



Decrees allot land for renewables, appoint judges

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued two Royal Decrees on Thursday reading as follows:

Royal Decree No 10/2023 stipulates the allocation of land plots for the purposes of renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects.

Article 1 states that state-owned land plots specified in the plenary layout /chart attached to this decree will be allocated for the purposes of renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects.

Article 2 states that no rights over the land stipulated in **Article (1)** of this decree may be granted or exploited by the government departments concerned in any way, except with prior written approval of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Article 3 stipulates that 'the granting of usufruct right for the land stated in **Article (1)** of this decree' to Oman Hydrogen Company will be based on the request of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals. The application to do so will specify the land subject to usufruct, in accordance with legally prescribed procedures.

Article 4 states that Oman

Hydrogen Company may divide the usufruct land granted to it, and then sign contracts with third parties to use these segmented plots of land for the purposes of renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects by floating an open bidding/tender subject to the principles of declaration, equal opportunities, equality and freedom of competition.

Article 5 states that the Minister of Energy and Minerals may, within 30 days from the date of issue of this decree, endorse signed projects that were dedicated to renewable energy and clean hydrogen, without having to float a bid as stipulated in **Article (4)** of this decree.

Article 6 states that the Minister of Energy and Minerals will issue the principles and determinants for practising activities related to renewable energy and clean hydrogen projects.

Article 7 cancels all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article 8 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Continued on [Page 03](#)

Oman ranks 4th in UN list for e-govt services

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman is ranked fourth in the 2022 Government Electronic and Mobile Services (GEMS) Maturity Index issued by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

The index measures the maturity of government services provided through electronic portals and smart applications according to three pillars, which are service availability and development, service use and satisfaction, and the government's efforts to public outreach.

Of the 18 Arab countries that participated in the 2022 index, Saudi Arabia was ranked first, followed by Qatar and the UAE.

Oman improved its year-on-year score from 64 per cent to 69, a growth of 7.8 per cent, and its ranking by one place, compared to fifth in 2021, through better performance in two pillars.

The first is the use of the service and user satisfaction, from 46.35 per cent in 2021 to 58.08 per cent in 2022, and second in the public outreach pillar, from 67.70 per cent in 2021 to 72.14 per cent in 2022.



There is need to promote the maturity of these services at the national level by keeping pace with the use of new digital technologies such as virtual reality

NAWAR AL AWA

A total of 24 institutions were included in the evaluation in Oman, along with 84 services across several sectors, such as commerce and industry, health, education, transport, traffic, po-

lice, tourism, municipal affairs, labour and justice.

According to ESCWA, the index is a tool that enables decision and policy makers to monitor digital transformation

programmes, and it seeks to bridge the gap in most of the international indicators, related to service maturity, its use, user satisfaction, and public outreach.

'To this end, 84 government services have been identified, and it is necessary for each country to deliver them electronically for individuals and businesses.'

Reliance on e-government services has generally increased in the Arab region compared to 2021, especially in educational

and financial institutions, but more efforts must be exerted to digitise services in other sectors such as justice and tourism. These are the key findings of the fourth edition of the GEMS index on the Arab region issued annually by ESCWA since 2019.

Nawar al Awa, ESCWA GEMS project lead, said that there is need to promote the maturity of these services at the national level, even in high-assessment states, by keeping pace with the use of new digital technologies such as virtual reality.

He also highlighted the importance of cooperation and shared experiences among countries in order to avoid duplication of effort, particularly since the report indicates that there is a widening gap between Arab countries, causing results to range between one and 87 per cent.

In addition, the report highlights the role of digital government services in increasing efficiency, reducing waste and corruption, promoting transparency, providing accountability and achieving economic growth. It also mentions the key role of digital governments in promoting equality among citizens.

SIX-DAY AL BASHAYER FESTIVAL CONCLUDES



Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs and Special Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, presided over the final race of the six-day annual Al Bashayer Festival for camel racing in Adam, Dakhliyah, on Saturday. The most prestigious prize - Golden Sword - went to Al Asimah owned by Hijan al Bashayer (ONA)

Israeli strike kills 15 in Damascus

Beirut, Lebanon - An Israeli air strike on Damascus killed 15 people early on Sunday and badly damaged a building in a district housing state security agencies, a war monitor said.

Civilians, including two women, were among those killed in "the deadliest Israeli attack in Damascus" since the civil war began, said Rami Rahman of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The overnight strike cratered a road and wrecked the adjacent ten-storey building in the Kafr Sousa district, which is home to senior state officials and Syrian intelligence headquarters, said the Britain-based observatory.

A woman was also killed in the Mazraa district, possibly hit when Syrian anti-aircraft munitions crashed down, it added.

It was not immediately clear

who was the intended target of the strike, which shook Damascus and left a gaping hole in the street.

Other missiles overnight hit a warehouse used by pro-regime Iranian and Hezbollah fighters near Damascus, said the observatory, which relies on a wide network of sources inside Syria.

AFP

See also [Page 09](#)

4.1-magnitude earthquake in Duqm, no damages

Our Correspondent
Muscat

People in Duqm woke up to light tremors as Al Wusta experienced a 4.1-magnitude earthquake on Sunday morning. Royal Oman Police (ROP) confirmed that no cases of injury or damage to property were reported.

The Earthquake Monitoring

Centre (EMC) at Sultan Qaboos University reported that a 4.1-magnitude earthquake struck on Sunday morning at 7.55am in the Al Haqf area of Al Wusta.

'It was mild and had no effects. It occurred at a depth of 16.3km.'

Dr Issa al Hussein, Director of EMC, told ONA that tremors of light classification are usually not followed by aftershocks.

04



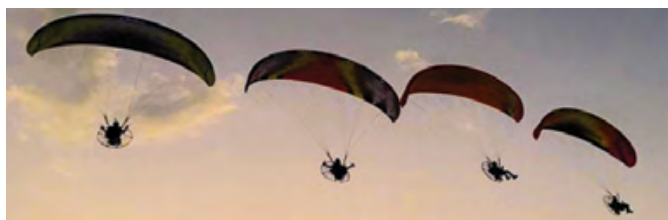
Abraj Energy IPO opens for subscription

Pact inked to facilitate paragliding activities

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Oman Committee for Air Sports, under the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Youth, signed a cooperation agreement with the Association of Paragliding Pilots and Instructors (APPI), a non-profit organisation based in Switzerland, last week.

Under the agreement, APPI will support and provide the relevant training, courses, licences and draft the paragliding rules and regulations to be applied in the sultanate. It will also support pilots by conducting workshops and training courses.



Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Dr Ahmed bin Saeed al Jahuri, Chairman of Oman Committee of Air Sports, said it is working to draft rules for the sport in the sultanate and set up local and global collaborations.

"This agreement is one of the most important achievements for us, and we hope that it will serve the sport of paragliding

through application of international legislation and regulations."

The committee is working to facilitate all procedures related to obtaining permits and to enable the sport to grow in the sultanate.

Shahin Fallah, Master Instructor at APPI, said that the agreement is a big step forward

for air sports in the sultanate. "Implementation of the APPI education system in the country will help Omani pilots progress to advance professional levels safely. We are going to plan the required courses and workshops in Oman as soon as possible to help pilots and instructors reach an acceptable level of knowledge, techniques and experience with the most updated methods," said Fallah.

"Our goal is to train professional tandem pilots and instructors and help the air sports community grow fast and safely."

INVITATION TO TENDER



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

Tender No. : RFP-2000000359

Tender Title : Provision of IT Cybersecurity Consultant Services

Scope : Sohar Aluminium requires a fulltime onsite external service provider to lead the development and implementation of a comprehensive Cyber Security program for the Operation Technology (OT) & Information Technology (IT) domains ensuring that valuable data assets are properly protected, and cyber risks are addressed as per best standards to support SA strategic objectives.

Start Date for Issuing Tender Documents
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Last Date for Applying Tender Documents
26 February 2023

Last Date for Tender Submission
14 March 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>

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic took a significant toll. New estimates by the World Health Organization show that the death toll associated directly or indirectly with the pandemic between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2021 was approximately 14.9mn.

The pandemic also impacted businesses in various ways, such as increasing operation costs, impacting sales and labour-related challenges including paying salaries and retrenchment.

What has Oman learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and what can be done to avoid health crises in the future? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said



Yusuf Khan
Senior manager

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us a completely different way of living life. If what we learnt and practised then (masking, hand sanitation, social distancing etc) continue

to be followed now in daily life, then no pandemic can affect us. Think healthy, act healthy and stay healthy is what we learnt.

Salim al Kindi
Businessman

Oman took some excellent steps during the

COVID-19 crisis. Though we felt at the time that the measures were harsh, now I feel they were appropriate and kept matters in control. One such step was the strict use of masks, failure of which was punishable with a fine. I think the best way to prevent any kind of health crisis is to have regular health checks and regular booster vaccines. People

must be given vaccines from time to time (maybe once every two years) to develop immunity.

Mohammad al Balushi
Private sector employee

There are a few things we learnt from the pandemic, one of which is that one must maintain personal hygiene. One must take very good care of health and eat healthy food. Life is so uncertain. The best way to avoid any health crisis is to eat homemade food and stay away from people with any contagious ailment.

Vinod Khanna
Sales executive

The best lesson that every country, including Oman, learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic is that of crowd control. I think this was the part most people ignored earlier as we never ever faced such a crisis. Also, to avoid any kind of health crisis we must make sure to have regular physical check-ups. If there's an outbreak of a pandemic ever again, the first step is to stop people from travelling.

Ahmed al Hinai
Tour operator

The lesson that Oman learnt was the urgent need for more ICU units in the country, which is common for other countries too. From the health perspective, I think that we must follow basic health hygiene and never take even minor ailments lightly. We saw how a small cold can turn to be so dangerous. We must never ever ignore any health related issues.

? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

A new Social Protection Draft Law has been approved. What more can be done to make the law all-inclusive to cover all segments of society?

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

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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21-year-old Indian on 15,000km ride to spread message of peace

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An Indian cyclist on a mission to cover 15,000km through several Arab countries over two continents stopped by to explore Oman's breathtaking scenery and spread the message of peace.

Hazif Ahmad Sabith (21) plans to cycle to the sacred Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina and visit the tomb of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), after which he will go to Egypt's Al Azhar University, renowned for Islamic learning, for higher studies.

Sabith was in Oman for a couple of days following which he left for the UAE. He started the journey mid-January from Kanyakumari in the Southern tip of India setting out for Mumbai from where he flew to Oman.

Sabith aims to end his 15,000km ride in 200 days.

During his visit to Oman, he visited several landmarks of Muscat and also travelled to Nizwa and Sur.



Speaking to Muscat Daily, he said, "People are very hospitable in Oman. They don't know me, yet they were kind and ready to

help with anything."

The cycle adventure will take Sabith through UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Is-

rael, besides Oman, before reaching Egypt.

"It has been a long-time dream to go to Cairo's Al Azhar University for higher education and cycle all the way to Medina to visit the holy tomb of the Prophet."

Throughout the journey, Sabith aims to convey the word of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), and study and record the local traditions of every country. "I have always been excited and thrilled about learning the culture of different countries. I am amazed to see the diversity of India and I am sure I am going to witness more diversity on this trip," he said.

Sabith, who has earned respect for his speeches on Islam and life in general, will document his trip in his YouTube channel called 'sabi inspires'. It currently has 140,000 subscribers. His feats are also recorded in India Book of Records, Asia Book of Records and Kalams World Records.

Tracking devices help find rich haul of meteorites

Muscat - Oman's Meteorite Monitoring Project, with its tracking devices installed across locations in the desert, is paying rich dividends in terms of generating precise data on meteorite fall in the country.

Thanks to the project, important landings are immediately detected and documented, and meteorites recovered for research.

Hussein bin Ali al Ghafri, Director of Heritage Department in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said, "The ministry has documented several meteorites through its Meteorite Monitoring Project in cooperation with the Natural History Museum of Bern, Switzerland, and technical support provided by Curtin University of Australia. The tracking devices have started generating precise data on meteorite fall in Oman."



(Supplied photos)

He added that following analysis of the data, the monitoring devices are able to accurately determine the exact location of these meteorites as they cross the airspace. "The ministry has worked for nearly 23 years on a programme to document meteorites landing in Oman."

Ghafri informed that the ministry has succeeded in documenting more than 7,000

meteorites so far. The devices used are the first of their kind not just in Oman but the Middle East and powered by renewable energy and can be installed almost anywhere.

A number of national cadres have been trained for the Meteorite Monitoring Project.

Oman is known for its large meteorite collection and the possibility of several thousands lying exposed in deserts across the country.



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Dr. Karthik
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Specialist Orthodontist.
91105912

MOH No: 44/2023

Festival to put spotlight on unique tourism experiences of Dakhliyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dakhliyah Festival 2023 will be held from February 23 to March 4 at the archaeological site of Salut in Bahla.

An official at Dakhliyah Governor's Office said, "The festival aims to support small and medium enterprises and introduce visitors to the cultural and historical heritage and tourist destinations in the governorate. It will contribute to increasing tourism and economic returns."

About the activities of the festival, Haitham Mohammed al Ghassani, Director General of Tourism Promotion at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, said, "The festival will include a number of cultural, heritage, entertainment and adventure activities and programmes, as well as showcasing many tourism experiences that are unique to the governorate."

He added that Nizwa Fort will



(Supplied photo)

host cultural and theatre shows and various competitions, while the wilayat of Bahla will witness the opening of Bisya and Salut Archaeological Visitors Centre

with many accompanying events.

According to Ghassani, there will also be a tour of antique cars in Al Hamra, passing through

farms, aflaj and historical monuments. "The tour will help visitors know about the neighbourhood, experience rural life, and enjoy the beautiful farms and palm

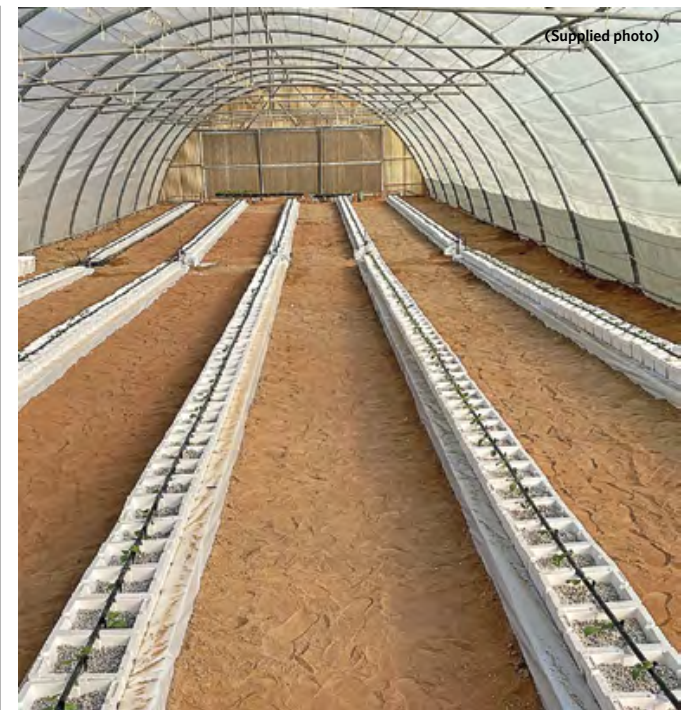
The antique cars tour will help visitors know about Al Hamra, experience rural life and enjoy the beautiful countryside

HAITHAM AL GHASSANI

plantations in the countryside. The ministry will also organise events and activities related to astronomy in Jabal Shams."

The festival will include paragliding shows in Manah Public Park and various other activities in Bahjat Sumail Park and Izki Public Park.

A mountain race will be held in Al Ain and Al Sawad, traditional equestrian sports (al ardah) and a tent pegging competition in Adam, while a poetry evening and a camel show will be held in Bidbid.



(Supplied photo)

6,200 acres of land allocated to boost agri sector in Buraimi

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In order to achieve sustainability in agriculture and self-sufficiency in food, Buraimi has allocated more than 6,000 acres of land for cultivation of various crops.

An official at Buraimi Governor's Office said, "The governorate has designated 6,200 acres for agricultural activities. Of the total, 3,500 acres are in the niyabat of Al Rawdah, 700 acres in the wilayat of Mahdah, and 2,000 acres in the wilayat of Al Sunainah."

He informed that Buraimi has good reserves of groundwater and land suitable for agriculture. "The initiative aims to enhance food security in the governorate by supporting farmers to cultivate various crops."

In the governorate's efforts to set up various projects, 19 tenders have been offered for development and implementation.

The governorate has also invited bids for a consultancy study on the establishment of an entertainment centre in the wilayat of Buraimi, development of a gate at the entrance of the governorate, and development of Falaj Buraimi and Mahdah Oasis.

Tenders have also been announced to construct a walkway in the Al Rawdah area in the wilayat of Mahdah, playgrounds in Al Hail in the wilayat of Buraimi and one in the Al Khadraa area of the wilayat of Mahdah, and development of a municipal park with a cycle track also in the wilayat of Buraimi.

The developments are being under taken under the Governorate Development Programme for which His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik raised the amount from RO10mn to RO20mn for each governorate for the current Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), starting from 2022.

Municipality calls for cleanliness in public places

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has called on citizens and residents reminding them of their civic duty to preserve and protect public places.

In a statement, it said, 'Muscat Municipality urges all citizens and residents to abide by the law and preserve public places such as parks and beaches, and to ensure safety in residential neighbourhoods.'

The municipality also called on



(Supplied photos)

everyone - officials of institutions and civil society and also individuals - to cooperate in the safe disposal of waste in order to preserve the environment and the health and safety of community members

Warning against littering, the municipality confirmed that it is forbidden by law and punishable with a fine of up to RO100.

'Cleanliness of Muscat and preservation of tourist facilities and sites are the responsibility of everyone,' the civic body stated.

CPA recovers over RO1.5mn for consumers in Muscat in 2022

Muscat - The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) in Muscat recovered over RO1.5mn for consumers in 2022.

According to statistics released by the Muscat Consumer Protection Department, this amount was recovered from several sectors.

A statement issued by CPA said, 'The number of consumer complaints in Muscat was 15,051, of which 92.5 per cent

were resolved.'

CPA stated that the amount was recovered within the framework of the authority's keenness to safeguard the rights of consumers in the event of breach of their rights as stipulated in the Consumer Protection Law and its executive regulations.

The authority called on all to cooperate to create a safe market that reassures and satisfies consumers.

H M issues two Royal Decrees

Continued from Page 01

Royal Decree No 11/2023 appoints judges to the Supreme Court.

Article 1 appoints judges - named in the list attached to this decree - to the Supreme Court. **Article 2** states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

The judges appointed to the Supreme Court are: Dr Majid al Hajri, Suleiman al Na'ebi,

Badr al Rashdi, Ahmed al Kharousi, Abdullah al Hinai, Dr Hassan al Riyami, Hamoud al Rashdi, Dr Mohammed al Maawali, Sultan al Rashdi, Khamis al Ghafri, Issa al Shabibi, Hamad al Toobi, Abdulrahman al Kamali, Saleh al Sarmi, Dr Thani al Amri, Yahya al Busaidi, Ibrahim al Thani, Ahmed al Jabri, Mohammed al Nahdi, Dr Mohammed al Saadi, and Abdullah al Nuomani.

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Abraj Energy IPO opens for subscription

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The initial public offering (IPO) of Abraj Energy Services, a subsidiary of Oman's global integrated energy group OQ, opens today for the public subscription.

The subscription for the first category (large and institutional investors) runs from February 20 until March 2, 2023, whereas the subscription for the second category (retail investors) runs from February 20 until March 1, 2023.

The Abraj Energy Services IPO is part of Oman Investment Authority's (OIA) divestment plan to exit some government investments to provide opportunities for Omani and foreign investors to achieve the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. This step aims to promote the private sector's participation in various economic sectors at the national level. The IPO will enhance the sultanate's economic diversification policies and attract investors from Oman and abroad.

By virtue of the IPO, 49 per cent of the issued share capital of

Abraj Energy Services intends to pay dividends amounting to 85% of its profits generated during the financial year ended December 31, 2022



Abraj Energy Services (i.e., 377,398,000 shares) will be put for sale. The selling shareholders will maintain their right to adjust the IPO size at any time before the end of the subscription period, OQ said in a press statement.

Abraj Energy Services has put

49 per cent of its shares for sale in the IPO after obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals from the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

The shares will be offered in two parallel categories. The first category will be allocated to major investors and will account

for 85 per cent maximum of the total public offering. It will be directed to major and corporate investors in Oman and international investors. The subscription price in the first category will be set within the range of 242bz to 249bz per share.

The second category of

shares will be offered for small investors and will account for no less than 15 per cent of the total public offering. It is allocated to individual investors in the sultanate. The shares of this second category will be offered at a maximum discounted price of 224bz per share, calculated at a maxi-

Abraj to organise IPO roadshows

Muscat – Abraj Energy Services will organise five roadshows and information sessions about its initial public offering (IPO) during February 20-26, 2023 in collaboration with the Capital Market Authority (CMA) and Oman Chamber for Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

The roadshows will be organised in different governorates of the sultanate, aiming to educate investors, citizens and residents about the offering and investment opportunity.

The first information session will be conducted on February 20 at the OCCI branch in Sur in the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah, while the

OCCI branch in Sohar will host the second session in the Governorate of North Al Batinah on February 21.

In cooperation with the CMA, the company will organise an expanded information session on February 22 to educate investors and brokers about the IPO. Another information session will be held in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah.

The OCCI branch in Nizwa will host the session on February 23, while the OCCI branch in the Governorate of Dhofar will host the fifth information session on February 26 at Directorate General of Heritage and Tourism in Salalah. ONA

OQIC, Vision Insurance announce merger

Muscat – Oman Qatar Insurance Company (OQIC) and Vision Insurance Company have announced a landmark merger that promises to deliver exceptional results and quality insurance solutions for Omani market and people.

"The merger is a direct reflection of Oman's empowered private sector, driving a globally competitive national economy", OQIC said in a press release.

OQIC – which has been operating in the Omani market for more than a decade – is a subsidiary of the Doha-based Qatar Insurance Company (QIC), a market leader in the wider MENA region holding more than 50 per cent stake in OQIC.

Salem al Mannai, QIC Group CEO, said, "QIC has continually developed its local, regional and global footprint to cover insurance solutions and services in a diverse array of industry sectors. We believe that within the context of Oman's political, social



Hasan Yaseen al Lawati



Salem al Mannai

Following the merger, authorised capital of OQIC increased from RO20mn to RO30mn and issued capital from RO10mn to around RO22mn

and economic stability, good governance and favourable outlook for growth in the insurance sector, this merger is viewed as a key growth opportunity for

OQIC and expands QIC's footprint in the profitable direct-line insurance market within the GCC region."

Hasan Yaseen al Lawati, chief

executive officer of OQIC, said, "Our merger with Vision Insurance, where OQIC is the surviving entity, is another significant milestone in our company's journey towards continuous success. The merger will bring synergies across multiple functions. We welcome skilled and talented workforce of the merging entity into OQIC family and our assets base will increase significantly. The wider branch network across the sultanate will facilitate customer experience and boost revenues."

Lawati noted that this merger transaction will position OQIC among the leaders in Oman in terms of gross written premium.

"The merger reflects our ongoing commitment to our motto, which is 'brilliance, excellence and success'. It represents OQIC's continued growth as a prosperous and profitable company, which ultimately supports Oman's march towards a globally competitive, modern and ad-

vanced future," he said.

"This endeavour was a key growth opportunity for OQIC. It means more prosperity, more profitability and a more progressive Oman. Also, let's not forget that this merger brings about a unified company, leveraging a greater market share in the sultanate," Lawati added.

Following the merger, the authorised capital of OQIC increased from RO20mn to RO30mn and the issued capital from RO10mn to around RO22mn. This decision was taken at the company's extraordinary general meeting.

According to OQIC, the merger broadly reflects OQIC's alignment with national goals set out in Oman Vision 2040, which foresees an empowered private sector driving a national economy that is competitive and aligned with the global economy.

OQIC is engaged in the business of life, medical and general insurance in the sultanate.

Oil prices drop more than 4% last week

Muscat – Oil prices decreased nearly 4 per cent in the week ending February 17 amid soaring inflation sentiment in the US and weak demand projections after a larger-than-expected build in inventories.

Brent crude was trading at US\$82.83 per barrel at 11:47 GMT on Friday, posting a 4.3 per cent fall from the last Monday session that opened at US\$86.51 a barrel.

The US benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) registered at US\$76.22 per barrel at the same time on Friday, decreasing 4 per cent relative to the opening price of US\$79.35 a barrel on Monday. Prices began the week on a negative note ahead of the re-

lease of US inflation data, as markets focused on macroeconomic data, especially the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and statements from US Federal Reserve (Fed) officials.

Sentiments over soaring inflation raised oil demand concerns, causing a fall in prices.

US President Joe Biden's announcement of a plan on Monday to release oil from the country's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR), the world's largest supply of emergency crude oil, also put oil prices under pressure.

The plan includes the sale of 26mn barrels, which are set to be delivered to the market from April 1 to June 30.

Agencies



ChatGPT sparks Artificial Intelligence 'gold rush' in Silicon Valley

New York, US – ChatGPT, Silicon Valley's latest app sensation, has investors rushing to find the next big thing in generative AI, the technology that some hail as the beginning of a new era in big tech.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been increasingly present in everyday life for decades, but the November launch of the conversational robot from start-up OpenAI marked a turning point in its perception by the general public and investors.

"Every so often we have platforms that come along and result in an explosion of new companies. We saw this with the internet and mobile, and AI could be the next platform," said Shernaz Daver of California-based Khosla Ventures.

Generative AI, of which ChatGPT is an example, wades through oceans of data to conjure up original content – an

image, a poem, a thousand-word essay – in seconds and upon a simple request.

Since its discrete release in late November, ChatGPT has become one of the fastest growing apps ever and pushed Microsoft and Google to rush out projects that had until now stayed carefully guarded over fears that the technology wasn't yet ready for the public.

"Just five days after its release, a million people used ChatGPT – about 60 times faster than it took Facebook to reach one million users," said Wayne Hu, a partner at SignalFire, another venture capital firm..

"Suddenly investors are all talking about how ChatGPT might eliminate millions of knowledge worker jobs, disrupt trillion-dollar industries, and fundamentally change the way we learn, consume, and make decisions," he said.



The explosion of generative AI comes at an otherwise morose time for the tech sector, with tens of thousands of layoffs cascading through the world's biggest companies as well as smaller ones that are struggling for survival.

"While other categories are facing a contraction in valuations and raising capital, generative AI companies are not," said Daver.

Hu said that the market valuations for generative AI compa-

nies have been sky high, while they have contracted for everything else.

'Hard to keep up'

OpenAI, the ChatGPT creator, is valued by Microsoft at nearly US\$30bn despite still burning through money at a high speed, he said.

Entrepreneurs specializing in generative AI say they no longer need to scream out for attention when hunting for cash or walk

OpenAI, the ChatGPT creator, is valued by Microsoft at nearly \$30bn despite still burning through money at a high speed

through the details of what they are trying to offer.

"It's helped us a lot," said Sarah Nagy, founder of Seek AI, a start-up that allows nonspecialists to extract technical data from a database using queries in everyday language.

"Before ChatGPT... I had to explain what generative AI is, and why it matters," she added.

Now the appetite for ChatGPT-like capabilities is seemingly limitless, and not only from

investors.

"The demand from customers has increased a lot," said Nagy. "It's even hard to keep up, because we're still a small company."

The entrepreneur wants to grow her team and, according to Daver, while the trend is to downsize, "we are currently hiring" in generative AI.

In the last few weeks, it is mainly the giants that have been in the news, first and foremost Microsoft, OpenAI's partner and investor, followed by Google, which is trying to keep up. But in their shadow, a galaxy of start-ups have ideas on offer too.

Other recent examples of funding rounds include California-based Kognitos, which aims to automate administrative tasks, and the platform for designers Poly that can whip out 3D graphics or maps in seconds.

In addition to the usual venture capitalists, tech giants are on the lookout, like Google, which just invested US\$300mn to acquire 10 per cent of newcomer Anthropic and its chatbot Claude.

Hu said the ChatGPT "gold rush" could be unprecedented and expand well beyond Generative AI because the very technology itself minimizes the need for a computer coder or designer to execute ideas.

"Now you no longer need to get a Stanford PhD in computer science: any developer can build something amazing on top of ChatGPT and other foundation models in one weekend."

"This wave of AI could be bigger than mobile or the cloud, and more on the scale of something like the Industrial Revolution that changed the course of human history," Hu said.

AFP

ECB will raise rates again in March: Lagarde

Brussels, Belgium – European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde reiterated that the institution plans to raise its interest rates by a half percentage point even as the eurozone's economic outlook improves.

Data released on Monday showed the 20-nation currency bloc dodged a recession at the end of last year by posting weak-but-positive growth of 0.1 per cent, while inflation has been easing - even if it remains at a high 8.5 per cent.

"In view of the underlying inflation pressures we intend to raise interest rates by another 50 basis points at our next meeting in March," Lagarde told lawmakers at the European Parliament.

She added it would then evaluate the subsequent path for monetary policy, reiterating the message the bank delivered after hiking rates by a half percentage point on February 2.

The ECB will publish updated



Christine Lagarde

If ECB goes through with half-point hike in rates, it would be its sixth increase since July for a total increase of 3.5 percentage points

economic forecasts at its March meeting, which will help it formulate the course for monetary policy.

If the central bank goes through with the half-point hike in interest rates, it would be its sixth increase since July for a total increase of 3.5 percentage points.

The rates are approaching the point where analysts consider them restrictive, or high enough where they slow consumption and investment, which in turn reduces pressure on prices.

"Keeping interest rates at restrictive levels will, over time, reduce inflation by dampening demand and will also guard against the risk of a persistent upward shift in inflation expectations," said Lagarde.

Policy rate decisions would be data-dependent and follow a meeting-by-meeting approach after March, she added.

AFP

Putin warns of efforts to 'hinder' Gazprom's work

Moscow, Russia – President Vladimir Putin lashed out Friday against "direct attempts" to hinder work of Russian gas giant Gazprom, at the centre of deteriorating ties between Moscow and Europe over the Ukraine conflict.

European countries were heavily reliant on the company for natural gas supplies but have since raced for other sources after Russia dispatched troops to Ukraine.

Speaking during an event celebrating the company's 30-year anniversary, Putin commended its "efficiency and sustainability".

"Despite - frankly speaking - unfair competition and direct attempts from the outside to hinder and restrain its development, Gazprom is moving forward and launching new projects," Putin told a group of Gazprom employees via video link.

Moscow announced earlier this week that its gas exports were down 25 per cent year-on-year in 2022, blaming European



Russian President Vladimir Putin

countries for the sharp fall off.

In response to Russia's intervention, Germany scrapped the approval for the recently completed Nord Stream 2 pipeline which would have deepened European reliance on Russian gas supplies.

Moscow said that instead gas supplies to China last year had doubled compared to the previous year and that it hopes to further increase deliveries after losing its share in the European market.

AFP



Tesla 'recalls' 360,000 vehicles to fix software

New York, US – Tesla is recalling nearly 363,000 electric vehicles because of problems with their driver-assistance technology that heighten crash risk, according to a US regulatory announcement seen by AFP Thursday.

The recall affects a range of Model S, Model X, Model 3 and Model Y Tesla autos from between 2016 and 2023, equipped with "Full Self-Driving Beta" technology, said a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration notice.

To remedy the problem, Tesla will release a software update that can be implemented remotely.

Problems with Tesla's FSD Beta system mean cars could undertake maneuvers that "could potentially infringe upon local traffic laws or customs, which could increase the risk of a collision if the driver does not intervene," said an NHTSA notice.

The driver-assistance system "may allow the vehicle to act unsafe around intersections" by not coming to a complete stop at a stop sign, traveling straight in a

turn-only lane or running an orange light, NHTSA said in a letter to Tesla.

The system also "may respond insufficiently to changes in posted speed limits," the NHTSA letter said.

Tesla shares fell around five percent following the announcement.

The company's Chief Executive Elon Musk downplayed the setback on Twitter, agreeing with a user who said the term "recall" should not be used for problems that can be addressed without significant repair. "The word 'recall' for an over-the-air software update is anachronistic and just flat wrong!" Musk wrote.

The action comes as US regulators investigate Tesla's driver assistance programs on a number of fronts.

Last month, Tesla disclosed that the Department of Justice opened an investigation into its driver-assistance program. That is on top of an ongoing NHTSA review of Tesla's "Autopilot" following several safety incidents.

AFP



A'Sharqiya Investments Holding Co. (SAOG)

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Chairman's Report

Dear Shareholders,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Annual General Meeting of your company. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to present before you the Annual Report for the year 2022 along with the audited consolidated financial statements of A'Sharqiya Investment Holding Co. (SAOG) and its subsidiary, Qalhah Real Estate Investments & Services LLC (QREIS).

Investment Environment 2022

The World Economy is estimated to have grown by 3.4% in 2022 after an increase of 6.0% in 2021. The global fight against inflation, Russia's war in Ukraine, and a resurgence of COVID-19 in China weighed on global economic activity in 2022. Global inflation is estimated to have reached 8.8% in 2022 from 4.7% in 2021. Despite these headwinds, real GDP was surprisingly strong in the third quarter of 2022 in numerous economies, including the United States, the euro area, and major emerging market and developing economies due to stronger than expected private consumption and fiscal support. In the fourth quarter of 2022, however, this uptick is estimated to have faded in most—though not all—major economies.

Oman's real GDP grew by 4.5 per cent in the first nine months of 2022 and Brent crude averaged USD 103.71 per barrel in the first 10 months of 2022. Key rating agencies upgraded the Country's credit rating and revised their outlook upward as a result of ongoing fiscal consolidations and higher oil prices. It is expected that Oman will be able to further improve its credit ratings and outlook through the implementation of its fiscal consolidation plan. The credit rating agencies stressed the importance of continuing with fiscal consolidation measures to overcome any adverse impact on financial and economic stability due to likely reversal in the high oil price environment. It should be noted that the Brent crude price closed at USD 85.91/ barrel for the year after reaching a high of USD 127.98/ barrel in early March 2022.

The financial markets across asset classes had a difficult year in 2022 driven by increasing interest rates affecting asset valuations, though the effect of higher interest rates on earnings growth was not fully reflected in 2022. S & P 500 declined 18.9% for the year 2022, while the S & P Global Developed Aggregate Ex-Collateralized bond index posted a negative return of 16.69% in 2022.

2022 witnessed improved operating performance of certain key holdings due to the recovery from the pandemic and removal of restrictions related to Covid-19 and the regional economic strength due to higher oil price. The Company is constantly aiming to increase focus towards sectors in a structural growth trend like education etc. We expect the operating performance of certain key holdings to further improve in 2023 due to complete reopening in geographies that they operate.

The investment strategy of your company is to generate long-term shareholders wealth by identifying investment opportunities that generate attractive sustainable long-term returns. Such a strategy entails a vision that looks beyond the short-term volatilities in the market. The Company also allocates a portion of its capital to investment opportunities that look attractive in the medium-term. Selection of these opportunities is dictated by market conditions and other macroeconomic factors impacting the investment environment. This opportunistic allocation is a strategy to minimize the negative impact of volatilities in the market on our overall portfolio. The portfolio holdings are continuously reviewed to ensure the operational performance and progress of key milestones by the portfolio companies are on track with our long-term forecasts.

Performance for the year

In line with the investment environment, your company is constantly monitoring and continues to take significant efforts to stay focused on adding value to its investee companies with a long term perspective and to take advantage of attractive new investment opportunities.

For the full year ended December 31, 2022, your company generated an Operating Income of RO 1,166,950 as compared to RO 1,150,150 during the previous year 2021 reflecting an increase of 1.46%. The profit after tax arising from the company's operations during this period was RO 486,185 as compared to RO 530,660 during the previous year 2021, reflecting a decrease of 8.38%.

The net change in the fair value of the company's investment portfolio under the FVOCI was a negative RO 113,845 for the year 2022 as compared to an increase of RO 1,382,729 for the year 2021. The total comprehensive income for the year 2022 is RO 372,340 as compared to an income of RO 1,913,389 in 2021. The substantial drop is primarily driven by overall market performance in comparison to the previous two years and also on account of exits in certain holdings.

Despite the drop in fair value, the company with its long term perspective is firm in its belief that the investments will yield long term growth and returns based on each company's underlying fundamentals. The long term relationship with OLNQ through its association with its Subsidiary Qalhah Real Estate investment continues to be strong and the company looks forward to continued association in the years to come which will be mutually beneficial to both.

The total assets of the company is RO 18,704,326 at the end of the year as compared to RO 18,658,938 at the end of 2021. The company's Shareholder Funds increased by 0.17% to RO 14,803,573 at the end of 2022 compared to RO 14,778,235 at the end of 2021. The book value of the company's equity share remained the same at 164 Baizas per share on December 31, 2022.

Outlook for 2023

The global GDP is projected to grow 2.9% in 2023 and 3.1% in 2024 as per the IMF's World Economic Outlook (WEO) Update in January 2023. The IMF forecasts Oman's GDP to have grown 4.4% in 2022 and forecasts it to increase by 4.1% in 2023.

The Sultanate's budget for 2023 estimates total revenues at OMR 10.1 billion, a reduction of 5% compared to 2022 budget. The overall public spending is estimated at RO 11.4 billion leading to a fiscal deficit target of RO 1.3 billion. development expenditure is estimated at RO 900 million, the same level budgeted for 2022, while the actual development expenditure for 2022 was RO 1.1 billion. 70% of the 2023 budget deficit is expected to be covered by external and domestic borrowing while the remaining 30% will be covered by drawing on the reserves.

The Sultanate's general budget 2023 allocated 4.3 billion of the total current spending on basic services, which will be distributed as follows: 44% on education, 22% on social welfare, 22% on health and 12% on housing.

The FY 2023 Oman budget represents the third year of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025). It takes into account Oman Vision 2040 priorities and fiscal framework and objectives to achieve fiscal sustainability, and reduce the ratio of the size of public debt to GDP.

The 2023 Budget framework aims at achieving a set of objectives and priorities, notably fiscal sustainability, control inflation, a diversified economy, improve Oman's Credit Rating, digital transformation etc. These initiatives are expected to bode well for the economy in the long-term.

The outlook for our investee companies is due to the return to normalcy in economic and social activities. The Company will continue to support its investee companies in the local market with a long-term view, and focus on opportunities in other markets to achieve effective diversification of the portfolio.

Corporate Governance

I am pleased to confirm that the company is fully committed to the Capital Market Authority's Code of Corporate Governance for Public Listed Companies. The Board of Directors has established a fully empowered Audit Committee which is effectively performing its role in accordance with the aforementioned Code. A report on Corporate Governance and a Management Discussion and Analysis forms part of the Annual Report. The Corporate Governance Report has been audited by the statutory auditor and forms part of the Annual Report.

Acknowledgment

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for his able leadership and for his support to the private sector for the development of the country. I also thank the shareholders for their continued support and for the confidence reposed on the company. My appreciation also goes to the company's management and staff for their contributions and commitment to the company.

Mohammed Ali Mohammed Al Fannah
Chairman

Separate and consolidated statement of financial position as at 31 December 2022

	Parent Company		Group	
	31 December 2022 RO	31 December 2021 RO	31 December 2022 RO	31 December 2021 RO
ASSETS				
Non-current assets:				
Plant and equipment	5,523	6,564	289,669	6,673
Capital work-in-progress	-	-	-	282,569
Lease receivables	-	-	4,373,168	5,036,251
Financial assets at fair value through other comprehensive income	8,977,325	9,364,698	8,977,325	9,364,698
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	95,244	119,019	95,244	119,019
Investment in a Subsidiary	250,000	250,000	-	-
Deferred tax assets	39,463	54,467	39,463	54,467
Total non-current assets	9,367,555	9,794,748	13,774,869	14,863,677
Current assets:				
Current portion of lease receivables	-	-	663,083	558,064
Prepayments and other receivables	724,238	29,016	235,973	101,526
Cash and cash equivalents	1,940,081	1,644,140	4,030,401	3,135,671
Total current assets	2,664,319	1,673,156	4,929,457	3,795,261
Total assets	12,031,874	11,467,904	18,704,326	18,658,938
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES				
Equity:				
Share capital	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000	9,000,000
Legal reserve	1,584,619	1,421,127	1,667,953	1,504,461
Fair value reserve	994,644	895,393	994,644	895,393
Retained earnings/(accumulated losses)	262,980	(648,349)	3,140,976	3,378,381
Total equity	11,842,243	10,668,171	14,803,573	14,778,235
LIABILITIES				
Non-current liabilities:				
Lease liability	-	-	3,535,193	3,551,098
Staff terminal benefits	124,586	112,867	155,074	140,701
Total non-current liabilities	124,586	112,867	3,690,267	3,691,799
Current liabilities:				
Current portion of lease liability	-	-	15,905	15,073
Other payables	36,215	44,411	112,586	105,006
Income tax payable	28,830	5,971	81,995	68,825
Amount due to a related party	-	636,484	-	-
Total current liabilities	65,045	686,866	210,486	188,904
Total liabilities	189,631	799,733	3,900,753	3,880,703
Total equity and liabilities	12,031,874	11,467,904	18,704,326	18,658,938
Net assets per share	0.132	0.119	0.164	0.164

Separate and consolidated statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2022

	Parent Company		Group	
	Year ended 31 December 2022 RO	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO	Year ended 31 December 2022 RO	Year ended 31 December 2021 RO
Income:				
Dividend income	1,917,518	457,831	467,525	457,831
Finance income on lease receivable	-	-	510,106	583,417
Realised gain on disposal of financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	-	6,203	-	6,203
Other income	123,757	75,487	189,319	102,699
	2,041,275	539,521	1,166,950	1,150,150
Expenses:				
Staff costs	(243,036)	(222,554)	(243,036)	(223,314)
Finance cost on lease liability	-	-	(185,764)	(186,552)
Unrealised loss on financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	(23,775)	(13,420)	(23,775)	(13,420)
Other finance costs	(2,093)	(845)	(2,093)	(845)
General and administrative expenses	(134,485)	(119,676)	(145,538)	(123,872)
Depreciation expense	(3,719)	(3,808)	(28,146)	(3,896)
Profit before income tax	1,634,167	179,218	538,598	598,251
Income tax credit/(expense)	752	(4,736)	(52,413)	(67,591)
Profit for the year	1,634,919	174,482	486,185	530,660
Other comprehensive (loss)/income for the year				
Items that will not be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss				
Remeasurement (loss)/gain on financial assets at FVOCI	(98,841)	1,382,729	(98,841)	1,382,729
Deferred tax on FVOCI investments	(15,004)	-	(15,004)	-
Other comprehensive (loss)/income for the year	(113,845)	1,382,729	(113,845)	1,382,729
Total comprehensive income for the year	1,521,074	1,557,211	372,340	1,913,389
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.018	0.002	0.005	0.006

Note: The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder who requests them in Arabic or English as requested, within 7 days of receipt of the request.

Mazoon Dairy participates in Gulfood 2023

Mazoon Dairy has announced its participation in the 28th edition of Gulfood 2023 - the largest F&B processing and packaging exhibition in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Many global F&B brands and entities in the food and beverage industry will attend the exhibition between February 20-24 at the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Center, a press release said.

Mazoon Dairy will take part in Gulfood for the third time since its participation in its previous edition in which it managed to introduce a variety of its distinctive products into the regional market. Mazoon Dairy's keenness to participate in this regional exhibition reflects its ongoing efforts to expand its presence in the target markets and to enhance its position as one of the largest milk and dairy product producers in the region

Ahmed al Ghafri, chief support officer, said, "Mazoon Dairy's participation in these in-

ternational exhibitions is a crucial opportunity for us to introduce our competitive high-quality products to the target manufacturers and suppliers, and to strengthen our relationships with our consumers. Thanks to this event, we will be able to engage and communicate with hundreds of customers at these markets. It is a perfect platform that attracts major global players in the food and beverage industry. In addition to sharing our experiences and deepening our relationships, this event will help us to develop new business relationships that will strengthen the Omani exports, and significantly boost the national economy."

He added, "Our annual participation also helps us to gain a clear understanding of the current market trends and the consumer needs and expectations. This underpins our ability to cope with the ongoing challenge of developing ground-breaking products, particularly in terms of quality, taste and pricing."



Saudi Broadcasting aims high for Ramadan '23

Governmental entity, Saudi Broadcasting Authority (SBA) has officially revealed its schedule of programming for Ramadan 2023.

The unveiling took place at a high-profile event held in Dubai, which was attended by several C-level executives, including Mohammed Fahad al Harthi, CEO at SBA, Bandar al Hassan, chief commercial officer at SBA, Ibrahim al Farhan, content director at SBA and Khalid al Khudair, CEO, SMC.

SBA's exclusive sales representatives - SMC - handled and executed the event. They further extended their support by inviting top agencies and partners, as well as providing full on ground assistance, a press release said.

"This is an exciting time for us," said Khudair, "and we are keen to fully assist our partners SBA, ensuring they get the required visibility during Ramadan."

Ali Makhseed wins OI DC

The Oman International Drift Championship (OIDC) concluded after its fourth and final round at the Muscat Arena.

A total of 63 drivers participated in Friday's round, with an unexpected turn of events with much-awaited battles ending in cars crashing and experiencing technical issues, a press release said. Well renowned drivers were out from the Top 16 and Top 8, losing their place on the podium early on in the competition.

Race director, Fahmi al Busaidi said, "This year's championship was very much different to the previous seasons and OAA is always looking to improve the event in many ways such as the technology used, training our marshals, altering the track to competitive levels. The international drivers we had here had commented on the difficulty of the tracks, and how it was unlike to the ones they participated in other countries."

He added, "Organising such an event is not a one-day job. We started very early in preparing for this competition, coordinating with the various departments to deliver this

championship at a professional standard."

Local driver Ahmed Al Amri who was on a winning streak in the last two rounds, was out during the Top 16, and was surpassed in points by Haitham al Hadidi in the National category.

Haitham al Hadidi said, "We have really enjoyed these past four rounds and it was just perfect. Everything went well. Many champions came from different countries and it turned out to be such a hard championship. All the winning drivers deserved it, and we are now preparing for the next season. Hope everyone enjoyed it and thanks to OAA and OI DC for such an amazing event and can't wait to see you next year."

Nasser al Harbali said, "I'm really happy and so proud of my team for making it to the Overall as it wasn't something we were thinking off. We had a goal just to get a chance to be on the podium in one of the rounds and to be here and say that I not only came first in this round but also won a place for the overall championship is a lot more than I was planning to achieve."

Winners of Round 4 International

3rd - Nikolass Bertans
2nd - Ali Makhseed
1st - Nasser al Harbali

MENA

3rd - Ahmad Daham
2nd - Haitham al Hadidi
1st - Ali Makhseed

National

3rd - Ahmed Al Amri
2nd - Tariq Al Shaihani
1st - Haitham al Hadidi

Overall winners International

3rd - Nasser al Harbali
2nd - Benediktas Cirba
1st - Ali Makhseed

MENA

3rd - Ahmed Al Amri
2nd - Ahmad Daham
1st - Ali Makhseed

National

3rd - Tariq Al Shaihani
2nd - Ahmed al Amri
1st - Haitham al Hadidi

Meethaq wins Leading Islamic Banking Brand Award

Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has won the award for Leading Islamic Banking Brand in Oman from Global Brands Magazine.

The latest accolade from the leading UK-headquartered brands magazine adds to several prestigious awards previously won by Meethaq, which celebrated its 10th anniversary at the end of 2022, a press release said.

The Global Brand Awards honour companies, which have performed extraordinarily well in the fields of Finance, Education, Hospitality, Lifestyle, Automobiles and Technology. The awards seek to acknowledge key players across these sectors who are constantly striving to do better through exceptional service delivery and focus on customer-centricity, and reward their performance with global recognition.

The latest award for Meethaq is an acknowledgement that it



has been able to establish the largest customer-centric Islamic branch network in Oman consisting of 24 branches across different governorates with ongoing plans to further develop the network in the coming months.

In addition to its branch network, Meethaq also has a dedicated network of over 40 ATMs/CDMs and provides free

access to about 800 Bank Muscat ATMs and CDMs across the country. Meethaq customers also benefit from world-class mobile and internet banking facilities as well as access to a state-of-the-art call centre.

Ali Ahmed al Lawati, assistant general manager - Meethaq Corporate Banking, said, "The Award for Leading Islamic Bank-

ing Brand in Oman is the latest accolade for Meethaq's exceptional efforts over the last 10 years and its continuing aim to offer the best value proposition and services aligned to the needs of its growing family of customers in the Sultanate as well as the latest global financial trends. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our valued customers for their strong

confidence and trust in Meethaq. Going ahead, we will continue to innovate and launch new state of the art products and services which further enhance the customer experience."

Meethaq extends support to different customer segments and key economic sectors with its innovative Shari'a based products. In addition to offering a full suite of Islamic banking products and services for its retail customers including savings accounts, current accounts, home finance, auto finance, debit / credit cards, mobile and internet banking and for its SME and corporate customers including current accounts, call accounts, fixed deposits, working capital finance, short term and long-term financing facilities, Meethaq has heavily invested in its staff, systems and controls to ensure its services and products are delivered in a professional and Shari'a-compliant manner.

Indian embassy launches 'Oman Yoga Yatra' 2023

The Embassy of India in Oman, in collaboration with Oman Hockey Association, conducted a successful yoga session for the national men and women hockey teams of Oman on February 16, also marking the launch of the five month long 'Oman Yoga Yatra' which will culminate on International Yoga Day (June 21).

The yoga session, which was conducted at the Embassy premises, was led by a team of experienced yoga instructors from India. The participants, including players and coaching staff, were introduced to various yoga postures and breathing exercises that can help improve their men-



tal and physical health, and enhance their performance on the field, a press releases said.

President of Oman Hockey Association, Dr Marwan al Juma,

was the chief guest at the event which provided a great opportunity for the players to learn new techniques to help them stay focused and physically fit.

H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman, said, "We are delighted to have had the opportunity to share our traditional practice of yoga with the national

men and women hockey teams of Oman. Yoga is not just a form of physical exercise, but a way of life that can help one achieve a state of balance, harmony, and well-being. We hope that the players will continue to practice yoga and benefit from it in their personal and professional lives."

The Oman Yoga Yatra will include regular yoga sessions, workshops, and lectures on various aspects of yoga, as well as specific demographics and health conditions. The programme will culminate on International Yoga Day - June 21 - with a special event that will showcase the popularity of Yoga in Oman.

'Reaching the Last Mile' charity run held in Abu Dhabi to fight NTDs

The second annual 'Reaching the Last Mile' charity run, an event hosted by the Abu Dhabi Sports Council in support of the UAE-based Reach Campaign to raise awareness and funds to combat neglected tropical diseases was held on February 18 at Yas Bay Waterfront

The run was open to participants of all ages and fitness levels, with 1k, 3k, 5k and 10k routes to choose from. The event attracted a mix of individuals, teams, and families, a

press release said. All donations from the event go to benefit The Reach Campaign, a fundraising initiative working to eliminate two neglected tropical diseases (NTDs): river blindness and lymphatic filariasis.

NTDs are a group of communicable diseases that are preventable and treatable, yet continue to affect 1 in 5 people worldwide, including 1 billion children. NTDs cause immeasurable suffering - they blind, debilitate, disfigure and can be



fatal. By most commonly affecting vulnerable and marginalized populations, NTDs create cycles of poverty and cost developing nations billions of dollars each year.

More than 200 million people worldwide require treatment for river blindness while an estimated 850 million people are at risk of lymphatic filariasis.

Suhail al Arifi, executive director of the Events Sector at the Abu Dhabi Sports Council, said, "The run is a reminder of

our responsibility to support the less fortunate around the world. We are committed to activating local communities in support of worthy causes and to helping further the efforts of Reaching the Last Mile Fund."

Nassar al Mubarak, managing director, of The Reach Campaign, added, "This event reflects both, the generosity of the UAE community, and our shared, long-standing commitment to ending neglected tropical diseases."

Customers hail Nissan Pathfinder's redesign

Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) say that the fifth-generation Nissan Pathfinder, which has embraced the toughness of its predecessors, has captivated customers in Oman with its revolutionary design, standards of comfort, connectivity, and performance.

They feel it has fostered its SUV leadership and bolstered its line-up to cater to the evolving needs of customers in the sultanate, a press release said.

An amazed Mansour al Mahdouri says, "I am truly impressed with new Pathfinder. A 271-horsepower 3.5ltr V6 engine is matched with an all-new 9-speed transmission for smooth, direct response. The all-new Intelligent 4WD with 7-position drive and terrain mode selector helps provide confident driving on- and-off-road, while Pathfinder's best-in-class 1500kg maximum towing capacity provides plenty of capability to haul heavy items."

Adel Al Hadabbi who appreciates its space says, "With a roomy cabin that has room for



up to eight people, the Nissan Pathfinder is always ready and reporting for family transportation duty."

A spokesperson for SBA said, "A large number of standard safety features, solid towing performance and decent fuel economy conspire to make the 2023 Pathfinder a trustworthy player vouch customers. The Pathfinder offers a bold, rugged, completely redesigned exterior and a family adventure-ready interior. Available technology features include an all-new Head-up Display, 12.3-inch digital dashboard, ProPILOT Assist with Navi-Link and standard Nissan Safety Shield® 360."

Sharp, muscular design cues pay homage to the original 1987 model and conveys both strength and capability, while an all-new 9-speed automatic transmission provides strong acceleration for a smooth and direct vehicle response. Within the cabin, infotainment and connectivity upgrades including the addition of ProPILOT technology help reduce distractions.



ECS, Etisalat to enhance cooperation in exhibitions

Expo Centre Sharjah (ECS) has discussed with Etisalat Services Holding (ESH) ways to enhance cooperation aimed at developing the exhibitions and conferences Industry, in addition to exchanging views and experiences and developing joint work to enhance ECS's efforts towards achieving the optimum investment of information and communication technology (ICT).

The news came out of a coordination meeting held at ECS that brought together Saif Mohammed al Midfa, CEO of ECS,

Muammar al Rukhaimi, CEO of ESH, and a number of officials on both sides. They discussed working to enhance ICT in supporting the exhibitions sector, in addition to reviewing the upcoming events and exhibitions that ECS intends to organise.

Midfa welcomed the visiting delegation, pointing out that the meeting reflects the ECS's keenness to develop partnerships and exchange experiences with various organisations with a view to developing the exhibition industry in the Emirate of Sharjah and

enhancing its competitiveness in order to maintain its position as one of the most important hubs that lead the industry in the region.

He also praised the ESH's efforts and innovative services in facility management and digital solutions, indicating that the meeting is crucial to help ECS keep abreast of developments in the ICT world and adopt the latest innovations and the best smart solutions and advanced digital services that fulfil the aspirations of the ECS's staff.

NDEC holds exhibition on Ramadan and Diabetes

The National Diabetes and Endocrine Center (NDEC) at Royal Hospital, in cooperation with the Oman Diabetes Association, organised an awareness exhibition on controlling diabetes during Ramadan under the theme 'You Can Fast Ramadan' at Oman Oasis Mall last week.

A number of pharmacies, pharmaceutical companies, government authorities, and health clubs participated in the exhibition. The event aimed to educate people with diabetes on controlling blood sugar levels during Ramadan.

The exhibition highlighted diabetes education, nutrition, sports, drug education on how to use medications, insulin, and the necessary doses during Ramadan, eye health, and foot care health for people with diabetes. The exhibition also included a corner displaying the latest technologies for controlling blood sugar levels.

Yas Marina Circuit to stage World Triathlon Championship



Abu Dhabi Sports Council has announced the official race routes for the World Triathlon Championship Series race in Abu Dhabi, presented by Daman, with the Yas Marina Circuit selected as the venue.

Taking place on March 3 and 4, the season-opening race will see the world's best professional and amateur triathletes challenge themselves on one of Abu Dhabi's iconic sporting destinations as the prestigious competition returns to the home of the Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix, a press release said.

The event, which will attract thousands of local, regional and international triathletes, features

fifteen race categories including the Elite Men and Women, Elite Para and Age Group, Junior and dedicated races for athletes of determination.

The race gets underway with the swimming leg in Yas Marina's aquamarine waters against a stunning backdrop of the W Abu Dhabi hotel and the famous motorsport circuit, surrounded by the spectacular mega yachts and luxury boats. This swim course is well-known across the triathlon circuits in the world as one of the most beautiful swim-section of the season.

Following the completion of the swim, the triathletes will have the unique opportunity of

tackling the same course as that faced by Formula One drivers as they cycle around the track. The bike course is described by race organizers as 'a level of technicality to excite the seasoned triathletes looking for a challenge, while also well suited to the beginners'. The Grandstands will also be open so fans can cheer on their favourite triathletes as they make their way around the circuit.

The final leg of the race will be the all-important run to the finish line with the flat course presenting an opportunity for people to set their personal best timings in the presence of thousands of spectators.

Wizz Air inaugurates new route to KSA

Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, the ultra-low-fare national airline of the UAE, has commenced operations on the new route of Medina, a centre of Islamic culture.

The new destinations further strengthen regional connectivity with high quality point-to-point travel on WIZZ's convenient flight schedule, a press release said.

Medina, a historical city of religious significance, boasts breath-taking views and architecture. Known as 'The Enlightened City', Medina is home to Al Masjid an Nabawi, the Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) mosque, the oldest mosque in the world. Medina is the burial place of Prophet Muhammad and steeped in Islamic history and civilisation with prominent mosques and landmarks to visit.

Johan Eidhagen, officer and managing director of Wizz Air Abu Dhabi, said, "Saudi Arabia boasts an eclectic mix of travel opportunities and we are delighted to boost the Saudi tourism industry with ultra-low-fares to Medina. We are committed to strengthening connectivity between the UAE



and Saudi Arabia, with unique travel experiences awaiting adventurous travellers across our ever-expanding network. We look forward to welcoming pas-

sengers on board our modern, young, and sustainable aircraft soon."

Eng Sofiene Abdessalem, managing director of Tibah Air-

ports Operations Company, said, "We are pleased that Wizz Air has joined our airline network with daily flights between Medina and Abu Dhabi. This demonstrates Tibah Airports Operation Company's commitment and strategy to expand travel options, strengthen the global connectivity of Medina Airport, one of the Kingdom's main gateways, and provide convenient and affordable travel alternatives for our customers."

Strategically located in the UAE, Wizz Air Abu Dhabi provides ultra-low fare, hassle-free and efficient travel options to Alexandria (Egypt), Almaty (Kazakhstan), Amman (Jordan), Ankara (Turkey), Aqaba (Jordan), Athens (Greece), Baku (Azerbaijan), Belgrade (Serbia), Dammam (Saudi Arabia), Kuwait City (Kuwait), Kutaisi (Georgia), Manama (Bahrain), Samarkand (Uzbekistan), Sarajevo (Bosnia), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Tel-Aviv (Israel), Tirana (Albania) and Yerevan (Armenia) among others.

NUST holds graduation and awards ceremony for 2021-22

The National University of Science and Technology (NUST) honoured 1215 graduates at the 2021-2022 graduation ceremony at Madinat Al Irfan Theatre, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on February 12. The ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health.

Chairman of the Board of Directors, Dr P Mohamed Ali welcomed the gathering and advised the graduates to continue learning and developing themselves so to play their role effectively in society, a press release said.

The vice chancellor, Dr Ali al Bimani, and the academic affiliates also congratulated the graduates and urged them to trust the knowledge and training they have obtained and serve industries and the community with pride and confidence.

In the ceremony, 27 students received special awards from the colleges of Medicine & Health Sciences, Pharmacy, Engineering and International Maritime College of Oman for their excellence in academic achievements and contribution in enhancing students' overall experience in the cam-

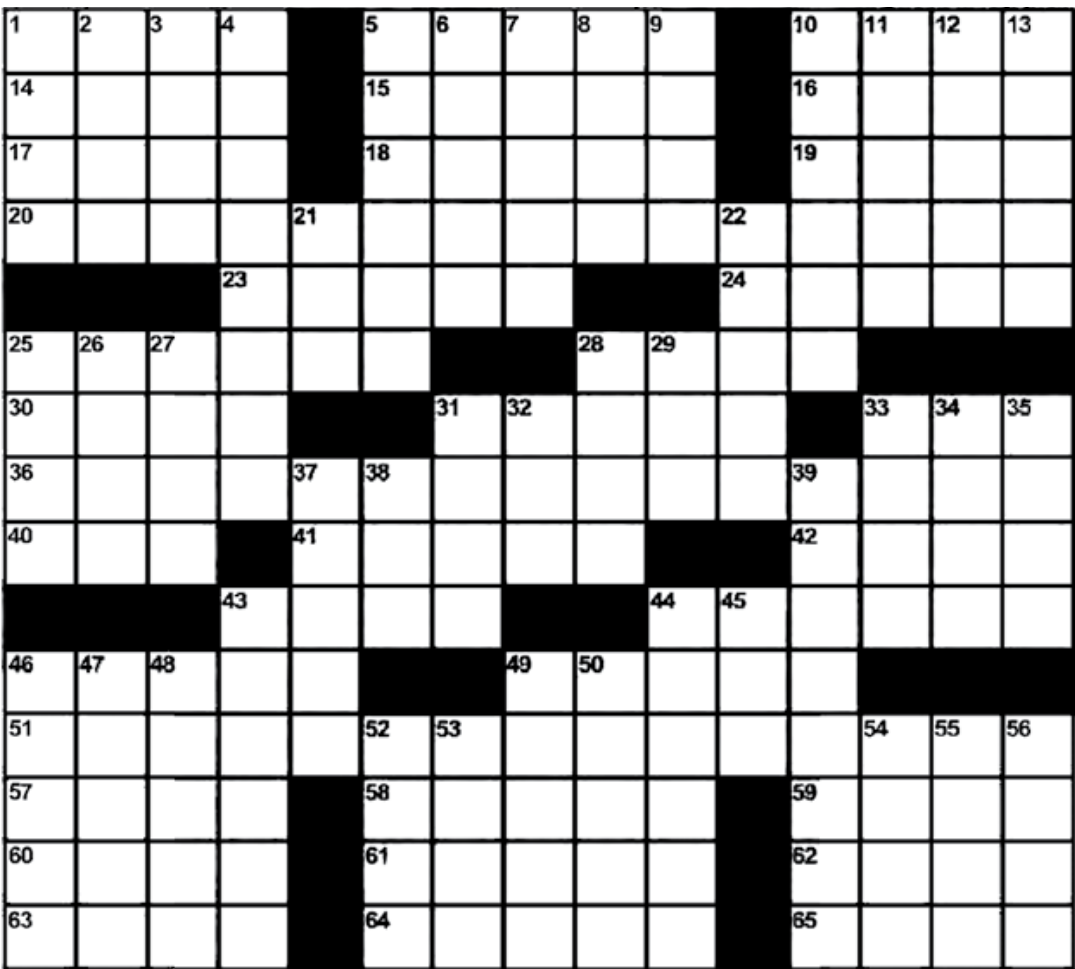
puses.

The awards included Academic Excellence Award - Post Graduates, Academic Excellence Award - Undergraduates, Meritorious/High Honours and Honours Awards, and Citizenship Award.

National University shapes its vision in order to become an internationally recognised and renowned academic institution for education and research fostered by social values.

The University has made significant progress towards higher ranking locally, regionally and internationally.

DAILY CROSSWORD

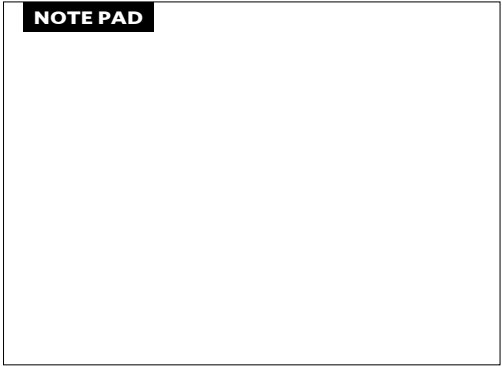


ACROSS

- 1) This puzzle's theme word
5) Some mantel pieces
10) Crow's-nest cry
14) Snowman prop
15) Dark
16)Dalai_
17) "National Velvet" au-
thor Bagnold
18) Late British princess
19) River to the Caspian
20) Area's ruling power
23) Encumbrances
24) Taj Mahal country
25) Least busy
28) 18-wheeler
30) Bleacher feature
31) Manhattan Project goal,
briefly
33) Summer cooler
36) Polemically
40) The 168 in a wk.
41) Sharp mountain ridge
42) Hilo welcome gifts
43) Slant or prejudice
44) Make a meaningful
connection

- 46) Assumed name
49) Parts of boilermakers
51) Certain orchestral
composition
57) "What've you been _?"
58) Relating to the ear
59) Stratford's river
60) High-school pupil
61) Slyly disparaging
62) Enjoy a novel
63) Blows it
64) Walked back and forth
65) Without
DOWN
1) European auto
2) Trattoria order
3) Kind of proportions
4) Grave warning
5) Financial plan compo-
nent
6) Confederacy's counter-
part
7) Bulgars and Croats
8) Food sticker
9) Headliner
10) Seniors, years later
11) Ran quickly
12) Certain Arab
13) "Big Three" meeting site
of 1945
21) Fleur-de-_
22) Rain clouds
25) Rash reaction?
26) Last name in fashion
27) Camera component
28) Achy
29) Dash lengths
31) Blvd. relatives
32) "Wanna ?"
33) Bug on a dog
34) Came down, as on a
perch
35) The "Big Board," on
Wall St.
37) Worker's demand
38) "Are you a man_
mouse?"
39) Best-of-the-best play-
ers
43) Francis and Kevin
44) Reacted to a punch
45) Behave humanly, in a
saying
46) Like severe pain
47) One running easily
48) Prefix with "act" or

- "play"
49) Acid type
50) Dodge artfully
52) Hoarse around?
53) Bluefin or bonito
54) Part of the eyeball
55) Equine tone
56) Peters out



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You'll be stuck behind some rather slow-moving people today, so get ready to be patient. Bring a book with you just in case you're stuck in a long line. Make sure you've got good music in your car, because traffic could be hairy. And take deep, controlled breaths if you are stuck trying to explain something kind of simple to someone who is also kind of simple. It's not that you are impatient or unreasonable: You're not. But right now everything and everyone else is stuck in a lower gear.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
You've got some very restless power growing inside you right now. What are you going to do with it? Channel all of your energy into a useful direction, and you will see some great progress before the end of the day. Help a worried friend or lend a hand to a harried co-worker. Take on a new obligation if you can. Your restlessness is a gift that, while challenging, will give you a chance to shine and build your ego up to where it should be right now -- healthy!



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21
Personality clashes can be tricky sometimes, but today they'll be very entertaining -- partly because they won't involve you, and partly because you'll have a front row seat to a very juicy altercation today! Do not shy away from tossing in your two cents, either -- this will be a good-natured battle between two dynamic people who will feed off of the energy you contribute. So sit back, relax and watch all of the action unfold. When you feel like tossing in a wisecrack, toss away!



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Your passionate nature is coming out in full force today, and it will come in handy. You might want use it to come to the defense of someone who has been judged incorrectly by the crowd of people you hang out with. Like a superhero, you can sweep in and make everyone see how wrong they were about this person. Show them that by respecting and even embracing the unique qualities of other people, they can challenge themselves to become better people.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
Do not delve deep into any type of emotional entanglement right now, even if you think that you are completely ready to take things to the next level. It is still too soon. If this person is really who you think they are, they'll wait for you a little while longer. Time is the most crucial element in your life right now, and you have much more than you think you do. So what is your rush? Taking things slowly now might be frustrating to you, but it is the best move you can make.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
This is a great day for friendships -- making them, strengthening them, and celebrating them! The people you like the best are wonderful distractions during the day, and each interaction you have, from phone calls to text messages, will add a lovely spark of sunshine to your life. Savor the time you spend with loved ones. Make each moment count by never, ever assuming they know how you feel! Communicate to new and old friends alike just how much you care.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
In order to make any real progress today (especially in terms of your health), you need to evaluate your goals and put together a list of your top priorities. Do you want to lose weight or get toned? Do you want to do it by increasing your exercise or by decreasing your calorie intake? Do you have a specific deadline in mind (a wedding, a party)? Or is this an overall lifestyle change? No matter what your goals, this type of analytic approach will help you get to the finish line faster.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Too many changes happening too quickly could bring you right back to square one, so take things slowly right now! Sure, you're all jazzed up over the improvements you want to make in your life, and that is to be commended. But you can't successfully take on more than you can actually deal with. You might think that taking everything on at once will ensure that you'll stick to the plan, but nothing could be further from the truth. 'One step at a time' is the best way to reach your goal.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
Despite your best efforts, your career is going to end up back on the front burner of your life once again. This time, don't fight it. Just go with it, and take care of things that pop up today instead of putting them off. In the long run, it's much better for your personal life if you deal with these things now. Putting them off for another day might seem like the right move, but you will only spend your private time worrying about it all anyway.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Should you or shouldn't you? No matter what you are debating right now, your indecisive nature isn't going to enable you to come to a decision on your own. This is one of those rare times when someone's outside opinion could be just what you need to see things more clearly. Do some online research to help you narrow down your options, and if you can, talk to someone who's been stuck in a similar conundrum. Making a choice doesn't always have to be a totally solo endeavor.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
Your more intense feelings are bubbling up to the surface today, and they could cause you to become somewhat distracted during the course of boring meetings or stilted conversations. You will need major stimulation, today, to stay 'tuned-in' to other people. Your own inner world is going to be a lot more captivating than the exterior land of reality, but this is a sign that your imagination is ready to help you get to the next level in your life. Just make sure you don't flake out on an important event.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
Fuzzy logic is not going to get you very far today, so if you are trying to get your way in any type of negotiations, don't try to take a short cut. It will only backfire on you. Like it or not, you have got to back things up with research and proof. Sure, it might take a little bit of extra time to gather together the information you need to make your case, but in the end you will thank yourself for doing what it takes to ensure that you are not going to be embarrassed.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

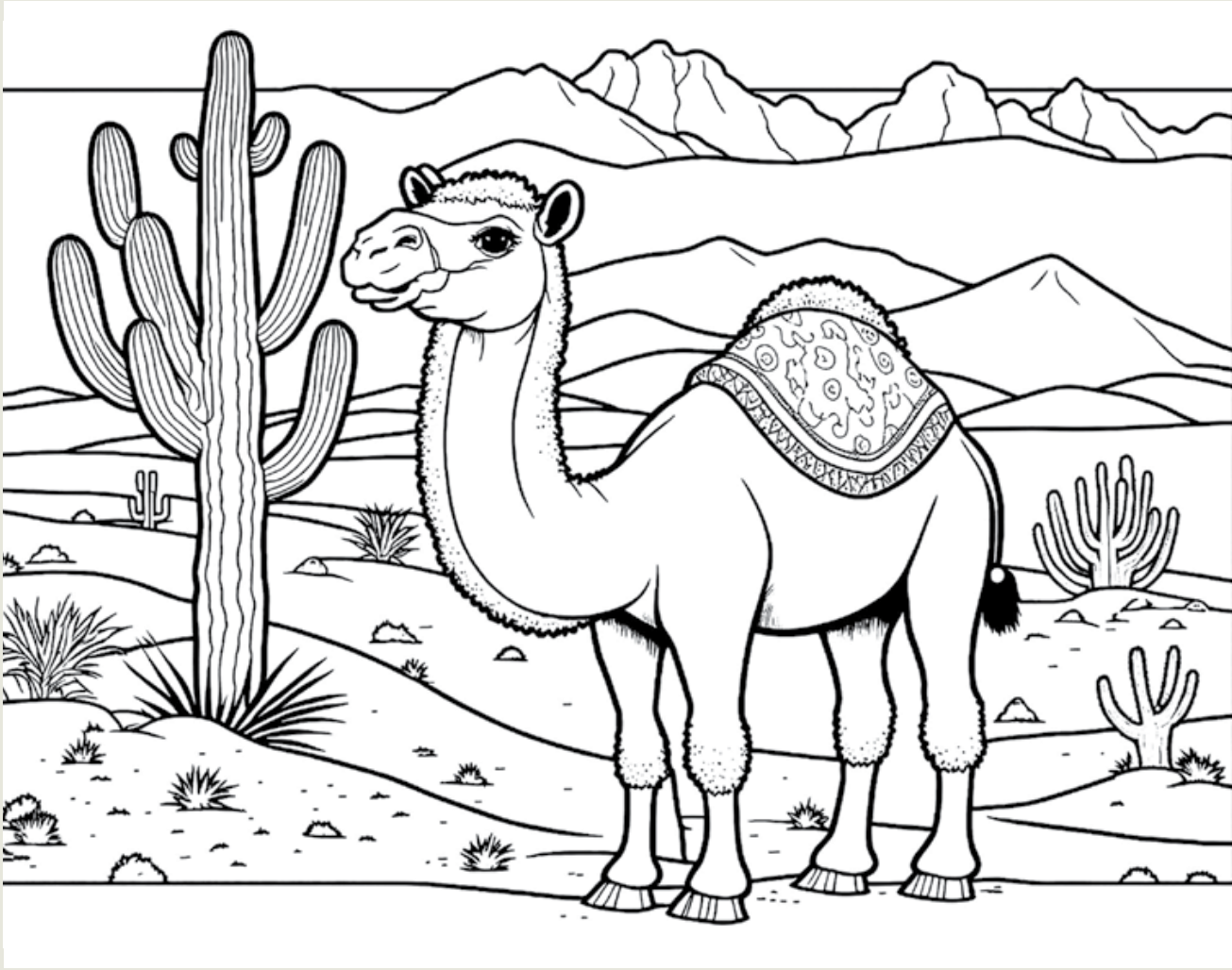
01. Who in 2011 won the unofficial event he has hosted, the Chevron World Challenge, his first professional golf tournament win since 2009?
A. Hunter Maan
B. Tiger Woods
C. Julien Foret
D. David Oakley

02. Where is the mouth of the Yangtze River?
A. The Bocca Tigris
B. Dongying
C. Shanghai
D. Hangzhou

03. The annual Roskilde Festival, first held in 1971, takes place in what country?
A. Spain
B. Denmark
C. UK
D. Japan

Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER



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

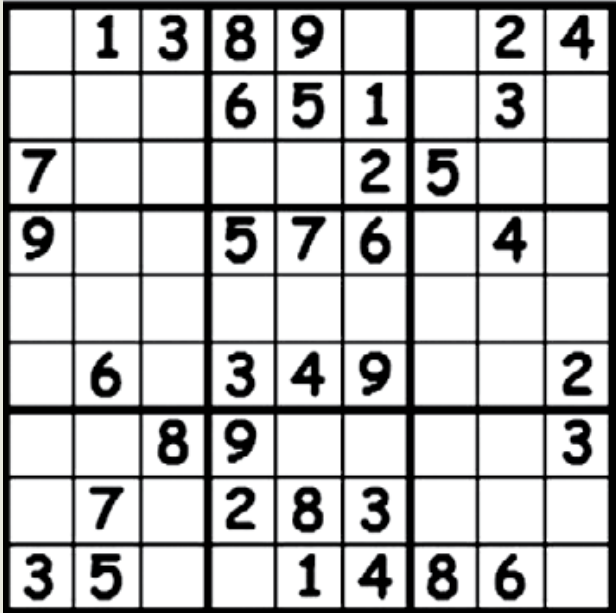
WORD BUILDER



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

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



SUDOKU EASY ANSWER



Israeli strike kills 15 people in Syrian capital

Civilians, including two women, were among those killed in the Israeli attack in Damascus

Beirut, Lebanon - An Israeli air strike on Syria's capital Damascus killed 15 people early on Sunday and badly damaged a building in a district home to several state security agencies, a war monitoring group said.

Civilians, including two women, were among those killed in 'the deadliest Israeli attack in the Syrian capital' since the start of the civil war, said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The overnight strike cratered a road and wrecked the adjacent 10-storey building in the city's Kafr Sousa district, which is home to senior state officials and Syrian intelligence headquarters, said the Britain-based Observatory. A woman was also killed in the capital's Mazraa district, possibly hit when Syrian anti-aircraft munitions crashed down from the night sky, said the Observatory.

It was not immediately clear who was the intended target of the strike, which AFP correspondents reported shook the city and left a gaping hole in the street, also blowing out windows of nearby buildings.



A man inspects damage in the aftermath of an Israeli air strike that hit the medieval Citadel of Damascus on Sunday (AFP)

Other missiles overnight hit a warehouse used by pro-regime Iranian and Hezbollah fighters near Damascus, said the Observatory, which relies on a wide network of sources inside Syria.

Syria's defence ministry overnight confirmed the Kafr Sousa attack and gave an initial death toll of five, including one

soldier, and 15 wounded civilians, some in critical condition.

Shortly after midnight 'the Israeli enemy carried out an aerial aggression from the direction of the occupied Golan Heights targeting several areas in Damascus and its vicinity, including residential neighbourhoods', it said.

Syrian defence forces had

'shot down several missiles', the ministry added in its statement.

Historic buildings near the medieval Damascus citadel were also 'severely damaged', said the head of the Syrian antiquities department, Nazir Awad, who blamed 'an Israeli missile'.

An Israeli army spokesperson on Sunday said 'Israel does not

comment on reports in foreign media'.

More than a decade of war

Israel, during more than a decade of war in Syria, has carried out hundreds of air strikes against its neighbour, primarily targeting the country's army, Iranian forces

and Hezbollah, allies of the Damascus regime.

Israel's military rarely comments on its operations in Syria, but regularly asserts that it will not let its arch enemy Iran extend its influence to Israel's borders.

"We will not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons and we will not allow it to entrench on our

northern border," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at Sunday's cabinet meeting, but did not refer directly to the Damascus strike. Late last year, the head of the Israel Defense Forces Operations Directorate, Major General Oded Basiuk, presenting an operational outlook for 2023, said the army 'will not accept Hezbollah 2.0 in Syria'.

In Tehran, foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani on Sunday 'strongly condemned the attacks of the Zionist regime against targets in Damascus and its suburbs, including against certain residential buildings'.

The raids had left 'a number of innocent Syrian citizens' dead and injured, he said. The Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, based in the Gaza Strip, also denounced the strikes.

The Syrian conflict started in 2011 with the brutal repression of peaceful protests, and escalated to pull in multiple foreign powers and global militants.

Nearly half a million people have been killed, and the conflict has forced around half of the country's pre-war population from their homes.

The Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad receives military support from Russia as well as from Iran and Tehran-allied armed Shiite groups, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, which are declared enemies of Israel.

The latest attack comes more than a month after an Israeli missile strike hit Damascus International Airport, killing four people, including two soldiers.

AFP



This file photo shows Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Ramallah on January 31 (AFP)

Leaders of Israel, Palestine told to 'restore calm'

Washington, US - Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke on Saturday with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and separately with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, reaffirming US support for a 'two-state solution' in the region and asking the two to 'restore calm'.

Blinken spoke by telephone with both men to reaffirm US commitment to 'a negotiated two-state solution and opposition to policies that endanger its viability', State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"The Secretary underscored the urgent need for Israelis and Palestinians to take steps that restore calm and our strong opposition to unilateral measures that would further escalate tensions."

That message followed a decision by Israel's new hard-right government to give retroactive permission to multiple settlement outposts in the occupied West Bank - a move that drew nearly unanimous criticism among major powers including the US.

The White House said on Thursday it was 'deeply dismayed' by the Israeli decision, but it nevertheless voiced op-

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke separately with the leaders and reaffirmed the US support for a two-state solution

position to a proposed UN Security Council resolution to demand Israel end settlements in the occupied territories. Blinken met with Abbas late last month in the West Bank at the end of an intense series of diplomatic meetings planned before the latest flare-up of violence.

In their phone call, the two 'discussed efforts to improve the quality of life of the Palestinian people and enhance their security and freedom', Price said in a statement.

Blinken and Netanyahu spoke about broader regional challenges, Price said, 'including the threats posed by Iran', and Blinken underscored the United States' 'ironclad commitment to Israel's security'.

AFP

Thousands of Nigerians rally ahead of presidential vote

Abuja, Nigeria - The frontrunners in Nigeria's presidential race hit the campaign trail on Saturday in a major push to convince voters a week before the polls.

More than 90mn people are registered to vote in Nigeria where President Muhammadu Buhari is stepping down after his two terms allowed by the constitution.

Waving from the top of an open-air double-decker bus, the ruling party's candidate Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) paraded through the streets of Maiduguri in north-east Borno state.

Several hundred supporters ran alongside the convoy as they made their way to Elkanemi Sports Centre where more people with flags and banners were gathered to hear the candidate speak.



Supporters sit on a vehicle during an All progressives Congress (APC) rally in Maiduguri on Saturday (AFP)

A political veteran and former governor of Lagos, Tinubu is expected to stage a final rally in his hometown on Tuesday.

In nearby Adamawa state, the main opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) also made his entrance aboard a

double-decker bus into Mahmud Ribadu Square in the city of Yola.

A massive crowd awaited Abubakar, singing, dancing, many decked out in traditional clothes, with a camel even among the throng.

'Atiku', as he is widely known, was vice president from 1999 to 2007 and is making his sixth attempt at the presidency.

"He's long waited for this opportunity, we've been praying for a unifier, a man that brings about unity in the country," supporter Victor Dogo said.

Outsider candidate Peter Obi from the Labour Party (LP) was not seen on the campaign trail on Saturday but took to social media to call on his supporters, 'the Obidients', to rally in several cities across the country.

AFP

Iran freedom struggle stars at Berlinale

Berlin, Germany - The Berlin film festival, long a champion of Iran's embattled independent directors, is spotlighting its citizens' fight for basic rights with a series of screenings, events and a red-carpet protest.

French-Iranian actor Golshifteh Farahani, who is serving on the jury for the top prizes with president Kristen Stewart, said as the festival kicked off Thursday that cinema was a crucial fuel for the freedom movement. "In a country like Iran that is a dictatorship, art is not only an intellectual or philosophical thing, it's essential, it's like oxygen," she said.

Farahani made her name in Iranian movies and became an international star in productions such as Jim Jarmusch's 'Pater-son' opposite Adam Driver.

She and Stewart joined the red-carpet demonstration for women's rights in Iran on Saturday with festival chief Mariette Rissenbeek, who told AFP the



Iranian film director Sepideh Farsi Press (third from right) among others attends a protest at Berlin Film Festival in Berlin on Saturday (AFP)

Berlinale stood with Iranian directors who 'weren't allowed to travel to the festival'.

The Berlinale, Europe's first major cinema showcase of the year, has awarded its Golden Bear top prize to many of the leading lights of Iranian cinema including Asghar Farhadi (*A Separation*), Jafar Panahi (*Taxi*) and Mohammad Rasoulof (*There Is No Evil*).

Iran, rocked by months of anti-government rallies, this month released Panahi and Rasoulof from prison along with several dozen other well-known detainees in an apparent attempt to appease critics.

This year, the festival is showing several documentaries, including Steffi Niederzoll's *Seven*

Winters in Tehran and *My Worst Enemy* by Mehran Tamadon, which expose the brutal conditions in Iran's jails as well as rampant executions.

Niederzoll's harrowing film, which includes material smuggled out of Iran, tells the story of Reyhaneh Jabbari, who was hanged in 2014 at the age of 26 for killing a former intelligence officer she maintained had tried to rape her.

Featuring wrenching interviews with her family, who agitated for her freedom and appealed for mercy to the murdered man's son, the film recounts how an international campaign for Jabbari's life arose.

Zar Amir Ebrahimi, who won the best actress award at Cannes last year, narrates the film with letters, journals and text messages Jabbari wrote from jail, where she became a role model for many fellow prisoners.

AFP

Islamic State leader snatched in Syria raid: US

Washington, US - US troops working with Syrian Kurdish-led forces on Saturday captured an Islamic State provincial official in Syria, the US military said.

The IS official, identified as Batar, was 'involved in planning attacks on... detention centres and manufacturing improvised explosive devices', the US military's Central Command said.

Neither civilians nor US forces were killed or injured in the operation carried out with the help of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The raid came a day after four US troops were wounded as they conducted another raid to kill a senior IS group leader in northeastern Syria.

AFP

N Korea says it test-fired Hwasong-15 as warning to US, Seoul

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea said on Sunday it had test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile as a warning to Washington and Seoul, saying the successful 'surprise' drill demonstrated Pyongyang's capacity to launch a 'fatal nuclear counterattack'.

In response, the US and South Korea staged joint air drills featuring a strategic bomber and stealth fighter jets, Seoul said.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered the 'sudden launching drill' at 8am on Saturday (2300 GMT Friday) and a Hwasong-15 missile - a weapon first tested by the North in 2017 - was fired from Pyongyang airport that afternoon, the official KCNA reported. South Korea's military

said it detected an ICBM launch at 17:22 (0822 GMT) on Saturday, which Japan said flew for 66 minutes before splashing down in its Exclusive Economic Zone, with their analysis indicating it was capable of hitting the mainland United States.

North Korea's leadership hailed the test - the country's first in seven weeks - saying it showed 'the actual war capacity of the ICBM units which are ready for mobile and mighty counterattack', KCNA said.

The launch was 'actual proof' of the country's 'capacity of fatal nuclear counterattack on the hostile forces', it added.

The South Korean military said on Sunday it had staged joint

air drills with the United States featuring at least one US B-1B long-range bomber.

'The exercise displayed the timely and immediate deployment of the US extended deterrence assets to the Korean peninsula,' demonstrating the 'overwhelming force' of the allies, the ministry said in a statement.

The sanctions-busting North

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered the sudden launching drill at 8am on Saturday and a Hwasong-15 missile - a weapon first tested by the North in 2017 - was fired from Pyongyang airport



Test-firing of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) 'Hwasong-15', at Pyongyang International Airport on Saturday (AFP)

Korean launch came just days before Seoul and Washington are due to start joint tabletop exercises aimed at improving their response in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack.

Pyongyang had last week warned of an 'unprecedentedly' strong response to upcoming

drills, which it describes as preparations for war and blames for the deteriorating security situation on the Korean peninsula.

The Saturday test is significant as 'the event was ordered the day-of and so this is not so much a traditional 'test', but an exercise', US-based analyst Ankit

Panda told AFP.

"We should expect to see additional exercises of this sort," he added. Relations between the two Koreas are already at one of their lowest points in years, after North Korea declared itself an 'ir-reversible' nuclear state.

AFP

'Cardiac implants reused from the dead' in Romania

Bucharest, Romania - A network of Romanian medics is under investigation over allegations they reused cardiac implants for living patients after they had been extracted from dead bodies, prosecutors said.

One of the doctors was arrested for 30 days on Saturday evening, a statement from prosecutors said. The Bucharest tribunal ordered the preventive arrest of cardiologist Dan Tesloianu, working in a hospital from the eastern city of Iasi, for abuse of office and bribery.

The prosecutors said that from 2017 until 2022 he implanted 238 medical devices 'of unknown origin', sometimes extracted from dead patients, and illegally reused them thus putting lives at risk. Tesloianu is suspected of overseeing a network that included at least four other doctors who were providing him with the devices, without prior approval from sick patients or their families.

'A large part of the interventions for implanting cardiac devices were not necessary and were triggered by fictitious diagnosis' or medication that would induce specific symptoms, the statement released on Saturday added. On Friday, Romanian police announced 24 searches in three counties in a case involving 'medics who did surgical interventions by violating procedures and the rules for using cardiac implants'. Nine persons were brought in for hearings as a result.

Romania, which joined the European Union in 2007, has seen its public healthcare system plagued by corruption scandals in past years and still spends the least amount on health-care of all EU countries.

AFP



Female giant panda Xiang Xiang eats bamboo ahead of her return to China, at Ueno Park in Tokyo on Sunday (AFP)

Japan bids farewell to four pandas returning to China

Tokyo, Japan - Thousands of Japanese fans on Sunday bade farewell to four beloved pandas which will be returned to China this week, with some visitors shedding tears.

Visitors flocked to Tokyo's Ueno Zoo to catch a last glimpse of Xiang Xiang, who has been a massive draw for the park since her birth in 2017, and to a park in western Wakayama region for the other three pandas.

In Tokyo, the final viewing of Xiang Xiang, the zoo's first baby panda since 1988, was limited to 2,600 visitors who won a lucky lottery ticket, but some fans who did not win still came.

"I wanted to breathe the same air," as Xiang Xiang, Mari Asai

told the *Asahi Shimbun* daily.

"Even if I cannot see her, my heart is filled with joy knowing she's there," the 48-year-old said. Another visitor told local media, crying, that she wanted to be closer to the five-year-old panda. "Everything about her is adorable, whether sleeping or awake," she said.

Ueno Zoo receives calls and emails every day from panda fans asking it to keep Xiang Xiang, the *Tokyo Shimbun* daily reported, citing a zoo official.

The panda was initially set to head to China in 2021 but its departure was postponed multiple times due to travel restrictions linked to the pandemic.

In Wakayama, visitors came

to say good-bye to Eimei, which became the world's oldest to father a baby panda in 2020 at age 28, the equivalent of being in his 80s for a human, as well as his twin daughters.

"Everyone is so cute I almost cried," a woman in her 70s told public broadcaster NHK. "I'm sad they're going back to China."

The black and white mammals are immensely popular around the world and China loans them out as part of a 'panda diplomacy' programme to foster foreign ties.

There are an estimated 1,860 giant pandas left in the wild, mainly in bamboo forests in the mountains of China.

AFP

Ukraine must win for change in Russia: Garry Kasparov

Munich, Germany - Russian former chess champion and leading Kremlin critic Garry Kasparov said on Saturday that Ukraine had to defeat Moscow as a 'pre-condition' for a democratic transition in Russia.

"Liberation from (President Vladimir) Putin's fascism runs through Ukraine," Kasparov said at a panel discussion on Russia's 'democratic future' at the Munich Security Conference, also attended by other prominent

Kremlin critics.

"Russians live in a bubble. This cannot be broken unless the idea of empire collapses, thanks to a military defeat."

Kasparov, who left Russia about a decade ago, said 'the war will be lost when they realise that they are losing the war' - and not by judging territorial gains and losses. Others at the panel included ex-tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, rights activist Zhanna Nemtsova - daughter of

assassinated Kremlin opponent Boris Nemtsov - and Irina Scherbakova, co-founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Russian rights organisation Memorial.

Kasparov urged the West to keep up its support for Kyiv, saying that 'no expenditure is too much for Ukraine'.

'What is feared is a de-escalation' and that Kyiv's allies would ease their efforts, said Khodorkovsky, once one of the richest men in Russia before he was im-



Garry Kasparov speaks during a panel discussion at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, southern Germany, on Saturday (AFP)

prisoned between 2003 and 2013. Scherbakova, whose non-governmental group was shut down by the Russian government at the end of 2021, said she also shared the view that Ukraine's victory is indispensable.

"It's a tragic time, it's painful to hear for the Ukrainians because they are paying with their blood... but to go on the streets in Russia, one must be very brave," she said.

AFP

Ex-US president Jimmy Carter receiving hospice care at home

Washington, US - Jimmy Carter, the 98-year-old former US president who led the nation from 1977 to 1981, is receiving hospice care at home, where he will spend his 'remaining time,' his nonprofit foundation said on Saturday.

Carter, the oldest living former president and a Nobel peace laureate, resides in Plains, Georgia, with his wife, Rosalynn.

That hamlet is where he was born and worked as a peanut farmer before becoming the governor and later launching his bid as Democratic presidential nominee. "After a series of short hospital stays, former U.S. President



Former US president Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn (AFP)

Jimmy Carter today decided to spend his remaining time at home with his family and receive hospice care instead of addi-

tional medical intervention," the Carter Center said in a statement posted to Twitter.

During his presidency, Carter

Jimmy Carter today decided to spend his remaining time at home and receive hospice care

CARTER CENTER

placed a commitment on human rights and social justice, enjoying a strong first two years which included brokering a peace deal between Israel and Egypt dubbed the Camp David Accords.

But his administration hit nu-

merous snags - the most serious being the taking of US hostages in Iran and the disastrous failed attempt to rescue the 52 captive Americans in 1980.

In November of that year, Republican challenger Ronald Reagan beat Carter at the polls, relegating him to a single term. Reagan swept into office on a wave of staunch conservatism.

As the years passed, a more nuanced image of Carter emerged, taking into account his post-presidential activities and reassessing his achievements.

He founded the Carter Center in 1982 to pursue his vision of world diplomacy, and he was the

recipient of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize for his tireless efforts to promote social and economic justice. "The Carter family asks for privacy during this time and is grateful for the concern shown by his many admirers," the Carter Center said.

"He has the full support of his family and his medical team," it added.

Carter said basic Christian tenets such as justice and love served as the bedrock of his presidency, and the ex-president taught Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist, his church in Plains, well into his 90s.

AFP

Turkey winds down earthquake rescue as US pledges fresh aid

Antakya, Turkey - Turkey on Sunday said rescue efforts following last week's devastating earthquake had ended in all but two provinces as visiting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced US\$100mn in fresh humanitarian aid.

The 7.8-magnitude tremor that struck southeastern Turkey and northern Syria on February 6 has killed more than 44,000 people, with the likelihood of finding survivors two weeks on extremely remote.

No survivors have been found in at least 24 hours.

The head of Turkey's disaster agency Yunus Sezer on Sunday said search and rescue efforts had been completed in all provinces apart from Hatay and Kahramanmaraş, the earthquake's epicentre.

Sezer said search and rescue efforts continued at around 40 buildings in the provinces on the 14th day but expected the number to fall by late on Sunday.

The agency head also said Turkey's death toll had risen to 40,689.

The total death toll including Syria is now 44,377.

The winding-down of rescue operations came as Blinken arrived in Turkey to show solidarity with a NATO ally and announce a new aid package worth US\$100mn.

'Long-term effort'

Washington's top diplomat met his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu at Incirlik air base in southern Turkey, through which the United States has shipped aid.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (centre) shakes hands with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu after a helicopter tour of earthquake stricken areas on Sunday (AFP)

Sadly, it's less about search and rescue but long-term recovery. It's going to take a massive effort to rebuild

ANTONY BLINKEN

Blinken then accompanied Cavusoglu in a helicopter to view the damage wrought by the disaster in Hatay province.

The new aid 'will be moving soon. Sadly, it's less about search and rescue but long-term recovery. This is going to be a long-term effort', he told reporters.

"It's going to take a massive effort to rebuild but we're com-

mitted to supporting that effort," he added, saying the United States had now contributed US\$185mn in assistance to Turkey and Syria.

The trip had been planned before the earthquake, the worst natural disaster to hit Turkey in its post-Ottoman history.

Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay said on Saturday that

some 105,000 buildings either collapsed, needed to be demolished or were severely damaged.

In the devastated southeastern Turkish city of Antakya, Husseyin Yavuz told AFP he had been waiting days to find his cousin's body under the rubble and insisted the search operations should continue.

"We've been here since the

day of the earthquake. With God's help, we still have hope," he said.

Blinken's visit - his first to NATO ally Turkey since taking office in 2021 - will also see him meet officials coordinating the delivery of US aid and see the humanitarian effort under way in Hatay.

AFP

Shark kills Australian tourist in Noumea

Noumea, France - A shark killed a 59-year-old Australian tourist on Sunday near a crowded beach in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia, authorities said.

The man was swimming close to a pontoon around 150 metres (500 feet) from the beach in the capital Noumea when the shark attacked, biting him several times, they said.

Two people sailing their boat nearby rushed him back to the beach, where emergency services tried to save him. The man had major bite wounds in his leg and both arms, local prosecutor Yves Dupas told AFP.

He died at the scene despite receiving cardiac massage.

Many people were in the water at the time and witnessed the incident at the Chateau-Royal beach just south of Noumea. There was a panicked rush back onto the beach and police evacuated the area.

Noumea's mayor, Sonia Lagarde, ordered the closure of most beaches in the area and the capture of tiger sharks and bull sharks in nearby waters.

Drones were deployed to track them and two were sighted before operations were suspended at nightfall, police said.

The prosecutor said an investigation would shed more light on the circumstances of the attack, which happened inside the zone watched over by lifeguards.

A 49-year-old swimmer was seriously injured by a shark last month, also near the Chateau-Royal beach.

A surfer was also attacked by a shark a few days later but escaped without injury.

AFP

Aid group issues urgent appeal for quake-hit Syria

Al-Hammam Crossing, Syria - The group Doctors Without Borders called on Sunday for the 'urgent scaling up' of earthquake aid to northwest Syria as it delivered a convoy laden with emergency assistance.

Aid has been slow to reach Syria's rebel-held areas since the February 6 quake killed a combined total of more than 43,000 people across Turkey and Syria.

"An urgent increase in the volume of supplies is needed to match the scale of the humanitarian crisis," said the French aid group Doctors Without Borders (MSF). It charged that supplies 'currently fail to even match pre-earthquake volumes'.

"Aid is trickling in in negligible amounts for the moment," said Hakim Khaldi, MSF's head of mission in Syria. "We emptied our emergency stocks in three days." 'According to UN data,



A convoy of trucks from Doctors Without Borders (MSF), carrying aid to earthquake victims, enters Syria from Turkey via the al-Hamam border crossing in the countryside of Jindayris in northwestern Syria, on Sunday (AFP)

five days after the earthquake, only 10 trucks had entered' rebel-held areas of Syria through the

Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey, MSF said.

It added that 'in the 10 days

following the earthquake, the number of trucks that crossed the border into northwest Syria

was lower than the average weekly number for 2022'.

A convoy of 14 trucks laden with 1,269 tents and winter kits sent by MSF had arrived in Syria through the Al-Hammam crossing in the Afrin area on Sunday.

"The delivery was arranged outside of the United Nations cross-border humanitarian mechanism," the group said.

Activists and emergency teams in Syria's northwest have decried a slow UN response to the quake in rebel-held areas, contrasting it with the plane loads of aid that have been delivered to government-controlled airports.

Before the quake struck, almost all of the crucial humanitarian aid for the more than four million people living in rebel-controlled areas was being delivered through just one crossing, Bab al-Hawa.

AFP

Plane crashes on Philippine volcano, 4 on board missing

Manila, Philippines - Rescuers struggled on Sunday to reach the slopes of an active volcano in the central Philippines where a small plane is believed to have crashed, officials said, with the fate of those on board still unconfirmed.

The Cessna 340 aircraft with four people on board went missing shortly after departing for Manila from Bicol International Airport in Albay province, several kilometres from Mayon volcano, on Saturday.

Manila-based Energy Development Corporation said the missing plane belonged to the company and it was seeking to confirm if the wreckage spotted on Sunday in 'very steep terrain and high altitude of about 6,000 feet' was

theirs.

Two of the four passengers on board the missing plane were Australian, Bicol police said, adding rescue teams with sniffer dogs had been deployed to find the crash site.

"The problem is the weather is bad and it hampers the visibility of the ground search," Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines spokesman Eric Apolonio told AFP.

Albay disaster officer Cedric Daep said a Cessna aircraft had been seen 300 to 350 metres (984 feet to 1,148 feet) from the crater. But he warned the rumbling volcano could erupt at any time, which was complicating rescue efforts.

AFP

'Why hold onto them?': Houston residents turn in their guns to police

Houston, US - Marilyn Bragg had five guns in her car - they were her late husband's, but she no longer wanted them in her home.

Over the weekend, she joined a long line of vehicles to turn the weapons in to police in Houston, Texas, a state rocked by mass shootings.

"I'm just trying to get guns out of the house. I don't even know how to shoot a gun," the 64-year-old retiree said. "I have grandkids and I don't want my grandkids to get hold of them."

Dozens of cars were waiting on Saturday in the gun drop-off line at Harris County's Deussen Park, where police weapons experts attended to them one by

one.

Gun owners had to leave their weapons in the trunk or back seat, where they were retrieved by an officer, checked to make sure they were unloaded and registered in a document.

Several people had brought at least a dozen guns, which were received without question. Over the course of the day, 793 guns were handed in.

In return, participants got gift cards worth US\$50 for a non-functioning weapon, US\$100 for a working shotgun or rifle, US\$150 for a pistol and US\$200 for a semiautomatic weapon.

This is the county's third such drive in the past year, with an-



A police officer hands off rifles to another officer to be loaded on a truck during a gun buyback programme in Houston, Texas, on Saturday (AFP)

other 2,000 guns already collected as part of a plan to reduce crime.

"I think it's a good programme. It helps me get rid of some guns I haven't used and that are of no

value to me," said 62-year-old Stuart Wolf, who was dropping off 11 guns in his truck.

"There are really no safe ways other than this to get rid of them."

Also waiting in the drop-off line with his wife Loretta was Kenneth Blackmon, 69, who was turning over seven guns.

"We have enough weapons, and some of the ones we're getting rid of, we don't need. So why hold on to them? Just get rid of them," he said.

"And not to mention the crime going on. Naturally, we don't leave our weapons in the car, but a lot of people do, and that's how a lot of the criminals... steal the

weapons."

Deadly shootings

Every day, police in cities across the state report shooting incidents. "Since 2009 more people have died in mass shootings in Texas than in any other state," said Rodney Ellis, a county commissioner, citing a report from a prominent gun control organisation. "And over the past decade, gun thefts in Texas increased by 16 per cent."

According to 2020 figures from the FBI, the violent crime rate in Texas - at 446.5 incidents for every 100,000 people - was markedly higher than the national average, at 398.5.

In 2019, there were 1,379 murders in Texas, which has a population of about 30mn people.

Of those murders, 1,064 were carried using guns, the second highest figure in the country after California. Days ago, one person was killed and three were wounded by gunshots during an altercation between two groups at a mall in the border town of El Paso. A 16-year-old suspect was detained over the crime.

The incident took place just steps from a Walmart store where, in 2019, a shooter massacred 23 people. A 24-year-old white nationalist pleaded guilty to the killings earlier this month.

AFP



England players return to the pavilion after their win against New Zealand in the first Test at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui on Sunday (AFP)

Stokes fires Ashes warning after England crush New Zealand

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand - England captain Ben Stokes fired an Ashes warning to Australia after crushing New Zealand by 267 runs in the first Test at Mount Maunganui on Sunday, saying his team has got more firepower on the way.

England made it 10 wins from 11 Tests since Stokes was handed the captaincy and Brendon McCullum the coaching reins last year, introducing an attacking revolution that again proved decisive in the day-night Test at the Bay Oval.

Having used aggression and clever pink-ball tactics to get the upper hand, England closed out victory in the first session of day four, dismissing New Zealand for 126 after they resumed at 63-5.

Veteran pace duo Stuart Broad and James Anderson both finished with four second innings wickets as England notched a first win on New Zealand soil in 15 years and took a 1-0 lead in the two-match series.

Broad (4-49) was a menace on Saturday night under lights when he tore through New Zealand's top order, with all four wickets clean bowled to reduce them to 28-5 in pursuit of 394 for victory. Long-time new ball partner James Anderson (4-18) became the chief tormentor on Sunday, knocking over four tailenders as New Zealand added 63 more runs in 22.3 overs.

Only Daryl Mitchell, unbeaten on 57, put up any resistance after resuming his innings on 13, striking two sixes on his way to a sixth Test half-century. England tactically dominated the game, batting aggressively and deliberately timing the end of both their innings so New Zealand had to face a new pink ball in lively seam conditions under lights on days one and three.

The visitors will be favourites to beat the struggling Black Caps in the second Test in Wellington before turning their attention to the showdown with Australia.



Australia's Tahlia McGrath plays a shot during their Group A match against South Africa in the T20 women's World Cup at St George's Park in Gqeberha on Saturday (AFP)

Tahlia McGrath stars as Australia beat South Africa, England edge India

Gqeberha, South Africa - Australia powered their way into the semi-finals of the Women's T20 World Cup on Saturday, confirming their status as favourites, while England looked their most likely challengers.

Australia were put under pressure by South Africa and an enthusiastic home crowd at St George's Park in Gqeberha, but won comfortably in the end by six wickets with 21 balls to spare.

In the earlier game of a double-header England remained the only other unbeaten team by inflicting a first defeat on India, winning by 11 runs.

Tahlia McGrath and Ashleigh

Tahlia was excellent, Ash as well. They summed up the conditions really well and put the pressure back on South Africa

MEG LANNING

Gardner ensured Australia would finish top of Group 1 with aggressive batting after their side had been in trouble.

Chasing 125 to win, Australia slipped to 40 for three but McGrath and Gardner went for their shots in a fourth-wicket partnership of 81.

McGrath hit 57 off 33 balls before being caught going for a

big hit with four runs needed to win. She reached her half-century off 29 deliveries. Gardner made 28 not out off 29 balls.

"Tahlia was excellent, Ash as well," said Australian captain Meg Lanning.

"They summed up the conditions really well and put the pressure back on South Africa."

South Africa captain Sune

Luus said her team had failed to capitalise on a good start to their innings after they were sent in to bat.

"We just didn't have enough runs on the board," she said.

Australia completed their group matches with four wins from four matches while defeat was a blow to South Africa's chances of reaching the semi-finals.

With only one win from their first three matches, South Africa will rely on New Zealand defeating Sri Lanka in Paarl on Sunday.

The hosts will then need to win their final match against Bangladesh in Cape Town on

Tuesday to force a three-way tie for second place in Group One.

Net run rate would then be the tiebreaker.

"It's not ideal to have to rely on other teams but we're going to leave everything out there," said Luus.

England won a top-of-the-table Group Two contest despite a career-best bowling performance by India opening bowler Renuka Thakur, who took five for 15.

But Nat Sciver-Brunt (50) and Amy Jones (40) scored freely as England posted 151 for seven. India replied with 140 for five. AFP

Swiatek sweeps past Pegula to win Qatar Open title

Doha, Qatar - World number one Iga Swiatek won her second successive Qatar Open title on Saturday, sweeping past Jessica Pegula 6-3, 6-0 in the final.

It was the Pole's first title of 2023 and 12th of her career.

The reigning French and US Open champion, Swiatek dropped just five games all week on her way to the Doha title.

Swiatek completed victory over world number four Pegula in just 69 minutes to take her career head-to-head over the American to 5-2. Doha remains a special place for Swiatek -- last year her title triumph in the Qatari capital sparked a 37-match winning streak which culminated in her second Grand Slam title at the French Open.

"I'm really happy that I could kind of find more balance, comparing to how I felt at the beginning of the season," Swiatek said, after her win. "I think this tourna-



Poland's Iga Swiatek celebrates with the trophy after defeating Jessica Pegula of the US in the final of the Qatar Open at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash complex in Doha on Saturday (AFP)

ment is going to give me a lot of confidence, but still, I want to take everything step by step. I'm just really happy that I could win this match today."

Swiatek next makes the short journey to the UAE for the Dubai WTA tournament which gets underway on Sunday.

If nothing else, she'll be hoping the playing conditions are easier than in Doha where high winds presented challenges all week.

"Yesterday it kind of hit me that even though it's windy, I can use the wind properly," said the 21-year-old. "I kind of use my intuition to sometimes imagine that I should play shorter, or on the other hand, play with more topspin so the wind is going to kind of take this ball even further."

"So today I just kind of continued that, but I didn't really want to overanalyze that, and I just kind of played how my intuition told me."

Alcaraz cruises into ATP final with Norrie in comeback event

Buenos Aires, Argentina - World number two Carlos Alcaraz, who missed four months with injuries, cruised into the final of his comeback event on Saturday at the ATP Argentina Open.

The 19-year-old Spaniard who captured last year's US Open title dispatched compatriot Bernabe Zapata Miralles 6-2, 6-2 in 77 minutes to book a Sunday championship date with Britain's Cameron Norrie.

Top seed Alcaraz is playing in his first tournament since last year's Paris Masters after suffering an abdominal tear and in January said he would miss the Australian Open with a right hamstring injury.

Just reaching the clay-court championship match against second-seeded Norrie has great meaning for Alcaraz.

"It's a really special moment for me," Alcaraz said. "I was a little bit down after the injury, so I had to recover in those four months the confidence and the rhythm."

"Coming back for my first tournament of 2023 and making the final is so special for me."

Alcaraz has a 3-1 career record against Norrie, who beat Peru's Juan Pablo Varillas 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 in an hour and 54 minutes in Saturday's other semi-final.

AFP



Christian Atsu

Body of Ghana star Atsu killed in Turkey earthquake flown home

Accra, Ghana - The remains of former Ghana international footballer Christian Atsu who died in a devastating earthquake in Turkey were being flown home on Sunday, the country's foreign ministry said.

Atsu, 31, was caught up in a 7.8-magnitude quake that rocked Turkey and Syria on February 6, killing more than 44,000 people in both countries.

There were initial reports the former Chelsea and Newcastle

United player had been rescued a from the rubbles day after the quake, but those reports turned out to be false and his body was found on Saturday.

"The remains will be accompanied by his family and Ghana's ambassador to Turkey on a Turkish airlines flight and will arrive in Accra (Ghana's capital) at 7:40 p.m. Sunday," the foreign ministry said.

On Saturday, the ministry said that Atsu's older brother and

twin sister were present at the site of the rescue when his body was recovered.

His widow Marie-Claire Rupio and their three children were in the stands at St James' Park on Saturday to join in a tribute to the player before Newcastle's Premier League match against Liverpool.

Atsu scored the last of his 33 career goals for Hatayspor in Turkey's Super Lig on February 5, hours before the quake struck.

"There are no words to describe our sadness," tweeted his Turkish top-flight club in homage to him.

"We will not forget you, Atsu. Peace be upon you, beautiful person."

He previously played for his national team the Black Stars and Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo said "football has lost one of its finest ambassadors, one who will be difficult to replace". AFP

ERRING HAALAND

Pep Guardiola rues misfiring City draw in title race blow after Norwegian star misses two sitters

Nottingham, United Kingdom - Pep Guardiola admitted Manchester City had only themselves to blame for failing to kill off Nottingham Forest in a 1-1 draw that damaged their bid to retain the Premier League title.

Arsenal's 4-2 win at Aston Villa earlier on Saturday had moved them back to the top of the table at City's expense.

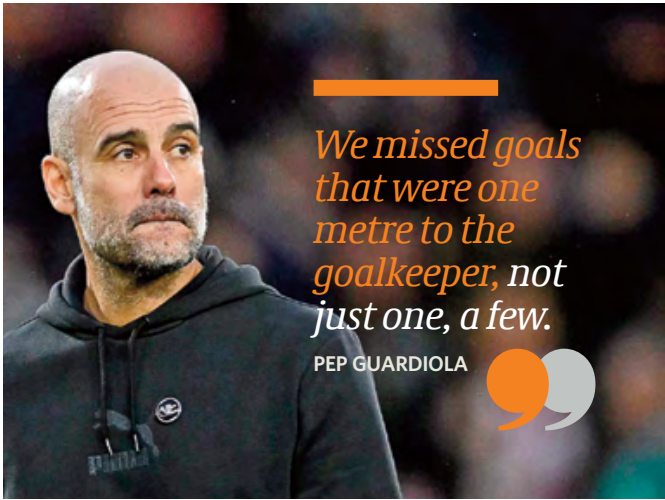
But Guardiola's side were on course to regain pole position after Bernardo Silva's 40th-minute strike from the edge of the area opened the scoring at the City Ground.

However, Erling Haaland missed two sitters and Kevin De Bruyne also wasted a good chance before Chris Wood's tap-in for his first Forest goal in the 84th minute rocked the champions. The result left second-placed City two points behind Arsenal, who have a game in hand to extend their title race lead after bouncing back from their mid-week 3-1 loss to Guardiola's men.

Guardiola conceded City were the victims of their own downfall after such sloppy finishing.



Manchester City's Erling Haaland looks disappointed at the end of their English Premier League match against Nottingham Forest on Saturday (AFP)



"It was a brilliant performance, we played really good but we didn't score. At this level you have to score and that is why we dropped points," he said.

"The first half should already be 2-0 or 3-0, we conceded one shot on target and we dropped points. We are sad and disappointed but the way we played was really good.

"We missed goals that were one metre to the goalkeeper, not just one, a few. That is why we didn't win. What can I say?"

Guardiola showed the tension

is mounting in the title fight when he was booked in the second half.

The Spaniard confronted the fourth official in a furious reaction to referee Graham Scott's decision not to award a foul after Haaland went down under a challenge from Joe Worrall when clean through on goal.

"We don't make any excuses. I could say many things that have happened this season," Guardiola said. "I am not a guy who is here to talk about things we cannot control."

AFP



Real Madrid's Federico Valverde celebrates after scoring against Osasuna in their Spanish League match in Pamplona on Saturday (AFP)

Real stumble past Osasuna before Champions League trip to Liverpool

Madrid, Spain - Fede Valverde and Marco Asensio scored as Real Madrid struggled to beat Osasuna 2-0 in La Liga on Saturday, just three days before they head to Liverpool in the Champions League.

Uruguay midfielder Valverde and Spain winger Asensio netted in the final quarter of an hour in Pamplona to cut Barcelona's advantage to five points at the top of the table before the Catalans host lowly Cadiz on Sunday.

Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema was missing from Real's matchday squad as coach Carlo Ancelotti rested the France attacker ahead of Tuesday's Champions League last-16 first leg at Anfield.

"It was a hard-fought, close match, well played by both teams, and we are all the more satisfied to have won," said Ancelotti.

Los Blancos were unable to break the deadlock before the interval as the Basque hosts stepped up their aggression in defence and were shown three yellow cards in 45 minutes.

The home side's physicality caused Ancelotti to confront the officials as they left the field at the interval as the Italian was unhappy with Osasuna's special attention to Vinicius as whistles circled around El Sadar.

AFP

Inter Milan squeeze past Udinese, Messias fires AC Milan to third

Milan, Italy - Inter Milan made sure the gap separating them from runaway Serie A leaders Napoli stayed at 15 points with a 3-1 success over Udinese on Saturday.

Romelu Lukaku, Henrikh Mkhitaryan and Lautaro Martinez all scored in a hard-fought win against ninth-placed Udinese, who have won only once in their last 15 league matches.

Simone Inzaghi's side stay second and are three points ahead of local rivals AC Milan, who beat Monza 1-0 earlier on Saturday, but are a long way behind rampant Napoli after their 2-0 win at Sassuolo on Friday.

Lukaku gave Inter the lead from the penalty spot at the second attempt in the 20th minute, his first league goal since their opening match of the season at Lecce. But Sando Lovric gave the away side a deserved equaliser with a powerful strike two minutes before half-time.

From there Inter struggled to break down spirited Udinese, Edin Dzeko missing a great chance a minute before a piece of magic from Mkhitaryan which swung the match in the hosts' favour.

Former Armenia captain Mkhitaryan swept home a beautiful first-time finish from Federico Dimarco's layoff in the 73rd minute to send a wave of relief around the San Siro.

In the final minute substitute Martinez lashed in his eighth goal in all competitions since the World Cup after collecting Danilo D'Ambrosio's long pass, giving Inter a big win ahead of the Champions League visit of Porto on Wednesday.

"Obviously it's really important to win the home leg," said

Mkhitaryan to Sky.

Milan's season is creaking back into gear and Junior Messias lashed in a powerful strike from the edge of the area in the 31st minute to earn a third league win since the new year.

"We had chances to add more... but given the situation we find ourselves in we need to keep building our belief getting results," coach Stefano Pioli told DAZN. "We're in a battle for the Champions League, but if we keep clean sheets we have the quality to win games."

AFP



Inter Milan players celebrate after beating Udinese in their Italian Serie A football match at San Siro stadium in Milan on Saturday (AFP)

Gladbach down Bayern after Upamecano red card

Berlin, Germany - Borussia Muenchengladbach continued their remarkable recent record against Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich, winning 3-2 after a controversial eighth-minute red card for defender Dayot Upamecano on Saturday.

Bayern's Upamecano controversially saw a straight red for bringing down surging French compatriot Alassane Plea just outside the box.

Replays showed the contact was minimal but after a short video review the decision stood, making it the second time in the past three German top-flight games Bayern have been reduced to 10 men.

Bayern goalkeeper Yann Sommer was given a special reception prior to the match, commemorating his eight-and-a-half year stint in Gladbach before moving to Munich to replace the injured Manuel Neuer in January.

Gladbach's free kick after the red card came to nothing but the



Bayern Munich's French defender Benjamin Pavard (L) and Muenchengladbach's French midfielder Kouadio Konevie battle for the ball during their German Bundesliga match on Saturday (AFP)

home side were given another chance just five minutes later when Canada defender Alphonso Davies handled near the corner flag.

Shaping to curl the free kick goalwards, Gladbach midfielder Jonas Hofmann cut the ball back

inside to an unmarked Lars Stindl, who struck a low shot through the crowded penalty box into the goal.

The Bavarians continued to push despite their one-man disadvantage and equalised on the counter-attack after 35 minutes,

when a lightning fast Davies sped up the sideline and cut the ball back for Eric-Maxim Choupo Moting, who rocketed in a one-touch finish.

Gladbach retook the lead after 55 minutes through Hofmann, who pressed Bayern into a mis-

take, playing a quick series of passes with Plea before smashing a near-range strike past Sommer.

Gladbach's French striker Marcus Thuram sealed the win in the 84th minute when he tapped Hofmann's cross past the outstretched hand of Sommer.

Teenage French striker Mathys Tel scored in injury time to give Bayern hope, but the home side held on for victory.

The loss, just Bayern's second of the season in all competitions, cemented Gladbach's status as Munich's bogey side.

The German champions have beaten Gladbach just once in their past seven meetings.

After the match, a frustrated Nagelsmann entered the referees changing room asking for an explanation after saying Plea "lost his balance" before the red card. Nagelsmann later apologised saying "I went too far", adding "we would have liked to win here, we didn't."

AFP

Bayern coach Nagelsmann under investigation after rant against referee

Berlin, Germany - The German FA (DFB) said Sunday Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann is under investigation over his furious rant at match officials following his side's 3-2 defeat by Borussia Muenchengladbach.

The Bayern coach will be asked to provide a statement on Saturday's incident at the beginning of next week, the DFB's investigatory body told AFP affiliate SID. Nagelsmann apologised on Saturday for storming into the referees' changing room following the defeat in Muenchengladbach.

Aggrieved by a contentious red card decision against Dayot Upamecano which reduced Bayern to ten men early in the game, Nagelsmann reportedly used heated language as he confronted referee Tobias Welz.

Journalists outside heard Nagelsmann say "that's a joke, they're taking the piss", leaving



Julian Nagelsmann

the room calling the officials "spineless".

The Bayern boss later admitted he had "gone too far", but insisted the red card was unfair.

Welz, meanwhile, defended his decision on Sport1 on Sunday morning, and said there was no bad blood between him and Nagelsmann.

"It was an emotional discussion, but there were no insults traded," he said.

SWEEPING VICTORY

Jadeja stars as India hammer Australia to take 2-0 Test series lead

New Delhi, India - India spinner Ravindra Jadeja on Sunday returned career-best figures of 7-42 to help India take an unbeatable 2-0 Test series lead with a six-wicket thrashing of Australia inside three days of a dramatic match.

Jadeja, a left-arm orthodox bowler, teamed up with fellow spinner Ravichandran Ashwin to dismiss Australia for 113 in a morning session when the tourists' batting imploded, thanks to overusing the sweep shot on a tricky New Delhi pitch.

The hosts romped to their victory target of 115 in the second session, guaranteeing that they retain the Border-Gavaskar trophy in the four-match series.

They have won their previous three series against Australia and are now close to securing a spot in the World Test Championship final.

India lost skipper Rohit Sharma, run out after a fluent 31, and Virat Kohli, who surpassed 25,000 international runs during his innings, stumped on 20.

Nathan Lyon took two wickets to return a match-haul of seven.

Cheteshwar Pujara stood firm with 31 in his landmark 100th Test to steer his team home with a winning four, as wicketkeeper-batsman Srikar Bharat, unbeaten



India's Ravindra Jadeja celebrates after taking the wicket of Australia's Alex Carey during the third day of the second Test in New Delhi on Sunday (AFP)

on 23, looked on.

"We were prepared for them coming out and playing shots," Rohit said of his team's bowling plan.

"Our idea was to not panic and just hit the right areas, waiting for the mistake to happen, and that's exactly what happened."

He added: "So our focus was keeping it tight in the morning, and these guys (Jadeja and Ash-

win) are the masters of bowling in these conditions."

Australia, who also lost the opening Test inside three days, crashed from their overnight 61-1 to be bowled out in 31.1 overs, after losing nine wickets for 52 runs in just over 90 minutes of mayhem.

Jadeja improved on his previous Test best of 7-48, adding to the three he took in the first innings. Ashwin grabbed the re-

maining three in the Australian second innings.

Off-spinner Ashwin struck in the first over of the day to get Travis Head caught behind for 43, three balls after the left-hander hit a boundary to add to his overnight score.

'This loss hurts'

Marnus Labuschagne attempted to take the attack to the opposition with the paddle shot and the

reverse sweep, but was bowled by Jadeja for 35.

David Warner's concussion substitute Matt Renshaw looked clueless against spin in his eight balls at the crease, before he missed an attempted sweep, giving Ashwin another lbw.

Wickets fell like nine-pins and Lyon narrowly averted a Jadeja hat-trick. The bowler kept up the charge to wrap up the Australian innings, which started on a

promising note near the end of day two. "Everyone controls their own game, some balls just have your name," skipper Pat Cummins said on the overuse of the sweep. "But we need a review on the shot choice."

"Both games were disappointing, this one in particular," he added. "We were ahead in the game and that doesn't happen often in India. This loss hurts."

AFP

Rohit to miss ODI opener against Australia, Test squad unchanged

New Delhi, India - India on Sunday retained their squad for the final two Tests against Australia after taking a 2-0 lead in the series, but said skipper Rohit Sharma would miss the opening one-day international due to "family commitments".

The two teams will next head to the third and fourth Tests of the series in Indore (March 1-5) and Ahmedabad (March 9-13) followed by three ODI matches starting March 17.

Test squad for third and fourth Test: Rohit Sharma (capt), KL Rahul, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Virat Kohli, KS Bharat (wk), Ishan Kishan (wk), Ravichandran Ashwin, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Shreyas Iyer, Suryakumar Yadav, Umesh Yadav, Jaydev Unadkat

ODI squad: Rohit Sharma (capt), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, Suryakumar Yadav, KL Rahul, Ishan Kishan (wk), Hardik Pandya (vice-capt), Ravindra Jadeja, Kuldeep Yadav, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Umran Malik, Shardul Thakur, Axar Patel, Jaydev Unadkat.

Skipper Rohit backs Rahul despite Test batting slump

New Delhi, India - India skipper Rohit Sharma backed his deputy KL Rahul despite an extended dry run that saw the opener fall for one Sunday during their successful second Test chase against Australia.

Rahul has failed to go past 23 in his past 10 Test innings and scored just 17 and one in the team's six-wicket win inside three days at New Delhi.

The under-fire batsman remained unlucky in his latest dismissal after his shot hit the knee of the short-leg fielder and the ball lobbed to the wicketkeeper.

Social media was abuzz with memes lampooning Rahul's dismissal. Veteran commentator Harsha Bhogle said it "might be time" for Shubman Gill to replace the deputy skipper in the third Test.

But Rohit said any batsman with potential will be guaranteed an "extended run".

"It is not just about KL but anyone," he told reporters.

"It was clear from our side that we want him to go out and play his game. We are not going to look too much into what one in-



India's KL Rahul walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal during the third day of the Test against Australia in New Delhi on Sunday (AFP)

dividual is doing, it is about how everyone needs to come together."

Coach Rahul Dravid also backed 30-year-old Rahul to come good soon. Rahul has averaged more than 33 in 47 Tests since his debut in 2014 against Australia in Melbourne.

He's got hundreds in South Africa and England, we'll continue to back him. I believe he has the quality and class to come out of this

RAHUL DRAVID

"I think he needs to trust his processes. This is just a phase, he has been one of our most successful overseas openers," Dravid told broadcaster Star Sports.

"He's got hundreds in South Africa and England, we'll continue to back him. I believe he has the

quality and class to come out of this."

'No sense of panic'

Ravindra Jadeja remained India's hero for the second straight game after his international return from a career-threatening knee injury.

The left-arm spinner returned career-best Test figures of 7-42 and combined with Ravichandran Ashwin to pack off Australia for 113 in 31.1 overs.

Rohit lauded his man-of-the-match bowler.

"He has been brilliant. Comebacks are not easy but the confidence that guy has in his ability, that is massive. And you can see it on the field," Rohit said of his champion performer, who passed 250 Test wickets in the match.

"There were times he was put under pressure but there was no sense of panic, he just kept relying on what he is good at and he kept doing that."

The hosts have retained the Border-Gavaskar trophy in the four-match series and are now close to securing a spot in the World Test Championship final.

AFP



Australia's captain Pat Cummins (R) speaks with Nathan Lyon during the second day of the second Test against India in New Delhi on Saturday

Australia to review shot choice after India loss: Cummins

New Delhi, India - Skipper Pat Cummins on Sunday admitted Australia's batsmen slipped "away from their methods" after an over-reliance on sweep shots hastened their collapse in a six-wicket Test loss to India.

The tourists' resumed on 61-1 but lost their remaining wickets in just over 90 minutes to fold for 113 in a dismal morning session on a tricky, low-bouncing New Delhi pitch.

India spinner Ravindra Jadeja dazzled with seven wickets to bring down the curtains on Australia as the hosts took an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the four-match series.

"Disappointed, we were ahead of the game but we slipped," said Cummins after his team's second straight Test loss inside three days. "Everyone controls their own game, some balls just have your name," he added. "But I think there will be a review. Shot choice, did we go about it the right way?"

Six of the 10 Australian batsmen including Steve Smith and David Warner's concussion sub-

stitute Matt Renshaw fell after attempting the sweep or reverse sweep as Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin, who took three, wreaked havoc. "I thought they bowled really well, it's not easy out there, but perhaps some guys went away from their methods," Cummins told reporters.

"Each batter has their own way to go about it. I don't think there's any one size fits all rule. Unfortunately, quite a few of us got out with kind of cross-batted shots, which might not be our preferred method."

Australia posted a competitive 263 in the first innings with India coming one-run short of the total on Saturday in what had been a closely fought match.

Indian skipper Rohit Sharma said the sweep was "not a very good option" for the tourists.

"Stepping out to the spinners was probably the safer option," he added. "That is my view."

The third Test starts on March 1 at Indore with Cummins hopeful that "a bit of a refresh" will spur a turnaround for his side and better application from the batters.

Yalla Shabab, Oman Stallions register victories

Muscat - Yalla Shabab defeated Zawawi Powertech by four wickets while Oman Stallions beat Ibn Abdul Samad (IAS CT) by 44 runs in Oman Cricket's Premier Division league powered by Muscat Pharmacy.

Opting to bat first against Yalla Shabab, Zawawi Powertech were all out for 199 in 49.1 overs with key contributions from Gowtham Sagar (40 of 62; 3x4,2x6), Muhammed Raheem (32 of 37; 3x4,2x6) and Prabhakaran Kannan (29 of 27; 3x4,1x6).

Muhammed Zahid (3/43),

Nester Dhamba (2/36) and Wasim Ali (2/31) were the main wicket-takers for the Yalla Shabab.

In reply, Hasnain UI Wahab (73 of 80; 8x4,2x6) and Hannan Rizwan (61 of 74; 7x4) played crucial roles as Yalla Shabab chased down the target in 42.4 overs. Nishad KS took 2 for 32. It was Yalla Shabab's fifth victory in six games.

In the other match, Stallions, opting to bat first, were all out for 149 in 39.2 overs despite fine contributions from Jitenkumar Ramanandi (69 of 83; 7x4) and

Yasir Ali (38 of 78; 1x4,1x6). Mehdi Hasan (4/40), Rana Naeem (3/11) and Sagheer Ahmed (2/16) shone with the ball for IAS CT.

However, Stallions bowlers responded in fine fashion to bundle out IAS CT for 105 in 31.4 overs.

Mohammed Waqas (52 of 74; 3x4,2x6) waged a lone battle for IAS CT. Bilal Khan (4/30), Mohit Patel (4/40) and Faisal Shah (2/15) were the wicket-takers for Stallions, who are third in the standings with five wins in seven games.



Yalla Shabab's Hasnain UI Wahab, Muhammed Zahid and Hannan Rizwan

GRAPHIC ART

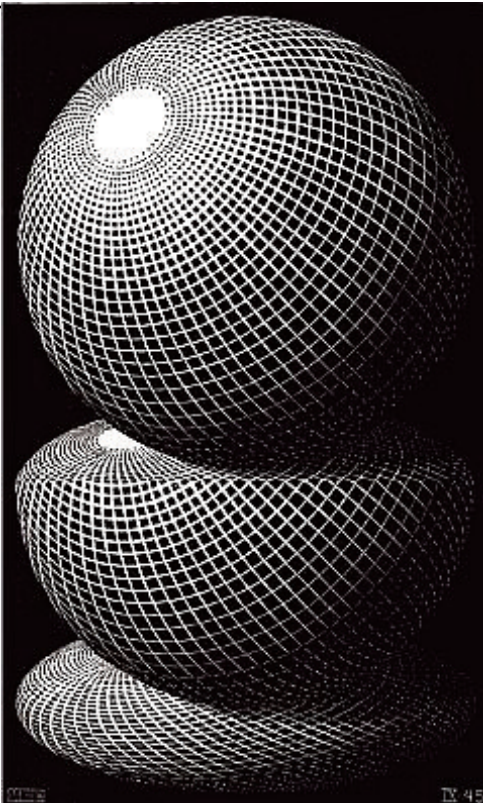
ESCHER'S WEIRD WORLD

DUTCH SHOW BRINGS M C ESCHER'S MIND-BENDING WORLD TO LIFE AT THE HAGUE

A new exhibition which opened in The Hague (The Netherlands) on Saturday makes the mind-bending works of Dutch graphic artist M C Escher jump off the page into real life. It comes as the city, where most of his art is kept, kicks off a year celebrating 125 years since his birth. Called 'Escher - Other World' the show at the Kunstmuseum combines the works of the Dutch master with architectural installations by Belgian art studio Gijs Van Vaerenbergh that bring Escher's

weird world to life. There's a sculpture by the duo with upside-down stairs and doors leading nowhere, reflecting the famous columns and steps depicted in Escher's 1947 woodcut print 'Other World (Another World)' in one hall. In another, visitors can experience a giant sculpture of a golden Gordian knot, representing the idea of eternity depicted in the knots drawn by Escher. Elsewhere, visitors can see their reflections distorted by mirrors, representing Escher's depictions

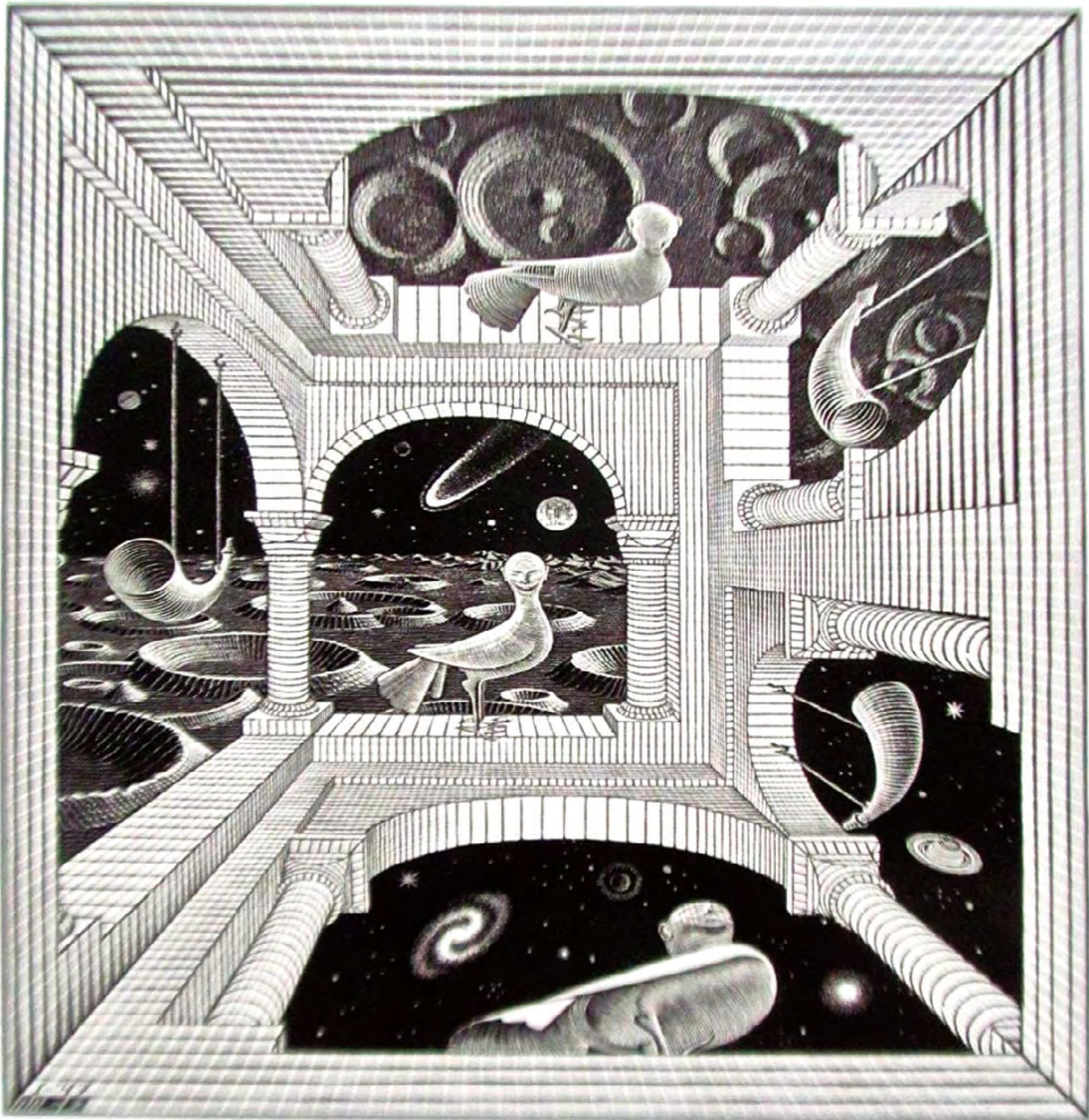
of spheres. And in another room, there is a blue 'tessellation maze' made of frames with layers, creating a pattern to the backdrop of Escher's longest woodcut print 'Metamorphosis II'. "I think you'll really experience the themes that Escher loved so dearly," the exhibition's curator Judith Kadee told AFP. "You really have sort of a physical three-dimensional experience of what Escher loved so much," she said. Kunstmuseum director Benno Tempel described it as 'a mesmerising exhibition'.



New forms of space

The exhibit is divided into two categories that feature in Escher's work: day and night. DAY, the first part of the show, is in the museum's large daylight galleries. NIGHT, the second part, exhibits some quirky themes around Escher's art in its side galleries. Arnout van Vaerenbergh, who with Pieterjan Gijs forms the art studio Gijs Van Vaerenbergh, said the idea was "to confront visitors with new forms of space and experiment, see how far we can push this." Elsewhere in The Hague, visitors will still be able to visit the Escher in the Palace museum, which has a permanent collection of the Dutch master's work. But it, too, has a special exhibition opening Saturday to mark the 125th anniversary of his birth. Escher's work will hang with that of his friend and mentor Samuel Jessurun de Mesquita, who is credited with having convinced him to switch from architecture to graphic art. Mesquita himself had been deported with his wife and son to the Nazi death camps in 1944, where they perished. In the coming months, the city is set to be dressed up in Escher's art as part of the anniversary celebrations, which climax on his birthday, June 17. In the autumn, another exhibit called 'Just like Escher' will showcase contemporary artists and designers inspired by Escher's work. 'Escher - Other World' runs at the Kunstmuseum until September 10.

AFP



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CROSS CULTURAL INITIATIVE

Growth

AN EXHIBITION, CURATED BY AUSTRIAN ARTIST MARJAN HABIBIAN, FEATURES ARTWORKS OF FOUR AUSTRIAN ARTISTS AT STAL GALLERY. THE EXHIBITION IS ON TILL FEBRUARY 28

The artists: Elisabeth Gschiel, Marjan Habibian, Marlene Gollner, and Walter Kratner

On the occasion of the celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations between Oman and Austria, the Austrian Embassy in Oman, in collaboration with Stal Gallery and Studio, presents a cross-cultural initiative, stimulating a dialogue between both countries, through an interactive art programme at Stal Gallery.

'Growth' is a cross-cultural programme, initiated and supported by the Embassy of Austria in Oman. The programme is focused on the cultural aspect and culminates in an exhibition which was inaugurated on February 14 by H E Sayyid Saeed bin Sultan al Busaidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, under the auspices of H E Christian Brunmayr, Ambassador of Austria to Oman.

The exhibition was curated by Austrian artist Marjan Habibian and features artworks of Austrian artists Elisabeth Gschiel, Marlene Gollner, Walter Kratner and Marjan Habibian.



The celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Austria and the Sultanate of Oman represents an excellent framework to work together on contemporary art projects, such as the exhibition 'Growth' at Stal Gallery

H E CHRISTIAN BRUNMAYR
Austrian Ambassador

"Growth is always accompanied by pain. Be it the growth of a plant seed, the physical growth of a human being or an animal, the intellectual growth of a human being, or even the growth of a culture, society, and civilisation. All of this requires awareness and in step of which pain is an integral part. Prosperity, beauty, and progress reach higher levels - achieving results requires effort, perseverance, tolerance, and awareness," Marjan says.

The four artists from Austria present their art using tools of different forms of art. This includes words, photos, space, materials, lines, shapes, colours or hybrid combinations of these. From the individual works and groups of works in this exhibition one can easily recognise that the artists primarily understand 'growth' as an aesthetic transformation process.

Elisabeth Gschiel, whose motifs do not draw with a pen, but sew them like threads on

paper with a sewing machine, invites you to witness a craft traditionally attributed to women from the female point of view.

The sculptures, vessels or body volumes by Marlene Gollner allow a resonance and interaction between the visible and the hidden to be experienced. Wild silk fibres are the material of these body shells, obtained from the cocoons of silkworms in the metamorphosis between chrysalis and butterfly.

Walter Kratner's work is about standardised portraits which have been retouched with graphite and oil. The viewer will realise that nationality or cultural background cannot even be guessed at a second glance.

Finally, Marjan Habibian's drawings and paintings are interspersed with painterly elements and also contain influences from Persian ornamentation.

The artists have all strived to soften traditional media boundaries and open them up for

discussion.

An Art Talk was also held on February 15 wherein the artists shared their work-in-progress as well as their thoughts on Austrian contemporary art, and the current exhibition.



Walter Kratner



Marlene Gollner



Marjan Habibian



Elisabeth Gschiel



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