



H M to leave for UAE today

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will pay a visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Wednesday. A statement to this effect was issued by the Diwan of Royal Court on Tuesday, reading as follows: 'His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will leave tomorrow for UAE, in response to the UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan's invitation to His Majesty to take part in a fraternal meeting between GCC leaders, King Abdullah II Ibn al Hussein of

the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and President Abdel Fatah el Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt. 'His Majesty the Sultan will be accompanied by an official delegation comprising Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidi, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court; Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Nu'amani, Minister of the Royal Office; Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister and Sayyid Dr Ahmed bin Hilal al Busaidi, Ambassador of Oman to the UAE.

Royal Decree ratifies air services pact between Oman, Turkey

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal decree No 5/2023 on Tuesday, ratifying the protocol of amending the air services agreement between the governments of the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Turkey, signed in Montreal on September 29,

2022. Article 1 ratifies the aforementioned protocol in accordance with the version attached to this decree. Article 2 says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. ONA

Oman 6th in world, 1st in MENA in renewable energy regulatory index

100
Legal framework for renewable energy
100
Planning for renewable energy expansion
94
Incentives and regulatory support for electricity
92
Attributes of financial and regulatory incentives
*Score out of 100



Our Correspondent Muscat

A new World Bank report on energy policies and regulations ranks Oman sixth in the world and first in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in Renewable Energy regulatory indicators. The 2022 edition of the RISE (Regulatory Indicators for Sustainable Energy) report shows that many countries have embedded new policies to improve their energy independence and minimise energy costs in their COVID-19 recovery plans. The report shows Oman has achieved good position in the regulatory indicators for renewable energy and electricity access. According to the report, 100 per cent of Oman's population has access to electricity and

The most important factor that contributed to Oman's rankings is the attention that the government accorded to sustainable energy

AUTHORITY FOR PUBLIC SERVICES REGULATION

clean cooking. The sultanate scores high in renewable energy indicators such as legal framework for renewable energy (score of 100), planning for renewable energy expansion (100), incentives and regulatory support for electricity (94) and attributes of financial and regulatory incentives (92). Overall, the RISE report ranks Oman second at the GCC level, fifth in MENA, and 38th globally. In the GCC, the UAE - with a score of 81 - is ranked 33rd overall, followed by Oman (score of

78), Saudi Arabia (73), Qatar (70), Bahrain (63) and Kuwait (56). The figures indicate Oman's robust progress in achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040, including the global competitiveness index. The accomplishment also reflects the positive aspect of applied policies and regulatory frameworks in Oman. The Authority for Public Services Regulation said that one of the most important factors that contributed to Oman's accessing these high rankings is the atten-

tion that the government and relevant authorities accorded to developing sustainable energy spheres and providing necessary enablers through approved plans to implement the transition to alternative energy and diversify its sources. Other factors include market liberalisation - through bilateral sales and spot market - adopting a national strategy for an orderly transition to zero neutrality (in carbon emissions), establishing the Oman Sustainability Centre, setting regulatory frameworks for environment-friendly vehicles, sector-based governance, setting the necessary incentives to support areas related to renewable energy and backing up initiatives. RISE covers 140 countries, representing more than 90 per cent of the world's population.

'No truth in reports of inhuman treatment of Chad housemaids'

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has not found any truth in video reports of inhuman treatment of housemaids from the Republic of Chad. The commission said it has followed up and investigated the video showing some officials and a number of Chadian women complaining of mistreatment by their employers in Oman after they returned back to their country. 'The commission believes that the presentation of the issue through this video and the description thereof was exaggerated and even contradictory to the truth,' the OHRC stated. 'If there had been any infringement or violation of the rights of the said Chadian women, they - prior to their travel - would have reported the issue to the competent authorities in Oman to investigate any abuse and maintain their rights in accordance with the law. However, neither the said women nor the Republic of Chad, which has fol-

Through the competent authorities, the OHRC ascertained that the women have not been subjected to forced labour or human trafficking

lowed up on their subject, has reported any case to the competent authorities', it informed. The OHRC stated that as soon as it was informed, the commission communicated with the competent authorities in Oman to ascertain the truth of the issue and to redress any legal or humanitarian abuse towards the said women. On its investigation, the commission found that the Chadian women, referred to in the video, were employed under contracts of employment pursuant to the law and the procedures followed in Oman, under the mutual agreement and consent between

the women and the relevant employers. Only one of the said women filed a complaint to the competent authorities for a dispute between her and the employer, and the issue was settled as per legal procedures and she accepted to return to work. 'Through the competent authorities, the OHRC has ascertained that all the aforementioned women have not been subjected to forced labour or human trafficking, as all documents submitted by the competent authorities prove that they have not filed any report or complaint in this regard.' It added that as a matter of mutual cooperation between the two countries, the authorities in Oman took all the necessary steps in terms of providing travel tickets and ensuring that they received their financial dues, from their employers. 'Therefore, the OHRC considers that the case was only a matter of disagreement or lack of agreement between the employers and the aforementioned women.'

Oman 5th most secure country in the world

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman has been ranked the fifth most secure country in the world, according to Numbeo, the world's largest database of user contributed data about cities and countries. According to the Numbeo

Safety Index 2023, Qatar is ranked first, followed by the UAE, Taiwan (China), Isle Of Man and Oman, making the top five. Oman received 80.3 points in the security index and 19.7 points in the scale of measuring the spread of crime. The results reflect the efforts made by the Royal Oman Police

(ROP) in preserving security and public order, protecting lives and properties, and preventing and combating all sorts of crimes. The accomplishment also affirms the high level of awareness in the Omani society, with citizens complementing the efforts of the ROP in maintaining law and order.



Foreign investors keen to develop two nature reserves: EA

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Environment Authority on Monday revealed receiving multiple proposals from foreign institutions expressing their interest to invest in the sultanate's two prominent nature reserves. On the sidelines of the 'Oman Conference on Environmental Sustainability', Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Omari, chairman of EA, said that the authority received multiple requests from local and foreign institutions to invest in the Starlight Reserve in Al Hajar al Gharbi in Dakhliyah governorate, and the Rustaq Wildlife Nature Reserve in South Batinah. 'The authority has formed a committee to discuss these offers and choose the best among them,' he informed. 'Oman has 26 nature re-

serves, through which we aim to preserve our biological diversity and promote the sultanate in the world of ecotourism,' the EA chief further said. Nature reserves in Oman are a major tourist attraction, offering scenic nature, camping and diving facilities to enjoy coral reefs and other underwater treasures. Spread over an estimated 387sqkm and featuring natural elements, the Starlight Reserve in Al Hajar al Gharbi was set up through a Royal Decree issued in May 2019 for stargazing, as all types of light and illumination are banned in the designated area of the reserve. The Rustaq reserve is a mountain range 2,000m above the sea level - extending from Wadi Bani Kharus in the east to Wadi al-Sahtan in the west.

EGYPT HOSTS SUMMIT MEETING ON PALESTINIAN ISSUE



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi (centre) flanked by Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (right) and the King of Jordan Abdullah II poses for a photo ahead of tripartite summit at Al Ittihadiyah Palace in Egypt's Cairo on Tuesday. The leaders held summit talks to discuss Palestinian developments. An Egyptian presidential spokesman said the talks tackled challenges facing the Palestinian cause

Empty Quarter Festival to start on Jan 25

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The second edition of the Empty Quarter Festival of Dhofar will kick-start on January 25 and run until February 3.

The festival will be organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) in Al Khadf area of Al Shahr in the wilayat of Thumrait in Dhofar governorate.

"The festival will be organised in cooperation with the Office of the Governor of Dhofar, Dhofar Municipality and the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED)," Khalid bin Abdullah al Abri, director general in the Directorate of Heritage and



The festival aims to make Dhofar a sustainable tourist destination, in addition to highlighting the potential of winter tourism for attracting investors

KHALID AL ABRI

Tourism, Dhofar, said.

According to Abri, the festival

aims to make Dhofar a sustainable tourist destination, in addition to highlighting the potential of winter tourism for attracting investors.

"Al Khadf oasis will be the main area for various services and events, such as mobile vehicles for entrepreneurs, Wabar heritage village having an exhibition of handicrafts, a corner for the families engaged in cottage industry, and an arena for traditional events.

"The festival will include a number of heritage, tourism and entertainment



events, and will showcase bedouin heritage arts at Al Khadf oasis," he said.

The event venue will have a theatre for entertainment shows; sites for climbing; areas for basketball and football events; options for camel and horse riding; and sandbike rental sites.

The bedouin arts will include Taghrud and folklore, while traditional games, sand race challenge, paragliding activities, and the Thumrait Open Shooting Championship will add fun to the festivity, the official said.

A 10km run has also been planned for enthusiasts and athletes, the organisers said.

A tourist convoy of four-wheel drive vehicles will be made available for visitors to explore the Empty Quarter. The caravan will set out from the festival site and will take visitors to Ramlet Jadilah - the highest sand dune in the world, located in Dhofar, around 12km from the Oman-Yemen border. The peak of the dune stands at 455m above sea level.

"The governorate seeks to place this festival in the map of regional tourism festivals by hosting the World Desert Championships and motivate tourism partners to support and sponsor the festival, which has a potential to offer good economic and marketing returns," Abri added.



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Three infiltrators arrested with huge cache of drugs

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) arrested three expats on Tuesday for smuggling large quantities of drugs into Oman.

A statement issued by the ROP said, 'Three people of

Asian nationality have been arrested after they entered the country illegally by sea, and were found in possession of more than 28kg of crystal meth, 21kg of morphine and 10kg of hashish.'

'Legal procedures have been taken against them,' it stated.

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New initiative to employ 100 jobseekers in Oman airports

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Airports, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, on Tuesday launched a programme to train 100 jobseekers in the aviation and ground services sector.

The 'Masir' programme aims to empower Omani youth to achieve their goals and engage them in the labour market.

The launch ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Sayyid Salem bin Muslim al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development in the Ministry of Labour.

"Through this partnership, the ministry seeks to strengthen the efforts of the private sector institutions and train jobseekers to enter the labour market," H E Busaidi said.

"More than 11,000 jobs were created within the Employment Training Programme through

the Human Resources Development Sector in 2022," he added.

Saud bin Abdulaziz al Azizi, executive director of TRANSOM Handling, said, "The programme seeks to train about 100 jobseekers for the aviation sector in the first phase. This programme comes in line with the company's strategy to qualify and train the national cadre in line with Oman Vision 2040."

He added that the company aspires to receive larger number of candidates in the second phase.

According to Azizi, the programme will continue for two years and will employ jobseekers in passenger services and some technical jobs in the aviation sector.

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Desert marathon to see 500 participants from 40 countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 500 participants from 40 countries have signed up for the Oman Desert Marathon to be flagged off on January 21.

This will be the eighth edition of the self-sufficient race, which will run over four stages covering 165km in four days.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) said, 'Under the auspices of H E Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidi, Undersecretary for tourism in MHT, the Oman Desert Marathon will be flagged off at Al Wasel village in the wilayat of Bidiyah in North Sharqiyah at 7am.'

With an average maximum temperature of 25°C during the day, and average minimum of 17.3°C at night, January offers the participants of the marathon perfect conditions to enjoy the race to the fullest, MHT stated.

First held in 2013, the Oman Desert Marathon is staged through one of the most spectacular deserts in the world.

The course has sand in every stage, helping participants discover a country rich in culture and landscape, while still being a tough challenge for them.

The four stages of the 2023 edition will have a course of 47km, 55km, 42km and 21km, offering participants a spectacu-



The organisers confirmed the participation of nine time Marathon de Sables winner and seven time Oman Desert Marathon winner Rachid el Morabity in this edition

lar route.

'An epic stage of 55km followed by a marathon distance, and a more relaxed last day will be a good end to the party,' stated the organisers.

The organisers confirmed the participation of nine time

Marathon de Sables winner and seven time Oman Desert Marathon winner Rachid el Morabity in this year's edition.

Rachid, an iconic Moroccan athlete, was the winner in the last edition of the Oman Desert Marathon held in 2019, while his

brother Mohammed el Morabity came second. Ukrainian ultra-distance and mountain runner Evgenii Glyva came third in the same race.

Oman Desert Marathon could not be held since 2019 due to the pandemic.

South Sharqiyah to have groundwater recharge dam

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its efforts to raise the country's groundwater level, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) will build a groundwater recharge dam in Wadi Sal in South Sharqiyah.

'The ministry is looking for partnership with a private sector firm for building a groundwater recharge dam in Wadi Sal in the wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, for which a tender has been floated,' MAFWR informed through a statement.

The ministry has built 174 dams, 56 of which are for groundwater recharge, 115 surface storage and three for flood protection in various governorates.

The deadline for submission of tenders is February 8, the ministry added.

MAFWR provides irrigation facilities by constructing dams - which are of three types: groundwater recharge dams, storage and flood prevention embankments; implementing projects for the maintenance of aflaj; digging auxiliary wells and issuing water licences, while constantly monitoring water levels in those area.

According to statistics released by MAFWR, 808 water licences were issued in December last to drill new wells.

The statistics show that the governorate of Dakhliyah led in



MAFWR provides irrigation facilities by constructing dams, besides other projects

obtaining licences to dig new wells, with 217 licences, followed by 160 in Dhahirah, 117 in South Batinah, 114 in North Sharqiyah, 100 in North Batinah, 38 in Buraimi, 29 in South Sharqiyah, 17 in Muscat, eight in Dhofar, five in Al Wusta and three in Musandam.

The ministry deals with these projects in accordance with the technical requirements and gives conditional approvals in coordination with other government agencies.

The ministry is working on well-studied plans for such projects, by proposing the allocation of water abundant places for the establishment of these projects, and encourages Omani investors to establish such vital projects.

According to MAFWR, Oman received an average rainfall of 123mm in 2020 against 183mm in 2019.

Oman to host first international forum on dates from today

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A two-day international forum on developing expertise to produce and market dates will kick off on Wednesday.

The forum is being organised by the International Dates Council in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

The forum, being held for the first time, will cover various as-

pects of dates production, marketing and promotion. It will discuss benefits that could be secured for all segments of the value chain - the farmers, manufacturers, marketing agencies, traders and consumers - as well as its contribution to the national economy and the environment with a view to sustainable growth.

To be held under the auspices of H E Dr Saud Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries

and Water Resources, the forum will be attended by researchers and specialists from academic, research and other establishments from Oman and abroad.

The forum will also be attended by experts in the fields of date marketing and production, economists, nutritionists and representatives of local and international organisations, government institutions, private sector establishments, embassies and commercial offices.

Trader fined RO2,000 for selling tobacco

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has imposed a fine of RO2,000 on an expat for trading and selling chewing tobacco in the wilayat of Barka, South Batinah governorate.

CPA stated that the Consumer Protection Department in South Batinah recently arrested an expatriate worker 'who traded and sold non-smoking, chewing tobacco to consumers'.

CPA officials had received information that an expatriate in Barka was using his car for selling prohibited cigarettes and chewing tobacco to consumers.

'This is a violation of decision No 301/2016 and its amendments regarding the ban on trading chewing tobacco in any form and under any name,' a CPA statement said.

After collecting evidence and coordinating with the concerned authorities in the governorate, CPA officials arrested the viola-

tor and legal measures were taken against him. Around 3,600 bags of chewing tobacco and 1,990 packs of prohibited cigarettes were seized and will be destroyed. While an administrative fine of RO2,000 was imposed on the violator.'

The authority affirmed that it spares no effort in following up and monitoring the markets. 'CPA will control everything that may harm the health and safety of consumers or is against consumers' rights,' the statement said, appealing to consumers to report any abuses they may notice in the market.

Obscure parking signboard in Ruwi makes people pay 'unwanted' fines

Our Correspondent
Muscat

An obscure signboard in the parking lot next to Nesto hypermarket in Ruwi is leading to 'unwanted' fines for many commuters for parking their vehicles inadvertently in the zone meant for taxis.

The signboard, which states that the parking area is reserved for 'small taxis', has faded over the years and hence fails to draw the attention of the other car drivers visiting the area.

On most days there are ample parking space for general public, however on weekends and specially during special promotions at the hypermarket, there is a rush and that is when many people are fined for parking in the spot designated for taxis. An unauthorised parking attracts a fine of RO10 from the civic authorities.

Ashraf M Alam, a regular shopper at the hypermarket, said, "I have been a victim of this problem twice. I no more keep my car there. When there is no parking slot, I am okay with parking a little far; but in no way I shall endure fine. The sign has faded and very difficult to see."



The authorities should take a serious note of the problem and make parking signs properly visible with bold fonts and bright colours

A SHOPPER

Another shopper - who wished not to be named - said, "It would help commuters if the signboard is a little more clear. Even the colour contrast is bad and can't be read properly. I have seen such unclear signboards in

several other areas such as Seeb, Mawaleh and Gubrah."

He added that the authorities should take a serious note of the problem and make parking signs properly visible with bold fonts and bright colours.

Chaos is more during the days the hypermarket offers sales.

"Often parking signs are missed and the chances for this one to be missed is high due to its obscurity. As a result many vehicle owners fall victims to fines," said another visitor.

An official from the hypermarket added, "Public parking signboards do not come under our ambit even though we have our staff to guide shoppers to designated parking. The best way to avoid fines is to use the parking facility of the hypermarket."



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Sri Lanka	955.35
*Rates as on January 17 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

US deficit widens in fourth quarter

The US budget deficit widened in the first three months of the government's fiscal year on greater social security spending and higher interest payments on debt, the Treasury Department said.

While pandemic-related spending went down and there were lower unemployment benefits paid out as economic recovery from Covid-19 continued, the government also brought in a smaller amount of revenues, data showed.

This caused the deficit to grow 12 per cent to US\$421bn in the October to December period, from the same window a year prior, the Treasury said.

Spending totaled US\$1.4tn in the quarter, a similar level as the comparable period a year earlier.

In particular, interest on public debt rose 10 per cent in December and 37 per cent in the most recent quarter, a Treasury official said Thursday.

This segment has seen one of the biggest increases so far in the fiscal year.

A category that also saw greater spending was education, on the back of "increased modifications or estimates for subsidies, primarily in the direct student loan programs," the official said.

Crypto awareness high in Oman as ownership grows

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As the hype around cryptocurrencies has been spreading fast around the world in past few years, Omani citizens and residents hold a high level of crypto awareness and are increasingly becoming familiar with cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, Ethereum and others, according to a new survey.

The survey, which was conducted by Oman-based investing community platform Souq Analyst, found that crypto awareness in Oman is rising at a fast pace. The survey results showed that an impressive 97.9 per cent of Omani adults have heard about cryptocurrency, indicating an increasing level of awareness.

Citing data from cryptocurrency payments gateway TripleA, Souq Analyst's Oman Cryptocurrency Adoption Report 2023 indicated that approximately 65,000 people in Oman own cryptocurrency or about 1.9 per cent of the sultanate's population. This is compared with 1.6 per cent ownership rate in Saudi Arabia and 0.9 per cent ownership rates in Qatar and Bahrain each.

Souq Analyst's study - which included more than 200 respondents from across Oman - uncovered important details about the demographics of crypto owners in the sultanate.

The survey found that around



Souq Analyst found that over 55% crypto owners in Oman own Bitcoin while nearly 48% hold Ethereum. Due to its various uses, Ethereum comes in second place in Oman, followed by Ripple (XRP), Tether, and other alternative coins

90 per cent crypto owners in Oman are between the ages of 18 years and 44 years, while only eight per cent are over the age of 45 years.

"The growing adoption of digital assets and cryptocurrencies in Oman is a trend that cannot be ignored. As highlighted by our study, the level of engagement and familiarity with digital assets in Oman is on par with that of the rest of the world," Mohammed al

Tamami, founder of Souq Analyst told Muscat Daily.

"It is crucial that investors, traders, regulators, and other stakeholders take note of this trend and take a more responsive approach to the economic and monetary evolution currently taking place globally," Tamami added.

The survey results showed that the majority of Omani crypto owners are highly educated people with 66 per cent of them had a bachelor's degree or higher and nearly 25 per cent of them had graduated from high school.

Furthermore, the study showed Bitcoin as the most popular cryptocurrency among Omani crypto owners. It found that over 55 per cent of crypto owners in Oman own Bitcoin, while nearly 48 per cent hold Ethereum.

Due to its various uses, Ethereum comes in second place in Oman, followed by Ripple (XRP), Tether, and other alternative coins, Souq Analyst said in its report.

Despite concerns about investment risks and safety of crypto assets, a significant portion of crypto owners in Oman view digital assets as a safe alternative to traditional currencies.

As per Souq Analyst's report, over 12 per cent of respondents reported owning more than RO10,000 worth of crypto assets, while more than six per cent reported owning between RO5,000-RO10,000 worth of crypto assets.

Moreover, 62 per cent of respondents are planning to increase their cryptocurrency holdings this year, according to the survey results.

It showed that 62 per cent of cryptocurrency owners in Oman invest long-term, but 25 per cent use digital assets for learning and education purpose and 23 per cent trade on a daily basis.

CBO issues RO49mn treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Three tenders of the government treasury bills were issued by the Central Bank of Oman this week. Total issuance of treasury bills amounted RO49mn.

In the first tender, the value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO2mn for a maturity period of 28 days. The average accepted price reached RO99.675 for every RO100 bills, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO99.675. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.2366 per cent and 4.2504 per cent, respectively.

For second tender, the value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO10mn for a maturity period of 91 days. The average accepted price reached RO98.790 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO98.790. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 4.8533 per cent and 4.9127 per cent, respectively.

For the third tender, the value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO37mn for a maturity period of 182 days. The average accepted price reached RO97.479 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO97.450. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 5.0549 per cent and 5.1856 per cent, respectively.

The repo operations with the CBO is 5.00 per cent while the discount rate on the Treasury Bills Discounting Facility with the central bank is 5.50 per cent.

China warns of 'spillover' from Western rate hikes

Davos, Switzerland - China's vice premier warned Tuesday about the impact of "spillover effects" of Western interest rate hikes on emerging economies.

"We call for more attention to the spillover effects of major countries' rate hikes on emerging market and developing countries so as not to add to more debt or financial risks," Liu He told the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

The US Federal Reserve has hiked its benchmark lending rate at a pace unheard of since the 1980s over the last year to tame soaring inflation, while the European Central Bank has also raised borrowing costs.

The US moves have strengthened the value of the dollar, raising the cost of borrowing for countries with debt priced in greenbacks.

"We need to uphold the right



China's Vice Premier Liu He

principles and uphold the effective international economic order," he said, before adding: "We have to abandon the Cold War mentality."

China's export-oriented economy is seen as being particularly threatened by changes to the global trading system, with the United States in particular looking to shore up its domestic industry and limit trade with Beijing in key strategic sectors.

The theme of this year's meeting in Davos is "Cooperation in a fragmented world," a nod to international tensions caused by the war in Ukraine and increased rivalry between the United States and China.

"How to strengthen cooperation in a fragmented world is a real problem we all face," Liu said.

AFP

Saudi-Oman Investment Forum from Feb 1

Muscat - Oman's Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion will organise the Saudi-Oman Investment Forum, scheduled to be held in Riyadh on February 1, 2023.

The forum will be held in cooperation with the Saudi Ministry of Investment.

The forum seeks to consolidate existing trade and investment relations, find new strategic opportunities for joint investment and encourage private sector institutions in the two countries to open up broader avenues for joint action that benefits both sides.

The Saudi-Oman Investment Forum tasks include dialogue sessions to discuss the most promising investment sectors in the two countries, including renewable energy, supply chains, tourism, real estate, transport and logistics services. The sessions will also look into other activities of common interest that contribute to accelerating the volume of joint investment and enhancing trade exchange.

The forum will review prominent developments in the business and investment environment, as well as the functioning of industrial zones in the two countries.

Private sector representatives



Private sector representatives from Oman and Saudi Arabia will hold bilateral meetings (ONA)

Establishments that will take part in the forum include Oman Investment Authority, the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI).

ONA

Egypt's economic turmoil squeezes struggling middle class

Cairo, Egypt - With Egypt's economy in crisis, the currency in freefall and inflation skyrocketing, the poor have been hit hard but the middle class is also teetering on the brink.

"It's like we were hit by an earthquake, suddenly you have to let go of everything," said Manar, a 38-year-old mother of two.

"Now whatever semi-humane life people had has been reduced to thinking about how much bread and eggs cost," she told AFP, asking to be identified only by her first name.

The Egyptian pound has lost half its value against the dollar since March, following a devaluation demanded as part of a US\$3bn International Monetary Fund loan agreement.

Official annual headline inflation hit 21.9 per cent in December, and food prices surged 37.9 per cent in the Arab world's most populous nation.

But Steve Hanke, an economist at Johns Hopkins University who measures inflation based on purchasing power parity and factoring in black market exchange rates, estimated Egypt's real inflation rate at 101 per cent.

The economy, dominated by state and military-owned enterprises, had already struggled after successive blows, from years of political unrest to the



A pedlar sells roasted corn cobs by the medieval Sultan al-Ghuri Complex (built in 1505) in the Azhar district of Cairo on Sunday (AFP)

Covid pandemic.

But it was Russia's invasion of Ukraine - with both countries key exporters of wheat and sources of mass tourism to Egypt - that set off the latest painful crisis.

The war also unsettled global investors who pulled billions out of the North African country.

According to the World Bank, nearly one-third of Egypt's 104mn people already live below the poverty line, and almost as many are "vulnerable to falling into poverty".

It's not the first time Egyptians have shouldered hardships that come with IMF-backed reforms.

In 2016, a US\$12bn bailout saw the government enact a slate of measures, including a sharp currency devaluation and wide-ranging subsidy cuts.

Since prices began spiralling again last year, social media users have scrambled for cost-saving tips, suggesting grocery list substitutions and personal finance manoeuvres.

But for a 41-year-old translator who is the mother of a six-year-old son, and who asked not to be named, even "military-grade discipline" in the supermarket is no longer enough.

With her husband's salary "losing 40 per cent of its value in six months", she also worries about expenses "like mortgages and car payments and tuition".

The new reality has driven families that were considered part of the middle class to seek help.

Ahmed Hesham of the Abwab El Kheir charity said more

and more middle-class Egyptians - "private sector employees making 4,000-6,000 pounds" (US\$135-202) per month -- have been coming in for donations.

"A lot of people had life savings they were keeping aside... Now they're using them for health care or daily costs," Hesham told AFP.

"They used to make a good living, now they can't make ends meet. They've never been in this position before, and they're mortified to come to us," he added.

"One man told us he can either feed his kids or put them through school, but not both." AFP

China's economy grows at slowest pace in decades

Beijing, China – China's economy grew last year at its slowest pace in four decades as it was hammered by Covid lockdowns and a property crisis but the forecast-beating reading raised hopes for a strong recovery as it reopens.

Beijing's rigid adherence to its zero-Covid strategy of strict containment that effectively shut the country off from the world hammered business activity last year and threw supply chains offline, rattling the global economy.

The measures meant the growth came in at just three per cent last year, the worst reading since a 1.6 per cent contraction in 1976 - when Mao Zedong died - excluding pandemic-hit 2020.

National Bureau of Statistics official Kang Yi told reporters on Tuesday the world's number-two economy had in 2022 "faced storms and rough waters in the global environment", and warned "the foundation of domestic economic recovery is not solid as the international situation is still complicated and severe".

The figure missed the government's 5.5 per cent target and was well down from the previous year but it was better than the 2.7 per cent predicted in an AFP survey of analysts. The fourth-quarter reading also topped forecasts, providing some optimism for 2023.

Retail sales shrank just 1.8 per cent in December, compared with the 9.0 per cent estimated, as the lifting of restrictions allowed consumers to go back to the high street.

Industrial output and fixed-asset investment also beat expectations, while unemployment fell last month from November.



A photo taken on Sunday shows containers stacked at inland port in Nanchang, in China's Jiangxi province (AFP)

"The good news is that there are now signs of stabilisation, as policy support doled out towards the end of 2022 is showing up in the relative resilience of infrastructure investment and credit growth," Louise Loo, Senior Economist at Oxford Economics, said in a note.

'Zero-Covid' scrapped
China's economic woes last year sent reverberations across a global supply chain already struggling with waning demand caused by surging inflation and central bank interest rate hikes.

Strict lockdowns, quarantines and compulsory mass testing prompted the abrupt closures of manufacturing facilities and businesses in major hubs -- including Zhengzhou, home of the world's biggest iPhone factory.

Beijing abruptly loosened pandemic restrictions in December in the wake of some of the biggest protests in years but the move has sent infections soaring

across the country, sparking concerns about the near-term effects on the economy.

The World Bank has forecast China's GDP will rebound to 4.3 per cent in 2023 - still below expectations.

Problems in the property industry are also still weighing on growth.

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

The regulatory tightening marked the beginning of financial worries for Evergrande, the former Chinese number one in real estate that is now struggling with a mountain of debt.

Real estate sales have since fallen in many cities and many developers are struggling to survive.

But the government appears to be taking a more conciliatory

approach to reviving the sector.

Measures to promote "stable and healthy" development were announced in November, including credit support for indebted developers and assistance for deferred-payment loans for homebuyers.

Jing Liu, chief economist for Greater China at HSBC, said the "normalisation path is likely to be bumpy", warning of a "big setback in the near term" followed by a strong rebound.

"The roll-out of a series of measures to ensure sufficient funding support to developers and revive housing demand will also help to stabilise the property sector," she said.

But Chaoping Zhu, of JP Morgan Asset Management, sounded a note of optimism, saying in a note: "Looking forward, we expect to see a sustained economic recovery in 2023 as a result of reopening and policy stimulus.

AFP

EU takes on US and China over clean tech in Davos

Davos, Switzerland – The EU's chief announced ambitious plans Tuesday to challenge China and the United States in the race for clean-tech industries, as a battle over green trade emerged at the World Economic Forum.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen slammed what she described as "aggressive attempts" to lure Europe's clean-tech industrial capacities to China and other countries.

"China heavily subsidises its industry and restricts access to its market for EU companies," she told the world's global political and business elite at the annual meeting in the Swiss Alpine village of Davos.

"We will not hesitate to open investigations if we consider that our procurement or other markets are being distorted by such subsidies."

She also renewed European concerns over the US Inflation Reduction Act, a climate subsidy package worth around US\$370bn, though she said both sides have been working to find "solutions" that could include allowing EU-made electric cars to benefit from the act.

"Our aim should be to avoid disruptions in transatlantic trade and investment. We should work towards ensuring that our respective incentive programmes are fair and mutually reinforcing," she said.

The week-long forum is taking place under the theme of "cooperation in a fragmented world" as the planet faces a perfect storm of crises -- Russia's invasion of Ukraine, soaring inflation, the spectre of recession and climate catastrophes.

But tensions between world



European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen (right) speaks as WEF founder Klaus Schwab (left) listens during a session of the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos on Monday (AFP)

powers still emerged at the meetings in Davos.

Speaking after von der Leyen, Chinese Vice Premier Liu He called for an end to "Cold War mentality" and repeated Beijing's opposition to "unilateralism and protectionism".

At a separate panel discussion, US climate envoy John Kerry said countries complaining about the Inflation Reduction Act should instead try to imitate the United States.

"The reaction of other countries shouldn't be, 'oh my god, you shouldn't be doing that, that's putting us in an unfair position'. Do it, too," he said.

"Everybody's got to do the same thing to accelerate this process even more," Kerry added.

Von der Leyen announced projects to step up European efforts to build clean energies key to the world's aspirational goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The plans include a "sovereignty fund" to boost research, innovation and strategic indus-

trial projects in efforts to achieve net-zero emissions.

She also said a "Net Zero Industry Act" would be proposed to focus investment on strategic projects along the entire supply chain.

"Those who develop and manufacture the technology that will be the foundation of tomorrow's economy will have the greatest competitive edge," she said.

"To get ahead of the competition we need to keep investing in strengthening our industrial base and making Europe more investment and innovation friendly," the EU chief added.

But she also called for cooperation between "like-minded partners", from the United States to Ukraine, to form a "critical raw materials club" in order to slash Europe's dependence on China for the rare earths that are needed to make clean technology such as electric car batteries.

The war in Ukraine remained a key topic of discussion at the WEF.

AFP

Nissan, Renault near 'historic' rebalancing of alliance: Source

Paris, France – Nissan and Renault are nearing a "historic" rebalancing of their auto alliance, with a deal likely to be announced in the coming weeks, a source close to the talks said Tuesday.

The Japanese and French giants have been wrestling with a reshaping of their partnership for months, with discussions including a reduction of Renault's hefty 43.7 per cent stake in Nissan.

The pair joined forces in 1999, and were later joined by Mitsubishi Motors, but the union has been contentious, particularly in recent years.

The source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Nissan's independent directors had "given their green light" to a deal, paving the way for a "historic" agreement.



Final details are expected to be ironed out at a meeting in Japan on January 26, with the signing and an announcement the following week, the source added.

A Nissan spokeswoman declined to comment on "speculation", but Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun daily also reported the deal was close to completion, and Jiji news agency said Re-

nant's CEO would be in Japan over the weekend.

Renault is expected to reduce its stake in Nissan to 15 per cent, matching the size of the Japanese firm's stake in its French partner.

Nissan is also likely to invest in Renault's new electric vehicle business Ampere, though the size of the stake is not yet clear. AFP

Airbus tops Boeing in 2022 plane deliveries

New York, US - Airbus consolidated its leadership in civil aviation for 2022, reporting more orders and deliveries than American archival Boeing as both companies contend with lingering supply chain challenges.

In terms of deliveries, Airbus finished the year having 661 planes arrive with clients, much higher than Boeing's 480.

But the Airbus lead in new contracts was slimmer, with its 820 net orders outpacing Boeing by just 12.

Still, the US giant notched a 40 percent jump in annual deliveries in its best year since 2018, prior to the lengthy global grounding of the 737 MAX after two deadly crashes and the massive travel downturn due to Covid-19.

Boeing's performance was plagued by a halt of more than one year to deliveries of the 787



Dreamliner, its other best-selling plane, which resumed deliveries only in August after an extensive back-and-forth with US air safety regulators.

"We worked hard in 2022 to stabilize 737 production, resume 787 deliveries, launch the 777-8 Freighter and, most importantly, meet our customer commitments," said Boeing Commercial Airplanes President Stan Deal.

"We will stay focused on driving stability within our operations and the supply chain as we work to deliver for our customers in 2023 and beyond," he added.

At Airbus, deliveries rose eight percent from the 2021 level, but lagged the company's earlier targets due to lingering supply chain problems. The European giant had initially aimed for 720 deliveries in 2022.

The level of actual deliveries is "obviously less than we were targeting but given the complexity of the operating environment I want to thank the teams and our partners for the hard work and the ultimate result," said Airbus Chief Executive Officer Guillaume Faury.

Key suppliers in aviation have

struggled with labor shortages, difficulties tracking down key materials and volatile energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Both companies have been forced to reset expectations about their capacity to build planes as quickly as the industry would like.

This comes as airlines are eager to boost flight numbers to take advantage of pent-up travel demand from the pandemic, while also looking to improve fuel efficiency and lower their carbon footprint.

Airbus reduced its output of the A320 to 40 per month during the pandemic, while previously targeting a monthly level of 65 at end-2023. But the company has pushed back this goal to 2024, citing supply chain issues.

AFP

UK unemployment stable but inflation slams wages

London, UK – UK unemployment has steadied but wages continue to lag sky-high inflation, official data showed Tuesday, fuelling a cost-of-living crisis and mass strike action.

The unemployment rate was unchanged at 3.7 per cent in the three months to the end of November compared with the three months to the end of October, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

Wages jumped 6.4 per cent over the same period - but sank by 2.6 per cent in real terms, with British inflation stuck at the highest level in decades.

"The real value of people's pay continues to fall, with prices still rising faster than earnings," said



Darren Morgan, ONS director of economic statistics.

"This remains amongst the fastest drops in regular earnings since records began" in 2001.

With pay failing to keep pace with rampant prices, Britain is witnessing strikes across the public and private sectors.

A total 467,000 working days

were lost to walkouts in November, the highest level since 2011, the ONS said Tuesday.

Key affected areas included communication, transport and education.

Industrial action looks set to intensify after Britain's largest teaching and nursing unions on Monday announced further

stoppages, while the government seeks to limit strikes with controversial legislation.

The ONS will publish crucial December inflation data on Wednesday.

Inflation slowed in November but remains at around the highest level in 40 years, at 10.7 per cent. Prices last year soared on supply constraints caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the lifting of pandemic lockdowns and Brexit fallout.

The UK government argues that lifting pay risks worsening the inflation situation.

"We must not do anything that risks permanently embedding high prices into our economy, which will only prolong the

pain for everyone," repeated finance minister Jeremy Hunt in response to Tuesday's data.

That has sparked fury from trade unions.

"Workers have been losing hundreds of pounds from their annual pay over the last year," said Paul Nowak, head of the Trades Union Congress umbrella group.

"The Conservative government will not resolve pay disputes by rushing in new laws that attack the right to strike.

"The best way to settle disputes is around the negotiating table -- and with credible pay offers that protect workers from rising prices," Nowak added.

AFP



ANNOUNCEMENT

The Filipino Community Social Club (FILCOSOC) would like to invite all its bona fide members (members who are active and in good standing for at least three (3) months) to attend the General Assembly (GA) meeting on 3rd March 2023 from 9AM to 12 noon at Fitness Lounge, Qurum.



Youth Majlis returns to World Economic Forum

Mohammed bin Salman Foundation, "Misk," a non-profit established by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, is bringing the Youth Majlis back to the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland.

One of the only youth-focused pavilions at the Swiss alpine destination, Misk will unite delegates under the theme of Generation Transformation – a mindset that harnesses the unique strengths of all genera-

tions to create lasting positive change, a press release said.

The Youth Majlis will provide a platform for forward-looking dialogue, serving as a catalyst to explore collaborative solutions to solve some of the world's most pressing issues – from inclusive economic growth to ambitious climate action.

"In a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented, it's more important than ever to find ways to cooperate, work together and harness the power of

youth," said Omar Najjar, chief programme officer, Misk Foundation. "Our decision to bring the Youth Majlis back to the World Economic Forum is a powerful step in this direction, placing young people at the heart of the global conversation and empowering them to take bold action for a better future."

More than 35 global leaders and decision makers from the US, China, Singapore, South Africa, India, Egypt, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia will convene at

the Youth Majlis to promote a revamped, youth-focused approach to global collaboration.

The return of the Youth Majlis is also an important step toward advancing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's vision for a more prosperous and sustainable future. It comes after Misk's Youth Majlis welcomed more than 1,700 visitors from 42 countries, 14 heads of state and ministers, 200 VIP guests, and 25 speakers during the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in 2022.

Ahlibank launches Digital Wealth System

Cementing its position as an industry leader in private banking and wealth management services, Ahlibank launches its new Digital Wealth System.

Aimed at its Wealth Management customers, this new system allows customers to view online investment profiles, trade mutual funds online, create systematic investment plans online, analyse portfolio's asset allocation vs model portfolio, as well as other services. The launch of this state of the art system comes in line with the bank's digitalisation efforts, and its vision to become an excellence hub to provide its customers with an extensive suite of products and services, a press release said.

Commenting on the launch of the Digital Wealth System, Najla Murtadha al Lawati, AGM, head of Private Banking and Wealth Management at Ahlibank, said, "We at Ahlibank take pride in our customer-centric approach in all our operations. At its core, the bank works with a mission to meet the ever-changing needs of its customer base, and is always looking to introduce tailored products and services to ensure all our stakeholders are well taken care of. Ahlibank's Private Banking and Wealth Management offers its customers top-tier service that fit the dynamic lifestyles they lead, and serve as a hub for investment value added solutions, investment solutions for fixed income securities, mutual funds, real estate funds, and much more."

It is worth mentioning that the newly introduced Digital Wealth



System allows users to view their investment portfolio to easily manage their, bonds, mutual funds and exchange-traded funds, and other financial assets in one dashboard. The service supports buying and selling of mutual funds online, placement of thorough systematic investment plans, as well as analysis of portfolio asset allocation vs an existing model portfolio.

The Digital Wealth System redefines how private wealth is digitally managed, and provides systematic and clear updates, reports, fund analytics, and track performances.

"Fitting right in with Ahlibank's digitalisation outlook, this newly introduced Digital Wealth System offers a new wealth management experience to make investing easier; it is not only a dashboard, but also a strategic financial advisor, and a digital wealth management

guide.

Taking the lead in its private banking and wealth management efforts, Ahlibank's Digital Wealth Program serves an excellence hub for global-standard services that meet and exceed our customers' expectations," Najla added.

In addition to the Digital Wealth System, Ahlibank is committed to contribute to the country's digitalisation efforts and Oman Vision 2040 through introducing world-class digital services. As digital technologies evolve and global economies grow, the bank's digitally-enabled steps keep it at a competitive advantage, and allow it to continuously enhance the quality of its suite of products and services, while the future of banking is now dictated by digital innovations, Ahlibank has successfully adapted through its digital and customer-driven technologies.



HUAWEI MatePad SE the best choice

The best tablet for your needs can be quite tricky to find, whether you are looking to outfit the children with pocket-friendly, durable tablets for school or just want a beautiful second screen to keep near the couch.

Tablets are great gadgets for accomplishing many tasks from light office work such as emailing, sketching and preparing presentations to consuming audio-visual entertainment, gaming and much more. The interesting thing about tablets is that they have become necessary for families as everyone can use them for different purposes, a press release said.

If you are on the lookout for a new top entry-level tablet with a price tag starting from RO71.9 in Oman this 2023, whether it is for personal use or for your children for school or just for the whole family, then we definitely recommend the new Huawei MatePad SE as it stands as the smart family entertainer and here is why it is our favourite.

The Huawei MatePad SE 10.4-inch's screen puts photos and videos on a clearer display, with intricate and vivid details, thanks to its 2K

high-definition resolution, 83% screen-to-body ratio, and 225 PPI. The 4096-level brightness adjustment changes in real time to account for the ambient lighting conditions and keep the eyes refreshed at every moment. Additionally, the Huawei MatePad SE 10.4-inch has passed TUV Rheinland Low Blue Light and Flicker-free certifications, demonstrating proven eye fatigue relief.

The HUAWEI MatePad SE 10.4-inch is equipped with a 6 nm Octa-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 680 chipset, four Cortex A73 2.4 GHz (indicating highest frequency) performance cores, and four Cortex A53 1.9 GHz efficiency cores. The energy efficiency ratio (EER) is further improved, and multiple kernel-oriented optimizations have been applied to ensure a smooth experience. The tablet features low power consumption and continuous output performance, delivering unparalleled entertainment and audio-visual performance.

In addition, the HUAWEI MatePad SE comes with a 4GB RAM as well as 128GB internal storage for smooth processing.

beIN Sports to broadcast Riyadh Season Cup

BeIN Media Group (beIN) has announced that its flagship channel, beIN Sports, has acquired the rights across all its territories (Middle East and North Africa, France, Turkey, Asia, North America, and Australasia) to broadcast the highly-anticipated Riyadh Season Cup, taking place in Saudi Arabia's King Fahd International Stadium on Thursday, January 19.

French champions PSG will face players from top Saudi clubs Al Hilal and Al Nassr. In this match, recent Al Nassr signing Cristiano Ronaldo will go head-to-head against his long-time rival, PSG forward Leonel Messi,



who is fresh off his first FIFA World Cup victory with Argentina in Qatar last month. Ronaldo and Messi have not

clashed since December 2020 when Juventus beat Barcelona 3-0.

The Saudi team will be led by

legendary manager Marcelo Gallardo, a two-time Copa Libertadores winner as manager of River Plate. In PSG's ranks will be Brazil's Neymar and France World Cup star Kylian Mbappe, who was recently top scorer at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, a press release said.

In MENA, live studio coverage before the match kicks-off on the beIN Sports free-to-air channel and beIN Sports 2 in Arabic at 19:00 MECCA, while English coverage starts at 19:30 MECCA on beIN Sports English 1, leading right up to the opening whistle at 20:00 MECCA. French commentary will also be provided on

beIN Sports French 2.

Saudi presenter, Tariq al Hammad, will lead the Arabic studio analysis and will be joined by former Saudi national team captain Yasser Al Qahtani, former Tunisian professional and African Footballer of the Year Tarek Dhiab and former Egyptian professional star Mohamed Aboutrika.

The English studio will be fronted by beIN's presenter Nicky Crosby with expert analysis from former French football professional and PSG player Didier Domi, who currently serves as a technical advisor to the PSG Academy in Doha.

Deloitte launches Jordan Digital Centre for M E

Deloitte launched the Jordan Digital Centre (JDC), the Amman based state of the art facility providing professional consulting, digital and technology services to clients across the Middle East market.

The launch of JDC is a strategic move in the growth plans of the renowned professional services organisation, scaling up its investment in local talent and delivering impact to clients, a press release said.

The launch event was held under the patronage of the Crown Prince of Jordan, Al Hussein bin Abdullah II, who said, "The launch of the Deloitte Jordan Delivery Center is a great example of leading international companies investing in Jordan's talent, further strengthening Jordan's position as a regional and international digital hub. The centre will provide learning, development, and growth opportunities that will help our youth succeed in the digital age."

The JDC will offer clients a range of technology solutions from digital transformation, data



and analytics, human capital, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), advertising, marketing and E-commerce. The centre will tailor client specific solutions to address a wide range of challenges facing the regional public

and private sectors, positioning it as a leading regional digital center.

"The Jordan Digital Centre expands Deloitte's presence in the digital and technology space in the region, following the

launch of the Deloitte Digital Centre in Riyadh and the Deloitte Digital Studio in Dubai. JDC will enhance our offerings of high-quality professional service and will enable us to continue to provide world class

business solutions to a wider range of clients across the Middle East," said Rashid Bashir, CEO of Consulting at Deloitte Middle East.

"This state of the art digital center represents an exciting opportunity for growth for the regional business eco system and I'm looking forward to hearing about the center's future success stories. Over the next few years, we expect JDC to be home for about 350 professionals, who will play an active role in the work we're doing for some of the most iconic projects that we run across our key regional markets," he added.

In addition to expanding Deloitte's presence in the digital and technology space, the JDC will also be focused on recruiting and nurturing local and international talent. The launch renews Deloitte's commitment to the future of Jordan and its youth. Providing opportunities for learning, development, and growth, to help develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the digital age."

Interactive exhibition on 'Energy in Transition' opens

Under the patronage of H E Mohsen Hamad Saif al Hadrami, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, and German Ambassador H E Thomas F Schneider, the exhibition 'Energy in Transition - Powering Tomorrow' was inaugurated at Bait al-Zubair on January 16.

The interactive exhibition highlights the multi-layered aspects, challenges, and potentials of the global energy transition from society, politics, economy, and scientific perspectives.

The global perspective is highlighted in a decentralised way, among other things through international project examples and interview partners, a press release said.

The exhibition takes the visitor through a powerful multimedia experience created with animated and interactive infographics, typographic overlays, and graphically enhanced maps. Decision trees, clickable diagrams, film sequences, and a continuous change of perspective create small interactions for the visitors on multi-touch monitors.

The exhibition is open to visitors at Bait Al Zubair until February 2. It is suitable for all generations, providing an introduction into the energy transition and its challenges. A panel discussion entitled 'Energy transition in the mobility sector' will also be held on January 29.



itors at Bait Al Zubair until February 2. It is suitable for all generations, providing an introduction into the energy transition and its challenges. A panel discussion entitled 'Energy transition in the mobility sector' will also be held on January 29.

Indian Schools board conducts webinar on 'dream careers'

To equip the students with the knowledge and to provide authentic information on the world of opportunities available in various fields beyond their schooling, the Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman, had come up with an initiative like Avenir, the mega career counselling programme, which had helped many students identify and explore various career options.

In continuation with its ongoing mission, under the aegis of the Board of Directors, and the Samridhi Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Indian School Salalah hosted a webinar on Career Guidance on January 14 through the Zoom platform. The session was attended by around 200 students of grade eight to twelve and their parents, from all 21 Indian Schools in Oman, a press release said.

The webinar was graced by Dr Sivakumar Manickam, chairman, Board of Directors - Indian Schools in Oman, Vinoba M P, senior principal, and educational advisor along with Mridula Srivastava, regional product manager - Marketing Macmillan Education India, and Gaurav Chadurvedi, senior manager (Sales) Middle East Macmillan Education India.

Dr Manickam highlighted the significance of being smart in selecting the right career in the new era of technology and globalisation. "The sole purpose of conducting such a webinar is to guide the students to be aware of the latest trend in pursuing their careers in the future," he said.

The resource person for the webinar was Surbhi Dewra, one of the leading Indian women entrepreneurs, who has been working in the career guidance space since 2011 and had established Career Guide in 2015 with an aim to serve young students and parents by helping them choose a career.

Dewra commenced the session by drawing students' attention to the positive changing scenario around the world in the realm of advancement and technology. She focused on the required skills to be inculcated such as the right attitude and aptitude, hard-working and updating information in regard to the latest trends in career options.

CSE holds annual day celebrations

Care and Special Education organised its annual day celebrations with a colourful display on January 14 at the Multipurpose Hall of Indian School Muscat.

Areej Mohsin Darwish, chairperson of ACERE, cluster of Mohsin Haider Darwish, graced the occasion as chief guest while Dr Sivakumar Manickam, chairman of the Board of Directors, Indian Schools Oman, was the guest of honour, a press release said.

The function was attended by Syed Salman, vice chairman, Board of Directors, Indian Schools in Oman, Vijay Saravanan, director, Board of Directors, Vinoba M P, senior principal and education advisor, Sunil Kattakath, president of the CSE Management Committee, Vishala Lakshminarayan, convener, CSE Management Committee, Sharafdeen Yoosaf, member of the ISM SMC, Saji S Nair, senior vice principal of Indian School Muscat, CSE In Charge Sheeba Naqvi, teachers and parents of CSE.

Areej Mohsin Darwish appreciated the efforts of the management and staff of Care and Special Education in providing the best of facilities for the uplift of the children with special needs and congratulated the students on their stupendous performance on stage.



mittee, Vishala Lakshminarayan, convener, CSE Management Committee, Sharafdeen Yoosaf, member of the ISM SMC, Saji S Nair, senior vice principal of Indian School Muscat, CSE In Charge Sheeba Naqvi, teachers and parents of CSE.

Digital thinkers, scientists, whizkids to attend LEAP in Riyadh

After breaking a host of industry records during its 2022 launch, LEAP - the world's most visionary technology event - returns to Riyadh in February with an even bigger format promising to attract the greatest digital thinkers and doers to empower the entrepreneurs, ignite innovation and leap into new worlds.

An expected 100,000 global tech innovators and disruptors will gather at the Riyadh Front Exhibition and Conference Centre from February 6-9, to unveil and accelerate a huge platform of breakthrough products and ideas, and forge partnerships that will drive new worldwide collaborations leveraging technology's limitless potential, a press release said.

Taking place alongside LEAP, the inaugural DeepFest - in partnership with the Saudi Data & AI Authority (SDAIA) - will run from February 7-9 and gather drivers of the global Artificial Intelligence eco-system to unveil life-changing, multi-sector initiatives in a thought-leadership conference and sector-specific tracks, trainings, live-demos, start-up pitches and an exhibition featuring companies transforming the world we live and work in.

Support comes from the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), which is powering LEAP in conjunction with Tahaluf - a strategic joint venture co-owned by Informa PLC and the SAFCSP.

Global business leaders, technocrats and experts will take to LEAP's main stage to bring new perspectives to pressing world issues, including climate emergency and sustainable development, health crises, equality, inclusion, belonging and diversity. They will discuss the leadership strategies of tech giants and unicorns, explore web3's business potential, and look to redefine governance paradigms for privacy, safety, and security. The event will host over 700 billionaire investors, astronauts, tech-nocrats, and sporting superstars turned tech investors across LEAP's various stages housing 15 conferences. With over 900 exhibitors confirmed for 2023, LEAP has drawn a powerful international line-up, some of which will take part in new mega tent displays and include world-leading names from throughout the USA, Middle East, Levant, North Africa, the Sub-continent, Europe, and Scandinavia. They include Saudi Arabian heavyweights STC, NEOM, Saudi Aramco, Mobily and ELM lining up alongside an international cadre of the biggest names in the tech business, including Snapchat, Google Cloud, Amazon Web Services, Visa, Alibaba cloud, Ericsson, Huawei, Dell, Nokia, SAP, Microsoft, Cisco, and IBM.

Some of LEAP's speakers this year include football legend and tech investor Thierry Henry, billionaire venture capitalist Tim Draper, two-time World Boxing Heavyweight Champion Anthony Joshua, Pekka Lundmark, president and CEO of Nokia, Borje Ekholm, president and CEO of Ericsson, Steve Bartlett, the youngest Dragon's Den investor, podcaster, and founder of Social Chain, Gitanjali Rao, the 17-year-old American inventor and TIME's first-ever Kid of the Year, Susan Kilrain, NASA astronaut



and the second woman and youngest person to pilot the Space Shuttle, and Sian Proctor, an explorer and mission pilot for the Inspiration4 all-civilian orbital mission to space. The scheduled investors control a combined and unprecedented US \$51.6tn fund pool.

"Our rapidly changing world demands we keep pace with appropriate regulation and governance, and we need the best brains in the business to help us navigate a globally appropriate pathway," said Faisal al Khamisi, Chairman of the SAFCSP.

A series of precision-focused Orbital Talks at LEAP will lift the lid off new parameters impacting the creative economy, smart cities, 4IR, energy, sustainability, FinTech, HealthTech, retail, education, NFTs and space tech. The LEAP Investor Stage, meanwhile, will see the world's most sought-after tech investors deep-mine emerging opportunities.

Among those scouting potential at LEAP's Investor Stage will be industry titans GV Ravishankar, managing partner of Sequoia Capital India, Tim Rengel, investor and Advisory Board member of Adit Ventures, and William Bao Bean, general partner, SOSV, who will witness firsthand the exhilarating Rocket Fuel Start-up Pitch Competition, where 90 incredible start-ups will compete for a prize pool of more than US\$1mn.

Medlab to address MENA in-vitro market

Medlab Middle East, the MENA region's largest medical laboratory exhibition and congress, will address the growth of the in-vitro diagnostics (IVD) market, which is expected to top US\$10bn by 2027, when the show returns to Dubai World Trade Centre from February 6-9.

According to research by Market Data Forecast, the IVD market, which refers to tests done on samples such as blood or tissue taken from the human body, is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.17% between 2022 and 2027 in the Middle East and Africa region, a result of the growing preference for early disease diagnosis from the public and governments favouring their usage, a press release said.

This is being further compounded by the increasing adoption of technology to develop advanced cutting-edge IVD devices which allow for quick, precise and error-free diagnostics in detecting, curing, treating or preventing disease and other conditions. The uptake of these devices surged due to the increase in point-of-care testing and molecular diagnostics during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Tom Coleman

According to the data, the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases, growing healthcare expenditure, the adoption of the latest technological advancements, and increasing govern-

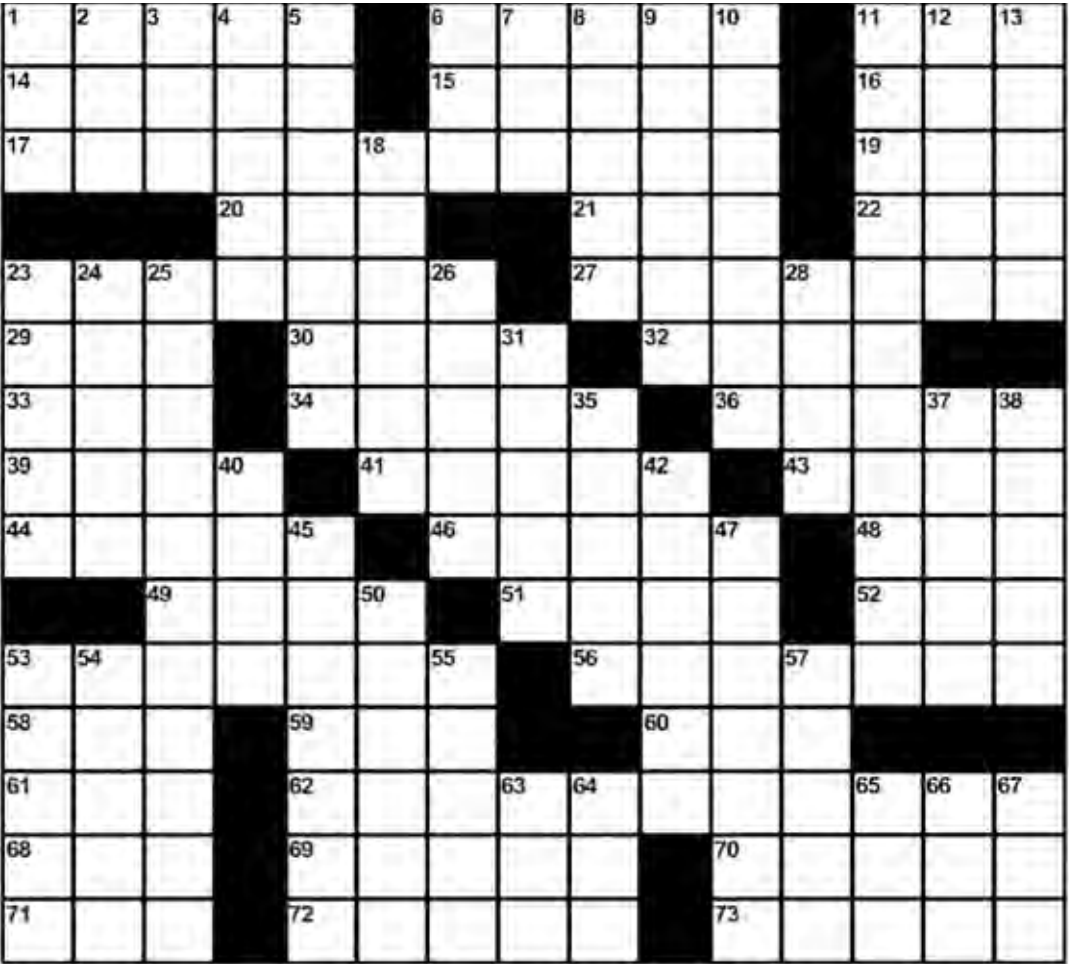
ment initiatives are likely to result in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar being the main drivers of growth in the region.

Tom Coleman, exhibition director for Informa Markets, said, "At the core of the growth in the market of IVDs is the utilisation of new technology. Developments in analytics, user-friendliness, and individualised patient treatments are driving industry advancements. As a result, medical device manufacturers are working to broaden the range of available IVD technologies and create new products by utilising point-of-care (POC), liquid biop-

sies, molecular diagnostics, artificial intelligence (AI), and the Internet of Things (IoT)."

A host of exhibitors at Medlab Middle East, which takes place under the show theme, 'Paving the way for technological advancements and sustainability in laboratory medicine', will be showcasing the width and breadth of new products in the IVD market, including next-generation sequencing tests which can scan a person's DNA to detect genomic settings, with devices varying from small, handheld tests to more complex laboratory instruments.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Monte's follower?
- 6) Sorority letter
- 11) Electronics brand, once
- 14) "Cuts Like a Knife" singer Adams
- 15) Detective Pinkerton
- 16) Be off
- 17) Wear out one's welcome
- 19) Tilly or Ryan
- 20) Enlarged coffee server
- 21) "The Phantom Menace" kid
- 22) Big commotion
- 23) Rainbow fishes
- 27) Bring up
- 29) Blotter letters
- 30) "... in a Manger"
- 32) The break of day
- 33) Relative of 6-Across
- 34) Former Nigerian capital
- 36) Video-game acquisitions
- 39) "... quam videri" (North Carolina's motto)
- 41) They join oxen
- 43) Hawaiian tuber
- 44) Oozes through cracks
- 46) Certain canonical hours

- 48) Beau for a lass
- 49) Barefaced
- 51) Bound
- 52) "What was_ think?"
- 53) Clever escape
- 56) Celeb status
- 58) Tumbler's protection
- 59) School org.
- 60) Memphis-to-Boston flight path
- 61) Former Giant Mel
- 62) You may be on it for quite a while
- 68) Despite the fact that, briefly
- 69) Lace tip
- 70) Weighed down
- 71) The bard's bedtime?
- 72) Affirmative answers
- 73) Dead-on

DOWN

- 1) Major broadcaster
- 2) It's often left hanging
- 3) Scandinavian rug
- 4) Easy two points
- 5) Officially accused
- 6) _ Vicente, Brazil
- 7) Not feeling well
- 8) Twilight, poetically

- 9) Like some spaceships
- 10) Kind of chest pain
- 11) Not expire
- 12) Belief
- 13) An inert gas
- 18) Like some streets
- 23) Bill with big bucks
- 24) Tsar's proclamation
- 25) Remote feature
- 26) Palms yielding starch
- 28) Dimwit
- 31) Bumpkin
- 35) Famous battle participants
- 37) A Muse
- 38) City evacuated by Lot
- 40) Poetic saga
- 42) New York island
- 45) Boatyard feature
- 47) Bit of glitter
- 50) Mental decline
- 53) Chew the scenery
- 54) Bat-making machine
- 55) Manicurist's handful?
- 57) "Chill!"
- 63) Athletic supporter?
- 64) That thing's
- 65) "Princess..." (Gilbert and Sullivan)

- operetta)
- 66) "Hold on a..."

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Your vision for your future could be clouded by wishful thinking and overly high hopes. It's good to be positive about where you want to take your life, but right now you might only be hearing what you want to hear, and that isn't the best road to go down. Reach out for a reality check from a good friend or family member. They have an objective perspective and can help you wake up to what is realistic. They won't be raining on your parade. They'll just be clearing your vision.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

A generous person you know is being a little bit less so lately, so don't rely on them like you usually do to toss in extra money. They are feeling much more thrifty and conservative than usual, and it could put a crimp into your relationship. They have a chip on their shoulder about their financial situation and could be tossing a lot of guilt your way. Put yourself in their place and remember that it isn't easy to hold on to money. Work with them and cut them some slack.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Someone's curiosity might drive you a little bit crazy today. They know you know more than you're letting on, and they won't give up trying to pry it out of you! Secrets are for keeping, so stick to your plan to stay quiet about the inside info you have. You can try to avoid them, but you know deep down that it will be much more fun to watch them squirm with eagerness to know what you know. Enjoy this powerful feeling. You're like a cat with a mouse right now. And it's fun!



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

In order to get more romance in your life, you should go back in time. Not all old-fashioned ideas are keepers, but some of them are lost treasures you should try to regain. Instead of rushing into a new relationship because you're eager to get something going, opt for a little courtship. Take things slowly and really get to know the person. If you're in a relationship, integrate a few courtship rituals into it. Go on a date with your sweetie and pretend you just met.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Modesty doesn't look as good on you as you might think, so what's with the "aw, shucks" attitude? Your latest achievement deserves a lot more attention than it's getting, so find a way to drum up some press coverage today. No one is going to sing your praises right now except you, so if you want to get the credit you deserve, you should spread the word. Don't worry about people thinking you're boasting. They'd be boasting too if they did what you did!



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Acting spontaneously today could get you into a bit of trouble, so consider yourself warned. Plans are your friends and not to be ignored. They will help you stay on task for the day. Clearheadedness is good. Right now, you need to get a better grip on the forces that are working around you, but you won't be able to do that if you're going off willy-nilly, doing whatever you feel like doing whenever you feel like doing it. Stick to the plan and don't deviate more than you have to.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

A long-lost friend could reappear in your life today through email, phone, or some other means. If you aren't certain how you want to reply (or even if you want to), respect that feeling and sit with it for a while. There is a reason you're hesitant to reconnect, and you need time to figure out exactly what that is. Don't bend to peer pressure in this situation. This is a decision you'll come to when you come to it, no sooner and no later.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

The people who will be around you today are all quite adept at talking, but unfortunately none of them are good listeners. The burden will be on you to help everyone understand what needs to happen and how to get things done. Sure, you'll have to fight tooth and nail to get the attention you need from the group, but who is better at getting attention than you? The stars suggest you use humor to cut through the group's chaos and get everyone on the same page.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

This morning should be fairly quiet and calm, which will lead you to have a much more grounded day than you've had in a long while. This is a wonderful opportunity for you to catch up on doing chores, running errands, or taking care of other types of easily overlooked tasks. Think of it as "lifekeeping" as opposed to housekeeping. You'll get a chance to rearrange a few things in your life and make your immediate surroundings a lot more pleasant.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You can choose some things about your life, but there are certain things you have no control over, and the sooner you understand that, the better you'll be able to connect with others today. If you spend all your energy trying to force a certain type of interaction or conversation, you won't be fully present in the moment. For today, let things happen to you and then react. Don't dictate the topic of conversation. Just let things evolve naturally.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Are you looking for some stimulation of the intellectual kind? Today is a good day to go out and get it! You'll have no fear in new situations, and your curiosity (if you follow it) can lead you into some very fun and educational situations. But don't expect a day of research and reading. You can learn a lot more by getting together with new groups of people and talking about touchy topics. Nothing is out of bounds today, so ask the questions that are burning brightest.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Whatever you've been contemplating is something you have to stop contemplating. Today, you should finally get out there and just do it! Your stalling tactics are wearing thin, and there's no point in putting things off any longer. What are you afraid of? Rejection? Success? Be proactive today and see for yourself that whatever you're afraid of really isn't that frightening after all. Once you dive in, you'll see how fun and easy it really is.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. What is notable about the date Friday 15 October 1582 in Western history?

- A. It was the first day observed under the Gregorian calendar
- B. John Dee revealed the occult Enochian language
- C. The first play by William Shakespeare was staged
- D. The Douay-Rheims Bible, translated from the Latin Vulgate into English, was published

02. The character created by O. Henry in his 1907 short story "The Caballero's Way" formed the basis, although considerably softened, for the main character in what 1950s US TV series?

- A. Fury
- B. Buffalo Bill, Jr
- C. Casey Jones
- D. The Cisco Kid

03. Which of these is the oldest known complex scientific calculator, sometimes called the first analogue computer?

- A. Scheutz's engine
- B. Babbage's difference engine
- C. Antikythera mechanism
- D. Harvard Mark I

Answers: 1.A 2.D 3.C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

H	A	N	I
T	G	W	N
B	R	W	L
A	S	A	O

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long. **Solution** 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

Iran releases celebrity chef held in crackdown

Paris, France - Iran has released a prominent chef and Instagram influencer who was detained earlier this month in its crackdown on nationwide protests, a human rights group and supporters said.

Navab Ebrahimi, known for his videos promoting Persian cooking, was arrested in Tehran on January 4 and taken to the city's Evin prison.

Nik Yousefi, an Iranian filmmaker and photographer who was himself arrested in October as part of the crackdown and then freed, wrote on Twitter that Ebrahimi had been released on bail on Monday.

He posted a picture of Ebrahimi smiling with his partner. The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) also said Ebrahimi had been released on bail, adding there was still no word on the charges levelled against him.

Iran has arrested at least 14,000 people in the wave of protests sparked by the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman.

Prominent journalists, filmmakers, lawyers and activists have been arrested. Some have been released on bail, including star actor Taraneh Alidoosti, but others remain in prison.

AFP

Three foreign NGOs partially resume aid in Afghan with women workers

Kabul, Afghanistan - At least three leading international aid agencies have partially resumed life-saving work in Afghanistan after assurances from the Taliban authorities that Afghan women can continue to work in the health sector.

Hundreds of NGOs have been instrumental in trying to address one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with half of Afghanistan's 38mn people hungry and three million children at risk of malnutrition.

CARE, Save the Children and International Rescue Committee (IRC) suspended their operations in late December in protest against a government order banning Afghan women from aid work, the latest rollback of women's rights in the country.

"We have received clear, reliable assurances from relevant authorities that our female staff will be safe and can work without obstruction," Save the Children said in a statement, confirming they had resumed work in the health sector in the past few days.

"However, with the overarching ban still in place, our other activities where we do not have reliable assurances that our female colleagues can work, remain on hold."

The IRC and CARE also confirmed they had resumed work with women staff in the health sector.

The international community has been urging the government in a series of high-level meetings to reverse the order banning



An Afghan labourer arranges food aid bags provided by an NGO for distribution among the needy people, at a gymnasium in Kabul on Tuesday (AFP)

We have received clear, reliable assurances from relevant authorities that our female staff will be safe and can work without obstruction

SAVE THE CHILDREN



women in the aid sector, which was expected to have heavy consequences on aid flows coming into the country.

Abdul Rahman Habib,

spokesman for the ministry of economy that ordered the ban, told AFP that it was 'a need for our society' that women were allowed to work in the health sec-

tor. "We need them to support the malnourished children and other women who need health services. They (women staff) are working in line with our religious and cultural values."

'New guidelines'

Two aid officials said negotiations were ongoing with the authorities to allow women to work in other sectors, including education, water, sanitation and food distribution.

"We are hopeful that there will be new guidelines soon," said an aid official with a foreign NGO, who asked not to be named.

The authorities might 'selectively open' other sectors for women, another aid worker said, also speaking on condition of anonymity.

"They are expected to ask NGOs which specific departments within their organisations and work sectors they need women staff for, and accordingly,

permissions could be given," he said.

A senior Taliban official who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity said NGOs would have to provide reasons for employing women.

"The ministry of economy will look into these reasons and if an understanding is reached then the NGOs will be asked to provide a good working atmosphere for women employees," the Taliban official said.

The ban was imposed because women were not observing the rules issued by the ultra-conservative authorities on wearing the hijab or being accompanied by a male relative while travelling, Taliban officials say. But aid officials have dismissed those charges, insisting their organisations had already segregated men and women employees and that women were wearing hijabs.

Women workers are vital for on-the-ground aid operations in Afghanistan, particularly in identifying other women in need.

"From the start of winter our situation has been worse. We have not eaten anything for four days," said Parveen, a mother of eight, standing in a queue to receive food aid in Kabul.

She said she preferred receiving aid from women workers rather than men.

"I can't tell a man to give me aid first because I have a small kid or I am sick," said Parveen, 38.

"To a woman, you can tell everything."

AFP

Boris Pistorius to be new German defence minister

Berlin, Germany - Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Tuesday picked little-known Boris Pistorius to be Germany's new defence minister, saying he is the 'right person' to steer the armed forces through an era of momentous change.

The appointment follows the resignation of Christine Lambrecht at a crucial time for the ministry, with Germany under intense pressure to send battle tanks to Ukraine.

Pistorius, 62, who is a member of Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD) and interior minister of Lower Saxony state, is a surprise choice for the post.

Much better known politicians had been thought to be in the running, such as Eva Hoegl, the parliamentary commissioner on armed forces, and Employment Minister Hubertus Heil.

But the chancellor insisted Pistorius was the right man for the job at a time when Germany is looking to overhaul and revive its armed forces in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Pistorius is an extremely experienced politician who has administrative experience, has been involved in security policy for years and, with his competence, assertiveness and big heart, is exactly the right person to lead the Bundeswehr (armed forces) through this era of change," Scholz said.

'Well connected'

The appointment ends a streak of three female defence ministers, as well as upending a promise by Scholz to keep his cabinet gender-balanced when he became chancellor in 2021.

Born in Osnabrueck, Pistorius studied law and worked as a



Boris Pistorius (AFP)

lawyer before entering politics in the 1990s, eventually becoming mayor of his native town.

In Lower Saxony, Pistorius has gained a reputation for his work in renewing the police force and boosting it to combat extremism.

Der Spiegel magazine noted he is 'the most visible' of the state interior ministers, and is 'well connected with the security authorities'.

He had previously been rumoured to be in the running for the post of federal interior minister, which looks set to be vacated later this year by current postholder Nancy Faeser.

The appointment will see him follow in the footsteps of other high-profile politicians who graduated to national politics from Lower Saxony, such as Sigmar Gabriel and Gerhard Schroeder.

Pistorius has a huge task on his hands, taking up the new post at a time of sweeping change for the Bundeswehr and days ahead of a crucial meeting of defence ministers from Ukraine's allies.

The Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which coordinates arms supplies to Kyiv, is due to meet at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany on Friday.

AFP

Israeli troops kill Palestinian after alleged attack

Halhul, Palestinian Territories - Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian man on Tuesday after he allegedly fired at troops in the occupied West Bank, medical and military officials said.

The Palestinian health ministry said Hamdi Abu Dayyeh, 40, was killed 'by Israeli occupation bullets' in the southern town of Halhul.

Israel's army said an assailant shot at soldiers, 'who responded with live fire and neutralised him'.

An AFP photographer saw the body of a man beside a military tower at the northern entrance to the town, before it was covered by soldiers.

A Palestinian woman told AFP she was in a car with her family when gunfire erupted.

"We were on the road, people were moving around normally... the army kept firing, we got down



Tear gas is fired by Israeli forces at the scene near the body of the Palestinian man in West Bank on Tuesday (AFP)

under the seats," said Umm Amir Taqatqa, a resident of nearby Beit Fajjar.

Italian deported

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities said on Tuesday they had de-

ported an Italian woman detained in a deadly military raid in the Bethlehem area of the occupied

West Bank. Stefania Costantini was arrested on Monday during an incursion by Israeli forces into Dheisheh refugee camp, in the southern West Bank, Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency said.

A 14-year-old boy was shot dead by Israeli forces during the raid, with the army saying forces opened fire when residents threw Molotov cocktails and other weapons at them.

The Shin Bet said Costantini arrived on a tourist visa in May and was suspected of being involved in the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) group. "Costantini was summoned in September 2022 for interrogation by the Shin Bet, but she did not report (to the authorities) and even continued her activities."

AFP

Air crash: Nepali hospitals return bodies to families

Pokhara, Nepal - Nepali hospital staff began the grim task of handing over bodies to grieving families on Tuesday after a plane with 72 people on board crashed, the country's worst aviation disaster in three decades.

The Yeti Airlines flight with 68 passengers and four crew plummeted into a steep gorge, smashed into pieces and burst into flames as it approached the central city of Pokhara on Sunday. All those on board, including six children and 15 foreigners, are believed to have died.

Rescuers have been working almost around the clock extracting human remains from the gorge strewn with twisted plane seats and chunks of fuselage and wing.

Seventy bodies had been retrieved by early Tuesday, police



Nepal's army and volunteers carry the body of a victim who died in a Yeti Airlines plane crash in Pokhara on Tuesday (AFP)

official AK Chhetri told AFP. Another senior official said the day before that the hope of finding anyone alive was 'nil'.

"We retrieved one body last night. But it was three pieces. We are not sure whether it's three

bodies or one body. It will be confirmed only after a DNA test," Chhetri said.

Drones were being used and the search for the two remaining bodies had been expanded to a radius of two to three kilometres

(one to two miles), he added.

The black boxes from the plane, made by France-based ATR, were handed over to authorities on Monday, said Bikram Raj Gautam, chief of Pokhara International Airport.

Hospital workers in blue and white protective suits and masks loaded bodies wrapped in plastic onto army trucks on Tuesday as distraught relatives wept and hugged outside.

The trucks then left for the airport, where the bodies would be airlifted back to the capital Kathmandu. The body of one victim, journalist Tribhuban Poudel, was laid out on a bier covered with orange marigold flowers outside his home as mourners filed past offering prayers in the winter sunshine.

"Eight bodies have been

handed to families. We will hand over another 14 bodies after completing autopsies here in Pokhara. Forty-eight bodies have been sent to Kathmandu for DNA tests and handover to the families," Chhetri said.

The ATR 72 was flying from Kathmandu to Pokhara, a gateway for religious pilgrims and trekkers, when it crashed shortly before 11am (0515 GMT).

The cause of the crash was not yet known, but a video on social media showed the twin-propeller aircraft banking suddenly and sharply to the left as it neared Pokhara airport. A loud explosion followed.

Experts told AFP it was unclear from the clip whether human error or a mechanical malfunction was to blame.

AFP

China's population shrinks for first time in more than 60 years, shows official data

Beijing, China - China's population shrank last year for the first time in more than six decades, official data showed on Tuesday, as the birth rate slows in the face of mounting financial pressures and shifting social attitudes.

The world's most populous country is facing a looming demographic crisis as its workforce ages, which analysts warn could stymie economic growth and pile pressure on strained public coffers.

Analysts point to the soaring cost of living - as well as a growing number of women in the workforce and seeking higher education - as reasons behind the slowdown.

"Who dares to have kids?" a Shanghai resident in his thirties said on Tuesday.

"The unemployment rate is so high, COVID destroyed everything, there's nothing we can do. Next year we'll have declining growth again."

The mainland Chinese population stood at around 1,411,750,000 at the end of 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported, a decrease of 850,000 from the end of the previous year.

The number of births was 9.56mn, the NBS said, while the number of deaths stood at 10.41mn.

The last time China's population declined was in the early 1960s, when the country was battling the worst famine in its modern history, a result of the disastrous Mao Zedong agricultural policy known as the Great Leap Forward.

China ended its strict one-child policy - imposed in the 1980s owing to fears of overpopulation - in 2016 and began allowing couples to have three children in 2021.

But that has failed to reverse the demographic decline for a country that has long relied on its vast workforce as a driver of economic growth.

"The population will likely trend down from here in coming years," Zhiwei Zhang of Pinpoint Asset Management said.

"China cannot rely on the demographic dividend as a structural driver for economic growth," he added.

"Economic growth will have to depend more on productivity growth, which is driven by government policies."



A nurse takes care of a newborn baby at a hospital in Fuyang, in China's eastern Anhui province on Tuesday (AFP)

'A lot of pressure'

The one-child policy meant Chinese people got used to smaller families, Xiujian Peng, a researcher at Australia's University of Victoria, told AFP.

And for those who were only children as a result of the policy, 'there's a lot of pressure when it comes to taking care of your parents and improving your quality of life in the future', a young woman in Beijing told AFP.

For those who do have children, balancing work and child-rearing can be an impossible task.

"For many women, having a child means that they have to give up on a lot of things they wanted to do," Nancy, a 32-year-old e-commerce worker, explained.

News of the population decline quickly trended on China's heavily censored internet.

"Without children, the state and the nation have no future," one comment on the Twitter-like Weibo service read.

"Having children is also a social responsibility," another comment from a well-known

'patriotic' influencer read.

But others again pointed to the difficulties of raising children in modern China.

"I love my mother, I will not be a mother," said one.

"No one reflects on why we do not want to have (children) and do not want to get married," another said.

Analysts point to the soaring cost of living and growing number of women in the workforce and seeking higher education as reasons behind

'Policy package needed'

Independent demographer He Yafu also pointed to 'the decline in the number of women of child-bearing age, which fell by five million per year between 2016 and 2021' - a consequence of the ageing of the population - as a reason for the low birth rate.

Many local authorities have already launched measures to encourage couples to have children. The southern megacity of Shenzhen, for example, now offers birth bonuses of up to 10,000 yuan (around US\$1,500) and pays allowances until the child is three years old.

But analysts argue much more needs to be done.

"A comprehensive policy package that covers childbirth, parenting, and education is needed to reduce the cost of child-raising," researcher Peng told AFP.

"Women's job insecurity after giving birth should be addressed particularly."

The Chinese population could decline each year by 1.1 per cent on average, according to a study by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences that was updated last year and shared with AFP.

China could have only 587mn inhabitants in 2100, less than half of today, according to the most pessimistic projections of that team of demographers.

And India is set to dethrone China this year as the most populous country in the world, according to the United Nations.

AFP

Biden to visit flood-hit California

San Francisco, US - US President Joe Biden will travel to flood-hit areas of California on Thursday, the White House said, as the country's most populous state cleans up from a devastating and lethal series of storms.

Biden will tour storm-hit communities, 'survey recovery efforts, and assess what additional federal support is needed', the White House said in a statement on Monday. Nine successive storms have rolled in from the Pacific Ocean, slamming California and other western regions in three weeks of extreme weather that has cost 20 lives.

Biden declared a major disaster in California over the weekend, allowing the federal government to expedite aid, including help with temporary housing and repairs.

The storms have forced tens of thousands of people to evacuate their homes, according to an executive order signed on Monday by California Governor Gavin Newsom. Damage estimates



Capitola Pier, built in 1857, is seen damaged after recent storms in Capitola, California (AFP)

from the series of storms already top US\$1bn.

Even as scattered sunny skies were predicted for Tuesday, there would not be much of a respite for relief workers in California hustling to clear landslides, shovel mud from roads and remove fallen trees.

About 15,300 homes in the state remained without power

early on Tuesday, according to PowerOutage.us.

Sodden cities in northern California reported staggering accumulated quantities of rain.

A report from the National Weather Service (NWS) for the Bay Area said more than 18 inches (45cm) of rain have fallen on San Francisco since December 26. 'It's the wettest 22-day

period since January 14, 1862," the NWS office said in a tweet.

In the Central Valley, the fertile region that produces 40 per cent of US fruits, Modesto reported more than an inch of rain Monday, beating an old record set in 1950, and Stockton had 1.2 inches of rain, surpassing a record set there in 1973.

AFP

Fiji military warns of 'concern' over PM Rabuka's reforms

Suva, Fiji - Fiji's military chief warned on Tuesday that reforms under new Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka could violate the constitution, but also pledged to respect the law and 'stand with democracy'.

Fiji has been shaken by four coups in the past 35 years, and the possibility of military intervention loomed over a tight general election last month. Rabuka's election victory ended the 16-year rule of former naval commodore Frank Bainimarama, who seized control of the Pacific archipelago through a putsch in 2006.

Under Fiji's constitution - adopted in 2013 - the military has wide powers to intervene in politics. Rabuka's government has made reviewing the constitution one of its immediate priorities. In a statement 'authorised' by Major General Jone Kalouniwai, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) said it had 'growing concern' over the ambition



Fijian Commander of the Military Forces Jone Kalouniwai (AFP)

and speed of the government's 'sweeping changes'.

The military worries that the changes are being pursued 'without full understanding' of procedures or are being 'intentionally done to challenge the integrity of the Law and the Constitution of this land', Kalouniwai said.

Hours after issuing the statement, however, he said the military would continue to 'honour the current government that is in place'. "Let me just reassure the

public that the RFMF will continue to stand with democracy, we will continue to respect the law," Kalouniwai told online news outlet fijiivillage.com.

In response, Rabuka said there was no reason to fret about the military's criticism.

"Relax. Do I look worried?" he asked reporters. "I have no concerns about my relationship with the military. I have every confidence in them."

Fiji's home affairs minister Pio Tikoduadua said he summoned the army chief to communicate the government's concerns over his statement. "The commander has assured that today will be the last day that he will be making such a public utterances as that," Tikoduadua told reporters.

The minister said decisions to recall the country's diplomats and reinstate hundreds of airport workers were among the issues raised by the commander.

AFP

'Rohingya refugees suffer widespread police abuse'

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh - An elite Bangladesh police unit is engaged in the rampant extortion, harassment and wrongful arrests of the Rohingya refugees it has been tasked with protecting, Human Rights Watch said on Tuesday.

The Armed Police Battalion (APBn) operates in camps housing nearly one million members of the stateless minority, most of whom fled neighbouring Myanmar after a military crackdown that is now the subject of a UN genocide investigation.

But the refugees and humanitarian workers told the New York-based watchdog that safety had deteriorated after the unit took charge of camp security in 2020, with some Rohingya telling AFP abuses had become 'a regular occurrence'.

"Abuses by police in the Cox's Bazar camps have left

Rohingya refugees suffering at the hands of the very forces who are supposed to protect them," said HRW Asia researcher Shayna Bauchner.

The rights group said it had spoken to dozens of Rohingya refugees living in the sprawling and overcrowded camp network in the country's southeast, documenting at least 16 cases of serious abuse by APBn officers.

Police demanded hefty bribes of refugees under threat of arrest, HRW's report said, adding that families were often forced to sell gold jewellery or borrow money to free unjustly detained relatives.

Bauchner called on authorities to investigate the claims and hold responsible officers to account.

Battalion commander Syed Harunor Rashid said the report was 'questionable'.

AFP

Nigerians flock to get voting cards as election looms

Lagos, Nigeria - Braving stressful waits, red tape and repeated visits, Nigerians are rushing to pick up their voting cards for next month's presidential election, where three main candidates are vying to replace President Muhammadu Buhari.

Nearly 10mn new voters have been registered for the February 25 ballot, of whom 84 per cent are young people aged under 34 - a key block of ballots.

The election in Africa's most populous country is shaping up to be an exceptional event.

For the first time since the end of military dictatorship in 1999, a third party candidate is presenting a real challenge to the dominance of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP).

With Nigeria struggling with growing insecurity, high living costs and increasing poverty, many young voters said they were more keen now to have a say about their future leader.



Officials of Independent National Electoral Commission sort voters card at a ward in Lagos on January 13 (AFP)

Crowds gathered at Lagos schools over the weekend where election officials called out names, checked off lists and handed out a coveted ID, the biometric Permanent Voting Cards or PVC.

Some would-be voters were successful but others were frustrated to be told to come back.

"They told me my PVC is not ready. They have to go back to Abuja," said Chuks David, a software developer in Lagos' Surulere area.

"We need to get things right, and that is why I am taking the time and the stress to get my PVC."

The Independent National

Electoral Commission, known as INEC, last week extended the deadline for PVC collection by eight days. In some states 100,000 cards were collected in just five days, it said.

Picking up her card in Lagos State's Alimosho district, first-time voter Gbemisola Akindola said she hadn't seen the need for

change in 2019. But this year she said she was determined to have her say.

"Right now something is very very clear, that it's time we transition to the younger generation ruling us and that's why, if I don't do it now, when would I do it?"

Nigeria's elections in the past have been marred by logistical delays, violence and claims of fraud and vote buying.

In 2019, INEC was forced to postpone the election by a week just hours before voting was scheduled to start because of difficulty getting material to polling stations.

Election officials say 2023's ballot will be more transparent after the introduction of electronic transfer of results and a biometric voter identification technology known as BVAS at the voting stations to stop fraud.

"This instilled confidence in our people," Adenike Tadesse, INEC head of voter education in Lagos, told AFP.

AFP

INDIA

Rather be ‘beheaded’ than step into RSS office, says Rahul Gandhi

Hoshiarpur, India - Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday issued a strong statement against the saffron brigade led by the Sangh Parivar as he made it clear that nothing can ever force him to see eye to eye with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and that he prefers to be ‘beheaded’ than step into an RSS office.

Rahul made his clash with the Sangh ideology clear amid growing speculations about BJP leader and his cousin Varun Gandhi’s entry into Congress, as he said that their ideologies do not match. Gandhi said that Varun at some point accepted the ideology of the RSS and added that he cannot accept this ever.

“Varun at some point, maybe even today, accepted that ideology and made it his own. I can not accept that thing,” the Wayanad MP said during a press briefing.

Gandhi said that he will have to be ‘beheaded’ to make him enter the RSS office.

“Varun Gandhi is in BJP if he walks here then it might be a problem for him. My ideology doesn’t match his ideology. I



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi holds a boy while leading Bharat Jodo Yatra, in Jalandhar on Monday (ANI)

cannot go to the RSS office, I’ll have to be beheaded before that. My family has an ideology. Varun adopted another and I can’t accept that ideology,” he said.

“I can surely meet him and hug him, but cannot accept that ideology,” Gandhi added at a press conference during the Punjab-leg of the Bharat Jodo Yatra that aims to ‘end the politics of hate and division and the over-centralisation of our politi-

cal system’

The Congress leader claimed that the BJP will suffer a ‘massive blow’ due to issues like unemployment, and price rise.

“It is abundantly clear that the BJP will suffer a massive hit by economic distress, unemployment, and price rise. There is massive anger against the BJP,” he said.

Lashing out at the ‘structure of media’, the Congress leader on Tuesday claimed that ‘hatred

is being spread in the media’, while also alleging that it is playing the role of ‘distraction instead of a watchdog’.

Gandhi called for an ‘independent media and institutions’ citing his party’s philosophy, and said that media is a ‘feedback channel’ for the Congress governments.

“The media is being controlled and pressured. The reporters are not at much fault. You have constraints. You have

to do what your owner tells you to do. I understand as you tell me. I’m not criticising you. I’m criticising the structure of media,” he said.

“Congress’ philosophy is of an independent media and institutions. Even if Congress wants to control media, we do not have the capability of implementing it because our structure is not as centralised as the BJP. We want independent and fair media,” Gandhi added.

Alleging that media is playing the ‘role of distraction’, the Congress leader said that it should rather play the ‘role of a watchdog’.

“The small businessmen are being crushed, farmers are being looted, but you distract by doing Hindu-Muslim, Bollywood, sports,” he said.

Gandhi said that the media should put pressure on the government. “If you were given freedom, you would have asked about the data which we have presented here. You should be raising farmers’ issues and employment issues. We would like the media which puts pressure on the government.”

ANI



A local resident shifts her belongings from Joshimath on Tuesday (ANI)

Met dept predicts 4-days snowfall, rain in Joshimath

Joshimath, India - The coming four days will be very tough for the residents of Joshimath in Uttarakhand which is already going through land subsidence rendering people homeless.

Adding to the woes of the people, the meteorological department has predicted rain and snowfall in Joshimath, Chamoli and Pithoragarh on January 19, 20, 23 and 24. According to meteorologists, there is a possibility of change in the weather pattern in the state due to the re-activation of Western Disturbance in these four days.

“There is a possibility of rain on January 19 and 20, while on January 23 and 24, there is a possibility of snowfall along with rain,” said Bikram Singh,

director of Meteorological Center Dehradun.

In such a situation, the state government and district administrations will have to be alert in the disaster-affected area of Joshimath, he added.

Hundreds of residents have been shifted to relief centres in safe places after land subsidence began in Joshimath.

The Uttarakhand government has already announced relief packages worth crores of rupees for the affected families of Joshimath.

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said that the relief package has been released for nearly 3,000 families affected by gradual land subsidence in the Himalayan state.

ANI

BJP will win 2024 LS polls by even bigger margin: Amit Shah

New Delhi, India - Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday exuded confidence that the BJP would win the 2024 Lok Sabha elections by an even bigger majority.

On the final day of the two-day national executive meeting of the BJP on Tuesday, members of the top party panel arrived at a consensus on extending BJP national president J P Nadda’s tenure till June 2024. Addressing a press conference on the sidelines of the national executive meet at the NDMC Convention Centre in the national capital on Tuesday, Shah said: “I am confident that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Nadda-ji,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted by BJP national president JP Nadda as he arrives for the second day of the two-day BJP national executive meeting in New Delhi on Tuesday (ANI)

the BJP will win the 2024 Lok Sabha elections by an even bigger majority. Modi-ji will return to lead the country as the Prime Minister.”

Lauding the efforts of Nadda in his role as the party’s national chief, ever since assuming his office on January 20, 2020, the same year the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the entire country, Shah said the party made significant strides under his leadership.

“During the pandemic, our party did significant work under Nadda-ji’s leadership, be it providing food and ration to the poor for free or taking people affected by the virus to hospitals for check-ups and treatment,”

Shah added.

He further claimed that of the political parties in the country, the BJP is the only one which

During pandemic, our party did significant work... providing food and ration to the poor for free

AMIT SHAH

works to further democracy.

“BJP is the most democratically run party in the country. From the establishment of the

Bharatiya Jan Sangh to this day, the elections in the BJP - from the booth-level to the national president - have always been in accordance with the party’s constitution,” Shah added.

The Union Home Minister further said under Nadda’s leadership, the party organisation has worked on the principle of ‘Seva Hi Sangathan’ (service is organisation), right from the booth to the national levels.

According to sources, the proposal for Nadda’s extension was mooted by Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and was agreed upon unanimously by the members of the National Executive.

ANI

Nobel Prize-winning Swiss physicist Muller dies at 95

Geneva, Switzerland - Swiss physicist Karl Alex Muller, who won the Nobel Physics Prize in 1987 along with his German colleague Georg Bednorz for their discovery of the first high-temperature superconductor, has died.

Muller, who was 95, died on January 9, according to a death notice published in the *Tages-Anzeiger* newspaper by his family and the IBM Research laboratory.

The scientist died peacefully in his sleep, after facing the final chapter of life with ‘perseverance and optimism’, they wrote. Muller and Bednorz were researchers at the IBM Zurich Research Laboratory when they jointly won the world’s top physics prize more than 35 years ago.

They were honoured ‘for their important breakthrough in the discovery of superconductivity in ceramic materials.’

Their findings made superconductivity more accessible and opened the way to a broad range of applications, from lev-



Karl Alex Muller (AFP)

itating trains to MRI imaging.

Superconductivity - the phenomenon by which electricity flows through a material without experiencing any resistance or losing energy as heat - was discovered in 1911, when Dutch physicist Heike Kamerlingh Onnes cooled mercury to minus 270 degrees Celsius (minus 454 degrees Fahrenheit) and saw electric resistance disappear.

After that, superconductivity for decades appeared possible only in metallic compounds at similarly super-low temperatures. While small advances were made in 1973 when an alloy was produced

that could become a superconductor at slightly higher temperatures, it still required cooling to -250C.

But in 1986, Muller and Bednorz ditched the traditional alloys and instead sought superconductivity in oxide materials - lanthan-barium-copper oxides - which brought the required temperature up to -238C. Their discovery of a new class of superconductors, so-called high-temperature superconductors (HTS), earned them the Nobel nod the following year.

Zurich University described Muller as ‘swimming against the current’, adding: “1986 was an exciting year for science in Zurich. It all began with a seemingly far-fetched idea.”

The fact that they found a higher critical temperature made it possible for superconductivity to be achieved by cooling with liquid nitrogen rather than far more expensive liquid helium, making it simpler and cheaper to use.

AFP

Vietnam president Phuc resigns amid major anti-graft purge

Hanoi, Vietnam - Vietnam President Nguyen Xuan Phuc has resigned, state media said on Tuesday, after days of rumours he was about to be sacked as part of a major anti-corruption drive that has seen several ministers fired.

Phuc has ‘submitted his resignation from his assigned positions, quit his job, and retired’, state news agency VNA said.

Phuc’s sudden departure is a highly unusual move in communist Vietnam, where political changes are normally carefully orchestrated, with an emphasis on cautious stability.

State media said the communist party had ruled he was responsible for wrongdoing by senior ministers under him during his 2016-2021 stint as prime minister, before he became president. Two deputy prime ministers were sacked this month in an anti-corruption purge that has led to the arrest of dozens of officials, with many of the graft allegations relating to deals done as part of Vietnam’s COVID pandemic response.

Phuc ‘took political responsi-



Vietnam’s President Nguyen Xuan Phuc (AFP)

bility as leader when several officials, including two deputy prime ministers and three ministers committed violations and shortcomings, causing very serious consequences’, VNA said, quoting the party central committee’s official statement. Earlier this month, the country’s rubber stamp National Assembly removed Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam from their positions as deputy prime ministers.

Minh was a minister of foreign affairs while Dam was in charge of the country’s handling of the

COVID-19 pandemic. At least 100 officials and businesspeople, including Dam’s assistant, have been arrested in connection with a scandal involving the distribution of COVID-19 testing kits.

Corruption, infighting

Thirty-seven people - many of them senior diplomats and police - have also been arrested in an investigation over the repatriation of Vietnamese during the pandemic.

After closing its borders to

slow the spread of the coronavirus, Vietnam organised nearly 800 charter flights to bring citizens home from 60 countries and territories. But travellers faced complicated procedures while paying exorbitant airfares and quarantine fees to get back to Vietnam.

Phuc, 68, was elevated to the largely ceremonial role of president in April 2021 after winning plaudits for the country’s broadly successful handling of the pandemic. Authoritarian Vietnam is run by the Communist Party and officially led by the party general secretary, president, and prime minister, with key decisions made by the politburo, which now numbers 16.

Le Hong Hiep, a fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, said Phuc’s resignation may also be linked to political infighting. “It’s mainly related to corruption investigations but we cannot rule out the possibility that his political rivals also wanted to remove him from his position for political reasons,” he told AFP.

AFP

SHAKY, BUT NOT STIRRED



Tunisia's Ons Jabeur survives first-round test at Australian Open

Melbourne, Australia - Second seed Ons Jabeur joked that her coach was "going to kill me" after her quest for a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open began with a shaky three-set victory on Tuesday.

The Tunisian eventually saw off Tamara Zidansek 7-6 (10/8), 4-6, 6-1 in an unconvincing win littered with unforced errors.

Jabeur was runner-up at both Wimbledon and the US Open last year but had to grind past the Slovenian world number 98 under the roof on Rod Laver Arena in a 2hr 17min battle.

"It was a tough match honestly," Jabeur told reporters. "Just not the way I wanted to play. But I kept fighting."

Jabeur has set herself the twin targets in 2023 of becoming the first Arab and African woman to win one of the four tennis majors and toppling Iga Swiatek from the number one ranking.

But the 28-year-old, who had strap-

ping on her left knee, suffered early nerves as she took to Melbourne Park's centre court for the night session on day two.

Jabeur dropped her opening service game but broke back straight away.

Further breaks were exchanged before the powerful Jabeur eventually outlasted the Slovenian 10-8 in an attritional tiebreak at the end of a first set that lasted 68 minutes.

Serving at 3-4 in the second, Jabeur was broken for a third time and Zidansek took advantage to level the match.

But after the extended interval between sets, Jabeur cleaned up her play, made fewer errors and sped away to victory.

"It was frustrating to lose the second set, but I think I got the time to think and talk to myself more," she said. "The third set was really great."

"I just tried to follow what my coach

told me to do. I wasn't really doing that and he's going to kill me after the match," she joked.

Jabeur committed 49 unforced errors during her stuttering opening match, but only six came in her much-improved third set.

"I just tried to be more patient. It's a tough sport and you definitely don't want to play three sets here," she said.

In the end Jabeur did just enough to set up a second-round meeting with either Alison Riske-Amritraj of the United States or Czech Marketa Vondrousova in round two.

Jabeur, who missed last year's Australian Open with a back injury, won Madrid and Berlin trophies last year in a breakout season which propelled her to second in the rankings.

Jabeur reached her first Grand Slam quarter-final at Melbourne Park in 2020 and has now won 11 of her last 12 opening-round matches at majors, the only loss coming to 52nd-ranked Magda Linette at Roland Garros last year.

I just tried to follow what my coach told me to do. I wasn't really doing that and he's going to kill me after the match

ONS JABEUR



Taylor Fritz celebrates after beating Nikoloz Basilashvili

Taylor Fritz wins to defy 'Netflix curse'

Melbourne, Australia - American Taylor Fritz dispelled any notion of a "Netflix curse" at the Australian Open on Tuesday, even as it claimed another high-profile victim.

Nick Kyrgios, Paula Badosa and Ajla Tomljanovic all pulled out of the Grand Slam with injury - all three are featured in the new Netflix documentary series "Break Point". So too does Italy's 13th seed Matteo Berrettini, who promptly lost to British veteran Andy Murray in the first round in Melbourne on Tuesday.

But Fritz, who is also in the fly-on-the-wall series, defeated Nikoloz Basilashvili of Georgia and afterwards dismissed any light-hearted social media talk of a supposed curse.

"I noticed the people pulling out of the tournament but I didn't know it was a thing," said the 25-year-old.

"I'm not going to lose my first-round match because I'm in the Net-flix show, so I didn't think about that."

Fritz defeated Basilashvili 6-4, 6-2, 4-6, 7-5 and faces either Australian Alexei Popyrin or Taiwan's Tseng Chun-hsin in round two.

Djokovic storms into second round

Melbourne, Australia - Novak Djokovic swept past Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena to launch his bid for a 10th Australian Open title Tuesday, with the Serb enjoying a rousing reception following his deportation a year ago.

The 35-year-old, who was banned from last year's tournament, showed few signs of the hamstring niggle he picked up in Adelaide this month as he raced to victory on Rod Laver Arena 6-3, 6-4, 6-0.

After not being able to play last year over his Covid vaccination stance, there were concerns over how he might be received by fans in Melbourne.

The city endured lengthy lockdowns during the height of the pandemic.

But, as in Adelaide, the fourth seed walked out to loud cheers and chants of "Nole", with vocal backing during the match from a stadium awash with Serbian flags.

"Thank you for giving me such a welcoming reception that I



Novak Djokovic hits a return against Roberto Carballes Baena during their first-round match at the Australian Open on Tuesday (AFP)

could only dream of," said Djokovic, who is chasing a record-equalling 22nd major title.

"I feel really happy that I'm back here in Australia and on the court where I have had the biggest success in my career."

"Definitely this court is the

most special court in my life and I couldn't ask for a better start to the tournament."

He arrived at Melbourne Park in sizzling form after ending 2022 by winning another ATP Finals title, then followed that up by triumphing at the Adelaide International.

As if that wasn't daunting enough for 75th-ranked Carballes Baena, Djokovic came into the clash having won his last 21 Australian Open matches.

He opened with an ace, but didn't have it all his own way at first, needing to save three break points in the fifth game.

But he quickly settled and broke next game to love for a 4-2 lead and closed out the set.

His hamstring appeared to trouble him briefly when he slid for a shot at 2-2 in the next set, but he pressed on and broke again for 4-3 when Carballes Baena netted a forehand.

AFP

Murray wins five-set epic as weather plays havoc

Melbourne, Australia - Andy Murray rolled back the years to defeat 13th seed Matteo Berrettini in a five-set epic at the Australian Open on Tuesday, on a day when sweltering heat and then heavy rain played havoc.

There was also controversy off the court on day two after organisers banned Russian and Belarusian flags at Melbourne Park.

Novak Djokovic was set to make his eagerly anticipated return to the Grand Slam later Tuesday, following his ban and deportation last year.

The day looked set to belong to the 35-year-old Murray - and Melbourne's famously fickle weather.

The Briton saved match point

to defeat Italy's Berrettini 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-7 (7/9), 7-6 (10/6) in 4hrs 49mins on Rod Laver Arena, where the roof was closed because of the extreme heat.

"I will be feeling this this evening and tomorrow," the former world number one, who plays with a metal hip after career-saving surgery, said.

"But right now unbelievably happy and proud of myself."

The three-time major winner faces either Fabio Fognini or Thanasi Kokkinakis in round two.

Also in the men's draw, Russia's fifth seed Andrey Rublev ended the tournament of 2020 finalist Dominic Thiem 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 in 36 degrees Celsius (96.8 Fahrenheit) temperatures.

Former US Open champion Thiem was outplayed as he continued his return from a wrist injury that kept him off the court for nine months across the 2021 and 2022 seasons.

As the mercury rose, the heat forced play to be halted on outside courts. The

Andy Murray exults after a point against Matteo Berrettini (AFP)

roofs were closed on the three main stadiums: Rod Laver Arena, Margaret Court Arena and John

Cain Arena.

Play resumed on the outside courts about three hours later, only to be disrupted again in the evening when a storm hit, dumping torrential rain that forced players back into the locker room. About 90 more minutes of play were lost. Britain's Dan Evans, Pablo Carreno Busta of Spain, Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov and Diego Schwartzman of Argentina all rolled into round two.

Eighth-seeded Taylor Fritz of the United States defeated Nikoloz Basilashvili from Georgia, while 12th seed Alexander Zverev needed a fifth set before finally seeing off Juan Pablo Varillas. Ninth seed Holger Rune

also won in straight sets.

Russian flag ban

On Tuesday, Tennis Australia banned Russian and Belarusian flags after a complaint from the Ukrainian ambassador to Australia.

The red, white and blue stripes of Russia were seen Monday during at least two matches, with Ukrainian fans reportedly calling security and police to the stands.

"The ban is effective immediately," said Tennis Australia.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian and Belarusian players have normally competed under a neutral flag as independents, as is the case at the Australian Open.

BUMPER ENTRY

Dakar Rally winner Nasser al Attiyah heads the field for next week’s Oman International Rally, local hopes rest on Oman Rally Team’s Abdullah al Rawahi



Abdullah al Rawahi



Nasser Al Attiyah

Muscat - The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) has announced an impressive line-up of international drivers and national entries for the Oman International Rally, round one of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC), taking place on January 26th-28th.

Fifteen international crews and 10 teams taking part in a national event grace the entry list announced by the organising committee. The field includes individuals from nine countries and is headed by the global motor sport stars of the moment, Nasser al Attiyah and his Andorra-based co-driver Mathieu Baumel.

On Sunday, the duo secured Al Attiyah's fifth success in the world-renowned Dakar Rally and a fourth triumph for his co-driver. The Qatari makes the switch from that all-conquering Toyota Hilux to join forces with Autotek Motorsport in a bid to begin another defence of his regional rally title in a Volkswagen Polo GTi.

Al Attiyah has seven wins under his belt in the Sultanate of Oman and is a clear favourite for victory next week over the 13 gravel stages that make up the year's championship.

Qatar's Nasser Khalifa al Atya the runner-up in the regional series back in 1993 - again teams up with Giovanni Bernacchini to drive a Ford Fiesta R5. His Italian co-driver took part in the Dakar Classic event in Saudi Arabia over the last two weeks.

Completing the Rally2 line-up will be Petr Kacirek in his Duck Racing Skoda Fabia. The Czech finished second overall behind Al Attiyah in Oman last year with Vaclav Kopacek.

Vaclav is replaced by Petra Rihakova on this occasion, with whom Kaarek has taken part in numerous Czech events in the past.

Kuwait's Meshari al Thefiri is a multiple former MERC2 champion and will drive a Mitsubishi Evo X in Oman, where he lines up against 10 other Group NR4 cars on the entry list to compete in the MERC2 category.

The defending champion Issa

Abu Jamous returns to defend his title in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX and lines up against fellow Jordanians, Ihab al Shorafa, Shadi Shaban, Sheikh Bader al Fayed and Shaker Jweihan, in addition to Kuwait's Mohammed al Zafiri and Yousef al Dhefiri, Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled and Oman's Abdullah al Zubair and Zakariya al Aamri.

Local drivers dominate the entry for the Oman national event: Haitham al Zadjali and Ghaith al Qasmi wheel out a pair of Mitsubishi's and there are two Subaru Imprezas for Fai-sal al Rashdi and Jarah al Touqi.

UTVs are becoming popular across several FIA motor sport disciplines and rally organisers have received entries from three crews driving Yamaha YXZs - Oman's Mohammed al Mazrui and Mutasim al Balushi and Lebanon's Alain Nawfal.

There are also national entries from Abdullah al Toqi,

Musab Soomar and Salim al Toqi. The former will be partnered by a famous Austrian female co-driver from the FIA World Rally Championship (WRC): Ilka Minor has partnered drivers of the calibre of

Manfred Stohl and Henning Solberg to eight podiums and 25 stage wins in the WRC since she made her WRC debut with Achim Mörli in Corsica in 1997.

Her best results were a pair of second-placed finishes with

Stohl at the 2005 Cyprus Rally and Wales Rally GB in 2006.

The 2023 Oman International Rally gets underway with a ceremonial start and a timed super special stage on Thursday, January 26th.

Shakhtar to give \$25m of Mudryk fee to aid war victims in Ukraine

Paris, France - Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk, who completed the sale of Mykhailo Mudryk to Chelsea at the weekend, pledged on Monday to give a sizeable chunk of their fee to victims of the Russian invasion.

Mudryk will cost the Blues up to 100 million euros with an initial fee of 70 million euros and the remaining 30 million euros in performance-related add-ons.

"I am allocating \$25 million (UAH 1 billion) today to help our soldiers, defenders, and their families," said Shakhtar President Rinat Akhmetov in a statement.

"The money will be used to cover different needs - from providing medical and prosthetic treatment and psychological support to meeting specific requests."

Akhmetov's 'Heart of Azovstal' project is named after the steel-works in the port city of Mariupol in south-eastern Ukraine which held out for weeks under sustained attack from Russian forces in the spring of 2022 before surrendering.



Mykhailo Mudryk

"Their acts of bravery are unparalleled in the modern history," said Akhmetov.

"It is them, their sacrifice and courage that helped contain the enemy in the first months of the war and let all of us feel the inevitability of the victory of Ukraine now."

Akhmetov said he was "happy for Mykhaylo and proud of him" for landing the move to Chelsea.

"I am absolutely confident that the entire Europe will acclaim Mykhaylo's brilliant and fine play."

Klopp has no plans to quit as he plots Liverpool overhaul

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Jurgen Klopp says he will not leave Liverpool unless he is told to go, hinting at a major overhaul of his ageing squad at the end of the season.

A sixth Premier League defeat of the campaign at the weekend means the 2020 champions are 10 points outside the top four with just over half the season remaining.

Klopp last year signed a contract extension until 2026 and the 55-year-old stressed only the sack would prevent him seeing that through.

"Either the manager's position changes or a lot of other things change," he said. "So as far as I am concerned unless



someone tells me I will not go. "So that means maybe there is a point where we have to change other stuff. We will see that, but that is something for

the future. Like summer or whatever. Not now. "I have space and time to think about it - we have to play better football now."

India cricketer Pant thanks 'heroes' after horror crash

New Delhi, India - Indian cricket star Rishabh Pant has thanked "two heroes" who helped get him to hospital after his car crashed into a road divider and caught fire.

In his first public comments since the accident, Pant said he would be "forever grateful and indebted" to Rajat Kumar and Nishu Kumar, posting a photo of the duo at his hospital bed.

"I may not have been able to thank everyone individually, but I must acknowledge these two heroes who helped me during my accident and ensured I got to the hospital safely," Pant said on



Rishabh Pant

Twitter late Monday.

"Rajat Kumar & Nishu Kumar, Thank you. I'll be forever grateful and indebted."

The flamboyant wicketkeeper-batsman crashed his Mercedes SUV north of New Delhi before dawn on December 30.

He suffered multiple injuries when the car rammed into a crash barrier, flipped over and caught fire. The 25-year-old was rushed to a local hospital in Dehradun before being airlifted to Mumbai for further treatment and surgery.

The Indian cricket board said that Pant suffered several injuries

including a damaged ligament in his right knee, a hurt wrist and ankle, and abrasions on his back.

Pant tweeted Monday that his "road to recovery" had now begun and that an operation - reportedly on his knee - "was a success".

"I am humbled and grateful for all the support and good wishes... The road to recovery has begun and I am ready for the challenges ahead," he tweeted.

He also thanked the Indian cricket board and government authorities for their "incredible support".

AFP

THUNDERBOLT

Jameel al Yahmadi scores a stunning goal as Oman edge Bahrain to enter the final of Arabian Gulf Cup

Basra, Iraq - The match had entered the final ten minutes, the score was 0-0, with Oman enjoying the better of the exchanges; there was hope, but there was also desperation.

And just when it looked like the second semi-final of the Gulf Cup between Oman and reigning champions Bahrain was meandering into extra time, Jameel al Yahmadi announced himself.

Al Yahmadi, wearing a number 10 shirt, got a beautiful lay-off from his team-mate Salah al Yahyaei on the edge of the box, and the midfielder met it sweetly with the outside of his right foot to send the ball swerving into the top right corner of Bahrain goal.

It was nothing more than Oman had deserved and they easily managed to hold on to the lead to make their fifth final appearance in the prestigious tournament.

Oman will take on Iraq in the final after the hosts defeated Qatar 2-1 in the first semi-final.

Oman will be looking for their third title having won the trophy in 2009 and 2017-18.

Oman coach Branko Ivankovic said his team would give their all in the final, having last lifted the trophy in the 2017-18 edition.

"I thank everyone, reaching the final is something good, and I congratulate the players who played a good match," said Ivankovic.

"We deserved to win against the team who won the last edition, this gives confidence to the players, who gained the mentality of winning," he said.

Oman had a good chance in the opening minutes of the game when Salah al Yahyaei surged through the right into the box before pulling the ball back but Issam al Subhi's attempt was blocked by a desperate Bahrain defence.

Jameel al Yahmadi header off the resultant corner was straight at Bahrain the goalkeeper.

Though clear-cut opportunities were few and far between, both teams had promising chances in the match.

Oman goalkeeper Ibrahim al



Oman's Jameel al Yahmadi scores against Bahrain in their Gulf Cup semi-final in Basra, Iraq on Monday (AFP)

Mukhaini was called into action a few times and he had to be on his toes to save a left-footed shot from Bahrain's Mahdi al Humaidan.

Earlier, Iraq continued their fine run to beat Qatar and have a

go at a fourth Gulf Cup title.

Iraq, who last lifted the title in 1988, opened the scoring in the 19th minute through Ibrahim Bayesh.

A mistake by goalkeeper Jalal Hassan, however, saw Amro

Surag drawing Qatar level in the 29th minute but Aymen Hussein then struck what proved to be the winner two minutes from the end of the first half.

Iraq head coach Jesus Casas said his team deserved their



I thank everyone, reaching the final is something good, and I congratulate the players who played a good match

BRANKO IVANKOVIC

place in the final after working hard throughout the tournament.

"I am happy with the team, especially our defensive work, which is a result of all players' efforts, not just the defenders.

"Now we can think about winning the title. As I said before, we focus match by match, and now we can say that we want to win the title, especially the players," said Casas.



Jameel al Yahmadi celebrates with team-mates after the win

Small stadiums, high temperatures: What Ronaldo can expect in Saudi

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - After lighting up football's biggest stages, Cristiano Ronaldo faces a very different reality in Saudi Arabia with smaller stadiums and less exalted teams - and some very high temperatures.

Ronaldo, 37, says he's embracing the "challenge" of the Saudi Pro League, a step into the unknown for a player who is more used to Real Madrid's heaving Santiago Bernabeu stadium or the "Theatre of Dreams", Manchester United's Old Trafford.

The transition has been eased by the combined 400 million euros he'll receive in wages from his new team, Al Nassr, and a separate payment to act as an ambassador for an expected Saudi World Cup bid, according to sources close to the club.

But it will be a big adjustment for the five-time Ballon d'Or winner, who will soon be running out at modest venues including the 6,000-seat Al Batin Stadium.

After an exhibition appearance against his great rival Lionel Messi's Paris Saint-Germain in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Thursday, Ronaldo will make his Saudi Pro League debut for Al Nassr on Sunday.



Cristian Ronaldo at an Al Nassr training session

The 16-team league will take Ronaldo from Dammam on the Gulf coast to Jeddah on the Red Sea, as well as desert-bound provincial cities such as Majma'ah and Hofuf, a hub for Saudi

Arabia's date industry.

Chartered planes

While Al Hilal and Al Ittihad, the giants of Saudi football, play in 62,000-capacity home grounds, a handful of Pro League teams

have small venues for less than 10,000 fans, and some pitches are surrounded by running tracks.

"Sometimes the stadiums are not in the best condition," Mokbel al Zabni, editor-in-chief of the

Al Riyadiah newspaper, told AFP, cautioning that empty seats are a common sight.

"The attendances that Ronaldo is used to will not exist. We are not used to seeing stadi-

ums full to capacity," he said.

Ronaldo's home ground will be Al Nassr's 25,000-capacity Mrsool Park, which lies on a university campus in Riyadh and was packed for his gala unveiling earlier this month.

Chartered planes will ferry the superstar and his team-mates to away games, club sources said, sparing him long coach trips through the desert landscape.

The Pro League season runs from August to May, avoiding the worst of the fierce summer heat when temperatures routinely top 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

Even the evenings, when many games are played, can remain above 30C (86 Fahrenheit) in August and September, and from March until the end of the season.

"The weather will pose a challenge to Ronaldo... but I think he will adapt and excel," said Saleh al Khalif, Al Riyadiah's deputy editor-in-chief.

'No walk in the park'

Saudi Arabia is a leading force in Asian football with six World Cup appearances, including a famous victory over Messi's Ar-

gentina at the recent edition in Qatar. Al Hilal and Al Ittihad have won six AFC Champions League titles between them. With Ronaldo, Al Nassr will have hopes of qualifying for this year's competition and joining their great rivals as Asian champions.

Although the Pro League's standards cannot match the heights of England, Spain and Italy, where Ronaldo has spent his career so far, it is a competitive division.

The Saudi league was launched in 1976 but in the 14 years since the Pro League became the top tier, there have been six different winners.

Khalif said the league's "strength and diversity" were comparable to English football, insisting it would be no "walk in the park" for Ronaldo.

The Pro League is packed with 128 foreign players from 48 countries, with each team allowed to sign eight.

At Al Nassr, coached by Frenchman Rudi Garcia, Ronaldo's team-mates include Colombia and ex-Arsenal goalkeeper David Ospina and Brazilian midfielder Luis Gustavo, formerly of Bayern Munich. AFP

OBITUARY

La Lollo's rollercoaster

GINA LOLLOBRIGIDA, ITALY'S WICKEDLY WITTY SCREEN GODDESS, SAYS SHE BECAME AN ACTRESS BY ACCIDENT, DESPITE KEEN INTEREST IN SCULPTURE, SINGING, AND PHOTOJOURNALISM

One of the last icons of the Golden Age of Hollywood, Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida, whose death at the age of 95 was announced on Monday, was famed for her biting wit and sensual beauty.

Bringing much-needed glamour and pizzazz to the post-war period, she stirred hearts whether as an onscreen gypsy, queen or single mother.

Humphrey Bogart, who she starred opposite in her breakthrough movie *Beat the Devil* in 1953, said Lollobrigida made 'Marilyn Monroe look like Shirley Temple'.

Best known for Luigi Comencini's 1953 classic *Bread, Love and Dreams*, and Jean Delannoy's 1956 *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Lollobrigida starred with many of the leading men of the time, including Errol Flynn and Burt Lancaster. While she had a crazy good time with a playful Bogart, not all the shoots were as fun.

Her co-star in wartime romancer *Never So Few*, Frank Sinatra, had 'zero sense of humour', she told *Variety* in 2018, when she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Actress by accident

Luigia 'Gina' Lollobrigida was born on July 4, 1927 in Subiaco, a mountain village 50km east of Rome. She began to study sculpture after her family moved to the capital, supporting herself by singing and modelling before attracting the attention of Italian film producers. She said her entry into acting was an accident.

"I refused when they offered me my first role. They insisted again... So I told them my price was one million lire, thinking that would put a stop to the whole thing. But they said yes!" she once told *Vanity Fair*.

Italians then dubbed her their answer to Elizabeth Taylor after her signature movie *La Donna Piu Bella del Mondo* (*The Most Beautiful Woman* in the

World) in 1955.

Diva rivalry

She had an infamous long-standing rivalry with fellow Italian diva Sophia Loren. When Loren claimed she was the 'bustier' one, Lollobrigida hit back, saying Loren could play a peasant, but never a lady, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*.

Affectionately dubbed 'La Lollo' by fans, she played the queen in *Solomon and Sheba* in 1959 and a single

mother in *Buona Sera*, Mrs Campbell, garnering a Golden Globe nomination for her performance. A cinema sex symbol, she was pursued for years by US tycoon Howard Hughes, who brought her to Hollywood, and by Prince Rainier of Monaco, at the time still married to Princess Grace.

"I've had many lovers and still have romances," she was quoted by several British newspapers as saying in 2000. "I am very spoiled."

She was married in her early 20s to Slovenian doctor Milko Skofic, with whom she had a son before they divorced in 1971.

In 2006, aged 79, she announced plans to marry Spanish long-time partner Javier Rigau Rafols, 34 years her junior, but they split up a year later. Lollobrigida accused him in 2013 of having tricked her into signing documents allowing him to marry her by proxy, with a stand-in, in a civil ceremony in Spain.

"My experience has been that, when I have found the right person, he has run away from me," she told *Vanity Fair* magazine in 2015. "I am too strong, too popular." The marriage was annulled by a Vatican court in 2019.

Photojournalism scoop

Lollobrigida won seven David di Donatello awards during her career, Italy's Oscar equivalent. But by the 1970s she had turned from acting to sculpture and photojournalism, including getting a scoop interview and photo shoot with Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

She travelled the world, snapping celebrities from Henry Kissinger to Indira Gandhi, Maria Callas, Liza Minnelli, Salvador Dali, Audrey Hepburn and Ella Fitzgerald.

She also nurtured political ambitions: in 1999 she ran, unsuccessfully, for a seat in the European Parliament. She was back in the spotlight in 2021, amid a bitter legal battle with her son over her fortune.

Italy's Supreme Court ruled that she needed a legal guardian to stop people preying on her wealth, because of a weakening in her perception of reality. Despite that, in 2022 she attempted again to enter politics, with a failed bid for a seat in the Italian parliament.

In a 2019 interview with *AGI*, Lollobrigida said she wanted to be remembered for more than just her work in cinema. "For my sculptures, and above all, for my photography," she said.

AFP



In 1965, Gina Lollobrigida waves to the crowd during the 18th Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, France



On July 04, 2017, Gina Lollobrigida (C) waves upon her arrival in Via Condotti to celebrate her 90th birthday, in front of Piazza di Spagna, in central Rome



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MEN'S
FASHION
WEEK

MIXED
GENRES
FOR
GENTLEMEN



Models present creations by Giorgio Armani during the Autumn-Winter 2023-2024 men's fashion show, as part of the Milan Fashion Week, in Milan on January 14

MEN'S FASHION WEEK GOES LIVE IN MILAN, GUCCI BRINGS BACK THE BOYS



The return of Gucci to the menswear catwalk calendar, robust sales of Italian fashion, and a farewell to the pandemic-imposed trend of virtual shows - all systems go for men's fashion week in Milan which opened last Friday.

Promising spectacle and optimism after a year in which sales of Italian fashion showed the strongest growth of the last 20 years, presentations for Fall-Winter 2023/2024 men's collections run until Tuesday.

Of the 79 shows, only four are digital, a holdover from the debilitating pandemic period that sent sales plunging and brought a halt to live runway shows.

"Nothing replaces the live experience, the frenzy, the expectation, the applause, the top models parading on the catwalk and the powerful music," fashion consultant Elisabetta Cavatorta told AFP.

Most anticipated was fashion powerhouse Gucci which put on a menswear-only show for the first time in three years and the luxury label's first since artistic director Alessandro Michele's surprise departure in November.

New direction at Gucci

At its minimalist show Friday, Gucci said it was celebrating 'the aesthetics of improvisation' with a collection inspired by the classic wardrobe of the gentleman, revisited in a subversive spirit. Combining faded jeans with sequined tops and green and red or pink boots with heels, the collection mixed genres and colours.

Long oversized coats with ample shoulder pads and maxi skirts split to reveal bare legs peppered the collection, while wool hats and rectangular tote bags tossed carelessly over the shoulder added to Gucci's accessory arsenal.

With his colourful collections seeped in the 1970s, Michele provided a new lease on life after being tapped in 2015 to revive sales at the storied brand with the world-famous



(Above) a model presents a creation of Dolce & Gabbana, (left and right) models present creations by Fendi

stripe logo in green and red.

While sales exploded by 44 per cent in 2018 for Kering's flagship brand, growth has lagged competitors in the last two years.

"It remains to be seen whether Alessandro Michele's departure initiates a change of direction for the fashion house," Cavatorta said. As to who will take over the reins at Gucci, the fashion world awaits news of Michele's successor with bated breath.

Soaring revenues

Armani, Prada, Fendi, Dolce & Gabbana and Zegna are among the big labels set to unveil men's collections in the Italian fashion capital. But there have been defections including Versace, which plans to show its men's and women's collections together in Los Angeles on March 10.

Despite the war in Ukraine and the impact of the energy crisis on an energy-intensive fashion supply chain, sales of Italian fashion last year rose 16 per cent to 96.6 billion euros (US\$104.4 billion).

"This is the highest revenue in the last 20 years," said Carlo Capasa, president of the Italian Fashion Chamber, at a presentation ahead of the shows last month.

Inflation has had an impact, as Italian fashion prices rose by about nine percent in 2022, but their increase is "a positive sign that closes a year marked by dramatic events and difficult times," Capasa added.

Exports of 'Made in Italy' fashion climbed 18.7 per cent in the first nine months of last year, driven by demand in the United States and the Gulf countries where exports both soared by more than 50 per cent.

Sales to China grew more moderately, at 18.8 percent, while exports to Russia fell by 26 per cent, in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. But one area in which the impact of the COVID-19 crisis will still be felt in Milan is the absence of Chinese buyers.

Despite the lifting of coronavirus-related health restrictions by authorities in Beijing, the number of buyers who will travel to the city for the shows will be limited, Capasa said.

AFP



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