

► NEWS BRIEF

H M GREET'S PRESIDENT OF COTE D'IVOIRE

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Alassane Dramane Ouattara of the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire on his country's National Day. His Majesty conveyed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes to the president and his people.

UAE SENDS MILITARY VEHICLES TO CHAD

Dubai, UAE - The United Arab Emirates has sent military vehicles and other security gear to Chad in support of "anti-terrorism" efforts and border protection, the Gulf state said on Sunday. Chad is a neighbour of Niger, where a coup late last month toppled one of the last pro-Western leaders in the terrorist-plagued Sahel region.

04



Total investment in Khazaen Economic City hits RO316mn

11



Sweden send holders US out of World Cup

No need for US to maintain security in Strait of Hormuz: Iran

Tehran, Iran - Iranian Armed Forces spokesman Brig Gen Abolfazl Shekarchi has said there is no need for the US Armed Forces to maintain security of the Sea of Oman and Strait of Hormuz.

Brig Gen Shekarchi made the remarks on Saturday in response to the US plan to put guards on commercial ships going through the Sea of Oman and Strait of Hormuz.

"What does the security of the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean have to do with America? What are you (US forces) doing here?" the commander said.

"All the countries in the region are capable of establishing security in these waters," he added.

Washington announced recently that US military is considering putting armed personnel on commercial ships travelling through the Strait of Hormuz.

In reaction to the US move, Brig Gen Shekarchi said it is the US policy to blame other countries for the insecurity and instability in the region and use it as a pretext to boost its mili-

tary presence in the region.

Deploying armed personnel on commercial ships would be an unheard of action aimed at stopping Iran from seizing and harassing civilian vessels, American officials told The Associated Press on Thursday.

Brig Gen Shekarchi stressed that the weapons manufactured by the US and Europe are now used against civilians in Gaza and Yemen, but they accuse Iran of interfering in regional countries' affairs.

Since 2019, Iran has seized several ships in the strait, the narrow mouth of the Sea of Oman, as part of its efforts to pressure the West over negotiations regarding its collapsed nuclear deal with world powers. Putting US troops on commercial ships could deter Iran from seizing vessels or escalating tensions further, AP reported.

While officials offered few details of the plan, it comes as thousands of Marines and sailors on the amphibious assault ship *USS Bataan* and the *USS Carter Hall*, a landing ship, are on their way to the Sea of Oman.

Agencies

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman was among the top ten countries in the world for fastest growing destinations for international arrivals in 2022 as compared to 2019.

According to US-based Skift, a travel industry news and market research company, Oman witnessed a growth of 38% in international arrivals in 2022 over 2019, and ranked seventh in the world.

Skift's State of Travel Report 2023 revealed that Austria (355%) topped the list of fastest growing destinations for international arrivals in 2022, followed by UAE (109%), Dominican Republic (71%), Andorra (47%), the Netherlands (43%), Qatar (42%) and Oman.

The other three in top ten include Albania (33%), Colombia (23%) and Serbia (14%).

The report stated that except for aviation, the performance of all sectors - hotels, vacation



rentals and car rentals - have surpassed 2019 levels in the Middle East.

'While international travel in most regions still lags 2019 levels, the Middle East is the only region to witness a complete recovery of international travel in the first

quarter of 2023,' Skift stated.

United Arab Emirates was the most visited in the region last year with 22.7mn tourist arrivals, surpassing 2019 levels, followed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco.

Tourist arrivals to Oman, too,

surpassed the pre-COVID-19 pandemic level of 2.5m in 2019 to 2.9mn in 2022.

A report issued by international firm BMI, a Fitch Solutions Company, has indicated that recovery of the tourism sector in Oman in 2022 was stronger than

expected and that the positive trend is expected to continue in the current year.

From January to May 2023, Oman reported 1,548,630 visitors, a surge of 95.1% compared to the same period last year.

According to BMI's analysis,



3.5mn international tourists are expected to visit Oman in 2023, marking a 20.8% annual increase from 2022. Furthermore, the average annual tourist influx for the forecast period of 2023 to 2027 is expected to grow by 7.4%. This growth is attributed to both leisure and commercial tourism, boosted by high oil prices that stimulate domestic investments.

The report suggests that the Middle East will be the primary source of tourists for Oman in 2023, with 1.5mn visitors expected from the region. The Asia-Pacific region and Europe trail behind, anticipated to bring 606,390 and 320,600 tourists respectively. Meanwhile, Africa and America are predicted to contribute 72,000 and 72,800 visitors respectively.

BMI anticipates a consistent upward trajectory for Oman's tourism sector until 2027 and beyond. This aligns with Oman's economic diversification strategy and Oman Vision 2040's directives.

MHT pushes to regulate over 1,700 unlicensed hotels

Our Correspondent Muscat

There are more than 1,700 unlicensed hotels in Oman affecting the quality of tourism products and services and the reputation of the tourism sector in general, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) has stated.

To regulate the sector and check malpractice, the ministry kick started a month-long awareness campaign themed 'Quality begins with licensing' on Sunday.

The campaign's goals are manifold - to enhance the hotel sector's operations, ensure quality standards align with the ministry's vision, curb malpractices that tarnish the tourism sector's reputation, and curtail financial discrepancies arising from unregulated hotel activities. Moreover, the campaign seeks to address security concerns linked to these establishments.

Said bin Hareb al Obaidani, Director General of Tourism Development at MHT, emphasised the



campaign's intent to rectify unlicensed hotel operations. "This initiative addresses the increas-

ing issues and complaints associated with unauthorised hotel activities, ensuring that our tourism

sector remains robust and compliant," he stated.

Obaidani further explained that the campaign is tailored to cater to multiple demographics. For licensed hoteliers, the focus is on upholding high-quality services and prominently displaying their tourism licence, particularly on electronic platforms like social media, making verification straightforward for potential guests.

For unlicensed operators, the campaign underscores the requirement of aligning their activ-

ities with existing regulations to avoid legal complications. "In coordination with relevant authorities, we are actively monitoring unlicensed hoteliers and will take stringent legal action against those operating without requisite permissions," Obaidani added.

For those looking to venture into the tourism sector, Obaidani recommends using the ministry's official portal. "Our collective aim is to ensure safety, security and quality for all. And it all starts with proper licensing," he concluded.

RAFO BAND TRIUMPHS IN WORLD MUSIC COMPETITION IN SCOTLAND



In a notable display of musical prowess, the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) Music Band clinched the top spot for overall appearance at the World Music Competition in Dundonald, Scotland. With more than 180 musical bands from around the world showcasing skills, the competition is being held in five cities across Scotland and will conclude on August 21 (ONA)

Muscat boy aces global space colony design contest

Tridwip K Das Muscat

ABA Oman International School student Rui Chang Lyu, 17, who will start Grade 12 this month was a member of the team declared global winner of the International Space Settlement Design Competition (ISSDC) 2023 held at Kennedy Space Center, Florida, USA.

The competition is supported by various aerospace, engineering and educational organisations, including NASA. Held this

year from July 28 to 31, ISSDC is an industry simulation game for high school students set in the future. First held in 1984, it puts students in the shoes of aerospace industry professionals.

Organised into four competing teams - called companies, each made up of six teams - the students are tasked with designing a space colony that will accommodate several thousand people in a realistic scenario set in the later years of this century.

Each year, ISSDC organisers



Rui Chang Lyu (Supplied photo)

design a new challenge and scenario with its own unique requirements. The four participating student companies work to create a design and operating plan for the space colony which meets the challenge/project requirements.

Each student company prepares a written summary of 50 pages or less of its proposal, and makes a 35-minute presentation to the competition judges that explains the project requirements in five broad departments - Structure, Operations, Human

factors, Automation and Business/budget.

Explaining his role, Chang said he was involved in designing the structure which required maths and physics skills, as well as budgeting the project. He was also head of communications, bringing together the virtual and in-person competitors, and tasked with ensuring communication between all departments was clear and everything that was required across teams was fulfilled.

Continued on Page 03



MILESTONE MOVE

In a significant move, Oman has introduced the first-of-its-kind Social Protection Law in the region – a milestone in the country's commitment to fostering inclusiveness and ensuring the welfare of all its residents.

With this new law, expatriate workers in Oman will now have access to end-of-service benefits, providing them with the much-needed social security and peace of mind after years of dedicated service to the nation.

This move will also strengthen the bond between Oman and its diverse expatriate community. Oman warmly embraces its diverse expatriate community, providing it a sanctuary of comfort and peace.

How can this system be streamlined for the maximum benefit of expats? Here's what *Muscat Daily* readers said -



Kiran Choudhury
Housewife

To get benefit out of the social protection bill for expatriates, the Wage Protection System (WPS) should be strictly implemented and followed. Workers under labour contracts suffer badly due to unpaid salaries and benefits. There must also be fines that need to be imposed for organisations that do not follow the WPS.

Amir Hosein Anvari
Senior business head of retail operations

The new Social Protection Law should ensure clear and transparent guidelines on eligibility, calculation and timely payment of benefits. Implementing an online platform for seamless processing and communication will maximise efficiency and benefit expats.

Santosh Kumar
Private sector employee

Oman's pioneering move in introducing the Social Protection Law is indeed a remarkable step towards promoting inclusiveness and welfare for all residents, including expatriates. To streamline this system for the maximum benefit of expats, the government can enhance accessibility to information and services related to social protection, ensuring that expats are well informed about their rights and entitlements. Additionally, simplifying the application process and making processes more online will facilitate expatriates' access to

social support programmes.

Mohamad Owais Qazi
Fishing equipment salesman

The law expands the social security cover to expat workers who will be covered for employment injury, maternity and sickness under the same terms as national workers. Also, non-Omani mothers get maternity leave of 14 weeks at full pay and non-Omani fathers get paternity leave of seven days at full pay for newborns, besides uniform employment injury insurance for all employed expats.

Salman al Abri
Private sector employee

One of the easy ways would be if government agencies could collaborate with diplomatic missions and community organisations or clubs for a better understanding of the expatriate community's unique needs, leading to tailored assistance where necessary. There must be good language translators for better understanding between the communities.

Obaid Qureshi
Salesman

The different embassies and their respective social organisations, including schools, can conduct regular outreach campaigns to raise awareness among expats about the available social protection measures. This will ensure that they can avail maximum benefits.



With the use of artificial intelligence rapidly rising, do you feel that it will replace jobs and human emotions?

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Artisanal fishing dominates share of Oman's fish landings with 93.9%

Muscat - By the end of June this year, artisanal fishing made up 93.9% of the total fish landed in Oman, accounting for 371,647 tonnes. This represents a 5% increase compared to the same period in 2022 when it accounted for 353,950 tonnes.

Data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information shows that the value of the catch of artisanal fishing was RO195.884mn. Commercial fishing accounted for 20,724 tonnes, while coastal fishing contributed 3,059 tonnes.

Among the governorates, Al Wusta recorded the highest quantity of fish landed through artisanal fishing – 144,707 tonnes – followed by South Sharqiyah – 110,593 tonnes, Dhofar – 42,128 tonnes, North Batinah and South Batinah – 37,553 tonnes.

Musandam recorded 21,938 tonnes of fish landed through ar-



tisanal fishing, while Muscat registered 14,727 tonnes.

Small surface fish constituted the largest part of the catch, accounting for 221,234 tonnes by the end of June 2023. This marks a 17.7% increase compared to

the same period in 2022 when the quantity was 187,895 tonnes.

The quantity of large surface fish caught by artisanal fishing decreased 6.5% to 83,846 tonnes by the end of June, compared to 89,638 tonnes in June

2022. The quantity of demersal fish caught also decreased – 13.5% – to 57,379 tonnes by the end of June from 66,309 tonnes in June 2022.

The quantity of sharks landed through artisanal fishing increased 12.7% to 3,119 tonnes this year compared to 2,000 tonnes in 2022.

A total of 4,096 tonnes of crustaceans and mollusks were caught through artisanal fishing by the end of June 2023, compared to 4,434 tonnes in June 2022. Additionally, other types of fish caught through artisanal fishing accounted for 1,973 tonnes.

The dominance of artisanal fishing in Oman's fish landings underscores its significance in the local fishing industry and highlights the importance of sustainable practices to preserve marine resources for the future.

Muscat Municipality approves bridge construction for Telal al Qurm

Muscat – Property developer Alargan has announced that it received official approval from Muscat Municipality to build an Irish bridge. This bridge aims to provide smooth connectivity and easy access for residents of Telal al Qurm.

Commencing on August 20, the four-month project will undergo significant changes while adhering to the strict Oman Highway Design Standards 2017.

The approval was granted following a comprehensive hydrology study to ensure structural stability and efficient water flow during rainy seasons and all year round. Implementation of meticulous drainage measures will further optimise surface water drainage, a press release stated.

Alargan has gone beyond the development's boundary, showcasing its dedication to community development by funding the Irish bridge in the public domain.



According to the company, the 4mX4m bridge will play a crucial role in maintaining an uninterrupted link to Telal al Qurm all year round. This will guarantee the safety and well being of not only Telal al Qurm's residents but also the surrounding neighbourhood and the wider community.

Maheer Joujou, Acting General Manager of Telal al Qurm said, "At Alargan, we consistently strive to enhance the living experience for our valued residents

and investors. Safety remains a paramount concern, making it a top priority throughout the bridge's development. Approval for the bridge reflects our unwavering commitment to creating thriving communities with top-tier infrastructure and safety."

The seamless connectivity forged by the bridge is set to bolster the overall value of Telal al Qurm, enriching the investment potential for residents and stakeholders alike.

"At Al Abraj, we take immense pride in conducting comprehensive studies and structural assessments, furthered by the support from ministries. This project truly reflects the collective efforts of all stakeholders in creating a secure and thriving community," said Yassin Jaffer, Managing Director of Al Abraj Consulting Engineers & Architects, which will implement the project.



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FSQC warns of infestation in Sanabel's frozen Okra Zero

Muscat - The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources' Food Safety and Quality Centre (FSQC) has cautioned against an infestation found in Okra Zero, a frozen product of the brand Sanabel imported from Egypt.

FSQC received a report through Gulf Rapid Alert System for Food about the presence of insect infestation in 400gm packs of Okra Zero bearing batch number BK3006NA and expiry date 5/2024.

In a statement, FSQC said, 'In

the interest of the health and safety of consumers, the centre would like to confirm that it has taken all necessary measures to

stop the import of the product at border crossings, and is currently working to ensure that local markets are free of affected products, if any, in coordination with the authorities concerned.'

It added, 'The centre recommends all consumers avoid consuming this product and dispose of it.'



HEAC to announce results on August 16

Muscat - The Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation will announce results of the first sorting for admissions in the academic year 2023/2024 on August 16.

Dr Hamad Khalfan al Nu'amani, Director General of HEAC,

said that stiff competition is expected to be witnessed in the results of the first sorting, especially for high-demand educational programmes, such as those of Sultan Qaboos University, scholarships abroad, as well as health and education specialisations in various institutes.

North Sharqiyah Grape Festival a big success: Governor Shamsi

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The recently held Grape Festival in North Sharqiyah governorate generated ROS8,000 in revenue - making it one of the most successful events of the year.

The two-day festival, which was held in June, provided marketing and promotional opportunities that supported grape growers and related businesses in the region.

Intense activities on June 19 and 20 - benefiting local farmers, small and medium enterprises, jobseekers, and productive families - resulted in the generation of this revenue, organisers said.

Sheikh Ali bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Governor of North Sharqiyah, emphasised the festival's purpose of promoting investment in grape cultivation and marketing.

"It encouraged the launch of packaging and marketing companies, thus enhancing the crop's value. The festival also sought to inspire the private sector to support grape cultivation and foster contract farming through agricultural associations, thereby creating job opportunities," he said.



This outcome is partly due to the signing of three memoranda of understanding between several government institutions, including the Governor's Office and MAFWR, MHUP

SHEIKH ALI BIN AHMED AL SHAMSI



Shamsi told ONA that the festival's success reaffirmed the benefits grape cultivation provides to the region.

"This outcome is partly due to the signing of three memoranda of understanding between several government institutions, including the Governor's Office

and both the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP)."

These agreements included the allocation of over 40 hectares of land to local farmers and supporting projects and in-

vestment opportunities in the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, RO36,000 in total was earmarked for establishing model farms for grape cultivation and production.

Badr bin Ahmed al Habsi, Director of the Events and Awareness Department in the

Governor's Office, confirmed that the festival, held in Al Rawda village, significantly benefited local farmers, businesses, jobseekers, and productive families.

Speaking on the generated revenue, Habsi informed that it came from the sale of 4,000 grape seedlings and about 10,000kg of grapes of 35 different varieties. Small and medium enterprises secured revenue from the marketing campaign of the festival.

The festival also indirectly benefited more than ten jobseekers and over 40 entrepreneurs participating in the exhibition.

The festival received widespread coverage from local and international media, showcasing its success.

A total of 2,514 photographs were captured by 54 professional photographers, and 107 promotional and documentary video clips were prepared.

Twenty-four media personnel from government and private institutions also covered the event.

The festival's social media platforms saw significant interaction among institutions and individuals throughout the event, adding to the success of the festival, organisers added.



Ibri emerges as preferred pitstop on way to Dhofar

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The wilayat of Ibri in Dhahira governorate is seeing an influx of tourists thanks to the khareef season in Dhofar.

With its strategic location overlooking the Empty Quarter's border crossing - the pivotal point connecting Oman with Saudi Arabia - Ibri is reaping the benefits of its geographical position.

Notably, the wilayat has become a favoured resting spot for visitors travelling from the Hafeet port in Buraimi governorate and those journeying overland from Saudi Arabia to the verdant landscapes of Dhofar governorate.

Given Dhofar's distance of roughly 900km from Dhahira, travellers opt to take a break in Ibri for rejuvenation.

This surge in visitors has also sparked notable commercial activity, especially within the hospitality sector.

Gulf tourists, en route to Dhofar, normally choose to rest and recharge in Ibri.

Ali bin Khamis al Sudairi, Assistant Director of the Department of Heritage and Tourism in Dhahira, highlighted this boom.

"Hotel occupancies in Ibri have been soaring - hitting between 60% to 85%, particularly

in July. It's an unmistakable sign of tourism rebounding in the governorate," he commented.

Dhahira isn't just a stopover. Proactive efforts are underway to engage tourists and elevate their experience. Sudairi mentioned how local institutions provide crucial tourism information, guiding visitors about potential attractions in Dhahira and offering detailed maps of tourist hotspots.

Hotel occupancies in Ibri are between 60% to 85%, particularly in July. It's an unmistakable sign of tourism rebounding

ALI AL SUDAIRI

Further testament to Dhahira's hospitality is the collaborative spirit demonstrated by various government and civil units. Ibri's local charity teams, for instance, offer roadside assistance for tourists facing vehicular issues on their journey.

This spirit of cooperation and assistance is not only enhancing the overall visitor experience but also amplifying Dhahira's reputation as a key stakeholder in Oman's growing tourism narrative.

MAFWR fixing satellite tracking devices on fishing fleet to modernise operations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Water Resources (MAFWR) has initiated a project to equip the sultanate's large artisanal fishing fleet with satellite tracking devices.

Aimed at improving the fishing sector and supporting the fishermen, 250 vessels across Oman have already been outfitted with these devices.

"Our goal is to establish an electronic system that monitors all fishing vessels within the sultanate," said an MAFWR official. "This project will continue until all artisanal boats are equipped with these tracking devices."

The ministry official reminded that this initiative isn't merely an installation of tracking devices. Instead, it represents a considerable upgrade to the existing system, establishing electronic connections with satellites and earth stations, revolutionising the way fishing vessels are monitored in Oman.

"The new system is notable



for its innovation and efficiency," the official stated.

"It facilitates swift delivery of necessary information regarding the fishing vessels. Thanks to connectivity through the Internet of Things networks, the speed of response in emergencies has improved greatly."

Satellites transmit crucial information about the boats and ships to operations rooms. The data is then analysed and relayed to the respective parties, enabling prompt action, the official

explained.

The benefits of this system extend beyond just tracking. It offers data on fish production, aids in fish marketing, differentiates between legal and illegal fishing units, and upholds safety standards for fishing vessels.

In April 2021, MAFWR entered into an agreement with the Middle East Scientific Equipment Corporation. The objective of this agreement is to develop an electronic system for tracking and monitoring fishing vessels

across Oman.

The project aims to upgrade the existing tracking system, established in 2000, by facilitating electronic links with satellites and earth stations. In doing so, it will gain high-definition accuracy in line with global standards, allowing Oman's fishing fleet to operate seamlessly.

"The initiative aligns with the ministry's strategic plans and programmes, all part of realising Oman Vision 2040," the official concluded.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Muscat	35	29
Abu Dhabi	45	30
Doha	46	31
Kuwait City	42	32
Manama	41	31
Riyadh	45	26

International Space Settlement Design Competition

Continued from Page 01

"For example, if the Business department needed the cost for the design of a medical robot, it would need the Structure team to first design the robot and then Operations to choose the materials needed. Only then could Business estimate the cost of the materials to build the robot, labour cost and the schedule to build the robot," Chang elaborated.

Describing the experience, Chang said, "The 40 hours were very stressful and most of us barely even slept at all, but we got to experience how it would be in the aerospace design industry. That was amazing! I also got to make a tonne of new friends and expand my connections."

Chang's team from Palm Springs, USA, was one of six that made up a company called Dougledyne Astrosystems and

Fletch Constructors which aced the competition. He joined the team upon the invitation of his friend Ariba Syed, a student of Dwight Global.

Chang's advisor during the competition Javier Gil, Florida based structural engineer, informed that students from all around the world competed in many qualification rounds before reaching the finals.

"Chang is an excellent leader and showed outstanding engineering ability. I do not think his team would have won without him. Early on in the competition, his team was experiencing many issues.

"The team consisted of around 60 students and the students in charge of organising the team were doing a poor job. Chang stepped up and pushed the whole team in the correct direction," Gil said.

"Throughout the competition he would speak with students from every discipline to aid them in understanding their role and push them towards success. I think the pressure he put on the team to perform better was vital for the win."

Nikhil Narayanan, computer science and physics teacher at ABA, attributes the win to the hard work of the students; Chang's in particular. "It certainly puts ABA on the map of schools that encourage and produce high achieving STEM students. I hope that it encourages up and coming students to seriously consider aerospace and space technology as an area of further study."

Narayanan described Chang as "an inquisitive and highly social student, always very driven and hardworking; he has a strong focus on achieving the best he can".

While thankful of his teachers, including Narayanan and Sen K Jose who "taught me the valuable maths skills I have which I used in the competition", Chang is eager to help anyone in Oman interested in taking part in the competition.

"Oman has never had students take part in a prestigious international competition like this one as there aren't enough students that are interested or at least don't voice themselves out. I am willing to organise teams if required due to my large pool of connections," he volunteered.

Chang is currently in a ten-week summer internship programme in computer science at University of California, Santa Cruz, USA, which will end this month. He was accepted for the programme on 100% financial aid, inclusive of housing, tuition, food and transportation.



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Tender Number	Description of Tender	Last date to collect the tender	Tender return date	Grade
PRE/23/155 2023/MM/HQ-37	Consultancy Services for Design of Festival Land	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	First
PRE/23/098 2023/MM/QS-43 (Re –Call)	Shifting Abandoned Vehicles (Re –Call)	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	Specialist
PRE/23/112 2023/MM/QS-44 (Re –Call)	Painting of Muscat Municipality vehicles (Re Call)	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	Specialist
PRE/23/116 2023/MM/QS-41 (Re Call)	Supply of Polymerization devices and accessories (Re Call)	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	Specialist
PRE/23/120 2023/MM/QS-42 (Re Call)	Roads Maintenance Works in Muscat Governorate (Re Call)	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	First
PRE/23/126 2023/MM/QS-45 (Re Call)	Construction of Proposed Solutions to Resolve Water Stagnation at Qurum (Re Call)	25/08/2023	17/09/2023	Forth

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MARKET WATCH	
MSX30	4,759.65
Sensex	65,721.25
FOREX RATES	
(RO1 equals)	
Indian	216.59
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Bangladesh	283.39
Philippines	145.48
Sri Lanka	834.64
*Rates as on August 06 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

US crude oil stockpiles fall by 3.7%

US commercial crude oil inventories decreased by 3.7% during the week ending July 28, according to data released by the Energy Information Administration (EIA). Inventories fell by around 17mn barrels to 439.8mn barrels, against the American Petroleum Institute's expectation of a fall of around 15.4mn barrels. Strategic petroleum reserves, which are excluded from commercial crude stocks, remained unchanged at 346.8mn barrels last week, the data revealed.

Gasoline inventories, however, rose by 1.5mn barrels to 219.1mn barrels over the same period.

EIA data showed that US crude oil imports increased by about 301,000 barrels per day (bpd) to around 6.67mn bpd during the week ending July 28, while crude oil exports rose by around 692,000 bpd to about 5.28mn bpd.

US crude oil production, meanwhile, declined by 14,000 bpd and stood at 12.59 million bpd over the same period.

Maha Energy seeks extension for Oman oil exploration deal

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Swedish energy firm Maha Energy has requested an extension to the initial phase of its exploration and production sharing agreement (EPSA) with the Ministry of Energy and Minerals for Block 70 onshore Oman, which is set to expire in late October.

Maha Energy is the operator of Block 70 with a 65% working interest, with Mafrag Energy holding the remaining 35%.

Maha Energy announced the results of the initial short-term production test on Block 70 in Oman (initial phase).

'All eight production wells drilled in the 2022/2023 drilling programme were tested for the short-term, and five produced oil to surface at an initial estimated average rate of 300 barrels of oil per day per well, while three wells had to be suspended after producing water and gas but before producing any oil,' the company said in a statement.

'Even though more than 4,000 barrels of heavy, high viscosity oil (between 11-13 degrees API) were produced, filling all tank capacity available at Block 70, oil offloading has not yet initiated,' Maha Energy said.

The company added that it is now scaling up chemical treatment of the produced oil, based on those products that provided



Photograph for illustrative purpose only

the best results in the lab, to reduce viscosity and enhance flowability.

The company said during the second quarter of 2023, the minimum work obligations of the EPSA have been fully concluded as planned. As Maha Energy approaches the end of the initial phase in late October 2023, different extension scenarios were evaluated by the company and discussed with Omani authorities.

'Hence, driven by Maha Energy's commitment to conclude testing effectively and to ensure an appropriate and robust request for a potential declaration of commerciality, the company has requested the extension of the initial phase of the EPSA to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals,' Maha Energy said.

During the extended initial phase, Maha Energy intends to

implement activities necessary to support any decision regarding Block 70's declaration of commerciality, such as: (i) running detailed simulations of the long-term behaviour of the reservoir and wells at Block 70; (ii) restarting the cold production of wells and troubleshooting for the maximum possible sustained rates contingent on reaching specifications; and (iii) preparing a detailed plan for enhanced oil recovery (EOR) such as steam, waterflooding, or other production enhancement methods to be performed during a possible second stage of the extended initial phase.

Block 70 is an onshore block that includes the shallow undeveloped Mafrag heavy oil field. The block is located in the middle of the prolific oil producing Ghaba Salt Basin in the central part of Oman.

Total investment in Khazaen Economic City hits RO316mn



Our Correspondent
Muscat

The volume of investments attracted by the Khazaen Economic City in Barka has reached to RO316mn till the end of June 2023, with foreign investments accounting for more than 58% of the total investment.

The statistics issued by the Khazaen Economic City showed that the value of foreign investments amounted to RO186mn, while the value of local invest-

ments amounted to RO130mn.

The data further showed that the total number of nationalities invested in the city are 16, while the number of signed agreements reached 100.

The number of projects under construction has reached 23 project, and the number of direct job opportunities reached 300 for national cadres in various sectors. The Khazaen Economic City explained that the most prominent investments are in the logistics as the total value of

investments in this sector amounted to RO60mn, while the number of agreements reached 20. As many as 10 agreements were signed in the food sector with an investment volume of RO87mn, the data showed.

Meanwhile, the agreements signed in the industrial sector amounted to RO92mn for 65 investment agreements.

The agreements signed in the pharmaceutical sector amounted to 5 with an investment value of RO77mn.

Bahrain heat spurs record high energy consumption



Manama, Bahrain - Bahrain has recorded unprecedented electricity consumption, authorities said, as scorching summer temperatures and high humidity force increased reliance on energy-intensive air-conditioning systems.

Manama's Electricity and Water Authority said the tiny island state, located in one of planet's warmest regions, "recorded its highest-ever electricity consumption rate" on Thursday at 3,798 megawatts.

Beating last year's record of 3,708 MW, the latest figure

came as temperatures on Thursday reached 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), compounded by 85% humidity.

The electricity authority said on social media it "urges all of its customers to adopt practices that promote energy and water conservation in order to help preserve our national resources".

Life in Bahrain largely moves indoors during the summer months, with the ever-present Arctic blast of air-conditioning systems.

Like other Gulf states, Bahrain

is prone to hot and dry summers made warmer by climate change. Experts predict that the entire region could become uninhabitable by the end of the century if warming trends are not reversed.

Efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change have gained pace in the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates prepares to host the United Nations' climate summit later this year.

COP28 will take place in the UAE business hub of Dubai in November and December.

AFP

US Fed official says more rate hikes 'likely' needed to lower inflation

Washington, US - A US central bank official has said that more interest rate hikes "will likely be needed" to bring inflation down further, shortly after policymakers lifted rates to the highest level since 2001.

Federal Reserve governor Michelle Bowman's prepared remarks to an event in Colorado also came after a mixed employment report on Friday showing that hiring in the United States has slowed but wage gains remained robust.

Bowman said she supported the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee's (FOMC) decision for a rate hike in July



Michelle Bowman

given "strong economic data and still elevated inflation."

"I also expect that additional rate increases will likely be needed to get inflation on a path

down to the FOMC's two percent target," she added in her remarks.

On Friday, Labor Department data showed that the world's biggest economy added 187,000 jobs in July and 185,000 in June - slowing from before.

But wage gains held steady at 0.4%, and were 4.4% higher than the same period a year ago in July.

Analysts noted that this could still be too elevated for the Fed.

"The demand for workers continues to exceed the supply of available job seekers, adding upward pressure on prices," said Bowman in her Saturday speech.

She added that she would be seeking "consistent evidence" that inflation is on a meaningful path down toward the Fed's two percent target, when mulling how long the federal funds rate needs to remain restrictive.

"I will also be watching for signs of slowing in consumer spending and signs that labor market conditions are loosening," she said.

Officials are expected to assess the labor market report for August, along with upcoming inflation readings, before making their next rate decision in late September.

AFP

Russian oil price cap under growing scrutiny as prices rise

London, UK - When the West rolled out its unprecedented price cap on Russian oil late last year, it hoped to starve Moscow of much-needed revenue while minimising the impact on other countries.

Eight months on, it is seen in Western capitals as a successful part of the squeeze on Russian President Vladimir Putin, but a policy that has yet to be properly tested, according to energy analysts.

With oil prices on the rise after months in the doldrums, the cap's impact - and limits - could now come into clearer focus.

"We also know, like with all of our measures, Russia will attempt to evade the price cap," Eric Van Nostrand, the US Treasury's acting assistant secretary for economic policy, said in a speech Thursday.

"We remain vigilant in monitoring oil markets and the whole coalition remains focused on enforcing our sanctions."

The mechanism, a price ceiling of \$60 per barrel on Russian oil, was agreed and introduced by the European Union, G7 and Australia, in early December.

Companies based in EU and G7 member states and Australia are banned from providing services enabling maritime transport, such as insurance, of oil above that price.

It aims to restrict Russia's revenue as punishment for its invasion of Ukraine, while making sure Moscow keeps supplying the global market.

"Russia's revenue is, you know, nearly 50% lower than it was a year ago," a senior US official told reporters Tuesday.

"We're not evaluating the success of this policy based on



The oil price cap has forced Russia to build up a fleet that exists outside of the G7 to transport its oil

how many molecules of oil are actually traded under \$60," he added.

"We're evaluating the success of this based on whether Russia's aggregate revenue is suffering relative to an unrestricted market."

'Not been tested'

"The G7 price cap has done what it was designed to do - restrict Russian revenues while keeping oil in the market," Matthew Holland, an analyst at Energy Aspects, told AFP.

Helge Andre Martinsen, an

analyst at DNB, noted Russian oil export volumes have been "surprisingly stable" and the price cap had "really not been tested due to a softening oil market".

Moscow had taken its own steps to soften the impact of the price cap, including before its introduction eight months ago.

The US official noted it had offered steeply discounted long-term contracts, around 30% below Brent Crude prices, to buyers in southeast Asia and India, ahead of December 2022.

Since then North Sea Brent Crude, the key benchmark for Europe, has remained below the \$90 mark, while its US equivalent, the West Texas Intermediate (WTI), has not exceeded \$85 a barrel.

Meanwhile Russian Urals, Moscow's oil benchmark, has mostly traded below the man-

dated \$60-a-barrel price.

However, prices have been on the rise in recent weeks, with production cuts by Russia and other members of OPEC+ blamed in part.

In mid-July, Urals crude broke the \$60-a-barrel barrier, according to reports based on data from pricing agency Argus Media.

Stephen Innes, analyst at SPI Asset Management, said the Russian production cut was "payback" on the West for its support for Ukraine.

"They knew it would drive oil prices higher in the middle of peak driving US season while China was filling every teapot refinery to the brim," he added.

But with prices on the rise, "it might be the first real test of the price cap", he added - a forecast echoed by Martinsen.

Holland argues Urals breach-

ing the cap "will reduce interest in Russian oil from some buyers", citing India in particular, which the analyst said gets "nervous about sanctions risks".

Moreover, the cap has also forced Russia to build up a fleet that exists outside of the G7 to transport its oil.

"Investments the Russian government makes into the shadow fleet or into its own insurance companies in order to sell above the cap, for example, draw funding away from its war chest as the Kremlin's cost of continuing the war in Ukraine continues to rise," said Van Nostrand.

For Han Tan, analyst at Exinity, "the true results from this price cap, as desired by the West, will only be manifested if there's a meaningful pullback in Russia's war efforts".

AFP



This file photo shows a factory of Chinese electric vehicle maker Li Auto in Changzhou, east China's Jiangsu Province (Xinhua)

China rolls out measures to boost economic recovery, confidence

Beijing, China – Despite challenges at home and abroad, China's economic recovery continues apace, and the country is extending support measures to boost confidence, ensure sustained recovery and promote high-quality development.

A slew of policy pledges, targeting specific sectors ranging from consumption, private economy, and property market, to capital market and forex market, have been made public after a key meeting of the top leadership vowed to strengthen counter-cyclical regulation and make more policy options available.

At a press conference Friday, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) official Yuan Da said the country would mull a raft of policy options that are stronger and more targeted, and take action in response to changes in situations.

To encourage consumption, which the government said plays a fundamental role in driving economic growth, the NDRC released a 20-point plan to spur consumer spending on a wide range of goods and services, including new energy vehicles, home appliances, electronics, catering, and tourism.

The top economic planner urged local authorities to ban new restrictive measures on auto purchasing while improving those that have already been in place.

NDRC also unveiled 28 policy

measures to support the private economy, including encouraging private investment in major national projects and enhancing financial support to the sector that contributes to a majority of the country's urban jobs.

For the property sector, a pillar of China's economy, the authorities demanded timely adjustment and improvement of policies in the sector in response to the new situation, stating that "major changes have taken place in the relationship between supply and demand in

households.

These pro-growth policies, covering a wide range of areas, are well-aligned and consistent with each other. This round of policies highlighted policymakers' determination to stabilize growth, investment bank CICC said in a report to clients.

Amid global headwinds, China's economy expanded 6.3% in the second quarter of the year, accelerating from 4.5% in the previous quarter. It grew 5.5% in the first half of the year, above the government's target

Amid global headwinds, China's economy expanded 6.3% in the second quarter of 2023, accelerating from 4.5% in the previous quarter

China's real estate market."

Ni Hong, China's Minister of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, said at a recent symposium with the country's real-estate developers that effective policy steps, such as reducing down payment ratios for first-time homebuyers, lowering mortgage rates and easing purchase restrictions for people wanting to buy a second house, will be firmly implemented.

On the financial front, the Ministry of Finance and the State Taxation Administration unveiled a package of tax relief measures to support small businesses, tech startups, and rural

of around 5% set for 2023.

Besides improvement in the headline GDP data, a breakdown also showed optimisation in economic drivers, with final consumption contributing to 77.2% of economic growth in the first half.

The readings came after various international institutions revised their forecasts for China's economic growth this year.

On Monday, the purchasing managers' index for the manufacturing sector, a key measure of China's factory activity, came in at 49.3 in July, up from 49 in June and 48.8 in May, adding to the evidence of stable recovery

in the world's second-largest economy.

The continued recovery and supportive measures are helping boost business confidence. A survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in South China pointed to growing optimism, as more than 90% of the participating companies had partially or fully recovered from the pandemic, while 57% of them stayed optimistic about the Chinese market, up 4% compared with a survey result released in late February.

Top leaders believed the Chinese economy's long-term sound fundamentals remain unchanged, but warned of new difficulties and challenges that mainly arise from insufficient domestic demand, difficulties in the operation of some enterprises, risks and hidden dangers in key areas, as well as a grim and complex external environment.

At Friday's press conference, Zou Lan, an official with the People's Bank of China, the central bank, said the country has ample policy space and sufficient policy tools and has the confidence, condition, and capability to deal with various risks.

Yuan Da said with the effect of the supportive measures gradually playing out, the economy will maintain its stable and sound trend in the second half of this year, following a sustained recovery in the January-June period.

Xinhua

Saudi wealth fund creates firm to attract top sports events

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia – The Saudi sovereign wealth fund on Sunday announced a new sports investment company designed to draw "major global events" to the kingdom, which has spent recent months luring top football stars.

The company, SRJ Sports Investments, "will invest in acquiring and creating new sports events IP (intellectual property), commercial rights of popular and prominent sports competitions and hosting major global events in Saudi Arabia," the Public Investment Fund (PIF) said in a statement.

It will "target businesses specialised in offering unique fan engagement activities and transformative sports technology across the industry, bolstering Saudi Arabia's position as one of the world's leading sports and entertainment destinations".

One of the world's largest sovereign wealth vehicles, the PIF in 2022 had assets under management totalling 2.23tn



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

Saudi riyals (\$595bn), according to its annual report released Sunday.

Sports have been a major focus of the oil-rich kingdom's effort to rebrand as a global business and tourism destination under the Vision 2030 reform agenda pursued by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the PIF chairman.

Football clubs in the Gulf state, the world's biggest crude exporter, have signed a host of major stars beginning with Cristiano Ronaldo last year and continuing with Karim Benzema, Jordan Henderson and Sadio Mane this year, though overtures to Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi have been unsuccessful.

Saudi Arabia has also caused shockwaves in golf with its financing of the rebel LIV series and hosts a Formula One Grand Prix.

The ATP and the WTA, which run the men's and women's professional tennis tours, have been targeted by the Saudis, who hosted an exhibition for top men's players outside Riyadh last year.

The flurry of deals and negotiations have spurred allegations of "sportswashing", or using sports to distract from Saudi Arabia's frequently criticised human rights record.

AFP

Maersk sees weaker demand for shipping

Copenhagen, Denmark – Maersk, the world's second-largest container shipping firm, said it expects shipping volumes to fall this year as companies continue to reduce inventories.

The Danish firm had previously expected shipping volumes to be flat or dip slightly this year, but now sees them down one to four percent.

"The inventory correction observed since (the fourth quarter of) 2022 appears to be prolonged and is now expected to last through year end," it said, adding it expected its volumes to evolve in line with the market.

It said market demand would likely remain subdued as long as companies reduce their inventories.

In the second quarter Maersk's container ship division saw its revenue halved from the same period last year -- when companies were trying to stock up to meet pent-up demand following the end of pandemic lockdowns in most countries -- to \$8.7bn. The drop was "driven by a decrease in freight rates and loaded volumes", it said.



Overall revenues fell 40% to \$12.9bn, in line with analyst expectations.

Strong demand saw freight rates swell, but these have since fallen back to normal levels.

Net profits fell by 83% to \$1.45bn, but were much better than the \$686mn analysts expected, which the company put down to measures to reduce costs.

"Cost focus will continue to play a central role in dealing with a subdued market outlook that we expect to continue until end year," said chief executive Vincent Clerc.

Last year the firm posted a massive profit of \$29.19bn thanks to strong demand and high rates, but had already warned 2023 would see a return to a more normal performance.

Maersk shares sank 4.3% in afternoon trading on the Copenhagen stock exchange.

AFP

Elon Musk offers legal aid for users in trouble at work over X posts

San Francisco, US – Elon Musk on Saturday said his social media company X would provide monetary legal aid to users who face blowback from their bosses over posts on the platform.

Users, including many celebrities and others in the public eye, have occasionally found themselves in hot water with their employers over controversial things they have posted, liked, or retweeted on the platform, which was formerly known as Twitter.

"If you were unfairly treated by your employer due to posting or liking something on this platform, we will fund your legal bill," he wrote on the site.



Elon Musk

"No limit. Please let us know." Musk gave no details on how users could claim their money.

Since the tycoon bought the social media platform for \$44 billion last October, its advertising business has collapsed, in

part because of its looser approach to blocking hate speech, and the return of previously banned far-right accounts.

Musk has repeatedly cited a desire for free speech as motivating his changes, and lashed out at what he sees as the threat posed to free expression by changing cultural sensitivities.

According to nonprofit organisation the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), hate speech has flourished at the platform.

X has disputed the findings and is suing the CCDH.

In December, Musk reinstated former US president Donald Trump's Twitter account,

although Trump has yet to return to the platform.

The ex-president was banned from Twitter in early 2021 for his role in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol by a group of his supporters seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

X recently reinstated rapper and designer Kanye West around eight months after his account was suspended, according to media reports.

Last fall, West, who now goes professionally by Ye, posted an image that appeared to show a swastika interlaced with a Star of David, and Musk suspended the artist from the platform.

AFP

UNAUDITED CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30 JUNE 2023			
Particulars	As on 30-06-2023 Rials	As on 30-06-2022 Rials	
ASSETS			
Property Plant & Equipment	1,840,963	1,138,464	
Right of Use Assets	86,002	107,773	
Deferred Tax Asset	68,757	74,283	
Total non current assets	1,995,722	1,320,520	
Current Assets	874,404	1,412,051	
Less : Current Liabilities			
Short term maturity of Long term Loan	--	--	
Other current Liabilities	1,472,476	1,088,385	
Net Current Assets	(598,072)	323,666	
TOTAL ASSETS	1,397,650	1,644,186	
LIABILITIES			
Share Holders' Funds:			
Share Capital	1,000,000	1,000,000	
Reserves & Retained Earnings	397,650	644,186	
Long Term Loan	--	--	
TOTAL LIABILITIES	1,397,650	1,644,186	
UNAUDITED CONSOLIDATED STATEMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE INCOME FOR THE THREE MONTHS ENDED 30 JUNE 2023			
Particulars	6 months ended 30-06-2023 Rials	6 months ended 30-06-2022 Rials	
Sales	755,945	810,090	
Gross Profit	154,730	111,380	
Depreciation	(89,199)	(68,099)	
Admin & General Expenses	(177,086)	(179,436)	
Operating Profit / (Loss)	(111,555)	(136,155)	
Finance Charges	(18,689)	(7,754)	
Other Income	16,959	6,016	
Balance	(113,285)	(137,893)	
Prior year tax payment	--	--	
Profit /(Loss) before taxation and minority interest	(113,285)	(137,893)	
Provision for Taxation	--	--	
NET PROFIT/(LOSS) AFTER TAX	(113,285)	(137,893)	
Notes :-			
1) Previous year figures have been regrouped wherever necessary.			
2) Complete Accounts are available with Capital Market Authority. However the same will be sent by mail to any Share Holder who requests them, either in Arabic or English, as requested, within 7 days of receipt of the request.			
Request shall be forwarded to the following address:			
P.O. Box: 13, Postal Code: 124, Rusayl, Sultanate of Oman			
E-mail : info@csitops.com			

Oman new entrant in Kearney's Index this year

Oman, along with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Lebanon joined the list of Kearney's 2023 Global Services Location Index for the first time.

Global management consultancy Kearney recently published its 12th edition of the Global Services Location Index (GSLI), which studies the vital factors that make countries attractive as potential locations for offshore services.

The UAE continues to improve on its global ranking, moving up four spots on the list this year to 21st place. Jordan and Saudi Arabia were labelled as the two strongest new entrants from the Middle East region.

This year's index focused on talent regeneration and digital skills, bringing Canada, Poland, and Singapore into the limelight as emerging technology destinations for establishing innovation hubs.

Home to more than 4,000 start-ups across Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, along with multiple free zones, the UAE is emerging as a technology hub for the Middle East and Africa, the group observed.

"When it comes to talent regeneration, two dimensions contribute to the scoring: The intensity of technology innovation and the focus on digital skill enhancement, areas where the UAE is focusing significant energy and investment which is



paying off. The UAE talent regeneration, combined with the country's scale and its relations with nearby countries, will all help it to become the location of choice for nearshoring," it added.

A key trend in this year's GSLI is the criticality of talent regeneration. With the emergence and adoption of digital technologies, cost-centric service locations are at risk of losing their competitiveness to more developed and technologically advanced coun-

tries as more work and processes will be automated. Talent regeneration, therefore, will serve as the backbone of this shift.

"In an ever-changing global market landscape, where skills take precedence over cost advantages, a nation's true strength lies in its capacity to foster and unleash the potential of its talented people," says Rob Van Dale, Middle East and Africa Lead, Digital at Kearney.

While countries such as the

UAE and Saudi Arabia do not naturally have a cost advantage, we see that their considerable focus on talent regeneration is starting to pay off, and in a world where this is expected to become more important, coupled with their investments in digital resonance and an already attractive business environment, they may in the near future further increase their attractiveness for high skilled services catering to their region.

In an era of rapidly evolving technology and ever-changing trends, business services such as information technology, business process outsourcing, and engineering are increasingly being delivered across borders as companies seek to lower their costs, scale their talent, and become more efficient by using more of the global talent base. The global market for business services has also grown from US\$624bn in 2022 to US\$681bn in 2023,

which will increase the demand for such services.

India, China and Malaysia continue to lead thanks to their immense cost advantage, abundant talent pool, and strong skills. Notably, India and China also show signs of strength in talent regeneration capabilities making them global frontrunners in the availability of a tech-enabled workforce.

Geopolitical, economic, and technological forces have

spurred significant changes in the global labour market. Therefore, a country's ability to reskill and redeploy its workforce in response to changing market demands and technological disruptions is key to improving its attractiveness as an offshore location for business services. Talent regeneration will be the most crucial gamechanger as Industry 4.0 continues to reshape the demand for future skills and jobs.

About the 2023 GSLI and the country ranking methodology

The 78 countries in the 2023 Global Services Location Index were selected based on corporate input, current remote services activity, and government initiatives to promote the sector. They were evaluated against 52 metrics across four major categories: financial attractiveness, people skills and availability, business environment, and digital resonance.

This year, Kearney refocused the Index to be more forward-looking and captured digital resonance and talent regenerative capabilities and availability.

In the process, a few metrics were dropped from the people skills availability and digital resonance pillars that were focusing on traditional IT, and new digitally focused parameters were added. This along with global trends and key local disruptors led to marked differences in some countries' rankings.

Bank Muscat receives Best Bank Award 2023 from Euromoney

In recognition of its outstanding contributions to the banking sector, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the sultanate, has been awarded the Best Bank in Oman award by Euromoney.

Mohammed Sultan al Habsi, Chief at UAE Representative Office, Bank Muscat, received the award on behalf of the bank, a release stated.

Euromoney's decision was based on a number of different criteria including the product mix, financial performance, asset and revenue quality, customer satisfaction, and digital offerings. It also included growth in assets, profitability, geographic reach, strategic relationships, new business development and innovation in products.

The selection results came after extensive consultations with corporate financial executives and bankers, banking con-



sultants and analysts across the world.

The recognition further solidifies Bank Muscat's position as a leader in the banking sector in Oman and adds to the bank's long-standing success.

Over the years, Bank Muscat has remained committed to its strategy of providing the best

services and banking products to suit all segments of society and meet their aspirations.

With a wide range of retail, corporate, wholesale and investment banking services as well as asset management and private banking offerings, Bank Muscat provides its customers with reliable, dynamic and innovative

banking services and products, aiming to maintain market leadership.

Bank Muscat holds the distinction of being consistently voted as the Best Bank in Oman by prestigious local, regional and global institutions, including Global Finance, EMEA Finance and Meed.

The bank was ranked as well by Forbes Middle East as one of the Top 100 Listed Companies and Top 50 Banks in the region.

The bank is the largest bank in Oman by total assets and has consistently demonstrated its leadership in position in Oman. Bank Muscat announced recently its preliminary unaudited results for the first half of the year ending on June 30.

The bank posted a net profit of RO104.32mn for the period compared to RO99.26mn reported during the same period in 2022, an increase of 5.1%.

ahlibank's double cashback

As part of its endeavours to enhance customer experiences with exciting offers, ahlibank has announced an offer of up to 2% cashback on international transactions for all ahlibank credit card holders.

This falls in line with the bank's efforts to engage with its customers through generous rewards and innovative promotions.

Applicable from August 1 to August 31, the month-long campaign will offer customers the chance to get up to 2% cashback on international transactions.

A 1% cashback will be on international spending for all credit cards, in addition to the existing 1% which is already provided for the Signature and Infinite credit card holders. This would provide signature and infinite customers double the cashback on international spending on POS or online.

This lucrative offer is part of ahlibank's initiatives to engage with its customers through meaningful rewards, thereby strengthening relationships between the bank and its new or existing customers.

By giving them a chance to earn back when spending internationally, ahlibank aims to enhance the customer's experience at all times and be a preferred partner for their daily banking needs.

Commenting on the exciting offer, Muneer al Balushi, AGM - Head of Retail Distribution at ahlibank, pointed out that the bank always looks for new ways to keep its customer's loyalty intact.

Moreover, there is no better way to do it than by offering exciting and tangible rewards and promotions to them, he acknowledged.

"Offering a cashback on international transactions is truly

a value add, and we believe that our customers will receive this very well. Our goal is to improve the customer's banking experience by creating a dynamic banking environment that aligns with current trends in the global and local banking industry."

ahlibank looks to provide the best services that enhance its preferred status as one of the most preferred banks in the country. This campaign is an effective step that reflects the bank's contribution to its customers by enhancing their travel experiences.

ahlibank is keen to invest in meaningful banking solutions using the latest innovations to support its customers. The bank has earned a reputation for enabling its customers to benefit from the best services and products and to provide easy and secured banking solutions.

Oman's NSSG gains recognition for cybersecurity solutions

Following a resounding win at COMEX for Excellence in Technology, National Security Services Group (NSSG) is continuing to build its reputation, garnering recognition for providing customised cybersecurity solutions.

Showcasing its innovative drive through a range of Omani-designed solutions, the company's strategic vision and commitment to the advancement of the industry secured its place alongside some of the world's biggest technology names including Microsoft and Huawei.

A homegrown group united by a drive for innovation, NSSG has invested in creating a Research and Development team of Oman's brightest talents, which has resulted in the development of several in-house integrated cybersecurity solutions such as DCapsula, a trailblazing DMARC solution that represents a milestone in Omani ingenuity



and cybersecurity.

Other innovative products include HashStrike, a one-of-a-kind combination of carefully crafted software, powerful hardware, and big data analysis password auditing tool as well as PassRay, which is a solution designed to enhance an organization's password maturity

through powerful analytics and reporting.

"For almost a decade, we have been using our disruptive technology and passion for innovation to create a secure and resilient digital future for the sultanate, all the while keeping pace with the globalisation of the digital world," said Warith al

Maawali, acting CEO of NSSG.

"As our nation works towards the goals set in Oman's Vision 2040, our vision in parallel strives to ensure this journey remains safe and secure, fortifying the nation through security, and awareness, and harnessing the brilliance of our Omani talents."

The first CREST-accredited

organisation in MENA with ISO 27001 certification covering its internal network, data center, employees, physical security and penetration-testing operations, NSSG's cutting-edge solutions are enabling the digital transformation of entities across Oman and beyond.

Today, the company is provid-

ing the latest services in cybersecurity, managed security, emergency responses, advisory services and advanced training, offering a wide range of cybersecurity solutions.

It is also the first cybersecurity company in Oman approved by MTCIT as a Security Assessment Services provider.

Ooredoo's tourist plans for constant connectivity

Nothing marks the Khareef season in Dhofar better than sharing your rainy-day snaps, chatting with family and friends, and snuggling up to stream your favourite series while it is raining outside.

'Ooredoo has you covered with its revamped value-packed Tourist plans with more high-speed data and local and international calling minutes. The plans are for everyone, whether from Oman or abroad, as Ooredoo continues to check in on you and notices you and your needs,' Ooredoo stated in a release, while informing about tourist plans for the ongoing khareef season in Dhofar.

The tourist plans are available in all Ooredoo stores and give customers up to 25GB of data, unlimited local calls, and international calls and SMS to not less than 90 destinations worldwide.

Niger on brink of deadline to reverse coup

The ECOWAS bloc had given the troops that toppled President Bazoum a week to return him to power

Niamey, Niger - Pressure on the leaders of a coup in Niger mounted on Sunday with the approach of the west African bloc's deadline for the military to relinquish control or face possible armed intervention.

The ECOWAS bloc, chaired by regional military powerhouse and Niger's neighbour Nigeria, had given the troops that toppled President Mohamed Bazoum on July 26 a week to return him to power. ECOWAS military chiefs of staff have agreed on a plan for a possible intervention to respond to the crisis, the latest of several coups to hit Africa's Sahel region since 2020.

"We want diplomacy to work, and we want this message clearly transmitted to them (the military) that we are giving them every opportunity to reverse what they have done," ECOWAS commissioner Abdel-Fatau Musah said on Friday.

But he warned that 'all the elements that will go into any eventual intervention have been worked out', including how and when force would be deployed.

Niger's military leaders have said they will meet force with force. In the dusty alleyways of Niamey's Boukoki neighbourhood, the prospect of an armed



A woman holds the image of ousted Niger President Mohamed Bazoum, 63, who has been held by coup plotters with his family in his official Niamey residence since July 26, during a protest outside the Niger Embassy, in Paris on Saturday (AFP)

intervention by ECOWAS is met with defiance.

"We're going to fight for this revolution. We're not going to retreat faced with the enemy,

we're determined," said Boukoki resident Adama Oumarou.

"We were waiting for this coup for a long time. When it arrived, we breathed a sigh of re-

lief," she said.

Algeria, itself an economic and military power on the continent which shares a long land border with Niger, has warned

against a military solution.

"We categorically refuse any military intervention," Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said in a television inter-

view on Saturday evening, adding that such action would be 'a direct threat to Algeria'.

He stressed 'there will be no solution without us (Algeria). We are the first people affected'.

"Algeria shares nearly a thousand kilometres" of border with Niger, he said.

"What is the situation today in countries that have experienced military intervention?," he said, pointing to Libya and Syria.

Former colonial power France, with which Niger's new rulers broke military ties after taking power, said it would 'firmly' back whatever course of action

2012, with France and the United States stationing around 1,500 and 1,000 troops in the country, respectively.

Anti-French sentiment

Yet anti-French sentiment in the region is on the rise, while Russian activity, often through the Wagner mercenary group, has grown. Moscow has warned against armed intervention from outside Niger.

Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, relies heavily on foreign aid that could be pulled if Bazoum is not reinstated as head of state, Paris has warned.

Bazoum, 63, has been held by the coup leaders with his family in his official Niamey residence since July 26.

In a column in *The Washington Post* on Thursday - his first lengthy statement since his detention - Bazoum said a successful putsch would 'have devastating consequences for our country, our region and the entire world'.

Bazoum won an election in 2021 that ushered in Niger's first-ever transfer of power from one civilian government to another. AFP

We were waiting for this coup for a long time. When it arrived, we breathed a sigh of relief

ADAMA OUMAROU

ECOWAS took after the deadline expired. Niger has played a key part in Western strategies to combat militant insurgencies that have plagued the Sahel since

Russia strikes Ukraine blood centre, aeronautics group, says Zelensky

Kyiv, Ukraine - Moscow escalated its attacks in Ukraine on Saturday, with President Volodymyr Zelensky denouncing a deadly strike on a blood transfusion centre as a 'war crime'.

A separate strike struck a key factory, both attacks coming just hours after Kyiv hit a Russian tanker in the Kerch Strait.

The attacks were the latest since Moscow exited a deal last month that had ensured Ukrainian grain exports despite the ongoing conflict.

Russian forces struck the blood transfusion centre in the Kharkiv region of northeast Ukraine, Zelensky said, adding that 'dead and wounded are reported'. A 'guided air bomb' hit the centre in Kupiansk, a city a few dozen kilometres from the Russian border, said Zelensky.

"Rescuers are extinguishing the fire," he wrote on social media, adding: "This war crime alone says everything about



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (AFP)

Russian aggression."

The strike came shortly after Zelensky said Russian missiles had hit a facility of the Ukrainian aeronautics group Motor Sich, a maker of plane and helicopter engines and other components.

It is one of several companies requisitioned by the government since Moscow's invasion.

Strikes also hit the region of Khmelnytskyi in western Ukraine, around 300km (190

miles) southwest of Kyiv.

The region, home to a major Ukrainian airbase, has been regularly targeted by Russian strikes in recent months. In his evening address, Zelensky remained defiant, saying that 'no matter how many such Russian attacks there are, they will still do nothing for the enemy'.

Earlier Saturday, Ukraine claimed it 'blew up' a Russian tanker, the 'SIG', that was trans-

porting fuel for Russian troops, a Ukrainian security source told AFP.

The tanker was hit at around 11:20pm (2020 GMT) on Friday south of the Kerch Strait, Russia's Federal Agency for Sea and Inland Water Transport said.

The ship was holed at the waterline in the area of the engine room but was still afloat, the agency said.

In a video obtained by AFP purporting to show the attack, a vessel is seen approaching a large ship before the connection cuts off. The Ukrainian source said the 'successful special operation', which involved a naval drone and explosives, was carried out jointly with the navy in Ukrainian territorial waters.

The SIG oil and chemical tanker is under US sanctions for supplying jet fuel to Russian forces in Syria, who are supporting President Bashar al-Assad.

AFP

US prosecutors seek protective order citing ex-president's post



Donald Trump (AFP)

Washington, US - Prosecutors have asked a US judge to limit information Donald Trump can publicly discuss regarding the latest indictments against him, citing a threatening post by the ex-president that his campaign defended on Saturday as 'political speech'.

Jack Smith, the special counsel overseeing the charges against Trump for seeking to overturn the 2020 election, filed a motion on Friday urging a federal judge to impose a protective order to prevent the former president from revealing evidentiary details about the case.

The judge, Tanya Chutkan, then issued a weekend order to Trump's legal team that they respond to the government's motion by 5pm (2100 GMT) on Monday.

The fast-moving developments came in the wake of Trump appearing to defy a judge who had warned him not to dis-

cuss the case with any potential witnesses, and his posting of what is being seen as a threat on his social media platform.

"If you go after me, I'm coming after you!" Trump wrote in all caps on Friday on Truth Social.

Trump, the frontrunner for the Republican nomination in the 2024 presidential election, has pleaded not guilty to the four election conspiracy and obstruction charges - the most serious in the multiple cases he faces.

His social media post was cited and displayed in Smith's

motion to US District Court Judge Chutkan, which referenced Trump's history of attacking people who were connected to criminal cases against him.

"All the proposed order seeks to prevent is the improper dissemination or use of discovery materials, including to the public," prosecutors wrote in the motion. "Such a restriction is particularly important in this case because the defendant has previously issued public statements on social media regarding witnesses, judges, attorneys, and others associated with legal matters pending against him."

The motion went on to say that if the defendant were to issue public posts about details or grand jury transcripts obtained during the discovery process, 'it could have a harmful, chilling effect on witnesses or adversely affect the fair administration of justice in this case'.

AFP

Turkish drone kills PKK military official in Iraq

Sulaimaniyah, Iraq - A Turkish drone strike killed a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) military official in northern Iraq on Sunday, officials in the autonomous Kurdistan region said.

The 'Turkish army drone' targeted a car with PKK fighters in the district of Chamchamal, near Iraqi Kurdistan's second city Sulaimaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan's counter-terrorism services said. "A PKK military official was killed, and another fighter was wounded," it added in a statement.

Since 1984, the PKK has waged an insurgency in Turkey that has claimed tens of thousands of lives, and Ankara has long maintained dozens of military bases inside northern Iraq where it regularly launches operations against its fighters. The Turkish army rarely comments on its strikes against PKK bases in the mountains of

northern Iraq.

Ankara and its Western allies classify the PKK as a 'terrorist' organisation. At the end of July, four PKK fighters were killed in the same region in a drone strike also attributed to Turkey by Iraqi Kurdistan.

Both the Iraqi federal authorities and the Kurdistan regional government have been accused of tolerating Turkey's military activities to preserve their close economic ties.

However, officials have repeatedly condemned Turkish operations in Iraq, describing them as a violation of the country's sovereignty and the rights of its civilians.

On July 25, the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani referred to an 'upcoming visit' by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but it has yet to provide further details.

AFP

Vote clears Senegal opposition figures for 2024 poll

Dakar, Senegal - Senegal's parliament passed a vote on Saturday that effectively restored the right of two key opposition deputies to run in the country's presidential election next year.

The vote cleared any person convicted but then either pardoned or amnestied to run for office, paving the way for Khalifa Sall and Karim Wade, who would otherwise have been ineligible. The proposal was passed by 124 votes to one.

Once the text is officially promulgated, which seems likely given it was backed by the government, both men will be free to run for office.

Sall, a former mayor of Dakar, and Wade, son of former president Abdoulaye Wade, are both considered leading contenders for the presidential vote, due in February 2024.

They were prevented from running in the last presidential election, in 2019, because of separate convictions for financial crimes.

The 2019 victor Macky Sall,



Karim Wade, son of former Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade (AFP)

who is completing his second term in office, ended months of speculation by announcing in July that he would not seek a third term, the legality of which had been disputed.

Some observers believe that Saturday's parliamentary vote may help ease the tension that has gripped the country in recent months.

Sonko's campaign

Senegal until recently enjoyed a

reputation of relative stability in the region.

But since 2021 it has been shaken by sometimes deadly political violence linked to the judicial woes of leading opposition figure Ousmane Sonko.

The way leading opposition figures such as Wade and Sall had been ruled out of the electoral race because of their convictions also sparked political tensions.

On Monday, Sonko, widely

considered another leading contender for next year's presidential poll, was indicted and detained and his party dissolved.

The vote passed by parliament cleared any person convicted but then either pardoned or amnestied to run for office

A government spokesman accused him and his followers of having fomented insurrection and promoted violence.

It now seems more likely than ever that Sonko, who has already been convicted in two other cases, will be unable to contest the election. In this context then, the presidential race seems more than usually open.

Contenders

Karim Wade, 54, a former min-

ister during his father's presidency between 2000 and 2012, seems to be back in the running for the top office.

His six-year prison conviction in 2015 was for illegal enrichment. He served three years before being pardoned by President Sall in 2016, after which he went into exile.

Khalifa Sall, 67, served as mayor of Dakar from 2009, but he was detained in 2017, accused of embezzlement and sentenced to five years in jail the following year. He was released in 2017, also having received a presidential pardon.

All three opposition figures have denounced the judicial proceedings against them as politically motivated.

President Sall meanwhile, opened talks with a part of the opposition in May, agreeing to discuss the eligibility of Khalifa Sall and Wade for political office.

Those involved in the talks agreed on this latest change to the law as the solution.

AFP

Pope Francis winds up visit to Portugal with outdoor Mass

Lisbon, Portugal - Pope Francis celebrated an open-air Mass before a huge crowd on Sunday at a waterside park near Lisbon to wrap up an international jamboree of Catholic youth.

Around 1.5mn people attended the service at the Parque Tejo park on the eastern outskirts of the Portuguese capital, the Vatican said.

The crowd waved national flags and cheered as the 86-year-old pope arrived at the park, which was built for the occasion on a former landfill site.

Many had camped out overnight in sleeping bags or floor mats after attending a vigil in the park held by the pope.

In his homily, Francis thanked the youth for taking part in the festival, calling them 'the hope of a different world'.

He also urged the crowd to extend their 'affection and prayers' to those who could not come 'because of armed conflicts and wars'.

"There are many of them in our world. In thinking of this continent, I feel great sorrow for beloved Ukraine, which continued to suffer greatly," he added to applause.

With little shade in the park, pilgrims protected themselves from the blazing sun with umbrellas or makeshift tents made from sheets.

Portugal's state weather agency has issued a 'red' alert - its highest level - for Lisbon on Sunday due to the heat, with temperatures forecast to hit 41 degrees Celsius (106 degrees Fahrenheit). "It's extraordinary to be able to be here to see our Pope Francis who has managed to gather people from the whole



Pope Francis waves after celebrating the closing mass of the World Youth Days (WYD) in Tejo Park, Lisbon, on Sunday (AFP)

It's extraordinary to be able to be here to see our Pope Francis who has managed to gather people from the whole world

PIMENTEL GOMES

world," Pimentel Gomes, a 52-year-old priest from Brazil, told AFP as he sat for breakfast before the Mass.

'Touching'

The pope, who now uses a

wheelchair or walking stick to get around, will meet with the thousands of event volunteers on Sunday afternoon to thank them before flying back to Rome.

This was his first foreign trip since he spent nine nights in hospital after undergoing hernia surgery in June. Charlotte Bordas, a 26-year-old who came from Mont-de-Marsan in southwestern France, said she was moved to see the pope had made the trip despite his health problems.

"We see he's really tired, weakened, but he still took the time to come to see us, talk to us, and it is particularly touching for me to see him," she told AFP.

Francis arrived in Portugal on

Wednesday for World Youth Day, a six-day international Catholic jamboree featuring festive, cultural and religious events.

It comes as Francis attempts to galvanise young Catholics at a time when secularism and priest paedophilia scandals cause some to abandon pews in Europe. The pope met 13 victims of clerical abuse at the Holy See's diplomatic mission in Lisbon during his first day in Portugal.

"The meeting was held in an atmosphere of intense listening and lasted more than an hour," the Vatican said.

'Moment of joy'

He also met 15 youths from war-

torn Ukraine's delegation, visited a community centre in Lisbon's impoverished Serafina neighbourhood and prayed at the shrine of Fatima north of the Portuguese capital.

"It has been an extraordinary moment of joy, of energy, with remarkable speeches by the Holy Father, with very important messages," Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa told public television RTP before Sunday's Mass.

Francis has received an enthusiastic welcome throughout his visit to the Catholic-majority country, with well-wishers lining the streets to see him go by.

AFP



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visiting a major munitions factory at an undisclosed location in North Korea (AFP)

N Korea leader Kim Jong Un inspects weapons factories: KCNA

Seoul, South Korea - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visited several major arms factories this week, including facilities producing engines for strategic cruise missiles, and called for increased weapons production, state media reported on Sunday.

The three-day inspection of the factories comes less than two weeks after Kim attended a major military parade with Russian and Chinese officials, showcasing North Korea's newest weapons, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and spy drones.

Kim visited a factory producing engines for armed unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as production lines of shells for super-large-calibre multiple rocket launchers and transporter-erector-launchers, the Korean Central News Agency reported.

During the engine factory visit, Kim called for 'steadily increasing the performance and reliability of the engine' and 'rapidly expanding its production capacity', KCNA said.

Kim also highlighted the

modernisation of small arms as 'the most important and urgent matter in making war preparations... in keeping with the changed aspect of war', the agency reported.

The inspections come as South Korea and the United States prepare for major joint military drills later this month.

North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for an invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take 'overwhelming' action in response.

Last month, Pyongyang held a major military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War armistice, with analysts describing the event as 'the largest, most overt North Korean display of nuclear-capable systems'.

North Korea also recently held a large defence expo, with Kim giving a tour to the visiting Russian defence minister through a vast display of the country's newest and most advanced weaponry, including ballistic missiles and spy drones.

AFP

At least 30 missing in shipwrecks off Italy

Rome, Italy - At least 30 migrants are missing following two shipwrecks off the Italian island of Lampedusa, according to survivor testimony, the UN's migration agency said on Sunday.

Around 28 people were reported lost at sea by survivors on one boat, while three were reported missing from the second, after both went down in stormy weather on Saturday, said the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Both were rickety iron boats believed to have set off from Sfax in Tunisia on Thursday.

Cultural mediators with the IOM believed there were 'at least 30 people missing' after speaking to the survivors, press officer Flavio Di Giacomo told AFP.

An investigation into the shipwrecks has been opened in Agrigento, on the nearby Italian island of Sicily. Agrigento's chief of police Emanuele Ricifari said the traffickers would have known rough seas were forecast.

"Whoever allowed them, or forced them, to leave with this sea is an unscrupulous criminal lunatic," he told Italian media.

"Rough seas are forecast for the next few days. Let's hope they stop. It's sending them to slaughter with this sea," he said.

AFP

21 injured, buildings collapse as 5.4 quake hits east China

Pingyuan, China - A shallow 5.4-magnitude earthquake struck eastern China in the early hours of Sunday, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said, with state media reporting at least 21 people injured and dozens of buildings collapsed.

The quake, which struck at 2:33am (1833 GMT Saturday), hit 26km (16 miles) south of the city of Dezhou in Shandong province, at a depth of 10km, the USGS said.

It was the strongest to hit the province in more than a decade, state-run tabloid the *Global Times* said. The quake was felt as far away as Beijing and Tianjin, as

well as in Shanghai, about 800km (500 miles) from the epicentre.

Videos on social media showed shaking light fixtures, trembling ground and people evacuating their buildings, with one clip showing people walking past bricks scattered on the ground.

"The tremor was so strong... during the earthquake my head was shaking on the pillow, I thought I was having a nightmare," one person posted on social media platform Weibo from Shandong's neighbouring Hebei province.

USGS's PAGER system, which



A damaged house is seen in Pingyuan county, Dezhou city, in China's eastern Shandong province, on Sunday (AFP)

provides preliminary assessments on the impact of earthquakes, issued a red alert, estimating extensive damage

and some casualties were probable based on previous quake data.

Citing Shandong authorities,

state broadcaster CCTV said there were at least 21 injured and that 126 houses or other buildings had 'collapsed' from the earthquake, which was followed by 52 aftershocks.

An AFP team saw cracked walls and bricks strewn on the ground near the epicentre of the quake in Shandong's rural and sparsely populated Pingyuan county, but the damage appeared relatively minor.

Locals helped with the cleanup operation in one village, with a group of four elderly women putting a low brick wall back together outside an overgrown yard.

Deng Hongqiang, 55, who lives outside the village but came back to prop up the wall on his uninhabited property, told AFP he had been jolted awake by the quake. "At the time, all I knew was the ground was shaking... so I went outside," he said.

There was 'no way' to repair his old house in the area, he said. "We'll have to demolish and rebuild." China's Ministry of Emergency Management has launched a level-four emergency response and sent a team to Shandong province to lead the rescue work, according to state news agency Xinhua.

AFP

Japan condemns Russia nuclear threat on Hiroshima anniversary

Tokyo, Japan - Japan's prime minister hit out at Russian threats to use nuclear weapons as the country marked the 78th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on Sunday.

Around 140,000 people died in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and 74,000 in Nagasaki three days later, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on the two Japanese cities days before the end of World War II.

"Japan, as the only nation to have suffered atomic bombings in war, will continue efforts towards a nuclear-free world," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said at a ceremony in Hiroshima.

"The path towards it is becoming increasingly difficult because of deepening divisions in the international community over nuclear disarmament and Russia's nuclear threat," he said.

"Given this situation, it is all



People attend the ceremony to mark the 78th anniversary of the world's first atomic bomb attack, at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima on Sunday (AFP)

the more important to bring back international momentum towards realisation of a nuclear-free world," he said.

"Devastation brought to Hiroshima and Nagasaki by nuclear

weapons can never be repeated," said Kishida, whose family comes from Hiroshima.

Kishida's comments echoed those of UN chief Antonio Guterres, who issued a statement on

the Hiroshima anniversary saying that 'some countries are recklessly rattling the nuclear sabre once again, threatening to use these tools of annihilation'.

"In the face of these threats,

the global community must speak as one. Any use of nuclear weapons is unacceptable," Guterres said.

At the ceremony, thousands of people - survivors, relatives and foreign dignitaries from a record 111 countries - prayed for those killed or wounded in the bombing and called for world peace.

Russia and Belarus were not invited to the ceremony for the second straight year because of the Ukraine crisis.

Participants, many dressed in black, offered a silent prayer at 8:15am (2315 GMT Saturday) when the first nuclear weapon used in wartime was dropped.

Nuclear disarmament

Kishida hosted the G7 summit in the city earlier this year.

Kishida has tried to move nu-

clear disarmament up the global agenda, taking leaders of wealthy democracies to Hiroshima's peace park memorials and museum. However, there is little appetite to reduce stockpiles with Russia repeatedly issuing thinly veiled warnings that Moscow could use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, as well as repeated North Korean missile tests and stalling efforts towards non-proliferation.

Earlier this month, more than 100 medical journals across the world issued a rare joint call for urgent action to eliminate nuclear weapons, warning that the threat of nuclear catastrophe was 'great and growing'.

The anniversary follows the US release of blockbuster *Oppenheimer*, a biopic about J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the creators of atomic weapons.

AFP

India’s capital halts plan to hide street dogs for G20 summit

New Delhi, India - India’s capital has called a halt on plans to catch and hide thousands of stray dogs before world leaders arrive in the megacity for next month’s G20 summit, a local official said on Sunday.

New Delhi’s municipal government announced on Thursday it would round up canines outside boutique hotels and popular tourist hotspots, and keep them at animal sterilisation centres until the summit was over.

But the policy was abruptly withdrawn over the weekend, a

local official told AFP on Sunday, without explaining why.

Local media reported that the dog-catching scheme had aroused opposition from Delhi residents and animal rights activists. More than 60,000 stray dogs live on Delhi’s streets according to India’s Livestock Census of 2012, the most recent available government figures.

Sterilisation campaigns have been regularly employed by local authorities to keep the canine population in check, though dog packs remain pres-



Street dogs take a nap in front of commuters waiting for their bus at a bus stop in New Delhi on Friday (AFP)

ent in parks and residential neighbourhoods around the city. Many of Delhi’s strays are beloved by their adopted neighbourhoods despite lacking formal owners, with some dogs clothed in special canine jackets to keep warm during the city’s harsh winters.

But they are also a hazard to humans, with local media regularly reporting on the mauling of young children by aggressive dog packs across the country.

Roughly 17mn dog bites are reported across India each year and the World Health Organi-

zation says that nearly 20,000 people nationwide die of rabies annually.

The Delhi metropolitan area, home to around 30mn people, has been on an intense beautification drive since India assumed the G20 presidency last year.

Authorities have cleared illegal slums near summit venues and revamped major arterial routes on the city’s gridlocked roads ahead of September’s summit, which will host leaders of the world’s top economies.

AFP

At least 28 killed after train derails in southern Pakistan

Nawabshah, Pakistan - At least 28 people were killed on Sunday when an express train derailed in southern Pakistan, the railway minister said, with an emergency declared at local hospitals struggling to deal with dozens of injured.

Accidents and derailments occur frequently on the country’s antiquated railway system, which has nearly 7,500km (4,600 miles) of track and carries more than 80mn passengers a year. “This is quite a big accident,” railway minister Khawaja Saad Rafique told reporters.

“According to the information so far, 28 passengers have been killed and many are injured.”

Rafique said at least 1,000 passengers were aboard the Hazara Express when it derailed on a section of track where no faults had been reported.

“There can be two reasons: first that it was a mechanical fault, or the fault was created - it might be a sabotage. We will investigate it.”

The derailment happened near Sahara railway station close to Nawabshah city in the southern Sindh province.

“Eight coaches have derailed,” Mohsin Syal, a railway official, told local HUM News.

The railway minister said an emergency had been declared at local hospitals as doctors struggled to treat the injured.

There were chaotic scenes at the Nawabshah Trauma Centre as ambulances and private cars ferried the injured for treatment.

One man leapt from the back



Paramilitary rangers and volunteers inspect the carriages at the accident site following the derailment of a passenger train in Nawabshah on Sunday (AFP)

There can be two reasons: first that it was a mechanical fault, or the fault was created - it might be a sabotage

KHAWAJA SAAD RAFIQUE

of an ambulance clutching a child, his clothes soaked in blood, while a woman moaned in pain as she was carried in on a

stretcher.

“We don’t know what happened, we were just sitting inside,” said one dazed woman.

At the accident site outside Nawabshah, dozens of cars, tractors, rickshaws and motorcycles could be seen parked on a road that runs alongside the track.

Volunteers were wading through a canal that separates the road from the railway line to help, and lifting the injured to get them assistance.

Relief train
Some passenger compartments

were upright but off the tracks, while others lay on their side, mangled steel from the undercarriage twisted and buckled.

Senior police official Younis Chandio told Geo News from the site that some passengers remained trapped in one carriage.

Ijaz Shah, a provincial railway official, told AFP that a relief train had been dispatched to the site.

The Hazara Express is a daily passenger train that leaves the port city of Karachi in the south and takes around 33 hours to reach Havelian in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, some

1,600km north.

In June 2021 two trains collided near Daharki in Sindh, killing at least 65 people and injuring about 150 others.

In that accident, an express derailed onto the opposite track, and a second passenger train crashed into the wreckage roughly a minute later.

At least 75 passengers burnt to death in a fire aboard the Tezgam express train in October 2019, while a two-train collision at Ghotki killed more than 100 people in 2005.

AFP



A painted X is seen representing the location of a body of one of the two men killed in an accident in Limoges, central France, on Sunday (AFP)

Two people dead after police chase scooter in France

Limoges, France - A teenager riding a scooter and his adult passenger were killed in France after an encounter with police, during which officers said on Sunday the pair fled a patrol and crashed into another vehicle.

The incident comes just weeks after France was engulfed by its worst rioting for years following the police shooting of Nahel, an unarmed 17-year-old of Arab origin, during a road stop.

In the latest deadly incident, police sources say the moped fled at the sight of a police patrol that was preparing to stop it, with officers giving chase before abandoning the pursuit in Limoges, western France.

Police claim the moped then jumped a red traffic light and collided with a car, killing the 16-year-old rider instantly and injuring the adult passenger, who later died of his injuries in hospital. Limoges city hall said the car was carrying a father and his young children, who were ‘shocked and traumatised’.

On the city’s General Leclerc avenue, a major thoroughfare lined with residential buildings, the roadway was strewn with sawdust and crosses indicating the positions of the bodies, according to an AFP journalist at the scene. One of the crosses, surrounded by traces of blood, was 30 or 40 metres from the point of impact between the two vehicles.

Police sources said that the pair were riding a powerful Yamaha TMAX scooter and that police ‘quickly put an end’ to the pursuit, ‘judging the situation too dangerous’.

The regional authorities in Haute-Vienne declined to comment on the case, referring the matter to the Limoges prosecutor’s office, which is expected to release a statement later.

“Our thoughts are obviously with the families of the victims to whom we offer our deepest condolences,” the mayor of Limoges, Emile-Roger Lombertie, said in a statement.

AFP

24 people dead in Morocco road accident, say officials

Rabat, Morocco - One of Morocco’s worst-ever road accidents left 24 people dead on Sunday in the central province of Azilal, officials said.

They were killed when a minibus carrying passengers to a weekly market in the town of Demnate overturned on a bend, the local authorities said. They added that an investigation has begun.

Accidents are frequent on the roads of Morocco and other North African countries, which see thousands of road deaths annually.

In March 11 people, mostly agricultural workers, died when their minibus slammed into a tree after the driver lost control in the rural town of Brachoua, local officials said at the time. Many poorer citizens use coaches and minibuses to travel in rural areas.

In August last year, 23 people were killed and 36 injured when their bus overturned on

a bend east of Morocco’s economic capital Casablanca.

An average of 3,500 road deaths and 12,000 injuries are recorded annually in Morocco, according to the National Road Safety Agency, with an average of 10 deaths per day.

The figure last year was around 3,200.

Authorities have set out to halve the mortality rate by 2026 ever since the worst bus accident in the country’s history left 42 dead in 2012.

On July 19 in neighbouring Algeria 34 people were killed when a passenger bus collided head-on with a pickup truck carrying fuel cans and burst into flames, deep in the southern Sahara region, officials said.

The North African country’s deadliest road crash in years also left 12 others injured, many with severe burns, Algeria’s civil defence agency said.

AFP

No sign of mass Pakistan protests after Khan’s jailing

Attock, Pakistan - Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan’s three-year sentence for graft prompted scattered rallies around the country, but there was no sign of any mass uprising on Sunday despite his call for supporters to protest.

His imprisonment has raised fresh concerns of violence ahead of an election due later this year - that he is now disqualified from contesting - and has cast doubt on the fairness of any vote that excludes him.

His lawyers complained on Sunday they were being denied access to him for consultations so they can mount urgent legal challenges against his conviction.

They also raised concern for his confinement at Attock Jail, established 100 years ago on the outskirts of historical Attock city, around 60km (40 miles) west of the capital, Islamabad.

“He is a 70-year-old man and a former elected prime minister so legally he should be given a better class (of conditions) inside the jail,” said Gohar Khan, a



Supporters of Imran Khan shout anti-government slogans during a protest in Quetta on Saturday (AFP)

member of his legal team.

Officials from his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party said around 50 supporters had been detained overnight as police moved swiftly against protests after Khan was arrested and whisked into jail.

At a court hearing not attended by the ex-premier on Sat-

urday, a judge found him guilty of graft in relation to gifts he received while prime minister and sentenced him to three years in jail. Anyone convicted of a criminal offence is disqualified from contesting elections in Pakistan, and parliament is likely to be dissolved in the next two weeks, just before it completes its term.

A general election is due to be held by mid-November, but there is speculation the polls could be delayed following the release on Saturday of the country’s latest census results, which necessitates the redrawing of constituencies under Pakistani law.

Khan’s arrest and detention for three days in connection with

the same case in May, sparked deadly violence when his supporters took to the streets in the tens of thousands, clashing with police.

In the aftermath of his release, PTI has been targeted by a crackdown with thousands of arrests, reports of intimidation and muzzling of the press.

Khan was prime minister until April last year, when he was ousted in a vote of no-confidence he says was engineered by the country’s powerful military.

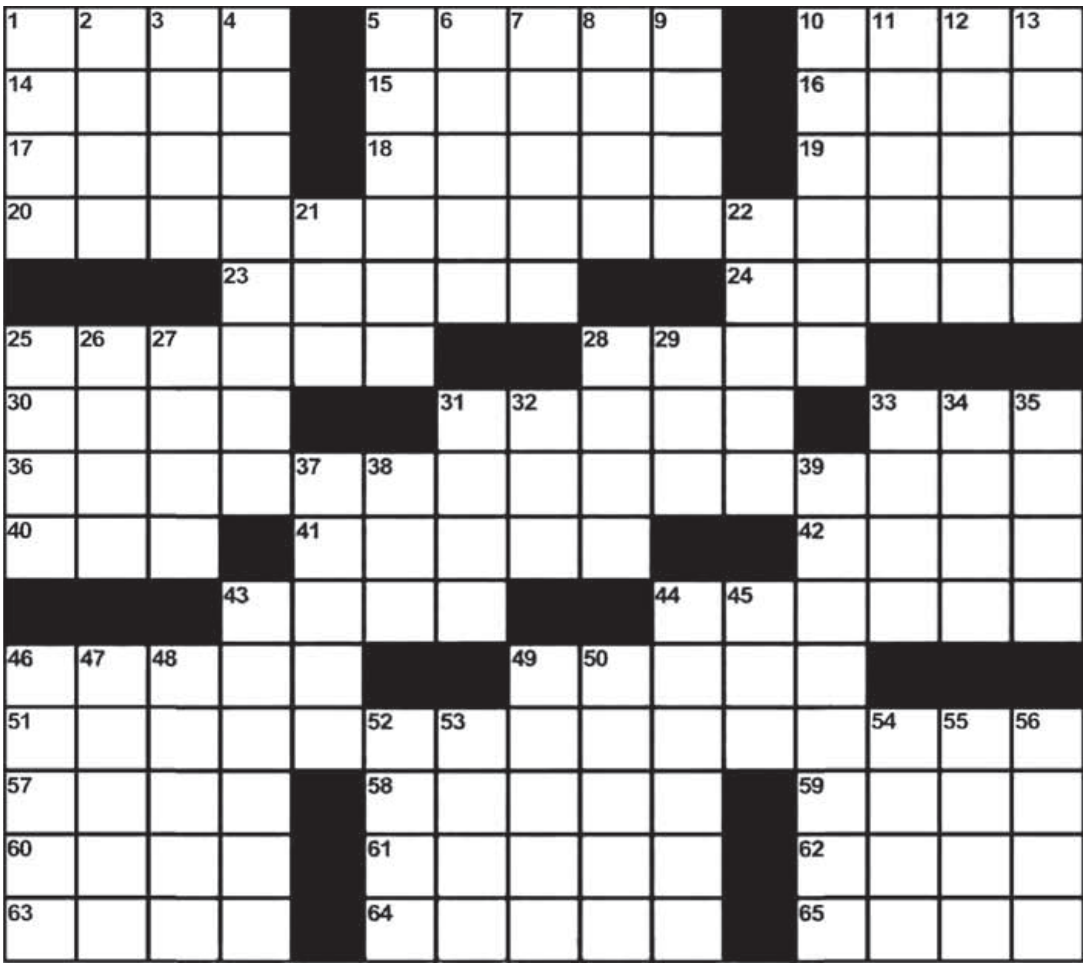
Soon after police picked him up from his home in Lahore on Saturday, a pre-recorded video was released on Khan’s social media accounts calling for his supporters to protest in force.

“I have just one request and appeal, that you are not to sit silently at home,” he said.

“This is a war for justice, for your rights, for your freedom... chains don’t just fall off, they have to be broken. You must continue peaceful protest until you get your rights.”

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1) Quite some distance off
5) Type of cheese
10) Clothes-info locales
14) Longest arm bone
15) Man of fables
16) Son of Isaac and Re-bekah
17) Punjab princess
18) Electric-car company
19) Abounding
20) Three things after "space"
23) Loud, in music
24) Food that never decays
25) Historical records
28) Speak indistinctly
30) Naval commando
31) "The 12 Days of Christmas" musician
33) African antelope
36) Two things after "space"
40) Bothered (with "at")
41) Slightly wet
42) Border order?
43) Give a Bronx cheer
44) Substance found in flour
46) Evil nation in the Bible
49) Pale
51) Three things after "space"
57) Honky-__ piano
58) "Four Quartets" poet T.S.
59) Deli condiment
60) Flip-a-coin test answer
61) Distribute proportion-ately
62) Affirm positively
63) "Don't overdo it"
64) Borgnine's "From Here to Eternity" role
65) Bird's home
- DOWN
- 1) Mystic enveloper
2) Patriotic symbol
3) "Interview With the Vam-pire" author
4) Drops from above
5) Goatlike creatures of myth
6) Least big
7) Bring forth
8) Arias, e.g.
9) Petty clash
10) Product of a good horror film
11) Like much of the world's population
12) Foot-in-mouth incident
13) Full of beef fat
21) Army rank (Abbr.)
22) Make butter
25) On a yacht, perhaps
26) Teller's call
27) Base of the neck
28) Barbecue rod
29) Zodiac lion
31) Two fives, for one
32) Neutral possessive
33) Ganges access
34) "Good going!"
35) Very familiar with
37) End of the Greek alpha-bet
38) Something fishy
39) One who falls for a star?
43) Professional horse rider
44) Depressed urban area
45) Large pasture
46) Not glossy, as a photo
47) Public square, in ancient Greece
48) Biological subdivision
49) Cocked, as a hat
50) Chases away, as a fly
52) Severely hearing-im-paired

NOTE PAD

C	H	U	M	A	U	G		U	P	P	E	R
R	I	L	E	S	N	U	B	G	R	A	T	A
E	T	N	A	T	A	M	E	L	O	R	D	S
S	C	A	T	T	E	R	B	R	A	I	N	S
S	H	E		B	O	R	M	O	L	U	G	I
			B	O	O		I	F	S		M	A
E	S	P	Y	I	C	O	N	A	T	O	N	E
S	P	R	E	A	D	O	N	E	S	W	I	N
S	L	O	S	H	A	E	R	O	D	Y	E	S
E	A	T	A	R	C		F	L	Y			
S	T	E	M		C	H	A	S	T	E	A	A
			S	C	R	A	M	B	L	E	D	E
O	U	T	G	O		A	L	A	N		T	R
F	R	E	E	S		N	E	V	E		C	E
			F	I	R	E	S		R	E	D	S

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
If you've been bored lately, have no fear. Sure, celebrations have become a bit of a foreign concept to you, but that's about to end when some very good news comes your way. It might be about you or it might be about a close friend, but either way it's going to put a huge smile on your face. You have everything you need to create a special event, so why not make it happen? Don't stop to get permission from anyone. Make it a nice surprise!

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
Things are changing in the life of someone you care deeply about, and it's still not quite clear to this person whether these will be good changes or bad. They're feeling stressed and it's affecting your relationship. But instead of getting upset with them, help them. You can be a very calming influence to them right now, and you can show them how to hang in there until their life gets a little calmer. They need someone to remind them that things will be okay, and you can be that person.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
A foe's surprising victory over you has thrown you for quite a loop, and your confidence could be shaken. But things like this happen in waves, and you should just tell yourself that they were overdue for a win after all their losses. Instead of being jealous of them or worried about your superior status, be glad that this person gets their time in the sun. It will make things all the more satisfying when you beat them next time. You'll love the challenge and victory will be very sweet.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
Follow the example of a friend who's started tightening their financial belt. Even if your current money situation is just fine and dandy, it certainly wouldn't do you any harm to put a lock on your wallet for a while. In addition, your friend will appreciate the gesture. It will help make socializing with them a lot easier too. If you're both working with the same budget, it will be easier to find something fun that makes everyone feel comfortable and happy.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
You need to push things a little more in one of your relationships. You've been patient long enough waiting for them to wake up to what is possible. And since they show little if any sign of doing so, it's up to you to show them the light. It's time for you to take a little risk. Be vulnerable and open about your feelings, but be careful not to put forth any demands. Pressure isn't a good element to add to this equation. All you have to do is talk.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
It is one thing to hold on to your principles, but it is quite another to hold on to idealistic notions about how people should behave. The world is not always a friendly place, and that's just a fact. It's a fact that is sad and unfortunate, but you have to admit it and factor it into your plans today. It's not about thinking negatively or assuming the worst. It's about being realistic and realizing that people want to know what's in it for them.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
Today, you could either meet or reconnect with someone who changes your opinion about an issue that you never though you'd budge on! Your mind is open and you're intellectually curious, so the timing is perfect. Plus, they aren't going to preach at you. They know that won't get them anywhere. You will discover that you were either wrong all these years or you've grown to become a person with a different perspective than the one you used to have.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
Who knew that someone's absence could make you feel so good? Don't be ashamed to breathe a sigh of relief when someone you don't like very much isn't on the scene today (and may perhaps never bother you again). It's not like you wish them ill; it's just that they add way too much stress to your life, and you don't need it. You don't have to share your feelings with other people. It's not nice to talk about people who aren't around to defend themselves. Just be happy and grateful.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
Even though you won't be moving into any new territory today, you most certainly won't be bored! You'll be among familiar faces who offer no friction or disagreement. A spirit of commonality will be present all day long since you'll be with people who have the same values you do. And even if you test the situation by making a controversial statement, everyone will see through the act and call your bluff. Expect a lovely harmony wherever you go.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
It's okay if you're feeling a little more sensitive than usual today. Don't be self-conscious about it. It's to be expected, what with everything that's been going on. Don't beat yourself up if you snap at someone's innocent comment. It's important to be aware of your feelings and just let yourself feel them. Pushing them aside or pretending that everything is fine and dandy might make other people more comfortable, but it won't help you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these is the name for a small purse or bag, originally of network but later of silk, rayon, etc.?
- A. Reticule
B. Canticle
C. Ridicule
D. Particle
02. When is a stirrup cup tradition-ally served?
- A. At the start of a foxhunt
B. After mucking out the stables
C. During a greyhound race
D. At the end of wedding celebra-tions
03. If the numbers from 1 to 10 are multiplied by each other, which of these numbers is nearest to the re-sult?
- A. 3.5 million
B. 350,000
C. 35 million
D. 35,000
- Answers: 1. A 2. A 3. A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

R	L	L	S
A	I	U	I
I	M	G	M
A	T	Y	M

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

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

THE END OF AN ERA

Sweden send holders spinning out of World Cup after tiebreaker drama

Melbourne, Australia - Sweden stunned the United States 5-4 in a sudden-death penalty shootout Sunday to surge into a Women's World Cup quarter-final against Japan and consign the defending champions to their earliest-ever exit.

The title-holders dominated the opening 90 minutes but a breakthrough proved elusive with Swedish goalkeeper Zecira Musovic making some startling saves to keep her side alive.

With the 0-0 deadlock remaining after extra-time it went to penalties in Melbourne - and the tension went up another notch.

Sweden's Nathalie Bjorn was the first to miss, skying high, only for Megan Rapinoe to do the same.

Rebecka Blomqvist's effort was saved, again putting the USA in the driving seat, only for Sophia Smith to blast wide.

When Kelley O'Hara hit the post, it was all down to Sweden's Lina Hurtig, who made sure - but only after VAR ruled her kick had crossed the line.

For the Americans, who just never really got going at this tournament, it ended their dreams of a third World Cup title in a row in the most painful fashion. It was also an inglorious end for Rapinoe, the Golden Boot winner at the 2019 tournament.

She will retire at the end of the season.

"This is like a sick joke. For me personally, I'm just like, this is dark comedy. I missed a penalty," Rapinoe told Fox Sports.

"I think it can be cruel and just not our day."

She added: "I thought we played really well. I'm so happy for us that we went out like that, playing the way that we did."

Expectations were high coming into the tournament for the four-time champions, who had made at least the semi-finals at every World Cup.

But they never looked up to

This is like a sick joke. For me personally, I'm just like, this is dark comedy. I missed a penalty. I think it can be cruel and just not our day. I thought we played really well

MEGAN RAPINOE

the task in the group stage, with just one win, against Vietnam.

The dramatic conclusion leaves the tournament without the two top-ranked sides after Germany's group-stage departure.

This devastating early exit will be seen as a major underachievement for the Americans,



Swedish players celebrate their round of 16 win against the US in the Women's World Cup in Melbourne on Sunday (AFP)

ity Rodman preferred up front to Lynn Williams.

Sweden rested nine players in their last group game, but reverted to their strongest XI with strikers Fridolina Rolfö and Stina Blackstenius returning and Musovic getting the nod as goalkeeper ahead of Jennifer Falk.

After both sides sized each other up, the USA worked the first clear chance on six minutes,

but Andi Sullivan's drive from the edge of the box skewered wide.

A patient Sweden created space early on, particularly on the flanks, and sent in a series of teasing crosses to use their height advantage, to no avail.

As the game wore on the US assumed midfield control and a livewire Rodman went close to the opener after 18 minutes, letting fly from distance with Muso-

vic palming away. She was forced into a similar stop minutes later, again from Rodman, but could only watch as a towering Lindsey Horan header rattled the crossbar in the best opportunity of a lively half the US dominated.

The title-holders carried the momentum into the second stanza and only a world-class reflex save from Musovic kept Sweden on level terms, turning a

vicious strike from Horan around the post at full stretch.

It was all the United States and a goal seemed inevitable, but Musovic again kept Sweden in the game with another cracking save in the 88th minute, this time from Alex Morgan.

She pulled off two more brilliant saves in extra-time to take the match to penalties.

AFP

Nigeria target 'transformational' win over England at World Cup

Brisbane, Australia - Nigeria coach Randy Waldrum believes knocking European champions England out of the Women's World Cup would be "transformational" for the sport in the country as the sides prepare to meet in the last 16 on Monday.

The Super Falcons have appeared at every Women's World Cup going back to the inaugural edition in 1991 but their build-up to this year's tournament was overshadowed by a row with

their national federation over bonuses. They had even threatened to boycott their opening game but put that behind them to draw with Olympic champions Canada and then beat co-hosts Australia.

A draw with the Republic of Ireland then ensured that they qualified for the last 16 at the expense of Canada and set up a clash with strongly-fancied England in Brisbane.

"It would be a huge win, obviously," Waldrum said Sunday when asked about what knocking out England would signify.

"Already with what we have accomplished Nigeria is buzzing again, from what I understand.

"I don't think people expected us to get out of the group and to get the results we have got, so I think it has already been a big success.

"But obviously if you can not only beat the Olympic gold medallists but turn around and

beat the European champions then it would be something extremely special back home for all the people in Nigeria, and more importantly for this squad, for what they have worked so hard to do.

"So it certainly could be transformational in a lot of different ways."

It is the third time that Nigeria have made it out of their group at the World Cup but they have never won a knockout tie.



Randy Waldrum

Walsh in line to return for Nigeria clash in England World Cup boost

Brisbane, Australia - Keira Walsh will be available for England in their last-16 Women's World Cup clash against Nigeria on Monday as long as she shows no adverse reaction to returning to training.

England's key midfielder was stretchered off in agony in a 1-0 group-stage win over Denmark with what was feared to have been a serious knee injury.

But scans found the Barcelona star had not been badly hurt and just over a week on she resumed training on Sunday, in a huge boost to England's World Cup hopes.

Coach Sarina Wiegman declined Sunday to disclose the exact nature of the knee injury but said: "She's doing well. She started to rehab straight after we knew what was going on.

"She was on the pitch and training today.

"Now we'll wait to see how she recovers from that training session and if she does well then she's available for tomorrow."

Wiegman switched England's



England's Keira Walsh suffered the injury during their match against Denmark last week (AFP)

usual 4-3-3 formation to 3-5-2 against China because of Walsh's absence and it paid off with a handsome 6-1 win.

Whether she retains the same set-up against Randy Waldrum's Nigeria remains to be seen given the threat of Barcelona goal machine Asisat Oshoala and the dangerous Uchenna Kanu in at-

tack. Wiegman is especially wary of Nigeria - who defeated co-hosts Australia 3-2 in the group phase - on the counter-attack.

"They're quick, they're pretty physical, so those are things we really need to be aware of," she said. Wiegman said a series of shock results at the World Cup, including early exits for Germany,

Brazil and Canada, were proof that England could not afford to take lower-ranked Nigeria lightly.

England are European champions and one of the favourites to win the World Cup but Wiegman cautioned: "What we've seen in this tournament is that nothing is easy.

AFP

World Cup sets record in attendance

Melbourne, Australia - The Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand is the best-attended edition of the tournament ever, FIFA said on Sunday, surpassing Canada in 2015.

Prior to the evening game between holders the United States and Sweden in Melbourne, a total of 1,339,331 people had been through the turnstiles, FIFA said. An attendance of 27,706 in Melbourne pushed the overall number to a Women's World Cup record.

The previously best-attended Women's World Cup was in Canada with a total of 1,353,506. On that occasion there were fewer teams and therefore fewer matches - 52 games compared with 64 this time.

The record will be extended further with the current tournament still in the last-16 stage.



Sarina Wiegman

Last-one-standing Wiegman hopes for more women coaches at World Cup

Brisbane, Australia - England coach Sarina Wiegman said Sunday she hopes there will be more woman coaches in the game in future after she became the last one remaining at the Women's World Cup.

Desiree Ellis's South Africa were defeated 2-0 by the Netherlands earlier in the day in the last 16, leaving Wiegman as the only woman coach left at the event. Wiegman, who took her native Netherlands to the final in 2019 and guided England to the European Championships crown last summer, said: "Before the tournament started we had 20 male and 12 female coaches.

"What we hope is that that balance gets right in the future and we are working on that, at least in England.

"And I know in a lot of other countries too, to give opportunities to have more women in the game and hopefully also more coaches in the game."

Wiegman said it was not a "competition" to see which woman coach could stay at the World Cup longest, but added: "Of course, I had hoped that more female coaches would still be in the tournament."

England face Nigeria, coached by Randy Waldrum, in the last 16 on Monday in Brisbane.

DUTCH ENTER LAST EIGHT

Netherlands tame South Africa to set up Spain clash

Sydney, Australia - The Netherlands set up a heavyweight Women's World Cup quarter-final clash with Spain after ending South Africa's historic run with a 2-0 victory on Sunday.

But the 2019 runners-up suffered some anxious moments in front of 40,000 in Sydney and had goalkeeper Daphne van Domselaar to thank for keeping the African champions at bay in the first half.

Jill Roord scored after nine minutes to put the Dutch on their way against a team ranked 45 places below them and featuring in the knockout rounds for the first time. South Africa goalkeeper Kaylin Swart then made a mess of an innocuous Lineth Beerensteyn shot midway through the second half to give the Dutch a second.

The Netherlands will meet Spain on Friday in the last eight but Van Domselaar was called into action numerous times.

"It wasn't our best game but happy to play my part in the clean sheet," said the stopper, who plays for Aston Villa and was named player of the match.

"I don't know if it was my best (game) but I will be looking back with pride."

Netherlands coach Andries Jonker was relieved afterwards that his side avoided becoming the latest to be on the end of a



Jill Roord of the Netherlands' scores against South Africa in their round of 16 match at the Women's World Cup in Sydney on Sunday (AFP)

World Cup shock.

He said his team can beat anyone, but was scathing of their first-half performance.

"We lost the ball too often in the first half and gave a few chances away," he said.

"Daphne saved us a few times

and I was happy to lead 1-0 at half-time.

"We did much better in the second half and had much more control of the game.

"We deserved to score again and in the end deserved to win."

The 54th-ranked South Africa

was kicking themselves after having numerous chances in the opening 45 minutes, almost all to their livewire captain Thembi Kgatlana.

On six minutes the striker fired straight at Van Domselaar - it was to become a theme.

The Dutch took the lead three minutes later, midfielder Roord nodding in from close range following a corner for her fourth goal of the tournament.

Kgatlana, who scored the winner over Italy that gave South Africa their first win ever at the

World Cup, was a constant threat with her pace.

Four more times in the first half the US-based Kgatlana could have scored.

South Africa coach Desiree Ellis was proud but felt her side should have won.

"We had a lot of chances, especially in the first half, to kill off the game," she said.

"The chances we created should have put us out of sight."

Kgatlana threat

Neutrals at Sydney Football Stadium were behind South Africa and there was a buzz of anticipation each time Kgatlana ran with the ball.

On 12 minutes she sprinted away from a Dutch defence that was treading water and fizzed her effort just over the bar.

Kgatlana rattled the Dutch once more soon after with a mazy run and shot that stung the palms of Van Domselaar.

South Africa had already taken off injured forward Jermaine Seoposenwe and they lost Bambanani Mbane three minutes before the break when she was stretchered off with a badly hurt ankle.

If anything that spurred Ellis's side and Kgatlana surged through again but was foiled by Van Domselaar once more.

Moments before the break there was a repeat, the Dutch defence finding the 27-year-old Kgatlana too hot to handle but Van Domselaar standing firm.

The Dutch got a grip on proceedings in the second half and were gifted a second on 68 minutes when Swart's blunder let Beerensteyn's tame effort slip through her hands.

"In the end the legs were not there to push for the duration of the game," said Ellis. "Their goalkeeper getting player of the match shows how well we played."

South Africa coach issues call for more help after stunning World Cup run

Sydney, Australia - South Africa coach Desiree Ellis appealed Sunday to the government and sponsors to step up if women's football in the country is to push on after the team's historic World Cup run.

The African champions won a World Cup game for the first time in stunning Italy 3-2 to seal a landmark place in the last 16 in Australia and New Zealand.

Their run came to an end in a 2-0 defeat to the Netherlands in Sydney, but they gave the 2019 finalists numerous scares, especially in the first half.

"To the sponsors: I don't know how you can ignore something special like this," said Ellis, who felt her team had enough chances in the opening 45 minutes to have been out of sight.

"I don't know how you can't assist in getting us to climb up the ladder and assist in getting us better."

Ellis said there were players in her squad who still had full-time



Desiree Ellis

jobs outside football and called for South Africa to establish a professional league.

"What this team has achieved, I think the corporate world needs to stand up and re-

ally take notice and be counted," she said.

"Otherwise we will come back in four years' time and go through the same thing... we could have gone further.

"When I looked at how the World Cup was going (with surprise results), the possibility of us winning it was there.

"So we urge the corporates to assist here. We urge the government even to step in and assist and push the corporates to come

wasteful finishing, they found goalkeeper Daphne van Domselaar in unbeatable form.

"We spoke about underdogs yesterday, I don't think there's underdogs in this World Cup," said Ellis, whose players were given a warm reception by the

To the sponsors: I don't know how you can ignore something special like this. I don't know how you can't assist in getting us to climb up the ladder and assist in getting us better

DESIREE ELLIS

on board.

"It's not just our senior team, it's our youth teams as well - there's no sponsors."

South Africa, who were squeezed out 2-1 by Sweden and drew 2-2 with Argentina in the group stage, had half a dozen chances in the first half against the Dutch.

But together with some

Sydney Football Stadium crowd on a lap of honour at the end.

"The whole of South Africa should be very proud of this team.

"I know everybody got up early in the morning (back home) and expected victory.

"We are proud - disappointed of course - but proud of the players," she added.



Japan players celebrate their goal against Norway on Saturday

Japan fly in under radar to make case for World Cup glory

Sydney, Australia - Japan have flown in under the radar to become the team to beat, along with England, at the Women's World Cup and boasting the tournament's leading scorer in Hinata Miyazawa.

The United States, the holders, and a European contingent led by continental champions England were touted as title contenders going into the World Cup.

Nobody was talking about Futoshi Ikeda's Japan, who are ranked 11th in the world by FIFA.

Even back home, expectations that they could pull off a repeat of their 2011 World Cup triumph were low.

"I think we were left behind by the sudden strides that the rest of the world were making," former Japan coach Asako Takakura, who led the team at the 2019 World Cup, told AFP ahead of the 2023 edition.

Japan went out in the last 16 in 2019 but are already into the quarter-finals four years

later. They won all three of their group games - a record matched only by Sweden and England - scoring 11 times and not conceding.

Wins over Costa Rica and Zambia were expected, but it was the 4-0 thrashing of Spain which made the rest of the tournament sit up and take notice.

They followed that up with a 3-1 victory over former champions Norway on Saturday and now face the United States or Sweden for a place in the semi-finals.

"I think they showed maybe why they have been the best team so far today," Norway's Barcelona star Caroline Graham Hansen told reporters afterwards.

"They're so disciplined and very structured in the way they play offence and defence."

Sergio Echigo is a famously hard to please columnist for the Nikkan Sports newspaper in Japan. Even he is impressed.

AFP



Sam Kerr

Australia eye Sam Kerr return in World Cup round of 16

Sydney, Australia - Australia coach Tony Gustavsson hinted that Sam Kerr will play a part in their last 16 clash at the Women's World Cup against Denmark on Monday after the star striker returned to training.

The Matildas captain has yet to see any minutes at the tournament after a calf injury sustained before their opening game.

But she took a big step towards her recovery by resuming training with a ball on Saturday and could finally be thrust into action.

"We had a nice moment with the team yesterday to see her back with her boots on and touching the ball and being with the team in training," said Gustavsson. "It was a very good feeling for Sam, her teammates and me.

"She is a player we will talk about tonight to see how many minutes would be most suitable, looking at 90 minutes and extra-time and how do I get the best out of Sam Kerr in a game plan tomorrow," he added.

Australia didn't need Kerr's

goal-scoring prowess in an impressive 4-0 win over Olympic champions Canada in their final must-win group game, with Hayley Raso, Mary Fowler and Steph Catley all hitting the mark.

The raucous spectators also played a part and Gustavsson said a potential 70,000-plus crowd at Stadium Australia in Sydney would again be crucial to get them into a quarter-final against either France or Morocco.

"The one thing I want to emphasise is the support from the stands," he said.



Coco Gauff returns a shot to Liudmila Samsonova (AFP)

Americans Pegula and Fritz fall in semifinal defeats in Washington

Washington, United States - American top seeds Jessica Pegula and Taylor Fritz suffered semifinal defeats at the Washington Open on Saturday but Coco Gauff kept the star spangled banner flying by earning a place in Sunday's final.

Greek fourth seed Maria Sakkari upset top seed Pegula to capture her third victory in 26 hours and she will face another home favorite in the final after Gauff defeated Russian

seventh career final, won her only WTA title in 2019 at Rabat.

Pegula, the 2019 Washington champion, was denied her fifth career final but will match her career high of third in the world rankings next week.

Sakkari improved to 5-3 in her career rivalry with Pegula, who won their most recent prior meeting in February's Doha semifinals.

Sakkari dominated the first set and went up 4-1 in the second but Pegula broke Sakkari in the seventh game and held to pull level at 4-4.

A double fault handed Pegula a break chance in the ninth game and Sakkari swatted a forehand wide for a 5-4 edge. The American then held to force a third set.

It would have been ideal if I could be off the court an hour earlier

MARIA SAKKARI

Liudmila Samsonova, the defending champion, in straight sets.

Fritz fell to Tallon Griekspoor 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 and the Dutchman will play for the title against Britain's Dan Evans, who beat Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov 6-3, 7-6 (7-4).

Ninth-ranked Sakkari, forced to play twice Friday due to rain on Thursday at the WTA and ATP hard court event, reached her first final since losing to Pegula last October at Guadalajara.

"It would have been ideal if I could be off the court an hour earlier," Sakkari said. "But at the end I got the win which is what I wanted the most."

Sakkari, who reached her

Tsitsipas champion

Top seed defeats de Minaur to capture ATP Los Cabos title

Los Cabos, Mexico - Greek top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Australian fifth seed Alex de Minaur 6-3, 6-4 on Saturday to capture the ATP Mexico Open for his first title in 14 months.

Tsitsipas, this year's Australian Open runner-up, claimed his first ATP outdoor hardcourt crown in his third final of the year, having fallen to Novak Djokovic at Melbourne and top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz at Barcelona in April.

The 24-year-old Greek star captured his 10th career title and first since June of last year at Mallorca to snap a five-final win drought. World number five Tsitsipas improved to 10-0 all-time against 19th-ranked de Minaur, who was hoping for a Mexico double after winning the title at Acapulco in February.

"It was a great match," Tsitsipas said. "I'm really happy we were able to deliver a great quality in the final match."

The 24-year-old from Sydney was denied an eighth career ATP crown in his third final of the year. He also lost to Alcaraz in June's trophy match at Queen's.

After Tsitsipas dominated the first set, de Minaur surrendered a break on a double fault to open the second set but broke back at love in the sixth game to pull level. Tsitsipas, who won 23 of his 28 first-serve points, responded with a break in the ninth game, seizing a 5-4 edge with a blistering forehand winner, then held serve to finish off the Australian.



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with the trophy after beating Australia's Alex de Minaur in the final of Mexico ATP Open on Saturday (AFP)

Glover and Horschel share lead at Wyndham Championship

Miami, United States - Lucas Glover and Billy Horschel shared the lead on 18-under par at the PGA Tour's Wyndham Championship in Greensboro, North Carolina after Saturday's third round.

Glover, the 2009 U.S. Open champion shot an eight-under round of 62, finishing with back-to-back birdies at Sedgfield Country Club.

Horschel shot a bogey 63 while overnight leader Russell Henley slipped back after his 65 which also ended with birdies on the 17th and 18th.

Glover's only blemish came on the eighth hole, where he three-putted but he bounced back immediately with birdies on the 9th and 10th holes.

"I hit it nice, hit every fairway and missed a green. Irons were pretty sharp today, hit it close a bunch and putted nicely," said



Lucas Glover of the United States plays his shot from the 14th tee during the third round of the Wyndham Championship on Saturday (AFP)

Glover, who said his approach on Sunday would be to avoid being too adventurous.

"I think you try to attack this place a little too aggressive and

some good numbers and hit it close, you've got a good chance to make some birdies," added Glover.

The 43-year-old from Greenville, South Carolina, said he felt at home on the course.

"I've got a lot of family in this area. I've got two or three uncles that were members here years ago and still got a bunch of cousins in the area. We are three hours from where I grew up and I like the course. Just like it. It's a special place," he added.

The 43-year-old Glover will be targeting his fifth win on the PGA Tour with his most recent victory coming at the John Deere Classic two years ago. Floridian Horschel has seven wins on the PGA Tour already under his belt while Henley is looking to add to his four victories.

AFP

Indian swimmer fails doping test ahead of Asian Games

New Delhi, India - India's anti-doping agency has provisionally suspended a 14-year-old swimmer from competing after testing positive for a banned substance ahead of next month's Asian Games in China.

The swimmer, whose name was not disclosed, is among 36 athletes suspended by India's National Anti-Doping Agency this year, according to an updated list published on the agency's website this week.

The minor tested positive for 19-norandrosterone, a banned performance-enhancing steroid that is known to increase muscle strength and help speed up recovery.

This year the US anti-doping agency has suspended three athletes for taking the substance.

AFP

Biles captures US Classic in return to gymnastics competition

Hoffman Estates, United States - Four-time Olympic champion Simone Biles made a triumphant return to gymnastics after a two-year hiatus, dominating the US Classic on Saturday in her first competition since the Tokyo Olympics.

Biles, a 19-time world champion, electrified a sellout crowd in suburban Chicago with a stunning performance, receiving an all-around judges' total score of 59.100 points. "Tonight went really well," Biles said. "Everything has fallen into place. I feel really good about where I am now mentally and physically."

"I still think there are some things to work on in my routine but, for the first meet back, I would say it went pretty well. I'm



Simone Biles competes on the balance beam during the Core Hydration Classic at Now Arena on Saturday (AFP)

very shocked and surprised. I'm very happy now that that is out of the way."

The meet was the last chance to qualify for the US nationals in three weeks at San Jose, California, and Biles is also hoping to compete for a title in Antwerp in October at the World Championships.

Biles used the US Classic as her comeback meet in 2018 after

a lengthy break following her starring role at the 2016 Rio Olympics, which included gold in all-around, vault, floor and team.

While Biles has not announced if she will be making a bid to compete at next year's Paris Olympics, her superb comeback spectacle at the Classic at age 26 could be a first stride in that direction.

"We're still in the working

steps," Biles said when asked about the Paris Games. "My main goal was this and then championships and after that we'll look on to worlds and then we'll see. "So far it's heading in the right direction but I still have to work on myself. I'm still going to do my therapy. I'm going to put myself first."

Biles struggled at the Games in Japan in 2021 with mental health issues and the "twisties" - a disorienting feeling while in mid-air that leaves gymnasts at greater injury risk when landing.

She was affected early in the Olympic team competition, pulled out of the all-around plus the vault, uneven bars and floor exercise disciplines before taking bronze on the balance beam.

Tonight went really well... I still think there are some things to work on in my routine but, for the first meet back, I would say it went pretty well. I'm very shocked and surprised

SIMONE BILES

LAST GASP WIN

‘Invincible’ Aleix Espargaro swoops late on Bagnaia in British MotoGP

Silverstone, United Kingdom - Aleix Espargaro won a classic British MotoGP with a last-lap lunge to deny world champion Francesco Bagnaia at Silverstone on Sunday.

Brad Binder of KTM completed the podium on the return of MotoGP after its mid-season break.

Bagnaia extended his lead in the riders' standings to 41 points after his closest challenger Marco Bezzecchi crashed out.

"It was one of those days when you feel invincible," said Espargaro, who started from a lowly fourth row of the grid.

"Even starting from 12th I felt super good with the bike," added the Spaniard who continued the race's tradition of producing a different winner every year since 2013.

Rain began to splatter the circuit late on to add spice to a tense finish with Espargaro timing his decisive move on Bagnaia to perfection. "My plan was to pass him (Bagnaia) but when it started to rain I said to myself 'okay stay



Aleix Espargaro celebrates on the podium after winning the British Grand Prix at Silverstone circuit in Northamptonshire on Sunday (AFP)

quiet and leave Pecco to open the track and then on the last lap I had something more to overtake him," Espargaro added.

"The last lap was dramatic with a lot of riders coming from

behind, it was slippery, so it was quite scary!"

Despite missing out on his fifth win of the season Bagnaia was all smiles, especially after finishing pointless down in 14th in Satur-

day's sprint. "It was tricky. I tried to push but I was on the limit.

"Finishing second is a great result," the Ducati factory rider said.

"For sure not an easy weekend, yesterday not the best day,

but finishing second makes me happy."

He leads the 2023 world championship on 214 points from Jorge Martin (173) and Bezzecchi (167).

South African Binder, who moved up to fourth on 131 points, reflected: "Hats off to my team, I'd love to have got the win today for them but third's going to have to do."

"The track is so big it was wet in some sectors and others were bone dry," he added.

The race began in dry and sunny conditions in stark contrast to Saturday's deluge.

Pole-sitter Bezzecchi was pipped to turn one by KTM's Jack Miller, with Bagnaia in hot pursuit.

'Pecco' was up to second at the end of the first lap and then surged past Miller to lead.

Bezzecchi, racing for Valentino Rossi's VR46 Ducati-satellite team, emerged as Bagnaia's main rival - Miller suddenly plummeting down the pack and out of contention.

Sprint winner Alex Marquez was forced to retire early with a damaged bike.

Joan Mir, the 2020 champion, crashed and Bezzecchi then tumbled out with 15 laps to go.

That left Bagnaia with a slender lead over Espargaro, who had quietly picked his way through the pack. Bagnaia had a clutch of challengers ready to pounce over the final two laps and it was Espargaro who hit the front late on to claim his second career MotoGP win.

AFP

Evans triumphs in Finland

Jyväskylä, Finland - Elfyn Evans won the Rally of Finland on Sunday to narrow the gap on world champion Kalle Rovanpera in the drivers' standings.

The 34-year-old Welsh driver was gifted the lead on Friday when local favourite Rovanpera, his Toyota teammate, was forced to retire after crashing.

After taking the closing power stage Evans came home 39.1sec clear of second-placed Thierry Neuville of Hyundai.

Evans moved to within 25 points of championship leader Rovanpera with four rounds of the season remaining.

"It's been a pretty good weekend," said Evans after his seventh career win and second this season after Croatia in April.

"Of course we're sorry for the loss of Kalle at the start of the rally but after that it's been really fantastic to drive this car - it's such a joy to be behind the wheel of on these roads and we're really happy with this one. "It's been a fantastic atmosphere and great to have the support behind us. Of course, in terms of the championship it's also not bad and we close the gap."

Neuville finished nearly a minute ahead of Japan's Takamoto Katsuta to stay third in the world championship standings. "It's a bit like a victory for me," said the 35-year-old Belgian who has never been very lucky in Finland in the past.

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SHEEP DOGS

Crouching canines, winged predators

SCOTS TRAIN AN ANCIENT DOG BREED — MAREMMAS - TO DETER EAGLE ATTACKS ON GRAZING SHEEP



A young Maremma sheep dog stands by a sheep as it is trained to protect livestock from the threat of sea eagles

Dotted among a small flock of sheep in a field in the Scottish Highlands, Luigi and Peaches, two young working dogs with thick white coats, are busy being trained to keep watch on the skies above.

The pair, who descend from the Roman-era Maremma breed reared by shepherds to protect their livestock from wolves, are learning to guard against Scotland's resurgent sea eagles, formally known as white-tailed eagles.

Once driven to extinction across the British Isles, these eagles have been successfully reintroduced in recent decades but are increasingly blamed for ravaging lambs left to roam the countryside.

The loss of the valuable livestock is sparking tensions with some farmers, devastated by the financial fallout and demanding the government issue licences to shoot the birds.

The worsening situation prompted Jonny and Daisy Ames to create the dog training programme at their falconry near Aviemore, in the hope it will allow farmers and eagles to better coexist.

"The last thing that we want is to see eagles being shot, for licences to be issued and to end up back at square one," Daisy Ames told AFP. "There needs to be a solution that works for both sides."

Sea eagles were once a common sight across Scotland but were hunted to extinction throughout the 19th century, with the last bird shot in 1918.

A re-introduction programme in 1975 brought chicks from Norway to the island of Rum, one of Scotland's wildest places. More were reintroduced in Wester Ross between 1993 and 1998 and on the east coast in 2007 and 2012.

Drones and cheetahs

The birds, an endangered species with only around 10,000 pairs across the globe, have since established a breeding population on Scotland's west coast and are now thriving -- but at a cost to some farmers.

Searching for a solution, Jonny Ames tapped into his experiences working with the Cheetah Conservation Project in Namibia, where Maremmas were trained to



The last thing that we want is to see eagles being shot, for licences to be issued and to end up back at square one. There needs to be a solution that works for both sides

DAISY AMES

keep the big cats away from livestock.

To teach his latest canine recruits, he attaches a lure designed to resemble an eagle to a drone and hovers it over the dogs in a sheep field.

"The drone has a big eagle hanging on the bottom of it and it kind of dive bombs the dogs a little bit," he said. "If you can imagine an eagle in the wild, if it's coming

in to a kill and there's a wolf there, it isn't going to land."

He and Daisy also allow a sea eagle kept at the falconry to feed from a carcass in front of the dogs in a controlled environment.

"They can't reach each other but we want to try and show the dogs that the eagle is a predator and if there is one near the lambs then you want to scare it off," Jonny explained.

One of the benefits of the dogs is that they are 'completely soft' when it comes to humans, he noted. "They don't make good guard dogs for people and the worst they are going to do is lick them to death."

Devastating effect

Jenny Love, a sheep farmer on Scotland's west coast, said the eagles have had a devastating effect, adding she frequently hears complaints from local farmers.

But she is sympathetic to Britain's biggest bird of prey, with a majestic wingspan stretching over two metres.

"Eagles are not the bad guys here," Love said. "There is nothing else for these birds to eat, so they are eating lambs which are easy

prey for them.

"But this is taking an enormous toll on farmers. Their livelihood is being taken away from them. The public perception is that farmers are the bad guys."

Farmers are eligible for a maximum annual payout of £5,000 (US\$6,383) for livestock killed, through the Sea Eagle Management Scheme. However, the process is costly and arduous and only partially recoups the losses, according to Love, who argues that compensation levels should be increased and application requirements simplified.

One farmer had lost £30,000 worth of lambs in a season, she pointed out.

"I've had big tough guys breaking down in tears in front of me because they don't know what to do," she added.

Love is sceptical about the Maremmas, which she argues are trained to work in fields where the sheep are close together.

Thousands of dogs would be needed to guard sheep across the mountains where nearly all the lambs are lost to the birds, Love lamented.

AFP



Daisy Ames from Rothiemurchus Falconry holds a Sea Eagle on her arm

OVERTOURISM



Belgium's canal city of Bruges hits a 'red line' with tourist crowds - a welcome surge after years of lull. But the crowds are now getting menacing

Inhabitants of Belgium's cobblestone-and-canal city of Bruges are clear - summertime tourism has hit capacity. "It's really reached a red line now," says one, 55-year-old architect Arnout Goegebuer, as he sits inside a cafe, peering out a window across a packed outside terrace. "We don't need more tourists anymore, it's enough - may be a little bit less is needed," he says.

It's a sentiment reiterated by other residents of the western city, population 119,000, which each year hosts eight million visitors - most of them concentrated in the summer months, and most of them on day trips.

Residents are not against tourism, which brings money and prestige and provides jobs. But, they say, it needs to be balanced, to stop the city turning into a Disneyfied open-air museum.

With Bruges crowds back to pre-COVID levels, including from cruise ships docking in nearby Zeebrugge port and disgorging passengers who spend just a few hours, "there's a lot of trouble for locals," says Kurt Van Der Pieter, a 62-year-old retiree who lived his whole life in the city.

"People of Bruges say it's too much, very too much some days," he says.

The situation is not unique to Bruges. Europe's other top historical canal cities of Venice and Amsterdam have both taken steps to bar cruise ships calling. Venice received a wake-up call in July when UNESCO recommended the city be put on its endangered list because of over-tourism and other problems.

An August 2022 ranking, published by an Airbnb competitor called Holidu, put Venice, Bruges and the Greek island of Rhodes in equal second place in its list of the most overcrowded European destinations based on the number of tourists versus inhabitants.

The Croatian walled city of Dubrovnik - famed as the backdrop for much of The Game of Thrones fantasy TV series - came first on the list.

Bruges's tourist authority, Visit Bruges, disputes Holidu's ranking and says its own figures, based on usage of mobile devices while in Bruges, show that daily there are 131 visitors per 100 inhabitants.

"Bruges is often referred to as a mass tourism destination, but it isn't," a spokeswoman, Ann Plovie, told AFP.

TOURISM STRATEGY

"This is like a bit (of a) misconception that the city is overcrowded. Indeed, I can't deny that there are many tourists, but you should come on different periods and then you would see also the difference," adds another spokeswoman, Anne De Meerleer.

In 2019, Bruges implemented a five-year strategy to boost overnight stays, spread the tourist numbers around geographically and over each year, and to lure visitors more interested in cultural and gastronomic deep-dives than selfies and waffles.

"Our aim is to not to get more visitors but the kind of visitors we get," De Meerleer says as she guides a visitor to stunning spots that are almost empty and are just a couple of streets from the main market square.

The results of the strategy are unclear, torpedoed by the 2020-2021 collapse in tourism caused by COVID-19 travel restrictions around the world.

Bruges's city centre also faces tensions over accommodation options for overnight stays, with a halt to buildings being converted to hotels to ensure locals aren't squeezed out.

Unlike cities like Milan, Bruges has not banned private vehicles from its historic district, though the railway station is a short walk away. Car registration plates come from all



People of Bruges say it's too much, very too much some days

KURT VAN DER PIETER

over Europe. The Belgian city is already at work on its next five-year strategy, this one with an emphasis on sustainability.

VISITORS' VIEWS MIXED

The mix of tourists walking around in Bruges is even broader, as is their verdict as to whether they found the place overcrowded or not.

"I didn't think there would be this much people," says Lee Hotaee, a South Korean tourist, admiring the city's architecture in a guided group visit.

"It's not that busy actually. It's like going to somewhere that's as nice as Amsterdam or Florence or Venice but not as overrun," says a Scottish tourist, Ross Henderson, 43.

A 59-year-old French tourist, Ariele Delat-

tre, who had made the short trip to Bruges from her hometown of Lille, near the Belgian border, says a canal boat ride revealed the tourist diversity.

"The boat's driver asked what nationalities were present on the boat, and it's true that we had Asians, Germans, Britons, French, Indians - people from everywhere," she says.

Diego Rodriguez, a 41-year-old Venezuelan tourist walking around in a Spanish-speaking guided tour, said he found the tourist numbers "fine like this, especially as we're in the summer months, the vacation months".

He added that he had visited Bruges a couple of months earlier and it was emptier though it was spring and it was colder - people weren't on holiday.

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