

NEWS BRIEF

H M GREETES CHAIRMAN OF YEMENI PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Muscat - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Rashad al Alimi, Chairman of the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council, on his country's National Day.

In the cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Alimi, praying to Allah the Almighty to grant him success to achieve all hopes and aspirations for the Yemeni people.

HISTORIC VISIT BEGINS

EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT SISI LEADS WELCOMING PARTY THAT GREETED HIS MAJESTY THE SULTAN UPON HIS ARRIVAL IN CAIRO

Cairo, Egypt - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik arrived in the Arab Republic of Egypt on a two-day official visit on Sunday.

When His Majesty the Sultan's plane touched ground at Cairo International Airport, President Abdul Fattah el Sisi of Egypt headed the welcoming party that greeted His Majesty the Sultan at the foot of the ramp.

Also present at the reception were Abdullah bin Nasser al Rahbi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to Egypt and its Permanent Representative to the Arab League, and members of the Embassy of Oman in Egypt. Then, His Majesty and President Sisi headed to the Hall of Ceremonies, passing between two rows of the Egyptian Republican Guard.

After a short rest at the ceremonial hall, His Majesty the Sultan, accompanied by President Sisi, boarded a motorcade that took them to Al Ittihadiya Palace, flanked by a group of motorcycles from the Egyptian Republican Guard. There, an official reception ceremony was conducted in honour of His Majesty the Sultan.

Upon arrival of the two leaders' motorcade at the main gate of the palace, trumpets were sounded and a group of horsemen lined up, while the artillery fired a 21-gun salute.

Then, the Egyptian President accompanied His Majesty the Sultan to the dais of honour, where the Omani Royal Anthem and the Egyptian Republican Anthem were played. After that, His Majesty the Sultan, accompanied by President Sisi, inspected a Guard of Honour, which saluted His Majesty.

After that, souvenir photos were taken of His Majesty the Sultan and President Sisi.



His Majesty the Sultan shook hands with dignitaries from the Egyptian side, including Gen Mohamed Zaki, Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces and Minister of Defence and Military Production, Sameh Shoukry, Foreign Minister, Maj Gen Abbas Kamel, Head of General Intelligence, Dr Hala el Said,

Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Dr Mohamed Moait, Minister of Finance, Dr Assem al Jazzar, Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities (Head of Mission of Honour), Ahmed Samir, Minister of Trade and Industry, Khalid Radi, Ambassador of Egypt to Oman, and Ahmed Fahmy,

Spokesman of the Presidency.

President Sisi also shook hands with members of the Omani delegation accompanying His Majesty the Sultan.

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al Maha

Profits of oil marketing firms rise on increased sales

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Erdoğan eyes third decade in power in historic runoff vote

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H M, Egyptian President hold official talks

Cairo, Egypt - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and President Abdul Fattah el Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt held an official session of talks at Al Ittihadiya Palace in Cairo on Sunday evening.

At the outset of the session, the Egyptian President reiterated his heartfelt welcome to His Majesty the Sultan as a dear guest of Egypt and its people. He wished His Majesty the Sultan and his official delegation a happy stay.

On his turn, His Majesty the Sultan reciprocated the kind sentiments, thanking the president for the warm welcome and sincere hospitality.

The two leaders reviewed the distinguished relations and the deep-rooted historical bonds binding the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt.

They also explored various aspects of existing bilateral cooperation in several fields and contemplated ways of consolidating



the joint interests in a manner that generates bounty and benefits to the two countries' peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan and the Egyptian President also exchanged views on various developments at the regional and international arenas.

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H M, President Sisi exchange honours

Cairo, Egypt - His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and President Abdul Fattah el Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt exchanged orders at Al Ittihadiya Palace in Cairo marking His Majesty's visit to Egypt.

The Egyptian President conferred on His Majesty the Sultan 'Order of the Nile', which is Egypt's highest state honour. The conferment of the order demonstrates President Sisi's deep appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan and embodies the deep-rooted historical relations binding Oman and Egypt.

On his part, His Majesty the Sultan decorated President Sisi with 'Oman Civil Order of the First Class,' one of the highest Omani honours.

The conferment of the order reflects His Majesty the Sul-



tan's appreciation for the Egyptian President and pride over the depth of fraternal relations between the two countries' peoples.

The exchange of orders was attended by the official delegations of the Omani and Egyptian sides, as well as senior officials in Egypt.

President Sisi hosts dinner

President Sisi hosted an official dinner at Al Ittihadiya Palace in honour of His Majesty the Sultan. The dinner was attended by the official delegations of the Omani and Egyptian sides.

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Oman-Egypt ties in qualitative shift: Egyptian Ambassador

Muscat - The historic first visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to Egypt and his meeting with President Abdul Fattah el Sisi will advance the deep-rooted relations between the two countries towards new horizons, according to Khalid Mohammed Radi, Ambassador of Egypt to Oman.

Radi emphasised the significance of His Majesty the Sultan's visit to Egypt, expecting it to propel the longstanding relations between Oman and Egypt, marking a qualitative shift in bilateral ties.

During the visit, various important matters of mutual interest and international issues will be discussed.

The Egyptian Ambassador said that discussions between His Majesty the Sultan and the Egyptian President will focus on enhancing relations in political, economic, commercial, cultural and social spheres. Additionally, there will be a focus on coordination on regional and international matters, as the region requires increased cooperation to ensure peace, security and stability.

President Sisi's visit to Oman in June 2022 played a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between the two countries. The visit saw the signing of several agreements in areas such as maritime navigation, investment, trade, industry, competition regulation, industrial development, investment promotion, environment, vocational and technical training, and higher education.

"The signing of these agreements laid the foundation for extensive mutual cooperation, resulting in a significant boost in trade exchange between Oman and Egypt in 2022."

Ambassador Radi highlighted that trade volume between Oman and Egypt increased 52 per cent compared to 2021, with



His Majesty the Sultan's visit serves as a message to further strengthen relations across multiple levels

KHALID MOHAMMED RADI

a total trade exchange of about EGP1.1bn.

Egyptian exports to Oman amounted to EGP433mn, while Egyptian imports from Oman stood at EGP760mn.

"These figures reflect the strong commitment of both countries to foster bilateral relations."

The ambassador elaborated on the specific products being exchanged between Oman and Egypt. "Oman exports metal ores, fish, aluminium and related industries, and organic chemical products to Egypt. On the other hand, Oman imports various agricultural products, furniture, electrical appliances, dairy products and other items from Egypt."

Under the guidance of their respective leaderships, officials from Oman and Egypt are actively working together to develop relations in various fields, he added.

"This joint effort is reflected in the economic, commercial and investment sectors. The volume of Egyptian investments in Oman has reached close to US\$2bn.

Oman's favourable investment environment, regulations and facilities for foreign investors serve as significant incentives for investments, attracting investors from Egypt and other countries."

Radi emphasised that Oman's upgraded credit rating is a testament to the efforts undertaken under the Royal directives of His Majesty the Sultan, which have established Oman as a haven of security and stability.

He further highlighted the increasing number of Egyptian companies in Oman, which now stands at around 1,900. "The visit of His Majesty the Sultan serves as a message to further strengthen relations across multiple levels, particularly in the economic, commercial and cultural domains."

The ambassador described the cultural relations between Oman and Egypt as extensive and diverse, covering various fields, including the art, literature, cinema and theatre.

Reiterating the shared perspectives of the two countries on regional and international issues, Radi said that these views stem from common values centred on establishing principles of security, peace and adherence to international law.

The Egyptian ambassador commended Oman's distinguished diplomacy in addressing various regional issues. He acknowledged Oman's steadfast support for peace efforts in different parts of the region and highlighted the care and attention provided by the Omani government and people to the Egyptian community residing in Oman.

"The Egyptian community actively participates in various development programmes, making positive contributions to Oman's progress in multiple fields."

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Pacts worth RO70mn to boost investment sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) signed ten usufruct contracts worth more than RO70mn on Sunday. The agreements were signed by H E Hamad bin Ali al Nazwani, Undersecretary for Housing in MHUP, and representatives of companies and institutions investing in projects. In a statement, MHUP said the ten usufruct contracts will

The 10 usufruct contracts will cover commercial, industrial, health and agricultural sectors in Muscat, Dhahirah and South Batinah

cover commercial, industrial, health and agricultural sectors in Muscat, Dhahirah and South Batinah. 'Valued at over RO70mn, the contracts will encompass a total area of more than 1.3mn sqm.'

Most of these contracts are for projects in Muscat, including one for establishment of an integrated specialised hospital in Seeb on an area of 40,000sqm at an investment cost of RO65mn, and a cement products factory costing RO1.2mn to be built on an area of 3,000sqm. Additionally, several contracts were signed for projects in the industrial sector, including one worth RO1.2mn in South Batinah.

One usufruct contract in Ibri, Dhahirah, is in the agricultural sector. MHUP also offered five new sites for investment through the Tatweer platform within the national initiative for integrated residential projects - Sorouh - on Sunday. These projects are in Buraimi, South Batinah, Dhahirah, North Sharqiyah and South Sharqiyah.

75% buildings to have fibre optics by 2025

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Boasting of one of the highest mobile penetration rates in the world, Oman now targets having fibre optics in at least 75 per cent of its buildings by 2025.

At a meeting organised on Sunday, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) revealed details of plans of infrastructure expansion in the telecommunications sector, improving quality of service, upgrading basic indicators for evaluating the quality and prices of telecommunications services in Oman, and reviewed investments in the last five years.

Under an executive programme, TRA is targeting to include 75 per cent buildings under fibre optic services, 85 per cent buildings covered by fixed broadband networks and 100 per cent stations supporting fourth and

fifth generations network by 2025.

A TRA official informed that the percentage of mobile phone subscription vis a vis the total population has reached 140 per cent, and the percentage of fixed broadband coverage in buildings is 80 per cent.

Oman's quest for quality telecommunication infrastructure has placed the sultanate among the most developed countries in terms of network readiness and access to telecommunication services. According to the Network Readiness Index (NRI) 2022, released by the Washington DC-based think tank Portulans Institute, Oman is ranked fourth in the Arab world.

It has a score above the regional average in three of four pillars: NRI score, People, Governance and Impact. In sub-pillars, it outperforms the average of Arab states in six of 12 sub-pillars: Access, Individuals, Govern-

ments, Trust, Inclusion and Quality of Life.

The indicators where Oman performs particularly well include Population covered by at least a 3G mobile network (rank 1st), Internet access in schools (rank 1st), and Gender gap in Internet use (rank 8th).

The TRA official informed that the authority has issued 12 regulations, including one on communication towers, rights of users of telecommunications services, quality of communication services, implementation of services in the field of communications, and regulating the provision of voice or video communication services via Internet protocol.

He added that the number of violations in the telecommunications sector in the year 2022 was 167, amounting to more than RO608,000.

"The number of government schools that were covered by telecommunication services in 2022 was 1,221, of which 1,146 schools were covered by fibre optic and 5G services, representing 94 per cent of the total," the TRA official added.



MERA to support 300 hajj pilgrims

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) launched an initiative on Sunday called Rabat, which will provide financial support of RO120,000 for hajj pilgrims. H E Dr Wa'il bin Saif al Harrasi, Undersecretary of MERA, informed that the initiative targets 306 pilgrims eligible from the social security families registered with the Ministry of Social Development to perform hajj this year. Beneficiaries are chosen according to an eligibility criteria approved by MERA through its electronic system for pilgrims. According to H E Harrasi, the Rabat initiative is linked to the Rabat endowment, which has been providing services to Omani pilgrims and umrah performers for many years. "Rabat aims to help those who are unable to perform

Rabat aims to help those who are unable to perform hajj. MERA is working on improving the endowment system

H E DR WA'IL AL HARRASI

hajj," he said, and added that MERA is working on a new strategy to improve the endowment system in the sultanate. Sultan bin Said al Hina'i, head of Omani Hajj Mission for 1444 AH, said the mission has completed procedures for the travel of pilgrims from Oman to Saudi Arabia. The pilgrims will leave on June 14. Ninety-nine per cent of the pilgrims have completed all documentation and requirements for travel to Saudi Arabia.

Exchange houses refuse ₹2,000 bills, expats upset

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Indian residents in Oman are encountering challenges in transactions with ₹2,000 currency notes, as exchange houses in the country refuse to accept these. This follows a statement issued by Reserve Bank of India (RBI) saying the ₹2,000 bills will be withdrawn from circulation. The general public has until September 30 to deposit or exchange these notes. The RBI instructed banks to cease issuing ₹2,000 denomination banknotes with immediate effect. The bills, however, will continue to be legal tender till the specified date. Confirming the decision of



Oman's exchange houses to not accept ₹2,000 bills, a senior official at Global Money Exchange, said, "Currently, we are not exchanging any ₹2,000 notes in compliance with Government of India instructions and are awaiting further information."

Expressing his disappointment over the exchange houses' decision, Sulaiman Babu said, "I am not well-informed about bank rules and was unaware of this change. I recently returned from

India and have some Indian currency with me. I went to an exchange house in Mawalah, but they refused to accept the notes. I need the money for my daily expenses and left the place dejected."

According to another exchange house official, a solution to the current situation is eagerly awaited. "We aim to assist our valued customers and are working towards that." The ₹2,000 bills were introduced by RBI in November 2016 as a measure to combat black money and counterfeit currency. These high-denomination notes were intended to replace the ₹500 and ₹1,000 bills which were demonetised at the time.

"The discontinuation of notes is often driven by several factors, including the prevention of counterfeit currency," a bank official in Muscat explained. "Exchange houses, responsible for ensuring the authenticity of currencies, must exercise caution in accepting notes to safeguard their customers." He further explained that the relatively large size of the ₹2,000 bill compared to other currencies poses logistical challenges for money exchange houses in terms of storage and transportation. "Practical considerations like these have influenced their decision to refrain from accepting these high-denomination Indian currency notes."

Wadi Bani Khalid records 32mm rainfall in 4 days

Muscat - Heavy to moderate rains lashed several governorates in the past four days, with Wadi Bani Khalid recording the highest rainfall of 32mm from May 17 to May 20. Isolated rains lashed Dhofar in the early hours of Sunday with more expected over most governorates during afternoon and evening. The adverse weather is likely to result in a drop in temperature, according to the Directorate General of Meteorology. Data collected from the rain monitoring stations of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources from Wednesday till Saturday showed that Nizwa received 23mm of rainfall, Ibri 21mm, Liwa 20mm, Al Qabil 18mm and Shinas 15mm.

New initiative launched to boost scientific research

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a move to bolster the research and education community, the Oman Research and Education Network (OMREN) has introduced a new service aimed at providing its members an exceptional experience. Supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, OMREN has launched a bulk SMS service to facilitate quick and effective communication among member institutions, students, academic staff and affiliates. The service will enable dissemination of important information, updates and awareness campaigns through SMS, fostering high-level interaction. Highlighting the significance



of OMREN's half-million bulk SMS service, Najah Mohammed al Rashdi, Director of Innovation

Park Muscat, said it will empower all members to meet their diverse needs - like sending up-

dates or promotional short messages - effortlessly and efficiently, without concerns about cost. There are numerous advantages of using OMREN's new service. It is free of charge and the service is automatically renewed annually, ensuring uninterrupted service. Additionally, a user-friendly control system enables easy management and recording of all relevant information. OMREN also provides a support plan, offering assistance to members in managing and optimising the service through strategic service providers with round-the-clock support. 'We urge relevant teams in affiliated organisations to fully utilise and benefit from this service,' a statement said.

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BRIEFS

Japan emerges from recession as demand rebound

Japan's economy emerged from recession and grew faster than expected in the first quarter as a post-COVID consumption rebound offset global headwinds, shoring up hopes for a sustained recovery. But mounting signs of a slowdown in the US, European and Chinese growth cloud the outlook for the export-reliant economy, heightening uncertainty on how soon the central bank can phase out its massive stimulus programme, Reuters reported.

The world's third-largest economy grew an annualised 1.6 per cent in January-March, government data showed, far exceeding market forecasts for a 0.7 per cent gain and marking the first rise in three quarters.

The growth followed a 0.1 per cent fall in the final quarter of last year, which was revised down from a 0.1 per cent rise.

The decline marked two straight quarters of contraction, meeting the definition of a technical recession.

Profits of Oman's oil marketing firms rise on increased sales

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The total profits of Oman's three oil marketing companies - Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO), Shell Oman Marketing Company, and Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company - significantly increased during the first quarter of 2023 as the firms recorded robust growth in fuel sales.

For the first quarter of 2023, all three oil marketing companies together reported slightly more than RO4mn in total net profits, which is 13 per cent higher compared to the RO3.56mn net profit registered by the companies in the first quarter of the previous year.

The sultanate's largest oil marketing company, OOMCO, saw its net profit for the three-month period ending March 31, 2023, grow by more than 16 per cent to RO1.41mn compared to the RO1.21mn net profit reported in the same period of 2022. The company's group turnover jumped by 20 per cent to RO202.4mn in the first quarter of 2023, against the RO169.1mn recorded in the previous year.



Al Maha Petroleum posted an impressive 74 per cent year-on-year growth in its net profit for the first quarter of 2023

In its latest financial report, OOMCO stated that the increase in revenue was the result of higher sales in the bunker fuel trade and aviation segment.

The company also expressed optimism about Oman's future economy, which is expected to positively impact its performance.

'The company is pursuing its five-year strategy (2022 - 2026), which reflects a clear growth road-map that focuses on domestic and international growth, as well as future mobility, sustainability, renewable energy, and an operational excellence framework that aims for effective processes and opti-

misation of our operational efficiencies,' OOMCO said.

'OOMCO continues to innovate and develop new initiatives to ensure that it remains resilient. The company will spare no efforts to explore all viable opportunities that will enhance the overall company's performance in a sustainable way,' the com-

pany added.

Al Maha Petroleum posted an impressive 74 per cent year-on-year growth in its net profit for the first quarter of 2023. The company's net profit rose to RO1.6mn during the January-March period of 2023, compared to RO920,000 recorded in the same period last year. Its sales revenue during the first quarter of 2023 grew by 21 per cent to RO120.87mn from RO99.9mn in the same period of the previous year.

Al Maha Petroleum attributed this growth to its expanding operations and diversifying product portfolio. The company stated that the robust growth in net profit demonstrates its commitment to cost management and operational efficiency.

'The retail segment witnessed a significant improvement compared to the same period in 2022, as sales increased in the majority of retail stations due to the lifting of restrictions on movement.

Additionally, retail fuel stations near the borders contributed to the increase in sales due to price differences,' Al Maha Petroleum said in its fi-

nancial report.

According to Al Maha Petroleum, the fiercely competitive commercial fuel segment continues to be challenging due to low demand from many business and service units in the power sector resorting to the use of gas as a replacement for gas oil.

However, the company stated that the increase in the bunkering business and the delivery of additional fuel products to the Duqm Refinery has contributed to the growth of the commercial segment.

Shell Oman Marketing's sales revenue rose 10 per cent to RO122.79mn in the first quarter of 2023, compared to RO112.1mn in the same period last year. However, the company reported a 31 per cent drop in net profit for the first quarter of this year, at RO993,000 compared to the RO1.43mn earned in the corresponding period of 2022.

The decline in quarterly profit was mainly due to movement in aviation fuel prices compared to the same period last year and an overall increase in direct costs, Shell Oman Marketing said in its financial report.

OPEC chief says global oil industry requires \$12tn investment by 2045

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The Secretary-General of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Haitham al Ghais, said that while there may not be a one-size-fits-all solution to achieve a sustainable energy future, collaboration and inclusive action are essential in achieving a just and permanent energy transition.

During a press statement on the sustainability-centric efforts made by the international organisation, Ghais said, "The challenges for energy, climate, and sustainable development are enormous, and this means that the discourse needs to be inclusive."

He emphasised the importance of oil by stating, "Imagine a world without oil and the multitude of essential daily products derived from it: gasoline, heating oil, jet fuel, kerosene, toothpaste, deodorant, soap, cameras, computers, car tires, upholstery, contact lenses, artificial limbs and hearts, many types of medicine, and much more."

Ghais continued, "Essential



OPEC Secretary-General Haitham al Ghais

services that people depend on would vanish, transportation would grind to a halt, many homes would be without heat, people's health would suffer, global food supply chains would be disrupted, and energy poverty would rise further. It is a world that does not bear thinking about."

However, he stressed the importance of a just and sustainable energy transition, where no one is left behind. He stated, "The challenges for energy, climate, and sustainable develop-

ment are enormous, and this means that the discourse needs to be inclusive. We need every voice at the table, with the G7 playing a vital role."

Addressing the rising energy demand due to population and economic growth, Ghais mentioned, "In our World Oil Outlook 2022, we forecast that global energy demand will expand by 23 per cent by 2045. Meeting this growth, ensuring energy security and affordable access, and lowering global emissions in line with the Paris Agreement require

all energies, and unprecedented investment and collaboration."

He added, "For the oil industry alone, which will make up almost 29 per cent of the world's energy needs by 2045, global investment requirements total US\$12.1tn between now and then. This equates to more than US\$500bn each year."

Ghais acknowledged that recent annual investment levels have been significantly below this amount due to industry downturns, the pandemic, and the increasing focus on environmental, social, and governance issues. He emphasised the need to rectify the chronic underinvestment, stating, "The sustainability of the global energy system is at stake. We are playing catch-up on investments. We need a long-term, investment-friendly climate that works for producers and consumers."

He also highlighted the readiness of OPEC member countries to play a key role in providing energy to the world and reducing emissions.

WAM

OPAZ proceeds with plan for digital transformation

Muscat - Oman's Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) is proceeding with its strategic plan for the digital transformation programme, including setting June 30, 2023 as the last day for receiving and sending paper-based transactions, except for some special government correspondence.

This reflects OPAZ's efforts and initiatives to make the most of the modern technologies, and to achieve a major objective of Oman Vision 2040 towards digital transformation in government transactions and services provided to investors and beneficiaries.

Mahmoud bin Hamoud al Rawahi, general manager of planning and information technology at OPAZ, stressed on the authority's commitment and endeavour towards implementing the strategic directions of the National Programme for Digital Transformation, adopting digital best practices and benefiting from modern tech-

nology in order to improve and increase the efficiency of the provided government services. Thus, OPAZ has set June 30 as the last day for receiving and sending paper-based transactions, except for some special government correspondence, Rawahi said in a press release.

Rawahi said, "OPAZ strives to simplify the procedures for investor services and re-engineered all licenses, permits and approvals necessary to operate any investment project. It also participated in Manajm laboratories to simplify the procedures of government services supervised by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, which had an impact on raising the level of quality of services provided to investors."

He informed that OPAZ will develop the centralised platform for investor services in all the zones affiliated to the authority. This platform will provide all services online in the economic zones, free zones and

industrial cities, considering the integration between this platform and other national platforms related to the services provided by government bodies.

OPAZ held several meetings with the concerned government parties to ensure full integration with its digital platforms, reflecting the national strategic directions to maximise the use of the infrastructure available to these entities.

"OPAZ will soon announce launching the first version of Etlizam system, which is one of the electronic applications that assists the different concerned departments to perform their regulatory role in an interactive manner with companies. The main purpose of the supervisory work of OPAZ is to bring an added value represented in improving the performance and efficiency of the projects that are supervised by OPAZ with regards to its compliance with the relevant legislation," Rawahi said.

High cost casts shadow over generative AI revolution

Washington, US - The explosion of generative AI has taken the world by storm, but one question all too rarely comes up: Who can afford it?

OpenAI bled around US\$540mn last year as it developed ChatGPT and says it needs US\$100bn to meet its ambitions, according to industry media The Information.

"We're going to be the most capital-intensive startup in Silicon Valley history," OpenAI's founder Sam Altman told a panel recently.

And when Microsoft, which poured billions of dollars in investment into OpenAI, is asked about how much its AI adventure will cost, the company answers with assurances that it is keeping an eye on its bottom line.

Building something even near

the scale of what OpenAI, Microsoft or Google have on offer would require an eye-watering investment on state-of-the-art chips and recruiting prize-winning researchers.

"People don't realise that to do a significant amount of AI things like ChatGPT takes huge amounts of processing power. And training those models can cost tens of millions of dollars," said Jack Gold, an independent analyst.

"How many companies can actually afford to go out and buy 10,000 Nvidia H100 systems that go for tens of thousands of dollars a piece?" asked Gold.

The answer is pretty much no one and in tech, if you can't build the infrastructure, you rent it and that is what companies already do massively by outsourcing



their computing needs to Microsoft, Google and Amazon's AWS.

And with the advent of generative AI, this dependency on cloud computing and tech giants deepens, leaving the same players in the driver's seat, experts warned.

'Heavily underestimated'
The unpredictable costs of cloud

computing, "is a heavily underestimated problem for many companies," said Stefan Sigg, Chief Product Officer at Software AG, which develops software for businesses.

Sigg compares cloud costs to electricity bills and says companies that don't know better are in for "a big surprise" if they let their engineers run up bills in the mad rush to build tech, including AI.

Microsoft's signature cloud

offer is Azure and some observers believe the giant's all-in bet on AI is really about protecting Azure success and guaranteeing the cash cow's future.

Azure has been the giant's unsexy bread-winner for years, bringing in huge profits but without attracting the headlines of an iPhone or social media that go straight to the consumer.

For Microsoft, "the golden goose is monetizing cloud with Azure because we're talking about what could be a US\$20, US\$30, US\$40 billion opportunity annually down the road if the AI bet is successful," said Dan Ives of Wedbush Securities.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella insists that generative AI is "moving fast in the right direction."

Deeply respected on Wall

Street, Nadella will have a six- or nine-month grace period to show his bet is a winner, Ives predicted.

Microsoft acknowledges the risk, but insists that on AI, it must "lead this wave," CFO Amy Hood told analysts this month.

"We will charge for those AI capabilities, and then ultimately, we'll deliver operating profit," she said.

Piling up profit at the company founded by Bill Gates can only mean passing on the cost of AI to customers.

From Main Street to Fortune 500, the dependency on the AI-amped will be an expensive one and companies and investors are drumming up alternatives to at least reduce the bill.

"AI training, GPT training will become a very important cloud

service going forward," said Spectro Cloud CEO Tenry Fu.

His company, like many others in the sector, helps companies optimize cloud technology to reduce expenses.

"But after training, a company will be able to get their model back for real AI application" and the dependence on the cloud giants will hopefully be reduced, he added.

Regulators are hoping that they can keep up, and not leave the giants in charge, imposing their terms on smaller companies.

"Law enforcers (must) ensure that... opportunities and openings for competition... are not getting squashed out by the incumbents," FTC chairwoman Lina Khan told CNBC.

AFP

Biden says Republican debt ceiling demands 'unacceptable'

Washington, US – President Joe Biden on Sunday slammed Republican demands in negotiations to resolve the US debt ceiling standoff as “unacceptable” but said a solution can still be found before a disastrous default.

Speaking at a press conference just before leaving to return to Washington from the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan, Biden said Republicans’ latest demands for spending cuts as a condition for raising the US government borrowing authority were “frankly unacceptable.”

“It’s time for the other side to move from their extreme positions,” he said.

Biden said he would talk directly with Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy during his Air Force One flight on Sunday back to Washington and said “we can reach an agreement.”

However, he cautioned that he could not “guarantee that they wouldn’t force a default by doing something outrageous.”

Biden said that he was looking into an obscure constitutional clause in the 14th Amendment, which states that the validity of public debt “shall not be questioned” – and potentially authorising the president to



US President Joe Biden speaks about debt negotiations in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on May 17 (AFP)

circumvent Congress and raise the debt ceiling himself.

“I think we have the authority. The question is could it be done and invoked in time,” he said, noting the likelihood of legal challenges to this and the rapidly approaching debt deadline.

The Treasury Department says that the government could run out of money and default on its US\$31tn debt as early as June 1 if Congress, where Republicans control the House of Representatives, does not authorise more borrowing.

Biden had planned to travel from Japan to Papua New Guinea and Australia but cut short the Asia trip due to the debt talks.

'Hostage' accusation
The debt ceiling raise is usually an uncontroversial annual procedure but this year the increasingly hard-right Republican Party has turned the threat of default into a powerful lever to try and force Biden to accept spending cuts. Biden accuses his opponents of putting the US economy

at risk for political point scoring. Discussions were at an impasse over the weekend in Washington, as both sides traded accusations.

“We’re making zero demands to avoid default. You’re the only ones with a hostage,” tweeted White House spokesperson Andrew Bates, accusing Republicans of seeking to trigger a recession in the world’s leading economy.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that McCarthy was being strong-armed

by his party’s pro-Donald Trump wing, which is “threatening to put our nation into default for the first time in our history unless extreme partisan demands are met.”

McCarthy, however, tweeted Saturday to say the White House was the one “moving backward.”

“Unfortunately, the socialist wing of the Democrat Party appears to be in control – especially with President Biden out of the country,” he said.

Biden said that McCarthy was likely waiting for him to join in before the talks could be revived.

“My guess is he’s going to want to deal directly with me,” Biden said.

Spending and taxing
More borrowing is required imminently by the US government just to meet expenditures already agreed to in the current budget.

Failure to strike a deal to lift the debt ceiling would leave Washington unable to pay its bills and trigger an array of economic shockwaves worldwide – including, the White House says, a US recession.

With the 2024 election campaign underway and Biden potentially facing Trump again,

Republicans have seized the opportunity to paint the Democrats as responsible for the country’s gargantuan debt – which in reality has built up over decades.

Republicans say the debt ceiling can no longer be raised without harsh measures to reduce the deficit. These include slashing social spending and restricting access to Medicaid, the subsidized program providing health care for the poor.

Biden has countered with a plan to reduce some spending but also to raise new revenue by increasing taxes on the richest Americans and corporations which currently enjoy huge tax breaks. Republicans are refusing to accept any tax increase as part of a deal.

“That’s what we continue to have a significant disagreement on, on the revenue side,” Biden said in his press conference.

He cautioned that the 14th Amendment was not a magic bullet, since he could not be sure about his ability to invoke it before the government ran out of money.

“We have not come up with unilateral action that could succeed in a matter of two weeks or three weeks. That’s the issue. So it’s up to lawmakers,” he said.

AFP

Russian oil revenues tumble due to price cap: US Treasury

Washington, US – Russia’s oil revenues have suffered a marked decline since Western countries slapped a price cap on Russian crude as punishment for the invasion of Ukraine, the US Treasury said.

“Despite widespread initial market skepticism around the price cap, market participants and geopolitical analysts have now acknowledged that the price cap is accomplishing both of its goals,” according to the Treasury report.

The US\$60-a-barrel cap levied by the G7 group of advanced economies, the European Union and Australia caused oil revenues to shrink from as much as 35 percent of the total Russian budget before the war to 23 percent this year, the Treasury said.

The Treasury, citing Russian Ministry of Finance figures, said federal government oil revenues were down over 40 percent between January and March this year compared to a year earlier.

The decline in revenues comes despite an increase in overall Russian oil exports to countries including India over the last year.

The report will provide welcome news for G7 now leaders holding a summit in Japan.

AFP

Electric trucks pick up speed despite bumpy road

Gothenburg, Sweden – Using a motorised arm, a worker at Volvo’s factory near Gothenburg slowly guides massive black blocks alongside a chassis, the three tonnes of batteries soon to power an electric truck.

“This is where the difference lies,” explains Sandra Finer, vice president of operations at the Swedish site.

On the assembly line, “we use the same people, the same equipment and the same process, (but)... when we build the electric truck we dock the electric module instead of an engine for the diesel trucks.”

Electric heavy trucks are now mass produced in Europe, North America and China and have been rolled out faster than expected – though it will still be a while before they overtake polluting diesel trucks in number.

“It is a really exciting moment we’re living in regarding electric trucks,” Felipe Rodriguez, an independent expert at analysis group International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT), told AFP.

“Just four or five years ago, people would have said ‘You’re crazy, that’s not going to happen. Diesel is king, it can’t be beaten,’” he said.

Electric heavy trucks require massive amounts of energy to propel their heavy loads, raising questions about their range and recharging capabilities.

They need charging terminals dozens of times more powerful than those made for electric cars.

The electric trucks are also more expensive, currently costing between two to three times more than a traditional diesel model, according to industry experts.

However, those prices are expected to go down and the higher up-front price can be offset by cheaper running costs using electricity, as well as different country-specific incentives.



This file photo shows two Volvo electric trucks at the company’s proving ground in Hålleröd, east of Gothenburg, Sweden (AFP)

Race to launch

Spurred by increasingly strict EU regulations aimed at reducing CO2 emissions as well as massive Chinese state support for its national manufacturers, the sector is determined to press ahead.

There has been “a reckoning in the industry that they will not be able to hold on to their diesel engines forever,” Rodriguez said.

“There is now a race to really develop and launch these electric trucks on the market.”

In 2022, electric trucks accounted for a tiny portion of heavy trucks on the world’s main markets – just one or two percent, with 40,000 to 50,000 units sold worldwide, most of them in China, according to data from trade experts.

But the main Western truck makers – Germany’s Daimler and Man, Sweden’s Volvo and its French subsidiary Renault Trucks, and the other Swedish manufacturer Scania – have invested heavily.

US manufacturer Tesla, which has been hugely successful with its electric cars, also aims to break into the e-trucks sector, with its “Semi” model promising a range of up to 800 kilometres (500 miles).

The global truck market is sizable, estimated at more than US\$200bn per year with almost six million units sold.

“In 2030, 50 per cent of the volume that we sell for Volvo

Trucks should be zero emissions ... and in 2040, everything that we sell should be zero emissions,” Roger Alm, head of Volvo Group’s trucks division, told AFP.

That more or less corresponds to the level necessary to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement to decarbonise road transport, according to the ICCT.

Diesel long-haul trucks emit around one kilo of CO2 per kilometre, the ICCT estimates.

With Europe’s current electricity mix, which still comprises a significant amount of coal and gas, the carbon footprint of an electric truck is two-thirds lower than that of a diesel truck.

Electric trucks are expected to account for 90 percent of the truck market by 2040, according to ICCT.

“It has started to really take off and grow in the Northern parts of Europe and in North America,” Alm said.

“Now it’s moving into the southern parts of Europe and we also have new markets in Africa, for example, Australia, Brazil, so it’s expanding country by country.” Together with other manufacturers, Volvo, the world’s second-biggest truck builder, has agreed to take part in a vast European project to increase the number of truck charging stations, currently one of the weak points holding back their adoption.

AFP

China says US chipmaker Micron failed security review

Beijing, China – China’s cybersecurity watchdog said Sunday US chipmaker Micron had failed a national security probe and told “operators of critical information infrastructure” to stop purchasing its products.

The probe was the latest escalation in the ongoing chip war between the United States and China, with Washington looking to cut off Beijing’s access to the most advanced semiconductors.

It also came as China tightened the enforcement of its national security and anti-espionage laws.

Micron’s products “have relatively serious potential network security issues, which pose a major security risk to China’s critical information infrastructure supply chain and affect China’s national security”, the cybersecurity administration said in a statement.

“Operators of critical information infrastructure in China should stop purchasing Micron products.”



China launched a cybersecurity review in March of products sold in the country by Micron

Beijing launched a cybersecurity review in March of products sold in the country by Micron, one of the world’s major chip manufacturers.

The chip war between Beijing and Washington escalated last year when the United States imposed restrictions on China’s access to high-end chips, chipmaking equipment and software used to design semiconductors.

Washington cited national security concerns, and said it wanted to prevent “sensitive technologies with military appli-

cations” from being acquired by China’s armed forces and intelligence services.

The United States imposed targeted controls on the ability of domestic industry leaders to sell their products overseas.

It has also sought to persuade key allies to follow suit.

The Netherlands and Japan – both leading manufacturers of specialised semiconductor technology equipment – have recently announced new restrictions on exporting certain products, but without naming China.

Beijing has slammed the moves as “US bullying tactics” and accused Washington of “technological terrorism”, vowing that such controls will only strengthen its resolve to achieve self-reliance in the sector.

The development of a robust domestic semiconductor industry has been a longstanding goal of the Chinese government, which has invested billions of dollars in domestic chip firms.

Chips are the lifeblood of the modern global economy, powering everything from cars to smartphones, and they are forecast to become a US\$1tn industry globally by 2030.

Nowhere is their essential nature more visible than in China, the world’s second-largest economy, which relies on a steady supply of foreign chips for its huge electronics manufacturing base.

In 2021, China imported semiconductors worth US\$430bn – more than it spent on oil.

AFP

China exports rise at slower pace in April

Beijing, China – China’s exports grew at a slower pace in April compared to the previous month, according to official data released Tuesday, as the world’s second-largest economy endures a patchy recovery from tough Covid curbs.

Rising global inflation, the threat of recession elsewhere and geopolitical tensions with the United States have weakened demand for Chinese products.

Exports growth cooled to 8.5 per cent in April in US dollar terms, after a surprise jump of 14.8 per cent in March, customs data showed.

Beijing’s exports to Russia leapt 67.2 per cent in April, year-on-year, but demand from mar-



China’s economy grew 4.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2023

kets elsewhere shrank.

China’s exports have grown for two months, snapping a run

of five straight declines, when production was disrupted by sweeping lockdowns and delays at ports when China enforced its zero-Covid policy.

The stifling health restrictions were scrapped in December but domestic consumption remains subdued.

Imports fell much more sharply than expected in April, sliding 7.9 per cent year-on-year, compared with a 1.4 per cent decline in March. Analysts polled by Bloomberg had expected imports to decline by 0.2 per cent.

“The contraction of imports may be partly driven by the slowdown of global demand, which in turn affects China’s imports of parts and components,” said Zhang Zhiwei, chief economist at

Pinpoint Asset Management.

China’s trade surplus grew to US\$90.21bn in April, up from US\$88.2bn in March.

Its economy grew 4.5 per cent in the first three months of the year.

But manufacturing activity contracted in April due to tapering global demand and a slow domestic recovery.

The official manufacturing purchasing managers’ index (PMI) – a key gauge of Chinese factory output – fell unexpectedly to 49.2 in April from 51.9 in March, and below the 50-point mark that separates expansion and contraction in activity, data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed.

AFP

Foton Aumark delivers strong value proposition



Foton Aumark, the popular light duty truck is a preferred choice for the customers in Oman and has a strong value proposition. Aumark is designed to meet the Oman users’ pursuit for an efficient and worry-free logistics.

The truck which is powered by legendary Cummins 3.8L turbo diesel engine, ZF Transmission and DANA Axles is known for its excellent fuel economy, safety, and top-quality performance in the logistics and cargo industry.

The Foton Aumark - light duty truck coupled with Cummins Engine and ZF (6-speed) manual transmission. Available in three wheelbase 3360mm, 3800mm, 5100mm, the light duty truck has competitive edge and has many comfortable features including cruise control, reversing sensor, remote control central door-locking, ABS+EBD, Air with exhaust brakes, power windows among others.

The light duty truck, which is perfect for intra city use and city-to-city movements of goods, offers industry leading technology that augments the truck’s driving experience while providing supreme safety and provides customers with the best experience for their customized transportation needs, Foton Aumark - light duty truck is an ideal choice for its superior loading, fuel efficiency and less frequent service requirements features (service can be done at every 20,000km). With its outstanding features, Foton Aumark - light duty truck is great value for money too.

Owner of three Foton Aumark Ali Ghasi Mabrook Saleem is captivated by the light duty truck’s high-class Turbo engine with good power and excellent fuel economy, outstanding braking system, exceptional loading capabilities and excellent stability during long distance.

He calls it a highly capable light truck that delivers superior performance; Aumark signifies Foton’s dedication to developing innovative driving technologies that deliver an incredible personalised experience to customers. Thanks for Gulf Great Sands LLC team for proving the outstanding service, I am very much impressed with Foton Aumark light duty truck he adds.

The light duty truck embodies a lot the brand Foton stands for - amazing design, advanced technology and empowering performance. Foton strives to provide global automotive markets with high quality, affordable vehicles powered by sourcing the best of current as well as emerging technologies.

Formidable joint ventures with globally-reputed manufacturers and major component brands, have enabled Foton to include sustainable engineering, advanced systems and state-of-the-art technology into every Foton vehicle.

“Foton Aumark - light duty truck has grown to be a popular choice in Oman. Its attributes and fundamental fortes have garnered great response from customers in the sultanate,” a spokesperson for GGS said.

“Aumark is designed to meet the Oman users’ pursuit for an efficient and worry-free logistics, which leads the world-class product. The light duty truck with different wheelbase based on the business application. It can be modified into a cargo truck, refrigerator truck, light dump truck and open cargo body truck.”

The Foton Aumark is fully customisable with versatile body options to make it a productive work tool for everyday use. Aumark is what a truck should be - solid, reliable and good value. The Foton Aumark - light duty truck is built on a new platform and positioned as a mid-to-high-end professional logistics vehicle used to transport between cities in Oman.

With Foton Cummins efficient power, the product will be greatly improved in power, fuel, noise reduction, and weight.

The Foton Aumark has experienced 1.6mn kilometre road test, and diverse working conditions tests, including durability testing, reliability testing, stability test, high-low temperature testing, highland testing among others.

Partnering with Foton Motor Group, one of the world’s largest manufacturer of commercial vehicles, Gulf Great Sands LLC (GGS) have full range of commercial vehicles in Oman. Through this exclusive distribution partnership, Gulf Great Sands has commenced the supply of a range of Foton’s commercial vehicles in Oman including the Foton View - High roof wide body 13-Seater Mini-Bus and Cargo Van, Foton Aumark - light duty truck (Diesel), Tunland Gasoline Pickups, View Mini- Buses, Panel vans, and Foton Auman - Medium Duty Truck.

OAB to finance customers of La Vie properties

Oman Arab Bank (OAB), Alizz Islamic Bank (AIB) and Oman Real Estate Investment Services (ORIS) have signed a joint agreement allowing customers to access a full range of financing solutions and competitive rates when purchasing property at new project La Vie in Muscat Hills.

Customers can now finance off-plan units via an OAB housing loan, with full details and terms available from OAB’s sales agents and branches. The agreement was signed by Sulaiman al Harthi, CEO of OAB; Ali al Mani, General Manager of AIB; and Nasser al Shibli, Chief Real Estate Officer of ORIS.

The LA VIE project covers an area of around 640,000 square meters and features a natural golf course spanning 600,000sqm, complete with 18 holes and a private club man-



aged by the world-renowned golf management company ‘Troon’.

The project also comprises of residential, commercial, and tourism buildings with a built-up area of 64,000sqm. The centerpiece of the development is an 80-room boutique hotel managed by TIVOLI, with the largest rooftop swimming pool in Muscat to date, providing panoramic views of the golf course.

The Hotel will also provide a private health club, and spa operated by the world-leading brand ‘Anantara’.

TIVOLI will also manage 100 fully serviced branded apartments. The residential complex comprises of 8 independent luxury villas and 22 apartments, all offering spectacular views of the

golf course and Al Hajar Mountains. The project also includes approximately 2,800sqm of retail space hosting a variety of international brands, some of which are new to the Omani market.

“This joint agreement will give prospective buyers increased financial flexibility when purchasing property at the outstanding new LA VIE development in Muscat Hills,” Sulaiman al Harthi said. “We pride ourselves on the wide suite of financial products we offer to our customers, giving them an excellent range of options when making their most important purchases.

“I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues at Alizz Islamic Bank and our counterparts at Oman Real Estate Investment Services (ORIS) for all their hard work to make this

agreement possible.”

Commenting on the agreement, Nasser al Shibli said, “We are delighted to collaborate with Oman Arab Bank and Alizz Islamic Bank to offer customers a comprehensive range of financing options and competitive rates when purchasing properties at LA VIE. Located in the heart of Muscat, this exceptional development offers a unique lifestyle experience and a range of amenities to its residents.

“Through this joint agreement, we aim to provide buyers with the necessary financial flexibility and convenience to purchase their dream home at LA VIE. We are confident that this partnership will contribute to the success of the project, and we look forward to exploring further opportunities for collaboration with both banks in the future.”

Muscat civic body showcases updated Baladiyeti App

Muscat Municipality will take part in the ICT information and Communication Technology Show (Comex2023), which kicks off on Monday at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC).

Muscat Municipality will showcase its state-of-the-art services related to digital transformation and facilitating the user experience, and reveals the details of the updated services in the new version of the Baladiyeti smartphone application during the four-day event that will continue until Thursday.

In addition to introducing those interested in the municipality’s WhatsApp platform,



which is called ‘Moeen’ platform, which in turn provides an automated service to respond and identify options for the beneficiaries of services and guide them in the correct direction, which in turn saves time and effort and facilitates receiving knowledge.

STARZPLAY brings a gripping tale of redemption and love in the highly anticipated film ‘Harley’

STARZPLAY, one of the region’s top three subscription video on demand services, is thrilled to announce the release of its new original, *Harley*, starring the ‘Number One’ Mohammed Ramadan, set to drop on June 10.

The STARZPLAY Original, premiering exclusively right after its theatrical release, promises audiences an enthralling narrative that delves into the depths of love, redemption, and personal transformation.

Since its release on Eid al Fitr, *Harley* has taken the cinemas by storm, leading the box office charts while appealing to both critics and audiences alike. *Harley* marks Mohamed Ramadan’s return to the big screen after a gap of four years.

Set in a gripping underworld of diamond trafficking, *Harley*



follows the journey of Hashem, a brilliant mechanical engineer known as Harley. Being the right-hand man to a renowned gang leader, Harley is driven by his exceptional intelligence and speed.

However, faced with the devastating consequences of drug abuse and the tragic loss of his brother, Harley resolves to break free from his criminal lifestyle and protect his new-

found love from succumbing to the same fate.

Created by Mohammed Sami and directed by Mohammed Samir, *Harley* features an ensemble cast that includes Mai Omar, Mahmoud Hemida, Bassel el Zaro, Mai Kassab, Ismail Farghali, and Ahmad Dash. *Harley* is poised to captivate audiences with its powerful performances and gripping storyline.

The release of *Harley* is a testament to STARZPLAY’s commitment to bringing its audiences across the MENA region an exceptional viewing experience and an exclusive content library.

Stay tuned for the exclusive premiere of *Harley* on STARZPLAY, as the platform continues to deliver compelling and high-quality entertainment experiences to its subscribers.



NHI hosts VIPs for ‘lunch of seafood’

There were nervous students on duty at NHI as they waited for the arrival of their VIP guests for a sumptuous ‘Lunch of Seafood Salad, Rack of Lamb’ and finished with a classic Pear Belle Helene dessert in the Classroom restaurant.

As part of the new strategy at NHI, the institute is hosting regular lunches for the hotel GMs and other interested parties.

They were proud to host H H

Tarik bin Shabib; H E Thomas Friedrich Schneider, the Ambassador of Germany; H E Veronique Aulagnon, Ambassador of France; and H E Pierluigi Délia, Ambassador of Italy; accompanied by general managers of several hotels and a bank CEO.

The conversation around the table was interesting and full of insight into the workings of the hotel industry and their hopes

for the future of tourism in Oman.

The ambassadors were also able to give their thoughts on their own nationals coming to Oman.

Now in its 28th year, NHI is still at the forefront of key hospitality training for the sector.

Goulam Amarsy, majority shareholder of NHI, said, “We are working on solutions for the training and development of

more senior staff, regional training within Oman and international training within the Gulf region.”

Principal Robert Maclean told the gathered guests to urge all their teams to come and visit NHI to see how the training is conducted.

“If you are someone, who has any experience of the industry we will welcome you to you assist us,” the principal added.

MoE experts share views on education plans, tracks

The Ministry of Education recently convened a meeting of experts and educationists to discuss the educational ladder, the study plan, and the educational tracks against the backdrop of school curriculum and education path.

The School Education Development and Structuring Project Management Office brought together members of various teams formed for the purpose of looking into various aspects of education plan, for this discussion in the presence of Dr Yahya al Harthi, Director-General of the Curriculum Development and the acting director of the School Education Development and Structuring Project Management Office.

The meeting also discussed what has been accomplished in the vocational and technical education track, which will be implemented in the next academic year in four schools, two in Muscat governorate, and two in South Batinah governorate in the fields of entrepreneurship and information technology.

The meeting included the presentation of three papers, where Dr Yahya al Harthi, Director-General of the Directorate-General of Curriculum Development, presented an introductory paper on the Education Development Project Management Office and its structure.

The paper pointed out the most important functions of the office represented in following up the decisions of the steering committee, supervising the general framework of the school ed-



ucation development project and its structure, and studying the proposed implementation plans to ensure compatibility and harmony between the study plan and educational paths.

In his paper, the Director-General touched on the most important terms of reference of the technical teams concerned with the implementation of the educational ladder and study plan, represented in preparing executive work plans for the application of the educational ladder and the study plan, setting its own performance indicators, and studying the perceptions of curriculum development and educational calendar according to the study plan.

The terms of reference of the two teams for the implementation of vocational and technical education were to determine the requirements for the implementation of vocational and technical education, the challenges and so-

lutions to overcome them, and to hold meetings with the competent authorities to discuss the requirements in coordination with the Project Management Office, and to hold discussion sessions with specialists in the educational field on developments in the implementation of the vocational and technical education.

Muhammad al Wahaibi, Director of the Curricula Studies and Development Office, presented the second paper 'The Educational Ladder and Study Plan Implementation Team', in which he discussed the educational ladder in Oman, and that schools will be categorised according to grades I to IV; V to VIII and IX to XII - keeping the basic education for grades I to X, and the post-basic education for grades XI-XII.

The paper also dealt with comparisons between the study plan for grades I-VIII where number of subjects will be reduced

from 11 to nine between basic subjects, accompanying subjects, while grades IX-X will have basic and elective subjects, the number of which will be reduced from 12 to eight.

The study plan for grades XI-XII has more flexibility in offering tracks in proportion to the local needs so that the students begin to plan their education by choosing the path that corresponds to their tendencies and abilities.

The paper also reviewed the implementation strategy for the study plan for grades I to IV during the academic year 2023-24, and the plan for authoring and developing textbooks.

Dr Atom al Khatri, assistant director of the Office of the School Education Development and Structuring Management Project, presented the third paper on the vocational and technical education (business administration and information technology),

in which she clarified that the study subjects in business administration are divided into main subjects (Islamic education, Arabic language, mathematics, social studies), and specialised subjects (specialised English language, introduction to business, commercial marketing, commercial decision-making, training in the business world).

She also stated that the study materials in information technology are represented in main subjects (Islamic education, Arabic language, mathematics, social studies), and specialised subjects (specialised English language, information systems management, database management, software development, robotics, and social media in business).

The language of instruction will be English, so that the main and elective subjects are taught according to the curricula of the Ministry of Education for grades XI-XII.



Ooredoo launches Spring Forward programme for future leaders

From workshops, training opportunities to competitions, Ooredoo has been doing whatever it takes to support young people across Oman in kick-starting their futures as leaders and entrepreneurs.

Hoping to inspire future generations of groundbreakers at work, Ooredoo has launched the eighth edition of its Spring Forward workshop series.

The workshops, which are delivered by professional industry leaders and licensed trainers, aim to polish the professional skill set of young Omani women and men. Spring Forward training opportunities are perfect for participants to further gain the experience, skills and confidence to boost their careers!

Participants include employees from the Ministry of Health and Oman Women's Sports Committee and Gender Equality. Launched by Ooredoo in April 2018, following the success of Springboard, a training programme for talented Omani women, Spring Forward is the company's digital entrepreneurship and leadership programme and open to both men and

women participants. It aims to leverage the individual strengths of participants by providing dedicated coaching and support in building their teamworking and leadership skills, while group-based projects are a key component as well.

As part of Ooredoo's commitment to giving back to the community, the Spring Forward and Springboard programmes fall under the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Goodwill umbrella, led by head of CSR, Ayesha al Shoily, a licensed trainer for the initiatives.

Both CSR programmes are regarded as a benchmark for successful public-private sector collaboration.

Ever since it launched these educational programmes several years ago, Ooredoo has provided professional development opportunities for nearly 10,000 Omani men and women.

These initiatives have enabled participants to further build their skill sets, as the company works closely with industry leaders and licensed trainers to support the growth and development of individuals.



Dream Car win makes Ramadan with Sharaf DG memorable

Sharaf DG Oman successfully concluded the Biggest Ramadan Bonanza with Mega Prizes to be won. Customers could double their chances of winning with every additional RO100 spent at Sharaf DG.

Shoppers stood a chance to take home the Grand Changan CS85 SUV Car worth RO16,000 and enjoy 2 Home Makeovers from OC Homes worth OMR 500 each. Add to that, the most desired iPhone 14 Pro Max, Hisense Refrigerator and a Gaming Laptop made it the most fascinating shopping season. A total of 51 winners walked away with exciting prizes.

Talking about the experience, Arhab Hilal al Rahbi, a customer shared, "We were excited to shop at Sharaf DG this Ramadan. We have been dreaming of our own car for too long. And what better than chance to win big this holy month.

"We recently moved houses

and were looking for the best deals for a home makeover. The joy of shopping with a chance to win incredible prizes, all in one place has us coming back to Sharaf DG. Looking forward to seeing what's in store for the coming months."

Winners were facilitated in a grand ceremony at Muscat Grand Mall in the esteemed presence of Rakesh Madhur, Chief Operating Officer, Retail, Sharaf DG. Their joy knew no bounds.

Sharaf DG continues to grow in both, strength and impact and it will only get better with expansion plans, growth projects and aligning with the times to create new benchmarks for Middle East retail.

Their customers, brand partners and teams are their biggest strength. What's coming next will deliver on many more years of great value for shoppers and partners.

Oman's boxers crowned at Muscat Fight Night

Muscat Fighting Championships launched Oman's first ever boxing event at the Crystal Ballroom of the Grand Millennium Hotel Muscat recently.

The hotel ballroom was transformed into a boxing arena buzzing with adrenaline and excitement for the upcoming bouts. The MFC Fight Night showcased nine boxing bouts in different weight categories, including three title fights for the lightweight, middleweight, and heavyweight divisions.

The event was sanctioned and commissioned by the World Boxing Council (WBC), the world's largest boxing federation, and the Middle East Professional Boxing (MEPB) to ensure all protocols were respected.

With a crowd of over 1000 spectators, the venue was packed with all eyes set on the ring to see who would hold Oman's next titles.

The fight for the lightweight title saw Sajwal Bashir of 3MAC take on Laith al Mahrzi of Oman Kickboxing Club. After a closely contested match, Laith al Mahrzi emerged as the winner by a unanimous decision and claimed the lightweight title.

In the fight for the MFC middleweight title, Reza Hassannia faced Asad Abdulkadir of Fitbox, in which Reza Hassannia prevailed and claimed the title of Oman's new middleweight champion. In the most anticipated event of the night, Idris Salami from 3MAC, coached by Ali Fajwani in the red corner, and Hatem al Rahbi, coached by Nidhal Aouali, and Khalid al Saaidi from Oman Kickboxing Club in the blue corner, engaged in a fierce battle for the heavyweight championship title.

Each fighter entered the ring



ready to unleash powerful blows and scything swings, but in this fight of attrition, Hatem al Rahbi won by a unanimous decision to become Oman's first heavyweight champion.

He also received a trophy, the WBC gold medal, and the promoter's MFC belt bearing the heavyweight title.

Both combatants were seen congratulating one another on a superb battle. Coach Ali Fajwani when asked about the fight and preparation said, "It was a good fight. We made a concerted ef-

fort to prepare Idris for the fight by pushing him hard and speeding up his training, but regrettably we fell short that night. Idris put forth a valiant effort during the fight but ultimately lost.

"Hatem put on an impressive performance, moving forward for the majority of the rounds and landing more accurate blows than Idris, giving him the victory. Hopefully, for the next MFC we will be better prepared."

Coach Khalid al Saaidi, asserted that despite the difficult fight against a skilled opponent

like Idris, Hatem's tenacity and efforts shone in the ring and he emerged victorious, thanks to his successful strategy.

His ability to remain calm under pressure and change his strategy in response to his opponent's movements was a clear indication of his fighting prowess. This victory will undoubtedly serve as a stepping stone for Hatem's future success in the amateur boxing world.

The inaugural MFC Fight Night event was undoubtedly the most exciting and well received event to date, handled by a team of dedicated volunteers with a common goal of promoting martial arts in the sultanate. The core team includes president Baqar Haider; vice-president Fayyad Samarah and vice-president Operations Hanna Hiridjee.

When Hanna was asked on her thoughts about the event, which was powered by Sisu Fitness and Bally YLT, she responded that the event was a success and that they are already swamped with requests for the next one.

According to Jose Mohan, head of the Middle East Boxing

Commission, "The event was extremely well organised and delivered excitement and passion from the crowd". He also affirmed the MEPB's support for the development of boxing in Oman, saying "On behalf of the MEPB, we are thrilled to express our support for the growth of the sport of boxing in the country of Oman".

According to the coaches present, the event was a great opportunity for the young boxers to gain exposure and experience in the sport, as well as to network with other fighters and coaches. Fighters from gyms across the country like 3 MAC, Fitbox, Master Academy, Muscat Boxing Club, Muscat Fight Club, Muscat MMA, Oman Boxing Club, Oman Kickboxing Club, Rolling Gym, Saham Blue Sharks, Scorpion Nest, Sohar Boxing Club, Tmrn Gym, TS Gym, UFC Gym, Wawan Gym, Zebra Club, participated in the event.

The organisers of the event ensured that the medical and safety aspects of the game were given top priority, a team of medical professionals from Apollo Hospitals, a ringside doctor and professional MEPB referees were present at all times to oversee the fighters and the game.

This helped to minimise any probable risks associated with boxing, and ensure the safety of all the fighters throughout the event with strict rules, and pre/post fight medicals.

"Being a part of MFC and managing the medical welfare for the event was a great opportunity. Our medical team was equipped with all the medical training necessary to ensure the fighter's safety before and after the fight," said Sunil Kumar K from Apollo Hospitals.

IN BRIEF

Bahrain to resume diplomatic relations with Lebanon
Dubai, UAE - Bahrain said on Saturday it would restore full diplomatic relations with Lebanon after a year and a half, following a row over the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. Bahrain and other Gulf countries followed Saudi Arabia in recalling their diplomats towards the end of 2021 after a Lebanese minister criticised Riyadh's military intervention in the war in Yemen. Manama - a staunch ally of Riyadh - also called on its citizens in Lebanon to leave the country.
But the tiny Gulf kingdom said on Saturday that it was bringing an end to the impasse, a move welcomed by Beirut.

Iran hangs three drug traffickers: Judiciary
Tehran, Iran - Iran on Sunday executed three men convicted on drug trafficking charges, the judiciary said, the latest of hundreds of people hanged in the country since the start of the year.
The three men, described as members of a 'drug cartel', were hanged after being convicted of 'corruption on earth' for producing nearly 40kg (88 pounds) of heroin, the judiciary's Mizan Online news website said. The executions came one day after a man was hanged following a conviction over leading a human trafficking and prostitution ring.

Three men die in Marseille shooting
Marseille, France - Three men died on Sunday in an assault rifle attack in the French port city of Marseille, which has seen a surge of drug-related gang murders in recent months, police said.
The three were part of a group of five men in their 20s who left a nightclub shortly after 5am (0300 GMT) and were driving away when their car was attacked by unknown men with Kalashnikov rifles, they said.
The two survivors of the attack were unharmed and fled the scene, as did the shooters.
AFP

Israel far-right minister Ben-Gvir visits Al-Aqsa compound

Jerusalem - Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir visited the flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound on Sunday, a controversial move by the extreme-right politician amid heightened tensions in annexed east Jerusalem.

The move came three days after Ben-Gvir and tens of thousands of Jewish nationalists marched through the Old City and just over a week into a fragile Gaza ceasefire.

"Jerusalem is our soul," Ben-Gvir wrote on Telegram, alongside a photo of himself at the site



Itamar Ben-Gvir (AFP)

cist government and the arrogance of its ministers from the extreme right', said Hamas.

Israeli police confirmed Ben-Gvir's visit in a statement, adding that it passed without incident.

Al-Aqsa mosque is the third holiest site in Islam and is administered by Jordan. Non-Muslims are permitted to visit the site, but not pray there.

The compound is also the most sacred site for Jews, who pray below it at the Western Wall.

'Dangerous and unacceptable'
Jordan decried Ben-Gvir's actions as a 'provocative step' and

a 'dangerous and unacceptable escalation'.

It 'represents a flagrant and unacceptable violation of international law, and of the historical and legal status quo in Jerusalem and its holy sites', said foreign ministry spokesman Sinan Majali. Tours of the site by Jewish nationalists have long been criticised by Palestinians and Arab nations, while Ben-Gvir's visits have taken on added weight since he took office in December.

The timing of Sunday's visit also holds significance, coming

days after nationalists marched through the Old City to celebrate east Jerusalem's capture by Israeli forces in the 1967 Six-Day War. Palestinians were forced to close their businesses and were removed from the march route to make way for the Israeli participants.

Thursday's event was marred by incidents of violence against Palestinians and journalists, while the United States condemned 'the hateful chants such as 'Death to Arabs' during the rally.

AFP

Mitsotakis urges 'stronger' Greece as uncertain election gets underway

Athens, Greece - Greeks began casting ballots on Sunday in a general election that could deliver a chaotic outcome, with the leading candidate, outgoing Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, urging voters to return him to power for a 'stronger country'.

The EU nation goes into the polls in fairly robust economic health, with unemployment and inflation falling and growth this year projected to reach twice that of the bloc - a far cry from the throes of a crippling debt crisis a decade ago.

But economic issues remain squarely in focus even though a post-COVID tourism revival helped Greece book growth of 5.9 per cent last year.

Mitsotakis, 55, has urged voters not to squander hard-fought economic stability.

"Today we are voting for our future, for more and better jobs, for a more efficient health care system, for a stronger country with an important role in Europe and protected borders," he said after casting his ballot along with two of his three children.

But his main opponent, former leftist premier Alexis Tsipras, has warned that the rosy headline figures belie growing poverty as wages fail to keep pace with rising prices.

Tsipras is seeking a comeback



Greek Prime Minister and leader of right wing party New Democracy, Kyriakos Mitsotakis leaves the polling booth at a polling station on the general election day in Athens on Sunday (AFP)

after a first mandate in 2015 to 2019, during which he led rocky negotiations with creditors that nearly crashed Greece out of the euro. He called on the country to 'turn the page on four difficult years' and pick a 'fair government for a better future'.

Horse-trading?
Close to 10mn Greeks are eligible to cast a ballot, including 440,000 first-time voters.

Opinion polls suggest that Mitsotakis enjoys a clear lead of

five to seven percentage points.

Yet the likely outcome of the vote is unpredictable, as changes to the electoral rules mean that no party is expected to obtain an outright majority.

Whether the party that tops the polls would seek a coalition or turn to another round of votes by early July to determine who governs Greece could depend on the size of the lead it amasses.

That could spell weeks of horse-trading, with the socialist

party Pasok-Kinal, led by 44-year-old Nikos Androulakis, a potential kingmaker.

'Living on coupons'
Sunday's vote marks the second national elections in which Mitsotakis, a Harvard graduate and former McKinsey consultant, is pitted against Tsipras, a 48-year-old former communist and trained engineer.

The outgoing premier says he has delivered on his previous electoral promises of lower

taxes, tougher immigration rules and steady growth.

But Tsipras has accused Mitsotakis of promising 'better jobs and wages, only to have the middle class live on coupons'.

Cost of living and jobs occupy many voters' minds.

"Life, especially for young people, is very difficult. Unem-

Today we are voting for our future, for more and better jobs, for a more efficient health care system

KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS

ployment is high, there are no work prospects and salaries vanish at the end of the month," said Athens resident Dora Vasilopoulou, 41.

In Greece's second-biggest city Thessaloniki, Giorgos Antonopoulos, 39, who works at a commercial store, said 'salaries are used up halfway through the month and nothing is done to address this issue'.

"We work just to survive."

But Nadia Aggelopoulou, 47, a civil servant, said she believed

that Mitsotakis was 'doing what he can' to fight inflation.

His government 'has been excellent on all levels', she said, adding that 'we don't hear lies. We're expecting salary hikes'.

But ahead of the vote, Mitsotakis' government has come under pressure over the devastating head-on train collision in February that claimed 57 lives.

The government had initially blamed the accident on human error, even though Greece's notoriously poor rail network had been suffering from years of under-investment.

Mitsotakis' tough stance against immigration also came under the spotlight as *The New York Times* this week published footage allegedly showing Greek coastguards expelling migrants by setting them adrift in the Aegean Sea.

A wiretap scandal that forced the resignations of the head of the intelligence service and a nephew of Mitsotakis, who was a top aide in his office, could also have an impact on the election outcome.

Androulakis, the Pasol-Kinal leader, had been seen as a potential coalition partner for Mitsotakis but things went sour when he discovered he had been under state surveillance.

AFP

Erdogan eyes third decade in power in historic runoff election

Istanbul, Turkey - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cruises on Sunday into the final week before an historic runoff election as the big favourite to extend two decades of his Islamic-rooted rule until 2028.

Secular leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu gave the opposition's best performance of Erdogan's dominant era in May 14 parliament and presidential polls.

The retired bureaucrat of Kurdish Alevi descent broke ethnic barriers and Erdogan's stranglehold on the media and state institutions to win almost 45 per cent of the vote.

But Erdogan still came within a fraction of a point of topping the 50-per cent threshold needed to win in the first round.

The 69-year-old leader did it despite Turkey's worst economic crisis since the 1990s and opinion surveys showing him headed for his first national election defeat. Kilicdaroglu will now need to rally his deflated troops and beat the odds yet again to wrest back power for the secular party that ruled Turkey for most of the 20th century.

The Eurasia Group consultancy put Erdogan's chances of winning next Sunday at 80 per cent. "It will be an uphill struggle



A voter casts her ballot for the 2nd round of Turkey's presidential election in Nicosia, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), on Saturday (AFP)

for Kilicdaroglu in the second round," Hamish Kinnear of the Verisk Maplecroft consulting firm agreed.

'Millions of patriots'
Erdogan rode a nationalist wave that saw smaller right-wing parties pick up nearly 25 per cent of the parallel parliamentary vote.

Kilicdaroglu is courting these voters in the second presidential round. The 74-year-old revamped his campaign team and tore up his old playbook for the most fateful week of his political career.

He has replaced chatty clips that he used to record from his kitchen with desk-thumping

speeches and pledges to immediately rid Turkey of millions of migrants. "As soon as I come to power, I will send all the refugees home," he said in his first post-election address.

He has chased the endorsement of a little-known ultra-nationalist, whose tiny vote share pushed Turkey into its first presidential runoff.

And he has punched back against Erdogan's claims that he was associating with 'terrorists' - a code word for Kurdish groups fighting for broader autonomy in Turkey's southeast. "We have millions of patriots to reach," Kilicdaroglu said.

But Kilicdaroglu's sharp right

turn could prove costly with voters from Kurdish regions that overwhelmingly backed him in the first round.

Kurds embraced Erdogan during his first decade in power because he worked to lift many of their social restrictions.

They turned against him when Erdogan formed his own alliance with Turkey's nationalist forces and began to unleash purges after surviving a failed coup attempt in 2016.

Kilicdaroglu's new and more overtly nationalist tone echoes a secular era during which Kurds - who make up nearly a fifth of Turkey's population - were stripped of basic rights.

The political battles are being accompanied by market turmoil that set in once it became apparent that Erdogan was on course to keep his grip on power.

Turkey's recent years have been roiled by economic upheaval that erased many of the gains of Erdogan's more prosperous early rule.

Most of the problems stem from Erdogan's fervent fight against interest rates - an approach some analysts link to his adherence to Islamic rules against usury.

AFP

East Timor polls close as voters seek end to years of deadlock

Dili, East Timor - Voters in East Timor flocked to polling stations on Sunday to cast their ballots in parliamentary elections, hoping for an end to years of political deadlock in Asia's youngest country.

This is the fifth parliamentary poll since East Timor gained independence from Indonesia in 2002 after a 24-year occupation, with 65 national lawmakers to be elected to a five-year mandate.

Voters formed long queues, carrying umbrellas for shade as they patiently waited for their turn until polling stations closed at 3pm (0600 GMT).

"All people came to give their voices, because one voice can make a change," 61-year-old Cesar dos Santos de Carvalho told AFP at a polling station in the capital Dili. "I hope the political party that I chose can put attention on health, education and agriculture, because these are the priority sectors."

Nazario Gregorio Guterres, another voter, stressed the need to improve infrastructure in East Timor, one of the world's poorest countries. "Just (look at) our capital city, Dili. It's difficult to get electricity and clean water. The party I chose must fix roads, electricity, and provide clean water," said Guterres.



East Timorese Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak casts his ballot paper during the general election in Dili on Sunday (AFP)

The young democracy, a former Portuguese colony, has 890,000 registered voters, and a total of 17 parties are vying for seats, but the election is expected to mainly be a showdown between the two largest.

The Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, also known as Fretilin, leads the coalition currently in power, while the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT) is hoping to make a comeback.

CNRT is led by Xanana Gusmao, East Timor's first president who was in office until 2007, while Fretilin's leader is former prime minister Mari Alkatiri.

Both are considered independence-era icons and are veterans of East Timor politics, but they have been locked in a bitter

feud for decades.

Younger voters make up a large part of the electorate in the country of 1.3mn people, 65 per cent of whom are under 30.

"I voted for CNRT. I support Xanana (Gusmao). He is... an influential character (who) leads with responsibility. He has integrity and loves this country," said 27-year-old student Renaldo de Andrade.

CNRT won a presidential election last year after capturing 62 per cent of the vote in a run-off, with Nobel Peace laureate and Gusmao ally Jose Ramos-Horta assuming the post. Gusmao is hoping to build on that momentum by taking over the legislature, but he may need to forge an alliance with smaller parties.

AFP

Ukraine's Zelensky wins new diplomatic, military support

Hiroshima, Japan - President Volodymyr Zelensky secured more arms, munitions and 'unwavering' diplomatic support from G7 allies in Hiroshima on Sunday, as Russia claimed victory in the battle for a devastated eastern city.

Meeting leaders from a bloc of rich democracies, Zelensky won a commitment from US President Joe Biden to provide yet more 'ammunition, artillery, armoured vehicles' on top of access to F-16 jets.

Top Zelensky aide Andriy Yermak said the US package included additional ammunition for HIMAR rocket launchers, artillery shells, anti-tank guided missiles and thermal imaging systems worth US\$375mn.

Zelensky's surprise trip to Japan has been a major diplomatic coup, putting his country and Russia's 15-month-long invasion firmly at the top of the agenda.

But success in the negotiating rooms contrasted sharply with difficulties on the ground, as he reflected on the months-long battle for Bakhmut and new Russian claims to have taken control of the eastern city.

Asked about the fate of the former salt-mining town of 70,000 people, Zelensky was notably downbeat, saying 'you have to understand there is nothing' there.

"For today, Bakhmut is only in our hearts," he said.

Ukrainian forces have tried for months to keep a toehold on the town, forcing Moscow to com-



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen walks with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky ahead of a working session on Ukraine during the G7 Leaders' Summit in Hiroshima on Sunday (AFP)

Meeting leaders from a bloc of rich democracies, Zelensky won a commitment from US President Joe Biden to provide yet more ammunition, artillery, armoured vehicles on top of access to F-16 jets

mit significant numbers of troops there in the process.

On Saturday, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated mercenaries from the Wagner organisation and regular units for the operation to 'liberate' the town.

Zelensky's invitation to visit Hiroshima, a city synonymous with the horrors of nuclear war,

was a 'deeply meaningful' symbol of support, according to host Fumio Kishida, Japan's prime minister.

"By inviting President Zelensky to Japan, we demonstrated the unwavering solidarity of G7 with Ukraine," he said.

As well as securing backing from allies, the visit afforded Zelensky a rare opportunity to win

over a handful of nations who have pointedly offered little or no condemnation of Russia's invasion. Leaders from India, Brazil, Vietnam and Indonesia were among those invited to attend the summit as non-members.

'I understand your pain'

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has accused the West of 'encouraging the war' and is yet to confirm he will even meet his Ukrainian counterpart.

The reception was warmer however from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who told Zelensky: "I understand your pain and the pain of Ukrainian

citizens very well."

"I can assure you that to resolve this India and, me personally, will do whatever we can do."

Zelensky offered an upbeat assessment of the encounter, saying he believed India 'will participate in the restoration of the rules-based international order that all free nations clearly need'.

Zelensky is also looking for support for a 10-point peace plan, centred on the demand that Russia retreat from Ukrainian territory.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the message from Ukraine and its allies was clear: "Russia must withdraw troops".

Any peace plan, he said, 'can't simply be linked to a freeze of the conflict'.

"Russia should not bet that if it holds out long enough, it will end up weakening support for Ukraine."

Zelensky had previously been scheduled to attend the G7 summit remotely but arrived on the back of a major breakthrough in his battle to wrest advanced weaponry from the West.

The White House dropped its longstanding reluctance to allow allies to supply Kyiv with F-16 fighter jets, opening the way for Ukraine to receive its most sophisticated material yet.

Washington insisted the aircraft were part of a US strategy to support Ukraine 'in a way that avoids World War III', and deflected criticism that their decision was too long coming.

AFP



US President Joe Biden shakes hands with South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol as Japan PM Fumio Kishida looks on in Hiroshima on Sunday (AFP)

Biden invites Japan, S Korea leaders for formal talks in US

Hiroshima, Japan - US President Joe Biden on Sunday invited the leaders of Japan and South Korea to formal three-way talks in Washington, a senior US administration official said.

The leaders met briefly on the sidelines of the G7 summit, to which host Japan invited South Korea as long-frosty ties between the neighbours thaw.

Tokyo and Seoul, both key US allies, have long been at odds over issues related to Japan's brutal 1910-1945 colonial rule of Korea, including sexual slavery and forced labour.

But South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida have made active efforts to restore soured ties since Seoul announced a plan to compensate those affected by wartime forced labour without Tokyo's involvement.

Biden praised the pair's 'courageous work to improve their bilateral ties', the White

House said in a statement.

The three leaders also discussed 'new coordination' over North Korea's 'illicit nuclear and missile threats', the statement added.

The official said the timing for the meeting would be worked out 'soon', and there were no further details immediately available. Earlier, Yoon and Kishida made a historic visit on Sunday to a memorial for Koreans killed in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

It was the first time leaders of the two countries have jointly visited the memorial, and only the second time a Japanese prime minister has done so.

"This will be remembered as a courageous action by Prime Minister Kishida that paves the way for a peaceful future while expressing grief for the Korean victims of the atomic bombing," Yoon said at a bilateral meeting after the visit.

AFP

El Salvador soccer stadium stampede kills 12: Police

San Salvador, El Salvador - Twelve people were killed on Saturday in a stampede at an El Salvador stadium where soccer fans had gathered to watch a local tournament, police said.

Authorities said initial reports pointed to a crush of fans who tried to enter Cuscatlan Stadium in the Central American country's capital San Salvador to watch a match between teams Alianza and FAS.

The match was suspended as emergency personnel evacuated people from the stadium, where hundreds of police officers and soldiers gathered as ambulance sirens wailed. "Preliminarily, we have a negative result of 12 victims,

nine who are here in the stadium and three more that we have been informed are in different hospital centers," National Civil Police (PNC) director Mauricio Arriaza told reporters.

"Salvadoran soccer is in mourning," Arriaza said.

Health Minister Francisco Alabi said the country's hospital network was 'providing medical care to all patients'.

Interior Minister Juan Carlos Bidegain said the civil protection service's first responders were on the scene.

Carlos Fuentes, spokesman for the emergency services group Comandos de Salvamento, said they were treating more than 500 people.

AFP

Ukraine denies fall of Bakhmut, says advancing in suburbs

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukraine on Sunday denied Bakhmut had fallen to Russian troops in the longest battle of the war and said it was instead advancing around the suburbs, making it 'very difficult' for Russian troops to stay in the devastated city.

A day after President Vladimir Putin congratulated his troops and private mercenary group Wagner who claimed to have taken the city in eastern Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky suggested it would be a pyrrhic victory for Moscow.

"You have to understand there is nothing' there in Bakhmut, he said, sat next to US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan.

"For today, Bakhmut is only in our hearts."

Zelensky's spokesman later clarified that the Ukrainian president was not confirming the loss of Bakhmut to Russian troops.



Members of Wagner group waving a Russian flag and Wagner Group's flag on the rooftop of a damaged building in Bakhmut on Saturday (AFP)

"The president denied the capture of Bakhmut," spokesman Sergiy Nykyforov said on Facebook. Deputy Defence Minister Ganna Malyar then said Ukrainian troops 'have semi-encircled the city'.

"The advance of our troops in the suburbs on the flanks, which is still ongoing, makes it very dif-

ficult for the enemy to be in Bakhmut." She said Ukrainian troops were still in control of a residential area and some industrial facilities.

The loss of Bakhmut would be hugely symbolic for the Ukrainians, who had held on for months, ignoring US advice behind the scenes to focus elsewhere.

But some analysts have said Ukraine has inflicted heavy losses on Russia in Bakhmut and forced it to commit large resources, potentially weakening its defences in other parts of the front line.

Backdrop of ruins

Bakhmut, a salt-mining town that once had a population of 70,000 people, has been the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting in Moscow's more than year-long Ukraine offensive.

The fall of Bakhmut, where both Moscow and Kyiv are believed to have suffered huge losses, would allow Moscow to bring home a key victory after a series of humiliating defeats.

It would also come before a major counteroffensive that Kyiv has been preparing for months. Zelensky himself has warned that the city's loss would open the way for Russian troops to

capture more of the Donbas region. "As a result of offensive actions of the Wagner assault units, with the support of artillery and aviation of the 'Southern' unit, the liberation of the city of Artemovsk was completed," Russia's defence ministry said, using the Soviet-era name of Bakhmut.

'Vladimir Putin congratulated the assault units of Wagner as well as all servicemen of units of the Russian armed forces who provided them with the necessary support and flank cover, on the completion of the operation to liberate' the city, TASS news agency quoted a Kremlin statement as saying.

Wagner's boss Yevgeny Prigozhin earlier claimed Bakhmut had fallen to his mercenaries in a video posted on Telegram against a backdrop of ruins.

AFP

Private mission carrying first Saudi astronauts to visit ISS set for launch

Cape Canaveral, US - A private mission to the International Space Station (ISS) organised by Axiom Space is due to blast off from Florida on Sunday, carrying the first two Saudi astronauts to go to the orbiting laboratory.

Rayyanah Barnawi, a breast cancer researcher, will become the first Saudi woman to voyage into space and will be joined on the mission by fellow Saudi Ali Al-Qarni, a fighter pilot.

The Axiom Mission 2 (Ax-2) crew will take off aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral in the southern state of Florida at 5:37pm (2137 GMT).

The team also includes Peggy Whitson, a former NASA astronaut who will be making her

fourth flight to the ISS, and John Shoffner, a businessman from Tennessee who will serve as pilot.

They are due to spend around 10 days on board the ISS, where they should arrive around 1:30pm on Monday.

"Being the first Saudi woman astronaut, representing the region, it's a great pleasure and honour that I'm very happy to carry," said Barnawi at a recent press conference.

She added that, aside from excitement for the research she will carry out on board, she is looking forward to sharing her experience with kids while on the ISS.

"Being able to see their faces when they see astronauts from their own region for the first time is very thrilling," she said.



The Ax-2 crew (left to right) Rayyanah Barnawi, John Shoffner, Peggy Whitson and Ali Alqarni (AFP)

A career fighter pilot, Al-Qarni said he has 'always had the passion of exploring the unknown and just admiring the sky and the stars'.

"It is a great opportunity for me to pursue this kind of passion

that I have, and now maybe just fly among the stars."

The mission is not Saudi Arabia's first foray into space.

In 1985, Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, an air force pilot, took part in a US-or-

ganised space voyage.

But the space mission involving a Saudi woman is the latest move by the oil-rich Gulf kingdom, where women only gained the right to drive a few years ago, to revamp its ultraconservative

image.

The kingdom established the Saudi Space Commission in 2018 and launched a programme last year to send astronauts into space.

Experiments

The four-member team is set to carry out some 20 experiments while on the ISS.

One of them involves studying the behaviour of stem cells in zero gravity.

They will join seven others already on board the ISS: three Russians, three Americans and Emirati astronaut Sultan al-Neyadi, who was the first Arab national to go on a spacewalk last month.

The mission to the ISS will be the second in partnership with

ISS-key holder NASA by Axiom Space, a private space company, which offers the rare voyages for sums that run into the millions of dollars.

The company oversees training the astronauts, chartering their means of transport and ensuring the smooth management of their stay.

Axiom Space carried out its first private astronaut mission to the ISS in April 2022, sending three businessmen and former astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria to spend 17 days in orbit as part of Ax-1.

Some astronauts on the ISS at the time said they had to take time out of their day - precious in zero gravity - to take care of the space tourists.

AFP

INDIA

Modi lands in PNG for Pacific summit

Narendra Modi will co-host the summit with PNG PM James Marape and other Pacific island leaders

Port Moresby, PNG - Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Papua New Guinea on Sunday for talks with Pacific island leaders, the first visit by an Indian premier as New Delhi seeks to counter China's growing footprint in the region.

Modi landed just after 10pm local time (1200 GMT) in the capital Port Moresby, where he will co-host the Summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation on Monday with Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape and other Pacific island leaders.

Beijing has been pouring vast sums into the Pacific, which has alarmed New Delhi officials who consider the region to be its backyard.

Relations between China and India have deteriorated since 2020 after clashes along their shared border.

Monday's talks are set to focus largely on climate change and development. The last such summit was hosted by India eight years ago.

Modi was met by a gun salute, traditional dancers and was welcomed by Marape.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi inspects the guard of honour upon his arrival at Port Moresby International Airport on Sunday (AFP)

The visit comes after Modi joined leaders from the United States, Japan and Australia on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Japan for a gathering of the Quad members, which aims to contain China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

G7 leaders, along with Modi and others invited to the summit, warned China on Saturday over its 'militarisation activities' in the Asia-Pacific region but said the bloc also wanted 'constructive and stable relations' with Beijing.

The G7 nations laid out a raft of concerns about China's economic and military activities in their final communique from Hiroshima.

Modi was met by a gun salute, traditional dancers and was welcomed by Marape. The visit comes after Modi joined leaders from the US, Japan and Australia on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Japan

More engagement

New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins arrived in Papua New Guinea for the Pacific summit earlier on Sunday.

Australian leader Anthony Albanese will be absent from the meeting after US President Joe Biden cut short his diplomatic tour over US debt crisis talks. New Delhi is increasing its engagement with the Pacific islands because of their strategic location and fears that China could fill voids left by other powers, experts say.

"Along with India's increasingly prominent role in the Quad, it's coming out on the international stage as an Indo-Pacific power. It wants to be seen as such," Mihai Sora, Pacific Islands research fellow at Australia's Lowy Institute, told AFP.

"This trip, and I would expect more engagement over the coming years, is really about building these relationships."

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Papua New Guinea in 2018. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will replace Biden for a parallel summit in Papua New Guinea with Marape and Pacific leaders, where he is expected to sign a security pact with the island nation.

China, in an apparent response to that deal and Blinken's visit, said on Friday that countries should not engage in 'geopolitical games' in the South Pacific.

AFP

No forms, ID cards needed to exchange Rs 2000 banknotes: SBI

New Delhi - State Bank of India (SBI) customers will not be required to submit any ID cards or fill out any requisition forms to exchange their Rs 2000 currency notes. They however would be allowed to exchange a maximum of ten currency notes of Rs 2000 at a time, according to a communication shared by the SBI with all its circles.

SBI also clarified its May 19 Annexure III - a requisition slip having dedicated columns for details of customer's identity proof, now stands withdrawn with immediate effect. "Please arrange accordingly and extend all cooperation to members of the public so that the exercise is conducted in a smooth and seamless manner without any inconvenience to the public," SBI said in its communication.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday decided to withdraw the Rs 2000 de-



A bank security guard takes a selfie with Rs 2000 currency notes, at a SBI branch in Dhanbad on Saturday (ANI)

nomination currency notes from circulation, but added they (currency notes) will continue to remain as legal tender. RBI had advised banks to stop issuing Rs 2000 denomination banknotes with immediate effect.

RBI, however, said that citizens will continue to be able to deposit Rs 2000 banknotes into their bank accounts and/or exchange them into banknotes of other denominations at any bank branch up to September 30, 2023.

The exchange of Rs 2000 banknotes into banknotes of other denominations can be made upto a limit of Rs 20,000 at a time at any bank starting from May 23.

"It has also been observed that this denomination is not commonly used for transactions. Further, the stock of banknotes in other denomi-

nations continues to be adequate to meet the currency requirement of the public," RBI said on Friday.

The Rs 2000 denomination banknote was introduced in November 2016, primarily to meet the currency requirement of the economy in an expeditious manner after the withdrawal of the legal tender status of all Rs 500 and Rs 1000 banknotes in circulation at that time.

The objective of introducing Rs 2000 banknotes was met once banknotes in other denominations became available in adequate quantities. Therefore, the printing of Rs 2000 banknotes was stopped subsequently in 2018-19, stated RBI.

About 89 per cent of the Rs 2000 denomination banknotes were issued prior to March 2017 and are at the end of their estimated life span of four-five years.

ANI

Nitish Kumar extends support to Kejriwal against Centre's ordinance

New Delhi - Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Sunday held a meeting with his counterpart Arvind Kejriwal in the national capital and extended his support to the AAP chief against the Centre bringing an ordinance to give the control of 'services' back to Delhi Lieutenant Governor.

Soon after the meeting, Nitish Kumar, Arvind Kejriwal and Bihar Deputy CM Tejashwi Yadav addressed the media.

Speaking on the issue, the Bihar CM said: "How can powers given to an elected government be taken away? It's against the Constitution. We stand with Arvind Kejriwal."

The Bihar CM who is putting in efforts to unite opposition forces against the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)-led government at the Centre said: "Will hold meetings in the future as well, we are trying to bring together all opposition parties in the country."

While addressing the media on the issue of the Centre bringing an ordinance negating Supreme Court order in favour



Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar meets Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, at CM's residence in New Delhi on Sunday (ANI)

of Delhi, Kejriwal said that the Bihar CM stood with the people of the national capital.

"In case, the Centre brings this ordinance as a bill, if all non-BJP parties come together it can be defeated in Rajya Sabha. If such a thing happens, it can send a message that the BJP government will be out in 2024," Kejriwal added.

Tejashwi Yadav said: "BJP is troubling the non-BJP governments. The central government is doing an injustice to Arvind Kejriwal. We stand with them. Discrimination is not fair. We will not let this happen," he said.

On Friday, the Union govern-

ment brought an ordinance to notify rules for the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) regarding the 'transfer posting, vigilance and other incidental matters'.

The ordinance has been brought to amend the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991 and it circumvents the SC judgement in the Centre vs Delhi case.

Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar has been meeting Opposition leaders to strengthen the bloc against the BJP ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

ANI

Renowned British writer Martin Amis dies aged 73

Miami, US - Renowned and influential British writer Martin Amis has died aged 73 at his home in Lake Worth, Florida, the Booker Prizes said on Saturday.

Amis was 'one of the most acclaimed and discussed writers of the past 50 years and the author of 14 novels', said the website of Booker Prizes, the leading literary awards for fiction in the United Kingdom.

His wife, Isabel Fonseca, told media that the author of searing and insightful works such as *Money: A Suicide Note*, *London Fields* and *Time's Arrow* died on Friday after a bout with esophageal cancer.

His death was announced on the same day as the Cannes festival showing of a film based on his 2014 book *The Zone of Interest*. Set in Auschwitz, the novel tells the story of a Nazi of-



British writer Martin Amis (AFP)

ficer who fell in love with the wife of the extermination camp commander.

Amis, the son of renowned comic novelist Kingsley Amis, equaled and even surpassed his father in fame with novels filled with savage humour.

"The novel is an incredibly in-

Amis was 'one of the most acclaimed writers of the past 50 years and the author of 14 novels', said the website of Booker Prizes, the leading literary awards for fiction in the UK

timate portrait of a writer," the younger Amis once told the BBC, reflecting on his career.

"Although I don't write autobiography, I am everywhere in my books."

In 2008, the Times of London named him one of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945.

Born in 1949 in Wales, Amis rose to literary celebrity amid the hip 1980s British fiction boom that included fellow novelists Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan.

Amis graduated from Oxford University in 1971 with a degree in English and worked as an editor before publishing his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in 1973.

It was with *Money*, published in 1984 with a comic take on consumerism, that Amis burst more broadly onto the literary scene. In addition to his novels, Amis published two collections of stories and eight works of nonfiction.

His book on the September 11, 2001 attacks, titled *The Second Plane*, includes articles, short stories and essays.

In recent decades, Amis be-

came a public intellectual, frequently appearing on television, sometimes alongside his long-time friend Christopher Hitchens, a British-American writer and renowned atheist who died in 2011.

He was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1991 and long-listed in 2003, the website noted.

The 1990s marked the peak of his literary career, even though he was accused of misogyny and, later, Islamophobia - accusations he firmly rejected.

Publisher Vintage Books said it was devastated by the death of Amis.

"He leaves a towering legacy and an indelible mark on the British cultural landscape, and will be missed enormously," Vintage said on its Twitter account.

AFP

'No legs, no limits': Gurkha amputee scales Everest

Kathmandu, Nepal - Gurkha veteran Hari Budha Magar, who was almost killed serving with the British army in Afghanistan, has become the first double above-the-knee amputee to climb Everest, a member of his team said on Sunday. "He reached the top of Sagarmatha at around 3pm on Friday. After successfully summiting the peak, he has now descended to the base camp, and will return to Kathmandu tomorrow (Monday)," Him Bista told AFP, using the Nepali name for Everest.

Magar, 43, lost his legs after stepping on an improvised explosive device in 2010 while on patrol in Afghanistan with the Gurkhas, a unit of Nepalis who have fought with

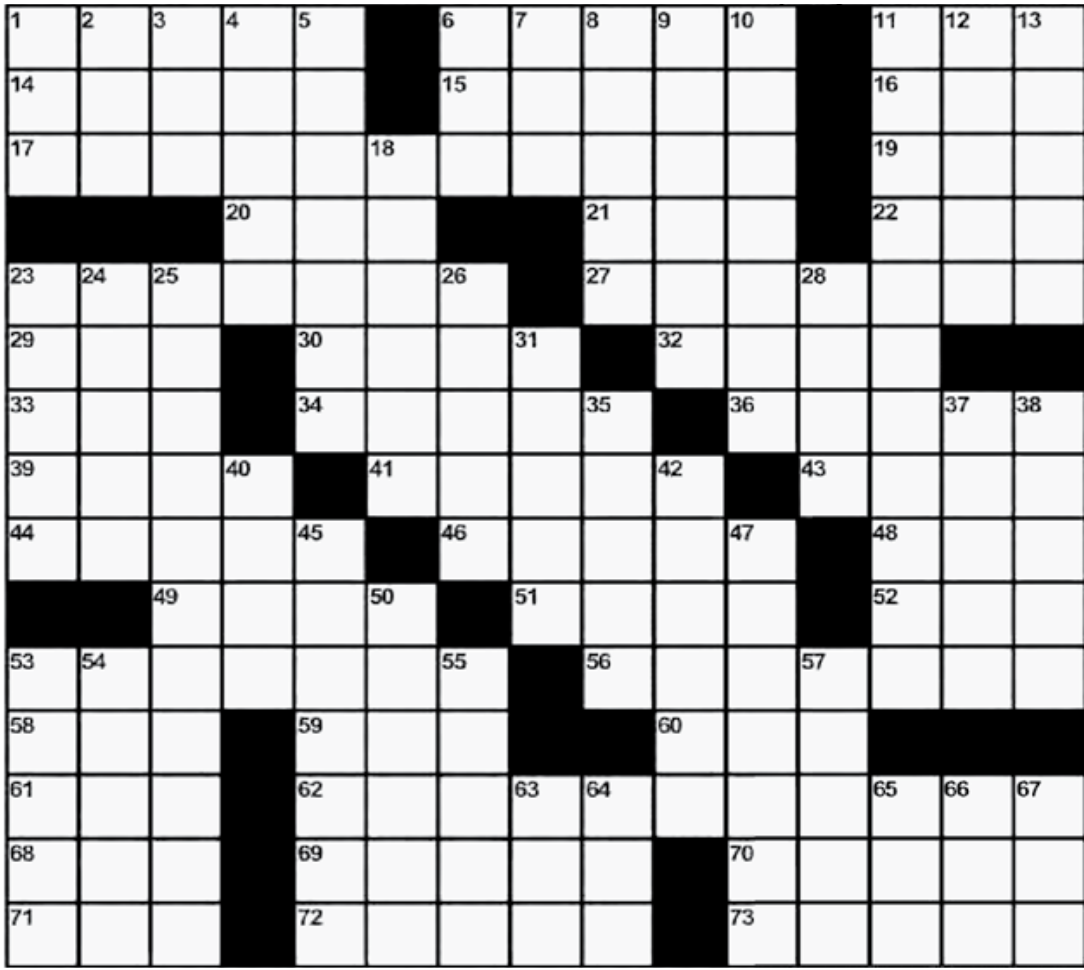


Hari Budha Magar (AFP)

the British Army for over 200 years. Two below-the-knee amputees have reached the peak in the past - New Zealander Mark Inglis in 2006 and China's Xia Boyu in 2018.

AFP

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Airspace monitor
6) Sharp, as pain
11) Blueprint
14) Domicile
15) One finishing second
16) " _ say!"
17) Florida attraction
19) Poetic pasture
20) "To_ is human ... "
21) Capt's guess
22) Arid
23) Putting on
27) Comebacks
29) "To what do I _ the pleasure?"
30) Twinings' offerings
32) Split asunder
33) African antelope
34) Block, at the bar
36) Like Rubik's puzzle
39) Pound inmate
41) Workshop items
43) Stubborn beast
44) Fourth in a list of 12
46) Cook crabs or clams
48) Related by blood
49) Above
51) Angel's item
52) "Dig in!"

53) "Much, " ("Thanks")
56) Hot sauce
58) Casbah headgear
59) Branch of the U.N.
60) Russian warplane
61) To return?
62) Tidy lotto prize
68) Nighttime, poetically
69) Skyliit courts
70) Mysteriously spooky
71) Singer Corinne Bailey_
72) Holography need
73) Having lost efferves-
cence
65 66 67

DOWN

1) Straight off the butcher
block
2) Early NBA rival
3) Palme, _ (Cannes award)
4) Some Madison Avenue
workers
5) Do over, as a manuscript
6) In the manner of
7) Bunk
8) One who puts you in
your place
9) Move unsteadily
10) Inconsistent
11) Some lectures

12) On guard
13) Isn't a benchwarmer
18) One of the Gallo broth-
ers
23) Principle or belief
24) Make a full confession
25) Spot for some hockey
faceoffs
26) Los_, Calif
28) Female gamete
31) "Sayer" attachment
35) Elizabethan collar fea-
ture
37) Hipbone-related
38) I O O, in Italy
40) South American mon-
key
42) Deli meat
45) Based on sound thought
47) Many hang from ceil-
ings
50) Jai alai ball
53) Bid
54) Kentucky college or its
town
55) Opportunities, so to
speak
57) Plastic shoelace thingie
63) An untruth
64) Do damage to

65) Nest egg component,
briefly
66) Car engine necessity
67) Once known as

NOTE PAD

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

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Don't let someone's nasty comment eat away at you. They're only trying to push your buttons, and you'll only play into their hands if you get mad. Instead, be extra good to them. Show them more respect than they've shown you. Kill them with kindness. By rising above the petty fight they seem to be itching for, you can show them and the influential people who may be watching that you're better than they are. Taking the high road is always wise for you.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Give yourself a lot of compassion today. You might not need it, but you have to remind yourself that if the chips are ever down, you can always rely on yourself. You are your own best support system. Don't listen to negative people who are telling you how badly things could go. Instead, just put your blinders on. It's okay to do that once in a while. Turn off the outside world and find comfort inside your mind. You will find all the encouragement and love you need.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

More than ever before, you're feeling confident and your communication skills are exceptional. You're finally ready to have that difficult discussion you've been putting off for a while. So step right up to the annoying person who's been pushing your buttons for far too long. Give a piece of your mind to that coworker who thinks they know everything. You don't have to be rude about what you say to them; you just have to make it clear that you won't tolerate their behavior any longer.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Someone at work or school is trying to get a rise out of you by acting in an unusual or controversial way. They're deliberately saying and doing things in order to get your attention. Could it be that they have a little crush on you? Probably. But to you, their weird behavior is nothing you can't roll with, so their little plan is going to backfire on them. They've underestimated how smart you are, but they are still intrigued, so enjoy the chase.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

To encourage more growth in one of your friendships, you should be more generous with your constructive criticism. This person can take honesty, and they want you to be honest with them. You just have to be sure that you give them that honesty with a coating of sugar. Focus on the positive and amp up your enthusiasm before telling them the downside of their behavior. You have a right to be a more active part of this relationship. And in order to do so, you have to speak up more.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Someone who is where you want to be in life is giving you a vision of the future you want to have some day, but what you might not realize is that the day is closer than you think. Switch your focus from your daily routine and start thinking bigger picture. Expand your world view to wake up your ambition. Start letting it drive your actions at work or at school. Talk to the people in power and let them know that you're ready to work for what you want.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

Are you feeling intimidated by an intellectual who just popped onto the scene? Don't be! The more they talk about how much they know, the more obvious it will be that they don't really know what they're talking about. Just let them hog the spotlight for as long as they want, and they'll quickly prove to everyone just how smart they aren't. True intelligence is all about knowing that you don't know everything. Be humble and keep learning.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Today, spice up your life by trying something new and different, whether it's a new hobby, bestselling novel, cuisine, or just a new route to and from work. Getting stuck in a routine is no fun, especially now, when there are so many wonderful things in your life to explore. There is no excuse for not mixing things up. You have the time, you have the energy, and you definitely will have the desire you need!

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

More than ever today, it's important for you to remember that you aren't in charge of anyone else's happiness. You're only in charge of your own. Everyone else must find their own way to fulfillment and joy, so don't fall for any guilt that might get tossed your way. And if other people are holding you responsible for their unhappiness, they aren't being fair. It might sound harsh, but you have to put your own real needs ahead of their perceived needs today.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Tempo is key today. Do your best to stay in rhythm with the people around you, which will be no easy task. Each person you encounter today is marching to the beat of their own drummer, and you'll have to be ready to go faster or slower depending on their pace. This challenge will be good for you, though. It will teach you to treat people as individuals and anticipate their needs. It will help you learn to be even more flexible than you already are!

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

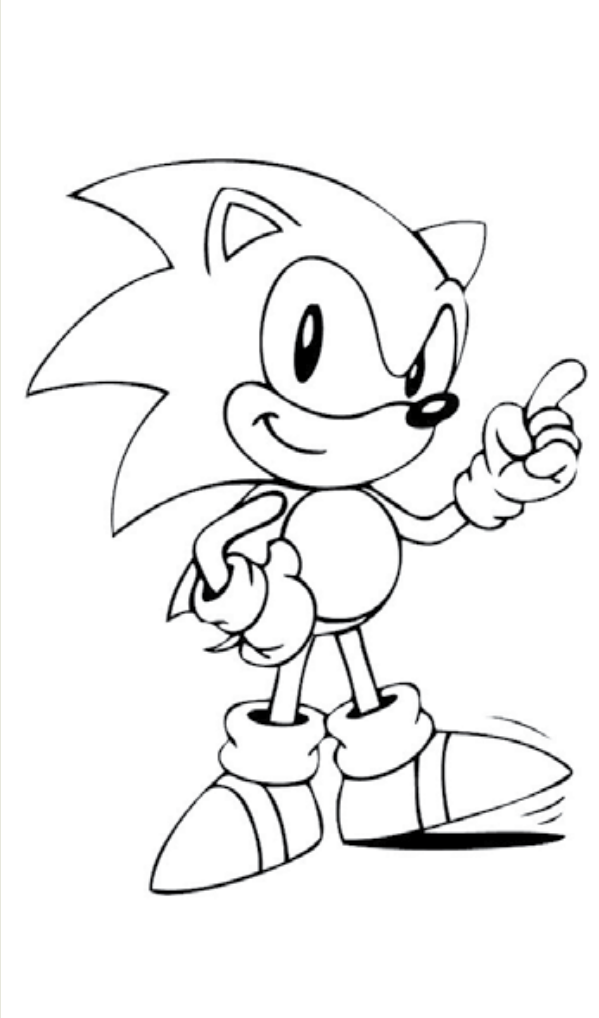
You could have a strong urge to exercise your creativity on your living quarters today. And if you have the time to do it, you definitely should. The Universe is sending you all the energy you need to repaint the kitchen, fix a broken chair, clean out a closet, and execute other types of domestic reengineering. Where you live says a lot about who you are. Make sure to add your personal flair so that visitors see the real you when they walk in the door.

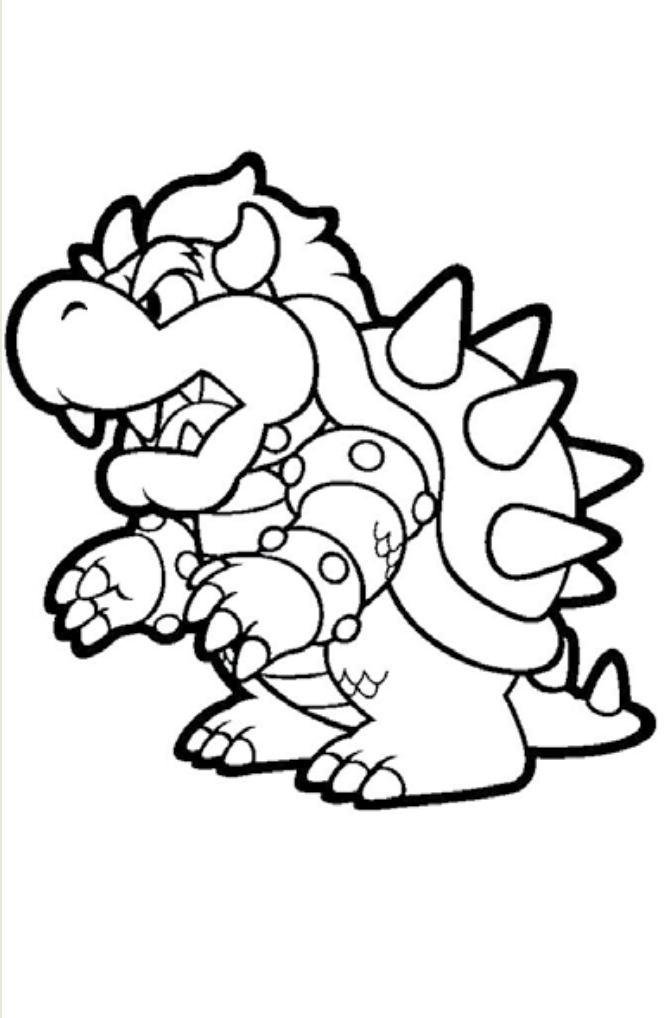
 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Despite the fact that the people around you right now might be less than thrilled about what's going on, you have to maintain your bright outlook. Don't join in others who might be throwing a great big pity party. They're never much fun after everyone agrees to be miserable. Let other people live under a cloud while you choose to stay hopeful and focused on going where it is you want to go. Of course, you also need to be prepared to go there by yourself.

Answers: 1.A 2.D 3.C

KIDS COLOURING





BOGGLER

N	T	E	U
R	E	R	O
P	A	E	R
S	E	K	S

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

MIGHT OF MAN CITY

Guardiola's men beat Chelsea to celebrate title triumph

Manchester, United Kingdom - Manchester City celebrated their third consecutive Premier League title on Sunday as a much-changed side was still good enough to beat Chelsea 1-0 at the Etihad.

Pep Guardiola's men clinched a fifth title in six seasons on Saturday when second-placed Arsenal were beaten 1-0 at Nottingham Forest.

That gave Guardiola the luxury of resting most of his star names with one eye on the FA Cup and Champions League finals next month as City go for the treble.

The strength of City's squad was exemplified by Julian Alvarez, who has spent most of the season as Erling Haaland's understudy, scoring his 17th goal of the campaign to extend the English champions' unbeaten run in all competitions to 24 games.

But a festive afternoon for City was marred at full-time as thousands of fans spilled onto the pitch despite pleas from the club to remain in the stands.

Guardiola made nine changes in all from the side that thrashed Real Madrid 4-0 in midweek.

The youthful hosts were still too sharp for the beleaguered visitors early on and took the



Chelsea players form a Guard of Honour for Manchester City players as they enter the pitch ahead of their English Premier League match at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday (AFP)

First of all congratulations to Manchester City for winning the championship but it is a sad day for us. Now we have to face the reality, today we gave a goal away

MIKEL ARTETA



lead on 12 minutes.

Alvarez continued his stunning season for club and country as the Argentine World Cup winner swept home Cole Palmer's pass.

Palmer made the most of a rare Premier League start and was unlucky not to double City's

lead when his goalbound effort was cleared off the line by Trevoh Chalobah.

Defeat confirmed that Chelsea will end a miserable campaign in the bottom half and a familiar lack of cutting edge in front of goal showed why the Blues have struggled under three

different managers this season.

Raheem Sterling should have marked his return to the Etihad with at least one goal but was denied by a fine save by Stefan Ortega when one-on-one with the German goalkeeper.

Moments later Conor Gallagher headed onto the post with

just Ortega to beat.

But the lack of jeopardy for both sides shone through as the majority of the game was played out at a snail's pace under the unusually baking Manchester sun.

Not that the home fans minded as they serenaded their side with cries of "champions" and bounced around doing the Poznan celebration with their backs to the pitch.

Chelsea had the better chances in the second-half to at least avoid a seventh defeat in nine games under caretaker boss Frank Lampard.

Even when the stand-in City goalkeeper Ortega was finally beaten by Sterling, John Stones was on hand to clear off the line.

Mykhailo Mudryk and Cesar Azpilicueta also wasted late chances to grab a point.

At the other end, Kalvin Phillips was inches away from his first City goal as the England midfielder's header came back off the inside of the post.

Alvarez had a second goal ruled out for handball by Riyad Mahrez 20 minutes from time before Guardiola gave the home crowd what they wanted by unleashing Haaland from the bench. The Norwegian went for goal with his first touch and nearly teed up Rico Lewis with a shot across goal.

But he was made to wait for his 53 goal of the season as City serenely played out the final stages to open up a seven-point lead at the top of the table with two games remaining to Arsenal's one.



Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez, captain Sergio Busquets and team-mates celebrate with the trophy

Real Sociedad earn crucial win at champions Barca

Barcelona, Spain - New La Liga champions Barcelona tumbled to a 2-1 defeat to Real Sociedad on Saturday before receiving their trophy at Camp Nou.

Mikel Merino and Alexander Sorloth struck for the visitors, who defended their hold on fourth place, restoring a five-point gap on Villarreal, fifth, in the fight for Champions League qualification.

Robert Lewandowski pulled one back late on for Barcelona, who clinched the title last weekend with a thumping 4-2 win at Catalan rivals Espanyol, and were given a guard of honour before the game.

Imanol Alguacil's side fought hard to dampen the celebrations in Catalonia with an impressive victory.

"(Winning here) is something historic for the club, it's such a tough place to come," Merino told DAZN after his side's first La Liga win at Camp Nou since 1991.

"I wasn't even close to being born last time La Real won here. We needed to win because behind us they're coming up strong and we

played a great game today."

Xavi picked a solid Barcelona line-up despite already wrapping up the title, but they quickly fell behind.

Jules Kounde carelessly lost the ball in a dangerous area and Sorloth fed Merino, who fired through Marc-Andre ter Stegen's legs after five minutes. It was the first goal the

(Winning here) is something historic for the club, it's such a tough place to come

MIKEL MERINO



German goalkeeper has conceded from open play at Camp Nou in La Liga this season, with the exception of a Ronald Araujo own goal.

Ter Stegen has 25 clean sheets this season and needs one more to match the league record of 26, although it will not be easy if Barcelona defend as casually in their final three matches.

Haaland's appetite for goals fuels Manchester City's title triumph

London, United Kingdom - Erling Haaland inspired Manchester City's Premier League title triumph with a record-breaking goal spree fuelled by his voracious appetite for success.

Haaland has taken the Premier League by storm since arriving from Borussia Dortmund last year in a £51 million (\$63 million) deal that already looks a bargain.

After scoring twice on his top-flight debut at West Ham in August, the 22-year-old striker maintained an astonishing goal pace that left a trail of broken records in his wake en route to clinching the title on Saturday.

He shattered the Premier League's single-season goal record, netting 36 times in 33 matches to move beyond the 34 scored by Alan Shearer and Andy Cole in the 1990s.

"If you were building a centre-forward from the ground up, Erling is what you would be left with. He's a goal machine," Shearer said. The Norwegian has scored 52 times in all competitions, including one five-goal haul and five other hat-tricks.



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola with Erling Haaland

While rival managers endure sleepless nights at the prospect of trying to subdue him, Haaland leaves no stone unturned in the pursuit of excellence.

Obsessed with staying in peak physical condition, Haaland claims his daily diet of heart, liver, milk and lasagne amounts to a

whopping 6,000 calories.

Haaland even wolfed down a tray of nutrition-rich beef liver after scoring in City's recent win at Everton, declaring the meal "bloody lovely" after fans reacted with surprise to an Instagram post of his dinner.

"People say meat is bad for

you but which? The meat you get at McDonald's? Or the local cow eating grass right over there? I eat the heart and the liver," Haaland said in a documentary about his move to Manchester.

Haaland has also created a "magic potion" milk smoothie, featuring kale and spinach, that

forms a key part of his diet.

Haaland's father Alfie helps by milking cows back home in Norway and delivering the pints to the striker in Manchester.

There is no detail too small for Haaland to control as he aims to maximise his natural talent.

He installed a cryotherapy chamber in his house to help recover after matches and wears special glasses to reduce the sleep-depriving effects of screens.

'Best professional'

Despite his blistering form, there was speculation earlier in the season that Haaland might not be entirely happy after City coach Pep Guardiola admitted the striker was still adapting to the Spaniard's tactics during an inconsistent spell for his side.

Guardiola's men won successive league titles playing largely without an attacking focal point and when Arsenal stormed ahead in the title race, there were claims City had been thrown off course by Haaland's arrival.

AFP

Marseille defeat opens Champions League door for Lens

Paris, France - Marseille slipped to a 2-1 defeat at Lille in Ligue 1 on Saturday, paving the way for Lens to grab second place and a spot in the Champions League group stages.

Jonathan Clauss gave Marseille the lead in the 29th minute with both goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier and defender Bafode Diakite making futile attempts to clear.

But Lille levelled thanks to Jonathan David's 22nd goal of the season courtesy of a 50th-



Lille's Mohamed Bayo (L) and Marseille's Chancel Mbemba battle for the ball during their French L1 match on Saturday (AFP)

minute penalty awarded when Marseille keeper Pau Lopez brought down teenage Cameroonian midfielder Carlos Baleba.

Marseille's Alexis Sanchez had a goal ruled out for offside on the hour mark before Jonathan Bamba headed the winner for Lille in the 72nd minute from a cross by Remy Cabella.

The result left Marseille third on 73 points, two behind Lens who travel to Lorient on Sunday.

"We are sad because we

wanted to win. We had opportunities. They had opportunities," said Marseille coach Igor Tudor.

On the chances of ending the season in second place, Tudor added: "As long as it is mathematically possible, we will try. It seems very difficult but in any case, we are having a very good season."

Should Marseille end the season in third, they will have to take their chances in the Champions League preliminary round.

AFP

We will make an impact at World Cup Qualifier: Mendis

Oman bank on their strong display in World Cricket League Division 2 to eye a ‘dream spot’ in ODI World Cup

Muscat - He has been a manager of a World Cup-winning squad and has already led Oman to two T20 World Cups. A coach who certainly knows what it takes to go to a World Cup, Duleep Mendis has a challenge that he is relishing as Oman prepares for a dream mission – a spot in the ICC Men’s World Cup.

The ODI World Cup is scheduled to be held in India in October-November later this year and with eight teams already confirmed, the stage is now set to decide the remaining two spots for the World Cup, which would be decided during the forthcoming ICC Men’s World Cup Qualifier in Zimbabwe from June 18-July 9.

Mendis will be leading Oman at the Qualifier and sounded confident of Team Red’s chances in Zimbabwe that will feature four-Test playing nations along with six Associate nations vie for the two berths at the ICC ODI World Cup.

Two-time World Cup winners West Indies, Sri Lanka, the team which won the World Cup in 1996 with Mendis as manager, hosts Zimbabwe and Ireland are



The team has done brilliantly to finish second in Division 2 and we are proud of their journey

MADHU JESRANI

the four teams that along with Netherlands finished as bottom five of ICC Cricket Super League. The quartet will be joined by Scotland, Oman and Nepal who finished as top-three nations in the World Cricket League Division 2 and UAE and USA, who made it through Qualifier playoff.

With the format for the World Cup Qualifier and groupings yet



Duleep Mendis (L) with physio Sean Novak (C) and Aaqib Ilyas

to be announced, Mendis said: “It has been a remarkable journey over the past four years during which we played 36 ODIs and finished second in the seven-nation Division 2.

“The forthcoming World Cup Qualifier will be a great opportunity for our boys to showcase their potential and I am confident that our team can do well. The

recent performance at the ACC Premier Cup, an Asia Cup qualifier, in Nepal where we finished third gave us a good insight what our players can do.

“The batting didn’t click initially but did well in the later stages in Nepal. If our batters can perform as they did in the later stages, I am confident we can do well. Bowling has been our forte

and if our batters play to their potential, we stand a chance.”

Mendis said: “Oman are not going to make up numbers in the Qualifier in Zimbabwe. We will make an impact and the 10-12 warm-up camp in Durban, South Africa, will do us a world of good. We will play five warm-up games against top teams there.

Journey of pride and passion, says Jesrani

While Mendis expressed hope and optimism, the man who has been one of the longest-serving managers of any Associate team in the world, Madhu Jesrani, who is also the secretary of Oman Cricket, was full of emotions while recollecting the team’s journey since the start of the 21st

century. Jesrani said: “We have reached World Cup Qualifiers twice in the past, first in 2005 in Ireland and then in 2009 in South Africa. We had few amazing results though the 2009 trip to South Africa was disappointing. The current team has done brilliantly to finish second in Division 2 and we are proud of their journey.”



Themba Zwane (L) of Sundowns fights for the ball with Wydad’s Arsene Zola during their CAF Champions League second leg semi-final on Friday (AFP)

Wydad claw back twice to reach CAF Champions League final

Johannesburg, South Africa - Holders Wydad Casablanca of Morocco equalised twice to draw 2-2 with Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa on Saturday, and book a second straight CAF Champions League final against Al Ahly of Egypt.

Captain Themba Zwane and later Peter Shalulile put the home team ahead in a semi-final, second leg thriller watched by a 45,000 crowd in Pretoria.

But Ayoub el Amloud cancelled out Sundowns’ first goal and an own-goal by Mothobi Mvala levelled the scoreline

again, and gave Wydad an ultimately decisive aggregate advantage through away goals after a goalless stalemate in the first leg.

Record 10-time champions Ahly had a much more comfortable passage to the final, defeating Esperance of Tunisia 1-0 in Cairo on Friday to complete a 4-0 aggregate triumph.

Set to make a record-extending 16th final appearance in the premier African club competition, Ahly will host the first leg on June 4 with the second leg on June 11.

The 2022 final involved a single match and a couple of goals from Zouhair el Moutaraji gave Wydad a 2-0 victory over Ahly in a match controversially staged in Casablanca.

Ahly wanted the final played at a neutral venue, but an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) was unsuccessful. The drama led to two-leg finals being reinstated.

Recently-hired Belgian Sven Vandenbroeck - the fourth coach of Wydad this season - said the experience of his players pulled them through in pursuit of a

fourth Champions League title.

‘Experience told’

“Sundowns were probably the better team over the two legs, but our greater experience and mental strength told,” he said.

“Wydad against Ahly is going to be a beautiful final and I am hoping for the same outcome as last season.

“There is little to choose between two great teams, but I think playing at home in the second leg may give us a slight advantage.”

AFP

Leipzig beat Bayern to hand Dortmund title edge

Berlin, Germany - Borussia Dortmund are two wins away from guaranteeing their first title in a decade after RB Leipzig came from behind to win 3-1 away at Bayern Munich on Saturday.

Bayern led 1-0 thanks to an early Serge Gnabry goal and looked in cruise control, but the visitors scored three second-half goals to turn the match, and the Bundesliga title race, on its head.

Dortmund, who last won the title in 2011-12 under Jurgen Klopp, can go two points clear of Bayern with one matchday remaining with a win on Sunday against Augsburg.

A stunned Bayern manager Thomas Tuchel said his team deserved to lose, explaining “when you play so far below your level, you lose games”.

“RB played OK, but this was completely about us. We lost this game.”

The win, Leipzig’s first in Munich and only their second victory ever over the German champions, secured the visitors Champions League football next



Leipzig’s Dominik Szoboszlai (L) and Christopher Nkunku celebrate after their third goal (AFP)

season.

Leipzig manager Marco Rose said “with our first goal, our belief

grew -- and we used that today.”

Bayern came into the match one point clear of Dortmund and

knew that two wins in their next two games would take them to an 11th straight league title.

Gnabry settled Bayern’s nerves after 25 minutes, blasting a rising shot in off the left post, his fifth in his past four games.

Bayern looked to take the speed out of the game and exert control, but Leipzig struck against the run of play on the counter after 65 minutes.

Konrad Laimer, widely tipped for a move to Bayern in the summer, took advantage of a superb team move to rocket the ball home.

A shellshocked Bayern sought to fight back but soon found themselves behind, after Benjamin Pavard brought down Christopher Nkunku in the box.

The France forward smashed the ball home from the spot, giving home ‘keeper Yann Sommer no chance.

Leipzig won another penalty with four minutes remaining after a handball, with Dominik Szoboszlai scoring.

AFP

Rome winner Rybakina sets sights on Roland Garros

Rome, Italy - Elena Rybakina won the Italian Open on Saturday and promptly turned her attention to Roland Garros and the pursuit of a second career Grand Slam title.

Kazakhstan’s Rybakina captured her second WTA 1000 title of the season at Foro Italico when Ukrainian opponent Anhelina Kalinina retired with a thigh injury which she had been carrying all week.

Rybakina hugged her friend and rival at the net as the tearful loser explained how the physical problem had finally caught up with her.

World number six Rybakina, the reigning Wimbledon champion, was leading 6-4, 1-0 when Kalinina called it quits shortly after midnight in a final long-delayed by rain.

Rybakina, 23, became the first woman to capture two WTA 1000 titles this season, having already won the prestigious Indian Wells hard court tournament in



Kazakhstan’s Elena Rybakina celebrates with the trophy (AFP)

March. She was also runner-up at the Australian Open and in Miami and now she is eyeing up the French Open.

“Hopefully I can go far at the French Open,” she said. “I have good memories playing there.

“Now that I’ve got more matches on clay, it’s a bit easier and (gives) a bit more confi-

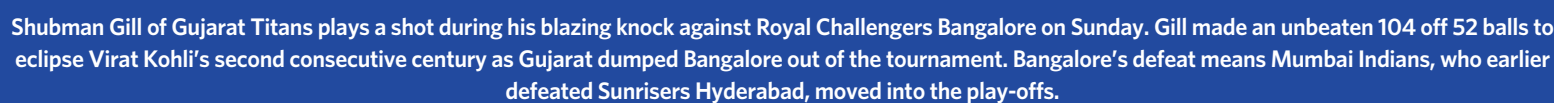
dence definitely.

“It’s always important to be healthy, be ready physically, then hopefully I can go far there.”

She offered wishes for a speedy recovery to Kalinina.

“She has done an amazing job, I hope she is fit for Roland Garros,” Rybakina said.

AFP



Kolkata, India - Lucknow Super Kings survived an unbeaten blitz of 67 by Rinku Singh to edge Kolkata Knight Riders by one run and qualify for the Indian Premier League play-offs on Saturday.

Nicholas Pooran's 58 guided Lucknow to 176-8, a total that was threatened by Rinku, a left-hand batsman, who smashed four sixes in his 33-ball knock but Kolkata ended on 175-7.

"First reaction is satisfaction," Lucknow skipper Krunal Pandya said after the win.

"We never gave up, we were put under a lot of pressure but credit to the boys. At one stage, they were 61-1 but I've seen it before that at this level, two-three tight overs and we're in the game."

The result ensured a top-two finish for Chennai Super Kings, who hammered hosts Delhi Capitals by 77 runs in their march to

the play-offs in the first match of the day.

Four-time champions Chennai, led by M.S. Dhoni, will take on holders Gujarat Titans, who top the 10-team table, in the first qualifier next week.

The winner will head straight to the final in Ahmedabad on May 28 and the loser playing the winner of the "eliminator" between teams three and four in the second qualifier.

"There is no recipe as such," Dhoni said on his team's success in the T20 tournament.

"You try to pick the best players and try to give them the best slot. You use them in the manner where they have most chances of succeeding and groom them in the areas where they are not as strong."

Two-time champions Kolkata bowed out of the race for the top four.

Cameron Green of Mumbai Indians celebrates his century against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Mumbai on Sunday (AFP)

Indians in play-offs as Bangalore lose to Gujarat

Mumbai, India - Australia's Cameron Green hit his first-ever T20 century to lead the Mumbai Indians to a crushing eight-wicket win over Sunrisers Hyderabad on Sunday which proved crucial as they moved into the play-offs after Royal Challengers Bangalore lost to Gujarat Titans.

Green made an unbeaten 100 off 47 balls and put on a key stand of 128 with skipper Rohit Sharma (56) as Mumbai achieved their victory target of 201 with two overs to spare at the Wankhede Stadium, their home ground.

Mumbai, five-time winners of the Indian Premier League, had to wait the result of the second match of the day between Royal Challengers Bangalore and holders Gujarat Titans but it was

worth the wait as Shubman Gill played a blinder to take Gujarat to victory.

Mumbai's win eliminated Rajasthan Royals from the play-off race while Bangalore, led by Faf du Plessis, endured heartbreak despite Virat Kohli making an unbeaten 101 for his second consecutive century.

Table-toppers Gujarat and second-placed Chennai Super Kings will clash in the first qualifier next week. Lucknow, who became the third team to book their play-off berth, await their opponent in the eliminator.

The winner of Qualifier 1 will head straight to the final in Ahmedabad on May 28 and the loser will play the winner of the eliminator.

Green, a big buy for Mumbai

for \$2.11 million in the auction, stood out on Sunday with eight fours and eight sixes.

After Rohit's departure, Green kept up the charge and put on an unbeaten partnership with Suryakumar Yadav, who hit 25, to register their eighth win in 14 group matches.

Medium-pace bowler Akash Madhwal set up victory with figures of 4-37 to check Hyderabad to 200-5, a total that looked to go bigger but for some disciplined bowling.

Openers Mayank Agarwal (83) and Vivrant Sharma (69) put on 140 runs to lay the foundations for the total, which proved insufficient.

The departure of Sharma and then Agarwal made Hyderabad slide with the rest of the batting falling apart.

Hyderabad took the wooden spoon in the 10-team table.



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FLIGHTS FROM RUSSIA

PROTESTS GREET
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PLANE TO LAND
IN GEORGIA IN
YEARS

Dozens of Georgians protested Friday outside an airport in the capital Tbilisi as a Russian passenger plane landed in the Caucasus country for the first time since 2019.

Anti-Russian sentiment runs deep in Georgia, which was annexed by the Russian empire in the 19th century and - after short-lived independence - forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union.

There have been no formal diplomatic ties between the two countries since Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 following years of tensions over Tbilisi's pro-Western orientation.

The resumption of air travel comes as Moscow's offensive in Ukraine stretches into its second year with most Western companies having cancelled their own flights to Russia.

An AFP journalist at Tbilisi Airport reported the flight operated by Azimuth Airline had touched down at 13:17 local time (0917 GMT) on Friday. A Georgian airline was also scheduled to fly to Moscow the next day.

"Despite the opposition of the Georgian people, Russia has landed its unwelcome flight in Tbilisi," tweeted Georgia's pro-EU President Salome Zurbishvili. Holding Georgian and Ukrainian flags, protesters gathered just outside the airport.

'NOT WELCOME'



Demonstrators protesting against the resumption of air links with Russia outside the Tbilisi Airport as the passenger plane of Azimuth Airline, the first direct flight from Moscow, arrives in Tbilisi

'You Are Not Welcome', said one placard, while a banner held by several people read, 'Russia Is a Terrorist State'.

One of the protestors, rights activist Lana Gvinjilia, 49, said the resumption of regular flights with Russia "means our government is collaborating with the Kremlin. This is humiliating for the Georgians who stand with Ukraine and we will not tolerate this situation."

Treason

Russia had banned air travel with the country in response to anti-Moscow rallies in Tbilisi in 2019. But in a surprise move last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin lifted the flight ban, a decision protested by hundreds in Georgia. Putin also introduced a 90-day visa-free regime for Georgian citizens.

Elene Khoshtaria, leader of Droa, an opposition party which

called for protests, said six demonstrators had been detained.

"We will not let them operate in Georgia," Khoshtaria said of the flights, speaking to AFP ahead of the arrival of the plane. She accused the ruling Georgian Dream party of committing 'treason'.

The party, which insists on its commitment to the country's EU membership bid, has recently

stepped up the anti-Brussels rhetoric.

The government faces mounting accusations of covertly cooperating with the Kremlin after years of tensions but insists it needs to maintain economic ties with Russia.

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili welcomed the return of flights as Putin's 'very positive decision'. He said only Russian airlines and aircraft that are not

affected by Western sanctions would be allowed to operate in Georgia.

Schizophrenic behaviour

"I want to reassure our friends in the European Union and elsewhere, this is only about economic and trade relationships," he said, adding that last year

Russia collected around US\$300bn from trade with the EU.

Georgia applied for EU membership together with Ukraine and Moldova after Russia invaded its pro-Western neighbour in February 2022.

Last June, EU leaders granted formal candidate status to Kyiv and Chisinau, but urged Tbilisi to reform the justice and electoral systems, improve press freedom and curtail the power of oligarchs.

Critics have accused Garibashvili's government of undermining Georgia's European integration and flirting with the Kremlin.

"Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Georgian government's behaviour has been schizophrenic," said political analyst Ghia Nodia.

"They say they want European integration and at the same time their posture towards Europe is confrontational."

Garibashvili has dismissed such claims, calling them "an insult to the Georgian people". He said his government's stance on Russia was shaped by 'strategic patience and pragmatic policy'.

Among the protestors at the airport, lawyer Lasha Tkesheladze, 29, said the resumption of flights was "totally unacceptable."

"We want to be in the EU, not under Russia's rule, that's why we are protesting here today."

AFP

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Champa Chanbeli, who trains others to make earthen stoves lifted off the floor, at her flood-resistant hut at Sanjar Chang village in Tando Allahyar district

OCTOGENARIAN ARCHITECT

Building confidence

AN OCTOGENARIAN ARCHITECT WORKS TO FLOOD-PROOF PAKISTAN'S VILLAGES BY EMPOWERING LOCALS TO CO-CREATE THEIR DWELLINGS

At 82 years old, architect Yasmeen Lari is forging the way in fortifying Pakistan's rural communities living on the frontline of climate change. Lari, Pakistan's first woman architect, has ditched a lifetime of multi-million dollar projects in the megacity of Karachi to develop pioneering flood-proof bamboo houses. The few pilot settlements already constructed are credited with saving families from the worst of the catastrophic monsoon flooding that put a third of the country underwater last year. "We continued to live in them," said Khomo Kohli, a 45-year-old resident of Pono Colony village, which is a few hundred kilometres outside of Karachi. "The rest of the residents had to move onto the road where they lived for two months until the water receded."

Now, Lari is campaigning to



scale up the project to one million houses made from affordable local materials, bringing new jobs to the most vulnerable areas. "I call it a kind of co-building and co-creation, because the people have an equal

part in embellishing it and making it comfortable for themselves," she said. The architect, who trained in the United Kingdom, is behind some of Karachi's most notable buildings, including brutalist constructions such as the Pakistan State Oil headquarters, as well as a string of luxury homes. As she was considering retirement, a series of natural disasters - including a massive 2005 earthquake and 2010 floods - stiffened her resolve to continue working with her Heritage Foundation of Pakistan. "I had to find the solution, or find a way by which I could build up the capacities of people so that they could fend for themselves, rather than waiting for outside help," she told AFP. "My motto is zero carbon, zero waste, zero donor, which I think leads to zero poverty," she said.

Traditional techniques Climate change is making monsoon rains heavier and more unpredictable, scientists say, raising the urgency to flood-proof the country - particularly as the poorest live in the most vulnerable areas. Pakistan, with the world's fifth-largest population, is responsible for less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions

but is one of the nations most vulnerable to the effects of extreme weather. Pono Colony, with around 100 houses, was developed just months before catastrophic monsoon rains arrived last summer and displaced eight million people. The village's elevated homes are protected from rushing water, while their bamboo skeletons - pierced deep into the ground - can withstand pressure without being uprooted. Known locally as 'chanwara', the mud huts are an improved take on the traditional single-room houses dotted along the landscape of southern Sindh province and Rajasthan state in India. They require only locally available materials - lime, clay, bamboo and thatching. With straightforward training to locals, they can be assembled at a cost of around US\$170 - around an eighth of the cost of a cement and brick house.

Royal recognition Lari recalls working on social housing in Lahore in the 1970s, when local women pored over her plans and probed her on where their chickens would live. "Those chickens have really remained with me, the women's needs are really the uppermost when I'm designing," she said. This time around, the redesign of traditional stoves has become a significant feature - now lifted off the floor. "Earlier, the stove was on the ground level. Children would burn themselves on the flames, stray dogs would lick pots and germs would spread," said Champa Kanji, who has been trained by Lari's team to build stoves for homes across Sindh. "Seeing women becoming independ-

My motto is zero carbon, zero waste, zero donor, which I think leads to zero poverty

YASMEEN LARI



Pono Colony in Sanjar Chang village, in Tando Allahyar district. (Right) Workers arrange bamboos used to build the structure of flood-resistant huts at Sanjar Chang village in Tando Allahyar district

ent and empowered gives me immense pleasure," Lari said. Lari's work has been recognised by the Royal Institute of British Architects, which awarded her the 2023 Royal Gold Medal for her dedication to using architecture to change people's lives. "An inspirational figure, she moved from a large practice centred on the needs of international clients to focussing solely on humanitarian causes," RIBA president Simon Allford said. "This is wonderful feeling," Lari said. "But of course it also makes my tasks harder. I have got to make sure that I now deliver."

AFP