

Iran, Saudi to restore ties

Tehran, Iran - Regional power-houses Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed on Friday to restore ties and reopen diplomatic missions in a surprise, Chinese-brokered announcement that could have wide-ranging implications across the Middle East.

In a trilateral statement, Iran and Saudi Arabia said they would reopen embassies and missions within two months and implement security and economic co-operation deals signed more than 20 years ago.

Riyadh cut ties after Iranian protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions in 2016 following the Saudi execution of revered Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr - just one in a series of flashpoints between the two longstanding rivals.

Friday's announcement, which follows five days of previously unannounced talks in Beijing and several rounds of dialogue in Iraq and Oman, caps a broader realignment and efforts to ease tensions in the region.

"Following talks, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have agreed to resume diplomatic relations and reopen embassies and missions within two months," said the joint statement, which was published by both countries' official media.

The detente between Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, and Iran, a pariah for Western governments over its nuclear activities, has the potential to reshape relations across the region.



Iran, Saudi thank Oman for facilitating talks

Muscat - Iran and Saudi Arabia thanked Oman and Iraq for facilitating talks between the two, which led to resumption of diplomatic relations.

In Friday's statement, Iran and Saudi Arabia said they "thank the Republic of Iraq and the Sultanate of Oman for hosting the talks held between the two sides in 2021 and 2022 as well as the leaders and government of the People's Republic of China for hosting and supporting the talks held in that country".

Welcoming the trilateral statement, Oman hoped that

resumption of ties will contribute to strengthening the pillars of security and stability in the region and consolidating positive and constructive co-operation that benefit all peoples of the region and the world.

H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, received a phone call from his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on Friday, when the latter thanked Oman for hosting Saudi-Iran talks in Muscat, which culminated in the agreement to resume diplomatic relations.

Iran and Saudi Arabia support rival sides in several conflict zones including Yemen, where the Huthi rebels are backed by Tehran and Riyadh leads a military coalition supporting the government. The two sides also vie for influence in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

"It kind of sets the scene for the region's two superpowers to start to hash out their differences," said Dina Esfandiary of the International Crisis Group.

"The potential downside of that, of course, is that if they are the ones who are divvying up the region and sorting things out amongst themselves, you start to lose sight of regional contexts and grievances, which could potentially be problematic."

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian welcomed the rapprochement and said Tehran will "actively prepare other regional initiatives".

He tweeted, "The return to normal relations between Tehran and Riyadh offers great opportunities to the two countries, the region and the Muslim world."

Saudi Arabia's top diplomat Prince Faisal bin Farhan al Saud said the agreement stems from the kingdom's preference for "political solutions and dialogue" - an approach it wants to see become the norm in the region.

The White House welcomed the deal, but said it remains to be seen whether the Iranians will "meet their obligations".

AFP

See also [Page 09](#)

6,000% surge in visitors from UAE to Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Visitors from UAE are a significant part of the 2.9mn international overnight visitors Oman received in 2022.

Visitors from UAE to Oman increased a whopping 6,000 per cent to 1,357,559 in 2022 compared to 22,322 in 2021, the largest source market for the sultanate.

Visitors from India reached 355,459 in 2022, the second largest source market for Oman, according to the latest data from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The data includes the top ten source countries for the sultanate, including 81,829 from Germany, 63,570 from Britain, 48,835 from Iran, 44,815 from France, 42,770 from Saudi Arabia, 37,087 from USA, 31,704 from China and 29,986 from Italy.

The ministry confirmed that there are enough indicators to show the recovery of the tourism sector in the sultanate.

It informed that some projects are in an advanced stage of completion, while others are under construction.

Oman Group is implementing several projects and developing public facilities in a number of governorates.

Oman announced the soft opening of a 1,800m dual zip line project in Khasab, Musandam, in



Visitors from India reached 355,459 in 2022, the second largest source market for Oman, followed by Germany, Britain, Iran, France, Saudi Arabia, USA, China and Italy

tanate had welcomed 874,444 visitors in 2020 and 3,506,441 in 2019, which was 8.2 per cent more than the 2018 figure of 3,241,757.

Oman second largest source market for Dubai

Visitors from Oman have contributed significantly in Dubai attracting 14.36mn international overnight visitors in 2022 - 97 per cent more than 2021.

Visitors from Oman to Dubai increased 369 per cent to 1,311,000 in 2022 compared to 280,000 in 2021, becoming the second largest source market for the emirate after India.

Visitors from India recorded a growth of 102 per cent to 1,842,000 from 910,000 in 2021, according to the latest data from Dubai's Department of Economy and Tourism.

Oman was followed by Saudi Arabia, the UK and Russia making the top five source markets.

Plain packaging for tobacco products adopted

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has become the second country in the region, after Saudi Arabia, to adopt plain packaging for tobacco products.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has issued a decision on Omani Standard Specification (OS 1655:2022) on plain packaging of tobacco products, and deemed it a binding Omani standard specification.

The move has been appreciated by the World Health Organization (WHO) office for the Eastern Mediterranean, describing Oman's action as 'significant and pioneering'.

It added that the step is consistent with the obligations of the states that are party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, an international treaty that sets out numerous ob-



ligations aimed to reduce the global burden of tobacco use.

The move is also consistent with the sultanate's plans to meet 30 per cent reduction in tobacco consumption by 2025.

Plain packaging bans use of logos, colours, brand images or any kind of publicity on tobacco packages. It allows display of names, brands or product names in a standard style of colour and font.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Dr Jawad al Lawati, senior consultant and rapporteur of the National Tobacco Control

Committee, said the move is a significant step towards tobacco control measures.

"The MoCIIP decision is based on Ministry of Health recommendations, and was being worked on for the last few years."

He informed that at least 65 per cent of the packaging will now include a public health warning, picture and a message to quit, while the rest will have the brand name. "The brand name will be in a standardised font and colour, based on regulations of the MoCIIP decision."

According to WHO, tobacco packaging is a mobile billboard promoting consumption of tobacco products. 'If you strip back the decoration, gloss and misleading elements of tobacco packaging, you are left with little more than a box of deadly, addictive products that kill approximately 6mn people a year and harm the health of many more.'



Xi Jinping appoints Li Qiang Chinese premier



Moroccan food fest at Grand Millennium

Oman is committed to reduce GHG emissions: EA official

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is committed to a low carbon economy and reducing its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, according to Ibrahim Ahmed al Ajmi, Supervisor of Climate Affairs at the Environment Authority (EA).

Ajmi was speaking at a two-day national workshop on preparing a plan to adapt to climate change and achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050, which kicked off on Wednesday.

The workshop was organised by the Environment Authority in cooperation with Sultan Qaboos University, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and Green Climate Fund.

According to Ajmi, Oman has adopted a national plan for zero carbon neutrality, and five main sectors are targeted to reduce GHG emissions - oil and gas, electricity production, transportation, industry and construction.

Oman's 2021 carbon emissions have been assessed at 90MTCO₂e. The five sectors account for 95 per cent of these emissions, with industry producing the lion's share - 32 per cent - followed by oil and gas - 25 per cent.

Ajmi added, "Efforts are being made by the concerned sectors to achieve the goal of reducing GHG emissions, which are expected to decrease by 21 per cent in the sultanate by 2030."

INVITATION TO TENDER

OMAN AND ETIHAD RAIL COMPANY

The developer and operator of the railway network connecting THE SULTANATE OF OMAN AND UAE

Invites specialized Contractors to apply for the prequalification for tendering of the civil works

The potential Contractor(s) must demonstrate individually or in JV/Consortium that they have the necessary resources and required expertise to meet the requirements as follows:

✓

Be a local company or a JV/Consortium led by local company registered in Oman or UAE to deliver the package(s) in the relevant country.

✓

Have recent experience executing projects of a similar size, nature (earthworks, structure, tunnels, freight facilities, roads and depots, etc), in particular:

• Design and build experience

• On time completion of projects and to the required quality

HOW TO APPLY

The Prequalification documents will be available for purchase and downloading through an e-Payment Services Gateway from:

13/03/2023 at 10:00 am till 27/03/2023 at 6:00 pm

for a non-refundable amount of 5,240 OMR or 50,000 AED (excl. VAT)

Further information (including payment details and obtaining prequalification documents) can be obtained on our website at:

https://TenderDoc.oe-rail.com

Please address any further clarifications or queries to:

Civil-PQ@OE-Rail.com

ANNUAL RESULTS FOR 2022

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

OUR VALUES: SAFETY | ESG | RESPECT | VISION | INTEGRITY | CARING | EMPOWERMENT



On behalf of the Board of Directors, I present the audited financial statement for Renaissance Services SAOG for the financial year ended December 31, 2022.

Our positive momentum continues into the last quarter, ending the year with an 11% increase in revenue over the corresponding period in 2021 and a 9% rise in net profit. The Board is recommending a dividend of 20bz per share (20% of the paid-up capital) for shareholder approval at the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

RS CONSOLIDATED

	RO Million		USD Million	
	2022	2021	2022	2021
Revenue	121.9	109.8	316.6	285.2
EBITDA	24.1	23.8	62.6	61.8
Operating profit	16.3	15.9	42.3	41.3
Net profit after tax	12.2	11.2	31.7	29.1
Net profit after non-controlling interest	11.4	9.1	29.6	23.6

PERFORMANCE

2022 was productive in terms of award of new business as well as retention of existing contracts and recalibration of rates. These included formally winning the Ministry of Health Catering, Cleaning, Laundry and Pest Control contracts for three years, Ministry of Defence Hospital Catering contract and renewal of Al Mouj, BP Khazzan, Daleel Petroleum, Port of Salalah contracts, amongst others. The overall order backlog increased from RO 64.9mn to RO 117.7mn in pure services contracts, excluding Renaissance Villages and Permanent Accommodation for Contractors (PACs).

As testimony to the excellent service provided to our stakeholders and our customer-centric approach, we are pleased to report that we have achieved a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 94 in the 2022 customer survey.

We have established an operating and business development footprint in Qatar following an initial short-term catering contract for a global sporting event. We have reorganised our operations in the UAE, which is showing green shoots through improved business performance and better debt collection.

We are looking at the rapidly growing market of Saudi Arabia where there are opportunities to export our Renaissance Village concept. We are willing to use our balance sheet for controlling interests in such projects as well as enter that market as a service provider with our full range of IFM capabilities.

RENAISSANCE 2.0

2022 has been a year of transformation and rapid change for Renaissance, of diving deep to evaluate every aspect of the business comprising our people, processes and services to find the path to exponential growth. We redefined our vision, values and purpose and pledged to bring in fresh perspectives and future-focused, collaborative strategies, so that we continue to do what we do, but better.

We placed transparency in decision-making and cross-functional collaboration above all else in order to get the best of the talent that is present within our own organisation, irrespective of existing hierarchies. We strengthened and expanded our senior management team to lead by example and drive the modern, innovative, efficient and green culture that symbolises Renaissance 2.0.

To help achieve our various objectives, we have on board a new Chief Commercial Officer, Chief Internal Auditor, Chief People Officer and Chief Innovation and Transformation Officer. These talented young Omanis bring to the table their strong capabilities, vision and passion that align with the new Renaissance goals. In December 2022, we welcomed a new Chief Financial Officer.

YOUTH SHADOW ADVISORY BOARD

One of the major decisions under Renaissance 2.0 was to form a Youth Shadow Advisory Board (YSAB) which opens the stage for young people well-versed in future competencies to challenge preconceived notions and push for a shift in perspective.

Our transformational journey under Renaissance 2.0, internal and external, will only be impactful if the youth are involved and contribute to that change.

Overstepping conventional belief that only age, degrees and experience are imperative to guide a company, we hope to leverage the imagination, disruptive instincts and futuristic DNA of our YSAB members to prepare for new customer segments and markets that resonate with tomorrow's generation. And as a company with 9,000+ employees where the largest age group is between the age of 30-35, we believe this will also help us effectively bridge gaps between workers of different generations with enhanced respect and understanding across the organisation.



Conversely, the ten non-executive YSAB will benefit from the Renaissance Board members' decades of experience to gain insights on critical leadership skills and building business resilience.

DIGITAL INITIATIVES

'Digital to the core' continues to be the essential philosophy to power the new Renaissance, as we develop services that enhance process efficiencies, improve customer and employee experiences and open avenues for new digital businesses. We brought in subject matter experts on key areas like operational excellence and are now moving to the solutions phase of the Core Operational Excellence optimisation programme. We completed a comprehensive digital gap assessment and finalised the creation of an inhouse Innovation Hub headed by the Chief Innovation and Transformation Officer to lead the further development and implementation of 2.0.



SUSTAINABILITY

As part of its commitment to best-in-class technologies and reducing its environmental impact, Renaissance is partnering with SOURCE Global, to generate sustainably sourced drinking water for Renaissance Village Duqm (RSVD) in Oman's Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), with plans to expand to additional sites.

The project will create a sustainable source of clean, safe, and high-quality drinking water made locally in Oman and served in reusable glass bottles for the workforce staying in the 18,800+ bed RSVD.



ESG

As Renaissance shifted gears to embark on a transformational journey towards a green, digital and innovation-led future, 2022 marked a renewed focus on sustainable development.

Renaissance kept a positive impact on the environment, society and its investors at the core of its decisions while driving continuous improvement in service standards, employee satisfaction, and market performance.

Initiatives like the Lean Six Sigma Green Belt training programme are empowering teams with practical problem-solving skills across all domains to deliver optimal results. Smart technologies using IoT and data analytics have been deployed across sites to optimise resource utilisation and maximise savings leading to greener, sustainable outcomes.

Choosing socially conscious investments has meant that our CSR initiatives have made a real long-lasting impact on communities we operate in across Oman ranging from supporting local community projects in health, education and worker welfare along with institutions like Outward Bound Oman aimed at developing national capacity.

Internal initiatives such as RALI (Renaissance Accelerated Learning Initiative) which welcomed its second batch of young Omanis this year, substantial local procurement of services and material and high Omanisation goals underpin our commitment to boosting our already strong ICV record.

RSVD

2022 was a challenging year for occupancy levels at RSVD ending the year with an average of 60%, primarily due to a gap between the completion and commissioning of projects and mobilisation of new ones. With major new projects scheduled in Duqm, ranging from steel, cement and roadways to green hydrogen and petrochemicals, our management is focusing on working closely with the project developers and authorities to gain further clarity on timelines and their support in housing their workforce in the market-leading ILO-compliant, world-class worker accommodation in Oman.



OUTLOOK

We will be impacted by the pause between major projects specifically in Duqm and expect 2023 to be a lower occupancy year, but at the same time there have been significant increases in activities and projects in the oil and gas sector. In 2022 occupancy in the PDO PACs was 89%. We are actively pursuing opportunities to expand our facilities given the expected growth in PAC occupancy in 2023. These initiatives are expected to be decided in Q1.

On the supply chain front, whilst we were negatively affected by the global inflationary headwinds in 2022, we are expecting to see greater stability with the strengthening regional partnerships in the GCC, going ahead.

Conflict continues in Europe with the war between Russia and Ukraine along with signs of instability and uncertainty in the world order. However, most forecasts envisage continuing growth in the MENA region and the overall conditions seem positive.

Major ratings agencies upgraded Oman to 'stable' or 'positive' in 2022 and the government's prudent fiscal management was supported by unexpected higher oil prices last year. The same is expected in 2023 with oil prices starting the year well above the fiscal budget price.

TRIBUTE

We express our thanks and support to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. His Majesty's leadership in driving economic and structural reforms to encourage local and international investments, enables us to look ahead to the future with optimism and confidence.

Samir J. Fancy
Chairman

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31ST DECEMBER 2022

	2022 RO '000	2021 RO '000
Non-current assets		
Property, plant and equipment	138,360	143,747
Other non-current assets	7,552	6,568
	<u>145,912</u>	<u>150,315</u>
Current assets	<u>75,767</u>	<u>76,663</u>
Current liabilities	<u>50,021</u>	<u>50,331</u>
Non-current liabilities		
Term loans	65,345	78,168
Non-current payables	10,662	10,443
	<u>76,007</u>	<u>88,611</u>
Net assets	<u>95,651</u>	<u>88,036</u>
Equity		
Share capital	23,641	23,641
Share premium	26,936	26,936
Treasury shares	(6,853)	(6,853)
Retained earnings and other reserves	30,223	23,288
	<u>73,947</u>	<u>67,012</u>
Non-controlling interest	21,704	21,024
Total equity	<u>95,651</u>	<u>88,036</u>

CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31ST DECEMBER 2022

	2022 RO '000	2021 RO '000
Revenue	121,935	109,835
Operating costs	(105,683)	(93,910)
Profit from operations	<u>16,252</u>	<u>15,925</u>
Net finance costs	(4,153)	(4,686)
Profit before tax	<u>12,099</u>	<u>11,239</u>
Tax	119	(31)
Profit for the year	<u>12,218</u>	<u>11,208</u>
Net profit attributable to:-		
Shareholders' of the Parent Company	11,378	9,137
Non-controlling interest	840	2,071
	<u>12,218</u>	<u>11,208</u>

Note:
1) These audited financial results are subject to approval by the Shareholders at the Annual General Meeting proposed to be held on 27th March 2023.
2) The audited financial statements are available on Muscat Stock Exchange website and the Company's website.

BBC to air film on Oman's evolution over millennia

London - The Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in London on Thursday held a ceremony to launch a documentary film titled *Treasures of Oman*. It puts a spotlight on Oman's civilisation and culture witnessed over thousands of years.

The launch ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Dr Abdullah Nasser al Harassi, Minister of Information.

The film was produced through a cooperation between *Nizwa Magazine* and Sandstone Global, a British production firm.

Treasures of Oman is the outcome of a visit by British novelist and professor Bettany Hughes to a variety of archaeological and historical sites in Oman, from the governorate of Musandam to the governorate of Dhofar. The film will be shown on BBC World Channel and Channel 4, a public TV channel in the UK.

Bettany said her visit to Oman was aimed at exploring the country's deep-rooted history. The visit offered her an opportunity to have a close look at different manifestations of the country's civilisations from BC era to the Middle Ages.

During the visit, she accompanied archaeological teams studying different sites spread across the sultanate that showed evidence of the existence of ancient settlements. She also toured many castles and forts.



H E Dr Abdullah Nasser al Harassi with Bettany Hughes (right) at the launch of 'Treasures of Oman' on Thursday (Supplied photo)

The film also shows life in the Al Hajar Mountains, specifically in Jabal Shams, and demonstrates how Omani people made use of these mountains since the times of the Majan civilisation, and how the copper trade enabled the civilisation flourish.

The documentary also presents facts about the ancient burial grounds of Bat in the wilayat of lbri. The film also spans the area of Wadi Dhawka in Dhofar where the frankincense trade was once a thriving commercial practice for Oman's population, which also engaged in commercial activities related to spice trade with India,

China and Egypt.

The film highlights the history of the ancient city of Sumharam in Dhofar and Khor Rori, as well as the latest discoveries dating back to the 5th century BC.

The film demonstrates how groundwater channels - aflaj - in Misfat al Abreen in Al Hamra led to the growth and prosperity of agrarian societies, with special focus on Bahla, with its famous castle and ancient wall.

Highlighting the marine life in Musandam, the film delves into the significance of maritime trade that gave rise to the Kumzari language - a mixture of Persian, Portuguese, French and other languages - from the people who frequented Musandam for trade.

Bettany is an award-winning historian, author and broadcaster, whose speciality is global culture. Her programmes are regularly watched by 250mn plus people worldwide.

She has written and presented over 50 radio and television documentaries on international subjects ranging from Islamic culture to the great philosophers and artists of the world for BBC, Channel 4, Discovery, PBS, The History Channel, National Geographic and ITV.

Aisha makes Oman proud, wins 'Prince of Poets' TV show

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Poet Aisha al Saifi was crowned winner of the reality TV show *Prince of Poets* in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday.

The show was created in April 2007 by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage and is aired live every week.

Aisha took home AED1mn, a symbolic cloak and a ring for her win. She is the first Omani poet to reach the finals of the programme and also win. She was born in Nizwa, Dakhliyah and is the author of three collections of poetry, including *The Sea Changes its Gown*. She is also the first female poet to win the Omani Poetry Festival.



"On International Women's Day, I was crowned princess of poets and draped in the cloak of poetry - the first Arab woman to

be bestowed with the title - thanks to God, and your support for me by voting for me and your prayers," she posted on Instagram.

Oman strives for women's empowerment

Muscat - In a speech at the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67), held at the United Nations headquarters in New York last week, Oman affirmed the high status of women in Islam, as well as their guaranteed rights.

The speech was delivered before the international conference titled 'Women in Islam' by the Omani delegation head H E Dr

Mohammed Awad al Hassan, Permanent Representative of Oman to the UN.

H E Hassan pointed out that Islam remains a religion of truth, mercy and dignity, despite campaigns of intolerance and hatred faced by Muslims throughout the ages, including the phenomenon of Islamophobia.

He explained that Oman has enacted laws and legislations

aimed at protecting women and guaranteeing their rights, and the government will continue to support women in all respects.

In his speech, H E Hassan informed that Oman does not entertain narrow-minded slogans calling for the exploitation of women or alienating their innate nature from being part of the lofty message of Islam.

He added that Oman will continue to exert efforts to protect and empower women in a manner that preserves their dignity and sound social status.

At the conclusion of the speech, H E Hassan called for further work on advancement of all human beings, away from fanaticism and extremism, so that all can contribute to building bridges of cooperation, understanding, tolerance and coexistence.

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Terms & Conditions Applied

Fine of up to RO5,000 for drying laundry on balcony

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To maintain the aesthetic urban facade of buildings in the city, Muscat Municipality has stressed the importance of adhering to the requirements when drying laundry on balconies.

A statement issued by Muscat Municipality said, 'The municipality stresses Article 32 of Local Order No 92/23 for buildings in the governorate, as well as the requirements to be taken into account for drying clothes on balconies of residential buildings overlooking public streets.'

Municipal laws do not permit hanging out laundry on balconies except after installing elements to cover it. The clothes on balconies should be covered with 'mashrabiya' or wooden mesh, the perforation of which should be no more than 1.50cm x 1.50cm wide, the concrete open-work should have a depth of at least 10cm, and perforations no more than 7sqcm.

According to Article No 14 of the Muscat Municipality Law, hanging laundry on balconies of buildings is a violation, the fine for which can be between RO50 and RO5,000 or imprisonment for a period of not less than 24 hours and not more than six months.

41st Day of Remembrance
11-03-2023

"Although our life's journey have bid us apart,
we are with you, you are with us,
Always in our hearts".

In Loving Memory of

Megha Abraham
Thadathil House
06-03-2006 † 30-01-2023

With fond memories
Biju Luckose & family

Send your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om

الوطنية للتأمين على الحياة والعام
NATIONAL LIFE & GENERAL INSURANCE
Ominvest Group
مجموعة اومينفست

Building No: 115, Plot No: 330, Block No: 146, Way No: 4202, Greater Muttrah, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, Tel: 24730939, Website: www.nlicgulf.com

Notice and Invitation to Attend the Annual General Meeting

The Board of Directors of NATIONAL LIFE & GENERAL INSURANCE (the "Company") has the pleasure to invite the shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting, which will be held on Sunday at 05:00 PM on 26/03/2023, via the electronic platform which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om). If the quorum requirement for holding the Annual General Meeting is not fulfilled, a second Annual General Meeting General Meeting shall be held on Thursday at 04:00 PM on 30/03/2023, via the electronic platform which can be accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing & Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om) to discuss the following agenda:

Annual Ordinary General Meeting Agendas:

- To consider and approve the Board of Directors report on Company's activity and its financial position for the financial year ended 31/12/2022
- To consider and approve the Corporate Governance Report for the financial year ended 31/12/2022
- To consider and approve the Auditor's Report and the Audited Financial Statements of the Company for the financial year ended 31/12/2022
- To ratify the sitting fees paid to Directors' for attending meetings of the Board and sub committees for the previous financial year and to determine the Directors' sitting fees for the upcoming financial year (Annexure 1)
- To consider and approve the proposal of distributing RO 150,000 (one hundred and fifty thousand Omani Riyals) as remuneration for the Board of Directors for the financial year ended 31/12/2022
- To notify the shareholders of the transactions carried out with related parties during the financial year ended 31/12/2022 (Annexure 2)
- To notify the shareholders of the amounts spent for the company's social responsibilities for the year ended on 31/12/2022 (Annexure 3)
- To consider and approve the proposed allocation of RO 100,000 (one hundred thousand Omani Riyals) for Corporate Social responsibilities for the year ending on 31/12/2023
- To consider and approve the Board of Directors evaluation report for the financial year ended 31/12/2022
- To appoint statutory auditors for the financial year ending 31/12/2023 and determine their fees

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the controls for holding General Meetings using modern technology issued by the capital market authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- Legal person, exclusively, has the right to delegate a natural person to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCD.
- Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meeting. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the General Meeting.

For further information please contact on telephone No 95299234 or email: hamad@nlicgulf.com

CHAIRMAN KHALID MUHAMMAD ALZUBAIR	LEGAL ADVISOR MEHDI AL LAWATI LAW OFFICE	EXTERNAL AUDITOR KPMG L.L.C.
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INTERVIEW

MERCEDES-BENZ WINNER: AUTOMOTIVE (LUXURY) CATEGORY



'We will continue to deliver on our commitment to customers'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Mercedes-Benz has won Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award in the Automotive (Luxury) Category for the sixth straight year at an award ceremony recently held at Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz Carlton Hotel. In an interview with *Muscat Daily*, Shaun Michael, CEO of Mercedes-Benz Oman, spoke about Mercedes-Benz brand's strengths in the Omani market and discussed the outlook for luxury cars segment in 2023 and beyond. He emphasised that Mercedes-Benz Oman remains committed to deliver on its promise to offer 'the best or nothing'.

Mercedes-Benz has won Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award for the sixth year in a row. What are the key strengths of Mercedes-Benz that are consistently winning trust of the Omani people?

It is a great honour to once again receive this award and to realise that we have been effectively building and strengthening a resilient bond of loyalty and trust with our customers in Oman. At Mercedes-Benz, we believe that being a respected and trusted brand and creating an excellent customer experience are inextricably linked.

The sleek design, luxurious finishes and supreme attention to detail of every Mercedes-Benz vehicle are all pillars of the brand, and one of the main reasons Mercedes-Benz remains one of the strongest brands in the industry to this day. Meanwhile, our superior customer service, excellent on-road assistance programs and warranties provide added peace of mind.

Mercedes-Benz can trace back its history in Oman to the 1970s, while our German luxury

brand had already earned a distinctive global reputation for making high-quality, high-performance and reliable luxury cars. Mercedes-Benz has its heritage, prestige and engineering talent among its key strengths.

However, we do not take our reputation as one of the strongest brands in the industry or this award for granted. Hence, we work hard to ensure the vote of customers continues to be worth it, from the moment they walk through our door and throughout their relationship with us which is built on trust, and this includes an after-sales service strategy as well, while we continue driving growth in Oman.

How do you ensure a high-level customer satisfaction during sales and after sale services?

Our cars are known worldwide for their quality and safety, and we can guarantee that when a customer makes a purchase at Mercedes-Benz, it will be worth their time and money, regardless of whether a customer is buying their very first car or just coming in to have their certified pre-owned car serviced, they are offered the same level of care and quality - after all, that it what our "best or nothing" philosophy is all about.

Meanwhile, we have a dedicated team of sales consultants at our showroom who are always available to help customers select their dream car. We work closely with our customers to help them find the perfect vehicle for their needs and aspirations, and continue the relationship through to regular servicing and after-sales support, which remains a high priority.

Our digital solution, StarView, offers customers access to personalised video updates and real-time status reports during a car service via email and SMS. It is all part of our ongoing commitment to offer the best possible experi-



SHAUN MICHAEL
CEO OF MERCEDES-BENZ OMAN

ence to our customers, whether online through our revamped websites or visiting our state-of-the-art showrooms.

Oman's economy saw a strong post-pandemic recovery last year. How was Mercedes-Benz's Oman sales performance in 2022 and which were the best performing models in this market?

The luxury car segment has been driving most of the growth of the global automobile industry, and despite the many disruptions the world has seen in 2022. Relatively speaking, we achieved great sales in Oman throughout the entire year.

Our best performing models still include the C-Class, E-Class, and S-Class, which remain steady favourites among senior executives. Our Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs), such as the GLE,

GLC, and CLA, have always been popular with families in Oman, providing them with the space, comfort, safety and durability to drive around the cities, or a luxury road trip through the desert and the mountain or along the coast.

To ensure Mercedes-Benz continues to remain the most trusted brand in Oman, what is going to be your focus and plans for 2023 and in the years to come? Do you plan to launch some new vehicles in the market this year?

We entered 2023 with a renewed purpose to continue building the brand, and we are excited about the outlook for 2023. We will continue to adapt to the needs of customers, while we will carry on our strong heritage and legacy at the same time. As always, we aim to introduce the latest models to the Omani market. The Mercedes-Benz Lineup for 2023 includes the new GLC SUV, new E-Class, and the new GLC Coupe.

Meanwhile, other key focus areas include further digitalisation and the e-commerce journey to make it more convenient for customers to choose their new Mercedes-Benz. We will also continue to offer training and professional development opportunities to help our employees grow in their careers. We will remain committed to ensuring that our customers remain fully satisfied throughout their entire journey with us, as we will continue to deliver on our promise to offer 'the best or nothing'.

It seems the worst - due to pandemic-induced recession - is over and the economy is bouncing back stronger. How do you see the current trends and outlook for luxury car segment in the Omani market?

When it comes to the luxury car segment, we

are expecting that our customers and potential buyers will continue to redefine luxury. Traditional elements such as craftsmanship, safety, performance and quality are expected to remain powerful buying factors, but potential buyers are also increasingly interested in the latest technologies and an increasingly more personalised experience, it all should feel very special and state-of-the-art.

As I mentioned earlier, the luxury car segment has been driving most of the growth of the global automobile industry, and despite the many disruptions the world has seen in 2022.

Meanwhile, the wider passenger car market has been growing, with the largest segment proving to be small SUVs. We will also be rolling out a number of new and exciting initiatives this year alone, reinforcing our commitment to being a future-ready customer-centric brand offering "the best or nothing" to our customers.

What is the average age of a Mercedes-Benz customer in Oman? And how does the company meet expectations of the younger customer base who prefer to have a lot of technology on the dashboard?

People of 40 years and older, as well as people between 25 to 40 years of age, form the main customer base for Mercedes-Benz. As forward-looking company we realise that, moving forward, the key to driving growth will be to continue to reach the largely young population and respond to their love of technology and innovation. Mercedes-Benz has introduced next generation safety options and driver assistance to make driving a true pleasure while the interior is a fully-connected haven for the driver.

Continued on Page 05



النهضة للخدمات ش.م.ع.
Renaissance Services SAOG

P O Box 1676, PC 114, Muttrah, Oman, Tel: 24796636 Fax: 24796639
www.renaissanceservices.com

Notice of the Annual General Meeting

The Board of Directors of Renaissance Services SAOG (the 'Company') invites all shareholders to attend the Annual General Meeting ("AGM"), which will be held on Monday, 27th March 2023 at 5:00 pm through MCD's online platform for general meetings (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event that the quorum for holding the AGM is not met, a second AGM shall be held on Tuesday, 28th March 2023 at 3:00 pm to discuss the following agenda:

1. To consider and approve the Report of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
2. To consider and approve the Report on Corporate Governance for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
3. To consider the Auditors' Report and approve the Balance Sheet and Profit and Loss Account for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
4. To consider and approve the Board of Directors performance evaluation report for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
5. To consider and approve the proposed cash dividend distribution at the rate of 20 baisas per share.
6. To approve the sitting fees being availed by the members of the Board of Directors and the members of the Board's sub-committees for the financial year ended 31st December 2022 and to specify the sitting fees for the next financial year.
7. To consider and approve the Directors' Remuneration of Rials 300,000/- for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
8. To apprise shareholders of the transactions entered into with related parties during the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
9. To apprise shareholders of the amounts paid for the Corporate Social Responsibility ("CSR") programs for the financial year ended 31st December 2022.
10. To approve an amount of Rials 150,000/- for CSR programs for the financial year ending 31st December 2023.
11. To appoint an independent consultant to measure the performance of the Board of Directors and its Sub-Committees for the year ending on 31st December 2023 and specify their fees.
12. To elect Board of Directors for a new term of office from shareholders and /or non-shareholders. (Those who wish to stand as candidates for the board shall fill the candidacy form and submit to the company at least five (5) days prior to the date appointed for the general meeting latest by end of Wednesday 22nd March 2023 and the candidate shall meet the requirements prescribed for the membership of the Board of Directors).
13. To appoint auditors for the financial year ending 31st December 2023 and approve their fees.

In accordance with the Articles of Association of the Company and the rules for convening general meetings using modern technology issued by the Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- a) A juristic person shall have the right to authorise exclusively a natural person to attend the General Meeting and vote on his behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in Muscat Clearing and Depository (MCD).
- b) Voting on any of the agenda items shall begin no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting. Where a shareholder has exercised his/her vote in the three days prior to the AGM, and his/her share balance has changed (i.e., increased or decreased) after voting, the vote will be cancelled and the shareholder will be required to vote again.

For further information, please contact Mr. Hatim Al Hilali - Company Secretary,
on phone number (00968-93220564) or email address: hatim@tawoos.com

Samir J Fancy
Chairman

Ernst & Young (EY)
Auditors

Al Busaidy Mansoor Jamal & Co.
Legal Advisor

Oman to offer new mining concessions soon

Muscat - Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals is preparing to soon announce a new mining concessions bid round for 2023.

In a statement to Oman News Agency, the ministry confirmed

that it is in the preparation process to offer new batch of mining concession areas in the first quarter of 2023. This will include concession areas targeting commodities like chromite, cop-

per, limestone and others.

Dr Salah al Dahab, director general of investment said that the ministry is currently in the final stage of negotiations with specialised mining companies.



الشركة العمانية المتحدة للتأمين ش.م.ع.
Oman United Insurance Co. S.A.O.G

Notice Invitation to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting

The Board of Directors of Oman United Insurance Company SAOG have the pleasure to convene the honorable shareholders to attend the Annual Ordinary General Meeting scheduled to be held at 5:00 pm on Thursday, 30th March 2023 through the electronic platform designated for holding the annual general meetings which can be logged in through the website of Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event that the quorum for the above-mentioned meeting is not sufficient, then the second meeting of the Annual General Meeting will be held at 5:00 pm on Wednesday, 5th of April, 2023 through the above-mentioned electronic platform, to discuss the following agenda:

1. To consider and approve the Company's Report for the year ended 31/12/2022.
2. To consider and approve the Corporate Governance Report for the year ended 31/12/2022.
3. To consider and approve the Board Evaluation Report (As attached) for the year ended 31/12/2022.
4. To consider the Auditor's Report and to approve the Balance Sheet and Income Statement for the year ended 31/12/2022.
5. To consider and approve the proposal to distribute cash dividends to the shareholders at AGM date, amounting to 35 Bzs per share for the year ended 31/12/2022.
6. To ratify the sitting fees paid to the Board of Directors and to the Board's subcommittees during the year ended 31/12/2022, and to determine and approve the sitting fees for the next year.
7. To consider and approve the proposal to distribute remuneration to the Board of Directors amounting to R.O (150,000) Rial Omani One Hundred & Fifty Thousand for the year ended 31/12/2022.
8. To notify the shareholders of the related party transactions that took place during the year ended 31/12/2022.
9. To consider and approve the related party transactions which will be executed during the year ending 31/12/2023.
10. To notify the AGM of the donations paid towards Corporate Social Responsibility activities during the year ended 31/12/2022.
11. To consider and approve the proposal of allocating RO (50,000) Rial Omani Fifty Thousand for Corporate Social Responsibility activities during the year ending 31/12/2023.
12. To appoint Statutory Auditor for the year ending 31/12/2023, and approve their fees.

According to the Controls of holding annual general meetings using the modern online technology issued by the Capital Market Authority, we would like to draw your attention to the following:-

- (A) Juristic person, exclusively, has the right to authorize a natural person to attend the general meeting and vote on his behalf through online electronic platform, provided that this natural person has an investor number registered with the MCD.
- (B) Voting on any of the items on the agenda begins no more than three days prior to the date of the meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting. In the event that the shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled and he will have to vote again in the day of the general meeting.

Please attend online at least 30 minutes prior to the AGM. For further information, please contact on phone No. 24477314 Email: moosa@omanutd.com.

CHAIRMAN

EXTERNAL AUDITORS

LEGAL ADVISOR



OQ to showcase alternative energy projects at Oman Sustainability Week

Muscat – OQ, the sultanate’s global integrated energy group, participates in the second edition of the Oman Sustainability Week Conference, which takes place from March 12 to March 16, 2023. The conference will see participation from local and global leading companies, sustainability experts, decision makers and those with a keen interest in the field.

At the conference, Ghalib Saeed al Maamari, vice president – low carbon molecules, will present OQ Group’s decarbonisation and alternative energy strategy. The group will also showcase several initiatives and share its experiences at the panel discussions to be held at the exhibition accompanying the conference.

Speaking on OQ Group’s strategy, Shaima Murtadha al Lawati, vice president of sustainability at OQ said, “Investing in alternative energy projects, managing our carbon footprint, managing water resources and waste resulting from OQ’s operations, diversity, inclusiveness as well as occupational health and safety are some of the pillars of OQ’s strategy over the next three years, some of which are amongst the main themes of the Oman Sustainability Week Conference.”

OQ seeks to manage its carbon footprint through adopting best practices and modern technologies. In 2021, OQ launched a comprehensive decarbonisation strategy based on three themes:

OQ Group is currently focused on four major projects across alternative energy and green hydrogen to reinforce Oman’s global position, namely the Hyport Oman, H2Oman, SalalaH2 and Green Energy Oman (GEO) projects

GHALIB SAEED AL MAAMARI

energy efficiency, clean energy as well as low-carbon molecules. As part of the group’s commitment to implementing this strategy, the Bisat C Oil Treatment Plant was designed to the highest standards in accordance with HSE and sustainable methodology, with the goal of reducing 55 per cent of carbon emissions, more than 50 per cent of equipment and reduction of 40 per cent of iron consumption.

Maamari added, “The group is presently focused on four major projects across alternative energy and green hydrogen to reinforce Oman’s global position, namely the Hyport Oman, H2Oman, SalalaH2 and Green Energy Oman (GEO) projects. These initiatives are made possible through worldwide and regional collaboration, along with the signing of agreements and memorandums of understanding.”

‘We will continue to deliver on our commitment to customers’

Continued from Page 04
Oman recently announced its commitment to reach net-zero emissions target by 2050 and in line with this goal the government is now focusing on the decarbonisation. How can automotive players such as Mercedes-Benz contribute to Oman’s net-zero goals?

We aim to play our part in supporting Oman achieve its net-zero objective by 2050, while climate protection is a high priority for most of today’s customers of luxury brands, as it is to us as an automaker. Economic, environmental, and social responsibility go hand in hand — along the entire value chain.

At an international level, for example, Mercedes-Benz AG is a founding member of ‘Transform to Net Zero’, a climate protection initiative launched by Microsoft and leading international companies. Within this international context, Mercedes-Benz has marked out a way for it to bring our new car fleet to ‘net zero CO2’ within less than 20 years – and not only in driving operations, but along the entire value chain.

Since 2022, for example, our passenger cars and vans have been produced CO2-neutrally from the more than 30 plants of Mercedes-Benz AG worldwide. One

example is our Factory 56 in Sindelfingen, where the new S-Class and the all-electric EQS are produced.

Decarbonising also involves partly replacing vehicles that currently run on conventional fossil fuels with low-emission electrical vehicles (EVs) that either battery operated or hydrogen fuel-cell operated. We look forward to receiving more EVs in the future and promoting the transition from conventional hydrocarbon-based fuels to renewable energy. Demand for batteries and electrical drives will grow, while the need for conventional transmissions and engines is expected to decline.

A mass adoption of electric vehicles is thought to be a major contributor to net-zero goal in the future. Keeping this in mind, can you throw some light on Mercedes-Benz’s plans in electric vehicle segment, and how long it may take you to introduce an EV in Oman market?

There is certainly a growing interest in EVs which is partly why we are striving for a technological leadership role in electric drives and digitalisation and looking forward to meeting the increasing demand by introducing more innovative and powerful models.

US closes Silicon Valley Bank in biggest collapse since 2008

Santa Clara, US – US regulators pulled the plug on Silicon Valley Bank on Friday in a spectacular move that sent global banking shares sputtering, as markets fretted over possible contagion

from America’s biggest banking failure since the 2008 financial crisis. US authorities swooped in and seized the assets of SVB, a key lender to US startups since

the 1980s, after a run on deposits made it no longer tenable for the medium-sized bank to stay afloat on its own. Little known to the general public, SVB specialised in financ-

ing start-ups and had become the 16th largest US bank by assets: at the end of 2022, it had US\$209bn in assets and approximately US\$175.4bn in deposits. Its demise represents not only

the largest bank failure since Washington Mutual in 2008, but also the second largest failure ever for a retail bank in the United States. AFP



OMAN REINSURANCE COMPANY S.A.O.C

Post Box 1968, Postal Code 114, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman, Telephone: 24397700 Fax: 2439 7777

OMAN REINSURANCE COMPANY S.A.O.G. Directors' Report

Dear Shareholders,
After Compliments,
The Board of Directors is pleased to present the Annual Report of Oman Reinsurance Company S.A.O.G. ("Oman Re" or "the Company") along with the audited financial statements for the year ended 31st December 2022.

The Financial Highlights for fiscal year 2022 are summarized below:

	31 December 2022 OMR	31 December 2021 OMR
Gross Written Premium (GWP)	36,590,738	27,605,434
Net underwriting result	3,360,325	2,058,254
Investment and other income	2,330,871	2,106,536
Expenditure – General and Admin Expenses	(3,148,629)	(2,596,381)
Net Profit after tax	1,627,024	1,355,455

2022 had been an exceptional year for the Company. The global tailwinds in reinsurance markets along with prudent underwriting by the Company resulted in a substantial increase in underwriting results. The reinsurance pricing globally has been strengthening with a reduction in underwriting capacities because of consistent large cat events and underpricing over the past years resulting in underwriting losses for major players on a regular basis. However, for us as Company, we had a benign year marked with lower Nat-Cat activity and lower large losses. The Company also took advantage of the withdrawal of the reinsurance capacities by the international players in our core markets by increasing our market share and solidifying our brand as a reliable partner in difficult times.

During 2022 the Gross Written Premium (GWP) increased by 32.5% to reach at OMR 36.6 million compared to OMR 27.6 million of last year. Net underwriting results before management expenses increased by 63.3% to reach OMR 3.4 million compared to last year's OMR 2.1 million. The prudent investment management resulted in an increase of 10.6% in investment income which reached OMR 2.3 million in 2021 compared to OMR 2.1 million in 2021. The net profit after tax for 2022 is OMR 1.6 million, compared to last year's OMR 1.3 million.

Business Environment and Key Initiatives during the year 2022

Oman Re's Vision is "Reinsurance Protection beyond Expectations". The Company sees significant potential to achieve its Vision knowing that the MENA region specifically remains an attractive, high-growth market for reinsurance given its relatively low levels of insurance penetration. Furthermore, reinsurers in MENA region are expected to play an increasingly important part in supporting regional government's economic diversification drives away from oil. Oman Re is no exception.

Over the years, Oman Re has made notable progress by means of various strategic initiatives, to strengthen its foothold in the Sultanate and in the wider territorial scope where it operates (Afro-Asian countries). Furthermore, support from a highly respected regulatory regime, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) and the stable economic environment of the Sultanate are additional factors in instilling market confidence in the Company, and for the Company to become the preferred reinsurance partner in Oman and the broader region.

As part of its long-term vision to be a key player in the Omani market and to add value to its economy, Oman Re undertook the following key activities during 2022:

- Oman Re actively contributed towards the bidding process of the OIA & CMA initiative to host the largest gathering of regional insurers in Muscat, i.e., the 34th General Arab Insurance Federation (GAIF) Conference. Further to the successful bid, which was announced during the 33rd GAIF Conference in Algeria in June 2022, the Muscat-based event will be held the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCCEC) from 18th to 21st February 2024. Over 2,500 regional and international insurance professionals are expected to be part of this key event ahead.
- The Company conducted a "Reinsurance Webinar" on 10th October 2022 for the Omani market led by senior professionals from the Facultative and Treaty underwriting teams. Over 150 participants benefitted from this interactive event covering the concepts, principles and practice of reinsurance.
- Considering the increased frequency of natural catastrophe events in Oman in the recent years, Oman Re initiated – a national dialogue with the regulator and Oman Insurance Association in view of mitigation and management of natural catastrophes affecting the Sultanate since 2018. In November 2021, following Cyclone Shaheen, Oman Re conducted in coordination with the Capital Market Authority, a workshop on this subject involving the Omani Insurance Association and all decision makers of the local insurance companies. All participants concurred on the importance of the establishment of a Nat Cat Pool for Omani market. A Steering Committee with representatives from six local companies and chaired by Oman Re was formed and is actively working on the various technical aspects of the reinsurance pool formation. Oman Re was elected by the steering committee as the Nat Cat Pool Manager, which will positively reinforce our status as the reinsurance leader in Oman and boost our brand image regionally. The deployment of the Omani Nat Cat Pool was planned for second half of year 2022. The steering committee completed their assessment of the Motor Nat Cat Pool section and shared their proposal with the Capital Market Authority for formal approval and necessary insurance law amendments. With regards to the Non Marine Nat Cat pool, the steering committee completed the data collection and modeling. At this point in time the steering committee is working on various pricing option of the cover with international reinsurance market.
- Oman Re has maintained its business from the local market in 2022 despite a more selective underwriting of treaty accounts. On the other hand, our facultative portfolio increased during 2022 due to favorable rate movements and also as part of our overall strategy to reinforce our business mix towards facultative book because of better results. Oman continues to be our key market where we write 70% of our business.

The Company is expected to reinforce its position as a lead reinsurer in Oman in 2023 and in the years ahead. Please find below figures of GWP from Omani market by underwriting year:

	2022 OMR	2021 OMR	2020 OMR
Treaty	982,287	1,136,647	941,847
Facultative	1,781,937	1,552,946	1,066,636
Total	2,764,224	2,689,593	2,008,483

Development of Omani Talent

A key strategic initiative for Oman Re is continuous training and development of its human assets, especially the Omani cadre. In this regard Oman Re conducted the following:

- The Company extended great emphasis towards people development activities and launched an in-house online learning platform in March 2022, the "Oman Re Learning Hub" in collaboration with an international partner – Skillsoft Percipio. Over 500 business silks courses were undertaken collectively by all staff members.
- Also in March 2022, the Company introduced the "Professional Certifications Incentive Scheme", whereby 15 staff members are enrolled for various global qualifications from UK-based institutions, such as the Chartered Insurance Institute (CII); the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA); and the International Compliance Association (ICA).
- All staff members completed the Anti-Money Laundering & Counter-Terrorism Financing course; Health & Safety course; and Team Building Activity during year 2022. Additionally, all functional heads participated in the Leadership Development Workshop, and various staff members from the Operations, Support and Control divisions actively participated in the respective domain specific training courses during the year.
- Oman Re, under the umbrella of Oman Insurance Association (OIA), also collaborated with the Chartered Insurance Institute (CII) and the Foundation for Insurance and Finance Education (FIFE) to conduct two groups (English & Arabic respectively) of 'Certificate in Insurance (Cert CII)' professional designation qualification for insurance personnel within the Omani market during year 2022. With 40 candidates collectively enrolled for the English & Arabic programs, 22 candidates completed the coveted qualification comprising of three courses, and other 18 candidates completed training for their three courses with exams to follow. A certification ceremony in this regard was held on 22nd November 2022 to coincide with OIA's Annual Meeting of Members. Over 100 professionals representing insurers, reinsurers, brokers as well as the Capital Market Authority (CMA) – the Omani insurance industry regulators witnessed and participated in the certification event.
- Furthermore, in collaboration with the Capital Market Authority (CMA) and the Ministry of Labour (MOL) in Oman, Oman Re has curated an ambitious Graduate Development Program in Insurance (GDPI), whereby ten high calibre Omani youth will be enrolled into the program with core objective being to create highly skilled and competent insurance and reinsurance professionals in order to promote advancement within the operations and services of the insurance industry in the Sultanate of Oman. The selected candidates will be hosted by Oman Re for one year period, whereby they are scheduled to undertake the Certificate in Insurance (Cert CII) professional qualification in partnership with the Foundation for Insurance and Finance Education (FIFE) along with on-the-job learning within the Oman Re's Operations Division (Underwriting, Claims and Technical Accounts) under the mentorship of the Company's designated subject matter experts. Upon successful completion of the GDPI program, local insurance companies (including Oman Re) have committed to recruit all candidates into relevant technical positions. Work is in final stages on this project with certain financial approvals being awaited from MOL, the sponsor of this GDPI program.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Oman Re is fully committed to be a responsible business by contributing back to the society in which it operates. During 2022, Oman Re contributed the following to different charitable causes:

SNO	PARTICULARS	AMOUNT
1	Ramadan food drive	2,000
2	Oman Charitable Organization	2,000
3	Cancer Association of Oman	1,000
4	Al Noor Association for Blind	1,000
5	Oman Association for Disabled	1,000
6	Dar Al Atta	1,000
7	Amerat Charity	2,000
	TOTAL	10,000

The Company will extend its CSR activities during 2023 in respect of health in general and will also support the underprivileged members of society. The Company is planning to spend OMR 15,000 with respect to CSR activities in 2023.

Financial Performance

Premium

In the year 2022, the total Gross Written Premium was OMR 36.6 million compared to OMR 27.6 million in 2021, an increase of 32.5% year on year. Treaty increased by 19.6% to reach OMR 16.8 million compared to OMR 14.1 million in 2021; Facultative increased by 46.0% to reach OMR 19.7 million compared to OMR 13.5 million in 2021.

Claims

In the year 2022, total Net Incurred Claims amounted to OMR 14.8 million as against OMR 11.3 million in 2021. The net incurred claims increased by 31.2% in nominal terms due to the growth in the business volume. However, in terms of loss ratio there has been a substantial decrease, i.e., from 63.1% in 2021 to 58.4% in 2022. The details are given below:

Sr. No.	Description	2022	2021
1.	Net claims settled during the year	6,489,962	4,789,045
2.	Movement in net outstanding claims	3,305,140	4,519,736
3.	Movement in net IBNR claims provision	5,026,328	1,990,987
4.	Net incurred claims	14,821,430	11,299,768

Reserves and Provisions

The IBNR (Incurred But Not Reported) reserves of the Company stood at OMR 13.7 million (gross) and OMR 12.2 million (net) at the end of 2022, against OMR 8.8 million (gross) and OMR 7.2 million (net) respectively for 2021.

The Reserves and Provisions for the year 2022 are as per the details given below:

Sr. No.	Description	2022	2021
1.	Net Unearned Premium Reserve	13,596,720	9,964,332
2.	Net Outstanding Claims Provision (including IBNR)	30,929,216	22,597,748
	Total	44,525,936	32,562,080

General and Administrative Expenses

In the year 2022, the total expenditure amounted to OMR 3.1 million as against OMR 2.6 million in 2021. Although expenses as nominal amount increased by 21.3%, the General and Administrative expenses on Gross Written Premium dropped to 8.6% compared to 9.4% in 2021. The details are given below:

Sr. No.	Description	2022	(AMOUNT IN OMR) 2021
1.	General and Administrative expenses	3,148,629	2,596,381
	Total	3,148,629	2,596,381

Investment Income

The Investment and other income for the year 2022 was OMR 2.3 million as against OMR 2.1 million in 2021. There was a significant increase of 10.6% in investment income compared to prior year as per the below mentioned details:

Sr. No.	Description	2022	2021
1.	Interest income	2,181,937	1,848,628
2.	Dividend income	115,490	111,237
3.	Realised gains on sale of investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	9,351	184,422
4.	Unrealised fair value gains/(loss) on investments at fair value through profit or loss	9,609	(133)
5.	Gain/(loss) on sale of equipment	708	-
6.	Custody expenses	(14,484)	(37,618)
7.	Other income	28,260	-
	Total	2,330,871	2,106,536

Share Capital

In line with requirements from the Capital Market Authority (CMA) for licensees, Oman Re's paid up capital at 31st December 2022 stood at OMR 32.6 million (approximately USD 84.7 million), thus fulfilling one of the key licensing / regulatory requirements.

Reinsurance License

During 2019, the Company successfully renewed its Reinsurance License from CMA for a period of five years up to 15th June 2024.

Internal Audit

Internal Audit Department (IAD) promotes action on audit advice and reinforces staff accountability and commitment to results. It's ultimate aim is to enhance Oman Re's risk management and control systems. In 2022, IAD fully executed the risk-based internal audit plan for 2022, which was approved by the Audit Committee.

Risk and Actuarial

As part of its remit during 2022, the Risk and Actuarial Department (RAD) has been working on embedding the Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) framework throughout the Company, supported by a comprehensive Risk Management Policy. It also monitors adherence to the risk appetite set by the Board by means of Top Risks report and Risk Tolerance Control reports, with the result of developing a risk-based decision-making process throughout the Company.

Future Plans

Based on our Vision, "Reinsurance Protection Beyond Expectations", we aim to position Oman Re as a reinsurer renowned for providing innovative and responsive solutions. Oman Re complies with best corporate governance practices. Through our commitment to the insurance and reinsurance industries, we will continue to build our reputation as a financially strong reinsurer with highly acceptable quality of service.

To achieve our vision, Oman Re will:

- Be guided by clear and sound underwriting principles and guidelines that lay emphasis on quality rather than volume in view of sustained and profitable growth to the satisfaction of our shareholders.
- Be committed to its values of Integrity, Dynamic Culture and Transparency within the workplace and in dealings with clients.
- Seek long-lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships with clients.
- Develop and retain a highly motivated professional team.
- Recognize and reward strong performance; individuals will be appraised for their contribution to the Company and rewarded appropriately.
- Embed and establish systems and procedures so the Company can manage risks and encourage creativity.
- Comply with Corporate Governance principles to ensure transparency and to protect the interests of the shareholders and the reputation of the Company.
- In order to obtain a sound financial rating, the Company will maintain risk-adjusted capitalization at levels sufficient to absorb our growth and follow a disciplined underwriting approach.

Year 2022 marked the last year of our 3-year business planning cycle titled "BROADENING OUR HORIZON FOR PROFITABLE GROWTH". Oman Re focused on the following strategic objectives during 2022:

- Enhance business profile and expand profitably.
- Diversification in terms of both geography and lines of business.
- Promote Oman Re as a regional leader.
- To manage the credit rating exercise, with the aim of improving the current rating.
- Proximity to clients through regional operations.
- Embedding ERM.
- Strengthening the Human Capital.
- Invest in optimising efficiencies.

At the end of 2022, the BOD approved 2023-2025 business planning cycle titled "SHAPING THE FUTURE OF OMAN RE"

Oman Re Property

The Company has obtained most of the necessary regulatory permits with respect to the approval of design and construction of the property. Due to the overall economic challenges of property market in Oman, the Board of Directors has deferred the project until there is improvement in the overall economic and property markets.

Acknowledgements and Appreciation

On behalf of the Board of Directors, the Executive Management and the Staff Members, we are honoured to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tanki Al Said for his visionary leadership and we pray to the Almighty God to grant him every strength to continue to lead the Sultanate on the path of sustainable development.

May almighty god save Oman, its leader and citizens.

The Directors of Oman Re wish to acknowledge the valuable guidance and assistance received from the Capital Market Authority, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and the support received from clients and business partners. We look forward to receiving their continued support and encouragement.

The Directors also wish to extend their thanks and appreciation and express their gratitude for the continuing commitment and dedication of its shareholders, the Executive Management and employees at all levels. The Directors are thankful to the esteemed shareholders for their support and the confidence placed in the Company and the Board.

Dr. Juma Bin Ali Al Juma
Chairman of the Board

Statement of financial position as at 31 December 2022			Statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2022		
	31 December 2021	31 December 2021		Year ended 31 December 2022	Year ended 31 December 2021
ASSETS			Income		
Non-current assets			Gross premiums written	36,590,738	27,605,434
Property and equipment	92,568	137,643	Net underwriting results	3,360,325	2,058,254
Intangible assets	120,887	163,913	Investment and other income, net	2,330,871	2,106,536
Investment property	1,900,000	1,900,000		5,691,196	4,164,790
Investment property under development	184,592	184,592	Expenses		
Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	29,191,780	19,788,547	General and administrative expenses	-3,148,629	-2,596,381
Non-current portion of bank deposits	6,590,268	12,288,000	Foreign exchange losses, net	-661,596	-119,351
Deferred tax assets, net	339,946	0		-3,810,225	-2,715,732
Total non-current assets	38,420,041	34,462,695	Profit before tax for the year	1,880,971	1,449,058
Current assets			Income tax expense	-253,947	-93,603
Investments at fair value through profit or loss	637,539	576,615	Net profit after tax for the year	1,627,024	1,355,455
Insurance and other receivables	11,025,292	8,360,858	Other comprehensive income:		
Accrued income	13,964,080	11,870,135	Items that will not be reclassified to profit or loss:		
Deferred policy acquisition costs	3,936,555	3,081,338	Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income		
Reinsurers' share of insurance funds	23,015,386	29,098,209	Valuation (losses)/gains on equity investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	-638,818	262,032
Current portion of bank deposits	15,826,000	11,165,268			
Cash and cash equivalents	2,755,277	5,556,548	Deferred tax credits/(charge) on valuation of equity investments at fair value through other comprehensive income	71,023	-184,120
Total current assets	71,160,929	70,508,971	Items that will or may be reclassified to profit or loss:		
Total assets	109,580,970	104,971,666	Investments at fair value through other comprehensive income		
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			Valuation losses on debt instruments at fair value through other comprehensive income	-1,448,034	-99,700
Capital and reserves			Deferred tax credits/(charge) on valuation of debt instruments at fair value through other comprehensive income	217,205	-43,410
Share capital	32,615,926	32,615,926	Other comprehensive loss for the year	-1,796,624	-65,198
Legal reserve	641,431	478,729	Total comprehensive (loss)/income for the year	-171,600	1,290,257
Investment fair value reserve	-1,738,919	-102,368	Earnings per share - basic and diluted	0.005	0.004
Contingency reserve	5,681,236	4,216,914			
Accumulated losses	-8,110,588	-7,948,515			
Total capital and reserves	29,089,086	29,260,686			
Non-current liabilities					
Employees' benefit liabilities	324,998	243,373			
Deferred tax liability, net	0	68,358			
Total non-current liabilities	324,998	311,731			
Current liabilities					
Technical provisions	67,541,322	62,460,289			
Reinsurers' premium and other payables	12,356,990	12,581,149			
Deferred commission income	268,574	357,811			
Total current liabilities	80,166,886	75,399,249			
Total liabilities	80,491,884	75,710,980			
Total equity and liabilities	109,580,970	104,971,666			
Net assets per share	0.088	0.088			



Lulu Hypermarket gets HACCP Certification

Lulu Hypermarket has received the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification for its stores in Oman.

The HACCP, which is a globally recognised Food Safety Management System certification, was certified to stores in Bausher, Darsait, Al Bandar, Markaz Al Bahja, Al Lawami, Mall of Muscat and Sohar. The certification was awarded by the United Registrar of Systems (URS), which is a well-known international certification body, and accredited by Emirates International Accreditation Center (EIAC), with the partnership of Total Quality Consultancy (TQC), a press release said.

The HACCP accreditation is a proof of Lulu's commitment to uphold food safety regulations at all times. Good manufacturing practices are regularly implemented at the grassroots level in all food handling sections to ensure that cleaning and sanitization, verification activities, food and water testing, quality control, maintenance and calibration have all been followed up.

All Lulu stores strictly comply with local municipality requirements as well as international standards for the safety of food products, giving immense importance to the safety requirements of its valued customers. In order to establish a food

safety culture among workers, regular food safety trainings are also organized for food handlers based on their work categories. Food safety awareness programmes have also been regularly conducted among workers.

Lulu management also makes sure that all policies and procedures are properly implemented at all levels of the organisation. To ensure sustainable food safety assurance, all systems are reviewed on a regular basis through planned and unplanned internal audits and review meetings.

Commenting on the HACCP accreditation, Shabeer K A, regional director - Lulu Hypermar-

kets, Oman, remarked, "As a committed retailer, Lulu's objective is to produce and distribute safe, wholesome, and palatable food items of utmost quality and hygiene. We have set the highest standards in food safety, quality, traceability, and accountability and constantly adheres to food safety policy to produce and deliver quality and safe products. Good hygiene practices are the backbone of all operations."

"We will continue to meet HACCP's extremely high standards of safety and quality control, so that consumers can feel assured while making the right shopping choices," he added.

NBO holds 'market outlook' session

In keeping with its commitment to creating value for its customers, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently held a Market Outlook 2023 event for its high-net-worth clientele at the bank's headquarters.

The unique experience was part of NBO's comprehensive Private Banking proposition, which it created to guide clients towards long-term financial well-being. Tapping into its 50-years of experience, NBO welcomed James Ashley, an expert in asset management from Goldman Sachs, to share valuable insights and benchmark best investment



practices during this interactive event, a press release said.

Ali Mustafa al Lawati, assistant general manager and head of Private Banking at National Bank Oman, said, "We created

this distinctive value proposition to meet and exceed the unique wealth management requirements and expectations of our clients. Private Banking is carefully curated to provide a host of

comprehensive, confidential, and holistic solutions that meet the expectations of our premier client segment. We recently celebrated our 50th anniversary and Private Banking constitutes an important milestone in our journey."

NBO's Private Banking proposition was launched in 2022 when the bank rolled out a broad portfolio of investment and wealth management solutions and services through a state-of-the-art platform. It offers clients the opportunity to leverage market opportunities and invest in a wide range of offerings.



Musandam ideal for Ramadan and Eid

There's no better time to book a trip to Six Senses Ziggy Bay than this Ramadan and Eid-al Fitr. Nestled in Oman's dramatic Musandam Peninsula, where rugged mountains dive into vibrant emerald waters, across a powdery sand beach, GCC residents can enjoy the leisurely drive from Dubai (just 2 hours away) or from anywhere in Oman.

For adventure-seekers, couples, families or just those looking for a private getaway, the 82-villa resort is a remarkable natural playground. During the very special period which focuses on reflection and togetherness, guests can discover a number of meaningful experi-

ences, a press release said.

What could be more relaxing than limited access to the outside world? Six Senses Ziggy Bay's village-inspired villas, suites, and beachfront retreats are the ideal undiscovered havens for guests to enjoy time and space to find themselves. Natural stone and timber set the style for Omani-inspired private enclaves, whilst colourful and cool interiors lead out to personal pool areas with high cobblestone walls, sun loungers and shaded summer houses.

Perched on a private terrace and set to the most picturesque backdrop, the resort's signature award-winning restaurant sits

293 meters above the azure waters of Ziggy Bay, overlooking the magnificent Omani landscape. Serving a Kaiseki style dinner, Sense on the Edge tells the story of executive chef Sébastien Pinson's culinary journey and personal travels from land to sea.

Six Senses Ziggy Bay also takes to the seas for its latest out-of-the-ordinary escapade. The recently refurbished Dhahab - meaning gold in Arabic - now offers one- or two-night voyages for the ultimate sea-hotel adventure. Guests can explore the dramatic coastline and fjords of Musandam aboard a traditional, hand-crafted Omani dhow.

Bank Muscat allows online loan applications

Bank Muscat has launched a new service within its Internet and Mobile banking channels, which enables customers to submit applications for loans and credit cards digitally.

The new service further expands the list of options available to customers through the bank's various digital channels and enhances banking convenience leading to reduce waiting times when visiting branches, a press release said.

The new features enable customers to apply digitally for a number of loan facilities across various categories such as Personal, Vehicle, Marriage, Travel, Educational, and Health and Beauty loans. Customers may also apply online for a variety of credit cards including Visa Infinite credit card, Gold credit card, Oman Air credit card, Lulu credit card, Al Jawhar Visa Platinum credit card, Asalah Visa Signature credit card and the Private Banking Visa Infinite credit card according to the eligibility norms



Abdunansir N al Raisi

phone as well as the email id registered with the bank. The customer should then visit the branch selected during the submission process within 5 days and submit all the required documents to complete the process.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdunansir N al Raisi, general manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said, "Bank Muscat is committed to provide innovative services that are in line with the latest technological developments. This new feature will allow our customers to use their Internet or Mobile banking to experience the power of banking convenience in line with our strategy of serving our customers better, every day. In fact, our customer-centric strategy is one of the key pillars that Bank Muscat is proud to have initiated in our continuing efforts to improve and enhance customer experience and achieve our strategic goal of sustainable and long-term relationships within the community that we serve."

Barcelo resort offers packages for Ramadan season and Eid

Barceló Hotel Group has announced its special Ramadan offers for guests across UAE and Oman to celebrate with meaningful experiences for family and friends during Ramadan.

A time of reflection, sharing and togetherness, Barceló Hotel Group invites guests to immerse themselves in the essence of giving with exquisite offers in the

Sultanate of Oman. A range of special packages, including tantalising Iftar and Suhoor buffets, staycations and more, are on offer, a press release said.

Tucked away in the heart of Mussanah, the city's flagship beach resort - Barceló Mussanah Resort welcomes guests to an unforgettable Dine and Stay experience. From a delicious Iftar to

a flavoursome Suhoor, guests will be refreshed, rejuvenated and satisfied.

During the week, guests can enjoy a relaxing stay in the luxurious Deluxe Room for two for RO49 as part of the Dine and Stay package. Guests also have the option to upgrade to a Seaview Room for RO10 or a Suite for RO20.

Kaldi coffee shop offers delicious options

A new wave of exciting products has recently arrived at the Kaldi coffee shop, offering customers a variety of delicious options.

The coffee shop now offers four types of salads, including a Tuna salad, a chicken and garden salad, a pomegranate and Fateh salad, and a Asian chicken salad. Each salad is made with fresh ingredients and is sure to

satisfy even the pickiest eaters, a press release said.

In addition to salads, the coffee shop has added several types of sandwiches to their menu. Customers can now choose from a labneh tuna sandwich, a labneh chicken sandwich, and lemon chicken sandwich.

The sandwiches are made

with freshly-baked bread and can be customised to include any combination of toppings and condiments.

The coffee shop is also offering a selection of freshly-baked pastries and desserts, including muffins, cookies. Customers can also enjoy a variety of hot and cold beverages, including coffee, tea, and smoothies.

Oman LNG participates in Sustainability Week

Oman LNG has remained steadfast in its mission to contribute to the nation's sustainability agenda. In its most recent endeavour, the company confirmed its participation as a strategic partner in the upcoming Oman Sustainability Week (OSW), scheduled to be held between March 12-16 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC).

An event of national importance, OSW will be hosted under the Ministry of Energy and Minerals. The event is well-equipped to highlight Oman's commitment to sustainability leadership, the event will bring together key stakeholders, policymakers, sustainability experts, and industry leaders from different sectors, a press release said.

As part of its business sustainability scope, and to ensure the sustainability of both its operations and community reach, Oman LNG has initiated several strategic projects such as the Power Project, a new gas-engine power plant which will increase the plant efficiency as well as will boost Oman LNG's environmental performance and reduce its carbon footprint. The company has also invested in research and exploring ways to reduce its carbon footprint and enhance its sustainability.

To ensure its sustainable contribution to its community,



Oman LNG earns a dedicated portion of its net income after tax (NIAT) annually to invest in social investment programmes. Taking a holistic approach to sustainability and in close alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the company's initiatives pan across various segments. Oman LNG has helped empower, enrich, and boost the well-being of people, protect the biodiversity of Oman, and spearhead several sustainability programmes directed at transitioning to a green, circular economy.

Commenting on Oman LNG's participation and support at the

event, Dr Amor al Matani, CEO of Oman LNG Development Foundation, said, "As a progressive, dynamic and resilient company, Oman LNG has seamlessly adapted to the evolving realities of the global energy landscape. As such, sustainability plays a major role in Oman LNG's business activities, initiatives and projects.

"The company has translated such commitment through the delivery of reliable energy worldwide, where it uses cutting-edge techniques to implement sustainable practices for a cleaner sustainable future. Our continuous investment in technologies has helped us achieve the set

sustainable targets while reducing our carbon footprints. We have been able to strike the right balance between cost-efficient and environmentally-friendly operations."

He added, "At Oman LNG, we continue to deliver enhanced shareholder value by taking a proactive stance on embracing, implementing, and advocating ESG practices. Our sustainability strategies also further attest to our ethical stance while highlighting the efforts made towards diversifying into renewable and clean energy."

Oman LNG is keen on promoting energy sustainability and maximising economic value.

Mazoon Dairy wins Most Trusted Brand Award

Mazoon Dairy Company has been awarded the Most Trusted Brand Award for 2022 in the 'Dairy' category for the second consecutive year.

This award comes as the ultimate recognition of the public's confidence and satisfaction in the company's outstanding products. The award also contributes to enhancing Mazoon Dairy presence in the local market, a press release said.

The sixth annual awards event, organized by the Apex Media, was held under the auspices of H E Engineer Saeed bin Hamoud al Mawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Ghafri, Chief Support Officer of Mazoon Dairy, received the award. During the event, awards were given in more than 50 categories to some of the sultanate's most reputable companies.

The quality of the brands goods and services as well as consumer satisfaction are attested to by these accolades.

Al Ghafri expressed his happiness at this achievement which demonstrates the company's level of quality and added value in terms of quality and competitiveness through its products, which are delivered daily, fresh



from the farm to all areas of the sultanate.

Mazoon Dairy is one of the most technologically advanced

dairy firms in the region, with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment, with a dedication to maintaining strict standards of

quality control.

Consumers have a great deal of trust in the company, which is a crucial factor and a persistent

commitment to offering consumers the greatest healthy and quality products with exceptional taste.



Bank Nizwa marks decade of growth

Bank Nizwa celebrates its 10th anniversary, marking a decade of exceptional growth and performance in the Islamic banking sector.

The event was held under the auspices of H E Sultan bin Salem al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and Sheikh Khalid bin Abdullah al Khalili, chairman of Bank Nizwa. The gala celebration was hosted on March 6 in Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz Carlton Hotel. The event highlighted the bank's achievements, growth strategy and future, a press release said.

"As we mark this momentous occasion, we are grateful for the unwavering support of our shareholders, customers and employees who have played a pivotal role in our journey towards becoming Oman's fastest-growing Islamic bank. Over the past decade, we have successfully executed our strategy of delivering innovative Shari'ah-compliant banking solutions that meet the evolving needs of our customers.

"As we look to the future, we remain steadfast in our commitment to providing exceptional banking services that are

grounded in Islamic principles and are aligned with the aspirations of Oman's Vision 2040. We are confident that Bank Nizwa will continue to play a leading role in driving the growth of the Islamic banking sector in Oman and contributing to the development of the national economy," said Sheikh Khalid bin Abdullah al Khalili, chairman of Bank Nizwa.

Bank Nizwa, as a pioneer of Islamic banking in the country, is committed to expanding its reach throughout the sultanate and increasing its branch network to serve all governorates and regions.

The bank strives to provide financial services to the maximum number of customers and cater to their needs, no matter where they are located.

Bank Nizwa's unwavering commitment to its goals reflects its determination to strengthen its position as a leading financial institution in the sultanate.

The bank strives to meet the aspirations of its customers and the entire community, as it continues to enhance its services and expand its network.

Air Arabia starts direct flights to Baku

Air Arabia Abu Dhabi starts its direct flights from Abu Dhabi to Baku in Azerbaijan. The direct flights will connect Abu Dhabi International Airport to Heydar Aliyev International Airport with a frequency of three flights per week, starting from September 13.

Adel al Ali, Group CEO, Air Arabia, said, "We are excited to start our direct flights between Abu Dhabi and Baku, a city which offers a unique blend of Europe and Asia. Baku is a significant route in our expansion plans from UAE's capital and reinforces our commitment to providing our customers with more choices, convenience, and enhanced connectivity, while sup-



porting both countries' aviation sector and tourism industry."

Air Arabia Abu Dhabi continues to enhance global connectivity to and from the capital of the UAE, serving a total of 32 destinations directly from Abu Dhabi International Airport, a press release said. It operates a total fleet of 68 Airbus A320 and A321

neo-LR aircraft, the most modern and best-selling single aisle aircraft in the world.

The otherworldly city of Baku is a must-visit destination, offering travellers anthropological sites, modern boulevards and panoramic views, as well as sizzling lakes and mud volcanos for the more adventurous.



INFINITI Valet Programme offers seamless servicing

Expanding upon its premium ownership experience, Infiniti Oman has launched the Infiniti Valet Programme, offering owners seamless vehicle servicing with pick-up and drop-off from the comfort of their homes and offices.

The Infiniti Valet Programme provides Infiniti owners with time-saving convenience empowering them with the ability to choose the time and location from which their vehicle is collected and returned, a press release said.

Once scheduled, vehicles are collected for servicing from a preferred location and returned at a time convenient for owners. The service thoughtfully integrates into Infiniti's courtesy vehicle programmes available only at Infiniti Service, Azaiba, with prior appointment, ensuring owners can enjoy seamless mobility while their vehicle is serviced.

A spokesperson for Suhail Bahwan Automobiles said, "as a human-centric organisation, we understand the value of conven-

ience and in crafting a premium customer journey. With service offerings such as Infiniti valet, we create a seamless experience that enables our customers to rise above the details of every day, by returning to them the luxury of time."

The Infiniti Valet Program is rooted in the Japanese heritage and honours the commitment to providing thoughtful hospitality. The programme offered in Oman is available to all Infiniti customers, regardless of vehicle age or type of warranty.

INVITATION FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING AND ANNUAL ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

The Board of Directors of **Ahli Bank SAOG** (the "**Bank**") are pleased to invite the shareholders to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting and Annual Ordinary General Meeting to be held at 3:00 p.m. on Monday, the 27th of March 2023 via the electronic platform for general meetings on Muscat Clearing and Depository's website (www.mcd.gov.om). In the event that the quorum for the Extraordinary General Meeting and/or Annual Ordinary General Meeting is not complete, the second Extraordinary General Meeting and/or Annual Ordinary General Meeting will be held at 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, the 30th of March 2023 via the abovementioned electronic platform to discuss and consider the following agenda:

FIRST MEETING: EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

1. To consider and approve the amendments to the Articles of Association of Ahli Bank SAOG.
2. To consider and approve the issue of a total number of up to 100 Million Perpetual Additional Tier 1 Capital Instruments in the form of perpetual bonds, by way of either a private or public issues at face value of One Rial per bond plus issues expense in one or multiple tranches to be determined by the Bank's Board of Directors after taking all the required procedures and obtaining the approval of the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority.
3. To authorize the Board of Directors to take all the necessary actions to execute item (2).

SECOND MEETING: ANNUAL ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

1. To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report on the Bank's activities and its financial position for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
2. To consider and approve the Board of Directors' Report on the organization and management of the Bank (Corporate Governance Report) for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
3. To consider and approve the auditor's report on the Bank's audited financial statements for the year ended on 31 December 2022.
4. To notify the general assembly on the Sharia Compliance Report of Ahli Islamic for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
5. To consider and approve the proposal to distribute cash dividends of an amount of 9 Baizas per share to the shareholders on the date of the Annual General Meeting.
6. To ratify the sitting fees paid to the Board of Directors and Board Sub-Committees for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022 and determine their sitting fees for the financial year ending on 31 December 2023.
7. To consider and approve the proposal to distribute remunerations of an amount of RO 300,000 to the Board of Directors for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
8. To ratify the remuneration and sitting fees of the Shari'a Supervisory Board for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022 and determine their sitting fees for the financial year ending on 31 December 2023.
9. To notify the general assembly of the related party transactions entered into by the Bank during the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
10. To notify the general assembly of the contributions made to support community services during the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
11. To consider and approve the report on the performance of the Board of Directors for the financial year ended on 31 December 2022.
12. To elect a new Board of Directors of the Bank.

Anyone who wishes to stand as a candidate shall complete the form prepared for this purpose and submit it to the Bank at least five (5) days prior to the date of the Annual General Meeting latest by close of business on Wednesday, 22 March 2023. Nomination forms received after such date will not be accepted. Candidates must consider fulfilling the requirements prescribed for membership of the Bank's Board of Directors.

13. To approve the criteria for the performance appraisal of the Board of Directors of the Bank.
14. To appoint a third party for appraising the performance of the Board of Directors for the financial year ending on 31 December 2023 and determine their fees.
15. To appoint auditors and external Shari'a auditors for the financial year ending on 31 December 2023 and determine their fees.

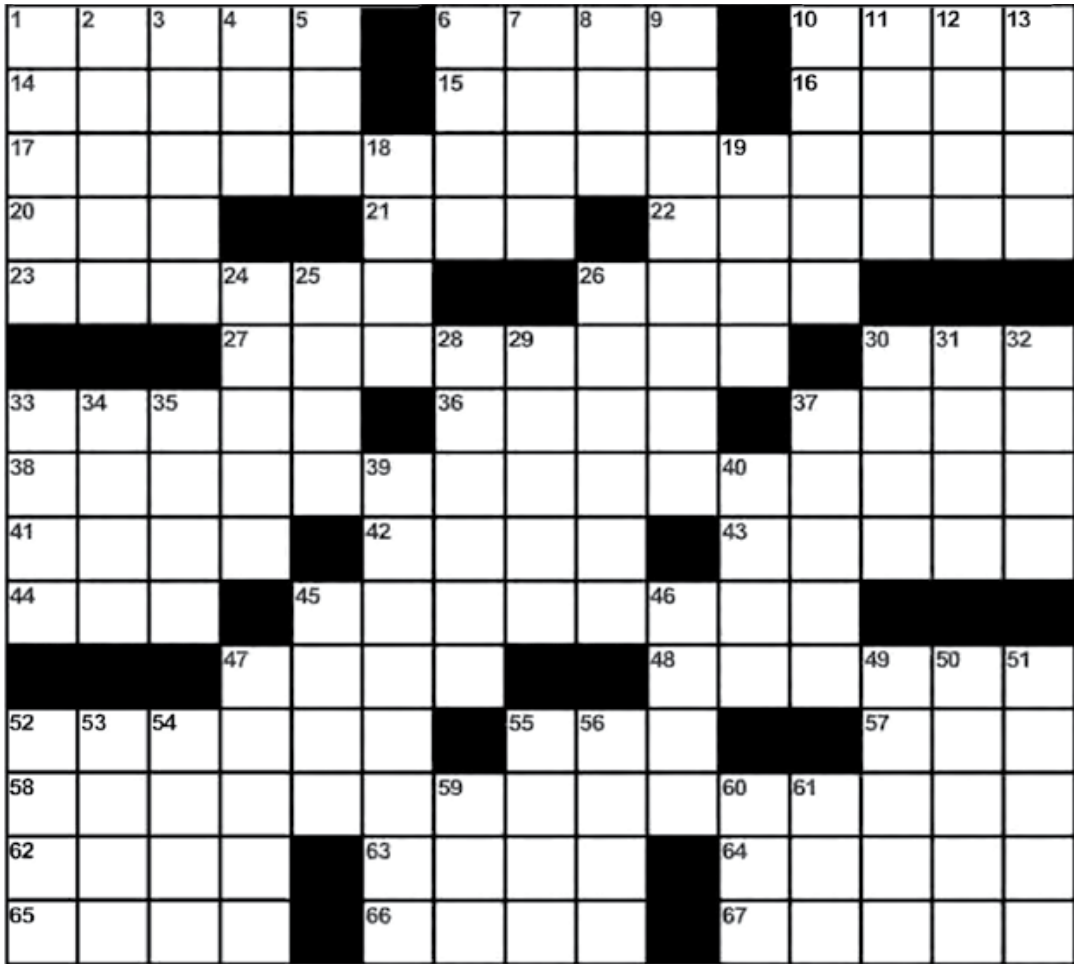
Pursuant to the Bank Articles of Association and the Rules for Convening General Meetings of Public Joint Stock Companies via Electronic Means issued by the Capital Market Authority (CMA), we would like to draw your attention to the following:

- (a) Only juristic persons shall have the right to appoint a proxy to attend the Extraordinary General Meeting and the Annual Ordinary General Meeting and vote on their behalf via electronic means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in Muscat Clearing and Depository Company.
- (b) Voting on any of the items on the agenda shall commence no more than three (3) days before the date of the general meeting and until the voting process ends on the day of the meeting. If a shareholder's balance is increased or decreased, the voting process will be cancelled, and the shareholder must cast his vote again on the day of the general meeting.

In case of any enquiries, please contact **Mr. Habib Al Hamaid** at telephone number **24577200**.



DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Go into

6) Tubular pasta

10) Brit's elevator

14) Code name?

15) 2015 nuke deal country

16) Woody's son

17) Bummed-out vampire?

20) Aliens, for short

21) Rustic stopover

22) Already programmed

23) Step down

26) Skedaddles

27) Game-winning shots, e.g.

30) Kiltie's cap

33) De-grease, say

36) Brooding spot

37) Make do, somehow

38) Communist in charge of a private school?

41) Frozen waffle brand

42) Bird on a Canadian dollar

43) Helping hands

44) Hand-wringer's word

45) Grows, as a romance

47) Active sort

48) _ up (enlivened)

52) "Aja" band _ Dan

55) Intimate apparel

57) Gardner of "On the Beach"

58) Cowardly partier in a stadium parking lot?

62) Canaveral org.

63) Belt-makers' tools

64) Sharpener's creation

65) Modeler's medium

66) Farm team's harness

67) Symbol of laziness

DOWN

1) Feature of a fading flame

2) Nick of "A Walk in the Woods"

3) Supporting frame

4) Legal conclusion?

5) Ole Miss athlete, familarly

6) Jerusalem's Mount _

7) Press a suit, say?

8) Smidgen

9) Sporadically

10) Alternative to Velcro, on shoes

11) Is vexing to

12) Skedaddle

13) Basis for pressing a suit, maybe

18) Town Car, for short

19) Pottery class projects

24) Kind of potato

25) Simmons of KISS

26) Frankincense and amber, for two

28) Not al fresco

29) Deliveries to record execs

30) Open-_ shoes

31) Recess at St. Paul's

32) Sloppy state

33) Shell team

34) K'NEX alternative

35) Slight lead

37) Like new dollar bills

39) Passage between buildings

40) Not at all ferocious

45) Tie for a Texan

46) Gemstone of silica

47) Airport annoyance

49) Spot for a grill

50) Decathlon part

51) _ Vader of "Star Wars"

52) Match up

53) Eurasian duck

54) "Frozen" character

55) Pitcher's flub

56) Climb the corporate ladder

59) Tango necessity

60) Navigation aid, for short

61) Net giant, briefly

NOTE PAD

BORED STOW LASS
ADORE TERI IBET
JOSE FERRER LAVA
ARS IRAN ERASER
REND SMOKERS
CARESS SHANE
ALEX TWAIN DROP
MOSH ODE RIP A
PETA AMISS TODAY
RENEE LEVELS
SPARTAN TINA
AERIAL SUEZ AMP
KAOS YULBRYNNER
ESSO SMEE MANIA
SEEN TADS EMERY

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Rushing around from one adventure to another might sound like a great way to spend your life, but if you're always off saving the world or solving the latest big crisis, when will you have time to take a nap or read a good book? Balance is the key to happiness in your life, and you need to work on getting back some of your old equilibrium. Get started as soon as you can. The still, quiet moments in life hold just as many rewards for you as the dramatic, glamorous ones. See for yourself!

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Do something just for the thrill of it today! Forget about getting stuff done, making progress on a big project, or impressing that certain someone. You're in good standing on all those fronts and can just take a break from your responsibilities for a while. The stars say that right now is the perfect time to kick back and have fun with life. Stop taking things so seriously, because that's no fun at all. And people really want to have fun with you now.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Your luck is about to change today, which is very good news if you've been striking out left and right. And, conversely, it isn't such good news if life has been sweet and easy lately. There is always going to be change in your life, and you have to get used to it. Having to alter your plans isn't necessarily a negative thing. Revised plans often reap better results in the end than the original ones would have. Try to appreciate change.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

No matter how cute you think someone is today, their personality will put you off. Arrogance, after all, is a very ugly accessory. There is no need to tolerate a rude person, no matter how attractive they are or how powerful they may be. If someone displays an attitude of undue superiority, feel free to give them a piece of your mind. Taking them down a peg or two will feel good and earn you a lot of respect from someone who's been admiring your style for quite a while.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Is there too much happening around you right now or not enough? You could be vacillating between being bored out of your skull and utterly overstimulated today, which could drive the people you're hanging out with a bit nuts. But despite their frustration with your unpredictability, they'll love it at the same time. So just embrace your pendulum-like mood swings, and don't feel like you have to hide your emotions. You should go from tears to laughter without hesitation.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Be mindful of all your property today, especially the resources that you need for work or school. It's just your way to lend your favorite pen, let someone review your notes, or offer to give someone your laptop to check their email, but that kind of generosity could paint you into a corner today. You don't have to turn into a miser, but you should make sure you don't let anyone walk away with something that belongs to you!

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Using your compassion will help you make it through the day more easily. There are quite a few opinionated people in your vicinity, and trying to put yourself in their shoes is the best way to keep yourself from getting unduly angry. It's hard for you to understand how some people come to the conclusions they come to, but there is some logic at work there, however twisted it may be. Take a "live and let live" approach and be grateful that most of the people in your life are more open-minded.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Today, an influx of crystal clarity will free you up to help tackle someone else's problems for a while! People will be looking to you for answers to their issues, and you should be as honest as you can when you give them. This is a time to be totally up front with the people you care about who are going through a tough time. Tell it to them straight, and you'll be doing them a bigger favor than if you sugarcoat the truth beyond all recognition.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Getting too caught up in getting your own way is going to lead you down a very lonely path, so beware. Today, if you don't compromise, you'll only be hurting yourself. Give until it hurts. Show someone else that you respect them, and you acknowledge that in order to get part of what you want, you have to give them part of what they want. This dynamic is healthy, and it can apply to any negotiation you have to make whether you're at work or on a date.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

A position you're put in today could require you to make a tough decision. Do you opt for the choice that's best for you or the one that's best for someone else? Avoid the urge to consult other people about what you should do. While getting input is a fine idea, it could end up confusing you in the end if you talk to too many people. Plus, you might come off as someone who doesn't really know what they're doing. To protect your reputation, make this call on your own.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Working with other people might feel like a challenge for you today. Your mood isn't going to match anyone else's, and a personality conflict could erupt with at least one person. Is it up to you to change in order to make them feel more at ease? Not this time! Follow your mood wherever it leads you and then just deal with the consequences. Chances are this person will back down and let you call the shots. You will score a sweet victory.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Today, you could get a great chance to learn more about a culture you've always been curious about. Feed your curiosity until you're satisfied, but try not to overdo it! Getting too obsessed too soon about something new could lead to information overload, and you won't have enough time to enjoy any of it. Everything is going well in your life right now, better than you could have expected, honestly. Fortunes are turning, and you could get an opportunity to travel.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The islands of Kos, Leros, Nisyros, Patmos and Rhodes are in what sea?

A. Caribbean

B. Caspian

C. North

D. Mediterranean

02. A club in central London called "The Night Tripper" that opened on 23 December 1966 later changed its name to what?

A. The UFO

B. The Ad Lib

C. The Marquee

D. CBGBs

03. How many ounces are there in 8 lbs?

A. 128

B. 108

C. 112

D. 120

Answers: 1. D 2. A 3. A

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

A	O	E	O
T	O	S	U
O	B	N	L
Y	R	B	S

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Saudi-Iran breakthrough adds new twist to Israel's outreach to Arabs

Riyadh, KSA - Saudi Arabia's surprise move to restore ties with Iran adds a new, complicated layer to its delicate diplomatic dance with Israel, which craves a breakthrough normalisation deal of its own, analysts said.

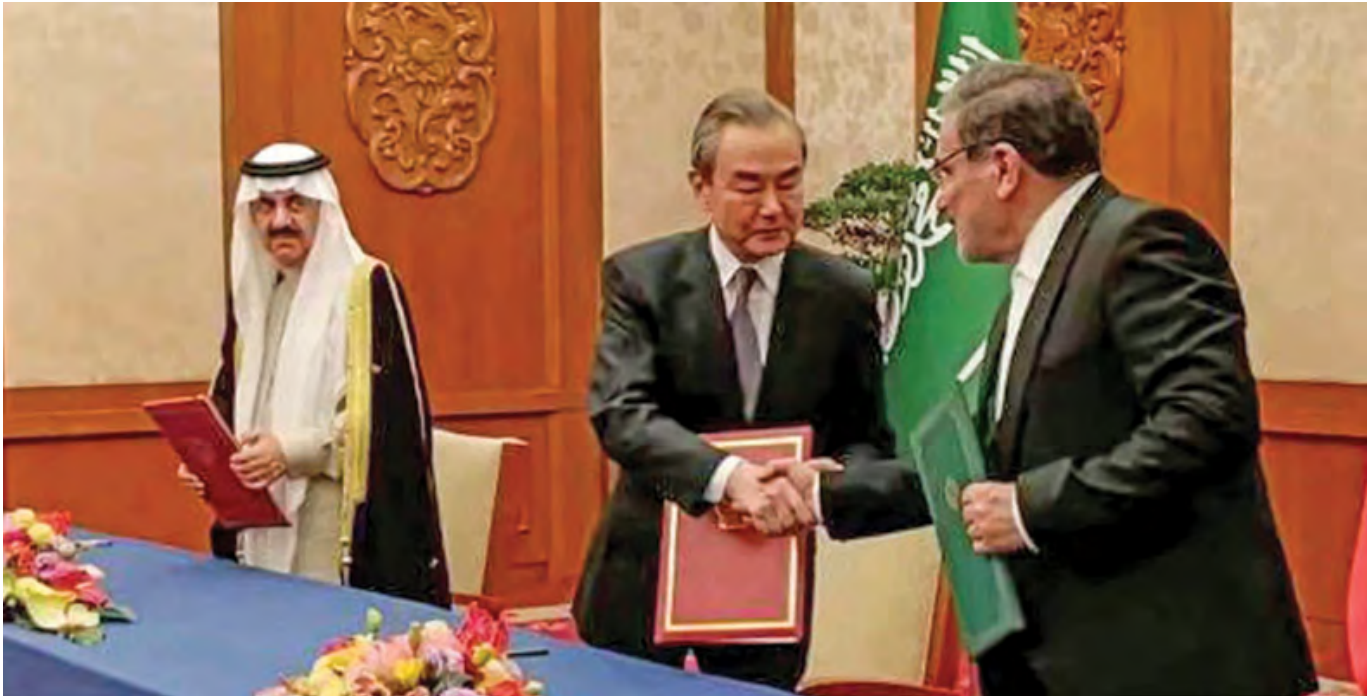
Riyadh and Tehran announced on Friday that after seven years of severed ties they would reopen embassies and missions within two months and implement security and economic cooperation agreements signed more than 20 years ago.

The China-brokered deal provoked sharp criticism within Israel of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made clear his focus on bringing Saudi Arabia on board as part of a regional alliance against Iran.

Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid said it represented 'a total and dangerous foreign policy failure of the Israeli government'.

Yet regional observers cautioned that the actual implications of the deal are far from clear - both in terms of future Saudi-Iran cooperation and Israel's relationship with Riyadh.

The notion that Saudi Arabia was exclusively interested in Israel as part of a potential front against Iran was always 'superficial', said Saudi analyst Aziz Alghashian. "This idea of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' - Saudi has seldom operated in that way, especially not strategically



Secretary of Supreme National Security Council of Iran Ali Shamkhani (right) shaking hands with Director of Office of Central Foreign Affairs Commission of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Wang Yi during a meeting with Saudi's National Security adviser Musaad bin Mohammed al-Aiban in Beijing on Friday (AFP)

This idea of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' - Saudi has seldom operated in that way, especially not strategically

AZIZ ALGHASHIAN

ally," he said. With Friday's news, 'you clearly see that Saudi Arabia has

prioritised a rapprochement with Iran over an overt rapprochement with Israel', he added. But 'this doesn't mean very quiet relations with Israel are going to cease... Now the relationship with Iran is a variable that is part of the calculation'.

A widening gap?

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, has long said its recognition of Israel hinges on a two-state solution with the Palestinians. It did not join the 2020 US-

brokered Abraham Accords that saw the Jewish state establish ties with two of the kingdom's neighbours, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Yet there have been subtler signs of potential cooperation.

Several Israeli journalists who hold foreign passports were able to visit Saudi Arabia both before and during US President Joe Biden's tour of the Middle East last year. The Saudi civil aviation authority announced during that trip that it was lifting overflight restrictions on 'all carriers',

paving the way for Israeli planes to use Saudi airspace.

And in October the Arab-Israeli head of an Israeli bank appeared at a Saudi investor forum, hailing the 'amazing' opportunities in the kingdom.

This week, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* reported that Riyadh has been privately lobbying for security guarantees from the United States and assistance with a civilian nuclear programme in exchange for a deal with Israel. But surging Israeli-Palestinian

violence this year has made public progress unlikely in the short term, said Umar Karim, an expert on Saudi politics at the University of Birmingham. "The Saudis have no incentive right now to quickly normalise with Israel," he said.

And the new Saudi-Iran deal 'could lead to a wider gap between Israel and Saudi Arabia if this yields a wider diplomatic opening between the kingdom and Iran', said Brian Katulis of the Middle East Institute in Washington. "Israel is sceptical of any diplomacy with the regime in Tehran." That makes the Saudi-Iran deal 'a clear diplomatic victory for Iran' and 'a blow' to Netanyahu, said Nicholas Heras of the New Lines Institute of Strategy and Policy.

"Saudi Arabia, which is being heavily courted by Israel, just sent a big signal to the current Israeli government that the Israelis cannot count on Riyadh to support Israeli military action against Iran, anywhere in the region," he said. Not everyone thinks the ramifications are so obvious, however.

"The Iran/Saudi deal is a relatively narrow one, focusing on specific issues such as the re-opening of embassies and the resumption of trade relations as well as security from attacks," said Fatima Abo Alasrar, non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute. AFP

Angola to send forces to DR Congo

Luanda, Angola - Angola said on Saturday it will send a military unit to the Democratic Republic of Congo, after a ceasefire it brokered between rebel militiamen and government troops collapsed.

The DR Congo's restive east has witnessed a flare up in violence since a militia called M23 took up arms again in late 2021, going on to capture swathes of territory.

Angola has played a mediator role in the conflict, but the latest ceasefire it negotiated collapsed on Tuesday on the same day it was due to take effect.

On Saturday, the country's presidency said that it 'will send a unit' of its armed forces to its northern neighbour.

'This unit's main objective is to secure the areas where the members of the M23 are stationed and to protect' members of a team tasked with monitoring compliance with the ceasefire, the presidency said in a statement.

Luanda said the decision was taken after consultations with Kinshasa, adding other regional leaders as well as the United Nations had been informed.

The deployment needs approval from parliament, where the ruling party, which has been in power since the 1970s, holds a comfortable majority. AFP

Warring rivals in Yemen discuss prisoner swap in Geneva

Geneva, Switzerland - Representatives of Yemen's government and Iran-backed Houthi rebels kicked off talks in Geneva on Saturday for an exchange of prisoners, with the UN urging both sides to engage in 'serious' discussions.

The new round of closed-door negotiations amid years of civil war are being overseen by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

"I hope the parties are ready to engage in serious and forthcoming discussions to agree on releasing as many detainees as possible," UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said in a statement.

The talks, reportedly set to last 11 days, mark the seventh meeting aimed at implementing an agreement on prisoner exchanges reached in Stockholm five years ago, the UN said.

Under that deal, the sides agreed 'to release all prisoners, detainees, missing persons, arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared persons, and those under house arrest', held in connection with Yemen's nearly decade-long conflict, 'without any exceptions or conditions'.

The ICRC noted in a statement to AFP that past meetings mediated by Grundberg's office had 'resulted in the release of prisoners on both sides'.

"In 2020, more than 1,050 detainees were released and provided with transportation to their region of origin or home country following an agreement reached by the

sides," it said.

Hoping for 'decisive' talks

The latest meeting comes almost a year after the Houthis said they had agreed to a prisoner swap that would see 1,400 rebels freed in exchange for 823 pro-government fighters - including 16 Saudis and three Sudanese nationals.

But the warring parties have since held a series of talks in the Jordanian capital Amman that did not result in any developments.

"The ICRC is committed to supporting the implementation of future detainee releases and exchanges, and to repatriating or transferring released detainees across front lines back to their respective homes," the organisation said. Emphasising that it was 'a neutral intermediary in this process', the ICRC said it was 'not involved in the negotiations on who exactly is going to be released and the identities of the detainees proposed and accepted for exchange by all concerned parties'.

Speaking to the official Saba news agency on Thursday, Yemeni government delegation member Majed Fadail said the aim of the talks was 'to reach an understanding regarding the details' of a prisoner exchange.

In a Twitter post the same day, the leading Houthi delegate to the Geneva talks said he hoped the negotiations would yield concrete results. "We hope that this round will be a decisive one," Abdul Qader al-Murtada said. AFP

Afghanistan: Bomb blast kills guard, wounds journalists

Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan - A bomb blast in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif on Saturday killed a security guard and wounded a group of journalists, as well as several children, police and a witness said.

The blast came two days after a suicide bomber killed the Taliban governor of northern Balkh province in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group.

The attack on Mohammad Dawood Muzammil in the Balkh provincial capital Mazar-i-Sharif on Thursday marked the killing of one of the highest-ranking officials since the Taliban stormed back to power in 2021.

Saturday's blast took place during an event honouring



A wounded man is assisted by men near the site of a bomb blast during an event commemorating the media, in Mazar-i-Sharif on Saturday (AFP)

Afghanistan's media at a cultural centre in Mazar-i-Sharif. Police said a security guard was killed and that five journalists were

among the wounded. "I heard a big bang... then there was chaos as everyone was trying to find a way to es-

cape," Afghan journalist Atif Arian, who was wounded in the blast, told AFP.

"Some journalists are seriously wounded."

Balkh police spokesman Mohammad Asif Waziri said three children were also among the wounded.

Arian said the explosion happened when a group of children were singing an anthem, minutes after a Taliban official had delivered a speech.

Afghan journalists were regularly targeted before the Taliban reclaimed power, with several attacks claimed by Islamic State.

Muzammil, the Balkh governor, was killed by an IS suicide bomber minutes after he arrived

at his office in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Violence across Afghanistan has fallen since the Taliban seized control but security has deteriorated again, with Islamic State claiming several deadly attacks. The militant group has emerged as the biggest security challenge to the Taliban government since last year, carrying out attacks against Afghan civilians as well as foreigners and foreign interests.

The Taliban and IS share an austere Sunni Islamist ideology, but the latter are fighting to establish a global 'caliphate' instead of the Taliban's more inward-looking aim of ruling an independent Afghanistan. AFP

Iran says deal reached to buy Russian fighter jets

Tehran, Iran - Iran has finalised a deal to buy Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, state media reported, as defence cooperation between the two countries deepens.

The air force of sanctions-hit Iran has an ageing fleet of aircraft and has struggled to acquire spare parts to keep its warplanes in the air.

In a statement to the United Nations, Tehran said it began approaching 'countries to buy fighter jets' to replenish its fleet in the wake of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

'Russia announced it was ready to sell them' after the expiry in October 2020 of restrictions on Iran purchasing conventional weapons under UN Resolution 2231, said the statement carried late on Friday by the official IRNA news agency.

"The Sukhoi 35 fighter jets were technically acceptable for Iran," it added.

Tehran has forged strong ties with Moscow in various sectors including the military in the past year.

Kyiv has accused Tehran of



This file photo shows a Russian air force Sukhoi Su-35 fighter landing at the Russian military base of Hmeimim, located south-east of the city of Latakia in Hmeimim, in Syria's Latakia governorate on September 26, 2019 (AFP)

The air force of Iran has an ageing fleet of aircraft and has struggled to acquire spare parts to keep its planes in the air

supplying Moscow with Shahed-136 'kamikaze' drones used in at-

tacks on civilian targets since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year - an allegation the Islamic republic denies.

The United States has expressed alarm over the growing military cooperation between Iran and Russia, with Pentagon spokesman John Kirby warning in December that Russia looked likely to sell Iran its fighter jets.

Kirby maintained that Iranian pilots had reportedly been learning to fly the Sukhoi war-

planes in Russia, and that Tehran may receive the aircraft within the next year, which would 'significantly strengthen Iran's air force relative to its regional neighbours'.

Iran currently has mostly Russian MiG and Sukhoi fighter jets that date back to the Soviet era, as well as some Chinese aircraft, including the F-7.

Some American F-4 and F-5 fighter jets dating back to before the 1979 Islamic Revolution are

also part of its fleet.

The United States began reimposing sanctions on Iran in 2019, a year after its unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal under then-president Donald Trump.

The 2015 deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, gave Iran relief from international sanctions in return for curbs on its suspect nuclear programme. AFP

Li Qiang appointed Chinese premier as Xi asserts influence

Beijing, China - Li Qiang, one of Chinese President Xi Jinping's most trusted allies, was confirmed as premier on Saturday, as Xi cements his influence on the country's top leadership.

Li, the former Shanghai party chief who oversaw the city's gruelling two-month lockdown last spring, was named the successor of outgoing premier Li Keqiang at a meeting of the parliament.

The 63-year-old received nearly every vote from the more than 2,900 delegates at the National People's Congress, a day after Xi was unanimously selected by deputies for a norm-breaking third term as president.

Xi's motion nominating Li Qiang as premier was read out to the chamber on Saturday morning. Journalists were asked to leave the chamber as deputies, mostly dressed in dark suits, marked their ballots in a tightly choreographed process.

Delegates later applauded as Xi ceremoniously deposited his votes in the ballot box while cheerful traditional music played from speakers.

An electronic screen in the hall displayed 2,936 votes for Li, with only three delegates voting against his appointment and eight abstaining.

Li later took an oath, swearing to be loyal to China's constitution and to 'work hard to build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious and great modern socialist country'.

His ascension had once



China's newly-elected Premier Li Qiang (right) is congratulated by Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chairman Wang Huning at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Saturday (AFP)

Li, the former Shanghai party chief who oversaw the city's gruelling two-month lockdown last spring, was named the successor of outgoing premier Li Keqiang at a meeting of the parliament

seemed in doubt after his handling of the Shanghai lockdown, in which residents struggled to access food and medical care.

But Li's record, along with widespread protests last winter over Xi's zero-COVID policy, has been brushed aside as Xi cements his grip on Chinese politics.

Former top prosecutor Zhang Jun was appointed supreme court president at the same session on Saturday, while Ying Yong, who was party chief of COVID-hit Hubei province in the early months of the pandemic, was selected as procurator-general of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

Longtime allies

Unlike almost all previous premiers, Li does not have experience working at the central government level.

Li, who started his career as an irrigation pump station worker near his hometown, rose steadily through local government ranks and was promoted to affluent Zhejiang province's top job in 2012.

He was Xi's chief of staff in the early 2000s when the Chinese leader was Zhejiang's party chief.

In 2017, Li was appointed the party secretary of Shanghai - a sign of the president's high degree of trust in him.

Now, in his capacity as pre-

mier and head of China's cabinet, the State Council, he will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the country as well as macroeconomic policy.

Outgoing premier Li Keqiang last week announced a growth target of 'around 5 per cent' for 2023, one of the lowest in decades, as the world's number two economy fights stiff headwinds. Last year, the Chinese economy expanded just three per cent, one of its weakest performances in decades on the back of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and a real estate crisis.

China's housing market, which along with construction accounts for more than a quarter of GDP, remains in a slump, having been dealt a hefty blow since Beijing started cracking down on excessive borrowing and rampant speculation in 2020.

Hong Kong-based Chinese politics expert Willy Lam told AFP it was unlikely Li Qiang would serve as a counterweight to Xi's efforts to control the economy. "Xi has doubled down on the fact there must be tighter party-state control of the economy," Lam said.

"It is very doubtful whether Li Qiang himself will have the authority to further develop Deng Xiaoping's reform and open door policy," Lam added, referring to the decades-long process of opening up that has appeared to be threatened under Xi.

AFP



Thick smoke rises during an eruption from Mount Merapi as seen from Tunggularum village in Sleman on Saturday (AFP)

Indonesia's Merapi volcano erupts, ash blankets villages

Yogyakarta, Indonesia - Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted on Saturday, spewing out smoke and ash that blanketed villages near the crater.

There were no immediate reports of casualties, the country's disaster mitigation agency said.

Images broadcast on local outlet Kompas TV showed ash-covered houses and roads at a village near the volcano, located on Java Island, near Indonesia's cultural capital Yogyakarta.

The Merapi Volcano Observatory estimated the ash cloud reached 9,600 feet (3,000 metres) above the summit.

Authorities established a restricted zone of seven kilometres from the crater after the eruption, which was recorded at 12:12 pm (0512 GMT).

"To anticipate potential danger from Mount Merapi eruption, the public is advised to stop any activities in the potential danger area," agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said in a statement on Saturday.

Nearby residents should also expect 'disruptions' from ash and be aware of potential dangers from volcanic mudflow, particularly if it rains near the volcano, Muhari said.

At least eight villages near the volcano have been affected by volcanic ash, an officer at one of Merapi's observation posts said in a statement.

The volcano's last major eruption in 2010 killed more than 300 people and forced the evacuation of some 280,000 residents.

It was Merapi's most powerful eruption since 1930, when about 1,300 people were killed. An eruption in 1994 left about 60 people dead.

The volcano's alert status has remained at the second-highest level since 2020 after showing renewed activity.

Indonesia, which has nearly 130 active volcanoes, sits on the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', where the meeting of continental plates causes high volcanic and seismic activity.

AFP

Gabon: Number of missing in ferry disaster rises to 34

Libreville, Gabon - The number of people believed missing in a ferry disaster off the coast of Gabon has climbed to 34 following a reassessment, with the death toll also rising from two to three.

At least one child and two adults have been found dead since the Esther Miracle - a mixed-use freight and passenger vessel that travelled between the capital Libreville and the oil town of Port-Gentil - sank in the wee hours of Thursday not far from the coast, according to authorities.

The number of passengers and crew aboard the ship was initially believed to be 151, but that figure was revised upwards to 161 on Friday evening.

"One hundred twenty-four

people have been rescued (and) three lifeless bodies have been found, while 34 people are still missing and the search continues," Libreville deputy public prosecutor Loic Mangongo told public television channel Gabon Premiere.

Mangongo did not explain how the 10 other missing people had been left out of the initial count. Three more people have also been rescued from the wreck since the initial tally given on Thursday afternoon, though authorities did not specify the circumstances in which they were found.

With currents strong in the Gulf of Guinea, the chances of finding more survivors so long after the disaster is dwindling.

AFP

Rescuers airlift residents from remote Australia floods

Sydney, Australia - Rescuers flew residents out of a remote Australian town by helicopter on Saturday as record-high floods rose rapidly and authorities issued a 'final alert' to evacuate.

Police said helicopters and other aircraft had already flown out 53 vulnerable people over the past few days from the small community of Burketown in northeastern Australia.

Murky water lapped at the sides of buildings in the town, which lies 1,600km (1,000 miles) northwest of the Queensland capital Brisbane and is usually home to about 200 people.

The swollen Albert River had transformed wide areas of land around the town into lakes, with only the tops of trees visible, aerial images provided by emergency services showed.

Police said about half of the town's houses had been flooded.



An aerial view of the flooded northern Queensland town of Burketown (AFP)

Only about 100 people remained in the Queensland town by Saturday morning and helicopters were ferrying more people to safety, state police said.

"At the moment the water movements are unpredictable and are rising at a rapid pace," the local Burke Shire Council said

in a 'final alert' to residents.

"We strongly encourage residents to evacuate," it said, telling them to pack a bag and warning there would be no evacuation flights after Saturday. Evacuated resident Shannon Moren told public broadcaster ABC she was worried about the impact of the

flooding on livestock.

Cows swimming

"I checked on my parents' cattle property the other day and you can see cattle up to their necks in the water, literally swimming for their lives," she said.

Police also urged all remaining residents to get out.

The elderly and young children were a priority for evacuation, Queensland police said in a statement, adding that sewerage systems had been 'compromised' and power would also be cut off. "It is not safe for people to remain," police said.

Following heavy rains, which have since eased, the Albert River has topped a March 2011 record of 6.78 metres (22 feet), Queensland's bureau of meteorology said.

The river rose to more than seven metres on Friday, and was

not expected to peak until Sunday, the forecaster said.

Australia has been lashed by heavy rain in the past two years, driven by back-to-back La Nina climate cycles over the Pacific.

But the country's bureau of meteorology has predicted drier and warmer weather in the months ahead as La Nina nears its end. An east coast flooding disaster in March last year - caused by storms in Queensland and New South Wales - claimed more than 20 lives.

Flash floods swept through parts of eastern Australia later in the year, forcing evacuations in Sydney in July and tearing homes from their foundations in some country towns in November.

Australian researchers have repeatedly warned that climate change is amplifying the risk of natural disasters.

AFP

Japan mourns 2011 disaster as nuclear support grows

Tokyo, Japan - Japanese offered tearful prayers on Saturday on the anniversary of the deadly tsunami that triggered the Fukushima disaster, but public support for nuclear power is growing as memories of the 2011 meltdown fade.

A minute's silence was observed nationwide at 2:46pm (0546 GMT), the precise moment when a 9.0-magnitude quake - the fourth strongest in Earth's recorded history - devastated northeastern Japan 12 years ago. The undersea quake unleashed a tsunami that left around 18,500 people dead or missing and overwhelmed cooling systems at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, leading to the worst nuclear catastrophe since Chernobyl.

All of Japan's nuclear reactors were taken offline after the disaster and the majority remain out of

action today.

But the global energy crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine has caused electricity bills to soar in Japan, inspiring a government push to reboot reactors as polls show that public views on nuclear power are softening.

On Saturday, TV footage showed people who lost loved ones to the tsunami laying flowers, offering prayers and bowing in front of graves.

"Hi guys, it's been 12 years," public broadcaster NHK showed Fumiko Sugawara, 73, telling the grave of her family members, including her husband.

"We're surviving, so please watch over us," said the resident of Kesennuma, a city flattened when huge waves rushed ashore.

No deaths have been directly ascribed to the nuclear accident, after which around 165,000 people fled their homes in the area ei-



People visit a cemetery at Namie town of Fukushima Prefecture on Saturday, on the 12th anniversary of the tsunami and nuclear disaster (AFP)

ther voluntarily or under evacuation orders.

Most areas around the plant have since been declared safe after extensive decontamination work, but many former residents have chosen not to return.

With Japan now facing its most severe energy crunch in decades, the government wants to speed up the revival of its nuclear industry.

Opinion shifting

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has called for seven reactors approved by Japan's nuclear safety watchdog to resume operations, and for the nation to consider building 'next-generation' reactors with new safety mechanisms. Recent opinion polls by major newspapers the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* show that a majority of people support restarting the reactors

for the first time since 2011.

"The government will continue to spearhead efforts toward the safe and steadfast decommissioning of the Fukushima Daiichi plant - a process crucial to recovery," Kishida said at the Fukushima memorial service.

"It is our responsibility to promote efforts to build a disaster-resistant country." Mistrust of nuclear power still runs deep among campaigners who accuse TEPCO, the operator of the Fukushima plant, of safety lapses that upended local communities.

In January, Tokyo's High Court upheld the acquittal of three former TEPCO executives, again clearing them of professional negligence over the disaster.

But in a separate civil verdict last year, the trio - plus one other ex-official - were ordered to pay a whopping 13.3 trillion yen (US\$97bn) for failing to prevent

the accident.

The enormous compensation sum is believed to be the largest ever for a Japanese civil case, although lawyers acknowledge it is well beyond the defendants' capacity to pay.

The government also plans to start releasing more than a million tonnes of treated water from the stricken Fukushima plant into the sea this year.

A combination of groundwater, rainwater that seeps into the area, and water used for cooling, it has been filtered to remove various radionuclides and kept in storage tanks on site, but space is running out.

The water release plan has been endorsed by the International Atomic Energy Agency but faces staunch resistance from local fishing communities and neighbouring countries.

AFP

French protesters back on streets against Macron's pension reform

Unions hope they can still force Macron to back down as parliament debates the draft law

Paris, France - Demonstrators in France took to the streets on Saturday for a seventh day of protest against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform plans, with police expecting up to a million people at rallies nationwide.

Unions hope they can still force Macron to back down as parliament debates the draft law, with the National Assembly and the Senate moving towards a final vote as early as this month.

"This is the final stretch," said Marylise Leon, deputy leader of the CFDT union. "The endgame is now," she told the franceinfo broadcaster on Saturday.

This week, Macron twice turned down urgent calls by unions to meet with him in a last-ditch attempt to get him to change his mind. "When there are millions of people in the streets, when there are strikes and all we get from the other side is silence, people wonder: What more do we need to do to be heard?" said Philippe Martinez, boss of the hard-left CGT union.

"This country's leaders need



Protesters march during a demonstration in Toulouse, southwestern France on Saturday (AFP)

to stop being in denial of this social movement," said CFDT head Laurent Berger on Saturday.

Police said they expect between 800,000 and one million people at 230 planned demonstrations across France, of which up to 100,000 were likely to march in Paris. It was the second protest day called on a weekend, with unions hoping that demonstrators would show up in greater numbers if they did not have to take a day off work.

'Future of children'

"I'm here to fight for my colleagues and for our young people," said Claude Jeanvoine, 63, a retired train driver demonstrating in Strasbourg, eastern France. "People shouldn't let the government get away with this, this is about the future of their children and grandchildren," he told AFP.

At the last big strike and protest day on Tuesday, turnout was just under 1.3mn people, according to police, and more than

three million according to unions.

Several sectors in the French economy have been targeted by union calls for indefinite strikes, including in rail and air transport, power stations, natural gas terminals and rubbish collection.

On Saturday in Paris, early indications were that urban transit was little affected by stoppages, except for some suburban train lines. The capital's main demonstration was to start around 2pm (1300 GMT).

The French Senate, meanwhile, early on Saturday resumed debate of the reform whose headline measure is a hike in the minimum retirement age to 64 from 62. Senators have until Sunday evening to conclude their discussions, and a commission is then to elaborate a final version of the draft law which will be submitted to both houses of parliament for a final vote.

Should Macron's government fail to assemble a majority ahead

of the vote, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne could deploy a rarely-used constitutional tool, known as article 49/3, to push the legislation through without a vote.

An opinion poll published by broadcaster BFMTV on Saturday found that 63 per cent of French people approve the protests against the reform, and 54 per cent were also in favour of the strikes and blockages in some sectors.

AFP

First rains hit Mozambique as cyclone inches closer, again

Maputo, Mozambique - Intense rains and winds started to lash parts of Mozambique on Saturday as Tropical Cyclone Freddy bore down on the country for the second time in as many weeks, authorities said.

Freddy, which is on track to become the longest-lasting cyclone on record, slowed its advance towards the southern African nation and was 60km (40 miles) off the coast on Saturday morning, according to the Mozambique National Meteorology Institute (INAM).

"The system reduced its speed from seven to four kph, thus delaying its entry," INAM said in an update.

'Heavy rains and very strong winds' were affecting the central provinces of Zambezia, Manica and Sofala, it added.

The cyclone was expected to make a second landfall in Mozambique later this weekend, after a first deadly hit in late February. It was initially forecast to make landfall on Friday night.

"There is already quite substantial flooding," Guy Taylor, a spokesman for the United Nations' children agency UNICEF, told AFP from the seaport of Quelimane, on Saturday.

AFP

Over 1,000 migrants brought to safety at Italian ports: Coastguard

Rome, Italy - More than 1,000 migrants were brought to safety at two Italian ports after the overcrowded boats they were on encountered problems in the Mediterranean, the coastguard said on Saturday.

The rescues came the same day as a body was discovered of the 74th victim of the deadly shipwreck nearly two weeks ago - that of a female child between five and six years of age, according to news agency AGI.

The February 26 shipwreck, which occurred just off the shore of Calabria, has drawn sharp criticism of the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni for its failure to intervene timely to save the boat.

The coastguard said on Saturday it was wrapping up a large rescue operation that began Friday after three boats were spotted drifting off Italy's coasts. One was south of the Calabrian city of Crotone and two further south off Roccella Ionica.



A boat overloaded with migrants is seen during a rescue operation on Friday off the coast of Calabria (AFP)

Coastguard videos showed a large fishing boat pitching violently back and forth in nighttime rough seas with dozens of people visible on the deck. Other images showed inflatable rescue boats approaching another fishing vessel packed with people.

Those 487 migrants onboard the first boat were safely brought to the port of Crotone at about 0200 GMT Saturday morning,

the coastguard said.

Another rescue operation in which 500 migrants were brought to safety aboard a coastguard ship was wrapping up, it said.

News agency ANSA had earlier reported that the ship had docked at the port of Reggio Calabria. A third boat carrying 379 people was rescued by two coastguard patrol boats and the

migrants transferred to a Navy ship headed to the Sicilian port of Augusta, it said.

Italy's defence ministry said it had begun to air transfers of migrants away from the crowded migrant centre on the island of Lampedusa, which it said was now over capacity.

The recent shipwreck has put the government on the defensive.

AFP

World's first 3D printed rocket set to blast off from Florida

Washington, US - The world's first 3D printed rocket is scheduled to blast off from Florida on Saturday on the maiden flight of an innovative spacecraft billed as being less costly to produce and fly.

Liftoff of the rocket, Terran 1, had been scheduled for Wednesday at Cape Canaveral but was postponed at the last minute because of propellant temperature issues.

The new launch window for the rocket built by California aerospace startup Relativity Space to put satellites into orbit is from 1pm to 4pm (1800 GMT to 2100 GMT) on Saturday.

Terran 1 is set to reach low Earth orbit eight minutes after blastoff on a voyage intended to gather data and demonstrate that it can withstand the rigors of liftoff and space flight.

If the rocket manages to attain low Earth orbit, it will be the first privately-funded vehicle using methane fuel to do so on its first try, according to Relativity.

Liftoff of the rocket, Terran 1, had been scheduled for Wednesday at Cape Canaveral but was postponed at the last minute because of propellant temperature issues

Terran 1 is not carrying a payload for its first flight but the rocket will eventually be capable of putting up to 2,755 pounds (1,250kg) into low Earth orbit.

The rocket is 110-feet (33.5 metres) tall with a diameter of 7.5 feet (2.2 metres) and 85 per cent of its mass is 3D printed with metal alloys, including the engines.

It is the largest ever 3D printed object according to the Long Beach-based company whose goal is to produce a rocket

that is 95 per cent 3D printed.

Terran 1 is powered by Aeon engines using liquid oxygen and liquid natural gas - the 'propellants of the future', according to Relativity, capable of eventually fueling a voyage to Mars.

Vulcan rockets being developed by United Launch Alliance and SpaceX's Starship use the same fuel.

Terran 1 has nine 3D printed Aeon 1 engines on its first stage and one 3D printed Aeon Vacuum engine on its second stage.

Relativity is also building a larger rocket, Terran R, capable of putting a payload of 44,000 pounds (20,000kg) into low Earth orbit. The first launch of a Terran R, which is designed to be fully reusable, is scheduled for next year from Cape Canaveral.

A satellite operator can wait for years for a spot on an Ariane-space or SpaceX rocket, and Relativity Space hopes to accelerate the timeline with its 3D printed rockets.

AFP

Former Jehovah's Witness member shoots dead six people in Germany

Hamburg, Germany - A disgruntled former Jehovah's Witness member shot dead six people of the Christian group's congregation in the German city of Hamburg, before turning the gun on himself, authorities said on Friday.

Eight other people were wounded, including four seriously, in Thursday evening's attack, said Hamburg interior minister Andy Grote, calling it 'the worst crime in our city's recent history'. Police identified the gunman as Philipp F., 35, a former member of the Christian group who left the community about 18 months ago 'but apparently not on good terms'.

Investigators were still seeking a motive for the killings, but there was no indication of a terrorist motive in the attack, said a senior prosecutor.

An anonymous tip-off had been sent to the weapons control authority in January this year, claiming that Philipp F. may have been suffering from an undiagnosed psychological illness and that he had a 'particular anger against religious members or against the Jehovah's Witnesses and his former employer'.

Raids following the shooting on the gunman's apartment uncovered 15 magazines loaded with 15 bullets each and four further packs of ammunition with



Hamburg's First Mayor Peter Tschentscher (centre) arrives at the tator where several people were killed in a shooting, on Friday (AFP)

about 200 rounds.

Police said the gunman had fired several shots at a car after noticing the driver manoeuvring the vehicle as he was headed for the Kingdom Hall building. The woman escaped with light injuries and contacted police.

The assailant shot at a window through which he entered the building and began firing on the congregation of around three dozen people present at the service with another 25 people participating on livestream.

The first distress calls reached emergency services at 9:04pm local time (2004 GMT) on Thursday, and police forced their way into the Jehovah's Witnesses building minutes later.

The police action interrupted the shooting, prompting the attacker to flee to the first floor of the building where he killed himself, said Grote. "We can assume that (the rapid police action) saved many lives," he added.

Police had initially said the shooting left eight people dead, but that included the gunman and a seven-month-old foetus killed in the attack. The woman pregnant with the baby has survived and was counted among the wounded.

The Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany association said it was 'deeply saddened by the horrific attack on its members'. Chancellor Olaf Scholz condemned the 'brutal act of violence' and said his thoughts were with the victims and their loved ones.

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said investigators were 'working flat-out to determine the background' to the attack.

In a public television interview on Friday, Faeser spoke in favour of tougher legislation on carrying firearms in Germany.

A bill now being drafted seeks to make a medical certificate a requirement for a permit to carry weapons, she said.

But without evidence of unfitness to bear arms, it is 'very, very difficult' to intervene after a permit has been granted, she said.

Neighbours recalled hearing multiple shots fired late Thursday. "Our son filmed the whole thing, he could see quite well from the house," said Bernd Miebach, a 66-year-old business owner.

AFP

'BUT WHAT AUDACITY'

Karim Benzema disputes 'liar' Didier Deschamps' claim over his fitness at the Qatar World Cup

Paris, France - Karim Benzema has responded to Didier Deschamps' claim that the striker told him "he wouldn't have been ready" to play at the World Cup because of an injury by implying the France coach was a "liar".

The Real Madrid forward pulled out of the France squad with an injured left thigh on the eve of the tournament and departed their team hotel in Qatar soon afterwards.

Benzema returned to training with his club on December 10, four days before France played Morocco in the World Cup semi-finals.

"Karim told me himself that he wouldn't have been ready," Deschamps told the *Parisien* newspaper in an interview published on Saturday.

"When Karim got injured, our doctor accompanied him to the Aspetar clinic to undergo an MRI," said Deschamps.

"Karim passed on the results to someone who follows him in Madrid and who also gave him an opinion. When he came back to the hotel, it was already gone midnight.

"I met Karim in his room with our doctor who had come to give me the report from the scan... Karim was hurt because this World Cup meant a lot to him. He told me, 'It's over.'"

"We stayed together for about 20 minutes," added Deschamps.

"When leaving I told him, 'Karim, there's no rush. Organise your return with the team manager.' When I woke up I found

out he was gone. It's his decision, he won't tell you otherwise, I understand and respect it."

Benzema, who announced his international retirement the day after France lost the World Cup final on penalties to Argentina, appeared to dispute Deschamps' version of events on social media.

The Ballon d'Or winner posted on Instagram a screenshot of Deschamps' remarks accompanied



"I met Karim in his room with our doctor who had come to give me the report from the scan... Karim was hurt because this World Cup meant a lot to him. He told me, 'It's over.'"

DIDIER DESCHAMPS

by the phrase "but what audacity" and a clown emoji.

He also shared the video of a popular French influencer, who repeats the words "liar, you are a liar", while again addressing Deschamps. Benzema's hasty departure from Qatar had fuelled speculation of a rift between him and the rest of the squad as well as Deschamps.

AFP



Karim Benzema



Paris Saint-Germain's Neymar (L) at Aspetar Hospital in Doha after undergoing surgery (AFP)

Neymar 'happy' but return uncertain after surgery: PSG

Doha, Qatar - Doctors are still not certain when Brazilian striker Neymar will be able to return to play despite a successful ankle operation in a Qatari hospital, a Paris Saint-Germain medical chief said Saturday.

The French club said before Friday's surgery that the 31-year-old could be out for up to four months, ruling him out of the rest of this season.

"Neymar Junior was operated yesterday, it was very successful," Hakim Chalabi, PSG's medical director general told AFP.

"Right now he is very good and he is happy.

"He is not so painful and the surgeons who operated are very happy."

Neymar will stay at the Aspetar sports hospital in Qatar for at least two days. After a period

of rest, PSG will start physiotherapy, Chalabi said.

"Later on we will evaluate a time for a return on the field. Right now it is a bit soon to talk about." The club's medical staff will consult with the surgeons after more examinations. "He is going to be on crutches for a few days but then after he should be back to half weight lifting."

AFP

Thompson topples Tsitsipas at Indian Wells

Indian Wells, United States - Unseeded Australian Jordan Thompson grabbed one of the biggest wins of his career on Friday, ousting third-ranked Stefanos Tsitsipas 7-6 (7/0), 4-6, 7-6 (7/5) to reach the third round of the Indian Wells WTA and ATP Masters.

"It's unreal at a Masters 1000 ... to have a win like that is incredible," said Thompson, the world number 87 whose only prior victory over a top-10 player came back in 2017 against Andy Murray at Queen's Club.

He admitted he felt a little lucky when a stinging forehand from Tsitsipas on match point was ruled a hair wide.

"I'm thankful that last ball was out - I thought it was in," Thompson told fans on court.

While Tsitsipas led the third-set tiebreaker 2-1 and 4-3, Thompson's coolness under pressure paid off as Tsitsipas belted a forehand into the net to give the Aussie a match point before succumbing with the near miss.

AFP



Jordan Thompson celebrates his victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas (AFP)



Christiaan Bezuidenhout of South Africa plays a shot

Bezuidenhout and Svensson in lead before play stopped at Players

Miami, United States - South Africa's Christiaan Bezuidenhout and Canadian Adam Svensson shared the lead at the Players Championship on Friday before the second round was suspended due to an incoming storm.

Bezuidenhout was four-under-par for his round, through 14 holes leaving him on eight-under for the tournament while Svensson was on the same score but had only completed 11 holes.

American Ben Griffin was the clubhouse leader after completing his round, shooting a one-under 71 to leave him two strokes behind the leaders.

Play will resume at 7am local time on Saturday with world number three Rory McIlroy facing the strong risk of missing the cut.

The Northern Irishman was six-over for the tournament having double bogeyed on the par-4 sixth, placing him five shots away from the projected cut.

World number two Jon Rahm of Spain had pulled out of the tournament on Friday morning due to illness.

Argentina goalie auctions World Cup gloves for \$45K for cancer hospital

Buenos Aires, Argentina - The gloves worn by Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano "Dibu" Martinez in the nail-biting penalty shootout with France at Qatar's World Cup final last year were auctioned Friday for \$45,000 in aid of a children's cancer hospital.

"\$45,000 for the Dibu gloves to help the Garrahan boys!" the Argentine Pediatric Foundation said on Instagram, referring to the oncology ward of the Garra-

han Hospital, the main pediatric hospital in Argentina.

The auction was held online Friday and featured Martinez via video-link from his home in England, where he plays for Aston Villa.

The gloves were worn by Martinez as he faced the penalty shootout against France in the final in Qatar, with Argentina winning 4-2, granting Lionel Messi's team the championship after drawing the

The World Cup finals are not played every day, (the gloves) are special

EMILIANO MARTINEZ

match 3-3 in extra time. "When they gave me the op-



Emiliano Martinez

tion to donate the World Cup gloves, I didn't hesitate, it's a good cause for the boys," said the goalkeeper during the event.

Martinez had autographed the inside of the gloves when announcing the donation in February. "The World Cup finals are not played every day, (the gloves) are special. But it helps a child much more than me having them hanging in a frame in my house," he said.

AFP

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Liverpool suffer shock defeat to Bournemouth after historic thrashing of Man Utd

Bournemouth, United Kingdom - Mohamed Salah missed a penalty as Liverpool came back down to earth with a bump in their shock 1-0 defeat at struggling Bournemouth on Saturday.

Jürgen Klopp's side travelled to Dean Court in high spirits after their historic 7-0 thrashing of arch rivals Manchester United last weekend.

But Liverpool's hopes of using that remarkable result as a springboard to push for a top four finish in the Premier League were given a brutal reality check on the south coast.

Philip Billing punished woeful Liverpool defending to put the struggling hosts ahead early on and Salah blew the chance to equalise when he fired wide from a second half spot-kick.

Salah became Liverpool's record scorer in the Premier League era when he netted twice against United.

But the Egypt star's failure to add to his total of 130 condemned Liverpool to a first defeat in their last six league games.

Fifth-placed Liverpool appeared to use up all their goals in the United demolition and their toothless display left them three points behind Tottenham ahead of the north Londoners' game against Nottingham Forest later on Saturday.

Apart from the damage done to Liverpool's top four bid, it was hardly ideal preparation for Wednesday's Champions League last 16 second leg at Real Madrid, where the Reds need a miracle in the Spanish capital to overturn a 5-2 deficit.

Losing to a Bournemouth side that started the day bottom of the table and lost 9-0 at Liver-



Bournemouth's Philip Billing (2R) scores past Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker in their English Premier League match on Saturday (AFP)

Apart from the damage done to Liverpool's top four bid, it was hardly ideal preparation for Wednesday's Champions League last 16 second leg at Real Madrid, where the Reds need a miracle

pool in August was the latest indignity in a troubled season for Klopp's men which has featured shock losses against Brighton, Brentford and Wolves.

Bournemouth scored the second-fastest goal ever in the Premier League history at Arsenal last weekend, but still blew a

two-goal lead in a painful last-gasp defeat against the league leaders.

It was Liverpool who made the fast start this time and Virgil van Dijk's header was arrowing towards the top corner until Bournemouth midfielder Jefferson Lerma cleared off the line.

Creaky Liverpool

Bournemouth should have capitalised on that escape moments later when Dominic Solanke's pass sent Dango Ouattara clean through on goal.

But as Ouattara rounded Liverpool keeper Alisson Becker, his touch took him too wide and he could only shoot into the side-netting.

Ouattara again threatened Liverpool with his pace but once more he could not provide the finishing touch as Van Dijk got back for a last-ditch block.

Liverpool's high defensive line was creaking and Ouattara finally helped puncture it in the

28th minute.

Racing onto a pass down the right flank, Ouattara shrugged off Van Dijk's weak challenge and whipped over a low cross that Billing finished from close-range as Liverpool's sluggish defenders failed to react.

Van Dijk had a chance to make amends for his part in Liverpool's shambolic defending when he climbed to meet Robertson's cross, but the Dutch centre-back headed wide with the goal at his mercy. Klopp responded to Liverpool's lethargic performance by sending on Diogo Jota for Harvey Elliott at half-time.

AFP



Real Madrid's Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior (R) scores against Espanyol in their Spanish league match in Madrid on Saturday (AFP)

Madrid cut gap on Barcelona with Espanyol victory

Madrid, Spain - Vinicius Junior scored a fine solo goal as Real Madrid came from behind to beat Espanyol 3-1 and cut Barcelona's lead to six points at the top of La Liga on Saturday.

Joselu had sent the visitors ahead early on at the Santiago Bernabeu but Vinicius produced a surging run and lethal finish to pull the champions level.

Eder Militao's header completed the turnaround and Madrid could have added more goals in the second half, with Rodrygo hitting the crossbar from a free-kick.

Eventually Marco Asensio tucked away the third in stoppage time after a fine run and pass from defender Nacho Fernandez.

Barcelona visit Athletic Bilbao on Sunday to try and restore their advantage, ahead of El Clasico at Camp Nou next weekend.

"They caught us out a bit with their goal, but the game gives us confidence to face a complicated week," said Nacho, ahead of Madrid's clashes with Liverpool in the Champions League on

Wednesday and Barcelona on Sunday.

"When space opens out, we're a team that has very fast players up front (to capitalise)."

After failing to score from open play in their last three matches across all competitions, Madrid's three well-taken goals were a confidence boost.

With Karim Benzema out with an ankle issue, although poised to return for the Champions League last 16 second leg clash with Liverpool, Carlo Ancelotti selected Rodrygo up front in his place.

The coach also opted to play Eduardo Camavinga out of position at left-back again and the French midfielder's mistake helped the visitors move ahead after eight minutes.

Camavinga misjudged a long ball which he allowed to reach Ruben Sanchez, who crossed for striker Joselu to smash into the top corner.

It was the forward's 12th goal of the season - only Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski has scored more in La Liga, with 15.

BBC sport output in chaos as presenter Lineker taken off air in asylum row

London, United Kingdom - The BBC's sport service was in meltdown on Saturday after pundits and commentators refused to work in support of presenter Gary Lineker, who was forced to "step back" after accusing the government of using Nazi-era rhetoric.

Match of the Day presenter Lineker, England's fourth most prolific goalscorer, sparked an impartiality row by criticising the British government's new policy on tackling illegal immigration.

The 62-year-old compared the language used to launch the new policy to that of Nazi-era Germany on Twitter, which the BBC said on Friday was a "breach of our guidelines".

"The BBC has decided that he will step back from presenting Match of the Day until we've got an agreed and clear position on his use of social media," the broadcaster said in a statement. Lineker is a freelance broad-



Gary Lineker

caster for the BBC, not a permanent member of staff, and is not responsible for news or political content so does not need to adhere to the same strict rules on impartiality. Pundits and former England strikers Ian Wright and Alan Shearer immediately tweeted that they would not take part either, followed by the programme's commentators.

Wright then said on his podcast on Saturday that he would quit the BBC if Lineker was

sacked for good.

The BBC announced that the highlights show, a Saturday night fixture since 1964 and the longest-running football television programme in the world, would air without pundits or a presenter for the first time.

It also said players would not be asked for interviews after some indicated they would not be available in support of Lineker. Adding to the chaos, sports presenters and pundits

then pulled out of a slew of BBC radio and television shows on Saturday, forcing their cancellation and the airing of repeats and podcasts instead of live coverage.

'Immeasurably cruel'

The row was sparked by Lineker's response to a video in which Home Secretary Suella Braverman unveiled plans to stop migrants crossing the Channel on small boats.

Lineker, the BBC's highest-paid star, wrote on Twitter: "This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the '30s."

The Conservative government intends to outlaw asylum claims by all illegal arrivals and transfer them elsewhere, such as Rwanda, in a bid to stop the crossings, which totalled more than 45,000 last year.

AFP

Inter Milan stunned by shock defeat at Spezia

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan missed the chance to cut Napoli's huge lead at the top of Serie A lead on Friday after suffering a shock 2-1 defeat to relegation-threatened Spezia.

Goals from Daniel Maldini and M'Bala Nzola either side of a Romelu Lukaku penalty handed fourth-from-bottom Spezia a crucial victory in their bid to avoid the drop.

But the defeat was another bodyblow to Inter's faint hopes of overhauling Napoli at the top of the table. Napoli are now 15 points clear of second-placed Inter at the top of the table and have played one game less.

Inter paid the price for failing to take the chances which came their way, with Argentinian forward Lautaro Martinez having a penalty saved by Spezia goalkeeper Bartlomiej Dragowski after 15 minutes.

Martinez did find the net early in the second half but Lukaku was offside.

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TEST OF PATIENCE

Gill ton powers India’s reply in Ahmedabad Test, but Australia still ahead

Ahmedabad, India - Shubman Gill’s sparkling century and an unbeaten 59 by Virat Kohli kept India strong in their first innings reply against a persistent Australian spin attack in the fourth Test on Saturday.

India were 289-3 at stumps and still trailing Australia’s 480 by 191 runs on day three at the world’s biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

Gill stood out with his 128 - the opener’s second Test ton and first in India - as he built key partnerships including a 113-run stand for the second wicket with Cheteshwar Pujara, who made 42.

“It feels great to be able to get a hundred in India,” Gill, 23, told broadcaster Star Sports.

“The pitch was pretty good to bat on. Anything that was happening off the pitch was off the rough area.”

Spinners kept coming back with wickets as Nathan Lyon, Matthew Kuhnemann and Todd Murphy took one each on a pitch favouring the batsmen.

Gill, who replaced a struggling KL Rahul in the third Test, hit 12 fours and one big six in a good show of batting to surpass his previous Test best of 110 despite cramping towards the end of his knock.

He finally fell lbw to Lyon’s off-spin in the third session before

Kohli took charge along with the left-handed Ravindra Jadeja, on 16, to see out the day’s play.

“The way Shubman played was exceptional to be honest,” Lyon said.

“That one I got him on was probably a little bit flatter, a little bit faster than what he was expecting,” he added.

“A decent ball on my behalf, but I thought the way he went

It feels great to be able to get a hundred in India. The pitch was pretty good to bat on. Anything that was happening off the pitch was off the rough area

SHUBMAN GILL

about it was pretty special... He’s definitely a special player.”

Kohli reached his first Test half-century since January 2022 after a jittery start to his innings when he got off the mark on the 12th ball.

Australia delayed taking the second new ball, available to the fielding side after the 80th over, by 14 overs.

Earlier Gill overcame a tough spell of run-making in the second session to raise his ton with a fine sweep off Murphy, taking a bow as the raucous weekend crowd



India’s Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a century during the third day of the fourth and final Test against Australia in Ahmedabad on Saturday (AFP)

applauded, but lost his partner Pujara four balls later.

Murphy trapped Pujara lbw, ending a stand which prospered after skipper Rohit Sharma fell to Kuhnemann’s left-arm spin for 35 in the morning session.

“It’s a big moment for the two

young spinners and I think they bowled exceptionally well,” Lyon said of Murphy and Kuhnemann.

“I think it’s pretty even. We know games in this part of the world can speed up quickly.”

Australia’s stand-in-skipper Steve Smith rotated his bowlers,

who remained disciplined in their line and length to test the batsmen’s patience for much of the hot afternoon.

Gill broke the shackles with two successive boundaries off Cameron Green to bring the crowd alive with delightful cover drives.

India started the day on 36-0 and kept attacking.

Mitchell Starc bowled to plan with his short balls and a heavy leg-side field, but Rohit took on the challenge as he smashed the left-arm quick for a four and a six

at long leg.

The pitch has been vastly different from the viciously spinning tracks in the previous three Tests and Usman Khawaja brought Australia the early advantage with his 180.

AFP

South Africa win by 284 runs as West Indies collapse in Johannesburg

Johannesburg, South Africa - South Africa’s bowlers ripped through the West Indies batting as the hosts completed a 284-run win on the fourth day of the second Test at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Saturday. The West Indies were bowled out for 106 after being set to make 391 to win.

South Africa won the two-match World Test Championship series 2-0.

The match was effectively won and lost in 8.1 overs leading up to lunch when the West Indies crashed to 34 for six.

Fast bowler Kagiso Rabada struck twice in three balls and sparked the collapse after opening batsmen Kraigg Brathwaite and Tagenarine Chanderpaul survived the first 10 overs, putting on 21 runs. Rabada dismissed Brathwaite for the seventh time in successive innings when he trapped the West Indian captain leg before wicket for 18 with a ball which kept low.

Two balls later Raymon Reifer gloved a catch down the leg side to wicketkeeper Heinrich Klaasen. Spinners Simon Harmer and Keshav Maharaj also took two wickets each as



South Africa’s Kagiso Rabada (R) celebrates with team-mates after the dismissal of West Indies’ Kraigg Brathwaite

the West Indies lost six wickets for 13 runs.

Off-spinner Harmer shared the new ball with Rabada and extracted extravagant turn, having Chanderpaul caught at second slip after the left-hander had faced 36 balls and scored only two runs.

Roston Chase, Jermaine Blackwood and Kyle Mayers all fell cheaply with South Africa’s only setback coming after Maharaj won a successful appeal for leg before wicket against Mayers in the last over before lunch.

In celebrating, he collapsed

and was stretchered off the field with a left ankle tendon injury.

Maharaj was taken for a scan. With all-rounder Wiaan Mulder suffering a right index finger injury, which also required a scan, South Africa were effectively down to three frontline bowlers.

Mitchell and Tickner lead New Zealand fightback against Sri Lanka

Christchurch, New Zealand - A stubborn century from Daryl Mitchell, a blazing 72 from Matt Henry and three wickets to Blair Tickner swung the momentum New Zealand’s way in the first Test against Sri Lanka on Saturday.

Sri Lanka had claimed the initiative on the first two days of the Christchurch Test but were 83 for three in their second innings at stumps on day three, a lead of 65 runs.

New Zealand have “swung the game to their side,” Sri Lanka assistant coach Naveed Nawaz conceded.

Angelo Mathews was not out 20, with Prabath Jayasuriya also at the crease on two, and Nawaz suggested Sri Lanka would need at least 200 more runs.

“Daryl Mitchell and Matt Henry, the partnership, took the game away from us,” he said.

“But we have to back ourselves that a couple of our batsmen will go in there and get stuck in and get some big runs to swing the game back to our side.

“Its a good wicket to bat on and gives a little bit to the fast



New Zealand’s Daryl Mitchell celebrates after his century (AFP)

bowlers still so I suppose anything above 275-300 would be a good score.”

New Zealand earlier recovered from 151 for five to be all out for 373, an 18-run lead, after a dogged 102 from Mitchell and Henry’s swashbuckling performance that included 58 runs

from boundaries. Tickner claimed the wickets of captain Dimuth Karunaratne for 17, Osada Fernando for 28 and Kusal Mendis for 14 in the 38 overs before stumps to finish with three wickets for 28 runs off 10 overs.

AFP

High Protein Snacks

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MOROCCAN FOOD FESTIVAL



Photos: V K Shafeer



AS A PRECURSOR TO THE UPCOMING RAMADAN SEASON, GRAND MILLENNIUM FLOATS A MOROCCAN FOOD FESTIVAL TO OFFER DINERS IN OMAN A CHANCE TO SAVOUR DIVERSE MIDDLE EASTERN CUISINE

Hubert Vaz

There's the unmistakable sound of spices sizzling in olive oil and a whiff of caramelised onions and tomatoes to greet you as you enter the Bahriyat Restaurant at Grand Millennium for dinner these days. And if the live stations do have the power to stop you in your tracks, what's laid before you in traditional earthenware on the buffet counter goes a step further in putting you into a culinary trance.

You have suddenly entered a different part of the Arab world. It's as if you've switched countries, from Oman to Morocco in an instant. And, one glance at what's on offer at the buffet counter, combined with

TAGINE treats

tuous portions of chicken and beef with a quick seasoning which you'd love to tuck into on the way back to your table.

There's the popular Tagine made of meat and vegetables, fish tagine, couscous, Rfissa

condiments on your plate but every morsel, on its journey from the plate to your mouth, explodes with a unique impact that unravels the essence of Morocco and its great food traditions.

Look around, no one is watching to notice the trickle of gravy down your chin, on the stray tears that announce your degree of delight. At least for this evening, you have to be oblivious of your fitness commitment and mentally generate fox promises of hitting the treadmill the next morning with greater dedication.

Abdel

Jaoued Chtourou, Cluster F & B Manager, informed that two chefs have been specially flown in for the Moroccan Food Festival to create authentic Moroccan dishes that will not only create a lasting impact among diners but also popularise Moroccan food in Oman in a big way. The food festival, which began on February 27, will continue till March 18, he said.

"There are no Moroccan food restaurants in Oman where people have an opportunity to relish Moroccan food. Hence, we have organised this festival to offer diners in Oman a chance to try out and enjoy Moroccan cuisine which is very popular,

not just in the Arab world but also other parts of Europe," Abdel Jaoued said, adding that this festival generates a fitting ambience that leads to the ensuing season of Ramadan.

He further disclosed that Grand Millennium is committed towards providing its guests with varied experiences and the Moroccan Food Festival is one of these. At Bahriyat Restaurant, diners can enjoy an a la carte menu for dinner as well as a set three-course menu for lunch, while a special private dinner for ladies has been organised by the Rooftop Pool on March 14. Moroccan Cooking classes and a Moroccan Street Food Night are also on the cards.

Chef Fatima Ezzouhairi said, "People of all nationalities enjoy Moroccan food. At this festival, we prepare the dishes in the most authentic way, just as it is prepared in Morocco - in restaurants as well as in homes. The dishes are not very spicy but we do use a lot of spices like chillies, pepper, and many other dried whole spices. Moroccan cuisine has many dishes, each with its own distinct flavour. At this festival, we offer some of the best dishes, but you have to visit Morocco to enjoy all of it."

We have organised this festival to offer diners in Oman a chance to try out and enjoy Moroccan cuisine which is very popular, not just in the Arab world but also other parts of Europe

ABDEL JAOUED CHTOUROU
Cluster F & B Manager



smiling chefs and stewards dressed in traditional Moroccan attire, does assure you of a feast for the senses.

You settle at your table, but conversation cannot hold you down for long, as the aromas of freshly seasoned poultry and meats deliver their magical spell on all those present. The chefs give you brief insights into the fare for the evening and put together sump-

served over a layer of unleavened bread, Mechoui (roasted lamb), Harira (meat and vegetable stew), zalouk (salad made from seasoned eggplant and tomatoes). And the chefs are willing to season and toss up your portion on the spot and serve it piping hot.

The spices are used in moderation and the presence of oil in every dish is limited. You also don't see the whole spices and



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March 12

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from Mohammed Zulfikar Ali, Dilshad & Ikhlal Al Samaa

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AI IN ART

At first glance it seems to be just a modern take on Johannes Vermeer's masterpiece 'Girl with a Pearl Earring'. But look more closely and things get a little strange.

Firstly, there are two glowing earrings in the image hanging in the Mauritshuis museum in the Dutch city of The Hague. And aren't those freckles on her face actually... a slightly inhuman shade of red?

That's because the work - one of several fan recreations replacing the 1665 original while it's on loan for a huge Vermeer show at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum - was made using artificial intelligence (AI).

Its presence has sparked a fierce debate, with questions over whether it belongs in the hallowed halls of the Mauritshuis - and whether it should be classed as art at all.

"It's controversial, so people are for it or against it," Mauritshuis press officer Boris de Munnick told AFP. "The people who selected this, they liked it, they knew that it was AI, but we liked the creation. So we chose it, and we hung it."

Frankensteinish

Berlin-based digital creator Julian van Dieken submitted the image after the Mauritshuis asked people to send in their versions of the famous painting for an installation called 'My Girl with a Pearl'.

Van Dieken said he had used the AI tool Midjourney - which can generate complex pictures on the basis of a prompt, using millions of images from the internet - and Photoshop.

The Mauritshuis then chose it as one of five images out of 3,482 submitted by fans that would be printed and physically hung in the room where 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' is normally housed.

"It's surreal to see it in a museum," van Dieken wrote on Instagram.

The budding artists ranged in age from three to 94, depicting the 'Girl' in diverse styles ranging from a puppet to a dinosaur and a piece of fruit. But the decision to choose an AI-generated image sparked a backlash.

Dutch artist Iris Compiet said on the Instagram feed for the Mauritshuis exhibition that it was a 'shame and an incredible insult', and dozens of others

Painting of Vermeer's 'Girl' with glowing Artificial Intelligence earrings sparks Dutch art controversy



Visitors look at an image designed with artificial intelligence by Berlin-based digital creator Julian van Dieken (C), inspired by Johannes Vermeer's painting 'Girl with a Pearl Earring', at the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague. (AFP)



Artist Eva Toorenent, of the European Guild for Artificial Intelligence Regulation, criticised what she called the 'unethical technology'.

"Without the work of human artists, this programme could not generate works at all," she was quoted as saying by the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*.

What is art?

"It's such a difficult question - what is art, and what is not art?" said the Mauritshuis's de Munnick. But he insisted that the museum, whose collection boasts three Vermeers and nearly a dozen Rembrandts, had not deliberately set out to make an artistic statement on AI.

"Our opinion is, we think it's a nice picture, we think it's a creative process," he said. "We're not the museum to discuss if AI belongs in an art museum." He admitted though that "up close, you see that the freckles are a little spooky."

Visitors to the Mauritshuis were equally divided, he added. "Younger people tend to say, it's artificial intelligence, what's new. Elderly people sometimes say we like the more traditional paintings."

The Mauritshuis was looking forward to the return of the real 'Girl' in April, he added. The painting's fame has increased in recent years due to a 1999 novel by US author Tracy Chevalier and an ensuing Hollywood film.

"Well, she is beautiful in the (Rijksmuseum) exhibition... But we will be very happy when she is at home." AFP

We think it's a nice picture, we think it's a creative process.

We're not the museum to discuss if AI belongs in an art museum

BORIS DE MUNNICK

piled in.

"It's an insult to the legacy of Vermeer and also to any working artist. Coming from a museum, it's a real slap in the face," Compiet told AFP.

She said AI tools breach the copyright of other artists by using their works as the base for artificially generated images, as well as scraping the data of internet users in general. The image itself she described as 'almost Frankensteinish'.



An advertisement for Johannes Vermeer's painting 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' displayed at the entrance of the Mauritshuis museum. (AFP)

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