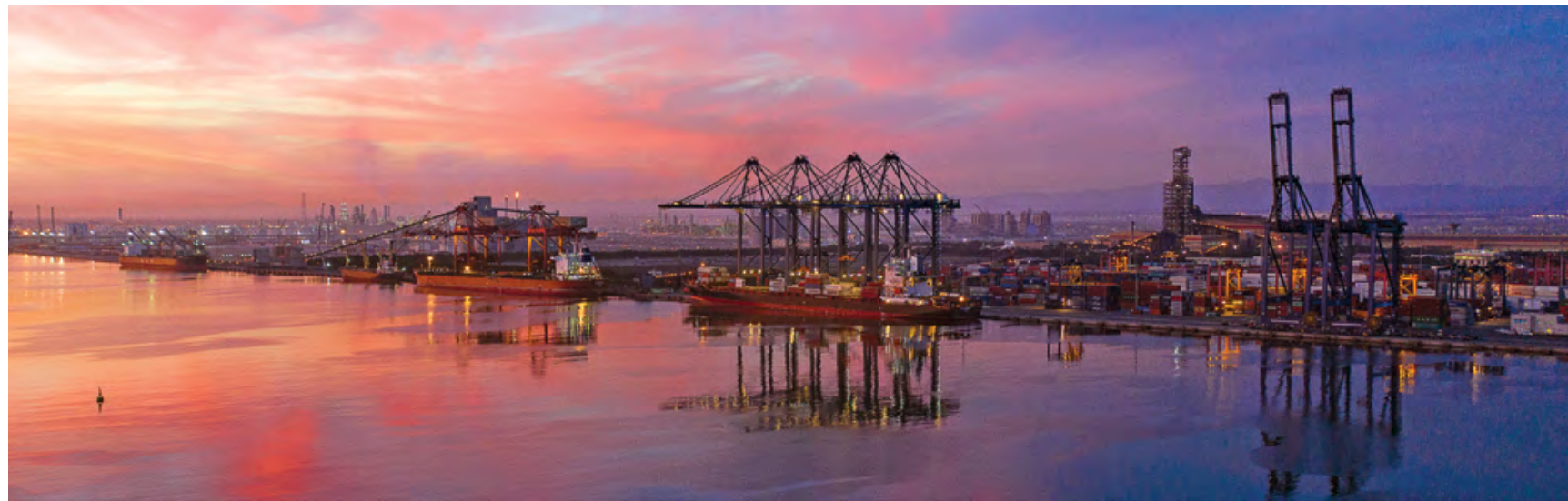




OIA grows assets to R018bn

Over 800 jobs created in OIA and its companies for Omanis in 2022

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the investment arm of the sultanate, grew its total assets to nearly R018bn at the end of 2022 after realising an 8.8% return on investments during the year. OIA attributes this to its focus on investment diversification and risk mitigation.

On Wednesday, OIA published its annual report, providing valuable insights into the authority's performance and achievements during 2022.

In his opening message in the report, H E Sultan al Habsi, Minister of Finance and Chairman of OIA, said the authority approached all circumstances and challenges in 2022 prudently. OIA, he said, developed strategies in line with future economic analyses and expectations, with emphasis on diversifying investments and mitigating risks.

OIA continued its support of the state's general budget with dividends amounting to R05.6bn from 2016 till the end of 2022. Additionally, the report showcased OIA's commitment to creating opportunities for nationals, with over 800 jobs created in the authority and its companies for Omanis last year.

H E Habsi stated that the economic conditions are not an obstacle to OIA's efforts to



Oman Investment Authority developed strategies in line with future economic analyses and expectations, with emphasis on diversifying investments and mitigating risks

H E SULTAN AL HABSI

IMF praises Oman's financial strategy

Muscat - International Monetary Fund has applauded Oman's economic measures and financial efforts, especially those targeted at controlling expenditure and reducing public debt.

The remarks were made by an IMF team, which concluded a visit to Oman on Wednesday, after meeting Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Secretary-General at Ministry of Finance.

Jashmi presided over the meeting to examine the observations and technical ad-

vice from IMF.

IMF's mission to Oman aimed to provide technical advice for refining the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan and the state's general budget.

During its visit, the IMF delegation held discussions with finance specialists from the Ministry of Finance and representatives of various government institutions.

The purpose of these dialogues was not only to provide technical support for financial planning but also to assess existing procedures

for the preparation and monitoring of the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan.

Additionally, the team offered guidance on integrating this plan with the overall process of managing the state's general budget.

The delegation also examined the sultanate's financial statements and annual financial reports. The preparation and updating process of the Medium-Term Fiscal Plan was discussed, and an evaluation of anticipated financial risks was carried out.

promote economic development and achieve financial sustainability in the sultanate. Through its investments spread across more than 50 countries, OIA managed good returns on investment and rewarding profits.

"This includes the Future Generations Fund; with investments in public and private mar-

kets, the fund realised a relatively better financial performance compared to a number of global sovereign funds. Meanwhile, the National Development Portfolio, which includes more than 160 companies in the sultanate, earned total profits of over R01.4bn," H E Habsi stated.

In his foreword to the report,

H E Abdulsalam al Murshidi, President of OIA, stressed that the authority addressed the events and economic conditions of 2022 through balanced plans and prudent investment decisions in line with local and global changes. "As a result, OIA realised good performance and productivity outcomes and ex-

panded its investments," he said. Nationally, OIA companies launched ten national projects across governorates in targeted sectors that have the potential to contribute to the desired economic stimulus.

Internationally, OIA invested in Group-14, a leading company that manufactures silicon anode car batteries; Crusoe Energy, which has developed an innovative technology to capture flare gas emissions for generation of clean energy; and Ascend Elements, a company that has developed an innovative technology to recycle lithium-ion batteries.

OIA also invested in 13 private equity funds in Europe, Asia and North America.

Divestment plan

The OIA annual report sheds light on its divestment plan, which aims to enable the private sector to lead the Omani economy and enhance its contribution to driving economic development.

OIA's divestment activities in 2022 saw the listing of Pearl REIF, the first real estate investment fund on Muscat Stock Exchange, divesting from International Maritime College Oman, and preparing six assets in different sectors for divestment in 2023.

Continued on Page 03

CAA counters claims of high operating costs of Salalah flights

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has addressed concerns regarding the allegedly prohibitive cost of operating flights to Salalah, which some airlines claim hinder their ability to increase service frequency to Dhofar.

CAA's statement was in response to remarks attributed to Capt Mohammed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, who reportedly voiced his concern during a panel discussion at the 3rd Arab Forum for Tourism and Heritage in Salalah.

"We will not increase the number of flights to Salalah because it is an unprofitable route for us due to the fees and taxes we pay. We currently pay R020 in taxes for a ticket worth R050 during the khareef season," Capt Ahmed reportedly stated.

He urged a collaborative effort by government agencies to address the matter.

CAA said a comprehensive analytical study was conducted on the fees levied on domestic flights. The study considered the authority's departure and air nav-

igation fees, as well as landing and parking fees charged by Oman Airports Company.

"The study showed that the fees for July 2023 were R08.857 per passenger for return trips between Muscat International Airport and Salalah Airport," the authority stated

A CAA study showed that the fees for July 2023 were R08.857 per passenger for return trips between Muscat and Salalah

It further explained that competition between the two ground handling companies at Muscat International Airport offers airlines the opportunity to secure competitive pricing for services.

Reiterating its commitment to making domestic flights more affordable and available as per market demand, the authority confirmed that it is working closely with concerned authorities and strategic partners.

H M HONOURS SAUDI ENVOY



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has conferred the Al Nuoman Order, First Class, on Abdullah Saud al Anzi, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Sultanate of Oman. Delegated by His Majesty the Sultan, Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, handed over the Al Nuoman Order to Anzi when he received the latter to bid him farewell at the end of his tour of duty as ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Oman. Sayyid Shihab conveyed his gratitude to Anzi for his efforts to enhance bilateral relations, wishing him success in his future assignments (ONA)

NEWS BRIEF

STATE COUNCIL STUDIES MEMO ON 2023 BUDGET

Muscat - The State Council held its eighth meeting chaired by Chairman H E Sheikh Abdulmalik Abdullah al Khalili on Wednesday.

The meeting reviewed a report on the tasks of the council's committees during the fourth annual convening and a follow-up report on the missions undertaken by the council's members in the current session.

The meeting also reviewed a memorandum from the Council of Ministers on the government's response to observations and views on State Budget 2023.



Big debate: Walking on a treadmill vs outdoor

Russian strike damages 40,000t of grain

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russia damaged almost 40,000 tonnes of grain in an overnight strike on southern Ukrainian ports near the Danube river, Kyiv's infrastructure minister said on Wednesday.

"The Russians attacked warehouses and grain elevators - almost 40,000 tonnes of grain were damaged," Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said in an English-language post on social media.

Kubrakov added that the grain was destined for some African countries, China and Israel, and



accused Russia of using Iranian drones to carry out the attack. "These are the very ports that

have become the foundation of global food security today."

On Wednesday, Paris accused

Moscow of deliberately putting global food security at risk after Russian drone strikes on the Danube vital for grain exports.

"Russia is once again deliberately putting global food security at risk by destroying essential grain export infrastructure," the French foreign ministry said, accusing Moscow of 'only pursuing its own interest at the expense of the most vulnerable populations' and driving up prices of agricultural products.

AFP

See also Page 07

Smoking kills 8.7mn every year, second-hand smoke 1.3mn

Geneva, Switzerland - Only four countries - Brazil, Mauritius, the Netherlands and Turkey - have adopted all the anti-tobacco measures recommended in the fight against the 'deadly scourge' of smoking, the World Health Organization said on Monday.

In a fresh report, the UN health agency urged countries to scale up their use of recognised measures to reduce tobacco use, including enforcing advertising bans, plastering health

warnings on cigarette packages, raising tobacco taxes and providing assistance to those who want to quit. It said Mauritius and the Netherlands had now joined Brazil and Turkey in implementing all of its recommended measures.

WHO said 5.6bn people, or 71% of the world's population, were now protected by at least one tobacco control measure - five times more than in 2007.

The health agency said the

global rate of the prevalence of smoking had dropped from 22.8% in 2007 to 17% in 2021. Without this decline, there would have been 300mn more smokers now.

"Slowly but surely, more and more people are being protected from the harms of tobacco," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

said, adding that his organisation was eager to support national efforts to "protect their people from this deadly scourge".

Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death, killing 8.7mn people each year, including 1.3mn who die from inhaling second-hand smoke.

According to the organisa-

tion, eight countries are one policy step away from joining the leaders in tobacco control: Ethiopia, Iran, Ireland, Jordan, Madagascar, Mexico, New Zealand and Spain.

However, 2.3bn people in 44 countries remain unprotected by any WHO anti-tobacco measures. And 53 states still do not have complete smoking bans in healthcare facilities - something Ruediger Krech, the WHO's health promotion director, called

"completely unacceptable".

The WHO report also decried far too little regulation of e-cigarettes. Globally, 121 countries have adopted some measure addressing e-cigarettes.

But 74 countries - home to almost one third of the global population - have no regulations in place for such products, meaning no bans on use in public places, no labelling requirements and no bans on advertising.

AFP





(V K Shafeer)

Outbreak of red tides prompts health warning

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Recent red tide outbreaks along the coast from South Batinah to Muscat have resulted in tonnes of dead fish washing up, prompting a warning from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) for the public. Numerous beaches in Oman have reported incidents of dead fish washing ashore.

MAFWR advised the public against consuming any dead fish from these beaches due to potential health risks. It also cautioned against swimming in affected waters.

Elaborating on the situation, an official from the Marine Sciences and Fishing Centre informed that there is an uneven distribution of algal bloom in Omani waters. "The intensity varies. For instance, in Muscat there's no bloom, yet a little further in Seeb,

there is," the official said. "Avoid consuming dead fish washed ashore and temporarily suspend fishing activities in affected regions."

V K Shafeer, a resident of Muscat, was dismayed at finding dead fish on his morning walking in Qurum beach on Tuesday. He described the sight as unusual for a typically pristine location like Qurum.

Effects of the red tide have also been felt in local infrastructure. On July 24, the outbreak disrupted operations at Barka's desalination plant. Nama Water Services has urged subscribers to limit water consumption until seawater quality is restored.

Red tides are harmful algal blooms, which occur when colonies of algae - plant-like organisms that live in the sea and freshwater - grow out of control, producing toxic or harmful effects on people, fish, shellfish, marine mammals and birds.

Al Sogara: Jabal Akhdar's hidden village awakens

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Tucked away in a mountain, the serene hamlet of Al Sogara is accessible only by hiking up a steep stone staircase. While similar cliffside settlements are scat-

visitor experience, the ministry, in collaboration with a local company, has labelled the native trees in the village, leveraging expertise from specialists at Oman Botanical Garden.

Future plans for Al Sogara involve educational activities and



tered throughout Jabal Akhdar, Al Sogara stands alone in its continued habitation, with a living history of over 450 years etched into its mountainside homes.

Despite Jabal Akhdar's reputation as a tourism hotspot, Al Sogara remains largely undiscovered and is often called the 'Forgotten village'.

However, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) aims to change this by enhancing Al Sogara's appeal through the development of its natural, cultural and heritage aspects.

Nestled some 40km from Seih Qatana, Al Sogara is one of Oman's most secluded settlements. Its picturesque charm, coupled with its rich history spanning 450 years, makes it a compelling tale of survival and resilience.

According to Sultan al Makhmari, head of Tourism Experience Development Department, MHT is exerting concerted efforts to boost Al Sogara's profile, including revitalising the village infrastructure with natural resources and improving access. Enhancing visitor experience with viewing platforms, rest areas and waste disposal facilities is also in focus. "The revitalisation project is complete," Makhmari said.

He emphasised Al Sogara's uniqueness as a tourist destination embodying Oman's ancient rural lifestyle. To further enrich

MHT is exerting concerted efforts to boost Al Sogara's profile, including revitalising infrastructure with natural resources and improving access

SULTAN AL MAKHMARI

workshops, including rock carving and traditional Omani coffee making sessions, and adventure tourism activities like mountain walking. Visitors can also look forward to exploring natural attractions like caves and ancient trails leading to other villages.

Abdullah bin Nasser al Shuraiqi, representative of National Company in Al Sogara, shared that the village welcomed over 5,000 visitors last year, a testament to the fruitful collaboration between National Company and MHT. He informed that a project to improve access from parking lots to the village entrance has been completed.

The village revitalisation initiative is expected to fortify the tourism sector, attracting more visitors, bolstering the local economy, and creating job opportunities for the local population, MHT stated.



79,034 visit Jabal Akhdar in H1 2023

Muscat - Jabal Akhdar in Dakhliyah governorate recorded a notable influx of 79,034 visitors in the first half of 2023, according to the latest statistics from the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Among the visitors, Omani citizens formed the largest group - 28,406.

Visitors from Saudi Arabia stood at 3,848, while those from Kuwait and the UAE were 611 and 329 respectively. The number of visitors from Bahrain and Qatar were 273 and 265, respectively.

Arab tourists from other nations totalled 3,027, showing a considerable interest from the wider Arab community.

However, it was tourists from nationalities outside the Arab world that made up the most significant portion of visitors, with a total of 42,275.

The data underscores Jabal Akhdar's broad appeal, attracting guests from a wide range of nationalities to experience its unique heritage and natural beauty.

EA campaign to plant 2mn mangrove seeds by August 14

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of a campaign aiming to plant 2mn mangrove seeds by August 14, Environment Authority is executing planting operations in North Batinah, South Batinah, South Sharqiyah and Al Wusta.

The campaign, which kicked off on July 24, was preceded by an extensive collection effort driven by the authority's Directorate General of



Nature Conservation in Muscat with the goal of collecting 2mn seeds from the mangroves populating Qurum Natural Reserve.

On Wednesday, the Directorate General of Nature Conservation in Al Wusta launched a drive to plant 1.1mn seeds across Khor Ghawi and Qaysad, located in the wilayat of Al Jazir.

On July 30, EA embarked on planting 800,000 seeds in the creek of the wilayat of Shinas. This drive will continue until August 13 with the objective of nurturing environmental ecosystems

and increasing green cover.

The campaign aligns with EA's ongoing national initiative to plant 10mn indigenous trees over the next decade. It is part of the authority's commitment to enhancing ecosystem efficiency and expanding green cover.

Mangroves serve a pivotal function in the regional ecosystem, providing crucial protection against beach erosion, sustaining ecological balance, and fostering the growth of commercially important fish and other marine species.

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JOURNEY THROUGH THE LENS

OFS to host film fests throughout the year



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Film Society (OFS) is preparing to host a series of film festivals across the sultanate in 2023-24. The initiative aims to encourage and facilitate the younger generation to produce films that cast light on the diverse social and cultural facets of life in Oman.

The festival circuit includes the Batinah International Film Festival, Dakhliyah Film Festival, Al Dhahirah International Film Festival, Salalah Film Festival and Al Sharqiyah International Film Festival, climaxing in the grand Muscat International Film Festival in early 2024. Dates for each festival, barring Batinah International Film Festival, are yet to be announced by OFS.

Emphasising the growing influence of Omani cinema in the Arab world, Jamil al Yaqoobi, Chairman of Al Dhahirah International Film Festival, said, "OFS aims to spotlight stories about our history and culture, conceived and crafted by our own people. Over the past few years, we've discovered remarkable talent who we support through workshops and seminars."

Yaqoobi highlighted the success of Al Dhahirah International Film Festival, scheduled for December, noting that the last edi-



OFS aims to spotlight stories about our history and culture, conceived and crafted by our own people... we've discovered remarkable talent

JAMIL AL YAQOOBI

tion attracted 175 films from 18 countries. "We were taken aback by the enormous response for a festival in a relatively remote region. We anticipate over 200 entries this year."

In collaboration with the Office of the Governor of South Batinah, OFS will hold the second edition of the Batinah International Film Festival from November 12 to 15. This year's theme - 'Human Relationship with the Land' - embodies the deep-rooted connection between Oman's people and their environment.

The festival serves as a launch pad for emerging cinema talent,

providing a gateway to global cinematic perspectives, promoting film culture and elevating Omani production standards.

Dr Humaid al Ameri, Chairman of OFS, described the festival as part of a series of events aimed at spreading cinema culture. "The festival not only showcases Oman to the global cinema community but also motivates Omani filmmakers by acknowledging and featuring their work."

Mohammed bin Abdullah al Ajmi, Director of Batinah International Film Festival, described the event as a unique platform for filmmakers to showcase their creativity and exchange experiences. "Cinema plays a crucial role in telling stories and strengthening cultural and human connections. The festival unearths talent from Oman and elsewhere," he added.

Held in January, the Al Sharqiyah International Film Festival saw the participation of nearly 120 films. Anwar al Ruzaiqi, the festival's director, said the event was a huge success and expects increased participation from the Arab world in the next edition.

OFS regularly conducts workshops on various aspects of filmmaking, including scripting, cinematography, editing and marketing, drawing experts from around the globe to train local talent.

OIA grows assets to RO18bn realising 8.8% return on investments

Continued from Page 01
OIA aims to utilise the returns from these divestments by directing them to investments in new sectors.
The report also delved into

the positive impacts of the Code of Governance for OIA entities, which was published at the beginning of 2022. It helped companies improve outcomes, enhance performance, generate

profits and enhance efforts toward reducing debts.
OIA stated that its companies reduced debt by 23.4% as a result of a structured plan that targeted the payment of RO3bn,

including the prepayment of RO600mn.
The report also highlighted OIA's positive efforts in attracting foreign investments to its mandates.

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Industry leaders who have nominated their champions...

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Arab nations discuss strategic cooperation in communications

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The communications and information officials from Arab countries congregated in Muscat on Wednesday to discuss joint strategies related to telecommunications, besides discussing cybersecurity and the challenges that Palestine faces in the field of post.

The 52nd meeting of the Executive Office of the Arab Communications Ministers Council held at Madinat al Irfan was an avenue for comprehensive discussions on telecommunication strategies in the Arab region, an official report said.

The event, which was hosted by Oman and led by the United Arab Emirates, reviewed the rec-

ommendations of the 51st meeting of the Permanent Arab Committee for Communications and Information, along with insights from the 43rd assembly of the Permanent Arab Committee for Posts.

These discussions were held in anticipation of forwarding the approved recommendations to the Ministerial Committee of Arab Ministers for Communications and Information.

Majed Sultan al Mesmar, Director General of the UAE's Telecommunications and Digital Government Regulatory Authority, while leading the meeting, highlighted the critical role that the information and communication sector played during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring its importance across all sec-

tors. He said the discussions focused on enhancing the use of technology in Arab nations to improve services for their citizens.

The delegation also considered contributions from Arab nations to the Arabic section of the International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union. Other matters under review included the challenges faced by Palestine and the broader Arab strategy for cybersecurity, among others.

Bassam Fadel al Sarhan, Chairman of the Board of Commissioners and CEO of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in Jordan, stressed the significance of such gatherings.

According to Sarhan, these meetings enhance cooperation among Arab nations, paving the way for regulatory frameworks.

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Oman and Etihad Rail signs key deal with Jindal

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman and Etihad Rail Company (OERC), the developer and operator of the UAE-Oman rail network, has signed a key memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Sohar-based Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel Company.

The MoU aims to establish a sustainable end-to-end transport logistics solution between Jindal's steel complex at Sohar Port and the UAE, via the UAE-Oman rail network.

As part of OERC's commitment to provide efficient and cost-effective logistics solutions for major global players across different sectors, the MoU will allow Jindal to annually transport up to 4mn tonnes of raw materials and finished products from its



steel complex at Sohar Port to the UAE markets.

Under the terms of the agreement, OERC will leverage its state-of-the-art rail network to support Jindal in optimising operational integration through fa-

cilitated loading and unloading processes while guaranteeing rolling stock and facilities' requirements of iron ore and steel.

Commenting on the agreement, Mohammed Zahran al Mahrouqi, deputy CEO of OERC,

said, "Our partnership with Jindal Shaded reinforces Oman and Etihad Rail Company's commitment to improving logistics services to meet the future needs and expectations of our customers by providing comprehensive so-

lutions and stimulating the growth of various industrial sectors within Oman and the UAE."

"The MoU will enable Jindal to enhance its supply chain efficiency, benefiting from the UAE-Oman rail network's fast,

cost-effective, and sustainable services," he added.

Harsha Shetty, CEO of Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel Company, said, "This is an important milestone for our company as we look forward to further expanding the reach of our high-quality, industry-leading products in the region and beyond. Our ability to seamlessly transport nearly 4mn tonnes of raw material will greatly help us in our operations, supporting our ambition to reduce our carbon footprint."

"We are very proud of our partnership with this national strategic project that will bring enormous economic and social returns to both the sultanate and the UAE, whilst also emphasising the region's competitive advantage as a logistics hub," he added.

Through this collaboration, Jindal will not only streamline its transportation and logistics operations, but also further advance its sustainability objectives and strengthen its green value chain.

Oman and Etihad Rail Company will ensure an environmentally friendly transportation and logistics solution through the Oman-UAE rail network, contributing to the reduction of CO2 emissions in Oman and the UAE, in line with their national goals of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

OERC has recently entered several commercial and investment partnerships with major international players in various industrial sectors to provide innovative logistics solutions and facilities.



PDO achieves historic milestone of drilling 1,500th well at Nimr

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the leading oil and gas exploration and production company in the sultanate, celebrated the drilling of its 1,500th well at the Nimr Oil Field, the first achievement of its kind in Oman.

The 1,500th well, referred to as NM-1500, is part of the Nimr cluster, located in the South of PDO's concession area.

Covering a total area of 1,875 km, Nimr is PDO's largest cluster, and boasts the most extensive well stock spread across 23 fields. It contributes more than 12% of PDO's production (around 90,000 barrels per day)

and possesses one of the most substantial hydrocarbon growth portfolios.

In a press statement, PDO's managing director Steve Phimister said, "This historic accomplishment of drilling the 1,500th well in the Nimr cluster underpins our long-term commitment to sustainable growth and maximising value to Oman's economy. We are setting new benchmarks in the energy sector, safely and competitively growing our core business, in terms of both cost and carbon performance."

"This achievement is the result of a great cross-functional effort within the organisation and we are immensely proud of

everyone involved," he added.

The journey to NM-1500 began 43 years ago when the discovery well, NM-1 was drilled in the Nimr-C area, with output starting a few years later following the commissioning of production facilities. The well is still yielding oil today.

PDO's oil south petroleum manager Junaid Ghulam said, "NM-1500 symbolises the persistence, resolve, sustainability and superb reputation of our company and its people to produce oil from the most challenging of sub-surface environments, consisting of heavy oil from complex classics with strong aquifers, for decades past and decades to come."

According to PDO, Nimr in recent years has evolved into an efficient well factory delivering over 130 new wells a year.

NM-1,500 was operational just 15 hours after the rig move, a testament to the well-oiled machine that Nimr has become. This achievement was made possible through efficient management of operational issues and effective collaboration between various teams across the company.

Notably, the well NM-1,000 was drilled in 2013 over a 23-day period in the complex and challenging Middle Gharif sandstone reservoir to a total depth of 2,100 metres and is now in production.

Oil prices climb on expected decline in US stockpiles

Muscat - Crude oil prices rebounded on Wednesday after estimates of a massive weekly drop in US crude inventories, while prospects of another OPEC+ production cut also boosted prices ahead of the group's meeting on Friday.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at \$85.64 per barrel in morning trade in London, a 0.86% gain from the closing price on Tuesday of \$84.91 per barrel.

The American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at the same time at \$82.06 per barrel, up 0.85% from the session close of \$81.37 per barrel on Tuesday.

Investor risk appetite was constrained after Fitch cut the US' credit rating, citing fiscal deterioration, but a big plum-



met in US commercial crude oil stockpiles mitigated concerns, as a robust stockpile draw signals solid oil demand in the world's top oil-consuming economy.

Inventories are estimated to contract by around 15.4mn barrels, higher than the market forecast of a drop of 900,000 barrels.

However, demand in China is still on investors' watch lists as the country tries to recover from pandemic-era demand weakness.

Analysts say worrisome economic data from China may lead to another output cut decision by the OPEC+ group during its meeting on Friday.

Agencies

Oil majors still profitable even if super-profits gone

Paris, France - From BP to ExxonMobil to TotalEnergies, none of the oil and gas majors have repeated the exceptional profits posted in 2022 when prices surged in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but they nevertheless remain comfortably profitable this year.

BP was the last to report earnings, reporting Tuesday a second-quarter net profit of \$1.8bn, which was just a fifth of what it earned in the same period last year.

Before it, the US giant Exxon-Mobil saw its second-quarter profits tumble 56% to \$7.9bn, while rival Chevron saw a similar fall to \$6bn.

Shell saw a 64% drop in net earnings to \$3.1bn, while TotalEnergies fared better with just a 28% slide to \$4.1bn.

All of them saw their financial performance "impacted by fluctuating prices of oil, gas and refined products," as BP described it on Tuesday.

In 2022, the five oil majors earned a combined total of \$151bn in net profits thanks to the double-whammy of the Russian invasion of Ukraine causing supply concerns, with Moscow cutting gas supplies to most of Europe, just as the emergence of the global economy from pandemic lockdowns boosted demand.

'Exceptional year'

"2022 was clearly an exceptional year and not the norm," said



Brent crude traded at an average of \$78.1 per barrel in Q2 2023, far from the \$114 during the same period last year

Moez Ajmi, an energy analyst at the consulting firm EY.

Oil and gas prices are now much lower.

The Dutch TTF gas contract, the reference for western Europe, fluctuated between 25 and 55 euros per megawatt hour in the past three months, after hitting nearly 350 euros in March 2022 in the wake of the Russian invasion.

Meanwhile, Brent crude traded at an average of \$78.10 per barrel in the second quarter, far from the \$114 during the same period last year.

While their earnings were considerably lower, the energy majors "remain very profitable", Ajmi said.

"The proof: their policy to always reward shareholders and boost dividends, the increase in investments compared with last year, and the better debt ratios," he added.

Shell announced a 24% in-

crease in interim dividends, and the share buyback programmes in place at the majors are also considerable, according to Ajmi's calculations.

Everything points to an "excellent 2023" for the energy majors, Ajmi said, even if the current pricing levels mean they won't be anything like those of last year.

"Oil prices will be elevated, well over \$80, as the economic prospects look better and soft landing is more likely," said Adi Imsirovic, an oil sector expert at Surrey Clean Energy.

Support for oil prices has also come from decisions by Russia and Saudi Arabia to put less oil on international markets.

Meanwhile, the gas market has stabilised.

"European gas storage is pretty full and in the absence of an exceptionally harsh winter, prices should stay moderate," Imsirovic said.

AFP

Samail Industrial City signs expansion deal with Flexible Rubber Factory

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Samail Industrial City, which is managed by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), has signed a contract with Flexible Rubber Factory to expand the project, involving an investment of up to RO1mn and covering a total area of 20,000 sqm.

This expansion aligns with the efforts of supporting circular economy practices, promoting recycling initiatives, and boosting local value-added services, Madayn said in a press statement.

Sami al Kharusi, owner and executive director of Flexible Rubber Factory (Marn), in-



formed that the factory is the first of its kind in Oman. It specialises in recycling used tires and transforming them into rubber-derived products fol-

lowing the process of extracting steel from the rubber powder.

Notably, Marn stands as the exclusive factory in the Gulf re-

gion that extracts and exports 'rubber dough' to global markets for tire manufacturing.

Kharusi said that the factory stands out for its 100% Omani management, and notably, 30% of the production lines have been locally manufactured within the factory itself.

He added that a remarkable feat of the factory is its 100% waste recycling rate, leaving no room for additional waste. Moreover, the factory plays a significant role in generating opportunities at the local level, as the rubber dough is used in the manufacturing of a wide array of products, including shoes, waterproof materials, asphalt, and various rubber-based products.

Fitch downgrades US credit rating

Washington, US – Fitch downgraded the United States' top-notch credit rating by a step on Tuesday, citing a growing federal debt burden and an "erosion of governance" that has manifested in debt limit standoffs.

The decision to downgrade the US from AAA to AA+ sparked a fiery rebuttal from the White House, with press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre saying the move "defies reality."

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a separate statement that she "strongly" disagreed with Fitch as well, calling the change "arbitrary and based on outdated data."

It is the first such downgrade by a major ratings company in more than a decade. A debt ceiling impasse in 2011 saw S&P lower Washington's AAA rating, drawing bipartisan outrage.

"The rating downgrade of the United States reflects the expected fiscal deterioration over the next three years, a high and growing general government debt burden, and the erosion of governance" relative to peers, said Fitch Ratings on Tuesday.

It added that there was a stable outlook assigned.

Yellen said Fitch's quantitative ratings model declined between 2018 and 2020, but the agency was only announcing its change now despite progress seen in indicators.

She argued that US "Treasury securities remain the world's preeminent safe and liquid asset, and that the American economy



A file photo shows view of the US Capitol in Washington, DC

is fundamentally strong."

While the lifting of the US debt ceiling – a limit on government borrowing to pay for bills already incurred – was often routine, it has for several years become a contentious partisan issue.

Little lasting impact?

There is a "clear short-run implication" of the downgrade involving higher bond yields and a potential sell-off in the stock market and the dollar, said Mickey Levy of Berenberg Capital Markets.

But he does not expect long-run ramifications even if it could

lead some investors to reduce their Treasury exposure in the near term. Levy noted widespread awareness of the rising debt situation.

John Canavan, lead US analyst at Oxford Economics, does not expect the Fitch move to have a "lasting market impact."

"One key reason for that is that the S&P downgrade more than a decade ago already broke the dam on this front," he told AFP, noting that there was little lasting effect from that decision.

But "psychological support for dollar-denominated debt" could take a hit in the short-term, interfering with Treasury auctions at

a time when it needs to ramp up the size of issuance, he said.

'Steady deterioration'

In May, Fitch had placed the country's credit on "rating watch negative," reflecting increased political partisanship that hampered a resolution to raise or suspend the debt limit ahead of a looming deadline.

While lawmakers reached a bipartisan agreement to avert a catastrophic default, Fitch in June kept the US on negative watch.

"In Fitch's view, there has been a steady deterioration in

standards of governance over the last 20 years, including on fiscal and debt matters," the agency said Tuesday.

"The repeated debt-limit political standoffs and last-minute resolutions have eroded confidence in fiscal management," Fitch added.

It also said the US government "lacks a medium-term fiscal framework" and has seen only "limited progress" tackling challenges related to rising social security and Medicare costs as the population ages.

This year, hard-right Republicans dominating their party's narrow majority in the House of



Global stock markets slide after US downgrade

London, UK – Global stock markets slumped Wednesday after the United States had its top credit rating downgraded by Fitch.

Wall Street's main indices fell at the start of trading, but the losses were modest.

The blue-chip Dow shed 0.4%, the broader S&P 500 gave up 0.7% and the tech-heavy Nasdaq fell 1.1%.

"Market participants were already contending with the nagging notion that the stock market was overbought on a short-term basis and due for a pullback," said market analyst Patrick O'Hare at Briefing.com.

"It didn't necessarily need another excuse to continue with a consolidation trade, yet Fitch Ratings provided one

after Tuesday's close when it downgraded its US credit rating to AA+ from AAA."

In Europe, London's FTSE 100 was down by 1.0%, while Frankfurt and Paris markets dropped 1.1% and 0.8% respectively. Euro Stoxx 50 index decreased 1.1% for the day.

In Asia, Japan's Nikkei fell 2.3%, while Hong Kong and Shanghai markets dropped 2.5% and 0.9%, respectively.

Ratings downgrades often mean it becomes more expensive for a government to borrow, but the status of US government bonds, or Treasuries, as a highly liquid safe-haven asset actually saw their yield dip immediately after the announcement.

AFP

Representatives decided to use the debt limit vote as leverage for forcing President Joe Biden into accepting cuts to many Democratic spending priorities.

This triggered a test of political strength that threatened to end in chaos before the two sides reached an agreement.

AFP

Iraq says in touch with US over paying for Iranian gas

Baghdad, Iraq – Iraq's prime minister said on Tuesday Baghdad is in contact with the United States on settling outstanding debts of \$10bn the country owes Iran for gas imports.

Iranian gas is crucial for Iraq's electricity generation, but US sanctions on Iranian oil and gas impose restrictions on how Baghdad can pay for its imports.

Iraq cannot directly hand over cash to Iran, but payments must be held in a bank account and be used by Tehran to fund imports of food and medicines.

On July 11, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani announced that Iraq would start paying for Iranian gas with oil, as a way of circumventing the complicated mechanism.

"Work is continuing with the American side concerning unpaid bills, which have fallen to 9.2bn" euros (\$10bn), Sudani told reporters at a press conference on Tuesday, recalling that Baghdad in the last few months paid Iran around \$1.9bn it owed.

He said a delegation from Iraq's central bank and the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI) went to Oman on Tuesday "to agree on a formula for transferring these



Iraq's Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani

funds to the Sultanate of Oman, in agreement with the US Treasury".

On July 24, United States State Department Spokesman Matthew Miller said some funds could be transferred via Oman, which has often acted as an intermediary between the West and Iran.

"We thought it was important to get this money out of Iraq, because it is a source of leverage that Iran uses against its neighbour," Miller told reporters.

Ravaged by decades of conflict and international sanctions,

oil-rich Iraq relies on Iranian gas imports for a third of its energy needs. It is also beset by rampant corruption, and suffers from dilapidated infrastructure.

Miller told the July 24 briefing that Oman would still be subject to "the same restrictions as when the money was held in accounts in Iraq, meaning that the money can only be used for non-sanctionable activities such as humanitarian assistance".

All the transactions also will need to be approved by the US Treasury Department in advance, he added.

AFP

Germany hails 'important progress' in EU talks on hydrogen plants

Frankfurt, Germany – German Economy Minister Robert Habeck has welcomed "important progress" in talks with the European Commission on the conditions for state aid for hydrogen power plants.

Berlin, which aims to source the country's electricity almost entirely from renewable energy by 2035, sees hydrogen playing a key role in the shift away from fossil fuels.

Habeck, describing the discussions with Brussels as "intensive", said an understanding had been reached on the legal framework for planned tenders for the plants.

"We achieved important progress," he said in a statement.

The economy ministry, in the same statement, stressed there was no approval yet from Brussels regarding national state aid for the hydrogen plants.

But the talks had set out "the guard rails within which the state subsidy programs must operate in order to comply with the state aid and energy legislation at European level", the ministry said.

The ministry will finalise its power plant strategy over the summer before launching a con-



sultation phase with relevant stakeholders.

"A climate-neutral power sector is the backbone of decarbonisation of the other sectors, because all other sectors will use more electricity in the future than they do today," Habeck said.

Germany aims to get most of its clean energy from wind and solar power in the future.

But in times of little wind or sunshine, "controllable power plants" such as those running on climate-neutral hydrogen will be needed to make up the shortfall, Habeck said.

Berlin wants to tender 8.8 gigawatts of new plants that will run on hydrogen from the start,

Habeck said.

The government also plans to tender another 15 gigawatts of power plants that will temporarily run on natural gas until they are connected to the hydrogen grid, by 2035 at the latest.

But the issue of subsidies for power plants has proved thorny in talks between the European Commission and Berlin.

Germany wants subsidies for future plants to be included in the EU's decarbonisation plans, which would guarantee faster approval and larger sums, magazine Der Spiegel reported in July.

But the Commission reportedly believes this would be prob-

lematic if it also covers plants running on climate-damaging gas, meaning only hydrogen plants could qualify for subsidies.

Hydrogen is a zero-emission energy carrier when it is made using renewable electricity.

So-called green hydrogen is produced by passing an electric current through water to split it between hydrogen and oxygen, a process known as electrolysis. It is considered green because the electricity comes from renewable sources of energy that don't create harmful emissions.

When burned, hydrogen only emits harmless water vapour.

AFP

US manufacturing sector struggles with nine month of contraction

Washington, US – The US manufacturing sector saw activity contract for a ninth straight month in July, survey data showed Tuesday, as new orders struggled on cooling demand while companies reduced production and headcount.

The weakness comes as demand for goods took a hit from shifting consumption towards services, while the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes in the past year also impacted business spending.

To rein in surging inflation,

the central bank lifted rates rapidly to ease demand, and its actions are rippling through the world's biggest economy.

The Institute for Supply Management's (ISM) manufacturing index came in at 46.4 percent last month, inching up from 46.0% in June – but this was still firmly below the 50% threshold indicating growth.

"Demand remains weak but marginally better compared to June, production slowed due to lack of work, and suppliers continue to have capacity," said ISM



survey chief Timothy Fiore.

"There are signs of more employment reduction actions in the near term to better match production output," he added.

But with manufacturing accounting for around nine percent of payrolls, falling employment is unlikely to drag overall numbers, said economist Kieran Clancy of Pantheon Macroeconomics.

The headline ISM figure however signals contraction "for the longest stretch since the global financial crisis," said economist Oren Klachkin of Oxford Eco-

nomics.

"We see tougher times ahead," he said.

He added that big-ticket and credit-sensitive goods stand to suffer the biggest losses in a mild recession, expected around end-2023.

For July, ISM data showed that the new orders and production indexes both improved slightly but remained in contraction, while employment plunged.

Two manufacturing industries – petroleum and coal products, as well as furniture and

related products – reported growth while 16 others shrank, ISM said.

"Sales in our industry are extremely slow entering into the second half of the year, and no upturn is expected until at least the fourth quarter," said a survey respondent from the chemical products sector.

Another respondent noted that semiconductor trade restrictions against China have "negatively impacted" its North America industrial business.

AFP



Bank Muscat employees undergo LEADSkill training in Sohar

Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the sultanate, has partnered with the Faculty of Business at Sohar University to provide ‘specialised training’ to a group of selected employees.

Nineteen high-potential bank employees from Dhahirah, Buraimi, North and South Batinah were trained by the members of Al Masar Training Institute to help the staff improve critical thinking, management and leadership skills, the bank informed.

This programme was held ‘in line with its pioneering role in the development of Omani human resources, Bank Muscat added.

The bank’s employees underwent training through the LEAD-Skill programme, which upskilled

and empowered them to lead, manage accounting and financial matters, and drive change interventions.

The programme ended with a Capstone Business Challenge and the awarding of certificates to the trainees recently.

In addition to enhancing the ability of employees to their new responsibilities and adhering to the highest standards of integrity at work, the programme also included several assorted activities to enhance their participation and interaction during the training.

“The bank’s employees are the core strength and the primary reason for its success and accomplishments. Hence, Bank Muscat continuously invests resources and time to further develop

their capabilities,” said Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, Deputy General Manager - Regional Branches, Bank Muscat.

“The bank is also closely supporting efforts for further development of Omani youth through specialised programmes and courses to realise national development goals. We thank Sohar University and Al Masar Training Institute for their excellent training programme, which will help our employees to reach their full potential and contribute in the best possible manner to the bank and to the nation.”

Professor Nur Naha Binti Abu Mansor, Dean, Faculty of Business at Sohar University, said, “We are delighted to collaborate with Bank Muscat to offer the

LEADSkill programme to talented bank employees from the different branches in different wilayats. The programme is a Faculty of Business project based on global standards of essential leadership skills and will go a long way in enabling the participants to overcome business challenges and apply best practices in leading and managing teams in their respective sectors.”

The bank’s Jadara Academy, which is accredited by the Global Association of Corporate Universities and Academics, provides a comprehensive framework for all staff learning and development programmes. It works with reputed local and international higher educational organisations to train and develop the bank’s

human resources.

Bank Muscat employees who took part in the LEADSkill programme expressed their happiness and appreciation with the programme and for the various efforts made by the bank to develop Omani human resources.

Bank Muscat has over 4,000 employees, enjoys over 95% Omanisation and excellent gender equality. Over 48% of the bank’s employees are women, who work across different departments and at all levels including the management. As a result of its strong HR processes and abundant learning and development opportunities, most of its senior and middle management today have been promoted from within the bank’s ranks.

ahlibank’s ‘Wafra Plus’ account for daily return

As part of ahlibank’s commitment to offering innovative products and services to its customers which support their saving goals in a sustainable manner, the ‘Wafra Plus’ account was introduced as a daily return account which offers many benefits such as competitive rates, debit cards, and more, as it enables new and existing customers to develop their financial resources and grow their account balance on a daily basis.

The ‘Wafra Plus’ Daily Growth Account is a savings account that pays up to 2% interest per year on the daily balance maintained in the account. At the end of each day, the benefit is compounded and credited to the clients’ accounts.

Key benefits for Wafra Plus accountholders include up to 2% interest per annum in competitive benefits, compounded advantages on a daily basis, unlimited transactions on the account, and benefits being credited to the account every day.

The ‘Wafra Plus’ account comes in line with the comprehensive growth strategy of ahlibank.

“We at ahlibank are always keen to encourage smart and sustainable money management in all our operations, and the ‘Wafra Plus’ account comes as a good example of that, as it supports our customers’ efforts to save in a simple and effective way that meets their goals and aspirations. By enhancing our existing suite of products and services, we are always looking to

develop solutions that suit the lifestyles of our customers,” said Muneer al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail Distribution.

With Wafra Plus, customers can use 24x7 cash management tools via digital channels or the branch network; they are not only able to make unlimited transactions, but are also able to augment their savings with competitive perks that are compounded and paid on a daily basis. As a result, advantages are available to customers as withdrawals or compounded benefits in their accounts.

“Customers’ financial strength will be enhanced not only by the availability of limitless withdrawals, but also by the intrinsic savings culture it fosters, as it is designed as a straightforward and easy-to-maintain service,” added Balushi.

“The ‘Daily’ prefix on the product indicates the Bank’s desire to instill financial competency in its customers, who will now be able to earn more on a daily basis. We strongly encourage our current and prospective customers to take advantage of this unique opportunity to grow their finances while enjoying the peace and security that comes with it.”

ahlibank’s experienced team of professionals constantly keep their eyes and ears on the market to understand and assess customer choices and feedback. This helps the bank deep dive into key trends, and needs of customers, enabling thought through product innovation.

Bait al Zubair opens exhibition of artworks by women artists



Bait al Zubair on Wednesday opened an exhibition of artworks by a group of students, in the presence of the artist Anwar Sonia.

The Luminous Threads exhibition had works that represent the memories, interests and wishes of a group of young female artists, graduates of the General Education Diploma, embroidered on paper with coloured threads.

This group of female artists moves to a new life stage full of challenges and aspirations, and recalls here the most beautiful events and inspiring small con-

cerns. The artworks are made using embroidery, collage, drawing, painting and 3D moulding.

The exhibition includes more than 50 artworks using embroidery, collage, drawing, photography and 3D modelling techniques. It will remain open until August 24.

Marafiq, GUtech conduct training for Al Wusta students in Britain

The Centralised Utilities Company (Marafiq), a subsidiary of OQ Group, in cooperation with the German University of Technology in Oman (GUtech), implemented a training programme on English language and life skills for a group of students from Al Wusta governorate.

The programme - held in the United Kingdom - was focused on enhancing the cultural and scientific exchange, enabling students to undergo academic experiences and preparing them for university life and the labour market. The programme was implemented using stimulating and innovative educational methods based on specialised courses in English with the development of skills of communication with other cultures.



Nasser bin Hamoud al Habsi, VP People, Culture & Technology, Marafiq Company, said that the company funded the program to confirm its role in the field of social responsibility in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, through investing in human capital, developing students’ skills and qualifying them for the labor market, as well as enhancing their capabilities in the fields of

innovation. He pointed out that Marafiq has funded a number of similar programmes in the past.

He explained that the programme aimed to develop students’ skills, familiarize them with the cultures of other peoples and enhance their desire to learn about various scientific disciplines, especially that the pro-

gram comes at a time when students are preparing for the new academic year.

The programme, which was held from July 9 to 29, included a number of specialised courses to raise the level of students in the field of English while developing their skills of social communication with other cultures.

COP28 summit to drive demand for effective PR services in UAE

The stage is set for the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28).

As the international community becomes increasingly focused on sustainability and climate action, the demand for effective communication and PR services has never been greater.

The prestigious COP28 conference offers opportunities for PR practitioners in the UAE to showcase their expertise and contribute to shaping the narrative around climate change.

As a whole, the PR industry in the UAE continues to grow steadily. While specific figures for the size of the PR market in the UAE may vary, it is undoubtedly a thriving industry within the

country’s broader communications and marketing sector.

The growth is driven in part by the UAE’s position as a global business and tourism hub. This status has attracted numerous multinational corporations and international organisations to the country’s shores, all of which require effective PR services to manage their reputations and communicate with both local and regional stakeholders.

The country’s diverse economy, which spans sectors such as sustainability, finance, energy, real estate, hospitality, and technology, contributes to the robust demand for PR services across various industries.

Furthermore, the UAE’s focus on hosting major global events,

conferences, and exhibitions has fueled the growth of the PR industry. Events such as the Dubai Expo 2020 and now the upcoming COP28 conference draw international attention, necessitating strategic communication efforts to showcase the country’s achievements and initiatives to a global audience.

As the UAE continues to position itself as a global player in various sectors, the PR industry will sustain its growth trajectory, offering immense opportunities for professionals and agencies in the years to come.

For the upcoming COP28 in November this year, PR practitioners will once again play an important role in the success of the event. Here are some of the



Firas Sleem, CEO, Virtue PR

ways that they can contribute:

Climate change has emerged as a pressing global issue, capturing the attention of governments, businesses, and individuals worldwide. The COP conferences bring together world leaders, environmental experts, and activists

to discuss and negotiate climate policies and actions.

The upcoming COP28 conference in the UAE will provide a platform for nations to showcase their climate programs and commitment to sustainability. Consequently, the eyes of the world will be on the UAE, presenting a significant opportunity to shape public perception and catalyze positive change.

UAE’s Climate Commitments

Hosting COP28 provides the UAE with a unique opportunity to showcase its sustainability initiatives and position itself as a global leader in climate action. With their vast network and regional knowledge, PR agencies in

Dubai and the rest of the UAE can work closely with government entities, environmental organisations, and corporations. The collaboration may focus on the UAE’s efforts to implement renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure, and innovative environmental initiatives that matter or make a difference.

The demand for PR services will surge as the UAE seeks to communicate its achievements, partnerships, and future goals to a global audience. PR professionals will be responsible for organizing press conferences, media interviews, and high-profile events that emphasize the country’s climate change mitigation efforts. They will also play a crucial role in fostering international

collaborations, attracting investments and promoting sustainable tourism in the UAE.

In an increasingly digital world, PR efforts extend far beyond traditional media. During COP28, PR agencies in the UAE can leverage digital channels, including social media, effectively to amplify the conference’s messages and engage a global audience.

PR agencies can develop comprehensive social media strategies, create compelling content, and actively engage with users to generate conversations around climate change. They will collaborate with influencers and thought leaders to reach wider audiences and create impactful campaigns that encourage sustainable practices.

Russia strikes Kyiv and grain export route

Russia has been pounding the port city of Odesa since Moscow withdrew from a grain deal last month

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russian drones on Wednesday damaged infrastructure at a Ukrainian port on the Danube, as Moscow targeted strikes against facilities vital for grain shipments from Ukraine following the collapse of an export agreement.

Kyiv was also targeted with drones from several directions in the latest wave of attacks aimed at Ukraine overnight, leaving several floors of a glass high-rise damaged.

"The enemy attacked port facilities and industrial infrastructure of the Danube," the Ukrainian general prosecutor's office said in a statement.

A grain elevator, silos and warehouses were damaged or destroyed, it said.

The prosecutor's office in the district of Izmail, where a key Danube river port is located, had opened a probe into the strike, the statement added.

There were no reports of casualties following the strike despite a blaze breaking out at port facilities, Odesa regional governor Oleg Kiper said.

Russia has been pounding the port city of Odesa and the surrounding region since Moscow withdrew from a grain deal last month that allowed Ukraine to continue exports via the Black



This handout photograph taken and released by Ukrainian Emergency Service on Wednesday shows rescuers dousing a fire at a house after a night drone attacks in Bucha district, Kyiv region (AFP)

Sea despite the war.

The deal had allowed around 33mn tonnes of grain to leave Ukrainian ports, easing fears of food shortages in vulnerable

countries.

With the Black Sea route effectively blocked, the port at Izmail is now the main export route for Ukrainian agricultural prod-

ucts via neighbouring Romania.

'More air defence' needed

Romanian president Klaus Iohannis,

whose country borders the southern tip of Ukraine along the Danube, said on Wednesday that Russia's repeated attacks on Ukraine's Danube infrastructure

were 'unacceptable'.

The formerly obscure port of Izmail, along with Reni further upstream, have become crucial to global food supplies.

But the transit routes are struggling to process all the arriving grain, causing massive bottlenecks, and have been targeted by Russian strikes.

Kyiv was also targeted with drones from several directions in the latest wave of attacks aimed at Ukraine overnight

The army said it had repelled Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones launched from the Sea of Azov that were aimed at the Odesa region. "Air defence forces worked nonstop for almost 3 hours," the Operational Command South wrote on Telegram.

Last week, Kyiv said it lacked the means to defend itself against strikes on grain infrastructure carried out by Russia, which is blocking 'virtually all' Ukrainian ports, according to an army spokeswoman.

"The Russians tried again to attack civilians, our ports, elevators," the head of Ukraine's presidential office, Andriy Yermak, said on Wednesday on Telegram, adding that Ukraine needed 'more air defence'.

Meanwhile in Kyiv, more than 10 Russian drones were downed during an overnight attack on the capital, the city's military administration said.

"Groups of drones entered Kyiv simultaneously from several directions. However, all air targets - more than 10 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) - were detected and destroyed in time by the forces and means of air defence," said Sergiy Popko, head of the administration.

He said Russia had used a barrage of Iranian-made Shahed drones, with debris hitting several areas.

In the Golosiivsky district, 'parts of a drone fell on a playground' and a fire broke out in a non-residential building, he said, adding that emergency services were on the scene.

Kyiv's Mayor Vitali Klitschko had said earlier that the attack on the capital had damaged several districts, including the busy Solomyansky, which hosts an international airport.

AFP

West Africa envoys to fly to coup-hit Niger as Europeans leave



People arrive at Paris Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport in Roissy-en-France, near Paris on Wednesday, after being evacuated from Niger (AFP)

Niamey, Niger - Envoys from the West African bloc ECOWAS were expected in Niger on Wednesday, a week after a coup that triggered alarm among neighbours and allies, as France evacuated more citizens from the capital Niamey.

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) leaders on Sunday imposed trade and financial sanctions and gave the coup leaders a week to reinstate Niger's democratically elected president or face potential use of force.

A delegation led by former Nigerian president Abdulsalami Abubakar would fly to Niamey on Wednesday, a senior source in ECOWAS and a Nigerian military official told AFP.

ECOWAS military chiefs are also expected to start a three-day meeting in the Nigerian capital Abuja.

The bloc's current chair is Nigeria - West Africa's military and economic superpower - which has vowed to take a firm line against coups that have proliferated across the region since 2020. "We are ready, and as soon as we receive the order to intervene, we will do so," Nigeria's chief of staff Christopher Musa said in an interview on RFI Hausa on Monday.

But junta-ruled Mali and Burkina Faso warned that any military

intervention in their neighbour would be tantamount to a 'declaration of war' against them.

Europeans leave

France on Wednesday scheduled more flights to evacuate its citizens and other Europeans from Niamey following hostile anti-French demonstrations at the weekend.

By early Wednesday nearly 500 people had landed in Paris aboard two flights, including mostly French citizens but also Portuguese, Belgians, Nigerians, Ethiopians and Lebanese evacuees. The evacuation was 'well organised, it was fairly quick, for me everything went well', said a man who gave his name as Bernard, who had been working in Niger for the European Union for two months.

"In Niamey, there are no particular tensions in the city, no particular stress, people go about their business," he said.

Italian authorities also said they had evacuated around 100 foreigners living in Niger, who arrived in Rome early on Wednesday, with ANSA radio reporting they included 36 Italians and 21 Americans.

Germany has urged its citizens to leave, but the United States has opted to not evacuate Americans for now.

AFP

Tunisia president dismisses PM as country faces big challenges

Tunis, Tunisia - Tunisian President Kais Saied sacked Prime Minister Najla Bouden without explanation on Tuesday night and replaced her with former central bank executive Ahmed Hachani, whom he tasked with overcoming the 'colossal challenges' facing the cash-strapped North African country.

No official explanation was given for Bouden's dismissal, but several local media outlets highlighted Saied's displeasure over a number of shortages, particularly of bread in state-subsidised bakeries.

Saied 'terminated the functions' of Bouden, who had been the first woman to head a government in Tunisia, according to a press release and video released by the presidency shortly before midnight.

Saied immediately appointed in her place Hachani, who until now worked at the Tunisian central bank and studied law at



Tunisian President Kais Saied

the University of Tunis, where Saied taught, according to Hachani's Facebook profile.

The new head of government, a figure unknown to the general public, was sworn in before the president, according to the presidency video.

At the end of the ceremony, Saied wished him 'good luck in this responsibility'.

The president stressed that 'there are colossal challenges

that we must overcome with a solid and strong will, in order to protect our homeland, our state and social peace'.

In recent days, several meetings have taken place within the government and between the president and ministers over the problem of shortages of subsidised bread in several regions in the country.

According to media, Saied, who recently said 'bread is a red line for Tunisians', fears a repeat of the bread riots that left 150 dead in 1984 under Habib Bourguiba, the father of Tunisian independence.

Faced with a low-wage economy, the Tunisian state has since the 1970s centralised the purchase of a large number of basic ingredients such as flour, semolina, sugar, coffee and cooking oil, before putting them on the market at subsidised prices.

AFP

Saudi detains US citizen's relatives over lawsuit

Dubai, UAE - Human rights groups have accused Saudi Arabia of detaining five relatives of a US citizen who pursued a commercial lawsuit in Pennsylvania against royals including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The five detainees appeared briefly on Monday at the Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh, which was established in 2008 to try terrorism cases, said Abdullah Alaoudh, Saudi director for the Washington-based Freedom Initiative. A judge read out the names of all five but did not disclose whether they had been charged with anything or set a date for a new hearing, Alaoudh said.

The Freedom Initiative has denounced the proceedings, saying that 'turning a private, commercial dispute into a basis for unjust detention' amounted to 'a gross abuse of

authority' by the Saudi judiciary. Saudi officials have not responded to questions about the case.

The five detainees are relatives of 15-year-old US citizen Rakan Nader Aldossari, whose family filed a lawsuit in June 2020 on his behalf against former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef.

The lawsuit by Rakan's father, Saudi businessman Nader Turki Aldossari, accuses bin Nayef and other Saudi entities of failing to honour a decades-old contract related to a refinery project on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia.

The suit was later amended to include Prince Mohammed, stating that he had placed bin Nayef under house arrest and seized his assets, thus preventing bin Nayef from meeting his contractual obligations.

AFP

Kuwait's scorching summers a warning for planet

Kuwait City, Kuwait - As the blazing summer sun beats down on Kuwait, shoppers stroll down a promenade lined with palm trees and European-style boutiques, all without breaking a sweat.

In one of the world's hottest desert countries, it's all made possible by architecture and technology: the entire street is located inside the heavily air-conditioned Kuwait City shopping mall.

Outside, where temperatures now often soar around 50 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit), barely anyone is moving around on foot, leaving the historic market largely deserted. "Only a few people stay in Kuwait at this time of year," said date merchant Abdullah Ashkanani, 53, as large fans sprayed cooling mist onto the few customers braving the blistering heat.

Ashkanani, who hails from Iran, said he keeps his shop open



A screen displays the time and temperature in Kuwait City on July 23 (AFP)

largely 'for appearances' during the hottest months when most of Kuwait's four million residents flee abroad.

For those who stay behind in the tiny oil-rich country, life is made bearable by the ever-present Arctic blast of air-con systems. "We can put up with it because the house, the car, everything is air-conditioned,"

said pensioner Abou Mohammad, dressed in a white robe and keffiyeh and sitting in a comfortably cooled cafe.

The irony is not lost on him that such energy-guzzling systems produce the carbon emissions that are heating up the planet - especially the sweltering Gulf region, a climate hotspot.

Such excessive energy con-

sumption, said Mohammad, has 'brought this heat to Kuwait'.

Heating up

Kuwait is home to seven per cent of the world's crude reserves - energy wealth that has long afforded many of its people a luxury lifestyle.

An extremely water-scarce country, it also relies heavily on fossil fuels to power seawater desalination plants.

Like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Kuwait is one of the world's leading emitters per capita of CO2, a key driver of global warming.

Kuwait has always been hot, its dry summers fanned by the northwesterly shamal wind that also blows over Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Temperatures in Mitribah, a remote area in northwest Kuwait, often soar past 50 degrees Celsius, making it one of the hottest places on Earth after Death Valley in California.

But in recent years, climate change has made summer peaks

hotter and longer, said meteorologist Essa Ramadan, as periods of extreme heat have gone 'from two weeks to about a month'.

The number of days per year that see temperatures rise above 50C have more than tripled since the turn of the century, noted the meteorologist.

As the world records ever more heat records, 'what is happening to us will happen elsewhere', he warned.

Kuwait - where glass towers soar into the sky and cars choke the highways - has only recently invested in public transport and green energy to help counter climate change.

Its environment protection authority, which falls under the oil ministry, recognises 'a rise in temperatures in recent years', its director Samira Al-Kandari said.

To help change course, Kuwait has started building its first commercial solar power park, the Shagaya project.

AFP

Trump indicted for trying to overturn 2020 US election

Washington, US - Donald Trump was indicted on Tuesday over his efforts to upend the results of the 2020 US election - the most serious legal threat yet to the former president as he campaigns to return to the White House.

It is the third criminal indictment of the 77-year-old Trump since March and charges him with three counts of conspiracy and one count of obstruction.

Trump, the frontrunner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, is already scheduled to go on trial in Florida in May of next year for allegedly mishandling top secret government documents.

The new charges, two of which carry maximum sentences of 20 years in prison, raise the prospect of Trump being embroiled in more legal proceedings at the height of what is expected to be a bitter and divisive presidential campaign.

The indictment brought by special counsel Jack Smith accuses Trump of conspiracy to defraud the United States and conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding - the January 6, 2021 joint session of Congress held to certify Democrat Joe Biden's election victory.

Trump is also accused in the 45-page indictment of seeking to disenfranchise American voters with his false claims that he won the November 2020 presidential election.

"Shortly after election day -



This file photo shows former US president Donald Trump making his way inside the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse in New York on April 4, this year (AFP)

The indictment brought by special counsel Jack Smith accuses Trump of conspiracy to defraud the United States and conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding - the January 6, 2021 joint session of Congress held to certify Democrat Joe Biden's election victory

which fell on November 3, 2020 - the Defendant launched his criminal scheme," the indictment, handed down by a grand jury in Washington, said.

"The purpose of the conspir-

acy was to overturn the legitimate results of the 2020 presidential election by using knowingly false claims of election fraud," it said.

Smith, a former war crimes

prosecutor at the Hague, said the January 6 attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters was 'an unprecedented assault on the seat of American democracy'.

"It was fueled by lies," Smith told reporters in brief remarks.

"Lies by the defendant targeted at obstructing a bedrock function of the US government - the nation's process of collecting, counting and certifying the results of the presidential election."

Part of that plan, the indictment alleges, was to have then-vice president Mike Pence use his role as presiding officer over the January 6 joint session to throw out several states' votes.

Pence ultimately refused, issuing a public statement saying that he did not believe the Constitution allowed him that power.

As Trump's supporters later stormed the US Capitol, where Pence was in hiding, Trump tweeted that his vice president 'didn't have the courage to do what should have been done'.

White House silence

The White House maintained silence on Trump's historic indictment.

Biden, who is seeking reelection next year, continued his beach vacation in Delaware, dining out with First Lady Jill Biden before seeing the film *Oppenheimer*.

Trump's campaign, meanwhile, issued a blistering statement, comparing his prosecution to 'Nazi Germany in the 1930s' and stating that he had followed 'advice from many highly accomplished attorneys' - a likely line of defense at trial.

The indictment mentions six co-conspirators but none are identified and Trump, who is to be arraigned on Thursday, is the only named defendant.

The case is expected to be heard by US District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan, an appointee of former Democratic president Barack Obama.

Smith said he is seeking a 'speedy trial'.

AFP



A Move Forward Party (MFP) supporter holds a poster of leader Pita Limjaroenrat during a protest in Bangkok on Wednesday (AFP)

Winning party in Thai election excluded from new coalition

Bangkok, Thailand - The reformist party that won Thailand's general election was excluded on Wednesday from a coalition trying to form the next government, as lawmakers seek to overcome resistance from military and pro-royalist senators.

The Move Forward Party (MFP) won the most seats in May's election, riding a wave of support from young and urban Thais weary of almost a decade of army-backed rule, but it fell well short of a majority.

An eight-party coalition including MFP's closest rival, Pheu Thai, was not enough to get its leader Pita Limjaroenrat elected prime minister, leaving the kingdom in political deadlock.

Harvard-educated Pita, 42, was blocked from the top job by the senate - whose members were handpicked by the last junta - because of his determination to reform Thailand's tough royal defamation laws.

After weeks of backroom haggling, Pheu Thai leader Chonlanan Srikaew announced that MFP was out of the coalition.

"The formation of the new government will not include MFP," he told reporters.

"Pheu Thai will work to get enough votes, MFP will be in opposition, and we will work in a new dimension that is beneficial to the people." The news sparked an angry protest by some MFP supporters, who burned effigies and shouted abuse outside Pheu Thai's offices.

Tycoon nominated

The party will now put forward property tycoon Srettha Thavasin as its candidate to become prime minister, Chonlanan said.

To become prime minister, a candidate must be approved by a majority of both houses of parliament - the 500 elected MPs and

the 250 senators appointed under the last junta.

Pita managed 324 votes across the two houses in the first vote in parliament, with only 13 senators supporting him.

He was blocked from running in a second ballot and suspended as an MP by the Constitutional Court over his ownership of media shares, which is prohibited for lawmakers under Thai law.

Last month, MFP announced it was stepping back from efforts to form a government, allowing Pheu Thai to lead the coalition instead. A senior MFP leader said the priority was not to make Pita prime minister but to safeguard

Pheu Thai will work to get enough votes, MFP will be in opposition, and we will work in a new dimension that is beneficial to the people

CHONLANAN SRIKAEW

Thai democracy by shutting out former junta leaders such as outgoing PM Prayut Chan-O-Cha.

Pheu Thai is seen as a vehicle for the Shinawatra political clan, whose members include two former prime ministers ousted by military coups in 2006 and 2014.

Talks aimed at garnering more support for the coalition from other parties revealed that MFP's insistence on lese-majeste reform was a major stumbling block, Chonlanan said.

"Several parties have made it clear that they will not support any government with MFP in the coalition," he said.

AFP

Beijing witnesses 'heaviest rainfall in 140 years'

Fangshan, China - Deadly rains that pummelled China's capital in recent days were the heaviest since records began 140 years ago, Beijing's weather service said on Wednesday, as a massive cleanup operation began.

Millions of people have been hit by extreme weather events and prolonged heatwaves around the globe in recent weeks, events that scientists say are being exacerbated by climate change.

And the Beijing Meteorological Service said the capital has just experienced the 'heaviest rainfall in 140 years', when city authorities started keeping records.

"The maximum (amount) of rainfall recorded during this storm, which was 744.8mm, occurred at the Wangjiayuan



People watch a collapsed bridge on the Dashihe River after heavy rains in Fangshan district in Beijing on Tuesday (AFP)

Reservoir in Changping," the service said, adding the largest volume previously recorded was 609mm in 1891.

At least 11 people have died in the rains in Beijing, state broadcaster CCTV said on Tuesday,

with more than a dozen missing.

The epicentre of flooding shifted to neighbouring Hebei province on Wednesday.

In Beijing's Fangshan district - on the border between the capital and Hebei - an AFP team saw

a park that had been completely flooded, with tons of rubbish that had been washed away by torrential rains stuck near a bridge.

The area had been 'extremely dangerous' on Tuesday, a police officer said.

Journalists also saw a military vehicle with caterpillar wheels on its way back from the most affected areas.

And in the opposite direction, AFP saw an ambulance, a rescue boat and a police car heading to Zhuozhou, a hard-hit district of Hebei. State media footage showed rescuers rowing inflatable rafts through waterlogged neighbourhoods, while locals clung to construction scaffolding awaiting help.

Storm Dokuri, a former super typhoon, swept northwards over China after hitting southern Fu-

jian province last week, following its battering of the Philippines.

Heavy rains began pounding the typically dry capital and surrounding areas on Saturday.

The amount recorded in just 40 hours neared the average rainfall for the entire month of July.

State media warned last week that 130mn people would be affected by the extremely heavy rainfall across northern China.

Swaths of suburban Beijing and the surrounding areas have been inundated, with state media reporting 974,400 people have been evacuated in the capital and neighbouring Hebei province.

A further 42,211 people have been evacuated in Shanxi province to the west.

AFP

Hundreds of migrants between life and death in Tunisia-Libya desert

Al-Assah, Libya - In the unbearable midday heat, a Libyan patrol near the border with Tunisia comes across a black African man collapsed on the reddish-brown desert sand.

He is barely breathing, and officers try to revive him, gently, with a few drops of water on his lips.

The man is one among hundreds of migrants arriving daily in Libya after being abandoned in the desert borderland by Tunisian security forces, according to Libyan border guards and the migrants themselves.

By the time they reach Libya, the migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are ready to drop from exhaustion, in temperatures that have exceeded 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

AFP on Sunday witnessed the border guards rescue around 100 men and women from an uninhabited zone near Sebkhath al-Magtha, a salt lake along the



Libyan border guard provide water to migrants of African origin who reportedly have been abandoned by Tunisian authorities, following their arrival in an uninhabited area near Al-Assah on the Libya-Tunisia border on Sunday (AFP)

Libya-Tunisia border.

In the distant shimmering heat haze, six figures emerge, the latest to reach the area. They speak Arabic and say they have come

from Tunisia.

Libyan border guards told AFP that, over the past two weeks, they have rescued hundreds of migrants who said they were left

by Tunisian authorities in the border region near Al-Assah, about 150km (90 miles) west of Tripoli.

In early July, hundreds of migrants from sub-Saharan

African countries were driven out of the Tunisian port city of Sfax as racial tensions flared following the death of a Tunisian man in a clash between locals and migrants.

Tunisians 'brought me here'

Haitham Yahya, from Sudan, said he worked for a year in Tunisia's construction sector after reaching the country clandestinely through Niger and Algeria. "I was at work when they caught me and brought me here, first in a police car then in a (security forces) truck. Then they left me and told me to go to Libya," he said in Al-Assah.

At its closest point, near Sfax, Tunisia is only about 130km from the Italian island of Lampedusa.

The North African country is a major gateway for migrants and asylum-seekers attempting perilous sea voyages in hopes of a better life in Europe, whose lead-

ers have offered financial aid to help Tunisia manage the flow.

Human Rights Watch said up to 1,200 black Africans were 'expelled, or forcibly transferred by

I was at work when they caught me and brought me here... Then they left me and told me to go to Libya

HAITHAM YAHYA

Tunisian security forces' in July to the country's desert border regions with Libya and Algeria.

In mid-July, the Tunisian Red Crescent said it had provided shelter to at least 630 migrants who had been taken after July 3 to Ras Jedir, about 40km north of Al-Assah.

A few days later, though, AFP

gathered testimony from hundreds of migrants still stuck in the Ras Jedir buffer zone. They said they had been forced there by Tunisian security forces.

In Ras Jedir, 350 people remained in a makeshift camp, including 65 children and 12 pregnant women.

"Their living conditions are very problematic," a humanitarian official told AFP, adding that 'it is not sustainable in the long term, there are no toilets, no water tanks, no real shelters'.

At Al-Assah, dazed migrants continue to stagger in, some with only sandals on their feet.

In twos and threes or by the dozens, they come. Some collapse. The guards hold bottles of water over their parched mouths.

Faced with the influx, Libyans from the border guards Battalion 19 of the army, and a unit against Saharan immigration, have been patrolling daily.

AFP

INDIA

Forced to flee: Despair after ethnic clashes

Each side tells similar stories of loved ones murdered, homes torched and harsh new lives in camps

Moirang, Manipur - Deadly ethnic violence in India's troubled Manipur state divided communities but each side tells similar stories of loved ones murdered, homes torched and harsh new lives in camps.

At least 120 people have been killed since May in armed clashes between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki in the northeastern state. Many in Manipur believe the number could be higher.

Some 50,000 people have been forced to flee, among them teacher Ranjana Moirangthem, who was evacuated by the army after a terrifying night sheltering with 25 neighbours crowded in a room as gun battles between gangs raged around them.

Moirangthem, a Meitei living in what has become a Kuki-only area of Churachandpur, fled with just the clothes she was wearing. In her panic, she forgot the education certificates she needs to find work.

She later asked a Kuki friend to rescue her precious documents but was told her home was likely among the thousands set on fire. "I was a teacher," she said. "I don't know what to do now that I don't have anything to prove my qualification."

She now lives on government



People gather in a relief camp for displaced Meitei community, in Moirang on July 25 (AFP)

I was a teacher. (Now) I don't have anything to prove my qualification. I just want to go back. Churachandpur is where I have lived all my life - it is my home

RANJANA MOIRANGTHEM

and charity handouts in a crowded camp in Moirang district, with around 250 people living in a guesthouse with mattresses covering every space on the floor.

"I just want to go back," she said. "Churachandpur is where I

have lived all my life - it is my home too."

'Houses on fire'

L Sonia, another Meitei in the same camp, said she made desperate calls to local politicians when gangs rampaged through

her neighbourhood in Churachandpur.

"Their problem is with the government, right? Why set our houses on fire?" she asked angrily. "People are moved to relief camps after floods, but they get to go back to their homes... What do we do?"

The far-flung states of north-east India - sandwiched between Bangladesh, China and Myanmar - have long been a tinderbox of tensions between different ethnic groups.

In Manipur, conflict erupted from a mix of causes including competition for land and public jobs, with both sides blaming state and national government for failing to stop the violence.

India's Interior Minister Amit Shah has promised an 'impartial investigation' into the violence and has said the government 'stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the people of Manipur'.

But violence continues and those left homeless are angry.

"Tens of thousands of people in Manipur are crying, what is Narendra Modi doing!" Sonia shouted, in a desperate appeal to the Indian prime minister. "Are we not Indian citizens?"

'Every day we cry'

Communities are divided. In Churachandpur, Meitei are no longer welcome.

Dummy coffins line the route into the district as a terrifying warning to Meitei, and road signs with the Churachandpur name have been scored out because it is derived from an ancient Meitei king.

The Kuki have built a bamboo hut memorial with images of their people killed, including the youngest, a two-month-old baby. One message reads that their "blood will never go in vain".

In a camp for the Kuki displaced, 40-year-old Vaneilhing, a mother-of-two who ran a shop before she fled, described how a mob of hundreds dressed in black appeared at her house. First they looted it and then set it ablaze.

"Every day we cry... some people didn't even find the time to wear their shoes before they ran," she said, too scared of possible reprisals to give her full name.

The community gathers at night in a makeshift chapel, praying and singing hymns in a bid to drown out the crackle of gunfire between vigilante militia forces. Joy was tempered with gloom when a baby was born earlier this month in the camp.

"What is this baby going to do now? Where will it go?" asked Vaneilhing.

AFP

Death toll in religious riots rises to 6

New Delhi - Riot police were patrolling urban neighbourhoods near India's capital on Wednesday following a second night of sectarian riots that have killed six people so far.

The unrest began on Monday when mobs hurled stones at a Hindu religious procession and set cars alight in the predominantly Muslim district of Nuh, around 75km (45 miles) south of New Delhi. Arson and vandalism attacks broke out the following evening in parts of nearby Gurugram, a satellite city of the capital and a key business centre where Nokia, Samsung and other multinationals have their Indian headquarters.

One neighbourhood saw a mob of around 200 people



Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel conducting a flag march at Badshahpur, in Gurugram on Wednesday (ANI)

armed with sticks and stones loot several meat shops and set fire to a restaurant while chanting Hindu religious slogans.

Haryana state chief minister

Manohar Lal Khattar said six people had been killed in the violence and 116 arrested so far.

"Those found guilty will not be spared. We are committed to the

safety of the public," he told reporters on Wednesday.

Two of the dead were security personnel on their way to help contain the unrest in Nuh, state police said. Police in New Delhi said they had increased security in some neighbourhoods as a precautionary measure.

Local media reports said tensions first flared after prominent Hindu nationalist activist Monu Manesar, a member of the radical right-wing group Bajrang Dal, announced he would attend Monday's procession in Nuh.

Manesar is wanted by police over accusations that he was responsible for the lynching of two Muslim cattle traders in another part of Haryana state.

AFP

SILENT PROTEST



Protesters take part in a silent rally calling for an end to violence against women following a spate of incidents in the country, in Mumbai on Wednesday (AFP)

Pope calls for 'courageous courses of peace' for Ukraine

Lisbon, Portugal - Pope Francis on Wednesday urged Europe to find 'courageous courses of peace' to end the war in Ukraine as he opened a five-day visit to Portugal for a major Catholic youth festival.

The 86-year-old pontiff has repeatedly called for peace in Ukraine and has sought to play a mediating role, though his efforts have yet to yield results and he has faced criticism for failing to blame Russia for the war.

"We are sailing amid storms on the ocean of history, and we sense the need for courageous courses of peace," he said in an address to officials and diplomats at Lisbon's riverside Belem Cultural Centre.

"With deep love for Europe, and in the spirit of dialogue that distinguishes this continent, we might ask her: 'Where are you sailing, if you are not showing the world paths of peace, creative ways for bringing an end to the war in Ukraine?'"

Francis received a standing ovation as he arrived in a wheel-



Pope Francis holds a meeting with authorities, civil society, and diplomatic corps at Belem district's cultural centre in Lisbon on Wednesday (AFP)

chair on the stage to deliver his speech, which was peppered to references to Portuguese literature and music.

He arrived in Lisbon to take part in World Youth Day, which is actually a week of religious, cultural and festive events held about every three years in a different city.

Organisers expect a million people from over 200 countries to take part.

Francis, the first Latin American pope, said he hoped this year's event would serve as an

'impulse towards universal openness' for Europe.

"For the world needs Europe, the true Europe. It needs Europe's role as a bridge and peacemaker in its eastern part, in the Mediterranean, in Africa and in the Middle East," he said.

The pope, who has made protection of the environment a cornerstone of his pontificate, also warned about the increased warming and pollution of oceans and the subsequent climate risks.

AFP

Disabled survivors of Beirut port blast three years ago long for financial support, justice

Beirut, Lebanon - Dany Salameh was already ill but a blast that devastated Beirut's port three years ago aggravated his condition, leaving him dependent on a walker and feeling abandoned by authorities.

People hurt or disabled by the catastrophic explosion told AFP that Lebanon, bankrupt and politically paralysed, has failed to deliver adequate medical care, financial support or justice.

"The state forgot about us," said the soft-spoken Salameh from his apartment in a district close to the port, much of which was destroyed along with entire districts of Beirut in one of history's biggest non-nuclear explosions. "I lost my car, my home, my job, my mobility... Yet no one looked after us," he added.

The blast on August 4, 2020 killed more than 220 people and injured at least 6,500.

Salameh was at his family home in a neighbourhood adjacent to the port when the blast threw him from one side of their rooftop terrace to the other.



Dani Salameh uses a walker to move around at his house in the Lebanese capital on July 22 (AFP)

Formerly a sound engineer, he had been diagnosed in 2015 with multiple sclerosis - a lifelong condition in which a person's central nervous system is attacked by the body's own immune system.

While Salameh escaped bad physical injury in the explosion, the shock had a devastating effect on his illness. He soon found himself struggling to walk.

Vital medicine for his disease costs US\$140 a month, twice-yearly injections cost US\$1,000,

and he said he needs an operation that costs US\$10,000.

But Salameh is unable to afford health care as he survives on family support and limited work opportunities.

His head was bandaged after a fall last month requiring stitches, and he said he had gone for months without his regular medication.

'My life has ended'

The blast came during an eco-

nomie collapse that has crippled Lebanon's public sector and pushed most of the population into poverty.

Amanda Cherri, a former make-up artist, said injuries and constant pain forced her to give up her career.

"My life has ended. Someone stole it in only five minutes," said Cherri, 40, from the building overlooking the port where she used to work.

At the moment of the explosion, she was near floor-to-ceiling mirrors and two huge vases that all smashed to smithereens.

The shards pierced her face and body, leaving her blind in one eye and with one hand paralysed. Authorities said the blast was triggered by a fire in a warehouse where a stockpile of ammonium nitrate fertiliser had been hazily stored for years.

"People who have become disabled have a right to lifelong support," said Sylvana Lakkis, who heads the Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities.

AFP



India players celebrate with the trophy after winning the third and final ODI against the West Indies on Tuesday (AFP)

BACK TO NORMALCY

India blow away West Indies in decider to seal ODI series

Tarouba, Trinidad and Tobago - India swiftly erased the memory of a poor second match to annihilate the West Indies by 200 runs in the decisive third and final one-day international at the Brian Lara Stadium on Tuesday.

Even with senior players in captain Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli still rested the tourists' batting finally came good collectively to post a formidable 351-5 batting first. Their seamers then demolished the home side's top

order and a ninth-wicket partnership of 55 merely delayed the inevitable with the West Indies bundled out for 151 off 35.3 overs.

India's margin of victory was their second largest in ODIs against the West Indies and also extended their run of bilateral series wins against the Caribbean team in the format to 13.

Openers Shubman Gill and Ishan Kishan set the tone for the India innings after they were put in with man-of-the-series Kishan

benefiting from an early dropped chance to belt 77 off 64 balls - his third consecutive half-century - in an opening stand of 143, a new record for the wicket for India in ODIs in the West Indies.

Gill was more circumspect in getting to a top score of 85 off 92 balls before falling to Gudakesh Motie, the left-arm spinner being the most economical for the home side in conceding just 38 runs from his 10 overs.

"This was definitely special to finally get a fifty on this tour," said Gill after receiving the man-of-the-match award. "It's all about playing according to the conditions and assessing the situation

as quickly as possible."

Sanju Samson also wasted no time in taking advantage of another rare ODI opportunity to smash 51 off 41 with four sixes.

However his impressive mid-innings assault was surpassed by Hardik Pandya, the stand-in captain hoisting five sixes and four fours in an unbeaten 70 off just 52 deliveries.

"I look forward to these sorts of games where there is something on the line," said Pandya. "We knew there was something at stake and the way the boys were up for it, came out and performed but also enjoyed it was really satisfying."

England, Australia docked points for slow over-rates during Ashes

London, United Kingdom - England and Australia have been docked significant chunks of points in the World Test Championship for slow over-rates during the Ashes series.

Having gained 28 points in a series that finished 2-2, with Australia retaining the urn as holders, England have lost 19 for infringements in four of the five Tests.

It leaves them with just nine points in the third edition of the WTC, dropping them below the West Indies, who have played just two matches and are yet to record a win.

The International Cricket Council last month implemented an overhaul of the sanctions for slow over rates, which was retrospectively applied for the start of this WTC cycle.

Teams are required to bowl 90 overs a day.

Australia, who beat India in the World Test Championship final in June, had 10 points deducted from their tally by the International Cricket Council.

Agencies



James Anderson (L) and England's Stuart Broad (R)

Ashes star Woakes grateful for Broad and Anderson input

London, United Kingdom - Chris Woakes believes his England career has benefitted from the knowledge he has gained from Stuart Broad and James Anderson rather than been hampered by the presence of the veteran pacemen.

Despite his outstanding Test record on home soil, double World Cup-winner Woakes has often found himself on the outside looking in when it comes to red-ball cricket given the enduring careers of Anderson and the now-retired Broad, who bowled out after the Ashes finale at The Oval.

"The last three weeks have

been a bit of a whirlwind and it's just amazing to be a part of," Woakes said. "I think I'm just proud of myself to be able to keep going."

"I feel very lucky to have played with Stuart. Jimmy's the same. The stuff that I've learned from them has had a huge impact on how I've bowled about over the years. It's been an honour."

He added: "It's extended my international career, if anything. We won't know what would have been if they hadn't been around, but I only have good things to say in terms of the knowledge they've passed on."

AFP

CLASSIFIEDS

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DANCE OF REGGAE GIRLZ

Jamaica dump Brazil and Marta out of World Cup to reach last 16

Melbourne, Australia - Jamaica dumped out Brazil and South Africa sent Italy home on Wednesday as the supposed minnows roared into the last 16 of an increasingly open Women's World Cup.

The Reggae Girlz' coach Lorne Donaldson declared it "job done" after his dogged Jamaica side strangled the life out of eighth-ranked Brazil in Melbourne for a 0-0 draw.

It was the point Jamaica needed to progress into the knockout rounds for the first time in history and meant a crushing end to the World Cup career of Brazilian legend Marta.

The 37-year-old, arguably the greatest player in the history of

France topped Group F as Kadiatou Diani hit a hat-trick in a 6-3 win over Panama and a possible meeting next with Germany.

Marta Cox's wonder strike on 67 seconds had left the French reeling, swerving a free-kick into the corner from 30 yards for Panama's first-ever World Cup goal. She spun away in celebration and was mobbed by teammates as the tears flowed at a sold-out Sydney Stadium.

South Africa joy

There were also tears - of joy and devastation - after 54th-ranked South Africa showed Jamaica the way in a wet Wellington.

The African champions won a Women's World Cup match for

Over the last two weeks, I've lost three family members. I could have gone home but I chose to stay with my girls. Because that's how much it means to me

THEMBI KGATLANA, SOUTH AFRICA CAPTAIN

women's football, was as shell-shocked as she was upset afterwards. Brazil's meek group-phase exit at the hands of a team ranked 43 was their earliest departure from the tournament since being turfed out at the same stage in 1995.

Jamaica finished second in Group F and will meet the team that comes top when Group H concludes on Thursday. That is currently Colombia.

the first time with a stunning 3-2 victory over 16th-ranked Italy in a thriller. Captain Thembi Kgatlana scored the winner in the 92nd minute to make history for South Africa and set up a meeting with the Netherlands - sending Italy home.

Arianna Caruso scored twice for Italy and thought she had salvaged the draw they needed to go through with 16 minutes left, before Kgatlana's stunning late



Jamaica's Paige Bailey-Gayle (L) and Deneisha Blackwood celebrate after their match against Brazil on Wednesday (AFP)

intervention. "Over the last two weeks, I've lost three family members. I could have gone home but I chose to stay with my girls," said Kgatlana, who plays for Racing Louisville in the United

States. "Because that's how much it means."

Sweden topped Group G with the maximum nine points to set up a clash with holders the United States up the opening

goal in a 2-0 win. The Americans came into the tournament in Australia and New Zealand as favourites to win an unprecedented third World Cup in a row. But they have looked nothing

like the team that has for so long dominated women's international football and only scraped out of the group phase with a shaky 0-0 draw against debutants Portugal on Tuesday.

'We can beat them': Sweden set up USA showdown at World Cup

Hamilton, New Zealand - Sweden coach Peter Gerhardsson said his in-form side are "convinced" they can knock the United States out of the Women's World Cup after setting up a last-16 tie with the holders this weekend.

A Rebecca Blomqvist header and an Elin Rubensson penalty gave a much-changed Sweden team a 2-0 win over Argentina in Hamilton on Wednesday as they topped Group G with three wins out of three.

The world's third-ranked team will now head to Melbourne to play the USA on Sunday, after the reigning world champions stumbled out of their group in second place with just one win.

It will be their first meeting since Sweden beat the USA 3-0 at the Tokyo Olympics two years ago on their way to taking the silver medal.

"We have played really good group-stage games, we have won all three of them, and we also beat them in the Olympics," said Sofia Jakobsson, who came into Sweden's line-up against Argentina and set up the opening goal.

"We are a confident team and looking forward to playing these games where it really matters and you have to win to move forward."

Marta says Brazil World Cup exit 'not even in my worst nightmares'

Melbourne, Australia - Marta said Brazil's Women's World Cup exit at the group stage Wednesday was "not even in my worst nightmares" as the legendary attacker bid a heartbreaking farewell to the tournament.

The 37-year-old, arguably the greatest women's footballer of all time, started the game but could do nothing to help Brazil get the goals they needed as their campaign ended in a toothless 0-0 stalemate with Jamaica, who progressed in to the last 16.

Brazil and Marta are out in the group phase, their poorest World Cup performance since being dumped out at the same stage in 1995.

"It's hard to talk at a time like this. Not even in my worst nightmares was it the World Cup I dreamed of," said Marta, who looked as shell-shocked as she was upset.

"But it is only the beginning, the Brazilian people ask for re-



Brazil's Marta waves to the crowd after their match against Jamaica on Wednesday (AFP)

newal, and there is renewal.

"The only old one is me, most of them (team-mates) are young girls with enormous talent, it's just the beginning for them.

"I end here, but they continue."

Marta - nicknamed "Pele in a skirt" by the late football great - will never win the World Cup to

add to her many achievements.

Among them, she is the all-time leading goal-scorer in World Cups, men's or women's, but was unable to add to her tally of 17 in Melbourne.

"Marta ends here, there is no more World Cup for Marta," said the forward, who has been dogged by injury in the twilight of her career.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to have one more World Cup and very happy with what is happening with women's football in the world."

Coach Pia Sundhage said she expects Marta to carry on with her playing career "because she loves the sport".

But she pointedly added: "Whether she is good enough for the national team, let's see."

"I am going to look for good players so it will be harder for Marta. We need to be better than today."

AFP

Lauren James steps out of brother's shadow to light up World Cup

Sydney, Australia - Lauren James said on the eve of the Women's World Cup that she wanted to be known as more than just the sister of Chelsea's Reece James - safe to say she has now done that, and more.

The 21-year-old sparked in a 6-1 annihilation of China on Tuesday as European champions England swept into the last 16 of the World Cup and a meeting with Nigeria.

James scored twice, had another disallowed and a hand in three other goals in a remarkable display.

She had needed just six minutes to stamp her mark on the tournament in Australia and New Zealand with a wonderful strike from outside the area in a 1-0 win over Denmark.

Coach Sarina Wiegman resisted calls to start the exciting attacker in the tournament opener against Haiti, when England underwhelmed in a 1-0 win thanks to a penalty.

But James, who like England



Lauren James with her brother Reece

men's international Reece plays for Chelsea, was given a start in the next match against the Danes and was the best player on the pitch for 45 minutes.

She rightfully kept her place for the China game in Adelaide and produced a scintillating display to light up the World Cup.

"She's special - a very special player for us and for women's

football in general," England team-mate Chloe Kelly told reporters.

Wiegman makes a point of not picking out individual players for praise, but she conceded afterwards that James "did special things".

James came off in the 81st minute to a standing ovation.

AFP



US held on for a 0-0 draw with Portugal to scrape through to the knockout phase

USA look far from World Cup favourites after limping into last 16

Auckland, New Zealand - The United States came into the Women's World Cup as favourites to win a third title in a row but they head into the last 16 looking anything but champions after limping through the group stage.

There were already doubts about Vlatko Andonovski's side after an unimpressive 3-0 win over Vietnam in their opening game was followed by a 1-1 draw with the Netherlands.

Andonovski and his players put a positive spin on those dis-

plays but there were very few redeeming features about their performance on Tuesday, when they held on for a 0-0 draw with World Cup debutants Portugal to scrape through to the knockout phase.

Ana Capeta's shot that hit the post in injury time very nearly won the game for Portugal, which would have condemned the holders to an unthinkable group-stage exit.

But aside from surviving that scare, the underlying numbers are concerning for the Ameri-

cans.

They had less of the possession at Eden Park and failed to score for the first time in 15 World Cup games, since a 0-0 draw with Sweden in the 2015 group phase.

They also had less of the possession in their draw with the Dutch, while their finishing has been poor since the tournament started.

"I don't think that was a good performance all together, starting from the back," admitted Andonovski.

"I don't think we were able to solve the problems that the opponents presented. There were moments where we did and it looked good, but those moments were very few and not enough to be able to walk out of here with several goals."

The 46-year-old Andonovski is in the firing line.

It was always going to be a huge task for him to succeed Jill Ellis, who led the team to back-to-back World Cup triumphs in 2015 and 2019 before stepping down.

'THAT'S ALL FOLKS!'

Italy legend Buffon hangs up his gloves

Milan, Italy - Gianluigi Buffon announced his retirement from football on Wednesday, bringing down the curtain on a glorious career as one of the world's greatest ever goalkeepers.

"That's all folks! You gave me everything. I gave you everything. We did it together," he posted in English on social media.

Buffon, 45, hangs up his gloves after two final years at Parma, the club where it all began nearly three decades ago when Italian football was Europe's gold standard.

He had a contract which ran until next summer with Parma but he will no longer be a part of the Serie B club's bid to return to the top flight after two years away.

Buffon is a symbol of a halcyon age when the best footballers went to play in Serie A and Italy developed dozens of world class players.

The former Italy captain has a record 176 caps for his country while also holding the record for Serie A matches played - 657, stretching back to 1995.

After bursting onto the scene as a 17-year-old, keeping out the likes of George Weah and Roberto Baggio in his Parma debut against AC Milan, Buffon won 27 major trophies.

The majority came over 19 seasons at Juventus, where he



Gianluigi Buffon

won 10 Serie A titles, five Italian Cups, while he also won the UEFA Cup in 1999 for Parma as part of possibly the best team in the club's history.

He also won Ligue 1 with Paris Saint-Germain in 2019 before returning to Juve, but he will be

most fondly remembered for Italy's victory at the 2006 World Cup. Buffon was one of the stars as an Azzurri team battered by the 'Calciopoli' match-fixing scandal - which would cost him as Juve keeper two league titles - beat France on penalties after

knocking out hosts Germany in the semi-finals.

That was the last hurrah for a generation which had made Italy one of the world's dominant football nations, and as their fortunes slowly declined he suffered the ignominy of two straight

group stage exits before bowing out not long after failure to qualify for the 2018 tournament.

Buffon won his last trophy in his final season with Juve two years ago, lifting the Italian Cup alongside Federico Chiesa, 22 years after he triumphed with

Parma alongside his teammate's father Enrico.

I shouldn't have apologised'

However Buffon's career has also been plagued by scandal, not least consistent rumours that is,

or at least once was, a sympathiser of the far-right.

He drew fierce criticism for choosing the number 88, a neo-Nazi code for 'Heil Hitler', on his jersey for the 2000-01 season.

Two years before he wore a t-shirt with the neo-fascist slogan 'Boia chi molla', which loosely translated means death before surrender, under his kit for a match against Lazio, who have some of Europe's most hard-right supporters.

He publicly apologised for the

After bursting onto the scene as a 17-year-old, keeping out the likes of George Weah and Roberto Baggio in his Parma debut against AC Milan, Buffon won 27 major trophies.

t-shirt, claiming he had no idea of the source of the phrase, but in his 2010 book 'Number One' he said that he was still shocked at how he was "crucified".

Buffon also claimed he chose the number 88 because he wasn't allowed 00, which he wanted to represent "balls", as a symbol of his comeback from a period out injured, and that 88 was simply four balls.

He changed his number to 77 but in his book he expressed outrage at the criticism he received from Rome's Jewish Community, saying his only mistake was "being weak". "I shouldn't have apologised and I should have pushed to keep the number I had already chosen," he said.

AFP



Ousmane Dembélé

Dembele poised to leave Barca after PSG offer: Xavi

Las Vegas, United States - Barcelona boss Xavi Hernandez confirmed on Tuesday that Ousmane Dembele is poised to leave the Spanish giants after receiving an offer from Paris Saint-Germain.

Dembele, 26, was left on the bench on Tuesday as Barcelona wrapped up their North American pre-season tour with a 1-0 win over AC Milan in Las Vegas.

Afterward, Xavi told Spanish television that French international Dembele - who scored in last weekend's victory over Real Madrid in Dallas - had been left out after informing Barcelona he wanted to leave.

"I will be very clear," Xavi said. "He has asked us that he wants to leave, he has been very direct, that he has a proposal from Paris Saint-Germain, that they have called him from there and here we cannot do anything. It is his personal decision.

"To me, it hurts me because I think we have taken great care of him here so that he is happy and content and continues to make a difference for us.

"But he says that he has this proposal and that he has decided to leave. That is why he has not played today."

Dembele, who joined Barcelona in 2017, has one year left on his contract with the La Liga giants.

Sadio Mane joins Ronaldo at Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Saudi side Al Nassr confirmed the signing of Bayern Munich striker Sadio Mane on Tuesday as the Senegal star prepares to team up with five-time Ballon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo.

The twice African footballer of the year is the latest high profile player to join the cash-rich Saudi league.

"I'm really happy to be part of you guys, I can't wait to see you," Mane said in a video addressed to Al Nassr supporters on the club's social media accounts.

Both clubs announced the transfer involving the former Liverpool star which German media estimated at around 30 million euros on a three-year deal with an annual salary for Mane of 40 million plus 10 million in results-based bonuses.

Earlier Tuesday Mane, 31, rued his departure with two years of



Sadio Mane

his contract at Bayern remaining.

"Leaving Bayern hurts me. I would have wished for a different ending," he told Sky Germany.

Those sentiments were echoed by Bayern boss Thomas Tuchel when he spoke in Singapore on the eve of his side's friendly against Liverpool.

"We had a long, big hug and we both agreed that we don't like what's happening now, but we think it's for the best in this situation," said the Bayern coach.

"Sometimes things don't work out as everybody wants it to work out. In person I have always had a very good relationship with him

and this will stay.

"I can totally understand that he feels hurt and I also wouldn't feel happy if things like this happened. "Obviously it's something that we didn't bring into the full potential, which is my job and my responsibility, but in this particular situation, it was the best solution to untie the knot."

Mane moves to the club that instigated the first coup of a raft of signings by Saudi clubs with the capture of Ronaldo on a four-year contract.

Mane won the Champions League and Premier League in six seasons with Liverpool and was a key part of Jurgen Klopp's devastating front three with Mohamed Salah and Roberto Firmino.

When Liverpool won their first English league title for 30 years in the pandemic-disrupted 2019-2020 season, Mane scored 18 goals.

Bayern Munich edge Liverpool 4-3 in Singapore

Singapore, Singapore - A stunning stoppage-time strike by Frans Kratzig sealed victory for Bayern Munich in a pre-season friendly against Liverpool in Singapore on Wednesday as the German league champions came from behind twice to win 4-3.

The 20-year-old fired past Alisson as the game entered stoppage time to settle a thrilling encounter in front of a crowd of nearly 50,000 fans at the National Stadium.

A goal inside two minutes by Cody Gakpo and a header by Virgil van Dijk had put the English side two goals up in the opening half-hour but Bayern hit back through Serge Gnabry and Leroy Sane to level the score before half-time.



Bayern Munich's Arjon Ibrahimovic (L) and Liverpool's Luis Diaz battle for the ball during their friendly



Inter Miami's Jordi Alba (R) and teammate Lionel Messi during a training session in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on Tuesday (AFP)

Alba targets trophies after re-uniting with Messi in Miami

Fort Lauderdale, United States - Spain full-back Jordi Alba says he is targeting more trophies after re-uniting with former Barcelona teammates Lionel Messi and Sergio Busquets at Inter Miami.

Alba is available for a possible Inter Miami debut in Wednesday's Leagues Cup match against Florida rivals Orlando City after arriving in Miami at the weekend.

The 34-year-old won five Spanish league titles and a Champions League title during his time with Barca and a European Championship and Nations League with Spain.

"I have come here to compete, to win everything," Alba told a press conference after training on Tuesday.

"I've been fortunate to win everything with Barcelona and almost everything with the national team...it was the right decision to come here to a very exciting project."

Alba said the impact of Messi and Busquets, who led

Miami to back-to-back wins over Cruz Azul and Atlanta in the group stage of the competition, has already been evident.

"I think the arrival of Busi (Busquets) and Leo (Messi) has made the team grow a lot, Alba said. "And I'm going to be the same player I've been in Europe, I'm going to have the same demands of myself."

Alba said that despite not having played since Spain's Nations League final victory over Croatia on June 19, he has kept himself in good condition and is ready to hit the ground running. "I have trained quite well in Barcelona for many days. It is true that it is not easy to train alone, but I got in touch with the (athletic staff) here, from Inter Miami, and well, they made it very easy for me," he said.

"I worked hard to be able to compete when I got here and I couldn't wait to train with my teammates, to know how they were personally."



14

LEFTOVERS!
Don't discard your left-overs, convert them into delicious dishes



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IN TOWN
Morocco's 'Throne Day' celebrations and reception aboard Logos Hope



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ENTERTAINMENT
A peek into tinsel town in Hollywood and Bollywood

FOLLOW YOUR

footsteps



WALKING
VS
TREADMILL

- 1

What are the advantages of walking outside over treadmill?

Beena Sharma, a housewife, believes that connecting with nature surpasses the benefits of using a treadmill as it accords a refreshing effect on the mind. "For the past decade, I make it a point to walk twice a day, with the goal of reaching at least 10,000 steps daily. I can do it at my convenience, whenever I feel so, unlike following strict timings in a gym"
- 2

How often do you count your calories burned?

Yusuf al Amri, a retired individual, said, "I am not able to monitor calories burned - I need to download a smartphone app for that - but I check my weight using an electronic weighing machine at home."
- 3

Besides walking, do you also do any other exercises?

Paramjeet Kaur, a resident of Wadi Kabir who has been dealing with sugar-related health issues, said, "As per the doctor's recommendation, I combine hand clapping while walking, using the stationery cycle (available in parks), and practising yoga, too."
- 4

Have you made any changes in your diet?

Salman al Balushi, a senior service engineer at Bank Muscat, said, "I eat only one meal a day and fast for five days a week. I find this essential for maintaining my fitness level."
- 5

What motivates you to go for walks?

Paramjeet Kaur said, "My motivation is my own desire to stay fit and healthy as I grow old. Besides, I enjoy the bonding experience when my entire family joins me for walks together."

Most people in Muscat turn to walking as an easy-to-do daily option to satisfy their quest for fitness. In the epic battle of exercise, however, they are further torn between striding on a treadmill indoors or hitting the great outdoors for a stroll in nature. Though summer temperatures play spoilsport, here's how a few regular 'walkers' back their own individual choices:

(Contributed by: Deeba Parween)

- 1

What are the advantages of using treadmill over walking outside?

Sapna, a housewife, finds the gym routine simpler and more effective than outdoor walking. "Going to the gym has greatly improved my sleep, flexibility, and balance. I feel fit and accomplished after each workout. In just 7-8 months, I have successfully lost 9kg. Besides, one can workout in air-conditioned premises in stead of sweating it out outdoors.
- 2

How often do you count your calories burned?

Firdaus Khan, a civil design engineer, monitors his weight every week. "It has become more convenient to monitor the number of calories burned, and distance travelled, thanks to the gym machines we have available."
- 3

Besides walking, do you also do any other exercises?

Mohammad Shahil, a gym trainer, said, "Simply walking can lead to skin sagging for some people. Hence it is important to incorporate a few strength training exercises to build stamina and have effective results."
- 4

Have you made any changes in your diet?

Firdaus Khan, who used to eat three heavy meals a day - dinner being particularly late - said, "I've made a positive change in my eating habits. Now, I eat more vegetables and have only fruits for dinner."
- 5

What motivates you to use the treadmill?

Firdaus Khan, who has a gym subscription, said, "My motivation to stay consistent stems from the fact that I have invested in this option and need to make the most of it."

cook-up

LEFTOVERS

Kitchen tricks



Butter Chicken
(with leftover rotisserie chicken)

- Ingredients**
- ½ leftover rotisserie/tandoori chicken
 - 6tbsp salted butter
 - 1½ cup sliced onions
 - 1tsp ginger - grated
 - 1tsp garlic - grated
 - 4 cups chopped tomatoes (or two cans)
 - 1-2tsp red chilli powder
 - ½tsp turmeric
 - 1tsp coriander powder
 - 1tsp garam masala
 - 1 cup water
 - ¼ cup cream
 - ¼ cup kasuri methi (dried fenugreek leaves) – crushed
 - 1tbsp chopped coriander – for garnish

Method

Debone the leftover rotisserie chicken and break up the roasted flesh into small pieces. Set aside. Now, heat a wok and add 3tbsp of butter. Let it melt on low flame. Once the butter melts, add the sliced onions, ginger and garlic. Sauté the mixture and let the onions caramelize. Once the onions turn brown, add another 3tbsp of butter, chopped tomatoes, chilli powder and salt. Cover the wok and let the mixture cook on low flame for 5-6 minutes.

Remove the lid and add 2 to 3 cups of water to the wok. Stir the mixture and mash the tomatoes with a serving spoon. Then add the coriander powder and garam masala. Let it cook for a few minutes until the mixture gets thicker and oil is visible on the sides. Take it off the stove and let it cool down completely.

Once the mixture has cooled, blend it into a smooth paste using a hand blender. Add the mixture to a pan with half cup water and let the gravy simmer.

Now, add the chicken pieces to the gravy in the pan. Add the cream and crushed kasuri methi over it and mix all the ingredients well. Let the gravy simmer until it becomes thick and creamy. Garnish with chopped coriander and serve hot with rotis/rice.

Banana Bread
(with mushy bananas)

- Ingredients**
- 3 overripe bananas (blackened skin) - mashed
 - 1 cup granulated sugar
 - ½ cup butter
 - 2 large eggs
 - 1tbsp milk
 - 1tsp ground cinnamon
 - 2 cups all-purpose flour
 - 1tsp baking powder
 - 1tsp baking soda
 - 1tsp salt

Method

Preheat the oven to 200° C. Line a loaf tin with a strip of wax paper and grease it. Cream the sugar and butter in a large mixing bowl until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, mixing after each addition. Add the mashed banana and milk and stir to combine. In another bowl, mix together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt. Add this mixture to the wet ingredients and stir everything to blend well.

Pour the batter into the prepared loaf tin and bake for 60 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the centre comes out clean. Remove from oven and set aside to cool completely on a wire rack. Slice and serve.



Don't discard your leftovers, they can be converted into scrumptious dishes by using them as the base ingredient in many recipes. Whether you have bread, rice, protein or fruit that have passed their prime, think twice before you consign them to the bin



Vegetable Fried Rice
(with leftover steamed rice)

- Ingredients**
- 4 cups leftover white rice – refrigerated overnight
 - 3tbsp vegetable oil
 - 2tbsp minced garlic
 - 2tbsp minced ginger
 - 2-3 green chillies - chopped
 - 2 spring onions – chopped (green and white separately)
 - 1 carrot – chopped fine
 - 1 cup shredded cabbage
 - 1 cup chopped French beans
 - 2tsp dark soy sauce
 - 2tsp white vinegar
 - 1tsp salt, or to taste
 - ½tsp cracked black pepper

Method

Add oil to a large wok and heat it on high heat. (The trick to making smoky rice is cooking it on high heat.) Once the oil is hot, add garlic, ginger, and green chillies, and fry for 20-25 seconds, stirring frequently. Add white part of onions and fry for 20-25 seconds. Add carrots, cabbage, and green beans and sauté for 30-40 seconds, stirring. Now add dark soy sauce, vinegar, salt, and black pepper powder, and toss everything well.

Crumble the rice with hands to separate grains, and add it to the wok. Mix and toss well to coat the rice with the sauces. Cook for a minute on high heat and turn off flame. Garnish with the green part of onions and serve hot. Optional: add scrambled egg or shredded chicken for a delicious variety.

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entertainment

SHABANA AZMI MARKS FIVE DECADES IN INDIAN CINEMA

Bollywood actor Shabana Azmi and veteran writer-lyricist Javed Akhtar attend the screening of *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* in Mumbai last week. Shabana has been seen intermittently on the silver screen over the past decade and in this film she plays the Bengali grandmother of 'Rani' played by Alia Bhatt. Though her role in the film was nothing much to talk about she did her part with the finesse of a veteran, and next year marks her 50th year in Indian cinema. Her debut in *Ankur*, in 1974, had won her the National Film Award for Best Actress.



MADONNA THANKS FAMILY FOR SUPPORT DURING ILLNESS

Madonna over the weekend praised the support of friends and family one month after she was hospitalized with a bacterial infection that forced her to postpone her tour.

"Love from family and friends is the best Medicine," the 64-year-old wrote on Instagram.

"As a Mother you can really get caught up in the needs of your children and the seemingly endless giving... But when the chips were down my children really showed up for me," Madonna continued. "I saw a side to them I had never seen before. It made all the difference. So did the love and support from my friends."



Emmys to be postponed due to Hollywood strikes

This year's Emmy Awards will be postponed due to the ongoing Hollywood strikes, US media reported Thursday.

The television's equivalent of the Oscars was scheduled to take place in September, but could be pushed as far back as January, the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

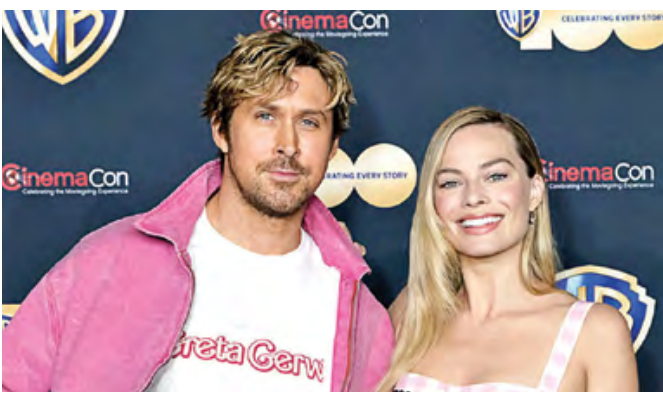
Trade publication *Variety* said 'vendors, producers and others involved with the event' have already been informed of the delay which has not yet been officially announced.

'EUPHORIA' ACTOR ANGUS CLOUD DIES AGED 25

Angus Cloud, the 25-year-old co-star of hit HBO drama *Euphoria*, died on Monday, his family said.

No cause of death was given for the actor, who portrayed laconic drug dealer Fezco 'Fez' O'Neill in the multiple Emmy Award-winning series. A statement said Cloud had been struggling to deal with the recent passing of his father, and had experienced ongoing mental health issues.

'The only comfort we have is knowing Angus is now reunited with his dad - his best friend,' it added.



BARBIE COUPLE DO A CAMEO IN SIN CITY

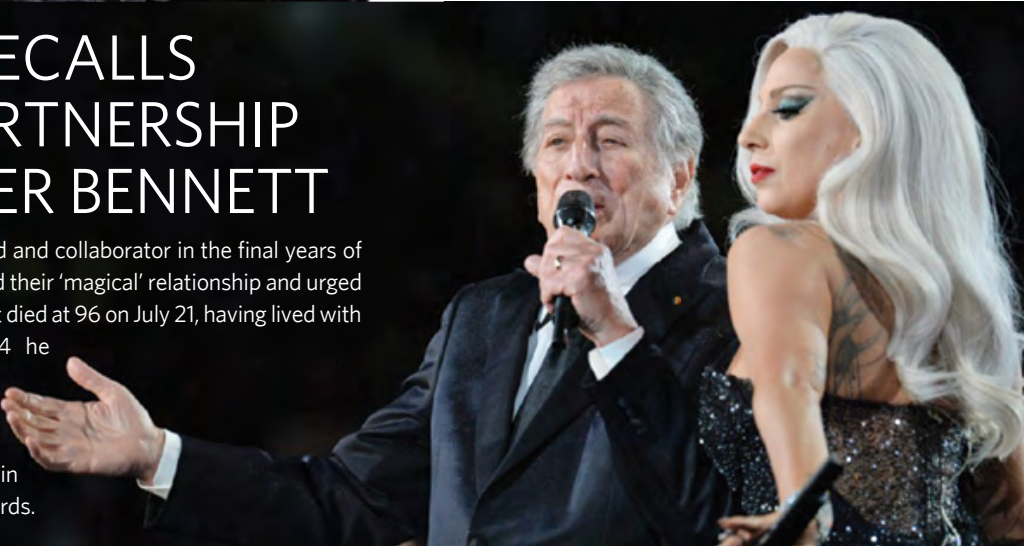
Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling touched down inside Caesars Palace in Las Vegas during Warner Bros' CinemaCon presentation on Tuesday morning.

The studio welcomed Gerwig, Robbie and Gosling to the Colosseum stage along with co-star America Ferrera to chat up the Mattel project and debut several minutes of never-before-seen scenes.

The new footage comes on the heels of a trailer and character posters that were revealed earlier this month. *Barbie* has been receiving rave reviews in different parts of the world where it is being screened as early collections predict a good run for this film. It also gives the duo a shot in the arm for their respective careers.

LADY GAGA RECALLS 'MAGICAL' PARTNERSHIP WITH CROONER BENNETT

Lady Gaga, who was Tony Bennett's friend and collaborator in the final years of the hitmaker's life, over the weekend hailed their 'magical' relationship and urged others not to 'discount your elders'. Bennett died at 96 on July 21, having lived with Alzheimer's disease for years. In 2014 he became the oldest person ever to reach number one on the US album chart through a collection of duets with Lady Gaga, with whom he also won a Grammy in 2022 for their album of Cole Porter standards.



COMING SOON

JAILER

Muthuvel Pandian is a strict yet empathetic jailer who learns that a gang is trying to rescue its leader from prison, where he sets out to stop them.

Genre: Action
Starring: Mohan Lal, Jackie Shroff, Rajnikanth
Language: Tamil



BOLLYWOOD MOVIE REVIEW
ROCKY AUR RANI KII PREM KAHANAI
Genre: Family Drama
Starring: Ranveer Singh, Alia Bhatt, Jaya Bachchan, Shabana Azmi, Dharmendra

Family fracas

Karan Johar, of Dharma Productions, knows well how to package his movies. Unlike Salman Khan - who keeps the focus solely on himself and avoids casting popular faces in his films - Johar weaves in a few veteran stars as well as other character artists to let his movies appeal to one and all. And *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem*

Kahaani (RARKPK) is his umpteenth (not really) take on family drama where members of the audience identify with different characters on screen.

Just like the multi-starrer *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, Johar has brought in his trademark colour and fanfare into RARKPK with a star cast that appeals to different generations and which will be appreciated by varied audiences



across India. And, of course, one character does reflect aspects of his own life somewhere in between.

The story is about two families - the Randhawas, a Punjabi business family who own the prosperous Dhanlakshmi

Sweets, named after their matriarch Dhanlakshmi Randhawa (Jaya Bachchan) and the Chatterjees, a bengali family with Shabana Azmi playing Jamini, the grandmother of Alia Bhatt aka Rani. Rocky (Ranveer) is the grand-

son of Dhanlakshmi while Dharmendra plays the role of her invalid husband Kanwal Lund who suffers from amnesia.

What makes the two families cross paths is the fact that Jamini (Shabana) and Kanwal (Dharmendra) had been yesteryear lovers who never made it together. Rocky, a happy go lucky, less educated youth and Rani, a successful, well-qualified television news channel anchor, stumble on evidence of this old alliance and decide to let the oldies meet in a bid to revive Kanwal's mental state. In the bargain (you guessed right) they fall in love and the rest is an essay which a five-year-old can pen.

Rocky attempts to induce humour throughout the film with his poor English diction which actually doesn't quite sound funny, had it not been for the funny spellings of subtitles in English

that you cannot possibly miss on the big screen. Well, he was just his own crazy self and we are not going to describe his outlandish attire.

There are a few social messages thrown in for effect. And if you expect a sterling performance from Dharmendra, you are going to be disappointed, for he is presented with a dazed expression and seated in a wheelchair all through the film - well not all through.

If you want a break from the spate of serious flicks on the big screen and small screen, this movie with its colourful song and dance sequences, vibrant star cast, predictable storyline, and humour (you do hear loud laughter in the auditorium) will be one for your 'mammeries' - we mean, memory - thanks to Rocky's dictionary. A good watch.

Rating ★★★★★