

Royal Decree promulgates Maritime Law

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No 19/2023 on the promulgation of the Maritime Law, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman on Thursday.

Article 1 states that the provisions of the Maritime Law attached to this decree will be enforced.

Article 2 stipulates that the Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology will issue the decisions necessary for the execution of the provisions of this attached law. Till such time, the existing regulations and decisions will continue to be enforced without prejudice to the provisions of the attached Maritime Law.

Article 3 cancels the Maritime Law promulgated by Royal Decree No 35/81 and the Law on Regulating Navigation in Regional Territorial Waters promulgated by Royal Decree No 98/81, as well as all that contradicts the attached law or contravenes its provisions.

Article 4 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on the day following its date of publishing.

ONA



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Postpone travel to Marburg affected countries: MoH

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has issued an advisory asking the public to postpone travel to Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea, where an outbreak of Marburg virus disease has been reported.

The ministry, represented by the Directorate General of Diseases Surveillance and Control and Emergency Management Centre, is monitoring the Marburg Virus Disease (MVD) outbreak in the two African countries, it stated.

Marburg virus disease is a rare but severe hemorrhagic fever, which according to WHO, can have fatality of up to 88 per cent.

Symptoms include fever, fatigue and blood-stained vomit and diarrhoea. There is no approved vaccine or antiviral treatment for it. The Marburg virus is transmitted to human beings from fruit bats. It belongs to the same family of virus that is responsible for the deadly Ebola disease.

In case of an urgent need to be present in the epidemic countries, MoH instructed travellers to take the following precautions to avoid MVD infection:

- ▶ Avoid direct contact with patients with symptoms like fever, muscle ache and skin rash, and



Risk of spread globally is low: WHO

Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, told ONA that the organisation is closely monitoring the emergence of cases of MVD in Africa, and that it is working closely with affected countries to combat the disease.



The outbreak began in Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea. "Currently, the risk of the disease spreading globally is low." He added that WHO aims to prevent an outbreak through virus surveillance and support countries at risk to develop preparedness plans.

visiting areas affected by MVD.

- ▶ Avoid contact with blood and other body fluids of other people.
- ▶ Avoid contact with fruit bats or visiting mines and caves inhabited by such creatures.

ited by such creatures.

- ▶ Avoid contact with animals such as chimpanzees and gorillas.
- ▶ Travellers who are feverish, or

have chills, muscle pain, skin rash, sore throat, diarrhoea, weakness, vomiting, stomach pain and unprovoked bleeding, or bruising during or after travel (till 21 days) should isolate themselves from others and head to the nearest healthcare facility. They should disclose to medical staff whether they have travelled in the infected areas or contacted people with MVD.

MoH said it is keeping abreast of the latest developments of the epidemiological situation, in contact with concerned authorities in public health emergencies, and updating procedures according to follow-up data.

Oman: Racism challenges UN Charter and human rights declaration

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman stressed that racism poses a challenge to the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a speech by the sultanate's delegation at the 52nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland.

The delegation stated that the

continuation of hatred and intolerance increases the possibility of depriving people and nations their rights to development and well-being for ethnic or religious reasons, as their rights are affected by stigmatisation, humiliation, non-integration or isolation.

In a speech, the sultanate focused on the discrimination that Muslims in many countries are

subjected to, whether against their persons or against their religious symbols and face provocations, such as burning copies of the Holy Quran under the pretext of freedom of expression.

"Racism poses a challenge to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, destabilises societies, weakens governments, im-

pedes development opportunities, and undermines the integration of peoples," the delegation added.

The delegation noted the experiences of the sultanate in this field and its many initiatives. "They stem from a well-established policy and guidelines based on supporting a culture of coexistence and spreading tolerance among peoples."

S&P upgrades Oman's outlook to 'positive'

Our Correspondent Muscat

S&P Global Ratings has upgraded its outlook on Oman to 'positive' from 'stable', mainly due to the government's improving fiscal performance. At the same time, S&P has affirmed Oman's sovereign credit ratings at 'BB/B'.

"The positive outlook reflects our view that the government's fiscal and economic reform programme could strengthen Oman's fiscal position beyond our current assumptions, adding a greater degree of resilience against the economy's structural susceptibility to adverse oil price shocks," S&P stated on Friday.

Last year, S&P upgraded Oman's sovereign credit ratings twice on improving fiscal position due to government reforms and higher oil prices.

S&P on Friday indicated that it could further raise the ratings on Oman over the next 12 months if ongoing reforms further strengthen the sultanate's fiscal position, due to a continued reduction in government net debt and interest costs.

"A stronger economic growth trajectory could also contribute to an upgrade," the rating agency added.

Oman's government returned to a fiscal surplus last year with a preliminary estimate of 5.3 per cent of GDP in 2022 after seven years of deficits. S&P forecasts general government fiscal surpluses in 2023 and 2024, following a RO1.15bn surplus in 2022.

Omani government is repairing its balance sheet, with debt repayments and strong nominal GDP growth reducing its gross debt stock to 40% of GDP in 2022, from over 60% in 2021

S&P GLOBAL RATINGS

"We expect fiscal surpluses will continue in 2023 and 2024. Government reform efforts and favourable oil prices will support fiscal surpluses over next two years," the rating agency said.

According to S&P, Oman's fiscal and external positions are benefiting from government reforms and higher oil prices. The sultanate's government used windfall oil revenue over 2022 to reduce debt to RO17.6bn (40 per cent of GDP) from RO20.8bn (61 per cent of GDP) at year-end 2021.

"We understand that the government repaid RO511mn in debt in January 2023 and made additional repayments in March 2023. We estimate year-end 2023 government debt at RO16.5bn (37 per cent of GDP). The reduced debt stock, along with forecast fiscal surpluses in 2023 and 2024, will increase fiscal policy space," S&P noted.

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Ramadan Mubarak



Eco-friendly boat sails across 7 governorates to mark Ramadan

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To mark the holy month of Ramadan and promote sports in communities, the Governorate of Musandam and OQ, in co-operation with the Ministry of Education, launched Marsa al Khair on Thursday.

Marsa al Khair comprises a team sailing the waters off the seven coastal governorates of the sultanate in an eco-friendly boat using wind energy.

Considered the first of its kind in the sultanate to sail across the coastal governorates during Ramadan, Marsa al Khair showcases the strong connection of



Omanis with the sea and the maritime legacy of the country to the younger generation.

Marsa al Khair was flagged off on Thursday by H E Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidi, Gov-

ernor of Musandam, from where it will sail to North Batinah, South Batinah, South Sharqiyah, Dhofar and Al Wusta, before ending in Muscat.

Several sports and recreational activities for school students and families are planned at every port of call.

'Marsa al Khair aims to encourage school students to engage in beach and traditional games, spread awareness of the significance of sports on health, and provide opportunities for young people and companies to cooperate in community partnership projects, while raising awareness on the role of OQ's community initiatives in the governorates,' a media

statement said.

'OQ seeks to enhance community partnerships in its operations and activities in the local community, as well as strengthen its cooperation with government entities and the private sector,' it added.

N Batinah launches activities for youth during Ramadan



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Governorate of North Batinah launched a special programme for the promotion of religious and spiritual values among youth during the month of Ramadan last week.

The month-long programme - called Siraj - was launched under the patronage of Mohammed Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of North Batinah, in the presence of several walis and directors of government departments.

Launching the programme, Sulaiman Hamad al Sunaidi, Director General of North Batinah Municipality and Chairman of the Organising Committee of Siraj, said that although the events are distributed in all wilayats of the governorate, the

main activities will be held in Sohar Public Park.

An estimated 1,500 youth will participate in various events that are designed to help them learn religious and spiritual values, benefiting from the free time available during Ramadan.

Siraj will include a variety of activities, such as debates, cultural events and football, volleyball and chess competitions.

Activities for memorisation of the Holy Quran and poems, besides development of oratory skills, will find a special place in the month-long programme that will also include religious lectures.

According to Sunaidi, the events will be held alongside exhibitions for productive families and owners of small and medium enterprises in all the wilayats.



Fak Kurbah secures release of 319 prisoners

Muscat - To date this Ramadan, 319 debtors have been released from prisons through the Fak Kurbah initiative run by Omani Lawyers' Association (OLA).

The initiative helps raise funds to pay off debts of people serving sentences in insolvency cases.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, an OLA official said, "We have succeeded in securing the release of more detainees by settling all their financial obligations, taking the total number freed so far to 319."

Of the total, 98 were released from prison in North Batinah, 54 in Dhahirah, 42 in Buraimi, 32 in South Sharqiyah, 29 in Muscat, 26 in South Batinah, 20 in Dakhliyah, 13 in North Sharqiyah, four in Dhofar and one in Musandam.

Now in its tenth edition, Fak Kurbah was launched on March 17 this year and will continue till mid-April.

Those wishing to contribute to the cause can donate through Bank Muscat A/C No 0317024849660014.

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MHT invites bids for restoration of two heritage sites in N Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has invited interested companies to bid for the restoration of Sohar Fort and Sur al Maghabsha Wall in the wilayat of Suwaiq in North Batinah governorate.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'Interested parties are expected to submit a letter of expression of interest and an action plan on how to restore the two sites.'

Applicants will also have to provide details of their organisational structure, including detailed data on shareholders and partners, and previous experience in the field.

The deadline for submission of tenders is April 19, the ministry informed.

Sur al Maghabsha is a fortification wall built during the reign of Said bin Sultan al Said in the 19th century.

The other site chosen for restoration is Sohar Fort - built in



the 1st century AD.

The fort is perched atop a hill and has five towers. In its vicinity, there are two parks - the Silver Jubilee Park and Sohar Park - ideal places for people to unwind or take a break from the hectic pace of life in the city.

According to MHT, it is focused on the implementation of a number of programmes and initiatives of the Omani Tourism Strategy (2016-40), including the development of 14 tourist projects across the country.

Those projects will be under-

taken taking into account the elements of sustainability, empowerment of local communities, and enhancing their role in protecting their cultural heritage and customs for posterity.

Oman's historical and her-

The ministry is focused on the implementation of a number of programmes and initiatives of the Omani Tourism Strategy, including the development of 14 tourist projects

itage sites are a big attraction both for the domestic and international tourists.

The number of visitors to various historical sites in Oman recorded a significant increase from 7,064 in 2016 to 22,259 in 2020 - posting a 215 per cent growth, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Available data shows that the governorates of North Batinah and Dakhliyah have the highest number of castles and forts.



9th Oman Desert Marathon to be held in January '24

Muscat - The ninth edition of the Oman Desert Marathon (ODM) will be held from January 20-24 next year, the organisers announced.

The 165km long self-sufficient four-stage race has been taking place in Oman's spectacular deserts since 2013, presenting runners with once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to course through the sultanate's unique landscape and enjoy its rich culture and world-renowned hospitality.

The race - spread over four days - covers 42km on day one, 55km on day two, 47km on day three, and 21km on the final day.

The last edition saw the participation of many Omani runners, constituting the majority of the participants coming from various parts of the world.

The 8th edition of the Oman Desert Marathon had participants from Spain, France, Ukraine, Italy, Germany, Poland, Britain, Belgium, Switzerland and Morocco.

The event took an interesting turn, with memorable yet unexpected victories from the Swiss Corina Sommer in the Women's category and Morocco's Mohamed el Morabity in the Men's category.

As for the Omani runners, Saleh al Saidy, Sami al Saidi and Hamdan al Khatri were the top three.

Keeping alive the tradition of the ODM, the ninth edition to take place in Bidiya will have

shorter races one day earlier on January 19. The shorter races - to be held in addition to the main event - will be for 10km, 5km and 2km distances.

The shorter races proved to be quite successful in the last edition.

'Perfect weather conditions in January help runners to enjoy the desert to the fullest. With an average high temperature of 25 degrees during the day, participants are sure to get an enjoyable experience that will forever be etched into their memories', stated a press release.

For those in Muscat, there will also be a chance to participate in a night desert run to be held in Ghala in October next year.

This will be the 2nd edition of the 5km Night Trail charity race, and it will give participants the opportunity to enjoy a run (or a walk) under the beautiful starlit desert sky.

The 165km Oman Desert Marathon Classic also has a night stage, and that was purposely orchestrated with the aim of giving runners the chance to experience the magical desert night sky, as well as to raise environmental awareness and motivate participants to help protect and conserve natural heritage.

The route takes runners across the spectacular Omani land, with all its various landscapes, from the Al Wasil oasis and the vast desert to Al Jawharat Resort.

'Visitors to museums declined 4.5% in 2021'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Museums across Oman saw a slight decrease in the number of visitors from 121,000 in 2020 to 115,255 in 2021.

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) report indicates a fall of 4.5 per cent in 2021, despite the fact that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was easing after it had virtually brought the world to a standstill in 2020.

Museums play a major role in spreading historical awareness among members of society. They bring Arab and foreign cultures and civilisations together, leading to a constructive civilised dialogue in order to reach a contemporary global society living in peace.

The sultanate has several museums, including the National Museum of Oman, the Omani Children's Museum and the Natural History Museum.

NCSI's statistics also show that the number of museums in the sultanate grew from ten in 2015 to 22 in 2021. Of the 22 museums, ten are government run and 12 private.

'The number of visitors to private museums were 18,428 and 96,827 to the government ones,' an NCSI statement said.

It further stated that the government had spent RO237.1mn on heritage and culture projects in 2019.

The average monthly household spending on recreational and cultural activities in the sultanate in 2019 was RO10.5.

Campaign launched to distribute 10,000 wild saplings in Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) launched a campaign to distribute 10,000 saplings of wild trees in the wilayat of Quraiyat in Muscat governorate.

In a statement EA said, 'The authority, in cooperation with the office of the wali in Quraiyat, launched a campaign last week to distribute 10,000 seedlings for free in Quraiyat.'

With the two-day campaign - called 'Quraiyat is Green' - the authority aimed to increase the green area in the wilayat and support the national campaign to plant ten million wild trees.

In January 2020, the EA and Petroleum Development Oman launched a national initiative to plant 10mn wild tree saplings in ten years.

The authority has included species such as ghaf, al samar



and sidr in the programme for which nurseries are being set up.

According to EA, the initiative for planting 10mn wild trees came after achieving successes in other plantation drives, and it embodies the partnership and cooperation between EA and all

the sectors in preserving the environment and achieving sustainable development.

Cultivating of one acre of forest, which is close to the size of a football field, reduces carbon dioxide emissions by 2.5 tonnes per year, the authority added.

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Progress of UAE-Oman railway project reviewed



Muscat – The board of directors of Oman and Etihad Rail Company have praised the leadership of both countries for their support of the joint railway network connecting Sohar Port with the UAE National Rail Network. The backing is set to accelerate the project’s development, fostering sustainable growth, in addition to strengthening economic ties between the two countries.

During their meeting, the board members underscored the significance of this joint project, which marks a new milestone in the relationship between the UAE and Oman. The project aims to facilitate passenger and freight movement, create rewarding job opportunities for professionals in both countries, and foster sustainable development and stronger ties through the development and operation of a safe, secure, and efficient railway network connecting

Oman and the UAE.

Held in Muscat, the meeting was attended by H E Suhail bin Mohamed Faraj Faris al Mazrouei, the UAE’s Minister of Energy and Infrastructure and chairman of Oman and Etihad Rail Company, and H E Eng Saeed bin Hamoud al Maawali, Oman’s Minister of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology and vice chairman of Oman and Etihad Rail Company.

The goal of the meeting was to review the company’s achievements, developments, research, and studies conducted during the recent period, a press release said.

During the meeting, the board members were updated on the progress of the joint network, as well as the results of engineering design reviews and system studies. These studies provide engineering solutions aligned with

international standards and are designed to meet the challenges of local environmental conditions.

The board members also discussed the company’s efforts to ensure the application of international best practices and the adoption of the latest technologies and systems to develop an integrated railway network. These measures guarantee smooth train operations and facilitate seamless border crossings, meeting the requirements for rapid and efficient transportation of passengers and goods.

In February 2023, Oman and Etihad Rail Company signed a cooperation agreement with Mubadala Investment Company, a sovereign investor in Abu Dhabi. This partnership reflects both parties’ commitment to exploring investment opportunities and expanding coopera-

tion in the railway sector, supporting, and accelerating the preparatory work and completion of the UAE-Oman Railway Network project’s implementation plan.

Oman and Etihad Rail Company was established in September 2022, as a joint venture, equally owned by Etihad Rail and Oman Rail with the goal of designing, building, and operating a railway network that links Sohar Port to the UAE National Rail Network, with a total project investment of US\$3bn.

The company will lay the groundwork and workplan for the execution of the project, including its financial mechanisms and schedule, and thus overseeing the design, implementation, and operation of the railway network, which connects Sohar and Abu Dhabi, in line with the standards of the two countries.

OQ Group posts \$3.8bn net profit for 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman’s global integrated energy company OQ Group has announced its full-year 2022 financial results, reporting the highest net profit in the group’s history.

OQ Group’s net profit rose to RO3.85bn for the full year 2022, while its total revenues and adjusted EBITDA stood at RO39.126bn and US\$6.179bn, respectively.

The record performance was driven by strong operational performance in the majority of the group’s businesses and an advantageous market environment, OQ said in a press statement.

The group’s robust performance was higher than both the 2022 budget and 2021 actual performance. This was primarily driven by higher production volumes, favorable prices in both its upstream and downstream businesses and a strong performance from its trading arm.

“This year has been an exceptional year for OQ, witnessing the strongest financial and operational performance in its history, while at the same time anchoring OQ as an energy transition enabler in Oman,” said Mulham al Jarf, OQ Group chairman.

Talal al Awfi, OQ Group chief executive officer said,



“With an increased focus on building financial resilience, improving operations, optimising cost, and establishing an operating model that drives accountability, we are more equipped than ever to face market challenges and be more resilient in the face of adverse conditions.”

OQ manages direct energy investments within the sector such as oil and gas exploration and production, infrastructure and transportation for energy, oil refining, petrochemical production, oil marketing, and power generation. Through strategic partnerships, the group has brought foreign investments to Oman, contributing to the nation’s

economic growth and further enhancing the energy security.

OQ operates across 17 countries covering the energy value chain from exploration and production to marketing and distribution of end-user products to serve more than 3,000 customers across 80 countries. As part of its commitment to responsible growth, OQ strategically applies innovation, technology and extensive experience towards the development of energy opportunities.

OQ’s endeavors are fueled by the vision to be the nation’s partner for energy transition in tandem with Oman’s Vision 2040 to create a progressive and diverse society.

EU deal to nearly double renewable energy by 2030

Brussels, Belgium – The European Union reached a deal Thursday to almost double the share of renewables in the 27-nation bloc’s energy consumption by 2030 amid efforts to become carbon neutral and ditch Russian fossil fuels.

The provisional political agreement, which was reached after nightlong negotiations between the EU parliament and states, seeks to raise the share of renewable energy to 42.5 per cent, from 22 per cent today.

The EU has set an ambitious target to become a “climate neutral” economy by 2050, with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

The move also comes as it has sought to slash dependence on Russian fossil fuels after Moscow cut gas supplies last year and the bloc placed bans on seaborne crude and other petroleum products from the country.

“Renewable energy will... contribute to our energy sovereignty by reducing fossil fuel imports,” European Commission vice president Frans Timmermans said, adding it would also mean cheaper energy for consumers and business.

But environmental groups criticised the agreement, saying it did not go far enough.

“A mandatory 45 per cent target would already be weak and outdated... anything lower than 45 per cent simply shows European disunity and lack of ambition,” said Cosimo Tansini, policy officer for renewable energy at the European Environmental Bureau.

Cutting red tape

The deal is a compromise between the 45 per cent share for renewables that was sought by EU lawmakers and the European Commission, the EU’s executive branch, and the 40 per cent pre-



The provisional agreement between EU states seeks to raise the share of renewable energy to 42.5 per cent, from 22 per cent today

ferred by the states.

The previous target for 2030 had been set at 32 per cent.

The deal says member states should, however, make every effort to achieve 45 per cent.

The proposed directive also seeks cutting red tape for renewable energy projects.

The goal is to “fast-track the deployment of renewable energies” as part of the EU’s plan “to become independent from Russian fossil fuels, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”, said a statement from the Council of the EU which represents the bloc’s governments.

Companies have complained that red tape has slowed the development of such infrastructure.

The agreement includes hydrogen, nuclear power and biomass on the list of sources of renewable energy along with solar and wind technology.

Biomass derives from organic material such as trees, plants and urban waste, and includes the burning of wood to produce electricity.

Scandinavian countries defend the practice, but it is criticised by environmental groups over concerns about its impact

on forests.

Pascal Canfin, chairman of the European Parliament’s environment committee, said the agreement sets strict rules on using biomass.

“The use of biomass is better regulated even if the parliament wanted to go further,” Canfin, of the centrist Renew political group, said.

Markus Pieper, of the right-wing European People’s Party, said the agreement makes biomass “100 per cent green”.

Canfin said the deal also “recognises the specific role of nuclear (energy) which is neither green nor a fossil fuel”.

The inclusion of nuclear power was hotly debated in recent weeks.

Major nuclear energy producer France and its allies wanted “low-carbon hydrogen”, which is made using nuclear energy, to have the same status as hydrogen made from renewables such as solar and wind power.

A group led by Germany had been opposed to including hydrogen produced from nuclear power over concerns it would slow investments in renewables.

AFP



Al Omaniya Financial Services posts RO2.7mn net profit for 2022

Muscat – The annual general meeting (AGM) of Al Omaniya Financial Services Company was held on March 29. The meeting was presided by the company’s chairman Khalid Said al Wahaibi.

At the AGM, Al Omaniya’s shareholders approved the company’s audited financial statements and 12.25 per cent dividend (comprising of 7.25 per cent cash dividend and 5 per cent unsecured compulsorily convertible bonus stock bonds).

The company’s board of directors appreciated the meas-

ures taken by the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority with a view to strengthening the financial sector in the sultanate.

In a press release, Aftab Patel, CEO of Al Omaniya Financial Services, said that the company’s loan book stood at RO132mn and total revenues stood at RO14.754mn for the year ended December 31, 2022.

Al Omaniya’s pre-tax profit stood at RO3.236mn and its net profit came at RO2.750mn for the full year 2022. The com-

pany’s earnings per share is 9bz and net worth of the company stands at RO69.9mn. The book value of the share is 219bz.

Patel noted that the company has a well diversified portfolio of assets with the lowest non-performing assets (NPA) ratio of 2.99 per cent in the finance and leasing industry.

Al Omaniya’s cumulative expected credit loss (ECL) provisions towards installment finance receivables, including special reserve for non-performing assets, stand at RO18,420K

which covers 464 per cent of the non-performing assets.

Patel further stated that Al Omaniya has been at the forefront of issuing innovative financial instruments and that the company has pioneered the issue of bonus stock convertible bonds as dividends over several years. He added that Al Omaniya has been paying consistent dividend and has the unique distinction of paying dividend every single year since inception. The cumulative total dividend paid so far is 478.58 per cent.

Inflation at 50-year high in crisis-hit Pakistan

Islamabad, Pakistan – Pakistan’s year-on-year inflation hit 35.37 per cent in March – the highest in nearly five decades – as the government scrambled to meet International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditions to unlock a desperately needed bailout.

Month-on-month inflation was 3.72 per cent, according to government data released Saturday, while the average inflation rate for the past year was 27.26 per cent.

Years of financial misman-

agement and political instability have pushed Pakistan’s economy to the brink of collapse, exacerbated by a global energy crisis and devastating floods that submerged a third of the country in 2022.

The country needs billions of dollars of financing to service existing debt, while foreign exchange reserves have dwindled and the rupee is in freefall.

Poor Pakistanis are feeling the brunt of the economic turmoil, and at least 20 people have been killed since the start

of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in crowd crushes at food distribution centres.

“The way inflation is rising, I believe a famine-like situation has been simmering,” said Shahida Wizarat, a Karachi-based analyst.

At least 12 people were killed Friday in a crowd crush in Pakistan’s southern city of Karachi at a factory distributing Ramadan alms.

The South Asian nation – home to more than 220mn – is deep in debt and must enact

tough tax reforms and push up utility prices if it hopes to unlock another tranche of a US\$6.5bn IMF bailout and avoid defaulting.

Inflation is expected to stay at “elevated” levels, the finance ministry said, “owing to market frictions caused by relative demand and supply gap of essential items, exchange rate depreciation and recent upward adjustment of administered prices of petrol and diesel.”

AFP

Eurozone and US inflation slow, bringing respite to policymakers

Brussels, Belgium – Eurozone inflation slowed sharply in March while US price increases eased last month as well, official data showed Friday, offering some relief to policymakers.

The data released on both sides of the Atlantic will provide central banks some respite as they carefully balance taming inflation with interest rate rises, against the risks that more hikes could hurt their banking sectors.

Consumer prices rose by 6.9 per cent on an annual basis in the eurozone, down from 8.5 per cent in February, according to the European Union's statistics agency.

It is the lowest rate recorded in a year, and a lower figure than analysts expected as well.

But the eurozone's core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, edged up to 5.7 per cent in March from 5.6 per cent a month earlier.

Core eurozone inflation "is still significantly too high", European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde told students in Italy on Friday after the figures were released.

In the US, the Federal Reserve's preferred measure of inflation slowed in February also, according to Commerce Department data released Friday.

The annual personal consumption expenditures price index (PCE) slowed to 5 per cent in February from 5.3 per cent a month earlier, with increases recorded in the cost of food, energy and goods.

Core PCE, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, only slowed slightly to log an annual increase of 4.6 per cent in February, down from 4.7 per cent in January.

"I think that's good news for the Fed but, you know, it's part of an ongoing challenge," Citigroup global chief economist Nathan Sheets told AFP in an interview.

In a statement released Friday, US President Joe Biden said: "We are making progress in the fight against inflation."

Inflation still too high

Despite the positive developments announced Friday, inflation still remains well above the central banks' two-per cent targets.

The Fed and ECB have both raised interest rates repeatedly to tame high inflation, although recent turbulence in the banking sector has added some complications.

In the eurozone, inflation remains elevated despite falling



The European Central Bank (ECB) headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany. Eurozone analysts expect further rate hikes by ECB to tackle rising prices

from a peak of 10.6 per cent in October.

But in March, energy prices fell by 0.9 per cent after rising by 13.7 per cent in February, according to Eurostat, the first drop since February 2021.

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent oil and gas prices soaring last year, they have become more stable in recent months, helped also by mild weather.

Eurozone food and drink

prices rose by 15.4 per cent in March, compared with 15 per cent in the previous month, according to Eurostat.

"This indicates that price pressures remain high for the moment, although this should improve in the coming months," ING senior eurozone economist Bert Colijn said.

After nine interest rate increases since March 2022, Fed chair Jerome Powell suggested the US central bank may only raise rates once more before bringing its current hiking cycle to a halt – but only if the data supported it.

"The Fed needs to see more marked, sustained, cooling inflationary pressures – and specifically in non-sheltered services – before they're comfortable and are able to kind of stand down on the fight against inflation," Sheets from Citi told AFP.

Eurozone analysts also expect to see further rate rises to tackle rising prices.

"Descending headline inflation thanks to cooling energy prices will not be enough for the ECB to stop tightening, as policymakers are looking for clear signs of core inflation easing," said Riccardo Marcelli Fabiani, economist at Oxford Economics.

ING's Colijn added in a note: "The potential for core inflation to remain stickier than hoped will be the main reason for the ECB to continue to hike in the near term. We expect another 25bp hike in May and another in June."

Inflation slows across Europe

Inflation slowed in some of Europe's biggest economies in March, fueling hopes that the region is past the worst price increases.

In Germany, annual price growth slowed to 7.4 per cent in March from 8.7 per cent in the first two months of 2022.

The annual inflation rate came in at 5.6 per cent in France in March, compared to 6.3 per cent the previous month.

The slowdown was more pronounced in Spain, with inflation coming in at 3.3 per cent compared to six per cent in February.

Among the 20 countries that use the euro, Luxembourg had the lowest inflation rate in February at 3.0 per cent, Eurostat said.

According to other Eurostat data published Friday, the unemployment rate in the eurozone remained stable in February at 6.6 per cent.

AFP

IMF approves \$15.6bn Ukraine loan package

Washington, US – The International Monetary Fund has approved a US\$15.6bn support package for Ukraine to assist with the conflict-hit country's economic recovery, the fund said in a statement Friday.

Russia's invasion has devastated Ukraine's economy, causing activity to contract by around 30 per cent last year, destroying much of its capital stock and spreading poverty, according to the IMF.

The outbreak of war has rippled through the global economy, fueling global inflation through rising wheat and oil prices. The two-step program will look to stabilize the country's economic situation while the war continues, before turning to "more ambitious structural reforms" after the end of hostilities, IMF deputy managing director Gita Gopinath said in a statement.

The 48-month Extended Fund Facility approved by the fund's board is worth roughly US\$15.6bn.

It forms the IMF's portion of a US\$115bn overall support package comprised of debt relief, grants and loans by multilateral and bilateral institutions, the IMF's Ukraine mission chief Gavin Gray told reporters on Friday.

AFP

Elon Musk defends paid Twitter as blue tick ultimatum looms

Washington, US – Elon Musk has defended his controversial pay model for Twitter, claiming that any social media platform that didn't follow suit would fail because they would be swarmed by bots.

Musk made his prediction on the eve of Twitter's April 1 ultimatum that verified accounts with the cherished blue tick that had not forked over cash would lose it.

"The fundamental challenge here is that it's (easy) to create literally 10,000 or 100,000 fake Twitter accounts using just one computer at home and with modern AI (artificial intelligence)," Musk told a question and answer session on Twitter.

"That's the reason for really pressing hard on verified where the verified requires a number from a reputable phone carrier and a credit card," Musk said.

"My prediction is that any so-called social media network that doesn't do this will fail," Musk added.

The change in system puts pressure on companies, journalists and celebrities who used Twitter as their main channel of communication and relied on the blue tick for credibility.



In this file photo, a phone screen displays a photo of Elon Musk with the Twitter logo shown in the background (AFP)

And it also raises the specter of imposters and jokesters paying for an officially verified, but totally fake account.

In the US, the subscription plan, known as Twitter Blue, costs US\$8 a month or US\$84 a year, or US\$11 a month if bought through Apple's app store.

Since its creation in 2009, the blue tick or checkmark became a signature element that helped the platform become a trusted forum for news makers and campaigners.

But Musk and his fans said the blue check was decided by fiat in a secretive procedure and called it a symbol of an unfair class system.

Opening the blue tick to paying subscribers was among the first decisions made by Musk when he took ownership of Twitter last year, but his overhaul backfired.

Within hours, Twitter was flooded by fake yet verified accounts impersonating celebrities, major companies and even Musk himself.

Musk swiftly backtracked, but many advertisers fled the site, denying Twitter a major source of income that the CEO is struggling to replace.

For now, blue checks of celebrities – including Justin Bieber and his 113mn followers or footballer Cristiano Ronaldo and

his 108mn – are tagged on the site as "legacy" accounts.

The verified account conundrum also involves officials, charities and news media companies.

Already the White House, which will keep a special designation as a government entity, told employees it would not pay to have its staff's official Twitter profiles keep the blue tick, Axios reported.

News media companies, firms and charities already lost their blue tick and were tagged as verified business accounts under Musk's new system.

According to Twitter's website, these cost a hefty fee of US\$1,000 a month in the United States, and US\$50 for each additional affiliated account.

"This will be awful for those who can't afford the new fees," said Andrew Stroehlein, European Media Director of Human Rights Watch, who said his group would not pay for the privilege.

"It will damage the effectiveness of local activists, including human rights activists, who have long used Twitter for grassroots organizing," he added in a blog post.

AFP

UAE revokes Russian bank's licence after US sanctions

Abu Dhabi, UAE – A Russian bank hit by US sanctions will be forced to cease operations in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates' central bank said Friday.

MTS Bank, which had earned an Emirati licence last year, was among more than 200 entities and individuals targeted by a wave of sanctions last month on the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The UAE central bank said in a statement that "it has been decided to cancel MTS Bank's Abu Dhabi licence... and close the branch" in the Emirati capital "within six months".

"This decision comes after considering the available options regarding the new status of MTS Bank, and taking into account the sanctions risks associated with



the bank after the designation."

During the six-month period to "wind down its operations", the Russian bank would be barred from opening new accounts and carrying out any transactions apart from clearing prior obligations, the central bank said.

It had announced in late February it was "studying... the available options" after the US measures.

Senior US officials visited earlier this year for talks with UAE authorities, including the central bank, on evasion of sanctions on Russia and Iran as well as money laundering and financing of groups deemed "terrorist".

The UAE has maintained a neutral stance towards Russia's war. The oil-rich Gulf monarchy and its financial hub Dubai have attracted Russian professionals and businesspeople fleeing the impact of Western sanctions since the invasion in February 2022.

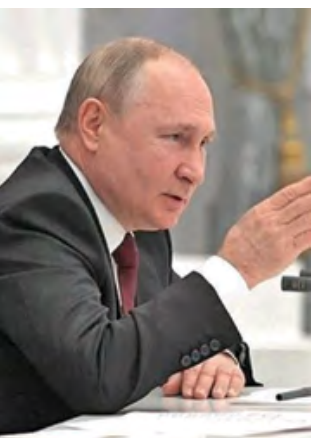
AFP

Putin warns about negative effects of sanctions on Russian economy

Moscow, Russia – Russian President Vladimir Putin warned his government on Thursday about the possible negative effects of Western sanctions on the country's economy.

Putin said at a meeting with Cabinet ministers in Moscow that, in general, Russia adopted to the restrictive measures but "illegitimate restrictions in the medium term can really have a negative impact."

He urged the ministers to in-



Vladimir Putin

crease the efficiency of the economy and support projects aimed at the country's technological and infrastructure development.

Putin noted that last week during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Moscow and Beijing designated eight areas of cooperation.

"These include the creation of technological partnerships, interconnected infrastructure development, cooperation in the financial sector and the real

sector," he said.

Putin added that at another meeting last week with business representatives he discussed a new growth model for the economy and what needs to be done to support it.

"I propose that today, together with members of the government and the leadership of the Central Bank, we also discuss this topic, return to what business and I discussed with you," he said.

Anadolu Agency

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SUMMARY OF ASSETS AND LIABILITES AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2022					
ASSETS	31.12.2022 (RO' 000)	31.12.2021 (RO' 000)	LIABILITIES	31.12.2022 (RO' 000)	31.12.2021 (RO' 000)
1. CASH IN HAND	1,028	948	1. CAPITAL AND RESERVE	1,440	1,264
2. DEPOSITED WITH CENTRAL BANK OF OMAN	100	100	2. BORROWING FROM BANKS	-	-
3. PRECIOUS METALS	-	-	3. BALANCES DUE TO BRANCHES	-	-
4. BALANCES DUE FROM BANKS	812	598	4. BALANCES DUE TO MONEY- CHANGER	482	309
5. BALANCES DUE FROM BRANCHES	-	-	5. LOANS AND ADVANCES PAYABLE	-	-
6. BALANCES DUE FROM MONEY-CHANGER	83	36	6. CHEQUES AND DRAFTS ISSUED AND OUTSTANDING	-	-
7. CHEQUES AND DRAFTS PURCHASED	-	-	7. OTHER LIABILITIES	429	651
8. LOANS AND ADVANCES	-	-			
9. INVESTMENTS	-	-			
10. FIXED AND INTANGIBLE ASSETS	27	87			
11. OTHER ASSETS	301	455			
TOTAL	2,352	2,223	TOTAL	2,352	2,223
WE CERTIFY THAT THE ABOVE BALANCES ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH THE BOOKS AND RECORDS OF THE COMPANY AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2022					
16 FEBRUARY 2023			MGI VISION CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS		

ahlibank holds AGM, EGM



ahlibank held its annual general meeting (AGM) and an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) on an electronic platform through Muscat Clearing and Depository's website, on March 27.

Presided over by Hamdan Ali Nasser al Hinaï, chairman of the ahlibank board of directors, the meeting was attended by the board members, senior management, and shareholders.

During the extraordinary general meeting, the shareholders approved the amendments to the Articles of Association of Ahli Bank SAOG. In addition to this, the shareholders have also approved the issuance of a total number of up to 100 Million Perpetual Additional Tier 1 Capital Instruments in the form of perpetual bonds, by way of either a private or public issue at face value of One Rial per bond plus issues expense in one or multiple tranches.

Issuance tranches to be determined by the bank's board of di-

rectors after taking all the required procedures and obtaining the approval of the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority.

During the course of the annual general meeting, shareholders approved the board of directors's report on the bank's activities and its financial position for the financial year ending on December 31, 2022. Shareholders also approved the bank's organisation and management report (corporate governance report), auditor's report on the bank's audited financial statements and the sharia'a compliance report of Ahli Islamic for the year ending on December 31 last year.

Moreover, bank's shareholders approved the distribution of a cash dividend of 9 baizas per share. Further, the general assembly was informed of related party transactions the Bank completed during the previous fiscal year.

"The bank has completed 15 years since its establishment as a commercial bank. As a team, we have been able to unlock our true potential and experience competitive success despite market challenges," said Hamdan al Hinaï, speaking on the sidelines of the AGM.

"We have already established our credentials in the country with a rich portfolio of products and services, and are now buoyed by the consistent growth in our customer base, which is equally complemented by investor confidence."

The AGM also conducted an election to acclimate new members to the Board of Directors of the bank for the coming period. It approved the Board's Performance Report and criteria for the Performance Approval of the Board of Directors.

Additionally, a third party was appointed to appraise the Board's performance for the financial year ending on 31 De-

cember 2023 and determine their fees. External auditors and external sharia'a auditors were also appointed for the same period.

Highlighting the Bank's strategy to focus on a lower cost-cutting base by introducing new products and expanding retail branches, Hinaï added: "Our vision to be a vibrant and innovative center of banking through our customer-centric approach to business, has helped us amplify our market presence and bolster our relationships with our patrons.

"We will ensure that the year unfolds several new innovative products and digital technologies to strengthen our key performance indicators. Our intent to stay connected with our customers and to meet their changing requirements will further augment our growth curve. Our commitment is, first and foremost, to our people and our country."



Rolls-Royce Muscat wins two awards at regional conference

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Muscat team triumphed with a double win at the Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Regional Dealers Conference in Dubai, UAE recently.

The Muscat team won 'Retain' and 'Customer Centricity' Awards for 2022, a release said.

"I am delighted to congratulate Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Muscat on their impressive and well-earned double win at the Regional Dealer Conference," said César Habib, Regional Director for Rolls-Royce Motor Cars, Middle East & Africa.

"The 'Retain' and the overarching 'Customer Centricity' awards are a testament to their exceptional customer service and dedication to the marque, as well as their continuous pursuit of excellence. We are proud to have them as part of our Rolls-Royce family and look forward to their continued success," he fur-

ther added.

On behalf of the Muscat team, Rachid Zamani, Managing Director of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Muscat, said that the every member of the team felt "honoured to receive the Retain award and most importantly the 'Customer Centricity' prestigious award".

At Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Muscat, he stressed that the members are committed to providing their clients with the highest level of service and personalised attention. "I would like to extend my gratitude to my team for their hard work and dedication, without which these accolades wouldn't have been possible."

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Muscat's exceptional high-touch approach towards clients and unwavering dedication to the marque have played a pivotal

role in establishing the brand's success in the region.

Collecting the 'Retain' and 'Customer Centricity' accolades at the Regional Dealer Conference 2022 held in Dubai, the awards were given in recognition of the dealership's exemplary performance in a number of areas including customer retention and its outstanding commitment to delivering the highest levels of service and personalised attention to clients and Provenance performance.

A core part of the global Rolls-Royce family, the team's unique local knowledge, unparalleled experience and professional expertise have ensured deep and lasting relationships with its clientele. The awards acknowledge the dealership's commitment to putting customers at the heart of everything they do, a hallmark of the House of Luxury.

Danube Ramadan cricket enters semifinal stage

Ayan Muscat and MCC qualified for the semifinals of the Danube Ramadan Tennex Ball Cricket Tournament 2022, organised by Al Hail Cricket Team.

The semifinal matches are going to play on Tuesday, the club confirmed in a press statement.

"We are getting full support from the participating team's total of 16 teams divided in four groups, top of each ground will qualify into the semifinal," said Rafeeq Ahmed al Balushi, the chief development officer of Al Hail Cricket Club.

During the weekends, the tournament saw some exciting games on the day eight of tournament. In one of the matches, Ayan Muscat won the toss and elected to bat first and managed to score 68 in 10 overs loss of nine wickets. In reply, Direction Bravos scored 58 runs in 10 overs loss of 8 wickets and lost the match by 10 runs.

Bilal from Ayan Muscat was declared man of the match.



The second match was played between Abeer Warriors and Qureshi XI. Abeer captain Husain won the toss and elected to bat first.

The team was able to score 83 runs losing of 10 wickets in 9.4 overs with Saud scoring 20

runs in 12 balls. Ovais al Taf scored 17 runs.

In reply Qureshi XI scored 52 runs with loss of six wickets in 10 overs. Abeer Warriors won the match by 31 runs.

Abeer's Ovais was declared man of the match.



NBO partners with Nidaa charity to support 'meaningful CSR' initiatives

As part of its commitment to creating positive change in communities across the nation, National Bank of Oman (NBO) launched its annual Ramadan campaign focusing on local charities and community groups.

The campaign kicked-off with a bake sale fundraising event, which was organised by NBO employees to support meaningful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

This year, NBO partnered with the Nidaa Charity Team in view of the 'Bab al Rayyan' initiative to provide meals to outdoor work-

ers and people stuck in traffic during iftar, this initiative serves the community as well as the women who prepare these meals, that happen to be from low-income families.

Sherifa al Maskari, Head of Brand at National Bank of Oman, said, "Marking the Holy Month of Ramadan, our annual campaign has become a meaningful tradition at National Bank of Oman, especially to employees who want to make a real difference in their communities and beyond.

"We therefore focus on partnerships and initiatives that have

a measurable, authentic and sustainable social impact, which is also aligned with our broader Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy."

The 'Shahr al Attaa' Ramadan campaign is part of NBO's broader CSR programme, which so far has resulted in tens of thousands of Omani Rials to support a variety of sustainable and community-centred initiatives.

In addition to the partnership with the Nidaa Charity Team and fundraising activities, NBO also reaches out to as many underprivileged families as possible

through their food hamper distribution. Additionally, the bank organises an annual 'Qaranqasho' festival event for the less fortunate children, and distributes gifts to them during Eid-al-Fitr.

NBO has long been an active participant in local charities and initiatives that aim to support communities, especially during this special time of the year. 'Through CSR initiatives, we will continue to seize opportunities and work together with key partners to unlock opportunities that drive progress, prosperity and create value for Oman', it added.

Ooredoo, Shell Oman launch 'one-of-a-kind' customer promotion

Ooredoo has partnered with Shell Oman Marketing Company to launch a unique customer promotion to win exciting gifts; from on-net calls to social and local data.

On purchasing Shell Helix Lubricants, customers will receive a voucher card and the code simply needs to be entered into the Ooredoo App to redeem one of the great prizes available. The promotion will take place at all Shell service stations across Oman from March 7 to April 30.

Ooredoo is transforming the digital landscape of Oman with an extensive list of value-added

telecommunications solutions, fast and seamless network coverage across Oman, and the cutting edge in digital services.

In addition to its multi-award winning App, Ooredoo's stores, dealers and franchises cover every corner of Oman, staying connected to customers wherever they are.

Commenting on this latest in a long-standing series of ventures with Shell in the B2B and B2C spheres, Ahmed Diwan, Chief Commercial Officer at Ooredoo, said, "Ooredoo has always put the customer first and this latest promotion is just one



more way we are upgrading their world with superior digital services and rewards. We're delighted to be partnering with Shell Oman Marketing Company; to mutually provide amazing value and an unmatched experience, and we look forward to future ventures together."

Khalid al Awaisi, General Manager Mobility, Shell Oman, said, "We are excited to partner with Ooredoo in a campaign to delight our customers. This is a great opportunity for our customers to earn rewards for their loyalty to our brand. We are constantly seeking ways to enrich

our customers' journeys and this partnership is an extension of that commitment."

Shell Oman operates in a multi downstream business providing Retail, Commercial, Lubricants, Marine, Bitumen and Aviation fuel products and services. It has a network of 206 retail service stations. It also has a portfolio of lubricants, including carbon neutral lubricants, which is in line with Oman's National strategy for an orderly transition to net zero.

Customers buying a Shell Helix 4L pack will be able to enjoy this exciting promotion.

Lulu convoy of goodness spreads joy across Oman



In a bid to deliver joy and happiness during the Holy Month of Ramadan, Lulu group rolled out an initiative to distribute special Ramadan grocery kits to 1,000 deserving families across Oman.

A special 'Convoy of Goodness' journeyed across four major governorates in Oman to meet families and distribute Ramadan essentials needed for the

Lulu's aim behind implementing such an initiative was to highlight the importance of sharing and being socially responsible by creating an opportunity to spread happiness to people across Oman during Ramadan

Holy Month.

The campaign was a reflection of Lulu's continued commitment to engage in charitable and humanitarian initiatives and to create a positive impact in the community in which it operates.

Lulu joined hands with N7N volunteer team to implement this

four-day charity campaign. The volunteers travelled across the city as well as the remote areas of Oman and distributed Ramadan kits consisting of a month's worth of groceries needed for an entire family during Ramadan. The convoy covered governorates such as Muscat, Salalah, Sharqiyah and Sohar.

"Ramadan is an occasion that emphasises the values of empathy and generosity," said Shabeer K A, regional director - Oman, while speaking about the initiative. "Lulu's aim behind implementing such an initiative was to highlight the importance of sharing and being socially responsible by creating an opportunity to spread happiness to people across Oman during Ramadan. We thank the N7N Volunteers Team for collaborating with us to carry out this noble initiative. We appreciate their sincerity, dedication and commitment to make this campaign a true success," he added.

Lulu's strategies to support charities, local community-based initiatives, events and projects have helped them build lasting relationships with the local community. The customer-centric group's vision is to work closely with its partners and customers to make a positive difference to people's lives.



Volkswagen Oman sets strategic targets for 2023

Volkswagen Oman, represented by Premium Motors, has announced its strategic targets for 2023, with a focus on lead generation and customer satisfaction.

Under the guidance of general manager Christian Nehme and sales manager Antoine Jbeily, Volkswagen Oman is aiming to achieve higher targets for both new and used car deliveries in 2023. The company recognises the importance of lead generation and customer satisfaction in achieving long-term business success and will be prioritising these areas moving forward.

"We are excited to announce our ambitious goals for 2023," general manager Nehme said.

"Lead generation and customer satisfaction are key areas of focus for us, and we are committed to providing the best possible service to our customers."

In addition to these strategic goals, Volkswagen Oman is also proud to be part of a larger group of automotive brands in Oman that prioritise customer satisfaction.

Audi Oman, also represented by Premium Motors, recently took first place for customer satisfaction in the region and fourth place for lead generation.

"We are proud to be part of a group of automotive brands that prioritize customer satisfaction," added sales manager Jbeily.

Investment delegation from Taiwan to visit Oman

With the efforts and arrangements of Taiwanese and Omani Trade offices, an investment delegation composed of about seven Taiwanese companies and manufacturers will visit Oman from April 29 to May 4, a release said.

The delegation is visiting the sultanate to study the investment environment and look for local partners. The business projects of these companies cover the fields of fish and shrimp farming, cold chain and fishery food processing, electric buses, lithium batteries and energy storage, electric pile charging and AloT, recycled plastics and post-consumer resin, and AI educational robot, among others.

Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Muscat requested Oman's manufacturers - interested in participating in the cooperation - to visit their office and provide the relevant information of the company and contact information for the future course of action.



NBO's Muzn holds Q1 sharia'a supervisory board meeting

In keeping with its mission to provide customers with the latest sharia'a-compliant solutions, Muzn, National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Islamic banking window, recently held its first sharia'a board meeting for the year 2023.

Chairman Sheikh Dr Muhammad Zubair Usmani was joined by Muzn's other members of the board that include HH Sayyid Dr Adham bin Turki al Said, Sheikh Dr Abdulrahman Abdullah al Saadi, and Sheikh Saleh al Kharusi.

During the meeting, the board discussed the bank's latest innovative products, the quarterly sharia'a audit and sharia'a review processes.

"We are committed to fostering the development of the country's growing Islamic finance sector," said Salima al Marzouqi, chief Islamic banking officer.

"Sharia'a compliance is at the heart of what we do and ongoing collaborations with our experienced sharia'a board members allow for constructive engagement among them to further improve our products and services," Salima further said.

She asserted that the bank al-

ways aims to create new possibilities for our customers while ensuring their banking experience is not only seamless but is in keeping with their values as well.

"We have identified many areas on which we will continue to focus our efforts during the upcoming months, while we continue to adapt to new technologies and meet the ever-evolving needs of our customers," she added.

Muzn offers a variety of innovative, competitive and quality financial solutions with the values of sharia'a at the core. Among its

latest products are its Islamic Personal Financing Facility and Kids Wakala account. Meanwhile, customers are now also able to make cash deposits through a diverse network of Cash and Cheque Deposit Machines (CCDMs) operated by NBO, Muzn's parent company.

Moreover, its pioneering digital services continue to grow, with a new Wallet Transfer feature as its latest addition, enabling customers to send and receive money locally and instantly through a mobile number, and Scan & Pay using QR codes.

AVOD's Minara named 'Oman's Most Trusted Brand'

In a rousing testament to its steadfastness as a worthy companion in every kitchen in Oman, Minara, the flagship brand of Areej Vegetable Oils & Derivatives (AVOD) has won Oman's Most Trusted Brand Award 2022. This is the third time that the brand has won the seal of approval from its loyal consumers in Oman.

The ultimate recognition was conferred to AVOD at a gala event held under the auspices of HE Eng Said bin Hamoud bin Said al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, at Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz-Carlton Hotel, in early March.

It was attended by their Highnesses, Excellencies and senior

officials from 50 winning companies along with Oman's crème de la crème from the corporate and media sector.

Oman's Most Trusted Brand Awards is the sultanate's first trust-based brand awards that act as top recognition and validation of public trust in a brand. The winners are selected through a carefully vetted voting process that reaches out to the consumers to choose from among the best they trust.

Eng Salem bin Nasser al Bortmany, CEO - Areej Vegetable Oils & Derivatives - expressed his happiness at the momentous win and said, "Consumer trust is always paramount. It is easy to fall short of expectations, especially during turbulent times. To



have won the Oman's Most Trusted Brand award for the third time, especially in times such as these, not only underlines the significance of consumer trust, but it also acts as timely validation

that AVOD has continued to do right for its end users and contributed to enriching their lives and of those around them.

"The Minara range is our flagship product that is built on the

foundation of our Eat Right, Live Well' philosophy, which focuses on building healthier and happier communities. Over the years, to match our consumers' evolution, AVOD has continued to evolve

its transformation strategy to create products that exceed their expectations."

To win such awards and accolades, Bortmany said, "is an honour and a privilege".

"we hope we can continue to rise above and beyond the expectations of our valuable consumers and keep rightfully earning their loyalty for years to come," he added.

The flagship Minara range consists of the popular Minara Sunflower oil and its range of olive oils. It also recently added Canola Oil and Corn Oil to its impressive line-up.

It is manufactured in AVOD's modern hygienic plant, which is upgraded constantly with state-of-the-art technology thus

allowing AVOD to meet international standards and offer only top-quality products to their wide customer base in Oman, the region, and the world markets.

With more than three decades of expertise, AVOD has the distinction of being the first company in Oman to fortify and enrich Minara brand of oils and its top-quality other cooking oils with vitamins A&D. All products, including Sohar, Khafeef, Jabal Akhdar, Muscat Margarine and Areej cooking oil, are a perfect blend of health and quality.

A heritage brand that knows that at the heart of good health is nutrition, AVOD has earned the reputation for having the best practices in the industry.

Trump ‘shocked’ by indictment but ‘ready to fight’ all charges

Washington, US - Donald Trump’s legal team went on the offensive on Friday following his historic indictment, vowing the former president would never seek a plea deal and was ready ‘to fight’ all charges.

The 76-year-old Trump, who is hoping to recapture the White House in 2024, chimed in with attacks on the prosecutors who brought the charges against him and even the judge expected to hear the case.

“ELECTION INTERFERENCE, KANGAROO COURT!” Trump posted on his social media platform Truth Social, adding that Juan Manuel Marchal, the judge who may preside over an eventual trial, ‘hates me’.

Trump is to be booked, fingerprinted and will have a mugshot taken at a Manhattan courthouse on Tuesday afternoon before appearing before a judge as the first ever American president to face criminal charges.

“The president will not be put in handcuffs,” said Joe Tacopina, one of Trump’s attorneys, adding that he does not believe prosecutors will ‘allow this to become a circus’.

Tacopina said the hush-money case being brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg against Trump faces ‘substantial legal challenges’ and the former president would plead not guilty.

There is ‘zero’ chance Trump would accept a plea deal, he told NBC’s Today show. “It’s not going to happen. There’s no crime.”

Trump, who is currently at his palatial Mar-a-Lago residence in



Supporters of Donald Trump protest near his Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, on Friday (AFP)

Florida, was initially ‘shocked’ at the indictment, his attorney said, but ‘he’s now in the posture that he’s ready to fight this’.

‘No comment’

Trump’s pending arrest throws a political grenade into next year’s White House race and President Joe Biden sidestepped questions from reporters about the indictment of the Republican he beat in 2020 and could potentially face again in November of next year.

“I have no comment on Trump,” Biden said.

A New York grand jury indicted Trump on Thursday over a US\$130,000 hush-money payment made to a porn star to buy

her silence during his 2016 campaign. Trump has denied any wrongdoing and accused Bragg, a Democrat, of waging a ‘political witch-hunt’ to derail his new White House bid.

In predicting his indictment, Trump called for protests and warned it could lead to ‘potential death and destruction’ for the country. And in a statement, the ex-president said he had already raised US\$4mn for his 2024 presidential campaign in the 24 hours following news of the indictment.

Extra security has been deployed for days around the downtown Manhattan courthouse where Trump is to be

booked and arraigned, with the New York Police Department saying on Friday there were ‘no current credible threats’ to the city.

Trump survived two impeachments while in the White House and kept prosecutors at bay over everything from the US Capitol riot to missing classified files - only to land in court over a sex scandal involving Stormy Daniels, a 44-year-old adult movie actress.

He faces felony investigations in Georgia relating to the 2020 election and in Washington over both the classified files and the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol by his supporters. Top Re-

publicans have rallied around the former president who remains the favourite to win the party’s 2024 presidential nomination.

‘Outrage’

Kevin McCarthy, the top House Republican, said the indictment had ‘irreparably damaged’ the country.

Trump’s former vice president and possible 2024 challenger Mike Pence called it an ‘outrage’ that would only ‘further serve to divide’ the United States.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, another likely 2024 Republican rival, slammed the indictment as ‘un-American’.

On the Democratic side, former House speaker Nancy Pelosi said ‘no one is above the law’ and Representative Adam Schiff - lead prosecutor of Trump’s first impeachment - called it ‘sobering.’ “The indictment and arrest of a former president is unique throughout all of American history,” Schiff said. “But so too is the unlawful conduct for which Trump has been charged.”

Trump’s ex-lawyer Michael Cohen told Congress in 2019 that he made the payment to Daniels on Trump’s behalf to hide a 2006 tryst and was later reimbursed.

The grand jury that indicted Trump was asked to consider if there had been a cover-up intended to benefit his campaign by burying the scandal.

The impact of the indictment on Trump’s 2024 election chances is unpredictable but Senator Lindsey Graham, a staunch Trump ally, said it would benefit the former president. AFP



Andrew Tate (left) and his brother Tristan Tate walk out of the central arrest centre of Bucharest police, in Bucharest, late on Friday (AFP)

Tate moved from detention to house arrest in Romania

Bucharest, Romania - Controversial influencer Andrew Tate and his brother were released on Friday after three months of detention in Romania and moved to house arrest while they are investigated for alleged human trafficking and rape.

Tate, a British-American former kickboxer with millions of online followers, along with his younger brother and two Romanian women, are under investigation for allegedly ‘forming an organised criminal group, human trafficking and rape’.

Tate, 36, and his brother Tristan, 34, were arrested in late December, and have been held in pre-trial detention ever since, which was again extended last week.

However, an appeals court ‘rejected the prosecution’s proposal to extend the pre-trial detention’ and ordered the pair be placed ‘under house arrest’, according to a court ruling seen by AFP.

Accompanied by their Romanian lawyers, the brothers - who deny all charges against them - were released around midnight (2100 GMT) from the police central arrest premises in

Bucharest amid chaotic scenes, an AFP journalist reported.

“Freedom at last,” a smiling Andrew Tate said said to whoops and hollers from supporters as he arrived at his house. “It’s a little bit emotional, I’ve been in one room since last year.” He thanked the judges for the release and maintained that he was innocent of all charges against him.

Media thronged the entrance while young fans greeted Andrew Tate with cries of ‘Top G’ (for gangster), his nickname.

Tristan said the judges had made ‘the right decision’ and vowed to prove that he was ‘an innocent man’.

Their lawyer Eugene Vidineac said they were forbidden from contacting other people involved in the case and could not ‘leave their home without prior approval from judicial authorities.’

Earlier, he insisted the brothers were not a flight risk.

“There’s no reason for them to flee, because to be on the run is not a life worth living and the Tate brothers don’t want this life. They are just tired and want to rest,” he said. AFP

8 found dead crossing into US from Canada

Montreal, Canada - Eight people including two children were found dead in a marsh near the Canada-US border after trying to cross illegally into the United States, police said on Friday.

Their bodies were discovered near a capsized boat belonging to a missing man from the Akwesasne Mohawk community, officials reported.

“A total of eight bodies have now been recovered from the waters,” local police chief Shawn Dulude told a press conference.

An initial six people from two families - one of Romanian descent with Canadian passports, the other from India - were discovered late on Thursday, including one child under the age of three.

Two more people were reported found at the Friday press conference by Dulude, an infant ‘Canadian citizen of Romanian descent, and one adult female believed to be an Indian national.’

Canadian authorities believe all were attempting to enter the United States illegally from Canada.

The Mohawk tribal territory straddles the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario, and the US state of New York.

The capsized boat was described as ‘very small’ for poor weather conditions including rain, sleet and strong wind.

“It was not a good time to be out on the water,” local deputy police chief Lee-Ann O’Brien told a news conference earlier in the day. Dulude added that such crossings

were sometimes facilitated by local people, particularly young people who are lured by the money and exploited by criminal organisations.

‘Heartbreaking situation’

The first body was found during an aerial search of the area.

Authorities are waiting on an autopsy as well as toxicology test results to determine the cause of death.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, speaking to reporters, said: “Our hearts go out to the families of the individuals who perished. This is a heartbreaking situation.”

Our hearts go out to the families of the individuals who perished. This is a heartbreaking situation

JUSTIN TRUDEAU

O’Brien noted a recent ‘increase in people passing through Akwesasne gaining entry into the US’, with 48 crossings since the start of the year. Once landing on the US side, they are typically picked up on shore and transported by vehicle into New York State, she said.

Two other people have been found dead near the border in recent months while trying to cross illegally into the United States from Canada. AFP

Lawyer of Suriname ex-dictator calls for his acquittal

Paramaribo, Suriname - The lawyer of Suriname’s former dictator Desi Bouterse called on Friday for a court to acquit him of a 20-year sentence over the deaths of 15 political prisoners.

Bouterse first seized power in a 1980 coup and in December 1982 allegedly rounded up 15 political opponents - including lawyers, journalists and businessmen - for execution at the Fort Zeelandia military barracks in the capital Paramaribo.

The 77-year-old had already been sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2019, but he has been challenging that verdict and under Surinamese law cannot be



Suriname former President Desi Bouterse leaves the High Court of Justice, in Paramaribo on Friday (AFP)

arrested before he exhausts the appeals processes.

“I ask for you to respond to

the undeniable need of our society... for the trial to end as soon as possible and with an acquit-

tal,” said his lawyer Irvin Kanhai during the appeal hearing in Paramaribo. Kanhai added it would be ‘wise and an act of patriotism to end’ the trial against Bouterse, who has always denied involvement in the murders.

Bouterse was all smiles when he left the court on Friday, greeting supporters who shook his hand and hugged him.

During the previous hearing in January, Bouterse admitted in court that he had heard gunshots on the day the prisoners were killed, but insisted he did not order their execution nor was he present for the killings.

He said he believed the gun-

shots were part of an effort to intimidate the inmates, who he claims were trying to overthrow him. Instead, Bouterse accused his number two Paul Bhagwandass - who died in 1996 - of being responsible for the Fort Zeelandia violence.

The court is expected to issue its verdict in the second half of 2023. Bouterse stepped down in 1987 under international pressure, but returned to power in 1990 in a second, bloodless coup. He left office a year later but was then elected president in 2010 and remained in the post until 2020. AFP

Biden tells Russia to release US reporter

Washington, US - President Joe Biden on Friday called for Russia to release *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, who is being held on espionage charges, while rebuffing a call from the paper’s editorial board to expel Russian journalists from the United States.

Asked by White House reporters what his message was to Russia regarding Gershkovich, a US citizen, Biden said: “Let him go.”

The *Wall Street Journal*’s board of opinion editors called in a piece published on Thursday afternoon for the expulsion of Russia’s ambassador to the United States, as well as ‘all Russian journalists working here’, describing the move as ‘the minimum to expect’.

“The timing of the arrest looks like a calculated provocation to embarrass the US and intimidate the foreign press still working in Russia,” it added.



Journalist Evan Gershkovich (AFP)

The *Journal*’s editor in chief, Emma Tucker, sent a note to the newspaper’s staff on Friday, saying that ‘we will carry on doing everything in our power to secure Evan’s release’.

“Your safety and security are what matters most to me, and we will continue to protect that no matter where you may be re-

porting from,” she added.

Speaking to reporters before leaving to view tornado damage in Mississippi, Biden said that expelling Russian journalists was ‘not the plan right now’.

Gershkovich is believed to be the first foreign journalist held for spying in post-Soviet Russia

Gershkovich is believed to be the first foreign journalist held for spying in post-Soviet Russia, and his arrest is expected to escalate the Kremlin’s confrontation with the West amid Moscow’s war in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, responding to the editorial board’s demand that all

Russian journalists be expelled, said ‘the newspaper can say that, but it should not happen. There’s just no reason for this’.

He said that Gershkovich had been caught ‘red-handed’.

‘Secret’ case

According to Russian state news agency TASS, Gershkovich denied the charges against him at a court hearing in Moscow. He was remanded in custody until May 29 pending trial.

The case has been classified as ‘secret’, TASS reported, which restricts information that can be published about it.

The only details available are that Russia’s security agency announced it had ‘foiled an illegal activity’ by arresting Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg - about 1,100 miles (1,800km) east of Moscow - on an unspecified date.

The 31-year-old journalist’s detention, on charges that carry a maximum penalty of 20 years

behind bars, is a serious escalation of Moscow’s sweeping crackdown on the media.

The White House condemned the arrest and warned Americans not to travel to Russia, while also advising those now inside the country to leave for their own safety.

“The targeting of American citizens by the Russian government is unacceptable. We condemn the detention of Mr. Gershkovich in the strongest terms,” White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. US officials said they were in touch with the family of Gershkovich as well as the newspaper and that the State Department had contacted Russia.

Several other US citizens are in jail including Paul Whelan, a former Marine, who was arrested in 2018 and handed a 16-year sentence on espionage charges that he denies. AFP

Pope leaves hospital, quips ‘I am still alive’

He will begin preparations for Holy Week and Easter, the most important week in Christian calendar

Rome, Italy - A jovial Pope Francis joked with well-wishers on Saturday as he left hospital after a three-night stay for bronchitis, and headed back to the Vatican to prepare for Christianity’s most important week.

The 86-year-old pontiff, who was admitted to Rome’s Gemelli hospital on Wednesday with breathing difficulties, got out of the car transporting him and smiled and joked with the crowd.

Asked by someone how he felt, he quipped twice with a big smile ‘I am still alive!’

Francis will now begin preparations for Holy Week and Easter, the most important week in the Christian calendar.

The pontiff felt unwell on Wednesday after a general audience in St Peter’s Square, but his condition improved after he was given antibiotics.

On Friday, the pope visited the children’s cancer ward at the hospital, handing out chocolate Easter eggs and baptising a weeks-old baby boy.

As he left on Saturday, he reached out to bless sick people, and stopped to hug and pray with distraught parents



Pope Francis addresses the media as he leaves the Gemelli hospital on Saturday in Rome, after being discharged following treatment for bronchitis (AFP)

whose young daughter had just died.

The Argentine pope confirmed on Saturday he will preside over Palm Sunday mass in St Peter’s Square, the start of a busy week of events leading up to

Easter.

‘Not scared’

Francis’ hospitalisation was his second since 2021, when he underwent colon surgery, also at Gemelli.

His increasing health issues over the past year have sparked widespread concern, including speculation that he might choose to retire rather than stay in the job for life.

Pressed by journalists on Sat-

urday as to whether he had been scared by his latest illness, he shook his head and said ‘no’.

He is set to dive back into work at the Vatican, with a meeting with a top cardinal on the agenda for later on Saturday.

His predecessor, Benedict XVI, quit in 2013, in a radical step not seen since the Middle Ages.

Visitors to St Peter’s Square on Friday expressed relief over his recovery.

“I was afraid for the pope,” said one 56-year-old Italian tourist who gave his name as Davide.

He has pushed through major governance reforms and sought to forge a more open, compassionate Church, although he has faced internal opposition, particularly from conservatives.

Presiding over mass

He has repeatedly said he would consider stepping down were his health to fail him - but said last month that for now, he has no plans to quit.

During Palm Sunday mass, Francis is expected to remain seated while another cleric - probably a senior cardinal - con-

ducted the ceremony at the altar.

The Vatican, citing medical staff, said on Thursday that Francis had been diagnosed with ‘infectious bronchitis’ requiring antibiotics, and that the treatment had brought about a ‘marked improvement in his state of health’.

The Gemelli hospital is the favoured choice of pontiffs to the point of being dubbed ‘Vatican 3’ by pope John Paul II, who was treated nine times at Gemelli and spent a total of 153 days there. A Jesuit who seems most happy being among his flock, Francis continues to travel internationally and keep a busy schedule.

But he has been forced to use a wheelchair and a walking stick in the past year because of knee pain, and admitted last summer that he had to slow down.

He said on Thursday he was ‘touched by the many messages’ he was receiving in hospital, thanking on Twitter those praying for his recovery.

Francis’ earlier stay at Gemelli in July 2021 lasted 10 days. He was admitted after suffering from a type of diverticulitis, an inflammation of pockets that develop in the lining of the intestine, that required surgery.

In an interview in January, the pope said the diverticulitis had returned.

AFP

The 86-year-old pontiff, who was admitted to Rome’s Gemelli hospital on Wednesday with breathing difficulties, got out of the car transporting him and smiled and joked with the crowd

Israeli police say killed man who grabbed a gun and shot at them

Jerusalem - Israeli police said on Saturday they shot dead an Arab Israeli who grabbed a gun from an officer and fired it in a scuffle in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Police said the attack took place around midnight near the Chain Gate, an access point to the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem.

Officers stopped a suspect and, as he was being questioned, ‘the man suddenly attacked one of the policemen’, grabbing his gun ‘and managing to fire it’, a statement said.

“In a swift response of the officers who were in danger and struggling with the man, they shot him,” the statement said, adding medics later pronounced him dead.

The suspect was identified as a resident of Hura, a Bedouin village in southern Israel.



Israeli police forces deploy in the Old City in annexed east Jerusalem on Saturday (AFP)

Passers-by reported hearing gunfire, and an AFP photographer saw scores of Israeli police deployed in the Old City at around 1am (2200 GMT Friday).

The attack occurred hours after thousands of Palestinians had packed the Al-Aqsa mosque

compound on the second Friday of Ramadan for peaceful prayers.

Israeli police said more than 100,000 faithful had gathered to pray at Islam’s third holiest site, built on what Jews call the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site.

More than 2,000 police offi-

cers had been deployed throughout the city.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict had seen an upsurge of violence since the beginning of the year, raising fears of a flare-up during Ramadan.

AFP

Finnish PM’s rival Orpo upbeat on election eve as he tops polls

Helsinki, Finland - Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s centre-right rival Petteri Orpo was upbeat on Saturday on the eve of legislative elections after polls put his party in top place.

“We have done a great campaign. We have the best candidates all over Finland and we are first in polls so I’m optimistic,” National Coalition party leader Orpo told AFP.

The party that comes out on top traditionally inherits the post of prime minister, provided they can form a majority in parliament. According to the latest survey published on Thursday by public broadcaster Yle, Orpo’s National Coalition has a thin lead at 19.8 per cent.

The nationalist eurosceptic Finns Party, led by Riikka Purra, polled 19.5 per cent. The Social Democrats led by current Prime Minister Sanna Marin took third place at 18.7 per cent. The



National Coalition Party chair Petteri Orpo looks on during his election campaign rally in Helsinki, Finland, on Saturday (AFP)

mother-of-one, who took office in 2019 as the world’s youngest prime minister at age 34, is Finland’s most popular prime minister this century, polls show.

“I want to fix our economy. I want to boost economic growth,” Orpo said, adding that Marin ‘is not worried about the economy. She is not worried about debt’.

Finland’s debt-to-GDP ratio

has risen from 64 per cent in 2019 to 73 per cent, which the National Coalition wants to address by cutting spending by €6bn (US\$6.5bn).

The elections come just after Finland received all necessary ratifications from NATO members to accede to the US-led military alliance.

AFP

Mexican army ‘withheld’ info on missing students

Mexico City, Mexico - An independent commission investigating the 2014 disappearance of 43 Mexican students has accused the armed forces of deliberately withholding information about the case.

Officially, cartel members killed the students and incinerated their remains. But exactly what happened to them has been hotly disputed.

In August, a government-backed truth commission branded the tragedy as a ‘state crime’, and said the military shared responsibility - either directly or through negligence.

There was ‘an internal decision not to provide more information’ about the incident, Carlos Beristain, a member of the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), told reporters on Friday.

He said the commission’s experts had seen a document from the General Staff of the Mexican Defense Secretariat

with instructions ‘to give an agreed response’.

“That for us is not acceptable,” Beristain said, adding that witnesses had also informed the commission that intelligence documents were dispersed to various locations to hide them.

The GIEI, a body created in 2015 by an agreement between the Mexican government and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), has ‘renewed’ elements of the investigation, said Colombian lawyer Angela Buitrago, also a member of the truth panel.

This means the prosecutor’s office could reactivate arrest warrants - which were canceled in September - against around 20 military personnel involved, Buitrago said.

She added that Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has ‘directly requested a report’.

AFP

Arkansas tornado kills 3, storms leave 3 dead

Washington, US - A tornado tore through the southern US state of Arkansas and killed three people on Friday, while severe storms further north in Illinois and Indiana left three dead, authorities said.

The Arkansas tornado whipped across the state in the afternoon, causing what Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders called ‘widespread damage’.

Sanders said two people were killed in the town of Wynne in the eastern part of Arkansas, while an official in Pulaski County, which surrounds the capital Little Rock, confirmed a fatality there.

“Significant damage has occurred in Central Arkansas,” Sanders wrote on Twitter.

Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott Jr. said ‘close to 30 individuals have been transported to our local hospitals’.

The National Weather Service issued tornado warnings for parts of the nearby states of Tennessee, Illinois, Kentucky and Iowa.

In the evening, calamity struck Belvidere, Illinois, when severe weather caused the roof and part of the facade of the Apollo The-



Homes damaged by a tornado are seen on Friday in Little Rock, Arkansas (AFP)

ater to collapse while a heavy metal band played on stage inside. “More than 20 ambulances were reportedly called to the scene,” Fox 32, a Chicago TV affiliate, reported on its website.

Belvidere Fire Chief Shawn Schadle reported one dead and 28 injured in the disaster, with five people hospitalised with severe injuries.

TV footage showed emer-

gency personnel carrying out injured concert-goers on stretchers, while video posted on social media showed rubble - some nearly waist-high - on the floor of the concert venue, and a gaping hole in the roof.

“My administration is closely monitoring the roof collapse at the Apollo Theatre in Belvidere tonight,” Illinois Governor JB Pritzker tweeted in the late

evening.

In neighbouring Midwest state Indiana, two people were confirmed dead after a storm swept through Sullivan County, Indiana state police told CBS/FOX-affiliated TV station WTHI.

Images posted on Twitter by WTHI showed downed telephone poles, crumbled homes and debris covering roads.

‘Completely wiped out’

The Arkansas tornado struck during the afternoon, steamrolling over parts of Little Rock.

“This was actually an incredibly devastating tornado,” witness Lara Farrar told AFP.

She said she drove to West Little Rock and got out of her car at a blocked intersection.

“I was basically in total shock because the neighbourhood had been basically completely wiped out and destroyed,” Farrar said.

“Some of the buildings had the roof completely blown off.”

She said the path of the tornado was about a quarter mile wide (half a kilometre), leaving intense destruction, but outside the direct path, damage was ‘very minor’. Scott, the Little Rock mayor, tweeted that ‘property damage is extensive and we are still responding’.

Authorities in Pulaski County surrounding the state capital said it suffered ‘significant storm and tornado damage’. More than 78,000 people were without power across the state, according to Poweroutage.us.

AFP

INDIA

38 people arrested in Howrah violence

Two cases have been registered in connection and section 144 has been imposed in a few areas

Howrah, West Bengal - As many as 38 people have been arrested in connection with West Bengal's Howrah violence during a Ram Navami procession, the police said on Saturday.

Police said that two cases also have been registered following the incident. "I want to tell the public that there is no need to be scared. The situation is under control and is normal now. Thirty-eight people arrested and two cases registered," Howrah police commissioner Praveen Tripathi said.

He further said that section 144 has been imposed in few areas while 'area domination exercise are being conducted by the police to build confidence in people'.

Amid the political furore, the Mamata Banerjee government on Friday handed over the probe of Howrah violence to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). A special team led by Inspector General of Police, CID Sunil Choudhury has initiated



Police personnel stand guard following a clash that broke out during Thursday's Ram Navami procession at Shibpur, in Howrah on Saturday (ANI)

the investigation.

The situation turned violent in the Shibpur area of Howrah with fresh violence, on Friday a day after the arson on Ram Navami.

Several vehicles were set on fire earlier on Thursday after two groups clashed in Howrah amid Ram Navami celebrations.

During the procession, the rioters vandalised public and private properties and set vehicles on fire.

Meanwhile, Union Home

Minister Amit Shah spoke to West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose and took stock of the situation in Howrah where violence broke out.

Shah also called West Bengal BJP president Sukanta Majumdar and enquired about the law and order situation in the state.

The West Bengal BJP chief on

Friday had written to the Union Home Minister seeking National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe into violence.

Besides, Leader of Opposition in the State Legislative Assembly and BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari has filed a PIL (public interest litigation) in Calcutta High Court seeking an NIA probe and immediate deployment of central forces in the violence-affected areas.

The acting justice of Calcutta High Court granted leave to file the PIL and directed the same to appear at the top of the list on April 3.

Speaking to ANI, Adhikari said: "The state police minister (Mamata Banerjee) is useless. Her resignation is the only solution. I sent a mail to the Union Home Minister and the Governor yesterday. I have approached the High Court. Governor is going to visit the spot. The Court should step forward. All this should stop. Section 144 (CrPC) has been imposed here."

ANI

PM Modi flags off Bhopal-Delhi Vande Bharat Express train

Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh - Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday flagged off the Bhopal-New Delhi Vande Bharat train from Madhya Pradesh's Rani Kamlapati railway station.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw were also present on the occasion. The Vande Bharat Express will run between Rani Kamlapati and Hazrat Nizamuddin stations.

Speaking at the flagging-off ceremony, Modi said that 'the Vande Bharat Express train showcases the skill, potential and confidence of our nation'.

He said that there has been 100 per cent occupancy in Vande Bharat trains and they are technologically advanced, clean, and on time.

Taking a dig at Congress, he said: "Previous governments were busy with public appeasement. But this government is



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being welcomed upon on his arrival, in Bhopal on Saturday (AFP)

Vande Bharat Express train showcases skill, potential and confidence of our nation... they are clean and on time

NARENDRA MODI

dedicated to satisfying people's needs and aspirations."

Modi also expressed deep anguish over the Indore temple stepwell collapse incident, which claimed 36 lives.

"I express my grief over the incident that happened on Ram Navami in Indore. I pay tribute to those who lost their lives in this accident. I express my condolences to the kin of those

devotees who have been injured and are undergoing treatment in the hospital. I wish them a speedy recovery," he said.

The prime minister also interacted with school students and train staff on board the Vande Bharat train at Rani Kamlapati railway station. The indigenously designed train set of Vande Bharat Express is equipped with state-of-the-art passenger amenities. It will provide a faster, more comfortable and more convenient travel experience for rail users, boost tourism and promote economic development in the region, according to the officials.

Modi had arrived in Bhopal on Saturday to flag off the train and to attend Combined Commanders' Conference-2023. The three-day conference of Military Commanders on the theme 'Ready, Resurgent, Relevant', concluded at the Kushabhau Thakre Hall.

ANI

'Join democratic process': Shah urges Mizoram's armed groups

Aizawl, Mizoram - Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who is on a visit to Mizoram's Aizawl, appealed on Saturday to the armed groups in the northeast to join the mainstream and become a part of the democratic process.

He also said that the Modi government aims to develop the entire northeast area and connect all eight state capitals by air, rail and road before 2025. "Today multiple projects worth Rs 2500 crores have been inaugurated in a single day in a small state like Mizoram. This shows that our government is committed to the development of northeast," he said while addressing the people after the inauguration of several development projects in the state worth around Rs 2500 crore.

"Our government is focussing on exploring every area whether tourism, agriculture, or any other sector where there is the scope of development," he



Union Home Minister Amit Shah (ANI)

added.

The home minister said that there used to be violence in the state of Mizoram, 'but today peace has been established'.

"At one time there was violence and unrest here. Bullets were fired, and bombs exploded. But today Zoramthanga is the Chief Minister of Mizoram, and there is peace here. This is an example of the success of democracy in India," he said. "Today, I appeal to whatever armed groups are left in the northeast, to come and join the mainstream, become a part of the democratic process and give their contribution to the development of the region and the country. Mizoram is a great example of the triumph of democracy in front of the whole world."

AFP

Battle in Colombia over river-wrecking gold 'dragons'

El Bagre, Colombia - The giant skeletons of burnt and dismantled gold dredgers litter the rivers of northwest Colombia, where the government is waging a full-out war on illegal mining.

Nicknamed 'dragons' by locals, the massive machines used to suck gold from riverbeds are blamed for destroying the environment and financing organised crime.

But their dismantling in a massive army operation has been met with hostility by communities who depend on mining for their daily survival.

Around El Bagre in the gold-rich Bajo Cauca region, a protest by miners that started early this month has been marked by acts of vandalism the government blamed on the Gulf Clan drug cartel for instigating.

But Luis Manuel Campo, 32, one of the miners, insisted to AFP that 'we have nothing to do with criminal groups'.

Campo co-owns a dredger



An aerial view of the environmental impact from mining in Taraza municipality, Colombia (AFP)

with three other people.

"We are not hiding. We just want the persecution to stop," he said.

"We want to be formally recognised as miners so that we

can work in peace, without stigma."

New gold rush

The names of the villages in this region such as Zaragoza and

Caceres serve as a reminder of the Spanish colonisers who were already extracting gold in Bajo Cauca in the 17th century.

It became a bastion of rightwing paramilitary fighters in

the 1990s, and is now a stronghold of the Gulf Clan, Colombia's most powerful cartel.

President Gustavo Petro this month called off a ceasefire with the Clan, accusing it of being behind attacks on civilians committed by protesting miners.

Criminal groups in Colombia make almost as much money from illegal mining as they do from trafficking cocaine, authorities say.

With a recent rise in gold prices, Bajo Cauca has been gripped by a new type of gold rush, with poor communities scouring the gravelly river beds with shovels, bulldozers and dredging machines.

"Apart from gold, there is nothing here," said Campo.

Locals say about 350 dredging machines are active in the region - big and small - on top of those operated legally by the Mineros Aluvial multinational.

The illegal dredgers range from simple machines with

makeshift conveyer belts to larger mechanical contraptions that require several divers to guide a massive vacuum pipe under the dark water.

Then there are the 'dragons' - three-storey, 20-metre (66-foot) long boats with massive engines.

There are about two dozen of these in the Bajo Cauca region.

One 'dragon' costs about half a million dollars, their owners tell AFP.

"At the current (gold) price, it is profitable," said Alex Cossio, 41, who runs one of these monsters.

One 'dragon' can extract up to two kilograms (4.4 pounds) of gold per day - worth more than US\$50,000, according to a police official who did not want to be named.

AFP observed at least six 'dragons' lying mutilated and burnt by the riverside, some already being repaired by their owners.

AFP

Kyiv slams Russia's UN presidency

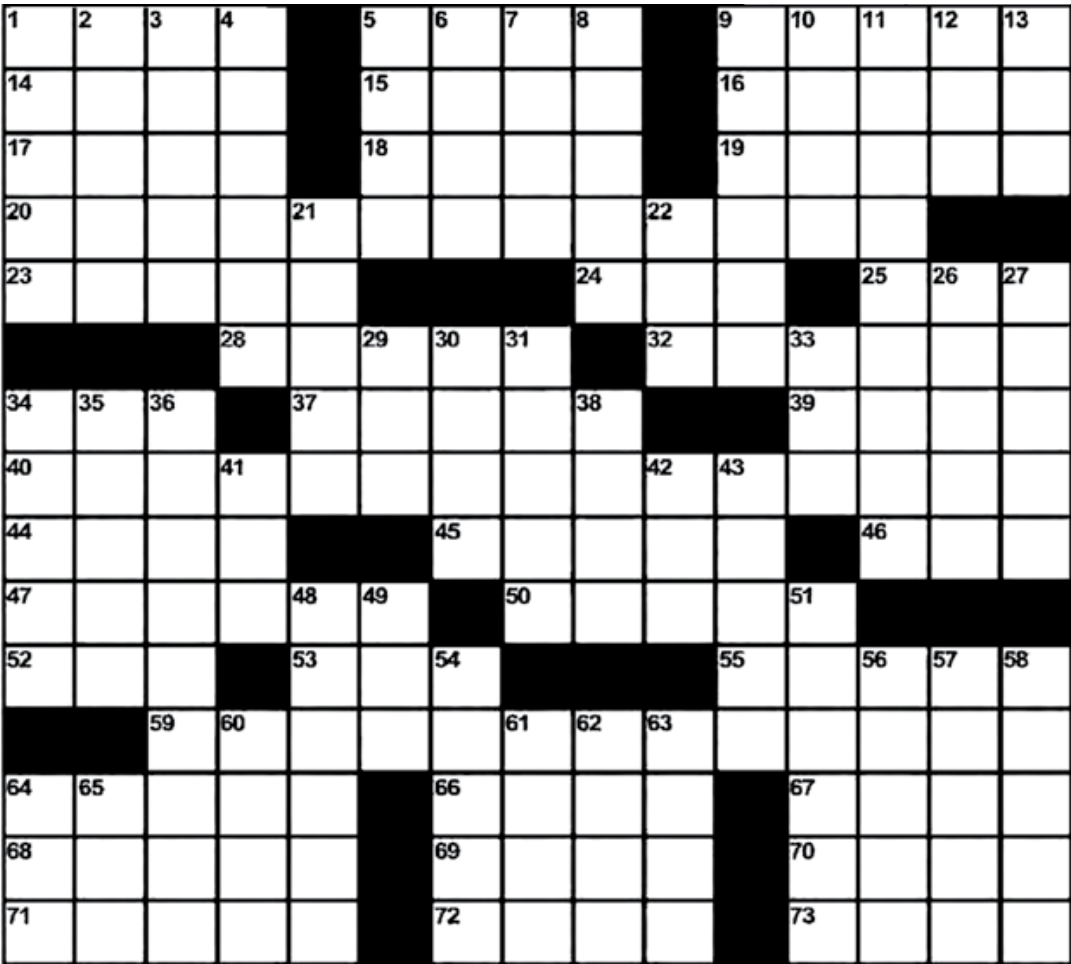
Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine on Saturday branded Russia's presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of April 'a slap in the face', joining a chorus of outrage from Western countries.

Moscow assumes the presidency as part of its monthly rotation between the Security Council's 15 member states, with ties with the West at their lowest point since the Cold War over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Russia's tenure of the body's rotating presidency was 'a slap in the face to the international community'.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Ale quantity
5) Starfish features
9) Hole for an anchor rope
14) Butter alternative
15) Generous paint applica-
tion
16) Fall-leaf color
17) _ Bator (Mongolian
capital)
18) Continental cash
19) Chilling
20) Event capturer
23) East_ (certain
Londoner)
24) Zodiac carnivore
25) Experimentation room
28) Stuffs to the gills
32) Like animals in a petting
zoo
34) Vegas opening?
37) Strictly verboten
39) Tinging with excite-
ment
40) In an uncertain position
between two choices
44) Boyfriend
45) Horse utterance
46) Acquire
4 7) Spaghetti Westerns
50) Get nosy
52) _Lanka
53) "So that's it!"
55) Have reservations

59) Good way in which to
exit?
64) Hawaiian island or
porch
66) Small grimace or pout
67) Refer to, as a research
paper
68) Admits customers
69) Scorpio's birthstone
70) Red_ (cinnamon
candies)
71) Train crash site?
72) Tenant's expense
73) Change that doesn't jin-
gle

DOWN

1) " got to be kidding!"
2) Last poker bet?
3) Check the check
4) Those in receivership?
5) Maker of PCs and tablets
6) Lothario
7) Cleo's significant other
8) Round seat
9) Bringer of bad luck
10) Problem that's hard to
face?
11) Merry-go-round, old-
style
12) "Wait just a..."
13) "I heard him exclaim_
he drove
21) Give a formal speech
22) It's suitable to Santa?

26) Cut off from everyone
else
27) Procreate biblically
29) Thing to run in a bar
30) Black, as piano keys
31) They're painful to the
touch
33) Ripken of the Baseball
Hall of Fame
34) Some wolves
35) What a sympathizer
lends
36) Merchant of office sup-
plies
38) ChiefNorse god
41) Shade or tint
42) Maniac's introduction?
43) Mary's best friend of
old TV
48) Pungent veggie
49) Seashell seller of rhyme
51) Blanketlike cloak with a
hole in the center
54) Cause of knight
sweats?
56) President Lincoln's con-
cern
57) Midler or Davis
58) Lock of hair
60) Give an earful
61) Unhurried gait
62) Taiwan's monetary
unit, familiarly
63) Sandwich from the

oven
64) Tennis shot that's easy
65) Copier at the zoo?

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Today, your patience might be tested when one or more of your projects gets put on hold by someone else, either because they have power over you or because they've flaked out on their part of things. As much as you might want to get angry, you need to take a philosophical view of things. This pause in the action was meant to happen for a reason, possibly to give you time to double-check the work you've done so far. Put your energy in that instead of getting mad at someone else.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

The issues you'll be dealing with today are very complicated ones. You will have to navigate your way through some very gray areas. You may find yourself wishing things were simpler and easier to figure out! But, alas, there is no black or white, no right or wrong. Everyone and everything is much more complicated than that. Take the time to really dig into the issues and see things not just from both sides but from all sides. It will put you in a much more powerful position.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

Someone in your life needs to step up and take on more responsibility, and you need to tell them to. You've been getting a little tired of bearing the brunt of a certain project or task, and this inequity needs to end today. How do you communicate this to them? In person. Make sure they don't misunderstand what you're telling them, and be available for questions. If you send an email or a text, they'll undoubtedly take things the wrong way and get defensive.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Your intense energy makes you a great candidate for a leadership position right now, so if you're ready to take on more power, grab it today! You have a way of effortlessly motivating people. You are great at helping them see past their individual goals, thus enabling them to focus all their energy on what will benefit the greater population. This is a skill you need to practice, though. So don't beg off any new responsibilities because you think you'll get another chance later.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You'll get along best with people who appeal to your more analytical side today. Surprisingly, all of the folks who are trying to tug at your heartstrings will get little if any sympathy from you. You're hungry for facts and figures that clarify things, not feelings that make them warm and fuzzy. You want to know what's really going on so that you can make an objective evaluation. You're willing to see the other side of the argument, but you're not going to give people points for sob stories.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Breaking the rules isn't always a bad thing, especially if the rules limit your creativity. Today, you shouldn't do what you are told. You should do what you want to do. Let any inspiration that comes your way guide you and take you on a little adventure. It's time to let your brain loose on the world. Take it out of its nine-to-five box and show it something that it has never seen before. It's the perfect day to view some modern art or a foreign film.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you aren't sure if you're ready to commit to a party, date, new job, or anything else that will take a chunk of your time, then don't say that you will commit just because you're afraid to hurt someone's feelings. The worst thing you can do is make a promise that you can't fulfill. It could brand you as an unreliable person, which you most definitely are not. So try not to be flighty. Be honest. In the end, people will appreciate honesty more than half-baked involvement.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Pick a cultural event that's coming up and get some tickets for it today. It's time to inject your life with a little dose of high art. An opera, touring musical, play, art opening, ballet, or modern dance performance would fit the bill nicely. Bring one of your more adventurous friends with you and make a whole arty night out of it. Even if you don't love every minute of the experience, the dedication to pure creativity will inspire you greatly.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Have you been feeling a bit bored with your life lately? Well, here's some good news! Today offers you a great opportunity to stir things up and get your adrenaline going again! Sure, it might require you to take a risk or two, but isn't that the only way you can win sometimes? Insert yourself into an uncertain situation where you could be rejected or come out with less than you put in and just see what happens. No matter what the outcome is, you will be better off for it.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Too many different elements in your life are overlapping with each other right now, and it's your family that could fall to the bottom of the heap. Today, step back and slow things down. Make plans with your family or your family of friends to do something, anything. You don't have to plan a huge dinner party or other elaborate event. Even just sitting around watching TV together will bring you back into each other's lives in the way that you need to be.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Someone could challenge a belief that you've held for a very long time today, and they could say an awful lot of things that make sense. Your first instinct will be to defend your position as you have in the past and discount their opinion if they don't eventually come around to agreeing with you. But you should try to be open to what they're saying. Some of it will resonate with you in a profound way. Believe it or not, you could be wrong. It does happen every once in a blue moon!

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Communication is very important today. Written, spoken, and even body language will all convey potent meanings. The people you'll be dealing with right now are tuned in to you very closely, even strangers will almost be able to finish your sentences. This means that you're probably going to be able to get an awful lot done in very little time today. If you've been waiting for feedback from someone, call them today. They'll have an answer.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. What group did the UK join in 1973?

A. EEC
B. NATO
C. UN
D. SEATO

02. The village of Zermatt is close to what geographical feature?

A. Victoria Falls
B. The Matterhorn
C. Suez Canal
D. Lake Baikal

03. Mike Judge is the creator of which of these TV series?

A. Beavis and Butthead
B. The Simpsons
C. South Park
D. Family Guy

Answers: 1.A 2.B 3.A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	M	N	L
G	R	I	D
F	U	A	P
U	N	N	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

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

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

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

SINNER RESOLVE

Italian downs Alcaraz to set up Miami final with Medvedev

Miami Gardens, United States - Italy's Jannik Sinner turned on the style to end Carlos Alcaraz's hopes of the "Sunshine Double" and his reign as world number one, triumphing 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2 in their Miami Open semi-final on Friday.

Sinner will meet Russian Daniil Medvedev in Sunday's final while Alcaraz will lose his number one ranking to Novak Djokovic.

Medvedev reached his fifth straight ATP Tour final with a 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-3 win over fellow Russian Karen Khachanov.

The disappointment for the 19-year-old Alcaraz, the defending champion in Miami and coming off a title at Indian Wells, will be tinged with frustration after he struggled in the third set with leg cramps.

It had been an enthralling and entertaining power-hitting performance from both men in the first set, with an incredible 25-shot exchange in the seventh game, bring the crowd to their feet.

The intense, high quality set was eventually won by the Spaniard after a tie-break, but an

inspired Sinner fought back in the second.

Sinner broke in the first game and although Alcaraz broke back to make it 2-2, the 21-year-old Italian sensed his moment was arriving and showed confidence in his powerful groundstrokes.

Worried and confused The world number one was moving with difficulty and was broken on his first serve in the deciding set. Looking in discomfort, he crouched down on his baseline in between points and shot some worried and confused looks to his team in the stands.

Sinner chose some more conservative strokes and although Alcaraz appeared to recover a little, the Italian ran out the winner in three hours.

Alcaraz said his problems had appeared during a bathroom break after the second set.

"I went to bathroom for five minutes and yeah, everything went down for me a little bit. I stopped myself. I started cramping a little bit. You know, after a really tough match it's, well, it is tough to stop the match for five



Jannik Sinner of Italy celebrates a point against Carlos Alcaraz of Spain during the semifinals of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on Friday (AFP)

When both players play tennis like this it is very nice to play, you can feel it with the crowds. There was just a great energy with everything. It is nice to be part of matches like this

JANNIK SINNER

minutes," he said.

"I started cramping at the beginning of the third set, but it wasn't the reason for I lost the match. I came back...I started to

feel better but of course Jannik, he was better than me in the third set. That's the truth," he said.

Sinner had lost to Alcaraz in straight sets in their meeting at

the same stage in Indian Wells and he said he could feel just how high the quality of their encounter at Hard Rock Stadium had been.

"When both players play tennis like this it is very nice to play, you can feel it with the crowds. There was just a great energy with everything. It is just nice to be part of matches like this," he said.

Sinner also said that he had suffered some cramping during the second set but recovered

quickly. "I knew that I had to go on and wait for the right moment," he said. "I feel ready to compete and I am happy to be in the final," he added.

The 27-year-old Medvedev, playing against his boyhood friend, survived a second-set comeback but his trademark precision stroke play saw him through against the big-serving Khachanov in a high quality encounter. The contest saw a series of long rallies as Medvedev

fended off Khachanov's thumping shots from the baseline and then pinned his opponent back on his service game.

Medvedev hit 13 aces and saved four of six break points as the match turned decisively in his favor when he broke Khachanov in the fourth game of the third set.

Medvedev won 82% (14 of 17) of his first-serve points in the final set and was relieved to have beaten a player who knows his game so well.

Verstappen on pole in Australia as Mercedes bounce back

Melbourne, Australia - Double world champion Max Verstappen claimed pole on Saturday for the Australian Grand Prix ahead of Mercedes' George Russell, but his Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez had a torrid time and will start last.

In overcast and cool conditions, Lewis Hamilton in the other Mercedes was third ahead of Aston Martin's Fernando Alonso in a tight session that went to the wire.

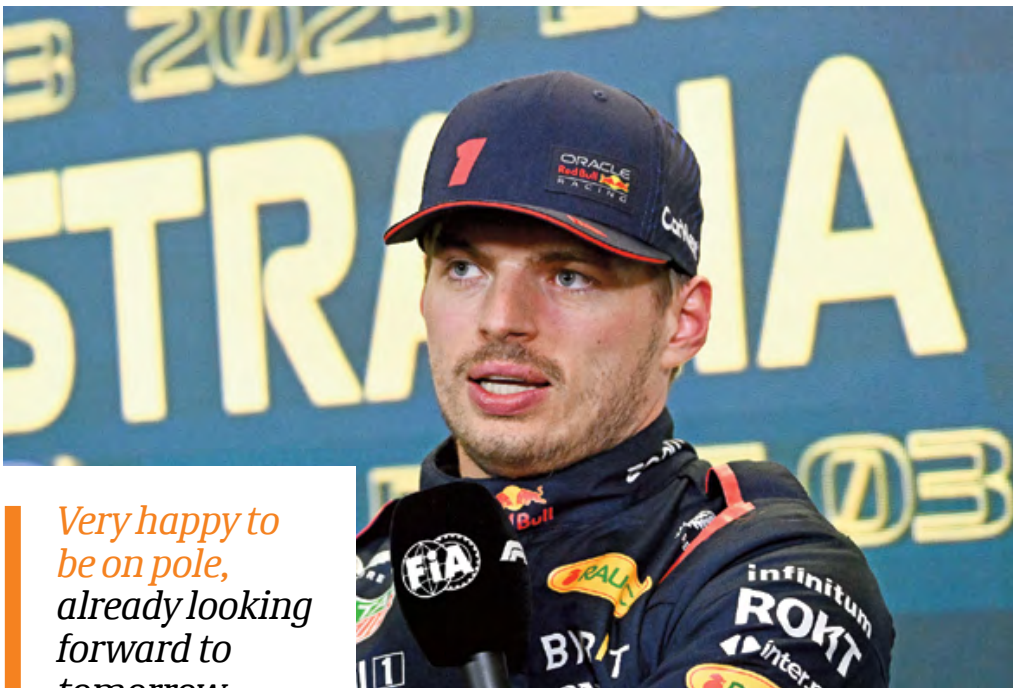
Last year's winner Charles Leclerc came seventh in the Ferrari, with his teammate Carlos Sainz fifth.

It was a huge performance from Mercedes, whose W14 has struggled for speed but is clearly improving as they again bettered Ferrari.

Lance Stroll in the other Aston Martin will start sixth ahead of Leclerc with Williams' Alexander Albon a shock eighth.

Alpine's Pierre Gasly was ninth with Nico Hulkenberg in a Haas rounding out the top 10.

It was a second pole of the year for Dutchman Verstappen, and the 22nd of his career, after the season-opening race in Bahrain, which he went on to



Pole position qualifier Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen speaks during a press conference in Melbourne on Saturday (AFP)

Very happy to be on pole, already looking forward to tomorrow.

MAX VERSTAPPEN

win. He started from 15th in Saudi Arabia a fortnight ago after mechanical problems, but sliced through the field to come second behind Perez.

The 25-year-old knocked out his rivals with a flying lap at the death of one minute 16.732, which was 0.236 secs ahead of

Britain's Russell.

"I think the last run was very good, the whole weekend has been tough to get the tyres in the right window," said Verstappen, who has never won in Australia and will start on pole for the first time at Albert Park.

"Very happy to be on pole, already looking forward to tomorrow. I think we have a good race car but it is tricky on the tyres, so going to be an interesting race for sure."

But Mexico's Perez - one point behind Verstappen in the championship standings - had a horror of a day, struggling with grip and balance.

AFP

Miami Gardens, United States - Two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova said she opposed the All England Club's decision to allow Russian and Belarusian players to compete at this year's tournament.

Wimbledon last year banned players from Russia and Moscow-allied Belarus after the invasion of Ukraine and the Lawn Tennis Association also barred players from other events in the United Kingdom.

However, competitors from the two countries will be able to enter the Grand Slam in July if they compete as "neutral" athletes and comply with certain conditions.

"First of all, for sure I'm always staying against the war. For sure, I'm just more worried about the Ukrainian people and players," Kvitova told reporters after winning her Miami Open semi-final against Sorana Cirstea.

"I appreciate that Wimbledon had a tough time last year not giving the points (after) the Russian and Russian didn't play.

"I think they shouldn't be allowed actually. In my opinion, (n)either to the Olympics. So I'm



Petra Kvitova celebrates match point against Sorana Cirstea of Romania during the semifinals of the Miami Open on Friday (AFP)

just a little bit on the Ukrainian side of this," she said. Kvitova said she was particularly concerned about Russian and Belarusian involvement in the Olympic Games.

"Not in the Olympics for sure, because I feel the Olympic Games are because we don't want war in the world. So that's my concern. I am really appreciating that Wimbledon didn't take them last year," she said.

Kvitova said that she and other players had not been consulted about the Wimbledon decision and the issue had not been discussed in the locker-room.

The All England Club, which runs Wimbledon, said the decision was made after talks with the UK government, Britain's governing Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) and international tennis bodies.



Scottie Scheffler

Scheffler, McIlroy seek history as LIV-PGA feud hits Masters

Augusta, United States - Top-ranked defending champion Scottie Scheffler and world number two Rory McIlroy will chase historic triumphs at next week's 87th Masters while the PGA Tour-LIV Golf feud makes its debut at Augusta National.

Scheffler will try to join Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus and Nick Faldo as the only back-to-back Masters winners.

"I have a couple things to work on before Augusta, but definitely plenty of confidence going in," Scheffler said.

Scheffler, who has won the Players Championship and Phoenix Open this year, seeks the first Masters repeat since Woods in 2002.

"I'm not going to think of myself as the defending champion," he said. "I'm just going to go out there like I usually do, try and execute shots and play good solid rounds of golf."

Four-time major winner McIlroy, who has not captured a major since the 2014 PGA Championship, tries to complete a career Grand Slam by taking a green jacket. "Everything feels in really good order," McIlroy said. "Just work on some things I know I'll need and just make sure I'm ready and rested."

McIlroy, who won at Dubai in January, has confidence he can join Woods, Nicklaus, Ben Hogan, Gary Player and Gene Sarazen with the career Slam.

"I've always known that I have the game to win at this place," McIlroy said. "It's just a matter of having that game for four days in a row."

Woods, a 15-time major winner, will return to the course where he made his comeback last year from severe leg injuries suffered in a 2021 car crash.

But the most intense sub-plot entering the year's first major tournament is the showdown between players in the Saudi-

backed rebel LIV Golf League and the PGA Tour, which has banned all LIV golfers from its events.

Majors have allowed LIV golfers who qualify to compete. At the Masters, last played before LIV's debut last June, that includes 18 LIV players, six of them past Masters winners - Dustin Johnson, Patrick Reed, Bubba Watson, Sergio Garcia, Charl Schwartzel and Phil Mickelson.

AFP

TWO GOOD FOR THE REST

City thrash Liverpool but Jesus keeps Arsenal eight points clear

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester City thrashed Liverpool 4-1 on Saturday but remain eight points adrift of Arsenal at the top of the Premier League after Gabriel Jesus scored twice in the Gunners 4-1 win over Leeds.

In the clash between the two sides that have dominated English football over the past five years, City were a class apart despite the absence of Erling Haaland due to injury.

Liverpool went in front through Mohamed Salah's 23rd goal of the season but were blown away in the second half after Julian Alvarez brought City level before the break.

Pep Guardiola's men needed less than a minute in the second period to go in front as Kevin De Bruyne tapped home Riyad Mahrez's cross.

Ilkay Gundogan slammed home the third before Jack Grealish rounded off his best performance in a City shirt with a fine finish for the fourth.

"Now it's the Jack we thought. Aston Villa fans know this Jack," said Guardiola of Grealish, who joined for a Premier League record £100 million in 2021.

"Nothing changed, it's just a question of believing I am part of that, and I can be here."



Manchester City's Argentinian striker Julian Alvarez (C) celebrates after scoring against Liverpool in their English Premier League match on Saturday (AFP)

Liverpool went in front through Mohamed Salah's 23rd goal of the season but were blown away in the second half after Julian Alvarez brought Manchester City level before the break

A sobering defeat is another blow to Liverpool's hopes of a top-four finish as the Reds slip to eighth in the table.

Seventh heaven for Arsenal

Arsenal did not feel the pressure of City briefly cutting the

gap be-fore kick-off at the Emirates as Jesus marked his first league start since November with a double.

Bukayo Saka was handed a rare rest by Mikel Arteta and Jesus took responsibility from the penalty spot in his absence to open the scoring 10 minutes be-

fore half-time.

Jesus was sidelined for three months after picking up a knee injury at the World Cup but the former City forward's return for the run-in could deny his old club a fifth title in six years.

The Brazilian fired home his second goal of the game after

Ben White doubled Arsenal's lead early in the second half.

Rasmus Kristensen pulled a goal back for Leeds, but Granit Xhaka rounded off the scoring as Arsenal made it seven consecutive league wins for the first time under Arteta.

Brighton and Brentford shared the points after a thrilling 3-3 draw.

Three times Brentford led at the Amex through Pontus Jansson, Ivan Toney and Ethan Pinnock.

But the Seagulls grabbed a deserved point thanks to Alexis Mac Allister's late penalty after Kaoru Mitoma and Danny Welbeck also equalised in the first half.

A point apiece sees both sides edge above Liverpool and within six points of the top four.

Roy's return delivers for Palace

Roy Hodgson's return at Crystal Palace delivered the Eagles' first victory of 2023 as Jean Philippe-Mateta's 94th minute goal beat Leicester 2-1 at Selhurst Park.

The Foxes looked on course for a much-needed win when Ricardo Pereira fired home on 56 minutes.

But Eberechi Eze's free-kick hit the woodwork and deflected in off Leicester goalkeeper Daniel Iversen to quickly get Palace level be-fore Mateta coolly slotted home at the death.

Defeat sees Leicester slip into the relegation zone after Bournemouth came from behind to beat Fulham 2-1 thanks to goals from Marcus Tavernier and Dominic Solanke.

Klopp promises spending spree after 'anomaly' season for Reds

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said the Reds will spend in the transfer window to improve on a disappointing season but hit back at criticism of the club behind the scenes.

Klopp's men came close to winning an unprecedented quadruple last season as they lifted the FA Cup and League Cup before falling just short to Manchester City in the Premier League and losing the Champions League final 1-0 to Real Madrid. But Liverpool's hopes of winning silverware this season are already over.

Eliminated early in the domestic cups and at the last 16 of the Champions League, they travel to Manchester City on Saturday 27 points adrift of leaders Arsenal down in sixth.

A top-four finish is all that Klopp's side can now salvage from the campaign, but he said criticism of the club's medical and physical preparation was misplaced despite the role injuries to key players have played in a difficult season.



Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp gestures on the touchline during the English Premier League match against Manchester City on Saturday (AFP)

"(This season is) an anomaly but I would prefer we were still in the Champions League spot," said Klopp on Friday. "It doesn't change overnight, you don't lose all our brains and fitness and medical (department).

"Things happen and then you have to react, but when you are a little bit unlucky in this direction then it's really difficult and the league is running away at that moment. "That is where we were.

The football part, we didn't deal well enough with setbacks through the season."

Attention has already turned to how Liverpool will strengthen in the summer, with Borussia Dortmund's Jude Bellingham reportedly their top target.

Klopp said positive talks with players had taken place during the international break but refused to put a number of how much he will need to spend.

Kvaratskhelia: Boy from rural Georgia turned Napoli star

Tbilisi, Georgia - Khvicha Kvaratskhelia started out knocking the ball about as a barefoot boy by a riverside in rural Georgia, but is now one of the hottest properties in world football.

Following in his footballer father's footsteps, the forward spent five years at Dinamo Tbilisi's academy from the age of 11.

He is currently dazzling for runaway Serie A leaders Napoli, with 14 goals and 14 assists in all competitions this season.

"Few could imagine at the time that the lean boy would become an international star," the then advisor to Dinamo Tbilisi's president, Levan Salukvadze, told AFP.

Back in 2017, when Kvaratskhelia began his senior career at Georgia's preeminent club, aged 16, "managers feared he wasn't physically fit (enough) to play with seniors", Salukvadze said.

"The club's president suggested to wait a couple of more years before he joins the team, but I told him that in two years'



Napoli's Georgian forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (C) celebrates a goal

time Kvaratskhelia would be playing for Liverpool or Real."

Now, Kvaratskhelia is an international star dubbed "Kvaradona" by Napoli fans in reference to their revered icon Diego Maradona.

As a child, he was a "shy, disciplined boy who lived for foot-

ball", according to Salukvadze.

"Since his childhood, he was fully concentrated on football and up until today football is more than just a job to him... that's why his feints, play, running, and acceleration are this joyful."

Dinamo Tbilisi's then-chief

scout Teimuraz Ugrekhelidze described him as a "very talented kid, distinguished for his speed and technique".

"His technique was not only about not losing the ball, he was always ready to take the offensive," he added.

AFP



Union Berlin's Kevin Behrens (C) celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Stuttgart

Union win to keep title hopes alive

Munich, Germany - Union Berlin kept up their pursuit of the Bundesliga title with a 3-0 victory over rock-bottom Stuttgart on Saturday.

Second-half goals from Sheraldo Becker, Kevin Behrens and an own goal from former Union player Genki Haraguchi took the third-placed side to just two points behind leaders Borussia Dortmund and one back from champions Bayern Munich.

Dortmund and Bayern clash later on Saturday.

"Our first half wasn't good, but

the coach chose the right words in the dressing room. We came out, scored three goals, and that's what matters in the end," said Becker. "After half-time, we played like we should," added Union manager Urs Fischer.

Stuttgart have now won just one of their past 12 games and anchor the table alone with eight matches still to play. Stuttgart goalkeeper Fabian Bredlow said his side "need to bust our butts" to avoid relegation.

Mainz dealt fifth-placed RB Leipzig a blow in their bid for

Champions League football next season, winning 3-0 at the Red Bull Arena.

Goals from Marcus Ingvartsen, Ludovic Ajorque and Dominik Kohr took Mainz, who have now won five of their last seven games, to victory.

Leipzig have now lost two straight since their 7-0 Champions League crushing at the hands of Manchester City in March.

Freiburg missed a chance to take advantage of Leipzig's loss, drawing 1-1 at home against struggling Hertha Berlin.

A second-half goal from Italy winger Vincenzo Grifo had Freiburg ahead but a late strike from Berlin-born Jessica Ngankam saw the honours shared.

Bayer Leverkusen handed Schalke their first defeat in nine match-es, winning 3-0 away thanks to second-half goals from Jeremie Frimpong, Florian Wirtz and Sardar Azmoun.

A goal from Germany forward Felix Nmecha in the sixth minute of injury time stole a point for Wolfsburg, who drew 2-2 at home against Augsburg.



RAJAPAKSA SHINES IN PUNJAB'S WIN

PUNJAB KINGS VS KKR

Mohali, India - Sri Lanka's Bhanuka Rajapaksa smashed 50 to set up a seven-run win for Punjab Kings in their rain-hit opening Indian Premier League match against Kolkata Knight Riders on Saturday.

The left-handed Rajapaksa's 32-ball knock and a late charge by big-buy Sam Curran, who hit an unbeaten 26, powered Punjab to 191-5 after being invited to bat first in Mohali.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh led the bowling charge with three wickets to restrict two-time champions Kolkata to 146-7 in 16 overs when rain stopped play and Punjab won by the DLS method.

Rajapaksa set the tone for the team's domination with skipper Shikhar Dhawan, who made 40, in an 86-run second-wicket stand before the Sri Lankan big-hitter departed.

Curran, a left-handed all-rounder who became the most expensive IPL player when Punjab paid \$2.23 million in the December auction, proved his worth with a 17-ball blitz including two sixes.

Punjab replaced Rajapaksa with fast bowler Rishi Dhawan under the new "impact player" rule among other innovations in the T20 tournament.



Punjab Kings' Bhanuka Rajapaksa plays a shot during their match against Kolkata Knight Riders on Saturday

The impact player, who can only be an Indian unless the team has fewer than four overseas players in their XI, is chosen from one of five substitutes listed with the team.

Other new rules include captains being allowed to announce their XI after the toss and teams being able to review umpires' decisions on no-balls and wides using the Decision Review Sys-

tem. A nearly 30-minute floodlight failure delayed the start of the Kolkata innings, which was soon hurt by a double strike in one over by Arshdeep. AFP

MAYERS, WOOD SPARKLE IN LUCKNOW'S EASY WIN



Kyle Mayers of Lucknow Super Giants' plays a shot during his knock of 73 off 38 balls against Delhi Capitals on Saturday. Lucknow defeated Delhi by 50 runs as they followed Mayers effort with a dazzling bowling performance from Mark Wood, who took five wickets for just 14 runs. Ravi Bishnoi and Avesh Khan, who helped themselves with two wickets each, gave Wood good support.

TODAYS MATCHES

MATCH 4

2.00 PM



SUNRISERS HYDERABAD



RAJASTHAN ROYALS

MATCH 5

6.00 PM



ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE



MUMBAI INDIANS

Gujarat win IPL opener in front of more than 100,000 fans

Ahmedabad, India - Opener Shubman Gill smashed 63 as holders Gujarat Titans beat Chennai Super Kings by five wickets in the Indian Premier League opener in front of more than 100,000 fans in Ahmedabad on Friday.

Chasing 179 for victory, Gujarat rode on Gill's 36-ball knock to achieve their target with four balls to spare at the world's biggest cricket stadium and their homeground.

The 16th edition of the money-spinning T20 tournament began with a glitzy opening ceremony and fireworks at a ground which has an official capacity of 132,000.

A roar erupted when home captain Hardik Pandya won the toss and elected to field first but it was Chennai opener Ruturaj Gaikwad who soon silenced the home fans with a flurry of boundaries in his 92 off 50 balls.

Ruturaj lost partners Moeen Ali for 23 and then new signing Ben Stokes - the England all-rounder brought for \$1.96 million



Gujarat Titans' Rahul Tewatia (L) greets teammate Rashid Khan after their victory against Chennai Super Kings on Friday (AFP)

in the auction - for seven but kept up the attack against the opposition bowlers.

But Mohammed Shami, who reached 100 IPL wickets, Rashid Khan and Alzarri Joseph took two wickets each to check the

opposition scoring. Gujarat suffered a blow when new overseas player Kane William-son jarred his knee while attempting a catch at the boundary and limped off the ground. AFP



Ben Stokes with Stephen Fleming

Chennai to wait for Stokes to be '100 per cent ready' before using him as a bowler

Chennai, India - Chennai Super Kings will wait for Ben Stokes to be "100% ready" before using him as a bowler this season as he continues to manage a long-standing knee injury, team coach Stephen Fleming confirmed.

ESPNcricinfo revealed this week that Stokes would start the IPL as a specialist batter following a cortisone injection in his left knee ahead of the season, since he wants to ensure he is fit enough to play a full part in this summer's Ashes series as England Test captain.

Stokes, who cost INR 16.25 crore (£1.6 million approx.) at

December's IPL auction, made 7 off six balls on his Super Kings debut on Friday night, batting at No. 4 in their defeat to defending champions Gujarat Titans in Ahmedabad.

Speaking in the post-match press conference, Fleming said Stokes was "progressing well".

"He had a fair amount of time off between the last Test match and getting here, and he had some medical work done on the knee," Fleming said. "We want to do the right thing by Ben and make sure that he's 100% ready to go."

ESPNcricinfo

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KNITTING

CRAFT

KNITTING HAS SURGED IN POPULARITY
ONCE AGAIN IN THE UNITED STATES IN
THIS AGE OF PANDEMICS AND SELF-CARE.
BUT LOOK WHO'S DOING IT!

On a sunny March afternoon just outside the nation's capital, one club of enthusiasts sets itself apart - the ten or so people clicking their needles are men.

DC Men Knit meets twice a month in the Washington area to knit or crochet scarves, hats and blankets. The goal? Relaxation, friendship and reclaiming a pastime historically enjoyed by men and women.

The group's coordinator Gene Throwe says he hopes to "provide a safe space for men to knit together and trade our skills with one another, to help each other out, because knitting has for quite a while been viewed as a female vocation."

The 51-year-old Throwe, an office manager for a national association of nursing schools, puts some finishing touches on a brown sweater with a subtle golden pattern that he's been making on and off for years.

Like many of his fellow knitters, Throwe grew up watching his grandmother work magic with her needles. That feeling of nostalgia turned to regret as he watched the hobby fall by the wayside, in favour of more modern pursuits. One day, he realised he could do something to revive it.

"Why do I have to expect the women to do it - I can do it, too!" he recalled.

The members of DC Men Knit tend to spark a degree of fascination when they meet in public places - but no hostility or discrimination.

"It's always some grandmotherly type person that stares at us, like we just landed from Mars," Throwe says. with a laugh.

"And then they'll just start asking us questions about what we're working on."

Not just for grandmas

Historically, men have always been knitters, from those who ran lucrative medieval knitting guilds to the schoolboys in World War II Britain who made blankets for the troops.

For those who are passionate about the craft, the latest craze is nothing out of the ordinary.

In his shorts in near-freezing temperatures, and a fanny pack around his waist, Sam Barsky doesn't fit the mould of the usual social media influencer. But he has nearly 500,000 followers on Instagram and TikTok combined.

Barsky - a self-styled knitting artist - has won over fans with his freehand knitting and his unique sweater designs, which are inspired by landscapes and nature, monuments or works of art.

Niagara Falls, Stonehenge, the New York City skyline, penguins, robots, the Wizard of Oz: Barsky takes it all on and has sweaters not just for Christmas but for

every occasion - birthdays, Valentine's Day, Hanukkah, you name it.

He even has a sweater dedicated to his sweaters, with about 30 of his creations knitted in miniature form. His work has been displayed at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore.

"Knitting is not just for grandmas. Knitting is for anyone of any age or gender who wants to do it, who enjoys doing it," he told AFP in an interview at Oregon Ridge Nature Center in Cockeysville, Maryland, north of Baltimore.

It was in the park that he kept knitting when the coronavirus pandemic brought travel to a screeching halt.

The park's trees, some of which were painted in 2017 by people who overcame drug and alcohol addiction, have been immortalized on one of Barsky's sweaters against a golden background.

Pandemic side effects

While Barsky is keen to travel once again, he says the pandemic was not all bad for him personally - his TikTok account, which he opened in September 2020, quickly attracted a bigger following than the Instagram account he'd been using for years.

Once people were free to meet up in person again, his knitting circles got much, much larger crowds because lots of other people picked up knitting in that period of time, he said.

Like breadmaking or pottery, knitting and other sewing arts were revitalised during the first months of the pandemic as a way for penned-in Americans to combat their boredom and anxiety - a scenario repeated around the world.

Even former first lady Michelle Obama has taken up the hobby, showing off the sweaters she made for president husband Barack in promotional appearances for her latest book.

In the DC Men Knit group, each member found a purpose. For Throwe, knitting is reclaiming an art form that can be modern and useful. Devin Breckenridge, a 48-year-old video game aficionado, says he wanted to do something a little more creative and knitting fit the bill. And for Michael Manning, a 58-year-old retired government worker, the soothing repetitiveness of knitting was 'just very relaxing'.

AFP



Michael Manning, a retired federal government worker, attends a gathering of DC Men Knit in Alexandria, Virginia



Sam Barsky, whose professional knitting led to him becoming a social media influencer



Knitting is not just
for grandmas.
Knitting is for
anyone of any age
or gender who
wants to do it, who
enjoys doing it

Sam Barsky



Gene Throwe, coordinator of DC Men Knit (right), and other members attend a gathering in Alexandria

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artist Zhao Xiaoyong standing next to his paintings at Dafen Village, in Shenzhen, in China's southern Guangdong province

Brushing up

China's 'art factory' painters turn from fakes to originals



People practising painting in an alley at Dafen village, in Shenzhen

Painters in a Chinese village once known for churning out replicas of Western masterpieces are now making original art worth thousands of dollars, selling their own works in a booming domestic art market.

Home to more than 8,000 artists, southern China's Dafen has been producing near-perfect copies of timeless masterpieces for years. In its heyday, three out of five oil paintings sold worldwide were made in the village, and for years village painters sold their copies to buyers across Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

Exports began to dip after the 2008 global financial crisis, and all but dried up when China slammed shut its borders in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

A few artists gave up and closed their studios. But others saw in the obstacles an opportunity to establish themselves as painters in their own right by catering to China's art market - the second-biggest in the

world, with sales jumping by 35 per cent in 2021.

Self-taught artist Zhao Xiaoyong used to sell replicas of Vincent van Gogh's work for about 1,500 yuan (US\$220) each, while his original pieces fetch up to 50,000 yuan, he said.

When Zhao moved to Dafen from central China in 1997, his family shared a tiny two-bedroom apartment with five other tenants.

"Those days, there was an assembly line-style system, with each artist painting a small section of a larger piece, like an eye or a nose, before passing the piece to another painter to draw a limb or a shirt sleeve," he told AFP.

After years of cranking out mock masterpieces, Zhao eventually saved enough money to visit the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Saint-Paul Asylum in southern France, where the artist famously painted 'The Starry Night'.

"I felt I could finally enter into his world instead of just copying his brush strokes," Zhao said. "I re-

alised I had to come out of Van Gogh's shadow and give life to my thoughts."

Now he chronicles how the Dafen oil painting village has changed, using Van Gogh's style: one canvas shows Zhao in a crowded workshop holding one of the Dutch painter's self-portraits, while fellow artists nap on their desks.

Tourist boost

Since China's dismantling of its 'zero-Covid policy' in late 2022, the streets of Dafen are once again bustling with visitors, crouched in front of easels, slapping paint on canvases.

As well as immersing themselves in the artistic culture with painting lessons, many of the tourists come to buy pieces from the villagers, but their hunt for a good deal is another factor behind the fading market in handmade fakes.

In one alleyway, workers brush paint onto printed canvases of Duc-



I felt I could finally enter into his world instead of just copying his brush strokes. I realised I had to come out of Van Gogh's shadow and give life to my thoughts

ZHAO XIAOYONG

cio's 'Madonna and Child'. These are sold for a knock-down price as low as 50 yuan per piece, while a hand-painted copy costs up to 1,500 yuan.

"We paint a few strokes over the printed image to make it look like an authentic oil painting," said one

artist, who declined to be named.

"Buyers think the printed background is painted using water-colours."

Chinese aesthetic

Another Dafen-based artist on a mission to move on from painting imitations is Wu Feimin, who has carved out a niche selling Buddhist-themed art.

"I used to copy Picasso's work, and now I have my distinct style," Wu said, painting a giant face of the Buddha with a palette knife.

"It takes weeks, sometimes months, to complete one painting," the artist said as he was getting ready for exhibitions in the village and the rich industrial hub of Guangzhou. "It's risky, but the margins are better."

Other artists said that they went back to school during the pandemic to learn how to draw mountains and weeping-willow trees seen in

traditional Chinese landscape paintings.

"Wealthy Chinese buyers want art that reflects a Chinese aesthetic," said Yu Sheng, a fine-art teacher who used the opportunity to retrain in the classical style.

While he continues to make ends meet by exporting replicas of Western works, he also creates his own pieces, determined to crack the more lucrative domestic market and become a portrait painter for the wealthy.

And he is confident in his abilities over those of artists from well-known schools.

"Our technique is better because we paint every day, but we don't have contacts with art dealers in big cities," he said. "Our survival depends on whether our work is recognised by China's art buyers - we must learn to bend like bamboo."

AFP



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