

► NEWS BRIEF

SAYYID BILARAB CHAIRS MEET OF OMANI STARTUP PROGRAMME

Muscat - The Supervisory Committee of Omani Promising Startups Programme held its first meeting of 2023 on Sunday. The meeting was chaired by H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said.

The programme seeks to activate the system of startups focused on technology and innovation in Oman and contribute to spreading the culture of entrepreneurship in educational institutions.

It also aims to raise social awareness on the importance of startups and support them to scale up their operations locally as well as globally.

The meeting discussed the selection of representatives in the Supervisory Committee, among other matters.

09



CBO clears merger of HSBC Oman, Sohar International

SMEs drive economy, add RO8bn to GDP

Our Correspondent Muscat

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have stood out in the last few years as the key driver behind economic development in the sultanate with the sector contributing about 25 per cent or RO8bn to the GDP. Several initiatives have been lined up to propel the sector further in 2023.

Unveiling its achievements of 2022 and upcoming initiatives for 2023, the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) held a press conference on Sunday.

It highlighted initiatives aimed at developing and empowering SMEs in fields related to In-Country Value (ICV), funding, digital transformation and entrepreneurship, among others.

Abdul Aziz bin Saeed al Raisi, Vice-President of ASMED, announced that the authority will set up a Digital Academy for Entrepreneurship and Startups in 2023. "The academy aims to create partnerships between the public and private sectors and prepare a development programme for startups, in addition to studying and analysing investment opportunities in the governorates."

He said that the contribution



(Supplied photo)

of SMEs to the GDP was about RO7bn or 24 per cent three years ago. "According to the latest statistics, the percentage now ranges between 25 and 26 per cent, equivalent to RO8bn."

Raisi informed that the authority aims to finance 250 institutions this year, and license 70 new support centres for services based on the needs of each governorate.

Furnishing statistics, Raisi said the total number of SMEs registered in the country until September 2022 was 210,877, while the number of SMEs registered with the authority until December 2022 was 104,141.

He explained that the number of active enterprises that ob-

tained the Entrepreneurship Card (Riyada) was 37,489, and their contribution to exports amounted to more than RO2bn according to September 2020 data.

"Of the total, 28,445 new entrepreneurship cards were issued in 2022, while the number of requests for renewals was 20,113. The card is a document that enables its holder to obtain a package of facilities, incentives and exemptions from relevant public and private agencies."

ASMED received more than 200 applications from SMEs for usufruct rights in ten industrial areas in 2022, of which 35 were approved.

The authority held more than 770 consultations on various

commercial, administrative, marketing, technical and legal aspects for SMEs. It also signed agreements aimed at providing 300 opportunities for SMEs in several fields.

Younis Mohammed al Nasri, Assistant Vice-President for Finance and Investment at ASMED, said, "We received 203 applications for finance, of which more than 20 applications were approved until the end of 2022, giving more than RO2.3mn."

ASMED also announced several programmes to enhance skills of entrepreneurs, while opening registration for the Readiness Programme for 2023, which is implemented in all governorates.

Fees for expats in govt schools slashed by 50%

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Education (MoE) has issued a ministerial decision (No 32/2023) reducing fees for non-Omani students in government schools by 50 per cent.

The decision provides for exempting some groups from tuition fee, in addition to reducing fees for a number of services provided by the ministry.

Those exempted from public school fees, include children of Omani women married to non-Omani men, students from Gulf Cooperation Council countries, students who do not hold identification documents confirming their nationality (restricted to students of schools specified by the Ministry of Education in the border areas) and students from the Republic of Yemen.

The decision also stipulates that children of non-Omanis working in the Ministry of Education will be charged 50 per cent less school fees and fees for non-Omani students in government schools will be RO50 instead of RO100.

The decision also includes reduction of fees of private schools, following submission of an application for establishment/construction/licence renewal from



Those exempted from public school fees include children of Omani women married to non-Omani men, students from GCC states and Yemen

RO300 to RO150, and reducing licence fee for private schools from RO1,500 to RO750.

The decision was issued on January 30 and comes into effect a day following its publication in the Official Gazette.

Decision issued to set up programme for air transport facilitation

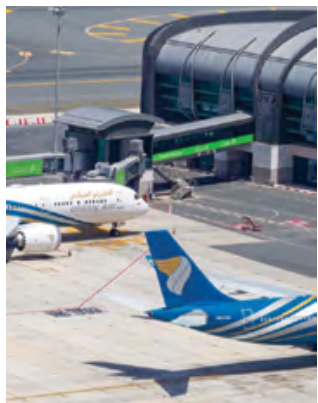
Our Correspondent Muscat

H E Saeed bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), has issued a decision (No 116/2023) related to the executive regulations of the Civil Aviation Law.

The decision stipulates that CAA will develop national programmes for civil aviation security and air transport facilitation, in addition to the formation of the National Committee for Air-space Planning.

The committee will include a representative of CAA and members representing the Foreign Ministry and Royal Air Force of Oman, and define its terms of reference.

The decision also stipulates that the authority will set controls for use of land, buildings and lights in the areas adjacent to airports, and form a commit-



tee to study and address all issues related to the use of land adjacent to airports.

The decision prohibits all media outlets from publishing any meteorological information or data other than those obtained from CAA and the practice of any work related to the activities of meteorological services in Oman except after obtaining approval of the authority.

The decision was issued on January 29, and takes effect a day after publication in the Official Gazette.

POPE'S HEALING TOUCH TO COUNTRY RAVAGED BY WAR

Pope Francis blesses a child during holy mass at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan. He wrapped up his pilgrimage to South Sudan with an open-air mass after urging its leaders to focus on bringing peace to the fragile country torn apart by violence and poverty. The three-day trip was the first papal visit to the largely Christian country since it achieved independence from Sudan in 2011 and plunged into a civil war that killed nearly 400,000 people

See also Page 14



Ministerial decision issued to tighten funding of non-profit organisations

Our Correspondent Muscat

H E Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, has issued a ministerial decision (No 36/2023) related to non-profit organisations and combatting terrorism financing and money laundering.

The decision states that all organisations registered with the ministry must submit a

record of the names and date of birth of members and all contributions they make.

Organisations should also submit detailed records of all international and domestic transactions to identify all funds spent and collected.

The decision stipulates that all organisations must keep their records and books for ten years and submit these to the concerned authorities upon re-

quest.

The decision also stipulates that organisations must not receive more than RO100 from their members. Funding should be through official banking channels only.

The decision also states that all non-profit organisations must seek the assistance of an audit office for all financial and administrative records and all their activities.

Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf dies

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan's exiled former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who became a key US ally during the "war on terror", died in a Dubai hospital on Sunday aged 79 after a long illness.

Musharraf seized power in a 1999 bloodless coup and was acting simultaneously as Pakistan's army chief, chief executive and president when the 9/11 attacks on the US took place.

The general twice suspended the constitution and was accused of rigging a referendum shoring up his power, as well as rampant



rights abuses including rounding up opponents during his nearly nine-year rule.

In Pakistan, where the military remains supremely powerful and enjoys significant support,

Musharraf is a divisive figure.

"There was good in him," 69-year-old Naeem ul Haq Satti told AFP in an Islamabad marketplace.

"But his one act, which will be remembered throughout history, was he violated the constitution," the retired civil servant added. "The most important thing a country has is its constitution."

Musharraf had been suffering from a rare disease known as Amyloidosis and last summer his family said he had no prospect of recovery.

AFP



POOR WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SHURA, MUNICIPAL POLLS

Omanis are taking major strides towards gender equality with women on a par with men in obtaining college degrees, securing jobs in high positions and social status. Much has changed in social life compared to just a decade ago.

Omani women have been at the forefront of nation building for 50 years of the Blessed Renaissance. Their eagerness to see Oman grow and prosper in various fields has been vital in the development of the sultanate. Today, it is common to see women's participation in every field.

However, the recent elections for Municipal Councils produced abysmal results for women. Only one woman was elected.

In every Majlis A'Shura and Municipal Council election, men far outnumber the women elected. What can be done to increase the number of women elected? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said on the matter:



Dulcy Pascal
Homemaker

I believe the solution is very simple indeed: Women empowerment. Also, if women vote for women, the problem will be partially solved, because there is a saying that the main enemy of a woman is a woman.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

The recent Municipal polls held in the sultanate were overwhelmingly in favour of men. This is due to the negligible participation of women in the municipal elections. And the results were repressive for women as only one single candidate won.

To support women, we have to reserve seats for them and give them more opportunities. Secondly, the women of Oman are focused on only a few areas - like SMEs, sports, the private sector, science and technology, education, environment and humanities. Thirdly, they are witness to the plight of women in many Asian countries where women are elected but

they are just like rubberstamps and not given the opportunity to work for improvement.

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

Unequal representation of women is a worldwide phenomenon. Oman is no exception. Encouragement from families and communities along with reservation of a particular percentage of seats for women will help them come up against the odds.

Kiran Choudhury
Homemaker

The number of women elected to the Majlis A'Shura and Municipal Councils can be increased by making women of villages and cities aware of their role in the betterment of society. Women at the grass root level should be encouraged and every head of the family and social worker should play a pivotal role in women's empowerment

Asma al Balushi
Private sector employee

The main reason for the poor representation is women are not encouraged in senior decision-making jobs. The mindset of society needs to change and people must accept that women can be competent and be equally good leaders as men.

? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

Tourism festivals are being held in several governorates taking advantage of the winter season. Do you think these festivals have helped boost tourism? What else can be done to develop tourism in the governorates?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatdaily@apexmedia.co.om You can also log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue.

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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Sidrah develops next-gen women leaders

Our Correspondent
Muscat

One must strive to inspire others by lifting others and there must be more collaborations rather than competition. These were the motivational words that inspired women aged 18 to 25 at Sidrah, a leadership programme for young women.

The event marked the completion of its inaugural edition at InterContinental Muscat on Sunday. Held in the presence of H E Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrooqi, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the event showcased the evolution of Sidrah and presented stories of the participants and their enriching experience over six months of the programme.

Co-designed and co-run by Lahunna Oman and Outward Bound Oman, Sidrah was launched in June 2022 to serve the unique needs of young Omani women across the sultanate, striking a balance between theoretical concepts and pragmatic exercises. Its mission was to train the next generation



in creative problem solving, leading change, character development and civic engagement by reinforcing Omani values, social responsibility and citizenship.

Shatha Salim al Maskiry, Founder of Lahunna, said, "As a natural extension of Lahunna's objectives, the first edition of Sidrah helped more than 40 young women build a stronger sense of self and purpose by developing their abilities to think critically, collaborate and solve problems, as well as harnessing their emotional intelligence to network and communicate effectively."

She informed that participants

had access to mentors in various fields "which not only provided the young women a pathway towards expanded options for their careers and lives, but also personally gave me hope that the next generation can create a better future by being agents of change".

Shatha added, "Our participants learnt that they do not require championing nor empowering - they have all it takes to excel. I can't wait to see how much more they will achieve from here with the boost of confidence they have now."

On the occasion, Mark Evans, Executive Director of Outward

Bound Oman, said, "We have been privileged to continue our decade-plus journey of making an impact on youth in Oman. One aim of our courses is to generate and develop the next generation of future leaders for the nation. Our partner Lahunna Oman complemented this programme in Phase II by catering to the intellectual needs of the young women to cultivate their leadership skills and create an expansive network of connections to expand their professional horizons. The development they have shown throughout the programme has been fantastic to witness - and a tribute to the

careful planning, in-depth and continuous observation that went into the programme by Lahunna Oman."

Sidrah employed a two-phased approach. Phase I focused on experiential learning, held over four days in June 2022 at Outward Bound Oman's Jabal Akhdar Training Centre. Phase II comprised six intensive months of coaching and mentoring represented by NYAA in Singapore, Protiviti and IDENTITY. The programme was further complemented with guest speakers who were CEOs, parliamentarians, academics, industry experts and entrepreneurs.

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Muscat Nights visitors highlight the need of revamping festivities, venue



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Nights came to an end on Saturday after 17 nights of amusement, entertainment and culinary delights. Muscat residents were overjoyed with the return of the festivities after a gap of three years, albeit in a new form. However, many felt the need for a revamp of the event and a dedicated venue for it.

According to an online survey conducted by Muscat Daily, there is a clear mandate - nearly 70 per cent respondents sought

the inclusion of new activities and events to make the festival more interesting. Twenty-five per cent respondents said the activities held in the just-concluded event were good enough.

To a question regarding the venue, 46.43 per cent of respondents preferred Amerat Park to Qurum Park. Amerat Park was the venue for a few years prior to the latest edition. It has ample parking as well as adequate space to accommodate a wide variety of activities, including concerts, laser display and fireworks.

While 50 per cent of respondents want Qurum Park to be a key location for Muscat Nights in the coming years, an equal number did not approve of it due to accessibility issues, owing to traffic on festival days, especially weekends, and parking problems.

A good number of respondents (39.9 per cent) pointed out the lack of parking space, traffic jams and inconvenience to residents as the main reasons for moving out of Qurum Park.

Most respondents welcomed Muscat Nights as it filled the void

created by the discontinuation of Muscat Festival, but a section of them expressed concern over Qurum Park as a venue due to the traffic congestion it caused in the area.

"Muscat Municipality needs to review the decision to hold Muscat Nights at Qurum Park simply because of the lack of enough parking space. The park is a great festival location but we are all aware that Qurum has traffic jams even on normal days. Something has to be done with the roads around Qurum before thinking of having such events



I encounter traffic in Qurum even on normal days. If the festival did not get enough visitors, it's because people were reluctant to go afraid of getting stuck in traffic

YAHYA RASHID



Green tide reported in two governorates: MAFWR

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has stated that the sea along the coast of Wusta and South Sharqiyah are affected by green tide, a phenomenon caused by phytoplanktons.

A statement issued by MAFWR said, 'The ministry has observed recently a bloom of phytoplanktons in parts of Duqm in Al Wusta and Masirah in South

Sharqiyah, resulting in the death of some fish.'

Derived from the Greek words phyto (plant) and plankton (made to wander or drift), phytoplanktons are microscopic organisms that live in watery environments, both salty and fresh.

The ministry said the phenomenon increases in winter due to natural factors that stimulate growth of phytoplanktons, such as change in the water temperature and movement of marine currents loaded with nutrients.



The colour of the water changes to red, brown, orange, light yellow or green, depending on the colour of the phytoplankton.

The growth of phytoplanktons in a large area leads to depletion or lack of oxygen dissolved in water, and the death of fish and other marine organisms as a result of suffocation and their inability to breathe.

MAFWR urged citizens and residents not to swim in water affected by phytoplanktons.

Over 600 donors needed this week: Central Blood Bank

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Department of Blood Bank Services (DBBS) has announced that there is an urgent need of blood due to low stocks of most blood types.

In a statement, DBBS said, 'The Central Blood Bank in Bausher needs more than 600 blood donors this week to meet requirements of health institutions for blood units because

of low stocks of most blood types.'

The blood bank also needs 70 platelet donors and 35 plasma donors per week.

'We urge everyone to take the initiative to donate blood.'

Those interested can donate blood from 8am to 8pm, from Saturday to Thursday, and from 2pm to 8pm on Friday.

Appointments can be made through WhatsApp - 94555648 - or by calling 24591255.

OCCI launches new programme to support SME owners



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, announced a new programme called Commercial Franchise on Sunday to support small and medium enterprises.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, an OCCI official said, "The pro-

gramme includes training and advisory workshops on commercial franchising with the objective of spreading the culture of commercial franchising among business owners in the sultanate."

Under the programme, SME owners will be provided training and consultations. "The chamber will conduct the first programme, spread over four days, in Muscat starting February 20. Soon we will announce dates for all other

governorates."

The programme will also include working papers and legal information about commercial franchising. "It also aims to help business owners expand the volume of their businesses and share successful experiences."

OCCI called on SME owners to register for the programme through <https://eqp.datamin.org.om/estebyan/jnotztp202269145041>

Oman adopts Gulf specs for electric cars

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Qais Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued Ministerial Decision No 45/2023 regarding adoption of Gulf specifications for electric cars as Omani standard specifications.

The decision provides for adoption of the Gulf standard specifications (GSO2698:22) related to the technical requirements of e-cars as binding Omani standard specifications.

As per the decision, an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000 will be imposed on anyone who violates the provisions of the decision. The decision was issued on February 1 and will come into effect 90 days after publication in the Official Gazette.

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MG Motor records 40% sales growth in M E in 2023

MG Motor continues to rise up the rankings of the GCC's top ten car manufacturers as the brand secured 6th position with an unprecedented sales performance in 2022.

The past year concluded with MG recording a remarkable 4.7 per cent market share, with total sales of 57,506 units. The company's achievements are particularly impressive considering the competition it faces from rising Chinese brands in the GCC market, a press release said.

This remarkable milestone could not have been achieved without the exceptional support from MG's dealer network and the aggressive expansion plans the brand has implemented. As a result, the brand now has a total of 49 showrooms in the region, currently open, with six new showrooms pencilled in for opening in the first half of 2023.

The brand has always focused on ensuring the highest standard of customer service, with four new facilities opening in the first six months of 2023, adding to the 64 state-of-the-art facilities



already used by MG customers.

MG continues to have registered double-digit growth ever since it kicked off its operations in the Middle East region, and in 2022 the brand's sales increased by 40 per cent. MG is now one of the top six automotive brands in

the region, and continues to lead by recording large increases in market share across the GCC. Customers continue to show their appreciation for the British-born brand's products, with MG5 and MGZS being the best performing models across the year.

Tom Lee, managing director of MG Motor's Middle East operations, commented, "MG has recorded another year of extraordinary growth in the region despite the ambitious goals we have set for ourselves and the slew of new competitors. The

growing awareness, popularity and desire for the MG brand has been really evident as we have maximised accessibility to the brand for customers across our nine markets, and as we look to introduce two new markets in the first three months of 2023."

ISG students top CBSE literary tests

Sabyasachi Choudhury, a class 10 student from Indian School Al Ghubra (ISG), won the first position in the CBSE Reading Challenge 2022-2023 conducted in October-November 2022.

The CBSE Reading Challenge conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) was held in two phases. Participants from classes 6 to 10 were eligible to participate and were registered on the CBSE portal using their registration numbers.

The Reading Challenge, an innovative activity initiated by the CBSE with a focus to promote Reading Literacy, had students participating from various CBSE schools across India and the world. The challenge required participants to not only correctly answer the questions from the reading passages but to complete and upload the answers swiftly.

Sabyasachi emerged as winner from thousands of students across the globe in the Delhi - East region, of CBSE.

Meanwhile, two more students from ISG emerged victorious at the literary competitions conducted by The Emerald Heights International School, Indore.



Sabyasachi Choudhury

The Emerald Heights Knowledge Convergence Arc was an online competition where students from various schools across India and abroad, participated in literary competitions. Jahnvi Krishna, a class 5 student won the Best Object Coordination prize in the Elucidate - Storytelling competition and Angela Mariam Kurien, a class 8 student bagged the Critics Choice Award in the Creative Writing (Prose) category.

Jahnvi narrated a self-written story of 1.5 minutes using Kerala's traditional hand mirror as a prop (Valkannadi), with absolute clarity and confidence. Angela was expected to weave a story in an hour using a list of given words. The duo were exemplary in their performance.



ROHM presents Mozart's Le Nozze Di Figaro opera

The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) presents Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's wonderful opera Le Nozze Di Figaro, performed by the Accademia Teatro alla Scala conducted by Sestro Quatrini.

The opera features incredible young talent, artists from the academy associated with one of the most famous opera companies in the world, Teatro alla Scala, a press release said.

Le Nozze di Figaro tells the story of Figaro, a servant to the Count who is marrying Susanna, another member of the household. The opera is a comedy, following the twists and turns of a plot which sees the Count trying to woo Susanna himself, the Countess trying to win back the Count, a manservant who would woo anyone but in this case must don a disguise as a woman to confuse the Count, and a maid

who thinks Figaro must repay a debt with marriage but turns out to be his mother.

Figaro is by turns tumbled by events and the chief puppet master of the story. This classical production, dressed with glorious period costume and staged by the acclaimed director Giorgio Strehler with revival director Marina Bianchi is exceptional. It will be staged on February 16 and 19 at 7pm.

Zahara Travel partners with Sabre

Zahara Travel, the leading travel management company in Oman, reaffirms its strategic partnership with Sabre Corporation, a leading software and technology company that powers the global travel industry.

Furthermore, Zahara Travel signed a multi-year agreement to expand its technology scope with Sabre and recruit the latest technology solutions to enable its strategic goals, a press release said.

Under this renewed and expanded agreement, Zahara Travel will continue to use Sabre Red 360, to deliver intelligent and consultative services to travellers, respond to evolving traveller demands and create



compelling shopping experiences. The travel company will continue to access Sabre's marketplace of more than 400 airlines, 750,000 hotel properties, and hundreds of tour operators, rail, car and cruise providers, giving Zahara Travel the opportu-

nity to sell personalized travel packages from suppliers all over the world.

"In such a competitive landscape, technology is important to maximize our efficiency and deliver our promise of providing a seamless and exceptional travel

experiences," said Gautam Broota, CEO, Zahara Travel. "For more than two decades, Sabre has been the backbone of our operations, thus we are expanding our relationship to deploy further technology solutions to support our strategy."

Ooredoo offers Internet Professional Plans

Committed to playing a leading role in supporting businesses of all sizes in Oman, Ooredoo's re-vamped Internet Professional (OIP) plans offer higher speeds, rates, and more options.

Available as part of all plans, business customers can enjoy all the benefits of unlimited fixed internet with speeds ranging from 5 Mbps to 1 Gbps, unlimited calling minutes to Ooredoo land-



Saied al Lawati

lines, up to 1,000 local voice minutes to any mobile network, and international calling discounts of up to 35%. Plus, a dedicated helpdesk and after sales support available 24/7 makes it even easier to make the most out of Ooredoo's great value packages, a press release said.

Saied al Lawati, director of Business Marketing and ICT Solutions at Ooredoo, said, "We

recognise that companies in Oman have a considerable impact on the national economy as they contribute to productivity and growth. As a digital leader in the telecommunications industry, Ooredoo continues to support businesses to improve their connectivity further, while capitalising on our seamless network, cutting-edge technology, and outstanding customer service."

Maserati MSG opening race held at Diriyah E-Prix

Maserati MSG Racing experienced a difficult opening race at the 2023 Diriyah E-Prix, with the team navigating a handful of challenges in the first part of Formula E's Saudi Arabian double-header.

Following a promising weekend in Mexico City, the team made positive progress during practice at the UNESCO World Heritage Site, however, endured a bruising qualifying session in the afternoon, a press release said.

Both Edoardo Mortara and Maximilian Günther launched their efforts in Group A, although a sudden front tyre lock and collision in Turn 11 brought about an early end to Max's afternoon of running. Later in the session, Edo was also involved in an accident, in which an off-line half-spin



tipped the Swiss-Italian driver into the barriers on the outside of Turn 16.

As a result of extensive repair work, Max was unable to participate in the race, which left Edo as Maserati MSG Racing's sole charger. From 20th on the grid, he made immediate progress on the opening lap and following a brief Safety Car period, continued to fight forward.

By lap 11, Edo had ascended to 15th and next overtook Sérgio Sette Câmara for 14th before settling into a rhythm behind reigning World Champion, Stoffel Vandoorne.

A puncture on lap 33 of 39 dealt a final cruel blow and forced Edo to retire from the race, with the team's full attention now placed on Race Two in Diriyah.

Al Busaidy, Mansoor Jamal expands partnership

Leading Omani law firm, Al Busaidy, Mansoor Jamal & Co (AMJ), has appointed Ravinder Singh as a new partner in its Projects and Commercial Department.

Ravinder has a broad range of experience in corporate and commercial matters and advises his clients across a wide-ranging spectrum of sectors. His key industry experience includes conventional and renewable energy, infrastructure, and natural resources including green hydrogen projects, mining, real estate, construction, and telecommunications, a press release said.

"We are delighted to welcome Ravinder into our partnership," said Mansoor Jamal Malik, managing partner. "His appointment to the partnership is a tes-



Ravinder Singh

tament to the success we have had in the Project and Commercial department and demonstrates our commitment to support fast-paced economic growth and development in Oman. It boosts our capability to respond to the business community's need for quality legal services at a time of increasing complexity of transactions."

NBO celebrates its 50th anniversary

National Bank of Oman (NBO) recently marked its 50th anniversary with a series of initiatives and events bringing together clients, team members and other stakeholders.

Ever since its inception in 1973 as the first local bank in Oman that introduced banking services, the customer-centric NBO has been at the forefront of creating value, smart solutions and ushering socio-economic development, a press release said.

The bank highlighted its contributions and the opportunities it has unlocked, benefitting not only its customers but also the entire nation during three dedicated events. With the presence of the bank's Board of Directors, the first event witnessed the recognition of 65 of the longest-serving team members with 30-plus years of contributions.

The second event was dedicated to celebrate with the bank's partners. As for the third, close to 20 small and medium enterprises were invited, and over 1000 team members and their families participated to mark this milestone. During these celebrations, participants enjoyed a virtual showcase of NBO's 50-year journey and future plans, which was produced as the biggest digital show of its kind in Oman.

Abdullah Zahran al Hinai, CEO of National Bank of Oman, said, "Ever since our establishment five decades ago, we have always been driving sustainable growth and progress by making our customer experiences an absolute priority. Being a customer-centric bank has enabled us to continuously address the rapidly and ever-changing



needs of our clients, while we have been expanding our array of services and integrating digital technologies into our operations.

"With the renewed renaissance under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, we renew our promise to our customers to continue nurturing our partnership and ensure it soars to new heights."

Meanwhile, putting its customers at the core of its operations, NBO entered a



partnership with the telecom provider Vodafone, to further facilitate the bank's services and digital solutions, while both entities will also cooperate in other initiatives benefiting customers and team members alike.

In addition, the bank also signed an agreement with Abraj Energy Services, an integrated energy company in Oman. The bank also partnered with Ottu, a Kuwait-based company offering Computer Integrated Solutions, to further streamline online payment processes for the bank's customers.

Creating value that feeds into the overall progress of Oman, NBO also announced other initiatives. One of the initiatives was with the Oman Charitable Organisation (OCO), in which NBO donated to the non-governmental organisation to support national social welfare projects and programmes benefitting children, orphans and disabled people.

Nabil declares winner of mega prize – MG RX5

National Biscuit Industries, manufacturers of the brand 'Nabil' with the extensive range of biscuits, cream wafers and snacks, has announced the winner of the final round of 'Nabil Buy & Win' promotion raffle draw. The winner of MG RX5 is Mohammed Humayun Rashid, a press release said.

The winners of 4g gold coins were Ibrahim Abdallah al Darmaki, Mohammad Saif, Al Salt bin Ahmed al Amni, Shiju Kumar, Clevan, Hamdan al Jabri, Khamis Bin Muhammed al Kindi, Abdallah Hamoud al Mitlik, Manoop V S, and Khalfan.

This is the seventh year when National Biscuit Industries offered a car as a Mega Raffle prize. The company has recently launched a new range of products - Maamoul, Fillz, Nankhatai, and Nutgestive, to name a few of them. The company thanks the consumers of Oman, for their continued support and promises to offer them a wider basket of quality products at the most affordable prices.

Nabil products have a strong presence in the GCC region and are exported globally to more than 45 countries with the unflinching patronage of consumers.

Bank Muscat organises event for premier banking customers

Asalah Priority Banking and Al Jawhar Privilege Banking from Bank Muscat recently hosted a special networking event in Sur, in line with the bank's customer-centric vision and commitment to further strengthen its partnership and communication channels with its customers.

The events, which were attended by Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, deputy general manager – Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, and other bank officials, saw excellent participation from a large number of Premier Banking customers. They follow recent customer meets in Duqm, Nizwa and Sohar, which were organised by the bank to strengthen its partnership with customers and get their feedback regarding new services, products and offers.

Sabeea thanked Asalah and



Al Jawhar customers for their whole-hearted support and confidence in Bank Muscat's various high-tech services and products, which are backed by its customer-centric vision. He said

that promptly responding to customer feedback and keeping pace with global banking trends were key to Bank Muscat's continued leadership in the financial services sector in Oman. He

added that the bank would further work towards realising customer aspirations and expectations in line so as to continue providing a world-class banking experience.

Barwani to speak at Business Conclave'23

As part of celebrating 37th year of successful presence in the sultanate and recently being awarded as the most trusted brand, Shahi group, one of the leading suppliers of food and spices in Oman, has invited Knowledge Oman founder and popular motivational speaker, Tariq Hilal al Barwani, to motivate, engage and inspire at its up-coming Business Conclave 2023 February 7 at the Sheraton Hotel, Muscat.

"I am honoured to be invited to speak at Shahi's Business Conclave and look forward to be sharing the journey of what it takes to create and maintain a successful brand," said Barwani

Tariq who joined leaders and visionaries of international repute at the world's leading



speaking agency, the London Speaker Bureau, will be delivering an engaging session on what it takes to create and maintain a successful brand. Tariq has launched many initiatives that received 22 awards, the most recent being the icon of the year 2022.

SBA announces low EMI of RO130 on 2023 all-new Nissan X-TRAIL

Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) has announced low EMI of RO130 on the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL which offers customers class-leading versatility, elevated exterior and interior designs, advanced safety, and improved levels of capability.

In line with SBA's commitment to provide the best for its customers, it is offering attractive EMI which is calculated on the price of the base model with 20% down payment, 6.5% rate of interest for 5 years loan tenure through Bank Muscat, a press re-

lease said.

A senior official of SBA said, "We are delighted to offer low EMI on the incredibly popular Nissan X-TRAIL. Developed as a premium urban crossover, the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL furthers the brand's commitment to introduce innovative mobility solutions."

Reflecting the Nissan SUV's role to 'Defy Ordinary', the key themes echoed across the event were eXpand, eXpress, eXplore, and eXhale, pushing guests to eXist beyond the everyday. A

segment-leader on several fronts, the all-new model features the latest Nissan Intelligent Mobility technologies, including ProPILOT Assist for the very first time on the X-TRAIL line-up, and offers heightened connectivity with up to a collective 35.4-inches of cabin screens.

The X-TRAIL has been an integral part of Nissan SUV line-up in the region for the last twenty years and has continually catered to the needs of families and adventure enthusiasts across Oman.



STAN'S THE MAN

Veteran star shines as Switzerland beat Germany in Davis Cup

Paris, France - Stan Wawrinka took Switzerland to the Davis Cup Finals group stage on Saturday, winning a rollercoaster deciding clash against Germany, just weeks shy of his 38th birthday.

Three-time Grand Slam title winner Wawrinka, who helped the Swiss to the Davis Cup title alongside Roger Federer in 2014, defeated Daniel Altmaier 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 as his country triumphed 3-2 in their qualifying tie.

Former world number three Wawrinka, now down at 135 after a long spell rebuilding his career following two foot surgeries, was playing in the tournament for the first time in eight years having made his debut in 2004.

By contrast Altmaier, 13 years younger, was making his Davis Cup debut in Trier.

Wawrinka, who turns 38 next month, had lost his singles opener on Friday in straight sets to Alexander Zverev.

He was on the losing side again earlier Saturday when he and Dominic Stricker were beaten in the doubles 6-7 (3/7), 6-3, 6-4 by Tim Puetz and Andreas Mies.

However, Marc-Andrea Huesler then stunned world number 14 Zverev 6-2, 7-6 (7/3) to bring Switzerland level at 2-2, setting the stage for Wawrinka's moment in the spotlight.

"I'm happy that I won one point and the last one was the most important," said Wawrinka.



Stan Wawrinka celebrates after his victory against Daniel Altmaier

The United States, who have won the 123-year-old tournament on a record 32 occasions, also booked their place in September's group stage by seeing off Uzbekistan in Tashkent.

Experienced doubles pair Austin Krajicek and Rajeev Ram cantered to a 6-2, 6-4 win over Sanjar Fayziev and Sergey Fomini

in just 52 minutes.

Serbia shrugged off the absence of Novak Djokovic to comfortably defeat a Norway team missing world number four Casper Ruud.

Ahead 2-0 after Friday's opening singles in Oslo, Nikola Patic and Filip Krajinovic saw off Viktor Durasovic and Herman Hoeyer-

aal 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 for the key point.

France, the 10-time champions, made the next round with a win over Hungary.

Ugo Humbert, making his tournament debut this weekend, sealed the tie with a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Fabian Marozsan in Tatabanya in the deciding singles.

France were given a scare

when Hungary surprisingly claimed the doubles rubber as Marozsan and Mate Valkusz defeated Nicolas Mahut and Arthur Rinderknech 6-2, 7-6 (7/4) before Adrian Mannarino levelled at 2-2 with a straight sets win over Marton Fucsovics.

"I am so proud of this team," said Humbert."



Lin Zhu recorded a straight-set victory against Lesia Tsurenko

China's Lin Zhu beats Tsurenko to win Thai Open

Bangkok, Thailand - China's Lin Zhu triumphed over Ukraine's Lesia Tsurenko in the final of the 2023 Thailand Open in the seaside resort of Hua Hin on Sunday evening.

It was Lin's first-ever WTA final, and she was the first Chinese player to make it past the quarter-final stage at the Thailand Open.

After a patchy start the 28-year-old, who is ranked 54, steadied before going on to clinch victory 6-4, 6-4.

Tsurenko, once ranked 23 but competing in a major final for the first time in five years, did not give her a smooth ride.

She battled back from match point down near the

end of the second set, unsettling Lin enough to force the younger player into a series of unforced errors.

But the Ukrainian was visibly discomforted by the swarms of mosquitos later invading the court, allowing an opening for her opponent, who fought through a series of nail-biting rallies for the win.

"I would not be here without you guys," Lin said, thanking her team and the fans who came out and supported her.

Tsurenko paid tribute to her "amazing" opponent, adding: "Days like this I hope you just have more and more, just play as amazing as you played today."



Khalid Kail , Mohd Zahid and Wasim Ali of Yalla Shabab after the win

Yalla Shabab beat Majees CC in Oman Cricket Premier Division

Muscat - Yalla Shabab defeated Majees CC by 108 runs in the Oman Cricket Domestic League Premier Division powered by Muscat Pharmacy.

Put in to bat first, Yalla Shabab made 285 in 50 overs as Wasim Ali (101 of 94; 6x4,4x6) and Khalid Kail (101 of 107; 11x4,1x6) hit centuries and stitched an un-

beaten partnership of 207. Earlier, Hannan Rizwan (43 of 45; 7x4) also was in fine form. Sahil Shaik bagged 2/29 for Majees CC

In reply, Majees CC batters never really challenged the mammoth total of Yalla Shabab, with only Zeeshan Maqsood (83 of 108; 2x4,5x6) offering any

kind of resistance.

Majees CC's innings ended at 177 in 42.5 overs as Muhammed Zahid (3/35), Wasim Ali (2/29) and Zikria Islam (2/30) shone with the ball.

It was Yalla Shabab's fourth win out of five games while Majees CC are yet to get off the mark.

Edwards to coach Mumbai Indians WPL side

Mumbai, India - Mumbai Indians on Sunday named England's Charlotte Edwards as chief coach of its Women's Premier League team ahead of the inaugural tournament to be held in India in March.

The 44-year-old former England captain has coached cricket teams in Australia and her own country for the last five years.

The Mumbai Indians, owned by tycoon Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries, are the most successful franchise in the men's Indian Premier League with five trophies.

Last month, India's cricket board auctioned off five women's WPL teams for \$572.5 million.

The franchise also announced Jhulan Goswami as the team's mentor and bowling coach alongside all-rounder Devika Palshikar as batting coach and Trupti Chandgadkar Bhat-tacharya as team manager.

Goswami topped the ICC Women's ODI bowling rankings in 2016 and also holds the records for the highest number of wickets (350) in women's ODI



Charlotte Edwards

history and the most wickets in women's World Cups.

Palshikar has coached teams in India and Bangladesh and won the Asia Cup with the latter in 2018. Bhattacharya is a former manager of the Indian women's cricket team.

"It is wonderful to see more

It is wonderful to see more and more women in sport. This is an exciting time for women's sport in India

NITA AMBANI

and more women in sport, excelling not just as players, but also as coaches, administrators, and support staff," Nita Ambani, a director at Reliance and Mukesh's spouse, said in a statement.

"This is an exciting time for women's sport in India," she said.

AFP

Ancer tightens hold on Saudi International

King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia - Abraham Ancer heads into the final day at the Saudi International with a two-shot lead over American Cameron Young after the Mexican maintained his dazzling form in the desert on Saturday.

A bogey-free third-round six-under par 64, inspired by some fine iron play with 16 greens reached in regulation, doubled Ancer's overnight lead over Young.

It looks like a two-horse race with American Matthew Wolff (63), Australia's Lucas Herbert

(67) and Thailand's Sadom Kaewkanjana (68) in a tie for third, seven shots behind Ancer's 17-under par total of 197.

"It was another very solid round with no dropped shots, that's always my goal," said Ancer, on target for his first win since the 2021 WGC-FedEx St Jude Invitational.

"On a golf course like this where it's blowing pretty good, I'm really, really happy.

"My ball striking has definitely been on, and I've been rolling it really nice all week. I have not re-

ally focused on what everybody else is doing. Just trying to play the same game I've been playing the past three days," added Ancer.

The par-4 13th is one of the toughest holes on the golf course and it produced a two-shot swing between the leaders when Ancer hit a brilliant second shot that hit the flag and left him with a two-foot birdie putt.

"I just told my caddy that it was a perfect distance, and I was just going to aim on the edge of the green and just hope that the

wind takes it. I hit it really nicely and it worked out really good," recounted Ancer.

Young pulled his tee shot and wound up making a bogey.

On the 14th, Kaewkanjana hit his tee shot into a fairway bunker and ended up making a double bogey.

With a third 65 in three rounds, Young moved to 15-under par, and said: "I think I've played really solidly. Obviously, Abe's playing some really nice golf. So, I think tomorrow will be fun."



Abraham Ancer in action at Saudi International in King Abdullah Economic City, north of Jeddah, on Sunday



Al Ahly's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Afsha (R) celebrates scoring against Seattle Sounders FC in the FIFA Club World Cup on Saturday (AFP)

Afsha late winner sets up Real Madrid semi for Al Ahly

Tangiers, Morocco - Afsha scored in the 88th minute as Egyptians Al Ahly edged Seattle Sounders 1-0 on Saturday to book a Club World Cup semi-final with Real Madrid.

Second-half replacement Afsha, a 20-time Egypt international, saw his late volley deflected to wrong foot Sounders goalkeeper Stefan Frei, which took Al Ahly to Wednesday's last-four fixture in Rabat.

Earlier, teenager Musab Al Juwayr scored the crucial spot kick as Al Hilal beat CAF Champions League winners Wydad

Casablanca 5-3 on penalties (1-1 after extra time) to set up a semi-final with Brazilians Flamengo.

Al Juwayr, 19, converted after Yahya Attiat-Allah's miss for the Moroccans, playing 350km down the coast from their home city. Defender Ayoub El Amloud had opened the scoring for the outfit on home soil before teammate Yahya Jabrane was sent off in stoppage time at the end of the match.

Midfielder Mohamed Kanno equalised for the Saudis and sent the game into extra time after 94 minutes.

ROARING LIONS OF TERANGA

Senegal beat hosts Algeria on penalties to win CHAN title and complete African double

Algiers, Algeria - Senegal completed a double when they beat hosts Algeria 5-4 on penalties after a 0-0 draw to win the African Nations Championship (CHAN) final on Saturday.

Golden Boot winner Aymen Mahious had a chance to win a competition reserved for footballers playing in their country of birth when he stepped forward to take the 10th spot-kick.

But his attempt was weak and straight at goalkeeper Pape Sy, who saved comfortably, leaving the teams deadlocked at 4-4, and necessitating a sudden-death extension to the shootout.

Ousmane Diouf calmly converted to edge Senegal ahead amid whistling from many in a sellout 39,120 crowd at the Stade Nelson Mandela in Algiers.

Ahmed Kendouci had to score to keep Algerian hopes of victory



Senegal's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the 2022 African Nations Championship final against Algeria in Algiers on Saturday (AFP)

alive, but his shot rebounded off the crossbar and Senegal were champions.

The local-based team triumphed a year after the full Senegal team, including stars like Sadio Mane, beat Egypt on penalties to win the premier

competition, the Africa Cup of Nations.

It was a joyous occasion for all of west Africa as teams from the region reached five of the other six Nations Championship finals and lost them all.

This was the second final to

be decided by a shootout with Libya beating Ghana on penalties after a goalless 2014 title decider in Cape Town.

Regular and extra time in a tense, physical Algiers showdown were notable for the lack of goal attempts with just four in

120 minutes, three of them from Algeria.

The attempt that came closest to breaking the deadlock was in the 107th minute when a volley from Houssem Mrezigue was brilliantly pushed over by Sy.

AFP

Haller on scoresheet after cancer battle as Union knock Bayern Munich off top

Berlin, Germany - Sebastian Haller crowned his recent return from testicular cancer with an emotional first goal for Borussia Dortmund on Saturday, as Union Berlin knocked Bayern Munich off the top of the Bundesliga with a dramatic late win over Mainz.

Six months after a shock diagnosis which saw him miss the entire first half of the season, Haller finally opened his account for the club he joined last summer.

The Ivory Coast international's second-half header prompted wild celebrations among his teammates and helped Dortmund to a 5-1 win over Freiburg which kept them within two points of leaders Union.

"I've been waiting for this moment since day one. When I



Borussia Dortmund's Sebastian Haller (L) celebrates with Jude Bellingham after scoring against Freiburg on Saturday (AFP)

scored the goal, it felt like the whole stadium was on fire," Haller told Sky.

"I am happy, but the way is still long, so we will keep walking and hope for more goals," he

added. Freiburg were reduced to 10 men early in the first half after French full-back Kiliann Sildillia was booked twice in the space of two minutes.

Former Freiburg player Nico Schlotterbeck then heaped more misery onto his old club, his low snapshot beating goalkeeper Mark Flekken at the near post to give Dortmund the lead.

Schlotterbeck and Niklas Suele handed Freiburg a lifeline with some farcical defending on the stroke of half-time, allowing Lucas Hoeler to sweep in an unexpected equaliser.

Yet Karim Adeyemi wriggled his way through the Freiburg box to restore the lead with a neat finish early in the second half, before goals from Haller, Julian Brandt and Giovanni Reyna completed the rout.

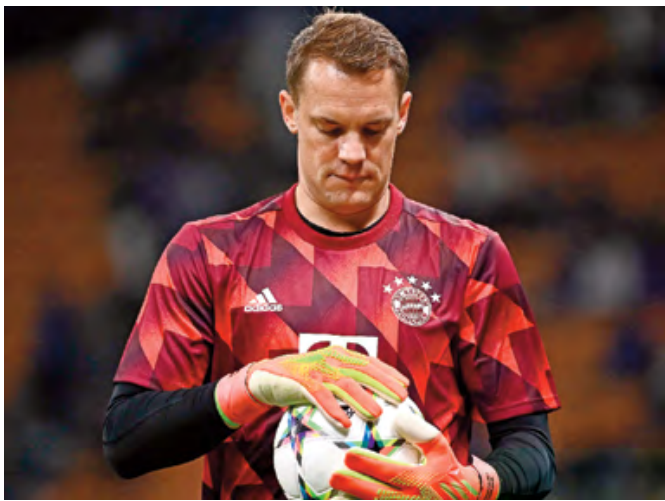
Neuer 'put personal interests' above Bayern, says sporting director

Berlin, Germany - Bayern Munich sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic said on Sunday he was "disappointed" with injured captain Manuel Neuer, who "put his personal interests above" the club.

The statement, which relates to Neuer's tell-all interview with media outlets Sueddeutsche Zeitung and The Athletic, is the latest in the war of words between the club and its captain.

Neuer, who is currently out injured with a broken leg from a skiing accident in December, criticised the club's decision to fire long-time goalkeeping coach Toni Tapalovic, saying he felt "as if my heart had been ripped out".

Speaking with German tabloid Bild on Sunday, Salihamidzic said: "I understand Manuel is affected personally, but as captain I would have expected a different



Manuel Neuer

attitude from him.

"Manuel has put his personal interests above the interests of the club.

"We'll discuss it with him sensibly internally."

The off-field saga is mirrored

by poor results on the field for the German champions, who are yet to win a league match in 2023.

Bayern, who sit in second place behind Union Berlin, travel to Wolfsburg on Sunday.

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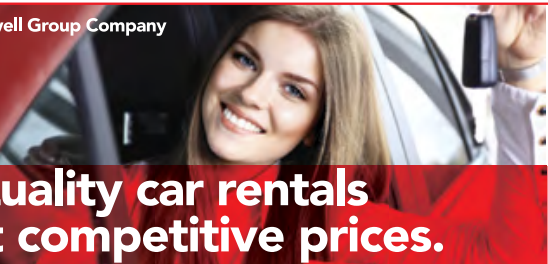
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MESSI SPECIAL

Argentinian superstar hits winner as PSG come from behind to beat Toulouse

Paris, France - Lionel Messi scored a superb second-half winner as a Paris Saint-Germain side missing the injured Kylian Mbappe and Neymar came from behind to beat Toulouse 2-1 on Saturday and consolidate their lead at the top of Ligue 1.

Dutch midfielder Branco van den Boomen gave mid-table Toulouse the lead at the Parc des Princes from a 20th-minute free-kick, only for Achraf Hakimi to curl in the equaliser with half-time approaching.

Messi then put PSG in front just before the hour mark with a glorious first-time strike on his left foot low into the corner of the net from just outside the area.

It was Messi's 10th Ligue 1 goal of the season and his 15th for his club this campaign, as the World Cup winner stepped up in the absence of PSG's two other superstar attackers.

The Qatar-owned club are now eight points clear at the top of the table from Marseille, who play Nice on Sunday and then host PSG in the French Cup last 16 in midweek.

Mbappe will miss that game and the Champions League last-16 first leg against Bayern Munich on February 14 after being ruled out for three weeks with a thigh injury suffered in the 3-1 win at Montpellier last Wednesday.

Neymar missed a second successive game with an apparently minor adductor problem, meaning it was left to Messi to lead the attack alongside the 20-year-old Hugo Ekitike with support from



Paris Saint-Germain's Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring against Toulouse in their French Ligue 1 match in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

Vitinha and Carlos Soler.

Injury problems

But Christophe Galtier's side have other issues, with Sergio Ramos unable to play, Marco Verratti suspended, and Renato Sanches forced to come off in tears just 12 minutes into the game.

"Leo is holding the team to-

gether," Galtier told broadcaster Amazon Prime. "It is not just two players we are missing. There is Kylian and 'Ney' but also Marco Verratti and Sergio Ramos.

"He takes on the role of leader naturally, and he did so in mid-week too. He was so important to the way we played. He takes the initiative. We need to give him

the ball even more."

Portugal midfielder Sanches was starting for just the fifth time since joining from Lille at the start of the season but had to come off with what looked like a hamstring injury. He was replaced by teenage defender El Chadaille Bitshiabu, with Danilo Pereira moving up into the midfield, and

the substitute was partly responsible when PSG fell behind.

Bitshiabu was booked for bringing down Zakaria Aboukhmal 25 metres from goal, and Van den Boomen sent the resulting free-kick low into the left corner of the net with Gianluigi Donnarumma beaten.

AFP



Paris Saint-Germain's Lionel Messi (C) fights for the ball with Toulouse's Warren Kamanzi on Saturday (AFP)

Paris Saint-Germain want Messi to sign contract renewal

Paris, France - Paris Saint-Germain's football advisor Luis Campos says he will be "delighted" if Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi agrees to extend his contract with the French champions.

The 35-year-old seven-time Ballon D'Or winner

he had spent his whole professional career.

"We are in discussions. I cannot hide that, I would love to have him involved in this project, that he can continue with us," Campos told French broadcaster TF1.

"I would be delighted if he does so, but we are talking at the moment trying to achieve that goal, that Leo Messi remains with us."

Campos lauded Messi's recent contributions to the team especially in the win over Montpellier.

"At half-time I said to him 'Leo it is imperative you drag the others with you'. He replied: 'keep calm' and he produced an exceptional second-half."

Messi's form is just the boost PSG require with Mbappe's injury due to see him miss their Champions League Last 16 first leg clash with Bayern Munich on February 14.

I would love to have him involved in this project, that he can continue with us

LUIS CAMPOS

achieved his life-time ambition of winning the World Cup in December but has maintained a decent run of form on his return to France.

Messi joined PSG in 2021 on a two-year contract, with the option of renewing it for another, after an emotional farewell to Barcelona where



Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag with Casemiro

Ten Hag fumes over Casemiro red card in Man Utd win

London, United Kingdom - Erik ten Hag criticised "inconsistent" VAR after Manchester United's Casemiro was the only player sent off following a mass brawl in Saturday's 2-1 win against Crystal Palace.

Bruno Fernandes' early penalty and a Marcus Rashford strike put United on course for a 13th successive home win in all competitions.

But Ten Hag's team had to survive a nervous finale at Old Trafford after Brazil midfielder Casemiro was dismissed before Palace's Jeffrey Schlupp scored to reduce the deficit.

Just prior to his goal, Schlupp had shoved United winger Antony off the pitch, sparking a fight involving both sets of players which ended with Casemiro receiving a straight red card for violent

conduct. Referee Andre Marriner was advised to check the pitchside monitor by the VAR to review images of Casemiro grabbing Palace's Will Hughes by the throat.

"It was a really high level first 70 minutes until the incident takes place and then you see this team stands for each other," Ten Hag said. "Then I see two teams fighting each other, I see two teams where players, several players, are crossing the line and then one player is picked out and sent off. For me, that's not right."

United's victory consolidated their grip on third place in the Premier League.

Ten Hag said Schlupp took a "big risk" by shoving Antony off the pitch, saying he could have been "badly injured".

AFP

Mallorca damage Real Madrid title hopes as Marco Asensio misses penalty

Palma, Spain - Real Madrid's hopes of retaining La Liga as the champions fell 1-0 at Real Mallorca, to remain five points behind leaders Barcelona.

The Catalans host Sevilla later on and can open up an eight-point lead after a frustrated Madrid fell against Javier Aguirre's side, with Marco Asensio missing a penalty against his former club.

Nacho's 13th minute looping header into his own net separated the teams in a hard-fought clash, frequently slowed by various fouls from the hosts.

Amid a constant battle between winger Vinicius Junior and Mallorca's players and supporters, the islanders held off Los Blancos to record an impressive victory.

Real Madrid, second, were without goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, hurt during the warm-up, along with the injured Karim Benzema, Eder Militao and Ferland Mendy, among other absentees.



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior (R) vies with Mallorca's Daniel Rodriguez during their Spanish League match (AFP)

Rodrygo started up front in place of Benzema, while Dani Ceballos and Fede Valverde were given starts in midfield ahead of veterans Toni Kroos and Luka Modric.

The match was heated from

the start, largely due to historic bad blood between Vinicius and Mallorca.

Mallorca captain Antonio Raimon has criticised the Brazilian winger on multiple occasions for lacking respect towards oppo-

nents and said he wouldn't hold him up as an example to his son.

Home fans at the Visit Mallorca Stadium whistled Vinicius when he was on the ball and chanted Raimon's name.

Anelotti was also frustrated

his team were playing in the early after-noon after having faced Valencia on Thursday night and Madrid started sluggishly.

Mallorca, 10th, took an early lead when Nacho's attempted header sent Dani Rodriguez's in-swinging cross from the left looping over Courtois's stand-in Andriy Lunin and dipping just under the crossbar.

The hosts shackled Vinicius well in the first half and reduced Madrid to pot-shots from distance, Antonio Rudiger and Valverde firing wildly off-target.

Vinicius was booked for stepping on Pablo Maffeo's foot, leaving the Brazilian incredulous after various fouls against him had not been punished with a card.

Ceballos protested vehemently to the officials as the teams went in at the break and was also booked, as temperatures rose in the Mallorcan sun.

Vinicius pulled at the Madrid badge on his shirt while looking at the home fans to agitate them further.

AFP

Osimhen and Kvaratskhelia combine at Spezia to send Napoli 16 clear

La Spezia, Italy - Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia were again the stars of the show for Napoli as the Serie A leaders won 3-0 at Spezia to extend their advantage to a whopping 16 points.

Wing wizard Kvaratskhelia put Napoli ahead from the penalty spot two minutes after the break on the Italian Riviera before Osimhen netted twice, taking his league tally to 16.

Nigeria forward Osimhen pounced on a defensive error to double Napoli's lead in the 68th minute and five minutes later rolled home an easy finish after



Napoli's Victor Osimhen (L) celebrates with Khvicha Kvaratskhelia after scoring against Spezia in their Italian Serie A match on Sunday (AFP)

Mattia Caldara passed straight to Kvaratskhelia on the edge of his own area.

"All the victories are important, we need to keep the momentum and try to win all games," said Osimhen to Sky in Italy. "It is not going to be easy of course, Serie A is a very competitive league and we have to be on top of our game. We go back, we prepare for the next game, that is the most important thing."

Osimhen ended the day on top of the world after beginning it going into the stands at the Stadio Picco to apologise to a

woman fan who hit with an off-target pre-match practice shot.

The 23-year-old hugged the woman and posed for selfies before going on to continue Napoli's unstoppable looking title charge.

"I think she was looking at her phone, the ball hit her in the face and I felt so sorry, as I didn't mean to do that," added Osimhen.

Luciano Spalletti's side will be at least 13 points clear come the end of the day as their closest challengers Inter Milan host ailing champions AC Milan in Sunday's late match.

AFP



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Indian regulator reassures investors after Adani rout

Mumbai, India – India's securities regulator said Saturday that markets were stable and protected from further volatility, following a phenomenal share rout that hit the business empire of tycoon Gautam Adani.

The combined market cap of Adani Group's listed companies has collapsed by around US\$120bn – about half of the conglomerate's value – since US short-seller Hindenburg Research released an explosive report in late January.

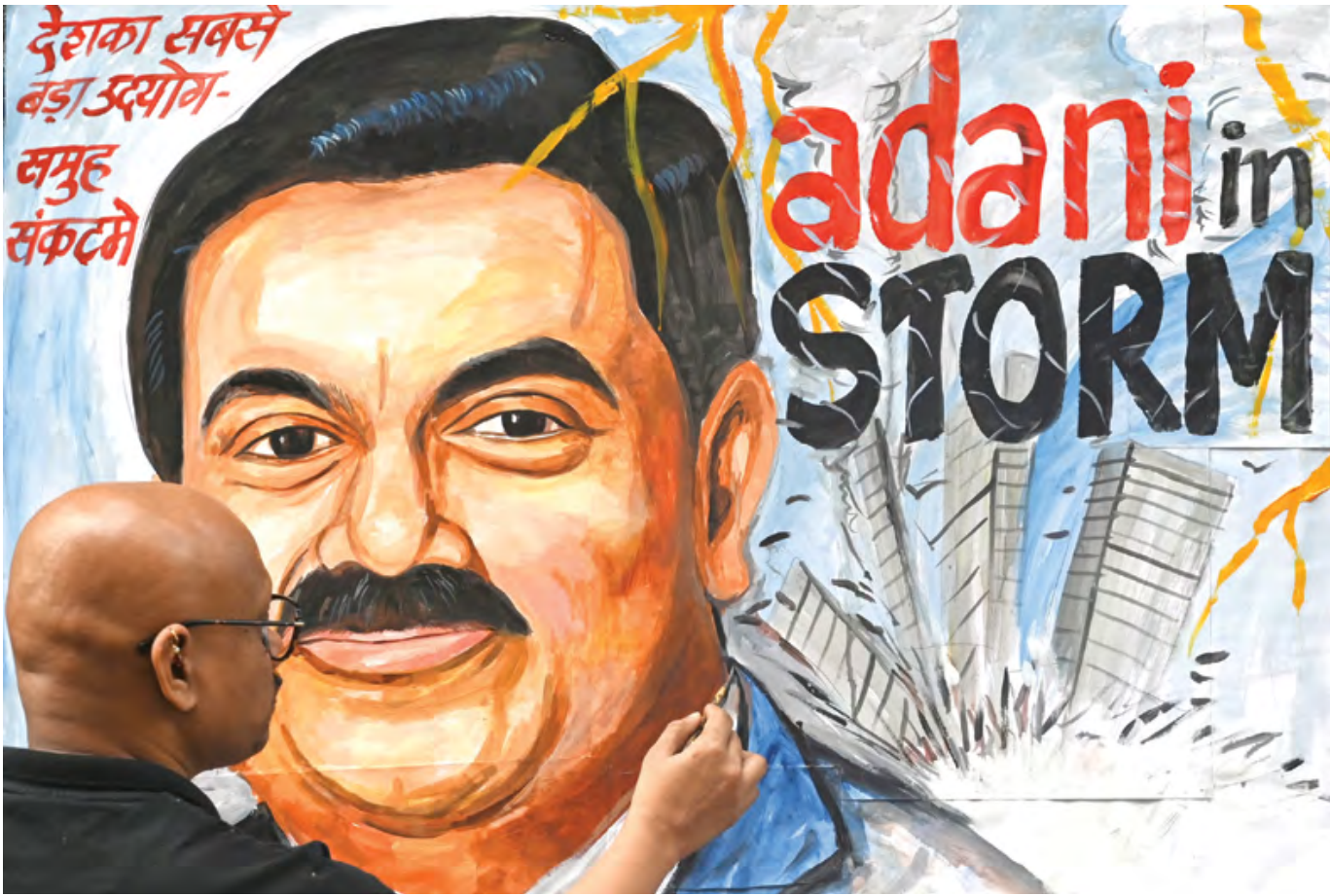
It accused Adani of accounting fraud and artificially boosting its share prices, calling it a "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" and "the largest con in corporate history".

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) said in a statement that India's financial market had "demonstrated ongoing stability and is continuing to function in a transparent, fair and efficient manner".

It added that it had "put in place a set of well defined, publicly available surveillance measures" for addressing excessive volatility in specific stocks, without naming the Adani conglomerate.

Adani dismissed the allegations in the Hindenburg report as a "maliciously mischievous" reputational attack and issued a 413-page statement asserting its claims were "nothing but a lie".

Hindenburg said in response



Art school teacher Sagar Kambli gives final touches to a painting of Gautam Adani highlighting ongoing crisis of Adani Group in Mumbai on Friday (AFP)

Adani had failed to answer most of the questions raised in its report.

The group's founder has seen his fortune plummet sharply, dumping him from third to 17th on the real-time Forbes rich list.

His operations have expanded at breakneck speed, with Adani Enterprises shares soaring more than 1,000 per cent over the past five years.

Finance Minister Nirmala

Combined market cap of Adani Group's listed companies has collapsed by around \$120bn – about half of the conglomerate's value – since US short-seller Hindenburg Research released an explosive report in late January

Sitharaman on Friday insisted Indian markets were well regulated and that the controversy

would not affect investor confidence.

Earlier this week Adani can-

celled a US\$2.5bn stock sale meant to help reduce debt levels – long a concern – restore confidence and broaden its shareholder base.

Big banks including Credit Suisse and Citigroup have stopped accepting Adani bonds as collateral for loans to private clients, according to Bloomberg News, fuelling worries about how the conglomerate will raise fresh funds.

AFP

China expected to boost global growth, IMF says

Washington, US – China's economy is expected to contribute a quarter of global growth this year, the International Monetary Fund said Friday, although uncertainty around Covid-19 and the property sector could stifle momentum.

After almost three years of stringent health restrictions, Beijing in December abruptly ended the zero-Covid policy that had battered the economy and provoked widespread protests.

The Asian giant posted growth of just three percent in 2022, hammered by stringent lockdowns and a deepening crisis in the key property sector.

"China's economy is set to rebound this year as mobility and activity pick up after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, providing a boost to the global economy," the IMF said in an annual assessment of the Chinese economy.

"That's good news for China and the world as the Chinese economy is now expected to contribute a quarter of global growth this year," it said.

The IMF on Monday revised its 2023 growth forecast for China up to 5.2 per cent, after upgrading its global growth forecast partially based on the country's reopening.

Authorities in China have said the soaring virus case numbers that accompanied the reopening have now passed their peak, with a travel surge prompted by the biggest Lunar New Year holiday in years offering a much-needed boost to business.

However, Friday's assess-



ment also warned of "significant economic challenges" ahead.

"The contraction in real estate remains a major headwind, and there is still some uncertainty around the evolution of the virus," it said.

The property sector, which along with construction accounts for more than a quarter of China's GDP, has been hit hard since Beijing started cracking down on excessive borrowing and rampant speculation in 2020.

"Longer-term, headwinds to growth include a shrinking population and slowing productivity growth," the IMF said.

China's population shrank last year for the first time in more than six decades, official data released last month showed, and the nation of 1.4bn has seen birth rates plunge to record lows as its workforce ages.

The slowdown in global demand, the uncertainties of the war in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions are the "main risks" to Chinese growth this year, the IMF said.

AFP

Google, Apple disappoint as tech earnings hit by gloom

New York, US – Google and Apple have reported downbeat results for the last quarter of 2022 as Amazon beat expectations, but warned that the coming months would be uncertain in a difficult moment for Big Tech.

The tech titans posted earnings as shares in Meta skyrocketed on Friday a day after it reported better results than expected and signaled spending and job cuts.

The results follow weeks of unprecedented layoff rounds in the usually unassailable tech sector amid pessimism about the economic outlook.

The souring mood followed a long spell of outsized growth during the peak Covid-19 period when consumers went online for work, shopping and entertainment.

"Big Tech calls from Apple, Amazon, and Alphabet painting a much different picture of demand environment than the tech bears were hoping for," tweeted Wedbush analyst Dan Ives, referring to investors who believe shares are on a downward path.

While earnings reports show there is "caution in the air" there are signs that the companies could be heading for soft landings, the analyst added.

Google parent Alphabet's revenue of US\$76bn in its fourth quarter and profit of US\$13.6bn were below what it made in the same period a year earlier, with share prices falling more than 3 per cent in after-market trade.

Google saw a slump in its crucial advertising sales, which were slightly better than analysts had projected, according to data compiled by Factset.



A file photo shows the logos of Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft displayed on a mobile phone and a laptop screen (AFP)

"It's clear that after a period of significant acceleration in digital spending during the pandemic, the macro economic climate has become more challenging," Google CEO Sundar Pichai said in an earnings call. Pichai last month announced a plan to lay off 12,000 employees in order to reverse pandemic over-hiring and focus on new areas, especially artificial intelligence.

Google was caught off guard by the sudden rise of user-friendly AI such as ChatGPT, which is seen as a potential rival to Google's popular search engine.

Apple is the only US tech giant that has not announced major layoffs in recent weeks.

The world's biggest company in terms of market value reported a fall in quarterly revenue and profits for the final three months last year, hit by a drop in sales of its flagship iPhones.

Apple sales were hit by curtailed production at factories due to China's zero-Covid policy

that was only recently lifted.

"COVID-19 related challenges" that "significantly" reduced Apple's supply of iPhone 14 Pro and iPhone 14 Pro Max lasted through most of December, Apple chief executive Tim Cook said on an earnings call.

'Unprecedented circumstances'

Apple's revenue was US\$117.1bn, down 5.4 per cent from a year ago for the same quarter a year earlier, missing what analysts had forecast.

"The world continues to face unprecedented circumstances, from inflation to war in Eastern Europe, to the enduring impacts of the pandemic and we know that Apple is not immune to it," Cook said.

Amazon meanwhile reported an inflation-fueled increase in sales despite the company announcing a massive round of layoffs to correct for a hiring binge during the pandemic when business growth ramped up.

AFP

US sees surprise hiring surge as unemployment edges down

Washington, US – US job gains surged unexpectedly last month as unemployment slipped to its lowest rate in more than five decades, government data showed, indicating strength in the labor market despite efforts to ease economic activity.

This could prove concerning to policymakers, with risks that elevated wages could feed into inflation.

While the US central bank has tempered its aggressive campaign to rein in prices on signs that the world's biggest economy is cooling, the latest figures could steer it towards more interest rate hikes than expected.

The United States defied expectations to add 517,000 jobs in January, nearly double the December figure, after a five-month slowdown in hiring, said the Labor Department on Friday.

"Job growth was widespread, led by gains in leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, and health care," the report added.

Employment in manufacturing and construction showed resilience as well, despite a



US President Joe Biden speaks about the January 2023 jobs report in Washington, DC (AFP)

slowdown in activity in both sectors.

The jobless rate edged down to 3.4 per cent, a level last seen in 1969, according to government figures.

But wage growth slowed slightly with average hourly earnings rising by 0.3 per cent to US\$33.03, down from December's 0.4 per cent increase.

Taken together, these figures suggest the labor market remains too hot for policymakers,

with the hiring figure marking a spike from December's 260,000 number.

US President Joe Biden cheered the strong job creation since he took office and noted that inflation was still cooling off. He pushed back against critics who, he says, suggest that "the only way to slow down inflation was to destroy jobs."

"Today's data makes crystal clear... these critics and cynics are wrong," he told reporters,

though conceding there remains more work to do.

"The data show the economy is creating jobs at a rapid pace," said Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics.

Job creation is showing "no sign of softening" she added, despite the Fed's eight consecutive hikes to the benchmark lending rate, aimed at easing demand and bringing down costs.

"Wage growth has slowed, but it has not yet slowed enough for the Fed," added Ian Shepherdson at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

The Federal Reserve has been closely eyeing the jobs market, with labor demand exceeding the supply of available workers and employers keen to retain staff they may have struggled to find during the pandemic.

While unemployment is typically seen to edge up as interest rates rise and borrowing costs go up, the jobless rate has hovered at historically low levels in recent months.

Wages are "still at a high level," Fed Chair Jerome Powell told reporters Wednesday.

AFP

Bangladesh seeks oil credit from Saudi Arabia

Dhaka, Bangladesh – Cash-strapped Bangladesh asked Saudi Arabia for extended credit on oil supplies, Dhaka's foreign ministry said, as the South Asian nation grapples with dwindling foreign exchange reserves.

Saudi Arabia supplies more than half of Bangladesh's crude

imports, but Bangladesh has been hit hard by the global surge in energy and food prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time the taka has depreciated about 25 per cent against the US dollar, driving up costs for petrol distributors and power utilities that have rippled

across the rest of the economy.

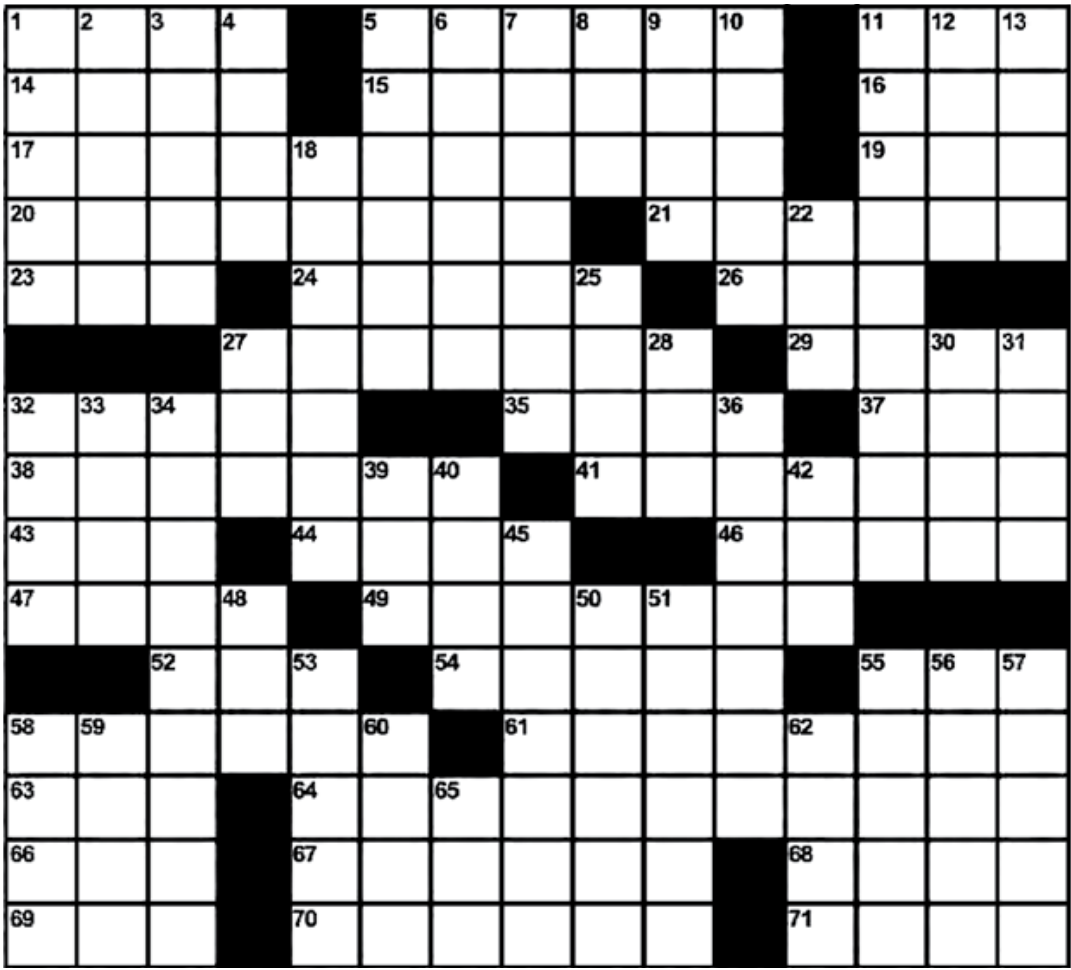
Nationwide blackouts of up to 13 hours a day hit the electricity grid last year and the government offered food relief for households unable to afford rice and other staples.

In a meeting Wednesday with Riyadh's ambassador, foreign

minister A.K. Abdul Momen asked Saudi Arabia to consider supplying crude and refined oil "on a deferred payment basis", the foreign ministry said in a statement. The economic strains come with a general election due by next January.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Doe's dear
5) Reach for the stars
11) Big_ (London landmark)
14) Hawaiian city
15) Trumpet relative
16) " ____ he drove out of sight"
17) Question for a Canadian tree?
19) Id's counterpart
20) Truthfulness
21) Cleric ranking below a priest
23) N.Y. summer setting
24) A Kennedy
26) Cheerleader's cheer
27) Like some cakes
29) Support in chicanery
32) Entree fowl
35) Not one card short of a deck
37) Scene of the William Tell legend
38) Starting points
41) Nighttime visitor of folk-lore
43) Ms. Taylor
44) Saroyan's "My Name Is_"

- 46) View from an overlook
47) Knock silly
49) Startled
52) Massachusetts cape
54) Calvin or Robert
55) Put two and two to-gether
58) Small pet
61) It keeps one up at night
63) Inventor Whitney
64) What the paranoid tree-phobic person shouts?
66) Dad's room, perhaps
67) Exact restitution
68) Comstock, for one
69) A musician might pick it? (Var.)
70) Less easygoing
71) Like Easter eggs

DOWN

- 1) Get rid of a five o'clock shadow
2) Tuckered out
3) On one's toes
4) "The Duchess of Alba" painter
5) Sharpness of perception
6) Apply balm to
7) What God bears
8) Type of stain
9) Swamp thing

- 10) It put people to sleep, once
11) Lazy trees?
12) "Cogito, _ sum"
13) Advertising sign
18) South and central Pacific islands
22) Not quite the majors
25) Shepherding areas
27) Fire fuel
28) Genetic material
30) Latin J word
31) Rocking Turner
32) More than cool
33) Pavarotti solo
34) Delivered tree?
36) To make poisonous
39) Large lobbying grp.
40) Famed vaccine devel-op
42) "How_ this happen?"
45) Drags through the mud
48) Unpopular slice
50) Fail to keep a promise
51) Title that's usually ab-breviated
53) Jack Sprat's dietary re-striction
55) Rankle
56) Electron tube

- 57) Not fashionable
58) Helen of Troy's mother
59) "Potpourri for 400, _"
60) Donate
62) Canasta term
65) Stimp's cartoon friend

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Try to be first today. Be the first person to the office or classroom, the first person to offer a kind word to a distressed person, the first person to call a spade a spade, even the first person to post a comment on a social media post! You'll get a certain little rush out of beating everyone to the punch. Your competitive energy hasn't had any place to show its stuff lately. The act of being first today will keep you satisfied for quite a while.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You run the risk of operating on autopilot right now. You've got your routine, you know how to do things, and you know how you like them done. Now what? You need to get a bit of freshness into your life! To do this, start talking to new people. Get conversations going with total strangers. You'll meet someone who teaches you something and changes one of your opinions. There's an opportunity to expand your mind every day if you choose to open yourself up to it.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

It's definitely important to keep balance in your life, but don't beat yourself up if you just can't do it now. Sometimes you get into a phase in which all you want to do is relax, and sometimes all you want to do is work. It isn't the end of the world. You can't force yourself to mix things up if you don't feel like it. Cut yourself some slack and don't try to be perfect. No one expects it of you, so why should you expect it of yourself?



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

A person in your life who is slow by nature is suddenly picking up the pace right now, and you're going to be shocked when you hear what they've been up to! Your oldest friends are suddenly coming up with new surprises, and their changes should offer you the inspiration you've been looking for. It's time to think about making a few changes in your own life. And don't worry. You don't have to do anything drastic unless you want to.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You are like an energy sponge today, soaking up the attitude of whoever you happen to be spending the most time with. Therefore, it's highly advisable that you call up your most high-spirited friend and find out when you two can hang out together. There is some news in their life, and you're the perfect sounding board for them. Give them advice like you always do: honestly and with plenty of warmth. This is likely to be a great time for the two of you.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Your perseverance in terms of a relationship is finally paying off. You've given them the time they needed and made it clear to them that you're interested in them for who they are, not just what they can do for you. You should expect some return on this investment today. It's their turn to show you what they can bring to the table. Let them help you, listen to you, and be there for you. After all, this give-and-take is what a healthy, honest relationship is all about.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Today, you'll have no problem squashing your travel bug. You're feeling much more drawn to homey activities and cozy couch-bound nights than big journeys. However, you might be the only person in your group who feels this way, which could cause some confusion when everyone starts talking about how excited they are to hit the road. Communicate clearly and honestly that they can count you out. Make sure they know that it's just the mood you're in, nothing personal.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Today is going to be centered all around your relationships at work, at home, on the highway. The way you interact with friends and strangers alike is important, so make sure you're paying attention to how you come off to other people. Being a good listener is vital, and biting your tongue is essential. Avoid making assumptions about people, and do some deep breathing to avoid road rage. And no matter who you're talking to, you must be totally honest.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your bravery extends way past physical action today. You're brave in your philosophy too. The avant-garde, the odd, and the edgy don't intimidate you at all. You're ready to have your beliefs challenged. Get ready for new ways of thinking. This is a wonderful day to stimulate your brain by visiting a modern art museum, watching an innovative foreign film, or dining out at an exotic restaurant. Turn what you know on its ear and see what it looks like!



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

The good news you've been savoring is getting you excited, but you need to be careful that your enthusiasm doesn't get the best of you today. Not every person you're with is capable of understanding why you're in such a good mood. You run the risk of saying things before you think them through all the way. While this probably won't create any major tension or painfully awkward moments, you need to manage your image a bit more carefully right now.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Are you getting nervous about an upcoming event or date? There's no need to worry about your performance in the slightest. You will do just fine! And while you're wrapping things up on your latest venture, don't forget to think about what you're going to tackle next. This is a good day to start anything, be it a new relationship, new book, or new fitness routine. You have some seriously positive, can-do energy coursing through those veins of yours!



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Try to take a casual attitude toward any drama that pops up today. Not only will it help you persevere and get through it more quickly, but it will also keep you happier and healthier. Some people just love running around in a panic, but all that does is get them a lot of negative attention and generate a lot of stress. If you can learn how to take things in stride, you'll be much better off. Be careful not to blow things out of proportion.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. The girth goes on which part of the horse?

- A. Across the nose
B. Around the ribs
C. Under the tail
D. Around the neck

02. In snooker, what is the name of the shot where a ball goes into a pocket after hitting the opposite cushion?

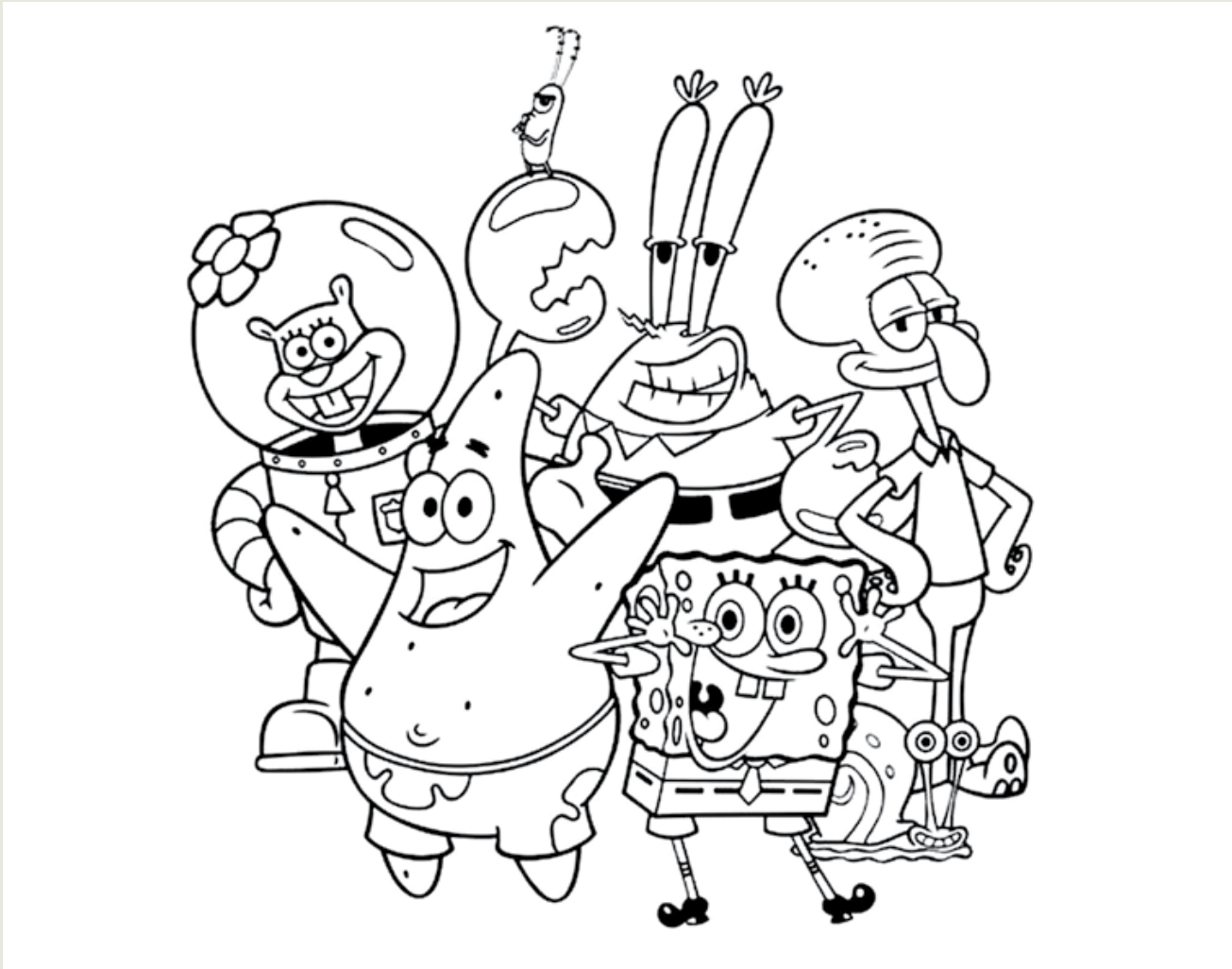
- A. Jump shot
B. Plant
C. Cannon
D. Double

03. Kerkyra is what the locals call what island?

- A. Corsica
B. Corfu
C. Crete
D. Cos

Answers: 1.B 2.C 3.D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	Z	C	N
T	T	I	L
A	S	T	R
A	P	I	E

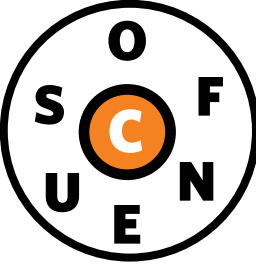
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. 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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

US shoots down Chinese spy balloon, drawing Beijing's ire

Washington, US - The Biden administration lauded the Pentagon for shooting down an alleged Chinese spy balloon off the US Atlantic coast on Saturday, but China angrily voiced its 'strong dissatisfaction' at the move and said it may make 'necessary responses'.

The craft spent several days flying over North America before it was targeted off the coast of the southeastern state of South Carolina with a missile fired from an F-22 plane, Pentagon officials said, falling into relatively shallow water just 47 feet (14 metres) deep.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin called the operation a 'deliberate and lawful action' that came in response to China's 'unacceptable violation of our sovereignty.' But China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs blasted the US action in a statement on Sunday morning, saying the downing of the 'civilian' aircraft was 'clearly overreacting and seriously violating international practice'.

Saturday afternoon was the military's first chance to take down the balloon 'in a way that would not pose a threat to the safety of Americans', a senior defense official told reporters, while still allowing authorities to collect the fallen debris from US territorial waters.

In eyewitness video posted to social media, the balloon appeared to disintegrate in a white puff before its remnants dropped vertically into the Atlantic Ocean below.

Twitter user Haley Walsh posted that she 'heard and felt the explosion' in Myrtle Beach, a



US President Joe Biden speaks to reporters after arriving at Hagerstown Regional Airport in Hagerstown, Maryland, on Saturday. Biden congratulated fighter pilots for taking down the 'Chinese spy balloon' off the east coast after it spent several days flying over the US (AFP)

The US insisted on using force, clearly overreacting. China will resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of enterprises and reserve the right to make further necessary responses

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, CHINA



popular resort town in South Carolina.

President Joe Biden, who earlier on Saturday had promised 'to take care' of the balloon, congratulated the fighter pilots involved.

"They successfully took it down. And I want to compliment our aviators who did it," Biden told reporters in Maryland.

The controversy erupted on Thursday, when American offi-

cials said they were tracking a large Chinese 'surveillance balloon' in US skies.

That led Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday to scrap a rare trip to Beijing designed to contain rising US-China tensions.

After initial hesitation, Beijing admitted ownership of the 'airship,' but said it was a civilian weather balloon that had been blown off course and that it 'regrets' the episode.

But after Saturday's operation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

expressed China's 'strong dissatisfaction and protests against the use of force by the United States to attack the unmanned civilian airship'.

Instead of responding in a 'restrained manner,' the ministry said in its statement, 'the United States insisted on using force, clearly overreacting'.

"China will resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of relevant enterprises and reserve the right to make further necessary responses," the statement added.

Democrats approve US presidential primary shakeup

Philadelphia, US - The Democratic National Committee formally approved a shakeup to its 2024 primaries calendar on Saturday that should help President Joe Biden, if he decides to run for the White House again. At a conference in Philadelphia, the DNC voted for a proposal that will see the first Democratic primary of next year held in South Carolina.

For years, the eyes of the world have traditionally been focused every four years on rural, overwhelmingly white Iowa and tiny New Hampshire as the kickoff states for the months-long process of selecting presidential candidates.

But back in December, Biden proposed putting South Carolina - which has a large Black population - first. It was approved by the DNC in a voice vote that month with only the members from Iowa and New Hampshire opposing the change before Saturday's full vote of the committee.

The move will give greater sway to African Americans in choosing the party's White House candidate. Biden's victory in the Democratic presidential primary in South Carolina in 2020 helped revive his flagging candidacy and propelled the former vice president to the nomination and eventually the presidency.

AFP

Macron gives ground to allies in unpopular pension reform bid

Paris, France - President Emmanuel Macron's government on Sunday offered a concession on contested French pension reforms, seeking to shore up support from prospective right-wing allies ahead of the parliamentary debate.

People who began work between the ages of 20 and 21 will be able to retire at 63, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne told the JDD weekly, rather than the headline age of 64 that has unions and large swathes of the public bristling.

"We hear the request" of MPs from the conservative Republicans party, whose votes are needed to make up a majority for the reform, Borne said.

Republicans leader Eric Ciotti had earlier told the *Parisien* newspaper that the change would 'secure a very large majority' of his MPs.



France's Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne (AFP)

Although re-elected to the presidency last year, Macron also lost his parliamentary majority and has been forced either to cobble together compromises or ram through laws using an unpopular constitutional side door.

But he has stuck to the widely disliked pension reform, against which hundreds of thousands of

people demonstrated and many workers went on strike in two days of mass action so far, with more planned on February 7 and 11. Meanwhile the left-wing opposition in parliament has submitted thousands of amendments to stymie debate on the law.

Borne also acknowledged de-

mands from the Republicans and Macron's Democratic Movement allies for a 2027 review of the reform, which aims to bring the pensions system out of deficit by 2030.

And she said the government would pile pressure on companies to end the practice of letting go of older employees, which leaves many struggling to find work in their final years before pension age. "Too often, companies stop training and recruiting older people," Borne said.

"It's shocking for the employees and it's a loss to deprive ourselves of their skills."

Government plans will force companies to regularly publish details of how many older workers they employ, with Labour Minister Olivier Dussopt on Saturday trailing financial penalties for those which fail to do so.

AFP



Firefighters fight a fire in Puren, Araucania region, Chile on Saturday (AFP)

Death toll in Chile forest fires rises to 23

Concepcion, Chile - At least 23 people have died in hundreds of forest fires whipped up amid a blistering heat wave in south central Chile, a senior government official said on Saturday night.

"We want to mourn the passing of 23 persons," said Deputy Interior Minister Manuel Monsalve, adding that 979 people have been injured in the fires.

Monsalve said 232 wildfires

were still active on Saturday, including 16 that began earlier in the day.

The government of President Gabriel Boric extended a state of disaster to include the southern region of Araucania. The regions of Nuble and Biobio were already under a disaster designation.

The move allows Boric to mobilise the military to help battle the fires as the death toll contin-

ued to rise. Temperatures soared to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), hindering efforts to contain the fires, many of which raged out of control.

Boric, who suspended a holiday to rush to the city of Concepcion, 510km (320 miles) south of the capital, Santiago, tweeted that he would keep working 'to confront the forest fires and to help families'.

AFP

Cypriots vote for new president in close contest

Nicosia, Cyprus - Cypriots voted on Sunday in a close presidential election between three front runners, with the electorate focused on corruption and the economy amid deadlock over the island's long-standing division.

A record 14 candidates - but only two women - are standing, with the winner needing 50 per cent plus one vote to succeed two-term President Nicos Anastasiades.

Opinion polls predict a run-off on February 12, with no contender expected to secure an immediate outright majority.

A record 14 candidates - but only two women - are standing, with winner needing 50% plus one vote

Chief returning officer Costas Constantinou said turnout at 10am (0800 GMT) stood at 11.7 per cent and that voting was 'running smoothly'.

Former foreign minister Nikos Christodoulides is the favourite. Backed by centrist parties, the 49-year-old commands a firm lead in opinion polls but not enough to shake off his rivals.

He is likely to face off in the second round against either Andreas Mavroyiannis, a 66-year-old technocrat backed by communist party AKEL, or Averof Neofytou, 61, leader of the ruling conservatives, DISY.

The last opinion poll by state broadcaster CyBC on January 27 had Christodoulides leading at 26.5 per cent, Neofytou at 22.5

per cent and Mavroyiannis 21 per cent.

Many analysts believe that Christodoulides, who served in both Anastasiades administrations, is still the favourite.

"All polls indicate that Christodoulides is going to the second round. I would be very much surprised if he didn't reach it," said Andreas Theophanous of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs.

"And if he goes to the second round, he is predicted to win," he added.

AFP



Cypriot voters cast their ballots at the Geroskypou polling centre in the western Paphos district, on Sunday (AFP)

Fierce battle in Bakhmut, missiles hit Kharkiv

Bakhmut, Ukraine - Heavy fighting was underway on Sunday in the northern parts of the frontline hotspot Bakhmut, while Russian missile strikes on Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv wounded five people.

Despite the flow of Western weapons to Ukraine, Russia has in recent days claimed gains around war-ravaged Bakhmut in the eastern region of Donetsk.

However, the head of Russia's mercenary group Wagner said on Sunday that the Ukrainian army was not retreating and that fighting raged on in northern parts of Bakhmut. "In the northern quarters of Artemovsk, fierce battles are going on for every street, every house, every stairwell," Yevgeny Prigozhin said in a statement, referring to Bakhmut by its old name.

"The Ukrainian armed forces are fighting to the last," he said.

Russian forces have been trying to seize control of Bakhmut in the eastern region of Donetsk for months in what has become the longest and bloodiest battle since Russia invaded Ukraine last February.

'I came to pray for peace'

The fight for Bakhmut has turned



Women, one wounded, leave their partially destroyed residential following a Russian missile strike in Kharkiv, on Sunday (AFP)

the town with a pre-war population of roughly 75,000 into a ghost town dotted with hedgehog anti-tank defences and burnt-out cars. The town has no water, gas or electricity.

About 20 people, including two soldiers, attended a Sunday mass in the basement of the golden-domed All Saints' church in the deserted town.

Three women sang hymns,

punctuated by sounds of mortar shells in the background.

The room was lit by two dozen candles and a portable light used by the two priests to read from the sacred book.

"Today I prayed that everything will be better for me after I die," said 20-year-old Serafim Chernyshov standing outside the church, with loud sounds of a steady exchange of small arms

fire and the pounding of mortar shells to and from Russian positions echoing in the background.

"Last night, a missile flew into my garden and a bullet flew inside my house, it could have hit me," he added. "I might die now or in 30 years. If I'm killed, it will be God's will."

"I came to pray for peace," added Lyubov Avramenko, 84.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Friday that Kyiv's troops would fight for Bakhmut 'as long as we can'.

He urged the West to supply Kyiv with sophisticated weapons to help his forces retain control of Bakhmut and speed up deliveries of heavy tanks. In his evening address on Saturday, Zelensky acknowledged that the situation was getting tougher.

Russia, he said, was 'throwing more and more of its forces at breaking down our defence'.

"It is very difficult now in Bakhmut, Vugledar, Lyman and other areas," he added, referring to the frontline towns in the east of the country. The British defence ministry said on Sunday that over the past week, Russia had made 'small advances' in its attempt to encircle Bakhmut.

The two main roads into the city for Ukrainian troops 'are

likely now both threatened by direct fire, following the Russian advances', the British defence ministry said. "Bakhmut is increasingly isolated."

Missile strikes in Kharkiv

For months Moscow has systematically targeted Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, including the energy grid, leaving millions in the dark and cold in the middle of winter. In Ukraine's second city Kharkiv, a missile strike hit a residential building on Sunday, wounding four people, said Oleg Synegubov, head of the regional administration. Another strike left a security guard injured when a missile hit an institute in the northeastern city, he said.

On Saturday, 'the Russians killed four residents of the region of Donetsk', said Pavlo Kyrylenko, head of the regional administration, adding that another 11 people were injured.

On Sunday, Russia faced a fresh turn of the sanctions screw, with an embargo on ship deliveries of its refined oil products. The European Union, the Group of Seven industrialised nations and Australia will cap the price of Moscow's refined oil products.

AFP

India to ban 138 betting apps, 94 loan lending apps with Chinese links

New Delhi, India - In a major crackdown, the India government has initiated the process to ban and block 138 betting apps and 94 loan lending apps with Chinese links on an 'urgent' and 'emergency' basis, top government sources said on Sunday.

Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) is learnt to have taken the decision based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). As per sources, the MHA recommended the MeitY this week to ban and block these apps. The ministry initiated the process after confirming that these apps attracted Section 69 of the IT Act as they contain material which is prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India.

The action behind the move is based on several complaints of extortion and harassment of common people who had

availed small amounts of loans through the mobile apps being run by those entities and persons. It is learnt that these apps are the brainchild of Chinese nationals who hired Indians and made them directors in operation. As per inputs, desperate individuals were lured into taking on a loan and then jacked up the interest by up to 3,000 per cent annually.

When the debtors were unable to repay the interest, let alone the entire loan, individuals representing these apps started harassing those in debt.

They sent them lewd messages, threatening to release their morphed photos and shaming them with messages to their contacts.

The matter came into the spotlight after a spate of suicides, particularly in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, by those who opted for such loans or lost money to betting apps.

States like Telangana,

Odisha and Uttar Pradesh as well as central intelligence agencies had then asked the Union Home Ministry to take action against these apps, sources said. Based on these inputs, the MHA started analysing 28 Chinese loan lending apps six months ago. However, they found that 94 apps are available on e-stores and that others are working through third-party links.

It is learnt that many apps are now not available to download on smartphones but sources say the betting apps and games are being downloaded through independent links or websites.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) issued an advisory, stating that since betting and gambling are illegal in most parts of the country, advertisements of these betting platforms, as well as their surrogates, were also illegal.

ANI

Former UK PM Truss criticises Sunak policies as pressure builds

London, UK - Former UK prime minister Liz Truss on Sunday criticised her successor Rishi Sunak 'detrimental' tax policies, as the current leader also faced pressure from another predecessor Boris Johnson over his Ukraine strategy.

Truss came to power in September, immediately implementing a radical tax-slashing agenda. But her plans spooked the markets and threatened to take down the pension sector and she was forced out after only 44 days, making her the country's shortest-serving leader ever.

In her first intervention since losing her job, she argued that the 'powerful economic establishment' took her down, and that her replacement Sunak had made a mistake in rejecting all of her tax-cutting measures.

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, she blamed the 'strength of economic orthodoxy and its influence on the market' and said that Sunak's decision to raise corporation tax from 19 to 25 per cent was 'economically detrimental'. "I am not claiming to be blameless in what happened, but fundamentally I was not given a



Former UK PM Liz Truss (AFP)

realistic chance to enact my policies by a very powerful economic establishment, coupled with a lack of political support," she wrote.

The IMF - which criticised Truss' sweeping tax cuts at the time - last week delivered a blow to Sunak when it predicted the UK would be the only G7 country with negative growth in 2023, blaming it partly on the UK's 'tighter fiscal and monetary policies'.

Sunak has barely been in office 100 days, and despite calming markets, is languishing in the

polls as the country's cost-of-living crisis rumbles on.

The re-emergence of Truss and the more visible role taken by Boris Johnson in trying to secure more military support for Ukraine has increased pressure from various factions in Sunak's own party.

During a surprise trip to Washington this week Johnson put pressure on Sunak over the conflict, telling Fox News that he should send fighter jets and 'give the Ukrainians what they need as fast as possible. Get this thing done. Forget about Putin'.

Johnson was also a visible pro-Ukraine presence at last month's World Economic Forum meeting, which Sunak did not attend. Johnson and many of his supporters still blame Sunak for triggering his downfall by resigning as his finance minister.

The resulting leadership campaign turned into a bitter fight between Truss and Sunak. The pro-growth faction of MPs that helped her win that contest are reported to be regathering, threatening more headaches for the prime minister.

AFP

Eight dead in weekend avalanches in Austria

Vienna, Austria - Austrian police said on Sunday that five people had been killed in avalanches in the west of the country, after three deaths were reported on Saturday despite pleas for caution on ski slopes.

The eight deaths came as resorts are filled during the February school holidays in Vienna, with the avalanche alert level at four on a scale of five after several days of intense snowfall and wind. On Sunday, the body of a 59-year-old man buried while helping the snow removal effort in his tractor was recovered, police in Austria's western Tyrol region said.

Two skiers aged 29 and 33, including a guide, who were carried off-piste on Saturday morning were found dead in Sankt Anton am Arlberg.

And a 62-year-old man, who had not returned after cross-country skiing around the summit of Hohe Aifner, was recovered by rescuers and could not be revived, a police spokesman told AFP.

The authorities declined to give information on the nationality of the four victims recovered on Sunday.

On Saturday, a 17-year-old New Zealander who was skiing off-piste, a German man in his 50s and a 32-year-old Chinese man, also said to be skiing outside of the designated routes, were found dead.

Over the past two days, heavy snowfall and wind have increased the avalanche danger, with officials warning winter sports enthusiasts to exercise caution. Thirty avalanches were reported on Saturday in Tyrol alone, eleven of which involved missing people, with the numerous rescue operations hampered by poor visibility and bad weather conditions.

AFP

UK mega-lab generates weather to test homes of future

Salford, UK - The thermometer sinks below zero as a blizzard of fine snow descends on two houses freshly built inside a massive laboratory in northern England.

Despite the icy conditions, the two energy-efficient homes remain cosy and warm due to their use of cutting-edge heating and insulation technology.

Welcome to Energy House 2.0 - a science experiment designed to help the world's house-builders slash carbon emissions, save energy and tackle climate change.

The project, based in a laboratory resembling a giant warehouse on Salford University campus near the centre of Manchester, opened last month.

Rain, wind, sunshine and snow can be recreated in temperatures ranging from 40 degrees Celsius to -20C, operated from a control centre.



An engineer walks through a simulated snow storm at Energy House 2.0 at Salford University, England (AFP)

Replicating weather

"What we've tried to achieve here is to be able to replicate the weather conditions that would

be experienced around 95 per cent of the populated Earth," Professor Will Swan, head of energy house laboratories at the

university, told AFP. The facility, comprising two chambers that can experience different weather at the same time, will test types

of housing from all over the world 'to understand how we deliver their net-zero and energy-efficient homes', he added.

The two houses, which are quintessentially British and constructed by firms with UK operations, will remain in place for a few years. Other builders will then be able to rent space in the lab to put their own properties under the spotlight.

The project's first house was built by UK property firm Barratt Developments and French materials giant Saint-Gobain. It is clad with decorative bricks over a frame of wood panels and insulation, with solar panels on the roof.

Scientists are examining the efficiency of several different types of heating systems, including air-source heat pumps.

In the living room, a hot-water circuit is located along the bottom of the walls, while further heat is provided via infra-red

technology in the moulding and from a wall panel. Mirrors also act as infra-red radiators while numerous sensors monitor which rooms are in use.

Residents will be able to manage the technology via one single control system similar to Amazon's voice-activated Alexa interface. Builders estimate the cutting-edge tech will mean that the energy bill will be just one quarter of what the average UK home currently pays, a boon to customers.

It will also make an important contribution to Britain's efforts to reach zero carbon emissions by 2050 to combat climate change.

A parliamentary report found that, in 2019, 17 per cent of heating emissions from buildings came from homes - making their contribution similar to all the petrol and diesel cars driving on Britain's roads.

AFP

Pope urges end to ethnic hatred at open-air mass in South Sudan

Juba, South Sudan - Pope Francis appealed on Sunday to the people of South Sudan to lay down their 'weapons of hatred' at an open-air mass on the final day of his pilgrimage to a country blighted by violence and poverty.

Large crowds of ecstatic worshippers streamed into the John Garang Mausoleum in the capital Juba to see the 86-year-old pontiff, who has made peace and reconciliation the theme of his three-day trip to the world's newest nation.

"Let us lay down the weapons of hatred and revenge... Let us overcome the dislikes and aversions that over time have become chronic and risk pitting tribes and ethnic groups against one another," Francis said in his homily.

He voiced hope that the people of South Sudan, a country that has been at war for about half its young life, would 'build a reconciled future'.

People waved national flags and sang 'Welcome holy father to South Sudan' as the Argentine pontiff moved through the crowds in his popemobile before delivering the mass to an audience local authorities put at around 70,000.

Francis later flew out of Juba for Rome. He is due to hold a press conference on board his plane along with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, who joined him on the trip.

It was his first papal visit to the largely Christian country since it achieved independence from mainly Muslim Sudan in 2011 after a long and bloody



President of South Sudan Salva Kiir (2nd R) walking next to Pope Francis at the Juba International Airport (AFP)

Future generations will either venerate your names or cancel their memory, based on what you now do. No more bloodshed, no more conflicts, no more violence

POPE FRANCIS

civil war. Despite the initial revelry in 2011, South Sudan was at war with itself just two years later in a conflict that killed nearly 400,000 people and displaced four million.

A peace deal was signed in 2018 between President Salva Kiir and his deputy Riek Machar but many of its conditions remain unmet and violence continues to roil the country.

Hope for change

The wheelchair-bound pontiff, who himself tried to broker peace during the civil war, re-

ceived a rapturous welcome throughout his visit.

"I came to see the pope bring change to the country. For many years we've been at war, but we need peace. We want the pope to pray for us," said James Agui, 24. He was among the many who stayed overnight to join the mass at the John Garang mausoleum - built in honour of South Sudan's rebel hero who was killed in a helicopter crash in 2005.

On Saturday, Francis met victims of the civil war, who were brought to Juba from var-

ious camps, and urged the government to resume the peace process and restore 'dignity' to those affected by conflict.

With 2.2mn internally displaced people (IDPs), and another two million outside the country, South Sudan is witness to the worst refugee crisis in Africa.

'A new start'

"I have been suffering in my life. That is why I'm here, so the pope can bless me and my family," 32-year-old Josephine James told AFP at Sunday's mass. "Ever since he arrived, people have been happy. I am very happy."

The papal visit has been closely followed in the devoutly Christian country of 12mn people, where church leaders played a key role in protecting civilians during times of conflict.

Gunmen kidnap environmental activist in Iraq



Jassim al-Assadi

Baghdad, Iraq - A prominent Iraqi activist campaigning for the preservation of the famed Mesopotamian marshes has been kidnapped by armed men south of the capital Baghdad, his family said on Sunday.

Jassim al-Assadi, 65, head of the environmental group Nature Iraq, has appeared regularly in local and foreign media to raise awareness of the threats facing the country's southern wetlands, a UNESCO World Heritage Site imperilled by years of drought.

Assadi was 'driving on the highway from Hilla to Baghdad' on Wednesday morning when he was abducted, his brother Nazim told AFP.

"Five kilometres (three miles) before the capital, two cars stopped him, and armed men in plain clothes handcuffed him and put him onto one of the vehicles, taking him to an unknown location," he said.

"My cousin was with him," Nazim Assadi added. "They left him on the road."

The family has not heard from Assadi since and police are investigating, the brother said, adding that the kidnappers had not contacted any relatives. "We need time to understand the reason. The motive isn't clear for now," Nazim Assadi said.

An Iraqi security official, requesting anonymity as they were not authorised to speak to the media, confirmed to AFP that the family had reported Assadi missing.

While Iraq has regained relative stability after decades of conflict and unrest, assassinations and kidnappings of ac-

Armed men in plain clothes handcuffed him and put him onto a vehicle and took him to an unknown location

NAZIM ASSADI

tivists and officials remain common. Iraqi civil society groups have decried the continued presence of armed factions across the country and the proliferation of weapons, while tribal conflicts often lead to deadly violence.

Since 2006 Assadi, a hydraulic engineer by profession, has been involved in numerous initiatives to restore the marshes, where he was born.

The area had faced destruction at the hands of dictator Saddam Hussein, and has been further jeopardised by climate change.

After years of drought, winter rains this year have brought some respite to herders and livestock in the famous wetlands, which were parched and dusty last summer.

AFP

Protest-hit Iran detains journalist: Media

Tehran, Iran - Iranian authorities have detained a journalist at a reformist publication, local media reported on Sunday, as her sister, also a journalist, remains in custody after reporting on Mahsa Amini's death.

Iran has been gripped by nationwide protests since the September 16 death in custody of Amini, a 22-year-old ethnic Kurd, who had been arrested for an alleged breach of strict dress rules for women.

Elnaz Mohammadi, a reporter for reformist newspaper *Hammihan*, was detained at the Evin prosecutor's office in Tehran after she had gone there 'for an explanation', reported *Shargh*, another reformist daily. It was not immediately clear why Mohammadi had been summoned there.

Her sister, Elahe Mohammadi, was arrested on September 29 after reporting for *Hammihan* from Amini's funeral. The journalist was subsequently charged with 'propaganda against the system and conspiracy to act against national security', offences punishable by death.

The procession in Amini's home town of Saqez in Kurdistan province turned into one of the first protest actions.

AFP

Thousands rally for fifth week against Israeli govt reform plan

Tel Aviv, Israel - Thousands of Israelis demonstrated in central Tel Aviv on Saturday for the fifth consecutive week against controversial legal reforms touted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government.

Crowds carrying blue and white Israeli flags braved the rain, swarming the city's central Kaplan Street, with signs labelling the new government a 'threat to world peace'. Another sign read 'Save Israel's democracy from Netanyahu'.

The protests have become a weekly fixture on Saturday evenings since Netanyahu's new government - dubbed the most right wing in Israel's history - took office in late December. Local media reported that protests were held in 20 cities across the country, and said tens of thousands gathered in



Israelis march during a rally against controversial government plans to give lawmakers more control of the judicial system in Tel Aviv on Saturday (AFP)

Tel Aviv alone.

Israeli police did not provide official figures for turnout when contacted by AFP.

Dania Shwartz, 44, from Ramat Gan told AFP that pro-

testers were 'reclaiming' the Israeli flag.

"If you look around there's a lot of Israeli flags and for many years the Israeli flag was a symbol of the right (wing)," she

said.

"We are patriots and we want this country to keep existing. The Israeli flag belongs to all of us, this is not a question of being right or left."

Among the crowd in Haifa was former Israeli prime minister Yair Lapid, who said in a video posted to social media: "We will save our country because we are unwilling to live in

an undemocratic country."

Netanyahu returned to power following elections in November, at the head of a coalition with extreme-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties. Last month, he was forced to remove a top minister, Aryeh Deri who leads the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, due to a recent tax evasion conviction.

The government has since announced its intention to pursue a policy of settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, as well as social reforms that have worried the LGBTQ community and controversial judicial reforms. The judicial reforms would allow Israel's parliament to overrule any Supreme Court decision with a simple majority of 61 lawmakers in the 120-seat body.

AFP

East African leaders urge 'immediate ceasefire' in east DR Congo

Bujumbura, Burundi - East African leaders called on Saturday for an immediate ceasefire in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, at an extraordinary summit called to find ways of calming the raging conflict.

The talks were hosted in Burundi by the seven-nation East Africa Community (EAC), which is leading mediation efforts to end the fighting in the vast central African nation.

A resurgent rebel group known as the M23 has taken swathes of land in the mineral-rich east and fighting is continuing despite a peace roadmap hammered out in the Angolan capital in July last year and the deployment of an EAC force in November.



DR Congo President Felix Tshisekedi (left) is greeted by Burundi's President Evariste Ndayishimiye at the summit in Bujumbura on Saturday (AFP)

The heads of state called for an 'immediate ceasefire by all parties' and the withdrawal of all

armed groups, including foreign, in a statement issued after the summit.

They directed army chiefs to meet within a week to set timelines for the withdrawal, while also highlighting 'the need for enhanced dialogue among all the parties'.

Both present in Burundi's lakeside economic hub of Bujumbura were DRC President Felix Tshisekedi and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda.

Kigali has been accused of backing the M23 in a conflict that has sent many Congolese fleeing their homes and exacerbated regional tensions.

Tens of thousands of people are 'caught in the vice of armed violence' in the face of the recent advance of M23 rebels in the east, the UN's humanitarian coordination office in DRC said in a

statement on Saturday.

In a statement ahead of the summit, the Congolese presidency had called for the EAC force to be made more 'offensive' to tackle the rebels.

It protested that despite the terms of the Luanda roadmap the M23 and its allies had not withdrawn but rather 'expanded their areas of occupation'.

Kagame's visit, his first to Burundi since 2013, also suggested some rapprochement between the Great Lakes neighbours whose relations have long been frosty.

The EAC meeting took place shortly after a visit by Pope Francis to Kinshasa, where he met victims of the conflict and condemned the 'inhumane violence'

and 'brutal atrocities' taking place. Militias have plagued the mineral-rich eastern DRC for decades, many of them a legacy of regional wars that flared during the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Since November 2021, the M23 has seized chunks of territory and come within miles of the east's main commercial hub Goma. The EAC decided to create a military force to pacify eastern Congo in 2022, with the first troops arriving in Goma in November.

Kenya's President William Ruto said the security situation remained 'fragile and regressing as more and more civilians bear the burden of the conflict'.

AFP

SAUDI TOUR

'SPORTSWASHING' ON WHEELS

Cycling is the newest gem in Saudi Arabia's expanding collection of sporting jewels as the conservative Gulf monarchy and its neighbours invest hugely in sport to burnish their international image and diversify their economies.

This week's Saudi Tour is the first of three stage races in the Arabian Peninsula in February, with competitions also scheduled in Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Among the riders are Dutch sprinter Dylan Groenewegen, a winner of five stages at the Tour de France, and German veteran John Degenkolb, who has claimed titles at Paris-Roubaix and Milan-San Remo.

The event is unfolding in a vast region of northwestern Saudi Arabia, the size of Belgium, that is home to UNESCO-listed archaeological sites and canyons - but few spectators.

An ostentatious competition launch last weekend featured a dazzling drone show, while the competitors are feted at every presentation, with podiums erected in the middle of the desert or atop exposed boulders.

The absence of large crowds - only a few dozen fans gathered at the finish line of stage one on Monday - offers riders a more relaxed atmosphere, with some able to sip coffee shortly before the start.

A demanding course snaking through high-lying plateaus tests the teams' endurance as the

SAUDI ARABIA CAPTURES CYCLING IN SPORTS CHARM OFFENSIVE

matic. The tour in Al-Ula adds to Saudi Arabia and its regional neighbours' long-term quest to wield soft power through sport and wean economies off the huge revenues generated for decades by fossil fuels exports.

This has included Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr signing football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo and investments in teams such as Newcastle United - potentially the prelude to a successful World Cup bid after Qatar organised last year's edition.

On Wednesday, Saudi Arabia was selected to host football's 2027 Asian Cup, adding to a

cation the cycling capital of Saudi Arabia, if not the Middle East.

The authorities aim to foster luxury tourism in Al-Ula as part of the multi-billion-dollar 'Vision 2030' national development project launched by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

One early beneficiary are the Saudi Tour competitors, put up in luxury lodges costing 1,000 euros (around US\$1,100) per night at the host country's expense.



2023 Saudi Tour, from AlUla Old Town to Maraya on February 3



The pack rides past ancient Nabataean carved tombs as it crosses the archaeological site of al-Hijr (Hegra)

riders contend with fierce winds, a sandstorm, and the threat of camels and donkeys crossing the road.

Growing sports portfolio

The real stakes, however, are arguably diplo-

portfolio of major events including the 2029 Asian Winter Games - to be held on artificial snow - and the 2034 Asian Games.

According to media reports, the kingdom has also tried to acquire the ownership of Formula One.

Cycling capital of Saudi Arabia

Cycling is no exception to the trend. Apart from this month's races, three of the UCI World Tour's 18 teams have a Gulf country as a major sponsor.

They include two-time Tour de France cham-

pion Tadej Pogacar's Team UAE, Team Bahrain Victorious and Australia's Jayco, co-sponsored by AlUla to the tune of US\$7mn per year.

Phillip Jones, chief destination management and marketing officer at the Royal Commission for AlUla, told AFP the goal was to make the lo-

The arid and sparsely populated region can offer stays for cyclists during the October-March high season before the searing summer heat, with a commitment to sustainability and respecting the local environment, Jones said.

Organisers Amaury Sport Organisation said they intended to continue developing cycling in the region and are planning to create a women's Saudi Tour, with the UAE Tour offering one this year.

Sportswashing

The tour has sparked criticism from human rights campaigners concerned about the kingdom's human rights record, who say it is an example of 'sportswashing'. The astronomical sums of money splurged on the event have also created tensions among the cycling community.

Vincent Lavenue, general manager of French team AG2R-Citroën, said other resources were necessary to satisfy world cycling's investment needs from sources other than Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

Riders, however, have been more diplomatic. "We're part of a system and turning down offers isn't simple. Riders benefit, but I think, the region here does too," Degenkolb told AFP.

Competitors also appreciated the calm and more informal experience of racing in a remote wilderness compared with the intensity of European tours.

"It's not a holiday but it's a hell of an experience," said Austria's Felix Grossschartner, who thinks having such events one or twice a season would be a great idea.

AFP



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Performers with the United Ukrainian Ballet dance during their opening performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, on February 1

UKRAINIAN BALLET

Light-footed mission

AS DANCERS LEAP, BALLET MEMBERS HOPE HEARTS FLUTTER FOR UKRAINE



It started out as quite a small idea, which turned out to be something huge. The underlying idea was to offer a safe place to the dancers and to allow them to continue dancing

IGONE DE JONGH

When the United Ukrainian Ballet took the stage this week at Washington's Kennedy Center, the dancers performed works of art and also undertook a diplomatic and cultural mission of sorts.

Composed of dancers driven into exile by the Russian invasion, the ballet company sees its mission as more than dance.

To dance in spite of the war is a way of fighting 'on the cultural front', a troupe member, Yuliia Kuzmych, 27, told AFP. Kuzmych danced at the Opera in Kyiv before joining the company. US audiences have responded enthusiastically.

The ballet performed Giselle last Wednesday night on the stage of the Kennedy Center, a national performing arts facility. The audience gave a standing ovation to the dancers, who sang the Ukrainian national anthem, hand over heart, at the end while waving flags from their embattled homeland.

The ballet company brings together dozens of professional artists from all over Ukraine, who now live in exile.

"It started out as quite a small idea, which turned out to be something huge," said Dutch prima ballerina Igone de Jongh, who initiated the project, based in The Hague. "The underlying idea was to offer a safe place to the dancers and to allow them to continue dancing," she said.

It is also 'the best way to keep the Ukrainian culture alive and visible', she added.

Slava Ukraini

While the dancers initially ended up in the same place due to tragic circumstances, they are slowly becoming a company because they are all united by the idea that they represent the country, said renowned choreographer



Alexei Ratmansky, a Ukrainian flag pin attached to his jacket.

"They represent the culture of this country and they are not military people. They are dancers... and they fight in their field," said Ratmansky, who worked at the Bolshoi, in Moscow, but now uses only harsh words for 'the dictator' Vladimir Putin.

At first, only women were allowed to join the company, Ratmansky said, since men of fighting age needed special permission to leave Ukraine. But the Ukrainian ministry of culture - which saw this project as an important cultural message to the world - eventually issued exit permits to all dancers.

That is how Oleksii Kniazkov, 30, who worked at the National Opera in Kharkiv, was able to travel to the Netherlands. At the time of the invasion, he was preparing to perform Romeo and Juliet.

"It wasn't so easy to get permission to leave," he told AFP before warming up for the second performance of Giselle in Washington. Since then, he considers his work with the United Ukrainian Ballet to be a diplomatic mission.

"Our performances are important because we make contact with ordinary people. We unite Ukrainians, Americans, and people from other countries in an emotional way," he said.

"We are all fighting for the freedom of Ukraine, and we do it through art," added Svitlana Onipko, 27, a dancer from Kyiv who joined the ballet in The Hague in September.

On Wednesday night, some of the audience at the Kennedy Center waved Ukrainian flags while others wore brightly coloured Ukrainian shawls.

"Slava Ukraini!" (Glory to Ukraine), a young woman in the audience shouted to a round of applause.

AFP



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