

Oman's real GDP grows 4.7% to RO8.7bn in Q1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's real GDP grew at an annual rate of 4.7% in the first quarter of 2023, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The sultanate's real GDP - gross domestic product at constant prices - reached RO8.7bn for the January-March quarter, compared to RO8.3bn recorded in the same period last year, as shown by the preliminary official data.

Non-hydrocarbon GDP grew at a rate of 4.6% in the first quarter, compared to 3.5% growth of hydrocarbon GDP. The growth of non-hydrocarbon GDP was primarily driven by robust activities in Oman's industrial and services sectors.

Within the hydrocarbon sector, oil activity recorded a growth of 2.8% to RO2.82bn in Q1 2023, while gas activity grew by 7.6% to RO449mn over the same period.

In non-hydrocarbon growth, overall industrial sector activities increased by 4.4%, primarily boosted by a 5.2% growth in manufacturing. The construction and mining industries grew by 3.1% and 9.9%, respectively.



Non-hydrocarbon GDP grew at a rate of 4.6% in the first quarter, compared to 3.5% growth of hydrocarbon GDP

Activities in the services sector, the largest contributor to Oman's GDP, grew by 4.5% in the first quarter of 2023. Within the services sector, wholesale and retail trade grew 5%.

The first quarter GDP growth numbers are in line with Oman's GDP growth in 2022 when the sultanate recorded a growth of 4.3% for the full year.

For the full year 2023, the government's estimates in January

projected Oman's real GDP to grow by 5.5%, mainly due to an increase in oil and gas production. As per government estimates, hydrocarbon GDP is projected to grow 10.1%, and

non-hydrocarbon GDP is expected to grow 2.9% this year.

However, international institutions such as International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and global credit rating agencies have estimated that Oman's 2023 economic growth will remain significantly lower than the previous year, mainly due to an expected decrease in oil output owing to an OPEC+ decision, of which Oman is a

member.

Last week, IMF stated that the sultanate's economic growth is projected to slow down to 1.3% in 2023 and then rebound to 2.7% in 2024, reflecting oil production cuts by OPEC+ and moderate growth in the non-hydrocarbon sector.

However, IMF acknowledged that Oman's economy continues to grow, and inflation is contained at low levels.

Foreigners entitled to property for 99 years in future cities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shuaili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, announced that foreigners have the right to own property for 99 years in future cities like Sultan Haitham City at the Investment and Development Forum - titled 'Get life chances' - held on Thursday.

Highlighting the significance of the future cities programme, the minister stated that it is one of Oman's largest projects. "Under this initiative, foreigners will be granted 99-year usufruct rights to own property in the new cities."

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning is currently working on the development plans of several future city projects, including Greater Muscat, Greater Nizwa, Greater Salalah and Greater Sohar. These projects will involve the allocation of approximately 30mn to 40mn sqm of land in the wilayats of Salalah, Nizwa and Sohar to establish modern cities, comprising a total of around 40,000 housing units.

Additionally, the government has introduced the Sorouh programme, the National Initiative for Integrated Residential Neighbourhoods, which includes nine development sites. Three of these sites are currently under implementation, three under construction and three available for investment.



H E Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shuaili

H E Shuaili said the government is offering four options to citizens - 'Choose Your Land,' 'Plan Your Land,' 'Replace Your Land' and 'Acquire Your Land.'

These options aim to provide citizens flexibility and choice in property acquisition in Sorouh and future cities projects.

Sultan Haitham City, one of the future cities, encompasses six residential neighbourhoods. Twenty agreements worth over RO1.2bn have been signed for the city and three agreements are due for investment opportunities.

H E Shuaili informed that Oman Development Bank has announced financing options for construction contracts in Sultan Haitham City as well as other future projects involving Omani youth. "The Ministry of Housing aims to prioritise governance, legislation and digital transformation. We also seek to enhance competencies, capacity building and better communication with the business sector to achieve common goals at an accelerated pace."

New national health policy soon: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, has stressed the significance of developing a national policy for Oman's healthcare system.

Mirroring Dr Mandhari's view, H E Dr Fatima Mohammed al Ajmi, Ministry of Health's Undersecretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs, has stated that with Oman's national health policy developed nearly three decades ago, there is an urgent need to update it.

This came in her opening speech at a workshop on Thursday for the final discussions on the National Health Policy Document for the Sultanate of Oman.

Held in collaboration with WHO, H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, presided over the one-day workshop, which was attended



Oman's national health policy was developed nearly three decades ago; there is an urgent need to update it

H E DR FATIMA
MOHAMMED AL AJMI

by representatives of various sectors.

Dr Mandhari commended WHO member states' efforts in formulating or updating their national health policies. He emphasised that a well-rounded policy serves as the foundation of a robust and adaptable health system. "The policy sets strategic

directives, prioritises healthcare aspects, and fosters partnerships to achieve sustainable development."

Highlighting the significance of updating the national health policy, H E Dr Fatima emphasised the vital role it plays in guiding the country's health sector towards the goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040.

She stated that comprehensive and sustainable health coverage, high-quality healthcare for the entire population, and community participation are among the priorities outlined in the policy. "The document also aims to establish an advanced health system equipped with modern technologies, supported by sustainable resources, and governed by effective policies.

"Collaborations and partnerships are key to realising the objectives of the national health policy," the undersecretary reiterated.

Wagner rebels turn against Putin

Moscow, Russia - Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed to defeat revolt as his former ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner paramilitary group, launched an apparent insurrection. Wagner claimed to have taken control of a key military facility in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Wagner troops were reported to be moving towards the capital.



See also Page 09

Tender Announcement

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

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Nonrefundable)	Tender Purchase deadline	Clarification deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2023/06/ENG/011	Construction of a new filling station at Albahja in Haima at Al Wusta Governorate	150.000	04.07.2023	06.07.2023	11.07.2023

Bank Name & Account Number

Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with a minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om.
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** The tender bid should be submitted in a sealed envelope and addressed to the Chairman of the Tender Committee, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.
- For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling 24610289/24610287/24610355

181 dams, 66 sewage treatment plants built to boost water security

"We will have 14 counters at Muscat International Airport and 12 at Salalah Airport for flights between Muscat and Salalah."



ADEL BIN AHMED AL ZADJALI



Our Correspondent

Muscat

Saudi Arabia's low-cost airline flynas, flying in from King Abdulaziz International Airport

The official welcome cere-

Salalah Airport has the capacity to accommodate 2mn passengers annually, with future expansions capable of receiving 6mn passengers annually.

Our Correspondent

Muscat

He pointed out that many projects and research studies



DR ABDULAZIZ AL MASHAIKHI

According to Mashaikhi, production of desalination water increased to 473mn cubic metres

The percentage of households using improved sanitation facilities is about 97%.

Solar power ensures reliable water supply for Buraimi aflaj



Our Correspondent

Muscat

Under the patronage of H E Dr Saud bin Hammoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, the inauguration event took place in the presence of Dr Hamad bin Ahmed al Busaidi, Governor of



Speaking at the inauguration, Talib Ahmed al Jabri, Supervisor of Falaj Al Sarrani, stated that the 3,000-year-old irrigation system

Oman has a total of 4,112 aflaj, each differing in type based on the geological and hydrological characteristics of their respective areas.



In Muscat, 2,066 campaigns were organised, while in Dakhliyah there were 458 campaigns, 474 in Dhahirah, 342 in South Batinah, 265 in North Bati-

Similar inspection campaigns are carried out jointly with different government departments, including municipalities, the Ministry of Education and Royal Oman Police, MoL stated.



Oman showcases its experience in combating terror at UN meet

New York, USA - The sultanate outlined its experience in tolerance, peaceful coexistence and combating terrorism at the third UN Counter-Terrorism Week, which concluded in New York on Friday.

Oman participated in the event with a programme titled 'Towards a Society Free of Terrorism: The Omani Experience in Combating Terrorism and Extremism'.

During the event, H E Dr Mohammed Said al Ma'amari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, presented a paper titled 'Peaceful Coexistence in Order to Promote Tolerance and Mutual Respect to Combat Terrorism'.

The paper dealt with Oman's policy on international relations, which is mostly based on peaceful coexistence among nations and peoples, good neighbourliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of others and respect for the sovereignty of states.

The paper also underlined Oman's contributions to resolving disputes by peaceful means.

Additionally, H E Dr Mohammed Awadh al Hassan, Permanent Representative of Oman to the United Nations, presented a paper titled 'The Omani Experience in Combating Extremism and Terrorism'.

The paper highlighted the salient features of Oman's national strategy on combating terrorism. It unveiled the measures undertaken by Oman to protect society from extremism and terrorism, as well as efforts exerted by the country to combat terrorism and terrorism financing in the domestic and international arenas.

Organised by the National Counter-Terrorism Committee in cooperation with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, the event was held under the auspices of Vladimir Voronkov, UN Undersecretary General for Counter-Terrorism. It was attended by Miguel Moratinos, UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, heads of states and representatives of permanent missions accredited to the United Nations in New York.

Local startup revolutionises personal finance management

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An Omani startup has thrown the digital transformation of banking services into top gear. Its Maaly App is empowering people to effortlessly oversee their financial matters. The app won the ITHCA Pitch Battle Competition 2023 held at COMEX last month.

Ahmed al Shibli, CEO of Digital Coin Company (DCC), told Muscat Daily in an exclusive interview that the Maaly App was designed as a unique finance management tool that allows users to monitor transactions, gain insights into spending patterns, and make informed decisions for future financial endeavours like budgeting and saving plans.

The idea behind the app emerged following recognition of the need to digitise banking services in the country's ongoing digital transformation. DCC started as a startup in 2015, testing ideas at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology's SAS for Entrepreneurship Centre. However, its breakthrough came in 2018 when Oman Technology Fund invested in it, supporting its vision of revolutionising the banking sector with digital services. "That's how we built our startup, the Digital Coin Company," said Shibli.

DCC specialises in providing user-friendly financial solutions through projects like Maaly App and TelyPay. While Maaly App focuses on personal finance



Ahmed al Shibli (L) at the awards ceremony of the ITHCA Pitch Battle Competition 2023 held at COMEX last month (Supplied photo)

management and helping users achieve their financial goals, TelyPay offers a payment gateway and invoicing system for small businesses to accept payments remotely.

"The ultimate aim of Maaly App is to enhance financial literacy and utilise technology to support users in reaching their financial objectives."

Shibli emphasised DCC's commitment to delivering cutting-edge solutions tailored to the evolving needs of its diverse clientele. "We have a team of 13 professionals spanning various

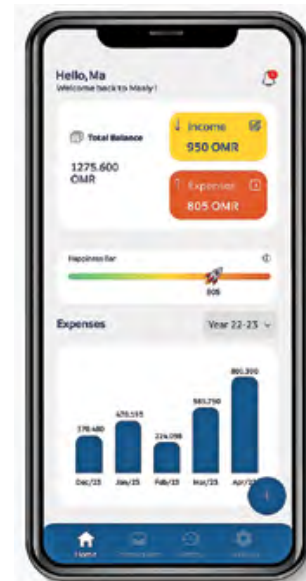
fields, who work together cohesively, celebrating our recent success in winning the ITHCA Pitch Battle Competition 2023."

As a startup in the banking sector, DCC faces several challenges. These include sourcing and hiring the right talent, building trust and awareness among potential customers and partners, and navigating the complex regulatory environment. "Moreover, we strive to scale our products and services while maintaining high quality and performance standards."

Looking ahead, DCC aims to

expand its offerings, streamline the fintech landscape and collaborate with more financial institutions, e-commerce platforms and relevant stakeholders. "We plan to introduce new products and services that cater to customers' evolving needs, such as investment options, robo-advisors and personal savings."

Shibli expressed gratitude to organisations like SAS for Entrepreneurship Centre, the Authority for SME Development and Oman Technology Fund for their support in shaping ideas, providing mentorship, and enabling in-



The ultimate aim of Maaly App is to enhance financial literacy and utilise technology to support users in reaching their financial objectives. We have a team of 13 professionals

AHMED AL SHIBLI

ternational connections for knowledge exchange among entrepreneurs.

Encouraging the younger generation of Omanis to embrace technological changes, Shibli said, "Building a startup in the technology sector may be challenging, but it is achievable with passion, perseverance and patience."

MAFWR urges caution in handling sacrificial animals

Our Correspondent
Muscat

With Eid al Adha around the corner, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has emphasised the need for all to exercise caution when purchasing animals for sacrifice.

It is essential to ensure that sacrificial animals are free from disease and external parasites, particularly ticks, it stated.

According to a ministry official, to ensure public health and to guarantee that the meat intended for human consumption is free from disease and pathogens, it is advisable to have sacrificial animals slaughtered in designated municipal facilities.

The official further informed that MAFWR is actively implementing preventive measures to contain the spread of zoonotic diseases, including Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever.

MAFWR's efforts are primarily focused on strengthening quarantine procedures and systems for live animals, ensuring



these are free of ticks and other external parasites. This involves taking necessary samples and sending these to specialised laboratories for testing.

"The ministry urges all citizens and residents to take precautionary measures before, during and after the process of animal slaughter. The person re-

sponsible for slaughtering an animal should be in good health, free from injuries or wounds, and should wear protective clothing," the official added.

Proper disposal of slaughter waste is crucial; it should not be thrown in open areas to avoid potential transmission of germs and pathogens.

Over 6mn Captagon tablets seized

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Royal Oman Police (ROP) seized 6mn Captagon tablets on Thursday.

In a statement, ROP said, "The Directorate General for Combating Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances thwarted an international drug smuggling operation. Around 6mn tablets of Captagon were found with the people arrested."

Legal measures have been taken against them, it stated.

According to drugs.com, Captagon was first manufactured in 1961 as an alternative to amphetamine and methamphetamine used at the time to treat narcolepsy, fatigue and the behavioural disorder 'minimal brain dysfunction'.

Some sources suggest Captagon is one of the more popular recreational drugs among youth in the region.



Play on Shakespeare with cast of 40 actors to be staged on Oct 27

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A poster of the much awaited play *Ithihasam*, which has a cast of over 40 actors, was released by Oman Film Society (OFS) officials last week. Rehearsals for the play have been going on for over six months.

The two-hour production will be staged by Bhavalaya Art and Culture Foundation in association with International Organisation Creative Events on October 27 at Qurum Rose Garden. Following Muscat, the play will be staged in Sohar, Sur and Salalah.

Releasing the promotional poster, Dr J Retnakumar, Chairman of Bhavalaya Art and Culture Foundation, said, "Art unites

Shakespeare is the inspiration of every artist and we are delighted to have a drama based on his life in Oman

MOHAMMAD AL KINDI

people and drama is one of the best mediums transcending every manmade barrier of religion and nationality. The play depicts the life of the world's most popular dramatist William Shakespeare and the inspirations behind his major literary works, including *Othello* and *Hamlet*."

Organisers claim *Ithihasam* will be one of the biggest produc-

tions in Oman performed on an open-air stage with live translations in English and Arabic on a giant screen.

According to Mohammad al Kindi, film director and former chairman of OFS, drama and films are "interlinked".

"We are happy to release the poster; kudos to the devotion and hard work of this big team for the last six months. Shakespeare is the inspiration of every artist and we are delighted to have a drama based on his life in Oman," Kindi said.

Also present at the poster release event were Dr Humaid al Amri, Chairman, and Qasim al Suleimy, former chairman of OFS, and the cast and crew of *Ithihasam*.

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Oman signs \$10bn deals for two green hydrogen projects



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Hydrogen Oman (Hydrom), a subsidiary of the state-owned Energy Development Oman (EDO), signed two new agreements worth \$10bn on Wednesday to develop green hydrogen projects with the POSCO-ENGIE consortium and the Hyport Duqm consortium.

H E Eng Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and chairman of Hydrom, signed the agreements, awarding two new green hydrogen projects in Oman.

The deals were signed with the winning bidders - POSCO-ENGIE consortium and Hyport Duqm consortium - in Round 1 of the Oman green hydrogen auction process during a special

event organised by Hydrom at Crowne Plaza OCEC.

Following the previous award of three projects worth \$20bn earlier this month, Oman has awarded a total of five large-scale green hydrogen projects, representing a total investment of more than \$30bn and a total production of 750 KTPA.

The total investment in the two newly awarded projects signed with the POSCO-ENGIE consortium and Hyport Duqm is expected to exceed \$10bn. The contracts are expected to yield a total production capacity of 250 thousand tonnes per annum (KTPA) from more than 6.5GW of installed renewable energy capacity at the sites.

The first project was awarded to the POSCO-ENGIE consortium, which consists of

South Korea's POSCO Holdings, France's ENGIE, MESCAT Middle East DMCC, Samsung Engineering Co Ltd, FutureTech Energy Ventures, Korea East-West Power Co Ltd, and Korea Southern Power Co Ltd. The consortium is expected to produce more than 200 KTPA of green hydrogen by 2030, utilising over 5.2 GW of combined wind and solar energy to produce and export ammonia. The plant will be built in the Governorate of Al Wusta.

The second project was awarded to the Hyport Duqm consortium, which consists of Oman's OQ Alternative Energy and Belgium's DEME Concessions.

The consortium aims to produce more than 50 KTPA of green hydrogen by 2029 in the

project's first phase. The signing of this agreement follows the earlier signing of commercial term sheets in March 2023.

Commenting on the agreements, H E Afi said, "We are pleased to witness the signings of these new agreements with such prestigious international companies.

The fast-paced efforts behind the announcement of these new projects reflect Oman's commitment to reinforcing its leading position in the global green hydrogen sector in line with its energy transformation strategy."

Eng Abdulaziz al Shidhani, managing director of Hydrom, said, "We are proud of what we have accomplished so far towards developing the green hydrogen sector in Oman.

The signing of these agreements reflects Oman's commitment to stimulating the growth of its green hydrogen sector and cementing its leading position regionally and globally. Hydrom conducted Round 1 of the auction in record time.

Today, we also witness the launch of the Round 2 public auction for new green hydrogen blocks. These accelerated steps aim to achieve the national objective of producing more than 1 MTPA of green hydrogen by 2030."

Oman's ambitious plan aims to produce more than 1 MTPA of green hydrogen by 2030, ramping up to 8 million tonnes per annum (MTPA) by 2050, with a cumulative investment value of \$140bn for the projects.



Eng Abdulaziz al Shidhani, managing director of Hydrom, speaks during the launch of Round 2 auctions for green hydrogen projects (ONA)

Oman launches second bidding round for green hydrogen projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After completing the first round of auctions, which resulted in a total of five project awards worth more than \$30bn, Hydrogen Oman (Hydrom) has launched the second round of auctions for land blocks designated for green hydrogen projects in the sultanate.

In Round 2, Hydrom plans to award up to three land blocks in the Dhofar region by the end of the first quarter of 2024. The auction process for Round 2 provides companies with the opportunity to submit investment proposals for the development of large-scale green hydrogen projects in some of Oman's most attractive locations.

Concurrently, Hydrom will finalise negotiations with companies with whom it signed commercial term sheets in March 2023, with the goal of signing the full agreements before the end of 2023.

Hydrom is a subsidiary of the state-owned Energy Development Oman (EDO).

H E Salim bin Nasser al Afi, Minister of Energy and Minerals and chairman of Hydrom, said,

"We are delighted to announce the launch of Round 2 of the public auction for green hydrogen projects. This aligns with our ambitious plans to establish Oman as one of the world's largest exporters of green hydrogen by 2030. We possess valuable natural resources and geographical features that allow us to spearhead this promising sector and capitalize on its potential as the energy source of the future."

H E Afi emphasised that the green hydrogen sector is one of the key enablers in achieving the strategic goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040 and the country's target of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Eng Mazin al Lamki, CEO of EDO, said, "We are delighted with Hydrom's accomplishments during the Round 1 public auction process. We look forward to achieving yet more remarkable milestones with Round 2, and at an accelerated pace. Doing so will support EDO's vision of developing Oman's energy sector and leading Oman's sustainable energy future. Furthermore, we will continue to provide the necessary support to Hydrom to achieve its vision."

SAP launches Oman's first private cloud data centre

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has reached a major milestone in its digital transformation with the announcement of the sultanate's first private cloud data centre, launched by global technology company SAP in alignment with the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MTCIT).

At the same time, Oman's global integrated energy company OQ signed an agreement with SAP to adopt 'RISE with SAP' and to run its SAP solutions, including integrated enterprise resource planning (ERP) across all of its business assets, on the new in-country data center, making OQ the first SAP Oman private cloud customer.

SAP's data centre will help to empower Oman's Vision 2040 strategy by accelerating innovation and cloud adoption and enabling companies across more than 25 industries to leverage the benefits of SAP's cloud solutions with secure in-country data storage.

In a press release, Dr Ali al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information Technology at the MTCIT, said, "The launch of a local SAP cloud service that enables companies to securely store their information within Oman's borders is aligned with the MTCIT's commitment to creating efficient digital systems and



solutions as set out in the four-track digital transformation program we announced last year."

"We believe the move will inspire new public and private sector digital transformation agendas as well as innovation as Omani entities start to leverage the benefits of cloud computing, including advanced technologies such as AI and machine learning."

By moving to the cloud, OQ will be able to leverage the benefits of SAP S/4HANA ERP, which include increased efficiencies, 360-degree visibility, and greater control over all operations.

The solution streamlines and automates business processes and delivers real-time analytics, enabling data-driven decision-making to respond with agility to new opportunities and changes in the market.

To support the country's digital transformation, OQ and SAP are also exploring collaborating with the MTCIT to develop emerging talent by training Omani nationals through in-country, global, and virtual programs covering technology,

business, and behavioural skills. This effort includes participation in SAP's Young Professionals Program in Oman, which has already trained 140 university graduates in core and emerging technologies.

In addition, job seekers and freelancers will be supported through a new SAP-designed platform that will bridge the gap between supply and demand for full-time and freelance opportunities.

Commenting on SAP's investment in cloud and skills development in Oman, Alaa Jaber, managing director for SAP Fast Growth Markets, said, "Oman is a significant market for SAP as it is widely recognised for its commitment to digitalisation.

The new data centre will enable forward-thinking businesses, such as OQ, to develop and enhance their operations with the latest SAP solutions and improve efficiencies while lowering total cost of ownership."

Jaber added that it is possible for Omani companies to accelerate their move to the private cloud to experience the many benefits of cloud computing.

Saudi Aramco, TotalEnergies sign contracts for \$11bn complex

Dhahran, Saudi Arabia - Saudi Aramco and France's TotalEnergies on Saturday signed contracts to start building an \$11bn petrochemicals facility in the Gulf kingdom, the two companies said.

A signing ceremony for the engineering, procurement and construction contracts for the Amiral complex took place at Aramco's headquarters in Dhahran, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

The move "marks the start of construction work on the joint petrochemical expansion", Aramco and TotalEnergies said in a joint statement.



Seven companies were awarded contracts for the construction of the project in Jubail, on Saudi Arabia's east coast. The facility is slated to begin operations in 2027.

The project, first announced in 2018, represents an investment of around \$11bn, of which \$4bn will be funded through equity by Aramco and TotalEnergies.

The complex will enable Saudi

Arabia's SATORP refinery to convert internally produced off-gases and naphtha, as well as ethane and natural gasoline supplied by Aramco, into higher value chemicals.

It will have the capacity to produce 1.65mn tonnes per annum of ethylene and other industrial gases, Aramco said.

"As part of Aramco's growth strategy, the project is anticipated to contribute to value-addition opportunities in the kingdom's downstream ecosystem," Aramco president Amin Nasser said at the signing ceremony.

AFP

ADNOC Drilling wins \$2bn contracts

Abu Dhabi, UAE - Abu Dhabi-based ADNOC Drilling Company has confirmed the award of five 10-year contracts, totalling approximately \$2bn, in support of ADNOC Offshore's growing drilling operations.

The contractual conditions, particularly the duration, were agreed with the client in light of the strength of the offshore jack-up market with higher day rates, the company said in a press release.

The contracts supporting drilling operations across five fields in ADNOC's offshore portfolio, are for the charter of five high-specification, premium



jack-up rigs along with all required manpower and equipment.

The rigs will commence activity progressively from the end of

2023, with significant revenue expected in 2024 and first full-year revenue contribution from 2025. The revenue associated to these contracts is included in the Company's full year 2023 and medium-term guidance.

Abdulrahman Abdulla al Seiri, CEO of ADNOC Drilling, commented: "We are pleased to have been awarded these important contracts. Long-term contracts like these are the backbone of our business model, providing clear line of sight on future earnings. As we continue to grow our fleet, our shareholders will benefit from the opportunity to be directly invested in

ADNOC's accelerated production capacity growth, which is driving faster revenue growth and progressive, long-term shareholder returns while responding to the world's rising energy demand."

The five rigs have been acquired as part of the company's fast-tracked rig fleet expansion programme, designed to enable the delivery of ADNOC's accelerated production capacity growth to responsibly meet rising global energy demand.

The new rigs will be among the most capable, high-specification rigs working in the Arabian Gulf.

Big ideas, small steps at climate finance summit

Paris, France – A global climate summit wrapped up Friday with leaders agreeing that the international financial system was woefully inadequate in an era of global warming, after taking a number of small steps to helping debt-burdened developing nations.

While host country France pitched the conference as a consensus-building exercise, leaders were under pressure to produce clear outcomes from the two-day meeting as economies stagger under growing debt after successive crises in recent years.

The summit comes amid warnings that the world's ability to curb global warming is reliant on a massive increase in clean energy investment in developing countries.

French President Emmanuel Macron hailed a "complete consensus" to reform global financial institutions and make them "more efficient, fairer and better suited to the world of today".

Some 40 national leaders gathered in Paris, most from developing countries whose economies have been buffeted by a succession of crises in recent years, including Covid-19, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, soaring inflation and extreme weather events.

The conference heard time and again that the nearly 80-year-old financial system – underpinned by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund – was no longer fit-for-purpose in facing 21st-century challenges.

"With this mechanism, the rich are always rich and the poor are always poor," said Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

While there was agreement



French President Emmanuel Macron speaks during the closing session of the New Global Financial Pact Summit, in Paris on Friday (AFP)

on the broad outlines of the problem, there was less progress on steering the global financial juggernaut in a new direction, though there were several incremental initiatives and advancements on existing promises.

World Bank president Ajay Banga said the lender would introduce a "pause" mechanism on debt repayments for countries hit by a crisis so they could

"focus on what matters".

Friederike Roder, Vice President of Global Advocacy at Global Citizen, said overall the progress made was "not sufficient", pointing out that the IMF target included a US pledge of \$21bn that is stuck at Congress.

But she said the meeting had managed to "totally change the conversation" on tough issues that have up to now been mostly

kicked into the long grass.

Observers have also hailed the strong leadership role of developing nations at the summit, including Barbados, Kenya and the V20 group of more than 50 climate vulnerable countries, which all came with a suite of ideas.

An official summary of the meeting prepared by France expressed hope that a pledge to

\$100bn target met for climate, poverty funds, IMF chief says

Paris, France – The head of the International Monetary Fund said that rich countries had met a target of reallocating \$100bn of funds from the institution to battle climate change and poverty in developing countries.

"We meet the target, we do have the 100bn," Kristalina Georgieva told a roundtable discussion at a climate financing summit in Paris.

Ahead of the summit the IMF had still needed another \$40 billion to hit the target, she said.

The plan, first announced in 2019, was for wealthier countries to recycle \$100 billion in IMF special drawing rights (SDRs) for vulnerable economies.

SDRs are foreign exchange reserve assets awarded to countries based on how much they contribute to the IMF.

The idea, which some European countries resisted, was for wealthier countries to lend these foreign exchange reserve

Kristalina Georgieva

assets to the IMF, which could in turn lend them to developing economies.

Ahead of the summit, France and Japan announced that they would redeploy 30 percent of their SDRs for this purpose.

Georgieva was speaking at the Summit for a New Global Financial Pact organised by France, which aims to find financial solutions to help tackle the problems of poverty and climate change.

French leader Emmanuel Macron said in his opening remarks that the IMF and partner organisation the World Bank were "not completely suited" to the world's current challenges.

Veteran president of Congo, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, highlighted how pledges from rich countries to help vulnerable countries had failed to materialise, including a promise to provide \$100bn a year at a COP climate summit in Copenhagen in 2019.

"Every time time there's a COP meeting we make the same announcements. In Copenhagen, it was announced that there would be 100bn dollars per year for poor countries, but we never saw it. It didn't reach us," he told an audience.

AFP



The Bank of England is tasked by the government to keep UK annual inflation close to a target of 2%

UK hikes rate half-point as high inflation persists

London, UK – The UK central bank Bank of England Thursday lifted its key interest rate by a half-point to five percent to tackle stubbornly high UK inflation despite such a move worsening a cost-of-living crisis.

The higher-than-expected 13th hike in a row, to a 15-year peak, came one day after data showed UK annual inflation remaining at 8.7% to defy expectations of a slowdown.

Prior to the data, markets had expected a smaller quarter-point increase following a regular policy meeting.

"There had been significant upside news in recent data that indicated more persistence in the inflation process," the Bank of England (BoE) said in the gathering's minutes.

A half-point hike was in stark contrast to the Federal Reserve, which last week pressed pause on US rate hikes after a sharp easing in the country's inflation.

The higher-than-expected 13th hike in a row, to a 15-year peak, came one day after data showed UK annual inflation remaining at 8.7% to defy expectations of a slowdown

The European Central Bank last week raised its borrowing costs by a quarter point.

The Swiss and Norwegian central banks hiked their rates on Thursday.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has made slashing the pace of price rises a priority for his Conservative government as it heads into a general election next year.

Traders anticipate UK interest rates will hit six percent by the end of the year, likely pushing Britain into recession.

Sunak wants inflation reduced to five percent by the end of the

year, or about half the level at the start of 2023.

The BoE began lifting its key interest rate from a record low of 0.1% at the end of 2021, with inflation starting to creep up as economies slowly emerged from lockdowns.

UK inflation went on to strike a 41-year peak at 11.1% in October on rampant energy bills, after major oil and gas producer Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022. The BoE is tasked by the government to keep UK annual inflation close to a target of two percent.

AFP

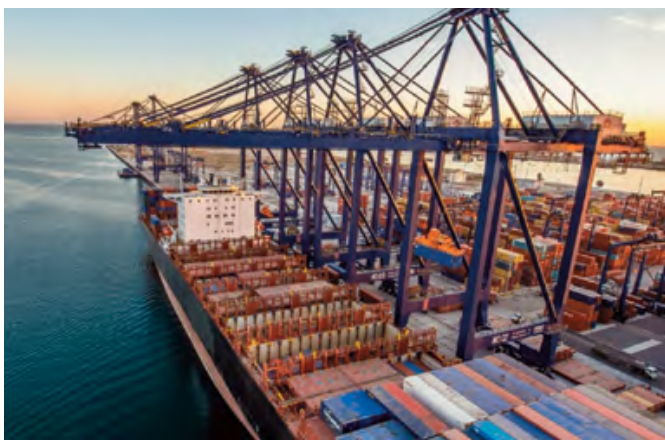
Cash-strapped Pakistan to lease part of Karachi port to UAE for \$220mn

Karachi, Pakistan – AD Ports Group of the UAE signed an agreement Thursday to take over the running of part of Pakistan's main Karachi docking facility in a deal worth an immediate \$220mn, the company said.

The deal will come as a shot in the arm for Pakistan, with the economy on the brink of collapse and the government desperate for big-ticket foreign investment to help service crippling debt.

AD Ports Group has formed a joint venture with another UAE company, Kaheel Terminals, to take over berths from Karachi Port Trust (KPT), the state-owned handling agency.

Karachi Port is Pakistan's oldest and busiest, with 33 berths, and the UAE deal will see the joint venture lease four of them



for the next 50 years,

"The JV will undertake significant investments in infrastructure and superstructure over the next 10 years," an AD Group statement said.

Plans include deepening the berths to allow for bigger ships to dock, extending the quay wall, and increasing the container

storage area.

As a result, the terminal will be able to handle ships capable of carrying up to 8,500 containers, and capacity will increase from 750,000 to a million containers a year, the statement said. The bulk of development is planned for 2026.

The UAE is a major contributor to Pakistan's economy in the form of grants, loans and direct investment, and has previously bailed out a government that for months has been on the brink of defaulting on its debt.

AFP

AD Ports Group has formed a joint venture with another UAE company, Kaheel Terminals, to take over berths from Karachi Port Trust (KPT), the state-owned handling agency

LIQUIDATION ANNOUNCEMENT

The Official liquidator of Arabian Suppliers and Contractors **C.R No. 1802798**(Under Liquidation) announce that, the members of the company have passed a resolution on **29/5/2023** to liquidate the company, the liquidation has been published in the official Gazette issue no. 1496 dated **4/6/2023**. All creditors are requested to file their official claim supported by statement of account with the liquidator within six months from the date of official gazette announcement (**not later than 3/12/2023**), All Debtors are requested to settle their dues directly to the liquidator , the liquidator address is:

Telephone No. 99461960 –
Email bekry70@gmail.com
Al Raid commercial center –
Qurum – 1st floor office No. (28).

LIQUIDATION ANNOUNCEMENT

The Official liquidator of Arabian Technical Supplies LLC **C.R No. 1409956** (Under Liquidation) announce that, the members of the company have passed a resolution on **29/5/2023** to liquidate the company, the liquidation has been published in the official Gazette issue no. 1497 dated **11/6/2023**.All creditors are requested to file their official claim supported by statement of account with the liquidator within six months from the date of official gazette announcement (**not later than 10/12/2023**), All Debtors are requested to settle their dues directly to the liquidator.The liquidator address is :

Telephone No. 99461960 –
Email bekry70@gmail.com
Al Raid commercial center –
Qurum – 1st floor office no. (28).

OAB provides housing loans for Sultan Haitham City

Oman Arab Bank (OAB) and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning have signed a home financing agreement to provide competitive loan rates for the first 100 home owners in Sultan Haitham City.

The agreement was signed by H E Dr Khalfan al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, and Sulaiman al Hinai, head of Wholesale Banking Group at OAB.

Through the agreement, the bank will provide flexible loans at reduced rates to customers who wish to purchase homes in the first phase of the city of the future, named for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, a press release said.

Sulaiman al Harthi, CEO of Oman Arab Bank, said, "This agreement is a first step in our efforts to enable customers to own a home and live a sustainable and comfortable life in



Sultan Haitham City. We aim to make homeownership at the groundbreaking futuristic urban landmark development more accessible and affordable.

The project is one of many strategic developments the bank has recently partnered with in its ongoing efforts to play a bigger role in the economic growth of the country.

In fact, the city not only reflects key pillars within Oman's Vision 2040 goals, but also embraces an inclusive architectural vision for generations to come."

The city, which was inaugurated by His Majesty the Sultan in May, will represent a new model for smart, sustainable cities. It is planned to cover an area of approximately 14.8 million sqm, with 2.9 million sqm of green spaces, and house 100,000 residents in 20,000 residential units.



Sohar International shareholders vote on merger

Sohar International shareholders vote on merger

Following discussions which began in June 2022, Sohar International and HSBC Oman have been working closely on a proposed merger.

"We can confirm that the shareholders of Sohar International Bank voted in favour of the merger with HSBC Bank Oman at the Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) held on June 20. The shareholders of HSBC Bank

Oman have also voted to approve the merger," a press release said.

The bank said it is working closely with HSBC Bank Oman to ensure a smooth process to minimise disruption, if any, to HSBC

Bank Oman customers and, together, have set a tentative target date of August 17 as the date of completion of the merger. This timeline remains subject to all formal steps and actions being completed without any delays on

account of factors beyond the control of Sohar International and HSBC Oman.

On completion of the merger, HSBC Oman customers and employees will automatically transfer to Sohar International.

Oman Air named 'Best Airline Staff in the Middle East'

Oman Air has been designated 'Best Airline Staff in the Middle East' at the Skytrax 2023 World Airline Awards.

Aboudy Nasser, Chief Commercial Officer, received the award on behalf of the company during the Paris Air Show, with members of the airline's team in France also in attendance, a press release said.



Oman Air also scored highly in a string of global rankings, including 8th for World's Best First Class Airline Seats, 12th for World's Best First Class Airlines, 14th for World's Best Airline Cabin Crew, 18th for World's Best Inflight Entertainment, and 27th in the World's Top 100 Airlines list, climbing 10 places from last year. The World Airline Awards, which are in their 24th year, are voted for by travellers from all over the world based on their experiences both on board and at the airport.

Eng Abdulaziz al Raisi, CEO of Oman Air, said, "Our people are the heart and soul of our airline. We are driven by a passion that embodies exceptional professionalism and going above and beyond to create extraordinary

and unforgettable moments for every guest. Receiving this prestigious award for the sixth time amongst our other global rankings is a source of immense pride and a testament to our unwavering commitment to set new benchmarks for guest experience, year after year."

Edward Plaisted, CEO of Skytrax, added, "It is a superb achievement for Oman Air to win this award for having the Best Airline Staff Service in the Middle East for the sixth time. The unique hospitality provided the multi-national cabin crew and ground services team is clearly very popular with customers of Oman Air."

Training camp for Mathematics Olympiad on

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Department of Innovation and Scientific Olympiad, continues implementing the training camp for six students as part of their preparation to participate and represent the sultanate in the International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO) in its 64th edition, which is to be held in Japan during July 2-13.

This training camp aims to



provide students with the theoretical knowledge necessary to bridge the knowledge gap between the level of pre-university education in the previous themes and what is needed to understand the problems raised and then solve them. It also aims to provide them with problem-solving skills and strategies, and to teach them methods for formulating solutions that they can write in cor-

rect ways.

A training plan has been developed to be implemented remotely by a group of trainers and experts from whom are attested to have competence and experience in training students of the International

Olympiads. The sultanate's student team is undergoing external training (by external trainers) remotely (virtually) from February until July 2023.

SOHAR launches 'Maseer'

SOHAR Port and Freezone, in collaboration with innotech, a leading company in educational technology, are organising the educational programme 'Maseer'.

Running between July 9 and August 3, the programme aims to attract over 200 students from schools in Al Batinah North Governorate to develop their capabilities and skills in a variety of fields. These workshops will be conducted by field experts, a press release said.

Mohammed bin Ali al Shezawi, vice president of People and Support Services at SOHAR Port and Freezone said, "Investing in future generations through Corporate Social Responsibility programmes is paramount.

This programme demonstrates our commitment to the well-being of society and fosters sustainable development.

We aim to positively impact young lives."

New ahliExpress machine installed in Mall of Oman

Ahlibank has launched the new ahliExpress Multifunctional machine at Mall of Oman. This initiative aligns with the bank's efforts to bring its services closer to clients and enhance accessibility.

The state-of-the-art ahliExpress Multifunctional machine is aimed at delivering round-the-clock, digital banking services. With faster processing and responses, the device will expedite transaction time and offer a unique experience to new and existing customers. As part of Ahlibank's endeavours to embrace digitalisation, the machine guarantees top-notch services that are current and in tune with global digital trends, a press release said.

Muneer al Balushi, AGM - head of Retail Distribution at Ahlibank, said, "By expanding our operations and offering new avenues to our customers, we have strengthened our digital footprint in the country. Customers seeking new and innovative products should feel right at home with this device.

The multifunctional machine

will not only deliver an exceptional digital banking experience, but will also drive our goal of fostering a digital economy. This device also reflects our mission to exceed customer expectations and sustain our growth in the market."

"Embracing digitalisation is a part of Ahlibank's contribution to achieving Oman Vision 2040. Digital solutions like the ahliExpress multifunctional machine are a step towards enhancing the country's social development

and supporting its economic growth. The bank's technologically advanced and innovative services have provided ease and convenience to our customers," he added.

With this technology, new customers can open accounts, and existing customers can open additional accounts, as well as update profiles and Civil ID or resident cards, print account statements and chequebooks seamlessly, and contact ahliconnect for support directly.

OPAZ organises training on community role in sustainability

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), in cooperation with the Omani Network for Volunteers 'Taawon', organised a training programme for its employees on strategic community partnership for sustainability.

The programme aims to promote the importance of voluntary work and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) among employees. Further, it served fami-

lising employees with the different techniques of managing and executing CSR initiatives and projects to give back to society, a press release said.

Organising this training programme came to enlighten employees with different values, some of which are emphasising the sense of belonging, community service, and commitment to the social work ethics. On the other hand, the programme in-

cluded interactive sessions to train the participants on the basics of effective voluntary work by developing a joint action plan, based on promoting team work in various CSR projects and initiatives.

Moreover, the programme will touch on the trends and principles of voluntary work as well as highlighting a number of ideas and proposals that employees can work on as social projects.



Bank Muscat inaugurates new branch in wilayat of Amerat

Bank Muscat inaugurated a new branch in Madinat Al Nahdha in the Wilayat of Amerat recently in the presence of H E Sheikh Salem bin Rabie bin Khamis al Sunaidi, Wali of Amerat and senior Bank's officials.

The new branch is characterised by a modern design and distinctive space that provides customers comfort while completing their banking transactions. It is also located in a privileged location and close to the population density, shops and commercial institutions, a press release said.

The new branch features a number of unique facilities including dedicated Sayyarati, Baituna, and Najahi desks. Also, as part of the bank's focus on improving access to persons with disabilities, the branch has implemented access ramps, teller counters and ATMs, which are disabled-friendly.

Abdulnasir N al Raisi, general manager – Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said, "This branch is featured by a modern design in order to keep abreast of developments in the banking sector and provide the best banking services and facilities for valued customers. This step comes as part of Bank Muscat's strategy to strengthen the branch network in all governorates and translate the bank's vision "we work to serve you better every day". The bank will continue to open more

of these new branches with a wonderful design and large space and also equipped with the latest modern technologies to meet the needs of the bank's customer base."

He added, "Over four decades of operations in Oman, Bank Muscat has earned a name for its customer-centric vision, backed by the largest branch and ATM-CDM-FFM network, a state-of-the-art Mobile and Internet banking platform, and a number

of world-class financial products and services. The opening of the new branch in Amerat will further help serve our customers better every day in line with our aim to provide an enhanced Customer Experience."

Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, deputy general manager - Regional Branches, Bank Muscat, added, "The current branch was chosen to meet current and future customer needs and is an implementation of the bank's vision."

‘Discover Dhofar’ campaign opens

Oman Visitors and Holiday House for Travel and Tourism have launched an exciting promotion campaign to promote tourism in the beautiful Dhofar Governorate, titled 'Discover Dhofar.'

This campaign comes at an opportune time, coinciding with the breathtaking autumn season in Dhofar, when the region transforms into a top tourist destination for travelers, a press release said.

The campaign aims to showcase the unique natural beauty of Dhofar and discover the rich culture and ancient history of the governorate. With a wide range of enticing offers and distinctive experiences, the campaign attracts tourists and travelers from all over the world.

With their strong presence on social media channels and effective digital marketing tools, Oman Visitors has successfully disseminated content to an international audience, extending beyond domestic tourism. A significant role will be played by their partnership with Holiday House, the distinguished Omani brand that provides comprehensive tourist programmes to all visitors to the governorate.

A unique and exceptional tourism experience will be provided to visitors from within or outside the Sultanate of Oman as a result of this partnership.

This campaign offers exploratory tours to famous tourist sites in Dhofar. Additionally, desert safari trips and diving excursions are organised to explore the beauty of stunning beaches and coral reefs. Visiting traditional restaurants and markets and immersing themselves in the local culture are all part of this experience. The campaign also offers special accommodation deals in high-end hotels, allowing visitors to enjoy luxurious Omani hospitality.

Holiday House CEO, Ali al Asimi said, "This initiative serves as a testament to our commitment to promoting tourism in Dhofar Governorate and showcasing its unique beauty and cultural heritage. We are confident that the autumn season in Dhofar presents a wonderful opportunity to enjoy unforgettable tourism experiences. One of our main goals is to bring tourists from around the world to this enchanting region."



9th International Day of Yoga observed

The Embassy of India in Muscat, in association with the Indian School Muscat, hosted a celebration to mark the 9th International Day of Yoga on the theme 'Yoga for Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' on June 21.

More than 2000 people from all walks of life, including Indian nationals, resident Ambassadors, members of the Diplomatic and Defence Corps, and students from Indian schools, participated in the event. As part of the celebrations a common Yoga Protocol was conducted, a press release said.

The event marked the culmination of the 'Oman Yoga Yatra' which started in February 2023 to popularise the benefits of yoga throughout Oman and encourage its widespread adoption. 'Oman Yoga Yatra' succeeded

the 'Muscat Yog Mahotsav' which featured 75 curated Yoga events across Oman – including those in Muscat, Salalah, Sohar, and Sur, for 75 days from April to June 2022.

A commemorative video, 'Soulful Yoga Serene Oman', jointly produced by the Embassy of India and Visit Oman, was launched on the eve of the International Day of Yoga. This visually captivating video showcased the picturesque landscapes of Oman, serving as a serene backdrop to the practice of yoga.

H E Sheikh Humaid al Maani, head of the Global Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, graced the event as chief guest, adding significant prestige to the event which emphasised the importance of yoga as a practice that unifies people.

OIFC Khedmah receives token of appreciation

Oman Investment and Finance Company – Khedmah – continues its achievements series in digital collecting and customer services.

Recently, Khedmah has received an award in the Partners in Progress event organised annually by Bank Muscat in recognition of the highest collecting companies. Honouring Khedmah represents the development led by OIFC Khedmah in digital collecting and its continuous effort to enhance the mechanism of smoothly processing transactions that align with the needs of customers and enables them to carry out instant and secure payments, a press release said.

Said Bin Ahmed Safrar, CEO of OIFC Khedmah, said, "The recognition of Khedmah embodies the amount of effort made by OIFC in customers servicing and billing collecting and other payments through its widespread branches all over the sultanate, Khedmah app and OIFC website, and Kiosks. We will continue to work steadfastly towards achieving the aspirations of our customers and providing innovative



payment solutions that align with the advancement witnessed in the field of digital collecting. To ensure that Khedmah remains up-to-date with the latest technologies the meet the growing and diverse needs of our customers.

This year's Partners in Progress event, organised by Bank Muscat, highlights the remarkable achievements in the digital payment sector and showcase contributing partners in shaping progress. Over the course of the past four decades, Khedmah has garnered widespread popularity across the Sultanate of Oman, primarily due to its user-friendly application that offers instant and secure payment processes.

Al Ahlia Insurance bags ‘Top Merchant’ award

Al Ahlia Insurance announced that it has been recognised as the 'Top Insurance Merchant' at Bank Muscat's prestigious Annual Partners in Progress Award 2023.

The much-anticipated event took place recently at the esteemed Kempinski Hotel Muscat, a press release said.

Bank Muscat's Annual Partners in Progress Award aims to acknowledge and appreciate the invaluable contributions made by its esteemed partners across various industries. This year, Al Ahlia Insurance stood out for its exceptional commitment to excellence, customer service, and innovation within the insurance sector.

Miron Kibria, Chief Financial Officer at Al Ahlia Insurance, expressed his gratitude for receiving this esteemed accolade, stating, "We are thrilled and honoured to be recognized as the 'Top Insurance Merchant' at Bank Muscat's Annual Partners in Progress Award 2023. This achievement reflects the hard work, dedication, and unwavering commitment of our entire team to providing unparalleled insurance solutions to our valued customers."

The recognition received from Bank Muscat's Annual Partners in Progress Award is a testament to Al Ahlia Insurance's steadfast efforts in delivering excellence in the insurance sector. The company remains committed to upholding its reputation as a leading player in the industry.

Changan EADO Plus now available on low EMIs

Arabian Gulf Automobiles and Equipment (AGAE) has announced low EMI on Changan EADO Plus, a compact yet aggressive family sedan that exceeds customer expectations.

This remarkable vehicle boasts premium styling, a luxurious interior, and a host of advanced safety features. Prospective buyers can now take advantage of EMI options starting at RO94 for a convenient six-year term through banks only, a press release said.

The approximate EMI is calculated by banks based on a 20% down payment for a loan tenure of six years and is subject to credit approval. The offer is applicable only for vehicles purchased for personal use and is subject to the terms and conditions of the lending institution.

A spokesperson for AGAE



said, "This remarkable vehicle not only embodies style, energy, and practicality but also showcases a flawless design that seamlessly merges fashion

and function. As a family car, it leaves a lasting impression with its attractive exterior, opulent and roomy interior, interactive dashboard, and a wide range of

EADO Plus becomes an irresistible choice. Don't miss out on this golden opportunity to make this exceptional sedan your own, as you embark on a journey where style meets practicality and safety takes centre stage."

The Changan EADO Plus 1.4 Turbo engine is equipped with a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission. One can experience true peace of mind on the road with the Changan EADO Plus, equipped with a range of intelligent safety features.

This top-of-the-line sedan offers a driving experience like no other, with Dual 10" screens that enhance convenience and keep you connected. Cruise effortlessly with adaptive cruise control, enjoy the expansive view from the panoramic sunroof, and navigate effortlessly with the built-in navigation system.

IN BRIEF

Around 40 missing in Italy migrant boat shipwreck: UN

Rome, Italy - More than 40 people are missing after a migrant boat capsized off the Italian island of Lampedusa, the UN said.

The shipwreck took place on Thursday and at least one newborn baby is among those missing, said UNHCR representative to Italy Chiara Cardoletti.

The vessel left from Sfax in Tunisia and was carrying 46 migrants from Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, Flavio Di Giacomo, a spokesman for the UN migration agency IOM, said on Friday.

The boat capsized in strong winds and high waves, he said.

Australia sanctions three involved in downing of MH17

Sydney, Australia - Australia on Saturday announced financial sanctions and travel bans on two Russians and a Ukrainian involved in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in 2014. Canberra officials said the sanctions target Russian national Sergey Dubinsky and Ukrainian Leonid Kharchenko, who were found guilty in absentia of murder and other charges by a Dutch court last year, after 298 passengers and crew died in the MH17 disaster. Sergey Muchkaev, a colonel with the Russian Armed Forces, is also included in the sanctions by Australia.

First person diagnosed with autism dies at 89 in US

Washington, US - An American man who was the first person to be diagnosed with autism died last week in his native state of Mississippi at the age of 89, his family said. In 1943, at the age of 10, Donald Triplett was diagnosed with having a developmental disability called autism in what was referred to as 'Case 1'.

Known as 'Donald T' in scientific literature, Triplett became a symbol for people with autism seeking fulfillment, becoming the subject of multiple interviews, a documentary and a book.

AFP

Sierra Leone votes amid crippling economic crisis

Freetown, Sierra Leone - Sierra Leone voted on Saturday in a fiercely contested general election, with President Julius Maada Bio seeking a second term amid a crippling economic crisis that sparked deadly riots last year.

The deeply poor West African nation was battered by a brutal 1991-2002 civil war and the Ebola epidemic a decade later, and further pummelled economically by the COVID pandemic and the fallout from the war in Ukraine.

Boubacar Conteh, 27, from Wellington in the east of Freetown, waited since four in the morning to cast his ballot.

"I want my country to change - I need change," he said.

Twelve men and one woman are vying for the top job and incumbent Bio's main challenger is Samura Kamara of the All People's Congress (APC) party.

The two could face off for the second time in a row. Bio, 59, of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), narrowly beat Kamara, who is aged 72, in a runoff in 2018.

Rising food prices are a key issue for many voters in the import-dependent nation of eight million people.

Year-on-year inflation hit 43 per cent in April, according to the latest official figures.

Both Bio and Kamara told AFP they would prioritise boosting agricultural production.

Regional allegiances

Polling stations opened later than the scheduled time of 7am in the capital Freetown, AFP journalists said, including in the central



A woman casts her ballot in Freetown on Saturday during the presidential vote (AFP)

Wilberforce Barracks area. They were due to close at 5pm (1700 GMT). Some 3.4mn people are registered to vote, 52.4 per cent of whom are under 35 years old, according to an electoral commission spokesman.

Presidential candidates must secure 55 per cent of valid votes for a first-round win.

Turnout has ranged between 76 and 87 per cent over the past three elections.

Voters will also elect members of parliament and local councils in a proportional representation system after a last-minute switch from a first-past-the-post system.

Under a recently passed gender act, one-third of all candi-

dates must be women.

A new 11.9 per cent vote threshold will make it difficult for independents and minority parties to secure seats in parliament.

Many Sierra Leoneans vote based on regional allegiances.

The majority of people in the south and east normally vote for the ruling SLPP while most people from the north and west normally vote for the opposition APC. Jobs and benefits are commonly perceived to flow to regions whose politicians are in power.

Bio, a former coup leader in the 1990s, has championed education and women's rights in his first civilian term.

Kamara, a former foreign and

finance minister, has lambasted the electoral commission for alleged bias in favour of the ruling party. He is facing a protracted trial over allegations that he misappropriated public funds as foreign minister, a case he says is politically motivated.

A June 14 poll by Institute for Governance Reform (IGR), a partner of the pan-African survey group Afrobarometer, forecasts Bio will win 56 per cent of the vote, with 43 per cent for Kamara. Another poll, conducted by the newspaper Sierra Eye and two local data groups, forecasts 38 per cent for the incumbent and 25 per cent for his main challenger.

AFP

No evidence COVID created in Chinese lab: US intelligence

Washington, US - The head of US intelligence said on Friday that there was no evidence that the COVID-19 virus was created in the Chinese government's Wuhan research lab.

In a declassified report, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) said they had no information backing recent claims that three scientists at the lab were some of the very first infected with COVID-19 and may have created the virus themselves.

Drawing on intelligence collected by various member agencies of the US intelligence community (IC), the ODNI report said some scientists at the Wuhan lab had done genetic engineering of coronaviruses similar to COVID-19.

But the US 'has no information' indicating they had done such work on the specific COVID-9 virus, known as SARS-CoV-2, or on any 'close progenitor, or a backbone virus that is closely related-enough to have been the source of the pandemic'.

The report, made for Congress and carrying an unreleased classified annex, came three months after lawmakers demanded a fuller explanation of US intelligence's information on the origins of the pandemic which erupted at the end of 2019.

Some lawmakers allege that the virus was created out

of so-called gain-of-function genetic engineering research at Wuhan, and that Beijing had covered up evidence to show it was a man-made disease.

Reiterating a conclusion announced in March, the ODNI report said 'almost all' of its constituent agencies, which include the NSA, the CIA and FBI, assess that COVID-19 was not genetically engineered and most believe as well it was not laboratory-adapted.

But the ODNI report, as in March, did not dismiss the possibility that COVID-19 was being examined in the Wuhan lab at the time and may have leaked out through carelessness. ODNI said the intelligence community remained divided on whether the pandemic arose from a natural occurrence of the virus - perhaps transferred from animals like bats - or a from lab leak.

The report said the Wuhan lab had done pathogen research and vaccine development together with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) 'for public health needs'.

But the coronaviruses used in this research 'were too distantly related to have led to the creation of SARS-CoV-2', the report said.

It firmly rejected allegations that COVID-19 was developed by the PLA as a bioweapon.

AFP

GHOST FESTIVAL



Participants wearing ghost masks and colorful costumes take part in the annual Phi Ta Khon carnival or ghost festival in Dan Sai district in northeastern Thailand's Loei Province on Saturday (AFP)

Documentary to be made about kids rescued in Amazon

Paris, France - The Colombian government is working with British producer Simon Chinn to make a documentary about the four Indigenous children who survived 40 days alone in the Amazon after a plane crash that killed their mother, the country's president said on Friday.

Gustavo Petro, who is attending a climate summit in Paris, said he had 'a first meeting' with Chinn, a two-time Oscar winner for the documentaries *Man on Wire* (2008) and *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012).

The four children - Lesly (13), Soleiny (9), Tien Noriel (5) and



This file photo shows Colombian Army checking one of the children during their transfer to Bogota on June 9 (AFP)

one-year-old Cristin - were the only survivors of a small plane crash in the Amazon on May 1.

All three adults on board, including their mother, died.

AFP

On eve of election, Greece eyes win by Kyriakos Mitsotakis

Athens, Greece - Sipping her four-euro (\$4.36) freddo in a suburban Athens cafe, Maria N. says she has no illusions about how Greece's national election on Sunday is going to turn out.

"I'm not even sure I'm going to vote, the outcome is foregone," the doctor says.

With opinion polls giving him a lead of around 20 percentage points, conservative leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis is almost assured of winning a second straight four-year term.

But he fears that voter apathy could end up costing him the absolute majority he seeks, which was the whole point of him calling fresh elections for the second time in a month.

Crediting him with bringing back stable economic growth to a country once notorious for its debt woes, voters gave Mitsotakis 40.79 per cent of the vote on May 21.

But his party fell five seats

short of a parliamentary majority, which would have required the 55-year-old to govern in a coalition, something that he has refused.

Getting voters to return to the polls however is a gamble for the former Harvard graduate and McKinsey financial consultant. His key challenge is to keep the 9.8mn eligible Greek voters away from the beach this weekend.

He has even gone as far as to warn of a third election in August, at the height of the busy tourism season, if he fails to clinch enough votes to form his own government.

"I hope we don't have to meet again in early August," he told Skai TV on the last day of campaigning. "This is no joke," he added.

'Not strong'

On May 21, Mitsotakis crushed the leftist Syriza party of former



Conservative leader of New Democracy party, Kyriakos Mitsotakis (centre) greets his supporters in Athens on Friday during his main Athens pre-election rally ahead of the second round of general elections (AFP)

prime minister Alexis Tsipras by over 20 points in a victory which nobody expected to be

as clear.

A Pulse poll for Skai TV on Thursday suggested that 73 per

cent would vote for the same party they chose in May.

Tsipras is still remembered

as the prime minister who nearly crashed Greece out of the euro. Having now lost four electoral contests to Mitsotakis, his future as head of Syriza is at stake.

He warned this week against giving Mitsotakis a 'blank cheque' that would enable him to carry out a 'hidden agenda' of anti-social policies.

But cafe-owner Agueliki Giannopoulou, 45, is not convinced. Tsipras, he said, 'says nothing of note. His message is not strong'.

For many Greeks however, high consumer prices remain a constant source of worry despite the headline growth figure touted by Mitsotakis.

In front of a sports betting shop, two retirees were discussing the high cost of living.

"Prices are changing every day at the supermarkets," said Konstantinos Noumas, noting that cherries were being sold

for 1.70 a kilogramme at cooperatives as supermarkets charged 6.0 euros a kilo.

His friend, Zissis Karagiorgos, 67, hoped that 'the people, especially young people will stop being afraid of change'.

While normally more inclined to vote left, even young Greeks mainly voted conservative at the last vote.

Nikos Giorgiou, 24, who had turned up with her mother at Syntagma Square on Friday for Mitsotakis' final campaign rally said he 'deserves an absolute majority'.

"Only Mitsotakis can allow the country to stabilise economically and to offer a future for young people who had gone into exile during the economic crisis," he said.

Student Giorgos Bistouras, 20, said he simply hoped that 'salaries will improve and that promises will be kept'.

AFP

REBELLION IN RUSSIA

World watches with concern as mutiny unfolds in Russia

Ukrainian President Zelensky said Wagner mutiny showed Russia was weak

Paris, France - Countries around the world were on Saturday closely watching events unfolding in Russia, where a mutiny by the Wagner mercenary group posed the most serious challenge yet to President Vladimir Putin's long rule. Here is what governments and analysts are saying about the extraordinary situation taking place in nuclear-armed Russia:

Ukraine

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the Wagner mutiny showed Russia was weak.

"Russia's weakness is obvious. Full-scale weakness. And the longer Russia keeps its troops and mercenaries on our land, the more chaos, pain, and problems it will have for itself later," he said in a statement on social media.

Deputy Defence Minister Ganna Malayar said it provided a 'window of opportunity' for Kyiv on the battlefield.

The United States

US President Joe Biden was briefed on the situation in Russia and Washington and 'will be consulting with allies and partners on these developments', National Security Council spokesman Adam Hodge said.

Europe

European Union chief Charles Michel tweeted that the bloc was 'closely monitoring the situation in Russia as it unfolds. In touch with European leaders and G7 partners'.

"This is clearly an internal Russian issue," he wrote, adding that 'our support for Ukraine' remains 'unwavering'.

The bloc's diplomatic chief Josep Borrell said the EU was in 'permanent contact with our



Members of Wagner group detain a man in the city of Rostov-on-Don, on Saturday (AFP)

ambassador in Moscow and continuing our internal consultations with our member states'.

NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said only the alliance was 'monitoring the situation'.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak urged 'all parties to be responsible and to protect civilians'. "We're in touch with our allies as the situation evolves. I'll be speaking to some of them

Minister Jana Cernochova.

"After 16 months of the war in Ukraine, Russia is waging war on Russia. No surprise. It's a tradition over there. Failed wars end up with the Tsar being executed, with chaos and with a civil war supervised by snoopers. Congratulations," she said. Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer, who has met Putin since the launch of the Ukraine war, warned of the nuclear risks

Emmanuel Macron is also keeping a close eye, the Elysee said. "We remain focused on supporting Ukraine."

In Rome, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's office said the events 'show how the aggression against Ukraine is causing instability also within Russia'.

In Sweden, Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom tweeted: "The government is closely following the situation in Russia. The situation is serious."

In Norway, Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt said Oslo was 'closely following the dramatic situation in Russia and are in close contact with the embassy in Moscow.'

Belgian Defence Minister Ludwigne Dedonder tweeted that the situation was 'serious' and he was watching to see 'what impact it has on the conflict'.

G7

The EU's Borrell announced that foreign affairs ministers of the G7 nations held a call to 'exchange views' on the situation on Saturday.

Borrell didn't provide details of the exchange in his tweet, which Berlin also confirmed, saying German Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock

'just discussed the situation' with her G7 counterparts.

Qatar

Qatar's foreign ministry said it was following 'with great concern' and urged restraint.

"The worsening situation in Russia and Ukraine will have negative repercussions on international peace and security, and on food and energy supplies, which were mainly affected by the Russian-Ukrainian crisis," the ministry said.

Analysts

The UK Ministry of Defence said in an intelligence update that 'this represents the most significant challenge to the Russian state in recent times'.

"Over the coming hours, the loyalty of Russia's security forces, and especially the Russian National Guard, will be key to how the crisis plays out," it said in a tweet.

The US-based Institute for the Study of War said the armed rebellion was 'unlikely to succeed' but that 'an armed Wagner attack against the Russian military leadership in Rostov-on-Don would have significant impacts on Russia's war effort in Ukraine'.

AFP



Yevgeny Prigozhin speaking inside Russian southern military district headquarters in the city of Rostov-on-Don on Saturday (AFP)

Prigozhin, the mercenary supremo turned firebrand critic

Moscow, Russia - Russia's large-scale offensive in Ukraine has propelled businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin from the Kremlin's shadows to become a firebrand critic of Russia's military brass, who he called to be ousted on Friday.

Before President Vladimir Putin ordered troops to Ukraine last February, 62-year-old Prigozhin dispatched mercenaries from his private fighting force to conflicts in the Middle East and Africa but always denied involvement.

That changed when the long-time Kremlin ally finally admitted last year he had founded the Wagner group and began a mass recruitment drive at Russia's prisons for foot soldiers to fight in exchange for an amnesty.

While gaining public acclaim in Russia as Wagner spearheaded the capture of several key Ukrainian towns including Bakhmut, Prigozhin has also blasted what he says is systemic mismanagement and lying in the Russian defence ministry.

"The evil that the military leadership of the country brings must be stopped," Prigozhin said on Friday, after claiming the defence ministry had launched strikes on Wagner bases.

Russia's FSB security service responded by opening a criminal probe into calls to stage 'an armed mutiny', even though Prigozhin has assured Russians he was calling for 'justice' and 'not a

coup'. Prigozhin has been locked in a bitter months-long power struggle with the defence ministry as his ragtag forces spearheaded the costly battles for limited gains in eastern Ukraine.

He had earlier accused the Russian military of trying to 'steal' victories from Wagner and slammed Moscow's 'monstrous bureaucracy' for grinding progress on the ground.

And he directly blamed Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and other senior officials for his fighters' deaths, claiming Moscow had not provided sufficient ammunition.

Unlike Russia's generals, who have been criticised for shirking the battles, the stocky and bald Prigozhin regularly poses for pictures alongside mercenaries allegedly on the front lines.

Earlier this year he posted on social media a picture from the cockpit of a SU-24 fighter jet and challenged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to an aerial duel.

The former hotdog seller and native of Putin's hometown Saint Petersburg, who was jailed for nearly a decade during the Soviet era, for years dismissed allegations he was linked with Wagner.

But last September, he conceded that he had founded the fighting force and opened headquarters in Saint Petersburg.

AFP

Palestinian who shot at checkpoint killed by Israel forces

Jerusalem - Israeli forces on Saturday killed a Palestinian who opened fire on a checkpoint north of Jerusalem, lightly wounding a guard, police said while a Palestinian fighter group claimed the attack.

Israeli police said a 'suspect opened fire at the security forces operating at the (Qalandia) crossing'.

"The security forces operating at the crossing engaged the threat by returning fire and neutralised the attacker. The death of the attacker was later determined at the scene," a police statement said.

AFP

Air strikes, artillery, killings in Sudan as aid stalls

Khartoum, Sudan - Artillery fire, air strikes and gun battles rocked Sudan's capital on Saturday, witnesses told AFP, as the UN urged a stop to 'wanton killings' that have left decomposing bodies in Darfur.

While fighting rages, relief efforts have stalled after more than two months of fighting between rival generals.

Houses in Khartoum shook from the fighting that continued unabated, residents said, with entire families sheltering in place, running low on vital supplies in the baking summer heat.

The United Nations says nearly 1.5mn people have fled the capital since violence erupted in mid-April, pitting the regular army against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Entire districts of Khartoum no longer have running water, and those who remain in the city have had no electricity at all since Thursday, several residents told AFP. The battle for power



People ride with furniture and other items atop a truck moving along a road from Khartoum to Wad Madani at the locality of Kamlin, about 80km southeast of Khartoum, on Friday (AFP)

between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, has killed more

than 2,000 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

The deadliest violence has

raged in Darfur, a vast western region on the border with Chad where the UN has warned of possible crimes against human-

ity and said the conflict has taken an 'ethnic dimension'.

In the South Darfur state capital Nyala, residents said they had been caught in the crossfire. They reported battles, shelling and artillery strikes.

"Civilians were killed, and wounded are arriving at the hospital," a medic told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The UN on Saturday urged 'immediate action' to stop killings of people fleeing El Geneina, the West Darfur state capital, by Arab militias aided by the paramilitaries.

The Geneva-based UN rights office said witnesses had given 'corroborating accounts' of militias targeting men from the non-Arab Masalit people. It said all but two of the 16 people it interviewed testified they had witnessed 'summary executions' and the targeting of civilians on the road from El Geneina to the border between June 15 and 16.

"All those interviewed also

spoke of seeing dead bodies scattered along the road - and the stench of decomposition," the UN said. Two-thirds of health facilities in the main battlegrounds remain out of service, according to the Sudanese doctors' union. The few hospitals still operating are extremely low on medical supplies and struggling to obtain fuel to power generators.

The UN says a record 25mn people - more than half of Sudan's population - are in need of aid and protection.

Aid has reached at least 2.8mn people, the UN said, but agencies report major hurdles to their work, from visas for foreign humanitarians to securing safe corridors. "The army is... loath to let aid into the capital, fearing that packages will end up in the RSF's hands" as has happened before, 'allowing the paramilitary to hold out longer', according to think-tank the International Crisis Group (ICG).

AFP

With an eye toward China, Biden goes all-in for Modi

Washington, US - Laser-focused on countering China, US President Joe Biden has embraced Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he has few other world leaders, casting aside any concerns about the Hindu nationalist's authoritarian streak.

Biden offered Modi the full pomp of a state visit with two dinners - one intimate and one gala - a meeting with top CEOs, and a long list of concrete take-aways including agreements on US engines for India's new home-grown fighter-jets and a major semiconductor factory.

Biden is 'trying to tell the world that America is back. We've got partners and allies and we've got India on our side of the ledger', said Aparna Pande, a South Asia expert at the Hudson Institute.

Biden hopes to 'send a message to China - you have your people and I have my people and India is among mine', she said.

Tamanna Salikuddin, a former State Department official, called the joint statement for Modi's visit 'remarkable' in its scope with the defense deliverables on par with what the United States would give a NATO or other treaty ally.

"The depth and breadth of what we're committing to with India is really putting them in a totally different basket. And I think that is what Modi wanted," said Salikuddin, now director of



US President Joe Biden looks on as India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during an official State Dinner at the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday (AFP)

The depth and breadth of what we're committing to with India is really putting them in a totally different basket

TAMANNA SALIKUDDIN

South Asia programmes at the US Institute of Peace.

The Biden administration considers China the most serious long-term challenger to the United States, despite renewed

efforts to manage tensions.

Both Biden and Modi publicly played down the China factor but Modi made a clear allusion in his address to the US Congress where he backed a 'free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific', winning knowing applause from lawmakers. India, a fast-growing economy which has surpassed China as the world's most populous country, has a long-running territorial dispute with China, which the Indian public widely sees negatively.

Sidestepping rights concerns

Modi enjoyed more obvious kin-

ship with fellow right-wing populist Donald Trump, for whom the prime minister arranged a packed stadium rally in his home state of Gujarat, a scene hard to imagine with Biden, who is not known for exciting the masses.

But US presidents across party lines have been seeking a closer relationship with India since Bill Clinton in the late 1990s, seeing alignment between the world's largest democracies after Cold War estrangement.

Modi, the most powerful Indian leader in decades, comes with particular baggage. Before he became prime minister in

2014, the United States refused to issue him a visa due to his alleged role in anti-Muslim riots as leader of Gujarat.

The US State Department in its latest religious freedom report spoke of vigilante violence against minorities after incitement from Modi's base. Indian authorities have also raided media offices and parliament expelled the opposition leader.

At least six lawmakers boycotted Modi's speech but Biden made clear that rights concerns would not impede ties with India and offered carefully chosen words about both countries facing challenges to democracy.

Modi, who has not held an open press conference at home in his nine years in power, was coaxed to take two questions as part of the state visit and denied discrimination against minorities.

"There's an irony in that the Biden administration seeks to contrast democratic India with authoritarian China," said Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center.

But Biden 'doesn't appear to worry too much' about accusations he is ignoring democratic backsliding in India, Kugelman said. "The two leaders definitely got what they wanted: They brought the most prestige possible to a partnership they're keen to showcase," he said.

AFP



A statement addressing the OceanGate tragedy is posted at the entrance of OceanGate Expedition's headquarters in Everett, Washington (AFP)

Canada launches probe into Titan submersible loss

Ottawa, Canada - Canadian authorities said on Friday they would launch an investigation into the loss this week of the Titan submersible along with five people onboard during a dive to the Titanic wreck.

The Canadian-flagged Polar Prince cargo vessel towed the Titan out to sea last weekend but lost contact with it about an hour and 45 minutes after the submersible launched into the ocean depths. The Canadian Transportation Safety Board said 'as the investigation authority of the flag state of the support vessel' it would 'conduct a safety investigation regarding the circumstances of this operation'.

The US Coast Guard said on Thursday that all five people aboard the submersible had died after the vessel suffered a 'catastrophic implosion'.

A debris field was found on the seafloor, 1,600 feet (500 metres)

from the bow of the Titanic.

The somber announcement ended a multinational search-and-rescue operation that captivated the world since the tiny tourist craft went missing in the North Atlantic four days earlier.

The Transportation Safety Board routinely probes air, rail, marine and pipeline accidents with the aim of improving transportation safety. It does not assign fault or determine civil or criminal liability. The independent agency said it has sent investigators to St. John's, Newfoundland, from where the Polar Prince set sail, 'to gather information, conduct interviews, and assess the occurrence'.

"In the coming days, we will coordinate our activities with other agencies involved," it added in a statement. The Polar Prince is majority owned by the Miawpuke First Nation.

AFP

A PRAYER FOR PEACE



Members representing Assam Christian forum and CRI-NEI takes part in a solidarity prayer meet for restoration of peace in Manipur, India, after the ethnic violence, at a school in Guwahati on Saturday (AFP)

Bangladesh arrests chief of militant outfit

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh police have arrested the leader of an Islamist organisation at his hideout in Dhaka, officers said on Saturday, months after the launch of a crackdown against the group.

Shamin Mahfuz, the founder of Jamaat al Ansar fil Hindal Sharqiya, is accused of helping to run militant training camps in the country's restive Chittagong Hill Tracts. Police said Mahfuz was arrested late on Friday along with his wife in an industrial suburb of the capital, where they were found with a pistol, explosives and bomb-making materials.

"An anti-terrorism case has been filed against Mahfuz. We seek 10 days of remand to question him," Mohammad Asaduzzaman of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism unit told reporters.



Bangladesh police escort Shamin Mahfuz, the chief of the Islamist organisation Jamaat al Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, and his wife after being arrested, in Dhaka on Saturday (AFP)

Lawyers for Mahfuz could not be reached for comment.

Asaduzzaman said the Sharqiya founder had first been de-

tained in 2014 and came into contact with other outlawed extremist groups while in prison.

He said Mahfuz had brokered

a deal for the organisation to use training camps run by the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), a mainly Christian tribal insurgent

group. Last October the country's elite Rapid Action Battalion security force said it had launched an assault on KNF and Sharqiya encampments in three remote hill towns near the Indian border, arresting dozens of people.

The crackdown forced hundreds of villagers to flee across the border and take refuge in the northeast Indian state of Mizoram. Fresh clashes between the KNF and the Bangladesh military killed at least five soldiers in the last four months, the army has said.

The KNF rejected any connections with Sharqiya in a Facebook post last year.

Bangladesh security forces launched a nationwide drive against Islamist extremists last decade after a series of high-profile terror attacks.

AFP

SNP will fight for an independent Scotland: Yousaf

Edinburgh, UK - The Scottish National Party (SNP) will fight the next general election in the United Kingdom with independence 'front and centre' of its campaign, First Minister Humza Yousaf said on Saturday.

Addressing a conference of Scotland's governing party in the city of Dundee, Yousaf vowed he would seek fresh negotiations with the UK government about independence if the SNP wins the most Scottish seats in the election expected next year.

"Let me be clear, if the SNP does win this election, then the people will have spoken," he said.

"We will seek negotiations with the UK Government on how we give democratic effect to Scotland becoming an independent nation."

Yousaf's remarks come as public support wanes for the SNP after the arrest of its former leader and first minister Nicola



Scotland's first minister Humza Yousaf poses with his family during SNP independence conference in Dundee, Scotland on Saturday (AFP)

Sturgeon, the key figurehead of the independence movement in recent years. The Dundee meeting is the first in-person conference since Yousaf, 38, replaced her in March, and the party

started to see a drastic slide in its popularity.

Sturgeon, who came to power after the last - failed - 2014 referendum on Scotland breaking away from the UK, unexpectedly

announced her resignation in February, saying she lacked the 'energy' to carry on. She was arrested and interviewed by police earlier this month over claims of mismanagement of SNP finances, weeks after her husband, the party's former chief executive, had also been detained.

Both have denied any impropriety and have been released without charge.

Support shifts

The SNP has been the dominant force in Scottish politics for nearly two decades.

It currently has 64 members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs), out of a total of 129 - and governs in a coalition with the pro-independence Greens.

Meanwhile, it currently represents 48 of Scotland's 59 constituencies in the UK parliament in London. But in the wake of the funding scandal, polls show sharp

drops in support for the party.

A recent YouGov survey suggested it would haemorrhage seats if a general election were held now, losing nearly half its seats. Labour - which wants Scotland to remain part of the UK with along England, Wales and Northern Ireland - would gain 23 seats there to bring their tally north of the English border up to 24.

The Scottish Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, also pro-union parties, would each take four seats, according to the poll. Patrick English, an associate director at YouGov, said it confirmed that the recent bad news stories have hit SNP support.

"Not since 2010 have either the Scottish Nationalists failed to win more than 30 seats at a general election contest, or Labour surpassed seven (in Scotland)," he noted.

AFP

China: 4 arrested over blast that killed 31 in restaurant

Beijing, China - Chinese police arrested four people on Saturday linked to a restaurant explosion that killed dozens, state media reported.

At least 31 people were killed and seven others injured when a gas explosion ripped through a barbecue restaurant in the northwestern city of Yinchuan on Wednesday.

It happened on the eve of the three-day Dragon Boat Festival holiday when many in China go out and socialise with friends.

The suspects included the restaurant owner, two shareholders and the manager, state news agency Xinhua reported.

They were arrested for allegedly 'causing a serious accident through negligence' and a criminal investigation was under way, Xinhua said.

AFP

The local public security bureau had frozen the assets of nine individuals, including the four arrested, it added.

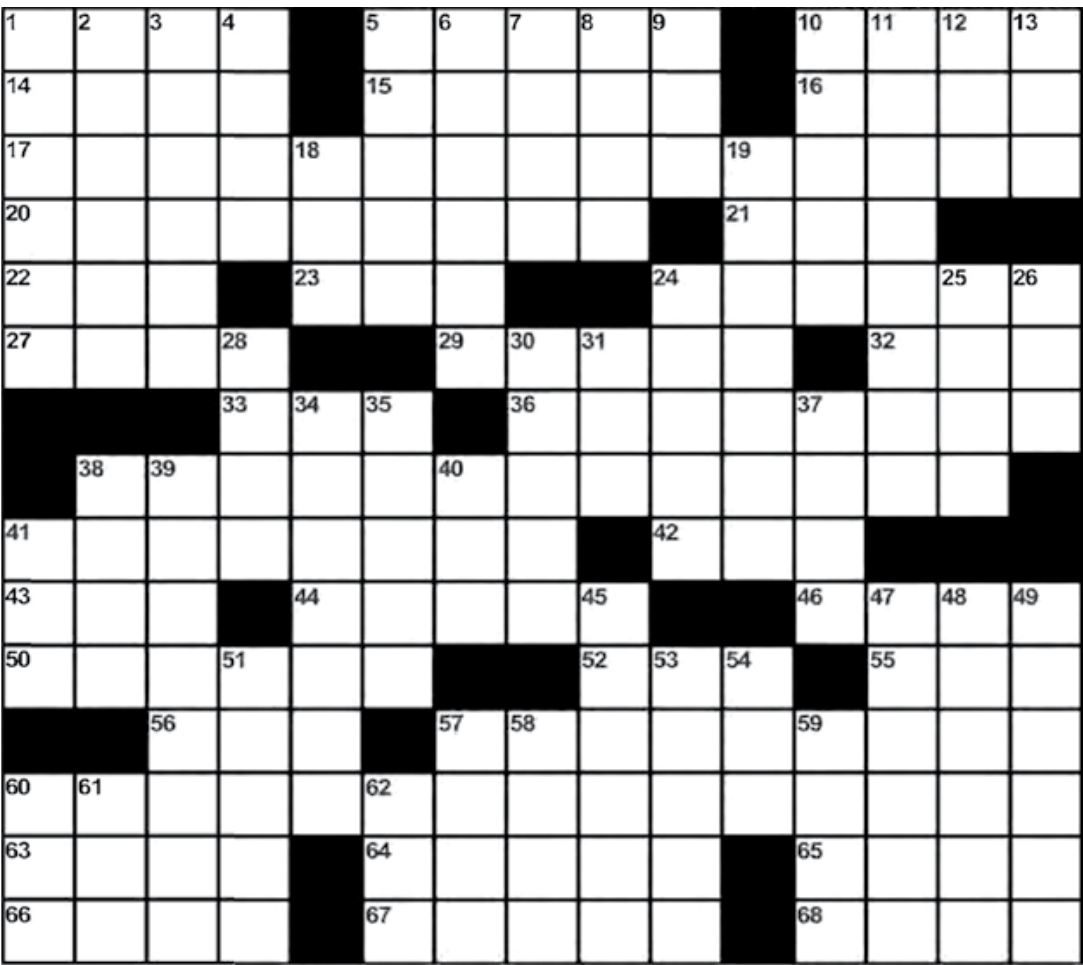
Chinese President Xi Jinping had 'demanded all-out efforts in treating the wounded and the strengthening of safety supervision and management in key industries and fields to effectively protect people's lives and property', Xinhua said on Thursday.

Explosions and other deadly incidents are relatively common in China, where building codes are often poorly enforced.

At least 17 people died in a fire at a restaurant in the northeastern city of Changchun in September 2022, according to statements given at the time by local authorities.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Framing 2x4
 - 5) Middle ear bone
 - 10) Birthday topics
 - 14) Jason's ship
 - 15) Makeup option
 - 16) Hatcher of TV
 - 17) Almost have in-laws
 - 20) Official government pardons
 - 21) Golfer's aspiration
 - 22) Old TV "Squad"
 - 23) "Just a..." ("Wait!")
 - 24) In an optimistic way
 - 27) It's south of Turkey
 - 29) Housing projects?
 - 32) Gaming cube
 - 33) Dream Team team
 - 36) Farthest toward the sunset
 - 38) Instruction to an actor, sometimes
 - 41) Animal that preys on others
 - 42) Highest non-face card
 - 43) Draft contents
 - 44) Like interstate highways
 - 46) Mouth off at
 - 50) One who makes a point
 - 52) Work unit

- 55) Fond du_ Wisconsin
 - 56)_ in xylophone
 - 57) Like good obedience school candidates
 - 60) Avoid the public
 - 63) Frank with a famous diary
 - 64) Slender watercraft
 - 65) Rope entanglement
 - 66) Pricey opera house seating section
 - 67) Way the wind
- DOWN**
- 1) Italian deli item
 - 2) Low number on the Richter scale
 - 3) Lake George is there
 - 4) Bird of peace
 - 5) Ready to spit nails
 - 6) Observe
 - 7) Like baby monkeys
 - 8) They are uttered with shudders
 - 9) Gloater's shout
 - 10) Legendary reference book?
 - 11) Trash
 - 12) Closer's stat
 - 13) Walter Scott or Walter Raleigh
 - 18) Curvaceous one of 26
 - 19) Disciple of Jesus

- 24) Go back to the default settings
- 25) Santa checks it
- 26) Up to the present
- 28)_ pro quo
- 30) Conscious of
- 31) Really relax, in slang (with "out")
- 34) Furthest from the fresh-est
- 35) "When you wish upon..."
- 37) Clothing store section
- 38) Musician Clapton
- 39) Making copies in the office
- 40) Heavy measure
- 41) Outdoor sound blasters, briefly
- 45) Certain church official
- 47) Lacking pigmentation
- 48) Wild West drinking hole
- 49) Potpourri offerings
- 51) One spelling for an Indian princess
- 53) Irritated
- 54) Large African antelope
- 57) Any old Russian ruler
- 58) Jeweler Lalique or Hollywood's Russo

- 59) Inquires
- 60) Cowpoke's sweetheart
- 61) Yoko of the music world
- 62) Mo. of colorful foliage

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You are likely to hit at least one obstacle today, but sometimes roadblocks are there to keep you from getting into dangerous situations, so take a deep breath when you encounter one. Try not to look at it as a bad thing. The limitation you encounter, whether it's a strict parent, a militant boss, or just a rule you must obey, is there for a reason. You may have to struggle more than usual to get somewhere today, but in that struggle you'll appreciate your journey all the more



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
It's healthy to treat yourself right, but if you overindulge for too long, you run the risk of getting behind on your finances, going over budget, or developing some unhealthy habits. It's time to start creating some rules for yourself and sticking to them! Cutting back here and there doesn't have to be painful. Bring your lunch with you more often. Wash your car yourself. Avoid shopping for a while. You won't have trouble finding other things to do.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
Before you get involved in any new event, sport, or relationship today, you need to put things on pause and take one last look at the fine print involved. You absolutely can't take things at face value right now. There is just too much uncertainty and subterfuge around you. There's always more to the story, and it's definitely in your best interest to find out what it is. This kind of knowledge will keep you from getting hurt, and it will send a clear message that you're no fool.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
It's great that you have a new goal, and the Universe says that you need to start working on it as soon as possible if you want to reach it. The clock is ticking, and you have your work cut out for you. To get the help you need, find a few likeminded people who share your hopes and dreams. They'll provide the moral support for you to go the distance. Often the best way to show yourself how capable you are is to let other people remind you.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Your adventurous spirit is getting stronger right now, and your heart is doing its bidding. Is it time to plan a trip to some exotic or otherwise exciting locale? Hunker down and scroll through travel websites and ask friends about their recent journeys. Figure out where you really want to go next and who you want to go with, if anyone. A solo trip might be the perfect solution, so keep your mind open to that.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Walk down the quieter path today. Avoid the crowds, skip the hot spots, and say no to that party invitation. This isn't an ideal time for you to be meeting new people or vying for the attention of a group of people. However, it is the perfect time to indulge in some sanity-saving alone time. Even if you feel no need for solitude, it couldn't hurt to have some time to think about recent events. Recharge your batteries tonight and you'll wake up feeling more alive than ever.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Today, the good news you've wanted to hear for a long time could finally arrive, and it might have an unforeseen effect on your finances. Take some time to review your accounts and make sure you understand how they could be changing in the near future. Money is also on the mind of a dear friend who has some serious debt troubles. Lend them your ear and sympathize, but don't lend them any money. It will only create problems for you two in the future.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Celebrate the recent kindness a stranger showed you by performing an act of kindness of your own and making it twice as generous. If you can donate some money to a charity, give more than your usual amount. Money might not be able to buy happiness, but it can help people in need and make you feel good. Let a driver cut in front of you in traffic, pay someone else's toll, or just give somebody a smile. The world is full of people who are just like you.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
The cast of characters in your life will start changing today, and you might not like who enters the picture at first. Your regular way of doing things will have to be different in order to accommodate them, and this could naturally create some feelings of resentment. But do your best to embrace what's going on. It's definitely for the best in the long run. After the initial turmoil is over, things are only going to start getting better. The Universe is pushing you in the right direction.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Your original ideas need to be protected right now. They could be in danger of being stolen. Not everyone is as creative as you are, and some unscrupulous people have no problem taking your ideas and promoting them as their own. You have a good idea of who the likely thief could be, so be tight-lipped when you're around them. There's no need to elaborate on why you're being so elusive. It will only make them angry. Let them find out what you're cooking up when everyone else does.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You could be fighting a very tough battle between your patience and your temper today. There are too many annoying people around you right now, and none of them seem to know a thing about manners. Maybe a rude stranger cuts in front of you in line. Maybe a distracted driver nearly runs you off the road. Or perhaps an inconsiderate coworker takes the last can of your favorite soda from the machine. Regardless, you need to put things in perspective. Don't lose your cool!



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
It's not your responsibility to fix the problems in your friend's life. You need to be supportive of them, but you have to stop putting so much pressure on yourself. And if they choose to ignore your solid advice, you can't be frustrated by their continued failure. Sure, you know that they're making a huge mistake, but they don't. The only way they'll learn is through trial and error. Take a more hands-off approach to your friendship. It's the best thing for both of you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 01. Jeremy Strong, Kieran Culkin, Sarah Snook and Matthew Macfadyen are part of the ensemble cast of what award-winning US TV series, first aired in 2018?**
- A. When They See Us
 - B. Lodge 49
 - C. Succession
 - D. Russian Doll

- 02. Which of these is one of the activities with which Coretta Scott King was associated?**
- A. Civil Rights Movement
 - B. Egyptian archaeology
 - C. Underwater exploration
 - D. Aviation

- 03. What is a common name for the butterfly known as Vanessa cardui?**
- A. Painted lady
 - B. Mallow skipper
 - C. Plum Judy
 - D. Cabbage white

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

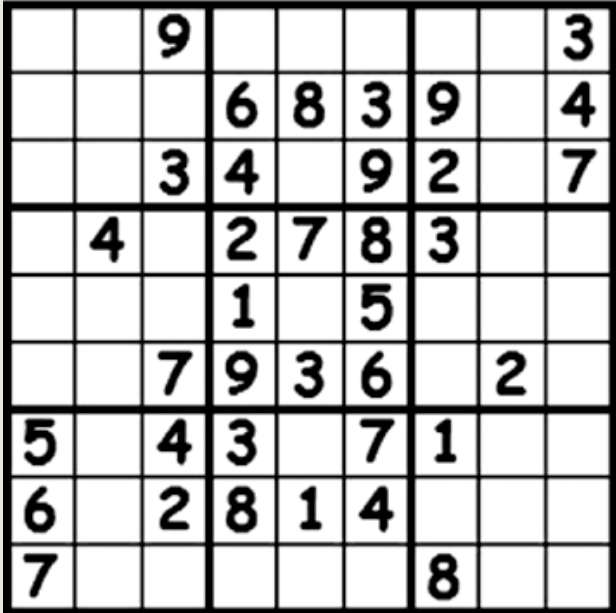


Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters.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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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



WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



DISCOUNT SALE!

Rivals seek to profit as mega spenders Chelsea look to trim bloated squad

Manchester, United Kingdom - Chelsea have embarked on a fire sale following their stunning spending spree, trimming their bloated squad in an effort to comply with financial regulations as they prepare for a new era under Mauricio Pochettino.

In their first year under the ownership of an American consortium, Chelsea spent more on transfer fees than any club has

with other Chelsea players expected to follow him.

A potential influx of Saudi cash could prove vital to Chelsea's chances of complying with the Premier League's financial fair play (FFP) rules.

Clubs are allowed a maximum loss of £105 million over a three-year period, with deductions allowed for spending on infrastructure, youth and

In their first year under the ownership of an American consortium, Chelsea spent more on transfer fees than any club has ever done in a 12-month period, only to finish 12th in the Premier League

ever done in a 12-month period, only to finish 12th in the Premier League - their lowest placing since 1994. The arrival of RB Leipzig forward Christopher Nkunku this week has added to the outlay of more than £500 million (\$635 million).

But most of Chelsea's business is focused on departures, with key players in the squad that won the Champions League just two years ago set to leave.

France midfielder N'Golo Kante has already said his goodbyes to join a wave of star footballers heading to Saudi Arabia,

women's football.

Chelsea looked set to be well over that limit, having posted £275 million worth of losses in the final two years of Roman Abramovich's reign, even before LA Dodgers co-owner Todd Boehly and private equity group Clearlake Capital took charge.

Some of the club's new signings last season such as Enzo Fernandez and Mykhailo Mudryk were handed eight-year deals to minimise the impact of their transfer fees on the books.

For FFP purposes, transfer fees are spread over the number of



Chelsea's Croatian midfielder Mateo Kovacic is on the verge of joining English champions Manchester City

years of the contract. By contrast, sales can be registered in full as soon as they are completed and Chelsea are in a rush to get business done before the end of football's financial year on June 30.

Havertz, Kovacic on the move

A number of Chelsea's Premier League rivals are circling, keen to take advantage of cut-price deals.

Croatia international Mateo Kovacic is on the verge of joining English champions Manchester City for an initial £25 million.

England's Mason Mount is the subject of serious interest from Manchester United.

Germany forward Kai Havertz is close to joining London rivals Arsenal for £65 million, while Marc Cucurella could reportedly join Newcastle for around half the £60 million he cost Chelsea to sign from Brighton year.

Saudi interest in Edouard Mendy, Kalidou Koulibaly and Hakim Ziyech is making waves.

Business links between the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Clearlake have resulted in accusations of a conflict of interest.

Former Manchester United captain Gary Neville has called for an embargo on transfers from Premier League clubs to Saudi to "ensure the integrity of the game isn't being damaged". However, the Premier League reportedly investigated any links between Chelsea's ownership group and the PIF at the time of last year's takeover and was apparently happy there was no conflict.

Wolves captain Neves joins Saudi's Al Hilal

Paris, France - Wolves captain Ruben Neves on Friday became the latest major player to move to Saudi Arabia, the 26-year-old Portuguese international joining Al-Hilal.

"From the 'Wolves' to the biggest team in Asia," Al Hilal announced on social media after the player signed a three-season deal in Paris.

Neves leaves Wolves after six seasons for "a club record fee", the Premier League side announced, reported to be around 55 million euros.

Neves, who arrived at Wolves from Porto, had one year on his contract left at Molineux.

He joins in the Saudi Pro League Real Madrid's Karim Benzema, 35, and Cristiano Ronaldo,



Ruben Neves

38, in what is expected to be just the start of a series of moves for stars based in Europe.

Thanks to its oil riches, Saudi Arabia, the conservative Gulf

monarchy frequently targeted over its human rights record, has swiftly achieved a prominent role in world sports, dishing out billions of dollars in the process.

France's World Cup-winning midfielder N'Golo Kante, 32, has joined Benzema at Al Ittihad.

The kingdom's league had already signed up five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo, who joined Al Nassr in January.

But in contrast to recent moves for players in the twilight of their careers, Neves still has his prime years ahead of him.

Barcelona had held a long-term interest in the former Porto midfielder.

The huge deal eases Wolves' financial pressures.

They have been under pressure to sell to avoid breaching Premier League spending rules after splashing out £150 million on transfers over the past 12 months.

Neves has made 253 appearances for Wolves, scoring 30 goals, since arriving in 2017.

"Ruben is the embodiment of everything you look for when trying to bring players into a football club; a leader, a humble man and an extremely talented footballer who took Wolves to a different level," said the English side's sporting director Matt Hobbs.

He helped them win promotion from the Championship a year later and then to two consecutive seventh-placed finishes in the Premier League.

Wolves also reached the Europa League quarter-finals in 2020, but have struggled to replicate that success and finished 13th last season.

AFF



Sergio Busquets

Sergio Busquets joining Messi at Inter Miami

Miami, United States - Inter Miami announced on Friday they are signing former Spain and Barcelona midfielder Sergio Busquets to team up with Lionel Messi at the Major League Soccer club.

Messi said earlier this month he was moving to Miami and he will now be reunited with his former Barca team-mate Busquets.

Inter Miami posted a tweet heralding the arrival of the player. "Si, Busi" read the Twitter post, referring to Busquets' nickname. The tweet included quotes praising Busquets from several people in the game including former Spain coach Vicente del Bosque.

Busquets said in May that he would leave Barcelona in the summer at the end of his contract.

The 34-year-old made 143 appearances for Spain before announcing his retirement from the team in December.

Busquets has been a central part of Barcelona's successes in the past 15 years, including nine Spanish league titles and

three Champions League triumphs.

Busquets played as a pivot behind Andres Iniesta and Xavi Hernandez in an iconic midfield trio, and the three of them also won the World Cup with Spain in 2010.

Inter Miami owner Jorge

We will be making additional signings during the summer window

JORGE MAS



Mas said this week that the club expected to make between three to five new signings to join Messi. "We will be making additional signings during the summer window, more than what people anticipate... I can say we will potentially be making between three and five signings."

AFF



Sebastien Ogier steers his Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid in Kenya

Ogier holds off onslaught fom Rovanner in Kenya

Nakuru, Kenya - Sebastien Ogier held off an onslaught from world championship leader Kalle Rovanner on Saturday to maintain his lead in the Safari Rally going into Sunday's final stage.

Ogier, 39, who is not driving a full season, leads Rovanner by 16.7 seconds ahead of Sunday's finale. The race is down to a two-car battle between the Toyotas of Ogier, eight-time world cham-

pion, and Rovanner, 22, the defending champion.

More than two minutes behind in the seventh round of 13 this season are the two other Toyotas with Welsh driver Elfyn Evans and Japan's Takamoto Katsuta.

Since returning to the calendar in 2021, Kenya has the reputation as one of the toughest rallies on the circuit.

CONCACAF suspends four players after USA-Mexico brawl

Los Angeles, United States - CONCACAF meted out suspensions to Weston McKennie and Sergino Dest of the United States and Mexico's Cesar Montes and Gerardo Arteaga on Friday in the wake of the stormy Champions League clash between the two nations.

The United States triumphed 3-0 in the semifinal match that saw both sides finish with nine men. Montes was shown a red card for an ugly wild kick at Folarin Balogun and McKennie was dismissed for his role in the fracas which followed.

Arteaga and Dest were sent off after another mass brawl.

CONCACAF, football's governing body for North and Central America and the Caribbean, said on Friday that McKennie and Montes have been suspended a further three matches, in addition to their automatic



Sergino Dest (R) of the US and Mexico's Gerardo Arteaga are involved in a scuffle during their CONCACAF Nations League semifinals

one-match bans.

Dest and Arteaga were suspended an additional two games.

Dest and McKennie are not in the US squad for the CONCACAF Gold Cup that starts on Saturday, but the sanctions will be a blow for Mexico in the competition, with both Montes and

Arteaga in the Gold Cup squad.

CONCACAF said both teams had been fined an undisclosed amount, but did not mention the homophobic chants by Mexican supporters that prompted Salvadoran referee Ivan Barton to halt the match in the final minutes.



Kazakhstan's Alexander Bublik returns the ball to Germany's Alexander Zverev during their Halle Open semi-final on Saturday (AFP)

PARTY POOPER

Bublik beats home hope Zverev to reach the final of Halle Open

Halle Westfalen, Germany - Alexander Bublik eased past home hope Alexander Zverev 6-3, 7-5 to reach the final of the Halle ATP tournament on Saturday.

Bublik, 26, will play his first final of the season in the Wimbledon warm-up grass-court event against either Spaniard

Roberto Bautista Agut or Russian Andrey Rublev.

Kazak Bublik won his only title last year in Montpellier against Zverev and now holds a 3-1 record against the German.

On Saturday, Bublik took less than an hour and a half to dispatch the former world number two, firing down 14 aces with a

strong service game. In the first set, he quickly took the lead with a break in the fourth game (3-1), and then counted on his serve (6-4) to pull him through.

The two players duelled until 5-5 in the second set, when Zverev collapsed, allowing Bublik to confidently seal victory 7-5.

On Friday, Bautista Agut defeated top seed Daniil Medvedev. Medvedev lost 7-5, 7-6 (7-3) against the 35-year-old Spaniard. Eighth seed Bautista Agut now boasts a 5-2 career

record against the 2021 US Open winner.

"To beat Daniil on this court, you have to play really good" said Bautista Agut. "I didn't feel good (for) some months this year, but I kept working hard. I know tennis is sometimes very difficult, but today it showed that I have been working hard."

Medvedev, the former world number one, was runner-up on the Halle grass in 2022, losing to Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in straight sets in the final. With a

poor record on the surface, Medvedev has never reached the quarter-finals at Wimbledon, missing last year's tournament due to a ban on Russian athletes over the war in Ukraine.

Rublev, meanwhile, came from behind to defeat Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor.

Rublev lost the first set 3-6 but won the next two 6-3, 6-4, making it the second time he beat Griekspoor this season after another three-set win at the Qatar Open in Doha in February.

Kvitova ousts Garcia to reach Berlin semis

Berlin, Germany - Former Wimbledon winner Petra Kvitova edged Caroline Garcia 6-4, 7-6 (7/3) to seal her spot in the semi-finals of the rain-hit WTA German Open in Berlin on Saturday.

The seventh-seeded Czech - Wimbledon champion in 2011 and 2014 - built on a solid first serve to defeat her third-seeded rival.

"I never played her on this surface and it was an advantage for me," said the 33-year-old. "It's sweet revenge after my defeat in the Cincinnati final (last year)."

The quarter and semi-finals are being played on Saturday, after rain washed out play on Friday in the traditional Wimbledon warm-up.

France's Garcia, the world number four, had been in the game until conceding her serve in the seventh game of the first set which the Czech won in 52 minutes. She saved break points in the second set, notably at 4-4, but was unable to match Kvitova in the tie-break with the Czech player sweeping 7 points to 3.

Kvitova next takes on 22nd-



Czech Republic's Petra Kvitova returns the ball to France's Caroline Garcia during their quarter-final match at WTA German Open tennis tournament in Berlin on Saturday (AFP)

ranked Ekaterina Alexandrova who advanced to the last four after fellow Russian Veronika Kudermetova withdrew.

Croatia's Donna Vekic beat Russia's Elina Avanesyan 6-2, 7-6 (7/0) to reach her first grass-court semi-final in four years.

She next plays Greek sixth seed Maria Sakkari who battled past Czech Marketa Vondrousova 7-6 (9/7), 6-1 to reach

her fifth semi-final of the year.

Krejcikova to meet Ostapenko in final

Top two seeds Barbora Krejcikova and Jelena Ostapenko will meet in the final of the Birmingham Open after coming through their semi-finals in contrasting fashion on Saturday.

Krejcikova has been untouchable so far this week. The world number 12 is yet to drop a set as she eased past China's Zhu Lin 6-3, 6-2.

"I'm really happy with the way I played today," said the 2021 French Open champion. "It's always difficult to play on the grass because the game can change quickly, so I'm happy how I handled the match and that I'm in the final."

By contrast, Ostapenko has been taken to a deciding set in all four of her matches in Birmingham, but has battled through to reach her first final of the season.

The Latvian came from behind after dropping the opening set to fourth seed Anastasia Potapova to win 5-7, 6-2, 6-4.



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz returns to Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov during their quarter-final match at Queen's Club in London on Friday (AFP)

Alcaraz powers past Grigor Dimitrov into Queen's semi-finals

London, United Kingdom - Carlos Alcaraz remains in the hunt for his first grass court title after the world number two beat former champion Grigor Dimitrov 6-4, 6-4 to reach the semi-finals at Queen's Club on Friday.

Alcaraz admitted earlier in the week to watching videos of Roger Federer and Andy Murray to learn how to move on the grass and appears to be finding his feet on the surface ahead of Wimbledon next month.

Since surviving a marathon first-round encounter with French lucky loser Arthur Rinderknech, Alcaraz has not dropped a set to reach the last four in London.

A break in the first game was enough to win the Spaniard the first set as Dimitrov missed three chances to break back in the sixth game.

The Bulgarian, who won the Queen's title in 2014, got off to a flier in the second set as he led 3-0.

Alcaraz battled back to lead 4-3, only to give the break back for 4-4.

However, the US Open champion was gifted the chance to

serve for the match when an error-strewn game from Dimitrov threw away his serve to love.

Alcaraz took full advantage to set up a semi-final clash with Sebastian Korda, who beat British number one Cameron Norrie 6-4, 7-6 (7/1).

"Grigor is a really top player in

I played very well since the beginning. The two matches before helped me a lot

CARLOS ALCARAZ

every surface, but even more here on grass, he feels the ball very well," said Alcaraz.

"I played very well since the beginning. The two matches before helped me a lot."

Second seed Holger Rune said he was fired up by Lorenzo Musetti's smashed overhead that hit the Dane in his 6-4, 7-5 quarter-final win.

AFP

Zimbabwe stun Windies, Dutch knock Nepal out of World Cup qualifier

Harare, Zimbabwe - Zimbabwe stunned West Indies by 35 runs in a crucial World Cup qualifying triumph on Saturday while the Netherlands ended Nepal's hopes of reaching the global showpiece for the first time.

The Dutch side's seven-wicket win guaranteed a Super Sixes place and also meant that both Zimbabwe and two-time champions West Indies were assured of their places in

the next round.

However, Zimbabwe will have the advantage of taking the two points from Saturday's win with them into the next stage which features the top three sides from the two groups of five.

Zimbabwe, put into bat, made 268 with Sikandar Raza top scoring with 68 from 58 balls, hitting six fours and two sixes.

AFP

Bradley, McCarthy share lead as McIlroy climbs at Travelers Championship

New York, United States - Keegan Bradley birdied five straight holes in a seven-under-par 63 on Friday to join Denny McCarthy atop the leaderboard at the US PGA Tour Travelers Championship, where Rory McIlroy was among those in the mix.

McCarthy, who led by two after a 10-under-par first-round 60, followed up with a five-under-par 65 at TPC River Highlands in Cromwell, Connecticut.

Bradley blistered the back nine to join him on 15-under-par 125 - a 36-hole course record - rolling in five straight birdies from the 12th through the 16th.

Bradley had kick started his round with a 58-foot birdie putt at the third hole and drained a 10-footer at eight. He sank a 34-foot birdie at the 12th to launch his back-nine surge.

"Felt like I could make every putt I looked at," Bradley said. "I was just reading them really good. When you're putting good everything feels easy and it's automatic."

McCarthy shook off a bogey at the second hole, where he missed the green, carding six birdies the rest of the way.

That included a 43-foot birdie putt at the 10th and another from



Keegan Bradley of the US plays his shot from the 12th tee during the second round of the Travelers Championship on Friday (AFP)

just inside 20 feet at 18.

McCarthy said it was "nice" to post the 36-hole scoring record for the course, but he remained focused on claiming a first PGA Tour title.

"Golf tournaments aren't 36 holes unfortunately, so I know there is still a lot of golf left," he said.

McCarthy and Bradley - who played through afternoon showers - were two strokes clear of Chez Reavie, who carded a 63 for 127. Eric Cole shot a 65 for 129 while Zac Blair and Adam Scott were tied at 130 as the course again yielded a bevy of low

scores.

World number two Jon Rahm couldn't take advantage, firing a one-over 71 that left him at two-under, two shots outside the cutline that came at four-under par.

McIlroy was in a group on eight-under-par 132, climbing the leaderboard with an impressive display on the greens and despite a double-bogey disaster at his penultimate hole, the par-three eighth - the same hole he aced on Thursday. "Other than that, it was a really good round of golf," said McIlroy, whose tee shot was in the water.

"It just got hit by a little bit of

wind," McIlroy said. "Hit a pretty good shot. I just misjudged the wind a little bit and it came up short - the one place you couldn't miss today on that hole."

The Northern Ireland star, coming off a runner-up finish to Wyndham Clark at the US Open at Los Angeles Country Club on Sunday, had eight birdies at that point, setting the tone with a 19-foot birdie putt at the 11th.

His five birdies in his first nine holes also included a 13-footer at the 14th and a 14-footer at 17. His three birdies coming in included a 25-footer at the third.

AFP



Marco Bezzecchi

MARCO TAKES POLE

Bezzecchi on Dutch MotoGP pole, more misery for fome world champion Marquez

Assen, Netherlands - Marco Bezzecchi nailed pole for the Dutch MotoGP in record style on Saturday as Marc Marquez suffered more misery.

Bezzecchi became the 13th different pole sitter at Assen in the past 13 visits to the classic venue known as 'the Cathedral of Speed'.

The Italian secured only his second pole in MotoGP when lowering the track record with a flying lap of 1 minute 31.472 seconds.

Riding for Valentino Rossi's VR46 Ducati satellite team he is joined on the front row by world champion Francesco Bagnaia and his VR46 teammate Luca

I'm very happy with this pole, I feel good with the bike

MARCO BEZZECCHI

Marini.

"I'm very happy with this pole, I feel good with the bike," said Bezzecchi, who was building on his dominance of all three practice sessions.

After struggling in Friday's opening practice on his factory Ducati, Bagnaia was relieved to qualify in second.

"It's like night and day compared to yesterday morning

when the bike was hard to handle," said Bagnaia. "But we made rapid improvements which gives me reason to smile and be optimistic for the races."

Behind the all-Ducati front of the grid on the second row are Fabio Quartararo's Yamaha, KTM's Brad Binder and Aleix Espargaro (Aprilia).

For Marquez it was another difficult day at the office on his Honda. The Spanish motorcycling star has endured a wretched season and the six-time champion's woes continued in Assen.

He arrived at the eighth round of the season after five crashes in Sachsenring last weekend nurs-

ing injuries to his ankle and ribs.

The Spaniard hit the deck in practice on Friday, and was dusting himself off again after a calamitous loss of concentration in the first qualifying session.

As he was looking over his shoulder he ran into Enea Bastianini's bike in front of him to end up once again falling off his Honda and on the gravel.

It left the 30-year-old starting way back in 17th in the grid for Saturday's sprint and Sunday's main event.

This season Bagnaia leads the standings by 14 points from Jorge Martin, who starts from 10th after a crash on one of his 'hot' laps.

Bezzecchi wins sprint race

Marco Bezzecchi won the Dutch MotoGP sprint race at Assen on Saturday ahead of world champion Francesco Bagnaia.

Fabio Quartararo completed the podium after third-placed Brad Binder was demoted to fifth following a long lap penalty for track limits. Bagnaia took command of the 13-lap dash around the classic motorcycling venue at turn one from Binder as pole sitter Bezzecchi was caught napping, dropping to third.

Bezzecchi bided his time and moved back to race second, leaving Bagnaia in his crosshairs. AFP

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OMAN OASIS



The two paintings attributed to Dutch artist Rembrandt ahead of their presentation at Christie's auction house in Amsterdam

MASTER PAINTINGS

LOST
REMBRANDT
PORTRAITS TO
BE SOLD AFTER
200 YEARS AT
CHRISTIE'S IN
LONDON

CHRISTIE'S CATCH

As family heirlooms go, it doesn't get much better than a pair of Rembrandt portraits that the world had forgotten about for 200 years.

A British family rather casually enjoyed the oil paintings by the 17th century Dutch master until an expert from Christie's auction house spotted them.

Now the last pair of Rembrandt portraits to remain in private hands are set to fetch between £5mn and £8mn when they go under the hammer at Christie's in London next month.

"I first encountered these pictures a few years ago on a routine valuation and was stopped in my tracks," Henry Pettifer, International Deputy Chairman of Old Master Paintings at Christie's, told AFP as the paintings went on display in Amsterdam.

"I was really staggered to discover that the pictures had never really been researched and never been addressed in any of the literature on Rembrandt over the course of 200 years."

The 20cm oval portraits, believed to date from 1635, depict an elderly plumber named Jan Willemsz van der Pluym and his wife Jaapgen Carels.

The couple, painted in an unusually intimate style for Rembrandt, were friends of the artist's family and hailed from his hometown of Leiden in the Netherlands.

Casually enjoying

An ancestor of the current owners bought the paintings at an auction at Christie's in 1824, where they were listed as Rembrandts, and they have remained in the same collection ever since.

"They've been sitting quietly and enjoyed by the owner's family over the course of two centuries... rather casually enjoying them very much," said Pettifer. After spotting them, forensic work began on verifying that they were genuine.

"Essentially, the pictures were unknown, initially to be treated with a great deal of caution, but obviously needed to be examined and researched in great detail," he said, adding that the auction house enlisted help from art experts, including from Amsterdam's famed Rijksmuseum.

"We were fortunate enough that they had their scientific team really very carefully look into them for nearly two years," Christie's expert Manja Rottink told AFP.

Experts looked at the line of ownership of the paintings, which are mentioned in an inventory of the oldest daughter of the portrait subjects, said Rottink, the senior international specialist of old master paintings at Christie's.

Very exciting

They also checked Rembrandt's signatures, including whether they had been done at the time in wet paint, and comparing the artistic style to his other works.

"The conclusion was that, indeed, they are by the artist... it was sort of overwhelming how enthusiastic everyone was about this find," she said.

As the smallest known portraits by Rembrandt, they have also shed new light on the style of the artist, who at the time was better known for much larger portraits commissioned by wealthy families.

"These are something slightly different, something much more intimate," said Pettifer.

"I was really staggered to discover that the pictures had never really been researched and **never been addressed in any of the literature on Rembrandt over the course of 200 years**

HENRY PETTIFER



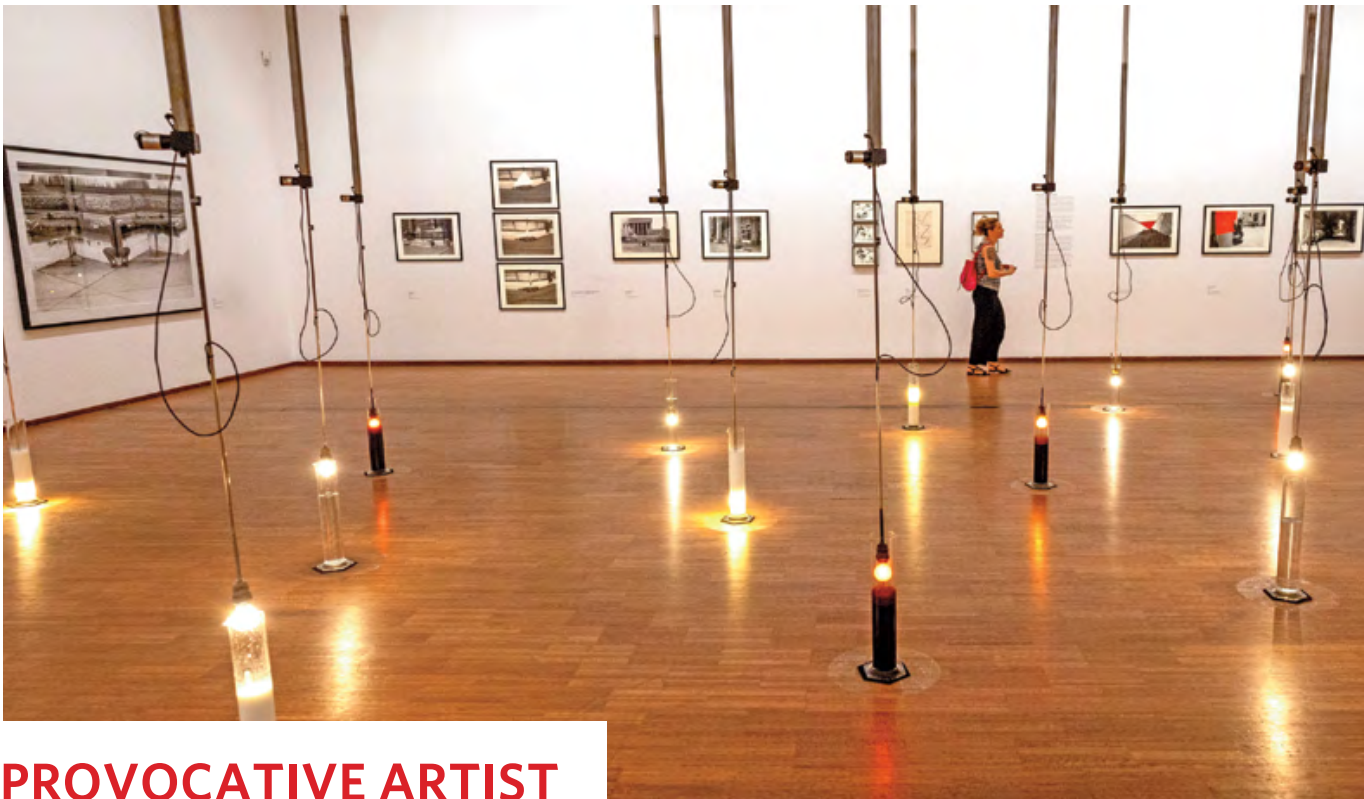
The newly discovered Rembrandts, which Christie's describes as "one of the most exciting discoveries we have made in the Old Masters field in recent years," have also been on tour in New York and London, where they will go under the hammer on July 6.

While it remains to be seen whether the buyer will be private or a museum, one thing about the auction is certain - 'They've been intact all their lives, so we're selling them together,' said Pettifer.

AFP



A gallery assistant cleans the frame of a portrait of Jan Willemsz van der Pluym presented at Christies auction house in Amsterdam on June 21



PROVOCATIVE ARTIST



performative *Expressionist*

‘NOWADAYS, I’D BE ARRESTED,’ SAYS OCTOGENARIAN AUSTRIAN ARTIST VALIE EXPORT WHO EXCELS IN ART, SCULPTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND FILMS



Society has become so restrictive that police would now arrest her for public performances, provocative Austrian media artist Valie Export said, ahead of the opening of a retrospective in Vienna.

Best known for performances in public dating back to the late 1960s, 83-year-old Export's oeuvre spans photography, video, film, installations and sculpture. The photography-focused show at the Albertina gallery, which opens Friday, is one of the biggest retrospectives of her work.

"Our society has become very restrictive, and it is becoming even more restrictive," she said in an interview, adding "it is a step backwards" compared to the 1970s.

If she were to perform in public again today, Export is convinced that the police would eventually arrest her. "You are no longer allowed to do anything in the public space other than walking, standing, looking," she quips. Today, people would certainly be shocked if they saw her performances, she added.

Back in the late 1960s, those who witnessed Export's bare-breasted 'Touch and tap cinema' in several European cities were mainly 'curious', she said.

But Export also had some haters, who sent her poisonous mail, threats, and dragged her to court for alleged indecency.

"Everything is so uncertain" these days, she said, due to a world that keeps changing rapidly and in unexpected ways, including geopolitically.

"We really live in a very difficult time now," she said, expressing her fear that people have 'lost direction'. But they still need to take on these challenges, she added.

Our society has become very restrictive, and it is becoming even more restrictive. It is a step backwards compared to the 1970s

VALIE EXPORT

The show in Vienna, which runs until October 1, features over 160 works created between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, some of them showcased for the first time.

Catholic church and Nazi past

Born Waltraud Lehner and raised by a single mother in post-war Austria, a staunchly Catholic nation struggling to come to terms with its Nazi past, Export's 'performative expression' would be shaped by her upbringing.

Educated in a convent school in Linz, Export said she has always been fascinated by the ceremonies and rituals she saw during church service.

"Every priest, every cardinal or pope, they all perform as God's representatives and that influenced and impressed me."

Export's earliest works were feminist and focussed on the female body, themes that dominate much of her work. The female body, she argues, has been regulated by societal norms for centuries.

Defying conservative Austria, her works were never intended to 'shock' but were rather thought-provoking 'acts of protest' against prevailing attitudes in society.

However, feminism is far from where it should be, even though important steps towards equality and the recognition of women have been made, said Export.

The 'oppression of women has lasted for centuries, millennia', so it won't be possible to bring about social change within "50 or 100 years", she said.

Export and Maria Lassnig were the first women to represent Austria at the Venice Biennial in 1980.

AFP

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