

NATIONAL
POLICY TO CUT
IMPORTS,
INCREASE
EXPORTS ON
THE ANVIL

HIS MAJESTY PRESIDES OVER COUNCIL OF
MINISTERS MEETING



Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik chaired a meeting of the Council of Ministers in Muscat on Sunday.

At the outset of the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan thanked and praised Allah the Almighty for the riches bestowed on Oman, its loyal people and all those residing on its land. Then, His Majesty reviewed local and international developments.

As part of His Majesty's constant care and follow-up of the educational system - its development and upgradation to meet the goals of Oman Vision 2040, and its aspirations to efficiently groom generations of citizens and prepare them with skills and capabilities in various fields - His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to the Council of Ministers to implement the 'Vocational and Technical Education System', which aims to enable students of Grades 11 and 12 to choose educational tracks within a range of professional and technical fields, including engineering and industrial specialisations.

The Council of Ministers approved the plan following a study presented by the Ministry of Education, which included new educational tracks and curricula designed to keep pace with the requirements of sustainable development

and future skills. This is in addition to restructuring the educational system so that the Vocational and Technical Education System can be implemented with effect from the next academic year (2023/2024).

After His Majesty the Sultan praised teachers and their active role in the upbringing of generations of Omani citizens, instilling in them values

to provide the necessary facilities for investors to be partners in sports development.

His Majesty the Sultan underscored the significance of developing the sports sector and upgrading it. He also stressed the need to complete the sports strategy being prepared to raise the efficiency of young people and explore their skills from early educational stages.

generating employment opportunities for citizens.

His Majesty the Sultan commended the efforts undertaken by the governorates to enhance economic activities through the establishment of various projects, festivals and other events. In this context, he underlined the need for the governorates to demonstrate their

government to enhance the role of the private sector in developing the national economy, encouraging the establishment of businesses, attracting more investments and increasing competitiveness in government tenders by providing an opportunity for a larger number of companies, the Council of Ministers decided to cut down commercial registration fees for foreign investors and equate them with Omani investors, according to specific regulations to be determined by the authorities concerned.

The Council also approved exempting companies contesting tenders from providing temporary insurance - the bidding guarantee submitted as a condition for a tender.

Then, His Majesty spoke about regional and international affairs and Oman's bilateral relations with several Arab and friendly countries with the objective of meeting the common interests and aspirations of nations.

At the conclusion of the meeting, His Majesty touched on a number of aspects of concern to the country and the citizens. His Majesty wished all further success towards the realisation of Oman's progress and prosperity.

ONA

**Omani Teacher's
Day - February 24 - to be
official holiday for teachers
and support staff**

**Commercial registration
fees for foreign
investors to be same
as Omani investors**

**Competition among
governorates to
propose top three
development projects**

and virtues, the Council of Ministers approved the establishment of Omani Teacher's Day - February 24 - as an official holiday for all teachers and support staff in public and private schools.

Following the Council's proposed initiatives and investment projects of the 'Investment Laboratory in the Sports Sector', His Majesty issued directives to study related priority projects and

As part of its keenness to contribute to the national economy, the Council of Ministers laid emphasis on enhancing the local content of Omani industries, as well as the preparation of a national policy to reduce imports and increase exports. The Council also stressed the allocation of a percentage of development spending for projects that contribute to achieving in-country value (ICV) for the national economy, besides

potential and to compete with each other to present the best proposal for development projects that can be implemented in one of their respective wilayats, so that those projects can be evaluated in accordance with specific regulations and conditions to be announced later. This will provide funding for the top three winning projects.

Complementing the efforts made by the



Honourable Lady presides over graduation
ceremony of female police officers



Nizwa - Honourable Lady Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah bin Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman, presided over a celebration of Royal Oman Police (ROP) marking the graduation of a new batch of female police officers on Sunday.

The graduation ceremony was held at Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa, Dakhliyah.

Upon arrival of the Honourable Lady, columns of the graduate officers saluted the chief guest. Then, the commandant of the graduates stepped forward, requesting the Honourable Lady to signal the commencement of the military parade.

Marching in front of the

Royal Dais, the columns performed the military salute to the Honourable Lady, following which the top graduates of the batch came forward to receive awards from her.

Next, the columns of the graduating officers sang the ROP anthem *Humaat al Haqq* and took the oath of allegiance. Later, the graduates saluted the Honourable Lady signalling the conclusion of the parade.

The ceremony was attended by members of the Royal family, female members of State Council, senior ROP personnel, and officials from educational, health and social sectors in Dakhliyah.

ONA



RO150 - A MAGICAL NUMBER

In a welcome move, Royal Oman Police (ROP) has significantly reduced the minimum salary criteria for expatriates to be eligible for family visa. The new rule now allows expats to bring their families to Oman if they earn a minimum monthly wage of RO150, down from the previous requirement of RO350 per month.

What are the pros and cons of this decision? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said -



KM Gurnani
Businessman

It's a very good move. It will certainly boost the economy. With more expat families coming, many apartments currently lying vacant will find tenants and small shops, for groceries and garments, which are on the

verge of closing, will get a new lease of life.

Ahmed al Musallami
Private sector employee

Reduction of the minimum wage eligibility from RO350 to RO150 for family visa will be a big boost the real estate sector, besides

helping the business sector.

Salman Khan
Tour operator

This is a wise move from the government. It will boost the economy. Houses will be rented, shops will see more business, cafes

and restaurants will get more customers, more people will go to the cinemas... Also, people of diverse backgrounds will come together creating a melting pot of many cultures living in harmony.

Ahmed al Kindi
Driver

I welcome the decision. It will be good both for our businesses and the social life of migrant workers who lived as forced bachelors due to the RO350 cap. Over the last few years, we taxi drivers have struggled. Our main customers were expatriates and their families. With the new decision, our business will return.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

It is indeed a very good and wise move by the authorities. It will help the economy and retail businesses in Oman. Expatriates with less income can enjoy with their families. The only concern is medical insurance for families - what do they do in the event of a sudden health crisis?

Tamjeed Mohammed
Plumber

I've always wanted to bring my family to be with me here in Muscat but was unable to do so due to RO350 minimum wage criterion. Allowing expats who had been forced to leave their family behind will improve their mental health.

? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

Organ donation: How can people be encouraged to donate organs in Oman?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om You can also log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue.

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Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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Low pressure to bring isolated rain starting Monday: CAA

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The northern parts of Oman are expected to receive light to moderate rain starting Monday night due to an air trough affecting the sultanate, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

The latest weather maps and analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre show that an air trough is likely to affect Oman till Thursday, March 2.

According to the Directorate General of Meteorology, the governorates in the north of Oman are expected to receive light to moderate rain and thundershowers from Monday to Thursday.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	34	20
Doha	29	18
Kuwait City	21	14
Manama	25	17
Muscat	26	20
Riyadh	32	13

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MOH No: 658/2023

Galaxy of stars to perform at OAA music fest

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The first edition of Muscat Beats, a music and culture festival, was officially launched under the patronage of Brig Jamal bin Said al Tai, Board Member of Oman Automobile Association (OAA) and Chairman of Muscat Beats Organising Committee, at Muscat Arena in OAA on Sunday.

The five-day musical extravaganza over two weekends - March 2, 3 and 4 and March 10 and 11 - will feature a line-up of international stars from the region and South Asia.

The event will be held at the state-of-the-art facility in Muscat Arena hosting an audience of 20,000 every night.

According to organisers, a 24m-wide main stage created by technical partner Talentz will feature the largest IMAG LED screens ever used in Oman. It



has been designed to the best international standards, and is one of the highlights of the event,' a press release said.

Saudi artist Aedh Yousef will open the festival on March 2.

The Indian musical genius Ilaiyaraaja will dazzle Oman for the

first time on March 3.

Popular singers Ankhil Alamgir, Shakib Khan, and Nancy and Imran Mahmudul from Bangladesh will perform on March 4.

Bollywood sensation Sunidhi Chauhan will enthrall the audi-

ence with a scintillating performance on March 10.

Legendary singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan from Pakistan will close the festival on March 11.

According to the organisers, over 130 supporting artists and technicians will accompany the

stars and the event promises to be a milestone in Oman's live entertainment history.

"A unique aspect of the event is to promote locally available talent under the larger umbrella of the global stars," said Brig Tai.

"We have, therefore, created a separate Entertainment District which is a free to attend ten-day event running concurrently with the global concerts," he added.

The Entertainment District will feature performances by local talent as well as special days presented by different communities based in Oman showcasing music and culture of their respective countries. Food stalls and a souq will add to the family-oriented celebration of the district.

"Additionally, world-class services including traffic management systems, contactless ticketing lanes, security and hospitality services inside the event

venue are noteworthy," said Suleiman Rawahi, Managing Director of OAA.

"In collaboration with Mwasalat, Muscat Beats will also offer extensive free parking at the old Exhibition Centre, with free shuttle bus service for ticket holders to and from the parking and the venue. Additional bus routes (Routes 1 and 1A) and Route 12 to the venue are extra services for the convenience of the large audiences expected," Rawahi added.

"We are hoping to take entertainment and live music to another level in Oman by providing world-class entertainment," said Rajesh Raman from the Organising Committee of Muscat Beats. "We are confident that with the support of all our corporate partners and the demand fuelled by music loving audiences, Muscat Beats 2023 is only the first step in an exciting journey ahead."



H E Ibtisam Ahmed Said al Farooji

'Invest in Oman' event to open today: MoCIIP

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) will hold a 'hall' called 'Invest in Oman' on Monday.

A statement said, 'The hall will be inaugurated by H E Sultan bin Salem al Habsi, Minister of Finance, in the presence of dignitaries and a number of investors from inside and outside Oman.'

The event aims to stimulate investment locally, and will be the first reference for an investor to complete all procedures and requirements for establishing, operating and finalising investment procedures in Oman.

The event will also contribute to strengthening the complementary role of companies in the government and private sectors.

H E Ibtisam Ahmed Said al Farooji, MoCIIP Undersecretary for Investment Promotion, informed that 41 public and six private agencies are taking part.

"The ministry is working on developing the business environment to enhance Oman as a fertile environment for business growth and investment, and a leading destination for attracting investors and entrepreneurs by improving the integration of efforts between the concerned authorities," she said.

OVER 380,000 PEOPLE VISIT MARITIME FESTIVAL IN NORTH BATINAH



Over 380,000 people visited the maritime festival in North Batinah held in Manial Park in Sohar. The festival, which started on January 28, concluded on Saturday under the patronage of H E Sayyid Sulaiman bin Hamoud al Busaidi, Deputy Secretary-General of Council of Ministers. On the occasion, Mohammed Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of North Batinah, said the festival achieved its objectives, including stimulating commercial and market activities for productive families and small and medium enterprises. Its beneficiaries included 138 families and SMEs and 156 craftsmen participated (Supplied photo)



Al Anwar Ceramic Tiles. CO.A SAOG

P.O. Box No 143, Al Harthy Complex, P.code 118, Sultanate of Oman
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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE 31 DECEMBER 2022

Dear Shareholders,

It is my privilege to present to you the company's operating report for the year 2022
Overview of operations and financial performance

2022 has been a good year for your company. During the year, we registered a gross revenue of RO 27.63 M. The profit from operations stands at RO 5.81 M, however the Net Profit after tax has dipped to RO 2.93 M due to accounting an amount of RO 3.14 M unrealized impairment of fair value changes thru profit and loss as per IFRS 9.

During the year we produced 17.13 million sq. meters of tiles. Our emphasis on continuous improvement programs, effective global sourcing, employing appropriate technologies and optimum levels of automation has helped us to reduce down time, process losses and costs while enhancing throughput and yield. Our competitive cost position continues to be a source of strength in relation to our regional peers.

I am pleased to state that we continue to be the market leaders in our home market in Oman. We continue to perform well in the GCC Markets.

Future Outlook

The stable oil prices and the end of covid pandemic will have a positive impact on the construction and infrastructure industry.

The revoking of the antidumping duty in UAE and the imposition of the customs duty in KSA will adversely impact our prices and volumes. As regards the customs duty in KSA, we are told that this is being actively discussed by both the governments and we are hoping for a satisfactory resolution, enabling free and fair access to the Saudi market.

The successful commissioning of the new plant will enhance our capability to introduce larger format tiles which will improve our realisation and the additional volumes will help amortise our fixed costs more optimally. A better realisation and a lower cost will help us offset to some extent the impact detailed above.

The company's strategy has been clear and consistent over the years. Our strategic intent is to emerge as the lowest cost producer of ceramic tiles in the region, by employing appropriate technologies and lean manufacturing systems driven by a committed and competent

team of people.

We recognize that our strength and vitality are our people. Their proper selection, training, motivation and reward are basic to our continuing growth and success.

Dividends

The Board of Directors have recommended a cash dividend of 10 Baizas per share. This is subject to approval at the Shareholders Annual General Body Meeting scheduled on 27 March, 2023.

Corporate Governance

I am pleased to report that your company has adhered to all the regulations covering Corporate Governance in Oman. We remain committed and aspire to becoming model corporate citizens.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Al Anwar Ceramics is committed to its Corporate Social Responsibilities. Our CSR activities include assistance to selected community developmental activities, assistance to building of schools, mosques and support for local sports and cultural activities.

Conclusion

We continue to look to the future with optimism and excitement.

On behalf of the Directors, I wish to thank the company's management and all our staff for their professionalism and commitment. **They remain our greatest asset.**

We are grateful to the government of Oman for their support and encouragement.

We are confident that Oman will continue to grow and prosper under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and we hope to play our part in this.

Hussain Ali Habib Sajwani
Chairman

STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME (AUDITED) FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2022

	2022 RO	2021 RO
Revenue	27,633,694	25,700,483
Cost of sales	(16,285,393)	(14,843,393)
Gross profit	11,348,301	10,857,090
Other income	123,302	148,620
Salaries and other related employee costs	(2,188,954)	(2,002,628)
Selling and distribution expenses	(2,944,315)	(2,667,511)
General and administrative expenses	(409,288)	(394,331)
Allowance for expected credit losses	(133,535)	(50,000)
Profit from operations	5,795,511	5,891,240
Fair value loss from investments at fair value through profit or loss	(3,135,506)	-
Interest income from investments at fair value through profit or loss	933,167	1,334,035
Finance and dividend income	189,925	352,390
Finance costs	(343,963)	(194,860)
Profit for the year before taxation	3,439,134	7,382,805
Income tax	(513,307)	(1,109,900)
Net profit for the year	2,925,827	6,272,905
Other comprehensive income:		
Items that will not be reclassified to profit or loss:		
Changes in fair value of investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	(259,776)	(127,704)
Deferred tax credit on investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	38,966	19,156
Other comprehensive loss for the year	(220,810)	(108,548)
Total comprehensive income for the year	2,705,017	6,164,357
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.013	0.025

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION (AUDITED) AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2022

	2022 RO	2021 RO
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	21,015,516	15,082,174
Right-of-use assets	3,573,815	3,706,178
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	1,674,773	2,067,423
Deferred tax assets	335,765	-
	26,599,869	20,855,775
Current assets		
Investments at fair value through profit or loss	7,648,696	9,628,751
Inventories	5,357,698	4,108,220
Trade and other receivables	9,874,157	9,811,469
Cash and bank balances	1,003,500	6,591,412
	23,884,051	30,139,852
Total assets	50,483,920	50,995,627
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
Equity		
Share capital	22,000,000	22,000,000
Legal reserve	7,333,333	7,333,333
Retained earnings	3,650,833	6,225,006
Equity investment reserve	(1,043,754)	(822,944)
Total equity	31,940,412	34,735,395
Liabilities		
Non-current liabilities		
Non Current portion of term loans	3,350,079	-
Non-current portion of lease liabilities	3,876,694	3,874,536
Employees' end of service benefits	1,114,436	1,003,077
Deferred tax liability	-	240,261
	8,341,209	5,117,874
Current liabilities		
Current portion of term loans	773,342	-
Bank borrowings	2,749,994	4,791,342
Trade and other payables	5,622,748	5,168,486
Income tax payable	1,056,215	1,182,530
	10,202,299	11,142,358
Total liabilities	18,543,508	16,260,232
Total equity and liabilities	50,483,920	50,995,627
Net assets per share	0.145	0.158

MARKET WATCH	
MSX30	4,659.22
Sensex	59,463.93
FOREX RATES (RO1 equals)	
Indian	215.77
Pakistan	670.80
Bangladesh	278.44
Philippines	142.90
Sri Lanka	949.19
*Rates as on February 26 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

World Bank announces \$2.5bn financing for Ukraine

The World Bank announced an added US\$2.5bn in financing for Ukraine, aimed at supporting essential services and core government functions as war rages in the country.

The funding comes a year after Russia's invasion, and the development lender has mobilised more than US\$20.6bn in emergency financing for Ukraine to date. "One year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world continues to witness the horrific destruction inflicted on the country and its people," said World Bank President David Malpass in a statement.

The funds are provided by the United States Agency for International Development and will be transmitted to Ukraine's government after verification of eligible expenses by the bank.

"We will continue supporting the people of Ukraine through urgent repair projects and coordination with the government for recovery and reconstruction efforts," said Malpass.

Bank credit in Oman grows 4.8% to RO29.2bn in 2022

Total bank deposits grew 1.1% year-on-year to RO25.9bn in December

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's banking sector recorded an year-on-year credit growth of 4.8 per cent last year but deposit growth sharply slowed to 1.1 per cent in 2022, the latest data from the Central Bank of Oman showed.

Total outstanding credit extended by the banking sector (both conventional and Islamic banks) grew 4.8 per cent to RO29.2bn at the end of December 2022 against the same month of the previous year, the CBO said in its monthly bulletin.

Of the total outstanding credit, bank credit to the private sector demonstrated a growth of 4.1 per cent year-on-year to reach RO24.4bn. Non-financial corporations received the highest shares of the total private sector credit, at approximately 45.8 per cent at end-December 2022, followed by household sector at 45.1 per cent.

The share of financial corporations was 5.3 per cent in total private sector credit, while other sectors received the remaining 3.7 per cent as of end-December 2022.

Conventional banks' total outstanding credit grew 3.4 per cent year-on-year in December 2022.



While conventional banks' credit to the private sector increased 1.9 per cent to RO19.5bn, their overall investments in securities declined by 11.5 per cent to RO4.3bn, the CBO data showed.

Banks' investment in government development bonds marginally decreased by 0.5 per cent year-on-year to RO2.2bn in December 2022, while their investments in foreign securities increased by 1.4 per cent to RO0.9bn over the same period.

Deposit growth slows

On the other hand, total banking sector deposits in Oman grew by a lower rate of 1.1 per cent to RO25.9bn at the end of Decem-

ber 2022 against the same period a year ago.

Total private sector deposits slightly decreased 0.3 per cent to RO17.4bn. In terms of sector-wise composition of private sector deposits, the biggest contribution was from household deposits at 52.2 per cent, followed by non-financial corporations at 28.9 per cent, financial corporations at 16.1 per cent and other sectors at 2.9 per cent.

Aggregate deposits held with the conventional banks decreased 0.9 per cent year-on-year to RO21bn at end-December 2022. Private sector deposits, which accounted for 67.8 per cent of total

deposits with conventional banks, decreased by 2.0 per cent as of December 2022 to reach RO14.3bn.

Moreover, government deposits with conventional banks witnessed an increase of 2.8 per cent at RO4.9bn and deposits of public enterprises increased by 2.9 per cent to RO1.4bn.

As per the CBO data, the weighted average interest rate on Omani rial deposits with conventional banks witnessed an increase from 1.976 per cent at end-December 2021 to 1.993 per cent at end-December 2022. The weighted average Omani rial lending rate decreased from 5.570 per cent to 5.379 per cent

over the same period.

Meanwhile, the overnight Omani rial domestic inter-bank lending rate jumped to 3.944 per cent in December 2022 from 0.369 per cent a year ago.

This is an outcome of the increase in the average repo rate for liquidity injection by the CBO to 4.774 per cent from 0.5 per cent a year ago, moving with US Federal Reserve rate, the central bank said.

Islamic financing grows 12.2%

Oman's Islamic banking sector continued to witness a robust growth in 2022, recording double digit growth in both credit and deposits.

Islamic banking entities provided financing worth RO5.4bn at the end of December 2022, recording a growth of 12.2 per cent over that a year ago. Total deposits held with Islamic banks and windows increased by 10.9 per cent to RO4.9bn.

Total assets of Islamic banks and windows increased by 8.7 per cent on a year-on-year basis to reach RO6.4bn at the end of December 2022. Islamic assets now constitute about 16.5 per cent of the total banking system assets in Oman as of the end-December 2022.

ADNOC Gas eyes \$2bn windfall in UAE IPO

Dubai, UAE - State-owned UAE energy firm ADNOC Gas announced a price range on Thursday for an initial public offering (IPO) it hopes will raise US\$2bn, in what would be this year's biggest share flotation so far.

ADNOC Gas, an offshoot of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), is selling four per cent of issued share capital or 3.07bn shares at ADE2.25-AED2.43, valuing the company at US\$47-50.8bn, it said in a statement.

"Investors purchased all the shares on offer within an hour," a source close to the company told AFP, citing a message sent to investors.

The final offer price is due to be announced on March 3, and trading on the Abu Dhabi stock exchange is expected to start on March 13.

At the top of its range, the IPO will raise just over US\$2bn.

The Abu Dhabi Pension Fund, South Africa's Alpha Wave Ventures and Abu Dhabi's IHC Capital Holding are among the cornerstone investors, as well as other Emirati-controlled entities, committing a combined US\$850mn.

The share flotation, announced only last week, follows increased activity in the gas market following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

AFP

Abraj concludes its IPO roadshows

Salalah - As part of its IPO introductory sessions tour, Abraj Energy Services on Sunday organised its last introductory meeting in Salalah in cooperation with the Dhofar branch of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI). The session highlighted the details of the initial public offering (IPO) for the investors.

The IPO of Abraj Energy Services, a subsidiary of OQ Group, enters its second week on Monday.

The subscription period will end on March 1, 2023 for the small investor category, while the subscription for large investors category will end on March 2, 2023.

Speaking on the occasion, Sheikh Nayef bin Hamid Beit Fadil, chairman of OCCI branch in Dhofar Governorate, said, "We appreciate the efforts of the Oman Investment Authority to exit certain government assets and the importance of attracting



national and foreign investment to Oman.

This [IPO], in addition to expanding the ownership base of government companies, is vital for stimulating the national economy."

He noted that "these efforts reflect the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the success of the country's economic diversification policies".

Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, said that by listing Abraj shares for the

public offering, the company aims to build a strategic partnership with local, regional, and international investors. "This implements the company's expansion plans and diversifies the portfolio of services and solutions provided to clients."

Hamhami noted that Abraj is one of the largest leading companies operating in the oil and gas sector, with high profitability which makes it an attractive destination for local and regional investors.

He added that Abraj has distributed profits to stakeholders for more than 10 years, achieving record earnings figures with an increase of more than 100 per cent from 2019 to 2021 despite market volatility and the Coronavirus pandemic.

Hamhami explained that Abraj owns one of the latest drilling fleets in the Middle East, as well as being the first local company in the Middle East and North Africa to enter in the field of integrated fracking services.

Global trade 'resilient' during Ukraine war: WTO



Geneva, Switzerland - Russia's war in Ukraine did not dent global trade in 2022 as badly as feared, the World Trade Organization said - and Russia's export values even surged.

A year on since the full-scale invasion, the WTO concluded that trade had proved "remarkably resilient", with importing countries affected by the conflict finding alternative sources of supply.

A report looking into the war's impact on global trade and development estimated that trade growth in 2022 was above the WTO forecast of three per cent issued last April in response to the invasion - and substantially higher than its estimates for more pessimistic scenarios.

Detailed figures will be published this April.

For the most exposed countries, trade had kept afloat, the WTO said, as had trade in products significantly affected by the war - such as wheat, maize, sunflower products, fertiliser and fuels.

"Global trade has held up well in the face of the war in Ukraine," the WTO's chief economist Ralph Ossa said.

"Despite the devastation we have seen one year on, trade flows remained open... Sharply

higher food prices and supply shortages have not materialised thanks to the openness of the multilateral trading system".

The effects on the warring countries' exports contrast starkly.

Sharply higher food prices and supply shortages have not materialised thanks to openness of the multilateral trading system

RALPH OSSA

While Ukrainian exports collapsed by 30 per cent in value terms last year, Russian exports expanded by 15.6 per cent in value terms, almost entirely due to an increase in prices for fuels, fertilisers and cereals.

Cereal exports from Ukraine - central to the food security of many African countries - dropped by 14.9 per cent, forcing nations to adjust their sourcing, said the WTO.

The report cited Ethiopia, which had relied on Russia and Ukraine for 45 per cent of its

wheat, turning to Argentina and the United States instead.

Meanwhile, countries neighbouring the conflict such as Hungary and Poland increased their imports from Ukraine, mainly for agricultural products, said Ossa.

While Russia's exports expanded by value, WTO estimates suggest that its volume may have declined.

"Trade flows are sharply down for industrial goods such as motor vehicles, pharmaceuticals or aircraft, where sanctions are more restrictive," the Geneva-based organisation said.

Ossa said Russian exports decreased the most to Britain and the United States, while increasing to China and India.

Prices for goods affected by the war rose less than had been expected after the invasion, the WTO said.

Maize prices increased by 24 per cent, which although a substantial increase, was significantly lower than the gloomiest predictions.

Looking ahead, Ossa said: "Resilience will ultimately be best served by fostering deeper and more diverse international markets, anchored in open and predictable trade rules."

AFP

US Fed's preferred inflation gauge rises, fueling rate hike concerns

Washington, US - A key indicator of US inflation rose in January as new home sales jumped more than expected, said government data, feeding fears that interest rates could stay high for longer.

The numbers, indicating that the world's biggest economy is running hotter than policymakers hope, came despite aggressive efforts by the Federal Reserve to raise the benchmark lending rate and rein in inflation.

While sectors like housing slumped recently, some areas of inflation remain sticky, potentially pointing to more rate hikes in the pipeline.

The Fed's preferred gauge of inflation, the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price

index, rose 5.4 per cent last month from January 2022, while consumption surged more than one per cent from a month prior, said the Commerce Department.

From December to January, the PCE price index jumped 0.6 per cent, the biggest rise since mid-2022 as prices for goods and services both picked up.

Excluding the volatile food and energy segments, the PCE price index still bounced 0.6 per cent from the preceding month.

"Today's report shows we have made progress on inflation, but we have more work to do," said President Joe Biden in a statement.

But he added that while there may be setbacks, the US faces

"global economic challenges from a position of strength."

The central bank focuses on the PCE price index as it reflects actual spending, including shifts to less expensive items, unlike the more well-known consumer price index.

While inflation has come off last year's decades-high levels, it remains well above policymakers' two per cent target.

Personal income rose as well from December to January, said the Commerce Department.

Meanwhile, sales of new US homes surged more than expected in January by 7.2 per cent to an annual rate of 670,000, seasonally adjusted, the Commerce Department added.

This was the highest in nearly a year and up from December's revised rate of 625,000. The median sales price last month cooled to US\$427,500.

New properties make up a small portion of overall home sales - and transactions of existing homes remains weak despite Friday's data.

"Higher mortgage rates are impacting affordability and are weighing heavily on home sales, a trend that is not yet showing any sign of stabilizing or reversing," said Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics.

She added that there has been a "reversal in progress last month," in the inflation gauge.

AFP

US revises down GDP growth for Q4 to 2.7%

Washington, US – The US economy grew slightly less than reported in the final three months last year, the Commerce Department said, citing a downward revision to consumer spending.

GDP growth in the October to December period was 2.7 per cent, annualised, lower than the 2.9 per cent increase originally reported.

"The updated estimates pri-

marily reflected a downward revision to consumer spending that was partly offset by an upward revision to nonresidential fixed investment," said the Commerce Department in a statement.

GDP growth for 2022 remains unchanged at 2.1 per cent.

The adjustment comes as the Federal Reserve's aggressive efforts to cool demand and lower

Adjustment comes as Federal Reserve's aggressive efforts to cool demand and lower inflation ripple through US economy, leading to a slump in housing sector and hitting consumer spending

inflation ripple through the world's biggest economy, leading to a slump in the housing sector and hitting consumer spending.

But overall, the labor market

and consumption has generally held up, fueling hopes of a "soft landing" for the economy where inflation comes down without a major downturn.

In the fourth quarter last year, economic growth reflected increases in areas like private inventory investment, led by manufacturing, as well as consumer spending, said the Commerce Department.

But among consumer spend-

ing, there was a shift from spending on goods to services.

The pick-ups were also partly offset by decreases in residential fixed investment and exports, the department added.

The deceleration in GDP in the final months last year mainly reflected a downturn in exports and slowing in consumer spending, among other areas, the Commerce Department said.

In the third quarter of 2022,

GDP rose 3.2 per cent.

Analysts expect the pace of expansion to also slow in the first few months of 2023, in welcome news to the Fed.

"However, even as growth slows, a focus on lowering elevated inflation means rates will move up further and will remain higher for longer," said Rubela Farooqi, chief US economist at High Frequency Economics.

AFP

Meta unveils more cautious approach to ChatGPT frenzy



San Francisco, US – Facebook-owner Meta has unveiled its own version of the artificial intelligence behind apps such as ChatGPT, saying it would give access to researchers to find fixes to the technology's potential dangers.

Meta described its own AI, called LLaMA, as a "smaller, more performant" model designed to "help researchers advance their work," in what could be seen as veiled criticism of Microsoft's decision to release the technology widely, while keeping the programming code secret.

Microsoft-backed ChatGPT has taken the world by storm with its ability to generate finely crafted texts such as essays or poems in just seconds using technology known as large language models (or LLM).

LLM is part of a field known as generative AI that also includes the capacity to execute images,

designs or programming code almost instantaneously upon a simple request.

Usually the more staid actor in big tech, Microsoft has deepened its partnership with OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, and earlier this month announced the technology would be integrated into its Bing search engine as well as the Edge browser.

Google, seeing a sudden threat to the dominance of its search engine, quickly announced it would release its own language AI, known as Bard, shortly.

But reports of disturbing exchanges with Microsoft's Bing chatbot – including it issuing threats and speaking of desires to steal nuclear code or lure one user from his wife – went viral, raising alarm bells that the technology was not ready.

AFP



Russia halts oil pipeline deliveries to Poland: PKN Orlen

Warsaw, Poland – Polish energy group PKN Orlen announced on Saturday that it had stopped receiving Russian oil through the Druzhba pipeline, which under its last contract accounted for 10 per cent of Orlen's needs.

"Deliveries through the Druzhba pipeline towards Poland were stopped by the Russian side," the Polish company said in a statement to AFP.

Orlen said the move would not impact supply to Polish clients and that all oil deliveries would now come by sea.

Until now, PKN Orlen had imported about 10 per cent of its oil needs through the pipeline from Russia and the rest from other countries through maritime routes.

The move comes a day after the European Union agreed on a new round of sanctions over Russia's war in Ukraine.

Poland said earlier this month

it was still buying 10 per cent of its oil supplies from Russia, despite its insistence on stronger sanctions on Russian oil.

Poland had declared last year it had a "radical plan" to stop all Russian oil imports by the end of 2022.

But deputy minister for state assets Maciej Malecki told parliament that Poland still has a valid contract with a Russian company Tatneft.

That meant Poland was still buying 200,000 tonnes of oil from Russia each month.

According to Malecki, Orlen – a state company – "strongly declared that it would stop buying Russian oil as soon as an EU embargo is introduced".

Malecki said that the current contract with Tatneft could not be terminated as it would force Warsaw to pay compensation fees to the Russian firm.

AFP

Al Madina Takaful Everything in harmony											
Chairman's Report											
DEAR SHAREHOLDERS, ASSALAMU ALAIKUM WA RAHAMATULLAH WA BARAKATUHI [MAY THE PEACE, MERCY AND BLESSING OF ALLAH BE WITH YOU] ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS, AND MANAGEMENT TEAM OF AL MADINA INSURANCE CO (AL MADINA) OR "THE COMPANY", I AM PLEASED TO PRESENT TO YOU THE RESULTS ACHIEVED BY YOUR COMPANY FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED ON 31 DECEMBER 2022.											
FY2022 WAS MARKED BY CONSTANT UNCERTAINTIES AND WAS ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING YEARS FOR THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY IN OMAN, WHEREBY THE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE COUNTRY, STARTED RECOVERING TO PRE- PANDEMIC LEVELS, AS A RESULT OF WHICH THE LOSS RATIOS IN CERTAIN LINES OF BUSINESS ALSO ROSE TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS. WE ALSO WITNESSED HARDENING OF THE REINSURANCE MARKET DUE TO NATURAL CATASTROPHES IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN AND HIGH INFLATION RATES IN EUROPE AND OTHER GLOBAL MARKETS ACCOMPANIED BY SOME CAPACITY WITHDRAWALS FROM THE REGION AND CONSOLIDATION OF INSURANCE COMPANIES IN OMAN AND THE GCC COUNTRIES. DESPITE THESE FACTORS, AL MADINA CONTINUED TO MAINTAIN ITS MARKET SHARE, BY DISCIPLINED AND TARGETED, UNDERWRITING PRACTICES TO PRICE RISKS CORRECTLY, ENSURING THAT CORE UNDERWRITING PROFITABILITY IS MAINTAINED.											
AL MADINA DEMONSTRATED ROBUST RESULTS AND ACHIEVED ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR OF UNDERWRITING PERFORMANCE DURING FY2022, DESPITE CONTINUED CHALLENGES FACED BY THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY AND GROWING CONCERNS AROUND GLOBAL RECESSION, YOUR COMPANY RETAINED ITS POSITION OF BEING THE 3RD LARGEST INSURANCE COMPANY IN OMAN, WITH GROSS WRITTEN CONTRIBUTIONS (GWC) OF RO 44.7 MILLION (FY 2021:RO 44.1 MILLION), A GROWTH OF RO 0.6 MILLION AS COMPARED TO THE LAST FINANCIAL YEAR.											
AL MADINA HAS A WELL-BALANCED INSURANCE PORTFOLIO WITH ALL LINES OF BUSINESS CONTRIBUTING POSITIVELY TO THE UNDERWRITING SURPLUS. YOUR COMPANY ALSO EXCEEDED ITS INSURANCE OPERATIONS BUDGET AND IS AMONG VERY FEW COMPANIES OPERATING IN SULTANATE OF OMAN, WHICH ARE REPORTING PROFITS FROM UNDERWRITING AND OPERATIONS THIS YEAR. THE FY2022 FINANCIAL RESULTS DELIVERED BY YOUR COMPANY REFLECT ITS INTENT TO DELIVER CONSISTENT SURPLUS FROM INSURANCE OPERATIONS SO THAT THE POLICYHOLDER'S INTEREST IS SAFEGUARDED WHILE WE CONTINUE TO REWARD OUR SHAREHOLDERS. IN THE YEAR 2022, THE SHAREHOLDERS PROVIDED HIBA, AMOUNTING TO RO 2.3 MILLION TO SUPPORT THE POLICYHOLDER'S FUND GENERAL AND FAMILY TAKAFUL (FY 2021: RO 3.1 MILLION). THIS WAS DONE TO REDUCE THE DEFICIT IN THE POLICYHOLDER'S ACCOUNT AND IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE REGULATORS. THE COMPANY HAS SYSTEMICALLY REDUCED THE DEFICIT IN POLICYHOLDER'S ACCOUNT FROM RO 3.9 MILLION AT THE BEGINNING OF FY2016 TO A DEFICIT OF ONLY RO 146 THOUSAND AT THE YEAR ENDED, 31 DECEMBER 2022.											
THE OVERALL PROFIT BEFORE TAX, OF THE COMPANY STOOD AT RO 1.64 MILLION FOR FY2022, AS COMPARED TO RO 1.59 MILLION LAST FINANCIAL YEAR. THIS WAS DESPITE THE INCREASED CLAIMS AND OTHER ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES FACED BY THE COMPANY DURING THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2022.											
OPERATING ENVIRONMENT THE LISTED INSURANCE COMPANIES IN OMAN, SAW A GROWTH OF 30% IN THEIR TOPLINE DURING FY 2022, WITH PREMIUM VOLUMES INCREASING FROM RO 404 MILLION IN FY 2021 TO RO 523 MILLION IN FY2022. HOWEVER, THE INSURANCE SECTOR, SAW SIGNIFICANT DECREASE IN PROFITABILITY, DUE TO HIGHER CLAIM REPORTING IN MOTOR AND MEDICAL SEGMENT AS NORMALCY RETURNED ALONGSIDE THE COMPETITIVE PRICING PRESSURES IN THE MARKET.											
HOWEVER, IN THIS TOUGH ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT, ALONG WITH THE PRICING CHALLENGES PREVAILING IN THE INSURANCE MARKET, YOUR COMPANY WAS ABLE TO DELIVER AN EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND RECORDED A 6% GROWTH IN NET EARNED CONTRIBUTIONS FROM RO 14.3 MILLION IN FY2021 TO RO 15.2 MILLION IN FY2022. THIS WAS ACHIEVED THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF STRICT UNDERWRITING DISCIPLINE AND A FOCUSED SALES STRATEGY FOR THE SUCCESSFUL CONVERSION OF NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES.											
RESULTS FROM OPERATIONS YOUR COMPANY CONTINUES TO DELIVER STABLE GROWTH WHILE STRENGTHENING ADEQUACY & SUFFICIENCY OF ITS RESERVES. THE UNDERWRITING SURPLUS FROM TAKAFUL OPERATIONS BEFORE INVESTMENT INCOME, MUDARIB SHARE AND WAKALA FEES BUT AFTER ADJUSTMENT OF COMMISSION EXPENSES, HAS INCREASED TO RO 4.95 MILLION IN FY2022 AS COMPARED TO RO 4.88 MILLION IN FY2021. THIS WAS ACHIEVED THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF PRUDENT UNDERWRITING, EFFECTIVE RISK SELECTION AND EFFICIENT CLAIMS ADMINISTRATION BACKED BY HIGH-QUALITY GLOBAL REINSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS.											
AL MADINA IS CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING ITS CORE COMPETENCIES AND MAINTAINS A HEALTHY AND WELL-BALANCED PORTFOLIO ACROSS ALL LINES OF BUSINESS, WHICH HAS RESULTED IN A REMARKABLE 15% INCREASE IN THE OPERATING SURPLUS AS COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS FINANCIAL YEAR, DESPITE THE INCREASE IN INCURRED CLAIMS BY 17%.											
YOUR COMPANY IS CONSTANTLY STRIVING TO ENHANCE ITS CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE BY ONGOING PROCESS EFFICIENCY, QUICK TURNAROUND, PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE, TOP OF THE LINE CLAIMS SERVICING AND ADOPTING THE BEST INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES IN THE FIELD OF INSURANCE OPERATIONS.											
INVESTMENT INCOME THE INVESTMENT ENVIRONMENT REMAINED VERY UNCERTAIN AND UNPREDICTABLE DUE TO MULTIPLE HEADWINDS, ESCALATION											
OF GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS, INFLATIONARY CONCERNS, AND THE LOOMING POSSIBILITY OF GLOBAL RECESSION. IN THIS VOLATILE MACROECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT, YOUR COMPANY DEMONSTRATED A RESILIENT INVESTMENT PERFORMANCE AND REGISTERED A TOTAL INVESTMENT INCOME (SHAREHOLDERS AND POLICYHOLDERS) OF RO 1.37 MILLION, IN FY2022 AS COMPARED TO RO 1.35 MILLION DURING FY2021.											
THE INVESTMENT PORTFOLIO OF YOUR COMPANY IS PRUDENTLY MANAGED AND WELL DIVERSIFIED ACROSS VARIOUS ASSET CLASSES. AL MADINA HAS ENHANCED ITS PORTFOLIO'S ABILITY TO GENERATE SUSTAINABLE RISK ADJUSTED RETURNS FROM ITS INVESTMENTS IN CORRELATION WITH THE PREVALENT THEME OF MARKET VOLATILITY AND UNCERTAINTIES.											
SHAREHOLDERS' PROFIT AL MADINA REGISTERED YET ANOTHER YEAR OF SUCCESSFUL FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SHAREHOLDER'S PROFIT. YOUR COMPANY REPORTED A 11% INCREASE IN PROFIT ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE SHAREHOLDERS AMOUNTING TO RO 1.06 MILLION, IN FY2022 AS COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS YEAR PROFIT OF RO 0.95 MILLION.											
RISK MANAGEMENT YOUR COMPANY CONSTANTLY EVALUATES ITS RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE INSURANCE BUSINESS AS WELL AS ITS INVESTMENTS AND ADOPTS NECESSARY MEASURES TO MANAGE THESE RISKS.											
DIVIDEND POLICY YOUR COMPANY ADOPTS A WELL-BALANCED DIVIDEND POLICY FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF PROFIT AND REMAINS COMMITTED TO DELIVERING VALUE TO YOUR INVESTMENTS. YOUR COMPANY HAS A TRACK RECORD OF CONSISTENT DIVIDEND PAYMENTS OVER THE LAST SIX YEARS. THIS REFLECTS OUR CONTINUING FINANCIAL STRENGTH EVEN IN THE MOST SUBDUED MARKET CONDITIONS.											
COMPANY'S OUTLOOK & VISION AS WE EMBARK INTO THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA, WE ARE EXTREMELY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE YEAR 2023, AS THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY IN OMAN IS POISED FOR A PERIOD OF STABLE GROWTH AND THE OVERALL OUTLOOK APPEARS TO BE POSITIVE, AS MARKETS HAVE WITNESSED SOME STABILITY IN THE OIL PRICES. OUR EMPHASIS WILL BE ON STABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH, WHILE KEEPING THE FOCUS ON SOME KEY DRIVERS SUCH AS CUSTOMER SERVICE, LAUNCHING OF NEW PRODUCTS, TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS AND REGULATORY CHANGES. MUCH WILL ALSO DEPEND ON HOW THE GLOBAL REINSURANCE MARKET RESPONDS TO THE RAPID FREQUENCY OF NATURAL CATASTROPHIC EVENTS IN OMAN, SUBSEQUENTLY IMPACTING REINSURANCE PRICING. IN ADDITION TO THE AVAILABILITY OF REINSURANCE CAPACITIES AND ISSUES OF RISK CONCENTRATIONS, APART FROM THESE, PUBLIC SPENDING, FOREIGN INVESTMENT, MARKET CREDIT ISSUE AND CASHFLOW WILL ALSO BE CRUCIAL FACTORS FOR THE GROWTH OF THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY.											
OUR POSITION IN THE MARKET, COMBINED WITH STRONG UNDERWRITING FUNDAMENTALS WILL ENABLE US TO CONTINUE OUR ENDEAVOR TO PROVIDE SUSTAINED GROWTH AND PROFITABILITY TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN FY2023. WE EXPECT TO MAINTAIN OUR MARKET POSITION IN LINE WITH OUR PROJECTION FOR FY2023, BY STRENGTHENING THE DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS AND SUPPLY CHAINS. FURTHERMORE, MANDATORY HEALTH INSURANCE IS EXPECTED TO BE ROLLED OUT IN 2023 AND IT IS EXPECTED TO GIVE A THRUST TO THE HEALTH INSURANCE MARKET. AL MADINA HAS FULFILLED THE LICENSING REQUIREMENT AND AWAITS FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS OF CAPITAL MARKET AUTHORITY.											
THE COMPANY CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN ITS STEADY TRACK RECORD OF ALWAYS BEING DRIVEN BY AND SUPPORTIVE OF, NATIONAL OBJECTIVES, SUCH AS IN JOB CREATION AND OMANIZATION.											
AL MADINA WILL CONTINUE TO INVEST IN TECHNOLOGY - DRIVEN INNOVATION, IT UPGRADES, PROCESS AUTOMATION AND INCREASED DIGITALIZATION OF INSURANCE PROCESSES. THE COMPANY, WITH ITS WELL-PLANNED GROWTH STRATEGY IS WELL POSITIONED TO ACHIEVE STABLE GROWTH AND OPERATIONAL PROFIT IN FY2023 THROUGH DISCIPLINED UNDERWRITING, PROCESS EFFICIENCY, FOCUSED SALES PLANNING, AND SUPERIOR CUSTOMER SERVICE.											
THE COMPANY WILL CONTINUE TO LOOK AT GROWING OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE ISLAMIC FINANCE SPACE TO GENERATE STABLE YIELD ON ITS INVESTMENT BOOK AND TO ACHIEVE THE TARGETED INVESTMENT RETURNS FOR SHAREHOLDERS AND POLICYHOLDERS.											
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IT GIVES ME IMMENSE PLEASURE TO EXPRESS APPRECIATION ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD, WE EXTEND OUR THANKS TO OUR CUSTOMERS, BUSINESS PARTNERS, SHAREHOLDERS, SHARIA SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE AND STAFF MEMBERS, FOR THEIR SUPPORT AND CONTRIBUTIONS DURING THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED, 31ST DECEMBER 2022. WE ALSO THANK AND APPRECIATE THE CAPITAL MARKET AUTHORITY FOR THEIR CONSTANT SUPPORT AND THEIR INITIATIVES ORIENTED TOWARDS THE INSURANCE MARKET, WITH A SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TAKAFUL INSURANCE IN THE COUNTRY.											
ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD, I TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS OUR MOST SINCERE GRATITUDE TO HIS MAJESTY SULTAN HAIITHAM BIN TARIQ AL SAID, FOR HIS DYNAMIC AND PROGRESSIVE LEADERSHIP. WE ARE CONFIDENT THAT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF HIS MAJESTY, THE SULTANATE WILL CONTINUE TO MARCH TOWARD FURTHER PROGRESS, DEVELOPMENT, AND PROSPERITY.											
MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL.											
DR. MOHAMMED ALI AL BARWANI CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD											
STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2022											
		Shareholders' fund		Participants' fund		Grand total					
		2022 RO	2021 RO	General takaful	Family takaful	Total participants' fund		2022 RO	2021 RO	2022 RO	2021 RO
ASSETS											
Cash and bank balances		1,043,047	1,883,878	5,196,834	4,769,100	430,625	613,196	5,627,459	5,382,296	6,670,506	7,266,174
Investments carried at fair value through profit or loss		857,080	1,252,303	-	-	-	-	-	-	857,080	1,252,303
Takaful balance receivable		-	-	17,214,787	15,208,309	953,717	1,058,288	18,168,504	16,266,597	18,168,504	16,266,597
Retakaful / reinsurance balance receivable		-	-	209,936	222,890	597,561	649,132	872,022	907,497	872,022	907,497
Receivable from participants' fund - family takaful		-	-	711,304	1,563,545	-	-	711,304	1,563,545	711,304	1,563,545
Receivable from participants' fund		2,743,573	2,666,587	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,743,573	2,666,587
Due from retakaful / reinsurance companies in connection with takaful liabilities		-	-	53,834,700	60,664,527	1,454,586	1,647,732	55,289,286	62,312,259	55,289,286	62,312,259
Deferred policy acquisition cost		780,483	775,080	164	163,979	164	724	1,435	780,647	790,515	780,647
Other receivables and takaful assets		602,830	587,373	2,147,944	1,182,090	633,607	501,227	2,781,551	1,683,317	3,384,381	2,270,690
Investments at fair value through equity		2,068,442	2,266,624	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,068,442	2,266,624
Bank deposits		4,300,000	3,350,000	12,897,500	8,025,000	1,475,000	1,075,000	14,372,500	9,100,000	18,672,500	12,450,000
Investments carried at amortised cost		5,710,977	6,229,113	460,519	-	100,000	100,000	560,519	100,000	6,271,496	6,329,113
Deferred tax asset		299,137	201,925	-	-	-	-	-	-	299,137	201,925
Investment in real estate		5,170,000	5,170,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	5,170,000	5,170,000
Property and equipment		611,927	686,092	-	-	-	-	-	-	611,927	686,092
Total assets		24,187,496	25,069,975	92,773,688	91,649,172	5,645,096	5,645,299	98,418,784	97,294,471	122,606,280	122,364,446
LIABILITIES, PARTICIPANTS' FUND AND SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY											
LIABILITIES											
Takaful liabilities		-	-	66,228,713	73,349,399	1,803,877	2,023,619	68,032,590	75,373,018	68,032,590	75,373,018
Unearned retakaful commission		-	-	163,979	163,979	-	-	-	-	163,979	163,979
Retakaful/reinsurance payables		-	-	17,899,454	12,674,381	443,971	140,950	18,343,425	12,815,331	18,343,425	12,815,331
Accounts and other payables		1,725,552	1,762,731	7,398,630	4,213,971	1,170,808	969,008	5,182,979	5,182,979	10,294,990	6,945,710
Charity fund payable		21,738	6,327	-	-	-	-	-	-	21,738	6,327
Payable to shareholders		-	-	902,896	1,259,707	1,840,677	1,406,880	2,743,573	2,666,587	2,743,573	2,666,587
Payable to participants' fund - general takaful		-	-	-	-	711,303	1,563,546	711,303	1,563,546	711,303	1,563,546
Employees' end of service benefits		510,630	572,083	-	-	-	-	-	-	510,630	572,083
Total liabilities		2,257,920	2,341,141	92,593,672	91,659,866	5,970,636	6,104,003	98,564,308	97,763,869	100,822,228	100,105,010
PARTICIPANTS' FUND											
Deficit in participants' fund net		-	-	180,016	(10,694)	(325,540)	(458,704)	(145,524)	(469,398)	(145,524)	(469,398)
Total participants' fund		-	-	180,016	(10,694)	(325,540)	(458,704)	(145,524)	(469,398)	(145,524)	(469,398)
SHAREHOLDERS' EQUITY											
Capital and reserves		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Share capital		17,500,000	17,500,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	17,500,000	17,500,000
Share premium		1,380,151	1,380,151	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,380,151	

Bank Muscat participates in SQU's Alumni Day



Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, participated in the 7th Alumni Day of Sultan Qaboos University, which was held recently under the patronage of H H Sayyid Dr Fahd bin Julanda al Said the Vice Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University.

The event was attended by a number of dignitaries, alumni, faculty and non-teaching staff of the university as well as bank officials. The Alumni Day stems from the keenness of the university to create an effective communication channel with its alumni, enhance their sense of belonging and offer them a plat-



form to meet and exchange ideas and their professional experience.

Bank Muscat has a highly successful, collaborative and long-standing partnership with the Sultan Qaboos University

and participated in the Alumni Day in line with its commitment to national initiatives, especially in higher education, which facilitates the country's progress and development.

During the event, Yasser

Salim Tabook, senior regional manager, Bank Muscat, said that Bank Muscat is keen to further strengthen bonds with Sultan Qaboos University and contribute to building Omani talent and human resources. Also,

Bank Muscat provides a wide range of world-class products and services to students, faculty and staff at the Sultan Qaboos University. Tabook added that the bank appreciates the special relationship it has with the na-

tion's leading university and would also continue to further strengthening cooperation and partnership with various government and private sector institutions in the sultanate.

The bank actively participates

in several events at the university every year including job fairs and exhibitions. Every year, the bank also recruits many university graduates to different departments across the bank. The bank is also continuously offering many internship opportunities to college and university students as part of its efforts to help develop Omani human resources to achieve further growth and progress.

Bank Muscat also continually launches new initiatives to provide the best services to the community as part of its corporate social responsibility and sustainability programmes.

Its Green Sports programme is one of the leading CSR programmes in Oman, which provides support to local sports teams as part of efforts to develop sports infrastructure in Omani sports throughout the Sultanate of Oman.

Other pathbreaking programmes conducted by the bank includes the Tadhamun programme and the Al Wathbah Academy which are achieving great success in serving different segments of society.



JLR offers 'Smart Repair Service'

Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) has introduced the 'Smart Repair Service', where SMART stands for 'Small and Medium Area Repair Technique' with a savings benefit of cost and time. This is a unique offering for its existing customers in Oman for its entire fleet of cars - all Jaguar and Land Rover models.

Compared to the time-consuming and expensive traditional body repair services, this service could offer significant savings. 'The service also guarantees a superior quality finish as per Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) standards,' the company said.

Customers often find themselves at odds with minor scratches or small paint jobs. As the repairs are usually labour-intensive, adding a strain on expenses and time, many choose to ignore the problem. 'This is about to change with the latest

service offering from JLR that makes use of the portable SMART Repair tool kit. The JLR SMART staff is officially trained by BASF, the approved JLR paint dealer. So, while your car gets serviced, these highly efficient technicians finish the paintwork, reducing the time drastically,' the company added.

Repairs are localised to the affected area only so by saving time and labour, the overall costs get reduced as well. Effective and efficient without compromising on quality, the results are as good as the detailed service of repainting the whole part even for some minor scratches or a partial paint job.

Smart repairs are offered on minor body-related issues such as dents, scratches, wheel rim repairs etc. The JLR SMART Repair Service is available at the nearest JLR Service Centre.

SalamAir introduces two new destinations to its growing network

Creating a new milestone in its network expansion strategy, Oman's value-for-money airline SalamAir has announced direct flights to two new destinations Mashhad in Iran and Almaty in Kazakhstan.

Mashhad is the third destination in Iran for the airline, with flights to Shiraz and Tehran already in its network, and Almaty is the airline's first entry into Kazakhstan.

Weekly flights from Muscat to Mashhad and Almaty are scheduled for starting from February 21 and July 1 respectively. These two routes serve a high demand for medical, business, and leisure tourism. The new flights will also offer convenient connections to the SalamAir network.

Speaking of the two new routes, Captain Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, said, "Iran has been one of the key focus markets for us, and we are pleased to launch the third destination to the country. The steady bilateral connection and strong cultural and economic ties between Oman and Iran have given significant momentum to our growth plans and enabled the route's success.

Speaking of the 2nd destina-



tions, he added; This is our first introduction into Kazakhstan; the city of Almaty has promising passenger travel into Muscat, and we expect to carry both business travelers and holiday-makers between the two important cities. Oman and Kazakhstan recently agreed to have close bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy, renewable energy, tourism, and food security too thus this route being mutually beneficial."

Mashhad

The holly city is the capital of Khorasan province in northeast Iran and the second largest city in the country, Mashhad is best known for the shrine of Imam Reza. Every year, millions of peo-

ple visit the holy shrine considered the largest and most magnificent of its kind. Mashhad is located 850km North East of Tehran and has a population of over two million. Mashhad is a tourist city with many hotels of various categories and many guesthouses for the pilgrims and tourists who come to this city from every part of the world. The city's climate varies with very cold winters, pleasant springs, usually mild summers, and beautiful autumns, and it's known for its delicious cuisine.

Almaty

Located near the gigantic Tian Shan Mountain range, Almaty in Kazakhstan is described as a magnificent city with surprises

offering picturesque scenic views and luxury shopping experiences. Kazakhstan, the world's ninth-largest country, extends from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Altai Mountains east on its border with China and Russia. Almaty is the old capital city of Kazakhstan and remains the financial as well as the cultural hub. Almaty means 'city of apple trees', and because of its relatively mild climate, it has a wide range of apple trees. The City of Almaty first came to global prominence as one of the many stops on The Silk Road, as traders crossed countries and continents to trade. Almaty is known for its major natural attractions such as the Kolsai Lakes, Charyn Canyon, and

Altyn-Emel National Park. It has wide tree-lined streets, numerous parks, and orchards amid a backdrop of mountains. Tourism is a key industry in Almaty and is a major source of foreign exchange earnings. It is also known for mountain hiking and river rafting in summer and skiing in winter. The weather and climate of the place play a major role in making or breaking any trip.

SalamAir meets the nation's growing demand for affordable travel options and aims to generate further employment and business creation opportunities in various sectors in Oman. In a short span, SalamAir has grown in its operations and expanded its reach across the region, serving customers across a cross-section of society.

SalamAir flies to domestic destinations viz. Salalah, Suhar, Duqm, and Masirah, and to international destinations such as Dubai, Doha, Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Madinah, Kuwait, Bahrain, BEY, Sarajevo, Istanbul, Trabzon, Bursa, Baku, Colombo, Kathmandu, Bangkok, Phuket, Prague, Shiraz, Tehran, Mashhad, Alexandria, Khartoum, Multan, Sialkot, Karachi, Dhaka, Chattogram, Jaipur, Trivandrum, Lucknow, Kuala Lumpur, and Almaty.

Sri Lankan embassy to organise Independence Day cricket tournament

The Embassy of Sri Lanka is holding a cricket tournament to commemorate its 75th year of independence, a release said.

The Sri Lankan Independence Day Cricket Tournament, to be organised as part of the yearlong special commemorative events of celebrating the 75th anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence, will take place at the Oman Cricket (OC) grounds - Al Amerat on April 28 (Friday) from 7.00am to 10.00pm.

The Sri Lankan Embassy in Oman will be having a series of commemorative events for celebrating the 75th anniversary of its independence from this month till January next year.

The celebrations had officially commenced with the Flag Hoisting ceremony at the Embassy for the 75th Independence Day on February 4.



The Cricket Tournament is organised by the Embassy of Sri Lanka in coordination with the Sri Lankan expatriate community in the Sultanate of Oman to revamp the splendid memories

of Sri Lankan expatriates' school life in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is well known for cricket and has produced several outstanding cricketers. Former national cricket player and test

captain of Sri Lanka, Dulip Mendis, is the current head coach of the national cricket team of the Sultanate of Oman, and also the Chief Development Officer of Oman Cricket.

'The embassy is grateful to Pankaj Khimji, Chairman of OC and Duleep Mendis for making available the prestigious OC grounds for the event,' the embassy said.

The BPOS Global LLC in the Sultanate of Oman will be the Event Manager for this tournament. The BPOS is headed by a Sri Lankan legend residing in Oman for about 48 years,

Anselm Perera.

The organising committee of the Cricket Tournament has introduced several sponsorship packages: Event Partner as well as Gold, Silver, Associate, Media, Medical, Beverages and Food partners for contributing their support to make this event successful.

There will be 12 teams participating in the tournament. Each team will represent a school in Sri Lanka or a group of schools. Each team will nominate 13 players out of which 11 players will play. For the families and kids, there will be special fun competitions through out the day to enjoy.

The Embassy of Sri Lanka welcomes all Sri Lankans and cricket fans in Oman to enjoy this memorable cricket tournament, the embassy added.

ahlibank opens its head office in Wattayah

In line with its continuous endeavour to provide an unique banking experience to its customers, and a conducive work environment for its employees, ahlibank celebrated the official inauguration of its new iconic headquarters building in Wattayah.

The milestone event was held under the auspices of Abdul salam Mohammed al Murshidi, President of Oman Investment Authority, along with top delegates, customers and stakeholder.

A significant milestone in the bank's journey, the opening of the bank's new building, comes in line with its commitment to supporting the country's socio-economic growth and to Oman Vision 2040. The bank also dedicated the evening to its 15th anniversary, as a testament to ahlibank's commitment and progress as a critical player in the sultanate's banking sector.

"The inauguration of the new building not only evidences our business growth but also signals a further deepening of our long-standing commitment to our customers and the sultanate as we continue to strive for new levels of excellence in the banking industry," said Said Abdullah al Hatmi, Chief Executive Officer of ahlibank.

Expressing his delight on the success of the celebration, he pointed out that the bank firmly believes that business success



goes beyond profit and numbers, it also includes the lessons learned along the way.

"Expansion has always been a key part in our growth strategy, and this spectacular celebration attests to the same. This is not only a huge step for

ahlibank, but also for the country as a whole.

"At ahlibank, we consistently strive to provide a stimulating work environment for employees. We encourage them to think creatively and critically, incorporating smart technologies

to keep pace with a dynamic market and charting sustainable ways of doing business. This has helped the bank create an efficient internal ecosystem that ultimately benefits its clients," Hatmi stressed.

Emphasising on the modern

building layout and facilities, Hatmi went on to say that "embracing operational innovation, the latest digital advancements, and people-centric values, the new building focuses on creating a comfortable place to work and thrive. Bringing together the

best of information technology and infrastructure, the new building has enhanced security levels and ensures an uncompromised, streamlined, and seamless flow of processes."

An exciting agenda surrounded the celebration, which

began with an in-depth tour of the new building and its facilities, which dedicated a corner for the bank's milestones and achievements, followed by an extensive overview of 'ahliExpress', the bank's multi-functional device, and its growing suite of digital banking services.

The bank's new building has innovation at its core and has several facilities tuned to match a modern lifestyle. It follows an open-plan layout accommodating 1,000 employees, and other outstanding facilities. Focusing on enhancing accessibility, the three HQ buildings which are stretched over 34,000 square meters are linked through a network of corridors with a contemporary design which also connects the multi-level parking building to each of the floors of the building. The 7-storey new building has more than 600 parking spaces for the bank's employees and customers.

The new state-of-the-art building is built keeping the highest international innovative standards of architecture in mind. With ahlibank's proven digital competence in providing a futuristic operating environment, the new building also incorporates enhanced digital services to reduce turnaround time and increase the accuracy of transactions. The bank treats customer convenience and satisfaction as critical pillars for success.

Understanding hernia, treatment, prevention

Hernias are a common condition that affects people of all ages and genders. They occur when an organ or tissue protrudes through a weak spot in the abdominal wall, causing a bulge or swelling. While hernias can occur in various parts of the body, the most common type is the inguinal hernia, which affects the groin area followed by ventral hernia which may affect any part of the anterior abdominal wall especially in the umbilicus.

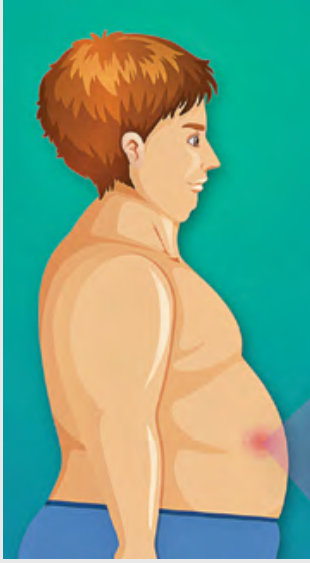
As general and laparoscopic surgeons, we have seen numerous cases of hernias during the stint of our practice. The good news is that hernias are usually treatable with surgery, and most patients can resume their normal activities within a few weeks of the procedure.

One of the most important things to keep in mind about



Dr Swaroop Dundi
Specialist General &
Laparoscopic Surgery
Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Sohar

hernias is that they do not go away on their own. If left untreated, they can cause discomfort, pain, and even lead to serious complications such as strangulation, where the blood supply to the affected tissue is



cut off, leading to tissue death. Symptoms of a hernia can vary depending on the type and location of the hernia. Some common symptoms include a visible bulge or swelling, pain or discomfort, a feeling of pressure or fullness, and nausea or vomiting.

If you suspect that you have a hernia, it is important to see a specialist as soon as possible. In some cases, a hernia can be diagnosed with a physical exam, but in others, imaging tests such as ultrasound or CT scan may be necessary.

Treatment options for hernias typically involve surgery to repair the weakened area of the abdominal wall. In most cases, we at Aster Al Raffah Hospital Sohar perform this surgery using minimally invasive laparoscopic techniques, which involve making small incisions and using specialized tools and cameras to guide the procedure.

After surgery, most patients are able to go home the very next day and can resume normal activities within a week, although strenuous exercise and

heavy lifting should be avoided for several weeks to allow for proper healing.

Preventing hernias involves maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding heavy lifting, and practicing good posture when standing or sitting. If you have a family history of hernias or have had a hernia in the past, you may be at increased risk and should discuss preventive measures with your doctor.

In summary, hernias are a common condition that can cause discomfort and lead to serious complications if left untreated. If you suspect that you have a hernia, please consult Department of Surgery at Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Sohar for a detailed examination and diagnosis. With appropriate care, most patients can make a full recovery and resume their normal activities within a few weeks.

Ooredoo set to join industry experts, global tech giants at Mobile World Congress 2023

Ooredoo Group has announced its participation at Mobile World Congress for the 2023 edition of the event in Barcelona, Spain.

This year's Mobile World Congress, the largest and most influential connectivity event in the world, is set to be held from Monday to March 2 at the Fira Gran Via, Barcelona. This year's key themes are 5G Acceleration; Reality+; OpenNet; Fintech; and Digital Everything.

A delegation of Ooredoo representatives will travel to Barcelona for MWC 2023. At the event, Ooredoo Group and operating companies across the world will share insights into the many exciting developments within these key themes, including

new partnerships, products, services and solutions, as well as providing updates on recent ventures and achievements.

Ooredoo's participation at the Mobile World Congress 2023 underscores the company's longstanding commitment to innovation and technology leadership within the telecommunications industry.

The delegation of senior Ooredoo representatives attending the event will meet with their industry counterparts and many world-leading partners for top-level dialogue on issues affecting the industry and its stakeholders, as well as exploring new partnerships and business relationships opportunities.

Oman Air adds 4 new destinations; increases number of flights in 2023 summer schedule

Continuing its ambitious and dynamic strategy of fleet and network expansion, Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, has unveiled its summer schedule for 2023.

The schedule specifies significant frequency increases on existing routes, and the addition of four destinations - representing a 60 per cent increase in the number of flights from Muscat compared to the previous year.

This will provide the market with approximately 60,000 more seats weekly across its network and provide greater convenience and connectivity for Oman Air guests.

The four additional destinations being introduced for the summer schedule are: Four-weekly flights from Muscat to Chittagong (from March end); four-weekly flights from Muscat to Maldives (from June end);



twelve-weekly flights from Muscat to Lucknow and five-weekly flights between Muscat and Thiruvananthapuram (from August).

The expanded network and schedule for 2023 demonstrates Oman Air's ongoing efforts to contribute to the economy of the Sultanate of Oman while also exhibiting its drive for increased global reach through its award-winning services and products, along with its signature Omani

hospitality both in the air and on the ground.

In the Far East sector, the airline announced daily wide-body flights to Phuket in Thailand from March end, and ten weekly flights to Kuala Lumpur from June.

For the Indian Sub-Continent sector, Oman Air will have two daily wide-body flights from March end to Mumbai, Chennai, Cochin, Kozhikode and Hyderabad in India; and to Dhaka in Bangladesh.

Additionally, the airline has announced double-daily flights to Kuwait from June, and five daily flights to Salalah from July.

Oman Air also announced daily wide-body flights to Moscow in Russia from March end. Six weekly flights were announced for Paris (France) and daily flights to Trabzon (Turkey) from March end.

From June, there will be daily double flights to Istanbul (Turkey), the airline added.

First female Omani captain

Oman's aviation industry has reached a landmark moment with the announcement of Oman Air pilot Maha al Balushi as the first female Omani Captain.

Maha officially received her new rank during a ceremony recently held at the Oman Air's headquarters in Muscat, the latest in a string of firsts she has achieved over her decade-long career with the airline.

"My dream has always been to become a Captain. It hasn't been easy but thanks to the support I have around me, from my family to my training team and the airline, I have accomplished what I set out to do. It is an honour to hold this role and I hope that I will inspire other Omani women to choose such a rewarding career in the skies," said Maha.

Captain Moosa al Shidhani, Senior Vice President Flight Operations at Oman Air, said, "We are thrilled to have Ms Maha as our first female Omani Captain,



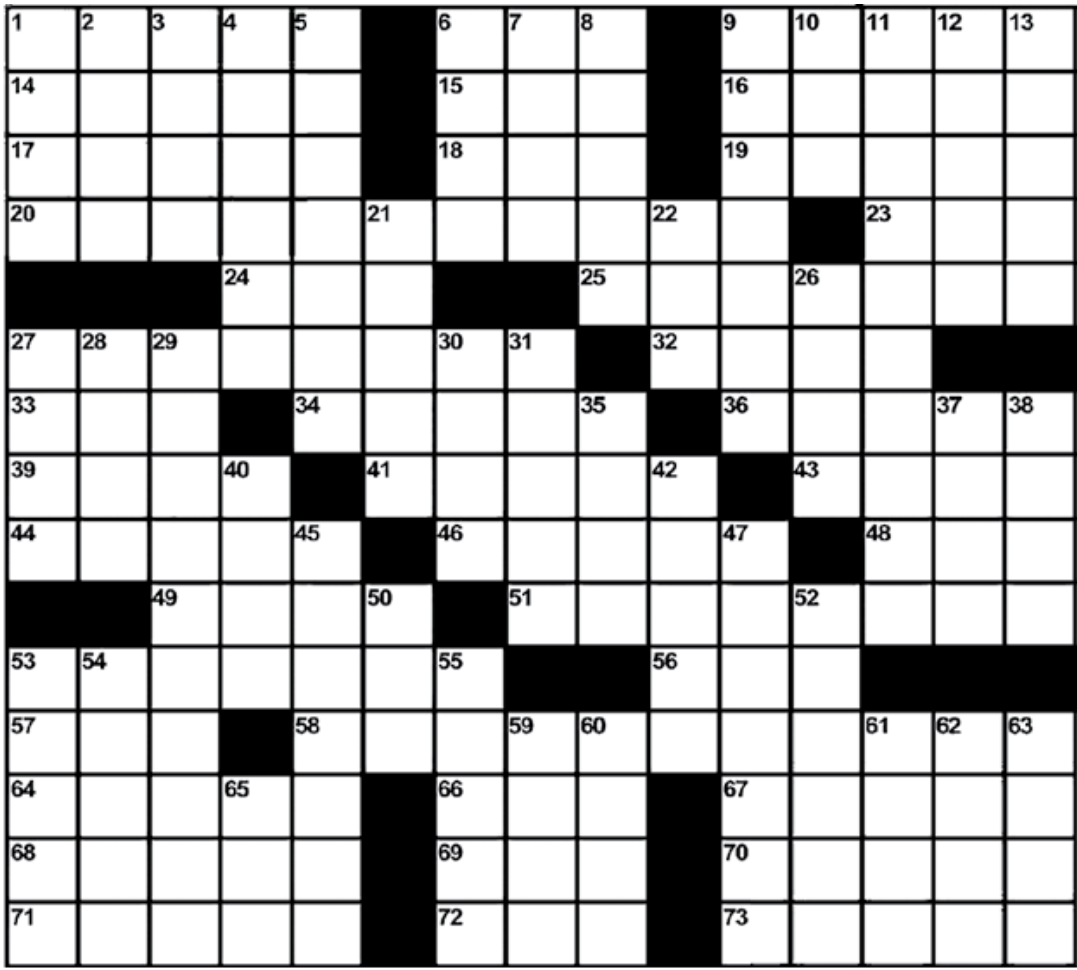
and we believe this is just the beginning of great things to come. This is not just a milestone for our airline but for Oman's aviation industry, and we are honoured to play a leading role in its progress by continuing to nurture Omani talent in all areas of our operations."

Maha has been with Oman Air since 2010, after graduating from the cadet programme at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Australia,

the only woman who was enrolled in the programme at the time. She also made waves when she became Oman's first female First Officer in 2013.

Oman Air pursues a proactive policy of recognising talented and qualified women and supporting them to excel within their chosen careers. Over 1,230 Omani female employees contribute to the airline's strength and represent a range of levels and roles in every segment of the airline.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Major airline
6) Major broadcaster
9) An encouraging word
14) Type of manual
15) Fond du_ Wisc.
16) Downy duck
17) Supernatural life forces
18) Opposite of hence
19) Cathedral topper
20) Method of pairing off for safety
23) Lennon's wife
24) " _ _ he drove out of sight"
25) Locks
27) Make a connection with
32) Splashy party
33) Make public
34) Impressionist's speciality
36) Easy wins
39) It's in the eye of the beholder
41) "When I Need You" singer Leo
43) Ballpoint pen inventor
44) Swarms, as with life
46) "I'll_ a good word for you"

48) Baby's first word, maybe
49) Musician's jotting
51) Gag order?
53) Chess sequence
56) Female on the farm
57) They are not positive
58) Person on a political ticket
64) Dislike, and then some
66) Elephant's weight, maybe
67) Hearing-based
68) "Crazy" singer Patsy
69) Boundary
70) Cable cars on high
71) Used a keyboard
72) "Winnie-the-Pooh" baby
73) Lauder of cosmetics

DOWN

1) Asinine
2) Biblical birthright seller
3) Advance
4) Business person
5) Nineveh was its capital
6) Kind of court
7) Grocery store staples
8) Patton portrayer
9) Sully
10) Tear violently

11) "Goodbye, friend"
12) "From the Earth to the Moon" author
Jules
13) Cookies nearly 2 inches in diameter
21) Oozes
22) .000000 I joule
26) Messy dresser
27) Angler's supply
28) Leprechaun's land
29) Amity
30) It's a tide
31) Become free of moisture
35) Abominable snowman
37) Figurehead's place
38) Sometime today
40) L.A. or Houston problem
42) Become ready to pick
45) Asterisked
47) Notorious London prison
50) Australian bird
52) Takes exception to
53) Legislate
54) In a high-minded way
55) "Come in!"
59) Off-limits thing
60)_European

61) "I smell_!" ("Something's fishy here!")
62) Not wild at all
63) "Will there be anything...?"
65) "_ moment, please"

NOTE PAD

C A B S P L U S D A R E D
A R E A R O S E A M I G O
L I A M O G E E L E D G E
D R E W B A R R Y L E S S
R E N A A R
O P I N E D M O H S M A D
G E N E S M E N O S O L E
L E S S T H A N Y O U K N O W
E V E S E A U X S I E N A
R E T M A S S B U T T E R
C A T L A A
S I R T H O M A S L E S S
E C L A T P I N K T A C O
M A I N E E D G E O L A N
S N E E R D I E T N A M E

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Is your ambition exerting too much control over your life? Nope! That's simply not possible today. In fact, you have to get on that career ladder and climb more aggressively. Moving yourself upward should be your top priority right now, mostly because all the conditions are perfect for you to succeed! By the end of the day, you'll be very happy about where you end up. Pay some more attention to ascending the ladder today, and you're sure to go to some amazing places!

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your ideas are just as good as anyone else's. Why on earth would you ever doubt that? The people who are in power right now definitely prefer your way of thinking over your peers', so take a chance. You have nothing to worry about! Speak up today whenever you get the opportunity. If you want people to respect you, you have to give them a reason to do so. Share what you're thinking. You know you're dying to! This is the day to promote your plans.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You could meet people today whose views are very, very different from yours. They have a lot of convincing things to say in defense of the other side of the argument. So convincing, in fact, that you might start to rethink your own position. This is only natural, and you should definitely explore what these people are telling you in more depth. You should also be open to the idea that you could be working under an incorrect assumption or basing your opinion on false evidence.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You are drawn to outrageous people and activities today, but you know deep down inside that outrageousness won't provide the substance necessary for the happiness you seek. Stylishness and panache aren't your priorities. You need a deeper connection. Flirtations are fun, but they don't hold your attention the way a vigorous debate does. It's time to challenge your intellect. Sit down for a talk with that smart person who really intimidates you.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Reorganizing your priorities might be called for today when someone you were counting on unexpectedly flakes out on you at the last minute. Choose where you put your energy very carefully. Are you going to waste it getting angry at the person who let you down, or are you going to productively channel it toward figuring out a way to work around this temporary setback? Be constructive with your emotions and you'll get some amazing things done today.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Your job today is to wake someone up. Call up your most lackadaisical friend and tell them that it's time to think about changing their approach. They need to change what they're doing and how they're doing it! Convince them that while they don't need to stray too far from their usual routine, they do need to freshen things up a bit. They're behind the times, and it's causing a few people to comment. Before your friend becomes the object of derision, give them a heads-up.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Creating more romance to your life doesn't just relate to a love relationship. Romance is also a big part of how you relate to the world. Are your ideals losing some of their romance? Are you seeing things in a beautiful and hopeful way, or are you seeing them with suspicion and cynicism? Things can seem hopeless, but over the long term, any rough patch you're going through will be a mere wrinkle in your life. Have hope for tomorrow. It will be better than today.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Use your creativity during an argument or debate today. You can come up with a funny or amusing way to switch the focus away from the places where you and someone else disagree and toward the places where you have common ground. Creativity is also going to come to your rescue when you're stuck in a long line or a situation where boredom is likely to overtake you. Entertain yourself with thoughts about how you're going to spend next weekend. Make your plans while you bide your time.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

One of your most attractive qualities is your sense of humor. You can see the funnier aspects of almost anything. This bright attitude has come to your rescue often in the past, and it has enabled you to keep an even keel while other people whip themselves into a frenzy of worry. Today, when a friend is in distress, use that sense of humor to cheer them up and help them see that things aren't so bad after all. Sure, life isn't always perfect, but it is often amusing.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Someone you're working with could be setting up road blocks left and right, but today they'll be forced to learn to be flexible. Delightfully, this lesson is something that you don't have to teach them. All you need to do is stand by and watch the entire entertaining situation. It's a wonderful thing to see people get their just desserts, isn't it? Well, don't gloat too long. You will still need to work with this person to get all the important stuff done!

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

The time is right for you to open up your home. Host a few friends. Invite a few family members over for dinner. You'll all have a blast relaxing together over some good food. And before you worry that you'll fail to impress people with gourmet goodies, remind yourself that these people don't love you for your cooking abilities, they love you for you! Order takeout or make it a potluck extravaganza if you need to take the pressure off yourself. Just get everyone together.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Today, when you know you're right, you're right! Your intellect is strong and focused right now, and it's going to give you a sixth sense about who's telling the truth, who's trying to hide the truth, and who is afraid of the truth! This type of knowledge could be a dangerous thing in the hands of lesser beings, but a superstar like you knows how to use your powers for good, not evil. You'll finally have the opportunity you've been waiting for to introduce two like-minded people.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book", what animal was Kaa?

- A. Wolf
- B. Snake
- C. Panther
- D. Elephant

02. What are the two main symbols of the Freemasons?

- A. Triangle and circle
- B. Brick and trowel
- C. Dog and gramophone
- D. Set square and compass

03. What type of geographical feature is an ox-bow?

- A. Forest
- B. Hill
- C. Lake
- D. Canyon

Answers: 1.B 2.D 3.C

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

G	O	N	O
R	I	I	O
M	I	D	T
A	R	S	M

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

1	8	4	3					
	6		5	1		2		
			4			3	9	
7					4		8	
			7	3	1			
	9		6					4
	1	8			9			
		7		4	6		2	
					3	6	1	9

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

6	1	9	3	7	8	5	2	4
5	2	8	9	4	1	7	3	6
3	7	4	6	5	2	8	1	9
4	3	7	5	8	9	1	6	2
2	5	6	1	3	7	9	4	8
9	8	1	4	2	6	3	5	7
1	6	3	8	9	4	2	7	5
8	4	2	7	1	5	9	6	3
7	9	5	2	6	3	4	8	1

Blinken eyes US inroads in Central Asia as Ukraine rattles nerves

Washington, US - Secretary of State Antony Blinken is heading to Central Asia hoping that greater US engagement will reassure former Soviet republics rattled by the Ukraine war, although Russia's historic clout limits the extent of cooperation.

Days after the anniversary of the Ukraine invasion, the top US diplomat will hold talks on Tuesday in Kazakhstan and then Uzbekistan and meet jointly with foreign ministers of all five ex-Soviet Central Asian states in Kazakhstan's capital Astana.

Donald Lu, the top US diplomat for South and Central Asia, said the United States was realistic that the five nations were not going to end their relationships with Russia or their other giant neighbour, China, which has been boosting its own presence. But he said Blinken would show that the United States is a 'reliable partner' and different from Moscow and Beijing.

"We have something to offer in terms of engagement economically, but we also have something to offer in terms of the values that we bring to the table," Lu told reporters.

After a year of traveling the world to rally support for Ukraine, Blinken's mission may be his most subtle yet.

Diplomats and experts say that Central Asian leaders are walking a tightrope due to formal security agreements with Moscow and Russia's overwhelming security and economic influence, including as a destination for labourers.

All five abstained or did not vote as the UN General Assembly on Thursday demanded that Russian forces leave Ukraine.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) meets with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the United Nations headquarters in New York City on Friday (AFP)

There is a real desire among the leaders of these nations to move away from Russia... there's a real opportunity for the US to be creative and to engage with these leaders

JENNIFER BRICK MURTAZASHVILI

For the United States, 'the sky is the limit in Central Asia right now', said Jennifer Brick Murtaashvili, an expert on the region at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the University of Pittsburgh.

"There is a real desire among the leaders of these nations to

move away from Russia. I think they realise that Russia is a threat to them, but by geography, there's very little they can do about it, and their economic situation doesn't give them a lot of options," she said.

"So I think there's a real opportunity for the United States to

be creative, to engage with the leaders of these countries and sort of meet them where they are."

Complex stance

Kazakhstan, with which Russia has its longest land border, has among the most complex relationships with Moscow. It has been mindful about the rights of its sizable ethnic Russian minority - even more so after President Vladimir Putin pointed to Ukraine's treatment of Russian speakers in justifying his invasion.

Kazakhstan's President

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who will meet Blinken, last year traveled to see Putin and reaffirmed partnership with Russia.

But he recently spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and urged a negotiated end to the conflict based on international law, and Kazakhstan has welcomed tens of thousands of Russians fleeing conscription.

The month before the Ukraine invasion, Tokayev had called in Russian-led forces to help regain control after riots but he quickly asked them to leave following public opposition.

Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon made waves in October when a video went viral of him giving Putin a rare public scolding at a regional meeting, accusing Russia of ignoring the interests of the Central Asian countries.

The United States has seen glimmers of hope on human rights, a longstanding concern in a region historically run by authoritarians. Lu pointed to the recent conviction in Kazakhstan of police officers accused of torture during last year's unrest, as well as Uzbekistan's rapid abolition of forced and child labour in cotton harvests.

"It's really quite remarkable. I don't know that we have seen that sort of speedy progress paralleled anywhere else in the world," Lu said. The Ukraine war is not the first time that an international crisis has thrown a greater spotlight on Central Asia.

Uzbekistan initially took a leading role supporting the US military in its war in Afghanistan, which President Joe Biden ended in 2021.

AFP



An aerial view shows Hadrat bridge across the Euphrates river that is witnessing a sharp decrease in water levels, in Nassiriya on Sunday (AFP)

Levels of Iraq's Tigris and Euphrates rivers decrease in south

Nasiriyah, Iraq - Iraq's Tigris and Euphrates rivers have witnessed a sharp decrease in their levels in the south of the country, officials said on Sunday, pledging to take urgent measures to ease water shortages.

In Nasiriyah, capital of the southern province of Dhi Qar, an AFP photographer saw the river bed of the mighty Euphrates dry in patches. The water ministry blamed the situation in some southern provinces on 'the low quantity of water reaching Iraq from neighbouring Turkey'.

"This has triggered a sharp drop in the country's water reserves," it said in a statement.

The Tigris and the Euphrates both have their source in Turkey, and authorities in Iraq have long accused the Ankara government of withholding water in dams that choke the rivers, dramatically reducing flows into Iraq.

Iraqi authorities also accuse farmers of abusing water supplies and flouting restrictions to irrigate their lands.

Water scarcity hitting farming and food security are already among the 'main drivers of rural-to-urban migration' in Iraq, the UN and several non-government

groups said in June 2022.

According to official Iraqi statistics from last year, the level of the Tigris entering Iraq has dropped to just 35 per cent of its average over the past century.

Water ministry spokesman Khaled Chamal said on Sunday that Iraq was getting only 30 per cent of the water it expected from the Tigris and the Euphrates. Iraq regularly asks Turkey to release more water, and has imposed measures to ration water for agriculture and domestic use. Water is also often held back in dams in Iraq's north, triggering anger among residents in the south.

Chamal told AFP the latest drop in water levels in both the Tigris and Euphrates in the country's south was 'temporary'.

Authorities will increase levels by releasing water from Iraqi dams in the northern areas of Mosul, Dukan and Dambikhan, he added.

"There should be positive results within the next two days," he said. After decades of conflict, oil-rich Iraq has been plagued by poverty, drought and desertification.

AFP

Iran frees Spanish woman detained since end 2022

Madrid, Spain - Iran has released a Spanish woman who had been detained in the country since November, Spain's foreign minister said on Sunday.

"She was freed yesterday, but we didn't want to announce it publicly before her plane had taken off from Iran," Jose Manuel Albares told journalists. "I was able to speak with her... she is well," he said, adding she was on her way to northwestern Spain, where she is from.

The woman, Ana Baneira, was 24 years old when she was arrested, the US-based Human Rights Activists News

Agency (HRANA) revealed at the time.

The circumstances of her detention were never confirmed by Iranian authorities, however it took place as the country was rocked by protests after the death of Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly violating the strict dress code for women.

Another Spanish citizen, football fan Santiago Sanchez Cogedor, has been held since October, when he was arrested while trying to walk to Qatar for the football World Cup.

AFP

Brazil moves on illegal mines in Yanomami territory

Alto Alegre, Brazil - Brazilian authorities this week intensified their fight against illegal mining on the land of the Indigenous Yanomami people, sending helicopters over the Amazon jungle in search of clandestine dig sites.

From above, heavily armed police and officials from the Ibama environmental agency spot a camp: a brown patch of deforested land in the middle of the vast green carpet that is the Amazon.

There are improvised sleeping quarters, a kitchen, bathrooms. The sound of engines thrumming indicates the miners are not far away.

Government agents have already blocked illegal movement on the area's two main rivers, said Felipe Finger, an Ibama co-



An aerial photo shows an illegal mining camp, known as garimpo at the Yanomami territory in Roraima State, Brazil, on Friday (AFP)

ordinator. "Now we are starting another phase - to attack these mining operations, break up and neutralise these camps."

Spotting the helicopters, the 'garimpeiros', or illegal miners,

flee into the jungle, leaving behind sacks of cassiterite - tin dioxide-rich ore known as 'black gold' - which they sell to commercial buyers.

While camouflage-wearing

soldiers torch the camp, agents question a 36-year-old miner who failed to escape.

"Illegal mining is not going to end - it has nothing to do with Lula or Bolsonaro," he says, referring to the current leftist president and his right-wing predecessor.

The miner, who gave his name as Eduardo, said he could make 5,000 reais (US\$1,000) a week working in the camp, adding, 'where can you earn that in the city?'

Yanomami leaders say some 20,000 clandestine miners have invaded their territory, killing Indigenous people, sexually abusing women and adolescents and contaminating rivers with the mercury they use to separate gold from sediment.

'Nothing to eat'

In January, the federal police opened an investigation of possible genocide linked to the miners' abuse of the Yanomami and their resources.

The move came after an official report found that around 100 young children had died in the area last year, some from malnutrition.

"We suffer from diarrhea and vomiting, we have no health care, people go hungry and we have nothing to eat," one Yanomami told AFP on Friday.

Brazil's air force has installed a field hospital in Boa Vista, capital of northern Roraima state, and the military said it has evacuated some 130 patients by helicopter from remote locations.

AFP

EU adds sanctions on Wagner for Africa 'rights abuses'

Brussels, Belgium - The EU on Saturday announced additional sanctions against Russia's Wagner mercenary organisation for 'human rights abuses' in the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan and Ukraine.

A total of 11 individuals and seven entities tied to the paramilitary group were added to the bloc's list for asset freezes and a travel ban.

The Wagner Group itself - which is fighting in Russia's war in Ukraine - was already sanctioned by the European Union in 2021.

The latest additional sanctions were decided 'in view of the international dimension and gravity of the group's activities, as well as its destabilising impact on the countries where

it is active', said a statement from the European Council.

"The Wagner Group's activities are a threat to the people in the countries where they operate and the European Union," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

The European Council said eight of the individuals and the seven entities listed came under the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime for Wagner's activities in the Central African Republic and Sudan. One Wagner individual came under an EU sanctions regime applied specifically to Mali.

The other two Wagner individuals were listed under the EU's sanctions regime punishing Russia for its war in



EU Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Vice President Josep Borrell speaks during a United Nations Security Council meeting on Thursday at U.N. Headquarters in New York City (AFP)

Ukraine, which was also updated on Saturday.

These two were Wagner commanders said to be linked to Russia's capture of the town of Soledar in Ukraine in January.

Wagner in Africa

In Mali, the EU sanctioned the head of Wagner's forces there.

The statement said Wagner's fighters in Mali 'have been involved in acts of violence and multiple human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings'.

Mali is ruled by a junta that last year forced France to remove troops deployed there a decade ago on an anti-militant mission.

Others listed by the EU in the Central African Republic

were high-profile Wagner members, including 'the security advisor' to that country's President Faustin Archange Touadera.

Wagner has been involved in the Central African Republic at Touadera's invitation to quell a rebellion, and their presence also forced French troops there to leave last year.

Gold and diamond companies linked to Wagner in the Central African Republic and Sudan were hit by the EU sanctions. A Central African radio station, Lengo Sengo, was also listed 'for engaging in online influence operations on behalf of Russia and the Wagner Group with the goal of manipulating public opinion'.

AFP

France's Macron to visit China, urges Beijing to pressure Russia to end war

China, with close ties with Russia, has sought to position itself as a neutral party on the conflict

Kyiv, Ukraine - French President Emmanuel Macron said on Saturday he would visit China in April, and urged Beijing to pressure Russia to end the war in Ukraine.

China has sought to position itself as a neutral party on the conflict, even as it has maintained close ties with Russia and helped scuttle a joint statement condemning the war at a G20 gathering in India. It published a 12-point position paper on Friday that called for urgent peace talks and a 'political settlement' to end the conflict.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Friday also expressed hopes to meet Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, calling it 'important for world security'. Macron said on Saturday he would visit China in 'early April' and urged Beijing to help 'put pressure' on Russia to end the war.

"The fact that China is engag-



France's President Emmanuel Macron flanked by France's Agriculture Minister Marc Fesneau, listens to a breeder, on the inauguration day of the 59th edition of the Agriculture fair in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

I will visit China in early April... The fact that China is engaging in peace efforts is a good thing. Peace is only possible if Russian aggression is halted and troops withdrawn

EMMANUEL MACRON

ing in peace efforts is a good thing," Macron said on the sidelines of an agricultural show in Paris, in reference to the position paper. Peace was only possible if 'Russian aggression was halted, troops withdrawn, and the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and

its people was respected', he added.

Earlier on Saturday, the Chinese foreign ministry said Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko would pay a state visit from February 28 to March 2 at Xi's invitation. A long-time

ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko allowed his country to be used as a launchpad for Moscow's invasion of its pro-Western ally on February 24 last year. Kyiv has expressed concerns that Belarus could again support Moscow in its war effort, with the countries announcing the creation of a joint regional force last October.

Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang told his Belarusian counterpart Sergei Aleinik that Beijing was willing to work with Minsk to deepen mutual political trust during a phone conversation on

Friday, China's ministry said in a statement.

China would also continue to support Belarus in maintaining national stability and oppose attempts by 'external forces' to interfere in its internal affairs or impose 'illegal' unilateral sanctions on Minsk, Qin told Aleinik.

Diplomatic rifts exposed

The diplomatic rift between Beijing, Moscow and the West was exposed on Saturday as G20 finance ministers failed to adopt a joint statement on the global economy after China sought to water down references to the Ukraine war.

Russia said the United States, the European Union and the G7 'destabilised' the talks in India by trying to impose their 'diktat'.

The Chinese position paper urged all parties to 'support Russia and Ukraine in working in the same direction and resuming direct dialogue as quickly as possible'. It also made clear its opposition to the use and threat of deploying nuclear weapons, after Putin threatened to use Moscow's atomic arsenal in the conflict.

Some of Ukraine's allies have expressed scepticism at China's commitment to brokering peace, nodding to Beijing's close ties to Moscow. China has denied a claim by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that it was 'con-

sidering providing lethal support' to Russia.

Macron urged China 'not to supply any arms to Russia' and sought Beijing's help to 'exert pressure on Russia to ensure it never uses chemical or nuclear weapons and it stops this aggression prior to negotiations'.

Zelensky did not specify when or where talks with Xi would happen, but expressed hope on Friday that China would support a 'just peace' in Ukraine and that Beijing would not supply weapons to Russia.

On Sunday, the deputy chief of Ukrainian military intelligence told a German newspaper group that a fresh push to retake seized territory was planned for spring, adding Kyiv's forces would 'not stop until we get our country back to its 1991 borders'.

"One of our strategic military objectives is to try to drive a wedge into the Russian front in the south - between Crimea and Russian territory," Vadym Skibitsky said.

Beyond that, 'the objective of our counter-offensive is to liberate all the occupied territories of Ukraine, including Crimea'.

Skibitsky also raised the possibility of future Ukrainian strikes on 'arms depots or military equipment on Russian territory, for example around the city of Belgorod, from where attacks on Ukraine are launched'.

AFP

Rallies call for peace in Ukraine

Berlin, Germany - Protesters in Germany and France on Saturday demanded peace for Ukraine, a day after activists in both countries marked one year since the Russian invasion.

About 10,000 people braved the falling snow in central Berlin to call for negotiations with Moscow rather than weapons deliveries to Ukraine. Under the slogan 'Rise up for Peace', demonstrators bundled up against the cold gathered at the iconic Brandenburg Gate near where a day earlier activists had parked a bombed-out Russian tank in front of Russia's embassy in Berlin.

Organised by far-left politician Sahra Wagenknecht and feminist Alice Schwarzer, who both addressed the crowd, the demonstration is controversial for drawing support from far-right politicians too. The two women have also launched a petition which claims to have gathered more than 645,000 signatures.

In Paris 3,000 protesters rallied as they sang Ukraine's national anthem at Place de la Republique before Ukrainian children dressed in traditional costume led a procession.

AFP

PNG abduction: All hostages released

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea - Three hostages, including a New Zealand archaeologist, were freed in Papua New Guinea on Sunday after a tense week of negotiations between police and armed kidnappers in the country's rugged highlands.

Professor Bryce Barker, alongside his two Papua New Guinean colleagues, were seen walking across the tarmac alongside police at Port Moresby's airport after officials announced their safe release. "It has been a stressful week for all involved and to finally have the hostages back safely in the custody of our security personnel is very important for us as a country," PNG Prime Minister James Marape said.

Barker - a professor at Australia's University of Southern Queensland - and the two women were taken hostage at gunpoint last Sunday in a remote and densely forested region near Mount Bosavi - about 570km



Bryce Barker (centre) is escorted from a plane following his release in Port Moresby on Sunday (AFP)

(360 miles) northwest of Port Moresby.

Marape said all three appeared unharmed although 'obviously traumatised' after the 'random opportunist crime'.

Earlier this week, the captors released another woman who was also part of the group of academics working in the area when they were kidnapped.

Police had been negotiating

with the hostage takers, who initially demanded a ransom of US\$1mn - an enormous sum in one of the Pacific's poorest nations - before dropping the asking price and abandoning a 24-hour deadline.

Australia's and New Zealand's foreign ministers welcomed the news and thanked PNG authorities for their work. "I welcome news from PNG that all

hostages have been released and will soon be reunited with their families," Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said.

Marape said the hostages had been freed after 'covert operations' and the original ransom demand had not been paid - but did not provide further details.

"We apologise to the families of those taken as hostages for ransom," Marape said.

"To criminals, there is no profit in crime. We thank God that life was protected."

Police were now searching for the armed group, he added.

Barker's Australian colleagues were 'relieved' by the release of the 'much-loved' and 'highly-regarded' professor, University of Southern Queensland vice-chancellor Geraldine Mackenzie said.

The archaeologist had many years of experience working in the Pacific nation and was on a research trip when he was seized.

AFP

Russian ship docks with ISS to replace damaged capsule

Moscow, Russia - An uncrewed Russian Soyuz capsule docked early on Sunday with the International Space Station and will eventually bring home three astronauts whose initial return vehicle was damaged by a tiny meteoroid.

The MS-23 ship autonomously latched to the orbiting research lab, live video from ISS-partner NASA showed, completing the Soyuz's two-day journey after launching off from Kazakhstan.

It is expected to bring home US astronaut Frank Rubio and Russian cosmonauts Dmitry Petelin and Sergei Prokopyev in September.

The three arrived at the ISS last September aboard MS-22, and were originally only supposed to stay about six months, until the end of March.



The unmannned Soyuz MS-23 replacement spacecraft is seen taking off to the ISS from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Friday (AFP)

But their capsule began leaking coolant in mid-December after being hit by what US and Russian officials believe was a tiny space rock.

Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, decided to send MS-23 to replace the damaged vessel, but without its own three

planned crew members.

With no one to replace them, Rubio, Petelin and Prokopyev will now spend almost a year in space. The damaged MS-22 is expected to depart the space station without passengers and return to Earth in late March.

AFP

Hunger, malnutrition still blights the lives of Sudan's children

Kalma, Sudan - In Sudan's sprawling Kalma camp for the displaced, Ansaf Omar lives with the gut-wrenching guilt of losing her toddler to a food crisis that has hit millions of people nationwide.

"I am severely malnourished so I couldn't breastfeed him," said Omar, 34, a month after her one-and-half-year-old child died in Kalma camp just outside Nyala, the provincial capital of South Darfur state.

"I took him everywhere - hospitals, treatment centres, but he died in the end," she said.

Desperate mothers like Omar battle daily around Kalma to feed their frail and hungry children, many of whom are severely malnourished.

Sudan is one of the world's poorest countries, with one-

third of the population - at least 15mn people - facing a growing hunger crisis, according to United Nations figures.

Nearly three million of Sudan's children under the age of five are acutely malnourished, the UN says.

"Over 100,000 children in Sudan are at risk of dying of malnutrition if left untreated," said Leni Kinzli, head of communications in the country for the World Food Programme (WFP).

Nationwide, one-third of children under five are 'too short for their age', and nearly half of Sudan's 189 localities have a 'stunting prevalence more significant than 40 per cent', according to the Alight aid group.

It said that at least 63 children were reported to have



Sudan is one of the world's poorest countries, with one third of the population, at least 15mn people, facing a growing hunger crisis, according to United Nations figures (AFP)

died from causes related to malnutrition at Alight facilities in and around Kalma in 2022.

Sudan grappled with chronic hardships under the regime of

Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted in 2019. His three-decade rule was marked by internal conflicts, government mismanagement and punishing

international sanctions.

Bouts of violence

The restive Darfur region was the scene of a bitter civil war that broke out in 2003, pitting

ethnic African minority rebels against Bashir's Arab-dominated government in Khartoum. Economic troubles deepened following the COVID-19 pandemic and a 2021 military coup which derailed a post-Bashir transition and triggered cuts to crucial international aid.

Some 65 per cent of Sudan's people live under the poverty line, according to a 2020 UN report. Food insecurity is not new to the residents of Kalma, Darfur's largest camp and home to some 120,000 people displaced since the 2003 conflict erupted in the country's arid western region.

But residents say conditions have worsened as economic hardships kept rising and sporadic bouts of deadly violence continued.

Alight's nutrition centres in Kalma saw a 'dramatic increase on admissions to and demand on its emergency nutrition services' in 2022, according to the group's country director, Heidi Diedrich.

"Kalma stabilisation centre newly admitted 863 children in 2022, an increase of 71 per cent from 2021," according to Alight.

"The number of deaths at the stabilisation centre increased by 231 per cent in 2022, all children aged six months and above."

Outside one nutrition centre in Kalma, 38-year-old Hawa Suleiman cradled her sleeping infant, hoping to find food for the child.

"We have nothing at home. We sometimes go to sleep hungry," she said.

AFP

Italy: Around 60 migrants die in boat wreck

Rome, Italy - At least 59 migrants, including a baby just a few months old, died after their overloaded boat sank early on Sunday in stormy seas off Italy's southern Calabria region, officials said.

"As of a few minutes ago, the number of confirmed victims was 59," Vincenzo Voce, mayor of the coastal city of Crotona, told TV channel Sky TG-24 on Sunday afternoon.

Earlier, the coastguard service said '43 bodies' had been found along the coast and '80 people recovered alive, including some who managed to reach the shore after the sinking'.

The overloaded vessel broke up in violent waves off Crotona at dawn, according to Italian media.

AGI news agency quoted a rescue worker as saying an infant of just a few months old was among the victims.

Rescue workers told AFP that the vessel was carrying 'more than 200 people'.

"Dozens and dozens of people drowned, including children. Lots missing. Calabria is in mourning after this terrible tragedy," regional governor Roberto Occhiuto said.

Far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the post-fascist Brothers of Italy party, won power in October vowing to stem the flow of migrants reaching Italian shores.

"The government is committed to preventing (migrant boat) departures and, with them, this type of tragedy," she



Rescuers handling a body bag at the site of a boat wreck in Steccato di Cutro, south of Crotona, after a migrants' boat sank off Italy's southern Calabria region on Sunday (AFP)

Dozens and dozens of people drowned, including children. Lots missing. Calabria is in mourning after this terrible tragedy

ROBERTO OCCHIUTO

said on Sunday.

'Eradicate the causes'

President Sergio Mattarella said: "A large number of these migrants came from Afghanistan and Iran, fleeing very harsh conditions." He urged the international community 'to make a

strong commitment to eradicate the causes of these migrations - wars, persecution, terrorism, poverty."

The government in Rome has accused its European Union partners of not taking in sufficient numbers of migrants seeking to enter the bloc, even though

many who arrive in Italy then travel on to other EU states. This week Meloni's hard-right coalition government pushed through parliament a controversial new law that forces migrant aid charities to perform only one life-saving rescue mission at a time.

Critics say the measure violates international law and, by cutting the number of rescue ships able to operate, will result in more people drowning in the central Mediterranean, which is considered the most dangerous crossing for people seeking asylum in Europe.

On Sunday the United Nations and the European Commission chief urged countries to agree fairly on ways to share out responsibility for people fleeing conflict and poverty for what they hope will be a better life in Europe. "Time for states to stop arguing and to agree on just, effective, shared measures to avoid more tragedies," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said of Sunday's 'terrible shipwreck'.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called for progress on a stalled reform

of EU rules on providing asylum for those in need.

"We must redouble our efforts on the (EU) Pact on Migration and Asylum and on the Action Plan on the Central Mediterranean," she said.

Meloni said it was 'criminal to put a boat of barely 20 metres (66 feet) to sea with 200 people onboard and a bad weather forecast'. She demanded collaboration from migrants' home countries and states from where they embark on their perilous sea crossings.

AFP

Palestinian, Israeli reps hold talks in Jordan

Amman, Jordan - Israeli and Palestinian representatives were holding talks in Jordan on Sunday, state media in the kingdom said, with the 'political-security' meeting aiming to restore calm after deadly violence.

Jordanian state broadcaster Al-Mamlaka said the meeting, which kicked off in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba, was 'the first of its kind in years between Palestinians and Israelis with regional and international participation' and would address 'the situation in the Palestinian territories'. Sources with knowledge of the meeting said Palestinian intelligence chief Majed Faraj and the head of Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency Ronen Bar were set to be in attendance.

US National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, as well as Jordanian and Egyptian security officials were also expected to be present, the sources added on condition of anonymity.

The meeting comes amid international concerns over intensifying unrest between Israel and the Palestinians.

AFP

INDIA

CBI arrests Manish Sisodia in Delhi excise policy case

New Delhi, India - The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Sunday arrested Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia in connection with the alleged Delhi excise policy case, after eight hours of questioning.

Shortly before arriving at the CBI office for questioning, the deputy CM said false cases were being lodged against leaders of the ruling party as Prime Minister Narendra Modi was 'afraid' of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. "Conspiracies are being hatched by the CBI and ED. Modi is afraid of CM Arvind Kejriwal's rising popularity. As AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) grows further, BJP will continue to slap false cases on us. We are not afraid of the CBI, ED and their false cases," Sisodia said, claiming that people were starting to regard the AAP as an alternative to the BJP.

He said that the PM, while not afraid of Congress MP Rahul

Conspiracies are being hatched by the CBI and ED. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is afraid of Arvind Kejriwal's rising popularity

MANISH SISODIA

Gandhi, was scared of the AAP. "Everyone says that only AAP will rid the country of the BJP in future. Modi-ji may not be scared of Rahul Gandhi but if there's one party that he is scared, it is the AAP. They will put me in jail, but we are not afraid. We will fight. Kejriwal is the only future leader of this country," Sisodia said, addressing supporters at Raj Ghat.

He further appealed to Arvind Kejriwal to 'keep fighting'



Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia arrives at CBI headquarters for questioning in Delhi Excise Policy Scam, in New Delhi on Sunday (ANI)

for the welfare of the people. "I want to tell Kejriwal-ji, please continue with what are

you doing. Keep fighting for the welfare of the people," Sisodia said. AAP workers were heard

chanting 'Modi Mar Gaya' slogans outside Fatehpur Beri Police Station in support of Sisodia.

The Delhi Police had detained 50 workers and leaders of the AAP.

Delhi police said the AAP workers and prominent leaders, including Sanjay Singh, were detained allegedly for violating Section 144 of the CrPC.

"A total 50 persons, including 42 men and 8 women, were detained," Delhi Police said.

Trilok Puri MLA Rohit Kumar Mehraulia, Sangam Vihar MLA Dinesh Mohnia, Kondli MLA Kuldeep Singh, Rohtash Nagar ex-MLA Sarita Singh and Delhi minister Gopal Rai were among those arrested.

Earlier, the CBI had asked Sisodia to appear for questioning on February 19. On last Sunday, Sisodia requested the central agency to defer questioning saying that he is 'preparing the budget' at present and said he could only appear before it towards February-end.

However, Sisodia has not

been named an accused in the chargesheet filed in the case. Arrested businessmen Vijay Nair and Abhishek are among the seven accused named in the chargesheet.

In August last year, the CBI searched Sisodia's bank locker in connection with the case. The deputy CM claimed the sleuths did not find any incriminating material in his locker.

Several raids were conducted at 21 places in Delhi and the National Capital Region, including Sisodia's residence, and the premises of four public servants last year, according to a CBI officer, who further said that the raids were conducted across seven states.

The CBI launched a probe in the matter on the basis of a report forwarded by the Delhi chief secretary to L-G Saxena recommending a probe by the central agency.

ANI

Terrorists kill Kashmiri Pandit in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama

Pulwama, India - A Kashmiri Pandit working as a security guard at a bank was shot dead by terrorists in Achan area of Kashmir's Pulwama district on Sunday morning, a police officer said.

The deceased was identified as Sanjay Sharma, son of Kashinath Sharma, and was a bank security guard by profession, the officer added.

Security has been tightened and the entire area has been cordoned off to arrest the attackers.

The Kashmir police said that the terrorists opened fire on Sanjay Sharma, a member

of Kashmiri Pandit community, while he was on his way to a local market in Achan.

The injured person was rushed to a nearby hospital, with the help of locals, for treatment, where he succumbed to bullet injuries.

There was an armed guard in his village, and further details of the incident are awaited, Kashmir police said.

Earlier, four days ago, terrorists opened fire and injured a man, Asif Ganai, outside a mosque in the Anantnag district. He, however, survived the injuries.

Jammu and Kashmir police

had arrested three militant associates of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen group in South Kashmir's Kulgam district, a week ago.

Kashmir police had said that the operation was commenced after receiving a tip-off on militants carrying illegal arms and ammunition. Following the input, the Kulgam police team launched a hunt near Daderkoot Alamganj to arrest them.

The police confiscated a pistol, two pistol magazines, and 13 live pistol rounds from the possession of the accused.

ANI

Rahul 'learnt a lot from Bharat Jodo Yatra'

Raipur, India - Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has said he learnt a lot during his just concluded months-long 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' during which he met people from all sections of the society.

"During Bharat Jodo Yatra I learned a lot. I walked for my nation from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. Thousands connected with me and other party leaders during the yatra. I listened to all problems of farmers and realised their pain," Gandhi, an MP from Kerala's Wayanad constituency, said on Sunday at the party's ongoing 85th Plenary Session in Raipur. The yatra began on September 7, 2022, from Kanyakumari and passed through 12 states, culminating in Jammu and Kashmir - covering a total distance of about 4,000km over the course



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi addresses the party's 85th Plenary Session, in Atal Nagar-Nava Raipur on Sunday (ANI)

of four-and-a-half-months.

He also mentioned Jammu and Kashmir leg of his yatra, saying that he felt like being at home when he reached there.

"Fifty-two years passed and I still don't have a home, but

when I reached Kashmir, it felt like home. The yatra was to make people of all castes and age groups feel at home. People were not talking politics with me during the yatra but it all changed when I reached Kash-

mir," Gandhi said.

According to Congress, the walk was aimed at uniting and strengthening India. It also sought to address unemployment and inflation issues, and what the Congress claimed as the 'politics of hate and division and over-centralisation of our political system'.

Further, Rahul Gandhi, while targeting the BJP, said that politics should revolve around unemployment and economic matters.

"During elections, issues not relevant to the public are raised. Politics should be on how to tackle unemployment, strengthen GDP, and take our economy forward. The BJP raided us but we are standing strong," he added.

ANI

IN A LEAGUE OF HIS OWN

Armand Duplantis sets new world pole vault record

Clermont-Ferrand, France - Armand Duplantis of Sweden set a new world pole vault record of 6.22 metres at an indoor meeting in France on Saturday, describing it as "almost an out-of-body experience".

Olympic champion Duplantis improved his own record of 6.21m that he set in winning the world title outdoors in Oregon last year.

Competing at the All-Star Perche meeting in Clermont-Ferrand, central France organised by 2012 Olympic pole vault champion Renaud Lavillenie, Duplantis cleared the new record at his third attempt to the delight of the 4,000-strong crowd.

Duplantis, 23, said: "When you have moments like this, when the energy is so high, and you're going down there for the record, it feels like levitating, it feels like my body never even touched the ground the whole jump."

"There's something about it that just feels overwhelming right now, and I really think it's because Renaud means so much to me, he's meant so much to me

since I first started, he's been my biggest inspiration, biggest idol.

"He really motivated me, made me believe that I could break the world record. So for me to break the world record here, his hometown, his competition that he hosts..."

US-born Duplantis entered

record of 6.16m that had stood since 2014.

"Each world record feels like it brings something a bit different out of me," Duplantis said. "Maybe the first one might have been a bit crazier, but this might be number two right now, it's really unbelievable."

When you have moments like this, when the energy is so high, and you're going down there for the record, it feels like levitating

ARMAND DUPLANTIS

the competition at 5.71m, clearing that height at his first attempt.

He passed at 5.81m and managed 5.91m on his second try before winning the competition by clearing 6.01m on his first attempt before having the bar raised to the record height.

It was the sixth time that Duplantis has broken the world record. He set the first in Torun in February 2020, when he cleared 6.17m to add a centimetre to Lavillenie's previous world

He said re-writing the record books no longer left him with any nerves.

"The pressure doesn't really feel the same anymore to me. I've proved a lot the past few years, the past two years especially, and I know what kind of jumper I am, what I am capable of. "I know that I am deserving to be in the spot that I am."

AFP



Sweden's Armand Duplantis sets a new world record (6.22m) in the men's pole vault event during the International indoor athletics meeting All Star Perche at the House of sports in Clermont-Ferrand, central France, on Saturday (AFP)

Daniil Medvedev halts Murray heroics to take Qatar title

Doha, Qatar - Daniil Medvedev beat fellow former world number one Andy Murray 6-4, 6-4 in the Qatar Open final on Saturday to win his second ATP title in a week.

The 27-year-old, who won in Rotterdam last Sunday, convincingly ended his 35-year-old opponent's comeback heroics that saw Murray fight four three-set battles and overcome eight match points to reach the final in Doha.

Medvedev broke Murray's first serve in each set as he remained unbeaten in three encounters between the two. His 17th career title should see him move up one place to seventh in the new world rankings. Medvedev said both players struggled to find their rhythm in the wind but also complained about new match balls used on the tour.

"Honestly now I can say this now that the tournament is over, and also I won, I think that these balls are not good for hard courts," said the Russian.

"They changed something this year and I don't like them. I heard a lot of other players are struggling with shoulders, elbows and wrists."

"Myself I had wrist problems in Australia. Generally I think I



Daniil Medvedev celebrates on the podium with the trophy after defeating Andy Murray in the Qatar Open final in Doha Saturday (AFP)

was struggling all week to find the perfect rhythm with these balls, but I am happy to win."

Medvedev fired down five aces but also committed six double faults. Murray repeatedly shouted at himself and his support team after errors.

Medvedev had seemed to be cruising to victory in the second

set until he was serving at 3-2 up with two game points. Murray fought back and produced a brilliant backhand winner to surge back into the clash at 3-3.

At 4-4, Murray was leading 40-0 in a bid to produce another shock, but the Scot let Medvedev get back into the game for the key break that decided the title.

"Daniil is one of my favourite players to watch and one of the best on the tour," said Murray, who acknowledged he had been through an "amazing week".

Murray is expected to rise from 70th to 52 in the world rankings. But he said that after his gruelling week he would speak with his team before deciding whether to compete in the Dubai tournament this week.

Murray saved three match points in his first round game and five against Czech challenger Jiri Lehecka in his semi-final.

He spent more than 12 hours on court during his week in Doha and conscious of his 2019 hip replacement surgery and will see what toll that has taken.

"All were pretty tough matches physically so at my age and with the conditions I do have to be mindful of those things," he said. "Definitely there are some things to work on but I am proud of my week and the work that me and my team have put in to get me back to this stage."

Medvedev said he would fly to Dubai on Sunday to prepare for an event boosted by his second straight title but wary of the fact that he could meet world number one Novak Djokovic in the semi-final.

AFP



Barbora Krejickova lifts the WTA Dubai trophy after defeating Iga Swiatek (AFP)

Barbora Krejickova stuns Swiatek to take Dubai title

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - Barbora Krejickova defeated Iga Swiatek to claim the Dubai WTA title on Saturday, becoming just the fourth woman this century to defeat the top three players in the world at the same tournament

For former French Open champion Krejickova, ranked 30 in the world, it was a sixth career title.

The 27-year-old Czech snapped world number one Swiatek's six-match, 12-set winning streak with a 6-4, 6-2 result in one hour and 31 minutes, in

front of a capacity crowd at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis stadium.

Krejickova had also defeated second-ranked Australian Open winner Aryna Sabalenka in the quarter-finals and world number three Jessica Pegula in the semi-finals.

Only Venus Williams, Serena Williams and Sabalenka have managed to beat all top three players in a single tournament in the 2000s.

"It's a huge achievement, what I was able to do this week. I was really enjoying all the matches, I definitely love playing

on the big courts," said Krejickova, who will move up to 16 in the rankings on Monday.

It was a week of great escapes from Krejickova -- who saved four match points against an eighth-ranked Daria Kasatkina in the second round and rallied back from 0-6, 1-3 down in her quarter-final against Sabalenka.

"This title definitely means a lot. It was a great week for me, I was improving every single game and today I showed my best," said Krejickova, who also defeated Swiatek in the Ostrava final last October.

Defending champion Carlos Alcaraz to face Norrie again for ATP Rio title

Rio De Janeiro, Brazil - Top-seeded defending champion Carlos Alcaraz fended off hard-hitting Nicolas Jarry 6-7 (2/7), 7-5, 6-0 on Saturday to reach the final of the ATP Rio Open.

Alcaraz lined up a title rematch with second-seeded Briton Cameron Norrie, who outlasted Bernabe Zapata Miralles 6-2, 3-6, 7-6 (7/3).

It will be the second meeting between Alcaraz and Norrie in as many tournaments, after the Spaniard's narrow victory in the Buenos Aires final last Sunday.

"It's going to be a very tough match, Cameron is at a great level, he has already shown it in previous matches," Alcaraz said in an on-court television interview.

Alcaraz's Argentina triumph cemented his return from a four-month injury layoff. The 19-year-old was sidelined late in 2022 with a torn abdominal muscle and he withdrew from the Australian Open in January after picking up a leg injury in training.

His fitness was tested against Jarry, a former world number 38

now ranked 139th as he tries to climb back after serving an 11-month doping suspension in 2020.

The Chilean broke Alcaraz in the second game of the contest as his punishing groundstrokes carried him to a 5-3 lead.

Alcaraz, whose US Open triumph last September saw him become the youngest ever world number one, found his astonishing shot-making touch to win 12 straight points, breaking Jarry as he leveled the set at 5-5.

But Jarry dominated the



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz returns the ball to Chile's Nicolas Jarry during their Rio Open semi-final in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Saturday (AFP)

tiebreaker, roaring to a 5-1 lead and polishing it off with a service winner.

The second set was another tense battle. Alcaraz saved four break points in the opening game and they went with serve from there until Alcaraz -- who had the trainer on at the last two change overs -- broke Jarry to love to pocket the set.

The third was all Alcaraz. He gained his first break for a 2-0 lead with a spectacular running forehand winner and wrapped it up with his third break of the set

after two hours and 43 minutes.

Norrie will be playing his third final of the year and seeking a first title after his runner-up finishes in Auckland and Buenos Aires.

After splitting two lopsided sets, he and Zapata Miralles traded breaks midway through a tense third.

Norrie fought off a break point at 5-5 as they went to the tiebreaker, in which he seized the initiative with a drop shot winner and never trailed.

AFP

THE 'INCREDIBLE'

Haaland sets club record as City crush Bournemouth

Bournemouth, United Kingdom- Pep Guardiola hailed Erling Haaland after the "incredible" striker set a Manchester City goal record as the Premier League champions thrashed Bournemouth 4-1 to keep the pressure on leaders Arsenal on Saturday.

Haaland scored his 27th goal in 24 Premier League appearances, establishing a new single-season City record in the competition as he moved past Sergio Agüero's total of 26 in 2014-15.

Guardiola's side were already leading at Dean Court through Julian Alvarez's early strike by the time Haaland netted.

Phil Foden's first league goal since November and a Chris Mepham own goal completed City's first win in their last three games in all competitions.

Arsenal's 1-0 win at Leicester earlier on Saturday had piled the pressure on City, who could ill afford to slip up for a second successive weekend.

They had blown the lead in a 1-1 draw at Nottingham Forest last Saturday, allowing Arsenal to reclaim top spot in the process.

City had also failed to hold onto their advantage in Wednesday's



Manchester City's Norwegian striker Erling Haaland celebrates with team-mate Phil Foden after a goal (AFP)

Considering the amount of games and a lot of travel we played incredibly aggressive. Our attack was more dynamic and we got a good result. Erling Haaland, his impact has been incredible.

PEP GUARDIOLA

day's 1-1 draw at Leipzig in the Champions League last 16 first leg.

But City had never lost to Bournemouth in 18 previous meetings and they routed the strugglers for the second time this season to move within two points of Arsenal, who have a game in hand against Everton on

Wednesday.

"Considering the amount of games and a lot of travel we played incredibly aggressive. Our attack was more dynamic and we got a good result," Guardiola said.

"Erling Haaland, his impact has been incredible. We love him and he is helping us. Today we

found him more and he is an incredible threat."

Despite his barrage of goals, Haaland had endured criticism over the last week amid a growing debate about his perceived flaws and possible negative impact on City this season.

Costly misses from Haaland in the Forest draw led some to

question if City, champions in four of the past five seasons, are a less cohesive unit with the Norway striker in their line-up.

But Haaland's 33rd goal in 32 appearances in all competitions since signing from Borussia Dortmund last year should silence the doubters for a while at least.

Gulf in class

Kevin de Bruyne was only fit enough to feature among the substitutes on his return from illness after missing the Leipzig tie.

That meant there was a place for Alvarez and the Argentine World Cup winner quickly repaid Guardiola's faith.

When Foden's advance into the area was halted by Bournemouth keeper Neto, Haaland flicked the rebound against the crossbar and Alvarez was on hand to finish from virtually on the line.

Determined not to repeat their recent failures to hold the lead, City poured forward and Ruben Dias headed inches wide from a corner.

City were in complete control and Haaland doubled their advantage in the 29th minute.

Ilkay Gundogan's cross was bundled towards goal by Rico Lewis and Haaland swoop to slot home from close-range.

Encapsulating the gulf in class between the teams, Haaland has scored more league goals than the entire Bournemouth squad have managed in the competition this season.

AFP



Arsenal's Ukrainian defender Oleksandr Zinchenko greets the fans after the final whistle on Saturday

Zinchenko-led Arsenal win dedicated to Ukraine: Arteta

Leicester, United Kingdom - Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta dedicated his side's 1-0 win at Leicester to remain on top of the Premier League to the people of Ukraine, one year on from Russia's invasion. Ukraine international Oleksandr Zinchenko replaced Martin Odegaard as the Gunners' captain for the day and wore an armband in the colours of the Ukrainian flag.

"It was great because it was an initiative from the players," said Arteta. "Martin came to me yesterday and they wanted to have

that gesture with him.

"Today we wanted to win for him, for his loved ones, and for all the Ukrainian people that I think has inspired the world with that fighting spirit and with the togetherness they showed as a country. "If we can add some happiness today to them and reflecting on who Alex (Zinchenko) is for us, it was a good opportunity, so I'm delighted to dedicate that win to them."

A four-game winless run prior to a 4-2 victory at Aston Villa last weekend had dented Arsenal's

hopes of a first league title for 19 years. Arteta's men even briefly surrendered top spot to Manchester City, but are now two points clear of their title rivals with a game in hand.

"It was really important because it creates more belief in the players, around the club and externally," added Arteta on his side's return to winning ways.

"But I had the belief the players could do it. It was coming back to some details and basics that get games away from us that we made much more."

Sampdoria claim pig's head sent to them was 'act of intimidation'

Rome, Italy- Sampdoria blasted on Saturday "an act of intimidation" after a severed pig's head was sent to the troubled Serie A club's headquarters.

Italian media widely reported that a box with the pig's head was left with a threatening message for owner and former chairman Massimo Ferrero and vice-chairman Antonio Romei.

In a statement, Sampdoria expressed their "deep outrage at yet another serious act of intimidation that took place this morning at our headquarters".

Ferrero, who was forced to step down as chairman in 2021 after he was charged with fraudulent bankruptcy, has previously said that he has also received bullets in the post apparently from fans angry at his stewardship of the club.

The 71-year-old film producer has owned Sampdoria since 2014.

AFP



Real Madrid's Alvaro Rodriguez celebrates scoring against Atletico Madrid on Saturday (AFP)

Real Madrid snatch derby draw, Valencia edge past Real Sociedad

Madrid, Spain- Real Madrid's young striker Alvaro Rodriguez salvaged a late 1-1 draw for the champions in a tense derby clash against 10-man Atletico Madrid on Saturday in La Liga.

New Valencia coach Ruben Baraja earned his first win with an impressive 1-0 triumph against Real Sociedad at Mestalla, to help the team move provisionally one point clear of the drop zone.

Real Madrid's draw reduces league leaders Barcelona's advantage on Los Blancos to seven points, but gives the Catalans the

chance to expand the gap to 10 on Sunday when they travel to Almeria.

Jose Gimenez had headed Atletico in front in the second half shortly after team-mate Angel Correa had been sent off for elbowing Madrid defender Antonio Rudiger.

However 18-year-old Rodriguez headed Madrid level on only his second league appearance for the club.

The striker made a strong impact in a cameo against Osasuna last weekend, setting up a goal,

and made an even more important contribution against Atletico.

Despite his impact, Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti admitted his team's hopes of defending the title are fading, albeit not extinguished.

"It's not a goodbye to La Liga - it's even more complicated, but we will fight to the end and see what happens," Ancelotti told reporters.

The Italian coach praised Rodriguez for making a difference coming off the bench.

AFP

Freak Brandt goal sinks Hoffenheim as Dortmund go three points clear

Berlin, Germany- In-form Borussia Dortmund midfielder Julian Brandt scored a freak first-half goal to secure a 1-0 win at Hoffenheim on Saturday and send his side three points clear at the top of the Bundesliga.

Just before half-time, Dortmund captain Marco Reus swung in a free-kick from just outside the box to Brandt, who looked to be trying to get out of the way, but the ball skimmed off his back and into the net.

Brandt, who was named Bundesliga player of the month on Thursday, has now scored in five consecutive matches for Dortmund, who are on a nine-match winning streak.

He said his side "pushed our luck a bit" but declared the victory was a "strong snapshot" of where the team is right now.

"In the past we've often lost games like that," he said.

After the break, Dortmund midfielder Emre Can's clumsy



Borussia Dortmund's Julian Brandt (L) celebrates with team-mates after their match against Hoffenheim in Sinsheim on Saturday (AFP)

challenge on Hoffenheim midfielder Kevin Akpoguma inside the box survived a VAR review, despite the former Liverpool player clearly clipping his opponent's heel.

Dortmund winger Marius Wolf looked to have doubled his side's lead after 57 minutes when he struck a lifting ball past keeper Oliver Baumann, but the goal was ruled out for a foul at the other end of the pitch in the build-up.

Hoffenheim's Fisnik Asllani

had a late chance to equalise when Angelino found him unmarked a metre from Dortmund's goal, but the striker headed just wide.

Bayern Munich and Union Berlin, both three points behind Dortmund, meet on Sunday in the Bavarian capital.

Elsewhere, RB Leipzig climbed into the top four with a 2-1 home win over Eintracht Frankfurt.

Leipzig took the lead after just six minutes, with Timo Werner

chipping the ball in despite losing his balance on the edge of the box. Emil Forsberg, who assisted Werner's effort, doubled Leipzig's lead in the 40th minute.

Frankfurt's Djibril Sow scored a fine 61st minute goal to give the visitors hope, but Leipzig held on to leapfrog Freiburg into fourth.

Werner said his team deserved to win after "a really strong first half" and revealed only now has he fully recovered from the ankle ligament injury.

Oman Under 19 boys whitewash Hong Kong in bilateral series

Muscat - It was a dominating display by the local lads as hosts Oman U19 team made a clean sweep in the four-match bilateral 50-over-a-side series against Hong Kong at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground in Al Amerat recently.

Coached by Adeel Shafique, the hosts won all their matches, played over seven days, by a comfortable margin, underlining their superiority in all departments of the game.

For Hong Kong, who are currently playing the six-nation Asia Regional Qualifier in the UAE, it was not the best of results ahead of the Qualifier. Just one spot is available for the ICC U19 Cricket World Cup 2024 from the ongoing Asia Qualifier, which began on February 24. Beside Hong Kong, the other nations in fray are Kuwait, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore and hosts UAE.



Oman U19 boys team

Oman won the first match by 46 runs with debutant Mustaqeem Sayed hammering 86 runs. Mustaqeem continued his rich vein of form to emerge as the hosts highest run-getter with a total of 165 runs in four innings.

Oman scored 215/8 in the 50 overs and then restricted the visitors to 169/9 in the opener.

Glen Menezes stood out with his bowling throughout the series as he bagged a total of 11 wickets with an economy of 3.14, three of which came in the first match. The storyline remained the same in the next match, this time, Hong Kong batting first. Oman bowled them out for paltry 137 in 47 overs with Aryan Bisht picking three wickets. The home team cantered to victory in 25 overs with skipper Aditya Gurumukhi hitting a half-century.

The third match witnessed

Oman putting up a huge total of 288/8 and then bowling out Hong Kong for meagre 108. Bisht shone with bat this time as he slammed a 67-ball 69 while Menezes ran through the rival batting lineup with a five-wicket haul.

In the concluding game, Hong Kong batted first and were bowled out for 178 in the 48th over. The hosts needed only 37.4 overs to reach the target.

Perez pips Hamilton as F1 testing wraps up in Bahrain

Sakhir, Bahrain - Sergio Perez topped the timesheets for Red Bull from Lewis Hamilton's Mercedes as pre-season testing wrapped up in Sakhir on Saturday. Perez has emerged as a crucial cog in teammate Max Verstappen's world championship success over the past two seasons. And after three days trying out their 2023 cars in the desert all the signs are that Red Bull will be hard to deny next Sunday in the Bahrain Grand Prix, the first of a record 23-race season.

"Red Bull seem to be very strong in these three days," said Ferrari's Charles Leclerc after Verstappen had been quickest on the first day of testing on Thursday.

"I feel we have some work to do," added Leclerc, who will be hoping new Ferrari chief Frederic Vasseur can bring a change of fortune for the Scuderia on race-day after Ferrari's title challenge last term was undone by a mix of poor strategy and reliability. "The car is working really well," said Verstappen, who is targeting a third straight title after defending his controversially gained 2021 crown four races from the end of



Sergio Perez

last season with a record 15 wins. Testing concluded with Perez 0.359seconds up on Hamilton as Verstappen sat out the final day.

There was an upbeat mood in the Mercedes garage with the new car performing well and showing no signs of the bouncing that dogged last year's W13.

"We're not quite where we want to be but it's a good platform to start from," commented Hamilton.

Teammate George Russell, who secured his first win in Brazil last year, said: "I believe we have improved the car over the course of testing and got the W14 in a much better window today."

WHO IS THE BEST?



Lionel Messi



Kylian Mbappe



Karim Benzema

Messi, Mbappe and Benzema up for FIFA world player award

Paris, France - Just like in the World Cup final, Paris Saint-Germain teammates Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe go up against one another for The Best FIFA Men's Player prize for 2022 on Monday, with Ballon d'Or Karim Benzema the other contender.

The ceremony takes place in Paris, and Messi appears as the favourite to add another individual gong to his collection after leading Argentina to glory over Mbappe's France in that epic encounter in Qatar.

Messi has won the Ballon d'Or seven times and claimed the

FIFA award - inaugurated in 2016 following FIFA's split with Ballon d'Or organisers France Football - once in 2019.

In the last two years Messi has made the podium as Robert Lewandowski has won the title, but the 35-year-old's career-crowning World Cup triumph was the defining moment of 2022.

The winner is decided by a jury comprised of the coach and captain of every men's national team and one journalist from each country, but fans can also vote.

Mbappe became the first player to score a World Cup final hat-trick since Geoff Hurst in 1966 as he dragged France to a 3-3 draw after extra time - despite two goals by Messi - before they eventually succumbed in a shoot-out.

Mbappe, who turned 24 just after the final, was the tournament's top scorer with eight goals, one more than Messi, who claimed the Golden Ball for best player.

He was also comfortably

everything else.

"Because Messi won the World Cup he has the biggest chance of winning, that's a fact," admitted Ruud Gullit, himself a former Ballon d'Or winner.

Dutchman Gullit was speak-

ing in his role as a member of the Laureus Academy, which recently included Mbappe and Messi among the nominees for their own awards.

"But I have so much respect for Mbappe. For me he is on the same level. What he did in the final, to take that responsibility was unbelievable," he added.

Benzema's chances of winning another individual honour were hit after he missed the World Cup due to injury.

Exiled from the French team for five and a half years because of his involvement in a blackmail scandal over a sextape involving a former teammate, Benzema's Ballon d'Or win last October had completed his own career redemption.

The Real Madrid striker, now 35, scored 44 goals in 46 games for his club last season, inspiring them to glory in the Champions League and La Liga.

He has continued to bang in the goals this season.

"I am really, really proud of my journey," he declared after claiming the Ballon d'Or.

AFP

Because Messi won the World Cup he has the biggest chance of winning, that's a fact. But I have so much respect for Mbappe. For me he is on the same level

RUUD GULLIT

PSG's most important player in the year leading up to the World Cup, despite being joined there by Messi - he was Ligue 1's leading scorer and France's player of the year.

However, their World Cup achievements overshadow

ing in his role as a member of the Laureus Academy, which recently included Mbappe and Messi among the nominees for their own awards.

"But I have so much respect for Mbappe. For me he is on the same level. What he did in the

44Cup Oman returns to Muscat for season opener

Muscat - Oman Sail will host nine of the world's best crews at the 44Cup, to be held at Al Mouj Muscat Marina from March 1-5. The 44Cup Oman marks the start of a five-event season taking place over the next seven months. This will be the 16th season of racing between the high-performance owner-driver one-design monohulls and will once again bring together the worlds of sailing and business.

Oman's team, Oman Sail, is

taking part in the first leg of 44Cup this year, following a successful debut at last season's 44Cup Oman finale. The crew will be skippered by Musab al Hadi, one of Oman's most accomplished sailors, with Hussain al Jabri serving as tactician and Nasser al Mashari as the main trimmer. Waleed al Kindi, Haitham al Wahaibi, Akram al Wahabi, Raad al Hadi, Yassir al Rahbi, Abdulrahman al Mashari, Ali al Balushi Ahmed al Hasani,



Action from last season's 44Cup in Oman

and Ibtisam al Salmi, the first female Omani sailor to race in the 44Cup, all add valuable experience to the team. They will be supported on shore by Sulaiman Almanji and Piri Nagy.

They will be joined by eight teams from six countries and principalities across Europe, including last season's winners Charisma from Monaco, runners-up Ceeref powered by Hrastnik 1860 from Slovenia, and third-placed Team Nika from Monaco.

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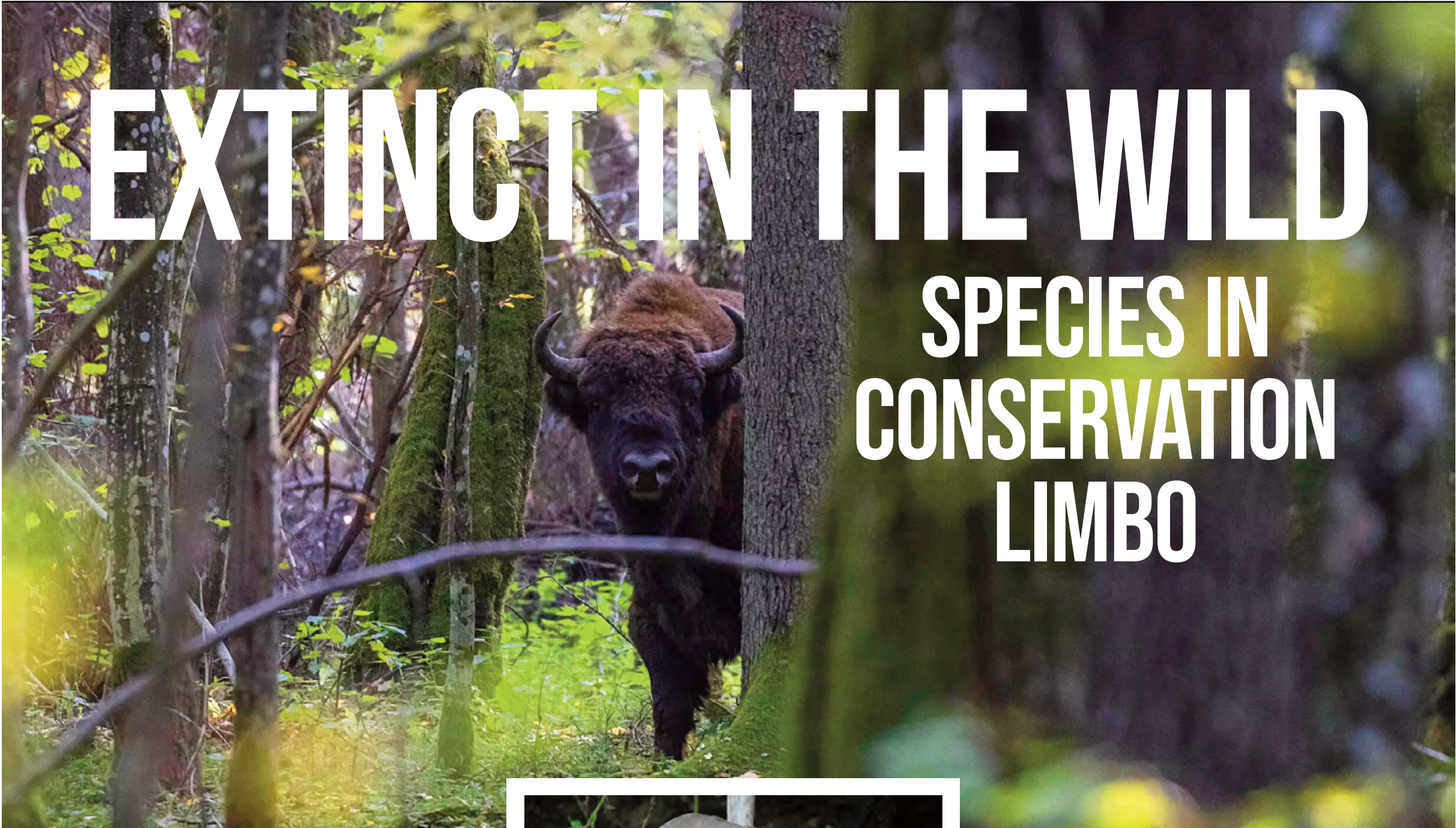
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For species classified as 'extinct in the wild', the zoos and botanical gardens where their fates hang by a thread are as often anterooms to oblivion as gateways to recovery, new research has shown.

Re-wilding what are often single-digit populations faces the same challenges that pushed these species to the cusp of extinction in the first place, including a lack of genetic diversity. But without conservation efforts, experts say, chances of these species surviving would be even smaller.

Since 1950, nearly 100 animal and plant species vanquished from nature by hunting, pollution, deforestation, invasive lifeforms and other drivers of extinction have been put into critical care by scientists and conservationists, according to the findings.

While the category 'extinct in the wild' was not added to the benchmark Red List of Threatened Species until 1994, the term could have applied to all of them.

Of these species teetering on the edge, 12 have been reintroduced to some degree back into the wild, according to a pair of studies published last week in the journals Science and Diversity. Another 11, however, have gone the way of dinos, dodos and dozens of Pacific island trees, whose delicate flowers will never again grace the planet.

Biodiversity loss has reached crisis proportions not seen since an errant asteroid as big across as Paris smashed into Earth 66mn years ago, wiping out land dinosaurs and ending the Cretaceous period.

That was one of five so-called mass extinction events over the last half-billion years.

Scientists say human activity has pushed

Earth into the sixth, with species disappearing 100 to 1,000 times more quickly than normal.

"Real opportunities to prevent extinction and return previously lost species to the wild abound and we must take them," the international team of 15 authors said. "We have lost 11 species entirely under our care to extinction since 1950."



Lonesome George was the last known Pinta Island Tortoise, from the Galapagos Archipelago (AFP)

duced that surviving specimens were rounded up into zoos and a breeding programme was launched in Poland.

After reintroduction into the wild in 1952, the broad-shouldered beasts thrived and are no longer considered threatened with extinction by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature

decades later to another island, where their numbers are increasing.

'Overlooked category'

Giant Pinta tortoises on a neighbouring Galapagos island - one of the 11 extinct-in-the-wild species that didn't make it - were not so lucky.

After living for half a century as his species' sole survivor, a 75kg male known as Lonesome George died in 2012.

Other creatures that never made it out of intensive care include Hawaii's black-faced honey creeper, a petite bird devastated by mosquito-borne avian malaria last seen in 2004; Mexico's freshwater Catarina pupfish, unsuccessfully relocated to captivity when its native habitat dried out due to groundwater extraction; and five types of snail on the Society Islands that fell victim to an invasive carnivorous cousin. Surprisingly, the studies show that species surviving only in controlled environments are in a kind of conservation limbo.

"This is an overlooked category," the researchers noted. "Despite being considered most at risk, extinct-in-the-wild species are not assessed under the Red List process."

"We have largely ignored the extent of, and the variation in, extinction risk of the very group of species for which humans are most responsible," they added.

Of the 84 species currently with this status, nearly half have not benefitted from attempts to reintroduce them into the wild. Most are plants, suggesting a possible bias towards reintroducing animals that might not be entirely scientifically justified.

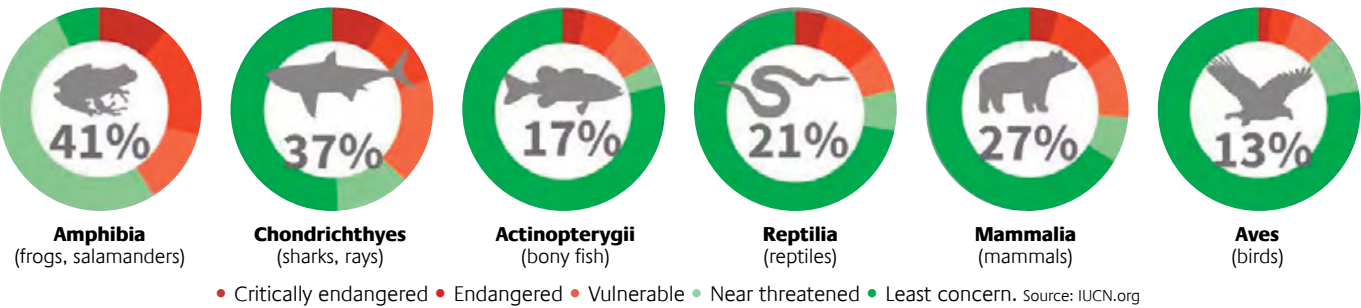
At its most recent World Conservation Congress in 2020, the IUCN called for the reestablishment of extinct-in-the-wild species in the wild by 2030.

AFP

BIODIVERSITY ON DISPLAY: VERTEBRATES

28% of all species assessed by IUCN are threatened with extinction, here we take a look at the situation for vertebrates

Vertebrates in focus



Success stories

Another study published last week in *Current Biology* - looking at the 'Great Dying' event 252mn years ago that annihilated 95 per cent of life on Earth - showed that accelerated species loss preceded broader ecological collapse.

"Currently, we may be losing species at a faster rate than in any of Earth's past extinctions," lead author Yuangeng Huang, a re-

searcher at the China University of Geosciences, told AFP.

"We cannot predict the tipping point that will send ecosystems into a total collapse but it is an inevitable outcome if we do not reverse biodiversity loss."

Recent conservation success stories - some of them heroic - include the European bison, which once roamed across Europe.

By the 1920s their numbers were so re-

(IUCN), the keepers of the Red List.

Red wolves in North America, wild horses in central Asia and the desert-dwelling Arabian oryx have all staged comebacks with a helping human hand. So has the largest land tortoise in the world, native to Espanola Island in the Galapagos.

By the 1970s, *Chelonoidis hoodensis* had been eaten to the brink. Fourteen surviving individuals were removed and relocated

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DROUGHT TOURISM



WALKING ON WATER

ISLAND RECONNECTED BY DROUGHT

On foot or by bike, visitors stream across the narrow path connecting the small island to the edge of Lake Garda, a symbol of the winter drought hitting northern Italy.

Dotted with cypresses and rocky white beaches, San Biagio island was in the past only accessible by boat.

But historically low waters on the lake have revealed a sand and stone causeway - and tourists are flocking to the site.

"It's a beautiful sight, but sad at the same time, because it's caused by drought. We hope it will be short-lived," said Alberto Pampuri (62), who cycled to the spot with his wife and two friends from nearby Brescia.

The unusual phenomenon recalls the 'Floating Piers' installation created in 2016 by artist Christo, when yellow floating footbridges were placed across nearby Lake Iseo.

"But they were artificial bridges, whereas this is a natural work of art," said

Agata Carteri, a 48-year-old teacher.

A lack of snow on the surrounding mountains, warm temperatures and no rain for six weeks have combined to bring the water levels of Garda, Italy's largest lake, to its lowest winter level for 30 years.

The waterline is 60 to 70 centimetres below the average for the last few decades.

Warning signs

After a record drought last summer which devastated harvests, the north of Italy is once again showing warning signs, with water levels low in the River Po, Lake

worker said as he surveyed the newly emerged causeway.

While the lack of snow spells trouble for ski resorts in the mountains, the novelty of the low waters is a boost for the little community of Manerba del Garda.

"The island has become a popular out-of-season attraction," said Mayor Flaviano Mattiotti.

"But if the level of the lake doesn't rise in the spring, we are ready to dredge the harbours to allow access for tourist boats, which would be a first."

Almost 28Mn tourists visited Lake Garda last year, around 40 per cent of them from Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

"It's like walking on water," said Afra Vorhauser, from the northern town of Merano, after walking across to the uninhabited island.

In the bright February sun, families ate picnics on the grass or at wooden tables, while on the exposed beaches children climbed the rocks or skimmed stones.

This winter has seen a 'new tourist movement, born out of the curiosity for discovering areas of the lake that are normally below water', said Paolo Artelio, head of local tourism agency Visitgarda.

These include the Grottoes of Catul, the ruins of a Roman villa built on the Sirmione peninsula, a part of which has emerged thanks to the lower water level.

But officials are keen to emphasise that the normal attractions of the lake remain.

"For tourists, nothing changes, because the lake still has an average depth of 136 metres - they can surf, sail or swim as they wish," said Pierlucio Ceresa, secretary general of the Community of Garda, which is responsible for the quality of the water.

He said it was 'premature to proclaim a disaster', saying that if it snows in the coming weeks and rains in March, the situation 'will return to normal'.

AFP



For tourists, nothing changes, because Lake Garda still has an average depth of 136 metres - they can surf, sail or swim as they wish

PIERLUCIO CERESA

Maggiore and Lake Como.

Five years ago, Matteo Fiori had to wade his way to San Biagio island, also known as the Island of Rabbits, holding his rucksack above his head to keep it dry.

"The water came up to my chest, it was an adventure," the 45-year-old social







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