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HM greets citizens, residents, Islamic nation on Ramadan

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq has addressed a message of greetings to Omani people, residents in Oman and the Islamic nation on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan.

The Diwan of Royal Court issued a statement to this effect reading as follows: 'Upon the advent of Ramadan, His Majesty the Sultan has addressed a message of greetings to Omani citizens, residents of Oman and the whole Islamic nation.

'His Majesty the Sultan prayed to the Almighty Allah to shower abundant blessings of Ramadan on all Muslims. His Majesty the Sultan has underscored the significance of all individuals and establishments' maintaining compliance to precautionary measures to tackle the pandemic, notably by adhering to instructions issued by the authorities.'

ONA



Govt to cut debt by RO2.85bn

At the end of March 2022, the Ministry of Finance had repaid debt worth RO1.49bn

Muscat - As part of its debt management strategy, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) will cut down the country's debt by more than RO2.85bn in April 2022, thereby reducing its public debt to RO19.46bn in the first four months of the year.

Budget 2022 earmarked RO1.3bn for payment towards interests on loans, but without prejudice to a commitment to repay maturing debt to the tune of RO2.7bn.

At the end of March 2022, MoF had repaid debt worth RO1.49bn, including the repayment of RO850mn loan prior to its maturity. In addition, the ministry will be repaying the RO1.365bn loan in April 2022. 'This comes in line with MoF's efforts to re-



(Muscat Daily)

duce public debt which is estimated to total RO19.46bn by the end of April 2022,' it stated.

As part of its liability management efforts, the ministry recently settled a RO1.55bn loan facility agreement. The loan was obtained through a group of 26 local, regional and international financial institutions. 'The loan was oversubscribed by more

than 150 per cent with a significantly tightened-pricing inside the Oman curve, reflecting the market's validation of Oman's fiscal reform initiatives and active liability management.'

The government plans to utilise the surplus arising from higher oil prices for enhancing development spending to stimulate economic growth and support development

projects, repay part of public debt, reduce fiscal deficit and minimize the cost and risks of the debt portfolio.

The ministry pointed out that steps are underway to tap other fiscal surpluses to inspire economic growth in line with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's Royal directives to implement more development projects that support the private sector, notably by augmenting the Developmental Budget's allocations to RO1.1bn.

In the last few years, MOF has undertaken a set of fiscal measures with the aim of reducing the annual fiscal deficit, whilst addressing the financial situation and enhancing the efficiency in public spending. Furthermore, it seeks to implement a debt management strategy that aims to smoothen the redemption profile and minimise the refinancing risk of the debt portfolio by replacing high-cost loans with low-cost loans, while extending the maturity.

ONA

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Draw for 2022 Qatar World Cup revealed

Biden 'grateful' for Oman's role in Yemen truce

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Joe Biden, President of the United States, has welcomed the two-month truce between Yemen's warring parties starting from Saturday, the first day of Ramadan for many Muslims in the region, and an accord on fuel shipments and Sanaa airport. He also praised the role played by Oman and Saudi Arabia in conflict resolution in Yemen.

"I am grateful for the leadership role of Saudi Arabia and Oman in bringing this initiative to fruition before the holy month of Ramadan. I am also grateful for the hard work of the Yemeni government and the confidence they have placed in UN-led media-

tion," said Biden.

"The United States of America will work to deter threats to our friends and partners as we continue to strive for de-escalation and peace throughout the region. I wish the people of Yemen a peaceful Ramadan, and assure them of our ongoing commitment to help end this terrible war," he added.

The truce announcement was made by Hans Grundberg, UN special envoy for Yemen, during a conference on Yemen's war hosted by the Gulf Cooperation Council in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Friday's announcement brings a glimmer of hope in a brutal conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands and left millions on the



brink of famine in Yemen.

"The parties to the conflict have responded positively to a United Nations proposal for a two-month truce which comes into effect from April 2," Grund-

The parties to the conflict have responded positively to a United Nations proposal for a two-month truce which comes into effect from April 2

HANS GRUNDBERG

berg said in a statement.

"The truce can be renewed beyond the two-month period with the consent of the parties."

The Foreign Ministry of Oman

also welcomed the announcement, praising the positive discussions held by the UN envoy in his recent visits to Muscat.

UN chief Antonio Guterres welcomed the announcement, expressing hope for a 'political process' to bring peace to the country. "You must take that momentum in order to make sure that this truce is fully respected and that it is renewed and... that a true political process is launched," he said.

"This demonstrates that even when things look impossible, when there is the will to compromise, peace becomes possible," Guterres added.

President Biden in a statement added, "I welcome the announcement of a two-month truce in the

Yemen conflict. This initiative is a long-awaited reprieve for the Yemeni people. It entails a halt to all military activities by any party inside Yemen and across its borders, the entry of fuel ships into Hudaydah port, and the renewal of commercial flights to and from Sanaa to agreed destinations."

"These are important steps, but they are not enough. The ceasefire must be adhered to, and as I have said before, it is imperative that we end this war. After seven years of conflict, negotiators must undertake the hard and necessary work to reach political compromises that can bring about an enduring future of peace for all the people of Yemen."

(With input from AFP)

(From March 13 to April 13)

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MoE to set up 76 schools in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) on Thursday unveiled the details of its plan to set up 76 schools in different parts of Oman.

Majid bin Said al Bahri, Under-secretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs at MoE, said, "We thank His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik for his directives which were issued last week to set up 76 schools in different parts of Oman."

He added that the new schools will lower student density in classrooms and reduce the number of evening schools as well as replace dilapidated school buildings.

Of the 76 schools, 19 will be developed in Muscat governorate, 17 in North Batinah, 11 in South Batinah, nine each in South Sharqiyah and Dhofar, five in Dakhliyah, two each in Buraimi and Musandam and one each in Dhahirah and North Sharqiyah.

Sulaiman bin Zahir al Ruwaishti, director-general of Planning and Strategic Development at MoE, said, "The new schools will accommodate about 80,000 male and female students, and they will be built taking into account the current number of students in each governorate, the number of evening schools in it as well as the expected increase in the number of students until the end of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025)."

According to Ruwaishti, the



The new schools will accommodate about 80,000 male and female students, and they will be built taking into account the current number of students in each governorate

SULAIMAN AL RUWAISHDI

number of students is estimated to reach 156,000 during the tenth five-year plan. "In order to absorb more numbers of students, the ministry expands the capacity of existing schools and constructs new schools," he added.

In addition, the ministry has plans to expand 300 existing schools during the current development plan to be able to accommodate 30 per cent of new students. Also, as part of its Tenth Five-Year Development Plan, the ministry envisions construction of 251 new integrated

schools across the Sultanate of Oman that can accommodate the remaining 70 per cent of the additional numbers of students.

"The new schools will reduce the number of evening schools in the sultanate, which is expected to reach 106 in the next academic year 2022-23, in addition to reducing the number of students in classrooms to reach 30 students for grades 1-4 and 35 students for grades 5-12," said Ruwaishti, adding that by the next academic year 2022/2023, four integrated

school buildings will be opened in some governorates.

Khaled bin Hilal al Rajhi, assistant director, Budget Department at MoE, said, "The private sector will play a major role in building these new schools. Forty-two of these buildings have been offered to the private sector according to design, financing, construction and maintenance model. The term of the contract will extend to more than 20 years."

According to the latest statistics, the number of teachers in the academic year 2021/2022 in government schools reached 56,569, which includes 17,881 male and 38,688 female teachers, accounting for an Omanisation rate of 84.8 per cent.

As for the teachers in special education schools, 57 are male and 250 females, with an Omanisation rate of 90.6 per cent.

MoH opens new dialysis centre in Al Amerat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Dr Ahmed Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, inaugurated the new dialysis centre in Al Amerat on Thursday, in the presence of a number of dignitaries and senior officials.

Built at a cost of more than RO1mn, the centre has been funded by the heirs of Abdullah Moosa al Raisi.

H E Sa'eedi stated that cases of kidney failure in Oman, as with the rest of the GCC countries, are seeing an increase due to diabetes and hypertension among other reasons. He added that 40 per cent of such cases can be avoided through adopting a healthy lifestyle, following an appropriate diet, and performing physical activity, while 80 per cent can be cured after diagnosis if these healthy habits are being followed.

H E Sa'eedi said that around 3,000 patients are on dialysis in Oman, pointing out that kidney transplantation is considered a



(Supplied photo)

successful therapy procedure for such conditions.

The centre is located in Al Nahdha Health Centre in an area of 1,300 sqm, with a capacity of 42 beds. The centre includes five dialysis rooms, a pharmacy, two offices for doctors and nursing supervisors, a meeting hall, in addition to a training room, a medical warehouse, a treatment room, patient waiting area, and personnel changing room.

At the opening, a presentation on the project and kidney failure was made. Later, the patron of the event and the attendees toured the centre and were

informed about the services provided to patients and clients.

Fifty employees representing physicians, nurses, medical orderlies, and medical records clerks are working in the facility.

The centre operates all days except on Fridays in two shifts - from 7am to 12pm, and 1pm to 4pm.

Five dialysis centers are functioning in the Governorate of Muscat located in Baushar, Seeb, Quaryat, Royal Hospital, and Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, with a capacity to accommodate up to 662 patients monthly.

Private health institution suspended for manipulating COVID-19 tests, says MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Evaluation Team of the Directorate General of Private Health Establishments at the Ministry of Health (MoH) has suspended a private health institution for manipulating COVID-19 tests.

A statement issued by the

Ministry of Health, said, "The Evaluation Team has identified one private health institution which was manipulating COVID-19 tests. The institution was suspended and referred to the Violation Committee."

"In addition, the issue has been assigned to the relevant legal institutions for appropriate action," it further said.

ROP to work from 8.30am to 1.30pm during Ramadan

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has announced the official working hours for the holy month of Ramadan.

A statement issued by ROP, said, "The official working hours during Ramadan in all ROP departments will be from 8.30am to 1.30pm from Sunday to Thursday."

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Shaddad al Musalmy
Muscat

Busaidi urged people to take good care of their health by drinking plenty of water and eating hydrating foods during Ramadan. "High temperatures can also make you perspire more, so it is important to drink fluids to replace



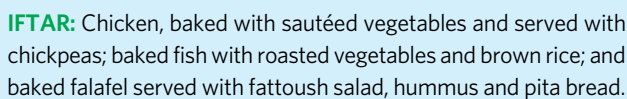
During this time of the year, supermarkets

As far as keeping healthy in Ramadan is concerned, the month of fasting has many benefits. "For most people, fasting is safe as long as they remain hydrated. This can be achieved by drinking sufficient water at night and avoiding

“During the day, we need to avoid being in hot and humid places as it increases the loss of body fluids. Ramadan diet is not different from what we should have all year. We still need to consume a total of eight servings of fruits and vegetables and consume less sugar and sugary beverages,” he added.

The hadiths highlighted here throw light on the status of the blessed month, its merits, rewards and special offers, as well as the Prophet's example in Ramadan.

During Ramadan, health experts advise drinking plenty of water between iftar and suhoor and with high temperatures, it is



In the event of hot weather, Dr Hussain, said, "Reducing the amount of physical activity, staying out of the sun at peak hours (11am-4pm), eating more cold

At suhoor time, one should have a wholesome meal which will provide enough energy to last until the next iftar. Because dates are readily available in Oman, eating three of them to break the fast - a traditional and healthy way to begin iftar - can do wonders because dates are an excellent source of fibre. There is also a need to incorporate plenty of vegetables to provide vitamins and nutrients.



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specialized Companies in the field of tender shown below and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents from the website through the following link: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees until the end of deadline stipulated abelow.

Tender No.	No E- Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/22/008	7/2022/MM/ QS-4-Recall-1	RFP for Annual maintenance Contract (AMC) of oracle E- Business HRMS & Financial System (Re Call) (E- Tender)	Rial 25	21/04/2022	11/05/2022	Specialiset
PRE/22/023	2022/MM/ QS-11	Supply & Installation Information Security Systems (Phase 1) (E- Tender)	Rial 25	21/04/2022	11/05/2022	Specialiset
PRE/21/063	2022/MM/ QS-12	Site preparation for street vendor in Wilayat A'Seeb (E- Tender)	Rial 25	21/04/2022	11/05/2022	second
PRE/22/006	2022/MM/ QS-13	Supply of Lighting Materials (E- Tender)	Rial 25	21/04/2022	11/05/2022	second

Tender Conditions :-

- 1- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- 2- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- 3- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- 4- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
- 5- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+96824402200/24402330).

Equinix plans to build first data centre in Salalah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Equinix, the world's leading digital infrastructure company, has announced plans to build a brand new data center in the city of Salalah in Oman.

The new data center is being built in cooperation with Omantel, the regional leading wholesale carrier of the Middle East, and will be commercially and operationally managed in full by Equinix as a carrier neutral and open access Equinix International Business Exchange (IBX) data centre.

The new site, named SN1, demonstrates Equinix's commitment to Oman and the Middle East region. SN1 will be the second carrier neutral data center to be built in Oman after MC1 in Muscat and will be Equinix's fifth data center in the region alongside strategic sites in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Once open, SN1 will become a key interconnectivity point for traffic flows between Asia, Europe, and Africa.

"We are delighted to extend our successful partnership with Equinix through establishing this new international subsea cable hub in Salalah, which is strategically located in the south of Oman, on the coast of the Arabian Sea," Talal al Mamari, CEO



Talal al Mamari



Kamel al Tawil

The new data centre is being built in cooperation with Omantel and will be commercially and operationally managed in full by Equinix as a carrier neutral and open access Equinix International Business Exchange (IBX) data centre

Omantel, said in a press statement. He said, "Salalah is the rising star of the Middle East for Asia to Europe and Africa subsea cable systems passing the region and is quickly establishing itself as the new main regional strategic interconnection point. Salalah will be the hub for a connectivity ecosystem much needed to meet an ever-increasing demand for onwads connectivity to the

Middle East and Africa."

By shortening the length and route of many highly strategic and important cables in the region, the new SN1 site in Salalah will change the landscape of global traffic flows by creating a much more cost-effective route to connect businesses to the Middle East. The new site will also offer direct fiber links to Equinix's MC1 in Muscat, the first

carrier-neutral hub in the Middle East, and enables carriers, content providers and cloud providers to co-locate critical IT infrastructure in the region.

"We are seizing on this fantastic opportunity to invest in Salalah by building a world class data center that will undoubtedly change the landscape of global traffic flows between three major continents," said Kamel al Tawil, managing director of Equinix Middle East and North Africa.

"With access to several new and existing submarine cables, this major new interconnectivity point continues Equinix's strategy of developing network-dense and interconnectivity-rich ecosystems," he added.

The SN1 facility is the latest subsea landing site in a string of strategic subsea investments for Equinix. In December 2021, the company announced it had been selected by SUB.CO for the hosting of the 9,800km Oman-Australia Cable (OAC) into its International Business Exchange (IBX) data centres in Perth, Australia and Muscat, Oman.

Additionally, during 2021, Equinix opened similar cable hosting sites in Genoa and Bordeaux as well as announced the opening of significant subsea connections with EllaLink in Portugal and Brazil.

Sohar Port appoints Emile Hoogsteden as new CEO

Sohar - The board of directors of Sohar Port and Freezone (SOHAR) announced the appointment of Emile Hoogsteden as the new chief executive officer of Sohar Port, a joint venture of the Port of Rotterdam Authority and Asyad Group.

Hoogsteden succeeds Mark Geilenkirchen effective from July 1, 2022, bringing a solid track record of building and managing robust business strategies in the global logistics industry. His stellar background will continue to pave the way for more growth opportunities for the port and tenants at SOHAR, a press release said.

Under this new leadership, SOHAR will continue to be one of the fastest-growing port and freezone complexes in the world.



Emile Hoogsteden

To date, the company has attracted close to US\$30bn in investments by serving diverse industries including metals, raw materials, and plastics to name a few.

As a future-ready port capa-

ble of welcoming the world's largest container vessels, SOHAR will take a leading role in achieving the national economic priorities within the Oman 2040 Vision.

As one of the fastest-growing ports in the world, SOHAR Port and Freezone continues to leverage on its strategic location and enhance its services, positioning itself as a key logistics hub within the region and across the world. A powerful combination of the expertise of the Port of Rotterdam and the government of Oman, represented by Asyad, it is earmarked as one of the sultanate's mega-projects, home to logistics, petrochemicals and metal clusters, as well as the region's first dedicated agro-terminal.



Renaissance AGM approves dividend of 20bz per share

Muscat - Renaissance Services - Oman's leading accommodation, services solutions and international facilities management (IFM) company which is listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange - held its annual general meeting (AGM) on Wednesday at Sheraton Oman Hotel.

Amongst other resolutions on the agenda of the AGM, Renaissance's shareholders approved a dividend of 20bz per share (or 20 per cent of the paid-up capital).

In his statement, Samir J Fancy, chairman of Renaissance Services, said, "2021 was a good

year in terms of improved performance, although that remains below our ambition, capacity and capability. Client and government support to implement agreed minimum worker welfare standards in Duqm, remains key to realise the full promise and potential of our business."

US allies agree to tap emergency oil reserves

Paris, France - US allies agreed on Friday to tap their emergency oil reserves again in a bid to calm crude prices that have soared following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The decision was made at an extraordinary ministerial meeting of the 31-nation International Energy Agency chaired by US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm.

While the group said in a statement that it would only disclose the details "early next week", US President Joe Biden said earlier that they agreed to release "tens of millions of additional barrels of oil onto the market".

The IEA members - which include the United States, European countries, Australia and

Japan, among others - had already pledged last month to release 62.7mn barrels of oil.

The IEA move will mark just the fifth time it has tapped its stockpiles since 1991. Its members hold emergency stockpiles totalling 1.5bn barrels.

The group repeated its warning that the prospect of large-scale disruptions to Russian oil

production "is threatening to create a global oil supply shock".

"The IEA Ministers reiterated their concerns about the energy security impacts of the egregious actions by Russia and voiced support for sanctions imposed by the international community in response," the group's statement said.

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OPEC+ sticks to modest oil output increase

Vienna, Austria - The OPEC group of oil producing countries and its Russia-led allies agreed on another modest oil output increase on Thursday, ignoring Western pressure to significantly boost production as the Ukraine conflict has rocked prices.

While OPEC refused to budge, the United States said it would tap its strategic stockpile by a record amount in a bid to cool soaring prices.

The 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and ten countries spearheaded by Russia

backed an increase of 432,000 barrels per day in May, marginally higher than in previous months. The group, known as OPEC+, said in a statement following a ministerial meeting that the "continuing oil market fundamentals and the consensus on the outlook pointed to a well-balanced market".

It added that the "current volatility is not caused by fundamentals, but by ongoing geopolitical developments."

But Capital Economics, a research firm, questioned whether the group would be able to meet the target. "We doubt they will,"

said Edward Gardner, the firm's commodities economist.

"Production in Russia, which has the same quota as Saudi Arabia, is more likely to decrease than increase this year due to Western sanctions reducing demand for its exports," Gardner said. He also noted that OPEC+ was already struggling to meet its quotas before the war.

The United States has urged OPEC+, as the alliance is known, to boost production as high energy prices have contributed to soaring inflation across the world, which has threatened to severely

derail the recovery from the Covid pandemic. Crude prices have spiked over fears of a major supply shortfall after Moscow invaded Ukraine on February 24. Russia is the world's second biggest exporter of oil after Saudi Arabia.

It has retreated since then on hopes that Moscow and Kyiv could agree on a ceasefire, which would ease concerns over Russian supplies. Covid lockdowns in China have also weighed on prices as the country is the world's top crude consumer.

AFP

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SUMMARY OF ASSETS AND LIABILITIES OF UNIMONI EXCHANGE LLC					
AS ON 31st DECEMBER 2021					
	Amount in RO '000			Amount in RO '000	
ASSETS	31.12.2021	31.12.2020	LIABILITIES	31.12.2021	31.12.2020
1. Cash in Hand	6,202	3,541	1. Capital & Reserves	14,997	15,518
2. Deposits with Central bank of Oman	230	190	2. Borrowings from Banks	-	-
3. Precious Metals	-	-	3. Balances due to Branches	-	-
4. Balances due from Banks	5,874	9,515	4. Balances due to Money Changers	115	14
5. Balances due from Branches	-	-	5. Loans and Advances payable	-	-
6. Balances due from Money Changers	2,993	1,735	6. Cheques and Drafts issued and outstanding	21	196
7. Cheques and Drafts purchased	-	-	7. Other Liabilities	2,728	3,247
8. Loans and Advances	-	-			
9. Investments	-	-			
10. Fixed Assets	958	1,112			
11. Other Assets	1,604	2,882			
TOTAL	17,861	18,975	TOTAL	17,861	18,975

US added 431,000 jobs in March

Washington, US - The United States added 431,000 jobs in March and the unemployment rate fell to 3.6 per cent, bringing the labour market closer to where it was before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the government said Friday.

While payroll growth was slightly below analysts' forecasts, the unemployment rate dipped more than expected and is now near the 3.5 per cent level seen in February 2020. The number of unemployed people declined to six million, according to the Labour Department report.

AFP

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX index records 1.8% weekly losses

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) recorded losses during last week as the season of annual general meetings (AGMs) ended. The MSX30 Index ended the week lower by 1.77 per cent.

All the sub-indexes closed in red for the week. Financial index closed lower by 1.23 per cent. Service index and Industrial index ended lower by 0.55 per cent and 0.66 per cent, respectively. MSX Shariah index lost 2.61 per cent during the week.

In a move to attract more international investors and foreign capital inflows into the country, the Muscat Stock Exchange plans to allow 100 per cent full foreign ownership in joint stock companies, according to a tweet from the Muscat bourse. The Muscat Clearing and Depository has finalised the technical requirements in accessing emerging markets to open up the market, the tweet added. This move will make the bourse more attractive to international investors and provide them with a more flexible environment for their investment. In January this year, MSX said it plans to list 35 state-owned companies in the next five years, with one or two firms from the oil sector making the cut this year.

Local news

►National Bank of Oman's (NBO) AGM approved issuance of US\$300mn (or RO equivalent) worth of Tier 1 Perpetual Securities, to be executed over the next five years. This issuance may be listed on MSX (if in RO) or a regional or an international bourse. NBO's CET1 ratio is relatively on the lower side as compared to its larger peers, while its Tier 1 Ratio is the lowest within the sector. It would strengthen the bank's balance sheet as well as its capital adequacy if it is able to raise this US\$300mn. The bank had previously re-called its Tier 1 Perpetual Bonds issued in Nov 2015 during May 2021, while at the same time, it had issued US\$300mn worth of Tier 1 Perpetual bonds in April 2021, thereby preserving its Tier 1 capital at end-2021 as compared to 2020.

►Bank Dhofar's board of directors has resolved to cancel the brokerage license, due to the low profit from this activity and the bank is in the process of taking the necessary action to cancel the service. Noting that the bank incurs various costs related to the brokerage unit, as the percentage of spending in this activity exceeds the profit from brokerage. The bank undertakes that the requirements



related to cancelling the license will be met and will settle any obligations that may appear in the future. The date of cancelling the activity will be disclosed after taking all necessary measures according to the guidelines of the Capital Market Authority. Oman's telecom sector data for February revealed that fixed-line subscribers are down 4.1 per cent while mobile subscribers are down 0.7 per cent. Within mobile segment, prepaid subscribers are down 6 per cent while postpaid subscribers are higher by 24.9 per cent year-on-year. Active mobile broadband subscribers are up by 0.4 per cent. Penetration levels are lower at the end of February 2022 as compared to February 2021.

►In a sharp bounce back from the COVID-19 pandemic that had hit global trade hard in

2020, Oman's non-oil exports shot up by more than 91 per cent in 2021, after economies reopened and global demand recovered from the recession. Total non-oil exports surged by 91.2 per cent to RO5.792bn in the full year 2021 from RO3.032bn recorded in the previous year, driven by increased demand from key markets in the region and around the world, according to data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Al Khalili Group and Tibiaan Properties recently announced the official launch of Elodea project. The investment value of the project is approximately RO18mn.

►The project will provide more than 600 parking spaces and will be an integrated market consisting of a ground floor only, according to the most pre-

ferred and growing patterns of shopping, making it a preferred destination for residents of the area to meet their needs.

GCC markets

Leading ratings agency Standard & Poors has upgraded its outlook for Saudi Arabian economy from stable to positive with A-/A-2 credit ratings, Saudi Press Agency reported. At the same time, S&P confirmed its short and long-term sovereign credit assessment at "A-/A-2", it stated. Such positive expectations reflect the improvement of the kingdom's GDP and its medium-term general budget related to recovery from COVID-19 pandemic in addition to developments at the oil industry sector and continuation of government reforms programme, it added.

The United Arab Emirates is hoping the economy will grow by 5-6 per cent this year as it recovers from the pandemic, and by the same pace over the next few years to help double the economy by 2031, its economy minister said last week. "The whole world is recovering and I think we are in a recovery phase after the pandemic, (but) predicting growth as well this year is a challenge," Abdulla bin Touq al Marri told Reuters on the sidelines of the Investopia

conference in Dubai, referring to the Russia-Ukraine war and oil prices. The UAE's non-oil economy has benefited from public spending, credit growth and improving business sentiment, and its hosting of the Dubai World EXPO has boosted tourism.

Saudi Tadawul Group Holding Co (Tadawul Group) aims to lure new investors and boost trading of current institutional investors, CEO Khalid Alhussan told Argaam, on the sidelines of the Saudi Capital Market Forum. He added that the group seeks to offer new financial products and services, which allows for stronger and better competition.

Tadawul is witnessing a strong listing momentum. "Therefore, there must be a balance between increased listings and money injected into the market as additional funds," Alhussan said.

He added that the group is in advanced talks with two to three GCC companies as regards their cross listing on the main market.

Saudi Arabia announced agreements and investment initiatives worth SAR51.8bn in various fields during the Global Entrepreneurship Congress (GEC), which was held in Riyadh. The total value of

agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) reached SAR25.2bn. New launches reached SAR22.9bn. The total value of venture capital and private equity deals stood at SAR3.7bn, with SAR109mn investment rounds. Among the most important agreements signed during GEC was one by the Social Development Bank (SDB), which unveiled its plan to allocate more than SAR11bn to finance the entrepreneurs.

Recommendation

Oil prices plunged on news that the United States was considering the release of up to 180mn barrels from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the largest in the near 50-year history of the SPR. Investors need to watch developments on this front.

The regional markets have performed well during the previous week except Oman and Qatar, which closed the week lower. Elevated oil price has been supportive of the GCC stock markets, however, now with oil price under pressure, investors need to remain cautious.

Oman's AGM season is almost over. We advise investors to read AGM approved agenda carefully in order to pick good investment stories.

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UAE and Israel agree on terms of 'milestone' free trade deal

Jerusalem - Israel and the United Arab Emirates said Friday they had agreed on the terms of a free trade agreement to boost commercial relations following their normalisation of ties.

Israel described as "historic" the deal abolishing customs duties on "95 per cent of the products" exchanged between the Jewish state and Gulf Arab country.

The 2020 normalisation deal reached between the two countries was one of a series of US-brokered agreements known as the Abraham Accords, and trade between them last year totalled some US\$900mn dollars, according to Israeli figures.

Talks for a free trade agreement began in November and were concluded Friday after four rounds of negotiations, including last month in Egypt between Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and the UAE's de facto



A photo shows (left to right) Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al Sisi, and Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt

leader, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan.

"The good relations forged between our two countries are strengthened today by this free trade agreement, which will significantly improve economic cooperation for the benefit of the citizens of both countries," Ben-

nett said. The deal was now "ready for signature", the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Trade Thani al-Zeyoudi said.

"This milestone deal will build on the historic Abraham Accords and cement one of the world's most important and promising emerging trading relationships," Zeyoudi said.

Israel this week hosted a summit of top diplomats from the United States and three Arab states - the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco - with which it has normalised ties since 2020.

Sudan also agreed to normalise ties with Israel, although it has yet to finalise a deal.

AFP

Saudi Arabia deposits \$5bn in Egypt

Cairo, Egypt - Saudi Arabia has deposited US\$5bn at Egypt's central bank, according to state media in both countries, a day after Qatar pledged US\$5bn in investment and amid a surging wheat import bill.

The Egyptian and Saudi governments have signed a draft agreement for Saudi investments

in the country totalling a projected US\$10bn, according to a statement by the Egyptian cabinet.

The announcements come as the North African country enacts a slate of financial measures to mitigate the economic fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

As the world's largest im-

porter of wheat, Egypt relied on the two countries for 85 per cent of its supply, as well as 73 per cent of its sunflower oil.

Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli said his government is intent on "deepening economic and investment cooperation" with Saudi Arabia.

AFP

India, Australia ink interim trade deal

New Delhi, India - India and Australia signed an interim free trade deal on Saturday that cuts tariffs on billions of dollars of commerce as the two Quad partners bolster their economic ties. Both signatories are members of the Quad alliance with the United States and Japan, which is seen as a counterweight to an increasingly assertive China.

But while they both border the Indian Ocean, India was only Australia's seventh-largest trading partner in 2020, and accounted for just over four per cent of exports last year.

The Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement was signed simultaneously in New Delhi and Canberra by India's



Piyush Goyal addresses a joint press conference after taking part in the virtual signing ceremony of the India-Australia trade agreement with Australian Trade Minister Dan Tehan, in New Delhi on Saturday (AFP)

commerce minister Piyush Goyal and his Australian counterpart Dan Tehan in a joint ceremony.

India and Australia are "natural partners, connected by shared values of democracy, rule

of law and transparency", Goyal said. "Our relationship rests on the pillars of trust and reliability aptly reflected in our deepening geo-strategic engagement through the QUAD and the sup-

ply chain resilience initiative."

Two-way trade reached around US\$17bn last year, with resource-rich Australia exporting sheep meat, coal and other commodities, and India largely supplying services. At the same time Canberra's relations with its biggest trading partner China are at their lowest point in a generation, with many Australian goods hit with punitive sanctions and ministerial relations frozen.

Beijing has been angered at Australia's willingness to legislate against overseas influence operations, to bar Huawei from 5G contracts and to call for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.

AFP

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United Securities wins big at Top Brands and Sustainability Awards

The sultanate's leading Financial Investment Advisory and Securities business, United Securities (US) has won two prestigious accolades at the Oman Forum Sustainability Awards - presided over by H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation - and the Top Omani Brand Awards, held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said.

United Securities was recognised as a 'Top Omani Brand' in the Investments category and also bestowed with the 'Oman Forum Sustainability Award' for Leadership in Financial Investments at glitterati awards ceremonies organised at the Al Bustan Palace, press release said.

The Top Omani Brands and Sustainability Awards (Part of the Oman Forum) provide recognition and celebrate the achievements of Oman's leading business entities, shining the spotlight on those that build



smarter, more effective and more efficient brands and solutions.

The ceremonies recognise businesses who demonstrate a resolute commitment in the pursuit of business excellence and sustainability in their respective fields, contributing to the evolving business landscape in the sultanate and beyond.

Speaking on the sidelines of

the Awards ceremony, Mustafa Ahmed Salman, CEO of United Securities, said, "Our victory at both award ceremonies indicate that we are on the right track. We are delighted to have won them as they are a recognition of our leadership in the financial investment advisory and securities domain."

"I am very proud of the US team for continuously upholding

our commitment to the highest standard of work! It is our tradition of service excellence, sustainability and investment expertise at a regional and international level that continues to keep us in a strong position to play a pivotal role not only in our customers' growth, but at the forefront of the country's development as a global investment and trading hub."



ISD holds graduation ceremony 2021-22

Indian School Darsait organised a graduation ceremony for their outgoing batch of Class XII 2021-22 at a function held on March 27 in the Senior School auditorium, a press release said.

Vinoba M P, Senior Principal and Education Advisor, Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman, was the chief guest while Ajit Vasudevan, convenor and head, Academic and ICT Subcommittee, SMC, graced the function as the guest of honour. The graduation ceremony commenced with an invocation song, followed by the welcome address by Alexander Gee Varghese, vice principal, Senior section.

The Class Teachers of various sections of class 12 introduced their classes to the audience.

Benson Binu Philip and Niranjana Pramod Nair, head boy and head girl respectively enumerated their invaluable experiences and reflections. Representing their classes, Ria Thanmayee (12 A), Anna Clement (12 B), Saurav Vinod Nair (12 C) and Angel Maria Tarson (12 D) shared their reminiscences of rather an exclusive and most extraordinary learning mode that they have encountered.

Sebastian Chungath, president, School Management Committee, addressed the young minds to achieve great heights in any field, while remembering to be humane, to be considerate to the society, to take care of fellow citizens, and above all to be simple and humble. He further

thanked the parents for their support to achieve laurels and congratulated the graduates on this occasion and urged them to follow the path of justice at point in their lives.

Felicitating the students, Vinoba shared with the students the golden mantras of success and chosen anecdotes from his experience by confiding that he had a concept in life to work as a team to achieve success. He said, "Learning and hard work are the keys to success and are very much required for improving your professional career and life as there is no shortcut to it". He further encouraged the students to choose their career according to their passion and interest and with a right attitude.

Malabar Gold and Diamonds presents Studs & Drops Festival

Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one among the largest jewellery retailers globally with a strong retail network of over 280 outlets spread across ten countries, announced the 'Studs & Drops Festival', showcasing an extensive collection of earrings in gold, diamonds and precious gems, giving their customers a unique chance to view and own a diverse collection of earrings from over 20 countries. The festival will run until April 17.

Women often use earrings to complement their outfits and accentuate their style, preferring to always own an extensive collection. The jewellery chain presents a marvellous range of

earrings for today's woman, considering the different roles she plays, be it at work, home, celebrating special occasions or adding sparkle to just another ordinary moment in life, a press release said.

This exclusive festival offers a stunning collection of earrings in gold, diamonds, and precious gems designed and handcrafted by skilled artisans from around the world.

The customer gets to choose from hundreds of designs that are suitable to use as office wear, casual wear, party wear or bridal wear along with other international designs at affordable prices.

Lulu 'Shop and Win' three draws announced

Lulu has announced a set of winners of the first, second and third draws of its Shop and Win promotion which offers RO100,000 worth of cash prizes. The first-of-its-kind promotion, which coincides with pre-Ramadan shopping, had kicked off on March 10 and will continue till May 7, a press release said.

To be part of the promotion, customers have to spend RO10 at any Lulu stores to register for the e-Raffle draws. The promotion will give 281 customers the opportunity to win amazing cash prizes. There will be a Grand Prize of RO10,000 cash as well as weekly cash prizes of RO5000, RO750, RO500, RO200 and RO100.

The winners of the first three draws were selected through e-Raffle draws held on March 18,



25 and 30 at the Baushar, Darsait and Wadi Lawami outlets respectively. While, 105 winners were declared in these three draws, Hanan al Barwani, Mohamed Ismaeel al Dosawqi and Dipin E V won cash prizes of RO5000 each and Yousef al Farsi, Mohit Balani and Marvin

Lupa took home RO750 each. Nine winners each won RO500, 30 winners won RO200 and 60 others won RO100 each.

Speaking about the promotion, Shabeer K A, regional director - LuLu Hypermarkets Oman, said, "I congratulate the winners of the three draws of our Shop

and Win promotion. It's really heartening to see the warm response to the promotion so far. We have organised this promotion in time for Ramadan and the Eid to offer customers a more rewarding experience while shopping at Lulu. We hope our shoppers make use of all the of-

fers and deals available this Ramadan and Eid purchases too."

Shabeer remarked, "There are five more draws left for our customers to try their luck during this period. This will be the perfect time for customers to take home some valuable cash prizes too," he added.



Maserati Grecale fulfills order from Mars

Maserati is breaking the rules and fulfilling an order from Mars - a special textured metallic shade - is the result that goes beyond the boundaries of the Earth.

"A special Maserati for a special customer. Innovative by nature, Maserati has chosen the Fuoriserie Programme to create a unique model," a press release said.

Maserati Fuoriserie is a blank slate and the brand is offering a wide range of designs and colours for it. The rest falls to the inspiration of individual customers (Martians too!), who are given the opportunity to take on the stance of a trendsetter and to express their personal creativity.

The Mission from Mars has begun and the options to customise Grecale are pushed to their absolute limit. The red dust of the planet Mars and its oxi-

dised rocks cross-fertilise Grecale Mission from Mars - a special textured metallic shade - is paint inspired by mineral dust and metal erosion is used on components inside and out.

The exteriors are painted in Galactic Orange, a Fuoriserie interpretation of the bodywork in a multi-layered colour. Its highly liquid base is reminiscent of molten metal, on top of an intense, futuristic and almost frosted orange-red resin.

To complete the exterior, Grecale Mission from Mars features special Vortex Wheels. Not a mere customisation of the wheel rim from a chromatic perspective, but a genuine retelling of the mechanical processing of the material itself; its removal leaves behind a vortex design, recalling the displacement of air caused by start-up.

Vision Insurance opens branch in Wilayat of Sur



Vision Insurance opened a new branch in the Wilayat of Sur with a larger area and in a strategic location near Carrefour in order to facilitate its clients in the neighbouring regions and to benefit them from the company's insurance services

Essam Maslamani, CEO of the company, cut the ribbon of the new branch and gave a welcoming speech to the attendees, saying, "Providing the best insur-

ance products, services and offers to all our customers across the sultanate is our main goal, and our network of 17 branches plays a key role in achieving this goal.

With the transfer of the Sur branch to its new location, it allows us to maintain our commitment towards customers and segments of society in general to benefit from the advanced insurance services and

promotions offered by the company

He further said, "The solutions and services that Vision Insurance provides to its customers includes vehicle insurance policies, comprehensive and third party for individuals and companies, besides roadside assistance, alternative car, and instalments of the insurance amount for Bank Muscat credit card holders.

Indian embassy organises 'Sewa Utsav' service

As the Indian community worldwide celebrates 75 glorious years of India's independence under 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' with pride and joy, the Embassy of India, Muscat, has decided to celebrate this momentous occasion through community service.

The Embassy of India, in association with Indian Social Club, is organising several activities under a 'Community Service Fortnight' or 'Sewa Utsav 2022' to contribute to the local community during the holy month of Ramadan, a press release said.

The Sewa Utsav is inspired by the noble spirit of the holy month of Ramadan including spiritual reflection and helping others as well as the core Indian value of serving humanity.

It is an initiative of the Indian community under the aegis of the embassy to ex-

press gratitude and contribute to the local society in a positive way.

Several activities have been planned until April 16 under Sewa Utsav with the support of government of the Sultanate of Oman.

The Sewa Utsav will commence with a 'Happinez workshop' for Children with Special Needs.

The programme will focus on the need to pursue inclusive education to look after the interests and well being of children with special needs and highlight the important work being done in this regard by the Care and Special Education (CSE), a centre run with the support of Indian schools in Oman at the Indian School Muscat.

Children of Indian schools in Oman will also participate in activities on environment protection - a tree plantation drive, beach cleaning, and wadi cleaning.

Bank Muscat participates in SQU Career Fair

In line with its commitment to create rewarding internship and job opportunities for Omani youth, Bank Muscat is participating in the 22nd Career and Training Opportunities Fair organised by Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) from March 28 to 30.

The three-day annual event is being held with participation from 30 different institutions from both the government and private sectors under the patronage of Dr Nasser Musabab al Zidi, deputy vice chancellor For Administrative and Financial Affairs, a press release said.

Bank Muscat is keen to participate in the annual career fair organised by The Center for Career Guidance at SQU. As the nation's leading bank, Bank Muscat

attaches great importance to national initiatives, especially human resources development aimed at contributing to Oman's future. Investing in human resources and talent is the real wealth of the nation. Bank Muscat makes use of every opportunity to extend support to Omani nationals seeking career development and training opportunities by regularly participating at career fairs organized by leading educational institutions.

Throughout its 40 years journey, Bank Muscat has always seen its employees as its core strength and partners in various successes and accomplishments. Hence, the bank constantly invests resources and time to further develop their

skills and reach their peak potential. This in turn helps to retain talent. From the moment of joining, the bank provides suitable training and development opportunities to enable employees to perform to the best of their abilities.

The bank is also responsive to employee feedback and strives to ensure a professional work environment. It takes pride in the fact that it has achieved over 95% Omanisation and has an excellent gender ratio as over 48% of its employees are female. With over 3,800 employees, Bank Muscat is a dream employer for Omani youth, particularly those who are interested in the financial services sector.



Bank Nizwa leads way in Islamic Banking

As a leading and most trusted Islamic bank in the Sultanate of Oman, Bank Nizwa has reported robust growth across all parameters in its latest financial results for the year ended 31 December 2021.

Expanding its reach of innovative Shari'a-compliant products and services to customers across the sultanate, Bank Nizwa has successfully achieved a positive performance in 2021, whilst drawing the long-term strategic roadmap till the year 2025. The Bank's five-year business plan has been drawn keeping in mind the next phase of growth and expansion, aligned to the overall objectives of Oman Vision 2040, and promising increased returns

for the shareholders, a press release said.

Not only has the bank demonstrated utmost resilience during the pandemic, but has also attested to it with steady financial performance, surpassing the market expectations. It has recorded a net profit of RO12.52mn, indicating a 13 per cent growth after tax for the period ended 31 December 2021, compared to RO11.067mn in the same period in 2020.

The bank's total assets also grew by 16 per cent to reach RO1,404,173n compared to RO1,206,259mn in the preceding year. Upholding its commitment to expanding its customer base, the bank's customer deposit

portfolio increased by 20 per cent to RO1,109,383mn against RO924,208mn on a year-on-year basis, whereas the bank's financing to customers rose by 13 per cent to RO1,146,497mn for the year ending 31 December 2021 compared to RO1,014,605mn in 2020.

During the Annual General Ordinary Meeting of Bank Nizwa, the proposal of distributing cash dividends to shareholders at a rate of 3.5% of the issued capital of the bank (at a rate of 3.44 baisas per share) was approved. In addition, the new board members have been elected, including Sheikh Khalid al Khalili, Musabab al Muta'iri, Sayyid Amjad al Bussaidi, Sheikh Saif al Mawali,

Sheikh Majid al Mamri, Hussain al Shalwani, Ishaq al Mawali, Atif al Siyabi, Saleem al Raisi. Following the Annual Ordinary General Meeting, the new elected board of directors met and elected Sheikh Khalid Abdullah al Khalili as a chairman, Musbah Saif al Muta'iri as vice chairman, and Tariq Mohammed Othman as board secretary.

Commenting on the bank's extraordinary performance, Khalili said, "Our financial results for the year 2021 demonstrated the underlying strengths and resilience of our business. We are proud of the momentous year as Bank Nizwa reached key milestones despite the economic challenges."

Shell Oman opens first service station in Liwa

Motorists on Batinah Expressway can now enjoy high-quality Shell fuels and services in the wilayat of Liwa.

The opening of the first service station on Batinah Expressway in Liwa marks the first of four Shell service stations planned on the expressway, a press release said.

While more facilities and services will be rolled out in due course, customers of Shell Liwa Service Stations on Batinah Expressway can already fill their vehicles with Shell fuels, including Shell V-Power, and be part of Shell's latest campaign Win Big with Shell to win two MG cars and eight Shell V-Power fuel cards which will continue until May 20.

Shell Liwa Expressway service station is the first among four mega integrated Shell service stations that are slated to open on this key highway in 2022, in alignment with an earlier agreement signed between Shell Oman Marketing Company and the Ministry of Housing & Urban



Development. Shell Oman will open another two 15,000sqm expressway stations in Suwaiq and a 30,000 sqm expressway station in Saham.

Commenting on the opening, Khalid al Awaisi - Mobility country manager, Shell Oman Marketing Company, said, "As the first fully integrated service station on the Batinah Expressway, the Shell Liwa Expressway service station is a huge milestone for

us and serves as an integral part of the company's expansion plan. The Batinah Expressway enhances connectivity and provides a vital link between the various logistics hubs, industrial projects, and economic zones in the region. Being the very first service station on the Batinah Expressway, the Shell Liwa Expressway service station also holds critical value for motorists on the route."

Ahlibank's new account offers chance to multiply money

Amplifying its mission to create unrivalled avenues that meet customer needs, ahlibank has introduced the 'Daily Multiplier Account', called 'Wafra plus', which will provide its new and existing customers an exclusive opportunity to multiply their money - everyday.

With 24X7 cash management via digital channels or branch network, customers will not only enjoy unlimited transactions, but also supplement their savings with the addition of competitive benefits that is compounded and paid each day. Accordingly, benefits will be made available as withdrawal or compounded benefits in customers' accounts, a press release said.

"The new account has been devised as a platform to secure and build our customers' savings accounts. Simply put, it will multiply their money on a daily basis, allowing them to earn bonus benefits. This is a significant landmark in our strong growth trajectory, and it reflects our commitment to create and implement products and services that are truly relevant to our customers. We believe in engaging with our customers across various platforms to assess their changing requirements and, accordingly, incentivise our products to match their pulse and financial attitudes," said Muneer



al Balushi, AGM - head of Retail Distribution.

The 'Daily Multiplier Account, Wafra plus', launched under Ahlibank's popular brand name 'Wafra', will allow Ahlibank customers to earn benefits, on daily basis.

Designed as a convenient and easy to maintain service, it will enhance customers' financial strengths with not just the provision of unlimited withdrawals, but the inherent savings culture it promotes. The prefix of 'Daily' on the product reflects the Bank's intent to integrate the concept of financial competency among its customers, who now stand to earn more on a daily basis.

Highlighting Ahlibank's quest to constantly upgrade its prod-

ucts and services, Balushi added, "Our cadre of responsive managers and professionals are attuned to the market trends and rely on constructive feedback from our customers to conceptualise and implement innovative products that reflect the changing environment. Besides, every customer is different and, as an institution of excellence, we know the importance of tailoring products that cater to specific segments of the society. We believe innovation is the key to progress and our 'Daily Multiplier Account' is symbolic of that growth. We urge our account holders and potential customers to avail this exclusive opportunity to build their finances and enjoy the peace and security that it entails."

DECCAN CHARGERS CHAMPIONS WIN TELANGANA TOURNNEY



The Telangana community in Oman organised a cricket tournament under the patronage of K Chandrasekhkar Rao, chief minister of Telangana. Eight teams competed in the tournament and the final match was played between Deccan Challengers and Deccan Chargers Champions. The tournament was won by Deccan Chargers Champions.

Avani Muscat offers space for varied events

A new leader for business and leisure events in Muscat has emerged, as Avani Muscat Hotel's 720 square metre ballroom, two state of the art meeting rooms, and private majlis create the perfect spaces to host occasions of any type and size.

Large scale conferences, product and car launches, weddings, and celebrations are a natural fit for Avani Muscat's modern ballroom where up to 900 people can be hosted. Divisible into smaller spaces, indoor



and outdoor pre-function areas, and a bridal suite, this dynamic ballroom space can be adapted to fit any event, a press release said.

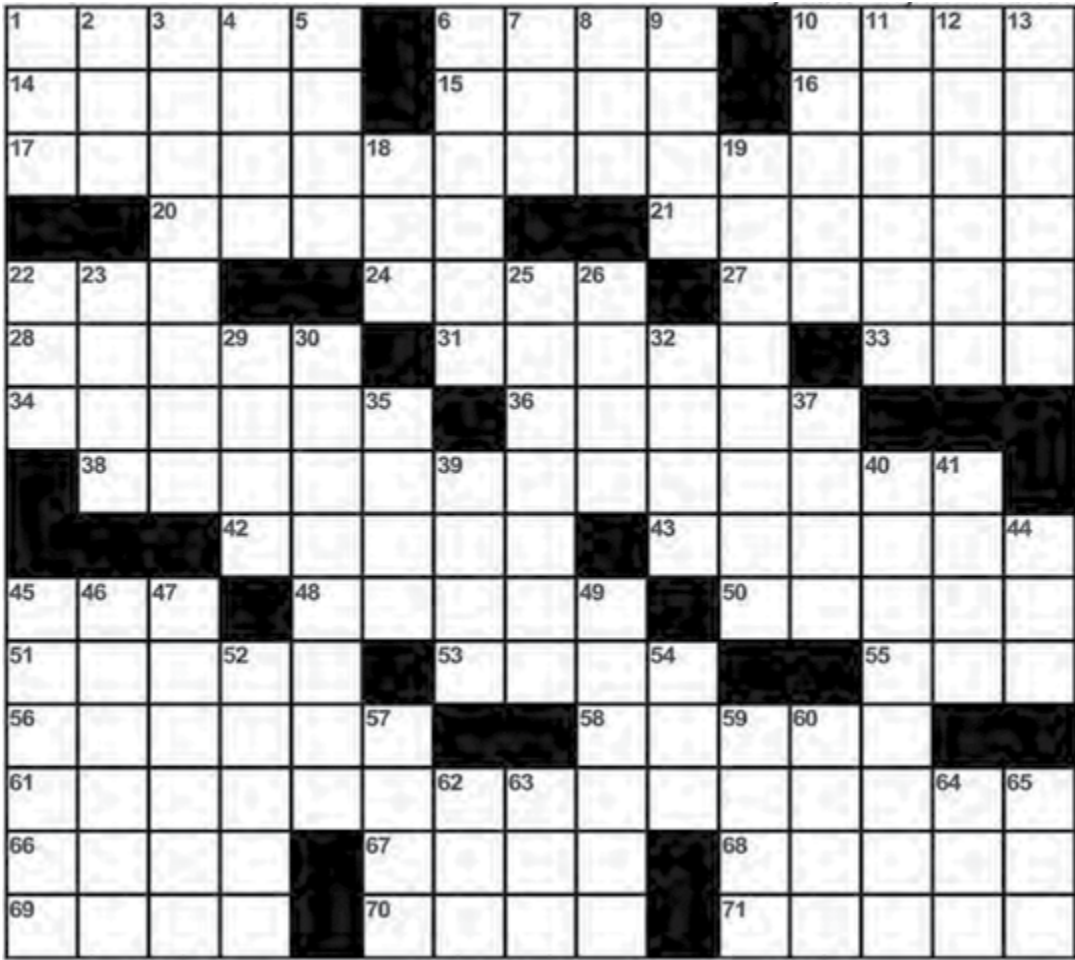
Around 540 people in ban-

quet style or up to 126 in a boardroom setting can be comfortably accommodated for talking, eating, dancing, laughing, or learning. Just 15 minutes from Muscat International Airport with spa-

cious parking and 206 hotel rooms and apartments, Avani Muscat is the new convenient destination for guests and delegates travelling locally, regionally, or globally.

Two more intimate meeting rooms able to accommodate up to 36 are ideal for interviews, seminars, board meetings, or smaller social events. As with the ballroom, each space comes with the latest AV technology and presentation equipment and offers adaptable layouts to suit any event.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Cassettes, e.g.
6) Cain's brother check
10) Plants a butt
14) As a whole
15) _ Scotia
16) Insanity, in a courtroom
17) 3 5 ...
20) Matronly address
21) Some abdominal exercises
22) Bedazzle
24) Minor fight
27) Examine a patient again
28) Shower alternatives
31) Close to identical
33) "To_ is human ... "
34) Involve
36) Santa_ (California track)
38) 10 ...
42) Passed crookedly, as a check
43) Big name in hogs
45) _ Sec.
48) Harvest wool
50) Dusty chasers
51) Land for development

53) Many have gray underneath
55) " ... for what_ worth"
56) Imprisoned, e.g.
58) King topper
61) 100 ...
66) Fall lead-in?
67) Miscellaneous mix
68) Prophetic deck
69) "Auld Lang_."
70) Bread from a tandoor
71) Kind of house or glasses

DOWN

1) Singer McGraw
2) "The Phantom Menace" boy, briefly
3) South Carolina's state tree
4) "Enchanted" girl in a 2004 film
5) Was an aggressive baserunner
6) Lack of vigor
7) Automaton, briefly
8) The day before
9) "_ and the Real Girl" (2007 film)
10) Deliberately annoy
11) Mistreat
12) Type of tantrum

13) Backtalker
18) Thing to get pinned on
19) Arson's easy target
22) Mr. Lincoln, briefly
23) Magician's prop
25) June 14 U.S. celebration
26) Fish appendages
29) It preys overhead
30) Ominous
32) _ and kin (friends and relatives)
35) "Mono" attachment
37) Start for "dynamic"
39) Require
40) Town in "Hamlet"
41) Word with "road" or "hearing"
44) "Affirmative"
45) Trees no more
46) Cantankerous
47) Long-sleeved garment
49) Judge to be probable
52) Home of the Minotaur's labyrinth
54) Jrs.' elders
57) Black, in verse
59) "The Iron

Chancellor" Bismarck
60) End of a film shooting
62) Pie_ mode

63) Spy agency
64) Split Asian peninsula (Abbr.)
65) Posting at JFK

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You certainly don't like to be lectured to, so you should understand that no one else does either. Make sure you stay off the soapbox today. If you've been having great success with a new diet or savings plan, good for you. The people in your life are very happy for you! But don't assume that they want to know all your secrets, and definitely they want your advice on their own challenges. Don't project your goals onto others.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Extravagance will be very entertaining today, so go for broke whenever you can! Go ahead and ask for that upgrade, buy that frivolous luxury item, or even just treat yourself to something delicious. This isn't the time to restrict yourself when it comes to material goods. Hunt for bargains some other time. As long as you keep your financial reality in mind, you should feel comfortable about splurging a bit today.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Being open-minded is like eating on a regular basis: It's essential to a healthy existence. Right now your open-mindedness might be tested. How do you handle something that even to your very open mind seems totally out-there? Do you ignore it? Engage with it? Doubt yourself? Don't forget that trust in your own judgment plus a healthy dose of scepticism, a dash of self-doubt, and a lot of humility is usually a good approach.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

There's no question that people are important to each other, but for you, people are really, really important. You draw strength and energy from interactions, though, of course, they can be draining too. It's imperative for you to be engaged in a peopled world in order to feel fulfilled. So take a look at just how fulfilled you feel (or don't feel) right now. An idea or two for how to improve things will likely occur to you.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You care about the fish in the sea and the creepy crawly creatures on the earth and the big bears and the giant whales and your fellow humans in a genuine way. You're willing to make adjustments in your life like riding a bike to work and using less electricity if it will help keep the oceans and the environment a better place for everyone. But why not research a few new ways you could help?

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Whether you help your elderly neighbour carry groceries or you volunteer at the animal shelter, you always feel best if you're giving of yourself. There are thousands of opportunities to volunteer, and by taking any one of them you'll be making a big difference in your community. And this will make a big difference in how you feel about yourself.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you've been struggling with a relationship for a little while now, today could be a turning point. It's hard to say why something shifts between two people, but one of those tension-easing changes is poised to take place. Take a deep breath and you might even notice that the difference isn't so much in them or your duo's dynamic; it's more like a shift is taking place within you. So go ahead and try again with this person.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Bragging has gotten a bum rap. And yes, it isn't cool to go on and on about your accomplishments. But if you feel that you've done something good, then share it with the people who care about you! If you simply state the facts about what you did and then confess that you're pretty proud of yourself, everyone will rejoice. Imagine that your best friend reached one of their goals. Wouldn't you beam with pride?

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Few things taste worse than sour grapes, as you know from experience. Luckily, you're on your way to understanding the futility of jealousy. So you won't have any problem applauding the performance of a peer or friendly rival today. Good for you! Keep an eye out for someone who could benefit from your philosophy. Someone else's envy will be obvious, and it could create drama if you don't hush this person up.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Try not to laugh too loudly today when a self-described intellectual says something pretty darn stupid. It just goes to show you that no one knows everything and anyone can look silly if the circumstances are right. Let this experience serve as a cautionary lesson to you. Don't make public statements about things you aren't really familiar with. Everyone has the right to an opinion. Just make sure that yours are informed ones.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Patience is a virtue, but it isn't necessarily one of yours. Don't feel too bad about it, though. Impatience can be a virtue too, one that prevents you from letting things stall out or go undone. But right now it's patience that you need to cultivate. Yes, sometimes it really is the only way to go. So get started being patient, and don't be discouraged if it takes a while. Sometimes the going is a little slow!

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your life has involved many compromises, which have created greater harmony and strengthened your bonds with friends, family, and partner. But not everyone feels that making compromises has been so enriching, as you will see all too clearly today. Someone with a big selfish streak could come into your life. When they say, 'It's my way or the highway', you should be prepared to hit the road.

Answers: 1.C 2.B 3.C

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

M	A	D	E
R	R	S	T
C	B	P	D
A	U	O	T

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

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

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

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

'Russian forces pull back from north around Kyiv'

Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine - Ukraine on Saturday said Russian forces were making a 'rapid retreat' from northern areas around the capital Kyiv and the city of Chernigiv as the Red Cross prepared for a fresh evacuation effort from the besieged southern port of Mariupol.

Ukraine said Russian forces were concentrating in the east and south, a day after thousands of people from Mariupol and surrounding Russian-held areas escaped in a convoy of buses and private cars. "Russia is prioritising a different tactic: falling back on the east and south," Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhaylo Podolyak said on social media.

He said that while Russian forces appeared to be pulling back from Kyiv and Chernigiv, their aim was to 'control a vast stretch of occupied territory and set up there in a powerful way'.

Podolyak said Russian forces would 'dig in there, set up air defence, drastically reduce losses and dictate terms. Moscow's aim was to 'drastically reduce losses & dictate terms', he said on Twitter on Saturday. "Without heavy weapons we won't be able to drive (Russia) out."

'Our city doesn't exist anymore'
Mariupol has been an important Ukrainian hold-out, suffering weeks of Russian shelling, with at least 5,000 residents killed, local



A Ukrainian soldier takes pictures of a Russian tank, in the outskirts of Kyiv, on Friday, amid Russian invasion (AFP)

officials said.

The estimated 160,000 who remain face shortages of food, water and electricity. "We have managed to rescue 6,266 people, including 3,071 people from Mariupol," Zelensky said in a video address on Saturday.

Dozens of buses carrying Mariupol residents who had escaped the devastated city arrived on Friday in Zaporizhzhia, 200km to the northwest, according to an AFP reporter on the scene.

The buses carried people who had been able to flee Mariupol to Russian-occupied Berdiansk.

"We were crying when we reached this area. We were crying when we saw soldiers at the checkpoint with Ukrainian crests on their arms," said Olena, who carried her young daughter in her arms.

"My house was destroyed. I saw it in photos. Our city doesn't exist anymore."

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said its

team headed to Mariupol to try and conduct an evacuation was forced to turn back on Friday after 'arrangements and conditions made it impossible to proceed'. The ICRC said it would try again on Saturday.

New US aid

Peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow resumed via video on Friday, but the Kremlin warned that what it described as a helicopter attack on a fuel depot inside Russia would hamper

negotiations.

"This is not something that can be perceived as creating comfortable conditions for the continuation of negotiations," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

The air strike hit energy giant Rosneft's fuel storage facility in Belgorod, 40km from the Ukraine border.

But Kyiv would not be drawn on whether it was behind the attack, with Zelensky telling US network Fox News: "I'm sorry, I

do not discuss any of my orders as commander in chief."

He said Russia was consolidating and preparing 'powerful strikes' in the east and south, joining Western assessments that Moscow's troops were regrouping, not withdrawing.

Zelensky repeated his plea for the West to provide greater military support.

"Just give us missiles. Give us airplanes," he told Fox. "You cannot give us F-18 or F-19 or whatever you have? Give us the old

Soviet planes. That's all... Give me something to defend my country with."

The Pentagon later said it was allotting US\$300mn in 'security assistance' to bolster Ukraine's defence capabilities, adding to the US\$1.6bn Washington has committed since Russia invaded in late February.

A ferocious Ukrainian fight-back and Russia's logistics and tactical problems have hampered Russian efforts and there is growing concern inside the country as military losses mount.

Russia on Friday launched its annual military draft but vowed that conscripts would not be sent to fight in Ukraine.

Referring to the draft, Zelensky urged Russian families not to send their children to war.

"Don't let them join the army. It's not their war. We don't need any more deaths," he said.

Civilians have trickled out of devastated areas after arduous and daring escapes.

Three-year-old Karolina Tkachenko and her family walked an hour through a field strewn with burnt-out Russian armoured vehicles to flee their village outside Kyiv.

"The shops are closed, there's no delivery of supplies. The bridge is also blown up, we can't go for groceries through there," said Karolina's mother Karina Tkachenko.

AFP

China denies working to circumvent Russia sanctions

Beijing, China - China said on Saturday it was not doing anything 'to circumvent' sanctions imposed on Russia, following warnings from EU officials that any attempt to aid Moscow's war in Ukraine could damage economic ties.

In the clearest indication yet of Beijing's position on the matter, a foreign ministry official told reporters: "We are not doing anything deliberately to circumvent sanctions imposed on Russia by Americans and Europeans."

But the statement, delivered after virtual talks between top EU and Chinese leaders on Friday, comes as Beijing holds to its stance of refusing to condemn the invasion by its ally Russia.

Washington has raised fears that China could potentially send military and economic aid to Russia or help it get through the tough Western sanctions which are battering the country's economy.

"We oppose sanctions and



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (left) meeting his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Huangshan in China on March 30 (AFP)

the effects of these sanctions also risk spilling to the rest of the world," said Wang Lutong, director-general of the Chinese foreign ministry's department of European affairs, at a press briefing.

Top EU officials warned China's leader Xi Jinping at a virtual summit a day earlier that any attempt to aid Russia's war could hurt ties between the two economic superpowers, adding that the business sector is closely watching events.

The talks with President Xi - initially intended to focus on issues such as trade and climate change - were overshadowed by Western fears of Chinese support for Moscow in its attack on Ukraine.

In the face of European warnings, however, Wang said China's normal trade with Moscow 'should not be affected'.

"Even Europe has been conducting normal business with Russians," he said.

AFP

'Russian soldiers likely exposed to radiation'

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russian soldiers were likely exposed to radiation while they were occupying the area around the Chernobyl nuclear power station over the past four weeks, Ukrainian officials said on Friday.

Vehicles used by Russian forces would have raised radioactive dust clouds and soldiers also dug trenches in the most contaminated part of the site, Ukraine's nuclear agency Energoatom said.

The power station, the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986, was taken back under the control of Ukrainian forces on Thursday as Russia withdrew from areas north of the capital Kyiv. "All the equipment at the Chernobyl power station is functioning. The control and radiation monitoring systems function as usual," power station chief Valery Seida said in a statement. But he said the soldiers may have been exposed.

"The thick dust that their vehicles raised into the air and the radioactive particles it contains can easily penetrate into the Russians' organism through their



A Maxar satellite image shows an overview of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine (AFP)

lungs," Seida said.

Since they also dug trenches in the area, 'it is entirely possible that they have been exposed to considerable levels of radiation', Energoatom said.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general Rafael Grossi said on Friday the agency had no confirmation of such reports and added that 'the general radiation situation around the plant is quite normal'.

However, he added the Russian withdrawal might have led to

higher levels of 'localised radiation' due to the movement of heavy vehicles, as was the case when Russia seized the site.

On Thursday the agency said it was 'seeking further information in order to provide an independent assessment' of the reports that troops may have been contaminated.

Speaking to reporters in Vienna after a trip to Ukraine and Russia where he held talks with officials from both sides, Grossi also said the agency had 'agreed

separately with Russia and with Ukraine' on plans to send assistance missions to Ukrainian nuclear facilities.

Russia's capture of Chernobyl in the early days of its invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, raised worldwide fears over nuclear leaks.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters in Warsaw that Russia had shown 'irresponsibility' in its actions around Chernobyl.

AFP

Shanghai parents fear separation from kids after positive COVID test

Shanghai, China - Nearly all of Shanghai's 25mn residents were under stay-at-home orders on Saturday, as parents raised fears of being separated from their children in the event of a positive COVID-19 test.

The city, which is the epicentre of China's most severe coronavirus outbreak since the first months of the pandemic, has faced weeks of phased lockdowns. Authorities had vowed not to shut down the whole city, China's finance hub, but have conceded to rare failures in their attempts to control the outbreak.

On Saturday, Shanghai had over 6,300 local cases - more than two-thirds of the nationwide caseload, which is relatively low by global standards but troubling to a country that recorded double-digit daily cases for much of the last two years.

Over 14mn residents were

tested on Friday, state media reported. But the testing regime has seeded anxiety among parents about being separated from their children.

"My daughter is not yet four-months-old but if she tests positive then she'll be quarantined by herself," a resident in the populous Puxi area, west of the Huangpu river, told AFP.

"This is totally impossible to understand. No matter the circumstances, a newborn should never be separated from their parents," the 33-year-old, who gave his surname as Law, said.

Shanghai will offer 'timely support to juveniles' left unattended due to reasons such as their parents being infected with COVID, Zeng Qun, deputy head of the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, said according to state media outlet Xinhua.

Those left at home will be al-



Health workers wearing personal protective gear walk next to a residential compound during the second stage of a COVID-19 lockdown in Jing'an district in Shanghai on Friday. (AFP)

lotted a 'temporary guardian' or transferred to institutions 'for juvenile protection for special care', the report said.

Anger and fear rising

Anger is rising among Shanghai residents over lockdowns that were initially billed for four days

to mass-test the city, but now appear likely to drag into late next week or longer.

An initial four-day shutdown

of Pudong, the eastern half of the financial hub, was meant to lapse on Friday. But most of its residents are still confined, as complex quarantine rules mean any block with a virus case will have to be locked down for up to two weeks.

Residents in the city's western half - Puxi - were ordered to stay home from Friday, meaning almost all of Shanghai's population is currently quarantined.

"I'm worried both parts of the city will end up remaining closed for a while," a Puxi resident named Wang told AFP.

Fear is rising in Shanghai, with residents complaining of a lack of fresh food while the city's health resources are stretched.

There are over 1,500 people in a city exhibition hall that has been converted into a quarantine centre.

An unverified audio clip circu-

lating on social media on Saturday purportedly showed a health official telling a resident that state quarantines were full.

While China has managed to quash most of its domestic virus clusters, the highly infectious Omicron variant has piled pressure on the country's zero-COVID strategy.

Shanghai's restrictions threaten to snarl supply chains, with shipping giant Maersk saying on Friday that some depots in the city remain closed and trucking services will likely be hit further due to the lockdown.

Organisers of mega motor show Auto China 2022 said on Saturday that the event in Beijing this month would be postponed over the 'widespread and frequent occurrence' of COVID outbreaks in many parts of China.

AFP

Israelis kill three Palestinian fighters as violence spirals

Jerusalem - Israeli security forces killed three Islamic fighters when they came under fire on Saturday during a raid in the West Bank, police said, the latest deaths in a surge of violence.

The bloodshed comes amid heightened tensions ahead of the start of the holy Muslim month of Ramadan, that has seen violence spiral in Israel and the occupied West Bank.

Last year during Ramadan, clashes that flared between Israeli forces and Palestinians visiting Al-Aqsa mosque in annexed east Jerusalem led to 11 days of devastating conflict between Israel and the Gaza Strip's Islamist rulers Hamas.

On Saturday, Israeli police said security forces killed three members of the Islamic fighters Jihad militant group who had opened fire during an operation to arrest them near the northern West Bank city of Jenin.

Four Israeli soldiers were wounded during the operation, one of them seriously, the police said.

The Israeli forces had intercepted 'a fighter cell on its way to an attack, and stopped the car in which they were travelling between Jenin and Tulkarem', the police said in a statement.

The Islamic group confirmed the three deaths.

"We mourn the death of our three hero fighters," the armed wing of Islamist movement said, adding that two of them



Palestinians help a fellow protester who was reportedly shot in the foot amid clashes with Israeli security forces, during a demonstration marking Land Day in Bilin village in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on Friday (AFP)

were from Jenin and one from Tulkarem.

Hamas said the Israeli approach would fail.

"The enemy's policy of assassination in the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem will not provide it with so-called security," Hamas said.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid warned in a tweet on Saturday that the security forces would 'act forcefully against any attempted attack' on citizens of the Jewish state.

Saturday's clash is the latest in a spate of bloody violence in Israel and the West Bank since March 22.

IS-linked attacks

On Friday, Israeli forces shot dead a 29-year-old Palestinian during clashes in the West Bank city of Hebron, the Palestinian health ministry said.

The Palestinian Wafa news agency named him as Ahmad al-Atrash, who it said was taking part in a protest against Israeli settlements and had previously served six years in an Israeli prison.

The Israeli army said that during a 'riot' in Hebron, 'a suspect hurled a Molotov cocktail' at soldiers, who 'responded with live fire'.

Hebron, the biggest city in the

West Bank, is home to about 1,000 Jewish residents living under heavy Israeli military protection, among more than 200,000 Palestinians.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said 70 people were wounded in Friday's clashes with the Israeli army in the Nablus area of the northern West Bank.

On Thursday, Israeli security forces raided Jenin after three fatal attacks rocked the Jewish state, leading to clashes in which two Palestinians were killed, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

Elsewhere in the West Bank on the same day, a Palestinian

man who stabbed and seriously wounded an Israeli civilian with a screwdriver on a bus was shot dead south of the city of Bethlehem. The violence followed an attack on Tuesday night in Bnei Brak, an Orthodox Jewish city near Tel Aviv.

A Palestinian with an M-16 assault rifle killed two Israeli civilians, two Ukrainian nationals and an Israeli-Arab policeman.

A total of 11 people have been killed in anti-Israeli attacks since March 22, including some carried out for the first time by assailants linked to or inspired by the Islamic State group.

AFP

NASA begins critical final test on mega Moon rocket

Washington, US - NASA on Friday began a critical two-day-long test of its giant Space Launch System (SLS) rocket complete with a simulated countdown, as the agency gears up to return humans to the Moon. Known as the 'wet dress rehearsal', it is the final major test before the Artemis-1 mission this summer: an uncrewed lunar flight that will eventually be followed by boots on the ground, likely no sooner than 2026.

"The countdown is now underway," NASA said in its Artemis blog at 5pm Eastern Time (2100 GMT), confirming members of the launch control team had been issued their 'call to stations'. Data from the test, which ends Sunday mid-afternoon, will be used to finalize a launch date for Artemis 1. NASA had said May could be the first window, but later now seems likely.

It is called a 'wet' dress rehearsal because supercooled liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen will be loaded into SLS from ground systems, just as they would be in a real launch.

The 98-metre rocket - expected to be the most powerful in history at the time it is operational - was rolled out to Launch Complex 39B at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida around two weeks ago.

Teams are now filling up a sound suppression system with water that is used to dampen acoustic energy during lift-off. They will continue

to practice every operation that would be carried out in a real launch.

Come Sunday morning, with the SLS rocket and Orion crew capsule fixed atop both powered on, they will load up 700,000 gallons (2.6 million liters) of propellant.

They won't actually ignite the rocket's RS-25 engines, which were tested previously. Instead they will halt the countdown about 10 seconds before liftoff, in order to simulate a 'scrub', when launch is aborted due to technical or weather related issues.

The fuel will be drained, and a few days later SLS and Orion will be rolled back to the vehicle assembly building to carry out checks on how everything went. Test milestones will be posted on NASA's blog for the Artemis mission, and the public might be able to glimpse the rocket venting vapour on the launch pad on April 3, during tanking operations, on the agency's YouTube channel.

On Monday, agency officials plan to hold a press conference to give further information. NASA won't however let the public listen to live internal audio. Senior NASA official Tom Whitmeyer explained this was because certain key information, including timing sequences, could assist other countries looking to develop long range missiles.

AFP



Forces loyal to Yemen's Houthi rebels take part in a military parade in the capital Sanaa, on Thursday (AFP)

War-torn Yemen holds breath for two-month truce

Sana, Yemen - The UN said Yemen's warring parties are set to lay down their weapons for the first nationwide truce since 2016 on Saturday with all eyes on whether the UN-brokered ceasefire will hold.

The Iran-backed Houthi rebels and Saudi-led coalition have both agreed to observe the two-month truce, which is to take effect at 1600 GMT on the first day of Ramadan.

Yemen's intractable war has killed hundreds of thousands directly or indirectly and displaced millions, triggering the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations.

Previous ceasefires have been ineffective. A national truce ahead of peace talks in April 2016 was violated almost immediately, as were other ceasefires that year. A 2018 agreement to cease hostilities around rebel-held Hodeida port, a lifeline for the Arab world's poorest country, was also largely ignored.

Both the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have welcomed the latest initiative, which follows a surge in attacks but also increasing diplomacy including ongoing talks - snubbed by the rebels - in Riyadh. "This time I am optimistic. This truce is unlike all the previous ones," Asmaa Zayed, a

college student who also works as a cashier in Hodeida, told AFP.

"The fact it comes with Ramadan gives us a lot of hope. This war started when I was 15 years old and turned all my dreams into nightmares."

Under the agreement, all ground, air and sea military operations in Yemen and across its borders would stop, UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said in his announcement.

Fuel ships would be allowed into Hodeida port and commercial flights could resume to certain regional destinations from the airport in the Houthi-held capital Sanaa - both key demands of the insurgents before they consider peace talks.

The two sides have also agreed to meet to open roads in Tazeer and other governorates, Grundberg said, adding the truce could be renewed with their consent. "All Yemeni women, men and children that have suffered immensely through over seven years of war expect nothing less than an end to this war," said the Swedish diplomat.

With fighting in Yemen at a stalemate, the Houthis launched a series of drone-and-missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and coalition partner the UAE this year.

AFP

After crisis, Spain's right-wing PP appoints new leader

Seville, Spain-Spain's opposition Popular Party (PP) on Saturday appointed Alberto Nunez Feijoo as leader in the hope the calm, experienced moderate with a pragmatic outlook will return the right-wing faction to power.

After 13 years governing Galicia in northwestern Spain with an impressive track record of four absolute majorities, the party is hoping the 60-year-old will be able to translate his regional success to a national level.

"I have come here to win and to govern," he told delegates on Friday at a two-day party conference in the southern city of Seville to appoint him.

The Galician leader is the only candidate running to take over from Pablo Casado, who was



Alberto Nunez Feijoo hugs Member of the Ukrainian Parliament Yelyzaveta Oleksiyivna Yasko in Seville on Saturday (AFP)

edged out following a bitter internal dispute with one of the party's rising stars. When he took over as PP chief in July 2018, Casado was a young hardliner who promised to breathe new life into a party snarled in corrup-

tion and bleeding votes.

But barely four years later, the 41-year-old was left fighting for his political life after a very public confrontation with Isabel Diaz Ayuso, whose success as Madrid regional leader threw his own

lacklustre leadership into sharp relief.

Casado told the gathering on Friday that he was giving up his seat in parliament and quitting all 'positions of responsibility' in the PP. "It is best if I step aside," he said.

Two former PP prime ministers also spoke at the two-day gathering: Jose Maria Aznar, who was premier between 1996-2004, and Rajoy, who served between 2011-2018.

Both urged party members to rally around Feijoo.

"I ask everyone for the greatest unity and the clearest support for this new stage of our party," said Aznar speaking by video link because he has COVID-19.

Feijoo v. Vox and the Socialists

Feijoo is the only one of Spain's regional leaders to govern with an absolute majority in a region where the Socialists pose no threat and the far-right party Vox has made no headway despite its growing popularity across Spain.

But at a national level, the scene is the opposite, and Feijoo will have to contend with a Socialist-led government, its hard-left partner Podemos and Vox in the ascendancy.

During his political career, Feijoo has steered clear of scandal, despite the emergence of photos from mid-90s showing his friendship with a cigarette smuggler later jailed for drug trafficking.

AFP

Macron holds first rally as France election race tightens

Paris, France - President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday will hold his first rally of the French election campaign, with far-right rival Marine Le Pen eating into what once seemed his unassailable lead barely a week ahead of the ballot.

The centrist Macron threw his hat into the election ring at the last moment and has been distracted by the war in Ukraine, conducting diplomacy from the Elysee while Le Pen paces the country to discuss basic issues, including purchasing power.

With the first round of elections on April 10 - followed by a run-off on April 24 - polls have shown Le Pen comfortably in second place in the initial stage and narrowing the gap on Macron for round two.

Macron's 1230 GMT rally before an expected crowd of 35,000 at the indoor La Defense Arena stadium - a vast venue that usually hosts top-level rugby and rock concerts - represents a pivotal chance for the president



The first round of the French presidential election is to take place on April 10 and the second one on April 24. (AFP)

to regain momentum.

He will make his appearance more 'physical' than traditional rallies, according to his campaign team, requiring an 'energetic presence' on stage.

He will address his supporters for an hour or more, it said.

The latest Elabe poll published on Saturday showed Le Pen garnering 47 per cent of the vote in a second-round run-off against Macron, who was projected to win 53 per cent.

Allowing for a margin of error in the poll, this could put Le Pen in the zone to snatch victory.

"Of course Marine Le Pen can win," Macron's former prime minister Edouard Philippe warned in an interview with the *Le Parisien* daily posted online on Thursday.

Philippe, who is backing Macron, added that 'if she wins, believe me, things will be seriously different for the country... Her programme is dangerous.'

'Possible to defeat Macron'

Le Pen, who lost to Macron in the 2017 polls run-off, has sought to moderate her image in the last half decade in a process helped by the emergence of Eric Zemmour as a fellow candidate in the far-right. While Zemmour risks taking votes from Le Pen in the first round, his more radical stances in immigration and Islam have helped her project a more mainstream image.

"We feel it on the ground, there is a great dynamic, a hope that is emerging as the campaign nears its end," she said on a visit to eastern France on Friday.

"What people said was the automatic re-election of Emmanuel Macron turned out to be fake news. It is perfectly possible to defeat Emmanuel Macron and radically change the politics of this country," she added.

But the first round risks being a disaster for The Republicans - the traditional right-wing party that was the political home of ex-presidents such as Nicolas Sarkozy and Jacques Chirac.

Their candidate Valerie Pécresse is projected by most polls to be vying with Zemmour for fourth place after failing to find momentum in the campaign.

Her big chance to ignite her bid will be at a rally Sunday in southern Paris. But the *Le Parisien* daily reported that Sarkozy would be staying away in a major snub to her campaign.

AFP

Sri Lanka under 36-hour nationwide curfew

The country deploys troops with sweeping new powers under a state of emergency to quell protests

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka declared a 36-hour nationwide curfew on Saturday and deployed troops backed with sweeping new powers under a state of emergency to quell protests against the president, his relatives and even his most trusted shaman.

The lockdown will go into effect at dusk on Saturday and be lifted on Monday morning, police said - a period that covers planned mass anti-government protests against worsening shortages of fuel, food and medicines. The order came a day after President Gotabaya Rajapaksa invoked a state of emergency following a violent attempt to storm his house, saying it was for the 'protection of public order'.

The ire of a mob in the near-bankrupt country was directed on Saturday at a woman identified as a soothsayer frequently consulted by Rajapaksa in the northern town of Anuradhapura.

Rights activist and former opposition legislator Hirunika Premachandra led dozens of women to storm seer Gnana Akka's shrine and residence, but



A pedestrian walks past soldiers standing on guard along a street in Colombo on Saturday (AFP)

armed police stopped them.

"Why are police protecting a shaman?" she asked a senior officer who physically blocked her march, as seen on a Facebook

live video, verified by AFP as authentic. "Thief, thief, Gota thief," the crowds chanted after armed security personnel stopped them.

"Think of the country and let us pass," another woman activist pleaded.

'#GoHomeRajapaksas' and '#GotaGoHome' have been

trending for days on Twitter and Facebook in the country, which is battling severe shortages of essentials, sharp price rises and crippling power cuts in its most

painful downturn since independence from Britain in 1948.

The coronavirus pandemic has torpedoed tourism and remittances, both vital to the economy, and authorities have imposed a broad import ban in an attempt to save foreign currency. Many economists also say the crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing, and ill-advised tax cuts.

The curfew and state of emergency in the country of 22mn came as social media posts called for protests on Sunday.

"Do not be deterred by tear gas, very soon they will run out of dollars to re-stock," said one post encouraging people to demonstrate even if police attempt to break up gatherings.

In normal times, Sri Lanka's military can only play a supporting role to police, but the state of emergency gives them authority to act alone, including to detain civilians.

US ambassador Julie Chung warned: "Sri Lankans have a right to protest peacefully - essential for democratic expression."

"I am watching the situation

closely, and hope the coming days bring restraint from all sides, as well as much needed economic stability and relief for those suffering," she tweeted.

Former colonial power Britain's envoy expressed similar concerns, while the European Union mission said it 'strongly urges Sri Lankan authorities to safeguard democratic rights of all citizens, including right to free assembly and dissent, which has to be peaceful'.

Travel trade specialists say the state of emergency could be a new blow to hopes of a tourism revival as insurance rates usually rise when a country declares a security emergency.

"There are reports of sporadic attacks on the homes of government politicians," a security official told AFP, adding that a ruling party legislator was hit with eggs at a public event in the central district of Badulla on Friday.

In the nearby hill resort of Nuwara Eliya, protesters shouted anti-Rajapaksa slogans and blocked Mahinda Rajapaksa's wife Shiranthi from opening an annual flower exhibition.

AFP

Monster surf hits Australia's east, Bondi Beach engulfed

Sydney, Australia - Huge waves battered Australia's east coast on Saturday, sweeping water into properties and engulfing Sydney's Bondi Beach.

Danger warnings were issued for most of the coast in New South Wales as strong winds whipped up damaging waves.

A video of a monster swell, which reached up to five metres high, showed the tide rushing up to the doors of homes, while the onlookers ran from the surging water at Avoca Beach, which is about 90 minutes drive north of Sydney.

Peter Evans from the NSW State Emergency Service told AFP that crews were attending to several homes in the area where water had entered but conditions were easing.

"We're hoping that the worst has passed and we don't end up with anything tonight or tomorrow like we've had this morning and last night," Evans said.

Clear weather was helping the workers but after months of



Residents watch big waves crashing into rocks at Bondi Beach in Sydney on Saturday (AFP)

heavy rain there was still a lot of water on the ground, he added.

"The sea conditions are still very, very rough."

Sydney's famed Bondi Beach disappeared under the deluge as white water crashed over walkways and spilled onto a road.

The Bureau of Meteorology issued a warning for the weekend of hazardous surf and strong

winds from the north coast of New South Wales down to the Victoria border.

It comes after weeks of extreme weather along Australia's east, fuelled by La Nina weather patterns and climate change.

Record rainfall and deadly flooding have killed at least 22 people since early February.

AFP

Will Smith resigns from Oscars Academy

Los Angeles, US - Will Smith resigned from the body that awards the Oscars on Friday, five days after he assaulted comedian Chris Rock during a live global broadcast.

The actor said his actions, which overshadowed Hollywood's glitziest night of the year, were 'shocking, painful and inexcusable'. "The list of those I have hurt is long and includes Chris, his family, many of my dear friends and loved ones, all those in attendance, and global audiences at home," Smith said.

"I betrayed the trust of the Academy. I deprived other nominees and winners of their opportunity to celebrate and be celebrated for their extraordinary work. I am heartbroken."

Attendees at the Dolby Theatre watched open-mouthed as Smith mounted the stage and slapped Rock across the face after the comic made a joke about his wife's closely cropped head.

Jada Pinkett Smith has alopecia, a condition that causes hair to fall out.

He returned to his seat and



Will Smith accepting the award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *King Richard* during 94th Oscars in Hollywood, California on March 27 (AFP)

shouted obscenities at Rock, who has been widely praised for keeping a cool head and getting things back on track.

Half an hour after the astonishing attack, Smith was awarded the best actor Oscar for his role in sports biopic *King Richard*.

There have been conflicting reports in recent days over whether Smith was asked to leave the ceremony, with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences saying he refused to go. The group said this week it was starting disciplinary action

incredible work it does to support creativity and artistry in film."

Praise

Rock, who told a comedy audience in Boston this week he was 'still kind of processing' events, has drawn praise for the way he handled events.

Oscars producer, Will Packer, told ABC that it was the comic's professionalism that allowed the show to go on.

"Because Chris continued the way that he did, he completed the category. He handed the trophy to [best documentary winner] Questlove... it gave us license in a way to continue the show, which is what we were trying to do," he said.

Packer said he had counselled against ejecting Smith from the theater after speaking to Rock as he walked off stage.

"I said: 'Did he really hit you?' And he looked at me and he goes: 'Yes. I just took a punch from Muhammad Ali,'" Packer said. Smith played the legendary boxer in the 2001 film *Ali*.

AFP

Pope arrives in Malta, refuge of St. Paul, in Mediterranean mission

Valletta, Malta - Pope Francis began his first trip to Malta Saturday, where he is expected to ask the heavily Catholic country to do more to help migrants who have risked their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe.

The pontiff's plane touched down around 9:50 local time (0750 GMT) at Malta's airport south of the capital, ahead of a welcome ceremony with Prime Minister Robert Abela and dignitaries at the Grandmaster's Palace, the former seat of the Knights Hospitaller who ruled for centuries over the Mediterranean archipelago.

Aboard the papal plane, Francis - who had boarded using a lift for reduced mobility passengers instead of stairs - told journalists accompanying him the visit to the tiny island nation would be 'quick, but will be beautiful'.

The visit to Malta was scheduled two years ago but was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, and now comes as war in Ukraine has unleashed Eu-

rope's worst refugee crisis since World War II, with more than four million fleeing the country.

Francis said on Twitter on Friday that his 'journey in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul' would be an 'opportunity to know at first hand a Christian community with a millennia-old history'.

Francis, who will visit a migrant centre during his two-day trip, is likely to renew calls for an end to the war while reminding the world not to overlook those who continue to risk their lives at sea trying to reach Europe from North Africa.

"The pope comes to our island as a herald and messenger of reconciliation and mercy not only in the Mediterranean basin, but throughout the world," the Archbishop of Malta Charles Scicluna said in Italy's *Christian Family* magazine published on Friday.

Steeped in Catholicism

Francis' visit to Malta follows those of his predecessors Benedict XVI in 2010 and two visits by



Children offering flowers to Pope Francis (left) as Malta's President, George Vella (second from left) and his wife Miriam Vella look on after the Pope landed at Malta's international airport in Luqa on Saturday (AFP)

John Paul II, in 1990 and 2001.

The country's history is steeped in Catholicism going back to St. Paul, who is believed to have been shipwrecked on Malta en route to his execution

in Rome.

About 85 per cent of Malta's 516,000 inhabitants say they are Catholic believers. Catholicism is part of the constitution and Malta is the only European Union

country that completely bans abortion.

The pontiff will conduct mass Sunday before an estimated crowd of 10,000 people in Floriana, next to the capital Valletta,

following a visit to the Grotto of St. Paul, where the apostle is believed to have sought shelter.

Also on Sunday, he will visit migrants living at the Hal Far peace lab, a migrant centre founded by a Franciscan friar in 1971 in honour of former pope John XXIII.

The centre currently houses 55 young male migrants from across Africa but is preparing for the arrival of refugees from Ukraine.

Seeking refuge

During his weekly audience on Wednesday at the Vatican, Francis praised Malta for welcoming 'so many brothers and sisters seeking refuge'.

But non-governmental rescue groups who patrol the Mediterranean repeatedly accuse Malta of ignoring calls for help from migrants in its waters, refusing to let them land, or alerting Libyan authorities to intercept them and bring them to overcrowded, unsanitary detention camps in Libya where they risk torture and

abuse.

Maltese authorities argue the country takes a disproportionate share of migrants to Europe given its small size.

Ahead of Francis' visit, German charity organisation Sea-Eye called on him to ask Maltese authorities to allow over 100 people pulled to safety by one of its migrant rescue ships to dock.

Following the pope's visit with Abela, whose Labour Party won a third term in government following general elections last weekend, he will take a catamaran from Valletta's Grand Harbour to the island of Gozo, where he will preside over a prayer meeting at the national shrine of Ta' Pinu.

Francis, who suffers from a painful sciatica that has occasionally caused him to cancel official events, did not take the stairs in boarding the plane from Rome's Fiumicino Airport on Saturday morning, instead using a lift for reduced mobility passengers.

AFP

SPRING SALON 2022



Soulscape

Matti Sirvio Art Gallery has now dressed up for its Spring Salon 2022 – a joint exhibition wherein artists have poured out their soul in meaningful abstracts

Hubert Vaz

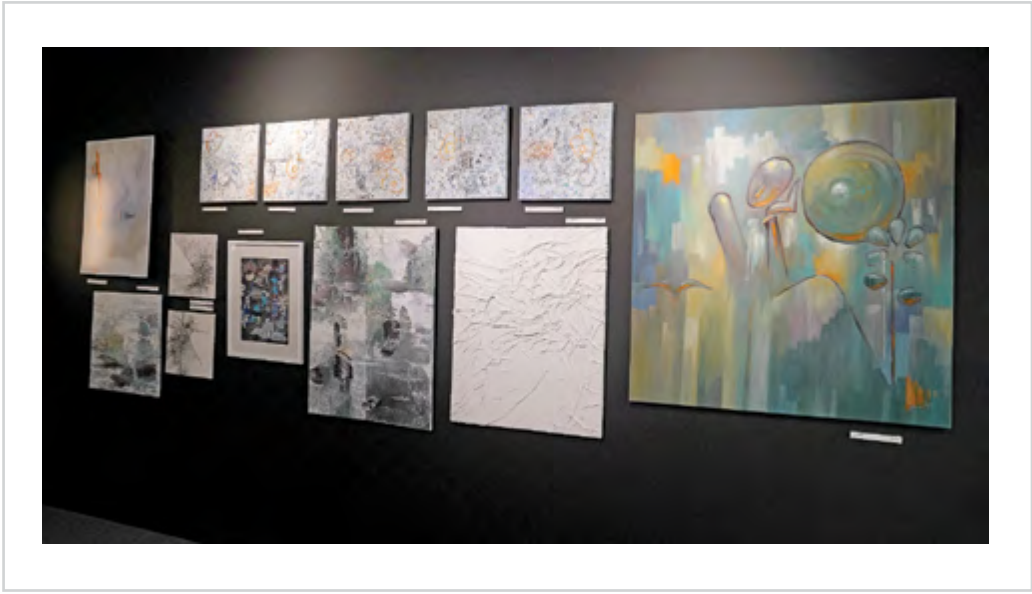
The riot of colour and confluence of creative expression seemed to unleash an invisible force that appeared to be blowing in different directions. And if you got caught in between, exiting the gallery without being overpowered would not be possible.

Soulscape – the annual Spring Salon 2022 at Matti Sirvio Art Gallery – has a unique stature this time round. Curated by popular Finnish artist Matti Sirvio and featuring canvases entered by a host of artists of varied nationalities in Oman, this joint exhibition has many sides to it. There are sections which take the viewer on the path to enlightenment and there are sections which border on paranoia and bafflement – and if you escape their grip, you might be sucked into a serenity of the soul that's shrouded in mystery.

"It's great to see the artistic journey of the participating artists. Some have still a hard time with non representative art, few of the works are fully abstract. The theme – Soulscape – of course, prompts to express the invisible," says Matti, adding, "Soul also is a place where we hide things. I feel, like there are over 30 souls hanging on the walls."

Having worked with some of the participating artists several times over the past few years as well as a few new entrants in every exhibition curated by him at this popular art gallery at Jawharat al Shatti, Matti admits, "I totally enjoyed the atmosphere of joy and freedom on the opening night of this exhibition (March 26). I saw all kinds of people in front of the artworks, talking about art. That's what exhibitions are all for. I was also happy to include two Emirati artists in this show – Henda al Rasheed and Budoor al Budoor."

Some of the participating artist said they spent



many days trying to zero down on a suitable theme for their contributing artwork for this exhibition. While the theme dictated the treatment, it, however, took varied forms with regard to the treatment undertaken by the artists. And if there was a visible overlapping of creative expression on some of the canvases, the interpretations were different, even diagonally opposite in some cases.

Sheffy Tattarath, a senior Indian artist residing in Oman, accorded a feminine connotation to the theme. "Her soulscape," he said, "it's all about her inner journey, finding rhythm amid chaos, finding pleasure in pain as well as finding pain in pleasures."

He goes a step further to provide a poetic assertion, "At times, her mind drips and bleeds, just like a broken palate. Her petals wither away like seasonal flowers. You can search for her in your neighbourhood or within yourself...or without. You might know

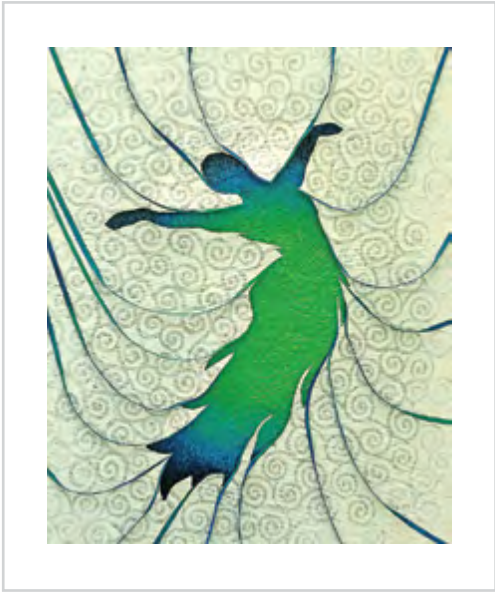
her for sure. If not, ask her..."

Shashi Menon, another senior artist, however, believes that inner space belongs to the soul and can be only experienced. It is an entity that can be seen with an inner eye and felt with the heart.

"Words and the mind merge into that silence... While trekking through the mountain of your soul, and seeing the landscape around you, only one expression is possible, from deep within – Wow! It was my humble attempt to portray that wow factor with the help of mesmerising hues. It helps you meditate, if you view it with your inner eye," says Shashi

Elizabeth Davis, who has been a lucky charm of sorts in most of Matti's exhibition, was omnipresent this time, too, with her thought-provoking canvas titled – Atma (meaning soul).

"I love to do Matti's exhibition themes because he makes me think, not just outside the box, but outside



the whole container itself. My soul is basically the essence of myself. It was very challenging to bare my soul, warts and all!"

Shrikant Akojwar, another participating artist who presented an interesting installation, said, "You see on the canvas a beautiful soul tied up with so many strings surrounded with a misty background. The visual depicts that every individual soul wants to enjoy and see the other side of life but we humans, most of the time, do not give free space to our inner soul and engage our mind with complications."

As illustrated in Akojwar's artwork – 'Marionette Soul' (inspired by John Gray's freewheeling book 'Soul of the Marionette' which questions the idea of human freedom), the artist asserts, "We always treat our soul as a puppet and move according to our unpredictable human nature and live with grief and sadness."

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CHARITY GALA



'Blue' BIRD SERENADED

Artists hail revolutionary **Joni Mitchell** at a pre-Grammy gala for her outstanding contribution to music. From *Blue* in 1971 – cited as the best album of all time - to becoming a Kenedy Center honoree in 2021, the songstress has given her all to music over the past five decades



Joni Mitchel at the gala



Yola
British singer-songwriter



Madison Cunningham
US singer-songwriter



Jimmie Allen
US singer



John Legend
US singer-songwriter

Music's legends and hit-makers turned out Friday to honour Joni Mitchell - the Canadian-born folk icon behind classics including *A Case Of You* - at a charity gala ahead of the Grammys that featured moving tributes and glassy eyes.

The 78-year-old Mitchell donned a sequined kimono-style robe, bejeweled black beret and bright red nails at the MusiCares show where artists, including Herbie Hancock, Cyndi Lauper, Angelique Kidjo and Stephen Stills, along with this year's leading Grammy nominee Jon Batiste, paid homage to her vast oeuvre.

"It's been quite a year," the artist known for her distinct contralto and open-tuned guitar told journalists on the red carpet.

In December she was among the inductees at the Kennedy Center Honors gala, one of America's most prestigious arts awards.

The evening marked a rare public appearance for the trailblazing Mitchell, who in 2015 suffered a brain aneurysm that left her temporarily unable to speak, the aftermath of which has involved extensive physical therapy.

On Friday, however, she was glowing, telling reporters she's been having artistic 'ideas' even as she continues to focus on improving her health.

The influential artist who inspired everyone, from Neil Diamond to Prince, is perhaps best known for the intensely personal 1971 album *Blue*, a deep dive into emotional heartache. Last summer, *Blue* charted number one on iTunes as it hit its 50th anniversary - outperforming even pop sensation Olivia Rodrigo's *Sour*.

Voicing her own astonishment over the milestone, Mitchell explained her album's enduring popularity and recent resurgence: 'May be people want to get a little bit deeper'. And asked by reporters how she was feeling health-wise, she said "pretty good," adding she'd been making improvements.

Touches the world

Jazz great Hancock - who in 2007 released a tribute album to Mitchell entitled 'River: The Joni Letters' - hailed his longtime friend's artistic courage.

"She bares her soul, but she does it in such a poetic way," Hancock told AFP on the red carpet, in the hours before he delivered a performance of Mitchell's song 'Hejira' onstage. He credited Mitchell, who is widely considered among the 20th

century's greatest songwriters - with teaching him how to listen to lyrics.

"Some people - and I'm one of 'em - when we listen to music, we hear the harmonies and the musical textures, and the lyrics sound like gibberish," he continued. Yet Mitchell's poetry still strikes him, Hancock said, adding, "Nobody writes lyrics like Joni."

"She's given all of us the courage to tell the truth," said performer Billy Porter, who paid tribute to Mitchell singing her beloved *Both Sides Now* onstage.

"To use our art to grow; to use our art to heal. To set some other people free - she's powerful that way," he said.

The star-studded gala is an annual tradition from MusiCares, the charitable wing of the Recording Academy that raises money to help musicians in need prior to the Grammy Awards.

This year's celebration also featured an affecting remote performance of *A Case Of You* from Graham

Nash, of the folk supergroup Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, a band Mitchell deeply influenced as well as shared a rich working relationship with.

She also dated both David Crosby and Nash, and mined the latter break-up for inspiration on a number of the songs comprising the seminal *Blue*, including the touching *A Case of You*.

Neil Young appeared in a video message sending Mitchell

'lots of love', while Stephen Stills attended the ceremony in Las Vegas and praised Mitchell as one of the great artists of this world.

"Back when we were kids we had a good time trying to figure out the tunings that she used. Crosby happened to be the most adept at it," he told AFP. Crosby produced her debut album, *Song to a Seagull*.

Stills played guitar as Brandi Carlile belted out a rollicking rendition of *Woodstock* on an evening flush with performances, that left many in the room, especially Mitchell, with tears welling.

"I could retire now, and just let other people do it," she joked when she accepted her award. "Everybody was splendid."

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked the audience to rounds of applause, before joining the night's performers to sing *The Circle Game* and *Big Yellow Taxi*. Stills summed up the mood - 'God bless you Joni Mitchell, for being in our lives'.

AFP

Casper Ruud of Norway celebrates after defeating Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina in semifinal at the Miami Open (AFP)

If he triumphs this weekend, Alcaraz, who made the last four in Indian Wells earlier this month, will become the youngest

Hurkacz served superbly to force a second set tie-break as the slow conditions suited both

CARLOS ALCARAZ

"He has played well here and was the defending champion but

Norwegian first
World number eight Ruud,

"I've played Rafa a couple of times over the last two years."

He overpowered Cerundolo, making his first appearance at the elite Masters level, 6-4, 6-1.

AFP



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain celebrates a point against Hubert Hurkacz of Poland during their semifinal match (AFP)

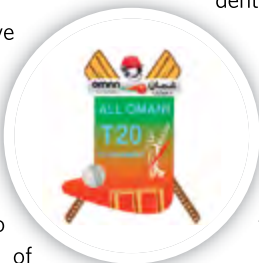
AFP



Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder Fabinho (C) scores their second goal from the penalty spot during the EPL match against Watford at Anfield (AFP)

The teams have been split in groups of two, with four teams in

announce the start of this all-Omani competition. One of our aims at Oman Cricket has always been to build on the successful staging of the T20



"We have already taken multiple steps in ensuring its robust health in Oman and this event is another milestone on that same road. I thank all the

Spectators are welcome to watch the games live at the Oman Cricket Academy. Proof of double vaccination against COVID-19 must be displayed on entry.

Group A - Oct Ruwi, Oct Muscat, Oct Al Mabela, Oct Al Hail 'B'

Group B - Oct Al Amerat, Oct Seeb, Oct Al Hail 'A'



IPL 2022



GUJARAT TITANS V DELHI CAPITALS

Gill's 84, Ferguson's four wickets tame Delhi Capitals



BRIEF SCORES:
Gujarat Titans 171/6 in 120 overs (Shubham Gill 84 (46) 6 x 4, 4 x 6; Mustafizur Rahman 23/3; Khaleel Ahmad 34/2) won over Delhi Capitals 157/9 in 20 overs (Rishab Pant 43 (29) 7 x 4; Rovman Powell 20 (12); Lockie Ferguson 28/4; Mohammed Shami 30/2) by 14 runs

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



CHENNAI SUPER KINGS VS PUNJAB KINGS

Buttler ton, bowlers help Royals down Mumbai

Mumbai, India - England's Jos Buttler hit the first century of this Indian Premier League season to lead his side Rajasthan Royals to a convincing victory over Mumbai Indians on Saturday.

Buttler smashed 100 off 68 deliveries before being bowled by Jasprit Bumrah off a toe-crushing yorker as Rajasthan finished on 193-8 after being invited to bat first in Mumbai.

Bowlers then combined to restrict Mumbai to 170-8 as Royals, who won the inaugural IPL season in 2008 under Australian great Shane Warne, remained unbeaten in their two outings.

Royals won by 23 runs and now lead the 10-team table in the expanded Twenty20 tournament that is being played at four venues in two cities, including Pune.

Five-time champions Mumbai Indians, led by Rohit Sharma, slipped to their second loss in as many games.

"I thought they batted well to get to 193. Buttler played an exceptional innings, we tried



Jos Buttler, orange cap, celebrates with teammates after winning the match against Mumbai Indians

everything we could to get him out," said Rohit.

"But I thought 193 on that pitch could have been chased, especially when we needed 70 in 7 overs. But these things can happen and its early days. We can learn."

Buttler lost his opening partner Yashasvi Jaiswal for one but put on key stands including an 82-run third-wicket partnership

fours in an over from fellow West Indian Kieron Pollard.

Buttler completed his second IPL hundred in his landmark 300th match before walking back to the dug out as Bumrah's second wicket in the over and third in the innings.

Royals fast bowlers struck early and Prasidh Krishna sent back skipper Rohit Sharma for 10 in the second over of the innings.

Left-handed opener Ishan Kishan, who made 54, put back the chase with a 81-run stand with up and coming Indian talent Tilak Varma, who made 61.

Kishan fell to New Zealand left-arm quick Trent Boult, and off spinner Ravichandran Ashwin bowled Varma.

Leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal was denied a hat-trick after substitute fielder Karun Nair dropped a catch at first slip, following two successive wickets of Tim David and Daniel Sams.

The chase fell apart and Mumbai remained well short of their target despite Pollard's 22.

AFP



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DRAW FOR 2022 QATAR WORLD CUP REVEALED

A closer look at each group following Friday's draw in Doha for the 2022 Qatar World Cup

GROUP A QATAR ECUADOR SENEGAL NETHERLANDS 	GROUP B ENGLAND IRAN USA EURO PLAY-OFF WINNER 	GROUP C ARGENTINA SAUDI ARABIA MEXICO POLAND 	GROUP D FRANCE PLAY-OFF WINNER DENMARK TUNISIA 
GROUP E SPAIN PLAY-OFF WINNER GERMANY JAPAN 	GROUP F BELGIUM CANADA MOROCCO CROATIA 	GROUP G BRAZIL SERBIA SWITZERLAND CAMEROON 	GROUP H PORTUGAL GHANA URUGUAY SOUTH KOREA 

Spain against Germany on November 27 is the tie of the opening round and the assumption is it will be crucial in deciding who tops the group out of the two former World Cup winners, although that could set them on a path to play Brazil in the quarter-finals.

Hajime Moriyasu's Japan will hope to have their say in a country where they won the Asian Cup in 2011.

The remaining place will be taken by the winner of a play-off between Costa Rica and New Zealand and the prospect of either going far seems remote.

Belgium were until recently the top-ranked national team in the world and came third in 2018. With the likes of Kevin De Bruyne, Romelu Lukaku and Thibaut Courtois, they have plenty of world-class players but Eden Hazard's decline has been steep. They should top the group, with Croatia unlikely to come close to their run to the 2018 final now that Luka Modric turns 37 this year.

Morocco's squad is full of European-based talent such as Paris Saint-Germain's Achraf Hakimi. Canada, under English coach John Herdman, are at their first World Cup since 1986.

Brazil were in the same group as Serbia and Switzerland just four years ago.

Tite's side cruised through qualifying and are now targeting their sixth World Cup. However, it remains to be seen how Neymar, now 30, handles the pressure and if he stays fit.

Switzerland, who reached the Euro 2020 quarter-finals, are favourites to go through with Brazil. Cameroon are back after missing 2018 and dramatically defeating Algeria in the African play-offs, but they will struggle to go far.

At almost 38, it will surely be Cristiano Ronaldo's last chance to win the World Cup. Yet Portugal have so much talent in their squad that some think they could even be better off without him. They will hope to avenge a defeat to Uruguay in the last 16 in 2018 - Uruguay have an ageing star striker of their own in 35-year-old Luis Suarez.

South Korea, with a Portuguese coach in Paulo Bento, will again struggle to go beyond the group phase while 60th-ranked Ghana are not the team of 2010 and were not expected to qualify.

AFP



"We have negative memories, but something like that doesn't happen to us twice. You can see clearly that Germany have improved. They are going through a period of renewal but we are seventh in the world, and we want to beat everyone in the world."

MANUEL NEUER
Germany goalkeeper and captain Manuel Neuer on being drawn with fellow former champions Spain. The Spanish thrashed Germany 6-0 in a Nations League match in November 2020.



"It is the same handicap for everyone. It means we think the players will arrive fresher than at a normal World Cup, in better shape physically and in footballing terms. The lack of time is a handicap, but no team will have much time."

LUIS ENRIQUE
Spain coach on having just eight days between domestic leagues breaking up and the World Cup starting



"For us, we're in on day one so it's quite clear now what our programme looks like for the end of the Premier League season and getting out here as quickly as possible."

GARETH SOUTHGATE
England manager, whose side face Iran on the opening day of the tournament on November 21, just eight days after the final round of Premier League games before the international break.



"I advise you (France) to also prepare because we have a very good team and we will be ready to fight."

KASPER HJULMAND
Denmark coach on facing the defending champions



"I haven't been to Qatar or Senegal that often so I don't know these countries that well."

LOUIS VAN GAAL
Netherlands coach on Group A rivals which also include Ecuador



"It's in the past. It was 24 years ago. What matters to is what will happen now."

GREGG BERHALTER
USA coach after being paired with Iran. The two met at the 1998 World Cup where Iran won 2-1

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Offer valid from 20th March to 19th May 2022 on applicable models purchased for personal use. Offer not available for vehicles purchased for Commercial use, Rent-a-car, Taxi, Government and Driving School. **Assured Gift Voucher worth up to OMR 200 - Amount varies between models. Voucher can be redeemed for purchase of Value-added service products, Service contracts and Parts at SBA Service Centers. #Periodic Maintenance Service only. Whichever is earlier. Applicable on all models except GTR & 370Z. Offer includes only 10,000 kms service intervals. @1st year Oman & UAE only. ^ For 1st year only. @ & ^ Applicable on all models except GTR, 370Z & Urvan. Applicable for private registrations only. For Commercial registrations additional amount needs to be borne by the customer. *Additional PMS Service for new car, exclusive discount on labor charges, parts & trade-in benefits. Second car purchase should be either in the name of existing Nissan owner or his/her immediate family member (wife/husband/son/daughter/brother/sister) to avail additional benefits under the scheme. Conditions apply. * EMI's shown are calculated on the price of the base model with 20% down payment, 3.5% Rate of Interest for 6 years loan tenure. Subject to credit approvals.

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International
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