

Smoother travel option to UK for Omanis from Feb 1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Applications for Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) will open for Omani nationals looking to travel to the UK starting February, according to the UK embassy in Oman.

In a statement, the UK embassy said, 'The UK's ETA scheme will open for Omani nationals, who can now benefit from cheaper and smoother travel. In four weeks (February 1, 2024), applications for ETA will open for Omani nationals looking to travel to the UK from February 22, 2024.'

Each year, the UK welcomes millions of visitors from around the world. From holidays to short-term study or business trips, the UK is a dynamic, diverse and exciting destination. The statement added that travel to the UK is about to become cheaper and more seamless.

'ETAs are being introduced as part of our transformation and digitisation of the UK border. They will enable a more efficient customer experience and cement the UK as a world leader in border security.'

The ETA scheme is broadly for visitors who do not need a visa for short stay in the UK, or who



do not have UK immigration status prior to travelling.

'This landmark opening demonstrates the UK government's delivery in transforming and digitising the UK border, enabling an increasingly seamless customer experience in the future for the millions of legitimate visitors who come to the UK.'

In 2022, the UK welcomed almost 800,000 visitors from the

Gulf, with this set to increase over the next few years.

The announcement was welcomed by many citizens. Speaking to *Muscat Daily*, Abdullah al Farsi, an athlete, said, "I am delighted at the official opening of the electronic travel authorisation scheme for Omani nationals. I believe the decision is an important step to facilitate mobility for us as athletes to participate in

foreign camps and gain necessary experiences." The ETA will also help many Omani students and patients to travel easily and increase tourism movement between the two countries.

According to Khamis al Abri, a legal expert, the decision confirms the strength of relations between the two countries, which has existed for many years. It will facilitate travel between the two

countries, as well as increase investments. "This initiative not only simplifies the travel process for Omanis visiting the UK but also reflects the strength of our bilateral relations. We look forward to building the human bridge between our two countries further," Abri added.

Omanis can register via Gov. uk/electronic-travel-authorisation

Maersk to divert vessels away from Red Sea

Copenhagen, Denmark - Danish shipping giant Maersk is diverting all container vessels from Red Sea routes around Africa's Cape of Good Hope for the foreseeable future, warning customers to prepare for significant disruption.

Shippers across the world are switching away from the Red Sea - and so the shortest route from Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal - after Houthis in Yemen stepped up attacks on vessels in the Gulf region to show their support for Palestinian group Hamas fighting Israel in Gaza.

The trip round Africa can add about ten days to journey times and requires more fuel and crew-time, jacking up shipping costs.

Maersk had said earlier this week it would pause all vessels bound for the Red Sea following an attack on one of its ships by Houthi fighters, and has since begun redirecting ships around Africa.

'The situation is constantly evolving and remains highly volatile, and all available intelligence at hand confirms that the security risk continues to be at a significantly elevated level,' Maersk said in a statement on Friday.

As a result, the company, which controls about one-sixth of global container trade, will divert all Maersk vessels around



the Cape of Good Hope 'for the foreseeable future'.

The news will deepen concerns about a prolonged disruption to the delivery and supplies of goods from clothing to cars even after the United States on December 19 launched a multinational operation to try to safeguard commerce in the Red Sea.

Houthis attacked one of Maersk's container vessels in the Red Sea on January 1, with assailants trying to board the ship. India is providing protective escorts to Indian container ships in the high seas around the Red Sea.

Hapag Lloyd incurred costs in a two-digit million euro range between December 18 and 31 after diverting 25 ships, a company spokesperson told Reuters on Friday.

Journeys have been delayed by between one and three weeks, depending on the area, the spokesperson said.

HM's Accession Day holiday on Jan 11

Muscat - Thursday (January 11) will be an official holiday for employees in State Administrative Apparatus units, other legal entities and private sector establishments on the occasion of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq's Accession Day.

MoH introduces e-certification for medical exams

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has announced a significant advancement in healthcare services with the introduction of an electronic certification service for medical examinations. Starting Sunday, this new system will be operational for examinations conducted by Gulf Health Council (GCC)-accredited centres.

This initiative is set to revolutionise the processing of healthcare transactions, aiming to improve efficiency and speed within the healthcare system, MoH stated.

From January 7, individuals seeking medical examination certifications can access these through the ministry's health portal or at Sanad offices. This development eliminates the need for physical visits to MoH's medical fitness examination centres, thereby streamlining the process significantly.

The electronic certification service specifically addresses medical exams conducted by GCC-accredited centres. This strategic move is expected to ensure more seamless procedures and faster issuance of health-related certifications.

Additionally, the ministry has introduced a new feature on its portal, allowing citizens and residents to validate sick leaves issued by private medical institutions within the sultanate. This digital verification system can be accessed conveniently through the MoH portal, marking another step towards digital integration in healthcare services.

These enhancements by MoH reflect a commitment to leverage technology to improve health services, ensure convenience and promote efficiency in the health sector.



SHINAS' TRADITIONAL EQUESTRIAN SPORTS CAPTIVATE NORTH BATINAH

North Batinah's Shinas Equestrian Field buzzed with energy on Friday as 80 horsemen from North and South Batinah showcased skills in traditional horse-riding sports. Organised by Shinas Equestrian Committee and Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation, the event was held under the patronage of Sheikh Abdullah bin Salem al Hajri, Wali of Shinas

Traditional medicine thrives despite advancements in healthcare

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Despite the availability and ease of access to modern healthcare, there is still widespread use of traditional medicinal practices in urban Oman. Herbal medications and traditional massage are the most common forms of traditional medicine (TM) used, according to a study conducted by researchers from Sultan Qaboos University Hospital and College of Medical Sciences, Ibra.

There appears to be widespread use of TM practices in Oman for a range of ailments, the study found. 'The proportion of people who reportedly used some form of TM was 67.8%, similar to other reports from countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, India, China and South Africa.'



TM is usually used in Oman to mainly treat chronic conditions that did not respond to modern medications or for ailments such as diabetes, low-back pain and muscular pain, the study published in the *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal* said.

Herbal medications (65.8%) and traditional massage (60.4%) were the most common forms of TM reportedly practised.

Among women, 69.2% availed herbal medication, 63.5% opted for massage, 29.8% cupping, 24% wassam and 11.5% acupuncture. In male respondents, cupping was the most common form of traditional medicine (65.2%), followed by herbal medication (64.4%), massage (59.3%), wassam (46.7%) and acupuncture (21.9%).

Close to 66.7% of diabetic and

72% hypertensive patients had reportedly tried herbal medications, with many claiming that they had specifically used it to lower blood sugar (56.2%) or blood pressure (77.2%).

Back pain was the most common condition for which traditional medicine was used, with the majority having tried traditional massage (74.3%), cupping (69.3%) and/or herbal medication (62.4%) to treat it.

Acupuncture was found to be the least common traditional medicine practice (21.2%) used for back pain. The other conditions treated using traditional medicine were headache, abdominal pain, nerve pain, jaundice and swelling.

Although most respondents felt that TM was not better than modern medicine (80.5%), many (81.5%) felt that it was ef-

fective and approximately two-thirds (67.8%) had tried at least one method. Of those who had tried it, a majority (84.2%) found it to be useful, with only a small number (8.3%) claiming that they had subsequently suffered some side effects.

'Traditional practices are part of the culture and heritage of various communities, though these practices appear to be used less frequently by Oman's youth compared to its older population. In light of this, interventions to educate Oman's public regarding the side effects of some of these practices is needed to aid their improved integration into Oman's local healthcare services,' the authors suggested.



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12 British Omani Society sets up art group

Oman to host Middle East Space Conference

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Sultanate of Oman, under the aegis of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, is set to host a three-day regional space conference to explore investment opportunities in this sector.

The Middle East Space Conference, being organised in collaboration with Euroconsult from Monday, aims to bolster the space sector in the Middle East, establishing it as a key area for investment in space applications and technologies, officials informed.

Aligning with Oman Vision 2040, the ministry is keen on de-

veloping the space sector as a catalyst for economic diversification.

The National Programme for the Digital Economy in Oman has identified the space sector as a critical focus, guided by the MTCIT's National Centre for Space, Advanced Technology, and Artificial Intelligence.

Over the next decade, emphasis will be on ground applications, activities, and attracting investment opportunities in space-related ventures, so stated officials. Oman's unique capabilities make it an ideal candidate for such developments.

H E Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani, Undersecretary for Communications and Information



H E Dr Ali bin Amer al Shidhani

Technology in MTCIT, highlighted the conference's significance, noting its alignment with the Omani space sector policy launched in January 2023.

"The event aims to position



Oman as the regional hub for space applications supporting economic diversification. The conference will feature 15 leaders from global space agencies and companies, along with 70 ex-

perts in various space-related disciplines. Nearly 400 participants from government and private sectors worldwide are expected to attend," he informed. Key objectives of the confer-

ence include stimulating international investment, localising technological advancements in the space sector, and discussing essential space services for the region. The conference seeks to build partnerships for investment and economic projects in the Middle East, in response to the rapid technological evolution characterising the fourth industrial revolution.

The conference, to be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, will cover an array of topics. These include building an integrated space sector, financing, international partnerships, satellite communications, Earth observation and monitoring via satellites, and develop-

ments in satellite technologies across various sectors.

The final day will explore the new dimensions of the space sector, notably the involvement of private sector investments and the transformation this brings to applications and services, enhancing efficiency across numerous fields.

An exhibition alongside the conference will feature over 25 local and international companies specialising in space technologies. This platform will facilitate the exchange of experiences, foster effective partnerships, and open investment opportunities, thus promoting awareness of technological advancements in the industry.

Foreign ministries of Oman, Brunei explore cooperation in clean energy

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The 22nd consultations session between the foreign ministries of the Sultanate of Oman and Brunei Darussalam was held on Thursday in Brunei's capital city of Bandar Seri Begawan.

The Omani side was headed by H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthi, Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, while the Brunei side was headed by Pengiran Norhashimah binti Pengiran Mohd, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The two sides reviewed bilateral relations in the fields of eco-



nomie and investment cooperation and means of augmenting them, especially in the areas of logistics, clean energy, green hydrogen, cultural exchange and educational exchange. They also discussed regional and international matters of mutual interest.

On the sidelines of the visit, H E Harthi met with Dato Seri Setia Haji Erywan bin Pehin Datu Pekerma Jaya Haji Mohd Yusof,

Second Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Acting Director of Brunei Investment Agency.

H E Harthi and his accompanying delegation also visited Golden Corporation company, an affiliate of the Oman Brunei Investment Company, which operates in the fish farming field.

Omani's Ambassador H E Irma Said al Kathiri also attended those meetings.

Oman Air named MENA's most punctual airline

Muscat - Oman Air has been named the most punctual airline in the Middle East and North Africa for 2023, scoring an outstanding 92.5% On-Time Performance (OTP), the highest among all carriers across all categories.

The rankings, published in the 2023 On-Time Performance Review by global aviation analytics leader, Cirium, measured performance data collected from more than 600 sources of real-time flight information.

It's the second consecutive time the Muscat-based airline has taken the top spot, having scored 91.3% during 2022.

In aviation, on-time performance is the cornerstone of the



passenger experience. Flights that are on time mean smoother, less stressful journeys, making it a key differentiator for guest satisfaction.

'By committing itself to achieving exemplary on-time performance, Oman Air continues to prove its reliability, reduce travel uncertainties, and increase passenger confidence, underscoring its dedication to elevating the overall travel experience,' the airline stated.

Tender Announcement



The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Mada'ayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of buying	Date of submission	Type of work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
2/2024/PEIE/ H Q-2 (Re Tender)	Cleaning and Maintenance Works at Al Wadi Al Kabir Industrial City	16-01-2024	05-02-2024	Services	Third and above	25

Note: Re-Call the tender because of the change in the type of work from electromechanical and telecommunications contracting and maintenance to services

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website.

1. Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.
2. eTendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om and +968 24402200 Note: Bid Submission will be online only.

Mada'ayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

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MTCIT integrates AI as part of Oman's programme for digital transformation

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MTCIT), through its National Programme for Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technologies, has undertaken a series of innovative artificial intelligence projects in various sectors during 2023, reinforcing the collaboration between public and private sectors.

Dr Salem bin Humaid al Shuaili, Director of the Department of Artificial Intelligence Projects and Advanced Technologies, highlighted key initiatives such as AI in food and vehicle monitoring; data digitisation; generative intelligence in public services; and automated induction technology to extract data from the Internet.

Dr Shuaili said that Mohsen Haider Darwish Company, in association with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), has utilised computer vision technologies to track and identify vehicles transporting food items and link them to data.

Moreover, it aids in examining food items, such as rice, by detecting counterfeit products and



MHD, in association with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, has utilised computer vision technologies to track vehicles transporting food items

DR SALEM AL SHUAILI

measuring the quantities of food-stuffs being transported. The system also incorporates sensors for monitoring temperature and humidity, ensuring the preservation of storage quality.

In the digitisation area, Dr Shuaili added that Schlumberger Oman has implemented AI technologies to digitise paper and scanned data into easily referable digital formats. This system effectively links various datasets to provide a comprehensive

overview of transportation projects, specifically those in Nizwa.

"This digital structuring has streamlined access to detailed project information, facilitating maintenance and historical analysis," he informed.

Similarly, Netways Oman successfully deployed generative AI technologies to develop the National Centre for Statistics and Information's data portal.

According to Dr Shuaili, this involved the creation of an auto-

mated speaker to respond to user inquiries, improving stakeholder engagement in statistical services.

Additionally, TecKnow For Consultancy integrated generative intelligence with WhatsApp, simplifying public access to e-government service information via chat.

Barne Enterprises and Inma Information Technology Company contributed to integrating generative AI technology in public service. They developed automated systems to extract data from the Oman portal, and present them in an easily accessible format, replacing traditional internet browsing methods.

"These innovations have led to the creation of user-friendly applications for smartphones, significantly enhancing public accessibility," Dr Shuaili noted.

These projects showcase Oman's commitment to digital transformation, leveraging AI to optimise public services, streamline processes, and enhance the quality of life for its citizens.

These advancements are a testament to the country's dedication to harnessing cutting-edge technologies and mark a significant step towards achieving a digitally empowered future.



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Call for strict measures to prevent illegal selling of second-hand cars in city streets

Despite intensified efforts by the government to fight illegal street vending in Muscat and beyond, the capital city is witnessing illegal selling of second-hand cars.

Muscat Daily took a tour around busy three areas - South Al Hail, North Al Hail and Seeb Souq - and found bylanes lined up with used cars for sale.

Local residents and car showroom owners disapprove of these “illegal activities” in their neighbourhoods, some calling for



meeting recently to review a study of the central automobile market in Oman and viewed a visual presentation on Khazaen Central Car Market in Khazaen Economic City.

The Khazaen Central Car Market project aims to organise the used car markets in Muscat governorate and develop a commercial, industrial and logistics centre that serves the automotive sector, providing consumers access to a wide range of products and services, while creating added value for local and international companies.

Muscat Municipality's Decision No 55/2017 states that engaging in the unlicensed activity of selling cars on streets can lead to a fine and work suspension until a proper licence is acquired.

Muscat Municipality calls for strictly adherence to the rules and regulations in this regard.

According to taxi driver Salim al Balushi, this illegal activity is widespread and now witnessed in many parts of the city. "The authorities regularly conduct campaigns to restrict such practices. I advise people to buy cars from official showrooms to help curb this phenomenon."

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) will organise the fourth Science and Culture Forum for GCC female students on Sunday.

An official at SQU informed that 182 female students enrolled in 16 GCC higher education institutions are geared up to attend the three-day forum. Aimed to help develop their cultural and scientific knowledge, it is part of a series of initiatives hosted by the GCC countries to build a better future for female students in the region.

Through effective communication and interaction, the forum aims to empower and motivate female students in the GCC, while also enhancing shared values. It will provide a platform for female students to discuss challenges, share experiences and

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour signed a cooperation programme on Thursday with Oman College of Health Sciences (OCHS) to groom 109 job-seekers in various health specialities.

develop solutions.

Additionally, it will enable them to network and build relations with their peers. The forum will provide a platform for female students to showcase their talents and abilities.

The SQU official informed that several programmes will be held at the forum to enhance the talents of participants so they can contribute to the ever-renewing GCC Renaissance.

The forum will host competitions in four categories - Religion (Quran recitation, prophetic speech and religious chanting), Culture (literature competition and debate), Arts (art, short-movies competition, photography and digital art), and Science (medical, technological, environmental, economic and humanistic research).

"The forum is envisioned as a platform for GCC female students to engage in cultural and scientific competitions that will enable them to be distinguished in these areas. Through this platform, female students can gain recognition for their hard work and dedication. It can also help to motivate them to pursue further academic and professional opportunities, and help create a network of female professionals in the region," the SQU official said.

In a move to bolster employment efforts, the Majlis A'Shura Office has announced a decision to form a temporary committee dedicated to addressing jobseekers' issues.

The decision was made during a meeting led by H E Khalid Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis A'Shura, last week. This initiative underscores the shura's commitment to resolving the challenges faced by job-seekers in the sultanate.

The meeting also examined a study on the future of the frankincense tree in Dhofar governorate and discussed other vital topics, including a report on the youth parliamentarians' training programme.

To boost employment, the Ministry of Labour (MoL) launched an app called 'Maak' ('With you') in 2023. This digi-

tal platform is designed to connect jobseekers and employers. Maak currently offers over 11 electronic services for jobseekers, representing a significant step towards digitalising employment services.

MoL has reported notable progress in the employment sector, achieving 87% of its target for the third quarter of 2023 in both government and private sectors. This period saw the creation of 30,464 job opportunities, with an additional 26,689 individuals with prior work experience being employed, bringing the total to 57,153.

The ministry has reaffirmed its dedication to employment as a cornerstone of the national economy. Formation of this committee, besides the launch of 'Maak', illustrates a proactive approach by the government in tackling employment challenges and supporting jobseekers.



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Tender No.	Tender Title	Tender Document Sales Start Date	Tender Document Sales End Date	Bid Submission Closing	Companies that are eligible to participate	Tender Document fee (R.O)
707/2023/MAFWR/HQ-86 - Recall - 1	Supply & Installation of HVAC System and allied Works in Fishery Quality control Center, Al Bustan	Wednesday 3/1/2024	Sunday 14/1/2024	Tuesday 23/1/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with Specialized grade	(25/-) Omani riyals for local companies ----- (10/-) Omani riyals for SMEs
647/2023/MAFWR/HQ-78 - Recall - 1	Design And Build Services For Detailed Design And Construction Of 'Marfa' – Small Scale Fish Landing Centre At Haramel In Muscat Wilayat And Governorate, Sultanate Of Oman	Thursday 4/1/2024	Sunday 14/1/2024	Wednesday 24/1/2024	Specialized companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board with excellent grade	(250/-) Omani riyals for local companies ----- (25/-) Omani riyals for SMEs

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- The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.
- The Tenderer should attach Bid Commitment Declaration for local companies, and for International company that not have head quarters in the Sultanate of Oman should attach Bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman (as required in the tender) and addressed to the Ministry of Agricultural, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources.
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Oman targets at least 3% economic growth for 2024

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Finance expects Oman's economy to achieve a growth of at least 3% during 2024 while continuing to maintain annual inflation at moderate levels.

The ministry announced the state budget for the fiscal year 2024 last week, aiming to sustain financial, economic, and social stability in line with the Financial Framework of the 10th Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) and Oman Vision 2040.

"The 2024 budget is meticulously crafted to achieve a comprehensive array of economic and social objectives, including economic growth of at least 3% at constant prices during 2024 and maintaining inflation rates at moderate levels, around 3%," the Ministry of Finance stated in the 2024 budget statement.

Preliminary results of the fiscal year 2023 indicate a growth of real GDP by 2.3% for 2023, with GDP reaching RO43.7bn by the end of 2023, the ministry noted in the statement.

National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI) data reveals that GDP growth at constant prices, by the end of Q3 2023, stood at approximately



Preliminary results of the fiscal year 2023 indicate a growth of real GDP by 2.3% for 2023, with GDP at constant prices reaching RO43.7bn by the end of 2023

2%, amounting to RO26.433bn compared to RO25.915bn in the same period of 2022.

This growth is mainly attributed to an increase in the

value-added of non-oil activities by 2.7%, amounting to RO18.190bn by the end of Q3 2023, compared to RO17.704bn registered in the same period

of 2022.

Meanwhile, the value-added of oil activities at constant prices witnessed a growth of 0.5% by the end of Q3 2023, amounting to approximately RO9.068bn compared to RO9.02bn registered over the same period in 2022.

International institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and global credit rating agencies ear-

lier estimated that Oman's 2023 economic growth will remain significantly lower than the previous year, mainly due to an expected decrease in oil output owing to an OPEC+ agreement, of which Oman is a member.

The estimated revenues for Oman's 2024 budget are calculated based on an assumed oil price of \$60 per barrel and an average daily oil production of 1.031mn barrels per day.

The IMF recently stated that Oman's economic outlook remains favorable. "Supported by favorable oil prices and sustained reform momentum, Oman's economic recovery continues, and inflation remains contained."

Regarding inflation rate, the most recent data released by the NCSI indicates that the inflation rate in Oman declined to 1.03% by the end of November 2023 compared to 2.87% in the same period in 2022. This figure is deemed moderate compared to global inflation indicators.

"It is anticipated that the inflation rate will persist at around 1% over the medium term. The government carried out several interventions aimed at curbing inflation, particularly through subsidies on food and fuel products," the Ministry of Finance said.

SNF announces \$250mn expansion plan in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

SNF, world's leading manufacturer of water-soluble polymers, has announced a major expansion plan worth \$250mn in self-financing and partnerships in Oman.

With more than 1.5mn tonnes capacity of active content, France-based SNF is the foremost global supplier of integrated solutions for chemical enhanced oil recovery (EOR).

"SNF expects to use these funds to further develop its production capabilities within Oman, meet infrastructure needs of its key clients, expand its workforce in the region and promote academic collaborations and research and development (R&D) activities in the oil and gas sector in Oman," the company said in a press statement.

In 2024, SNF plans to open its Regional SNF Technical Centre in Muscat, to be known as RSTC Oman, which will serve as SNF's R&D hub for the entire Gulf region.

"This facility expands the commitment of SNF in developing world-leading polymer expertise to support cus-



tomers to achieve their production and sustainability objectives at every phase of oil and gas life-cycle," SNF said.

The new Technology Centre brings faster access to SNF global expertise, locally, allowing closer technology collaboration opportunities and more efficient regional project support. SNF will develop the capability of the Technology Centre through sharing expertise, training students and young professionals and the hire and training of local talent.

"SNF takes pride in its long-term commitment to its partners in Oman, as it has demonstrated over the past 20 years through its continuous presence in the country and numerous industrial successes," the company added.

Oil prices rise after Fed signals rate cuts to come

Muscat - Oil prices increased on Friday over robust demand indicators in the US as crude oil inventories declined and Federal Reserve minutes show interest rate cuts are likely in 2024, while the Israel-Palestine conflict continues heightening fears of a wider war in the Middle East.

Global benchmark Brent crude traded at \$78 per barrel in London on Friday, a 0.52% gain from the closing price of \$77.59 a barrel in the previous trading session. US benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) traded at the same time at \$72.69 per barrel, up 0.69% from Thursday's close of \$72.19 per barrel.

Investors were awaiting the minutes of the Fed meeting in December to see the direction of the US economy and the country's interest rate policy in the coming months.

According to the minutes released on Wednesday, US Federal Reserve members believe interest rates are near their "peak."

"In discussing the policy outlook, participants viewed the policy rate as likely at or near its peak for this tightening cycle, though they noted that the actual policy path will depend on how the economy evolves," the Fed's December meeting minutes revealed.

The Fed skipped a rate hike for the fourth time in 2023 on December 13, keeping the federal funds rate unchanged between the 5.25% - 5.5% target range - still the highest in 22 years.

The central bank made 11 interest rate increases from March 2022 through July 2023 to fight record inflation that climbed

during the summer of 2022 to its highest in more than four decades.

President of Richmond Federal Reserve Bank Tom Barkin on Thursday said in his speech at the Raleigh Chamber of Commerce in North Carolina that "a soft landing is increasingly conceivable but in no way inevitable."

The country's crude oil inventory data released by the Energy Information Administration (EIA) on Thursday showed that demand is upsurging in the world's largest oil-consuming country.

According to data, US commercial crude oil inventories decreased by around 5.5mn barrels to 431.1mn barrels, compared to the American Petroleum Institute's expectation of a draw of around 7.4mn barrels.

However, gasoline inventories rose by around 10.9mn barrels, limiting further price upticks.

Prices also continue receiving help from the rising tension in the Middle East after Hamas' Political Bureau Deputy Chairman Saleh al-Aroui and six others were killed Tuesday in an Israeli drone attack in the Dahieh district of Beirut, referred to as Hezbollah's stronghold.

Oil prices saw further gains after Libya's largest oilfield, the Sharara, shut down completely amid protests.

Around 300,000 barrels of oil per day is now at risk in Libya's two oil facilities, El-Feel and Sharara, the country's largest oil field, due to protests over high fuel prices and a lack of job opportunities in the country.

Agencies

AD Ports Group, Red Sea Port Authority sign 15-year concession agreement

Cairo, Egypt - Abu Dhabi's AD Ports Group has initiated a 15-year concession agreement with the Red Sea Port Authority (RSPA), to develop, operate and manage three cruise terminals at Safaga, Hurgada, and Sharm El Sheikh ports in Egypt.

The agreement also encompasses the renovation of the Sharm El Sheikh terminal, with the ultimate aim of enhancing the cruise tourism experience in Egypt. A definitive concession agreement is expected to be concluded in the first quarter of 2024, subject to regulatory approvals.

The concession agreement was initiated in the presence of Lieutenant-General Eng Kamel el Wazir, Egypt's Minister of Transport, by Major General Mohamed Abdel Rahim, Chairman of the Red Sea Ports Authority and Ahmed al Mutawa, Regional CEO, AD Ports Group, at the Egyptian Ministry of Transportation in Cairo.

The collaboration will see AD Ports Group investing \$3mn over 15 years in the management and operation of the three cruise terminals to provide new services, improve access for cruise operators and add new



The agreement will see AD Ports Group investing \$3mn over 15 years in the management and operation of the three cruise terminals in Egypt

itineraries through the Group's cruise terminal network in the Red Sea.

This will strengthen AD Ports Group's cruise business in the Red Sea region, supporting volumes of cruise passengers and elevating passenger and cruise experiences.

Ahmed al Mutawa, Regional CEO, AD Ports Group, said, "This agreement is a testament

to our commitment to fostering tourism in the Red Sea region and strengthening the existing ties between the UAE and Egypt. With an investment of \$3mn, AD Ports Group is poised to boost cruise tourism in the Red Sea, bringing world-class services and facilities to these ports, whilst supporting economic growth for Egypt."

This latest partnership comes in the wake of the signing of a definitive concession agreement between AD Ports Group and RSPA for the development and operation of a multi-purpose terminal at Safaga Sea Port.

This collaboration will see an investment of \$200mn over three years, aimed at developing a state-of-the-art facility within the strategic location of the Red

Sea. It will be the first internationally operated port serving the Upper Egypt region.

AD Ports Group inaugurated the Aqaba Cruise Terminal, the first-of-its-kind facility in Jordan. This new addition to the group's Red Sea portfolio forms part of its cruise expansion strategy aimed at elevating passengers' cruise experience, globally.

WAM

UAE tops GCC countries in real estate deals in 2023

Abu Dhabi, UAE - An economic report has highlighted the UAE topped GCC countries, acquiring the highest share of the total value of real estate deals conducted during the first ten months of 2023, surpassing the expectations for the entire year.

The report, issued today by Kamco Invest company indicated that the value of real estate deals in the GCC countries

reached \$171.6bn from January to October 2023, marking a growth of 21.1% annually as compared to \$141.7bn in the same period of 2022.

The report highlighted that Dubai accounted for 52.1% of the total value of real estate deals executed across all GCC countries. The value of real estate deals in Dubai surged by almost 57% annually during the first ten months of 2023, driven

significantly by the rise in prices of leading developers and increased demand for luxury properties under construction for both single-family and multi-family homes valued at over AED5mn.

Additionally, the report pointed out that the value of real estate deals in Abu Dhabi jumped by 56% during the first nine months of 2023. This contributed to the performance of

the UAE markets in enhancing the overall value of real estate deals for the GCC countries during the first ten months of the current year, surpassing the estimates for the entire 2022, which stood at \$165.8bn.

Furthermore, according to Kamco Invest's report, real estate stock indices in the UAE and Saudi Arabia continued their strong performance, witnessing significant gains during

the first 11 months of the current year.

As per the Gulf real estate total yield index released by Refinitiv, the sector's performance rose by 19.2%, surpassing the Morgan Stanley Gulf Index. This growth was propelled by the strong performance of real estate development indices in Dubai by 32.9%, Abu Dhabi by around 29%, and Saudi Arabia by 21.4%.

US economy has achieved soft landing, Yellen says

Washington, US – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Friday declared that the US economy had achieved a long-sought soft landing, according to media reports.

Soft landing of the economy is a historically unusual event in which high inflation is tamed without significantly damaging the labour market.

“What we’re seeing now I think we can describe as a soft landing, and my hope is that it will continue,” Yellen said Friday in an interview with CNN, as reported by Bloomberg.

Government figures out earlier Friday showed job gains and wage increases in December both exceeded expectations, with payrolls climbing 216,000. The report, which suggested continued upside risk for inflation, prompted investors to trim bets that the Federal Reserve would begin cutting rates in March.

As per the Bloomberg report, Yellen zeroed in on the latest wage data, which showed average hourly earnings rose 4.1% in the year through December. Given consumer inflation for the year is projected by economists to come in at 3.2%, that would mean wages exceeded price growth in 2023.

“Wage increases are running over price increases now,” she said. “American workers are get-



US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen

What we’re seeing now I think we can describe as a soft landing, and my hope is that it will continue

JANET YELLEN

ting ahead and the progress for the middle-income families is very noticeable.”

Yellen declined to comment on how she thought the Fed should proceed but said the central bank had handled monetary policy well.

“The path the labour market and economy and inflation have

followed suggests they’ve made a set of good decisions,” Yellen said.

For two years the Treasury chief consistently rejected the gloomiest predictions for the US economy even as the central bank pursued an aggressive rate-hiking campaign through much of 2022 and 2023. While never

ruling out a recession altogether, she repeatedly said she saw a “path” to a so-called soft landing.

In recent weeks Yellen has been on something like a victory lap. In December she said economists who predicted recession were now “eating their words,” and she repeated her critique Friday.

“There has been a lot of pessimism about the economy that’s really proven unwarranted,” she said. “A year ago, most forecasters believe we would fall into a recession. Obviously, that hasn’t happened.”

India’s GDP to grow 7.3% in 2023-24: NSO

New Delhi, India – The Indian economy is expected to grow 7.3% in the current financial year 2023-24 which will end on March 31, remaining the fastest-growing major economy, the National Statistics Office said on Friday.

However, these are early projections for 2023-24. Improved data coverage, actual tax collections, expenditures incurred on subsidies, and data revisions made by source agencies would have a bearing on subsequent revisions of these estimates.

India’s economy grew 7.2% in 2022-23 and 8.7% in 2021-22.

The first advance estimates of GDP come after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) raised its growth forecast last month by 50 basis points to 7% from an earlier estimate of 6.5%.

The upward revision by the RBI and the NSO comes on the heels of India reporting more-than-expected July-September quarter growth.

The Indian economy grew 7.6% during the July-September quarter of the current financial year 2023-24, remaining the fastest-growing major economy. India’s GDP growth for the April-June quarter grew 7.8%.

Strong rabi crops sowing despite the late harvest of kharif crops in some states; manufacturing sector is gaining strength with easing input cost pressures; and a pick-up in demand condi-



India’s manufacturing sector is estimated to expand 6.5% in 2023-24

tions, according to RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, were some of the reasons for the revision in 2023-24 growth projections.

Further, NSO estimates showed that the manufacturing sector is estimated to expand 6.5% in 2023-24, compared to 1.3% the preceding fiscal.

Construction sector output is expected to grow 10.7%, up from 10% in the previous year, NSO data showed.

Meanwhile, the United Nations’ World Economic Situation and Prospects 2024 report on Friday projected India’s economic growth to reach 6.2% in 2024, slightly lower than the 6.3% estimate for 2023, amid robust domestic demand and strong growth in the manufacturing and services sectors.

Gross domestic product in South Asia grew by an estimated

5.3% in 2023 and is projected to increase by 5.2% in 2024, driven by a robust expansion in India, which remains the fastest-growing large economy in the world, as per the report. The UN report said India registered strong investment performance in 2023, driven by government infrastructure projects and multinational investments.

“Investment has been more resilient in developing economies than in developed economies. Investment in South Asia, particularly in India, remained strong in 2023. India is benefiting from growing interest from multinationals, which see the country as a key alternative manufacturing base in the context of developed economies’ supply chain diversification strategies,” the report said.

ANI



People’s Bank of China said renminbi’s exchange rate will remain stable at a reasonable and balanced level

China’s central bank vows strong support to economy

Beijing, China – China’s central bank vowed to provide strong support for steady economic growth and high-quality development this year at a work conference in Beijing on Friday.

Work will be done to deepen supply-side structural reform in the financial sector, expand high-level opening up in an orderly manner, and strengthen counter-cyclical and cross-cycle adjustments, according to a statement of the People’s Bank of China.

Prudent monetary policies will be flexible, moderate, precise, and effective, and the growth of

social financing and the money supply will be matched with the economic growth and price levels. The renminbi’s exchange rate will remain stable at a reasonable and balanced level.

The statement said major areas and weak links will receive more financial support, including technological innovation, carbon emission reduction, agriculture, small firms, the private economy, and rural revitalisation.

The opening up of the financial markets will be promoted, with easier access for foreign investors to China’s bond market.

The central bank will also actively participate in international financial governance and expand global cooperation. The yuan’s internationalisation will also take solid steps.

Efforts will be made to guard against and properly defuse financial risks in major fields.

Efforts will also be made to deepen financial reforms, improve financial services and management, and push forward institutional reform and business process optimisation, according to the statement.

Xinhua

International sea freight prices kick off 2024 with exceptional jumps

Dubai, UAE – Global sea freight prices began the year 2024 with significant jumps, reaching record levels not seen since the end of November 2022. This comes amidst a series of increases in prices during the last quarter of the previous year, ending the downward trend witnessed in 2023.

On a weekly basis, according to the Baltic Index for measuring sea freight prices, as of January 4, 2024, prices jumped by more than 85% compared to their levels in the week ending December 29, 2023. The average cost of shipping a 40-foot container reached \$2,490 compared to \$1,341 the previous week.

According to the Drewry WCI composite index, the increase reached 61% on January 4 compared to its level on December 21, 2023. The average cost of a 40-foot container rose to \$2,670 compared to \$1,661.

Before this weekly jump, despite the price increases observed during the last quarter of the previous year due to geopolitical events, price levels at the end of 2023 were lower than their levels at the end of 2022.



According to the Baltic Dry Index (BDI), global sea freight prices decreased by approximately 37.7% over the past year. The cost of shipping a typical 40-foot container reached \$1,341 in the week ending December 29, 2023, compared to \$2,152 in the week ending December 30 of the previous year, 2022. This information is based on the BDI, which monitors shipping prices globally across major routes passing through the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and through the Suez Canal.

Shipping prices reached their highest levels in the week ending January 13 during the year 2023, with costs reaching \$2,238. The lowest level for prices during

2023 was in October, specifically in the week ending October 20 when the cost of shipping a container reached \$1,048. Subsequently, there was a gradual increase until reaching the current levels.

The cost of shipping a typical 40-foot container was \$1790.2 at the end of the first quarter of the previous year. It then dropped to \$1277.2 at the end of the second quarter and decreased to \$1176.4 at the end of the year’s third quarter.

As per the Drewry WCI composite index, it surged by 61%, reaching \$2670 for each 40-foot container in the current week compared to the previous week. It also increased by 25%

compared to the same week of the previous year.

The index indicates that the current price level of \$2670 for the typical 40-foot container is now 88% higher than the average prices of 2019 (pre-COVID-19 pandemic), which were \$1420.

According to the Drewry WCI composite index, shipping prices surged during the current week from Shanghai to Rotterdam by 115%, reaching \$3577 per container, a significant increase from \$1910. Following this, prices from Shanghai to Genoa increased by 114%, rising from \$2222 to \$4178 per container.

WAM

IEA forecasts 6% share for biofuels in road transport by 2030

New Delhi, India – According to data from the International Energy Agency (IEA), biofuel demand is expected to expand, making up 6% of forecasted road transport energy demand by 2030.

According to a report by S&P Global Commodity Insights (GCI), this growth is attributed to policies and planned project additions outlined in the IEA’s December report titled “The Role of E-fuels in Decarbonising Transport.”

The forecasted 6% share is

equivalent to 5.3 exajoules, reinforcing the significance of biofuels in the broader context of decarbonising the transport sector.

The IEA notes that road transport will continue to dominate the use of liquid biofuels, maintaining a share of 98% by 2030. This underscores the critical role biofuels play in the transition toward more sustainable energy sources.

In 2022, road transport accounted for nearly all liquid biofuel use, and this trend is



expected to marginally decrease to 98% by 2030, as highlighted in the IEA’s October World En-

ergy Outlook.

In that scenario, biofuels represented 2.2mn barrels per day

of oil demand in 2022, constituting 5% of the road transport demand.

Expanding biofuels beyond 9 exajoules would necessitate exploring other feedstocks available in larger quantities that do not compete for land resources for food and feed production.

The December IEA report identifies new feedstocks compatible with existing technologies, such as those grown on marginal land or as cover crops, offering around 8 exajoules of liquid biofuel potential.

However, these approaches face challenges, including higher costs, strict sustainability criteria, and the need for dedicated policy support.

Organic feedstocks like agricultural and forestry residues, along with municipal solid waste, offer additional supply potential. Still, their deployment at scale is limited, and they face competition from other bioenergy uses. Global biodiesel demand is expected to continue growing, reaching over 1.4mn barrels per day in 2025, reflect-

ing the industry’s upward trajectory over the past decade. S&P Global Commodity Insights analysts project this increase from around 1mn barrels per day in 2022 and less than 600,000 barrels per day ten years ago. The bulk of this biodiesel will be used for blending in road diesel.

While biofuels are poised to play a significant role in the future of transport, other factors such as electric vehicles (EVs) are also contributing to the displacement of oil demand.

ANI

Hero Dubai Desert Classic welcomes DP World Tour stars for 35th edition

European Ryder Cup Captain Luke Donald, Rolex Series winner Ryan Fox and Major Champions Padraig Harrington, Francesco Molinari and Adam Scott are set to star at the 35th anniversary edition of the Hero Dubai Desert Classic. They will join an exciting field at the iconic Emirates Golf Club from January 18-21 that includes defending champion and world number two Rory McIlroy, reigning Open Champion Brian Harman, European Ryder Cup heroes Tommy Fleetwood and Tyrrell Hatton and rising PGA TOUR star Cameron Young.

Former world number one Donald, who captained Team Europe to a 16½ - 11½ victory against the United States in the 2023 Ryder Cup in Rome, was recently announced as Europe's first repeat Captain since Bernard Gallacher performed the role in 1991, 1993 and 1995. He will lead Europe once again at the 2025 Ryder Cup in New York, but before then, he is looking forward to starting his season with back-to-back weeks in



Adam Scott

Dubai, including just his second appearance at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic, a press release said. Donald said, "I'm pleased to be able to add the Hero Dubai Desert Classic to my schedule for the second successive season. I enjoyed the experience at the start of 2023, so I know coming straight back will be a great way to get my 2024 season started. Dubai is such an iconic place for the DP World Tour, so I'm looking forward to starting my season with two weeks in a row, at the new Dubai Invitational and then at Emirates Golf Club for the first Rolex Se-



Francesco Molinari

ries event of the season." After helping Donald's side to victory in his home country as one of Team Europe's Vice Captains in Rome, 2018 Open Champion Francesco Molinari will return for his 10th appearance at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic. Italy's first male Major Champion previously formed one half of the famous 'Moliwood' pairing during the 2018 European Ryder Cup victory, and the six-time DP World Tour winner will reunite with partner Fleetwood over the Majlis Course in January. Also, continuing the Ryder Cup connection, Europe's 2021 Captain



Luke Donald

and multiple Major champion Harrington is set to add further star power to the field. The 15-time DP World Tour winner has taken the PGA TOUR Champions by storm in recent years, winning six times since January 2022, including adding the U.S. Senior Open to his collection of Major titles. Harrington has an impressive record at the Hero Dubai Desert Classic, with three top tens over his 11 previous appearances, including a second place finish in 2001. Fellow Major champion Scott is also looking forward to starting his season in Dubai. The former World Number One, who



Padraig Harrington

became the first Australian Masters Tournament winner when he claimed the Green Jacket in 2013, is no stranger to success in the Middle East. The 11-time DP World Tour winner has claimed titles all over the world, counting wins in Qatar in 2002 and 2008 on a CV that includes victories in his native Australia, Asia, South Africa and most recently the 2020 Genesis Invitational on the PGA Tour. New Zealander Fox secured his biggest career victory to date at the 2023 BMW PGA Championship after posting a five under par round of 67 on Sunday to lift the famous trophy at



Ryan Fox

Wentworth Club in England to secure his first Rolex Series title. The four-time DP World Tour winner previously claimed the Seve Ballesteros Award for Players' Player of the Year after an impressive 2022 season - including victory in the UAE at the 2022 Ras Al Khaimah Classic - and was presented with his trophy by one of Seve's sons Javier and his daughter Carmen at the 2023 edition of the Hero Dubai Desert Classic. Simon Corkill, executive tournament director of Hero Dubai Desert Classic, said, "We're absolutely thrilled to be announcing more star names to our

line-up for the 2024 Hero Dubai Desert Classic. The additions of triumphant Ryder Cup captain Luke Donald, Major champions Padraig Harrington, Francesco Molinari and Adam Scott, as well as Rolex Series winner Ryan Fox, certainly makes the field more competitive in this 35th edition of the tournament and we cannot wait to see them tee off at the Emirates Golf Club in January.

"With many top stars confirming their attendance, this is a fantastic opportunity for people to see the players up close while enjoying a wide array of entertainment off the course in what will be a memorable event." The Hero Dubai Desert Classic will be celebrating its 35th anniversary and its recent official certification as the first Geo-Certified event in the Middle East, and the first in the DP World Tour's Rolex Series. GEO Certification is an industry leading credibility standard that recognises leadership and action in environmental and social responsibility.

Exciting offers from Bank Muscat's branded credit cards

Bank Muscat has opened up the application process, without the need for salary transfer for the bank's co-branded credit cards, namely, the Bank Muscat Oman Air Visa Platinum Credit Card and the Lulu Bank Muscat Titanium Credit Card.



Omanis working in government/quasi-government institutions, as well as tier 1 and 2, who have an active account with Bank Muscat, will now be able to apply for the Bank Muscat Oman Air Visa Platinum Credit Card and the Lulu Bank Muscat Titanium Mastercard Credit Card without the requirement of transferring their salary, a press release said.

To make it easier for customers to take advantage of the benefits the cards offer, the documents needed to process the credit cards application are minimal and include a valid ID card and proof of salary/employment (salary certificate) with minimum 6 months of service.

Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, general manager - Products, Bank Muscat, said, "Bank Muscat is delighted with the positive feedback the unique co-branded cards receive in response to the various features they offer. In line with our customer-centric initiatives, we are pleased to simplify the application process to enable all customers to enjoy the benefits offered. I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation for our valued customers for their continuous trust and confidence in Bank Muscat's products and facilities. Bank Muscat will continue to enhance its partnerships to offer a world of exclusive privileges and rewards for our valued customers."

The Bank Muscat Oman Air Visa Platinum Credit Card helps customers make the most of their travels, offering great rewards and privileges for shopping, dining, travel, lifestyle, and entertainment. Frequent travellers will particularly appreciate the exclusive reward of earning 2 Sindbad

Miles for every RO1 spent with the card, as well as 1,000 welcome bonus Sindbad miles with the first usage of the card within 30 days.

Customers will also benefit from the fast track to Sindbad Silver tier programme upon completion of 2 return trips through Oman Air within 6 months of card issuance. The credit card also facilitates complimentary visits to 25 airport lounges worldwide as well as complimentary chauffeur service to and from Muscat and Salalah Airports. Cardholders can also enjoy easy payment plan (EPP) scheme, exclusive discounts, as well as, the 'best in class' complimentary travel insurance that covers accident insurance, lost baggage, lost money, cancellation, travel delay, delayed baggage, personal liability, legal expenses and loss of passport.

Similarly, the Lulu Bank Muscat Titanium Mastercard Credit Card offers its own unique range of benefits that enhance cardholders' everyday life, including the exclusive ability to earn 2% lulu reward points every time the card is used at Lulu Hypermarket in Oman and the ability to earn 0.5% reward points when shopping with the card at other local and international merchants. Cardholders can also enjoy travel related benefits including complimentary access to over 10 lounges across the UAE, KSA, Jordan, Kuwait and Egypt as well as free travel insurance. The credit card also offers exclusive discounts across shopping, dining, travel, lifestyle and entertainment. Credit cardholders can also benefit from the buy now pay later, easy payment plan (EPP) scheme offering 0% interest rates on purchases, Cinema offers and exclusive discounts.

Instant Cash Football Cup brings agents together

Instant Cash, a company within the FINTX portfolio, the fintech arm of Emirates Post Group, and one of the fastest-growing money transfer brands in the region, successfully organised the Instant Cash Football Cup for its agent partners in Oman, highlighting its dedication to fostering a culture of sports and encouraging a healthy lifestyle.

By hosting such events, Instant Cash is working towards inspiring its agent parents to lead healthier lives by popularising different sports activities in the country, a press release said.

A recent indoor football tournament featured 6 dynamic teams, including renowned names such as Unimoni Ex-



change, Purshottam Kanji Exchange, Joyalukkas Exchange, Al Jadeed Exchange, Mustafa Sultan Exchange and Global Money Exchange, representing some of Oman's top exchange houses.

Purshottam Kanji Exchange emerged as the victor, claiming the first position, while Joyalukkas Exchange displayed commendable skills to secure the runner-up position in the tournament. Trophies, medals, and certificates were presented to the winners and participants, respectively. The enthusiastic support from senior management of exchange houses further highlighted the commitment to fostering sportsmanship and camaraderie.

OHI, Johnson Controls event a success

Oman International Electronics and Trading Co (OHI Electronics) announced the successful conclusion of its inaugural Building Management event on November 1 at Intercity Hotel, Muscat-Sultanate of Oman.

OHI Electronics is a subsidiary of the OHI Group of companies, one of the largest ELV/ITC system Integrators in Oman, with over four decades of vast experience in projects offering extra low voltage solutions, which includes audio visual solutions, security solutions, automation, sustainable energy, hospitality and kitchen appliances. It is an authorised partner



for Johnson Controls Facility Explorer Building management platform in OMAN, a press release said.

The event was attended by more than 40 key customers from both government and private sectors. Johnson Controls

and OHI Group, represented by Leonardo Varela, the region's Director-Controls Products and Osama Henin, group general manager respectively, welcomed and presented their company's vision and capabilities.

The OHI team organised a live demonstration while Johnson Controls regional manager-Controls Products, Paramita Chatterjee, presented an extended overview of the Facility Explorer BMS platform. Besides FX, she also showcased Johnson Controls broad portfolio of sensors, Triatek Critical Environment and KNX based lighting controls and GRMS system.

Wizz Air among world's top 5 low-cost airlines



Wizz Air, Europe's fastest growing and most environmentally sustainable airline globally, has taken home the award for being among the World's Top 5 Safest Low Cost Airlines by AirlineRatings.com, a press release said.

The AirlineRatings' World TOP 5 Safest Low Cost Airline award recognises airlines with a fleet of over 50 aircraft, that have excellent safety culture and low incident rates. In making its evaluation, AirlineRatings.com takes into account a comprehensive range of factors that include serious incidents, recent fatal accidents, audits from aviation's governing and industry bodies, profitability, industry-leading safety initiatives, expert pilot training assessment and fleet age.

With the AirlineRatings' award, Wizz Air also confirms its global leadership in safety, along with sustainability.

Mall of Muscat greets patrons on New Year

Mall of Muscat, leading leisure and entertainment destination, has greeted its valued customers, patrons, and the wider community on New Year.

A spokesperson for Mall of Muscat said, "As we welcome the New Year 2024, we extend our sincere wishes to everyone for a year filled with joy, health, and prosperity. This is a time of new beginnings and renewed hope, and we are excited to share these moments with our esteemed visitors and guests."

The spokesperson added, "The New Year brings with it the promise of fresh opportunities



and the continuation of our journey towards excellence. We are grateful for the ongoing support from our customers and are committed to enhancing their shopping and leisure experience at our mall. We look forward to being a part of the community's cherished moments and celebrations this year."

The Mall of Muscat, home to over 240 varied brands in fashion, lifestyle, sports, and electronics, remains dedicated to providing a distinct and enjoyable shopping and entertainment experience in the Sultanate of Oman.

'4% of Gaza's population dead, missing'

Israel's air, land and sea attacks have destroyed about 70% of Gaza Strip's civilian infrastructure

London, UK - More than 90,000 people, about four per cent of the population in Gaza, are dead, wounded or missing, a human rights monitor said on Friday.

The Geneva-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor made the assessment and said Israel's continuous air, land and sea attacks have destroyed about 70% of the Gaza Strip's civilian infrastructure since October 7.

The group accused Israel of making the Strip uninhabitable.

"Israel is pushing hundreds of thousands of civilians towards mass forced displacement," it said in a statement.

Hundreds of bodies that cannot be recovered remain on roads, according to Euro-Med, particularly in areas where the Israeli army has conducted ground incursions.

The group said Israel's attacks are an 'apparent attempt' to expand its territory to include the entire Gaza Strip, uprooting the vast majority of the population in violation of international law, which, it added, 'likely amounts to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide'.

Referring to reports that Israel is prohibiting humanitarian supplies from entering the Strip more frequently, Euro-Med noted that Israel is using 'starvation as a weapon'.

It reiterated demands for special rapporteurs at the UN and the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to investigate 'violations that have been widely documented since Israel started its genocidal war on Gaza'.

122 killed in last 24 hours

At least 122 Palestinians have



Hundreds of bodies that cannot be recovered remain on roads, according to Euro-Med, particularly in areas where the Israeli army has conducted ground incursions (Anadolu Agency)

At least 122 Palestinians have been killed and another 256 injured in the last 24 hours as Israeli forces continued their ongoing onslaught in the besieged Gaza Strip, the Health Ministry said on Saturday

been killed and another 256 injured in the last 24 hours as Israeli forces continued their ongoing onslaught in the besieged Gaza Strip, the Health Ministry in the blockaded enclave said on Saturday.

"The Israeli occupation committed 12 massacres against families in the Gaza Strip, resulting

in 122 casualties and 256 injuries during the past 24 hours," the Health Ministry said in a statement.

The Palestinian death toll from the Israeli army's ongoing attacks on Gaza since October 7 has risen to 22,722, with 58,166 injured, the ministry added.

Israel has launched relentless

air and ground attacks on the Gaza Strip following a cross-border attack by Palestinian group Hamas on October 7. Israeli officials say Hamas attacks have killed around 1,200 Israelis.

The Israeli onslaught has left Gaza in ruins, with 60 per cent of the enclave's infrastructure damaged or destroyed and nearly two million residents displaced amid acute shortages of food, clean water, and medicines.

According to the Palestinian news agency, WAFA, at least 15 Palestinians were killed in Israeli airstrikes overnight on Friday across the Gaza Strip.

Israeli planes attacked two houses in Deir al-Balah in central Gaza and the Al-Manara neighbourhood in the southern city of Khan Younis, it said.

Rocket barrage from Lebanon

Lebanese military group Hezbollah on Saturday claimed responsibility for the rocket barrage from Lebanon on Mount Meron in northern Israel earlier in the morning.

In a statement, Hezbollah said it targeted an Israeli military installation in the area with 62 projectiles, adding that the attack is 'an initial response' to the alleged

Israeli killing of Hamas' deputy chief Saleh al-Arouri in Lebanon on Tuesday.

"Approximately 40 launches from Lebanon toward the area of Meron in northern Israel were identified," read a statement issued earlier on Saturday morning by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

According to the statement, the IDF responded by striking a Lebanese military cell that took part in the launches.

Israeli media reported that there were explosions close to Mount Meron after sirens sounded in some 90 communities close to the northern border

with Lebanon. Video circulating on social media showed smoke in several areas in Mount Meron. No injuries were reported.

Blinken visit

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Saturday met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in Istanbul, with issues before them including the ongoing carnage in Gaza, final steps to complete Turkey's ratification of Sweden's NATO bid, and US approval for the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey.

Blinken is also due to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul.

Following his visit to Turkey, through January 11 Blinken is set to proceed to Greece, Jordan, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the West Bank, and Egypt.

During his regional tour, according to the US State Department, Blinken will stress protecting civilian lives, releasing hostages, delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza, restoring essential services, and preventing the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza.

He will also address urgent steps to reduce violence, calm rhetoric, and ease tensions, including deterring Houthi attacks in Yemen and avoiding escalation in Lebanon.

Blinken will reaffirm the US commitment to work with partners for Middle East peace, emphasising progress towards a Palestinian state alongside Israel, said the department.

His visit comes amid a rising human catastrophe in the Gaza Strip due to both Israeli attacks and its blockade on the besieged strip.

Agencies



This file photo shows a soldier standing guard at the Qayyarah airbase in southern Mosul, Iraq on March 26, 2020 (Anadolu Agency)

Iraq prepares to end international coalition's mission

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraq's prime minister announced on Friday the formation of a bilateral committee to arrange the ending of international coalition forces in the country and affirmed Baghdad's steadfast and principled stance toward achieving that goal.

It came in a speech delivered by Mohammed Al-Sudani during a memorial ceremony organised by the Popular Mobilization Forces on the fourth anniversary of the death of the former commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, and the Deputy Head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and their companions. On January 3, 2020, Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were killed in a US airstrike near Baghdad.

"The attack violated all norms, charters, and laws governing Iraq-US relations, branding it a heinous and unjustified crime," said Al-Sudani.

The Iraqi News Agency, INA, said the prime minister said: "The Popular Mobilization

Forces stand as an official entity affiliated with the state, operating under its authority, and constituting an integral part of our armed forces. "We have consistently emphasised that in case of any violation or transgression by an Iraqi party, or a breach of Iraqi law, the sole authority to address these issues rests with the Iraqi government," he said.

Al-Sudani pointed out that 'the government is the authorised body to enforce the law, and everyone is required to operate through it'.

He also stressed: "We steadfastly assert our principled stance to conclude the presence of coalition forces, given that the justifications for their existence have ended."

"We are currently in the process of scheduling the commencement of dialogue through the bilateral committee tasked with establishing arrangements for the conclusion of this presence. This commitment by the government is unwavering."

Anadolu Agency

Jordan army clashes with smugglers

Amman, Jordan - The Jordanian army on Saturday announced armed clashes with smugglers from Syria, injuring a number of them and leaving some others arrested.

In a statement, the Jordanian army said that 'since two o'clock in the morning, Saturday (Friday 2300GMT), armed clashes have been taking place between border guard forces and large armed groups of smugglers on the northern border within the jurisdictional area of the Eastern Military District'.

"These clashes have so far resulted in the injury and arrest of a number of smugglers, and the thwarting of the smuggling of large quantities of drugs and weapons," the statement added without giving further details.

"Armed groups are being ex-



Jordanian Army's armoured vehicles are seen on Syrian border (Anadolu Agency)

pelled back into Syria," the army added. An unnamed Jordanian source announced on Friday that its military had carried out two airstrikes on sites inside Syrian territory, saying this came 'in the framework of pursuing drug smugglers who ex-

port drugs into the kingdom', according to Al-Mamlaka TV.

On December 31, the Jordanian army said in a statement that the kingdom was facing a 'frenzied campaign' from drug traffickers and weapons smugglers. In recent days, Jordanian

security have carried out a series of raids in the east of the country, after clashes between the army and armed groups on the border with Syria, which resulted in the killing and wounding of a number of them.

Anadolu Agency

Europe freezes as Finland sets record temperature

Athens, Greece - After an extremely hot and dry summer and warm fall seasons, Europe is now gripped by extreme cold, bringing heavy snowfall and floods, with Finland setting a new record temperature of -44.3 degrees Celsius (-47.74 degrees Fahrenheit) on Friday.

Temperatures dropped to a record low of -44.3C in Finland's northwest region of Lapland in the early hours of Friday, the public broadcaster YLE said, citing the country's Meteorological Institute.

The institute noted that temperatures below -42C have only been recorded three times this century.

The extreme weather also



caused transportation disruptions in the capital Helsinki and across the country, as the Finnish National Rail Service (VR) suspended train service on dozens of routes.

Meanwhile, electricity con-

sumption in the country has been at a record high for the past few days owing to the extreme cold, and the electricity spot price is expected to hit a record high of €2.35 (US\$2.57) per kilowatt-hour on Friday.

In Sweden, the cold snap has caused temperatures to drop below -40C in northern parts, with thermometers reading -43.8C at the country's northernmost weather station of Naimakka, the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SHMI) said.

The extreme cold and snowfall also caused chaos on many of the country's motorways, the public broadcaster SVT reported. Similarly, Norway experienced the coldest weather since 2020 on Friday, with temperatures expected to drop to -20C in the capital Oslo, and -30C in the country's east, the public broadcaster NHK said.

Anadolu Agency

Death toll from Japan earthquakes climbs to 110

Tokyo, Japan - The death toll from earthquakes that hit central Japan on New Year's Day has climbed to over 110, local media said on Saturday.

Authorities also said that the search for over 200 people in Ishikawa region still classified as missing six days since the quake continues, public broadcaster NHK reported.

On Monday, a strong magnitude 7.6 earthquake hit the Ishikawa province on the Sea of Japan, destroying a dozen buildings and causing huge damage to roads in the region, followed by smaller quakes.

Aftershocks also continue as a strong 5.4 magnitude earthquake struck the prefecture on Saturday morning while authorities are urging residents to stay alert for more, possibly as large as the first, according to the broadcaster.

Local officials are also having trouble delivering relief supplies to affected areas as roads remain damaged and often blocked while thousands of homes have no power.

In a rare move, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent a message of sympathy to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida over the deadly quakes, state-run media said on Saturday.

Anadolu Agency

INDIA

BJP plans nationwide live telecast of Ram Mandir consecration event

The consecration ceremony is scheduled to take place in Ayodhya on January 22

New Delhi - The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has announced plans to telecast the consecration ceremony of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya live on the booth level across the country. The ceremony is scheduled to take place on January 22. As per party sources, BJP workers have been instructed to set up large screens for the live telecast of the consecration at the booth level. This initiative aims to provide a means for the common people to witness the consecration of Ram Lalla (infant Lord Ram). "This way, the general public can have darshan of Shri Ram Lala and witness the consecration ceremony," according to the sources. Additionally, BJP workers are encouraged to engage in social work on a personal level. "Workers may choose to distribute blankets, organise community feasts ('bhandar'), or contribute through donations in terms of food or fruits to help those in need," the sources added. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to attend the consecration ceremony. The event has garnered attention, with several VVIP guests from India and abroad receiving invitations to participate in the event in Ayodhya.



'Dhwaja Dand' made of brass for the Ram temple in Ayodhya being flagged off from Ahmedabad on Friday (ANI)

Vedic rituals for the Pran-Pratishtha (consecration) ceremony of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya will begin on January 16, a week before the main ceremony. A priest from Varanasi, Lakshmi Kant Dixit, will perform the main rituals of the consecration ceremony on January 22. From January 14 to 22, Ayodhya will mark the Amrit Mahotsav. A 1008 Hundi Mahayagya will also be organised, in which thousands of devotees will be fed. Several tent cities are being erected in Ayodhya to accommodate thousands of devotees, who are expected to arrive in the temple town of Uttar Pradesh for the consecration. According to the Sri Ram Janambhoomi Trust, arrange-

ments will be made for 10,000-15,000 people. Local authorities are gearing up for the anticipated surge in visitors around the ceremony and are in the process of implementing enhanced security measures. Meanwhile, Maharashtra's former chief minister and Shiv Sena (UBT) Chief Uddhav Thackeray said on Saturday that the party will perform a 'Maha Aarti' at the bank of the Godavari River in Maharashtra's Nasik on the Ram Temple consecration day. "The birth anniversary of Bala Saheb falls on January 23 but since the consecration ceremony of the Ayodhya Ram Temple is going to be held on

January 22, the Shiv Sena will perform a 'Maha Aarti' on that day at the bank of the Godavari River in Nasik'. "We do not want to indulge in matter of who has got the invitation and who has not. When the consecration ceremony will be held in Ayodhya, at the same time, we will participate by offering prayers at the Kala Ram Temple in Nasik. On the same day, we will hold party's conference in Nasik itself," Thackeray added. Nasik's Kalaram Temple is dedicated to Lord Ram. It is believed that Lord Ram stayed here in Panchvati with wife Sita and brother Lakshman during their exile ('Vanvaas'). Udhav Thackeray has not been invited to the grand consecration ceremony. Earlier, the BJP and the Shiv Sena (UBT) had engaged in a bitter falling out over the issue, with Thackeray saying that he had not been invited for the ceremony. "First, I have not received any invitation. Second, I don't need an invitation to go there. Ram Lalla is not a party's property, he belongs to everyone. I just want that this event not to be politicised...This decision was given by the Supreme Court, not the government," Thackeray said. ANI

Aditya-L1 enters final orbit

New Delhi - In a significant scientific milestone, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Saturday injected Aditya-L1 spacecraft - the first dedicated solar mission - into its final destination orbit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister of State for Science and Technology Jitendra Singh were among leaders who hailed the achievement. Aditya-L1 has reached Lagrange Point L1, about 1.5mn km from earth. The PSLV-C57.1 rocket carrying the Aditya-L1 orbiter lifted off successfully from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, in September. The successful launch of the maiden solar mission of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) came on the heels of the historic lunar landing mission - Chandrayaan-3. Modi said India will continue to pursue new frontiers of science for the benefit of humanity. Aditya L1 has seven different payloads on board, four of which will observe the light from the sun and the other three will measure in-situ parameters of the plasma and magnetic fields. ANI

FROZEN LAKE



Shikaras stand parked on the banks of the frozen Dal Lake as the temperature drops to minus 3 degrees in Srinagar on Saturday (ANI)

Congress unveils logo of 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra'

New Delhi - The Congress on Saturday unveiled the logo and slogan of the party's upcoming 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' which will be led by party leader Rahul Gandhi. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh and General Secretary K C Venugopal were present for the unveiling event held at All India Congress Committee headquarters in Delhi. The slogan of the Yatra is 'Nyay ka haq milne tak'. "Under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, we are starting 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' from January 14. 'Bharat Jodo Nyay



Congress leaders launch the logo and tagline of 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' at AICC Akbar Road in New Delhi on Saturday (ANI)

Yatra' is our strong step towards providing economic, social and political justice to the country's people," Kharge said. Kharge attacked Prime Min-

ister Narendra Modi and said he has not visited Manipur, the state which has witnessed ethnic violence. "We are going among the

people to tell them that there is no other way. We tried to speak in the Parliament and raise the issues. But the Government gave us no opportunity. 146 MPs were suspended for the first time in the history of this country. He at least came to the Lok Sabha but never once did he even take a peek at the Rajya Sabha," he added. The 'Yatra' will start from Imphal and cover a distance of 6,713km, straddling 100 Lok Sabha constituencies and 337 assembly segments and covering 110 districts. The march will culminate in Mumbai on March 20 or 21. ANI

Americans remain divided 3 years after Capitol riot as Trump set to stand trial

Houston, US - It has been three years since pro-Donald Trump protesters violently stormed the Capitol building in Washington DC to try to stop the certification of Joe Biden as the next president. That flashpoint in American history has drastically changed the political climate in the US. To this point, more than 1,200 defendants have been charged with crimes for their alleged roles in the January 6, 2021, attack with more than 700 already pleading guilty to mostly misdemeanors such as illegal picketing and destruction of property. More than 100 have been convicted for more serious crimes such as assaulting police officers and a rare Civil War-era count of sedition, according to CBS News. Investigators said 140 police officers were assaulted that day and the FBI is still trying to track down others involved in the attack, including more than 80 people accused of violent crimes

who have not yet been identified. The FBI is offering a US\$500,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons who planted pipe bombs outside the Democratic and Republican national party headquarters in the nation's capital the day before the riot. While those convicted of misdemeanors have been sentenced to minimal terms ranging from probation to months in prison, some of the more serious offenders have landed lengthy prison terms. The two longest sentences were handed down to the leaders of well-known US militant groups who supported Trump. Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio was sentenced to 21 years in prison and Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes received 18 years behind bars. US Attorney Matthew Graves said members of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys were the ones who lit the flames that



This file photo shows Donald Trump speaking at 'Save America March' rally in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021

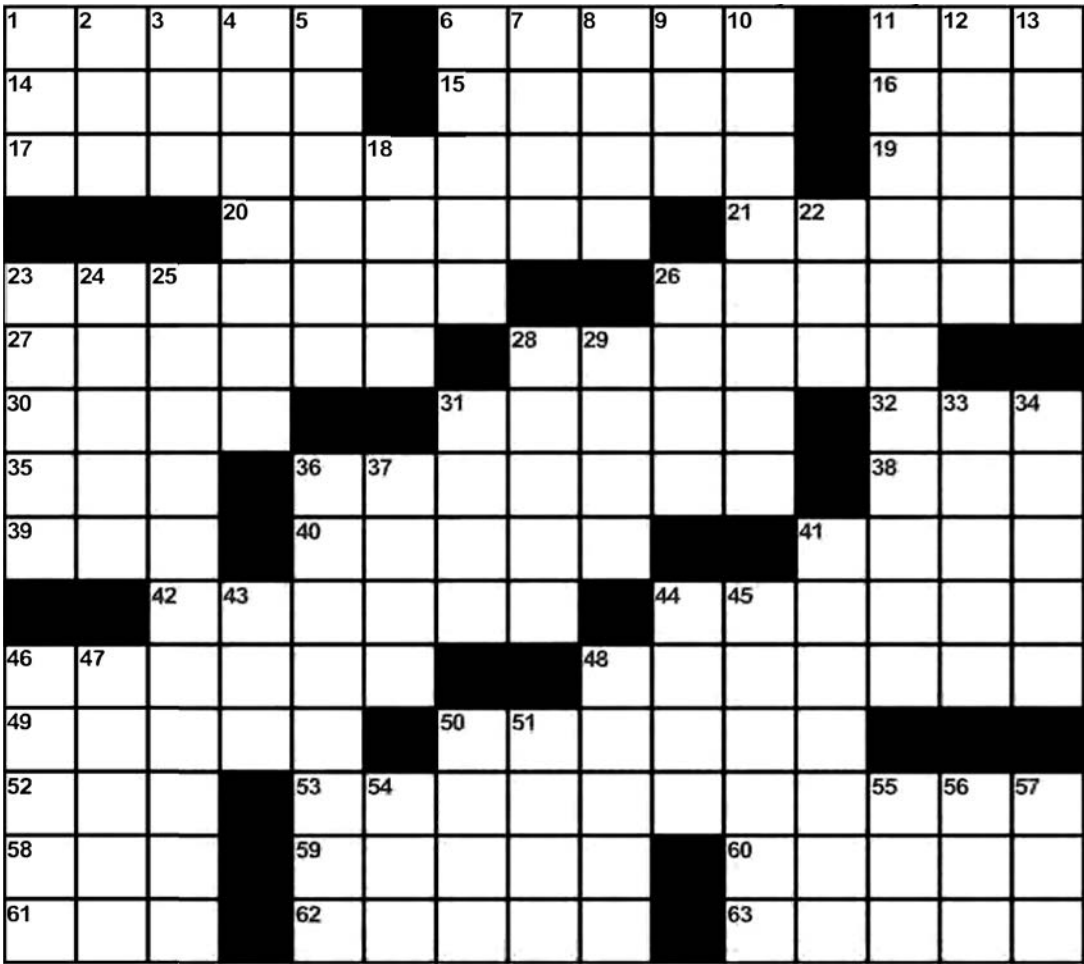
Donald Trump has been accused of inciting the insurrection on that infamous day and the former president is now set to stand trial for his alleged part in the riot

quickly spread through the riot. Trump has been accused of inciting the insurrection on that infamous day and the former president is now set to stand trial for his alleged part in the riot. He has been charged with four

federal counts, including obstructing an official proceeding and three counts of conspiracy. He has pleaded not guilty to all charges and is expected to stand trial in March, although the date could be pushed back pending multiple appeals. While special counsel Jack Smith, who sought the indictment against Trump, did not directly charge the former president with facilitating or promoting the January 6 attack on the Capitol, court filings revealed that Smith could introduce evidence at trial showing that the events of the riot are 'exactly what (Trump) intended' to happen. Trump's political standing in the wake of the riot is a paradox in and of itself because, despite the serious nature of the charges against him, the attack has seemingly fortified his base of supporters to the point where Trump is currently the frontrunner for the 2024 Republican presidential

nomination. A Washington Post/University of Maryland poll released on Tuesday showed that a little more than 50 per cent of voters said Trump bears either 'a great deal' or 'a good amount' of responsibility for the January 6 attack, which is down 10 per cent from December 2021 when 60 per cent of voters held the former president responsible. While the numbers are distinctly divided between party lines, 14 per cent of Republicans now say Trump bears responsibility for the riot versus 27 per cent in 2021. On the flipside, 86 per cent of Democrats blame Trump for the attack, down from 92 per cent in 2021. The Texas Politics Project Poll conducted by the University of Texas at Austin (UT) also released its latest findings on Friday regarding the riot and Trump's current political standing with Texas voters. Anadolu Agency

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1) Viewed anew
- 6) Poppa's significant other
- 11) Go up and down, as an apple
- 14) Furious
- 15) Par _ (French airmail)
- 16) You-here separator
- 17) Corrosive in cells
- 19) Even the score
- 20) Make possible
- 21) Prefix with "state"
- 23) Net work?
- 26) Fairy-tale bridge minders
- 27) Is a keynote speaker
- 28) Moe, famously
- 30) Bits of food
- 31) Lord of literature
- 32) Automobile
- 35) "Stupid me!"
- 36) Charlotte team
- 38) H.S. biology topic
- 39) _ Lanka (Ceylon)
- 40) Virtually guaranteed, as a victory
- 41) Catcher's offering
- 42) Present occasions

- 44) "Dallas" role
- 46) John Hancock, famously
- 48) Confuses and entertains
- 49) English exam finale, often
- 50) Gazed steadily and impolitely
- 52) 19th letter of the Greek alphabet
- 53) Some cheap hooch
- 58) Mai _ (rum cocktail)
- 59) WWII sub
- 60) Treetop dwelling
- 61) 10 of calendars, briefly
- 62) Semiaquatic salamanders
- 63) Botanical swelling

DOWN

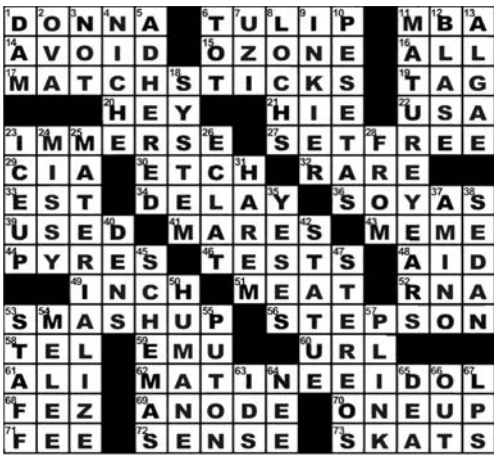
- 1) Barbecue offering
- 2) Historic time
- 3) Warned the bench
- 4) Certifies
- 5) It gets roasted
- 6) Noncommittal answer
- 7) Race track shape
- 8) Cheese fanciers
- 9) "You don't mean me?"
- 10) Fireplace stands

- 11) Wartime motivators
- 12) Large bay window
- 13) Chasers, at times
- 18) Detested rodents
- 22) Christmas drink
- 23) Cabin location, often
- 24) Overthrow, e.g.
- 25) Skimpy beach attire
- 26) Barfly's binge
- 28) Lip _ (mouths the words)
- 29) Arboretum item
- 31) Camembert's kin
- 33) Protractor's measure
- 34) _ fast (caught in a race)
- 36) Baker's sweet
- 37) A single time
- 41) Blurred, as a signature
- 43) Put _ show
- 44) Andean land
- 45) One-celled creatures (var.)
- 46) Brief quarrel
- 47) Bartender on TV's Pacific Princess
- 48) Sheets of cotton
- 50) Stash away
- 51) "... does it!"

- 54) Presidential nickname
- 55) Anger

- 56) Game with matchsticks
- 57) Caribbean, e.g.

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Someone in power could be tad bit difficult for you to bear today, but you need to give your temper some time to cool off before you say anything that could cause any friction with them. They have a long memory, and you never want to leave a bad impression. Like it or not, you need to make sure you're on their good side right now. You are cautioned to avoid impetuoussness at all costs today. The slower you go, the better place you'll end up in.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Have some ice-breaker comments ready to go today, because you are likely to be thrust into groups of people you need to get to know. In order to initiate some good conversation with these people, be cheerful. Avoid touchy topics like politics, religion, or money. It's much wiser to stick to safe topics like movies, sports, and celebrity gossip. Shallow topics might not lead to deep connections, but at least they won't lead to arguments.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

A confused and struggling friend could use some tough love today, and you're the best person to give it to them. Unlike a lot of folks, you know exactly how to deliver the cold, hard truth in a warm and supportive way. Few people know how to deliver such a tricky message without hurting someone's feelings or sounding judgmental. But your compassion will see you through. Trust yourself today, and you could open up new doors in an old relationship.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Who sang, backed by U2, as the first song in the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park, London, in 2005?

- A. Mick Jagger
- B. Elton John
- C. David Bowie
- D. Paul McCartney

02. What concept was described and highlighted in a 1983 book edited by European-British historian Eric Hobsbawm and British Africanist Terence Ranger?

- A. Pizza effect
- B. Invented tradition
- C. Imagined community
- D. Folklorismus

03.Which of these entertainments was introduced to the western world last?

- A. Sudoku
- B. Frisbee
- C. Chess
- D. Mah Jong

Answers: 1.D 2.B 3.A



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

If you get caught up in a power struggle today, get out of it as soon as you possibly can. Even if you have to completely give in to someone's demands, you should. Fighting for your point of view is just not worth the risk right now. Giving in might not be your first choice, and it might not make everyone happy, but you'll end up in a better place in the long run. You have to know how to pick your battles. Today's conflicts are simply not worth your energy.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You will be bouncing between opposites all day long, but these extreme situations will be an awful lot of fun. You have the flexibility required to go with the flow no matter how sudden or unexpected the changes. The only problem is that you make it all look too easy, so no one is going to recognize the skills that you possess. This is a wonderful day to try a new look and see how it goes over with friends. Updating your wardrobe is always fun.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

You usually have good judgment when it comes to getting to know people, but it might be a little clouded right now. This new person that you are dying to get to know better, for example, are they really deserving of this level of admiration? Think about this long and hard today, because who you bring into your life is not a choice to make lightly. Make sure you're choosing these people based on the right reasons. Disposable friendships are more trouble than they're worth.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

It's important to defend how you feel about things, but is it worth upsetting someone you care about or making an important person mad? If the person you disagree with can't be big enough to accept your position, then you have to be big enough to accept theirs, but you don't have to agree with it. You can't always surround yourself with like-minded people. Not only is it boring, but it's a small way of seeing the world. Disagreements can be very educational.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Embrace your inner eccentric and try not to edit yourself today. So what if you raise a few eyebrows, or provoke people? Their opinions matter less than the freedom you will feel by doing what you want to do in the way you want to do it. Trying to fit in with the status quo all the time is not only exhausting, but it limits your creativity. Let your freak flag fly. Ignore propriety and you are likely to inspire a few of your more adventurous friends to join you.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Focusing too much on one of your more troubled relationships really isn't a good idea right now, believe it or not. Sometimes putting tension under a microscope only makes it seem bigger than it really is. A better tactic right now is to give each other space to miss one another and space to figure out where you want things to go next. You also could use some alone time to get back in touch with your own singular goals in life. Those matter too.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You are ready to take on bigger and better tasks in your daily life. Your ambition is raring to go, and this is a great time to join a gym, start a home-remodeling project, or step up at work and ask for a raise. You have a good eye when it comes to your aim too. Your goals are high, but they're not so high that you are sure to fail. Success in anything you start today might be slow in coming, but it's almost assured as long as you stick with it.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

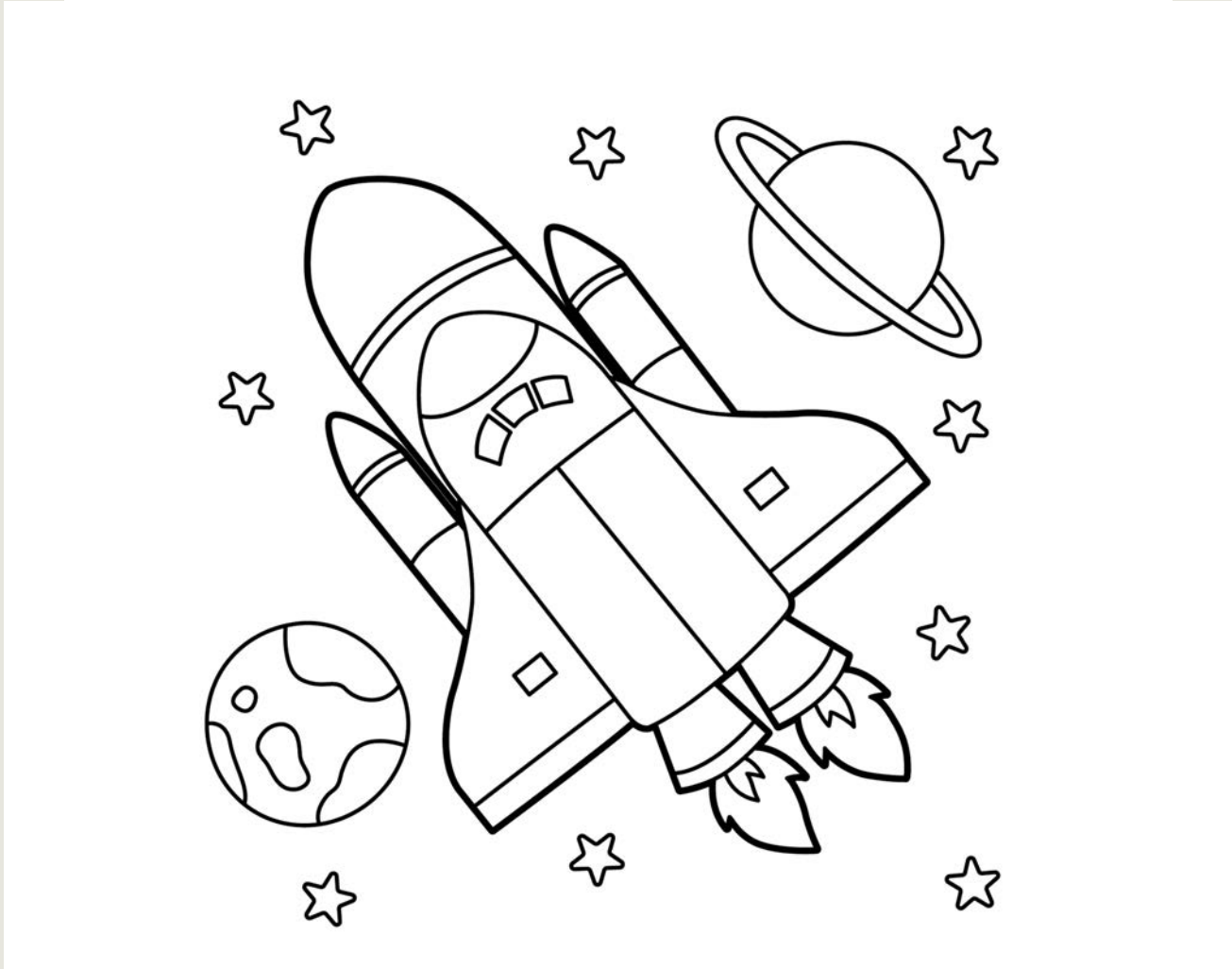
When you receive some glowing and positive feedback from an unlikely source today, try not to look surprised. The people in power have been noticing your accomplishments for a while, and they would like to see more of what you can do. Therefore, you can expect to get some extra attention over the next few days. People are expecting more and more of you now, but you will rise to the occasion with grace and charm. You are going to impress quite a lot of people.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

If you're put into a situation that involves a clash of delicate egos today, focus on fairness. Even if the big boss won't like it, you have to speak the truth as you see it. Your ideas and views are strong, so there is no reason to hide what you feel just because you fear it won't be popular. Equality is too important to be sacrificed in order to get on someone's good side. If you think something is a bad idea, say so. Set a good example by being honest and objective.

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

L	O	O	G
A	N	T	L
V	A	D	T
S	D	S	A

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

FAIRY-TALE FAREWELL

Warner powers Australia to 3-0 victory against Pakistan in Test series

Sydney, Australia - Retiring opener David Warner crushed Pakistan with an audacious half-century to farewell Test cricket in style as Australia won the third Test at the SCG by eight wickets to complete a series sweep.

Warner smashed 57 off 75 balls before his fairy-tale final innings ended shortly after lunch on day four with Australia just 11 runs short of victory. He was given out lbw to offspinner Sajid Khan on review as Warner walked off to handshakes from the Pakistan team and then waved his bat to a raucous ovation from the 24,220 crowd.

Marnus Labuschagne finished unbeaten on 62 from 73 balls with Australia making light work of the 130 target on a dry surface that had played tricks with variable bounce and sharp turn.

Australia batted with intent and scored at over five runs an over as the surface appeared easier for batting compared to on day three when 15 wickets fell. Pakistan succumbed to Warner and Labuschagne's 119-run partnership with fiery quick Aamer Jamal, their best bowler in the series, surprisingly not used until after lunch.

All eyes were on Warner in his final innings of his 112-Test career. Coming out to a standing ovation, Warner had a long embrace with opening partner and close mate Usman Khawaja before entering a guard of honour from Pakistan.

Sajid opened the bowling for Pakistan and made an immediate impact on the first ball when he beat Khawaja with a sharp deliv-



David Warner walks off the field after his final innings

ery that turned past the bat. Sajid revived Pakistan's slim hopes when he dismissed Khawaja lbw for a duck later in the over in a decision upheld on review.

There was intrigue over whether Warner would dig in or play in his trademark proactive style. His intention was evident

when he skipped down the pitch at left-arm quick Mir Hamza and opened his account with a punch through cover as he showcased his sprinting between the wickets to race back for a second.

On his 12th delivery, Warner smashed his first boundary when he plundered a wide delivery

from Hamza through cover before unfurling his white-ball skills when he reverse swept Sajid to the boundary. Warner's approach was nonetheless risky on a tricky surface and he had some luck when he inside edged seamer Hasan Ali past his stumps. He also had an anxious moment when he almost holed out to mid-on off Sajid only to land safely wide of Jamal who had run back in vain.

But Warner notched his half-century off just 56 balls and Australia only needed to knock off 39 runs after lunch. The remaining interest in the contest centred over whether Warner would hit the winning runs. He survived a tight lbw call off Sajid on 53 that Pakistan unsuccessfully reviewed and Labuschagne was dropped by captain Shan Masood at short midwicket to continue their series-long fielding woes.

Labuschagne, who last year averaged a modest 35 in Test cricket, was in sublime touch and scored his second half-century of the match. He hit the winning run after Warner's dismissal as Australia claimed a series whitewash with none of the three Tests getting into a fifth day.

This match effectively lasted just three days after half of day two was washed out. But Australia were challenged, particularly their batters, with Warner set to leave a big hole at the top of the order.

It was a disappointing finish for Pakistan, who sank to their 17th straight defeat in Australia. ESPNcricinfo



Australia players celebrate with the trophy

Australia replace India as No. 1 Test team in rankings

Dubai - Australia have replaced India as the No.1-ranked Test team in the ICC rankings. Australia had held the top spot briefly following their win in the World Test Championship final in June.

Australia and India had a rating of 118 each, but India were ahead on points. However, India lost one rating point after they drew their series in South Africa 1-1, and are now placed second.

Australia, meanwhile, beat Pakistan in the first two Tests to stay on 118 rating points.

This also means India's reign as the No. 1 team across all three formats has come to an end. In last September, they had become only the second team in men's history to occupy the top spot across formats.

India and Australia also occupy the top two spots in ODIs. India are No. 1 with a rating of 121,

Australia just below with 117.

In T20Is, India (265) have a lead of nine over the second-placed England (256).

When it comes to player rankings, Kane Williamson, Babar Azam and Suryakumar Yadav are the No. 1 batters in Tests, ODIs and T20Is respectively.

Among bowlers, three spinners - R Ashwin in Tests, Keshav Maharaj in ODIs and Adil Rashid in T20Is - occupy the top spots.

Namibia first up for Oman in T20 World Cup

Muscat - Oman will take on Namibia on June 2 in their opening match in Group B in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup to be co-hosted by the West Indies and the US from June 1 to 29. England, Scotland and Australia are the other teams in the group.

A total of 20 teams, including co-hosts West Indies and the US, are divided into four

groups in the ninth edition of the tournament.

Arch-rivals India and Pakistan are in Group A and will face off in a highly anticipated clash on June 9. Joining them are Ireland, Canada, and the US.

Group C has New Zealand and the West Indies, two powerhouses of T20 cricket. They are joined by Afghanistan,

Uganda, and Papua New Guinea, making for a mix of experience and emerging talent.

South Africa, seeking their first T20 World Cup crown, headline a challenging Group D along with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Netherlands, and Nepal. A total of three venues in the USA and six in the Caribbean will be used for the tournament.

CLASSIFIEDS

BIRTHDAY WISHES



GOKUL

Many happy returns of the day, Gokul! Yours, Supriya, Ankita, and Rushab

BIRTHDAY WISHES



AMAL AJITH

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GUNNING FOR GLORY

Klopp wants Liverpool to push for trophies on four fronts

London, England - Jurgen Klopp said Liverpool will not take the FA Cup lightly despite a packed schedule, embracing the chance to fight for glory on four fronts this season.

The Premier League leaders set their sights on North London for a historic FA Cup clash with 14-time champions Arsenal on Sunday. The encounter pits two of the competition's most decorated sides, boasting a combined 22 trophies between them.

While Liverpool fell short of a historic quadruple in 2021-22 by a single Premier League point to Manchester City, they did lift the League Cup and FA Cup after defeating Chelsea in both finals.

This season, with a League Cup semi-final and Europa League round of 16 already on the calendar, Klopp remains ambitious, urging his side to push for every trophy.

"The season with the three fi-



Liverpool will be without Mohamed Salah (R) when they take on Arsenal in the FA Cup on Sunday

nals and a really intense Premier League season was intense while we were in it, but it was good fun as well, to be honest," Klopp told reporters.

"It was good fun the games the boys played, the two finals against Chelsea were two of the

best draws I saw in my life - unbelievably intense, technically at a super-high level - so it was a wonderful experience.

"Playing at Wembley is a top experience. I would not change it for anything. It was absolutely great.

"But no, you cannot really think like that (the impact on next season).

"We cannot go out of a competition just because we think we might have a problem next year. That would be a problem we have to sort then."

'Incredible clash'

Neither Arsenal nor Liverpool would have preferred to play each other in the third round of the FA Cup but the north London club's manager Mikel Arteta hopes the "incredible clash" signals the start of another good run

in the competition.

Arteta won the FA Cup in his first season with Arsenal in 2019-20, beating Manchester City and Chelsea to lift the trophy and extend the club's record to 14 titles. Liverpool have won the cup eight times.

The Spaniard said on Friday he expects another humdinger of a match against the Premier League leaders after the two sides played out a thrilling 1-1 draw at Anfield just before Christmas.

"We have a great history in this competition with our two clubs. We have a big opponent to start with and again make another beautiful journey," Arteta told reporters.

"The draw is the draw. We

but we have this incredible clash in the third round and we have to cope with it. We expect a great game and a good run."

Although Arsenal were top at Christmas, they have dropped to fourth in the table amid a slump in form, with fingers being pointed at the lack of goals from Gabriel Martinelli, Bukayo Saka and Martin Odegaard.

Martinelli and Odegaard topped the club's scoring charts with 15 league goals last season while Saka had 14 goals and 11 assists. However, the goals have dried up this season, with the trio netting a combined 12 goals so far.

"What they did last year is exceptional. To maintain those numbers, we knew it would be

We have a great history in this competition with our two clubs. We have a big opponent to start with and make another beautiful journey

MIKEL ARTETA



Diego Maradona during his Napoli days

Maradona cleared of tax evasion charges in Italy

Rome, Italy - Italy's highest court has delivered a verdict in the long-running case against Diego Maradona, exonerating the Argentine football legend of tax evasion charges. This brings an end to a 30-year legal battle that had cast a shadow over Maradona's legacy.

Known as "El Pibe de Oro" (The Golden Foot), Maradona was accused of using proxy companies in Liechtenstein to evade legal fees during his time playing for Napoli between 1985 and 1990. The fees related to his personal image rights.

The Court of Cassation overturned a 2018 verdict that had found Maradona guilty

"It is over and I can clearly

state without fear of being contradicted that Maradona has never been a tax evader," his lawyer, Angelo Pisani, said.

Rome's Court of Cassation overturned a 2018 verdict in mid-December, a court document published on Wednesday and seen by Reuters showed.

Maradona died in November 2020 from a heart attack. Fans of Napoli and of the Argentine national team worshipped him as the "god of football".

Investigations into the footballer's tax payments started in the early 1990s and resulted in charges of 37 million euros (\$40.38 million) and the confiscation of some of the player's belongings during his visits to Italy.

Tottenham, Fulham advance to fourth round of FA Cup with 1-0 victories

London, England - Pedro Porro's maiden goal for Tottenham Hotspur proved the difference as they edged past Burnley 1-0 to book their place in the FA Cup fourth round. Fulham also progressed comfortably, dispatching Rotherham United 1-0, while Wolverhampton Wanderers salvaged a 1-1 draw at Brentford despite playing with ten men from the ninth minute.

Eight-time FA Cup winners Spurs and Burnley looked destined for a replay before Porro broke the deadlock in the 78th minute of a drab game when he intercepted goalkeeper Arijanet Muric's throw, firing a rocket from long range into the top far corner.

"(Porro) shoots a lot in training - misses a lot, but today it came off and it was an unbelievable goal," a grinning Spurs forward Brennan Johnson told ITV.

The victory was relief for Ange Postecoglou's team, who were missing several key players to injury and international duty, including South Korea captain Son Heung-min at the Asian Cup, and Pape Matar Sarr and Yves Bissouma, who are both at the Africa Cup of Nations.

"The bottom line is we're



Tottenham's Pedro Porro celebrates after scoring against Burnley

though to the next round so that's what you've got to take out of it because I think the cup games are a unique beast and

we're through to the next round so that's the main thing," Postecoglou said.

Burnley's best chance came in

the first half when Zeki Amdouni received a clever flick just outside the six-yard box but took a poor first touch and launched the ball

over the bar. They rarely threatened as Spurs found a way to grind out the win.

Championship (second tier) side Rotherham, who haven't made it through to the fourth round since 2001-02, kept their composure early on as Fulham controlled the play.

But Bobby De Cordova-Reid made the breakthrough in the 24th minute, smashing the ball into the top left corner from outside the area as the visitors became overstretched, much to the delight of the foot-stamping fans rattling the century-old Johnny Haynes stand.

Jordan Hugill thought he had levelled the score for Rotherham just moments later, but his effort was ruled out for offside, and ultimately the Yorkshire side were sent home without registering a single shot on target.

"Going through in the competition was our aim, our desire was clear and we deserved it," Fulham manager Marco Silva said.

Depleted Wolves fell behind to a Neal Maupay goal four minutes before the break but the visitors found the equaliser in the 64th minute when Tommy Doyle hit a stunning strike from outside the area.

Hurkacz, Swiatek win as Poland enter United Cup final

Sydney, Australia - Hubert Hurkacz and Iga Swiatek battled past their singles opponents as Poland reached the final of the United Cup mixed team tournament with a 2-0 victory over France on Saturday.

World No. 9 Hurkacz staved off a late comeback attempt by Adrian Mannarino and prevailed 6-3 7-5, handing top seeds Poland a 1-0 lead in the \$10 million tournament, which began last week with 18 countries in contention.

"I think definitely today was a real battle. Adrian was playing really, really tricky shots and it's



Iga Swiatek celebrates after winning a point against Caroline Garcia

really difficult to play against," Hurkacz said. "So I was just battling for every single point and I think mentally I was able to stay in the present, stay positive before each point and I think I was also really resilient today."

"Definitely it's something different that suddenly you play your next match completely in a different city, different time-zone," Hurkacz said. "I really like playing in Sydney, especially it was quite early because 10:30 a.m., with a three-hour time difference, it's not usual you play a big match at 7:30 a.m. in Perth time. I was able to get a good

night of sleep and play well today."

Swiatek endured a more challenging outing against Caroline Garcia, as the world No. 1 dropped the opening set before rediscovering her top level and winning 4-6 6-1 6-1.

"I'm happy that I came back and I didn't make so many mistakes as in the first set. For sure, Caro was putting pressure as usual, so I'm happy that we're through to the final," Swiatek said. "Hubi played a great match today. He had everything under control, and it was nice watching that."

Nadal's Aus Open return uncertain

Brisbane, Australia - Rafael Nadal's planned Australian Open return is shrouded in uncertainty after he expressed doubts about his participation following a quarter-final defeat in the Brisbane International.

Nadal battled for nearly three and a half hours against Australian Jordan Thompson on Friday, ultimately falling 5-7, 7-6 (6), 6-3. Nadal missed three match points in the second set, but his performance was overshadowed by concerns about his left hip. This discomfort, which resurfaced during the match, led Nadal to confess, "I'm not 100 per cent sure of anything" regarding his Australian Open



prospects. The 22-time Grand Slam champion took a medical timeout in the third set, further fueling speculation about his fitness. The new development

comes just ahead of the start of the Australian Open in Melbourne on January 14. Nadal has won two of his 22 Grand Slam titles in Australia.

"I hope to have the chance to be practising next week and to play Melbourne," the 37-year-old said. "Honestly, I am not 100 per cent sure of anything now. Then, in the next couple of days, let's see how I feel. If I don't feel well, then we are going to do a test and we are going to check it."

"I feel the muscle tired. It is not the same as last year at all because when it happened last year, I felt something drastic immediately. Here I didn't feel anything."



BRITISH OMANI ART GROUP

DIFFERENT strokes

A British Omani Art Group has been set up last Wednesday as part of the British Omani Society which works to enhance and preserve the longstanding friendship between Britain and Oman

Oman through a love of art. The art group will maintain a particular focus on developing and supporting emerging artists from Oman and the UK.

How many British artists are there in Oman at present?

Although there are only a few British artists in Oman at present, many artists have visited and been inspired by Oman's beauty and culture. This group will enable British artists to remain linked to Oman, and vice versa.

Who would comprise the Omani artists in this group?

The group is open to any British or Omani artists or supporters of the arts. The aim is to build a group within the British Omani Society to share an appreciation of art, seek opportunities to collaborate in the field of art, and – most importantly – support emerging artists from Oman and the UK. Anyone interested in joining the group should visit the British Omani Society website and join the society.

Are any joint exhibitions/workshops lined up for the near future?

A small exhibition is being planned this summer in London, linked to the visit of a few Omani artists to conduct work and visits in the UK to develop their art. An event in Oman is planned for the following year.

Will this group be aligned with any artists' group in the UK?

The group will include both Omani and British artists. At present, we are not aligned with any artists groups, but will seek to work with organisations in both UK and Oman.

What type of support will the group receive from the British Embassy in Oman?

The British Embassy have been fully supportive of this initiative. All events in 2024 in Oman will be conducted in collaboration with the British Embassy.

Will the group take up or facilitate any visits of Omani artists to the UK for training or any collaboration?

Yes, we are planning to facilitate the visit of a few emerging artists to the UK this summer. The aim of the visit is to help develop the artists. A small exhibition will be held in London during the visit to showcase their work. The application and selection process for this opportunity will be confirmed in the near future.

Hubert Vaz

Collaborations, artistic exchanges, joint exhibitions, cultural sharing, and much more is on the cards for members of a newly set up British Omani Art Group which was launched at the British ambassador's residence in Sidab on Wednesday.

In a bid to strengthen the friendship between Oman and Britain, the British Omani Society, of which His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik is a patron, has taken up this initiative to widen the scope of artists in Oman who will have an opportunity to collaborate and learn from as well as share their own skills with artists from the UK.

Major General (retired) Richard Stanford CB MBE WO, chairman of the British Omani Society, said "The British Omani Society is very pleased to be creating this new group of artists and art supporters, that will grow our existing activities in the field of the arts, and continue Oman and the UK's historic and longstanding friendship."

The initiative is being supported by the British Embassy in Muscat. And, the British ambassador, H E Dr Liane Sanders, OBE, stated, "We are happy to support this initiative to help emerging Omani artists and build on the rich artistic heritage and shared culture of Oman and the UK."

Polly Gedney, a British artist living in Oman who has helped in founding this group, asserted, "When we first moved to Oman 3 years ago, my breath was taken away by the beauty of the country. The landscape, the cultural heritage, and the people of Oman are an inspiration. Every sunrise and every sunset illuminates another potential subject. Oman has such a vibrant and talented pool of artists. I am so pleased to be a part of this group and help support emerging Omani artists, and I hope that other British artists will also get to experience the beauty of Oman."

Felix Gedney, a spokesman for the group, in a brief tete-a-tete with Muscat Daily, shares some insights on the new art group:



How did the idea to set up this group come about?

During the past three years living in Oman, Polly Gedney (my wife) has been inspired by the natural beauty of Oman, as well as the unique culture and

the country's wonderful people. Artists' friends from the UK have visited to work in Oman. The idea of the group came about during discussions with visiting British artists as they discovered the beauty of Oman for themselves.



We are happy to support this initiative to help emerging Omani artists and build on the rich artistic heritage and shared culture of Oman and the UK

H E DR LIANE SANDERS

Paintings by Elizabeth Davis - second prize winner of the British Omani Society Art Competition held to mark Oman's 50th National Day - depict what a huge impact Oman has had on her artwork.

Who are the core members of the group?

The group aims to be a network of artists and supporters of the arts, enhancing and preserving the longstanding friendship between Britain and



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