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MoL launches new app for jobseekers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) at a meeting on Sunday with several ministers and governors discussed the mechanism of employment in the public and private sectors, investment in governorates, ways to localise professions and the challenges facing the governorates in these areas.

During the meeting, the ministry launched the Maak or 'with you' app for jobseekers, the national workforce, and employers. It currently contains more than 11 electronic services for jobseekers, while additional services for the national workforce and employers will be added later.

On the sidelines of the meeting, H E Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour, said that the ministry provided 35,000 jobs in 2022 in the public and private sectors, surpassing the target for the year.

He added that the number of jobseekers who joined the labour market in the private sector for the first time exceeded 20,000 last year and the number of people benefiting from the job security fund in 2022 increased by about 3,000 compared to 2021.

The ministry informed that there were more than 85,000 jobseekers in the country till the end of October 2022.

H E Sheikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosani, Undersecretary in MoL, said, "The meeting provided an



opportunity for dialogue and knowing the requirements of each governorate. It sought to familiarise the governors with the ministry's policies, its plans for the next year and the require-

ments of employment in each governorate."

The programme also covered the system of individual and institutional performance proficiency, mechanisms for

implementing the training programmes, the initiatives presented by the Training Support Centre, the National System for Capacity Building and Talent Management, and the tasks of

the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit's office.

Each governor shared a vision for his governorate - an initiative that the governor intends to in-

corporate in Oman's national economy.

Fahd Khalfan al Batashi, head of the digital transformation team at MoL, said that on the Maak app, jobseekers can upload their profiles, experiences, courses undertaken, besides their health status.

It also includes details of vacancies in the government and private sectors.

According to Batashi, the app provides jobseekers with search options for vacancies based on the educational level, gender and geographical location.

"The app in the next stage will include services for employers - both individuals and establishments - and Omani and non-Omani workforce," said Batashi.

RO10,000 award for designing Oman's pavilion

Our Correspondent
Muscat



H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham bin Tarik al Said on Sunday announced the launch of a competition to design Oman's pavilion for Expo 2025

event in Japan.

The design will be supervised by the Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

To be build on an area of 1,763sqm, Oman's pavilion proposes to present itself as a platform to unite people from different cultures in line with the expo's slogan 'Designing Future Society for Our Lives'.

In a statement, H H Sayyid Bilarab said that as a continuation of the interest shown to the Bilarab bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design, the door is open for Omani youth to invest their energies in designing the sultanate's pavilion at the Expo 2025 in Osaka - in the Kansai region of Honshu in Japan.

He informed that as there is no age restriction for participation, the competition allows a larger segment of citizens to compete. However, it is only open to special-



H H Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said

ists in the fields of architecture, design and urban planning, who can participate individually or as a team with maximum five members. Local consulting offices also have the opportunity to participate in the

competition.

H H Sayyid Bilarab concluded by inviting the youth, who meet the conditions, to participate in this national project aimed at strengthening the presence of Oman on the global map.

The results of the competition will be announced in February and the winning project will receive a financial reward of RO10,000.

It is noteworthy that the Expo 2025 aims to create an ideal future society by achieving sustainable development goals by the countries participating in the exhibition to ensure sustainability, and improve and enhance life through communication.

Six new nature reserves planned across Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) on Sunday unveiled its achievements for 2022 while celebrating the Oman Environment Day, which falls on January 8.

H E Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, chairman of EA, said, "The authority has prepared a plan to register six new nature reserves in Oman. The sites will be subject to evaluation by the concerned authorities before any announcement."

He explained that there is a roadmap for the green economy that is being implemented by the authority with the funding from Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) - in strategic partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme.

Talking about the initial indications of the national campaign to combat invasive birds, he confirmed that about 25,000 invasive birds have been eliminated, and there is a decline in their numbers.

According to Amri, the authority has implemented a set of environmental projects and initiatives in Oman across various sectors in accordance with the agreements signed by the sultanate with international organisations.

EA has also formed a committee to study and provide environmental data to international organisations such as the United Nations and publications that are interested in publishing environmental data.

Dr Mohammed Majid al Kasbi, director of the Chemicals and Waste Management Department at EA, said, "The authority disposed of 86 tonnes of pesticides, and installed 16 devices to monitor persistent organic pollutants."



H E Abdullah al Amri

He pointed out that the authority had prepared a project to study the level of mercury in the environment, its compounds and wastes in the sultanate.

"It also details several points such as limiting its import, and its emissions."

Ahmed bin Saeed al Shukaili, director of the Marine Environment Conservation Department at EA, informed that the authority is preparing an action plan for the protection and conservation of sea turtles that includes six goals to be achieved through 14 programmes.

The authority announced four investment opportunities in nature reserves - the Khor Taqah Nature Reserve, the Jabal Akhdar Landscape Reserve, the Al Hajar Starlight Reserve, and Al Saleel Natural Park. "The projects are being analysed and evaluated," he added.

The authority confirmed that it launched several projects and initiatives to save and rehabilitate wildlife; surveyed 236 coastal wetlands, and collected data on coral reefs in 11 locations in Musandam governorate.

EA said it succeeded in planting more than 2mn trees (2,084,698), sowing more than 2.5mn seeds (2,542,250), and expanding the authority's nurseries to 11, as part of the national initiative to plant 10mn trees.

RAISING A STORM IN THE DESERTS OF SAUDI ARABIA



French driver Pierre Lacheume and his Belgian co-driver Francois Beguin compete during Stage 8 of the Dakar 2023 between Al Duwadimi and Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia on Sunday. Sebastian Loeb grabbed victory on Sunday in the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally after Carlos Sainz was hit with a five-minute penalty. The victory lifted Loeb to fourth overall but he remains almost two hours behind rally leader Nasser al Attiyah (AFP) See also [Page 13](#)

Real estate trade down 2.7% to RO2.311bn till Nov last year

Our Correspondent
Muscat

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

According to the data issued by the National Centre for Sta-

tistics and Information (NCIS), the fees collected this year for real estate transactions until the end of November 2022 amounted to over RO57.7mn, a decrease of 26.8 per cent compared to the corresponding period of 2021.

The data also showed a decrease in the traded value of sales contracts by 3.1 per cent to RO1.73bn compared to

RO1.107bn in 2021, while the number of sales contracts decreased by 20.6 per cent to 64,233 until the end of November 2022, compared to 80,900 contracts during the same period in 2021.

The traded value of mortgage contracts at the end of November 2022 dropped 2.2 per cent to reach RO1.223bn, compared to RO1.251bn in No-

vember 2021.

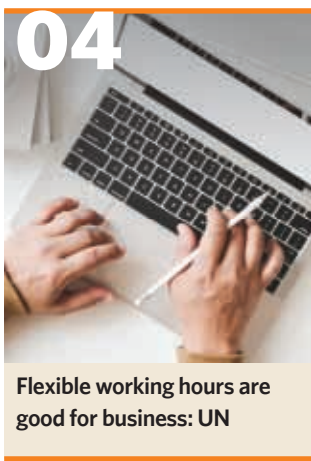
The number of mortgage contracts rose by six per cent to 17,804 from 16,795 contracts during the same period in 2021.

The number of swap contracts decreased by 23.2 per cent to 1,234 and the value of swap contracts went down by 12.9 per cent, to reach RO14.5mn until last November, compared to RO16.6mn during

the same period in 2021.

The number of title deeds issued by the end of November 2022 reached 216,168, comprising a decrease of 6.6 per cent.

The number of title deeds issued for citizens of GCC countries, however, increased by 6.2 per cent to reach 788 compared to 742 during the corresponding period in 2021.



Flexible working hours are good for business: UN



Lifting of curbs brings separated families together



93m rainfall in Bukha; family, tourists rescued

Our Correspondent Muscat

Moderate to heavy rains lashed several governorates in the last three days, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

Bukha and Khasab in Musandam recorded the highest rainfall of 93mm and 81mm respectively in three days from Friday to Sunday morning, causing many wadis to overflow.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority said that it rescued a family of three from a wadi in the wilayat of Khasab, while a group of tourists were

rescued after their car was stranded in another wadi in the Governorate of Musandam.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), Bukha in Musandam recorded 93mm rainfall in three days from Friday.

Data collected from the rain monitoring stations of MAFWR from Friday till Sunday showed that Khasab received 81mm of rainfall, Liwa 62mm, Shinas 42mm, Madha 34mm, Sohar 18mm, Nakhal 14mm, Khaboura 11mm, Saham 8mm, Wadi al Maawal 6mm, Mahdah 5mm, Seeb 3mm, Rustaq 3mm and

Mussanah 2mm.

Stay away from wadis

The authority called on the citizens and residents to take precautions and not risk crossing wadis and to stay away from low-lying areas, in order to avoid loss of life and property.

The Directorate General of Meteorology predicted mainly clear skies for most of the governorates with advection of clouds and chance of late night and early morning low clouds over the governorates of South Sharqiyah, Al Wusta and Dhofar on Monday.

HOW CAN WE CASH IN ON WINTERS?



Oman enjoys three to four months of winter every year. What makes winters in Oman the best time to visit is the pleasant weather, which is neither too cold to force you stay indoors, nor too hot to make you feel uncomfortable when out in the sun. Winters in Oman allow visitors to experience the highly diverse terrain and topography of the country, which cannot be otherwise enjoyed completely during the rest of the year. Also, winters here mean to put on your adventure shoes and get in the wilderness to explore the real beauty of Oman. How can Oman make use of its pleasant winter season? What kind of activities can be planned to attract visitors? Here is what Muscat Daily readers had to say on this:

nature being at its best. To attract more tourists during the winter months, we can organise film and music festivals, besides organising more international championships in various fields of sports. When Oman becomes the host of more international events, it will in turn encourage more tourists to come and enjoy the pristine beauty and warm hospitality of Oman.

Yousuf al Balushi
Gym trainer

We can have more sporting events in the country during this time. This will engage people as well as attract investments. The best example has been the recently concluded FIFA World Cup in Qatar that was held during the winter months. Another idea can be to have more outdoor activities. It is also the time to organise various festivals, while Muscat can work on something on the lines of Dubai Shopping Festival.

Ahmed al Busaidi
Private company employee

More events and more outdoors activities must be promoted at a reasonable price during the winter months. This is the time for international tourists to visit Oman; and I think that there must be some special passes and privileges (at least for a few months) for them. This shall benefit the country and we must capitalise on this.

Mohammad Osama Rawat
Private sector employee

Oman has mesmerising deserts and beautiful mountains. The best option to attract visitors during the winter season is to create a special economical fare structure for tourists which is otherwise quite high during the winter season. Muscat should have a floating restaurant, which will serve as an added attraction.

Salim Rawahi
Cashier

The best way to make Oman more popular

is to have more winter activities and events for the gastronomically adventurous tourists. We can have stalls of international food at Muttrah and Seeb Corniche as well as in marinas. Of course, prices will have to be more affordable than what we find in star hotels. This will also boost the economy at the grassroots level.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

Oman's winters are pleasant and exciting in contrast to the harsh winters that people face in the western world. During this season, Oman becomes more vibrant with the



With Oman banning the import of plastic bags, how will the decision help curb the menace?

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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Citizen dies after falling from mountain in Quriyat

Our Correspondent Muscat

The body of a citizen who fell from a mountain in the wilayat of Quriyat was recovered on Saturday.

A Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) offi-



cial said, "Teams of the Department of Civil Defence and Ambulances in Muscat responded to an accident report involving a citizen who fell from a mountain in the wilayat of Quriyat.

"The teams, in cooperation with Royal Oman Police avia-

tion, were able to reach the site despite the difficult mountainous terrain, and retrieve the body of the man."

CDAA has urged hikers and mountaineers to register their details on the NIDAA app prior to venturing out on any adventure trip.

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Companies specialized in the field and registered with Tender Board, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link: (https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	No E-Tender	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/22/154	2023/MM/QS-6	Supply & Installation of Chain Link Fence at AL Seeb	25	28/01/2023	16/02/2023	Specialist
PRE/22/174	2023/MM/QS-7	Supply & Installation of Playground Equipment in Different Parks	25	28/01/2023	16/02/2023	Specialist
PRE/22/177	2023/MM/QS-8	Annual Maintenance Contract For Data Center Systems Muscat Municipality	25	28/01/2023	16/02/2023	First

Tender Conditions :-

1- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of abond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1%) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.

- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+96824402200).
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OQ to finance three environment projects

250,000 trees to be planted as part of national initiative for planting 10mn trees

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) signed three agreements with the OQ Group, a global integrated energy company, to finance environmental initiatives in the sultanate.

The first agreement is related to OQ's Green Initiative, a project that aims to increase green areas by planting 250,000 trees as part of the national initiative for planting 10mn trees launched in January 2020.

The second agreement relates to supporting Al Saleel Natural Park in the wilayat of Al Kamil Wal Wafi in South Sharqiyah as part of the OQ's belief in the importance of effective social engagement for the well-being of the society.

The third agreement is for supporting the initial response unit for oil pollution incidents in Musandam governorate.

This project falls under the OQ's social investment programme as part of its approach aimed at promoting the efforts exerted to protect the environment and conserve natural resources.

Environment conservation is considered a pillar of the social



The signing of these three agreements reflects OQ's commitments towards conserving the environment in Oman

TALA BIN HAMAD AL AWFI

responsibility programmes carried out by OQ, a press release stated.

The agreements were signed by H E Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, Chairman of EA, and Tala bin Hamad al Awfi, CEO of the OQ Group.

"We appreciate the efforts exerted by OQ, whether it comes to complying with the national and international environmental frameworks and legislations in its operations or implementing environmental requirements in various operation sites," H E Amri said.

He commended OQ's contributions to the environment through its support to the efforts of the governmental authorities including EA in their initiatives for the conservation of the environment and Oman's natural resources.

"The signing of these three agreements reflects OQ's commitments towards conserving the environment in Oman considering that it is a pillar of OQ's social investment programme," Awfi said.

"It also embodies its social responsibility and the group's belief

in the importance of enhancing the governmental and social efforts aiming at implementing the initiatives that call for environment preservation and conserving natural resources."

The OQ's CEO asserted that his organisation "makes the environment a priority in every aspect of its operations and activities out of its belief in the importance of business sustainability".

"It pays great attention to the necessity of striking a balance between achieving this sustainability and conserving natural and environmental resources."

Awfi confirmed that OQ as a global integrated energy group, moves forward in implementing its policies that observe balanced environmental frameworks and support the initiatives that add value to the society.

Sharqiyah international film festival to showcase 118 films

Our Correspondent Muscat

As many as 118 films from 18 countries will be showcased at the Sharqiyah International Film Festival to be held in Sur from January 11 to 14.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Anwar al Ruzaqi, director of the event, said that the festival - being organised by the Oman Film and Theater Society - "is the fifth stop in the series of international festivals launched by the society".

"These festivals aim to enhance the capabilities of film-

makers in the sultanate, as well as to promote the 'Make Your Film in Oman' project."

Some of the 18 countries that will be represented in the festival include Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen, Iran, Tunisia, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. "Oman will be represented by 18 local films," informed Ruzaqi.

The Sharqiyah festival aims to spread and promote cinematic culture and tourism potential of various governorates; besides exploring the capabilities and creativity of local filmmakers.

"The festival will have a seminar on cinema and architecture, and workshops on script writing and cinematography. A tour of the governorate will also be organised for the guests from abroad," said Ruzaqi.

The festival will also include competitions for feature films and short documentaries. It will host some well-known personalities from the field of cinema and theatre, such as actor Saad al Faraj from Kuwait; Jordanian actress Suhair al Fahd; Hana al Omair, chairperson of the new Saudi Cinema Association; among others.

170 bikers rally to promote tourism

Our Correspondent Muscat



To promote tourism and the Omani archaeological sites, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) and Oman Riders concluded a motorbike rally that traversed five governorates and covered 750km in three days culminating on Sunday.

Speaking to Muscat Daily, Khalid al Azri, head of Oman Riders, said, "Around 170 bikers from the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Italy, Jordan and some of the Gulf countries took part in the rally, which was flagged off on Friday.

"The rally started from the Oman Automobile Association in Muscat at 8am and headed to South Batinah. From there the bikers went to North Batinah and Dhahirah governorates and ended the ride in Buraimi on Sunday."

The bikers visited popular tourist sites such as Al Mansur

Castle in the wilayat of Rustaq, Bait al Marah Castle (Husn Bait al Marah) in Yanqul and Falaj al Sarrani, located in Sara Oasis in the wilayat of Buraimi.

The riders were greeted by enthusiastic crowds. In few places they were received by popular Omani bands presenting folk songs to welcome the bikers.

The rally, Azri informed, was held to promote Omani tourism and heritage sites and spread awareness on the importance of sports, especially motorbike sports.

"We organise many activities throughout the year to spread awareness about voluntary works, besides two annual activities: One in the city of Salalah and another across several governorates during the winter season."

Azri added that the group will continue to popularise sports among youth, and called for community participation in promoting Omani archaeological sites. "I hope that the youth follow traffic rules and safety measures when riding motorbikes."

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(RO1 equals)

Indian	214.06
Pakistan	591.27
Bangladesh	270.32
Philippines	144.46
Sri Lanka	951.84

*Rates as on January 08

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Shell says European windfall taxes to cost \$2bn

British energy giant Shell said windfall taxes imposed by the European Union and UK following a surge in profits would cost the group about US\$2bn.

Shell said the exceptional tax bill, imposed after oil and gas prices surged last year, would be included in its 2022 fourth quarter earnings to be confirmed next month.

Energy prices soared following the invasion of Ukraine by key oil and gas producer Russia, contributing heavily to decades-high inflation worldwide.

That has led to governments subsidising rocketing energy bills for consumers, with help from the sector's companies via additional taxing of profits.

Shell said in a statement Friday that the impact on fourth quarter earnings of the EU and UK windfall taxes "is expected to be around US\$2bn".

It comes with Shell under new leadership after Ben van Beurden stepped down as chief executive at the end of last year after nearly a decade at the helm.

The energy major will now look to reinvent itself under the group's former renewables boss Wael Sawan.

Flexible working hours are good for business: UN

Geneva, Switzerland – Flexible working arrangements like those introduced during the Covid-19 crisis are not only good for employees but also boost productivity and potentially a business's bottom line, the United Nations said.

In its first report focusing on work-life balances, the UN's International Labour Organization evaluated the effects of working time, working hours and working time arrangements on the well-being of staff and also on business performance.

"This report shows that if we

apply some of the lessons of the Covid-19 crisis and look very carefully at the way working hours are structured, as well as their overall length, we can create a win-win, improving both business performance and work-life balance," Jon Messenger, lead author of the report, said in a statement.

The report examines the crisis response measures governments and businesses used as the pandemic spread, aimed at keeping organisations functioning and workers employed.

It found that the larger proportion of workers on reduced hours helped to prevent job losses. And it determined that the "large-scale implementation of telework" put in place around



the world had "changed not only teleworking but also the nature of employment, most likely for the foreseeable future."

The Covid measures provided

powerful evidence, the ILO said, that giving workers more flexibility in how, where and when they work could be positive not only for them but also for businesses, including through increased productivity.

On the flip side, restricting flexibility increased costs, including because of increased staff turnover, the report found.

"There is a substantial amount of evidence that work-life balance policies provide significant benefits to enterprises," it said. The ILO emphasised that teleworking and other flexible

working arrangements helped maintain employment while encouraging more employee autonomy.

But it said regulation, including so-called "right to disconnect" policies, was needed to avert negative effects.

According to the report, far from everyone in the global workforce works a standard eight-hour day, or 40 hours a week. More than a third regularly work more than 48 hours each week, while 20 percent work fewer than 35 hours per week.

AFP

Bank Muscat wins investor relations award from MEIRA

Muscat – Bank Muscat has won the Leading Corporate for Investor Relations Award from the Middle East Investor Relations Association (MEIRA) at an awards ceremony held in Riyadh recently.

The award was received on behalf of the bank by Nasser al Balushi from the Riyadh branch at an event, which was attended by senior officials from a number of stock exchanges and listed companies from the region. MEIRA is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the Investor Relations (IR) profession and international standards in corporate governance. The awards initiative is part of the integrated efforts made by MEIRA in partnership with regulators and stock exchanges in the region to promote disclosures and raise awareness about the need for transparency as well as the importance of disclosing interim and material information.

MEIRA aims to enhance the reputation, efficiency and attractiveness of capital markets in the Middle East region through dialogue among members and encouraging the Investor Relations community to implement global best practices within the field.

The association works closely with stock exchanges, regulators and other market participants to support companies in their professional development and certification programmes. As a corporate member of MEIRA, Bank Muscat, which is recognised as the leading financial services provider in Oman, is committed to the implementation of best practices in its investor relations, greater transparency and improved market communications.

Bank Muscat in line with its vision 'To serve you better, everyday', has always committed to providing accurate and updated information to all its stakeholders in accordance to the relevant rules and regulations. It is indeed a matter of great pride that the bank has put in place a clear strategy to disseminate critical information in a consistent and timely manner to its stakeholders. The bank regularly issues financial results data as well as clarifications and disclosures on issues, which may affect its current and future operations.

Furthermore, Bank Muscat engages with investors periodically as per the Investor Relations regulations and practices to provide updates and outlook on the bank's performance.



Gulf Stone Company suspends operations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Sohar-based Gulf Stone Company announced that it has suspended operations until further notice due to severe financial problems.

"We would like to inform you that our company is facing severe cash flow problems due to severe shortage in sales, demand was affected due to the economic effects of the COVID-19," Gulf Stone Company said in a disclosure submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

As per the disclosure, the company has run out of all financial resources and not in a position to procure raw materials and run its day-to-day operations.

"The company is forced to suspend its operation starting from January 5, 2023 until further notice. We will keep you updated," Gulf Stone Company added.

The company further said that its board of directors is trying to find a solution by increasing the capital and/or to bring new investors to subscribe the company's shares.

Gulf Stone Company is an Oman-based publicly listed company producing engineered quartz stone since year 2001 and exporting to more than 20 countries around the world.



Saad Sherida al-Kaabi (right), Qatar's energy minister, and Bruce Chinn, CEO of Chevron Phillips, attend a signing ceremony in Doha (AFP)

Qatar, Chevron to build \$6bn gas-to-plastics plant

Doha, Qatar – Qatar signed a US\$6bn deal with Chevron Phillips Chemical on Sunday to build a plant including the biggest ethane cracker in the Middle East, converting natural gas into polyethylene and other plastics.

The Ras Laffan Petrochemicals Complex, which will produce 2.1mn tonnes of ethylene a year along with 1.7mn tonnes of polyethylene derivatives, will come on stream in 2026.

The complex will have "lower waste and greenhouse gas emissions" than similar facilities around the world, said Saad Sherida al-Kaabi, Qatar's energy minister and the CEO of QatarEnergy.

QatarEnergy has a 70 per cent equity share in the joint venture with Texas-based Chevron Phillips taking the other 30 per cent.

"This marks QatarEnergy's

largest investment ever in Qatar's petrochemicals sector and the first direct investment in 12 years," Kaabi said at a signing ceremony in Doha.

Ras Laffan will double Qatar's ethylene production capacity and increase its polymer output from 2.6mn tonnes to more than four million tons a year. Overall, Qatar's petrochemical production capacity will rise to almost 14mn tonnes a year.

The investment "marks an important milestone in QatarEnergy's downstream expansion strategy", Kaabi said.

"It will not only facilitate further expansion in the downstream and petrochemical sectors in Qatar, but will also reinforce our integrated position as a major global player in the upstream, LNG, and downstream sectors."

AFP

COMMENTARY

Hydrogen-centric economy presents opportunities for UK-Oman partnership

Oman and the UK have strong economic ties, which deliver thousands of Omani jobs, growth and prosperity. Around 47 per cent of all the foreign direct investment (FDI) into Oman is British, with the energy sector playing a vital part. British flag-bearers bp and Shell – and a whole ecosystem of UK energy companies, including SMEs from across the UK – heavily contribute towards a sector that underpins 77 per cent of Omani state revenue.

COP26 and COP27 have shown how energy is changing; and I am delighted that Oman is surging ahead as a regional leader. Last month's Second Green Hydrogen Summit in Muscat brought together leaders in every aspect of the hydrogen value chain from production and transportation to applications and storage. Spearheaded by the Omani government, the summit demonstrated the sultanate's ambition to be a global leader in green hydrogen.

Oman's renewable energy potential stems in large part from its enviable location. With strong sun, fierce winds and abundant space, located near strategically located shipping ports for future exports, Oman will only have to allocate 0.1 per

cent of its landmass for renewable energy to support its own future energy requirements, making energy exports key.

Vision, innovation and collaboration are also key to success, and the sultanate's plans to



SIMON PENNEY
UK Trade Commissioner for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan and British Consul General to Dubai

build a hydrogen-centric economy by 2040 hold significant opportunities for partnership between our two nations. Three factors drive the potential for this UK-Oman collaboration: the strength of the UK's policy framework, renewables ecosystem; and the government export financing.

UK's policy framework

Low carbon hydrogen is the UK's new home-grown super-fuel and it will be vital for our own energy security, in order to meet our legally binding commitment to achieve net zero by 2050. Last year the UK govern-

ment doubled the UK's 2021 hydrogen production ambition to up to 10GW, by 2030. This places the UK firmly at the forefront of the global race to develop hydrogen. As hydrogen provides a secure, low carbon replacement for fossil fuels, it enables the transition to a greater energy security and of course to reach our net zero targets.

UK's renewables ecosystem

We cannot achieve our green energy goals in a vacuum, and we need to work with partners around the world to reach global solutions. I was delighted to be a keynote speaker at the Omani government's 'New Energy Oman' conference at Mansion House in London in July last year. I joined H E Abdulsalam al Murshidi, H E Qais al Yousef and senior representatives from

OQ, PDO, Hydrom and many more. We were joined by over 250 UK institutional investors and energy companies from every corner of the UK. These companies see the opportunity in Oman and were keen to hear about the hydrogen opportunities on offer. Many of these attendees visited Oman for the British embassy's Energy Trade Mission last October, and December's Green Hydrogen Summit Oman.

UK's export financing

The UK-Oman Sovereign Investment Partnership, signed almost one year ago, has provided the springboard to diversify and keep increasing bilateral investment, to support prosperity and quality jobs across every corner of both our countries.

One critical element to unlocking Oman's renewables potential is finance. Through the UK's export credit agency, UK Export Finance (UKEF), the British government has the potential to play a catalytic role in this area.

UKEF is emerging as a pioneer export credit agency for sustainability. Last year, UKEF was the export credit agency (ECA) which provided the most financing for sustainable deals,

with £3.6bn provided for sustainable projects. It was recognised as the top ECA for sustainable financing, according to an independent ranking.

UKEF recently launched a new mission statement which puts sustainability at the heart of its agenda, and revealed an ambitious suite of new emissions reduction targets. With an already strong partnership with Oman, and a track record of financing strategic projects here, I expect to see UKEF emerge as a key participant in supporting major deals in Oman's renewable energy and clean growth space.

In summary, the UK recognises that partnership, collaboration and co-investment hold the keys to a greener and more sustainable future for Oman and the UK; and the UK's offer will continue to support new jobs, growth and prosperity across Oman and the UK. The Trade and Investment team at the British Embassy Muscat are primed and ready to drive this forward – onwards we go.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of Muscat Daily or Apex Media Publication

Eurozone annual inflation drops to 9.2% in December

Brussels, Belgium – The eurozone’s annual inflation rate fell for a second month in a row, to 9.2 per cent in December, driven by easing energy prices, official data showed, bringing some relief to Europe in the new year.

Boosted by the slowdown in the rate of energy cost rises, inflation fell last month from 10.1 per cent in November, according to EU statistics agency Eurostat.

It is the first time the rate is in single digits since September.

Consumer prices had reached a record 10.6 per cent in October, caused by sky-high energy prices buffeted by Russia’s war in Ukraine. That is five times higher than the European Central Bank’s target.

Analysts had expected the inflation rate in the single currency area to drop again but the fall was larger than predicted by Bloomberg and FactSet, which foresaw 9.5 per cent and 9.7 per cent respectively.

Energy costs rose 25.7 per cent in December compared to 34.9 per cent a month earlier. Food and drink costs also rose.

“All told, the early 2023 data releases confirm that the more apocalyptic scenarios envisaged a few months ago will be averted,” Andrew Kenningham, chief Europe economist at Capital Economics said in a note.

The figures were unlikely to convince the ECB to stop raising interest rates, analysts warned, since the rate of core inflation,



which excludes energy and food prices, actually rose in December.

“The eurozone economy is at best stagnating, and persistent core inflation means the ECB will feel duty-bound to press on with its tightening cycle for a while yet,” Kenningham said.

More rate increases

“It is likely that the peak in inflation is behind us now, but far more relevant for the economy and policymakers is whether inflation will structurally trend back to two percent from here on,” said Bert Colijn, senior eurozone economist at the ING bank.

Colijn noted that core inflation was “still adjusting with a lag” which the ECB had taken “a very hawkish stance towards... and has indicated that it will hike through a mild recession to bring inflation structurally down to two per cent”.

ECB chief Christine Lagarde last month promised to tame rampant inflation and warned the eurozone to brace for more rate hikes in 2023.

“We are raising interest rates and we will raise them further, at a steady pace, until they are at a level which ensures a timely return of inflation to our two-per cent medium-term target,”

Lagarde said in a message on December 23.

Among the 20 countries that use the euro, including Croatia which joined this month, Spain has the lowest inflation rate, reaching 5.6 per cent in December, Eurostat said.

France and Germany this week reported falls in consumer prices in December, further raising hopes that Europe may be past the peak of inflation.

Across the Atlantic, officials from the US Federal Reserve also indicated there would be more rate hikes this year to keep prices under control.

AFP

Pakistan forex reserves decline to eight-year low

Karachi, Pakistan – Pakistan’s central bank forex reserves have plunged to an eight-year low of US\$5.6bn, posing a serious challenge for the country in financing imports.

Coupled with another US\$5.8bn held by commercial banks, the nation has US\$11.4bn in reserves - enough to pay for just three weeks of imports, traders and economists say.

“This is a very grave situation. If things get worse, Pakistan will need to have its loans restructured,” said Mohammad Sohail, the head of economic watchdog Topline Securities in Karachi, alluding to a possible default.

Pakistan’s economy has crumbled alongside a simmering political crisis, with the rupee plummeting and inflation at decades-high levels, but devastating floods and a global energy crisis have piled on further pressure.

The latest data from the central bank released overnight - for the week ending December 30 - show the country has half the foreign exchange reserves it held a year ago.

Servicing foreign debt and paying for crucial commodities such as medicine, food and energy are among the chief concerns.

Thousands of shipping containers are held up at a Karachi port because banks have been unable to guarantee foreign exchange pay-



ments.

Cargo includes perishable foodstuffs and medical equipment worth tens of millions of dollars.

“A major hospital in Karachi could not carry out eye surgeries for a month because of a lack of equipment,” said Masood Ahmed, chairman of the Healthcare Devices Association of Pakistan.

Successive governments have failed to shore up multilateral or bilateral aid to meet foreign payments, although a US\$6bn International Monetary Fund deal was restarted after Pakistan finally met conditions such as ending subsidies on fuel.

But Islamabad has so far only received half the funds - the last payment in August - with a further review of the package ongoing.

“All hopes are pinned on the release of the remaining amount,” Sohail said.

Pakistan often looks for financial rescue from allies including China and Saudi Arabia, but analysts say the two countries are holding off until Pakistan gets the IMF green light.

Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif spoke with both his Chinese counterpart and the IMF managing director on Thursday.

Shehbaz said Friday the Chinese premier informed him that Beijing had told the IMF that China stands with Islamabad in this difficult situation. On Friday the leader of Pakistan’s powerful military was in the Saudi capital where he was reportedly pushing for financial relief.

AFP

Germany has avoided 'worst-case' energy scenario: Minister

Oslo, Norway – Germany has so far avoided the “worst-case scenario” of an economic meltdown after being cut off from Russian gas, and is optimistic its stocks will last through next winter, the economy minister said.

Russia, the biggest exporter of gas to the European Union before it invaded Ukraine, turned off the taps in September last year over crippling sanctions imposed against it over the war.

Germany, Europe’s largest economy, was heavily dependent on Russian gas, and scrambled to find alternative suppliers, such as Norway and the United States, paying a higher price for their gas.

“The worst-case scenario that threatened this summer has been avoided so far... a complete meltdown of the heart of European and German industry has been avoided,” climate and economy minister Robert Habeck said during a visit to Oslo.

He told a press conference that gas “reservoirs are well-filled, more than 90 per cent, and prices are falling.”

Habeck said that while gas prices could rise again, he had a “certain optimism” ahead of next winter, as gas stocks have been boosted and deliveries of liquefied natural gas (LNG) have ramped up.

Like much of Europe, Germany has scrambled to build infrastructure to import LNG, and inaugurated its first terminal in December.

Norway boosted its gas production by eight per cent last year and has become Europe’s leading gas supplier since war broke out in Ukraine.

“Germany has rarely been more important to Norway than right now. And I think Norway has rarely been more important



to Germany, as it is right now,” Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said.

On Thursday, the two countries agreed to boost cooperation in green sectors such as renewable energy and electric batteries.

Norwegian oil and gas giant Equinor and German utility firm RWE announced a joint hydrogen project aimed at helping Germany decarbonise its energy production.

The plan includes the construction of an unspecified number of plants -- initially fuelled by Norwegian natural gas -- to replace coal-fired power plants which Berlin wants to close by 2030.

While natural gas emits less CO2 than coal, it will gradually be replaced by hydrogen as production capacity increases.

The “blue” hydrogen will be produced from natural gas at first, with more than 95 percent of the CO2 captured through the industrial process.

It will then be carbon-free “green” hydrogen, using energy from offshore wind farms that Equinor and RWE want to develop jointly off Germany and Norway.

AFP

US services activity shrinks in December

Washington, US – The dominant US services sector contracted for the first time in more than two years in December, survey data showed on Friday, as business activity slumped.

The Institute for Supply Management’s services index dipped below a key 50-per cent threshold, indicating a contraction and surprising economists.

The sector accounts for two-thirds of the world’s largest economy and has held up in spite of a forceful campaign by the Federal Reserve to cool demand and rein in surging inflation - but the higher interest rates now appear to be biting.

The ISM services index “ended a 30-month period of growth, contracting for the first time since two straight months of sub-50 per cent readings in April and May 2020,” said ISM survey chair Anthony Nieves.

The December reading came in at 49.6 per cent, with the business activity index and new orders index both plunging.



In this file photo taken on June 13, 2022, chefs prepare food in the kitchen of Amali restaurant in New York (AFP)

While supplier deliveries were faster in December as logistics problems eased, “employment contracted due to a combination of decreased hiring due to economic uncertainty and an inability to backfill open positions,” Nieves said. “The holiday season contributed to the continued growth in business activity, albeit

at a slower rate,” he added.

'Startling'

“The alarming 10.8-point plunge in new orders came out of the blue,” said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

According to the ISM survey, comments from respondents

noted that “high interest rates for mortgages have slowed sales dramatically,” while orders were softening or in some cases, being canceled.

The real estate and entertainment sectors were among industries reporting a decline in new orders last month, ISM added.

While monthly numbers may

fluctuate, “the headline number is startling and a repeat performance in January should set alarm bells ringing,” Shepherdson warned.

For now, “business is slower than usual,” said a survey respondent in the agriculture sector. Another respondent from the property sector added: “We are optimistic, although concerned, about continued inflation pressures... and supply chain issues that just won’t go away.”

“Increasing interest rates are dampening the residential housing construction market, which only adds to the concerns,” the respondent said.

But Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics said although the latest data point to weaker activity in 2023, “we are still quite a ways from a significant slowdown.”

“It’s important to remember that softer readings on the economy are a feature, not a bug, of the Fed’s rate hiking campaign,” he said.

AFP

International fusion energy project faces delays

Saint-Paul-les-Durance, France – An international project in nuclear fusion may face “years” of delays, its boss has told AFP, weeks after scientists in the United States announced a breakthrough in their own quest for the coveted goal.

The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) project seeks to prove the feasibility of fusion as a large-scale and carbon-free source of energy.

Installed at a site in southern France, the decades-old initiative has a long history of technical challenges and cost overruns.

Fusion entails forcing together the nuclei of light atomic elements in a super-heated plasma, held by powerful magnetic forces in a doughnut-shaped chamber



Pietro Barabaschi, CEO of ITER, gestures before an interview in his office in Saint-Paul-les-Durance, France (AFP)

called a tokamak.

The idea is that fusing the particles together from isotopes of hydrogen -- which can be extracted from seawater -- will create a safer and almost inexhaustible form of energy compared with splitting atoms

from uranium or plutonium.

ITER’S previously-stated goal was to create the plasma by 2025.

But that deadline will have to be postponed, Pietro Barabaschi -- who in September became the project’s director-general -- told

AFP during a visit to the facility.

The date “wasn’t realistic in the first place,” even before two major problems surfaced, Barabaschi said.

One problem, he said, was wrong sizes for the joints of blocks to be welded together for the installation’s 19-by-11-metre (62-by-36-feet) chamber.

The second was traces of corrosion in a thermal shield designed to protect the outside world from the enormous heat created during nuclear fusion.

Fixing the problems “is not a question of weeks, but months, even years,” Barabaschi said.

A new timetable is to be worked out by the end of this year, he said, including some modification to contain the expected cost overrun, and to

meet the French nuclear safety agency’s security requirements.

Barabaschi said he hoped ITER would be able to make up for the delays as it prepares to enter the full phase, currently scheduled for 2035.

On December 13, US researchers working separately from ITER announced an important technical breakthrough.

Scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) in California said they had used the world’s largest laser to create, for the first time, a fusion reaction generating more energy than it took to produce.

“Some competition is healthy in any environment,” Barabaschi said about the success.

AFP



NBO signs agreement with Nesto Hypermarket

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently signed an agreement with Nesto Hypermarket on providing global transaction banking services to Nesto in Oman.

As NBO is continuously seeking to optimise, automate and personalise its services, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) will see the bank providing online direct debit and smart digital payment solutions to Nesto Hypermarket. These online services will be available through the bank's Corporate Internet Banking platform, integrated Point of Sale (POS) Machine and Payment Gateway, which will further optimise the management of the client's working capital, a press release said.

Furthermore, the agreement will improve the customer experience in Nesto stores and will result in co-marketing initiatives and joint campaigns, while both, NBO and Nesto employees, will be able to benefit from special offers as well.

Mohammed al Jabri, assistant general manager, and head of Global Transaction Banking at National Bank of Oman, said, "Our reimagined partnership with Nesto Hypermarket enables our long-standing client to benefit from our sustainable and cutting-edge technological solutions and our Corporate Internet Banking platform."

He added, "We aim to support all our corporate clients through a range of state-of-the-art global transaction banking services. As banking is transforming at a rapid and tech-driven pace, we will keep on pushing for further improvements in our services. Hereto, we remain committed to our relentless exploration of the most innovative digital solutions that support our clients' specialized business needs and drive progress over time."

Al Sayyid Khalid bin Mahfoodh al Busaidi, partner at Nesto Group, said, "At Nesto Hypermarket, we strive to provide our customers with the best shopping experience. As one of the leading hypermarkets in the region and rapidly growing, we are continuously looking for ways to improve our services and take our customer service to the next level.

"With this in mind, we have recently partnered with National Bank of Oman to provide a range of innovative digital banking solutions, which will help optimise the management of our working capital and further enhance the customer experience in our stores. We are delighted to be collaborating with such a renowned financial institution and look forward to the many benefits that this agreement will bring."

As a large corporate, Nesto will benefit from its digital shift in many ways and from using the cutting-edge Corporate Internet Banking (CIB) platform in particular. The CIB platform takes care of all types of payments, including local and international transfers, foreign currency payments, and bill payments, while it provides a vendor and salary file upload service, as well as other supporting online services. Meanwhile, the Direct Debit solution helps Nesto and other large corporates and institutions to efficiently manage the recurring collections from their customers, resulting in an improved cash flow and an efficient recovery of overdue invoices.

Oman Air ranked most punctual airline in Middle East and Africa

Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, has been named top in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) for punctuality.

As per the results of the 2022 On-Time Performance Review by global aviation analytics leader, Cirium, the airline's on-time arrivals stood at 91.38%, almost 5% ahead of the region's second highest ranking airline.

The annual Cirium On-Time Performance Review is considered the global gold standard for airline and airport performance, its results based on data collected from more than 600 sources of real-time flight information. It defines on-time flights as those that arrive within 15 minutes of the scheduled gate arrival.

Captain Nasser bin Ahmed al Salmi, COO at Oman Air, said, "During 2022, the global operational environment has been challenging, with many airports affected by disruptions and resource challenges, as well as the lingering effects of COVID-19. Despite such a backdrop, we have continued to maintain an excellent service record. To have achieved this recognition for on-time performance against some of the world's most reputable airlines is a testament to the dedication and hard work of all Oman Air staff across our global network."

"As we enter into 2023, we look forward to continuing to pursue excellence in all elements of our guest experience, from punctuality to convenience, our products and services, and of course our signature Omani hospitality."

Continuing to position itself as a major international carrier, Oman Air has set several benchmarks for quality, comfort and hospitality in the last year, earning itself the 2023 Five-Star Major Airline rating by the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX), among others. Evolving to meet the demands of a rapidly shifting market, the airline has made increasing investments in its products and services, offering guests innovative cabin design, exceptional hospitality, and a growing range of destinations.



Ooredoo promotes Shahry Business Plan

Businesses of all sizes in Oman wanting to stay ahead of the curve can now leverage 5G to transform their operations by choosing Ooredoo's Shahry Business Digital Plan.

They can currently even enjoy up to five times absolutely free 5G data. Available until February 14, new and existing customers can subscribe to the great value plan and get up to 5TB of bonus 5G data - enjoying a vastly improved, seamless performance, whether they are in the office, working from home or anywhere else. It's the perfect opportunity for businesses in Oman to discover the benefits that 5G presents and leverage its capabilities.

Saied al Lawati, director of Business Marketing & ICT Solutions at Ooredoo, said, "We know that businesses of all sizes are key drivers of national economic growth, diversification and stability. Hence, and in line with Oman's Vision 2040, we continue to find ways to help Oman's businesses to thrive. Companies of all sizes now get to experience our transformative 5G network which provides a huge opportunity for them to transform their business operations."

With a choice for every budget, Shahry Business Digital plans start from just RO10 per month and go all the way up to RO90 a month, including endless data, unlimited closed user group minutes, data that can be used locally and in the GCC, and much more. For those that want to build their own plan, they can select the data quota and voice minutes required, and even data roaming with Passport World or GCC. Accessible through the Ooredoo App, it's a fully digital experience from order to delivery.



Saied al Lawati

Sharjah Shopping Promotions a big success

The Sharjah Shopping Promotions (SSP), which is being organised by Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), continued to attract shoppers for the second week in a row, with amazing offers and major discounts of up to 75% on luxury brands and a wide range of consumer goods.

The Sharjah Shopping Promotions is currently taking place in all cities and regions of the emirate and will run until January 29. It is increasingly attracting a huge turnout of shoppers and visitors from both inside and outside the Emirate, who were keen to enjoy the World's Coolest Winter, and live unparalleled shopping experience.

Since its launch on December 15, 2022, the Sharjah Shopping Promotions have improved the sales of participating centres and shops and generated high revenues, as evidenced by the rising number of purchase vouchers and the large number of shoppers who took part in raffle draws to win valuable prizes, thus boosting the retail trade sector and satisfying merchants and businesses in many other sectors.

Ibrahim Rashid al Jarwan, director of Economic Relations and Marketing at SCCI and General Coordinator of the event, said, "The Sharjah Shopping Promotions is one of the major annual events organised by the chamber to highlight Sharjah's economic, social, cultural and touristic position and contribute to revitalising commercial activity and securing its sustainable growth. The Chamber has successfully met these goals, thanks to the continuous successes being made by the event, as demonstrated by the increasing numbers of customers and the rise in sales at shopping malls and other retail stores."

Hana Al Suwaidi, head of the SCCI's Festival and Shows Department, said, "The event is held every year to provide Sharjah shoppers and visitors with unique shopping experience. The chamber is committed to developing innovative work mechanisms in order to create an environment that stimulates promotional and entertainment events and attracts large numbers of visitors who can enjoy their time watching the winter events.



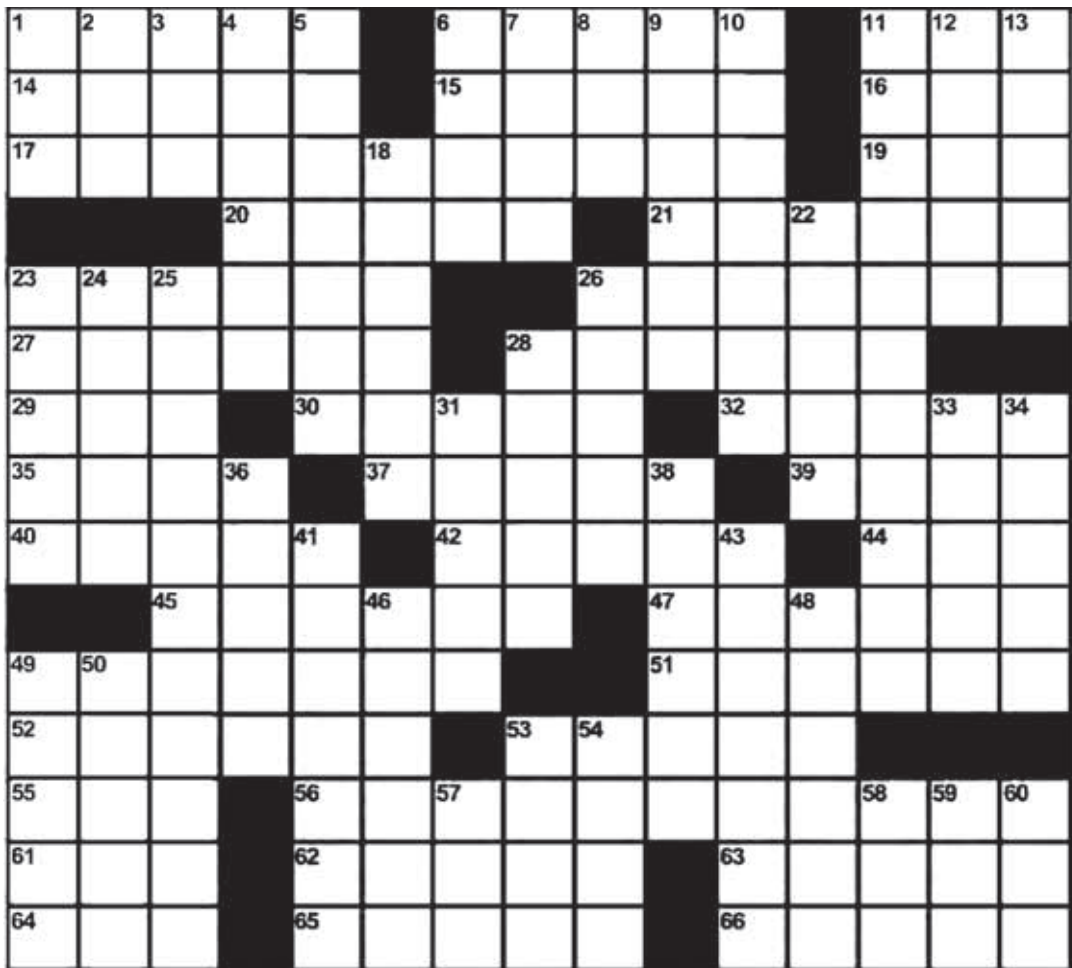
HUAWEI FreeBuds 5i available in Oman now

Huawei recently announced its all-new Hi-Res Certificated TWS with long battery life and outstanding ANC, the HUAWEI FreeBuds 5i.

The latest iteration to the HUAWEI FreeBuds series offers users high-resolution sound with 28h of Music Playback and 42dB Multi-Mode ANC. This is also topped off with a compact and comfortable design with dual-device connectivity and IP54 Water Resistance. More importantly, the HUAWEI FreeBuds 5i is compatible with different operating systems, including devices running on Android and iOS. Consumers can now get the HUAWEI FreeBuds 5i for a price of OMR 34.9 from Huawei's online platforms as well as certified retailers, a press release said.

The HUAWEI FreeBuds 5i supports LDAC HD audio codec, and it is Hi-Res certified. Hi-Res Audio Wireless is officially defined as the capability to reproduce the full range of sound of recordings mastered from CD quality music sources, and it is widely accepted.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Sandwich shops, briefly
6) Exclude
11) Melancholy
14) "... you glad?"
15) More than angry
16) Born in France
17) Motorist's hazard?
19) Poetic circle
20) Biscotti flavoring
21) Bonehead
23) Allot
26) Certain piranhas
27) Milk curdler
28) City in Ohio
29) Lennon's Yoko
30) Bonn's river, in Bonn
32) They may be reserved
35) Like freshly cut grass
37) Cavalry weapon
39) Faucet sound
40) Arthur's mail
42) Exodus commemora-
tion
44) Some forensic evi-
dence
45) Breakfast choice

47) Like the fastest route
49) Beach bathhouses
51) Brief bursts
52) Skips over, as vowels
53) Nondairy spreads
55) Be unwell
56) Pure to the Seven
Dwarfs?
61) "Get it?"
62) Goosebump-raising
63) Aquarium fish
64) Naval rank (Abbr.)
65) Slip cover?
66) Old anesthetic

DOWN

1) "Dear old" guy
2) Be wrong
3) Hawaiian wreath
4) To no avail
5) Bee's last resort
6) Archaeology sites
7) Gael's tongue
8) Prohibit
9) Discordant
10) Makes electrical im-
provements
11) One using only a half

pipe?
12) Home on a treetop
13) Mortgages, e. g.
18) Certain fractions
22) Helped through diffi-
culty (with
"over")
23) Oven emanation
24) Mexican Mr.
25) They make dog-sled-
ders jealous?
26) Funnel-shaped
28) Lhasa's land
31) Facilitates
33) Add color to
34) Petty arguments
36) Rover
38) Parted waters
41) Didn't allow to run out
43) Snappy comeback
46) Cattle driver with a
whip
48) Variety of potato
49) Terminate
50) UFO pilot
53) Elevator pioneer
54) Bruce and Jason
57) Anger

58) Mathematician's or-
dinal
59) Rich rock
60) Major conflict

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The obstacles that are planted in the middle of your path today aren't as daunting as they might first appear. You have to assess the situation and then step back and form a game plan. Early in the morning, deal with all your messages and line up your tasks for the day. Then get a cup of coffee. Taking a break before you dive in will help you stay fresh and get an accurate idea of the issues that lie ahead. They won't look so big once you're refreshed!

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Listen closely to your heart today, because it's going to alert you to a new romance or love opportunity. This might not involve romance in the terms of a significant other. It could very well mean that more romantic ideas and concepts are becoming more prominent in your life. But either way, you should keep yourself open to new opportunities and do whatever you can to honor a recent commitment you made with someone you have known for a very long time.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Just because this day won't be very difficult doesn't mean that you can turn off your brain! This isn't a day to gloss over small details and just hope that everything is good enough, because numbers will still figure prominently in your day, either in the context of budgets, bank statements, or taxes. Pay attention to what you're doing, get it done quickly, and then you can go off and enjoy the rest of this wonderful day!

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Everyone shows their affection in a different way, so try not to have specific expectations. If you're going on a date, keep an open mind and don't read more into their words than are really there. And if a friend isn't doing or saying the things that you would do or say, so what? They aren't you. And aren't you glad? Accept the way the people you care about communicate with you, and you'll soon understand how much you really mean to them.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

The act of soul searching doesn't have to be a solitary endeavor. If you're feeling aimless or looking for something new to be passionate about, get together with the one or two people who know you inside and out and talk about it. They have some exceptional insight about where your strengths and weaknesses lie and can suggest some ideas or avenues that you would never have come up with on your own. Invite their participation and you'll invite them closer to your heart.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You need to try to rein in your increasingly self-indulgent ways today. Keep driving right on past the shops, cook dinner for yourself instead of going out, and do you really need another spa day? It's a wise time for you to eliminate any excess spending and get back to a simpler way of living. When you take a little bit of a break from pampering yourself for a while, you'll appreciate it all the more when you go back to treating yourself like a rock star.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Talking will get you anything you want today. Your way with words is especially captivating right now, and you will have the perfect terms on the tip of your tongue. Verbal communication has long been one of your strengths, and today it's even more so. This is a wonderful time to meet new people, especially people who you want to impress. Job interviews, first dates, or any other potentially monumental appointments are going to go well.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Sure, you're smart enough to know that life isn't fair, but that doesn't always stop you from seeking justice and equality as you journey through your days. By maintaining this delicate balance between realism and idealism today, you'll be able to handle any situation, no matter how bizarre or uncomfortable it might be. Becoming a cynic might save you some disappointment here and there, but it's much more rewarding to think that all people are equal and should be treated as such.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

There is absolutely no excuse for feeling bored today! Even if there isn't much on your calendar, your phone hasn't been ringing, and no one is around to hang out with, you can entertain yourself for hours. While other poor souls can't ever feel comfortable by themselves, you won't have that problem today. When you're by yourself you can do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it. So enjoy a day of following your whims, wherever they take you.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Food and captivating conversation go hand in hand right now, so if you're about to attend or host a dinner party, then you're in for quite a good time! Do your best to chat up the folks you rarely see. Get back in step with what's up in their lives. They've been going through quite a lot of changes and could very well inspire you to start making some much needed changes in your own life. Feed your friends and you'll end up feeding your own soul.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Is someone being a bit greedy with regard to you right now? Their nonstop attention and eagerness to spend time with you has been quite flattering, but today you might be starting to feel a bit claustrophobic. You've got a more introverted personality than you might realize, and it's wishing for some peace and quiet. Of course, you don't want to hurt this person's feeling by rejecting them, but you need to tell them to give you space. If you don't, they could start to annoy you.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

When was the last time you wrote anyone a love letter, not an email? You know, the old-fashioned pen-on-paper note that you put into an envelope, stamp, and send via the post office? No one does it anymore because digital means are so much easier, but since when should convenience be such a big part of expressing your feelings for someone? Today, write a love letter to someone you care about. It could even be yourself! You will brighten someone's life immensely.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 01. Who won Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine 2012, and for what?**
- A. R Steinman: the dendritic cell and its role in adaptive immunity
B. E A von Behring: serum therapy and development of a vaccine against diphtheria
C. J B Gurdon, S Yamanaka: stem cell research
D. R G Edwards: development of in vitro fertilisation
- 02. In 2005, Dan Wheldon became the first British competitor to win what event in over 30 years?**
- A. Indianapolis 500
B. Wimbledon Men's Singles
C. Boston Marathon
D. Tour de France
- 03. Why was Captain William Kidd hanged in 1701?**
- A. Bigamy
B. Treason
C. Theft
D. Piracy

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

I	C	E	I
S	D	C	T
O	T	N	E
I	M	I	A

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Charlie Hebdo attack victims honoured

The weekly’s latest edition mocking Iran’s leadership has sparked outrage

Paris, France - French politicians paid tribute on Saturday to *Charlie Hebdo* staff and other victims of the January 2015 Islamist attacks, days after the satirical weekly’s latest edition sparked outrage in Iran.

French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted the names of all 17 victims of a spate of attacks eight years ago in and around Paris, including the 12 people killed at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*.

“We will never forget you,” he added, with a cartoon by the well-known French cartoonist Plantu below.

Prime Minister Elisabeth



Paris' mayor Anne Hidalgo hands over a wreath of flowers to police officers during a ceremony marking anniversary of *Charlie Hebdo* attack, in Paris (AFP)

Borne also marked the anniversary of the attacks, which also involved a deadly siege at a kosher supermarket.

“In the face of Islamist terrorism, the Republic remains standing,” she tweeted. “For their families, for our values, for our liberty: we do not forget.”

And Culture Minister Rima Abdul Malak tweeted: “Satire, irreverence, the republican tradition of press cartoons are intrinsic to our democracy. We continue to defend them.”

The tributes came days after Tehran reacted furiously to cartoons mocking Iran’s leadership in the latest issue of *Charlie Hebdo*, which appeared on

Wednesday.

The magazine had invited cartoonists to depict Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the context of ongoing demonstrations against his theocratic regime, by women in particular.

The graphic front cover sought to highlight the fight for women’s rights, while others were sexually explicit and insulting towards Khamenei and fellow clerics.

Many cartoons pointed to the authorities’ use of capital punishment as a tactic to quell the protests.

Tehran’s anger

In response, Iran summoned France’s ambassador and called on the government to hold ‘the authors of such hatred’ to account. On Thursday, it said it was closing the Tehran-based French Institute for Research (IFRI).

“France has no right to insult the sanctities of other Muslim countries and nations under the pretext of freedom of expression,” foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said.

In Paris on Saturday, Interior Minister Gerard Darmanin and the city’s mayor Anne Hidalgo were among the politicians who attended a ceremony at the former offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, in the city’s 11th arrondissement.

It was there that two gunmen killed staff at the magazine, including some of its best-known cartoonists.

A few metres further down the same street, police lieutenant Ahmed Merabet was gunned down by the killers as he tried to stop their escape.

The gunmen, who claimed to represent Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) said they were taking revenge for previous satirical cartoons in the magazine depicting the Prophet Mohammed. They were killed after two days on the run.

The day after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, another Islamist gunman killed a police officer in Montrouge, just outside Paris - and a day later he killed four hostages at a Jewish supermarket in east Paris.

AFP

Two killed in Ukraine despite Russia ‘ceasefire’, says Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine - Two Ukrainians were killed and another nine were wounded despite Russian leader Vladimir Putin unilaterally ordering his forces to pause attacks on Orthodox Christmas, Kyiv said on Sunday.

As a result of ‘Russia’s armed aggression’, one person was killed and another eight wounded in the eastern region of Donetsk over the past 24 hours, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of the Ukrainian president’s office, said on Sunday. One more person was killed in the northeastern region of Kharkiv and another was wounded in the southern region of Kherson over the same period, Tymoshenko said.



A partially destroyed residential building is reflected in a car window in Chasiv Yar, Donetsk region, on Saturday (AFP)

“Despite the so-called ‘cease-fire’ declared by the Russian occupiers, over the past day, the enemy launched nine missile and three air strikes and fired 40 attacks from multiple rocket launchers,” Ukraine’s defence ministry said in a separate statement. “In particular, civilian infra-

structure was hit.” Putin had ordered a 36-hour ceasefire to allow Orthodox Christians to mark Christmas in Russia and Ukraine. The unilateral ceasefire ended at 11pm in Kyiv (2100 GMT) on Saturday.

Kyiv and AFP journalists on the ground said there was little

sign the fighting had eased on Saturday. “After midnight the enemy launched seven rocket attacks on Kramatorsk and two on Kostyantynivka,” said Pavlo Kyrylenko, head of the Donetsk regional administration.

The Russian defence ministry insisted on Saturday it observed

the halt in fighting but repelled a number of Ukrainian attacks and killed dozens of Ukrainian troops.

Ukraine had dismissed the halt as a tactic by Russia to gain time to regroup its forces and bolster its defences following a series of battlefield setbacks.

AFP

Benin elects lawmakers, with opposition allowed to stand

Cotonou, Benin - Benin voted for a new parliament on Sunday with opposition candidates authorised to stand in the legislative elections for the first time under President Patrice Talon after four years of absence.

Sunday’s vote will be a key test for the West African nation, where Talon’s supporters say he has ushered in political and economic development, but critics argue that his mandate has eroded democracy.

The streets of Cotonou, the economic capital, were calm and all markets and shops were closed, AFP reporters said.

Polling stations opened at 7am (0600 GMT) and will close at 4pm (1500 GMT), according to the Autonomous National Electoral Commission.

The last legislative elections in 2019 were marked by deadly violence, record abstention and a total shutdown of the internet - rare events in Benin, once praised as a bastion of democracy in the region.

The opposition was unable to participate in the 2019 elections due to a tightening of the voting rules.

Only two movements allied to the president were authorised to compete, bringing about a parliament entirely won by Talon’s supporters.

This time, seven political parties - including three claiming to be in opposition - were allowed to participate.

After voting in the morning in



Voters check the voters' roll at a polling station at the public elementary school of Agla Est in Cotonou on Sunday (AFP)

People no longer have too much hope, they are afraid of some trickery. This government disappointed me

BAWA ALIMIIYAO

movement. Everything is fine,” said Hamdan Moussa, 22, local representative of the Republican Bloc (BR), a pro-government party.

Early turnout

But turnout - historically low in 2019 - appeared slow on Sunday morning at polling stations visited by AFP in Cotonou and other areas.

“People no longer have too much hope, they are afraid of some trickery,” said Bawa Alimiyo, 40, in front of a primary school in Cotonou, where he voted for an opposition party.

“This government disappointed me, we had hope. We are waiting for change and we need deputies representative of the people.” A wealthy businessman, Talon was elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2021.

AFP

Prosecuted South African ex-apartheid minister dies

Johannesburg, South Africa - Adriaan Vlok, a feared minister under South Africa’s apartheid system and one of its few high-ranking officials to be prosecuted, died on Sunday aged 85 in a hospital near Pretoria, his family said.

The former law and order minister, who oversaw a brutal police crackdown on opponents of white rule, ‘passed away early this morning in the Unitas Hospital in Centurion, after a short illness’, a family spokesman said in a statement.

In the late 1980s, Vlok oversaw bomb attacks on churches and trade unions seen as hostile to white-rule.

“I believed that apartheid was right,” he told AFP in 2015. “It was our job to make people fear us.”

In his old age he said he had changed his mindset, and sought redemption by handing out food to the poor in a township - settlements outside cities designed to segregate non-whites.

AFP

A rave of their own: Egypt’s women DJs creating inclusive dance floors

Cairo, Egypt - Laser beams illuminate a darkened restaurant turned dance hall in Cairo as revellers move to thumping beats from female DJs - part of a generation of women shaking up Egypt’s underground electronic music scene.

“All my life, I’ve seen men behind the decks,” said party-goer Menna Shanab, 26, as psychedelic visuals reflected off the waters at the Nile-side venue.

“It’s good to see the music scene evolving,” said the young Cairo resident, decked out in fashionable streetwear.

In Egypt’s patriarchal society, the music industry remains male-dominated, while the conservative country’s cultural es-



People attend a music performance by Egyptian DJ Yas Meen Selectress in Cairo on September 10, 2022 (AFP)

tablishment marginalises and even bans electronic music artists.

Female party-goers for years have complained about harassment on the dance floor, while

many revellers find mainstream venues too pricey.

Now, a generation of young

women DJs are forging their own path, seeking to create more inclusive spaces for performers and party-goers alike.

A small but vibrant electronic music scene is ‘booming’ in the Egyptian capital, according to Yemeni music journalist and occasional DJ Hala K, asking like others AFP interviewed to be identified only by her stage name. “A lot of female talents feel more confident and empowered to pursue DJing,” the Amsterdam-based Hala K said by telephone.

Aspiring artists are taking inspiration from female DJs from the region, she added - such as Palestinian Sama Abdulhadi, who has performed from Egypt

to France and at premier US festival Coachella.

In Cairo, there are ‘powerful, talented women at the turntables: they know how to make people dance’, Hala K said.

Party in peace

DJ and promoter A7ba-L-Jelly decided to establish her own collective as part of making the underground electronic dance music scene more inclusive.

“I wanted to organise events where I would feel safe myself, without harassment,” said the 32-year-old. “I just wanted to go and party in peace.”

More than 90 per cent of women in Egypt aged between 18 and 39 said in 2019 that they

had experienced some form of sexual harassment, according to the Arab Barometer public opinion research network.

“In some places in Egypt, where they play more commercial music... you won’t enter because you are single, or because you don’t look rich enough,” A7ba-L-Jelly added.

“I book male and female DJs to create dance floors that are inclusive in terms of music, gender and social class,” she said.

From the Nile-side dance venue, DJ Yas Meen Selectress complained that regardless of gender, ‘there are no dedicated spaces for us where we can play our music’.

AFP

Iran regime divided on how to tackle unprecedented protests: Analysts

Nicosia, Cyprus - Iran's Islamic clerical regime is divided in its response to months of unprecedented protests, wavering between repression and what it views as conciliatory gestures trying to quell the discontent, analysts say.

"The conflicting messages we are getting from the Iranian regime suggest an internal debate on how to deal with ongoing protests," said Nader Hashemi, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver.

'In most authoritarian regimes, there are hawks and doves' who disagree on how repressive the state should be during crises, he said.

The granting of retrials to several death-row protesters, and the release from detention of prominent dissidents, are signs that some seek to take a softer approach.

But a reminder of the headline tacked came on Saturday when Iran executed two men for killing a paramilitary member during protest-related unrest.

Demonstrations began after the September 16 death in custody of Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Amini, 22. She had been arrested by morality police who enforce a strict dress code which requires women to wear a scarf-like covering over their hair and neck.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meeting with the newly-appointed police chief General Ahmad-Reza Radan in Tehran on Saturday (AFP)

The protests have escalated into calls for an end to the Islamic regime, posing the biggest challenge for the clerics since the 1979 revolution deposed the shah.

Authorities have responded with deadly violence that has left hundreds dead.

Thousands have been arrested and 14 detainees sentenced to hang, many for killing or attacking security force members, according to the judiciary.

‘Experimenting’

The Supreme Court has upheld some of the death sentences and a total of four men have now been executed. The judiciary has also announced retrials for six of the 14.

This reflects a 'political calculus', said US-based Iran expert Mehrzad Boroujerdi, co-author of *Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook*.

"They know that mass executions will bring more people into the streets and further agitate them. On the other hand, they want to send a signal that they are not reticent to execute protesters so that people are intimidated."

In what analysts see as another attempt to calm the situation, two prominent dissidents arrested early during the protests, Majid Tavakoli and Hossein Ronaghi, were freed weeks later. Ronaghi had been on a hunger strike.

The regime is using 'every-

thing from pressure release valves to long prison terms and executions. They are experimenting with these as they struggle to formulate a more clearly articulated policy,' Boroujerdi said.

Anoush Ehteshami, director of the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the UK's Durham University, said the retrials partly reflected mounting foreign and domestic pressure.

"But also within the regime there is division about how to handle this," Ehteshami said, with hardliners on one side and others who see executions as further encouraging resistance.

Retrials and the release of dissidents are 'measures of appeasement... to try and throw a bone' to the protesters, he added.

While such measures may appear insignificant, from the perspective of a 'securitised, beleaguered regime... they think they are being magnanimous and responding to public pressure'.

Celebrities have also been detained, but often for far shorter periods. Star actor Taraneh Ali-dousti was freed on bail on Wednesday after being held for almost three weeks over her support for the protests, her lawyer said.

AFP

Israel: Entry permits of 3 Palestinian officials revoked

Jerusalem - Israel said on Saturday it had revoked entry permits for three senior officials from Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party after they visited an Israeli Arab recently released from prison.

Mahmud al-Alul, Azzam al-Ahmad and Rawhi Fattouh had visited Karim Yunis in his home village of Ara in northern Israel following his release on Thursday after serving a 40-year sentence for killing an Israeli soldier.

"The three men took advantage of their status and entered Israel this morning (Saturday) to travel to the home of the terrorist Karim Yunis," the office of Defence Minister Yoav Galant said in a statement. Galant ordered their Israeli entry permits be revoked in response, it added.

The move follows a decision by Israel's security cabinet to withhold millions of dollars in revenues from the Palestinian Authority and impose a moratorium on Palestinian construction projects.

AFP



A man is led away following his arrest by a Special Task Force (SEK) in Castrop-Rauxel, western Germany on Sunday (AFP)

Iranian suspected of terror attack held in Germany

Berlin, Germany - An Iranian man has been arrested in western Germany suspected of preparing an 'Islamist attack' using cyanide and ricin, police and prosecutors said on Sunday.

The 32-year-old man was 'suspected of having prepared a serious act of violence threatening the security of the state by obtaining cyanide and ricin with a view to committing an Islamist attack', police in Muenster and Recklinghausen, along with the Duesseldorf prosecutors' office said in a statement.

But a search of the man's residence in the town of Castrop-Rauxel found no evidence of toxic substances, Duesseldorf prosecutor Holger Heming told AFP.

Authorities had been given a 'serious tip' that had prompted the overnight raid, regional interior minister in North Rhine-Westphalia, Herbert Reul said.

The arrest was carried out shortly before midnight on Saturday evening, a spokeswoman for the police said.

Another person, thought to be the main suspect's brother, was also taken into custody during the operation, she said.

Whether the second man was implicated in the allegations was being examined, chief prosecutor

Heming said. Authorities would 'decide at a later point' whether the 32-year-old main suspect would be presented before a judge, police said.

The raids were carried out by agents wearing protective suits against the perceived chemical hazard, according to local media reports. German authorities were tipped off to the risk of an attack with a 'chemical bomb' several days ago by a foreign intelligence service, the German daily *Bild* reported. Ricin is a highly toxic substance, which is classed as a 'chemical weapon' in Germany. Much like cyanide, ricin can be lethal.

In 2018, a Tunisian man and his wife were arrested on suspicion of planning a biological bomb attack in Germany.

The couple, who sympathised with the Islamic State group, were found in possession of 84 milligrams of ricin in their Cologne apartment. The man was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2020, while his wife received an eight-year sentence.

Germany has been targeted in recent years by several Islamist attacks, including a 2016 truck attack on a Christmas market, that killed 12 people.

AFP

Israelis protest new Netanyahu government

Tel Aviv, Israel - Thousands of Israelis protested on Saturday against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new government, regarded as the most right-wing in Israeli history, an AFP correspondent said.

Protesters brandished signs with slogans including 'Democracy in danger' and 'Together against fascism and apartheid' in the coastal city of Tel Aviv.

Some waved Israeli and rainbow flags while others held a large banner reading 'crime minister' - a slogan widely used by Israelis during regular demonstrations against Netanyahu in



Israeli left wing protesters march during a rally against Benjamin Netanyahu government, in Tel Aviv on Saturday (AFP)

past years.

Following his November 1

election win, Netanyahu took office late last month at the head

Show goes on at Palestinian theatres



People stand outside the 'Freedom Theatre' at the Jenin camp for Palestinian refugees in the occupied West Bank on December 12, 2022 (AFP)

Ahead of the opening night of the theatre's latest production, *Metro Gaza*, the creatives woke up to find three Palestinians had been killed in an Israeli operation.

"What can we do? Can we continue, or stop, cancel the show?" asked Sheta.

The actors took to the stage as planned and an audience of around 75 filled half the stalls.

Yasmin Shalaldeh, 30, a Jerusalemite who plays a Gazan girl in the show, said it was 'essential to keep on working', particularly in Jenin.

More than 40 Palestinians were killed last year during Israeli operations in the Jenin area, including fighters, children, and a teenager involved in the theatre's youth programme who was shot dead in November.

Funding ban

After Jenin, *Metro Gaza* went on tour to Ramallah, east Jerusalem and finally Haifa in northern Israel. Each playhouse faces its own challenges and Jerusalem's

El-Hakawati, also known as the Palestinian National Theatre, has seen its audiences dwindle since Israel began constructing a barrier around the West Bank in the early 2000s.

"After the wall and the checkpoints, (it) started to get less and less, people cannot come," said director Amer Khalil, as the sound of children enjoying a puppet show drifted into the room.

Whether living in Jerusalem, the West Bank, Israel or the blockaded Gaza Strip, Palestini-

ans hold different papers which impact the ability of theatre casts and audiences to travel.

"It's torture," said Shalaldeh. "When you have a play in Jerusalem and you send it to someone from Gaza and they want to come, they can't."

Long gone are the days when directors must submit their script to Israeli censors, yet the theatre is 'threatened by other things', said Khalil.

Decorated with posters of past productions, El-Hakawati's foyer bustles with Jerusalemites ahead of each new performance.

But the director described a 'very, very, very difficult - critical - economic situation', with ticket sales not even covering a third of running costs.

El-Hakawati cannot receive any support from the Palestinian Authority, which is banned by Israel from operating in Jerusalem, leaving it to 'live on donations' largely from European states, said Khalil.

"Like the whole world, you have a national theatre and... the running costs - electricity, water, taxes - are all paid by the government or by the municipality. And this is what we don't have here," he said.

AFP

Migrants, drugs on agenda as Biden heads to Mexico

Biden will stop off in Texas for his first trip to a border overwhelmed by record numbers of migrants

Mexico City, Mexico - US President Joe Biden will seek Mexico's help tackling illegal flows of migrants and drugs, particularly deadly opioids, during a visit beginning on Sunday for a North American leaders' summit.

Aiming to tame criticism over what he has called a 'broken' immigration system, Biden will stop off in Texas for his first trip to a border overwhelmed by record numbers of migrants and asylum-seekers. The issue is almost certain to top the agenda when Biden meets Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Monday, a day before Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau joins them for the so-called 'Three Amigos' summit.

Another priority for Biden is stepping up joint efforts to fight trafficking of fentanyl and other



Immigrants receive donated shoes outside a migrant shelter in El Paso, Texas on Saturday (AFP)

drugs behind an addiction crisis in the United States.

"Mexico is extremely relevant and important in dealing with both acute issues, which have become political vulnerabilities for Biden," Michael Shifter, a senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue think tank, told AFP.

On Thursday, Washington announced that up to 30,000 qualifying migrants a month would be

allowed into the United States from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela if they arrive by plane.

The quota will be restricted to those who already have a US sponsor, while those attempting to cross the border illegally will be expelled in coordination with Mexico.

Mass kidnappings

The International Rescue Com-

mittee humanitarian group warned that the new measures 'will only push more asylum-seekers into dangerous situations, the likes of which have already been seen in the form of mass kidnappings across northern Mexico'.

Flows of migrants fleeing violence and poverty in their countries are a major challenge for Mexico, whose border has be-

come a revolving door for people trying to cross to the United States.

Thousands of people are stranded in Mexico because of the controversial Title 42 rule implemented under ex-president Donald Trump's administration, ostensibly as a health measure to reduce the entry of people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

AFP

19 people killed in road accident in eastern China

Beijing, China - Nineteen people died and 20 were injured on Sunday in a road traffic accident in eastern China's Jiangxi province, state media reported.

The 'major road traffic accident' took place just before 1am (1700 GMT) in Nanchang County, state broadcaster CCTV reported, citing local authorities. "The cause of the accident is under in-depth investigation," CCTV added.

Local news outlet Jimu, affiliated with the state-owned Hubei Daily Media Group, reported the accident took place when a truck hit a funeral procession. People had been carrying out a roadside offering to the dead before planning to head to the crematorium on Sunday morning, a local woman surnamed Deng told the outlet.

They were then hit by a truck, the report said, with most of the dead and injured being funeral attendees.

Another local man, surnamed Gong, told the outlet his wife had been killed in the accident and that they had been attending the funeral.

The truck had suddenly crashed into the back of the line, tearing through the group before finally reaching the hearse, he said.

Around an hour after news of the accident emerged, Nanchang County traffic police issued travel tips to drivers saying the area was experiencing 'foggy weather'.

"Driving visibility is poor, there is low visibility, which

The major road traffic accident took place just before 1am in Nanchang County, state broadcaster CCTV reported, citing local authorities

can easily cause traffic accidents," it said.

"Please pay attention to fog lights... slow down, drive carefully, keep a safe distance from the car in front, avoid pedestrians, do not change lanes and overtake," it added.

Road accidents are common in China due to a lack of strict safety controls.

Last month, one person died during a highway pile-up in central China that involved hundreds of vehicles and was caused by low visibility in fog.

AFP

Maduro hosts Colombia's Petro on a surprise visit to Caracas

Caracas, Venezuela - Colombia's President Gustavo Petro made a surprise trip to meet his Venezuelan counterpart Nicolas Maduro on Saturday - their second face-to-face after the thawing of a years-long diplomatic freeze.

The two leaders held talks for about three hours in Caracas at the Miraflores presidential palace, where Petro - Colombia's first leftist president - arrived around midday.

The summit came just days after the final reopening of the South American neighbours' shared border, closed in a spat over Maduro's disputed 2018 reelection. Since taking office in August, Petro's government has worked to mend diplomatic ties with Caracas.

Venezuela has also served as a key facilitator for Petro as he seeks to fulfil a campaign promise of establishing 'total peace' with the armed groups still active



Nicolas Maduro (right) and Gustavo Petro shake hands before a private meeting in Caracas, on Saturday (AFP)

in Colombia, some of which operate along the two countries' porous border. At the end of 2022, Petro seemed to have made major progress on that

front, announcing a bilateral ceasefire with five armed groups that would last from January 1 to June 30. But one of the groups, the ELN, said just three days later

that it had not entered into any such deal, and the government conceded later that nothing had been signed.

AFP

Chile's Boric replaces justice minister after pardons row

Santiago, Chile - Chile's leader Gabriel Boric on Saturday replaced his justice minister following a row over presidential pardons she had advanced.

Boric granted 13 pardons at the end of last year on the recommendation of minister Marcela Rios, who was tasked with finalising the list. They were mainly for people convicted of crimes committed during the social uprising against inequality and rising living costs that started in October 2019 under his predecessor Sebastian Pinera.

Pardons for those involved in the protests that left about 30 dead and 400 injured, had been a Boric campaign promise.

But his decision was brought into question when it turned out one of the beneficiaries had previous convictions for robbery and theft.

Opposition parties said they would seek to bring charges against the minister who advised



Chile's former Justice Minister Marcela Rios (AFP)

the president.

"Because there were shortcomings in the execution of my decision to grant pardons... I have decided to accept the resignation of Marcela Rios Tobar," Boric announced on Saturday. "When such situations occur in politics, we must assume responsibility."

He named lawyer Luis Cordero Vega in her place.

Rios's replacement is the third ministerial change in Boric's nine-month-old administration, during which he has also seen a referendum reject a proposed new Constitution - another of his campaign promises.

This is not the first time presidential pardons have caused a public outcry in Chile.

AFP

Forty-six Ivorian soldiers return home after Mali junta pardon

Bamako, Mali - Forty-six Ivorian soldiers detained in Mali since July arrived home late on Saturday, according to an AFP reporter at the airport, a day after they were pardoned by the neighbouring country's junta.

The troops, whose detention triggered a bitter diplomatic row between the countries, were arrested on July 10, 2022, after arriving in the Malian capital Bamako.

Mali accused them of being mercenaries, while Ivory Coast and the United Nations say they were flown in to provide routine backup security for the German contingent of the UN peacekeeping mission.

On Saturday, the 46 arrived at an airport in the Ivorian economic capital Abidjan.

After their plane landed at 11:40pm (2340 GMT), the uniformed soldiers disembarked one by one, each brandishing a small Ivorian flag.

They were greeted by President Alassane Ouattara before entering the presidential pavilion at the airport where their families were waiting for them.

Ouattara said he hoped the two countries could move on from the diplomatic spat.

"Now that this crisis is behind us, we can resume normal relations with the brother country of Mali, which needs us and which we also need," he said in a speech at the airfield.

A spokesman for the soldiers thanked Ouattara, and 'the Ivorian people for their support and active solidarity'.



Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara speaks with Ivorian soldiers at Abidjan airport on Saturday (AFP)

"We are happy and relieved to return to the motherland," he said.

On December 30, a Bamako

court sentenced the soldiers to 20 years in prison, while three women among the original 49 arrested received death sentences

in absentia.

They were convicted of an 'attack and conspiracy against the government' and of seeking to

undermine state security, public prosecutor Ladj Sara said at the time.

The sentence came in the run-up to a January 1 deadline set by leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for Mali to release the soldiers or face sanctions. But on Friday, Mali's junta leader Assimi Goita pardoned all 49.

Diplomatic efforts

An Ivorian delegation had travelled to Mali for talks before the trial opened, and the Ivorian defence ministry had said the dispute was 'on the way to being resolved'.

An agreement reached between Mali and Ivory Coast at the time had left open the possibility of a presidential pardon.

The Malian government on Friday cited a memorandum of understanding the two countries had signed 'on the promotion of peace and the strengthening of relations of friendship, brotherhood and good neighbourliness between the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Ivory Coast'.

It also thanked Togo's President Faure Gnassingbe, who mediated in the row, but denounced the 'aggressive position' of ECOWAS leader Umaro Sissoco Embalo. Relations between Mali and its West African neighbours were strained before the arrests, since elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was toppled in August 2020 by officers angered at failures to end a militant insurgency.

AFP

INDIA

'India becoming easier to do business'

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar urged the Indian diaspora to invest in the country

Indore, India - External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday urged the Indian diaspora to invest in India, saying that the country is becoming easier to do business.

Addressing the Malaysian delegation with Sivakumar Varatharaju Naidu, Minister of Human Resources, Malaysia, Jaishankar said: "It is a country which is becoming easier to do business. The reputation has grown very much in the last few years. There are a lot of innovations, startups, which are up-coming. Those of you who have interest in small and medium scale will find many more partners today in India than perhaps was the case earlier." India is organising the 17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention in Indore from Sunday till Tuesday. The theme of the Convention is 'Diaspora: Reliable partners for India's progress in Amrit Kaal.'

Jaishankar also held a bilateral meeting with Naidu earlier



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar holds a bilateral meeting with Malaysia Minister of Human Resources Sivakumar Varatharaju Naidu on the sidelines of the 17th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention, in Indore on Sunday (ANI)

where they attended exchange of MOUs. He also met with Ministers from Mauritius.

"I assured the minister in the brief meeting we had before this. We would like to understand from all of you in the course of this Convention, even afterward - what are the obstacles? What are the challenges? What can we do better? Everybody can always improve and we are very open-minded. We do not take the attitude that - that is the way it is - we know best. The change is not only in cleanliness but also in an open

mind. We are willing to listen to all of you, understand all of you, and take your suggestions, and views into consideration. I look forward very much to working with you to build a much stronger relationship between India and Malaysia," he said.

Speaking about Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, he said: "We are doing this physically after a bit of a gap because of the COVID. It is all the more momentous for that reason. I think, in the last few years, we have also seen a lot of changes which have brought the Indian dias-

pora closer to India."

Lauding Indian diaspora help during the COVID-19 pandemic he said: "Even during the COVID period, many of you took a lot of interest and made a huge effort to support the COVID treatment and handling in India. We appreciate that very warmly. On our part, we also tried to be helpful, especially to the countries where Indian-origin communities, there was a particular focus."

Jaishankar said that the trade between India and Malaysia has crossed US\$20bn and he hoped

that it will grow in the coming years.

"Today the Indian community remains a strong bridge between India and Malaysia. Historically, we always had good, close, cordial relations. We work together in the ASEAN also bilaterally. We have today trade of more than US\$20bn, we believe that trade can definitely grow in the years to come. I hope that your visit here will also give you a sense of the changes in India and I think, Indore is a very good example of changes in India," said the EAM.

He also lauded Indore ranked number one in the country in the cleanliness campaign and said that not only the city has changed, but the mindset is also open and gave a glimpse of India's stride in the economic field.

"In fact, in our cleanliness campaign, this is a city which ranked number one in the country. Spend a little time going around the city, that itself will give you a sense of the change. It's not just the change in cleanliness, there is a change in overall mindset. Today there is a lot

of optimism, we still believe that we will get 7 per cent rate of growth at a time when the global economic condition is quite difficult," he said.

He also hoped to make India a tourist-friendly country and said that such events help in bonding with people of Indian origin. "We certainly are hoping to make our country tourist-friendly. There is a certain emotion or feeling that we bring in such events. It's not like a business meeting, it is something deeper than that."

ANI

AI flight incident 'a matter of personal anguish', says Tata Sons chairman

New Delhi, India - The urination incident onboard an Air India flight between New York and Delhi on November 26 last year is a 'matter of personal anguish', said Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran on Sunday.

In a statement, Chandrasekaran said: "The incident on Air India flight AI102 on November 26th, 2022, has been a matter of personal anguish to me and my colleagues at Air India. Air India's response should have been much swifter. We fell short of addressing this situation the way it should have been." He further said that the Tata Group and Air India stand by the safety and well-being of the passengers and crew with full conviction.

"We will review and repair every process to prevent or address any incidents of such un-



Tata Sons Chairperson N Chandrasekaran (ANI)

ruly nature," he added.

Earlier, after facing backlash, Air India had issued show cause notices to four of its cabin crew and one pilot and de-rostered them pending investigations.

On Friday, Air India chief executive officer (CEO) Campbell Wilson also asked the airline staff to report any instances of 'any improper behaviour on board to authorities at the earliest even if the matter appears to

We will review and repair every process to prevent or address any incidents of such unruly nature

N CHANDRASEKARAN

be resolved'. In a letter to Air India employees, the CEO stated that timely action is necessary against those who don't follow the flight rules.

Campbell said: "This week has, regrettably, been dominated by media headlines of which you are no doubt familiar. The repulsion felt by the affected passenger is totally understandable and we share her distress." He reiterated the im-

portance of reporting untoward incidents onboard flights to authorities, even if the crew believes it has been resolved.

Meanwhile, Delhi's Patiala House Court on Saturday sent accused Shankar Mishra, who had allegedly urinated on a co-passenger, to 14 days of judicial custody.

Mishra's lawyer moved a bail plea in Delhi's Patiala Court. The plea will be heard on January 11.

Mishra was arrested by Delhi Police from Bengaluru on Friday night. The Delhi Police has so far recorded the statements of three crew members of Air India in connection with the case.

Mishra had allegedly urinated on a 70-year-old woman in an intoxicated condition in business class of an Air India flight on November 26 last year.

ANI

Residents evacuated from holy town

Dehradun, India - Authorities in one of the holiest towns in the Indian Himalayas were evacuating panicked residents on Sunday after hundreds of houses began developing yawning cracks and sinking, officials said.

The cause of the apparent subsidence in Joshimath in the northern state of Uttarakhand was unclear, but residents blamed the building of roads and tunnels for a nearby hydro-electric project.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called a high-level meeting for later on Sunday to discuss the problem after the government formed an expert panel to carry out a 'rapid study' into the cause.

Local official Himanshu Khurana told AFP that at least 60 families had been relocated into shelters and many more were likely to be shifted out from their sinking dwellings.

Residents said a much larger



A view of damaged pavement due to landslides, in Joshimath (ANI)

number had already fled their homes and that around 600 houses and hotels were sinking in the town of around 20,000 people.

Another official said on condition of anonymity that several areas in the town had been 'demarcated unsafe' and entry restricted. "People are deeply worried. The fear is that the town is sinking," he said as helicopters surveyed the area.

Many locals have been

forced to sleep out in the freezing cold and said they had been warning authorities for weeks and in some cases months about cracks in buildings and roads, some of which were oozing brown muddy water.

Around 1,800 metres above sea level, Joshimath is a major gateway to a number of important religious sites in the Himalayas, attracting thousands of pilgrims every year.

AFP

Nearly 200 Rohingya refugees land in Indonesia in boat arrival

Banda Aceh, Indonesia - A wooden boat carrying nearly 200 Rohingya refugees, a majority of them women and children, landed on Indonesia's western coast on Sunday, police said.

The ship is the fifth boat carrying Rohingya refugees to land in Indonesia since November, according to authorities. Thousands of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, heavily persecuted in Myanmar, risk their lives each year on long and expensive sea journeys - often in poor-quality boats - in an attempt to reach Malaysia or Indonesia. The wooden vessel - which carried 69 men, 75 women and 40 children - arrived at around 02:30pm local time (0730 am GMT) on a beach in Indonesia's western-

most province of Aceh, local police chief Irwan Fahmi Ramli said on Sunday.

"They are generally healthy, but there is one pregnant woman among them, and four people are sick," Ramli said.

"We had coordinated with doctors who will come here to conduct an initial health check of these refugees, particularly those who are sick." The refugees will be transferred to a local government facility.

According to one of the passengers, the boat departed Bangladesh on December 10. "We feel very happy because we arrived here. Already, our engine is damaged and also we don't have food in the boat," 26-year-old Fairus told reporters.

AFP

40 killed, 85 injured in Senegal bus disaster

Dakar, Senegal - Forty people were killed and 85 were injured when two buses crashed in a head-on collision overnight on an arterial road in Senegal's central Kafrine region, the government said on Sunday.

Images of the incident showed the completely mangled front end of a white bus, with blood-flecked seats, personal items and a shoe strewn around the tree-lined crash site. Road accidents are common in Senegal, largely because of driver error, poor roads and decrepit vehicles, say experts, but the latest disaster has caused one of the heaviest losses of life from a single incident in recent years.

In a statement, the government announced three days of national mourning beginning on Monday, with flags to be flown at half-mast throughout the country. President Macky Sall will visit



A general view of the scene of a bus accident in Kafrine, central Senegal, on Sunday (AFP)

the crash site just outside of the village of Sikilo on Sunday, it said.

"In view of this tragedy, the head of state extends his deepest condolences to the families of the victims and wishes a speedy recovery to the injured," the gov-

ernment said.

Public prosecutor, Cheikh Dieng, said in a statement that early investigations suggested a public passenger bus suffered a burst tyre and swerved off course. It then crashed 'head-on

with another bus coming in the opposite direction', he said.

'Tragic'

The statement said the incident happened around 0330 GMT. It is 'a tragic accident', Kafrine

mayor Abdoulaye Saidou Sow, who is also the Minister of Urbanism, told AFP. Speaking from Kafrine, he said President Sall would be joined there by the prime minister and several other ministers on Sunday.

Opposition politician Ousmane Sonko announced on Twitter that he would postpone a scheduled fundraising programme in light of the accident.

"We bow before the memory of the deceased, offer our very sincere condolences to their grieving loved ones and to all Senegalese and pray for the merciful rest of their souls as well as a speedy recovery for the injured", he said.

Colonel Cheikh Fall, who heads operations for the National Fire Brigade, told AFP the victims were taken to a hospital and medical centre in Kafrine.

AFP

NO WALK IN THE PARK, BUT NOVAK FINDS A WAY

Djokovic survives Korda’s challenge to win Adelaide title

Adelaide, Australia - Top seed Novak Djokovic saved a match point and was forced to the limit as he held on to defeat Sebastian Korda 6-7 (8/10), 7-6 (7/3), 6-4 on Sunday and win the Adelaide International.

The 21-time Grand Slam winner needed more than three hours to stamp his authority on his unseeded American opponent, son of former world number two Petr Korda.

In doing so, Djokovic extended his unbeaten streak in Australia to 34 straight matches and won his fifth consecutive final dating to Tel Aviv last year.

The winner of 92 career titles now heads to the Australian Open in a week’s time as a heavy title favourite.

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AFP



Novak Djokovic celebrates after beating Sebastian Korda in the ATP Adelaide final on Sunday (AFP)

USA win inaugural United Cup

Sydney, Australia - World number nine Taylor Fritz battled past Italian Matteo Berrettini with a powerhouse performance to steer the United States to the inaugural mixed teams United Cup title in Sydney on Sunday.

Frances Tiafoe and Jessica Pegula both won their singles rubbers to give their country a 2-0 lead with Fritz delivering victory by winning 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (8/6).

Madison Keys made it a clean-sweep 4-0 with a 6-3, 6-2 win over Lucia Bronzetti.

"It's amazing for the team to win this event, we came in with really high hopes," said Fritz.

"Really happy to be in the position to clinch the match. The emotions when you win are amazing.

"We had a lot of team bonding this week," he added. "When we combine the guys and girls from the US we are so deep through the rankings it just makes team so much stronger."

The dominant United States crushed the Iga Swiatek-led Poland 5-0 to make the decider of the new tournament -- which began with 18 nations playing round robin matches in Perth,



Team US celebrates with the United Cup trophy after their victory against Italy on Sunday (AFP)

Brisbane and Sydney -- while Italy outgunned Stefanos Tsitsipas's Greece 4-1.

Fritz constantly put pressure on the Berrettini serve, earning four break points on his first two service games, but all were saved.

Despite the American being in charge from the baseline, it went to a first set tiebreak where he got two decisive early breaks to move 3-0 ahead before closing

out the set.

Fritz again created a series of break points in the second set, but Berrettini hung on and it again went to a tiebreak where he once more prevailed.

Women's world number three Pegula, who burst into the top 10 in 2022 by winning the WTA 1000 Guadalajara tournament, stormed home 6-4, 6-2 against Martina Trevisan.

"Definitely very relieved, first

match of the day, first match of the final," said Pegula.

"Martina is playing great, she's a fighter, I feel like she's thriving on the atmosphere with the fans and her team and really hard to beat someone like that.

"Glad I was able to play well enough to get the win."

High level

Trevisan stunned world number six Maria Sakkari in a gripping

three-hour encounter on Friday, and her confidence was high.

But Pegula was also in red-hot form, toppling world number one Swiatek for the first time in the semi-finals.

She came out firing against Trevisan, racing to a 3-0 lead after breaking the Italian's opening serve.

Trevisan showed the fighting qualities that helped her beat Sakkari to claw back, converting a break point in the fifth game and holding serve to get it back on level terms.

They exchanged breaks again on the fast hard courts before Pegula pounced once more to clinch the set on the Trevisan serve with a backhand winner.

It was all Pegula in the second as she put her foot to the floor, racing 5-0 clear.

But the Italian refused to give up and broke back as the American served for the match before her comeback faltered.

Tiafoe picked up where Pegula left off, surged through the first set 6-2 against Lorenzo Musetti before the Italian retired due to a right shoulder injury.

AFP



Coco Gauff celebrates with the Auckland Classic trophy (AFP)

Gauff: Auckland title will boost Australian Open confidence

Auckland, New Zealand - Top seed Coco Gauff says clinching the Auckland Classic title on Sunday will inject her with "a lot of confidence" ahead of the Australian Open.

The American teenager breezed to victory in the final, negotiating two lengthy stoppages while outclassing Spanish qualifier Rebeka Masarova 6-1, 6-1.

It completed a dominant week for the world number seven, who didn't drop a set at the tournament and effortlessly cast aside her 130th-ranked opponent to snare a third WTA title and her first for nearly two years.

Displaying the sort of form that took her to the final of the French Open seven months ago, Gauff's methodical groundstrokes look set to be a potent weapon at the year's first Grand Slam starting in Melbourne in just over a week.

The 18-year-old said her form this week was a major boost before crossing the Tasman Sea.

It was also comforting that she had emerged better for an exhausting off-season in which she was challenged by coach Diego Moyano.

"This gives me a lot of confidence, honestly. You never know how your first week is going to go -- could be good or terrible. But I

think it's been a great week," she said.

"Despite the rain, I couldn't have asked for a better start to my season.

"In the off-season, I play with a bunch of guys and I was winning some but losing most of it, so when I played here it felt good to get some wins under the belt.

"It's a credit to the good off-season that I've had. Thanks to my coach, clearly he knows what he's doing."

Gauff also showcased a cool mental approach, unflustered by the stormy weather that afflicted the Auckland WTA250 event throughout the week.

Two of her five matches were forced indoors while two others were disrupted by rain, including the final, which began nearly two hours late.

Gauff was serving at set point in the first set when another downpour forced the players off more than two hours.

The marathon match appeared to be draining for 23-year-old Masarova, who was playing her seventh match in eight days, including qualifying.

Masarova conceded fatigue had been a factor and she was "disappointed" in her performance in a maiden WTA final appearance.

Sabalenka sends Australian Open warning with Adelaide win

Adelaide, Australia - Aryna Sabalenka said she was ready for a "big fight" at the Australian Open after firing a warning shot Sunday by winning her first title since 2021 at the Adelaide International.

The world number five ended a slump of three consecutive defeats in WTA finals with a 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) victory against rising Czech teenager Linda Noskova in torrid 36 Celsius (96.8 Fahrenheit) conditions.

The Belarusian double-faulted on the first of three match points but sent over a serve winner on the second to wrap up the afternoon.

"I'm super happy with an-



Aryna Sabalenka celebrates after winning the Adelaide title (AFP)

other title, it was a great week," the winner said. "I enjoyed every moment here in Adelaide, I'm happy with my performance.

"My serve helped me a lot, today especially. I was able to

put her under pressure on her serve. I think that's why I won today."

The second seed, a holder of 10 titles, added one more to her career total as she put her vet-

eran's experience to good use, ending the week without the loss of a set.

She last lifted a trophy at the Madrid Masters in May, 2021 and is optimistic about her Australian Open chances after her week in South Australia.

"I just feel that I'm ready to show my best. I'm ready for a big fight," she said.

World number 102 Noskova, the 2021 Roland Garros junior champion, will rise towards the top 50 with her run to her maiden final, upsetting world number two Ons Jabeur and veteran Victoria Azarenka along the way.

At 18, she was the youngest

finalist at a WTA 500 event since Caroline Wozniacki at New Haven 2007.

"It was obviously a very tough match today. Aryna played just amazing," Noskova said. "I didn't have a lot of chances.

"I did have some break points, but she always served her way out of it. That was really tough to beat."

The teenager added: "When I trust myself and my game, I can actually beat some of the best players; that's really a great feeling.

"But I'm obviously going to have to develop my game. There are a lot of blind spots. There's always things to work on."



Naomi Osaka

Osaka, Venus join list of big names to miss Aus Open

Melbourne, Australia - Two-time Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka became the latest star to pull out of the opening Grand Slam of the year Sunday, leaving the tournament deprived of some of the biggest names in the game.

No reason for the Japanese player's withdrawal was given with organisers Tennis Australia tweeting: "We will miss her at AO2023."

Ukrainian Dayana Yastremska was promoted to the main draw at Melbourne Park in her absence.

Osaka has not played a competitive match since September and reports last week said that, despite being on the official entry list, Tennis Australia were having trouble verifying her whereabouts.

The 25-year-old's social media accounts indicated that she had been travelling in Europe with her on-again, off-again boyfriend rapper Cordae.

Her no-show was another blow for the tournament starting on January 16 after US Open champion and world number one Carlos Alcaraz withdrew on Friday with a right leg problem.

Veteran American Venus Williams will also be missing after picking an injury at last week's Auckland Classic and handing back the wildcard she had been awarded.

AFP



Australia players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Test series against South Africa in Sydney on Sunday (AFP)

ANTICLIMAX

Australia denied series sweep as South Africa hold out for rare draw

Sydney, Australia - South Africa were untroubled as they batted out for their first draw in almost six years on the final day of the third Test in Sydney on Sunday, denying Australia a series whitewash.

Australia went into the fifth day of the rain-ravaged Test requiring 14 wickets for an improbable victory, but the Proteas comfortably negotiated their way through to earn a first draw in their last 47 Tests going back to New Zealand in 2017.

The teams shook hands with five overs left and South Africa at 106 for two in their second innings with Sarel Erwee unbeaten on 42 and Temba Bavuma 17.

Australia enforced the follow-on after Josh Hazlewood led the way with four wickets to dismiss the Proteas for 255 -- 21 runs short of their target, but their highest innings total of a dismal series.

"We tried different things, kept putting balls in good areas and hoped the luck would turn," Australia skipper Pat Cummins said. "We were up against it, we had 150 overs to take 20 wickets on a good surface."

Australia could only muster two wickets in South Africa's second innings with skipper Dean Elgar yet again failing along with Heinrich Klaasen.

Elgar fell for the fourth time in

We tried different things, kept putting balls in good areas and hoped the luck would turn

PAT CUMMINS



the series to a leg-side catch by wicketkeeper Alex Carey for 10. Cummins peppered him with a rising delivery and targeted Elgar's technical batting flaw off his hips for yet another cheap dismissal.

Elgar finished a miserable se-

ries with just 56 runs from six innings at an average of 9.33, raising yet more questions about his future as South Africa's Test skipper.

"Touring Australia is never easy," Elgar said. "The message to the group yesterday was to fight it out on day five."

"Only three or four guys have played here before, so there are a lot of learnings. It is a tough place to tour, maybe the toughest in the world."

"Test cricket teaches you resilience. When things aren't on your side, you still have to wake up and try again."

Australia opener Usman Khawaja was named man-of-

the-match for his unbeaten 195 in Australia's first innings declaration of 475-4.

Fellow opener David Warner was man-of-the-series, based largely on his double century in Melbourne.

Lyon distraught

Asked about his feelings on being stranded short of his first Test double-century by the declaration, Khawaja said: "I would have loved to get a double ton."

"But this is what cricket is about. You play for milestones but you also need to do the best for the team."

Australia had some chances on the final day and leading spin-

ner Nathan Lyon was left distraught when two contentious reviews involving Klaasen went against him. Klaasen survived a strident leg before wicket appeal and subsequent review on 27.

A run later a low catch by Steve Smith was given not out after a review with the third umpire Richard Kettleborough ruling that part of the ball was touching the grass when it went into Smith's fingers.

The final Test draw means Australia have yet to mathematically seal a place in the World Test Championship final in London in June ahead of next month's series in India.

AFP

Pakistan, Kiwis build towards World Cup with ODI series

Karachi, Pakistan - Pakistan and New Zealand will face off in the first of three one-day internationals in Karachi Monday, with an eye on this year's World Cup in India.

The preceding Test series between the two teams failed to produce a result in either of the two Tests - both in Karachi - ending a miserable season for both teams.

Pakistan failed to win any of their three Test series at home, losing four of the eight Tests including their first-ever 3-0 whitewash at the hands of England.

New Zealand also failed to win any of their last six Tests.

But Babar Azam is confident his team will do well in the limited over matches.

"Pakistan has proved themselves to be a good white-ball team and this series provides us a perfect launching pad to kickstart our World Cup preparations," said Azam of the World Cup in October/November.

Azam's team won eight of the nine one-day internationals last year, including a 2-1 series win over a formidable Australia at home.

"We are a well-rounded side with solid batters and bowlers who have proved themselves time and again so I am confident of doing well in the coming se-



Pakistan's captain Babar Azam speaks at a press conference ahead of their ODI series against New Zealand, in Karachi, on Sunday (AFP)

Pakistan has proved themselves to be a good white-ball team and this series provides us a perfect launching pad to kickstart our World Cup preparations

BABAR AZAM



ries," said Azam.

Pakistan will miss pace spearhead Shaheen Shah Afridi who is recovering from a knee injury

sustained in November last year, while spinning allrounder Shadab Khan is also out with a recent finger fracture.

Opener Fakhar Zaman will bolster the batting, as will Haris Sohail -- recalled after two years.

New Zealand, runners-up in the last World Cup in 2019, won ten of their 16 ODIs last year and have a strong unit led by Kane Williamson.

They have been dominant against Pakistan, having won 12 of the last 15 ODIs between the two teams.

Williamson is also concentrating on World Cup, having relinquished Test captaincy.

"I felt that continuing to captain the white-ball formats was preferable with two World Cups in the next two years," he said last month, referring to the 2023 ODI and 2024 T20 World Cups.

The accomplished batter acknowledged Pakistan's strengths.

"Pakistan is a very strong side and naturally know these conditions very well," said Williamson.

"For us as a team it's focusing on the cricket we want to play and try put out some improved performances."

New Zealand pacer Matt Henry is also out of ODIs with an abdominal strain sustained on the final day of the drawn second Test. They are already missing pace trio Trent Boult, Kyle Jamieson and Adam Milne - for varied reasons.

AFP



Brazil's Lucas Moraes competes with Qatar's Nasser Al Attiyah and during the eighth stage of Dakar Rally (AFP)

Al Attiyah maintains lead as Loeb wins Dakar stage 8

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - Sebastien Loeb grabbed victory Sunday in the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally after Carlos Sainz was hit with a five-minute penalty.

The victory lifted Loeb to fourth overall but he remains almost two hours behind overall leader Nasser Al-Attiyah.

The 48-year-old Frenchman won the stage by 2 minutes and 11 seconds in his Prodrive from Qatari Al Attiyah after 822 km of racing through valleys and sand between Al Duwadimi and

Riyadh. Loeb has had a wildly up-and-down race. After bad days on Monday and Tuesday he won on Wednesday and then rolled his car on Thursday and on Saturday lost more than 16 minutes.

Sainz has also had shifting fortunes in the sands. On Sunday he was caught driving 40 kilometres over the limit in his Audi in a 30kph section. The penalty dropped him to third for the day at 3min 31sec.

The Spaniard is 17th overall. Henk Lategan was fourth in a

Toyota at 4min 53sec to tighten his grip on second place but the South African fell 1hr 3min 46sec behind the leader.

Brazilian Lucas Moraes is third in another Toyota at 1:20.22 with Loeb fourth, 1:52.06 off first.

Monday is a rest day before the competitors hit the road again on Tuesday for the final six stages.

In the motorbikes, Ross Branch made amends for running out of fuel in the previous two stages with a welcome win.

PERFECT TRIBUTE

Danilo honours late hero Vialli by firing Juve second, Inter slip at Monza

Milan, Italy - Danilo made sure that Juventus paid the perfect tribute to deceased former captain Gianluca Vialli by netting the only goal in Saturday's 1-0 win over Udinese which fired the Turin giants second in Serie A.

Massimiliano Allegri's team jumped one point above AC Milan and to within just four of league leaders Napoli thanks to a beautifully-constructed goal finished off by the Brazilian defender four minutes from the end at the Allianz Stadium.

Danilo extended Juve's league winning streak to eight games, a run in which they haven't conceded a goal, after Federico Chiesa controlled fellow substitute Leandro Paredes' delicate chip and then played a perfect pass across goal.

That was one of the few clear-cut chances Juve created against eighth-placed Udinese, who were missing their talisman Gerard Deulofeu and are winless in nine matches.

On Friday, Juve travel to Napoli, who on Sunday are in action at Sampdoria, where former Italy forward Vialli - a victim of pancreatic cancer - played most of his football and may be mourned the most.

"After the win our first thoughts go to Gianluca Vialli. He was a great guy, I was lucky enough to have had him in my life," said Italy forward Chiesa.



Juventus' Brazilian defender Danilo celebrates after opening the scoring against Udinese in their Italian Serie A match at the Juventus stadium in Turin on Saturday (AFP)

The 25-year-old was part of the Italy team which won Euro 2020, and hailed Vialli's role in that triumph despite him not having a coaching role with the

Azzurri set-up.

"You could speak for hours and hours about what a great man he was," Chiesa added.

"This win is for him"

Champions Milan will move back into second if they beat Roma in Sunday's late match, and sit two points ahead of Inter Milan after Denzel Dumfries'

stoppage-time own goal led to them drawing 2-2 at Monza.

Spirited Monza are nine points clear of the relegation zone in their first ever Serie A season thanks to Dumfries deflecting former Inter youth player Luca Caldirola's header into his own net.

However Inter coach Simone Inzaghi was livid that a Francesco Acerbi strike had not been given 10 minutes earlier because referee Juan Luca Sacchi blew for a non-existent foul before the ball went in, leaving VAR powerless to intervene.

"We're very angry, because it's a clear mistake. After five years of VAR... Everyone knows to wait and see what happens," said Inzaghi to Sky.

Vialli remembered

It was an emotional day for many Juve fans, who will remember Vialli as the last captain to lead their team to a major European honour more than a quarter of a century ago.

Fans brought jerseys emblazoned with the former Italy striker's name, while one flag in the Allianz Stadium stands depicted the moment he lifted the Champions League trophy in 1996.

Gianluca Pessotto, who played over 250 times for Juventus and was alongside Vialli in that triumphant campaign, hailed "a captain. A friend," in his pre-match eulogy on the pitch.

"You were our leader on and off the field," said former Italy international Pessotto who is now sporting director of Juve's youth academy.

"Nobody will ever forget the memories you gave us with your football and your goals. We will miss your smile so much."

AFP



Marseille's Eric Bailly fouls Hyeres' midfielder Almike Moussa N'Diaye during their French Cup match on Saturday (AFP)

Bailly's flying tackle leaves French Cup rival in intensive care

Paris, France - Marseille defender Eric Bailly was sent-off after a horror flying tackle left a French Cup opponent in intensive care on Saturday.

Ivory Coast international Bailly, 28, who is on loan from Manchester United, was red-carded after just 15 minutes of the tie at fourth division amateur side Hyeres when his foot crunched into the chest of Almike Moussa N'Diaye.

The stricken Hyeres player was stretched off before being taken to a local hospital from the modest 8,000-capacity Francis-Turcan stadium in Martigues in southern France.

Hyeres president Mourad Boudjellal, the colourful and controversial former owner of Toulon rugby club, told AFP that N'Diaye was then transported to another hospital in Marseille, 40km away.

"He was transferred to Hopital Nord in Marseille and they admitted him to intensive care, as a precaution," said Boudjellal.

We pray that everything goes well for him. He's a great lad and one of our best players

MOURAD BOUDJELLAL

"We pray that everything goes well for him. He's a great lad and one of our best players."

Earlier, coaching staff at Hyeres had been more reassuring.

"It's more fear than harm, nothing serious, maybe a concussion," assistant coach Zaki Noubir told Maritima radio.

"Bailly came quickly into our dressing room to offer his shirt and above all to hear the latest news."

Despite playing most of the last-64 tie with 10 men, Marseille still had too much firepower and ran out 2-0 winners.

AFP

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Bahrain, Qatar start with wins

Basra, Iraq - Defending champions Bahrain kicked off their 2023 Gulf Cup campaign with a 2-1 win over United Arab Emirates on Saturday. Qatar also got off to a perfect start with a 2-0 triumph over Kuwait in the group's later match.

Bahrain, aiming to win the title for a second time, found UAE a tough nut to crack in the first half with the Emiratis enjoying the better chances.

Neither side, however, was able to find a breakthrough in the opening 45 minutes.

That changed in the 60th minute with Kamil Al Aswad opening the scoring for Bahrain with a free-kick from outside the area. There was more cheer in the 77th minute with Jasim Al Shaikh's strike from distance doubling their advantage.

Sebastian Tagliabue pulled one back for UAE in added time but there was to be no comeback as Bahrain took the points.

Qatar struck twice in the first half to seal the points against a spirited Kuwait side.

Fielding a largely young team,

Bahrain's Mahdi al Humaidan controls the ball in front of UAE's Ahmed Jamil during their Gulf Cup match (AFP)

Qatar opened the scoring in the 23rd minute through Amro Surag's curling shot from just inside the box.

Kuwait tried to find a way

back but found themselves further behind when Ahmed Alaaeldin struck from the penalty spot in the 38th minute.

In Group A, Saudi Arabia will

aim for their second win when they play hosts Iraq on Monday while Oman and Yemen will both be aiming for their first victories.

AFC

Iraq apologises after chaos at Gulf Cup

Basra, Iraq - Iraq apologised to neighbours Kuwait after a scuffle in the VIP section prevented the Kuwaiti emir's representative from attending opening ceremonies at the Gulf Cup football tournament.

Matches are taking place in the city of Basra, near Kuwait, as war-scarred Iraq hosts the regional event for the first time in more than four decades.

The country was long banned from international football.

Videos on social media showed about 20 men verbally abusing and jostling each other, for unknown reasons, in a VIP section of the city's International Stadium. It was hosting the tournament's opening match between Iraq and Oman on Friday.

During the chaos, Kuwait Olympic Committee president Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah al Ahmad could not get into the venue, Kuwaiti press reported. He was representing the country's Emir Sheikh Nawaf al Ahmad al Sabah.

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NO QUARANTINE

Heading her boyfriend goodbye, student Yuri Tan was among hundreds excitedly heading north across Hong Kong's border with mainland China on Sunday as pandemic travel restrictions were mostly lifted, finally allowing separated families to reunite.

"I am going back because I don't have to undergo quarantine anymore," an elated Tan told AFP, clutching luggage containing a few boxes of fever medication for family.

Tan, 23, was planning to travel to Shenzhen just across the border from Hong Kong and then take a connecting flight to her hometown of Yangzhou in eastern China, a journey that until recently would have meant weeks in mandatory isolation first.

China lifted quarantine rules for all international visitors on Sunday, ending almost three years of self-imposed isolation. On the same day, the border between mainland China and Hong Kong also did away with most restrictions. Around 60,000 people are now allowed to travel each way daily.

On Sunday morning, there were large crowds at the Lok Ma Chau border crossing heading north, but noticeably fewer people heading south into Hong Kong. With the Lunar New Year two weeks away, many said they were going for family reunions.

Pre-travel tests

Chinese student Galen Liu said he had been studying for a doctorate in Europe, making a return home all but impossible until now and leaving him feeling "helpless".

Two weeks ago he flew into Hong Kong and waited for the border to reopen so he could reunite with his parents and sister in neighbouring Guangdong province.

"I am really excited," Liu told AFP. "Now I can finally go home and I don't need to take a flight - I can just cross the border overland."

Liu was carrying medicine for family, most of whom, he said, had been recently infected after China abruptly abandoned its strict zero-Covid strategy.

Cases have soared in the world's most populous nation, with hospitals



A railway staff member in a pink vest (C) holds a placard reminding passengers to bring along their COVID-19 test result papers and successful reservation notice as passengers travel to the Lok Ma Chau checkpoint

China lifts curbs

There's excitement at Hong Kong's China border as quarantine lifted

a city that long served as a business gateway to China before it was cut off due to COVID-19.

The sports equipment manufacturer said he planned to attend an exhibition there before travelling overseas for much needed meetings with clients.

"It was quite inconvenient when I could not travel and meet my customers face to face," Zeng told AFP. "When my clients wanted to check out a sample, we could do it via video link."

Hong Kong's economy is in dire straits, mired in recession and desperate for crowds to return. Prior to the pandemic, mainlanders accounted for about three quarters of arrivals.

An 80-year-old traveller surnamed Liu said he was returning to Hong Kong to celebrate the Lunar New Year with family.

"I hope the procedure can be further simplified, like scrapping the test requirement," Liu said. "It's a bit complicated for an 80-year-old man like me." AFP

CHINA ENDS QUARANTINE

China lifted quarantine requirements for inbound travellers on Sunday, ending almost three years of self-imposed isolation even as the country battles a surge in COVID-19 cases.

The first people to arrive expressed relief at not having to undergo the grueling quarantines that were a fixture of life in zero-Covid China. And in Hong Kong, where the border with mainland China was re-opened after years of closure, more than 400,000 people were set to travel north in the coming eight weeks.

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Making ‘capital’

INDONESIA IS MOVING ITS CAPITAL TO THE RAINFORESTS OF BORNEO AS ITS CAPITAL JAKARTA IS SINKING FAST, BESIDES FACING AN EVER-INCREASING CLEAN WATER CRISIS

Indonesia is relocating its capital city from Jakarta to a site more than 1,000km in the rainforests of Borneo Island. The project is set to launch at the end of President Joko Widodo's term in 2024.

Here's why Southeast Asia's largest economy is moving its administrative centre to Nusantara, a lush, biodiverse region home to the world's oldest rainforests.

Sinking city

Jakarta is sinking at an alarming rate due to the excessive extraction of groundwater.

A study by Indonesia's Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology in 2021 found that the sprawling megalopolis sinks about six centimetres on average every year, making it one of the fastest-sinking cities on earth.

"Building a sea wall is inevitable because the flood is already here, but over time the dam will sink, and the flood will happen again," Heri Andreas, an earth scientist at the Bandung Institute of Technology, told AFP. "The best solution to control the land subsidence is by controlling the exploitation of groundwater," he said.

A quarter of the capital's area will be completely submerged by 2050 if no urgent measures are taken, the National Research and Innovation Agency said.

Overwhelming burden

Jakarta is one of the world's most overpopulated cities, home to more than 30 million residents living in its greater metropolitan area. Pollution

from its traffic-choked roads and the absence of a rubbish collection system - forcing many to burn their trash - has produced air quality that at times rivals New Delhi and Beijing.

The government estimates that hours-long traffic jams across the city inflict billions of dollars in economic losses for the world's biggest Muslim-majority country every year.

"Jakarta's burden is overwhelmingly heavy," Djoko Setijowarno, a transportation analyst from the Indonesia Transportation Society, told AFP.

"The commute is highly inefficient, long and exhausting. It also decreases people's productivity."

Widodo has said he envisions the new capital as a modern city where everybody can bike and walk between destinations that are close to one another.

Wealth distribution

With more than 17,000 islands, Indonesia is the largest archipelagic nation on earth. But its population and economy are mainly concentrated in Jakarta and the wider Java Island, which is home to more than half of the country's 270 million people.

people in Java."

By comparison, East Kalimantan province - where the new capital Nusantara will be built - has fewer than four million people.

The government has prepared 56,180 hectares in East Kalimantan province on the Indonesian part of Borneo, which the country shares with Malaysia and Brunei.

Disaster-free zone

Another reason for the capital relocation cited by the government is disaster mitigation. According to the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency, Jakarta is surrounded by active fault lines, making it perilously vulnerable to earthquakes.

Borneo has the lowest possibility for earthquakes compared to other major Indonesian islands because it is further from active fault lines, the agency said.

Jakarta also deals with frequent flooding because it sits on swamp land.

Researchers believe water supplies may dry out for many in Jakarta and wider Java if Indonesia does not relieve pressure on the megalopolis.

"Jakarta and Java Island are heading towards a clean water crisis, we projected the crisis might happen in 2050," the earth scientist Andreas said, blaming rapid population and industrial growth.

"When the population explodes, the poor sanitation will get worse, pollutants will contaminate the rivers and shallow groundwater, rendering them unusable," he said.

AFP



Architect Sofian Sibarani, handpicked to design the new Indonesian capital of Nusantara



This screengrab taken from aerial video footage taken on August 13, 2022 shows people travelling in a boat through a mangrove forest in Balikpapan, located in eastern Borneo - the world's third-largest island

The government says it wants to diversify Indonesia's centres of economic and political power.

"The relocation (of the capital) is for distribution, for fairness," Widodo said in March. "We have 17,000 islands but 56 per cent of the population are in Java. There are 156 million

A quarter of the capital's area will be completely submerged by 2050 if no urgent measures are taken

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