

Maternity leave to be 98 days soon

Sayyid Theyazin presides over 'Together we Progress' forum

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is set to increase paid maternity leave to 98 days from the current 50 in the new Social Protection Law, the draft of which the Council of Ministers recently approved for referral to the Council of Oman.

Under the groundbreaking law, the social protection system will bear the cost of the leave, not the employer. "This will address the issue of gender bias, which is being reported while hiring women," said Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Secretary-General of Ministry of Finance, on Sunday.

Speaking at the 'Together we Progress' forum, which Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, presided over, Jashmi touched on the preliminary results of the Medium-Term Fiscal



Last year, RO200mn was added to the budget for development projects, and another RO200mn was added this year

DR KHAMIS AL JABRI

Plan, including restructuring of pension funds, and the drop in break-even oil price to US\$68 per barrel in the 2021-2025 period, compared to US\$80 during 2016-2020.

Organised by the Secretariat General of Council of Ministers, the forum reviewed government policies and priorities in different sectors and discussed these with representatives of various seg-

ments and groups of society.

The forum also discussed the government's policies in Oman Vision 2040 and various measures taken in light of global economic challenges and mechanisms for dealing with the employment issue.

Sayyid Theyazin affirmed that he was happy with the forum's discussions and listening to the questions raised by participants.

Sheikh al Fadhl bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary-General

of the Council of Ministers, said, "The forum was organised under the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik as a result of his keenness to strengthen communication between the government and society."

Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, made a visual presentation of the components of the vision document, which has four main areas, 12 national priorities, 12 strategic directions, 75 strategic goals, and 68 national and international performance indicators.

He added that a team from the Ministry of Economy and the National Centre for Statistics and Information is reviewing the international and national indicators on which Oman Vision 2040 works.

"As a result of the improvement in oil prices and the overall financial situation, development projects have begun to return to normal. Last year, RO200mn was added to the budget for development projects, and another RO200mn was added this year."

RO400 minimum wage under review: MoL

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) is studying a move to raise the minimum wage to the RO360-RO400 range, according to H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour.

Speaking at the 'Together we Progress' forum, H E Ba'owain said, "We are currently reviewing the minimum wage. We have sent an initial draft to the Secretariat General of the Council of Ministers. The hike in the minimum wage depends on the average of monthly wages and the annual inflation rate and it may range between RO360 and RO400."

Currently, regardless of qualification, Omani workers are paid a minimum salary of RO325. "Our goal is not to reduce wages. This is purely an economic matter based on supply and demand," H E Ba'owain added.

According to him, the ministry will launch 'Khatwa', the first na-



H E Dr Mahad Ba'owain

tional interactive electronic platform that provides students and jobseekers specialised counselling services and comprehensive data on study programmes in higher education and employment opportunities.

Regarding layoffs and promotions, he said these can happen in the private sector only in the presence of all parties involved, in accordance with clear legal controls. "The ministry, in coordination with the Ministry of Finance, is currently studying the issue related to late promotions of 2013 to 2018 batches."

Sayyid Asaad bids farewell to US ambassador

Muscat - On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Co-operation Affairs, and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, received in his office on Sunday Leslie M Tsou, Am-

bassador of the United States of America to the Sultanate of Oman, to bid her farewell at the end of her tour of duty.

The ambassador expressed gratitude for His Majesty the Sultan's support during her tour of duty. She also conveyed her appreciation of the Omani gov-

ernment and people.

She wished His Majesty good health, happiness and a long life, and the sultanate further development and growth under the wise leadership of His Majesty.

On his turn, Sayyid Asaad expressed his appreciation for the efforts exerted by the ambassa-

dor in serving bilateral relations. He also wished her success and the American people further progress and prosperity.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary-General and the two advisors at the Office of Sayyid Asaad.

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Heavy rains likely in three governorates, warns CAA

Our Correspondent Muscat

A low pressure affecting Oman will bring heavy rains and thunderstorms in the governorates of Dhofar, Al Wusta and South Sharqiyah from Monday until Tuesday morning. The downpour may range between 20mm to 100mm in the three governorates, with chances of isolated rain over the rest of the governorates. With the prediction of heavy

rains, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) called on everyone to take precautions during thunderstorms, not to cross wadis, avoid low areas, and not venture into the sea during the warning period. The National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre of the Directorate General of Meteorology stated that Oman will be affected by a low-pressure trough starting on Sunday and lasting till Thursday. A statement issued by CAA

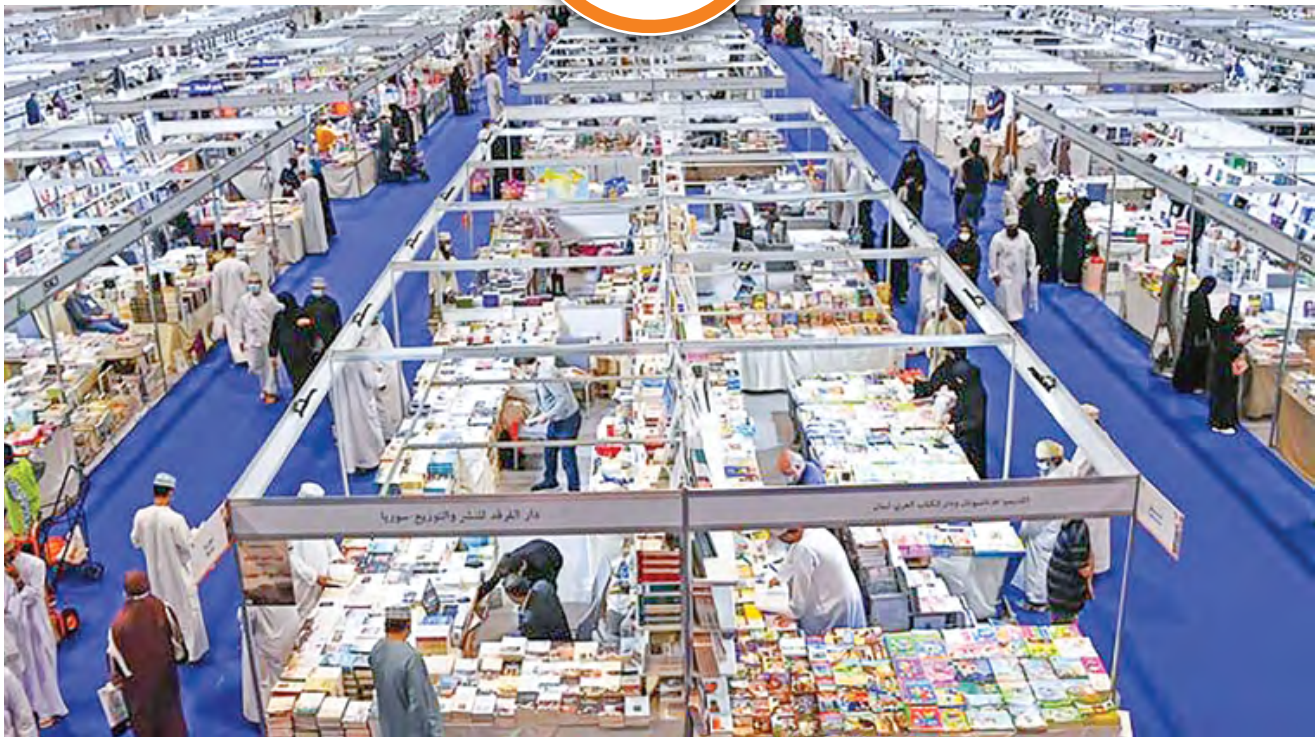
said, 'The low pressure may lead to rains and thunderstorms associated with downdraft winds and hail with chances of flash floods over some parts of Oman, particularly over South Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar.' Horizontal visibility may reduce during thundershowers to less than 1,000m, it added. Sea state will be moderate to rough with maximum wave height ranging from 1.5m to 3m along the coasts of the Arabian Sea and South Sharqiya governorate.

Agreement signed for joint programme to develop Oman Innovate Platform

Muscat - The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, Oman Information and Communication Technology Group (ITHCA Group) and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology will jointly conduct a programme to develop the digi-

tal platform for Oman's National Innovation System. The deal for this cooperation programme was signed by H E Dr Saif Abdullah al Hadabi, Undersecretary for Research and Innovation, MoHERI; H E Dr Ali Amer al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communication and In-

formation Technology in MTCIT; and Eng Said Abdullah al Mandhari, CEO of ITHCA; during the meeting of the steering committee of Oman Innovate Platform on Sunday. The programme also aims to benefit from global experiences in this field.



READ AND BE FREE FOREVER

The more we read, the more things we know; the more we learn, the more places we go. Books have a profound impact on our lives and to encourage the habit of reading, Oman organises an annual international book fair in Muscat. This year marked the 27th edition of Muscat International Book Fair held from February 22 to March 4 at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Among other highlights, this year the fair hosted 826 publishing houses from 32 countries that presented 533,063 titles and publications, 5,900 of which were new publications, 260,614 Arabic and 204,411 non-Arabic books.

Reading is a habit cultivated over years. Should Muscat International Book Fair be held twice a year to continue encouraging the habit of reading among people?

Nasser al Rawahi Teacher

Muscat International Book Fair should be a month-long event, which is better than holding it twice a year. This will be an opportunity for everyone to read, exchange experiences and attend fruitful cultural and literary seminars.

Mehar Zabin Private sector employee

As Richard Steele rightly said, "Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body." Reading presents an opportunity to the mind to unleash its hidden powers of comprehension, extensive thinking and creative imagination. While books open a doorway to explore new horizons of both fiction and reality, a book fair is a place where this fondness for books gains sanctuary. Book fairs help develop an attachment to a variety of books; these lead people to come together and share their love for books unabashedly.

Mohtesan Maqsood Private sector employee

Yes, it should be held twice a year to encourage the habit of reading among Omanis and expatriates. Also, more organisers and publishers need to get involved in the book fair to increase the number of good books, including English novels and motivational books.

Nayab Anjum Private sector employee

Yes definitely, the book fair should be held twice every year because of its benefit to society. Youngsters will get a chance to widen their horizons and discover new areas of interest. It will also provide an opportunity to new authors to attract audi-

ences to kick off their career.

Bashar Iqbal Student

Having a book fair twice a year can encourage reading habits by providing more opportunities for people to discover new books and authors. It can also create a sense of community among book lovers. Having a book fair twice a year will have positive effects on individuals and communities by enriching people's lives through literature.

Munazzah Zainab Homemaker

The book fair can be held twice a year but that will not guarantee that people are going to read. We all have been guilty of going to a book fair, purchasing a book and never reading it. Reading is a habit which is built over time and just a book fair cannot cultivate it.

Alina Anwer Private sector employee

In this digital era, adults, teens and children are stuck to phones and aren't aware of the surroundings. Books help to relax, increase imagination, build vocabulary, and learn about history and culture. So it is necessary to organise as many book fairs as possible.

Kiran Choudhury Homemaker

The book fair should be held twice a year - once as per the current schedule and the second time after the final exams are over. This will encourage reading which has to be developed among all as it is one of best hobbies. Electronic devices are no match for books.

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Companies specialized in the field and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link: (https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender Number	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
2023/MM/HQ-6 (PRE/21/097)	Rehabilitation of Internal Roads at Al Udhaibis & Al Ghubra	40	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	First
2023/MM/QS-13 (PRE/23/010)	Paving Work at Embassies Area (Interlock)	25	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	(SME) Third
2023/MM/QS-14 (PRE/23/024)	Supply of Autodesk Softwares	25	26/03/2023	03/04/2023	Excellent
2023/MM/HQ- 7 (PRE/23/039)	Cleaning Works at Willayat Muttrah	25	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	Specialist
2023/MM/QS-15 (PRE/23/041)	Rehabilitation project for the front yard of kalboubh Park	25	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	(SME) Second
2023/MMQS-16 (PRE/23/049)	Supply shoes and Personal Protection Tools for workers in various Units of Muscat Municipality	25	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	Specialist
2023/MMQS-17 (PRE/23/057)	Supply of Tires (Re-tender)	25	08/04/2023	27/04/2023	Specialist
2023/MM/HQ-8 (PRE/23/058)	Supply and Install of Playground Equipment, , Benches, Litter Bins for Bousher Park	25	26/03/2023	03/04/2023	Specialist

Tender Conditions :-

1- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.

- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
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? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

Ramadan is a time when there is an acute shortage of blood donors. How can people be encouraged to donate more?

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.

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Fak Kurbah starts 2023 campaign for prisoners

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Fak Kurbah initiative organised by Omani Lawyers' Association has launched its 2023 campaign to help raise funds to secure the release of individuals jailed in Oman for non-criminal offences.

Launched on Friday, this year the initiative will continue till mid-April.

In 2022, the number of insolvent persons set free from jail by Fak Kurbah was 1,035, compared to 749 in 2021.

Sayyid Muhammad bin Hamoud al Busaidi, Vice-President of Supreme Judicial Council, said, "We are launching the tenth edition of Fak Kurbah this year in efforts to help those in distress with the help of the generosity and benevolence of the Omani people."

Launching this year's edition of Fak Kurbah, Dr Mohammed al Zadjali, Chairman of Omani Lawyers' Association, said, "We are keen to develop this initiative



The initiative has helped 4,969 insolvent individuals who were imprisoned or were about to be imprisoned. The generous people of our society gave them a hand and helped them stand again

DR MOHAMMED AL ZADJALI



and its scope by introducing an online donation platform."

According to Zadjali, the initiative represents social solidarity and harmony. "The previous editions of Fak Kurbah revealed the significance of cooperation and solidarity in helping those in distress, and those going through

hardships and difficulties. The generous people of our society gave them a hand and helped them stand again."

In order to develop the initiative, and make it easily accessible to donors, a website - <https://www.fakkrba.om> - has been launched for online dona-

tions. Direct bank account transfer continues as an option.

"Over the past years, the initiative has helped 4,969 insolvent individuals who were imprisoned or were about to be imprisoned," Zadjali added.

Held under the slogan 'Because we believe everyone deserves a second chance,' the initiative aims to collect donations to secure the release those who have been imprisoned due to financial, civil, commercial or labour claims.

"Omani Lawyers' Association looks forward to transforming the humanitarian initiative into a sustainable project that operates throughout the year through its own administrative staff," Zadjali said, revealing future plans.



(Supplied photo)

Pact inked to provide interactive screens in schools in North Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education signed a cooperation agreement with Asyad Ports to finance purchase of interactive screens for several schools in Suwaiq, North Batinah on Sunday.

H E Majid bin Said al Bahri, Undersecretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs in the ministry, attended the agreement signing.

The agreement was signed by Dr Waleed bin Talib al Hashemi, Director General of Directorate General of Education in North Batinah Governorate, and Faisal bin Ali al Balushi, Director Gen-

This partnership with the education sector is part of the company's mission to serve the community for its advancement

FAISAL BIN ALI
AL BALUSHI

eral of Commercial Affairs in Asyad Ports.

On the occasion, Hashemi said, "Signing of this agreement is realisation of the partnership between the Directorate General

of Education in North Batinah and the private sector, which will enhance teaching facilities in schools, and support modern educational methods in line with Oman Vision 2040."

On his part, Balushi said, "This partnership with the education sector is part of the company's mission to serve the community for its advancement. It's a pleasure to provide this support to the Directorate General of Education in North Batinah, and we hope that this partnership achieves the goals and visions it was set for, the most important of which is the development and enhancement of students' abilities and the educational process."

Second edition of EA's six-month Turtle Commando Programme concludes

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) concluded the second edition of the Turtle Commando Programme, a project to protect endangered turtles and preserve Oman's biodiversity, on Sunday.

The concluding ceremony was held under the auspices of

Dr Yahya Badr al Maawali, Governor of South Sharqiyah.

The programme aimed to encourage youth to volunteer for environmental causes, rid beaches of fishing and plastic waste, conduct workshops to find solutions to the factors threatening turtles, educate participants about the importance of turtles and in turn transfer the



(Supplied photo)

knowledge to the community.

More than 270 volunteers from Oman and abroad participated in the programme, which lasted six months.

Participants worked at two locations - Ras al Hadd and Masirah Island - during the turtle nesting and hatching seasons.

The programme achieved several set objectives, including

completion of 16,369 campaigns and awareness activities on the importance of sea turtles, environmental laws and guidelines.

The Turtle Commando Programme emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to travel restrictions, the number of international tourists fell but domestic tourism flourished, leading to overcrowding in turtle reserves.

While there were a large number of visitors to watch turtles nest and baby turtles hatch, there were few observers to instruct on the rules and regulations of the reserves. This led to irregularities and exposing turtles to risks in the reserves in the past two years. The programme aimed to find effective solutions to meet these challenges.

Nine countries take part in open karate championship in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Martial artists from nine countries took part in the 6th Open Karate Pioneers Academy Championship that concluded at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, Bausher on Saturday.

The championship was one of the biggest karate events in the country with participation of 335 male and female karatekas representing 27 clubs, academies and private centres from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and the United Kingdom, besides Oman.

The two-day event was held under the auspices of Hon Saleh Zakwani, Member of State Council and Chairman of Omani British Friendship Association, in the presence of Salem bin Hamad al Mahrouqi, Chairman of Oman Karate Committee, and Al Shee-



(V K Shafeer)

han Muhammad Bahrami, President of Japan Shotokan Karate Association for Asia.

Ahmed bin Saeed al Zakwani, President of championship organiser Karate Pioneers Academy, said, "I express my sincere thanks, appreciation and respect

for all referees and participating clubs' staff, including administrators, coaches, players and their parents for their cooperation for the advancement of the sport of karate."

Competitions were held in various categories based on

karatekas' age and weight in kata and kumite.

Al Qudra Karate Club from Oman bagged the championship. Ali Main Karate Club and The Champ, also from Oman, were placed second and third respectively.

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Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Euro area annual inflation at 8.5% in February

Annual inflation in the eurozone stood at 8.5 per cent in February, according to final data released on Friday. The rate dipped slightly from January's 8.6 per cent, but was still well above 5.9 per cent in February 2022, Eurostat reported. Food, alcohol and tobacco had the largest contribution to the main reading (up 3.10 percentage points), followed by services (up 2.02 percentage points), non-energy industrial goods (up 1.74 percentage points), and energy (up 1.64 percentage points). On a monthly basis, consumer prices increased 0.8 per cent in February. Annual consumer inflation in the EU was at 9.9 per cent in February, edging down from 10 per cent in January.

GCC banks resilient to risks from US bank failures: Rating agencies

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Substantial volatility in stock markets across the globe, including in the GCC, has followed the failure of US-based Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank, and investors are increasingly worried about the contagion risks from US bank failures. However, global credit rating agencies, S&P Global Ratings and Moody's Investor Service, have assured that most banks in the GCC countries are resilient to US banks' distress and can effectively manage contagion risks.

Limited exposure

Responding to investors' questions on the potential impact of US bank failures on rated GCC banks, S&P in a report said that the majority of GCC banks' US exposure is lower than five per cent of total assets. On average, the banks that S&P rates in the GCC had an exposure of 4.6 per cent of assets and 2.3 per cent of liabilities at the year-end 2022, reflecting exposure ranging from zero to 22 per cent and 11.4 per cent, respectively. 'Five of the 19 banks we rate in



the region have more than 5 per cent of their assets in the US, while four had more than 5 per cent of liabilities to counterparties in the US. Generally, GCC banks would have limited lending activity in the US and most of their assets there would be in high-credit quality instruments or with the US Federal Reserve Bank,' S&P noted. On March 12, the US regulators closed Signature Bank, just two days after shutting SVB, following mass withdrawals of customer deposits from these US regional banks. The events have shaken investor confidence and will likely lead to tightening liquidity across global debt markets. Moody's said that the impact of US banks' distress will likely be

limited for most rated GCC banks as their broad franchises and large government presence on banks' balance sheet shields their financial performance from shocks. Moody's also noted that GCC banks are not materially exposed to the failed US banks and are not as susceptible to large losses from held-to-maturity debt securities. 'The spillover effects of the US bank distress are still developing, however,' it added. However, S&P said that GCC banks' US portfolios have contributed to unrealised losses but the overall amount appears manageable, in its view. 'In light of the banks' good funding and liquidity profiles and expected government support in case of need, the chance of GCC



banks having to sell meaningful volumes of investment securities appears limited. Nevertheless, if they did, and all unrealised losses crystallised, the impact would be on profitability rather than on capitalisation for the majority of rated banks, in our view,' S&P said. Moreover, the rating agency sees funding as a relative strength for most GCC banking systems. It said, 'Core customer deposits are GCC banks' main funding source and we do not foresee this changing in the next few years. Deposits have displayed a high degree of stability through numerous shocks.' According to S&P, banks in Bahrain and Oman continue to display a moderate external debt position. It said, 'We do not fore-

see any major refinancing risk, however, barring a liquidity freeze on the international capital markets. Banks in the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia remain in a net asset position, and we expect they can manage their balance sheets if the rollover rate of their gross external debt declines.' Government support Both rating agencies view GCC governments as highly supportive toward their respective banking system, in case of need. S&P said, 'We expect extraordinary support to be forthcoming to these banking systems in case of need. These countries have a strong track record of supporting their banking systems in times of stress.'

According to Moody's, GCC banks are strongly interlinked with their respective sovereigns. For the most part, the footprint of governments in the region can be found right across banks' balance sheets - as borrowers, depositors and as main shareholders, creating a supportive and interlinked operating environment. Most GCC governments are highly rated by the rating agencies. The governments maintain equity stakes in the banking systems, both directly and indirectly through public-sector institutions, pension funds and companies. Governments, as Moody's said, anchor the GCC banks' funding profiles through inflows of stable deposits, which have increased thanks to higher oil-related government revenues in 2022. 'They also provide lending opportunities to GCC banks, that are playing a pivotal role in implementing the governments' economic diversification agendas. All these factors ensure GCC banks remain core to the regional economies and will protect them against sudden market shocks,' the rating agency added.

Oil prices drop 10% during last week

London, UK - Oil prices fluctuated in a highly volatile market posting around 10 per cent decline in the week ending March 17, over fears that a global banking crisis would weigh on the demand outlook. International benchmark Brent crude was trading at US\$74.73 per barrel at 11:41GMT on Friday, posting a 9.52 per cent fall from the Monday session that opened at US\$82.60 a barrel. The American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) registered at US\$68.69 per barrel at the same time on Friday, decreasing 10.32 per cent relative to the opening price of US\$76.60 a barrel on Monday. Prices have posted their lowest level, trading near 15-month lows, with Brent trading between US\$71.67 a barrel and US\$83.48 a barrel, while WTI between US\$65.65 a barrel and US\$77.47 a barrel. 'The drivers for the recent price declines are financial contagion risk and to some degree



trader positioning," Bob McNally, the founder and president of US-based Rapidan Energy, told Anadolu Agency. Both benchmarks started the week on a bearish note on the back of a weak dollar after the sudden collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank. Despite the US Administra-

tion's efforts to assure the safety of the depositors' assets, prices continued their decline through the week over investors' worry about the spillover effect of the US banking sector crisis. Also, the ECB decision to increase its policy rate by 50 basis points to 3.5 per cent on Thursday exerted some downward

pressure on prices, increasing expectations for a similar move in the US. However, oil prices experienced some upward movements with economic recovery expectations in China, the world's largest oil importing country. In its monthly oil report, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries said China's reopening following the lifting of the strict zero-COVID-19 policy, is expected to add considerable momentum to global economic growth. A larger than expected rise in US oil inventories also added to downward pressures on oil prices. US commercial crude oil inventories rose by around 1.6mn barrels to 480.1mn barrels during the week ending March 10, according to data released by the Energy Information Administration late Wednesday. Market expectation was for an increase of 555,000 barrels. Anadolu Agency

Oman Flour Mills receives over 34,000 MT Australian wheat

Muscat - Oman Flour Mills Company (OFM) has received the first Australian wheat shipment it purchased through its affiliated company OMAUS PTY Ltd, as part of its project for purchasing wheat directly from Australian farmers. The affiliated company signed an agreement with Australian farmers for purchasing 34,728 metric tonnes (MT) of Australian wheat. H E Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, inspected the first wheat shipment accompanied by H E Mark Lawrence Donovan, ambassador of Australia to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and Yemen. They also listened to an explanation about the efforts exerted by OFM to diversify the sources of purchasing wheat. Haitham bin Mohamed al Fannah, chief executive officer of OFM, said, "Oman Flour Mills secured high quality wheat from



farmers in Australia. This resulted in shortening the supply chain, as part of its role played to enhance the food security and secure the strategic stock of grain in Oman." He added, "The establishment of OMAUS PTY Ltd in Australia, which worked directly with farmers to secure wheat shipments from Australia adds value to the strategic stock by receiving high quality grain in a way that achieves a competitive advan-

tage in the international markets." Fannah explained that OFM moves forward to invest in strategic assets across the grain value chain. This will ensure that Oman will receive high quality grain at competitive prices. It will also guarantee the availability of grain, which will enable the sultanate to secure strategic procurements and ensure food security.

US Fed to balance banking woes, inflation in next rate decision

Washington, US - US central bankers face an unenviable task when they gather in Washington this week: tackling persistent inflation without adding to financial sector turmoil after Silicon Valley Bank's rapid collapse. The Federal Reserve has raised rates eight times since last year in the face of decades-high inflation as it looks to cool the economy without tipping it into a recession. While Fed Chair Jerome Powell earlier signaled willingness to speed up interest rate hikes if needed, most analysts and traders see a small rise of 25 basis points as the most likely outcome on Wednesday at the end of the Fed's two-day meeting. A quarter-percentage-point hike would match the magnitude of the Fed's last increase in February.

With fears of contagion after the rapid failures of three mid-sized lenders earlier this month, a minority of observers also believe the Fed could halt its rate increases. A catalyst for the demise of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) was the Fed's quick shift from near-zero interest rates to steep hikes, a reversal that swiftly lowered the value of SVB's holdings linked to long-term US Treasury bonds. Given the market turbulence, a bigger, 50 basis-point hike is now "off the table," Citigroup global chief economist Nathan Sheets said in an interview with AFP. "My expectation is, it's going to be 25 but it's going to be a debate - and where markets are next Tuesday and Wednesday is going to be critical," he said. SVB's dramatic implosion this



month was the largest banking failure since the 2008 financial crisis. The failure of the California high-tech lender on March 10, and the collapse of New York's Signature Bank a few days later,

sparked a rout in regional banking stocks and led many analysts to conclude that the Fed will abandon an anticipated increase in the pace of hikes. Powell told senators earlier this month that it may be necessary to increase the benchmark lending rate to tame the "widespread" inflationary pressures keeping price rises elevated above the bank's long-run target of two per cent.

Futures traders responded by

pricing in a 50-basis-point rise, according to CME Group. But the financial stress brought to light by SVB's failure caused a dramatic turnaround in expectations. The strains in the financial sector will likely have weakened the Fed's resolve to move more aggressively on March 21 and 22, Bank of America US economist Michael Gapen said on Friday. "We think recent events have changed the debate," he wrote in a note to clients. "We think the debate is now between a 25 (basis points) rate hike in March, or none at all." Cooler data emerges Data for February shows that some corners of the American economy are now beginning to contract - which eases pressure on the Fed - while the consumer price index measure of inflation

slowed slightly to an annual rate of 6.0 per cent. US retail sales and wholesale prices slipped last month, providing some respite for the Federal Open Market Committee to consider when it mulls another interest-rate hike. But the Fed's favored measure of inflation showed an annual increase in January, suggesting there is still a long way to go before price rises are brought back under control. Turmoil in the banking sector is not over either, with many regional banks seeing their stocks plunge again at the end of the week despite intervention by US regulators and some of Wall Street's biggest banks. "At a minimum, stress in financial markets suggests the Fed should proceed with caution," Bank of America's Gapen said. AFP

UBS against the clock in Credit Suisse takeover talks

Zurich, Switzerland – UBS was up against the clock Sunday in talks to finalise a mammoth takeover of its troubled rival Swiss bank Credit Suisse and reassure investors before the markets reopen.

Switzerland's biggest bank UBS is being urged by the authorities to get a deal over the line in a bid to avoid a wave of contagious panic on the markets Monday, according to several media reports.

The wealthy Alpine nation's largest banks have been in urgent negotiations throughout the weekend, with the government, central bank and financial regulators all involved.

The 20 Minuten newspaper filmed members of the Swiss government, including President Alain Berset, heading into the finance ministry in Bern early Sunday, with the Swiss news agency ATS reporting that the building's window shutters had been lowered.

Blick newspaper said UBS will buy Credit Suisse in a deal to be sealed later Sunday in Bern at a meeting featuring the government and the banks' executives.

A merger of this scale – involving swallowing up all or part of a bank arousing growing investor unease – would normally take months. UBS will have had a few days.

However, the Swiss authorities felt they had no choice but to push UBS into overcoming its reluctance, due to the enormous pressure exerted by Switzerland's major economic and financial partners, fearing for their own financial centres, said Blick.

"When the stock market opens on Monday, Credit Suisse could be a thing of the past," the tabloid said.

While under Swiss rules, UBS would typically have to consult shareholders over six weeks, it could use emergency measures to skip the consultation period and a shareholder vote, the Financial Times newspaper said, citing unnamed sources.



UBS would require public guarantees to cover legal costs and potential losses, according to a report by Bloomberg, citing anonymous sources.

Credit Suisse, the country's SNB central bank and the Swiss financial watchdog FINMA all declined to comment on the negotiations when contacted by AFP.

The government did not immediately respond when contacted by AFP Sunday.

The SonntagsZeitung newspaper called it "the merger of the century".

"The unthinkable becomes true: Credit Suisse is about to be taken over by UBS," the weekly said.

The government, FINMA and the SNB "see no other option", it claimed.

"The pressure from abroad had become too great -- and the fear that the reeling Credit Suisse could trigger a global financial crisis," it said.

Like UBS, Credit Suisse is one of 30 banks around the world deemed to be Global Systemically Important Banks – of such importance to the international banking system that they are

deemed too big to fail.

But the market movement seemed to suggest the bank was being perceived as a weak link in the chain.

"We are now awaiting a definitive and structural solution to the problems of this bank," French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told Le Parisien newspaper. "We remain extremely vigilant."

According to the FT, Credit Suisse customers withdrew 10bn Swiss francs (US\$10.8bn) in deposits in a single day late last week – a measure of how far trust in the bank has fallen.

After a turbulent week on the stock market, which forced the SNB to step in with a US\$54bn lifeline, Credit Suisse was worth just over US\$8.7bn by Friday evening – precious little for a bank considered one of 30 key institutions worldwide.

FINMA and the SNB said Credit Suisse "meets the capital and liquidity requirements" imposed on such banks, but mistrust remains.

Amid fears of contagion after the collapse of two US banks, Credit Suisse's share price plunged by more than 30 per cent on Wednesday to a new record low of 1.55 Swiss francs.

After recovering some ground on Thursday, its shares closed down eight percent on Friday, at 1.86 Swiss francs as the Zurich-based lender struggled to retain investor confidence.

Credit Suisse has been plagued by a series of scandals in recent years. Shares were worth 12.78 Swiss francs in February 2021.

AFP

OECD raises global growth forecast but recovery 'fragile'

Paris, France – The OECD raised its global economic growth forecast as inflation eases and China emerges from Covid restrictions, but warned of vulnerabilities as seen in the US bank sector turmoil.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said it now expects the global economy to grow by 2.6 per cent this year compared to 2.2 per cent in its previous forecast in November.

But it remains under the 3.2-per cent expansion seen in 2022, the Paris-based OECD said in its updated economic outlook titled "A Fragile Recovery".

"More positive signs have now started to appear, with business and consumer sentiment starting to improve, food and energy prices falling back, and the full reopening of China," the

OECD said in its Interim Economic Outlook report.

But it warned "the improvement in the outlook is still fragile. Risks have become somewhat better balanced, but remain tilted to the downside".

It cited uncertainty over the course of the war in Ukraine, the risk of renewed pressure on energy markets and the impact of rising interest rates.

Central banks worldwide have hiked rates in efforts to tame decades-high inflation that soared after Russia invaded Ukraine, but markets fear rising borrowing costs could tip economies into recession.

"Signs of the impact of tighter monetary policy have started to appear in parts of the banking sector, including regional banks in the United States," the OECD said.

"Higher interest rates could also have stronger effects on economic growth than expected, particularly if they expose underlying financial vulnerabilities."

The monetary tightening has been linked to the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank last week after it booked a US\$1.8bn loss on bonds whose prices were brought down by the higher rates.

A second US lender, Signature Bank, also imploded over the weekend while a third, First Republic Bank, was rescued Thursday by a coalition of its peers through US\$30bn in deposits.

Fears of contagion spread to Europe, with Credit Suisse securing a US\$54bn lifeline from the Swiss central bank after its shares tanked.

AFP



NATIONAL ALUMINIUM PRODUCTS COMPANY S.A.O.G

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2022

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors of National Aluminium Products Company SAOG (NAPCO), it gives me great pleasure to present you the Annual Report containing the audited financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2022 and an overview of the performance of the Company.

Economic environment
Year 2022 saw global economies recovering from the pandemic shock on the back of aggressive fiscal and monetary policies. However, during the same year the war in Ukraine was witnessed and looming fears of a global recession have posed major Challenges.

The past year witnessed unprecedented challenges, with the prolonged war in Ukraine, rising energy prices, low gas availability, high inflation and weakening consumer demand all leading to risks to a liquidity challenge which has put a direct impact on the profitability of Aluminia downstream industries in the middle east. On the other side, the aluminum market witnessed severe fluctuations in the LME price which affected negatively on the company to produce the required quantities which require for cash flow to continue production as in turn the necessity of more working capital in which production declined and production cost rises.

Performance review
The financial performance of the National Aluminium Company Products Company SAOG (parent company) and Novel Aluminium Products Company LLC (subsidiary company) collectively represent as a "group" during the year 2022 as compared to 2021, is summarized in the table below:

	Parent			Consolidated		
DESCRIPTION	JAN TO DEC 2022	JAN TO DEC 2021	% Change	JAN TO DEC 2022	JAN TO DEC 2021	% Change
	RO 000's	RO 000's		RO 000's	RO 000's	
Total Revenue & other income	24,623	28,907	-17%	24,723	28,907	-14.47%
Total Expenses (Excl. tax)	(26,136)	(31,935)	18%	(26,239)	(31,973)	18%
Net Loss before tax for the year	(4,905)	(3,048)	-61%	(4,929)	(3,068)	-61%
Net Loss after tax for the year	(4,277)	(2,885)	-48%	(4,300)	(2,905)	-48%

The group realized revenue and other income of RO 24,723 million as compared to RO 28,907 million during the previous year which is RO 4,184 million (14.47%) reduction and reported a net loss after tax of RO 4.3 million as compared to RO 2.9 million in previous year. The company's profitability was mainly affected by the below key drivers:

- Shortage in liquidity affected the company's ability to procure its raw material in time resulting the production quantity required to fulfill its customers' demands.
- The fall of big steel state companies which negatively affected the revenue collections.
- Increasing competition due to additional capacities in the neighboring countries which affected the metal margin.
- A persistent liquidity condition in the GCC market has stressed the operations of the company and resulted in significant delays in collections.
- Reductions in lenders' financial facilities.
- Significant cost of borrowing due to high interest rates for the working capital.

Future outlook
There are currently two major concerns surrounding the current global crisis. One is the tightness in energy markets and the fall-out on energy security of some regions. Secondly, elevated energy prices have spurred a chain reaction, fueling inflationary impulses and volatility. Global supply chain disruptions continued because of the war in Ukraine. This has dented consumer confidence and deepened risk sentiment in financial markets.

The uncertainty in Aluminium price and alarming reduction in the LME warehouses worldwide is the factor causing uncertain condition despite a significant recovery in Europe, North America and Australia supported by government rebate taxes on renovations and new buildings. The global conflicts, rising power tariffs and curtailment of primary Aluminium capacity in the major economies resulted in shortage of supply in primary Aluminium.

The GCC aluminium extrusion shall continue facing a challenging environment due to the over capacities versus the low demand especially in the construction segment. The incentives are expected to continue during the year 2023, where larger GCC players continue to be extremely aggressive in terms of pricing strategies.

The company is exercising all available options by effectively utilizing the operational resources, cost containment initiatives and improving efficiencies to sustain operating margins. Your company has extended its export market to overseas countries where the margins are higher, and the payment terms are more sustainable. This shall reflect as an enhancement in the operating margins and reducing the cash flow cycle. NAPCO will remain keen to meet all the challenges ahead to enhance the Company's image and financial strength to generate returns on the shareholder's funds.

Dividend
The Board has not recommended any dividend for the Financial year 2022.

Corporate Governance
Your Company has a sound corporate governance culture manifested with strong emphasis on transparency, accountability and integrity and a corporate system is integrated with ethical business practices meeting the high standards expected by the Authorities.

This Report contains a separate section confirming compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance issued by Capital Market Authority.

Health, Safety and Environment
In line with our commitment to the safety of our people, HSE continues to receive the highest priority in our organization and daily business activities have been carried out successfully without any Lost Time Injury (LTI) incident.

Organisation
Your company has always paid special attention for the recruitment and training of Omani employees and is committed to progressively attain high levels of Organisation at all levels of hierarchy and skill sets within the organization.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
Social responsibilities are one of the pillars that contribute to social development and strengthen the relationships between the corporate world and the surrounding society. NAPCO realized this important key factor and its general assembly supported this initiative by approving the spending of two thousand (2,000) Rials. The company spent RO 1800 for Omani Association for Disabled and paid the 10% of RO 2000 to Omani Charitable Organization as per the ministerial Resolution from Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion number 20/2021 and CMA resolution 172/2021.

Compliance with internal regulations and control system:
The Company is committed to maintain a high standard of internal regulations and control system commensurate with the size and nature of the operations. A manual of financial activities approved by the Board is in place, which specifies authority levels for various key to day operations. The system of internal control is monitored regularly by the Board, its Committees, Management, Internal and external auditors for its compliance.

Acknowledgement and Appreciation
I would like to extend my deep thanks to our honorable shareholders and to all my colleagues on the Board of Directors for their valuable contributions. I would also like to thank the Management and staff for their loyalty, hard work, dedication, and contributions in the achievement of our goals and acknowledge, with sincere gratitude, the support extended by all the investors, clients, vendors, banks, regulatory and government authorities, MSM and CMA and look forward to having the continued support from all of them.

I wish to place on record, personally and on behalf of the Board of Directors and employees, our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq bin Fahd and his wise government for continued support, encouragement, and guidance for our company and wish him all success in leading Oman to achieve greater progress and prosperity.

For & on behalf of the Board of Directors
National Aluminium Products Co. S.A.O.G.

Dr. Zakia Hassan Al-Naseeh
Chairperson

Consolidated and separate statement of financial position as at 31 December 2022

	31 December 2022 RO	Group 31 December 2022 RO	Parent Company 31 December 2022 RO	Parent Company 31 December 2021 RO
ASSETS				
Non-current assets:				
Property, plant and equipment	10,746,918	11,830,992	10,742,263	11,821,066
Intangible assets	71,274	86,542	63,963	86,542
Right-of-use asset	949,627	984,404	949,627	984,404
Investment property	460,000	460,000	460,000	460,000
Investment in subsidiary	-	-	31,500	31,500
Deferred tax assets	628,500	-	628,500	-
Total non-current assets	12,856,319	13,361,938	12,875,833	13,383,512
Current assets:				
Inventories	2,402,175	3,283,246	2,402,175	3,283,246
Trade and other receivables	7,856,186	2,722,887	5,517,122	12,716,924
Amounts due from related parties	-	-	2,586,113	4,477
Cash and cash equivalents	260,688	201,156	22,341	201,156
Total current assets	10,519,049	16,207,289	10,527,851	16,205,803
Total assets	23,375,368	29,569,227	23,403,704	29,589,315
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES				
Equity:				
Share capital	3,357,145	3,357,145	3,357,145	3,357,145
Legal reserve	1,119,048	1,119,048	1,119,048	1,119,048
Revaluation reserve	1,550,598	1,744,976	1,550,598	1,744,976
Accumulated losses	(5,059,683)	(954,020)	(5,016,392)	(933,912)
Total equity	967,106	5,267,149	1,010,399	3,287,267
LIABILITIES				
Non-current liabilities:				
Lease liability	1,068,158	1,045,256	1,068,158	1,045,256
Employees' end of service benefits	298,977	297,487	298,977	297,487
Total non-current liabilities	1,367,135	1,337,743	1,367,135	1,337,743
Current liabilities:				
Accrual liability	65,128	65,128	65,128	65,128
Borrowings	15,964,865	19,444,487	15,964,865	19,444,487
Trade and other payables	5,011,134	3,454,700	4,996,177	3,454,700
Total current liabilities	21,041,127	22,964,315	21,026,170	22,964,315
Total liabilities	22,408,262	24,302,058	22,393,305	24,302,058
Total equity and liabilities	23,375,368	29,569,227	23,403,704	29,589,315
Net assets per share	0.029	0.157	0.030	0.157

Consolidated and separate statement of profit or loss or other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2022

	Year ended 31 December 2022 RO	Group Year ended 31 December 2022 RO	Parent Company Year ended 31 December 2022 RO	Parent Company Year ended 31 December 2021 RO
Revenue	24,447,847	28,536,427	24,349,383	28,536,427
Cost of revenue	(25,382,634)	(28,014,730)	(25,368,075)	(28,014,730)
Gross (loss)/profit	(934,787)	521,707	(1,018,692)	521,707
Other income, net	275,079	370,543	274,559	370,543
Allowance for expected credit losses	(957,145)	(406,397)	(957,145)	(406,397)
General and administration expenses	(1,093,323)	(1,076,773)	(1,077,352)	(1,058,041)
Selling and distribution expenses	(811,884)	(1,000,829)	(728,042)	(999,483)
Loss from operations	(3,522,062)	(1,591,780)	(3,506,872)	(1,571,673)
Finance costs, net	(1,406,481)	(1,476,328)	(1,398,486)	(1,476,328)
Loss before income tax	(4,928,543)	(3,068,108)	(4,905,358)	(3,058,001)
Income tax	628,500	163,112	628,500	163,112
Loss for the year	(4,300,043)	(2,904,996)	(4,276,858)	(2,894,888)
Other comprehensive income	-	-	-	-
Total comprehensive loss for the year	(4,300,043)	(2,904,996)	(4,276,858)	(2,894,888)
Basic and diluted loss per share	(0.128)	(0.087)	(0.127)	(0.086)

NOTE

The Company does not have items under other comprehensive income.

Certain comparative figures have been reclassified to confirm to presentation adopted in these financial statements.

The complete accounts will be sent to any shareholder who requests them either in Arabic or English as required within 7 days of receipt of the request.



شركة الملفات الصناعية المرنة (ش.م.ع) Flexible Industrial Packages Co. (SAOC)

lot no: 225 / 226, Road no: 21, Rusayl Industrial Estate, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. Tel: +968 24446121, Email: info@fipco.net

Ordinary General Meeting Agenda

The Board of Directors of Flexible Industrial Packaging Company SAOC is pleased to invite all Shareholders to attend the company's Ordinary General Meeting, which will be held on Wednesday 05/04/2023 at 10:00am, in the head quarter of Mohammed Al Barwani Company in Al azaiba. If the quorum not satisfied a second Annual Ordinary General Meeting will be held on Tuesday 11/04/2023, in the same place and at the same time to discuss the following Agenda:

1- To approve the resignation of all the members of the Board of Directors in accordance with the provisions of Article (200) of the Commercial Companies Law No. 18/2019, (as per the attachment)

2- To elect a new Board of Directors for the Company from amongst Shareholders or non-shareholders. Any person who wishes to be nominated to the Board of Directors of the Company is required to fill in a Director's Nomination Form. Such a form can be obtained from the Company. The complete Form should be delivered to the Company at least two (2) working days prior to the date of the Ordinary General meeting (no later than the end of the business hours on 02/04/2023). The candidate must satisfy the company's board membership requirements.

Shareholder would have access to reports, documents and statements relating to the agenda items of the Ordinary General Meeting during the official business hours at the Company's head office, according to the Company's Articles of Association, each shareholder is entitled to authorize in writing any other person to attend the meeting and to vote on his/her behalf on the decisions of the general meeting

The shareholders are requested to arrive a half an hour before the scheduled meeting time.

For further information please contact Mr. Ahmed Sulaiman Al Amri on telephone No. 24446121

Chairman

Auditor,

Legal Adviser,

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OMAN'S MOST TRUSTED BRAND



Al Mouj wins in Integrated Tourism Complex Sector

Al Mouj Muscat, Oman's premium lifestyle and leisure destination, is celebrating the news that it has once again been voted the Most Trusted Brand in the Integrated Tourism Complex (ITC) sector of Oman's Most Trusted Brands Awards.

The annual awards programme is in its sixth year and by inviting members of the public to vote for their favourite brands it shines a spotlight on Oman's best loved organisations, companies and products.

This year there were 45 different categories from banks and supermarkets to dental practices and paint suppliers

and over 911,000 votes were received with Al Mouj Muscat coming out on top as winner of the nation's best ITC having won the award previously.

Set along 6km of beautiful coastline, Al Mouj Muscat launched in 2006 as Oman's first ever ITC and today 4.9mn people visit it every year. A joint venture between Majid Al Futtaim Properties, OMRAN and Tanmia, it has earned worldwide recognition and multiple awards for its vibrant mix of dining, leisure, entertainment and retail options and is home to 8,000 people from 85 different countries.

Within its playground of leisure and lifestyle opportunities are 85 cafés, restaurants and stores, a World 100 championship golf course, an elegant 400-berth marina, 5-Star hotels, pristine beaches, beaches, parks, landscaped boulevards and cycle tracks.

Commenting on the repeat win Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, said, "Al Mouj Muscat works tirelessly to create a unique and exceptional customer experience and winning this award once more is a true reflection of our lasting appeal. Now, with the highly successful

launch of Al Mouj Business Park, the first in the region to be located oceanside and within a golf course, our community offers an unparalleled destination for people and companies seeking the most exemplary way to live, work and play.

"Our visitor numbers grow year on year, further driving forward opportunities for success for the many retail and hospitality business partners located here. Al Mouj Muscat continues to attract significant and sustained tourism revenue both now and we remain committed to maintaining our place as Oman's most trusted ITC."



Meethaq Oman's most trusted Islamic Bank

Confirming its pioneering role in the sultanate once again, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has won Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award in the Islamic banking category for a second consecutive year.

The award was handed over by H E Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, to Ali Ahmed al Lawati, Assistant General Manager - Corporate Banking, Meethaq, at a glittering ceremony at the Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, in the presence of Saleh Zakwani, Executive Chairman, Apex Media.

The event was also attended by a number of high-profile

guests including their highnesses, excellencies, chairmen, managing directors, CEOs and other senior officials. Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award endorses the top brands in the sultanate based on public feedback and is a validation of the public trust in different brands, which have established themselves as No.1 in their customers' minds.

Ali Ahmed al Lawati, Assistant General Manager - Meethaq Corporate Banking, thanked Apex Media for this noteworthy accolade and said, "Meethaq is delighted to win this prestigious award for Oman's Most Trusted Brand in Islamic Banking, which affirms its unrivalled position as the pi-

ioneer of Islamic banking in Oman. It is a matter of great pride that Meethaq has been delivering world class innovative Islamic banking products and services, driven by its strong customer-centric vision, and this has in turn led to a phenomenal growth over the last ten years.

"We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all our valued customers for their trust and strong confidence in Meethaq Islamic Banking and being partners in this ongoing journey to set new Islamic banking benchmarks in the region."

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat is Oman's most popular and largest Islamic banking service provider.

Understanding Haemorrhoids!

Haemorrhoids, also known as piles, are a common condition that can cause discomfort, pain, and bleeding during bowel movements. This condition is caused by the swelling and inflammation of the veins around the anus or in the lower rectum.

Haemorrhoids can be caused by factors such as constipation, prolonged sitting, pregnancy, and obesity. Symptoms can vary in severity and include itching, discomfort or pain, bright red blood on toilet paper or in the toilet bowl, swelling or a lump around the anus, and a feeling of fullness or pressure in the rectum.



Dr Gabriel Rodrigues
Consultant - General & Laparoscopic Surgeon
Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Sohar

Fortunately, there are various treatment options available for haemorrhoids, depending on the severity of the condition. Over-the-counter creams and ointments can provide relief from itching and discomfort associated with haemorrhoids.

Injection therapy and sclerotherapy can shrink haemorrhoids, while banding involves placing a rubber band around the

base of the haemorrhoid to cut off the blood supply, causing it to shrink and fall off. In severe cases, surgery may be necessary to remove the haemorrhoids.

Lifestyle changes can help to prevent constipation and reduce pressure on the veins in the rectum and anus. To prevent haemorrhoids, individuals can make simple changes such as eating a high-fibres diet, staying hy-

drated, avoiding long periods of sitting or standing, avoiding straining during bowel movements, and engaging in regular exercise.

It is important to speak with a healthcare professional if experiencing symptoms of haemorrhoids to determine the best course of treatment.

In conclusion, haemorrhoids are a common condition that can cause discomfort, pain, and bleeding during bowel movements. Various factors can contribute to the development of haemorrhoids, including constipation, prolonged sitting, pregnancy, and obesity.

Fortunately, there are several treatment options available, including over-the-counter creams and ointments, lifestyle changes, and medical procedures. By making simple lifestyle changes, individuals can also prevent the development of haemorrhoids. It is important to seek medical advice if experiencing symptoms of haemorrhoids to ensure appropriate treatment.

Muscat gears up for Urban Hackathon on Sustainable Development Challenges

Following the success of the Urban Hackathons in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the European Union Delegation to Oman will host the third Urban Hackathon #peoplemakeplaces in Muscat, from May 21 to 23.

The event is being organised in partnership with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Muscat Municipality, as well as the embassies of Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, and Oman Think Urban (OTU).

The Oman Urban Hackathon aims to bring together local practitioners and civil society to find bottom-up solutions to the most pressing issues on sustainable development and to promote local talent as well as Muscat's green transition.

Applications for the hackathon are open until March 19. Registrations are open to

high school students (16+), university students, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and professionals in the field of urban planning, architecture, civil engineering, digital art & design, environmental science, culture studies and transportation.

The hackathon revolves around seven themes of urban planning for applicants to choose from.

The themes are:

- Climate change and urban sustainability: solve heatwaves challenge, adapt to rising sea levels, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, public transportation, consumption behaviour, and construction.
- Waste management: formulating ideas that reduce industrial or organic waste and promote recycling and reuse methods.
- Mobility: inventing eco-friendly transportation on land,

- sea, or flight alternatives.
- Energy: reducing consumption, and shifting to renewable energy alternatives.
- Water management: Ideate alternative methods to reduce water consumption, reduce risk of flooding & wadi management and inspire water provision.
- Community participation and public spaces: Thinking of ways to empower local communities and offering accessible natural open spaces for the public to use.

Communities and culture as urban dimensions: Originating urban ideas that uplift cultural exchange and social cohesion, boost cultural and social activities within marginalised communities, or raise awareness about cultural practices.

Senior experts in sustainable planning, including several coming from Europe, will be coaching and guiding the participants

throughout the process.

Participants will have the opportunity to present their solutions to a jury of business, technology, and industry professionals, who will select the winning hackathon team who will receive funding from a local business angel investor to further develop and implement the project.

However, all competing teams will receive assistance from local partners, EU experts, and OTU in making their project a reality. The winning team will be chosen for its dedication to highlighting Oman's culture and how it reflects modern sustainability.

All solutions will be in line with Oman Vision 2040, the Oman National Spatial Strategy, and the European Green Deal - the EU's plan to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050.

Indian School Sur celebrates Kindergarten Graduation Day with enthusiasm

Indian School Sur celebrated Kindergarten Graduation Day with great enthusiasm.

Mariam Hilal Almkhaini, Assistant Director of the Private Schools Department, Ministry of Education, South Sharqiya, was the chief guest of the programme, while Sheikhha Hamoud al Ghailani, Head of the Early Education Department, graced the occasion too.

School principal Dr S Srinivasan presided the function with the presence of SMC convenor Jami Srinivas Rao, treasurer Saeed T P, and member Pradeep Kumar AV.

The event began with the invocation of the Almighty, followed by the lighting of the lamp by the dignitaries.



Ms Nusrath, KG, and the Primary in-charge addressed the audience. Kindergarten Graduation is a significant life event and

a wonderful way to acknowledge the child's accomplishment and celebrate their learning.

Chief guest praised the gradu-

ates for their accomplishments in her convocation speech and said that completing kindergarten is an exciting milestone for pre-pri-

mary students and their first step towards a future full of possibilities. "The day represents a fresh start that gives their academic

lives and the quest for knowledge and education new perspectives," she added.

Mariam Hilal Almkhaini and

guests Jyothi Srinivas Rao and Jusaia Saeed handed over the graduation diploma.

The smart little ones of the pre-primary school entered the stage during the graduation ceremony, which was the most significant event of the day. As they celebrated graduation, the kids looked stunning and confident in their caps and gowns.

The audience burst into joyful applause as they were presented with scrolls of merit in front of their beaming faces. For the little ones, receiving their graduation certificates from dignitaries was happy and worth cherishing.

Finally, parents and the departing kindergarteners shared about their memories and experiences in the school.

NBO's 'practices for internal e-learning' gets best award

In recognition of its achievements in digital capacity building, the National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Academy of Excellence recently won the 'Best Practices for Internal e-Learning' Award.

The accolade was presented by MEA HR & Learning Achievement Awards. This acknowledgment highlights the bank's efforts to offer innovative and rewarding upskilling opportunities for its employees.

NBO's Academy of Excellence, the bank's training arm, has been using a Cloud-based Learning Management System, which is an eLearning platform, to deliver quality technical and soft skills courses for staff members.

These online training opportunities allow NBO employees from across different divisions to benefit from an excellence standard in teaching and further refine their knowledge and skills across



a range of bank-related subjects.

The bank believes that its people are its most important asset and it will therefore always aim to provide them with an empowering and innovative learning environment. Apart from using cutting-edge technologies, NBO has been increasingly looking to move beyond its traditional compliance training approach and recently implemented a rewards-based approach.

Instead of assigning compulsory courses at the start of each year, the bank's Academy of Excellence has introduced monthly courses across different categories. It also introduced a 'Rolling Trophy' competition providing another incentive for teams to do their level best during these courses. Both initiatives resulted in an increase in course completion rates from around 70 per cent to 85 per cent.



Badr Al Samaa opens dialysis unit at Sohar centre

Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals launched its second dialysis centre in the Sultanate of Oman at Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar.

The launch happened on the occasion of World Kidney Day. The event was presided over by Dr Najat Mohammed Issa al Zadjali, former director of Private Health Establishments, Sohar MoH Hospital, as the chief guest.

Dr Vidyand Vaidya, Regional Epidemiologist, North Batinah governorate; Dr Ibrahim Sayyed, HoD Nephrology, Sohar MOH Hospital; Firasath Hassan, Executive Director, Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals; Jacob Oomen, COO of Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals; doctors and staff of Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar also graced the occasion.

Dr Najat al Zadjali expressed her happiness in the amount of change that the private healthcare sector had offered over the years to the healthcare domain of the sultanate. She appreciated Badr Al Samaa's efforts in introducing new modalities every now and then.

Dr Vidyand Vaidya congratulated the effort and initiatives which Badr Al Samaa had undertaken in North Batinah governorate. He said there was utmost need for dialysis services and with the introduction in Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar hundreds of patients will be benefited. Dr Ibrahim Sayyed also

indicated towards the importance of dialysis and the impact it would create in the provision of quality healthcare in the North Batinah region and for its people.

Dr Iqbal Ahmed, Specialist Nephrologists, Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar gave the attendees an awareness talk regarding the process of dialysis, its importance in modern day treatment advancements and its necessity in contemporary medical management.

The dialysis unit in Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar - at present with two beds - boasts of having the HemoDia Filtration Technique (HDF) for use, which seldom centres utilise and provide in the sultanate.

Manoj Kumar, branch head and Dr Azhar Iqbal, medical director, Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar; Shamnad Aman, branch head, Badr Al Samaa, Falaj Al Qabail Clinic; Savad, branch head, Badr Al Samaa Polyclinic, Sohar; and Sheikh Basheer, zonal marketing head were also present on the occasion.

Representatives of major social organisations in the region such as KMCC, Kairali and OICC also graced the occasion.

With this event today, Badr Al Samaa Hospital, Sohar becomes the first centre in the private sector to provide dialysis in the North Batinah region making it a proud moment for the entire Badr Al Samaa family.

Zubair Automotive participates in Gulf traffic week

As part of its social responsibility goals, the Zubair Automotive Group took part in the 35th Unified Gulf Traffic Week - themed 'Your Life is a Trust'.

Through its participation, the group aims to raise awareness of traffic safety and emphasise the significance of adhering to traffic laws and regulations.

The opening ceremony was held under the patronage of Sayyid Dr Munther al Busaidi, the Vice Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit. The event also witnessed the presence of many personnel from Sultan's Armed Forces, Royal Oman Police (ROP), and stakeholders from both the public and private sectors.

As part of the event, the ROP hosted an exhibition at the Mall of Oman to raise awareness of the dangers of traffic accidents and their causes.

Mohammad al Farei, Chief Operating Officer of the Zubair



Automotive Group commended the ROP's efforts in promoting road safety, saying, "The participation of the Zubair Automotive Group in the Unified Gulf Traffic Week is aimed at strengthening the public-private partnership's role in instilling a culture of adhering to road safety rules.

"We also aspire to enhance the collaboration between all segments of the community to

achieve the desired objectives of such events. The ultimate goal is to raise public awareness about the importance of following the rules and the positive impact that will have on the individual and society as a whole."

The Zubair Automotive Group has kept pace with the development of the sultanate throughout the years and stands today as one of the country's largest and oldest automotive distributors, partnered with the world's most prestigious brands.

Representing them is a diverse range of subsidiaries, including General Automotive Company, International Heavy Equipment (IHE), Dhofar Automotive, Sayarti and Zubair Commercial Trucks and Equipment. Each boasts its own distinct business philosophy, country-wide sales and service network, various brand and product portfolios, and an unwavering focus on customer satisfaction.

Al Hail Cricket Club announces Danube Ramadan cricket league

Al Hail Cricket Club is organising the 4th Edition of the Danube group Ramadan Premier League 2023 at the Al Hail Cricket grass Ground in Mabelah on March 24.

The tournament matches will be played on a league basis with participation limited to 16 teams divided into four groups, each team gets a chance to play three matches in round stage and topers of group will qualify for the semi finals.

The tournament is open to all the teams that are participating in OCC-conducted 'A' division and all other divisions below A division. The organisers have decided to give some interesting prizes besides the main trophy and cash prize for the winners and runners-up team. There will also be prizes for the 'Best Bowler' and 'Best Disciplined Team' apart from regular prizes.

This is the first time in the history of Oman to have a tennex ball league tournament during Ramadan. The credit goes to Danube Group management for their support to have such an event on a yearly basis and bring new things for the cricket lovers in Oman. In this format the teams get more games to play and enjoy. The title of the event is 'Celebrate Ramadan, Celebrate Sport, Celebrate life'.



In addition, there are other exciting prizes that will be given away by the organisers in various categories. To make it more exciting for the viewers as well, the organisers will also give away surprise gifts on a weekly basis to the visitors and viewing audience. A separate area will be provided for children to play during the course of the tournament.

All the matches will start at 9.30pm after Taraweeh prayer. The interested teams can register their team on the club's website www.alhailcricketclub.com.

Registration will be on a first-come first-served basis with limitation up to 16 teams max. The tournament draw is scheduled to

take place in HCT ground in Mabelah at 7.30pm on March 21 in the presence of all the team captains and managers.

"We would like to thank Thamim Ansari, Country Head-Oman- Danube Group for his unstinting support to cricket in the country," the club said in a press statement.

Thamim Ansari is also an accomplished cricketer and currently playing soft ball cricket in Oman for the Danube Cricket Team and his team recently won a tournament too.

Thamim Ansari has played first class cricket in the UAE for the Danube Team and scored centuries in 50 balls only.



Vodafone wins 4 STEVIE Awards for MENA

Crowning its one-year anniversary celebrations, Vodafone in Oman brought home a quadruple win from the 2023 Middle East & North Africa Stevie Awards, receiving three Gold and one Bronze accolades in recognition for its digital innovation, creative drive and impactful proposition.

The three Gold Stevie Winner victories came for Most Innovative Tech Startup of the Year for its My Vodafone App; Award for Innovation in Brand Development for the launch of Vodafone in Oman; and Most Innovative Advertising or Marketing Team of the Year. Vodafone also received a Bronze Stevie Award for Innovation in Cross-Media Mar-

keting for its memorable Hello Oman campaign.

Fahad Abdul Aziz Saud al Busaidi, Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Vodafone Oman, said, "We are extremely proud to be recognised by the Stevie Awards for all our innovation and hard work since launching our operations in early 2022. To have earned four awards shows exactly how much Vodafone has been able to achieve during such a short time, setting a benchmark for new generation telcos in the region."

Today, Vodafone is the only 100 per cent digital operator in Oman. Its agile business model has enabled it to push innovation and set a benchmark in the country, and in fact, its App is the only

telecom app with 100 per cent market penetration at 2mn downloads.

Offering convenience and choice, customers can onboard themselves fully digitally in less a few minutes, including plan and number selection, identity verification using advanced AI and facial recognition capabilities, payment and eSIM (and physical SIM delivery or pick-up).

My Vodafone is the first telecom app to allow customers to replace their SIMs digitally, providing SIM-to-eSIM replacement within seconds.

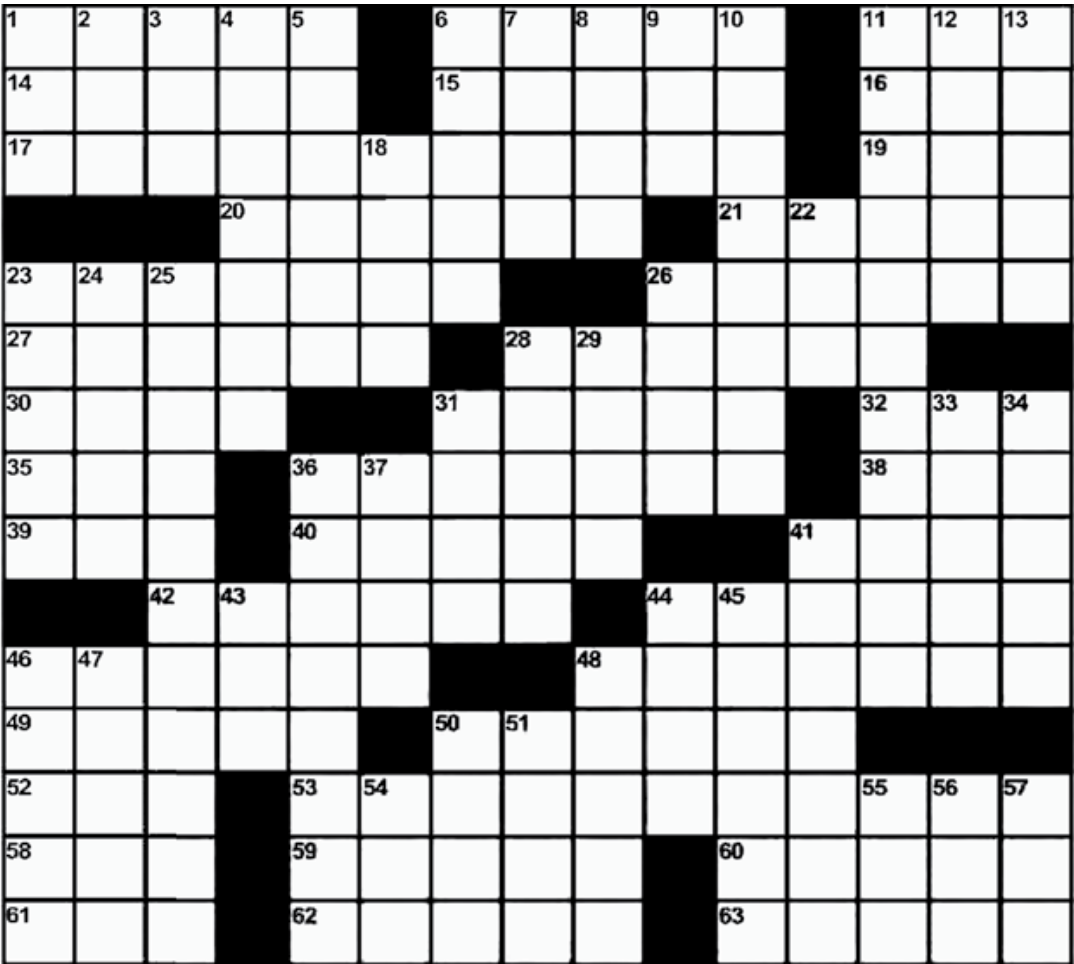
Its creative and youthful approach underpinned by value creation has also set it apart in a highly competitive market. In just

one year Vodafone changed the advertising and marketing landscape in Oman.

From its campaigns and creatives, to its collaborations with partners and influencers, and social media presence and community building initiatives, it continuously challenged the limits to bring a digitally differentiated experience to everything it did.

Looking back over 2022 year, having recorded 2.2bn impressions and over 240mn views, Vodafone not only pulled off an incredibly successful launch in the market, but also brought the best marketing innovations to Oman in a way that touches the hearts and minds of all Omanis.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Religious leader's max-ims
6) Like the frontrunner
11) It checks the water
14) Pizzeria necessities
15) Beatniks beat it
16) Verse of glorification
17) Does a certain pet-owner's chore
19) Type of instinct
20) Twelve-strong panel
21) Postpone for later ac-tion
23) Waiter's charge
26) Is appropriate for
27) Footwarmer for a wee foot
28) Saggy, brimless toppers
30) Early birds?
31) Dropped hints about
32) EL (Charlton Heston role)
35) Western agreement?
36) Optical solution
38) Put into play
39) Place for yachting
40) They spin in the wind
41) Extreme bitterness
42) More beloved

44) Emulated a humming-bird
46) Sum part
48) Ones skilled in laws
49) One having a ball?
50) Male part of a flower
52) "What_bid?"
53) It's better to let it lie
58) Heat provider for all
59) They may be induced
60) Beloved English princess
61) Unit of work or energy
62) Napoleon's fate
63) South American range

DOWN

1) Deep, as a voice
2) Eggs in a lab
3) Hair salon application
4) Some printers
5) Allay fears
6) More than dislike
7) Groundbreaking one?
8) Puts a stop to
9) Long... (the distant past)
10) Some canines
11) Bone-shaped snacks
12) Motion picture rating word

13) Dispenses, as justice (with "out")
18) Rainforest unit
22) Place for rudders
23) Follows commands
24) Elephant gone amok
25) Swimming, in a way
26) Some lingerie items
28) Leafy nook
29) Pilots' approximations, briefly
31) Hackman of Hollywood
33) Speck of land in the ocean
34) They contain property lines?
36) Disappear gradually
37) It has three feet
41) Earn, as money
43) Moray, e.g.
44) Moore of movies
45) Business meeting out-line
46) Humiliate
47) Raise objections
48) Moment of forgetful-ness
50) Prefix meaning "half"
51) Blueish hue
54) Bagel shop order

55) Mom's man
56) What two heads are
57) Type of station
better than

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Today, you'll have to regain some headway you lost over the past few days. It wasn't your fault that you fell behind, but it will do you no good to focus on punishing the real culprit. They'll get the punishment they deserve in the way they deserve it. You need to get out of the subliminal business of revenge! Do the work you need to do and then move on to lighter, happier thoughts. Get together with one of your favorite people and have a silly, giggle-filled evening.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If you like what someone is doing or saying today, show them how much you admire them! Your ego will get a boost from the act of praising someone else, so go ahead and do it. Not only will you make their day, you will also give them some much-needed support. Just because you see that someone is talented doesn't mean that anyone else does. Don't hide how you feel. Wouldn't you like to know if someone thought you were fantastic? There's no point in not being totally open.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

There is a lot of heavy emotional energy around you today, and it could make you feel moody and slow. Don't worry about it. So what if you take a little longer to get ready this morning, or you're not quite as talkative as you usually are? The people who know and respect you aren't going to get upset about it, so why should you? Drink all the extra cups of coffee you want, but your situation won't change. But in a few days it will be over.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Put the task of addressing your relationships at the top of your priority list today. There is a lot going on with one of your friends or coworkers, and you have a good idea what exactly it is that's going on. It might be tempting to wait for them to come to you, but you really need to be the proactive one in this partnership. Show them you care about their welfare as much as they care about yours. Don't ever let yourself get so caught up in your own issues that you forget other people matter.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Stick to your own agenda first today even if it requires you to cause conflict in a group. Getting along well with others might be an unrealistic goal now. After all, you can't always sacrifice what is best for your life in order to be everyone's best friend. Don't compromise what you believe just to get along with other people. In the end, people will have to respect you for sticking to your principles and not succumbing to the pressure of the majority.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

A surprise encounter with someone from your past could stir up a lot of difficult emotions today. You've got to organize these emotions if you want to get past them. Put things in perspective. Don't let your feelings get the better of you. Remember, they're just feelings. Even the bad ones (like jealousy, regret, anger) are natural. You can't fight them. Make a list of each negative feeling as it comes over you, and before you know it you won't be feeling them anymore.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

You'll get an objective confirmation of how attractive you really are today when a total stranger gives you a compliment that makes your day. This confidence boost will do wonders for your physical health as well as your mental state because it will encourage you to take your health regimen up a notch. You're so close to what you want to achieve, why not push a little harder to get all the way there? Prove to yourself that you can do it. The Universe is sending you the support you need.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your generous, caring nature might tempt you to jump into the fray today. You hope to make peace! But you should try hard to resist this urge even if you think resisting will make people think you're selfish. You can do more good for everyone (including yourself) if you keep away from controversy or conflict right now. It's not stingy to want to keep the energy you have for yourself. In fact, it's a very wise strategy. Especially when only the troublemakers can forge real peace.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Someone you've known for a very long time is suddenly seeing you in a brand-new light, and you can expect them to have an unusual question for you. This exchange could stir up some deep feelings for both of you, and it could create a temporary distance between you two. Try to see this as a growth opportunity, not an obstacle to your relationship. Despite how you may be feeling about them, there is an extremely bright future ahead of you both.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The career transition you're going through right now is very exciting. But be careful not to automatically equate career change with career improvement! This new routine will still become an old routine eventually, no matter how thrilling your new responsibilities are initially. This isn't to say that things won't be exciting for a while. Just make sure that you don't commit yourself to anything too permanent too soon. You have to give yourself time to settle into your new role first.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

When you understand that a certain someone has disappointed you over and over again, you will finally see them for who they are. Today, it becomes clear that they're simply not the person you thought they were and it's time for you to admit it. When you accept them for who they are (warts and all), you'll immediately feel less annoyed by their antics. Being held to a high standard doesn't work for everyone. Some folks simply can't rise to the challenge.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Ambition could get in your way today, because you're using it too much! You're all hot and heavy on a new plan or idea that you think will get you one step higher on the career ladder, but have you taken the time to really learn all the facts? Don't get involved with stuff you're unsure of, because it could turn out to be a huge waste of your time. Instead, wait things out a bit longer. Don't act in haste. If this is a great opportunity, it will still be great a few days from now.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these airlines is based in Germany?

A. Ryanair
B. Aeroflot
C. Lufthansa
D. KLM

02. The Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471 was decisive in which conflict?

A. The English Civil War
B. The Wars of the Roses
C. The Seven Years' War
D. The Boer War

03. Which of these is an example of an "anthropoid"?

A. Wasp
B. Ape
C. Deer
D. Bear

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	A	R	B
E	U	R	Y
L	S	E	K
Y	P	E	M

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER

I S
G F H
N I

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

New protests in France ahead of crucial no-confidence votes

Paris, France - France faced another day of protests on Sunday against a bitterly contested pension reform rammed through by President Emmanuel Macron's government, a day before crucial no-confidence votes in parliament.

After weeks of peaceful strikes and marches against raising the official retirement age from 62 to 64, police on Saturday closed the Place de la Concorde opposite parliament for demonstrations following two successive nights of clashes.

Some individual lawmakers were targeted, with Eric Ciotti - chief of the conservative Republicans party expected not to back the no-confidence motions - finding early on Sunday that his constituency office had been pelted with rocks overnight.

"The killers who did this want to put pressure on my vote on Monday," Ciotti wrote on Twitter, posting pictures showing smashed windows and threatening graffiti.

More than 80 people were arrested at a 4,000-strong Paris demonstration on Saturday where some set rubbish bins on fire, destroyed bus stops and erected improvised barricades.

And 15 more were held in Lyon after police said 'groups of violent individuals' triggered clashes.

Other demonstrations in cities around France passed off peacefully, with hundreds turning out in the Mediterranean port city Marseille.

"What do we have left apart from continuing to demonstrate?" said Romain Morizot, a 33-year-old telecoms engineer, at the Marseille protest.

After the government used a constitutional provision to bypass a parliamentary vote on pension reform, 'now that will



French CRS (Compagnie Republique de Securite or Republican Security Corps) Police extinguish rubbish set on fire during protests in Rennes, western France, on Saturday, two days after the French government imposed a pension reform using article 49.3 of the constitution (AFP)

More than 80 people were arrested at a 4,000-strong Paris demonstration on Saturday where some set rubbish bins on fire, destroyed bus stops and erected improvised barricades

stoke social tensions everywhere', Morizot added.

"We'll keep going, we don't have a choice".

Away from the streets of major cities, the hard-left CGT union said on Saturday that workers would shut down France's largest oil refinery in Normandy, warning that two more could follow on Monday.

So far, strikers had only prevented fuel deliveries from leaving refineries but not completely halted operations.

Industrial action has also

halted rubbish collection in much of Paris, with around 10,000 tonnes of waste now on the streets as the government forces some binmen back to work.

A ninth day of wider strikes and protests is planned for Thursday.

People close to Macron told AFP that the president was 'of course following developments' on the ground.

Alongside raising the headline retirement age, Macron's reform also increases the number of years people must pay into the

system to receive a full pension.

The government says its changes are needed to avoid crippling deficits in the coming decades linked to France's aging population.

But opponents say the law places an unfair burden on low earners, women and people doing physically wearing jobs, and polls have consistently showed majorities opposed to the changes.

A survey of 2,000 people published in the *Journal du Dimanche* weekly on Sunday gave Macron an approval rating of 28 per cent, its lowest since 2019's mass 'yellow vests' demonstrations against a new fuel tax.

After Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne used Article 49.3 of the constitution to pass the law without a vote in the lower house National Assembly, opponents' last

hope to block the reform is to topple the government in one of Monday's no-confidence votes.

Labour Minister Olivier Dussopt told the JDD that 'it's not an admission of failure, but it's heart-breaking' to have used the nuclear option to pass the reform. The pensions changes were 'too important to take the risk of playing Russian roulette', he added, after weeks of concessions to the Republicans - long in favour of raising the retirement age - failed to bring enough conservative MPs on board to secure a majority.

Few lawmakers in the fractious Republicans group are expected to vote against the government in Monday's no-confidence motions, brought by a small group of centrist MPs and the far-right National Rally.

AFP



Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev casting his vote during parliamentary elections in Astana on Sunday (AFP)

Kazakhstan kicks off snap elections to parliament

Astana, Kazakhstan - Kazakhstan holds snap parliamentary elections on Sunday as the leader of the Central Asian country pushes political reforms that critics say are designed to consolidate power one year after deadly protests.

Polling stations opened at 7am (0100 GMT), according to AFP reporters in the capital Astana and Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city. Around 12mn voters have until 8pm to cast their ballots.

The huge, oil-rich nation is wedged between its former Soviet master Russia and China, which is gaining status in Central Asia as an economic powerhouse.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced the early vote as part of a 'modernisation' drive introduced months after protests against fuel prices erupted in January last year. They were brutally crushed and 238 people died, according to the official toll.

Tokayev, a former diplomat, was hand-picked in 2019 by his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev to take the helm after a three-decade rule. But Tokayev purged vestiges of that era after the demonstrations.

He promised to reform government institutions and in January dissolved parliament, saying early polls would 'give new impetus to the modernisation'.

The ex-Soviet country's elections now feature a wider array of candidates but there was scepticism in Almaty over the changes.

"Will I take part in the elections? No, to be honest... because I hardly believe in fair elections in Kazakhstan in general," Aset Smagulov, a 21-year-old IT specialist, told AFP before the poll.

Independent candidates are allowed to run for parliament for the first time in nearly 20 years, whereas the previous lower house was made up of three pro-government parties. The threshold to enter the 98-seat legislature has been lowered to five percent and a 30 per cent quota was introduced for women, young people and people with disabilities.

Political scientist Dimash Alzhanov said the ruling elites remain in control of the votes, despite the changes.

"The electoral system has changed and gives the impression of choice. But in reality, the president and his administration are keeping the vote count in their hands," Alzhanov told AFP.

"Here, elections are held in order to keep power. That's what elections are in an authoritarian country," he said.

After the riots that grew out of peaceful demonstrations against a fuel price spike, Tokayev was re-elected in a snap presidential vote in November.

AFP

Kuwait reinstates old parliament after annulling 2022 vote

Kuwait City, Kuwait - Kuwait's constitutional court on Sunday nullified last year's legislative elections and ruled to reinstate the previous parliament, state media said, as a political crisis roils the oil-rich Gulf state.

The ruling was made due to discrepancies in the decree dissolving the previous parliament, the official KUNA news agency said.

The September polls were the most inclusive in a decade, and saw opposition members take a parliamentary majority with 28 out of 50 seats.

Many in the opposition had stayed out of elections in the past decade, over what they saw as alleged meddling in parliament by the executive authorities.

"The Kuwaiti Constitutional Court issued a verdict on Sunday annulling the results of the 2022 National Assembly elections," KUNA said.

It also ruled to reinstate the parliament that was elected in 2020 but dissolved following orders by the crown prince in June, KUNA said.

"The dissolved council, from the date of issuance of this ruling... will regain its constitutional authority, as though it was never dissolved," president of the Constitutional Court Mohammad bin Naji

al-Ghanim returns as parliament speaker, a position he had held since 2013 but lost in last year's poll. He replaces Ahmed al-Saadoun.

Lawyer Nawaf al-Yassin said Sunday's ruling followed several electoral appeals.

"The appeals relate to the invalidity of the electoral process, the decrees calling for elections, and the decree dissolving the previous National Assembly," he told AFP.

Ruling welcomed

Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state with a fully elected parliament. One of the world's biggest oil exporters, it adopted a parliamentary system in 1962.

But repeated political crises have led to state paralysis and regular disputes with cabinet.

In January, Kuwait's government resigned three months after it was sworn in due to disputes with lawmakers. It was the sixth government in just three years.

Sunday's ruling by the constitutional court was welcomed by lawmakers who will now return to their posts, including Saadoun Hamad al-Otaibi.

AFP

Former Qatar finance minister charged with bribery, corruption

Doha, Qatar - Qatari prosecutors have charged former finance minister Ali Sharif Al-Emadi with bribery, money laundering and a range of corruption charges, the state news agency said on Sunday.

Al-Emadi, 54, was arrested in May 2021 when he was one of the most influential business executives in the Middle East. He will face trial with other defendants, Qatar News Agency

reported.

The former minister has been charged with 'bribery, appropriation of public money, abuse of office, abuse of power, damage to public money and money laundering', prosecutors were quoted as saying.

Al-Emadi, who became finance minister and chairman of Qatar National Bank in 2013, has not been held in detention.

Prosecutors said the investi-

gation had been completed 'by interrogating the accused, hearing witnesses, and examining the technical reports' but gave no details on the charges, the sums involved or the identity of the other accused.

Al-Emadi rose through the ranks after joining QNB in 2005 as it became one of the most influential banking groups in the Middle East.

AFP

In search of Jewish heritage in Morocco's oases

Akka, Morocco - In the depths of Morocco's Akka oasis, two archaeologists pore over the floor of a synagogue searching for the minutest of fragments testifying to the country's ancient Jewish history.

They are from a team of six researchers from Morocco, Israel and France, part of a project to revive the North African country's Jewish heritage after it was all but lost following the minority's exodus.

The discovery of a fragment of a Hebrew religious manuscript is 'a sign from above', jokes Israeli archaeologist Yuval Yekutieli, from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Efforts to uncover Jewish historical treasures scattered across the kingdom's oases are one of the outcomes of warming ties since Morocco and Israel normalised relations in 2020.



Women chat in an alley of the Jewish neighbourhood, or mellah, in the village of Tagadirt in Morocco's oasis region of Tata on February 28 (AFP)

Akka, a lush green valley of date palms surrounded by desert hills some 525km (325 miles) south of the capital Rabat, was once a crossroads for trans-Saharan trade.

Within the oasis, tucked away in the middle of the 'mellah' or Jewish quarter of the village of Tagadirt, lie the ruins of the synagogue - built from earth in the architectural tradition of the area.

While the site has yet to be dated, experts say it is crucial to understanding the Judaeo-Moroccan history of the region.

"It's urgent to work on these types of vulnerable spaces that are at risk of disappearing," said Saghir Mabrouk, an archaeologist from Morocco's National Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (INSAP).

Rich legacy

Dating back to antiquity, the Jewish community in Morocco reached its peak in the 15th century, following the brutal expulsion of Sephardic Jews from Spain.

By the early 20th century, there were about 250,000 Jews in Morocco. But after waves of departures with the creation of Israel in 1948, including following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the number was slashed to just 2,000 today.

Little documentation remains of the rich legacy that the community left behind.

"This project aims to study this community as an integral part of Moroccan society, and not from a Judaeo-centric perspective," said Israeli anthropologist Orit Ouaknine, herself of Moroccan roots.

As the day progresses, the archaeologists amass a small trove of manuscript fragments, amulets and other objects discovered under the 'bimah', a raised platform in the centre of the synagogue where the Torah was once read.

Yekutieli, the Israeli archaeologist, said the 'most surprising thing' was that no one had written about the buried objects, and that it was only when excavations began that they were discovered. While Jewish tradition dictates that such texts are never destroyed, it is unusual to find them buried at such sites.

AFP

China's Xi plays peacemaker on Russia visit

Foreign ministry spokesman Wenbin said China would play a constructive role in promoting peace talks

Beijing, China - President Xi Jinping heads to Russia on Monday hoping to deliver a breakthrough on Ukraine as China seeks to position itself as a peacemaker.

Freshly reappointed for a third term in power, Xi is pushing a greater role for China on the global stage, and was crucial in mediating a surprise rapprochement between Middle Eastern rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia this month.

Rumours that he may soon hold his first call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky since the outbreak of war have raised hopes in Western capitals that Xi may lean on his 'old friend' Putin to stop his bloody invasion during the three-day state visit.

Announcing the trip on Friday, foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said China would 'play a constructive role in promoting peace talks'.

"Stopping the war is everyone's wish, given Europe stands to lose such a lot and the United States may not be able to support Ukraine for as long as it thinks it can," said Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at Beijing's Renmin University of China. "China can put forth its views on both

sides - it can say it is a trusted friend of both Ukraine and Russia. I think this is very significant."

Beijing, a major Russian ally, has long sought to depict itself as a neutral party to the conflict.

But it has refused to condemn Russia's invasion and has sharply criticised Washington's support for Kyiv - leading Western leaders to accuse Beijing of providing diplomatic cover for Russia to bludgeon its European neighbour.

"Beijing has done remarkably little so far to encourage peace in Ukraine, since any credible effort would require pressuring Russia or at least calling Russia out directly," said Elizabeth Wishnick, a professor and Chinese foreign policy expert at Montclair State University in the United States.

Xi's trip - which comes after the International Criminal Court on Friday announced an arrest warrant for Putin on war crimes accusations - aims 'to show whatever support for his strategic partner he can provide, short of aid that would result in sanctions', she told AFP.

Much talk, little substance

Seeking to play the peacemaker, China last month published a 12-



This file photo shows Russian President Vladimir Putin (left) and Chinese President Xi Jinping posing for a photograph during their meeting in Beijing on February 4, 2022 (AFP)

point position paper on the war in Ukraine, calling for dialogue and respect for all countries' territorial sovereignty. Beijing has also touted its Global Security Initiative (GSI), a hallmark Xi policy that aims to 'promote durable peace and development'.

Both documents have drawn ire in the West for dwelling on

broad principles instead of practical solutions to the crisis.

China's recent diplomacy around the war appeared to be 'an attempt to highlight' the GSI and 'build momentum for its foreign policy and re-engagement with the world', said Ja Ian Chong, an associate professor at the National University of Singa-

pore. "Whether (China) is actually stepping up its efforts to play peacemaker in a meaningful way will depend on the substance of what it proposes during meetings with leaders from Ukraine and Russia," said Chong, who specialises in Beijing's international relations.

"Their previous peace plan

was more about general principles than actionable proposals."

'Not impartial'

Beijing's efforts to show itself to be an international mediator

Freshly reappointed for a 3rd term in power, Xi is pushing a greater role for China on the global stage, and was crucial in mediating a surprise rapprochement between Middle Eastern rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia

East. "Brokering the (Saudi-Iran) deal feeds into the Chinese government's narrative of being a positive-sum global player promoting peace and cooperation that contrasts with Washington's purportedly destabilising actions," said University of Southern California assistant professor Audrye Wong.

But stilling the gunfire in Ukraine would be 'somewhat harder' than the Saudi-Iran deal, said Wang of Renmin University, citing China's 'limited' influence over Moscow and US backing for Kyiv.

Beijing, he suggested, could help usher in 'an armistice similar to the one formed from the Korean War' that stops the fighting but kicks questions of territorial sovereignty further down the road.

But Wishnick, of Montclair State, said Ukraine was 'unlikely to accept China as a mediator since it is not viewed as neutral or impartial'.

"Xi may be eager for diplomatic successes, but I just don't see one on the horizon in Ukraine," she said.

"Neither side is willing to give up hope yet for territorial gains on the battlefield."

AFP

Kosovo, Serbia fail to reach an agreement after marathon talks

Ohrid, Republic Of North Macedonia - Kosovo and Serbia stopped short of signing a potentially landmark deal late on Saturday night after holding a marathon round of talks, even as the EU hailed progress toward reaching a long-sought agreement between the arch-foes.

The latest round of high-stakes negotiations followed months of EU-mediated shuttle diplomacy, nearly 25 years after the war between ethnic Albanian insurgents and Serb forces sparked a NATO bombing campaign that ended the conflict and saw Serbian government personnel and security forces pull out from the breakaway territory.

Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic engaged in negotiations for nearly 12 hours during a summit in North Macedonia's Ohrid, picking over an 11-point plan unveiled by the EU last month during a Brussels summit.

But in the end, they failed to iron out a final agreement that could be signed by both.

Following the talks, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell sent mixed signals about the negotiations, saying a framework to implement the plan had been reached but a path toward normalisation of ties remained elusive. "The parties were not able to find a mutually acceptable solution as ambitious as we were providing or proposing," said Borrell, even as he hailed reaching a deal that went unsigned in the end.

Serbia has long refused to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence made in 2008, with perennial bouts of unrest erupting between Belgrade and its former break-away province.

Following Saturday's talks, the two leaders both admitted that progress had been made but were quick to unleash barbs at the other over the failure to put pen to paper.

Kosovo's Kurti said he was



The parties were not able to find a mutually acceptable solution as ambitious as we were providing or proposing

JOSEP BORRELL

ready to sign the document, but blamed Serbia's leader for failing to sign off on the plan for a second time.

"The other side, just as in the last meeting in Brussels on February 27, is avoiding signing the agreement, now also with the annex," Kurti told reporters.

"It is now up to the European Union to find a mechanism to make the status of this agreement legally and internationally binding."

Serbia's Vucic was lukewarm about the day's results.

"I think we have made one important step in a constructive atmosphere and we will start to work on something. Of course, it was not some D-day but it was an okay day," said Vucic.

The 11-point document backed by the EU has laid out a framework stating that neither side would resort to violence to resolve a dispute, nor seek to prevent the other from joining the European Union or other international bodies - a key demand from Kosovo.

AFP

At least 14 killed as powerful earthquake jolts Ecuador, Peru

Guayaquil, Ecuador - At least 14 people were killed, several were wounded and buildings were damaged in a powerful earthquake that shook Peru and Ecuador on Saturday, authorities said.

Destroyed buildings, crushed vehicles and debris could be seen in cities such as Machala and Cuenca in Ecuador, as rescue officials rushed to lend aid and panicked residents ran into the streets.

The quake, which the United States Geological Survey (USGS) put at a magnitude of 6.8 and a depth of nearly 41 miles (66km), struck at 12:12 local time (1712 GMT). Its epicenter was in the Ecuadoran municipality of Balao, near the border with Peru, authorities said.

"I went out into the street because I saw people starting to run in panic, getting out of their cars," Magaly Escandon, a sewing supplies saleswoman in Cuenca, told AFP.

Ecuador's presidency reported 13 dead - 11 in the province of El Oro and two in the province of Azuay.



View of debris after the quake in city of Machala, Ecuador on Saturday (AFP)

In the Peruvian city of Tumbes on the border with Ecuador, a four-year-old girl died after a brick hit her on the head, according to an official report.

"There where the pool of blood is, I was playing with my... niece and a brick fell on her," her uncle David Alvarado told AFP.

The tremor was also strongly felt in other cities including Guayaquil, Quito, Manabi and Manta, social media reports said.

Ecuador's presidency reported that 'there are injured people who are being treated

promptly in hospitals', but did not provide any figures.

President Guillermo Lasso traveled to El Oro, where he visited the wounded in a hospital, and will next head to Azuay.

"I have just finished visiting the city of Machala... I have ratified government support, the availability of resources," he said in a video posted on Twitter.

Earlier in the day he urged people to remain 'calm and to be informed through official channels' about damage to buildings.

AFP

Seven die in Mexico shootout as gunmen ambush soldiers

Chilpancingo, Mexico - At least five suspected criminals and two soldiers were killed in a shootout after gunmen ambushed a military unit in southwest Mexico, authorities reported on Saturday.

The confrontation occurred on Friday afternoon in the community of El Pescado, in a mountainous area of the state of Guerrero that is difficult to access and the scene of conflicts between criminal groups.

A military unit 'was the target of an attack by approximately 18 armed civilians aboard two vehicles', after which a shootout broke out, according to an army report.

Five gunmen and two soldiers were killed while two people suffered gunshot wounds.

According to local authorities, the attackers were likely members of La Familia Michoacana, which was formerly one of the most powerful drug

cartels in Mexico but lost much of its influence after the capture of its leaders.

The cartel has been regrouping and has been involved in various violent incidents.

According to authorities, La Familia Michoacana is battling the Los Tequileros criminal group for control of the area where they engage in drug trafficking, extortion and kidnapping.

Guerrero, one of Mexico's poorest states, has endured years of violence linked to turf wars between drug cartels fighting for control of marijuana and opium production and drug trafficking.

More than 350,000 people have been killed across Mexico in a spiral of bloodshed since the government deployed the army to fight drug cartels in 2006, according to official figures.

AFP

North Korea fires short-range ballistic missile

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea fired a short-range ballistic missile on Sunday, Seoul's military said, the fourth show of force in a week as South Korea and the United States stage major military drills.

Seoul and Washington have ramped up defence cooperation in the face of growing military and nuclear threats from the North, which has conducted a series of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests in recent months.

South Korea and the United States are in the middle of 11 days of joint drills known as Freedom Shield, their largest in five years.

North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take 'overwhelming' action in response. "Our military detected one short-range ballistic missile fired from around the



US Air Force B-1B bombers and F-16 fighter jets flying with South Korean Air Force F-35A jets during a joint air drill in South Korea on Sunday (AFP)

Tongchang-ri area in North Pyongan province at 11:05am (0205 GMT) towards the East Sea," South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

The missile flew 800km (500 miles) and was under analysis by

US and South Korean intelligence, the JCS said in a statement, calling the launch 'a serious provocation' that violated UN sanctions.

"Our military will maintain a solid readiness posture based on its ability to overwhelmingly respond to any provocation by

North Korea, while carrying out intensive and thorough combined exercises and drills," it said.

Tokyo also confirmed the launch, with deputy defence minister Toshiro Ino telling reporters Japan had 'lodged a vehement protest to and strongly condemned (North Korea) through our embassy in Beijing'.

The US military's Indo-Pacific Command condemned the launch, saying it highlighted 'the destabilising impact' of North Korea's banned weapons programmes. South Korea's defence ministry said hours after the launch it had staged joint air drills with the United States featuring at least one US B-1B long-range bomber.

The drills also involved South Korean F-35A stealth fighter jets and US F-16 fighters and took place as part of the Freedom Shield exercise. The exercise had

'greatly enhanced the allies' interoperability... and wartime capabilities', the ministry said in a statement.

'War maniacs'

The latest launch came a day after North Korean state media reported that more than 800,000 young North Koreans had volunteered to join the army to fight 'US imperialists'.

The young volunteers were determined to 'mercilessly wipe out the war maniacs' and joined the army to 'defend the country', the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said. On Thursday, Pyongyang test-fired its largest and most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile, the Hwasong-17, its second ICBM test this year. It described the launch as a response to the 'frantic' US-South Korea drills.

AFP

Putin visits Mariupol captured from Ukraine

The visit triggered an angry reaction from Ukraine, which blasted its ‘cynicism’ and ‘lack of remorse’

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise trip to Mariupol, the Kremlin said on Sunday, his first visit to territory captured from Ukraine since the start of Moscow's invasion.

Just hours after Putin visited Crimea to mark the ninth anniversary of the peninsula's annexation, video distributed by the Kremlin showed him landing by helicopter in Mariupol, the port city that Moscow captured after a long siege last spring.

The visit triggered an angry reaction from Ukraine, with a presidential aide blasting its ‘cynicism’ and ‘lack of remorse’.

The Russian leader took a tour of the city and was seen driving a car. The Kremlin said he visited a rebuilt musical theatre and followed the presentation of a report on reconstruction work.

“We’re praying for you,” a resident told Putin, referring to the city as ‘a little piece of paradise’, according to images broadcast by Russian state TV, showing the visit took place at night.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters the visit was ‘spontaneous’, adding that Putin’s movements around the city and his meeting with locals were not planned.

He added that the visit took place ‘very late’ on Saturday and in the early hours of Sunday.

It was Putin’s first trip to the eastern Donbas region since he



Russia's President Vladimir Putin (left) speaks with apartment block residents on his visit to the Ukrainian city of Mariupol late on Saturday (AFP)

launched the invasion in February 2022, and comes almost a year after Moscow announced the capture of Mariupol after a campaign that saw the destruction of the Azovstal steel works, the last holdout of Ukrainian forces in the strategic port city.

‘Lack of remorse’

Mariupol was left devastated after Moscow relentlessly bombarded the city on the shores of the Sea of Azov and subjected it to a brutal siege. “The criminal always returns to the crime scene... the murderer of thousands of

Mariupol families came to admire the ruins of the city and (its) graves. Cynicism and lack of remorse,” Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhaylo Podolyak said on Twitter.

Ukraine’s defence ministry said on Twitter Putin visited the

city at night ‘as befits a thief’.

“He watched the ‘rebuilding of the city’... at night. Probably in order not to see the city, killed by his ‘liberation’, in the light of day,” the exiled Mariupol city council said on its Telegram account.

The visit comes ahead of a trip

to Moscow this week by Chinese President Xi Jinping, widely seen as a diplomatic coup for Putin.

Beijing, a strategic ally of Moscow, has touted the trip as a ‘visit for peace’ as it seeks to play mediator in the Ukraine conflict.

China has sought to position

itself as a neutral party, urging Moscow and Kyiv to open negotiations. But Western leaders have repeatedly criticised Beijing for failing to condemn Russia's offensive, accusing it of providing Moscow with diplomatic cover for its campaign.

Putin also met army chiefs including the chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov, in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don near the border with Ukraine, the Kremlin said.

He also made a surprise visit to Crimea on Saturday, with Russian state TV showing him visiting the Black Sea port city of Sevastopol accompanied by the local Moscow-appointed governor Mikhail Razvozhayev.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 following a referendum that was not recognised by Kyiv and the international community.

The weekend visits came after the International Criminal Court, based in The Hague, issued an arrest warrant for Putin over Russia’s alleged deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children during the conflict.

Kyiv says more than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the start of the conflict, many of them placed in institutions and foster homes.

Putin is now liable for arrest if he set foot in any of the court’s more than 120 member states.

AFP

Indian police arrest 78 in action against separatists in Punjab

New Delhi, India - A manhunt for a radical Sikh preacher in India entered its second day on Sunday, after authorities shut mobile internet in the whole of Punjab state and arrested 78 of his supporters.

Amritpal Singh rose to prominence in recent months demanding the creation of Khalistan, a separate Sikh homeland, and with his headline interpretation of Sikhism at rallies in rural pockets of the northern state of some 30mn people.

Last month Singh, 30, and his supporters armed with swords, knives and guns raided a police station after one of his aides was arrested for alleged assault and attempted kidnapping.

The brazen daytime raid in the outskirts of Amritsar - home to the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple - left several police injured and heaped pressure on authorities to act against



Police and security personnel patrol in the village Jallapur Khara about 45km from Amritsar on Sunday (AFP)

Amritpal Singh rose to prominence in recent months demanding the creation of Khalistan, a separate Sikh homeland

Singh.

After the operation began on Saturday, Punjab police tweeted late in the day that 78 people had been arrested in the ‘mega crackdown’.

But Singh himself was not thought to be among them.

On Sunday, there was a major police presence across Punjab, especially in rural pockets and around Singh’s village of Jallapur

Khara, local media reported.

The police said that its ‘manhunt’ was ongoing and the overall ‘situation is under control, citizens (are) requested to not believe in rumours’.

Local media reports said that the Punjab government ordered the mobile internet shutdown to be in place until noon (0630 GMT) on Monday.

It was worried that social media could be used to spread rumours and misinformation which, reports said, could spark street violence.

Indian authorities frequently shut down mobile internet services, particularly in the restive northern region of Kashmir.

Punjab - with about 58 per cent Sikhs and 39 per cent Hindus - was rocked by a violent separatist movement for Khalistan in the 1980s and early 1990s when thousands of people died.

AFP



Palestinian protesters burn tyres east of Gaza City on Sunday, against peace talks being held in Egypt (AFP)

Egypt hosts Israeli-Palestinian talks

Cairo, Egypt - Israeli and Palestinian officials were holding talks in Egypt on Sunday ‘to restore calm’ after a surge in deadly violence in the occupied West Bank, Egypt’s foreign ministry said.

The meeting, which follows similar talks last month in Jordan where both sides pledged to prevent more violence, comes amid concerns of a feared escalation during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan starting in the coming

week.

The meeting is aimed at ‘supporting dialogue between the Palestinian and Israeli sides to put a stop to unilateral actions and escalation and break the cycle of violence’, Egypt’s foreign ministry added.

Officials from Egypt, Jordan and the United States were attending the meeting in the Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh, it added.

Hussein al-Sheikh, Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) secretary general, said on Saturday on Twitter that the Palestinian delegation would participate ‘to demand an end to the continuous Israeli aggression against us’.

Few details have emerged from the talks, but the efforts were already rejected by fighting Palestinian factions.

AFP

Protesters denounce UK’s ‘illegal’ migration bill

London, UK- Anti-racism protesters marched in London on Saturday to denounce the government’s controversial plan to tackle cross-Channel migrant crossings by preventing arrivals from applying for asylum.

Around 2,000 protesters, many carrying signs reading ‘no human being is illegal’ and bearing trade union logos, marched towards Downing Street, the prime minister’s official residence. Organisers said the demonstration was partly a response to the government’s ‘inhuman’ and ‘illegal’ migration bill.

“People in this country are decent... and they’re willing to open their arms to people who are fleeing terrible circumstances,” said the protest’s planning officer Mark Daly.

“The government is trying to make these people not only un-



Protesters take part in the Resist Racism March and Rally in central London on Saturday (AFP)

welcome but illegal. We cannot classify people as illegal,” he said. “It’s a racist policy from a racist government.”

Other protests took place in Glasgow, Scotland, and the Welsh capital Cardiff.

The Conservative govern-

ment wants to outlaw asylum claims by all illegal arrivals and transfer them to ‘safe’ third countries, such as Rwanda, in a

bid to stop thousands of migrants from crossing the Channel on small boats.

The bill proposes preventing people who have arrived in the country illegally from seeking asylum before they are sent to a third country deemed safe.

Exceptions would be made for unaccompanied minors.

More than 45,000 migrants arrived in the UK last year by crossing the English Channel on small boats.

UNICEF, the UN children’s agency, said last week that it was ‘deeply concerned’ about the bill’s potential impact on minors. So too has United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told the House of Commons earlier this month that stopping the boats was the ‘people’s priority’.

AFP

Kenya police ban protest by opposition over inflation

Nairobi, Kenya - Kenya’s police on Sunday banned the opposition from holding a protest over inflation, saying requests for the demonstrations were filed too late, but organisers vowed to go ahead with the rallies.

Raila Odinga, leader of the Azimio la Umoja party, had called for Monday’s demonstration in Nairobi over soaring inflation, which in February reached 9.2 per cent year-on-year in the East African nation.

Odinga also claims that last year’s tight presidential election was ‘stolen’ from him, denouncing the government of President William Ruto as ‘illegitimate’.

Nairobi police chief Adamson Bungei said on Sunday

that police received requests to hold two demonstrations only late on Saturday and early on Sunday, when normally three days’ notice is required for public rallies.

“For public safety, neither has been granted,” he said at a press conference in the capital. Organisers had planned to march near the State House, the presidential palace.

“I want to underline some areas such as State House where we have heard people planning to invade or visit is covered by the laws of Kenya that it is a restricted area for unauthorised persons,” Bungei said.

But Odinga vowed that the gathering would go ahead.

AFP



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka celebrates after scoring against Crystal Palace in their English Premier League match in London on Sunday (AFP)

Firing on all cylinders

Saka stars as Arsenal move eight points clear with 4-1 thrashing of Crystal Palace

London, United Kingdom - Arsenal surged eight points clear at the top of the Premier League as Bukayo Saka's brace inspired a 4-1 rout of Crystal Palace on Sunday.

Gabriel Martinelli opened the scoring in the first half at the Emirates Stadium to put the leaders on course for a sixth successive league victory.

It was redemption for Martinelli, whose missed penalty condemned Arsenal to Europa League last 16 defeat in their shoot-out against Sporting Lisbon on Thursday.

Mikel Arteta's side needed just 45 minutes against struggling Palace to erase the bitter taste of that loss.

Saka followed Martinelli's goal

Heading into the international break, Arsenal have ensured the fate of the title race will be in their hands in the final 10 games

by doubling Arsenal's lead before half-time.

Granit Xhaka netted the third after the interval and Jeff Schlupp's reply was no consolation as the influential Saka's second capped Arsenal's stylish display. Arsenal now have a substantial eight-point lead over second placed Manchester City, who took the weekend off from Premier League duty to thrash Burnley in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Saturday.

With a game in hand on Arsenal and a crucial clash with the

Gunners looming on April 26, Pep Guardiola's champions will still believe they can win a fifth title in six seasons.

But heading into the international break, Arsenal have ensured the fate of the title race will be in their hands in the final 10 games.

After surrendering top spot with a defeat against City in February, Arsenal have responded impressively, showing a maturity and composure far beyond the Gunners' teams that routinely underachieved in recent years.

Arteta deserves immense credit for transforming a side that blew their top four place last season.

Less than a year later, Arsenal, the first English side ever to win nine London derbies in a single season, have the look of champions elect.

Arsenal played a gruelling 120 minutes against Sporting before their Europa League campaign ended in painful fashion.

Such a quick turnaround could have tested Arsenal mentality and physically.

But they had the ideal opponents in a Palace team now without a win in their 13 matches in 2023 and reeling from Friday's sacking of boss Patrick Vieira.

Vieira was a key member of

the last title-winning Arsenal side 19 years ago and Gunners fans chanted his name throughout the game.

Rampant Arsenal

Arteta had described Arsenal's run-in as "11 finals" and he made six changes to freshen up his team for the first of those hurdles.

Palace, led by interim boss Paddy McCarthy, nearly took a shock lead when Wilfried Zaha's shot hit the post, deflected off diving Arsenal keeper Aaron Ramsdale and rebounded just wide.

That served as a wake-up call for Arsenal and they made the breakthrough in the 28th minute. AFP



Erling Haaland celebrates after scoring against Burnley

Haaland hits another hat-trick as Man City show Kompany's Burnley no mercy

Manchester, United Kingdom - Burnley manager Vincent Kompany endured a nightmare return to Manchester City on Saturday as Erling Haaland scored his sixth hat-trick of the season in a 6-0 rout that sent Pep Guardiola's men into the FA Cup semi-finals. Kompany, who won four Premier League titles in an 11-year career at City as a player, was given a hero's reception at the Etihad.

But on the pitch City showed no mercy towards their former captain as Haaland took his tally for the season to 42 goals.

Julian Alvarez also scored twice and Cole Palmer netted the other goal as City remained on course for a treble of Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup.

Haaland scored five as RB Leipzig were put to the sword in a 7-0 thrashing in the Champions League in midweek.

The Norwegian has now scored at least a hat-trick in six of his 19 appearances at the Etihad this season.

"It's been a good couple of games -- important games. (To win) 7-0 and 6-0 before the national team break is impressive. I'm really happy," said Haaland.

"I think we're in the part of the season where we should be at our best."

Burnley are storming towards a return to the Premier League in Kompany's first season in charge.

But the Championship leaders were shown the gulf they have to bridge next season by a clinical City display.

"It is always a place I am proud to come back but I was also proud to come here with Burnley," said Kompany.

The visitors had started the brighter of the two sides but were undone once Haaland opened the scoring by prodding home Alvarez's pass on 32 minutes.

Moments later it was 2-0 as Phil Foden was released down the left to square for Haaland to stroke home.

City's number nine completed his hat-trick on the rebound after Foden's shot came back off the post.

His remarkable form has overshadowed Alvarez's excellent start to his City career. The Argentine World Cup winner signed an extended contract at the Etihad this week celebrated with a double of his own from two Kevin De Bruyne assists. AFP

Griezmann-inspired Atletico crush sinking Valencia

Barcelona, Spain - Antoine Griezmann pulled the strings for Atletico Madrid as they shredded Ruben Baraja's helpless Valencia 3-0 in La Liga on Saturday.

The French forward opened the scoring for the hosts at the Metropolitano and continued his own superb form with another fine display at the heart of Diego Simeone's side.

Yannick Carrasco doubled Atletico's lead early in the second half and Thomas Lemar sealed the win, with the Rojiblan-

cos, third, moving six points clear of fourth-placed Real Sociedad, having played a game more.

The defeat leaves the troubled Los Che 17th, level on 26 points with Getafe, 18th, who host Sevilla on Sunday.

Atletico recorded a fifth win in six La Liga games and tightened their hold on third place with a confident display, the kind they could not find in the first half of the campaign.

"Before the World Cup nothing was going for us, and now everything is," Atletico mid-

fielder Marcos Llorente told DAZN.

"The team is happy, and looking forward to keep on winning games, and the objective is to finish as high as we can.

"We know all we have left is La Liga so we will try to climb ranks. Above us we have big teams, why not try and catch them up?"

Memphis Depay missed two good chances for Atletico early on before Griezmann broke the deadlock after 23 minutes.

Llorente burst forward and

fed the striker, and while there was a stroke of luck about his first touch, which appeared to bounce off his foot and set the ball up nicely, the second was a neat finish for his ninth league goal of the season. Valencia thought they had responded through Hugo Duro but his strike was ruled out by VAR for a foul at the other end of the pitch by Dimitri Foulquier.

The first half was intense and fairly even, but Atletico stroled to victory in the second.

AFP



Atletico Madrid's Antoine Griezmann celebrates after scoring against Valencia on Saturday (AFP)



Zlatan Ibrahimovic

Milan fall at Udinese despite Ibrahimovic's goal record

Milan, Italy - Zlatan Ibrahimovic became the oldest goalscorer in the history of Serie A on Saturday but couldn't stop AC Milan from falling to a 3-1 defeat at Udinese.

Ibrahimovic, 41, was in Milan's starting line-up for the first time since January last year and smashed home a penalty at the second attempt in first-half stoppage time to make the score 1-1 following Roberto Pereyra's ninth-minute opener.

But it wasn't enough to stop fourth-placed Milan from losing their fourth match away from home in their last five and miss the chance to move provisionally

"We not in a good position in the league and getting into the top four is so important for us... We've not done enough over the last few weeks

STEFANO PIOLI

second in Italy's top flight.

Stefano Pioli's team stay fourth, two points behind local rivals Inter Milan in second in the race for the Champions League.

They will drop out of the top four if Roma win the Rome derby with Lazio on Sunday evening while Inter face fierce rivals Ju-

ventus hoping to steal a march on their rivals for Europe's top club competition.

"When a team plays like this it means the coach hasn't done his job. We played way below our standard," Pioli told Sky.

"We not in a good position in the league and getting into the

top four is so important for us... We've not done enough over the last few weeks."

Wearing the captain's armband Ibrahimovic missed his first spot-kick but was given a second chance when Beto was penalised for encroachment, and thumped his shot down the middle of the goal.

At 41 years and 166 days old Ibrahimovic overtook former AC Milan defender Alessandro Costacurta - who also netted against Udinese in 2007 aged 41 - as the oldest scorer in Italy's top flight.

He had previously made three

substitute appearances this season after being sidelined since May last year, following reconstructive surgery on the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee.

Udinese coach Andrea Sottil was sent off for his protests at the decision to award the penalty for a Jaka Bijol handball and then allow Ibrahimovic to retake following Marco Silvestri's brilliant save.

But Sottil's side were ahead at the break as Beto made up for his earlier error by finishing off Isaac Success' low cross on the stroke of half-time.

AFP

STARC CONTRAST

Left-arm pacer’s five-wicket haul and Marsh blitz help Australia hammer India in the second one-dayer

Visakhapatnam, India - Mitchell Starc’s 5-53 and a blazing 66 by Mitchell Marsh helped Australia demolish India by 10 wickets in the second one-day international to level the series at 1-1 on Sunday.

Starc, a left-arm quick, rattled the Indian batting with his pace and swing to bundle out the opposition for 117 in 26 overs in Visakhapatnam.

Openers Travis Head (51) and Marsh, who smashed six sixes in his 36-ball blitz, then took apart the Indian bowling to romp home in 11 overs and level the three-match series with one game left.

Australia finished the chase with 39 overs to spare and bounce back from their opening loss.

Starc led the team’s lethal attack with the wicket of Shubman Gill for a duck after the tourists decided to bowl first after overnight rain.

Two successive strikes from Starc to get returning skipper Rohit Sharma for 13 and then Suryakumar Yadav, out for a second straight first-ball duck, pushed India onto the back foot.

KL Rahul played out the hat-trick ball but lasted for just 11 more deliveries before falling leg before wicket to Starc, who returned figures of 4-31 in his first spell of six overs.

Skipper Steve Smith took a stunning one-handed catch at first slip to dismiss Hardik Pandya for one off the bowling of Sean Abbott, who took three wickets.



Australia’s Mitchell Starc (R) celebrates with teammates after the dismissal of India Rohit Sharma in their second one-day international in Visakhapatnam on Sunday (AFP)

Smith went full stretch to his right and was airborne when he took the catch off an edge from Pandya, setting social media abuzz with praise for his "superman" effort.

Virat Kohli attempted to hit back for India with a score of 31 that included four boundaries before he was trapped in front by Nathan Ellis.

Wickets kept tumbling and the departure of Ravindra Jadeja, the hero from Friday’s first match in Mumbai, for 16 off the bowling

Australia finished the chase with 39 overs to spare and bounce back from their opening loss

of Ellis added to India’s woes.

Starc wrapped up the innings with his ninth ODI five-wicket haul. Axar Patel, who came into the team in place of Shardul Thakur, was unbeaten on 29 after hitting two sixes.

The left-handed Head and Marsh came out firing as they smashed Mohammed Siraj and Mohammed Shami to all parts of the ground.

Head began the attack with two straight boundaries off Siraj and Marsh soon joined the charge with a string of fours and sixes.

AFP

Lahore Qalandars defend title with thrilling win

Lahore, Pakistan - Lahore Qalandars became the first team to win back-to-back Pakistan Super League titles on Saturday, beating Multan Sultans by one run in a thrilling final.

Captain Shaheen Shah Afridi took 4-51 after smashing a rapid 44 not out but had to effect a run out at the bowler’s end as Multan’s Khushdil Shah tried to make a third run to force a super over.

Qalandars had scored 200-6 in their 20 overs before a packed 25,000 Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore and Sultans finished on 199-8.

Qalandars had also defeated Sultans in last year’s final.

Shaheen conceded 34 runs in his opening two overs as Sultans raced to 101-1 in 10 overs, with Rilee Rossouw (52) and Mohammad Rizwan (34) adding 64 for the second wicket.

Rossouw smashed seven fours and two sixes off just 32 balls.

But Shaheen returned for his second spell to dismiss Kieron Pollard (19), Tim David (20), Anwar Ali (one) and Usama Mir (nought).



Lahore Qalandars captain Shaheen Shah Afridi holds the PSL trophy as he celebrates with his team-mates in Lahore on Saturday

With 35 needed in the last two overs, Shah and Abbas Afridi took 22 from Haris Rauf’s 19th over but failed to get 13 in the last.

“We reached the final again and won the title for a second time so that’s a reward for teamwork,” said Shaheen.

“We played well in the final but it was a tense win.”

Earlier, Qalandars were lifted by a rampaging Shaheen who clobbered a 15-ball 44 not out with five towering sixes and two fours, helping his team smash 85 runs in the last five overs.

Abdullah Shafique top-scored

with a 40-ball 65.

Shafique and Fakhar Zaman (39) took Qalandars to 95-1 after their team won the toss and batted and opener Mirza Baig hammered an 18-ball 30.

But once Zaman was dismissed, Qalandars lost four wickets in the space of 18 balls,

slumping to 112-5.

Shaheen promoted himself to number seven and instantly made an impact, as he and Shafique hit 24 runs in the 17th over from pacer Ihsanullah.

Leg-spinner Usama Mir was the pick of Sultans’ bowlers with 3-24.

West Indies’ Hope trumps Bavuma as captains hit tons

East London, South Africa - New captain Shai Hope hit a match-winning century for the West Indies in the second one-day international against South Africa at Buffalo Park in East London on Saturday.

But he admitted he had anxious moments as opposite number Temba Bavuma played what he described as “a brilliant innings”.

“I forgot how difficult this game was,” said Hope as he accepted the man of the match award after his team won by 48 runs.

Hope, playing his first international match since August, made 128 not out in a total of 335 for eight – a record for the West Indies against South Africa. But for more than half the South African innings it looked as though it might not be enough.

Bavuma followed up his Test-best 172 against West Indies a week earlier with a superb one-day high of 144

before the home team were bowled out for 287.

South Africa made a flying start with Quinton de Kock hitting a dazzling 48 off 26 balls in an opening stand of 76 off 52 deliveries with Bavuma.

They stayed well ahead of the required rate and reached 184 in the 25th over before Tony de Zorzi was third man out.

The hosts slumped to 238 for eight but Bavuma found an unlikely ally in Lungi Ngidi in a ninth-wicket stand worth 49 before Bavuma gloved a catch to wicketkeeper Hope off Alzarri Joseph.

Hope, captaining West Indies for the first time, stayed calm as the pressure mounted. He praised Joseph and left-arm spinner Akeal Hosein, who both took three wickets.

“The rate that they were going we needed to take wickets,” he said.

AFP



Shai Hope of the West Indies plays a shot en route to his century



New Zealand players celebrate the wicket of Sri Lanka’s Angelo Mathews on the third day of their second Test in Wellington on Sunday (AFP)

Dominant New Zealand close on series sweep of Sri Lanka

Wellington, New Zealand - New Zealand maintained their dominance over Sri Lanka in the second Test on Sunday, enforcing a follow-on and setting up the likelihood of a series clean sweep with two days to play.

The tourists reached 113-2 in their second innings at stumps on day three but still trailed by 303 runs at Wellington’s Basin Reserve. They need a massive turnaround to avoid defeat after being skittled out for 164 in their first innings in response to the Black

Caps’ 580-4 declared.

Starting off with a deficit of 416 runs, they showed more fight in their second turn at bat.

Captain Dimuth Karunaratne posted his second half-century of the day before being dismissed by counterpunch Tim Southee for 51, caught in the deep after fellow-opener Oshada Fernando had been removed cheaply.

Kusal Mendis was at the crease on 50 and Angelo Mathews unbeaten on one off 40 balls, with the pair seeing off the last

11.5 overs in stoic fashion. Sri Lanka’s best hopes of saving the Test could rest with the weather.

Rain is forecast for the final day, meaning they could force a stalemate if they can successfully bat through Monday, when cold, blustery conditions are expected and may make life uncomfortable for New Zealand in the field.

The tourists’ slim hope of winning to square the two-match series was effectively ended by a slew of rash shots which derailed their first innings.



Kashyap Prajapati

Kashyap’s double ton powers Muscat CT into Super League final

Muscat - Kashyap Prajapati scored a double century as Muscat CT defeated Oman Stallions by 186 runs to march into the final of the Oman Cricket Super League powered by Muscat Pharmacy.

Prajapati’s 204 runs of 147 balls with 21 fours and 6 sixes helped Muscat CT make 333/5 in 50 overs. Prajapati was well supported by Ayaan Khan (49 of 58).

In reply, Oman Stallions’ innings ended at 147 in 44.4 overs with Ayaan Khan taking three wickets for 13 runs. Samay Shrivastav and Sandeep Goud picked two wickets each as Muscat CT registered their fifth victory in the Super League in six games.

Muscat CT will take on Oman Stallions again in the final on Monday with the match starting at 9.15 am.

In another match, Yalla Shabab edged Renaissance by three runs. Yalla Shabab made 182 in 38.3 overs with fine contributions from Imran Alam (32 of 51) and Khalid Kail (31 of

25). Nadeem Khan was the pick of Renaissance bowling with 4/40 and he was well supported by Imran Ali (2/22) and Bilal Mohammed (2/35).

In response, Renaissance were cruising at one stage before losing wickets in clusters. Nadeem Khan’s effort (54 of 83) took the close but they

Muscat CT will take on Oman Stallions again in the final on Monday with the match starting at 9.15 am

were all out for 179/10 in 49 overs courtesy of brilliant spells from Mohammed Nadeem 4/37 and Hassnain Ali Shah 4/37.

Yalla Shabab take on Renaissance in the third-place playoff on Tuesday.

RESCUE ACT

Oman Racing battle back from early puncture to finish ninth on FIA WEC debut

Muscat - Ahmad al Harthy, Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood mounted a competitive recovery during the opening round of the 2023 FIA World Endurance Championship at Sebring in the USA on Friday, 17th March, to rescue a ninth-place finish - following a costly puncture in the first hour of racing.

The Oman Racing with TF Sport trio had been set to mount a challenge for the GTE Am podium during the eight-hour race, thanks to a superb top-three qualifying performance from Al Harthy, but instead they had to be satisfied with a strong fight-back after losing significant time during the first stint.

American racer Dinan took the start at his home race in the No.25 Aston Martin GTE and held third place early on, but just five laps into the contest a heavy accident for the No.83 Ferrari 488 resulted in the appearance of the Safety Car.

Almost all of the GTE Am cars



Oman Racing’s Ahmad al Harthy in action at the opening round of the 2023 FIA World Endurance Championship at Sebring in the US on Friday

I was really happy with my performance, it showed if things go perfectly well for us we can get good results here in WEC. It’s a very, very competitive championship

AHMAD AL HARTHY

served their first pit stops while the race was under caution, with the D’Station Racing Aston Martin an exception. So, when racing resumed, Dinan was fourth but when the D’Station car pitted around 75 minutes into the race

Oman Racing moved back into third. Just a short while later, though, a puncture to the front-right Michelin tyre put Dinan off the circuit and a huge amount of time was lost as he coaxed the car back to the pits. Rejoining the

track in 12th position in GTE Am, Dinan pitted again with one hour and 45 minutes elapsed.

Al Harthy climbed into the driving seat of the Aston Martin for his first race miles in FIA WEC and he immediately set the squad’s fastest lap of the race at that point. The Omani, supported by Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS, then climbed into 11th place before the end of the second hour and closed time on the cars ahead.

Dinan returned to the driving seat late in hour three, before Al

Harthy started his second stint in hour four and continued to push as the team tried to recover as much time as possible. Halfway through the race Al Harthy held 10th position and he lapped impressively, delivering pace which confirmed the squad’s podium potential had the early puncture not occurred.

“I was really happy with my performance, it showed if things go perfectly well for us we can get good results here in WEC. It’s a very, very competitive championship and we learnt a lot racing at Sebring,” said Al Harthy.



Oman U16 team

Oman U16 cricket coach confident of a good show at ACC West Zone Cup

Muscat - Oman U16 cricket team head coach Syed Aamir Kaleem expressed confidence in his boys as they look forward to a top-place finish at the ACC Men’s U16 West Zone Cup 2023 in Dubai, UAE, from March 24-30.

Organised by the Asian Cricket Council (ACC), and hosted by the Bahrain Cricket Federation, the tournament features all six GCC countries.

Besides Oman, the other teams participating in the tournament are UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Oman, captained by Jeet Shah, will take on UAE in the opener on March 24. Speaking after a training session at the Oman Cricket Academy grounds in Al Amerat on Friday.

Aamir Kaleem said: “We have been preparing hard for this tour-

nament for the past one month. We have a great bunch of young and talented cricketers, who have performed exceptionally well in the domestic season.

“They have made it to the national team based on their merit and have displayed a lot of talent in the local competitions. They have the potential to make it big and I am confident that the team will do very well.”



Novak Djokovic

Djokovic to miss Miami Open over lack of Covid vaccination

Miami, United States - Novak Djokovic will not play at the Miami Open after failing to receive a waiver to enter the United States despite not being vaccinated for Covid-19.

Tournament director James Blake told The Tennis Channel on Saturday that the world number one, a six-time Miami cham-

pion, was denied entry despite the best effort of tournament officials.

“We did all we could. We tried to talk to the government but it’s out of our hands,” Blake said ahead of the start of the tournament next week.

“We tried and he wasn’t able to play, same result as he had in

Indian Wells.”

Djokovic was not allowed a spot in the ongoing Masters 1000 event in the California desert.

“We’d love to have him and he’s our greatest champion, six times here, so we’d obviously love to have him here but unfortunately that’s way above my

pay grade,” Blake said.

Djokovic has missed other events due to being unvaccinated against Covid, but was allowed to compete in this year’s Australian Open and won his 10th crown at Melbourne for his 22nd career Grand Slam title - level with Spain’s Rafael Nadal for the all-time men’s record.

Bopanna, 43, becomes oldest ATP Masters 1000 champion

Indian Wells, United States - India’s Rohan Bopanna became the oldest ATP Masters 1000 champion when he and his Australian partner Matt Ebden claimed the men’s doubles crown at Indian Wells on Saturday.

The unseeded duo upset top seeds Wesley Koolhof and Neal Skupski 6-3, 2-6, 10-8 in the final.

“Truly special. It’s called tennis paradise for a reason,” the Indian veteran said after clinching his fifth Masters 1000 trophy and first in Indian Wells. “I’ve been, over the years, coming here and seeing all these guys win for so many years. I’m really happy that Matt and I were able to do this and get this title here. It’s been some tough matches, close matches. Today we played against one of the best teams out there. Really happy that we got the trophy.”

The Indian-Australian pairing knocked off defending and two-time desert titlists John Isner and



Rohan Bopanna of India and Matthew Ebden of Australia celebrate with the trophy (AFP)

Jack Sock in Friday’s semi-finals and beat Canadian singles stars Felix Auger-Aliassime and Denis Shapovalov in the quarters. Their opening victory came in a match tie-break against Rafael Matos and David Vega Hernandez.

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TOXIC ALGAE

'Sunshine State' sees red

Algal blooms - known as 'red tides' - are the unwanted visitor that has ruined the spring break in Florida



Lido beach Key, off the coast of Sarasota, Florida

With its brilliant sun, white sand and turquoise water, Lido Key Beach would make for a perfect postcard of Florida beaches if it weren't for the dozens of dead fish lying on the shore, killed by a toxic algal bloom known as 'red tide'.

The bloom usually hits Florida's Gulf Coast in the summer, but this year it has come during spring, a time when thousands of American families flock to the Sunshine State during school break, and the outbreak bodes ill for its tourism sector.

On the terrace of the Lido Beach Resort, Jeff Napier, a 62-year-old employee, laments the effect red tide has had on business.

"We had a lot of cancellations. People get sick," Napier told AFP. "Why would you want to spend that kind of money and stay here?"

High amounts of the harmful algae, known as *Karenia brevis*, can kill marine life and cause respiratory complications in some people. It also has a sulfurous, decaying smell.

Dick Bowser experienced that firsthand a few days ago. The 80-year-old tourist walks along the shoreline with a cane in each hand, happy that the ocean currents have turned the tide away from Sarasota, at least for now.

"It smelled horrible. I couldn't stand to be near the beach," Bowser said. "It bothered me in the form of coughing, continuous coughing. I got a sore throat every day, having trouble with my eyes or sinuses."

In Napier's case, the toxic algae gave him five days of migraines, something he doesn't want to experience again. "They just got to fix that red tide. They got to fix it," he says. "But I don't know what they're going to do about it."

Kill the algae

Fifty kilometers from Lido Key Beach, scientists from the Mote Marine Laboratory have been working since 2020 to lessen the impact of red tide, a phenomenon first reported by Spanish explorers in the 15th and 16th centuries, based on accounts of the native populations in the area.

"The goal of the research is to kill the algae, denature the toxin, and not have significant impacts on the nontarget species," explains Dr Michael Crosby, president and CEO of the laboratory.

To achieve this, researchers cultivate specimens of *Karenia brevis* in huge tanks of seawater that imitate the ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico and test various substances against it.

So far, they have identified a dozen methods that work, and over the next two years they plan to test them in the ocean, Crosby says.



In this file photo thousands of dead fish float in the Boca Ciega Bay located near the mouth of Madeira Beach in Madeira Beach, Florida



The goal of the research is to kill the algae, denature the toxin, and not have significant impacts on the nontarget species

DR MICHAEL CROSBY

Impossible to eradicate red tides

Crosby cautions that it is impossible to eradicate red tide completely, because unlike other harmful algae that are often the result of human activity on land, such as from agriculture runoff, *Karenia brevis* occurs naturally.

"We'll never get rid of red tide entirely," he says.

Florida's red tide begins about 65km off the state's west coast and may approach the coastline following ocean currents. The current outbreak was triggered by Hurricane Ian, which hit Florida in September, pushing existing red tide to the surface, explains Crosby.

Once on the coast, microalgae proliferate when they come into contact with water rich in nutrients, both, naturally or through agricultural activity.

"We are examining the degree to which it may be possible that humans, especially land-based inputs of nutrients, may exacerbate a red tide in terms of its intensity, or its duration."

"But even if you took all of the humans out of the state of Florida, you would still have red tides," he adds.

Facing the Lido Beach Resort, Napier seems resigned to living with the toxic bloom.

"You need to be aware that there is red tide in Florida. It has been here for hundreds of years."

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PARIS 2024



Marseille, the first city to welcome the Parisan flame in February

Riding the emission bogey

Organisers of the 2024 Paris Olympics say they plan to make the Games the world's first 'climate positive' sporting event, a boast experts claim is 'misleading'.

"We want to show that we can do these Games with half the emissions," Georgina Grenon, Paris 2024's director of environmental excellence, said with 500 days to go before the world's biggest sporting extravaganza gets underway in the French capital. "Within the limit of what is technically feasible in 2024, we will have made every effort to cut, cut, cut."

For Lindsay Otis Nilles, of Carbon Market Watch, however, "to say that an event has a positive impact on the climate is misleading."

"The event itself generates greenhouse gases which are bad for the climate. The financial support of the organisers for external projects does not change this."

Paris organisers say their calculations are based on reducing greenhouse gases and offsetting residual emissions linked to the event, in addition to financing projects to offset the effects of pollution.

Organisers insist they can halve CO2 emissions from the estimated 3.5 million tonnes generated during the 2012 London and 2016 Rio Games.

The construction footprint is limited, thanks to 95 per cent reliance on existing venues. Most of the polluting will be linked to travel, with 25 per cent of total emissions from spectator transit alone, and operations, including accommodation, security and catering.

CAN PARIS 2024 DELIVER THE WORLD'S FIRST 'CLIMATE POSITIVE' OLYMPICS?

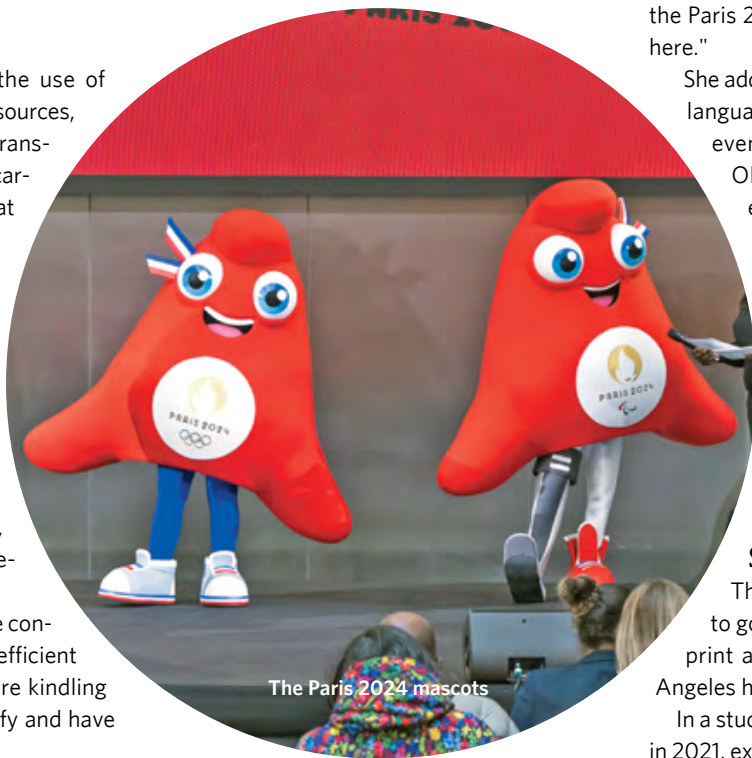
Offsetting emissions

Organisers have also favoured the use of electricity from renewable energy sources, with most venues near to public transport, and serving spectators 'low-carbon' dishes with less meat at venues.

"By offsetting even more CO2 emissions than those we are going to emit, we will become the first major sporting event with a positive contribution to the climate," organisers said.

Environmental compensation includes financing the planting of trees to absorb carbon dioxide, and projects to conserve and restore forests and oceans.

However, these ventures on five continents including providing more efficient cooking equipment in Africa where kindling is still often used, are hard to verify and have been criticised by UN experts.



The Paris 2024 mascots

Sports ecology expert Madeleine Orr, a professor at Britain's Loughborough University, praised the efforts being made but remains cautious on talk of a 'sustainable' games.

"All sport events have an impact. The most sustainable sport event is the one that doesn't happen," Orr said. "There's also the challenge of travel - for athletes and spectators - which is really out of the organisers' hands. We're waiting on the transport sector, mainly airlines, to sort out electric travel options. So, for now, offsetting is an acceptable option. I think the Paris 2024 organisers have the right idea here."

She added, "My concern is when absolutist language is used, like 'most sustainable event' or even just 'a sustainable Olympics', because even if they do everything right, a big international event cannot be perfectly sustainable, because certain emissions and waste products is unavoidable, and we know that offsetting programmes are imperfect. So, there's always a risk of overstating the accomplishments. That said, I'd always rather they try!"

Smaller Games

The question, however, remains how to go further to reduce the carbon footprint at future Olympic Games with Los Angeles hosting the 2028 edition.

In a study published in US magazine Nature in 2021, experts claim three things could make



We want to show that we can do these Games with half the emissions.

Within the limit of what is technically feasible in 2024, we will have made every effort to cut, cut, cut

GEORGINA GRENON

the Games more environmentally friendly - drastically reducing the size of the event, rotating Games between the same cities and implementing independent sustainability standards.

Orr backs the idea of smaller Games, with fewer spectators travelling by plane.

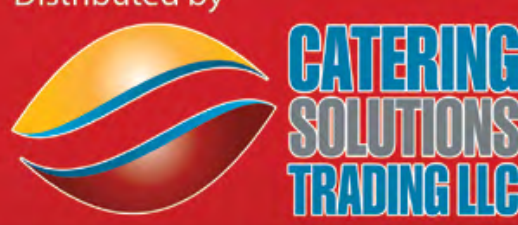
"In future, it's possible to reduce the size and scope of the event, which also opens the doors to use smaller facilities and fewer hotels, produce less waste, and so on, without eroding the athlete experience or the media spectacle that can be produced and broadcast to televisions around the world," she said, adding, "The world loved watching Tokyo and Beijing, even without fans. We can operate a more sustainable games."

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