broke a recent hot streak, coming in below economists' expectations.

Problem is, President Donald Trump's haphazard trade policies risk raising costs, choking off this progress and pinching households and already-flagging growth. That raises the grim possibility of true stagflation.

Annual growth in consumer prices of 2.8% is still above the US Federal Reserve's 2% target. Still, aided by a 1% monthly decline in gasoline costs, the increase from January fell to 0.2%, the lowest reading since October. That might ordinarily be an encouraging sign that the trend is coming back under control.

Yet the imposition of new 25% steel and aluminum tariffs, and resulting European and Canadian retaliation, just ahead of the inflation report's release on Wednesday scrambles the picture. The Fed's Beige Book business survey, published last week, warned that firms around the country expected to pass along tariff costs, with some doing so preemptively.

A survey found a 10 percentage point jump in the proportion of companies raising prices. The NFIB report raised concerns that core inflation, which strips out volatile food and energy categories, could reaccelerate from its February rate of 3.1% towards 4%.

There remains some narrow hope that the tariff blitz may yet force trading partners to agree to collective disarmament, resulting in a negotiated outcome that actually reduces levies around the world.

A glimmer of encouragement appeared on Tuesday, as the Canadian province of Ontario backed down from threats to cut off electricity supplies to the northeastern US power grid in return for Trump nixing 50% tariffs on metals.

But the seemingly arbitrary application of trade policy has spooked markets and driven up the risk of recession, with JPMorgan now penciling in a 40% chance of one in 2025, up from 30%.

A bit of froth coming off richly valued stock markets can be a sensible readjustment. As investors rush to safer assets, 10-year treasury yields have fallen to 4.22% from a recent high of 4.79% in January. That could have a stimulatory effect by lowering financing costs and mortgage rates.

But the rest of Trump's agenda, like hard-to-unwind lumber and steel tariffs and immigration restrictions, risks the worst of both worlds: higher costs, lower growth. The vacation is over, and the re-entry is rough. — Reuters

Fixing Oman's labour market challenges

OMAN'S labour market is grappling with significant challenges, particularly the issues of concealed trade and unregulated labour.

Concealed trade occurs when businesses are officially registered under Omani citizens but secretly operated by expatriates, while unregulated workers are those employed outside the legal framework, often without contracts or proper protections.

These practices do not only hinder job opportunities for Omanis, but also disrupt economic stability by fostering unfair competition, reducing tax revenues and undermining the labour market's integrity.

To address these concerns, the government has implemented stricter regulations such as the Wage Protection System (WPS) and Omanisation, which aims to increase the employment of Omanis in the private sector.

However, the challenge lies in ensuring that these policies do not negatively impact market flexibility or hinder business competitiveness.

The presence of concealed trade and unregulated labour affects the economy in multiple ways: it depresses wages and job quality by allowing businesses to exploit legal loopholes, drives capital flight as informal businesses avoid taxation and reduces employment prospects for Omanis by making it cheaper to hire expatriates.

These concerns were highlighted by the Minister of Labour, who revealed that out of 400,000 registered companies, only 265,000 employ workers, raising alarm over the extent of concealed trade.

In response, the government has taken several corrective measures. The Wage Protection System (WPS), launched in mid-2023, mandates salary payments through banking channels to enhance transparency and curb irregular employment practices. Additionally, authorities



The Nizwa traditional market is a practical example of a marketplace where Omanis dominate the local trade sector because market conditions naturally favour them.



QASIM AL MAASHANI

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have preserved 50,000 to 60,000 Omani jobs between 2021 and 2023 by negotiating with businesses to prevent layoffs.

Furthermore, the government continues to absorb between 12,000 and 16,000 employees annually into the public sector, although this is not a sustainable long-term solution.

However, while these measures help regulate the market, they also pose challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Unlike large corporations, SMEs may struggle to comply with stricter regulations, as higher labour costs could lead to financial strain or even business closures.

To prevent this, targeted government support in the form of incentives and subsidies will be essential in helping SMEs transition without significant disruptions.

If Oman enforces these labour regulations effectively, the market will experience several shifts.

First, wages and working conditions are expected to improve as businesses will need to offer fair pay and better work environments to attract local talent.

Second, job competition will increase as informal employment declines, pushing businesses to enhance work conditions to remain

competitive.

Third, a shift towards private-sector employment will be necessary for Omanisation to succeed, as more Omanis will need to see the private sector as a viable career option with competitive salaries and benefits.

While these regulations are necessary to protect the workforce and eliminate concealed trade, excessive intervention could stifle business growth and deter investment. The key to success lies in finding a balance — ensuring that worker protections are enforced while maintaining market flexibility.

This requires a combination of regulatory oversight and government support to create a labour market that benefits both businesses and employees.

Some experts argue that beyond strict government intervention, market forces should play a crucial role in reshaping the labour market.

According to one economic analyst, concealed trade is a phenomenon that exists across the Gulf, and rather than relying on excessive government intervention, allowing natural market competition to take its course would push weaker players out of the market.

A practical example is Nizwa, where Omanis dominate the local trade sector because market conditions naturally favour them, making it difficult for expatriates to compete.

A similar strategy could be applied to areas like Muttrah Souq, where expatriates currently dominate. Instead of abrupt displacement, the government could introduce measures that naturally shift market control towards Omani traders.

A potential strategy for Muttrah Souq could involve allocating commercial spaces to Omanis under usufruct agreements, ensuring that local traders have access to prime business locations.

Additionally, offering temporary incentives such as rent-free spaces and utility exemptions could make it financially viable for Omanis to enter the market.

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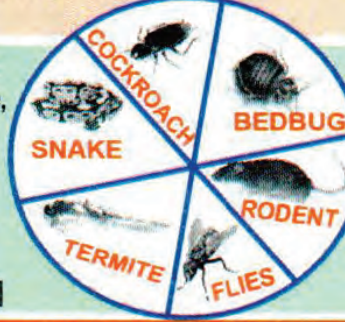
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Ramadhan

4

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I spent around 13 years in Europe. During that period, I skipped fasts in Ramadhan. What should I do in this case? Should I feed the needy or fast?

If you are able to fast, you must fast, at least one month in a year. Feeding poor people is only for those who are medically unable to fast.



HADITH GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Abu Huraira and Abu Sa'id (Allah be pleased with both of them) reported Allah's Messenger (as saying):

Allah, the Exalted and Majestic, said: Fast (is exclusively) meant for Me and I would give its reward. There are two (occasions) of joy for the observer of fast. He feels joy when he breaks the fast and he is happy when he meets Allah. By Allah in Whose Hand is the life of Muhammad, the breath of the observer of fast is sweeter to Allah than the fragrance of musk.

QURAN VERSE OF THE DAY



"Say, I take refuge with the Lord of Daybreak. From the evil of what He created. And from the evil of the darkness as it gathers. And from the evil of those who practice sorcery. And from the evil of an envious when he envies."

(Al Falaq)



DUA SUPPLICATION TO ALLAH

O Allah, on this day, do not condemn me for slips, make me decrease mistakes and errors, do not make me a target for afflictions and troubles, by Your honour, O the honour of the Muslims.



THE CHANGING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND HOW RAMADHAN IMPACTS ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

BY NASRULAH AL AJMI

RAMADHAN

is a time of spiritual reflection, fasting and community gatherings, but it also brings significant shifts in economic activity, particularly for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Oman. With altered consumer behaviours, adjusted working hours and evolving business strategies, SMEs must navigate both challenges and opportunities to sustain operations and capitalise on seasonal demand.

While certain sectors, such as retail and food services, experience a surge in sales, others may see slowdowns due to reduced working hours and shifting consumer priorities. However, businesses that effectively adapt – whether by launching Ramadhan promotions, extending evening hours, or embracing e-commerce – can transform the holy month into a period of growth and increased engagement.

For SMEs in the food production sector, Ramadhan necessitates careful planning to meet fluctuating demand. Farha al Kindi, CEO of Mina Fisheries Products, explained that the company structures its operations well in advance to align with seasonal fish availability and anticipated market needs.

"Our production schedule is care-

fully structured to correspond with the seasonal fish landings throughout the year. We ensure that when large catches are available, we acquire, process and store sufficient quantities to meet market needs," she told the *Observer*.

She added that a significant portion of production takes place in Shaaban, the month preceding Ramadhan, to ensure stock availability. "While regular manufacturing slows down during Ramadhan, we maintain limited production for specific requests or non-core products. However, the overall volume remains lower than usual."

Rather than focusing on production, Mina Fisheries shifts its emphasis during Ramadhan to marketing, distribution and sales management. "During Ramadhan, our emphasis transitions from manufacturing to ensuring efficient product distribution, marketing initiatives and sales management. This approach allows us to maintain a steady supply of our products in the market while adapting to the evolving consumer landscape during this period," Al Kindi noted.

Said al Mandhari, CEO of Libasi, highlighted that the company successfully navigated the challenges of Ramadhan by aligning its operations with the season's unique rhythm. "While some perceive Ramadhan as a period of reduced productivity, at Liba-

si we maintained steady performance by adopting flexible working hours and a Lean Management approach," he said.

Recognising different peak periods for each department ensured efficiency. "Our sales team sees the highest engagement after Iftar, while our marketing team focuses on visibility during the day, and operations ramp up in the evening," Al Mandhari explained. He noted that shorter working hours actually encouraged greater focus and collaboration among teams. "Ramadhan inspired even greater teamwork, enabling us to set clear goals and coordinate effectively to overcome potential slowdowns."

Beyond operational success, Libasi remained committed to social responsibility by donating traditional garments to charitable organisations. "Giving back to the community is a core value at Libasi, and we take pride in strengthening our bond with society during this important time," he said.

As Oman continues its economic diversification efforts, understanding the impact of Ramadhan on different industries is essential for SMEs striving to remain competitive. By anticipating market trends and adjusting their strategies accordingly, businesses can use the holy month as an opportunity for sustainable growth and long-term resilience.



Why dates hold a special place in Oman and the Arab world

BY KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

DATES—those enchanting fruits, cherished primarily in the Arab world, are bursting with remarkable medicinal benefits. They serve as a daily vitamin supplement and are especially popular during the holy month of Ramadhan.

Following the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (May Peace Be Upon Him), who broke his fast with a simple dry date alongside friends, Muslims worldwide share this time-honoured practice when breaking their fast.

In essence, dates are nature's treasure trove, filled with nutrients that promote robust health. They are particularly beneficial for maintaining strong bones, packed with copper, magnesium, selenium and manganese, along with a good amount of calcium — making them excellent for the health of both bones and teeth.

Let us introduce you to Bappan Kutty Haji, a dedicated vendor of dates and date products for the past 28 years, starting his journey at the historic Mawaleh Central Fruits and Vegetables Market and now thriving at Silal market in Barka.

Hailing from Areekkulam in Kerala's Malappuram district, Haji has established himself as a veritable authority on dates. When asked about different varieties, their nutritional content and medicinal values, he becomes animated, effortlessly sharing his extensive knowledge.

"By demand, Khalas is the most



popular variety of date in Oman. Other noteworthy types include Khaneezi, Battashi and Kasab. Additionally, we enjoy varieties such as Lulu, Mabsili, Safawi, Mabroom, Ajwa, Fardh, Khalas and Sukkari," he shares, illuminating his expertise.

While Sagai and Khudri dates predominantly hail from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Safawi dates hold a special place in the hearts of Omanis. Mabsili is often transformed into dry dates in various Asian countries,

where they are sun-dried to perfection.

Khaneezi dates are recognised for their sweetness, while Barni and Fardh are milder options suitable for those with diabetes. Other imported varieties such as Sakakai, Sagai, and the medicinal Ajwa also grace our markets, alongside the larger Majdool and Iran's Zahidi, each adding unique flavour to the local scene.

"The date industry in Oman is flourishing, not only catering to local palates, but also exporting to countries like India. However, local production is currently insufficient, and it's crucial that farmers receive the support needed to focus on date cultivation; we must also attract the younger generation to this vital agricultural pursuit. The government's initiative, the One Million Date Palm Programme, promises to significantly bolster date farming," Haji explains, recounting his journey from the Seeb market to his present venture at Silal market.

He emphasises the myriad medicinal properties that dates offer, advocating for their daily consumption to reap substantial health benefits.

"If you suffer from colds or allergies, incorporating dates into your daily diet can enhance your immune system, helping ward off such ailments. They aid in controlling cholesterol levels, supporting weight loss, and even regulating melanin production in the skin, providing anti-ageing benefits. Truly, the medicinal virtues of dates are boundless," Haji concludes, proudly representing his Omani brand, Assafa Dates, which is well-regarded in the market.

RAMADHAN TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

“Harira” (traditional soup), evening lanterns, and family feasts in Morocco

Ramadhan in Morocco is a time of piety and celebration, rich with culinary traditions and community engagement. As evening approaches, the tradition of breaking fast begins with “Harira”, a hearty soup made of tomatoes, lentils and spices, often served with dates and sweets. Families congregate to share meals, emphasising the importance of togetherness and gratitude. Vibrant lanterns illuminate doorways, symbolising the joy of the month. The mosques overflow with worshippers during nightly prayers, fostering communal bonds and spiritual reflection. Traditional music and storytelling often accompany evening gatherings, creating a harmonious atmosphere. Moroccans celebrate not just the act of fasting, but the shared cultural experience that brings people together. Acts of charity are frequently observed, as communities focus on helping those in need, reinforcing the values of empathy and generosity.

DAILY HEALTH TIPS TO REMEMBER



Manage Stress

Ramadhan is not only a physical challenge but also a spiritual journey that can sometimes lead to stress, particularly with numerous commitments such as prayers, community engagements and meals. It is essential to manage stress during this period for both mental and physical health. Consider adopting mindfulness practices like meditation or deep breathing exercises during challenging moments. Maintaining a reflective journal to record thoughts, experiences and gratitude daily can also enhance your sense of mindfulness and connection to the spiritual significance of Ramadhan. Additionally, balance your commitments with self-care activities that bring you joy, such as reading, connecting with loved ones, or engaging in hobbies. Social connections can provide vital support, alleviating feelings of stress.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN ISLAM



762 CE: Founding of Baghdad

The founding of Baghdad by the Abbasids as the new capital was a pivotal moment in Islamic history. Strategically located along trade routes, Baghdad became a centre for culture, learning and commerce. The city's layout and architecture symbolise the Abbasid vision, promoting knowledge and innovation. It housed the House of Wisdom, attracting scholars from various backgrounds to exchange ideas.

FEATURES



FASHION
THAT
MAKES
YOU FEEL

It’s not often that fashion show notes, the word salads that purport to explain the idea behind a collection but often seem like a pointless justification, offer a gut punch of surprise. But that’s what happened after the Comme des Garçons show, when Rei Kawakubo issued her usual explanatory aphorism.

“Recently we feel that big business, big culture, global systems, world structures maybe are not so great after all,” it read. But — there was an addendum — “Small can be mighty.”

For anyone following the news every day, it was impossible not to know what Kawakubo meant. Seeing her show, it was also hard not to think: Yeah! After all, she was not making a point about miniskirts.

Instead, what came through in her amalgamations of classic fabrics — pinstripe wools, gingham, tartan, jewel-toned velvets — made into what resembled dresses, or at least dress-adjacent structures, was their human scale.

Each odd, striking piece stood on its own: a shift emerging from the labyrinth of material here, a jacket from the mille-feuille there; a pyramid of black and white tuxedo ruffles, like the upended skirts of a ballgown, sandwiching the person inside, turning her into a monument to dressing gone by. Each one was like a little stack of memories, caught in the process of morphing into something else. What would it be? Who knows.

With them came emotion. Not necessarily desire, but tenderness. And the pure pleasure of seeing creativity let loose to roam, at a time when fashion often resembles a cynical exercise, controlled by big groups.

The show was only 20 looks. Their power lay not in their shoulders or their logos or their bombast, but their ability to get under your

skin and push on the soft places. To make you feel, and not just think, or raise your eyebrows, or yawn. That’s rare enough to seem like a radical experience, but it has happened a few times this week.

It happened, for example, at Rick Owens, whose world-building can tend toward the extreme, but who reined in himself — and his soaring shoulders, leaving behind the smoke machines of many other seasons to, as he said in a preview, “remind everybody that all of my proposals are real.” It was a reaction, he said, to “looking around and seeing this kind of ostentatious festival of fashion in which we live.”

It’s as weird to hear Owens discussing the need to make “plausible” clothes as it is to think of Kawakubo saying “small.” (“Even I might roll my eyes at me,” Owens said, laughing.) But the truth is his long bias-cut skirts, collaged together from denim and wool and slit up the centre to swirl around the legs; his suede and leather jackets, with their air of desiccated royalty, are simply elegant.

As was a hoodie pieced together from hundreds of strips of some shiny fabric so

it resembled feathers and an evening dress woven from strips of leather that looked both ancient and otherworldly — and wearable. Owens’ clothes can read as aggressive, but they also offer their own kind of embrace.

Still, perhaps no collection was as purely moving as the Undercover show from Jun Takahashi. Created to mark the brand’s 35th anniversary, it was ostensibly a revisiting of what Takahashi called his own favourite collection, from fall 2004, which had been inspired by Patti Smith and the work of the French “plush” artist Anne-Valerie Dupond. (Yeah, it was hard to know what to make of that combination of references.)

No matter; it actually featured models of all ages wandering aimlessly around the show space in what seemed like random patterns. Just as the buttons on their sweaters and Champion sweatshirts wandered off-centre, meandering through a forest of found objects that decorated their hems: keepsakes and shiny trinkets, like the rescued contents of a treasure chest, that dangled like charms.

A black coat was finished in onyx tinsel and made to be misbuttoned. Puffer party dresses had teddy bear heads quilted into their skirts, as if they were the Easter Island version of FAO Schwarz cuddle toys. Everything was sort of squishy, in a good way; complex and utterly casual at the same time.

At the end, a model came out in an ivory cotton suit, soft as a blanket, long fabric feathers trimming her arms. They were transformed into wings when she put her hands in her pockets. And when she gave a little shrug, as if to say, “What’s the big deal?” or “Can you believe this is going on?” the movement of her dorsal muscles made her wings flap. Back and forth, back and forth, as if getting ready for liftoff.

In that tiny gesture, whole stories lie. — NYT