

Budget surplus rises to R0520mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's budget surplus increased to R0520mn during the first four months of 2023, compared to a surplus of R0468mn during the same period of last year, the Ministry of Finance announced on Thursday.

The government will continue utilising the surplus for stimulating economic recovery, enhancing social spending and reducing public debt, the ministry said in its Fiscal Performance bulletin.

The rise in surplus was mainly due to a 12% increase in Oman's net oil revenue, amounting to R02.308bn in the January-April period of this year compared to R02.059bn in the corresponding period of 2022. Higher oil revenue was driven by increased oil prices and higher production, the ministry noted.



The sultanate's average daily oil production increased 3.2 per cent to 1.064mn barrels per day

during the first four months of 2023 compared to 1.031mn barrels per day produced during the

same period of 2022.

The average price at which Oman sold its crude oil during

the January-April period increased by 5% to US\$84 per barrel from US\$80 per barrel

recorded in the first four months of 2022. Oman's 2023 budget is based on an average oil price estimate of US\$55 per barrel and average oil production of 1.175mn barrels per day.

An eight per cent increase in the current revenue also contributed to the state coffers. Oman's revenue for the first four months of 2023 was R01.172bn against R01.081bn during the same period of the previous year.

Oman, however, witnessed gas revenue falling by 15 per cent to R0908mn during the January-April period this year from R01.071bn during the same period last year.

'This decline is due to the deduction of gas purchase and transport expenses from the total revenue collected from the Integrated Gas Company', the ministry noted.

On the other hand, total public spending amounted to R03.872bn during the first four months of 2023, up by R0123mn or 3% compared to R03.749bn actual spending during the same period in 2022.

'This (rise in public spending) is due to an increase in current expenditure of civil ministries,' the Ministry of Finance said.

It added that the government subsidies on oil products amounted to R0111mn for the first four months of 2023.

Supported by an improving fiscal position due to government reforms and higher oil prices, the sultanate's sovereign credit ratings were upgraded by various global rating agencies.

Recently, global credit rating agencies S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings revised their outlooks on Oman's ratings to 'positive' from 'stable'.

Oman, Belgium review ties in energy sector

H M receives message from Belgian king

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from Philippe Leopold Louis Marie, King of the Belgians focussed on the bilateral relations between Oman and Belgium.

The message was handed over to Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, when he received in Muscat Hadja Lahbib, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Federal Cultural Institutions, on Friday.

During the meeting, the guest conveyed greetings of the King of



the Belgians to His Majesty the Sultan. She expressed gratitude for the efforts Oman made to secure the release of a Belgian citizen, as well as two Austrians and a Danish citizen recently.

As far as the bilateral relations between Oman and Belgium are concerned, the two ministers lauded the progress witnessed in various areas viz., economy, trade, investment and culture.

They also commended the cooperation between Duqm Port and the Port of Antwerp, stressing the importance of expanding the cooperation to cover other fields, particularly in the renewable energy projects and green hydrogen production.

"Delighted to receive FM Hadja Lahbib of Belgium. We reviewed the progress in our bilateral relations, and focused on expanding and diversifying our common interests, especially in renewable energy, green hydrogen, and logistics," Sayyid Badr tweeted.

The two sides also underlined their keenness to expand cultural, academic and student exchange programmes and cooperation in the fields of science and technology, as well as

promoting tourism and investment opportunities between the two countries.

Both sides affirmed that they will continue exchanging views on both regional and international issues for peaceful solutions.

"In Muscat, I personally conveyed to my Omani counterpart Sayyid Badr our deep gratitude and recognition for the valuable role Oman played as a facilitator in the liberation of Olivier Vandecasteele, two Austrian citizens and one Dane. We also discussed our bilateral relations, as well as regional and global security," tweeted Hadja. "Finally, I exchanged views with the Omani transport minister, Said al Ma'awali on our common economic projects," she added.

Biparjoy likely to hit Pakistan, India in next few days

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The category 2 tropical cyclone Biparjoy in the Arabian Sea is likely to impact India and Pakistan in the next four days, according to the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Center.

The latest satellite images and analyses of the Directorate General of Meteorology on Saturday showed Biparjoy in the middle of the Arabian Sea at latitude 17.3 North and longitude 67.4 East.

Located at 980km from the coast of the sultanate, the eye of the cyclone was found having a wind speed of around 83 to 90

knots. The Met further warned against venturing into the sea as waves are expected to rise to 3-6m on the coasts of the Arabian Sea during the next three days.

The average waves on the coasts of the Sea of Oman will be 1.5-2.5m.

Jason Nicholls, lead international forecaster at AccuWeather, observed that model clusters have started to lean toward Biparjoy threatening Pakistan and India next week.

"However, track toward Oman still not off the table. Wind intensity should ease as it nears coast next week but heavy rain can remain a concern."



GCC, US commit to regional diplomacy and stability

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the United States of America, in a statement issued on Thursday, stressed the importance of joint efforts to work towards de-escalation in the region. They affirmed their joint commitment to support diplomacy for the realisation of those goals.

The statement was issued at the GCC-US Joint Ministerial meeting on Strategic Partnership held in Riyadh on Thursday.

The Gulf and American sides agreed to the important role of infrastructure projects in enhancing integration and interdependence in the region, besides contributing to stability and prosperity at the regional level.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the two sides stressed the need to support navigational rights and freedoms. They underlined collective efforts to address threats that might target the security of ships in waterways in the region. The ministers also under-

A statement issued at the GCC-US Joint Ministerial meeting on Strategic Partnership stressed on joint efforts for de-escalation in the region

scored the importance of confronting terrorism and extremism in all countries around the world.

The ministers welcomed the decision of Saudi Arabia and Iran to resume diplomatic relations.

In this context, they stressed the importance of the region's countries adhering to international law, including the United Nations Charter.

The two sides stressed the importance of ongoing peace efforts led by the United Nations in Yemen after the April 2022 truce and the calm that has prevailed

since. They hoped to see the realisation of a comprehensive political process leading to a permanent end to the conflict.

With regard to the Palestinian issue, the two sides stressed the need to refrain from all unilateral measures that undermine the two-state solution or raise tensions. They urged to maintain the historical status quo in holy places in Al Quds (Jerusalem).

The ministers hailed the special role of Jordan in this regard. They also expressed their appreciation for Egypt's decisive role in mediating between armed factions in Gaza and Israel in the aftermath of the recent hostilities.

The two sides reaffirmed their commitment towards reaching a political solution to the Syrian crisis in a way that preserves Syria's unity and sovereignty, meets the aspirations of its people and complies with international humanitarian law and the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015). OMA

Oman takes part in global meet on terrorism

Muscat - Oman, represented by its Foreign Ministry, took part in a ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (Daesh) held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Thursday.

The meeting brought together delegates from the Arab and friendly countries, as well as representatives of regional and international organisations. Oman's

delegation was headed by H E Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister.

The meeting dealt with ongoing global efforts to eliminate hotbeds of terrorism, in compliance with the objectives of the United Nations and the UN Charter on maintaining international peace and security.

The meeting laid emphasis on

collective responsibility and the need to consolidate cooperation, exchange experiences and develop all means of combating terrorism and addressing the ideology of hate.

It elaborated on the means of dismantling the networks of terrorism, enhancing the stability and prosperity of societies and realising peaceful coexistence

among different communities.

Additionally, ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS announced the launch of its Stabilisation Pledge Drive, with a goal of raising US\$601mn for areas liberated from ISIS in Iraq and Syria - towards which eight members have already announced pledges more than US\$300mn.

A VIGNETTE OF MAASAI HERITAGE



A group of Maasai men perform their traditional dance during a cultural festival in Sekenani, in the middle of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, on Saturday. Maasai people are a Nilotic ethnic group inhabiting Kenya and northern Tanzania (AFP)

Confusion, despair as exchange houses continue to refuse ₹2,000 Indian notes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Indian residents in Oman are continuing to find it difficult to get their ₹2,000 currency notes exchanged at local exchange houses, increasing their frustration and disappointment with the authorities.

This follows a statement issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) saying the ₹2,000 bills will be withdrawn from circulation. The general public has until September 30 to deposit or exchange these notes. The RBI instructed banks to cease issuance of ₹2,000 denomination banknotes with immediate effect. The bills, however, will continue to be a legal tender till the specified date.

Lack of proper notification or



announcements regarding the non-acceptance of the currency in Oman has led to further confusion among the Indian expatriates.

Most affected people are blue-collar workers who are vis-

iting these exchange houses only to be turned away.

Ramesh Pal, an individual who travelled from Ghubra to Ruwi, shared his experience, saying, "My cousin's son arrived in Oman with ₹10,000, including

₹2,000 notes given to him by his father as a backup fund until he receives his first salary. However, when I went to an exchange house, I was denied without a valid reason, even though I know the exchange deadline is Sep-

tember 30."

Sultan Ameer Khan, a clerk from Lucknow working in a shop in Ruwi, added, "Exchange houses should formally announce the reasons for not accepting ₹2,000 currency notes

A friend of Sultan, who chose to remain anonymous, lamented that the Indian Embassy "unfortunately, is not addressing the issue".

When approached for comments, various exchange houses,

acknowledged the challenge, saying, "If we start accepting ₹2,000 notes, they will accumulate on our end as we currently lack the means to exchange them. Alternatively, the Indian Embassy should engage with the Indian government to resolve this and retrieve the currency from exchange houses."

People's demand is for a formal announcement to bring clarity to the issue and eliminate the need for unnecessary travel to exchange houses.

The Indian Embassy said that they have provided guidelines from RBI to the exchange houses. "₹2,000 notes are legal tender and should be accepted. However, we have not received any instructions from New Delhi other than those issued by the RBI."

Exchange houses should formally announce the reasons for not accepting ₹2,000 currency notes through their online platforms or newspaper advertisements

SULTAN AMEER KHAN

through their online platforms or newspaper advertisements. They engage in extensive promotions during Eid and Diwali, so why not address this critical issue now? Most of them turn a deaf ear."

including Purshottam Kanji, Global Money, and Mustafa Sultan, provided similar responses, stating, "We are looking into the matter".

Saji C Thomas, general manager of Wasel Exchange, ac-

906 labour complaints, 1,139 arrests in May: MoL

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) received a total of 906 labour complaints from across the sultanate in the month of May leading to 257 cases reaching the court of law.

The ministry conducted numerous inspection visits and awareness campaigns throughout the governorates during the last month to detect/thwart any violation of labour laws, besides having workers as well as their

employers know about their rights and responsibilities.

Out of the 906 complaints, 257 were referred to the competent courts, while 27 complaints are still under investigation, the ministry informed.

The remaining cases were amicably resolved through mutual agreements between the two involved parties.

In Dakhiliyah governorate in particular, MoL received 376 labour complaints. Of these complaints, 75% were resolved amicably.

In 2022, the ministry received a total of 66,469 labour complaints from various parts of the sultanate. Throughout the year, the ministry conducted over 12,045 inspections and 2,114 awareness campaigns in different governorates.

Addressing the violation of labour laws, the ministry made some significant breakthroughs, resulting in the arrest of 1,139 expatriate workers in May.

MoL conducted 804 inspections in Muscat governorate during the month, leading to the

deportation of 990 workers for violating labour laws.

Among the violators, 210 were found to be occupying jobs meant for Omanis, 291 were working for someone else, other than their employer, while 612 were self-employed and 26 engaged in unauthorised professions.

On the importance of having labour unions, an MoL official informed 57 unions were registered in the sultanate as of 2022, acknowledging their significant role in the market.

Grape festival to be held in N Sharqiyah in June

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The North Sharqiyah governorate is organising a two-day grape festival from June 19 to celebrate a major jump in the cultivation of the woody grape vine in the governorate.

Sheikh Ali bin Ahmed al Shamsi, governor of North Sharqiyah and chairman of the festival's organising committee, highlighted the significance of the festival, particularly in the wilayat of Mudhaibi, which has witnessed a remarkable progress in grape cultivation, while playing a vital role in reinforcing food security.

The governorate currently cultivates grapes over an area of 3,240 hectares of land, yielding approximately 55.9 tonnes of fruit per year, he informed, adding that Al Rawda village in Samad al Shan, situated in the wilayat of Mudhaibi, boasts of having the largest grape fields in North Sharqiyah.

"The festival aims to support grape cultivation, production, and encourage young entrepreneurs to invest in grape-related



The festival aims to support grape cultivation, and encourage entrepreneurs to invest in grape-related projects

SHEIKH ALI AL SHAMSI

projects."

It seeks to shed light on the economic and social importance of grape cultivation, promote investment opportunities in grape farming and marketing, and encourage small and medium enterprises to establish companies for packaging and promoting grape farming. "The event also aims to stimulate the private sector's involvement in grape cultivation, foster contract farming through agricultural associations, and create employment opportunities," said Shamsi.



The festival will witness the signing of agreements to support grape growers, establish model farms, and facilitate the marketing of grape production, the North Sharqiyah governor said.

A seminar will be organised as part of the festival to discuss grape cultivation, production, marketing, and processing, while an exhibition will be held on the sidelines. It is expecting a large number of visitors, including researchers, academics, and students from higher educational institutions.

Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tender:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Nonrefundable) OMR	Tender Purchase deadline	Clarification deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2023/06/ENG/010	Construction of New Filling Station at Harweel in Dhofar Governorate	100.000	15.06.2023	20.06.2023	25.06.2023

Bank Name & Account Number Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with a minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om.
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** The tender bid should be submitted in a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of the Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
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Oman, Russia sign pact to avoid double taxation

Muscat - Oman and the Russian Federation inked an agreement on Thursday to avoid double taxation of their citizens residing in each other's country.

The agreement - signed by Saud Nasser al Shukaili, chairman of the Oman Tax Authority on behalf of the Oman government and Alexei Sazanov, deputy minister of finance on behalf of the Russian government - also seeks to prevent any tax evasion by their citizens in the other's country.

The two countries mutually decided to legally protect investors from double taxation and regulate the imposition of taxes so as to allow investments and trade exchange grow.

Oman has signed more than 38 taxation agreements with friendly countries to expand the scope of trade and investments.

SUMMER GUIDE FOR SAFE ROADS

Experts urge respect for rules to reduce accidents

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Road accidents and related fatalities have been on the rise in Oman in recent years, prompting experts to emphasise the importance of respecting traffic rules, particularly during the summer when temperatures soar.

According to the latest statistics from the Royal Oman Police (ROP), road accidents increased by approximately 15% in Oman from 2020 to 2021. Additionally, fatalities and injuries rose by 17% and 19% respectively.

In 2021, 434 lives were lost in road accidents compared to 371 in 2020 and 511 in 2019.

However, data from the past decade demonstrates significant progress in the reduction of road accidents, deaths, and injuries in Oman.

From 2012 to 2021, road accidents decreased by 81%.

In 2012, there were 8,209 accidents, 4,514 injuries, and 1,139 deaths, whereas in 2021, the numbers dropped to 1,539 accidents, 1,621 injuries, and 434 deaths. This represents a 64% reduction in injuries and an 82% reduction in fatalities compared to 2012.

In an effort to raise awareness and fulfill its social responsibility, *Muscat Daily* spoke to several experts about the causes of road accidents and the measures that can be taken to prevent them.

Sultan al Rawahi, a road safety



and security expert, labelled unfit tyres as a major cause of traffic accidents during the summer. He stressed on the importance of driving at a safe and appropriate speed depending on factors such as traffic volume, vehicle condition, weather conditions, and the driver's physical and emotional state.

Rawahi also expressed concern about the habit of eating while driving and suggested that "drivers should receive notifications of their violations and black points directly on their phones via text messages to discourage repeat offences".

Naser al Hosni, a driving instructor, advised against using mobile phones while driving, emphasising that it is illegal and can lead to serious accidents. He urged road users to exercise cau-

tion and maintain control over their vehicles while approaching roundabouts or road junctions to avoid collisions. "The failure to adhere to traffic regulations is the third leading cause of accidents. One in every three accidents is speed-related."

Yosua al Balushi, a racing driver, spoke about the importance of conducting regular maintenance checks on vehicles during the summer months. These include monitoring the radiator water level, inspecting the entire cooling system, checking engine oil, ensuring proper tyre air pressure, verifying the brake system, monitoring the vehicle's temperature, confirming the functionality of the engine and cooling fans, and ensuring the presence of safety equipment such as stepneys (spare tyres)

and fire extinguishers.

Balushi also called for increased awareness campaigns and the promotion of traffic safety culture among school students, along with educational competitions to encourage adherence to traffic rules. He acknowledged that fatal accidents still occur in certain regions of the country, "often due to drivers not complying with speed limits".

ROP has launched several safe driving awareness campaigns, including the 'Driving without Mobile Phone' initiative, to reduce road accidents in the country.

Balushi lauded ROP's introduction of black-point system to enhance road safety.

ROP urged upon drivers to follow rules and regulations to prevent road accidents.



Oman Air reduces fare for Salalah to RO54 for citizens

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To meet the increased demand and provide enhanced accessibility, Oman Air, the national carrier of Oman, has decided to operate eight daily flights between Muscat and Salalah, starting from June 15 until September 15.

Additionally, in anticipation of tourist influx during the khareef

season, the airline will further augment its services by increasing the daily flight count to 12 on selected days.

Following the Royal Directives to provide fuel price subsidies at Salalah airport, Oman Air has announced a significant reduction in ticket prices for Economy Class travel between Muscat and Salalah for Omani citizens. The revised ticket prices have been set at RO54 for a return

journey.

'The increase in direct flights to and from Salalah during the khareef season is a testament to Oman Air's commitment to facilitating tourism and seamless transportation for citizens to the governorate of Dhofar. This initiative not only ensures competitive prices but also contributes to the overall growth and development of the region,' the airline stated.

TENDER NOTICE

The Internal Tender Committee of Port of Duqm Company SAOC., hereby announces the following Tender:

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of receiving Specifications	Date of Bid Submission	Suppliers	Tender Fee OMR (Inclusive of VAT 5%)	Place of Submission
ITC/T/004 /2023	Expert Consultancy Services for PODC Marine Projects to prepare a Solid Basis of Design, Scope of Work and Employer's Requirements	20th June 2023	2nd July 2023	Only Specialized Companies	100/- Non Refundable	Port of Duqm Company 3rd floor

Taking into consideration the following:

All specialized companies that wish to participate in the tender must deposit the tender amount into the bank account of the Company (details of the bank account is set out hereunder) and submit the original payment receipt of the tender along with a copy of the Commercial Registration Certificate and the contact details of the authorized individual (business card) to the the following e-mail address: tenders@portofduqm.om
From 08:00 - 13:00 and 14:00 (Sunday – Thursday).

Payment Information:

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Account Name	Port of Duqm Company S.A.O.C
Account Number	0423047518510013
Bank Name	Bank Muscat
Branch	Ghala Corporate Branch
Bank ID Code	BMUSOMRXXXX

Complete Tender documents should be submitted in sealed envelope with red wax with tender number and title and addressed to the "Chairman of Internal Tender Committee". The envelope should not make any reference to the bidder details.

All applicants are required to submit the Tender in the Tender box in the main office of Port of Duqm Company at or before 16:00 PM on the assigned date for submission of the Tender. Tenders submitted after the above mentioned date and time shall not be considered.

- The company is not obliged to accept the lowest offer or any other offer without any justifiable reasons.
- The company reserve the right to issue the order either in part or full for the quoted items without any justifiable reasons.
- The company reserve the right to reject the tenders not complying with the tender documentation requirement.

For any clarification, please contact us through tenders@portofduqm.om

Port of Duqm Company S.A.O.C.

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Muscat airport welcomes AirSial's inaugural flight

Muscat - Muscat International Airport celebrated the arrival of the first flight of AirSial from Pakistan with water salutes on Thursday. The Pakistani airline is offering eight weekly scheduled flights to Muscat - three each from Islamabad and Lahore, and two from Sialkot.

The addition of this new flight is the result of Oman Airports dedicated efforts to boost economic and tourism activities between Oman and other nations. Additionally, AirSial's flights will provide residents and citizens with more travel options.

With its comprehensive range of services, Muscat International Airport attracts a growing number of regional and international flights, underscoring its vital role in meeting the increasing demands of both airlines and passengers, Oman Airports stated.

In the span of one year, from January 2022 to January 2023, the airport experienced a remarkable 143% surge in the total number of international and domestic flights - both arrivals and departures - reaching 7,687 flights. These flights transported over 1mn passengers.

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Air fares may stay sky-high despite falling oil prices

Paris, France – Despite the recent fall in oil prices, high air fares may stay in place for some time to come, say airline industry professionals and experts.

The gradual return of demand for travel last year following the lifting of Covid-19-related travel restrictions, had already given the signal for higher fares.

But this year, just as the airlines are expecting to see passenger numbers almost back to pre-crisis levels, prices have really taken off.

In France in April, the average cost of an air ticket was 32.6% higher than four years earlier, according to the French Civil Aviation Authority. That increase was as much as 51% for flights to the Asia-Pacific region.

In the United States, the air ticket price index published by the St Louis Federal Reserve showed an 11% increase in air ticket prices between April 2019 and April 2023.

This is despite the fact that oil prices have eased since peaking in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) estimates that they will fall to an average of \$98.5 a barrel this year, compared with \$135.6 last year.

Representing between 25% and 30% of airline costs, fuel normally has a significant effect on ticket prices.

However "labour costs and other costs associated with the supply chain... seem to be higher or rising," Marie Owens Thomsen, IATA's chief economist said earlier this week in Istanbul.

"Airlines will have to find a way to cover those costs or they will start making losses again," at a time when they are barely back in the black and have to pay off the colossal debts incurred due to Covid-19, she added at the general meeting of her association,

which brings together 300 airlines from around the world.

'Too few seats'

For Vik Krishnan, a specialist in the airline sector at strategy consultancy McKinsey, the main issue is now "less about oil prices and more about the fact that there are too few seats chasing too many people who want to be in them".

Despite order books that are sometimes full right up to the end of the decade, aircraft manufacturers are struggling to meet their delivery targets because of shortages of parts or materials from their suppliers.

There is also the thorny issue of labour costs.

"Many airlines had to recut their deals with their flight and cabin crews... but also all of the supply, the ground handlers, the maintenance shops, they all had to pay considerably higher wages coming out of Covid," said Geof-

frey Weston, from the consultancy firm Bain & Company.

"There aren't many factors that are going to bring ticket prices down," echoed Pascal Fabre, aviation sector specialist at AlixPartners.

And given that the airline industry will have to invest hundreds, if not thousands, of billions of dollars in new aircraft and renewable fuels if it hopes to meet its 2050 decarbonisation target, IATA's Owens Thomsen sees no respite for consumers any time soon.

"Costs are likely to increase until such a point when all of these solutions have become commercially viable and produced at scale.

"When we reach that lucky moment, we can start thinking that these costs can decline again. I cannot pinpoint necessarily when that's going to happen but I'm tempted to say 2040".

AFP

GCC, Iraq launch electrical grid interconnection project



Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia – The governor of Saudi Arabia's eastern province, Prince Saud bin Naif bin Abdulaziz, inaugurated the commencement of the electrical interconnection project between the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) and Iraq.

Prince Saud bin Naif conveyed his immense joy and satisfaction in commemorating the remarkable achievement accomplished by the GCCIA. He viewed the occasion as a blessed result of the collective endeavours within the GCC, underscoring their unwavering dedication to fruitful cooperation.

By inaugurating the electrical interconnection project with Iraq, he emphasised the extensive advantages and abundant prosperity it would bring to the entire region. Additionally, he highlighted that this project serves as a catalyst for a new era, ushering in broader horizons and expanding market opportunities.

In a press release, Prince Saud bin Naif said, "Since its establishment in 2009, the project has consistently demonstrated its impact year after year, generating numerous economic advan-

tages for the GCC countries. Notably, it has substantially reduced both the capital and operational expenses associated with the Gulf electricity network. According to the studies conducted, the project has furnished approximately half of the overall required energy reserves in the countries prior to the finalisation of the electrical interconnection."

He added, "With the inauguration of the interconnection project with Iraq, the electrical interconnection endeavour expands its horizons, entering a broader realm. Through this collaboration, we achieve a multitude of objectives, elevating the stature of the GCC countries in bolstering and enhancing the value of the regional electricity market. The project fulfils the aspirations of the people in the region for electricity trade and exchange, while also serving as an integral component of the comprehensive Arab electrical interconnection project, which aims to connect Arab nations with each other."

During his address, Engineer Ziyad Ali Fadel, the Iraqi Minister of Electricity, underscored the

significance of the Gulf-Iraq electrical interconnection project, emphasising its strategic importance in terms of Arab integration in the realm of electrical energy. He highlighted how this project acts as a vital conduit linking Iraq to its Arab Gulf counterparts.

He further mentioned that following the signing of the framework agreement between the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity and the GCCIA in 2019, the laying of the project's foundation stone represents a tangible manifestation of direct cooperation with their brethren, particularly with the GCCIA.

The project entails the implementation of a dual-circuit transmission line spanning from the Al-Zour Substation (400 kV), passing through the Al-Wafrah Substation (400 kV), and reaching the Al-Faw Substation (400 kV), encompassing a total length of 322km.

The anticipated capacity to be imported through this initiative is estimated at 500MW, thereby catering to the electricity requirements of the Basra governorate.

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX posts weekly gain as industrial stocks rise

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) posted weekly gains as industrial sector and financial sector stocks recorded positive movements during last week.

The MSX30 Index closed last week at 4,658.73 points, up by 28.1 points or 0.61% high from the previous trading session when it stood at 4630.63 points. All major sectoral indices rose except for the services sector index which fell by 1.52%. Industrial Index increased by 1.77%, Financial Sector Index was up by 0.42%, and MSX Sharia Index rose by 0.54%.

Local news

►Dhofar International Development and Investment Holding Company announced the approval of the board of directors of Oman Investment and Finance Company (OIFC) for the proposed merger. As per the terms of the proposal, the merger will be by the incorporation method and OIFC is valued at RO25.2mn.

►Galfar Engineering and Contracting Company has been awarded a massive contract worth RO280mn by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO). Galfar announced that PDO has awarded Galfar the Off-Plot Delivery Contract Qarn Alam via a letter of award that was formally accepted by both parties on May 25, 2023, and approval from PDO to disclose was confirmed on Sunday. The company estimates the value of this call-off contract to be approxi-

mately RO280mn for an execution period of seven years. The contract also includes an additional three-year extension option worth RO120mn.

►Oman Cement Company received a written notice from Abra Holdings Limited containing information relating to an acquisition offer to acquire 15.42% of the issued share capital of Oman Cement Company in accordance with the Takeover and Acquisition Regulation. The board of directors of Oman Cement Company confirmed that it is not seeking another person to make a competing offer for the shares in Oman Cement Company.

►Oman, represented by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, announced its decision to extend its voluntary cut of 40,000 barrels of oil per day until December 2024 as a precautionary measure. This decision, the ministry said, was made in coordination with the countries participating in the OPEC+ agreement, which includes both OPEC members and non-OPEC oil-producing countries.

►The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has announced significant changes in the authorised activities of finance and leasing companies (FLCs) in a move aimed at promoting growth and enhancing the sector's contribution to the economy. The decision, outlined in a recent circular, expands the scope of operations for FLCs and introduces new guidelines to govern their activities. Under the re-



vised regulations, FLCs are now permitted to accept deposits from corporate entities, with a minimum deposit size of RO5,000. This change opens up new avenues for FLCs to strengthen their financial position and diversify their services.

►Hydrogen Oman (Hydrom), a subsidiary of Energy Development Oman (EDO), signed three agreements granting the first green hydrogen blocks in Oman with a total investment value exceeding \$20bn. The first one was awarded through Phase A Round 1 public auction process, and the other two are awarded following the earlier signing of commercial term sheets. The signing of these agreements signifies another key milestone of Oman's journey to becoming a global hub for green hydrogen production.

GCC markets

The UAE's economic growth is expected to remain robust, averaging 4.6% from 2022 to 2024, driven by higher oil prices and improved business confidence, according to the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF). The AMF's Arab Economic Outlook Report forecasts a 4.2% growth rate for the UAE in 2023, accompanied by a decline in the consumer price index to 2.9% in 2023 and 2.57% in 2024. With stable oil and gas prices and lower prices for basic goods, such as agricultural products, the report projected a 3.4% growth for Arab economies, accompanied by tighter monetary policies to curb inflation.

Qatar recorded a budget surplus of QR19.7bn in the first quarter of 2023, its state news

agency said last week citing the finance ministry. Total revenues for the first quarter stood at QR68.6bn, of which QR63.4bn were oil and gas revenues while non-oil revenues amounted to QR5.2bn, the Qatar News Agency statement said.

Global news

US President Joe Biden last week signed a bill that suspends the US government's \$31.4tn debt ceiling, averting what would have been a first-ever default with just two days to spare. The House of Representatives and the Senate passed the legislation last week after Biden and House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy reached an agreement following tense negotiations. The Treasury Department had warned it would be unable to

pay all its bills if Congress had failed to act by then. Biden signed the bill at the White House a day after hailing it as a bipartisan triumph in his first-ever Oval Office address to the nation as president.

The United States' 'AAA' credit rating will remain on negative watch, despite a debt limit agreement that will allow the government to meet its obligations, Fitch Ratings said on last week.

Where the US Senate passed bipartisan legislation backed by President Joe Biden that lifts the government's \$31.4tn debt ceiling, following months of bickering between Democrats and Republicans. 'Reaching an agreement despite heated political partisanship while reducing fiscal deficits modestly over the next two years are positive considerations,' Fitch said in a statement.

US job growth accelerated in May, but a surge in the unemployment rate to a seven-month high of 3.7% suggested that labour market conditions were easing, which could give the Federal Reserve cover to skip an interest rate hike this month.

The increase in the unemployment rate from a 53-year low of 3.4% in April, which was reported by the Labor Department last week, was the largest since April 2020. Outside the COVID-19 pandemic, it was the biggest jump since 2010, reflecting a drop in household employment and a rise in the workforce. The gradual increase

in the labor pool is easing pressure on businesses to raise wages.

The Bank of England is trying to curb an inflation rate that is running higher in Britain than in the United States and the eurozone, without pushing the economy into a recession after having already increased borrowing costs 12 times since late 2021. The BoE is expected to raise rates again, to 4.75% from 4.5%, on June 22 after inflation slowed by less than it hoped in April. Investors see a roughly 60% chance that bank rate will climb to 5.5% later this year. Nonetheless, two of the Monetary Policy Committee's nine members say the delayed impact on the economy of the BoE's rate hikes to date mean there is no need to tighten policy any further.

Australia's central bank raised interest rates by a quarter-point to an 11-year high, and warned that further tightening may be required to ensure that inflation returns to target. The hawkish message sent the local dollar surging and bond yields spiking, as markets quickly moved to price in an above even chance of a further rate increase next month.

Wrapping up its June policy meeting, the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) hiked the cash rate to 4.1%, saying inflation is still too high and removed a reference that stated "medium-term inflation expectations remain well anchored," which had been in policy statements since July last year.

Eurozone in recession at start of 2023

Brussels, Belgium - The eurozone entered into a technical recession at the start of the year, shrinking by 0.1% for a second consecutive quarter, figures from the EU's statistic agency showed.

Eurostat revised down an earlier forecast that had predicted slight growth, after economic powerhouse Germany said last month it had fallen into recession.

The worse-than-expected figures come as inflation and higher interest rates have curbed demand in Europe's largest economy.

Eurostat cut its earlier estimate of 0% growth in the final quarter of 2022 and 0.1% growth in the first quarter of 2023 to 0.1% contractions in both periods.

Two consecutive quarters of shrinking gross domestic product is the threshold for a technical recession.

The bad news comes after a painful year for European economies as surging energy prices sparked by Russia's war on Ukraine sent inflation spiralling.

The European Central Bank has responded by hiking its key rates by 3.75 percentage points since embarking on an unprecedented campaign of monetary tightening in July last year.

The latest figures cast doubt over more optimistic predictions for the whole 2023.

The European Commission forecast in mid-May that growth for the year would reach 1.1% across the 20 countries that use the single currency.



Eurozone inflation remains well above the 2.0% target set by ECB

'Stagnation'

Charlotte de Montpellier, an economist at ING Bank, predicted that the figure for 2023 would only reach 0.5%.

"Since the spring, all the data has been bad", she told AFP, pointing in particular to German industrial production and new orders.

"The European economy is in a phase of stagnation and has had difficulty getting through the winter because of the energy shock."

Even though gas and oil prices have fallen in recent months, last year's surge in prices has had a major impact on household confidence and forced a reduction in consumption.

Capital Economics said in a note it thinks "GDP is likely to contract again in Q2 (the second quarter) as the effects of monetary policy tightening continue to feed through".

"Domestic demand has been hit hard by the combination of inflation and rising interest rates," it said.

Headline inflation for the 20 EU countries using the euro dipped to 6.1% in May.

But inflation remains well above the 2.0% target set by European Central Bank (ECB).

ECB chief Christine Lagarde said inflation remains "too high" and has suggested that a smaller rate increase could be on its way.

The news of a technical recession could put pressure on the central bank to hold off on further tightening.

Adding to Europe's woes, a slowdown in the United States and weaker-than-expected recovery in China are also weighing on exports.

AFP

FORESIGHT



SYED ADIL ABBAS

The writer is an MBA from Cardiff Metropolitan University (UK), currently based in Muscat, and has over 20 years of international experience working with the public and private sectors in the Middle East, Far East, Africa and India

As the world's temperature continues to rise and the impacts of climate change become increasingly apparent, scientists and policymakers are exploring a range of solutions to combat the problem. One of the proposed solutions is geoengineering, a set of technologies that aim to manipulate the Earth's climate to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Geoengineering techniques include removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, reflecting sunlight away from the Earth's surface, and manipulating weather patterns. While some of these techniques are still theoretical and largely untested, they offer a potential way to combat climate change if conventional approaches such as reducing emissions fall short.

One of the most promising geoengineering techniques is carbon dioxide removal, which involves removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it underground or in the ocean. This technique has the potential to reduce the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which would help to slow the rate of global warming. However, it is expensive and requires significant infrastructure and technology investments.

Another proposed geoengineering technique is solar radiation management, which involves reflecting sunlight away from the Earth's surface. This can be done by deploying reflective materials in the atmosphere or in the space. The idea is to reflect a portion of the sun's energy back

into space, reducing the amount of heat absorbed by the Earth's surface. While this technique is promising, it has the potential to disrupt weather patterns and could have unintended consequences.

Despite the potential benefits of geoengineering, there are also significant risks associated with these technologies. Manipulating the Earth's climate could have unintended consequences and may lead to new and unforeseen environmental problems. Additionally, geoengineering does not address the root cause of climate change, which is the burning of fossil fuels. While these technologies could buy time for the world to transition to a low-carbon

GEOENGINEERING: EMERGENCY BRAKE BEFORE CLIMATE RUNS WILD

economy, they should not be seen as a replacement for reducing emissions.

Despite the risks, experts believe that geoengineering is necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has suggested that geoengineering may be necessary to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, the threshold beyond which the most catastrophic impacts of climate change are expected to occur.

The climate change is already affecting Oman's ecosystems and geoengineering could provide a potential solution to

some of the challenges. For example, solar radiation management techniques could be used to cool urban areas and reduce the impact of heat waves. Carbon dioxide removal techniques could be used to sequester carbon emissions from industrial sources and potentially offset some of the country's carbon footprint.

However, there are also potential risks associated with geoengineering in Oman. Reflective materials deployed in the atmosphere or in space could potentially interfere with the country's weather patterns, affecting rainfall and water resources. Additionally, carbon dioxide removal techniques may require significant infrastructure investments and could potentially divert resources away from other pressing needs, such as food security.

In conclusion, geoengineering offers a potential solution to combat climate change if conventional approaches fall short. While there are significant risks associated with these technologies, they may be necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change.

However, they should not be seen as a replacement for reducing emissions, which remains the most effective way to combat climate change. Geoengineering should be seen as a last resort, a way to buy time for the world to transition to a low-carbon economy. In Oman, geoengineering could provide a potential solution to some of its unique challenges, but careful consideration and evaluation of the potential risks and benefits are necessary before deploying these technologies.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Muscat Daily or Apex Press & Publishing

India's central bank holds interest rates as inflation pressure eases

Mumbai, India - India's central bank on Thursday kept interest rates on hold for its second-straight meeting, citing easing inflation pressures, but warned about an uncertain global outlook.

The benchmark repurchase rate was left at 6.50% by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), bank governor Shaktikanta Das announced in a webcast, in line with expectations.

"The Monetary Policy Committee decided to remain focused on withdrawal of accommodation to ensure that inflation progressively aligns with the target while supporting growth," Das said.

"Headline inflation still remains above the target, and being within the tolerance band is not enough. Our goal is to achieve the target of 4.0% going forward."

Inflation hit a peak of 7.79% in April last year, well above the RBI's target range of 2.0-6.0%, before slowly easing to 4.7% in April.



RBI governor Shaktikanta Das

India's economy expanded 6.1% in January-March, the final quarter of the fiscal year, to take annual growth to 7.2%.

The South Asian nation of 1.4bn people, which recently overtook China to become the

worse by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Despite easing inflation, Das cautioned that a key risk factor was the warming El Nino weather phenomenon, which could weaken the monsoon and lift crop prices, stoking inflation.

Agriculture is a key cornerstone of India's economy and the annual monsoon is crucial to its food output.

"Close and continued vigil on the evolving inflation outlook is absolutely necessary, especially as the monsoon outlook and the impact of El Nino remains uncertain," Das said.

"Geopolitical tensions, uncertainties around the monsoon and international commodity prices, especially sugar and rice and also crude oil, and the volatility in global financial markets pose upside risks to inflation."

Headline inflation was projected to hit 5.1% in the 2023-24 financial year, he added.

AFP

Pakistan unveils \$51bn budget, sets aside over half to pay debt

Karachi, Pakistan - Pakistan's cash-strapped government unveiled a 14.5tn rupee (around \$50.5bn) budget Friday, with over half set aside to service 7.3tn rupees of debt.

Pakistan's economy has been stricken by a balance-of-payments crisis as it attempts to service crippling external debt, while months of political chaos have scared off potential foreign investment.



This handout photograph shows Ishaq Dar presenting the budget 2023-2024 in the national assembly in Islamabad on Friday (AFP)

Inflation has rocketed, the rupee has plummeted and the country can no longer afford imports, causing a severe decline in industrial output.

About 950bn rupees was earmarked for vote-winning development projects ahead of a general election later this year, while other populist measures include civil service pay rises of up to 35%, and a 17.5% increase for state pensions.

Presenting the budget to the National Assembly on Friday, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar insisted targets had been prudent.

"There are general elections in the country soon, but despite that the next fiscal-year budget is prepared as a responsible budget instead of an election budget," he said.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif blamed his predecessor Imran Khan - ousted by a vote of no-confidence in April last year - for the morass. "Our preceding government has battered the economy," he said.

Akhtar Khan Nawaz, a labourer at a fruit and vegetable market in the capital Islamabad, said "the poor were being humiliated".

"(The budget) will be of no use unless inflation is reduced, the poor will only get relief if inflation is eased," he told AFP.

Sharif said he was optimistic for an extension later this month on an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan facility crucial to keeping the economy afloat.

"The IMF chief has given his verbal commitment... there is no hindrance," he said.

The IMF has told Pakistan it needs to secure additional external financing, scrap a swathe of populist subsidies, and allow the rupee to float freely against the dollar before unlocking another tranche of the \$6.5bn facility.

Still, the latest budget sets aside 1.07tn rupees for subsidies.

"The government definitely has to take such popular decisions as it is the election year," said Nasir Iqbal, an economist at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE).

The country failed to meet any economic growth targets for the fiscal year 2022-23, according to a key government report released Thursday, with GDP growth a miserly 0.3%.

Dar said Friday the latest budget was based on GDP growth of 3.5%, although the World Bank projected a less-ambitious two percent growth in a report issued earlier this week.

It also had an annual inflation forecast of 21%, against a current year-on-year rate of 37.97%.

The economy has also been ravaged by record monsoon floods last year that left almost a third of the country underwater, laying waste to vast swathes of farmland and leaving tens of millions homeless.

But the political crisis remains the biggest risk factor in the months ahead.

Former premier Khan's hugely popular campaign to return to office spilled into street violence after his brief arrest last month, prompting a massive crackdown on his party including mass arrests and trials scheduled for military courts.

The army holds undue influence over Pakistan politics, having staged at least three successful coups leading to decades of martial law.

Attacks by militants have also risen since the Taliban took control in neighbouring Afghanistan, further undermining the prospect of foreign investment.

On Friday Dar earmarked 1.8tn rupees for defence spending - up from last year's 1.5tn rupees.

AFP

Japan economy grew more than thought in Q1

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's economy expanded 0.7% in the January-March quarter, up from an initial estimate of 0.4%, government data showed Thursday.

The latest figure - which also beat market expectations of 0.5 percent growth - reflects strong corporate investments, data released by the Cabinet Office showed.

The first-quarter number is much stronger than the 0.1%

seen in the final quarter of 2022.

"Exports declined sharply, reflecting slowing in economies overseas while domestic demand such as individual consumption and corporate investment grew, leading to economic growth as a whole," Saisuke Sakai, chief economist of Mizuho Research & Technologies, said in a note ahead of the data's release.

"Given that the economy saw

contraction in the July-September quarter... the Japanese economy's recovery is still not enough" to match pre-Covid pandemic levels in 2019, he said.

Looking ahead, Japan's economy will likely keep growing, led by domestic demand thanks partly to inbound tourism," he added.

The latest data comes after a government survey released earlier this week showed that real-

term wages for workers in Japan declined three percent in April from a year earlier.

A separate government report has also found household spending in April dipped 4.4% in real terms from the previous year.

Sakai said "real-term wages are expected to rise in the latter half of the current fiscal year" to March 2024.

AFP

OAB, Alizz Islamic support Dakhliyah Investment Forum

Oman Arab Bank and Alizz Islamic Bank have joined hands with Al Dakhliyah Governorate represented by Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Office to explore opportunities in Al Dakhliyah Governorate at the first of its kind Investment Forum.

Scheduled to take place on June 11 and 12, the preparatory workshop will serve as a platform for the forum to identify investment prospects in areas of agriculture, industry, heritage and tourism in the governorate as well as gain insights on interested investors. The event is the initial installment in a series that will subsequently expand to the other governorates. Throught these projects, both banks aim to foster innovation, facilitate ease of business and provide equal opportunities for all, a press release said.

Sulaiman al Harthi, CEO of Oman Arab Bank, said, "Together with Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up unit and the Governor's office, we are working together to understand the specific needs of each governorate and explore development



projects that will yield economic returns on the local communities and ultimately Oman."

"Achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040 is of incredible importance to the private sector, holding the keys to our economic prosperity and competitiveness, and maintaining pace with regional and global developments. We all have vital roles to play as we strengthen economic relations between the government and private sector - and the banking industry is a particularly important driver of progress."

Ali al Mani, general manager of Alizz Islamic Bank, said "This

forum is dedicated to advancing economic development of the Governorate of Al Dakhliyah by identifying untapped opportunities. By nurturing and prioritising the pivotal sectors of industry, tourism, and agriculture, we aim to stimulate robust economic growth and support in creating a thriving and sustainable economy for the governorate."

Ahlam bint Hamed al Qassabi, director of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Office in Al Dakhliyah Governorate added, "The governorate is committed to consistently improving the investment environment, with a strong emphasis on

three key sectors: industry, heritage and tourism, and agriculture. We are dedicated to channeling our efforts into these sectors. We will diligently examine and evaluate the investment opportunities that arise from the workshop, in close collaboration with various government entities."

The introductory workshop will host a range of discussion sessions across two days showcasing investment opportunities. It is aimed at bolstering ongoing economic diversification efforts in Al Dakhliyah, which has experienced a surge in economic development and projects.



ODP wins award for digital transformation

Oman Data Park, the Sultanate's first cloud services and managed cyber security provider, won an award for Ten Years of Excellence in Digital Transformation during the 8th edition of the New Age Banking Summit 2023, held on May 31.

The conference discussed many topics related to the banking and financial sector, such as the open APIs in banking and finance, challenges and opportu-

nities in embracing digital transformation at a faster pace, the ways of managing a balance between shareholders' expectations, the overcoming disruption threats and business growth, the collaboration between banks, regulatory bodies and challenger enterprises, data-driven banking, the utilization of AI in banking, and the other related topics, a press release said.

The taking part of Oman Data

Park, the cloud services partner of this edition, included an active contribution to the conference discussions among the panelists, where Eng Maqbool al Wahaibi, CEO, of Oman Data Park, deliberated on the topic 'Navigating the Digital Age of Banking', while Hassan Abdul Ali, general manager - of Business Development, at Oman Data Park, gave a presentation on 'Cloud Transformation for Banking'.

MoE meets heads of private schools

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Directorate-General of Private Schools, organised a meeting with those concerned in the departments of private schools in the educational directorates in the governorates.

The meeting targeted 60 directors of private school departments and heads of departments in the Directorates-General of education in the governorates. It was held under the auspices of H E Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambo-saidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education, in the presence of representatives from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Petroleum Development Oman Company, the ministry's legal department, and a number of the directorate's employees, at the Training and Emergency Centre in the Civil Aviation Authority building, a press release said.

The meeting began with a recitation of two poems - Falak al Mahaba by Salim al Kalbani and Cradle and Glory by Yahya al Hasani, recited by student Mansour bin Nasser al Hussein, a 6 grader at Sheikh Hamdan Al Yousifi School in



Seeb, followed by a welcome panel entitled 'Welcome, Hala' presented by the students of Al Mouj Private School, in Seeb.

Dr Ambo-saidi said, "Private school education is complementary to public school education, and the School Education Law emphasised the role and importance of private schools, which are an important gain and support for the role of the Directorate-General of Private Schools in organising the private school education sector.

We hope to enhance the status of private schools and the roles they play, and there is no doubt that there is continuous support from the ministry for private schools, in accordance with the laws and regu-

lations in force for private schools."

Dr Khadija al Salami, acting director-general of private schools, said, "This forum comes within the framework of the continuous efforts of the Ministry of Education represented by the Directorate-General of Private Schools, and its constant interest in improving work in the private school education sector.

It is also keen to develop human resources in supervising these schools, and following up their work progress as a basic pillar aimed at increasing knowledge, skills and capabilities, and exchanging experiences in order to raise the level of performance and productive efficiency."

Kempinski effects new appointments



Mohamed Haidar

Kempinski Hotel Muscat has announced the appointment of Mohamad Haidar as Executive Pastry Chef. Mohamad brings with him more than 15 years of extensive pastry chef experience, having led the pastry kitchen team for leading hotels and restaurants across several countries in the Middle East & Europe.

Mohamad joins Kempinski Muscat from his most recent role as Head Pastry Chef for L'Oscar London, a luxury boutique hotel in London where his mission was to manage all aspects of the pastry and bakery sections, including menu development, team mem-



Manal Amwaj

bers training and ensuring compliance with food safety and quality standards, a press release said.

Meanwhile, Manal al Omari has been appointed assistant director of marketing & e-commerce. Manal brings with her more than 10 years of experience in e-commerce and marketing, having led the e-commerce and digital departments for leading hotel chains across several countries in the Middle East. She joins Kempinski Hotel Muscat from her most recent role as Marketing Manager for the prestigious Burj Al Arab in Dubai.



MoE concludes ideal weight challenge project

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Omani Federation of School Sports, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, concluded the ideal weight challenge project.

The closing ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Majid bin Said al Bahri, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial Affairs, in the presence of Abdullah bin Khalifa al Saadi, director general of Financial Affairs at the Ministry of Education, a number of representatives of the Omani School Sports Association, representatives from the Ministry of Health, and ambassadors of the federation, a press

release said.

The project was launched as an experiment in 12 schools from the first cycle of education in Muscat Governorate, targetting students in the second and third grades, with a total number of about 200 students. The student, Lujain Al-Barwani, won the first place from the Ajyal Muscat School for Basic Education, Khalid Al-Maamari from Ghala School for Basic Education came in second place, and Nour Al-Bahrani came in third place from Al-Radwan School for Basic Education. At the general level, Al-Tibyan School for Basic Education won the Project Award.

228 PDO Emdad trainees graduate

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) celebrated the graduation of 228 young Omanis as part of its Emdad initiative in collaboration with the 'Musalih' platform.

The ceremony was held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) in Muscat under the auspices of H E Sayyid Salim Musallam al Busaidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources, a press release said.

Following an agreement signed in 2020 between PDO and the Musalih platform, the graduates joined a training programme in specialised technical fields including plumbing, fixing and installation of electrical connections.

Qualified graduates will join Musalih, which is an online handy-

man services platform. It links Omani professionals with customers in need for household services. Through the platform, customers can choose the type and timing of service, with clear prices and within a short time.

PDO External Affairs and Value Creation director Eng Abdul-Amir bin Abdul-Hussein al Ajmi said, "Today's celebration proves that the potential of young Omanis has no limits, and bears witness to their great capabilities.

We hope that their successful experience in these fields will motivate others to pursue the prospects of freelancing as an important secondary source of income, which mainly depends on self-learning and the personal skills of individuals."

SPAR Oman opens 26th outlet at Al Khoud

SPAR Oman opened its 26th store at Al Khoud. Strategically located near Sultan Qaboos University, SPAR will offer customers a premium shopping experience that combines freshness, convenience, variety, and affordability.

As part of the launch celebration, a special promotion themed 'Fresh and Local' will feature special deals until the 10th of June, a press release said.

"The SPAR brand has become a household name in Oman, thanks to our customers' trust and confidence," said M Sridhar, CEO of SPAR Oman.

"Since the opening of the first SPAR store in Oman in 2014, SPAR has enjoyed exceptional growth and has continued to expand its operations.



"Today, SPAR has become synonymous with freshness,

choice, and value with superior customer service. We are

actively listening to customer feedback and expanding our

offerings." Sridhar said about SPAR's growth profile.

Bank Muscat inaugurates new branch in Al Hail

Bank Muscat celebrated the opening of its new branch in Al Hail in the Wilayat of Seeb. The inauguration ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali al Shehhi, Wali of Seeb, and in the presence of members of the bank's executive management, and media representatives.

The new branch in Al Hail is an integrated branch with a modern design that takes into account the advanced standards related to the banking sector. It is designed to provide a comfortable experience to all customers to conduct transactions in one place as it includes an Asalah Priority Banking Center, special sections for Baituna and Sayyarti products as well as safe deposit boxes, a press release said.

The branch is also equipped to facilitate access of persons with disabilities to various banking services. The new branch is operated by experienced Omani cadres, who are ready to provide the best services for customers. The services provided by the branch can be availed during weekdays from Sunday to Thursday, from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon.

Abdulnaseer N al Raisi, general



manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said, "We are pleased to launch the newest addition to our retail banking branches to provide various banking services and facilities to customers, who can accomplish a wide range of banking transactions, including opening accounts, cards and financing services in addition to various commercial facilities to ensure

the provision of the best and most quality services. The bank's branches form an important channel and a direct link with customers and we are always happy to listen to customer feedback and suggestions to continue developing services and meet their aspirations and needs, strengthen our relationship with them and develop it to new heights of successful and

effective communication."

Saleh Mohammed al Maani, deputy general manager, Capital Regions, Bank Muscat, commented, "The bank is keen to make various banking services and facilities available and closer to customers. Today, we are delighted to open this new branch in Al Hail in the Wilayat of Seeb to add to the network of branches in Muscat Governorate, where we now have 55

branches designed to meet the needs of a large segment of customers. The bank will continue the process of development and improvement, translating its vision 'To serve you better, everyday'. I take this opportunity to invite customers to visit the branch and take advantage of the various banking services and facilities offered by Bank Muscat."

Omantel invests in byanat for Data Analytics services

Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, has invested in Byanat's Seed Funding Round to expand the provision of data analytics solutions through a software-as-a-service (SaaS) analytics platform for telecommunications operators and service providers.

The funding round featured participation from 500 Global in collaboration with Sanabil Investments, an investment fund owned by the Public Investments Fund (PIF) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Al Jabr MENA, a startup development and innovation firm. This funding is set to expedite byanat's technology and product development and enable entry into the Saudi market, a press release said.

Byanat is one of the tech companies that was incubated at Omantel Innovation Labs. The company aims to enhance infrastructure in the telecom, energy, and utilities sectors. Their SaaS analytics platform assists businesses in effectively scaling and maintaining connected infrastructure, by unifying communication management, device management, and data analytics. Talal bin Said al Mamari, CEO of Omantel, commented, "This historic investment partnership is an eloquent endorsement of the

trust global investors have in Omani startups. It also reflects Omantel's far-sighted vision towards innovation and technology. Omantel's investment in Byanat is driven by our confidence in its potential to revolutionise the technology industry, not just in Oman but worldwide.

As we continue to focus on enhancing and growing our innovative services and infrastructure, we also place a high priority on empowering startups through various programs offered by Omantel Innovation Labs."

Omantel Innovation Labs, Oman's innovation and entrepreneurship centre, fosters Omani tech startups and cultivates a thriving ecosystem. Their investment in Byanat reaffirms their dedication to nurturing ground-breaking startups and reinforcing Oman's status as a regional leader in technology and innovation.

Ahmed al Ghadani, CEO of Byanat, said, "With this milestone investment, our focus at byanat is firmly set on the future. We're committed to scaling our operations, expanding our product offerings, and reaching new markets, ensuring that we remain at the forefront."

Byanat has made waves, winning the Machine Learning Award in Data.

Minister of Education receives winning football teams

H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, received in her office the two North Al Sharqiyah educational winning teams of the football tournament for the first cycle schools in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate, which was organised by the Directorate-General of Education in North Al Sharqiyah, and under the supervision of the School Sports Committee of the Omani Federation for School Sports.

The reception of the students was attended by H E Majid bin Said al Bahri, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial Affairs,



Alia bint Said al Habsi, director general of North Al Sharqiyah Educational Directorate, and representatives of the directorate's Sports Committee members, a press release said.

Forty two schools from the first cycle-education schools in

North Al Sharqiyah participated in the league, and the matches were played in a two-times knockout system. The participating teams were divided into five groups, in which Al Roya School for Basic Education won the first place, Al Mudhaibi School came

in the second, and Al Khadhras School came in the third.

Alia al Habsi said, "The football league for school students enhances their athletic abilities, utilises their time, and connects the local community with the educational community. The efforts of parents and clubs have emerged with the efforts of the different teams that came together to produce sports teams at a very high level. What we saw during the final match between the two teams of Al Roya School and Al Mudhaibi School is the high skills of these students, which enhances their identity and their health.



Six Senses Zighy Bay offers summer treats

This summer, Six Senses Zighy Bay, one of the region's most treasured and hidden destinations, is treating guests to 'Eat With Six Senses', a limited time complimentary half-board upgrade with every night's stay, inclusive of breakfast and an evening dining experience.

Located just over two hours away from Dubai, guests can enjoy the laidback drive from Dubai through to Musandam, amidst the magnificent Hajar mountains, before arriving at the resort, situated within Zighy Bay itself, a press release said.

Part of the local fabric and cul-

ture yet in tune with the wider world, Six Senses Zighy Bay undoubtedly offers an all-encompassing and unique range of experiences to stimulate, energize and restore. The 82-villa resort is truly a natural playground, perfect for adventure-seekers, couples, families or just those looking for a private long Eid weekend or summer getaway with limited access to the outside world.

Food is always on the agenda at Six Senses Zighy Bay, and under the resort's executive chef, guests can expect delicious dishes from fresh seasonal menus

which showcase a range of local flavors. Each menu is crafted in line with 'Eat With Six Senses' guiding principles, which is to use natural ingredients, sourced locally and sustainably.

As part of 'Eat With Six Senses' offer, guests can enjoy a three-course dinner from the a la carte menu at the Spice Market, known for its authentic regional flavors engulfed with rustic earthy tones and a serene ambiance, inclusive of Spice Market buffets and Indian Thali nights, or the Summer House and the Zighy Bar, which both serve classic dishes with a contemporary twist.

BankDhofar expands network in S Sharqiyah

Reinforcing its expansion strategy, BankDhofar has recently announced the official opening of three more branches in South Sharqiyah Governorate - Sur branch, Al Ashkhara branch, and Masirah branch.

This step translates BankDhofar's endeavour to be closer to customers across the sultanate, and provide them with the best banking experience, a press release said.

The opening ceremonies were held in the presence of a number of prominent members of the society and BankDhofar executive management team. Sur branch



was officially opened under the patronage of H E Dr Yaha Badr al Maawali - Governor of South Al Sharqiyah, Al Ashkhara branch was opened under the patronage

of Sheikh Nayef Hamoud al Maamari- Deputy Wali of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, while Masirah branch was opened under the patronage of Sheikh Abdul Hameed al Abri -

Deputi Wali of Masirah.

Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, chief retail banking officer at BankDhofar, stressed that the opening of these branches in South Al Sharqiyah Governorate is part of a broader strategy to grow BankDhofar's presence across the country. "The new branches will offer a range of banking services to customers. We will continue our efforts to get closer to our customers and open more branches." He added.

BankDhofar has a nationwide network of 92 branches, including BankDhofar, Maisarah, and two corporate branches.

Training Camp for International Chemistry Olympiad concludes

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Department of Innovation and Scientific Olympiads, concluded the final training camp for students participating in the Abu Rayhan Al Biruni International Chemistry Olympiad. The training camp lasted for six days at the Wyndham Garden Hotel Muscat.

The training camp came in preparation for the actual participation in the Abu Rayhan Al Biruni International Chemistry Olympiad in its first edition for

the year 2023, which is to be held in the city of Khwarizm in the Republic of Uzbekistan this month from 11 to 17 of June, a press release said.

The participating students were had intensive daily theoretical and practical training for a period of (8) hours in six days, in addition to solving global exercises and problems inspired by previous international Olympiads to get them used to the pattern of questions in cooperation with an external trainer,



in addition to the national trainers.

The mechanism for selecting the participating students was in three stages. In the first stage, the educational directorates in the governorates nominated a number of excellent students in chemistry. In the second stage, the ministry implemented a training programme - remotely - with the participation of more than (64) students, from the beginning of February until the beginning of May, in cooperation

with an outside trainer. In the third stage, the Ministry, represented by the Department of Innovation and Scientific Olympiad, implemented a central test at the level of the Sultanate to select the national team.

The Sultanate of Oman is participating with a national team comprising (4) school students in the Olympiad of Abu Al Rayhan Al Biruni, which is held every two years in the Republic of Uzbekistan and lasts for seven days.

FOUND ALIVE!

Indigenous children lost for 40 days in Colombian Amazon found alive

Bogotá, Colombia - Four Indigenous children who had been missing for more than a month in the Colombian Amazon rainforest were found alive and flown to the capital Bogota early on Saturday.

The children, who survived a small plane crash in the jungle, were transported by army medical plane to a military airport at around 00:30am on Saturday (0530 GMT).

They were immediately taken off the plane on stretchers with ambulances waiting to bring them to hospital.

"Today we have had a magical day," President Gustavo Petro told the media earlier on Friday, after announcing their rescue. "They are weak. Let's let the doctors make their assessment," he added.

The president had posted a photo on Twitter showing several adults, some dressed in military fatigues, tending to the children as they sat on tarps in the jungle. One rescuer held a bottle to the mouth of the smallest child, whom he held in his arms. "A joy for the whole country! The 4 children who were



One of the four Indigenous children who were found alive is stretchered out of a plane upon landing at the CATAM military base in Bogota on Saturday (AFP)

lost 40 days ago in the Colombian jungle were found alive," he wrote on Twitter.

Video shared by the Defense Ministry late on Friday showed the children being pulled up into a helicopter as it hovered over the tall trees in almost complete

darkness.

Originally from the Huitoto Indigenous group, the children - aged 13, nine, four and one - had been wandering alone in the jungle since May 1, when the Cessna 206 in which they were traveling crashed.

The pilot had reported engine problems only minutes after taking off from a jungle area known as Araracuara on the 350km (217-mile) journey to the town of San Jose del Guaviare.

The bodies of the pilot, the

children's mother and a local Indigenous leader were all found at the crash site, where the plane sat almost vertical in the trees.

Officials said that the group had been fleeing threats from members of an armed group.

A massive search involving 160 soldiers and 70 Indigenous people with intimate knowledge of the jungle was launched after the crash, garnering global attention.

The area is home to jaguars, snakes and other predators, as well as armed drug smuggling groups, but ongoing clues - footprints, a diaper, half-eaten fruit - led authorities to believe they were on the right track.

Worried that the children would continue wandering and become ever more difficult to locate, the air force dumped 10,000 flyers into the forest with instructions in Spanish and the children's own Indigenous language, telling them to stay put. The leaflets also included survival tips, and the military dropped food parcels and bottled water.

Rescuers had also been

broadcasting a message recorded by the children's grandmother, urging them not to move.

According to the military, rescuers found the children about five kilometres (three miles) west of the crash site.

The children, who survived a small plane crash in the jungle, were transported by army medical plane to a military airport

'Absolute survival'

Huitoto children learn hunting, fishing and gathering, and the kids' grandfather, Fidencio Valencia, had told AFP the children are well acquainted with the jungle.

News of the rescue came as Petro returned home from Cuba, where he signed a six-

month truce with Colombia's last active guerrilla group, the ELN.

"Getting closer and attaining peace in the agreement that is moving forward with the ELN... And now I return and the first news is that indeed the Indigenous communities that were in the search and the military forces found the children 40 days later," he told reporters in Bogota.

"They were alone, they made it on their own. An example of absolute survival that will go down in history," he said. Seventeen days after the children went missing, Petro announced that they had been found alive, but he retracted the statement a day later, saying he had been given false information.

On Friday, he praised "the effective coordination between the military and the Indigenous people" during the search, saying it was an "example of an alliance for the country to follow."

Valencia told AFP that the children had been found by a native of Araracuara who had been participating in the search. AFP

The 40-day search for four children aged 13, nine, four and 11 months

Bogotá, Colombia - For 40 days after their plane crashed, four Indigenous children were lost in the Colombian Amazon rainforest. AFP looks at the timeline of events.

Doomed flight

On the morning of May 1, a Cessna 206 plane run by Avianline Charters left a jungle area known as Araracuara to head for San Jose del Guaviare, one of the main towns in the Colombian Amazon.

On board were the pilot, an Indigenous leader of the Huitoto community, as well as

Magdalena Mucutui Valencia and her four children - aged 13, nine, four and 11 months.

Minutes after starting the 350km (217-mile) flight over the jungle, the pilot reported engine problems and the plane disappeared from radar.

According to officials, the four Huitoto siblings boarded the plane with their mother to flee threats from members of an armed group.

Signs of life

Between May 15 and 16, soldiers found the bodies of the pilot and the two adults in the

Caqueta area. The plane was stuck vertically in thick vegetation, with its nose destroyed.

They did not locate the children. A sniffer dog found the baby's bottle in a secluded spot near the crash site.

More than 100 military personnel were deployed to the area, suspecting there was at least one survivor.

The search was joined by dozens of Indigenous people from nearby villages who are accustomed to traveling through the Amazon - home to jaguars, snakes and other predators, as well as armed drug

smuggling groups.

Military aircraft dumped 10,000 flyers into the forest with survival tips and instructions in Spanish and the children's own Indigenous language. Shoes, clothes and half-eaten fruit were found among the trees.

About 2.5km from the crash site, soldiers also found a camp abandoned by guerrillas.

Premature announcement

Heavy rainfall and giant trees that can grow up to 40 metres (130 feet) tall made the 'Oper-

ation Hope' search difficult.

Three weeks after the crash, soldiers found diapers and shoes, and claimed that they had passed within 100 metres of the children. The search was reduced to a 20sqkm section of jungle.

On May 17, soldiers came across a makeshift shelter, constructed out of sticks and branches. A dog also found scissors and hair ties.

On the same day, President Gustavo Petro announced that the children had been found alive. But he retracted the statement a day later, saying

he had been given false information. On May 26, the military organised a symbolic celebration for the baby, who turned one year old that day, having spent almost a month lost in the jungle.

Finally found

On June 9, Petro announced that the children were found alive and released a photo showing them surrounded by soldiers and Indigenous people who participated in the search. The children appear thin and have no shoes.

"They were alone, they

made it on their own. An example of absolute survival that will go down in history," the president said. According to the military, rescuers found the children about 5km west of the crash site.

Army rescuers "immediately took charge of and stabilised" the four siblings, who were transferred to San Jose del Guaviare, according to the defense minister.

They arrived at a military airport in Bogota early on June 10, with ambulances waiting to take them to hospital. AFP

Blinken reschedules postponed Beijing visit

Washington, US - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to China next week, rescheduling a visit that was canceled in February after a saga over a suspected surveillance balloon, US officials said on Friday.

Blinken is expected to arrive in Beijing on June 18, the first trip by a top US diplomat to China since his predecessor Mike Pompeo in October 2018, US officials said on condition of anonymity.

The State Department has not officially announced his travel. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby recently said the US would announce travel by senior officials "in the near future" without giving details. Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met in Bali in November and agreed to try to stop high tensions from soaring out of control, including by sending Blinken to Beijing.

AFP

France: Man gets 18 years in jail for burning alive pregnant girl

Beauvais, France - A court in France sentenced a man to 18 years in prison on Friday for stabbing and then burning alive his 15-year-old girlfriend.

The 2019 killing of the secondary school pupil, identified in court only as Shaina, revived outrage in France over the number of women who die at the hands of intimate partners.

The court was told that the accused, a 17-year-old high school student at the time, had lured Shaina to a shed in the town of Creil north of Paris to kill her and burn her body.

Post-mortem forensic examination revealed 'multiple wounds' inflicted by a knife, but also that Shaina was still breathing at the start of the fire.

According to public prosecutor Loic Abrial, the crime was 'premeditated at every stage'.

He had sought a tougher, 20 or 30-year sentence, but the court took the accused's status as a minor into consideration.

In response, Shaina's brother, Yasin, cried angrily.

"18 years! That's justice in France," he shouted at the special juvenile court in Oise, and had a tense exchange with the accused before collapsing and being taken



A relative holds a placard prior to the trial of the alleged murderer of Shaina Hansye, at the Juvenile Assize Court of Beauvais on June 5 (AFP)

to hospital. Restrictions prevent the media from identifying the accused, who has staunchly maintained his innocence.

"Why, why?" he said in reaction to the verdict, following four-hour deliberations.

"You're wrong, I'm innocent." Defence lawyer Elise Arfi said it was 'too early' to comment on the possibility of an appeal.

The case made waves in France where a woman is murdered by her partner or former partner every three days.

Shaina's murder was particularly shocking, not only because of her young age, but also because two years earlier she had been the victim of sexual assault,

for which four other young people were given suspended sentences ranging from six months to two years in prison. Graphic images of her assault had been posted online with the aim, according to lawyers, of showing Shaina as a person 'who they can sleep with but also get rid of'.

Described by her mother as 'funny and smiling', Shaina was probably in the early stages of pregnancy at the time of her murder, according to investigators. The day before she was killed, she had gone out after a family dinner. In her handbag relatives had found a positive pregnancy test.

AFP

Massive 'chirping' blue egg sculpture hatches in Warsaw

Warsaw, Poland - In a square in central Warsaw, a couple of people are bent over a huge sculpture of a blue egg, their heads turned and pressed against the shell.

As they listen to the soft sounds of a baby bird hatching, a hooded crow cocks his head and sips from a shallow pool of water installed nearby.

"This chick and the mini-pond next to it speak to a sensitivity to Warsaw's non-human residents," Warsaw deputy mayor Aldona Machnowska-Gora said at the unveiling.

"Don't hesitate to walk up to the egg and hug it. It makes for an incredible experience," she said.

Located at Five Corners Square - once home to an arena where animals would fight to the death - the acoustic installation titled The Hatchling is a call for empathy with other lifeforms in the era of climate change.

"The idea was to bend people's bodies over something other than themselves," said Joanna Rajkowska, the artist behind the sculpture.

"We care about our well-being so much. It's like a complete obsession... It's time to



People interact with 'The Hatchling. Song Thrush' by Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska at five corners square in Warsaw on Thursday (AFP)

think about other species," she told AFP.

'The Hatchling speaks'

At around two metres (6.6 feet) high and three metres long, The Hatchling is a larger than life version of a song thrush's blue spotted egg.

The colour is more intense than the real blue because the sculpture will inevitably fade in the sun. "Inside, instead of a bird, we have a lot of electronics, a lot of circuits and sound transducers... So The Hatchling speaks," said Rajkowska.

"Literally, like pecking the shell. But also the heartbeat,

which is three times faster than the human heart. You can also hear all the movements and the chirping," she added.

"So it's a whole spectrum of sounds. Basically the desperate life that is trying to get out of the egg."

She teamed up with her musician partner for the recordings, though they do not come from a song thrush, as the stress of the process would have been enormous for a wild bird.

"An ornithologist told me that if I take an egg from the nest and then return it, the parents will not accept it... So I decided to find safe conditions," Rajkowska said. AFP

6 civilians killed in Somalia siege

The assault, for which Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, began before 8pm on Friday

Mogadishu, Somalia - Six civilians were killed and 10 wounded in a six-hour siege by Islamist Al-Shabaab militants at a beachside hotel in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, police said on Saturday.

The Al-Qaeda-linked militants have been waging an insurgency against the internationally backed federal government for more than 15 years and have often targeted hotels, which tend to host high-ranking Somali and foreign officials.

"Six civilians were martyred in the attack... and 10 others were wounded. Three brave members of the security forces were martyred during the rescue operation," the Somali Police Force said in a statement.

The assault, for which Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, began just before 8pm on Friday (1700 GMT) when seven attackers stormed the Pearl Beach hotel, a popular spot at Lido Beach along Mogadishu's coastline. It ended at around 2am, police said, after a fierce gunfight between security forces and the militants, all of whom were killed during the battle.

"The security forces managed to rescue 84 people including women and children and elderly people," the police statement added.

Witnesses reported hearing



An ambulance enters the site of an attack at the Pearl Beach Hotel in Mogadishu on Saturday (AFP)

Six civilians were martyred in the attack... and 10 others were wounded. Three brave members of the security forces were martyred during the rescue operation

SOMALI POLICE FORCE

gunfire and explosions at the hotel on Lido beach.

"I was near the Pearl Beach restaurant when (a) heavy explosion occurred in front of the building," one witness, Abdurahim Ali, told AFP.

"I have managed to flee but there was heavy gunfire afterwards and the security forces rushed to the area."

Yaasin Nur was at the restaurant and told AFP it was 'full of people as it was recently reno-

uated'. "I'm worried because there are several of my colleagues who went there and two of them are not responding to their phones," he said.

Several ambulances were also parked nearby, an AFP journalist saw.

'All-out war'

The attack at Lido beach underscored the endemic security problems in the Horn of Africa country as it struggles to emerge

from decades of conflict and natural disasters.

Al-Shabaab, which was driven out of Somalia's main towns and cities by an African Union force, still controls large swathes of countryside and continues to carry out attacks against security and civilian targets, including in the capital.

Last year, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud launched an 'all-out war' against Al-Shabaab, rallying Somalis to help flush out members of the militant group he described as 'bedbugs'.

His pledge came after 21 people were killed and 117 others were wounded in an Al-Shabaab siege on a Mogadishu hotel in August 2022 that lasted 30 hours.

That attack raised serious questions about the security forces, who failed to protect a heavily guarded administrative district.

Two months later, twin car bombings in Mogadishu killed 121 people and injured 333 in the country's deadliest attack in five years.

The army and militias known as 'macawisley' have in recent months retaken swathes of territory in the centre of the country in an operation backed by the African Union mission ATMIS and US air strikes.

But Al-Shabaab fighters killed 54 Ugandan peacekeepers last month in an attack on an African Union base in the southern town of Bulo Marer.

AFP



Smoke rises above buildings as people gather at a market to buy food provisions, in Khartoum on Saturday (AFP)

Latest ceasefire in Sudan begins as civilians voice disappointment

Khartoum, Sudan - A 24-hour ceasefire took effect on Saturday between Sudan's warring generals but, with fears running high it will collapse like its predecessors, US and Saudi mediators warn they may break off mediation efforts.

With the fighting now about to enter a third month, civilians trapped in the battlegrounds in greater Khartoum and the flash-point western region of Darfur are desperate for relief from the bloodshed but deeply sceptical about the sincerity of the generals. Multiple truces have been agreed and broken since fighting erupted on April 15, and Washington had slapped sanctions on both rival generals after the last attempt collapsed at the end of May.

The nationwide truce announced by US and Saudi mediators on Friday took effect at 6am (0400 GMT).

'Should the parties fail to observe the 24-hour ceasefire, facilitators will be compelled to consider adjourning' talks in the Saudi city of Jeddah which have been suspended since late last month, the mediators said.

Civilians voiced disappointment that the promised ceasefire was so limited in scope.

"A one-day truce is much less than we aspire for," said Khartoum North resident Mahmud Bashir. "We look forward to an end to this damned war."

Issam Mohamed Omar said he wanted an agreement that required fighters of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) who had occupied his home in Khartoum to leave so that he can return there from his temporary lodgings across the Nile in Omdurman. "For me, a truce that doesn't kick the RSF out of the

home they kicked (me) out of three weeks ago, doesn't mean anything to me," he said.

Sudan specialist Aly Verjee said he saw little reason why this truce should be honoured any more than its predecessors.

"Unfortunately, the incentives have not changed for either party, so it's hard to see that a truce with the same underlying assumptions, especially one of such short duration, will see a substantially different result, said Verjee, a researcher at Sweden's University of Gothenburg.

Upwards of 1,800 people have been killed in the fighting, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Nearly two million people have been displaced, including 476,000 who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, the United Nations says.

The Saudi and US mediators said they 'share the frustration of the Sudanese people about the uneven implementation of previous ceasefires'.

The army, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, said it has 'agreed to the proposal', adding in a statement it 'declares its commitment to the ceasefire'.

The paramilitary RSF, commanded by Burhan's former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, said: "We affirm our full commitment to the ceasefire."

Both statements said the truce could support humanitarian efforts, while cautioning against violations by their opponents. "If observed, the 24-hour ceasefire will provide an important opportunity... for the parties to undertake confidence-building measures which could permit resumption of the Jeddah talks," the US-Saudi statement said.

AFP

Unclear if 'pirates' threatened Turkey ship crew: Italy media

Rome, Italy - The crew of a cargo ship boarded by Italian special forces may not have been threatened by knife-wielding 'pirates' as initially reported, Italian media said on Saturday.

On Friday, Italy's defence minister said marines had dropped onto a vessel off the nation's coast after reports that that 'stowaways' used knives to threaten the crew.

The ship, *Galata Seaways* sailing under a Turkish flag, was then escorted to Naples, where Italian investigators were questioning the crew and others aboard.

According to Friday media reports and statements from the defence ministry, the ship captain radioed for help after knife-wielding migrants, who had secretly boarded the vessel hoping to reach Europe and were discovered by the crew, tried to take some of the crew hostage. But interviews with the crew have so far not backed up that version of events, according to Italian media on Saturday.

The captain has told investigators that he alerted the authorities after he saw two men with knives try to enter the ship's machine section and, failing to do so, then rejoined the other stowaways, according to reports by ANSA news agency and *La Repubblica* daily.

"For the moment, it is not clear what the clandestine passengers wanted to do with the knives," *La Repubblica* said, citing 'informed sources'.

"Thus it is not clear whether

there was a diversion attempt or not," *La Repubblica* wrote, adding that no-one has yet been charged with piracy over the incident.

The three migrants who were found to have knives on them have been charged with arms possession, but have not been jailed, according to ANSA. The 15 stowaways came from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Four of them - two men and two women - have been hospitalised, according to ANSA.

One of the women is preg-

The Galata Seaways is a roll-on roll-off cargo ship designed to carry vehicles

nant, the other is weak, one of the men could have a fractured ankle, and the other is suffering from hypothermia.

"When we were discovered, we were afraid that we'd be arrested and repatriated," ANSA quoted one of them telling investigators.

The *Galata Seaways* is a roll-on roll-off cargo ship designed to carry vehicles and was sailing under a Turkish flag with reportedly 22 crew members.

It set off from Topcukur in Turkey on June 7 and was headed for Sete in southern France.

AFP

OFF GUARD



A member of the Grenadier Guards is carried after fainting during the Colonel's Review at Horse Guards Parade in London on Saturday ahead of The King's Birthday Parade slated for June 17 (AFP)

UK hobbyist stuns maths world with new shapes

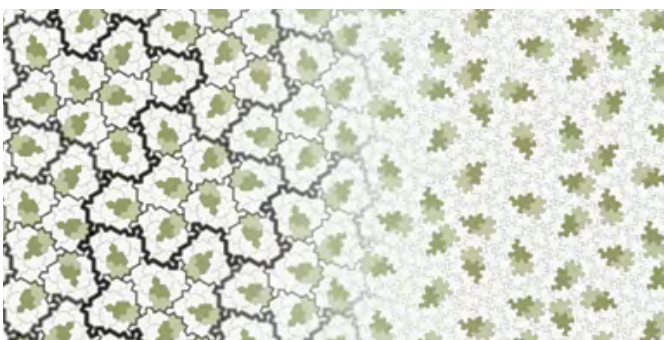
Paris, France - David Smith, a retired print technician from the north of England, was pursuing his hobby of looking for interesting shapes when he stumbled onto one unlike any other in November.

When Smith shared his shape with the world in March, excited fans printed it onto T-shirts, sewed it into quilts, crafted cookie cutters or used it to replace the hexagons on a soccer ball - some even made plans for tattoos.

The 13-sided polygon, which 64-year-old Smith called 'the hat', is the first single shape ever found that can completely cover an infinitely large flat surface without ever repeating the same pattern.

That makes it the first 'einstein' - named after the German for 'one stone' (ein stein), not the famed physicist - and solves a problem posed 60 years ago that some mathematicians had thought impossible.

After stunning the mathemat-



A tile shape which from the left tile fades into 'the spectre', recently 'discovered' by British mathematician David Smith (AFP)

ics world, Smith - a hobbyist with no training who told AFP that he wasn't great at maths at school - then did it again.

While all agreed 'the hat' was the first einstein, its mirror image was required one in seven times to ensure that a pattern never repeated. But in a preprint study published online late last month, Smith and the three mathematicians who helped him confirm the discovery revealed a new shape - 'the spectre'.

It requires no mirror image, making it an even purer einstein.

'It can be that easy'

Craig Kaplan, a computer scientist at Canada's Waterloo University, told AFP that it was 'an amusing and almost ridiculous story - but wonderful'.

He said that Smith, a retired print technician who lives in Yorkshire's East Riding, emailed him 'out of the blue' in November. Smith had found something 'which did not play by his normal expectations for how shapes behave', Kaplan said.

If you slotted a bunch of these cardboard shapes together on a

table, you could keep building outwards without them ever settling into a regular pattern.

Using computer programmes, Kaplan and two other mathematicians showed that the shape continued to do this across an infinite plane, making it the first einstein, or 'aperiodic monotile'.

When they published their first preprint in March, among those inspired was Yoshiaki Araki. The Japanese tiling enthusiast made art using the hat and another aperiodic shape created by the team called 'the turtle', sometimes using flipped versions. Smith was inspired back, and started playing around with ways to avoid needing to flip his hat.

Less than a week after their first paper came out, Smith emailed Kaplan a new shape.

Kaplan refused to believe it at first. "There's no way it can be that easy," he said.

But analysis confirmed that Tile (1,1) was a 'non-reflective einstein', Kaplan said.

Something still bugged them - while this tile could go on forever without repeating a pattern, this required an 'artificial prohibition' against using a flipped shape, he said. So they added little notches or curves to the edges, ensuring that only the non-flipped version could be used, creating 'the spectre'.

Kaplan said both their papers had been submitted to peer-reviewed journals. But the world of mathematics did not wait to express its astonishment.

Marjorie Senechal, a mathematician at Smith College in the United States, told AFP the discoveries were 'exciting, surprising and amazing'.

She said she expects the spectre and its relatives 'will lead to a deeper understanding of order in nature and the nature of order'.

Doris Schattschneider, a mathematician at Moravian College in the US, said both shapes were 'stunning'.

AFP

India: Gujarat anti-terror unit arrest five ‘with links to Islamic State’

Ahmedabad, India - The Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) of the Gujarat Police have arrested five persons, including a woman from Porbandar, with alleged links to proscribed international terror outfit the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) an affiliate of the Islamic State.

State police said on Saturday that the arrests were made as part of a special operation and raids are still underway. Addressing a press conference here today Director General of Police (DGP) Gujarat Vikas Sahay said that the officials of the ATS of the Gujarat Police had received information that three of terrorists

linked to the ISKP were planning to leave India via Gujarat.

“It is a banned terrorist organisation, Islamic State - Khorasan Province. Three terrorists affiliated with this organisation were planning to leave from Porbandar via the waterway,” the DGP said.

“This information was received by the ATS of Gujarat Police. The information was properly processed and further developed.”

“Acting on the tip-off, a team of Gujarat ATS early morning of June 9, set up a watch at Porbandar railway station and identified the three youths and held them and questioned them,” the DGP



Persons, allegedly having links with international terrorist organisations, are seen after their arrest in Porbandar, India on Saturday (ANI)

said.

The three arrested from Porbandar were identified as - Ubaid Nasir Mir, Hanan Hayat Shawl and Mohammad Hajim Shah all natives of Srinagar, the

DGP said.

Based on questioning the detained trio, Sahay said that two more people also linked to the ISK were held. They have been identified as Zubair Ahmed Munshi from Sringar and one woman Sumerabanu Mohammad Hanif Malek, who is a resident of Surat city.

Gujarat Home Minister Harsh Sanghvi said that five suspected terrorists were arrested and congratulated the Gujarat Police ATS and Surat Crime Branch for the arrests. “Gujarat police have been thwarting terror plots and it will continue to do so in the coming days. Gujarat police will take

forward the zero tolerance policy of the Centre as put forth by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Five suspected persons have been arrested, one from Surat,” the minister said.

Terming it a big success for Gujarat Police, he said that the ATS will inform about its probe findings after the investigation concludes.

The accused were interrogated throughout Friday night in connection with their terrorist activities, the DGP said.

It was ascertained that they were preparing to flee outside India to join the ISKP and were in

contact with each other for the past year. They were allegedly being given messages from their handler Abu Hamza.”

A special team of the ATS had been active for the past few days for special operations in Porbandar and surrounding areas, according to ATS sources.

The special operation of the ATS was led by DIG Dipen Bhadrans, who along with other officials, has been in Porbandar since yesterday. The convoy of officers arrived at the Special Operations Group (SOG) office in Porbandar, where the ATS completed the operation.

ANI

UK politics reels from shock of ex-PM Johnson's departure

Johnson announced his decision, claiming he had been forced out in a stitch-up

London, UK - Former British prime minister Boris Johnson's angry departure from parliament over COVID lockdown-breaking parties sparked fevered speculation on Saturday over his and the current government's future, with allies and enemies trading barbs.

Johnson announced he was leaving as a member of parliament on Friday, claiming he had been forced out in a stitch-up by his political opponents.

The 58-year-old populist politician has been under investigation by a cross-party committee about whether he deliberately lied to parliament over parties when he was in office. In evidence earlier this year, he insisted he had not.

But as the committee prepares to make public its findings, he said they had contacted him ‘making it clear... they are determined to use the proceedings against me to drive me out of parliament’.

The Privileges Committee, which has a majority of MPs from his own Conservative party,



This file photo shows Britain's then prime minister Boris Johnson adjusting his tie at the start of a cabinet meeting at 10 Downing Street in London on May 24, 2022 (AFP)

has powers to impose sanctions for misleading parliament, including suspension.

Ordinarily, suspension of more than 10 working days leads to a by-election in the MP's constituency.

By quitting, Johnson avoids the consequences of a humiliating fight to remain an MP in his Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency in northwest London where he holds a slim majority of just over 7,000.

He denounced the committee, chaired by veteran opposition Labour MP Harriet Harman, as a ‘kangaroo court’.

“It is very sad to be leaving Parliament - at least for now - but above all I am bewildered and

It is very sad to be leaving Parliament - at least for now - but above all I am bewildered and appalled that I can be forced out

BORIS JOHNSON

appalled that I can be forced out, anti-democratically... with such egregious bias,” he said.

He claimed the committee's report, which has not been published, was ‘riddled with inaccuracies and reeks of prejudice’, adding he had ‘no formal ability

to challenge anything they say’.

Their ‘purpose from the beginning has been to find me guilty, regardless of the facts’, he said.

Responding to the resignation, the Privileges Committee said Johnson ‘impugned the integrity of the House by his statement’.

‘Good riddance’

Johnson loyalist Nadine Dorries also quit as an MP, meaning current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, whom Johnson partly blames for his downfall, faces two by-elections as his party languishes in the polls.

Johnson's ability to generate strong feelings of admiration or hate was reflected in the reaction



Professor Sergio Alfieri (left) delivers a press conference on Pope's health at the Gemelli University Hospital in Rome on Saturday (AFP)

Pope recuperating, to miss Angelus prayer

Rome, Italy - Pope Francis is recovering well from a hernia operation but will not appear in public for Sunday's Angelus prayer, his doctor said on Saturday.

Francis underwent a three-hour operation at the Gemelli hospital in Rome on Wednesday, the latest health procedure for the 86-year-old leader of the Catholic Church.

All papal audiences have been cancelled until June 18 to give the pontiff time to recover, but the pope resumed work from his hospital room on Friday.

“He doesn't have a fever, all cardio-respiratory functions are normal,” Sergio Alfieri, the surgeon who operated on the pontiff, told the press on Saturday.

But doctors have recommended skipping the public Angelus prayer to avoid putting stress on abdominal muscles, which would be required to appear at the window of his hospital room.

“Generally, after an operation like this, one is hospitalised for four-five days,” Alfieri said.

“We hope to convince him to

stay all of next week as such a hospital stay will allow him to return to work with more strength and security.”

But Francis will ultimately decide when to be discharged, he said.

Francis was suffering from a hernia on the site of a scar from a previous surgery. Wednesday's operation saw him placed under general anaesthesia as the abdominal wall was repaired with a surgical mesh.

In March, he spent three nights in Gemelli being treated with antibiotics for a respiratory infection. In July 2021, he underwent surgery for a type of diverticulitis, an inflammation of small bulges or pockets that can develop in the lining of the intestine, spending 10 days in hospital.

Francis has been head of the worldwide Catholic Church since 2013, when his predecessor Benedict XVI became the first pope since the Middle Ages to resign, citing his failing mental and physical health.

AFP

Canadian PM Justin Trudeau visits Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made an unannounced visit to Kyiv on Saturday as Ukrainian forces were engaged in fierce fighting against Russia on the southern front line.

Trudeau, who is due to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy later on Saturday, placed flowers by a wall displaying the faces of soldiers killed in combat while a military orchestra played, AFP journalists saw.

He also visited an open-air exhibition featuring destroyed military vehicles.

Ukraine's Deputy Defence Minister Oleksandr Polishchuk handed Trudeau a container holding shrapnel from a rocket that fell on the Black Sea port city of Odesa.

A group of Ukrainian soldiers who received training in Canada spoke with Trudeau.

One of them, Colonel Petro Ostapchuk, told reporters the troops received training for elite shooters, engineers and young commanders. “It's a great privilege to meet the prime minister,” he said.

Canada, which hosts a large Ukrainian diaspora, has been one of Kyiv's key allies since the Russian invasion.

Ottawa has provided Ukraine with significant military aid, trained more than 36,000 soldiers and adopted sanctions against Moscow.

Trudeau's visit comes as Russia has reported thwarting Ukrainian attacks in the east and south that some observers have interpreted as the start of Kyiv's expected large-scale counter-offensive.

Ukraine has so far minimised the importance of the attacks.

AFP

Row erupts in Germany over restitution of bronzes

Berlin, Germany - In a move that many hailed as a salve for the historic wounds between Europe and Africa, Germany last December returned 22 artefacts, looted during the colonial era, to what is now Nigeria.

But five months on, questions are being asked in Germany as to whether cultural guardians were wise to hand back the priceless treasures, known as the Benin bronzes.

Controversy erupted after Nigeria's outgoing president, Muhammadu Buhari, suddenly declared in March that the artefacts would be returned to a traditional ruler - and not to the Nigerian state, as Germany had expected.

The recipient named by Buhari is the Oba of Benin, a descendant of the sovereign who reigned over the kingdom of Benin when the bronzes were looted by the British at the end of the 19th century.

Custody of any repatriated bronzes must be ‘handed over to the Oba’, who will be ‘responsi-



An ‘Altar group with a queen mother’ (Benin Kingdom, 18th-19th century) is displayed at an exhibition in Berlin on September 15, 2022 (AFP)

What happens to bronzes now is for the current owner to decide, and that is sovereign state of Nigeria

CLAUDIA ROTH

ble for the management of all places’ where they are kept, Buhari's statement said.

Buhari's announcement was one of his last moves in office before he was succeeded by Bola Tinubu following elections.

But it stirred soul-searching in

Germany, where critics said it appeared to breach a key understanding with Nigeria.

Under a July 2022 agreement, Germany promised to return around 1,100 bronzes from 20 of its museums, and both sides agreed on the importance of

making the works accessible to the public. Underpinning this were plans to display the bronzes in a new museum in Benin City in southern Edo state.

The state of Saxony has put the brakes on further restitutions pending clarification on whether the Oba's ownership would affect public display of the bronzes.

Saxony's Grassi museum was among five museums that handed over the 22 bronzes in December and other museums in the state still hold 262 pieces.

Before proceeding with returning them, the state wants to ‘wait to see what the effect of this declaration is (...) and how the new government is going to proceed’, a spokesman for the Saxon culture ministry told AFP.

‘We will not take any new steps’ before the situation is made clear, he said.

No ‘conditions’

Asked about Buhari's declaration, foreign ministry spokesman Christopher Burger said the return of the bronzes was ‘not sub-

ject to conditions’.

“It is the decision of the sovereign state of Nigeria to do what it wants,” he said, while adding that it was ‘important to us that the public continue to have access to the Benin bronzes’.

Culture Minister Claudia Roth said she was ‘surprised and irritated’ by the response to the declaration in Germany.

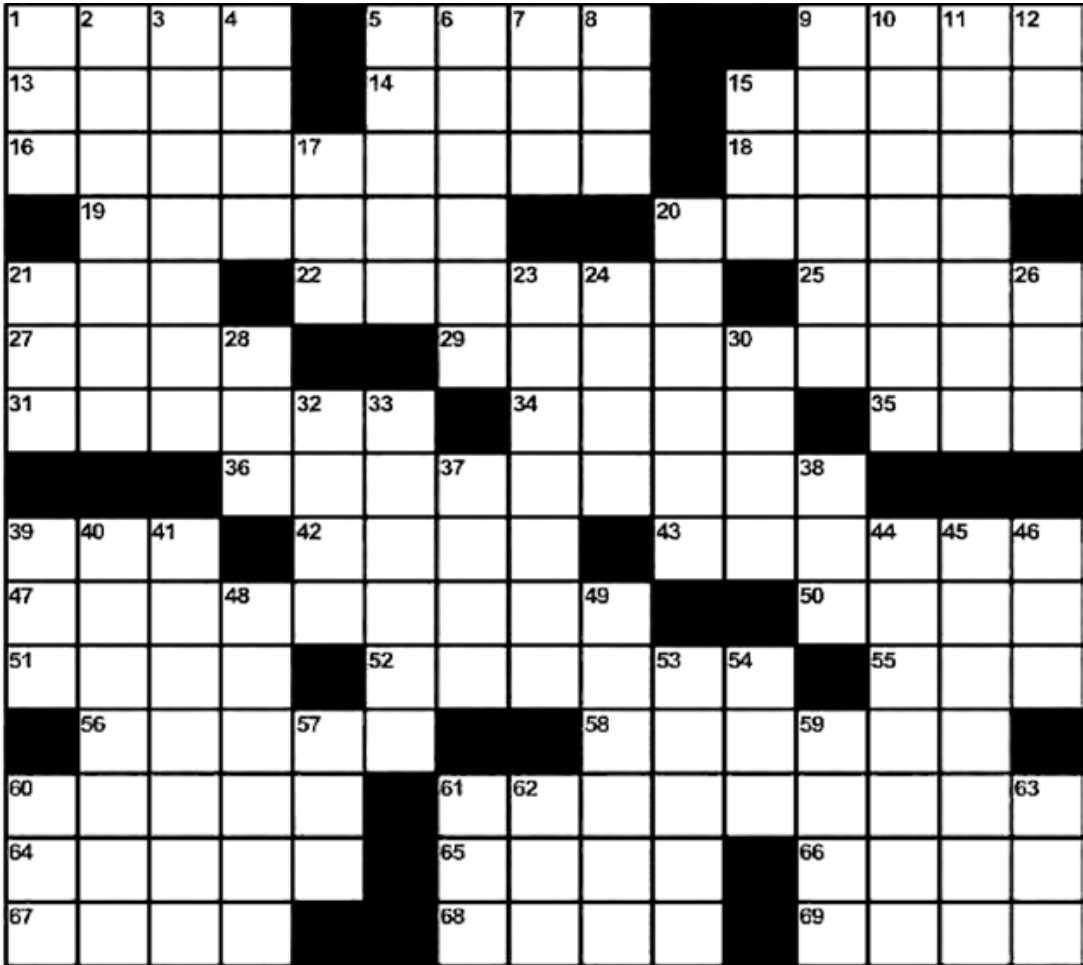
“What happens to the bronzes now is for the current owner to decide, and that is the sovereign state of Nigeria,” she told the ZDF broadcaster.

Hermann Parzinger, president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (SPK), which runs the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, said he did not believe Buhari's declaration placed future restitutions in doubt.

The Ethnological Museum has around 530 historical objects from the ancient kingdom of Benin, including more than 400 bronzes - considered the most important collection outside London's British Museum.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) One of the Jackson brothers 39) "Patriot" add-on
5) Lhasa _ (small dog)
9) Four-star review
13) Ancient
14) "Bear of very little brain"
15) Feasts
16) Dignified sobriety
18) To the left, at sea
19) Tisket's partner in song
20) Swedish money
21) Automotive "valve"
22) Meditative martial art
25) Trigonometric function
27) Gambler's marker
29) Musical buildup
31) Jesus, to many
34) Bullets, briefly
35) Opening in a dentist's schedule?
36) Broke the budget
ANYTHING GOES
42) It has six sides
43) Casual top
47) Scottish broadswords
50) Arab ruler

DOWN

- 1) _ in turkey (spelling lesson)
2) Practical joker's cry
3) Israeli city
4) English 101 readings
5) Breathing problem
6) Kind of license
7) "Emergency!"
8) Sounds of acknowledgment
9) Rest
10) Making amends

- 11) Open porch
12) Suffix for the very best
15) At considerable distance
17) NASDAQ, for one
20) Broadway's fate?
21) Many computers
23) Caught some shut-eye
24) Cord fiber
26) Emulate a bunny
28) Spanish uncle
30) Bamboozles
32) Egg cell
33) Zinger
37) Pink, as a steak
38) Not just "a"
39) Aloof
40) Gave a high-five
41) Duck type
44) Copy
45) Fastened, in a way
46) "Don't give up!"
48) Desires
49) Japanese leader of yore
53) Express one's view
54) "... the season ..."
57) Not his or hers?
59) Came down to earth

- 60) Letters before an alias
61) Thing dropped for trips
62) In-flight info, for short
63) Fat letters

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Feeling a little bit bored with your social life lately? To get a sense of renewal in your life right now, you should let other people take charge of things. Let them organize the get-togethers and the parties for the next few weeks. Sure, you love to get people together, but why not give someone else a chance to take the lead? By always being the ringleader, you're never getting a taste of anything new! Keep things fresh in your life by handing over the reins. Open your mind and get ready to try some new things.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You should seek stability today. Take a break from frivolous events and flaky people and head for home. Spend more time with the family members and friends you know inside and out. The tried-and-true people in your life aren't boring. They're comforting! Things that go the distance offer the most value in life, so if you're looking for any new furniture or clothing, go shopping at an antique store or vintage shop. Substance beats out trendy every time.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Recent flashbacks have you feeling nostalgic. Have you been curious about what an ex has been up to? Today would be a good day to get back in touch with them. They're open to hearing from you. If face-to-face communication is too intimidating, pick up the phone and settle in for a long conversation. Overall, freeing up your time should be a bigger goal today. You need some extended time by yourself to regroup and reflect on the progress you've made.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your popularity is surging right now, so when teams are chosen today, you're going to be one of the first picks. Don't be intimidated by the extra attention you'll be getting. Bask in it. It might not last too long, so you'd better take advantage of it while you can. Brighter stars are coming to steal away some of your thunder. Enjoy being in the limelight for now and savor all the adulation you're getting while you can.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

All that lighthearted and flirtatious banter you've been having with that cute someone has been fun, but today you should follow your urge to take things to the next level. Instead of skimming the surface, delve deep down into real substance and see what you come up with. This person isn't quite who you think they are, and after a lengthy conversation about today's hottest topics, you might discover that you feel a lot differently about them now than you did yesterday.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Friendship can mean different things to different people, so be very careful that you aren't making too many assumptions about what a new friendship is all about. An unexpected comment could catch you off guard today. They clearly have different ideas about what constitutes a good time. This might not necessarily be a deal-breaker, but it is something you should clarify. What they tell you will probably open up the door to a whole new level of fun.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Someone you thought you knew inside and out could surprise you by how they react today. Their feelings might reveal some shocking things about their philosophy of life, but that doesn't have to change how you feel about them. You care about them for who they are, not whether they agree with you all the time, right? This could be the beginning of a new phase for the two of you, when you'll see each other as more complicated and thus more interesting.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Sometimes it's the quietest moment in your day that carries the biggest impact. You won't need thunder and lightning to tell you that you've come upon a huge revelation today. The changes you want to make might not be the changes you need to make, so be open-minded about the conclusions you reach. They might not be what you expected or even what you wanted, but they'll be the best answer. Don't hesitate to start down this new path. As soon as you do, you'll know it's the right way.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your sense of who you are has been growing slowly but steadily, and you're already seeing the rewards of being more self-assured in your social life. Today, you should look forward to it becoming effective in your work life too. Your feelings about ambition have been ambivalent lately, but when you get a taste of power, you'll finally see where you want things to go. You'll soon be able to get out there and start making them happen, so get ready!



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Big things are coming up soon, but today you're still in something of a holding pattern. While you wait, you need to be careful not to get your hopes too high. There is still too much up in the air, and you can't count those chickens before you hear them squawking! And whatever you do, don't sign any legal documents. Letting your eagerness get the best of you would be a big mistake, one you'll regret later. Wait until things happen before you figure out how you'll react to them.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

You've got a lot of ideas germinating, right now, but it's going to take a great deal of concentrated effort to shape any one of them into something that you can actually make happen. Don't let this frustrate you, though. You did the hard part. Now all you have to do is wait for the right time, the right person, or the right opportunity to present itself. Then you'll be able to make things happen. Get comfortable with waiting. It's usually worth it.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

That warm and fuzzy feeling someone gives you is starting to grow into a decidedly hotter vibe, and not necessarily in a good way. There is some real friction going on between you two, and you just don't seem to be on the same page any more. The good news is that this tension doesn't have to be scary. Disagreements don't have to signal the beginning of the end. They're just disagreements. Stop giving them so much power. You two can and will work through this.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which is the world's most populous country to have a Muslim majority of over 85%?

- A. Indonesia
B. Pakistan
C. Bangladesh
D. Iran

02. When the Simplon Tunnel opened it was the only permanent road access between which two countries?

- A. Switzerland and Germany
B. Italy and Switzerland
C. Italy and France
D. Austria and Italy

03. Which of these was the title of a single by Peter Andre that was not released off the album "The Long Road Back" in 2004?

- A. Mysterious Girl 2004
B. Flava
C. The Right Way
D. Insania

Answers: 1. A 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



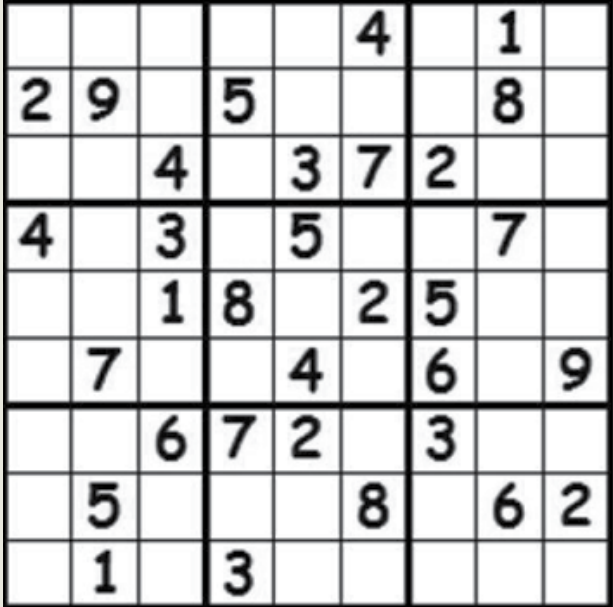
BOGGLER



Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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



WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



THRESHOLD of greatness

‘History hovering’ over Djokovic as Grand Slam record beckons

Paris, France - Novak Djokovic admits “history is hovering” over him as he takes on Casper Ruud in the French Open final on Sunday with a men’s record 23rd Grand Slam title tantalisingly close.

The 36-year-old Serb can set numerous landmarks in what will be his seventh championship match at Roland Garros.

As well as breaking the 22-Slam tie he shares with Rafael Nadal, he can become both the tournament’s oldest champion and the only man to win all four majors on at least three occasions.

“The only thing I can say is that I’m very focused. History is always something that’s hovering over me,” said Djokovic, the 2016 and 2021 winner in Paris and now the oldest finalist in 93 years.

Djokovic, playing his 34th Grand Slam final, can also return to the world number one ranking with victory over Ruud, replacing Carlos Alcaraz, the man he defeated in the semi-finals.

Victory on Sunday would place him once again halfway to an historic calendar Grand Slam, a sweep of all four majors in the same year which has only ever been achieved by two men.

Rod Laver accomplished it twice, the last coming in 1969.

Djokovic, however, refuses to contemplate such dominance, wary of how the pressure doomed his last bid to pocket all four Slams in the same year when he lost the 2021 US Open final to Daniil Medvedev.

“I’m not thinking about a calendar slam. I’m thinking really just to win another Grand Slam title here on Sunday, and I’m so close. I know it. I know the feeling,” said Djokovic.

‘Talk about history’
“Experience is on my side, but does it win matches? I don’t



Novak Djokovic celebrates his victory over Carlos Alcaraz in the French Open semi-final in Paris on Friday

I didn't come into Roland Garros thinking I was the favourite to reach the final. It's been two very fun weeks in Paris and hopefully third time can be a charm for me

CASPER RUUD

think so. I have to be prepared for another long battle, and after the final, if I win, let’s talk about history.”

Ruud was runner-up to Rafael Nadal in the 2022 final before

also losing the championship match at the US Open to Alcaraz. The 24-year-old Norwegian has never defeated Djokovic in four meetings and has yet to win a set.

Despite Ruud’s desperately poor record against Djokovic, he can point to his prowess on clay.

Since 2020, he has the most wins on the surface with 87, most finals with 12 and nine titles.

On Sunday, the world number four will attempt to make sure that all the pressure sits squarely on the shoulders of Djokovic.

“I think it’s just a matter of not thinking like, I ‘need’ to win this match. This is a word that I try to avoid,” he said.

Djokovic's six French Open finals

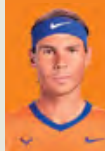
Paris, France – As Novak Djokovic faces Casper Ruud in his seventh final at Roland Garros on Sunday, here is a look at his previous six championship matches at the tournament, a run which has yielded two wins and four defeats.



2012
lost to Rafael Nadal
6-4, 6-3, 2-6, 7-5

In a final pushed into a third week for only the second time because of rain on the Sunday, Nadal, playing in his 16th Grand Slam final, took his Paris record to a staggering 52 wins against just one loss.

Victory, which was achieved on a Djokovic double fault, allowed him to break the tie for six French Opens he shared with Bjorn Borg.



2014
lost to Rafael Nadal
3-6, 7-5, 6-2, 6-4

Nadal clinched his ninth French Open and 14th career Grand Slam title, becoming the first man to win five Roland Garros crowns in succession.

Djokovic dominated the early stages of the final, the pair’s 42nd meeting, seemingly immune to the sweltering 30-degree heat on Philippe Chatrier court.



2015
lost to Stan Wawrinka
4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4

Djokovic saw his dreams of becoming just the eighth man to claim a career Grand Slam shattered again despite being the overwhelming favourite to beat Wawrinka, just as he had done in 17 of 20 previous clashes.

Djokovic was in tears on the presentation podium as the 15,000-capacity crowd afforded him a lengthy standing ovation.



2016
defeated Andy Murray
3-6, 6-1, 6-2, 6-4

Djokovic captured a first French Open and a 12th career major, joining Don Budge in 1938 and Rod Laver, in 1962 and 1969, as the only players to simultaneously possess the French Open, Australian Open, US Open and Wimbledon trophies.

But he did it the hard way as the final reached a tense conclusion.



2020
lost to Rafael Nadal
6-0, 6-2, 7-5

Nadal demolished Djokovic to win his 13th French Open and go level with Roger Federer on 20 majors. He also claimed his 100th match win at Roland Garros against just two defeats since his 2005 debut.

The Spaniard, the oldest champion in Paris since Andres Gimeno in 1972, claimed the title without dropping a set.



2021
defeated Stefanos Tsitsipas
6-7 (6/8), 2-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-4

Djokovic claimed a 19th Grand Slam title and became the first man in 52 years to win all four majors twice after a four-hour and 11-minute triumph.

He also became the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to win all four Slams on multiple occasions and just the third in history.

AFP



Iga Swiatek plays a return to Karolina Muchova in the French Open final in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

Swiatek fights off Muchova in thriller for third French Open title

Paris, France - Iga Swiatek battled past Karolina Muchova 6-2, 5-7, 6-4 to win her third French Open title on Saturday and become the first woman to successfully defend the Roland Garros title since 2007.

The 22-year-old Swiatek is just the third woman in the Open era to win each of her first four Grand Slam finals, the Pole adding to her 2020 and 2022 titles in Paris and last

year’s US Open triumph.

Monica Seles and Naomi Osaka are the only other players to accomplish the feat.

Swiatek, the world number one from Poland, is also the youngest woman to claim back-to-back French Open titles since Monica Seles in the early 1990s.

Justine Henin was the last woman to win successive Roland Garros crowns when

she captured her third in a row and fourth in total 16 years ago.

Swiatek’s latest coronation caps another dominant two weeks on the clay in Paris, where her record stands at 28 wins and two losses in five visits. Muchova, at 43 in the world, was the fourth lowest ranked woman to reach the French Open final, her first championship match at a major.

‘My whole body cramped, never felt tension like this,’ says Alcaraz

Paris, France - Carlos Alcaraz said “every part of his body cramped” and that facing a “legend” like Novak Djokovic caused the tension which ended his French Open hopes in a dramatic semi-final on Friday.

Djokovic, 36, triumphed 6-3, 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 to become the oldest man in 93 years to reach the championship match at Roland Garros where he will be bidding for a third title and record-setting 23rd men’s Grand Slam crown.

“The first and second sets were very intense. My arm cramped and then every part of my body cramped,” said 20-year-old world number one Alcaraz.

“It was really tough for me to move at the third set, and in the fourth set let’s say I had a one percent chance.”

He admitted that facing Djokovic for the first time at a Grand Slam, and just the second time in his career, caused a unique tension which contributed to his physical ailment.

“The tension of the first set, the second set, it was really intense. Really good rallies, tough rallies, drop shots, sprints,” he



Carlos Alcaraz

I would have felt sorry with myself if I retired. I'm in a semi-final of a Grand Slam

CARLOS ALCARAZ

explained.

“Novak is a legend of our sport. If someone says that he goes onto the court with no nerves playing against Novak, he lies. Of course playing a semi-final of a Grand Slam, you have a lot of nerves, but even more facing Novak. That’s the truth.”

The drama on Friday unfolded just as Djokovic had levelled the

third set at 1-1 with the first two sets split but with Alcaraz seemingly in the ascendancy in the sweltering 33-degree Paris heat.

Alcaraz, 16 years Djokovic’s junior, pulled up clutching his right calf.

He conceded his next service game because he sought treatment courtside before a scheduled change of ends and could not receive a medical timeout for cramping.

As boos and jeers rained down, Djokovic, playing in his 45th Grand Slam semi-final, swept the next five games to open a two sets to one lead.

Alcaraz left the court for a five-minute bathroom break but his physical limitations easily opened the door for Djokovic to coast into his 34th Grand Slam final, having wrapped up 10 of the last 11 games of the semi-final.

“I would have felt sorry with myself if I retired. I’m in a semi-final of a Grand Slam,” said US Open champion Alcaraz.

“Thinking about the fourth set, I thought that probably I have one percent chance to come back.”

Battle for African supremacy

Wydad Casablanca warriors seek hat-trick of final triumphs over Al Ahly in CAF Champions League

Johannesburg, South Africa - Egyptian club Al Ahly are the undisputed giants of Africa, winning a record 23 continental titles across four competitions, including the CAF Champions League 10 times.

But the Cairo Red Devils have never won a Champions League final against Wydad Casablanca, who they face in Morocco on Sunday in the second leg of the 2023 title decider.

Wydad edged Ahly 2-1 on aggregate in the 2017 decider and last year they dominated a single-match final in Casablanca with Zouhair el Moutaraji scoring twice for a 2-0 triumph.

If the Moroccans complete a hat-trick over the Egyptians this weekend, they will truly be the nemesis of Ahly, who have not lost more than once against any other final rivals.

Apart from Wydad, Asante Kotoko of Ghana, Etoile Sahel of Tunisia and Esperance of Tunisia have overcome Ahly in finals of Africa's premier club competition.

Last weekend, the latest episode in the greatest African rivalry of recent years ended with Ahly establishing a fragile 2-1 aggregate advantage in front of their red-clad supporters.

It was looking good for Ahly with five minutes of regular time remaining and the home side two goals in front thanks to South African Percy Tau and Mahmoud Kahraba.

Wydad knew an away goal could turn a final that was slipping from their grasp into a



Al Ahly players at a team training session ahead of their CAF Champions League final second leg match against Wydad Casablanca

I wanted to win in Cairo, but I am not unhappy with a 2-1 scoreline. It has opened the door to glory and we must take full advantage. That away goal could make a huge difference

SVEN VANDENBROECK

cliffhanger, and Saïfeddine Bouhra emerged as the unlikely saviour.

On the field just four minutes, the substitute pounced on a loose ball inside the area and ham-

mered it into the net.

Instead of needing at least two goals in Morocco to draw level on aggregate, Wydad will become back-to-back champions for the first time if they win 1-0 at home



Wydad Casablanca players at a team training session

and triumph on away goals.

"That away goal could make a huge difference," said Belgium-born Wydad coach Sven Vandebroek, the fourth occupant this season of one of the 'hottest' coaching seats in Africa.

"Trailing by two goals late in the second half, we were in big trouble. Saïfeddine changed the complexion of the final.

"Naturally, I wanted to win in Cairo, but I am not unhappy with a 2-1 scoreline. It has opened the door to glory and we must take

full advantage.

"I am in charge of a disciplined, united group. I hope we will be rewarded by becoming African champions again."

Meeting Ahly in Champions League finals brings out the best in Wydad with the loss in Cairo last Sunday the first in four meetings. In group and semi-final encounters, it is a different story with Ahly having a clear edge, winning four matches, drawing three and losing just one.

AFP



Kenya's Faith Kipyegon celebrates after breaking the World record in the women's 5000m at the IAAF Diamond League Meeting in Paris

Kipyegon and Girma break record in Paris

Paris, France - Kenyan Faith Kipyegon made it two world records in a week after delivering a masterclass in the women's 5,000m at the Paris Diamond League meeting on Friday while Ethiopia's Lamecha Girma smashed the 19-year-old record in the men's 3,000m steeplechase.

Kipyegon headlined a stellar night of track and field at the Stade Charlety that also saw Norway's Jakob Ingebrigtsen set a new world record in the rarely-

run 2 miles event.

Kipyegon showed her trademark kick to the line in the 5,000m to win in 14min 05.20sec, slicing a full second and a half off the previous best of 14:06.62 set by Ethiopia's Letesenbet Gidey, the world 10,000m champion.

There were further outstanding performances from Keely Hodgkinson of Britain who set the 10th fastest time ever in dominating the women's 800m in 1min 55.77sec.

Former footballers three times more likely to suffer dementia, study finds

London, United Kingdom - Former professional footballers are almost three-and-a-half times more likely to be diagnosed with dementia than the general population, according to a study commissioned by the English Football Association (FA) and Professional Footballers' Association (PFA).

The findings of the study, conducted by the University of Nottingham, support previous research that former footballers may be at higher risk of neurocognitive disease. The new report states that 2.8 percent of retired professional footballers in their study reported medically diagnosed dementia and other neurodegenerative disease compared to 0.9 percent of the general population.

Dr Charlotte Cowie, the FA's head of medicine, said: "The FOCUS study worked with an established group of former professional footballers that were participating in research and was able to review their



The FA has implemented guidance to reduce and remove repetitive and unnecessary heading from youth football

brain health, and it supports the previous findings in the FIELD study which suggest an increased risk for neurodegenerative disease in former professional footballers than in the general population.

"This is an extremely complex area of our game, but we are committed to working collectively with our stakeholders to help grow our knowledge in this area through further med-

ical and expert analysis."

The Football Association has been criticised by campaigners for not doing enough to aid former players now suffering from neurocognitive disease.

But it said it had introduced "industry-leading" concussion guidelines which has restricted heading practice in training and banned deliberate headers from under-12s level.

AFP



Neymar (R) with Lionel Messi

Neymar 'already knew' Messi was Miami-bound

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - Brazilian striker Neymar revealed Friday he was in on the secret that Lionel Messi was leaving Paris Saint-Germain for Inter Miami before it was officially announced.

"I already knew it!" exclaimed the Brazilian, laughing, in response to a question on the YouTube channel of NBA Brazil about his reaction to the announcement of the departure of his Argentine teammate for Florida.

Neymar was in Miami on vacation and attended Game Three of the NBA Finals between the Miami Heat and the Denver Nuggets on Wednesday.

"I knew he would come here, we had already talked about it. I told him he would be happy in Miami", said Neymar, who played alongside Messi at Barcelona from 2013 to 2017 and then for the last two seasons at PSG.

"I'm very happy for him, and at the same time a little sad because he left," added the Brazilian star, whose own future at PSG is un-

certain after another injury-marred season.

Neymar said he was confident that Messi will help Major League Soccer reach new heights: "It will be a much more popular league, with a lot more

I knew he would come here, we had already talked about it. I told him he would be happy in Miami

NEYMAR

viewers, and everyone should benefit from it."

World Cup winner Messi, 35, announced on Wednesday he was heading to Inter Miami in the twilight of his epic career, rather than returning to Barcelona, or joining his great rival Cristiano Ronaldo in Saudi Arabia.

AFP

Athanaze, Sinclair help West Indies to 3-0 UAE sweep

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates - Alick Athanaze hit the joint-fastest half-century on a ODI debut and off-spinner Kevin Sinclair marked his return with a four-wicket haul and a series of flamboyant somersaults as West Indies defeated the United Arab Emirates by four wickets to complete a 3-0 sweep in Sharjah on Friday.

West Indies overhauled their target of 185 with four wickets and nearly 15 overs to spare.

Both Athanaze, 24, and 23-year-old Sinclair are not part of West Indies' squad for the up-



Alick Athanaze of the West Indies celebrates after scoring a half-century in their third ODI against United Arab Emirates in Sharjah

coming World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe.

On Friday, opener Athanaze got off to a flying start, racing to 30 off 11 balls.

He then equalled Krunal Pandya's record for the joint-fastest fifty on ODI debut with a drilled four off Rohan Mustafa.

Athanaze looked good for a century, but Aayan Khan cut his innings short on 65 off 45 balls.

In the absence of regular captain Shai Hope and vice-captain Brandon King, who were rested among a number of changes, West Indies went 81 balls with-

out a boundary.

Stand-in captain Roston Chase (27) closed out the chase along with Keemo Paul.

The start had been promising for UAE after they opted to take the first strike.

Vriitya Aravind (70) and captain Muhammad Waseem (42) forged a 69-run partnership for the second wicket off just 55 balls.

It was Raymon Reifer who snapped the stand when he went around the wicket and hit the top of Muhammad Waseem's off stump in the 12th over.

FORMIDABLE CHALLENGE

India set 444 to win World Test Championship final

London, United Kingdom - Alex Carey made an unbeaten 66 as Australia set India a daunting 444 to win the World Test Championship final at The Oval on Saturday.

India were 164 for three at stumps with Virat Kohli batting on 44 and Ajinkya Rahane on 20. Earlier, India bowled well to hold Australia to 270-8 declared in their second innings on the fourth day, with left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja taking 3-58 in 23 overs.

But the scale of the task now confronting Rohit Sharma's side could be gauged from the fact only four teams in the 146-year history of Test cricket have scored more than 400 runs in the fourth innings to win a match.

Australia resumed Saturday

well-placed at 123-4 despite a sloppy third day that included dropped catches, wickets off no-balls and rash shots that led to the dismissals of first-innings century-makers Steve Smith and Travis Head.

Marnus Labuschagne, the world's top-ranked Test batsman, failed to add to his overnight 41 when he tentatively pushed forward to a fine Umesh Yadav delivery, with Cheteshwar Pujara holding a sharp catch at first slip.

On another sun-drenched day in south London, with temperatures topping 29 degrees Celsius, Rohit turned to Jadeja, who had accounted for Smith and Head on Friday, in the hope of a fresh breakthrough.

Jadeja succeeded in unusual fashion when Cameron Green, on



Australia's Alex Carey plays a shot during his unbeaten knock of 66 on the fourth day of the ICC World Test Championship final against India at The Oval, in London, on Saturday (AFP)

25, failed to pad away a delivery that pitched outside leg stump, with a sharply turning ball deflecting onto the stumps off the Australian all-rounder's glove.

The turn being extracted by Jadeja would, however, have encouraged Australia off-spinner Nathan Lyon.

It might have also made India rue their decision to omit star off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, the world's top-ranked Test bowler, from this match in order to play an extra seamer.

Carey, strong on the drive, should have been out for his lunch score of 41 when he edged Yadav only for the ball to go between Pujara and Virat Kohli at first and second slip, with neither fielder going for the catch.

The wicketkeeper then completed a valuable 82-ball individual fifty -- a heartening innings for Australia both in the context of this match and with the first Ashes Test against England at

Edgbaston starting next week.

With the lead above 400, Mitchell Starc thrashed Yadav through midwicket before India took the new ball.

It eventually proved Starc's undoing when his brisk innings of 41 off 57 balls, including seven fours, ended when a fast-traveling edged drive off Mohammed Shami was well caught by Kohli, now at first slip.

But in sharing a partnership of 93 with fellow left-hander Carey, fast bowler Starc had more than played his part with the bat.

Australia captain Pat Cummins came into bat but declared soon afterwards.

The WTC is the only major men's cricket trophy Australia have yet to win.

India are appearing in their second WTC final after losing to New Zealand in the inaugural 2021 showpiece match in Southampton.

AFP

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NAVYATHANCHAL

Celebrating Saris



RANGREZ, THE ARTISTS GROUP OF INDIAN SOCIAL CLUB, LAUNCHED A COFFEE-TABLE BOOK TITLED 'NAVYATHANCHAL' – AN ARTISTIC CELEBRATION OF SARIS BY 26 ARTISTS. THE BOOK WAS RELEASED BY H E AMIT NARANG, AMBASSADOR OF INDIA

Hubert Vaz

Fabrics, frames, figments of imagination... Artists belonging to Rangrez, the artists group of Indian Social Club, have this time round pulled out a rabbit from their hat! With scores of joint exhibitions, including virtual shows, under their belt, this group has now documented their artistic flair in the form of a unique

coffee table book – *Navythanchal* - that celebrates the variety of Indian saris, and tipped their hat to the efforts of Indian weavers who have unleashed magic through their fingers via their ancient craft over the past few centuries. You can walk back through time to the era of Peshwas and Moghuls, unravel the dexterous skill-sets of ancient artisans, come face to face with the magical designs laid out in fabrics with silk, gold, embellishments, traditional methods of dying and time-tested techniques that enhance the appeal as well as longevity of this traditional female attire that takes on multiple forms in different Indian states. The book, released by H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India last week, features the work of 26 artists via 28 saris, curated by Shalini Kartik who guided the artists to follow their own artistic flair in choosing a favourite sari type to paint on a first-come-first-serve basis. The book serves as a beginner's guide to embarking on a love affair with saris. The efforts of the ladies, who apart from creating the artworks also modelled for photographs to showcase varied sari types, were appreciated by K Venkatesan, an award winning textile designer, who considered it a unique initiative in celebrating saris. The brain behind the book, Sushmita Gupta, founder-artist of Rangrez, said,

"Sari is one of the oldest garments. It has survived the ravages of time. Yet, in modern times, due to factors of ease, comfort, shortage of time coupled with flooding of easier garments in the market, sari suffered a setback. The talented weavers faced the backlash. In 2015, two friends started a trend on social media called 100 Sari Pact. They promised to wear at least a 100 saris in a year. Soon this assumed the status of a movement. I was the first one to adopt it in Muscat." The artists worked in tandem with each other in bringing forth a vibrant collection of sari designs that showcase the variety, technique and history of different Indian saris that have been in vogue for several generations and never gone out of style. A professional photographer, Tariq Ansari was roped in to do the photo-shoots with the member artists who themselves presented a wide collection of saris within a short schedule. A couple of publishers are currently in touch with Rangrez and it will soon be available in Al Bhaj Store in Muscat, Sushmita disclosed. Shalini Kartik, curator, added, "This exhibition and coffee table book are a tribute to the weavers who have preserved and enriched this heritage for generations. It is also a celebration of the love and passion that I have for saris as a curator and a collector."



I am a sari aficionado and that is not a secret. So when Shalini Kartik brought the theme of painting saris on a canvas to me, I quickly suggested the photo shoot and then it snowballed into a coffee table book on the behest of her daughter Akanksha who designed the book.

Sushmita Gupta



Sarees are expressions of identity, culture, and art. They are woven with stories, emotions, and memories. In this exhibition, you will discover the diversity and beauty of saris from different regions of India and learn about their history, symbolism, and craftsmanship, besides encountering how our artists have recreated these stunning saris as paintings that reflect their personal experiences.

Shalini Kartik, curator



What I saw was a great team work with a common objective in mind. Practically, it was not possible to finish the shoot in one day but good planning by Shalini and Sushmita, made it possible. It's a model's job to pose so the photographer can get the shot, and though not professional, the models represented a great composition where everyone is connected.

Tariq Ansari, photographer



I wanted to make sure the paintings and the weaves stood out on the pages. I also wanted the reader to be able appreciate the art of the saris, so the images highlight different aspects of making the sari, the inspiration behind the sari or the material itself. The rustic look and the vintage images were added to highlight old traditions.

Akanksha Kartik, designer



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K-POP BAND



A rehearsal at OCEC. Photo: V K Shafeer

BOYS IN GROOVE

The Korean boy band trio of B.I.G (Boys in Groove), which performed its first concert in Muscat at OCEC on Friday, say they hope to stick together through thick and thin in coming years. ‘Music is a beautiful binding force that brought us together, and we hope it keeps us together forever,’ they chorus

Hubert Vaz

A streak of soft light plays on J-Hoon’s cheeks in the Green Room and the shimmering studs in his ears sends criss-crossing rays back to the ceiling... Heedo’s shiny black leather shirt compliments his youthful baritone but his coy disposition plays spoilsport... And Jinsuk, the youngest in the group, referred to as ‘Maknae’ (in Korean), was surprisingly in his element minutes before the curtains went up on their maiden concert in Oman.

That’s the cute trio that currently forms B.I.G (Boys In Groove), one the popular South Korean boy bands that has been taking K-pop around the world with the sole aim of giving the younger generation a reason to celebrate life, love, friendship, and relationships in a bid to make the world a better place to live in.

“Music is a beautiful, binding force that brought us together and we hope it keeps us together forever,” the trio chorus, adding that they all chose

music for a career simply because it gives them much joy and fulfillment. Given a chance to chose another profession, they grope for cues from each other, but after a round of exchanging dimpled smiles and mischievous mutterings in Korean, they hold ‘thumbs up’ signs and confess, “we can’t think of anything else but music!”

There are giggles in the background in the Green Room among the few eavesdroppers, as the boys share their inner feelings and aspirations. And though they are absolutely overpowering on stage, as they belt out their favourite renditions to the accompaniment of sleek dance moves that send their female fans in a tizzy, they get a little unsettled when digging for answers from within – but, with a little wit and wisecracks, they nonetheless sail ahead smoothly.

You want to walk through their psyche and dig out hidden emotions, personal ambitions, secret aspirations, but they send you on another track with their well-rehearsed smiles and mannerisms – the ones that have kept them in the reckoning over the past nine years. And, though Gunmin,

the fourth member of the band is not with them now (as he has taken up the mandatory military service in South Korea), they are confident that nothing can lead them to a split in coming years.

Asked about their first impressions of Oman, J-Hoon and Heedo say they find it a beautiful country, bestowed with natural beauty, and will be taking a quick trip to some destinations in Oman before leaving. Jinsuk adds that the people they’ve met are very friendly and hospitable, and that set them at ease instantly in Oman.

About expected responses from fans in Oman, the boys said, the responses from young fans has always been overwhelming around the world as well as in Arabia, and from what they’ve encountered in UAE and Saudi Arabia, they are sure Arab fans in Oman, too, will accept and enjoy their music – especially because they have lined up a few Arabic renditions.

“B.I.G concerts don’t always bear a message,” said J-Hoon, explaining that their job was to entertain audiences with renditions that celebrate life, love, friendship, relationships, all of which have a common message of goodwill. We want to touch the hearts of young music lovers and enable them to enjoy music just the same way as we do.”

When told that most boy bands eventually break up as they get bored with the group and want personal achievements to shine, Heedo said, “We love and treasure each other’s friendship more than anything else. I’m sure we will never get bored together and will continue as a group for many years ahead.”

Jinsuk added, “As of now, the unity within our group is very strong and we would like to keep it that way forever.” Through another round of smiles and tapping of each others’ shoulders, they ascertained that ‘all is well’ with them now and there is no reason to foresee a storm in future.



We want to touch the hearts of young music lovers and enable them to enjoy music just the same way as we do

J-HOON



	JINSUK	J-HOON	HEEDO
Favourite music	K-pop	Arabic songs	R & B
Favourite singer	BTS	BTS	Psy (Korean singer)
Favourite country	S Korea	Oman	S Korea
Favourite food	Chicken	Coffee	Hareesa
Favourite brand	Christian Dior	Louis Vuitton	Nike - sportswear brands
Favourite colour	Black	Grey	Purple
If not a singer	I'd be a driver - I just love driving	I'd be a barista	I'd be an actor
I dream about	I love thinking about the happy times we now share	Going for a world tour	Good performances everywhere
I fear	Ghosts, jinns	Heedo (laughs)	About what the future has in store
My Mamma calls me	(Laughs) Can't disclose	Jung Hoon - We don't have nick-names	Heedo, what else?
Girlfriend?	Yes, girlfriends around the world.	Yes - all my B.I.G. fans	Yes. Cannot reveal



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