

MTCIT plans national portal for e-services by year end

Contribution of digital economy to rise to 10% of GDP by 2040

Digitalisation of government services to reach 80% by 2025

Study conducted on the economic impact of Muscat Metro

Our Correspondent Muscat

With an aim of raising the contribution of the digital economy to reach ten per cent of the GDP by 2040, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) will launch the national portal for electronic services by the end of this year.

In an interview with Oman TV, H E Said bin Hamoud al Ma'awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technol-



ogy, said that the ministry "is working to launch the national portal for electronic services by the end of this year to provide a one-stop-shop for services, and new services will be added to it constantly".

He informed that the ministry has created a unified index for all government services, which reached 3,000 services in 2022. "The ministry will aim to digitalise 80 per cent of government services by 2025. It has a plan to raise and double the contribution of the digital economy to reach ten

per cent of the GDP by 2040."

"The logistics sector expanded after the pandemic by 28.4 per cent in 2022 compared to 2021. The sector's contribution to the GDP reached seven per cent."

About the dream project of Muscat Metro, the minister said that a study was conducted on its economic impact by a team established for the purpose of avoiding any situation that may cause problems in the long run.

Talking about the road projects, H E Ma'awali said, "The Rusayl-Bidbid road is expected to

be fully opened in the first quarter of 2024, while work on the first phase of Adam-Haima-Thamrait road was stalled.

"As a result, the contract has been withdrawn from the executing company. A fresh tender will be issued to complete the project," he added.

For the delay in completing the Sharqiya Expressway, the minister cited the failure of the executing company as the reason and affirmed that "the ministry will re-offer a tender to complete the project".



Oman's logistics sector expanded after the pandemic by 28.4 per cent in 2022 compared to 2021

H E SAID AL MA'AWALI

H E Ma'awali informed that the ministry is currently working on preparing and improving the Batinah Highway with the executing company, starting from the wilayat of Barka to the wilayat of Shinas. While the Dibba-Lima-Khasab road will be assigned to a contractor in April for its implementation.

In the space science sector, the launch of Omani satellite has been postponed to 2025, the minister informed adding that the government has found funding sources for the project.

Royal Orders to push more development, charitable projects

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Orders on the anniversary of the Accession Day on Wednesday.

The Diwan of Royal Court released a statement to this effect reading as follows:

'In celebration of the 11th of January, anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's Day of Accession to power in Oman, His Majesty the Sultan issued Royal Orders to provide financial support to charity teams operating within Social Development Committees in all the wilayats of Oman and honour the volunteers therein. The Royal Orders also provide for extending financial support to charities supporting the Ministry of Social Development in appreciation for their efforts and roles in serving the community.

'In confirmation of the objectives of augmenting market value of Muscat Stock Exchange and enhancing the contribution of foreign investment in it, His Majesty the Sultan issued Royal Orders mandating the cessation of Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) on dividends and interest levied on non-resident persons.

'To encourage investments in Oman, His Majesty the Sultan issued Royal Orders to augment Oman Development Bank (ODB) maximum lending limit from RO1mn to RO5mn. The

Royal Directives allow an increase in this limit for development projects that contribute to augmenting added value. They also stipulate increasing the percentage of contribution towards financing the cost of projects and raising the bank's capital in line with this increase.

'Regarding investment plans in the governorates and employment opportunities in them, His Majesty the Sultan issued Royal Directives to expand the list of activities and areas financed by Oman Development Bank (ODB), while at the same time providing additional incentives for projects that are established outside the Governorate of Muscat.

'His Majesty the Sultan also underscored the significance of fostering the existing partnership between the Oman Housing Bank and other local banks, with the prime aim of accelerating financing to applicants on waiting lists. This should cover housing loan applications submitted to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

May the Almighty Allah protect His Majesty the Sultan and guard him as a symbol of pride for Omani people. May He grant Oman further progress and prosperity under His Majesty's prudent leadership.'

ONA

JABAL SHAMS FREEZES AT 0°C

Muscat - With cold winds sweeping most parts of the sultanate, Jabal Shams experienced the lowest temperature of the year, so far, on Saturday morning.

The mercury dipped to 0°C on Saturday resulting in freezing conditions at Oman's highest peak.

While the second coldest place in the sultanate was Saiq at 8.4°C, followed by Bidiyah (11.3°C), Samail (11.7°C) and Nizwa (11.8°C).

The Directorate General of Meteorology stated that Dhofar governorate was experiencing low level clouds and sporadic rains over the coastal areas. It expected clear skies over most of governorates with drop in temperature and advection of high and medium clouds.



Iran executes British-Iranian dual national for spying



UK artist Heather Ford returns to Oman

Cervical cancer elimination strategy for region launched

Our Correspondent Muscat

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean formally launched the Regional Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean on Wednesday.

WHO leaders, joined by women who have survived cervical cancer, advocates fighting the disease and high-level speakers, in a press conference introduced the '90-70-90' targets set by the strategy.

Under the strategy, the countries have to achieve 90 per cent human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination coverage for girls by age 15, 70 per cent screening

coverage for women by ages 35 and 45, and 90 per cent treatment for cervical pre-cancer and management for women with cancer by 2030.

The regional cervical cancer elimination strategy builds on the Global Strategy to Accelerate the Elimination of Cervical Cancer as a Public Health Problem, adopted by WHO Member States in 2020, which proposes: A world where cervical cancer is eliminated; a threshold of four per 100,000 women; and the 90-70-90 targets to be met by 2030 for countries to be on the path towards cervical cancer elimination within a few generations.

"The regional cervical cancer elimination strategy has been adapted to the religious, cultural,



social, economic and geographical contexts in the Eastern Mediterranean Region," said Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

"Implementation of widespread vaccination, screening

The regional cervical cancer elimination strategy has been adapted to the religious, cultural and social contexts in region

DR AHMED AL MANDHARI

and early diagnosis has been limited in many countries of the region. We applaud those countries in the region that have initiated efforts to support cervical cancer elimination, and encourage others, especially our high-burden countries, to take immediate ac-

tion. The context-driven regional strategy has the necessary technical tools and guidelines to help countries widely vaccinate, screen and diagnose to end needless suffering from a cancer that is both preventable and curable within a few generations."

Cervical cancer is the sixth most common cancer in women in the WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region. In 2020, an estimated 89,800 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer in the Region and more than 47,500 women died from this preventable disease.

Cervical cancer develops in a woman's cervix (the entrance to the uterus from the vagina). Almost all cervical cancer cases are linked to infection with high-risk

HPV. Although most infections with HPV resolve spontaneously and cause no symptoms, persistent infection can cause cervical cancer in women.

"January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. It is a perfect opportunity for us and our partners to galvanise joint efforts through this regional strategy, and jointly work towards eliminating cervical cancer and raising awareness about cervical cancer and HPV vaccination," explained Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. "When detected early and managed effectively, cervical cancer is one of the most successfully treatable forms of cancer," she added.

Global cooperation in social justice needed: Sayyid Badr

Our Correspondent Muscat

H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, took part in a two-day Voice of Global South Summit hosted by India on January 12 and 13.

The summit was held in virtual format, with ten sessions in total. It saw the participation of leaders and ministers from 125 countries of the Global South.

H E Sayyid Badr took part in the Foreign Minister's Session on Priorities of the Global South.

In his speech, H E Sayyid Badr stressed on the importance of international cooperation to ensure social justice and the well-being of all. He called for an exchange of views on best practices on important issues such as food and water security, development cooperation, and prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society.



H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi

Foreign Ministers from other participating countries expressed concern over the increasing fragmentation of the international landscape and exchanged perspectives on creating a conducive environment for the development priorities of the Global South. Ministers urged the international community to address the triple challenge of food, fuel, and fertiliser shortages. They also called for renewed and inclusive multilateralism that reflects contemporary realities. The need to raise their collective voice against terrorism was also underlined.

Private Enterprises Exempt of Paying Overdue OCCI Membership Fees

Driven by its role to support all private companies and enterprises, the Board of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry approved the

Exemption of all overdue membership renewal fees for the past years to all its members.

OCCI's exemption shall be effective starting from 1 February 2023 and will stay in effect for four months

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry

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OCCI - The Voice of the private sector www.omanchamber.om

HM confers Royal Commendation Order

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik conferred Order of Royal Commendation 'Second Class' on a number of citizens in appreciation of their outstanding contribution in several fields.

The medals were handed over by Sayyid Khalid Hilal al Busaidi, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court.

The recipients of the medals are:

- ▶ Sheikh Hamoud Humaid Hamad al Sawafi in the field of community initiatives and social responsibility. The medal was received on his behalf by his son Ahmed Hamoud Humaid al Sawafi.
- ▶ Mariam Issa Mohammed al Zadjali in the field of community initiatives and social responsibility.
- ▶ Prof Abdullah Hamad Suwaid al Badi in the field of research, innovation and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR).
- ▶ Prof Sameer Hamad Nasser al Adawi in the field of research, innovation and the fourth industrial revolution (4IR).
- ▶ Sheikh Mohammed Saud Salim al Mukhaini in the field of community initiatives and social responsibility.
- ▶ Shawqi Abdul Ridha Sultan in the field of digital economy and entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Dr Salim Sultan Salim al Ruzaqi in the field of digital economy and entrepreneurship.



Ahmed al Sawafi takes award on behalf of his father



Mariam Issa Mohammed al Zadjali



Prof Abdullah Hamad Suwaid al Badi



Prof Sameer Hamad Nasser al Adawi



Sheikh Mohammed Saud Salim al Mukhaini



Shawqi Abdul Ridha Sultan



Dr Salim Sultan Salim al Ruzaqi



Majid Fael Salim al Amri



Adnan Ahmed Hamad al Shuaili



Dr Saif Salim Saif Salim Saif al Abri



Dr Ali Mahad Musallam al Ma'ashani



Sumaia Said Sulaiman al Siabi

omy and entrepreneurship.

- ▶ Majid Fael Salim al Amri in the field of digital economy and entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Adnan Ahmed Hamad al

Shuaili in the field of digital economy and entrepreneurship.

- ▶ Dr Saif Salim Saif Salim Saif al Abri in the health field.

- ▶ Dr Ali Mahad Musallam al Ma'ashani in the health field.
- ▶ Sumaia Said Sulaiman al Siabi in the field of environment and natural resources.

Sayyid Busaidi congratulated the honourees, noting that the conferment of the medals constitutes His Majesty the Sultan's appreciation for the efforts they

made in their respective fields. The Royal gesture also constitutes a motive for more accomplishments, he added. The minister wished those honoured

success in their efforts and endeavours that stem from their social responsibility to serve this country and its beloved leader. ONA

MHUP to offer 23 plots in four governorates for investments

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to develop the real estate sector and stimulate investment, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is offering 23 plots of land via public auction in four governorates.

According to an official, the ministry will offer land measuring between 108sqm to 3,113sqm under usufruct contracts through online auction.

The lands offered for investments are provided with all services and are located in areas with large population density.

Of the 23 sites, eight are in Dakhiliyah governorate, six in Musandam, five in Buraimi and the rest are in Dhahirah.



The initiative aims to support the GDP growth, boost economic output through manufacturing, commercial and other industrial activities

Those interested in bidding must register through the electronic system - Tatwir platform - using ID number or the commercial register.

The initiative aims to support the GDP growth, boost economic output through manufacturing, commercial and other industrial

activities, fuel socioeconomic development and support the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.

The National Centre for Statistics and Information's (NCSI) data indicates that 1,721 plots of land were given in South Batinah in 2022, followed by 1,692 in

Dakhiliyah, 1,680 in North Batinah, and 1,562 in Dhofar.

The value of real estate transactions in the sultanate until the end of November 2022 was RO2.311bn, 2.6 per cent less compared to RO2.375bn recorded during the same period in 2021, according to NCSI.

Mysk Al Mouj introduces new menu at Salt & Pepper Restaurant

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Inspired by the popular Silk Route, Mysk Al Mouj Hotel on Tuesday introduced over 50 dishes in its menu at Salt & Pepper Restaurant.

The restaurant unveiled its refreshing menu, which it says promises food-lovers to 'take on the journey on the Silk Route with inspired dishes and beverages'.

Speaking during the launch, Meenu Singh, executive assistant manager, Mysk Al Mouj, said, "Food is a sensory art that appeals to all the senses, and we have curated this menu to ensure our guests experience one of the finest dining experiences of the Silk Route-inspired cuisine in Oman. All the dishes on the menu are authentic, with the



right procurement of local ingredients."

Over ten speciality chefs are there to lay out over 50 dishes consisting of culinary classics such as pastas, risotto, butter chicken, and signature dishes such as spiced pumpkin soup,

Bali beef rendang, Moroccan zatar spiced double lamb chops, baked gulab jamun and cheesecake among many.

Mysk Al Mouj is the flagship hotel of Mysk Hotels, an upscale brand launched under the Shaza Hotels group of the region.

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MOH No: 44/2023

Sohar celebrates Accession Day with festivities



Sohar - The people of Sohar in the Governorate of North Batinah organised a celebration on the occasion of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's Accession Day, at Sohar beach on Friday.

The celebration, which saw wide participation of people from all walks of life, was held in the presence of Hon Yaqoub bin Yousef al Kamshki, a member of the State Council; Muhammad bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, a member of Majlis A'Shura and a number of directors of government institutions, and sheikhs in Sohar.

The celebration included an exhibition of paintings on folk and lyrical arts. Traditional folk artists presented their songs expressing their joy on the national occasion, which was represented in the art forms of Al Ayyala, Al Azi and Al Hamasiyah.

A number of camel owners and horse riders presented a march in which they raised slogans in love and gratitude of His Majesty the Sultan.

Citizens working in the maritime industry and a number of dhow owners performed marine shows with songs highlighting the rich maritime heritage of Oman.

East Coast to hold exhibition to promote Omani products

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An exhibition that promotes Omani products and supports small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is returning after a gap of four years.

The Omani National Industries Exhibition (OniEX) will be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC) from May 31 to June 3, said the organiser.

East Coast for Organising Exhibitions will hold OniEX to attract international companies and to support SMEs to promote their products.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Khadijah Mubark al Batashi, managing director of East Coast, said that the last edition of the exhibition was held in 2018. "We had to suspend it for four years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, we expect more than 70 Omani entrepreneurs from different industries to participate in the exhibition."

Some of the industries include



We had to suspend it for four years due to the pandemic. We expect more than 70 Omani entrepreneurs from different industries to participate in the exhibition

KHADIJAH AL BATASHI

textile, furniture, home decor, foodstuffs, agriculture, health, automobile, building materials and construction.

"The exhibition will also provide a special corner for the industrial innovation sector as well



(Photo for illustrative purpose)

as for innovations in climate and renewable energy," said Khadijah.

According to her, the exhibition will provide a platform for bilateral meetings between businessmen and the visiting

delegations and participants.

OniEX will also host the Egyptian Exhibition for Industrial Products, and the Investment Opportunities Forum in order to open up new investment opportunities in Oman.

"Separately, we will organise an exhibition in Egypt in February. The exhibition aims to attract investments into Oman, promote Omani products abroad and establish business partnerships to meet the needs

OCCI writes off fees for members from private sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) Board of Directors has written off outstanding fees and renewal fees for OCCI membership.

OCCI board held its first meeting of 2023 at the chamber's headquarters under the auspices of Faisal Abdullah al Rowas, chairman of the OCCI Board.

The OCCI board affirmed its keenness to make the private sector a pivot for economic development that boosts the government's resources.

The OCCI board discussed a number of issues related to members' affairs and incentives, said the chamber.

Omani students win three awards in 'improving energy efficiency' challenge

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Centre of Excellence for Advanced Telecommunications Technology and IoT of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation announced the winning teams of 'The Green Redesign: Improving Energy Efficiency in Cities Using 5G and IoT' challenge, at Innovation Park Muscat last week.

The challenge was the second cohort of the Junior Academy programme that was established following a strategic partnership between Ericsson and the Ministry of Finance and Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel) in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and New York Academy of Sciences.

Among the 85 international teams which participated in the challenge, 'Greetopia' by Rawnaq Nasser al Seyabi from Nusaiba bint Kaab School (Girls) in Muscat governorate was adjudged the best project.

'Hydrogen Sustainable Cities' project by Ahd Abdullah al Riyami, Al Shifaa Abdulaziz al Kharousi, Maithaa Ahmed al Mayahi, Noor Younis al Kharousi, Roua Yousef al Kharousi and Emma P was adjudged the second.

All the members of the team



are from Salma Bint Qais School in the Governorate of South Batinah alongside Emma from Slovakia.

As for the third place, it went to 'Green Power: Building a Sustainable Farmhouse Using 5G and IoT' project by Dana Ahmed al Nedabi from Soroor Basic Education School in Dakhiliyah governorate.

The Junior Academy programme aims to provide young students with the opportunity to learn how to research and develop innovative skills and compete to find solutions to global societal challenges in the field of technology and science.

The programme can contribute to deepening the participants' knowledge and enabling them to take the initiative to contribute to providing solutions to technical problems.

The programme also comes in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 to shift towards a knowledge-based economy, and to provide current generations with the necessary skills to face the future, by refining their capabilities and empowering them with knowledge that allows them to grow as individuals in the Omani society.

The Centre of Excellence for Advanced Telecommunications

Technology and IoT is one of the offset projects of the Ministry of Finance currently being conducted at Innovation Park Muscat as a result of a partnership among Ericsson, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Omantel.

The centre acts as a research hub for developing 5G and IoT use cases as Proof of Concept (PoC) before deployments in commercial networks.

It supports small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as start-ups moving towards next-generation network evolution by incubating their ideas and concepts into reality.



Announcement



The Tax Authority announces to taxpayers that its headquarters will be relocated from its current location in the Wilayat of Muscat to the new premises in Al Mawaleh (Please follow the location in the provided map). The Authority therefore apologizes for not being able to receive taxpayers in person from Sunday 15 January 2023 until Thursday 19 January 2023.

Please Note that the Authority will continue to provide all E-services during this period. In case of any enquiry, please contact the Call Center on 1020. Thank you for your understanding.



Please scan the QR code to open the map.

Abolition of withholding tax to boost investment in MSX

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The abolition of 10 per cent withholding tax on stock dividends and income from bonds and sukuk owned by foreign investors will boost foreign investment in the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) and enhance its competitiveness, according to the top capital market officials.

On the occasion of Accession Day, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Orders to abolish the withholding tax on stock dividends and interest for non-resident investors.

H E Abdullah Salim al Salmi, executive president of the Capital Market Authority (CMA), said that the Royal Orders to cease the application of tax deducted at source (TDS) on dividends and income from sukuk and bonds, to the advantage of foreign investors, affirms His Majesty's keenness to provide all factors that enhance the investment environment and make the MSX an attractive investment destination for foreign capital.

"This will boost trading in the MSX, enhance its market capitalisation value, and boost the role of the capital market as a tool for financing economic projects as part of the efforts to achieve



Oman's Vision 2040," he said in a press statement.

H E Salmi expressed the importance of the new Royal Order that stipulates the suspension of the withholding tax permanently with immediate effect, where appropriate legislative amendments are to be effected in due course.

"Such amendments shall ensure the exclusion of dividends and income from bonds and sukuk from the scope of this tax.

This would enhance the confidence of foreign investors in the investment climate of the country, and reassure them that this tax will not be applied to their investments in the capital market in Oman," he explained.

The executive president of the CMA noted that Royal Directive to permanently abolish the withholding tax on foreign investors are consistent with the national priorities directing the executive plans of the government agen-

cies, which focus on attracting capital and encouraging investment.

The abolition of withholding tax gives the Omani capital market a competitive advantage to attract direct and indirect foreign investments, he added.

Oman's government imposed a 10 per cent withholding tax on dividends and income from sukuk and bonds in 2017 as part of the Income Tax Law amendments. Although the withholding

tax was suspended for a period of three years, starting from June 2019, which was later extended to 2025 as part of the economic stimulus plan approved by the Council of Ministers.

Haitham Salim al Salmi, CEO of the Muscat Stock Exchange said that the Royal Directives underscore His Majesty's keenness on establishing an environment that stimulates foreign investments.

"The Royal Directives also reflect the policy of openness that Oman has espoused in dealing with foreign investment," he said in a statement to Oman News Agency.

Salmi affirmed that, besides enhancing the attractiveness of the Muscat Stock Exchange, this step places the MSX comfortably in the global investment map and will constitute an incentive to attract more investments to the stock market.

He explained that the non-application of a withholding tax on dividends and interest will benefit non-resident foreign investors.

"Accordingly, the securities listed on the stock exchange will be more attractive to investors, especially since the share prices of most companies are still less than their fair value, as observed by analysts and experts in the financial market," Salmi added.



Shell signs LNG and green hydrogen deals with Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Global energy giant Shell signed several agreements with Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals, OQ Group and Oman LNG in the fields of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and green hydrogen.

The agreements and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) were signed at OQ Group's headquarters on Thursday.

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals also signed a Letter of Intent with Oman Shell Company to explore opportunities for the production of liquefied synthetic gas (LSG) in Oman.

LSG is produced when green hydrogen is combined with captured carbon dioxide to produce natural gas which is then liquefied. This low-carbon gas can be directly introduced to existing gas networks and infrastructure, including the LNG stations of the Oman LNG, all the way to the end user. The agreement was signed by H E Salim Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and Walid Hadi, senior vice president and country chair of Oman Shell.

Commenting on the agreement, H E Aufi said, "This agreement is the evidence of our confidence in the future of Oman as a multiple energy source hub, as well as the rapid development of its interest in renewable energy and green hydrogen production. The ministry works with care to achieve optimal utilisation of Oman's natural resources, by employing capabilities and modern technologies in the fields of energy with our partners in the sector." Oman LNG and Shell International Trading Middle East FZE announced the signing of a term-sheet for the offtake of 0.8mn tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas from Oman LNG, for a period of 10 years starting from 2025.

Walid Hadi said, "We are pleased to sign these important agreements that will strengthen our partnership with Oman. This will be Shell's first long-term LNG offtake from Oman and the

agreement supports continued production from Oman LNG into the 2030s. We're proud of the contribution we have made to the success of the venture to date and pleased to be deepening our relationship."

Such step marks another milestone in the history of Oman LNG, where it complements the company's strive to extend its contracts beyond 2024, with a strong interest to leverage partnership with various firms around the world.

This commitment ensures Oman LNG will maintain its strong position in the global LNG market and contribute to global energy security, delivering clean and reliable energy.

Hamed al Nu'amani, CEO of Oman LNG, said, "We are delighted to sign this term-sheet agreement with Shell, who has been our partner in the industry for many years. This agreement leverages the opportunities to place Oman LNG in a very competitive market, with strong partners allowing us to grow our market access."

OQ and Shell International signed a partnership agreement for developing green hydrogen in Oman after acquiring a 35 per cent shareholding interest in Green Energy Oman (GEO) project. The project is expected to be developed in multiple phases to produce around 1.8mn tonnes of green hydrogen at full capacity. This agreement was signed by Najla Zuhair al Jamali, CEO of OQ Alternative Energy and Walid Hadi.

Hadi said, "With our entry to the GEO consortium, we are taking a further step to advance lower and zero emissions energy projects in Oman. The project remains in its early phase, but this is a sign of the potential we see for Oman through the energy transition. We also look forward to working together with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to explore the sustainable development of the first integrated liquefied synthetic gas (LSG) value chain."

Focus on emissions, says UAE's climate talks and oil boss

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The president of this year's COP28 climate talks, who heads one of the world's biggest oil companies, on Saturday urged a focus on lower emissions, warning global energy needs were set to accelerate.

Sultan al Jaber, the United Arab Emirates' special envoy for climate change and CEO of the ADNOC oil giant, said less-polluting fossil fuels would remain part of the energy mix, along with renewables and other solutions.

"As long as the world still uses hydrocarbons, we must ensure they are the least carbon intensive possible," Jaber told the Global Energy Forum in Abu Dhabi, two days after his unveiling as COP president.

"We're working with the energy industry on accelerating decarbonisation, reducing methane and expanding hydrogen. Let's keep our focus on holding back emissions, not progress."



Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber (left) speaks to US Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, at the opening session of the Global Energy Forum, in Abu Dhabi, on Saturday (AFP)

Al Jaber's nomination on Thursday prompted protests from climate activists concerned that a senior figure from the oil industry has little incentive to steer the world away from hydrocarbons.

The Gulf monarchy argues that oil remains indispensable to the global economy and is pushing the merits of carbon capture - removing carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, as fuel is burned or from the air.

Al Jaber said the UAE, which will host COP28 in Dubai in November and December, approached the task with "humility, a clear sense of responsibility and a great sense of urgency".

He said the world's population, currently eight billion, was on course to reach 9.7bn by 2050 and would need "50 per cent more energy than what is available today".

"We are way off track. The world is playing catch up when it comes to the key Paris goal of holding global temperatures down to 1.5 degrees (Celsius)," he said.

"And the harsh reality is that in order to achieve this goal, global emissions must fall 43 per cent by 2030."

Jaber said renewable energy needed to triple to 23 terawatt hours by 2030, while low-carbon hydrogen production had to double. He said agriculture produces one-third of global emissions and needed deep reform.

"We are at a turning point in history. Low carbon growth is the future, but we must get there much faster," he said.

AFP

OQ's ammonia plant to boost Omani exports

Salalah - His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, will patronise the inauguration ceremony of OQ's ammonia plant at Dhofar governorate today.

The plant is one of the main development projects and will contribute to enhancing the utilisation of Oman's natural resources. It will support the economic diversification plans and will boost the export of Omani products to international markets.

Eng Kamal al Shanfari, executive director of OQ's projects in Salalah, said, "OQ's ammonia plant is integrated with the methanol plant and was designed to retain the hydrogen-rich purge gas generated by the methanol plant as feedstock. The demand for ammonia products



in the global markets is witnessing constant growth leading to higher returns and rendering the project highly feasible."

He said, "The ammonia is being used as a key ingredient in the production of fertilisers and is an important intermediate chemical in the manufacturing of synthetic resins, detergents, coolants, synthetic fibres, and polyurethanes, among other applications. Ammonia is also used in the production of green hydrogen, which is a key component of the OQ Energy Transition

agenda."

With regard to the in-country added value, Shanfari said, "Like all the main development projects, OQ's ammonia plant has made an effective contribution to enhancing the in-country added value. About US\$199mn were spent during the construction phase on procurements from Omani companies. Additionally, it has provided training programs that enhanced the capabilities of Omani youth in many fields."

OQ is a global integrated energy company with roots in Oman. With operations across 17 countries, it covers the entire value chain from exploration and production to marketing and distribution of end-user products. OQ's fuels and chemicals are sold in over 60 countries worldwide.

World enters 'new age' of clean energy: IEA

Paris, France - The world is at the "dawn of a new industrial age" of clean energy technology manufacturing that will triple in value by 2030 and create millions of jobs, the International Energy Agency said on Thursday.

The global market for key mass-manufactured technologies including solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicle batteries, heat pumps and electrolyzers for hydrogen will be worth around US\$650bn a year by the end of the decade, the IEA predicted in a report.

The figure is more than three times larger than current levels but is conditional on countries fully implementing their energy and climate pledges, it added.

Related jobs in clean energy manufacturing will more than double from six million to nearly 14mn by 2030, the agency said.

"The energy world is at the dawn of a new industrial age -



the age of clean energy technology manufacturing," the IEA said. But the Paris-based organisation warned that the concentration of resource extraction and manufacturing poses risks to supply chains.

Three countries account for 70 per cent of the manufacturing capacity for solar, wind, battery, electrolyser and heat pump technology, with China "dominant in all of them".

The Democratic Republic of Congo produces more than 70 per cent of the world's cobalt,

and three countries - Australia, Chile and China - account for more than 90 per cent of the global production of lithium, a key resource for electric vehicle batteries.

Supply chain tensions risk making the energy transition more difficult and expensive, the report added.

In a first, rising cobalt, lithium and nickel prices in 2022 led to an increase in the global price of electric vehicle batteries by almost 10 per cent.

The cost of building wind tur-

bines outside China has also crept up after years of declining prices, while similar trends are affecting solar panels.

IEA executive director Fatih Birol urged countries to diversify supply chains, citing Europe's dependence on Russian gas as a prime of example of the potential exposure to disruption caused by depending excessively on one trade source.

"As we have seen with Europe's reliance on Russian gas, when you depend too much on one company, one country or one trade route - you risk paying a heavy price if there is disruption," he said.

Birol also stressed the importance of international collaboration, "since no country is an energy island and energy transitions will be more costly and slow if countries do not work together."

AFP

US to take 'extraordinary measures' to avoid default

Washington, US – The US Treasury Department said it will likely begin "extraordinary measures" this week to prevent a default on government debt, setting up a high-stakes showdown in Congress over raising the nation's borrowing limit.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, in a letter to congressional leadership, said that the United States was projected to reach its legal borrowing limit – set at US\$31.4tn – as soon as next Thursday.

It would therefore need to "start taking certain extraordinary measures" to prevent a default.

Any such measures would only help for a limited time, likely no longer than six months, she warned.

Congressional lawmakers have found themselves gridlocked over raising the debt limit, with some Republican policymakers pushing for it to be used as leverage in hopes of gaining spending cuts.

If the Democratic-controlled Senate and Republican-controlled House cannot come to an agreement, the world's largest economy could risk defaulting on its debt.

"Failure to meet the government's obligations would cause irreparable harm to the US economy, the livelihoods of all Americans, and global financial stability," Yellen warned.



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen

"It is therefore critical that Congress act in a timely manner to increase or suspend the debt limit," she urged.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told reporters on Thursday that "we've got to change the way we are spending money wastefully in this country."

But the White House rebutted that raising the debt ceiling was not up for "negotiation."

President Joe Biden's press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, said the process was not meant to be "political football."

White House deputy press secretary Andrew Bates charged that House Republicans were

"telling the country that they will cause the most egregious self-inflicted economic meltdown in modern history unless they can hurt the most popular programs in existence."

Around 80 years ago, lawmakers introduced a limit on how much federal debt could be accrued.

Congress has always acted when called upon to raise the debt limit, according to the Treasury, and the ceiling has been lifted dozens of times.

Yellen noted Friday that "increasing or suspending the debt limit does not authorise new spending commitments or cost taxpayers money."

"It simply allows the government to finance existing legal obligations that Congresses and presidents of both parties have made in the past," she said.

The Treasury Department is unable to estimate precisely how long the extraordinary measures will allow it to continue paying the government's obligations, Yellen said.

But she cautioned that cash and the measures could be exhausted after early June.

Congressman Brendan Boyle, top Democrat on the House Budget Committee, called the situation "enormously concerning."

"Republicans need to do the right thing and come to the table to raise the borrowing limit before it's too late," he said in a statement.

AFP

World Bank cuts 2023 world growth forecast to 1.7%

Washington, US – Global growth is slowing "perilously close" to recession, the World Bank said, slashing its 2023 economic forecast on high inflation, rising interest rates and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Economists have warned of a slump in the world economy as countries battle soaring costs and central banks simultaneously hiked interest rates to cool demand – worsening financial conditions amid ongoing disruptions from the war in Ukraine.

The World Bank's latest forecast points to a "sharp, long-lasting slowdown" with growth pegged at 1.7 per cent this year, roughly half the pace it predicted in June, said the bank's latest Global Economic Prospects report.

This is among the weakest rates seen in nearly three decades, overshadowed only by the pandemic-induced downturn of 2020 and global financial crisis in 2009.

"Given fragile economic conditions, any new adverse development... could push the global economy into recession," the Washington-based development lender said.

These include higher-than-expected inflation, sudden spikes in interest rates to contain price increases, or a pandemic resurgence.

World Bank President David Malpass told reporters: "I'm concerned, deeply concerned that the slowdown may persist."



David Malpass

'Particularly devastating'

In the United States, growth will likely slow to 0.5 per cent in 2023, much lower than earlier forecast, while the euro area is to flatline as it battles energy supply disruptions and price hikes related to Russia's invasion.

China is predicted to expand 4.3 per cent this year, 0.9 points below previous expectations, partly due to lingering pandemic disruptions and property sector weakness.

"The outlook is particularly devastating for many of the poorest economies, where poverty reduction has already ground to a halt," Malpass said.

"Emerging and developing countries are facing a multi-year period of slow growth driven by heavy debt burdens and weak investment," he added.

While the World Bank has pushed for a quicker debt restructuring process, "progress remains stalled," Malpass said.

The broad-based slowdown and weak growth does not mark a recession just yet, said Ayhan Kose, head of the bank's forecast unit.

But in the near-term, the World Bank is watching out for "the possibility of financial stress, if interest rates go up higher at the global level," he told AFP.

If this happens and inflation remains persistent, "that could trigger a global recession," he said.

And if financing conditions get tighter, there will likely be more debt crises this year, he warned.

'Set to deepen'

Central banks including the US Federal Reserve have been hiking interest rates over the past year to fight inflation, but the drag on economies is "set to deepen" as policies take effect, the World Bank said.

"The world's three major engines of growth -- the United States, the euro area and China -- are undergoing a period of pronounced weakness, with adverse spillovers for emerging market and developing economies," the bank added.

For now, inflation has risen, nudged up by pandemic-era support, supply shocks and in some cases, currency depreciations relative to the US dollar.

Among the hardest-hit areas is Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for some 60 per cent of the world's extreme poor.

AFP

Musk faces US fraud trial over 'manupulating' stock market

New York, US – Elon Musk, the CEO of electric car giant Tesla, will face trial on Tuesday over allegedly manipulating the stock market with a tweet after a federal judge rejected his request to move the case out of California.

The case dates back to August 2018 when Musk tweeted that he had sufficient funding to take Tesla private, causing a whirlwind in the company's share price.

Musk was swiftly sued by shareholders for allegedly costing them billions of dollars with the Twitter post that said funding was "secured" to buy out the company's shareholders.

According to a spokesperson for the court, Judge Edward Chen on Friday refused to transfer the proceedings to Texas, the southern state where Musk moved Tesla's headquarters and jury selection is scheduled to begin on Tuesday.



Elon Musk

Defense lawyers had argued that the multimillionaire would be denied a fair trial in San Francisco, where he bought Twitter in late October and has been widely criticized for his decisions since taking over the social media firm.

After taking over Twitter, Musk fired more than half of the 7,500 employees, most in San Francisco, and radically changed the site's content moderation policies.

"For the last several months,

the local media have saturated this district with biased and negative stories about Mr. Musk that have fostered... highly prejudicial biases in the jury pool," the CEO's lawyers argued in a filing.

"The local media, in a deviation from how they typically cover these stories, have blamed Mr. Musk personally for the reductions and even accused him of violating the law," the lawyers said.

According to Bloomberg, Judge Chen expressed confidence at the hearing that impartial jurors could be chosen.

Musk's short tweet in 2018 has already attracted the attention of authorities.

The US stock market regulator, the Securities and Exchange Commission, ordered that Musk step down as chairman of the board of Tesla and pay a fine of US\$20mn.

AFP

UK plans 'green' free ports in Scotland

London, UK – British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak unveiled plans Friday to create two "green" free ports to attract post-Brexit business and jobs to Scotland, whose leaders are agitating for independence.

Sunak, fresh from what he called robust but constructive talks with Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, announced a drive to bolster investment two years after Britain's exit from the European Union.

His Conservative government will spend up to £52mn on the ports, which are located in Inverness-Cromarty Firth Green and in Forth Green.

The facilities will help Scotland "create jobs, drive growth and level up the country", the UK government added in a statement.

Free ports -- similar to free zones or enterprise zones -- are specially designated areas, usually found near ports or airports.

They are considered to exist



British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speaks to staff during a visit to Port of Cromarty Firth in Invergordon, Scotland, on Friday (AFP)

outside the host country's normal tax and customs territory, like duty-free shopping zones.

The news comes amid tensions with London staunchly opposed to attempts by Sturgeon's

nationalist government to hold a new independence referendum.

"We've got lots of challenges that we all face collectively around the UK -- and where we

can work together and make a difference we should," Sunak told the BBC in Scotland.

"Today's announcement of our two new green free ports in Scotland is a great example of that."

Officials said the ports qualified as "green" because they will aim to attract businesses focussed on renewable energy including offshore wind as well as carbon capture.

Sturgeon's Scottish National Party (SNP) had wanted to hold a second independence plebiscite in October, but this was blocked by Supreme Court judges in London.

Instead, the SNP says it will turn the UK's next general election likely next year into a de facto referendum for Scotland.

Scots voted narrowly in 2014 to remain part of the union, but this pre-dated the UK's controversial 2016 referendum to leave the EU.

AFP

German economy holds up in 2022 despite Ukraine war

Frankfurt, Germany – The German economy grew a better-than-expected 1.9 per cent last year, official data showed Friday, as government relief measures cushioned Europe's export giant from an energy crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine.

The expansion was slower than the 2.6 per cent growth in 2021, with GDP "stagnating" in the fourth quarter as inflation surged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, statistics authority Destatis said.

But 2022 growth surpassed the 1.8 per cent forecast by analysts, as government interventions and a mild winter helped Germany weather sky-high energy costs seen after Moscow slashed crucial gas supplies to Europe.

It was also higher than the 1.4 per cent expansion forecast by the government last October.

Analysts and the government have been predicting that Europe's largest economy will fall into recession this year, but the GDP figures -- and a string of recent indicators -- suggest it may dodge a severe downturn.

"Through decisive actions in the past year, we made the crisis manageable," Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in response to the growth data.

"In a short space of time, we pushed through legislative packages and mobilised large sums of money to support the economy and unburden consumers," he said.

But Destatis president Ruth Brand outlined the challenges faced by Germany, from "extreme energy price increases" to supply chain bottlenecks, rising food prices and a shortage of skilled workers.

"Despite these difficult condi-



A file photo shows HHLA Tollerort container terminal in the port of Hamburg, Germany

tions, the German economy held up well overall in 2022," she added.

Fritzi Koehler-Geib, chief economist at the public lender KfW, said the growth data was a "respectable result, made possi-

ble by the stabilisation policy of the German government and the adaptability of many companies."

"Nonetheless, the macroeconomic losses were still considerable: Before Russia's assault on

Ukraine, growth was expected to be roughly twice as high," she said.

'Stagnating, not contracting'

Moscow's reduction of gas sup-

plies via pipeline to Germany upended Berlin's long-held business model -- importing cheap Russian energy to power its flagship industrial sector and export high-quality goods to the world.

The government was left scrambling to find new -- and more costly -- sources of energy as food and fuel prices soared, weighing on German industry and consumers.

But efforts to build up gas reserves in preparation for the winter have allowed Germany to skirt acute shortages.

A massive 200-billion-euro (US\$216bn) support package announced in September to limit household energy bills and support businesses has also taken the sting out of price rises, analysts say.

The government itself had forecast in October that the economy would shrink 0.4 per

cent over the whole of this year.

But a string of indicators, which for months flashed red, are now turning around and suggest that the downturn will be less severe than initially feared.

Some analysts warn the reprieve may prove temporary given significant risks that lie ahead.

Germany will likely be unable to dodge a recession -- two consecutive quarters in which the economy shrinks -- said Carsten Brzeski, head of macroeconomics at ING.

The 2022 GDP figure "implies a stagnating, not contracting, economy in the fourth quarter. Will the widely predicted recession simply fail to materialise? We remain doubtful," he said.

"Avoiding the worst does not suggest the economy is doing well," he added.

AFP

TRA gets apprised of Ooredoo's operations

H E Omar al Ismaily, head of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) in Oman, paid an official visit to Ooredoo's head office on Wednesday to gain new insights into the company's future-ready and holistic approach to digital transformation and customer experience.

Ismaily visited several departments, learning about the company's fresh approach to customer experience and taking a tour of the award-winning contact centre. There was also a look at the company's data centre concepts and how these provide cutting edge technology and solutions for the country, a press release said.

The TRA aims to liberalise and promote the telecommunications sector in Oman and focuses on compliance of service providers with national regulatory requirements.

Noor al Sulaiti, CEO at Ooredoo Oman, said, "We were delighted to welcome H E Omar al Ismaily to our premises to gain fresh insights into our transformative approach, which opti-



mise our daily operations, processes and ultimately, our customer journey. Ooredoo's customer satisfaction rates have been high and we attribute this to our clear strategy, while we continue to embrace innovative digital technologies and reimagine the overall customer experience."

She added, "The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority's framework fosters the expansion of mobile broadband networks across Oman, including in rural and remote areas. This objective is aligned with our overarching national objective of digital inclusion of all citizens across the country, in line with Oman's Vision 2040, while complying with national regulatory standards."

Ooredoo plays a key role in supporting the country's Vision 2040 objectives, continuing to develop innovative solutions that upgrade their customers' world. Through its network, technology and solutions, Ooredoo contributes to the digitalisation of Oman's economy and society.

Bentley delivers more cars in 2022

Bentley Motors today announced total sales of 15,174 globally in 2022, an increase of 4 per cent over the previous record year (14,659) in 2021.

This significant achievement was driven by new model introductions and increasing demand for Mulliner personalisation and Bentley's new hybridised models, introduced under Bentley's Beyond100 strategic path to full electrification by 2030, a press release said.

With the high level of customer appreciation for bespoke cars in the Middle East region, the number of cars delivered increased by 6% as 968 were delivered in 2022 compared with 915 in 2021.

The continued demand for SUVs ensured Bentayga remained Bentley's number one model, selling more in its sixth year of sales than ever before, accounting for 42 per cent and establishing itself as the most successful luxury SUV in the world.

Furthermore, consistent appeal continued for the Continental GT and GT Convertible, accounting for nearly a third of sales, 30 per cent, with the new, performance-orientated GT



Speed the most dynamic road car Bentley has ever built, taking a 31 per cent high of the model mix. Finally, the Flying Spur, the world's finest luxury four-door grand tourer reached 28 per cent of total sales, thanks in part to the introduction of the new Hybrid model, the most advanced and environmentally friendly Fly-

ing Spur ever. Since market entry, the Flying Spur Hybrid is 30 per cent of the model mix, however in the UK, two thirds of all Flying Spurs sold are hybrid, the highest figure globally.

Commenting on the global sales results, Adrian Hallmark, Chairman and CEO of Bentley Motors, said, "In what was an-

other year of unpredictability, the business overcame significant headwinds and demonstrated great resilience to deliver the third consecutive record sales year. This underlines our brand strength, operational excellence and strong global demand by market and model.

"The reaction to the market

introduction of our hybrid models, Flying Spur joining Bentayga last year, demonstrate the path the luxury sector is heading, and we are positioned firmly at the forefront. These numbers are validation that we not only lead the sector in sales and market share, but also investment in electric technologies."

Wizz Air connects KSA with Budapest, Bucharest

Wizz Air, Europe's fastest growing and globally most environmentally sustainable airline, officially inaugurated two new connections between Budapest and Riyadh and Bucharest and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. The new routes will be served twice a week.

Soon after Wizz Air has launched flights to Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam from Austria and Italy at the end of 2022, the airline further strengthens its presence in Saudi by inaugurating two new routes from Hungary and Romania to Riyadh. The new routes will boost the growing Saudi Arabian tourism sector by bringing a new era of affordable, hassle-free and direct travel opportunities to Riyadh from the European capitals, a press release said.

The routes between Budapest and Riyadh and Bucharest and Riyadh are a part of a line-up of twenty-four new routes to Saudi Arabia announced in recent months by Wizz Air, underpinning the airline's commitment to sup-

porting the country's growing tourism sector by bringing more than one million passengers to the Kingdom in the coming year. The airline's growing presence is in line with the Vision 2030 Programme, a strategic and ambitious goal to triple passenger traffic in Saudi Arabia by 2030.

Robert Carey, president at Wizz Air, stated, "These two routes will unlock an eclectic mix of travel opportunities between the European Capitals and the Kingdom, benefiting from the immense historical, artistic and cultural heritage that the Saudi Kingdom has to offer its visitors."

Furthermore, with the two additional routes on top of the recently announced ones within our network to the Saudi Kingdom, Wizz Air once again confirms and strengthens its commitment to Saudi Arabia and Vision 2030, where it keeps innovating and will carry forward the banner of low-cost flying for the benefit of Saudi residents.

Dubai entertainment scene picks up

Dubai Calendar, the official listing platform for events in the city, is gearing up to kick-start the 2023 line-up of events and live entertainment with an incredible range of music, culture and sport events which will take place throughout the city during January and February 2023.

The programmes include a host of epic live entertainment events such as Dubai Beats and Cirque Du Soleil, and sporting spectacles including Dubai Desert Classic, and much more, a press release said.

Dubai Shopping Festival collaborated with Core Direction to create the region's first ever camping, music and movement festival - COREUNITY. The event took place in Hatta from January 13-15, working with the team who presented Yoga At The Top - Burj Khalifa and Movement & Music at the Dubai Opera Garden, to deliver an epic weekend of fun, wellness and adventure.

The annual Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) taking place until



29th January, is one not to be missed with incredible discounts across Malls and shopping destinations with daily entertainment shows and extraordinary raffles.

The Bolshoi Ballet's prima ballerina Svetlana Zakharova will be gracing the Dubai Opera stage for one night only on January 27. She will be joined by talented dancers Mikhail Lobukhin, Vayacheslav Lopatin, Denis Savin,

Artemy Belyakov, Anastasia Stashkevich and Ana Turazshvili from the Bolshoi Theatre.

Quoz Arts Fest is set to return to Alserkal Avenue from January 28-29. This year's celebration promises many more surprises in the artistic sphere. For all creative enthusiasts and art buffs.

Taste of Dubai, in partnership with Philips, is returning with another extravagant culinary celebration from February 3-5.

BeIN telecasts Australian Open 2023 live

BeIN MEDIA GROUP (beIN), and its flagship sports channel beIN Sports, has announced its live and exclusive coverage of the 111th edition of the Australian Open 2023 across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Tennis enthusiasts across 24 countries in the region can tune in from the opening round on Monday, January 16 to the finals on January 29 where fans can look forward to a jam-packed schedule of over 40 hours of live action daily, broadcast across four channels in both Arabic and English, a press release said.

BeIN Sports 5, the dedicated tennis channel for the tournament, will showcase the men's pre-finals, semi-finals, and finals from the Road Laver Arena, with both Arabic and English commentary. Meanwhile, BeIN SPORTS 6 and 7 will broadcast from the Margaret Court Arena and John Cain Arena respectively. beIN Sports 2 English will air a world feed with commentary in English, ensuring compre-



hensive coverage of all the matches.

BeIN SPORTS' coverage will be supported by commentary from seasoned professionals, including retired Moroccan champion Karim Alami, who was previously ranked 25th in the world, Kuwaiti tennis player Adel al Shatti, Selima Sfar, the second highest-ranked female Tunisian tennis player, former Moroccan player Anass Lamrani and sports commentator Chadi Souaiby.

To complement the live coverage, fans can also enjoy a variety of supporting and behind-the-scenes documentaries, previews, and daily highlights, starting with a pre-tournament documentary in Arabic on January 14. From January 16, 14 daily highlights episodes in English will be aired, each 26 minutes long, providing mini-matches and daily updates.

Highlight programming includes one-hour studio discus-

sions, such as a pre-tournament programme at 10pm MECCA on January 14, a preview of the Women's Semi-final at 10am MECCA on January 26, a preview of the Men's Semi-final at 5am MECCA on January 27, pre- and post-match analysis of the Women's final at 10am MECCA on January 28, and pre- and post-match analysis of the Men's final at 10am MECCA on January 29. The studio discussions will be hosted by Areej Sleem.



Mercedes-Benz offers latest certified pre-owned vehicles

Muscat – Mercedes-Benz Oman announces its latest line-up for certified pre-owned vehicles at exclusive prices valid until 31st March 2023.

As a pioneer for increased safety, Mercedes-Benz Oman utilises specialised measures and safety systems in each vehicle segment. All certified pre-owned vehicles undergo a 150-point in-

spection, which includes engine checks, fluid checks, and on-road driving evaluations.

Commenting on the latest offers, Shaun Michael, CEO at Mercedes-Benz Oman, said, “A certified pre-owned vehicle is a perfect way for customers to get into the Mercedes-Benz of their dreams – offering luxury through peace of mind. With safety being

an integral part of Mercedes-Benz’s DNA, our certified pre-owned vehicles undergo a thorough inspection to ensure the car provides the quality and value customers are paying for.”

The limited-time offer includes a selection of vehicles, with prices ranging from RO17,845 to RO55,645, including VAT. The range includes the

A 200 in Polar White with leather in 2-tone Classic Red/Black, the C 200 in Spectral Blue Metallic with leather in 2-tone Power Red/Black, the S 450 4MATIC in Designo Diamond White with leather in Macchiato Beige/Magma Grey, the GLB 250 4MATIC in Mountain Grey with leather in 2-tone Classic Red/Black, and the GLC 200

4MATIC in Obsidian Black with leather in Cranberry Red/Black.

Customers can choose from various service packages and financing options from Mercedes-Benz showrooms. They also receive a one-year warranty with unlimited mileage that can be extended for 2 years, 24-hr roadside assistance (select vehicles) and history of all services.

Maysan launches The Residences



Maysan Properties has recently launched The Residences, set to be the next phase of Maysan Square, The first Business District in Duqm.

Offering the comforts of owning a private home combined with the amenities and the kind of lifestyle provided in a work-life balanced ecosystem which is found in Maysan Square, a press release said.

The Residences is within five minutes of walking distance from the offices, cafes, grocery shops and other commercial establishments which are located and designed to satisfy all of Maysan Square user’s needs, whether the user is a single person, a couple, or for a family.

Access will be exclusive to its residents, ensured by top-notch technology that facilitates entry to the residential facilities as much as it impedes it for outsiders.

The Residences have 102 units starting from the ground floor to the fifth floor. Various types and layouts of spacious studio units, one-bedroom apartments, and two-bedroom apartments are well zoned with topmost exposure to natural light overlooking the natural scenic encircling the property.

Marvelous reflections will be seen at any hour of the day on its mirrored glass thanks to its completely glazed projections that accent full heights openings.

NBO provides growth prospects

Future-ready National Bank of Oman (NBO) recognises the benefits of upskilling for both its employees and the organisation.

Recently, eleven members of NBO’s Direct Sales Agents (DSA) team received a certificate from the bank’s Academy of Excellence upon completion of the 2-week Sales Star training programme. The capacity-building course had been designed for the DSA team, which is a main point of contact for potential clients, and covered specific topics while enabling participants to advance in their current careers, a press release said.

Direct sales agents are specialists in banking products and services and efficient solution advisors with strong employee-customer relationship-building skills who create a seamless customer experience around the clock.

Tariq Atiq, general manager and chief retail and digital banking officer at National Bank of Oman, said, “Any Direct Sales Agent is in a customer-facing



role which requires them to frequently update their knowledge and skills, while demonstrating a willingness to continuously learn what produces results for our customers. National Bank of Oman believes in the many advantages of skill building. It makes our employees feel valued and further improves confidence in their abilities which benefits not only their career, but also their customer services and sales skills.”

He added, “Our teams con-

tinue to learn about digital transformations and how the latest developments in technology impact our services as well, while we always aim to keep up with the ever-evolving needs of our clients in an environment that is becoming increasingly digital.”

The Sales Star training programme has been developed to help team members from across different divisions of the bank to further refine their skills to promote the bank’s products and services.

Qatar ready to host EXPO 2023 Doha

Preparations are on track to invite the world once again to Qatar, this time to experience Expo 2023 Doha - the first AIPH-approved A1 World Horticultural Expo in the Middle East.

An international delegation of AIPH officials visited multiple locations to assess the progress made by the Ministry of Municipality, including the first-ever tour of Expo House, Expo 2023 Doha’s unique legacy building, a press release said.

Covered in greenery, the House has the form of a hill and is integrated into the landscape of Al Bidda park. It is shaped like a semicircle, with a vast open space in front of it, and a fountain as a centrepiece, while the benches along the sides of the pavilion form a natural amphitheatre, offering stunning views and a perfect spot for the Expo’s events and gatherings.

The delegation was also able to evaluate the development of infrastructure elsewhere in Al Bidda park, which will be the home of EXPO 2023 Doha for six



months from October 2nd, 2023, to March 28th, 2024.

The event will occupy 1.7 million sqm and will be divided into three zones – International Zone, Family Zone and Cultural Zone. Expo 2023 Doha will host a myriad of activities, entertainment, and edutainment for all visitors, including Ministers and official delegations from the countries participating, as well as business visitors, horticulture aficionados, tourists, families, and children.

Bader al Dafa, Expo 2023 Doha commissioner general, said “It has been an honour to welcome the president of AIPH and his delegation to Qatar. We have successfully demonstrated that we are ready to host this prestigious event with more than 50 countries already signed up to participate.

“We are expecting to reach the target of 80 national pavilions, and we invite all countries to join this exceptional event

in Qatar.”

Leonardo Capitanio, AIPH president, said, “Qatar is creating a magnificent Expo that I am convinced will attract many visitors from Qatar, the region and from around the world. It is a special opportunity for people to experience the first World Horticultural Expo to take place in a desert region. It is clear that the Government of the State of Qatar is committed to making this event a great success.”

Oman Computer Services celebrates staff achievements of 2022

Oman Computer Services (OCS Infotech), a subsidiary of The Zubair Corporation and a leading IT services company, hosted an event to celebrate its achievements from last year.

The event was held at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa in the presence of Niels Bormans, CEO of The Zubair Group and several members of the executive management from The Zubair Corporation, a press release said.

Hilal bin Omar al Siyabi, chief corporate services officer at The Zubair Corporation, said, “To begin with, congratulations to OCS Infotech for its results and achievements last year. The most prominent among them



was the launch of SalisPay, an innovative payment gateway specialising in multi-channel payment processing and acquir-

ing, in partnership with India-based CredoPay. Moreover, the company also achieved good results in terms of human and fi-

nancial resources. The company’s achievements would not have been possible without the outstanding support of Zubair

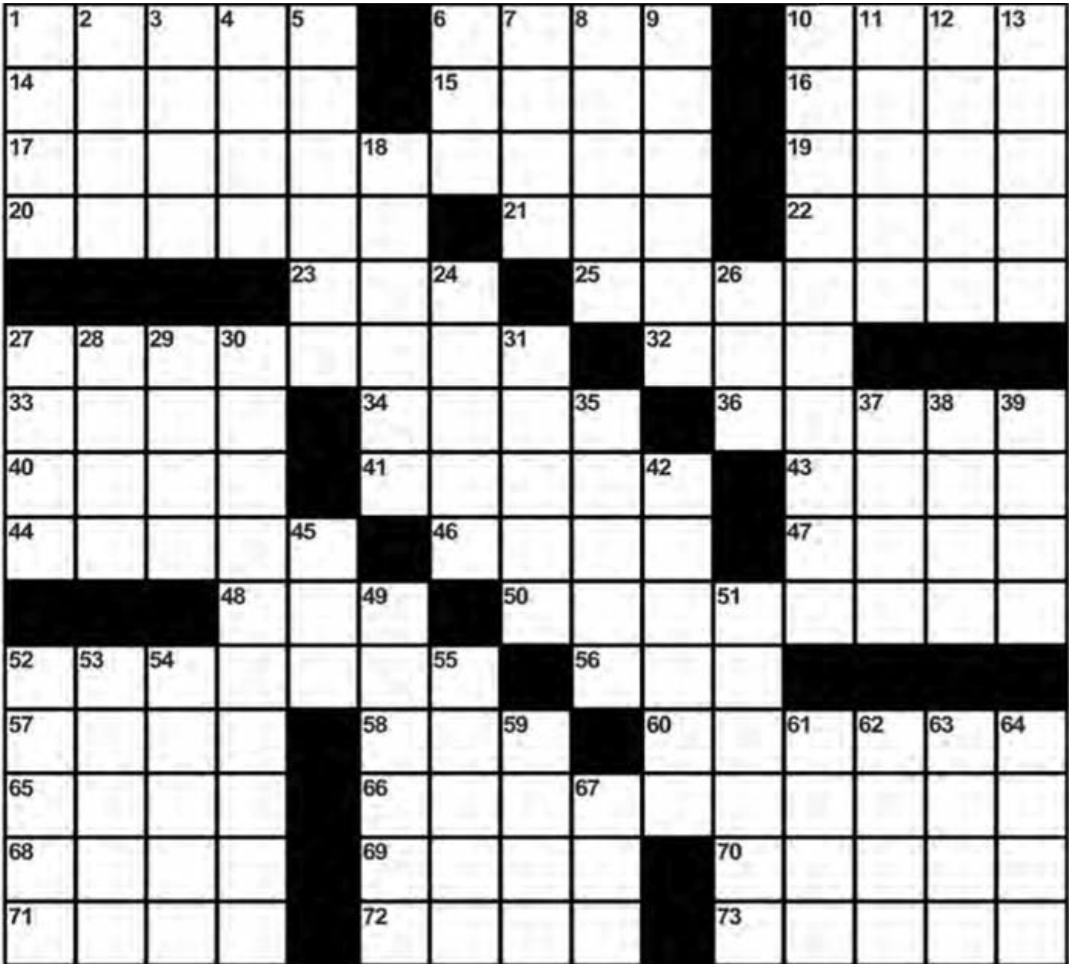
Corporation’s Board of Directors and the hard work of its employees. We wish them continued success in the coming year.”

During this ceremony, OCS general manager, Anu Cherian, showed his appreciation of the company’s achievements over

the past year, saying, “Looking at our overall results, 2022 can be considered an exceptional year for OCS Infotech. Such success and positive results can undoubtedly be attributed to the team’s commitment, effort, and diligence. We aim to achieve more in the coming year and look forward to even more success.”

Besides entertainment, the company’s annual ceremony featured many competitions and events aimed at promoting institutional culture and values, as well as a competitive spirit among employees. This was to improve the working environment, develop positive relationships between employees and help in developing their skills.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Book of legends

6) " _ Karenina"

10) Four inches, to an equestrian

14) Respond to a provocation

15) "Sanford and Son" producer Norman

16) Iris holder

17) Eagerness

19) Suburbanite's pride

20) Cling

21) Friend

22) Fudged facts

23) Apply gently

25) Within the law

27) First set of wheels, often

32) It may be running in a bar

33) One for the road

34) Not yours alone

36) Hors d'oeuvre spreads

40) Footnote word

41) Sobs

43) Hot issue?

44) Auxiliary proposition, in math

46) Bagpiper, often

47) Beasts of burden

48)Timewom

50) Galapagos giant

56) Air-traffic control org.

57) Old stereo

58) Fish eggs

60) Mirror reflections

65) Able to see right through

66) Buzz

68) Yemeni seaport

69) Dubbed ones

70) "Grease" role

71) Large wine containers

72) Pond coating, sometimes

73) The things right here

DOWN

1) Geometry calculation

2) Mix drinks

3) Homebuilder's strip

40) Tooth trouble

5) Well-built

6) "Aladdin" prince

7) Certain tide

8) Twangy, as a voice

9) Sleeve band

10) Loud clamor

11) Be of use to

12) Staircase post

13) Hunky-dory

18) Large marine herbivore

24) St. Louis team

26) Breach

27) Donkey feature

28) Uncouth

29) Any thing

30) Loud disturbances

31) Straight up and down

35) Mocking imitation

37) Prepare for takeoff

38) Nights, in classifieds

39) All there

42) Cook or Bering

45) Climber's challenge

49) Coercion

51) Least exciting

52) Offspring in a sty

53) Caste member

54) More than occasionally

55) EPA word

59) Shade of brown

61) Eastern nursemaid

62) Inheritance unit

63) Pulls the plug on

64) Cause for painful blink-

67) "Catholic" finish

NOTE PAD

ARMOR MECCA DAD
SHARI AMAHS OBI
HOWDOYUDOS NAP
ETA ERE TSP
ASHRAMS TURNKEY
OHO CMON STUN
RAW TENON STOWS
THIS REHAB SWAT
ASSAM SODAS HIE
IRIS WIDE OVA
LATINOS RENEWED
ITD ULT GSA
MOO SEEINGASHOW
INN ELIDE TERRA
TEE SYNOD ESSEX

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You're starting to think about making some big changes in your life, probably because one of your friends has been going through a dramatic transformation lately and you're feeling inspired! Start today by asking this person for a few pointers on how to go about an evolution. They have some excellent advice to give you, and some of their inside secrets should surprise you. Your attention will be very flattering to them, and it will encourage them to keep on going on their new life path.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your attitude about yourself is going through some changes right now, and it's almost like you're getting to know yourself all over again. This process of getting comfortable with new aspects of your personality isn't always the most comfortable experience, but it's necessary to improving your sense of confidence. One thing that might help you adjust is to avoid folks who are always telling you what to do with your life. You don't need that kind of advice right now.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

You're in the midst of a growth spurt right now and might be feeling the pains that come along with it. To get over the discomfort of this transition, just keep reminding yourself that you're moving away from great confusion and toward clearer, simpler ways of thinking. The people you've left behind were distracting you more than you initially realized. All that is over now, and you can look forward to a greater feeling of self-worth and self-confidence.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

After a long period of being frustrated that you aren't quite in step with the trends or news of the day, right now you're finally entering a phase when you're the very picture of hipness. All of your interests, fashion choices, musical tastes, and overall style have everyone buzzing with admiration and just a wee bit of jealousy. But don't be pompous about it. Show those folks that it's possible to be with it and charming at the very same time!

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You can be as flexible as a rubber band all day long if you want, but if the people you're dealing with remain rigid, then it won't matter how stretchy you are. The headway you make today unfortunately depends on other people. The good news is that you can choose who you spend time with, so feel free to refuse invitations from the people who you know are going to want to do things their way. By saying no you'll be helping them clue in to the fact that they should start being more open-minded.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Why be shy today when being loud and proud is so much more fun? The people you meet today aren't interested in good manners. They're interested in interesting ideas, and you have a lot of them! Don't sell yourself short or let yourself be overlooked. Stand up and be counted! Your uncharacteristic aggressiveness might surprise a few people who've known you for a while, but it will impress others, specifically the people who have influence over your life.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you want to put one of your innovative ideas into action right now, you have to be open to the possibility of asking for help from someone in a higher position than you. This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to ask a teacher or supervisor for assistance. Just talk to someone who has a bit more power than you do. Offering them ownership in the outcome is a wonderful way to get them on board, so investigate the pros and cons of starting a new partnership to get things off the ground.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Don't be too surprised if others in your work or school life start looking to you for answers today. You have a reputation for knowing what you're doing, and word of your competence is spreading faster than wildfire. Resist merely giving them the correct answer. You'll only encourage them to stop thinking for themselves. Instead, try to encourage these people to find their own answers. That way, you'll help them more than you ever could by just telling them what they want to hear.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Despite the fact that it can be so much fun to be a part of the crowd, today you need to hold on to your independence! Veer off the road everyone else is on, and whack your own trail through the weeds. Sure, it might seem like a nice idea to keep skipping down the road with everybody else, but where the heck are they really going? It's much better to put in the work to go your own way. Stay in control of where your life is headed and you'll always end up in the right place.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Be extremely wary of an extravagant gesture from a person who is usually frugal and unassuming. Unless they've recently won the lottery, they might be trying to overcompensate for some guilt or other type of negative feeling. Get some time with them today to find out what really motivated their generosity. Dig deep until they come up with the real reason. They have assumptions about you that need to be corrected, and you're the only person who can do it.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

If you feel like your boss or other authority figure has been trying too hard to control you lately, you're probably right, but that's what they're in your life for right now. Giving up some control over where you go or what you do isn't the end of the world, and it would be in your best interests to stop fighting so hard against them. They know more than you do, or they wouldn't be in the position they're in. So if you want to know as much as they do one day, be quiet and listen now.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You'll be forced to rethink your health today when a typical activity leaves you a bit more winded than you expected it to. Frustration could lead you to make declarations of dramatic change. Don't set unrealistic goals for yourself, but do get involved in more physically challenging activities! You need attainable milestones that can boost your confidence and keep you positive about the bigger mountains that you will need to climb a little further down the road.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. At the 1912 Olympic Games Serbia competed as an independent nation, but did not do so again until when?

A. 1948
B. 2008
C. 1920
D. 2016

02. Tigray, which became particularly prominent in international news in 2020 and 2021, is a region in the north of which country?

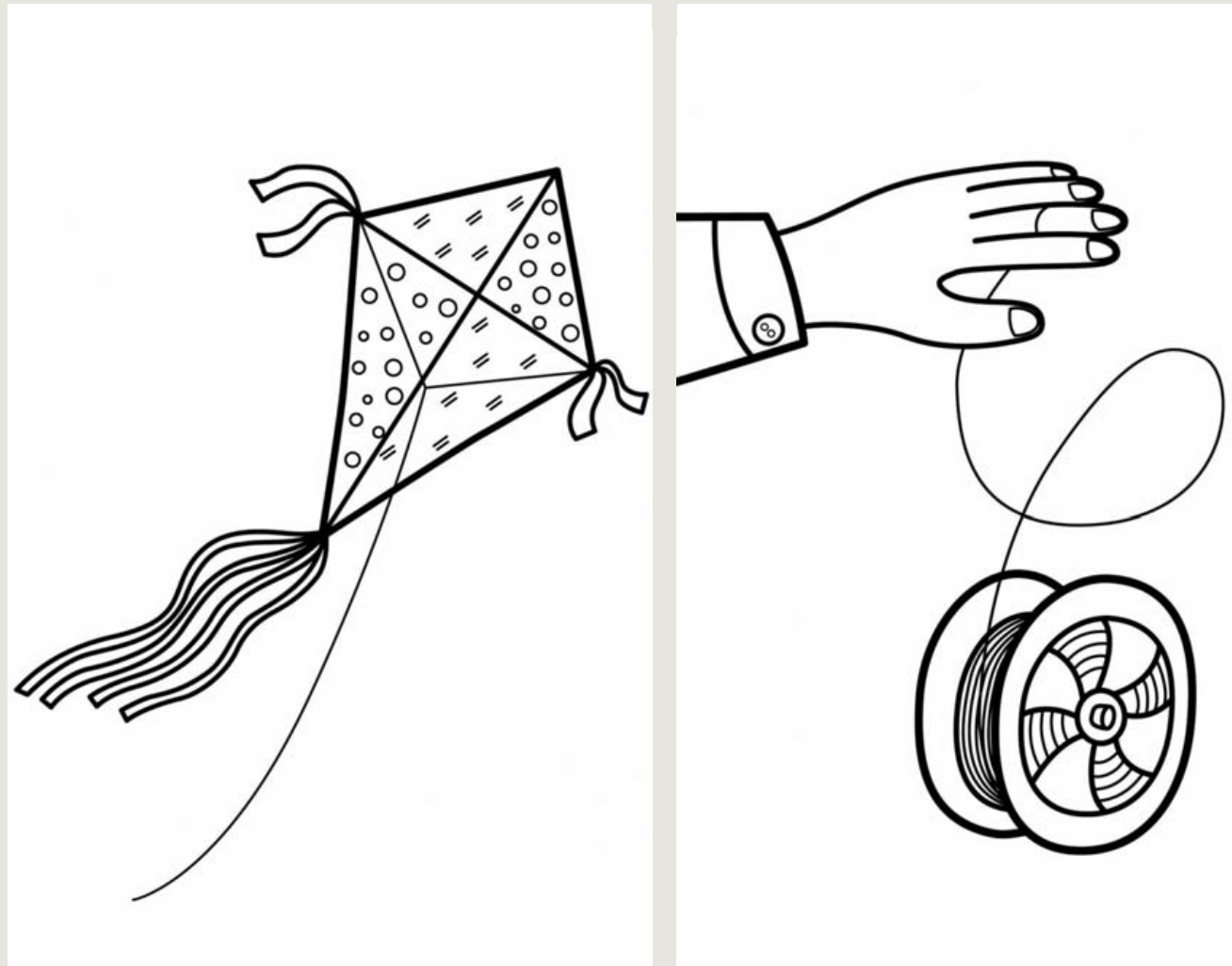
A. Kenya
B. Ethiopia
C. Eritrea
D. Nigeria

03. An atom of oxygen linked to an atom of hydrogen is a signature combination in the formulae of which compounds?

A. Organic
B. Alkalis
C. Acids
D. Alcohols and phenols

Answers: 1.B 2.B 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

C	V	E	T
R	G	O	R
K	S	A	E
O	G	A	H

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Iran executes British-Iranian dual national for spying

Paris, France - Iran said on Saturday it executed British-Iranian dual national Alireza Akbari after he was sentenced to death for spying for the United Kingdom, drawing sharp condemnation from the British government.

Akbari, 61, was hanged after being convicted of 'corruption on earth and harming the country's internal and external security by passing on intelligence', the judiciary's Mizan Online website said. It did not say when or where the execution took place.

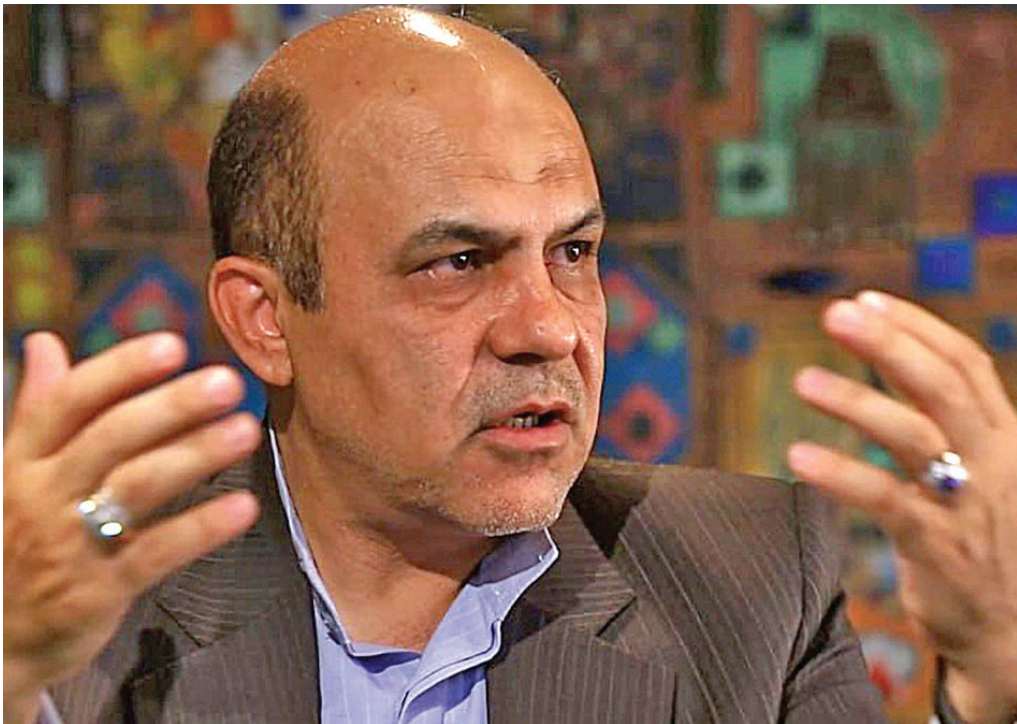
Mizan Online said Akbari, who had been arrested more than two years ago, had been a spy for Britain's MI6 secret intelligence agency and had received around US\$2mn for his services.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he was 'appalled' by the execution.

"This was a callous and cowardly act, carried out by a barbaric regime with no respect for the human rights of their own people," Sunak tweeted, adding his thoughts were with 'Alireza's friends and family'.

UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly warned on Twitter that his execution 'will not stand unchallenged', without elaborating.

Akbari was hanged only hours after the United States had joined its ally Britain in calling for Iran not to go ahead with the execution. US diplomat Vedant Patel said on Friday that Washington had been 'greatly concerned' by reports that Akbari had been 'drugged, tortured while in custody, interrogated for



Former Iranian deputy of defence minister, British-Iranian national Alireza Akbari (AFP)

thousands of hours and forced to make false confessions'.

'Forced confession'

Amnesty International called the execution 'abhorrent'.

It tweeted that Akbari had been subjected to 'torture and other ill-treatment' such as being 'forcibly administered chemical substances and being held in prolonged solitary confinement'.

Media outlets in Iran, which does not recognise dual nationality for its citizens, had broadcast a video this week in which Akbari appeared to speak of his contacts with Britain.

BBC Persian on Wednesday aired an audio message it said

was from Akbari in which he said he was tortured and forced to confess on camera to crimes he did not commit.

"I was given new clothes and asked to dye my hair to be released but then I was taken to a film studio and threatened with a gun to falsely confess," a man is heard saying in the recording.

Mizan Online, citing the intelligence ministry, said Akbari had become a 'key spy' for Britain's MI6 due to 'the importance of his position'. Akbari, a veteran of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, was arrested sometime between March 2019 and March 2020, state media said.

He was once identified by the

government's official Iran newspaper as a former deputy defence minister under Ali Shamkhani, who currently heads Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Akbari had also been an 'adviser to the commander of the navy' as well as 'heading a division at the defence ministry's research centre', state media said.

Protest crackdown

On Saturday Mizan Online reported that he had retired between March 2002 and March 2003, and moved to 'research and business activities in the private sector'.

Prominent Iranian lawyer

Saeid Dehghan on Twitter said the sentencing and execution of the dual national was 'political'.

Dehghan noted that his execution comes amid moves in the British parliament to list Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group over its role in a deadly crackdown on protests.

Amnesty International says Iran is the world's most prolific

This was a callous and cowardly act, carried out by a barbaric regime with no respect for human rights

RISHI SUNAK



Onlookers surround a bullet-riddled car in which 2 Palestinians were killed in Jaba near the West Bank town of Jenin, on Saturday (AFP)

Israeli forces kill two Palestinians in West Bank

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Two Palestinians were killed on Saturday during an Israeli army raid in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said. The two young men were shot dead by Israeli forces 'during an assault on the village of Jaba, south of Jenin' in the north of the West Bank, the ministry said.

No further details were provided on the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

The Islamic Jihad militant group condemned the killings in a statement, describing the two men as 'heroic martyrs' belonging to the group.

It said they were killed while trying to intervene against the 'occupation forces which were carrying out a cowardly assassination operation'.

The Israeli army said in a brief statement that it had launched 'counterterrorism activity' near the village, during which 'suspects shot live fire' at them from a passing vehicle.

"The soldiers responded with live fire. Hits were identified," it

said, adding that no Israeli soldiers were reported injured.

An AFP photographer saw a white car in Jaba with its windshield riddled with bullets on the driver's side.

The vehicle had crashed into a building under construction and its rear was completely gutted.

The Palestinian health ministry named the two young men killed as Ezzedine Bassem Hamamra, 24, and Amjad Adnan Khaliliya, 23.

A third Palestinian, 19-year-old Yazen Samer Jaabari, died of his injuries after he was shot by Israeli forces earlier this month, the ministry said.

He was wounded during in Israeli army operation on January 2 in the village of Kafr Dan, near Jenin, in which two other Palestinians were killed, according to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa. The latest deaths bring up to 12 the toll of Palestinians killed this year during violence in the West Bank, occupied by Israel since 1967.

AFP

United States tightens rules on converting pistols to long guns

Washington, US - US authorities announced on Friday they were tightening rules on a relatively new gun threat that has become more notable in recent years: converting pistols into more lethal short-barreled rifles. The new regulations target the use of attachable shoulder mounts or braces on guns classified as pistols, which are regulated differently from long guns and the separate category of short-barreled rifles, or those with barrels under 16 inches (40.6cm).

Millions of readily convertible 'handguns' have been sold in recent years, frequently semi-automatic weapons that, once equipped with a removable shoulder brace and other attachments, are indistinguishable in function from long guns but for their shorter barrels.

The Justice Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), which regulates guns, said that any handgun with a shoulder brace

attached would be considered a short-barreled rifle.

"For decades, the federal government has placed stricter regulations on short-barreled rifles than other firearms because short-barreled rifles are accurate - like rifles - and consistent in crime. The Justice Department said that recently gun manufacturers have sought to 'circumvent' the regulations by selling braces which attach to pistols and allow the shooter to stabilise the gun against their shoulder. The department said weapons like this have been used in recent mass shootings, including the nine killed at a Dayton, Ohio bar and 10 killed in a Boulder, Colorado grocery store.

The new classification means more stringent background checks, taxation and registration requirements in the sale of pistols with braces attached. However, the new rule does not ban the sale of braces separate from the guns.

"Today's action will save lives," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

The rules will 'make it harder for individuals intending to inflict carnage to obtain these weapons,' he said.

AFP

Today's action will save lives. The rules will make it harder for individuals intending to inflict carnage to obtain these weapons

JOE BIDEN

Lebanese protest arrest of Beirut blast victim's brother

Beirut, Lebanon - Activists gathered in front of a police station in the Lebanese capital on Saturday to protest the arrest of the brother of a victim of a deadly 2020 blast, witnesses said.

William Noun - whose brother, a fireman, was killed in the August 2020 Beirut port blast - was arrested on Friday over remarks made during a television programme, a judiciary source told AFP.

The young man is a leading figure among families of the blast's victims who have been calling for the continuation of a probe into the tragic event, on hold for over a year.

Noun's arrest sparked protests on Friday night, as his relatives and other victims' families, along with activists, cut off roads in the capital.

Known for his outspokenness, the young man had threatened during televised remarks on Thursday to 'blow up the palace of justice' to protest moves to replace the judge investigating the



This file photo shows Lebanese activist William Noun during a demonstration outside the residence of the minister of interior in the Lebanese capital on July 13, 2021 (AFP)

blast.

Embattled judge Tarek Bitar has faced an endless series of complaints against him, part of a campaign led by Shiite group Hezbollah and its allies seeking to block his probe into the blast.

On Friday, relatives of the victims threw stones at the palace of justice in Beirut, breaking some windows, in a protest over Noun's arrest.

Demonstrations resumed again on Saturday in front of the police station where Noun was being held, according to witnesses.

"This is an attempt to intimidate but it won't work," Noun's lawyer, Ralph Tannous, told Lebanese television. "This is a political move, not a judicial one."

MP and lawyer Melhem Khalaf meanwhile told AFP, 'I wish

they would implement with the same enthusiasm all the warrants issued by the judicial investigator' over the port blast.

The 2020 disaster, one of history's biggest non-nuclear explosions, killed more than 200 people and decimated vast areas of the capital after a stockpile of haphazardly stored ammonium nitrate caught fire.

AFP

Israel's Netanyahu defends proposed justice reform

Jerusalem - Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday rejected accusations that his government's judicial reforms would undermine democracy.

Justice Minister Yariv Levin has announced a series of measures which would allow politicians to override Supreme Court decisions and change the way judges are appointed.

An open letter published on Thursday by 11 former prosecutors said the reforms threaten to destroy Israel's judiciary.

The same day, the country's

top judge, in rare public criticism, called the planned overhaul an 'unbridled attack', while hundreds of lawyers rallied outside a Tel Aviv court in protest.

Netanyahu, who is being tried for corruption, rejected the claims, saying: "When they said that the least modification (of the justice system) is the destruction of democracy, this is not only an erroneous argument."

"It is also an argument that doesn't allow the reaching of agreements that we should



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (AFP)

reach through dialogue," he added, in comments issued by video. Netanyahu, already Israel's longest-serving prime minister, returned to power in late December to head the most right-wing government in Israel's history.

Supreme Court president Esther Hayut had told a legal conference Thursday that 'the justice minister's new plan is not one to fix the legal system, but to crush it'.

The proposed measures, if adopted by parliament, would

hand more powers to members of the legislature in appointing judges. Israeli judges are currently picked through a panel of magistrates, lawyers and politicians, under the supervision of the justice ministry.

The justice minister has also proposed a 'derogation clause' which would allow parliament to annul a Supreme Court decision with a simple majority vote.

Some within the new government allege that the judiciary has accumulated too much authority. Analysts say such a

clause could allow lawmakers to uphold any annulment of the corruption charges Netanyahu is being tried on, should parliament vote to absolve him and the Supreme Court then rule against it.

Netanyahu is the first sitting Israeli prime minister indicted while in office. He denies the charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Levin, a lawyer, said he had thought about his judicial reform for two decades.

AFP

Brazil riot: Former minister arrested

Anderson Torres was arrested when he arrived in the capital Brasilia from the US

Brasília, Brazil - A former minister under defeated Brazilian ex-president Jair Bolsonaro was arrested early on Saturday, local media reported, in connection with last week's sacking of government buildings.

Anderson Torres, Bolsonaro's last justice minister, was arrested when he arrived in the capital Brasilia from the United States, where both he and his former boss were at the time of the riot.

Thousands of 'bolsonaristas' invaded the seats of government in the capital on Sunday, breaking windows and furniture, destroying priceless works of art, and leaving graffiti messages calling for a military coup.

More than 2,000 rioters were detained after the events, for which the full extent of the damage is still being calculated.

A Supreme Court judge announced on Friday that Bolsonaro will be included in an investigation into the origins of the sacking, which was sparked by anger at the far-right leader's election defeat to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.



This file photo shows then Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (left) and his Minister of Justice Anderson Torres talking during an event to present the new national ID and passport at Planalto Palace in Brasilia on June 27, 2022 (AFP)

Torres was wanted under a Supreme Court warrant for alleged 'collusion' with the rioters, and stands accused of 'omission' in his most recent job as security chief for the capital.

The new justice minister Flavio Dino said on Friday that authorities would give his predecessor

until Monday to return to Brazil, or face extradition.

Dino also confirmed the discovery at Torres' home of a draft decree proposing emergency steps for the possible 'correction' of the October election, which Lula won by a razor-thin margin.

The undated and unsigned draft bears Bolsonaro's name at the bottom, but Dino said the authorship was unknown.

Torres said on Twitter the document was 'likely' part of a pile of papers that were destined to be destroyed.

He said the contents of the

draft had been taken 'out of context' to 'feed false narratives' against him.

Bolsonaro came under investigation

Anderson Torres, Bolsonaro's last justice minister, was wanted under a Supreme Court warrant for alleged collusion with the rioters, and stands accused of omission in his most recent job as security chief for the capital

tigation on Friday at the request of the office of the prosecutor general (PGR), which cited a video Bolsonaro had posted 'questioning the regularity of the 2022 presidential elections'.

By doing so, 'Bolsonaro would have publicly incited the commission of a crime', the PGR said

in a statement.

The Bolsonaro video was posted online two days after the violent storming of the presidency, Congress and Supreme Court but later deleted.

The PGR explained that even though the video came after the uprising, it may serve as 'a probative connection' that justified 'a global investigation of the acts performed before and after January 8, 2023 by the defendant'.

In a note seen by AFP on Friday, Bolsonaro's defense denied any involvement by the ex-president. Bolsonaro 'never had any relationship or participation in these movements', the note said, blaming the violence on 'infiltrators.'

Bolsonaro had for years sought to cast doubt on the reliability of Brazil's internationally praised election system, and had suggested he would not accept a defeat. He never publicly acknowledged Lula's victory, and left for the United States - where he remains - two days before the inauguration.

AFP

60,000 COVID deaths in China

Beijing, China - China's health authorities reported on Saturday almost 60,000 COVID-related deaths in just over a month, the first major death toll released by the government since it loosened its virus restrictions in early December.

China has been widely accused of underreporting its number of coronavirus fatalities since the abandonment of its zero-COVID policy.

Only a few dozen deaths had been recorded officially in December before Saturday's announcement, despite evidence of crematoriums and hospitals being overrun.

But a National Health Commission (NHC) official said on Saturday China had recorded 59,938 COVID-related deaths between December 8, 2022, and January 12.

The figure refers only to deaths recorded at medical facilities, with the total number likely to be higher.

The data includes 5,503 deaths caused by respiratory failure directly due to the virus, and 54,435 deaths caused by underlying conditions combined with COVID, Jiao Yahui, head of the NHC's Bureau of Medical Administration, told a news conference. Health officials insisted Wednesday it was 'not necessary' to dwell on the exact number.

Beijing revised its methodology for categorising COVID fatalities last month, saying it would count only those who die specifically of respiratory failure caused by the virus. This was criticised by the World Health Organization.

AFP

'World's most durable DJ' dies aged 98 in Hong Kong

Hong Kong, China - A beloved Hong Kong radio host dubbed the 'world's most durable DJ' by Guinness World Records has died aged 98 after more than seven decades on the air.

Reinaldo Maria Cordeiro, known to fans as 'Uncle Ray', was hailed as an industry powerhouse who jump-started the careers of numerous local musicians and introduced pop trends to generations of Hong Kong fans on his long-running radio

shows.

He interviewed scores of pop icons over the years including the Beatles, the Bee Gees, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra.

Cordeiro died on Friday in Hong Kong surrounded by family and friends, who sang 'You'll Never Walk Alone' as a farewell, a committee organising his funeral said.

The veteran DJ was 'a prominent figure in Hong Kong popular culture' who made

'considerable contributions to the Hong Kong music scene', the city's culture minister Kevin Yeung said on Saturday.

Born in Hong Kong in 1924, Cordeiro was the fifth of six children in a family descended from Portuguese immigrants.

He worked as a prison warden and bank clerk before turning to music, hosting his first show 'Progressive Jazz' at Radio Rediffusion in 1949.

Cordeiro became a house-



Reinaldo Maria Cordeiro (AFP)

hold name in the 1960s by hosting easy listening shows for Hong Kong's public broadcaster RTHK that became a hit with teenagers. His signature late-night programme 'All The Way With Ray' launched in 1970 and became the station's longest-running radio show.

He was named the 'world's most durable DJ' by Guinness World Records in 2000.

Cordeiro retired in 2021, telling RTHK that 'I've had the

best in life and I've had everything I wanted to be, everything I wanted to do'.

He reportedly had heart troubles over the past decade and was hospitalised last January after suffering a stroke.

He wrote in his autobiography that 'by sharing good music with my fans, I am in my element'.

"I refuse to countenance a world without music."

AFP

US Republicans probe chaotic Afghan withdrawal

Washington, US - Republicans launched an investigation on Friday into the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan that sparked a lightning takeover of the war-ravaged country by the Taliban and the death of 13 American troops in a militant attack.

Michael McCaul, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he had written to Secretary of State Antony Blinken requesting an array of records, from intelligence assessments to communications with the Taliban.

"It is absurd and disgraceful that the Biden administration has repeatedly denied our longstanding oversight requests and continues to withhold information related to the withdrawal," said McCaul, a longstanding opposition member on the panel who became its chairman after the House flipped to Republican control at the start of the year.

"In the event of continued noncompliance, the committee will use the authorities available to it to enforce these requests as necessary, including through a compulsory process."

The US soldiers were killed on August 26, 2021 in a bombing outside Kabul's airport as the capital fell, with the government crumbling days later despite US\$2tn pumped into Afghanistan over two decades.

Images of crowds storming parked planes, climbing atop aircraft, and some clinging to

a departing US military cargo plane as it rolled down the runway, were aired around the world.

The scenes preceded a sharp drop in President Joe Biden's approval ratings, nine months after he was elected promising smooth, competent leadership after the pandemonium under his predecessor Donald Trump.

While Trump sealed the withdrawal with the Taliban, his Republican Party has

House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Michael McCaul has requested an array of records

roundly criticised Biden's handling of the operation and vowed hearings as part of a series of probes into his administration. The State Department did not respond immediately to a request for comment but says it has provided more than 150 briefings to members of Congress since the August 2021 withdrawal, according to US media.

Around 2,500 US troops died in America's longest war but Afghanistan is no longer a priority back home, with 50 per cent of respondents to a Gallup poll conducted a year after the withdrawal saying the entire war was a mistake.

AFP

Peru president Boluarte insists 'I will not resign' as protests rage

Lima, Peru - Peruvian President Dina Boluarte has insisted she will not step down, after another day of protests and roadblocks across the country saw calls for her resignation and the arrest of a trade union leader with alleged links to Maoist rebels.

Supporters of ousted president Pedro Castillo have marched and barricaded streets throughout the South American country since December, demanding new elections and the removal of Boluarte.

"Some voices that have come from the violent and radical factions are asking for my resignation, provoking the population into chaos, disorder and destruction," Boluarte said in an address on state TV on Friday night.

"I will not resign. My commitment is with Peru."

Boluarte lamented that the protests have at times turned violent, as at least 42 people have been killed in clashes with security forces, including a police officer burned alive in a vehicle. Hundreds more have been injured. "I cannot stop reiterating my regret for the deaths of Peruvians in these protests," she said. "I apologize for this situation."

But she rejected the possibility of calling a constitutional assembly as demanded by protestors, pointing to the difficulties Peru's neighbour Chile has had in drafting and approving a new constitution. "That cannot happen overnight," Boluarte added.

Earlier on Friday - the tenth consecutive day of unrest, after a new-year lull - police announced



Demonstrators hold a blockade in the Pan-American highway at La Joya demanding resignation of President Dina Boluarte in Arequipa, Peru on Thursday (AFP)

the arrest of Rocío Leandro, a union leader from the Ayacucho region. Leandro, who has alleged links to Maoist rebels, is accused of financing protests and recruiting demonstrators.

Police spokesman Oscar Arriola claimed his arrest proved that remnants of the Shining Path Maoist rebels were involved in the protests. He said Leandro was a former Shining Path member known as 'Comrade Cusi'.

Roadblocks and border closures

The head of US diplomacy for Latin America, Brian Nichols, wrote on Twitter that Washington is 'deeply concerned about ongoing violence in Peru & saddened by the injuries & deaths'.

"We support peace on all sides & the gov't's stated commit-

ments to address the challenges gripping the country," he added.

The head of a delegation from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Guatemalan lawyer Stuardo Ralon, called for an 'impartial and effective' investigation into allegations of excessive force by authorities. He also noted 'a strong stigmatisation by racial and regional ethnic factors, particularly in the messages reproduced by some authorities who have referred with generalisations towards all indigenous and peasant people as terrorists.'

Protestors blocked roads in the capital Lima, and in several regions in the historically marginalised south.

A protest in the border city of Tacna, 1,200km (750 miles) southeast of Lima, led neighbour

Chile to temporarily close the crossing between the two countries.

The city of Arequipa in the south - the second-largest in the country and one of Peru's main tourist hotspots - had been practically blocked off from all transport links with the neighbouring regions of Cusco and Puno.

Several regional governors and professional associations, including lawyers and teachers, joined the calls for Boluarte to resign. "How many more deaths will Dina Boluarte's presence in the presidency cost?" asked Puno governor Richard Hanco, whose area has become the epicenter of clashes between protesters and security forces.

That region, close to the border with Bolivia, was where 18 people died following violent

clashes on Monday night.

Ministers resign

Opposition legislator Susel Paredes told local radio that time was running out for Boluarte and that the resignation of labour minister Eduardo García on Thursday was 'the beginning of the end' for the president. Two other ministers resigned on Friday: the heads of the interior ministry and the Ministry of Women.

Peru has been riddled with political instability in recent years. Boluarte, 60, is the sixth person to hold the presidency in five years.

Castillo, who was being investigated in several fraud cases during his tenure, has been remanded in custody for 18 months, charged with rebellion.

AFP

Ukraine says key infrastructure hit in strikes

Victory in Soledar would be a rare achievement for Moscow after a series of military setbacks

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine reported a fresh wave of attacks and hits on key infrastructure facilities on Saturday, a day after Russia claimed to have captured the ravaged eastern town of Soledar following a long battle.

Victory in Soledar would be a rare achievement for Moscow after an embarrassing series of military setbacks - although Kyiv insisted fighting was still ongoing in the city.

On Saturday morning, Ukrainian infrastructure was again under fire as winter deepened, officials said. "Today, the enemy fired at energy facilities again," operator Ukrenergo said, adding it was working on 'eliminating the consequences' of the strikes.

In Kyiv, AFP journalists heard several explosions, while Ukrainian officials reported strikes on a power facility. "There is a hit to an infrastructure facility, without critical destruction or fire," the Kyiv city administration said.

A fire broke out in a warehouse after fragments of a rocket fell, it said, adding there were no



Ukrainian servicemen stand near a tank on the frontline near Kreminna, Lugansk region, on Thursday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

reported casualties in the capital.

In the northeastern Kharkiv region, 'the enemy launched another missile attack on critical infrastructure and industrial facilities', governor Oleg Synehubov said.

There could be emergency power cuts in the city of Kharkiv,

the second largest in Ukraine, and in the surrounding region, Synehubov warned.

Attacks were also reported in the southern Zaporizhzhia region. The head of the central Cherkasy region, Igor Taburets, said that 'the enemy is attacking the territory of Ukraine again'.

Russian attacks killed three people on Friday, the deputy head of presidency Kyrylo Tymoshenko said.

'Help the living'

There is uncertainty about the fate of Soledar, a salt mining outpost that Russia claimed to have

captured, which Kyiv denies.

Both sides have conceded heavy losses in the battle for the town, with Moscow desperate to sell any win back home after repeated humiliations and Ukraine determined to hold - and win back - ground.

On an icy road near Soledar on

Saturday, AFP journalists saw Ukrainian medics tending to the wounded brought from the nearby frontline.

Bloodied helmets, bullet-proof vests and pieces of uniform were discarded on the side of the road after being cut from corpses.

The health workers are 'here

to help the living', said a 31-year-old medic who identified himself as Vadim.

Two men, one with a bandaged head, and another with an injured leg and carried on a stretcher, were quickly helped into a waiting ambulance.

The wounded are usually taken to stabilisation points before being transferred to hospital, Vadim explained.

Another medic bent over one of the wounded men's vest, collecting the remaining bullets. "Things are consistently difficult," said Vadim, but 'the Ukrainians are keeping their positions'.

The Russian defence ministry on Friday announced it had 'completed the liberation' of Soledar the previous day and pledged more 'successful offensive operations' in the eastern Donetsk region. In a separate statement, it praised the 'courageous and selfless' forces of mercenary group Wagner for storming Soledar.

The nod was an unusual recognition of the controversial force following talk of infighting and rivalry between Wagner and the official military.

The founder of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, insists that his force spearheaded the offensive for Soledar.

Ukraine has insisted it still controls the frontline city, despite Russia's claims to have taken it.

Regional governor Pavlo on Kyrlyenko said on national television Saturday that 'Soledar is controlled by Ukrainian authorities, our military controls it'.

AFP

Japan PM tells Biden that new era requires more military muscle

Washington, US - Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pledged on Friday alongside US President Joe Biden to modernise his country's military, warning that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had opened a dangerous new era and could embolden China.

Welcoming Kishida at the White House, Biden hailed the Japanese government's announcement last month that it will double defense spending over the next five years and develop new capabilities.

"Let me be crystal clear: the United States is fully, thoroughly, completely committed to the alliance and more importantly to Japan's defense," Biden said.

Japan has been officially pacifist since its defeat in World War II but has been shedding past sensitivities as China rapidly expands its military and North Korea relentlessly tests missiles.

In a speech after his White House meeting, Kishida cast his



US President Joe Biden and Japanese PM Kishida walk through the colonnade of the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

defense strategy as a historic turning point in the US-Japan alliance in the same league as the mutual defense treaty of 1960.

"Russia's aggression against Ukraine has marked the complete end of the post-Cold War world," Kishida said.

"If we let this unilateral change in the status quo by force go unchallenged, it will happen elsewhere in the world, including Asia," Kishida said, in likely a veiled allusion to fears of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

The relationship with China,

Kishida said, 'is the most critical challenge for both Japan and the United States'.

'Major shift' on Russia

Japan has joined Western powers in imposing sanctions on Russia and has provided humanitarian, although not military, aid to Ukraine since President Vladimir Putin invaded in February 2022.

Kishida called it a 'major shift' in Japan's policy toward Russia following marathon but unsuccessful talks to resolve a dispute over islands seized by Soviet troops shortly after Tokyo's surrender in 1945.

Kishida was visiting Washington at the end of a tour of Group of Seven nations as Japan starts its year leading the elite club of industrial democracies, in which the country is proud to be the only non-Western member.

AFP



Supporters of President Kais Saied take to the streets during protests by the opposition in Tunis on Saturday (AFP)

Tunisians rally against economic crisis

Tunis, Tunisia - Hundreds of Tunisians marched on Saturday after opponents of President Kais Saied called for protests over a worsening economic crisis.

"The people want what you don't want. Down with Saied," chanted the activists, including supporters of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party.

Ennahdha had dominated parliament until Saied launched a dramatic power grab on July 25, 2021, sacking the govern-

ment and freezing parliament before appointing a new cabinet and ruling by decree. "The coup has brought us famine and poverty. Yesterday the grocer gave me just one kilo of macaroni and a can of milk," said Nouha, a woman at one protest.

"How can I feed my family of 13 people with that?" the 50-year-old housewife lamented.

Saturday's protests were staged in the capital Tunis by two different opposition groups

and were held far apart with a heavy police presence to avoid any unrest. They were held against a backdrop of deepening political divisions on the 12th anniversary of the fall of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The biggest opposition force, the National Salvation Front (FSN), was kept about one kilometre from left-wing party activists gathered in front of the municipal theatre.

AFP

'Disastrous' flood warning in California as another storm hits

Los Angeles, US - Disastrous flooding could hit parts of California this weekend, forecasters warned on Friday, as the eighth storm in succession barreled in over land already too waterlogged to soak up any more rain.

The most populous US state has been pummeled by near-record downpours over a very wet three weeks, which have already caused flooding, landslides and widespread power outages.

At least 19 people are known to have died as communities struggle to cope with the constant deluge.

On Friday yet another system moved in, with forecasters warning the Monterey Peninsula could be cut off and the whole city of Salinas - home to 160,000 people - flooded.

"The entire lower Salinas Valley will have disastrous flooding," the National Weather Service said.

"The entire city of Salinas is in danger of flooding. Most of Castroville will flood. All roads near the Salinas River will be flooded and impassable. 90,000 acres or more of agricultural land in the Salinas Valley will have disastrous flooding.

"Many roads, homes and agricultural land areas in the Salinas Valley will have major flood damage." The Salinas River, already swollen by weeks of torrential rain, was expected to peak some time on Friday, breaching its banks in a flood that could last until Sunday.

Kelley O'Connell said the bursting of a levee near her home



People watch big waves hit the Monterey peninsula in Monterey, California, on Friday (AFP)

had worried her.

"If they release water from the dams or we get more rain, we're just a field away," she told the San Francisco Chronicle as she collected sandbags.

Evacuation orders and warnings were widespread, with forecasters saying major roads could become impassable - including highways that link the Monterey Peninsula with the rest of the

county.

"Residents both on the peninsula and in the Salinas area should expect to be cut off for two to three days," Monterey County officials said earlier this week.

Monterey County Sheriff Tina Nieto told reporters on Thursday that floodwater could strand people.

"This is a slow-moving event' and not all places will be impacted at once, she said.

"The river crests at different times."

Resident John Guru said he was taking no chances, with four days' supplies at home and two days' worth in his car in case he is caught out on the road.

"I'm not sure how bad it's going to be," he told the Monterey

Herald.

"I will find a place if needed and do whatever it takes," he said, adding: "This is crazy, I was not anticipating anything like this."

Workers have rushed out in between storms to clear up some of the mess left behind, shoveling mud from roads even in the heart of Los Angeles.

Crews have cut up felled trees, and heavy machinery have been drafted in to move rockslides.

Hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses have been left without power at various times - sometimes repeatedly - as rickety infrastructure has taken a battering.

And it's not over yet, forecasters say.

AFP

Myanmar air strike kills five

Bangkok, Thailand - A mother and her toddler were among five people killed in a military air strike in Myanmar's east, Karen rebels and an aid group said on Saturday.

Four junta fighter jets dropped eight bombs on villages in Hpaung district on Thursday afternoon, killing five people, the Karen National Union said in a statement. Another four people were wounded, the ethnic rebel group said. The Karen live largely in Myanmar's east. The Myanmar junta was contacted for comment but did not respond.

AFP



Ons Jabeur of Tunisia serves during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday (AFP)

I'm going to put more pressure on myself because I feel like sometimes you just need that to be one of the top players

ONS JABEUR

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Ambitious Ons Jabeur aiming for number one spot and maiden Grand Slam glory

Melbourne, Australia - Ons Jabeur said Saturday she is aiming to become world number one in 2023 and “not lose any more finals” after a breakthrough season when she fell just short of a maiden major crown.

The world number two is on the cusp of Grand Slam glory, having been runner-up at Wimbledon and the US Open last year.

“I will try to use that experience from last year because it was kind of tough,” the Tunisian

said ahead of the Australian Open, the first major of the year, which begins at Melbourne Park on Monday.

“My goal is to not lose any more finals, but just use that to be ready for the next one.”

The 28-year-old became the first Arab and African woman to reach a Slam final last year and will face Slovenia’s world number 88 Tamara Zidansek in the first round on Tuesday.

Jabeur said she would no longer be satisfied with matching

her best previous Australian Open performance.

“I may not be as happy as I was in 2020 reaching the quarter-final,” she said.

“The goal as second (ranked) in the world is to be in the second week, to make finals.”

She said she was focused on dislodging Poland’s Iga Swiatek from the top of the rankings and was not afraid to set lofty goals for herself.

“I like this kind of pressure,” she said. “I’m going to put more pressure on myself because I feel like sometimes you just need that to be one of the top players.”

Late bloomer Jabeur was 26 when she lifted her maiden WTA title in 2021 at Birmingham, adding Madrid and Berlin tro-

phies last year. She is keen to make up for lost time.

“I want to be number one in the world, not just the number but also the level and the discipline around it. I want to win more titles and get that Grand Slam title, for sure,” she said.

“I know a lot of players are hungry to do more. It’s going to be very interesting two weeks.”

Jabeur was stunned by rising Czech teenager Linda Noskova in the semi-finals at Adelaide earlier this month, where she needed treatment on a back injury during the first set.

But she allayed any fitness worries, especially after having to miss last year’s Australian Open with a similar back problem.

AFP

Nadal says Djokovic clear favourite at Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Defending champion Rafael Nadal admitted Saturday he felt vulnerable heading into the Australian Open after two straight defeats in the build-up and said that Novak Djokovic was clear favourite.

The 22-time Grand Slam winner crashed in his season-opening match at the mixed teams United Cup in Sydney to 12th-ranked Cameron Norrie and then again to Australia’s Alex de Minaur. Against the Australian, the Spaniard dropped six consecutive games after leading by a set and 1-0.

The 36-year-old top seed faces a testing first-round clash at Melbourne Park on Monday against emerging 21-year-old Briton Jack Draper, who reached the Adelaide semi-finals this week.

“Probably one of the toughest first rounds possible... young, powerful, growing very, very fast in the rankings, playing well,” he said. “A big challenge for me at the beginning to start the tournament. Let’s see. I’m here to just give myself a chance. I know he’s playing well.”

Nadal has lost six of his last seven matches stretching back to defeat to Frances Tiafoe in the last 16 at the US Open.

Asked if he felt vulnerable, the defending champion admitted: “Of course, without a doubt.

“I have been losing more than usual, that’s part of the business. Just accept the situation. I think I



Rafael Nadal hits a return during a practice session on Saturday (AFP)

am humble enough to accept that situation and just work with what I have today.”

Nadal, who recently became a father, swept past Russian Daniil Medvedev to win the Australian Open and a 21st Grand Slam title last year in an epic five-setter.

That victory came after archival and nine-time Australian Open winner Djokovic was detained and deported ahead of the tournament after refusing to get vaccinated for Covid-19.

The Serbian star, looking to equal Nadal’s record-breaking 22 Slam titles, is back this year and in top form after winning the Adelaide International I event last week.

That followed another ATP Fi-

nals crown in late 2022.

Nadal told Spanish reporters that his long-time rival was the clear favourite.

“Djokovic seems to be very well prepared. He got great results at the end of the year, he has also started the year winning. It is a tournament that has always been good to him,” he said.

“If we talk about favourites, on Saturday before the start of the tournament, there is no doubt that he is the top favourite to win the title.

“But tournaments are not won on the Saturday before, you have to work for two weeks, although he has shown that he knows how to do it very well.”

Lucky loser Kwon is Adelaide champ

Adelaide, Australia - Korean lucky loser Kwon Soon-woo won the biggest title of his career when he beat Roberto Bautista Agut in a thrilling final at the Adelaide International Saturday.

Kwon had lost in the second round of qualifying for the tournament but was given a place in the main draw as a lucky loser.

After victory over Czech player Tomas Machac in the first round, the South Korean defeated second seed Pablo Carreno Busta, Sweden’s Mikael Ymer and rising English star Jack Draper to reach the decider.

In a dramatic final that lasted 2hrs 43mins, Kwon saw off Bautista Agut 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4) in a match that swung both ways.



Kwon Soon-woo celebrates with the Adelaide International trophy

Kwon broke the Spaniard’s first service game then used his powerful shot-making, his fore-

hand in particular, to close out the first set.

Bautista Agut struck back immediately, breaking Kwon at the start of the second set and lifting his own service percentages to level the match at one set apiece.

When the 35-year-old Bautista Agut skipped out to a 3-0 lead in the third it seemed all over, but Kwon dug deep and broke back, taking the set to a tiebreak.

The two traded blows in the tiebreak until at 4-3 to Bautista Agut, the Spaniard faltered and Kwon claimed the next four points to close out the match.

The win was Kwon’s second title on the ATP tour, following his success at the Astana Open in Kazakhstan in 2021.

Bencic lays down Open marker with dominant Adelaide win

Adelaide, Australia - Switzerland’s Belinda Bencic laid down a marker for next week’s Australian Open with a dominant 6-0, 6-2 win over Daria Kasatkina in the final of the Adelaide International on Saturday.

Bencic, who will move back into the top 10 after this tournament, overwhelmed the higher-ranked Russian in 67 minutes of almost flawless tennis. She broke Kasatkina’s first service game and then raced through the opening set as the Russian offered almost no resistance.

Kasatkina, the world number eight, had no answers to the power and depth of Bencic’s groundstrokes and didn’t get on the scoreboard until the ninth game of the match.

And although she was able to offer more of a challenge in the second set, Kasatkina could do nothing to stop Bencic claiming



Belinda Bencic is all smiles after beating Daria Kasatkina (AFP)

her sixth title on the WTA tour.

Bencic said her success this week would help her heading into the Australian Open.

“It’s my best result before the Australian Open and I’ve had the most matches going into it,” she said. “It helps me to be confident and to know and believe in myself.”

Bencic will certainly be one of

the players to watch in Melbourne.

The 25-year-old, who has been ranked as high as number four in the world, won the singles gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, before leading Switzerland to their first Billie Jean King Cup triumph in 2022.

AFP

Gasquet stuns tearful Norrie for 16th title

Auckland, New Zealand - Veteran Richard Gasquet fought back to stun tearful Cameron Norrie in the Auckland Classic final on Saturday for his first ATP title in nearly five years.

In a gruelling match two days before the Australian Open, Frenchman Gasquet prevailed 4-6, 6-4, 6-4 over the British world number 12.

Gasquet was also emotional after winning the 16th title of his career and first since the 2018 Rosmalen Grass Court Championships in the Netherlands.

Second seed Norrie held triple break point to go 4-0 up in the third set but 36-year-old Gasquet held serve and then broke his opponent twice.

“It feels amazing. I’ve played my best tennis all through the week, but especially today,” Gasquet said.



Richard Gasquet poses with a local Maori performer as he celebrates his triumph at the Auckland Classic on Saturday (AFP)

“The third set, I couldn’t miss a shot, it was just crazy.”

Twenty-year tour veteran Gasquet will improve his world ranking from 67th to somewhere inside the top 50 ahead of his opening match at the Australian Open against compatriot Ugo Humbert.

Gasquet has reached three Grand Slam semi-finals but has never advanced past the fourth round at Melbourne.

It was a painful defeat for left-hander Norrie, who was in tears when addressing the crowd.

Raised in Auckland before

switching allegiance to Britain in his late teens, the 27-year-old attended the tournament regularly as a child.

The tournament was his first as a professional, in 2013, and he reached his first final there, beaten by American Tenny Sandgren in 2019.

Norrie, who has won four ATP titles and reached the semi-finals at Wimbledon last year, said his loss to Gasquet will sting.

“I wanted that one really bad but all credit to you, Richard, you hung in there and played better than me down the stretch,” he said.

“I had an amazing week, coming to Auckland, where I grew up watching the tournament. I’ve got a lot of friends and family here and everyone supporting me.”

AFP

Oman to meet Bahrain in Gulf Cup semi-finals, Qatar take on Iraq

Basra, Iraq: Bahrain and Qatar advanced to the 2023 Gulf Cup semi-finals after playing to 1-1 draws against Kuwait and United Arab Emirates respectively on Friday.

Defending champions Bahrain ended their Group B campaign on seven points while Qatar advanced ahead of Kuwait on goal difference thanks to Tameem al Abdullah's late equaliser against UAE.

Earlier on Thursday, Oman and hosts Iraq advanced semis with impressive victories.

Iraq topped Group A with a sizzling 5-0 win over Yemen while Oman produced a gritty performance to defeat Saudi Arabia 2-1.

Oman took the lead in the 34th minute through Al Mundher al Alawi.

Although Turki al Ammar equalised for Saudi Arabia, captain Harib al Saadi scored from distance in the 84th minute to help Oman seal all three points and a place in the last four.

Oman will play Bahrain on Monday while Qatar will take on hosts Iraq in the other last four tie.

Bahrain came into the tie only needing a draw to advance after having won their earlier two matches while victory was imperative for Kuwait to keep their campaign alive.

Defending champions Bahrain, however, started on the front foot and took the lead through Mahdi al Humaidan in the 26th minute.



Oman's Harib al Saadi celebrates with Zahir al Aghbari after scoring the winner against Saudi Arabia on Thursday

Going behind forced Kuwait into a more attacking mode as they pressed forward in numbers. Their aggression paid off just before the half-time whistle with Shabib al Khaldi equalising.

Needing to win, Kuwait dominated possession in the second half but suffered a setback when Hamad al Qallaf was sent off in the 68th minute as Bahrain held on to claim top spot and keep their hopes of retaining the title alive.

Despite having suffered a 2-1 defeat to Bahrain on Matchday Two, Qatar knew a win would put them through to the semi-finals.

The reigning AFC Asian Cup winners, however, found the already-eliminated UAE a tough nut to crack.

UAE, having lost their previous two matches, were determined to exit on a high and stunned Qatar by taking the lead through Fabio Lima in the 77th minute.

Qatar, however, fought back and their determination paid dividends two minutes from the end of regulation time when Al Abdullah levelled the tie to take them through to the semi-finals.

AFC

MARCUS MAKES A MARK, AGAIN

Blow to Man City's title hopes as Rashford's goal helps United win derby

Manchester, United Kingdom - Marcus Rashford scored the winner as Manchester United came from behind to beat Manchester City 2-1 and go third in the Premier League in a thrilling match at Old Trafford on Saturday.

Both United goals came in the final 12 minutes as Erik ten Hag's side moved to within one point of their local rivals in the table after inflicting a damaging blow to City's hopes of retaining the title.

Pep Guardiola's men looked to be heading to victory when Jack Grealish came off the bench to head the visitors into the lead.

But Bruno Fernandes' controversial equaliser turned the game and four minutes later Rashford netted for the ninth consecutive match at Old Trafford.

City could now fall eight points off the top of the table should Arsenal beat Tottenham in the north London derby on Sunday. The victory for United was sweet revenge after being destroyed 6-3 when the sides met in October.

The scoreline even flattered United at the Etihad thanks to two late goals from Anthony Martial.

However, Ten Hag's men have now lost just once in 19 games since in a stunning turnaround in the Dutch coach's first season in charge.

The introduction of Casemiro has transformed United's midfield since the last Manchester derby and Ten Hag's decision to play Fred alongside his Brazilian



Manchester United's Marcus Rashford celebrates after scoring the winner against Manchester City at Old Trafford on Saturday (AFP)

international teammate cut City's supply line to Erling Haaland. United's turnaround is reflected in Rashford's revival. The England international has now scored 16 times this season.

Rashford threatens

Rashford's pace in behind was the biggest threat posed by either side in the first half and he should have done better after rounding Ederson than allowing Kyle Walker to comfortably clear off the line.

Another Rashford burst then took him beyond Rodri, but again

the finish was lacking as Ederson hurried off his line to smother.

United's new loan signing Wout Weghorst was watching on from the stands and Martial's lacklustre performance before being replaced at half-time by Antony underlined Ten Hag's need for more forward options.

By contrast, City are blessed with an abundance of talent in the final third and Guardiola's ability to make game-changing substitutions looked to have swung the game in their favour.

Grealish had only been on the field three minutes before net-

ting the biggest goal of his City career to date as he nodded in Kevin De Bruyne's cross on the hour mark.

But City have struggled this season to match the consistency that has won them four Premier League titles in the past five years and were undone by a hugely controversial equaliser.

Rashford was clearly offside as he raced towards Casemiro's pass, but crucially did not touch the ball and left it for Fernandes to sweep home.

The assistant referee initially flagged for offside and City were

livid at the decision to allow the goal to stand.

City were still rocking when they conceded again as Alejandro Garnacho sprinted down the left and crossed for Rashford to prod home from close range.

There was still time for City to feel further aggrieved at referee Stuart Attwell as Haaland saw a penalty appeal waved away.

But the champions now have a huge job on their hands if they are to maintain their dominance of English football in the Guardiola era.

AFF



Mikel Arteta

Arsenal primed for test of title mettle at Spurs

London, United Kingdom - Mikel Arteta has urged Arsenal to prove they have learned the lessons of last season's disastrous defeat at Tottenham when the Premier League leaders visit their north London rivals on Sunday.

Although Arsenal powered to a 3-1 victory in the derby in October - making it three wins in the last four meetings - it is the painful memory of their most recent trip to Tottenham that remains etched in the minds of Arteta's players.

With just three games remaining last season, Arsenal would have been guaranteed to qualify for the Champions League if they won at fellow top four contenders Tottenham in May.

Instead, they crumbled to a woeful 3-0 defeat, then lost the next match at Newcastle to allow Tottenham to pip them to fourth place in a collapse that sparked furious criticism of Arteta from frustrated fans. It was a debacle that could have proved fatal to Arteta's Arsenal project, but the Spaniard has impressively made amends with his astute leadership during a campaign that has exceeded all expectations.

Arteta believes the bitter taste

from last season's surrender at Tottenham has played a significant role in fuelling Arsenal's title push.

"That was the result and the performance. There was a lot of things to learn and take from it," Arteta said. "We are in a different place now and we have to show we can play the way we want."

Unbeaten in their last 11 league games, the Gunners find themselves with a golden opportunity to win the title for the first time since Arsene Wenger's Invincibles reigned supreme in 2004.

With champions Manchester City looking vulnerable and losing to Manchester United on Saturday, and Liverpool struggling to shake off a season-long funk, Arsenal have seized the initiative in the title race with a remarkable 14 wins from their 17 games.

Arteta's side are five points clear of second placed City and now can increase their lead.

The next fortnight is shaping up to be a defining period for Arsenal, with the Tottenham clash followed by a January 22 visit from Manchester United, who are the only team to beat the Gunners in the league this season.

FIFA opens disciplinary case after Argentina's World Cup celebrations

Paris, France - FIFA on Friday announced it had opened disciplinary proceedings against Argentina for "offensive behaviour" during their World Cup final triumph over France last month. The South Americans downed holders France on penalties in Qatar after a dramatic 3-3 draw.

Goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez made a lewd gesture with his goalkeeper of the tournament trophy after the match, before being filmed in the dressing room mocking French star Kylian Mbappe.

FIFA said Argentina had potentially breached rules re-

garding "offensive behaviour and violations of the principles of fair play" and "misconduct of players and officials".

World football's governing body is also investigating the Argentinian FA over breaching media and marketing regulations.

Croatia are being investigated for potential violations of "discrimination" and "order and security at matches" rules. Players appeared to sing a song with fascist connotations following their third-place play-off victory over Morocco.

AFF

Rampant Napoli crush Juventus to move 10 points clear

Naples, Italy - Napoli's dreams of a first Serie A title since the days of Diego Maradona are more alive than ever after thrashing Juventus 5-1 on Friday and moving 10 points clear at the summit.

Luciano Spalletti's free-flowing team once again thrilled with a statement performance against their old rivals to stamp their authority on a title race which is increasingly looking like a one-team affair.

Victor Osimhen took his league tally for the season to 12 with a goal in each half while Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Amir Rrahmani and Elif Elmas netted the hosts' other goals to extend their advantage on both Juve and AC Milan.

Champions Milan can cut the gap back to seven points with a



Napoli's Victor Osimhen (R) scores against Juventus during their Italian Serie A match in Naples on Friday (AFP)

win at Lecce on Saturday but the way Napoli dealt with Juve was the latest signal that southern Italy's biggest club are the real deal and ready to end a 33-year wait for a league crown.

Kvaratskhelia and Osimhen were devastating in attack, with the pair setting up each other's goals and causing havoc more or less from the first whistle against a team who before Friday had

only conceded seven league goals in 17 matches.

"It was a brilliant night," said Osimhen to DAZN. "I'm happy for the team and I'm happy as well to contribute to it with two goals and an assist. We want to keep this momentum."

"The road is still long, we just want to continue to win our games... at the end of the season I think we have a good chance."

Juve had come into the match at a packed Stadio Maradona on a run of eight straight wins in which they hadn't conceded, making them title contenders despite a dismal start to the season. Instead Massimiliano Allegri's team left Naples with their tails between their legs after conceding five goals in a Serie A match for the first time since May 1993.

"When you make errors like we did against a team like Napoli, you are going to be punished. They are the league leaders and deserve to be where they are," said Allegri.

Napoli got stuck into Juventus right from the off, pressing high up the pitch and stopping the away side from building any meaningful play.

Osimhen couldn't quite get on the end of Kim Min-Jae's long ball in the 12th minute but the Nigeria international was not to be denied and two minutes later gave the hosts a deserved lead.

Matteo Politano's cross found its way to Kvaratskhelia, whose acrobatic volley was brilliantly saved by Wojciech Szczesny but then fell right to Osimhen who nodded in from close range.

AFF

LOEB MAKES HISTORY, AL ATTIIYAH EYES VICTORY

Nasser al Attiyah looks destined for fifth Dakar title even as Sebastien Loeb wins sixth successive stage

Hofuf, Saudi Arabia - French driver Sebastien Loeb won a record sixth successive stage in the Dakar Rally on Saturday although barring a disaster Qatar's Nasser al Attiyah looks set for a fifth title.

Loeb, a record nine-time world rally champion, won the 13th and penultimate stage, a 154 kilometre special from Shaybah to Al Hofuf, to break Finnish driver Ari Vatanen's mark of five consecutive victories in 1989.

The 48-year-old Prodrive star is in second spot overall - the same position as he filled last year - 1 hour and 21 minutes behind Al Attiyah.

"It's great, even though the record was not necessarily my goal," said Loeb.

"I especially wanted to cement my second place.

"The gap was small and I eased into my pace from the start of the dunes, so I wasn't going to change everything.

"I feel good on sand, I can set a strong pace, I'm confident, I can drive aggressively while watching out for broken dunes. It's cool." In contrast to Loeb setting the Saudi dunes ablaze, Al Attiyah has settled for a safety-first strategy having established a commanding lead going into the final week of competition.

The 52-year-old lost just 5min 38sec to Loeb in Saturday's stage.

"What is really important to me is winning the Dakar," said Al Attiyah. "The race was great for



French driver Sebastien Loeb and his Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin manoeuvre their BRX during the 13th stage of the Dakar Rally between Saybah and Al Hofuf, Saudi Arabia, on Saturday (AFP)

us, we just have to bring the title home now."

Al Attiyah's Toyota teammate, Brazilian Lucas Moraes fills out the podium. He holds a comfortable advantage of over an hour from another Toyota driver

South African Giniel de Villiers.

'Need to push'

The car crown may appear done and dusted but it is far from the case in the motorbike category.

Australia's two-time motor-

bike champion Toby Price holds a wafer-thin advantage following closest rival Kevin Benavides's victory in Saturday's stage.

The 35-year-old KTM rider holds a lead of just 12 seconds over the Argentinian.

Price maintained first spot despite a fall and a navigation error in the stage.

"I made one little mistake around 130," he said. "We went too far right and I took a fall while looking at the top of a dune.

"At this stage here, you need to push to keep the lead.

"I'm happy, I've put a 100 percent in every day."

American Skyler Howes lies in third spot 1min 31secs adrift of 2016 and 2019 champion Price.

Benavides, who won the title in 2021, was awarded the stage win after having more than 23 minutes restored to him.

This was the time he took to aid a stricken rival Matthias Walkner at the outset of the stage. The late revision dashed the cup of victory from South African amateur and debutant Michael Docherty, who had been hoisted to the top of the stage standings after Benavides's younger brother Luciano was penalised a minute for speeding.

Howes's compatriot Mason Klein's rollercoaster race - mixing impressive performances with several tumbles - came to a premature end.

The KTM rider was unable to start the stage due to medical

What is really important to me is winning the Dakar. The race was great for us, we just have to bring the title home

NASSER AL ATTIIYAH

reasons according to race organisers Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO). Sunday's final stage is a 417km run - including a 136km special - to Dammam bringing to a close two weeks of combat conducted over 8,000km. AFP

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Phillips fires Kiwis to ODI series win

Karachi, Pakistan - Glenn Phillips smashed an unbeaten half-century as New Zealand secured a series victory over Pakistan with a two-wicket win in the third and final one-day international in Karachi on Friday.

Phillips scored 63 off 42 balls, hitting four sixes and as many fours, to rescue New Zealand from a precarious 181-5 in their pursuit of a 281-run target.

His knock overshadowed Fakhar Zaman's 101 as Pakistan made 280-9 in their 50 overs.

Walking in to bat with New Zealand needing 100 off 87 balls, Phillips added 64 for the seventh wicket with Mitchell Santner, who scored 17 in a match-turning stand. Skipper Kane Williamson contributed with 53 and Devon Conway struck an equally steady 52 before Phillips finished off the chase with 11 balls to spare.

Phillips completed his first ODI fifty off just 28 balls, but he was dropped the following delivery when wicketkeeper Mohammad Rizwan failed to hold a catch off spinner Usama Mir.



Glenn Phillips

New Zealand's win sealed their first ODI series victory in Pakistan in six attempts and kept them top of the one-day rankings.

"He (Phillips) wasn't feeling great but he came out and played with a lot of freedom," said Williamson whose team have now won seven of their last eight ODI series. "I thought we were in the game at the halfway stage but made a few errors. For Glenn to play that knock, and credit to Pakistan as well. It was a hard-fought series."

AFP

Kohli, Rohit out of India squad for New Zealand Twenty20s

New Delhi, India - Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma have been left out of India's T20 squad for the home series against New Zealand as selectors ponder major long-term changes.

November's World Cup semi-final drubbing to England prompted soul-searching in India and talk among the cricket board of easing out senior players.

Both men remain in the one-day squad for the visit of the Black Caps. Kohli hammered 113 off 87 balls to drive a big win over Sri Lanka in an ODI at Guwahati on Tuesday. Skipper Rohit made 83. It did not give reasons however for the T20 omissions of Kohli and regular all-format captain Rohit.

Hardik Pandya will continue to skipper the T20 side. The three-match ODI series against New Zealand begins on Wednesday in Hyderabad while the first of three T20 matches takes place at Ranchi on January 27. India will then go into a home Test series against Australia on February 9. ODI SQUAD: Rohit Sharma



Virat Kohli (R) and Rohit Sharma

(capt), Shubman Gill, Ishan Kishan (wk), Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, Suryakumar Yadav, KS Bharat (wk), Hardik Pandya, Washington Sundar, Shabbaz Ahmed, Shardul Thakur, Yuzvendra Chahal, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Umran Malik.

T20 SQUAD: Hardik Pandya (capt), Suryakumar Yadav, Ishan Kishan (wk), Ruturaj Gaikwad, Shubman Gill, Deepak Hooda, Rahul Tripathi, Jitesh Sharma (wk), Washington Sundar,

Kuldeep Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Arshdeep Singh, Umran Malik, Shivam Mavi, Prithvi Shaw, Mukesh Kumar.

TEST SQUAD AGAINST AUSTRALIA: Rohit Sharma (capt), KL Rahul, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KS Bharat (wk), Ishan Kishan (wk), Ravichandran Ashwin, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Shami Siraj, Umesh Yadav, Jaydev Unadkat, Suryakumar Yadav.

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CREATIVE
IMAGINATION

Senior students of the Department of Visual Art in Scientific College of Design experimented with 'Methods of Creative imagination in Conceptual Art' under the guidance of Dr Nasser Palangi

A unique exhibition, churned out by 21 senior students of the Department of Visual Art in Scientific College of Design is currently underway in the Glass Gallery in Scientific College of Design (SCD). This exhibition titled 'Conceptual Art' is the final art project - the result of a Fall semester 2022-23 conducted by Dr Nasser Palangi, a senior faculty and talented Australian-Iranian artist.

Dr Palangi disclosed that, in this academic semester, Oman's new generation artists have expressed deep human, historical, social and cultural concepts with a contemporary visual sense, full knowledge of the methods of artistic creativity, and familiarity with different styles and techniques.

"The result of this course is the first Conceptual Art exhibition in Muscat," he said, adding that the exhibition opened on January 10 under the auspices of Ahmed Abdullah al Busaidi, general director of arts, Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth. Those present included Dr Mona Islam, dean of SCD, Dr Reem Elswaifi, head of Visual Art department, besides students and their family members, international and Omani artists, and gallery managers in the capital.

The exhibition features the works of 21 budding artists whose works were judged and evaluated by art professors including Farideh Zariv, artist-art curator, Dr Mohamed Taregh, lecturer-artist, Abed Obed, lecturer-artist, and Dr Nasser Palangi, lecturer-artist.

The participants students were Amna Mohammed Sultan al Jabri, Arwa Hamed Nasser al Souli, Aya Yousuf Mohammed Said al Hajri, Bushra Mohamed Homood al Wahibi, Fatema Salim Said Khamis al Maqbali, Hajer Abdullah Hamed al Ghufaili, Lulu Mohammed Rashid al Ghailani, Maryam Mohammed Alawi Ba Alawi, Mithaq Suhail Nasib Mubarak al Araimi, Nafaa Nashr al Noubi al Kiyumi, Nasnas Mohammed Juma Rashid al Ruzaiqi, Reeda Sulaiman Saif Hamed al Maamariya, Safiya Khamis Said al Maskari, Sandas Rashid Humaid al Shibli, Sara



Conceptual art



Artwork by:
Umayma AlSaighi
'The Arab woman'

Media:
Embroidered roses, crystals, three types of lace with different traditional patterns, wax plaster, triangular mirrors

Concept:
The personality of the Arab woman and her precious essence, with qualities of strength, originality and a spirit characterised by strength, passion and love.



Mohamed Ahmed al Humaidi, Sara Yousuf Abdallah al Balushi, Shahad Asad Abdul Wahab al Hamdi, Shima Ahmed Mohamed Said al Gammari, Umayma Mubarak Hamed al Saighi, and Yaqeen Yaqoob Yousuf al Maqbali.

Summing up the students' efforts, Dr Palangi said, "Through this project, my students experienced the methods of creative imagination, learned several new techniques, and researched about the history of contemporary and conceptual arts. They have presented their own selected conceptual vision through a visual language, created in two-dimensional, three-dimensional, video, and new media art formats. They will be a new generation of Omani artists who have started to experience a conceptual art movement, and hopefully, will continue this movement in future."

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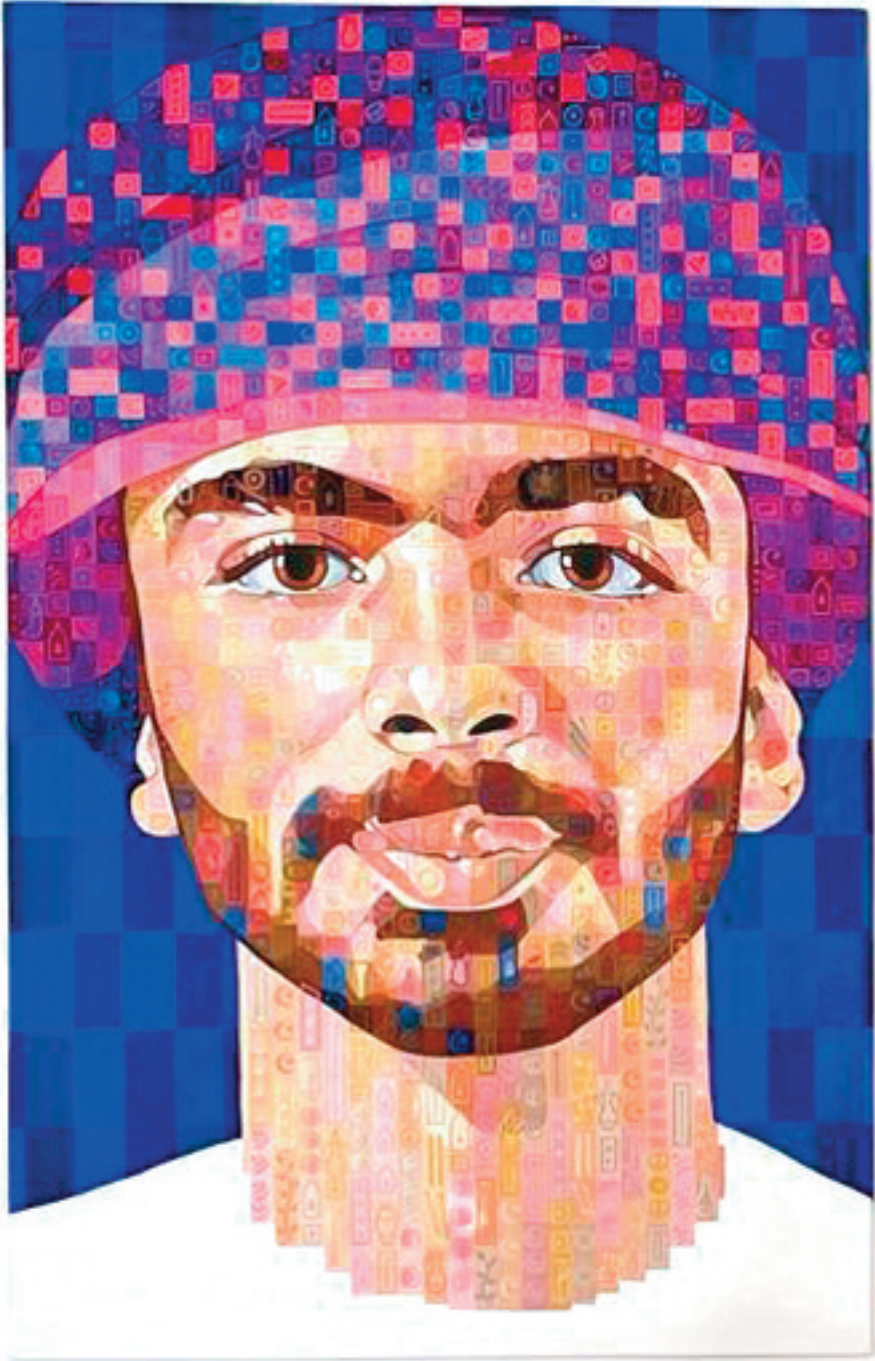
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PORTRAITURE AND
ICONOGRAPHY

UK artist Heather Ford returns to Oman for a second time with a new creative concept up her sleeve. The magic will flow forth tomorrow (January 16) evening at Stal Gallery



Heather hitherto

Hubert Vaz

Standing on the shoulders of giants – a solo exhibition by Heather Ford, UK artist, is set to provide deeper insights into a string of portraits created by the artist in a unique manner – a concept that's a fresh creative offering from the artist.

The exhibition will be inaugurated on January 16 at Stal Gallery under the auspices of Al Sayyida Wafa Hilal Hamed al Busaidi and continue till January 23.

Heather, who is currently on a short visit to Oman this time round, says she had spent some of her most fruitful years as an artist when she had first moved to Oman in 2010. However, she is now hopeful of coming back again.

"I had no idea then, about the profound effect my coming to Oman would have on my life. I fell in love with this beautiful country and its people. It felt like I was being lifted up and 'standing on the shoulders of giants'," Heather says, adding that it was Oman's rich culture and heritage which inspired her to paint with renewed passion.

She was welcomed into the community by Omani artists who helped her believe in her abilities and find new expression for her talent in the sultanate.

"I learned so much from them. They gave me the confidence to explore new ideas and techniques, she said, adding, "For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed drawing and painting portraits. I have always been able to capture a good likeness of a person. But over the past few years, I realised that portraiture is much more than just what a person looks

like. So I began to paint portraits in a new way – portraits that have a deeper meaning."

The concept of this exhibition had dawned her in the Summer of 2018 itself when, after eight wonderful years of living in Oman, she had to return to the UK.

This exhibition comprises a series of paintings that are made up of a variety of 'icons' and images that represent each individual and thus giving an insight into who they truly are. The icons are symbolic and significant, giving the viewer more knowledge and understanding, delving deep into the portraits' souls.

Explaining her new take on portraiture and iconography, Heather says, "I used to paint symbols in my portraits that had no meaning. People used to say to me, 'What do the symbols mean?' and it got me thinking. So, I started to paint portraits that were made up of a variety of icons and images, thus giving an insight into who they truly are."

She explained the message from the exhibition, that everyone gets their ideas and inspiration from someone who has influenced them to follow their dreams. This exhibition portrays six young individuals from different walks of life, and alongside them are portraits of those who have influenced them to follow their dreams.

Heather Ford will be giving an Art Talk on her work and providing Portraiture workshops for those wishing to try some of the techniques used in the exhibition, on January 18 between 4pm to 7pm.



Oman is a beautiful country with a rich culture and heritage. The architecture and the stunning scenery is a constant source of inspiration, as an artist. However it is the people and the community of Oman who pull on my heart strings and touch my soul

HEATHER FORD



The Student

(Amjad al Zadjali standing on the shoulders of Hassan Meer)

"My role model has to be my father. For the past three years I have been studying at Florida International University, and as I reflect, and look back on my childhood, I feel a deep sense of gratitude and love.

I was brought up with my brothers and sisters in a lively and vibrant home that centered around my immediate and extended family. It's an Omani tradition that everyone gets together, often at mealtimes, and my fondest memories are those that usually come from these special gatherings and the sharing of food. However, my father is not my chosen role model for this reason alone - he is much, much more.

My father, Hassan Meer, is a highly acclaimed Omani artist, mentor and curator who is at the forefront of Oman's contemporary art scene and I am continually inspired by his innovative ways of working, all of which revolves around Oman's rich culture and heritage. His paintings,

photography and installations are often linked to his spiritual beliefs, his childhood memories, and those of my great grandfathers house where he was raised.

When my father was growing up, art was not considered important in schools, but art was his passion and in his heart. He worked really hard to get an art scholarship. He was 23 years old when he began his studies, and six years later, in 2001, he graduated from Savanna College of Art and Design, Georgia USA. My father never gave up and he followed his dreams - his calling in life.

He is now a central figure in Oman who works tirelessly to raise the profile of Omani art. He discovers and mentors emerging artists and encourages them to push boundaries in contemporary and innovative ways. My father is helping to pave the way for the next Omani art generation, and beyond.

My father, Hassan Meer, reminds me to be the best I can be. He reminds me to be humble and full of gratitude, and to never ever give up." (See portraits above)



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