

## Religion, language most define personal identity: Omani youth

ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey finds Generation Z is guided by faith

Our Correspondent Muscat

Omani youth say their religion and language are most important to their personal identity, with an overwhelming majority (95%) also saying preserving their religious and cultural identity is more important to them than creating a more liberal and globalised society.

This is one of the key findings of the 15th annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey under the theme 'My Identity', the most comprehensive study of its kind of the Arab world's largest demographic - its over 200mn youth. The survey is conducted by ASDA'A BCW, a communications consultancy in Middle East and North Africa.

When asked what defines their personal identity, 52% of Omani respondents said, "my religion" followed by "my language" (40%). Across all respondents in the survey, "my religion" and "my family/tribe" were each named by 27% of respondents, followed by "my nationality" (15%), "my language" (11%), "my Arabic heritage" (8%), "my gender" (7%) and "my political beliefs" (4%).



OMANI YOUTH SAY

40%  
The Arabic language defines my personal identity

52%  
My religion defines my personal identity

64%  
Arabic language more important to me than it is to my parents

(8%), "my gender" (7%) and "my political beliefs" (4%).

Religion was named as most important to personal identity by 30% of the respondents in Levant, 27% in North Africa and 25% in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, while family/tribe was deemed most important by 37% of youth in North Africa, 21% in Levant and 20% in the GCC.

Over three-quarters (76%) of Arab youth said they are concerned about the loss of traditional values and culture, the highest percentage saying so in five years, while nearly two-thirds (65%) said preserving their religious and cultural identity is more important to them than creating a more tolerant, liberal and globalised society. This sentiment rises to nearly 74% in Levant, 72% in the GCC states and 68% in North Africa.

Interestingly, while 11% said language is most important to their identity, over half (54%) of the respondents said the Arabic language is less important to them than it is to their parents. This trend is seen across the three regions surveyed, with 59% of GCC youth, 51% in North Africa and 52% in Levant all saying it is less important to them.

Interestingly, in Oman, nearly two-thirds (64%) of youth said the Arabic language is more important to them than it is to their parents.

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## MTCIT signs pact for development of Shinas Port

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) inked a framework agreement with Quartet Solutions (QS) Maritime on Wednesday, aimed at developing, managing and operating Shinas Port.

The signatories were H E Eng Said bin Hamood al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and Abdul Baqi bin Ahmed al Kindi, CEO of QS Maritime, a consortium of local and international firms specialising in port management and operations.

This agreement stems from MTCIT's drive to attract more foreign investments and foster both international and local partnerships in port and harbour management and operations.

Development of the port is slated to proceed in three phases. The first involves forming a committee to oversee the port's handover. Starting November 1, the Stage 2 will commence with the development, management and operations of the port, alongside crafting a commercial and marketing plan, as well as a new general layout for the port. This phase will last for eight months.

In the third stage, final negotiations will be conducted over a 12-month period in preparation of signing a long-term agreement, aimed at developing, managing

*The agreement will enhance the expertise of Omani companies and professionals in port management and operations and boost imports and exports of commodities*

MUHANNA BIN MOOSA BAQER

and operating the port for an extended 30-year term.

Elaborating on the benefits of the agreement, Muhanna bin Moosa Baqer, Director General of Ports at MTCIT, said it will enhance expertise of Omani companies and professionals in port management and operations and also boost imports and exports of commodities like vegetables, fruits and other foodstuffs, while stimulating ship movement.

### NEWS BRIEF

OMAN PARTICIPATES IN G20 ANTI-CORRUPTION MEET IN INDIA

New Delhi, India - Oman, represented by the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution (SAI) and a number of related authorities, is participating in the third meeting of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) in Kolkata, India.

The third and final meeting of ACWG, under India's Presidency, will continue till August 11. Over 154 delegates from G20 members, ten invitee countries and various international organisations are attending the meeting.

## Oman Air, SalamAir MoU to improve cooperation

Our Correspondent Muscat

In a significant move to enhance collaboration in Oman's aviation sector, Oman Air and SalamAir signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Wednesday.

The agreement aims to improve cooperation and integration between the two airlines, specifically focusing on developing and implementing a joint commercial strategy for air transport in Oman.

The MoU, signed by Capt Nasser al Salmi, Acting CEO of Oman Air, and Capt Mohamed

Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, will guide the two airlines' networks to improve operational efficiency and elevate passenger services. The agreement's detailed provisions include collaboration in destination planning, flight scheduling, inventory and fleet management, and revenue and sales management.

H E Said bin Hamood al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Chairman of Board of Directors of Oman Air, said the MoU will enhance the complementary role of the two airlines and substantially boost passenger traffic at Muscat airport.

## Student team develops mental health app

Our Correspondent Muscat

A student team has developed an innovative application called 'Chillax' aimed at addressing psychological issues, relieving stress and enabling correct understanding of mental health concepts.

Amna bint Malik al Dahmani, a member of the team, spoke to ONA about the multifaceted app. It includes various features, including 'psychological nutrition' and 'treatment rooms' which offer two types of therapy sessions - immediate ones available the same day and others that can be scheduled as per the

user's convenience.

An integral part of the app is a diagnostic test that evaluates whether the user requires therapy.

Detailing the development process, Amna informed that it involved several stages, including extensive consultations with mental health professionals, creating a prototype to understand the app's functionality, and developing a tangible web-based model for trial use.

Additionally, the team prepared an exhaustive question-

naire to assess the app's feasibility and the community's acceptance of the concept.

According to Amna, what sets Chillax apart from other mental health apps is the inclusion of alternative solutions to psychological problems, such as yoga, meditation and interior design. "These methods have a major role in altering an individual's mindset," she explained, emphasising the team's commitment to quality.

However, development of the app was not without challenges.

Amna noted difficulties in selecting mental health specialists and finding a programmer to develop the app. Despite these hurdles, she stressed that the experience taught the team valuable lessons in facing challenges, developing strategies to overcome these, and staying abreast of the latest trends in entrepreneurship. "Our experience highlighted the importance of building a wide network of relationships," she added.

The team's efforts have been recognised; it qualified for the final round of a competition conducted by a company affiliated to INJAZ Oman alongside 14 other teams.



## MHT completes development of four tourist sites in Dhofar

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT), in partnership with Dhofar Municipality and Omran Group, has completed the development of four tourism projects worth more than RO3mn in Dhofar.

On Wednesday, the ministry announced the completion of the Mughsail Waterfront, Hamreer View, Darbat View and Ayn Jerziz projects.

"These include new facilities to provide distinctive experiences for visitors to the governorate throughout the year," MHT stated.

Khalid bin Abdullah al Abri, Director General of Heritage

and Tourism in Dhofar, had stated in May that the ministry is working to exploit and develop natural sites in the governorate to capitalise on the tourist seasons of khareef and spring.

Spread over 174,000sqm, the Mughsail Waterfront project has seen an investment of RO874,600 and includes parking lots, an events and activities arena, food kiosks, restaurants, a promenade on the beach, shaded sitting areas, picnic spots, and dedicated areas for exercise.

"It will also include facilities for marine sports, an adventure park and children's games," Abri said.

The Hamreer View project,



spread over 50,000sqm, has been built at a cost of RO505,000.

Spread over 105,000sqm, the Darbat View project cost RO561,500. "It will provide a unique experience in hospitality and entertainment and include picnic spots and a platform to view the waterfall," Abri informed.

The Ayn Jerziz project, built on an area of 40,000sqm, aims to improve public services and facilities and includes parking spaces, toilets and picnic spots.

"These projects will contribute to developing the governorate's economy and revitalising the business sector. The sites will be offered to SMEs on lease or usufruct contracts."

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Pioneering 3D printed coffee shop opens in Duqm

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Time to chill - Salalah Tourist Festival is on

# Youth-led initiative in Dhofar promotes culture and tourism

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

A group of Omani youth in Dhofar has embarked on a unique project combining the elements of tourism, entertainment and culture.

On the picturesque beach of Raysut in the wilayat of Salalah, the 'Osara' entertainment village serves as an integrated tourist destination, offering diverse recreational activities and cultural events, as well as relaxation opportunities that appeal to various age groups.

Majid bin Ali al Musahli, one of the founders of Osara, elaborated on the village's offerings in an interview with ONA. He explained that visitors and tourists can enjoy cultural and entertainment events, dine at restaurants and cafés with ocean views, and engage in beachside activities for a relaxing experience.

"The project management has



Osara was built entirely from recycled wood, making it unique and eco-friendly

MADINAT BAOMAR

added and improved some recreational activities to enhance tourism services for visitors to the site. The most notable ones are games such as throwing arrows, shooting with an axe, and water bike and boat rides," Musahli added.

Another founder, Madinat bint

Ahmed Baomar, shed light behind the idea of Osara. Since 2022, the project has been focused on providing an attractive destination to foster tourism development. The goal is to showcase the creativity and potential of Omani youth in tourism and entertainment, she said.

Madinat also emphasised the project's commitment to sustainability. "Osara was built entirely from recycled wood, making it unique and eco-friendly at the same time."

The founders are eagerly looking forward to expanding the village into a comprehensive tourist destination that can stimulate tourism in Salalah all year round, harnessing the available tourism potential creatively and innovatively.

Osara was established through the concerted efforts of Omani youth, with the support of Dhofar Municipality, the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development, and the Port of Salalah.

This collaboration underscores their commitment to encouraging and developing youth initiatives by creating opportunities for local restaurants, cafés and Omani families engaged in home businesses.



## Perseid meteor showers to dazzle Omani skies

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The skies over Oman are set to light up with extraordinary Perseid meteor showers till August 24. This breathtaking celestial display is anticipated to draw the attention of astronomy enthusiasts and casual observers alike. Best viewed away from city lights, the showers will peak on Saturday evening through the early hours of Sunday morning.

The Perseids are well known summer phenomena that provide a rare opportunity for people to connect with the cosmos. Whether a seasoned stargazer or just a beginner, this event promises an unforgettable experience for anyone who looks to the skies.

Ashwaq bint Nasser al Siyabiya, a member of the Executive Committee of Oman Astronomical Society, said, "The meteor showers occur when the Earth is near the orbit of a comet. The meteoroids that are behind the comet penetrate the Earth re-

sulting in meteor showers. At its peak, you can see between 60 to 100 meteors per hour from a dark place far from light pollution."

The Perseids are unique, famous for producing bright fireballs. Ashwaq explained further that these meteor showers are from the comet Swift-Tuttle, which orbits the Sun every 130 years. A recent survey found that Perseids produce more fireballs than any other meteor shower.

Abdul Wahab Busaidi, another stargazer, informed that this is ideal time to watch the showers since the Moon is not as bright compared to full Moon nights witnessed last year. He recommended visiting Sharqiyah Sands, Jabal Shams and Jabal Akhdar for the best views. Within the city, spots like Yiti, Quriyat and Sifah are also favourable.

Beginning in mid-July and continuing till late August, Perseid meteor showers offer a glimpse into the mysteries of the universe.

## Religion, language most define personal identity: Omani youth

Continued from Page 01

Reflecting the importance they place on their faith, a majority (73%) disagreed that religious values are holding the Arab world back, but nearly two-thirds (65%) said religion plays too big a role in the Middle East. Fewer Arab youth than in previous years feel the region needs to reform its religious institutions - down to 58% this year from 77% last year. This year, the face-to-face interviews with Arab youth were conducted from March 27 to April 12, coinciding with Ramadan.

This sense of young Arabs

embracing their religious identity is further reinforced by the finding that nearly two-thirds (62%) say the laws of their country should be based on sharia standards and not civil or common law. This sentiment is consistent across the three regions covered, with 68% in GCC and Levant, and 53% in North Africa saying they prefer sharia laws to govern their nations.

Sunil John, President - MENA, BCW and founder of ASDA'A BCW, said, "These findings reveal that Generation Z remains guided by faith, with their affinity towards their religion stronger

than ever and many being concerned about what they see as the loss of traditional values and culture. What is evident is that Arab youth increasingly view their personal identity through the lens of religion, family and nationality."

He added, "Another compelling finding is that the Arabic language is not as integral to their sense of tradition or their cultural values as one might have thought, with a majority of young people across the Arab world agreeing that the Arabic language is less important to them than it is to their parents.

"The loss in importance given by Arab youth to the Arabic language is inevitably a symptom of the pervasive spread of the Internet and social media. It is a cause for concern, most importantly, because of the Arabic language's potentially diminished role as a unifying force among Arab nations."

ASDA'A BCW commissioned SixthFactor Consulting, a leading research company, to conduct the 15th edition of the Arab Youth Survey through face-to-face interviews with 3,600 Arab citizens aged 18 to 24 in their home nations, the largest sample

in the survey's history.

The survey covered 53 cities across 18 Arab states, including for the first time South Sudan. The interviews were conducted in person rather than online to maximise accuracy and to reflect the nuances of Arab youth opinion across the region as much as possible.

'My Identity' is the fourth sub-theme of the 2023 ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey, whose overarching theme is 'Living a New Reality'. Findings on 'Global Citizenship' were announced in June, followed by 'My Politics' and 'My Livelihood' in July.

## Pioneering 3D printed coffee shop opens in Duqm

Duqm - Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) has announced the opening of the first-ever commercial coffee shop constructed using state-of-the-art 3D printing technology.

Spread over 101sqm, this unique establishment has been entrusted to an ambitious Omani entrepreneur, marking a significant milestone in the region's pursuit of innovation and economic empowerment.

Sultan bin Saeed al Defaie, small and medium enterprises specialist at SEZAD, expressed his enthusiasm for this new development, saying, "We are wholeheartedly committed to supporting SMEs and fostering their growth within the thriving ecosystem of Special Economic Zone at Duqm. By collaborating with SMEs, we reaffirm our unwavering dedication to their success. We have carefully selected an Omani entrepreneur to manage this coffee shop, further reinforcing our initiatives to bolster in-country value, promote an entrepreneurial culture, and drive social and commercial develop-



ment in SEZAD."

As part of SEZAD's overarching strategy to foster seamless integration and effective partnerships between public and private sector entities, comprehensive support and facilities are offered to SMEs. This includes the provision of modern and innovative marketing outlets within SEZAD, enabling these enterprises to expand, flourish and connect with diverse segments of society, Defaie informed.

Ali bin Nasser al Qassabi, operator of Cafia Café, has announced the opening of its



second branch, housed in the 3D café building in Duqm. This architectural marvel holds the distinction of being the first licensed 3D building in Oman.

Situated in the heart of the region's vibrant tourist area, Cafia Café is focused on two key elements to create an exceptional experience for its patrons - unparalleled attention to the quality of coffee and other beverages on

sweets, cakes and croissants is available, sourced from a specialised instant coffee production unit to cater to the varied tastes of customers.

Additionally, Cafia Café is collaborating with several reputed Omani roasters, forming a collaborative environment that can serve as a role model for aspiring Omani entrepreneurs.

"Cafia Café is strategically located in close proximity to the Duqm Front Residential Complex, the road leading to Duqm Beach - an important tourist destination in the region - and a selection of hotels and residential complexes," Qassabi highlighted.

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) received the prestigious 2023 COMEX Technology Award for its pioneering use of 3D printing technology in the construction of the commercial café and its annexes. The award, presented in May, highlights OPAZ's commitment to innovation, digital transformation and delivery of exceptional services to investors and stakeholders.

Cafia Café is committed to offering specialised coffee and tea options. The café's menu includes a diverse range of cold and hot beverages, meticulously prepared by skilled specialists. In addition, a delectable assortment of

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# Palm residue to fertiliser project in Barka

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries, and Water Resources (MAFWR) has initiated a groundbreaking project in Barka in South Batinah governorate to produce eco-friendly soil conditioner/enhancer.

At a cost of RO180,000, the new unit will produce soil enhancer from palm residue such as leaves and fronds.

"It is not only low-cost but also rich in essential minerals," officials said.

An agreement to this effect was signed in April for the actual work to begin in September. The soil enhancer project stands out



as part of the government's support for innovative agricultural solutions, reflecting Oman's commitment to environmentally sustainable practices. Ayman bin Muhammad al Rawahi, CEO of the Agricultural

Soil Enhancer Production Project, elaborated on the origins and goals of the initiative.

He stated that the project sprung from Oman's fertile environment, ripe for developing agricultural projects and enhancing existing farms.

"The project aims to provide solutions to the problem of environmental pollution by exploiting palm waste," Rawahi explained. "The attempt is to allow an Omani product to have competitiveness against imported products, and thereby create job

opportunities for young people."

The unique approach of the project lies in utilising palm residues and transforming them into an affordable alternative to imported agricultural fertilisers. The palm residues contain vital elements such as nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, calcium, and various microelements that nourish plants, he informed.

Such a blend benefits a wide array of crops, including vegetables, fruits, natural and aromatic plants, and even ornamental plants, all compatible with Oman's agricultural environment.

The entire project would come up on four hectares of land and would follow a seven-stage production process, Rawahi said. The process includes collection and cutting of palm waste, dry-

ing, chopping, again drying and finally, packaging the product.

Speaking about the project's potential, he pointed out that a single palm tree could yield about 100kg of organic soil enhancer per year. "The leaves and fronds, rich in protein and organic materials, contribute significantly to plant nutrition and soil enhancement. Moreover, this approach raises the economic value of the palm tree."

The ambitious project aims to produce approximately 900 tonnes of agricultural soil enhancer annually, utilising around 9,000 palm trees.

The novel project places Oman at the forefront of sustainable agricultural practices, demonstrating a robust and innovative approach to the challenges of modern farming.

## ODB clears loans of more than RO14mn

Muscat - In its fifth meeting of 2023, the Board of Directors of Oman Development Bank (ODB) approved loans exceeding RO14mn, targeting various key economic sectors. These include food security, industry, minerals, tourism, healthcare and logistics.

The funded projects, spread across the governorates of Buraimi, Dhofar, North Batinah, South Batinah and Muscat, aim to create job opportunities for Omani youth, minimise imports and enhance the value of Omani exports.

The board emphasised the importance of maintaining growth levels and meeting the indicators of the operational plan for the current year and praising the private sector's role in energising the economy.

# Jabal Akhdar Festival draws over 10,000 visitors in 6 days



Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Jabal Akhdar Festival in Dakhliyah governorate, now in its second edition, has drawn an impressive crowd of around 10,000 visitors since its launch on Thursday.

Scheduled to run until August 19, the festival is showcasing the rich cultural heritage and natural beauty of Jabal Akhdar and broader Oman.

The event not only seeks to attract tourists from both within and outside the country, but also aims to provide a platform to entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises.

"By participating in the festival, these businesses can capitalise on opportunities to promote tourism and create temporary job openings for the local community," organisers said.

Ahmed bin Salem al Tobi, Di-

rector General of Administrative and Financial Affairs in Dakhliyah, spoke about the significance of the festival.

"This festival is part of a series of events that seek to make Jabal Akhdar a distinctive tourist destination by highlighting its unique tourist and heritage sites, exceptional weather, and abundant tourism potential. Such festivals have become essential for the economic and touristic development of the governorate."

All entertainment, tourism, social, sports, and marketing events and activities for the festival are witnessing a great turnout, he confirmed.

Tobi elaborated on other activities scheduled to be launched in the coming days. Festival sites in Hail Al Yemen and Saih Qatna have seen a large influx of families and individuals, both local residents and visitors from outside the governorate.

The audience has engaged enthusiastically with diverse offerings, including theatrical performances like Aladdin shows and science displays, Royal Guard of Oman music performances, paragliding shows, and competitions for children.

The festival also features various themed corners, such as the Youth Corner, Children's Corner, Food Corner, and spaces dedicated to showcasing products from Jabal Akhdar's farmers and local productive families.

In an effort to help tourists explore the festival seamlessly, the governorate of Dakhliyah has set up the Beit al Rudaida visitor centre near Bait al Rudaida Fort in Birkat al Mouz.

The centre offers a variety of services, including car maintenance and rental, trip equipment, fire and safety gear, as well as access to tourist and adventure trip offices and guesthouses.



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|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| MOH/DGKH-27/2951/2023 | Replacement of Extract Fans in Wattayah Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinic & Phase 4 of Ortho Block Building at Khoula Hospital | 20/Aug/2023                                 | 14/September/2023                                        | Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in Excellent Grade | R.O 25,000                  |

- Tenders should be submitted on line on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>
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Rates as on August 09

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

WeWork warns it might go out of business

Embattled office-sharing firm WeWork has warned US regulators that it is worried about its survival.

Citing financial losses, cash needs, and a drop in memberships, WeWork said in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) that "substantial doubt exists about the company's ability to continue as a going concern."

The fate of the New York-based company depends on the "successful execution of management's plan to improve the company's liquidity and profitability," it said in the filing. WeWork's plan for the year ahead includes restructuring, negotiating more favorable terms on leases, beefing up membership and possibly even issuing debt or selling off assets, the SEC filing said. WeWork has lost billions of dollars during the first six months of this year, with macroeconomic conditions weakening demand for its shared office spaces, the company told regulators.

# GCC sovereign wealth funds' assets under management reach \$4tn

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) of the GCC countries are currently managing nearly \$4tn in assets, combining all SWFs from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

The total assets managed by GCC SWFs have grown by an average of 20% in the last couple of years to reach a high of around \$4tn today, according to a report from S&P Global Market Intelligence, which cited global SWF statistics.

GCC SWFs account for about 37% of the global SWF assets under management and are roughly equivalent in size to all counterparts in Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa combined, as per the S&P Global Market Intelligence report, which was carried by Zawya on Wednesday.

Five out of the ten largest SWFs worldwide are located in the GCC region.

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, Kuwait Investment Authority, Qatar Investment Authority, and Investment Corporation of Dubai jointly hold assets under management estimated at \$3.3tn, as per Global SWF.

'The sovereign wealth funds of GCC countries have greatly benefited from the recent energy revenue windfall in the region, allowing them to expand their global presence and diversify



their investments across different sectors,' said S&P Global Market Intelligence in its report.

While the external surpluses across the GCC are expected to decrease with declining energy prices in the near future, S&P Global Market Intelligence forecasts an aggregated GCC current account surplus of 9% of GDP in 2023 and 6% of GDP in 2024.

'This means that funds will continue to flow into well-funded SWFs, offering more investment opportunities both domestically and internationally,' the report stated.

*GCC SWFs account for about 37% of global SWF assets under management and are roughly equivalent in size to all peers in Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa combined*

**Preferred investors**

According to S&P Global Market Intelligence, GCC SWFs have become preferred investors during challenging times. During 2022, GCC state-owned investors (SOIs), including SWFs and public pension funds, invested approximately \$83bn in fresh

capital.

'Among the ten largest investments made by SOIs in 2022, five were made by GCC sovereign investors (with 62% from the UAE, 28% from Saudi Arabia, and 10% from Qatar). GCC SWFs are not solely relying on government funding for their strategic invest-

ments; they are also using asset sales,' the report added.

S&P Global Market Intelligence anticipates that continuous foreign currency generation will enable GCC SWFs to expand their investments across various sectors and geographies in the coming years.

It said, 'We are also likely to witness a reinvestment of GCC petrodollars into MENA countries and other emerging markets that offer attractive investment opportunities and require external funding, or are susceptible to geopolitical, economic, and monetary shocks. Egypt and Turkey

serve as examples.'

GCC governments experienced improved liquidity buffers throughout most of 2022, thanks to increased energy-derived revenues following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

'Enhanced liquidity resulting from the recent energy revenue windfall has allowed GCC governments to invest in projects aimed at diversifying their economies away from oil and gas, aligning with their national visions and strategic priorities, thereby promoting economic growth through the investment multiplier effect,' the report highlighted.

As per the report, SWFs in the region are utilising a portion of the additional inflows to strategically invest in advanced economies, primarily in the US and Europe (including the UK). However, the region's SWFs have not only acquired funds through government-transferred oil and gas receipts; they were also the most active sellers of holdings in 2022.

GCC SWFs play a crucial role in creating domestic employment opportunities, driving growth, and managing the transition to economies that are no longer heavily reliant on oil—a long-term objective.

Most SWFs focus on both domestic and foreign investments, playing a key role in realising their governments' national development strategies and deploying national wealth in sectors of domestic interest.

## UK-GCC yearly trade jumps 70% to \$83bn

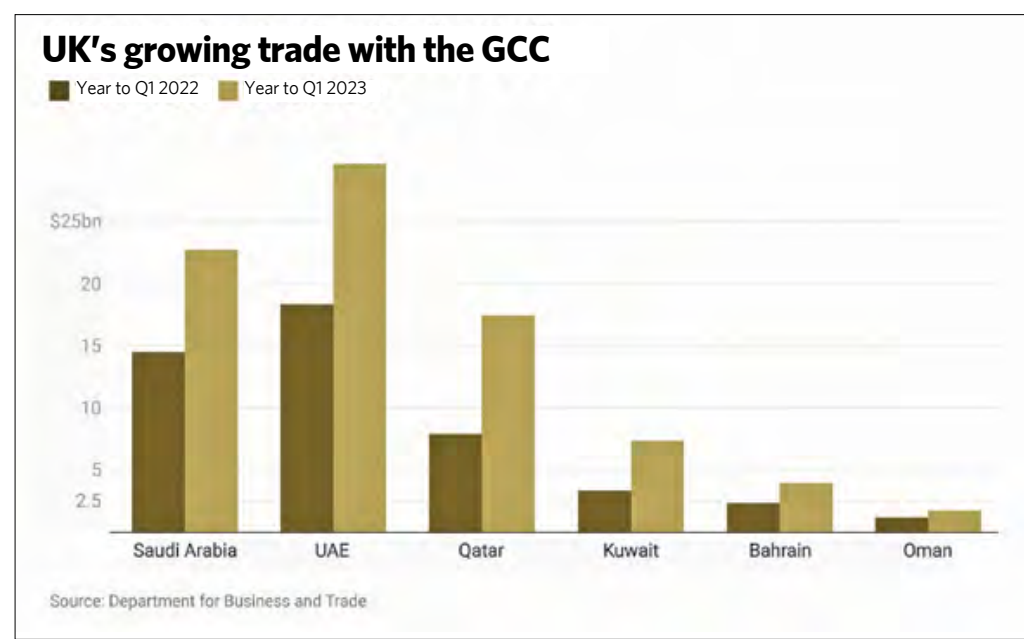
Dubai, UAE – Total trade between the UK and GCC countries rose by more than 70% to £64.5bn (\$82.7bn) in the year to the end of March 2023, driven by rising oil prices and a demand for services as Gulf states move to diversify their economies.

According to an AGBI analysis of statistics released by the UK's Department for Business and Trade on Tuesday, trade in goods and services eclipsed last year's figure of £37bn.

Over £15bn of trade consisted of UK imports of oil and gas from GCC countries, according to a press release issued by AGBI.

The fourth round of negotiations on the UK-GCC free trade agreement took place last week in London. Discussions were held across 23 policy areas over 44 sessions and "good progress" was made, a government statement said.

Freddie Neve, senior Middle East associate at analyst Asia House, told AGBI that oil still accounts for a significant portion of



UK-Gulf trade.

Average oil prices rose to \$100 a barrel last year, compared with almost \$70 in 2021.

"The UK has increased its purchases of Gulf oil and gas since the start of the Ukraine conflict to compensate for supplies it previously received from Russia,"

Neve said.

Neve added that trade also continues to be boosted by the GCC's efforts to diversify away from oil. This has encouraged growth in Gulf imports of UK professional services to assist delivery of various projects.

UK exports of services to the

region rose significantly last year to nearly £18bn.

Chris Innes-Hopkins, UK executive director of the Saudi British Joint Business Council, said the latest figures reflected a "growing engagement" by UK companies in new sectors of the fast-growing Saudi economy.

"The services sector is particularly buoyant and it's good to see many smaller UK companies getting involved in fintech, creative industries and education opportunities among others," he said. According to the UK Department for Business and Trade figures, the UAE was the UK's largest trade partner in the Gulf last year, followed by Saudi Arabia.

Bradley Jones, executive director of the UAE-UK Business Council, said the COP28 environmental conference, which will be hosted in Dubai later this year, is "really drawing attention" to opportunities for UK-UAE collaboration in sustainability and decarbonisation.

Lord Dominic Johnson, a minister of state in the UK's Department for Business & Trade, added, "We are seeing extraordinary rates of growth for British companies operating in the Gulf. I spoke to one of the big accounting firms. They're looking at 35% annual growth."

## ADNOC awards \$3.6bn contract

Dubai, UAE – The United Arab Emirates' ADNOC Gas on Wednesday said it awarded a \$3.6bn contract to expand its gas processing infrastructure, including the commissioning of new processing facilities.

The contract was awarded to a joint venture between the UAE's National Petroleum Construction Company (NPCC) and Tecnicas Reunidas, a Spanish general contractor, according to a statement carried by the official WAM news agency.

"The scope of the contract includes the commissioning of new gas processing facilities which will enable an optimised supply to the Ruwais Industrial Complex" in the western Al Dhafra region, the statement said.

The contract coincides with a larger plan "to enable increased gas recovery from existing fields and develop untapped re-



sources", the statement said.

ADNOC Gas, estimated to have the seventh largest gas reserves globally, is a subsidiary of state energy giant Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC).

ADNOC, the UAE's key revenue-earner, retains a 90% stake.

Last month, the energy giant said it had accelerated its emission reduction goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045 instead of 2050.

AFP

## 84% of Middle East organisations consider AI a top priority

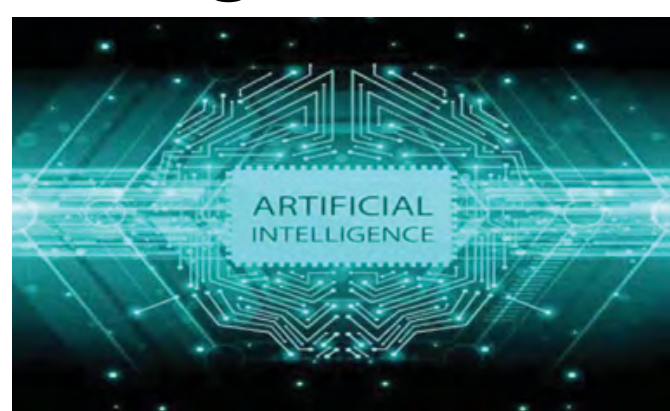
Dubai, UAE – The artificial intelligence (AI) landscape has changed dramatically over the past year with the swift adoption of Generative AI (GenAI), making it more difficult for organisations to be responsible with the technology and putting pressure on Responsible AI (RAI) programs to keep up with continuous advances, according to new research by MIT Sloan Management Review (MIT SMR) and Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

The report, titled 'Building robust RAI programs as third-party AI tools proliferate,' is based on a global survey of 1,240 respondents, representing organisa-

tions reporting at least \$100mn in annual revenues, across 59 industries and 87 countries.

According to the survey, 16% of Middle Eastern organisations implement RAI policies, processes, and/or approaches implemented across the company.

"The AI landscape in the Middle East, both from a technological and regulatory perspective has changed dramatically," said Elias Baltassis, partner and director, BCG X. "The rapid adoption of generative AI tools has brought AI to the forefront of conversations in the region. Yet, the fundamentals of responsible



AI remain crucial. This year, our research emphasises the pressing need for Middle Eastern organisations to invest in and scale their RAI programs to address

the growing uses and risks of AI in a region that is increasingly embracing digital transformation."

In the Middle East, the com-

ponents of RAI programs encompass broad principles (43%), policies (49%), governance (76%), monitoring (49%), tools and implementation (51%), and change management (43%). Individual considerations within these RAI programs include transparency and explainability (62%), social and environmental impact (59%), accountability (57%), fairness (54%), safety, security, and human wellbeing (68%), and data security and privacy (86%).

The Middle East regional survey reveals that 25% of organisations are RAI leaders, while

75% are laggards – highlighting the urgent need for most organisations in the region to double down on their RAI efforts.

The data suggests that organisations in the region can experience a range of benefits from RAI, including better products/services (43%), brand differentiation (27%), increased customer retention (43%), improved long-term profitability (30%), accelerated innovation (41%), and improved recruiting and retention (16%).

The vast majority (78%) of organisations surveyed globally are highly reliant on third-party AI tools, exposing them to a

host of risks, including reputational damage, the loss of customer trust, financial loss, regulatory penalties, compliance challenges, and litigation.

Still, one-fifth of organisations that use third-party AI tools fail to evaluate their risks at all.

Only 38% of organisations feel adequately prepared for AI regulations, highlighting the need for more awareness and preparedness.

The regulatory landscape is evolving almost as rapidly as AI itself, with many new AI-specific regulations taking effect on a rolling basis.

# China slips into deflation as post-Covid recovery falters

Beijing, China – China slipped into deflation for the first time in more than two years in July, official data showed Wednesday, as slowing domestic spending weighs on the post-Covid economic recovery.

The reading comes a day after news that the country suffered its biggest fall in exports since the early days of the pandemic, while imports tanked again as domestic and global demand fall away.

The Consumer Price Index, the main gauge of inflation, fell 0.3 in July, the National Bureau of Statistics said, having flatlined in June.

While it was marginally better than the 0.4% decline forecast in a survey by Bloomberg, it marked the first drop since the beginning of 2021 and will add to pressure on authorities to provide much-needed support to the economy.

Deflation refers to falling prices of goods and services and is caused by a number of factors, including waning consumption.

And while cheaper goods may appear beneficial for purchasing power, falling prices pose a threat to the broader economy as consumers tend to postpone purchases in the hopes of further reductions.

A lack of demand then forces companies to reduce produc-



A customer shops for fruits at a market in Beijing on Wednesday (AFP)

tion, freeze hiring or lay off workers, and agree to new discounts to sell off their stocks – dampening profitability even as costs remain the same.

China experienced a short period of deflation at the end of 2020 and early 2021, due largely to a collapse in the price of pork, the most widely consumed meat in the country.

Prior to that, the last deflationary period was in 2009.

Many analysts fear a longer stretch of deflation this time

around, as China's main growth engines stall and youth unemployment is at a record high of more than 20%.

Ongoing turmoil in real estate, a sector that has long accounted for a quarter of China's economy, is the "main source" for this "deflationary shock", said economist Andrew Batson of Gavekal Dragonomics.

Deflation is also being driven by flagging exports – historically a key source of growth for China, he added.

## 'Cause for concern'

Tuesday's worst-than-expected drop in exports had a direct impact on tens of thousands of export-oriented companies in China, which are now operating at a much slower pace.

"The latest Chinese inflationary data did little to inspire confidence that an economic turnaround is forthcoming," Tim Waterer, chief market analyst at KCM Trade, said in a note.

"The inflation data... was further evidence that China re-

mains a cause for concern from a global growth perspective," he added.

Meanwhile, the producer price index fell 4.4% in July – slightly better than June's 5.4% fall but marking the 10th consecutive month of contraction.

The index measures the cost of goods leaving factories and gives an overview of the health of the economy.

Declining producer prices mean reduced margins for companies.

The grim data suggests that China may struggle to achieve a five per cent growth target set for the year.

The world's second largest economy only grew 0.8% between the first and second quarters of 2023, according to official figures.

And many economists are now calling for a vast recovery plan to boost activity.

But for the time being, the authorities are sticking to targeted measures and declarations of support for the private sector – with little in the way of tangible steps.

Still, Wednesday's poor numbers may "put pressure" on the government to reconsider, economist Zhiwei Zhang of Pinpoint Asset Management suggests.

AFP



A file photo shows investors talking in front of a board displaying share prices in Shanghai (AFP)

## Stock markets waver after weak China data

London, UK – Global stock markets were mixed Wednesday with Wall Street opening flat after European bourses rebounded with a mixed showing by Asia.

Data revealed China slipped into deflation, compounding worries about the world's second biggest economy after the United States.

"Chinese economics dominates the headlines," noted Steve Clayton, head of equity funds at Hargreaves Lansdown.

The 0.3-percent drop in China's July consumer prices was the first since the start of 2021 and comes as slowing domestic spending weighs on the country's economic recovery.

Investors were already in a dour mood a day after China announced its biggest drop in exports since the beginning of the Covid pandemic more than three

years ago, while imports also tanked owing to slimming demand at home.

Stocks on Wall Street were flat at the open, as investors await the release of US consumer price inflation later in the week.

London's FTSE 100 index closed 0.7% up while Euro Stoxx 50 also rose 0.7% on Wednesday. Japan's Nikkei 225 was down 0.5%, Hong Kong was up 0.3%. China's Shanghai Composite dropped 0.5% for the day.

European bank shares recovered one day after sliding when Italy imposed a windfall tax on lenders and owing to concerns over the health of the sector in the United States.

Shares in BNP Paribas rose by 1.9% in Paris, by 0.9% in Commerzbank in Frankfurt and by 1.7% in Madrid's Banco Sabadell. AFP

## 'US Fed nears to holding interest rates steady'

Washington, US – The head of the Philadelphia Federal Reserve signalled Tuesday that the US central bank is close to holding interest rates steady.

"We are making progress against inflation. It has been slow progress, and I am watchful of any reemerging price pressures," Patrick Harker said in a speech in the northeastern city.

"Ten days ago, the latest PCE inflation report showed continued disinflation year over year on the headline measure and promise on the core measure," he added, referring to the official personal consumption expenditures price index, which rose 4.1% annually in June, down from 4.6% in May.

"I expect core PCE inflation to decline to a rate perhaps just below 4% year over year by the end of 2023, before falling below 3% next year and leveling out at our 2% target in 2025," said Harker. "Absent any alarming



Patrick Harker

new data between now and mid-September, I believe we may be at the point where we can be patient and hold rates steady and let the monetary policy actions we have taken do their work," he added. Harker said the Fed can achieve a "soft landing" – when the central bank tames inflation without slowing down the economy too much or pushing unemployment too high.

"I expect only a modest slowdown in economic activity to go along with a slow but sure disinflation," he added.

Agencies

## China-US chip war intensifies after export restrictions

New York, US – The trade war between the US and China is up a notch after Beijing imposed export restrictions on raw materials used in manufacturing chips.

Both countries are fighting for space in the fast-evolving areas of cyber security, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, chips and digital infrastructure.

According to research by Australian think-tank The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), China is far ahead of the US in technology.

China holds the leadership in 37 of 44 technology fields, while the US is ahead of China in seven fields, it said.

China is not among the largest manufacturers of chips, however, it is the largest consumer. The manufacturing is carried out by the US and other companies in East Asia.

Technological competition between the US and China has increasing importance and major implications for the global economy and security.

About 75% of chip production takes place in East Asia. Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan are at



the forefront of chip production.

However, China is the largest producer of gallium and germanium, which are raw materials used in the manufacturing of chips.

According to the European industry association Critical Raw Materials Alliance, China produces about 60% of germanium globally.

The "Chip and Science Act" passed by the US Congress on July 27-28 last year called for \$280bn in incentives to encour-

age domestic chip production.

The agreement, signed by US President Joe Biden on August 9, provides \$52bn in direct funding to support the semiconductor industry.

According to this law, domestic chip production and new factories will receive a 25% tax exemption for four years.

With these measures, the US aims to increase domestic chip production and gain a stronger position in global technological competition.

struction of new chip factories within the US.

In this way, the US will diversify and localize chip production, aiming to reduce external dependence in the supply chain and increase the security of chip production. China restricts exports of raw materials used in chip making.

Following all these developments, China took a decision that will affect chip production and imposed export restrictions on gallium and germanium, which are important raw materials in chip production.

China's decision requires approval from the relevant authorities before exporting gallium and germanium. The restriction came into effect on Aug. 1.

Experts noted that China took this decision to warn other states, reminding them that they also have retaliation options against restrictions.

Chips are of great importance in every field from home appliances to in-vehicle electronic systems, from the defense industry to wearable technologies.

Anadolu Agency

## 'Unsettled' Moscow residents tighten belts as Russian currency tanks

Moscow, Russia – In central Moscow, retired businessman Igor Inkin is preparing to turn down simple pleasures like dessert as the value of the ruble in his pocket continues to slide.

At 63 years old, he has seen the highs and lows of Russia's turbulent economy, but 17 months into the Kremlin's Ukraine offensive, Inkin is concerned about how to make ends meet.

The ruble has been trading around 97 against the dollar in recent days – its lowest level since March 2022, weeks after Moscow unleashed full-scale hostilities in Ukraine.

"Prices in the shops are going up and we're having to adjust our expenditures. It's very unset-

tling," Inkin told AFP. "We are denying ourselves many, many things... sweets and so on."

Coupled with a year and a half of unprecedented Western sanctions and a sharp drop in oil revenues, Russians are starting to feel the pinch.

Inflation has been on the rise since spring, forcing the central bank to hike its key rate to a greater-than-expected 8.5% to rein in prices.

"The situation with the ruble is especially worrying for us pensioners," Inkin said.

For young Russians, who now face the kind of isolation their Soviet peers remember, the outlook is bleak.

President Vladimir Putin insists Moscow will weather the



This photograph taken on July 6, 2022 shows a Russian ruble coin in Moscow (AFP)

storm, presenting it as a historic opportunity to bolster Russia's domestic businesses and create jobs for the country's youth.

Many Muscovites echoed

Putin's hope that isolation from the West would lead to a renaissance for Russian-made companies and businesses.

But, far from what is shown on

Kremlin-controlled television screens, many are struggling.

Dmitry Bobrov, a 19-year-old freelance IT fixer and bicycle courier, cannot always afford spare computer parts.

"Video cards, processors... after the ruble fell their prices have gone up a lot," he said, weighed down by a large courier bag. Western sanctions have made it harder for Russian businesses to buy goods and parts from abroad, forcing them to rely on parallel imports – goods transported via another country.

The United Kingdom on Tuesday introduced new sanctions targeting Russia's access to military equipment, adding to a long list of restrictions designed to isolate the country.

"The special military operation is also having a big impact, I think," Bobrov said, using the Kremlin term for its offensive in Ukraine.

Around him, billboards of Western brands have largely disappeared, replaced by huge portraits of Russian soldiers.

While many Russians appear publicly stoic and receptive to the Kremlin's narrative, data show they are increasingly worried about their livelihoods.

Fearing for their savings, Russians withdrew one billion rubles in cash (\$10.3mn) in the three days after the Wagner mercenary group staged a mutiny, according to central bank figures.

The number is some five times higher than the average of

a normal three-day period in Russia.

Sofya Donets, chief economist for Russia at Renaissance Capital, said the weakening of the ruble presented no risk to the country's financial stability.

Analyst Arnaud Dubien meanwhile said the drop in the rouble was expected, reflecting the country's foreign trade.

What is not expected, he said, is that "the ruble is weakening even as the price of oil increases again." The Russian economy relies heavily on oil and gas exports.

He warned that the government must be careful not to let the ruble slip past 100 dollars to 1 ruble.

AFP

# Oman Sail celebrates 15 years of voyage

Oman Sail marked its 15th anniversary on Wednesday with a celebration of all of the achievements so far as well as a look at the future.

Since 2008, Oman Sail has pioneered the re-emergence of sailing across the nation by engaging Omani boys and girls, professional sailors and people with disabilities in the sport, encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle and providing training to create new career opportunities.

Oman Sail has also organised and hosted an impressive roster of major international and regional events, as well as uniting the nation and honing Omani talent in several sports, generating significant global exposure for Oman, securing foreign direct investment, boosting inbound tourism through its extensive range of events and SeaOman, which has served more than 24,000 customers in the last decade, and making an important contribution to the national economy across all areas of the organisation.

“Over the past 15 years, Omani sailors have won 85 medals between youth and senior sailors, we have set two speed records and hold another Guinness World Record for our commitment to the environment,” said Dr Khamis al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail.

“Our success and our growth are testament to the multi-faceted approach we have always taken, and the impact we have had on so many lives across



Oman and around the world. It has been our honour to represent Oman at home and abroad and fly the Omani flag proudly wherever we go.

“We are ambassadors for the sport and for the nation, playing an important role in driving the

national economy, connecting our people with our heritage and making the world aware of Oman’s potential as a partner, a tourism destination, and a world-class host venue.”

During this time, Oman Sail has supported Mohsin al Busaidi

to become the first Arab to sail non-stop around the world, recreated the Jewel of Muscat’s historic voyage from Muscat to Singapore, launched Sailing Arabia - The Tour to showcase regional talent and the natural beauty of Oman, introduced the



region’s first women’s sailing team and first Para Sailing initiative, and became the first nation in the Middle East to host an America’s Cup event, among many other achievements.

Oman has become a regular host venue for events such as the 44Cup, and for major international events including the 50th edition of the Youth World Sailing Championships, and the 2022 RS Venture World Championships - the first sailing event exclusively for people with disabilities to be held in Oman which welcomed 72 sailors from 18 nations and was the largest Para Sailing event in the world that year. Same year, Oman Sail won Gold for Best Sport Event Organiser of the year and Silver for Best Sport Event of The Year in the Middle East’s Sport Industry Awards.

Dr Jabri added, “We believe

strongly in Oman’s ability to become recognised as a powerhouse in sports, tourism and every area of the national economy. The goals of Vision 2040 show us what can be achieved and Oman Sail is committed to supporting this mission.

“We have developed a new sports event strategy to serve as a roadmap for the next 15 years and beyond which will increase capacity amongst the youth, promote Oman overseas, create training and employment opportunities and direct more investment to the nation.”

Oman Sail’s sports events strategy is firmly aligned with driving national priorities and delivering the strategic goals of Vision 2040. Oman Sail will be a major contributor to staging of major events in Oman, supporting the development of world class facilities and community

engagement programmes.

Overall, the sports events strategy will contribute to 11 of the 12 National Priorities, with ongoing assessments to ensure that the impact of these supports the Sultanate in achieving the development goals of Vision 2040 - including inspiring community participation and industry development, contributing to a competitive economy, showcasing Oman’s beauty, and working alongside state agencies.

“I would like to thank all of the Oman Sail team, past and present, for their contribution in helping us reaching this milestone. We are certainly one of our nation’s success stories, and have made telling contributions in many economic sectors, but none of this would have been possible without the hard work and diligence of our staff,” concluded Dr Jabri.

## Oman Air, Chelsea partnership to kick off with club’s 1st match

Oman Air’s groundbreaking partnership with Chelsea FC is kicking off on Sunday, when the English Premier League (EPL) club will go head-to-head with Liverpool FC for its first match of the season.

Fans at the Stamford Bridge Stadium and those watching from home will be introduced to the beauty of Oman with a series of advertisements highlighting some of the country’s most popular destinations.

Oman Air’s eye-catching branding and members of the cabin crew will also be present around the pitch.

With over seven million people around the world anticipated to watch the game, it’s a significant step for the airline as its first



official event with the team since signing the deal last month.

As Chelsea’s official global airline partner, Oman Air will be engaged in a range of exciting promotional activities over the

next three years, leveraging the club’s expansive global reach as one of the highest-ranking clubs in the EPL.

Meanwhile, as part of its commitment to supporting Oman’s

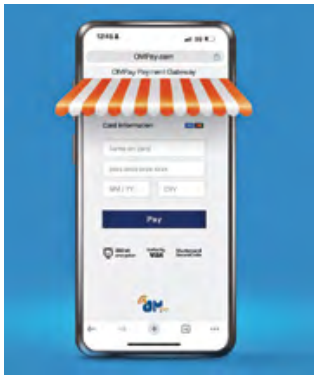
2040 Vision, the airline continues to harness opportunities to introduce Oman to new markets across the globe, highlighting its appeal as a premium tourist destination.

## OMPpay payment gateway keeping up with tech trend

OMPpay is sultanate’s rapidly emerging fintech solution. As part of its array of customer-centric products, the payment gateway is a merchant based solution that keeps digitisation trends in mind.

It opens up a world of possibilities to SMEs by introducing cutting edge technologies in the rapidly transforming retail arena. It features solutions for accepting international credit cards and domestic debit cards at the click of a button, custom-link payment generation, e-invoicing and recurring payment options.

Competitive charges, quick money transfers, user-friendly dashboard and payment settlements are some of its prime features. It means that merchants



have a 360 degree, hassle-free control over their business that comes without any waiting time.

Engineer Abdulaziz Rawahi, the founder and CEO of OMPpay, shares, “OMPpay has been created for our people, by our people. Oman’s financial sector is expanding in all directions, and

OMPpay’s payment gateway supports its pace.”

Depending on business needs, the payment gateway can be linked anytime and anywhere through company’s website or the mobile app. The product matches world class standards and follows advanced cyber security technologies to ensure a smooth and safe transaction process for both the merchant and the customer.

OMPpay is a mobile application available for download on Apple, Google, and Huawei stores.

The payment gateway requires merchant registration at [www.omppay.com](http://www.omppay.com). After the verification process, businesses can be integrated with OMPpay payment gateway within 24 hours.

## OQGN launches ‘Keep Safe’ awareness campaign in Dhofar governorate

Following the success of the last year, OQGN has launched the third edition of its awareness campaign, ‘Keep Safe’, in Dhofar governorate.

The campaign aims to raise individual awareness about maintaining safety by avoiding the risks associated with gatherings and meetings around gas pipelines during the Khareef season.

It was launched in the wilayat of Salalah under the patronage of H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohsen al Ghassani, Chairman of Dhofar Municipality, alongside the presence of several officials.

‘Keep Safe’ campaign, which began on Tuesday, has started a series of awareness programmes in three main locations: Attin, Al Mughsayl Beach and Al Hafa Souq.

It is showcasing insight into and information about OQGN, the exclusive operator of the gas transportation network in Oman, in addition to enhancing



individual awareness to ensure their health and safety within gas pipeline areas.

It is also highlight key existing gas pipeline projects.

The campaign commenced by presenting awareness films about OQGN’s vision and its pioneering efforts in developing

and managing gas transportation infrastructure in the Sultanate of Oman. This was followed by guidelines regarding security and safety, which included instructions to refrain from camping or setting up temporary sheds for barbecues and grills, in and around gas pipeline

areas. Further awareness to prevent people from organising unauthorised activities and family gatherings within these areas was touched upon as well.

The group carrying out the campaign also shed light on key existing gas pipeline projects in progress, which will add

176.7km to Oman’s infrastructure, in addition to 32.2km of 32-inch pipelines to the South Grid Project. OQGN hosts over 4,030km of pipeline network across the country.

Highlighting the significance of the campaign, Mansoor Ali al Abdali, Managing Director of

OQGN, said, “The campaign aims to raise individuals’ awareness about the importance of protecting their safety and well-being. The campaign targets all visitors and tourists of the Dhofar Governorate, both from within the Sultanate of Oman and abroad.”

“We are implementing the gas pipelines network awareness campaign, entitled ‘Keep Safe’, to ensure the safety of all visitors to the Dhofar Governorate during the khareef season. Alongside which, we also aim to safeguard the pipelines from any potential risks during camping, cooking or any other activities that may take place close to these areas,” he added.

He further stated that the launch of the awareness campaign reinforces OQGN’s commitment to enhancing safety and well-being in the neighbourhoods and villages that host its 4,030km-long gas pipeline system. This vast network supplies

gas to power plants, water desalination plants, cement and aluminium factories, aluminium smelters, fertiliser and methanol plants, refineries, steel and cement factories, oil companies and more.

OQGN has delivered 99.99+% gas availability over the last ten years.

In line with OQGN’s commitment to enhancing community awareness about health and safety, the ‘Keep Safe’ awareness campaign saw the implementation of other activities, including the distribution of first aid boxes to visitors to Dhofar governorate from land ports and the airport.

OQGN has also participated in the Traffic Safety Exhibition, organised by the Royal Oman Police (ROP) during the Khareef Season in Dhofar. This is aimed at raising awareness by carrying out workshops for targeted segments in the field of public safety and first aid.

# France softens tone on Niger coup

France is now inclining towards diplomatic solutions, with military action seemingly ruled out

Paris, France - Two weeks after the coup in Niger, France has abandoned its tough tone on the crisis and is now inclining towards diplomatic solutions, with military action seemingly ruled out for now, experts said.

West Africa's regional bloc ECOWAS had given coup leaders a deadline of last Sunday to reinstate elected president Mohamed Bazoum, or face potential use of force. But the Niger's new rulers defied the ultimatum and it elapsed with no action being taken. The leaders of ECOWAS - the Economic Community of West African States - meet again on Thursday in the Nigerian capital of Abuja.

On the eve of the deadline,



Customers buy goods at a market in Nigerien capital Niamey on Tuesday (AFP)

France loudly showed its support for ECOWAS, saying it 'firmly and resolutely' backed the bloc's efforts to restore Bazoum.

But Paris' latest declaration on Tuesday was cautious and measured, marking a clear shift from the earlier, more combative stance. France stands by its policy of backing efforts to 'restore

democracy' in Niger, but believes it is up to ECOWAS 'to take a decision on how to restore the constitutional order in Niger, whatever that decision may be', said a diplomatic source, asking not to be named.

The statement came after US acting deputy secretary of state Victoria Nuland went to Niamey

to speak with coup leaders.

But she acknowledged her talks made no headway and was unable to meet the new strongman, General Abdourahmane Tiani, or the detained Bazoum.

**'About diplomacy now'**  
Bertrand Badie, a professor at the

Sciences-Po university, said France's early belligerent tone was gone. "It's no longer about military intervention, it's no longer about denying this government all legitimacy, it's about diplomacy now," Badie told AFP.

"They're backing away from what they said at the start." Niger's new government has

*It's no longer about military intervention, it's no longer about denying this government all legitimacy, it's diplomacy now*

BERTRAND BADIE

accused France repeatedly of planning military action, a charge that Paris denies.

France's more hawkish tone at the weekend notable contrasted to calls for dialogue by Germany, Italy and the United States.

Respective coups in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2020 and 2022 had forced the pullout of French troops from those countries deployed to fight a militant insurgency in the Sahel region.

President Emmanuel Macron has since staked a lot on the relationship with Bazoum. Paris has 1,500 troops in Niger, most of whom are deployed at a major air base near Niamey.

AFP

## IN BRIEF

**UK-Turkey deal to tackle illegal migration**  
London, UK - The UK has announced a deal with Turkey to enhance cooperation on tackling illegal migration, which includes a new operational 'centre of excellence' to be established by the Turkish National Police. London announced the plan late on Tuesday as part of its attempts to reduce illegal migration to the UK, a key political issue.

The new UK-backed centre will 'enrich existing expertise in both countries with respect to activities aimed at disrupting criminal networks organising illegal journeys', according to a statement from the interior ministry. The UK will also deploy more officers in Turkey to disrupt the criminal gangs who run the illegal migration routes.

**Iran hangs 5 men convicted of gang rape**  
Tehran, Iran - Iran executed five men by hanging on Wednesday after convicting them of gang raping a woman in the northwest of the country last year, the judiciary said.

The 'five men who had kidnapped and raped a woman in the city of Marand in May 2022 were executed today (Wednesday)', the judiciary's Mizan Online website announced.

The men, who were arrested four days after the gang rape in East Azerbaijan province, were implicated in other crimes, Mizan said without elaborating. Last month, Iran executed three men who were convicted of raping women they had anaesthetised after luring them to a fake cosmetic surgery clinic.

**Journalist among 3 dead in Syria bombing**  
Damascus, Syria - A Syrian television journalist and two soldiers were killed on Wednesday when a roadside bomb exploded in the southern province of Daraa, state media reported.

'Correspondent Firas al-Ahmad from (privately owned) Sama TV and two members of our armed forces were killed by an explosive device' as they returned from a counternarcotics operation in the province, state television said. 'Terrorists' had planted the bomb, it added.

AFP

## Kenya: Fresh talks launched to end bitter political feud

Nairobi, Kenya - Kenya's government and the opposition launched fresh talks on Wednesday aimed at resolving a bitter political feud following a spate of violent protests over the high cost of living and calls for electoral reforms.

But even as the formal dialogue kicked off in Nairobi, both sides insisted there would no form of power-sharing to resolve the crisis in the East African powerhouse. Veteran opposition leader Raila Odinga has organised 10 days of demonstrations against the government of President William Ruto since March - blighted by sometimes deadly confrontations with the police.

At least 20 people have been killed in the clashes, according to official figures, although rights campaigners put the toll much higher. The unrest in one of the region's most stable democracies has provoked alarm at home and abroad and spurred calls for mediation to end the standoff.

"Dialogue, peace, stability and prosperity in whose name we gather here are not party issues. These are Kenyan issues," said Kalonzo Musyoka, the head of Odinga's delegation. "We shall not negotiate for any form of power sharing with (Ruto's)



Wiper party leader Stephen Kalonzo Musyoka (centre) arrive at the venue for the bipartisan talks in Nairobi on Wednesday (AFP)

Kenya Kwanza alliance or put any personal interest ahead of the interest of the people."

The talks are taking place at the Bomas of Kenya, a tourist site which was also the venue for the announcement of the results of the tightly fought poll held a year ago today.

No timeframe has been set for the duration of the negotiations and even the exact agenda is the subject of contention.

Odinga's Azimio La Umoja coalition said it wants to discuss the rising cost of living as well as electoral reforms after the opposition stalwart lost his fifth bid for the presidency to Ruto, claiming

he was cheated of victory.

However an initial draft agenda did not include the economic crisis nor a raft of tax hikes introduced in July, angering Kenyans suffering from spiralling prices for basic goods such as fuel and food. Critics accuse Ruto of breaking promises made during the election campaign, when he declared himself the champion of impoverished Kenyans and pledged to improve their economic fortunes.

Odinga called off demonstrations in April and May after Ruto agreed to dialogue through a similar process.

AFP

## Biden to visit Vietnam 'shortly'

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday he would travel to Vietnam 'shortly' as part of an effort to improve ties with Hanoi, as Washington seeks to counter China's influence in the region.

"I'm going to Vietnam shortly because Vietnam wants to change our relationship and become a partner," Biden said during remarks in New Mexico. "We find ourselves in a situation where all these changes around the world are taking place at a time we have an opportunity ... to change the dynamic," he added.

The United States and Vietnam have increasingly close trade links, while both share concern over China's growing strength in the region.

Friction has been increasing for years between Beijing and Southeast Asian nations, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, over China's sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea.

Washington and Hanoi pledged in April to upgrade diplomatic ties when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stopped over on his way to a Group of Seven (G7) foreign ministers' meeting in Japan.

"We think this is an auspicious time to elevate our existing partnership," Blinken told re-



*I'm going to Vietnam shortly because Vietnam wants to change our relationship and become a partner*

JOE BIDEN

porters during the visit with Vietnamese leaders. "We've had for the last 10 years this comprehensive partnership that has created an incredibly strong foundation of cooperation across many different areas. As a result, we think this is a good moment to go even further."

Blinken also attended a ground-breaking for a new US embassy in Hanoi.

And in March, Biden spoke with the head of Vietnam's ruling Communist party, Nguyen Phu

Trong. Washington has, however, bristled over human rights concerns in Vietnam, with Blinken saying he continued 'to underscore how future progress on human rights is essential to unleashing the full potential of the Vietnamese people'.

The South China Sea, the longtime centre of tensions between China and Vietnam, is seen as a powder keg, and many fear a miscalculation or accident could ignite a military conflict.

Analysts say Hanoi may be more reluctant to elevate relations with Washington, wary of upsetting Beijing - an important economic partner - despite rival claims in the South China Sea.

The United States has no territorial claim over the waters, but has persisted in conducting its own patrols there, angering Beijing. Washington says this is to ensure what it terms 'freedom of navigation' in the sea, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually.

The United States has also sought to improve relations with China in recent months, with Blinken visiting in June after a previous trip was canceled when an alleged Chinese spy balloon was shot down by a US warplane after traversing the country earlier this year.

AFP

## Rocky US-Saudi Arabia bond boosted by Israel normalisation push

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - A spate of high-profile visits by US officials to Saudi Arabia underscores how ties have warmed amid talks over a potential deal that would see the Gulf kingdom recognise Israel, analysts say.

Less than a year after US President Joe Biden warned of unspecified 'consequences' for Riyadh during a dispute over oil supply, he is dispatching top aides to meet Saudi royals at a rapid clip.

Over the weekend, his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, landed in Jeddah for a summit on Ukraine - his third visit to Saudi Arabia in just a few months.

While bilateral sessions - including during a three-day tour by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in June - have touched on topics from terrorism to Yemen, the prospect of normalising



This file photo shows Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan escorting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as they arrive for a meeting with GCC Ministers at the GCC Secretariat in Riyadh on June 7 (AFP)

Saudi-Israeli ties has been a mainstay agenda item, fuelling rosier exchanges even if it is still seen as a long shot.

"US-Saudi ties have warmed unquestionably in recent

months," said Ali Shihabi, a Saudi analyst close to the government.

"Dialogue has just gotten much more extensive and friendly and this subject is driving that."

The hurdles to an actual deal remain high: Riyadh is reportedly bargaining hard for benefits like security guarantees and assistance with a civilian nuclear programme with uranium

enrichment capacity.

And Saudi officials have long vowed not to normalise relations with Israel before the conflict with the Palestinians has been resolved.

All the same, coordination between Washington and Riyadh is today 'better now than at any point in the last two years', said Hesham Alghannam of the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences in Riyadh.

"It's much warmer and closer. It's not perfect, but it's the best moment since President Biden came into office."

**Familiar friction**  
The issues bedeviling the decades-old relationship are well-known, from flare-ups over human rights to Saudi concerns about Washington's reliability as a security partner.

Those concerns took on new

importance after attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, claimed by Yemen's Huthis but widely attributed to Iran, temporarily halved crude output.

Saudi officials were deeply disappointed by the tepid response of then-US president Donald Trump's administration, which they believed undermined their traditional oil-for-security trade-off.

Growing cooperation with Moscow and Beijing highlights how, as Alghannam put it, Riyadh is no longer content to place 'all the eggs in the American basket'.

The Saudis also leaned on China to broker a landmark rapprochement with Iran announced in March, something the Biden administration was in no position to do.

Yet it is important not to exaggerate any slip in Washington's status, Alghannam added.

"No major power has a significant military presence in the region other than the US, and this will be the case for many years to come," he said, a point driven home by the recent deployment of 3,000 US military personnel to the Red Sea, part of a beefed-up response after tanker seizures by Iran.

During last October's dust-up over oil production, both sides were rankled by the stern exchanges that ensued, said John Hannah, a former US senior foreign policy official who has been visiting the kingdom for three decades. "It extended to the point of very senior (Saudi officials) saying, 'OK, you may be re-evaluating the relationship and may have questions about the future of this partnership, but let us tell you we do as well,'" Hannah recalled.

AFP

# Alliance to fight deforestation in Amazon

8 South American countries vow to stop world’s biggest rainforest from reaching ‘a point of no return’

Belém, Brazil - Eight South American countries agreed on Tuesday to launch an alliance to fight deforestation in the Amazon, vowing at a summit in Brazil to stop the world’s biggest rainforest from reaching ‘a point of no return’.

The closely watched summit of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) adopted what host country Brazil called a ‘new and ambitious shared agenda’ to save the rainforest, a crucial buffer against climate change that experts warn is being pushed to the brink of collapse. The group’s members - Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela - signed a joint declaration in Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon River, laying out a nearly 10,000-word roadmap to promote sustainable development, end deforestation and fight the organised crime that fuels it.

But the summit stopped short of environmentalists’ and Indigenous groups’ boldest demands, including for all member countries to adopt Brazil’s pledge to end illegal deforestation by 2030 and Colombia’s pledge to halt new oil exploration.

“It’s a first step, but there isn’t



President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and his Minister of Indigenous Peoples, Sonia Guajajara, chatting during the summit of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) in Belém, Para State, Brazil on Tuesday (AFP)

a concrete decision, just a list of promises,” said Marcio Astrini, head of the Brazil-based Climate Observatory coalition.

“The planet is melting, temperature records are being broken every day... it is not possible for eight Amazonian leaders to fail to put in a declaration in bold letters that deforestation must be zero,” he added.

In his opening speech of the

two-day summit, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva emphasised that the ‘severe worsening of the climate crisis’ required action ‘in unison’.

“It has never been so urgent,” he said in remarks just hours after the European Union’s climate observatory confirmed July had been the hottest month ever recorded. Colombian President Gustavo Petro meanwhile called

for a massive programme to cancel developing countries’ debt in exchange for action to protect the climate, linking the idea to the post-World War II ‘Marshall Plan’.

“If we’re on the verge of extinction and this is the decade when the big decisions have to be made... then what are we doing, besides giving speeches?” he said.

## Vital carbon sink

Seeking to pressure the gathered heads of state, hundreds of environmentalists, activists and Indigenous demonstrators marched to the conference venue in Belém, urging bold action. It is the first summit in 14 years for the eight-nation group, set up in 1995 by the South American countries that share the Amazon basin.

Home to an estimated 10 per cent of Earth’s biodiversity, 50mn people and hundreds of

vided on some issues.

Colombia’s Petro is pushing other countries to adhere to his pledge to ban all new oil exploration - a touchy subject for some members, including Brazil, whose state-run oil company is controversially seeking to explore new offshore blocks at the mouth of the Amazon River.

“Achieving zero deforestation isn’t even enough to absorb all our carbon emissions,” Petro said. “The solution is to stop burning coal, oil and gas.”

If we’re on the verge of extinction and this is the decade when the big decisions have to be made... then what are we doing, besides giving speeches?

GUSTAVO PETRO

## Lula test

The summit is something of a dress rehearsal for the 2025 UN climate talks, which Belém will host.

Lula, Petro, Bolivian President Luis Arce and Peru’s Dina Boluarte were all present.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, absent due to an ear infection, sent Vice President Delcy Rodriguez, while

Ecuador, Guyana and Suriname were represented by high-level officials.

Arce urged wealthy nations to help fund efforts to protect the Amazon.

“All the responsibility for the climate crisis and its consequences shouldn’t fall on our shoulders and our economies. We’re not the ones who created the crisis,” he said.

The summit is a key test for veteran leftist Lula, who previously served as president from 2003 to 2010 and returned to office in January, vowing ‘Brazil is back’ in the fight against climate change, after four years of massive deforestation under his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro.

Indigenous groups - whose lands are crucial buffers against the destruction of the world’s forests, according to experts - urged South American leaders to take decisive action.

“Our struggle isn’t just for Indigenous peoples,” said Nemo Guiquita, head of Ecuadoran Indigenous confederation CONFENIAE. “It’s for the entire world, so future generations can survive on this planet,” she told AFP.

AFP

# Red Cross voices concerns after Venezuela chief axed

Geneva, Switzerland - The Venezuelan Supreme Court’s sacking of the president of the national Red Cross raises serious concerns about the independence of humanitarian work in the country, the organisation’s international headquarters said on Wednesday.

The Geneva-based International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) said in it was ‘aware of the involvement of government authorities in the reorganisation of the Venezuelan Red Cross’ leadership and board’.

“Any governmental intervention in our National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies raises serious concerns regarding their independence and principle-based humanitarian work of National Societies and will be treated with the utmost importance,” it said in a statement.

Venezuela’s highest court last Friday ordered the ‘immediate’ removal of Red Cross chief



A woman walks past Venezuelan Red Cross headquarters in Caracas (AFP)

Mario Enrique Villarroel, 75, who had led the charity for 45 years.

It accused Villarroel of ‘harassment and ill-treatment’ of the charity’s employees.

Also behind his removal was a powerful politician, Diosdado Cabello, the number two leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) of President Nicolas Maduro.

Cabello accused Villarroel of conspiring against Maduro and ‘mafia-style activity’ in the handling of the group’s budget.

Installed to replace Villarroel as head of an ad hoc restructuring committee was Ricardo Cusanno, former head of Fedecamaras, the nation’s main business union.

The IFRC, which oversees 191 national societies, stressed on Wednesday that it had ‘its own mechanisms to address situations when a member National Society might be considered breaching our fundamental principles’.

AFP

# 7 killed in southwestern China floods

Beijing, China - Seven people were killed in flash floods in southwestern China on Wednesday, as authorities in Beijing tripled the death toll from the capital’s heaviest-ever rains.

China has been hit by record downpours in recent weeks, damaging infrastructure and deluging swaths of Beijing’s suburbs and surrounding areas.

And in southwestern Sichuan province, flash flooding on Wednesday killed seven people on Wednesday, state media reported. The victims, who were reportedly taking pictures when the torrent struck, were tourists visiting a popular site.

In Beijing, authorities said 33 had died, including two rescue workers, in the recent bad weather in the capital, mainly by flooding and buildings collapsing - three times the figure given by officials on Tuesday last week.

“I would like to express my deep condolences to those who died in the line of duty and the unfortunate victims,” Xia Lin-mao, Beijing’s vice-mayor, told a



Local residents ride a scooter through a muddy street in Zhuozhou city, in northern China’s Hebei province on Wednesday (AFP)

news conference, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

Scores have died in the floods across northern China, with Beijing officials saying on Friday 147 deaths or disappearances last month were caused by natural disasters.

Of those, 142 were caused by flooding or geological disasters, China’s Ministry of Emergency Management said.

Millions of people have been hit by extreme weather events and prolonged heatwaves around the globe in recent

weeks, events that scientists say are being exacerbated by climate change.

## Sichuan torrent

Extreme weather has also struck in other parts of the country, with CCTV saying ‘local public security, fire and other departments are continuing to carry out search and rescue efforts’ after seven people were drowned in Sichuan’s Longxi River.

The flash flood occurred at about 10am near an embankment southwest of the provincial

capital of Chengdu, where ‘more than 10’ people were swept away by an unexpected tide of water, state media said.

Video shared by CCTV showed several people struggling to keep their heads above water as a powerful torrent pushed them downstream and bystanders shouted from the water’s edge.

The cause of the deluge was not immediately clear.

Meteorological authorities in the nearby city of Qionglai issued a yellow warning for rain at 10:40am on Wednesday, anticipating possible precipitation of ‘more than 50mm’ over the next six hours in certain parts of the administrative district.

Fifteen people were reported to have died in Hebei province, which neighbours Beijing, and 22 were missing on Saturday.

An AFP team in Hebei’s Zhuozhou saw residents and workers clearing up debris and fixing damaged property on Wednesday.

AFP

# North Korea invites foreigners to Pyongyang golf tournament

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea has invited foreign golfers to a tournament in Pyongyang, another tentative step in the reclusive country’s reopening after Chinese and Russian officials attended a military parade last month.

The country has been under a rigid self-imposed COVID-19 blockade since early 2020 but there are increasing signs Pyongyang may be becoming more flexible on border controls, experts say.

“The Pyongyang Golf Course hosts an amateur golfers competition in spring and autumn every year,” read a post from August 2 on Pyongyang’s official DPR Korea Tour website.

“Foreign amateurs can also take part in this competition held in spring and autumn in our country and develop friendship with Korean amateur golfers.”

The post also included an email address and phone number for its ‘golf travel company’ - under Pyongyang’s official



This file photo shows contestants taking part in an autumn golf contest at the Pyongyang Golf Course in Nampho City, North Korea, on October 20, 2022 (AFP)

tourism administration - but did not say when the tournament would take place.

In a separate post, Pyongyang said its agency, the Ryomyong Golf Travel Company, had developed attractions including ‘an underwater golf course, archery ground and boating ground’.

The posts were shared after

Beijing confirmed in July that North Korea had registered for this year’s Asian Games, to be held in the Chinese city of Hangzhou in September.

North Korea had registered for an overseas sporting event earlier this year but failed to send athletes.

Cheong Seong-chang of the

Center for North Korea Studies at the Sejong Institute told AFP recent signs indicate ‘that Chinese tourism to North Korea will gradually resume in the future’.

The North’s state media has said Kim Jong Il - current leader Kim Jong Un’s father and predecessor - scored an incredible 11 holes-in-one the first time he ever

played golf.

Pyongyang’s golf course was reportedly built in the early 1980s and was officially opened in 1987 to celebrate the 75th birthday of the country’s founder, Kim Il Sung.

It was financed by pro-Pyongyang ethnic Koreans in Japan.

Today, the course ‘covers an area of 196 hectares and has... 18 holes in total. More than 200 people can play there,’ the DPR Korea Tour website says.

An Chan-il, a defector turned researcher who runs the World Institute for North Korea Studies, said Pyongyang has ‘established a department of golf’ at a key sports university in Pyongyang.

“North Korea has designated golf as an important means of earning foreign currency,” An told AFP.

However, according to South Korea’s *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, there are signs that the North has also started using the course for its banned missile tests.

AFP

# Chinese FM to visit three Southeast Asian countries

Beijing, China - China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi will visit Singapore, Malaysia and Cambodia this week, Beijing said on Wednesday as it seeks to build ties in the region.

Wang, who returned to the post last month after the unexplained disappearance of predecessor Qin Gang, will travel to the three countries from Thursday to Sunday, the Chinese foreign ministry said in a statement.

“China hopes to strengthen strategic communication with the three Southeast Asian countries through this visit,” the foreign ministry said.

Cambodia has become one of China’s strongest allies in the region under the rule of outgoing ruler Hun Sen, receiving huge sums of Chinese investment.

But the flood of Chinese money has brought problems,

including a rash of casinos and online scam operations.

China’s relations with Southeast Asia have been complicated by self-proclaimed control over most of the South China Sea despite competing claims from nations including Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia.

Maritime disagreements have pitted some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) against Beijing and boosted sympathy for US opposition to China’s growing assertiveness. Others have backed Beijing. Singapore has for decades juggled ties with China and the US, engaging in an increasingly delicate balancing act amid the growing rivalry between the two powers across the Asia-Pacific.

AFP

INDIA

# Rahul Gandhi slams government inaction on violence in Manipur

New Delhi - India's opposition leader Rahul Gandhi condemned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inaction over deadly ethnic conflict in the country's northeast on Wednesday, in his first parliamentary speech since his defamation conviction was suspended.

Modi's administration is being forced this week to defend its conduct over months of violence in Manipur state that has killed at least 120 people.

Gandhi's fiery address to the chamber was part of a no-confidence debate demanding the government's resignation for letting the unrest fester for months.

"You are throwing kerosene in the whole country. You threw kerosene in Manipur, and lit a spark," Gandhi said, with cheers from supporters and jeers from rival lawmakers.

"You're set on burning the whole country. You are killing Mother India," he added.

Modi's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is regularly accused by opponents of fomenting divisions for electoral purposes, and India will hold general elections early next year. The ruling BJP has a large majority in the 543-member



Congress MP Rahul Gandhi speaks in Lok Sabha on Manipur issue during the ongoing Monsoon Session of Parliament, in New Delhi on Wednesday (ANI)

lower house, and is expected to comfortably defeat the no-confidence vote, which it has dismissed as a headline-grabbing gimmick.

"India's army can bring in peace in one day but you're not using it," Gandhi told fellow lawmakers. "If Modi doesn't listen to the voice of India, then whose voice does he listen to?"

Soldiers have been rushed in from other parts of India to contain the violence and a curfew and internet shutdown remain in force across most of the state.

### 'Broken'

Government minister Smriti Irani refuted Gandhi's allegations, saying the party was always ready to discuss the

Manipur issue in parliament.

"They ran away from the discussion, not us," Irani said.

"Rahul Gandhi said kerosene has been poured all over the country. And where all did you go to find the matchbox, Rahul Gandhi?" she added.

Gandhi, 53, the scion of India's premier political dynasty, was restored to parliament on

Monday after the Supreme Court last week suspended his defamation conviction over comments criticising Modi.

He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in March in a case that critics flagged as an effort to stifle political opposition in the world's largest democracy.

Gandhi is the son, grandson

and great-grandson of three former prime ministers, beginning with independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru.

Congress was once India's dominant political force but Gandhi has led it to two landslide defeats against the BJP and its nationalistic appeals to the country's Hindu majority.

Gandhi and his allies are attempting to stitch together a grand coalition of opposition parties ahead of next year's national elections, in which Modi will seek a third successive term.

At least 120 people have been killed in Manipur since May in armed clashes between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki community.

The state has fractured on ethnic lines, with rival militias setting up blockades to keep out members of the opposing community. Gandhi accused the government of having 'broken' Manipur 'into two parts', but Irani responded by insisting the state was 'not divided'.

Modi has been criticised by opponents for taking more than two months to speak about the conflict from when clashes began.

AFP

## Row over RaGa's flying kiss in House

New Delhi - Demanding action against Rahul Gandhi, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) women MPs wrote to Lok Sabha Speaker O M Birla alleging the Congress MP of making inappropriate gesture and displaying indecent behaviour in the House.

Earlier, BJP MP Smriti Irani - without naming Rahul Gandhi - said: "The one who was given the chance to speak before me displayed indecency before leaving. It is only a misogynistic man who can give a flying kiss to a Parliament which seats female members of Parliament."

"When the House of the People, where laws are made to protect the dignity of women, during the course of a session stands witness to a man's misogyny, my question is should he be brought to task?" she added. The complaint was signed by more than 20 women parliamentarians.

ANI

## What provoked the ethnic violence in remote northeast state of Manipur?

New Delhi, India - At least 120 people have been killed since May in armed clashes in Manipur, a remote state in northeast India with a history of ethnic conflict. AFP looks at the origins of the conflict:

### Why did the latest violence start?

The dispute stems from animosity between Manipur's Meitei majority and the Kuki, one of several tribal groups in the state that make up about 16 per cent of its population.

The Meitei are predominantly



Smoke billows from an abandoned house set on fire by miscreants in the violence-hit state of Manipur, in Imphal on August 5 (AFP)

Hindu and largely live in urban centres, while the mainly Christian Kuki usually live in scattered settlements in the state's hills.

Longstanding tensions between the two communities have revolved around competition for land and public jobs, with rights activists accusing local leaders of exacerbating ethnic divisions for political gain.

Things came to a head in May over plans to recognise the Meitei as a 'Scheduled Tribe' - a status already conferred upon the Kuki. This would grant them a form of affirmative action

through guaranteed quotas of government jobs and college admissions.

Kuki groups staged protests over fears the plans could reduce their own entitlements, with rallies quickly spiralling into violence.

Protesters set fire to vehicles and buildings, and Meitei mobs armed with guns and petrol cans then attacked Kuki settlements in the hills.

### What has happened since?

Mobs looted police stations

when the clashes began, with 3,000 weapons and 600,000 rounds of ammunition going missing according to the Press Trust of India news agency.

The state has fractured on ethnic lines, with rival Meitei and Kuki militias setting up blockades to keep out members of the opposing community.

Clashes have killed at least 120 people, though many in Manipur believe the number could be higher.

Some 50,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, taking shelter in relief centres or

nearby states. Reprisal attacks have seen the firebombing of homes and places of worship.

More than 220 churches and 17 Hindu temples had been destroyed by the end of July, according to a report by India Today news magazine.

Manipur is one of seven northeast Indian states - sandwiched between Bangladesh, China and Myanmar - that have long been a hotbed of separatism and a tinderbox of tensions between different ethnic groups.

AFP

## 41 migrants missing after Mediterranean shipwreck

Rome, Italy - Forty-one migrants including three children are feared dead after a shipwreck last week in the Mediterranean, UN agencies said, citing four survivors brought to the Italian island of Lampedusa on Wednesday.

Their metal boat overturned in bad weather during the night of Thursday to Friday after setting off from the Tunisian port of Sfax, said a joint statement from the UN agencies for refugees, children and migration.

The survivors - a 13-year-old boy on his own, a woman and two men - were rescued by a merchant ship and brought to Lampedusa by the Italian coastguard, they said.

In a separate statement, the Italian Red Cross, which manages the migrant reception centre on the island, said the four were generally in good health. They said they were from Ivory Coast and Guinea, and were unrelated to the missing migrants, it said.

The four managed to survive the shipwreck by floating on inner tubes, before reaching another boat at sea.

The shipwreck is one of several deadly incidents reported in recent days after a period of bad weather.

Officials on Monday had reported that 16 migrants died in shipwrecks off the coasts of Tunisia and Western Sahara.

And on Sunday, the UN's migration agency, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), said at least 30 people were missing after two shipwrecks off Lampedusa.

The tiny island, located just 90 miles (around 145km) from Tunisia, is the first port of call for many migrants heading from North Africa to Europe. But many of them do not survive, making the Central Mediterranean migrant crossing the world's deadliest.

More than 1,800 people died attempting the route so far this year, according to IOM figures from Friday - more than double the fatalities in the same period last year. IOM press officer Flavio Di Giacomo said on Wednesday the migrants who died in the latest tragedy would have had little chance given the bad weather.

AFP

## 9 dead, 2 missing in France holiday home fire 'tragedy'

Wintzenheim, France - Nine bodies were found and two people were missing on Wednesday after a fire in France tore through holiday lodging for a group of adults with learning disabilities, an incident the president called a 'tragedy'.

The fire at the timbered residence in the eastern town of Wintzenheim struck deep in the night with those on the upper floor unable to react fast enough to save their lives.

The secretary general of the Haut-Rhin prefecture in eastern France, Christophe Marot, said there was 'little doubt' the missing had been in the burning building and had not been able to escape.

The fire, which came at the height of the nation's summer holiday season, is the deadliest in France since a blaze at a bar in the northern city of Rouen in 2016 killed 14 people.

"We have located nine bodies and we are still looking for two," Philippe Hauwiller, who is leading the fire brigade search operation, told AFP.

With the complex search efforts ongoing, he added: "The difficulty lies in accessing the affected levels, since there is a lot of rubble, a lot of collapsed parts and the stability of the floor is



Firefighters work where a fire erupted at a holiday home in Wintzenheim, eastern France, on Wednesday (AFP)

*In the face of this tragedy, my thoughts go out to the victims, to the injured and to their loved ones*

EMMANUEL MACRON

very uncertain." The local fire service told AFP

authorities were alerted about the blaze in Wintzenheim, just outside the city of Colmar in the eastern Alsace region, at around 6:30am (0430 GMT).

"The fire was quickly brought under control despite the intensity of the flames," the prefecture the Haut-Rhin region said in a statement. It said seventeen people were safely evacuated, with one person hospitalised and another treated for shock.

Those staying at the centre

were part of a group of adults with learning difficulties, some of whom who had come to the picturesque and hilly region from the nearby city of Nancy for the holidays.

"In Wintzenheim, the flames ravaged a lodging which accommodated people with disabilities and their companions. In the face of this tragedy, my thoughts go out to the victims, to the injured and to their loved ones," French President Emmanuel Macron

wrote on Twitter, which is being rebranded as X.

### 'Little doubt'

Marot confirmed a total of 28 people had been inside at the time, with 11 initially reported as unaccounted for.

"Unfortunately, there is little doubt: all these people were present in the lodging and could not get out," he told reporters.

People on the ground floor were able to quickly leave the premises but not those upstairs, he said.

The missing and confirmed dead included 10 people with light learning difficulties and one supervisor, he said.

Marot said there was no indication over the cause of the blaze and added an investigation would be opened by regional prosecutors.

Deputy mayor Daniel Leroy said the residents when the fire broke out were 'taken by surprise in deep sleep, everyone was asleep'. The guesthouse 'has been running for several years without problems', he added.

The traditional semi-timbered building, built in the style of the Alsace region, was severely damaged by the fire, according to the firefighters.

AFP

# FAST, COOL, DEADLY

Hinata Miyazawa spearheads Japan’s title charge at Women’s World Cup

Tokyo, Japan - Hinata Miyazawa had never been prolific for club or country before the Women’s World Cup - now she is the tournament’s leading scorer and spearheading Japan’s surprise title charge.

The 23-year-old already has five goals in four matches and has Sweden in her sights in Friday’s quarter-final in Auckland.

“I honestly didn’t think I could score this much,” Miyazawa told reporters after her ice-cold finish in the 81st minute polished off Norway in the last 16. It was typical of how Miyazawa, who plays in Japan’s domestic women’s league, has been at the World Cup: cool, calculating and deadly.

It is also noticeable that she has scored with both feet and rather than trying to smack the ball into the net, it is all about precision and placement.

Expectations were low at home ahead of the tournament that Japan could repeat their World Cup title success of 2011.

Miyazawa had only scored four times in more than 20 appearances for her country.

But Japan are playing some of the best football at the World Cup and Miyazawa’s five goals equal the number that Homare Sawa achieved in the 2011 title success.



Hinata Miyazawa

### Deadly composure

Miyazawa’s goal haul is all the more surprising because she has scored only four times in 39 appearances for her club MyNavi Sendai over the past two seasons.

Miyazawa is often described as a midfielder but Dan Orlowitz, a sports writer for The Japan Times, said Japan coach Futoshi Ikeda has found a way to get goals out of her thanks to a 3-4-3 system that allows his team to be deadly on the break.

Miyazawa’s goals have mainly come from her running at speed from deep. “It’s because of how Japan is so well organised at the back that they are able to set her up,” Orlowitz told AFP.

“It’s a system that suits her abilities, and her abilities suit the system,” he said.

It was Japan’s 4-0 thumping of Spain in the group phase that really made the rest of the World Cup sit up and take notice.

Miyazawa scored twice, once with each foot.

“She has speed and is also a good finisher and adept at counter-attacking,” Japanese football commentator Sergio Echigo told AFP. “She is also very calm and doesn’t panic right before she is about to score a goal,” he added.



England boss Sarina Wiegman is the only woman coach left on the touchline.

## It’s the Women’s World Cup, so where are the woman coaches?

Auckland, New Zealand - The World Cup in Australia and New Zealand has showcased the strides made in women’s football on the field in recent years - while exposing the lack of woman coaches at all levels of the sport.

As the tournament heads into the quarter-finals, England boss Sarina Wiegman is the only woman left on the touchline.

The first 32-team Women’s World Cup began with 12 woman coaches. That’s 37.5 per cent, exactly the same as at the World Cup in 2019, when nine of the 24 teams in France had a woman at the helm.

“It is a problem not only on the international stage but at every level in the women’s game,” said Randy Waldrum, the American coach of the Nigeria team that lost on penalties to Wiegman’s England in the last 16.

“We need more women coaching in the sport.”

In England, where women’s football is highly professional, five of the 12 teams in the Women’s Super League finished last season with a woman manager. In some other countries, including at the World Cup, women’s football has only recently turned professional or even remains an amateur sport.

Many within the game believe that more woman coaches will inevitably filter through once

women’s football has had longer to take hold.

“There’s naturally more male coaches,” Wales manager Gemma Grainger told Sky Sports earlier this year.

“The men’s game has been professional for much longer and we see that transfer of male coaches into the women’s game, and that’s the state we’re at in this moment.”

*“It is a problem not only on the international stage but at every level in the women’s game”*

RANDY WALDRUM

## Colombia ‘dreaming big’ as they plot England’s downfall

Melbourne, Australia - Colombia captain Catalina Usme is “dreaming big” and coach Nelson Abadia wants to “make history” as the last team standing from the Americas plots the downfall of England in the Women’s World Cup quarter-finals.

The 25th-ranked South Americans have never made the last eight before but they are brimming with confidence after grinding down Jamaica 1-0 on Tuesday thanks to a goal from

their skipper.

They will now play England in Sydney on Saturday and are fearless, having beaten world number two Germany in the group stage.

“Because of their football and their history we need to be careful, we need to be cautious,” Abadia said of Sarina Wiegman’s strongly fancied England.

“But in football we have already seen that the gaps between teams have been closing down and Colombia have



Catalina Usme

proven to be a solid team.

“Of course, England are one of the favourites, that goes without saying - they are the European champions.

“But we also faced Germany, who were second favourites. We were wise enough and had the composure.”

Colombia’s intense, attacking mindset has served them well so far, with their teenage striker Linda Caicedo one of the stars of the tournament. But Usme is the glue that keeps them together and she said they were in no mood to stop now.

“We want more,” she said, having scored the goal to take Colombia into the last eight.

“It’s not our ceiling, now we are thinking about England, which is going to be a dream match. “We need to be calm, play an intelligent match, but with the certainty that we can achieve more in this World Cup.

“We are dreaming big - we can do this,” she added.

Abadia has been in charge since 2017 and after failing to qualify for the last tournament in France, has nurtured the likes of Caicedo into the players they are today.

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# THE MBAPPE CONUNDRUM

PSG superstar’s contract dispute overshadows start of Ligue 1 season

Paris, France - Uncertainty over the future of Kylian Mbappe hangs over French football ahead of the new Ligue 1 season, which starts this weekend.

The Paris Saint-Germain superstar has won France’s player of the year award four times in a row and been Ligue 1’s top scorer in five straight seasons, but his contract dispute with the champions has dominated headlines all summer.

Mbappe has refused to sign an extension to his PSG deal, meaning he can leave for free next year, with Real Madrid long seen as his preferred destination.

PSG want to sell him now and bring in a significant transfer fee for a player who cost 180 million euros (\$198m) from Monaco in 2017. A stand-off has ensued, and for now Mbappe remains in Paris but has been reduced to training apart from the first team.

“We can’t let the best player in the world today leave for free. It’s impossible,” said the Qatar-owned club’s president, Nasser al Khelaifi, last month.

The situation is hardly ideal for PSG’s new coach, with Luis Enrique having been appointed to succeed Christophe Galtier.

Regardless of what happens with Mbappe, PSG have a new



Kylian Mbappe

look after limping to the title in the last campaign and failing to impress in Europe. Lionel Messi has gone, so has Sergio Ramos. They needed attacking reinforcements even if Mbappe stays, and Portugal striker Goncalo Ramos has joined from Benfica.

The arrivals of Lucas Hernandez, Milan Skriniar, Manuel Ugarte, Lee Kang-in and Marco

Asensio mean they look stronger across the pitch.

“I could have stayed at Bayern Munich, but the interest PSG showed in me, their ambition and the project they are trying to put in place for the future convinced me to come,” Hernandez told sports daily L’Equipe.

PSG begin as overwhelming favourites to win a 10th title in 12

years, but their domestic rivals might sense their chance if Mbappe moves on.

## Changing landscape

The French football landscape is changing.

Ligue 1 has been reduced to 18 clubs. The move, after over two decades with 20 teams in the top flight, has been made with the aim

of helping French clubs become more competitive in Europe by having fewer league games.

Despite that, and despite seeing Messi depart and Mbappe maybe follow, the French league is hoping an upcoming auction for the next broadcast deal will allow it to make far more money than it does currently, especially for international rights.

*Mbappe has refused to sign an extension to his PSG deal, meaning he can leave for free next year, with Real Madrid long seen as his preferred destination*

League executives want their competition to be able to rival those in England, Spain, Germany and Italy for international popularity, but the growing trend of multi-club ownership threatens to turn several French sides into feeder teams.

Strasbourg have been taken over by BlueCo, the US-led consortium that owns Chelsea.

cant share in Crystal Palace.

However, his failure to convince the DNGC, French football’s financial watchdog, of the soundness of his spending plans means a cap has been imposed on their wage bill.

They have not been able to significantly strengthen a squad that finished seventh last season, outside the European places.



Harry Maguire

## Hammers on course to sign Maguire and Ward-Prowse

London, United Kingdom - Premier League side West Ham have agreed deals in principle to sign England internationals Harry Maguire and James Ward-Prowse, according to British media reports.

The UK’s Press Association said Wednesday that Manchester United defender Maguire, 30, and Southampton midfielder Ward-Prowse, 28, had agreed personal terms with West Ham.

Maguire, however, remains in talks with United about the exact terms of his departure from Old Trafford but a move worth an estimated £30 million (\$38 million, 35 million euros) is expected to be completed. West Ham - who will compete in the Europa League this term - are also said to be close to announcing the £35 million signing of Mexico midfielder Edson Alvarez from Ajax.

## Lopetegui quits as Wolves coach on eve of Premier League season

London, United Kingdom - Julen Lopetegui has left his job as Wolves coach just days before the start of the Premier League season after reportedly being unhappy over the club’s recruitment policy.

“Wolves and Julen Lopetegui have reached an agreement to part ways, ending the Spaniard’s nine-month reign as head coach at the club,” Wolves said in a statement on Tuesday.

“The head coach and club acknowledged and accepted their differences of opinion on certain issues and agreed that an amicable end to his contract was the best solution for all parties.”

Former Bournemouth head coach Gary O’Neil, sacked this summer after steering the Cherries to top-flight safety, is reported to be in line to replace Lopetegui.

Former Spain and Real Madrid boss Lopetegui joined Wolves in November, replacing Bruno Lage,



Julen Lopetegui

with the club bottom of the Premier League and helped them stay in the top flight, finishing 13th. But the 56-year-old was said to be frustrated by their approach in the transfer market, with a number of first-team players departing this summer and few replacements found.

Wolves have sold the likes of Ruben Neves, Conor Coady, Nathan Collins and Raul Jimenez and have only brought in two players on free transfers - Matt Doherty and Tom King.

The club’s statement added: “Talks have been ongoing in recent weeks, held with the utmost

respect and cordiality, affording the club time and space to begin work on finding a successor, while also ensuring that Julen and his backroom staff could continue their planned preparation to ensure the playing squad would be in the best possible condition for the start of the Premier League season.”

## O’Neil new head coach

Gary O’Neil has been appointed as the new head coach of Wolverhampton Wanderers on a three-year contract, the Premier League club announced on Wednesday. “We’re delighted to welcome Gary to the club,” said Wolves sporting director Matt Hobbs in a statement.

“He’s a highly-motivated young coach with strong principles and very well thought of by everyone he has worked with, and we’re excited to see what we can achieve together at Wolves.”



Kyle Chalmers

## Paris Olympics will be last for Australian swim king Chalmers

Sydney, Australia - Australian swim king Kyle Chalmers on Wednesday said the Paris Olympics will be his third and last, but the sprint star insisted it did not mean he was retiring.

The 25-year-old scorched the field to win 100m freestyle gold at the world championships in Japan last month, bagging the one medal that had long eluded him. It gave him the full set, having also achieved the feat at the Olympic, Commonwealth and world short-course level. “It will be the last Olympics for me, definitely,” he told SEN sports radio. “I’ll be 26 next year, and even this year, when I was in the marshall room, I was the oldest in my race by a long margin.”

“There are guys that were born in 2003 or 2004 that are there now. I’ll be old and ready to start the next chapter of my life.”

His comments were widely interpreted in Australia as calling it quits altogether, but Chalmers later took to Instagram to clarify this was not the case.

“I am not retiring! The quote was ‘It will be my last Olympics,’” he said. “There are many competitions after the Olympics that still give me the opportunity to represent my country at the highest level.”

## Red-hot Rahm leads the way as PGA Tour playoffs begin at Memphis on Thursday

Washington, United States - Reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm, the season points leader, will be the player to catch when the PGA Tour FedEx Cup playoffs begin Thursday at the St. Jude Championship.

The top 70 players from the season will tee off at TPC Southwind in Memphis, Tennessee, hoping to be among 50 who advance to next week’s BMW Championship, from which the top 30 will reach the Tour Championship in two weeks at East Lake in Atlanta.

Rahm has never won the play-

off top prize, which this year is \$18 million from a prize money pool of \$75 million.

If he can keep the points lead through the next two events, Rahm will get a two-stroke edge to start the Tour Championship over the number two points holder, who at this point is American Scottie Scheffler, just ahead of three-time playoff winner and defending champion Rory McIlroy.

“You want to win every time we tee it up, but yeah, the goal is to try to get to East Lake as number one and enjoy that two-shot

lead,” Rahm said Tuesday.

Rahm knows how much the extra strokes can matter. In 2021, he lost the Tour Championship by a stroke to Patrick Cantlay even though he played the four rounds in three fewer shots than the American.

“It has always made a difference,” Rahm said. “It made a difference when I finished second place. It’s the reason why they give it to you, so if we can take advantage of it, it would be nice.”

Top-ranked Scheffler, second-ranked McIlroy and world number three Rahm will play together

in the first two rounds.

Rahm has enjoyed an epic year with four titles, taking the Tournament of Champions and American Express titles in January, the Genesis at Riviera in February and his second major title in April at Augusta National. He also shared second last month at the British Open.

“It has been a really good season,” Rahm said. “Accomplished a lot of things I set myself out to do this year, and one of them was to be sitting right here as number one.”

AFP



Jon Rahm

# SURYAKUMAR ON SONG

Middle-order batsman blasts India to win over West Indies in third T20

Providence, Guyana - Suryakumar Yadav smashed 83 off 44 balls as India beat West Indies by seven wickets in the third T20 international in Guyana on Tuesday to keep the series alive.

After India lost T20 debutant Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill cheaply in pursuit of 160, Suryakumar took charge in a dazzling innings comprising 10 fours and four sixes.

He eventually fell clipping an Alzarri Joseph full toss to deep backward square leg, but Tilak Varma finished unbeaten on 49 and captain Hardik Pandya hit the winning six with 13 balls to spare.

"It was really important to be myself in the powerplay. The team wanted me to bat as much as possible," said Suryakumar.

"I practised these (scoops) strokes a lot. I have loved to do that. I just like to express myself."

West Indies skipper Rovman Powell had earlier dragged his side to 159-5 with a quick-fire 40 not out after winning the toss in Providence and choosing to bat.

Brandon King made a run-a-ball 42 while fellow opener Kyle Mayers (25) and Nicholas Pooran (20) also made decent contributions for the hosts.

Left-arm wrist spinner



India's Suryakumar Yadav hits a four during his knock of 83 in the third T20I match against the West Indies in Georgetown, Guyana, on Tuesday (AFP)

Kuldeep Yadav, recalled in place of Ravi Bishnoi, claimed 3-28 to lead the Indian bowling attack. Axar Patel and Mukesh Kumar picked up a wicket apiece.

"We were 10-15 runs short,"

said Powell. "It was a pretty good wicket. The start we got (with the bat), it was something we asked for. We lost our way in the middle."

India cut West Indies' lead to

2-1 in the five-match series after they lost the opener by four runs followed by Sunday's dramatic two-wicket defeat.

"We had to back ourselves. Two losses or two wins do not

change things. We have a long-term plan and it was important we showed our character," said Pandya.

West Indies are aiming to win their first series of two or more

matches against India in any format since 2016.

India won the preceding two-Test series 1-0 before beating the West Indies 2-1 in the ODIs.

AFP

## India cricket board makes \$1.5 billion surplus in five years

New Delhi, India - India's cricket board earned a surplus of around \$1.5 billion in the five years to 2021-22, the country's parliament heard during a rare look into the sporting body's finances.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) does not typically publish its finances in detail.

But it is known to be one of the world's most lucrative governing bodies thanks to India's diehard love of the game and periodic bidding wars over broadcast rights.

A government minister listed recent BCCI earnings in parliament on Tuesday which revealed revenue of \$919 million and expenditure of \$370 million for the year to March 2022, leaving a surplus of \$549 million.

It was the board's biggest surplus out of the five years from 2017-18, with earnings of \$3.3 billion and \$1.8 billion in expenses for the same period.

The all-powerful BCCI is often said to call the shots in world cricket due to their outsized wealth compared to other national cricket boards. The BCCI also stands to earn approximately \$230 million per year between 2024-27 - or 38.5 percent of the International Cricket Council's annual earnings of \$600 million.



Caroline Wozniacki hits a return against Kimberly Birrell (AFP)

## Wozniacki wins WTA return match after layoff since 2020

Montreal, Canada - Former world number one Caroline Wozniacki made a triumphant comeback in her return to competition after a layoff of more than three years at the WTA Montreal Open on Tuesday.

The 33-year-old Danish star defeated 115th-ranked Australian qualifier Kimberly Birrell 6-2, 6-2 in her comeback match at the hardcourt event, a tune-up for the US Open, which starts on August 28 in New York.

"I'm happy," Wozniacki said. "A little tired. Just it was fun to be out there again playing on center court in front of a big crowd. I'm just thrilled that I could win my first match in 3 1/2 years."

Her second-round opponent will be reigning Wimbledon

champion Marketa Vondrousova, the Czech world number 10 who ousted Egypt's 33rd-ranked Mayar Sherif 6-4, 6-2.

Wozniacki, the 2018 Australian Open champion, retired after a third-round loss at the 2020 Australian Open. She gave birth to two children and became a television commentator, her WTA playing days seemingly complete.

But Wozniacki announced in June she was making a comeback and received wildcard entries into Montreal and next week's Cincinnati tournament as stepping-stones to the US Open, where she was runner-up in 2009 and 2014.

AFP

## Ashraf recalled to Pakistan squad for Afghan series, Asia Cup

Lahore, Pakistan - Allrounder Faheem Ashraf has been recalled to a strong Pakistan squad for the three-match series against Afghanistan and subsequent Asia Cup, selectors announced Wednesday.

The 29-year-old played the last of his 31 one-day internationals in England in July 2021 but chief selector Inzamam-ul-Haq said his efforts warranted selection.

"We have picked 18 players for the Afghanistan series and one less for the Asia Cup and Ashraf was the best pace-bowling allrounder available to us," Inzamam said in Lahore.

Babar Azam will lead the squad throughout.

The ODI series against Afghanistan will be played on August 22, 24 and 26 in Sri Lanka, while the Asia Cup is scheduled from August 30 to September 17.

Pakistan will host only four matches in the Asia Cup after India refused to send its team across the border, with the remaining nine in Sri Lanka.

Middle-order batter Saud Shakeel is also recalled after a year-long gap but will only be part of the Afghanistan series.



Faheem Ashraf

Former vice-captain Shan Masood was unlucky to miss out, while pacer Ihsanullah was also not selected due to injury.

Inzamam, appointed chief selector on Monday, said he hoped players will get a proper tune-up for the World Cup in India from October 5 to November 19. "We have selected players with the focus also on the World Cup and hope that the team brings laurels to the country," he said.

**Pakistan's squad for Afghanistan series and Asia Cup:** Babar Azam (captain), Fakhar Zaman, Mohammad Rizwan, Shadab Khan, Abdullah Shafique, Faheem Ashraf, Haris Rauf, Iftikhar Ahmed, Imam-ul-Haq, Mohammad Haris, Mohammad Wasim, Naseem Shah, Agha Salman, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Tayyab Tahir, Usama Mir, Mohammad Nawaz, Saud Shakeel (only for Afghanistan series)

## India-Pakistan clash among nine World Cup fixture changes

New Delhi, India - India's clash with archrivals Pakistan in this year's ODI World Cup has been brought forward a day to October 14 among eight other fixture changes, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said Wednesday.

The world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad will host the hotly anticipated match, originally set for October 15 at the same venue.

Fixtures for the 50-over World Cup were originally published in June after weeks of delays arising from Pakistan's reluctance to travel to India.

Wednesday's overhaul of the schedule, less than two months before the tournament begins, came after the Board of Control for Cricket in India said foreign teams had requested changes.

Indian media reports said Ahmedabad officials had raised concerns about their ability to provide adequate security because the match was originally scheduled at the

start of a nine-day Hindu religious festival.

Ahmedabad is where Hindu-nationalist Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's political career began and the showdown will take place at the stadium bearing his name.

India and Pakistan are bitter adversaries and only play cricket against each other in international tournaments due to longstanding political tensions.

Pakistan had agreed to visit India after they agreed to jointly host September's Asia Cup, allowing India to play its matches in Sri Lanka.

But it was only this week that the Pakistan Cricket Board got approval from their government to make the India trip for the 50-over World Cup.

Any match between the South Asian neighbours therefore becomes one of the most-watched events on the global sporting calendar, and any victory is used to promote nationalism at home.

AFP

## Murray and Zverev master Toronto wind to advance, Ruud wins

Toronto, Canada - Former Toronto Masters winners Andy Murray and Alexander Zverev dispatched first-round opponents in windy conditions on Tuesday to power into the second round of the Canadian hardcourt event.

Britain's Murray worked through a marathon opening set before dominating the second

for a 7-6 (7/3), 6-0 victory over Italy's Lorenzo Sonego.

The 36-year-old Scotsman, with three Canadian titles on his resume, earned his first victory in the country since his 2015 trophy as he defeated the Italian in two hours, eight minutes in a challenging wind. Germany's Zverev, who defeated Roger Federer for the 2017 Canadian

title, reached the second round by defeating Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor 6-4, 7-6 (7/3).

Third seed Casper Ruud began his US Open run-up after a bye, struggling at the start but wrapping up a 7-6 (8/6), 6-4 defeat of Jiri Lehecka for a 199th career ATP match win.

The Norwegian trailed 4-0 in the first-set tiebreaker but found

form in his first hardcourt match of the summer to reach the third round. Britain failed to get two men into the second round as 11th-seeded Cameron Norrie went down 7-5, 6-4 to weekend Los Cabos finalist Alex de Minaur of Australia. Britain suffered another blow as Dan Evans, who took his first ATP title in 2 1/2 years on Sunday at

Washington, lost to Canadian wild card Gabriel Diallo 7-6 (7/4), 7-5, the local taking his first tour-level match triumph.

Canada lost its number one as Felix Auger-Aliassime suffered his fifth consecutive loss on his 23rd birthday, falling 6-4, 6-4 to Australian qualifier Max Purcell, the world number 78 whose next foe will be Murray.



Andy Murray



14

**RESTAURANT FAV**

If you love the all-time favourites in restaurants, why not make some?



15

**IN TOWN**

BBF reception for new British ambassador and DDA felicitations



16

**ENTERTAINMENT**

A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood

SALALAH TOURIST FESTIVAL 2023



other dialects under his belt.

The festival has many draws which include cultural/traditional performances at the main venue on Ittin road, food festivals, handicraft handicrafts and heritage encounters. The Haffa Souq is a prominent local market for traditional local handicrafts, gold and silver jewellery, pottery, clothes, and frankincense – giving the visitor a glimpse of Oman's real culture and heritage.

Visitors also throng the Al Fazayah beach in Salalah, with magnificent turquoise crystal waters along the perfectly rocky coastline. Al Mughsail beach is another stunning beach with a rocky stretch that has the popular blowholes. And the Museum of Frankincense Land adds an educational aspect to your visit.

Other draws include adventure sports, especially hiking in Wadi Darbat, amid mountains and waterfalls, besides opportunities for scuba diving at many locations.

On a more modern note, there's the Palmyra 7D Simulator in Salalah which offers a heightened and culminated experience for the senses. With special effects accompanied by water sprays, vibrating seats, fake snow, lightning and thunder, the experience is fun for people of all ages.

Similarly, Salalah's Light Park is also a big draw in Salalah Public Park - a recreational destination organised by the Dhofar Municipality this year - which will remain open until August 31. The illuminated park showcases artistically designed models of animals and plants using three-dimensional techniques. These sculptures are adorned with lights, creating a delightful atmosphere in the area.

Also, the 'Osara' village, located on Raysut beach in the Wilayat of Salalah, stands as a tourism and entertainment venture managed by a collective of Omani youth. This project serves as a comprehensive tourist destination, offering a diverse array of activities during the festival.

Time To chill

The Salalah Tourist Festival is on – you have many reasons to join in the revelry and enjoy the chill weather surrounding the annual khareef



There are many reasons but only one season to visit Salalah which dresses up with bountiful nature and is adorned with many an attraction that brings in tourists from within the sultanate, the region, and across the seas.

The annual Salalah Tourist Festival is currently on and there are many attractions this time round as the 'Khareef Festival' (as it used to be called earlier) has many new layers to be discovered by visitors, apart from the regular features.

For starters this weekend, Omani singer Haitham Mohammed Rafi will be performing tomorrow (Friday) at the Al-Qaws Theatre. Haitham, who was the first Omani to top a Bollywood music contest aired by Star Plus - 'Dil Hai Hindustani' – has performed numerous shows in numerous venues over the past few years following his sudden success as a singer. He has a range of songs in Hindi, Arabic as well as

| EVENT LOCATIONS           |            |          |        |
|---------------------------|------------|----------|--------|
| LOCATION                  | DATE       | DAYS     | TIMING |
| Salalah Gardens Mall      | 3-Aug      | Thursday | 7:30pm |
| Saadah Park               | 5-August   | Saturday | 7:30pm |
| Iteen Square              | 10-August  | Thursday | 7:30pm |
| Salalah Gardens Mall      | 12-August  | Saturday | 7:30pm |
| Saadah Park               | 17-August  | Thursday | 7:30pm |
| Al Haffa                  | 19-August  | Saturday | 5:00pm |
| Awqad Public Park         | 24-August  | Thursday | 7:30pm |
| Salalah Eat (Saadah Park) | 3-5 August | Thu-Sat  | 7:00pm |

cook-up

RESTAURANT-STYLE STARTERS

Crisp and crunchy

If you simply love some popular starters at restaurants in town, here's how you can create the same magic in your own kitchen

Chicken Lollypops

- Ingredients**  
**For the marination**  
12 chicken drums and wings  
2tbsp vinegar or lemon juice  
2tbsp ginger garlic paste  
½tsp salt  
2tbsp Kashmiri red chilli powder

- For the batter**  
½ cup all purpose flour  
¼ cup corn flour or rice flour  
½tsp salt, adjust to taste  
2tsp Kashmiri red chilli powder  
1tsp red chilli powder  
½tsp black pepper powder  
1tbsp ginger garlic paste  
1-2tbsp spring onions - minced  
Oil for frying

**Method**  
Prepare the drumsticks and wing pieces by cutting the flesh along the edge of the bone and pushing it downwards with the blunt side of the knife to form a bulb on each. Now, marinate the chicken - in a bowl, add prepared chicken drums and wings, vinegar, ginger-garlic paste, salt, red chilli powder, and mix.  
Cover and keep this in the refrigerator for 60 minutes.

Now, prepare the chicken lollypop batter. In another bowl, add all-purpose flour, cornflour, salt, red chilli powder, pepper powder, ginger-garlic paste, spring onions, and water, little by little, to form a medium-thick batter.

Heat oil for deep frying in a pan on medium flame. Dip each marinated chicken in batter and drop it in hot oil. Flip it after a couple of minutes and fry until the chicken is crispy on the outside. Transfer the fried lollypops to a paper towel to absorb any excess oil. Repeat the process for the remaining chicken.

Serve it with schezwan sauce or sweet chilli sauce.



Paneer Tikka Skewers

- Ingredients**  
150g greek yogurt  
1tbsp ginger-garlic paste  
2tbsp mustard oil  
2tsp coriander powder  
1tsp chaat masala,  
1tsp red chilli powder  
¾tsp garam masala  
1tsp kasuri methi – crushed  
½tsp salt, juice of one lemon  
2tbsp chopped coriander  
300g paneer - cut into big cubes/slices  
1 large onion – chopped into 2cm cubes  
1 bell pepper – chopped into 3cm pieces  
Mint chutney – to serve

**Method**  
Whisk the yogurt in a large bowl until smooth. Add all the ingredients for marinade to the yogurt - ginger garlic paste, mustard oil, coriander powder, chaat masala, Kashmiri red chilli powder, garam masala, kasuri methi and salt. Whisk to combine everything together, add the lemon juice and the chopped coriander. Mix well.

Now, stir in the paneer cubes, onion and bell peppers. Mix until all the paneer pieces and veggies are well coated with the marinade. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for minimum 1-4 hours.

When ready to grill, mount the chicken pieces, alternated with the veggies, onto bamboo skewers. You may drizzle a little oil over the skewers, if you wish so. Place the skewers on a grill plate over gas or on a grill rack in the oven and grill for 6-8 minutes, turning sides, till the veggies and paneer get charred corners. You may also cook in an airfryer for 10-12 minutes. Once done, remove and sprinkle chaat masala and lemon juice. Serve as a starter or anytime snack.



Calamari Rings

- Ingredients**  
4 cups vegetable oil for frying  
1 pound squid - cleaned and sliced into rings  
1tbsp garlic powder  
½tbsp onion powder  
½tsp sea salt, ½tsp dried oregano  
½tsp dried basil  
½tsp dried parsley  
½tsp paprika, ¼tsp cayenne pepper  
½tsp ground white pepper  
½ cup all-purpose flour  
1 lemon - cut into wedges  
¼ cup marinara sauce - warmed

**Method**  
Preheat oil to 180° C in a deep frying pan, or pot. Coat squid with a mixture of garlic powder, onion powder, salt, oregano, basil, parsley, paprika, cayenne, and white pepper in a medium bowl. Mix thoroughly. Then dip and coat with flour and toss to dredge.  
Fry squid in the hot oil, in batches, until light brown - 2 to 3 minutes. Do not overcook, or squid will be tough and chewy. Drain on paper towels. Serve with lemon wedges and marinara sauce.

Thread Chicken

- Ingredients**  
400g chicken breasts  
½ cup flour  
¼ cup corn flour  
½tsp black pepper powder  
½tsp paprika  
Salt, to taste  
1-2tbsp chilli sauce  
1tsp garlic paste  
1 egg – whisked  
10 filo pastry sheets  
Oil for deep frying

**Method**  
Cut the chicken breasts into neat strips – 8-10cm long. Take the strips in a clean bowl, add flour, cornflour, black pepper, paprika, salt, chilli sauce, garlic paste, egg, a little water, and mix well to form a thick smooth paste. Leave it to marinate for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, take spring roll sheets and cut them into thin strips, like noodles. Take a bunch of strips and wrap them around the chicken strips tightly.

Heat oil for deep frying on medium-low flame, and fry the chicken till golden brown. The heat is kept less so that the strips do not burn out before the chicken is cooked within.

Remove on paper napkins and serve hot with any favourite dip.



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take a break

IN TOWN

WELCOME RECEPTION



The British Business Forum held a reception to welcome H E Dr Liane Saunders, OBE, the new British amabassador in Oman



Photos: V K Shafeer

DDA felicitation



Delicious Dance Academy (DDA) felicitated its dance troupe which recently triumphed at the Global Dance Open championship in Spain



Photos: V K Shafeer

BOGGLER

|   |   |    |   |
|---|---|----|---|
| F | T | H  | M |
| G | E | Qu | M |
| E | A | D  | E |
| U | S | I  | A |

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY:

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

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

TRIVIA QUIZ - FOR TEENS

1. What is the rarest blood type?



2. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction - which of Newton's Laws states this?



3. How many bones do sharks have?

Answer : 1. Ab negative  
2. The third law of motion  
3. None

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

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your ambitions have not all come to fruition, but that doesn't mean that you have failed in any way. There is a time and place for everything, so don't get distracted if that big brass ring has escaped your grasp yet again. This isn't the end of your options, so don't beat yourself up about it. Instead, focus your energy on attaining some other new goal.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

You need to be more mindful of your role in every conversation you have today. People are going to be saying very important things and you need to catch every detail as it's tossed out. Taking notes wouldn't be a bad idea. This is a good time for you to gather information on a project or opportunity you're considering.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

A foreign accent will be like music to your ears today, evoking thoughts of exotic locales and reminding you that you need to plan your next vacation! Whenever you get a taste of wanderlust, you should act on it! Poke around some travel websites, flip through some travel magazines, and pull out your list of all the places you want to go someday.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Remember, you don't need to spend a lot of money to have a lot of fun. If you've been turning down social invitations for the sake of a bigger bank account, you could be penalizing yourself for no good reason. Let your people know that you're pinching pennies, and they'll be happy to adjust their proposed plans to be a little bit more modest.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

The person you'll be spending a lot of time with today might not be patient enough to listen to every word you're saying, so try not to make today the day that you confess anything major or bring up a delicate topic. But just because they aren't fully engaged doesn't mean that you won't have a great time with them. It's just not the right day to make a deep connection.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Life isn't always black and white, although some people you'll be dealing with today think that way. You can ask another person to be open-minded, but you can't force them to be. So if you get frustrated by a narrow-minded person today, don't try to change them. They have chosen to have this attitude about things.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If you really want to make a connection with someone, either in a professional or romantic capacity, you will need to increase the level of dialogue you're having with them. Small talk makes for shallow connections, and what you want right now is depth. So ask them about their childhood memories. Find out what their scariest moment was.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today, your focus should be on your own problems and whatever is going on at home with one of your older relatives. If they need any attention from you, you should do whatever it takes to give it to them. Cancel a date, postpone a trip, make a long-distance phone call. They miss the your voice and could benefit from a conversation.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You could encounter someone today whose mind is so closed that you wonder if any sunshine ever gets in there. Their narrow-minded attitudes are going to hinder your progress even if they have nothing to do with your workload. It's going to be next to impossible for you not to try to get them to open their minds.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Watch out for impulse buying right now. You might think you can't live your life any longer without a certain item, but you're wrong. And if you think about it for a few minutes, you'll realize that for yourself. Spending a big chunk of money right now could be a mistake, so you should just try to avoid putting yourself in any situation where you have the urge to buy.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

It's all in your head today. In other words, you can alter your reality by simply thinking differently than you have been. Feeling unattractive? Simply remind yourself that you are indeed very attractive, and people will start seeing it. Worried you won't pass a test? Tell yourself that you'll do as well as you can and then you will.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Try to be more open to change in your life today. Because if you are, you could enjoy a wonderful last-minute adventure! If you get too stuck on following your schedule to the letter, you'll miss out on some fun, spontaneous stuff. Good for you for wanting to cross things off your list, but is there any harm in putting a few things off for the sake of a picnic?

entertainment

HOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW:  
**MEG2: THE TRENCH**  
Genre: Science fiction, thriller  
Starring: Jason Statham, Wu Jing,  
Sophia Cai, Page Kennedy

UNDERWATER  
THRILLS AND SPILLS



**M**eg 2: *The Trench* is a 2023 science fiction action film directed by Ben Wheatley, with screenplay by Jon Hoeber, Erich Hoeber, and Dean Georgaris. It is based on the 1999 novel *The Trench* by Steve Alten.

A sequel to *The Meg* (2018), the film has also been named *Shark 2* in some territories. Like the first film, it follows a group of scientists who must outrun and outswim the titular Megalodons when a malevolent mining operation threatens their mission and forces them into a high-stakes battle for survival.

Five years after the events of the first film, Jonas Taylor has been involved in fighting environmental crimes while also helping Mana One in exploring a further deep part of the Mariana Trench where the Megalodon has been found.

Following the death of Suyin Zhang, Taylor has been raising her teenaged daughter Meiyang alongside her uncle and Suyin's brother Ji-uming Zhang, who has acquired his father's company alongside wealthy financier Hillary Driscoli.

Taylor and Jiuming lead a routine submersible exploration to the Trench, with Meiyang stowing away to see the trench for the first time – the rest is a bagful of underwater thrills and spills, and while some enjoy the second installments, others say it was damp squib compared to part 1.

You notice, that instead of focusing on the fugitive meg who escapes while the crew is busy, Jonas and his crew are sent deep into the ocean to the trench that the megalodons have called home for centuries.

And, if you think director Wheatley might bring in some of his earlier prowess, as seen in *Kill List* and *In the Earth*, you will be quite disappointed.

Until the final half-hour, when some real action surfaces, the movie drags on and you could've walked out by then. And you don't have to be a filmmaker to be amused as to why the giant shark takes a backseat to an evil underwater drilling operation. Good watch, anyway.

Rating ★★★★★

Scout jamboree SOS issued to BTS megastars

With national embarrassment building over the World Scout Jamboree evacuations, a South Korean lawmaker has issued an SOS to supergroup BTS.

The K-pop megastars are currently on a hiatus with two members - Jin and J-Hope - performing their mandatory military service, and another member, SUGA, set to enlist shortly. South Korea's military should give them a leave pass so they can briefly reunite and perform for the thousands of mostly teenagers from around the world left stranded by the jamboree fiasco, according to lawmaker Sung Il-jong.

COMING SOON

SOUND OF FREEDOM

The incredible true story of a former government agent turned vigilante who embarks on a dangerous mission to rescue hundreds of children from sex traffickers.

Genre: Action  
Starring: Jim Caviezel, Mira Sorvino, Bill Camp  
Language: English



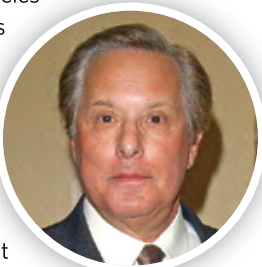
‘THE EXORCIST’  
DIRECTOR  
WILLIAM  
FRIEDKIN DIES

**W**illiam Friedkin, the groundbreaking US director of *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection*, died on Monday, a family friend disclosed. He was 87.

Friedkin passed away in Los Angeles after suffering unspecified health issues in recent years, said Stephen Galloway, a former *Hollywood Reporter* executive editor.

"He died this morning," confirmed Galloway, after speaking with Friedkin's wife. "The director had been working until a few weeks ago but had been in declining health," he added.

Oscar-winning director Guillermo del Toro led the tributes on Monday, calling Friedkin 'one of the Gods of Cinema.'



RAPPER TORY LANEZ  
SENTENCED TO TEN  
YEARS IN PRISON

Canadian rapper Tory Lanez, convicted of shooting US artist Megan Thee Stallion in the feet during a drunken argument after a Hollywood party, was sentenced Tuesday to 10 years in prison.

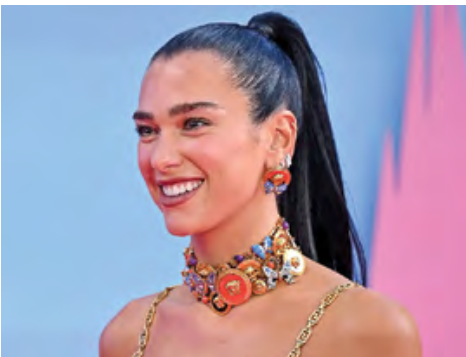
A Los Angeles judge handed down the sentence after hearing how Lanez had ordered the hip-hop star to dance as he shot at her several times while she stood on the road. The sentencing follows Lanez's conviction in December for assault with a semiautomatic firearm, discharging a firearm with gross negligence, and carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm in a vehicle.



JUNGKOOK TOPS  
GLOBAL CHARTS

BTS' Korean singer Jungkook has created history by becoming the first Korean Soloist in Billboard history to top the global charts for three consecutive weeks.

Jungkook's newest solo release *Seven*, featuring Latto, has spent its third week in the top 30 of the Hot 100, ranking at No 30 after two consecutive weeks in the top 10. Last month, Jungkook became the first Korean solo artist ever to simultaneously debut a song at No 1 on Billboard's Hot 100, Global 200, and Global Exclusive US chart when *Seven* debuted in all three charts at No 1.



DUA LIPA SLAMS  
ARTISTS FOR OFTEN  
ADDING PERSONAL  
WOES INTO MUSIC

Dua Lipa doesn't like to discuss her private life in her music.

The 27-year-old pop star has achieved Grammy Award-winning success with hits like *Don't Start Now* and *Break My Heart* but believes that some of her industry peers pour their personal woes into their music as a 'marketing tool' and that she would find it weird if fans were to start analysing her work in that way.

"How confessional can you be? I don't put so much of my life out there for people to dig into the music in this weird, analytical way," she said.

Christian Bale rejected lucrative  
Batman offer with Henry Cavill

**W**hile the DC characters delve in a darker space than MCU, and they have a niche following, Christopher Nolan, over a decade ago entered the scene and made a trilogy that stood beyond the DC vs MCU debate. The *Dark Knight* trilogy that made Christian Bale the *Batman*, is still revered. The next thing one could think of is the

studio wanting to bring back the duo, or at least Bale, but it turns out both denied, and the latter couldn't even be lured by US\$50mn.

Bale debuted as *Batman* in 2005 while Henry Cavill made his debut as *Superman* in 2013. It was said that the studio approached Nolan and Bale for a fourth movie too, but they decided that they would only make three movies, no more.

