

Housing assistance increased by RO5,000

RO25,000 will be given to a family of two or three individuals, and RO30,000 to a family of four or more

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) has increased the housing assistance for citizens by RO5,000. As part of its efforts to support low-income and social security families, H E Dr Khalfan bin Saeed al Shuaili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, on Sunday issued a Ministerial Resolution (No 9/2023), regarding amending the value of housing assistance for citizens.

According to the new decision, the value of housing assistance is determined based on the number of family members and the area of construction.

The decision stated that an amount not exceeding RO25,000 will be given to a family of two or three individuals to build or rebuild a house, provided



that the building area is not less than 140sqm. 'In case the area is between 140sqm and 250sqm, the beneficiary has to contribute towards extra expenses.'

For families with four or more members, a housing assistance of RO30,000 will be given to the family, provided that the building area is not less than 190sqm. 'In case the beneficiary wants to contribute for building on an area over 190sqm, the building should not exceed 300sqm.'

According to the earlier decision, the value of housing assistance

for building, rebuilding, restoring or making additions to a house was limited to a maximum of RO20,000 for two to three-member family, and the minister had the authority to raise the value of assistance in areas of difficult topography.

While for a family with four or more members, the limit was RO25,000.

The new ministerial decision aims to improve the quality of housing, enhance family stability and strengthen partnership and cooperation with the private sector,

taking into account the social and economic changes for the groups benefiting from the housing assistance programme, such as the increase in the value of building materials and the added tax, stated the ministry.

According to the latest statistics, the ministry provided housing assistance to 1,478 families worth RO35mn in 2022, compared to 1,261 families at a cost of RO30mn in 2021. While 600 families benefited from RO15mn in 2020 and 1,000 families got RO41mn in 2019.

MHT to hold festivals in four governorates

Our Correspondent Muscat

With an eye on boosting tourism in the governorates, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) will be organising four festivals across four governorates in the first three months of 2023, said H E Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Tourism in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The undersecretary revealed the ministry's plans for the first quarter during a press meet on Sunday, informing that "the ministry will organise the Desert Adventures Festival in Sharqiyah Sands, in the wilayat of Bidiyah in North Sharqiyah governorate, from January 29 to February 4."

The festival will include varied activities, he added.

Giving information on other festivals, H E Busaidi said that the ministry will hold the first edition of the Omani Maritime Heritage Festival in the wilayat of Sur in South Sharqiyah, from February 3 to 19.

"The festival will highlight the role of the wilayat, in the past and present, as a commercial and historical centre."

The festival will present a maritime heritage village, an Omani food carnival, and a simulation of the traditional sea



voyages as an embodiment of the historical voyages of Omani ships.

Also, the Empty Quarter Festival will be organised in the wilayat of Thumrait in Dhofar governorate from January 25 to February 3. It will be organised in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of Dhofar, Dhofar Municipality and the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development.

The festival aims to promote Dhofar as a sustainable tourist destination, in addition to highlighting the potential of winter tourism for attracting investors.

The ministry will also organise the annual festival of the Governorate of Dakhiliyah from February 23 to March 4, in cooperation with the Office of the Governor. The festival will include

several cultural, heritage, entertainment and adventure activities, and display a number of tourism experiences unique to the governorate.

"These festivals aim to stimulate local tourism, promote heritage and tourism sites, strengthen the Sultanate of Oman's position on the tourism map, and create added value for the local community by supporting small and medium enterprises," said H E Azzan.

Oman attracted about 3mn tourists in 2022. The number of visitors during the Khreef season in 2022 reached 813,000, compared to 767,000 in 2019 (before the pandemic).

The tourist spending during the season was about RO86mn in 2022, compared to 78mn in 2019.

NEWS BRIEF

LOW PRESSURE TO BRING RAINS FROM TUESDAY: CAA

Muscat - Isolated rains will occur in various parts of Oman from Tuesday, said the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

In a statement, CAA said, 'Oman will be affected by a low pressure trough from Tuesday until the weekend. Also, the northern governorates and the coastal areas along the Arabian Sea will be affected by thunderstorms of varying intensity accompanied by active downwind.'

For Monday, the Met office predicted clear to partly cloudy skies over most of the northern governorates of Oman with chance of isolated rain over the Musandam governorate and the coastal areas of Sea of Oman and Dhofar.

Iraq football body apologises to Omani fans

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Iraqi Football Association (IFA) has apologised for the unexpected crowd at the Basra International Stadium, which delayed entry of the Omani fans to the venue of the final of the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup.

'The Iraqi Football Association expresses its deep regret as a result of the huge crowd in the final match of the Gulf Cup between Iraqi and Omani, which exceeded all expectations, and led to a delay in the entry of the beloved Omani fans to the stadium to support their national team,' a statement issued by the association said.

Adnan Darjal, chairman, IFA said, "On behalf of the organising committee of the tournament, IFA apologises to the Omani fans who were late in entering the stadium. We extend sincere thanks to those in charge of Omani football led by H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik



Iraq supporters occupy the stand ahead of the Arabian Gulf Cup final against Oman at the Basra International Stadium, Iraq, last Thursday (AFP)

al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth; and Sheikh Salem al Wahaibi, president of Omani Football Association, for their support to Iraq in organising the 25th edition of the Arabian

Gulf Cup. It was the continuous coordination with them that resulted in the success of the closing ceremony and the final match between Iraq and Oman."

He added that Iraq is keen to

strengthen its historical relations with the 'brotherly Sultanate of Oman in all fields, especially the sports', and that what happened will not "affect the strength of the relations that unite the two countries".

"Thank you from the heart for your presence in the Basra International Stadium, and we repeat our regret for your delay in entering the stadium."

Oman condemns burning of Quran in Sweden

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Foreign Ministry on Sunday expressed Oman's strong condemnation of the desecration of the holy Quran in Sweden on Saturday.

A statement issued by the Foreign Ministry said, 'The Sultanate of Oman has strongly condemned the burning of copies of the holy Quran and such acts of provocation to the feelings of Muslims and incitement to violence and hatred, by extremists in Sweden.'

It stressed the need for international efforts to consolidate the values of tolerance and coexistence and criminalise all acts that promote the ideology of hatred.

India ready to help Oman in space research programme: ISRO

Shaddad al Musalmey Bengaluru

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which has the world's largest constellation of remote-sensing satellites and has sent two missions to the Moon and one to the Mars, is ready to help Oman in its space research programme.

A memorandum of understanding between Oman and India in 2018 on cooperation in the peaceful use of outer space, which the Indian Cabinet later approved, opened the doors for Oman to take help of ISRO.

"The MoU is for cooperation in the areas such as space sci-

ence, technology and applications including the remote sensing of the earth, satellite-based navigation, planetary exploration, and use of spacecraft, and space and ground systems," Dr D Gowrisankar, director, Office of International and Interagency Cooperation, ISRO, said.

He added that the MoU provides impetus to explore newer research activities and application possibilities. "Recently a delegation from Oman visited ISRO and expressed its interest in having a collaboration to build its space programme. In May 2016, Oman conveyed its interest to cooperate on space data centre in Oman with ISRO. We have



Arab journalists at ISRO headquarters in Bengaluru

given our proposal on that which involves setting up of data antenna," Dr Gowrisankar told Muscat Daily during the visit of Arab journalists to ISRO head-

quarters in Bengaluru. "Working with Oman can boost ISRO's own credentials. We have received grants from the government to launch 40 more rockets in the

next four years to boost satellite communication," he added.

Alongside its technological advancement, ISRO contributes to science and science education in the country. Various dedicated research centres and autonomous institutions for remote sensing, astronomy and astrophysics, atmospheric sciences and space sciences in general function under the aegis of Department of Space.

ISRO's own lunar and interplanetary missions along with other scientific projects encourage and promote science education, apart from providing valuable data to the scientific community which in turn en-

riches science.

Corresponding with Oman Vision 2040, Oman is exploring its options in space research as well as has ambitions to launch a satellite soon.

Oman recently entered into an agreement with the National Aerospace Services Company (NASCOM) to use its space launch complex Etlaq for multiple rocket launches, utilising the latitude efficient location in Duqm.

Etlaq space launch complex is a project, which NASCOM began last year as the company felt the need for having a facility for testing their prototype hybrid-solid rockets in a safe area that could be used for future launches.



10 people dead in Lunar New Year shooting in California



Oman pacer Bilal excited to play for Sharjah Warriors



PROS AND CONS: FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK

Many countries around the world have either switched or are thinking of switching to a four-day work schedule, which by many assessments and studies resulted in better output. Many companies are also of the opinion that a five-day work week causes nothing but results in employee burnout, inefficiency and finally, depression. It is argued by many that the reduced work hours can be good for both businesses and employees. In the UK, 88 per cent of the companies that tried out the shortened work week last year said that the new schedule worked well. With our neighbours adopting four-day work week, there have been talks in Oman on having a similar system. What do you think of the four-day work work culture and would it succeed in Oman? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers had to say about the issue.



K M Gurnani
Businessman

For the government sector, it could be workable with extended number of working hours but for the private sector, it will not be practical at all as it will be disastrous for the economy, which is already suffering after the pandemic. If introduced only for the government sector, Omani staff in private sector will feel discriminated. Hence it may not succeed.

Salim Amri
Hotel employee

I welcome the move, as there are times when

people get exhausted - mainly in my sector, during the holiday season - even before the arrival of their weekends. Sometimes we work overtime with no proper sleep. Three-day weekend will not only help recharge our mind and body for a better professional output, but will also help spend quality time with our families. I welcome this move. One of the main aims of a company should be to improve the well-being of its employees.

Mohammad Ansari
Private sector employee

I do not welcome the move at all. This will make us lazy and hamper our work. Also, I

must say that such a move will at times put stress on a few selected employees. There will be times of emergency or crisis where burden won't be shared.

Hameed al Harthy
Businessman

We already see fewer employees in many companies due to the pandemic lay-offs, which caused the workload getting doubled for many. This four-day work week will be a burden on business owners. I think that two-day weekend is perfect; maybe we can implement a rule not to work or disturb employees during the weekends. In many cases, we see

that even on weekends, employees work to meet deadlines. This must be discouraged.

Anwar al Balushi
Engineer

It is a good proposal indeed. It will give more time to us - mainly the private company employees, who often cannot spend enough time with their family members. Most people are exhausted due to work overload and also travel time; hence this proposed system will help us start the week with renewed energy. Also, experimental introduction of this system shows development and progress - both at personal and professional levels.



How can Muscat Nights be made more attractive?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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Oman Desert Marathon gets off to an impressive start

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The eighth edition of the annual Oman Desert Marathon (ODM) was flagged off on Saturday from Al Wasil Fort in the wilayat of Bidiyah.

The first day saw 2km, 5km, and 10km races, besides the 47km showpiece run, to set the momentum for the 165km run to be covered in four days.

On Sunday - the second day of the marathon, participants tested their grit over a distance of 55km, while on the third and the fourth day, they will run 42km and 21km respectively. While the race started with 44 runners on Saturday, three participants dropped out on the second day.

Morocco's Mohammed el Morabity came first on day one, with an impressive finishing time of 3 hours and 53 minutes. He was closely followed by his brother, Rashid el Morabity, who came eight minutes later, cover-

I was mainly competing with my brother, and we enjoyed the 47km run. This route had various terrains, including tall sand dunes, wadis, and flat land

MOHAMMED EL MORABITY

ing the distance in 4 hours and 1 minute.

When asked about his experience on day one, Rashid said he mainly enjoyed going head-to-head with his brother. "The weather was pleasant today. I was mainly competing with my brother, and we enjoyed the 47km run. This route had various terrains, including tall sand dunes, wadis, and flat land."

Saleh al Saidi was the first Omani male to complete Saturday's track, with a finishing time

of 4 hours and 19 minutes, and Morocco's Aziza el Amrany was the first woman to finish the route, with a time of 5 hours and 31 minutes.

Of the three runners, who unfortunately dropped out on the second day, two could not take part due to injuries to their knees, while the competition proved to be difficult for the third mentally.

There are 18 Omani runners, apart from those international participants coming from Italy, Germany, Poland, the UK, Morocco, France, Spain, Belgium, Ukraine, and Switzerland, who are taking part in the race.

A host of entities including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Oman Athletic Association, Tanuf, Omantel, Oman LNG, Jawharat Bidiyah Resort, OTSO, A'saffa, Pocari Sweat, Mwasalat, Camelback, Lulu Hypermarket, Oman Air, Tactical Trading, and Al Forn Café are sponsoring the self-sufficient marathon.

MHT invites bids to develop Barka Castle

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has floated a tender for the management and development of Barka Castle in South Batinah as part of its efforts to attract tourists and revitalise the economic activities in governorates.

Barka Castle is one of the most popular tourist attractions in South Batinah. Located between fish and vegetable markets, the castle was built in the middle of the 17th century in two phases. The first phase was built during the reign of Saif bin Sultan al Yaraibi and was completed during the reign of Hamad bin Saeed al Busaidi.

"The ministry is looking to partner with private sector groups for managing and developing the castle," MHT said in a statement.

The ministry confirmed that the competing companies must



submit a study that should include ways to market the castle commercially and culturally, ideas on cultural workshops, organising artistic and cultural events, and plans for various activities to revive the castle. Competing companies must

highlight the architectural uniqueness of the castle and involve the local community in various cultural and social events.

The deadline for the submission of bids is March 23.

Following the government's continuous efforts to develop the

tourism sector, historical sites in Oman recorded a significant increase in the numbers of visitors - 22,259 in 2020 compared to 7,064 in 2016 - registering a growth of 315 per cent, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

ROCKSLIDE INJURES TWO CHILDREN IN MUSCAT



Two children were injured due to a rockslide over a house in Darsait in Muscat, according to the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA). A statement issued by the authority said, 'The rescue and ambulance teams of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Department in the Governorate of Muscat responded to a report of a rockslide from a mountain on a house in the Darsait area of the wilayat of Muttrah. The accident resulted in the injury of two children, who were taken to a hospital in moderate health condition.'

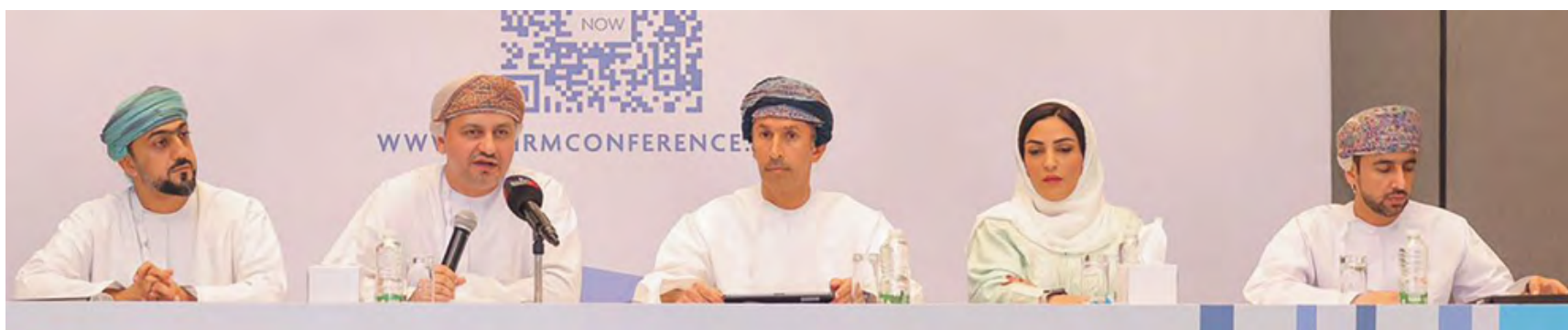
'The New Era of Work' conference from Feb 7

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL), in cooperation with the Omani Society for Human Resources Management (OSHRM), will have its annual 'The New Era of Work' conference next month to delve deep into various aspects of developing human resources in the sultanate.

The conference will be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre from February 7 to February 9, the ministry said, adding that the sixth annual conference 'aims to develop the Omani human resources and enhance the country's human capital'.

Dr Ghalib al Hosni, chairman of OSHRM, said that the importance of the conference comes within the framework of the



The sixth annual conference, to be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, aims to develop the Omani human resources and enhance the country's human capital

THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR

progress and prosperity witnessed by the human resources sector, which is striving to fulfill

the government's aspirations and vision for the sector to write a new future for the sultanate.

One of the important topics that will be discussed in the conference will be the 'future of workforce and workplace', the ministry said.

This will be done through panel discussions and paper presentations, which will showcase the latest innovations, trends and creative solutions in the development of human capital.

Dr Mohammed al Najjar, Di-

rector General of Training at the Ministry of Labour, said that the human resources sector is receiving great attention in Oman from the government, as it is the main axis of any development and progress. "The Ministry of Labour is working in accordance with Oman Vision 2040 in supporting non-profit organisations in the sector", and "signed many memoranda of cooperation for

training of national cadres", he said, noting that OSHRM is one of the important role models that keeps pace with the process of development and prosperity in human resources management.

The conference will also have 'OSHRM Awards' ceremony, Mohammed al Maimani, Board Member of OSHRM, said. This will be the second season of the ceremony, during which eight

awards distributed into three categories will be given away.

The 'Institutions' category will include 'Most Effective Institution Award during the COVID-19 Pandemic', 'Best Human Resources Initiative During the COVID-19 Pandemic', 'Impactful Business Award by Aligning Data Analytics During the COVID-19 Pandemic' and 'Influential Business Award during the COVID-19 pandemic'.

In the 'Business' category, there will be a 'Leadership Award', 'Best Effective HR Professional During the COVID-19 Pandemic Award' and the 'Most Effective CEO Award During the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

The third category - dedicated to research - will include the 'Best Research Award Related to Human Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

Virtual reality takes visitors in Naseem Park on heritage tour of popular sites

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Nights is drawing huge crowds across its four venues with Naseem Park witnessing a rush of families - arriving to immerse themselves in a plethora of activities lined up by the organisers - Muscat Municipality.

With focus on youth and use of technology this year at Muscat Nights, visitors to the heritage village in Naseem Park are treated to an experience in virtual reality that takes them on a tour of some of the most iconic cultural and tourist sites in Oman, all the while sitting on those comfortable chairs in the heritage village.

"Naseem Park is hosting a number of activities in the heritage village and the Madagascar Village with live performances, apart from exhibitions and other shows and carnivals," a Muscat Municipality



official said.

"The municipality is presenting the virtual reality technology in the heritage village, making the visitors reflect on the time and history of Oman."

The VR programme allows visitors to take a tour of six sites,

such as the Royal Opera House Muscat, Qasr al Alam Palace, Muttrah Souq, wilayat of Sur, Nizwa Souq and Misfat al Abriyen.

"The initiative aims to adopt emerging technologies in presenting the landmarks of the sultanate, and introduce children and visitors to Oman's popular cultural legacy. It also aims to promote tourist areas in Oman,

including the markets; and cultural and tourist attractions," the official added.

Apart from the heritage village, Naseem Park is also hosting children's pneumatic and electronic games, 'Chuba Chops' carnival, 'football skills' and 'ballerina bubble ball' shows, besides a show on 'Ultraviolet' series amid other events.

The park is also the venue for

The event has adopted emerging technologies to introduce children and visitors to Oman's popular cultural legacy

MUNICIPALITY OFFICIAL

sports and circus performances as well as offering a carnival arena with live performances.

Muscat Nights is being held in four locations: Qurum Natural Park, Naseem Park, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, and Oman Automobile Association.

All four venues are open daily to the public from 4pm to 11pm, while on weekends the locations will remain open until midnight, except for Qurum Nature Park, which will close at 11.30pm.

The Muscat Nights event will continue till February 4.

Muscat Municipality called on people to book their entry tickets via its official website <https://muscatnightslinks.com/>



Sohar Winter fest launched to support domestic tourism

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To support domestic tourism and stimulate commercial activity, North Batinah governorate, in cooperation with a number of government institutions and the private sector, launched the 'Sohar Winter' festival at Souq Sohar on Saturday.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Balushi, deputy wali of Sohar and chairman of the organising committee, said, "The festival will include more than 45 cultural, entertainment and shopping activities, in addition to various competitions. The committee has also allocated more than 40

stalls for families involved in cottage industry in the souq during the event."

The festival, which will continue until February 4, will also host photography and chess competitions, in addition to having open theatre activities including entertainment shows, and an exhibition of plastic arts.

Balushi informed that the Sohar Winter event aims to create a cultural and recreational space for citizens and residents, in addition to highlighting the tourism potential of Souq Sohar.

"The event also aims to promote the Omani cottage industry in Sohar and market its products," he added.

40 world titles decided on final day of World Veteran Table Tennis Championships

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The final day of the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships Muscat 2023 on Sunday, held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), saw prizes presented in 40 events.

The last day of the championship was tense, but the spirit of togetherness that had embodied the event was on show throughout.

Two players in particular will look back on the day with fond memories as they completed the

coveted 'full house' of medals.

Maria Donner of Finland and India's Mantu Murma won gold in each of the competitions they participated. Donner added the women's singles gold in the 40-45 years category to the Mixed Doubles gold she won with Sweden's Igor Krokhim and the Women's Doubles she won with Sofia Westhom. Murma won Mixed Doubles gold in the 60-years group with Vinay Chopra and then won Women's Doubles with Jette Vieg.

H E Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Undersecretary for Sports and Youth in the Ministry of Culture,

We are delighted that 1,600 participants from 69 countries visited Oman to enjoy our warm hospitality first-hand

H E BASIL AL RAWAS

Sports and Youth, was present on the occasion to give awards to the winners.

"The World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 is

an essential part within the International Tennis Federation calendar, with many players keen to take part every two years. We are delighted that 1,600 participants from 69 countries have visited Oman to enjoy our well-known warm hospitality first-hand," the undersecretary said.

"We are immensely proud to have received positive feedback on the country's hosting and organisational capabilities to making this event ground-breaking. Oman's unique charm and authentic Arabian experience, combined with the state-of-the-art facilities at OCEC, has made this

edition like no other in the event's history," H E Rawas added.

Elsewhere in the championship, Gregor Förster and Zolt Georg Böhm of Germany, and Norway's Paal Guttormsen and Japan's Kazuo Masuda finished with two gold medals each. Böhm and partner Boris Rosenburg won the Men's Doubles 60-years competition and then went on to take the Men's Singles 60-64 years crown by beating Wang Yansheng in the final.

Paal Guttormsen, won the men's Singles 65-69 years title, after winning the Mixed Doubles 65-years the day before with Es-

tonia's Kai Thornbech.

Förster and Masuda each won two gold and one bronze. Förster won the Men's Singles 40-years gold, and earlier secured the Men's Doubles 40 years title with Michael Marsden of Wales. He also won a bronze in Mixed Doubles 40 years with Germany's Tatiana Pokrovskaya. Masuda won the Men's Singles 85-years event and partnered with Reiko Miura to then win the Mixed Doubles. He also secured a bronze in Men's Doubles 85-years with Sweden's Urban Living.

Trine Grauholm won the

Women's Singles 45-49 years title; Estonia's Kai Thornbech emerged victorious in the 65-69 years category; Singapore's Liang Mui Heng secured 50-54 years gold. However, several age groups were dominated by Japanese players; the 70-74 years title went to Kazuko Horino, Noriko Watanabe won the 80-84 years event, Reiko Miura struck gold in the 85-years competition. In the Men's Singles, Iran's Mehran Ahadi won the 45-49 years event.

The next edition of the championships will take place in Rome, Italy, in July 2024.

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MARKET WATCH	
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Sensex	60,621.77
FOREX RATES	
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Indian	210.33
Pakistan	597.02
Bangladesh	274.39
Philippines	141.46
Sri Lanka	950.56

*Rates as on January 22
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Uganda issues licence for \$3.5bn oil pipeline

Uganda has issued a licence for the construction of a controversial US\$3.5bn pipeline set to carry crude oil from the East African country to international markets, a government minister said Friday.

The licence was granted to the East African Crude Oil Pipeline Company Ltd, which is 62 per cent owned by France's oil giant TotalEnergies, following cabinet approval.

The 1,443-kilometre pipeline will transport crude from oilfields being developed in Lake Albert in northwestern Uganda to a Tanzanian port on the Indian Ocean.

Last year, TotalEnergies and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) signed a \$10-billion agreement to develop the Ugandan oilfields and build the pipeline.

But the project has run into strong opposition from activists and environmental groups that say it threatens the region's fragile ecosystem and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people.

It includes drilling in Murchison Falls, Uganda's largest national park on the shores of Lake Albert.

Abraj to launch IPO in February, intends to offer 49% shares

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Abraj Energy Services, an indirectly wholly-owned subsidiary of Oman's global integrated energy group OQ, on Sunday announced its intention to proceed with an initial public offering (IPO) in February and listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange in March.

OQ (the selling shareholder) intends to offer up to 49 per cent of Abraj's share capital in the IPO. The offer represents the divestment of shares currently held by the selling shareholder. After the IPO, a minimum of 51 per cent shareholding will continue to be indirectly held by OQ.

Abraj's listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange will provide investors with access to one of Oman's leading onshore oil and gas field services providers, with a wide service offering including drilling, workover and well services.

The IPO will be open to the eligible investors in Oman and eligible international investors outside the United States (Phase I investors) and to retail investors in Oman (Phase II investors).

The subscription period for Phase I and Phase II investors is expected to commence in February, after receiving the required approval from the CMA. Admission of the shares to trading on the MSX is expected in March 2023, Abraj said in a press statement.

Dividend policy

Abraj is proposing to pay yearly



dividends, subject to debt repayments and covenants, working capital requirements, operational expenditure obligations, growth plans and the necessary approvals. In 2023 the company intends to pay a dividend of 85 per cent of profit for the year ended December 31, 2022.

In 2024 and 2025, Abraj intends to pay a yearly dividend for the years 2023 and 2024, respectively, which is the higher of 85 per cent of the prior year's profit or a six per cent increase on the prior year's dividend.

Ayad al Balushi, chairman of the board of directors at Abraj, said, "Through its commitment

Abraj Energy Services is proposing to pay yearly dividends. In 2023 the company intends to pay a dividend of 85% of profit for the year ended December 31, 2022

to technological innovation and quality services, Abraj has earned its place as one of the leading Omani onshore oilfield drilling and well services companies. We are confident that Abraj is now well positioned to enter its next phase of growth as a publicly listed company on the MSX and look forward to welcoming our new shareholders on our

growth journey."

Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj, said, "Throughout economic cycles, Abraj has demonstrated remarkable resilience, delivering strong financial performance and growth and ongoing innovation in new drilling technologies and well services. These are fundamentally important attributes as we look to an

ambitious future of continued leadership in Oman and a corporate strategy that leverages the company's long-standing relationships and diverse customer base."

"Through this offering, we believe investors have an opportunity to gain exposure to a profitable, growing company with one of the MENA region's youngest drilling fleets. We believe the company's future is very bright, not least because it is already pre-qualified in four countries to conduct a range of services, setting the stage for international expansion geared towards delivering growth and shareholder value."

As per the company, the IPO will be conducted in the manner approved by the CMA and will be offered in two tranches. Institutional offering (Phase I) represents a maximum of 85 per cent of the total offering, and will be made to eligible investors in Oman and international investors outside the United States. Retail offering (Phase II) represents a minimum of 15 per cent of the total offering, and will be made to retail investors.

If there is excess demand from retail investors, the Phase II offering may be increased up to a maximum of 35 per cent of the total offering size in line with the regulatory requirements, and the Phase I offering will be reduced in size accordingly. Alternatively, if the aggregate demand from retail investors in Phase II is less than 15 per cent of the offer, then after full allocation to retail investors, the bal-

ance of the shares shall be made available to institutional investors in the Phase I offering, if there is oversubscription in Phase I.

Ahlibank, EFG-Hermes UAE Limited (acting in conjunction with EFG Hermes UAE LLC) and National Bank of Oman have been appointed as joint global coordinators, and Ahlibank and National Bank of Oman have been appointed as issue managers.

Abraj's strengths

Abraj is the leading and largest drilling contractor in Oman by contracted operating drilling rigs, with 29 per cent market share. The company operates one of the youngest rig fleets in the MENA region with a sizeable rig fleet comprising 25 drilling rigs and 5 workover rigs.

Abraj is a regional pioneer in using integrated hydraulic fracturing services to further the development of unconventional deep tight oil and gas in Oman.

The caters to a diverse client base with long-term recurring contracts resulting in high revenue visibility. Its client base includes international oil companies, such as BP and Oxy, and national oil companies, such as PDO and OQ Exploration & Production LLC.

Abraj boasts strong revenue - for the year ended December 31, 2021, the company earned RO125mn from contracts with customers and had a CAGR of 23 per cent from 2007 to 2021, supported by growth in its drilling rig fleet.



Sohar Port and Freezone launches emergency response organisation to boost resilience

Sohar - To elevate emergency preparedness and response, including firefighting services, for all facilities and tenants, Sohar Port and Freezone (SOHAR) has launched Sohar Emergency Response Organisation.

A signing ceremony was organised to mark this milestone under the patronage of H E Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamakhi, Undersecretary for Transport at the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology.

"Ports play an important role not only as national economic drivers, but also serve as business and trade hubs in line with the Oman Vision 2040, which prioritises logistics as one of the most important pillars," Shamakhi said in a press release.

"Sohar Port and Freezone's investment in high-quality emergency preparedness and response will help safeguard the continuity of port operations thereby protecting the safety and vital interests of port users and Oman's logistic chain," he added.

The signing was also attended by representatives from Unity Fire and Safety Services LLC, a key local provider of firefighting and emergency response services that will manage Sohar Emergency Response Organisation, representatives of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDA) and OQ, which will provide assistance during large scale incidents. In addition, SOHAR Emergency Response Organization will further enhance collaboration among all partners through a regularly trained system of Mutual Aid services to adequately address large scale and/or complex incidents.

SOHAR Emergency Response Organization is highly trained, specifically tailored to the scenarios in Sohar Port and Freezone and prepared to handle various incidents ranging from building and industrial fires to traffic accidents to medical emergencies and traumas.

Sohar Emergency Response Organization has several key ca-

pabilities and is tasked to provide medical assistance, standard and industrial firefighting, hazardous materials and technical rescue, including rope and confined space rescue. On a 24-hour basis, SOHAR Emergency Response Organization maintains an emergency response and dispatch centre to handle incident reports and alert emergency response team members.

The organization is tasked with providing assistance anywhere within the port within six minutes of an emergency being reported. An important additional task is to add value for tenants, with services include support in their individual emergency pre-planning and training for effective (joint) emergency response operations.

As one of the fastest-growing ports in the world, SOHAR continues to leverage on its strategic location and enhance its services, positioning itself as a key logistics hub within the region and across the world boasting container, liquids, and bulk terminals.

Alshawamikh to utilise advanced water technologies in oil sector

Muscat - Alshawamikh Oil Services Company on Sunday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with International Desalination and Water Treatment Group (IDWT) and their partners represented by the Austrian company DEW (Devise Energy & Water) and Devise Engineering, a Greek company specialising in advanced water treatment and recycling solutions.

The agreement aimed to exchange cooperation in providing the latest technologies and methods related to water sustainability for uses related to oil sector operations. The MoU was signed by Dr Aflah al Hadhrami, CEO of Alshawamikh Oil Services, and Omar Elmaraghy, CEO



The agreement was signed by Dr Aflah al Hadhrami (middle) and Omar Elmaraghy, CEO of IDWT Group

of IDWT.

Hadhrami said, "The signing of this agreement enhances the company's strategy and plans to enter into vital projects within

the energy sector. This partnership is a result of the company's aspirations to engage in projects related to the use of modern technologies and techniques re-

lated to water treatment in the oil sector."

He added that IDWT has extensive experience in desalination and wastewater treatment solutions, and is active in the water industry providing reliable solutions to a variety of water-related issues, noting that IDWT has implemented 23 projects in Oman over the past 15 years.

Alshawamikh Oil Services is one of the super local community contractors within the energy market in the sultanate, including the sustainable energy field, and is seeking to fulfill Oman's ambition in the energy sector, regarding the Oman 2040 Vision.

OPEC Fund raises \$1bn via bond issue

Vienna, Austria - The OPEC Fund for International Development priced its inaugural benchmark bond issue in the capital markets last week. The bond was priced using its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) bond framework on which Credit Agricole CIB acted as sole sustainability advisor.

Attracting strong demand from investors globally, the three-year fixed-rate sustainability bond raised US\$1bn, which will be used to finance or refinance key sustainable development projects that are aligned with the OPEC Fund's multi-sectoral development mission and directly contribute to achieving the SDGs.

The bond attracted very



broad interest with 52 per cent of investors coming from Europe, Middle East and Africa, 27 per cent from Asia-Pacific and 21 per cent from North America. In terms of investor type, central banks and official institutions accounted for 62 per cent, banks 19 per cent, asset man-

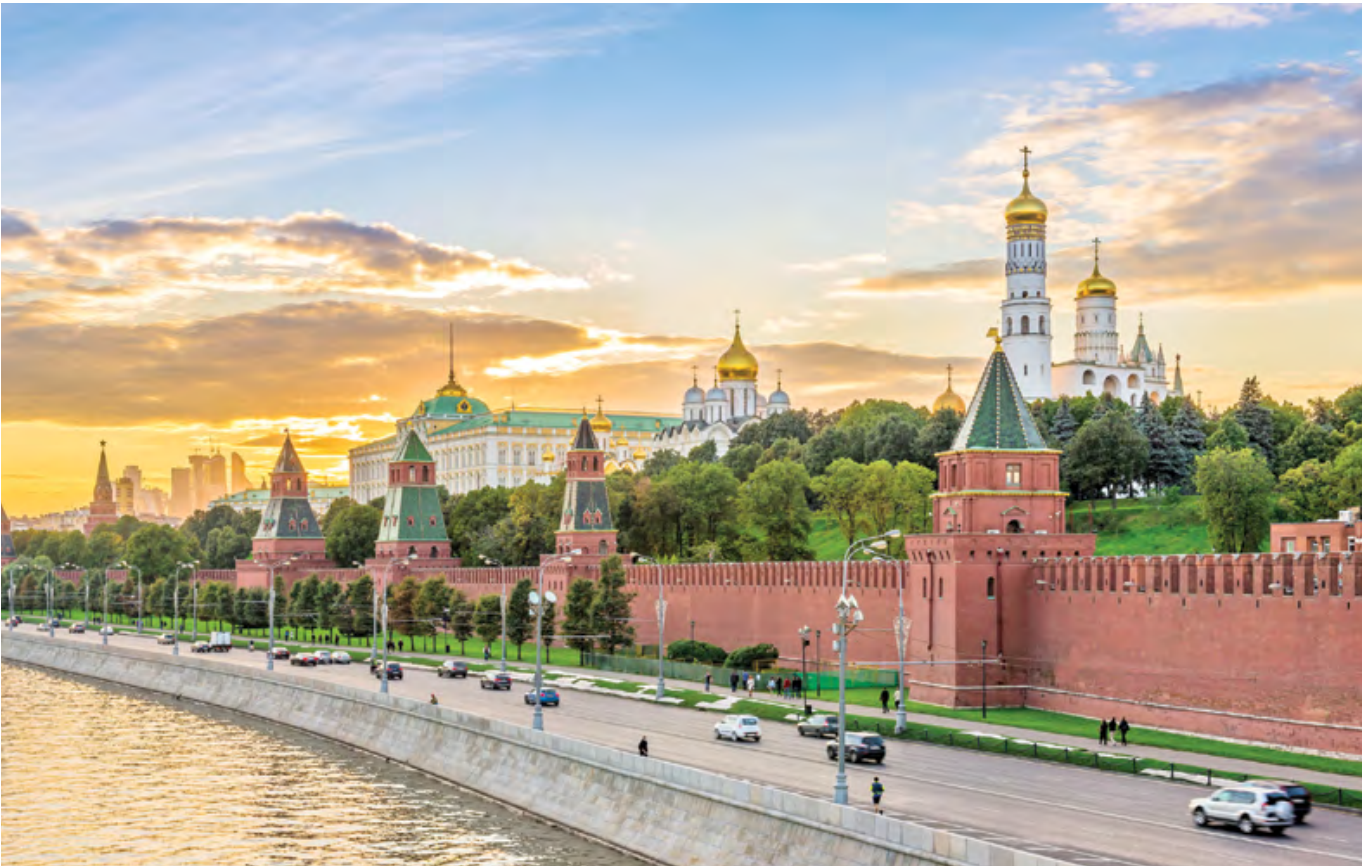
agers 9 per cent and insurance and pension funds for 8 per cent.

Dr Abdulhamid Alkhalifa, OPEC Fund's director-general, said, "The robust demand for our inaugural benchmark is testament to the confidence that investors have in the OPEC Fund

and our long-standing development-focused mandate. It also confirms the appetite for sustainable investments globally. At a time when there is an increasing need for development finance, the OPEC Fund is proud to have achieved this milestone. It will allow us to mobilise additional funds in support of our partner countries. The OPEC Fund has a 47-year track-record in delivering successful development outcomes and the additional funds will enable us to further deepen our impact."

The OPEC Fund is financing development projects in low- and middle-income countries in line with its South-South cooperation mandate.

WAM



The exiting firms tended to have lower profitability and larger workforces than the firms that remain in Russia, the study indicated

Only 8.5% of Western firms have left Russia: Study

Geneva, Switzerland – Despite widespread outrage over Moscow’s war in Ukraine, only a small number of Western companies have deserted Russia, according to a Swiss study.

Researchers at the University of St. Gallen and at the IMD institute in Lausanne have delved into how many companies based in the European Union and in G7 countries have actually divested from Russia since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine began last February.

Their findings reveal “a very limited retreat of EU and G7 firms from Russia, (and) challenge the narrative that there is a vast exodus of Western firms leaving the market,” St. Gallen University said in a statement.

“In effect, many firms headquartered in these nations have resisted pressures from governments, the media, and NGOs to leave Russia since the invasion of Ukraine.”

The study, which was published last month by the online Social Science Research Network (SSRN) – a publisher of “pre-print” studies not subjected to scientific peer-review – showed that only less than 10 per cent of EU and G7 companies with Russian subsidiaries had divested them.

When Moscow launched its invasion, 1,404 companies based in EU and G7 counted a total of 2,405 subsidiaries that were active in Russia. By late November, only 120, or about 8.5% of those companies, had divested at least one subsidiary

When Moscow launched its invasion, 1,404 companies based in the EU and the G7 counted a total of 2,405 subsidiaries that were active in Russia, the study showed.

By late November, only 120, or about 8.5 per cent of those companies, had divested at least one subsidiary in Russia, study authors Niccolo Pisani and Simon Evenett found.

There were more confirmed exits by companies headquartered in the United States than those based in Europe and Japan.

But even with the United States, fewer than 18 per cent of US subsidiaries operating in Russia had been completely divested since the invasion began, the study showed.

By contrast, 15 per cent of Japanese firms and only 8.3 per cent of EU firms had divested from Russia, it said.

Of those who have left their Russian subsidiaries in place, 19.5 per cent are German and 12.4 per cent are US-owned, according to the study.

The research also showed that the exiting Western firms

only accounted for 6.5 per cent of the total profit before tax of EU and G7 firms with active commercial operations in Russia.

They meanwhile accounted for 15.3 per cent of the total number of employees working for such firms in Russia.

This indicates that, on average, the exiting firms tended to have lower profitability and larger workforces than the firms that remain in Russia, the study said. These findings, the university statement said, “call into question the willingness of Western firms to decouple from economies their governments now deem to be geopolitical rivals.”

AFP

2023 economy will be a lot better than feared: ECB

Davos, Switzerland – The eurozone economy will fare “a lot better” this year than initially feared, European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde said, as hopes grow that countries can avoid a painful recession.

The economic “news has become much more positive in the last few weeks”, Lagarde told an audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The rhetoric has shifted from talk of a recession in the 20-nation club to “a small contraction”, she said, with some major economies like Germany possibly dodging a contraction altogether.

The ECB is expecting 0.5-per cent growth in the eurozone in 2023, according to its latest forecast.

“So it’s not a brilliant year, but it is a lot better than what we had feared,” Lagarde said.

The cautious optimism comes as sky-high energy prices, which soared last year because of the war in Ukraine, have started to fall.



Christine Lagarde

Mild winter weather has also helped, easing fears of gas shortages.

Lower energy costs have contributed to a drop in eurozone inflation, which peaked at 10.6 per cent in October.

Consumer price growth slowed to 9.2 per cent in December, fuelling hopes that inflation had finally passed its zenith.

Lagarde however warned that

inflation was still “way too high”.

The ECB has already hiked interest rates aggressively to tame inflation, lifting its key rates by 2.5 percentage points since July.

Lagarde reiterated that further interest rate raises would follow in order to bring inflation back to the ECB’s two-percent target.

“We shall stay the course,” Lagarde said.

AFP

Global minimum tax to generate \$220bn revenues, OECD says

Paris, France – The introduction of a global minimum corporate tax rate should generate an additional US\$220bn in annual revenues for governments, according to updated estimates published on Wednesday.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which helped shepherd the international agreement on the reform, said the amount is equivalent to nine percent of global corporate income tax revenues.

It marks a considerable increase from the previous estimate of a US\$150bn annual revenue increase from the introduction of a minimum 15 per cent tax rate.

More than 130 nations that

account for 90 per cent of the world economy agreed in 2021 to bring in the floor to end multinationals shopping for low tax rates.

The global minimum tax is only one part, known as Pillar Two, of the OECD agreement on tax reform.

The first pillar, which provides for the taxation of companies where they make their profits to limit tax evasion, primarily targets digital giants, still needs to be finalised.

The OECD also increased its estimates concerning how much in annual profits could fall under Pillar One provisions to US\$200bn, from US\$125bn previously.

This would generate addi-

tional tax revenue of US\$13-36bn, with low and middle-income nations making big percentage gains.

“The international community has made significant progress towards the implementation of these reforms, which are designed to make our international tax arrangements fairer and work better in a digitalised, globalised world economy,” OECD Secretary-General Mathias Cormann said in a statement.

“This new economic impact analysis again underlines the importance of a swift, efficient and widespread implementation of these reforms to ensure these significant potential revenue gains can be realised,” he added.

AFP

Musk announces more expensive subscription for ad-free Twitter

Washington, US – Twitter boss Elon Musk announced in a series of tweets Saturday that the company’s subscription service would show less advertising to users, including an ad-free tier.

The announcement comes as the social network has faced major economic uncertainty since its takeover by Musk in October.

“Ads are too frequent on Twitter and too big. Taking steps to address both in coming weeks,” Musk posted to his Twitter account Saturday.

And for those who choose it, “there will be a higher priced subscription that allows zero ads,” Musk added.

That would be a radical change in business model from Twitter, which has so far relied



This illustration photo shows a phone screen displaying a photo of Elon Musk with the Twitter logo shown in background (AFP)

on targeted advertising to generate revenue, before launching a paid subscription service in mid-December.

But advertising has been a question mark for Twitter lately, after Musk fired about half of the company’s 7,500-strong workforce late last year. The move sparked concern that the

company was insufficiently staffed to carry out content moderation and spooking governments and advertisers.

Musk said his strategy was to massively reduce costs while building up revenue, and that a new subscription service called Twitter Blue, which grants users a sought-after blue verification

tick for a fee, would help reach that goal.

The service costs US\$11 a month in the United States and is available on Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android mobile operating systems, according to a page on the company’s website.

Web subscriptions are also available for US\$8 per month or, at a discount, US\$84 per year.

Twitter Blue is currently available in the United States, Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Japan.

Musk-led Twitter has been riven by chaos, with mass layoffs, the return of banned accounts and the suspension of journalists critical of the South African-born billionaire..

AFP

Japan’s annual inflation hits 4% in December

Tokyo, Japan – Japan’s consumer prices rose four percent in December from a year earlier, a level not seen since December 1981, fuelled in part by higher energy bills, government data showed Friday.

The acceleration came after a 3.7 per cent increase in prices in November, and the data from the internal affairs ministry showed inflation for the 2022 calendar

year stood at 2.3 per cent.

The figures were released days after the Bank of Japan again opted to leave its ultra-easy monetary policy intact, bucking the trend set by other central banks that have hiked rates to tackle rising prices.

The December figure was well below the still sky-high levels that have sparked concern in the United States, Britain and else-

where, but it far exceeds the BoJ’s longstanding inflation goal of two percent.

Even excluding volatile fresh food and energy prices, the figure for December was three percent.

Rises in electricity and gas bills, as well as telecommunication fees and price hikes for a range of processed foods contributed to the December acceleration, the government data showed.

But the central bank has consistently said it believes the price increases seen over the last year are temporary and linked to exceptional events such as the war in Ukraine and spiking energy costs. The BoJ is reluctant to end its easing programme without clear signs that price rises are likely to be sustained, including rising wages.

AFP



Association for Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities

Announcement: Invitation to attend the 2023 General Assembly meeting

The Board of Directors of the Association of Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities is pleased to invite its distinguished members to attend the annual general assembly meeting, which is scheduled to be held on Sunday the 5/3/2023 at (4:30 PM) at the Association of Early Intervention.

Agenda of the meeting

- Board of Directors administrative report of the year ended 2022 and draft work plan for the year 2023.
- Balance sheet and closing account for the ending fiscal year and draft work of New Year budget.
- Discuss the Auditor report.
- Any Other Matters.

Kindly renew membership for members whose membership expired during 2021 – 2022, this will close on Sunday 12/2/2023. Any application received after the above date will not be considered. Note: all the above reports will be available at the association’s office and in the electronic media for the members review and information. If there are any inquiries, please send us by what’s up (72727785).

Compliant solutions takes centrestage in UAE seminar

As the world's leaders, social scientists and business community converge on this year's World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting, the key theme of 'Co-operation in a fragmented world', has resonated with stakeholders of MENA's financial services sector.

Building upon this message, UAE based LuLu Financial Holdings and Eastnets organised a special event around the role of fully compliant technologies in achieving financial inclusion, a press release said.

Speaking at the event, Adeeb Ahamed, managing director of LuLu Financial Holdings, said, that competition through collaboration requires the collective action of all stakeholders, including governments, fintechs and traditional players.

He stressed on the role of fully compliant solutions in helping companies tap into each other's benefits, adding, "The foundation of interoperable solutions depends on fully compliant platforms that adhere to regulations and simplify processes for interconnected entities. The significance of such platforms is set to increase as consumer behaviour undergoes further evolution and regulations are put in place to



ensure proper data ownership." The session also saw subject matter experts, Hazem Mulhim, founder and CEO of

Eastnets, Christos Christou, chief compliance officer of LuLu Financial Holdings, and Joel Lange, general manager of

Dow Jones Risk and Compliance, discuss the role of compliance in plugging gaps in financial services, especially

cross-border remittances. Christos said that the strategic role of compliant systems is gaining relevance, and that

companies such as LuLu Financial Holdings are enabling platform-based services to fintechs and traditional players, that can bridge the gap between the underbanked and technologically advanced financial products.

Calling for inclusion to be responsible and sustainable, Eastnets deputy CEO Deya Innab said in her closing remarks, that access to digital financial services should create financial stability and not lead to a debt trap situation. "Financial inclusion needs to be supported by consumer needs & financial education and should be guarded against fraud, data privacy issues and financial crime."

The session was attended by dignitaries from the UAE government and financial services sector, including Abdullah bin Touq al Marri, UAE Minister of Economy, MA Yusuff Ali, chairman and managing director, LuLu Group International, Dr Shamsheer Vayalil, founder and chairman, Burjeel Holdings, Mark Büsser, Chairman, IMTF, Hatem Dowidar, Group CEO, E&, and Brooks Entwistle, SVP, Ripple Services, among others.



Dr Mohammed el Deeb joins Al Hayat Hospital

Dr Mohammed el Deeb, renowned interventional cardiologist in Oman, has joined Al Hayat International Hospital as head of cardiology department.

Dr Deeb has been a visiting senior consultant interventional cardiologist and head of the Cardiology Unit at Al Hayat International Hospital since 2009. After 13 years as visiting senior consultant, Dr Deeb has joined Al Hayat as an in-house senior consultant cardiologist, a press release said.

Dr Deeb has vast experience of more than 25 years in Royal Hospital/National Heart Centre as a senior consultant interventional cardiologist. He has done 7000+ successful Diagnostic Coronary Angiography and Coronary Stenting. He is especially known as a master of performing emergency stenting for heart attacks, and has touched many people's lives.

IIE partners with Terex brand in Oman

Terex Rough Terrain Cranes and Franna Pick and Carry Cranes have appointed International Integrated Equipment LLC as the distributor in the Sultanate of Oman.

Terex Corporation is a global manufacturer of aerial work platforms and materials processing machinery. The Company designs, builds, and supports products used in construction, maintenance, manufacturing, energy, minerals and materials management applications, a press release said.

The company's products are manufactured in North and South America, Europe, Australia, and Asia and sold worldwide. The company engages with customers through all stages of the product life cycle, from initial specification and financing to parts and service



support. Franna Pick & Carry Cranes live up to their name with the strength and easy operation to pick up heavy loads and the steering flexibility to move in tight spaces. Their high road speeds get them to the jobsite quickly.

In Oman, the Terex and Franna Brand Cranes can be

procured through its official distributor M/s International Integrated Equipment LLC (IIE) situated in Muscat, Sohar and Salalah.

The announcement of this new partnership between Terex & IIE was done at a ceremony conducted at the IIE head office in Muscat.

During the co-operation ceremony

Ajit S Nair - head of Sales, Middle East & Asia, Terex Rough Terrain Cranes and Franna Pick & Carry Cranes, said, "Middle East is an important region for Terex, in terms of current and future potential. It is imperative to have the right partner; we invest in them, they invest in us and we grow together. M/s. International Integrated Equipment LLC (IIE) a part of Bahwan International Group is a highly reputed organisation, has the market know how and is focused on Customer Service. We are delighted to have IIE as our partner in Oman."

A senior spokesperson at IIE added, "Terex produces versatility of rough terrain cranes and pick and carry cranes allow us to cater in various business sector applications in Oman."

Ooredoo participates in Muscat Nights

Committed to further boosting its relationship with the community, Ooredoo participates in Muscat Nights 2023 as a Diamond Sponsor.

The highly anticipated festival has been organised by Muscat Municipality and will be taking place in the capital between January 19 and February 4. Ooredoo will be on site by setting up two pop-up stores at the events taking place at Qurum Park and Al Naseem Park, offering festival-goers the opportunity to benefit from its More Internet, 5G Home Internet and Fibre offers.

The event will feature exciting entertainment and family-friendly activities and will be simultaneously taking place at the Oman Automobile Association, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Qurum Park, and Al Naseem Park, a press release said.



Muscat Nights 2023 is one of Oman's most anticipated events, and by supporting the upcoming festival the company aims to bring together tens of

thousands of people to enjoy fun-filled activities. As modern technology will be one of the event's common threads, Ooredoo looks forward to interacting face-to-face with visitors about a variety of products, services and special deals.

January marked as Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

The MENA Coalition for HPV Elimination hosted a webinar on January 18, marking January as Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and highlighting the engagement of civil society that is needed to eliminate this preventable disease.

The main focus of the webinar, which was moderated by Dr Ibtihal Fadhi, chair at Eastern Mediterranean NCD Alliance, former regional adviser NCDs, WHO/EMRO, was on the important role of civil society and non-governmental organisations in supporting cervical cancer elimination across the region, a press release said.

Speakers addressed a variety of topics, including best practices around increasing uptake of HPV vaccination, challenges to overcome key barriers (including stigma and vaccine hesitancy), progress made towards the elimination of HPV and cervical cancer, and WHO EMRO's recently-launched Regional

Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy.

Dr Mohammed Afifi, regional advisor for Women's Health, WHO EMRO, highlighted the crucial role of civil society in supporting governments around cervical cancer elimination, namely around increasing awareness and vaccine uptake across the region. "We need to improve the public's knowledge of screening measures and the vaccine's importance, as many people do not know about the vaccine at all," he affirmed.

"Lebanon is facing many challenges: vaccine hesitancy, false information, and the high vaccine cost. WISH and some other NGOs are collaborating to improve uptake in women for the vaccine doses via university," said Dr Faysal el Kak, senior lecturer at the Faculty of Health Sciences, AUB. Over these last ten years, many initiatives have taken place toward eliminating cervical cancer in the region.

International drifting round 2 concludes on Jan 19

Another thrilling show was executed by drifters in the second round of the Oman International Drift Championship on January 19.

A total of 46 drivers competed in the qualifiers with a selection and 32 of them qualified into the finals the next day at the Muscat Drift Arena. Tough decisions were taken by the judges on the panel, taking in every minuscule detail into consideration. The winners for Round 2 were:

National Category
1st place: Ahmed al Amri
2nd place: Ali al Balushi
3rd place: Haitham al Hadidi
MENA (Middle East/North African) Category
1st place: Ali Makhseed (Kuwait)
2nd place: Ahmed al Amri (Oman)
3rd place: Ahmed Daham (Jordan)
International Category
1st place: Benediktas Cirba (Lithuania)



2nd place: Ali Makhseed (Kuwait)
3rd place: Alan Hynes (Ireland)

Lithuanian driver Benediktas Cirba said, "It was just incredible. This year, the competition is higher than ever and I feel honoured to be given first place for this round. I can't wait for what's in store for the next one." Cirba's race with Ali

Makhseed from Kuwait was a close call, with both of them putting up an incredible fight until the end.

Runner up for the International Category and first place winner for the MENA category, Ali Makhseed said, "It's a bitter-sweet moment to lose in the final because of a mechanical issue but I'm lucky today to get to the final, and thank God for that. It's

been a long weekend, and big thanks goes to OAA for organising such a great event and I look forward to seeing everyone in the next round."

The local drivers in the National category gave a tremendous performance with a great display of skill on the track.

Ahmed al Amri, champion of the local category, said, "I'm so happy to have earned first place

in the National category. It's been such a great season so far with all these great drifters and I thank OAA for all the work they have put into organising this tournament."

In continuation with Round 3 on February 9 and 10, the Oman Automobile Association wishes the contestants of this season the best of luck and success in the upcoming drift battles.

Bank Muscat launches 12th edition of Green Sports Programme

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes form an essential pillar of Bank Muscat's strategy of working continuously for the benefit of society. Hence, the bank launched the 2023 edition of its flagship CSR programme, Green Sports, and has invited all local sports teams who would like to apply for the programme to do so well before the deadline of February 18.

The Green Sports programme is developed to help local sports teams enhance their role in the community and provide suitable infrastructure that can help the youth develop their talents. The scope of Green Sports support for sports teams include greening of football fields with natural or synthetic turf, floodlights and water desalination equipment in areas facing problems of water salinity. This year too, 20 sports teams from different governorates will be provided support in one of the four categories available to them, a press release said. To improve the programme's inclusivity and reach across the sultanate, applications



Talib al Makhmari

can be submitted digitally. For more information and to submit applications, teams should go to: <https://techgurusales.com/green-sports/green-stadium-participation-form-terms.aspx> and complete the application form electronically using a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone.

All applicants should be able to showcase their positive impact and contributions to the local community. In case of any queries or doubts on the submission process, teams may email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com.

Talib Saif al Makhmari, manager, Community and Media Re-



lations, Bank Muscat, said, "We are pleased to see the positive social impact that Green Sports has created since its launch in 2012 as it is considered one of the major sustainable programmes the bank is implement-

ing. It was developed to support talented Omani youth by enhancing the infrastructure available to local sports teams in the sultanate. We would like to encourage all teams who would like to apply for the support to sub-

mit their applications through the specified link ahead of the deadline. Going ahead, the bank will continue its support to sports teams through Green Sports and help the youth meet their aspirations in this field."

Talib al Makhmari thanked all sports teams for their confidence in Green Sports Programme as it witnesses excellent and spirited competition every year. This confirms the success of the programme in enhancing this impor-

tant sector. He wished the applicants all the best with their applications this year.

The landmark Green Sports Programme is one of Bank Muscat's CSR initiatives, which draws from the values of leadership and partnership so as to create a positive impact on Omani society. The programme aims to develop and provide a sustainable infrastructure for sports fields in Oman.

It is a matter of great encouragement that Bank Muscat's Green Sports programme has so far benefitted 163 teams with over 50,000 team members across the Sultanate of Oman and with yet another 20 teams to be added this year.

In the past few months, the bank has seen the inauguration of more Green Sports fields across Oman. The facilities developed as part of the programme are often used as a venue for other social activities by local communities, leading to stronger social bonding and positive behaviour among young people.

Milano traders' meet held

Milano, a brand born in Italy, wholly owned by the Danube Group known for the finest bath and home solutions across the middle-east, held its annual Dealers' Meet in Oman on January 13 at Grand Hyatt Hotel with a turnout of more than 250 dealers.

Among other things, Milano undoubtedly views its expanding dealer network as a crucial component of its business. This is demonstrated by the innovative program the company launched, which involved flying their top-performing Middle Eastern dealers to luxurious vacation spots to celebrate their success while enjoying a break from work, a press release said.



The brand's initiative, which was introduced in 2017, has already given committed dealers a vacation to Switzerland in its first year and an Italian cruise in its second. The highly anticipated and planned vacation to London had to be postponed in 2019 because of the pandemic which

had played spoilsport. After a three-year break, the brand, with its headquarters in Dubai, resumed the programme in 2022, taking the traders to London and Georgia. The brand announced that it will be taking the dealers to Singapore on a captivating cruise in 2023.

Pact inked with ODP to provide cloud services in Musandam

To take part in the government digital transformation within the pursuit of the Governorate to keep pace with the technological developments, the Musandam Governor's Office has signed, on Sunday, a cooperation agreement with Oman Data Park (ODP), to utilise the company's cloud services in hosting the governorate data center.

In accordance with the agreement between the two parties, Oman Data Park will create and host the domain name and e-

mails IDs for the Governorate of Musandam, where ODP will set an official electronic address for the Governorate of Musandam to be used by visitors and beneficiaries of electronic services of the Governorate, a press release said.

ODP will also create an e-mail ID for each employee in the governorate that allows them to communicate with each other and with others. It will also assure the safe hosting of the Governorate's data and provide

continuous technical support to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of government work as well as assuring the smooth running of its transactions.

The agreement was signed by H E Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam Governorate and Eng Maqbool bin Salem al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park Company.

The agreement reflects the governorate's endeavour within the national direction to implement Oman Vision 2040.

MoE signs two cooperation agreements with Oman LNG

In the presence of H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniya, Minister of Education, the ministry signed two cooperation agreements with the Development Corporation of the Oman LNG Company.

The first agreement came to finance the initiative of a project to equip the classrooms of the integration programme with sensory integration aids for students with disabilities in the schools of South Al Sharqiyah governorate, a press release said.

The second agreement came to finance the project of the National Programme to Support Emerging Innovators. The signing of the two agreements took place at the office of the Minister, in the Ministry's General Diwan.

The agreements were signed on the part of the Ministry of Education, by H E Majid bin Said al Bahri, Undersecretary of the Ministry for Administrative and Financial Affairs, and on the part of the Oman LNG Development Corporation by Dr Amer bin Nasser al Matani, CEO of the Corporation.

On the importance and objectives of these two agreements, Bahri said, "This project will make a quantum leap in the indicator of improving the services provided to students with disabilities in the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The importance of equip-



ping halls for sensory integration is represented in the urgent need to find quality services that enhance the abilities of these students and show their maximum potential. The Ministry also seeks, through this project, to facilitate access to services and reduce the burden on parents, thus improving the quality of educational services in the Sultanate of Oman."

He added, "As for the second agreement, it came to finance the National Programme to Support Emerging Innovators by enrolling them in programmes concerned with developing the capabilities and skills of innovative students, who participated in the National Olympiad for Scientific Innovations and the Robotics

and Artificial Intelligence competitions that were held in December 2022 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

This programme aims to spread awareness of the importance of innovation and promote best practices in supporting the innovation system at the national level, in terms of providing an integrated knowledge and scientific environment of services, facilities and mechanisms necessary for students and educational cadres.

This program will also be implemented in cooperation with institutions concerned with innovation from the government and private sectors through several stages that include criteria for se-

lecting participants.

Dr Matani said, "We are pleased to continue the strategic partnership with the Ministry of Education, which will undoubtedly serve the educational process in the Sultanate of Oman, whether it is in providing new services to advance the social inclusion of students with disabilities, or in efforts to promote innovation among our students. The integrated classrooms project, which includes sensory integration, aims to deliver the educational message in a modern and accessible manner to students with disabilities, and this is reflected in the quality of the services provided, and in raising their academic achievement."

Shell Oman to introduce first smart service station in sultanate

Shell Oman Marketing Company signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Amlaak Energy Resources Company (Amlaak), an Omani company, to launch unique smart service stations in the Sultanate.

This makes Shell Oman the first fuel marketing company in Oman to plan and implement these state of the art modular service stations that promise to be safe, efficient, futuristic, and sustainable, a press release said.

The MoU, marking a new phase in the local energy market, was signed recently by Dr Mohammed al Balushi, CEO of Shell

Oman, and by Aarif al Jaffari, managing director of Amlaak

Moving towards integrated, efficient and lower-carbon practices, the new smart service stations reflect Shell Oman's commitment to meeting customers' evolving needs and their urban lifestyle. This solution is tailored to accelerate this transformation and promote intelligent sustainable development practices in the fuel marketing sector in Oman. While it enhances the efficiency in the overall value chain across the retail sector, it also reduces costs, waste, and the overall site car-



bon emissions.

The prefabricated service stations are easy to set up, economical and meet the requirements of the market that is increasingly

shifting towards feasible and convenient options to deliver energy products and services to savvy customers.

Dr Balushi, said, "We are glad

to be partnering with Omani entrepreneurs like Amlaak to work together in response to our customers' evolving needs and expectations, which is in line with our In-Country Value agenda. Urban populations and cities are growing, so it is vital to make the right choices for a sustainable future. In addition, digital technology has transformed customer expectations around the convenience of retailing, speed, and a seamless experience."

Having acquired exclusive GCC rights for this novel concept, Amlaak will collaborate with Oman Shell in setting smart

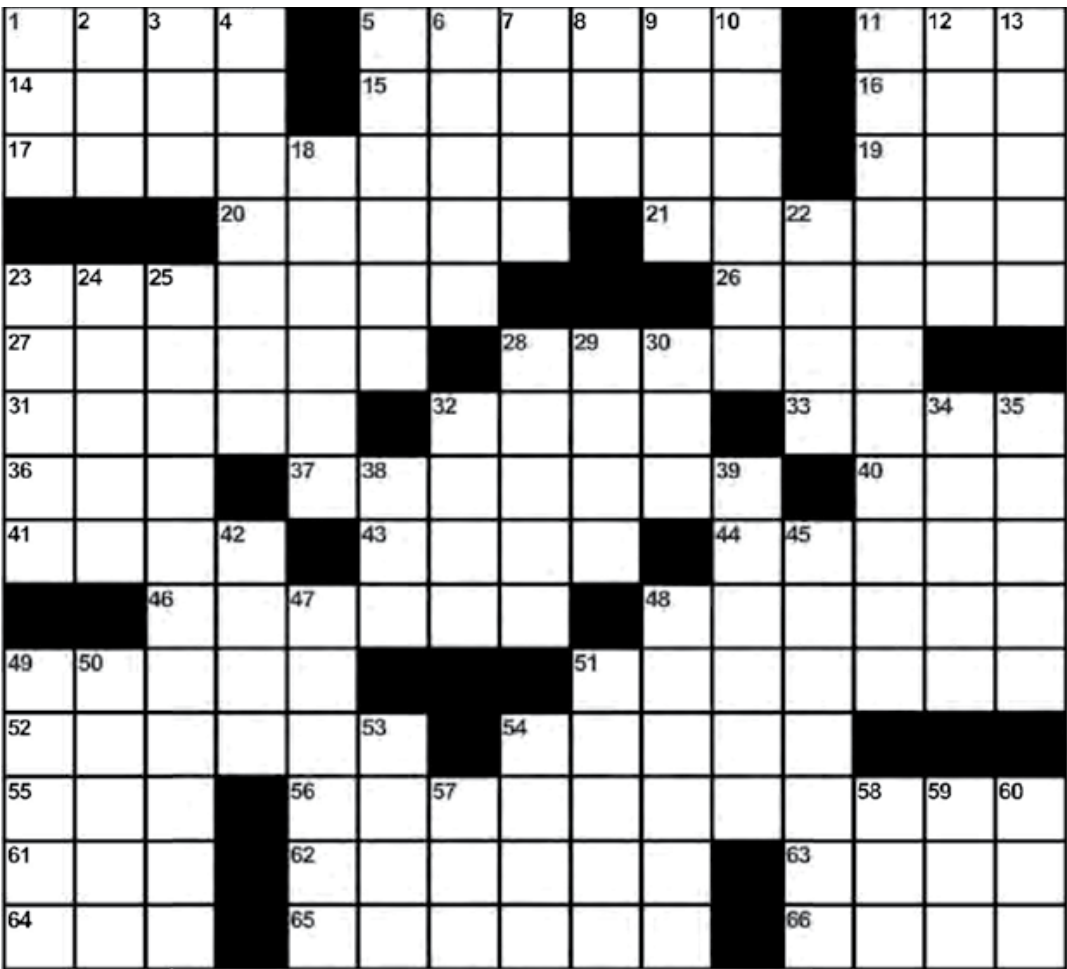
service stations in the country. Amlaak is one of the leading SME firms in the field of commercial fuel distribution, transportation of fuel, lubricants, and its other derivatives.

Commenting on the partnership. Mr. Aarif Al Jaffari said, "These new service stations adopt a modern design and are developed with sustainability, safety, and special efficiency in mind; standing at 1,000 m2 compared to the 3,000 m2 regular service stations. In terms of power usage, the new smart service stations consume 63% less power, utilize solar power to

consume 43% less electricity, and are equipped with a device to recycle fuel vapor on its first and second stages, deeming the stations completely free of fuel vapor, safe and environmentally efficient. Our goal here is efficiency and sustainability; hence we designed the new stations to be 89% mobile, and cost 42% less than the standard service station."

Khalid al Awaisi, general manager of Mobility at Shell Oman, further noted that the objective behind the fast-paced modular design was to provide environmentally friendly solutions.

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1) Transit charge

5) Bind, as grass stalks

11) Grammy category

14) Newspaper essay page

15) Give thought to

16) Wing not for flying

17) Restores strength to

19) Sweet murmur

20) In the cards

21) Well-seasoned stew

23) Endangered

26) Inclines

27) Makes shiny and smooth

28) Stoked

31) Tsunami kin

32) Without moisture

33) Potluck choice

36) One for the off-road

37) New versions of old films

40) Early afternoon

41) Nick's cousin?

43) Basks at the beach

44) Alaskan craft

46) Goes off volcanically

48) Larry or Shemp

49) Deep-six
- 51) Non sense

52) Exerts no effort

54) Delaware city

55) Make a decision

56) Livens up

61) Function

62) " ... falls_ on the plain"

63) Apple variety

64) Cabernet, e.g.

65) Breastplates (Var.)

66) TV prize

DOWN

1) In favor of

2) Arm-over-arm swinger

3) Make a motor roar

4) Teacher or preacher, e.g.

5) Sudden outpourings

6) _ out (made a successful putt)

7) "National Velvet" author

8) Wood-dressing tool

9) Change course suddenly

10) Artificial

11) Restore to a particular state

12) For all to hear

13) Draws, as a line on a

graph

18) Chatterbox

22) Turned a horse right

23) Pretentious sort

24) Carry away, in a way

25) Returned to life

28) Casual pair

29) Big boats

30) Scrabble IO-pointer

32) Salacious stuff

34) Tool for bending cold metal

35) Cornball

38) Clairvoyant's claim, for short

39) Supplier to an army

42) Caroler's syllables

45) Marina charge

47) Computer-is-working period

48) Crinkly leaved cabbages

49) Use elbow grease on

50) Small woods

51) Goblin or bugbear

53) Pantyhose woe

54) Rackets

57) Seven, on a grandfather clock

58) It's on some Scottish

locks59) "A Nightmare on_Street"60) State

NOTE PAD

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
The world's energy is feeling quite a bit louder right now, and it might create some stress in your day. Don't be surprised if you start feeling unusually introverted. Nothing will appeal to you more than crawling into bed and hiding away from the world. This isn't necessarily a case of the blues, more like a case of the blahs. Honor your feelings by trying to escape from the hubbub going on around you. Find out if someone else can take on some of your hassles.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
When you spend a lot of energy looking at issues deeply, it's only natural that you get exhausted! Today, you deserve a bit of a break from all the heavy analysis. At work or school, try to step back and coast for a while. You've built up enough momentum to keep things running smoothly, and there's no need to micromanage the progress. Take the opportunity to look at things from an outsider's perspective. It will enable you to see a few areas that need tweaks.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
One of your recent dreams included some confusing images. That's nothing new except for the fact that today you'll see one of those images again in the real world. Look at it as closely as you can. It holds a clue about how you can reach your latest goal much more quickly than you anticipated! You have the resolve, energy, and intelligence to figure out this symbolism and achieve what you really want. The right move might be to think big and take a few more risks.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The fifth longest river in Africa, the Rhumel (or Ampsaga) River, runs through which country?
A. Morocco
B. Algeria
C. Libya
D. Mauritania

02. Oil from oil wells was first used for what?
A. Evaporate brine to produce salt
B. Fuelling railway engines
C. Lubricating weaving machines
D. Lighting

03. Which of these is the name for a textbook of magic spells?
A. Omnibus
B. Almanac
C. Lexicon
D. Grimoire

Answers: 1. B, 2. A, 3. D



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Making choices based on your emotions isn't a wise strategy for you today. Your feelings, while important to you and your life, aren't relevant to everyone else. Don't mistake your goals for group objectives. It's vitally important for you to think things through with other people in mind. Be empathetic and try to see things from other perspectives. You could be called upon to act selflessly, and it would be a good idea to be prepared for that.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
You're going to encounter one or two very intriguing people during the course of your day, so you shouldn't pass up the opportunity to make a connection. Even if you're busy and running around, make time to have a conversation. But when you start chatting, don't make it all small talk. Go deep. Ask a penetrating question that requires more than a yes or no answer. It will be fun to challenge their opinions, and you'll have a ball defending your own.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
This is a wonderful day for you to be up in front of a crowd doing your thing! Your energy is engaging and approachable, and the audience will be positively eating out of your hand. They want to hear whatever it is you need to say, so say it loud and say it proud! Public speaking or a public performance might not be your favorite thing to do in the world, but today it will give you a rush that even the most thrilling roller coaster can't deliver.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
If you're feeling unsure about any decision today, no matter how insignificant it might seem, consult people who have been through it before. Experience builds expertise, and these folks have some very wise words for you. If you can't pick out the coffee drink to start your day, ask the barista. If you can't decide where to go for your next vacation, ask the coworker who just got back from theirs. Solicit information from folks who know best.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
The magnetic energy of a coworker or fellow student is drawing you into their orbit today, despite the fact that you don't really like them all that much. Is this the Universe's way of trying to help you two get along better? Possibly. Regardless, you need to put on your best attitude and treat this person with all the respect you expect from them, if not more. Set the tone for how you will work together, and make it clear that you can rise above personal differences.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
You should never become anyone's doormat, but that doesn't mean that you need to always be the one calling the shots. There's a lot of freedom in letting other people take over sometimes, and that is something you should find out for yourself today. Hand the reins over to someone you trust today. Let them pick the restaurant, choose the date, or be the deciding voice in what you do next. You'll soon discover that this person has great ideas and sacrificing control can be nice.

KIDS COLOURING

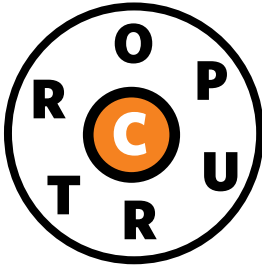


BOGGLER

E	A	U	J
R	G	S	S
U	E	R	U
E	T	P	H

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

WORD BUILDER



You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.
Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Sweden's NATO bid hit by rows with Turkey

Stockholm, Sweden - Sweden's bid for NATO membership is facing a dead end because Ankara's demands to Stockholm to hand over Kurdish activists and prevent rallies attacking Turkey's leadership have strained ties.

The chances of this changing after Turkey's parliamentary elections due in mid-May are uncertain, said Paul Levin, director of Stockholm University's Institute for Turkish Studies.

"We can now probably forget Turkish ratification before the elections, which seem to be scheduled for May 14," Levin told AFP.

"What happens after that depends in part on who wins."

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's objections to Sweden's NATO membership rest largely on Stockholm's refusal to extradite Turkish nationals Ankara wants to prosecute for 'terrorism'. And Erdogan is running for re-election.

In December, Sweden extradited a member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to Turkey. He had been convicted in a Turkish court and denied asylum in Sweden.

Erdogan wants more action from Stockholm against the PKK, listed as a terror group by Turkey and its Western allies.

"On one hand, there is a Turkish president who has jailed



Protesters demonstrate in front of the Consulate General of Sweden in Istanbul, Turkey, on Saturday (AFP)

We can now probably forget Turkish ratification before the elections, which seem to be scheduled for May 14. What happens after that depends on part in who wins

PAUL LEVIN

thousands over alleged insults and who wants to divert attention from a poor economy in the

months before an election," said Levin. "On the other hand, there are groups in Sweden who are

against NATO membership and PKK supporters worried about the government's pledges to go after' them, he said.

Levin said these PKK supporters had realised they could provoke Erdogan 'by insulting him and thereby stall the accession process'.

Protests in Sweden

A protest by a far-right politician

in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm on Saturday - authorised by the police - has further strained relations.

Rasmus Paludan is a Swedish-Danish activist who has already been convicted for racist abuse.

He provoked rioting in Sweden last year when he went on a tour of the country and publicly burned copies of Q'uran.

On Saturday, he burned another copy of the Muslim holy book after a speech of almost an hour denouncing Islam.

Police based their decision to authorise the protest on the basis of Sweden's liberal constitution, which protects the right to demonstrate.

Ankara summoned Sweden's ambassador to register its outrage, then cancelled a visit of Swedish Defence Minister Pal Jonson that had been scheduled for next Friday in Ankara - a rare high-level meeting.

Earlier this month, Ankara called in Sweden's ambassador after pro-Kurdish activists hung an effigy of Erdogan from its feet, explicitly comparing him to Benito Mussolini.

Italy's Fascist dictator was left hanging upside down after his execution in the closing days of World War II.

Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson denounced it as an attempt to sabotage the country's NATO membership bid - but that sparked a backlash from some inside Sweden defending the right to freedom of expression.

'Islamist dictator'

Then last week, the leader of the far-right Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Akesson, whose party props up the Swedish government, denounced Erdogan as an

'Islamist dictator'.

He urged Kristersson not to appease Turkey 'because it is ultimately an anti-democratic system and a dictator we are dealing with', Akesson told Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*.

Turkey is seeking the extradition of more Kurdish 'terrorists' based in Sweden. Erdogan recently said there were as many as 130 there.

Stockholm has made it clear that the courts have the final say, but that does not appear to have satisfied Ankara.

Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of NATO, who last spring was talking of a fast-track membership process of just a few weeks, told AFP in January he still thought it would happen in 2023, even if he could not guarantee it.

Both Turkey and Hungary were still to ratify the bid, he pointed out.

Both countries have maintained links with Russia since its invasion of Ukraine, with Ankara in particular adopting the role of mediator between the two sides.

One spark of hope for Sweden is that Finland, which also launched its bid to join NATO following the Russian invasion, has made it clear that it does not want to enter the alliance without its 'big brother'.

AFP



IRGC chief Hossein Salami and FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, attending a parliament meeting in the capital Tehran on Sunday (AFP)

Iran vows 'reciprocal' response to EU over Guards' terror label

Tehran, Iran - Iran on Sunday warned the European Union it would take 'reciprocal' measures after the European Parliament voted to list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group.

"The parliament is working to place elements of European countries' armies on the terrorist list' of the Islamic republic, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said on Twitter.

Members of the European Parliament voted on Wednesday to include the Guards on the 27-nation bloc's terror list in 'light of its terrorist activity, the repression of protesters and its supplying of drones to Russia'.

The vote is non-binding but comes with EU foreign ministers already due to discuss tightening sanctions on Iran next week.

Amir-Abdollahian and Guards chief Major General Hossein Salami attended a closed-door parliament session on Sunday morning to discuss the European Parliament's move.

"The European Parliament shot itself in the foot," Iran's top diplomat said, adding that the response would be 'reciprocal'.

If European diplomats 'who have no experience in diplomacy... do not correct their positions, every possibility is conceivable', he was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA.

Iran has been a signatory to the NPT since 1970, the year it came into force, and has always denied it has any ambitions to acquire or manufacture an atomic bomb, despite some Western accusations.

Members of the European Parliament voted on Wednesday to include the Guards on the terror list

Its nuclear programme was a source of tensions with Western powers until a deal was reached in 2015, providing Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear activity.

But the deal has been hanging by a thread since 2018 when the United States unilaterally withdrew and reimposed biting sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

Iran and world powers have been engaged in on-and-off talks to restore the deal, but discussions have been in deep freeze since last year.

AFP

Israel PM removes top minister Aryeh Deri over court ruling

Jerusalem - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu removed a top minister from office Sunday following a Supreme Court ruling against Aryeh Deri's appointment which has shaken the nascent cabinet.

"It is with a heavy heart, with great sorrow and with an extremely difficult feeling that I am forced to transfer you from your position as a minister in the government," Netanyahu told Deri during a cabinet meeting, according to a statement from the premier's office.

Leader of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish party Shas, Deri was appointed health and interior minister last month as part of a coalition deal following Israel's November 1 elections.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court ruled that Netanyahu 'must remove Deri from his position' due to a tax evasion conviction last year.

The judges said Deri made it appear as if he had intended to resign from politics to get a lighter sentence.



Israel's Interior and Health Minister Aryeh Deri (centre) reacts as he sits between PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Justice Minister Yariv Levin during a weekly cabinet meeting at the PM's office in Jerusalem, on January 8 (AFP)

The veteran politician was fined 180,000 shekels (US\$50,000) and relinquished his parliamentary seat, but ran for office again in the November polls. Lawmakers last month passed legislation allowing anyone convicted of offences but not given a custodial sentence to serve as a minister.

The judges ruled Deri's ap-

pointment 'could not stand' since it was 'extremely unreasonable', according to a summary of the court's decision.

Netanyahu said on Sunday the ruling, which permits Deri's Shas party to remain in government, 'ignores the will of the people'. The premier added he will endeavour to find any legal way for Deri to still 'contribute

to the state of Israel'.

Deri had held several ministerial posts during his decades-long career, including after a seven-year ban following prison time for taking bribes.

He was sentenced in 2000 to three years, but the sentence was reduced by a third for good behaviour.

AFP

16 killed in building collapse in Syria's Aleppo

Aleppo, Syria - A building collapsed on Sunday in Syria's war-damaged second city of Aleppo, killing 16 people including children, authorities and media reported.

Much of Aleppo was destroyed during Syria's conflict that began nearly 12 years ago and left many of the remaining structures in a decrepit state.

"The number of victims of the residential building collapse... has risen to 16 dead", said state news agency SANA.

Only one person had been rescued alive from the rubble of the five-storey building which was home to seven families, Syria's interior ministry said.

It was not immediately clear if anyone else had survived the tragedy in the city which was Syria's pre-war commercial hub.

AFP

Six more classified documents found in search of Biden home

Washington, US - Officials from the US Department of Justice found six more classified documents during a search of Joe Biden's family home in Delaware this week, the president's personal lawyer said in a statement on Saturday.

The new disclosure served up another embarrassing twist for Biden in an affair dogging him just as he gets ready to declare whether he will run for another term in 2024.

Biden insists he has done nothing wrong and has downplayed the situation as an innocent mistake.

Documents from his time as vice president and marked as classified first turned up in an office at a Biden-affiliated think

tank in Washington last year, and then again at his home in Delaware. Altogether they are about a dozen documents.

After the second find, the White House offered to let the Department of Justice search the Delaware home - the search was carried out on Friday and is now concluded, Biden attorney Bob Bauer said.

"DOJ took possession of materials it deemed within the scope of its inquiry, including six items consisting of documents with classification markings and surrounding materials," Bauer said.

The search lasted more than 12 hours and covered 'all working, living and storage spaces in the home,' Bauer said.



US President Joe Biden (AFP)

"DOJ had full access to the President's home, including personally handwritten notes, files, papers, binders, memorabilia, to-do lists, schedules, and reminders going back decades," he said.

Some of the new papers

seized were from Biden's time in the Senate and some were from his tenure as vice president, according to Bauer.

Bauer said Biden's personal lawyers and White House counsel previously arranged with the Justice Department to be present during the inspection, and they agreed to not publicise news of the search in advance 'in accordance with its standard procedures.'

The White House has said the earlier batches of documents were turned over to the Justice Department and National Archives, which handles presidential records, as soon as they were found.

On Thursday, Biden dismissed the furore over the dis-

covery of the old classified documents.

Asked by reporters during a trip to California about the issue, he said: "I think you're going to find there's nothing there."

"I have no regrets. I'm following what the lawyers have told me they want me to do. It's exactly what we're doing. There's no there there."

"We found a handful of documents... were filed in the wrong place. We immediately turned them over to the Archives and the Justice Department. We're fully cooperating and looking forward to getting this resolved quickly," he added.

AFP

Royal processions, big lunch and concert to crown King Charles III

London, UK - The coronation weekend for King Charles III will feature a star-studded concert, nationwide 'big lunch' and volunteering initiative as well as the traditional ceremony and royal processions, Buckingham Palace announced late on Saturday.

The three days of ceremonial, celebratory and community events in early May will be a chance for 'people to come together in celebration of the historic occasion', the palace said in an update on its much-anticipated plans. The landmark long weekend looms with the monarchy still grappling with the fallout from the publication earlier this month of Prince Harry's scorching tell-all memoir *Spare*, in which he made a series of incendiary claims against the family.

It is unclear whether US-based Harry - Charles' younger son - and his American wife Meghan will attend the coronation, with a recent *Sunday Times* report claiming a reconciliation could still take place prior.

Charles, 74, immediately became king when Queen Elizabeth died aged 96 on September 8 last year, ending her record-breaking 70-year reign after a year of declining health.

He also took over as head of state of 14 Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The coronation traditionally takes place some months after a new sovereign has ascended to the throne, following a period of



This file photo shows King Charles III watching as the Lord Chamberlain Andrew Parker breaks his Wand of Office at the Committal Service for Queen Elizabeth II held at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle on September 19, 2022 (AFP)

national and royal mourning as well as intense preparation.

Processions

The country's first coronation since 1953, set to be watched worldwide and feature various global dignitaries, will begin with Charles' formal crowning at London's Westminster Abbey on Saturday May 6, in a tradition dating back more than 900

years. Buckingham Palace has previously said the service, to be conducted by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, will reflect the monarchy's historic traditions alongside its modern role.

"The Coronation is a solemn religious service, as well as an occasion for celebration and pageantry," it noted.

Charles' wife, Queen Consort Camilla, 75, will also be crowned.

The pair will arrive from the palace without other royals in 'The King's Procession', before returning in a larger ceremonial entourage known as 'The Coronation Procession' featuring other family members.

Once back at the palace, the opening day will conclude with the royals appearing on the balcony overlooking The Mall where thousands of people are ex-

pected to gather.

'Special' concert

The next day will then see a 'special coronation concert' staged at Windsor Castle, west of London, to be produced and broadcast live by the BBC and featuring 'global music icons and contemporary stars'.

Several thousand pairs of tickets will be made available

through a public ballot, while volunteers from charities supported by Charles and Camilla will also be able to attend. The concert will feature a 'world-class orchestra' playing interpretations of musical favourites 'fronted by some of the world's biggest entertainers, alongside performers from the world of dance'.

A 'coronation choir', drawn from diverse community choirs

host thousands of 'coronation big lunches', billed as a 'nationwide act of celebration and friendship'.

"From a cup of tea with a neighbour to a street party, a coronation big lunch brings the celebrations to your neighbourhood," said the palace, which expects events in streets, gardens, parks and community spaces.

The scheme will be overseen and organised by a team from

The country's first coronation since 1953, set to be watched worldwide and feature various global dignitaries, will begin with Charles' formal crowning at London's Westminster Abbey on May 6

and amateur singers nationwide - such as Refugee choirs, NHS choirs, LGBTQ+ singing groups and deaf signing choirs - will also make an exclusive appearance.

A 'virtual choir' made up of singers from across the Commonwealth will also perform, while the castle's East Lawn will host a selection of spoken word sequences delivered by stars of stage and screen. But the centrepiece of the evening event will be a 'lighting up the nation' segment which will see iconic locations across the UK lit up using projections, lasers, drone displays and illuminations.

Big lunch

Also on May 7, neighbours and communities will be invited to

the Eden Project, the eco-friendly visitor attraction in Cornwall, southwest England. Camilla has been patron of its annual 'big lunch' initiative - which aims to boost community spirit, reduce loneliness and support charities and good causes - since 2013.

The final part of coronation weekend, dubbed 'the big help out', will be held on Monday May 8 - designated a public holiday in the UK this year.

Organised by community forum The Together Coalition and partners including The Scouts, the Royal Voluntary Service and various faith groups, it will 'highlight the positive impact volunteering has on communities across the nation'.

AFP



Tourists wait outside the Machu Picchu train station, Peru, on Saturday (AFP)

Peru closes Machu Picchu as protesters arrested in Lima

Lima, Peru - Peru closed the Inca citadel of Machu Picchu on Saturday amid steady anti-government protests, stranding hundreds of tourists, as authorities expelled protesters from a Lima university where they have been holed up as part of the crisis engulfing this divided country.

Protests demanding the resignation of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte have been ongoing since early December, leaving 46 people dead and prompting the government to impose a state of emergency in violence-hit areas.

This crisis triggered by the ouster of leftist Indigenous president Pedro Castillo last month stems largely from a gaping inequity between Peru's urban elite and poor rural Indigenous people in the Andean region who saw him as one of their own and working to make their lives better.

Authorities announced on Saturday yet another protester had died following demonstrations on Friday in the town of Ilave in that Andean region in the south.

Video footage from Ilave that went viral on social media shows

police shooting right at a crowd of Indigenous demonstrators in the town square. Enraged protesters responded by setting fire to a police station, local media reported.

Clashes between police and the crowd in that town near Lake Titicaca and the border with Bolivia left 10 people injured, hospital officials said.

Prior to the closing of Machu Picchu, rail services to the site had already been suspended due to damage to the track by demonstrators.

AFP

Brazil's Lula sacks army commander Arruda after anti-government riots

Brasília, Brazil - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva sacked the commander of Brazil's army on Saturday, two weeks after an election-denying mob loyal to his far-right predecessor ransacked the halls of power in Brasília.

The veteran leftist's dismissal of Julio Cesar de Arruda came a day before Lula was to make his first trip abroad - to Argentina - as he moves to put the South American powerhouse back on the international stage.

Arruda had only taken up the post on December 30, two days before the end of outgoing president Jair Bolsonaro's term, and was confirmed by Lula's administration in early January.

On January 8, Bolsonaro supporters ransacked the presidential palace, Supreme Court and Congress in Brasília, breaking windows and furniture, destroying priceless works of art, and leaving graffiti messages calling for a military coup.

Lula has said he suspects security forces may have been involved in the riots, in which more than 2,000 people were ar-



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva shaking hands with the new Army commander, General Tomas Ribeiro Paiva in Brasilia, on Saturday (AFP)

rested. The leftist president announced a review of his immediate environment.

Defense Minister Jose Mucio said on Saturday evening after meeting with the president that Arruda was out as head of the army because of 'a break in the level of confidence.'

"We thought we needed to stop this in order to get over this episode," Mucio said, alluding to the attack in Brasília. Mucio said

on Friday after a meeting with Lula and the chiefs of the three branches of the military that there was no direct armed forces involvement in the riots.

On Wednesday, the man named to be the new army chief, Tomas Ribeiro Paiva, until now the head of the southeastern army command, vowed that the military 'will continue to guarantee democracy'. And he suggested that the results of the

October election in which Lula defeated Bolsonaro should be accepted.

On Sunday Lula will head to Argentina, the customary first stop for Brazilian presidents. Beyond tradition, however, the trip will also allow him to meet with a faithful ally, President Alberto Fernandez, as well as regional counterparts at the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

"Everyone wants to talk to Brazil," Lula said this week in an interview with the Globo TV channel, promising to rebuild Brasília's ties with the international community after Bolsonaro's four years in office were marked by international isolation for the country.

Latin America is only the initial phase of his international push, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz paying a visit on January 30, and Lula headed to Washington to meet with his US counterpart Joe Biden on February 10.

AFP

Next New Zealand PM slams 'abhorrent' treatment of Ardern

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand's incoming prime minister Chris Hipkins criticised the 'abhorrent' treatment endured by Jacinda Ardern and vowed on Sunday to shield his own family, three days after her shock resignation.

Hours after being unanimously endorsed by Labour Party MPs as the party's leader and the nation's next prime minister, Hipkins attacked the personal abuse suffered by Ardern

during her more than five years in the top job.

Ardern sparked a national debate about the pressures she faced when she revealed on Thursday that she was stepping down just nine months before October 14 general elections, saying she no longer had 'enough in the tank'.

Politicians and other public figures have lined up to criticise the 'vitriol' Ardern was subjected to as prime minister, no-

tably on social media, although she did not mention it herself.

"The way Jacinda has been treated, particularly by some segments of our society - and they are a small minority - has been utterly abhorrent," Hipkins said.

"It does not represent who we are as a country," said the 44-year-old education and police minister.

Men have a responsibility to call out such treatment and say

'it's not ok', he said.

The future prime minister, best known for leading a national crackdown on COVID-19 for nearly two years, said he understood that putting himself forward as leader meant he was 'public property'.

"But my family aren't," he told reporters.

Hipkins said he wanted his six-year-old son and four-year-old daughter to grow up with a 'typical Kiwi kid life', adding that

his amicable separation from his wife was his own business.

"I have seen the enormous scrutiny and pressure placed on Jacinda and her family and so my response will be to keep my family completely out of the spotlight," he said.

Ardern said she had been exhausted after leading New Zealand through the COVID-19 pandemic, its deadliest terror attack and a volcanic eruption

AFP



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Chris Hipkins (AFP)



People ride a scooter next to the closed Huanan wholesale market, where the COVID-19 was first detected, in Wuhan on Sunday (AFP)

China logs nearly 13,000 COVID deaths in a week

Beijing, China - China reported nearly 13,000 COVID-related deaths in hospitals between January 13 and 19, after a top health official said the vast majority of the population had already been infected.

The death toll came a week after China said nearly 60,000 people had died with COVID in hospitals in just over a month - but there has been widespread scepticism over official data since Beijing abruptly axed anti-virus controls last month.

China's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a statement on Saturday that 681 hospitalised patients had died of respiratory failure caused by coronavirus infection, and 11,977 had died of other diseases combined with an infection over the period.

The figures do not include anyone who died at home.

Airfinity, an independent forecasting firm, has estimated daily COVID deaths in

China will peak at about 36,000 over the Lunar New Year holiday.

The firm also estimated that more than 600,000 people have died from the disease since China abandoned the zero-COVID policy in December. China has passed the peak period of COVID patients in fever clinics, emergency rooms and with critical conditions, Guo Yanhong, an official from the National Health Commission told a news conference on Thursday.

Tens of millions of people have travelled across the country in recent days for long-awaited reunions with families to mark Sunday's Lunar New Year, raising fears of fresh outbreaks.

China's transport authorities have predicted that more than two billion trips will be made this month into February, in one of the world's largest mass movements of people.

AFP

10 people dead in Lunar New Year shooting in California

Monterey Park, US - Ten people have died and at least 10 others have been wounded in a mass shooting in a largely Asian city in southern California, police said on Sunday, with the suspect still at large hours later.

The gunman opened fire at a dance venue in Monterey Park, as the local community were celebrating Lunar New Year, with witnesses saying he shot indiscriminately with a semiautomatic weapon.

Captain Andrew Meyer of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said officers had responded to emergency calls around 10:20pm on Saturday and found people pouring out of the premises.

"The officers made entry to the location and located additional victims," he said.

"The Monterey Park Fire Department responded to the scene and treated the injured and pronounced 10 of the victims deceased at the scene.

"There are at least 10 additional victims that were transported to numerous local hospitals and are listed in various conditions from stable to critical.

"The suspect fled the scene and remains outstanding."

Police gave no description of the wanted man, and did not say what kind of gun he used.

Monterey Park, about eight miles (13km) east of downtown Los Angeles, is home to around 60,000 people, the majority of them Asian or Asian American.

Meyer said detectives were also aware of another incident in the neighbouring city of Alhambra. "We have investigators on



Police stand guard at the scene near the intersection of Garvey and Garfield Avenue in Monterey Park, California, on Sunday (AFP)

The Monterey Park Fire Department responded to the scene and treated the injured and pronounced 10 of the victims deceased at the scene. There are 10 additional victims

ANDREW MEYER

scene trying to determine if there's a connection between these two incidents," he said.

Media reports said an attempted shooting at a ballroom and dance studio in Alhambra had been thwarted, with the alleged gunman tackled and disarmed, and no injuries reported.

US President Joe Biden has been briefed about the killings in Monterey Park, and ordered the FBI to give 'full support' to local authorities, White House Press

Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre tweeted.

Firing indiscriminately

Local resident Wong Wei told the *Los Angeles Times* his friend had been at the Monterey Park dance club, and had been in the bathroom when the shooting erupted.

When she emerged, she saw a man carrying a long gun and firing indiscriminately, as well as

the bodies of three people, two of them women and one person who he said was the boss of the club.

The paper reported that Seung Won Choi, who owns a seafood barbecue restaurant near the scene, said three people had run into his restaurant and told him to lock the door.

The three said there was a man with a semiautomatic gun who had multiple rounds of ammunition on him, and would reload every time he ran out, Choi told the paper.

Tens of thousands of people had gathered earlier in the day for the two-day Lunar New Year festival, which is one of the largest in Southern California.

The second day of the festival, on Sunday, was canceled

after the attack.

Meyer said detectives did not know whether the suspect knew his victims or was targeting a particular group.

"We will look at every angle," he said, adding that officers were reviewing surveillance footage.

"It's just too early in the investigation to know whether this incident was a hate crime or not," he told reporters.

The US Department of Justice said there were over 7,000 reported hate crimes in the United States in 2021, affecting more than 9,000 people.

Two thirds of those were race-related, it said.

Gun violence is a huge problem in the United States.

AFP

Explosion, gunfire near mayor's office in Mogadishu

Mogadishu, Somalia - A huge blast tore through buildings near the mayor's office in central Mogadishu on Sunday, with gunfire erupting afterwards in an attack claimed by Al-Shabaab, police and witnesses told AFP.

"Terrorists blasted a vehicle loaded with explosives onto a perimeter wall of the Mogadishu mall which is next to the Banadir administration headquarters," police officer Abdullahi Mohamed said.

Witnesses said the explosion damaged nearby buildings and gunfire could still be heard near the mayor's office.

"There is gunfire going on inside the vicinity of the main building but we don't know what is happening inside," a witness who runs a business near the offices said.

"There are some casualties but the whole area is cordoned off and we have been asked to



Police officers take up positions outside of the Mayor's office where an ongoing gun battle erupted following a reported explosion, in Mogadishu, on Sunday (AFP)

move away by the security forces." Another witness, Omar Nur, said he was inside the mall when the explosion went off

and 'was lucky to have escaped safely'.

Al-Shabaab, a militant group allied with Al-Qaeda claimed

responsibility for the attack via its communication channels, saying its fighters 'made their way inside the targeted building

after killing the security guards'.

The militants have been waging a bloody insurgency against the frail internationally backed central government for 15 years, carrying out attacks both in Somalia and neighbouring countries.

Major offensive

The latest attack comes days after seven soldiers were killed on Friday at a military camp in Galdad, a town in central Somalia about 375km (230 miles) north of the capital Mogadishu.

The US military said on Saturday the attack - in the Somali town retaken by the army this week - involved more than 100 Al-Shabaab militants.

"The combined actions by partner forces on the ground and the collective self-defence strike is estimated to have resulted in three destroyed vehicles and approximately thirty al-Shabaab terrorists killed" the

US military command for Africa (AFRICOM) said in a statement. In recent months, the Somali army and local clan militias have mounted a major offensive against the militant group, retaking swathes of territory in the centre of the country in an operation backed by US air strikes and an African Union force.

But despite the gains by the pro-government forces, the militants have continued to demonstrate the ability to strike back with lethal force against civilian and military targets.

On Tuesday, Al-Shabaab launched a deadly attack on a military base in another part of central Somalia, just a day after the government claimed a 'historic victory' over the militants.

Last week, eight people were killed in a roadside bombing claimed by Al-Shabaab in central Somalia, police said.

AFP

Fire kills four in Japan

Tokyo, Japan - A fire at an apartment building in Kobe in western Japan killed four men and left four in critical condition on Sunday, an official said.

The fire department was alerted to the blaze in the three-storey building by an emergency call at around 1:30am (1630 GMT Saturday). Four bodies were found after it was extinguished. Four other men, aged between their 40s and 70s, 'were taken to hospital unconscious', Masatoshi Sumitani at the Kobe fire department said.

Most of the occupants of the building were believed to be elderly men.

AFP

France, Germany firm up ties as 'driving force of a united Europe'

Paris, France - Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz and France's President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday pledged to drive Europe forward together, as the German leader visited Paris to celebrate 60 years of post-war cooperation despite recent strains.

The historic partnership has been under pressure from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and broader tectonic shifts.

Scholz said upholding strong ties was key for the continent.

"The future, like the past,

rests on cooperation between both our countries as the driving force of a united Europe," he said.

Macron said that 'Germany and France, because they cleared the path to reconciliation, must become pioneers to relaunch Europe'.

He cited the need to 'build a new energy model', encourage 'innovation and the technologies of tomorrow', and ensure the European Union is 'a geopolitical power in its own right, in defence, space and diplomacy'.

The two leaders were then to take part in a joint cabinet meet-



France's President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz wave as they arrive to attend a cabinet meeting in Paris on Sunday (AFP)

ing.

The personal relationship between both men has been less

than warm since Scholz assumed office in late 2021.

But 'there are structural prob-

lems that go further than the personal relationship', said Jacob Ross, a researcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin.

The frictions are even felt by the public, with 36 per cent of French respondents and 39 per cent of Germans telling pollster Ipsos this week that relations were suffering.

Support for Ukraine

The 1963 Elysee Treaty signed between post-World War II leaders Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle provided for everything from military coop-

eration to youth exchanges.

Since then, France and Germany have often built the foundation for joint crisis response in Europe, and other nations are looking to them again now.

Top issues to address include the Ukraine conflict, climate and energy, and European competitiveness faced with a new wave of 'buy-American' subsidies in the United States.

Scholz on Sunday pledged continued support to Kyiv after Russia invaded its pro-Western neighbour almost 11 months ago. "We will continue to provide Ukraine with all the support

it needs for as long as necessary. Together, as Europeans, to defend our European peace project," he said.

But Germany is still undecided on whether to deliver - or allow allies to deliver - its Leopard 2 battle tanks to Kyiv.

The impression that 'there is a united coalition, and that Germany is standing in the way is wrong', newly installed Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said on Friday. France has been pressing Germany to move faster, dashing ahead on mobile artillery in April and light tanks this month.

AFP

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

'I CAN BEAT ANYONE'

Elena Rybakina eager to take on the mantle after stunning world No 1 Iga Swiatek in straight sets

Melbourne, Australia - Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina blew the Australian Open women's draw wide open by beating red-hot favourite Iga Swiatek in straight sets on Sunday before declaring: "I can be number one."

Rybakina swept past the 2022 French and US Open winner 6-4, 6-4 in 1hr 29min on Rod Laver Arena in a powerful display.

She moves on to a quarter-final against 2017 French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko, who provided the second upset of a crazy few minutes at Melbourne Park by knocking out seventh seed Coco Gauff 7-5, 6-3 on neighbouring Margaret Court Arena.

Rybakina, who was born in Moscow but represents Kazakhstan, told reporters she has "a lot of things to improve" but is aiming for the top.

"If I perform like I did this week, and if it's going to be consistently, then for sure I will say that I can be number one," the 23-year-old said.

"I can beat anyone."

Rybakina did not get any ranking points for winning Wimbledon because of the ban on Russian and Belarusian players, meaning her world ranking of 25 does not accurately reflect her growing stature in the women's game.

"It doesn't bother me because

it's been already six months after Wimbledon and the year just started," said Rybakina, who is seeded 22nd but would have been well inside the top 10 had her Wimbledon win been rewarded in the rankings.

'Stay healthy'

Along with consistency, Rybakina needs to stay free of injury if she wants to build on her stunning Swiatek success.

"It's long. It's a lot of tournaments in front. The goal is to im-

prove but also to stay healthy because it's not easy to perform every week and feel fresh and don't be injured," she said.

From then on she was always in control, taking the first set with her fourth ace. Swiatek stepped up at the start of the second set, attacking off her forehand and broke immediately for 2-0 to chants of "Iga, Iga" from a small but noisy contingent of Polish fans in red and white.

The cries were short-lived. Rybakina broke to love at 1-3 as Swiatek's first serve deserted her.

At 4-4, the sixth forehand

If I perform like I did this week, and if it's going to be consistently, then for sure I will say that I can be number one. I can beat anyone

ELENA RYBAKINA

prove but also to stay healthy because it's not easy to perform every week and feel fresh and don't be injured," she said.

"So I think that's the most important thing."

Top seed Swiatek had her best chance at the beginning of the match, leading 40-0 on her opening service game and 15-40 on Rybakina's delivery in the next.

But it was the 6ft 1.83m tall Russian-born player who showed her resilience and power to win both for an early 2-0 lead.

winner of the match from Rybakina created a third break point, which she took when the Pole netted, before serving out with ease to take the match.

"Her ranking should be better, but we all know what happened in Wimbledon," conceded Swiatek.

Rybakina's victory means the top two seeds in the men's and women's singles are all out before the quarter-finals.

That has not happened at a major since the Open era began in 1968.



Elena Rybakina celebrates her victory against Iga Swiatek in the Australian Open in Melbourne on Sunday (AFP)

I wanted it too hard, I need to chill: Swiatek

Melbourne, Australia - World number one Iga Swiatek said she had felt the pressure and needed to "chill", after suffering a stunning exit in the Australian Open last 16 on Sunday.

The Pole came into Melbourne Park as a red-hot favourite for the first Grand Slam of the year, but was overpowered in straight sets by Wimbledon winner Elena Rybakina at Rod Laver Arena.

The 21-year-old admitted she buckled under the weight of expectation as her dream of a fourth major crown - but first in Australia - was shattered.

"Well, for sure, past two weeks have been pretty hard for me," Swiatek said/

"I felt today that I don't have that much left to fight even more," she said.

"I felt like I took a step back in terms of how I approach these tournaments, and I maybe wanted it a little bit too hard.

"So I'm going to try to chill out a little bit more."



Pegula warns 'long way to go' for title despite Swiatek exit

Melbourne, Australia - Jessica Pegula surged into the Australian Open quarter-finals in straight sets on Sunday, but warned there was "still a long way to go" to win the title despite Iga Swiatek's exit leaving her the woman to beat.

The American third seed is the highest-ranked player left in the women's draw after beating former French Open champion Barbora Krejickova 7-5, 6-2 in 1hr 41min.

Elena Rybakina's victory over Swiatek means the top two seeds in the men's and women's singles are out before the quarter-finals for the first time since the Open era began in 1968.

Pegula will face either 24th seed Victoria Azarenka of Belarus, who won the Australian Open in 2012 and 2013, or China's Zhu Lin for a place in the semi-finals.

Pegula, 28, has never made it to a Grand Slam semi-final before, and didn't regard herself as the Australian Open favourite.

"I look at the draw and there's still Jelena (Ostapenko) - she won the French Open. You have



Jessica Pegula hits a return against Barbora Krejickova during their round-of-16 match on Sunday (AFP)

Rybakina, who won Wimbledon last year," she said.

"You have Vika (Azarenka), who does really well here and Caroline (Garcia) won the WTA Tour championships," said Pegula.

"It doesn't really feel like I'm the highest (player) left, even though I guess that's a cool stat.

"It feels like there's still a long way to go, to be honest."

But, with seven of the top 10 women's seeds already knocked out before the second Monday of the tournament, Pegula accepted this could be her big chance.

"I mean, I have a great shot here," she said. "I've been playing the best I have than in any of my

other Grand Slam quarter-finals."

Pegula had an incredible 18 break-point opportunities across the two sets, mostly in the first, so was frustrated not to have clinched the win sooner.

"I had a few choice words towards my box in the first set," she laughed.

AFP

Coco Gauff breaks down in tears after defeat

Melbourne, Australia - Coco Gauff broke down in tears during an emotional press conference following her surprise exit from the Australian Open at the last-16 stage on Sunday.

The 18-year-old usually cuts a composed figure under the glare of the world's media, despite her tender age. But it all became too much when asked about the frustration she felt during her 7-5, 6-3 fourth-round defeat to Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko, the 2017 French Open champion.

"I worked really hard and I felt really good coming into the tournament, and I still feel good," Gauff told reporters.

"I still feel like I've improved a lot. But, you know, when you play a player like her and she plays really well, it's like there's nothing you can do."

The prodigiously talented American, who must now wait at least a bit longer for a first major crown, added: "I feel like today I would say nothing because every match you play a part in, but I feel like it was rough.

"So it's a little bit frustrating on



Coco Gauff (L) shakes hands with Jelena Ostapenko after the match

that part."

Her voice suddenly began to crack, the tears flowed and the teenager was offered a tissue, before saying: "I'm OK. We can keep going."

Gauff and Jessica Pegula, the women's doubles second seeds, will play for a place in the quarter-finals Monday against Miyu Kato

of Japan and Aldila Sutjiadi of Indonesia.

"I'm excited to play doubles. I think it gives me a chance to still be around and I definitely enjoy just competing in general," said Gauff.

"So I think it will help me (get over defeat), just let me play with some frustration."



Sebastian Korda exults after his victory against Hubert Hurkacz in the Australian Open round of 16 on Sunday (AFP)

Quick learner Korda claims another upset to march into Australian Open last eight

Melbourne, Australia - Giantkiller Sebastian Korda said that learning from his mistakes helped him surge into a maiden Grand Slam quarter-final on Sunday at the Australian Open.

The American 29th seed came through a rollercoaster 10-point deciding tiebreak to beat 10th seed Hubert Hurkacz 3-6, 6-3, 6-2, 1-6, 7-6 (10/7) on Rod Laver Arena.

He faces 18th-seeded Karen Khachanov next after the Russian crushed Yoshihito Nishioka 6-0, 6-0, 7-6 (7/4), incredibly winning the first 14 games before the

Japanese player woke up.

Korda, whose father Petr won the title in 1998, produced one of the performances of his career to upset two-time Australian Open finalist Daniil Medvedev in the third round.

After more heroics against Poland's Hurkacz, Korda said his displays were down to learning from previous blockbuster matches he had lost, including to Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic.

"I think I'm really good at just kind of moving forward, learning from my mistakes, what I've done in the past, then using them in

matches like this," he said.

"I've had a tough match with Rafa, serving for it a couple times. Match point with Djokovic. I think that really helped me, especially in the last match (in Melbourne) with Medvedev.

He had to dig deep to topple Hurkacz after a slow start.

The Pole took immediate charge on a hot day to break and race through the opening set.

But Korda came alive and hauled himself back into the contest, improving his first-serve percentage while cutting down on unforced errors. He worked a

break to move 3-2 clear and held on to take the second set.

With Hurkacz on the back foot, the American kept the pressure on and raced into a 4-0 lead in set three, but lost his focus as the fourth set got under way.

The Pole won five games in a row to take the match to a decider, where they went toe-to-toe until the drama-filled tiebreak.

Defeat was a bitter pill for Hurkacz, who was aiming to become the first Polish man to reach the Melbourne Park quarter-finals.

AFP



Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri at a press conference

Juventus reeling after transfer trial disaster

Milan, Italy - Juventus are in deep turmoil after being hit with a massive points deduction for what the Italian Football Federation ruled was transfer trickery on the part of the country's biggest football club.

Docked 15 points in Serie A, their sporting director Federico Cherubini banned for 16 months and facing a potential criminal trial into alleged accounting offences, Juve's season will now be dominated by off-field events.

Why were Juventus docked points?

Juve were found guilty of managing capital gains from transfers to artificially benefit their balance sheet.

It was a charge of which they and other clubs including Serie A leaders Napoli were cleared by the FIGC tribunal last year after it was ruled it was impossible to pin down the objective value of a footballer.

However prosecutors at the country's football federation (FIGC) convinced the governing body's tribunal to reopen the sporting trial on the basis of evidence from a separate criminal investigation carried out in Turin.

The FIGC won't publish for another 10 days the tribunal's reasoning for a points deduction which was even harsher than the nine requested by the prosecution.

But Italian media widely report that the documents from the criminal probe convinced the tribunal that there was systematic use of transfers to massage the club's accounts.

More courtroom drama looms

Juve will appeal the FIGC's decision at the country's highest sporting tribunal - at the Italian Olympic Committee - who within the next two

months will either uphold or throw out the sanctions handed down by the FIGC.

On March 27 a preliminary hearing will decide whether the club, which is quoted on the Italian stock market, and its former leadership will face criminal prosecution for a variety of accounting offences over the three seasons between 2018 and 2021.

Reportedly in their early stages are two more FIGC investigations into Juve's financial activity, one of which is into their alleged relationships with other clubs in gaming capital gains.

The other probe is into claims Juve lied about their players giving up salary payments during the Covid-19 pandemic, with criminal prosecutors saying the club privately assured players they would only miss out on a portion of what was publicly communicated.

Italian media report that Juve owe Cristiano Ronaldo nearly 20 million euros as part of that agreement.

European football's governing body UEFA are also investigating whether Juventus misled them in order to resolve breaches of Financial Fair Play rules with a "settlement agreement" in August last year.

Everything changes

Coach Massimiliano Allegri may have put a brave face on during Saturday's press conference ahead of their match with Atalanta, but his claim that "nothing changes" rings hollow when looking at the Serie A table.

The points penalty is not yet formally reflected in the league table but Juve were, as of Saturday night, de facto 28 points off the Scudetto pace and 12 away from the Champions League positions.

Warrior Bilal happy to rub shoulders with top stars

Oman pacer excited to play for Sharjah Warriors at inaugural ILT20 in the UAE

Muscat: Bilal Khan has been the main spearhead of Oman cricket team for the past few years. The 34-year-old fast medium pacer has been instrumental in many victories for Oman and is now set to showcase his mettle at the region's biggest T20 international franchise competition - the inaugural International League T20 (ILT20), which began on January 14.

Picked by Sharjah Warriors, one of the six franchises in the

Bilal, who is yet to feature in the team's playing XI, is hopeful of being picked in the forthcoming matches.

Sharjah Warriors, who meet Gulf Giants on Monday, have so far played three matches and are yet to open their account.

The tournament, which began on January 14, has managed to attract some of the biggest stars and has a lot to offer for the players.

With each team allowed to

The team includes some of the world's top stars and I am happy to be part of a team set-up that have greats like Moeen Ali, Marcus Stoinis and Chris Woakes

BILAL KHAN

ILT20, Bilal is the only Omani player to feature in the top-class international T20 league.

Having been with the squad since the start of the tournament began last week, Bilal said: "I am super excited to be part of the Sharjah Warriors squad. The team includes some of the world's top stars and I am happy to be part of a team set-up that have greats like Moeen Ali, Marcus Stoinis and Chris Woakes among others.

"It is a great learning curve for me. Rubbing shoulders with such stars definitely will improve my bowling skills."

pick nine overseas players, the ILT20 has given a good opportunity for cricketers from Associate Nations like Oman and Namibia.

Bilal said: "I have been working hard over the past many years and I am indebted to my national team coach Duleep Mendis, bowling coach Aavishkar Salvi and our trainer Evert for their full support.

"Sharjah Warriors head coach Paul Farbrace of England and team's bowling coach G Jayakumar of India have backed my bowling during the nets and practice games. I feel confident of producing a good spell for the



Bilal Khan

team in the upcoming games."

Bilal is not new to franchise cricket as he had in the past played in Afghanistan's Shpageeza Cricket League in 2017-18 and 2022 with Speenghar Tigers and Amo Sharks respectively.

For Bilal, the home ground in Sharjah brings back good memories as one of his three five-wicket match hauls in his ODI career was achieved at the same venue last year in a match against Namibia.

"I have very good memories of Sharjah cricket stadium. I hope to put up some strong performances if given a chance and I am looking forward to my first match with Warriors.

"I had played two practice games where I picked up two wickets so far. The coaches are happy with me and I am proud of the fact that I am playing along with world-class stars," said Bilal.

Warriors is a Capri-Global-owned Sharjah-based franchise and also includes England's Danny Briggs and Dawid Malan, Afghanistan quartet Mohammad Nabi, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Noor Ahmad and Naveen Ul Haq, and West Indies' Evin Lewis.

The six-team franchise-style league is being played over a 34-match schedule at Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. The final is scheduled to be played on February 12, 2023.

Rising star Vitidsarn stuns Axelsen to clinch India Open badminton title

New Delhi, India - Thailand's rising star Kunlavut Vitidsarn stunned top seed Viktor Axelsen to clinch the India Open badminton title with a 22-20, 10-21, 21-12 victory in the Sunday final.

In the women's singles, South Korea's An Se-young beat world number one Akane Yamaguchi of Japan in New Delhi to avenge her loss at the Malaysia Open final last week.

Vitidsarn's men's singles victory stood out as the 21-year-old former junior world champion got past the Danish ace and world number one for the first time in six attempts.

Vitidsarn, seeded eighth, proved his semi-final victory over Anthony Sinisuka Ginting of Indonesia was not a flash in the pan as he made Axelsen work for every point and won most of the long rallies.

"From my earlier losses against Viktor, I had learnt that if I could engage him in long rallies and take the match to the decider then I have a chance to



Thailand's Kunlavut Vitidsarn poses with his medal after defeating Denmark's Viktor Axelsen in the final of the Yonex Sunrise India Open in New Delhi on Sunday (AFP)

win," said Vitidsarn, who lost the World Championships final to Axelsen last year.

"The plan was adapting as we played along. I played without much pressure but the main plan

was to attack. I gave it whatever I had." Axelsen, who won the

Malaysia open title, bounced back after a close opening game but Vitidsarn kept his calm to win his first major Super Series crown since he won the German Open (Super 300) last year.

The 29-year-old Axelsen urged sports officials to keep players' health in mind when scheduling back-to-back tournaments in different time zones.

An bounced back from a game down to beat Yamaguchi 15-21, 21-16, 21-12 in a 62-minute battle of the Super 750 event.

Yamaguchi, who was the top seed and had beaten An in Kuala Lumpur last Sunday, conceded she made too many errors.

"In the first game I controlled the rallies and so did my opponent, but from the second game An increased her movement speed," Yamaguchi told reporters through an interpreter.

Yuta Watanabe and Arisa Higashino won the mixed doubles title, while Nami Matsuyama and Chiharu Shida won the women's doubles crown.

Spain's Rahm shares PGA American Express lead with rookie Thompson

Los Angeles, United States - World number four Jon Rahm, chasing his second US PGA Tour title in as many weeks, shares the lead with rookie Davis Thompson heading into the final round of the American Express Tournament.

Fourth-ranked Spaniard Rahm sounded supremely confident after firing an eagle and six birdies on Saturday in a seven-under par 65 to pull level with overnight leader Thompson on 23-under 193 at La Quinta, California.

Thompson, a former amateur standout at the University

of Georgia and a winner on the Korn Ferry developmental tour, carded a five-under par 67 to keep himself squarely in the hunt for a first PGA Tour title.

"Nothing but positive. That's all I can say," said former US Open champion Rahm, who won this title in 2018.

"Ball striking felt amazing. Hit a lot of great shots out there off the tee. Giving myself a lot of opportunities with the irons. Took advantage of quite a few of them."

Even some difficulties on the greens coming in - most notably a three-putt bogey at the par-



Jon Rahm putts during the third round of the American Express Tournament in La Quinta, California, on Saturday (AFP)

three 17th - didn't dampen Rahm's confidence, although he said he knew another low score would be needed on the Stadium Course, where the final round will be held after the first three rounds were spread over three courses.

Rahm, who opened 2023 with a come-from-behind victory in the Tournament of Champions in Hawaii this month, walked off the 18th with the lead, even though he couldn't get a 12-foot birdie putt to drop at the last.

He had expected Thompson, who piled up a US tour record-

equalling five eagles over the first two rounds - to regain the top spot.

But the 23-year-old American, who had five birdies in his first 12 holes but dropped out of a tie for the lead with a bogey at the 14th, found only one more birdie coming in - rolling in a four-footer at the 16th at the Stadium Course.

"I was really proud with how I stayed patient," Thompson said. "I didn't really force anything. Made a bad bogey on 14, but came back and birdied 16, so it was a good way to finish." AFP

NORMAL SERVICE RESUMES

Goal machine Erling Haaland scores hat-trick as Manchester City tame Wolves to put pressure on leaders Arsenal

Manchester, United Kingdom - Erling Haaland's fourth hat-trick in 19 Premier League appearances hauled Manchester City to within two points of leaders Arsenal with a 3-0 win over Wolves on Sunday.

Pep Guardiola got the reaction he was hoping for from the English champions after questioning their hunger to retain the title after Thursday's 4-2 win over Tottenham.

The hosts had to come from 2-0 down in a dramatic second half against Spurs, but there was little mystery over the destination of the three points once Haaland had broken Wolves' resistance five minutes before half-time.

Haaland's scoring rate has slowed marginally in recent weeks, but his header from Kevin De Bruyne's cross moved him level with the 23 league goals that saw Mohamed Salah and Son Heung-min share the Golden Boot with last season.

The 22-year-old took his tally to 30 goals in all competitions from the penalty spot early in the second half after Ilkay Gundogan had been upended by Ruben Neves.

Wolves then gifted Haaland his hat-trick just four minutes later as goalkeeper Jose Sa presented the ball to Riyad Mahrez, who unselfishly squared for his

teammate to roll into an unguarded net.

Guardiola quickly took the chance to give his star striker a rest as Haaland was replaced on the hour mark by Julian Alvarez to Wolves' relief.

City should still have inflicted further punishment on Julen Lopetegui's men.

Mahrez just failed to hold his run as he was flagged offside after dinking in De Bruyne's

Leeds edged one point clear of the bottom three after a 0-0 draw to Brentford

through ball before Gundogan headed a glorious chance over.

But three goals were more than enough for the three points to put pressure on Arsenal ahead of their clash at home to Manchester United later on Sunday.

Just a second league defeat since Lopetegui took charge leaves Wolves still outside the relegation zone only on goal difference.

Leeds edged one point clear of the bottom three, but remain without a league win since November after a 0-0 draw at home to Brentford.



Manchester City's Erling Haaland scores against Wolves in their English Premier League match at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester on Sunday (AFP)

Griezmann shines in Atletico romp, Sevilla snatch win

Madrid, Spain - Atletico Madrid produced one of their best performances of the season to defeat Real Valladolid 3-0 on Saturday, with Memphis Depay making his debut.

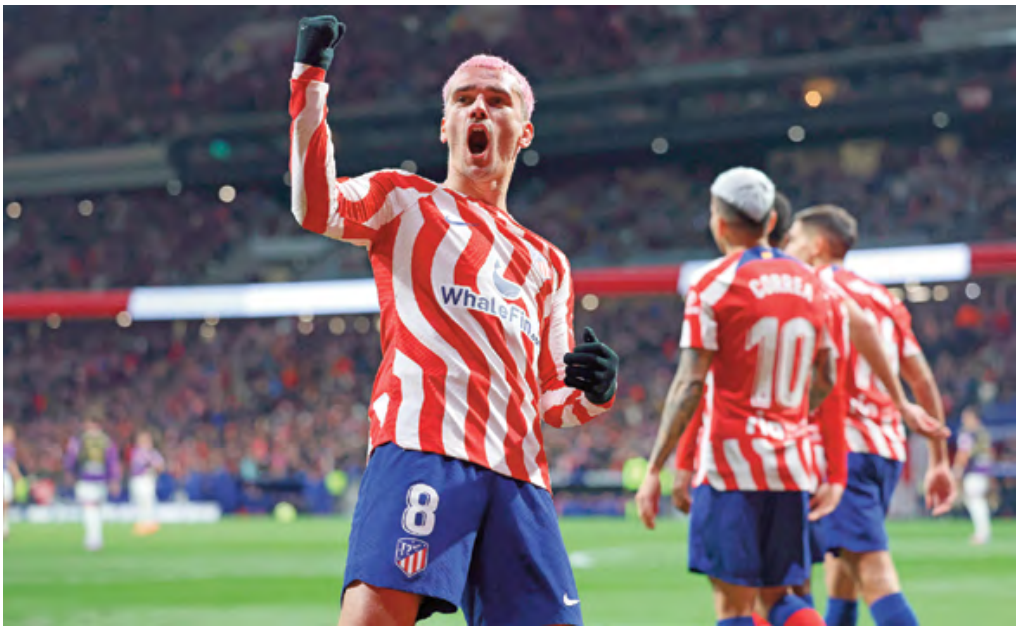
Real Sociedad, third, continued their fine form with a 2-0 win at Rayo Vallecano, while struggling Sevilla snatched a 1-0 win over Cadiz with a late Ivan Rakitic penalty.

Atletico's new Dutch forward Depay, signed from Barcelona on Friday, came off the bench in the second half but by then Antoine Griezmann's virtuoso display had the hosts in full control at the Metropolitano.

The French forward produced a sublime assist for Alvaro Morata to open the scoring and then struck the second himself.

Mario Hermoso netted the third from the rebound after his header from Griezmann's free-kick was parried back into his path.

Those three goals in an 11-



Atletico Madrid's Antoine Griezmann celebrates after scoring against Real Valladolid in their Spanish league match at the Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on Saturday (AFP)

minute spell in the first half wrapped up the points for fourth-placed Atletico.

Diego Simeone's team have endured a tough season both in the league and also in Europe,

where they were eliminated, but earned a second win in seven league games to get heading back in the right direction.

On Thursday they face rivals Real Madrid in the Copa del Rey

quarter-finals, important both as a derby but also their last realistic chance of silverware this season.

"I'm very happy, very pleased with the team's performance," Griezmann told DAZN.

"We have been doing well since the World Cup, playing with intensity, hard work, having chances, but we lacked a goal.

"That was largely my fault, because I was having chances but couldn't get it in. This goal will help me a lot mentally to get scoring again."

The victory brings Atletico within 10 points of leaders Barcelona, albeit having played two extra games.

Real Sociedad beat Rayo Vallecano earlier Saturday to pull level on 38 points with Real Madrid.

Sevilla climbed out of the relegation zone with a tight win over 19th place Cadiz at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan. Their coach Jorge Sampaoli was sent off for dissent in the second half with the game goalless.

Sevilla had chances but could not convert them, until Rakitic slotted home from the penalty spot with two minutes to go.

AFP

Napoli ease past Salernitana to move 12 points clear

Milan, Italy - Napoli further extended their grip on the Serie A title race on Saturday by beating local rivals Salernitana 2-0 to temporarily move 12 points ahead of the chasing pack.

Goals from Giovanni Di Lorenzo and Victor Osimhen immediately either side of half-time made sure that Napoli will be at least nine points clear at the halfway point of the season after the win in soaking Salerno.

Luciano Spalletti's side now have to wait until their closest rivals AC Milan take on Champions League-chasing Lazio in Rome on Tuesday to know just how far in front they will be after collecting 50 points in 19 matches.

That is a remarkable return for a club which allowed important players to leave in the summer and whose fans were in open re-

volt against owner Aurelio De Laurentiis.

"We've had a great first half of the season. We lost so many big players in the close season but managed to bring together a new group which has started really strongly," Di Lorenzo told DAZN.

Inter Milan are a further point behind their city rivals and will move provisionally into second place if they beat Empoli on Monday.

Napoli do not have to worry about Juventus who had been ahead of Inter on goal difference but were docked 15 points on Friday for illicit use of transfers to boost their balance sheet.

Save the ruling being overturned on appeal later this year, Juve are out of the race, making Napoli's bid for a first league crown since 1990 that much simpler.

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‘AQUAMAN’
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Jason Momoa, Sébastien Lépinard, Julie Lépinard, director Matthieu Rytz, and Annie Roney attend the 2023 Sundance Film Festival *Deep Rising* premiere at The Ray Theatre

He is best known as hunky, sea-dwell-ing superhero *Aquaman*, but actor Jason Momoa brought a stark and sober warning about the perils of deep-sea mining to the Sundance film festival on Friday.

The Hawaiian-born A-listers narrates *Deep Rising*, a new documentary about the frenzied efforts by resource-hungry corporations to scrape valuable metals from vast swathes of the Pacific floor.

Supporters of deep-sea mining claim that pellets of nickel and cobalt - used in electric car batteries - can be conveniently scooped off the seabed, helping reduce our fossil fuel reliance. But conservation groups and scientists fear this could devastate poorly understood marine systems that play a crucial role in regulating the climate, and some nations have called for bans.

"There were moments when I cried and got emotional" narrating the film, Momoa told AFP, before its world premiere at the festival in Utah. "It's very important, using your power for good. It's all the things I'm passionate about," added the actor, who took marine biology courses as a student, and is a UN Environment Programme advocate for the oceans.

The documentary follows key players in the fledgling industry including The Metals Company, a Canadian group pushing to mine the Clarion Clipperton Zone - a vast expanse of seafloor near Hawaii.

The film goes behind-the-scenes as its chief executive Gerard Barron courts wealthy investors with promises that little harm will be done to 'the most barren, desolate part of the planet,' in contrast to the devastation that ongoing mining is causing rainforests.

Deep Rising director Matthieu Rytz, however, told AFP, "We know so little" (about the real risk to the deep ocean). "Extraction on the seafloor, it's just a rush, because we don't have enough science to really understand what's happening there," he said.

The new oil

Still, The Metals Company has said it expects to be mining 10 million tonnes of material from the ocean floor every year, starting in 2025. And it is just one of about 20 research institutes or corporations that hold ocean exploration contracts, awaiting the go-ahead to begin commercial-scale mining.

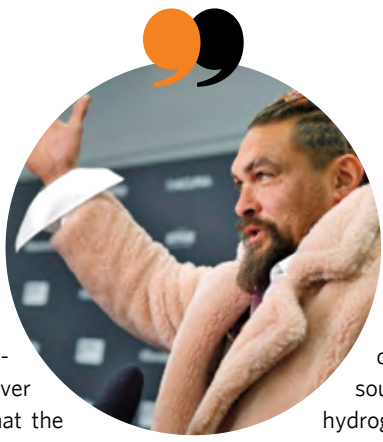
TROUBLE



Sandor Mulsow, Jason Momoa, and director Matthieu Rytz attend the 2023 Sundance Film Festival *Deep Rising*

There were moments when I cried and got emotional. It's very important, using your power for good. *It's all the things I'm passionate about*

JASON MOMOA



Rytz's film argues that the energy crisis has no 'silver bullet', and that the brewing race to harvest critical metals is not a solution but 'the new oil', and could trigger future resource wars.

It shows meetings of the International Seabed Authority, described by Rytz as an 'obscure room in Kingston, Jamaica' where delegates decide the future of 65 per cent of the planet's surface.

"This is beyond national jurisdiction. It's the high seas," said Rytz. "It belongs to all of us or none of us."

Rytz speaks in the film with scientists who argue that alter-

native clean, more abundant energy sources such as hydrogen should be explored for car engines, or that transport options such as high-speed rail should be expanded.

"We don't need these metals in the first place," he said. "The places we're going to be mining, it's total damage. There's no half damage. It's like clear-cutting a rainforest."

For Momoa watching the film, "You're supposed to question things. You're supposed to sit down and have breakfast, talk about stuff, and say, 'We need to rethink everything'."

AFP

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Tens of millions in China headed to their rural hometowns for Lunar New Year celebrations over the weekend, though President Xi Jinping said he was 'concerned' about the countryside's ability to weather a COVID-19 surge.

China's transport authorities have predicted that more than two billion trips will be made this month into February in one of the world's largest mass movements of people. But the exodus from big cities hit hard by COVID-19 was widely expected to cause a spike in cases in under-resourced rural areas.

Officials have said that 480 million people have travelled across the country since January 7, a huge increase compared with the same period last year. There were huge crowds on Thursday at central train stations in Beijing and Shanghai, where many travellers told AFP they were elated to be heading home - some for the first time in years.

"I don't care anymore, that's how I feel," a Shanghai-based worker called Chen, heading home to the southeastern city of Wenzhou, told AFP. "Last year I was so careful, and this year I feel much braver," she said.

"I haven't been home for three years," said Ren, an agent representing social media influencers. "Because of COVID-19, my salary hasn't been that high, and sometimes I don't even get to go to work. I wanted to be with my family. It doesn't matter if I have money or not, I want to go see them."

Others appeared more concerned about the coronavirus, with two young women in their 20s wearing hazmat suits.

"We're a bit worried the virus will be more transmissible during the Chinese New Year travel rush," one said. "Since we're going home, we're worried it'll affect our families, that's why we bought (hazmat suits)."

Gloomy emotions

China's leader has expressed similar concern about the impact of the outbreak on rural areas during the holidays.

"Xi said he was primarily concerned about

TENS OF MILLIONS IN CHINA, THROWING CAUTION TO THE WINDS, HEAD HOME TO CELEBRATE THE CHINESE NEW YEAR



Women of the Miao ethnic minority prepare decorations ahead of the 'Lunar New Year of the Rabbit' in Danzhai county, Qiongdongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture



Passengers arrive in large numbers at Hankou railway station, in Wuhan, in Hubei province

I haven't been home for three years. Because of COVID-19, my salary hasn't been that high, and sometimes I don't even get to go to work. I wanted to be with my family. It doesn't matter if I have money or not, I want to go see them

REN

official statistics are no longer believed to accurately reflect the scale of the outbreak.

Airfinity also estimated that more than 600,000 people have died from the disease since China abandoned the zero-Covid policy.

The Britain-based research firm has said its model is based on data from China's regional provinces before changes to reporting infections were implemented, combined with case growth rates from other former zero-Covid countries when they lifted restrictions.

AFP

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