



SAYYID THEYAZIN TO PRESIDE OVER ANNUAL HORSE RACE IN BURAIMI

Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, will preside over the Annual Horse Race of Royal Cavalry (RC) on January 26. The race, organised by Royal Court Affairs (RCA), represented by RC, will be held this year in the wilayat of Buraimi. The race will include five rounds, the most prominent of which will be for H M the Sultan's Cup. Equestrian sports as well as Omani music will be performed between the race rounds (ONA)



Shura Council candidacy filing starts on Jan 29

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Ministry of Interior has issued a decision stating the period for submission of applications for candidacy of the Shura Council's tenth member-ship term.

The applications can be submitted between January 29 and February 16, according to the decision, which also set September

3 as the deadline for withdrawing candidacy.

The ministry alerted eligible citizens to submit their applications via the election website (elections.om), after filling the mandatory forms available on the website and attaching all required documents. No application for candidacy will be accepted if received after the set date or delivered via means other than the stated website.

Omanis entitled to permanent, private, light driving licence

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Directorate General of Traffic at Royal Oman Police (ROP) has published a list of conditions for obtaining a permanent, private, light driving licence for Omanis.

In a statement, ROP clarified that in order to obtain the licence, the applicant must be Omani and not work as a driver of any other type of vehicle. 'No less than 15 years must have passed since obtaining the first driving licence,' ROP stated.

According to ROP, the applicant must also not have any health restrictions such as a disability, with the exception of

- Applicant should be an Omani citizen
- Permanent licence granted 15 years after obtaining first one

- Applicant must be free of any disabilities
- Applicant must have no record of Category 1 traffic violations

prescription lenses and glasses.

'The applicant is required to have a driving record free of any violations of the first category during the previous three years prior to submitting the application,' ROP stated.

It noted that the permanent licence will be withdrawn if any of the aforementioned conditions are found to be lacking.

'It is also not possible to combine the permanent special light driving licence with any other licences from another category.'

Earlier, the longest validity for driver's licence for Omanis was ten years, while new Omani drivers get one-year driver's licence which is renewed for a period of two years.

Simulation test for power outages at Muscat airport today



Our Correspondent Muscat

Muscat International Airport has announced that a simulation test for power outages will be carried out on January 24.

A statement issued by Muscat International Airport said, 'As part of Oman Airports' ongoing commitment to implement the highest standards for emergency response at its airports, in coop-

eration with our strategic partners, a simulation test for power outage will be carried out at Muscat airport on the morning of January 24, 2023.'

Oman Airports confirmed that all necessary plans and procedures are in place to ensure that airport operations, passenger traffic and vehicular traffic in areas adjacent to the airport are not affected by these exercises.

Omani researcher discovers gene that causes neurological disorder HSP

Our Correspondent Muscat

Dr Fatema Abdullah al Salmi, lecturer at University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), has discovered a new gene that causes hereditary spastic paraplegia (HSP).

HSP refers to a group of hereditary, degenerative and neurological disorders that are characterised by progressive weakness and stiffness of the legs.

Fatema's project - titled 'TMEM63C' - was the winner in the Health and Social Services category in the Annual Research Forum Awards, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Fatema said, "TMEM63C mutations cause mitochondrial morphology defects and underlie HSP. The main finding was that we identified a new gene, called TMEM63C, as a cause of HSP in two Omani siblings."

According to the researcher, diagnosis of HSP is challenging as its symptoms overlap with those of other diseases. "The research aimed to identify the genetic



There are a number of Omani families affected by HSP but the genetic cause is still unknown

DR FATEMA AL SALMI

cause of this rare genetic neurological condition in Oman."

About the outcome of the research project, Fatema said, "This work provides important new scientific evidence through identi-

cation of new genetic causes of HSP, while also empowering efforts to develop effective diagnostic testing strategies tailored to the spectrum of Omani monogenic diseases."

Highlighting the global relevance of the gene identification study in Oman, this finding, Fatema noted, led to the discovery of other HSP conditions worldwide with distinct deleterious mutations in TMEM63C associated with the same clinical outcome.

"While more detailed investi-

gations of TMEM63C are certainly required, our collaborative research studies highlight the potential role of TMEM63C in ER-mitochondrial integrity maintenance, defining the likely pathogenic basis of this disease. Data from this work provides new insights into a potential neurological role of this gene, and will likely contribute to the wider understanding of the pathomolecular basis of this highly heterogeneous neurodegenerative condition."

Of the future, Fatema said that she is hopeful that she will get a grant to continue the research as there are a number of Omani families affected by HSP but the genetic cause is still unknown.

HSP primarily affects the upper motor neurons. These neurons in the brain and spinal cord deliver signals to the lower motor neurons, which in turn, carry messages to the muscles. In HSP, upper motor neurons slowly degenerate so the muscles do not receive the correct messages, causing progressive spasticity (increased muscle tone/stiffness) and weakness of the legs. This leads to difficulty in walking.

INVITATION TO TENDER

SOHAR ALUMINIUM

Sohar Aluminium LLC (SA), PO Box 80, PC- 327, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman hereby invites qualified Suppliers/Contractors for the following tender:

Tender No. : RFP 23/10222647

Tender Title : Provision of Construction of Sohar Hospital Training Center

Scope : Sohar Aluminium Co. LLC invites a qualified service provider experienced in the construction field to construct a training centre for Sohar Hospital. The service provider should have the ability to build the project with the required specification and within the agreed project time period.

Tender No. : RFP 23/002

Tender Title : Provision of Metal Management Services at SA Metal Yard

Scope : Sohar Aluminium Co. LLC (SA) manufactures and produces liquid and solid metals and requires metal management system service. The Contractor who will be identified for this work shall be able to provide a comprehensive Metal Management System for the safe receipt, storage, packing, transport and delivery of the SA's finished metal products (metal), including all related administrative, Equipment's and documentation requirements from Sohar Aluminium Metal Yard (SAMY) to Container Terminal at Sohar Port.

Tender No. : RFP 23/001

Tender Title : Provision of Emergency Aluminium Bus Bar Welding Services

Scope : Vendor to provide onsite highly skilled & Certified Aluminium (MIG) welders working 24x7x365 (4 welders for 12 hours shift x 2 shift x 365 days) on-site to carry out emergency repairs on Aluminium bus bars. The Vendor shall ensure enough relievers to cover their weekly off, annual leave, sick leave and emergency leaves etc., as per labour law guidelines. Emergency requirements are not on continuous basis; hence, the welders will be allocated suitable alternative work as required by the department.

Document Issue Date : 31 January 2023

Last Date For Applying : 30 January 2023

Kindly send your email and company profile to: tender@sohar-aluminium.com
For list of active tenders visit: https://www.sohar-aluminium.com/en/content/tender-listing

INDIA-OMAN TRADE ON THE RISE: MEA

Shaddad al Musalmy
New Delhi

Dr Ausaf Sayeed, Secretary (Consular, Passport, Visa & Overseas Indian Affairs) in India's Ministry of External Affairs, has stated that the Gulf Cooperation Council - including Oman - is currently India's largest trading partner bloc with bilateral trade in 2021-22 valued at over US\$154bn. Oman's total trade with India was estimated at US\$9.99bn.

"Our GCC trade included exports worth US\$44bn (as against US\$27.8bn in 2020-21, a growth of over 58 per cent) accounting for 10.4 per of India's total exports in 2021-22 and imports from the GCC totalling US\$110.73bn (a rise of 85.8 per cent), accounting for 18 per cent of India's total imports during 2021-22. Imports are largely dominated by crude oil. Non-oil imports were worth US\$37.2bn," Sayeed said.

"Oman's total trade with India was worth US\$9.99bn in 2021-2022 compared to US\$5.44bn in 2020-2021. While India's imports in 2021-2022 were worth US\$6.88bn, exports were worth US\$3.14bn," Sayeed added.

He pointed out that there are significant opportunities to enhance bilateral cooperation in several sectors. "There are several focus areas for cooperation between India and the GCC and other WANA countries, such as food security, supply chain, health-care & pharma, energy security, renewable energy, including green hydrogen & green ammonia, rare earths, chips and semiconductors, and technology, including fintech & edtech."

Sayeed informed that India has a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with UAE which was signed on February 18, 2022, and came into effect on May 1, 2022. "Negotiations on this landmark agreement were completed within 88 days of launch. It marks the first trade agreement that UAE has signed with any country. The agreement aims to increase bilateral trade to US\$100bn by 2030 from trade of US\$72bn in FY 2021-22."

Separately India and the GCC have resumed discussions on concluding a free trade agreement. Terms of Reference have been exchanged and both sides are studying it. There is no fixed time frame by either side to finish these negotiations. "Gulf countries have made substantial Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in India to the tune of US\$20bn. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have respectively promised US\$75bn and US\$100bn of investments in India in different sectors," Sayeed said.

"Indian companies have made substantial

‘India has a lot to share with the world’

Oman, Egypt and United Arab Emirates will attend the G20 sessions this year as special invitees



Oman's total trade with India was worth US\$9.99bn in 2021-2022 compared to US\$5.44bn in 2020-2021. While India's imports in 2021-2022 were worth US\$6.88bn, exports were worth US\$3.14bn

DR AUSAF SAYEED

investments in West Asian countries. In many GCC countries, Indian companies are the largest in number other than the local companies - 6,000 in Oman, 700 in Saudi Arabia."

GCC countries account for 70% of gas imports

Sayeed informed that GCC countries account

for almost 35 per cent of India's oil imports and 70 per cent of gas imports. India's overall crude oil imports from the GCC in 2021-22 was worth US\$48bn. LNG and LPG imports in 2021-22 were about US\$21bn.

"India's energy partnership with GCC countries has evolved from a mere buyer-seller relationship into a more comprehensive partnership. Renewable energy is another im-

portant area of our bilateral cooperation with West Asia, particularly in the fields of green hydrogen and green ammonia. M/S ACME has signed a joint venture for a mega green hydrogen project in Oman. Three Indian companies have signed agreements with Egypt to develop green hydrogen by making substantial investments - Renew Power (US\$8bn), ACME (US\$6bn) and OCIO Energy (for-

merly Azure Power - US\$4bn)," he said.

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Sayeed said the two events have brought to the fore issues related to supply chain and food, health, pharmaceuticals and fertiliser security. "In all these areas, particularly food security, there is immense scope for close cooperation between India and GCC countries."

He said Gulf countries are interested in building mechanisms for making investments in India in the agriculture and food processing sectors for assured supplies that can address their food security concerns.

Learning from shared experiences

Sayeed noted that India has a lot to share with the world in its experience with digital public goods. "Our RuPay card and UPI platform are great examples in this regard. The RuPay card is accepted by UAE and we hope that other countries will also see its merit. The UPI platform can also be utilised by our partners for further enhancing trade and tourism," he said.

"India's defence and security relationship with the Gulf countries is continuously expanding, with high level visits, bilateral exercises, ship visits, training, and participation in exhibitions," Sayeed added.

He noted that there are emerging common security perceptions, especially on tackling terrorism, which has created new opportunities for India-GCC cooperation in fields such as counter-terrorism, maritime security, intelligence sharing, cyber security and defence cooperation.

Oman to attend G20 summit

Sayeed also informed that this year is of great importance to India. "We are hosting the G20 for which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given the motto 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' or 'One Earth, One Family, One Future.'"

This is what I would request you to propagate through your channels. We are happy that besides Saudi Arabia, which is a G20 member country, UAE, Egypt and Oman will also be with us in the G20 meetings this year as special invitees," he said.

"Additionally, to deal with issues related to climate change in a more pragmatic manner, we, as G20 president, will ensure close coordination with the UAE as it is hosting COP28 this year. We also congratulate Egypt for hosting COP27 at Sharm al Sheikh and for the success they achieved in setting the Loss and Damage Fund. India is also happy to participate in the Middle East Green Initiative launched by Saudi Arabia."

Lively, colourful activities of Muscat Nights draw crowds

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The ongoing Muscat Nights at Qurum Natural Park - one of four venues for the event - drew a large crowd on Sunday. Various colourful and lively activities were held near the lake area in the park, besides magic shows, movie screenings and music performances. Children in particular were thrilled to see boat shows, helium displays shaped like yachts and laser projections.

Ibrahim Amri, a bank employee and resident of Amerat, visited the Muscat Festival events earlier. "Now it's called Muscat Nights. I used to attend Muscat Festival at Amerat Park, which was much bigger. But this time, we are not having it there. However I must also say that it is



a good change to have the festival back in Qurum Park after so many years. I have come with my

family, especially for the laser shows."

Among the attractions are

food trucks, restaurants, cinema screenings, photo opts, horse shows, games and various com-



petitions. A colourfully dressed Turkish coffee seller named Ahmed who greets guests with a

warm smile and piping hot coffee has been a big hit at the venue.

A mini theatre with 100 seating capacity set up by Lunar Cinema is another attraction. Badraa Syed, a senior official of Lunar Cinema, said, "We had theatres in every Muscat Festival and have seen how people love open air theatre. It is a fun and new experience. Outdoor cinema is a new concept in Oman and people like it; Muscat Night is proof of that. There are two screenings - 7pm and 9pm - of one children's and one adults' show, both priced RO1. This week we will also screen the new Indian release Pathaan."

A troupe of Italian artistes, decked in white neon lights, entertained visitors of all ages. Taking gigantic shapes of various forms, including swans, ship and

horses, the entertainers were a big draw with visitors eager for selfies. Tamanna Kumari, a teacher, said, "These artistes are so gorgeous. The performance looks so different, like a mix of opera and circus. The live music band, their graceful moves and changing shapes are so unique. I personally loved the swans. My family enjoyed it thoroughly. We will be back this weekend."

An official of Muscat Nights at the venue said, "The crowd is less today compared to weekends, but I am sure it will grow in the next few days. The main attractions at the festival are the very lively and youthful activities with a lot of new games and fun engagements for families. Also the festival is back after a long gap due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

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MOH No. 44/2023

OWWSC opens RO150mn Sohar-Ibri water project



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (OWWSC) inaugurated a project that will supply water from Sohar Water Desalination Plant to the Governorate of Dhahirah on Monday.

The opening ceremony, held in the wilayat of Ibri, was presided over by H E Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, in the presence of

When designing the project, the company took into account the current and future needs of the governorate

QAIS BIN SAUD AL ZAKWANI

ministers, members of State Council, undersecretaries, sheikhs and dignitaries.

On the occasion, Qais bin Saud al Zakwani, CEO of OWWSC, stated that this vital project built at a cost of



(Supplied photos)

growth in demand, including commercial and industrial needs."

The project includes a water transmission line from Sohar Water Desalination Plant to Dhahirah - a total length of 230km - with 15 water tanks with storage capacity of 451,000m³ located in Sohar, Ibri and Dhank. The project consists of four pumping stations, with a maximum capacity of 144,000m³ per day, and a pipeline running parallel to the current water line

from Sohar to Buraimi. This pipeline will also meet future needs of Buraimi governorate by linking the two water transmission systems at a number of stations between the governorates of North Batinah, South Batinah, Dhahirah and Buraimi.

Through this project, OWWSC aims to ensure water supply operations to the wilayats of Dhahirah, which depended mainly on groundwater to meet drinking water needs and for development activities.



RO76.5mn collected in favour of State Budget 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Inspections conducted by State Audit Institution (SAI) in 2021 have had several positive effects in achieving direct added value, particularly collection and recovery in favour of the State Budget. The outcome was an additional RO76.5mn to the state budget.

In its efforts to enhance integrity, SAI dealt with 101 cases against which verdicts were issued. These included cases of forgery of official documents and use of forged documents despite awareness of fraud.

The cases also included entering data into the government information system illegally, asking

for bribe, squandering public money, misuse of official position, and dereliction of duty.

The inspections were conducted in departments of the state's administrative apparatus, public authorities and establishments, commercial firms and oil and gas companies.

SAI is keen on according professional attention when handling complaints and reports filed by social segments via existing channels of communication associated with financial and administrative offences, negligence, failure to perform official duty and manipulation of public funds.

As many as 505 complaints and reports were filed in 2021.

Arab forum for scientific research, sustainable development on Jan 30

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in cooperation with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), will host the ninth session of the Arab Forum for Scientific Research and Sustainable Development on January 30.

The two-day forum will be opened by H E Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister for Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in the presence of H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed bin Nasser al Shibaniyah, Minister of Education.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Higher Education,

Research and Innovation said, 'More than 150 Arab and Omani researchers will participate in the forum. It aims to build partnerships between the educational and scientific research sectors and others concerned with sustainable development in the Arab world, and develop strategies and plans to link postgraduate programmes and scientific research projects conducted in Arab universities and research centres with the development plans of Arab governments.'

'The forum also aims to attract Arab scientists and experts from inside and outside the Arab world, motivate them to develop sustainable programmes, and transfer and localise advanced technologies to Arab countries.'

Winners of Manafa'a 2022 announced

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Mawarid (Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Centre) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and Environment Authority announced the five winning projects of Manafa'a 2022, the fifth edition of the programme, on Wednesday, January 18, at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

The ceremony was held under the patronage of H H Sayyid Dr Fahad bin Al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University, in the presence of several senior officials, organisers and leaders of the participating teams.

This year, Manafa'a the programme, which has Oman India Fertiliser Company as main sponsor and Vale in Oman as golden sponsor, was held under the theme 'Climate Change and Air Pollution' to support and encourage ideas and innovations



(Supplied photo)

that contribute to reducing air pollution and climate change.

The winning projects of Manafa'a 2022 are Omanim, Sadan, Naqaa, Madahen and Greens.

Omanim, by Ali Salem al Buisaidi, Ghaitha Ghalib al Shuaibi, Afraa Salem al Mushrafi and Sarah Hamad al Moti, is an organic pesticide made with neem.

Sadan, by Esraa al Hajri, Hamood al Shukaili, Abdulrahman al Habsi and Al Hussain al Nadhairi, is a transparent heat-insulating material extracted from palm fronds applied on glass used in cars. It cuts 85 per cent of outside heat from reaching inside the vehicle.

Naqaa, by Abdulrahman Has-

The winning teams will be provided incubation services from February 2 to July 29, during which period their products will be developed and market readiness confirmed. Three of the five projects will qualify for a business accelerator

san al Marzouqi, Shamail Said al Saadi, Jawaher Darwish al Balushi and Manar al Attar, converts coffee waste into a material to capture carbon dioxide and purify air.

Madahen, by Aida Yaqoub al Rahbi, Bushra Abdullah al Amri and Manar Rajab al Mukhaini, aims to manufacture a dye extracted from nature which is

odourless and harmless to humans and the environment, unlike chemical dyes.

Greens, by Alanoud Hilal al Balushi, Shahad Salim al Harrasi, Hawraa Hussain al Khaburi and Omair Abdullah al Riyami, aims to grow azollas that can reduce carbon dioxide levels while providing livestock with high-protein feed and a nitrogen-rich fertilizer for farming.

The winning teams will be provided incubation services from February 2 to July 29, during which period their products will be developed and market readiness confirmed, in addition to advice on intellectual property rights and preparing brand identity for marketing. Three of the five projects will qualify for a business accelerator programme, which will start of July 30 and end on December 29.

This will include identifying local investors for the projects, building business and commercial identity, and consultations for marketing and financing.

Work on to restore Wadi Sarmi Road in Khabourah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) has restored 85 per cent of Wadi Sarmi Road in Khabourah, which was affected by Cyclone Shaheen in October 2021.

A statement issued by MTCIT said, "The Ministry is continuing to repair the damage caused to the Wadi Sarmi Road in the wilayat Khabourah, North Batinah, as a result of Cyclone Shaheen. Eighty-five per cent of road repairs have been completed.

'The ongoing works include the construction of a 1.8km stretch of road using retaining walls and concrete and asphalt paving. Repair of damaged protection devices on the road has also been completed.'

In September 2022, MTCIT also floated several tenders to repair infrastructure damaged by the recent torrential rains and overflowing wadis in some gov-



(Supplied photo)

ernorates.

MTCIT stated that the tenders were floated in coordination with the committee tasked with

accelerating the repair of damages caused by torrential rains and flooded wadis in some governorates in August 2022.

Upper air trough to affect Omani skies Jan 24 to 28

Muscat - The latest weather updates and analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre indicate that an upper air trough will likely affect Oman starting from Tuesday, January 24 to Saturday, January 28.

Advection clouds and isolated rain with occasional thunder-showers are expected over the governorates of Musandam, North Batinah, South Batinah, Buraimi, Dhahirah, Dakhliyah and Muscat.

Cloud cover is expected to gradually extend to the governorates of North Sharqiyah, South Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar. The peak of the effect is expected on Wednesday and Thursday. The northern governorates will experience the maximum rainfall.

The Civil Aviation Authority advises all to take precaution during rains and overflowing wadi, and to check visibility and state of the sea before set out.

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MARKET WATCH

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FOREX RATES

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Indian	211.52
Pakistan	601.36
Bangladesh	275.79
Philippines	141.51
Sri Lanka	946.05

*Rates as on January 23
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Oil prices declines on US recession fears

Oil prices slightly dropped on Monday underpinned by tentative economic growth in China and potential recession in the US.

International benchmark Brent crude traded at US\$87.51 per barrel in early morning in London, down 0.14 per cent from the closing price of US\$87.63 a barrel in the previous trading session.

The American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at US\$81.56 per barrel at the same time, a 0.10 per cent drop after the previous session closed at US\$81.64 a barrel.

However, the oil sector remains optimistic about an increase in demand in China as the country opted to end COVID-19 restrictions last month and reopened its borders for travel.

Markets are awaiting US fourth quarter gross domestic product data due later in the week, which will reveal likelihood of a recession in the world's largest economy.

Experts voice concerns that a potential recession in the US could offset demand growth from Asia.



OQ to inaugurate Bisat oil field on Thursday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Bisat oil field in Oman's Block 60 concession area - which is operated by the sultanate's global integrated energy company OQ - will be inaugurated on Thursday.

H H Sayyid Taimur bin Asa'ad al Said, chairman of the board of governors of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), will patronise over OQ's Bisat oil field inauguration ceremony on Thursday, according to an Oman News Agency report.

The Bisat oil field is one of the most important projects of OQ Group in the upstream sector. The field, which is located at Abu Tubul, utilises cutting-edge technologies and digital solutions to enhance the long-term sustainability of the resources and operations and maximise the

revenues and return on investment.

Earlier in November 2022, OQ announced the commissioning of its third crude oil processing plant in the Bisat oil field. The commissioning of the third plant

the overall cost of the project. Products manufactured in Oman accounted for RO60mn of the total procurement of the Bista oil field project.

The project has also created direct and indirect opportunities

Discovered in 2017, Bisat oil field now includes around 165 oil wells and consists of three crude oil processing plants

will contribute to increasing the field's production capacity to 60,000 barrels per day (bpd) by early 2023, further enhancing OQ's share in Oman's total oil production.

The In-Country Value for the Bisat oil field project has reached RO157mn. In addition, the total amount spent on local SMEs and contractors stood at RO34mn of

for Omani youth, resulting in a high overall Omanisation rate of 85 per cent.

A wide group of Omani talents contributed to the project, which included employees from OQ Group and employees working for the contracting companies.

Discovered in 2017, the Bisat oil field now includes around 165

Sustainability Week 2023 to be co-hosted by PDO

Muscat - Committed to spearheading a stable and inclusive energy transition, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has demonstrated its environmental stewardship by pioneering innumerable sustainability initiatives. The latest in its line of endeavours is its participation as the co-host of the upcoming Oman Sustainability Week (OSW) to be held during March 12-16, 2023 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC).

The national-level event is hosted under the patronage of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, and PDO will be co-hosting the event for the second year in a row.

PDO's external affairs and value creation director Eng Abdul Amir al Ajmi said, "With sustainability being the bedrock of transformation globally, PDO has kept pace with Oman Vision 2040 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, remaining steadfast in its commitment to deliver meaningful social investment programmes aimed at creating sustainable benefits for the Omani society."

He said, "OSW poses as an excellent networking platform to drive collaboration, cooperation, and knowledge exchange between industry leaders, sustainability experts, and stakeholders from various organisations. PDO seeks to support such impactful interactions which it believes is critical to further enhancing Oman's potential to become a leading green energy hub."



Eng Abdul Amir al Ajmi

Apart from being a meeting ground for key players in the sector, OSW will also showcase the latest technologies and innovations in the segment. Providing both business enhancement opportunities as well as the chance to increase awareness in the realm of sustainability, OSW includes leadership conferences, an extensive exhibition, awards, technical workshops, and site visits.

Through its participation at the event, PDO also endeavours to instil the 'Think Green' mindset amongst individuals and organisations while promoting awareness about the importance of adopting sustainable practices and the resultant positive impact on the environment. As a socially responsible institution that upholds the highest level of ethicality, PDO will continue to lead by example and encourage everyone to team up and commit to inculcating sustainability, both in their professional and personal lives.

Iraqi central bank chief leaves post amid currency volatility

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq's prime minister said on Monday the country's central bank governor had been relieved of his duties as the local currency continues to fall against the dollar.

"Today, the central bank governor's request for discharge was approved, as was the request for retirement by the president of the Trade Bank of Iraq," Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said during a televised address.

Mustafa Ghaleb Mukhif's departure as head of the Central Bank of Iraq comes after the market value of Iraq's dinar fell against the greenback in recent months.

Without identifying the successors for the key posts, Sudani said they were "known for their experience, their abilities and their integrity".



While an official exchange rate is set by Baghdad at 1,470 dinars to the dollar, the market value of the currency has dropped to 1,620 dinars since mid-November, according to the official INA news agency.

Analysts and officials say the drop in value coincides with efforts to make Iraq's banking system compliant with the international electronic transfer

system, known as SWIFT.

Muzhar Saleh, an adviser to the prime minister, previously told AFP these steps, which began in mid-November, were required to access Iraqi funds held in the United States.

Iraqi banks must now make "transfers on an electronic platform, verify the requests... and if it (the US Federal Reserve) has doubts, it blocks the transfer", he explained.

Banks in the oil-rich country have an estimated US\$100bn in funds held at the US Federal Reserve. However, since the introduction of the SWIFT mechanism, US regulators have declined 80 per cent of requests from Iraqi banks over suspicions about the funds' final recipients, according to Saleh.

AFP

Renaissance partners with SOURCE Global to produce renewable water

Muscat - As part of its commitment to best-in-class technologies and reducing its environmental impact, Renaissance Services will partner with SOURCE Global to generate sustainably sourced drinking water for Renaissance Village Duqm (RSVD) in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), with plans to expand to additional sites.

Renaissance is Oman's leading accommodation, services solutions, and integrated facility management company, with a growing presence in the UAE and Qatar.

Adjacent to RSVD, the company will install SOURCE Hydropanel, a patented technology that uses only the sun to harvest water from an entirely new and



endlessly replenished resource - pure water vapour in the air - creating the first 'water farm' in Oman.

The project will create a sustainable source of clean, safe, and high-quality drinking water made locally in Oman and served in reusable glass bottles for the workforce staying in the world-class, 18,800+ bed RSVD, which is Oman's largest International Labour Organization (ILO)-com-

pliant accommodation facility.

"Water is life. We are delighted to partner with SOURCE Global to implement this important green initiative here in Oman, and in particular, at Duqm. This is a future-focused, smart, sustainable solution that is aligned with the vision of SEZAD and OPAZ (Public Authority for Special Economic zones and Free zones) as a smart, green city," said Stephen R Thomas, CEO of Renaissance.

"Adopting SOURCE Hydropanel allows us to further push our sustainability agenda. We are contributing to reducing single-use plastic, preserving groundwater, and reducing CO2 emissions by using a sustainable and renewable approach to drinking water," he added.

Robert Bartrop, CRO, SOURCE Global, said, "Our Hydropanel technology is 100 per cent off-grid and offers industry leaders like Renaissance Services the opportunity to hydrate their workforce in a renewable, premium and sustainable way. We can produce high-quality drinking water even in dry and remote places and virtually anywhere on earth. We're proud to work with Renaissance in support of their commitment to a greener future."

Netflix beats expectations with 230mn subscribers worldwide

San Francisco, US - US streaming giant Netflix ended last year with more than 230mn global subscribers, beating analysts' expectations as hits such as "Wednesday" and "Harry & Meghan" enticed new viewers.

"2022 was a tough year, with a bumpy start but a brighter finish," the company said in a letter announcing bumper fourth quarter earnings.

Netflix also announced that co-founder Reed Hastings was standing down as CEO, ending a 25-year leadership that saw the company grow from a rent-by-mail DVD service to an entertainment juggernaut.

Hastings ceded control of Netflix to his two longtime asso-

ciates Chief Operating Officer Greg Peters and Ted Sarandos, who has been the face of Netflix in Hollywood and had already been named co-CEO.

"It feels like yesterday was our IPO; we were covered in red envelopes," Hastings said during an earnings call.

"Hopefully, some of you have held the stock for all 21 years."

Netflix became a publicly traded company in early 2002 at an opening price of US\$15 a share. Shares in the streaming television service were up nearly 7 per cent to US\$337.31 in after-market trades that followed release of the earnings figures.

The Netflix board has been discussing succession planning



In this file photo the Netflix logo is seen at the Netflix Tudum Theater in Los Angeles, California (AFP)

for many years, Hastings pointed out in a blog post, joking "even founders need to evolve!"

He said he would hold the new job of executive chairman,

noting this was a role that tech giant founders often take, using Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Microsoft's Bill Gates as examples.

The changing of the guard

was announced as Netflix posted added subscribers that blew past even the most optimistic expectations.

The streaming giant said it enticed 7.7mn new members in three months, bringing Netflix membership around the world to 230mn people.

Netflix praised a successful slate of new content that included horror-themed comedy "Wednesday," saying the "Adams Family" spinoff was the company's third most popular series ever.

Royal tell-all documentary "Harry & Meghan" also scored, Netflix said, as well as "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery" starring Daniel Craig.

"This is in stark contrast to the first half of the year. Creating the next biggest blockbuster drives subscribers," said tech and media analyst Paolo Pescatore.

New rivals

The fresh titles helped attract users to a new lower-priced "Basic with Ads" subscription, as consumers cut back on their entertainment spending amid soaring inflation and an uncertain economy.

Revenue in the October to December period, at US\$7.85bn, was in line with estimates.

Netflix insists that counting new users is no longer the most important criteria for assessing

the company's health and that revenue should instead be the main metric.

"What may be getting lost in the mix is that some number of new subscribers - we don't know how many - likely came in on Netflix's ad-supported tier," said Insider Intelligence principal analyst Paul Verna.

"That means, most likely, lower average revenue per subscriber, which is a measure Wall Street will be paying more attention to as Netflix's ad businesses scales up," he said.

Netflix goals this year include "nudging" viewers who use passwords shared by subscribers to pay their own way.

AFP

Global markets rise, dollar struggles on rates outlook

London, UK - Stock markets headed higher Monday and the dollar lost some ground as investors eyed less aggressive US interest rate hikes this year with inflation starting to cool from sky-high levels.

Comments from top Federal Reserve officials provided support to equities after they indicated the bank could lift rates at a slower pace compared with 2022.

London Stock Exchange's FTSE 100 increased 0.3 per cent, while Frankfurt and Paris markets gained 0.1 per cent each. Europe's EURO STOXX 50 was up 0.2 per cent.

In Asia, Tokyo was the stand-out performer, rallying more than one per cent following a blockbuster pre-weekend performance on Wall Street as tech shares rallied.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 jumped 1.3 per cent at the close, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng and China's Shanghai market were closed for a holiday.

The euro on Monday reached the highest level since April last year, at US\$1.0927, before slipping back.

"Investor confidence has surged into the Lunar New Year after China lifted its drastic Covid restrictions and hopes have risen that the end to interest rate hikes may finally be in sight," noted Susannah Streeter, senior investment and markets analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown.



Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange in New York City on January 18 (AFP)

Investor confidence has surged into the Lunar New Year after China lifted its drastic COVID-19 restrictions and hopes have risen that the end to interest rate hikes may finally be in sight

SUSANNAH STREETER

"There have been signs economies may prove more resilient in the downturn," she added.

Philadelphia Fed boss Patrick Harker has again called for slower US rate increases, while Kansas City Fed boss Esther George said she was optimistic

the world's top economy could still achieve a soft landing despite worries that a series of big borrowing-cost hikes last year would tip it into recession.

In Asia, trading was then with a number of stock markets closed for the Lunar New Year holiday.

"Although most Asian markets are closed for Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations, Japanese and Australian stocks are picking up on the better mood from US investors and on expectations of China's economy returning to some semblance of a pre-pandemic trend," said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes.

Crude oil futures extended their strong start to the year.

"Oil prices are trading higher on diminishing recession risks while easing inflation pressure suggests the days of outsized hikes are behind us, broadly supporting risky assets," Innes added.

AFP

Western climate subsidies risk hitting emerging markets: IMF

Davos, Switzerland - The head of the IMF warned that Western subsidies to combat climate change and encourage the transition to clean energy sources risked hitting the economies of the developing world.

The United States under President Joe Biden has passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) which contains sweeping subsidies and tax cuts worth around US\$370bn for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, making it the largest-ever US programme to combat climate change.

The European Union is considering responding in kind amid fears that the IRA will encourage businesses to move factories and production to the United States at a time when it is trying to strengthen its industrial base.

"My biggest concern is that something that in principle is very good to accelerate the transition to the green economy by using public money to step up private investment... may not serve well the emerging markets and the developing world," IMF head Kristalina Georgieva said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

She warned that subsidies needed to be accompanied by technology transfers from the rich world to emerging countries.



IMF head Kristalina Georgieva

"If we are to strive to get the industrialised world clean and we don't think about the emerging markets, we are all cooked," she said.

Speaking alongside Georgieva, French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire defended government backing for efforts to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels.

"The key question is not 'China first' or 'America first', or 'Europe first': the key question is climate first," he told the audience.

Also speaking in Davos on Tuesday, EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen announced plans for a "sovereignty fund" and a "Net Zero Industry Act" to defend Europe's industrial base from US and Chinese industrial subsidies.

Von der Leyen said she saw "aggressive attempts to

attract our industrial capacities away to China and elsewhere."

She said the EU had been "working with our US friends to find solutions" to the risk of US subsidies distorting transatlantic trade.

US climate envoy John Kerry argued that countries complaining about the act should instead try to imitate the United States -- even though this would not be possible for emerging countries with smaller government budgets.

"The reaction of other countries shouldn't be, 'oh my god, you shouldn't be doing that, that's putting us in an unfair position'. Do it, too. Everybody's got to do the same thing to accelerate this process even more," Kerry told a panel discussion in Davos on Tuesday.

AFP

US Fed governor favors smaller rate hike in Feb

Washington, US - There is ample evidence that a steep climb in interest rates has dampened demand and economic activity, suggesting the US central bank can further slow its rate hikes, Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller said.

Nearly a year since the Fed started tightening monetary policy to curb surging inflation, industrial production has fallen and the construction and real estate sectors have slowed, while consumer spending growth has started to ease.

Inflation has been moderating as well, coming down from a blistering 40-year high last June to 6.5 per cent in December.

"Based on the data in hand at this moment, there appears to be little turbulence ahead, so I currently favor a 25-basis point increase at the (Fed's) next meeting," Waller said in prepared remarks for an event in



Christopher Waller

New York.

Over the past year, the Fed has raised rates seven times including four steep 75-basis point jumps before slowing to 50 basis points in December.

But Waller warned that policymakers have "a considerable way to go" towards their two percent inflation goal.

"I expect to support continued tightening of monetary policy," he said.

While inflation has cooled, a major reason recently has been a significant drop in energy prices.

Stripping out the volatile food and energy segments, core inflation ticked up from November to December, signaling cause for caution, Waller noted.

"While it is possible to take a month or three months of data and paint a rosy picture, I caution against doing so," he said.

But the labor market remains robust, showing that jobs and income can hold up despite rising interest rates.

The United States has so far managed to make progress on lowering inflation without seriously hurting the labor market, Waller said.

"I remain optimistic that this progress can continue," he said.

AFP

'Italy set for slow GDP growth in 2023'

Rome, Italy - Italy's central bank revised higher its 2023 growth forecast to 0.6 per cent, with the country's economic expansion set to pick up after that.

The revision, from a previous estimate of 0.4 per cent, comes amid improving sentiment in Europe's top economies thanks to declining energy prices, raising hopes that recessions may be dodged.

The change brings the Bank of Italy's forecast into line with the forecast with Italy's far-right government under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

The bank also revised its 2022 growth estimate up to 3.9 per cent, from 3.8 per cent previously, although it said economic activity had weakened in the final quarter of the year.

That was due to "persistently high energy prices and the dampening of the recovery of the sectors most affected by the pandemic, such as trade, transport and accommodation services" the central bank said.



A file photo shows people stroll by Duomo square in downtown Milan in the Lombardy region, Italy (AFP)

The Bank of Italy cautioned its forecasts came amid "high uncertainty" due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, "it is assumed that tensions associated with the war will still remain high in the first months of 2023 and gradually decline over the forecast

horizon," it said.

Italy's economy should expand by 1.2 per cent both in 2024 and 2025, said the central bank, boosted by both exports and domestic demand.

Inflation, which rose to an average of 8.7 per cent last year, should fall to 6.5 per cent this

year and continue to decline, the bank said. It forecast a 2.0 per cent inflation rate in 2025. Economic growth in Italy reached 6.7 per cent in 2021, a rate unseen in the past 40 years, after plunging by 9 per cent in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

AFP

What does hitting the debt ceiling mean for the United States?

Washington, US - The United States hit its borrowing cap of US\$31.4tn Thursday, prompting the start of measures to avoid a default as Democrats and Republicans head towards another clash on raising or suspending the country's debt limit.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said her department would turn to resources from two funds for retirees as part of the "extraordinary measures" it started using to give the government some room to continue to function. Here is what you need to know about the situation:

Is the US in default?

The short answer is no.

The debt limit is a legally established maximum on how much the United States can borrow to pay the government's

bills, for everything from social welfare programs to salaries for the military.

Once the ceiling is reached, the Treasury begins to draw down cash balances and use accounting techniques that allow the government to continue operations, said Mickey Levy of Berenberg Capital Markets.

The threat of a default surfaces once these temporary measures are exhausted, which the Treasury said is likely around mid-year.

"The period of time that extraordinary measures may last is subject to considerable uncertainty," warned Yellen in a letter Thursday.

How serious could this be?

Failing to raise the debt limit



A billboard showing US debt is seen in Washington, DC, on Friday (AFP)

would have dire economic consequences, according to the Treasury, as it would lead the government to an unprecedented default.

There could be a shutdown of

some government functions, and even approaching a breach of the limit could roil markets.

For now markets remain calm, with Edward Moya of

trading platform OANDA noting the process regularly "goes down to the wire."

A default would hurt the United States' credibility and global standing, and investors could ask for higher interest rates to lend money to the government, adding to authorities' payments.

Not meeting the government's obligations "would be catastrophic for America's working families and lead to higher costs," warned Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Tuesday.

Why is there a gridlock?

Congressional lawmakers have found themselves gridlocked over raising the debt limit, an issue that has increas-

ingly sparked contentious debate in recent years.

Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, are calling for spending cuts in exchange for support in raising the debt ceiling.

But President Joe Biden has said he would not negotiate with Republicans who threaten to use the debt problem for leverage, saying it should not be "political football."

The new speaker of the House, Republican Kevin McCarthy, called it "a sign of arrogance if you say you wouldn't even discuss it."

The situation points to a heightened chance of an extended stand-off. The government has previously come close to a default over gridlocks on funding.

Is a default likely?

"The probability of government default on its debt is close to nil," Levy said. But the battle over raising the limit could become protracted.

Since 1960, Congress has acted 78 times to permanently raise, temporarily extend, or revise the definition of the debt limit. This has happened under both Republican and Democratic presidents.

Even if political maneuvering brings a partial government shutdown, "various budgetary work-arounds will allow the government to continue servicing its debt, conducting basic services including defense, and providing funding for Social Security and entitlement programs," Levy said.

AFP

Omani researcher explores collective impact of Green Supply Chain Management practices

Dr Anwar Khamis al Sheyadi, assistant professor of Operations and Supply Management at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Rustaq, won an award for his latest study on the impact of the Green Supply Chain Management practices on the environment.

Among the many innovative research projects of the ninth National Research Award, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 'The complementarity of Green Supply Chain Management practices and the impact on environmental performance' by Dr Sheyadi won in the Cultural, Social and Basic Sciences field in the PhD category, said a press release.

According to Sheyadi, the purpose of this study was to examine the collective rather than substitutive impact of internal and external Green Supply Chain Management (GSCM) practices on two aspects of environmental performance: environmental impact and environmental cost savings. GSCM is proposed as a collective competency, combining four distinct, but interrelated, sets of practices: environmental management systems, eco design, source reduction and external environmental practices.

Sheyadi and his team used a survey data from 138 Omani manufacturing firms and Structural Equation Modelling. The results showed that there was a strong empirical support for the complementarity of GSCM practices, and that there was a strong positive relationship between the level of collective GSCM competency and the environmental impact achieved. The findings supported the belief that complementarities between



GSCM practices lead to better performance. Sheyadi and his team recommended that managers should therefore focus on implementing bundles of GSCM practices as complement to each other rather than searching for individual best practices.

As for the significance of the project, Sheyadi suggested that this study focused on implementing GSCM among Omani manufacturing enterprises, a context that has not received much attention in the GSCM literature. GSCM is particularly important to enhance the attractiveness of Omani companies, and enable them to enter into the global networks of large multi-national companies. GSCM in general and findings of this study in particular can contribute positively to achieving Oman green plans and initiatives. This research contributed significantly to the existing knowledge about this region and provides more realistic and practical implications for managers and decision makers in Oman and other similar contexts.

This study was conducted by Sheyadi, Dr Luc Muyldermans, Nottingham University Business School, UK, and Dr Katri Kauppi, Aalto University, School of Business, Helsinki, Finland. The study was published in the *Journal of Environmental Management*, a leading peer reviewed journal for the publication of original research related to managing environmental systems and improving environmental quality.

"The award serves as a motivation for us and to all researchers towards making more efforts that have a positive applied impact on strategic decisions in vital sectors," Sheyadi said after receiving the award.



National efforts on NCD prevention and control marked with WHO experts

The Ministry of Health, represented by the Directorate General of Primary Health Care, is hosting experts from the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office to follow up on the progress made in monitoring the national efforts on the prevention and control of NCDs and review the screening and early detection for breast cancer.

The WHO delegation, currently on a four-day visit to the sultanate, is headed by Dr Asmus Hemrick, the Director of Non-Communicable and Mental Health Department at the WHO office in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

H E Dr Hilal Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, in the presence of concerned departments in the ministry, held a meeting with the delegation on Monday to discuss the updates in the fields of NCD surveillance and how to benefit from them at the national level.

In addition, the meeting discussed the completion of the existing work in establishing asthma, diabetes and breast cancer collaboration centers with WHO.

The WHO experts will also conduct field visits to primary, secondary, and specialised healthcare institutions to review the readiness and performance

of NCD clinics and registries, the screening services for breast cancer in primary healthcare, in addition to the provided services at the specialized level.

The experts will conclude their visit by meeting stakeholders from different health and non-health sectors to discuss the mechanism of sharing the national indicators for monitoring the preventive and control measures of NCDs and discussing the challenges facing the early detection of breast cancer. At the end, recommendations will be submitted to the concerned authorities to benefit in developing the future plans and programmes.

World-class runners to take part in Ras al Khaimah Half Marathon

With only a few weeks to go, Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA) on Monday revealed an initial line-up of four world-class runners set to take part in the 16th edition of the Ras al Khaimah Half Marathon on February 18.

The elite female category in the highly anticipated race will see the Women's Marathon silver medalist at the World Athletic Championships Oregon 2022, Judith Jeptum Korir of Kenya, return to the emirate in a bid to claim the title. With a fourth-place finish in last year's Ras al Khaimah Half Marathon, Korir will be looking to beat her personal best time of 65:28 as she takes to the start line for the 2023 edition.

Korir will face competition from Hellen Obiri of Kenya, a two-time 5,000-metre Olympic silver medalist, who finished runner up in Rio de Janeiro 2016, and Tokyo 2020, and holds a personal best half marathon time of 64:22. She also entered the Ras al Khaimah Half Marathon 2022, placing second in a competitive field.

The male elite runners include Ethiopian star Seifu Tura, who recently claimed second place in the Chicago Marathon 2022, and Kenyan Daniel Mateiko, who



holds a personal best time of 58:26 and finished third in the Valencia Half Marathon 2023.

Additionally, race organisers have unveiled a first look at the medal which will be awarded to all finalists once they cross the finish line at the much-awaited race. Anchored by a unique square shape and a vivid outline of a runner, the medal features an intricate bespoke design, and an inspiring quote from the event's technical partner, Under Armour - 'You are stronger than

you think'.

The colours of the medals have been carefully selected to represent Ras Al Khaimah's three key natural elements and core values: the sea with its perpetual swelling and subsiding waves, the desert with its undulating dunes, and the mountains with their staggering elevations. A landmark event on the Ras Al Khaimah calendar, the half marathon will return to Marjan Island, the Emirate's spectacular coral-shaped destination home

to majestic white sandy beaches and a plethora of world-class hotels and resorts.

As part of the 2023 race, participants can opt for a race weekend getaway and choose from a selection of staycation packages at partner hotels including, Mövenpick Resort al Marjan Island, Hampton by Hilton Marjan Island, Double Tree by Hilton Resort & Spa, Radisson Resort Ras al Khaimah Marjan Island, Rixos Bab Al Bahr, and Marjan Island Resort & Spa by Accor.



ROHM to present two-day folk music festival

The Royal Opera House Muscat has announced the upcoming festival of traditional and heritage music with a two-day festival from Thursday.

The Folk Music Festival will take place on Thursday and Friday at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts, on the outdoor

Maidan at 7pm.

The festival is becoming an annual event, which offers audiences a musical journey around the world with special guest countries invited to attend, said an ROHM release.

The countries invited to share their extraordinary folk

music heritage this year are Romania, The Philippines and Brazil. Groups from each country will perform on the Maidan alongside an Omani Ensemble.

The festival is being held to celebrate the traditional folk music of each country, acknowledging the intrinsic value of pre-

serving and sharing musical heritage, and, promotes artistic collaboration between nations.

ROHM invited people to come and 'enjoy the amazing spectacle of flamboyant costumes, elaborate dances, singing and accompanying musicians as they fill the maidan'.

ABA Oman International School wins International MarCom Award

ABA Oman International School won the prestigious 'InspirED School Marketers Brilliance Silver Award' for the Social Media Campaign - 'New Beginnings'.

In March last year, ABA moved from its old campus at Al Khuwair (established in 1987) to its stunning state-of-the-art campus at Madinat al Irfan, Muscat. This marked a new chapter in ABA's growth story and highlighted its 35-year strong legacy.

To commemorate this milestone, the school launched a social media campaign titled 'New Beginnings', spearheaded by former ABA Board Chair, Lamya al Kiyumi and the Board of Directors. The campaign showcased the 100-day countdown to the opening of the new campus and the official inauguration ceremony by H H Sayyid Bilal bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said, who



graduated from ABA in 2012.

Lamya al Kiyumi, former ABA Board Chair, said, "The move into our Al Irfan Campus was a dream held by numerous boards. It was an honour to be part of the Board that realised this dream. We wanted to build momentum and share our community's excitement of the move with everyone. The idea of a campaign

leading up to the move was born in a workshop led by our Strategic Development Committee and included Board Directors, ABA's Head of School and our Communications Director.

"The result: the 'New Beginnings' campaign where everyday, hope and excitement for the next chapter of our story was showcased," she added.

SBA introduces all-new Nissan X-TRAIL in Oman

As part of its strategy to consolidate its SUV leadership in Oman, Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) launched the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL in Muscat recently.

Developed as a premium urban crossover, the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL furthers the brand's commitment to introduce innovative mobility solutions, and offers customers class-leading versatility, elevated exterior and interior designs, advanced safety, and improved levels of capability.

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.

For over twenty years, the X-TRAIL has been an integral part of Nissan SUV line-up in the region and has continually catered



to the needs of families and adventure enthusiasts across Oman. Brought about by a deep understanding of its customers, the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL, which is one of the most technologically advanced SUVs to date, addresses customer desires in the rapidly growing mid-size SUV segment and is in line with the global Nissan NEXT transformation plan.

A senior official of SBA said, "Oman launch of the all-New 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL marks a major milestone for us at SBA, as we solidify our commitment to the region and continue to deliver innovation that excites."

The latest addition to Nissan's impressive SUV lineup, the all-new 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL features a striking exterior design, with distinctive Nissan elements including a signature V-motion grille and floating roof design. Accentuating the X-TRAIL's appeal to families are its bigger-opening rear door apertures, that open up to 85 degrees for easier rear access and egress. The interior receive a premium upgrade, underlined by Nappa leather-accented seating with 3D diamond quilting available on the top-of-the-range SL grade.

The 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL is powered by an all-new 2.5-litre four-cylinder petrol engine that, compared to its predecessor, raises power output by 12hp to 181hp, and boosts torque by 11Nm to 244Nm, for more effortless acceleration and confident overtaking. Power is pushed through an advanced Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) with paddle-shift controls on the steering wheel for manual over-ride of the new shift-by-wire transmission interface.

Making its debut in the All-New 2023 Nissan X-TRAIL is an Intelligent 4x4 system with direct coupling that reacts faster than ever before, allowing for the seamless transfer of power between axles for ultimate stability and traction. A twist-dial Drive Mode Selector provides five driving modes to choose from: Off-Road, Snow, Auto, Eco and Sports, with the added benefit of Hill Descent Control for carefully modulated downhill off-road driving.

Nissan Intelligent Mobility suite of active safety features is provided with greater capability, making it the safest X-TRAIL ever, with Nissan Safety Shield 360 that includes Automatic Emergency Braking with Pedestrian Detection, Blind Spot Warning, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, Lane Departure Warning and High Beam Assist. Supporting this is the first-ever introduction of Nissan's semi-autonomous ProPILOT Assist on X-TRAIL, which can accelerate, brake, and cruise at a set speed within a single lane.



Social Development Ministry receives offsprings of Palestinian martyrs

Dr Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development, has received Dr Tayseer Jaradat, Ambassador of the State of Palestine to the Sultanate of Oman, and members of a Palestinian delegation comprising offsprings of Palestinian martyrs and children of Palestinians jailed in prisons of Israeli occupation forces.

During the meeting, the minister underscored the significance of the visit which, she said, embodies the depth of fraternal relations and the strong bonds between Oman and Palestine.

The meeting was an opportunity to exchange expertise and study various aspects of social areas, including the childhood sector, Dr Laila added.

The Palestinian ambassador commended Oman's permanent stance in supporting the State of Palestine. He valued the Social Development Ministry's gesture to announce the social club of the Palestinian community in Oman.

The meeting was attended by Assayida Maani Abdullah al Buisaidi, Director General of Family Development in the ministry, as well as other officials and employees operating in the childhood welfare field.

AUS students win ITU GeoAI Challenge

A team of students from American University of Sharjah (AUS) won first place last month at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) GeoAI Challenge, a global competition that addresses real-world geospatial problems by applying artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The team developed a machine learning model to accurately classify cropland extent and map crop intensity using a cost-effective approach in four test regions: Sudan, Iran, Sri Lanka and Mozambique.

They produced two maps, one on cropland extent, which indicated the presence and absence of crops, providing a reliable fundamental layer to understanding the dynamics of crop activities; and a crop intensity map that looked at the number of crop planting cycles in one year in the assigned locations.

The maps are considered essential to many applications in agriculture as well as other relevant disciplines such as natural resources, environment, health and sustainability. The competition focused on addressing SDG10: Reduced Inequalities and SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals.



The winning team comprised AUS computer engineering students Maya Haj Hussain, Diaa Addeen Abuhani, Mohamed El-Mohandes and Jowaria Khan under the mentorship of Dr Imran Zuolkernan, professor and head of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, and Dr Tariq Ali, professor in Civil Engineering at AUS.

"We divided the challenge into two tasks. I worked along with ElMohandes on cropland extent problems, which focused on classifying crops and non-crops, from sample collection to building and testing different machine learning models. Meanwhile, Hussain and Khan worked on crop mapping. The project

provided us with good experience in dealing with remote sensing data, especially in the field of agriculture. It also helped us as a team understand each other and build trust before we start working on our senior design projects," said Abuhani.

The project required the students to carry out extensive research. "The topic was unfamiliar to all of us, so we worked together every step of the way to figure it out. The work included completing a literature review on the topic, figuring out how to collect time series data (known as time-stamped data), and then figuring out how to preprocess and clean that data. It also included putting together an algo-

rithm to find the number of crop cycles in a Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) time series to address crop intensity and how to successfully run our trained classifiers on the Google Earth engine," explained Hussain.

The wealth of knowledge the students gained from the competition was tremendous, particularly in the use of software platforms such as Google Earth engines, understanding concepts of geospatial analysis, and mapping and building algorithms. The team attributed their ability to navigate these new areas of research to the foundational education they received at AUS.

"AUS teaches students how to work in challenging and demanding environments as well as encourages self-learning. This is something that has really helped me get through this project, particularly with the short deadline we had and the new concepts with which we had to work," said Khan.

Having compiled the entirety of the research for submission and served as a student speaker during the live presentation of the project in the competition, El-Mohandes said that working in a team was a great experience. "We supported one another especially when one of us was unsure of the next steps," he said.

Oman's National Museum participates in 'Al-Madar' exhibition in Saudi Arabia

The National Museum is participating with a number of archaeological artifacts in the 'Al-Madar' exhibition, the first Biennial of Islamic Arts of its kind in the world, which is being held at the Hajj Terminal at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah from January 23 to April 23, with the participation of 12 institutions from all over the world.

The opening ceremony on Monday was patronaged by H H Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Mohammad bin Farhan al Saud, Minister of Culture and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, with the participation of H H Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, the Sultanate of Oman's Ambassador accredited to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its permanent representative to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum.

Moosawi said, "This is the first participation of the National Museum in the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as the selected collections shed light on the concept of beauty in Oman, which remained faithful to the Islamic origins and the identity of the country alike, as it raises the value of authentic beauty. It celebrates purity, simplicity and avoidance of affectation."

"The National Museum is honoured to celebrate the art of the Islamic world by participating in the 'Al-Madar' exhibition, which is held in the first Biennale of what is known as Islamic art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is reflected in the selected works with their designs that appear simple at first glance, but reflect the experience of unity and interdependence, and highlight the importance of contemplation and attention to the smallest details," he added.

Aya al Bakri, CEO of the Diriyah Biennial Foundation, said, "This event, the first of its



kind, aims to highlight and enrich Islamic cultural heritage throughout the ages. It was achieved by the first Biennale of Contemporary Art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which concluded in 2022.

"Our mission at the Diriyah Biennale Foundation is to enrich the cultural and artistic exchange between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as it is a center for the Islamic world, and artistic communities around the world, and to celebrate the many facets of the arts, so we are very happy to seize the opportunity to introduce the world to Islamic arts through the works of Ashraf It has a group of pioneers of the artistic community in the Kingdom, as well as cooperation with a number of distinguished success partners from around the world to create an upscale dialogue based on co-operation and cultural exchange between Saudi Arabia and the countries of the world in light of a thriving and di-

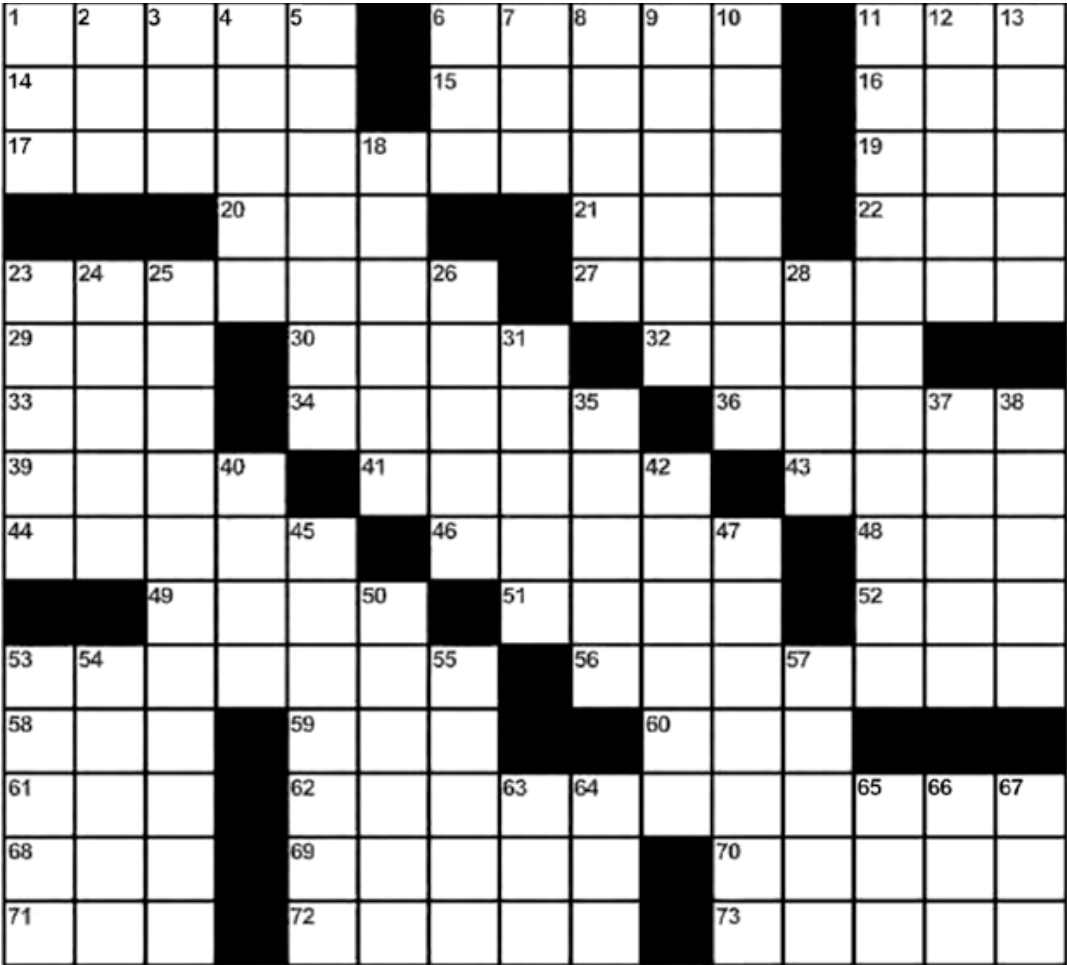
verse artistic climate," she added.

The corner of the National Museum at the Biennale includes a selection of archaeological artifacts that embody the duality of harmony and contrast in the manifestations of Omani culture, which reflects a wonderful balance between simplicity and decoration.

One section includes samples of utensils from the archaeological site of 'Hamasa' in Buraimi governorate, in black and white colours, dating back to the 9th century, carved stone tablet from Al Hijrah mosque, which dates back to the Yarubi Dynasty and is nearly four centuries old, and a tomb stone from the Dhofar governorate dating back to 1696-1697.

Throughout Oman's various regions, Arabic script was artistically unconfined by established calligraphic traditions. The calligrapher or engraver focused instead on understanding the nature of the material used, whether parchment, metal, stone, or wood. Calligraphic conventions were viewed as of particular significance, the importance rather being placed on filling, or creating, empty spaces, through which process information or beauty was reflected. In the objects presented here, the beauty in the void is expressed through the emptying of the pen box's inkwell onto blank pages, creating a Qur'anic manuscript.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Oral hygiene tool
6) Cut the turkey
11) USNA student, briefly
14) Result of labor?
15) "Once more!"
16) Words of protest from Yoko?
17) Not offensive
19) Cartographer's construction
20) Comstock find
21) Kil tie's headwear
22) Dir. opposite of WSW
23) Takes place
27) Estranged (Var.)
29) "Don't mind if..."
30) Jazz quintet's home?
32) Denomination
33) "Fie" homophone
34) Place to lounge
36) Pretenses
39) Opera singer Lily
41) Key place?
43) Two-tone cookie
44) Santa's reindeer, sans Rudolph
46) Sounds angry
48) Down with the flu

49) Sharing word
51) Change totally
52) Hawaiian necklace
53) Alter in tone
56) Rotted
58) Pit-stop place, briefly
59) Word before "sol" and "not!"
60) Park one's carcass
61) Clock face number
62) Proverbially newsworthy headline
68) Hail, to Ovid
69) Underdog's dream
70) A sad thing to be in
71) Natural moisture
72) Hammer parts
73) 1945 Allied conference site

DOWN

1) G-man's org.
2) Artist Maya
3) Grp.
4) Display a posture problem
5) Support, as with props
6) Common house pet
7) Khan's title
8) Bob Marley was one

9) Blood pressure, heart rate, etc.
10) Foes
11) For an instant
12) Absurd
13) Drugged, as a racehorse
18) Word with I-Across
23) Tutu wearer in "Fantasia"
24) Kind of committee
25) Angle
26) Grilled Thai dish
28) Cave phenomenon
31) Hatchet man's counterpart
35) Cast an amorous eye toward
37) Wild fight
38) Nonliquid state
40) Fellow named Bellow
42) Firstborn
45) Concoct
47) The "S" in SPCA
50) Minor knee injury
53) Trojan War epic
54) Not street-savvy
55) Like a close game, usually
57) Where to find whales

63) Uncle of rice fame (music)
64) Belonging to a thing
65) _ segno (from the repeat sign, in
66) Plate crumb
67) Government procurement org.

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

You've been cruising along nicely in the fast lane lately, but today you might want to ease over to the slow side of the road. Too much is going on, and there is some exciting stuff you're going to miss out on if you aren't careful! Sure, it's nice to have a lot going on in your life, but sometimes it's nice to step on the brakes and take a more leisurely route to where you're going. The landscape is lovely in your life right now. Why not take a longer look?

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone in your social circle has a chip on their shoulder, and they feel like they deserve something that you have. It's reality check time, You earned what you have fair and square, so don't go on the guilt trip they have all planned out for you! If you take their jealousy seriously, you'll be validating their claims. Tell them you're sorry they feel that way, but they're completely capable of getting to where you are, and you're ready to help them

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If someone you're being forced to collaborate with is being as willful as a child, then you need to be as strict as a schoolmarm. It might not be too much fun to parent a grown adult, but doing so is much more desirable than the alternative: dealing with the mess they make. Some people need discipline in order to focus, and you need to be prepared to dole some out. This is good training for a leadership position anyway, so get comfortable having an iron fist!

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your powers of persuasion are kicking some serious butt right now, and you could sell sand in the desert if you had to! But the only thing you should be selling right now is yourself. This is an excellent time to promote yourself at work or in a social context. You're a valuable commodity, and everyone needs to know it. Ask for that raise. Ask that special person to spend some time with you. The responses you get will make you smile.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If you sense that something isn't quite right with one or two people today, you're probably right. Something's going on that you need to know about. To find out, watch for plotters and people whispering in corners. March right up to them and find out what they're talking about. It's good to be curious today and even better to be bold enough to satisfy your curiosity! Getting to the bottom of all of the day's shenanigans will be incredibly satisfying, so do it.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

The truth is sometimes hard to believe, and today it could be difficult for you to buy into an idea that other people claim to be the truth. Are you letting the fact that you don't usually agree with these people overrule your common sense? Just because you don't usually see eye to eye with someone doesn't mean than you're never going to. You'll be cutting off an important new learning opportunity if you get all hung up on labels or party affiliations.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Mixing business with pleasure isn't a wise move right now, so if you're thinking of cooking up a romance in the workplace, turn off the heat ASAP. Get back to work and stop spending so much time at their desk. Things are all coming together on a big project, and it looks like you're going to hit a home run, perhaps even a grand slam. Invest your energy in something that will definitely help you, not on someone who might distract you from important things.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

If you're trying or starting something new today, the level of risk is much higher than you initially expected it to be. But remember that whenever there is high risk, there is potentially high reward. Sure, you could be embarrassed, but there is just as big a possibility that you'll hear great acclaim and thunderous applause. Do yourself a favor and focus on the applause part. Practice taking a bow and pretending to be modest!

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

You are on one heck of a roll today, so don't slow down for anyone or anything! If someone you've been working with can't quite keep up with you, that's their problem, not yours. You can't hold up your progress for the sake of someone else's ego. Besides, do you really think they want you to? Any adjustments you make today would look like charity to them. They don't want to be responsible for holding you back, so just go full steam ahead!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Sometimes your opinions are wonderful gifts that people really appreciate, but other times they can be a huge can of worms nobody wants to open! Yes, you should always be honest about what you think, but today you also need to be especially tactful and clear about your meaning. It's a good thing that your verbal communication skills are so powerful right now, because you'll need all your abilities to deliver your thoughts without making someone else feel wrong.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

If a recent argument or embarrassing situation has left you feeling a bit emotionally exposed, try to take time today to lick your wounds. You might benefit from having some quiet time on your own to think things through and comfort your bruised ego. Deal with your feelings of frustration now before they snowball into bigger and scarier emotions. The sooner to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again the better. Everyone makes a gaffe now and again.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

A person who's working behind the scenes has some specific ideas for your future, and they feel the need to tell you all about them today. It's nice of you to sit and listen to them dictate how you should run your own life, but there's no reason you have to do what they say! Don't get involved with stuff you're unsure of, and don't get involved with stuff just because someone you trust tells you to. Go your own way, and then sweetly tell them to do the same.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. In a casino, what is the name of the box that holds multiple decks of playing cards?

A. Slope
B. Cast
C. Shoe
D. Glove

02. What embroidery technique is to gather fabric so that it can stretch, and was commonly used in cuffs, bodices, and necklines in garments where buttons were undesirable before elastic?

A. Couching
B. Smocking
C. Sashiko quilting
D. Broderie Anglaise

01. Although much reduced and fragmented, the Atlantic Forest stretches where?

A. The coasts of southern Greenland
B. Along the coasts of the Gulf of Guinea
C. The coasts of Nova Scotia
D. Along the Brazilian Atlantic coastline, and inland

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. D

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

Y	U	L	S
S	S	T	O
S	W	H	A
U	B	P	N

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

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

WORD BUILDER

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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Poland ups pressure to send tanks to Ukraine

The Poland prime minister said he would seek Berlin’s permission to send German-made Leopard tanks

Warsaw, Poland - Poland said on Monday it would seek Berlin’s permission to send German-made Leopard tanks to Ukraine, but was prepared to do so without approval as Kyiv presses its allies for heavy weaponry.

After days of mounting pressure and stalling, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on Sunday said that Germany would not stand in the way if Warsaw asked to send Leopard tanks that Ukraine has demanded. “We will seek this approval,” Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told reporters on Monday.

“Even if we didn’t get such an approval in the end, we will give our tanks to Ukraine anyway - within a small coalition of countries, even if Germany isn’t in that coalition,” Morawiecki said.

Ukraine has blasted the ‘global indecision’ of its allies in supplying the tanks which it said was ‘killing more of our people’. Poland already announced earlier this month that it was ready to deliver 14 Leopard tanks to Kyiv but was waiting for a clear statement from Berlin authorising the transfer.

Berlin has insisted on the need for all allies to work together.



Protesters taking part in a demonstration in support of Ukraine, during a Foreign Affairs Council meeting at the EU headquarters in Brussels on Monday (AFP)

Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s spokesman reiterated that stance on Monday, saying the government ‘does not rule out’ the tanks’ transfer but added: “It has not yet decided.”

Haunted by its post-war guilt, Germany has always treaded lightly and quietly on the world stage when it comes to conflicts. Under Germany’s war weapons control act, Poland - and other purchasing countries - requires Berlin’s approval to hand over the Leopard tanks to Ukraine because they are German-made.

The war weapons control act aims to prevent German-made armaments being used in conflict zones against Germany’s interests.

On Friday, some 50 nations agreed to provide Kyiv with billions of dollars’ worth of military

hardware, including armoured vehicles and munitions needed to push back Russian forces.

‘Destroyed’ Soledar

Ukraine has called the tanks key to its effort in the war, which has seen heavy fighting in the nation’s east.

A Russian proxy official in east Ukraine has claimed to have visited Soledar, the flattened town in the Donetsk region of Ukraine that Moscow said it captured this month.

Denis Pushilin, Moscow’s top official responsible for Donetsk, said late on Sunday he had visited the destroyed salt mining town with Zurab Makiev, a member of Russia’s parliament.

Pushilin posted video on social media showing the men armed and wearing military attire arriving by car in Soledar.

AFP could not independently verify the images.

They were the first Moscow-linked officials to claim to visit the town, whose capture Russia has portrayed as a major victory. Pushilin told Russian state television on Monday after the visit that Soledar had been ‘destroyed’ and that there were ‘almost no whole buildings left’.

The defence ministry has said that the town’s capture is an important step to pushing out Ukrainian troops from Bakhmut, a larger mining town nearby.

Pushilin said that fighting in Bakhmut was ‘intensifying’ and claimed Russian troops were advancing and that mercenaries were controlling strategic heights near Bakhmut.

“The situation remains quite difficult, but our units are advancing almost everywhere,” he said.

Russia claimed control of Soledar on January 13. Ukraine has not formally announced the withdrawal of its forces from Soledar.

In a further ratcheting up of tensions between Russia and its European neighbours, Estonia said on Monday it would expel the Russian ambassador from Tallinn in retaliation for Moscow’s expulsion of the Estonian ambassador.

“We stand by the principle of parity in relations with Russia,” the Estonian ministry of foreign affairs said in a tweet sent in English.

AFP

EU imposes new sanctions on Iran over protest crackdown

Brussels, Belgium - The EU on Monday placed 37 more Iranian officials and entities on an asset-freeze and visa-ban blacklist over Tehran’s bloody crackdown on protesters.

The bloc targeted the minister of sports and the command of the Revolutionary Guards in 12 regions of Iran in its fourth round of sanctions over the repression of demonstrators, the EU’s official journal said.

Hard-line lawmakers, senior state media officials and the head of the body setting the country’s strict ‘morality’ rules were also added to the list.

The EU has already imposed sanctions on more than 60 Iranian officials and entities over the crackdown on protestors, including the ‘morality police’, Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders and state media.

But the 27-nation bloc has so far stopped short of blacklisting the Revolutionary Guards themselves as a terror group despite calls from Germany and the Netherlands to do so.

Iran has warned the bloc against taking the move and EU officials are wary that it could kill off stalled attempts to revive the 2015 deal on Tehran’s nuclear programme being mediated by Brussels.



European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell talks to the press as he arrives for an EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels on Monday (AFP)

You cannot say: I consider you a terrorist because I do not like you. It has to be done when a member state issues a legal statement

JOSEP BORRELL

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell insisted that there needed to be a legal ruling in an EU member state first before the bloc could make the move.

“You cannot say: ‘I consider you a terrorist because I do not like you,’” Borrell said.

“It has to be done when a court of one member state issues

14,000 people in the wave of protests, according to the United Nations.

Iranian authorities have executed four people for their role in the unrest and imposed the death penalty on a total of 18, triggering widespread international outrage.

The foreign ministers of France and Belgium urged the bloc to confront the issue of Iran’s detention of EU citizens, seen as ‘hostage-taking’ by rights groups and families of those detained.

“I think it is time that we Europeans think about how to respond to this policy of state hostage-taking that Iran is now practising,” French minister Catherine Colonna said.

“This must be taken into account in our thinking and in the decisions we will have to take in the future.”

Brussels is pushing for the release of Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele, who has been sentenced to over 12 years in jail and flogging on ‘espionage’ charges decry by UN experts.

France said last week that it is ‘extremely worried’ about the health of a French-Irish citizen Bernard Phelan held in Iran since October.

AFP



Russia’s FM Sergei Lavrov is welcomed by his South African counterpart Naledi Pandor ahead of their meeting in Pretoria on Monday (AFP)

SA: Russia’s FM gets controversial welcome

Pretoria, South Africa - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was welcomed by his South African counterpart for talks in Pretoria on Monday, in a visit that has sparked criticism against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

A continental powerhouse, South Africa has refused to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and resisted taking sides over the war.

The conflict has triggered sweeping Western sanctions against Moscow and attempts leave it diplomatically isolated.

South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor thanked Lavrov for the ‘most wonderful meeting’ after the talks, which she earlier said would have helped ‘strengthen the already good relations’ between the two countries.

Sitting alongside Moscow’s top diplomat she described Russia as a ‘valued partner’.

South Africa recently assumed the chairmanship of the BRICS, a grouping that also includes Brazil, Russia, India and China to challenge the dominant US and European-led global governance structures.

Last week, it announced it will host 10-day joint maritime drills with Russia and China off the port city of Durban and Richards Bay in February.

But the links with Moscow have triggered criticism in the country.

AFP

US citizen detained in Iran ends hunger strike

Washington, US - A US-Iranian dual national imprisoned in Tehran ended a seven-day hunger strike on Monday, saying he had lost 10 pounds but felt strengthened in his resolve to fight for the release of US prisoners.

Siamak Namazi, who has been detained since October 2015, said his strike marked the seventh anniversary of Washington’s decision to exclude him from a prisoner release that saw five other Americans freed after the inking of a historic denuclearisation deal with Iran.

Namazi had called on US President Joe Biden to consider the plight of American prisoners in Iran for a minute each day - one ‘for each of the seven years of freedom he... lost’ since the prisoner swap, according to a statement released by his lawyer on Monday.

“I went on hunger strike because I’ve learned the hard way that US presidents tend to rely more on their political thermometer than their moral compass when deciding whether or not to enter a prisoner deal with Iran,” he said.

“I denied myself food for an entire week so that maybe President Biden will recognise just how desperate the situation of the US hostages here has become.”

According to his lawyer, Namazi lost about 10 pounds (4.5kg) and his blood pressure spiked above normal levels during the hunger strike. He also struggled to stay warm, the statement said.

Namazi was blocked from leaving the country after a 2015 visit and sentenced to 10 years for collaborating with a foreign government, charges that he denies and that US officials have called groundless.

AFP

Beirut blast probe resumes after 13 months: Judicial source

Beirut, Lebanon - The Lebanese judge investigating the deadly 2020 Beirut port blast has resumed his work, a judicial official said on Monday, after a 13-month suspension due to political pressure.

“Judge Tarek Bitar has decided to resume his investigation,” said the official. The probe into the cause of the blast, one of history’s largest non-nuclear explosions, had been stalled since December 2021 as a series of complaints against Bitar obstructed his work.

The official said on Monday Bitar has ordered the release of five detained suspects and pressed charges against eight others. Among those charged



This file photo shows a part of the middle grain silos in the port of Beirut on August 12, 2022 (AFP)

were Abbas Ibrahim, General Security director general, and State Security agency chief Tony Saliba.

Embattled judge Bitar had previously sought permission to question both officials.

Lebanon’s former head of customs, Shafiq Merhi, was one of those released.

Despite the surprise decision, Bitar continues to face immense

pressure from politicians, who had filed dozens of complaints against him that forced him to halt his probe.

They include several ex-ministers, two of whom were hit with arrest warrants after they failed to show up for questioning. “Bitar conducted a legal study that led him to decide to resume his investigations despite the complaints filed against him,” the official said.

Lebanon’s powerful Shiite group Hezbollah had repeatedly demanded he step down on grounds of political bias.

No state official has yet been held accountable over the blast, while foreign countries and international bodies had called for the probe to resume.

Bitar met last week with two French judges to discuss his investigation, a judicial source told AFP at the time.

State institutions have been reluctant to cooperate with the probe, which began the same month as the explosion.

In February 2021, Bitar’s predecessor as lead judge was removed from the case by a court which had questioned his impartiality because his home had been damaged in the blast.

Parliament has refused to lift immunity granted to lawmakers, and Bitar’s requests to interrogate top security officials have been turned down.

AFP

California Lunar New Year mass shooter dead, motive unclear: Police

Monterey Park, US - The motive for a shooting that killed 10 people celebrating Lunar New Year in California remained unclear on Monday, the day after the alleged gunman shot himself dead as police moved to arrest him.

An intensive manhunt began late on Saturday after a man opened fire inside a dance studio and club in Monterey Park, a city near Los Angeles with a large Asian community.

Witnesses said he had shot indiscriminately, and appeared to have a lot of ammunition.

Five men and five women were killed, most in their 50s or 60s, police said, with around 10 others injured.

The suspect, identified by police as 72-year-old Huu Can Tran, then went to another dance venue a short distance away but was tackled and disarmed by people at the club before fleeing.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said over the following hours police tracked a wanted van, which was later reported in Torrance, several miles south.

When officers approached, they heard one gunshot from within.

"The suspect sustained a self-inflicted gunshot wound and was pronounced dead at the scene," Luna said.

"I can confirm that there are no outstanding suspects from the mass shooting incident."

Luna said the reason behind the horrific attack, which came as Asian communities around the world celebrated the Lunar New Year holiday, remained a mystery. "The investigation is still ongoing. Sheriff's homicide detectives are working around



Law enforcement personnel open the door of a van outside the site in Torrance, California, where the alleged suspect in the mass shooting in which 10 people were killed in Monterey Park, California, is believed to be holed up on Sunday (AFP)

The suspect, identified by police as 72-year-old Huu Can Tran, went to another dance venue a short distance away but was tackled and disarmed by people at the club before fleeing

the clock gathering additional information and working on determining the motive behind this extremely tragic event," he said.

Luna paid tribute to two people at the site of the second attempted attack.

"I can tell you that the suspect walked in there, probably with the intent to kill more people, and

two brave community members decided they were going to jump into action and disarm him."

"They took possession of the weapon, and the suspect ran away." The weapon used was not an assault rifle, Luna said, but 'a magazine-fed semi-automatic assault pistol... that had an extended large capacity magazine

attached to it'.

'Year of the rabbit'

Monterey Park, only a few miles from downtown Los Angeles, is home to around 60,000 people, the majority of them Asian or Asian American.

"We don't know if this is specifically a hate crime defined by law," Luna had said earlier, "but who walks into a dance hall and guns down 20 people?"

Sheriff's deputies in Monterey Park remained at the scene on Sunday, with decorations erected for the Lunar New Year hanging incongruously by the

police tape.

A banner above the street read 'Happy Year of the Rabbit'.

The Los Angeles Times reported that Seung Won Choi, who owns a nearby restaurant, said three people had run into the establishment and told him to lock the door. The three told Choi there was a man with a semiautomatic gun and multiple rounds of ammunition.

Tens of thousands of people had gathered earlier for the two-day Lunar New Year festival. Events planned for Sunday were canceled after the attack.

AFP

Billions of people exposed to toxic trans fat: WHO

Geneva, Switzerland - Efforts to eliminate industrially-produced fat have a long way to go with five billion people exposed to toxic fat added to many food products, the UN health agency said on Monday.

The World Health Organization called in 2018 for harmful trans fatty acids to be wiped out by 2023.

They are thought to be responsible for around 500,000 premature deaths from coronary heart disease each year.

Although 43 countries with combined populations of 2.8bn people have now implemented best-practice policies, most of the world remains unprotected, it said.

WHO acknowledged in an annual progress report that the goal was still out of sight.

Industrially-produced trans fat is often used in packaged foods, baked goods, cooking oils and spreads.

"Trans fat has no known benefit, and huge health risks that incur huge costs for health systems," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"By contrast, eliminating trans fat is cost effective and has enormous benefits for health," he said. "Put simply, trans fat is a toxic chemical that kills, and should have no place in food. It's time to get rid of it once and for all."

The WHO said that nine of the 16 countries with the high-

est estimated proportion of coronary heart disease deaths caused by trans fat intake were not implementing best-practice policies.

They include Australia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Ecuador, Egypt, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and South Korea.

Francesco Branca, the WHO's nutrition and food safety director, told reporters



WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

that trans fat elimination policies were in place in 60 countries, covering 3.4bn people or 43 per cent of the world's population. Of those countries, 43 are implementing best practice standards.

Best practice means either a mandatory national limit of two grammes of industrially-produced trans fat per 100 grammes of total fat in all foods; or a national ban on the production or use of partially-hydrogenated oils, which are a major source of trans fat.

AFP

Thailand van crash: Two children among 11 burned to death

Bangkok, Thailand - Eleven people, including two children, burned to death in a passenger van crash in central Thailand over the Lunar New Year holiday, police said on Monday.

Traffic accidents are common in the kingdom, which has a notorious road safety record, particularly during busy public holidays.

The van carrying 12 people was travelling from northeastern Amnat Charoen province to Bangkok when it veered off the highway in central Nakhon Ratchasima province on Saturday night, said Police Colonel Yingyos Poldej.

Yingyos told AFP that one man had been able to

climb out a window, but the other passengers were trapped and died in the blaze.

The survivor, Thanachit Kingkaew, a 20-year-old student, said he was asleep when he was jolted awake after hearing someone scream.

"I woke up and the next thing I know, the van was upside down. I didn't see what happened," he said.

"After the crash, the fire started engulfing the whole van starting from the back."

"I started kicking the windows and managed to crawl through a small hole," he said.

"Soon after that, the van exploded."

AFP

Japan PM says tackling birth rate crisis 'cannot wait'

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's low birth rate and ageing population pose an urgent risk to society, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Monday, pledging to address the issue by establishing a new government agency.

Birth rates are declining in many developed countries, but in Japan the issue is particularly acute because it has the world's second-highest proportion of people aged 65 and over, after the tiny state of Monaco, according to World Bank data.

"The number of births dropped below 800,000 last year, according to estimates," Kishida told lawmakers in a policy address marking the start of



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida delivers a policy speech at the Ordinary Diet session in Tokyo on Monday (AFP)

a new parliament session.

"Japan is standing on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society," he said.

"Focusing attention on policies regarding children and child-rearing is an issue that cannot wait and cannot be postponed."

The conservative leader said his policies - including launching the new Children and Families Agency in April - were designed to support parents and ensure the 'sustainability' of the world's third-largest economy.

Kishida added that he eventually wants the government to double its spending on child-related programmes.

"We must build a child-first social economy to reverse the (low) birth rate," he said.

Japan, which has a population of 125mn, has long been struggling with how to provide for its fast-growing number of elderly residents.

Birth rates are slowing in many countries including Japan's closest neighbours, due to factors including rising living costs, more women entering the workforce and people choosing to have children later.

Official data showed last week that China's population shrank in 2022, for the first time in more than six decades.

AFP

Sudan's prized gum trees ward off drought but workers wither

Demokaya, Sudan - A vast belt of trees vital for global production of fizzy drinks helps Sudanese farmers adapt to climate change, but in the harsh drylands many are reluctant to take up the trade.

Gum arabic, golden blobs of resin tapped from thorny acacia trees, is an emulsifying agent virtually irreplaceable for global industry. The ingredient is used in everything from soft drinks to chewing gum and pharmaceuticals.

Sudan, in northeastern Africa, is among the countries hardest hit by climate change but is also the world's largest producer of the raw gum.

"It's an important tree to fight desertification as it is drought resistant - and also increases the soil fertility, essential to increas-

ing crop production," said Fatma Ramly, coordinator of the Gum Arabic Farmers' Association, which counts seven million members. To harvest the amber-coloured resin, farmers must suffer the same climatic extremes as their trees.

"We work for hours on end under a burning sun," said Mohammed Moussa, who collects resin at the state-owned Demokaya research forest, about 30km (20 miles) from the North Kordofan state capital, El Obeid.

Moussa faces a constant struggle with the shortage of water in largely desert Sudan. His earnings from the trees barely 'provide enough money to buy water to cover us until the autumn' rainy season.

'Laborious'

Recorded temperatures in Sudan's Kordofan region have increased by almost two degrees Celsius in less than three decades, more than double the global average, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

"Water scarcity is one of the key challenges for people living in the acacia zone," said Madani Ismail, of the state-run Agricultural Research Corporation.

Farmers also have to contend with wide fluctuations in the price of gum on world commodity markets. Forty-five kilograms (100 pounds) of raw gum can fetch 22,000 to 25,000 Sudanese pounds (US\$43), de-



Sudanese men harvest gum arabic sap from an acacia tree, in the state-owned Demokaya research forest some 30km east of El-Obeid, the capital city of the central wilayat (state) of North Kordofan, on January 9 (AFP)

pending on the day's price.

The return barely covers the cost of production for Abdelbaqi Ahmed, 52, who owns a 28-hectare (70-acre) plot of acacia trees in Botei, North Kordofan.

He cultivates other crops to help boost his income from the trees, whose bark he cuts with a 'sunki' - a sharp blade attached to a long wooden shaft able to reach up high in the tree.

"It is a laborious task," said Ahmed, who sometimes hires others to help with the tapping. "So it doesn't usually pay off."

Others can't be bothered at all. Some cut down the trees for building materials or firewood. Many work in the nearby gold mines, like four of Ahmed's five sons.

AFP

INDIA

SC to set up 3-judge bench to hear Karnataka hijab ban row

A bench headed by the CJI assured that it will list the matter and give a date

New Delhi, India - The Supreme Court on Monday assured the petitioners to list the matter pertaining to the ban on Hijab in the educational institutes in Karnataka.

Senior Advocate Meenakshi Arora mentioned the matter related to the headscarves before a bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud. Arora said that many girls have lost out on the entire year because they have refused to take off their hijab.

She also apprised the court about practicals in educational institutes in February and sought an early hearing for interim directions.

A bench headed by the CJI assured that it will list the matter and give a date. The court also observed that the matter would be heard by a three-judge bench of the top court.

The court asked the lawyer to mention the matter before the registrar.

The top court had earlier given a verdict on various petitions challenging the Karnataka High Court order which upheld the ban on Hijab in educational institutes.

Justice Hemant Gupta dismissed the appeal while Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia allowed it. The matter was thereafter re-



Women walk past the Karnataka High Court following the verdict of the Hijab issue, in Bengaluru on March 15, 2022 (ANI)

ferred to the CJI for appropriate direction due to divergent opinions. The court was hearing various pleas against Karnataka HC's judgement upholding the Karnataka Government's decision to direct educational institutes to prescribe uniforms in educational institutes. Various petitioners have ap-

proached the apex court challenging the Karnataka HC order upholding the Karnataka government's order which directs strict enforcement of schools and colleges' uniform rules.

One of the appeals in the top court has alleged 'step-motherly behaviour of government authorities which has prevented students from practising their faith and resulted in an unwanted law and order situation'.

The appeal said the High Court in its 'impugned order' had vehemently failed to apply its mind and was unable to understand the gravity of the situation as well as the core aspect of the Essential Religious Practices enshrined under Article 25 of the Constitution of India'.

A bench of Karnataka High Court comprising Chief Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi, Justice Krishna S Dixit, and Justice JM Khazi had earlier held that the prescription of uniform is a reasonable restriction that students could not object to and dismissed various petitions challenging a ban on Hijab in education institutions saying they are without merit.

The Hijab row erupted in January 2022 when the Government PU College in Udupi allegedly barred six girls wearing the hijab from entering. Following this, the girls protested outside the college over being denied entry.

After this, boys from several colleges in Udupi started attending classes wearing saffron scarves. This protest spread to other parts of the state as well leading to protests and agitations in several places in Karnataka. As a result, the Karnataka government said that all students must adhere to the uniform and banned both hijab and saffron scarves till an expert committee decided on the issue.

ANI



A view of the fifth Submarine INS Vagir at the Naval Dockyard, in Mumbai on Monday (ANI)

5th Kalvari-class submarine Vagir commissioned

Mumbai, India - The Indian Navy on Monday commissioned INS Vagir the fifth submarine of Project 75 Kalvari class at the naval dockyard in Mumbai in presence of Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral R Hari Kumar.

Launched and named 'Vagir' on November 12, 2020, the submarine in its new avatar has the distinction of having the lowest build time among all indigenously manufactured submarines to date. Vagir undertook her maiden sea sortie in February 2022, marking the commencement of sea trials and has gone through a series of comprehensive acceptance checks and stringent and demanding sea trials prior to being commissioned, according to the defence ministry.

The submarine was delivered to Indian Navy by MDL on December 20, 2022.

Vagir will boost the Indian Navy's capability to further India's maritime interests and is capable of undertaking diverse missions including anti-surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, intelligence gathering, mine laying and surveillance missions.

"Vagir is a lethal platform with a formidable weapon package. Vagir is the third submarine inducted into the Navy in a span of 24 months. It is also a shining testimony to the expertise of our shipyards to construct complex and complicated platforms," said Admiral Hari Kumar.

Coxswain of the fifth Kalvari submarine Daljinder Singh on Saturday said that the submarine is ready to face any threat if war breaks out between India and China.

While talking to ANI, Singh said: "This submarine is the latest technology of the Indian Navy. It is a silent submarine. It has good anti-submarine weapons like the advanced version of mines. It has advanced versions of combat and advanced version of sonar, and radar systems.

"All the technology used in the submarine is Indian. If there is a war between India and China, then we are ready to face it," Singh said.

While Commanding Officer CDR Divakar S told ANI: "INS Vagir can be deployed both closer to the shore as well as mid-ocean. It will be ready to meet all the requirements of the Navy and the country. It is a big step towards becoming Atmanirbhar Bharat. This is the fifth Kalvari class submarine."

ANI

UK supports India's bid for permanent seat at UNSC: British High Commissioner

New Delhi, India - The United Kingdom supports India's candidacy for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), British High Commissioner Alexander Ellis said while adding that New Delhi's push for reforms will make the institution more effective in dealing with the realities of today.

In ANI Podcast with Smriti Prakash, Editor-in-Chief, the British High Commissioner said:

"We certainly support India becoming the member of the UNSC as this is why the UNSC reforms are the institutional that reflects to the realities of today."

"Change in the institution (UNSC) is hard and we need to make them work. Some of them come after the second World War like UN and UNSC, some came later like World Trade Organization (WTO)... zenith of globalisation, the mid 90s and what we want from India is actually to make the effective institution," he added.

He also gave the example of the International Financial Institutions (IFI) which is the product of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and said that the countries are adapting those to realities of today. He also said that India, for example had also lend money.

British High Commissioner also said that the vulnerable



British High Commissioner to India Alexander Ellis (ANI)

states like island nations need greater support so that they can create the impact in the world and hardwork is the key to that lock. "Change in the multilateralisation is hardwork. What we are seeing is the creation of new institution which we will start more," Ellis said.

He also gave the example of Clinical Trials Registry - India, which is majorly created with the support of the UK.

"India will increasingly be part of all of those (Indo-Pacific group, minilateralism) things and including in panel so the UK and India but also with other countries try to solve the particular problem," British High Commissioner said.

On December 1, India assumed the monthly rotating presidency of the UNSC for the second time in its two-year tenure as an elected member of the Council in 2021-22. India had earlier assumed UNSC presidency in August 2021.

During its December Presidency, India held a 'high-level open debate' on 'Maintenance of International Peace and Security: New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism (NORMS)' at the Security Council.

Earlier on December 14, The UK extended support for India's permanent membership at the UNSC.

ANI

Poisoning wild birds: Cyprus issues fines

Nicosia, Cyprus - Cypriot authorities have for the first time issued fines for the killing of rare wild birds using poison baits, conservationists on the Mediterranean island said on Monday.

Fines totalling €21,000 (US\$23,000) were last week ordered for an individual after three birds of prey were found dead at a rural property in the southern Limassol district, the group BirdLife Cyprus said.

The punishment 'represents a big step forward that will hopefully have a strong deterrent effect, BirdLife's project coordinator Melpo Apostolidou said.

AFP

Pakistan hit by massive power breakdown across nation

Islamabad, Pakistan - A massive power breakdown across Pakistan continued after night fell on Monday, affecting most of the country's 220mn residents, including in the mega cities of Karachi and Lahore.

Pakistan's national power system is a complex and delicate web where problems can quickly cascade.

The breakdown was caused by a fault in the national grid at around 7:30am (0230 GMT), plunging much of the country into darkness.

"We hope that the electricity will be restored throughout the country by tonight," Energy Minister Khurram Dastagir Khan said in a video statement.

The cut was caused by a variation in frequency on the national grid as power generation units were turned on early in the morning.



Students attend a class at a government school during a nationwide power outage in Rawalpindi on Monday (AFP)

The units had been temporarily switched off at night to save fuel, Khan earlier told the media. Localised power cuts are common in Pakistan and hospitals, factories and government institutions are often kept running by private generators. The machines are, however, beyond the means of most citizens and small businesses. In parts of northern Pakistan, temperatures

The power outage across Pakistan continued after night fell, affecting most of the country's 220mn residents including in the mega cities

were due to drop below freezing on Monday night with supplies of natural gas - the most common heating method - also unreliable due to load-shedding. The economy is already hobbled by rampant inflation, a falling rupee, and severely low forex reserves, with the power cut piling extra pressure on small businesses.

In the garrison city of Rawalpindi, homeware trader Muhammad Iftikhar Sheikh, 71,

said he was unable to demonstrate electronic products to browsing customers.

"The customers never buy without testing first," he said. "All of us are sitting idle."

Schools mostly continued either in the dark or using battery-powered lighting.

A shop owner in the southern port city Karachi, where temperatures were higher, told AFP he feared his entire dairy stock would spoil without refrigeration.

Thirty-nine-year-old printer Khurram Khan said orders were piling up because of the blackout.

Unreliable power is 'a permanent curse which our governments have failed to overcome', Khan complained.

Repair work was underway, with limited power restored in some parts of the country, including the capital Islamabad.

AFP

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

DEMOLITION JOB

Novak Djokovic storms past Alex de Minaur to reach Australian Open quarter-finals

Melbourne, Australia - A ruthless Novak Djokovic ominously warned Monday his hamstring injury was on the mend after his “best day so far” at the Australian Open as he surged into a 13th Melbourne Park quarter-final.

The Serbian fourth seed demolished Alex de Minaur 6-2, 6-1, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena to move a step closer to a 10th Australian title and 22nd major crown.

With his left thigh again strapped, the 35-year-old was a man on a mission, expending as little energy as possible in a 2hrs 6mins romp to inch within sight of Rafael Nadal’s slam record.

Djokovic aggravated his hamstring during his run to a 92nd title at the Adelaide International this month and has been struggling with it since.

But he moved freely against De Minaur to set up a clash with fifth seed Andrey Rublev for a semi-final berth after the Russian toppled Danish teen Holger Rune in a tense five-set clash on the same court.

“I didn’t feel anything today, so today was great,” Djokovic, who will return to world number one for the first time since June if he wins the tournament, said of the hamstring. “I thank my medical team, physio, God - anybody that really helped me. I keep on going.

“Obviously I don’t want to celebrate too early, I’m still in the tournament.

“I was feeling very good in the first match (in Melbourne), in the second match not so great, so I know things can change really quickly and I don’t take things for granted.

“But I’m really pleased with the way I played today, the way I moved, the way I hit the ball. I played the best match of this year so far.”

I thank my medical team, physio, God - anybody that really helped me. I keep on going. Obviously I don’t want to celebrate too early, I’m still in the tournament

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

Djokovic added that he had been pumping himself full of anti-inflammatory pills “trying to mask the pain”.

“But I had to find a way with my team. Today was the best day so far of the tournament and hopefully it stays that way.”

Very high level

Victory put him into a 13th Melbourne quarter-final to move fourth on the all-time list behind Roger Federer, Nadal and John Newcombe.

It is his 54th Grand Slam quarter-final in total - second only to the retired Federer’s 58.

De Minaur, who recorded his first victory against a top-five player in November when he beat Daniil Medvedev at the Paris Masters, was always facing an uphill climb.

Djokovic has not lost in Melbourne since 2018 - he did not play in 2022 - and has now won 25 consecutive matches at the Australian Open.

“I came up against a very good opponent with a very high level today,” said De Minaur.

“I think what I experienced today was probably Novak very close to his best, I would say. To me, if that’s the level, I think he’s definitely the guy that’s going to take the title.”

Djokovic always had the measure of the young Australian and broke to love in game six, consolidating without dropping a point for 5-2.

AFP



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic hits a return against Australia’s Alex De Minaur during their Australian Open round-of-16 match on Monday (AFP)



Czech Republic’s Karolina Pliskova hits a return against China’s Zhang Shuai during their last-16 match at Australian Open in Melbourne on Monday (AFP)

‘Super aggressive’ Pliskova powers into last eight

Melbourne, Australia - Former world number one Karolina Pliskova kept herself on track for a maiden Grand Slam title Monday with a “super aggressive” performance to destroy Zhang Shuai 6-0, 6-4 in the Australian Open fourth round.

The Czech 30th seed continued her confident run at Melbourne Park with a sizzling serving display, banging down 12 aces as she crushed the 23rd seed from China on the Kia Arena showcourt.

“I thought I started really well today, super aggressive,” said Pliskova, who raced through the first set in just 21 minutes.

“But I was going for it, especially the first set. A little bit slowed down in the second set, but also she started to play a bit better. Maybe a bit smarter.

“But I’m just happy that I made it because the second set, it could go, I think, both ways.”

Pliskova, who endured a torrid 2022 and missed last year’s

Australian Open with a wrist injury, was imperious in reaching her 11th Grand Slam quarter-final.

The 30-year-old has won 16 WTA Tour titles and reached the semi-final at Melbourne Park in 2019.

Pliskova is yet to drop a set and on this form has an opportunity to go all the way, especially with the top two seeds, Iga Swiatek and Ons Jabeur, already out.

‘The best match’

“I think the serve was really working for me well in these matches,” she told reporters.

“I think this is so far the best match I played here, definitely, especially the first set. I’m feeling the ball quite well, so happy for that.”

Pliskova will face Polish world number 45 Magda Linette, who stunned fourth seed Caroline Garcia of France, for a place in the semi-final.

“I watched her a little bit this

week,” Pliskova said of Linette, who will be appearing in her first Grand Slam quarter-final at the age of 30.

“I think she really improved her game a lot. She started to believe. Of course you can see that. She’s a fighter, playing a really good game from the baseline.

“If I play like I played today, I think it’s tough for anybody to compete with that.”

Last season Pliskova plummeted from fourth in the world to finish outside the top 30 for the first time since 2013.

Along the way, she was bundled out of the French Open in the second round by a 277th-ranked qualifier, as her fortunes on court hit rock bottom.

“Last year was tough, especially missing Australia, which is my favourite country and my favourite tournament to play,” she said.

“It was difficult to get back into shape, but I’m happy that I’m competing back at the level I

want to be.

“It’s always great to be in the second week of a Slam and hopefully I can stay a bit longer.”

Another second-round exit at Wimbledon prompted her to sack coach Sascha Bajin, the German who guided Naomi Osaka to back-to-back Grand Slam titles at the 2018 US Open and 2019 Australian Open.

In December, she rehired Bajin, who was seen beaming courtside Monday, and the turnaround in her form has been rapid.

Meanwhile, Aryna Sabalenka said she was reaping the benefits of a more positive mindset after crushing Belinda Bencic to reach her first Australian Open quarter-final on Monday.

The fifth seed won 7-5, 6-2 after a brutal display of power-hitting, with no signs of the nerves that have afflicted the richly talented Belarusian’s game in the past.

AFP

Garcia struggled with ‘emotions’ in Australian Open defeat

Melbourne, Australia - Title contender Caroline Garcia said she “shot herself in the foot” as nerves got the better of her in a last-16 defeat at the Australian Open on Monday.

The fourth seed was one of the favourites for the first Grand Slam of the year but was bundled out by 45th-ranked Magda Linette 7-6 (7/3), 6-4 in the last 16.

France’s Garcia, who was ranked 74th a year ago but rose to fourth by the end of 2022, managed to land only 49 percent of her first serves, which she put down to nerves.

As the tension grew, it left her having “a hard time keeping my emotions under control, putting my game in place and releasing myself forward”, she told French reporters at Melbourne Park.

The writing had been on the wall for Garcia in the previous round, when she needed 2hr 10min to avoid a massive upset



France’s Caroline Garcia reacts to a missed point against Poland’s Magda Linette during their last-16 match at Australian Open on Monday (AFP)

against world number 158 Laura Siegemund after losing the first set 6-1.

“What was not fluid in my game cost me dearly,” she said in comments in French, after making 33 unforced errors against Linette, who only tallied 14.

“What is annoying is that I can’t free myself, I can’t put my

game together,” said Garcia, who won the 2022 season-ending WTA Tour finals. “I didn’t go to the net much, and that’s what I’m most upset about.”

Asked if being one of the favourites for the title had been too much to handle, she replied: “Yes, I think so.”

AFP

Home comforts fuel Tsitsipas title bid at Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - It’s about 15,000 kilometres (9,000 miles) from Melbourne to Greece, but home comforts are fuelling Stefanos Tsitsipas’s charge towards a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open.

The 24-year-old world number four from Greece has enjoyed fervent support in Melbourne, which has the largest Greek population in Australia.

Spectators bellowing for Tsitsipas and waving the Greek flag buoyed the third seed when he suffered a scare against young Italian Jannik Sinner on Sunday in their last-16 encounter.

Tsitsipas eventually prevailed over five sets at Rod Laver Arena to set up a quarter-final against unseeded 21-year-old Jiri



Stefanos Tsitsipas

Lehecka of the Czech Republic on Tuesday. Tsitsipas is revelling in the support as he bids to win a major for the first time, but it goes deeper than that.

“I grew up in a climate that is very similar here, from the place I come from in southwestern

Athens,” Tsitsipas, one of the deeper-thinking men’s tennis players, said.

“It always reminds me of home a little bit when I’m here - the conditions are similar, it’s not very humid, it’s not very tropical. I can say it’s similar to the Athenian Riviera.

“Another reason, another plus, is wherever I look I see Greek faces, I see Greek people speaking Greek.

“Of course it’s very important when you’re far away from home to have that sort of feeling, to connect even more with the culture that you’re at.

“It feels very welcoming when you’re able to walk around and feel that.”

AFP

GOALLESS BUT PROMISEFUL

Ronaldo fails to score in Al Nassr debut

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Cristiano Ronaldo made a winning start to life in the Saudi Pro League as he led Al Nassr to a 1-0 victory over Ettifaq on Sunday in his first match since becoming the best paid footballer in history.

The Portuguese superstar didn't score but there were promising signs for Al Nassr, who are eyeing domestic and continental silverware after the 37-year-old moved for deals totalling more than 400 million euros.



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo attempts a shot during their Saudi Pro League match against Al Ettifaq at the King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh on Sunday (AFP)

He's one of the best players in the history of football, so it's very important for us to do everything possible to put him in the best condition

RUDI GARCIA

However, Ronaldo's league debut had an anticlimactic feel in front of 22,862 fans after he scored twice in this week's lively 5-4 exhibition defeat to Lionel Messi's Paris Saint-Germain.

"He's one of the best players in the history of football, so it's very important for us to do everything possible to put him in the best condition," said Al Nassr coach Rudi Garcia.

"I want him to enjoy playing and tonight he was happy to play for the first time with his new team."

Ronaldo, leading out Al Nassr as captain, made a low-key start in the first half, twice losing the ball with attempted trickery as his team-mates struggled to get him on the ball.

Ronaldo's early shot from the edge of the box was deflected over, and he nearly met Abdulmajeed Al Sulaiheem's cross that was headed in by Anderson Talisca for the game's only goal on 31 minutes.

Shortly afterwards Ronaldo, met by shouts of "Siu!" every time he touched ball, blazed over with a free kick from an inviting position just outside the penalty area.

Al Nassr's front three began to click in the second half and Ronaldo set up Pity Martinez and Talisca - after some trademark stepovers - for close chances in quick succession.

A swing and a miss at a bicycle kick showed Ronaldo was warming to his task, and he then attempted a shot from a nearly impossible angle after a dribble into the box.

But there was to be no goal for Ronaldo, watched by his girlfriend Georgina Rodriguez, in a win that kept Al Nassr on top of the Saudi Pro League.

All-time great

Ronaldo arrived in Saudi Arabia in early January but his debut was delayed while he served a two-match ban for knocking a mobile phone out of a fan's hand while at Manchester United.

The move to Saudi is a step down for Ronaldo, an undisputable all-time great who has continually delivered on football's biggest stages and amassed an astonishing haul of team and personal honours.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner is the all-time Champions League top-scorer, collecting five titles along the way, and has won seven domestic championships with Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus.

Ronaldo also holds the record for international goals - 118 with Portugal, with whom he won Euro 2016 - and career goals with 819. In Qatar he became the first man to score at five World Cups.

His shock move to Al Nassr came after his second stint at Manchester United collapsed in acrimony when he savaged the club in a TV interview.

According to a source close to Al Nassr, he signed for more than 200 million euros on top of a separate 200-million-euro deal to act as an ambassador for Saudi Arabia's expected 2030 World Cup co-hosting bid.

It will further swell the bank balance of Ronaldo, who became the first footballer to pass \$1 billion in career earnings in 2020.

Part of his appeal is his massive social media presence, with nearly 800 million followers across Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.



Borussia Dortmund's Sebastien Haller battles with Augsburg's Ermedin Demirovic for the ball (AFP)

'Unforgettable': Haller hails 80,000 fans after return from cancer

Dortmund, Germany - Borussia Dortmund striker Sebastien Haller made his first competitive appearance since recovering from testicular cancer on Sunday, coming on in the second half against Augsburg and describing his welcome by more than 80,000 fans as "unforgettable".

Haller came off the bench to rapturous applause, bringing the 82,000-strong crowd at Dortmund's Signal Iduna Park to their feet.

"The welcome I received was something unbelievable, unforgettable," Haller told German broadcaster DAZN.

The 28-year-old striker sported boots bearing the message 'F*ck Cancer' when he took the field.

"I was just happy to be here and to take my first steps on the pitch. It's something we can take with the team, this atmosphere, we can use (it) to win games."

Haller, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer just days after joining Dortmund in the summer of 2022, underwent several months of treatment, including four rounds of chemotherapy and two operations.

AFP

Haller, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer just days after joining Dortmund in the summer of 2022, underwent several months of treatment, including four rounds of chemotherapy and two operations.

AFP

Juve held by Atalanta in six-goal thriller after points deduction

Milan, Italy - Juventus played out a thrilling 3-3 draw with Atalanta in their first match since being slapped with a massive points deduction for illicit transfer activity, Roma taking their place in Serie A's Champions League positions following a 2-0 win at Spezia.

Italy's biggest football club were rocked on Friday by the Italian Football Federation's decision to dock them 15 points after ruling they had managed capital gains from transfers to artificially benefit their accounts.

That decision, which leaves them ninth in the league on 23 points, drew howls of disapproval from Juve fans at the Allianz Stadium before a hugely entertaining encounter and was blasted as "unjust and unequal" by CEO Maurizio Scanavino pre-match.

But the team showed fight to twice come back from going behind to Ademola Lookman goals to draw an exciting encounter, with Danilo's drive mid-



Atalanta's Rafael Toloi (L) fights for the ball with Moise Kean of Juventus during their Italian Serie A match at the Juventus Stadium in Turin on Sunday (AFP)

way through the second half eventually earning his team a point. Juve are 14 points from the Champions League positions, a bad situation for a club whose last accounts were nearly 240 million euros in the red and have various bodies examining their financial conduct.

"I think we'd need 71 points to get into the Champions League... We need to look at the reality who how things are," said coach Massimiliano Allegri.

AFP

Rahm holds off rookie Thompson to win US PGA American Express

Los Angeles, United States - Fourth-ranked Jon Rahm endured a frustrating day on the greens, but his four-under-par 68 was enough to hold off rookie Davis Thompson and claim a second US PGA Tour title in as many weeks at the American Express tournament.

Spain's Rahm, who opened the year with a victory in the Tournament of Champions in Hawaii, had five birdies on the Stadium Course in La Quinta, California, finishing with a 27-under-par total of 261.

Thompson, who started the day tied with Rahm for the lead,

carded a three-under 69 for 262.

"Ball-striking was great, I hit a lot of great putts - it's just golf," Rahm said of a multitude of putts that didn't drop. "I was burning edges all day."

Rahm led much of the day after back-to-back birdies at the first and second - both from about two feet. He rolled in a seven-foot birdie at the ninth and picked up another stroke at 11 - but it was far from smooth sailing from there.

A bogey at 13, where he missed the green and his five-foot putt to save par lipped out, Rahm was tied with Thompson



Jon Rahm celebrates with son Kepa Cahill Rahm after his victory (AFP)

Ball-striking was great, I hit a lot of great putts - it's just golf. I was burning edges all day

JON RAHM

for the lead.

He got his nose in front again with a birdie at the par-five 16th, where his second shot from the fairway avoided a steep drop off to a greenside bunker and his

eight-foot birdie putt agonizingly circled the cup before falling in.

Thompson, meanwhile, was in a tough lie in a fairway bunker on the way to a par at 16.

"The turning point was 16," Rahm said. "He missed that tee shot and I put it in the fairway. That's pretty much a half-stroke penalty right there."

"I knew if I did what I could do I was mostly likely going to have a one-shot lead going to the last two holes."

Thompson, a former amateur standout at the University of Georgia and a winner on the Korn Ferry developmental tour,

had followed his first birdie of the day at the fourth with a bogey at the fifth, where he was in the water. He closed the gap to one stroke with birdies at the sixth, ninth and 11th.

He came agonisingly close to pulling level again at the 17th, where his 48-foot birdie putt brushed the pin and didn't drop.

"I usually always leave the stick in from a long distance," Thompson said. "I feel like it helps me with my speed. I'll probably play the 'what if' game in my head for a long time, unfortunately."

AFP

STUFF OF CHAMPIONS

Bukayo Saka scores stunner, Eddie Nketiah bags double as Arsenal silence doubters with statement win over Man Utd

London, United Kingdom - Premier League leaders Arsenal have had their title credentials questioned all season but their last-gasp 3-2 win against Manchester United has silenced many of the remaining doubters.

Eddie Nketiah scored the winner in the dying moments of a pulsating match at the Emirates on Sunday as the home fans were infused with fresh belief that this could be their year.

The game against in-form United was seen as a critical test for the Gunners, especially after Manchester City closed the gap at the top of the table to just two points earlier in the day.

It was a challenge they did not fluff, hitting back hard after conceding the first goal, scored by Marcus Rashford, and staying calm after Lisandro Martinez cancelled out Bukayo Saka's strike in the second half.

Arsenal, who have made their best-ever start to an English top-flight season, now have 50 points after 19 games - five clear of defending champions City with a game in hand at the halfway point of the campaign.

"I don't think it gets much better than that," said a buoyant Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta.

"It was a beautiful moment, a really special one because we were pushing and pushing and pushing and the goal wasn't com-



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka celebrates after scoring against Manchester United in their English Premier League match in London on Sunday (AFP)

ing and it came at the end... it was just electric. It was really emotional, passionate and I lost it."

Arteta said he hopes the result, which follows last week's 2-0 win against Tottenham in the north London derby, gives his team the belief that Arsenal can be crowned league champions for the first time since 2004.

But he wants to keep his team's feet on the ground despite a remarkable season in which they have lost just once in the league.

"We know our reality, we

Aston Villa, Leicester, Bournemouth, Fulham, Crystal Palace and Leeds.

City, with title-winning pedigree, appear to have found their form again after a wobble and the sides at the bottom of the table will fight for their lives as the trap door looms. But former Arsenal captain Arteta has transformed his side from also-rans last season into title favourites, through luck and judgement.

Saka has gone from strength to strength while Nketiah has stepped up in the absence of new

It was a beautiful moment, a really special one because we were pushing and pushing and pushing and the goal wasn't coming and it came at the end... it was just electric.

MIKEL ARTETA

know how much we still have to improve," said the Spaniard.

Winnable matches

Arsenal face the defending champions in the middle of next month but their upcoming fixtures all look winnable and it is getting increasingly difficult to see where they will slip up.

Leaving the match against City aside, Arsenal's next opponents in the league are relegation-threatened Everton, Brentford,

signing Gabriel Jesus, injured while playing for Brazil at the World Cup. The 23-year-old now has six goals in six games in all competitions since the tournament in Qatar.

"What Eddie's doing is incredible," said Arteta. "We cannot say we saw that. We were hoping that he could do that because of the way he is, because of his mentality, because of his qualities."

AFP

Madrid triumph in Bilbao, Barca scrape past Getafe

Bilbao, Spain - Karim Benzema and Toni Kroos's goals kept Real Madrid on Barcelona's tail in La Liga with a 2-0 win against Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

After the Catalans had beaten Getafe 1-0, champions Madrid won a tight clash at the San Mames to remain three points behind their rivals.

Benzema broke the deadlock with a superb volley in the first half while Kroos fizzed home the second late on to kill off Athletic's hopes.

After losing the Spanish Super Cup to Barcelona last weekend, anxiety had increased in the capital, but a stirring Copa del Rey comeback against Villarreal on Thursday settled nerves.

This victory in Bilbao will reassure Los Blancos fans further, ahead of their derby clash in the cup with Atletico Madrid next week.

"It's clear that the team is defending well again, (we were) compact, solid," Real coach Carlo Ancelotti told DAZN.



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema (R) celebrates with Vinicius Junior after scoring against Athletic Bilbao in their Spanish league match on Sunday

"With us ahead in the game we needed to defend and we did it well. We did not give things away and in the end we won."

Madrid had let in eight goals in their previous four games across all competitions, but despite the injury absences of David Alaba and Aurelien Tchouameni, they were far more

sturdy in the Basque Country.

Athletic sit eighth, five points below the Champions League qualification spots.

Pedri Gonzalez's goal made the difference for Barcelona in their single goal win over Getafe.

Without suspended striker Robert Lewandowski, Barcelona created few noteworthy chances,

but did just enough to emerge with the three points to drive on their bid for a first league title since 2019.

"We didn't play well, we were sluggish, we didn't attack well," Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez told Movistar.

"But we do take an important win, three points at home, and another clean sheet which is important too."

Xavi's side have won six games in a row across all competitions and fans chanted the coach's name in the final stages despite a sub-par display.

Barca's first real chance came in the 35th minute and was converted by Pedri from close range, turning home Raphinha's cross after a great interception by Andreas Christensen set the Brazilian free.

Former Madrid striker Mayoral should have equalised for the visitors but was denied by Marc-Andre ter Stegen when through on goal, after a poorly judged Pedri back-pass.

Barca coach Xavi apologises for comment after Alves accusations

Barcelona, Spain - Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez apologised Sunday for a comment he had made about Dani Alves, who was arrested earlier this week following sexual assault allegations.

The 39-year-old defender, sacked by his Mexican club Pumas after his arrest, is being held in custody without bail in Barcelona.

The charge of sexual assault in Spain can mean anything from unsolicited and unwanted sexual groping to rape.

While police declined to give details on the case, a source close to the investigation told AFP that Alves is accused by a woman of rape.

Xavi had said Saturday he was in a state of shock after learning of the allegations and arrest, but also that he "felt bad" for Alves, while not men-



All actions of this type must be condemned whether Dani or anyone else did it

XAVI HERNANDEZ

tioning the alleged victim.

"Yesterday what I wanted to say about Dani Alves was misinterpreted, perhaps I was not forceful enough with my words

and it is important that I explain myself," said Xavi on Sunday after Barcelona's 1-0 win over Getafe in La Liga.

"It is a very lurid subject and yesterday I forgot to talk about the victims. It wasn't an appropriate comment.

"All actions of this type must be condemned, whether Dani or anyone else did it.

"I apologise to the victim, to the victims of both gender violence and this type of violation."

Alves, who played for Barcelona for eight seasons between 2008-2016, rejoined the Catalans for a short spell last season under his former teammate Xavi.

Catalonian police said they received a complaint on January 2 from a woman who accused Alves of sexual assault.

AFP

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FREEDOM FROM FEAR

WUHAN TURNS
PAGE ON COVID-19,
THREE YEARS ON

NOT AFRAID OF THE VIRUS



We are not afraid of the virus anymore... we don't have that fear in our heart anymore, as long as we protect ourselves and wear our masks

YAN DONGJU

battle against the virus.

But in a cogent reminder of the fraught geopolitics that would emerge as the virus spread across the globe, Wuhan's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market - once suspected of being the epicentre of the outbreak - remains closed.

The area around the once-bustling wet market was desolate when AFP visited on Monday, though a police car kept watch.

Over a billion infected

China, relatively unscathed for years after its initial out-

breaks thanks to draconian zero-COVID measures, has faced its biggest-ever case surge in recent weeks.

About 80 per cent of the population is believed to have contracted COVID-19 since health restrictions were lifted in December, according to leading epidemiologist Wu Zunyou.

On Saturday, China reported at least 13,000 COVID-related deaths in just under a week.

This figure, which only includes deaths reported in hospitals, adds to the approximately 60,000 deaths since December that were previously reported by authorities.

But it is likely a huge underestimate for a population of 1.4bn, and Beijing's official case tally is no longer believed to reflect reality.

AFP



Girls take a ride in Zhongshan Amusement Park in Wuhan on Monday (AFP)

Residents of China's Wuhan are saying that they are hopeful for the future and are no longer afraid of COVID-19, three years after the city was locked down over what was then a mysterious virus.

Since Beijing ordered Wuhan sealed off in a bid to suffocate the outbreak in January 2020, COVID-19 has devastated the planet, killing millions and plunging the global economy into turmoil. But life is now back to normal for many across the globe and after almost three years of gruelling lockdowns and mandatory mass testing, Beijing last month lifted its headline zero-COVID policy.

As China started celebrating Lunar New Year this week, Wuhan has become unrecognisable compared to the apocalyptic scenes that gripped the city of 11mn in early 2020.

Locals are crowding busy markets and families - some not wearing masks - are busy buying



A customer (right) buys fruit at a local market in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei province, on Monday (AFP)

toys and throwing stones along the Yangtze River.

Many are flocking to Guiyuan Temple, one of Wuhan's most famed sites - that opened for a Lunar New Year holiday for the first time in three years.

Others are enjoying snacks and local specialties on Hubu Alley, a popular historic thoroughfare bustling with stalls and

small restaurants.

Some told AFP that they were elated that life was returning to normal.

"The new year will of course be better," Yan Dongju, a cleaner in her sixties, told AFP.

"We are not afraid of the virus anymore... we don't have that fear in our heart anymore, as long as we protect ourselves and

wear our masks," she added.

"Now that we have opened up, everyone is quite happy," said delivery driver Liang Feicheng, wearing glasses and a black face-mask to keep warm.

"A lot of our worries and depression have all slowly been resolved," he added.

"People are going about their lives, coming together with fam-

ily and friends, going out to play and travel and being happy."

House of hope

The January 2020 decision to lock down the city, announced in the middle of the night, took Wuhan's residents by surprise as the world watched on with uncertainty.

For 76 days, Wuhan was cut off from the world, with residents holed up in their homes for fear of being infected as hospitals overflowed with patients.

But the horrifying scenes which marked the world's first COVID-19 lockdown are now a thing of the past.

Outside a shop where AFP captured the scene of a man who lay dying in the street in January 2020 - in an image that would become a symbol of the world's fight against COVID-19 - a sign for a new school on the second floor reads 'House of Hope'.

And a makeshift hospital built in just ten days during the early days of the pandemic lay abandoned, now featuring a triumphant banner hailing China's

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Macau's streets became packed after pandemic controls were abruptly lifted but it is far from business as usual as the Chinese casino hub wrestles with questions about its future.

Mainland Chinese tourists filled winding passages leading up to the historic Ruins of Saint Paul's, and stores selling local snacks like almond cookies and meat jerky had trouble keeping up.

"We don't have enough goods for this Lunar New Year as we didn't expect this," a business owner surnamed Li told AFP.

Tourists may now be back, but Beijing wants the former Portuguese colony to diversify its casinos-reliant economy.

President Xi Jinping has led a years-long anti-corruption campaign that clamped down on money laundering and gambling.

Yet quitting gambling - and the huge tax revenues casinos generate - will be a hard habit to break.

"The government has an inherent conflict," gaming consultant David Green told AFP.

"It needs to be seen by the central government to be promoting non-gaming, but... it has to be cognisant of maintaining its revenue stream."

The city of some 700,000 is the only place in China where casinos operate legally and for years has relied on mainland Chinese gamblers as its economic lifeline.

Last year Macau saw gaming revenues plunge to a record low of 42bn patacas (US\$5.2bn approx) after the government shut down most businesses at the height of a coronavirus wave.

Can't use the old ways

Macau issues just six operating concessions for a multi-billion-dollar industry that, until the pandemic hit, generated six times the gaming revenue of Las Vegas.

In December, the government awarded new decade-long concessions to all incumbents, effectively keeping the status quo but adding new requirements for non-gaming investment.

The firms have since pledged a total of US\$14.9bn on projects including theme parks,

UNEXPECTED CHANGE OF TIME



Hong Kong tourists riding a ferry heading from Hong Kong to the southern Chinese enclave of Macau (AFP)

PANDEMIC LEGACY

MACAU PONDERES FUTURE EVEN AS TOURISTS RETURN



Tourists from mainland China stroll down a street in the southern Chinese enclave of Macau (AFP)

convention and exhibition centres, fine dining and performance venues.

Former lawmaker Sulu Sou said it was 'a step forward' for Macau to set clear demands for diversification, instead of relying on vague slogans as it had for years.

"Changes in the industry and shifting attitudes toward gambling in mainland China forced the [Macau] government to spell these requirements out in black and white," he told AFP.

Sou pointed to the downfall of 'junket king' Alvin Chau, who was sentenced to 18 years in jail last week for hosting illegal gambling on a vast scale.

"It was a major signal to society that even as we return to normality, we can't use the old ways to make a fortune anymore," Sou said.

Chau was the figurehead of an industry that thrived on enticing high rollers from mainland China to gamble in Macau, by running VIP rooms and extending credit for bets.

VIP guests contributed around 15 per cent of industry earnings before the pandemic, but the majority of this would be 'permanently gone' due to regulatory concerns, according to Credit Suisse analysts.

'China's multi-year campaign against capital outflow and cross-border gambling carried on, rather than eased,' they wrote earlier this month.

Shock to the system

Last month, Macau dismantled most of its pandemic controls and reopened its borders, following Beijing's abrupt decision to abandon its signature zero-COVID policy.

For residents like pharmacist Mariana Soares, the reopening capped off nearly three years of anxiety and economic doldrums - but it also came with a sense of whiplash.

"It's a shock to the system," she told AFP.

"Suddenly everyone is coming in and it's like whatever happened before had been erased."

Dance studio owner Kam Pang said he was closing his business after two 'mentally draining' years, adding that he lost up to US\$25,000 when the government ordered businesses to close.

"We couldn't do business because all of a sudden we were in lockdown for half a month," he said.

Eager to make the virus a memory, Macau officials have doubled down on new



It was a major signal to society that even as we return to normality, we can't use the old ways to make a fortune anymore

SULU SOU

year celebrations with the hopes that the economic momentum can be sustained.

High-end hotels were fully booked during the festive period and officials said weekend visitor arrivals have recovered to around half of pre-pandemic levels.

Mass-market gaming revenue should be up to 55 percent of pre-pandemic levels by the end of the year, and 85 percent in 2024, according to Credit Suisse analysts.

Soares told AFP the pandemic changed how she saw her home city and that she would consider leaving for better economic opportunities.

"Macau will bounce back, I just don't know whether it would go back to its glory days," she said.

Pang said he believed Macau was 'slowly establishing new ways of surviving'.

"The question is whether people would like to come to Macau not to gamble but for other things."

AFP

Nando's logo and two bottles of Nando's PERinaise (Mild and Hot) with a 'new' starburst. Text: 'Move over mayo! PERinaise has arrived!'. Distributed by CATERING SOLUTIONS TRADING LLC. Please contact +968 22060236/237.

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