

Oman, Germany foster closer ties

HM’s visit to open vistas for cooperation in clean energy, making use of Oman’s natural resources that have attracted global attention

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik arrived in Germany for a three-day official visit on Wednesday evening.

During his visit, His Majesty the Sultan will hold a round of official talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and meet German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The meeting will enhance existing cooperation and maximise benefits in economic, scientific, technical and technological spheres.

The Royal visit of His Majesty the Sultan will open up vistas for cooperation in clean energy, making use of Oman’s natural resources that have attracted global attention to the country.

Oman and Germany mark 50 years of diplomatic relations this year. In the past five decades, both countries have worked dili-



gently lay the foundations for fruitful cooperation in political, diplomatic, economic and cultural fields, characterised by positivity and mutual respect.

Trade statistics show that the volume of commercial exchange between Oman and Germany stood at about RO201.8mn at the end of 2021. German exports to Oman amounted to RO172.9mn, while Omani exports to Germany

stood at RO28.8mn.

Data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information indicates that commercial exchange between the two countries at the end of March 2022 stood at RO53mn. Key Omani exports to Germany include electronic equipment, tuna, pharmaceutical products, medical equipment, and mining and plastic products. This is in addition to

polyethylene products and electrical cables.

Germany’s exports to Oman include machinery, chemicals, pharmaceutical products and vehicles.

Oman Investment Authority’s (OIA) investments in Germany cover a range of projects, including the Hilton Dusseldorf Hotel of which OIA owns 90 per cent, an investment of US\$27mn in Ad-

vario, a company tasked with operating the terminal at Sohar Industrial Port, and an investment of US\$1.8bn in chemical industries and products marketing firm - OXO.

Oman and Germany continue work on joint cooperation in areas such as development of small and medium enterprises, research, tourism, healthcare and environment conservation. Sev-

eral agreements and memoranda of understanding have been signed in this context on ways to develop economic and industrial cooperation and regulate air transport.

Omani-German relations are set up on grounds of respect, good intentions and mutual confidence in handling international issues. Principles of peaceful dialogue and respect for the Interna-

tional Law have brought the two countries closer on regional and global arenas and enabled them to operate better as partners in establishing international security and peace.

Germans love to travel around the world and Oman is one of their favourite destinations. As many as 23,289 German tourists visited Oman in the first five months of 2022.

► **NEWS BRIEF**

MAJLIS A'SHURA TO CONCLUDE THIRD ANNUAL SITTING TODAY

Muscat - Upon the orders of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Shura Council will end the third annual sitting (2021-2022) of the ninth Term (2019-2023) on Thursday.

Sheikh Ahmed Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary General of Majlis A'Shura, said that during the third annual sitting, the Majlis discussed various draft laws and decisions and studied five ministerial statements.

The Majlis also approved ten draft laws and agreements forwarded by the government, including the State Budget for fiscal year 2022, the Securities Law, amendment of provisions of the Law on Records and Archives, and the Notary Public Law provisions.



UN chief thanks Oman for its role in ensuring stability in region

New York, USA - The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres received H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali bin Issa al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, in his office in New York on Tuesday.

The meeting took place on the sidelines of a high-level ministerial political forum on sustainable development, which is being held in New York from July 13 to 15.

During the meeting, views were exchanged on a number of regional and international issues. The secretary-general expressed his appreciation for Oman’s foreign policy and its role in supporting stability and security efforts in the region.

He also expressed his gratitude to the Omani government for the existing cooperation and coordination with the United Nations, especially with regard to the Yemeni issue.

UN looks for Yemen truce extension

The United Nations, led by its Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg, is working to extend the Yemen truce, which got an initial extension of two months on June 2.

In a briefing to the UN Secu-

urity Council on July 11, Grundberg extended his gratitude for the continued support of the UN Council, as well as from the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the broader international community.

“Your continued support for the full implementation and extension of the truce as well as for the way forward will be vital in the weeks to come. The truce represents the best opportunity for peace in Yemen we have had in years and we should encourage and support the parties to make the most of this opportunity for the benefit of Yemen as a whole,” he said.

With the deadline for the truce extension a mere three weeks away, Grundberg said he wanted to outline a way forward that includes extending, consolidating and expanding the truce so that “we increase the benefits to Yemen’s population and move toward a political settlement”.

According to Grundberg, the truce has resulted in a significant reduction in civilian casualties, with the number of civilian casualties reduced by two thirds compared to the three months before the truce began.

OIA earns 10% returns from investments in 40 countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has generated more than ten per cent average annual return from its investments in 40 countries. The authority also committed 35 new investments and exited others with profitable returns since its establishment in June 2020.

These announcements were made in OIA’s first annual report covering its operations and investments from June 4, 2020, to December 31, 2021.

In the report’s opening remarks, H E Sultan al Habsi, Minister of Finance and chairman of OIA, said that despite the challenges and events witnessed during the period covered in the report, development efforts have remained on track with a clear focus on goals.

He noted that, on the contrary, opportunities emerged which were leveraged to the maximum.

“Everybody is satisfied with the achievements made by OIA within this short period, a result of the dedicated focus on contributing to the GDP, maximising returns on investments, and improving governance of state-owned companies.”

H E Abdulsalam al Murshidi, executive president of OIA, added that the authority’s key achievements from June 2020 to December 2021 are reflected in the average annual return of 10.3 per cent. “There was an addition of 35 new investments to OIA’s investment portfolio in private equity markets, in addition to exiting other investments with profitable returns.”

The report sheds light on OIA’s key performance overview, including restructuring



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H E SULTAN AL HABSII

of Boards of Directors of OIA companies and the appointment of national experts and specialists from various public and private sectors as chairpersons.

The report also highlights the addition of new investments to OIA’s portfolio currently spread over 40 countries. The portfolio now includes investment in SpaceX, a US company specialising in space exploration technologies, establishment of an investment fund with China Merchant Bank International with focus on future technologies, establishment of Muscat Stock Exchange pursuant to Royal Decree No 5/2021, and investment in Mycotechnology, a US company specialising in alternative food using the latest technologies.

The report lists the returns OIA earned from exiting certain investments, including its complete exit from Cognate BioServices, a US company engaged in manufacturing medical equipment, getting 3.15 times in return with an internal rate of return (IRR) of 42 per cent, complete exit from Migros Stores in Turkey where returns on investment increased by 1.11 times with an IRR of 1.6 per cent, complete exit from RAK Ceramics in the

UAE earning 1.13 times in return on investment and an IRR of 2.1 per cent, partial exit from US information technology firm First Data with 1.34 times in return on investment and an IRR of 2.6 per cent.

Among the joint investments established in partnership with several friendly nations is Vietnam-Oman Investment which entered a new investment agreement with CMES Company, a significant player in the renewable energy market developing rooftop solar power systems.

Oman Brunei Investment Company increased its capital to US\$200mn by utilising available opportunities and expanding its existing investments in Brunei and obtaining the Board of Directors’ approval to establish a private school in Muscat in partnership with Amity Group, a renowned educational services institution.

Additionally, Oman Spain Fund for Private Equity launched a new investment in Syngor, an international firm engaged in agricultural biotechnology.

02

France’s 50th anniversary of diplomatic presence in Oman

04

Oman crude price falls below US\$100 a barrel

Shaddad al Musalmay
Muscat

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Oman and France, the two countries have had fruitful cooperation in political, diplomatic, economic and cultural spheres. Omani-French relations have been characterised by positivity and mutual respect.

To mark 50th anniversary of France's diplomatic presence in Oman, Muscat Daily spoke with H E Veronique Aulagnon, Ambassador of France to Oman, ahead of Bastille Day, the national day of France celebrated on July 14, who said the relations go back many centuries.

"French traders were already visiting Oman in the 18th century. We signed our first bilateral agreement in 1807. We had a consul in Muscat at the end of the 19th century. His residence was turned into a French-Omani museum by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said - a rare gesture and a symbol of friendship between our countries," H E Veronique said.

'Strong legacy, but a legacy is not enough'

The relations, she added, are as strong as ever. "We have a strong legacy. But a legacy is not enough. Since His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik took office, we have been working to deepen our partnership. Our military and security cooperation is growing, in connection with Oman's strategic location and French military's important presence in the region and the Indian Ocean. We have at least one navy vessel visiting each month and holding regular joint training."

On people-to-people contact, H E Veronique said that such contacts are the backbone of bilateral ties between countries. "The pandemic has badly affected people-to-people contact all over the world. However, tourism on both sides is rapidly picking up."

In 2019, almost 70,000 French tourists visited Oman, which places France among the top European visiting nations. "We are also attracting more and more Omani students, through successful scholarship programmes, notably for doctors. We are working with the Ministry of Education to scale up the teaching of French in Omani public schools," she added.

'We do speak English'

H E Veronique informed that France is a growing tourism destination for Omanis. "Paris, Disneyland and Côte d'Azur (the French Riviera) are the most attractive spots. Their main interests are entertainment, culture, shopping, gastronomy and coastal tourism. I strongly encourage everyone to visit France, the number one destination in the world. And yes, we do speak English!" she declared.

On plans to make travel to France easier, H E Veronique said Omanis already benefit from

an easier and more generous visa issuing process in comparison with other nationalities. "The processing time for their application is shorter - few days. First time applicants may receive a two-year visa provided that they meet the requirements. The validity can be up to five years on a renewal," she said.

In addition, the EU recently started preliminary discussions on a mutual visa waiver with Omani authorities. "France is very supportive. We put it on the agenda during our Presidency of the European Union, which just came to an end. I am hopeful that a decision on the launching of negotiations can be reached in the coming months. In any case, the process would take some time."

On what Oman can do to attract more visitors from France, H E Veronique said the sultanate has a very effective marketing campaign in France resulting in a surge of French tourists. "Direct

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H E VERONIQUE AULAGNON

flights operated by Oman Air and now Air France are essential," she said.

"However, having discussed the matter at length with tourism agencies, I believe that there are three things that Oman could do to attract more visitors from France. First, provide more middle range accommodations - Oman is an expensive destination. Secondly, improve the offer; better services along the well identified tourism routes - good restaurants, modern gas stations and high profile cultural festivals. Thirdly, revisit the matter of

super taxes on certain goods and the closure of many restaurants during Ramadan. I am aware that this is a sensitive issue, but it is my responsibility to flag its negative impact on tourism from France."

'Imports from Oman multiplied seven times last year'

Trade between Oman and France has grown over the last ten years. It has amounted to between €250mn and €600mn a year. It reached over €300mn in 2021, which was a ten per cent

increase compared to 2020, after a sharp drop in 2020 because of the pandemic.

"The new element here is that imports from Oman to France multiplied by seven last year. France imports mostly oil refined products from Oman, while France mostly exports aircrafts, military equipment, machines, medicines, cosmetics and luxury goods."

H E Veronique said her country is encouraging French companies to increase their footprint in Oman. "They already have major market shares in sectors

such as energy production, water desalination, waste management, military and security equipment, and sophisticated infrastructures."

But they are also investing in new areas such as fisheries - the French Port of Lorient is part of a consortium to build and operate the fishery port of Duqm, renewable energy and possibly also green hydrogen. "There is also strong interest for tourism, agribusiness and health," she added.

On how Oman is collaborating with France in renewable energy, H E Veronique said, "Oman has a target of deriving 30 per cent electricity from renewable sources by 2030, against less than one per cent in 2018. To achieve this goal, the authorities need to aggressively bring new solar and wind power plants to the grid. In addition, Oman has a strong potential to produce green hydrogen, with significant benefits in the medium to long

term for Oman's carbon footprint and its economy," she said.

"French companies already have a strong footprint in the energy sector in Oman, and they are ideally positioned to invest in renewable energy. Two of them were prequalified to build and operate the new Manah I and II solar plants, and I hope that they will soon receive good news."

H E Veronique informed that French companies are also investing outside the scheme of government backed power purchase agreements because they need to meet more and more stringent corporate decarbonation targets.

"Since the Paris Climate Conference, it has become more and more difficult for an internationally listed company to continue with business as usual. And rightly so. In Oman, Veolia, partnering with TotalEnergies, will soon be operating the first desalination plant in the country powered by solar energy, and this is only a first step," she said.

"Total Energies is also positioning itself as a player in the 'solar energy for business' market. Last but not least, our companies are looking at opportunities in the green hydrogen sector, in Oman and in the region."

'No 1 destination for foreign investors in Europe'

On investment opportunities for Omanis in France, H E Veronique said, "France is the number one destination for foreign investors in Europe. Most attractive sectors for investment are commerce and distribution, digital services, advisory and services to companies, health, and the car industry. Investments to France from the Gulf region are booming, with a strong interest for hospitality and luxury, and also financial services and new technologies.

"In Oman, French investment is stable, and it is closely related to the presence of over 40 French companies. Now that the Omani economy is recovering and decisions by the government on tenders are expected soon, we foresee French investment to grow in the coming years. However, in a competitive regional environment, further action to improve the business environment would make a big difference."

Speaking about Oman's peace-building efforts, H E Veronique said, "Thanks to its good relationships with all its neighbours and partners, Oman has the diplomatic capital to engage successfully in peace making.

"It played a significant role to start the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. It has done a lot to support the first extension of the truce in Yemen and has definitely an important role to play to help the Special Envoy of the United Nations to obtain a new extension of the truce beyond August 2 and an agreement on the opening of the roads around Ta'izz."

@shaddadm

Registration now open for 2022 Manafa'a Programme

Muscat - Mawarid (Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Centre) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in cooperation with Environment Authority, has announced that registration is now open for the 2022 Manafa'a Programme.

In its fifth year, the programme aims to support and encourage ideas that will contribute to reducing air pollution and climate change. It will cover areas encompassing artificial intelligence applications and technologies, medical and therapeutic products, clean energy production,

energy efficiency, eco-friendly air purification systems and products as well as innovations and systems that contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

This year, the programme is being implemented within a strategic partnership with the Innovation and Technology Transfer Centre at Sultan Qaboos University and Falha Investment Company. Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) is the main sponsor and Vale in Oman is golden sponsor.

Interested applicants can reg-

ister through Mawarid's website (www.mawarid.gov.om/manafa'a) until September 22.

Applicants should be Omani or residing in the sultanate, older than 18 years and capable of developing their idea or product.

Teams should consist of two to four members, none of who should have won in the previous two editions of the programme. The proposed idea must be realistic, applicable and innovative, not be subject to any intellectual property rights, and the genetic resources used must be original or registered in the sultanate.

PARS AIR TO OPERATE WEEKLY FLIGHT TO MUSCAT



The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has given permission to Iran's Pars Air to operate a weekly flight to Muscat. 'The authority issued its approval for Iranian Pars Air to operate one weekly flight from Rasht International Airport in northern Iran to Muscat International Airport, starting from July 21, 2022,' CAA said in a statement (Supplied photo)

REGIONAL WEATHER

	Max	Min
Muscat	38	29
Abu Dhabi	42	31
Doha	38	28
Kuwait City	44	32
Manama	38	29
Riyadh	43	28

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	4.03am
Sunrise	5.29am
Duhr	12.18pm
Asr	3.38pm
Maghrib	7.02pm
Isha	8.23pm

Lensmen freeze frame traditions of Eid al Adha

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Omani photographers have captured colourful and lively images of Eid al Adha celebrations across the sultanate.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Majed al Amri from Amerat said that he is always on the lookout for mass congregations as these provide an opportunity to click interesting images.

"I took several pictures of people of Amerat gathering for Eid celebrations. People go to the local mosque or join any other prayer gathering for Eid prayers, after which they exchange greetings and wishes. People visit their relatives after prayers to exchange Eid greetings," Amri said.

Joy of children

The rains in several parts of Oman in the last few days provided the perfect setting for photographer Moosa al Hajri.

"My pictures show the joy of children during Eid in the wilayat of Al Qabel, dresses in traditional Omani costumes of bright colours. What added to their joy was the weather as they roamed the streets after the rains."

Show of riding skills

Abdul Rahman Ali al Hinai loves capturing images of Omani customs, especially traditions involving horses and camel.

On the third day of Eid al Adha, Hinai took pictures of a traditional event in the wilayat of Ibra called Ghayit Shuwa.

"After lunch, families gathered to celebrate Eid at the event venue with activities such as horse and camel shows, called ardhah," said Hinai.

"The event included traditional cultural programmes of poetry recitation and folk song and dance performances."

Both male and female jockeys performed a variety of impressive and thrilling displays of horse and camel riding skills and daredevilry in the ardhah dressed in traditional attire

MOOSA AL HAJRI



MAJED AL AMRI



ABDUL RAHMAN ALI AL HINAI

CDAA receives 386 emergency calls during rain-hit Eid holiday

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) received 386 rescue calls during the air depression until July 13.

In a statement, CDAA said, 'The water rescue department received 34 reports of people stuck in wadis and rescued 40 people. Firefighting teams dealt with 74 reports, while ambulance teams responded to 254 reports, in addition to 12 reports of drowning accidents in wadis, ponds and beaches.'

The authority stressed on the need to follow instructions and alerts issued by officials, not risk attempting to cross wadis and staying away from low-lying areas and electricity poles during the occurrence of such climatic conditions. It also stated that children must be monitored when they leave the house and not swim unsupervised in pools or the sea.

Fine for crossing wadis

Public Prosecution announced that a three-month imprisonment and a fine of RO500 will be imposed for crossing overflowing wadis in the sultanate.

In a statement, it said, 'Deliberately crossing wadis in a manner that puts your life or the lives of other people at risk is an offence punishable by imprisonment for a period up to three months and a fine of up to RO500.'



(Supplied photo)

Tropical depression likely in Arabian Sea, no direct impact on Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tropical depression may form near the coast of the western Indian state of Gujarat in the Arabian Sea this weekend, the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre has warned. The weather disturbance, however, is not expected to directly impact Oman.

The Directorate General of Meteorology stated, 'The latest analysis of the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre indicates probability of a tropical depression formation over

northeast of the Arabian Sea near the coast of Gujarat on Friday and Saturday, with no direct impact over the sultanate for the next three days.'

According to Jason Nicholls, international forecasting manager at AccuWeather, low pressure will form near the Gujarat coast in the next 24 to 48 hours with heavy rain and flooding risk in Gujarat, Maharashtra and parts of Madhya Pradesh through Thursday. "Heavy rain is possible in South Pakistan on Thursday and Friday."

He added that a low-pressure drift across the North Ara-

bian Sea can result in thunderstorms again in the east of Oman and UAE this weekend.

In its forecast for Thursday, the Met Office stated that clear to partly cloudy skies will prevail over all of the governorates. 'There are chances of convective clouds developing and isolated rain and occasional thundershowers associated with downdraft winds and hail affecting the Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining areas towards afternoon.' The coastal areas of Dhofar and adjoining mountains may witness drizzle and isolated rain, it added.

Citizen falls to death from mountain in Al Hamra

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The body of a citizen who fell from Jabal Hat mountain in the wilayat of Al Hamra was recovered on Tuesday.

A Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority official said, "Teams of the Department of Civil Defence and Ambulances

in Dakhliyah responded to a call about a citizen falling from Jabal Hat mountain. The teams were able to reach the site despite the difficult mountainous terrain and retrieve the body."

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

In a statement, CDAA said, 'Before you start your adventure, register the location and the participants on Nidaa.'

'Adventure seekers should take advantage of the app as it is meant to ensure that rescue teams arrive soon in the event of an emergency.' The app can be downloaded from <https://t.co/UTfDU5JHUK>

TRA issues plan for contingency management

Muscat - Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has issued a decision (No 107) setting regulations for the management of emergency cases.

The decision deals with the obligations of Segment 1 and Segment 2 personnel tasked with handling contingencies. The guidelines in the decision help achieve quick response and



maintain sustainability of basic communications in emergency conditions.

It also provides for integration among the departments concerned to realise the unification of efforts and restoration of services in the shortest possible time.

The decision also deals with the provision of necessary

equipment and human resources at emergency operation centres.

During emergency cases, the telecommunications sector joins hands with the National Committee for Management of Emergencies - a standard measure to tackle any probable negative impacts. ONA

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FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian Rs	207.24
Pakistani Rs	547.75
Bangladeshi taka	244.03
Philippines peso	146.48
Sri Lankan Rs	928.78

*Rates as on JULY 13
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

India accuses Oppo of evading \$551mn in import tax

Indian authorities Wednesday accused Chinese smartphone maker Oppo of evading customs duty worth US\$551mn, the latest tech company from China to face scrutiny by local investigative agencies.

India's Directorate Of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) found evidence that Oppo wrongfully used duty exemptions for items imported for use in mobile phone production, a government statement said as reported by AFP.

DRI officials searched Oppo India offices and key managers' residences, it said, and recovered "evidence indicating wilful mis-declaration in the description of certain items imported by Oppo India for use in the manufacture of mobile phones".

The searches make Oppo the latest Chinese tech company to come under New Delhi's spotlight, after similar raids against Vivo, Xiaomi and Huawei earlier this year.

Oppo, which is owned by China's BBK Electronics, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Insurance premiums rise 3% to RO480mn in Oman

Assets of insurance firms increased 7.5% to RO1.2bn

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Aggregate gross written premiums of insurance companies operating in Oman increased by 3 per cent to RO479.85mn for the year 2021 compared with RO465.89mn recorded in the previous year, the data released by Capital Market Authority (CMA) showed on Wednesday.

The data indicated that the rise in total premiums was mainly contributed by growth in life insurance, family takaful and health insurance segments during last year, while general insurance segment showed a mild increase in premiums.

Gross direct premiums of general insurance inched up 0.7 per cent to RO258.67mn in 2021 compared to RO256.95mn in the previous year.

On the other hand, life insurance and family takaful premiums grew by 6.6 per cent to RO57.321mn in 2021 from RO53.752mn recorded in 2020. Gross direct premiums for health insurance segment rose 5.6 per cent to RO163.866mn compared with RO155.193mn in the previous year.

Insurance compensations paid by insurers marginally increased by 0.1 per cent in 2021 compared to the 2020 figures. Total compensations paid by insurers stood at RO289.83mn for 2021 as compared to RO289.6mn in 2020.



Total compensations paid for general insurance policies dropped 8.4 per cent to RO125.522mn in 2021 compared with RO136.975mn in 2020. Compensations paid for life insurance/family takaful increased 38.6 per cent in 2021, while compensations paid for health insurance decreased 0.5 per cent.

Takaful premiums up 9.1%

Gross direct premiums of takaful (Islamic insurance) companies operating in the sultanate increased by 9.1 per cent to RO70.78mn in 2021 from RO64.85mn in 2020. Takaful premiums currently represent approximately 15 per cent of total premiums of the insurance sector in Oman, the CMA data showed.

Gross direct premiums for general takaful increased to RO44.16mn in 2021 from RO41.42mn in the previous year, while premiums for family takaful increased 10.8 per cent to RO13.47mn. Gross premiums for health takaful rose 16.7 per cent to RO13.15mn in 2021 compared to RO11.27mn a year ago.

Total takaful compensations paid by takaful insurers increased 13.7 per cent to RO38.392mn in 2021 compared to RO33.777mn in the previous year, which constitutes 13 per cent of the total compensations paid by insurance companies in Oman.

Insurers' assets reach RO1.2bn

Total assets of insurance companies in Oman increased by 7.5

per cent year-on-year to RO1.197bn at the end of 2021. Of the total assets, RO767.64mn were related to general insurance, RO219.97mn were related to life insurance, and RO209.95mn assets were related to health insurance.

The assets of national insurance companies accounted for RO872.48mn or 72.8 per cent of the total, while foreign insurance companies accounted for RO325mn worth of assets or 27.2 per cent of the total assets.

Total net profits of insurance companies dropped by 47 per cent to RO25.76mn in 2021 from RO48.54mn recorded in 2020. The profits of foreign insurance companies were about RO8.07mn in 2021 compared to RO14.938mn in 2020, a decrease of 46 per cent.



Oman crude price falls below \$100 for first time in three months

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Oman crude oil futures closed Wednesday under US\$100 per barrel for the first time in three months as global recession worries cloud the near-term outlook for oil demand.

Oman crude price for September delivery dropped 3.3 per cent to US\$98.95 per barrel on Wednesday at the Dubai Mercantile Exchange.

Global oil benchmarks Brent crude and WTI had closed Tuesday under US\$100 a barrel for the first time since April. Brent crude for September delivery tumbled 7.1 per cent to US\$99.49 a barrel as the market focused on worries about further China Covid-19 restrictions and the slowdown in Europe and the United States.

The US benchmark, West Texas Intermediate, fell 7.9 per cent to finish at US\$95.84 a barrel on Tuesday. Both Brent and WTI edged up on Wednesday and gains were limited by a US

supply report showing rising inventories and caution ahead of US inflation data.

The drop in Brent below the psychologically important US\$100 level came shortly after the euro currency fell to parity with the US dollar for the first time in nearly 20 years Russia cut off gas supplies to Europe, heightening fears of a recession in the eurozone.

The drop in the currency market is "raising concerns that Europe is going into recession, and that they're going to have to raise interest rates, which could slow the demand for oil," said Andy Lipow of Lipow Oil Associates.

"There's also concerns about China shutting down."

Despite worries about the weakening economic outlook, analysts have cautioned that global oil inventories remain low by historic standards, meaning the market could have a tough time meeting demand if there is a supply disruption.

(With inputs from AFP)

Fitch affirms OQ's rating at 'BB-'

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Fitch Ratings has affirmed Oman's global integrated energy company OQ's long-term issuer default rating (IDR) at 'BB-' with stable outlook.

OQ's issuer default rating is equalised with that of Oman (BB-/stable) to reflect Fitch's view of strong links between OQ and the state, Fitch Ratings said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Under our government-related entities (GRE) rating criteria we assess OQ's status, ownership and control, support track record and socio-political implications of default as 'strong' while financial implications of default as 'very strong'. This assessment results in a support score of 40 out of a maximum of 60," Fitch said.

Fitch has also revised up OQ's standalone credit profile (SCP) to 'b+' from 'b' to reflect successful project execution in both the upstream and downstream



segments, alongside stronger financial performance on higher oil and gas prices as well as refining and petrochemical margin leading to lower net leverage expectations.

"OQ's SCP also reflects its solid business profile with integrated operations spanning exploration and production, refining, marketing, chemical and petrochemical segments. OQ's SCP continues to be constrained by its complex group

structure," the ratings agency said.

Fitch noted that OQ completed the construction of its US\$6.9bn Liwa Plastics Industries Complex (LPIC) project in 2021 that will annually produce 880,000 tonnes polyethylene and 300,000 tonnes polypropylene. Other key OQ downstream projects include the US\$8.3bn Duqm Refinery with 230,000 barrels per day capacity that is expected to be commissioned in

2023 (over 90 per cent completed).

"OQ plans to focus on investment projects already in the pipeline and has suspended some planned large investments, such as a petrochemical plant at the Duqm Refinery.

Still sizeable capital expenditure earmarked for 2022-2026 of US\$6.2bn is mainly for maintaining output at OQ's oil and gas exploration and production arm," the ratings agency added.

Supply risks still haunt market despite high oil prices: IEA

Paris, France – High oil prices have yet to dampen demand which is set to continue rising and may soon outstrip supply, the International Energy Agency warned Wednesday.

It cautioned that the global economic recovery could be derailed unless governments take measures to reduce consumption and fuel prices that pose a threat to stability in some nations.

"Without strong policy intervention on energy use, risks remain high that the world economy falls off-track for recovery," the Paris-based agency that advises industrialised nations on energy policy said in its latest monthly report on oil markets.

Oil prices have surged from around US\$80 per barrel earlier this year to over

US\$120 at times as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sparked supply concerns and the reopening of China's economy from Covid lockdowns has boosted demand.

If high petrol prices have started to dent demand in industrialised nations, the IEA said this has been counterbalanced by larger-than-expected rebounds in demand by China and some emerging and developing nations.

The IEA now expects oil demand to rise this year to 99.2mn barrels per day (bpd) and to 101.3mn bpd next year.

Meanwhile, supply climbs to 100.1mn bpd this year. But even if it hits an expected record of 101.1mn bpd next year, it will fall below demand.

The IEA noted that the world has little spare capacity to increase production, with the combined buffer of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates set to fall to just 2.2mn bpd in August.

It said the production of OPEC+ nations could even fall next year if Russia's supply is impacted as expected by tightening international sanctions.

Coupled with tight refinery margins causing imbalances in certain product markets and putting upward pressure on prices, "it may be up to demand side measures to bring down consumption and fuel costs that pose a threat to stability, most notably in emerging markets," the IEA said.

AFP

Global economic outlook has 'darkened significantly': IMF

Washington, US – The global economic outlook has "darkened significantly" and could deteriorate further, the IMF's managing director said Wednesday, citing Russia's war in Ukraine and the rapid inflation it has caused, threatening widespread hunger and poverty.

The warning comes just months after the IMF already cut its global growth forecast for 2022 and 2023.

The Ukraine war hit as the world was struggling to recover from the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and has caused an acceleration of inflation that endangers the gains of

the past two years.

The international crisis-lender is "projecting a further downgrade to global growth" in 2022 and 2023, Kristalina Georgieva said in a blog post published ahead of the meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bankers, scheduled for Friday and Saturday in Bali.

"It is going to be a tough 2022 – and possibly an even tougher 2023, with increased risk of recession," she wrote.

The IMF is due to release its updated World Economic Outlook later this month, which Georgieva said will further downgrade the estimate for global

growth from the April estimate of 3.6 per cent.

"We warned this could get worse given potential downside risks. Since then, several of those risks have materialized – and the multiple crises facing the world have intensified," she said.

The outlook remains "extremely uncertain," and Georgieva warned that the poorest will be hit the hardest.

The risk of "social instability" was also increasing due to food and energy prices rising.

'Multilateral' cooperation

After a decade of low inflation,



prices worldwide have surged amid strong demand for goods that outstripped supply as

economies began to return to normal, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February and the sanctions imposed on Moscow pushed fuel and food prices up sharply.

Ukraine and Russia are major grain producers, and Russia also is a key source of energy for Europe, and has throttled back natural gas supply to the region.

Inflation also has complicated policymaking: major central banks are raising interest rates to contain prices, but that increases borrowing costs for emerging markets and developing nations, which face high debt burdens.

But Georgieva said fighting

the price surge is critical, despite the recession risk. "Acting now will hurt less than acting later."

Offsetting the effects of the war and the pandemic are top priorities, which can only be addressed through "multilateral" financial aid and debt relief, she said.

"Reducing debt is an urgent necessity – especially in emerging and developing economies with liabilities denominated in foreign exchange that are more vulnerable to tightening global financial conditions."

Georgieva stressed the top priorities were bringing down inflation, including through govern-

ment spending cuts that would aid central bank efforts.

She called on the G20 to boost "coordinated international action," including wealthier countries providing essential aid to poorer ones.

Most of the world's economies are "completely shut out" from global markets due to financial pressures, and lack the safety net of a large domestic market, Georgieva warned.

"They are calling on the international community to come up with bold measures to support their people. This is a call we need to heed."

AFP

Green British technology launched in Muscat

At the invitation of British Ambassador H E Bill Murray, the UK government hosted an event at the Diplomatic Club in Muscat to launch a new and patented green British technology into the Omani market.

This unique and environmentally friendly technology which has multiple commercial applications uses a dual fuel delivery system that is capable of drastically reducing environmental carbon emissions and fuel costs for the consumer.

G-volution the British company behind this technology gave a presentation on its use to local Omani companies and investors at the event. The company which already claims a world first in the development of diesel-CNG and diesel-LPG for use in the UK railway system hopes to bring this technology to the MENA region starting with the Sultanate of Oman.

This will ensure that the sultanate will have the opportunity to be the regional leader in environmental and climate change preservation by introducing this



type of technology to its Marine, Genset and HGV diesel infrastructure.

"The Sultanate of Oman will not only be a gateway to the GCC but due to its unique geography and political leadership, this great nation will spearhead the development of green technology in the often-neglected marine ecology by being a hub

for change in the Middle East, East Africa and even as far afield as the Maldives," said Dean M Junayed Miah, Director of Xpronet, Global Partner for G-volution.

The British company will seek to develop organic waste to biomethane by introducing a circular economy infrastructure that will complement its dual fuel

strategy.

"In a time of continuing global energy security concerns and climate change there is no better opportunity for a nation to use its own resources for energy independence," said Chris Smith, MD of G-volution.

"The sultanate has an abundance of feedstock wastage from its enormous poultry and fishery

industry which can ensure future job creationism as well as greener and more sustainable bio-fuel production for generations of Omanis," he added.

The historic relationship between Her Majesty's government and the Sultanate of Oman has always been one of mutual respect, friendship, and security. In a post-Brexit and post-COVID

era, it is important free trade between both nations incorporates inward and outward investments and developing together a greener sustainable technology.

"I am delighted to support G-volution's green technology that is in line with the UK government's energy strategy and commitment to net zero by 2050," said Michael Eyley, Director of

Trade and Investment - Oman.

"G-volution and Xpronet's partnership in Oman with Global Energy United presents a unique investment opportunity both for Oman and the UK. This partnership is aligned with Vision 2040 and the UK-Oman Sovereign Investment Partnership, enabling Oman to take a lead in using this technology to deliver widespread sustainable benefits including creating jobs," Eyley added.

During their visit, the British delegation met with various Omani companies and investors where discussions took place regarding the development of the dual fuel technology to encompass not only Oman but to explore opportunities for exporting the technology from the Sultanate to the region in general.

This would not only aid in the creation of more jobs for Omani youths but would provide an opportunity for the Sultanate to lead the Arab world in climate change preservation and for it to take centre stage in the upcoming COP27, to be held later this year at Sharm al Sheikh in Egypt.



Bentley conducts women mentoring programme

Bentley has successfully completed its first 'Extraordinary Women' mentorship programme, with the visit of five members of its first cohort to Bentley's headquarters in Cheshire.

The programme is designed to inspire the next generation of women talent and has engaged female students in the fields of technology, engineering, design and business, at partner universities in the Middle East and the UK.

During a week-long programme of activity, the students had the opportunity to explore various aspects of Bentley's manufacturing operations in

Crewe, learn more about products and business strategy, join panel talks with senior leaders and trainees from Bentley's early careers cohort and pitch their project ideas to colleagues from the Sales and Marketing team.

Member of the Board for Human Resources, Dr Karen Lange, explained: "Women remain under-represented in many key areas of our business, so as part of our Beyond 100 goals, we are extending our efforts to reach female students - particularly those studying STEM topics - and offer them insights into our business and the wide-range of careers that we offer.

"We are delighted that our

first visit and mentoring programme has been a success and I particularly enjoyed meeting with the students and seeing how they applied their academic insights to the business challenges we set them. We will use their input and feedback from the week to improve our outreach activities further still."

Sara Almarzooqi, who is studying Computer Science at the American University in Sharjah, said: "It's been a privilege to have participated in the first-ever Forces of Inspiration Mentoring Programme."

The next chapter of Extraordinary Women will soon be introduced in Saudi Arabia.

Omani engineers train in crane operation in Ireland; next training in Port of Duqm

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), in cooperation with the Irish company Liebherr for the manufacture and supply of cranes for the Port of Duqm, organised a training programme for four young Omani engineers, including one woman engineer holding diplomas and bachelor's degrees in mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and related technical disciplines.

The nine-month long training included teaching and qualifying engineers in an Irish university to complete all technical skills and basic practical experience necessary for understanding crane components, operation, and maintenance.

The programme also included practical training at specialised manufacturing sites for these cranes. The remaining part of the training programme will be held at the Port of Duqm during the installation period.

Commenting on this programme, Eng Ahmed Akak from the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones said that the programme came in line with the authority's belief in the importance of empowering Omani youth in various fields, es-



pecially specialised technical works in order to build qualified national competencies to operate and manage various operational works in the areas affiliated with the authority.

The authority was keen to send trainees to the Irish company that manufactured these cranes to qualify them in the field of managing and operating these state-of-the-art cranes that are characterised by automation and remote control system.

The trainee, Nasra Salem al Majrafi, said, "The training programme was an enriching opportunity, as we were able to acquire many technical skills in various fields such as security, safety and

programming, in addition to increasing our practical and personal skills in communication, time management, business, organising and arranging priorities, work ethics, problem-solving and crisis management skills at work."

Trainee Ahmed Saeed al Maharbi valued the efforts made by both OPAZ and the Irish company to provide this training, which enabled the trainees to learn more about the technologies and technical specifications of bridge cranes (RTG) and container cranes, their operation mechanisms and remote control.

He pointed out that they will undergo practical training on the

same cranes after installing the cranes and commencing operation in the Port of Duqm; which will contribute to empowering them scientifically and professionally by applying what they have studied theoretically and practically during the training programme in Ireland.

The trainees passed the specified period of training successfully and have proven their competencies and abilities for the next stage of their work mission. Coordination has been made with the competent authorities to hire the trainees as operators of equipment and cranes at the Port of Duqm, after fulfilling all training requirements.

'Summer in Qatar' campaign kicks off today

Qatar Tourism's 'Summer in Qatar' campaign that features a whirlwind of shows and exciting indoor entertainment is beginning on Thursday and will last all summer.

Coinciding with Eid al Adha, the events can be easily attended by GCC residents thanks to lifted public health measures and attractive promotional packages during the festive season.

With direct flights to Doha averaging one to two hours and the option to drive in for those who prefer travel by road, visa-free travel for citizens of over 95 countries including those of the GCC, and national health apps that are compatible with Qatar (Tawakkalna, Shlonik, Al Hosn, BeAware Bahrain and Tarassud), families are invited to enjoy an active and hassle-free holiday within close proximity.

Commenting on the upcoming packages tailored to GCC nationals and residents, Berthold Trenkel, Chief Operating Officer



at Qatar Tourism (QT) said, "We are pleased to offer all-encompassing experiences to our visitors from the region. Over this precious time with family and friends, we invite GCC nationals and residents to explore what Qatar has to offer through our special travel-and-stay packages and attractive roster of tours and excursions."

Family friendly entertainment

Starting on Thursday, audiences can delight in three spectacular

shows set to take place at the Lusail Arena. The *Alice in Wonderland - Cirque Show* (from July 14 to 16) tells the tale of Alice as she tumbles into a land of unexpected adventure and fairytale. The spectacular performance sees a swirling mix of musical theatre, ballet, and acrobatics. To follow is the *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp - Cirque Show* (July 21-23), which plays out as a grandiose circus and musical performance, complete with extravagant costumes. Finally, *The Smurfs - Live on Stage* (July 28-30) will entertain kids as they watch the Smurfs cheerfully prepare for their favourite time of year, the annual Spring parade. Tickets start at QAR145 (RO15.33 approx).

The campaign by Qatar Tourism with the tagline - 'This is your summer,' - also highlights popular activities in Qatar that are available year-round, including theme parks, water sports, and cultural destinations.

Qatar Airways travel packages

Qatar Airways has launched several promo packages that wrap-up every travel aspect including round-trip flights, hotel stays and tailored experiences. For families, adventurous travellers or thrill seekers, packages highlight tickets to the different attractions, whether it is tickets to the family-friendly live shows ('The Family Package'), a viewing of one of the world's largest aggregation of whale sharks from a catamaran ('Whale Sharks Package'), entry to the Desert Falls waterpark featuring more than 50 rides and a stay at the adjacent Hilton Salwa Beach Hotel and Villas ('Water Park Package') or tickets to the thrilling indoor theme park, Quest, and the neighbouring Banyan tree hotel ('Theme Park Package'). Packages can be found on the Qatar Airways page <https://www.qatarairways.holidays.com/om-en/offers/qatar-holiday-deals/>

Kaspersky Safe Kids certified for protecting from adult stuff

Kaspersky Safe Kids for Windows has received an 'Approved' certificate from AV-Comparatives, the independent testing organisation, for its ability to protect kids from adult content.

According to test results, Kaspersky Safe Kids blocked 98.6 per cent of adult websites. For the second year in a row, this was the only parental control solution out of those submitted that could reach the certification requirements.

In order to be certified by AV-Comparatives, a product must block more than 98 per cent of adult websites, have zero false alarms on child-friendly sites, and have no severely unresolved bugs or design flaws. For this report, AV-Comparatives tested parental control solutions against 1000 sites with adult content and checked the response from 100 obviously child-friendly webpages for false positives.



Along with Kaspersky Safe Kids' ability to block adult content, AV-Comparatives highlighted the almost instantaneous speed at which settings applied through the console are activated on a child's device. Besides the report praised Kaspersky's solution for being straightforward to install and very easy to configure using the cloud console.

AV-Comparatives also mentioned the flexibility of configuring time limits, among other key features. Parents can choose in-

dividual settings for different days or set these to change between weekdays and weekends. In addition, Kaspersky Safe Kids provides parents with a wide range of monitoring and control functions.

"Kaspersky Safe Kids for Windows has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness, and is the only parental control solution to have reached our strict certification level two years in a row," said Andreas Clementi, CEO and founder of AV-Comparatives.

Sri Lanka president flees, protesters storm PM's office

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Protesters in Sri Lanka defied tear gas, water cannon and a state of emergency to storm the prime minister's office on Wednesday after the president fled overseas, with the crowd demanding both men step down in the face of an economic crisis.

In a televised statement Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he had instructed the military and police to do 'what is necessary to restore order'.

But footage showed armed security personnel standing by in the grounds of his office as protesters, some holding national flags, milled and took pictures.

Other demonstrators at one point broke into state television studios, as the country's months-long political and economic crisis appeared to be moving towards a climax.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa promised at the weekend to resign on Wednesday after escaping his own official residence in Colombo just before tens of thousands of protesters overran it.

As president, Rajapaksa enjoys immunity from arrest, and he is believed to have wanted to go abroad before stepping down to avoid the possibility of being detained. The 73-year-old, his wife and two bodyguards took a military aircraft to the neighbouring Maldives, immigration sources told AFP.

Hours later, with no formal announcement he was stepping down, thousands of demonstrators mobbed the office of Wickremesinghe - whom Rajapaksa named as acting president during his absence - demanding both officeholders should go.

"Go home Ranil, Go home Gota," they shouted.

Tear gas and water cannon fired by police and the declaration of both a nationwide state of emergency and a curfew failed to



Demonstrators shout slogans inside the office building of Sri Lanka's prime minister during an anti-government protest in Colombo on Wednesday (AFP)

Rajapaksa and his wife, besides two bodyguards took a military aircraft to the neighbouring country of Maldives

disperse them and the crowd poured into the building.

Wickremesinghe, also 73, would automatically become acting president if Rajapaksa steps down, but has himself announced his willingness to resign if consensus is reached on forming a unity government.

"We can't tear up our constitution," he said in his statement. "We can't allow fascists to take over. We must end this fascist threat to democracy," he said, adding that the official buildings occupied by protesters must be returned to state control.

The protesters' actions were a repeat of the capture of Presi-

dent Gotabaya Rajapaksa's home and office on Saturday, when Wickremesinghe's private home was also set ablaze.

The prime minister's office confirmed that Rajapaksa had left the country, but said it had no schedule for any presidential resignation announcement.

The succession process could take between three days - the minimum time needed for parliament to elect an MP to serve out Rajapaksa's term, which ends in November 2024 - and a maximum of 30 days allowed under the statute.

A complicated exit
Rajapaksa is accused of mismanaging the economy to a point where the country ran out of foreign exchange to finance even the most essential imports, leading to severe hardships for its 22mn people.

Earlier on Wednesday, smiling Sri Lankans again thronged the corridors of the president's official residence after his departure,

with young couples walking around hand in hand in a mood of quiet celebration.

"People are very happy, because these people robbed our country," said retired civil servant Kingsley Samarakoon, 74.

"They've stolen too much money, billions and billions." But he held little hope for an immediate improvement in Sri Lanka's plight.

"How are people going to run the country without money?" he asked. "It's a problem."

Sri Lanka defaulted on its US\$51bn foreign debt in April and is in talks with the IMF for a possible bailout.

The island has nearly exhausted its already scarce supplies of petrol. The government has ordered the closure of non-essential offices and schools to reduce commuting and save fuel.

The departure of Rajapaksa, 73 and once known as 'The Terminator', had been stymied for more than 24 hours in a humiliating standoff with immigration

personnel in Colombo.

He had wanted to fly to Dubai on a commercial flight, but staff at Bandaranaike International withdrew from VIP services and insisted that all passengers had to go through public counters.

On arrival in the Maldives on Wednesday, Rajapaksa was driven to an undisclosed location under police escort, an airport official in the capital Male said.

His youngest brother Basil, who resigned in April as finance minister, missed his own Emirates flight to Dubai on Tuesday after a tense standoff of his own with airport staff.

The leader of the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya party, Sajith Premadasa, who lost the 2019 presidential election to Rajapaksa, has said he will stand for the presidency.

Premadasa is the son of former president Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was assassinated in a Tamil rebel suicide bombing in May 1993.

AFP

First defeat for President Macron's government in French parliament

Paris, France - France's government has suffered its first defeat in parliament after President Emmanuel Macron's ruling party lost its majority in elections last month.

The National Assembly rejected a proposal on Tuesday night to give the government powers to demand travellers show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test when entering France.

The defeat by 219 votes to 195 saw all the major opposition parties - the far-right National Rally (RN), the hard left LFI, and rightwing Republicans (LR) - unite against the minority government.

"The circumstances oblige the government to listen to opposition parties which at the moment it has a few difficulties in doing," top Republicans MP Olivier Marleix told Sud

Radio on Wednesday morning. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne condemned the obstruction and allies sought to stress how the so-called 'extremes' - the far-right and hard-left - had teamed up together.

"Clear collusion between the extremes, each one applauding the other," MP Maud Bregeon from Macron's Republic on the Move wrote on Twitter alongside a video.

Fellow ruling party Remy Rebeyrotte criticised 'an atmosphere like a football match' during the debate where speakers were routinely shouted down. The most senior MP in the hard-left LFI party, Mathilde Panot, referred to ruling party MPs as 'Playmobiles' - an insult comparing them to inanimate toys.

AFP

Terrorism remains a threat to EU: Europol

The Hague, Netherlands - Attacks are down but terrorism remains a threat to the European Union due to the war in Ukraine and a rise in propaganda during the pandemic, Europol said on Wednesday.

The total number of successful, thwarted and failed attacks was 15 in 2021 - significantly lower than 57 the year before, Europol said in its annual report.

This is due to a notable drop in the number of left-wing attacks, said the agency based in The Hague. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic represent a security threat for the years to come, added the docu-

ment. "The report's conclusions confirm that terrorism remains a real and present danger to the EU," Europol chief Catherine De Bolle said in a statement.

"At a time of geopolitical turmoil, the EU must maintain its counter-terrorism measures more than ever," she added.

"There is no doubt that the geopolitical changes and fallout from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine will have a lasting impact on EU security," she said in the report. The war has already attracted several radicalised individuals from the member states who have joined the fight on both sides, she said.

AFP

Migration tops agenda in Biden talks with Mexican president

Washington, US - A month after he snubbed Joe Biden's Americas summit, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador sat down with his US counterpart on Tuesday at the White House, amid rising tensions over migration.

Biden underscored the need to address 'migration as a shared hemispheric challenge' in remarks ahead of the meeting, describing long-time ally and neighbor Mexico as an 'equal partner'.

He said his administration was expanding legal pathways for work in the United States from Mexico and Central America, citing 'a record' 300,000 temporary work visas issued for Mexican workers last year.

And he thanked Lopez Obrador for 'stepping up' and issuing visas for Central American migrants in Mexico.

The Mexican president called for a 'bold programme' to tackle migration issues, calling on the United States - facing a labour shortage - to allow more skilled Mexican and Central American labourers into the country 'to support' the work force.

"It is indispensable for us to regularise and give certainty to migrants who for years have lived and worked in a very honest manner and are also contributing to the development of this great nation," he said.

Lopez Obrador acknowledged likely pushback from US Repub-



US President Joe Biden meets with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in the Oval Office of the White House on Tuesday (AFP)

lican politicians, who frequently claim Biden has left the southern US border unprotected against unauthorised crossings.

The two leaders said in a joint statement after their meeting that Mexico had also committed to invest US\$1.5bn on border infrastructure between 2022 and 2024. Tuesday's talks also touched on security and economic cooperation, including the need to invest in development projects in Central America to deter people from leaving.

The two countries agreed last year to overhaul their fight against drug trafficking to address root causes of migration, and to step up efforts to curb cross-border arms smuggling.

Addressing root causes
Human trafficking was also centre stage following the death late last month of more than 50 mi-

grants - many of them Mexicans - abandoned in a scorching hot trailer in San Antonio, Texas.

The two leaders said in their joint statement that the San Antonio tragedy 'further strengthens our determination to go after the multi-billion-dollar criminal smuggling industry preying on migrants and increase our efforts to address the root causes of migration'. Amid soaring inflation on both sides of the border, Lopez Obrador said he'd suggested suspending tariffs and regulations to 'lower prices for consumers in both our countries'.

He also floated a joint public-private investment plan to produce more goods.

The visit was Lopez Obrador's second to the White House since Biden took office last year, despite a sometimes tense relationship with his US counterpart. AFP

Western Europe wilts under heatwave

Bordeaux, France - France and Britain suffered soaring temperatures on Wednesday, edging closer to the blistering heat already engulfing Spain and Portugal as wildfires destroyed vast stretches of Western European forestland.

Large parts of the Iberian Peninsula have seen temperatures surpassing 40 degrees Celsius this week.

In southwestern France a wildfire raging since Tuesday had ripped through 1,000 hectares of pine trees just south of Bordeaux by Wednesday, prompting the evacuation of 150 residents from their homes.

Near the Dune of Pilat - Europe's tallest sand dune - another fire consumed about 700 hectares of old pine trees, authorities said, with the blaze still not contained.

Regional prefect Fabienne Buccio told reporters that fires were spread out over five kilometres, fuelled by dried-out vegetation. About 6,000 campers near the dune were evacuated as firefighters worked through the night on the sandy terrain.

Further inland, 500 people were evacuated around the village of Guillos as their homes came under threat from advancing fire.

'It was scary'
"There were flames in the top of the trees 30 metres high," mayor Mylene Doreau told AFP. "We could see them moving towards the village, it was scary." Some



A coachman cools off his horse during a heatwave in Seville, Spain on Tuesday (AFP)

600 firefighters have been battling the blazes in the region, aided by waterbomber aircraft.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne warned that the heat, forecast to last 10 days, 'affects people's health very quickly, especially that of the most vulnerable'. Some cities, like Toulouse and Lourdes, have made changes to their Bastille Day celebrations programmes on Thursday to limit the risk of accidental fire, while Nimes cancelled the traditional fireworks altogether.

The prefect of the Paris region, meanwhile, cut the speed limit on motorways and expressways to limit air pollution.

Heatwaves have become more frequent due to climate change, scientists say.

The previous such phenomenon to blight France, Portugal and Spain occurred in mid-June.

'Expect it to worsen'
"We do expect it to worsen," World Meteorological Organization spokeswoman Clare Nullis said on Tuesday.

"Accompanying this heat is drought," she said.

It had also been "a very bad season for the glaciers", she said.

Last week an avalanche triggered by the collapse of the largest glacier in the Italian Alps - due to unusually warm temperatures - killed 11 people.

The high temperatures are expected to spread to other parts of western and central Europe in the coming days.

Britain issued an 'amber' alert - the second highest of three levels - which indicates that the extreme heat will have a 'high impact' on daily life and people. Temperatures are forecast to hit 35C in the southeast of the country in the coming days.

A UK climate official said that there was a rising chance of a new UK record, beating Britain's highest recorded temperature recorded on July 25, 2019 - reaching 38.7C at Cambridge Botanic Garden, in eastern England.

In Spain highs of up to 44C are expected in Guadalquivir valley in Seville in the south in coming days.

Spain's health ministry said people should drink plenty of fluids, wear light clothes and stay in the shade or air-conditioned rooms to avoid their 'vital functions' being affected.

People making a living working outdoors struggled.

"The temperature is a bit oppressive," said Miguel Angel Nunez, a 54-year-old bricklayer at a construction site in central Madrid.

AFP

Biden begins Middle East tour in Israel

US President Joe Biden's first regional tour since taking office will also take him to Saudi Arabia

Tel Aviv, Israel - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday kicked off a Middle East tour in Israel where both sides vowed to deepen the Jewish state's integration in the region as they face their common foe Iran.

Biden - whose first regional tour since taking office will also take him to Saudi Arabia - pledged strong backing for Israel, which has forged ties with several Arab states in recent years and hopes to do so with Riyadh as well.

"We'll continue to advance Israel's integration into the region," Biden said after Air Force One touched down at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv to a red-carpet welcome.

Israel's caretaker prime minister Yair Lapid said that 'we will discuss building a new security and economy architecture with the nations of the Middle East', following US-brokered accords in 2020 with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco.

"And we will discuss the need to renew a strong global coalition that will stop the Iranian nuclear programme," he



Israel's President Isaac Herzog (left) and PM Yair Lapid (centre) listen to US President Joe Biden as he addresses hosts upon his arrival at Ben Gurion Airport in Lod near Tel Aviv, on Wednesday (AFP)

added, amid ongoing efforts by world powers to salvage Iran's frayed 2015 nuclear deal, which Israel opposes.

Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia on Friday will be the major focus of the tour, after he branded the oil-rich kingdom a 'pariah' over the 2018 murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The trip is seen as part of efforts to stabilise oil markets rattled by the war in Ukraine, by

re-engaging with a long-time key US strategic ally and major energy supplier.

Air Force One will make a first direct flight from Israel to Saudi Arabia amid efforts to build ties between the Jewish state and the conservative Gulf kingdom, which does not recognise Israel's existence.

Palestinian anger

Moments after Biden landed, Israel's military was to show him

its new Iron Beam system, an anti-drone laser it claims is crucial to countering Iran's fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles.

Israel insists it will do whatever is necessary to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions, and remains staunchly opposed to a restoration of the 2015 deal that gave Tehran sanctions relief.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi warned earlier on Wednesday that if Biden's goal on the trip was to bolster Israel's security,

he was destined to fail.

If US visits 'to the countries of the region are to strengthen the position of the Zionist regime... their efforts will not create security for the Zionists in any way', Raisi said, referring to Israel.

Israel has raised 1,000 flags across Jerusalem to welcome the US leader, who has not reversed former president Donald Trump's controversial decision to recognise the city as the capi-

tal of the Jewish state. Biden, 79, will also meet Palestinian leaders angered by what they describe as Washington's failure to curb Israeli aggression.

The persistent frustrations of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy are nothing new for Biden, who first visited the region in 1973 after being elected to the Senate.

Palestinians claim Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem as their capital and, ahead of the visit, accused Biden of failing to make

good on his pledge to restore the United States as an honest broker in the conflict.

Jerusalem to Bethlehem

"We only hear empty words and no results," said Jibril Rajoub, a leader of the secular Fatah movement of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Biden will meet Abbas in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem on Friday, but there is no expectation of bold announcements toward a fresh peace process.

Israel for now is again mired in political gridlock ahead of a November 1 parliamentary election, the fifth in less than four years.

Biden is scheduled to have a short meeting on Thursday with Israel's former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will try to reclaim power in the upcoming polls.

US-Palestinian ties have been strained by the May killing of Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh while she was covering an Israeli army raid in the West Bank.

The United Nations has concluded the Palestinian-American journalist was killed by Israeli fire. Washington has agreed this was likely, but also said there was no evidence the killing was intentional.

Abu Akleh's family has voiced outrage over the Biden administration's 'abject response' to her death, and the White House has not commented on their request to meet the president in Jerusalem.

AFP

UK Tories hold first round of voting for new PM

London, UK - Britain's ruling Conservative party on Wednesday began winnowing down the eight candidates vying to succeed Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who hinted the race could be curtailed to last days rather than weeks.

"I will be leaving soon with my head held high," Johnson said at his penultimate session of Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, following a spectacular collapse in cabinet support last week.

Praising his government's economic record, he added: "One of the consolations of leaving office at this particular time is that vacancies are at an all-time high."

Under the election schedule, Johnson's successor as Conservative leader is meant to be announced on September 5, as the party seeks to rebuild its popular support after he was felled by non-stop scandal.

But Johnson suggested the new leader could be elected 'by acclamation' before next week, if the last two candidates agree a deal between them.

Leading contenders have already ruled that out, and Johnson's press secretary told reporters that he was merely noting 'uncertainty' about the race.

She added that the government was filing a Commons vote of confidence in itself, with a debate set for Monday, after rejecting an opposition Labour motion that was designed to evict Johnson sooner.

Labour leader Keir Starmer said Johnson was 'totally deluded to the bitter end' but could take comfort in no longer having to follow the rules set for everyone else - a biting reference to 'Partygate' and other scandals.

In a sign of things to come, Starmer also set his sights on the Tory leadership contenders, including on the complicated tax



Britain's PM Boris Johnson listening to a question during PMQs session at the House of Commons in London on Wednesday (AFP)

I will be leaving soon with my head held high. One of the consolations of leaving office at this particular time is that vacancies are at an all-time high

BORIS JOHNSON

affairs of wealthy frontrunner Rishi Sunak.

Claims of unity

Johnson was forced last week to announce his resignation after a wave of ministerial resignations including by then finance minister Sunak. It was a stunning fall from grace for a politician who secured a landslide election win in December 2019 and took the UK out of the European Union a month later, before the COVID pandemic struck.

Conservative MPs were voting on the eight candidates who survived an initial cull on Tuesday, with a result expected around 1600 GMT on Wednesday.

Those failing to get 30 votes will be eliminated. A series of votes will be held into next week until there are just two left in the race.

Grassroots party members will then be balloted.

While Johnson himself says he will stay above the fray, his remaining loyalists have not held back in rubbishing Sunak, and have been coalescing behind the right-wing foreign secretary, Liz Truss.

Johnson praised the 'eight wonderful candidates', arguing any of them 'would wipe the floor with' Starmer's Labour. "In a few weeks, they will unite around the winner and do just that," he said.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, who withdrew from the race to support Sunak, pushed back at claims from Johnson allies that his candidate had been a "socialist chancellor" for overseeing a massive support package during the pandemic.

Sunak has since been stressing the need to balance the books, in contrast to a free-for-all series of tax cuts promised by leadership rivals that has drawn concern from the Bank of England and independent economists. Sunak came top in Tuesday's list of nominations from Tory MPs, ahead of former defence minister Penny Moradant, Truss and foreign affairs committee chairman Tom Tugendhat.

AFP

Maestro of Alpine climbing dies aged 99

Geneva, Switzerland - Marcel Remy, the grand old man of Swiss Alpinists and one of the oldest active climbers in the world, has died aged 99, newspapers and several specialist websites reported on Wednesday.

"For almost a century you have inspired people all over the world with your unwavering passion for climbing," his sponsor, the Swiss mountain sports company Mammut, said on Instagram. "Merci pour tout (Thanks for everything), Marcel. Climb on in peace."

In 2017, at the age of 94, Remy conquered the Miroir d'Argentine, a Swiss climbing classic with its 500 metres of limestone wall.

Even in his late 90s, he would still tackle the 16-metre high wall at the indoor climbing centre in Villeneuve, southwest Switzerland,



Marcel Remy (AFP)

land, with his oldest son Claude.

Climbing was always a major part of Remy's life. Brought up on tales of the mountains, he loved discovering the great outdoors and the Alps became his playground. Remy worked on the Swiss railways and spent all his

free time in the mountains, taking his two sons with him.

"He was a tough dad. With him it was do or die, whatever the conditions," his son Claude told AFP last year.

Remy passed on his passion for the Alps. Claude and his brother Yves are also well-known in the climbing world.

In August 2020, the top French climbing magazine *Grimper* devoted 40-odd pages to the family's exploits and the most impressive climbs they accomplished together.

In an interview with AFP in June last year, Remy said the secret to his longevity was pacing himself.

"It's the rhythm that you have to take - for breathing, for the movements," he explained.

AFP

'Ukrainian refugees hope for swift return'

Geneva, Switzerland - Most Ukrainian refugees want to return home as soon as possible but expect to stay in their host countries until hostilities subside, according to a United Nations survey on Wednesday.

UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, found that those who have fled abroad to escape Russian war were worried about their future and don't feel they can make long-term plans. UNHCR's figures show that 5,650,000 individual refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe.

AFP

Trump's tweet was a 'call to arms': Committee

Washington, US - Members of right-wing militia groups and other supporters of Donald Trump staged the January 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol after a tweet from the former president seen as a 'call to arms', lawmakers said on Tuesday.

Representative Liz Cheney, vice chair of the House committee investigating the attack on Congress, meanwhile said that the 76-year-old Trump had recently attempted to contact a committee witness.

The witness, who was not identified, did not take the call from Trump and alerted their lawyer, Cheney said, adding that the committee has 'supplied that information to the Department of Justice'. During its seventh televised public hearing, the House committee made up of seven Democrats and two Republicans examined the impact of a tweet that Trump sent on December 19, 2020 urging his supporters to descend on Washington on January 6 for a rally he promised



Former Oath Keepers spokesperson Jason Van Tatenhove (right) and Stephen Ayres, who has pleaded guilty to entering the Capitol illegally, are sworn in before a full committee hearing in Washington, DC, on Tuesday (AFP)

would be 'wild'.

The tweet was sent a little more than an hour after Trump met at the White House with his lawyer Rudy Giuliani, former general Mike Flynn, and Sidney Powell, another attorney, for a strategy meeting that one aide

described as 'unhinged'.

Committee member Jamie Raskin said that Trump's 1:42am tweet electrified and galvanised his supporters, especially the dangerous extremists in the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys and other racist and white na-

tionalist groups spoiling for a fight against the government'.

Members of the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers stormed Congress on January 6 along with thousands of other Trump loyalists.

AFP

United States launches Pacific push with new embassies, regional envoy

Suva, Fiji - The United States launched a major push into the Pacific on Wednesday as it seeks to hold off China's advances in the region, with Vice President Kamala Harris announcing the opening of two new embassies at a key regional summit.

Washington will open missions in Tonga and Kiribati and also appoint its first-ever Pacific regional envoy, Harris said as she pledged US\$600mn in funding for the region in her address to the Pacific Islands Forum in Fiji. The video-link appearance was a diplomatic coup for the United States, with China's attempts to secure a meeting on the sidelines of the summit rebuffed. The forum marks the first time Pacific leaders have met since the Solomon Islands signed a controversial security pact with China earlier this year. And the mounting US-China rivalry in the Pacific has directed intense interest towards this year's meeting, which brings together leaders from across the strategically important region.

Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni told AFP his country was 'really happy that the US will

be opening an embassy in Tonga, it will be the first time'. "It is a big milestone. We are very happy we are finally having a US presence in Tonga," he said. Forum secretary general Henry Puna also welcomed Harris' announcements, calling them 'a breath of fresh air'. "We have a long history of association and friendship with the US. But in recent years, they've gone missing from the region," he told AFP.

US v China

At least one official from the local Chinese embassy was in the room for the vice president's address and was asked to move from an area reserved for media, causing a stir among organisers. Harris said she and President Joe Biden acknowledged the Pacific may not have previously received enough attention or support in the past. "We are going to change that," she promised, adding the United States wanted to 'significantly deepen our presence in the Pacific region'. Washington's Pacific push - backed by a decade-long pledge of US\$60mn annually to the



US Vice President Kamala Harris speaks via video-link to the Pacific Islands Forum in Suva on Wednesday (AFP)

Forum Fisheries Agency and the relaunch of the Peace Corps in the Pacific - reflected a desire to 'embark on a new chapter', Harris said. The United States will also appoint its first-ever regional envoy and launch an inaugural national strategy for the region. Harris said the United States wanted to collaborate on mar-

itime security, disaster relief and infrastructure projects that 'do not result in insurmountable debt' - a subtle swipe at Beijing's lending policies. Pacific expert Tess Cain said 'it was a bit of a surprise that the vice president got that speaking slot', given the forum is traditionally restricted to Pacific leaders, Australia and New Zealand.

Australia arrives

New Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese landed on Wednesday in Fiji to attend the forum, his first visit to the Pacific since his election victory. Albanese will try to mend his nation's fractured relationships within the region after Australia's attempts to muzzle climate change announcements

saw the last forum meeting descend into shouting and tears. "Under the previous Australian government, they simply refused to do anything meaningful on climate change. And this has been felt as a personal affront by a generation of Pacific leaders," Pacific expert Wesley Morgan of the Climate Council said. But US-China rivalry and a shock decision by Kiribati's Beijing-aligned leaders to withdraw from the forum on the eve of the summit have threatened to sideline climate at the talks. Tuvaluan Foreign Minister Simon Kofe told AFP it was 'the responsibility of the Pacific to reaffirm the importance of climate change'. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said there was a need for 'greater transparency' about what China had agreed with the Solomon Islands. The United States and its allies worry China is using security aid to develop a military foothold in the Pacific Islands. Ardern expressed 'deep concern' about any moves that caused 'the militarisation of our region'. AFP

3 held in S Africa tavern tragedy

Johannesburg, South Africa - Police in South Africa said on Wednesday that they had arrested three people following the mysterious deaths last month of 21 young people in a township tavern. The bar's 52-year-old owner and two employees aged 33 and 34 were taken into custody in recent days for allegedly breaching alcohol sale regulations, police said in a statement without naming the arrested. The owner will appear in court on August 19 on charges related to selling or supplying alcohol to minors, while the two employees have each been handed a 2,000-rand (US\$118) fine. The youths, most of them teenagers, died on June 26 at the Enyobeni tavern in Scenery Park, a township in the coastal city of East London, but the cause of their death remains unclear. Survivors have described a battle to escape the jam-packed venue, with one reporting a suffocating smell. The police have yet to wrap up their investigation, and although officials have ruled out a stampede, autopsy results have not yet been made public. AFP



Plaintiffs in the TEPCO shareholder derivative suit, react following the court decision outside the Tokyo District Court on Wednesday (AFP)

Fukushima's ex-bosses to pay \$97bn damages

Tokyo, Japan - A Tokyo court on Wednesday ordered former executives from the operator of the devastated Fukushima nuclear plant to pay 13.32tn yen (\$97bn) for failing to prevent the disaster, plaintiffs said. Four ex-bosses from the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) were ordered to pay the damages in a suit brought by shareholders over the nuclear disaster triggered by a massive tsunami in 2011. Plaintiffs emerged from the Tokyo court holding banners reading 'shareholders win' and 'responsibility recognised'. Lawyers for the plaintiffs hailed the ruling, and said they believed it to be the largest amount of compensation ever awarded in a civil lawsuit in Japan. "Nuclear power plants can cause irreparable damage to human lives and the environment," the plaintiffs said in a separate statement after the ruling. "Executives for firms that operate such nuclear plants bear enormous responsibility, which cannot compare with that of other companies." The shareholders argued that the disaster could have been prevented if TEPCO bosses had listened to research and carried out preventative measures like placing an emergency power source on higher ground. Defendants said the studies they were not credible and the

risks unpredictable. But the court ruled nuclear plant operators have 'an obligation to prevent severe accidents based on the latest scientific and expert engineering knowledge', and the executives failed to heed credible warnings. In a statement read to AFP by a TEPCO spokesman, the firm declined to comment on the ruling, saying only: "We again express our heartfelt apology to people in Fukushima and members of society broadly for causing trouble and worry" with the disaster. The damages are intended to cover the costs to TEPCO for dismantling the reactors, compensating affected residents, and cleaning up contamination. The lawsuit is designed so the money will go to TEPCO itself, which the plaintiffs own partially as shareholders. Hiroyuki Kawai, a lawyer representing the plaintiffs, called the decision 'historic'. "We realise that 13tn yen is well beyond their capacity to pay," he told reporters, adding that the plaintiffs expect the men to pay as much as their assets allow. There was no immediate word on whether the executives would appeal, though the plaintiffs' legal team insisted 'if they have heart to feel regret... they should deeply apologise to residents and follow the judgement without appealing'. AFP

Greece's Real daily and radio firebombed: Company

Athens, Greece - Firebombs exploded at Greece's Real News and Real FM radio sparking a blaze that tore through the outlets' Athens offices, the media group said in a statement on Wednesday. The fire, which began in the early hours, was brought under control after 18 firefighters battled the blaze for two hours with all employees evacuated from the building, the group said. A number of people were taken to hospital with respiratory problems. A police investigation is under way to determine who was behind the incident. A preliminary police account said the remnants of three gas



A Greek police expert investigates after firebombs exploded at Greece's Real News and Real FM radio facilities in Athens on Wednesday (AFP)

canisters were found in the building between the basement and first floors of the office building. Proprietor Nikos Chatzinikolaou said on Twitter he believed the company was deliberately targeted, but did not say by

who. "Explosions and fire at Real FM and Realnews! They're burning us! They are trying to shut us down," he wrote on Twitter. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told the company owner that 'the state will do everything to bring the perpetrators to justice'. "Any attempt to target journalists must be condemned," he added. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said the 'attack on Real FM and Real News, which caused a fire and endangered human lives, is an absolutely reprehensible criminal action, which goes against freedom of expression in our country'.

In February, two incendiary devices exploded outside the homes of a journalist and a police officer in Athens, causing material damage but no casualties. Greece has dropped 38 places in the latest international press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In April 2021, investigative journalist Giorgos Karaivaz was killed in a daylight attack outside his home. Since then, the investigation has made no progress, RSF said. Real News and Real FM are centre-left outlets that offer platforms to opposition but also pro-government voices. AFP

South Korea vows probe of 2019 repatriations

Seoul, South Korea - The South Korean government on Wednesday slammed the controversial 2019 repatriation of two North Koreans, after releasing photos that appeared to show one of them resisting the handover. Then-president Moon Jae-in's administration had expelled the men after investigators said the pair murdered 16 crewmates before taking their fishing boat to South Korean waters. The government said at the time that the men - described by officials as 'dangerous criminals' - had no intent to defect. At least two officials said the pair did not want to stay in South Korea. But images of their transfer at the truce village of Panmunjom, released on Tuesday by the new, conservative government, showed one man desperately resisting the handover. If they were 'forcibly sent' to North Korea, it would be 'a crime against humanity that violates both international law and the Constitution', President Yoon Suk-yeol's spokeswoman Kang In-sun told reporters. The government will 'fully determine the truth behind this case', she said. One image showed a man collapsed on the ground, with of-



One of two alleged North Korean mass murderers, who were deported by Seoul in 2019, appears to physically resist as authorities try to hand him over to Pyongyang officials, via the truce village of Panmunjom (AFP)

officials apparently dragging him to the Military Demarcation Line between the two Koreas. In other photos, the two men appeared tied with ropes and blindfolded before their repatriation. Rights groups have said in the past that the transfer was a violation of international law because of the likelihood of the men being tortured or worse in North Korea. South Korean media had reported at the time that the two men were blindfolded on their journey and only became aware of their fate when their masks were removed to reveal North Korean soldiers ready to take them into custody. One of them immediately collapsed, the conservative Chosun Ilbo had reported. 'Disgusting and callous' The hawkish Yoon has been sharply critical of his predecessor's dovish approach, accusing the liberal Moon of appeasing Pyongyang. The 2019 case was the first-

ever transfer from the South to the North since the end of the Korean War. It was roundly condemned at the time as a breach of law by human rights groups, which also accused Moon of trying to curry favour with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Under the South Korean constitution, all North Koreans are automatically considered citizens, and those who reach its territory and express a desire to defect are routinely able to stay. A Moon government official

said in 2019 that the two men were sent back because they would 'pose a threat' to society, and that as 'dangerous criminals' they could not be considered refugees. And Kim Yeon-chul, Moon's unification minister, told lawmakers at the time that the fishermen did not want to stay. He said they told South Korean authorities: "Even if we die, we'd like to die in our home country." But Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said on Wednesday that the men's 'desperate resistance to being forced back' was clear in the newly released photos. He accused Moon - a former human rights lawyer - and his administration of having 'a disgusting and callous disregard for human rights'. The photos show that the deported men 'understood they were fighting for their lives', Robertson added. Since Yoon took office in May, prosecutors have reopened the case. And last week, South Korea's intelligence agency also requested a formal investigation into allegations that its former chief under Moon, Suh Hoon, ordered the premature closure of an internal investigation into the matter. AFP

Soul relief

BEEES HELP MENTALLY ILL ON GREEK ISLAND



Employees with some mental illness work in the Social Cooperative of the Dodecanese Department of Mental Health on Leros island in Greece (AFP)

I love what I do
here, it's a real relief
for the soul

ARTEMIS



On a hillside overlooking the azure blue waters of Greece's Leros island harbour, a small group of workers in protective gear are busy smoking bee-hives. But these are not ordinary beekeepers. Some of them are patients from the nearby psychiatric hospital, participating in a two-decade project combining therapy with professional fulfilment.

The social cooperative in Leros, housed in a former barracks known as the Caserma estate, is the first of its kind in Greece, explains project manager Andreas Georgiou.

The cooperative 'aims to socially and professionally integrate persons with psychosocial problems', he tells AFP.

"Through the programme... they acquire self-respect and self-esteem," he says.

On the fields of the estate, patients care for the bees and cultivate their high-quality diet - lavender, oregano and other aromatic herbs.

"This is a bee's paradise," says Georgiou, an occupational therapist and president of the Dodecanese social cooperative (KOISPE), which runs the estate.

In Lepida, to the south of the port, the employees package and label the honey, and dry the herbs in dedicated rooms inside the psychiatric hospital.

The estate produce is then sold in various locations on the island.

"I love what I do here, it's a real relief for the soul," says Artemis, a patient in his 60s as he seals honey jars.

"We try to be as traditional and pure here as possible," he adds, briefly switching into salesman mode.

The Leros cooperative employs 13 salaried workers, supervised by specialist beekeepers, in addition to a team of nurses and occupational therapists from the island's psychiatric hospital.

Leros is an island with a rich history going back to antiquity, and the site of a major World War II battle that later inspired war epic *The Guns of Navarone*.

Among other islands of the Dodecanese group, it was occupied by Italy for more than 30 years, giving rise to fascist-era rationalist architecture that is unique to the area.

But the island's modern image is closely associated with the local mental asylum, which was the scene of a major scandal involving the serious neglect of patients in the early 1990s.

'Immense' therapeutic gain

Georgiou says it was precisely the shock of the scandal that prompted the reforms which gave rise to the cooperative.

"The reforms launched more than 20 years ago radically changed the way patients are treated, with a view to de-institutionalising asylums," adds Giannis Loukas, a former director of the Leros psychiatric centre.

The therapeutic gain for patients is 'immense', he notes.

They can also enjoy the rights of employees instead of working illegally, as was the case for a long time in Leros and elsewhere in Greece, he adds.

While some patients live in the asylum, a large number are allowed to live in flats on the island for better integration into society, Loukas adds.

Georgiou notes that a handful of people have been able to make a full rehabilitation through the cooperative. One is working as an assistant plumber in Leros, while another is working in a hotel in Rhodes, he said.

AFP



Social workers along with an employee with a mental illness (right) check the beehives at 'The Caserma of Herbs' farm run by the Social Cooperative of the Dodecanese Department of Mental Health in the Greek island of Leros (AFP)



St Andrews, United Kingdom - St Andrews hosts the 150th British Open from Thursday with Rory McIlroy starting as the favourite for the Claret Jug while a determined Tiger Woods hopes to make an impact at a venue where he has triumphed twice before. Record crowds for the week of 290,000 are expected on Scot-

land's east coast for this landmark edition of the world's oldest golf tournament, which comes to the Old Course for the 30th time. With fine weather expected to continue for much of the week, it is shaping up to be a fitting way to mark a historic British Open, even if the sport continues to be rocked by the fallout caused by

the breakaway LIV Series. Players who left to join the Saudi-backed tour were allowed to take part by Open organisers, just as they were at last month's US Open despite both the PGA Tour and DP World Tour moving to ban the rebels. That means four-time major winner Brooks Koepka, Sergio

Garcia, Bryson DeChambeau, Dustin Johnson and former Open champion Phil Mickelson will all tee off on Thursday. McIlroy, though, is aiming to end an eight-year wait to add to his four major titles and the Northern Irishman is the favourite in the eyes of bookmakers.

The world number two won the 2014 Open at Hoylake but missed the chance to defend his title in St Andrews after injuring an ankle playing football. "I can't go in here thinking that this might be my time. I just have to go out and play a really good tournament," he added. McIlroy will tee off in Thurs-

day's first round alongside Collin Morikawa, winner of last year's Open at Royal St George's, and Xander Schauffele, who triumphed in last weekend's Scottish Open. There is no shortage of contenders, not least among the large contingent of American stars including world number one Scottie Scheffler and 2017 Open

winner Jordan Spieth. "If you're not getting amped up to play in this Open, I'm not sure this is the right sport for you," said Spieth on Tuesday, when stiff breezes blowing across the course served as a reminder of the challenges St Andrews can pose. AFP

British Open organisers will not ban LIV rebels but could make qualifying tougher

St Andrews, United Kingdom - British Open organisers have ruled out banning players who defect to the breakaway LIV Golf series from next year's event but hinted that it could become harder for rebels to qualify in future. R&A chief executive Martin Slumbers said in a press conference in St Andrews on the eve of this year's Open that banning members of the LIV series was "not on our agenda" despite stinging criticism of the Saudi-backed tour, which he said was "not in the long-term interests of the sport" and "driven by money". "We have been asked quite frequently about banning play-



ers," Slumbers said with an eye on next year's championship at Royal Liverpool. "Let me be very clear. That is not on our agenda, but we will review our exemptions and qualifications criteria for the Open.

Players have to earn their place in the Open and that is fundamental to its ethos and its unique global appeal

MARTIN SLUMBERS

"We absolutely reserve the right to make changes as our Open Championships committee deems appropriate. "Players have to earn their place in the Open and that is fundamental to its ethos and its

unique global appeal." The R&A followed the lead of the US Open by allowing rebel players to compete in the 150th Open at St Andrews, despite the PGA Tour and DP World Tour moving to ban them. As a result, LIV series members make up over 10 percent of the field this week, their number including the likes of four-time major winner Brooks Koepka, Sergio Garcia, Bryson DeChambeau, Dustin Johnson and former Open champion Phil Mickelson. With the new tour only launching last month, Slumbers said there was no prospect of the R&A changing their conditions for entry in this year's Open, even

though LIV series chief Greg Norman was not invited to St Andrews for an event this week. "We published the conditions of competition for the Open back in January and February," he said. "Everyone knew how you were going to get in the field for this week and we stick by that." One way in which the chances of rebel players appearing in the Open and other majors could be compromised is if the LIV series does not get formal recognition in the world rankings. The Official World Golf Ranking confirmed on Tuesday it had received an application from LIV Golf to be included in the ranking. AFP

Djokovic to open tennis courts at Bosnian 'pyramids'

Visoko, Bosnia and Herzegovina - Recently-crowned Wimbledon champion Novak Djokovic arrived in Bosnia on Wednesday to inaugurate tennis courts at a 'pyramid park' that he regularly visits to recharge his batteries. The tennis star, known for his new-age spiritual interests, is fond of a hill town of Visoko, where thousands flock every year to what some believe are an ancient man-made pyramid complex with healing powers - a claim rejected by scientists. The 35-year-old Serb, who claimed his 21st Grand Slam title on Sunday, visited the site for the first time in 2020 and

called it a "paradise on earth". He has returned to the "Bosnian Pyramids of the Sun" complex at least four times, either alone or with his family, to be always warmly welcomed by its founder Semir Osmanagic. Bosnian businessman and Osmanagic said the idea to construct a regional tennis training centre was born during Djokovic's last visit in March. "We have agreed to build in our park two courts for training of the top level players, one hard-court and another one with clay surface" Osmanagic told reporters recently. AFP

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Germany see off Spain to reach Euro quarters

Brentford, United Kingdom - Germany booked their place in the Euro 2022 quarter-finals as Klara Buhl and Alexandra Popp sealed a 2-0 win against Spain on Tuesday.

Martina Voss-Tecklenburg's side crushed Denmark 4-0 in their opening fixture, but had to show their more gritty side to see off Spain.

Germany had only two shots on target and just 30 percent of the possession, but their opportunistic finishing proved the difference at Brentford's Community Stadium.

Buhl gave Germany the perfect start with her third minute opener and Popp doubled the lead eight minutes before half-time. Germany sit top of Group B with maximum points after two successive victories, while Spain are in second place with three points.

"We started by pressing very high which immediately brought us a goal at a very important moment in the match," Voss-Tecklenburg said.

"We put together a team ready to suffer who showed their resilience. We knew we wouldn't have possession but we wanted to make the best use of transitions and it's great that it worked so well tactically."

In the last eight, Group B winners Germany play the runners-up in Group A, which will be either Austria or Norway.

Bottom of the group Finland, beaten 1-0 by Denmark earlier on Tuesday, were eliminated by the result from the day's late game.

Spain were one of the pre-tournament favourites, but now



Alexandra Popp (2L) scores Germany's second goal against Spain in their Group B match at the Women's Euro 2022 in west London on Tuesday (AFP)

We knew we wouldn't have possession but we wanted to make the best use of transitions and it's great that it worked so well tactically

MARTINA VOSS-TECKLENBURG

sit level on points with Denmark, who they face on Saturday in a shoot-out to decide who will advance along with Germany.

"There were two big mistakes that we paid for, but we know how it is against Germany. We created more chances but didn't know how to take them," Spain

boss Jorge Vilda said.

Flying start

Germany, eight-time European champions, were gifted the lead when Spain goalkeeper Sandra Panos tried to make a clearance from a routine back-pass but the ball struck Buhl, who turned in-

side Irene Paredes to drill a low shot into the bottom corner.

Spain were suddenly presented with a golden chance to score themselves when Lucia Garcia was played clear of a high German backline.

The Athletic Bilbao forward raced into the penalty area and took the ball wide of goalkeeper Merle Frohms, but sent her angled shot into the side netting.

Spain continued to press for an equaliser as Mariona Caldentey fired a dipping effort from the edge of the box just wide.

It was Germany, though, who

were on target again seven minutes before half-time.

A corner was floated over into the six-yard box, where captain Alexandra Popp got up to flick in a backward header via a slight deflection.

Spain looked to regroup once more and went close again just before the break when Aitana Bonmati's chipped effort dropped just wide.

Wolfsburg forward Popp almost had a third for Germany soon after the restart when she headed wide at the back post from a corner.

AFF



French enquiry blames organisers for chaos at Champions League final

Paris, France - An enquiry by the French Senate into crowd chaos at this year's Champions League final in Paris concluded that organisers were to blame, not supporters, undermining claims by the police and Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin.

A fact-finding mission led by two senators was set up after the Liverpool-Real Madrid game on May 28 which was marred by a delayed kick-off, crushes, teargas and street crime.

The investigation concluded that the problems were caused by a "string of dysfunctions" including a lack of preparation by French authorities and poorly executed security arrangements. "These dysfunctions were at every level, not only during the implementation but also during preparations in advance," the co-chair of the enquiry Laurent Lafon told reporters at a press conference.

The final report contradicted repeated statements from Darmanin that Liverpool fans were mostly responsible, with the minister claiming that up to 40,000 of them travelled to the stadium either

The game on May 28 was marred by a delayed kick-off, crushes, teargas and street crime

with no tickets or with fake ones.

"The first statements (by the minister) do not match up with reality," Francois-Noel Buffet, a fellow co-chair of the investigation, told reporters.

"The conclusions of the minister on the evening and the day after were not the right ones," Lafon added. "It was a biased conclusion, imprecise."

Many Liverpool supporters struggled to travel to the stadium because of a transport strike, then found themselves in bottlenecks and crushes at the stadium entry gates.

Faced with the build up of frustrated fans around the Stade de France, police fired tear gas to move the crowd back, affecting many children as well as disabled fans in wheelchairs.

AFF

Leeds saviour Raphinha set to join Barcelona

Barcelona, Spain - Brazil winger Raphinha, who played a pivotal role in Leeds United retaining their place in the Premier League last season, is poised to sign for Barcelona after the clubs agreed to the deal in principle on Wednesday.

The 25-year-old will cost the Catalans a reported 55 million euros (\$55.3million) - with a potential 15 million euros in add-ons - and sign a five-year contract.

"Barcelona and Leeds United Football Club have reached an agreement in principle for the transfer of Raphael Dias Belloli, Raphinha, pending the player passing his medical," read a statement on the Barcelona website.

Barcelona said they were buying: "a winger who is excellent in one on ones, taking on defenders being a key part of his game."

Raphinha spent two seasons at Elland Road, scoring 17 goals and providing 12 assists after they signed him from Ligue 1 outfit Rennes for £17 million - the French side are due a cut of the transfer fee.



Raphinha

Raphinha - who had two years remaining of his contract - became a fans' favourite and earned himself a permanent place in their hearts when he scored a penalty in the 2-1 win over Brentford in their final match of last season to ensure

they stayed up in the English top-flight.

Leeds manager Jesse Marsch - who replaced the sacked Marcelo Bielsa at the end of February - paid tribute to Raphinha admiring the dedication he showed in the battle to keep

them up.

Raphinha is the second big name to leave Leeds in the close season with England midfielder Calvin Phillips departing for champions Manchester City for fee of £45 million.

AFF

Sterling thanks Man City for 'lifetime of memories'

Manchester, United Kingdom - Raheem Sterling has said he will leave Manchester City "a man" on Wednesday as his transfer to Chelsea edged ever closer.

The 27-year-old posted a goodbye message on social media ahead of an expected £50 million (\$59 million) move.

Sterling announced his exit from the Etihad with a social media post thanking those he worked with at the club over the past seven years.

"Seven seasons, eleven major trophies, a lifetime of memories," he posted on Twitter. "What a ride it's been."

"I am thankful for the ups and the downs as it's the downs that have, at times, tested my strength and resolve and enabled me to stand here in front of you as the best possible version of myself."

"I arrived in Manchester as a 20-year-old. Today, I leave a man. Thank you for your endless support."

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LEARNING EXPERIENCE



Oman Sail teams gain valuable experience at regattas in Italy and Turkey

Muscat - Oman Sail's elite team and young Optimist squads wrapped up campaigns in Europe, gaining valuable experience of high-level competition in new classes.

The team competing at the Marina Militare Nastro Rosa Tour 2022 in Italy had to contend with low wind and technical issues throughout the competition which impacted several stages, finishing tenth in a close-fought lower half of the fleet.

Meanwhile, the team of five Oman Sail Optimist sailors also encountered tough conditions in Bodrum, Turkey, at the 2022 Arkas Optimist World Championships, finishing in the lower half of a very strong fleet.

The Marina Militare Nastro Rosa Tour squad of Akram Al Wahaibi, Ibtisam Al Salmi, Sultan



Sultan Al Balushi

Al Balushi, Ali Al Balushi and Abdul Majeed Al Hadhrami were on board the Beneteau Figaro 3 class of foil-assisted racing yacht for the very first time while also competing in wing foil and kite regattas simultaneously.

The Tour began in Genoa in Northern Italy and headed south, to Sicily and around the Mediter-



Ibtisam Al Salmi

ranean Coastline before concluding in Venice.

Ibtisam Al Salmi said, "This has been a tough event but very enjoyable. We have learned a lot as a team and been able to gain experience on another new class. Despite the difficult weather and technical problems, we have enjoyed our time here and gained a

great introduction to this type of race. Adding in the Wing Foil and Waszp for the first time made this an interesting tour for the whole team and we look forward to returning next year and continuing our journey."

The youth sailing team joined 286 sailors representing 62 countries at the BB Bodrum Sailing Club for the 2022 Arkas Optimist World Championships. Early races were challenging due to shifting winds and the team struggled to recover after a slow start while the leaders also toiled in low wind.

Mohammed Abdul Latif finished highest overall, placing 50th in the last race. The rest of Oman Sail's sailors found themselves in the Emerald Fleet for the final races where Tamim Al Balushi finished 38th, Firas Said

came in 49th, Abdul Rahman Al Hadi was ten places behind in 59th and Hasan Al Wahaibi ended in 60th.

Mohsin Al Busaidi, Oman Sail's Head of Youth Sailing Pathway, said, "This was a tough competition for our team against some of the very best Optimist sailors in the world.

"Together with coach Suhail Al Mayahi and team lead Abdulaziz Al Shidi, we have worked with the team to prepare for the championships and will continue our work with more competitions on the horizon. This has been a valuable learning experience for us all and will help us to perform at a higher level in the future."

The team will now move to Sonderborg, Denmark, for the Optimist European Championships from July 30 to August 6.



India's Jasprit Bumrah celebrates after taking the wicket of England's Jonny Bairstow at the Oval on Tuesday (AFP)

Bumrah says he has 'bowled better' after routing England in first ODI

London, United Kingdom - Jasprit Bumrah responded to a one-day international career-best haul that set-up India's 10-wicket thrashing of world champions England by saying "I have bowled so much better than this and not got wickets".

Bumrah took 6-19, including an opening spell of 4-9 in five overs that routed a proven top order, as England were skittled out for just 110 in 25.2 overs at the Oval on Tuesday.

India then sprinted to their target, with captain Rohit Sharma unbeaten on 76 as his side won with more than 31 overs to spare to go 1-0 up in a three-match series that continues on the other side of London's River Thames, at Lord's, on Thursday.

Bumrah, 28, may have been assisted by overcast conditions and a well-grassed pitch after Rohit won a good toss, but there was no denying his skill as he surpassed his previous best return in 71 ODIs of 5-27 against Sri Lanka at Pallekele in 2017.

"I don't look at end results and judge my bowling," Bumrah told reporters after a day/night match that ended so quickly there was no need for the floodlights to be switched on. "There have been instances where I have bowled so much better than this and not got wickets."

Bumrah was well-supported by new-ball partner Mohammed Shami (3-31) as India made light of the fact that England were fielding arguably their strongest batting line-up in the 50-over format since winning the 2019 World Cup final.

"Both of us had a conversation and decided we should go a little fuller and try to bowl a Test-match length," said Bumrah. "I try to keep a balanced mind, not look too far ahead..."

Keeping things simple, not trying to over-complicate it too much and shutting out the outside noise has always worked for me."

He started England's collapse by inducing Jason Roy to play on with just his fourth ball -- one of four ducks in an England innings where Bumrah had Joe Root, the world's top-ranked Test batsman, caught behind for nought as well.

"There's no doubt about the quality of the England side," said Bumrah. "You always want to test yourself

You always want to test yourself against very good players

JASPRIT BUMRAH

against very good players.

England captain Jos Buttler, whose 30 was the hosts' top score, paid tribute to Bumrah's "unique action".

"He has an incredibly high level of skill - he creates an angle but still has a phenomenal wrist to move the ball both ways from that angle to both right and left-handers," Buttler said.

"He produces tough angles and does it at high pace - as a package that is very good."

Buttler has now lost three of his four games -- including a 2-1 T20 series defeat by India last week - since taking over following former white-ball captain Eoin Morgan's retirement.

"It's certainly key not to panic," Buttler said. "If I look back over the past five or six years, batting has been our super strength in this form of the game."

AFP

Proteas prioritise T20 event ahead of World Cup qualification

Sydney, Australia - South Africa's quest to achieve automatic qualification for the 2023 Cricket World Cup became more difficult on Wednesday when the country's board agreed to forfeit a series against Australia.

Cricket South Africa (CSA) withdrew from a scheduled three-match World Cup Super League series in Australia in January in order to have their best players available for a domestic Twenty20 league.

The matches had been scheduled for January 12, 14 and 17 in Hobart, Sydney and Perth.

South Africa are languishing in 11th place in the Super League, with the top eight qualifying automatically for the World Cup in India next year.

The loss of the 30 points available for the series means South Africa will almost certainly have to win their remaining series against India and England, plus two postponed matches against the Netherlands, to avoid playing in a qualifying tournament.

"As difficult as this decision has been for CSA, the long-term sustainability of our new T20 League is reliant on having all our domestic players available for this exciting new addition to the CSA calendar," CSA chief executive Phisoletso Moseki said.

Cricket Australia announced earlier on Wednesday that it had been unable to accommodate South Africa's request to change the dates of the series.

A backlog of postponed fixtures from the pandemic meant there was no window available to reschedule before the qualification cut-off in May.



Cricket South Africa will forfeit a series against Australia to have their best players available for a domestic Twenty20 league

tures from the pandemic meant there was no window available to reschedule before the qualification cut-off in May.

Moseki said the matches had originally been scheduled for 2020 but had been postponed because of the pandemic.

"CSA is always keen on honouring its bilateral commitments," said Moseki. "CSA offered four options ... unfortunately, and to our disappointment, none of these were acceptable to Cricket Australia."

"CSA has agreed that the International Cricket Council award Australia the competition points."

Cricket Australia chief executive Nick Hockley said it was "disappointing" but the three-Test series against South Africa in December and January would go ahead as planned.

The loss of the series means three other Australia fixtures have had venue changes to provide an even spread of matches across the country for fans.

AFP

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