

► NEWS BRIEF

SAUDI ARABIA TO HOST 2027 AFC ASIAN CUP

Manama, Bahrain - Saudi Arabia has won a bid to host the 2027 Asian Cup, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Wednesday. The announcement was made at the AFC Congress in Manama.

Saudi Arabia was the sole bidder after India withdrew in December.

"We are excited to deliver the greatest tournament in the competition's history," the kingdom's sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al Faisal said after the announcement.

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PDO opens RO87mn Rima Water Treatment Plant

13



Palm fronds for furniture, heritage houses and more

Oman, Saudi Arabia ink 13 MoUs across sectors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed 13 agreements and memorandums of understanding worth millions of rials for investment in various economic and industrial sectors on Wednesday in Riyadh.

The agreements include cooperation and investment in the fields of oil and gas, petrochemicals, renewable energy, green hydrogen, mining, tourism, fish farming, stock exchange, logistics and transportation.

The pacts were signed on the sidelines of the Omani-Saudi Investment Forum in Riyadh.

"This forum is the embodiment of a deep relationship between Oman and Saudi Arabia, coming together under the theme of 'Partnership and Integration'. We have the opportunity to create a roadmap that supports businesses and investments for a prosperous future," said Khalid al Falih, Saudi Minister of Investment.

Oman's Ministry of Finance and the Saudi Fund for Development signed a MoU to finance the construction of an integrated economic zone in Dhahirah, at a cost of about RO122mn in its first phase.

The 388,000sqm project will include the construction of infra-



(ONA)

RO122MN
MoU to finance Phase 1 of economic zone in Dhahirah

RO60MN
MoU for entertainment project in Muscat

RO5MN
agreement in the field of electrical transformers

RO4MN
pact to invest in green hydrogen production

structure, including roads, electrical installations, water and sewage network, and industrial waste treatment, in addition to providing engineering consultancy services for the project (design and supervision).

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) signed a MoU with the Special Economic Cities and Zones Authority of Saudi Arabia in the field of economic and investment development to enhance the competitive advantage of cities and economic zones, and develop institutional capabilities between the two sides in a way that achieves mu-

tual benefit.

Siham Development and Investment Company and a Saudi company signed an agreement worth RO60mn to establish an entertainment project in Muscat.

Oman's Tanfeedh for Global Business and Saudi Clear Vision signed an agreement for cooperation in the field of research, development and innovation. The agreement aims to develop factories and businesses and support projects based on scientific research and innovation for sound economic returns.

Omani United Investment and Development Company and Saudi al Rajhi Holding Group signed an agreement to establish an investment company engaged in the fields of oil and gas, logistics, electronic payment, furniture and information technology between the two countries.

Voltamp Transformers Oman and Saudi Gulf Laboratory Company signed an agreement worth RO5mn in the field of electrical transformer services.

Delta Green Energy Company and Saudi External Consultants Group signed an agreement worth RO4mn to invest in the field of green hydrogen production. The agreement aims to prepare economic, investment and financing studies, and attract investment partnerships between the two countries.

Continued on [Page 02](#)



H M receives message from Kazakh President

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a written message from President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The message was handed over to Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, when he received in his office on Wednesday Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan.

During the meeting, the guest conveyed greetings and best wishes of the Kazakh President to His Majesty the Sultan and the Omani people.

On his turn, Sayyid Asaad asked the guest to convey greetings and best wishes of His Majesty the Sultan to President Tokayev and the people of Kazakhstan.

The meeting discussed bilateral relations between the two

countries and means of promoting these in various field. It also reviewed matters of mutual interest.

Oman, Kazakhstan hold political talks

Oman and Kazakhstan held a session of political talks on Wednesday. The session reviewed areas of bilateral cooperation in fields of economy, renewable energy, tourism and food security.

The Omani side was headed by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, while the Kazakh side was headed by Tileuberdi.

During the session, the two sides exchanged views on various regional and international matters of mutual interest.

The two sides signed an agreement to establish the Joint Oman-Kazakhstan Committee, in addition to inking a memorandum of understanding on political consultations.

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Cartoon characters, theatre shows charm visitors at OCEC

Our Correspondent
Muscat

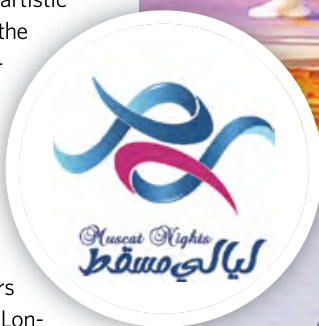
Despite the accident as a result of a technical failure in one of the children's rides at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Tuesday, Muscat Municipality confirmed that Muscat Nights activities continue as per schedule.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, a municipality official said, "The programmes and events at OCEC are continuing according to a schedule prepared in advance. The centre is holding a unique carnival, including a theatrical performance of 'Aladdin's Wonderland' and an artistic show called 'Winter in the Forest', which is a circus set in the Arctic winter. Other attractions are 'Fantasy Lion', 'Mr Bob' and '3D Mapping' shows."

He added that actors from Manchester and London, who have experience of performing theatre at Disney World as well as entertainment programmes in the GCC countries, such as Riyadh Season, have been contracted for the shows at Muscat Nights.

Elaborating on the games featured in Muscat Nights, he said, "There are 23 electric and mechanical games and rides for children and adults. Additionally, there are games that use virtual reality technology."

The municipality has also allocated a corner in 'Carnival Land' for two- to four-year-old children where cartoon characters perform acts from the series *Cocomelon*. "Children can enjoy their beloved cartoon characters, which have positive messages for the pre-school age group."



8 injured as children's ride malfunctions at OCEC

Muscat - Seven children and a woman were injured as a result of a malfunction in one of the rides at the amusement park in Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Tuesday night.

In a statement, the Civil Defence and Ambulance Au-

thority said, "The accident resulted in light to moderate injuries in seven children and a woman."

Issuing a statement on the accident, Muscat Municipality said, "The number of people affected by the technical defect that occurred in one of the

rides at OCEC is eight. Praise be to Allah, most of the cases have returned home. We are monitoring the health status of two who have been referred for further examinations. Muscat Municipality and the authorities in charge are following up the procedures."

It added, "We affirm our concern for the safety of everyone - young and old - and our seriousness in following all approved standards."

The civic authority urged people to seek information from official sources and not to spread rumours.



2023 Ironman 70.3 this weekend

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Triathlon Middle East hosted a press conference for local and international media representatives on Wednesday to introduce the 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman Muscat triathlon taking place this weekend.

Following the event's official opening ceremony today evening, which will be held under the patronage of H E Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Undersecretary for Sports and Youth in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman Muscat will kick off from the Shatti al Qurum beach-side district on February 4.

Saleh bin Ali al Khayfi, Director of Events at Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said, "For Oman, this globally-recognised triathlon event serves to further enhance the country's reputation as a premier host destination for regional and international sporting events, as well as for outdoor and adventure tourism activities of all kinds. It also serves to showcase the rich cultural beauty and modern infrastructure that Oman's capital Muscat is renowned for. To all athletes making their way to Oman for the first time, I welcome you to our beautiful capital city."

The race - which will welcome a diverse field of local, regional and international athletes to Muscat - will be preceded by events, including the Ironman Race Village & Expo and Ironkids Run Muscat being held Thursday

through Saturday.

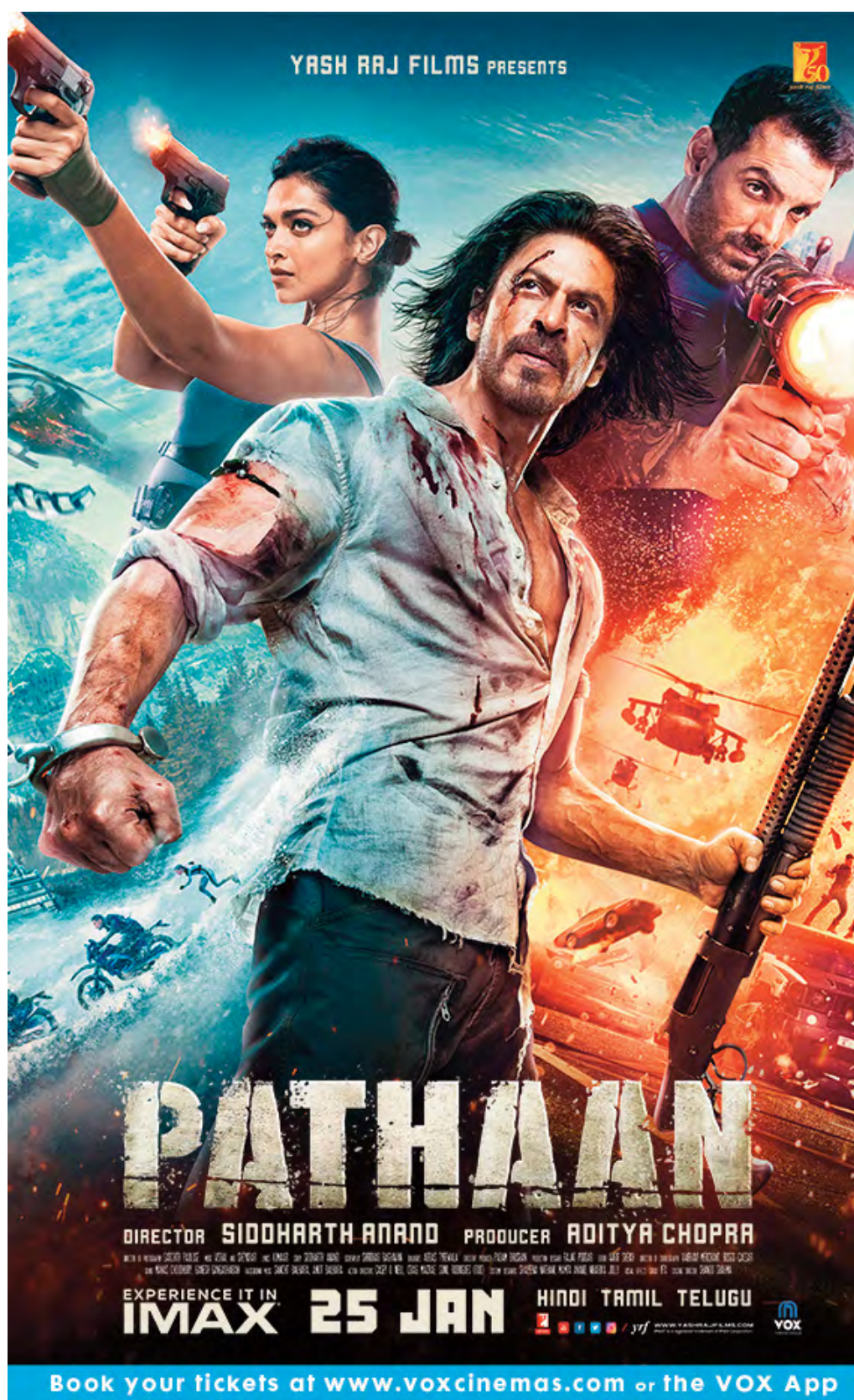
The event is scheduled to be the first and largest of its kind in the Middle East for the 2023 season, and will race off at 6.30am on Saturday on a route that takes athletes through some of the capital city's most spectacular scenery - via a 1.9km swim, 90km cycling and final 21.1km run - for a total race distance of 113km, or '70.3' miles.

Mohamed Obaidani, CEO and Founder, Triathlon Middle East, said, "This event has been a long time in the making, and we are finally set to host what promises to

This globally-recognised triathlon event serves to further enhance the country's reputation as a premier host destination for regional and international sporting events

SALEH BIN ALI
AL KHAYFI

be a magnificent 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman Muscat for the people of Oman - and for the estimated 800-plus athletes who are scheduled to take part. I encourage all sports fans and families in Muscat to visit the Ironman Race Village & Expo this weekend to witness the action. And, I wish all athletes the very best for their race day performance!"



Ministry confirms safety of imported agri products

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has confirmed the safety of all imported agricultural products. It denied rumours of the sultanate stopping agricultural shipments from

one country in the region.

A statement issued by MAFWR said, "The ministry would like to clarify regarding what is being circulated in social media about Oman stopping imports of agricultural products from a country. This information is incorrect and all imports of agricultural products

from all countries are subject to examination and analysis according to a food control programme of the competent authority in the ministry."

A team from the Centre for Food Safety and Quality and the Agricultural Quarantine Department visited the country at its request to find out about

aspects of export regulations there. "The team confirmed that agricultural products in the country and those exported to Oman come from sources registered with the concerned regulatory authorities and farms are monitored to ensure correct agricultural practices," it stated.

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Oman, Saudi Arabia ink 13 agreements in several sectors

Continued from Page 01

Visit Oman and Saudi Almosafer Company signed an agreement worth RO100,000 in the field of travel and tourism.

Oman Construction and Engineering Company and Tharawat al Manajem of Saudi signed an agreement to operate and manage mining sites, while Colossal Engineering and Construction Company and Saudi Desert Technologies signed an agreement to implement solar energy projects in Oman.

An Omani company and Saudi International Company for Marine Industries signed an agreement to support the marine industry in the kingdom, and lastly Omani Golden Integration Solutions Company and Saudi Specialised Industrial Services Company signed an agreement in the field of oil and gas services.

Sayyid Bilarab opens Oman-Swiss exhibition

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said presided over a ceremony at the National Museum on Wednesday to inaugurate an exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Oman and Switzerland.

The exhibition, Swiss Non-Conformist Design, is being held in cooperation with the Embassy of the Swiss Confederation in Oman, and the National Museum.

H H Sayyid Bilarab also opened another exhibition titled 'Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023', which is being organised by the German University of Technology (GUTech).

H H Sayyid Bilarab toured the Swiss Non-Conformist Design exhibition that is celebrating the uniqueness of modern and contemporary Swiss design, right from the beginning of the 20th Century, notably upon the emergence of the 'Dada' movement in Zurich, through to postmodern expressions.



The exhibition, which will last

until July 22, is the first appearance of this genre of Swiss design in the Middle East. It is one of the first exhibitions of its kind

in the world outside Switzerland, stated a press release.

The exhibition is distinguished for its special focus on non-con-

formist design. Nearly 40 per cent of the pieces exhibited in Muscat have not been displayed before.

The exhibits are carefully selected from among the high-level museum designs of pioneers of architecture in the 20th and 21st centuries

The exhibits are carefully selected from among the high-level museum designs of pioneers of architecture in the 20th and 21st centuries.

H H Sayyid Bilarab listened to a detailed account of the pieces on display, including themes of 'chairs' and the culture of 'sitting posture', since sitting and communication between people acquires special significance in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

Jamal Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary General of the National Museum, said that the event celebrates Swiss design and designers interested in the basic principles that underline Omani and Swiss cultures.

H E Thomas Oertle, Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to Oman, said that this unique exhibition displays objects from iconic artists such as Le Corbusier and Sophie Arp Täuber, to items never exhibited before such as furniture of Pierre Jeanneret from the Unesco World Heritage Site Chandigarh Capitol Complex in India, and finally to designs from contemporary Swiss artists such as Tom Strala.

Prof Dr Michael Braun, Rector of GUTech, said that 'Hope: Housing, People and Environment 2023' exhibition is an initiative to promote people-centred planning to activate urban environments in Oman. This initiative, he added, combines architecture, urban planning, social sciences, technology, environmental and sustainability aspects and many more.

RO85mn offered to stimulate investments in N Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Office of the Governor of North Batinah has signed agreements to the tune of RO65mn with Sohar Port Company, Vale and OQ to offer investment opportunities for the citizens of the governorate.

The agreements were signed on the sidelines of the Forum for Development and Business Opportunities, organised by Oman Development Bank (ODB) in



partnership with the Office of Governor of North Batinah and a number of public and private entities.

Additionally, Hamad Salem al Harthi, acting CEO of ODB, announced the allocation of RO20mn to provide financing

loans to beneficiaries in the governorate in 2023.

Harthi also presented a working paper titled 'Funding opportunities through ODB'.

On the occasion, Mohammed Suleiman al Kindi, Governor of North Batinah, announced a prize named 'North Batinah Governorate's Award for Entrepreneurship' which will be shared by the best entrepreneur and the best institution supporting entrepreneurship.

On the occasion, Mohammed

Abu Bakr al Ghassani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of ODB, informed that the bank has devised an ambitious programme this year to hold development and business opportunities forums in governorates in conjunction with their respective governors.

"The aim is to establish an environment conducive to the growth of small and medium enterprises so that they can achieve their goals," Ghassani added.

National Employment Programme, Baker Tilly Academy sign deal

Muscat - The National Employment Programme (NEP) on Wednesday signed a memorandum of cooperation (MoC) with Baker Tilly Academy to develop the capabilities of Omani nationals in the fields of career planning, strategic planning, systems of future skills, entrepreneurship and self-employment.

The academy offers a range of specialised training courses, instruction manuals and visual

content designed to suit the development of Omani capabilities.

The courses are designed in accordance with the most modern developments, information technology and data published in the NEP electronic platform.

The MoC was signed by Khalid Salim al Ghamhari, head of Capacity Building at the NEP, and Abbas al Humaid, managing partner at Baker Tilly Academy, Middle East and Africa.



Mwasalat posts over 87% jump in bus passengers last year

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman National Transport Company - Mwasalat - transported more than 3mn passengers in its buses in 2022 compared to 1.6mn in 2021, an increase of 87.5 per cent.

The increase, Mwasalat said, in the number of passengers on all operating lines 'is in recognition of the quality of services provided by Mwasalat, as well as the company's quest to raise awareness among various segments of society about the importance of using public transport in the sultanate'.

The transport company also transported over 221,000 passengers through its ferries in 2022. Last year, more than 8,400 passengers were estimated to have taken the bus on a daily basis, compared with 6,000 in 2021.

'The total number of training hours for jobseekers at Mwasalat reached 46,552. The percentage of Omanisation in the company is 92.1 and customer satisfaction has reached 92 per cent,' it stated.

In December 2022, Mwasalat and the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) succeeded in running

Mwasalat to have its bus fleet monitored through CCTV

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to provide security and monitor the movement of its fleet throughout the sultanate, Mwasalat floated a tender on Thursday inviting professional firms to supply and install the needed system.

A statement issued by Mwasalat said, 'The company invites professional firms to supply and install a CCTV solution for public transport fleet.'

The transporter is looking

for a qualified bidder for the supply, installation, commissioning and implementation of an integrated CCTV system solution with continuing support services to Mwasalat buses.

'The complete system will include all hardware and software, proven integration with (Open API), software implementation services, system training and continuing support as stipulated in the tender document.'

The last date for submission of tender is February 15, the company stated.

a public transport bus powered by biofuel, a first of its kind initiative in Oman.

The Green Bus project is part of an agreement between SQU and Mwasalat under which the SQU research team will be using one of the Mwasalat buses for testing in order to assess the quality of biodiesel in addition to providing technical support, exchanging technical expertise and

implementing a number of related initiatives together with the transporter. The project will contribute to achieving zero carbon neutrality, finding renewable and sustainable sources of energy and support creating opportunities for economic and social growth, besides helping to achieve sustainable development and limiting the consequences of the climate change.

REMEMBRANCE



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Parents and Sister

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(RO1 equals)

Indian	212.46
Pakistan	698.07
Bangladesh	275.55
Philippines	141.15
Sri Lanka	950.67

*Rates as on February 01

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

IMF approves \$4.7bn Bangladesh support package

The International Monetary Fund has signed off on a US\$4.7bn support loan package for Bangladesh to help it cope with soaring energy and food costs that have sparked huge protests. Bangladesh and other South Asian countries dependent on fossil fuel imports were hit hard by sharp cost-of-living increases following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Nationwide blackouts of up to 13 hours a day hit the electricity grid last year and the government extended food relief for households unable to afford rice and other staples.

The IMF package makes US\$476mn immediately available to the government but commits it to tax hikes and bringing down the number of bad loans in the banking sector.

PDO officially opens R087mn Rima Water Treatment Plant

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Under the auspices of H H Sayyed Marwan bin Turki bin Mahmood al Said, Governor of Dhofar, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) on Wednesday celebrated the inauguration of its second nature-based project, Rima Water Treatment Plant.

The project, which is valued at R087mn, follows the success of PDO's award-winning Nimr Wetlands project, which treats produced water using a series of sloping reed fields and evaporation ponds.

The event, held at the Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre in Muscat, was attended by several senior government officials, members of the company's board and executive committee and representatives from both the public and private sectors.

Spanning an area of 25 sqkm, Rima Water Treatment Plant uses a gravitational oil and water separation and natural biological treatment process, an emerging breakthrough technology that is the first of its kind to be used in Oman. This innovative solution not only ensures the effective treatment of the water but also creates a desert oasis for local wildlife.



The project has the capacity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an impressive 53,000 tonnes per year, PDO said in a press statement.

H H Sayyed Marwan said, "It was a pleasure to attend today's inauguration of the Rima Water Treatment Plant, a remarkable environmentally friendly project that applies natural technology to treat and manage water associated with oil production.

"This project showcases a commitment to using natural technology and green solutions to preserve the environment and make the most of our natural resources. It sets a strong example

Spanning an area of 25 sqkm, Rima Water Treatment Plant uses a gravitational oil and water separation and natural biological treatment process

to be followed in the region and worldwide, especially in terms of sustainable water management and addressing the challenges faced in oil and gas industry."

"We commend PDO for its innovative and environmentally responsible approach to its work and projects. The company's

dedication to preserving the environment is truly admirable and deserves recognition," he added.

PDO managing director Steve Phimister said, "Rima Water Treatment Plant represents a significant step forward in our commitment to sustainability and reducing our environmental



impact. By using nature-based solutions to treat wastewater, we can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and create new habitats for wildlife.

"Indeed, it is a breakthrough technology that provides an eco-friendly alternative to traditional deep-water disposal (DWD) methods, and can be utilised in many other industries that produce wastewater as a by-product."

Prior to the launch of Rima Water Treatment Plant, 60 per cent of the associated water produced at Rima was used for water flooding to maximise recovery, with the remaining 40

per cent being pumped into a deep reservoir in an expensive and energy-intensive operation. This has now been replaced by a more environmentally friendly and sustainable solution, capable of processing up to 65,000 cubic metres of associated water a day and reducing high-energy consumption by 10 megawatts.

The construction and commissioning of the plant came four months ahead of schedule with around 1.38mn LTI-free man-hours achieved. Additionally, all construction work was carried out by local companies, with a number of equipment being procured and prefabricated in Oman.

Indian cement giant UltraTech signs partnership deal with Seven Seas

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A strategic partnership agreement was signed between UltraTech Cement Limited, the flagship cement company of India's Aditya Birla Group, and Oman-based Seven Seas Company to invest in Duqm Cement Projects International (DCPI).

Duqm Cement Projects International, which is based in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), was fully owned by Seven Seas Company.

In its filing to the Indian exchanges on Monday, UltraTech said that its wholly-owned UAE-based subsidiary UltraTech Cement Middle East Investments has entered into a share sale and purchase agreement with Seven Seas Company for the acquisition of 70 per cent equity shares in Duqm Cement Projects International.



Seven Seas Company said the partnership with UltraTech is expected to contribute to economic diversification and employment generation

"The partnership [with UltraTech] is expected to contribute to the twin national objectives of economic diversification and employment generation," Seven Seas Company said in a press statement on Wednesday.

It said the team is working in close coordination with SEZAD officials to fast-track various approvals, infrastructure and providing investment environment in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

UltraTech is one of the largest cement producers in the world. The company, which is the leading cement producer in India, currently has a cement production capacity of 121mn tonnes in India which is expected to go up to 159mn tonnes by the end of financial year 2025.

In the Gulf region, UltraTech has manufacturing facilities in the UAE, and Bahrain.

DME posts 23% growth in physical delivery of Oman crude in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), the premier international energy futures exchange in the Middle East, recorded a 23 per cent year-on-year growth in physical delivery volumes of Omani crude during 2022.

More than 181mn barrels of crude were delivered and shipped through the exchange in 2022 compared to 147mn in 2021, DME said in a statement.

Since inception in 2007, DME has now supplied over 3bn barrels of Oman crude via its physical and EFP mechanism.

Trading volumes on DME were also significantly higher as the global trading community embraced its price discovery mechanism as an essential risk management and hedging instrument during the period of high volatility seen in energy markets during 2022.



DME registered a 20 per cent increase in front month volume, whilst recording an 11 per cent increase across the full curve, re-enforcing the price transparency and liquidity that led most major Middle East National Oil Companies (NOCs) to utilise the DME Oman Sour crude futures benchmark as part of their export pricing formulas.

Raid al Salami, managing di-

rector of DME, said, "Our performance in 2022 reflects the importance of DME Oman as the preferred benchmark and price discovery mechanism for sour crude in the East of Suez market. These increased trading volumes highlight the contract as the most reliable and transparent benchmark for sour crude heading to Asian markets."

US Fed set to slow rate hikes but signal inflation fight not over

Washington, US - The US Federal Reserve starts the second day of its policy meeting Wednesday, on growing expectations that it will step down to a smaller interest rate hike as red-hot inflation shows signs of cooling.

But the US central bank is likely to push on with efforts to rein in costs, concerned about the risks of taking its foot off the gas too quickly.

The Fed cranked up the benchmark lending rate seven times last year, including four consecutive 0.75 percentage point increases, lifting borrowing costs in hopes of dampening demand.

The aim is to rein in inflation, which surged to its fastest pace in decades in mid-2022 but has since come off a peak.

Policymakers are widely expected to announce a 0.25 percentage point rate hike at the end of their two-day meeting, slowing from a half-point increase in December and steeper hikes before that.

Not done yet

But Ryan Sweet, chief US economist at Oxford Economics anticipates this will be accompanied by signals that the Fed is not done yet.

"They want concrete evidence that they've killed inflation, and they haven't yet," he told AFP.

An easing of supply chain stress and shift from spending on goods to services allows the cost of goods to moderate.

"However, it is sticky services prices that will keep the Fed on its rate-hiking course," he said in



US Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, DC

a recent report.

Analysts expect that the Fed is looking for labour market conditions to ease, reducing wage pressures and services inflation.

For now, data released Tuesday showed that a measure of pay and benefits rose less than expected in the fourth quarter last year, adding to signs that the

labor market is cooling.

Time to halt?

Ian Shepherdson, chief economist of Pantheon Macroeco-

nomics, argues it is time to pause the Fed's rate hikes, saying in a tweet on Tuesday that "their work is done."

"They have suppressed inflation expectations; the Covid distortions to rents and margins are working through and will drive inflation down," he added.

"Every further Fed rate hike from here just increases the chance of an entirely unnecessary recession," said Shepherdson.

Some Democrats in Congress have also expressed concern over rate increases, with Senator John Hickenlooper urging this week for the central bank to "proceed with caution."

But Fed officials have expressed determination to stay the course, with Fed Chair Jerome Powell telling reporters in

December that "the historical record cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy."

Sweet of Oxford Economics told AFP: "If they signal that they're done and then have to reverse course, that's going to be very disruptive to financial markets."

In a speech this month, Fed Governor Christopher Waller cautioned against being "head-faked" by a temporary trend of positive data.

He added that he will be looking for recent improvements in inflation figures to continue.

"We still have a considerable way to go toward our two per cent inflation goal, and I expect to support continued tightening of monetary policy," Waller said in the earlier speech.

AFP

India budget focuses on tax cuts and spending boost

News Delhi, India - India's government announced a huge infrastructure programme, increased welfare spending and tax cuts Wednesday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to boost the economy and voters' incomes ahead of elections next year. It will spend around US\$122bn in the next financial year - an unprecedented 33 per cent increase - on ambitious road, port and railway projects, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her budget announcement.

The investments could create millions of jobs and boost Asia's third-largest economy.

Welfare spending will rise, including on providing all households with piped water and health insurance for the poor, and the finance minister extended a scheme distributing free food grains to about 800mn struggling Indians.

Modi looks set to seek a third term as premier in a general election due before May 2024.

The loudest cheers in Sitharaman's near 90-minute speech to parliament came when she announced around US\$4.2bn of direct tax incentives for the middle classes - some of the most vocal supporters of Modi and his ruling



India's Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman addresses the members of the media during a post budget news conference in New Delhi on Wednesday (AFP)

right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party.

But only about 80mn people and companies pay direct taxes in India, despite its population of 1.4bn. The vast majority of people earn less than the income tax threshold, and tax under-reporting remains a major issue.

India announced a double-digit increase in its annual defence budget with an eye on its increasingly assertive geopolitical rival China, with which it shares a tense and disputed northern border.

New Delhi - already the world's third-biggest military

spender according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - will increase its defense expenditure to US\$73bn, a 13 per cent rise, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman told parliament in her budget announcement.

Despite the tax cuts, Sitharaman

Fiscal deficit pegged at 5.9% of GDP

New Delhi, India - Presenting the Union Budget 2023, India's Minister of Finance Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday pegged the fiscal deficit target for financial year 2023-24 at 5.9 per cent of GDP.

The minister further said that the government intends to bring the fiscal deficit below 4.5 per cent of GDP by the financial year 2025-26. The Economic Survey on Tuesday noted India's GDP is expected to grow in the range of 6.0 to 6.8 per cent in the coming financial year 2023-24.

ANI

man said India's budget deficit would be reduced from 6.4 per cent of GDP to 5.9 per cent.

Finance Secretary T V Somanathan told journalists the government's expectations were based on growth projections and an increased total tax take.

AFP

ExxonMobil reports \$56bn profits in 2022

New York, US - US oil giant ExxonMobil reported record annual profits of US\$55.7bn in 2022, reflecting higher commodity prices amid recovering demand and the impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In the fourth quarter, profits rose 43.7 per cent to US\$12.8bn, thanks to higher oil and natural gas prices and better refining margins compared with the year-ago period.

Revenues from October through December rose 12.3 per cent to US\$95.4bn.

The results reflect slightly higher production of oil and natural gas in 2022 that chief executive Darren Woods said reflected ExxonMobil's investments prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

"While our results clearly benefited from a favorable market, the counter-cyclical investments we made before and during the pandemic provided the energy and products people needed as economies began recovering and supplies became tight," Woods said.

"We leaned in when others leaned out."

In 2020, ExxonMobil was kicked out of the Dow index while its stock languished during the coronavirus crisis, which dented petroleum demand. At the time, the company was criticized for taking on more debt than rivals.



The huge profits by oil companies have sparked pushback from governments. In December, ExxonMobil sued to challenge a new windfall tax policy in Europe.

ExxonMobil, along with rival Chevron, has also sparred with US President Joe Biden, who has bashed the energy giants for buying back shares instead of putting extra funds into new oil and gas investments.

On Tuesday Biden tweeted that the only thing "stopping Big Oil from increasing production is their decision to pay shareholders billions instead of reinvesting profits."

"I'm doing my part to lower prices, it's time Big Oil did theirs," he wrote.

The president's tweet came after a White House spokesperson told the BBC that Exxon's record profits were "outrageous," especially after "the American people were forced to pay such high prices at the pump" in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

AFP

Pakistan inflation rises to 48-year high as IMF visits

Karachi, Pakistan - Inflation has risen to a 48-year high in crisis-hit Pakistan, where the International Monetary Fund is visiting for urgent talks, according to data released on Wednesday by the country's statistics bureau.

Year-on-year inflation in January 2023 was recorded at 27.55 per cent, the highest since May 1975, with thousands of containers of imports held up at Karachi port. Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, stricken by a balance of payments crisis while it attempts to service high amounts of external debt.

The world's fifth-biggest population has less than US\$3.7bn in the state bank - enough to cover just three weeks of imports.

On Tuesday, an IMF delegation arrived in Islamabad to revive negotiations over a stalled bailout package with the government, which has so far held out from meeting the global lender's

Year-on-year inflation in January 2023 was recorded at 27.55%, the highest since May 1975, with thousands of containers of imports held up at Karachi port

tough conditions.

But in recent days, with the prospect of national bankruptcy looming and no friendly countries willing to offer less painful bailouts, Islamabad has started to bow to pressure.

The government loosened controls on the rupee to rein in a rampant black market in US dollars, a step that caused the currency to plunge to a record low. Artificially cheap petrol prices have also been hiked.

The state bank is no longer issuing letters of credit, except for essential food and medicines,

causing a backlog of thousands of shipping containers at Karachi port stuffed with stock the country can no longer afford.

Industry has been hammered by the imports block and massive rupee devaluation. Public construction projects have halted, textiles factories have partially shut down and domestic investment has slowed.

The National Consumer Price Index for January 2023 rose by 2.88 per cent from the previous month, the figures released on Wednesday showed. AFP.

Adani shares nosedive as Indian tycoon drops down rich list

Mumbai, India - Shares in Gautam Adani's empire nosedived again on Wednesday as the Indian tycoon dropped off the Forbes top 10 rich list following allegations of massive accounting fraud.

The five-day rout has now wiped out around US\$92bn of the value of the conglomerate's listed units, Bloomberg News said, while Adani's fortune has collapsed by more than US\$40bn.

The share price of flagship firm Adani Enterprises suddenly dropped further on Wednesday afternoon, closing 28.45 per cent lower on the Mumbai stock exchange.

The trigger was news that Swiss banking giant Credit Suisse had stopped accepting Adani bonds as collateral for loans it advances to private banking clients, Bloomberg reported.



Gautam Adani

The slide in Adani's personal wealth on the real-time Forbes rich list meant that the school dropout billionaire was overtaken as Asia's richest man by fellow Indian Mukesh Ambani.

Adani Total Gas - in which French giant TotalEnergies owns 37.4 per cent - dropped another 10 per cent on Wednesday, forcing the Bombay Stock Exchange to suspend trade in the stock soon after the market's open.

shareholder base to include "the average, normal Indian mom and dad as shareholders".

Large buyers instead propped up the share sale, including fellow Indian tycoons Sajjan Jindal and Sunil Mittal, Bloomberg News reported, citing unidentified sources.

Publicity-shy Adani, 60, has seen his empire expand at breakneck speed, with shares in Adani Enterprises soaring by more than a thousand per cent over the past five years.

This helped make him, as of last week, the world's third-richest man behind Elon Musk and Bernard Arnault and family.

According to US short-seller investment group Hindenburg Research, Adani has artificially boosted the share prices of its units by funneling money into the stocks through offshore tax havens.

AFP

Reliable European LNG demand fuels US natural gas boom

New York, US - Rising demand from Europe has added to a US natural gas investment boom even as the industry struggles to overcome opposition to pipeline construction.

Production of the fuel reached 3.1tn cubic feet for the month of October, according to the most recently available US data, an all-time high and up almost 50 per cent from the level a decade ago.

The industry has been in growth mode since the summer of 2021 when Russia began trimming shipments to Europe, according to Steven Miles, a fellow at Rice University's Banker Institute in Houston.

That comes on the heels of the US shale revolution in the first decade of the 21st century that ultimately led to the United States becoming a net exporter of the fuel in 2017.

The progression has not been continuous, with plummeting natural gas prices crimping investment and leading to the bankruptcy of one of industry's biggest players, Chesapeake Energy, in June 2020.

But energy companies have become more confident in the long-term demand outlook for the fuel in light of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Five years ago, the long-term demand "was not nearly as clear as it is today," said Eli Rubin of EBW AnalyticsGroup, a consultancy.

"Especially after Russia invaded Ukraine, we have a healthy new respect for natural gas' role in providing energy security, for its role in helping to tame consumer pricing."

Even before the invasion, there was heavy investment in



facilities to transform gas into liquefied natural gas (LNG). In recent years, some 14 new liquefaction terminals have been approved, with the first set to begin operating in 2024.

"Over the next five years, we could potentially double US

LNG exports," Rubin said.

The push comes as big energy companies enjoy rich cashflow courtesy of lofty commodity prices that have enabled the industry to invest aggressively even as they boost share buybacks and dividends.

Pipeline blockage

While the growth of LNG has globalized the natural gas market to a limited extent, the dynamics remain heavily localized.

Prices on the benchmark European TTF contract are currently more than six times the

level of comparable Henry Hub contract in the United States.

That gap means that LNG exports are priced more closely to the US level, setting the stage for "middlemen" who can move the cargoes to Europe and "sell them at European prices," said Miles.

Much higher exports of US natural gas could lead to more price consistency across regions -- but probably not for many years.

"Maybe in the long run ... (the United States will) export so much gas to Europe that prices between Europe, Asia and North America become more aligned," said Ryan Kellogg, a professor at the University of Chicago specializing in energy.

"But I think we're pretty far away from that right now."

One lingering challenge facing the industry is the lack of pipeline capacity, particularly in the

northeastern part of the United States.

The nation's biggest natural gas basin, the Marcellus Shale, which is mostly in Pennsylvania, faces constraints due to lack of infrastructure.

A venture called the Mountain Valley Pipeline stands as a potential solution, but the project has been suspended for the last five years amid resistance from land owners and environmentalists. Opposition by climate activists and elected officials to industry-backed projects is "certainly much stronger than it was," said Rubin.

But the lack of infrastructure can exacerbate price volatility during periods of peak demand.

New England, which is in northeastern United States, relies on LNG for a fraction of its heating.

AFP

'Oman Sri Lankan enjoy cordial relationship'

Sri Lankans across the world are going to celebrate their 75th Independence Day on Saturday, February 4.

While extending greetings to the Sri Lankan expatriate community in Oman ahead of the celebration, H E A L Sabarullah Khan, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Sultanate of Oman, highlighted his country's relationship with the sultanate. Excerpts from his message are as follows:

Sri Lanka and Oman enjoy a cordial relationship at all levels, cemented by longstanding historical relations that paved the way for more formal diplomatic relations 42 years ago. I thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the government and the people of Oman for upholding our bilateral relations at high esteem. For a long time, many Sri Lankans have made the sultanate their home away from home, and even a few getting naturalised.

Sri Lanka and Oman can complement each other in several areas of cooperation. Both the nations being abundantly blessed by the Mother Nature, yet in contrasting ways, have much to explore such areas of cooperation in



Sri Lankan Ambassador
H E A L Sabarullah Khan

which one could complement the other. My predecessor has rightly mentioned in his recent book on Sri Lanka-Oman Relations that the current level of bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries does not reflect the true potential of the opportunities available in both the countries. Today, it is of paramount importance to explore such opportunities and augment the numbers in every sector.

Since my arrival in Oman mid-September last year, I was lucky enough to present my credentials to His Majesty within just a month time so that I could be fully functional working towards

the filling of gaps... Several bilateral Agreements and MoUs in multiple areas of cooperation including in the fields of Tourism, Agriculture, Skill Development and Mutual Recognition of Qualifications, Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments, Financial Sector are under negotiation and finalisation.

The embassy facilitated a first ever visit of 17-member Omani business delegation to Sri Lanka from Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry in March last year. The purpose of the visit was to explore opportunities available in trade and investment between Sri Lanka and Oman and to establish business links between the private sectors of the two countries.

In January last year the delegation of the National Chamber of Exporters of Sri Lanka undertook a visit to Oman and had several meetings with the Omani business fraternity. The delegation led by Hon. Bandula Gunawardhana, then Trade Minister of Sri Lanka visited Oman in March 2022.

Sri Lanka and Oman also took stern action against human traffickers who tend to abuse tourist

visa for illegal practice of cheating innocents.

Last year had been rather challenging to Sri Lanka as political and socio-economic stabilities underwent unprecedented acid test. Although many countries worldwide were still recovering from the unpredicted economic shock caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, Sri Lanka was unfortunate to face multiple challenges. At this testing times, I humbly call upon all my fellow Sri Lankans to act responsibly and collectively work towards economic stability of our motherland.

This year being the 75th anniversary (of our Independence), the embassy in Muscat has planned a yearlong celebration, beginning in February and through to January 2024. The celebration commences with the Flag Hoisting Ceremony at the Embassy premises on February 4. It will be followed by 'The 75th Independence Day Cricket Tournament', which will take place on April 28 at the Amerat Cricket Grounds, in Muscat. Trade shows, food festival, tea promotion and cultural shows will be arranged in the coming months.



Ourshopee upgrades facilities and inventory

Ourshopee.com, the leading online shopping platform in Oman, is proud to announce the re-vamping of its operations in the country. The inauguration of the new facilities at CBD Area in Ruwi was held on January 14, and was graced by H H Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said. The event was also attended by Dr Shanith Mangalath, the founder and CEO of Ourshopee.

Ourshopee is a leading e-commerce platform in the GCC region, known for its wide range of products and exceptional customer service. With a commitment to delivering on time and providing the best deals, Ourshopee is a top choice for online

shoppers in the region.

The platform offers a diverse selection of products, from electronics and fashion to home goods and beauty. With its reputation for quality products and reliable service, Ourshopee is set to continue its growth as a leading e-commerce platform in the GCC.

Ourshopee has been serving the people of Oman since 2016 and has been continuously growing and expanding its reach. With the new modifications, the company aims to reach a wider audience and meet the market trends.

The new facilities include enhancements that will provide a

seamless shopping experience for customers. The company is committed to providing high-quality products and services to its customers and the revamp is a testament to that commitment.

"We are thrilled to launch our new facilities in Oman," said Mangalath, CEO of Ourshopee. "We are dedicated to providing our customers with the best possible shopping experience, and this launch is a significant step towards achieving that goal."

Ourshopee is confident that the new facilities and enhancements will help the company to continue to grow and establish itself as the leading online marketplace in Oman.



Badr Al Samaa to hold free cancer risk assessments

On the occasion of its 20th anniversary and to mark the World Cancer Day falling on February 4, Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals announced a mass campaign of providing 20,000 free Cancer Risk Assessments and Consultation for the residents and nationals of Oman.

The campaign, to be conducted by Badr Karkinos Centre for Cancer Care, will run for three months until April 30, a release said. The aim of this campaign is the early detection of cancer and spreading important health awareness on cancer.

Cancer is the second most cause of mortality in the world

today and Oman is not an exception. It is estimated that more than 20mn new cancer cases are diagnosed every year in the world. Data from Oman shows over 3,700 new cancer cases diagnosed in the year 2020. The major challenge in cancer care is that around 70 per cent of the cancer cases are diagnosed in the advanced stages.

Anyone interested in Badr Al Samaa's free Cancer Risk Assessment programme can enrol themselves by sending their name, age, gender and preferred location of Badr Al Samaa for assessment via whatsapp to 72255689.

Bank Muscat opens state-of-the-art branch

In line with Bank Muscat's customer-centric vision 'To serve you better, everyday', the bank inaugurated a new state-of-the-art banking branch at Madinat as Sultan Qaboos in the presence of Murtadha Ahmed Sultan, Director, WJ Towell Group; Ahmed Faqir al Balushi, Chief Banking Officer, Bank Muscat; and senior officials from the bank.

The new branch features a number of unique facilities like a Private Banking Branch, an Asalah Priority Banking Centre and a customer-centric reception desk that can promptly and efficiently assist customers in their banking needs. Also, as part of the bank's focus on improving access to persons with disabilities, the new branch will have disabled-friendly access, teller counters and ATMs.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdulnasir N al Raisi, general manager - Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said, "Bank Muscat has earned a name over four decades of operations in the Sultanate for its customer-centricity, which is backed by the largest branch and ATM-CDM-FFM network, state-



of-the-art Mobile and Internet banking, and world-class products and services.

"The opening of the new

branch will further strengthen the bank's leadership position in Oman by helping it serve its customers better every day in line

with its aim for an enhanced Customer Experience. I take this opportunity to thank all our customers for their confidence and trust in the bank, and for being our partners in the progress and development of the sultanate."

He added that the bank would be opening more such high-tech branches to meet the needs of different customer segments in the near future.

Taya Eid Bait Sabeeba, deputy general manager - Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, expressed happiness at the opening of the

branch to reach out and provide the best services to different segments of the bank's customers, especially Premier Banking customers. "The bank's continuously expanding branch and ATM-CDM-FFM network, which serve different customer and demographic segments, highlight its efforts to remain the bank of first choice in Oman."

He added that the current branch was chosen to meet current and future customer needs and was an implementation of the bank's vision to serve its customers better, every day. He thanked customers for their confidence in the bank.

The new branch, which will work from 8am to 2pm, will be a convenient option for the community in Madinat As Sultan Qaboos in general and Premier Banking customers.

Staffed by well qualified and experienced Omani employees, it aims to provide prompt and efficient customer services thereby building further on the bank's reputation as a listening bank that constantly strives to do better, every day.

Renaissance appoints Chief Communication, Marketing Officer

Renaissance Services has appointed Mohana Prabhakar as Chief Communication and Marketing Officer. Mohana took up the role in December 2022, bringing to Renaissance her comprehensive and strategic skills in media, content creation and delivery, publishing, marketing communication and brand building.

In the over three decades of her career, 21 years of which have been in Oman, Mohana has held several roles - as equity researcher, business analyst, editor, columnist and events planner. Her underlying commitment across these domains has been to differentiate, maintain quality and focus and always look for a fresh approach.

Renaissance CEO, Stephen Thomas, said, "Mohana has



Mohana Prabhakar (CCMO)

made a transformational difference to the company's communications from a consultancy perspective over recent years. We are now delighted to have her join us in the C-suite leadership team, where her transformative skills may be applied

beyond communications. Renaissance is committed to DEI and we are seeing more and more female colleagues joining our team at every level, making a positive difference to our outlook and delivery."

Commenting on her new role, Mohana said, "Renaissance has always stood out in Oman's corporate landscape because of its consistent focus on excellence and efficiency without compromising on the essential tenets of worker welfare and ESG.

"The company has many inspiring stories to tell but always with an eye on the future as we go on the Renaissance 2.0 transformation journey. It's exciting to join at a time where I hope to contribute my experience and expertise in enhancing Brand Renaissance."

Bank Nizwa earns distinction in Dubai event

Bank Nizwa, the fastest-growing Islamic Bank in Oman, was recently honoured with the 'Most Innovative Islamic Bank' award from the *International Finance Magazine*, a prestigious business and finance magazine that connects investors, corporate leaders and companies from around the world.

Held at the Jumeirah Emirates Tower Hotel in Dubai, the event was attended by Khaled al Kayed, the Chief Executive Officer of Bank Nizwa, who also received the award on behalf of the bank. Bank Nizwa is leading the charge in the FinTech space in Oman and is actively driving transformation. It has been rewarded for its commitment to streamlining its activities by incorporating digital technology.

This recognition is a testimony to the bank's dedication to providing innovative sharia-compliant products and services.



In the past year, the Bank shifted its focus to aiding customers by launching new digital financial options. Additionally, it has been extending its reach into the untapped retail and wholesale Islamic banking areas.

The bank CEO celebrated the award by stating, "We are thrilled to receive this esteemed

international recognition as a home-grown Islamic bank. A fundamental part of our accomplishment has been our commitment to excellence in delivering a full-scale Islamic banking solution to our customers, along with superior, customer-focused banking experiences that are both gratifying and unforgettable.

table. We will persist in attempting to upgrade our reputation as an Islamic bank that firmly backs the Sultanate's mission of becoming the international hub of the Islamic economy."

Kayed pointed out that over the last year, the bank created digital products and services to meet the demands of the market.

"This award is proof of our remarkable success in making the transition to a digital and innovative approach to keep our promise of simplifying our customers' financial matters and this is something we will keep doing."

Bank Nizwa, a leader in digital progression, has made various noteworthy strides in utilising new technologies. Recently, they opened their first digital-only, paperless and unmanned branch at the Mall of Oman. This branch provides high-quality services intending to give customers a streamlined experience.

Saudi executions up sharply under King Salman, MBS: Rights group

Dubai, UAE - Executions in Saudi Arabia have nearly doubled under King Salman and his son, de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman, activist groups said on Tuesday, detailing cases of torture and other human rights violations.

Capital punishment has soared from an average of 70.8 executions a year from 2010 to 2014, to 129.5 a year since King Salman took power in 2015, according to a report by Reprieve and the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR).

More than 1,000 death sen-

tences have been carried out under the current leadership, the NGOs said, after verifying official announcements with investigations and interviews with lawyers, family members and activists. Saudi Arabia executed 147 people last year, the report said, a figure confirmed by an AFP tally compiled from government announcements.

Saudi Arabia, which is one of the world's leading executioners, announced 81 executions in a single day last March it said were for terrorism-related offences. The country has undergone rapid social reforms in

Every data point in this report is a human life taken. The Saudi death penalty machine chews up children, protesters and vulnerable women in domestic services

MAYA FOA

recent years but activists accuse Crown Prince Mohammed of also overseeing a harsh crackdown on critics.

"Every data point in this report is a human life taken," said Reprieve director Maya Foa.

"The Saudi death penalty machine chews up children, protesters, vulnerable women in domestic service, unwitting drug mules and people whose only 'crime' was owning banned books or speaking to foreign journalists."

'Bloody path'
Crown Prince Mohammed said

in an interview with *The Atlantic* magazine that the kingdom had 'got rid of' the death penalty except for cases of murder or when someone 'threatens the lives of many people', according to a transcript published by state media last March.

But the six bloodiest years for executions in Saudi's recent history have all occurred under the current leadership, said Tuesday's report.

"This bloody path is being taken by the Saudi authorities for the purposes of intimidation and political repression," said Taha al-Hajji, legal director of

ESOHR.

"Reports of secret executions since the end of 2022 are extremely worrying."

Since 2013, at least 15 people have been executed for offences committed when they were minors. Eleven of the 15 executions were carried out after 2015.

The last known child defendant executed was Mustafa al-Darwish in June 2021.

Born on 19 September 1994, al-Darwish was arrested in 2015 and was later charged on offences relating to his alleged participation in protests when he was 17 years old.

He was executed 'without any warning to his family, who found out about his death on the news', the report said.

Apart from minors, at least 31 women were put to death from 2010 to 2021, including 23 foreign nationals and 13 who were domestic workers.

They include Indonesian domestic worker Tuti Tursilawati, who 'was convicted of murder and sentenced to death after she killed her employer when he was attempting to rape her, following a long period of sexual abuse', the report said.

AFP

One million faithful attend pope's mass in DR Congo capital Kinshasa

The attendees included the residents as well as the DRC president and leading opposition leaders

Kinshasa, DR Congo - Over a million worshippers turned out for a papal mass in DR Congo's capital on Wednesday, organisers said, on the second day of Pope Francis's visit to the conflict-torn country.

Many of the faithful in Kinshasa, a deeply observant megacity of some 15mn people, began to arrive at Ndolo airport on Tuesday night to assure themselves of a spot.

Francis entered the airport grounds aboard his popemobile and was greeted by singing and dancing crowds before the mass began at around 9:30am (0830 GMT).

Organisers said that over one million people were on the airport tarmac.

Adrien Louka, 55, told AFP he had arrived before dawn.

"As our country has many problems, it is reconciliation that we are looking for and the Pope will give a message so that the countries around us leave us



Pope Francis arrives by popemobile for the mass at the N'Dolo Airport in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), on Wednesday (AFP)

in peace," he added.

The attendees included Kinshasa residents as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo's president, Felix Tshisekedi, and leading opposition politicians.

Francis wished the crowd peace in Lingala, one of the DRC's four national languages and the everyday language of Kinshasa. The pope delivered the rest of his homily in Italian -

which was translated into the DRC's official language French - in which he urged the faithful 'not to give in to divisions'.

The 86-year-old pontiff had arrived in the DRC on Tuesday, on the first leg of a six-day trip to Africa that will also include troubled South Sudan.

Huge crowds had also thronged the streets for a glimpse of the popemobile as

Francis drove past.

'Massively plundered'
A former Belgian colony the size of continental western Europe, the DRC is Africa's most Catholic country.

About 40 per cent of the population of some 100mn people follows the church of Rome, according to estimates.

Another 35 per cent of the

population is Protestant of various denominations, nine per cent is Muslim and 10 per cent Kimbanguist - a Christian movement born in the Belgian Congo. Official Vatican statistics put the proportion of Catholics in the DRC at 49 per cent of the population.

During a speech to politicians and dignitaries in Kinshasa's presidential palace on Tuesday,

Francis denounced the 'economic colonialism' he suggested had wreaked lasting damage in the DRC.

"This country, massively plundered, has not benefited adequately from its immense resources," he said, to applause.

Despite abundant mineral reserves, the DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world.

AFP

Murakami to publish 1st new novel in six years

Tokyo, Japan - Celebrated Japanese author Haruki Murakami will release his first new novel in six years this April, publisher Shinchosha announced on Wednesday.

There was little detail given about the new work, which will be Murakami's first novel since *Killing Commendatore* was published in February 2017.

In a brief statement in Japanese, Shinchosha said the new work would be published on April 13, but gave neither its title nor details of the plot.

The book is expected to be published in Japanese initially, with translations following later.

Shinchosha told AFP it could not confirm when translations of the book might be released, or even when the name of the book would be announced. The title will be 1,200 Japanese manuscript pages long, but the exact number of book pages that will amount to was also not yet confirmed, the publisher added.

Murakami is an internationally renowned writer who is perennially pegged for the Nobel literature prize. The 74-year-old has a cult following for his surreal works peppered with references to pop culture, and translated into around 50 languages.

Readers are drawn into the so-called 'Murakami world' where giant frogs challenge salarymen in battle and mackerel rain down from the sky. Murakami is known as a reclusive figure, but has delighted fans in recent years by moonlighting as a radio DJ.

AFP

Elvis Presley's widow disputes late daughter Lisa Marie's will

Los Angeles, US - Elvis Presley's widow Priscilla has disputed their late daughter's will, claiming that an amendment which would remove her as a trustee is invalid, court documents show.

Lisa Marie Presley died suddenly in Los Angeles earlier this month from cardiac arrest at the age of 54.

According to court documents, Lisa Marie had in 2010 named her mother Priscilla and former business manager Barry Siegel as co-trustees of her estate, both during her lifetime and in the event of her death.

But Lisa Marie appears to have amended that plan in 2016 to remove them, and to declare that her older children Riley and Benjamin Keough should inherit the trust in the event of her death.

According to a filing last week by her lawyer, Priscilla Presley only 'discovered' the changes after her daughter died on January 12.



This file photo shows Priscilla Presley (right) and Lisa Marie Presley at Graceland Mansion in Memphis, Tennessee on June 30, 2006 (AFP)

The 'purported amendment' should be declared invalid because it was never delivered to Priscilla Presley during her daughter's life, it misspells Priscilla's name, and Lisa Marie's signature 'appears inconsistent' with her usual signature, alleges the filing seen by AFP.

The petition, filed last Thursday, calls on the Los Angeles superior court to rule the amendment invalid, and for the previous version of the will to be administered.

The financial stakes in a future court battle over Lisa Marie's inheritance would be high. Lisa Marie was Elvis's only child.

AFP

Syrians fear Islamic State resurgence as Kurdish-led forces sweep city of Raqa

Raqa, Syria - From his rooftop in the Syrian city of Raqa, Youssef Nasser watches nervously as hundreds of heavily armed Kurdish-led fighters sweep the streets of what was once the de facto capital of the Islamic State group.

The fighters are on guard against another guerrilla-style ambush after six of their comrades were killed in an IS attack in December on a local security complex that aimed to free hundreds of fellow militants from a prison there.

As the fighters go house to house, their blaring loudspeakers warning Raqa's people to stay put, 67-year-old Nasser said he hopes for 'stability and security' in his home city which is still recovering from the horrors of IS rule.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, with support from the United States, in 2017 routed IS from Raqa, which the group had used to spread their reign of terror, perpetrating



A member of Syrian Kurdish Asayish security forces walks past a house during a raid against IS group fighters in Raqa, on January 29 (AFP)

mass executions, including decapitations, and other crimes.

For traumatised residents of the former IS heartland in Syria, the recent attacks and the search for militants has heightened fears of a militant resurgence.

"If IS returns, it will be a disaster," Nasser, dressed in a traditional robe and headdress, told AFP. "It's normal to be afraid for your family, your children, your friends."

'Worried' constantly
The Kurdish-led fighters patrolled the streets of Raqa on foot, in trucks and armoured vehicles, in the operation that began last week, under the gaze of worried parents and fearful children. Before its 2019 military defeat, IS's once sprawling, self-proclaimed 'caliphate' incorporated swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory, but the group has not held fixed positions

since then.

Instead, they have launched sporadic attacks against Syrian government and Kurdish-led forces in the north and east, and strikes against Iraqi troops and their allies across the border.

Authorities in Raqa declared a lockdown and a state of emergency after the security complex assault, and set up checkpoints at the entrances to the city. As Syria's war approaches its 12-year mark, residents said they were fearful of a return by IS.

"I'm worried every time my children leave the house," Faiza Hassan, 45, told AFP after police searched her house. "The situation at the moment is very difficult." Sixty-year-old Umm Mohammed, bearing the traditional facial tattoos of the region, said the mere sight of armed men scared her, as she held a cigarette in her trembling hand. "Look how my hands are shaking." "I'm scared."

AFP

NATO chief applauds Japan plans to double its defence spending

Tokyo, Japan - NATO's chief on Wednesday applauded Japan's plan to double its defence spending, saying the pledge reflected the country's resolve for greater security involvement in a volatile world.

Speaking in Tokyo, Jens Stoltenberg said Japan's renewed focus on security made the nation 'even more' of a partner 'for peace'. "I am glad that Japan is planning (a military budget) to reach the NATO benchmark of two per cent of GDP devoted to defence," he said in an address at Keio University.

For decades, Japan has capped military spending at around one per cent of GDP, but late last year Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government approved a new security strategy, including plans to increase defence spending to two per cent of GDP by fiscal year 2027.

"This demonstrates that Japan takes international security seriously," Stoltenberg said.

Rising threats from China and North Korea, as well as Russia's war on Ukraine, have fuelled public support for greater military spending in Japan.

Stoltenberg said Russian President Vladimir Putin had 'totally underestimated Ukraine' and the strong unity among NATO members in supporting the country.

While stressing NATO did not see China as an adversary, he said Beijing's military build-up and ambitions were an issue to address. "Today, the global order that has served us so well for so many decades is under threat. Moscow and Beijing are at the forefronts of... authoritarian pushback," Stoltenberg said.

"In a more dangerous world,



NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg (AFP)

Japan can count on NATO to stand with you," he added.

Stoltenberg met Kishida on Tuesday and said afterwards they had agreed to 'remain united and firm' in the face of security threats from China, North Korea and the Ukraine war.

Asked about Stoltenberg's comments, Chinese foreign min-

In a more dangerous world, Japan can count on NATO to stand with you

JENS STOLTENBERG

istry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on Wednesday that 'NATO should seriously consider the role it has played in maintaining European security'. "On one hand, NATO claims that its position as a regional and defensive alliance has not changed," she said. "On the other hand, it continues to push beyond its traditional defence zone and territory, continuously strengthens military security ties with Asia-Pacific countries, and exaggerates the China threat."

AFP

Half a million strike in UK's largest walkout in 12 years

London, UK - Half a million workers went on strike in Britain on Wednesday, calling for higher wages in the largest such walkout in over a decade, closing schools and severely disrupting transport.

Europe is battling a cost-of-living crisis and the latest strikes come a day after more than 1.27mn took to the streets in France, upping pressure on the French government over pension reform plans.

Britain's umbrella labour organisation the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called it the 'biggest day of strike action since 2011'. Teachers and train drivers were among the latest groups to act, as well as border force workers at UK air and seaports.

"We are striking because for the past 10 years we had effectively had a pay cut," said job centre worker and union representative Graham, who preferred not to give his last name.

"Some of our members, even though they are working, still have to make visits to food banks," he told AFP.

"Not only are wages not keeping up, but things like fares, council tax and rents are going up. Anything we get is eaten away."

Britain has witnessed months of strikes by tens of thousands of workers - including postal staff, lawyers, nurses and employees in the retail sector - as UK inflation raced above 11 per cent, the highest level in more than 40 years.

'No magic wand'

At London's King's Cross rail station, Kate Lewis, a 50-year-old charity worker, said she sympa-



Teachers take part in a protest organised by GMB and NEU trade unions outside Trafford Town Hall in Manchester on Wednesday (AFP)

thised with the strikers despite her train being delayed.

"I understand. We are all in the same boat. All impacted by inflation," she said.

But government and company bosses are standing firm over wage demands.

With thousands of schools closed for the day, Education Minister Gillian Keegan told Times Radio she was 'disappointed' teachers had walked out.

Union boss Mark Serwotka said the government's position

was 'unsustainable'.

"It's not feasible that they can sit back with this unprecedented amount of industrial action growing, because it's half a million today," he told Sky News.

"Next week, we have paramedics, and we have nurses, then will then be the firefighters," he added, warning that unions were prepared to strike throughout the summer.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than, to wave a magic wand and have all of you paid lots more," British Prime Minister

Rishi Sunak told public health workers on Monday.

Nationwide rallies

"An important part of us getting a grip of inflation and halving it is making sure the government's responsible with its borrowing," he said.

"If that gets out of control that makes it worse and it's about making pay settlements reasonable and fair," Sunak added.

The latest official data shows 1.6mn working days were lost from June-November last year

because of strikes - the highest six-month total in more than three decades - according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

A total of 467,000 working days were lost to walkouts in November alone, the highest level since 2011, the ONS added.

Alongside the strikes, unions are also staging rallies across the country against the Conservative government's plans to legislate against public sector strike action.

AFP

Relief as Australia finds lost radioactive capsule

Sydney, Australia - A tiny but dangerously radioactive capsule that fell off a truck on a remote Australian outback highway has been found, relieved authorities said on Wednesday.

The silver-coloured cylinder - smaller than a human fingernail - was recovered by the side of the road near the town of Newman, Western Australia, state emergency services said.

The capsule disappeared from a truck travelling along the Great Northern Highway from a remote mine operated by Rio Tinto to the southwestern city of Perth sometime in mid-January.

Its disappearance went unnoticed until later in the month.

For the last week, vehicles carrying radiation detection equipment have been scouring a strip of Australia larger than the distance between Madrid and Paris, or New York and Chicago.

Although just eight millimetres by six millimetres, it contains enough Caesium-137 to cause



A radioactive capsule, which had fallen off a truck, after it was found along a desert highway, Western Australia on Wednesday (AFP)

acute radiation sickness.

"It's a good result," minister Stephen Dawson told reporters. "It's certainly a needle in a haystack that has been found, and I think West Australians can sleep better tonight." The capsule is part of a gauge used for meas-

uring the density of iron ore.

It was part of a package picked up on January 12 from Rio Tinto's Gudai-Darri iron ore mine and delivered to the Perth suburb of Malaga on January 16.

But the package was not opened until January 25 when

the gauge was found 'broken apart' with the radioactive capsule missing. State police were informed the same day.

It was ultimately found a few hours drive from the mine.

On Wednesday a team - including members of the Australian military - identified the capsule before loading it into a lead-lined container to shield people from radiation. It was now been transported to a 'secure location' and will begin another journey to Perth on Thursday.

"The site has been surveyed and cleared of any residual radiological contamination," state emergency services said.

Rio Tinto welcomed the capsule's recovery and repeated an earlier apology over the 'extremely rare' incident. "I'd like to apologise to the wider community of Western Australia for the concern it has generated," Rio Tinto Iron Ore Chief Executive Simon Trott said in a statement.

AFP

Peru's Congress still undecided on bringing elections forward

Lima, Peru - Peruvian lawmakers on Tuesday once again failed to agree on a plan to bring forward elections in a bid to end weeks of deadly protests that have brought parts of the South American country to a standstill.

Peru has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily demonstrations since December 7, when then-president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

In seven weeks of demonstrations, 48 people - including one police officer - have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the human rights ombudsman's office.

Fresh clashes between protesters and government forces erupted on Tuesday evening,

Peru has been embroiled in a political crisis with protests almost daily for the last 7 weeks, killing 48 people

prompting police to fire tear gas, as demonstrators demanded the dissolution of Congress, a new constitution, and the resignation of President Dina Boluarte, who as his vice president took over with Castillo gone.

Last month, lawmakers moved elections, originally due in 2026, up to April 2024 - but as protesters dug in their heels, Boluarte called for holding a

vote this year instead.

On Tuesday, lawmakers again failed to reach an agreement on a potential 2023 vote, and adjourned until Wednesday, after first rejecting Boluarte's proposal on Friday and then on Monday.

As lawmakers debated on Tuesday, demonstrators gathered for new protests in central Lima, only a few blocks from Congress.

The so-called Great March, called by union leaders and rural organisations, saw protesters chanting and waving banners reading 'Dina resign now.'

For union leader and protest coordinator Geronimo Lopez, the stalemate at the political level was indicative of a Congress 'clinging to stay in office.'

AFP



A woman crosses an almost empty street near Sule Pagoda in Yangon on Wednesday (AFP)

Myanmar: Silent protest on coup anniversary

Yangon, Myanmar - Streets emptied and shops closed in protest across Myanmar on Wednesday, the second anniversary of the coup that toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's government, with the junta hinting it may extend a state of emergency and delay new elections.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military's power grab and bloody crackdown on dissent, which has sparked fighting across the country and tanked the economy.

Western powers launched a fresh broadside of sanctions against the generals on the an-

niversary but previous rounds have shown little sign of throwing the junta off course.

Streets in the commercial hub Yangon largely emptied from late morning, AFP correspondents said, after activists called for people across the Southeast Asian country to close businesses and stay indoors from 10am to 4pm (0330-0930 GMT).

Roads leading to the famous Shwedagon pagoda - a Buddhist shrine that dominates Yangon's skyline and is usually thronged by worshippers - were largely deserted. Most buses on roads

elsewhere in the city were empty and there was a heavy security presence.

It was similarly quiet in the second city of Mandalay, a resident told AFP.

"There are a few people walking here and there in neighbourhoods but almost no activity on the main roads," the resident said, requesting anonymity.

Local media images also showed empty streets in the eastern city of Mawlamyine.

Around 200 supporters of the military marched through Yangon's historic downtown in the early afternoon, escorted part of

the way by soldiers, correspondents said.

The US embassy in the city warned of 'increased anti-regime activity and violence' in the days around the anniversary.

Around 400 protesters gathered outside Myanmar's embassy in Bangkok, some chanting slogans against the military and holding portraits of Suu Kyi.

The military justified its February 1, 2021, power grab with unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud in elections democracy figurehead Suu Kyi's party won in a landslide.

AFP

Mosque blast puts Pakistan city on edge

Peshawar, a city near former tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, was at the centre of rampant militancy

Peshawar, Pakistan - A mosque blast that killed 101 people - mostly police officers - in north-west Pakistan this week has put a city long scarred by violence back on edge, residents said on Wednesday.

A suicide bomber slipped undetected into a highly sensitive police headquarters and detonated explosives among a row of worshippers in the compound's mosque on Monday, causing a wall to collapse and crush officers. It is Pakistan's deadliest attack in five years and harks back to more than a decade ago when Peshawar, a city near the former tribal areas that borders Afghanistan, was at the centre of rampant militancy.

"The main fear is a second attack, another blast ... a suicide bomber may blow himself in a market," said 55-year-old Naeemullah Jan, a building con-

tractor in the city.

The city's police chief said the mosque blast was a revenge attack against the police force who are on the frontline fighting a resurgence in militancy since the Afghan Taliban came to power across the border.

Authorities are investigating how a major security breach could happen in one of the most tightly controlled areas of the city, housing intelligence and counter-terrorism bureaus, and next door to the regional secretariat. "Life in the city has become difficult. Police are stopping us at every checkpoint," said Faisal Khan, 39, a salesman who said he is now avoiding going to mosque and praying at home.

'Perfect storm'

Peshawar, the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was like



Policemen search a car before it enters a police compound in Peshawar on Wednesday (AFP)

much of the region severely affected by a wave of horrific violence carried out by the Pakistani Taliban after they emerged in 2007.

Years of attacks on schools, civilians and places of worship, finally ended with a military

clearance operation that began in 2014, pushing the insurgents into the mountainous border and Afghanistan.

Violence drastically declined until the withdrawal of US and Nato troops in Afghanistan in 2021 led to the return of the Taliban in Kabul, emboldening militant groups in the border region.

The Pakistani Taliban, known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are back with a new strategy - targeting stretched security forces in low level attacks.

The group have distanced themselves from this week's mosque blast but police are investigating whether an on-off TTP affiliate was the culprit.

"Earlier I used to feel safe near the police, now when a police car or officers pass near me, I fear in my heart that they might be attacked and I will also be hurt," 55-year-old Muhammad Haneef Awan told AFP.

Meanwhile, the country is almost paralysed by a dual economic and political crisis that has caused the cost of living to soar ahead of general elections due by October.

Politicians from the ruling coalition parties and former prime minister Imran Khan's opposition group - which earlier this month pulled out of ruling Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to pile pressure on the government - have blamed each other for the worsening security situation.

"This 'perfect storm' presents an ideal opportunity for the TTP and others of their ilk to strike at the state," read an editorial in the leading English newspaper Dawn on Wednesday.

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said the government's National Security Committee will meet soon to discuss another military operation against the insurgent groups.

AFP

Two Polish skiers dead in Indian Kashmir avalanche, 21 rescued



The site of the avalanche that hit the Indian resort of Gulmarg on Wednesday (AFP)

Gulmarg, India - Two Polish nationals were killed and 21 other skiers were rescued from the site of an avalanche that hit the Indian resort of Gulmarg on Wednesday, police said.

A huge snowslide barrelled down from the 4,390-metre (14,400-foot) peak of Mount Apharwat in Indian-administered Kashmir and buried nearly two dozen people on the slope,

all foreigners except for two local guides.

High-altitude rescue teams rushed to the site on snow scooters and retrieved the bodies of the two Polish skiers, police officer Amod Nagpuri told AFP.

"During the rescue ops, 19 foreign nationals and 2 local guides have been rescued," a police statement said.

"Unfortunately, 2 foreign na-

tionals lost their lives in the avalanche, and their dead bodies have also been recovered."

The rescued skiers were being treated at a nearby clinic. Authorities have yet to disclose their nationalities.

A cable car that transports visitors to the top of Mount Apharwat was closed after the avalanche hit.

Gulmarg attracts tens of thou-

sands of tourists and ski enthusiasts all through the year.

The resort is currently coated in several feet of snow after days of continuous snowfall.

The area is heavily militarised, with Indian security forces permanently stationed there owing to its close proximity to the de facto border that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

AFP

6.0-magnitude quake rocks southern Philippines

General Santos, Philippines - A 6.0-magnitude earthquake rocked the southern Philippines on Wednesday, the US Geological Survey said, with local authorities warning of aftershocks and possible damage.

The shallow quake struck at 6:44pm, near Monkayo municipality in Davao de Oro province on Mindanao island. Shallow earthquakes tend to cause more damage than deeper ones, but there were no immediate reports of major damage in the remote and mountainous gold mining region.

Monkayo police Staff Sergeant Harvey Asayas told AFP the quake was strong in the beginning but gradually weakened and stopped after 40 seconds.

"The authorities are now conducting patrols around to assess damage including the fire personnel and disaster officers," Asayas said.

Police Corporal Edwin Mangigo said there had been no reports of casualties at local mining sites.

AFP



A photo illustration shows cannabidiol (CBD) products in Hong Kong (AFP)

Hong Kong bans CBD, ranking it alongside heroin and cocaine

Hong Kong, China - A new law criminalising the possession, consumption and selling of cannabidiol (CBD) in Hong Kong came into effect on Wednesday, placing the substance on par with heroin in terms of legal classification.

CBD, a non-psychoactive derivative of the cannabis plant, is touted by its users as reducing pain, stress, anxiety and inflammation.

Hong Kong authorities, however, have said those claims 'lack authoritative scientific proof' and have justified their ban by arguing the products could be converted into the intoxicating compound THC, which was already illegal in the city.

been offloaded at government bins as of Sunday, according to official data.

Customs officials last week reminded consumers to beware of products branded with hemp leaves, and on Wednesday ran full-page newspaper ads saying: 'Anything with CBD? No way!'

'Step backwards'

The new regulations have impacted vendors in the recession-hit financial hub, even forcing some shops to shut completely.

"We had to stop selling a best-selling beer and we still get

Penalties include life imprisonment and a fine up to HK\$5mn for import, export or manufacture of CBD, which joins more than 200 prohibited drugs

customers calling to ask about the product daily," Chris Wong, co-founder of the HK Brewcraft store, told AFP.

Cafe Found, which billed itself as the first in the city to offer a range of CBD-infused foods and drinks when it opened in 2020, shut in September, and Yardley Brothers Craft Brewery said it was forced to ditch a popular line.

"It feels like a bit of a step backwards for HK," Luke Yardley, the company's founder, told AFP.

While many countries have moved to legalise the substance, mainland China banned CBD in 2021.

AFP

Ukraine hopes for progress on path to EU at summit

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine will hold a summit with the European Union in Kyiv this week, the government announced on Tuesday, as it expressed hope the conference would bring the war-battered nation closer to membership in the bloc almost a year after Russia launched its invasion.

Kyiv also announced it expected to receive up to 140 modern battle tanks from its Western allies, while the prospect of more advanced weapons for Ukraine came from the United States.

In his evening address to the nation, President Volodymyr Zelensky said he hoped the Friday summit would reflect a high 'level of cooperation and progress' with the 27-member bloc, which Kyiv has long sought to join.

"We are waiting for news for Ukraine," Zelensky said.

The fact the summit is being held in the Ukrainian capital sends 'a powerful signal to both partners and enemies', Prime Minister Denys Shmygal said.

"It is a message that Europe



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky taking part in a ceremony in Kyiv, to commemorate the 105th anniversary of the Battle of Kruty against Bolshevik Red Army, on January 29 (AFP)

believes in Ukraine's victory and supports our rapid movement towards EU membership," he said.

Ukraine gained EU candidate status in June last year, several months after Vladimir Putin sent Russian troops rolling across the border.

No details were provided on who would attend the summit from the European Union side.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said a dozen countries had promised more than 100 tanks after Germany and the US signed off on the de-

liveries last week.

"These are Leopard 2, Challenger 2, M1 Abrams," he added, without specifying a timeline for the deliveries.

The decision to supply the weapons came after weeks of diplomatic wrangling and was

seen as a breakthrough in the West's backing for Ukraine in its fight to win back territory from Russian forces.

French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu also announced his country would send 12 more Caesar truck-mounted howitzers to Ukraine.

Now Zelensky is urging the West to supply fighter jets and long-range missiles.

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday he would discuss the new requests for advanced weaponry with Zelensky.

"We're going to talk," Biden told reporters, speaking the morning after he answered with an emphatic 'no' when asked at the White House whether he favoured sending F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine.

And *The Wall Street Journal* reported on Tuesday that a US defence company, General Atomics, had offered to sell Kyiv two Reaper MQ-9 drones for a dollar as it prepares for an expected Russian offensive.

AFP

GILL JOY

Opener's ton takes the life out of Kiwis as India clinch T20 series

Ahmedabad, India - Opener Shubman Gill smashed an unbeaten 126 to help India clinch the T20 international series against New Zealand with a crushing 168-run victory in the decider on Wednesday.

Gill recorded his maiden T20 century for India as he steered the team to 234-4 after they elected to bat first at the world's biggest cricket ground in Ahmedabad. Indian bowlers skittled out the Kiwis for a paltry 66 in 12.1 overs for a 2-1 series win. The hosts had whitewashed the Kiwis in three one-day matches.

The huge victory was India's biggest ever in T20 internationals and the biggest margin by runs in a match played between two Test-playing nations.

India elected to bat first on a batting-friendly pitch and Gill continued his magnificent run of form -- hitting 12 fours and seven sixes in his 63-ball innings.

He had also put the New Zealand bowling to the sword with a double hundred and a ton during the ODI series.

Gill put on 103 runs for the fourth wicket with skipper Hardik Pandya, who made 30 and then took four wickets with his pace bowling, at the 132,000-seater

Narendra Modi Stadium.

Off-spinner Michael Bracewell struck early as he trapped Ishan Kishan lbw for one in the second over of the innings.

Gill, 23, hit back with a flurry of boundaries including three in one over off Blair Tickner. Rahul Tripathi, who made 44, joined the charge as the two put on 80 runs.

Tripathi smashed three sixes including one off leg-spinner Ish Sodhi only to hole out next ball in another attempt to clear the ropes.

Gill, who became only the fifth Indian batsman to record centuries across all three formats, found another attacking partner in Suryakumar Yadav who smashed 24 off 13 balls as the two kept up the onslaught.

Tickner cut short Suryakumar's stay with Bracewell taking a sharp catch at mid-on. But the unstoppable Gill changed gears and raised his ton off 54 balls with a boundary as he took off his helmet and let off a roar.

New Zealand made a horrendous start to their mammoth chase as they lost their top four for just seven runs inside three overs as Arshdeep Singh struck twice in the second over of the innings.



India's Shubman Gill celebrates after completing his century against New Zealand in the third T20 on Wednesday

Australian batter Khawaja's India visa belatedly issued ahead of tour

Sydney, Australia - Pakistan-born Australian batter Usman Khawaja was on Wednesday belatedly issued his Indian visa and will join his teammates who are already departing for next week's four-Test tour, an Indian diplomat said.

Khawaja - who moved to Australia aged four - has toured India before, but also faced delays on that occasion with his visa taking longer than Australia-born teammates.

"Waiting for my Indian Visa," Khawaja said on Instagram, above an image from Netflix series "Narcos" where forlorn Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar - played by actor Wagner Moura - sits alone on a swinging seat.

India's High Commissioner to Australia tweeted in response later that Khawaja's visa had been "issued and collected from our Consulate General in Melbourne".

"Let's have a great #Border-GavaskarTrophy series!" Manpreet Vohra tweeted. He did not elaborate on the reasons for the visa delay.



Usman Khawaja

Australian media reported that touring players and support staff began receiving visas in early January, and some have already begun arriving in Bengaluru, where the team will set up pre-match camp.

Pakistan and India have had fraught relations since partition in 1947 and those tensions have routinely seeped into sports.

The two countries last played a bilateral series a decade ago and Pakistani players have been barred from the prestigious T20 Indian Premier League.

Australia is trying to win its first Test series in India in almost a decade.

AFP

Malan, Buttler slam centuries in final ODI against South Africa



David Malan (L) celebrates with Jos Buttler after his century

Kimberley, South Africa - David Malan and captain Jos Buttler both hit centuries as England overcame a poor start in the third and final one-day international against South Africa at the Diamond Oval in Kimberley on Wednesday.

Malan made 118 and Buttler scored 131 to enable England to pile up 346 for seven after being sent in. It was a total which seemed unlikely when Lungi Ngidi took the first three wickets

to reduce the tourists to 14 for three in the sixth over.

The left-handed Malan and his right-handed captain rebuilt the innings, slowly at first and eventually in a torrent of runs.

Their partnership was eventually worth 232 off 211 balls.

South Africa, holding a winning 2-0 lead in the series, opted to go into the match without their two fastest bowlers, Anrich Nortje and Kagiso Rabada.

AFP

Shrivastav stars as Muscat CT ease past Renaissance

Muscat - Muscat CT defeated Renaissance by seven wickets in the Premier Division of the Oman Cricket Domestic League.

Opting to bowl first after winning the toss, Muscat CT banked on a bit of magic from Samay Shrivastav, who returned figures of 6 for 20, to restrict Renaissance to 190 in 46.3 overs.

Aqib Ilyas with 61 was the chief contributor for Renaissance while tailender Bilal Muhammed (29) also showed some resist-



Muscat CT's Samay Shrivastav, Kashyap Prajapati and Aiyappa

ance towards the end.

In reply, Muscat CT got off to a flying start with Aiyappa CR (56) and Kashyap Prajapati (52) in fine touch.

The target was reduced to 156 due to rain interruptions, and Muscat chased it down in 31.5 overs.

Bilal Muhammed (3/39) was the sole bowler to bag wickets for Renaissance.

It was Muscat CT's fifth win of the season.

In another match, Oman Stallions thumped Zawawi Powertech by seven wickets.

Opting to bat first in overcast conditions, Powertech were made to pay by Stallions bowlers with Hemal Tandel (5/30) and Faisal Shah (3/15) enjoying their outing.

Powertech were all out for 84 in 29.2 overs and Stallions chased down the target in 12.5 overs to register their fourth win in five games.

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NEWCASTLE, NEW GLORY

Magpies sink Southampton, end 47-year wait to reach League Cup final

Newcastle, United Kingdom - Eddie Howe hailed Newcastle as "a club on the up" after they reached the League Cup final for the first time in 47 years with a 2-1 win against Southampton in Tuesday's semi-final second leg at jubilant St James' Park.

Sean Longstaff's first-half double ensured Howe's side finished the job after winning 1-0 in the first leg last week.

Che Adams reduced the deficit before the interval and Magpies midfielder Bruno Guimaraes was sent off in the closing stages.

But Newcastle held on to clinch a 3-1 aggregate victory that booked a final date with Manchester United or Nottingham Forest at Wembley on February 26.

United hold a 3-0 lead against Forest heading into Wednesday's second leg at Old Trafford.

The Magpies' most recent domestic final ended in defeat against United in the 1999 FA Cup.

"You want to be in finals of competitions to increase your status and make yourself more desirable for people to join. This is a club on the up," Howe said.

"It was an intense game. At 2-0, we were playing really well. We are going for everything. As much as we can achieve, we will go for."

Newcastle, who have never won the League Cup, are aiming to lift a major domestic trophy for the first time since the 1955 FA Cup. Their last major silverware



Newcastle United's Sean Longstaff (L) celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Southampton in their English League Cup semi-final on Tuesday (AFP)

in any competition came in the 1969 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup.

On a cathartic night for Newcastle after decades of suffering, it was fitting that Longstaff, a boyhood Magpies fan, should be the one to send them to Wembley.

With Newcastle legends Alan Shearer and David Ginola joining the celebrations in the stands, raucous Magpies fans were ready to keep the party going all night long in the football-crazy city's Bigg Market and Quayside bars.

Revitalised by Howe's astute leadership and the financial muscle of a largely Saudi-backed



You want to be in finals of competitions to increase your status and make yourself more desirable for people to join. This is a club on the up

EDDIE HOWE

ownership group, a club once regarded as the laughing stock of the Premier League can finally hold their heads high.

Reaching their first domestic cup final this century is another significant landmark in Newcastle's rebirth.

"It is amazing. If you'd have said to anyone 12 months ago what was going to happen, they would have laughed," Longstaff said.

"Since the takeover we have brought in quality players. It is really special and emotional for me what we are building here."

Ramping up an already vociferous atmosphere, Newcastle's Anthony Gordon was paraded on the pitch before kick-off after completing his £45 million (\$51 million) move from Everton.

AFP



Saudi Arabia to host 2027 Asian Cup

Manama, Bahrain - Saudi Arabia has won a bid to host the 2027 Asian Cup, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Wednesday.

The announcement was made at the AFC Congress in the Bahraini capital of Manama.

Saudi Arabia was the sole bidder after India withdrew in December.

"We are excited to deliver the greatest tournament in the competition's history," the kingdom's sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal said after the announcement.

"The kingdom is transforming before our eyes and we are filled with excitement for what it will look like in 2027."

The world's biggest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has thrown hundreds of millions at sports deals including the acquisition of Cristiano Ronaldo, Formula One in Jeddah and the lucrative LIV Golf tour.

In the coming years the Saudis will hold the women's Asian Cup, the Olympic-sized Asian Games and even the Asian Winter Games on artificial snow.

Sheikh Salman elected Asian football chief for third consecutive term

Manama, Bahrain - Asia's football chief and FIFA's second-in-command Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al Khalifa won a new four-year term on Wednesday.

The Bahraini royal, who has led the Asian Football Confederation since 2013, was elected at the Asian Football Confederation Congress in his home country.

"I'd like to thank you all for placing your faith in me for another four-year term," he said after the vote which saw him stand unopposed.

"Asian football is entering a new era."

The Bahraini royal was a rival candidate to Infantino when the Italian-Swiss was elected FIFA president in 2016 after a major corruption scandal ended the reign of Sepp Blatter.

Sheikh Salman, whose confederation includes 47 of FIFA's 211 associations, has said he backs Infantino's bid for a fresh mandate this year.

Infantino congratulated Al Khalifa and praised the rise of



Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al Khalifa

Asian football, pointing in particular to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

"Obviously, the men's World Cup in Qatar was the best World Cup ever," Infantino said.

"It will be difficult to meet this benchmark." The AFC was in chaos when Sheikh Salman took charge after his predecessor, Qatari businessman Mohamed bin Hammam, was banned from football for life following bribery claims and conflict-of-interest violations.

AFP

Algeria crush Niger to set up CHAN final against wasteful Senegal

Algiers, Algeria - African Nations Championship leading scorer Aymen Mahious bagged a brace as Algeria hammered Niger 5-0 in Oran on Tuesday to qualify for a final showdown against Senegal.

While the host nation were ruthless when presented with scoring chances, Senegal were guilty of some incredible misses as they edged Madagascar 1-0 in Algiers in the other semi-final.

Algeria will face Senegal before an expected sell-out 40,000 crowd at the Stade Nelson Mandela in Algiers on Saturday, a day after Madagascar and Niger meet in Oran to decide who finishes third.

Mahious, a 25-year-old forward from Algiers club USM, scored three of the goals that earned Algeria four 1-0 victories en route to the penultimate stage of a tournament known as the CHAN. After captain Ayoub Abdellaoui nodded the host nation in front on 15 minutes, Mahious struck with a fierce shot, then a powerful header to take his tour-



Algeria's Abderrahmane Meziane (L) and Zinedine Belaid celebrate a goal against Niger in their African Nations Championship semi-final

namment total to five goals.

A nightmare first half for Niger got worse in the final minute when captain Boureima Katkore conceded an own-goal to leave the west Africans four goals behind at the break. Niger fared better in the second half, but there was still time for a tap-in fifth goal from substitute Sofiane Bayazid.

It was the widest winning margin in a CHAN semi-final, surpassing the 4-0 hiding Morocco gave hosts Cameroon two years ago. Algeria also matched the biggest victory in the 15-year history of a unique national team competition as it is confined to footballers playing for clubs in their country of birth.

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ENZO MANIA

Chelsea pay Premier League record fee of 121m euros to buy Argentine World Cup hero Enzo Fernandez

London, United Kingdom - Chelsea paid a Premier League record fee of 121 million euros to sign Enzo Fernandez as Joao Cancelo made a surprise move to Bayern Munich and Jorginho joined Arsenal on a frantic transfer deadline day in Europe.

Premier League clubs have once again massively outspent their rivals in a desperate scramble to strengthen their squads for the second half of the season.

Graham Potter's struggling Chelsea went on a staggering spending spree in January, bringing in a clutch of players including Mykhaylo Mudryk, Benoit Badi-

Player of the World Cup for his displays during Argentina's successful campaign in Qatar, only joined Portuguese giants Benfica in July last year, for a reported fee of around £10 million.

The 22-year-old is understood to have signed an eight-and-half-year deal that will run until 2031.

Todd Boehly's consortium has spent hundreds of millions since buying Chelsea at the end of last season but the club are languishing in 10th place in the Premier League.

Cancelo joins Bayern
Bayern Munich signed Manches-

FC Bayern is a great club, one of the best in the world, and it's enormous motivation for me to now play alongside these extraordinary players

JOAO CANCELO

ashile, Noni Madueke and Joao Felix, who joined on loan from Atletico Madrid.

World Cup winner Fernandez, whose transfer was announced by Portuguese club Benfica in the early hours of Wednesday, is Chelsea's eighth signing of the January window.

The £106.8 million fee eclipses the previous record of £100 million that Manchester City paid Aston Villa for Jack Grealish in 2021.

Fernandez, named Best Young

ter City wing-back Cancelo on loan until the end of the season and have the option to buy him for a reported 70 million euros.

The 28-year-old Portuguese defender joined City from Juventus in 2019 but has been a peripheral figure in Pep Guardiola's team since the World Cup.

"FC Bayern is a great club, one of the best in the world, and it's enormous motivation for me to now play alongside these extraordinary players," Cancelo said.

Premier League leaders Arse-



Enzo Fernandez

nal snapped up Italy midfielder Jorginho from Chelsea for a reported fee of £12 million.

Jorginho, who is understood to have signed an 18-month deal at the Emirates Stadium, told Arsenal.com: "I'm very excited for this new challenge and I just can't

wait to be on the pitch.

"Everything has happened so fast. I was a bit surprised, but I took the opportunity of this amazing challenge."

The Gunners, bidding to win their first Premier League crown since 2004, signed Belgium for-

ward Leandro Trossard from Brighton and Poland defender Jakub Kiwior from Italian side Spezia earlier this month.

Arsenal's north London rivals Tottenham announced the signing of defender Pedro Porro from Sporting Lisbon minutes before

the deadline.

The right-back has signed on loan until the end of the season with an obligation to make the move permanent at the end of the season.

Manchester United announced they had signed Bayern

Munich midfielder Marcel Sabitzer on loan early Wednesday.

United were forced into deadline-day action on Tuesday following an ankle injury to Christian Eriksen, which is set to rule the Denmark midfielder out until early May.

Chelsea's scattergun spending is no guarantee of success

London, United Kingdom - Chelsea's record-breaking last-minute swoop to sign Enzo Fernandez took the Blues' spending in the first year of the club's new ownership to a staggering figure of more than £500 million (\$616 million).

The Premier League giants splashed out 121 million euros for the Argentina midfielder, breaking the previous British transfer record - Jack Grealish's £100-million move to Manchester City.

Fernandez was Chelsea's eighth signing of the January window, with the spending overseen by Todd Boehly's consortium sending shockwaves around the football world.

Less than a year ago there were fears that Chelsea could run out of cash due to sanctions slapped on then owner Roman Abramovich following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Abramovich was described by the UK government as part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

A special licence allowed the club to continue operating and despite an expedited sales process Chelsea fetched £2.5 billion - a record for a football club.

The consortium fronted by Boehly and private equity group Clearlake Capital promised a further £1.75 billion of investment in infrastructure and the playing squad.

But nobody saw spending in the transfer market that has obliterated the single-season record for any club across the globe.

Chelsea sit 10th in the Premier League table, 10 points adrift of the top four places that secure a ticket for next season's Champions League, and are already out of both domestic cup competitions.

AFP



Sofiane Boufal

Morocco star Boufal joins Al Rayyan

Rennes, France - Sofiane Boufal, one of the stars of Morocco's run to the World Cup last four, was returning to Qatar on Tuesday when he joined Al Rayyan from Angers, in a deal announced by the two clubs.

Neither club revealed details of the transfer or the contract.

Boufal, 29, joined Angers at the age of 10 and stayed until 2015. He returned to the club in 2020 after spells at Lille, Southampton and Celta Vigo.

Boufal had hardly played for Angers since returning from Qatar. Ounahi completed a transfer to Marseille on Sunday.

Europe looks on helplessly at 'wild' spending by Premier League clubs

Paris, France - Another transfer window of record-breaking spending in the Premier League has led to more soul-searching around Europe, as clubs on the continent are unable to stop the drain of talent to England.

Chelsea have stolen most of the headlines with their eye-watering purchase of Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez from Benfica for an English record of 121 million euros (\$132m).

But he was just one of seven players to move to Stamford Bridge from clubs elsewhere in Europe, and Chelsea were not the only ones spending big.

Of the top 20 January transfers according to specialist site Transfermarkt, only two did not involve Premier League clubs - one was Marseille selling Brazil midfielder Gerson back to Flamengo, and the other was the French side buying Portuguese striker Vitorino from Braga in a 32 million-euro deal.



Marseille signing Vitorino from Braga for 32 million euros is one of the rare top deals that does not involve a Premier League team

There were no major moves involving any of the continent's powerhouses, with not even Paris Saint-Germain getting out their chequebook - they failed in an at-

tempt to sign Hakim Ziyech on loan from Chelsea.

The spending of the London outfit under new American owner Todd Boehly's consortium

was watched particularly closely by Borussia Dortmund, who will be their opponents in the last 16 of the Champions League this month.

"It is very wild, you just have to say that. They are running in their own race," Dortmund sporting director Sebastian Kehl said.

The Premier League's financial dominance is fuelled by domestic and international television revenues which are far higher than in any of the other so-called Big Five European leagues, in Spain, Italy, Germany and France.

Eleven of the top 20 revenue-generating clubs in the world last year are from the Premier League, according to Deloitte's latest Football Money League.

The rest now struggle to keep up, and La Liga has also accused Premier League sides of being "doped" because of phenomenally wealthy shareholders putting in additional money to then spend on new players.



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Weekend



14

COOK-UP

In wintry weather, there's nothing like hot and spicy seafood to keep you warm



15

IN TOWN

Muscat Nights at Qurm Natural Park, Naseem Garden draws crowds



16

ENTERTAINMENT

A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood

AL DRWAZA

BACK WITH FROND

Inspired by nature and spurred by the urge to preserve Omani culture and heritage, **Said Salim Nassar al Wardi**, from Bahla, turns palm fronds into elegant furniture as well as heritage houses and lounges



Mohammed Taha

With choir ropes and wooden dowels, palm frond strips and trellises, he creates some of the most amazing crafts that serve not only as furniture and storage items but also as lounges and dwellings... For Said Salim Nassar al Wardi, a resident of Bahla, recreating Oman's past with his creative crafts is not just a hobby but also an obsession.

Wardi says, he was inspired by the old houses made of palm fronds that dotted Oman's vast coastline and dwelling areas in the deserts in the past. "My project, Al Drwaza, deals with the construction of traditional resorts, lounges and rest houses made of wood and palm fronds, all done in an elegant way with a modern touch."

Wardi's Al Drwaza project is one of the examples of a success story inspired by Omani heritage. In creating his palm frond crafts, he not only draws fulfillment but also does his bit in keeping old traditions alive. Use of palm fronds for building houses and boats/dhows had been prevalent in Oman since the days of yore among the seafaring population.

"In 2016, we opened a factory on an area of more than 10,000sqm in Barka. After the initial success, we expanded with six branches in the wilayats of Bahla, Nizwa, al Hamra, al Kamil Wa al Wafi, Shinas and Sohar. We make complete rooms, umbrellas, chairs, and other furniture from palm fronds which are treated with natural materials to reinforce it and extend its life."

Wardi informed that he has participated in many festivals, such as the Muscat Festival and the Dates Festival, to display his products which are highly admired by tourists.

"I have traveled to many countries, including China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Pakistan to gain experience and develop our products."

Talking about the challenges he faced in setting up the project, he said, "Cyclone Shaheen and COVID-19 posed major challenges for me, and collecting the pieces of palm fronds was not easy. It took a lot of time, effort and money, but with patience and determination I was able to continue the business."

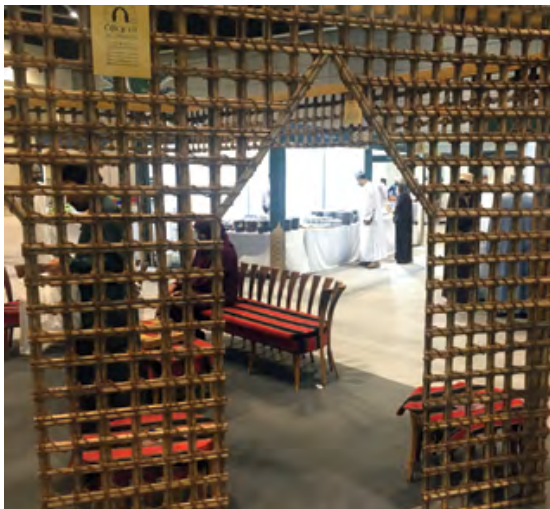
"Some pieces take a month and others take six months to be completed," he said, adding, "The project aims to spread cultural awareness among members of the society, promote domestic tourism, and preserve authentic Omani traditions."

Wardi, who is soon planning to develop products for the export market in neighbouring countries, has called on Omani youth to develop their traditional Omani products in line with current demands.



Follow your passion, be innovative and do not copy ideas and projects of others

SAID SALIM NASSAR AL WARDI



cook-up

Cheesy Garlic Mussels

Ingredients

- 750g fresh mussels
- ½ cup butter
- 8 cloves garlic - minced
- 1 1tsp julienned ginger
- 1 cup cheddar cheese
- ¼tsp dried thyme
- A pinch of cayenne pepper
- Ground black pepper, to taste
- Fresh parsley - minced, for garnish

Method

Clean mussels by brushing the outer shell and washing with cold running water. Remove the dark hairy parts. Boil a pot of water with ginger, add mus-

sels and boil for one to two minutes. Drain water, separate the shells of mussels, and discard the empty shells.

Transfer the mussel meat with shells to a tray lined with lightly greased foil.

In a skillet, melt butter over low heat and fry garlic until slightly golden.

Turn off the heat and add dried thyme and cayenne powder. Spoon garlic-butter mixture over mussels. Season with ground black pepper. Top with grated cheddar cheese. Bake mussels in a pre-heated oven at 200° C for 8 to 10 minutes or until cheese is melted and slightly golden. Transfer to a serving platter and garnish with fresh parsley.



HOT WINTER SEAFOOD stuff



Chinese Prawns

Ingredients

- 500g prawns
- 1½tbsp flour
- 1tsp red chilli powder
- Salt, to taste
- ½tbsp sesame oil, for frying
- For Chinese sauce
- Splash of rice wine vinegar
- ½tbsp granulated garlic or powdered garlic
- 1tbsp sweet chilli sauce
- 3tbsp light soy sauce
- 1tbsp honey
- 1tbsp sesame oil
- 1tsp chilli flakes
- To serve
- Sprinkle of sesame seeds
- 1 red chilli pepper - minced
- 3 spring onions - chopped
- Steamed rice

Method

Clean, shell and devein prawns, and place onto a paper towel to remove any excess water. Place the prawns into a small bowl and sprinkle over the flour, a pinch of salt, and red chilli powder. Mix well to fully coat the prawns. Place a pan on medium heat and add half 1tbsp sesame oil. When hot, add the prawns and stir fry for 30 seconds or until just pink. Remove from the heat and set aside.

To make Chinese sauce, in a small bowl, mix together the soy sauce, honey, sesame oil, sweet chilli sauce, rice wine vinegar, and garlic granules. Return the pan to the heat and pour the Chinese sauce over the stir fried prawns. Bring to a simmer, and cook for another 2 minutes or until the sauce thickens.

Take the pan off the heat and stir in the chopped chilli and spring onions.

Serve with rice and sprinkle over sesame seeds.

Pomfret Tawa Fry

Ingredients

- 3 medium size pomfrets
- 4tbsp curds
- ¼tsp red chilli powder
- 1tsp garam masala
- 1tsp lemon juice
- 6-7 tsp oil
- Onion rings and lemon wedges – for serving
- To marinate fish
- 1 lemon
- 1½tsp red chilli powder
- ½tsp turmeric powder
- 1tsp oil
- 1tsp salt
- Grind to paste
- 2cm piece ginger
- 8 cloves garlic .
- 3-4 dried red chillies

Method

Wash and clean fish. Make sharp, deep slits with knife. Marinate the fish with lemon juice, chilli powder, turmeric powder, butter, and salt. Apply the masala well on the fish and inside the cuts.

Grind the grinding ingredients with little water and set aside. In a bowl, add curds, chilli powder, garam masala, salt, lemon juice, ground paste, 2 tsp butter and mix. Pour this mixture over the fish and rub well so that the masala blends well even within the slits.

Refrigerate the marinated fish for 1 hour or more. Heat oil in a wide pan and place each fish piece gently in hot oil to shallow fry on low flame till fish roasts to golden brown.

Using a spatula, carefully flip the fish and fry the other side, too. Serve hot with onion rings and lemon wedges.



Oven Roasted Crab

If you've had enough of green chutney, tomato ketchup or any popular dip to accompany your winter snacks, try this 'wonderful tamarind dip' for an all new, zingy experience.

Ingredients

- 3 large crabs
- ½ cup butter
- 3tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 10 cloves garlic - minced
- ½ cup rice vinegar
- 1tsp sugar
- 2 lemons - sliced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Fresh parsley - for garnish

Method

Clean the crab, retaining the main shell - you may break the main legs apart from the body or keep it intact. To make the sauce, in a skillet, add ½ cup butter, 3tbsp olive oil, and chopped garlic. Cook on medium heat for 3 minutes, pour in ½ cup of rice vinegar and sugar, and simmer for 1 minute. Remove from the heat - sauce is ready.

Now, preheat the oven to 350F. In a baking tray, place the crabs on top of lemon slices, pour garlic butter sauce over the crab, season with salt and pepper. Bake for 15-20 minutes. While the crab is baking, place the crab's top shell into a pot of boiling water and boil for 10 minutes.

Place the top shells in a bowl and pour the melted butter from the baking sheet into the bowl and drizzle over the top. Garnish with chopped parsley. Place the top shells on top of the crabs before serving.

take a break

IN TOWN

MUSCAT NIGHTS



Muscat Nights revelry at Naseem Garden and Qurm Natural Park has been attracting large crowds last week. Photos: V K Shafeer



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Where was the record for the longest professional tennis match broken in 2010 when John Isner & Nicolas Mahut took 11 hours and 5 minutes over a three day period?
A. Australian Open
B. US Open
C. Wimbledon
D. French Open
02. Mrs Tiggy-Winkle appears in a book by which writer?
A. Roald Dahl
B. A.A.Milne
C. Maurice Sendak
D. Beatrix Potter
03. Joseph Conrad's semi-autobiographical 1899 novella "Heart of Darkness" speaks of happenings during a voyage up the Congo River into the Congo Free State, comparing what with what?
A. Trading practices on the west and east coasts of Africa
B. The "civilised" West, and African natives
C. The success of colonialism in Africa and in India
D. British and African navigation practices

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. B

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

BOGGLER

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J	O	A	S
K	E	R	E
S	C	R	S

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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If you're inclined to stick to charted territories and familiar faces today, feel free to do just that. There's no need to keep exploring and pushing boundaries all the time. If you don't do anything new now, you won't feel like you're missing out. Some friends might not understand how someone can say no to exciting invitations.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your bolder, more social self is coming to the forefront right now, so get out and about. Try to go on at least one adventure. Pick a place, then get planning. But don't go solo if you can join a bunch of amusing folks who know how to have a lot of fun. The best ways to appreciate where you are is to be among people who matter to you.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You are feeling a lot more than thinking right now. This means that you're likely to say something out loud before you think through how it might sound. This could create a misunderstanding between you and someone whose feelings you're desperately trying to protect, so be careful.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

It's easier than you think to turn bad energy into good energy! If you've been feeling down in the dumps, remember that you have so much to be happy about in your life. Ask a friend or family member to remind you about how far you've come. They'll be glad to. After all, who wouldn't want to be the person responsible for putting a bright smile on your face?



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Today, be careful where you shop and who you shop with. It's important to avoid any financial dealings with people who might encourage you to buy things you don't really need. Don't ask a stylist if you need a haircut because it's a sure bet what they'll say! It's important to consider the source in all your interactions now.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Watch out for people who are moving at a fast pace today and then get out of their way! Just because they seem like they know the answers about the big questions in life doesn't mean they really do. Even if they do, it doesn't mean that the answers for them are the right answers for you. It's important to go at your own pace when figuring things out.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The problem between you and a coworker or peer isn't due to a lack of intellectual connection. The two of you are definitely on the same page in terms of your mental focus and agility. The real root of the conflict or tension you're feeling right now probably has more to do with outside elements. Something might be going on in their life that you don't know about.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Things are starting to really get hopping in a new platonic relationship, but this probably isn't the start of a hot new romance. If you feel that your new connection is getting stronger and stronger, don't worry that things will start going in the wrong direction. Be confident that the two of you can continue having honest communication.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Have you been thinking about making a change in your life? Well, stop thinking and start doing! Regardless of whether it's a major or minor change that you have in mind, make it fast! Gradual transitions aren't going to cut it right now because they give you way too much time to change your mind.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

It's vitally important for you to put your ideas in writing today. Even if you don't think you're skilled at creative writing, you'll find the act of putting pen (or keyboard) to paper to be a great way to release your mental inhibitions. Once you start recording your ideas and thoughts, the flood will begin. This could lead to a wonderful awakening of your underutilized creativity.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Just because you have a little bit of extra cash in your account doesn't mean that it shouldn't stay there! Don't overspend today. It's much wiser to play it cool and keep your money for a rainy day. It could be a lot closer than you think! Play it safe in all areas of your life right now. In a developing relationship, don't push things too far too fast. Let them do the chasing for you.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Spurge on yourself today. Sure, it might make you feel weird to be generous with yourself when you don't have a lot of excess cash lying around, but you can find a way to put a smile on your face without breaking the bank. After all, picking up the phone and calling someone who always makes you laugh is free. And isn't there someone you've been meaning to call? Connecting with them is a gift you can give yourself.

entertainment



Trophies get ready for 73rd Berlinale in mid February

Berlinale executive director Mariette Rissenbeek (right) and Berlinale artistic director Carlo Chatrian look at Berlinale Bear trophies of the upcoming 73rd International Film Festival Berlinale that are produced at the Noack foundry in Berlin, on January 24. The Noack foundry traditionally prepares all the trophies for the Berlinale International Film Festival. The Berlinale, which will run February 16-26, ranks with Cannes and Venice among Europe's top three film festivals and serves as an early annual launchpad for the industry.

ACTRESS LISA LORING DEAD AT 64

American actress Lisa Loring, who played the child character Wednesday Addams in the original *The Addams Family* television series in the 1960s, has died. She was 64.

Her death from a stroke, reported by US media, comes a couple of months after the release on Netflix of spinoff show *Wednesday*, starring Jenna Ortega.

"Loring passed away on Saturday surrounded by her family," longtime agent Chris Carbaugh told CNN in a statement on Monday. "She brought to life one of the most iconic characters in Hollywood history that is still celebrated today," Carbaugh added.



SEAN PENN UKRAINE DOCUMENTARY TO PREMIERE AT BERLIN FILM FEST



US actor and director Sean Penn will premiere a documentary he filmed in Kyiv featuring Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky at next month's Berlin film festival, organisers said when they unveiled the full programme last Monday. The Berlinale, as the February 16-26 event is known, will shine a spotlight on the Russian invasion of Ukraine

as it passes its first anniversary.

Penn's *Superpower* is billed as 'the chronicle of a film project that reality forced to change into something less controllable but more meaningful'.

It will be the most prominent among several Ukraine-themed entries at the 73rd annual festival.

RELEASING TODAY

THE SON

Peter has his busy life with new partner Beth and their baby thrown into disarray when his ex-wife Kate turns up with their teenage son, Nicholas.

Genre: Drama
Starring: Hugh Jackman, Vanessa Kirby, Anthony Hopkins
Language: English

'Everything Everywhere All at Once' gets 11 Oscar nominations

Surreal sci-fi flick *Everything Everywhere All at Once* topped the Oscar nominations on Tuesday with 11, as Hollywood formally kicked off the race to the all-important Academy Awards.

German anti-war movie *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Irish black comedy *The Banshees of Inisherin* followed with nine nominations each from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which will hand out the awards on March 12.

As expected, Academy voters also rewarded blockbusters such as Tom Cruise's *Top Gun: Maverick* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* for helping to bring audiences back to movie theatres after the pandemic.

Seen here, British actor Rizwan Ahmed (L) and US actress Allison Williams announce the nominees during the 95th Academy Awards nominations announcement at the Samuel Goldwyn Theatre in Beverly Hills, California.



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW: PATHAAN
Genre: Action thriller
Starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Deepika Padukone, John Abraham

ACTION, AND THEN SOME



Bang-bang, pow-wow, bash-crash, vroom-zoom! That's the simple code to describe the much-awaited, Bollywood all-time-high grosser - *Pathaan* - which was released last week after months of hype and multi-pronged publicity stunts. The cash registers are ringing in cinemas in 100 countries where the film was simultaneously released and Yash Raj Films and their lucky icon Shah Rukh Khan are raking in the moolah like never before. And the fact that curious movie-buffs have made a beeline at theatres, following excellent trailers released on social media, is enough assurance that the film has already surpassed its projected revenues. But what about the storyline and treatment? Do fans get anything new that they haven't yet seen? We'd leave that blank for you to fill, that is, after you've seen the film and made your

own contribution towards the box office collections. The movie, minus King Khan's iconic status and Deepika's charming screen presence, is nothing but a hotch-potch of many blockbusters of the past decade, including the *Dhoom* series, *Bang Bang*, *Ek Tha Tiger*, *Tiger Zinda Hai*, *War*, et al. So if mindless action is your cup of tea, slurp this with pleasure. But, if you are interested in story, emotion, comedy, family drama, you might as well sit at home and watch your favourite TV soap. The fourth instalment in the YRF Spy Universe, directed by Siddharth Anand of *Bang Bang* fame (fame?), this film is about *Pathaan*, an exiled RAW agent (SRK), who must work with ISI agent Rubina (Deepika Padukone) to take down Jim (John Abraham), a former RAW agent-turned-traitor, who is planning to spread a deadly lab-generated

virus across India. (Not Covid!)

The film begins with a grey scale ambience and you see much of it all through, except in the song sequence of 'Besharam Rang' when Deepika's colourful bikinis light up the screen. There's much powder and shot in the rest of the scenes. And how much!

By the way, if you're wondering, that song was thrown in only for spice and had no connection whatsoever with the plot. We have yet to figure out why the director chose to introduce a female soldier and ISI agent from Pakistan gyrating in swimwear, with plenty of pelvic thrusts, in a poolside pub in Spain. And, to be honest, if flashes of that song sequence hadn't been included in promos on social media, *Pathaan* might not have turned out to be the blockbuster that it is now made out to be.

Rating ★★★★★