



The Tax Authority announces the imminent activation of the Tax Warehousing System for excise goods, which aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Enhance compliance with Excise Tax.
- Enable taxpayers to store their excise goods under Excise Tax suspension within licensed warehouses, in accordance with specific technical and regulatory controls.
- Improve the monitoring process in coordination with competent authorities.

The Tax Authority invites business sectors whom desire to benefit from the Tax Warehousing System to review the technical requirements by scanning the QR code, and prepare for submitting license applications when they open soon.



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1020

MOOD SET FOR MUSCAT NIGHTS

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 21

THE Muscat Nights 2026 will be a month-long gala of events reinforcing Muscat’s position as a fully integrated events city through diversified gamut of activities catering to people of all ages, nationalities and preferences, according to the Muscat Municipality, which is organising the annual celebration of togetherness running from January 1 to 31, 2026.

Reflecting a comprehensive vision for a winter season that seamlessly blends entertainment, culture, sports and economic activity into a unified urban experience across the Governorate of Muscat, the expanded programme is expected to attract more than two million visitors, underscoring the festival’s evolution from a standalone entertainment event into a fully integrated urban season.

Muscat Nights 2026 highlights the capital’s vibrancy, its ability to deliver diverse content for all segments of society, and its growing stature as a leading winter destination in the region. The daily activities will be hosted



across a wide network of locations throughout Muscat Governorate, including Al Qurum Natural Park, Al Amerat Public Park, the Oman Automobile Association, the Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM), Al Seeb Beach (Sur Al Hadid), the Wilayat of Qurayat, Wadi Al Khoudh, as well as major shopping malls.

This diversity of venues allows visitors to experience Muscat Nights across multiple urban settings and formats.

The Muscat Nights 2026 visual identity is ‘Siraj’, a child of light inspired by Omani identity, who travels across the city sky spreading joy and heralding the arrival of the season through a creative and unconventional storytelling approach.

“Muscat Nights presents a cutting-edge visual spectacle where art meets technology, as Al Qurum Natural Park Lake transforms into an open-air stage of wonder,” said a representative from the Muscat Municipality.

The Muscat Nights Circus emerges as a major attraction, offering daily performances at the Oman Automobile Association venue throughout the festival. International performers present a dynamic programme featuring acrobatics, aerial acts, balance skills, sleight of hand, and the use of hologram technology — advanced light-based techniques that create three-dimensional visual scenes, adding a new layer of innovation and audience engagement.

“Throughout Muscat Nights 2026, Al Qurum Natural Park will host regular nighttime drone shows using advanced technology. Additionally, the drone light shows, Masha and the Bear, a family adventure full of imagination, multiple entertainment zones for different age groups, and above all, the Carnival which creates a pulse of joy everyday, family rides, amusement attractions, daily parades, and performances by local and international artists are in the anvil.”

FOURTH SOHAR FESTIVAL BEGINS TODAY

SUHAR: The 4th edition of Sohar Festival begins Monday, December 22, and runs until January 31, 2026.

The festival will feature a variety of cultural, entertainment, tourist and heritage activities that meet the expectations of different age groups. Special emphasis will be laid on enhancing Omani identity and promoting national domestic tourism.

A key feature of the festival will be ‘Omnia Museum’, which will offer visitors an interactive experience through the application of artificial intelligence (AI).

The festival venue will also house an ‘integrated Omani village’ and it will feature other



The festival venue will also house an ‘integrated Omani village’.

activities like photography competition, kite-flying and go-karting.

The festival’s events also include carnival shows, concerts and stalls that appeal to families, children and private business households — making the festival venue a comprehensive destination for different segments of society.

— ONA

16 Quranic centres established across various governorates

MUSCAT: Oman Association of Holy Quran Care is exerting significant efforts to prepare a society proficient in the recitation, memorisation, and chanting of the Holy Quran by operating 16 Quranic centres distributed across the various governorates of Oman.

The Association is a voluntary charitable association supervised by the Ministry of Social Development. It works to provide a diverse range of Quranic courses and circles, utilising a variety of means, methods and approaches.

These programmes are conducted both directly and indirectly, through in-person attendance or remotely, and via both technical and traditional means to suit the varying circumstances and needs of all segments of society.

Furthermore, the



The centres are conducted both directly and indirectly, through in-person attendance or remotely

association collaborates with various Quranic efforts and endeavours dedicated to serving the Holy Quran, including competitions and activities held in partnership with government, private and community entities.

The association continuously seeks to expand its activities across all wilayats of Oman. To ensure the quality of its work, the association has developed special regulations governing the mechanism for opening new centres, defining their specific activities, and clarifying their operational workflows. — ONA

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SHORTTAKES



An officer who graduated from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

RAO CHIEF HANDS OVER ROYAL COMMISSION CERTIFICATES

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Matar bin Salim al Balushi, Commander of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO) handed over the Royal commission certificates to a number of officers who graduated from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the United Kingdom, in a ceremony held at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Sunday.

The RAO Commander congratulated the officers on their graduation and completion of military training.

He commended them for earning the gracious trust and confidence of His Majesty the Supreme Commander as officers in the Royal Army of Oman. He urged them to exert further effort and dedication in performing their upcoming duties, wishing them continued success. — ONA

RAFO LAUNCHES NEW SET OF MODERN MILITARY SYSTEMS



'Esnad' electronic application was launched and is designed to support the operational plans of the Air Force

MUSCAT: As part of the ongoing modernisation of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) on Sunday inaugurated a new set of modern military systems and equipment.

The inaugural ceremony was held under the auspices of Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hamad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman.

The ceremony, held at Muaskar Al Murtafaa, began with a speech about efforts made to enhance RAFO's operational efficiency and improve its technical system by adopting modern solutions in a manner that keeps pace with digital transition taking place in Oman.

The ceremony included a presentation showcasing some of RAFO's equipment, devices and laboratories.

The chief guest launched 'Esnad' electronic application designed to support the operational plans of the Air Force in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. He also unveiled the visual identity of RAFO buses and specialised vehicles.

AVM Al Ghafri and the guests toured an exhibition organised on the sidelines of the event that showcased. At the exhibition, they were briefed about the latest equipment and devices with which the RAFO has been supplied. — ONA

OMAN, BELARUS EXPLORE ENHANCING CULTURAL TIES

MINSK: A delegation from the National Museum and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) visited the Belarusian State University (BSU) on Sunday as part of the activities accompanying 'Oman Day' in the Belarusian capital, Minsk.

The delegation was led by HH Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at SQU and Vice-Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum.

The visit began with a meeting involving Andrei Ivanets, Minister of Education of the Republic of Belarus, and Dr Andrei Korol, Rector of Belarusian State University.

Discussions focused on strengthening ties between SQU and



The delegation also toured the Faculty of International Relations. — ONA

Belarusian academic institutions; enhancing Arabic language education and cultural exchange programmes; facilitating student exchanges and reciprocal visits

for researchers and developing collaborative frameworks to serve the mutual interests of both friendly nations.

The delegation also toured the

Faculty of International Relations.

As part of the knowledge-sharing programme, Jamal bin Hassan al Mousawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum, delivered a lecture titled 'Oman at the Crossroads of Civilizational Communication'. Attended by university students, the lecture explored Oman's deep historical roots and Oman's role as a vital link between global civilisations throughout the ages.

Founded on October 30, 1921, BSU is the leading educational institution and primary academic reference in the Republic of Belarus. It holds a prestigious global standing, ranked within the top 1% of universities in the QS World University Rankings 2025. — ONA

Showcasing GCC inmates' creativity, technical skills

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 21

GULF Inmates Week, a week-long exhibition dedicated to showcasing the artistic, creative and technical skills of prison inmates, opened at the Mall of Oman on Sunday.

The exhibition features products made by male and female inmates of the General-Directorate of Prisons and was inaugurated by Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development, and Major General Abdullah bin Ali al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations, along with other officials from the Royal Oman Police and government agencies.

The exhibition will run until December 27 and is being held in conjunction with the Unified Gulf Inmate Week 2025, themed 'Towards the Path of Reform'.

It showcases a variety of inmate work, including professional crafts, handmade products, paintings, women's clothing, handicrafts, antiques, silverware and date-based products.

The exhibition serves as a practical demonstration of rehabilitation and empowerment efforts aimed at developing the inmates' creative and professional skills.

GCC Inmates Week is an annual event celebrated across Gulf countries, focusing



The exhibition will run until December 27 and is being held in conjunction with the Unified Gulf Inmate Week 2025.

on inmate rehabilitation, support for families and community integration through activities like training, educational programmes, family days and sometimes pardons for good behaviour to facilitate prisoners' reintegration as productive citizens.

This year's celebrations include an exhibition of products made by male and female inmates of the Central Prison.

GCC Inmates Week emphasises prisons as reformatory institutions, involving various ministries and civil societies to provide vocational skills, moral support and a

second chance, highlighting humanitarian efforts in the justice system.

The Week also focuses on prisoner reformation, exploring additional ways to train and educate inmates in skills such as IT, soft skills, and personality development to help them build a better future.

This Week also emphasises maintaining support for inmates' families and promoting community acceptance of ex-offenders to integrate them back into society. Certified vocational training initiatives in various subjects are available to help inmates secure jobs.

Translation prize unveils 2026 shortlists

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

The Bait AlGhasham-DarArab International Translation Prize on Sunday announced the shortlists for its 2026 cycle across three categories — Translators, Authors and Omani Publications — following the completion of all judging stages and final reviews. The 2026 shortlists reflect a cycle marked by wide participation and notable diversity, spanning multiple literary genres and a broad range of geographic backgrounds. This year also saw submissions from translators based outside the Arab world, underscoring the Prize's expanding regional and international reach.

Shortlist - Translators Category in alphabetical order by English title
Angel of the South, translated by Peter Theroux — by Najem Wali
Cairo Marquette, translated by Katherine



Van de Vate — by Tareq Imam
People and Lizards, translated by Osama Hammad and Marianne Dhenin — by Hassan Abdel Mawgoud
Things Are Not in Their Place, translated by Zia Ahmed — by Huda Hamad
Village of the Hundred, translated by Enas El Torky — by Rehab Luay
Shortlist - Authors category, alphabetical order by Arabic title
Abad Ghayr Mariyya — Short-story collection by Mustafa Mallah
Al Matador — Novel by Majdi Daibes
Jibal Al Judari — Novel by Abd Al Hadi

Shaalaa
Jarash Jarash — Novel by Wael Raddad
Kain Ghayr Sawi — Novel by Tahir Al Noor
Shortlist - Omani publications category, alphabetical order by Arabic title
Tahta Zill Al Zilal — Novel by Mohammed Qart Al Jazmi
Arous Al Gharqa — Novel by Amal Abdullah
Qawanin Al Faqd — Short-story collection by Mazen Habeeb
The shortlists were selected by independent judging panels operating under the supervision of the Prize's Board of Trustees, chaired by Marilyn Booth, an internationally recognised translator and scholar of Arabic literature. Board members also include Mohammed al Yahyai, a writer and cultural historian, and Sawad Hussain, an award-winning Arabic-to-English translator.

SPOTLIGHT

GREEN INNOVATION

MOHAMED
AL BATTASHI

GREEN INNOVATION is becoming one of the most important ways countries deal with environmental challenges while continuing to grow their economies.

In Oman and across the Arab region, it is increasingly seen as a practical path that connects scientific research, modern technology and business ideas to real solutions that protect the environment. As pressure on natural resources increases, innovation is no longer a choice but a necessity. Green innovation helps societies use natural resources in smarter and more efficient ways while reducing harm to the environment.

Today, sustainability depends on strong cooperation between researchers, engineers, entrepreneurs and decision-makers. When these areas work together, new ideas can move beyond theory and turn into practical solutions that improve daily life and support long-term development.

One of the main challenges facing the region is turning research results into real applications. Prof Abdelmajid Ben Amara, Secretary-General of the Federation of Arab Scientific Research Councils (FASRC), has stressed that although many Arab countries have strong research institutions, the true value of research lies in how it serves society.

He has pointed out that scientific work should lead to useful technologies and systems that help solve environmental and development problems, not remain limited to academic publications.

In Oman, green innovation is already helping improve key sectors, especially through the use of circular economy ideas. Buthaina al Wahaibi, Innovation and Sustainability Acting Manager at Nama Water Services, has explained how treated wastewater is being reused for agriculture and development projects. This practice helps extend the use of water resources and reduces reliance on energy-intensive desalination. Such solutions support water security while also lowering environmental and financial costs.

Innovation is also changing how waste is managed. Instead of viewing waste as something to be discarded, new approaches focus on turning it into a useful resource. She has highlighted efforts to convert wastewater sludge into organic fertiliser and to explore waste-to-energy technologies. These projects aim to reduce landfill waste, protect the environment and make better use of available materials.

The success of green innovation does not depend on technology alone. Cooperation between research centres, government bodies, and the private sector plays a key role in ensuring that new solutions are practical and can be used on a wide scale. Strong partnerships help move ideas from laboratories into real projects that benefit communities and industries.

Supporting young innovators is another important part of building a sustainable future. By offering training, funding and guidance, young people are encouraged to develop creative solutions to environmental challenges. Their involvement brings new energy and fresh ideas, helping to strengthen national innovation efforts and prepare the next generation of leaders.

As environmental challenges continue to grow, green innovation offers a balanced way forward. It supports economic development while protecting natural resources and improving quality of life. Through applied research, circular economy practices and cooperation across different sectors, Oman is taking important steps towards building a more sustainable and resilient future, one where innovation serves both people and the environment.

GREEN INNOVATION MUST TRANSLATE RESEARCH INTO PRACTICAL, SCALABLE SOLUTIONS

REUSE OF WATER AND WASTE IS STRENGTHENING SUSTAINABILITY IN KEY SECTORS

COLLABORATION ACROSS ACADEMIA, GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS.

SHORT TAKES



The facility enjoys logistical advantages that enhance access to regional and global markets.

OIA-BACKED TUNA, SARDINE CANNING FACILITY EMERGES AS REGIONAL LEADER

MUSCAT: The Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has played a pivotal role in establishing a major tuna and sardine canning facility in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm through its subsidiary, Oman Food Investment Holding. The project aligns with OIA’s commitment to enhancing the added value of Oman’s fisheries sector and supporting sustainable economic growth.

With an investment of RO 26 million, the facility is among the largest fish canning plants in the Middle East, boasting a production capacity of 100 million cans annually — surpassing major plants across the GCC. Its state-of-the-art infrastructure enables superior processing capabilities while creating approximately 200 direct jobs, supporting local employment and contributing to national self-sufficiency in high-quality seafood.

The facility offers a diverse range of products, including canned tuna and sardines, as well as fish-derived products such as fish meal and fish oil. Operating on a fully integrated supply chain, it sources raw materials from Omani fishing companies and employs modern processing, cold storage and warehousing facilities. This ensures efficiency, high product quality, and strengthens the domestic food manufacturing sector’s contribution to value addition in fisheries.

Designed with sustainability in mind, the facility incorporates energy- and water-efficient measures and repurposes fish waste to produce secondary products, reflecting OIA’s alignment with global best practices and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strategically located in Duqm, near key fishing zones and the Arabian Sea’s growing network of seaports, the facility enjoys logistical advantages that enhance access to regional and global markets, positioning Oman as a leading exporter of premium seafood products.

DHOFAR MUNICIPALITY LAUNCHES RO1.8 M ROAD MAINTENANCE PROJECTS

SALALAH: Dhofar Municipality has commenced a comprehensive package of projects aimed at maintaining and rehabilitating internal roads across the governorate, with a total investment exceeding RO 1.8 million.

The initiatives are part of ongoing efforts to develop Dhofar’s road network, improve infrastructure efficiency, and support sustainable urban and economic growth in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Dr Abdullah bin Mohammed Baawain, Director-General of the Directorate-General of Projects and Technical Affairs at Dhofar Municipality, highlighted that the 2025 projects included the maintenance of damaged roads in Salalah as part of the first and second phases.

He added that current works continue across all wilayats of Dhofar, including Salalah, Taqah, Mirbat, Sadah, Maqshin, Thamrait, Al Mazyouna, Rakhyout, Dhalkout, and Shaleem and Al Hallaniyat Islands.

The road projects are being implemented according to approved technical standards and timetables, prioritising public safety, infrastructure sustainability and operational efficiency to ensure high service levels for the road network.

Dr Baawain also emphasised that the municipality follows a participatory approach, taking into account the needs of local communities while supporting development across various sectors.

The ongoing initiatives aim to enhance the quality of municipal services, improve traffic safety and contribute to the overall development of Dhofar Governorate. — ONA

Second ‘Governorates’ Ambassadors’ Forum in Al Dakhiliyah

MUSCAT: The Projects, Tenders and Local Content Authority, in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, will organise the second ‘Governorates’ Ambassadors’ Forum on Tuesday, December 23.

The three-day event is part of ongoing efforts to enhance institutional integration and exchange expertise among various government entities.

Eng Said bin Hamad al Amri, Director-General of Tenders at the Authority, explained that the forum provides an opportunity to bolster the capabilities of local cadres and develop work tools within governors’ offices. This aligns with the trend towards empowering



The event is part of ongoing efforts to enhance institutional integration and exchange expertise.

governorates to exercise broader powers under the decentralisation framework, contributing to

balanced and sustainable development across Oman. In a statement to ONA, he added

that the forum — which includes officials, engineers and specialists overseeing government projects in Al Dakhiliyah — aims to build effective communication channels.

It focuses on exchanging best practices in contracts, tenders and project management, while supporting local content to achieve integration in government work and reviewing major developmental projects implemented in the governorate.

The forum’s agenda includes several specialised sessions and workshops. The second day is dedicated to field visits to witness progress on key projects. The final day will conclude with technical workshops. — ONA

OCA and Apollo Hospitals sign MoU on cancer care

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

THE Oman Cancer Association (OCA) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India’s Apollo Hospitals to promote expertise sharing and technical cooperation in cancer care. OCA is a non-governmental, non-profit charitable organisation founded by four-time cancer survivor Yuthar al Rawahi.

The MoU was signed by Dr Sangita Reddy, Joint Managing Director of Apollo Hospitals Group, and Dr Wahid al Kharusi, President and Chairperson of OCA, on the sidelines of the recent two-day visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Oman.

Under the agreement, both organisations will collaborate on clinical programmes aimed at upgrading medical knowledge, exchanging scientific data, undertaking joint research, enhancing patient education and developing protocols for early cancer detection.

Speaking to Observer, Dr Reddy said Apollo Hospitals is actively exploring partnerships across Oman and the wider GCC region, including the possibility of establishing a local presence. She noted that discussions include collaboration on advanced diagnostics, remote testing and specialist services to improve access to high-quality healthcare.

“We are evaluating partnership models that would allow high-end

Under the agreement, both organisations will collaborate on clinical programmes aimed at upgrading medical knowledge, exchanging scientific data, undertaking joint research, enhancing patient education and developing protocols for early cancer detection



Dr Wahid al Kharusi and Dr Sangita Reddy signed the MoU.

diagnostic samples to be processed through our global reference laboratories, while also exploring the feasibility of setting up a base in Oman. Such collaborations can significantly enhance access to specialised care,” she said.

Dr Reddy added that other members of the Indian delegation accompanying the Prime Minister are examining opportunities for cooperation in pharmaceuticals, vaccine development and medical manufacturing, reflecting the expanding scope of healthcare collaboration between India and Oman.

Highlighting India’s healthcare strengths, Dr Reddy said the country offers a unique combination of clinical excellence, advanced technology, and affordability. “India delivers world-class healthcare outcomes at nearly one-tenth of global costs, making it a natural destination for those seeking quality treatment at accessible prices,” she

said during a press conference at the InterCity Hotel.

She also underlined India’s growing stature as a global hub for medical and wellness tourism, aligning with Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Heal in India’ vision. The initiative positions India as a preferred destination by integrating high-quality care, digital health platforms, telemedicine services such as e-Sanjeevani, streamlined medical visas, and holistic wellness systems, including Ayurveda.

“Our hospitals deliver outcomes comparable to the best in the world, yet at a fraction of the cost. This makes India attractive not only for individuals, but also for governments seeking to optimise healthcare coverage,” Dr Reddy noted, adding that Apollo Hospitals partners with the Indian government under public-private partnership models to develop technology-enabled primary healthcare centres with centralised digital monitoring.

Human Solidarity Day highlights Oman’s commitment to social cohesion

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman joined the world in observing Human Solidarity Day, emphasising the importance of social cohesion, community cooperation, and humanitarian action in building resilient and just societies.

Badr bin Mohammed al Zaabi, CEO of the Omani Charitable Organisation, highlighted the authority’s role in coordinating humanitarian work nationally and internationally, developing regulatory frameworks and implementing programmes that uphold human dignity.

“Our work ensures integration and efficiency in humanitarian efforts, particularly during disasters and conflicts, while adhering to national laws and international standards,” he said.

The Authority promotes social solidarity by encouraging community participation in charitable work, supporting vulnerable groups, and collaborating with state institutions, the private sector, and civil society. Initiatives such as volunteering,

student engagement and donation campaigns aim to instil values of empathy, responsibility and mercy in younger generations.

To guarantee transparency and accountability, the authority uses rigorous mechanisms for distributing support, including clear application criteria, social research, and collaboration with local partners. Aid delivery is also monitored internationally in coordination with Omani embassies, Red Crescent societies and accredited humanitarian organisations.

Al Zaabi emphasised that humanitarian solidarity is crucial during crises, citing Oman’s coordinated response to past natural disasters, including cyclones Gonu, Phet

and Shaheen. “The Omani community, from north to south, east to west, has repeatedly demonstrated a remarkable spirit of cooperation and unity, ensuring rapid relief and support for affected communities,” he noted.

Among notable community initiatives is the Al Khair Wafi initiative, led by women committed to organised charitable work.

Nawal al Hooti of the initiative stressed the importance of continuity and diversified support, particularly for orphans.

Sociologist Mubarak bin Khamis al Hamdani underscored that social solidarity strengthens societal ties, enhances trust and stabilises political systems, and that families and educational institutions play a pivotal role in nurturing these values across generations.

Human Solidarity Day in Oman not only celebrates the nation’s commitment to humanitarian principles, but also reflects the country’s efforts to embed social cohesion and volunteerism as core societal values. — ONA

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



France’s President Emmanuel Macron addresses French troops, in Abu Dhabi. — AFP

MACRON IN UAE FOR TALKS, CHRISTMAS WITH TROOPS

ABU DHABI: President Emmanuel Macron arrived in the United Arab Emirates on Sunday to celebrate Christmas with French troops and to discuss bilateral ties with the Gulf state, as France hopes for more cooperation in its fight against drug trafficking. Macron is due to meet with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan to discuss “strengthening the strategic partnership” between the two countries, according to the French presidency, which stressed their cooperation on security and defence.

France cooperates with the UAE on areas including artificial intelligence and trade, and now wants to secure the Gulf state’s support in its war on drug trafficking. Macron said that he wanted to seek cooperation from countries where certain ringleaders are located to seize their assets and have them arrested. The French troops deployed in the UAE take part in anti-drug trafficking patrols at sea.

They are also participating in Operation Aspides — the EU naval task force deployed to the Red Sea in response to attacks on ships and in Operation Chammal, which seeks to contain the IS group in Iraq and Syria. — AFP

SUDAN DRONE ATTACK ON DARFUR MARKET KILLS 10

PORT SUDAN: A drone attack on a busy market in Sudan’s North Darfur state killed 10 people over the weekend, first responders said, without saying who was responsible. The attack comes as fighting intensified elsewhere in the country, leading aid workers to be evacuated on Sunday from Kadugli, a besieged, famine-hit city in the south.

The North Darfur Emergency Rooms Council, one of hundreds of volunteer groups coordinating aid across Sudan, said a drone strike hit Al Harra market in the RSF-controlled town of Malha on Saturday.

The council did not identify who carried out the attack, which it said had sparked “fire in shops and caused extensive material damage”. There was no immediate comment from either the Sudanese army or the RSF.

The war’s current epicentre is South Kordofan and clashes have escalated in Kadugli, the state capital, where a drone attack last week killed eight people as they attempted to flee the army-controlled city.

A source from a humanitarian organisation operating in Kadugli said on Sunday that humanitarian groups had “evacuated all their workers” from the city due to security conditions.

The evacuation followed the United Nations’ decision to relocate its logistics hub from Kadugli, the source said on condition of anonymity, without specifying where the staff had gone.

Kadugli and nearby Dilling have been besieged by paramilitary forces since the war erupted. — AFP

SHOOTING INCIDENT

Gunmen kill 9, wound 10 in South Africa



Nine people were killed when gunmen opened fire in Johannesburg early on Sunday, in the second such shooting in South Africa this month. Ten more were wounded in the early morning attack in the impoverished Bekersdal township in a gold mining area around 40 kilometres southwest of the city. Most of the attackers were armed with pistols and one had an AK-47 rifle, deputy provincial police commissioner Major General Fred Kekana said. — AFP

AID AGREEMENT

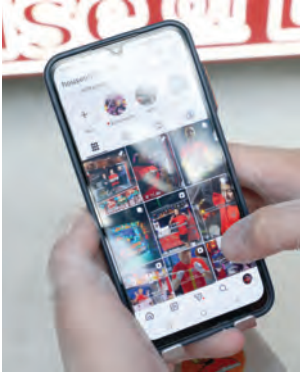
US signs health aid deal with Nigeria



Washington announced that it has signed a deal to strengthen Nigeria’s health system, a sign of improving ties with Africa’s most populous nation. Under a five-year bilateral deal, Washington will contribute nearly \$2.1 billion to help prevent HIV, tuberculosis, malaria and polio, and to protect maternal and child health, a US State Department spokesman said. Nigeria has committed to increasing its national health spending by nearly \$3 billion over the five-year period. — AFP

PLATFORMS RISKS

Switzerland open to social media ban



Switzerland must do more to shield children from social media risks, Interior Minister Elisabeth Baume-Schneider was quoted, signalling she was open to a potential ban on the platforms for youngsters. “The debate in Australia and the EU is important. It must also be conducted in Switzerland. I am open to a social media ban,” said the minister, a member of the centre-left Social Democrats. “We must better protect our children.” — Reuters

TAIWAN POLICE RULE OUT ‘TERRORISM’ IN METRO STABBING

TAIPEI: Taiwan police on Sunday ruled out “terrorism” in a metro stabbing in the capital Taipei, where an attacker killed three and wounded 11. A 27-year-old man, identified by police by his family name Chang, set off smoke bombs at Taipei Main Station metro on Friday afternoon before launching into a three hour stabbing spree. The attacker then moved to a shopping district near Zhongshan station, authorities said. “Based on what we have established so far

in the investigation, the suspect Chang did not make or display any statements or views related to politics, religion, or any specific ideology, and we have preliminarily ruled out terrorism,” a senior Taipei City Police Department official said, under the condition of anonymity. “Terrorist attacks have a specific definition and the suspect does not meet that definition,” he added. Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an said the suspect was found dead the same day, after jumping off a

nearby building. The senior police official said investigators also found searches for “random killings” on Chang’s iPad, including material related to a Taipei metro stabbing in 2014 when a man killed four people. In the immediate aftermath of the Friday stabbing, officials called the attack “deliberate” but said the motive was not clear. Police said they believe Chang had acted alone and planned to “randomly kill people”. He rented an apartment in the district in January. — AFP

Thai-Cambodia clashes displace over half a million

MORE than half a million people in Cambodia have been displaced by two weeks of deadly border clashes with neighbouring Thailand, Phnom Penh said on Sunday, ahead of regional talks aimed at easing tensions. The renewed fighting between the Southeast Asian neighbours this month, including with tanks, drones and artillery, has killed at least 22 people in Thailand and 19 in Cambodia, officials said. The conflict stems from a territorial dispute over the colonial-era demarcation of their 800-kilometre (500-mile) border and a smattering of ancient temple ruins situated on the frontier.

Cambodia and Thailand both said on Sunday that a meeting of Southeast Asian foreign ministers hosted by Malaysia on Monday was expected to de-escalate tensions, with Bangkok calling it “an important opportunity for both sides”. Thai foreign ministry spokeswoman Maratee Nalita Andamo reiterated earlier conditions for negotiations, including Bangkok’s demand that Phnom Penh be first to announce a truce, and cooperate in de-mining efforts at the border. Those conditions, Maratee told reporters, “will guide our interaction in the discussions tomorrow in Kuala Lumpur”.

Cambodia’s foreign ministry said the meeting aimed to restore “peace, stability and good neighbourly relations”. Phnom Penh would “reaffirm its firm position of resolving differences and disputes



People look at a damaged bridge after Thailand carried out air strikes, between Cambodia’s Oddar Meanchey and Siem Reap provinces. — AFP



Cambodia and Thailand both said on Sunday that a meeting of Southeast Asian foreign ministers hosted by Malaysia on Monday was expected to de-escalate tensions, with Bangkok calling it “an important opportunity for both sides”

through all peaceful means, dialogue and diplomacy,” it added. Cambodia’s interior ministry said more than 518,000 people were “suffering severe hardship due to forced displacement from their homes and schools” to escape Thai artillery and air strikes.

The fighting has displaced around 400,000 people in Thailand, Bangkok has said. Thailand’s defence ministry spokesman Surasant Kongsiri told reporters on Sunday that more than 200,000 remained in shelters. “There are some villagers that can return home,” he said, warning however that there may still “be some dangerous mines or bombs left”.

Each side has blamed the other for instigating the fresh fighting and traded accusations of attacks on civilians, after five days of clashes

in July killed dozens. The United States, China and Malaysia brokered a truce to end that round of fighting, but the ceasefire was short-lived. In October, US President Donald Trump backed a follow-on joint declaration between Thailand and Cambodia, touting new trade deals after they agreed in Kuala Lumpur to prolong their truce. But Thailand suspended the agreement the following month, after Thai soldiers were wounded by landmines while on patrol at the border. Bangkok has accused Cambodia of laying fresh mines, an allegation denied by Phnom Penh.

Trump, who has placed the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand on a list of wars he said he solved, this month claimed the two countries had agreed to a new ceasefire. — AFP

ISRAELI SHELLING ON SHELTER KILLS 6 IN GAZA

GAZA: Dozens of Palestinians gathered at a Gaza City hospital to mourn six people, including children, that the civil defence said were killed by the Israeli shelling of a shelter for displaced people. Gaza’s civil defence agency, which operates as a rescue force under Hamas authority, initially said on Friday that the Israeli shelling of a school-turned-shelter killed five people in the Tuffah neighbourhood east of Gaza City.

Agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal updated the toll to six, including children, on Saturday, adding that two people were unaccounted for under the rubble. The director of Gaza City’s Al Shifa Hospital, Mohammed Abu Salmiya, said that the victims were a four-month old infant, a 14-year-old girl, two men and two women.

Inside the hospital’s morgue, relatives peered beneath blankets to get a last glimpse of their loved ones. Outside, a grief-stricken man clutched an infant’s body wrapped in a white shroud, footage showed. Five other body bags were laid out on the ground as mourners prayed over the dead. — AFP

SANCTIONED VESSELS



A US military helicopter flies over the Panama-flagged Centuries, east of Barbados in the Caribbean Sea. — Reuters

US AGAIN SEIZES OIL TANKER OFF COAST OF VENEZUELA

WASHINGTON: The United States “apprehended” an oil tanker off Venezuela, a move Caracas deemed a “theft and kidnapping,” in the latest salvo of a pressure campaign by Washington, the US government said. It was the second time in two weeks that US forces have interdicted a tanker in the region, and comes days after President Donald Trump announced a blockade of “sanctioned oil vessels” heading to and leaving Venezuela. “In a pre-dawn action early this morning on Dec. 20, the US Coast Guard with the support of the Department of War apprehended an oil tanker that was last docked in Venezuela,” US Homeland Security chief Kristi Noem said in a post on X. The post was accompanied by a nearly eight-minute video of aerial footage that showed a helicopter hovering just above the deck of a large tanker at sea. Caracas slammed the seizure as theft and kidnapping, saying “those responsible for these serious events will answer to justice and to history for their criminal conduct.” A post from Homeland Security identified the vessel as the Centuries and said it was “suspected of carrying oil subject to US sanctions.”

Centuries is a Chinese-owned, Panama-flagged oil tanker, according to TankerTrackers, an online service monitoring oil shipments and storage. It said that Centuries loaded 1.8 million barrels of crude oil at a Venezuelan port earlier this month before being escorted out of Venezuela’s exclusive economic zone on December 18. The VesselFinder database also listed the ship’s last recorded location as off the Venezuelan coast.

A review found that Centuries does not appear on the US Treasury Department’s list of sanctioned companies and individuals. White House deputy spokeswoman Anna Kelly said in a post on X the tanker “contained sanctioned PDVSA oil,” in reference to Venezuela’s state oil company, and charged the ship as being “a falsely flagged vessel operating as part of the Venezuelan shadow fleet.”

On December 10, US forces seized a large oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela, which the attorney general said was involved in carrying sanctioned oil from Venezuela to Iran. The United States has for months been building a major military deployment in the Caribbean with the stated goal of combatting Latin American drug trafficking, but taking particular aim at Venezuela.

Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez voiced defiance in comments at a public event in Caracas broadcast — although he made no mention of the interdicted ship. “We are waging a battle against lies, manipulation, interference, military threats, and psychological warfare,” the defence minister said. — AFP

ELECTRICITY OUTAGE HITS SAN FRANCISCO, THOUSANDS WITHOUT POWER

SAN FRANCISCO: A huge electricity outage hit San Francisco, leaving 130,000 residents without power for several hours at its peak, with the city’s main provider saying all services would return overnight. Pacific Gas & Electric Company said in a statement on X that power had been restored to about 90,000 households by 9 pm on Saturday (05:00 Sunday GMT), “with the remaining 40,000 customers expected to be restored overnight.” Large parts of the West Coast

tech hub, which has a population of more than 800,000 people, were plunged into darkness, with disruptions to public transport and many traffic lights not working on a busy Christmas shopping weekend before power began to be restored. “I know this was a rough day,” San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie said in a video posted on X from the city’s emergency operations centre. “That is progress (on restoration of power)... but for those of you who do not have power, we want to make

sure you stay safe, check on your neighbours,” he said. Fire department and other city officials had been sent out and asked residents to stay home if possible. Many traffic signals were out, leaving traffic police to manage intersections and the self-driving ride-hailing service Waymo had paused operation of its vehicles, he said. A fire at a substation had caused the blackout, Lurie said. Parts of the city were blanketed in fog. — AFP

Kremlin denies three-way peace talks in preparation

THE Kremlin on Sunday denied that three-way talks between Ukraine, Russia and the United States were on the cards, as diplomats gathered in Miami for talks on ending the conflict. A day earlier, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had said that Washington had mooted the trilateral format, which would mark Moscow and Kyiv’s first face-to-face negotiations in half a year, but expressed scepticism that they would lead to progress. “At present, no one has seriously discussed this initiative, and to my knowledge, it is not in preparation,” Russian President Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters, according to Russian news agencies.

After revealing the US three-way proposal, Zelensky told journalists on Saturday that he was “not sure that anything new could come of it”, and urged the United States to step up pressure on Russia to end the war. But the Ukrainian leader struck a more upbeat note on Sunday, adding that “constructive” talks between US, European and Ukrainian negotiators were “moving at a fairly rapid pace”, while cautioning that “much depends on whether Russia feels the need to end the war for real”. “Unfortunately, the real signals coming from Russia remain only negative: assaults along the frontline, Russian war crimes in border areas, and continued strikes against our infrastructure,” Zelensky posted on X.

Russian envoy Kirill Dmitriev arrived on Saturday in Miami, where Ukrainian and European teams have also been gathering since Friday for the negotiations, mediated by US special envoy Steve Witkoff and President Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. Dmitriev “will return to Moscow, make his report, and we will discuss what to do next”, Uskakov said. The top Kremlin aide also told Russian journalists on Sunday that he had “not seen” the revised US proposal to end the conflict.

Washington last month stunned Ukraine and its European allies by presenting a 28-point plan to end the war widely seen as caving in to the Kremlin’s key demands, which has since been redrafted following Kyiv and Europe’s involvement. While



Residents react at the site of a Russian air strike, in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. — Reuters

little is known of the latest version, Kyiv is likely to be expected to surrender some territory — a prospect resented by many Ukrainians — in exchange for US security guarantees. Moscow’s troops have been steadily advancing at the eastern front in recent months, with Putin on Friday hailing the Russian army’s territorial gains — and threatening more in the coming weeks.

The last time Ukrainian and Russian envoys held official direct talks was in July in Istanbul, which led to prisoner swaps but little else in the way of concrete progress to stop the fighting. Russian and European involvement in Miami marks a step forward from before, when the Americans held separate negotiations with each side in different locations. But the extremely strained relations between the two sides after nearly four years of Europe’s bloodiest conflict since World War II have cast doubt over the prospect of direct Ukraine-Russia talks.

According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov in an interview published on Sunday, Putin however expressed his willingness to talk with France’s Emmanuel Macron on the conflict. Macron held several calls with Putin in the run-up to and during the early months of the conflict, in an attempt to press the veteran Kremlin leader on the war. Putin has

“expressed readiness to engage in dialogue with Macron”, Peskov told state news agency RIA Novosti. “Therefore, if there is mutual political will, then this can only be assessed positively.” In response, Macron’s office said Putin’s stated willingness to talk was “welcome”, but stressed that any discussion with Moscow would be conducted “in full transparency” with Zelensky and European allies.

Meanwhile, Zelensky said on X that “over the past week, Russia has launched approximately 1,300 attack drones, nearly 1,200 guided aerial bombs, and 9 missiles of various types against Ukraine” with the Odesa region and the south of the country “hit particularly hard”. The Ukrainian army was battling an attempted Russian breakthrough in the Sumy region, it said on Sunday, following reports that Moscow forcibly moved 50 people from a border village there. This marks a renewed Russian advance in the part of the region previously largely spared from intense ground fighting since Ukraine regained land there in a swift 2022 counter-offensive.

“Fighting is currently ongoing in the village of Grabovske,” Ukraine’s joint task force said, adding the troops were “making efforts to drive the occupiers back into Russian territory.” — Reuters

Australia falls silent, lights candles for Bondi Beach victims

SYDNEY: Australians fell silent in flickering candlelight on Sunday in memory of the Bondi Beach shooting victims, one week after gunmen fired into crowds celebrating a Jewish festival. A father and son are accused of targeting the beachside Hanukkah event, killing 15 people in the nation’s deadliest mass shooting in almost three decades. From raucous city pubs to sleepy country towns, Australia observed a minute’s silence at 6:47 pm, exactly a week since the first reports of gunfire.

Countless homes lined their windowsills with candles in a gesture of “light over darkness”, a key theme of the Hanukkah festival. “Last week took our innocence and, like the grass here at Bondi was stained with blood, so too has our nation been stained,” said David Ossip, president of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies. Summer winds buffeted flags

lowered to half-mast across the country, including over the famed Sydney Harbour Bridge.

A candle was lit before thousands of people held their silent vigil at Bondi Beach. Anger spilled over at the government’s perceived failure to act swiftly and forcefully enough to halt a rise in incidents since the outbreak of hostilities. Television images showed police surrounding one man who shouted: “Blood on your hands,” as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese arrived at the ocean-side event. Some in the crowd booed when Albanese’s presence was announced at the service. The prime minister, wearing a traditional Jewish kippah, did not speak at the commemoration.

As dusk fell over the Bondi foreshore, event organisers estimated some 20,000 had attended. “Bondi is with us, Sydney is with us, Australia is with us and the world is with us,” rabbi Yehoram



Australian PM Anthony Albanese attends a National Day of Reflection, at Bondi Beach in Sydney. — Reuters

Ulman said, before reading out the names of those killed. They include 10-year-old Matilda, the youngest victim, and Holocaust survivor Alex Kleytman, 87, who was killed shielding his wife from bullets. Paramedics, police and parents of the wounded were invited on stage to light the arms of a Jewish candelabrum known as a menorah. A generation of Australians has

grown up with the notion that mass shootings simply do not happen in the country. That illusion was shattered when alleged gunman Sajid Akram, 50, and his 24-year old son Naveed trained their long-barrelled weapons on the nation’s most famous beach. The attack was so unthinkable that many shrugged off the first cracks of gunfire as harmless festive fireworks.

The government has announced a suite of national measures on gun ownership and hate speech, promising stricter laws and harsher penalties. Albanese has announced a sweeping buyback scheme to “get guns off our streets”. It is the largest gun buyback since 1996, when Australia cracked down on firearms in the wake of a mass shooting that killed 35 people at Port Arthur. Albanese has also ordered a review of police and intelligence services. Alongside the killings, stories of immense bravery have emerged. Beachgoers grappled with the heavily armed assailants, while others shielded strangers or dashed through gunfire to treat the wounded. Shopkeeper Ahmed al Ahmed, a father of two who moved to Australia from Syria almost a decade ago, has been lauded after ducking between cars and then wrestling a gun from one of the attackers. — AFP

OPINION

Rethinking learning in the age of AI and technology



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2025 has offered vast challenges to the field of education, most of which revolve around the role of technology and Artificial Intelligence. While markets discuss the possibility of a potential crash of the AI industry, education is having to face short and-long term consequences of these developments which are rapidly changing the nature of our classrooms. To begin with, what kind of learning is suitable for a shifting world is becoming an important question. If content and information are easily available at the palm of one’s hand through digital devices, what exactly needs to be taught? Traditionally, education meant sharing information by more informed and experienced adults. Today, all that has changed with a levelling of the information gap. Nor do the traditional, time-tested methods of memorisation and testing content through quizzes achieve much. Students, particularly those in secondary and tertiary levels, wonder what exactly is being tested and why. Other challenges in education today include

teachers vying for attention from a cohort known to have a shorter attention span, triggered by multiple stimuli. In such a scenario, dry information load is unlikely to spur interest, or inspire a passion. But all this is not necessarily bad news. In fact, if anything, it offers new challenges and opportunities to re-conceptualise education in innovative frameworks. The current shift from knowledge sharing to capacity building is critical. Education today needs to be seen as a way to cultivate the abilities needed to navigate, interpret and apply information which is easily accessible. What must be taught extends far beyond facts. It focuses on what to do with these facts. Institutions must be able to balance efficient use of technology with the kind of human factors which will remain useful. These include human judgement, empathy, and creativity. These are not skills that automation can take over. Education systems today must also confront the difficulty of keeping curricula relevant in a world where industries transform rapidly. Digital literacy is important, but so are skills like problem solving, collaboration and adaptability.

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Such soft skills are basically transferable and ready for any future scenario. Many of the challenges facing education today are intertwined with making learning relevant to learners. This requires having extended conversations with youngsters on the importance of education that goes beyond rote learning. In a world where none of the learning outcomes of a classroom appear to have real-world applications, market ready skills need to be integrated with long-term, adaptable learning. In light of such rapid changes, educational institutions must also focus on social and emotional development. The lack of such skills is leading to large scale mental health issues where individuals find themselves socially isolated. The continuing effects of global disruptions have increased social pressure and economic uncertainty, contributing to rising anxiety among young people. This is being seen as a rising epidemic by social scientists and education needs to cater to such challenges. As like much else in today’s world, education is at a crossroads. This can be a challenge, but also an opportunity to offer youngsters the capacity to face their future with confidence.

BEETLES BLOCK
MINING OF EUROPE’S
BIGGEST RARE
EARTHS DEPOSIT

PIERRE-HENRY DESHAYES

As Europe seeks to curb its dependence on China for rare earths, plans to mine the continent’s biggest deposit have hit a roadblock over fears that mining operations could harm endangered beetles, mosses and mushrooms. A two-hour drive southwest of Oslo, in the former mining community of Ulefoss home to 2,000 people, lies the Fensfeltet treasure: an estimated 8.8 million tonnes of rare earths. These elements, used to make magnets crucial to the auto, electronics and defence industries, have been defined by the European Union as critical raw materials. In its Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) aimed at securing Europe’s supply, the EU has set as an objective that at least 10 per cent of its needs should be extracted within the bloc by 2030. No rare earth deposits are currently being mined in Europe. Due to environmental concerns, Rare Earths Norway has already been forced to push back its schedule. Now it aims to begin mining in the first half of the 2030s. Its so-called “invisible mine” project is intended to limit the mine’s environmental footprint. It plans to use underground extraction and crushing — as opposed to an open-pit mine — and re-inject a large part of the mining residue. But the location of the mineral processing park, where ore extracted underground would be handled and pre-processed, has posed a problem. The company had planned to transport the minerals on an underground conveyor belt emerging above ground behind a hill, in an area out of sight from the town and largely covered by ancient natural forests, rich in biodiversity. But experts who examined that site found 78 fauna and flora species on Norway’s “red list” — species at risk of extinction to varying degrees. They included saproxylic beetles (which depend on deadwood), wych elms, common ash trees, 40 types of mushrooms, and various mosses. As a result, the county governor formally opposed the location during a recent consultation process. “We need to start mining as quickly as possible so we can bypass polluting value chains originating in China,” said Martin Molvaer, an adviser at Bellona, a Norwegian tech-focused environmental NGO. “But things should not move so quickly that we destroy a large part of nature in the process: we must therefore rush slowly,” he said. Faced with such objections, the municipality has been forced to review the plans and take a closer look at alternate locations for the above-ground part of the mine. — AFP

The movie I was afraid to see



M. GESSEN

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I was afraid to see “The Voice of Hind Rajab.” I knew that the movie is based on the recordings of a 5-year-old Palestinian girl in the Gaza Strip, trapped in a car with the bodies of her family members, speaking with rescue workers. I knew that the girl — Hind Rajab — was eventually killed, too. And I knew that the film was made by Kaouther Ben Hania, the Tunisian director who has invented ways to mix documentary and fiction film-making that make it impossible to look away. The movie isn’t suspenseful in the sense that you know how the story ends. And it is eerily kind to the viewer, who never has to see the little girl stuck in the car, the little girl terrified of being killed, the little girl dying. All you see are the rescue-centre workers at their office in Ramallah (the film was actually shot on a set in Tunisia) — computers, glass partitions, a soaring but sterile view of the sky. Their task is to coordinate: to get clearance for an ambulance in Gaza to pick up the child. It’s an eight-minute drive for the ambulance, but the car can’t set off until its mission and route are approved — we never know exactly by whom. Eventually, as I knew going in, the ambulance would be shelled by Israeli forces and everyone would die. What I didn’t realise when I resisted seeing the movie was that these deaths were not its subject. The subject of the movie is the moral injury inflicted on people who became implicated in these deaths, even as they tried to prevent them. Had I known, I might have been even more scared of seeing “The Voice of Hind Rajab,” because this focus hits even closer to home. The most important word in this film is “coordination.” This word is whispered and yelled, mouthed with desperate need, shouted with disdain and called forth as though it were a magic spell. Coordination is the process by which rescue workers arrange for a safe route for an ambulance. At one

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point, Mahdi, one of the four central characters in the film, explains the process: He calls the Red Cross in Jerusalem; the Red Cross calls a unit of the Israeli Defense Ministry called COGAT, which stands for Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories; COGAT and troops on the ground agree on a route, which is communicated to the Red Cross, which sends it to Mahdi — who said, “But receiving the route doesn’t mean we have the green light. The green light to deploy the ambulance is another step from A to Z. I have to follow this procedure to the letter, because if we don’t, they could shoot at our ambulance and say it’s our fault.” It’s a long process, and like any bureaucratic process, it consists primarily of waiting. Omar, another rescue worker, who has been speaking to Hind directly, finds the waiting intolerable. He wants to bypass coordination and dispatch the ambulance directly. But Mahdi can’t risk the lives of the rescue workers on the ground. The people in this film have no choice but to coordinate, but their relationships to coordination are different. Mahdi seems to see it as his duty to follow the rules, because that will keep the maximum number of people alive. Omar sees himself and his colleagues as becoming complicit in inflicting fear, injury and ultimately death on the little girl. Mahdi points to photographs of Palestinian rescue workers who have died: He is struggling to protect those who remain. Omar yells at him. “How can you coordinate with the army who killed them and all those people?” he asks. Eventually, they come to blows. Omar curses about green lights and coordination, and shouts, “It’s because of people like you that we’re occupied.” At one point in “The Voice of Hind Rajab,” Omar proposes that the Palestinian Ministry of Health call the Israeli military to pitch the idea that they rescue Hind and use her for propaganda purposes. The

people in the room seem stunned at the suggestion. It may sound brilliant, but it would not work. An unspoken understanding hangs in the air — Palestinians have been so thoroughly dehumanised by the Israeli media that it’s unimaginable that even a 5-year-old girl could be seen as anything but the enemy. Eventually, there is an approved route, but still no “green light.” The little girl, of course, cannot understand how it is that adults are failing to help her. One of the women rescue workers, Rana, tries to explain that the rescue workers are like a big family, and that “my brothers and sisters at the Red Crescent are coordinating,” adding, “I swear, we are doing what we can.” She repeats: “We need to coordinate to get there.” It has been more than two hours. One of the last times we hear the word, it’s Hind’s mother who is speaking. She has been patched in so she can speak with her child. She wants to know whether the team has coordinated. The rescue workers assure her they have. They were about 200 feet from Hind when the ambulance was shelled. She lived for at least an hour after that. “The Voice of Hind Rajab” had its premiere at the Venice Film Festival in September and took the Grand Jury Prize, the second-highest honour. A few days later, it was screened to great acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival. High-profile US distribution companies came calling. But then, the producers Odessa Rae and Elizabeth Woodward told me, one by one the companies peeled off. In the end, Woodward, who has a small distribution company, put together something akin to self-distribution. The movie opens in New York and Los Angeles on Wednesday. Elsewhere in the world this film, shortlisted for the Oscar for best foreign movie, has major distributors — but not in the United States or Israel. That’s a kind of coordination, too.

There is always another bus coming!



ABDULAZIZ AL JAHDHANI

The writer is author, translator and a communications professional

SOMETIMES you miss the bus because you are meant to walk and see something beautiful along the way. Not every delay is bad as life slows you down to protect you, not hurt you. Maybe you are being guided, or maybe you are being redirected. So don't stress when things don't go your way. Take a breath and keep moving; the diversion might become the best part of your journey. And remember, there is always another bus coming!

As one year ends and another begins, many of us pause to reflect on what we have achieved and what still lives quietly in our hearts. The turning of the calendar is more than a change of dates; it is an invitation to believe again, to hope again and to chase the dreams that may have been postponed, doubted, or feared. The coming year is not just another chapter — it is a fresh chance to move closer to your dreams.

Dreams are born from who we are. They reflect our passions, our values and our deepest desires. That is why there is no such thing as a stupid dream. What may seem unrealistic or strange to others can be extremely meaningful to you. History is filled

with people who were laughed at for their dreams until those dreams became reality. Every great achievement once started as an idea that seemed impossible.

The world often tries to define what is “realistic”, but progress has never been built on realism alone. It has been built on courage, imagination and persistence. If a dream excites you, scares you a little and keeps returning to your thoughts, it matters. The coming year is the perfect time to honour that dream instead of dismissing it.

One of the most common reasons people abandon their dreams is the belief that time has already passed them by. They think they are too old, too far behind, or that they should have started earlier. However, time does not disqualify dreams, but fear does.

Many people achieve their greatest successes later in life, after years of learning, failing and growing. Every experience you have had so far has prepared you in one way or another. The coming year does not ask how old you are or how long it took you to begin; it only asks whether you are willing to take the next step. It is never too late to begin again, to change direction, or to pursue something meaningful. Dreams do not expire; they wait for the right moment. Belief is the bridge

Dreams are born from who we are. They reflect our passions, our values and our deepest desires. That is why there is no such thing as a stupid dream. What may seem unrealistic or strange to others can be extremely meaningful to you

between dreaming and achieving. If you truly believe in your dream, you will find ways to work towards it even when progress is slow. Not achieving your goal this year does not mean you failed; it simply means the journey is still continuing. Some dreams take longer than expected. Some require patience, resilience and repeated effort. The coming year or the years that follow may be when everything finally aligns. What matters is that you keep believing, keep learning and keep moving forward. Every small step counts even when results are not immediately visible. The difference between those who achieve their dreams and those who don't is often not talent or luck, but persistence. Belief keeps you going when motivation fades and obstacles appear. You may not achieve everything in one year, and that is okay.

Dreams are not meant to be rushed; they are meant to be lived. If you believe in them, work for them and refuse to give up, they will find their way into your life — this year, the next, or the one after that. The coming year is waiting, and so are your dreams. Chase them to come true. Remember, if the bus doesn't arrive when you expect it to, don't assume you are late. Maybe you were meant to walk, to notice and to grow.

PRESIDENT TRUMP SET TO EXPAND IMMIGRATION CRACKDOWN

TED HESSON, KRISTINA COOKE AND JEFF MASON

US President Donald Trump is preparing for a more aggressive immigration crackdown in 2026 with billions in new funding, including by raiding more workplaces - even as backlash builds ahead of next year's midterm elections. Trump has already surged immigration agents into major US cities, where they swept through neighbourhoods and clashed with residents. While federal agents this year conducted some high-profile raids on businesses, they largely avoided raiding farms, factories and other businesses that are economically important but known to employ immigrants without legal status. ICE and Border Patrol will get \$170 billion in additional funds through September 2029 - a huge surge of funding over their existing annual budgets of about \$19 billion after the Republican-controlled Congress passed a massive spending package in July.

Administration officials say they plan to hire thousands more agents, open new detention centres, pick up more immigrants in local jails and partner with outside companies to track down people without legal status.

The expanded deportation plans come despite growing signs of political backlash ahead of next year's midterm elections.

Miami, one of the cities most affected by Trump's crackdown because of its large immigrant population, elected its first Democratic mayor in nearly three decades last week in what the mayor-elect said was, in part, a reaction to the president. Other local elections and polling have suggested rising concern among voters wary of aggressive immigration tactics. “People are beginning to see this not as an immigration question anymore as much as it is a violation of rights, a violation of due process and militarising neighbourhoods extraconstitutionally,” said Mike Madrid, a moderate Republican political strategist. “There is no question that is a problem for the president and Republicans.” Trump's overall approval rating on immigration policy fell from 50 per cent in March, before he launched crackdowns in several major US cities, to 41 per cent in mid-December, for what had been his strongest issue. Rising public unease has focused on masked federal agents using aggressive tactics such as deploying tear gas in residential neighbourhoods and detaining US citizens.

In addition to expanding enforcement actions, Trump has stripped hundreds of thousands of Haitian, Venezuelan and Afghan immigrants of temporary legal status, expanding the pool of people who could be deported as the president promises to remove 1 million immigrants each year - a goal he almost certainly will miss this year. So far, some 622,000 immigrants have been deported since Trump took office in January.

White House border czar Tom Homan said Trump had delivered on his promise of a historic deportation operation and removing criminals while shutting down illegal immigration across the US-Mexico border. — Reuters

Global health workers strengthen US security

LAST December, while visiting Nairobi for a global health workshop, I met a group of community health workers, the frontline professionals who play a vital role in providing HIV, tuberculosis and maternal health services across Africa. They talked about navigating informal settlements to reach patients who missed appointments; building trust one conversation at a time; and knowing the ins and outs of their catchment area, including which children are orphaned, which traditional healers collaborate on referrals, and which patients struggle with adherence.

Their expertise was largely developed in programmes funded by the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR), which US president George W Bush launched in 2003. By training and supporting community health workers, the programme has helped strengthen the continent's healthcare systems. But these workers do more than deliver healthcare: they also function as an early-warning system for the next pandemic – a crucial role that directly benefits the US.

But US policymakers seem to have overlooked this, at least judging by the America First Global Health Strategy that the US Department of State released in September. It sets the ambitious goal of achieving the 95-95-95 targets (whereby 95 per cent of HIV-infected people know their status, 95 per cent of those who know are in treatment and 95 per cent of those being treated are virally suppressed). The strategy also aims to reduce both tuberculosis mortality and malaria mortality by 90 per cent by 2030, and to detect epidemic outbreaks within seven days and mobilise a response within 72 hours of detection.

At the same time, to end the system's “inefficiencies, waste and dependency” (a major theme in the current US administration, which has already eliminated billions of dollars in foreign aid), the strategy calls for shifting 270,000 frontline healthcare workers from US-funded NGO programmes to recipient government payrolls starting in 2027. The problem is that PEPFAR-funded healthcare workers typically



When faced with deep salary cuts, workers are likely to flee rural public health for better-paying jobs in urban clinics or other NGOs.



JUNAID NABI

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earn significantly more than their government counterparts, often requiring salary harmonisation when transitioning to government employment. In Malawi, nurses with international NGOs that are supported by PEPFAR have long earned a notably higher median salary than nurses with local NGOs. In South Africa, absorbing 24,264 PEPFAR-funded workers would cost the government R2.82 billion (\$167 million) – and even that represents only 63 per cent of what PEPFAR currently spends on salaries, illustrating the compensation gap workers face during transition.

When faced with deep salary cuts, workers are likely to flee rural public health for better-paying jobs in urban clinics or other NGOs. This reveals a fundamental tension in the strategy: it seeks to maintain robust disease surveillance while effectively dismantling the workforce responsible for it.

The section on pandemic preparedness, correctly identified as a core national interest, is telling. It touts the US government's proactive efforts to stop significant outbreaks of Ebola in Uganda and Marburg in Tanzania, celebrating that “zero cases reached American shores.” But there is no discussion of how this system works, particularly its dependence on the health workers now at risk.

PEPFAR infrastructure was essential to the rapid containment of

Uganda's Ebola outbreak in 2022-23: the programme's transport system for HIV samples was repurposed for haemorrhagic fever samples, while local partners leveraged their relationships with clinics to educate more people about infection prevention and control. Likewise, during the Covid-19 pandemic, PEPFAR-supported laboratory sites across Africa performed testing and community health workers applied their strategies for HIV contact tracing to surveillance of the outbreak. The 208,800 community health workers who are the PEPFAR programme's eyes and ears are the first to notice unusual disease patterns, report unexplained illness clusters and relay community signals to national surveillance teams. Lose them and America's early-warning capacity collapses.

Responding to outbreaks where they originate is cheaper and safer than waiting until they reach America. Covid-19, after all, cost the US economy trillions of dollars and killed more than one million Americans. In view of this, PEPFAR's annual budget of around \$6 billion is hardly excessive; rather, it is a high-return investment in national security.

The US strategy aims to complete bilateral agreements by December 31 and begin implementation by April, giving policymakers a three-month window. But government employment processes typically require two years to navigate budget approvals, create positions, recruit competitive candidates and set salaries. Uganda's successful health-worker transition followed a similar timeline. Rushing the handover risks triggering a mass exodus.

The US government has promised to employ dedicated staff members in each country to focus on validating and auditing surveillance data. But without community health workers to conduct contact tracing during disease outbreaks and maintain the community trust required for rapid case identification, there will be no data to process.

To be sure, the strategy identifies a major problem: less than 40 per cent of PEPFAR funding goes to frontline supplies and healthcare workers. Reforms are clearly needed. ©Project Syndicate, 2025

SPORTS

SHORT TAKES



Through organising this championship, ORSC aims to expand the base of badminton participation among clubs.

AL MAQBALI EMERGES CHAMPION OF BADMINTON TOURNAMENT

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Salim al Maqbali of Masirah club retained the title of Men's singles event for senior category of Oman Badminton Clubs Championship following his victory in style over Sultan al Shaibani from Al Amerat club by 2-0 on Saturday night at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher. The opening set ended for al Mabali by 21-16 while the following set finished at 21-12 to seal crucial triumph for the second successive time. Khalil al Darmaki of Bausher Club and Nasser al Jabri of Sohar Club shared third place award. In the doubles event, Oman Club dominated the competition, as both of its pairs advanced to the final to secure first and second places. Taqah Club and Al Amerat Club finished joint third, highlighting the competitive balance and depth of talent across participating teams.

As many as 15 domestic clubs took part in the event registering a record number of the participations. The participating clubs represented various governorates across the Sultanate of Oman including: Salalah, Al Bashaer, Al Musannah, Seeb, Al Shabab, Oman Club, Saham, Sohar, Fanja, Taqah, Bausher, Ibri, Al Amerat, Qurayat and Masirah. The strong turnout reflected the growing popularity of badminton in Oman and the increasing commitment of clubs to developing the sport and competing for national honours. This event marked the official conclusion of the Oman Racket Sports Committee's (ORSC) sporting calendar for the current year.

The three days event was concluded on Saturday in presence of Dr Rashid bin Saif al Maherzi, Member of the State Council, and was attended by Dr Abdulrahim bin Musallam al Droushi, Chairman of ORSC, along with committee members, representatives of participating clubs, badminton enthusiasts, and supporters, creating a vibrant and celebratory atmosphere. Following the final match, the chief guest delivered the awards and medals to the winning teams.

The tournament was marked by a high technical standard and intense competition, bringing together experienced players and promising young talents in an environment that encouraged competitive exposure, skill development, and the exchange of experience. ORSC has intensified its community outreach efforts through initiatives such as school-based badminton programmes, outdoor badminton activities, and championships for centres and clubs. These efforts have significantly boosted public interest in the sport and contributed to the successful conclusion of a season filled with tournaments and development activities throughout 2025.

Royal Cavalry crowned Oman Derby Champions



The opening race, the Lubban for thoroughbreds over 1,200 metres, saw Dhiban secure his second consecutive victory. — Mohammed al Balushi

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

THE ROYAL CAVALRY were crowned champions of the Oman Derby on Saturday after a deserved victory in the seventh race of the ninth meeting of the horse racing season, held at Al Rahba Racecourse in the Wilayat of Barka and organised by the Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation, represented by the Oman Horse Racing Club.

The event was held under the auspices of His Highness Dr Fares bin Turki al Said, in the presence of Sayyid Mundhir bin Saif al Busaidy, Chairman of the Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation, along with officials, horse owners and racing enthusiasts,

The programme comprised eight races, including five for purebred Arabian horses, two for thoroughbreds and one for locally bred Arabian horses.

The opening race, the Lubban for thoroughbreds over 1,200 metres, saw Dhiban secure his second consecutive victory. In the second race, Al Manthoura for locally bred Arabians over 1,600 metres, Al Muzafar E.S. delivered a strong finish to claim first place, the third race, Al Fakhar was dominated by Asifat Al Shamal, who won comfortably, while the fourth race, Al Saif produced a thrilling finale as Al Shali S.B. surged ahead in the closing stages. In the fifth race, Al Khanjar for thoroughbreds over 1,800 metres, A Great Deal recorded his first win of the season.

The sixth race, the Western Projects

Company Cup over 2,000 metres, was controlled by Al Oqab, owned by the Royal Cavalry, The highlight of the meeting came in the seventh race, the prestigious Oman Derby, where Al Areeq claimed a well earned victory, confirming the Royal Cavalry's dominance in one of the season's most anticipated contests.

The meeting concluded with the eighth race over 2,200 metres, which was won by Madmoon after strong competition, The event also featured cultural performances by the Royal Oman Guard band, traditional folk arts and a heritage village, the ceremony concluded with HH Dr Fares bin Turki al Said presenting trophies to the winners, while the Chairman of the Federation presented a commemorative gift to the patron.

GCC Junior Championship kicks off at Ghala Golf Club

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

The GCC Junior Golf Championship for girls and age categories Under 13 and Under 16 for boys and girls gets today Monday morning at Ghala Golf Club, hosted by the Sultanate of Oman and organised by the Oman Golf Federation, with competitions running from December 21 to 24.

The championship brings together a select group of promising young talents representing national teams from the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC countries, reaffirming the growing focus on youth development and grassroots programmes in Gulf.

The official opening ceremony was held on Sunday evening under the auspices of Hamad bin Abdullah al Busaidy, in the presence of several dignitaries, heads of GCC golf federations, official delegations and participating teams.

Speaking at the ceremony, Ahmed bin Faisal al Jahdhami, Secretary-General of the Oman Golf Federation, emphasised that hosting the championship reflects Oman's commitment to nurturing young athletes as the foundation for a sustainable sporting future, noted that the event serves as an



The championship represents a significant milestone in the development of golf across the GCC.

important platform for talent identification, skill development and strengthening the spirit of fair competition among GCC youth in a positive and fraternal atmosphere.

Al Jahdhami also expressed his appreciation for the continuous support of His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, highlighting the role such support has played in advancing golf in Oman and enabling the hosting of major regional tournaments, further thanked Ghala Golf Club for providing top level facilities and organisational



Ahmed bin Faisal al Jahdhami, Secretary-General of the Oman Golf Federation. — Faisal al Balushi

support, as well as partners and local and regional media outlets for their professional coverage of the event.

Meanwhile, Major General Abdullah Al Sayed al Hashmi, Chairman of the UAE Golf Federation, described the championship as one of the most important developmental stages for junior golfers, as it offers early competitive exposure and allows federations to assess players' technical and mental levels in real tournament conditions, stressed that participation is primarily aimed at long term development

rather than short term results.

For her part, Abeer al Juhani, Vice-President of the Saudi Golf Federation Office, highlighted the championship's role within the broader strategy of building a strong grassroots base noted that the event provides a practical benchmark for evaluating the outcomes of development programmes, while reinforcing fundamental skills, discipline and sportsmanship among young players.

On the technical side, Oman's national teams are represented by Wafaa al Hadhrami and Omaima al Hajri in the girls' category, while the Under 16 girls' team includes Mirali Sampat, Yasmine al Kathiri and Heba al Nabhani, the Under 16 boys' team features Maheeb al Kathiri and Mohammed al Junaidi, while the Under 13 boys' team comprises Yousef al Rumhi, Taimoor al Busaidy and Ibrahim Fayez Riyadh.

The championship represents a significant milestone in the development of golf across the GCC, while also underscoring Oman's growing presence on the regional and international sporting stage through its continued investment in youth competitions and the development of future champions.

SHORT TAKES



A key highlight of the tournament was an exhibition match featuring children from the Oman Down Syndrome Association.

THIRD EDITION OF ODSA CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT CONCLUDES

RIYADH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

The third edition of the Oman Down Syndrome Association ODSA Charity Golf Tournament concluded on Friday, at Ghala Golf Club, held in collaboration with the club in an inspiring sporting atmosphere that highlighted the values of social inclusion and community awareness of Down syndrome, while showcasing the abilities and talents of children with Down syndrome.

The tournament activities began and continued, attracting wide participation from international players, members of the national golf team and golfers from various clubs, adding strong competitiveness and diversity to the event.

A key highlight of the tournament was an exhibition match featuring children from the Oman Down Syndrome Association, presenting a powerful message of inclusion and empowerment through sport, for the first time in the tournament’s history, three additional disability focused associations took part, namely the Oman Autism Association, the Early Intervention Association and the Oman Association for the Hearing Impaired, reinforcing the concept of comprehensive inclusion in sporting events.

Players were divided into three groups according to the competition schedule, with the first group teeing off, followed by the second group and the third group. The day concluded with a competitive exhibition match, bringing together champions from the participating associations in a spirited and friendly contest.

In terms of results, the team comprising Azaan al Rumhy, Yusuf al Rumhy, Tharwat al Barwani and Zed claimed first place with a net score of 55.7. Second place went to Lance Scott, Michael Kuhn, Joe Watson and Kelly True with a net score of 57.1, while Mike Cuddihy, Douglas Hill, Liam Shanahan and Ewan Simpson secured third place with a net score of 58.8.

The tournament also featured on course competitions, with Devu winning the Nearest to the Pin NTP on Hole 2, Sabri al Mandhari on Hole 5, Lauren Johnston on Hole 12 and Mike Cuddihy on Hole 15 meanwhile, Josh Armstrongwon the Second Best Shot award on Hole 18.

The event concluded with a closing ceremony during which winners were honoured and sponsors recognised, reaffirming the vital role of sport in promoting social responsibility and fostering inclusion across all segments of society.



The event will be the first-of-its-kind in Asia, setting a new benchmark for high-performance, nation-versus-nation sailing in the region.

Team Oman lead Group B in SSL Gold Asian qualifier

SSL TEAM OMAN – featuring 10 sailors from Oman Sail – lead Group B after the first two days of the Star Sailors League Gold Cup Asian Qualifier. Winning all four races, the team stayed composed through tight upwind battles and difficult downwind manoeuvres.

In Race 1, the team took control early and built a commanding lead on the upwind leg, then sailed conservatively to ensure victory. Race 2 opened with a stronger wind, but SSL Team Oman stayed composed and crossed the line first to complete a perfect first day. This form continued into Day 2 where the team swept to victory in both races.

Representing Oman is skipper and team leader Nasser al Mashari, Hussain al Jabri, Yasser al Rahbi, Ali al Balushi, Akram al Wahaibi, Haitham al Wahaibi, Raad al Hadi, Abdulrahman al Maashari, Ibtisam al Salmi and Marwa al Khaifi.

Nasser al Maashari, Skipper and team leader, said “We have trained a lot, and that preparation helps us stay calm on board, even in tricky conditions. Our focus today was to keep things simple, use common sense, and execute each manoeuvre cleanly. Good communication across the whole crew was key. Everyone knew their role, and we focused on choosing the right moments to push and the right moments to stay conservative. That balance helped us avoid major mistakes.”

Team Oman are racing against Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates in Group B with the group winners qualifying for



Team Oman are racing against Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates in Group B with the group winners qualifying for the finals in Brazil.

the finals in Brazil. Group A comprises Myanmar, Philippines, South Korea and Vietnam.

Six teams from Asia — Japan, China, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and India — have already secured their place in the SSL Gold Cup 2026 through the official SSL Nations Ranking, based on the performance of their top sailors.

A total of 40 nations will compete for the title of ‘World Champion of Nations’ in Brazil.

The races are sailed on identical SSL47 yachts – high-performance one-design boats

that ensure pure, tactical racing where skill and teamwork decide the outcome. This format guarantees a level playing field, bringing out the very best in every crew.

The ‘Road to Rio’ Asian Qualifier concludes on Monday 22 December.

Organised in collaboration with the Yacht Racing Association of Thailand, the SSL Gold Cup Asia Qualifiers will run from December 20-22, 2025 at the Ocean Marina Yacht Club, Chonburi. The event will be the first-of-its-kind in Asia, setting a new benchmark for high-performance, nation-versus-nation sailing in the region.

Seeb, Al Bashayer take first-leg advantage in 1st division semis

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

In a highly competitive first leg of the First Division Volleyball League semifinals for the 2025–2026 season, Al Seeb Club secured an important 3–1 victory over Majees Club in a match held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

Al Seeb started strongly and claimed the first set 25–23, benefiting from accurate serving and organised attacking play. In the second set, Majees responded with determination, applying sustained pressure and eventually winning a hard-fought set 31–29 after a prolonged battle.

Al Seeb regained control in the third set, showing clear improvement in blocking and defence to edge it 25–23, before sealing the fourth set with greater confidence at 25–17, capitalising on Majees’ dip in performance and an

increase in unforced errors.

Match statistics highlighted Al Seeb’s overall superiority in total points scored (104–94). Both teams committed an equal number of errors (35 each), reflecting the closely contested nature of the match and the sustained pressure throughout.

In serving, Majees recorded five direct service points compared to just two for Al Seeb, but this advantage was not enough to change the outcome, especially as Majees committed 16 service errors compared to 14 by Al Seeb.

At the net, Al Seeb held the edge with 14 blocking points against 11 for Majees an element that played a decisive role in neutralising the opposition’s attack, particularly in the third and fourth sets.

TOP SCORERS HEAD-TO-HEAD
On an individual level, the top scorers’ numbers were remarkably close.



Alexandru Majees player, scored 19 points, while Bojdan Al Seeb finished with 18. Alexandru registered 14 successful attacks compared to 13 for Bojdan, but the attacking efficiency favoured Bojdan at 41 per cent versus 32 per cent. In addition, the Bojdan excelled in blocking

5 blocks to 2.

In the other first-leg semifinal of the First Division Volleyball League for the 2025–2026 season, Al Bashayer Club asserted complete control and recorded a convincing straight-sets victory over Sohar Club, confirming its readiness to compete for a place in the final.

The first set was relatively balanced, with Sohar attempting to keep pace, but Al Bashayer prevailed in the closing points to win 25–23 thanks to greater composure in decisive moments.

In the second set, Al Bashayer raised the tempo and imposed its attacking superiority, taking advantage of weaknesses in Sohar’s reception to win comfortably 25–15. Al Bashayer maintained its dominance in the third set, controlling play and closing it out 25–18 to complete a clean 3–0 victory. Statistics showed Al Bashayer’s

superiority in most aspects of the match, scoring 75 points compared to 56 for Sohar. In terms of general errors, Sohar committed 14 errors, while Al Bashayer made 23. In direct serving points, Sohar scored one point compared to two for Al Bashayer, while Sohar had fewer service errors (2) compared to Al Bashayer’s 13. At the net, Al Bashayer was clearly dominant, registering 15 blocking points compared to just 5 for Sohar, a decisive factor in the match result.

TOP SCORERS
Individually, Al Bashayer’s Flamm al Jaradi stood out with an outstanding performance, scoring 21 points with an attacking success rate of 59 per cent, compared to 10 points for Sohar’s Shisha, highlighting the clear difference in attacking effectiveness between the two sides.

SPORTS

SHORTTAKES



The national team arrived in Doha on Friday and completed several training sessions on the championship courts in preparation for the opening rounds.

OMAN TENNIS TEAM VIE IN GCC UNDER-10 CHAMPIONSHIP

SPORT REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Oman’s national Under-10 tennis team begun their campaign at the GCC Under-10 Tennis Championship, which is underway on Sunday in Doha, Qatar, and will run until Wednesday, featuring strong participation from Gulf nations.

The Omani delegation is represented by a squad of nine promising young players including: Omar al Shaibani, Fayadh al Hilali, Hood al Hashmi, Ali al Riyami, Muhammad al Najjar, Said al Marjabi, Ahmed al Touqi, Elias al Touqi, and female player Sara al Maskari. The team is headed by Othman Gharib al Raisi as delegation manager, with coach Sofiane Doub overseeing the technical preparations. The national team arrived in Doha on Friday and completed several training sessions on the championship courts in preparation for the opening rounds.

The players are targeting progression to the advanced stages of the tournament, building on a structured preparation programme that included consistent participation in domestic monthly competitions, which played a key role in sharpening their competitive readiness. Coach Sofiane Doub affirmed the importance of this Gulf participation describing it as a crucial step in the development pathway for this age group. “the continuous exposure to external competitions is essential for enhancing technical levels, stressing that the Under-10 category represents the foundation of the future of tennis in Oman.

The monthly local tournaments served as an effective platform for talent identification and gradual improvement from one event to another,” he added. “The Doha championship will provide a new and more demanding competitive environment compared to local events, offering valuable international experience for the players. I am confident in the team’s readiness and anticipated positive results from several players based on their strong technical performances in recent months.” he ended.



This rally was organised by Oman Automobile Association, sponsored by the MoCSY and supported by Toyota.

Salim wins Rally Oman Baja sprint

AFTER a day of excitement and fierce competition among the drivers, Salim al Touqi and his navigator Issa al Wardi won the Rally Oman Baja sprint title after finishing first in the rally, which took place on the tracks and roads of the Wilayat of Nakhal through the Nakhal and Al Sareer stages. Al Touqi surpassed the other driver, Ghaith al Qasmi, along with his navigator Ahmed Salim, who finished second. Meanwhile, Mazin al Shaibani, with his Co- driver Warith al Kharousi, managed to secure the third position, and Musab Soomar, with his navigator Sultan al Battashi, came fourth before Abbas al Lawati finished in fifth place. The closing ceremony of the rally was under the auspices of Shaikh Said bin Mohammad al Rashdi, the deputy Wali of Nakhal, who crowned the winners and distributed prizes to the top finishers in the rally. This rally was organised by Oman Automobile Association, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), and supported by Toyota. The rally featured various categories including regular rally cars, as well as off-road four wheel vehicles and motorcycles such as Cam-Ams and Polaris. The young driver Salim al Touqi managed to finish the rally with a time of 45 minutes and 3 seconds, while his colleague Ghaith al Qasmi recorded a time of 49 minutes and 20 seconds. As for the third-place winner, Mazin al Shaibani, he finished in at 52 minutes and 7 seconds.



The closing ceremony of the rally was under the auspices of Shaikh Said bin Mohammad al Rashdi, the deputy Wali of Nakhal, who crowned the winners in the rally.

Musab Soomar finished fourth with a time of 54 minutes and 10 seconds, and driver Abbas al Lawati finished fifth with a time of 54 minutes and 51 seconds. After the leader Haitham Soomar exited the rally due to a car engine malfunction, the rally driver Salim al Touqi, with his navigator Issa al Wardi, took the lead in the second stage in Al Sareer and tied with racer Mazin al Shaibani in the third stage with equal timing. He regained the lead in the fourth stage but dropped to third place in the fifth stage behind Mazin al Shaibani and Ghaith al Qasmi, ultimately finishing in

first place with the total times. Both Haithm Soomar and Bashar al Qasmi were unable to finish the race due to technical issues with their cars. Racers Shihab al Rahbi, Moataz al Kindi, Walid al Hashmi, and Sina Hasari also exited the race. The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) shows great interest in rallying sports and continuously seeks to create excitement and challenges among the racers by organising races in various regions to allow motorsport enthusiasts to closely follow these races in their areas and promote the sport of car racing in different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

Nizwa edge Salalah in the Oman Basketball League

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Nizwa Club secured a convincing 73–48 victory over Salalah Club in the preliminary round of the Oman General Basketball League for the 2025–2026 sports season. With this win, Nizwa raised its tally to 6 points, while Salalah remained on 4 points. Both teams qualified for the final rounds alongside Al Seeb and Al Bashayer, in a match held at Al Amal Club Hall. The game was competitive and entertaining, with both teams sharing periods of control. Nizwa dominated the first and second quarters by a large margin. In the third quarter, Salalah

became more active and lost by a narrow margin, while they managed to win the fourth quarter. However, the point difference built in the first, second, and third quarters enabled Nizwa to secure the final result, despite Salalah’s improved offensive performance. Several Nizwa players stood out in scoring, led by professional player Kingsley, along with Saeed Ghassan and Basel al Subhi. For Salalah, the leading scorers were Mishal Kafkaf, Qaisar al Balushi, and Faisal Bait Abdulnabi. Nizwa began the match aggressively and imposed their style of play through high attacking intensity and strong defence, which neutralised most of Salalah’s attacks and disrupted their offensive



The game was competitive and entertaining, with both teams sharing periods of control. — Ammar al Musafir

rhythm. Nizwa players capitalised on this dominance to score consistently and extend the lead, ending the first quarter ahead 28–9. In the second quarter, Nizwa maintained its offensive momentum, while its defence continued to block attacks and launch quick counterattacks, varying its offensive options. Salalah managed to score only 9 points, while Nizwa added 18 points, taking a 46–18 lead at halftime. The third quarter saw a slight change in momentum, with Salalah players showing improved activity and a better offensive display compared to the first half, managing to reduce the gap relatively. However, Nizwa’s repeated

responses saw them score 15 points against Salalah’s 13, ending the third quarter with Nizwa leading 62–31. In the fourth quarter, Salalah showed a clear improvement both offensively and defensively, scoring 17 points, while Nizwa scored 14. Despite this, the large advantage Nizwa had built in the first and second quarters allowed them to seal the match with a 73–48 victory. The match was officiated by international referee Rashid al Mushaifri as first referee, international referee Thani al Khalasi as second referee, and international referee Wafaa al Samri as third referee. At the scorers’ table were Maryam al Zadjali, Al Baraa al Hashmi, and Hafidh Awlad Ahmed.



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SHORTTAKES



The new service marks the airline’s first direct entry into both Iraq and Denmark.

OMAN AIR
CELEBRATES
INAUGURAL FLIGHT
TO COPENHAGEN

MUSCAT: Oman Air, the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman, has launched its inaugural flight to Copenhagen, Denmark, via Baghdad, Iraq, as part of its strategy to expand its international network.

The new service, operated under fifth freedom rights, marks the airline’s first direct entry into both Iraq and Denmark, highlighting its commitment to enhancing global connectivity and strengthening links between the Middle East and Europe.

Engineer Hamood al Alawi, Deputy CEO of Oman Air, said the new route reflects the airline’s focus on connecting communities, promoting cultural exchange and offering passengers a smooth and comfortable travel experience to new destinations.

He noted that the service supports diplomatic and economic ties between Oman, Iraq and Europe, while contributing to regional cooperation and development.

He added that the route responds to growing demand for travel between the region and Northern Europe, improves access to Scandinavia through Muscat; and enhances trade and tourism opportunities via the Baghdad stopover, reinforcing Oman Air’s role in advancing the Sultanate of Oman’s international partnerships.

The route is operated using Boeing 737 MAX aircraft, offering a modern and comprehensive onboard experience. — ONA

Firm invests RO 11.9m in
medical plastics in Oman

SAEED AL MASHARFI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

APEX TransGulf Manufacturing, which operates a specialist packaging facility at Salalah Free Zone, is expanding its manufacturing capacity with new production lines dedicated to medical-grade plastic products under the newly inaugurated Ladayn Plastics Industries Programme supported by OQ Group.

The expansion represents an investment of approximately RO 11.9 million that leverages locally sourced raw materials from OQ, while benefitting from the Free Trade Agreement to serve regional and international markets.

ApexTransGulf Manufacturing is one of nine projects inaugurated at Sohar Industrial City under the “Ladayn” Plastics Industries Programme, with total investments amounting to approximately RO 40 million.

The projects are expected to create around 200 direct job opportunities, in addition to indirect employment across supply chains, reinforcing the localisation of downstream plastics industries and supporting the Sultanate of Oman’s industrial diversification objectives.

Commenting on the expansion, Shayan N Sumar, Managing Director of Apex TransGulf Manufacturing, said: “Apex TransGulf Manufacturing has been operating as a Salalah Free Zone-registered company since 2015, specialising in the manufacture of polyethylene and polypropylene packaging, predominantly for the healthcare sector”. He



Apex Transgulf is launching new production lines dedicated to medical-grade plastic products under the Ladayn Plastics Industries Programme.

ApexTransGulf Manufacturing is one of nine projects inaugurated at Sohar Industrial City under the “Ladayn” Plastics Industries Programme, with total investments amounting to approximately RO 40 million.

explained that the project was established from the outset as an export-focused operation serving regulated international markets: “We manufacture Class I and Class II medical devices registered with the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), with the United States and Europe representing our key export markets”.

Highlighting the company’s recent expansion, Sumar noted that capacity has doubled in 2025 through closer integration with OQ: “This year, we have undertaken a 100% capacity expansion, supported by our strengthened partnership with OQ.

We currently operate 14 blown-film production lines and are adding three new lines, increasing our output from around 1,200-

1,500 tonnes to approximately 2,500 tonnes per month”.

On sustainability and environmental compliance, he emphasised that environmental performance remains a core pillar of the company’s operations: “We offer PFAS-free products that comply with European and US regulations, alongside compostable alternatives made from FDA-registered resins that are certified as home-compostable”.

He added that recyclability remains a key consideration across the product portfolio: “All our products are 100% recyclable. While recycled material cannot be reused in critical medical production, it can be repurposed for other grades, ensuring responsible material utilisation across the value chain”.

Funding boost for Oman polysilicon project’s parent company

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Ahead of the start of trial production at its landmark \$1.6 billion polysilicon complex in SOHAR Port and Freezone, United Solar Polysilicon’s parent, United Solar Holding Inc, has secured a \$30 million strategic investment from Waaree Solar Americas, the US subsidiary of Waaree Energies, one of India’s largest solar energy companies.

In a statement, Waaree Solar Americas said the investment will be made through the subscription of approximately 5.37 million Series B preferred shares in United Solar, with the transaction expected to close by January 31, 2026.

The investment is underpinned by a long-term polysilicon offtake agreement, aimed at securing a fully traceable, reliable and diversified polysilicon supply chain to support Waaree’s expanding solar manufacturing operations globally, with particular emphasis on the US market.

The announcement is significant for the Sohar polysilicon project, which represents



Rendering of the \$1.6 billion polysilicon complex at SOHAR Port and Freezone.

the flagship investment of United Solar Holding Inc, a Cayman Islands-based polysilicon producer.

Currently being prepared for trial operations, the facility is designed to produce 100,000 metric tonnes of polysilicon annually, sufficient to support approximately 40 GW of solar module manufacturing per year. Once fully operational, the project is expected to position United Solar among the world’s largest and most cost-competitive polysilicon producers.

“This strategic investment in United

Solar is a decisive step in strengthening Waaree’s long-term, secure and fully traceable polysilicon supply chain to support our rapidly expanding USA and global manufacturing footprint”, said Hitesh C Doshi, Chairman and Managing Director of Waaree Group.

“Access to reliable, cost-competitive and geopolitically diversified upstream materials is critical to delivering certainty to our customers and partners. United Solar’s world-class polysilicon facility in Oman represents a credible and resilient alternative aligned with our commitment to supply chain transparency, energy security and sustainable growth”.

Sam Zhang, Chairman of United Solar Holding Inc, said: “We are proud to have Waaree, one of the world’s leading solar manufacturers, as both an investor and customer.

This partnership underscores United Solar’s unique position in the polysilicon industry and Waaree’s commitment to supporting reliable polysilicon sources while contributing to a more secure and

diversified global solar supply chain”. In recent weeks, the Sohar site has hosted a series of high-level visits as stakeholders work to ensure a smooth and timely start-up.

Notably, senior officials from Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) inspected the project and its associated 400 kV grid station, built in the SOHAR Port and Freezone to connect the facility to Oman’s Main Interconnected System (MIS) and provide stable, high-capacity power supply for current operations and future expansion.

At the plant, United Solar Polysilicon (USP) will convert metallurgical-grade silicon (MG-Si) into high-purity polysilicon rods, the primary feedstock for solar cell manufacturing.

A dedicated on-site facility will crush the rods for casting into multicrystalline ingots, which are subsequently sliced into wafers. MG-Si preparation will also take place on site, with chlorosilanes sourced locally from an Omani chlor-alkali producer, while MG-Si will be imported primarily from Malaysia, where it is produced from quartzite and charcoal.

ADVERTORIALS

SHORTTAKES

THE ST REGIS AL MOUJ MUSCAT RESORT APPOINTS NEW GENERAL MANAGER



I look forward to blending my local experience with the resort's exceptional heritage to create unforgettable hospitality experiences. It is a privilege to play a role in the continued growth of Oman's flourishing luxury landscape.

MANUEL LEVONIAN
General Manager
The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort

MUSCAT: The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort, Muscat's best address, announces the appointment of Manuel Levonian as General Manager. With more than twenty-five years of leadership experience across the Middle East and GCC, Manuel is one of the region's most respected hospitality figures.

His appointment marks a new chapter for the resort as it continues to strengthen its position within Oman's and the region's luxury landscape.

Under the esteemed Alfordan Group, The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort stands as a luxurious coastal haven nestled in the heart of Al Mouj Muscat. The property blends Omani heritage with contemporary design, offering guests an experience of refined

elegance, personalized service, and timeless sophistication. Before joining The St Regis, Manuel guided properties within renowned international groups such as IHG Hotels & Resorts, Starwood Legacy and Accor Hotels. During this time, he became one of Oman's longest-serving general managers, a testament to his consistency, foresight, and excellence in operations.

At one of the properties, he led the hotel to record STR performance, sustained market share growth, and industry-leading colleague engagement results, while introducing award-winning dining concepts, major capital enhancements, and sustainability initiatives that positioned it as a benchmark for innovation.

"Having spent several years working in Oman, a country I now proudly call a second home to me," said Manuel Levonian.

"I am delighted to begin this new chapter at The St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort, where I look forward to blending my local experience with the resort's exceptional heritage to create unforgettable hospitality experiences. It is a privilege to play a role in the continued growth of Oman's flourishing luxury landscape."

A graduate of the University of East London with a Master of Business Administration and a Bachelor of Arts in International Hospitality Business Management from the University of Derby, Manuel complements his academic foundation with a career defined by strategic acumen and people-centered leadership.

His ability to unite financial discipline, brand development, and service culture has earned him wide recognition, including Oman's Best General Manager, GCC's Best General Manager, and a place on the GM Power List.

TALABAT MART'S 5TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATED IN OMAN

MUSCAT: talabat, the region's leading platform for everyday deliveries, celebrates the fifth anniversary of talabat Mart in Oman. Since launching in 2020, talabat Mart has become one of Oman's most reliable on-demand grocery delivery services, offering convenient access to daily essentials across the Sultanate of Oman. Today, 12 Omani brands represent more than 30% of talabat Mart's total stock. These include Bahar, Mudhish, Deleciou, Areej,



Manadeel, Athar, Chips Oman, Oasis, Saffa, Mazoon and Safwa. This focus allows customers

to access a strong selection of local products while supporting homegrown businesses. To mark the anniversary, talabat has launched a dedicated "Order & Win" campaign running until January 3, 2026. Customers who place orders on talabat Mart will automatically enter a draw to win one of 24 premium prizes, including iPhone 17 Pro, Apple Watch SE 3 and AirPods Pro 3 devices. Alongside the prize draw, weekly promotions will run until January 3.

14 more chances to win a brand new Toyota Yaris!

THE landmark 50th anniversary mega celebration by Saud Bahwan Automotive continues to delight customers, with more winners taking home brand-new Toyota Yaris vehicles. With every draw, Toyota ownership proves to be a rewarding experience that goes beyond quality and value.

Celebrating five decades of partnership between Saud Bahwan Automotive and Toyota, the campaign reflects a journey built on trust, reliability and customer happiness.

Along with the opportunity to win one of 50 Toyota Yaris cars, customers also enjoy exclusive benefits including 50% VAT covered, 5 years/50,000 km service, 50% insurance covered and RO 50 worth of Thiqah Loyalty Points. The 10th raffle draw highlighted winners from across Oman, each demonstrating the strong bond customers share with the Toyota brand. Among them was Sultan bin



Celebrating five decades of partnership between Saud Bahwan and Toyota, the campaign reflects a journey built on trust, reliability and customer happiness.

Hamed al Badi from Ibri, who purchased a Hilux. He said, "The Hilux is known for its toughness. Winning a Yaris in this celebration makes me even happier with my choice". From Al Seeb, Al Manal International Business, who purchased a RAV4, expressed their happiness, saying, "Toyota has always been a trusted partner. Winning a Yaris adds

a wonderful surprise to our ownership experience". The 11th raffle draw, continued the excitement with more delighted customers taking home brand-new Toyota Yaris cars. Among them is Dimah Al Raedah Trading from Muscat, who purchased a Yaris. They shared, "Buying a Toyota already felt right and winning a Yaris as well is truly special".

Another thrilled winner, Yasir bin Abdullah al Harsoosi al Musallami from Sinaw, who purchased a Hilux, said, "Toyota vehicles give you peace of mind. Winning a Yaris through this campaign is a proud moment for me". Also among the winners is Ruqaya bint Yaqoob al Rawahiyah from Al Seeb, who bought a Corolla. She said, "Toyota has always been part of our family's life. Winning a Yaris during this 50th Anniversary celebration feels wonderful". Adding to the list of lucky winners is the customer holding Coupon No 11732, whose Toyota purchase was rewarded with a truly unforgettable anniversary celebration moment. With every draw, more customers are turning their Toyota purchase into a memorable celebration. This mega campaign, one of the largest ever held in Oman, continues to create joyful moments for delighted winners across the Sultanate of Oman.

Turning transactions into rewards with Maal Cards

MUSCAT: Reinforcing its role as a partner in strengthening Oman's financial ecosystem through meaningful, customer-focused innovation, Sohar International, together with its Islamic banking window, Sohar Islamic, has launched a new raffle draw campaign that brings added value to everyday spending.

Building on the recent introduction of the Maal debit card, the campaign invites customers to experience the ease and reliability of a nationally developed payment solution — while enjoying the excitement of monthly rewards.

Customers and non-customers who order and activate their Maal debit cards through Sohar International or Sohar Islamic will be entered into monthly raffle draws, with prizes totalling RO 12,000 awarded to multiple winners.

Abdul Qadir al Sumali, Chief Retail & Premier Banking Officer at Sohar International,



The campaign invites customers to experience the ease and reliability of a nationally developed payment solution.

stated: "National payment initiatives achieve scale when they are actively supported at the institutional level and implemented through practical engagement initiatives that encourage participation.

At Sohar International, we approach this responsibility by aligning national frameworks with initiatives that integrate seamlessly into everyday banking activity. Through this approach, we seek to reinforce confidence in locally developed payment systems and contribute to the long-term resilience of Oman's financial ecosystem". Customers and non-customers who order and activate their Maal debit cards through Sohar International will be eligible to enter a monthly raffle draw with a total prize pool of RO 10,000, distributed among 20 winners, with each winner receiving RO 500. Similarly, customers and non-customers who obtain and activate their Maal debit cards through Sohar Islamic will be eligible to participate in a monthly raffle draw totalling RO 2,000, awarded to four winners, with each winner receiving RO 500.

Bank Muscat launches Jadarah AI Academy

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, celebrated the official launch of the Jadarah AI Academy and the graduation of the first batch of employees from the AI Lab Programme during a special ceremony attended by members of the bank's executive management, senior officials and programme participants.

The launch of the academy marks a key milestone in the bank's strategic direction to promote a culture of innovation and develop national talent in the fields of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies.

This initiative supports the bank's digital transformation efforts and contributes to building future-ready



The launch marks a key milestone in the bank's strategic direction to promote a culture of innovation and develop national talent.

capabilities aligned with global advancements in this vital field. Speaking on the occasion, Sheikha bint Yousuf al Farsiyyah, Deputy CEO for Operations, Bank Muscat, stated

that the launch of the Jadarah AI Academy represents an important step in the bank's journey to build human capital capable of adopting future technologies and enhancing

operational efficiency. She added: We are proud today of our talented Omani professionals who have demonstrated exceptional creativity and innovation in AI development. The Academy represents a strategic investment in human capital and contributes to supporting the Sultanate of Oman's digital transformation and empowering a new generation of experts in this field". The Jadarah AI Academy offers three main programmes: The AI and LLM Developer Programme, designed to build deep technical expertise in AI and large language models, The Techno-Functional Programme, focusing on the application of AI to enhance

business decision-making and productivity, The AI Masterclass, aimed at equipping leaders with the knowledge to adopt AI responsibly within the organisation. The event featured a presentation on the achievements of the AI Lab Programme, which was established to strengthen technical capabilities and enable staff to develop innovative, AI-driven solutions. It also included an overview of the Academy's specialised training courses designed to enhance both technical and managerial skills and to expand AI applications across banking operations and services. Participants also showcased their AI capstone projects, presenting innovative solutions for integrating AI into banking operations.

SHORTTAKES



The shipping line has taken an important step in expanding its footprint across the Middle East and Africa.

CMA CGM LAUNCHES DIRECT SERVICE AT THE PORT OF DUQM

Al Duqm: Asyad Ports and Freezones, a subsidiary of Asyad Group, has announced the launch of regular shipping services operated by French global carrier CMA CGM to the Asyad Container Terminal at the Port of Duqm. The new service was officially inaugurated with the arrival of the first vessel on the route, marking a major milestone in Al Duqm’s growing integration into global maritime trade.

The direct maritime link significantly strengthens Al Duqm’s position as a strategic logistics gateway on Oman’s Indian Ocean coast. It also expands the international connectivity network led by Asyad Group, supporting integrated logistics services and reinforcing the Port of Duqm’s role within global trade corridors.

With the inclusion of Al Duqm in CMA CGM’s global network, the shipping line has taken an important step in expanding its footprint across the Middle East and Africa. At the same time, the move reinforces the Sultanate of Oman’s ambition to establish itself as a competitive regional logistics hub serving multiple international markets.

Located at the heart of the Duqm Special Economic Zone, the Asyad Container Terminal is increasingly being positioned as a future hub for trade and industry. Linking the port to one of the world’s largest shipping networks enhances Oman’s presence in the regional logistics landscape and creates new opportunities for local industries to access global markets in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. The service is expected to be particularly beneficial for dry and refrigerated cargo, which are critical to modern supply chains.

Omar bin Mahmoud al Mahrizi, CEO of Asyad Ports said the partnership with CMA CGM represents a pivotal step in integrating the Asyad Container Terminal into global shipping routes. He noted that the decision by a leading international shipping company to include Al Duqm reflects strong confidence in the port’s operational efficiency and service quality. — ONA

Workforce restructuring or signal to Oman’s labour market?

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

THE decision by a well-known telecom firm to terminate the employment of 125 staff has reignited a broader economic debate over corporate restructuring, foreign investment responsibility and the evolving concept of job security in Oman’s private sector.

The Ministry of Labour said the move followed voluntary resignation offers equivalent to 24 months of full pay, accepted by 114 employees, while 11 declined. The ministry confirmed it coordinated closely with relevant regulators and continues to monitor the case to ensure compliance with labour



Sustainable workplace restructuring requires a delicate balance — one that protects national human capital while allowing companies to remain efficient and competitive, says expert.

regulations. Yet economists argue the issue should not be viewed purely through a legal or procedural lens.

Speaking to the Observer, a market economist said the decision raises structural questions about how large, listed companies manage change — and the signals such decisions send to the wider economy.

“As a publicly listed company, with a market value running into hundreds of millions of rials, it is expected to set benchmarks for responsible restructuring, not default to workforce reductions as the fastest solution”, the expert said.

He added that while corporate restructuring is often necessary,

modern economic practice emphasises redeployment, retraining, and productivity-driven transformation — particularly in sectors with relatively stable cash flows such as telecommunications.

The economist warned that decisions taken by large firms reverberate beyond their balance sheets. “If a company of this scale opts for contract termination, what message does that send to small and medium-sized enterprises that are continuously urged to absorb Omani talent and shoulder localisation costs?” he asked.

At the same time, the economist noted that the episode underscores a hard truth for employees in the private sector: job security can

no longer be assumed based on a company’s size or reputation alone.

“Private-sector employment today is fundamentally competitive”, he said. “Stability is increasingly linked to skills, adaptability and continuous professional development, rather than tenure or employer prestige”. He concluded that sustainable restructuring requires a delicate balance — one that protects national human capital while allowing companies to remain efficient and competitive.

“The success of any restructuring should not be measured solely by cost reduction, but by its ability to retain talent, maintain trust and support broader economic resilience”, he said.

WEALTH MILESTONE

Musk becomes first \$700 billion man



Elon Musk became the world’s first \$700 billion individual after a court ruling reinstated Tesla stock options worth \$139 billion, lifting his net worth to \$749 billion, according to Forbes.

The court reversed a lower ruling that voided Musk’s 2018 pay package. Tesla shareholders recently approved a separate \$1 trillion compensation plan, underscoring investor confidence in Musk’s AI-driven vision. — Reuters

ENERGY REVIVAL

Japan moves to revive nuclear



Japan is preparing to unlock more public funding for its nuclear power sector as part of efforts to revive the industry after the 2011 Fukushima disaster. Only 14 of 33 restart-ready reactors are currently operating due to strict regulations and local opposition.

Momentum may build next week as lawmakers in Niigata are expected to approve restarting two reactors at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant. — Reuters

HOUSING SIGNALS

US home sales tick up



US existing home sales rose slightly in November as easing mortgage rates offered modest relief to buyers, though economic uncertainty continues to dampen demand. Data showed housing inventory fell to an eight-month low, limiting choices and supporting prices.

Analysts warn that weak labour conditions remain major headwinds, while stalled supply growth could restrain a market recovery. — Reuters

EPS cement reshapes green building in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 21

OMAN’S construction sector is under growing pressure to align with stricter energy efficiency targets and lower carbon pathways as sustainability moves from policy ambition to regulatory reality. Developers are increasingly being challenged to deliver buildings that perform better over their entire lifecycle, not just at the operational stage.

According to a presentation delivered during the Green Build Oman Summit held recently in Muscat, expanded polystyrene (EPS)–cement composites are emerging as a viable solution to meet these evolving demands.

Addressing industry stakeholders, Youssif AbdelAleem, Technical Manager at Al Madina Cement Products, said the future of construction in Oman depends on materials that combine energy efficiency, environmental responsibility and practical application.

“We did not choose EPS randomly”, he said. “We chose it because it brings together the four pillars the market is demanding today: thermal insulation, sustainability, cost efficiency and ease of operation”. AbdelAleem explained that EPS-based cementitious and geopolymer matrices rely primarily on entrapped air rather than manufactured gases to achieve insulation. Air, he noted, is the most effective and natural insulating material available.

“The best-selling insulation material in the world is air”, he told the audience. “When air is entrapped inside EPS, it resists heat transfer by reducing both conduction and convection, which is critical in hot climates like Oman”.



YOUSSIF ABDELALEEM
Technical Manager at Al Madina Cement Products

“Most insulation products that rely on manufactured gases will be phased out because of their high GWP”, AbdelAleem warned. “EPS systems, depending on density and specification, can have a global warming potential as low as 7 to 41, which is a massive

difference”. Beyond carbon metrics, AbdelAleem highlighted the importance of long-term performance in harsh climates.

EPS cement composites, he said, are not affected by ultraviolet exposure or moisture in the same way as gas-based insulation. “EPS does not lose its efficiency over time”, he explained. “If it absorbs water or is exposed to UV, air is simply replaced by air. That is why the thermal performance remains stable throughout the lifetime of the building”.

Breathability was another key theme of the

This approach has significant implications for decarbonisation. Many conventional insulation materials depend on manufactured gases with very high global warming potential (GWP), often exceeding 1,400. Under international agreements such as the Montreal Protocol, such materials face increasing restrictions in the coming years. “Most insulation products that rely on manufactured gases will be phased out because of their high GWP”, AbdelAleem warned. “EPS systems, depending on density and specification, can have a global warming potential as low as 7 to 41, which is a massive

presentation, particularly relevant to Oman’s hot and humid environment. Non-breathable walls and roofs can trap moisture, leading to condensation, mould and premature ageing of buildings

“If your wall is not breathable, a building that is only two years old can look like it is 20 years old”, AbdelAleem said. “Breathability is not a luxury in this climate; it is essential”. He also argued that EPS-based systems address long-standing construction challenges linked to workmanship and complexity. Traditional multi-layer insulation systems are prone to performance gaps caused by joints, detailing errors and inconsistent application.

In contrast, EPS cement blocks, mortars and plasters can be applied using conventional construction methods. “You don’t need special adhesives or complicated layers”, he said. “It is plaster like plaster, mortar like mortar. Any contractor can apply it”.

From an economic standpoint, AbdelAleem stressed that thermal insulation is one of the few building investments that pays for itself. Effective insulation reduces cooling loads, lowers electricity bills and extends the lifespan of air-conditioning systems.

“When you invest in thermal insulation, it is the only element in the building that gives you back what you invested over time”, he said.

Importantly, the discussion extended beyond operational energy savings to embodied carbon.

As building codes increasingly focus on lifecycle assessment, materials must be evaluated from raw material extraction through manufacturing, construction and eventual recycling.

EPS cement systems, being lightweight, recyclable and low-energy to produce, offer a strong profile under this framework.

OPINION

The digital disconnect debate



DR MYTHILI KOLLURU

The writer is an assistant professor at the marketing and management department of the College of Banking and Financial Studies.

THE proliferation of smartphones, advances in communication technologies, collaborative work and remote or hybrid work models have blurred the lines between work and personal life. The work culture patterns of ‘always available’ and ‘always online’ across many sectors of the global economy have resulted in evidence of burnout, work-family conflict and acute anxiety; and have accelerated deterioration in mental health. The emergence of artificial intelligence, the come-back-to-work mandate, automation and massive layoffs across sectors beyond Silicon Valley have workplaces on the cusp of uncertainty and job insecurity. This predicament has been exacerbated by the expectation that staff adopt a ‘996’ work pattern, normalising long hours and constant availability. Several countries have responded to the situation by enacting statutory regulations or guidelines to protect employees’ wellbeing and ensure a conducive work environment. France has required companies with more than 50 employees to negotiate after-work schedules through collective agreements and policies; and to comply with labour and employment legislation. Spain has issued a statutory right to disconnect, especially from digital tools. In Ireland, codes of practice exist on the right to disconnect; though not strict, they set a benchmark for reasonable expectations. The United States does not have a federal

or state statutory right-to-disconnect rule in effect. It is more focused on company policies and wellness programmes. In the California Assembly, a bill in the pre-legislative stage would give employees the right to ignore employer communications outside working hours. In the Canadian jurisdiction, only Ontario has a legislated right-to-disconnect framework. It applies to companies with more than 25 employees and is more procedural than a strict ban. Some countries in Latin America recognise the right to disconnect after work in both the public and private sectors, while others provide partial protections, especially for teleworkers. Kenya is making progress towards recognising employees’ right to disconnect after working hours, as the Employment (Amendment) Bill 2022 seeks to establish this right by allowing employees to disconnect from work duties outside their contractual hours. Now, India, one of the world’s largest emerging markets and the world’s 4th-largest economy, has growing evidence of digital burnout and anxiety, with a growing pressure to stay constantly available. To tackle this emerging silent corporate crisis, a member of the Indian parliament, Supriya Sule, has introduced the Right to Disconnect Bill 2025 in the Lok Sabha, which aims to give employees the legal right to ignore work-related communication outside of official working hours. The bill proposes to confer on

The emergence of artificial intelligence, the come-back-to-work mandate, automation and massive layoffs across sectors beyond Silicon Valley have workplaces on the cusp of uncertainty and job insecurity.

every employee the right to disconnect from work and not receive calls and emails beyond work hours and on holidays. The proposed legislation seeks to grant employees the legal right to refuse work outside work hours without fear of being penalised or losing promotion, appraisal, or bonus. However, the bill has limited chances of being passed, but it could shape policy disclosure. Though the bill is a step in the right direction, it will not suffice; the organisational culture and corporate ecosystem must support it in tandem. It is worth noting that the bill has a very low chance of becoming law. This is a private bill, not a government bill. Post-independence, the government of India has passed only 14 private member bills. The last one became a law in 1970. Even if the legislation does not become law, it has raised employees’ voices across corporate India. It now pushes for a digital disconnect mandate after work hours. The bill is viewed as a timely response to India’s burnout culture, especially in the IT and other white-collar sectors. Some corporate leaders feel it will reduce India’s competitive edge, especially compared to China. Others welcome the intent, as it aims to reduce burnout and focus on impact rather than input. Leaders believe the bill will require redesigning staff workload and leadership modeling. This debate marks the beginning of a new voice for corporate India.

THE EU’S UKRAINE LOAN DESERVES 6 MARKS OUT OF 10

HUGO DIXON

The European Union’s 90 billion euro loan to Ukraine is far from perfect. But there is more good than bad about the deal the bloc’s leaders have just agreed. There is also scope to make it better. On the positive side, Kyiv is funded for two years and the EU has frozen indefinitely the 210 billion euros of Russia’s sovereign assets sitting in the bloc. Ukraine will not have to repay the loan unless Moscow pays war reparations. What is more, the EU has partly overcome the paralysis of unanimous decision-making. Both in making the loan and in freezing the assets, the union moved ahead without the support of some smaller member states. On the negative side, EU leaders were not able to overcome objections from Belgium to an even better plan. This would have involved using the cash associated with the Russian assets to fund the loan to Ukraine. Belgium, where 185 billion euros of the funds are deposited, was not prepared to hand the money over unless the other countries agreed to fully share any risks from Russian retaliation. So instead the EU will borrow on the market with the support of guarantees by 24 of its 27 members. The loan may also fail to be a gamechanger. While 90 billion euros funds Kyiv for two years, the EU could have provided around four years of financing if it had used all the Russian assets. That would have sent a stronger message to Vladimir Putin that he cannot win this war just by Ukraine running out of cash. It would also have done more to disabuse Donald Trump of his view that the EU is weak. There is a risk that the US president and his Russian counterpart will continue to push Ukraine to accept miserable terms as part of the ongoing peace talks. Trump may also press the EU to unfreeze Moscow’s assets to grease such a deal. It will be harder to force the bloc to do this now it has decided to immobilise the funds indefinitely. But the White House has lots of ways to twist countries’ arms. It is not too late to improve on the plan — both to make a bigger loan and to use the Russian assets to help fund it. The EU has already laid the groundwork for this. For a start, the European Commission will continue on the technical and legal aspects of such a “reparations loan”, an idea I helped develop. — Reuters

Liquidations to spike in Ireland in New Year

JUST as the UK economy struggles at present, Ireland’s in the European Union is not faring much better. Ireland’s reliance on multinationals and international exports means “global shocks” pose a great challenge for the Irish economy. A study from the Economic and Social Research Institute described the outlook for the Irish economy “as relatively favourable”. However, the report warns the country is vulnerable to external risks and “unforeseen shocks”. Company insolvencies will spike in January, a leading insolvency practitioner has warned, as small businesses grapple with the costs of the auto enrolment pensions scheme a rise in the minimum wage and Christmas VAT bills. The extra strain on cash flow will come amidst signs already this year of a pickup in creditor-led enforcement actions, Dessie Morrow of Azets Ireland (Audit services firm) said. Morrow now expects “a significant spike in small businesses closing their doors in the early months of 2026”, unless there are new supports offered. A delay between higher employment costs from January and reduction in the VAT rate for hospitality to 9 per cent in July will likely mean some struggling operators in that sector shut before they can benefit from the controversial Budget move, he said. Business operators trading through the busy Christmas period need to prepare for the tougher January conditions, including assessing the Small Company Administrative Rescue Process (Scarp) as a potential option to reduce debt, he said. Waiting until Revenue or other creditors move towards enforcement action can mean it is too late to save a business, he said. Revenue has shown flexibility and will engage with operators in order to save jobs, unless they have reason to be distrustful such as a track record of non-compliance, he said.



ANDY JALIL andyjalil@aol.com

The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

Company insolvencies will spike in January, a leading insolvency practitioner has warned, as small businesses grapple with the costs of the auto enrolment pensions scheme a rise in the minimum wage and Christmas Vat bills.



People walk on a bridge with the Customs House and Liberty Hall visible in the background, in Dublin, Ireland. — Reuters

“While certain aspects of the multinational sector continue to grow many small indigenous businesses are struggling to cope with the challenges of rising costs and economic uncertainty. Many of these businesses particularly in the hospitality and retail sector may manage to continue trading through the busy festive season, but more firms could face closure in early 2026”, Morrow said. The Azets Scarp Index shows there has been a 23 per cent decline in the number of firms entering the Scarp process this year, compared with 2024. Uptake since 2020, when the process was introduced has averaged around one business every two weeks. Hospitality (30 per cent) was the sector with the highest proportion of Scarp cases this year, followed by construction (11 per cent) and retail (7 per cent). Morrow says 1,448 jobs have been saved through the Scarp process since the launch of the process. Azets Ireland’s research shows there have been 108 Scarp cases since the introduction of the scheme. Of these cases, 72 per cent have resulted in successful rescue plans. So far this year, 23 Scarp processes have commenced. A strikingly high share of these cases

(70 per cent) were in Dublin. In the UK last month, the economy suffered a rise in larger businesses entering insolvency. A number of companies filing for administration rose by 19 per cent year-on-year to 119 in October, according to data from the Insolvency Service. A company administration is normally used by larger businesses and is more detrimental to jobs than company voluntary liquidations used by small firms. The overall number of corporate insolvencies including CVLs rose 16.7 per cent to 2,029 in October. Financial restructuring partner at EY Parthenon, Simon Edel said the figures showed the “effect of ongoing economic, policy, geopolitical and earnings pressures”. He added: “Firms are still struggling to offset higher employment costs either through pricing or productivity gains, while also contending with structural changes to their markets and external threats”. Large companies have been warning about the impact of budget uncertainty on their finances. A survey by Barclays found that more than half of UK businesses have paused investment.

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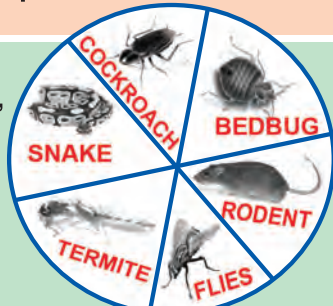
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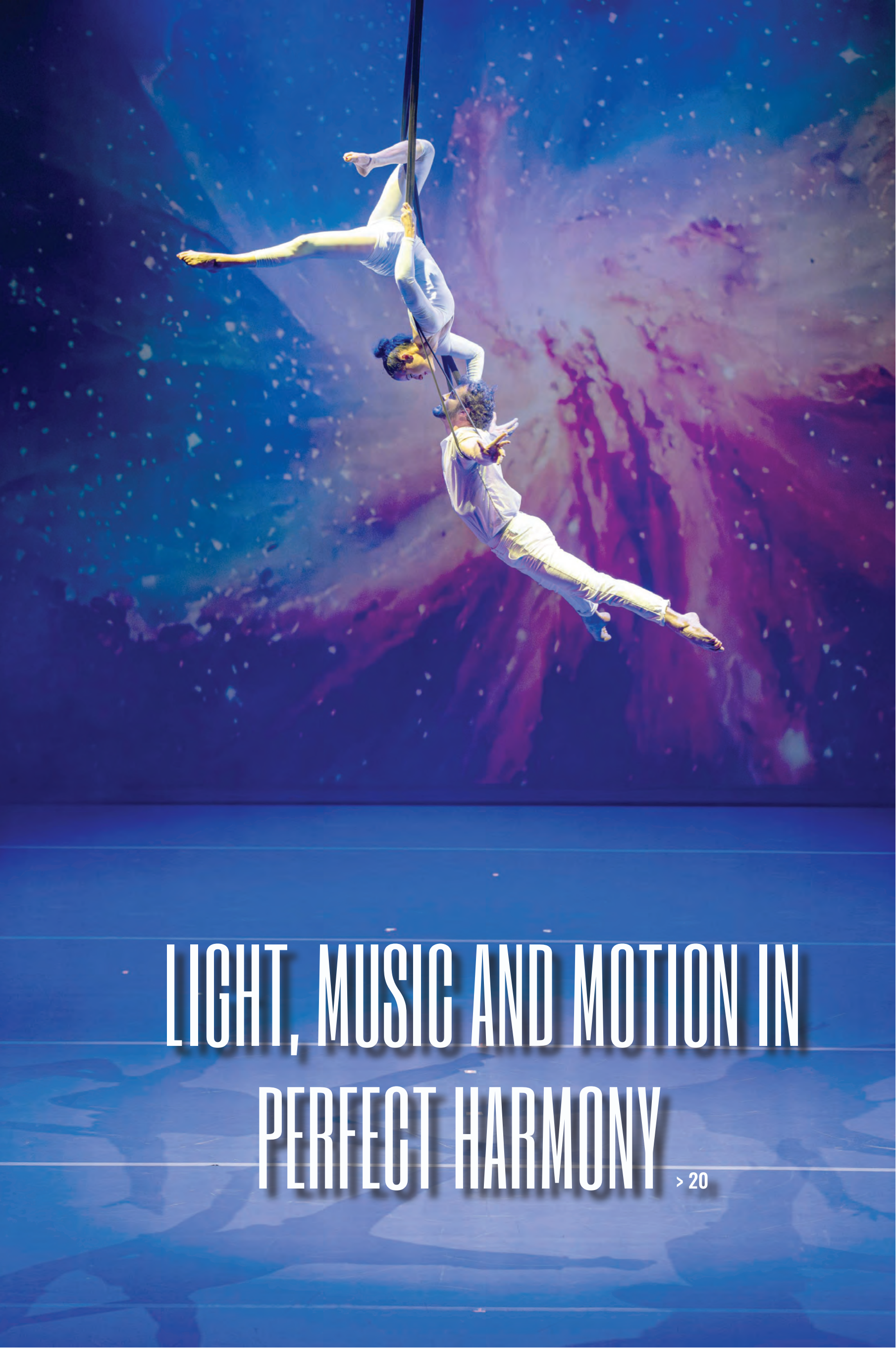


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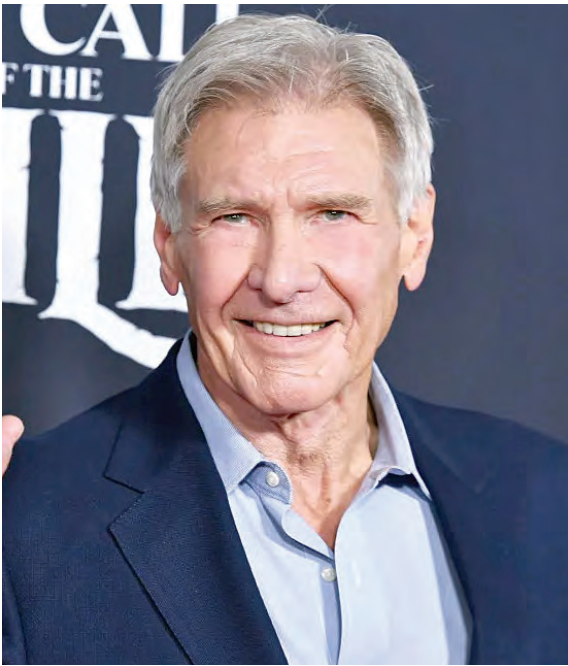


ART/LIFE



FILM AWARDS

HARRISON FORD TO GET LIFETIME ACTING AWARD



Harrison Ford is to be given a lifetime achievement award from the main union representing Hollywood actors, the organisation announced.

Ford, whose decades on the big and small screen have included some of the most famous roles in cinema, will be given the SAG-AFTRA Life Achievement Award as part of the rebranded Actor Awards — formerly the Screen Actors Guild Awards — in March.

The prize, which SAG-AFTRA gives annually to a performer who embodies “finest ideals of the acting profession”, is the latest recognition for a man whose characters — from Indiana Jones to Han Solo — are part of the cultural fabric of the 20th and 21st century.

“Harrison Ford is a singular presence in American life; an actor whose iconic characters have shaped world culture”, SAG-AFTRA President Sean Astin said.

“His career has been endlessly exciting, always returning to his love of acting. We are honored to celebrate a legend whose impact on our craft is indelible”.

Ford, who worked as a carpenter before hitting the big time as Bob Falfa in George Lucas’s 1973 film “American Graffiti”, said he was “deeply honoured” to be chosen as the recipient of the prestigious prize.

“To be acknowledged by my fellow actors means a great deal to me”, he said.

“I’ve spent most of my life on film sets, working alongside incredible actors and crews; and I’ve always felt grateful to be part of this community”.

As well as his recurring roles in the “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones” franchises, Ford is perhaps best known for his portrayal of replicant hunter Rick Deckard in 1982’s “Blade Runner”, a role he reprised 35 years later in “Blade Runner 2049”.

Previous recipients of the award include Robert De Niro, Jane Fonda, Morgan Freeman and Elizabeth Taylor.

The 32nd Annual Actor Awards Presented by SAG-AFTRA will be held on March 1 and will be streamed live on Netflix.

Ford, now 83, has one of the most iconic careers in Hollywood, spanning over six decades with roles that shaped popular culture.

He became a global star as Han Solo in Star Wars and Indiana Jones in the Indiana Jones franchise — characters that remain culturally defining.

He’s also known for roles in Blade Runner, The Fugitive, Air Force One, Witness (Oscar-nominated), and more. — AFP

QUICK FEATURES



LIFESTYLE

People sit in front of a wall painted with a sunset scene from Maasai Mara Safari Park at Surabaya Zoo during the Christmas and New Year holidays. — AFP



GASTRONOMY

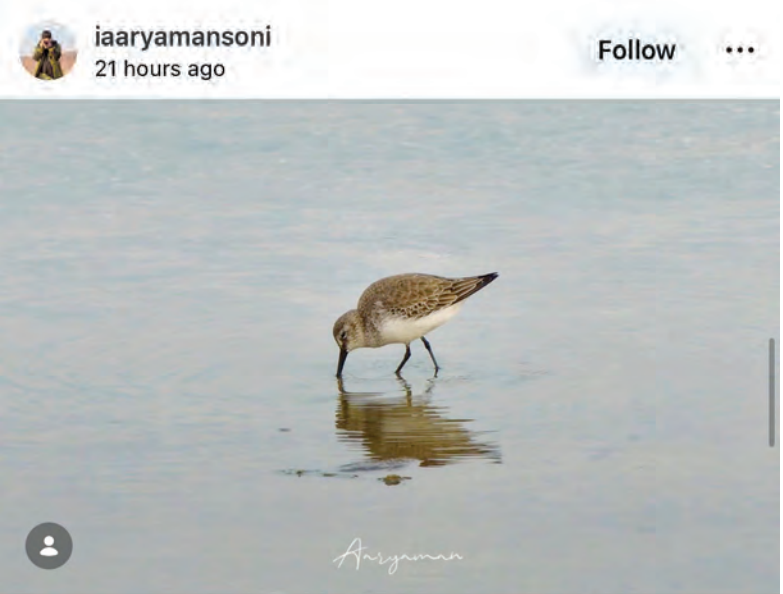
A juicy venison burger at a popular market in London. Some catering services are turning to deer meat as a low-carbon alternative to farmed livestock like beef. — AFP



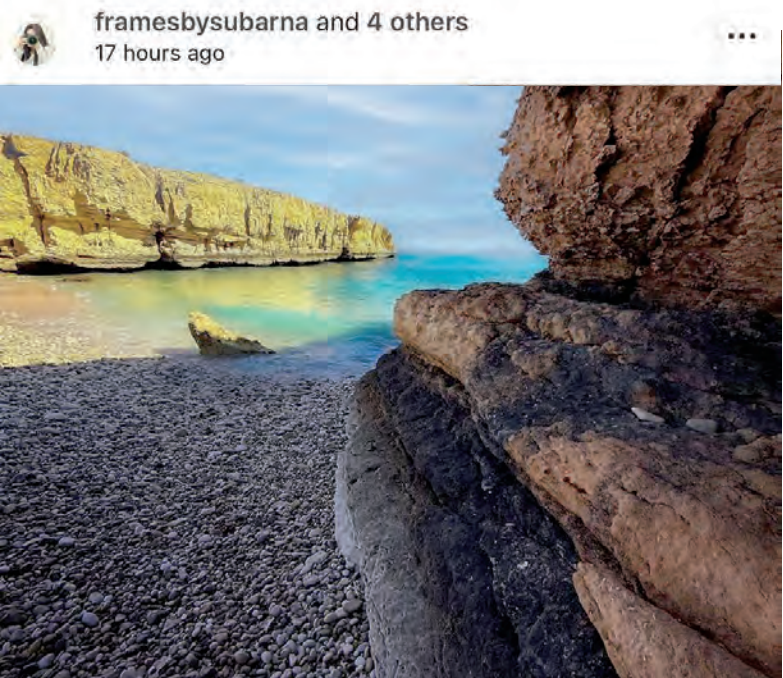
FESTIVALS

An Iranian girl poses with a Pomegranate in northern Tehran in preparation for the annual festival of Yalda, an ancient Zoroastrian rite. — AFP

INSTA PICKS



Symphony in motion



Turquoise shores

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KEITH LEE NAMED ‘CREATOR OF THE YEAR’ AT FIRST-EVER US TIKTOK AWARDS

Content creators across dance, music, sports, fashion, entertainment and education gathered in Hollywood on Thursday for the first US TikTok Awards, featuring Labubu dolls launched from a T-shirt cannon, a giant selfie challenge, skits and viral moment reenactments. The livestreamed ceremony on TikTok and Tubi, hosted by lifestyle influencer La La Anthony, crowned Keith Lee as “creator of the year” and honoured Bretman Rock for “video of the year”. “TikTok provided me a platform to be able to show small businesses around the country”, Lee, who creates family and small business content, said on stage while accepting his award.

“It’s hard to do something for myself, because I always put other people in front of me, but this is for me”, he added. Other winners included DJ Paris Hilton, who took home the “muse of the year” award for inspiring others; and Jeremiah Brown, a former “Love Island USA” contestant, who took home the “rising star of the year” award. “A muse doesn’t follow trends, we help create them”, Hilton said during her acceptance speech on stage. The honour highlighting activism included the “For Good” award, given to Zach, a creator with Down syndrome who shares his life to promote inclusion and his brother Pat Valentine, who educates audiences about the condition. Near the end of the night, Grammy-winning pop singer



Ciara performed a compilation of her most popular songs, including “Goodies”, “1,2 Step” and “Level Up.” The ceremony marks a significant feat for social media app TikTok, as its Chinese parent company ByteDance, led by CEO Shou Zi Chew, reported on Thursday that a binding agreement has been made with three major investors to sell just over 80% of the company’s US assets to American and global investors to avoid a US government ban. “I’ve been really involved with the opportunities to save TikTok from the very beginning”, Alexandra Doten, who makes educational videos for TikTok, said on the carpet before the show began. “I was in DC talking about it, so I’m just so excited. This platform does so much to spark creativity and to make people smarter and more inspired”, she added. — Reuters



The Oman 3165 Expedition, a 3,165 km journey by kayak around the coastline of Oman

Oman 3165: a Scientific Voyage Around oman

NAJAH AL RIYAMI

THE Oman 3165 Expedition, a 3,165 km journey by kayak around the coastline of Oman, continues to gather momentum as it moves steadily southward. The voyage began in Musandam and is gradually tracing the nation’s shoreline, combining exploration with environmental observation and learning opportunities for students following the journey from afar.

Marking a significant milestone in the expedition, explorer Mark Evans recently reflected on reaching Ras Al Hadd, describing it as a moment when “the kayak compass swings from heading 90 degrees east to 180 degrees south to the border with Yemen, still a long way off, but getting closer each day.” The headland, known as the most easterly point of the Arabic-speaking world, represents both a geographic turning point and a psychological marker in the journey. Support for the expedition appears to come from a range of partners who share an interest in science, education and coastal heritage. Asyad Shipping has been highlighted as a key enabler, while academic, conservation and educational organisations connected to marine research and geography have been referenced across expedition updates. These contributions appear to support different aspects of the mission, from logistics and outreach to scientific collaboration. The kayak in use, a custom-built Valley design marking fifty years since the original Nordkapp model, arrived in Oman shortly before the launch. Since then, it has carried the expedition through some of the country’s most dramatic coastal landscapes. Encounters with sea snakes, flying fish, turtles, octopus, ospreys and foxes have become part of the daily rhythm of travel,



The kayak in use, a custom-built Valley design marking fifty years since the original Nordkapp model, arrived in Oman shortly before the launch.

offering vivid insights into the biodiversity found along Oman’s northern and central shores. Alongside the physical challenge, the kayak serves as a platform for collecting environmental observations. The expedition is towing a hydrophone to gather acoustic recordings and is also taking small water samples that may later help scientists understand more about the species present along the route. This work is expected to contribute to broader biodiversity research efforts supported by international teams. Education remains a visible thread throughout the journey. Through online connections, classrooms in Oman and abroad have been joining occasional sessions to hear updates directly from the water. Students are being introduced to coastal wildlife, cultural landmarks and the science that accompanies the expedition, while a podcast series recorded along the route offers wider audiences a sense of the places, conditions and moments shaping the voyage. As the kayak progresses beyond Musandam and further along the northern coastline past areas such as Suhar, the narrative becomes one of connection between people and place, and between Oman’s maritime history and contemporary scientific interest in its waters. Nights spent on beaches and



The route of expedition

in quiet wadis, combined with passing interactions with coastal communities, add depth to the unfolding story. With each stage completed, the Oman 3165 Expedition continues to reveal new impressions of the country’s long and varied coastline. The observations gathered so far, whether scientific, educational or reflective, appear set to support a wider conversation about the value of Oman’s marine environment. Ultimately, the voyage stands not only as a physical undertaking but as a measured exploration of Oman’s coastal character, highlighting the importance of understanding, documenting and preserving these waters for the future.

FEATURES

GEORGINA BENISON

THE ‘Symphony of Lights’ performed last weekend at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts was a new commission from the Swiss company, ‘Lumen Créations’.

While their own promotional notes are full of unhelpful rhetoric, their production was a perfectly synthesised combination of contemporary dance, circus acrobatics, aerial discipline, music, light technology and vivid backdrop projection. They created a breath-taking visual opera, which transfixed the audience for a seamless seventy minutes. The only distraction was the interruption by latecomers being shown to their seats for ten minutes into the hypnotic performance.

Curtains opened to reveal a projection of constellations moving across the night sky while a recording of Rachmaninov provided an evocative soundtrack.

Manuel Maes, 31, carried a huge tree-sized fan, illuminated by LED lights as two ladies came through the auditorium wearing white fan costumes, twinkling as they joined him on stage. Always slow and smooth, the choreography mirrored the atmospheric music.

A suspended Marine Pirotais intertwined herself in a silk rope to a psychedelic backdrop of clouds. Mesmerising and supple, she spun herself into impossible shapes using balletic movement in mid-air.

Accompanied by Debussy’s ‘Arabesque’ and ethereal swirls like galaxies behind, the French aerial artist, Anaïs Franco, was suspended in a metal circle; a graceful and serene, continuously flowing, ‘Lady in the Moon’. Below, Lydie Boisset 21, started to spin in her illuminated Cyr wheel, a shadow and earth-bound echo of Anaïs’ acrobatics above.

In complete contrast, four break-dancers leapt on to a vocal hip-hop track. They threw themselves down, jumping on their hands, flipping and leapfrogging against vivacious coloured clouds and concluding in a flash of spotlight to thunderous applause.

A revolving blue ice-cube projection and electronic violin and harp backing enhanced the incredible strength, control and balance demonstrated by Marine Pirotais as she slowly unfurled into sustained hand and headstands. Her movements and poses were constantly evolving into seemingly impossible contortions of the human body. It was a spectacular highlight of the show and received well-deserved and prolonged adulation.

Another stunning favourite came with duo aerial acrobats, Violette Chaleard and Bruno Blandin. Their triangle trapeze gymnastics defied gravity, changing shapes as they spun and turned to the Music of the Spheres.

As a pair, their artistic coordination was compelling. Violette was hanging on his foot – her foot, his leg - hard to know who, supported whom by what, their bodies spinning upside down and merging into a single form. Even the trapeze became flexible, pulled into different shapes in a fascinating and unbelievable conclusion.

To the memorable piano score of Debussy’s ‘Clair de Lune’, Anaïs Franco returned in a Trio of silk drape artistry. Three women ascended the fabric in perfect synchronisation, flowing and weaving. They twisted and turned in choreographed backflips and summersaults, while green flowing ribbon projections reflected their agility. Making a final ascent to the top, they fell in a unison tumble, eliciting gasps from the onlookers.

The project introduced Utka Gavuzzo juggling pink balls, blue skittles and luminous swirls that became flowers, circles and patterns to techno-rock or rhythmic drumming.

Video and projection designer, Julian Schaferlee, created Spirograph patterns, which changed into a kaleidoscope of colours and shapes in a ceaseless feast of visual poetry. Pachelbel’s ‘Canon’ lured Lydie Boisset to tease her Cyr wheel while the beat-boys complemented her movement in an anachronistic juxtaposition of time and space.

Lumen Créations, under its founder and director Nicolas Hesslein, tells its stories by, ‘merging live performance and digital installation’. Following two sold out performances in Muscat, there is surely scope for a return visit very soon.

PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

LIGHT, MUSIC AND MOTION IN PERFECT HARMONY

A MESMERISING FUSION OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE,
AERIAL ACROBATICS, MUSIC AND CUTTING-EDGE LIGHT TECHNOLOGY,
‘SYMPHONY OF LIGHTS’ TRANSFORMED THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE INTO A DREAMLIKE
VISUAL OPERA LEAVING AUDIENCES SPELLBOUND

