

220,000 jobs needed for nationals by 2032: IMF

Our Correspondent
Muscat

International Monetary Fund (IMF) has highlighted the need for Oman to create over 220,000 jobs for its citizens by 2032 to accommodate a surge in its working-age population.

According to IMF's recently released *Selected Issues Report on Oman*, around 550,000 Omanis are expected to enter the age of working population within the next eight years, necessitating a boost in employment opportunities, particularly the private sector. 'Considering the prevailing participation rate of 67% and the replacement of retirees - approximately 10,000 annually - around 220,000 new jobs will need to be created by 2032, against 103,000 jobs created for Omanis during 2012-2019.'

The report notes that Oman cannot continue to rely on the public sector as the primary employer due to fiscal sustainability concerns and efforts to reduce dependency on hydrocarbon revenues. 'While the private sector has expanded, it remains heavily reliant on low-cost expatriate labour, primarily from South Asia. Expatriates currently account for 86% of private-sector jobs and dominate roles in construction, domestic labour and trade, which has driven down labour costs and bolstered competitiveness in



Female participation was 32% in the labour market in 2023 despite Omani women outperforming men in educational attainment and test scores

nonhydrocarbon sectors.'

IMF points to several labour market inefficiencies, including sectoral segmentation, where Omanis dominate roles in state-owned enterprises (over 70%), such as electricity and mining, but make up less than 15% of the workforce in tourism, construction and real estate. Additionally, most private sector jobs created for Omanis in the past decade were concentrated in low-paid

roles within construction, manufacturing and administrative support, the report states.

It also highlights the persistent gender disparity in the labour market, with female participation at just 32% in 2023. This is despite Omani women outperforming men in educational attainment and test scores.

IMF suggests measures such as investing in early childhood education, expanding leadership programmes for women and improving access to financing for female entrepreneurs to encourage greater participation.

The report added that labour market trends favouring private sector employment and increased female participation continued post-COVID-19, with notable differences. Expatriate employment grew over twice as fast as national employment.

Among Omanis, private sector employment rose by 18%, more than double the 8% growth in the public sector. Employment for Omani women saw the fastest growth, surging by 23% between 2020 and 2023, twice the rate for men at 10%.

To address these challenges, IMF underscores the importance of ongoing economic diversification under Oman Vision 2040, which could generate high-skilled employment opportunities for nationals. However, the report stresses that the success of these initiatives depends on upskilling and reskilling the Omani workforce. It also recommends maintaining a balance between integrating Omanis into the private sector and ensuring the labour market remains flexible enough to attract foreign investment and skilled expatriates.

Allow spirit of respect to inform policymaking: Sayyid Badr

Muscat - Omani diplomacy is not just an instrument of foreign policy but is woven into the fabric of the sultanate's culture and identity, said H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, in a speech in Muscat on Friday.

"The key ingredient in diplomacy is trust," he said. "If we allow the spirit of respect to inform policymaking, our partners will reciprocate."

The sultanate is "a nation that values tradition while embracing progress, whose people openly share their culture, their ideas and their dreams with the world," the minister said in a speech on Oman's Foreign



H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi

Policy delivered at the opening session of the Young Presi-

dents' Organization Inspire MENA Signature Retreat at the National Museum.

Under the theme 'Diplomacy and Hospitality: Neutrality and Influence', the minister summarised the principles of the sultanate's foreign policy as openness, neutrality and mutual respect.

Addressing an international delegation of young executives, H E Sayyid Badr referred to the museum's Aflaj Gallery, explaining how ancient mountain communities in Oman inspired its foreign policy.

Continued on Page 02

Arab nations reject Trump call for relocation of Gazans

Cairo, Egypt - Arab nations on Saturday rejected US President Donald Trump's suggestion to relocate Palestinians from Gaza to neighbouring Egypt and Jordan.

In a joint statement following a meeting in Cairo, the foreign ministers and officials from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, the Palestinian Authority and the Arab League said such a move would threaten stability in the region, spread conflict and undermine prospects for peace.

"We affirm our rejection of [any attempts] to compromise Palestinians' unalienable rights, whether through settlement activities, or evictions or annexation

of land or through vacating land from its owners...in any form or under any circumstances or justifications," a joint statement said, adding they looked forward to working with Trump's administration to achieve a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on a two-state solution.

Last week, Trump said Egypt and Jordan should take in Palestinians from Gaza, which he called a "demolition site" following 15 months of Israeli bombardment that rendered most of its 2.3mn people homeless. Critics have called his suggestion tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

Agencies



03
Oman to host FIH Hockey Men's Nations Cup 2



05
India budget - Tax relief for middle class

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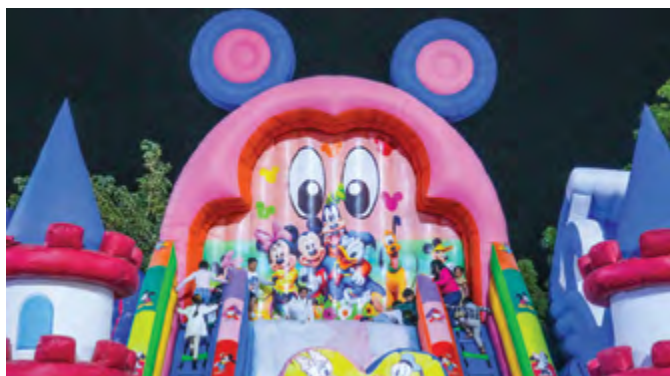
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SPECTACLE OF CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT CONCLUDES



After dazzling audiences for 41 days with an exciting mix of culture, entertainment and adventure across multiple venues, the curtains have drawn on Muscat Nights. Kicking off on December 23, 2024 and concluding on February 1, the festival had welcomed over a million visitors by January 20. With its diverse attractions and immersive experiences, the festival proved to be popular, leaving lasting memories for visitors.



(V K Shafer)

Inma allocates RO25mn for SMEs in 2025, extends repayment to 8 years

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Small and Medium Enterprises Development Fund (Inma) has announced allocation of RO25mn to finance SMEs in 2025. The initiative aims to support entrepreneurs and boost economic growth in the sultanate through targeted financial products and services.

Yahya bin Saleh al Siyabi, Director of Marketing, informed that the funds will be distributed through Inma's branches in Muscat, Suhar and Salalah to help local businesses expand. "Financing applications for 2025 are now open, offering opportunities to entrepreneurs and SMEs across Oman," he said. The fund will follow the same procedures and requirements as



in previous years to ensure consistency and accessibility. However, loan repayment periods have been extended to eight years instead of five for most financing products. Inma will provide financing for assets, projects and working capital, besides bill discounting, with loan amounts ranging from

RO50,000 to RO500,000. For larger companies, the financing ceiling can be raised to RO1mn. The fund also offers Islamic financing options to cater to customer preferences. This year, Inma has identified key sectors for investment, including tourism, services, infrastructure, transportation, oil and

gas, industry and trade. It encourages SME owners to focus on these high-priority sectors to drive growth, create jobs and support the sultanate's economic diversification.

A key feature of Inma's 2025 programme is its 'Field Visits Programme', which involves monitoring SMEs and providing guidance to business owners in developing their projects. The fund will also continue to offer accounting support through specialised firms, ensuring proper financial management with monthly audits and monitoring of business financial flows.

Inma's efforts align with Oman Vision 2040 and reflect its commitment to empowering local businesses and contributing to the country's broader economic development goals.



(ONA)

MTCIT signs RO35mn pact for Raysut-Mughsail Road

Our Correspondent
Salalah

Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) signed an agreement last week to build the Raysut-Mughsail dual carriageway at an estimated cost of RO35mn. The project aims to improve connectivity and boost economic activity in Dhofar.

An agreement was also signed with Future Innovation Company to develop a smart recruitment platform using artificial intelligence. The platform will be designed to streamline hiring processes, reduce sorting time and improve transparency in competency selection.

The agreement for the road project was signed by H E Khamis bin Mohammed al Shammakhi, Undersecretary for Transport at MTCIT, and Saeed bin Muslim al Kathiri, Chairman of Oman Construction Company. Dr Mishal bint Awad Mohammed al Sayari,

CEO of Future Innovation Company, signed for the recruitment platform agreement.

The signing ceremony was attended by H H Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, and H E Saeed bin Hamood al Mawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

Highlighting the project's significance for Dhofar's economic and social development, H H Sayyid Marwan said, "It will enhance the economic role of Salalah Port and the Free Zone by improving logistics services and attracting investment." He added that the new road would also improve access to key tourist destinations such as Mughsail Beach, creating new opportunities for tourism growth.

The dual carriageway will pass through key areas of Salalah, as well as the wilayats of Rakhayut and Dhalkut, improving connectivity and accessibility while creating further opportunities for

tourism development.

H E Shammakhi informed that the Raysut-Mughsail road project consists of a 33km dual carriageway, which will include six overpasses, underpasses, animal crossings and roundabouts. The new road will also connect with 18th November Road, extending 5.5km to Salalah Centre and the Sarfait border crossing with Yemen. This integration is expected to improve traffic flow, increase road safety, and enhance the overall infrastructure of the governorate.

"The project will play a crucial role in enhancing road safety and easing traffic congestion, as it integrates the Mughsail Road and Bridge Project," H E Shammakhi added.

This major infrastructure investment is expected to have a lasting impact on Dhofar's economic development, improving regional logistics and accessibility for residents, businesses and tourists alike.

Allow spirit of respect to inform policymaking: Sayyid Badr

Continued from Page 01

H E Sayyid Badr said these communities employed "conversation, reciprocity and pragmatism to reach agreements on water division" to provide "the framework for efficient water use, agricultural diversity and regional peace".

He called for the wider adoption of dialogue, neutrality and respect in international relations, using the examples of tackling climate change and re-

solving conflicts to illustrate his point.

"There is far more uniting us than dividing us," he said. "We have a shared responsibility to solve [today's] challenges. But, more importantly, we have a shared interest in doing so."

Highlighting the importance of talking and listening to everyone, especially those whose perspectives differ from our own, he said, "Refusal to engage constructively exacerbates hostility, deepens

distrust and prevents peace."

The minister explained that this belief is demonstrated in Oman's firm stance on Palestine, supporting peace processes in which all major groups are represented.

H E Sayyid Badr said he was concerned that some states reject inclusive dialogue, adding, "condemnation of Hamas blinds them to the group's legitimate demands" such as Palestinian statehood and self-determina-

tion.

"Foreign plans for the future governance of Palestine are often rooted in antagonism. This makes them unsustainable and unjust by denying the Palestinians the right to choose their own leaders," he added.

Noting the power of the young leaders in his audience to shape the future, he encouraged them "to prioritise common goals and trust pragmatically but boldly" in all their pursuits.



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Inaugural FIH Hockey Men's Nations Cup 2 from Feb 17



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat is gearing up to host the inaugural FIH Hockey Men's Nations Cup 2 from February 17 to 23 at Oman Hockey Stadium in Amerat. The tournament will feature eight teams competing for a chance to secure a place in the 2026 FIH Nations Cup.

The event provides a platform for emerging hockey nations ranked below those participating in the FIH Hockey Nations Cup. It offers them an opportunity to compete at a higher level and gain international exposure.

Oman captain Rashad al Fazari described the opportunity

Participating in the inaugural FIH Nations Cup 2 is a significant moment for us, particularly as we'll encounter some teams for the first time

RASHAD AL FAZARI

to compete in tournament as a milestone for his team. "Participating in the inaugural FIH Nations Cup 2 is a significant moment for us, particularly as

we'll encounter some teams for the first time. Hosting this tournament and competing before our home crowd fills us with immense pride and motivation."

Emphasising the importance of the event in developing the sport, Tayyab Ikram, President of FIH, said, "The FIH Hockey Nations Cup 2 offers a unique opportunity for teams ranked just below the FIH Hockey Nations Cup to showcase their talent in a global competition. This new event enables us to further promote growth and competitiveness within the sport and bring international exposure to more countries. I am sure their performances will set a new bench-

mark for future editions of the competition."

Divided into two groups, the eight teams include Egypt, Chile, China and Poland in Pool A, and Austria, Oman, Scotland and the United States in Pool B. These teams bring diverse playing styles, setting the stage for an exciting competition.

The tournament will begin with pool matches, with each team playing against every other in their group. The top two teams from each pool will advance to the semi-finals, leading to the final on February 23, where the first-ever FIH Hockey Men's Nations Cup 2 champion will be crowned.



MoH pre-marital and newborn screening programme unveiled

Muscat - In a move to improve public health and reduce prevalence of genetic and infectious diseases, Ministry of Health (MoH) launched two key initiatives - an expanded newborn screening programme and enhanced pre-marital medical examination - last week. These measures align with Oman Vision 2040's health priorities.

H E Dr Said bin Harib al Lamki, Undersecretary for Health Affairs in MoH, informed that both programmes are part of the country's preventive health strategy. "The pre-marital medical examination will screen for genetic blood disorders and infectious diseases, while newborn screening will focus on metabolic blood disorders. The initiative aims to lower the social and economic impact of such conditions on individuals and healthcare systems," he said.

According to the ministry, genetic and infectious diseases affect an estimated 9.5% of Oman's population. Early detection is seen as a crucial step in limiting their spread. As part of efforts to achieve universal

health coverage, the MoH has developed a national plan in collaboration with various sectors.

H E Dr Lamki confirmed that the Council of Ministers has endorsed a phased implementation of the pre-marital medical screening programme. In the first phase (2024-2025), screening will be introduced as an optional service, accompa-

through 2025 to prepare for the mandatory screening in 2026. "The first phase will introduce the pre-marital screening programme, the second will focus on the health risks of genetic and infectious diseases, and the third will reinforce the mandatory requirement," she explained.

The campaign aims to educate all segments of society, par-

Genetic and infectious diseases affect an estimated 9.5% of Oman's population. Early detection is seen as a crucial step in limiting their spread

nied by an awareness campaign. By 2026, the examination will become mandatory, with legislation ensuring it is a prerequisite for marriage.

Dr Jamila bint Taisir al Abri, Public Health Consultant and Director of Women's and Children's Health Department, highlighted the launch of a national media campaign under the slogan 'Start Right'. The campaign will roll out in three phases

ticularly young couples and parents. Awareness messages will be disseminated through traditional media and social platforms, alongside direct community engagement, health institution sessions and educational material distribution. An introductory meeting was held earlier in the year to align all participating sectors and provide necessary training for effective implementation.

Bee museum in Barka 60% complete

Our Correspondent
Barka

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is making strides to strengthen the apiculture sector in South Batinah with two key projects underway. A bee museum in Barka has reached over 60% completion, while the Sahtan Trade Line project in Rustaq, aimed at increasing the number of honey bees, has surpassed 30% completion.

The Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in South Batinah is making efforts as part of a broader push to support honey production, which saw beekeepers in the governorate produce 6.4 tonnes of honey in 2024. This included 4 tonnes of Sidr honey and 2.4 tonnes of Samr honey, valued at over RO96,000.

Abdullah bin Saif al Saidi, Di-

rector of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in South Batinah, emphasised the ministry's commitment to ensuring sustainability of the apiculture sector. "Honey production is an economically viable profession,



and the ministry is encouraging beekeepers to adopt modern technologies and commercial apiaries to maximise returns."

The directorate is conducting training and workshops for beekeepers, focusing on mod-

ern hive-raising techniques and improving production methods. Special exhibitions are also being organised in collaboration with public and private entities to support marketing efforts and raise awareness about the sector.

Saidi highlighted the need to diversify honey production and introduce advanced technologies for breeding improved queen bees. These efforts aim to enhance productivity and produce higher-quality honey, contributing to food security and economic growth in Oman.

Apiculture has garnered significant interest in South Batinah with over 1,000 registered beekeepers by the end of 2024. This growing involvement reflects the governorate's potential as a hub for honey production, backed by initiatives like the bee museum and Sahtan Trade Line projects.

N Sharqiyah signs RO40mn development projects

Our Correspondent
Ibra

North Sharqiyah has signed several agreements for development and service projects totalling more than RO40mn.

Signed on Thursday by Mahmoud bin Yahya al Dhahli, Governor of North Sharqiyah, the agreements represent the governorate's continued commitment to sustainable development and enhancing the quality of life for its citizens.

The 23 projects covered by the agreements aim to improve infrastructure, tourism and social services in the governorate's wilayats. Key projects include designing and paving of internal roads in several wilayats valued at RO24.9mn, and establishment of a new market in Sinaw, costing RO9.7mn. Another significant project is the Bidiyah entertainment centre costing RO2.55mn.

In addition, the agreements



include development of several parks and recreational facilities - Al Ghubra Park in Dima wa al Taien and Al Khalidiya Park in Wadi Bani Khalid - costing RO3.6mn.

Other projects include establishment of three multi-purpose halls in Bidiyah, Wadi Bani Khalid

and Dima wa al Taien, development of Ezz Village in Al Qabil, and a visitors' facility in Wadi Bani Khalid.

Dhahli informed that these projects are in alignment with Oman Vision 2040, aiming to provide essential services, enhance local economic and

tourism indicators, and create job opportunities. The diverse nature of the projects, ranging from road paving to setting up parks and markets, is set to boost the governorate's economic and commercial landscape while enhancing the living standards of its residents.

Oman's trade surplus hits RO7bn by November 2024

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's trade surplus grew to RO7.138bn during the first 11 months of 2024, compared to RO6.997bn recorded in the corresponding period of 2023, thanks to a significant rise in oil and gas exports during last year.

According to statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the total value of commodity exports reached RO22.225bn during the January-November period of 2024, up by 7.7% from RO20.636bn in the same period of the previous year.

The NCSI data showed that the increase in the value of exports was mainly driven by the rise in Oman's hydrocarbon exports, which reached RO14.994bn - an increase of 19.7% compared to exports of RO12.525bn in the same period a year ago.

Among hydrocarbon exports, the value of Oman's crude oil exports amounted to RO9.125bn, recording a growth of 2.5% over the same period of the previous year.

Moreover, the value of refined oil product exports surged by 175% to RO3.573bn during the first 11 months of 2024, thanks to increased refining capacity of the sultanate. However, the value of liquefied natural gas (LNG) ex-



Non-oil exports decreased by 16.6% in the first 11 months of 2024, reaching RO5.642bn compared to RO6.768bn recorded in the same period of 2023

ports decreased by 1.1% to RO2.296bn compared to the same period in 2023.

Non-oil exports decline

The NCSI data revealed a decrease in the value of non-oil exports by 16.6% in the first 11 months of 2024, reaching RO5.642bn compared to RO6.768bn recorded in the same period of the previous year.

Among Oman's non-oil ship-

ments, mineral products had the highest value, amounting to RO1.616bn, but this was down by 35.2% from the same period in 2023. This was followed by ordinary metals and related products, with shipments worth RO1.202bn, then exports of plastics and their products and rubber and related products, amounting to RO896mn.

Exports of chemicals and related industries decreased by 22%, with an export value of

RO725mn in 2024, followed by exports of live animals and animal products at RO320mn, and the value of exports of other products, which amounted to RO883mn.

On the other hand, the value of re-exports from Oman increased by 18.3% to RO1.590bn during the 11 months ending in November 2024, compared to the same period a year ago.

Imports grow

The value of commodity imports to Oman amounted to RO15.087bn, an increase of 10.6% compared to the same period last year, when imports totalled RO13.639bn.

Imports of mineral products

had the highest value, recording RO4.212bn, an increase of 9.5%, followed by machinery, electrical appliances and equipment, and their parts, including sound recording and broadcasting devices, with a value of RO2.606bn, showing a growth of 26%.

Imports of products of chemicals and related industries totalled RO1.401bn, an increase of 2.7%, while shipments of ordinary metals and their products recorded a value of RO1.449bn, a decrease of 1.2%. Imports of transportation equipment were valued at RO1.354bn, an increase of 13.1%, and imports of other products were recorded at RO4.065bn.



Bank Muscat board proposes 16.5% cash dividend for 2024

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Bank Muscat, the flagship financial services provider in the sultanate, has proposed a 16.5% dividend for the year 2024. The meeting of the board of directors of the bank, chaired by Sheikh Khalid bin Mustahail al Mashani, Chairman, on Wednesday, approved the financial results for the year ended December 31, 2024.

The board has proposed a 16.5% cash dividend for the year 2024. Shareholders would receive a cash dividend of 16.5 baisa per ordinary share aggregating to RO123.856mn on the bank's existing share capital. The proposed cash dividend is subject to the formal approval of the Annual General Meeting of the shareholders and regulatory authorities.

Bank Muscat said its capital adequacy ratio (CAR) after the cash dividend payout will be 20.02% which is well above

the regulatory minimum.

The bank posted a net profit of RO225.58mn for the year 2024 compared to RO212.45mn reported in 2023, an increase of 6.2%. Net interest income from conventional banking and net income from Islamic financing stood at RO397.70mn for the year ended December 31, 2024 compared to RO374.82mn for the same period in 2023, an increase of 6.1%. Non-interest income was RO145mn for the year ended December 31, 2024 as compared to RO138.00mn for the same period in 2023, an increase of 5.1%.

Bank Muscat's net loans and advances including Islamic financing receivables increased by 3.6% to RO10.237bn as against RO9.877bn as at December 31, 2023. Customer deposits including Islamic customer deposits increased by 3.6% to RO9.777bn as against RO9.438bn as at December 31, 2023.

Asyad Express, Amazon partnership strengthens e-commerce in Oman

Muscat - To further solidify Oman's role as a leading e-commerce hub, Asyad Express, part of Asyad Group, has expanded its partnership with Amazon. This collaboration allows Amazon to utilise Asyad Express' cutting-edge last-mile delivery solutions, enabling them to enhance their service reach and better serve customers throughout Oman.

In a fast-paced market, customers can experience improved efficiency and reliability in package delivery with tracking services and next-day delivery services to every corner in Oman, thanks to Amazon's extensive global reach with Asyad Express' robust local network.

Asyad Express delivers urgent parcels and documents, fostering consumer trust and encouraging more online shopping.

With an 81% increase in volume growth of Amazon operations in Oman in 2024, the continued partnership between Asyad Express and Amazon reaffirms the company's dedication to delivering exceptional value to its customers. Asyad Express continues to play a pivotal role in positioning Oman as a regional e-commerce hub, and its ongoing



work with Amazon supports the country's Vision 2040, aiming to build an innovation-driven economy that benefits both SMEs and consumers.

Asyad Express has established itself as a leader in Oman's logistics sector, specialising in express delivery and e-commerce solutions. It operates an extensive global network, processing, packaging, and shipping thousands of deliveries across 220 destinations and territories, with a wide variety of customer-friendly services available, completing deliv-

eries in just 24-72 hours, and providing in-house customs clearance for international shipments.

Asyad Express's state-of-the-art fulfillment center is equipped with cutting-edge technology, advanced warehousing capabilities, and automated inventory management systems. These facilities not only demonstrate Asyad Express's commitment to excellence but also support Oman's growing e-commerce sector and drive economic growth.

Ominvest concludes its participation in World Economic Forum Annual Meeting

Muscat - Oman International Development and Investment Company (Ominvest), a leading investment company in the region, concluded its participation at the 2025 World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting in Davos, where it championed a bold vision for Oman and the GCC's role in the global economy.

The discussions and outcomes from the Forum aligned closely with Ominvest's vision of fostering economic resilience, innovation, and sustainability in Oman and across the GCC region.

The Forum underscored the importance of rebuilding trust in an increasingly interconnected and fast-evolving global economy. Ominvest used the platform to highlight Oman and the Gulf region's growing economic progress, its robust fiscal management, and its growing appeal to international investors. With a strong focus on transparency and collaboration, Oman is fostering a growing investment climate, enabling it to emerge as a key player on the global stage.

The conversations at the WEF Annual Meeting further reinforced the vital role of innovation and diversification in driving sustainable growth. Oman's recent



Ominvest used WEF platform to highlight Oman and Gulf region's economic progress, its robust fiscal management, and its growing appeal to international investors

successes - including record-breaking IPOs, a growing trade balance surplus, and falling public debt - demonstrate the nation's commitment to creating a vibrant and diversified economy. This remarkable progress underscores Oman's potential to become a key driver of global economic development. Ominvest's own strategic evolution mirrors this ambition. With 30% of its portfolio invested internationally across diverse sectors such as finance, healthcare, and technology. Ominvest is not only

strengthening its own position but also demonstrating Oman's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the global economic landscape.

In a press release, Khalid Muhammad AlZubair, Chairman of Ominvest, said, "Our presence at WEF's Annual Meeting 2025 solidified our belief in the critical importance of cross-market collaboration to address global challenges. Oman's economic transformation and our investments' resilience have positioned us to actively contribute mean-

ingfully to global dialogues and shape solutions that drive shared prosperity."

Abdulaziz al Balushi, Group CEO of Ominvest, said, "The Annual Meeting provided an invaluable opportunity to connect with international leaders, share insights, and forge partnerships that will accelerate Oman's development goals. We see immense potential for Oman and the wider GCC region to become engines of global growth. As one of the largest investment companies in the region, Ominvest remains committed to leveraging these opportunities while aligning our strategies with the evolving needs of global markets."

Alexandre Raffoul, Member of the Executive Committee at the World Economic Forum, also commended Ominvest's participation, stating, "As we approach 2025, navigating complex geopolitical and economic dynamics requires shared insights and collective action. Contributions from key private sector players from Oman and across the GCC are essential in shaping discussions that drive resilience, innovation, and economic diversification across regions and industries. Together, we can build a more inclusive and sustainable global economy."

European Central Bank warns of weakening economy following rate cut

Brussels, Belgium - The European Central Bank (ECB) announced Thursday a 25-basis-point interest rate cut, marking its fifth reduction since the bank began easing monetary policy in June last year.

With this adjustment, the ECB's deposit facility rate - the bank's main interest rate - now

stands at 2.75%. Markets had priced in a more than 90% probability of a 25-basis-point cut ahead of the announcement.

The ECB is striving to balance the recent resurgence of inflation in the eurozone with sluggish economic growth. Headline inflation in the euro



area rose for the third consecutive month, reaching 2.4% in December, after having fallen below the ECB's 2% target earlier. The inflation rebound had been anticipated as the effects of lower energy prices began to fade.

Preliminary data showed that the eurozone economy re-

mained stagnant in the fourth quarter of 2024.

ECB President Christine Lagarde stated that the eurozone economy is likely to remain weak in the near term. She also confirmed that a 50-basis-point cut was not considered during the Governing Council's latest decision on interest rates.

In a statement, the ECB acknowledged ongoing economic headwinds, saying, "The economy continues to face headwinds, but rising real incomes and the gradual effects of restrictive monetary policy should support a recovery in demand over time."

WAM

INDIA BUDGET

India's budget gives tax relief to Middle Class

Ten million middle-income Indian taxpayers will be out of tax net according to budget announcements



India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman

New Delhi, India – India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, during her Union Budget 2025 speech on Saturday, announced that no income tax will be payable on income up to ₹1,200,000, providing significant relief to taxpayers, especially the middle class.

This limit will be ₹1,275,000 for salaried taxpayers, including ₹75,000 of standard deduction. She also stated that the new income tax regime will be simpler, with a special focus on benefiting the middle class.

In her speech, Sitharaman said, "For taxpayers earning up to ₹1,200,000 of normal income (other than special rate income such as capital gains), a tax rebate is being provided in addition to the benefit due to the slab rate reduction in such a manner that there is no tax payable by them."

The announcement from the Finance Minister of this significant relief to the middle class was met with loud thumping of desks by the Treasury benches, led by PM Narendra Modi. The Finance Minister also announced changes in income tax slabs and rates across the board, ensuring a more progressive taxation system.

Modi calls new budget 'force multiplier' for India's growth

New Delhi, India – India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday hailed the Union Budget 2025 as a "Force Multiplier" for India's development journey, describing it as a "budget of aspirations" for 1.4bn Indians.

He emphasised that this budget would fulfill the dreams of the people, with a strong focus on opening up several sectors for the youth. "This is the budget of the aspirations of 140 crore Indians, this is a budget that fulfills the dreams of every Indian," PM Modi stated.

He further highlighted that the budget aims to boost economic participation among the common citizens. "This is a budget which fulfills



This is a budget which fulfills the dreams of our people. We have opened many sectors for youth. Common citizens are going to drive the mission of Viksit Bharat

NARENDRA MODI

the dreams of our people. We have opened many sectors for the youth. Common citizens are going to drive the mission of Viksit Bharat. This budget is a force multiplier. This budget will increase savings, investment, consumption, and growth. I congratulate Nirmala Sitharaman and her entire team for coming up with a people-centric budget," he added.

PM Modi also pointed out that, unlike previous budgets focused on filling government coffers, this one is designed to benefit citizens directly. "Usually the focus of the budget is on how the government treasury will be filled, but this budget is exactly the oppo-

site of that. How will this budget fill the pockets of the citizens of the country, how will the savings of the citizens of the country increase and how will the citizens of the country become partners in development... this budget lays a very strong foundation for this," PM Modi remarked.

PM Modi also praised the reforms in the nuclear energy sector. "Encouraging the private sector in Nuclear Energy is historic. It will ensure a big contribution of Civil Nuclear Energy in the development of the country," he said.

The Prime Minister also hailed the announcement of tax relief for middle-class citizens.

come of up to ₹400,000 will not be subject to tax, up from ₹300,000. A taxpayer in the new regime with an income of ₹1,200,000 will benefit from a ₹80,000 reduction in tax.

As a result of these proposals, revenue of about ₹1tn in direct taxes and ₹26bn in indirect taxes will be foregone.

Ten million middle-income Indian taxpayers will be out of tax net according to announcements in the Union Budget 2025 presented by Sitharaman.

"One crore people will pay no tax," the Finance Minister told reporters at a post-Budget press conference. She was answering a query about the number of people who will be out of the tax net with the new proposals.

The government expects that taxpayers saving money through reduced income tax will reinvest it into the economy in the form of either consumption, savings, or investments.

In the July 2024 Budget, the government had proposed a comprehensive review of the Income-tax Act, 1961. The purpose was to make the Act more concise and clear, and to reduce disputes and litigation.



Budget 2025 allocates ₹11.2tn capex

New Delhi, India – India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has allocated ₹11.2tn for capital expenditure (capex) in the Union budget for 2025-26.

This marks a 0.9% increase over last year's budget estimate of ₹11.1tn, but when compared with the revised estimate of 2024-25 at ₹10.18tn, the budget estimate for 2025-26 is substantially higher.

Capital expenditure, or capex, is used to set up long-term physical or fixed assets.

The defence sector capital expenditure has received the largest hike of 4.6% for the financial year 2025-26, at ₹1.8tn. In 2024-25 (budget estimate), it was ₹1.72tn, which was later downwardly revised to ₹1.59tn.

The defence sector capex target for 2025-26 is 13.3% higher when compared with the revised estimate of 2024-25. India's defence sector is being pushed for substantial and sustained growth, driven by increasing capital expenditure. Key factors underpinning this growth include rapidly expanding defence exports and a significant emphasis on domestic manufacturing.

Moving on to railways and roads, both critical for the Indian economy, the capex target for 2025-26 has been unexpectedly kept unchanged, as the budget documents tabled on Saturday showed. The capital outlay for Railways and Roads remains the same as last year. The railways capex for the next fiscal is ₹2.52tn, the same as it was for 2024-25. Similarly, the capital outlay for Roads is also maintained at ₹2.72tn.

Global air travel surpasses pre-pandemic levels in 2024

Geneva, Switzerland – Thanks to a 10.4% year-on-year surge, global passenger demand exceeded pre-pandemic levels by 3.8% in 2024, according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA) data released on Thursday.

The aviation industry also saw its highest-ever load factor for the year, reaching 83.5%.

Capacity expanded by 8.7% at an annualised pace, showcasing airlines' ability to meet growing passenger demand while achieving operational efficiency.

IATA Director General Willie Walsh highlighted the strong appetite for travel, underscoring the industry's resilience and recovery.



"Aviation growth reverberates across societies and economies at all levels through jobs, market development, trade, innovation, exploration, and much more," he said.

International travel saw remarkable growth, with demand increasing by 13.6% compared to the previous year. Domestic travel also showed solid annual gains, with 5.7%.

Walsh pointed to critical challenges for the sector, underlining the importance of safety, particularly following Wednesday's mid-air collision between a passenger plane and an army helicopter near Washington, and

called for renewed focus on sustainable practices.

Despite record investments in Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) last year, its availability remains limited, meeting less than 0.5% of the industry's needs, he said.

"Governments could fortify their national energy security and unblock this problem by prioritizing renewable fuel production from which SAF is derived," Walsh said.

Looking ahead, IATA projects continued demand growth in 2025, with an estimated 8% increase, aligning with historical trends.

US GDP growth slows to 2.3% in Q4

Washington, US – The US economy expanded by 2.3% in the fourth quarter of 2024, falling short of market expectations of 2.7%, according to the Commerce Department's first advance reading released Thursday.

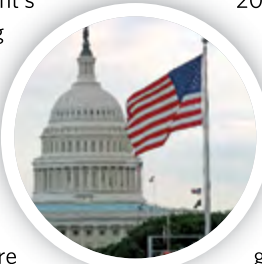
Consumer spending and government expenditures drove the quarter's gains, although they were partially offset by a decline in business investment. Imports, which subtract from GDP calculations, declined during the period, providing a modest boost.

The latest figure marked a notable slowdown from the robust

3.1% growth recorded in the third quarter.

For the full year, the economy grew by 2.8%, a slight cooling from the 2.9% expansion in 2023 but still reflective of steady momentum. Annual growth was supported by a broad-based uptick in consumer spending, government outlays, investment, and exports.

The price index for gross domestic purchases rose 2.2% in October-December, compared with a hike of 1.9% in the previous three-month period.



Mercedes-Benz introduces new G-Class portfolio in Oman

Mercedes-Benz Oman is proud to unveil the all-new G-Class portfolio. The diverse lineup of models features the iconic Mercedes-AMG G 63, Mercedes-Benz G 450 and G 500, and its Edition One electric G 580 with EQ Technology, representing the perfect fusion of tradition and innovation.

With a legacy spanning over 45 years, the G-Class continues to be an iconic figure in luxury off-road vehicles, now further elevated by electrification with the G 580. All models are built to excel in Oman's diverse and demanding terrains while offering unparalleled luxury, performance, and sustainability, a press release said.

Since its debut in 1979, the G-Class has been renowned for its rugged off-road capabilities and luxury, making it the perfect choice for Oman's adventurous spirit. The latest iteration continues to push boundaries with improved performance, advanced digital features, and luxurious comfort. The iconic design remains intact, with subtle updates like a redesigned radiator grille and bumpers, offering a modern yet familiar look.

The G-Class's off-road prowess remains unmatched with its ladder-frame concept, three mechanical differential locks, low range off-road gear reduction, and long-travel suspension.



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sion. With up to 100% gradeability, a ground clearance of at least 241mm, and a fording depth of 70cm, the G-Class is built to conquer the challenging landscapes of Oman, from sand dunes to rocky mountain paths.

The G 580 with EQ Technology marks a historic leap into the

future of off-roading, offering all-electric power without sacrificing the iconic G-Class performance. Powered by four individually controlled electric motors, the G 580 delivers an astounding 432kW and 1164Nm of torque, providing unparalleled power and control. Key innovations like

G-Turn, G-Steering, and the intelligent off-road crawl function ensure the G 580 excels in Oman's diverse off-road conditions.

The 116-kWh high-voltage lithium-ion battery ensures a driving range of up to 473km, making it ideal for long journeys

across Oman, whether through the city of Muscat or venturing into the desert. The G 580's fast-charging capabilities allow up to 80% recharge in just 32 minutes, minimising downtime and maximising your adventures.

With a fording depth of 850 mm, the G 580 surpasses its predecessors and is fully prepared for Oman's wadis and desert landscapes. Its design stays true to the G-Class heritage while incorporating new electric-specific elements like a black-panel radiator grille, a

slightly raised bonnet, and air curtains in the rear wheel arches to enhance aerodynamics.

Inside all of the G-Class models, the focus is on luxury, comfort, and advanced technology. The MBUX (Mercedes-Benz User Experience) infotainment system features a 12.3-inch high-resolution display with intuitive controls, voice commands, and smartphone integration. All the models come with high-quality materials, including nappa leather, ensuring a premium feel throughout.

NBO Muzn Islamic introduces Wakala financing

The National Bank of Oman (NBO) Muzn Islamic Banking has launched its innovative Corporate Running Wakala Finance Product, offering a Shariah-compliant alternative to conventional overdraft facilities.

This solution empowers businesses of all sizes by addressing their critical working capital needs, receivable financing, and other funding requirements, a press release said.

Salima al Marzooqi, assistant general manager and chief Islamic banking officer at NBO, said, "At Muzn, we continuously strive to enhance Shari'a-compliant products to meet the evolving needs of our corporate clients. The Corporate Running Wakala Financing solution is a testament to our dedication to offer innovative and ethical financial services. This product caters to businesses seeking Sharia-compliant alternatives to conventional banking products. We are proud to support all businesses in Oman by providing flexible solutions that align with their operational and financial goals."

Qatar to host the Triathlon World Championship

Visit Qatar, the Professional Triathletes Organisation, World Triathlon, and the Qatar Cycling and Triathlon Federation have announced the hosting of the Triathlon World Championship Finals Qatar T100 from 2025 to 2029.

This comes as part of a five-year partnership agreement between Visit Qatar and the Professional Triathletes Organisation, a press release said.

The inaugural Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship Final will be held from December 11th - 13th, 2025. The swim leg will take place in the Arabian Gulf, while the bike and run legs will navigate through Doha and Lusail, passing several iconic landmarks such as the Lusail Stadium.

The multisport festival weekend will also offer a series of swim, bike, and run events for amateurs, including the chance for amateur athletes to participate in the new 100km triathlon distance (2km swim, 80km bike, 18km run) alongside the best professional triathletes in the world.

Abdulaziz al Mawlawi, CEO of Visit Qatar, said, "We are delighted to partner with the Professional Triathletes Organisation to host the Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship Final in our vibrant cities for the next five years. This event underscores Qatar's growing reputation as a premier sports destination, showcasing our commitment to hosting world-class international sporting events. Qatar's infrastructure, state-of-the-art

facilities, and rich sports culture offers the perfect environment to host this event. This collaboration further strengthens Qatar's position as a global hub for sports tourism, inspiring both professional athletes and enthusiasts alike."

Antonio F Arimany, president of World Triathlon, who has designated the series as the 'Official World Championship Tour of long-distance triathlon', added, "The T100 Triathlon World Championship Final represents a new chapter for our sport, combining elite competition with global accessibility and participation. As we continue to grow triathlon around the world, confirming the presence of the Qatar T100 Triathlon World Championship Final on the calendar for the next five years is another major milestone for our great sport in this dynamic region."

"Partnering with Visit Qatar and the Qatari Triathlon Federation to host this prestigious event in Doha ensures not only a world-class experience for professional athletes but also an incredible opportunity for the broader triathlon community to connect with our sport. Qatar's dedication to innovation and excellence aligns seamlessly with our vision for the T100 series, and we're excited to see triathlon thrive in this dynamic and inspiring destination. Mass participation events are once more thriving alongside the elite racing around the world and really building into a major movement in the Middle East."

Joyalukkas floats Valentine's collection

Joyalukkas is celebrating the 'season of love' with exclusive offers for Valentine's Day, helping customers make the day even more memorable for their loved ones.

The renowned jeweller is presenting its beautiful 'Be Mine - Heart to Heart' collection, designed to bring love and elegance together in a seamless combination. Whether you're looking to express your love with diamonds or precious stones, Joyalukkas has a stunning collection of lightweight jewellery that is perfect for Valentine's Day gifting, a press release said.

From now until February 15, customers can enjoy amazing deals, including a RO20 gift voucher on the purchase of diamond and precious stone jewellery worth RO300. In addition to that, there's zero% deduction



on old gold exchange and 100% value on diamond exchange.

John Paul Alukkas, managing director of Joyalukkas Group, said, "Valentine's Day is a special occasion for celebrating the ones we love and we believe there's no better way to show that love than with a gift that is both, meaningful and beautiful. Our 'Be Mine - Heart to Heart' collection features exquisite diamond jewellery and elegant pendant sets designed specifically for this romantic season. This Valentine's, Joyalukkas is making it easier for you to express your love with our heartfelt offers."

The 'Be Mine - Heart to Heart' collection features gorgeous diamond jewellery and unique pieces that reflect the essence of love. Customers can visit any of the Joyalukkas showrooms to explore the variety of choice.

Asyad Express and Amazon strengthen Oman's e-commerce

To further solidify Oman's role as a leading e-commerce hub, Asyad Express, part of Asyad Group, has expanded its partnership with Amazon. This collaboration allows Amazon to utilise Asyad Express' cutting-edge last-mile delivery solutions, enabling them to enhance their service reach and better serve customers throughout Oman.

In a fast-paced market, customers can experience improved efficiency and reliability in package delivery with tracking services and next-day delivery services to every corner in Oman, thanks to Amazon's extensive global reach with Asyad Express' robust local network. Asyad Express delivers urgent parcels and documents, fostering consumer trust and encouraging more online shopping, a press release said.

With an 81% increase in vol-



ume growth of Amazon operations in Oman in 2024, the continued partnership between Asyad Express and Amazon reaffirms the company's dedication to delivering exceptional value to its customers.

Asyad Express continues to

play a pivotal role in positioning Oman as a regional e-commerce hub, and its ongoing work with Amazon supports the country's Vision 2040, aiming to build an innovation-driven economy that benefits both SMEs and consumers.

Dr Kavitha's yoga lessons lauded

Dr Kavitha Ramakrishna, a cultural ambassador who has devoted her life to sharing the timeless traditions of India through her expertise in Tanjore painting, authorship, and yoga, has bridged the gap between two rich cultures with her unique contributions.

An accomplished Tanjore painting exponent, Dr Kavitha has brought the ancient Indian art form to Oman, offering a window into its spiritual and artistic depth. Her work stands as a testament to her commitment to preserving and promoting this traditional art, inspiring many to appreciate its beauty and significance, a press release said.

Dr Kavitha's impact extends far beyond the canvas. As a renowned yoga mentor, she has transformed the lives of over 150 students in Oman, predominantly among the local Omani community. Through her insight-

ful guidance, she has introduced life-changing benefits of yoga, with a special focus on surya namaskars (Sun salutations) and meditation practices. For many, her teachings have been nothing short of transformative.

Omani student Shireen al Lawati, one of Dr Kavitha's mentees, says, "Dr Kavitha's yoga sessions have profoundly transformed my approach to lifestyle management, instilling in me a sense of balance and mindfulness that I had previously struggled to achieve. Through her expert guidance, I have learned to integrate yoga into my daily routine, enhancing not only my physical health but also my mental well-being. The emphasis on breath control and meditation has equipped me with tools to manage stress more effectively, while the diverse range of asanas has improved my flexibility and strength."



ISC Uttaranchal Wing holds cultural extravaganza

Recently five top class artistes from Uttarakhand came and conquered the hearts and souls of more than 200 music loving audience in Muscat. They made the audience sing and dance to their lively native tunes.

A lively atmosphere marked a gala cultural evening, hosted by the Indian Social Club's Uttaranchal Wing who is also celebrating this year as their 19th year of existence with the ISC. The excitement and enthusiasm among the artists, audience and organisers was incredibly enormous as the event was being held after a gap of few years. The event was supported by Asian construction, Al Arkan construction and other well-wishers.

The evening began with beautiful Pahadi hymns of Saurav Maithani, very talented singer, composer and lyricist, who also came up with peppy numbers like Meri pyari Nirmala, Dhol Damo ki thaap, Main Pahadon ka Rahivasi, etc.

It was soon followed by a series of popular songs by Meghna Chandra a prominent singer from the region. Ko Che Tu Ghasiyari, Hilma chandi ku batana brought out the love and the longing for the beloved.

Then came the most awaited performance by Inder Arya, he is not only a renowned singer but also a prominent figure in the music industry of the region, who presented the songs which have been creating new records, songs like of Gulabi Sharara, Sawri Sawri having record breaking viewership and creation of reels videos records.

The scene was filled with soul touching renditions in the hotel Muscat Holiday's ball room, and the audience were gripped by the melodious atmosphere and foot tapping music.

Pradeep Kumar, 1st Secretary and Head of Chancery at the Embassy of India in Oman, was the chief guest of the event. In his address he commended Govind Negi, the convener, and other members of the committee of the Uttaranchal Wing Muscat, for having carried out various events of cultural interest.

The new BMW iX to lead electric fray

As a vanguard in the field of electric mobility, the BMW iX has established a unique combination of progressive luxury and locally emission-free driving pleasure. The new edition of the Sports Activity Vehicle (SAV), designed exclusively for all-electric driving, underlines its claim to leadership with an increase in driving performance combined with a significantly extended range.

The new BMW iX now achieves a WLTP range of 700km, which is outstanding in the competitive environment. It is yet another fascinating example of the effectiveness of the BMW EfficientDynamics package of measures and technologies.

Innovations in the field of BMW eDrive technology go hand in hand with specific exterior and interior design modifications that emphasise the sporty character of the new BMW iX, a press release said.

New model designations reflect the BMW iX's additional performance. It will be available in the Middle East region from second quarter 2025 as the BMW iX xDrive45, the BMW iX xDrive60 and the BMW iX M70 xDrive. It will continue to be produced at the BMW Group plant in Dingolfing. The BMW Group's largest production plant in Europe is the company's centre of competence for the production of electric drives and at the same time the lead plant for the premium and luxury class models.

The exterior of the new BMW iX has an expressive presence and monolithic appearance with characteristic SAV proportions, a design language reduced to the essentials and clearly defined surfaces. The striking front design is characterised in particular by the redesigned BMW radiator grille with a particularly filigree frame and a structure of vertical and diagonal lines in its interior. The BMW Iconic Glow kidney grille with contour lighting (standard for the new BMW iX M70 xDrive) is now available as a new option.

The headlights have also been redesigned with vertical elements for daytime running lights and turn indicators. The standard equipment of the new BMW iX includes adaptive LED headlights.

New model designations reflect the BMW iX's additional performance. It will be available in the Middle East region from second quarter 2025



KR building materials launches Laufen showroom in Ghubra

A newly launched showroom in Ghubra features a curated selection of Laufen products, from ceramic fixtures and faucets to bathtubs, furniture, mirrors, accessories, and concealed installation systems—each reflecting a keen attention to detail.

Laufen's designs are defined by a calm, understated aesthetic that emphasises simplicity and functionality without compromising style. The seamless fusion of modern technology and premium materials redefines bathroom interiors, offering both minimalist and traditional options that cater to a variety of design preferences.

The showroom by Khimji Ramdas introduces a new era of sophistication and sustainability, setting a benchmark for bathroom spaces that are both glamorous and functional.

Hitesh Akarte – COO Khimji Ramdas Infrastructure Cluster stated, "The Laufen showroom has enabled a bathroom experience for both body and soul. Today we are offering a holistic bathroom culture."

ISD celebrates India's Republic Day

The 76th Republic Day of India was celebrated with great enthusiasm and patriotic fervour at Indian School Darsait on January 26. H E Amit Narang, the Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, was the chief guest on the occasion.

The event began with the national anthem of India, followed by a ceremonial march past featuring student contingents from six Indian schools in Muscat. Adhil Saham Arshad, Head Boy, extended a warm welcome to the chief guest, dignitaries, parents, and well-wishers, a press release said.

H E Narang quoted Mahatma Gandhi to remind the audience that rights and duties are two sides of the same coin. He encouraged students to read, understand, and follow the rights and duties outlined in the Constitution of India.

Cultural programmes followed showcasing the unity in diversity of India. The school choir from both primary and senior sections presented a medley of patriotic songs titled 'Sadbhaav Aur Shaanti' in seven different Indian languages. Students from the primary section also presented a colourful parade and a tableau titled 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas' which depicted the nation's growth in the fields of education, science and technology, infrastructure, economy, sports, and international relations.

'Brush and Beyond'

Indian School Darsait also organised Brush and Beyond, its annual art exhibition on January 26, inaugurated by H E Narang in the senior school auditorium.

Over 200 works of art by the students in the Primary and Senior sections, from classes I to XII, were on display. The paintings and sketches included a variety of themes, from flora and fauna to culture and portraits.

H E Narang and other dignitaries at the Republic Day programme at ISD were guided around the hall to view the exhibits by art masters Sandeep Sadanam and Baiju P K. Alok C Sukumaran, a student of class VIII, presented the ambassador with his painting.



Embassy of India hosts Republic Day reception

The Embassy of India hosted a grand reception on January 27 to celebrate the 76th Republic Day of India. The event witnessed an enthusiastic participation of over 1,000 attendees, including ambassadors, defence attachés, diplomats, and esteemed members of the Omani and Indian community.

H E Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion of the Sultanate of Oman, graced the occasion as the chief guest. He was accompanied by an official high-level delegation from the Sultanate of Oman. Piyush Goyal, minister of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, was the special guest for the occasion.

Goyal was on an official visit to Oman to co-chair the 11th India-Oman Joint Commission Meeting with H E Qais bin Mohammed Al Yousef.

Goyal spoke about India's extraordinary progress under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He emphasised India's growing global stature and highlighted the partnership between India and Oman as a shining example of collaboration.

H E Amit Narang, ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, highlighted the remarkable progress in India-Oman relations post-pandemic. He referred to the landmark visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to India, Oman's active participation in the G20 under India's presidency, and the rapid growth in bilateral trade, defence cooperation, cultural collaboration, and people-to-people ties.

The cultural highlight of the evening was a unique musical performance titled 'Sur Sandook', a vibrant India-Oman jukebox, featuring Omani violinist Nasser Al Kindi alongside percussion players - Team Melam Muscat.

Trump looks to oust Jan 6 investigators

Washington, D.C., US - The Trump administration has ordered the US Justice Department to launch a sweeping purge of the FBI, targeting officials involved in past investigations of President Donald Trump and the January 6 Capitol riot.

Reports in US media on Friday indicated dozens of Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) agents, including senior officials, are being evaluated for removal, with some ordered to resign or face termination.

Top officials across various FBI offices and headquarters were ordered to leave or face termination earlier in the week, according to the *Washington Post*.

The newspaper also reported that at least 30 federal prosecutors who had worked on Capitol riot cases have already been dismissed.

The moves follow Trump's mass pardons of over 1,500 individuals charged in connection with the January 6 US Capitol riot, including those convicted of violent crimes.

Government signals change

A memo from Acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove, seen by various media outlets, ordered the FBI to compile a list of all prosecutors and agents who were involved in the Capitol riot investigation.

Bove said that this precedes a 'review process to determine whether any additional personnel actions are necessary' vowing not to 'tolerate subversive personnel actions by the previous administration'.

On Monday, the Justice Department fired a number of officials who were involved in the now-abandoned criminal charges against Trump.

Meanwhile, in a letter to the staff, acting FBI Director Brian Driscoll said that the aim is to 'follow the law, follow FBI policy, and do what's in the best interest of the workforce and the American people'.

FBI 'weaponised' against Trump

The development comes after the resignation of FBI Director Christopher Wray, whom Trump replaced with Kash Patel, a close ally.

During his Senate confirmation hearing, Patel denied knowledge of any planned terminations but vowed to protect FBI employees from political retribution.

Trump has long claimed the FBI was 'weaponised' against him, particularly during the Russia probe and his legal battles over the 2020 election.

On Friday, when questioned about the move, Trump said the FBI was 'weaponised at a level that nobody's never seen before'.

"If they fired some people over there, that's a good thing, because they were very bad."



‘Major blow to FBI’

Democrat Senator Dick Durbin, called the potential firings ‘a major blow to the FBI and Justice Department’s integrity and effectiveness’.

“Unelected Trump lackeys are carrying out widespread political retribution against our nation’s career law enforcement officials,” he said.

The FBI Agents Association

“He’s going to be meeting in Panama, where Panama has treated us very badly,” said Trump. “We built the Panama Canal 110 years ago. Think of it, the most expensive development we ever did, and really one of the wonders of the world, one of the great wonders of the world.”

“We didn’t give it to China. We gave it to Panama, and Panama has been ripping down

Donald Trump has long claimed the FBI was ‘weaponised’ against him, particularly during the Russia probe and his legal battles over the 2020 US presidential election

condemned the move, warning that firing hundreds of agents would weaken national security and undermine law enforcement.

It was not immediately clear what recourse any fired agent might take.

‘Panama violated agreement’

Meanwhile, Trump said on Friday that Panama violated its agreement with the US on the Panama Canal and declared that the US will take back control of the canal.

Speaking to reporters from the Oval Office, Trump noted that Secretary of State Marco Rubio is heading to various countries in South America.

all the China language signs. They’ve been working like mad to try, but about 70% of the signs were up and they were written in Chinese, and that’s not the deal,” he said.

“So, we’re going to take it back. They’ve already offered to do many things, but we think it’s appropriate that we take it back. They’ve totally violated the agreement. We have an agreement. They violated the agreement, and Marco Rubio is going over there to talk to the gentleman that’s in charge,” he added.

Trump has repeatedly expressed a desire to reclaim the canal, citing concerns that American ships are being overcharged.

Agencies



UK presses Mauritius on deal to protect Chagos Islands base

London, UK - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his Mauritian counterpart Navin Ramgoolam spoke directly for the first time about the Chagos Archipelago deal on Friday.

Britain and its former colony reached a deal in October 2024 to hand the Chagos Islands back to Mauritius, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean.

The deal would end Britain's direct control of the islands but give it a lease of 99 years on a joint UK-US military base on the largest island, Diego Garcia.

In the Friday call, Starmer 'underlined the need for a deal to secure the military base on Diego Garcia that ensures strong protections, including from malign influence', according to a Downing Street statement.

"Both leaders reiterated their commitment to a deal, and they looked forward to speaking again soon," the statement said.

Ramgoolam, who was elected in November, has questioned the deal agreed by his predecessor. He has said it didn't benefit his country enough without going

into detail on individual sticking points. The Chagos Islands are a tiny group of some 60 islands in the Indian Ocean, south of India between Africa and Australia.

Britain set up the base on Diego Garcia after gaining control of the Chagos Archipelago in 1965 and then leased the base to the United States.

The base's location allows the US to more easily conduct military operations in the region, such as the global hotspots of East Africa and the Middle East.

DW

Small medical plane carrying 6 people crashes in Philadelphia

Philadelphia, US - A small medical plane crashed shortly after takeoff in the US city of Philadelphia on Friday.

Jet Rescue Air Ambulance, the company that operated the plane, said its aircraft was carrying six people.

That included four crew members, one child medical patient and the patient's mother on board.

There is no confirmation that any survived, the company said.

All six people on the plane were Mexican nationals, the Mexican Foreign Ministry said.

The ministry added on social media platform X that the airline company 'confirmed to the consulate that six people of Mexican nationality were traveling on the aircraft'.

The plane's operator said that the child was being treated for a life-threatening condition and was being taken home to Mexico at the time of the crash.

Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro wrote on social media



that the government is offering all resources while emergency services respond to the crash.

"We'll continue to provide updates as more information is available."

He later visited the scene of the crash, telling a press conference that 'we know there will be loss in this region'.

Witnesses told local media they saw body parts in or near the wreckage. Philadelphia City Council member Mike Driscoll cited fears of discovering deaths among residents or others on the ground.

Plane crashed near shopping mall

The plane crashed shortly after 6pm in a busy intersection near Roosevelt Mall in northeast Philadelphia, police said.

The usually crowded mall is an outdoor shopping centre with dozens of stores and restaurants in the residential neighbourhood of Rhawnhurst. The crash scattered debris across a wide area, sparking fires that severely damaged homes and vehicles.

DW

DR Congo: SADC talks show resolve but no resolution to crisis

Harare, Zimbabwe - Days after the East African Community (EAC) met over the escalating conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), leader from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) also held an extraordinary summit on Friday just outside Harare, Zimbabwe, to discuss the recent developments in the region.

"Escalating hostilities in eastern Congo have created a dire situation. We meet here to seek a lasting solution to end the challenges facing the DRC people," Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa said in his opening statement at the meeting. "People in eastern Congo have suffered for far too long

time. While we pause to mourn our loss, our resolve to ensure collective security cannot be shaken."

Diplomatic stand-off

The Zimbabwean leader, who currently is chairing the rotating leadership of SADC, confirmed the bloc's commitment to peace in the DRC while stressing how the conflict in the mineral-rich area had started to weigh heavily on diplomatic relations throughout the region. This comes after 13 SADC troops from South Africa and three from Malawi were killed last week in clashes with fighters belonging to the March-23 (M23) movement.

Most governments throughout the region - including South



Africa - but also many in the Global North believe that M23 is propped up and supplied with weapons by the Rwandan government - a charge which Kigali denies.

In the course of recent days, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, even appeared to be heading for a historic fall-out over this charge,

with Ramaphosa demanding a ceasefire from Kagame's government and Kagame openly threatening South Africa with retaliation in response.

The Rwandan leader accused Ramaphosa of lying and distorting the facts on the ground, adding that 'South Africa is in no position to take on the role of a peacemaker or mediator'.

"And if South Africa prefers confrontation, Rwanda will deal with the matter in that context any day," Kagame's statement concluded.

Ramaphosa meanwhile stressed that 'South Africa's military presence in the eastern DRC is not a declaration of war against any country or state', demanding 'the reversal of territorial expansion by the M23' and 'the exit of external forces from the DRC'.

Kagame, who has been leading Rwanda for 25 years, meanwhile is used to hearing a more accommodating rhetoric from the regional powerhouse, South Africa. Former South African president Thabo Mbeki once urged the DRC not to treat M23 as invading foreigners from Rwanda but to listen actively to their grievances.

M23 consists mainly of members of a Tutsi clan, who were moved to the present-day DR Congo during the partition of Africa in the 1880s, while a large part of the clan went to present-day Rwanda.

DW

Israel releases 32 Palestinians from West Bank in exchange for hostages

Earlier, Al-Qassam Brigades released three captives from Gaza and handed them over to the Red Cross

Ramallah, Palestine - Thirty-two Palestinians were released from Israeli jails on Saturday as part of the fourth batch of the prisoner swap deal between Israel and Hamas.

The freed prisoners were handed over to the International Red Cross from the Ofer Prison facility near Ramallah in the central occupied West Bank, in line with the terms of the ceasefire and prisoner swap deal that took effect on January 19.

According to an Anadolu correspondent, hundreds of Palestinians gathered near the Ramallah Cultural Palace to welcome the freed prisoners, waving Palestinian flags and chanting in support of the Palestinian resistance and Gaza.

Despite earlier warnings by the Israeli army, the crowd gathered to receive the prisoners, who raised victory signs in defiance of Israeli orders.

Many of the released prisoners appeared in poor health, with some barely able to walk. They were taken to hospitals in Ramallah for medical checks and treatment, the Anadolu correspondent added.

Commenting on the freed Palestinians' poor health, the Hamas group said this confirms 'the brutality' of what Palestinians prisoners endure in Israeli jails.

Hamas described these viola-



Relatives welcome Palestinians, who are released from Israeli jails as they arrive at Khan Yunis after crossing Karem Abu Salim border crossing in Gaza on Saturday

tions as 'war crimes and crimes against humanity that require immediate intervention by the international community, the UN and the rights' group'.

Meanwhile, the International Red Cross staff were 'angry' over the way Israel released the Palestinian prisoners on Saturday as

they were led out in shackles with their hands behind their heads, according to the Israeli daily *Haaretz*.

Earlier, the Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, released three captives from Gaza and handed them over to the Red Cross.

A total of 183 Palestinians are expected to be released Saturday from Israeli jails, including 111 who were arrested by the Israeli army in Gaza after October 7, 2023, according to the Hamas-run Prisoners' Information Office.

According to an Anadolu correspondent, two Israeli hostages

- Ofer Calderon and Yarden Bibas - were handed over to the Red Cross in Khan Yunis in southern Gaza.

The third Israeli captive, Samuel Siegel, who also holds US citizenship, was handed over to representatives of the Red Cross in the Gaza City seaport by the

Al-Qassam Brigades.

The Palestinian group confirmed handing over the three Israeli captives, including a US-Israeli dual national, in Gaza in exchange for the release of a new batch of the 'heroic prisoners from occupation's prisons'.

Anadolu Agency

Wounded Palestinians, patients cross into Egypt

Gaza City, Palestine - The first batch of wounded Palestinians and patients on Saturday left the Gaza Strip through the Rafah border crossing to undergo medical treatment in Egypt.

Their exit marks the first day of the Rafah crossing opening in accordance with the ceasefire agreement.

Buses and ambulances carrying wounded people, patients and their escorts left the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing heading to the Egyptian side of the border crossing.

Earlier, Mohammed Zaqout, the director of hospitals in Gaza's Health Ministry, said that the first batch includes 50 wounded and sick children.

He, however, did not elaborate on the mechanism of their medical treatment in the Egyptian Health Ministry's hospitals.

Anadolu Agency

JEWELLERY AND WATCHES EXHIBITION IN DOHA



Exhibitors arrange jewellery at the 21st edition of Doha Jewellery and Watches Exhibition in Doha, Qatar on Friday. The exhibition will last until February 5 (Xinhua)

Pakistan sees surge in militancy with 281 fatalities in January

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan saw a sharp surge in militancy in the first month of 2025 as militant attacks increased by 42%, according to the latest data.

The month ended with a deadly encounter between Pakistani security forces and suspected terrorists in the southwestern Balochistan province which left 18 paramilitary troops and 23 militants dead, the military said on Saturday.

It said the encounter followed when militants tried to block roads in the Mangocher area of the Kalat district in the province.

Earlier, the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) in its monthly report said that 74 militant attacks occurred last month, resulting in 240 fatalities, including 35 security personnel, 20 civilians, and 185



suspected militants. At least 117 people were injured, including 53 security forces personnel, 54 civilians, and 10 militants.

Northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province remained the worst-affected province, followed by Balochistan.

The Pakistani military further said at least 11 other militants

were also killed in multiple operations conducted across Balochistan on Saturday.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban interim administration on Saturday rejected a US report on the presence of ISIS/Daesh militants in Afghanistan.

Taliban deputy spokesperson Hamdullah Fitrat rejected the US

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)'s report on the presence of ISIS (Daesh) and other groups in Afghanistan, emphasising that ISIS has been suppressed in the country, Tolo News reported.

"Expressing concerns about ISIS activities is essentially a 'campaign' in favour of the group," Fitrat said.

SIGAR in its latest report claimed that militants are still present in Afghanistan and expressed concerns over the activities of ISIS, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Al-Qaeda in the war-torn country.

Pakistan also repeatedly claims terrorists from the banned TTP are based in Afghanistan, from where they carry out attacks in Pakistan. Kabul, however, denies the accusation.

Ukraine war: Russian army sends wounded soldiers back into battle

Moscow, Russia - Russia does not officially provide figures regarding the number of soldiers killed or wounded in the war against Ukraine. This information is classified and so far, the authorities have only made occasional statements regarding casualties.

In October 2023, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection Alexei Vovchenko, said that 54% of severely wounded Russian soldiers had had at least one limb amputated, and of these one fifth had required upper limb amputations.

At the end of 2024, Deputy Defence Minister Anna Tsivilyova, who is described by uncensored Russian media outlets as being a relative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, put the total

number of war-disabled veterans at 110,000.

War wounded sent back into battle

At the beginning of this year, several videos showing commanders of the Russian army sending wounded soldiers back into battle against Ukraine were shared almost simultaneously on the Russian social network VKontakte. In one case, the soldiers were in a forest and several were moving around on crutches.

In another video, a military policeman could be seen confronting two men in camouflage, one of whom was leaning on a stick. He threatened them with sexual violence.

The authorities later con-



Russia's war in Ukraine has led to hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides

firmed the incident and said that the man, who had tortured his fellow soldiers with a baton and a stun gun, had been arrested. It turned out that the wounded were temporary soldiers who had complained when their com-

manders wanted to send them back to the front.

In an official speech, Deputy Defence Minister Tsivilyova said that around 96% of wounded soldiers were returning to the front and the idea was to do this

as quickly as possible. She said this was possible 'thanks to the modernisation of field hospitals'.

This approach could partly indicate a lack of personnel at the front and large losses in the Russian army.

"I would guess that around six in ten wounded soldiers have suffered serious injuries," a veteran, who wanted to remain anonymous, told DW. He was recently discharged due to his own injuries, which he refrained from disclosing for security reasons. "The main thing is that my arms and legs are intact," he said, adding that he was currently waiting for a one-off payment of several million roubles.

He said that his disability pension of 22,000 roubles (the equivalent of about US\$228) was low. "I've become unable to work at the age of 36 and lost my health, but what can I do? I served my country and have no regrets," he added. He suspected that the army might be sending wounded soldiers to the front to

punish them for drug offenses or faking injuries.

Lower compensation

Recently, much online dissatisfaction has been directed at the latest presidential decree, which reduced one-off payments for minor injuries from 3mn to 1mn roubles. Compensation for other even less severe injuries can no longer exceed 100,000 roubles.

There have been complaints on VKontakte that doctors are playing down injuries. A soldier named Oleg wrote online that doctors had initially classified his injury as moderately severe. "On the day I was discharged, it suddenly became a minor wound. They said there were now new lists and categories," he said. DW

The story behind the saree Indian FM wore on the Budget Day

Madhubani, India - Indian Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman paid tribute to Madhubani art by wearing a saree gifted by Padma Shri awardee Dulari Devi while presenting the Budget on Saturday.

Devi, a renowned Madhubani artist from Bihar, met Sitharaman during the finance minister's visit to the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani for a credit outreach event. During their meeting, Devi presented the saree to Sitharaman and requested that she wear it on Budget Day.

While speaking to ANI on Saturday, Dulari Devi shared that she was happy to see the fi-

nance minister wearing the saree gifted by her.

"Sitharaman ji came to Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan, and the saree that was gifted to her was made by me. It is called Banglori silk. I had requested her to wear the saree. It took me a month to make it. I am very happy that she wore the saree today. It is a great honour for Bihar and the country," she told ANI.

The saree she chose to wear was an elegant off-white piece with intricate golden work. Sitharaman paired it with a red blouse and a shawl while carrying her signature 'bahi-khata' - a tablet wrapped in red cloth with



India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman arrives at the Parliament House to present the Union Budget 2025, in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

a golden national emblem.

Dulari Devi's journey to becoming a celebrated Madhubani artist is nothing short of inspiring. She comes from a fishing community, which traditionally was not involved in painting. However, she developed a passion for the art form while working for Karpoori Devi, an accomplished Madhubani painter.

Despite facing multiple hardships - being abandoned by her husband at 16, losing her child, and working as a domestic helper for 16 years - Dulari Devi never gave up.

Her paintings also spread awareness of important social issues like child marriage, AIDS, and female foeticide.

Over the years, she has created 10,000 paintings and displayed them in over 50 exhibitions across India. She has also trained more than 1,000 students through organisations like the Mithila Art Institute and Seva Mithila Sansthan, ensuring that the traditional art form thrives for future generations.

This is not the first time Nirmala Sitharaman has used her saree to showcase India's textile heritage. Over the years, her choice of sarees on Budget Day has celebrated various traditional weaves and fabrics.

ANI

Sitharaman ji came to Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan, and the saree that was gifted to her was made by me. It is called Banglori silk. It took me a month to make it

DULARI DEVI



Belgium: Right-wing strikes deal to lead new government

Brussels, Belgium - Political parties in Belgium struck a deal on Friday to form a broad coalition government.

The announcement concluded months of talks that followed federal elections in June last year.

The country's new prime minister is set to be the right-wing New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) leader Bart De Wever, who secured victory in the June polls.

De Wever heads 5-party alliance

De Wever will lead a five-party coalition which includes the Christian Democrats, the liberal Reformist Movement and the Flemish Social Democrats.

Together, they hold an 81-seat majority in Belgium's 150-seat parliament.

The far-right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party was excluded from the government talks, despite the anti-immigration party having made the largest gains in the June 2024 election.

Political parties consistently exclude Vlaams Belang due to its anti-immigrant and anti-EU stance as well as its aim to split up the country.

Belgium's Royal Palace re-

leased a statement saying that De Wever had reported the agreement of the future coalition to the king.

"His mandate has been extended until the appointment of the new government. The date of the swearing-in will be announced later," the palace said in a post on social media.

This will be the first time Belgium will have a nationalist in the position of prime minister. The mayor of Antwerp since 2013, De Wever had pushed for cuts in social benefits, reforms to the pension system and immigration curbs. "The die is cast," De Wever said on social media, adding a picture of him meeting the king at the palace.

DW

The country's new prime minister is set to be the right-wing New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) leader Bart De Wever, who secured victory in the June polls

With more Indians studying abroad, safety concerns rise

Indian students represent the largest group of foreign students in the US and Canada

New Delhi, India - In December alone, three Indian students were killed in separate incidents across Canada, prompting concerns about safety and rising violence.

Gurasis Singh, a 22-year-old postgraduate student from Punjab, was stabbed to death by his roommate in Ontario, just four months after he arrived in Canada for his studies.

A few days later, student Ritika Rajput was killed when a tree fell on her during a late-night bonfire in Kelowna, British Columbia. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police reported it as a 'non-suspicious' incident.

On December 6, Harshandeep Singh, 20, was shot and killed by a gang in Edmonton. As a student, he worked as a security guard. Two suspects were arrested and charged with first-degree murder in connection with his death.

In response, the Indian government has issued safety advisories for students to exercise 'extreme caution'.

Indian Foreign Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said that Indian embassies and consulates are actively monitoring these incidents and maintaining communication with students to inform them about safety measures, particularly regarding dangerous areas in cities.



Indian students represent the largest international cohort at many universities around the world

More Indians studying abroad

Indian students currently represent the largest cohort studying abroad, surpassing other nationalities for the first time in over a decade. As of 2024, around 1.33mn Indian students are pursuing higher education internationally, followed by over one million Chinese students, according to government data.

According to the US State Department, over 330,000 Indian students studied at various US higher education institutions in 2024. Canada has the highest number of Indian students, coming in at over 400,000 in 2024, according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

"With over 400,000 Indian

students enrolled in Canadian universities, most are using the student route as a pathway to immigration. A significant percentage end up in sub-par institutions and struggle to make ends meet, working long hours to pay their tuition," said Ajay Bisaria, a former envoy to Canada.

"These students often face serious issues, including hate crimes, mental health problems and maladjustment. They are also vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous agents who promise them a smooth transition to Canadian residency," added Bisaria.

Ravinder Singh, an Indian student in Toronto, told DW that many students are vulnerable to targeted crime if they rent ac-

commodation in poorer areas.

"Sometimes, students are just in the wrong place and at the wrong time and that is when they get hurt," Singh said.

Calls for more safety

Former Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla told DW that with a rising number of Indian students studying around the world, host countries should 'provide them with a safe and secure environment'.

In the past five years, at least 633 Indian students have died abroad across 41 countries, including the highest of 172 in Canada, followed by the US with 108 deaths encompassing a range of causes, the Indian Foreign Ministry said.

Shringla said host countries need to 'ensure that local communities hosting large numbers of students are adequately sensitised to prevent racism and violence against them'.

"There can be no justification for such violence perpetrated against harmless young students," added Shringla.

The US-based Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies (FIIDS) published an analysis in April 2024, addressing the cause of deaths among Indian students abroad. It found that incidents ranged from suspicious shootings, kidnappings, environmental deaths due to lack of safety knowledge, suspicious accidents, and violent crimes.

DW

US: Probe into deadly midair collision focuses on air traffic control

Washington, D.C., US - Investigators are working to determine the cause of a deadly midair collision near Washington that left 67 people dead, as new details emerge about air traffic control staffing, helicopter altitude, and potential safety failures, local media reported on Friday.

The crash occurred on Wednesday night when an American Airlines regional jet collided with a US Army Black Hawk helicopter over the Potomac River. Federal authorities have recovered all three black boxes from both aircraft, which are expected to provide crucial flight data, including altitude and communication records.

A report suggests that an air traffic control supervisor at Reagan National Airport combined the duties of managing helicopters and incoming flights before the collision.

The move, which occurred before 9:30pm local time, allowed a controller to leave his shift early.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has not commented on why the duties were combined at that time.

The FAA's preliminary safety report found that airport staffing levels were 'not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic'.

While combining roles is permitted under FAA regulations, it is not typically done during busy hours. Reagan National Airport has faced long-term staffing shortages, with only 19 fully certified controllers as of September



2023 - well below the 30 required by FAA targets.

Questions over helicopter's altitude

Investigators are also focusing on whether the Black Hawk was flying too high at the time of the impact. According to publicly available flight data, the American Eagle jet was at 375 feet, while helicopters near Reagan

National are generally restricted to flying below 200 feet under FAA rules.

Aviation attorney Tim Lorange stated that the passenger jet 'was exactly where it was sup-

posed to be, at the altitude that it was supposed to be'.

If official flight data confirms that the helicopter was above its permitted altitude, it could raise serious concerns about military training flights in heavily trafficked airspace.

The Black Hawk was on a routine training mission, with a seasoned instructor pilot and a co-pilot undergoing evaluation.

Investigators will examine whether the pilots received incorrect altitude readings, whether the air traffic controller gave any warnings, and whether the crew had logged sufficient recent flight hours.

Authorities have recovered 41 bodies from the crash site, with only 28 identified so far.

The jet was carrying 64 passengers, all presumed dead, while three soldiers were aboard the helicopter.

The US Army has identified two of the three service members killed in the crash as Staff Sgt. Ryan Austin O'Hara, 28, and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Andrew Loyd Eaves, 39.

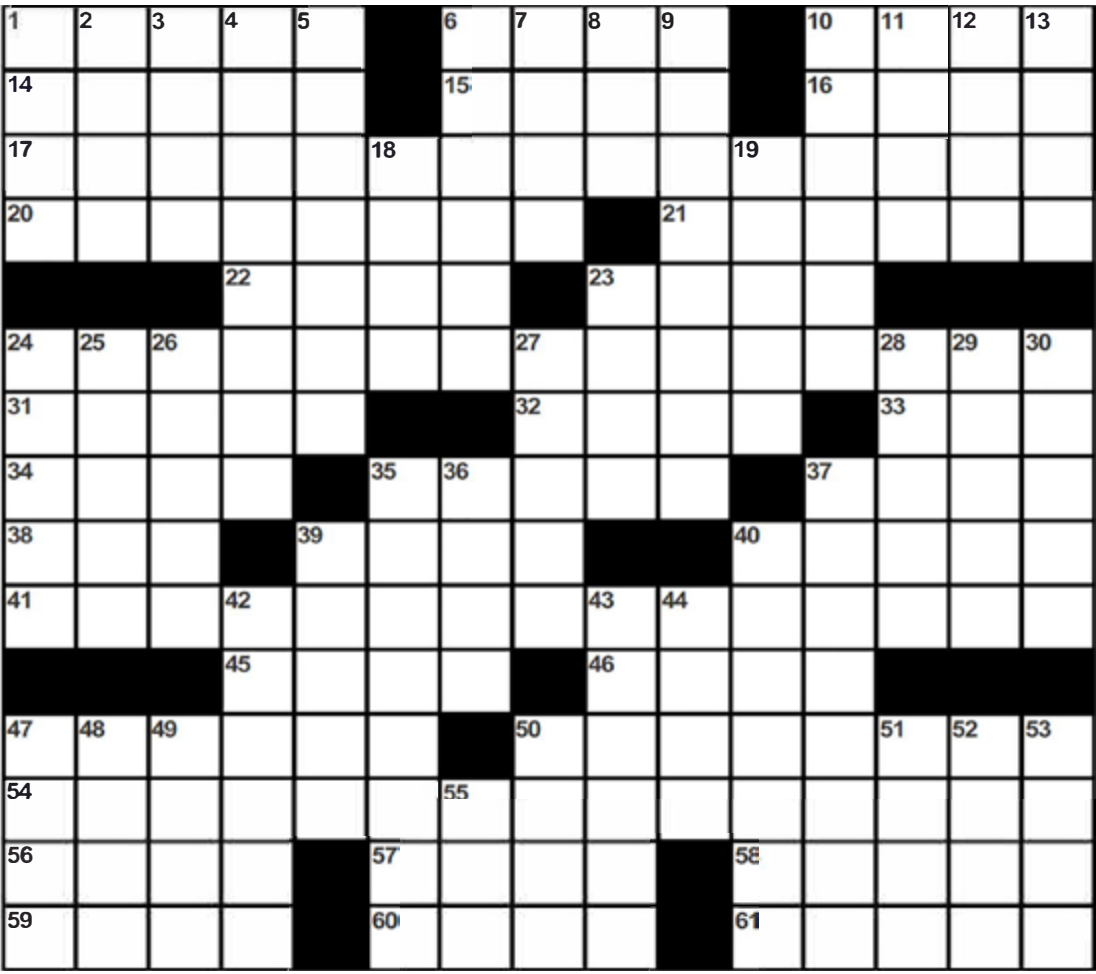
The third soldier's identity has not been disclosed at the request of the family.

First responders honoured the fallen soldiers in a solemn transfer ceremony on Friday night at Buzzard Point in Washington.

Following the crash, the FAA has indefinitely shut down the low-altitude helicopter corridor used at the time of the collision.

Anadolu Agency

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) "A man's house_ castle"
 - 6) _clock (midmorning)
 - 10) Pampering places
 - 14) Worst possible turnout
 - 15) African antelope
 - 16) Travel by foot
 - 17) 1998 film about a ball for teachers?
 - 20) Be humiliated
 - 21) James or Marilyn
 - 22) IRA type
 - 23) Top-of-the-line
 - 24) Bette Midler film about a thorny person?
 - 31) Paddled a canoe
 - 32) Golden Triangle coun-try
 - 33) "Deep Space Nine" shapeshifter
 - 34) Walk of Fame figure
 - 35) Fresh from the shower
 - 37) Boo-boo
 - 38) Suffix for "acrobat"
 - 39) Hermes' mother
 - 40) Hotel offering
 - 41) Tom Cruise flick about a bed?
 - 45) Gen. Robert_
 - 46) Homemade knife
 - 47) Thing-in-_
 - 50) Like some bathing suits
 - 54) Hitchcock thriller about a balcony seat?
 - 56) Make airtight
 - 57) Italian pronoun
 - 58) Like Erik the Red
 - 59) Diarist Frank
 - 60) Coup d'_
 - 61) Slip cover?
- DOWN**
- 1) Like JFK and LAX
 - 2) Manhattan neighbor-hood
 - 3) Some gardening tools
 - 4) One who derives by reasoning
 - 5) Type of restaurant
 - 6) "Good comeback!"
 - 7) Colleague of Agatha and Dashiell
 - 8) Big Apple paper's initials.
 - 9) Pretty ugly, for one
 - 10) Foster's river of song
 - 11) Wife number VI for Henry VIII
 - 12) Sax type
 - 13) Kind of terrier
 - 18) Rum Tum Tugger's musical
 - 19) Mallards' domains
 - 23) Honor student's grades?
 - 24) "I'll have _ this one out"
 - 25) Contrive, as a scheme
 - 26) Wipe clean
 - 27) Flash of light
 - 28) "God's honest truth"
 - 29) Corrects text
 - 30) Boxing-ring features
 - 35) Happy-go-lucky
 - 36) Citrus fruit
 - 37) CBS reality show
 - 39) First name in lip-synching?
 - 40) Grad student's pay-ment
 - 42) Decrepit
 - 43) Comparable to a pin?
 - 44) He and she
 - 47) "_ Wonderful Life"
 - 48) In those days
 - 49) Penn of movies
 - 50) Olympus Mountains peak
 - 51) Ireland, affectionately
 - 52) "Pool" intro
 - 53) Mother sheep
 - 55) Summer time, but not in Ariz.

NOTE PAD

JULEP ASTOR BUB
OSIER SPIRE ENE
BASKETCASES ASS
MOOT TACET
SOFTTEST SLIGHTS
AVOIDS HAVOC
LIONS CEASE OPS
ANTS DODGE OMIT
DEB SILOS RUBLE
RELET RESELL
SPIGOTS DIVERSE
HEDGE RANI
ORG GROUNDSWELL
JOE IONIC EAVES
INS NOONE BREAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
Today, everyone around you is feeling fine and in the mood for good times. Everywhere you go, you'll hear laughter, and it will be impossible not to have a good time. This is a great time to get your different social circles all together. Introductions need to be made. Having your worlds collide won't be stressful. It will be rewarding. There's a small-world connection that you need to know about.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Today, take some time to explore some territory that lies just beyond where you usually go. Be open to ideas that come from people of a different culture. You might not understand them at first, but once you think it over you'll see that sometimes things are so different that they work. You're also in a good frame of mind to try more exotic foods and listen to new music. Your aesthetic sensibilities are starting to evolve in a new direction.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Recent compromises you've had to make weren't exactly fun, but they've definitely created greater harmony in your life, which you'll come to see in a whole new way today. Your bond with friends and family members has been strengthened, and you have inspired people to start being more flexible in their own lives. Even someone who has a hard time acting selfless or regarding other people's needs is starting to show a more generous side.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The Korean word transliterated as "getbol" is Korea's term for which vital part of its shoreline ecology?
A. Mangrove swamps
B. Tidal mudflats
C. Pinnacle rocks for bird nesting
D. Coral reefs

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
A coworker you've been thinking about a lot lately, who seems to have been returning those lingering glances across the room for some time now, is about to let you know in one way or another that they're unafraid to stare back. They might even be brave enough to approach you in the hopes of striking up a conversation. You have to admire their courage, at least. And there's a lot more to admire where that came from.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Controversy at your job or school is waking you up to the fact that people you like can believe things that you definitely don't like. Understandably, this dissonance might cause you some stress or discomfort at first, but once you accept the fact that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, you'll be fine. Your relationships can withstand some healthy debate, so don't hold back when it comes to disagreeing with them. Just don't get personal about it.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
You could find yourself smack in the middle of some drama today, with a front row seat to all the action. While the events of the day could be pretty entertaining, the people involved might not have much of a sense of humor about it all, so be careful not to laugh too loudly around them. People don't realize how silly are when they get worked up over silly things. Some day they'll be ready to laugh about this, but not yet!

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Forget about even trying to listen politely to the naysayers, especially if they're talking about a certain someone you've just met and like very much. If you're relaxed and comfortable with your new person, it really doesn't matter what anyone says. You'll do exactly what you should do, which is make your evaluation based on your impressions of how the person treats you.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Material possessions aren't satisfying you now, which is a good thing. You could use a break from spending money. Anything having to do with money or shopping will only remind you of debt and stress, so this is the perfect day to avoid all that and think of something else. There are one or two projects you should get started on, and if you've been itching to get back into the kitchen.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
You're shortsighted if all you want out of a group dynamic is complete agreement. A dissenting voice or two might slow the process, but these people can also bring up good points and offer some novel ideas. Let the many voices in your group say what they want to say, and make sure you put in your two cents as well. If you encourage individuality and expression in the group, you'll be a part of something memorable.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
You're especially talkative, friendly, sociable, and ready to paint the town red right now, and certainly no one is better at making even complete strangers feel comfortable and accepted. Those wonderful traits will come in handy over the next week or so, a period that looks like it will be quite busy. Ready or not, here comes a full social calendar.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You're the straightforward type, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Gossip has never appealed to you either. It's too easy for it to spiral into outright lies. So when someone comes to you with an outrageous secret they're dying to whisper in your ear, don't be afraid to tell them you're not interested. You'd rather turn your focus away from the drama.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
If your love life hasn't been exceptionally exciting lately, that could all change today. You could experience a strong intellectual connection with someone who everyone thinks is a great candidate for a romance with you. If you're single and interested, there could be a golden opportunity to get closer to them. But if you're attached, use this spark of energy to inject new life into your current relationship.

02. What is the official language of Liechtenstein?
A. Italian
B. Spanish
C. Dutch
D. German

03. What is Parris Goebel's specialist field?
A. Directing (theatre)
B. Influencing
C. Hip-hop dance, and choreography
D. Ice skating

Answers: 1.B 2.D 3.C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

F	T	A	E
F	Y	E	S
E	A	N	S
I	S	B	D

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

'THE PRINCE IS BACK'

Neymar eyes 2026 World Cup with Brazil after returning to boyhood club Santos

Santos, Brazil - A tearful Neymar was welcomed back to his boy-hood club Friday by thousands of Santos fans and a concert at the team's home stadium beneath an electronic sign saying, "the prince is back."

The forward signed a contract upon arrival that sources said will run for six months.

Around 20,000 Santos fans filled Vila Belmiro Stadium in the rain outside São Paulo to celebrate the return Neymar, 32.

His evening arrival to fire-works capped a three-hour celebration that also featured local singers.

"I am very happy. We lived great moments here. There's still a lot that could come," Neymar said on the pitch. When fans chanted they want to see him dribble again, as he often did in his career, he said, "I will not lack boldness [to dribble]."

Shortly before, he greeted his future teammates and club executives at the Santos training ground.

Neymar, 32, began his career aged 17 with Santos in 2009, racking up 136 goals and 64 assists in 225 matches to help the club secure their first Copa Libertadores title in nearly 50 years in 2011.

He joined Barcelona in 2013, before moving to Paris St Ger-

main for a world record fee of 222 million euros in August 2017.

Neymar has played only seven games for Al-Hilal since moving from PSG for a reported fee of around 90 million euros (\$98 million) in August 2023.

"Some decisions are not about soccer logic," Neymar explained during a media conference.

"I started getting sad in training sessions (at Al-Hilal), and it wasn't good for my head. So there was the chance to come back and I did not think twice. Since the first day I decided I wanted to come back, I told my father (and agent) and it all worked."

The star forward, who has not played since November due to an ACL injury, expressed his readiness to take the field for Santos.

"I'm a competitive guy. I want to win everything I do that involves competition. I'm returning to Santos wanting to be champion again. It's a comeback after 13 years, and winning a Paulista that I've won three times, winning again will be different. I have this fire to win in my blood. You know how competitive I am. I didn't come here to hang out, I didn't come here to sit at home on the couch.

"I came here to find my happiness in playing soccer and helping Santos. I'm going to dedicate

myself to making the Santos fans happy and making myself happy. Being there at Vila Belmiro, it's impossible not to be happy."

This emotional return was not just about football but also a personal decision for Neymar. "Santos gave me the chance to come back. I gave away a lot of things to be here. It was a perfect marriage at an unimaginable moment for both parts. Still, it happened," Neymar shared.

I'm a competitive guy... I have this fire to win in my blood. You know how competitive I am. I didn't come here to hang out, I didn't come here to sit at home on the couch.

NEYMAR

Reflecting on his goals for the future, Neymar revealed his ambition to win the World Cup in 2026, which he believes will be his final appearance in the prestigious tournament.

"I am going after this World Cup trophy in any way I can. I have goals," said Neymar, who is Brazil's all-time top scorer with 79 goals in 125 matches.

Neymar also made it clear that he would honour Pelé's legacy by wearing the iconic No. 10 jersey for Santos.



Around 20,000 Santos fans attended Neymar's unveiling at Vila Belmiro Stadium outside São Paulo



Ange Postecoglou

I have failed in trying to unify Tottenham: Postecoglou

London, England - Tottenham Hotspur coach Ange Postecoglou said he has failed to unify the Premier League club and its supporters after fans voiced their displeasure at a dismal run of form by chanting against Chairman Daniel Levy.

Tottenham fans booed loudly after a 2-1 home defeat by Leicester City on Sunday left the club 15th in the table, while also making their feelings clear towards Levy, whom they accuse of failing to invest in the squad.

Supporters also chanted "Levy Out" during a 3-0 Europa League group-stage victory over Swedish side Elfsborg on Thursday.

"I've always felt when you are trying to build something successful, you need to be united. I have probably failed in trying to unify the club," Postecoglou told reporters on Friday ahead of Sunday's Premier League game at Brentford.

"Part of that is just because of the form we are in in the league, which allows people's minds to go away from the here and now. I thought the crowd were good (against Elfsborg). They understood we had a young squad out there and they got genuinely excited towards the end of the game seeing the young boys.

"That's what we're trying to tap into because we're going to need the support in this last phase of the season to hopefully create something special."

Despite the fans' resentment towards Levy, Postecoglou said the relationship could be mended if results improved.

"It's not an unusual situation for me - I've faced it before at other clubs," the Australian manager added.

"Usually when you get things right on the field, that gets everyone aligned again. All I can do is my utmost to get the team back on track in the league and give our supporters the priority of just enjoying our football team."

Al Nassr sign Colombian star Duran from Villa

Birmingham, England - Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr have signed 21-year-old Colombian forward Jhon Duran from Aston Villa for an undisclosed fee, the Premier League club announced on Friday.

Although neither club disclosed financial details, British media reported that the deal to sign the Colombia international was worth around 77 million euros (\$80.21 million) plus additions.

It is the second-highest transfer fee Villa have ever received after winger Jack Grealish's move to Manchester City

for a reported fee of 100 million pounds (\$124.05 million) in 2021.

"Aston Villa can confirm that Jhon Duran has joined Al Nassr for an undisclosed fee. Everyone at Aston Villa would like to wish Jhon all the best in the next step of his professional career," Villa said in a statement.

Duran, who joined from third tier U.S. club Chicago Fire FC II in 2023, scored 20 goals in 78 appearances for the Birmingham-based side.

Capped 15 times for his country, Duran will link-up with Portugal captain Cristiano



Jhon Duran

Ronaldo and Sadio Mane at Al Nassr, who are third in the Saudi Pro League standings with 38 points from 18 matches.

In July, Duran appeared to be on the verge of signing for West Ham United, with British media reports saying he had agreed personal terms ahead of a move worth 35 million pounds.

The switch never materialised and the Colombian then scored four league goals after coming off the bench in their first six games, including winners against West Ham United, Leicester City and Everton.

A runner-up with Colombia

at the 2024 Copa America, Duran has netted 12 goals in all competitions, including seven in the Premier League.

Regular starter Ollie Watkins, who netted 27 times across all competitions last season and has 10 Premier League goals this campaign, was also linked with move to rivals Arsenal but Unai Emery said the English striker is happy to stay.

Villa are eighth in the Premier League with 37 points from 23 matches and have also sealed a spot in the Champions League last 16.

Transfer speculation affecting Chelsea performance, says manager Maresca

London, England - Several Chelsea players have been the subject of speculation in the January transfer window, which is impacting the club's form, manager Enzo Maresca said on Friday ahead of a Premier League meeting with West Ham United.

Chelsea were second in the standings and hot on the heels of leaders Liverpool in December after a run of five straight league wins, but have since fallen to sixth and won just one of their last seven matches.

In the same period, players like defender Axel Disasi and forwards Christopher Nkunku and Joao Felix have been linked with moves away from the club. Asked if the speculation has had an adverse effect on the team, Maresca told reporters: "100%. 100% for me. But not only us, all the teams, because in the end (the players) are human beings. "Even if they are say, 'no, I'm professional, I'm focused on this',



Enzo Maresca

if they are talking about you and different clubs then the focus is not 100%. This can be something (to explain their drop in form)."

On Monday, Chelsea host 14th-placed West Ham what will be former manager Graham Potter's first return to Stamford

Bridge since he was sacked in 2023.

Maresca said Potter had transformed West Ham since taking charge earlier this month, adding: "They are very aggressive. I have watched the four games with Graham in charge

Chelsea were second in the standings and hot on the heels of leaders Liverpool in December after a run of five straight league wins, but have since fallen to sixth

and they try to be very aggressive - even in the last game against Aston Villa. So it will be a tough game like always and in terms of our tactical approach, we have two days to prepare the game and we will see."

The Italian coach faces a difficult decision for the match, with fans calling for goalkeeper Robert Sanchez to be dropped after the Spaniard committed an error that led to a goal in their 3-1 defeat to Manchester City last week.

Wood hits hat-trick as rampant Forest put seven past Brighton

Nottingham, England - Fired-up Nottingham Forest thumped Brighton & Hove Albion 7-0 helped by a hat trick from striker Chris Wood in their Premier League clash at the City Ground on Saturday in an emphatic bounce back from last week's humbling 5-0 loss at Bournemouth.

Forest move to 47 points after 24 games to consolidate third spot as they chase Champions League qualification, while Brighton are ninth on 34. Forest are now level with second-placed Arsenal, who host Manchester City in fourth on Sunday.

Nuno Espirito Santo's Forest side romped to their biggest margin of victory since a 7-0 rout of Chelsea in 1991.

"What a difference a week can make," Wood told TNT Sports. "Down in the dumps after last week. It wasn't us, it wasn't like us, but today that was definitely us. "It's fantastic, the boys have done superbly showing character to come back from last week.



Nottingham Forest's Chris Wood celebrates his goal

That is what we're about."

An own goal from Lewis Dunk in the 12th minute kicked off the scoring as Brighton's skipper lunged to clear Morgan Gibbs-White's low cross and poked the ball into the net.

Gibbs-White doubled Forest's lead in the 25th minute with a glancing header from Anthony Elanga's corner.

Wood, who has scored 17 league goals this season including seven in his last six games, netted his first of the day seven minutes later when, left completely un-

marked, he headed Elanga's cross past Bart Verbruggen.

Brighton's best effort was Danny Welbeck's rocket from 15 metres that hit the underside of the bar just before halftime.

Forest continued to run riot after the break and the 33-year-old Wood tapped home Elanga's cross in the 64th.

The New Zealand international completed his hat trick five minutes later with a penalty, which was awarded after Tariq Lamptey bundled Gibbs-White to the ground.

BATTLE LINES DRAWN

Arsenal captain Odegaard says he is relishing the heat of ‘big rivalry’ with Man City

London, England - Arsenal and Manchester City’s fiery rivalry is a natural byproduct of both teams’ desire to be the best, the north London club’s captain Martin Odegaard said ahead of their Premier League clash at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday.

Arsenal finished runners-up to City in 2022-23 and took the Premier League title race to the final day last season before once again finishing second behind Pep Guardiola’s side.

Tempers flared during their last meeting in September as Odegaard’s Norwegian compatriot Erling Haaland threw the ball at Arsenal defender Gabriel and directed heated words at Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta, asking him to “stay humble”.

Arteta’s side squandered a two-goal lead and were reduced to ten men in the reverse fixture in September, which ended in a 2-2 draw after a 98th-minute goal by City defender John Stones.

Odegaard said he is relishing the “heat” of Arsenal’s rivalry with City.

“I think in football, games like this, the emotions are so high and the adrenaline is there and everything. That’s something that can happen on the pitch and then when you walk off the pitch, then you are done with it,” Odegaard told British media.

“It is not something I think too



Man City’s Erling Haaland and Arsenal’s Gabriel square off during their Premier League match last September

much about. I think it is normal when you play these big games that there is a big rivalry. You are competing and you want to be the best. So, that’s how it should be and there should be a little bit of heat sometimes.

“But then, I think a lot of the players know each other from the national team - England, Brazil, me with Erling - so on the pitch

and off the pitch it is a bit different. When we are on the pitch, then it’s a good battle.”

City are fourth in the league standings with 41 points while second-placed Arsenal have 47 points.

Win will be a ‘big boost’

Victory over City will be a boost

for Arsenal’s title hopes, manager Mikel Arteta said.

“(Winning against them) would be a big boost for us (in the title race),” Arteta told reporters.

“Winning big matches is always something special. Every time we play a big match against our rivals, it brings something extra.”

Asked about how their rivalry

I think it is normal when there is a big rivalry. You are competing and you want to be the best. So, that’s how it should be and there should be a little bit of heat sometimes

MARTIN ODEGAARD

with Manchester City has developed in recent seasons, Arteta said. “(It is) Normal, two teams trying to win.”

Arsenal are unbeaten in their last 13 league games. City, however, endured a dismal run leading up to Christmas but have regained form by recording four

wins and a draw in their last five league matches.

Arteta confirmed goalkeeper David Raya is a doubt for Sunday’s clash after the 29-year-old Spaniard missed their Champions League match at Girona on Wednesday due to fitness issues.

Guardiola faces big schedule headache

Manchester, England - Premier League teams have it tougher than their European rivals due to their demanding fixture list, Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola said on Friday as his team prepare to face Arsenal four days after a key Champions League match.

City scraped through to the knockout round of Europe’s elite competition on Wednesday with a 3-1 win over Club Brugge and had little time to recover before resuming their league campaign.

They were also drawn on Friday morning to take on European giants Real Madrid in the two-legged Champions League play-offs.

“In Premier League, every team has to play everyone,” Guardiola said. “But normally in Premier League they always put the toughest schedules for teams in Europe in the important stages, schedule the most difficult ones, because it is tough to play against Real Madrid or Bayern Munich.”

Guardiola grew prickly when asked whether the league should do more to help clubs, saying the problem existed well before his arrival in Manchester.

Last season, we played the quarter-final against Madrid and three days later we had the FA Cup semifinal in Wembley

PEP GUARDIOLA

“Are you asking me that question after many years here? Come on. Don’t make me (answer) that question,” he said. “You have been here many years before me and it has always been like that. I’m not complaining because we have incredible success playing that calendar.

“It’s always been like that. We accept it. I’m not complaining because we won trebles and had success doing like that.

“I said many times, last season, we played the quarter-final against Madrid and three days later we had the FA Cup semi-final in Wembley when we could have another day. But we survive. I remember when I was in Barcelona and followed the Premier League and Alex Ferguson, Jose Mourinho and Arsene Wenger made the same complaints.

“Do you think it is going to change? The broadcasters decide, they don’t ask me what is better to play.”



Ayden Heaven

Arsenal youngster Heaven joins Manchester United

London, England - Manchester United have signed 18-year-old defender Ayden Heaven from Arsenal on a contract until June 2029 with the option to extend for another year, United announced on Saturday.

England U-19 international Heaven made his senior debut in October during Arsenal’s 3-0 win over Preston North End in the League Cup.

“I’m incredibly proud to join Manchester United. I’m grateful

to everyone who helped make this dream a reality,” the centre-back said in a statement shared by United. “I’ll be giving everything to continue my development and become the best player that I can be.”

Heaven, who was an unused substitute for Arsenal in three Premier League matches, will join United’s first-team squad, the statement added.

United, 12th in the league, host Crystal Palace on Sunday.

Real Madrid to face Manchester City in Champions League knockout playoff

Nyon, Switzerland - Defending champions Real Madrid will renew their Champions League rivalry with 2023 winners Manchester City in a blockbuster knockout phase playoff tie after the two teams were pitted against each other in the draw held in Nyon on Friday.

Both Real and City failed to advance automatically to the last 16 as one of the top eight sides after they finished 11th and 22nd, respectively, in the new league-phase format.

Teams that finished ninth to 24th will compete in a two-legged playoff to advance to the last 16.

Real and City have played each other in four knockout ties since 2020 and will be facing off for a fourth consecutive year after the Premier League champions avoided drawing Bayern Munich.



Real Madrid and Manchester City will be facing off for a fourth consecutive year in the Champions League

“It feels like a derby already, four years in a row facing Real Madrid,” City boss Pep Guardiola told reporters.

“But Bayern or Madrid, both were really tough. Hopefully we can arrive in the first leg here and then at Madrid as best as possible.”

The Spanish league leaders will fancy their chances having

eliminated English clubs in the knockout stages 13 times.

Although City thrashed the Spanish club 5-1 on aggregate in the semi-finals in 2023 en route to the treble, Real exacted revenge last year when they beat Guardiola’s side on penalties in the quarter-finals after two draws.

“In a perfect world, we

wouldn’t play them, but we weren’t able to get into the top eight and that’s OK,” Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti said.

“Playing two more or fewer games doesn’t matter ... we have the resources to deal with it.”

The competition does not get any easier for either team as they will face either Atletico Madrid or Bayer Leverkusen in the last 16.

With teams from the same country also allowed to face each other, unlike in previous years, the playoffs will have an all-French tie with Paris St Germain facing Brest. The winners will face either Liverpool or Barcelona in the last 16.

“There will be a French team in the last 16, so we have to see the positive side,” PSG coach Luis Enrique said.

Inter look for revenge against arch-rivals Milan in derby

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan played poorly in the first two derbies with AC Milan this season and will have to be more competitive and focused when they meet again on Sunday, manager Simone Inzaghi said.

Inter lost 2-1 to Milan in September when Matteo Gabbia headed the winner in the closing minutes and suffered a dramatic 3-2 loss to their rivals in the Italian Super Cup in January.

“We know the value of the opponent, this year the first two

derbies went badly. The first deservedly, because Milan did well,” Inzaghi told reporters on Saturday.

“In the second in Riyadh, we were in control and we had to be better in the incidents: the first goal was tainted by a foul on (Kristjan) Asllani.

“We have to react, we have to be better in the decisive moments of the match, which can turn against you in football.”

Inzaghi said Inter had played 16 games in the last two months and a packed Serie A calendar



Simone Inzaghi

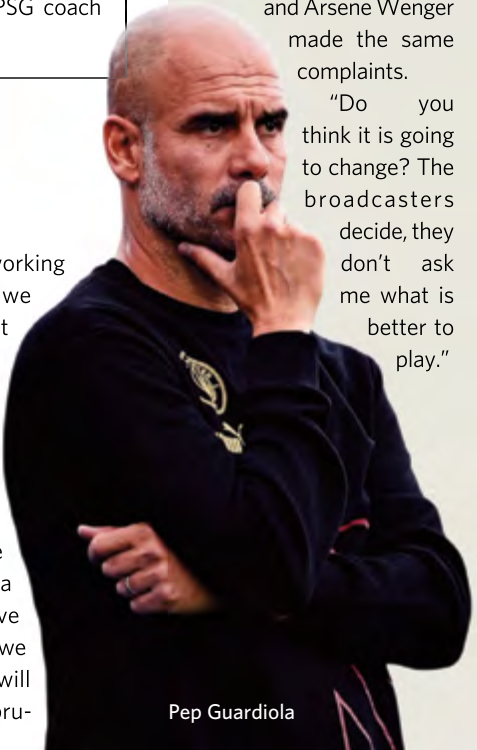
along with their Coppa Italia quarter-final against Lazio scheduled for Feb. 25 would prevent the team from performing at their peak.

Following the Milan derby, Inter host Fiorentina on Feb. 10 in a rearranged match which was suspended in December following midfielder Edoardo Bove’s collapse.

“We have played sixteen games in two months ... now we have the (rearranged game) with Fiorentina and the Coppa Italia on a particular date: it will

prevent us from working at our best as we thought, but it doesn’t depend on us,” Inzaghi said.

“As for (the Fiorentina game), they have set this date that we didn’t expect, the date of the Coppa Italia could have been different, but we know that we will have to run in February too.”



Pep Guardiola



Yazeed al Rajhi

Al Rajhi earns eighth victory at Ha'il International Rally

Ha'il, Saudi Arabia - Overdrive Racing's Yazeed al Rajhi continued where he left off with his recent Dakar Rally victory to earn an eighth career success in the Ha'il Toyota International Rally (Saudi Baja).

The Toyota Hilux driver won the event on five occasions when it ran to a longer format before 2020 and has now recorded shorter Baja successes in 2022, 2024 and 2025. His German co-driver Timo Gottschalk won the longer rally with Nasser al Attiyah in 2011 and has now taken wins with Al Rajhi in 2015, 2016, 2024 and 2025. The duo now lead the 2025 FIA World Baja Cup after the opening round.

Al Rajhi said: "It was a good race. Timo and I did it well. We enjoyed it. That's the most im-

portant. The 20th anniversary of the event here was a nice one. The event is going better and better every year."

Argentina's Juan Cruz Yacopini and his Spanish co-driver Dani Oliveras kept the pressure on the Saudi driver for long periods of the three-day event on a new route through the north-central deserts of Saudi Arabia and finished second in their Toyota Hilux. Yacopini finished 5min 49sec behind the Dakar winner.

Dania Akeel and Stéphane Duplé ran a third Overdrive Racing Toyota and were registered to defend Akeel's 2024 FIA Middle East Baja Cup title. They finished third to give Overdrive Racing a clean sweep of the podium places.

The Toyota Hilux driver won the event on five occasions when it ran to a longer format before 2020

Supersub Rana leaves England concussed

India clinch T20 series after substitute drama

Pune, India - Harshit Rana claimed three wickets in his debatable appearance as a concussion substitute to help India to a series-clinching 15-run victory against England in the fourth T20 International on Friday.

Put into bat, India overcame Saqib Mahmood's three-wicket burst to post a competitive 181-9 following half-centuries by Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube. England were 166 all out with two deliveries left in their innings as India grabbed an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match series.

All-rounder Dube was hit on the helmet by a Jamie Overton bouncer and seamer Rana replaced him despite it not being a like-for-like replacement as concussion substitute rules mandate.

"It's a dream debut for me," said an elated Rana after the match. "When Dube came back, after two overs I was informed I would be the concussion substitute. It is not just for this series; I have been waiting for an opportunity for a long time, and I wanted to prove I belong here. I have bowled well in the IPL and was just following the same here." England captain Jos But-



India's Harshit Rana claimed three wickets for 33 runs after coming on as a concussion substitute

ler was not happy with India being allowed to field primarily a seamer for a batting all-rounder, who rarely bowls.

"It's not a like-for-like replacement," Buttler told reporters. "Either Shivam Dube has put on about 25mph with the ball, or Harshit has really improved his batting."

"It's part of the game. I still think we should have gone on to win the match but yes, we dis-

agree with the (substitute) decision."

Earlier, England fast bowler Saqib impressed on debut as he began with a three-wicket maiden over to rattle India at the Maharashtra Cricket Association (MCA) Stadium.

India opener Sanju Samson fluffed his pull shot, number three Tilak Varma perished at deep third leg and captain Suryakumar Yadav was caught

at short mid-on prolonging his lean patch in the series.

Abhishek Sharma (29) and Rinku Singh (30) propped up India before the left-right combination of Dube and Pandya counter-attacked during their 87-run partnership.

Pandya and Dube smashed identical 53s but India managed only three runs from the eventful last over from Overton losing three wickets in the process.



Abdullah al Zubair

Oman's Abdullah al Zubair ready for Qatar Rally

Muscat - Omani rally driver Abdullah al Zubair and co-driver Taha Soomar will be in high spirits when they compete in the second round of the Middle East Rally Championship2 in Qatar this weekend.

Al Zubair secured victory in MERC2 at the opening round in Sohar and heads an impressive field of Subaru and Mitsubishi drivers chasing showroom class honours.

Al Zubair will sit behind the wheel of a Subaru Impreza (N14), which he drove in the first round in Oman, in which he also won the Best Omani Driver award.

Al Zubair had previously announced his participation in all rounds of this season.

"We have ample information about it and we have the ambition to put in a tough fight."

"We gained invaluable experience in the Oman International Rally through the stages of the Suhar Rally," said Al Zubair.

Kuhnemann, Lyon shine as Australia thrash Sri Lanka

Galle, Sri Lanka - Spin twins Matthew Kuhnemann and Nathan Lyon combined to dismantle Sri Lanka and bowl Australia to a crushing victory by an innings and 242 runs in the opening Test in Galle on Saturday.

Australia's biggest victory in Asia also ensured they will retain the Warne-Muralitharan Trophy, regardless of the outcome of the second and final Test at the same venue next week.

Australia's biggest victory in Asia also ensured they will retain the Warne-Muralitharan Trophy, regardless of the outcome of the second and final Test at the same venue next week.

Having declared their first innings on a mammoth 654-6, Australia bundled out the hosts for a paltry 165 with Kuhnemann (5-63) leading the rout.

A huge lead of 483 and the prospect of rain later in the day prompted Australia to enforce follow-on.

Kuhnemann and Lyon

claimed four wickets apiece to bowl Sri Lanka out for 247 to secure a victory inside four days.

Left-arm spinner Kuhnemann finished with a nine-wicket match haul but Australia opener Usman Khawaja won player of the match for his career-best 232.

"To get 650 allowed us an option to bowl twice," said Australia's stand-in captain Steve Smith, who reached 10,000 Test runs in Galle.

"I thought we batted exceptionally well and gave us a chance to press the game."

Australia needed just 45 minutes to claim the last five Sri Lanka wickets in the hosts' first innings when the fourth day's play began.

Kuhnemann wreaked havoc on a spin-friendly surface, while Lyon (3-57) chipped in from the other end, claiming the vital wicket of Dinesh Chandimal, who made 72.



Matthew Kuhnemann took nine wickets in the match

CLASSIFIEDS

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LoVid, heartsleeves (2024). Art Program, Enter Art Fair (2024)

DIGITAL ART



Since 2020, digital art has become more accessible, reaching beyond traditional art institutions and engaging a broader audience

DIANA VELASCO

AS DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY BECOMES INCREASINGLY INGRAINED IN EVERYDAY LIFE, THE ART WORLD IS UNDERGOING A SIGNIFICANT TRANSFORMATION THAT WITNESSES THE ‘DEMOCRATISATION OF ART MAKING’

Phygital strokes

MoMA Postcard is a global community project - an experiment in collective creativity on blockchain, it invites anyone to experiment with web3 technologies

Enter Art Fair’s 2024 Art Program ‘Betwixt - Analogue and Digital Realms,’ curated by Diana Velasco, stands at the forefront of a shift wherein the art world is at the crossroads of digital art, exploring the concept of ‘phygital’ - a fusion of physical and digital elements that reflects the ongoing evolution in how we interact with and experience art.

Velasco’s programme is particularly relevant now, as the boundaries between physical and digital realms blur more than ever. Digital devices have become indispensable in our routines, influencing everything from how we consume media to how we commu-

nicate and work. This transition is evident in the art world, too, especially following the 2019 lockdowns that accelerated the adoption of digital art.

“Since 2020, digital art has become more accessible, reaching beyond traditional art institutions and engaging a broader audience,” she said, however, pointing out that this shift also raises crucial questions about ownership, transparency, and ethics, especially with the rise of blockchain technology and AI. While these technologies offer exciting opportunities, they also concentrate control within a few tech giants. This duality between the potential and pitfalls of digital technologies makes the ‘phygital’ concept

central to the discussions and artworks in this year’s fair.

Evolution of Phygital Art: Merging Worlds

The merging of physical and digital art is not a new phenomenon, but the scale of its influence today is unprecedented. Early pioneers like Vera Molnár began integrating technology into their work as far back as the 1960s, but the mainstream acceptance of digital art has grown exponentially in recent years.

Velasco points out that artists like LoVid and Auriea Harvey, both featured in the Enter Art Program, have been exploring these intersections since the early 1990s, blending performance, music, and technology very long before digital art became widely recognised.

What sets this moment apart is the broad audience engagement with digital art, driven by the pervasive influence of technology in daily life. From gaming to social media, large segments of the global population are interacting with digital environments, making the interplay between classical art forms and new technologies both relevant and essential.

Velasco’s curation aims to bridge these worlds, offering a platform where analogue and digital realms converge to create inspiring and thought-provoking experiences.

The Phygital experience

The Art Program will feature a variety of works that exemplify this fusion. LoVid’s ‘heartsleeves’ transforms the audience from passive spectators to active co-creators, allowing participants to generate and tokenise their own digital portraits. This interactive video portrait emphasises the collaborative nature of digital art, blending human creativity with generative technology to democratise art-making.

Similarly, Human Unreadable by Operator pushes the boundaries of generative art by integrating dance with blockchain technology. The piece explores how choreography can be encoded and made collectible, creating a new form of art ownership that evolves with audience interaction. This New model designations reflect the BMW iX’s additional performance. It will be available in the Middle East region from second quarter 2025 dance performance exemplifies the dynamic relationship between technology and human experience, making artwork a living entity.

One of the standout performances in this year’s programme is *The Invisible Party*, a mixed-reality experience created by a French interdisciplinary artist group. This piece merges traditional dance with augmented reality, inviting attendees to explore the boundaries of reality and space.

Future of Digital Art

In addition to the artworks, the fair’s Talk Programme will delve into the latest trends and museum initiatives surrounding digital art. Speakers like Madeleine Pierpont from MoMA and conceptual artist Jonas Lund will explore how blockchain technology (Web3) and digital media are reshaping museums and artistic practices.

Pierpont is expected to discuss MoMA’s digital initiatives, including the Postcard project and the AI-driven ‘Refik Anadol: Unsupervised’ exhibition, which highlight how institutions are embracing digital art. These conversations are crucial for understanding how new technologies are being integrated into the art world, influencing everything from curation of art to the public experience.

Jonas Lund’s contribution will likely focus on the participatory nature of digital art and how technology enables new forms of interaction between artists, collectors, and audiences. His work engages with the behaviour of collectors, sometimes altering the artwork based on their actions, underscoring the dynamic and fluid nature of digital art.

As Enter Art Fair continues to evolve, the ‘Betwixt - Analogue and Digital Realms’ programme offers a powerful example of how art can transcend traditional boundaries. By merging physical and digital worlds, the fair not only creates new artistic experiences but also sparks essential conversations about the future of art in a rapidly changing world.

Courtesy: magazine.artland.com



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