

► NEWS BRIEF

FINAL LIST OF SHURA CANDIDATES TO BE UNVEILED TODAY

Muscat - The Ministry of Interior will announce the final list of candidates for membership to the tenth term of Majlis A'Shura on Wednesday. Names of candidates will be announced via the Intikhab app and published on the website elections.om

As per Article 44 of the Majlis A'Shura Elections Law, candidates may stage electoral campaigns to introduce themselves, starting from the date of announcement of the final list till the penultimate day of voting. The deadline for withdrawing candidacy is Sunday, September 3, 2023.

Islamic New Year

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Al Naseem circus - Rib-tickling, spine-chilling

Shura endorses 10-year cultural visa, private sector wage hike

Muscat - Majlis A'Shura has approved the introduction of a decade-long cultural visa, aimed at fostering the sultanate's arts community. This initiative aligns with a cultural strategy designed to build a balanced, enduring society that draws top creative talents.

The shura also endorsed several key measures on Tuesday aimed at boosting the cultural scene and development in the sultanate.

The ten-year cultural visa is designed to attract eligible intellectuals and writers to Oman. This move, as proposed by the Media and Culture Committee, underscores the significance of cultural heritage, architecture, language, literature, calligraphy, sculpture, drawing and other artistic fields. The committee emphasised the importance of



creating an environment that draws intellectuals, uniting the efforts of cultural authorities and visa and residence departments.

In a significant move for private sector workers, the shura approved a wage hike for Omanis, based on a report from the Youth and Human Resources Committee. This measure aims to elevate living standards, boost

individual income, increase purchasing power, and stimulate money cycle in the local market.

The shura also approved strategic projects in governorates to stimulate investments, promote comprehensive development and provide a database of investments in each governorate.

Charitable organisations received the green light to switch

their electricity and water bills from commercial to social security owner tariffs. This change acknowledges this sector's role in promoting cooperation and integration among all social segments.

The shura further sanctioned a study on the future of frankincense trees in Dhofar aimed at maximising the commercial and

economic benefits of the trees' products.

The session also considered the Economic and Financial Committee's report concerning the efficiency of tax collection. The report seeks to assess the current system's effectiveness, identify existing challenges within the tax infrastructure, and formulate suitable solutions. The committee's scrutiny revealed an urgent need for the initiation of a unified, central tax collection system. This will bolster the tax system's efficiency, augment tax revenue and subsequently increase its contribution to the state's overall budget.

The shura also approved a study to see how privatisation of struggling state-owned companies will help elevate standards of these and also transform these into self-financing entities.

H M receives message from Mauritanian President

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from President Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on Tuesday, dealing with bilateral relations between the two countries.

The message was received by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, during his meeting with the Mauritanian President's envoy Mohamed Salem Ould Merzoug, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and Mauritians Abroad.

During the meeting, Sayyid Badr and the Mauritanian envoy discussed ways of enhancing bilateral cooperation in a manner that serves the common interests of the two countries' peoples. They also exchanged views on regional and international issues.

ONA

Iran hails Oman's role to help lift sanctions against it

Tehran, Iran - Iran has appreciated Oman's role to help remove unilateral sanctions against the country.

Dr Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, on Monday hailed Oman's diplomatic efforts to help remove unilateral sanctions against Iran and said Muscat will proceed with its role in lifting sanctions against Tehran.

Abdollahian made the remarks in his meeting with H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign

Minister, in Tehran.

Stating that Oman is a very close friend of Iran in the region, the Iranian foreign minister considered the promotion of cooperation between Tehran and Muscat in various fields as a sign of the depth of the relations.

Expressing his satisfaction with the development of relations between the two brotherly and neighbouring countries, he said that Iran and Oman have made great progress in their relations, and holding such a meeting is an



opportunity to review and implement the previous agreements reached by the heads of the two countries.

It is necessary to seriously continue consultations between senior officials in order to prepare a comprehensive document for long-term cooperation between the two countries, he added.

Stressing the importance of holding the next meeting of the Joint Economic Cooperation Commission in Tehran in the

near future, Abdollahian expressed confidence that the results of the meeting will contribute to strengthening cooperation between the two countries in various fields.

He also informed that during his recent tour of four countries in the Gulf, he proposed the establishment of a forum among the Gulf states.

H E Sayyid Badr expressed his satisfaction with the growing relations between the two sides.

Agencies

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UNIFYING OMAN'S SOCIAL PROTECTION

Comprehensive pension reform gears up

Muscat - Royal Decree No 50/2023, which promulgates the bylaw of Social Protection Fund, defines the goals, areas of specialty and the administrative structure of the fund.

The decree acts as a legal reference for implementing the provisions of the Social Protection Law.

As per the Royal Decree, all assets and liabilities of the Public Authority for Social Insurance, Civil Service Employees Pension Fund, Ministry of Defence's Pension Fund, Royal Oman Police's Pension Fund, Royal Guard of Oman's Pension Fund, Pension Fund of Sultan's Special Force, Pension Fund of the Internal Security Service, Pension Fund of the Royal Office and the Pension Fund of the Diwan of Royal Court are transferred to the Social Protection Fund. Liabilities and assets from the Pension Programme of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) and the Pension Programme of Central Bank of Oman (CBO) are also transferred to the Social Protection Fund.

As such, 11 existing pension



systems, along with their assets and liabilities, will be merged into one entity. The decree aims at unifying retirement and social in-

surance systems from all sectors. It introduces a more efficient central apparatus capable of providing public services and devel-

oping assets.

The Social Protection Fund has a number of goals: It will implement the government's vision,

policy and programmes on social protection, provide an adequate and fair social coverage for various segments of society, estab-

lish an integrated and sustainable system for social protection, manage the fund's resources and invest its money to raise the value. It also aims to align the current and future obligations to the interest of beneficiaries, creating savings tools and support programmes to enhance social

11 existing pension systems, along with their assets and liabilities, will be merged into one entity unifying retirement and social insurance systems across sectors

protection, while following up and assessing the performance of all monetary and non-monetary social protection programmes.

The fund's administrative system will help devise social protection strategies, policies and programmes and enhance these in terms of incentives serving the covered groups, evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes and invest the beneficiaries' funds in a manner that achieves the expected return.

The fund also regularises the services and policies of client

care, and coordinates with the authorities concerned to improve and harmonise these with the rest of the relevant initiatives.

The fund will be managed and organised by a board of directors comprising the membership of representatives from the State's Administrative Apparatus (government departments), Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, General Federation of Oman Workers and independent members, in accordance with the best practices of governance and the requirements of the 'tripartite representation' of social insurance and protection systems.

Royal Decree No 50/2023 provides for the cancellation of all pension funds and the Public Authority for Social Insurance, as well as retirement/pension programmes - after transferring the ownership of their assets to the Social Protection Fund.

Royal Decree No 51/2023 acts in a similar way for military and security services pension funds, thus serving retirees of military units in an adequate manner.

ONA

Batinah international film fest from Nov 12

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Film Society, in cooperation with Office of Governor of South Batinah, has announced the second edition of Batinah International Film Festival, scheduled for November 12-15.

This year, the festival theme - Human Relationship with the Land - reflects the intrinsic connection between the people of Oman and their natural surroundings.

The festival serves as a platform for burgeoning talents in the movie industry. It not only opens a window to global cinematic perspectives but also aids in the propagation of film culture and the elevation of Omani production standards.

Dr Humaid al Ameri, Chairman of Oman Film Society, described the festival's role as being part of an ongoing series of events aimed at spreading the culture of cinema in the community. "The festival places Oman on the global cinema map and presents Omani governorates to the world, introducing them at film forums, while inspiring Omani filmmakers by recognising and featuring their work."

Mohammed bin Abdullah al Ajmi, Director of Batinah International Film Festival, said the event is an unmatched platform for filmmakers to showcase their creativity and exchange insights and experiences.

"We recognise the pivotal role of cinema in narrating stories and fortifying cultural and human connections. This festival serves as a vehicle to unearth both



The festival places Oman on the global cinema map and presents Omani governorates to the world, introducing them at film forums, while inspiring Omani filmmakers by recognising and featuring their work

DR HUMAID AL AMERI

Omani and international talents in the film industry," he added.

The event features various competitions spanning several categories, including contests for Omani and international short

films and short documentaries, and a special festival competition exploring the festival theme.

"The ultimate goal is to promote culture and human values," Ajmi said.

33 land encroachers removed in Bausher

Muscat - Committed to preserving public rights, Muscat Municipality has taken up the issue of illegal land possession in the wilayat of Bausher seriously. From 2020 to 2022, the Directorate General of Muscat Municipality in Bausher removed 33 unauthorised land occupations, all of which were in stark violation of existing regulations and laws.

Five cases involved illegal encroachment of land adjacent to a beach, while another situation uncovered unlicensed construction extensions outside property boundary.

Two instances involved illegal property extensions into the street, including one case in which trees were planted in a public lane. The most common violation, however, pertained to government land - 14 out of the 33 cases in the past two years.

The remaining infringements varied from unauthorised construction outside property boundaries, non-permanent additions, construction of concrete walls beyond plot boundaries, and transformation of unlawfully acquired land into livestock yards.

Muscat Municipality has reaffirmed that such activities, which undermine public rights and violate building codes, are strictly unlawful.

GEN NU'AMANI RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF IRAN



H E Gen Sultan Mohammed al Nu'amani, Minister of Royal Office, received in his office Ali Najafi Khoshroudi, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman, on Tuesday. The ambassador expressed his appreciation for Oman's stance on various regional and international issues. During the meeting, the two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest. They also reviewed the march of bilateral relations (ONA)

EA fuels green effort by planting 3,000 mangrove seedlings in Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority (EA) has carried out a campaign in Dhofar's Shalim and Al Hallaniyat Islands planting over 3,000 mangrove seedlings in Khor Warkh. This campaign, a part of an ambitious ongoing national initiative to plant 10mn indigenous trees in ten years, aligns with EA's core objectives to enhance ecosystem efficiency and expand green cover.

In addition to this plantation campaign, EA is working on rehabilitating mangrove nurseries in Qurum Natural Reserve. The project aims to generate 48,000 healthy seedlings, set to enrich the reserve with more life.



The project, slated for completion on July 24, will proceed with planting these nurtured seedlings in designated areas, thereby boosting the efficiency of coastal wetland systems.

Mangroves play a crucial role in the region's ecosystem, safeguarding beaches from erosion,

maintaining ecological balance, and promoting the growth of commercially valuable fish and other marine life.

With these initiatives, EA illustrates its commitment to environmental stewardship and biodiversity preservation, fostering a greener and healthier future.

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Oman joins in International Moon Day celebrations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As old as time itself, the moon has been the constant night light in our skies, working the overtime shift while the sun caught some sleep. It's been the silent muse for countless poets, inspiring verses of love and longing, and the trusty guiding light for sailors, helping them navigate through the expanse of unpredictable oceans.

The spotlight turns to the moon this week as the world celebrates International Moon Day on July 20.

Oman joins the global commemoration of Earth's celestial companion. The day, first observed on July 20, 2022, marks the anniversary of man's first lunar landing in 1969.

On December 9, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the proposal to observe International Moon Day. The 2022 inaugural celebration's theme was 'Lunar Exploration Coordination and Sustainability', aiming to educate people about the importance of sustainable lunar exploration.

This year's theme, 'Beginning the New Lunar Journey for Humanity', resonates as the world looks to future explorations.

Omani Astronomical Society is gearing up to observe the day with a lunar observation event scheduled on July 27 and 28 at Jabal Shams. Open to all astronomy enthusiasts, the event expects to attract over 50 participants.

Abdul Wahab Busaidi, former chairman and avid stargazer, noted the significance of July 20



(Muscat Daily)

Omani Astronomical Society is gearing up to observe the day with a lunar observation event scheduled on July 27 and 28 at Jabal Shams. The event is open to all astronomy enthusiasts

in our lives. "This day has historical significance for mankind. As Neil Armstrong said, 'One small step for man, a giant leap for mankind.' The moon plays a key role in our lives, even affecting our natural world through its influence on tides."

Busaidi further emphasised the importance of upcoming lunar missions as an opportunity to gain updated information about Earth's nearest neighbour.

The moon's influence extends beyond science, inspiring poets

and artists alike. Muscat based Indian poet Rajan V Kokkuri shared his lunar musings. "During an evening walk, I was inspired by the moon's reflection in the water. It felt like courting a partner, and I scribbled my thoughts in my book *Born to Dream*."

Echoing a similar sentiment, Pakistani painter Ibrahim Gailani said, "The moon, with its solitude and beauty, brings light to the darkness. Its illumination inspires the shimmering ivory colours prevalent in my paintings."

Initiative to boost consumer rights, trade transparency

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Directorate General of Studies and Development under the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has announced the launch of the Unified Contracts Initiative, which is set to impact several sectors across Oman with the aim of boosting consumer rights and transparency in trade practices.

Launch of the initiative is planned in two stages. In the first stage, contracts will be drafted, reviewed and approved. Subsequently, the second stage involves applying these contracts to commercial entities and institutions. This two-tiered approach targets sectors such as aluminium workshops, commercial kitchens and sellers of electrical and electronic goods.

The central aim of this initiative is to promote awareness of unified contracts and the application process involved. Further, it strives to enhance the quality and accessibility of services offered to consumers and streamlining market procedures.

A noteworthy aspect of the initiative is the focus on educating consumers and suppliers



(Supplied photo)

about their rights, both during and after sales transactions. The goal is to bolster consumer security, counter commercial fraud and minimise harmful practices. By identifying consumer problems and providing solutions, the initiative plans to reduce complaints and issues encountered by consumers.

An integral part of the initiative is also to advance the quality of consumer awareness programmes facilitated by CPA. To ensure the programme's efficacy, an annual review using verification indicators will monitor the initiative, allowing any challenge that might surface during its implementation to be addressed.

'This initiative is predicted to enhance the business climate,

especially in the retail and services sectors in Oman. This improvement is anticipated through the regulation and elimination of harmful practices,' stated CPA.

By facilitating legislation and procedures supporting consumer and supplier rights, the initiative will enhance institutional awareness about CPA regulations and requirements, it further said. 'This move is expected to deter potential violations by retailers and mall owners.'

Aligned with the Oman Vision 2040, the initiative draws inspiration from international, regional and Arab strategies based on the Consumer Protection Law.

SalamAir flies Fujairah-Salah direct

Muscat - SalamAir has announced the introduction of direct flights from Fujairah to Salalah starting July 30.

This new route brings the total number of destinations offered by SalamAir from Salalah to six, providing travellers with convenient choices to explore and enjoy the khareef season and beyond.

Capt Mohamed Ahmed, CEO of SalamAir, expressed excitement about the addition of this route and emphasised the airline's commitment to offering customers accessible and flexible travel options. With Salalah expecting a surge in tourism during the upcoming khareef season, SalamAir takes pride in

offering flights to Salalah from its recently established Fujairah route.

SalamAir connects Salalah to Muscat, Sohar, Madinah, Fujairah, Bahrain and Calicut.

On July 12, SalamAir operated its first direct flight from Muscat to Fujairah International Airport in the UAE.

Excitement builds for long weekend ahead

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Citizens and residents alike are looking forward to another long weekend following announcement of the Islamic New Year holiday on Thursday, July 20. Though this comes closely on the heels of the recent Eid celebrations, the holiday will be an opportunity for all to relax and reconnect with loved ones.

The anticipation is palpable as plans unfold across Muscat. Some are planning out-of-town adventures, including breaks in Salalah, while others are choosing to explore the city's hidden gems or enjoy laidback staycations and movies.

Medical professional Syed al Amri from Amerat recently returned from travels during the Eid holiday. Now, he and his family are planning a trip to Salalah. "We'll set off on Wednesday evening and reach by Thursday morning. Some of my cousins are also there. We are excited about meeting them after a long time."

Newlywed Aazan Balushi is



(Muscat Daily)

These three days will be about us - cooking, watching movies and, perhaps, a visit to my in-laws

AAZAN BALUSHI

staying put in Muscat to enjoy some quality time with his wife. "These three days will be about us - cooking, watching movies

and, perhaps, a visit to my in-laws," he said. They are also looking forward to go to the cinema to watch *Mission: Impossible 7*.

But despite the announcement of the holiday, not everyone has the luxury of time off. Musharaf Khan, a Pakistani national working as a tandoori chef in Ghubra, anticipates busier days ahead. "While many will enjoy the holiday, we who work in restaurants will put in extra hours. People eat out more as they want to enjoy their break, so

the demand for food and food services increase." He gets a three-hour break on regular days, "but during holidays, our work schedule becomes more demanding", Khan informed.

Regardless of the plans, it's certain that Muscat is ready to welcome this well-deserved break, with hopes of creating lasting memories.

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OOMCO expands footprint in Saudi Arabia

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As part of its commitment to its regional expansion strategy, Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) plans to add 14 one-stop-shop service stations in Saudi Arabia.

Through this expansion, OOMCO will be operating a total of 26 service stations in the kingdom by Q4 this year, the company informed.

The announcement came on the sidelines of a signing ceremony for a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between OOMCO and Tamiyoz for Fuel, a leading investment and development company for fuel stations in Saudi Arabia.

The MoU was signed by Tarik Mohammed al Junaidi, Chief Executive Officer of OOMCO, and Yousif Masoud al Saadi, Chief Executive Officer of Tamiyoz for Fuel.

Jaber Mansour al Wahaibi, General Manager of International Retail, Business Development, Strategic Planning, & Marketing and Digital at OOMCO, stated



that the company's unique selling proposition lies in large part in growing 'beyond the pump' and pursuing a customer-centric approach that applies to all our retail operations.

"Our successful business model is a source of competitive advantage that is transferable across the region and KSA,

which is among the key growth markets for us."

He added, "OOMCO aims to operate 26 stations across Saudi Arabia by the end of 2023. We partnered with Tamiyoz, a reputed Saudi-Arabia-based real estate investment and development company, to further facilitate this growth. This is in line



with our aim to become one of the top five fuel marketers in the Gulf Cooperation Council by 2027."

"As it continues to grow, OOMCO's service stations are rapidly becoming a destination of choice for premium fuel, food, beverages, and other convenient items and quality automotive

services," OOMCO stated.

Yousif Masoud al Saadi, Chief Executive Officer of Tamiyoz for Fuel, said, "Saudi Arabia's fast-growing population and a vibrant economy mean that there is a growing need for us to build and develop more service stations across the Kingdom.

"We are pleased to work with

Oman Oil Marketing Company as we are all committed to delivering high-quality products and customer service through these sites, which will also create more employment opportunities for local suppliers."

OOMCO's service stations provide customers with more than quality fuel and lubricants.

OOMCO plans to add 14 one-stop-shop service stations in Saudi Arabia by the end of Q4. The announcement comes on the sidelines of the signing of an MoU by OOMCO CEO Tarik al Junaidi and Tamiyoz for Fuel CEO Yousif Masoud al Saadi



Oman LNG, OBO complete youth training programme

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman LNG and Outward Bound Oman (OBO) celebrated completion of a training programme for over 240 youth that had been designed to upgrade their skills.

The event to celebrate this achievement - of equipping youth with a range of essential skills and work ethics - was held under the auspices of H E Dr Abdullah Ambusaidi, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education for Education.

The partnership between Oman LNG and OBO is a result of support from the Oman LNG Development Foundation that aims to develop human capital in the Sultanate as part of its responsibility towards society.

The 246 participants who benefited from the courses were a mix of government school students, university and college stu-

dents, job seekers and young people from low income families in partnership with several charitable organisations in Oman.

Participants were involved in a unique outdoor learning experience that included a series of discussions and activities, which focused on enhancing key skills required by employers in the job market with a focus on core business ethics.

Dr Amor al Mataani, CEO of Oman LNG Development Foundation, said, "Our commitment to collaborate with Outward Bound Oman emphasises our efforts to nurture the creative and innovative capabilities of younger generations. This support paves the way for students to acquire multiple skills and talents needed to enrich the local labour market."

Outward Bound Oman's executive director Mark Evans said that the partnership with Oman LNG "goes back to 2010 when

the Oman LNG senior leadership team was one of the first corporate groups to come to OBO for some immersive strategic thinking and teambuilding".

Since then, more than 500 young Omanis have had their employability enhanced through Oman LNG's social investment programme, he informed.

"This partnership supports one of the key pillars of His Majesty's Government in developing the human capital of Oman, and making young people future-ready; we look forward to working together even more closely in the coming years."

Outward Bound Oman is considered as a national asset and investment in the sustainable development of Oman in developing the nation's talent in line with Vision 2040, delivering training for more than 23,000 individuals, with three international standard training centres.

Stocks wobble as investors track US data, earnings results

London, UK - Stock markets wavered on Tuesday as investors digested data showing a mixed picture for the US economy and a fresh round of corporate results.

Investors were also still digesting this week's Chinese second-quarter growth data, which that fell short of forecasts and highlighted the tough job officials face in getting the country's post-COVID recovery back on track continued to weigh on markets.

European stocks were up in afternoon deal after tepid trading in the morning while Wall Street's main indices were mixed.

"Traders are concerned about economic numbers from China and... remain on the edge," noted Zaye Capital Markets analyst Naeem Aslam.

And while there is expectation that more stimulus measures are in the pipeline, other analysts warned that leaders were limited in how far they could go.

The figures came after last week's reports showing inflation had flatlined, suggesting China was on the brink of a period of painful deflation, while exports plunged for a second straight month.

Hong Kong led Asian losses on Tuesday, shedding more than two percent following a five-day rally, as it reopened a day after being shut because of a severe storm.

Shanghai, Sydney, Seoul, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta, Welling-



ton and Taipei also dropped, though Tokyo, Mumbai and Bangkok edged higher.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned about the effects of China's weakness on the global economy.

"Many countries do depend on strong Chinese growth to promote growth in their own economies, particularly countries in Asia, and slow growth in China can have some negative spillovers for the United States," she told Bloomberg Television.

Yellen expressed optimism about the US economy, which she described as being on a 'good path'.

"Growth has slowed, but our labour market continues to be

quite strong. I don't expect a recession," she added.

Data last week showed US inflation had come down quicker than expected in June, stoking hopes the Federal Reserve was close to the end of its interest rate hiking cycle.

Yellen's comments came out before data showing that US retail sales edged 0.2% higher last month, well below the analyst consensus of an increase of 0.6%. Craig Erlam, senior market analyst at trading platform OANDA, said that an upward revision of May figures helped balance out the June underperformance.

"I'm not convinced today's data really changes things as far

as the consumer or economy is concerned, all things considered, nor has it really changed anything on interest rate expectations, with markets almost fully pricing in a hike next week and probably no more after that," he said.

Other data showed US industrial production rose 0.5% in June, beating the consensus forecast of a flat reading.

Investors are also keeping watch this week on corporate earnings. Bank of America, the second largest US bank by assets, reported an 11% increase in revenue to US\$25.2bn, with net profit climbing 19% to US\$7.4bn, beating analyst expectations.

AFP

Oman well placed to become global renewables hub: OQ chief

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's plans for diversifying its energy sources through decarbonisation over the coming years were explored by Talal al Awfi, Group CEO of OQ, and other members of the company's integrated leadership team, in wide-ranging interviews they gave recently to Oxford Business Group's online broadcasting channel, Global Platform.

Awfi noted that Oman was well placed to capitalise on its natural resources and carve a niche as a global hub for renewable energy production.

"We have certain areas of Oman that are blessed with significant solar and wind potential, and we want to capitalise on this to produce energy and use that energy to produce things such as green hydrogen," he told OBG.

The video examines the role earmarked for alternative energy production in supporting broader efforts under way to diversify the sultanate's economy and create new employment opportunities, in line with key goals laid out in Vision 2040, Oman's long-term economic development framework.

Members of OQ's integrated leadership team gave valuable



insight into what Oman's future energy mix is expected to look like, with hydrocarbons set to drive the shift towards clean and green energy sources in the transition phase.

The development of the downstream segment was also

explored, with representatives highlighting the planned expansion of green industries in Oman, alongside alternative energy production, supported by revenue from oil and gas.

Other topical issues touched on included the added weight

being given to environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles in energy production.

"ESG standards have always been an important subject within the energy sector, especially as it relates to the environment," Awfi told OBG.

Other OQ interviewees noted both the steps that organisations are taking to develop their ESG strategies and the recognition that these and achievements made are gaining, leading to beneficial borrowing opportunities and other incentives.

Marc-André de Blois, OBG's Director of PR and Video Content, said that the interviews with

OQ's Group CEO and integrated leadership team provided a fascinating snapshot of the preparations under way in Oman to transition to a new era of energy production.

"Oman's plans to use revenues from hydrocarbons to develop alternative energy sources are gaining pace, with its natural resources and advantages standing it in good stead for large-scale renewable production," he said.

"Our video offers a welcome overview of the strategies being implemented in the sultanate to provide a secure and sustainable energy mix in the coming years,

with an eye, longer term, on meeting agreed 2050 net-zero targets."

Dana Carmen Agaribicean, OBG's Country Director, said indications in the interviews that initial steps were being taken towards decarbonisation, alternative energy generation and downstream expansion, would support Oman's broader efforts to diversify its economy.

"Oman's potential in the renewables segments has already been recognised globally, supported by its many strengths, which include expertise and knowhow built up over years in the energy sector," she said.

Saudi confirms drone deal with Turkey on Erdogan visit

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia - A Turkish firm will provide drones to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh said on Tuesday following a visit by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that aims to attract foreign investment.

Several contracts, including the drone deal with the privately-owned Baykar, were signed during a meeting between Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Red Sea port of Jeddah on Monday, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said.

Haluk Bayraktar, CEO of the drone manufacturer which is co-run by one of Erdogan's sons-in-laws, in a tweet called the deal "the biggest defence and aviation export contract in the history of the Turkish Republic".

The value of the deal has not been made public.

Erdogan, who in May elections won another five-year term, was in Saudi Arabia to kick off a Gulf tour seeking to drum up support for Turkey's faltering economy.

The Turkish leader is expected in neighbouring Qatar later on Tuesday.

After attending a Saudi-Turkish business forum in Jeddah on Monday, Erdogan and Prince Mohammed discussed "prospects for joint cooperation" in their meeting, SPA reported.



The two leaders signed cooperation agreements in the fields of energy, direct investment, defence and media, the report said. It added that Saudi officials also signed "two contracts with the Turkish company Baykar". Drones developed by Baykar have been used in Azerbaijan, Libya and Ukraine.

Saudi Arabia "will acquire drones with the aim of enhancing the readiness of the kingdom's armed forces and bolstering its defence and manufacturing capabilities", Defence Minister

Prince Khalid bin Salman said on Tuesday.

He did not specify the type of drone the kingdom is looking to procure.

An Arab diplomat in Riyadh, requesting anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the press, said it was Baykar's TB2 model.

Last month, Kuwait said it struck a \$367-million agreement to procure TB2 drones.

This week's visit is Erdogan's second to Saudi Arabia since a recent rapprochement between Ankara and Riyadh, whose ties were strained by the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's Istanbul consulate.

Turkey angered Saudi Arabia by vigorously pursuing the case at the time, opening an investigation and briefing international media on the gory details of the killing. But with ties on the mend, Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia in April 2022, and Prince Mohammed travelled to Turkey in June last year.

AFP



World bank chief Ajay Banga

G20 split over Ukraine, slow progress on debt

Gandhinagar, India - G20 finance chiefs ended talks in India on Tuesday with disagreement over Russia's war in Ukraine, limited progress on debt restructuring and warnings that divisions between rich and poor nations risked deepening poverty.

Many countries are still recovering from the coronavirus pandemic and drastic commodity price surges triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while climate change is affecting some of the poorest countries least able to cope.

The Group of 20 major economies failed to agree on a joint statement "because we still don't have a common language on the Russia-Ukraine war", but progress had been made on key issues, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said after the two-day summit of finance ministers and central bank governors in Gandhinagar.

The conflict in Ukraine created a devastating global economic impact sending food prices soaring, with diplomatic loyalties torn between Russia and the West.

'Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and stressed that it is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy,' a G20 outcome document read.

The war was 'constraining growth, increasing inflation, disrupting supply chains, heightening energy and food insecurity, and elevating financial stability risks', it added.

The new head of the World Bank said that growing divides between rich and poor nations risked deepening poverty in the developing world. "The thing that keeps me up at night is a mistrust that is quietly pulling the Global North and South apart at a time when we need to be uniting," Ajay Banga said on Tuesday.

"The Global South's frustration is understandable. In many ways they are paying the price for our prosperity," said Indian-born Banga, a naturalised American citizen. "When they should be ascendant, they're concerned promised resources will be diverted to Ukraine's reconstruction, they feel energy rules aren't applied evenly, constraining ambition, and they're worried the grip of poverty will pull down another generation."

AFP

DR Congo signs \$1.9 bn mining deal with UAE

Kinshasa, DR Congo - The United Arab Emirates signed a US\$1.9bn deal with a state mining company in DR Congo to develop at least four mines in the African country's turbulent east, the Congolese presidency said on Monday.

Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi's office stated on Monday evening that an Emirati government delegation had signed a partnership worth US\$1.9bn with Societe Aurifere du Kivu et du Maniema (Sakima) in the capital Kinshasa.

The deal would see the "construction of more than 4 industrial mines" in the provinces of



Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi

South Kivu and Maniema, according to the statement.

Congolese parastatal Sakima has mining concessions containing tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold in the volatile east of the

country. The statement gave no other details about the deal, including the type of minerals that would be extracted.

Government spokesmen were not immediately available for comment.

The new deal comes after the DRC signed a 25-year contract in December with UAE firm Primera Group over export rights for some artisanally mined ores.

The contract awarded Primera Group a majority stake in two joint ventures, Primera Gold and Primera Metals.

Primera Gold and Primera Metals received preferential export rates for artisanally mined

gold, and artisanally mined coltan and tin, tantalum and tungsten - the so-called 3T metals - respectively.

The DRC has touted the initiative as way to undercut mineral smugglers and guarantee a better livelihood for informal miners.

Militias have plagued eastern DRC for decades, sustained in part though trading illicit minerals.

Primera Gold began operations in South Kivu province in January, and by May had shipped one tonne of certified gold, according to the Congolese finance ministry.

AFP

Pharmaceutical giant Novartis upgrades outlook despite US legal setback

Zurich, Switzerland - Swiss pharmaceutical giant Novartis raised its earnings guidance for the second time this year on Tuesday despite a legal setback in the United States and announced it will spin off its generics unit later this year.

The company, which is focusing on its core pharmaceutical operations, said it plans to spin off its Sandoz generics unit at the beginning of the fourth quarter by listing its shares on the SIX Swiss stock exchange.

After the spinoff, Novartis will focus on five core therapeutic areas: cardiovascular, immunology, neuroscience, solid tumours and haematology.



During the second quarter, Novartis saw its net profits jump by 54% from the same period last year to US\$2.3bn thanks to both rising sales and lower restructuring charges.

Sales rose by 9% during the April-June period to US\$13.6bn, beating the analyst consensus of US\$13.2bn established by Swiss financial news service AWP.

The pharmaceuticals division drove the increase in sales, rising by 9% to US\$11.2bn, as its lead-

ing drugs such as heart failure treatment Entresto enjoyed a strong performance.

Novartis said it would appeal a US court ruling invalidating its patent for Entresto and noted no generic version of the medication is on the market in the US.

Chief executive Vas Narasimhan said the strong performance of its medications plus its pipeline of future drugs gives Novartis confidence over the medium term and enables it to raise its 2023 outlook for a second time. It now expects sales growth in the high single digits for 2023, compared to mid-single digits previously.

AFP

Dutch e-bike firm VanMoof declared bankrupt

The Hague, Netherlands - Dutch electric bike maker VanMoof, whose popularity earned it the name 'Tesla of e-bikes' but has faced financial problems, has been declared bankrupt by a court, the company said on Tuesday.

The company had raised US\$128mn in September 2021 in an effort to expand as it rode a boom in the e-bike sector after the COVID pandemic prompted people to seek alternatives means of transportation.

But it has struggled since then, with Dutch media saying it was plagued by bad publicity as bikes broke down frequently and repairs took too long.

The Amsterdam firm lost almost €80mn (US\$90mn) in 2021 and the same figure last year, according to financial daily Het Financieele Dagblad (FD).

An Amsterdam court granted the company a stay of payment last week after VanMoof filed for protection from creditors.

But the firm said the court

withdrew the suspension of payment proceeding of VanMoof's Dutch legal entities on Monday and 'declared these entities bankrupt'.

VanMoof added that its legal entities outside the Netherlands are not in insolvency proceedings.

Two administrators were appointed as trustees.

The trustees 'are investigating the possibilities of a re-start out of bankruptcy by means of an asset sale to a third party, so that

the activities of VanMoof can be continued', the company said in a statement.

VanMoof's bikes, which are sold in 20 countries, are known for their sleek, simplistic design with a battery hidden in the frame. It has sold 190,000 bikes, which cost several thousand euros a piece.

VanMoof said on its website that it would not sell any new bikes or accessories and that no ordered parts would be delivered.

AFP



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Bank Muscat celebrates Sayyarati partnership

In line with its commitment to strengthening its relations with partners and to further popularise the benefits of Sayyarati Auto Loans, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, organised a special event in Salalah for vehicle dealers based in the governorate.

The special networking event was attended by senior officials from Bank Muscat as well as representatives from car dealerships and showrooms from Dhofar Governorate.

On this occasion, Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, Deputy General Manager – Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, said, “We are pleased to organize this special event in Salalah to further strengthen our relationship with different companies operating in the all-important automobile sector including, dealerships, showrooms and other companies dealing with automotive services based in the Governorate.

“These events are an opportunity for us all to share different updates and ideas to help us develop the sector further. Celebrating the achievements today is part of this long-standing journey together, aspiring to achieve the best for our customers and strengthen this valued partnership with you.”



Addressing the gathering, Radhiya Hassan al Lawati, Head of Sales, Bank Muscat, said, “We are excited to once again meet our partners from this important sector. I take this opportunity to extend our sincere thanks and appreciation for all the cooperation and partnership over the past many years, which have resulted in us being able to provide the best services, facilities and

benefits to all our valued customers.

“As we all know, the automotive sector is one of the most important sectors in the Sultanate, which has been witnessing a good growth. We have been working really hard to strengthen our partnerships with everyone in the sector and are proud of the achievements made over the past few years. “We would like to extend our

appreciation to the strong efforts and cooperation between all our partners and the continuous trust of our customers. The results of the recent past are a strong testament to this.”

In 2003, the bank launched its Sayyarati Auto Loans to help customers own their dream cars through an easy and accessible financing option. Sayyarati auto finance enhances banking convenience for customers as it of-

fers various benefits, competitive rates and simplified procedures.

The automotive sector is an important one in Oman as it is a key enabler of rapid and efficient transport within the sultanate. As always, the bank will work with its partners by launching new initiatives and facilities, which will benefit the customers as well as help the partners grow their business.



OMPAY ties up with Salalah Eat 2023 as e-payment partner

OMPAY has announced its partnership with Salalah Eat 2023 as its official e-payment partner for one of the biggest annual food festivals in Oman.

The announcement came after signing a bilateral agreement between the two parties on July 12, a release stated.

This collaboration enables OMPAY to provide merchant solutions to food vendors at the festival for accepting transactions using the OMPAY merchant app features and expediting the foot traffic outside the stalls.

OMPAY's Digital Wallet and Merchant app are Oman's emerging payment solutions provider. Their advanced Fintech solutions ease funds transfers and allow cross-border remittances and transactions through QR code generations through the use of payment gateways and other useful features that OMPAY has to offer.

“Salalah Eat is a huge festival and we are empowering SMEs,

home businesses, and major brands through our Merchant Solutions to help reduce overcrowding at the cash counters and expediting the order handling process,” said OMPAY CEO Abdulaziz al Rawahi. “The vendors are charged a minimal fee as compared to other POS terminal providers. This is an opportunity for the vendors as well as the customers.”

OMPAY app users will have the privilege of a one-time free entry to the festival, creating a “walk in and start exploring” impression that has never been experienced at such festivals where waiting in line at the gate is common. Rawahi went on to project this service as “our priority for the people visiting Salalah Eat to have a seamless experience that will keep them coming back”.

“This is why we have made the first-time entry to the festival free for all OMPAY users who will be able to walk in and start tasting delicious food right away.”

Ooredoo celebrates Khareef

With the Khareef season in full swing in Dhofar, Ooredoo is adding to the experience with unique and uplifting experiences for thousands of visitors to the region, as main sponsor of Khareef Dhofar 2023.

Throughout the six-week festival Ooredoo will be bringing innovation and excitement to everyone enjoying the cooler weather with fun experiences, CSR activities, public events and dedicated youth engagement.

Every Friday, customers can enjoy stage shows, as well as a thrilling gaming event at Auqad park. The company will also be taking part in the Khareef carnival on Al Hafa waterfront. Visitors to Dhofar during the rainy season can stay connected with Ooredoo's 5G network.

ABQ to open its first private school at Al Imtiaz campus

Oman's largest international school operator, ABQ Education Group, is opening its very first private school at the start of the new academic year in August.

The group falls under the education pillar of The Zubair Corporation and operates under the philosophy of transforming and developing Oman's education system and consequently, the nation itself.

The school will be able to accommodate 1200 students from KG to Grade 12 but will only launch KG to Grade 4 in the first year of opening, a release stated.

The Al Imtiaz campus in Bawshar, which was previously home to the ABQ Azzan Bin Qais International School for 20 years before they relocated to Madinat Sultan Qaboos last year, is best-in-class and will soon be available for campus tours.

ABQ has become synonymous with excellent academic standards, innovative and unique programmes, outstanding facilities, and providing students with a comprehensive and holistic education. With the



Group's well-established portfolio of premium international schools in Oman, ABQ Azzan Bin Qais, ABQ Seeb, and ABQ Sohar, and their two standalone Pre-KG nursery schools in Mus-

cat and Sohar, ABQ is excited to open Al Imtiaz Private School in Bawshar later this year.

ABQ Education Group Chief Executive Officer Humayun Kabir said, “We have received

consistent market feedback that there is a need for a more affordable, yet exceptional academic product, and ABQ is responding to this need by making quality education accessible to a larger segment of society. ABQ Al Imtiaz will offer a more traditional environment than ABQ's other schools, with segregated classes for boys and girls from Secondary grades onwards as well as a unique blend of international (Cambridge) and enhanced Arabic curricula.”

Kabir added, “Imtiaz means unique, distinct, and exceptional and we recognise that each child has unique strengths and needs. We have high expectations for all our students and encourage each student to achieve their full potential.”

“Al Imtiaz School is part of ABQ's vision to further develop the educational system within the Sultanate of Oman by pro-

viding varied options and opportunities for students, and to equip the next generation to build a promising future for themselves and those around them based on the decisions being made today”, Kabir concluded.

Sigve Austheim, ABQ's Chief Learning Officer, said, “ABQ has an exceptional track record of delivering the highest standard in education and with this more affordable education option, we want to ensure that more families can benefit from the quality education we offer across our schools.”

With close to 60 cumulative years of school operating experience, ABQ has a wealth of knowledge and expertise within the Group to ensure that ABQ Al Imtiaz will be an educational institution that is forward-looking, academically strong, and culturally rooted in the local society.

Legacy in the Skies: Oman Air organises exhibition at Stal Gallery

Celebrating the history of civil aviation in Oman and its own unique journey, Oman Air has opened a first-of-its-kind exhibition at Stal Gallery in Muscat.

‘Oman Air: A Legacy in the Skies’ combines state-of-the-art multimedia, immersive displays, and an array of compelling artifacts that bring to life Oman's illustrious aviation past and celebrate the key milestones that have shaped Oman Air into the globally recognised and esteemed brand it is today.

Amouage, the Oman-based international fragrance house, is also present at the exhibition, unveiling the signature scent for Oman Air's new on-board amenity kits.

This captivating journey through time, spanning from the reign of Sultan Taimur bin Faisal to the present day, prom-



ises a truly immersive and enlightening experience for visitors of all ages.

Having celebrated its 30th anniversary earlier this year, Oman Air continues to invest in its award-winning products, while redefining the art of hospitality in the skies.

Most recently the airline earned the award for Best Airline Staff in the Middle East at the Skytrax 2023 World Airline Awards.

Oman Air has also been announced as global airline partner for English football club, Chelsea FC, further cementing it as a leading international carrier with worldwide appeal.

Entry to ‘Oman Air: A Legacy in the Skies’ at Stal Gallery in Madinat Qaboos is free and visitors are welcome to explore the exhibition from Sunday to Saturday between 10am and 7pm.

OBLC on Logos Hope showcases activities

Oman Book Lovers Club (OBLC) has joined as collaborator to 'showcase the club activities and host a reading corner' on the largest floating book fair in the world, *Logos Hope*, during its stay in Muscat from July 14 to 19.

Logos Hope - world's largest non-profit floating bookfair - returned to Muscat after 10 years, docking in Muttrah on July 13 with over 5000 titles of diverse books, offering attractive and affordable discounted price alongside with exciting events for the people living in Sultanate of Oman.

Logos Hope was established in 1970 with the aim of sharing knowledge, help and hope through literature, cultural understanding, leisure activities and more!

With over 300 crew members of 65+ nationalities, *Logos Hope* sails across 480 different ports around the world touching down 150 countries and territories and welcoming over 49mn visitors on board.

Their vision is to connect all book lovers in Oman and make OBLC a 'one stop shop' for all things books - with book discussions, online live chats with authors, book talks, clubs for kids, toddlers and teens, books sharing, bookstore and other amazing collaborations and book-related activities.



OBLC is a community founded for the sheer love for books and reading. Since its inception on March 30, 2021, OBLC has grown and formed its own identity with over 8000 members and 7000+ books.

On the first day of its presence

on the ship, OBLC welcomed numerous visitors hosting fun activities for kids and adults, that were both educational as well as entertaining.

One of the many esteemed guests that highlighted the event, mainly M al Rawahy, the director

of ART and SOUL Gallery, a passionate artist, an avid reader has showcased his unique calligraphy skills during the event.

Alongside, Dr Zainab Ansari, a professor and an author, held a captivating story writing corner. Other numerous games and ac-

tivities were organised for the kids.

OBLC's aim of hosting a reading corner is to connect all book readers in Oman and spread awareness of the Club, it's library and other reading activities to keen readers, who otherwise

have limited sources of finding their favourite books.

The club's library has a wide multilingual book collection, ranging from fiction, non-fiction, knowledge, books for toddlers, growing kids and teens, etc. OBLC runs it's library on Face-

book, through which, one can view their entire book collection, post being a member.

The club's volunteers act as a Point of Access (PoA) for the ease of book movements to and from borrowers. The access points are located all across Oman, from Muttrah to Seeb, to Sohar and to Salalah.

OBLC has previously collaborated with various schools and universities/colleges, in which they set up a small library in the respected premises for the students to view and read.

Fresh collection of books are showcased every quarter in order for readers to stay engaged and experience new reading materials.

OBLC is open for everyone to join and be a part of the Club, as a member, and/or volunteer. Registration forms for both are available on OBLC social media pages and also at their reading corner.

On Wednesday, visitors will get a second chance to see more of Rawahy's calligraphy skills along with a book discussion held by Shahad al Wahabi, a debut author, talking about pressing issues such as self care and bullying.

The day will also see many other activities including a reading session with writer/certified coach Vaishali Hamlai.

UAE climbs to 29th in UNIDO's industrial performance index

The UAE has been ranked first in the Arab region and 29th globally in UNIDO's Competitive Industrial Performance Index (CIP), climbing two spots from last year's index. The CIP, which ranks 153 countries, assesses national industrial performance in the global economy, benchmarking the ability of countries to produce and export competitively.

This index gauges and compares the strength of industrial competitiveness within countries. It is based on indicators including technological capabilities, innovation, productivity, and trade performance.

The UAE has remained in the CIP's top quintile, reflecting its position as a regional and global player in the industrial sector. Under the CIP, the UAE climbed from 124 to 115 in Industrial Export Quality, 98 to 95 in Share of Manufacturing Value Added in GDP, 110 to 97 in Share of Manufacturing Exports in Total Exports and 17 to 14 in Manufacturing Export per Capita indices.

Dr Sultan bin Ahmed al Jaber, Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology, said, "The UAE leadership's vision and directives have laid solid foundations to achieve sustainable economic development. The country has made qualitative leaps in industrial development and has been able to strengthen its strategic position as it moves towards achieving its industrial goals through a set of competitive advantages that enhance its position as a global hub for manufacturing and innovation.

"The recent UNIDO ranking confirms the UAE's leadership in industry and advanced technology and highlights the country's industrial trajectory. It also reflects MoIAT's commitment to stimulating sustainable industrial growth and enhancing investment attractiveness as well as regional and international competitiveness through deploying advanced technologies and solutions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

The minister emphasised the ministry's keenness to enhance the competitiveness of the national industrial sector in line with



Dr Sultan bin Ahmed al Jaber



Hanan Mansour Ahli

the objectives of Operation 300bn. Since its inception in 2020, the ministry has implemented strategies, policies, initiatives and programs that have contributed to the development of the sector. These include Make it in the Emirates, the National ICV Program and the Technology Transformation Program, which have contributed to enhancing the enablers and incentives offered by the industrial sector to local and international investors.

They have also contributed to empowering national talents and developing their technical competencies and skills, enhancing supply chain resilience, and motivating national and international companies to enter partnerships to manufacture quality products in the UAE.

These initiatives are largely responsible for the UAE ranking first in the region in UNIDO's index for two years running, while climbing to 29th globally in competitive industrial performance and rising nine places in the quality of industrial exports index.

"The UAE's announcement to reduce carbon emissions by 40 percent by 2030, in the third update of the second edition of the Nationally Determined Contributions report, underlines our leading model for building a sustainable future. The industrial sector is critical to achieving these sustainability goals. We remain committed to enhancing the competitiveness of the national industrial sector, as well as its attractiveness to investors, through focusing on expanding the use of advanced technology, entrepreneurship, and investing in sustainable future industries in line with our net zero by 2050 commitment," he added.

Hanan Mansour Ahli, managing director of the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, said, "The UNIDO ranking builds on significant strides made by the UAE across several global competitiveness reports. It reflects the government's commitment to strengthening the UAE's position as one of the most advanced nations, and recognises the ministry's efforts - as well as those of its strategic partners - to drive sustainable development."

She added, "The UAE holds the top ranking in 152 competitiveness indices globally and is among the top 10 in 425 competitive indices. These rankings are based on the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre's analysis of 1,502 indices published by the UN and other international organisations."

MoIAT's various initiatives have helped enhance the industrial sector's efficiency and competitiveness, demonstrating the ability of UAE industries to compete globally.

This has been underlined by the increasing contribution made by industry to GDP.

The sector contributed AED180bn last year. Additionally, these programmes have significantly boosted the UEA's non-oil industrial exports, estimated to have reached more than AED170bn in 2022.

One of the main drivers of industrial growth is the National In-Country Value Program. In 2022, six new entities joined the program. The programme redirected AED53bn into the economy in 2022, a 25% increase from 2021, while helping to provide jobs for almost 2,000 UAE nationals.

86% of beneficiaries satisfied with OPAZ

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has reported a customer satisfaction rate of 86% for the services provided until the end of June this year.

The assessment included an evaluation of several services provided in the areas supervised by OPAZ, such as the electronic land selection service, the central commitment system (Eltizam), environmental permits, receipt of signs, investor relations management system, unified electronic survey drawing service, central inspection system, electronic registration of small and medium enterprises, and one-stop services for investors.

The report of OPAZ call centre indicated that from the beginning of 2023 to the end of June, more than 647 incoming calls were received and handled.

These included 37 international calls, 347 investment-related requests, and 259 inquiries regarding investment opportunities. The call centre regularly publishes reports on communications, proposals, and the satisfaction levels of beneficiaries with the services provided through the center.

Notably, the OPAZ call centre



is equipped with modern technical systems and operates interactively to record transactions, requests, and transfer them to the competent authorities in the regions supervised by OPAZ.

The centre communicates with callers without any delay as it has systems in place to manage reports and proposals. These initiatives come within the efforts made to improve the

level of service provided based on the evaluation of beneficiaries and investors.

In June of this year, OPAZ announced that it will stop receiving and sending paper correspondence, in line with its commitment to promote digital transformation and expediting transactions.

OPAZ remains committed to enhancing the level of services

provided to investors and clients, with the aim of achieving their aspirations and improving their experience in electronic dealings with OPAZ.

This is a part of OPAZ's mandate in planning, developing, organising, supervising, facilitating, post-service and operation facilities, business acceleration, marketing, investment attraction, and institutional excellence.

Mercedes-Benz Oman announces limited time offer for certified pre-owned vehicle

Mercedes-Benz Oman has called upon people to benefit from an exclusive limited time offer for certified pre-owned vehicles of its brand.

Valid until September 30, the C 200 in Mojave Silver Metallic with leather interior in two-tone Power Red and Black, is priced at RO22,995, including Value Added Tax.

'Mercedes-Benz Certified Pre-Owned vehicles selects only the best used cars from Mercedes-Benz,' the company asserted, adding that the vehicles fulfil strict technical standards where each vehicle undergoes a comprehensive 150-point inspection by trained technicians.

This extensive scrutiny considers the vehicle's exterior and interior checks, mileage, and



service record verification, as well as on-road driving evaluations. All maintenance is performed at a high level, using Genuine Mercedes-Benz Parts.

Being part of the exclusive

Certified Pre-Owned Mercedes-Benz family entitles customers to many complimentary benefits and rewards, such as an unlimited-mileage warranty of one year with an option to extend up

to two years, 24/7 roadside assistance for certain vehicles, and a history of all services performed.

There are also a number of service packages available.

US nuclear-armed submarine visits South Korea for first time in decades

Seoul, South Korea - An American nuclear-armed submarine is making a South Korean port call for the first time in four decades, a White House official said on Tuesday, as the allies counter North Korea's growing military threats.

Relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points, with diplomacy stalled and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un calling for increased weapons development, including tactical nuclear weapons.

Seoul and Washington have ramped up defence cooperation in response, staging joint military exercises with advanced stealth jets and US strategic assets.

On Tuesday, they held the first Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting in Seoul, which aims to improve nuclear coordination between the two allies and boost military readiness against North Korea.

"As we speak, an American nuclear submarine is making



S Korea's National Security Adviser Kim Tae-hyo and US National Security Council Coordinator Kurt Campbell in Seoul on Tuesday (AFP)

port in Busan today, the first visit of American nuclear submarine in decades," White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell told reporters after the meeting.

The last time Washington deployed one of its nuclear-capable submarines to South Korea was in 1981.

Washington announced it would deploy a submarine capable of launching ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads to the Korean peninsula in April, while South Korean Pres-

ident Yoon Suk Yeol was on a state visit. It did not specify a timeline.

"The US side demonstrated strong resolve that in case the North attacks the South with nuclear weapons it will be met with immediate, overwhelming and decisive counter measures, leading to the demise of its regime," Kim Tae-hyo, the national security adviser who co-chaired the NCG meeting with Campbell, told reporters.

North Korea balks at hav-

ing US nuclear assets deployed around the Korean peninsula. Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of leader Kim Jong Un, said on Monday that such actions would only 'make the (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) go farther away' from possible talks.

North Korea was 'ready for resolutely countering any acts of violating its sovereignty', said Kim Yo Jong, who also dismissed holding talks with the United States as a 'daydream'.

AFP

Water use in focus in Spain election campaign

Daimiel, Spain - Tours of the wetlands of Tablas de Daimiel national park in central Spain still depart from a jetty - but visitors must now make the excursion on foot not by boat.

A lack of rain and drainage for agriculture have severely reduced the amount of water in recent years in what is one of Spain's most precious ecosystems, making boat tours impossible. The wetlands are dying, said 23-year-old Hugo Abad Frias, who is running for office in Sunday's general election in the province of Ciudad Real where the park is located as part of far-left coalition Sumar.

He complained there is a lack of proposals to end Spain's water shortage - and fears the situation will only get worse if far-right party Vox comes to power.

Most polls suggest the conservative Popular Party (PP) will win the most seats but will need Vox to govern and oust Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez from office.

Vox has vowed to end 'climate fanaticism' and pull Spain out of the Paris climate accord, an international agreement to combat climate change, if it



Visitors walk on a jetty as the water level of a swamp is falling due to low rainfall and intensive irrigation of farmland, at the Tablas de Daimiel, in the Castilla La Mancha region, on July 13 (AFP)

comes to power nationally.

The party, which actively courts rural voters, has also backed extending irrigation for farming.

"They want to lead us to a dead end by promising more

water when there is no more," Abad Frias told AFP.

Water management has become a central issue on Spain, which is grappling with a severe drought and successive heatwaves that have put the country

at the forefront of the climate crisis in Europe.

A row erupted earlier this year over water management in the Donana national park in southern Spain, also threatened by intensive agriculture.

'Excessive pumping'

This is a first in Spain where environmental issues have long been absent from the political debate, and which does not have a major green party, said political scientist Cristina

Monge of the University of Zaragoza.

Spain's political parties are divided in two blocs on green issues, she added.

The Socialists and Sumar see tackling climate change now as a priority, while the PP and Vox back the construction of new hydraulic infrastructure without reflecting on water use and climate change, Monge said.

Located within a semi-arid area of central Spain, the Tablas de Daimiel wetlands have long been a refuge of hundreds of bird species. But only six per cent of the surface area of the wetlands currently have water, said Abad Frias.

And that is due to transfers from the Tagus river some 80km (50 miles) away, and pumping groundwater, he added. Bridges cross over cracked soil with tall grass instead of water, and few birds can be seen.

In a manifesto published earlier this year, 500 experts denounced the 'excessive pumping of water from the aquifer for irrigated agriculture'.

'What will they eat?'

Eva Saldana, the executive di-

rector of the Spanish branch of Greenpeace, said the wetlands had been 'destroyed' by intensive farming aimed at exportation, and 'theft of groundwater through illegal wells'.

But Isidro Diaz del Campo, a 47-year-old local farmer, said 'there are many more people who comply (with the law) than who don't'.

He said he installed a drip irrigation system for his olive trees and pistachios which is designed to save water by minimising evaporation.

Diaz del Campo admitted, however, that like other farmers he has increased the amount of land his father cultivated and pumped more water for irrigation. He laughed at the left's idea for a moratorium on intensive irrigation or calls for illegal groundwater wells to be closed.

The solution instead should be to bring water from northern Spain or Europe to more parched areas, said Diaz del Campo.

"I don't know what will they eat at Sumar... you have to think of the environment but also of the survival of farmers," he added.

AFP



A Somali wild ass foal and its mother born in captivity are exhibited to the public at the Buin Zoo, Santiago, on Monday (AFP)

Rare Somali wild ass born in Chile zoo

Buin, Chile - A rare Somali wild ass has been born in a zoo in Chile, the fourth specimen of the critically endangered species to be born in the South American country, the zoo owner said.

The foal, named Julieta, was born in a private zoo on June 19, said Ignacio Idalsoaga, a veterinarian and founder of the zoo.

With white, striped legs similar to those of a zebra, the Somali wild ass is critically endangered in its native East Africa.

There are less than 200 left in the wild, and a similar number in captivity. Seven of the latter are in South America, all at the Buin Zoo in Santiago, according to the International Union for Con-

servation of Nature (IUCN).

Hunting and crossbreeding with the common domestic donkey have reduced the populations of this animal to the point of placing it at a critical level of extinction, the last category on the IUCN register before extinction.

"In non-traditional medicine, their bones are used for soup that is said to improve rheumatism, tuberculosis, despite the fact that it has not been scientifically proven," said Idalsoaga, the zoo founder.

Females can only have young approximately every two years, and the ass can live for about 30 years and weigh about 250 kilos (550 lbs).

AFP

PICTURE-PERFECT



Mainland Chinese tourists pose for photos next to the wax figures of China's President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan at the Madame Tussauds wax museum in Hong Kong on Tuesday (AFP)

'Climate change requires new China-US cooperation'

Beijing, China - Global warming poses a threat to all humankind and requires a new kind of cooperation between China and the United States, US climate envoy John Kerry told Chinese officials on Tuesday.

Kerry has called for 'urgent action' by Beijing and Washington to tackle the threat of climate change as the world's two largest polluters revive stalled diplomacy on reducing planet-warming emissions.

Speaking at Beijing's Great Hall of the People with China's top diplomat Wang Yi, Kerry underlined the need for 'global leadership' on the issue.

His visit to China came as the Northern Hemisphere endured



US Climate Envoy John Kerry and China's top diplomat Wang Yi shake hands at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Tuesday (AFP)

record-setting summer heat waves, which scientists have said are being exacerbated by climate change.

"Climate, as you know, is a global issue, not a bilateral issue. It's a threat to all of humankind," Kerry told Wang.

"This is a matter of global leadership," he stressed, adding that the world 'really hopes for that and needs it'.

"Our hope is now that this can be the beginning of a new definition of cooperation and of capacity to resolve the differences between us," he added, noting that 'we both know there are real differences'.

"But we also know from experience that if we work at it, we can find the path ahead and ways that resolve these challenges."

Wang, in response, underlined the need 'for a healthy, stable, and sustainable Sino-US relationship'.

"Cooperation on climate change is advancing under the

overall climate of China and the United States, so we need the joint support of the people of China and the United States," Wang told Kerry, who he described as an 'old friend'.

Climate talks between the two biggest greenhouse gas emitters came to a halt last year after Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the US House of Representatives, enraged Beijing by visiting self-ruled Taiwan, which China considers to be part of its territory.

Kerry, a former secretary of state, has enjoyed comparatively cordial and consistent relations with China despite Washington and Beijing locking horns over Taiwan and other issues.

AFP

Israelis march, block roads to protest judicial reforms

Tel Aviv, Israel - Israelis on Tuesday marched on highways and blocked army headquarters in Tel Aviv in the run-up to a parliament vote on the government's judicial reform agenda protesters say would 'dismantle democracy'.

The proposals have divided the nation and triggered one of the biggest protest movements in Israel's history since being unveiled in January by the hard-right government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Weekly rallies have drawn tens of thousands of protesters aiming to prevent what they believe could open the way to more authoritarian government.

Crowds gathered early on Tuesday in the coastal city of Tel Aviv, Israel's commercial hub, after organisers had called for a 'national day of resistance' ahead of a planned vote by lawmakers on a key clause later this month.

Organisers urged supporters to rally at train stations, city squares, highways and roundabouts across Israel.

Thousands of demonstrators holding Israeli flags and chanting 'democracy, democracy' marched on highways and bridges, and blocked several roads as well as an entrance to the military's headquarters in Tel Aviv, AFP correspondents reported. Some chanted slogans on loudspeakers and beat drums.

Opponents of the government's reforms also entered the stock exchange building in the city and staged a rally there.

Protester Inbal Oraz said the timing of the protest was 'critical'



Demonstrators use flares as they stage a 'day of resistance' to protest the Israeli government's judicial overhaul bill, in Tel Aviv on Tuesday (AFP)

This month is critical and this week is critical, because in less than a week we will know if this first law of this package is going to pass

INBAL ORAZ

before parliament breaks for summer recess on July 30.

"This month is critical and this week is critical, because in less

than a week we will know if this first law of this package is going to pass," the tech consultant told AFP. "We are doing our best to fight and stop it."

'Unlimited power'

Protester Ron Sherf, 51, vowed to continue challenging the government. "The government wants unlimited power to implement a policy that is not liberal, a policy of Jewish supremacy and a religious state," he said. "We are not ready for that as liberals."

Police said they had arrested at least 19 protesters for violating public order.

Rallies were also held in

Jerusalem, Haifa, Rehovot and other cities.

The government temporarily paused the divisive legal overhaul in March in the wake of a general strike. But in recent weeks it launched a new political offensive to pass the package in parliament.

Parliament is due to vote on a measure to limit the 'reasonability' clause, through which the judiciary can strike down government decisions.

Ahead of Tuesday's protests, organisers said in a statement it was the 'citizens who can stop the train of dictatorship'.

Josh Drill, a spokesman for the protest movement, said pressure on the government would continue through 'non-violent acts of civil disobedience'.

"We will continue to protest in the streets until the complete cancellation of the judicial overhaul," he told AFP.

Lawmakers adopted the 'reasonability' bill in a first reading last week.

If approved in second and third readings, it will become the first major component of the reform package to become law.

Other proposed measures include giving politicians a greater say in the appointment of judges.

AFP



A Greek policeman evacuates a child from wild fire at the village of Agios Charamlabos, near the capital Athens on Tuesday (AFP)

World must be ready for intense heatwaves: UN

Geneva, Switzerland - The world should get ready to face increasingly intense heatwaves, the United Nations warned on Tuesday, as countries across the Northern Hemisphere reeled from soaring temperatures.

Health authorities have sounded the alarm from North America to Europe and Asia, urging people to stay hydrated and shelter from the burning sun, in a stark reminder of the effects of global warming.

"These events will continue to grow in intensity, and the world needs to prepare for more intense heatwaves," John Nairn, a senior extreme heat advisor at the UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO), told reporters. Heatwaves are amongst the deadliest natural hazards, with hundreds of thousands of people dying from preventable heat-related causes each year.

Nairn warned the health risk was growing rapidly, amid burgeoning urbanisation, higher temperature extremes and ageing populations.

In the short term, he said the recently-declared El Nino - a warming climate pattern that occurs every two to seven years - 'is only expected to amplify the occurrence and intensity of extreme heat events'.

But regardless of El Nino, the trend is clear, Nairn said, pointing out that the number of simultaneous heatwaves in the Northern Hemisphere had swelled six-fold since the 1980s.

"This trend shows no signs of decreasing," he said, warning of heatwaves' 'quite serious impacts on human health and livelihoods'.

Europe, the world's fastest-warming continent, was bracing for the peak of the current heatwave to hit Italy's Sicily and Sardinia islands, amid forecasts of a high of 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit).

The WMO said it was monitoring to see if the current European temperature record of 48.8C recorded on Sicily in 2021 might be smashed.

Even more concerning than maximum day temperatures was the high overnight minimum temperatures, Nairn said.

AFP

FURNACE CREEK



People stand for a photo next to a digital display of an unofficial heat reading at Furnace Creek Visitor Center during a heat wave in Death Valley National Park in Death Valley, California, on Sunday (AFP)

Rescue workers recover last body, end search at flooded South Korean tunnel

Seoul, South Korea - Rescue workers recovered the last body and ended search operations at a flooded underpass in South Korea where more than a dozen people died in an incident that is now the subject of multiple official probes.

South Korea is at the peak of its summer monsoon season, and days of torrential rain have caused widespread flooding and landslides, with rivers bursting their banks, and reservoirs and dams overflowing. More rain is forecast in the coming days.

The interior ministry said that 41 people were killed and another nine were still missing nationwide in the heavy downpours, most of them buried by landslides or falling into a flooded reservoir.

Search and rescue operations at the 430-metre (1,410-foot) tunnel in Cheongju, North Chungcheong province, ended late on Monday after rescuers



Rescue workers search for missing people along an underground tunnel in Cheongju early on Monday (AFP)

recovered the last body, it said.

The tunnel was inundated on Saturday morning after floodwaters swept in too quickly for the vehicles inside to escape.

A total of 17 vehicles, including a bus, were trapped and 14 people were killed, the interior ministry said.

The tunnel will remain closed for additional inspections as part of the probe into the cause of the

province, and were largely due to massive landslides in the mountainous area that engulfed houses with people inside.

The Korea Meteorological Administration forecast more heavy rain through Wednesday, and urged the public to 'refrain from going outside'.

South Korea is regularly hit by flooding during the summer monsoon period, but the country is typically well-prepared and the death toll is usually relatively low.

Scientists say climate change has made weather events around the world more extreme and more frequent. South Korea endured record-breaking rains and flooding last year, which left more than 11 people dead.

They included three people who died trapped in a Seoul basement apartment of the kind that became internationally known because of the Oscar-winning Korean film *Parasite*.

AFP

Macron sticks with prime minister after pensions crisis, riots

Paris, France - French President Emmanuel Macron is keeping his prime minister in place, his staff has said, ending weeks of speculation about a possible reset after successive crises shaking his government.

Elisabeth Borne's time heading up the government has included the most turbulent episodes yet for Macron's second term leading France.

In the past months, the nation has been rattled by unrest over a contested pension reform and then rioting sparked by a policeman's killing of a teen of North African descent.

Under France's political tradition, prime ministers rarely last longer than a few years, with Macron on his third since taking power in 2017.

Their replacement is often a sign of a new political direction.

Persistent rumours had centred on Macron naming law-and-order Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin as Borne's successor, in part as a recognition of his handling of the riots which eased after tens of thousands police were deployed.

But in the end Macron opted for the status quo, a member of his entourage said late on Mon-



France's President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne chat at The Louvre Museum in Paris, on July 14 (AFP)

day. "To ensure stability and in-depth work, the president has decided to keep the prime minister in place," the official said.

The president is poised to later this week make an announcement 'reminding the country of his clear direction'.

Borne said she will proceed with a minor reshuffle of her cabinet this week, with junior minister Marlene Schiappa - under fire over her alleged mishandling of a public fund - and Education Minister Pap Ndiaye likely to be the first to go, according to observers.

The appointment on Monday

of Borne's new chief of staff, labour law specialist Jean-Denis Combexelle, seemed to indicate that Borne is hoping for a renewed dialogue with unions after a months-long standoff over an increase in the retirement age that she pushed through parliament without a vote.

"Calm has been restored," said the Elysee official, adding that fears of violence at last week's Bastille Day celebrations failed to materialise, allowing the government to re-focus on its policy agenda.

Macron's allies still lack an

absolute majority in parliament, and Borne may be a better choice to assemble adhoc support for Macron's policies than the divisive Darmanin, one former government minister told AFP.

"It is true that nobody else would be better at gathering a majority," the ex-minister said.

Borne earlier this month had told *Le Parisien* newspaper that she had submitted her policy proposals to Macron, focusing on matters covering labour issues, public order, climate change, health and education.

AFP

INDIA

Official removed after 8 cheetahs die

Top wildlife official in MP was transferred from his post by the state forest department

New Delhi - A top wildlife official has been removed after a scheme to relocate cheetahs from Africa saw eight felines die, raising questions about the high-profile project.

Asiatic cheetahs were declared extinct in India in 1952 but their African cousins were reintroduced last year as part of a plan championed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Eight cheetahs were brought in from Namibia, followed by another 12 from South Africa in February, with Modi presiding over the release of the first arrivals at the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh state.

Eight cheetahs have died in the last four months, with wildlife authorities attributing the deaths to natural causes.

But the top wildlife official in Madhya Pradesh, Jasbir Singh Chauhan, was transferred from his post by the state forest department on Monday, it said in a statement without giving reasons for his removal.

Media reports have linked the transfer to the cheetah deaths, citing sources saying that there were concerns over the project's management.

Of the eight cheetahs that died, five were translocated animals, plus three of the four cubs born since their arrival - renew-



This file photo shows a wild cheetah being released at Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh on September 17, 2022 (AFP)

ing concerns among experts about the project's viability.

On Sunday, the environment ministry had said it would be premature to declare the programme a success or failure 'since cheetah reintroduction was a long-term project'.

It also said that global experience, particularly from South Africa, showed that the initial phases of reintroductions re-

sulted in more than 50 per cent mortality. But wildlife conservationist Praveen Bhargav told AFP on Tuesday that the cheetah reintroduction programme was bound to fail as many fundamental issues had been ignored. "I believe the prime minister has unfortunately been misled by some bureaucrats and experts," he said.

"We neither have the expan-

sive grassland habitats that cheetahs need nor other ecological conditions to attempt such a complicated reintroduction," he said. "This was a very good, headline grabbing event but the harsh reality kicks in, as we are now witnessing after eight cheetahs have died."

'Disappointing' start
Arjun Gopalaswamy, a wildlife

and statistical ecologist who studies large carnivores, said there should be more transparency about the causes of death. Media reports have cited officials saying some of the animals could have died as a result of infections caused by their radio tracking collars.

The project's start was 'disappointing', Gopalaswamy told AFP, as seven out of the eight

deaths had happened inside the enclosures 'where such incidents were least anticipated'.

With one possible exception - a female killed by her partner while mating - a lack of information from authorities 'obscures the primary causes behind all the deaths', he said.

"From a scientific perspective, this ambiguity is worrisome as it prevents meaningful learning from these occurrences," he said.

Scientists from the Cheetah Research Project at Leibniz-IZW in Namibia had earlier said the relocation programme ignored 'spatial ecology', as the Kuno National Park was much smaller than the spaces the big cats usually need to thrive.

The reintroduction is the first intercontinental relocation of cheetahs and the programme aims to bring in about 100 of the animals over the next decade.

Cheetahs are one of the oldest big cat species, with ancestors dating back about 8.5mn years, and they once roamed widely throughout Asia and Africa in great numbers.

But today, after their extinction from many countries across the Middle East and Asia, only around 7,000 remain, primarily in the African savannahs.

AFP

INDIA formed to fight NDA

Bengaluru, Karnataka - Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday said that the next meeting of the like-minded parties to take forward the agenda of opposition unity against the BJP will be held in Mumbai.

He said a 11-member coordination committee will be put together, adding that the panel will decide the face of the grand Opposition alliance at the next meeting. "India National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) will be the new name of the alliance of 26 Opposition parties who met here in Bengaluru," Kharge said. "We will meet again in Mumbai to discuss the details on seat sharing and campaign management," he added.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said the Opposition was in a fight to save the country. Addressing a joint press conference at the end of the second joint Opposition meeting, he said the fight was 'not between two alliances standing on the opposite ends of the political spectrum but a fight to defend the idea of India'.

Meanwhile, representatives from a total of 38 political parties were in attendance as the meeting the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP got underway in the national capital on Tuesday evening.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had tweeted earlier that the NDA was a 'time-tested alliance'.

ANI

Urbanisation: The 'kidneys of Kolkata' under threat

Kolkata, West Bengal - Wetlands just outside Kolkata have for generations provided tonnes of food daily and thousands of jobs as they filter sewage through fish ponds - but rapid urbanisation is threatening the ecosystem.

Conservationists warn that pollution and strong-arm land grabs are putting a lifeline for the megacity's 14mn residents at risk.

"We are destroying the environment," said Tapan Kumar Mondal, who has spent his life farming fish in the ingenious



Women are seen walking across the East Calcutta Wetlands area in Kolkata in this picture taken on March 21 (AFP)

system of canals and ponds stretching across about 125sqkm (48 square miles).

"The population... has increased, there is a pressure on nature, they are ruining it," 71-year-old Mondal added.

Listed as a wetland of global importance under the United Nations Ramsar convention, the waters offer natural climate control by cooling sweltering temperatures - and act as valuable flood defences for low-lying Kolkata.

But Dhruva Das Gupta, from the environmental group

SCOPE, said that short-sighted building development was encroaching on the wetlands.

"The wetlands are shrinking," said the researcher, who is trying to finance a study of what is left of the waters.

'Natural treatment of sewage'

Every day, 910mn litres of nutrient-rich sewage flow into the wetland, feeding a network of about 250 hyacinth-covered ponds.

"Sunlight and the sewage create a massive plankton

boom," said K. Balamurugan, chief environment officer for West Bengal state, explaining that the microorganisms in the shallow fish ponds feed rapidly growing carp and tilapia.

Once the fish have had their fill, the water runoff irrigates surrounding rice paddies and the remaining organic waste fertilises vegetable fields.

"The sewage of the city is being naturally treated by the wetlands," Balamurugan said, giving them the nickname the 'kidneys of Kolkata'.

AFP

Weakened Typhoon Talim hits Vietnam after China

Hanoi, Vietnam - Typhoon Talim reached Vietnam on Tuesday after passing through China less forcefully than feared, with no deaths reported in either country despite nearly 260,000 people relocating before the storm hit.

Talim first made landfall in southern China late on Monday evening, battering the coast of Guangdong province with maximum winds of 136.8km (85 miles) per hour.

By Tuesday it had weakened to a tropical storm as it slowly made its way across the Vietnamese island of Bach Long Vi before moving towards the neighbouring Chinese region of Guangxi.

The storm passed by Bach Long Vi, an outlying island east of the capital Hanoi, 'with maximum winds of about 60kmph' the national weather bureau said on Tuesday.

Authorities revoked an evacuation order in the northern port city of Hai Phong, a day after 30,000 people were relocated from there and the province of Quang Ninh.

"People's activities have returned to normal in the city," state newspaper *Thanh Nien*

reported.

But Vietnam's second-biggest airport in Hanoi closed on Tuesday, disrupting hundreds of flights according to local media reports.

Authorities warned that heavy rains, flooding and landslides could still pose a risk in northern provinces after the storm passed.

China's state news agency Xinhua said on Tuesday that nearly 230,000 people were evacuated from their homes in Guangdong ahead of the expected landfall.

Forecasters said strong winds and heavy rains would lash Guangxi until Wednesday, issuing a warning for possible landslides, while authorities closed schools and suspended dozens of train services. Nine people were injured in Hong Kong during the brief typhoon period, according to the financial hub's Hospital Authority, while around 112 people sought refuge in temporary shelters.

Ferry services resumed on Monday afternoon and the stock exchange reopened on Tuesday after a storm closure.

AFP

Sri Lankan leader seeks to disarm India's China fears

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's president arrives in India on Thursday for his first visit to the regional powerhouse, with concerns mounting in New Delhi over China's increasing influence in the strategically placed but financially bankrupt island.

New Sri Lankan leaders usually travel to India within a few weeks of taking office, but Ranil Wickremesinghe's trip comes exactly a year after he became president following the toppling of his predecessor at the height of an unprecedented economic crisis.

As Sri Lanka drifted towards chaos with daily street protests over shortages of food, fuel and medicines, India poured nearly US\$4bn in aid to restore supplies and stabilise the island.

The loans and credit lines were granted despite Sri Lanka defaulting on its US\$46bn foreign debt and losing access to international financial markets.

"Without India's help Sri Lanka could have degenerated into anarchy," said political commentator Victor Ivan.

"The president will not only have to show gratitude, but reassure that we will not do anything to hurt them," he added.

"At the same time, Sri Lanka can't drop China because they are also a very important eco-



This file photo shows Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe saluting during the country's 75th Independence Day celebrations in Colombo on February 4, this year (AFP)

Sri Lanka can't drop China because (apart from India) they are also a very important economic partner

VICTOR IVAN

nomic partner."

China is Sri Lanka's biggest bilateral creditor and a Chinese firm acquired a 99-year lease on the southern port of Hambantota after Colombo was unable to

repay a huge loan from Beijing to build it.

A US\$1.4bn land reclamation project next to Colombo port - the biggest-ever foreign investment in Sri Lanka - has raised Indian fears that Beijing could use it as a listening post. Initially some of it was to have been Chinese sovereign territory.

Sri Lanka lies halfway along the main international shipping route between Europe and East Asia, with Colombo and Hambantota the only deep sea ports between Dubai and Singapore.

New Delhi sees the region as its backyard, and officials have

been alarmed by Beijing's activities. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has also struck other infrastructure deals with countries around the Indian Ocean, including the Maldives, Bangladesh and Djibouti, where it has a military base.

Spy ship

New Delhi raised concerns when a Chinese research vessel, *Yuan Wang 5*, sought permission to dock at Hambantota in August.

The port call by what India describes as a spy ship went ahead. Sri Lanka responded by asking China not to carry out any 'scien-

tific research' while in Sri Lankan waters.

Local political columnist Kusil Perera called the *Yuan Wang 5* spat an 'aberration'.

"One such incident will not decide the fate of the entire relationship with India," he said, adding that Indian businesses were also seeking to expand their presence in the island.

Wickremesinghe sought to address India's fears during a visit to France last month, dismissing speculation about Chinese military bases in Sri Lanka.

"No, we have no military agreements with China," he told the France24 TV network. "There won't be any military agreements. I don't think China enters into one.

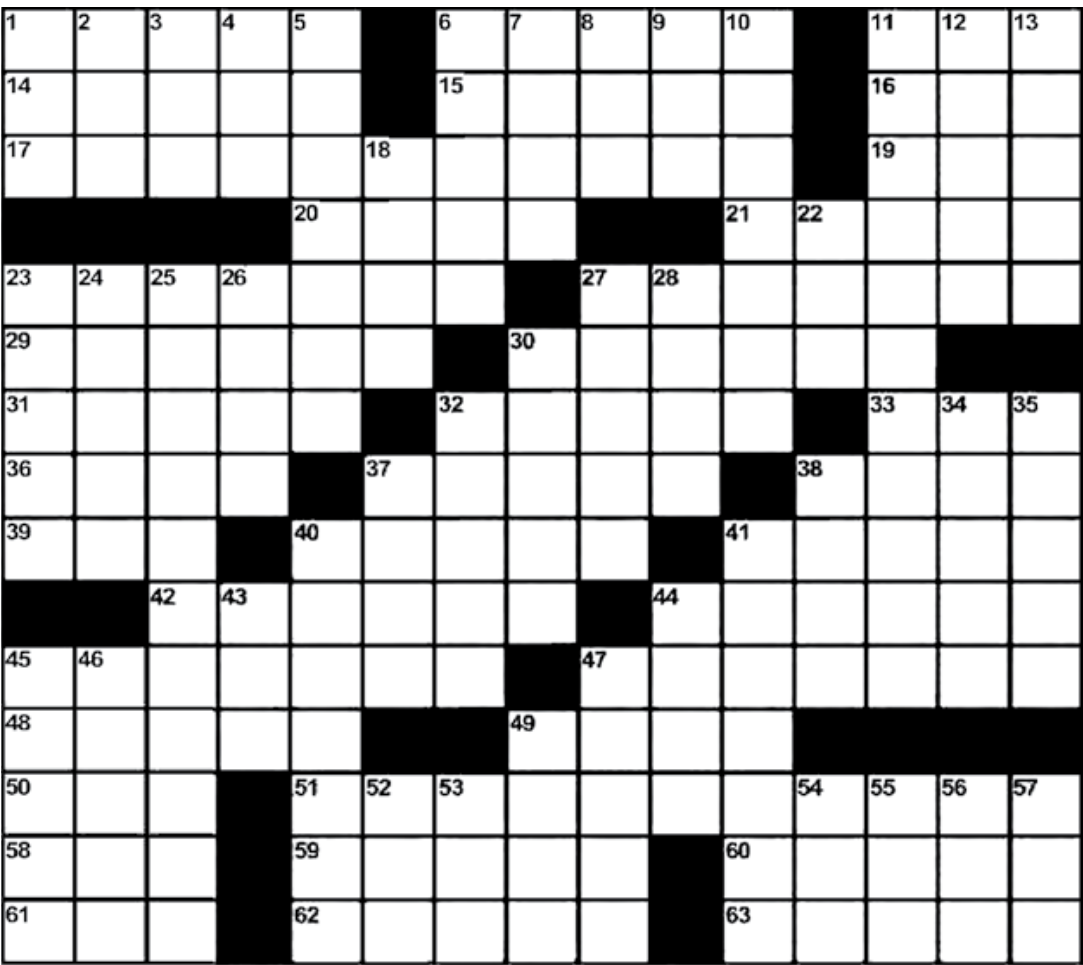
"We are a neutral country, but we also emphasise on the fact that we cannot allow Sri Lanka to be used as a base for any threats against India," he added.

Wickremesinghe will be the fourth Sri Lankan president to be hosted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He was elected by parliament to serve the remaining two-and-a-half years in the term of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who stepped down following protests over mismanagement of the economy.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1) Guy hiding in children's books
 - 6) Helps in a criminal activity
 - 11) Jeweler's item
 - 14) "Up the creek," is one
 - 15) Amend an atlas
 - 16) Genetically coded stuff, for short
 - 17) Fox and Lloyd went back
 - 19) Dinghy driver
 - 20) Arcing shots
 - 21) Sound from a henhouse
 - 23) Guts and other innards
 - 27) Agents' needs
 - 29) Form in the mind
 - 30) Did some house work?
 - 31) Darlings
 - 32) Informative, informally
 - 33) Bride's title
 - 36) Gets something down
 - 37) Musical qualities
 - 38) Look good on
 - 39) There's no fool like this kind
 - 40) Cut off, as relations
 - 41) '70s dance hal l
 - 42) Lumberyard cutter
 - 44) Cosmetic application

- 45) Ghostly entities
 - 4 7) Alfa Romeo alternative
 - 48) Make more exciting (with "up")
 - 49) Jazz combo, often
 - 50) "By the time I count to three" follower
 - 51) The parolee was back ...
 - 58) As to
 - 59) Phobias
 - 60) Break in two
 - 61) Driving-exam curve shape
 - 62) Womb resident
 - 63) Aden's land
- DOWN**
- 1) One skilled at repartee
 - 2) Fuss, to Shakespeare
 - 3) Set fire to
 - 4) "How stupid of me!"
 - 5) Western and Spanish dishes
 - 6) Caribbean resort island
 - 7) "All_ are off!"
 - 8) Bird that can't take flight
 - 9) Cigarette ingredient
 - 10) State in detail
 - 11) The elevator provided back ...
 - 12) Make it so, legally

- 13) "On your_, get set ... "
- 18) "Watch out!"
- 22) Superhero creator Stan
- 23) Part of DVD
- 24) Having no drawbacks
- 25) The ones making you slow down are back ...
- 26) Big- ticket items
- 27) Crouch in fear
- 28) L's meaning, sometimes
- 30) Extend, as a subscrip- tion
- 32) Spectacular stars
- 34) Xerox competitor
- 35) Bit of gravel
- 37) Class evaluation
- 38) Watches the kids
- 40) "The Jeffersons" was one
- 41) "The Wizard of Oz" character
- 43) "Asp" or "vamp" attach- ment
- 44) Hi's wife, in comics
- 45) Mountain feature
- 46) Maine flora
- 47) Use a steam iron
- 49) Drive- _
- 52) Wedding announce- ment word
- 53) Tit-for- _

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The culture that you've been a part of hasn't been feeling like the right fit lately. Is it time to see how the other half lives? Call up someone you know whose lifestyle is one you'd like to experience for a while. See if they'd be willing to let you be their apprentice for a few days or weeks, just long enough for you to see if this is a direction you'd like for your life. The only thing stopping you from making a change in your life is you.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

You and your friends are a little bit out of sync with each other, but don't worry. This dissonance might create more fun than frustration. Everyone is in the mood to compromise, and one of your friends is going to come up with a great idea. They will help make things better than they've ever been! It's going to be one of those days when you fully realize how lucky you are to have such fantastic people in your life. Show them how much you care.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Suddenly, things are starting to get pretty interesting in a formerly dull area of your life. It looks like something new is brewing. Are you ready? If you're eager for more romance to come into your life, today is the day for you! Don't be surprised if you feel a special connection getting even more special, but don't try to push things along too quickly. Soak it up and enjoy it for what it is. If you spend the day wondering what the next step will be, you'll miss out on all the fun.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 01. Who, in 2004, riding the prototype KTM 250-SXF four stroke, won the MX2 World Championship?**
- A. Marc DeReuver
 - B. Antonio Cairoli
 - C. Tyla Rattray
 - D. Ben Townley

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If you go too quickly through your day, you will miss out on some very fun stuff! Forces are pushing you to go at a more rapid pace than you might be comfortable with, and you need to tell them to stop. Ask them why they think you should be in a hurry to move on when where you are right now is such a wonderful place? They won't have an answer to that. Calling their bluff will help them understand that they need you more than you need them.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Believe it or not, today your combative nature is going to help you get further in life than your compassionate nature ever could. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, as they say, and you'll get more attention when you let someone know that you're expecting it. Being afraid of conflict can keep you from getting scarred in any battles, but it will also keep you from proving to yourself that you can handle yourself in a fight. So step up and don't be afraid!

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Just because a couple of your recent hunches were slightly off the mark doesn't mean that your intuitive skills have bitten the dust. Don't lose confidence in your gut today, because it will help you steer clear of some unpleasant people. Listen when that little voice says "don't trust this person." You are an excellent judge of character, and you'll have an especially good eye for seeing through the charm someone is working so hard to convey to you.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Today, take special note of the many people you meet, because one of your newest acquaintances could turn into a very important person in your future. Whether they're your new love, boss, or neighbor isn't going to be clear for a while, but this person will be a force to be reckoned with. Doors are opening for you, and you shouldn't hesitate to rush right through them. The time for research, planning, and waiting is over.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

If you're engaged in any kind of negotiation today, keep in mind that the outcome is entirely up to you. Or, to be more specific, the outcome depends on your level of commitment. Determination will play a critical role in how well you fare and how much of what you want you actually get. This applies to simple negotiations with family members and cutthroat wheeling and dealing with a professional. Hold fast and don't give up anything you're not willing to live without.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your dreams are more than trippy or bewildering movies your mind plays at night. They can be useful tools to help you look at the choices and problems in your life from a different perspective. The especially odd images that have been swimming through your unconscious mind lately are showing you patterns, and it's up to you to figure out what they are. Spend some time pondering a recent dream that caused you to wake up confused. You will definitely have an "aha" moment.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Today, one of the authority figures in your life could be all about micromanagement. That whirring sound you hear over your left shoulder? That's them, hovering over you and watching you work. Instead of letting their sudden interest create friction, take it as a sign that they see you as a force to be reckoned with and possibly even a threat to their position. You are one sharp cookie, and they know it, but there's no need to feel intimidated by them. Stay as friendly as ever.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

When it comes to helping other people, quality is much more important than quantity. After all, you should be doing it because you want to, not to score brownie points, right? So if you've got a friend who needs advice on their love life, an extra hand to help them move, or another pair of eyes to help them proofread their resume, don't do it halfway. Don't be watching the clock, worrying about how much time you're spending with them. Give them more time than you think they'll need.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

The weather forecast for your day includes some fog, but you can help burn it off early if you keep a sunny disposition. Instead of letting the gray mood of grouchy folks turn you inward or sullen, let it be a challenge to you to be all the more cheerful. With one chirpy "good morning" you'll be able to turn a frown upside down and get a rush from your ensuing sense of power. Spread your bright demeanor to strangers and friends alike, and make it a great day.

- 02. In probability theory, a stochastic process is what kind?**
- A. A guess, still to be proven
 - B. Random
 - C. Slow-moving
 - D. Interrupted

- 03. Drakensberg is a name for an escarpment in what area??**
- A. The Swiss Alps
 - B. Southern Africa
 - C. The Balkans
 - D. The Maghreb

Answers: 1. D 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

E	A	R	B
E	U	R	Y
L	S	E	K
Y	P	E	M

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

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

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

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

World Cup glory the missing piece for Kerr

Australian star ‘just want to win a major tournament with the national team’

Sydney, Australia - Sam Kerr says the only thing missing in her life is a major trophy with Australia - and the Chelsea forward plans to change that by winning her home World Cup.

Kerr made her Australia debut aged just 15 and has gone on to become one of the best players in women's football.

Now 29, she is set to be the face of the World Cup when it kicks off on Thursday, her profile having soared to new heights since moving to Chelsea in 2020 and steering them to the domestic double this year.

"She is a nightmare to defend. Her energy levels are like a 12-year-old. She is infectious," Chelsea manager Emma Hayes said recently.

"I don't know a striker in world football who can do what she does. She's the best."

Kerr is Australia's all-time leading scorer, surpassing Tim Cahill last year as the nation's most prolific among men or women with 63 goals in 121 appearances.

She has been shortlisted for the women's Ballon d'Or and nominated for the Best FIFA Women's Player consistently since 2017.

In 2019 Kerr became the first Australian, man or woman, to

score a hat-trick at a World Cup, but winning a major trophy with her country has eluded her.

"I just want to win a major tournament with the national team," the Australian skipper said in a documentary, "Matildas: The World at Our Feet", released in April. "It's the only thing missing in my life right now... if we win the World Cup, that would just be everything."

The tournament in Australia and New Zealand will be Kerr's fourth - but easily her biggest - World Cup.

Born to an Indian father and Australian mother, Kerr played Australian Rules as a youngster and was convinced she would one day represent her beloved West Coast Eagles, like her brother. She switched though to football aged 12 and made her debut for the Matildas as a substitute against Italy in 2009.

Kerr admits that shifting from Australian Rules - where there was little hope of earning a living as a woman - was not easy.

"I remember I struggled a lot," she previously said.

"I'm really thankful for my time in the AFL, but I'm also thankful I had to make the switch because there was no pathway for me at that time in AFL."

By now a footballer, she made

her debut for the W-League's Perth Glory aged 15, spending four years at the club before moving to Sydney FC. Known for her pace, agility and heading ability - as well as her trademark backflip goal celebrations - Kerr left for the United States in 2013.

She went first to Western New York Flash, then Sky Blue FC in New Jersey and finally Chicago

I just want to win a major tournament with the national team. It's the only thing missing in my life right now... if we win the World Cup, that would just be everything

SAM KERR

Red Stars. It is since moving to Chelsea that Kerr has risen to a whole new level.

She has scored more goals than any other player in the Women's Super League since moving there in 2020. Moreover, she has a sense for the big occasion with her goals often proving decisive.

While her onfield achievements have grabbed attention, she has also won plaudits for her work behind the scenes as an advocate for women's sport.

AFP



Sam Kerr



Pierluigi Collina

Real-time VAR explanations at Women's World Cup 'more transparent'

Sydney, Australia - Match officials explaining VAR decisions live to stadiums and television audiences for Women's World Cup games will make the process "more transparent", FIFA's referee chief Pierluigi Collina said on Tuesday.

The concept will be used at a major tournament for the first time when the World Cup starts on Thursday, having been trialled at the men's Club World Cup in Morocco this year and the men's U20 World Cup in Argentina last month.

Collina, chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee, told reporters that there had been positive feedback from the trials.

"We want to give more transparency, more understanding of the decision made by the referee," the Italian said.

"The referees here in Sydney have already practised at the training grounds using the PA system and things are going well."

"We are very confident this new tool will be very positive."

Fans have long called for more transparency over VAR (video

assistant referee) decisions.

Match officials at the World Cup in New Zealand and Australia will consult a screen on the side of the pitch before relaying their decision, the reason for it, the players involved and a brief description of the incident through the PA system via a microphone on their shirt.

We want to give more transparency, more understanding of the decision made by the referee

PIERLUIGI COLLINA

cophone on their shirt.

Collina admitted to some trepidation with referees required to explain in English, which is not the mother tongue for many, adding extra pressure.

"In anything there are pros and cons," he said. "After we will discuss and consider what is best for the future."

United States vow to send retiring Megan Rapinoe out 'on a high'

Auckland, New Zealand - Veteran United States star Kelley O'Hara was close to tears as she contemplated the upcoming World Cup being Megan Rapinoe's last, vowing Tuesday to send the women's football icon out "on a high".

The 38-year-old Rapinoe, who is also well known for her off-field activism, will retire at the end of this season, bringing the curtain down on a 17-year career in which she has twice won the World Cup.

"It is hard to put into words," an emotional O'Hara said of her teammate from the 2015 and 2019 World Cup-winning sides, ahead of the tournament in Australia and New Zealand starting Thursday.

"The 'Pinoe' that the world sees is an incredible person, and that is her also up close and personal," O'Hara, who has won 157 caps, told a press conference in Auckland.

"She brings a sense of humour and lightness, but intensity and empathy, and just is one of a kind."



Megan Rapinoe

"There has never been one like her, there is probably never going to be one close to her."

"It is sad to think about this being her last, but she has done such incredible things for this team."

"I hope we all send her out on a high."

Rapinoe and the United States are chasing an unprecedented third World Cup crown in a row.

The forward is a former winner of the Ballon d'Or and the Best FIFA Women's Player awards.

She has been a high-profile campaigner on social issues including LGBTQ+ rights, racial in-

equality and gender and pay equality.

She was also a leading voice in the US women's team's successful fight for equal pay and conditions which resulted in a lawsuit and eventual new collective agreement being struck in 2021.

AFP

Willian staying another season at Fulham

London, United Kingdom - Veteran Brazilian international Willian on Monday re-signed for Fulham on a one-year deal with an option for a further 12 months.

The 34-year-old former Chelsea and Arsenal winger scored five times in 27 Premier League appearances for the Cottagers last season.

He had reached the end of his contract and visited the Nottingham Forest training ground last week.

But he said he is staying at Fulham.

"Happy to sign one more year with Fulham," he told the club's website.

"Happy to continue the work that I did last season with all my teammates and the whole club. I think it's a club that can do even better this season."

West Ham spoil Postecoglou's Tottenham debut in friendly

Perth, Australia - West Ham spoiled Ange Postecoglou's much-anticipated Tottenham coaching debut Tuesday with a pulsating 3-2 pre-season friendly victory in Perth.

West Ham thwarted Spurs' late rally in a freewheeling contest between the London rivals in front of 46,266 fans at Optus Stadium.

The departure of captain Declan Rice to Arsenal has barely affected West Ham, who won their third straight pre-season game after Gianluca Scamacca broke the deadlock in the 78th

minute.

They exploited a new-look Tottenham, who showcased glimpses of the high-octane style expected under Postecoglou but were creaky in defence.

Tottenham had a remarkable 30 shots to four but rued a slew of missed opportunities.

Harry Kane took Tottenham's captaincy reins amid uncertainty over his future, having been courted aggressively by Bayern Munich.

He had an early close-range shot sensationally blocked by goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski but



Danny Ings (R) of West Ham celebrates with Jarrod Bowen after scoring against Tottenham Hotspur (AFP)

was relatively subdued before being substituted at half-time.

Marquee signings Guglielmo Vicario, James Maddison and Manor Solomon started in their Tottenham debuts.

Former Empoli goalkeeper Vicario is seen as a replacement for captain Hugo Lloris, who has skipped the tour as he seeks opportunities elsewhere.

Much like Postecoglou's previous teams, Tottenham started in swashbuckling style with several early shots on goal denied by Fabianski.

AFP

GOLD CLASS

England put their faith in ageing attack for must-win Ashes clash

London, United Kingdom - James Anderson returns on his Old Trafford home ground to lead an ageing England attack in a must-win fourth Ashes Test.

It is the only change for Ben Stokes's men, 2-1 down with two to play.

England have dropped Ollie Robinson, who suffered a back spasm as the hosts won the third Test by three wickets at Headingley.

Anderson is reinstated just a fortnight short of his 41st birthday for the match starting Wednesday.

Anderson's 688 wickets are the most by any paceman in Test history. Only spinners Muttiah Muralitharan and Shane Warne are ahead of the Lancashire swing bowler.

But Anderson managed just three wickets as England fell 2-0 behind. He is now, however, set to be the cornerstone of the oldest pace attack in an Ashes match since the Australia line-up of 1928.

That was the last time either side deployed four seamers aged 33 or above, with Stuart Broad (37), Chris Woakes (34) and express quick Mark Wood (33) joining Anderson in England's seam-bowling quartet.

England's seasoned campaigners also include all-rounder Moeen Ali.

"I was always told that old was gold," the 36-year-old Moeen said Monday. "But it's not just old, it's Jimmy, it's Broady, Woakesy, Woody - they're really good bowlers."

"Myself...you never know what you're going to get, but with those guys, you definitely know how good they are."

Only a few weeks ago, Moeen was retired from Test cricket but an injury to frontline spinner Jack Leach led to his recall.

With Ollie Pope sidelined by a dislocated shoulder, Moeen finds himself in the key position of number three, with star batsman



James Anderson

It's not just old, it's Jimmy, it's Broady, Woakesy, Woody - they're really good bowlers. Myself...you never know what you're going to get, but with those guys, you definitely know how good they are

MOEEN ALI

Joe Root preferring number four. Emerging talent Harry Brook made a decisive 75 at number five at Headingley.

Moeen only managed five at first-wicket down in the second innings at Headingley but England are keeping him there after

resisting calls for either captain Stokes, or wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow, who has struggled with both bat and gloves this series, to move up the order.

'Faith and destiny'

It is nearly seven years since Moeen - who has batted in every position from one to nine in his 66-Test career - scored the last of his five centuries at this level.

"If I'm playing well and I get in I have made Test hundreds before and it's not like I can't do it,"

said Moeen, who added: "But things happen for a reason...I'm a big one on faith and destiny."

Australia have yet to name their XI as Pat Cummins bids to lead the world Test champions to their first Ashes series win in England since 2001.

Veteran opener David Warner twice fell cheaply at Headingley to Broad, who has dismissed the Australian opener 17 times in Test cricket.

Warner and middle order mainstays, Marnus Labuschagne

and Steve Smith, have just one hundred and one fifty between them in 18 innings.

At Headingley, Mitchell Marsh marked his first Test since 2019 with a fine hundred after replacing the injured, but now fit, Cameron Green.

Australia must decide if both all-rounders can play in the team. Josh Hazlewood is set to return after fellow paceman Scott Boland went wicketless at Headingley.

AFP

Weather could make England 'even bolder' in bid to level Ashes

Manchester, United Kingdom - Ben Stokes said Tuesday that forecast bad weather in Manchester could make England even more aggressive as they bid to keep their Ashes hopes alive with victory in the fourth Test at Old Trafford.

England remained in contention to regain the urn from arch-rivals Australia with a three-wicket win at Headingley that left the hosts 2-1 down with two to play ahead of the concluding two Tests at Old Trafford and The Oval.

Since England captain Stokes joined forces with coach Brendon McCullum last year, the team have become renowned for their bold 'Bazball' approach to red-ball cricket.

But with heavy rain forecast on the fourth and fifth days in Manchester, England may have to up their tempo while trying to force a win in a match starting Wednesday.



Ben Stokes

"You never want to look too much into the weather but in the position we find ourselves in, we find we might have to," Stokes told an Old Trafford news conference on Tuesday.

"We know we have to win this game to take it to the last game for us to have a chance of getting the urn back."

"Going into the last game 2-0

down, we knew we had to win that so I think that helped us a little bit. Maybe again with the weather that's predicted, it might bring more out of us again knowing that we might have to push the game on even more than we normally do. "We'll just have to wait and see. If the weather is what it's predicted to be, we might have to."

Embiid wants NBA title: 'In Philly or anywhere else'

Los Angeles, United States - Philadelphia 76ers star Joel Embiid has given fans a jolt with an interview gaining steam on social media on Monday discussing his desire to win an NBA title "in Philly or anywhere else."

The big man from Cameroon broke through for a first NBA Most Valuable Player award last season, his eighth with the 76ers.

But Philadelphia were eliminated by the Boston Celtics in the second round of the NBA playoffs, later sacking coach Doc Rivers and hiring former Toronto coach Nick Nurse. "I just want to win a championship. Whatever it takes," Embiid said in an interview with LeBron James's long-time friend and business partner Maverick Carter that occurred on Thursday at the Uninterrupted Sports Film Festival.

"I don't know where that's going to be, whether it's in Philly or anywhere else, I just want to



Joel Embiid

have a chance to accomplish that. I want to see what it feels like to win that first one, and then you can think about the next one."

"It's not easy, but it takes more than one or two, three guys. You've got to have good people around you, and myself, every single day, I work hard to be at that level so I can make it happen. So, every single day, I'm working towards that."

By Monday, the interview was popping up on social media sites alongside speculation that it signalled Embiid could soon be seeking to force a trade.

The 76ers are already reportedly pursuing options for trading All-Star guard James Harden, who opted into this \$35.6 million contract for next season so that the team could work out a deal with another team.

CWG in limbo as Australia pulls out as 2026 host

Melbourne, Australia - The Australian state of Victoria pulled out of hosting the 2026 Commonwealth Games on Tuesday citing major cost blow-outs, leaving organisers of the games fuming as they scrambled to keep the multi-sport event afloat.

State Premier Daniel Andrews said the initial estimated Aus\$2 billion (US\$1.36 billion) needed to hold the Games would more likely be around Aus\$7 billion, which he called "well and truly too much".

"I've made a lot of difficult calls, a lot of very difficult decisions in this job. This is not one of them. Frankly, \$7 billion for a sporting event, we are not doing that," he said at a press conference in Melbourne.

"I will not take money out of hospitals and schools to host an event that is three times the cost estimated and budgeted for last year."

"The Games will not proceed in Victoria in 2026. We have informed Commonwealth Games authorities of our decision to seek to terminate the contract," he added.

The event - featuring 20 sports and 26 disciplines - was due to be held across five regional hubs in the state, including Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Gippsland and Shepparton, with each having its own athletes' village.

British Open brings golf's elite together ahead of uncertain future

Hoylake, United Kingdom - Golf's biggest stars will be brought together at the British Open this week as the foundations of an uneasy truce between the traditional tours and break-away LIV series are still being built.

In a shock announcement last month, the PGA and DP World Tours announced plans to merge with the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), which had bankrolled huge signing bonuses and prize money for players to jump ship to LIV.

But details on how the deal will work remain unknown, even for the world's leading players who stayed loyal to the PGA



Rory McIlroy

Tour. "They keep saying it's a player-run organisation (but) we don't really have the information that we need," said world number one Scottie Scheffler at last week's Scottish Open.

Without a concrete deal, the best of the LIV and PGA Tours will not face off again until the Masters next April.

Three-time major winner Jordan Spieth and world number six Xander Schauffele are among those to criticise PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan, who returns to work later this week after a month-long medical absence, for a lack of transparency.

But Rory McIlroy, who has consistently put himself forward

as an unofficial spokesman for the PGA Tour over the past 12 months, said last week he is now "apathetic" towards negotiations.

Defending British Open Cameron Smith was one of those to cash in on the riches offered by LIV just weeks after lifting the Claret Jug at St Andrews 12 months ago.

The Australian heads to Hoylake fresh from winning the LIV London event earlier this month.

Any suggestion that the LIV defectors would struggle at the majors due to a lack of regular competitive golf has so far been dispelled.

AFP



Marketa Vondrousova

Vondrousova vows to shun media spotlight

Prague, Czech Republic - Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova said Tuesday she was determined "not to push in anywhere" in her bid to avoid the media spotlight after her historic triumph.

The 24-year-old Czech beat Tunisia's Ons Jabeur in straight sets in Saturday's final to become the first ever unseeded female Wimbledon champion. "The last few days were pretty tough, it was quite a merry-go-round," she told reporters in Prague.

Vondrousova, who won her first major title at the All-England Club after finishing runner-up in the French Open in 2019 and taking the silver medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, said she expected the increased media interest to continue.

"I know it's part of the game. I'll just try to stick to my circle of

people and not push in anywhere and hopefully I'll be OK," she said.

Vondrousova knows that other players will now be looking to measure themselves against her after a win which propelled her from 42nd to 10th in the WTA rankings.

"I think this is a good problem. Everyone will try to show their best against me," she said.

"I won a Grand Slam title, but I have to take this into account and learn to live with it."

Vondrousova is planning a trip to her native city of Sokolov in the west of the country and want to rests until the end of the week, also to spare her sore ankle she hurt during the first round at Wimbledon. "I will have to start training again but I'll try to avoid publicity as much as I can," said Vondrousova.

Shakeel's double century puts Pakistan on top in Sri Lanka Test

Galle, Sri Lanka - Saud Shakeel hit his maiden double century in Tests as Pakistan stretched their lead to a dominant 149 against Sri Lanka on day three of the rain-hit opening match on Tuesday.

Sri Lanka bowled out the tourists for 461 in the final session after a frustrating ninth-wicket stand of 94 between Shakeel, who remained unbeaten on 208, and Naseem Shah, who made six off 78 balls.

The 27-year-old Shakeel, who is playing his sixth Test, ruled as he cut Dhananjaya de Silva for a boundary to bring up his double century to a standing ovation.

"When Naseem Shah joined me, he said that there's a chance for me to go for the double hundred," Shakeel told reporters after the marathon knock.

"A lot of credit to him for backing me and not letting me panic."

The hosts ended the day on 14 for no loss after bad light stopped another rain-affected day. Sri Lanka still trail Pakistan by 135 runs in their second innings.

Nishan Madushka, on eight, and skipper Dimuth Karunaratne, on six, were batting at close of play. The Sri Lankan bowlers led by off-spinner Ramesh Mendis,



Pakistan's Saud Shakeel celebrates after scoring a double century against Sri Lanka on the third day of their first Test in Galle on Tuesday (AFP)

who ended with a five-wicket haul, hit back in the second session but Shakeel combined with the lower-order including a 52-run seventh-wicket stand with Noman Ali, who made 25.

But it was his 177-run partnership with Agha Salman, who hit 83, that drove Pakistan's bounce back from 101-5 in their reply to Sri Lanka's 312.

Both Shakeel, who was dropped twice on 93 and 139 as he went past his previous best of 125 not out, and Salman scored runs briskly and hit regular boundaries - but the run rate dipped after Salman's departure.

"When I went in to bat, I wanted to attack. If I had tried to be defensive we would have got bowled out for 150," said Shakeel.

"That's the reason I attacked and was able to take the game deep." Sri Lanka coach Chris Silverwood said: "I don't think we did our best with the ball. It's good to see Ramesh get five wickets haul which he deserved as a unit we weren't good as we could have been."

"We managed to control their run rate to an extent today but unfortunately, we missed a couple of key chances that cost us." AFP

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PRETTY PINK

Hollywood A-listers have been walking red carpets in hot pink, glitter is back, and companies from The Gap to Burger King are doing rose-coloured collaborations - *Barbie* mania is everywhere as the hotly anticipated film hits theatres worldwide.

Toy maker Mattel, who first unveiled the iconic doll in 1959, has reached about 100 licensing agreements for everything, from roller skates to toothbrushes, in connection to director Greta Gerwig's summer flick.

Of course, *Barbie* is big in the beauty world too - lipsticks, blushes, and mirrors all bear the famous logo.

"In the 30 years that I have been tracking and analyzing box offices and trends, I've never quite seen anything like this before," said Paul Dergarabedian, a senior media analyst at Comscore.

"*Barbie* is tailor-made for marketing," he said. "It's perfect because *Barbie* is a toy, it's already a product, and beyond that, it's a lifestyle and a colour."

The movie, which stars Margot Robbie as *Barbie* and Ryan Gosling as boyfriend Ken, has been hyped as one of the biggest blockbusters of the season, with numerous premieres held around the globe ahead of Friday's debut in US theatres.

Of course, that promotion blitz has been curtailed at the 11th hour, with Hollywood actors now on strike over pay and other conditions. But the list of corporate partners is sure to keep the buzz going.

Microsoft, Forever 21, Ulta Beauty, Hot Wheels, Chevrolet and even Progressive Insurance are among the companies looking to cash in on *Barbie* mania.

The influential colour company Pantone even has a shade to match the zeitgeist - 219C is officially 'Barbie Pink'.

Mattel has even reached a deal with rival toy giant Hasbro, which will release a *Barbie* version of the classic board game Monopoly in the fall.

In exchange, Mattel will showcase *Transformers* on its Uno card game in connection with a Hasbro film release.

Irresistible

Robbie has embraced 'Barbiecore fashion' at premieres around the world, recreating some of the doll's most iconic looks, but the *Barbie* lifestyle trend is also full steam ahead.

Airbnb is offering up a stay at *Barbie's* 'Malibu

Australian actress Margot Robbie poses on the pink carpet upon arrival for the European premiere of *Barbie* in central London

Barbie blitz

*Barbie global marketing gimmicks hit fever pitch.
From beauty products to hotel stays, there's
'Barbie mania' in the offing everywhere*



Marchers dressed up to promote the *Barbie* movie prepare for the start of the Capital Pride Parade in Washington DC

Dream House' for two nights in connection with the film's debut. 'Placed perfectly above the beach with panoramic views, this life-size toy pink mansion is a dream come true!' reads the listing.

Singer John Legend and his model wife Chrissy Teigen took the plunge, posting a series of pictures on Instagram of their stay at the hot pink property.

The most ubiquitous shade of pink used on the Warner Bros film's set, a retro bubblegum hue made by Rosco, was used in such great quantities that the shoot has been blamed for a global shortage.

"It's just become a very irresistible proposition," said Paul Dergarabedian, media analyst, crediting both Warner Bros and Mattel with ensuring the buzz had staying power. Dergarabedian expects a strong opening weekend for *Barbie*, with around US\$75mn in North American ticket sales.

Barbenheimer

The film is opening in parallel with another big Hollywood entry, the Christopher Nolan-directed Oppenheimer, a biopic about the father of the atomic bomb. The unlikely face-off between the dark historical thriller and a fuchsia-tinted romp about a doll has created online buzz about a phenomenon dubbed 'Barbenheimer'.

Dergarabedian said the coincidental timing of the openings had contributed to unprecedented fodder about the films on social media and beyond. Both movies are opening on the heels of another big-screen blockbuster, *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning - I* which led the domestic box office last weekend.

A starry soundtrack includes tracks from Dua Lipa (who also appears in the film), Lizzo, and Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice, who recorded a cover of *Barbie Girl*, a 1997 hit by Danish-Norwegian band Aqua.

The original recording actually prompted a lengthy but unsuccessful trademark lawsuit by Mattel. The company subsequently embraced the song.

The movie's arrival has also not been without controversy. *Barbie* has been banned in Vietnam over a scene with a fictitious world map criticised for allegedly showing China's claims in the disputed South China Sea. Also, the Philippines allowed the film to be shown - but asked that the map be blurred.

AFP

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After an introductory stint in Muscat, Al Naseem International Circus has begun pitching tent in Salalah to enthral visitors at the ensuing Khareef Festival

AL NASEEM INTERNATIONAL CIRCUS

RIB-TICKLING,
Spine-chilling

Photos: V K Shafeer

The lights dimmed... the music stopped... and there was pin-drop silence as a batch of seven lions entered the caged arena in the centre of the stage, their spine-chilling roars punctuating the eerie tranquility within the tent.

Adults sat on edge, mothers grabbed hold of their infants and the ushers moved in from the exit points to ensure that nobody moved from their seats. You are in the midst of the most fascinating act of Al Naseem International Circus, and suddenly, even the sound of crunching popcorn seems a disturbance.

The ringmaster - a towering, burly professional from Iran - then took charge and entertained the audience with some awesome acts performed by the wild cats at the crack of his whip. He made them shuffle around in endearing formations and do impressive acrobats as the audience took delight in their amber coats and majestic manes, while the tent momentarily abounded with their musky body odour and ferocious demeanour.

The lion act was tucked towards the middle section of this two-hour circus which had a brief halt in Muscat last week before it proceeded to Salalah where regular shows will begin in a fortnight's time to coincide with the Khareef Festival revelry. But, the organisers assure, the show will return to Muscat after entertaining people in Salalah.

The circus comprises a range of entertaining acts performed by a diverse team of professionals hailing from seven different countries, including Iran, Portugal, Colombia, Argentina, South Africa, Brazil, and Pakistan.

While the highlight of the show is the lion act, the circus comprised a diverse range of acts to appeal to all age groups. The first act showcased an impressive Chinese pole bal-

ancing act followed by stupendous trapeze and aerial acts, with soft hues of lilac and crimson, and lilting background scores, filling the tent with an atmosphere of sheer awe.

While the audience weren't in good number, the applause after every act was, indeed, thunderous, as children and adults enjoyed the various acts at close proximity. Especially, the clowns from Argentina, who kept the audience in splits with their comical acts while the barricades and cages for the ensuing lion act was being set up.

The other fascinating acts included a captivating magic show that left everyone spellbound, a 'snake show' that surprisingly was well received, and the popular Globe of Death act wherein helmeted bikers performed nail-biting, daredevil acts, riding their motorbikes at high speed within a globular cage.

Fardin Binazade, an aerial artist from Iran, said he has been in the circus since the age of 17. "Initially, I used to work as a cleaner but I soon trained myself to do aerial acts by watching tutorials on YouTube. Now, the circus is my life and I experience great fulfillment with every applause."

Today, Binazade not only performs but also teaches calisthenics and aerial acts to his students. He proudly mentioned that some of his students have participated in talent shows in Iran, bringing him immense joy and satisfaction.

Dr Musab al Hinai, the CEO of Naseem Group said he has great plans to take the circus to all GCC countries. "We hope to soon take up a tour of different countries in the GCC, but I assure the people of Muscat, that the circus will return due to its positive response, particularly from children," he said, adding that he also has plans to introduce more novel experiences by establishing Salalah's largest water park in Ateer area later this month.

Contributed by: Deeba Parween)

'I CAN CONTROL ANY LION'

Mohammad Ali Ghahremani, the lion-trainer from Iran is a man with no fear of beasts. That he manages to be at explicit ease among lions during training sessions and performances, is enough evidence of his fearless disposition.

"I learnt this remarkable skill from my father who also was a fearless ringmaster. My cats (lions) hail from Iran, Africa, and India. I also have my own personal zoo housing around 127 lions," he disclosed adding that he has been in this profession for over 35 years.

A Guinness World Record holder for successfully performing daring acts with 40 lions in a single cage, Ghahremani admits that he has, indeed, been in numerous perilous situations over the years when his lions refused to conform to instruction.

Showing evidence of his occasional skirmishes with the wild cats (scratch marks on his face and arms), he asserts, "I have fearlessly confronted many challenges. Today, I can proudly say, that I can control any lion in the world."

Ghahremani, who weighs 160kg, said he follows a robust diet and fitness routine. "I eat 70 eggs and 7kg of chicken daily. I also spend two hours at the gym everyday."

