

GROUND BREAKING

Oman first GCC country to establish social insurance scheme for maternity and paternity, national provident fund to administer end-of-service benefits to migrant workers: ILO

NEW SOCIAL PROTECTION LAW DECREED

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq issued **Royal Decree No 52/2023** on Wednesday promulgating the Social Protection Law, after presenting the same before the Council of Oman.

Article 1 stipulates that the provisions of the Social Protection Law attached to this decree will be enforced.

Article 2 instructs the Chairman of Board of Directors of the Social Protection Fund to issue the executive regulation of the law attached to this decree, within a period not exceeding six months from the date of issue of this decree, as well as the decisions necessary for the implementation of provisions of the law attached to this decree. Till such time, the existing regulations and decisions will continue to be enforced without prejudice to the provisions of the law attached to this decree.

Article 3 replaces the text of Article 1 of Royal Decree No 15/2021 with the following text: 'The provisions of the Unified System attached to this decree will be applied to extend insurance protection to military personnel who are citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states while they are working in any GCC member state other than their countries.'

Article 4 cancels all provisions of pensions, gratuities and allowances/grants stated in laws promulgated by Royal Decrees No 26/86, Royal Decree No 72/91 and Royal Decree No 86/96, as well as laws and by-laws/systems issued under Royal Decree No 86/82, Royal Decree No 87/84, Royal Decree No 49/98, Royal Decree No 2/2000, Royal Decree No 32/2000, Royal Decree No 94/2000, Royal Decree No 3/2002, Royal Decree No 29/2003, Royal Decree No 44/2013 and Royal Decree No 82/2020.

This excludes the provisions related to gratuities and end-of-service allowances disbursed by employers (parties of employment).

Royal Decree No 31/96 will be deemed cancelled from the date of enforcement of the Investment Regulation issued vide the provisions of the law attached to this decree, and Articles 2 and 4 of Royal Decree No 15/2021 will be deemed null and void.

Article 5 cancels all that contradicts this decree or the law attached to it, as well as all that contravenes their provisions.

Article 6 states that this decree will be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on the first day of January 2024, except for the following:

1. Articles 72, 75, 76, 77, 83 and 84 of the law attached to this decree will be enforced on the day following the date of the law's publication.

Continued on Page 02



KEY BENEFITS

- Children:** All Omani children aged 0-17 will now benefit from a universal child benefit equal to RO10 per month per child.
- Disability:** All Omanis assessed with a permanent disability that requires care or support will receive RO130 per month.
- Old-age pension:** All Omanis older than age 60 will receive an old-age pension equal to RO115 per month.
- Survivors' benefits:** All Omani orphans younger than age 18 and widows younger than age 60 will receive RO80, regardless of the parents'/husband's participation in the contributory system.
- Family income support:** All Omani households - and non-Omani widows of Omani citizens - with income below a defined threshold will have their income topped up to match this threshold.
- Maternity:** All employed Omani and Non-Omani mothers of newborns, will have job-protected maternity leave for 14 weeks at full pay, financed based on a 1% contribution from the employer.
- Paternity:** All employed Omani and non-Omani fathers of newborns, will have job-protected paternity leave for seven days at full pay, financed from the same fund as maternity benefits.
- Work injury:** Uniform employment injury insurance for all employed workers in Oman, including non-Omanis (within three years), financed based on a 1% contribution from employers.
- Employment security:** A cash benefit equivalent to 60% of the last two-year average wage for a maximum period of six months for Omani workers who have involuntarily lost their employment, financed based on a 1% contribution split equally between workers and employers.
- Expat workers:** The new law establishes a national provident fund, which will collect employers' contributions and administer benefits to non-Omani workers in case of retirement, death and disability and upon return to countries of origin.

AMBITIOUS REFORMS PAVE WAY FOR UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The new Social Protection Law, issued last week through Royal Decree No 52/2023, radically reshapes the social protection system in the sultanate and is set to become a reference for countries in the region, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has stated.

Promulgation of the law marks the culmination of an ambitious reform process led by Tawazun, the high-level government programme for fiscal balance (now Estidamah), with the close support of ILO.

The comprehensive reforms entail a complete restructuring of the contributory pension system, with the integration of 11 pension funds into one single national scheme to cater for all workers in the private and public sector.

Oman is also the first country in the GCC to establish a social insurance scheme for maternity and paternity, and sickness cash benefits, ILO stated.

Among groundbreaking features, the new law introduces government-funded universal social protection benefits, including a cash benefit for all children under the age of 18, a universal old age pension for senior citizens over the age of 60, and a universal disability allowance. In a bid to increase efficiency and coherence, all government and contribution funded social protection benefits will be administered by Social Protection Fund, a newly established unified social protection agency.

The new law also significantly expands protection to migrant workers in Oman, who represent over three quarters of the country's working population. Migrant workers will be covered for employ-

Council of Ministers hails Social Protection Law

Muscat - The Council of Ministers issued a statement on the promulgation of the Social Protection Law and the bylaws of the Social Protection Fund and Pension Fund of Military and Security Apparatuses.

The statement reads as follows: 'The Council of Ministers is honoured to extend thanks and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for issuing the Social Protection Law and bylaws for the Social Protection Fund and Pension Fund of Military and Security Apparatuses. This Royal gesture embodies His Majesty the Sultan's at-



tention to upgrade standards of Omani people's social life. It reflects a sustainable vision that provides coverage and social protection for different segments of society in a way that achieves the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

'The Council of Ministers

expresses its thanks to the Council of Oman and the ministerial committee formed to supervise all necessary procedures for merging pension funds and conducting necessary studies to restructure, develop and devise integrated policies for the social protection system.

'The Council of Ministers extends its appreciation to the subcommittees, the team that undertakes the project, as well as the representatives of production parties. It commends the efforts made by all parties that helped shape the laws in the final form.'

ONA

and Supervisor of the National Programme for Fiscal Sustainability and Financial Sector Development or Estidamah.

"We congratulate the government, employers and workers in Oman for achieving this major milestone," said Ruba Jaradat, ILO's Regional Director for the Arab States. "The new legislation sets a new vision for social protection in Oman and paves the way towards universal social protection in the sultanate, establishing Oman as a reference for other countries in the region. Inclusive, comprehensive, equitable and sustainable social protection systems are critical for countries in the region to further ongoing social and economic transformations. Oman is showing that ambitious change in the region is possible, when it is rooted in international labour standards, careful analysis and social dialogue," she added.

"It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of the series of reforms Oman has set out to tackle: from fully revamping the tax and subsidy system, to completely restructuring its pension and contributory social protection system, to an ambitious re-think of its approach to reaching the most vulnerable in society, and providing migrant workers with key workplace protections," said Mia Seppo, ILO's Assistant Director-General for Jobs and Social Protection.

In recent years, the pension and social protection systems in Oman have faced growing challenges concerning sustainability, adequacy and effectiveness in providing needed protection to citizens and workers. Fragmented schemes have caused gaps in coverage and comprehensiveness, hindered efficiency and discouraged workers' mobility between economic sectors.

ment injury, maternity and sickness under the same terms as national workers. For the first time in the region, a national provident fund will also be established to administer end-of-service benefits to migrant workers.

The reforms set a new regional benchmark for alignment with international labour standards in the area of social security, and the progressive realisation of a rights-based universal social protection framework, in line with ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No 202).

"Inspired by principles enshrined in the Omani Constitution and the goals expressed in its Vision 2040, the government has embraced improving well-being and social protection as a central strategic priority. As Oman strives towards a more diversified and productive economy, protecting people remains at the core of its commitments. Rights-based and inclusive social protection are essential pillars for fostering sustainable economic progress, ensuring that no-one is left behind," said Nasser al Jashmi, Secretary-General of Ministry of Finance

Environmental Protectors initiative launched to safeguard Jabal Akhdar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Environment Authority in Dakhliyah governorate launched the second season of the ‘Environmental Protectors’ programme on Saturday.

Timed to coincide with the beginning of the Jabal Akhdar Tourism Festival running from August 3 to 19, the programme aims to elevate environmental awareness among citizens and visitors alike.

The initiative further aims to track and prevent violations to ensure a clean and sustainable environment in Jabal Akhdar.

Abdullah al Shaqsi, head of Environmental Monitoring Department in Dakhliyah, outlined the programme’s objectives. “After last year’s successful first season, we’re launching our second edition. We aim to safeguard environmental diversity, specifically



the protection of perennial wild trees.”

Shaqsi stressed the need to

avoid littering, refrain from felling trees and adhere to various other measures crucial for manage-

ment of Jabal Akhdar Nature Reserve.

He also noted a significant in-

79,000 tourists visit Jabal Akhdar

A popular destination for domestic tourism, Jabal Akhdar saw an influx of over 79,000 visitors during the first half of 2023, with Omani citizens constituting the majority.

Data from National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) shows that 28,406 visitors were Omani. Among the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia led with 3,848 visitors, followed by Kuwait (611), the UAE (329) and Qatar (265). Visitors of other nationalities totalled 45,302.

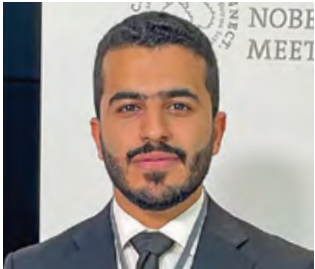
Omani scientist feted at Lindau Nobel Laureate meet

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dr Faris bin Abdullah al Farsi, from Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, has won the award for the most innovative research project at the Science Marathon held during the 72nd Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in Germany. The event saw participation of 27 teams from around the world.

The winning project, Farsi informed, revolves around the application of smart biochips. These devices play a pivotal role in identifying and combating bacteria that cause infection in chronic wounds. These biochips are equipped with lab-made microscopic antibodies, linked to enzymes and sensors, helping to detect and eliminate bacteria as they approach the wound site.

The project was a collaboration of young scientists from multiple disciplines, with backing from Germany’s Max Planck



Dr Faris bin Abdullah al Farsi

Foundation. Evaluation of participating research projects was conducted by a committee comprising Nobel laureates and international investors specialising in scientific research development, Farsi told ONA.

His involvement in the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting was made possible by the support of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. He was chosen to represent the sultanate among the world’s top 600 young medical scientists. The event witnessed the participation of over 40 Nobel laureates.



Muscat Finance (S.A.O.G)

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Un-Audited Financials for the Period Ended June 2023.

Dear Shareholders,
On behalf of the Board of Directors of Muscat Finance (SAOG), I am pleased to present the report for the quarter ended June 2023.

Economic Environment
Oman's economy is expected to grow by 5.5 per cent in 2023 as compared to estimated 5.0 per cent growth in 2022, mainly due to increase in oil and gas production, according to the estimates released by the Ministry of Finance. Government efforts for fiscal consolidation along with expansion in economy has resulted in public debt reducing from 70% of GDP in 2020 to 43% by the end of 2022. The Government is hopeful of the trend to continue in 2023 as Oman's economic recovery picked up pace and fiscal position substantially improved. Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) at constant prices recorded an increase of 4.7% to reach OMR8.70 billion at the end of the first quarter of 2023 (OMR8.36 billion in the first quarter of 2022). The increase is attributed to growth across a spectrum of economic segments like non-oil, services and oil activities. The positive sentiment reflected in the real estate sector also, as the total value of real estate deals in Oman increased by 37.8% by the end of May 2023 to reach OMR 1.2 billion compared to OMR 885.6 million during the same period in 2022.

Business Results
Your Company has recorded a net profit of RO 590K for the period ended June 2023 against RO 723K net profit for the corresponding period in the previous year. The Net Investment in Finance Debtors is now RO 94 Mill compared to RO 102 Mill.

The financial results are summarized below:

PARTICULARS	Amount in RO '000		
	YTD 30 th June 2023	YTD 30 th June 2022	% Change
Net Investment in Finance Debtors	94,019	101,547	-7%
Net Operating Income	2,992	3,293	-9%
Operating Expenses	1,712	1,800	-9%
Operating Profit	1,280	1,493	-4%
Provisions	690	770	-11%
Net Profit/(loss) after tax	590	723	-18%

The company continued to focus on increasing its core retail business and selective approach on Corporate business. The company also continued its focus on recovery and controlling the NPA. The company is also focusing on increasing the average return on assets and improving the net interest margin in

anticipation of more interest rate increases by the Federal Reserve Fund. The company has generated Net cash flows from operating activities of RO 3.77 Mill. This was mainly used to reduce the borrowing of the company which now stands at RO 55.53 Mill even after concluding the purchase of the new Head Office building. The company maintained a healthy and low leverage ratio of 1.74 times compared to 1.87 times in the similar period of 2022. The Board believes this will give the company a substantial opportunity to benefit from the recent changes introduced by the Central Bank of Oman and possibly return to the long term historic average profitability that was being achieved by the company.

Human Capital
Your Company fully recognises that having a competent, highly motivated, and performance-led workforce is key to ensuring the success of our business. The Board therefore approved a one off bonus in celebration of the 35th anniversary of your company. The company continued to add senior managers across the company to strengthen the team and achieve better customer service and also improve the screening and controls of the process of pre and post loan disbursement. The company continues to invest in building local talent with Omanisation ratio standing at 89% for the period ended June 30, 2023. This is well above the current regulatory requirement. Your company is also developing sustainable strategies to enhance finance towards green energy as a positive contribution towards reducing carbon footprints of our funding.

Head Office Building
The company concluded the purchase of its new Head Office (HO) building on Sultan Qaboos Highway. The new HO is expected to achieve an improvement to the current business model of the company. The HO aims to enhance the business process across the company to enable improved customer experience from the start to the end. The HO will offer the first drive through service among the leasing companies.

Future outlook
Oman is set to be the fastest growing economy within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 2023, with growth projected to reach 4.3% due to increased hydrocarbon production capacity, aided by the development of new natural gas fields. The recent guidelines from Central Bank of Oman on mobilization of deposits, personal loans and real estate financing are expected to expand available business opportunities to the company.

The company is positive on the business side due to positive changes from Government as well as from CBO but very selective and conscious as regard to corporate business.

Acknowledgement
On behalf of the Board and the company, I would like to express our sincere gratitude and best wishes to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq to lead the Sultanate of Oman with his wisdom and vision, towards a path of prosperity. I would like to thank His Majesty's

Government, the Central Bank of Oman, the Capital Market Authority and other Authorities for their continued support and guidance. We are also grateful to all our customers for their continued patronage and support, to our local and overseas bankers for their active co-operation, and to all the shareholders for the confidence reposed in its Board.

On Behalf of the Board of Directors
Faisal Mohamed Al Yousef
Chairman

	June 23 RO '000	June 22 RO '000
Assets		
Debtors arising from financing activities	94,019	101,547
Cash & Bank balances	1,397	408
Other assets	4,124	1,041
	99,540	102,996
Liabilities		
Bank borrowings, Bonds & Corp. Deposit	55,535	56,797
Creditors & other liabilities	5,150	7,761
	60,685	64,558
Net Assets	38,855	38,438
Shareholders' funds		
Share capital	30,715	30,715
Legal reserve	3,098	7,077
Impairment reserve	3,955	3,955
Cumulative changes in fair value	-	2
Retained Earnings	1,087	(3,311)
	38,855	38,438

	June 23 RO '000	June 22 RO '000
Lease and Interest income	4,285	4,611
Interest expense	(1,712)	(1,662)
Net interest income	2,573	2,949
Other Income	331	344
Profit on sale of Investment	88	-
Operating Expenses	(1,712)	(1,800)
Provision for Impairment	(690)	(770)
Profit / (Loss) before taxation	590	723
Provision for taxation	-	-
Profit/(Loss) for the period	590	723

NOTE > The complete accounts will be sent by mail to any shareholder or other interested party who requests them, in either Arabic or English, within 7 days of such
*Chief Executive Officer
*Muscat Finance (SAOG)
*P.O.Box 888, PC 112 Sultanate of Oman

Dakhliyah’s green, heritage lodges boost tourism revenues

Muscat - Green lodges and guesthouses in Dakhliyah are becoming vital contributors to the economic growth of the tourism industry. In its bid to diversify income sources, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has sought optimal investment opportunities in various sectors in the governorate.

At the end of the first half of 2023, Dakhliyah had 17 heritage inns, 16 green lodges and 31 guesthouses, according to data released by Department of Heritage and Tourism in the governorate.

Highlighting the important role of heritage lodges, Ali bin Saif al Shukaili, Assistant Director of Heritage and Tourism Department in Dakhliyah, said, “These introduce tourists to the Omani lifestyle, bridging the past and present, rural and urban.”

He added that these facilities blend the traditions of rural



Oman with modernity. Guesthouses, on the other hand, provide glimpses into contemporary Omani living.

The ministry has taken proactive steps to preserve heritage inns, including overseeing restoration and maintenance operations and retrofitting some houses for use as lodges.

“In Al Hamra, many heritage inns in Harat al Aqr are run by the

local community and ambitious Omani youth, providing job opportunities and a source of income,” Shukaili said.

He also informed about the competitive edge of guesthouses in Dakhliyah, attributing their success to their family-friendly environment and privacy. “Their simple yet luxurious offerings and integrated services cater to families’ recreational needs.”

Certificate verification service for vets from Aug

Muscat - Beginning August, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) plans to offer a certificate verification service for veterinarians and related healthcare professionals. This move aims to bolster the development of the country’s veterinary services sector.

MAFWR has partnered with DataFlow Group to provide primary source verification for professional certificates and documents. The internationally recognised company will verify academic credentials for candidates intending to work in Oman’s veterinary field, prior to them receiving their medical practice licences.

Dr Ahmed bin Saif al Ameri,

Director of Animal Health Department at MAFWR, said, “This pioneering step will help verify the original source of academic certificates across all veterinary specialties.”

Ameri emphasised that such a step holds significant benefits for Oman’s livestock sector and its breeders by ensuring safer professional practices.

By partnering with DataFlow Group, a strategic global partner for regulatory authorities in the area of verifying scientific and practical documents and information at source, the ministry demonstrates its commitment to attracting experienced professionals to Oman’s veterinary healthcare field, Ameri said.

Royal Decree issued

Continued from Page 01

2. The provisions, from the attached law, of the clause on insurance against work-related injuries and occupational diseases befalling non-Omani workers will be enforced three years following the date of issue of this decree.

3. The Chapter 6 of Part 3 of the attached law will be enforced two years following the date of issue of this decree.

4. The Chapter 7 of Part 3 of the attached law will be enforced one year following the date of issue of this decree.

5. Clause 1 of Article 139 of the law attached to this decree will be enforced from the date to be fixed by the Board of Directors of the Social Protection Fund, within a period of not more than three years following the date of issue of this decree.

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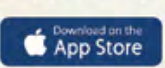
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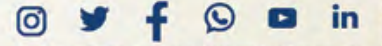








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Turkey considers visa-free entry for Omani nationals

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Turkey's Ambassador to Oman anticipates that Omani citizens could gain visa-free access to his country by the end of 2024. With over 130,000 Omani tourists visiting Turkey in 2022, a formal request has been submitted for such access.

H E Muhammet Hekimoglu, Ambassador of Turkey to Oman, said that the number of Omani tourists in Turkey is continually rising. He aims to bolster tourism ties between the two nations, organising events and meetings to entice Turkish tourists to Oman and acquaint them with its tourism potential.

H E Hekimoglu praised the substantial growth in bilateral co-operation across various sectors in the last decade. He reiterated the Turkish Embassy's commitment to enhance these relations and fulfilling mutual aspirations and interests. "The Turkish-Omani Business Council and commerce and industry chambers are establishing connections



Oman-Turkey trade volume has increased since 2017, reaching nearly US\$2bn in 2022

H E MUHAMMET HEKIMOGLU

to encourage Turkish businesses to participate in Omani exhibitions, particularly in the food and beverage sector," he said.

He further informed that Oman and Turkey's trade volume has increased since 2017, reaching nearly US\$2bn in 2022. Omani imports amounted to

US\$1.58bn and exports totaled US\$465mn.

In an interview with ONA, H E Hekimoglu disclosed ongoing efforts to establish a Turkish industrial zone in Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), suggesting that such a facility would bolster the economies of both nations, significantly influencing development of bilateral relations.

He added that Turkey values investment opportunities in SEZAD, particularly considering Oman's emphasis on developing non-oil commercial and industrial activities. With its proximity to GCC states and markets in South Asia and East Africa, the sultan-

ate's strategic ports are poised for more growth and business. "Efforts are on to foster increased cooperation and knowledge sharing in electricity, mining and renewable and alternative energy sources between our countries."

Efforts are also continuing to optimise trade and investment opportunities, aiming to overcome obstacles and facilitate trade and investment flow between the two countries. The envoy invited Turkish businessmen to visit Oman, encouraging them to participate in exhibitions and explore the sultanate's investment opportunities.

Currently, around 35 Turkish companies operate in Oman's contracting and engineering sector, undertaking projects worth US\$7bn. Many of these companies continue to actively pursue new projects, he informed.

H E Hekimoglu thanked Oman for the aid sent following the earthquake in February, acknowledging the valuable role of Oman's Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority in search and rescue operations.

MHT to hold road shows in India to boost tourism

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) is set to kick off a series of road shows in India starting Monday. To continue till July 31, these events will be held in Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata and Mumbai to promote Oman's tourism opportunities.

These road shows are designed to fortify the existing relations between Oman and India, while shedding light on the sultanate's rich history and captivating tourism landscapes. The shows will showcase a variety of attractive destinations and unique experiences Oman has to offer, extending beyond traditional tourism to include niche areas such as wedding venues,

The campaign - from July 24 to 31 - will be held in Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata and Mumbai to promote the sultanate's tourism opportunities

event locations, and conference and exhibition tourism.

Throughout the road shows, Indian tourism sector entities will be presented opportunities to network with their Omani counterparts, including a broad spectrum of industry players - hotels, tour operators, airlines and Min-

istry of Heritage and Tourism representatives. The emphasis will be on highlighting the diverse travel experiences available in Oman.

The four-city promotional campaign promises to be an engaging blend of presentations, interactive sessions and individual meetings. 'It serves as an optimum platform for Indian tourism companies to strengthen their existing relations, foster new business partnerships and engage in collaborations with their Omani peers. Participants will gain insights into the latest updates, upcoming developments and special promotions in the Omani tourism sector, positioning them to capitalise on these opportunities,' MHT stated.

OCCI explores developing trade ties with Belarus



Muscat - Sheikh Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), met a number of members of the State Council, representatives of the Parliamentary Friendship Group of the Republic of Belarus, in the presence of Dr Abdullah bin Masoud al Harthy, Honorary Consul of the Republic of Belarus, in his office on Wednesday.

The meeting discussed the outcome of the group's visit to Belarus, which aimed to enhance trade exchange, in addition to discussing ways to support the private sector and develop trade

and investment relations.

The meeting discussed ways of strengthening economic and commercial relations and cooperation with Belarus, exchanging views and experiences, and developing strategies to achieve common goals.

Harthy explained the importance of strengthening trade and investment relations with Belarus, urging private sector companies of the two friendly countries to increase bilateral co-operation to achieve common goals, in addition to focusing on increasing trade exchange in various economic sectors.

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University of Technology and Applied Sciences

University of Technology and Applied Sciences
Electronic Local Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender Committee at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences announces the offering of the practices shown in the following table:

M	practice number	Subject	Companies that are eligible to participate	Document's fee	Last date for electronic purchase	Last date bid submission
1	42/2023	Purchase and supply of textbooks for foundation program students for university branches	Companies and institutions specialized in this field and registered with the Tender Board in the excellent class, first, second, third and fourth	(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	31/07/2023 at 14:30 pm	06/08/2023 at 10:00 am
2	43/2023	Providing advisory services to design and supervise the establishment of student services centers at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Muscat Higher College branch	Companies and institutions specialized in this field and registered with the Tender Board in the first class	(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	17/08/2023 at 14:30 pm	31/08/2023 at 10:00 am
3	44/2023	Providing advisory services for the design and supervision of the construction of the Engineering Department building at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra University Branch		(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	17/08/2023 at 14:30 pm	31/08/2023 at 10:00 am
4	45/2023	Providing consulting services for the design and supervision of the commercial studies and fashion design building at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the university branch in Muscat		(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	17/08/2023 at 14:30 pm	31/08/2023 at 10:00 am
5	46/2023	Providing advisory services for the design and supervision of the construction of the engineering department building at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, the university branch in Muscat		(25) Twenty five Riyal Omani	17/08/2023 at 14:30 pm	31/08/2023 at 10:00 am

- Companies specialized in the above-mentioned businesses can purchase tender documents electronically from Sunday, July 23, 2023, starting from 7:30 am through the link below:
<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>
- Preference in awarding will be given to small and medium enterprises registered with the Authority for SME development and whose bid includes the biggest percentage of Omanisation and a biggest purchase percentage of national products.
- The University shall not be bound to accept the highest or any other bid.

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ACME Group secures \$500mn loan for green hydrogen project in Oman

New Delhi - Diversified renewable energy company ACME Group announced securing ₹40bn (US\$500mn approx) loan from one of the India's largest green infrastructure financial institutions REC Limited for its Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia project in Oman.

The loan will be utilised to begin the first phase of the pioneering Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia project, to be established at the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Duqm, ACME stated.

The first phase of the facility is expected to produce 100,000 tonnes of green ammonia annually and will be expanded to 1.2mn tonnes per annum with about 3.5GW of electrolyser capacity, which will be powered by 5.5GWp of the solar PV plant.

ACME Group also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with REC Limited amounting to over ₹210bn of loans for setting up of a 380MW (round the clock renewable power) RTC; phase 1 of the two independent green ammonia projects in the Indian states of Odisha and Tamil Nadu; and a 600MWhr of Pumped Hydro Project.



The securing of debt for the green hydrogen and ammonia project in Oman is an important milestone. We will start construction soon

SHASHI SHEKHAR

This is a 'significant' development, the company stated.

The MoU was formalised during the 14th Clean Energy Ministerial and 8th Mission Innovation meeting (CEM14/MI-8) held in Goa, the eastern Indian state globally famous for tourism.

"The securing of debt for the green hydrogen and ammonia project in Oman is an important milestone," said ACME Group vice chairman Shashi Shekhar.

Shekhar, a retired Indian bureaucrat, said that his company would start the construction ac-

tivities soon and build one of the most advanced technologies and create a state-of-the-art facility in Oman.

"As a company deeply committed to offering comprehensive green energy solutions, ACME Group is thrilled to receive support from one of the largest funding agencies in the renewable sector. This endorsement not only strengthens our resolve but also stands as a testament to ACME Group's unwavering dedication and proven track record in establishing top-quality assets."

Going forward, Shekhar said, "we are actively exploring the establishment of round-the-clock (RTC) energy solutions, encompassing solar, wind, hydro pump storage, green hydrogen, and ammonia".

REC chairman and managing director Vivek Kumar Dewangan said that the company is eager to collaborate with ACME Group across the entire renewable energy value chain.

"These projects are poised to play a pivotal role in facilitating the energy transition journey and

contributing significantly to achieving India's green energy targets."

REC has consistently been at the forefront of supporting cutting-edge technologies that not only address the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation but also foster a conducive investment environment.

"The partnership between REC and ACME Group marks a significant step towards a sustainable and greener future for the nation," Dewangan added.

ADNOC Gas signs 14-year LNG supply deal with IOCL

Abu Dhabi, UAE - ADNOC Gas, a world-class integrated gas processing company, announced a 14-year supply agreement with Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOCL) for the export of up to 1.2mn metric tonnes per annum of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to India's largest integrated and diversified energy company.

The agreement, valued in the range of AED25.7bn to AED33bn (US\$7bn to US\$9bn approx) over its 14-year term, signifies a major step forward in the partnership between the two industry leaders.

The landmark deal marks another significant milestone for ADNOC Gas as it expands its global reach, reinforcing its position as a global LNG export partner of choice, and reaffirming IOCL as its key strategic partner in the LNG market.

ADNOC Gas chief executive officer Ahmed Alebri said, "We are pleased to announce this long-term LNG sale, further strengthening the long-standing partnership with IOCL. We look forward to expanding our collaboration and take pride in the knowledge that ADNOC Gas' LNG exports will further support the development of IOCL and contribute to India's growth story."



Moody's affirms Masdar's stable outlook; assigns A2

London - Moody's Investors Service (Moody's) has today assigned an A2 rating to US\$750mn of new senior unsecured notes due 2033 to be offered by Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company PJSC (Masdar).

Concurrently, Moody's has affirmed Masdar's A2 long-term issuer rating and assigned a provisional (P)A2 rating to the company's new US\$3bn senior unsecured euro medium term note programme. The outlook remains stable.

Masdar's A2 issuer rating reflects the company's standalone credit quality, which has characteristics of a low-Baa credit profile, and Moody's expectation that its shareholders and their common ultimate owner, the Government of Abu Dhabi (GAD, Aa2 stable) would provide further support if this became necessary.

Following a reorganisation completed in December 2022, Masdar's rating has been strengthened by the ongoing support from shareholders, reflecting its strategic importance to GAD and backed by a shareholder agreement that allows it to access additional equity when required.

The shareholder agreement also allows diversification across technologies and geographies, including many highly rated jurisdictions; operating projects with

long-term cash flow visibility; a long track record as a developer and owner of renewable generation; and the non-recourse nature of most debt, which would insulate Masdar from financial distress at individual investments.

These factors are balanced by a lack of control over many renewable projects; the subordination of the holding company to significant project level debt and the risk of distribution lock-ups under the financing terms; high financial leverage of the portfolio when considered on a proportional basis; and growing competition and an increasing share of energy assets located in lower rated jurisdictions, Moody's reported.

The (P)A2 rating of the EMTN programme and the A2 rating of the offered notes are aligned with Masdar's long-term issuer rating. The ratings reflect the fact that the notes issued under the programme will be direct, unconditional, unsubordinated, and unsecured obligations and will rank pari passu with all other present and future unsubordinated and unsecured obligations.

The stable outlook reflects Moody's expectation that Masdar will maintain prudent leverage at its subsidiaries, associates and joint ventures, with no material increase in financial obligations at the holding company level.

S&P predicts GCC growth to slow down amid weaker oil demand, lower output

Our Correspondent
Muscat

After a stellar performance driven by higher oil income in 2022, the Gulf economy will feel the pinch of weaker global demand, higher borrowing rates, and lower oil output in line with OPEC+ decisions during 2023 and 2024, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence.

S&P Global Market Intelligence forecasts real GDP growth in the GCC to move from 7.5% in 2022 to 1.5% in 2023 before recovering slightly to 2.1% in 2024.

'The slowdown is mostly attributed to less favourable performances at the level of the real hydrocarbon economy, which will slightly contract in the near term, mirroring lower oil output,' S&P Global Market Intelligence



said in a report.

'Although energy prices have moderated, governments will continue to benefit from sufficient petrodollars to press ahead with investment projects whenever needed. The vast amount of foreign exchange reserves accumulated since 2022 also rein-

forced their liquidity buffers and ability to spend to diversify their economies,' it further stated.

The report, however, noted that the GCC region's real non-hydrocarbon economy continues to perform strongly, seeing uninterrupted growth as a full recovery from dissipating COVID-19

pandemic-related uncertainties comes into play.

'Tourism activity has picked up quite significantly over the past year, with global travel resuming, countries opening up borders, and loosening health-related restrictions. Hotel occupancy rates soared and transportation and other services sectors also performed robustly in the past few months. We expect 2023 to be another year of strong growth for the services economy, especially tourism and accommodation,' the report said.

According to S&P Global Market Intelligence, construction activity growth should slow in the near term yet remain satisfactory as GCC governments continue to benefit from fairly high liquidity and pursue their respective economic diversification drives.

Consumption growth

What the analysts noticed while preparing the report is that 'real private consumption growth in the GCC is likely to reach 6.9% in 2023, higher than the estimate for 2022, before slowing down to a still strong level in 2024'.

'This is partly because we believe that elevated consumer price pressures somewhat eroded purchasing power and dented private consumption growth in 2022,' the report writers explained.

With inflationary pressures gradually receding in the past few months, private consumption spending will gain further ground in 2023.

'Average inflation in the GCC is forecast to decline to 2.9% in 2023 and 2.5% in 2024,' the report added.

Pacts for Al Wusta projects signed at Madrid meet

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The recent Green Hydrogen Conference and Exhibition - Europe 2023, held in Madrid, Spain, witnessed signing of agreements for five new projects in Al Wusta governorate.

'The agreements were signed to initiate the development of five projects in Al Wusta governorate, spanning an area exceeding 1,600sqkm and with a total investment of more than US\$30bn,' the Omani company sponsoring the conference stated.

Hydrogen Oman (Hydrom), a subsidiary of Energy Development Oman (EDO), while participating in the event, presented the ambitious vision and strategic plans of Oman in fostering the growth of the green hydrogen industry, with the aim of becoming a global hub for its production in the near future.

Abdul Aziz Said al Shidhani,



the general manager of Hydrom presented the results of the first round of public auction for Phase A of the planned development.

Additionally, Shidhani discussed the second round of the public auction within the same phase, as well as the promising investment opportunities it offers companies interested in en-

tering this industry.

The Green Hydrogen Conference and Exhibition in Europe is a prominent global event that focuses on the future of renewable energy in the hydrogen sector.

Commenting on Hydrom's participation in the conference, Shidhani said, "Hydrom decided to participate in sponsoring this

event with the purpose of informing major companies operating in this field about Oman's visionary plans for the green hydrogen economy and the joint infrastructure being developed to support these projects, which will open doors for various industries to transition towards green production methods."

"Our primary goal was to encourage international companies to engage with us and take advantage of the excellent opportunities currently offered by the sultanate through the second round of public auction, which will also offer numerous plots of land in Dhofar. Our participation in this event was highly successful, as several companies expressed a keen interest in learning more about these investment opportunities," he added.

Talking about the future, the Hydrom general manager said that the company was "moving in the right direction to put Oman on the list of the world's leading green hydrogen producers", thus making it an attractive destination for foreign industrial investments seeking to transition to clean energy. "We are confident in our ability to attract leading companies in this sector as partners as we work together to create a more sustainable future for Oman's energy industry."

OETC infuses RO23mn to upgrade Nizwa station

Our Correspondent
Muscat

At a total cost exceeding RO23mn, the Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) recently completed the upgradation of the Nizwa grid station from 132kv to 220kv, along with the 220kv overhead transmission lines from the new grid station in Izki to the one in Nizwa.

Additionally, a 500mva, 400/220kv transformer has been added to the new Izki grid station, OETC informed, adding that this project would contribute to meeting the electricity transmission Security Standard requirements and enhance the reliability of the Transmission Network in Dakhiliyah governorate.

Masoud al Riyami, the chief operation officer at the OETC, emphasised the company's priority for the ongoing strategic projects designed to improve the performance and availability of the electricity transmission network throughout the sultanate.

"This is in line with the economic development, urban growth and increasing demand across various sectors," he fur-

ther said.

Riyami confirmed that projects are progressing in accordance with the company's plans, objectives, and aspirations.

Since its establishment in 2005, the company has been dedicated to work on development and enhancement of the availability and the reliability of Oman's electricity transmission network. "This is accomplished through the construction of various strategic projects throughout the sultanate and by actively adopting and implementing various technologies to adapt to the significant changes and trends in the energy sector, particularly the widespread integration of renewable energy sources," he added.

OETC, a member of the Nama Group, is the sole entity responsible for the transmission and dispatch of electricity in Oman. The company facilitate the transmission of electricity from generation stations to distributed load centres across the country.

The transmission network operates at a voltage of 132kv and above, to cover most of the governorates, whether in the north or the south.



WE NEED TO TALK



NAJMA AL ZIDJALY

Najma is a writer concerned with topics on self, national and cultural development; researcher; and associate professor of social media and Arab Omani identity in the Department of English Language and Literature (College of Arts & Social Sciences) at Sultan Qaboos University

Ask not what the Ministry of Higher Education can do for you

It was during his inauguration speech on January 20, 1961, that the 35th President of the United States, John F Kennedy, uttered what would become one of the most memorable and defining quotations of the 20th century: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

These words reverberated in my head during an interview I agreed to give for a student project. The research question intrigued me, even though I normally decline interview requests from students: How much does globalisation affect the Omani higher educational sector? As I teach about globalisation in my Language in Society course at Sultan Qaboos University, the student sought my expertise on the topic.

Globalisation originally symbolised the exportation of ideas, trade, and technology from the west to other regions of the world. Given the diversity of local needs, two related processes later emerged, referred to as glocalisation and localisation. The former engages in local communities exporting their own goods in addition to importing global ones, while the latter translates products or services to meet the needs of a specific region. As a result of this dynamic interaction between the global and local markets, societies typically thrive.

By attempting to gauge the extent to which globalisation has impacted higher education in Oman, the student essentially hoped to determine the frequency by which Omanis sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Ed-

ucation acquire cutting-edge frameworks and technologies while abroad in Western universities and implement them upon return in local institutions for the advancement of the Omani society.

I responded in a terse manner: "Not much."

Shocked, the student inquired, "Dr What do you mean?" I elaborated, "I cannot speak for other disciplines, but I do know from my own academic experience in the social sciences that most Omanis, in fact most Arab academics, do not easily embrace new ideas, methods, or analytical frameworks while abroad; with rare exceptions, the majority of changes in social sciences brought about by technological advancement escapes them. Due to this, outdated curricula and research frameworks such as surveys remain the primary research methods among Arabs rather than adopting newer, more complex methods of teaching, research, and learning."

"How should the Ministry of Higher Education address this issue?" The student inquired. "The ministry is not responsible for enforcing the learning of new technologies, because it cannot. It can fund educational initiatives but learning remains a personal responsibility," I replied in haste.

As a way to emphasise the point, I provided the junior interviewer with information about a student research project I supervised at my Department of English Language and Literature: According to the Ministry of Education, in 2013-2014, Jolly Phonics was adopted to improve reading and writing among Omani

elementary students.

Despite the ministry's provision of training workshops on how best to teach the internationally acclaimed textbook to children, Omani teachers continue to this day to struggle with the textbook.

Many participants admitted not attending these training sessions due to scheduling and location concerns; therefore, they persisted untrained in basic teaching techniques. Although YouTube offers numerous free teaching technique programs, there remains a lack of motivation in updating skills, which is all the more disconcerting.

Furthermore, in a memo sent to all departments not long ago, the main administration of Sultan Qaboos University urged academic staff to incorporate technological advancements into their teaching practices, many of which are provided by the university. The number of people who heeded that advice puzzled me.

Learning is a cultural practice that does not cease with the attainment of a higher degree, such as a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree; in reality, it is a lifelong journey that never ends. Arabs, however, often do not view the ceasing of a degree as the beginning of knowledge, but rather as the end.

The Arab culture is also marred by traditions that must remain intact in order for Arabic societies to survive. For this reason, fear of change has become a part and parcel of Arabic culture. Many are reluctant to change how we acquire and practice knowledge because of this, preferring old methods.

As he slumped back into the cushioned office chair in despair, the student interviewer queried, "Is all lost then?" "Not really," I smiled. I explained that everyone must keep up with the Netizens, or the generation that grew up with the Internet, eventually. There are so many opportunities for information and artificial intelligence available to students in elementary schools and universities that they may soon outsmart their teachers if the latter is unable to keep up.

It is my conclusion that learning is a personal pursuit, whether for self-development or for professional incentives. By providing and funding opportunities, which the Ministry of Higher Education continues to do, the government guides its citizens to the well, but Omanis must draw the water from the well themselves. Let them desiccate.

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

TENDERS ADVERTISEMENT

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) Announce the following Tenders:

Sr.No	Tender No.	Tender Name	Last date for obtaining the documents	Bid Submission Date	Requirements from participants	Tender Document's Fees (Including VAT) (RO)
1	58/2023	Maintenance of all OETC Grid Stations, Overhead Lines (OHL) and Underground Cables (UGC) for Five Years.	03/08/2023	29/08/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field Have A Valid Commercial Registration and OETC Registration Category (C) Certificate.	2,625/-
2	60/2023	Replace Old Grid Station Gates with Cantilever Slide Gates At Muscat, Al Batinah & Al Dhahirah Governorates	03/08/2023	29/08/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field Have A Valid Commercial Registration	52.500
3	62/2023	Providing Annual Maintenance Contract (AMC) for Managing Print Solution for all OETC Printers.	03/08/2023	29/08/2023	Local Companies with Experience in Same Field Have A Valid Commercial Registration	52.500
4	63/2023	Supply & Installation of IT Desktop Solutions for 3 Years	03/08/2023	29/08/2023	(SME) Local Companies with Experience in Same Field, Have A Valid Commercial Registration & Riyadh Card	Nil

Participation:	Interested Companies may obtain Tender Document with the necessity Apply on E-tendering
Buying the Tender:	By E-Tendering System.
Fees:	Against non-refundable payment as mentioned above against each set of document. (Payment Through Bank Transfer) , SMEs are exempted from tender's fees.
The deadline for clarification:	Before (21) Days from bid submission date.
Submission:	The submission of hard copy will be only for Bid Bond & other documents by E-Tendering
Terms and conditions:	- No other writing or any reference thereto should be mentioned on the envelope. - The bid should be valid for not less than (90) days from bid submission date. - The Tenderer should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of 1% of the bid value and should be valid for (90) days from bid submission date, addressed to Oman Electricity Transmission Company (SAOC). Small & Medium Enterprises are exempted from the submission of 1% of the bid bond. - Any bid not comply with the required guarantee, will not be accepted. - OETC is not bound to accept the lowest or any other offers.
Offer:	The bid bond should be submitted in Tender Box No. (1) at the company's building before 11:00 am on the assigned date for submission of the Tenders.
Company Address:	Muscat - Al Mawaleh Road No: 2153 - Building No. 423 O Block No: 321 - Contact Details: 93515198-92217856-91777378
Email	tenders@omangrid.com
Website:	www.omangrid.com / link of E-Tendering System https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



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إعلان طرح مناقصات

تعلن الشركة العُمانية لنقل الكهرباء عن طرح المناقصات التالية :

م	رقم المناقصة	عنوان المناقصة	آخر موعد للحصول على مستندات المناقصة	آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات	الدرجة	لمن الوثيقة (شامل ضريبة القيمة المضافة) (دع)
١	٢٠٢٣/٥٨	صيانة جميع المحطات الرئيسية التابعة للشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء وخطوط الجهد العالي والكابلات الأرضية لمدة خمس سنوات.	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٠٣	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٢٩	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول ومسجلة لدى الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء (الفئة ج .)	٢,٦٢٥/-
٢	٢٠٢٣/٦٠	استبدال البوابات القديمة لمحطات الكهرباء ببوابات منزلقة في محافظات (مسقط، الباطنة و الظاهرة).	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٠٣	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٢٩	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول	٥٢٥٠٠
٣	٢٠٢٣/٦٢	توفير خدمات الصيانة وإدارة الطابعات والتراخيص المرتبطة بها في الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء.	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٠٣	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٢٩	الشركات المحلية العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري ساري المفعول	٥٢٥٠٠
٤	٢٠٢٣/٦٣	توريد وتركيب الحلول لتقنية المعلومات لمدة 3 سنوات.	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٠٣	٢٠٢٣/٠٨/٢٩	الشركات المحلية الصغيرة والمتوسطة العاملة في هذا المجال ولديها سجل تجاري وبطاقة ريادة سارية المفعول	لا يوجد

الاشتراك الإلكتروني	يمكن للشركات والمؤسسات المتخصصة الحصول على مستندات المناقصة بعد تقديم الطلب عن طريق نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
طريقة الشراء	من خلال نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
الرسوم	مقابل دفع المبلغ المحدد أعلاه للنسخة الواحدة - لا ترد . الدفع عن طريق التحويل البنكي . تعفى المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة من دفع ثمن الوثيقة.
آخر موعد للإستفسارات	قبل (٢١) يوم من تاريخ آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات
تقديم العروض	يتم تسليم النسخة الأصلية فقط من الضمان البنكي للعطاء في الصندوق . أما العرض فيتم تسليمه من خلال نظام المناقص الإلكتروني.
الشروط و الضمانات	- عدم تحديد اسم صاحب العطاء أو ما يشير إليه على المظروف. - أن تكون العروض سارية المفعول لمدة لا تقل عن (٩٠) يوما من تاريخ تقديم العطاء. - إرفاق تلمينا في صورة ضمان مصرفي من أحد البنوك العاملة في البلاد قدره (٢١) من قيمة العطاء ساري لمدة (٩٠) يوما من تاريخ تقديم العطاء . ومعنونا بإسم الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء . تعفى المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة من تسليم الضمان المصرفي . - كل عطاء لا يستوفي التامين المطلوب لن ينظر فيه . - الشركة العمانية لنقل الكهرباء غير مقيدة بقبول أقل العروض أو أي عطاء آخر
العرض المقدم	يجب وضع الضمان البنكي للعطاء فقط في صندوق المناقصات رقم (١) بمبنى الشركة قبل الساعة ١١ صباحا من التاريخ المحدد لتقديم العطاءات
عنوان الشركة	عنوان الشركة: محافظة مسقط - الموالح - رقم السكّة ٢١٥٣ - مبنى رقم ٤٢٣٠ تفاصيل التواصل: ٩١٧٧٧٧٧٨-٩٢٢١٧٨٥٦-٩٣٥١٥١٩٨
البريد الإلكتروني	tenders@omangrid.com
الموقع الإلكتروني	www.omangrid.com link of E-Tendering System https://www.omangrid.com/en/Pages/Services.aspx



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Bank Nizwa's leadership in Islamic banking

Bank Nizwa, the leading and most trusted Islamic bank in the sultanate, organised two impactful lectures as part of its educational programme for Islamic banking at the Cultural Center in Sinaw and Imam Abdulmalik bin Humaid Mosque.

The lectures aimed to enhance the level of awareness within the local community about the principles and concepts of Islamic banking in line with sharia'a principles. Both lectures witnessed significant attendance and active participation.

The first lecture at the Cultural Center in Sinaw was delivered by Mustafa bin Nasser al Na'bi, deputy manager of sharia'a training at Bank Nizwa, while the second lecture at Imam Abdulmalik bin Humaid Mosque was delivered by Sheikh Dr Ali bin Sulaiman al Jahdhami, a member of the Sharia'a Board at Bank Nizwa.

These informative lectures reflect Bank Nizwa's continuous efforts to instill the principles of Islamic banking within the community and equip individuals with the necessary knowledge to maximise the benefits offered by Islamic banking services and innovative solutions that adhere to sharia'a principles, provided by



Bank Nizwa.

By providing comprehensive Islamic banking solutions, Bank Nizwa ensures that individuals can make sound financial decisions that align with their aspira-

tions and financial needs.

"At Bank Nizwa, we are dedicated to spreading awareness about Islamic banking among the local community through our educational programme for indi-

viduals interested in financial solutions aligned with our Islamic beliefs," said Dr Jahdhami.

"This programme equips them with the necessary knowledge to make sound financial

decisions that meet their aspirations and financial needs, through the provision of innovative financial products and services that comply with sharia'a principles and the lifestyle of the

community.

"Bank Nizwa will continue its efforts to keep pace with developments in the Islamic banking industry and contribute to the community by providing com-

prehensive Islamic banking solutions."

The educational programme for Islamic banking represents the extent of Bank Nizwa's efforts to promote awareness in the communities it serves and enhance individuals' capacities to understand the principles and concepts of banking compliant with sharia'a teachings.

Islamic finance is considered as a mean to enhance financial inclusion and achieve financial goals while developing projects that align with their beliefs and lifestyles for the Omani society.

It is worth mentioning that the efforts made by those responsible for the educational program for Islamic banking come as a manifestation of the bank's continuous commitment to fulfilling its social responsibilities.

Since its establishment, Bank Nizwa has continued participating in various community initiatives to raise awareness among different segments of Omani society about Islamic banking to make sound financial decisions.

Bank Nizwa has earned the trust and respect of the Omani community through its diverse and growing range of financial services and products tailored to meet the varied needs of its customers.

Global Space and Technology announces five projects in Duqm

The Global Space and Technology Company announced the 'ZONE88' area located in the special economic zone at Duqm, Oman.

The area includes five international projects: Space Habitat Center, Commercial space Launching Area, Unmanned vehicles technology Center, Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technology Testing Area, and Ground Station.

These projects have been designed to promote the space and technology industry, Attract global investment and scientific research to build a sustainable knowledge-based economy in this sector in the region.

Bahiya bint Hilal bin Sultan al Shuaibi, the founder and CEO of the company, emphasised that with these projects, will open the door for international and local institutions to invest in the space industry and benefit from the strategic location of the Sultanate of Oman. It will serve as a suitable

destination for spacecraft launches and as a centre for research and activities in the space sector in the region.

It is worth to mention, that the company aims to engage several partners, including governments, global and regional space agencies, private companies in the space and technology field, universities, research and development centres, scientists, and researchers in the field of space and related technologies, as well as investors and entrepreneurs in the space industry.

The 'ZONE88' project aims to attract global investments in the space industry. Raising the international standing of Oman in the field of space, technology and strengthening the commercial, industrial, and scientific relations with leading countries in this field.

Build a sustainable knowledge economy and qualifying competencies through these projects. It also seeks to stimulate partnerships and interna-

tional cooperation in the field of space, advanced sciences, and artificial intelligence. while promoting scientific tourism related to space sciences.

It is worth to mention, that the Global Space and Technology Company is engaged in several projects and services in the Space and Technology sector. This includes providing satellites communication services, remote sensing, and space imagery.

Also, the company works in simulation projects, Educational Technologies, and space research, with providing the necessary equipment. In addition, the company provides consulting services to the government, security, military entities, and the community within the country.

Furthermore, the Global Space and Technology Company has been selected as the winner of the Business Excellence Award 2021 by the World Union of Businesses in the United States of America.

Fun in the sun: Barceló Hotel announces summer escape



Barceló Hotel Group invited people to celebrate summer with their loved ones at the idyllic Barceló Mulsanah Resort in Oman, a wealth of opportunities to create treasured summer memories awaits.

'Experience a sensational summer with a tailored selection of exciting packages and offers,

including luxurious accommodations, delightful culinary experiences, and a plethora of activities to make this summer an unforgettable journey of relaxation and enjoyment with family and friends,' the group stated.

'Escape to Musannah's flagship beach resort for an enchanting summer staycation,' it added.

Barceló Mulsanah Resort offers luxurious accommodations and unparalleled hospitality.

This resort offers an exhilarating experience with a dedicated indoor kids' cinema with daily screenings, and complimentary ice cream for the little ones.

Enjoy the convenience of early check-in and late check-out, al-

lowing for extended fun. Indulge in buffet-styled meals at the Mydan Restaurant, and dive into temperature control pools for a refreshing swim. With an array of exciting amenities, Barceló Mulsanah Resort promises an unforgettable summer filled with laughter, relaxation, and cherished memories with the family.

Snow Oman's summer camp opens for kids

Snow Oman is inviting kids between four to ten years of age to join the coolest summer camp, which will run until August 31 in Muscat.

'Looking to help their kids stay cool this summer? Majid Al Futaim Entertainment is thrilled to announce its first-ever season of Summer Camp taking place at Snow Oman,' the group said.

'Beat the summer heat and boredom with fun learning workshops, physical activities, treasure hunts, magic shows, unlimited snow park rides and attractions, trips to VOX Cinemas and Magic Planet, and snow much more,' it added. Camp activities start at 9am and continue till 5pm from Sunday to Thursday and are available in daily, weekly, and monthly packages starting from RO20 inclusive of activities, two snacks and lunch.

Kalyan Jewellers launches 'Shop & Shine' campaign

Kalyan Jewellers, one of the most trusted and leading jewellery brands, recently announced the launch of its 'Shop & Shine' campaign.

Through this exciting campaign offer, the brand has announced assured giveaways on jewellery purchases worth RO500 and above. The unique initiative aims to offer customers with a chance to maximise the value of jewellery purchases from Kalyan Jewellers.

As part of this campaign, customers will receive a half-gram gold coin on purchase of gold jewellery worth RO500. Customers are entitled to receive a one-gram gold coin on purchase of uncut/precious stone jewellery worth RO500, whereas on purchase of diamond jewellery worth RO500, the jewellery brand will be giving away two-gram gold coins.

The offer is valid till Septem-



ber 4 this year.

Speaking about the offer, company's executive director Ramesh Kalyanaraman said, "At Kalyan Jewellers, our endeavour has been to enable our customers to extract best value from their purchase while providing a great

shopping experience. We have been consistently taking major strides towards offering a holistic shopping experience to patrons.

"As an extension to this thought, we are delighted to announce the 'Shop & Shine' campaign, offering patrons with a



chance to maximise benefits on their jewellery purchase. We believe patrons will continue to shower their love and support for brand Kalyan Jewellers and make this initiative a huge success."

Kalyan Jewellers is committed to providing exceptional experi-

ences and fostering a sense of delight for its valued patrons. Customers can avail the exciting range of offers along with benefits of Kalyan's 4-Level Assurance Certification on their jewellery purchases, ensuring a seamless service-backed shop-

ping experience.

The jewellery retailed at Kalyan Jewellers go through multiple purity tests and patrons will also receive the Kalyan Jewellers 4-Level Assurance Certificate, which guarantees Purity, Free Lifetime Maintenance of ornaments, Detailed Product Information and Transparent Exchange and Buy-back policies. The certification is part of the brand's commitment towards offering the very best to its loyalists.

Kalyan Jewellers offers popular house brands such as, Muhurat - Wedding Jewellery Line, Mudhra - handcrafted antique jewellery, Nimah - temple Jewellery, Glo - dancing diamonds, Ziah - Solitaire like diamond jewellery, Anokhi - uncut diamonds, Hera - daily wear diamonds, Rang - precious stones jewellery, and the recently launched Lila - coloured stones and diamond jewellery.

Israel forces kill Palestinian accused of ‘car ramming attempt’

Nablus, Palestinian Territories - Israeli forces have shot dead a Palestinian in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian officials said on Saturday, in what the army described as a ‘car ramming attempt’ near Nablus.

Fawzi Mukhalifa, 18, ‘was killed by the occupation (Israeli) bullets in the town of Sebastia’ late on Friday, the Palestinian health ministry said.

He was the second Palestinian to be killed by Israeli forces in the

West Bank within hours.

The army said troops had responded to ‘a car ramming attempt’ in the northern West Bank town ‘by firing towards the suspects who were in the vehicle. The driver was neutralised’. Another ‘suspect’ who had been in Mukhalifa’s car was wounded and arrested, the army said.

The deadly incident came amid rising tensions in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since the 1967 Six-Day War.



A man looks into a bullet-ridden car in which a Palestinian was killed late on Friday by Israeli forces, in the West Bank on Saturday (AFP)

The territory has seen a string of attacks by Palestinians on Israeli targets, as well as a surge in violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinian communities.

Earlier on Friday, the Palestinian health ministry reported the death of Mohammed al-Bayed, 17, near the city of Ramallah.

Bayed died from injuries sustained by live bullets fired by Israeli forces in the village of Umm Safa, it said, while Israeli border police accused him of attacking

officers. The force said in a statement a ‘violent disturbance’ had broken out ‘during which suspects threw stones and explosives’ at Israeli forces. “A security guard responded by shooting at a suspect who threw a bomb,” the statement said, adding that ‘a hit was detected’.

Violence linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this year has killed at least 198 Palestinians, 27 Israelis, one Ukrainian and one Italian, according to an

AFP tally compiled from official sources from both sides.

They include, on the Palestinian side, combatants and civilians, and on the Israeli side, mostly civilians and three members of the Arab minority.

The West Bank is home to nearly three million Palestinians, as well as around 490,000 Israelis who live in settlements considered illegal under international law.

AFP



Residents gather to watch the news on a television at a grocery store in Omdurman, on Thursday, amid ongoing fighting in war-torn Sudan (AFP)

Sudan: Rocket fire kills at least 16 civilians in Darfur

Wad Madani, Sudan - At least 16 civilians have been killed by rocket fire that hit their houses in war-torn Sudan’s western Darfur region, a local lawyers’ union said on Saturday.

The vast region, already ravaged by brutal conflict in the early 2000s, has seen some of the worst of the violence since fighting erupted in mid-April between Sudan’s rival generals vying for power.

“During an exchange of rocket fire between the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), 16 civilians were killed on Friday, according to a preliminary toll, in Nyala,” the South Darfur state capital, the union said.

And at least one man was killed by a sniper, it added.

In the West Darfur capital of El Geneina, near Chad, snipers have reportedly been targeting residents from rooftops since fighting began, and tens of thousands of residents have fled across the border.

The war, which broke out in the capital Khartoum on April 15 and spread to Darfur later that month, has left at least 3,000 dead across Sudan, according to

a conservative estimate.

It pits army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, commander of the paramilitary RSF.

Fighting in Darfur, an RSF stronghold, has recently concentrated around Nyala, after brutal clashes in El Geneina where the United Nations had reported atrocities. Battles have also continued in and around Khartoum.

Residents reported on Saturday first army air strikes on villages in the Al-Jazirah state’s north, just south of the capital.

The fertile land between the White Nile and Blue Nile rivers now hosts several hundred thousands of the estimated 3.3mn people the war has displaced.

If fighting expands into Al-Jazirah, they may be forced to flee again.

The humanitarian workers who support them would have to move as well, but fear the many bureaucratic challenges in relocating their operations.

Experts say both warring sides would like to see the battlefield expand.

AFP

Protest in Baghdad after Quran burning incident in Denmark

Baghdad, Iraq - Iraqi security forces on Saturday dispersed about 1,000 supporters of Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr who tried to march to Baghdad’s Green Zone housing foreign embassies, believing a Quran had been desecrated in Denmark.

The protesters were reacting to reports of an apparent desecration of the Muslim holy book for the third time in a month, with the first two in Sweden already raising diplomatic tensions.

On its Facebook page, the extreme right group Danske Patriot posted on Friday a video of a man burning what seemed to be a Quran and trampling an Iraqi flag.

Copenhagen police deputy chief Trine Fisker told AFP that ‘not more than a handful’ of protesters had gathered on Friday across from the Iraqi embassy.

“I can also confirm there was a book burnt. We do not know which book it was,” she said. “It was quite peaceful.”

Sadr, who has a following of millions among the country’s majority Shiite population and wields great influence over national politics, has urged action after Quran desecrations in Sweden.

His followers on Saturday reacted to the news from Copenhagen, and gathered in the pre-dawn darkness at Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, some carrying portraits of Sadr.

‘Yes, yes to the Quran!’ shouted the protesters, mostly young men.

Security forces cut two bridges leading to the high-security Green Zone where govern-



Followers of Iraqi Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr protest near Baghdad’s Green Zone, over an alleged burning of Quran in Copenhagen, early on Saturday (AFP)

The protesters were reacting to reports of an apparent desecration of the Muslim holy book for the third time in a month

mental institutions and foreign embassies are located.

The demonstrators tried to force their way through before officers pushed them back.

The protesters eventually dispersed several hours later, after scuffles erupted, an interior ministry official told AFP, speaking anonymously because he was not allowed to brief the media.

Protesters were trying to reach the embassy of Denmark, the official said.

Hundreds of Sadr supporters were already behind the storming and torching of Sweden’s embassy in Baghdad early on Thursday, over a planned burning of the Muslim holy book in Sweden, weeks after the same protester there lit pages of the Quran. Early on Saturday, Iraq’s foreign ministry had condemned ‘the desecration of the holy Quran and the Iraqi flag’ in front of the embassy in Denmark.

The ministry’s statement said that ‘these actions provoke reactions and put all the parties in delicate situations’.

A separate statement said ‘we cannot allow to happen again’ what occurred at the Swedish

embassy. It reaffirmed Baghdad’s ‘full commitment’ to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and said it guarantees ‘the protection and security provided to diplomatic teams’.

‘A clear provocation’

The actions of Sweden-based Iraqi refugee Salwan Momika, whose book-burning protest had been permitted by Stockholm on free speech grounds, triggered condemnation across the Muslim world. Iraq also condemned the attack on Sweden’s embassy but expelled Stockholm’s ambassador.

Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom called Momika’s protest ‘a clear provocation’ that ‘in no way reflects the Swedish

government’s opinions’, while also stressing a ‘constitutional right to freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom to demonstrate’.

Sadr on Saturday said in a vague tweet that ‘words are no longer enough’ in defending religion. The cleric’s supporters had rallied by their hundreds in Baghdad’s Sadr City after Friday prayers, chanting support for the Quran. Protests also erupted in Tehran and Lebanon.

The United Arab Emirates, meanwhile, summoned Sweden’s charge d’affaires on Friday to protest ‘the repeated attacks and abuses on copies of the holy Quran committed by extremists’ in Sweden, the foreign ministry in Abu Dhabi said.

AFP

Iranian Kurds keep low profile in Iraq

Arbil, Iraq - Like other Iranian Kurds who fled into exile during last year’s women-led mass protests, 17-year-old Sarina tries to keep a low profile in her new home in northern Iraq.

She avoids drawing attention in her waitress job and hides her face behind a COVID mask when she walks the streets of Arbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The teenager - who asked not to be fully identified citing security fears - was among the thousands who joined the wave of street protests sparked by the September death of Mahsa Amini.

Anger flared after the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian died in morality police custody after her arrest for allegedly flouting the strict Islamic dress code for women.

At the time, Sarina was visiting her mother in Mahabad, in Iran’s West Azerbaijan province, and joined the protests. She then took to the streets again in her nearby hometown of Oshnavieh.

When a friend of hers was arrested, Sarina went into hiding.



An Iraqi Kurdish woman works at the kitchen of a sweets shop named after Mahsa Amini, in Arbil, on June 22 (AFP)

“At first, I said I wouldn’t be returning home for two days,” Sarina recalled. Then the authorities raided her home while she was away and detained her uncle.

In mid-October, Sarina crossed the porous mountain border, a region long used by smugglers, from Iran’s mainly Kurdish west into Iraq’s autonomous Kurdistan region.

She now spends her mornings serving tea at a corporate office and her evenings working as a waitress, making ends meet on US\$800 a month.

“My family is forced to accept that I am here,” she said. “It is very difficult for them. They are worried about me.”

Sarina said she has no plans to move further away, explaining that ‘I don’t like being too far from my country. I want to be able to go back to my family quickly if something happens’.

‘Woman, life, freedom’

Iran’s protests under the motto ‘woman, life, freedom’ sparked a state crackdown during which hundreds were killed, mostly

protesters but also dozens of security personnel.

Thousands were arrested in what authorities labelled ‘riots’ and blamed on foreign enemies. Seven men were executed for protest-related violence against security forces.

Many Iranian Kurds fled to Iraq, some on tourist visas. Their number is unclear in the absence of official statistics.

People on both sides speak Kurdish, and many have relatives across the Iraq-Iran border. The dire economic situation in sanctions-hit Iran has compelled many to seek work in Iraq.

Kurdish Iranian opposition groups have long had bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran launched deadly military strikes on some of them during the unrest, accusing them of instigating the protests.

Early this year, Iraq and Iran signed an agreement to reinforce security along the border.

Tehran has threatened to resume attacks if the Kurdish opposition groups are not disarmed by September.

AFP

IN SUPPORT OF JUDICIARY



Demonstrators wave Israeli national flags as they march on the highway near the town of Mevasseret Zion on Saturday, during a multi-day march from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to protest the government’s judicial overhaul bill ahead of a vote in the parliament (AFP)

North Korea fires ‘cruise missiles’ into Yellow Sea

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea fired ‘several cruise missiles’ into the Yellow Sea between China and the Korean peninsula on Saturday, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

Pyongyang’s latest provocation comes as concern grows over the whereabouts and well-being of a US soldier who made an unauthorised dash into North Korean territory earlier this week, with the reclusive regime so far remaining tight-lipped about the incident.

Saturday’s launches are just the latest in a series by Pyongyang, and come as Seoul and Washington ramp up defence cooperation, with relations between the two Koreas nearing an all-time low.

The cruise missile launches took place around 4am (1900 GMT) on Saturday, Seoul’s military said.

“South Korean and US intelligence authorities were analysing the launches while monitoring signs of additional activities,” the JCS said.

North Korea had fired two ballistic missiles into the sea off its opposite coast toward Japan just three days earlier.

Diplomacy between Pyongyang and Seoul has stalled, and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has called for ramping up weapons development, including tactical nukes.



People watch a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul on Saturday (AFP)

South Korean and US intelligence authorities were analysing the launches while monitoring signs of additional activities

JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

In response, Seoul and Washington have staged joint military exercises with advanced stealth jets and US strategic assets, while

an American nuclear-armed submarine this week made a South Korean port call for the first time in decades.

‘End of the regime’

On his visit to the submarine on Wednesday, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol warned Pyongyang it would face the ‘end of the regime’ if it attacked the South with nuclear weapons.

“I feel assured having seen the US’ most important nuclear strategic asset here,” he said.

On Thursday, North Korean defence minister Kang Sun Nam said the Ohio-class submarine’s

deployment might have fallen ‘under the conditions of the use of nuclear weapons specified in the DPRK law on the nuclear force policy’, using an acronym for the North’s official name.

North Korea last year adopted a sweeping nuclear law setting out an array of scenarios in which it could use its nukes, including pre-emptive strikes if threatened.

A day later, South Korea’s defence ministry reiterated that any use of nuclear weapons by the North would prompt an ‘immediate and decisive response’ resulting in the Kim regime’s demise.

Saturday’s launches came just days after US soldier Travis King was believed to have been taken into North Korean custody after he broke away from a tour group visiting the Demilitarised Zone.

The United States has said it is ‘very concerned’ about Private Second Class King’s treatment, and as of Saturday, Pyongyang had yet to respond to inquiries about the soldier.

King had been due to return to the United States to face military discipline after serving jail time in South Korea for assault. Instead he left the airport before he was set to depart, joined a tour of the border and fled across it.

Sanctions ‘concerns’

Meanwhile, the Group of Seven nations, the European Union and three other countries have urged China to expel oil tankers from its waters that appear to be taking fuel to North Korea in defiance of UN sanctions, according to a letter seen by AFP on Friday.

“We have concerns regarding the continuing presence of multiple oil tankers... that use your territorial waters in Sansha Bay as refuge to facilitate their trade of sanctioned petroleum products to the DPRK,” read the letter, which was signed by the countries’ ambassadors and addressed to China’s UN envoy Zhang Jun.

AFP

‘Extreme’ market in Indonesia ends dog, cat meat trade

Jakarta, Indonesia - A notorious Indonesian animal market has ended the sale of dog and cat meat after years of activist pressure to stop the trade and its brutal methods of slaughter, according to campaigners.

Canine and feline meat were on the menu alongside bats, rats, snakes and monkeys at the Tomohon Extreme Market on Sulawesi island, known for its disturbing culinary spread until a ban was imposed on Friday.

The previously uncompromising bazaar is the first such market in the country to finally back down and stop the trade of cat and dog meat, animal rights group Humane Society International (HSI) said in a statement on Friday.

It called the ban a ‘historic agreement that will spare thousands of animals from being bludgeoned and blow-torched to death for human consumption’.

Indonesia remains one of the few countries in the world that still permits the sale of dog and cat meat due to local traditions and culture.

The market’s six remaining dog and cat meat traders signed an agreement to stop the sale, and the mayor of Tomohon city signed into law a ban on future trade at the

market, the group said in a statement. “The impact will be far-reaching, shutting down business for the traders’ vast network of traffickers, dog thieves and slaughterers,” Lola Webber, HSI’s director of campaigns to end the dog meat trade, said.

“We hope this unprecedented agreement will set the standard.”

Canine and feline meat were on the menu alongside bats, rats, snakes and monkeys at the Tomohon Extreme Market on Sulawesi island

The rights group said the agreement has potentially saved the lives of thousands of pups on the island, where as many as 130,000 are slaughtered annually.

The market had courted widespread criticism from activists for the methods used to slaughter animals, such as beatings, hangings and blow-torching of fur while they were still alive.

AFP

Around 2,000 penguins wash up dead on Uruguay coast

Montevideo, Uruguay - Around 2,000 penguins have appeared dead on the coast of eastern Uruguay in the last 10 days, and the cause, which does not appear to be avian influenza, remains a mystery, authorities said.

The Magellanic penguins, mostly juveniles, died in the Atlantic Ocean and were carried by currents to Uruguayan shores, said Carmen Leizagoyen, head of the Environment Ministry’s department of fauna.

“This is mortality in the water. Ninety per cent are young specimens that arrive without fat reserves and with empty stomachs,” she said, and stressed that all samples taken have tested negative for avian influenza.



Dead penguins lie on the beach in Barra Laguna de Rocha, Rocha department, Uruguay on Thursday (AFP)

Magellanic penguins nest in southern Argentina. In the southern hemisphere winter, they migrate north in search of food and warmer waters, even reaching the coast of the Brazilian state of Espirito Santo.

“It is normal for some percentage to die, but not these numbers,” Leizagoyen said, recalling that a similar die-off occurred last year in Brazil, for undetermined reasons.

AFP

JOINT DRILLS



Artillery are fired during joint military drills at a firing range in northern Australia as part of Exercise Talisman Sabre, the largest combined training activity between the Australian Defence Force and the United States military, in Shoalwater Bay on Saturday (AFP)

Migrant numbers surging: Panama

Panama City, Panama - The number of migrants passing through Panama on the way to the United States keeps climbing, far outpacing the record numbers reached in 2022, a top authority said on Friday.

“Today we add 227,000 migrants who have passed through our territory, and this month we are going to exceed the history-making 2022, when there were 248,000 migrants,” Security Minister Juan Manuel Pino told reporters.

Migrant passages are tallied at a border checkpoint in the Darien Gap, the muddy jungle that separates Panama and Colombia. Pino said the record numbers of migrants tallied in 2022 has almost been reached this year - with more than five months left to go in the year.

AFP

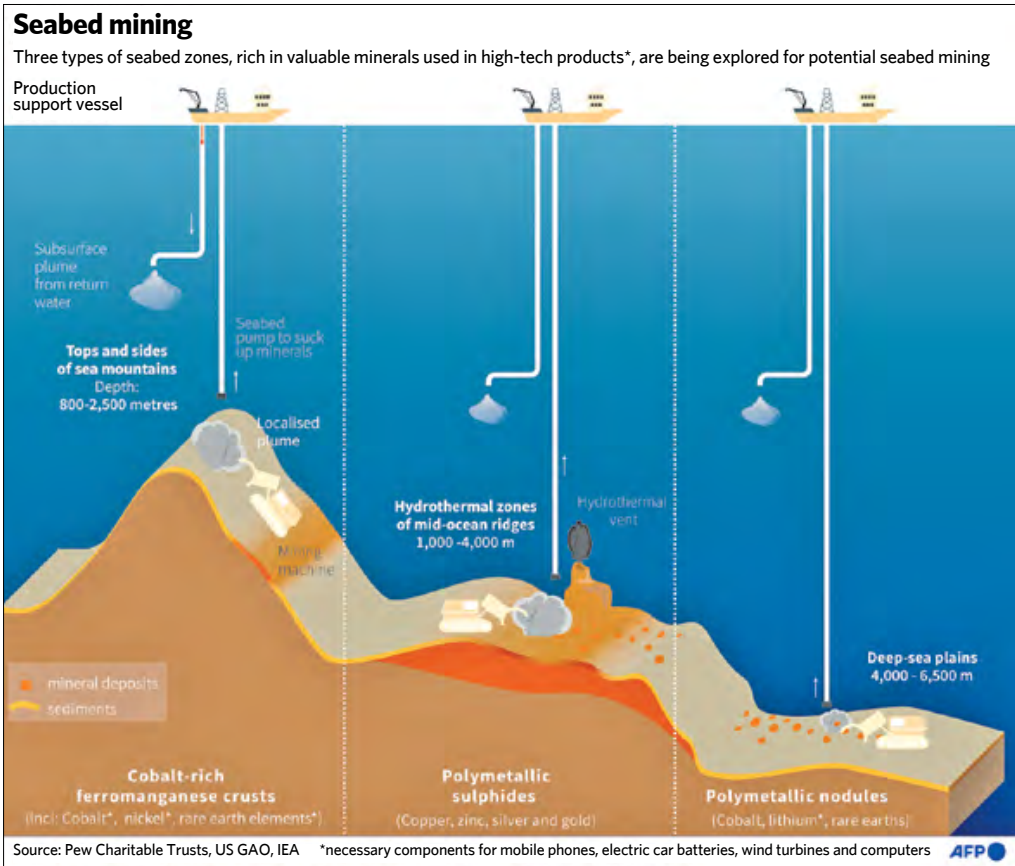
Nations aim to ink deep sea mining rules by 2025

United Nations, US - The International Seabed Authority’s member nations on Friday agreed on a two-year roadmap for the adoption of deep sea mining regulations, in spite of conservationists’ calls for a moratorium on mineral extraction they say would avert marine threats.

The ISA, an intergovernmental body tasked with protecting the seabed, and its member states have spent the last decade trying to hash out a mining code for the possible exploitation of minerals like nickel, cobalt and copper in deep seabed areas that fall outside of national jurisdictions.

But an agreement has so far been elusive.

In Friday’s decision, the ISA Council, which had been negotiating in Jamaica for the past two weeks, said it ‘intends to continue the elaboration’ of regulations ‘with a view to their adoption at the 30th session of the Authority’ in 2025.



“This is an indicative target,” rather than a deadline, said

council chairman Juan Jose Gonzalez Mijares.

Since July 9, after the expiration of a deadline triggered by

the small Pacific state of Nauru in 2021, the ISA is obligated to consider - though not necessarily grant - licenses for potentially environmentally devastating mining operations if governments request them.

That would go beyond the status quo, which has so far only seen the body grant exploration permits, as the deep sea mining sector itches to take off in earnest.

“We are no longer in a ‘what if’ scenario, but rather ‘what now’,” Nauru’s ambassador to the ISA Margo Debye said during the session, adding that her government planned to soon apply for a mining contract.

But ocean campaigners remain worried about a possible green light for industrial exploitation of the high seas, with the ISA yet to have agreed on a process for reviewing license applications.

“This roadmap negotiated behind closed doors does not reflect the rapidly growing con-

cern and opposition to deep sea mining,” said Sofia Tsenikli, speaking on behalf of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, Greenpeace and WWF, among other advocates.

“A mining application could be made at any time. A moratorium is urgently needed,” she added.

Next week, the ISA Assembly and its 167 member states will discuss for the first time a ‘precautionary pause’ in mining, supported by about 20 countries, including France, Chile and Brazil.

NGOs and scientists say that deep sea mining could destroy habitats and species that may still be unknown but are potentially vital to ecosystems.

They also say it risks disrupting the ocean’s capacity to absorb carbon dioxide emitted by human activities, and that its noise interferes with the communication of species such as whales.

AFP

Greece facing longest heatwave on record

A record-breaking heatwave stretching across southern US was expected to expand in coming days

Athens, Greece - Greece was on Saturday facing its hottest July weekend in 50 years, with temperatures forecast to soar above 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), while a record-breaking heatwave stretching across the southern United States was expected to expand in the coming days. Tens of millions of people in the northern hemisphere have been suffering through intense heat this summer as the world appears headed for its hottest July on record.

As temperature records tumble, experts have pointed the finger at climate change driven by the burning of fossil fuels, saying global warming is playing a key role in destructive weather.

Already 11 days into its heatwave, Greece's national weather institute warned reprieve was still days away, setting this up to be the longest hot spell the country has ever seen.

"According to the data, we will probably go through 16-17 days of a heatwave, which has never happened before in our country," Kostas Lagouvardos, the director of research at the National Observatory, told ERT television on Saturday.

The previous heatwave record in Greece was set in 1987, when scorching temperatures of over 39C lasted 11 days.

Across the southern United States, about 80mn Americans will swelter in temperatures of 41C and above this weekend, the National Weather Service (NWS) said.

The country's worst heat of up to 46C is forecast for Phoenix, Arizona, which has seen a record-breaking three weeks in a row of highs above 43C.

Tourists, meanwhile, have been flocking to Death Valley National Park, which straddles the border between California and Nevada, to post selfies with a temperature display outside the visitor centre.

Many are hoping to see it break a world record of 56.7C, which was set in July 1913 but was likely the result of a faulty measurement, according to several meteorologists.

Hottest absolute month

Regardless, July 2023 is on track to be the hottest absolute month - not only since records began, but also in 'hundreds, if



A woman cools off with cold bottles of water, distributed by the hellenic red cross organisation near the entrance of the Acropolis archeological site in Athens on Thursday, as the country is hit by a new major

not thousands, of years', leading NASA climatologist Gavin Schmidt said.

The effects cannot be attributed solely to the El Nino weather pattern, which 'has really only just emerged' and isn't expected

to strengthen until later on in the year.

El Nino is associated with the warming of ocean surface temperatures in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean. Schmidt said the trend of extreme heat was ex-

pected to persist, 'and the reason why we think that's going to continue, is because we continue to put greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere'.

Greece, which is battling dozens of forest fires, warned

people not to venture out unnecessarily due to the baking heat.

The exceptional temperatures also mean key tourist sites such as the Acropolis will be closed during the hottest part of the day.

"This weekend risks being the hottest registered in July in the past 50 years," said Panagiotis Giannopoulos, meteorologist with state broadcaster ERT.

Sea temperatures are two to three degrees above normal, the state weather service reported on

We will probably go through 16-17 days of a heatwave, which has never happened before in our country

KOSTAS LAGOUVARDOS

Saturday, while a high of 42.6C recorded by the Akrotiri weather station on Friday, which is expected to be topped.

Sunday is likely to see the city labour under temperatures as high as 44C, with the central re-

gion of Thessalia enduring 45C.

The temperatures are taking a toll on people's health.

A 46-year-old man was reported to have succumbed to heatstroke on the central Greek island of Evia after being admitted to Chalkida hospital, which said cardio-respiratory failure following exposure to high temperatures appeared to be the cause.

Emergency health officials told the state broadcaster at least 38 heatstroke patients were received in the last three days, while hospitals were also seeing cases of fainting and other heat-related conditions.

Authorities meanwhile reported firefighters were still battling 79 forest fires across the country, with their spokesman Vassilios Vathrakoyannis saying Greece would be on a state of alert through the weekend.

Fires on the island of Rhodes forced dozens to evacuate their homes late on Friday, officials said, as Slovak firefighters arrived to provide reinforcement.

Greece is just one of a swathe of countries battling a prolonged spell of extreme heat around the globe in recent days.

AFP

India: Opposition to chalk out strategy on Manipur

New Delhi, India - Floor leaders of the newly formed Opposition alliance the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) will meet at the office of Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge in Parliament on Monday to chalk out the strategy for the floor of the House, the sources said on Saturday.

The leaders are likely to protest in front of the Gandhi statue on the Manipur issue. The situation in Manipur dominated the proceedings of the second day of the Monsoon Session of Parliament on Friday, which began on Thursday, with the Opposition demanding the Centre to discuss the issue.

The Congress and opposition leaders are demanding a statement from Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Parliament during the ongoing Monsoon session.

Meanwhile, the proceedings of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha faced adjournments for the second consecutive day amid up-



People taking part in a protest over sexual violence against women in the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur, in Chennai on Saturday (AFP)

roar over the Manipur incident.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Prahlad Joshi informed members that the government is ready to have discussions on the Manipur violence in both Houses, and that the Home Minister would give his reply once the discussions are conducted.

The 12th session of the 17th Lok Sabha has begun close on the heels of 26 opposition parties forming INDIA to take on the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the 2024 Lok

Sabha polls.

In a recent incident in Manipur, two women were paraded naked and sexually assaulted before being set free by the mob comprising the majority community.

The incident allegedly took place on May 4, a day after ethnic clashes broke out in Manipur.

After a video of the same went viral, the police swung into action and arrested five people, including the main accused.

ANI

Cambodian poll workers prep and pray ahead of one-sided election

Phnom Penh, Cambodia - Incense drifted across a classroom as Cambodian election workers sought spiritual blessings for their makeshift polling station, ahead of a vote that leader Hun Sen needs no divine intervention to win.

Sunday's election has been widely condemned as a sham by international observers, with any real opposition eliminated, allowing Hun Sen to prepare to hand the reins to his son Hun Manet after four decades of iron-fisted rule.

At the Hun Sen Bun Rany Wat Phnom High School on the eve of the poll, workers moved battered desks, set up voting booths and unfolded large steel ballot boxes.

In one room, red incense sticks protruded from a bunch of bananas, smouldering on a desk.

The smoke wafted through the classroom in central Phnom Penh, passing over portraits of Cambodia's royal family and an image of the historic ruins of Angkor Wat tacked to the walls.



Officials on an elephant transporting election materials to a polling station in Mondulkiri province on Saturday (AFP)

"We ask the spirits for a smooth election tomorrow and future happiness," Touch Nara told AFP as she sorted through candidate lists.

It certainly looks like a smooth ride for Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with the sole credible alternative, the Candlelight Party, barred from running.

It means the CPP is the voters' only real option, despite the presence of 17 small and poorly funded parties -- their chances of scoring any of the 125 seats in the lower house are vanishingly small.

The 70-year-old leader has made it clear he will step down and pass the baton to his son, 45-year-old Hun Manet - per-

haps as soon as next month - though he has said he will still wield power from behind the scenes.

Web developer Seila Lyhour told AFP he was unsure about Hun Manet succeeding.

"For me, I would say that he will change direction a little bit from his father. Even though they are related some people have different opinions," he said.

"We cannot say for sure if it will go the same way," said the 23-year-old, who had been selected as an election worker and was being paid 245,700 riels (US\$59) for the day.

Outside the school, traffic sped past as many city residents returned to their home provinces for the poll.

In eastern Mondulkiri province, elephants trekked through rushing rivers, carrying ballot boxes to remote polling stations for Sunday.

About 9.7mn people are registered to vote.

AFP

Ukrainian drone strikes Crimea ammunition depot

Moscow, Russia - A Ukrainian drone attack on Crimea on Saturday blew up an ammunition depot, sparking evacuations on the Moscow-annexed peninsula and halting rail traffic, just five days after drones damaged Russia's symbolic bridge across the Kerch Strait.

Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, has been targeted by Kyiv throughout Moscow's 17-month long Ukraine offensive but has come under more intense, increased attacks in recent weeks.

In a counteroffensive launched to retake lands lost to Moscow, Kyiv has increasingly made clear - despite some Western unease - that it aims to also take back the Black Sea peninsula. "The goal is to return Crimea," Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky said, according to a transcript published by his office on Saturday of a speech addressing the Aspen Security Forum on Friday.

He said Kyiv considers the Crimea bridge - opened by Rus-



This file photo shows a Russian warship sailing near the Kerch bridge, linking the Russian mainland to Crimea, following an attack claimed by Ukrainian forces on July 17 (AFP)

ian leader Vladimir Putin in 2018 - as an 'enemy object' and wants it to be 'neutralised'.

Less than 24 hours later, the Moscow-installed head of Crimea Sergei Aksyonov, said an 'enemy' drone had detonated an ammunition depot. "As a result of an attack by an enemy drone on

the Krasnogvardeysky district, an ammunition depot detonated," Aksyonov said on Telegram, referring to an area that lies inland at the centre of Crimea.

He did not specify exactly where it hit and ordered the evacuation of people living within five kilometres of the zone, without

saying how many residents would be moved.

Aksyonov reported no casualties and claimed there was little damage, but unverified videos on social media showed billowing smoke rising into the air.

He also said rail traffic will be stopped on the peninsula: "To

minimise risks, it was also decided to halt rail traffic on Crimean railways."

Authorities later said that two trains going from Moscow to Crimea's main city of Simferopol and one in the opposite direction had been stopped. Road traffic across the Crimea bridge - one of the few ways to get out of Crimea as flights have been cancelled during the conflict - only resumed on Saturday after a Ukrainian attack damaged the bridge.

The attacks on Crimea have come as many of Kyiv's Western allies feel uncomfortable about Ukrainian ambitions to take back the annexed land, fearing a larger scale conflict with Russia.

They have also signified a sharp escalation in the Black Sea area, with Russia this week exiting the landmark grain deal that allowed the safe passage of cargo ships and saying it would consider vessels destined for Ukraine as potential military targets.

AFP

Baby monkey creates chaos in Pakistan court

Karachi, Pakistan - A baby monkey caused chaos in a Pakistan court after escaping from a troop presented as evidence in a case of wildlife smuggling, officials said.

Two men were intercepted outside Karachi on Thursday trying to smuggle 14 baby monkeys in crates usually used to transport mangos.

But when they were brought to court on Friday, one of the monkeys escaped - causing chaos as staff tried to tempt it down from a tree.

"The monkeys were kept in the boxes in a bad condition... they could hardly breathe," said Javed Mahar, chief of Sindh Wildlife Department.

The trade or keeping of wild animals is illegal in Pakistan, but laws are routinely ignored and there is a lively market in exotic pets.

Monkeys are frequently kept by street entertainers to attract customers, and in some cases have been trained by criminals to enter houses to steal.

The smugglers were each fined 100,000 rupees (around US\$350) on Friday and the court ordered the monkeys to be handed over to Karachi Zoo - a step immediately criticised by wildlife officials.

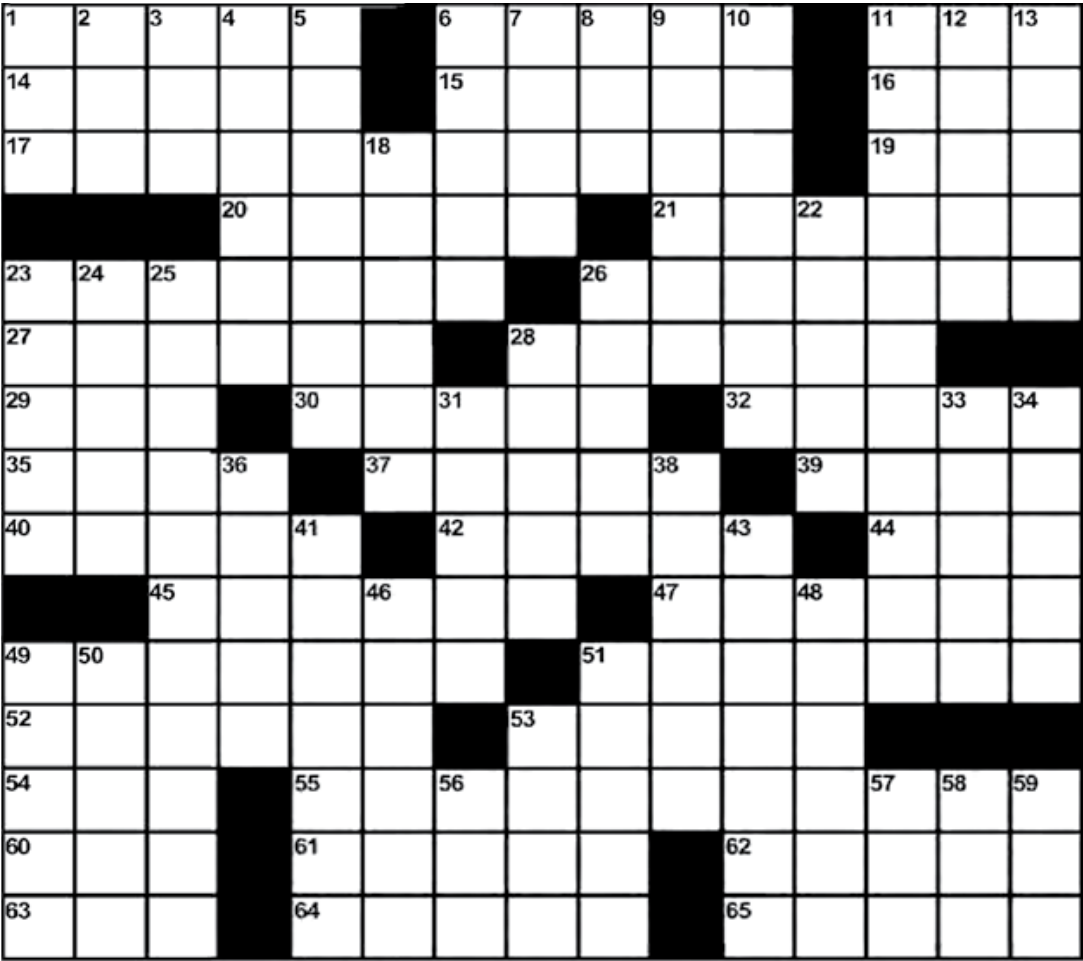
"The monkeys should have been returned to their natural habitat from where they were captured," Mahar said.

Pakistan's zoos are notorious for their poor facilities and activists accuse them of disregarding animal welfare.

In 2020, a court ordered the only zoo in the country's capital to close because of its decrepit state.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD

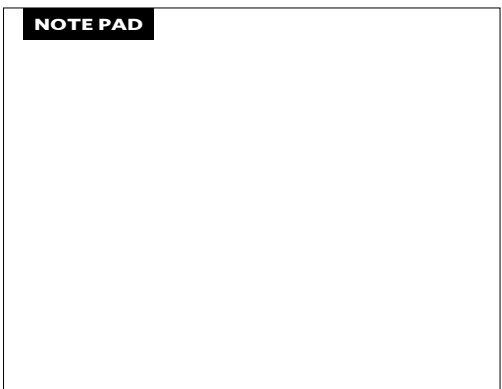


- ACROSS**
- 1) Gives kudos to
 - 6) Haggard who sang coun-try
 - 11) Without an umbrella on a rainy day, perhaps
 - 14) Prefix with "structure"
 - 15) Hunter in the night sky
 - 16) "How was_ know?"
 - 17) Removing ice cream from its carton, e.g.
 - 19) Convent resident
 - 20) Sly tricks
 - 21) Leave the country?
 - 23) One way to follow be-hind
 - 26) Saber rattlers
 - 27) Certain NFLers
 - 28) Quaint eatery
 - 29) Solitary figure?
 - 30) Card for a fortune-teller
 - 32) Classical lyric poem
 - 35) Get bent out of shape?
 - 37) More maneuverable at sea
 - 39) Czech or Croat
 - 40) Comparatively friendly
 - 42) Hairy bovine

- 44) One of the Gabor sis-ters
 - 45) Animals with striped legs
 - 4 7) Prado Museum home
 - 49) Crouched
 - 51) French painter Henri
 - 52) Like instantly
 - 53) Widespread fear
 - 54) Japanese cummerbund
 - 55) Three-part treats
 - 60) Noun-forming suffix
 - 61) Ransacking weapon?
 - 62) Less desirable turkey parts
 - 63) Hardly a big wheel
 - 64) Completely appeases one's hunger
 - 65) Wanda of "Curb Your Enthusiasm"
- DOWN**
- 1) Fleur de_
 - 2) Mandela's org.
 - 3) Enigma in the sky
 - 4) Be partially asleep
 - 5) Possessing wisdom
 - 6) It can get you stuff
 - 7) Tiny bits of work
 - 8) Brazil metropolis, familiarly

- 9) Dirty rats
- 10) Agreement among countries
- 11) Some alcoholic bever-ages
- 12) Musical composition
- 13) Utilizes a gym
- 18) "Amen!"
- 22) Is a fault-finder
- 23) Top of the head
- 24) Hawaiian veranda
- 25) Keeping on the stove too long
- 26) Tiny pests
- 28) Karloff of old horror films
- 31) Foaming at the mouth
- 33) Confederate President Jefferson
- 34) Avoid, as responsibility
- 36) Tea offering
- 38) Sharp Italian cheese
- 41) NBA team welcome in Jurassic Park?
- 43) Olympic teams
- 46) Illinois city
- 48) Detachable shirt collar
- 49) Displaying no emotion
- 50) Forbidden in polite society

- 51) Clublike weapons of old
- 53) North or South end
- 56) Developing newt
- 57) "Yuck!" relative
- 58)_ out (just manage)
- 59) Sound of deflation?



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The bumpy road you've been on for a while is going to get a whole lot smoother today. What's funny is that while you'll love the change of pace, a part of you is going to miss all of the exciting drama. An easy life can become a boring life, and this is something you understand all too well. Just try to enjoy this more peaceful period while it lasts. Don't wish it were different, because soon enough it will be! This lull in the action will give you a chance to regroup and recharge.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

This is not the time to go solo with your projects. Teamwork is the best way to make good things happen in your life now. There is real power in numbers, and it's your task to get together with as many other people as you can. Whether you join a group in order to get things done, travel to another country, or sit around playing a game, the crowd's energy is where it's at! One of the people you'll be hooking up with today has something to teach you.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

If a recent emotional conflict won't stop swirling around in your head today, try to distract yourself with some boring tasks. There are always chores and mindless tasks to be done, and if you can keep busy, you can keep yourself from dwelling on things you can't change. This isn't a form of denial. It's just a way to help yourself get some distance from the situation, which is what you need now. In a few days, you can talk about it, but don't push yourself to deal with it before you're ready.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. So if you're upset that you recently failed to reach a goal, don't dwell on it as a failure. Try to see it as a lesson, not as a waste of time. You're taking away something very valuable from this endeavor. Use it to carry you forward. You've got other goals to pursue, so switch your focus to those and choose to believe that you will reach them. Just because you missed last time doesn' mean you'll fail again.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Work issues have evolved in a good way. You're no longer worried about how to do things better, and you're thinking about what your next challenges should be. That's a very good sign that you're on the right track. Keep on doing what you're doing, and you should find an open door very soon. You need to be prepared to tell someone about what you want the next step in your career to be, because someone very powerful might ask you about it very soon.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Trying new things is always a wise and stimulating strategy in life, but just make sure that you don't go off in too many directions at once today. Keep things orderly and organized. If you simply attach yourself to the latest fad or the newest popular person, you could come off as being flighty and untrustworthy, which is unlike you. While you can't let your image dictate how you act, you need to be mindful of it right now. Influential people are watching.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Jealousy and resentment are in the air, not because of anything you've done, though, so put aside your famous ability to assume responsibility for every single thing that's happened since the day you were born. The way the heavens are arranged, every encounter stands to become intense and possessive, even the ones you thought were strictly casual. If a friend has a problem along these lines, be prepared to drag them out of that mood. It might not be a pretty sight.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

This is going to be a good day, especially if you can get out in the world and connect with as many new folks as possible. Why be shy about showing off your personality when you've got such a fantastic one? Each time you can make someone smile, you'll get another dose of bright, positive energy. You'll end the day glowing, thanks to a huge injection of self-esteem. This will pump up your ego and get you ready for the interesting challenges that are coming up.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Today, you could meet someone whose narrow-mindedness is shocking to you. But before you start to try to educate them with your modern ideas and beliefs, hold off. First of all, they might not be very happy to hear that you don't agree with them. And second, they really can't be blamed for living a life so unexposed to diversity. Share your open-mindedness and unique perspective with them in a caring, kind way. That way they won't feel threatened and won't go on the defensive.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Other people are having an awful lot of fun kicking up their heels right now, while you're feeling a bit stuck in the mud. The remedy is simple: if you want a little more fun in your life, then follow your friends over to the wild side for a little while! They can show you how to stop taking life so seriously. You need to start laughing at the little hiccups that are bound to happen in your day-to-day life. You need a new perspective and it's coming today.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

If you're in the middle of any business dealings, be extra careful about the fine print. Read it and then read it again. There could be some mighty big strings attached. Negotiations of any kind could be tricky right now, because not everyone's agenda will be out in the open. But people won't make the mistake of thinking you're an easy target if you're clear up front about what you are and aren't willing to compromise. It's important for you to be resolute in everything you do today.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

A situation could rapidly escalate from a bit of jealousy to all-out resentment because of one sentence spoken in the wrong tone at the wrong time. It can't hurt to have someone on your side who's an expert adviser or negotiator. This situation does beg the question, though, and that is how does it feel to be on the other side of the coin? Aren't you usually the peacemaker? Regardless, enjoy the night off. Guess what goes around really does come around. Even the good stuff.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

- 01. Where was the centennial Winter Olympics held?**
- A. Lillehammer, Norway
 - B. Atlanta, Georgia, USA
 - C. There were no Winter Olympics Games in the centennial year
 - D. Nagano, Japan
- 02. When did the self-governing Dominions of the British Empire achieve the right to have legislative independence from the United Kingdom?**
- A. 1899
 - B. 1945
 - C. 1931
 - D. 1960
- 03. Which is not another name for allspice?**
- A. Pimento
 - B. Jamaica pepper
 - C. Clove
 - D. Newspeice

Answers: 1. C 2. C 3. C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

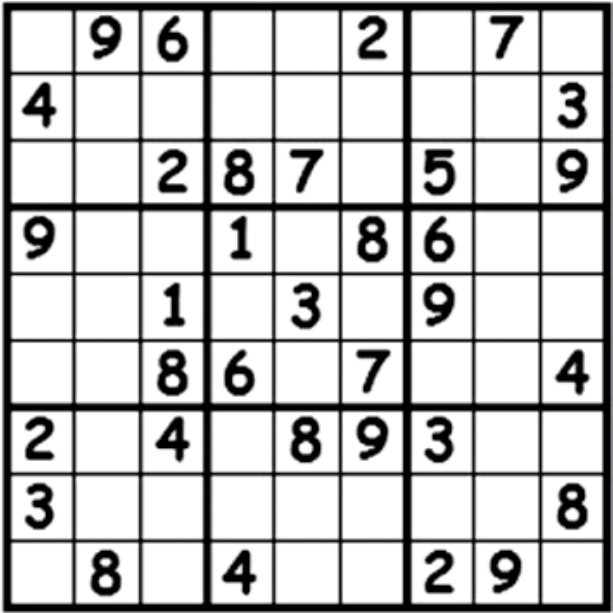


Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. 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.

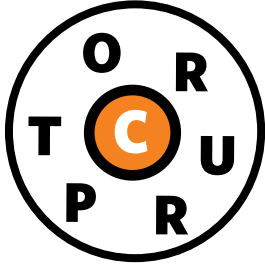
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

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



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



ATLAS LIONESSES ALL SET TO MAKE HISTORY

Morocco to become the first Arab team to play at a Women's World Cup

Casablanca, Morocco - Months after the men's groundbreaking run to the semi-finals in Qatar, Morocco's women will make World Cup history of their own on Monday.

When the Atlas Lionesses face two-times former champions Germany in Melbourne they will be the first Arab team to play at a Women's World Cup. It has not gone unnoticed in a country mad about football and still buzzing from what their men did at the Qatar World Cup in December.

"They will do just as well as the men," said 14-year-old Rabab Tougha after a training session at the football school of the local club in the Casablanca neighbourhood of Avadas.

It is her ambition to play the sport internationally, "especially after what the Atlas Lionesses have done".

Morocco's women enjoyed a surprise run to the final of last year's Africa Cup of Nations, which they hosted, before losing 2-1 to South Africa in front of over 50,000 spectators in Rabat.

That was followed by the



Morocco will take on Germany in their first match on Monday

Moroccan fans have that passion, as do our players, and we will give everything to make them satisfied. The men have shown us that nothing is impossible if you fight for it

GHIZLANE CHEBBAK

men's remarkable performance in Qatar when they became the first African and first Arab team to reach the semi-finals of the World Cup, where they lost to France.

Those performances have encouraged girls to take up football and the number of players regis-

tered at the Avadas academy - for youths who often come from underprivileged families - has increased to more than 50 from about 10 a year ago.

"The girls are motivated and want to learn how to play football" after seeing the success of

the men's and women's national teams, coach Mohamed Jidi told AFP. "We can see the impact. We had a girl who played rugby, others who played basketball or did athletics. But then they all wanted to start playing football because they decided there was

a future in it."

Morocco are in Group H at the Women's World Cup and as well as Germany will face South Korea and Colombia.

They are one of the lowest-ranked teams in Australia and New Zealand and it would be a surprise if they get out of the group, but captain Ghizlane Chebbak knows the men have raised expectations.

"Moroccan fans have that passion, as do our players, and we will give everything to make them satisfied," she told FIFA.com.

"The men have shown us that nothing is impossible if you fight for it and you stay focused," she added.

That women's football is growing in popularity in Morocco is thanks to a development strategy put in place in 2020. "The federation invested in women's football. Since then, mentalities have changed and the interest and evolution are palpable," Khadija Illa, president of the Moroccan women's league, told AFP.

In 2021, the North African kingdom set up a two-division professional women's league with 42 clubs, each of which committed to also launching teams at Under-17 and Under-15 level. The Royal Moroccan Football Federation picks up 70 percent of the expenses of each club, where players earn a minimum salary of 3,500 dirhams (\$360) per month in the top flight and 2,500 dirhams in the second tier. AFP



Giulia Dragoni

Barcelona teenager Dragoni face of new era at World Cup for Italy

Milan, Italy - The World Cup marks the dawn of a new era for Italy's women with teenage Barcelona midfielder Giulia Dragoni the exciting face of a fresh chapter.

Long-time captain Sara Gama, 34, was left out of Milena Bertolini's squad as the Italy coach made space for emerging talent.

Dragoni booked her spot on the plane to Australia and New Zealand after impressing on her debut aged 16 as a substitute in a recent goalless draw with Morocco.

The youngster is unlikely to start against Argentina when Italy begin their World Cup campaign on Monday in Auckland, given the stiff competition in a midfield led by Manuela Giugliano.

But Dragoni could well play a part at the tournament as Italy try to show that they are

better than their dismal display at Euro 2022.

Italy surprised by reaching the quarter-finals of the last World Cup - their first for two decades - but finished bottom of their group with one point at the Euro in England.

Dragoni was picked alongside another young talent in Fiorentina's Emma Severini, in a squad which features 15 players from Juventus and newly crowned Italian champions Roma. Dragoni, who played in mixed-sex football until she was 13 and earned the nickname "Little Messi", is a star in the making.

After leaving Inter Milan in January she scored four goals in 10 appearances as Barcelona's B team won the second-tier title, while also being part of the first-team squad which won the Champions League.

US and Japan make fast World Cup starts but England labour to victory

Brisbane, Australia - England squeezed past Haiti 1-0 as they began their Women's World Cup title bid in unconvincing fashion on Saturday, but holders the United States and former champions Japan were far more comfortable.

European champions England have been touted as the prime challengers to a United States team chasing an unprecedented third World Cup crown in a row.

But they will have to do far better than the display they put on in front of nearly 45,000 spectators in Brisbane, where a Haiti side making their World Cup debut could have snatched a point at the end.

A Georgia Stanway penalty in the first half put Sarina Wiegman's side ahead, but despite having more of the ball and more shots, England had goalkeeper Mary Earps to thank for preserving their narrow lead.

She made a superb save with her left leg as the time ticked



England's Alex Greenwood (R) and Haiti's Batcheba Louis battle for the ball during their Women's World Cup match at Brisbane Stadium on Saturday (AFP)

down after Roseline Eloissaint found herself all alone with only Earps to beat.

England, who have been embroiled in a dispute with the FA over bonuses in the lead-up to

the tournament, are aiming to add the World Cup to the European crown they won at Wembley last year.

China and Denmark, the other teams in the group, were to meet

in the final match of a bumper day of four games on Saturday.

Super Smith

In contrast to England's laboured performance, the United States

and Japan were rampant against other supposed minnows.

The United States cruised to a 3-0 win over Vietnam - it should have been many more - before Japan crushed Zambia 5-0.

Sophia Smith was the star of the show for the US team at Eden Park in Auckland, scoring twice and setting up captain Lindsey Horan for the third in front of just over 41,000 fans.

The only sour note for Vlatko Andonovski's side, which featured six World Cup debutants at kick-off, was that they were not more ruthless in front of the goal. They had 27 attempts to none for Vietnam and Alex Morgan missed a penalty.

"At the end, I just felt we needed to be a little bit better with the final shot," said the coach. "We created opportunities, we had a penalty kick, obviously enough to score a few more goals, but there are lots of positives from game one going into game two."

'Against their nature': When Brazil banned women from football

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Dilma Mendes does not remember how many times she was arrested as a child. Her crime? Playing football in Brazil.

The country may be synonymous with the beautiful game, but it banned women from the sport for nearly four decades until 1979.

Ahead of Brazil's opening match on Monday at the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, Mendes recalled the lengths she went to in order to fulfill her dream of becoming a footballer.

As a girl in the 1970s she gave



Dilma Mendes

ice cream to the boys she played with in Camacari in Brazil's impoverished northeast in exchange for an early warning of the arrival of police busting girls flouting the prohibition.

She used to dig a hole next to the pitch to hide in until the enforcers left, then crawled out again to continue kicking the ball around with her male friends.

When they let her, which was not always the case.

Sometimes all her precautions failed and Mendes found herself hauled off to a police station.

"When I was a child I thought the police stopped those who did

something wrong, and I didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong," Mendes, now 59, told AFP.

"The cops treated me well, but some said I couldn't play because football was for men."

Then-president Getulio Vargas promulgated a decree in 1941 to ban girls and women from football at a time many believed that participation in sport could inhibit childbearing ability.

The decree prohibited women from practicing "sports incompatible with the conditions of their nature."

AFP

MESSI MAGIC CONTINUES

Argentine superstar makes stunning start to Miami career with late winner on debut

Fort Lauderdale, United States - Lionel Messi made a Hollywood start to his American adventure, scoring a last-second winner with a curling free-kick in his debut game for Inter Miami on Friday.

Deep in the fourth minute of stoppage time, with the Leagues Cup match against Mexican club Cruz Azul standing at 1-1, Messi won a free-kick just outside the box, in perfect range for his famous left foot.

The script had been written and Messi delivered his line perfectly. The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner took a glance at the position of Cruz Azul goalkeeper Andres Gudino, then put his head down before curling his shot high to the keeper's right and into the top corner to deliver the 2-1 triumph.

The capacity 20,000 crowd at Miami's DRV PNK Stadium went wild, with some fans running on to the field before being apprehended by security. Smoke bombs in Miami's trademark pink went off in the area behind the goal, occupied by the team's most passionate supporters.

"We wanted to start like this by giving these people a victory," said Messi. "We knew that it was very important for us to start this championship in winning fashion and luckily we were able to do it in the end, and I am very happy," he added.

Miami are rock bottom of Major League Soccer and without a win in 11 games in league play, so Messi said the victory was sorely needed.

"It is a huge joy to get this first



Inter Miami's Lionel Messi (C) celebrates with teammates Christopher McVey (R) and Josef Martinez after scoring against Cruz Azul on Friday (AFP)

victory after how we have done in the league," he said. "It is important to start winning, beyond the fact that it is another championship, for confidence it is very good to get victories."

Miami and Major League Soccer hope that the arrival of the Argentine World Cup winner and

all-time great will transform the sport and push it into the American mainstream.

If Messi's debut was any guide, the former Barcelona star still has plenty to offer.

Even before his wonderful goal he had looked sharp and alert, his touch belying the fact that until

little over a week ago he was vacationing on a Caribbean beach with his family.

Sergio Busquets, the Spanish midfielder and former Barca team-mate, who has joined Messi for his American adventure, also made a strong impression after they both entered the

contest in the 54th minute as part of a triple change with Venezuelan Josef Martinez.

Busquets showed his famous, almost telepathic understanding with Messi remains, after over two years apart from each other, with the midfielder delivering pieces from all angles into the Ar-

gentine's feet.

But it was Messi's magical finish that will remain long in the memories of Inter Miami fans.

He also made sure that the club's co-owner David Beckham had a broad grin at the final whistle. "To be honest, as soon as I saw the free kick given I thought

this is the way it's meant to end. Especially when you've got players like Leo and Sergio on the pitch, that's what they produce," said the former England midfielder. "It's so exciting tonight for our fans. All of these people that come down here to see Leo just step onto the pitch, let alone just do what he's done. It's a dream come true for everyone in this stadium to see.

"It's such a moment for this country, such a moment for this league," he said.

Stars turn out

Messi became the biggest name signing in MLS's history when he joined Miami after his contract with Paris Saint-Germain came to an end in June.

NBA great LeBron James, reality television star Kim Kardashian and tennis legend Serena

We knew that it was very important for us to start this championship in winning fashion and luckily we were able to do it in the end, and I am very happy

LIONEL MESSI



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

Chelsea's Aubameyang seals three-year Marseille deal

Marseille, France - Chelsea striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has joined Marseille on a three-year contract, the French Ligue 1 club announced Friday.

"Come on OM... See you in Marseille," the 34-year-old Gabon international said in a short video released by his new club on social media.

Aubameyang scored just three goals in 22 appearances for Chelsea after reuniting with under former manager Thomas Tuchel in a £10.3m (12 million euros) deal from Barcelona last September.

Aubameyang had scored 79 goals in 95 appearances under Tuchel at Borussia Dortmund, earning a move to Arsenal in 2018 and finishing as joint top-scorer in the Premier League a year later.

But he was stripped of the Arsenal captaincy by Mikel Arteta before being sold to Barcelona just weeks later.

Aubameyang scored 13 goals in 23 matches in six months Spain, but was unable to reproduce that form during a season-long stay at Stamford Bridge.

France-born Aubameyang returns to French football, where he has worn the colours of Lille, Monaco and Saint-Etienne in the past.

AFP

Mbappe's omission fuels Madrid speculation

Paris, France - Paris Saint-Germain have left Kylian Mbappe out of their squad for a pre-season tour of Japan and South Korea, casting further doubt on the forward's future at the French champions.

PSG gave no reason for the omission of France's captain but 24-year-old Mbappe has said for weeks that he is refusing to sign a new contract.

His omission will fuel fresh speculation that he could leave to join Real Madrid before next season.

The forward declared in May that he did not want to extend his PSG contract, which expires next year, but indicated he wanted to remain at the club for a final season.

"I still have a year left on my contract and I am going to honour my contract," he said.

That would allow him to become a free agent next summer and leave PSG for nothing, a prospect that club president Nasser al-Khelaifi said was "impossible".

"We can't let the best player in the world today leave for free," Khelaifi said.



Kylian Mbappe

Khelaifi even gave Mbappe an ultimatum of a "maximum two weeks" to make his decision - sign a new contract or leave this summer. That date corresponds roughly with the departure of the team for Asia on Saturday.

When training resumed on July 15, Khelaifi again asked the Mbappe camp to clarify the situation.

But he has not received a response, a source with knowledge of the negotiations told AFP.

Mbappe has been taking part in the club's pre-season preparations and played the last 30 minutes and scored as PSG entertained Le Havre in a training ground friendly on Friday.

Mbappe, the club's all-time top scorer with 212 goals in 260 appearances, remains the second most expensive player in history.

He was still a teenager when he joined PSG on a season-long loan from Monaco in August 2017.

The move turned into a permanent transfer the following year in a 180-million-euro (\$200 million) deal.

The 29-player PSG squad that flies east will include Mbappe's younger brother, 16-year-old Ethan Mbappe, as well as Neymar, the Brazilian whose transfer fee of 222 million euros in 2017 is the world record.

In a letter PSG sent to Mbappe on July 3, the club expressed a feeling of betrayal, saying it had "helped you" and "supported your family since you were a teenager".

The club said Mbappe was not choosing the "win-win" solution - extend and not leave for free or accept a transfer.

"This is how all the great players, like you, left their club," PSG wrote.

AFP



Carlos Alcaraz

Battling Alcaraz cannot save Spain from Hopman Cup loss

Paris, France - In his first match since battling to the Wimbledon title, Carlos Alcaraz was made to work hard by David Goffin in the Hopman Cup in Nice on Friday.

In the men's singles, top-ranked Alcaraz had to fight to overcome the 111th ranked Belgian 4-6, 6-4, 10/8.

Goffin broke the 20-year-old Spaniard twice to take the first set and led 3-1 in the second before Alcaraz fought back to take the match to a super tiebreak 10/8 after falling 4-0 behind.

The victory drew Spain level in the tie after Elise Mertens beat Rebeka Masarova 7-6 (7/3), 2-6, 10/5 in the opening women's

singles.

In the deciding doubles, Mertens and Goffin brushed Masarova and Alcaraz aside 6-3, 6-1 in just over an hour to hand victory to the Belgian team.

The Hopman Cup is a mixed competition with two-player teams representing six nations in two pools of three.

Each country plays the other two teams in its pool. Each tie starts with women's singles followed by men's singles and then mixed doubles.

Belgium lost their opening tie to Croatian pair Donna Vekic and Borna Coric. Spain will take on Croatia on Saturday.

Barcelona introduce newly signed veteran midfielder Romeu

Los Angeles, United States - Barcelona officially presented their latest signing, veteran Oriol Romeu, on Friday as he joined the Spanish giants training for a second day in Los Angeles.

The veteran, tapped to fill the midfield void left by Sergio Busquets's departure for Major League Soccer's Inter Miami, returns from Girona to the club where he launched a career that has also taken him to Chelsea, Valencia, Stuttgart and Southampton.

"The emotions and sensations

are very nice," Romeu told reporters after club president Joan Laporta introduced him at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where Barcelona are preparing for their pre-season tour.

"Having the chance to return home and continue growing is an intense dream. It's one of the most exciting challenges of my career and the opportunity comes at my best moment," added Romeu, whose signing, which will keep him in Barcelona through 2026, was announced on Tuesday.



Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Oriol Romeu (L) is welcomed by teammates during a training session on Wednesday (AFP)

Romeu departed Barcelona 12 years ago, in part because Busquets, another youngster from the youth academy but a little more than three years older than Romeu, was establishing himself as a midfielder who would go on to become one of the best playmakers in Spanish soccer.

"He is a player who has marked an era," Romeu said of Busquets, who later Friday could make his debut for Inter Miami alongside Argentinian great Lionel Messi. "He is the best '5' we have been able to see for as long

as I can remember and arriving just after his farewell is a nice challenge that excites me," Romeu said.

In recent days, Barca coach Xavi Hernandez had contacted Romeu by phone to let him know that he was his pick for that position. Officials of the cash-strapped club confirmed on Friday that with Girona reluctant to part with the player they paid the amount of Romeu's termination clause, which Spanish media put at \$3.4 million.

AFP

MILESTONE MAN

Kohli hits landmark ton but West Indies fight back

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago - Virat Kohli's 29th Test century highlighted a solid batting effort by India in getting to 438 against the West Indies on the second day of the second and final Test in Trinidad on Friday.

In response, on a Queen's Park Oval pitch offering little assistance for the bowlers, the home side were well placed at 86 for one at the close. A repeat of the swift demolition West Indies suffered in the first Test in Dominica a week earlier seemed unlikely.

With a sense of occasion befitting someone of his vast experience and considerable success, Kohli reached three figures within minutes of the start of the day from his overnight score of 88.

A square-driven boundary off fast bowler Shannon Gabriel took Kohli to the landmark in his 500th international match and his determined demeanour throughout the innings suggested a monumental effort was in the making by the 34-year-old.

He was undone by an error of judgement when he was run out for 121. Alzarri Joseph's direct hit at the non-striker's end from

square-leg found Kohli just short of his ground as he scampered a single.

Kohli's innings spanned four-and-a-half hours. He faced 206 deliveries, stroking 11 fours. He dominated an important 159-run fifth-wicket partnership with Ravindra Jadeja which restored India's ascendancy after a mid-afternoon wobble on the first day when they slipped to 182 for four.

"This was an opportunity for

milestones won't matter but what will remain is the impact you left on the field and how you were able to help your team."

Jadeja's was the other wicket to fall in the morning session for a composed 61. He was adjudged caught behind off Kemar Roach, television umpire Michael Gough overturning the "not out" verdict by on-field official Marais Erasmus.

Ravichandran Ashwin held

This was an opportunity for me to stand up for the team and these are the sorts of occasions where I switch on completely. The stats and milestones are for others to talk about

VIRAT KOHLI

me to stand up for the team and these are the sorts of occasions where I switch on completely," said the former captain on his first Test hundred outside of India for more than four years.

"The stats and milestones and all of that are for others to talk about," he emphasised. "If I do it in a situation where the team needs me that is more special because in 15-20 years' time the

rest of the innings together before being last out to Roach for a 78-ball knock of 56. Roach and left-arm spinner Jomel Warrican led the bowling effort with three wickets each.

Destroyer of the West Indies at Windsor Park Stadium, Ashwin, like all the Indian bowlers, found the placid pitch much less responsive.

AFP



India's Virat Kohli celebrates his century on the second day of the second Test against the West Indies at Queen's Park Oval on Friday (AFP)



Karsten Warholm

'Consistent' Warholm lays down Worlds marker in Monaco

Monaco, Principality Of Monaco - Karsten Warholm fired out a warning to contenders for world gold in the men's 400m hurdles in Budapest next month with a stunning marker at the Diamond League meet in Monaco.

In hot, humid conditions on Friday, the Norwegian blasted his way to victory in a stunning 46.51sec, his second fastest time over the distance and the fourth fastest ever run. The 27-year-old Olympic champion and world record holder suffered a blip at last year's world championships in Eugene, where he could only finish seventh in the final.

That allowed Brazil's Alison Dos Santos to win gold, but it would be a brave punter to bet against Warholm claiming a third world title.

Pakistan look to double up against Sri Lanka after year-long drought

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Pakistan will look to use their newfound batting aggression to double up against Sri Lanka in the second Test starting Monday, after securing their first long-format victory for a year.

The visitors arrived in Sri Lanka without a Test win to their name in 12 months but despite a wobbly final-innings chase a four-wicket victory in Galle means they need only a draw in Colombo to win the two-match series.

A determined effort to raise their run rate with a more positive approach paid dividends, scoring at more than 4.5 per over for much of their first innings and putting the Sri Lankan bowlers under pressure.

It is an approach that has echoes of England's new "Bazball" style.

The first hundred of Saud Shakeel's double century came off



Saud Shakeel scored a double century for Pakistan in the first Test

just 129 balls, his 177-run partnership with Agha Salman laying the foundation for Pakistan's 149-run first innings lead.

After the last Test cycle, Pakistan's management was "very firm" that one of the reasons they were not winning matches was that "we weren't scoring at such a high rate as the opposition", Shan Masood said.

There had been a "concentrated effort" at pre-tour training camps in Lahore and Karachi, he added.

"The emphasis was on scoring runs just to sort of put the opposition under pressure," said Masood, who scored 39 off 30 balls in the first innings in Galle. "That has put us back in the game."

AFP

England eye victory charge in fourth Ashes Test after rain delays start

Manchester, United Kingdom - England looked to make the most of a gap in bad weather after their victory charge in the fourth Test against Australia was frustrated by the rain on Saturday.

No play was possible before lunch in a match England must win to regain the Ashes.

But following an inspection, the umpires announced the fourth day of the match would resume at 2:45 pm (1345 GMT) provided there was no further rain.

England, who have dominated the game at Old Trafford, are 2-1 down in the five-match series.

Australia are 113-4 in their second innings, still 162 runs behind England, who posted an imposing 592 in their first knock.

Persistent rain in Manchester meant large areas of the playing surface were under cover as knots of fans huddled under umbrellas.



Australia's Marnus Labuschagne plays a shot on the fourth day of the fourth Ashes Test against England at Old Trafford on Saturday (AFP)

Ground staff started mopping-up operations and removing some of the covers shortly before 1:00 pm (1200 GMT).

But the forecast for both the fourth day and Sunday's final day is dire.

Ben Stokes's men are desperate to ram home their advantage and level the series - they must

win it to regain the Ashes from holders Australia.

England restricted world Test champions Australia to 317 in their first innings before racing to 592 all out, thanks largely to a breathtaking innings of 189 from Zak Crawley bolstered by an unbeaten 99 from Jonny Bairstow.

Fast bowler Mark Wood

ripped through Australia's top order on Friday with a superb burst of 3-17, dismissing Usman Khawaja, Steve Smith and Travis Head

Wood, speaking before the umpires had completed their inspection, told Sky Sports: "There's a few (weather) apps going around in the dressing room. We've got every one of them covered! We're pretty optimistic at the minute.

"They're saying there will be a bit of a break, so hopefully we can get some play in and really push it home."

Australia fast bowler Josh Hazlewood admitted after Friday's close the tourists would welcome rain-enforced delays.

"We're well behind and it's easy to see that," he said.

England are bidding to become just the second side in Ashes history to win a series from 2-0 down.

Australia's Cassiel Rousseau denies China diving clean sweep at Worlds

Fukuoka, Japan - Australian diver Cassiel Rousseau hailed his "moment of overwhelming triumph" on Saturday after denying China a world championships clean sweep with a dramatic gold in the competition's final event.

China had won 12 out of 12 of the diving events in Fukuoka going into the men's 10m platform but Rousseau threw a spanner in the works by winning with a score of 520.85.

He sealed the deal with a stunning final dive that took him clear of Chinese pair Lian Junjie, who finished second on 512.35, and Yang Hao, who was third on 504.00.

Rousseau won the 10m platform gold at last year's Com-



Australia's Cassiel Rousseau competes in the men's 10m platform diving final on Saturday (AFP)

All my training up until this point has led me to this moment of overwhelming triumph

CASSIEL ROUSSEAU

monwealth Games and he said he "knew" he was going to add a first-ever world title.

"All my training up until this point has led me to this moment of overwhelming triumph," said the 22-year-old.

"To completely fulfil the potential that was granted to me by

that final dive was absolutely incredible."

Rousseau's final dive earned him 98.05 points and he said there was "no big secret" to his success.

"Everything is the result of the high degree of effort and consistency that I put up in relation to my training," he said.

"Besides that, I tried to stay true to myself and the values that I hold dear."

China had dominated the diving events all week and looked on course to repeat the clean sweep they achieved at last year's world championships in Budapest.

Zhu Zifeng and Lin Shan set the stage by winning the mixed 3m synchronised springboard

earlier in the day, maintaining their country's perfect record heading into the final event.

Lian said he felt "slightly pressured" by the quality of his opponents after finishing second to Rousseau.

"I want to say congratulations to the Australian diver Cassiel Rousseau, because his performance was excellent today," said Lian.

"I couldn't perform as well today."

Defending champions Zhu and Lin scored 326.10 in the mixed 3m synchronised springboard to finish ahead of Australia's Maddison Kenney and Dominic Bedgood on 307.38.

AFP

British Open: Harman soars to five-shot lead

Hoylake, United Kingdom - American Brian Harman stormed into a five-shot lead at the British Open on Friday after a faultless 65 left him on 10 under par as bigger names struggled to keep pace.

Home favourite Tommy Fleetwood leads the chase as he battled to an even-par round on Friday to remain in the hunt for his first major.

Rory McIlroy is best-placed among the pre-tournament favourites at one under as world number one Scottie Scheffler and defending champion Cameron Smith needed miraculous shots at the 18th to make the cut.

Harman surged to the top of the leaderboard at the Royal Liverpool course thanks to long birdie putts at the second, third and fourth before his chip into the par-five fifth hit the flag to tee up a simple putt for a four.



Brian Harman

I've had a hot putter the last couple of days so try to ride it through the weekend

BRIAN HARMAN

A run of 12 consecutive pars followed before a spectacular eagle at the last.

The world number 26 has never won a major but was sixth at last year's British Open at St Andrews and was joint runner-up at the US Open in 2017.

"I've had a hot putter the last couple of days so try to ride it through the weekend," said Harman. "I felt kind of freed up on 18. I made probably my two best swings of the day and got up there to 12 to 15 feet for eagle.

Just played a really nice hole."

Barring a collapse over the weekend, the 36-year-old will take some catching, with the sport's biggest stars failing to fire.

McIlroy believes

McIlroy believes he is still in with a chance of ending his nine-year wait to win a major at the scene of his only British Open victory, in 2014.

The Northern Irishman, benefiting from more forgiving bunkers, birdied the fifth to move to two under on the day after tournament organisers reacted to criticism from players that the sand traps were too tough during Thursday's opening round at Hoylake.

Greenkeeping staff were instructed to build up the edges to allow more balls to roll back into the centre of the bunkers.

However, the world number

two dropped two shots on the back nine before a birdie at the last.

"I might be nine back, but I don't think there's going to be a ton of players between me and the lead going into the weekend," said McIlroy, who is currently tied for 11th.

"If I can get to three, four, five-under par tomorrow going into Sunday, I'll have a really good chance."

Scheffler has been a model of consistency on the PGA Tour all year, but he came perilously close to missing the cut for the first time in 21 tournaments, ending with a four-over-par round to be three over for the tournament.

Needing a birdie at the par-five last, the 2022 Masters champion got up and down from a difficult lie in the greenside bunker to make a four.

AFP

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This aerial photograph shows damaged historical buildings at the ancient part of Antakya in Hatay



Gokhan Ergin, architect specialist on ancient buildings inspects historical buildings in the area



A damaged historical hotel five months after the 7.8-magnitude jolt and its aftershocks wiped out swathes of Turkey's mountainous southeast



Umut Almac, professor of architecture in the restoration department of Istanbul Technical University

Turkey's Antioch rises from the ruins, stone by stone, to preserve dilapidated heritage structures

The old priest painted a warning on the cracked walls of his shack: "Twelve children were born here! Don't touch this house."

Vahit Baklaci, 82, returns every day to the house where he was born in the heart of old Antakya, which has been turned upside down since an earthquake on February 6 devastated southern Turkey and Syria, killing at least 55,000 people. But ancient Antioch, a stone's throw from Syria, is not just any old town, insisted the old priest.

"Antakya has existed for thousands of years. Look, two mosques dating back to the beginnings of Islam, both destroyed. And there, two 2,000-year-old churches from the time of Jesus...also destroyed. That's why we have to be careful with these places."

Before the disaster, the Turkish Ministry of Culture had listed 719 buildings

of historic importance. When the diggers went into action, first to find the bodies and then to clear away the rubble, it posted notices to protect those still standing: "Do not touch without authorisation."

A representative of the ministry, standing in the dust in a fluorescent waistcoat and hard hat, makes sure those notices are obeyed - "If a building is too damaged, we can't do anything. But when we can, we take it down stone by stone," she said on condition of anonymity.

The stones that are saved are sorted, classified and numbered for future restoration. Six teams like hers patrol the old town. "We had about 50 at the beginning," she said.

A work of art

Talking about the future in this city in ruins, where you walk over collapsed roofs, step over bell towers and around toppled minarets, is a leap of faith.

Architect Gokhan Ergin picked up one of the orange roof tiles strewn across the ground. It was made in Marseille in southern France which from the Ottomans and later the French imported tiles in huge quantities. Antioch was part of the French mandate of Syria before being handed to Turkey just before World War II.

"We're standing in the city's first residential areas. These beautiful houses were charming hotels and restaurants," said Ergin, who has restored many of them and knows all about their mysteries, from the doors painted blue to deter scorpions to the curry plants sculpted above the entrance arches.

"It's like when you find a work of art, you make an inventory of it to protect it in a museum. We have to do the same thing here - these buildings are just as important. It's not just earth and stone," said the 40-year-old. "This is living history."

Ergin said the older buildings withstood the successive tremors of February much better because the planks and wood inserted between the mud brick structures helped absorb the shock.

Those houses that have been damaged were because of the collapse of their neighbours, who have been poorly restored, he insists. His, he proudly pointed out, still have their windows and glazing almost intact.

Plastic restoration

On Kurtulus Avenue, Antakya's main thoroughfare, formerly Herod Street and home to the synagogue and the region's oldest mosque, Habib-i Nejjär, built on the site of an ancient pagan temple transformed into a church in early Christian times, a team from Istanbul Technical University is carrying out its own surveys.

For Umut Almac, professor of architecture in the restoration department,

at least 800 more buildings in the city deserve protection. "That's the problem of the region, there are so many buildings that should be registered," he said.

In front of a former luxury hotel, with its crumbling breezeblock walls, he complained about the 'plastic restorations' carried out around 20 years ago to attract tourists. "They concentrated on the facade, without respecting the internal structures of the building."

When the quake hit on February 6, tens of thousands of buildings in southern Turkey collapsed in a matter of seconds.

Almac wants the reconstruction to be quicker, while others, including Ergin and the elderly priest Vahit, denounce the brutality of using diggers in the old town.

"I don't think we can move the stone blocks any other way," said the academic.

AFP

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Photos: V K Shafeer

Sweet art

*Demand for **Ghevar** – a Rajasthani sweetdish, popularly consumed at all festive celebrations during the Hindu month of 'Shravan', picks up*

Hubert Vaz

The run up to the host of Hindu festivals and traditions has begun, with the onset of 'Shravan' (the month of fasting and abstinences as per the lunar calendar) on July 4. And associated with this month is the consumption of popular sweets, like Ghevar and Feni, which have their roots in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

Some restaurants and sweetmeat manufacturers have already geared up to cater to the rising demand for these sweets which occupy a prominent place in the festive traditions, especially on 'Haryali Teej' (August 19) and 'Raksha Bandhan' (August 31).

This year, the month of Shravan extends for about 58 days (July 4 to August 31, which is a rarity after almost two decades. The elongation is attributed to the inclusion of the 'Malamas' month, an additional month inserted into the Hindu lunar calendar to synchronise with the lunar cycle.

According to sweetmeat makers of Kesar restaurant, the demand for 'Ghevar' goes up significantly during the month of Shravan when people regularly buy this sweet.

The reason - the month of Shravan is the

rainy season, and due to moisture in the air, most sweets become sticky. But 'Feni' and 'Ghevar' are two sweets that do not get spoiled by the moisture.

These sweets are consumed mostly for festivals like Hariyali Teej and Raksha Bandhan though you see it on sweets coun-



Ghevar is extremely popular in Rajasthan as well as the northern states of India during the season of Shravan. Besides consumption at home, people also present each other this sweet when they visit the homes of relatives and friends."

SUPRIYO MAITI

ters all through the month. Ghevar is prepared with a mixture of maida (all purpose flour) and water or milk. There is skilled technique of preparing this disc-shaped sweet directly in hot oil/ghee after which it

is coated with a sugar solution, cream, and garnished with saffron, nuts and raisins. Feni, on the other hand, is prepared with toasted filo pastry strings that are soaked in a sugar solution and garnished with chopped pistachios.

Supriyo Maiti, manager of Kesar, who hails from Rajasthan, said "Ghevar is extremely popular in Rajasthan as well as the northern states of India during the season of Shravan. In Oman, too, there is good demand for this sweet from people hailing from all Indian states. Besides consumption at home, people also present each other this sweet when they visit the homes of relatives and friends."

In rural areas, it is customary for people to send 'Sargi' (a platter of delicacies) to a sister's house on the first Raksha Bandhan after her marriage, of which Ghevar and Feni are an important part. That's why sweetmeat shops witness thronging crowds during the festival for buying these popular sweets.

Maiti added, "Over the last two weeks, there has been good demand for Ghevar and we have been preparing large quantities of this sweet, especially on weekends. During the season, we prepare anywhere between 100kg to 150kg of Ghevar for sale at the store, besides other orders customised for individuals. This is an annual tradition for us."

