

OMAN DAILY Observer

Weekend

12

SABALENKA,
ZVEREV MAKE
WINNING STARTS
IN MADRID

8

RAYSUT CEMENT
REKINDLES GREEN
ENERGY DEAL WITH
CHINESE FIRMمعرض مسقط
الدولي للكتاب ٢٠٢٥Muscat International
Book Fair 2025

29

الدورة التاسعة والعشرون
Twenty-ninth Edition

Editor-in-chief ABDULLAH BIN SALIM AL SHUEILI

THEBRIEF

HIS MAJESTY
GREETES TANZANIAN
PRESIDENT ON
NATIONAL DAY

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to Her Excellency President Samia Suluhu Hassan of the United Republic of Tanzania on the occasion of her country's National Day. In the message, His Majesty expressed his sincere wishes for continued progress, stability and prosperity for the friendly people of Tanzania; and for the further strengthening of the cooperative relations between the two countries. — ONA

NEW MOSQUE OPENS
IN KHASAB

The new Al Farooq Omar bin Al Khattab Mosque, inaugurated by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, will serve as a spiritual and social hub in Musandam. Blending traditional Islamic design with modern facilities, the mosque accommodates over 3,000 worshippers and includes a women's prayer hall; and advanced audio systems. Built on a total area of 11,640 square metres, the mosque also features a public majlis for 400 guests, intended for community and social gatherings. — ONA

POPE 'S FUNERAL TODAY



A Woman uses a Lime electric scooter on Via dei Fori Imperiali street, a day prior to the late Pope's funeral in Rome. The Vatican said over 128,000 people have already paid their respects to Pope Francis, whose body is lying in state in St Peter's Basilica ahead of his funeral set for April 26. — AFP

Gaza faces food crisis
as WFP aid stalls

THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME said on Friday it had run out of food stocks in Gaza due to the sustained closure of crossings into the enclave, while Gaza authorities said Israeli air strikes had killed at least 78 people in the past 24 hours.

"The WFP has depleted all its food stocks for families in Gaza," a WFP statement said, adding the UN agency on Friday delivered its last remaining food stocks to hot meals kitchens in Gaza.

"These kitchens are expected to fully run out of food in the coming days," it added. The agency said no humanitarian or commercial supplies had entered Gaza for more than seven weeks as all main border crossing points remained closed, resulting in the longest closure the Gaza Strip had ever faced. Israel has previously denied that Gaza is facing a hunger crisis. The military accuses Hamas who have run Gaza of exploiting aid — which Hamas denies — and says it must keep all supplies out to prevent the fighters from getting it.

Since March 2, Israel completely cut off all supplies to the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip and food stockpiled during a ceasefire at the start of the year has all but run out.

WFP warned that if the aid blockage was not lifted it might be forced to end its critical assistance.

On March 31, all 25 WFP-supported bakeries closed after wheat flour and cooking fuel ran out, while parcels giving families two weeks of food rations were depleted.

The Hamas government media office said that famine is no longer a looming threat and is becoming a reality. "Thousands of Palestinian families are now facing starvation after becoming unable to provide even a single meal for their children," it said in a statement.

Fifty-two people have died due to hunger and malnutrition, including 50 children, while more than one million children are experiencing hunger daily, it added.

The Israeli ministry of foreign affairs said 25,000 aid trucks had entered Gaza in the 42 days of the ceasefire — before it shut the border at the start of March — and that



A woman reacts near the bodies of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes at Nasser Hospital, in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip. — Reuters

Hamas had used the aid to rebuild its war machine.

Food prices have risen 1,400 per cent compared to during the ceasefire, WFP said, adding that more than 116,000 metric tonnes of food assistance which could feed

one million people for up to four months is currently stuck at the border crossing.

On Friday, the Gaza health ministry said Israeli air strikes killed at least 78 people in different areas of the enclave in the past 24 hours. — Reuters

Actors with Down syndrome tear down barriers in London show

LONDON: It's one of Shakespeare's most existential questions "to be or not to be?" Now a group of globe-trotting Peruvian actors with Down syndrome are tackling it head-on, breaking down prejudice and barriers.

Cristina Leon, Jaime Cruz and Manuel Garcia are members of the eight-strong group currently performing William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" at the Barbican centre in London this week until Sunday.

"This play shows that we can be included in everything at work and in education. There are no barriers, we can do lots of things and people must open their eyes to the fact that we can do any-

thing they ask us," Leon, 32, said.

The project was launched seven years ago born out of Cruz's dreams of becoming an actor.

He was working as an usher in the Teatro La Plaza in Lima and had never thought that his Down syndrome was an obstacle in life.

"I have always wanted to be an actor. One day there was an event (at the Lima theatre) in which you had to introduce yourself and I said my name and said I was an actor," the 30-year-old said.

He added that he wanted to overcome "prejudices, myths and barriers."

His words inspired the theatre's artistic director Chela de Ferrari,



Diana Gutierrez, Octavio Bernaza and Manuel Garcia are all members of Peruvian company breaking down barriers and challenging prejudices about people with Down syndrome.

who has now adapted the play for the eight actors and brought it to the land of Shakespeare's birth.

"He really caught my attention and I thought to myself I really need to have a more in-depth discussion with him," she said.

"We went to a cafe and while we were talking I had a vision of him wearing the prince's crown and I thought about the meaning that Jaime could bring to Hamlet's famous words 'to be or not to be,'" she said.

A casting session was organised and seven other actors were chosen for the group. "Jaime made me face my own prejudices, my deep ignorance about the reality. I

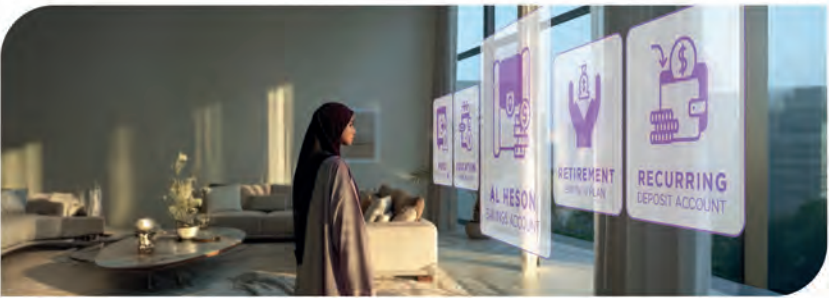
think what the public experiences mirrors exactly what happened to me," de Ferrari said.

Three years ago the group was invited to visit Spain and since then they have toured the world.

The show had a sold-out run at the Edinburgh International Festival last year, with The Guardian praising the cast's interpretation of the normally depressing tale of the Danish prince as "upbeat", adding it "oozes charm, humour and imagination".

"I don't think it's the only play with actors with Down syndrome, but I don't think other groups have travelled as much," de Ferrari said. — AFP

BOOK TALK



Terms and conditions apply

Save for your future goals today

With Al Heson Savings Account
and Ladies Account

Start Saving with BankDhofar Ladies account!



Sri Lankan authors Dinesh Deckker and Subhashini Sumanasekara take young readers on a magical journey through Oman in their new children’s book, ‘Sasha and the Sands of Oman,’ blending culture and heartfelt storytelling inspired by their real-life adventures



Authors Dinesh Deckker and Subhashini Sumanasekara with daughter Sasha

LIJU CHERIAN
@lijucherianoman

In a delightful fusion of culture, imagination and heartfelt storytelling, Sri Lankan authors Dinesh Deckker and Subhashini Sumanasekara bring to life their second children’s book, *Sasha and the Sands of Oman*. Following the success of *Sasha and Kitty’s Enchanted Journey* (2023), the duo’s latest installment continues the adventures of Sasha, this time weaving in the rich textures, landscapes and traditions of Oman — a country they proudly call home.

“The creation of Sasha was inspired by the everyday wonder we saw in our daughter,” say the authors. “We wanted to craft a character who explores the world with empathy, curiosity and kindness. Sasha embodies the dreamer in every child.”

Far from being just a scenic backdrop, Oman becomes a vital character in Sasha’s journey. “Unlike commercialised destinations, Oman is where silence speaks,” the couple notes. “It’s a land that respects tradition while gently embracing change. By anchoring Sasha’s adventure here, we were honouring a country that has deeply shaped our own outlook.”

Each chapter draws from real-life experiences — sharing meals with Omani families, walking through ancient souqs, celebrating weddings, and exploring wadis. “This isn’t a tourist brochure — it’s a heartfelt tribute,” explains Subhashini. “We’ve lived these moments and we wanted to portray them with genuine cultural respect.”

Chapter 15 holds special meaning. “Set in a desert camp, it’s the soul of the book,” says Dinesh. “Sasha sits under a canopy of stars, listening to a Bedouin storyteller. It’s a quiet, reflective scene — one we’ve experienced ourselves. The desert teaches you that not all adventures are loud. Some are deeply silent and transformative.”

The writing process between the husband-wife team was organic and intuitive. “Dinesh worked on the

SASHA’S JOURNEY BRIDGES CULTURES THROUGH STORYTELLING



Sasha discovers the frankincense trail in Salalah



e-book cover of *Sasha and the Sands of Oman*



Sasha enjoys fort adventures in Nizwa



Sasha at the rose harvesting season in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar



Sasha climbs the iconic Muttrah Fort



Sasha with Aisha, her friend at the Qurum Beach



Sasha’s walk around Muttrah Corniche sunset and at the Al Alam Palace

framework and locations, while I added emotional depth,” shares Subhashini. “There was no rigid method — it was more like a dance of ideas over coffee and quiet evenings.”

Blending education with entertainment was essential. “We didn’t want it to feel like a textbook,” says Dinesh. “When Sasha uses phrases like Ma’a salama or gets lost in the labyrinth of Muttrah Souq, children absorb culture effortlessly — it’s learning through wonder.”

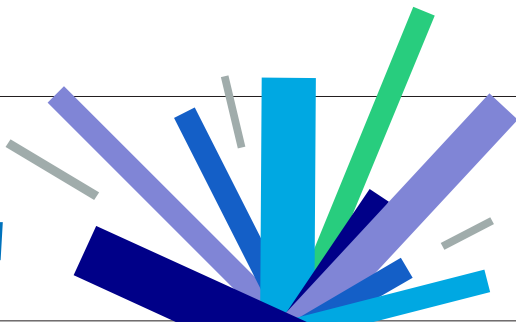
The book’s impact has resonated with families and educators alike. Wajira Degambada, a dance teacher in Salalah, shared: “Reading *Sasha and the Sands of Oman* with my daughters was one of those rare experiences where we both felt transported — her with wonder, me with nostalgia. It’s gentle, wise and filled with warmth. We’ve already read it twice.”

Candice Viljoen, an English teacher, echoed similar sentiments: “This beautifully written story takes readers on a gentle journey through Oman. The vibrant illustrations and lyrical storytelling highlight the country’s diverse beauty—from Muscat to Salalah. I especially appreciated the subtle message about memories and the joy of recording them. It’s a delightful read for families.”

The response from young readers has been just as touching. “Some children now pretend to be Sasha on their travels,” smiles Subhashini. “One Sri Lankan mother told us her daughter wants to learn both Arabic and Sinhala — because Sasha speaks both. That’s exactly what we hoped for.”

Sasha’s story, the authors hint, is far from over. “She’ll explore Egypt next, but Oman will always be home,” they say. “She may return for the Khareef in Salalah or sail through Musandam’s fjords. Discovery never ends — it just deepens.”

Their message to fellow writers is simple yet profound: “Write with authenticity. Let the culture breathe. Think like a child — curious, brave and open-hearted. When done right, children’s books don’t just entertain — they build bridges that endure.”



Iranian Foreign Minister launches book

MUSCAT: Dr Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Foreign Minister, signed his book 'The Power of Negotiation' at the Dar Luban pavilion during the 29th Muscat International Book Fair on Friday.

The signing ceremony was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information and Chairman of the Main Committee of Muscat International Book Fair.

Published by Dar Hashem in Beirut and translated by Dr Fatima Mohammadi Sijani, the book features an introduction and six in-depth chapters that explore negotiation types, the role and skills of the negotiator, and the stages and demands of negotiation.

Following the signing, Dr Araghchi toured several pavilions at the fair, including that of North Al Sharqiyah Governorate — the fair's Guest of Honour — which highlighted the governorate's cultural and historical legacy.

He also visited the Ministry of Information's pavilion, where he viewed a range of digital initiatives, including Oman News Agency's AI-powered virtual exhibition, historical photography, and audiovisual materials from the Directorate General of Electronic Media. The Ain Platform—both for general and children's content — features over 65,000 media resources, including 60 audiobooks, reflecting the Ministry's digital transformation efforts.

At the General Directorate



Dr Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Foreign Minister, signing his book 'The Power of Negotiation' at the Muscat Book Fair

of Publications and Artistic Works, the Iranian minister reviewed 'The Omani Presence in East Africa', a trilingual publication (Arabic, English, Swahili) that documents Oman's historical influence on the East African coast. The exhibit included a model of the iconic House of Wonders, built in 1883 during the reign of Sultan Barghash bin Said. Dr Araghchi concluded his tour with a visit to the Iranian National Library and Archives pavilion and the Saudi Arabian pavilion, where he viewed rare manuscripts and major publications. — ONA



A window to the world of letters

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

THE 10-DAY-LONG Muscat International Book Fair (MIBF) commenced on Thursday at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, under the auspices of HH Sayyid Dr Fahd bin Al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University and with the esteemed presence of Shaikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, Member of the UAE Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah; and Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information and Chairman of the Fair's Main Committee. The event serves as a central hub for literati, academia and reading enthusiasts from Oman and beyond. This year's edition, themed 'Cultural Diversity Enriches Civilisations,' emphasises cultural exchange and openness through its diverse events and international guests. The Fair offers an expansive window into the world of literature, where authors and readers alike engage in enriching discussions about writing and its impact on contemporary reading culture.

One of the highlights is the vibrant showcase of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, this year's 'Guest of Honour'. The exhibition



brings to life the region's rich history, local culture and contributions to Omani society, alongside its tourist attractions and modern developments, fostering pride among local generations.

STRONG PALESTINIAN PRESENCE
The Fair also welcomes a significant representation from Palestine, with publishers such as Dar Tabaq, Sameer and Mansoor Books; and Dar Al Jundi bringing forward narratives of historical and ongoing struggles. These publishers offer readers a chance to engage with the poignant stories of Palestinian suffering and resilience. A representative from Dar Al Jundi shared, "We make it a point to attend the book fair every year and the number of titles we bring continues to grow. We are grateful that there are

people who listen to us."

EXPANSIVE RANGE
With 681,041 listed publications, including 467,413 Arabic books and 213,610 foreign titles, the MIBF provides a wide selection for readers of all backgrounds. Notably, 27,464 Omani titles and 52,205 newly-printed books (2024-2025) are available for exploration. Contrary to concerns over a decline in youth reading habits, the high number of new publications reflects a continued vibrancy in the literary world.

EXCITING EVENTS, ACTIVITIES
With 155 planned events, the fair features interactive shows, youth initiatives and puppet performances. A special space has been set up for children, offering a theatre for performances and workshops, as well as an Arabic language corner and cultural activities for families. Additionally, several cultural cafés are available across the pavilions, further enhancing the experience.

The MIBF is open daily from 10 am to 10 pm and will run until May 3. Special morning hours from 10 am to 2 pm are dedicated to school groups on weekdays, providing a safe and educational environment to cultivate reading habits among young learners.

FOOD



A DISH FIT FOR ROYALTY



Engin Gülaydın,
Executive Sous Chef

AT ALOFT MUSCAT, tradition is re-imagined with finesse in this exquisite Turkish imperial delight. Executive Sous Chef Engin Gülaydın revives a dish steeped in romance and rich culinary heritage — Hünkar Beğendi, a smoky, velvety eggplant purée crowned with a tender lamb stew. Translated as ‘The Sultan Liked It,’ this dish embodies the grandeur of Ottoman kitchens and the artistry of modern Turkish cuisine.

Hünkar Beğendi
Smoky eggplant béchamel with slow-cooked lamb stew

- INGREDIENTS**
- For the Eggplant Purée
- 1 medium eggplant
 - 1 tbsp butter
 - 1 tbsp flour
 - ½ cup milk
 - Salt and pepper to taste
 - A pinch of nutmeg (optional)
 - Grated cheese (optional, for finishing)

- FOR THE LAMB STEW**
- 150g lamb, diced
 - 1 tbsp olive oil
 - 1 small onion, finely chopped
 - 1 garlic clove, minced
 - 1 small tomato, diced
 - 1 tbsp tomato paste
 - ½ cup water or broth
 - Salt, pepper and a pinch of paprika
- Preparation

- EGGPLANT PURÉE**
1. Roast the eggplant over an open flame or in the oven until charred. Peel and mash.
 2. In a pan, melt butter, add flour and stir to create a roux.
 3. Gradually whisk in milk until thickened.
 4. Stir in the mashed eggplant, seasoning, nutmeg and cheese if using. Keep warm.

- LAMB STEW**
1. Heat oil in a pan; and sauté onion and garlic until soft.

2. Add the lamb and brown evenly.
3. Stir in tomato, tomato paste, seasoning and broth. Simmer until lamb is tender and sauce is reduced.

TO SERVE
Spoon the warm eggplant purée onto a plate, top with the lamb stew and garnish with fresh herbs.

A ROMANCE ETCHED IN CULINARY HISTORY: The legend of Hünkar Beğendi dates back to the summer of 1867, when Sultan Abdülaziz, the first Ottoman ruler to travel to Europe, visited Paris and met Empress Eugénie of France. A quiet affection blossomed. Years later, during her stop in Istanbul en route to the Suez Canal opening, Eugénie brought her personal chef, who introduced béchamel sauce to the palace. Inspired, the Sultan's own chef added fire-roasted eggplant and topped it with lamb stew. The Sultan was so enchanted by the dish, he named it Hünkar Beğendi — ‘The Sultan Liked It.’

More than 150 years on, this royal classic continues to enchant palates, marrying timeless elegance with rich, comforting flavour.

CHEF ENGIN GULAYDIN:
Currently the Executive Sous Chef at Aloft Muscat, Chef Engin Gülaydın blends Turkish heritage with global flair. With over a decade of experience across Oman, Malta, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, he has served at iconic properties such as Swissôtel Makkah and Souq Waqif by Tivoli. Trained under Michelin-starred chefs and a participant at Chef Excellence 2024 in Dubai, Engin brings refined elegance and contemporary vision to traditional Turkish cuisine.

“Engin’s culinary passion elevates every dining experience at Aloft Muscat,” says Ramy Hamdoun, General Manager. “He masterfully transforms the rich essence of Turkish heritage into unforgettable moments. We are proud to showcase a talent like Engin — where every dish is a harmony of heart, heritage and artistry.”

THE BRIEF



A displaced Sudanese woman looks on next children

LONDON: Violence in Sudan’s Darfur region shows “the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing and may amount to crimes against humanity,” UK foreign minister David Lammy said. Lammy called on the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to “de-escalate urgently” and said that Britain would continue to “use all tools available to us to hold those responsible for atrocities to account”. Lammy said that reports of the violence in and around El Fasher were “appalling”. — **AFP**

MANILA: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos has ordered an investigation into alleged foreign interference in next month’s elections after a top security official’s warning that groups may be attempting to influence the outcome of the vote. “This is truly alarming,” Presidential Communications Undersecretary Claire Castro said in a media briefing. “We will conduct a thorough investigation so we can uncover the truth behind this.” The order came after a Senate hearing on Thursday. — **Reuters**

CARACAS: The attorney general of Venezuela said that El Salvador’s president is guilty of “human trafficking” for charging money to incarcerate Venezuelan migrants expelled from the United States. “He is committing the crime of human trafficking... he is charging \$7 million dollars for having these Venezuelans imprisoned in El Salvador,” Tarek William Saab said, calling it “a dirty business.” “International justice will be done against Bukele on this issue,” Saab added. — **AFP**



SYRIAN FLAG RAISING CEREMONY

Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al Shibani attends the ceremony of the new Syrian government flag while it was raised for the first time, outside United Nations Headquarters in New York. Meanwhile, Britain said it would support efforts to rebuild Syria’s financial system by removing sanctions to encourage investments in financial services, energy production and other sectors. London also lifted asset freezes on Syria’s Defence and Interior Ministries. — **Reuters**

DISASTER MEMORIAL

Nepal marks 10 years since quake



Nepal marked the 10th anniversary of a massive earthquake that killed almost 9,000 people and left millions more homeless. Nepal’s Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli attended a memorial ceremony at the site of Dharahara tower, one of many buildings that crumbled in the quake. “We are vulnerable to other natural disasters such as floods, landslides and are more prone to earthquakes. We need to prepare ahead against natural calamities,” Oli said. — **AFP**

TRAINING ACCIDENT

6 Thai officers killed in plane crash



Six Thai police officers were killed when a small plane crashed into the sea during a parachute training drill near a resort town. The crash occurred around 8:00 am off the coast of Prachuap Khiri Khan province south of Bangkok. Police spokesperson Archayon Kraithong said five of the six officers on board were killed at the scene. Authorities are examining the aircraft’s black box data recorder to determine the cause of the crash. — **AFP**

GEOLOGICAL ACTIVE ZONES

Magnitude 6.3 quake hits Ecuador coast



A shallow 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck off the Pacific coast of Ecuador early on Friday, the US Geological Survey reported and was felt as far away as the Andean capital Quito. Monitors said the epicentre was near the Pacific coast of Esmeraldas, at a depth of about 35 kilometres. The quake left at least one person injured, several buildings damaged and power knocked out in the Ecuadoran port city of Esmeraldas. — **AFP**



Muslims hold placards and flags during a protest against Kashmir’s attack, in Delhi. — **Reuters**

India searches for gunmen in Kashmir, amid tensions surge

ARMED POLICE and soldiers searched homes and forests for gunmen in Kashmir on Friday and India’s army chief visited the area to review security, after the killing of 26 men earlier this week — the worst attack on civilians in nearly two decades. The deadly attack triggered outrage and grief in India, along with calls for action against Pakistan. India’s army chief visited Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir and authorities scoured Pahalgam, the scenic town where the attack took place on Tuesday. India has said there were elements in Tuesday’s attack, when gunmen shot 26 men in a meadow in the Pahalgam area. Islamabad has denied any involvement. Indian financial markets plummeted earlier in the day but recovered some of their losses by the close of trade. The key stock indexes ended lower by 0.7 per cent-0.9 per cent, while the Indian rupee ended 0.2 per cent down, while the 10-year benchmark bond yield rose four basis points. The nations have unleashed a raft of measures against each other, with India keeping a critical

The nuclear-armed nations have unleashed a raft of measures against each other, with India keeping a critical river water-sharing treaty in abeyance and Pakistan closing its airspace to Indian airlines, among other steps

river water-sharing treaty in abeyance and Pakistan closing its airspace to Indian airlines, among other steps. General Upendra Dwivedi visited Kashmir on Friday to review security arrangements a day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi vowed to chase the perpetrators to “the ends of the earth”. India’s chief opposition leader Rahul Gandhi also visited Srinagar on Friday, meeting the injured and local government heads. India’s top two carriers IndiGo and Air India said some of their international routes, including to the United States and Europe, would be affected by the closure of Pakistani airspace, leading to extended flight times and diversions. There have been calls for and fears that India could conduct a military strike in Pakistani territory as it did in 2019 in retaliation for a bombing in Indian-controlled Kashmir that killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary police. Several leaders of Modi’s nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party have called for military action against Pakistan. The two countries both claim Kashmir in full, but rule it in part. India has long accused Pakistan of aiding groups who

have battled security forces in its part of the territory — accusations Islamabad denies. Indian officials say Tuesday’s attack had “cross-border linkages”. Kashmiri police, in notices identifying three people “involved” in the violence. India has not elaborated on the links or shared proof. Those killed in the attack came from all over India, Modi has said. Television channels showed funerals of victims taking place in several states and newspapers carried photos of women grieving and people praying in front of funeral pyres. Early on Friday, authorities in Kashmir demolished the houses of two suspected gunmen, one of whom is a suspect in Tuesday’s attack, an official said. Governments in many states ruled by Modi’s nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party have torn down what they say are illegal houses or shops of people accused of crimes, many of them, in what has come to be popularly known as “instant, bulldozer justice”. In an unrelated incident, sporadic firing was reported along the Line of Control that divides Indian and Pakistan, the Indian army said on Friday, despite a 2021 ceasefire which has been violated several times. — **Reuters**

WORLD

ENDEMICVIOLENCE



Students hold flowers as they arrive at Notre-Dame de Toutes-Aides high school. — AFP

COMMUNITY SEEKS ANSWERS IN FRENCH SCHOOL KILLING

NANTES: Mourners on Friday placed flowers in front of the French private school where a student killed a girl in a stabbing spree that prompted demands for tighter security in classes. High school senior Antonin said he was “sad and shocked” by the attack on Thursday. He said he had brought a white rose to show victims “we’re thinking of them”. Investigators are working to determine the motive of the youth, who also wounded three other pupils at the Notre-Dame de Toutes-Aides high school in the western city of Nantes.

The most seriously wounded of the three was “doing better” on Friday morning, Nantes prosecutor Antoine Leroy said. Witnesses said teachers overpowered the teenage student, whose identity has not been revealed. He was detained by police then hospitalised after a psychiatric examination. The suspect had sent a rambling email about “globalisation” to other students just before the attacks.

On Friday morning, one parent, who identified himself as Antoine, was dropping off his daughter in third grade at the school’s primary section. “We tried to find the right words to tell her about the girl’s death yesterday,” said the 44-year-old IT manager. But he said he needed more time before he could talk about the tragedy with his older daughter, a pupil at the high school. “It’s not a bad thing that the youngest ones are back at school today because they can ask the teaching staff questions if they need to,” he added. But another parent, Olivia, 37, said she felt anxious about her child being back in the classroom. “I admit that I found it difficult to drop my son off at school this morning,” said the nursing assistant and mother of four. “Normally, school is a place where nothing can happen,” she added. The knife attack is the latest in a series that has shocked France. Prime Minister Francois Bayrou called for a response to the “endemic violence” among some youths and demanded proposals to prevent further violence. “These weapons must be banned,” said Bayrou, raising the possibility of metal detectors as “one option”. The suspect sent a long email to fellow pupils before the attack, in which he said: “Globalisation has transformed our system into a machine to decompose humanity.” — AFP

US envoy meets Putin for Ukraine truce talks

US ENVOY Steve Witkoff met Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on Friday to tout Washington’s plan to settle the Ukraine conflict, a day after Donald Trump issued a direct appeal to the Russian president to halt his offensive. Trump has been trying to broker a truce between Moscow and Kyiv to end three years of fighting, but has failed to extract any major concessions from the Kremlin despite several rounds of negotiation.

Video published by Russian state media showed Witkoff meeting Putin at the Kremlin, with the two smiling, shaking hands and exchanging a few words in English before beginning talks. The American investor is playing a key role in Washington’s peace efforts and has already met Putin three times since Trump returned to the White House in January. Trump has threatened to walk away from talks if he does not see progress towards a ceasefire. On Thursday, after Russian attacks on Kyiv killed 12 people, Trump wrote on social media: “Vladimir, STOP!”, adding “Lets get the Peace Deal DONE!” When asked how he would respond if Russia did not accept a deal, Trump said on Thursday: “I won’t be happy, let me put it that way. Things will happen.”

The United States has not revealed the details of its peace plan, but has suggested freezing the front line and accepting Russian control of Crimea — a peninsula annexed by the Kremlin in 2014 — in exchange for peace. Trump was quoted as saying in a TIME magazine interview published on Friday: “Crimea will stay with Russia. And Zelensky understands that.” Ukraine has rejected ceding ground to Moscow and says it will not accept Russian control of Crimea. But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has in recent months accepted that he might have to try to secure the return of some land captured by Russia through diplomacy once a ceasefire is in place.

Zelensky had expressed frustration at a lack of “pressure” on Putin from the West, despite the United States warning of repercussions if Moscow refused a deal. “I don’t see any strong pressure on Russia or any new sanctions packages against Russia’s aggression,” he said during a visit to South Africa. Putin last month rejected a US proposal of a full and unconditional ceasefire that Zelensky has accepted and repeatedly called for since.

Trump, who has been accused of favouring Russia and has repeatedly vilified



Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomes US President Donald Trump’s envoy Steve Witkoff during a meeting in Moscow. — Reuters

Zelensky, said on Thursday that the main concession Russia would make in any peace deal was “stopping taking the whole country”. Witkoff said earlier this month that a peace settlement hinged on the status of the “so-called five territories” — a comment that drew a sharp rebuke from Zelensky, who accused the US envoy of “spreading Russian narratives”.

As Witkoff arrived in Russia on Friday, authorities there reported a senior general had been killed in a car bombing outside Moscow. An explosive device ripped through a parked car near Moscow killing a senior Russian general, investigators said, in an attack that resembled previous killings claimed by Ukraine.

Authorities named the victim as General-lieutenant Yaroslav Moskalik, deputy head of the main operational directorate

of the military’s General Staff, which is in charge of army operations. Kyiv has not commented on the attack, which bore the hallmarks of previous assassinations of military figures and high-profile backers of the Kremlin’s offensive over the last three years.

Ukraine has called some of them “legitimate targets” and sees the attacks as retribution for Moscow’s military campaign, which has resulted in tens of thousands of people killed. Russia’s Investigative Committee said it had opened a murder probe after a Volkswagen Golf blew up outside a block of flats in the town of Balashikha, east of Moscow. “Our military figure was killed as a result of a terrorist attack,” Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said. Investigators have not confirmed this charge. — AFP

Huge crowds pack Vatican ahead of Pope’s funeral

VATICAN CITY: Tens of thousands of people flocked to the Vatican on Friday for a last glimpse of Pope Francis’s open coffin, as world leaders and other guests began arriving for his funeral. Around 150,000 people had paid their last respects to the Argentine pontiff by midday Friday, seven hours before the end of three days of lying in state at St Peter’s Basilica, the Vatican said.

More than 50 heads of state and 10 monarchs are expected to attend Saturday’s funeral, alongside around 200,000 mourners. Vast crowds of people packed Via della Conciliazione, the wide avenue leading to the Vatican, pilgrims and tourists mingling with Italians enjoying the April 25 public holiday. Italian and Vatican authorities have placed the area around St Peter’s under tight security with drones blocked, snipers on roofs and fighter jets on standby. Further checkpoints will be activated on Friday night, police said.

For a second night in a row, the

Highlights

More than 50 heads of state and 10 monarchs are expected to attend Saturday’s funeral, alongside around 200,000 mourners.



Nuns and visitors queue next to a barrier to enter Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica. — AFP

Vatican kept St Peter’s open past the scheduled hours to accommodate the queues, only closing the doors between 2:30 am and 5:40 am on Friday. The Catholic Church’s first Latin American pope died on Monday aged 88, less than a month after spending weeks in hospital fighting severe pneumonia.

The Argentine pontiff, who had long suffered failing health, defied doctors’ orders by making a public

appearance on Easter on Sunday, the most important moment in the Catholic calendar. It was his last public appearance. Condolences have flooded in from around the world for the Jesuit, an energetic reformer who championed those on the fringes of society in his 12 years as head of the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics. He used his last speech to rail against those who stir up “contempt... towards the vulnerable, the marginalised and

migrants”. “It’s impressive to see all these people,” French cardinal Francois-Xavier Bustillo said of the queuing crowds, describing Francis as “a man of the people. “It’s a beautiful response, a beautiful embrace of his ministry, of his pontificate,” he added.

The Vatican has said 130 foreign delegations are confirmed for the funeral, including Argentina’s President Javier Milei and Britain’s Prince William, many of whom began arriving early on Friday morning. US President Donald Trump headed to Rome on Friday for the funeral of Pope Francis, the unexpected first foreign trip of his second term.

On Thursday the Vatican banned people from taking photos inside the basilica, a move that eased the queue. It came after some mourners took selfies with the coffin. After the funeral, Francis’s coffin will be driven at a walking pace for burial at his favourite church, Rome’s papal basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. — AFP

Unraveling the truth behind a haunting case



RASHA AL RAISI
rashabooks@yahoo.com

The writer is the author of *The World According to Bahja*

WHETHER YOU'RE A FAN of movies like *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring* or sceptical about the paranormal world, I invite you to watch Netflix's documentary 'The Devil's on Trial' written and directed by Chris Holt (2023).

It starts with the story of eleven-year-old David Glatzel, who gets possessed by a demon after moving with his family to a new house bought by his sister Debbie and her boyfriend Arnie Cheyenne Johnson in 1980. The family asks for the local priest's aid, but he only offers prayers that don't help David at all. His mother, Judy, decides to contact Ed and Lorraine Warren — the famous couple who investigated paranormal activities in the 70s and the 80s; and were depicted by Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson in the *Conjuring* movies — who immediately come to the rescue.

After a few interviews with the family and observation of David, they decide that it's a possession case that needs the intervention of the Catholic Church for an exorcism. However, exorcism is not something that the church takes lightly or performs immediately.

There must be enough evidence documented and presented before the church decides if it's a genuine case for exorcism. With the help of the Warrens, the family

manages to record David's voice when being possessed, along with Polaroid pictures of him being held down by different members of his family (and you get to see and hear all of it. Spooky!).

After a few months, exorcism is approved and the whole family, along with the Warrens, head to the church to witness it. But it doesn't go smoothly and David is almost killed if not for Debbie's boyfriend, Arnie, crying at the demon to leave the child alone and take him instead. And that's what happens exactly: the demon leaves David and enters Arnie. Of course, the Warrens weren't happy with Arnie's reaction to being the new host, yet Arnie doesn't show any sign of possession until months later.

In November 1981, Arnie was caught by the police after murdering his landlord, forty-year-old Alan Bono. Arnie, who was nineteen at the time, claimed that the last thing he remembers was leaving Bono's house along with Debbie and his sisters before blacking out. The case became known as the 'Demon Murder Trial' and 'The Devil Made Me Do It' as these were Arnie's claims of innocence. It was the first and the only time in American courts where the defence attorney attempted to use demonic possession as the reason for

A spooky Netflix documentary about a real murder case in 1981, where a man claimed he was possessed by a demon. With real interviews and creepy scenes, it leaves you wondering what really happened

dismissal. Yet, the judge rejects the claim for lack of evidence and Arnie is charged with murder and is released after five years. Then comes the bombshell: Was David's possession real or simply a child seeking attention?

Furthermore, was he being persuaded by the adults to do it for fame and fortune that never came? How about the Warrens' involvement in the whole case?

Was it done out of real concern or economic gains? These are the questions that you're hit with after hearing the testimony of David's elder brother Carl, who shares other claims, such as accusing his mother of adding sleeping pills to their dinner daily.

The documentary is entertaining with a good narrative. The interviews of the Glatzel's siblings and Arnie, along with the enactment of the events, was gripping as the actors truly resembled the real characters.

Nevertheless, I found the pictures and the tape recordings a bit disturbing yet essential to comprehend the storyline. The movie is cleverly made in a way that leaves you in doubt, even with all the witnesses' testimonies and pieces of evidence presented.

Recommended for the lionhearted only!

GRIEF THROUGH A SCREEN



DR SAMA GHIYASUDDIN
The writer is a healthcare strategist and mental health advocate

Three days. That's all it took for pandemic to take my father — a dedicated doctor who healed others until his final breath. I watched through a pixelated phone screen from thousands of miles away as the virus quietly stole his face, his voice and finally, his life. There was no final embrace. No whispered prayers at his bedside. No funeral

I could attend. Only the crushing silence of a quiet apartment and the dull, constant buzz of a phone delivering updates I could do nothing about.

Five days later, the crescent moon appeared in the sky. The world prepared for Eid with lights, food and joy. I prepared a broken smile for a video call with my mother, now a widow. "Next Eid, I'll come home," I had promised after so many years of being away. Every Eid, his voice would soften with longing and hope: "Next year, daughter?" That year, I had finally said yes. But God had other plans. There was no space for private grief. Soon came the whispers from relatives and community members: "No son? Who will handle the arrangements? The house will have to be sold." As though my mother, a strong survivor and we — her daughters — were not capable. We became what patriarchy fears most: women who do not disappear quietly.

Grief did not come gently. It was messy, loud and disorienting. And it rewired me. The daughter who once tiptoed around difficult conversations now burns with questions and demands answers. The woman who once pleased others now speaks with a new resolve. Why must the grieving also fight for basic compassion?

I found anchors. Friends who brought food without asking, who stayed on calls without words. Strangers in bereavement groups who became lantern holders in the longest nights of my life. I kept my father alive in the small rituals — cooking his favourite recipes with my child, writing him letters that he'll never read but my soul needed to send.

I set sacred boundaries. I said no to the relatives who urged me to "move on" or "stay strong." Instead, I embraced therapy, faith and every complicated, conflicting emotion that came with loss. I learned that grief is not something you fix.

A daughter's journey of growth

I WAS KNOWN AS "Daddy's Little Princess" — the girl who expected things to be ready, served and perfect. I wore the title proudly. I got upset if I didn't get what I wanted, especially from my mother. I was particular about my clothes, preferring only branded shops. My father often cautioned my mom, "Don't let her get used to this."

But life has its rhythm. Change didn't come overnight, nor was it forced upon me. It came slowly, naturally, through lived experiences. My father played a key role in that transformation. He encouraged me to learn how to make Arabic coffee and bake his favourite blueberry muffins, even though we had help at home. During Ramadhan or on ordinary days, he ensured I helped in the kitchen. At first, I resisted, saying, "You're making me learn so I'll have to do it forever." But even when my dishes looked unappetising, he would eat them with a smile and praise me, just to keep me going. He constantly used everyday moments to instill life lessons. "Help your mother carry bags," he'd say. Or, "One day, you'll study abroad. You'll learn what responsibility and money mean. We earn money — it doesn't grow on trees." During travels, he'd say, "Take this in. One day, you'll be in places like this through your achievements."

He inspired me to read, listen to stories and try new things — tennis, swimming, squash, even horse riding. While I didn't enjoy all of it at first, over time, I found joy in the things I once resisted.

Most importantly, he passed on his love for writing. He was work-



SARA AL HAMZI
sara.hamzy@gmail.com

The writer is a Muscat-based risk analyst and a passionate writer Growing up

A daughter reflects on the journey from being a pampered child to growing into a strong, grounded woman — guided by the quiet wisdom of her late father



ing on a leadership book that he never finished. One of my personal goals is to publish it in his memory, not just as his daughter, but as the woman he believed I could become.

In Grade 12, my father passed away. He had often reminded me, "Work hard so you can study abroad." His dream was for me to pursue commercial law. I didn't follow that exact path — I became a banker — but his guidance built the foundation for everything I am.

I began college in Oman, but mid-semester, I received a scholarship to study in Vienna. My life — the one my father prepared me for — had begun. I wasn't homesick, not even once. The girl everyone thought was too pampered embraced independence fully. I managed my finances, made international friends and learned to handle responsibilities not from lectures, but from life itself.

Abroad, I learned that self-worth isn't about what you wear or how

much money you have. It's about how you treat others, how you carry yourself and the integrity you show in both big and small moments.

One memory stands out. My father once bought me a denim skirt during a grocery run, claiming it was from a store I liked. I wore it proudly. Later, he confessed where it was really from. I laughed, but the lesson hit home — value isn't about price; it's about perspective.

A quote I once heard stuck with me: "Invest in gold, not luxury bags. The goal is not to look rich — it's to be rich." That truth continues to guide me.

Life's lessons don't come all at once. They arrive in pieces through quiet moments, failures and growth. True change isn't sudden. It's a gentle, daily unfolding. And even as we evolve, the child within us still lingers. For me, that child loves cartoons, Disney and theme parks — and I embrace her, because she brings me joy.

Weekend BUSINESS

SHORT TAKES



HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs

250 GLOBAL FIGURES TO ATTEND ADVANTAGE OMAN FORUM

BUSINESS REPORTER

Global investors, policymakers and business leaders are set to converge in Muscat on April 27–28, 2025 for the inaugural Advantage Oman Forum, a two-day international platform focused on the future of investment, economic resilience and strategic collaboration. The event will take place at the St Regis Al Mouj Muscat Resort and will open under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs.

Organised by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the forum is delivered through its investment arm, Invest Oman. The gathering is expected to bring together more than 250 senior figures representing government agencies, multilateral organisations and global media outlets. Its objective is to foster deeper dialogue around shifting capital flows, climate finance, regional integration and long-term investment strategy, positioning Oman as a stable and constructive partner in an evolving global investment landscape. The Advantage Oman Forum takes place at a time when governments and institutions around the world are reassessing their role in a more competitive global economy. Incentives and infrastructure alone are no longer sufficient to attract meaningful capital. Investors are increasingly prioritising countries that offer consistent policy direction, institutional trust and clear development frameworks.

Raysut Cement rekindles green energy deal with Chinese firm

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

IN A DEVELOPMENT poised to redefine Oman's approach to industrial energy efficiency, Raysut Cement Company is reactivating a strategic partnership with China's SINOMA Overseas Development Co, Ltd to launch the Sultanate of Oman's first waste heat recovery (WHR) power plant. The facility will harness thermal emissions from cement kilns to generate clean electricity — a model project aligning with global decarbonisation trends.

The news surfaced directly from Raysut Cement CEO Eng Hilal al Dhamri, who confirmed a successful high-level meeting with SINOMA Overseas in Dubai. Discussions centred on moving forward with a long-stalled green energy initiative at Raysut's flagship plant in Salalah.

“Dhofar will host the first station of its kind in Oman,” said Al Dhamri in a post on social media, adding that the project will operate on heat discharged from cement production kilns.

The groundwork for the WHR project was originally laid in 2018, when Raysut Cement and SINOMA Overseas Development Co, Ltd signed a memorandum to develop a 9-megawatt power facility. The system, once operational, is expected to cut the plant's reliance on grid power by up to 30 per cent and reduce CO₂ emissions by more than 50,000 tonnes annually.

This revival arrives at a critical juncture. Oman is ramping up sustainability commitments under Oman Vision 2040 and its net-zero road map for 2050. Waste heat recovery is a proven industrial decarboni-



The proposed Waste Heat Recovery project aims to harness thermal emissions from cement kilns to generate clean electricity

sation tool, already deployed across major cement markets like China and India.

The Raysut–SINOMA project is expected to be a regional first, offering a replicable model for industrial-scale energy reuse in the Gulf. With environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria gaining prominence across global capital markets, Raysut Cement's move could strengthen its sustainability credentials and attract future green investment.

Moreover, SINOMA Overseas Development — an internationally renowned engineering firm under the China National Building Material Group (CNBM) — brings

to the table extensive experience in delivering turnkey WHR projects worldwide. Its involvement signals technical credibility and enhances the project's feasibility.

No official commissioning timeline has been released, but engineering design and site preparations are expected to be revisited before the end of 2025. The Salalah plant, one of Oman's largest cement production hubs, is already primed for the system's integration.

When completed, the WHR facility will not only mark a first for Oman but serve as a blueprint for the region's low-carbon manufacturing future.

Chinese wind turbine giant backs localisation drive

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

HAVING MADE its debut in Oman's energy infrastructure space as the EPC contractor for the recently launched 500 MW Manah-1 solar power project, Chinese power engineering and manufacturing giant Shanghai Electric is now gearing up to deepen its presence in the Sultanate of Oman through its wind turbine manufacturing arm.

Shanghai Electric Wind Power Group Co Ltd, ranked among China's Top 5 wind turbine manufacturers, is a technical partner in the establishment of Oman's first wind turbine production facility in Al Duqm. The principal investor in the \$200 million venture is Oman-based Mawarid Turbine, which recently signed agreements with both Shanghai Electric and OQ Group for the development of a groundbreaking facility with an annual capacity of 1 GW at the SEZ.

While the plant's capacity is significant, it will nonetheless meet only a small fraction of Oman's vast demand for wind turbines and other essential equipment required to achieve the country's renewable energy generation and green hydrogen produc-

Highlights

Hydrom, the architect of Oman's green hydrogen industry, estimates the need for around 2000–3000 wind turbines, alongside a staggering 40 million solar panels



Workers of Shanghai Electric Wind Power pose with a wind turbine manufactured at one of the company's Chinese plants

tion targets. Hydrom, the architect of Oman's green hydrogen industry, estimates the need for around 2000–3000 wind turbines, alongside a staggering 40 million solar panels, to generate the volumes of green electricity necessary to achieve the green hydrogen production target of 1.4 million tonnes per annum by 2030.

Not included in this tally is the requirement of several hundred turbines that will be necessary to build out wind farms currently being procured for implementation by Nama Power and Water Procurement Co (PWP). As many as five wind farms, with an aggregate capacity of over 1 GW, are planned for launch in various parts of the country by early 2028. Addition-

ally, the partnership of OQ Alternative Energy and TotalEnergies is developing two wind farms for Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) with a combined capacity of 200 MW.

Although not all of Oman's current wind turbine demand is a captive market for the new Mawarid Turbine project, the imbalance between domestic production capacity and market demand highlights significant opportunities for investment in local manufacturing across the renewable energy value chain.

Shanghai Electric Wind Power, for its part, has pledged to support Oman's localisation goals in terms of its wind turbine manufacturing capacity needs. Wu Lei, Chairman — Shanghai

Electric Group, commented in a statement: “The Omani government's forward-looking Oman Vision 2040 and Green Hydrogen Strategy align with Shanghai Electric's strategic development goals. We are eager to use this project as an opportunity to integrate advanced technologies and high-quality products in the new energy sector with Oman's resource strengths and market potential. Through technology licensing and localised supply chain development, we aim to drive the implementation of more high-quality projects, contribute to Oman's energy transformation and help shape a new chapter in China-Arab energy cooperation.”

Established in 2006, Shanghai Electric manufactures a diverse range of wind turbines, catering to both onshore and offshore applications. Capacities range from 1.25 MW to 5 MW for onshore wind turbines and 3.6 MW to 11 MW for offshore turbines. The company operates a network of 12 manufacturing plans distributed across China, with around six R&D centres located in China and elsewhere around the world. Total capacity of wind turbines installed by the company around the world aggregates over 11 GW.

AI action figures flood social media

(A c c e s s o r i e s i n c l u d e d)



In a handout image generated by artificial intelligence and provided by ChatGPT shows, Pat Bassermann, who works in marketing and wrote an elaborate prompt to create his own action figure.

As AI platforms have surged in popularity, their image-generating abilities have come under scrutiny. Artists and musicians have argued that the technology threatens their livelihood



In a handout image generated by artificial intelligence and provided by ChatGPT shows, action figures which Pat Bassermann made for his daughters after creating one for himself.

THIS WEEK, actress Brooke Shields posted an image of an action-figure version of herself that came with a needlepoint kit and a pet terrier. Rep Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga, imagined her own figurine accompanied by a gavel and a Bible.

These hyper-realistic dolls are nowhere to be found in toy stores, at least for the time being. They are being created using artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT.

In recent weeks, social media users have been turning to AI to generate Barbie-fied versions of themselves, their dogs or their favorite famous figures. Anna Wintour has not been spared the AI-doll treatment. Neither has Ludwig van Beethoven.

The trend has frustrated illustrators who oppose the use of unlicensed artwork to train these artificial intelligence tools and who remain concerned about the effects of AI on their livelihoods. Several have responded by posting similar images of figurines that they illustrated themselves.

“Human Made,” reads a text bubble in the corner of one such illustration by Linh Truong, who depicted herself with her sketchbook and her cat, Kayla.

Truong, 23, an artist who lives in New York City, sees the AI action figures, the latest of several AI portraiture trends, as a way that tech companies are trying to connect with users on a personal level.

“They’re like, ‘We want you to see yourself in our product,’” she said.

To plenty of people, that’s a tempting possibility.

Suzie Geria, 37, a fitness trainer in Toronto, thought the action figure created for her by ChatGPT was surprisingly realistic. It came with a kettlebell and a cartoon peach to represent the glute-focused class she teaches at a nearby gym.

“It’s kind of cool to see yourself reflected in a cartoon form,” she said. “I think we’re looking at other ways to see ourselves in the world we live in, which is very much online.”

Geria said she had empathy for those who worked in industries that might suffer job loss because of AI. “It’s a tough one, but it’s bringing



CALLIE HOLTERMANN

The writer is reporter at The New York Times

people joy as well,” she said.

Pat Bassermann, 42, who works in marketing and lives in Andover, Massachusetts, typed a paragraph-long prompt into ChatGPT to create an action figure of himself.

“Use this photo of me to create an action figure of myself in a blister pack, in the style like a premium collectible toy,” he wrote, adding requests for grilling tongs and a “relaxed, friendly smile.” He uploaded a headshot and was presented with an image seconds later.

“Wife & Kids Not Included. Messy House Sold Separately,” reads a line of text at the bottom of the image.

Soon, his three daughters wanted their own versions. In a few more minutes, they were presented with figurines with ponytails, accessorised with ballet slippers, a video game controller and a cup of Boba tea.

As AI platforms have surged in popularity, their image-generating abilities have come under scrutiny. Artists and musicians have argued that the technology threatens their livelihoods. Deepfake images, many of them explicit, have confounded

schools, political campaigns and celebrities.

REPLICATE THE STYLE

In March, social media was flooded with videos that used ChatGPT to replicate the style of Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki. In response, some users circulated a clip of Miyazaki calling AI “an insult to life itself” in a 2016 documentary.

Martha Ratcliff, 29, an illustrator in Leeds, England, said she spent years developing a distinctive style of portraiture. She said she felt frustrated every time she saw a new AI portrait trend that ostensibly drew from the work of real artists without compensation.

She gets that it’s fun to hop on a trend, she said. “But I think if you look at the bigger picture, there are a lot of creatives that are worried,” she added. “You just don’t want it to wipe out the whole creative industry.”

She spent about 20 minutes making her own hand-drawn rendition of the trend. She depicted herself holding her newborn, surrounded by flowers, coloured pencils and a steaming mug that said “mama.” — The New York Times

Weekend

SPORTS

6-RED BALL

AL MUTASIM CLAIMS SILVER AT WEST ASIA SNOOKER CHAMPIONSHIP



Al Mutasim al Saadi won the silver in the 6-Red Ball Snooker for U21 juniors in Bahrain.

AHMED AL KAABI

Oman's national team player, Al Mutasim al Saadi, secured the silver medal in the 6-Red Ball Snooker competition for U21 juniors at the West Asia Combined Billiards and Snooker Championship, held in Bahrain from April 14 to 25. Al Saadi's silver medal came after a series of strong performances throughout the tournament. He began his campaign with a convincing win over a Bahraini player, showcasing calm and consistent play that allowed him to control the match from the start. Although he lost his second match in a thrilling contest against Saudi Arabia's Ziyad al Qabbani (2-3), Al Saadi displayed great composure and bounced back strongly in the knockout stages.

In the quarterfinals, he defeated the UAE's Saif al Zaabi 4-1, demonstrating full control of the table and sharp mental focus. He carried that momentum into the semifinals, where he once again won 4-1, this time against Bahrain's Abdullah al Ali, relying on a mix of precise shots and tactical play. However, in the final match, luck was not on his side as he fell to Iraq's Mohammad Qusay with a score of 0-4.

After receiving the silver medal, Al Saadi said: "I'm proud to win this medal for the Sultanate of Oman. While I had hoped for the gold, reaching the final in such a high-level tournament is a great achievement in itself. I faced skilled and experienced players and learned a lot throughout this journey. I sincerely thank the Oman Billiards and Snooker Committee for their constant support and I especially acknowledge the efforts of my coaches, Stephen Feeney and Mohammed Moataz, who played a major role in developing my skills and preparing me for this championship."

Coach Mohammed Moataz praised Al Saadi's progress, stating Al Mutasim has a unique talent. "We've been tracking his development since the beginning and over the past few years, he has significantly improved his game. What he achieved today is the result of his dedication and continuous hard work in training. He has a promising future and we are confident that he will become one of the leading names in the sport in the region."



Oman have won seven medals across nine editions.

10 days to go for Asian Beach Handball

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 25

THE OMAN Handball Association (OHA) in coordination with Asian Handball Federation (AHF) are gearing up to host the competitions of the 10th AHF Asian Men's and Women's Beach Handball championship which will be hosted in Muscat during May 6 to 15. Only 10 days are left for the event as the OHA has almost completed their preparations for a successful event which will take place at the sandy court in Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. On the other hand, Oman beach handball team is undergoing a domestic camp at the sandy court in Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Oman team — under guidance of domestic coach Hamood al Hasani and his assistant Jaber al Balushi — is involved with the proper technical training sessions and implementing the right tactics in order to ensure a solid performance during the competition. The Oman handball team's morale is high epically as they recently won the gold in the GCC Beach Games. The Oman

beach handball team began its campaign strongly in the GCC event with a 2-0 win over UAE. Then, Oman continued their winning streak in the tournament, claiming another victory over Bahrain by 2-0. Later, Oman stunned Saudi Arabia 2-0 before defeating UAE 2-0. Then, they repeated their win against Bahrain 2-0 and they secured the gold medal after defeating Saudi Arabia 2-0 in the final match.

Oman are clubbed with Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Maldives in Group A at the 10th AHF Asian Men's Beach Handball championship. Group B comprised of Iran, Philippines, Jordan, Pakistan and India. The women's competition will feature only four teams in one group only including: Vietnam, Hong Kong, Philippines and India.

BETTER SHOW
Oman players will eye a better show than their hosting for this event in 2015 as Oman finished as runners-up behind champions Qatar. The coaching staff will aim for a spot in the the 12th IHF Men's and Women's Beach Handball World Championship as the Asian Cup acts as a qualifier for global

event which is staged for 2026. Top teams only from the tournament will secure their spots in the World Championship. A total of nine teams will vie for the men's title besides the other title for women. For the women's championship, teams will vie in a round-robin format with the top two teams qualifying for the 2026 Beach Handball World Cup. In the men's event, the teams will play in a single-round league format in the first stage as the top two teams from each group will advance to the semifinals. Oman had also successfully hosted the Beach Handball World Cup in 2012 at Al Musannah Sports City. Oman's national team has a proud history in the competition having won seven medals across nine editions. This includes a gold medal in the inaugural 2004 championship and six silver medals, consistently placing the team among Asia's top performers. Furthermore, Oman's national beach handball team has a distinguished record as they had qualified for the 2024 Beach Handball World Cup in China.

‘Greatest-ever’ Vardy to leave Leicester at end of season

LONDON: Jamie Vardy will leave former Premier League champions Leicester at the end of the season, the relegated club announced on Thursday, describing the lightning-quick forward as their “greatest-ever player”. The talismanic striker, a key member of the side that lifted the English league title against seemingly impossible odds in 2016, vowed to continue playing even at the age of 38. The former England international joined the Foxes in 2012 from non-league side Fleetwood for just £1 million (\$1.3 million) and has scored 198 goals in nearly 500 appearances.

The club captain is Leicester's record Premier League goalscorer with 143 goals. He scored 24 times in the 2015/16 Premier League campaign, helping the Foxes to their first top-flight title in one of the greatest shocks in football history. Vardy was also part of Leicester's 2021 FA Cup-winning side, who beat Chelsea 1-0 at Wembley. “We can confirm legendary striker Jamie Vardy will leave Leicester City this summer after 13 seasons that have seen him become our greatest-ever player,” the club said in a statement. “Jamie is unique,” said chairman Aiyawatt Srivaddhanaprabha.



Leicester City's Jamie Vardy with the FA Cup trophy after beating Chelsea in final on May 15, 2021. — Reuters

“He is a special player and an even more special person.” **DEVASTATED** Vardy said he was “devastated” to be leaving the Foxes but the timing was right. “To the fans of Leicester, I'm gutted that this day is coming, but I knew it was going to come eventually,” he said in a video message to fans. “I've spent 13 unbelievable years at this club, with lots of success, and some downs, but the majority have all been highs.” Vardy, who has scored seven goals in 31 league appearances this season, gave a scathing assessment of Leicester's campaign after rel-

egation was confirmed on Sunday following a 1-0 defeat by Liverpool. “This season has been nothing but miserable and for me personally, a total embarrassment”, he said in a social media post. “It hurts.” Ruud van Nistelrooy's side are 19th in the table, having collected just 18 points from their 33 matches and are heading back to the Championship after just one season back in the top division. Vardy, the last remaining player from Leicester's 2016 title success still at the King Power Stadium, enjoyed a fairytale rise from the fifth tier of English football to the very top. — AFP

NBAPLAYOFFS



Detroit Pistons' Jalen Duren (0) dunks in the second half against the New York Knicks during game three of first round for the 2024 NBA Playoffs at Little Caesars Arena. — **Imagn Images**

THUNDER RALLY FROM 29 DOWN AFTER MORANT HURT TO STUN GRIZZLIES

LOS ANGELES: Oklahoma City made a stunning 29-point comeback after Memphis lost star guard Ja Morant to a hip injury as the Thunder beat the Grizzlies 114-108 on Thursday to reach the brink of a playoff sweep. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points, Jalen Williams added 26 and Chet Holmgren scored 23 of his 24 points in the second half to spark the second-largest NBA playoff victory fightback since 1997.

“It wasn’t pretty. They hit us first. But we did what we had to do and came away with a win,” Holmgren said. “It was a team mentality. Everybody was saying something when we went into that locker room. Then we came out and we cleaned it up.”

Oklahoma City seized a 3-0 lead in the Western Conference first round best-of-seven series with a chance to complete the sweep in game four at Memphis on Saturday.

Morant suffered a bruised left hip late in the second quarter when he drove to the hoop and leapt high into the Thunder’s Luguentz Dort and fell face-first onto the court, writhing in pain for several minutes and eventually leaving the game for good. The Grizzlies took their largest lead at 69-40 seconds after Morant’s departure with 3:15 to play in the second quarter and Memphis led 77-51 at half-time, but Oklahoma City outscored the hosts 63-31 in the second half.

Memphis interim coach Tuomas Iisalo said the injury to Morant, the Grizzlies points and assist leader this season, sapped his team’s energy and ability to execute plays.

“I would say quite drastically from the result, not only the energy but the execution,” Iisalo said.

“We did a great job fighting for 48 minutes but against this team it’s not enough to fight. You also have to be able to execute.” As for Morant, he added: “He’s going through further evaluations tomorrow and then we’ll know more.”

GREAT RESPONSE

The only greater NBA playoff collapse in the past 25 years came in 2019 when the Los Angeles Clippers rallied from 31 points down to defeat Golden State. “Our response, in a game that doesn’t feel attainable in certain parts of it, was great,” Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said.

The Morant injury play evoked memories of Golden State’s Jimmy Butler falling awkwardly Wednesday, with an MRI on Thursday reportedly showing a deeply bruised gluteus muscle that left him uncertain for game three against Houston on Saturday. Other playoff results on Thursday saw New York win 118-116 at Detroit and the Clippers rout visiting Denver 117-83.

Also in the West, the Clippers took a 2-1 series edge over Denver as Kawhi Leonard scored 21 points while James Harden and Norman Powell each had 20 for LA, who surged ahead 65-47 at half-time and pulled away. Serbian Nikola Jokic had his 20th career playoff triple double with 23 points, 13 rebounds and 13 assists for the Nuggets.

At Detroit, New York’s Karl-Anthony Towns scored 31 points and Jalen Brunson added 30 to spark the Knicks for a 2-1 series lead.— **AFP**

Hazlewood steers Bengaluru win over RR



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Josh Hazlewood celebrates the wicket of Rajasthan Royals' Shimron Hetmyer. — **Reuters**

AUSTRALIAN

PACER Josh Hazlewood starred with 4-33 in Royal Challengers Bengaluru’s 11 run IPL win at home against Rajasthan Royals, who won the toss and chose to field first on Thursday. Chasing 206 to win after Bengaluru’s 205-5, Rajasthan looked comfortable before Dhruv Jurel was dismissed by Hazlewood in the 19th over of the chase.

Jurel scored a 34-ball 47 and was removed with 17 needed off 9 balls for the win. Hazlewood removed England’s Jofra Archer on the next ball, leaving Royals reeling with 17 needed off the final over.

Earlier, Indian batting superstar Virat Kohli hit a 42-ball 70 to steer Bengaluru to a par score on a batting friendly Bengaluru wicket. Openers Kohli and Phil Salt raced to 59-0 in the powerplay before Salt was removed on 26 in the seventh over with the team on 61-1.

Kohli then built an important 95 run partnership with Devdutt Padikkal before finally falling in the 16th over to Archer.

Padikkal, who was batting very well, fell soon after a 27-ball 50, with Bengaluru on 161-3.

Quick wickets towards the end took away the momentum before key cameos by Tim David (23) and Jitesh Sharma, who remained unbeaten on 20.

Archer was Rajasthan’s standout bowler and finished with 33-1. Sandeep Sharma took 2-45 and Sri Lanka’s Wanindu Hasaranga finished with 1-30.

Rajasthan’s young top-order batters started really well and stayed ahead of the required run rate for the first half of the chase.

Indian Test opener Yashasvi Jaiswal hit 19-ball 49 before he was removed by Hazlewood.

His opening partner, Vaibhav Suryavanshi fell early on 16 to India veteran Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who

finished with 1-50 in his four-over spell.

Spinner Krunal Pandya bowled an important spell and removed both Nitish Rana (28) and Rajasthan skipper Riyan Parag (22) who looked dangerous after the fall of initial wickets.

Rajasthan were cruising before Rana’s wicket in the 14th over but its batters failed to convert starts into a score to help their team cross the finish line.

“I think we did really well with the ball... We held them back really well,” Parag said after the game.

“With the batting, I thought at the halfway mark we were in the driving seat,” he added.

But “we have ourselves to blame... (The team was) in the driving seat and we let it slip”.

Player-of-the-match Hazlewood said that he “was just sticking to my strengths”.

“I knew hard lengths were hard to hit so I was mixing that up with yorkers, change of pace,” he added. — **AFP**

SPORTS



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka returns a ball to Russia's Anna Blinkova during their 2025 WTA Tour Madrid Open tournament second round match at the Caja Magica in Madrid on Friday. — AFP

Sabalenka makes winning start in Madrid Open

ARYNA SABALENKA kicked off her quest for a third Madrid Open title with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over Anna Blinkova in second-round action at the Caja Magica on Friday.

The world number one improved her record at the tournament to 18-4, having lifted the trophy in 2021 and 2023, alongside her runner-up showing to Iga Swiatek last year.

After racing to a double-break 5-0 advantage against Blinkova in the opening set, Sabalenka lost one of her breaks before taking the lead on her third set point on the 48-minute mark.

The second set was a straightforward affair, with an early break of serve enough for Sabalenka to punch her ticket to the third round, where she awaits either her former doubles partner Elise Mertens or Colombia's Camila Osorio.

Sabalenka's three Grand Slam titles have all come on hard courts, but the Belarusian power-hitter has shown she can contend on clay, with two trophies clinched

from nine finals reached on the surface.

The 26-year-old admits the French Open has proven to be a "challenge" for her and she feels she has unfinished business there after losing in the 2023 semifinals to Karolina Muchova and the 2024 quarterfinals to Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva.

"Every time I go there, it's like a challenge for me, even though I love playing on clay and I feel really good," said Sabalenka of Roland Garros.

"But I like to accept tough challenges. So I really hope that one year I'll be able to get that beautiful trophy in my collection."

Earlier in the day, world number nine Paula Badosa delivered another blow to the tournament as she was forced to withdraw from her home event due to a lower back injury.

Badosa joins her fellow Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, who pulled out of the Madrid Open on Thursday citing a left hamstring issue and a right adductor injury.

Meanwhile, Tunisian 2022 Madrid champion Ons Jabeur crashed out in her opener to



Germany's Alexander Zverev plays a return to Spain's Roberto Bautista during 2025 ATP Tour Madrid Open. — AFP

Moyuka Uchijima 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 while Greece's Maria Sakkari took a positive step towards recapturing her form by dismissing 29th-seeded Magda Linette 7-6(5), 6-3.

ZVEREV BASKS ON FAVOURITE COURT

On the men's side, last week's Munich champion Alexander

Zverev fired 32 winners against just 24 unforced errors in a dominant 6-2, 6-2 win over Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut.

"For me, I always say that this is my favourite centre court in the entire world," said Zverev, who is a two-time Madrid champion.

"I only lost twice in my entire life here, so I hope that stays that way, throughout the next 10 days, and I can continue playing good tennis. As long as I do that, I'm happy."

The top-seeded Zverev awaits Nuno Borges or Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in the third round.

Last year's finalist Felix Auger-Aliassime stumbled at the first hurdle, losing to Argentina's Juan Manuel Cerundolo 7-6(5), 6-4.

The Canadian former world number six had a good start to 2025, winning two titles and reaching the final in Dubai but is currently on a four-match losing streak.

Auger-Aliassime is projected to drop out of the top 25 when the new rankings are released after the tournament.

It was a good day for Argentines

overall as Cerundolo's brother, Francisco, also advanced to the third round with a 6-3, 6-4 result against qualifier Harold Mayot.

Francisco Cerundolo will next take on his compatriot Francisco Comesana, who rallied back from 1-5 down in the opening set to upset 13th-seeded Arthur Fils 7-6(4), 6-4.

Fils criticised the live electronic line calling that is being used at clay tournaments for the first time this season, noting how the marks on the court do not match the ones shown on screens in the video replays.

Comesana agrees with Fils regarding the inaccuracy of the technology, but says he still prefers live electronic line calling to having line judges and chair umpires make the call.

"I looked at the marks as well and some marks were like 1cm out. But it's for both of us," said the 70th-ranked Comesana, who is through to a Masters 1000 third round for the first time.

"I prefer the electronic line calling because sometimes the line judges are late in making the calls." — AFP