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GHAILANI DIVES TO GLORY



Wins 2 golds, 2 silvers in AIDA Freediving World Cup 2022

Oman's Omar Abdullah al Ghailani created four new national records and broke an Asian record en route to four medals in the AIDA Freediving World Cup 2022 in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. Held from May 16 to 23, the competition saw 17 divers from 14 countries. See also [Page 03](#)

Visit to lead to 'wider horizons of cooperation'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Ebrahim Raisi, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, has expressed his delight in visiting Oman and meeting His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

President Raisi affirmed that his talks with His Majesty the Sultan laid emphasis on the necessity of taking steps to develop relations between the two countries in economic, commercial and tourism fields further.

In an interview with Oman TV, President Raisi reiterated that His Majesty the Sultan is pursuing the approach espoused by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said in consolidating Omani-Iranian relations.

The president described relations between the two countries "centuries-old bonds that are



Ebrahim Raisi, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

deeply engrained in memory" and that "this visit constitutes a point of transformation towards wider horizons of cooperation between the two countries".

He said Oman and Iran boast

of strong confidence and a unique experience that give impetus to robust cooperation on a number of regional and international issues.

In the interview, the president

touched on matters discussed during meetings held by Omani officials with their Iranian counterparts, notably economic co-operation and means of resolving difficulties faced by the business community on either side.

He conveyed the Iranian people's interest to invest in Oman, expand relations and develop commercial exchange.

"There is a proposal to establish a commercial office to overcome difficulties and present investment opportunities for businessmen in the two countries," President Raisi said.

He also pointed out that Oman and Iran agree that dialogue is the sole means of resolving disputes in the region.

On Yemen, the president explained that the solution to the crisis lay in negotiations among Yemenis themselves.

'More cases of monkeypox suspected in region'

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The first case of monkeypox in WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region has been reported in the United Arab Emirates as countries continue to scale up detection and response capacities for this viral disease.

The patient is currently receiving

treatment and additional suspected cases are being investigated in the region, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean stated.

A total of 131 confirmed cases had been reported from 18 countries across different WHO regions till Monday, with an additional 106 suspected cases being investigated. The confirmed

cases were reported from non-endemic countries that do not usually report monkeypox outbreaks. There are no associated deaths to date.

"More suspected cases are being reported in our region but not yet confirmed. In anticipation of additional confirmed cases in the region, WHO urges countries to report against the WHO case

definition and share information on cases reported on a timely basis. We are committed to providing information for health ministries, health workers, communities, and people to inform them of monkeypox and how to protect themselves and their loved ones," said Dr Ahmed al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

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(Muscat Daily)

OFA holds event to help SMEs conduct business

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A discussion was held at the French Embassy in Muscat on Tuesday to educate entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises on several aspects of business operations, including marketing and vendor registration.

Organised by the Omani French Friendship Association (OFA), the event was well attended.

The discussion was led by senior officials of Apave Gulf, a quality assurance and control, and integrity assessment and certification services company. A French company registered in Oman, it services clients throughout the GCC.

Goran Gramatikov, CEO of Apave Gulf, said, "There are many businesses that still work on word-of-mouth recommendations. No matter what promotions - paid ads and marketing strategies - one employs, a good recommendation always helps businesses."

He also laid stress on the importance of vendor registration in big companies. "We must understand that a big industry like oil

and gas has several other side jobs, like cleaning, catering, film shooting and medical services, which are not related to the industry. For these jobs, they invite vendors. One can register in their websites, and it is fair play. Every company has a platform for them to do business with their vendors. One must make the most use of these."

Speaking at the event, Turkiya al Adawi, manager of Human Capital Development Products and Services at Oman Society for Petroleum Services, said, "We always extend our support to SMEs, facilitating the process of vendor registration of enterprises on a common platform."

Sunaz Odakkal, deputy general manager, and Prakash Karunakaran, head of certification at Apave Gulf, also made a presentation to SMEs, explaining the most important requirements for a good marketing and B2B strategy.

OFA is a non-profit organisation and a networking platform that promotes friendship, understanding and matters of mutual interest between French and Omani businesses and social communities active in the sultanate.

Salalah Mills to import 180,000 tonnes of wheat from 2 countries

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Salalah Mills Company has stated that it will import wheat from India and Australia to bolster stocks.

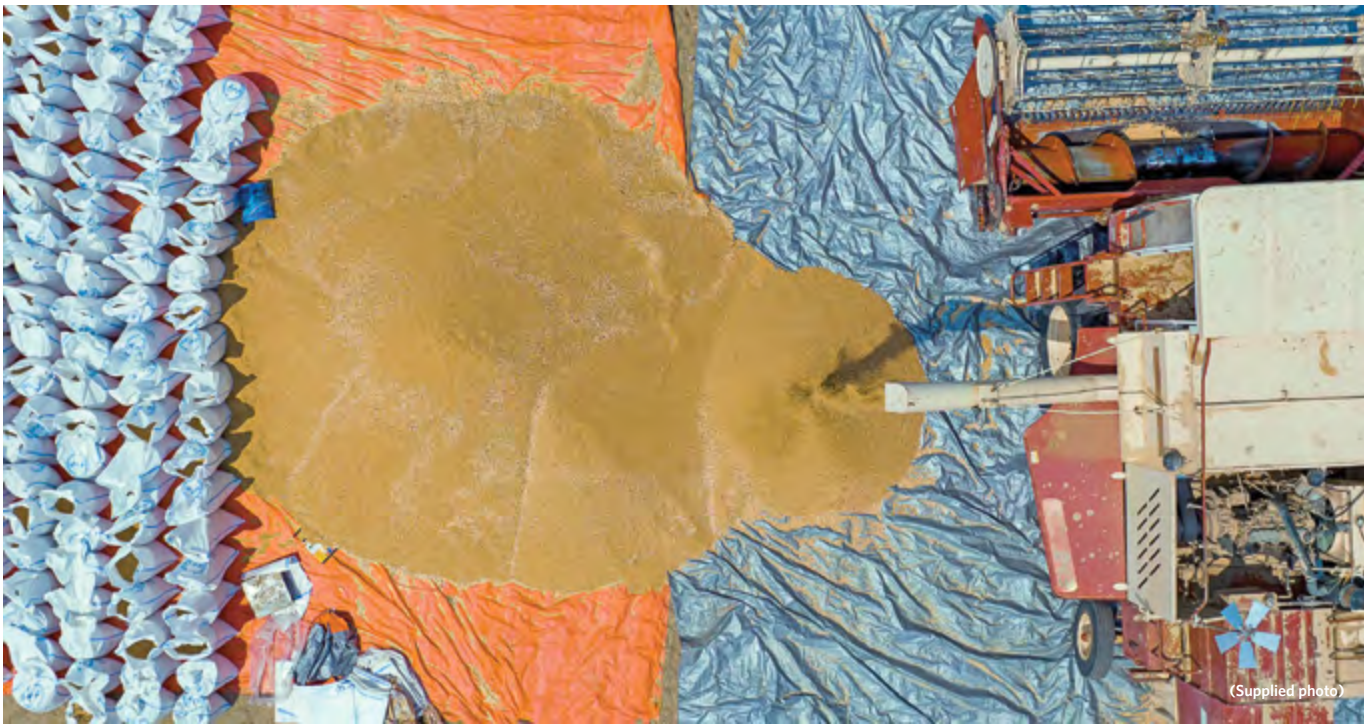
The consignment of 180,000 tonnes is expected to arrive in the next three months.

Ahmed bin Alawi al Dahab, CEO of Salalah Mills Company, informed that the contracted quantity will suffice for the year. "A ship loaded with 66,000 tonnes of wheat has left the Indian port of Kandla, heading to the port of Salalah," he said.

According to Dahab, the company - one of the largest mills in the sultanate - is currently looking to cover its wheat needs for the first half of 2023. It has a daily production capacity of 1,500 tonnes and imports more than 400,000 tonnes of wheat annually.

Meanwhile, Oman Flour Mills Company recently signed agreements with three countries to import an additional 160,000 tonnes of wheat.

Of this, 100,000 tonnes will be imported from India, 35,000 tonnes from Australia, and 25,000 tonnes from Argentina.



(Supplied photo)

A ship loaded with 66,000 tonnes of wheat has left the Indian port of Kandla, heading to the port of Salalah

AHMED BIN ALAWI AL DAHAB

According to statistics released by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Oman's wheat crop in

2020-21 produced 2,649 tonnes, 19.6 per cent more than 2019-20.

The total area of land under wheat production in 2020-21

was 2,449 acres, farmed by 3,067 wheat farmers, 5.5 per cent increase year-on-year.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources expects wheat production to increase to 3,000 tonnes this year.

A global food crisis, already impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, is being driven to famine levels worldwide by the war in Ukraine

and the resulting lack of grain exports, more than 75 speakers told the Security Council last week in a ministerial-level open debate on conflict and food security.

In 2021, most of the 140mn people suffering acute hunger lived in just ten countries: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

Awareness programme on lupus to be held soon

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A campaign and a workshop will be held soon to create awareness on systemic lupus erythematosus, commonly known as lupus.

The Omani Lupus Awareness and Support Group, comprising survivors of the disease, in cooperation with the National University of Science and Technology's College of Pharmacy, will hold the first public event aimed at creating awareness. Currently, the group has nearly 100 members.

Lupus is an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks its own healthy tissues, causing tissue damage and widespread inflammation of affected organs.

The disease primarily affects women, but the number of men suffering from lupus is seen rising. Symptoms include joint pain, skin rashes, tiredness and



(Supplied photo)

seizures.

It is often diagnosed several years after the first symptoms appear, complicating treatment and management.

Speaking during an event to announce the awareness programmes, Mazzan al Farsi, a survivor of lupus, said, "I developed symptoms, including high temperature, bloated abdomen and inability to consume solid or liquid food. The need of the hour is to spread awareness as well as

support for the silent sufferers."

At the announcement event, Dr Ali al Shirawi, consultant rheumatologist, Dr Aseelah al Harthiya, consultant dermatologist, and Noura al Akhzm, psychiatrist, presented their views on the disease.

The awareness event - called 'Life with Lupus' - will include a number of working papers dealing with lupus and its effects. Dates of the event are expected soon.

Indian environmentalist Sadhguru appeals to save soil in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

It is estimated that 90 per cent of the world's top soil will be degraded by 2050, with 52 per cent of Earth's agricultural soil already degraded. The degradation will affect the food chain, ecology and demography of mankind all over the world irrespective of nationality and community.

These were the concerns raised by the popular Indian environmentalist and motivational speaker Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, who is on a global mission to raise awareness on soil degradation. His campaign, called Save Soil Movement, has received support from over 70 nations till date.

The 64-year-old spoke at the Indian Embassy in Muscat, followed by a two-hour session with a live audience at Oman



(Muscat Daily)

Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Wednesday.

Speaking during the press conference at the embassy, Sadhguru said, "We must remember that we come from soil, thrive on soil and go back to soil. It is full of living microbes and organic content. One inch of fertile soil takes thousands of years to make and we are destroying it. We have received soil from a generation and must pass it on to the next. Save Soil is not an agitation, a protest

or a fight against anyone."

Lauding the efforts made in the Gulf region, he said, "While many countries are busy turning fertile land into desert, this part of the world is doing its best to create food. People have survived for years in the same deserts and it has specific qualities that can make life thrive."

The audience at OCEC heard an impassioned plea to save the planet's soil and a call to be part of this global movement.



INVITATION TO TENDER

We would like to invite all reputed & specialized companies, who have relevant experience to provide the required services mentioned against the below tenders for Fertilizer/Oil and Gas/Refinery/Petrochemical Industries to submit their best offer for the below Tender:

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Bid Submission due date	Not later than 12:00pm on 25 th July 2022 (Oman time)
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Minimum Experience	Ten (10) Years of experience in the subject filed in similar scope of work and scale.

All bidders shall submit their offer in THREE (3) separate envelopes as following:
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Oman welcomes EU Gulf strategy

Cooperation to help green energy transition, economic diversification in GCC states

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Sayyid Badr al Busaidi, Foreign Minister, has welcomed the formation of European Union's 'Strategic Partnership with the Gulf'.

The European Commission adopted a Joint Communication on 'Strategic Partnership with the Gulf' with the aim of broadening and deepening EU's cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council and its member countries on May 18.

The Joint Communication addresses a series of key policy areas, presenting concrete proposals for strengthened EU-GCC cooperation on energy, green transition and climate change, trade and economic diversification, regional stability and global

security, humanitarian and development challenges, and closer people-to-people contacts.

"I warmly welcome the EU Gulf strategy. It conceives a strategic partnership that will enhance our mutual security and help us all transition our economies to net zero carbon emissions," H E Sayyid Badr tweeted.

Speaking on the partnership, Josep Borrell, Vice-President of European Commission, said, "At a time of insecurity and significant challenges to the rules-based international order, aggravated by Russia's war on Ukraine, the EU and Gulf countries stand to gain from a stronger and more strategic partnership stretching over a number of key areas.

"We need to work more closely together on stability in the Gulf and the Middle East, on



I warmly welcome the EU Gulf strategy. It conceives a strategic partnership that will enhance our mutual security and help us all transition our economies to net zero carbon emissions

H E SAYYID BADR AL BUSAIDI

global security threats, energy security, climate change and the green transition, digitalisation, trade and investment. We also

need to strengthen contacts between students, researchers, businesses and citizens."

A strengthened partnership is beneficial both for the EU and for the Gulf partners, with the EU being the world's largest single market, a leader in research and innovation, an important security actor in the Gulf region and the leading actor on global challenges such as climate change and digitalisation.

Increased cooperation and exchanges between the EU and GCC countries will ultimately be beneficial also for the people of both regions. 'Closer inter-cultural cooperation, mobility for youth and students, higher education cooperation and exchanges will improve mutual understanding and trust. But these examples are not exhaustive,' stated a press release from the European Commission.

Background

Joining forces to address climate change and harness the opportu-

nities provided by the green transition is paramount and mutually beneficial.

The Gulf region is particularly impacted by climate change and the EU, a pioneer in initiatives for a climate transition, can be a partner in developing the know-how and expertise to address this challenge, European Commission stated.

A multilateral and rules-based international order requires cooperation to enhance mutual security and the stability of the wider European neighbourhood and the Gulf.

'Protracted conflict situations also require a more strategic and enhanced engagement to address the unprecedented humanitarian and development needs in the wider Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Gulf countries are a significant donor of bilateral financial aid and can play an important role in the promotion of the respect of International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles.'



Ghailani dives to Asian record

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Diver Omar Abdullah al Ghailani has added a feather in his cap by winning two golds, two silvers and the overall winner title in the AIDA Freediving World Cup 2022 held in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, from May 16 to 23.

Ghailani also created four new national records and broke the Asian record in the Constant Weight Bi-fins 92m category.

Speaking to *Muscat Daily* from Sharm el Sheikh, Ghailani said competitions in the tournament were held in four depth categories. "I claimed first place in Constant Weight Bi-fins 92m and Free Immersion 92m, and second in Constant Weight 92m and Constant Weight No Fins 61m dives."

The competition saw 17 divers from 14 countries, including Switzerland, Germany, China, Colo-

mbia, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Portugal and Finland.

He described the competition as 'tough' owing to the participation of experienced divers from around the world. Additionally, the temperatures encountered in the depths to which he dived were 'challenging'.

"I had a plan for each day, but often I was compelled to alter these according to the prevailing condition, like unexpected waves or water temperature."

Ghailani's preparations for the tournament started early in January this year. He also took part in a preparatory camp three weeks before the tournament in Sharm el Sheikh which helped him acclimatise to the temperatures of the water in which the tournament was held.

In July 2021 in the same event, Ghailani claimed four medals, including overall winner and a bronze.

JOINT MILITARY DRILL CONCLUDES



A joint military exercise between the Royal Army of Oman, the Royal Air Force of Oman and the Royal Navy of Oman, called 'Guarding Oman', concluded at the Said bin Sultan Naval Base on Wednesday. The drill was held within the framework of the training plans pursued by the Ministry of Defence and the Sultan's Armed Forces. It was held under the patronage of Rear Admiral Saif Nasser al Rahbi, RNO Commander (ONA)

Ministry documents traditional crafts, craftsmen in S Sharqiyah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has completed documenting records of traditional crafts in South Sharqiyah governorate in its efforts to support craftsmen in the sultanate.

In a statement, the ministry said, 'The Department of Heritage and Tourism in the Governorate of South Sharqiyah, in cooperation with the Omani Women's Association in Al Kamel Wa al Wafi, has completed recording and documenting traditional crafts and craftsmen engaged in these in the wilayat of Sur.'

The ministry had formed a team to document traditional crafts in all wilayats of South Sharqiyah.

'The initiative is part of a national project that aims to pre-



serve, document and register Omani crafts as a reference for Omani heritage,' it stated.

According to the latest data, there were more than 24,000 craftsmen in the sultanate at the end of 2020, of which more than 88 per cent were women.

The number of craftsmen in

the Governorate of Dhofar was 7,247, followed by North Sharqiyah (5,454), North Batinah (3,534), Dakhliyah (2,148), Al Wusta (1,534), South Batinah (1,357), South Sharqiyah (1,186), Muscat (608), Dhahirah (482), Musandam (405) and Buraimi (236).

The Royal Hospital holds event to observe World Hand Hygiene Day

Muscat - The Royal Hospital, represented by the Infection Control Department, organised an awareness event on Wednesday at its Training and Studies Centre to observe World Hand Hygiene Day.

The event saw the participation of several departments, including staff of laboratories, nursing department, radiology and rehabilitation. World Hand

Hygiene Day, marked annually on May 5, was held this year under the theme 'Unite for safety: Clean your hands'.

The event aimed to raise awareness among health workers in the hospital on the importance of hand hygiene and reduce healthcare-associated infection.

Speaking at the event, Dr Qasim al Salmi, director general of The Royal Hospital, pointed

out that the celebration reflected the importance and the direct impact of hand hygiene on patient healthcare and preventing the spread of infectious diseases, particularly antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

He informed that hand hygiene is the responsibility of all health workers, besides being one of the essential tasks of medical practice in all health institutions.

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Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Ukraine calls on West to 'kill Russian exports'

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called on the West Wednesday to "kill Russian exports" as a price for Moscow's invasion of his country, asking the world not to finance the Kremlin's "war machine".

"My message is very simple. Kill Russian exports," Kuleba said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, AFP reported.

"Stop buying from Russia. Stop allowing them to make money which they can invest in the war machine that destroys, kills, rapes and tortures people in Ukraine."

Nike halts sales to retailers in Russia

Nike will not renew licensing agreements in Russia, the company said Wednesday, joining a growing list of Western companies pulling back from the country following the invasion of Ukraine.

The move affects licensed retailers as Nike shuttered company-owned stores two months ago soon after Moscow sent troops into the neighboring country.

"Due to operational challenges in Russia, Nike has made the decision not to renew or enter into any new business commitments, including with our franchisee Up&Run," the company said as reported by AFP.

Shell, PDO to study carbon capture and storage in Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Shell Development Oman (Oman Shell) and Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) have agreed to collaborate and jointly study Carbon Capture Utilisation and Storage (CCUS) opportunities in Oman.

CCUS is a combination of technologies that capture, use and store carbon dioxide deep underground, preventing its release into the atmosphere. Shell considers CCUS as one of the enablers to actually achieve the climate objectives.

As part of this agreement, Oman Shell and PDO signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for a joint study, which will broadly assess all aspects related to reinjecting and storing CO2 in Oman. The study's scope

Walid Hadi

will cover technical matters, project time-frame and cost, as well as consider support for a regulatory and fiscal framework for CCUS in Oman, according to a press statement.

Through this collaboration, PDO and Oman Shell seek to leverage joint capabilities and economies of scale to initiate the CCUS industry in Oman, and to

Steve Phimister

facilitate the inception of a low carbon hydrogen value chain in Oman.

PDO is the operator of Block 6 and in line with Oman's Vision 2040 has clear commitments towards achieving net zero emissions by 2050. PDO is, therefore, progressing opportunities to grow its core hydrocarbon business whilst also reducing green-

house gases (GHG) emissions from its operations, including the use of CCUS for enhanced oil recovery (EOR) and long-term CO2 storage.

Oman Shell is the operator of Block 10 and is maturing options for an associated downstream project based on low carbon hydrogen value chains with CCUS.

Commenting on this agreement, Walid Hadi, Oman Shell country chair, said, "This collaboration allows Oman Shell and PDO to positively contribute to Oman's Vision 2040, creating opportunities to reduce the carbon intensity of PDO's existing operations and creating a new low carbon hydrogen value chain in Oman.

The intent of this collaboration is to progress CCUS opportunities in Oman, making the best use of PDO's knowledge of

the subsurface/surface and its long-standing experience of operating assets in Oman, together with Shell's global knowledge and experience in Carbon Capture Utilization and Storage. The initial study may well result in further collaboration involving additional projects in the future."

Steve Phimister, managing director of PDO, said, "In line with PDO's commitments to Oman's Vision 2040 and our role in the energy transition, this collaboration lays the foundation for PDO to reduce emissions from our operations as well as helping to progress Oman's national energy agenda, via large scale CCUS. PDO and Shell, are uniquely positioned based on capacity, geography, and expertise to execute this project together and build sustainable energy solutions for Oman's future."

UAE's Q1 non-oil trade hits AED500bn

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The UAE's non-oil foreign trade in the first quarter of 2022 was close to AED500bn for the first time in the country's history, a growth of 20.5 per cent compared to AED414.6bn recorded in the same period of 2021, according to the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre.

This figure is also up 26.3 per cent compared to the same period in 2019.

The data highlighted China's leadership in the list of top ten countries trading with the UAE in the first quarter of 2022, valued at AED57bn, followed by India with AED46.2bn and Saudi Arabia with AED32.5bn.

Gold topped the list of leading commodities included in the UAE's non-oil foreign trade, with a value of AED84.4bn.

WAM

After wheat, India caps sugar exports

New Delhi, India - India said it has capped sugar exports to safeguard its own supplies and ease inflation, days after a ban on wheat shipments sent global prices soaring in the wake of the Ukraine war.

The world's largest sugar producer and number two exporter after Brazil said on Tuesday that shipments would be limited to 10mn tonnes for the current marketing year to September.

The decision was taken "with a view to maintain the domestic availability and price stability during the sugar season," the food ministry said in a statement.

Sugar exports are forecast to hit a record high this marketing year, with contracts signed for around nine million tonnes, and 7.8mn tonnes already shipped, it said. Citing inflation and its own food security needs, in mid-May India banned any new wheat exports without government approval after the hottest March on

record - blamed on climate change - hit harvests.

Although India is a marginal player on the global market, the move sparked a further surge in already-soaring global food prices since Russia's February invasion of agricultural powerhouse Ukraine, which previously accounted for 12 per cent of global exports.

The decision also stoked fears of growing protectionism in the wake of the conflict.

The export ban also left hundreds of thousands of tonnes of wheat stranded at a major port in western India, with long lines of thousands of trucks waiting to unload.

AFP

CBO, CMA collaborate to promote tech innovation in financial sector

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and the Capital Market Authority (CMA) have signed an agreement to promote innovation and financial technologies (Fintech) in the sultanate's financial sector.

A collaboration programme on innovation and technology in the financial sector was signed on Tuesday by H E Tahir bin Salim al Amri, executive president of the CBO and H E Abdullah al Salmi, executive president of the CMA.

The agreement, which was signed on the sidelines of COMEX 2022, aims at building cooperation and coordination between CBO and CMA to enhance and promote innovation in the financial sector by using new technologies, CBO said in a statement.

The programme also aims at

The agreement was signed by H E Abdullah al Salmi (left) and H E Tahir bin Salim al Amri on Tuesday

developing the regulatory and supervisory processes and the exchange of expertise, as well as creating an environment that facilitates and fosters innovations in providing financial services in Oman.

In a separate statement, the

CMA said it signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the CBO for cooperation in innovation and technology in the financial sector and the projects related to innovations and new Fintech, financial culture and inclusion.

"The MoU aims to develop the regulatory and supervisory environment that would assist the growth of innovation and digitalisation in the financial sector. It would help create an appropriate environment for enhancing the patterns of innovation in the provision of financial services in Oman," the CMA said.

The CBO and CMA participated as supporters in COMEX 2022 held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre during May 23-25.

At COMEX, a special zone has been dedicated with CBO's initiatives and support under the name 'Fintech and Banking Pavilion', comprising participating financial and banking institutions.

The CMA launched a number of e-services related to communication with the public such as complaints service and whistleblowing service as well as it electronic initiatives such as XBRL and Dhamani platforms.

Omantel, Microsoft join hands to drive innovation

Muscat - Omantel has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Microsoft to collaborate on driving business value and accelerating ICT innovation to support the company's digital transformation strategy and streamline and improve services across the sultanate.

Microsoft will work with Omantel to develop the necessary foundational capabilities required for their workforce, assist with streamline operations and business support systems, transform customer experience, optimize next-gen networks, and accelerate innovation and growth.

"The rapid acceleration towards a progressively digital society and changing customer expectations are driving an increased need for innovation to ensure a fully connected environment," a senior official at Omantel said.

"This strategic collaboration with Microsoft will serve to reinforce our ICT transformation efforts to build a connected community fortified by innovation in the sultanate, enabling an improved customer experience for both consumers and enterprises alike," the official said.

Microsoft Oman and Bahrain country manager Saif Hilal al

Hosni said, "As a trusted digital transformation and digitisation partner, we are committed to helping our customers accelerate innovation and build new revenue streams by leveraging powerful advanced technologies such as 5G. By uniting our innovations with Omantel's expertise we will be able to ensure greater resilience and efficiencies for consumers and businesses

across Oman.

This new agreement builds on our long-standing partnership with Omantel to accelerate technology adoption and empower people and organisations in the country to achieve more."

Under the new agreement, Microsoft will engage with regional and international solution providers to bring the latest global innovations in digital

transformation, digitisation, cloud adoption, big data and data science, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, capacity building and skilling to Oman.

Additionally, Microsoft and Omantel will partner on the development of ideation workshops with technical and business stakeholders to evaluate various technology ideas and proposals within a high-level im-

plementation roadmap and collaborate on the delivery of technology awareness sessions centered around new Microsoft technologies. Omantel will provide support for the required cloud infrastructure to host the technology workshops and proof of concept, facilitate the connection with business and technical stakeholders in target departments, and provide technical and

financial support - as needed - for the potential implementation of the different solutions.

The importance of the telecommunications industry has risen rapidly, and significantly over the past two years as connectivity continues to underpin any efforts to realize a digital economy in the Middle East.

On top of this, the world of work is undergoing substantial

change as a result of the shift towards remote hybrid environments, driving the need for transformation. As such telecom companies are placing digital innovation at the core of strategies to meet the requirements of the future. According to McKinsey, digital transformation can yield a more than 30 per cent increase in gross profit for telecommunications operators.

EU chief 'confident' of quick Russia oil embargo agreement

Stockholm, Sweden – European Council chief Charles Michel expressed confidence Wednesday that the European Union would reach an agreement on a Russian oil embargo ahead of next week's European summit, despite opposition from Hungary.

Michel said European leaders were working very hard to find a resolution, adding that he had had many contacts on the subject.

"I'm still confident that we can be able to resolve the topic before the European Council" meeting in Brussels on Monday and Tuesday, Michel said during a joint press conference in Stockholm with Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson.

Hungary has yet to be convinced to back an EU embargo on Russian oil, and bringing it up at next week's European summit would be pointless, Prime Minister Viktor Orban told Michel earlier this week in a letter seen by AFP.

"Looking at the gravity of the issues still open, it is very unlikely that a comprehensive solution could be found before the special meeting of the European Council



President of the European Council Charles Michel (left) and Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson (right) give a joint press conference in Stockholm, Sweden, on Wednesday (AFP)

on 30-31 May," Orban wrote in the letter, dated Monday.

"I am convinced that discussing the sanctions package at the level of leaders in the absence of a consensus would be counterproductive," it said.

Michel said Wednesday he was "realistic, I know that there

are difficulties" but that he would "propose some possible solutions".

Some diplomatic sources have suggested EU leaders might take up the issue at the Brussels summit in order to come to a political agreement to unblock technical talks underway between Hungary and the European Commission.

Orban, often the odd man out in EU decision-making, has rocked the bloc's unity on the war in Ukraine by opposing an oil embargo.

Landlocked Hungary relies on Russian oil from a single pipeline

and Orban insists the proposed sixth package of EU sanctions against Moscow would have a devastating impact on his country's economy.

Budapest has demanded an exemption from the embargo for at least four years and wants 800mn euros (US\$860mn) in EU funds to re-tool a refinery and boost the capacity of a pipeline to Croatia.

The EU has offered Hungary, along with nearby Slovakia and the Czech Republic, lengthy exemptions from imposing the embargo and has been locked in talks with Budapest to resolve the stand-off.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen told CNBC Tuesday she still hoped to secure the oil embargo within "days" – although in a later interview with Euronews she suggested it would take a "matter of weeks".

"What we are looking at is one or two member states that are landlocked, so cannot have oil via the sea and need alternatives in pipelines and in refineries, and there we are trying to find solutions," she said.

AFP



ECB sees risks to financial stability

Frankfurt, Germany – Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put financial markets under renewed stress by driving up prices and impeding growth, the European Central Bank said in a report published Wednesday.

The war has "increased financial stability risks through its impact on virtually all aspects of economic activity", ECB vice-president Luis de Guindos said in a statement.

Inflation in the eurozone has accelerated as costs for energy, agricultural goods and raw materials have risen sharply.

Consumer prices rose at a 7.5 per cent pace in April, an all-time high for the currency club and well above central banks' target of two per cent.

At the same time, economic prospects in the bloc have diminished, with the ECB's most re-

cent forecasts predicting a "severe" scenario could shave over a percentage point off growth this year.

The reaction to the outbreak of the conflict and the levelling of sanctions against Russia have so far been "orderly", the ECB said in its biannual financial stability report.

"The market response was substantial, but more modest than at the onset of the (coronavirus) pandemic," it concluded.

New risks could emerge "should the growth outlook weaken further" as a result of the war or inflation continuing its upwards climb.

The development in prices has prompted central banks in developed countries to turn to interest rate hikes to tamp down inflation.

AFP

Russia to make foreign debt payments in rubles: Ministry

Moscow, Russia – Russia said Wednesday that it will start paying its foreign debt in rubles after the United States ended an exemption allowing Moscow to make the payments in dollars held in Russia.

The US Treasury announced Tuesday it was closing the escape clause to the drastic financial sanctions imposed on Moscow after it sent troops to Ukraine, pushing Russia closer to default.

"Noting that the refusal to extend this licence makes it impossible to continue servicing government foreign debt in US dollars, payments will be carried out in Russia's currency," the finance ministry said in a statement on Telegram.

The ministry added that there would be a "possibility to later convert them (payments) into the original currency" using a Russian financial institution as the paying agent.

Punishing Western sanctions on Russia have largely severed the country from the international financial system, including blocking Moscow's ability to access funds held in US banks to pay its foreign creditors.



The US move scrapped the final exemption, which was forcing President Vladimir Putin's government to drain its war chest of foreign currency reserves to make payments.

Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said in the statement that the current situation was "artificially created by an unfriendly country."

He said that it "primarily hurts the rights of foreign investors in Russian debt instruments".

Siluanov stressed the situation has "nothing in common" with 1998, when Russia de-

faulted on domestic ruble-denominated debt amid a broader financial crisis.

"Now we have money and a desire to make payments, too," the minister said, adding that the step would not affect Russians' quality of life.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said last week that "if Russia is unable to find a legal way to make these payments... they technically default on their debt." The Russian government has attempted to pay in domestic currency, but many of the bonds do not allow repayment in rubles.

AFP

Oil and gas firms use Ukraine war to resist climate efforts: Report

Paris, France – US oil and gas firms took advantage of energy worries over the Ukraine war to push their fossil fuel products and resist climate change regulatory measures, an analysis showed on Wednesday.

The London-based think tank InfluenceMap analysed advertisements and declarations by the companies in the weeks before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

It said the companies spread the misleading message that US climate change policies were to blame for rising energy prices and that more US-produced oil and gas was the solution.

As Western countries that import Russian hydrocarbons looked for alternatives in order to cut ties with Russia, InfluenceMap detected "an active effort from the US oil and gas industry to capitalise on the war in Ukraine".

They pushed "long-standing policy asks relating to the continued expansion of oil and gas," despite the widely-documented role such operations play in driving deadly global climate change,



InfluenceMap said.

The group identified one of the key players in the messaging effort as the American Petroleum Institute, a lobbying organisation that has numerous major fossil fuel companies among its members.

InfluenceMap said it detected

a surge in the number of ads about US-based energy and energy independence placed via one of the API's Facebook pages in the weeks before and after the Russian invasion.

One series of ads received nearly 20mn views on the social platform.

Surge in prices

"The sector has quickly mobilised around the war in Ukraine and high gas prices to promote the need for more 'American-made energy', often relying on potentially misleading or questionable claims," InfluenceMap Program Manager Faye Holder said in the report.

It also analysed public statements by oil and gas executives, finding that several of them publicly blamed climate change policies or promoted US-produced energy as part of the solution to the energy crisis.

The report documented cases where it said the sector had succeeded in securing some of its demands since the invasion, such as a commitment by authorities to speed up approvals for new gas projects.

Many posts by users on social media have blamed a surge in gasoline and crude oil prices on US President Joe Biden's decisions to limit drilling and to halt the Keystone XL pipeline project as part of his low-carbon energy transition plan.

AFP

Pfizer offers to sell medicines at cost to poorest countries

Davos, Switzerland – US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer on Wednesday said it would sell its patented drugs on a not-for-profit basis to the world's poorest countries, as part of a new initiative announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"The time is now to begin closing this gap" between people with access to the latest treatments and those going without, chief executive Albert Bourla told attendees at the exclusive Swiss mountain resort gathering.

"An Accord for a Healthier World" focuses on five areas: infectious diseases, cancer, inflammation, rare diseases and women's health – where Pfizer currently holds 23 patents, including the likes of Comirnaty and Paxlovid, its Covid vaccine and oral treatment.

"This transformational commitment will increase access to Pfizer-patented medicines and vaccines available in the United States and the European Union to nearly 1.2bn people," Angela Hwang, group president of the Pfizer Biopharmaceuticals Group, told AFP.

Five countries: Rwanda, Ghana, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda have committed to joining, with a further 40 countries – 27 low-income and 18 lower-middle-income – eligible to sign bilateral agreements to participate.

"Pfizer's commitment sets a new standard, which we hope to see emulated by others," Rwanda's President Paul Kagame said.

But he added that "additional investments and strengthening of Africa's health systems and



pharmaceutical regulators" would also be needed.

Seven years behind

Developing countries experience 70 per cent of the world's disease burden but receive only 15

per cent of global health spending, leading to devastating outcomes.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, one child in 13 dies before their fifth birthday, compared to one in 199 in high-income countries.

Cancer-related mortality rates are also far higher in low and middle-income countries – causing more fatalities in Africa every year than malaria.

All this is set to a backdrop of limited access to the latest drugs.

Essential medicines and vaccines typically take four to seven years longer to reach the poorest countries, and supply chain issues and poorly resourced health systems make it difficult for patients to receive them once approved.

"The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the complexities of access to quality healthcare and the resulting inequities," said Hwang.

"We know there are a number of hurdles that countries have to overcome to gain access to our medicines. That is why we have initially selected five pilot countries to identify and come up with operational solutions and then share those learnings with the remaining countries."

Specifically, the focus will be on overcoming regulatory and procurement challenges in the

countries, while ensuring adequate levels of supply from Pfizer's side.

The "not-for-profit" price tag takes into account the cost to manufacture and transport of each product to an agreed upon port of entry, with Pfizer charging only manufacturing and minimum distribution costs.

If a country already has access to a product at a lower price tier, for example vaccines supplied by GAVI, a public-private global partnership, that lower price will be maintained. Hwang acknowledged that even an at-cost approach could be challenging for the most cash-strapped countries, and "this is why we have reached out to financial institutions to brief them on the Accord and ask them to help support country level financing."

AFP

Eshraqa's 'Tasees' and ASMED hold boot camp



In working towards the strategic goal of establishing the sultanate as a hub for entrepreneurship and innovation, Khimji Ramdas Eshraqa's Entrepreneurship Academy (EEA) - 'Tasees' recently organised a first-of-its-kind 'Business Finance' workshop for small-medium enterprise (SME) owners.

The workshop was part of a training and development boot camp series that has been planned in collaboration with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED), a press release said.

'Tasees's training programme is the first in a series of workshops organised for SMEs who hold a Riyada card, and have been in business for more than a year. Initiated to solve a major pain area for SME owners - especially finance - the programme received over 200 applications from across Oman were short-listed on multiple parameters. Around 15 SME owners were then chosen to join the training programme's classroom sessions held at EEA's premises in Azaiba, over three consecutive days.

Participants were chosen from various sectors including tourism, oil and gas supplies, manufacturing, healthcare, auto servicing, construction, and land surveying, to name a few. Some of the topics that were discussed during the workshop include the history of business, use of money, income statements, the health of a business, financial ratios, net present value, as well as internal rate of return.

Nailesh Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas Group, mentioned, "Entrepreneurship has been identified as an important driver of sustainable social and economic growth under Oman's Vision 2040. With small businesses fast becoming the backbone of local communities and an engine for the national economy, it has never been more important to ensure that entrepreneurs and small business owners have access to the right educational resources, insights, and solutions. 'Tasees' partnership with ASMED is aligned with this, and is the latest in our efforts to deliver on the needs of these critical businesses so they can manage and grow their ventures better."

Haitham Khalid al Qarni, assistant director for Empowerment and Development Directorate, ASMED, stated, "Organised in collaboration with ASMED, Tasees' training programmes are designed in keeping with the needs of the SME sector, and aim to enable business owners to enhance and develop their capabilities. Financial Management is one of the most important aspects of entrepreneurship that business owners must know in detail.

Bank Muscat continues Baituna Finance offers



Abdullah al Maashani

Bank Muscat has been providing various financing products to the largest number of customers in Oman, which are in line with their unique needs. Bank Muscat's Baituna home finance, in particular, has been helping large numbers of customers over the years in financing their dream home.

As part of its efforts to improve financial inclusion, the bank is currently offering an attractive interest rate on home finance till June 30 to select customer segments who are currently not availing any financing from the bank. New customers can also avail the attractive offer by applying for financing or transferring their existing financing to Bank Muscat, a press release said.

Omani nationals in government institutions, Tier 1 companies, select government and private sector entities and pensioners are eligible for this special offer which features low interest rates starting at 4.5 per cent. Customers can use Baituna financing up to RO500,000 and for a tenure up to 25 years to construct or purchase new homes or buy land for residential construction.

Speaking about Baituna, Abdullah Tamman al Maashani, general manager - Products, said, "Bank Muscat is very keen to provide products and benefits in line with the needs of its customers, and is continuously fine-tuning and developing them. We would also like to thank our customers for the strong confidence in our products and services and their valuable feedback, which is helping the bank develop and offer new products that best serve the needs customers."



Mazoon Electricity holds first aid workshop

To mitigate the effects of an accident or medical emergency, Mazoon Electricity Company, the leading electricity provider in Oman, organised a workshop on first aid for employees.

The workshop, held to train employees with first aid procedures, was conducted by legal nurse Ammar al Lawati, a press release said. The objective of equipping employees with first aid skills is to preserve life, aid recovery and manage the incident.

A spokesperson for Mazoon Electricity said, "First aid training helps employees become more conscious of safety in the workplace, leading to a reduced number of accidents and injuries. We also feel employees trained in first aid will understand the steps to take during an emergency. A quick response can reduce recovery time, leading to less time lost from injuries."

To provide employees with the practical skills and understanding required to provide first aid in the workplace is in compliance with Mazoon Electricity's HSE policy.

NBO showcases latest banking technology at COMEX 2022

National Bank of Oman (NBO) participates in this year's COMEX 2022 that was inaugurated by Dr Khamis bin Saif bin Hamoud al Jabri, chairman of the Oman Vision 2040, as Gold sponsors.

The Sultanate of Oman's official technology, communications, innovation and digital transformation exhibition, demonstrates the advances in financial technology and the bank's capabilities to drive Oman towards a digitally-enabled future, a press release said.

Held at Oman Convention & Exhibition Centre (OCEC), COMEX 2022 - the 31st annual staging of the event - includes a public exhibition, workshops and seminars, as well as deep dive specialist events throughout the year. In addition to exhibiting the measures the bank has implemented to fulfil the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, NBO is one of the main contributors to Banking & Finance (fintech) Technology Week, presented by the Central Bank of Oman.

Tariq Atiq, chief Retail & Digital Banking officer at NBO, said, "COMEX 2022 is the ideal platform for the bank to showcase the next step in the digital transformation of Oman's financial sector. Banking & Finance Technology Week gives us the opportunity to gain insight into global trends, understand customer needs and continue to build on our reputation as a first mover to adopt the latest technology and develop innovative products and services.



Oman Air commended for support to Oman pavilion in Dubai Expo

In a recent ceremony held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, was commended for extending its support to the Oman Pavilion national initiative throughout Expo 2020 Dubai by H E Qais Mohamed al Yousef, Oman Minister of Commerce and Industry and Investment Promotion.

On hand to receive an official certificate of appreciation was Dr Khalid al Balushi, senior manager Government Affairs at Oman Air, a press release said.

Oman Air's longstanding commitment to national projects underscores the airline's vital role in the sultanate's broader tourism strategy and its ongoing participation in the realisation of Oman Vision 2040 objectives as a key enabler of travel into the country—linking Oman to important source tourist markets regionally and internationally.



The Oman pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai was an exceptional opportunity to showcase the sultanate's deep connection to

frankincense while promoting the country's benefits as a truly distinct travel destination in the Middle East. As national carrier, Oman Air, along with several other public and private institutions, was active at the Oman pavilion to support projects and community programs.

"The link between aviation and tourism development is significant and the role of airlines as enablers in the broader tourism ecosystem is especially significant given the challenges facing post-pandemic travel," said Eng Abdulaziz al Raisi, CEO, Oman Air. "As the national carrier of the Sultanate of Oman, our readiness to support important tourism and country branding projects is absolute, and our presence throughout Expo 2020 Dubai was a national initiative we were delighted to take part in, and one which contributes to Oman's economic development in travel-related sectors."

ROHM announces exciting acrobatic 'Play' on May 26



The Royal Opera House Muscat announced the upcoming production *Play*, a startling and inspiring show perfect for audiences of all ages.

This dynamic presentation is a fitting event with which to close the 2022 Royal Opera House Muscat season. The season has been defined by excellence in a range of genres, open to all audiences and inviting everyone to enjoy the opera house, a press release said.

Play takes the art of elite sport and creates a mesmerising show exploring themes of competition, spectating, emotional connections and the fantastical in a production which is both sophisticated and personal.

The performance will take place at ROHM on May 26 or 27 at 7.30pm while there will be a matinee performance at 4pm on May 28.

Contract awarded for roads in Duqm commercial district

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones assigned a project to construct and improve internal roads of the commercial district in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm to Al Rawas and Al Hashemi Contracting Company.

The project, comprising 13km of roads, serves the commercial district through 10 connections, distributed in three sides of the district and connected to the road of the rock garden district, Sayy Road from the south, and National Road 32 from the west. The commercial district is located 9km southwest of Duqm Port and 13km north of Duqm Airport, a press release said.

Engineer Yahya bin Khamis al Zadjali, in charge of managing the operations of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, said, "The construction of internal roads project for the commercial district in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm is one of the components of the road network within the master plan for the development of the zone, which represents the dynamic urban development strategy of the zone project until 2030. It complements the plans of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to provide an integrated road network & create a modern urban environment that attracts investment and stimulates commercial



movement in the zone."

As to the components of the project, Eng Yahya added, "The project consists of internal roads

in the commercial district that include 4km dual carriageways, in addition to 9km single carriageways with one lane and a num-

ber of traffic lights which will be linked with Road 32 and the roads adjacent to the commercial district through a number of

exits for easier traffic.

The project also includes the implementation of a sewage network to collect and dispose of liquid waste from the existing buildings in the commercial district, in addition to the pavement of parking spaces for vehicles in the plan, a sidewalk, and a special path for bicycles to serve the residents in the commercial district and the neighbouring neighbourhoods. It also includes a number of facilities that meet the direction of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm of providing infrastructure to make the commercial district a model neighbourhood for smart cities."



Financial inclusion features at World Economic Forum

Financial inclusion remains the first step towards personal and business wellbeing and is a prerequisite to meet several goals under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Despite this, over half the world is yet to gain equitable access to finance and this remains one of the biggest challenges facing the world today.

The World Economic Forum, which is driving forward the agenda of stakeholder capitalism, has consistently focused on financial inclusion and the role it plays in helping communities thrive.

This all-important topic was a subject of discussion on the second day of the ongoing WEF at Davos, with several global stakeholders convening to discuss this issue, a press release said.

HM Queen Máxima of the Netherlands opened the session raising a question on the need for public and private stakeholders

to fully understand the purpose of financial inclusion and evaluate how it can result in better financial health of an individual.

Karabo Morule of Capital Art, South Africa, brought up the subject of financial literacy as a key element of driving better use of access to finance. Her call for financial literacy finds relevance in various research studies which show a significant correlation between financial inclusion and financial health.

Morule's thoughts on connecting the underprivileged with financial products was echoed by Adeeb, whose company, Lulu Financial Holdings, is involved in the cross-border remittances and micro-loans segment. With over 1.1 billion people worldwide locked out of formal financial channels due to lack of a verifiable identity, Adeeb took the examples of India's Aadhar scheme and UAE's Wage Protection Scheme to stress better traceability of consumer spending.



Volkswagen's Golf R arrives in the Middle East

Volkswagen's ultimate performer has arrived in the Middle East. The all-new Golf R delivers sheer power with sports-tuned suspension and 4MOTION all-wheel drive which ensures the driver both control and comfort.

With a robust 2ltr 320 HP TSI petrol engine, the all-new Golf R releases power exactly when and where you need it. The all-new Golf R is not only an elite member of the model series but also the star of the R-brand. The car is available for pre-booking now with a starting price of US\$49,709 (excluding VAT), a

press release said.

The all-new Golf R is an unmistakable icon fully loaded with performance features. Along with an exclusive design and equipment, this highly dynamic car represents its class's gold standard of technology. In addition, the all-new Golf R is the first Golf to be launched with a new all-wheel drive system: 4MOTION with R-Performance Torque Vectoring and selective wheel torque control on the rear axle.

This innovative drive significantly increases the agility of the

new Golf R, particularly when cornering. As a result, drivers will get precise and neutral handling, optimum traction characteristics and exceptional agility. In other words: maximum driving pleasure.

Distinctive exterior features of the new Golf R model include matt chrome mirrors and R logo floor projection when the car door is opened and closed. The Golf R ride height is 20mm lower than the standard Golf. Three colour options include Lapiz Blue Metallic (a signature colour for R), Pure White or Deep Black.

Omantel, PDO, Al Mouj receive Customer Experience awards



PDO Oman receiving the award

Organisations that have effectively invested in the digitisation of their CX journey and made a mark to that effect were recognised at the Customer Experience Live and Intelligent Automation Show Middle East. The Omani organisations fetching top honours for their exemplary CX, AI and digital performances included Omantel, Petroleum Development Oman and Al Mouj Muscat.

Winning two prestigious awards namely Best Service Delivery Telecom and Best Intelli-

gent Automation Project in Telecom, Talal Said al Mamari, CEO, Omantel, said, "As far as automation is concerned, delivering high value to our customers through operational excellence is vital to us. Some of the opportunities lie in accelerated digitisation of products and services as we transition towards the future."

Similarly, bagging the Best Intelligent Automation Project in Oil and Gas and Intelligent Automation Leader of the Year Oil and Gas awards, Saud Zakwani,



Ayusha Tyagi presenting the award to the Omantel team

Head of Data Science, Petroleum Development Oman, said, "With hyper-automation and continuous improvement a key priority, intelligent automation is the common winning strategy being leveraged by organisations to transform processes and deliver bottom line impacts. At PDO, we are combining traditional automation methods with intellectual assets and data science to achieve agility and be a dynamic organisation."

Investments in CX technology are all set to soar as 74% organ-

isations in the Middle East plan to invest more than 200,000 US\$ in 2022, revealed the Intelligence Report launched on the sidelines of the Customer Experience Live and Intelligent Automation Shows Middle East held in Dubai over two days that concluded on 25th May. Organised by Customer Experience Live, a unique digital platform, the event saw over 600 senior leaders gather and share insights on how they transformed CX and automation into a growth lever for their organisations.

Khimji Ramdas Group fetes long-serving employees

Khimji Ramdas Group recently felicitated 25 of its employees for completing 25 years of service.

A total of 397 awardees completed a 25-year tenure between 2010 and 2021. In the 12th edition in 2022, 26 more employees were added to the list, out of which 18 were Omani nationals. As a mark of respect, 25g of gold were given to the employees for their ongoing contribution to the company.

Pankaj Khimji, director of Khimji Ramdas Group, said, "One of the core pillars of Khimji Ramdas is 'care', and that begins



with our employees. We have achieved great milestones and the credit, undoubtedly, goes to the unfaltering dedication, professionalism, and responsibility that our employees have demonstrated.

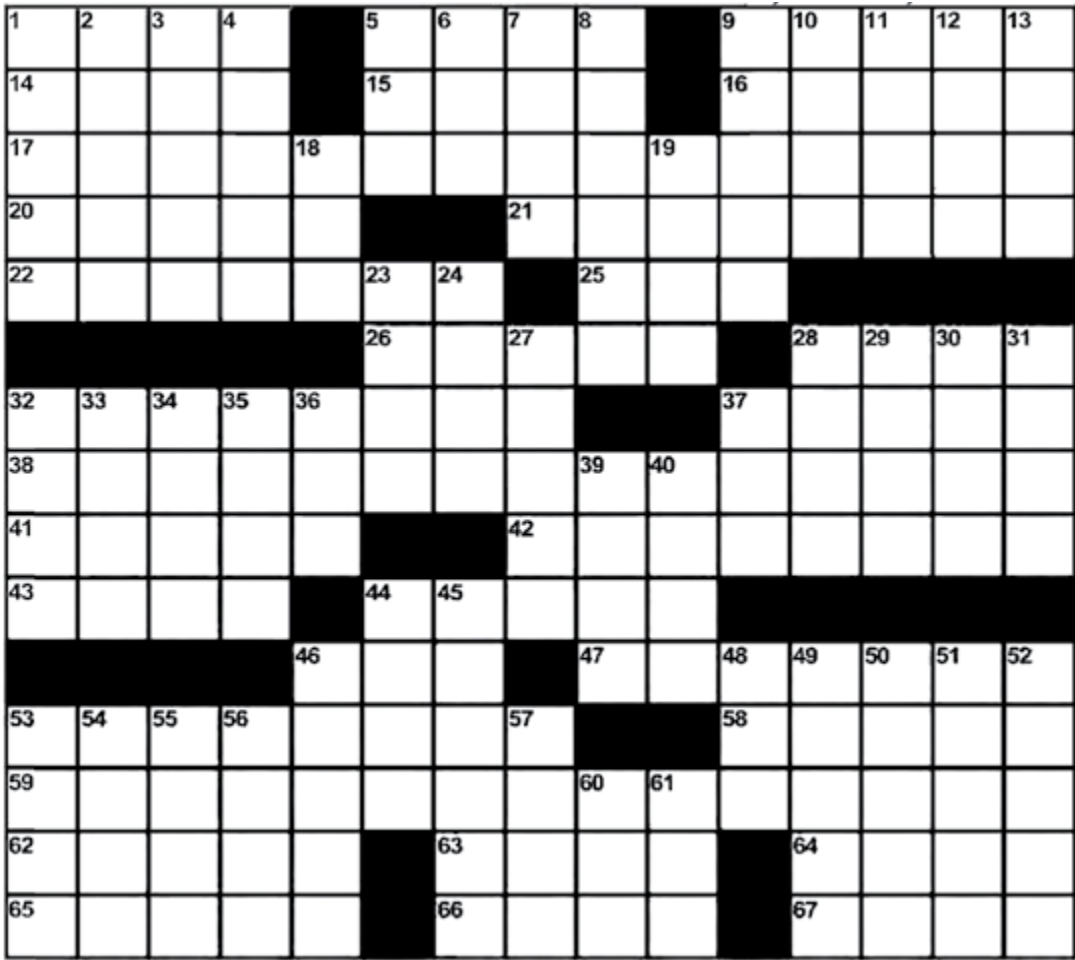
The inherent values of trust, commitment, and learning have been the cornerstone of our success and these beliefs have formed the base of a strong and long-running organisation. While we congratulate all the awardees at the event, we also thank them for their years of loyalty, hard work, and faith in the company."

Nailesh Khimji, director, Khimji Ramdas Group, added, "Our employees are the ambassadors of our organisation and play a quintessential role in its success story.

On behalf of the entire board of directors, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who has helped create the strong brand identity of Khimji Ramdas.

These contributions are of paramount importance to the continued growth of the organisation and are a mark of passion, perseverance, and dedication."

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Standard
 - 5) Kind of thermometer
 - 9) Comedian Silverman
 - 14) Dueling sword
 - 15) Off-limits double negative
 - 16) "All My Children" vixen
 - 17) Count calories
 - 20) Instant
 - 21) When most people work
 - 22) Clambake item
 - 25) Part ofTGIF
 - 26) Sleeveless garments
 - 28) Dance bit
 - 32) Potent pepper
 - 37) Omit a vowel in speech
 - 38) Microwave feature
 - 41) Alpaca relative
 - 42) Military equipment
 - 43) Harp's old cousin
 - 44) Antique shop item
 - 46) Dadaist pioneer
 - 47) Type of horse bit
 - 53) City in Florida
 - 58) Farm machine
- 59) Reason for an NBA video review
 - 62) Blazing
 - 63) Brown bag tippler, in stereotypes
 - 64) Endings for East or West
 - 65) Used a 58-Across
 - 66) Traditional Indian bread
 - 67) "Let it stand" in editorial circles

DOWN

 - 1) Small amphibians
 - 2) Eyeball-twisting drawings
 - 3) Catch up with again
 - 4) Place of pilgrimage
 - 5) Lennon's bride
 - 6) First name in the "Happy Days" cast
 - 7) From the beginning
 - 8) Become unglued
 - 9) Hunts
 - 10) Extremely dry, as land
 - 11) Capital of Latvia
 - 12) In need of a massage
 - 13) Lids
- 18) Skirt's edge
 - 19) Dampens
 - 23) "Be it_ so humble ..."
 - 24) You'll get a deal there
 - 27) Navigational aid
 - 28) Like some margins or chances
 - 29) It marches on
 - 30) First habitat
 - 31) Bold and sassy
 - 32) Become cohesive
 - 33) Comrade in arms
 - 34) Type of jet
 - 35) As high as one can get
 - 36) Bake sale org.
 - 37) Flight guess (abbr.)
 - 39) State flower of Tennesseee
 - 40) "Follow me!"
 - 44) Gator's cousin
 - 45) Like Billy Joel's girl
 - 46) Posed a question
 - 48) Early school lesson
 - 49) Fearsome threesome of destiny
 - 50) Bat an eye toward?
 - 51) Africa's Sierra_
- 52) Artist Max
 - 53) Striker's enemy
 - 54)_ Romeo (sports car)
 - 55) Muddy up
 - 56) Farmland measure
 - 57) Highlight for opera goers
 - 60) Genetic material
 - 61) Long, long time
- NOTE PAD**
-

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Enough with being good. You've been there, done that, and been awarded the T-shirt. Now, after stashing it in the bottom of your dresser drawer for who knows how long, you've just ironed it and put it up for sale online. Needless to say, you're ready for a change.

The Universe is feeling just as restless, however, so you don't need to be worried about monotony. Your unconventional mood will keep you far from bored.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

When it comes to relationships, you're not up for anything even remotely resembling routine. This doesn't (necessarily) mean that you'll try to entice a current partner to go bungee jumping, although you might be a bit more open with someone new if you're single, but it certainly does mean that you're in the mood to try something different.

The good news is that you won't be at all afraid to mention this to the person you're with and you'll have an extremely receptive audience.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21

For the most part, you're pleased, happy, and extremely proud of yourself when you say or do something that shocks and amazes the crowds. In fact, the more the merrier.

The Universe is also urging you to let fly with whatever crosses your mind, no matter where you are or who you happen to be with. For some reason, though, you're just a tad worried. What's up with that? Relax and lose the worry.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

Stop worrying (even though it's one of the things you're best at). You've followed all the rules and done things right, even in the eyes of those higher-ups who were looking to find fault with you. In short, you've been tested and found to be right on top of your game. So, if one of the powers that be seems to be acting oddly, force yourself to relax. Who knows what's going on in their world?

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

You're not losing your mind. You're right to feel a bit worried about exactly what might come of a current situation, especially because things have been going so darned well. But you don't need to take that worry any further. The heavens have arranged for some very deep emotions to touch both your hearts. If your current situation is totally unlike anything you've experienced before, relax. It's going to last.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Just because you aren't in love with your job doesn't mean that you're in a career crisis! It's time to stop, look at your employment situation realistically, and ask yourself how you would like to change it. Only then can you begin making things better. It's important that you not get too emotional about your situation.

You're in danger of becoming overwhelmed and feeling like there's no answer. But there is always an answer.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

If you can imagine it, you can have it. That's what you've always been told, what you've always believed, and now what you're about to prove. As if your already substantial intellectual prowess wasn't enough to get you started, the heavens are on your side. You'll wake up this morning with the vivid memory of a dream, the kind that will stay with you all day and constantly make you wonder "what if."

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Taking the lead in a confusing situation will win you big points today, so don't shy away from giving out orders or delegating tasks in a group. Believe it or not, if you just speak your mind with enough conviction, others will agree with you! The tone of your voice will command respect and earn their cooperation.

You're emerging as a person to watch, and you should use your increasingly high profile to your advantage. Work it!

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Right about now and for the next couple of days you really should be wearing a warning label, because you'll be anything but objective, unemotional, and detached, qualities your sign is usually famous for. Go ahead and let your feelings go. But if you want to be just a tad considerate of your loved ones, try to let them know that you won't be quite yourself before you reach for the tissues and they reach for the phone to dial 911.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You might be privately worrying that the creative roll you're on is about to come to an end, but that's just not the case. The Universe will give you the right to ask for some privacy when it comes to spending time alone with your inspiration. And since you're feeling so darned startling and unpredictable, one never knows what you might be thinking of taking on as a project or how easily you'll find it to express yourself.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Something very intriguing is going on with one of your friends, and you need to get to the bottom of it today. For clues, look at old emails or text messages you've received from this person. You might be quite surprised by what you find. Once you get a better handle on what's really going on, you'll be able to see the big picture and how you fit into it, if you want to. It might take time to decide whether you want to get involved, so don't rush.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

You're famous for being the very soul of discretion. In fact, when it comes to secrets, let's just say that they're your specialty. So when a particularly delicious mystery comes along, you can definitely be counted upon to keep it under wraps, even if you do walk around with a rather smug look on your face for an afternoon. That's the case now. Still, you should try your very best to be discreet. No use blowing your cover, right?

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these animal films was released last?

A. Babe

B. Jaws

C. Lassie Come Home

D. Lady and the Tramp

02. What was the venue for the 2021 Ryder Cup?

A. Whistling Straits, Wisconsin, US

B. Singing Sands, Islay, UK

C. Thunderbird, California, US

D. The Belfry, Warwickshire, UK

03. When Hugo Chávez entered the Venezuelan Military Academy in 1971 at the age of 17, what was he aiming to be?

A. A fire fighter

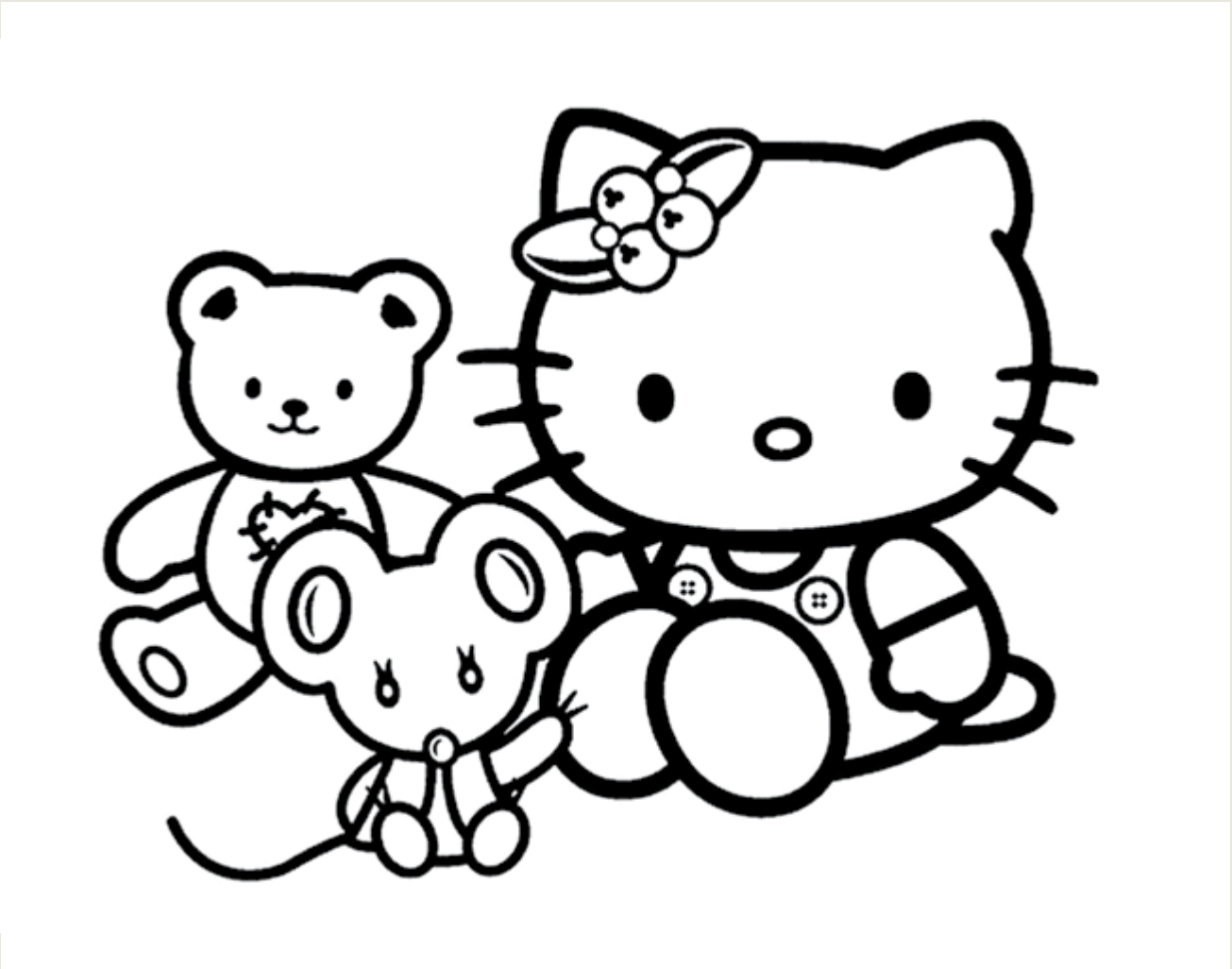
B. A naval engineer

C. A professional baseball player

D. An aviator

Answers: 1.A 2.A 3.C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

S	Z	C	N
T	T	I	L
A	S	T	R
A	P	I	E

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

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

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

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

Gunman kills 19 kids, 2 teachers at Texas school

The attack in Uvalde, about an hour from Mexican border, was the deadliest US school shooting in years

Uvalde, US - A teenage gunman killed at least 19 young children and two teachers at an elementary school in Texas on Tuesday, prompting a furious President Joe Biden to denounce the US gun lobby and vow to end the nation's cycle of mass shootings.

The attack in Uvalde - a small community about an hour from the Mexican border - was the deadliest US school shooting in years, and the latest in a spree of bloody gun violence across America. "It's time to turn this pain into action for every parent, for every citizen of this country," Biden said, his voice heavy with emotion.

"It's time for those who obstruct or delay or block common-sense gun laws - we need to let you know that we will not forget," he said. "As a nation, we have to ask when in God's name are we going to stand up to the gun lobby? When in God's name will we do what we all know in our gut needs to be done?"

Texas Governor Greg Abbott named the suspect as Salvador Ramos, an 18-year-old local resident and a US citizen.

"He shot and killed, horrifically and incomprehensibly," Abbott said.

Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) officials told CNN the gunman was believed to have shot his grandmother before heading to Robb Elementary School around noon where he abandoned his vehicle and entered with a handgun and a rifle, wearing body armour.



Families hug outside the Willie de Leon Civic Center where grief counseling was being offered in Uvalde, Texas, on Tuesday (AFP)

Over a dozen children wounded

The gunman was killed by responding officers, the officials said, adding later two teachers also died in the attack.

"Right now there's 19 children that were killed by this evil gunman, as well as two teachers from this school," DPS spokesman Lieutenant Chris Olivarez told NBC News.

Fourth-grade teacher Eva Mireles was shot and killed while trying to protect her students, her aunt Lydia Martinez Delgado told the *New York Times*.

"I'm furious that these shoot-

ings continue, these children are innocent, rifles should not be easily available to all," she said in a separate statement to US media. More than a dozen children were also wounded in the attack at the school, which teaches more than 500 students aged around seven to 10 years old, mostly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged.

Uvalde Memorial Hospital said on Facebook it had received 13 children while University Health hospital in San Antonio said on Twitter it had received a 66-year-old woman and a 10-year-old girl, both in critical con-

dition, and two other girls aged nine and 10. At least one Border Patrol agent responding to the incident was wounded in an exchange of gunfire with the shooter, Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman Marsha Espinosa tweeted.

It was the deadliest such incident since the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut, in which 20 children and six staff were killed.

'Happens nowhere else'

Ted Cruz, a pro-gun rights Republican senator from Texas,

tweeted that he and his wife were 'lifting up in prayer the children and families in the horrific shooting in Uvalde'.

But Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut, where the Sandy Hook shooting took place, made an impassioned appeal for concrete action to prevent further violence. "This isn't inevitable, these kids weren't unlucky. This only happens in this country and nowhere else. Nowhere else do little kids go to school thinking that they might be shot that day," Murphy said on the Senate floor in Washington.

AFP

Two decades of deadly gun violence in US schools

Washington, US - Here are America's deadliest classroom gun massacres in the last two decades:

Columbine High School (1999)

Two teenagers from Columbine, Colorado, armed with an assortment of weapons and home-made bombs, went on a rampage at their local high school. Twelve students and a teacher were killed during the April 20 massacre. Another 24 people were wounded.

Columbine, whose name has become synonymous with school shootings, is one of the first - and still among the deadliest - such shootings in the United States

Virginia Tech (2007)

A South Korean student at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute opened fire on the Blacksburg, Virginia, campus, killing 32 students and professors before committing suicide. Thirty-three people were wounded.

Sandy Hook Elementary School (2012)

A 20-year-old man with a history of mental health issues killed his mother in Newtown,

Connecticut, on December 14 before blasting his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School. Twenty children, aged six and seven, were shot dead, as well as six adults. The shooter committed suicide.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2018)

On February 14, a 19-year-old former student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who was expelled for disciplinary reasons returned to the Parkland, Florida, school and opened fire. He killed 14 students and three adult staff.

Stoneman Douglas students have become crusaders against gun violence under the banner 'March for Our Lives', lobbying for tougher gun control laws and organising protests and rallies.

Santa Fe High School (2018)

Ten people, including eight students, were killed when a 17-year-old student armed with a shotgun and a revolver opened fire on his classmates in rural Santa Fe, Texas. Classes had just started on the morning of May 18 when the shooting began.

AFP



A Palestinian child cries during the funeral of Ghaith Yamin, who was killed in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus, on Wednesday (AFP)

Palestinian teen killed by Israeli forces in West Bank: Ministry

Jerusalem - A Palestinian teenager was shot dead by Israeli soldiers in clashes that erupted during a Jewish pilgrimage to the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said on Wednesday.

The ministry identified the youngster as Ghaith Yamin, 16, who died of a head wound 'after being shot by Israeli forces' during clashes near Joseph's Tomb, outside the northern city of Nablus.

The Israeli army, which provides security for monthly pilgrimages to the site, said: "Hundreds of Palestinians took part in a violent riot as Jewish worshippers entered Joseph's Tomb, throwing stones and firebombs at the forces.

"Soldiers responded with fire at a suspect throwing a firebomb. A hit was identified," it said in a statement. "In addition, gunshots were heard in the area."

The Islamic Jihad group issued a statement praising the 'ambush' its fighters prepared for Israeli forces securing the pilgrimage, saying there was an

exchange of fire between the two sides.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said its medics treated four people wounded by rubber bullets and 36 who inhaled tear gas, as well as one person who fell during the clashes.

Tensions have been high in the West Bank for the past three months amid a wave of attacks on Israelis that led to arrests and clashes.

Nineteen people, mostly civilians - including 18 inside Israel and a Jewish West Bank settler - have been killed in attacks by Palestinians and Israeli Arabs since late March.

Israeli security forces have responded with raids inside Israel and the West Bank, particularly in the flashpoint northern district of Jenin.

Three Israeli Arab attackers and a police commando have died.

Thirty-four Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, including a journalist who was covering a raid in Jenin and bystanders.

AFP

'Warming Israel ties will help Palestinians'

Jerusalem - Turkey's diplomatic thaw with Israel will help the Palestinians, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday, in the first trip to Israel by Ankara's top diplomat in 15 years.

Cavusoglu, who met Palestinian officials in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, was in Jerusalem as Turkey and Israel seek to mend ties following a breakdown that began during an Israeli military operation in Gaza in 2008.

Cavusoglu and his Israeli counterpart Yair Lapid stressed that economic ties had continued to grow despite years of acrimony between the two countries. "We won't pretend that our relationship has not seen its ups and downs," Lapid said.

"Even in times of political tension, economic cooperation between our countries has been constantly on the rise," Cavusoglu noted that Turkey



Turkish FM Mevlut Cavusoglu lays a wreath by the eternal flame, at the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem Centre in Jerusalem on Wednesday (AFP)

was a top 10 trading partner for Israel and a major destination for Israeli tourists, voicing hope that deepening ties could yield benefits for Palestinians.

"We believe that normalisation of our ties will have a positive impact on peaceful resolution of the conflict," he said.

Cavusoglu claimed that dialogue between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Israeli counterpart Isaac Herzog helped 'maintain calm' during a tense period in Jerusalem this year that saw widespread clashes as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish passover holiday overlapped.

Marcos Jr proclaimed next Philippine president

Manila, Philippines - Ferdinand Marcos Jr was on Wednesday proclaimed the next Philippine president after a landslide win in elections that rights groups and religious leaders fear could weaken the corruption-prone country's fragile democracy.

Marcos, who formally takes office next month, secured more than 31.6mn votes, or 58.8 per cent of the total, according to a final tally released by parliament.

He was the first presidential candidate to win an outright majority since his dictator father, who presided over widespread graft and human rights abuses, was ousted by a popular revolt in 1986.

In the Philippines, the winner only has to get more votes than anyone else.

"I hereby proclaim Ferdinand Bongbong Romualdez Marcos



Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (centre) is being proclaimed as duly-elected president at the House of Representatives in Quezon City on Wednesday (AFP)

Jr as the duly elected president of the Republic of the Philippines," House of Representatives Speaker Lord Allan Velasco said, after legislators approved a report declaring Marcos the winner.

Marcos's victory followed re-

lentless online whitewashing of his family's past, and alliances with rival political dynasties who have the means to influence voters in their regions.

His main rival Leni Robredo finished well behind in second place with just over 15mn votes.

A joint session of the House of Representatives and Senate formally ratified the results and proclaimed Marcos the Philippines' 17th president. He will be inaugurated on June 30.

His running mate Sara Duterte, the daughter of the outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, was also proclaimed the winner of the vice presidential race.

Wearing a traditional formal shirt, Marcos greeted Sara Duterte with a hug as she arrived at a holding room inside the parliament building.

Former first lady Imelda Marcos, 92, who has been the driving force behind the family's comeback from exile to the peak of power, was pushed in a wheelchair into the chamber where she held a seat as recently as 2019.

Joining her was the new first

lady, Louise Araneta-Marcos, along with other relatives and supporters.

'Prelude of things to come?'

Hours earlier and several kilometres away, hundreds of riot police and protesters opposing the proclamations clashed outside the Commission on Human Rights. Water cannon was sprayed on the crowd of activists. Leftist groups reported at least 10 people wounded.

"Is the violent dispersal today a prelude of things to come under a Marcos-Duterte administration - where exercising our basic rights and freedoms are met with brazen State violence?" Cristina Palabay, secretary general of Karapatan human rights group, asked in a statement.

AFP

Xi speaks with UN rights chief as Xinjiang row rages

Beijing, China - Chinese President Xi Jinping held a video call with UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet on Wednesday, as she visits Xinjiang during a mission overshadowed by fresh allegations of Uyghur abuses and fears she is being used as a public relations tool.

China's Communist Party is accused of detaining over one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the far-western region as part of a years-long crackdown the United States and lawmakers in other Western countries have labelled a 'genocide'. As part of a long-awaited visit, Bachelet is expected to visit the cities of Urumqi and Kashgar on a six-day tour that has been dogged by concerns from Western officials, diplomats and rights groups that the Communist Party will attempt to use it to whitewash abuses.

China vehemently denies the allegations, calling them the 'lie of the century'.

The United States has reiterated its view that Bachelet's visit was a mistake after the release of thousands of leaked documents and photographs from inside the system of mass incarceration this week.

And activists have voiced concern that Beijing will prevent Bachelet from conducting a thorough probe into alleged rights abuses and instead give her a stage-managed tour.

But Xi defended his country's human rights progress during the video call, according to a readout



UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet (left) attending a virtual meeting with China's President Xi Jinping, in Guangzhou on Wednesday (AFP)

from state broadcaster CCTV, which did not say whether Xinjiang was mentioned by either side. "Human rights issues should also not be politicised, instrumentalised, or treated with double standards," Xi said according to CCTV, adding that China had 'a human rights development path that... suits its national conditions'.

CCTV reported Xi as telling Bachelet there was no 'ideal nation' on human rights.

He added that there was 'no need for a 'teacher' who is bossy towards other countries' - an ap-

parent reference to recent public criticisms of the trip by US and British officials.

According to the CCTV readout, Bachelet said the UN Human Rights Office was 'willing to strengthen cooperation with the Chinese side'.

She was also reported to have said: "I admire China's efforts and achievements in eradicating poverty, protecting human rights, and realising economic and social development."

Bachelet's spokesperson did not confirm the Chinese state media comments to AFP, but

said the high commissioner told Xi she hoped her office could 'accompany efforts to strengthen the promotion and protection of human rights, justice and the rule of law for all without exception'.

Bachelet later tweeted that the meetings with Xi and other officials 'have been valuable to discuss directly human rights issues & concerns in China & global'.

Violent methods

In addition to mass detentions, Chinese authorities have waged a campaign of forced labour, co-

erced sterilisation and the destruction of Uyghur cultural heritage in Xinjiang, researchers and campaigners say.

As Bachelet started the trip, a leak of thousands of photos and official documents from Xinjiang claimed to shed new light on the violent methods used to enforce mass internment in the region.

Reported by a consortium of media, including the BBC and Le Monde, the Xinjiang Police Files showed top leaders in Beijing including Xi calling for a forceful crackdown.

AFP



South Korea firing a Hyunmu-2 missile during a live-fire exercise aimed to counter North Korea's missile test on Wednesday (AFP)

North Korea fires 'ICBM' hours after Biden leaves Asia

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea fired a volley of missiles on Wednesday, including possibly its largest intercontinental ballistic missile, just hours after US President Joe Biden left Asia after a trip overshadowed by Pyongyang's sabre-rattling.

North Korea has also been conducting 'operational tests' of a nuclear detonation device, Kim Tae-hyo, Seoul's first deputy director of the National Security Office, said, adding a test could come 'imminently'.

His warning adds to the drumbeat of predictions from US and South Korean officials, who have been saying for weeks that Kim Jong Un's regime is close to conducting its seventh nuclear test.

Three missiles, including one ICBM, were fired from the Sunan area in Pyongyang, Seoul said - one of nearly 20 weapons tests by North Korea so far this year - prompting joint US-South Korea live fire missile drills in response.

Pyongyang's missile launches are 'an illegal act in direct violation of UN Security Council resolutions', Seoul's government said after a National Security Council meeting chaired by President Yoon Suk-yeol.

The United States called for Pyongyang to 'engage in sustained and substantive dialogue', a state department spokesman said. The three early morning ballistic missile launches came within an hour of each other, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

"The first ballistic missile (suspected ICBM) had a range of around 360km and an altitude of around 540km," Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement. This could have been North Korea's largest ICBM, the Hwasong-17, Kim Tae-hyo said later.

The second ballistic missile 'disappeared at an altitude of

20km' and the third - a suspected short-range ballistic missile - travelled around 760km at an altitude of around 60km.

Response to Biden

The Wednesday launches are the latest in a blitz of sanctions-busting weapons tests by Pyongyang this year, including test-firing intercontinental ballistic missiles at full range for the first time since 2017.

The latest apparent test came just days after Biden left South Korea on Sunday.

The tests were 'clearly timed for President Biden's return after his visit to South Korea and Japan', Park Won-gon, a professor at Ewha University said, adding that Biden hadn't even touched down in the US.

During Biden's visit, South Korea and the US announced they would look at ramping up joint military exercises, which had been scaled back for COVID and during a bout of failed diplomacy with the North.

They also discussed deploying more US tactical assets to the peninsula - measures that would likely enrage Pyongyang, which views the drills as rehearsals for invasion. "North Korea's objections against these announcements were expressed through the missile launches," Park said.

On his last day in Seoul, Biden told reporters he had only a short message for Kim: "Hello. Period."

"Pyongyang appears to have launched different types of missiles, probably in the process of improving related military capabilities," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul. "But this also looks like a statement that the Kim regime has many different ways of striking an adversary."

Kim has recently doubled down on his programme of military modernisation.

AFP

Crisis-hit Sri Lanka appoints PM to helm finance ministry

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was on Wednesday given the additional responsibility of running the finance ministry as the island nation grapples with its worst-ever economic crisis.

The South Asian island nation has suffered months of dire shortages and anti-government protests, with importers unable to finance vital food, fuel and medicines. Wickremesinghe, 73, was sworn in as finance minister after two weeks of wrangling among coalition partners for the crucial position ahead of bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund.

His appointment was delayed



President Rajapaksa (right) swears-in PM Ranil Wickremesinghe (left) as the new Finance Minister, in Colombo on Wednesday (AFP)

by a dispute between Wickremesinghe and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party of President Gotabaya Ra-

japaksa over who would take the post.

"The president's party had wanted the finance portfolio, but

the PM insisted he wanted it if he is to lead the country out of the economic chaos," a top politician involved in the negotiations told AFP, on condition of anonymity.

Wickremesinghe is expected to soon unveil a revised budget promising relief for poorer Sri Lankans suffering through record inflation and spiralling food prices. Staff-level talks with the IMF concluded on Tuesday, but it is expected to take six more months for the Washington-based lender to agree on a bailout package, central bank officials said.

Sri Lanka has already defaulted on its US\$51bn foreign debt and appointed international consultants on Tuesday to help

restructure its international sovereign bonds and other bilateral loans.

The government has effectively ended subsidies on fuel by raising prices to a record high on Tuesday, and Wickremesinghe's administration is expected to hike electricity and water tariffs to raise much-needed revenue.

Petrol and diesel both remain in short supply and motorists are forced to queue, sometimes for days, to fill up.

The government this week announced it was seeking a fresh US\$500mn loan from India to purchase fuel, in addition to two credit lines worth US\$700mn already provided by New Delhi.

AFP

Suu Kyi's relatives move UN against her detention

Geneva, Switzerland - Relatives of Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Wednesday filed a complaint before a UN watchdog against her detention following a military coup last year, their lawyers said.

Since a coup ousted her government in February 2021, plunging Myanmar into upheaval, the 76-year-old Nobel peace prize laureate has been in military custody and faces a raft of charges that could jail her for more than 150 years.

Describing the situation as a 'judicial kidnapping', human rights lawyers Francois Zimeray and Jessica Finelle said they had filed a complaint on behalf of her relatives with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

"Her arrest was illegal, her detention is devoid of any legal basis, and her different

trials violate the basic rules governing any legal procedure," reads the complaint, seen by AFP. "This is a kidnapping disguised as a trial, she is held incommunicado in defiance of all justice and resists with strength an unacceptable psychological torture."

"This is a tragic regression for Myanmar. Through the figure of Aung Sang Suu Kyi, the entire Burmese people is silenced, and its democratic aspirations are crushed."

After facing a string of 'far-cical charges', Suu Kyi has so far been sentenced to a total of 11 years in prison, but faces the prospect of more than 100 more years on 17 different charges, the lawyers said. Under a previous junta regime, Suu Kyi spent long spells under house arrest in her family's lakeside mansion in Yangon.

AFP

At least 22 killed in latest police raid on Rio favela

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - An anti-crime operation in a Rio de Janeiro slum left at least 22 people dead on Tuesday, officials said, a year after the bloodiest-ever favela raid in the city's history.

A further seven people were hospitalised, according to health officials, while police said one of the victims was a female bystander felled by a stray bullet.

Military police said they came under gunfire as they approached the northern Rio slum of Vila Cruzeiro in the early morning hours with the mission of locating and arresting 'criminal leaders'.

The toll doubled from the initially reported 11 deaths as more bodies were uncovered in the aftermath. Police said at least 11 of the dead were 'suspects'.

At least 19 schools in the area closed because of the gunfire, residents said. Police helicopters were also struck by bullets during the deadly exchange.

Police often carry out raids in



A woman holds the hands of a victim arriving on a truck at the Getulio Vargas Hospital, after a police operation at a favela, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Tuesday (AFP)

Rio's teeming slums in a bid to fight drug trafficking. This time, they said they were looking for gang leaders from other parts of Brazil hiding out in Vila Cruzeiro.

"It was an operation planned for weeks, but we identified criminal movements during the

night and decided to intervene," said team member Colonel Luiz Henrique Marinho Pires. He said the suspects were readying to move to another favela.

This was the deadliest police raid since 28 people died a year ago in a favela called Jacarezinho

- the largest such toll in the city's history. Vila Cruzeiro, a favela crowded onto a hillside not far from Rio de Janeiro's international airport, was also the scene of a violent confrontation in February, when police killed eight people.

Tuesday's pre-dawn raid targeted the Comando Vermelho, or Red Command, one of Brazil's most powerful crime gangs 'responsible for more than 80 per cent of the shootings in Rio', a police spokesman told TV Globo. Officers seized 13 assault rifles, four pistols, 20 motorcycles and 10 cars in the raid.

No arrests were reported.

The operation was criticised in some quarters for its use of overwhelming force and the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office announced the opening of an investigation into police conduct.

"Another massacre. Schools closed, thousands of people terrorised," tweeted left-wing city councilman Tarcisio Motta.

"The policy of extermination runs its course in Rio."

Residents and activists have often denounced official abuse during such anti-crime operations, including extrajudicial killings of suspects, which they say often goes unpunished.

AFP

Ukraine's Zelensky calls for Western unity

Russian invasion has entered its fourth month and Moscow's troops have advanced in eastern Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky blasted the West for lacking unity on Wednesday, as the Russian invasion entered its fourth month and Moscow's troops advanced in eastern Ukraine.

Fighting reached the edge of the industrial city of Severodonetsk, which is under fierce bombardment by Russian forces who are trying to encircle it in one of their key goals in Ukraine's Donbas region.

An unrepentant Moscow told the West to lift sanctions to stave off a global food crisis sparked by the war between two countries that together produce nearly a third of the world's wheat.

Zelensky renewed calls for heavy weapons from foreign partners, saying the billions of dollars' worth already put up were not enough to help Ukraine's outgunned forces.

"Unity is about weapons. My question is, is there this unity in practice? I can't see it. Our huge advantage over Russia would be when we are truly united," Zelensky said via videolink to an event on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Zelensky said Ukraine was grateful for US support, but urged Europe to step up, specifically naming neighbouring Hungary which is blocking an EU-wide embargo on Russian oil.

The Ukrainian president said hours earlier in his daily address to the nation that Russian forces 'want to destroy everything' in eastern Ukraine.



A woman runs to cover from shelling in a recently retaken village north of Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine, on Wednesday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine (AFP)

Western funds and weapons have helped Ukraine hold off its neighbour's advances in many areas, including the capital Kyiv.

Russia is now focused on expanding its gains in eastern Donbas, home to pro-Russian separatists, as well as the southern coast.

Aims for total destruction

The governor of the eastern region of Lugansk, Sergiy Gaiday, said fighting had reached the 'outskirts' of Severodonetsk, which was being hammered by air strikes, rockets, artillery and mortars.

"Russian troops have

advanced far enough that they can already fire mortars," Gaiday said in a statement on social media, adding that, 'yesterday there was already fighting on the outskirts of the city'.

"The Russian army has decided to completely destroy Severodonetsk. They are simply

erasing Severodonetsk from the face of the earth," the governor said in a separate video on Telegram. "I think that the next week will be decisive."

In the town of Soledar, Ukraine's salt manufacturing hub, the ground shook moments after Natalia Timofeyenko

climbed out of her bunker to reassure herself that she was not alone. "I go outside just to see people. I know that there is shelling out there but I go," the 47-year-old said after a thundering blast smashed apart a chunk of a mammoth salt mine where she worked with most of her

friends and neighbours.

Ghostly frontline towns like Soledar are being hammered by Russian artillery as they sit along the crucial road that leads out of besieged Severodonetsk and its sister city Lysychansk.

Twelve people were killed by 'extremely heavy shelling and attacks' in the neighbouring region of Donetsk, which also forms part of Donbas, the Ukrainian presidency said.

In a sign that the rest of the country remains at risk, Russian cruise missiles struck the major southern rail hub of Zaporizhzhia, killing one person and damaging dozens of houses, the presidency added.

In Moscow, authorities made it clear Russia was settling in for a long conflict, with parliament scrapping the upper age limit for soldiers.

"We will continue the special military operation until all the objectives have been achieved," Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said, using President Vladimir Putin's name for the war.

Tough sanctions imposed after Russia's February 24 invasion of its pro-Western neighbour are causing food shortages around the world, Moscow added.

"Solving the food problem requires a comprehensive approach, including the removal of sanctions that have been imposed on Russian exports and financial transactions," said Russian deputy foreign minister, Andrey Rudenko.

AFP

Boat sinks off Tunisia, more than 70 missing

Tunis, Tunisia - More than 70 people are missing in the Mediterranean after a boat crowded with migrants headed for Europe from Libya sank off neighbouring Tunisia, the coastguard said on Wednesday.

The boat, which was carrying around 100 people when it put to sea, capsized off the Tunisian port of Sfax, with coastguard and navy units able to pull 24 people out of the water, National Guard spokesman Houcem Eddine Jebabli said.

"According to preliminary results of the investigation, an inflatable boat left the coast of Zawara in Libya on Sunday night with around 100 people on board," he said, adding that so far one body had been recovered.

They were 'of various African and Asian nationalities', he added.

Libya has become a major launchpad for migrants seek-

ing to reach Europe on what has become the world's deadliest migration route.

Many end up in Italy, some 300km away, but many others die at sea when their often unseaworthy boats capsize or break down.

Improving weather in recent weeks has prompted a spike in departures.

Since the start of the year, 6,340 migrants have been intercepted and returned to Libya, according to figures published by International Organization for Migration (IOM) on Monday.

Human rights groups say those returned often face horrific abuses.

At least 129 people have died attempting the crossing and 459 have gone missing, the IOM said.

Tunisia's Sfax region is itself a busy departure point for attempts to reach Europe, some of them by its own citizens.

AFP

UK's PM Boris Johnson urged to quit over drunken 'Partygate' culture

London, UK - UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson rejected calls to resign after an inquiry on Wednesday found that he presided over a culture of lockdown-breaking parties that featured drunken fighting among staff.

Johnson is among dozens of people in Downing Street who have received police fines for breaching COVID regulations since 2020 - making Number 10 the most penalised address in the entire country.

"I take full responsibility for everything that took place on my watch," he told MPs in response to the long-awaited report by senior civil servant Sue Gray, insisting: "I am humbled, and I have learned."

But Johnson said he was absent from most of the events, and denied ever lying to parliament, or urging Gray privately to bury her 37-page report.

He expressed hope that with the investigation now over, 'we will be able to move on' in addressing priorities including the



Britain's PM Boris Johnson speaks during a press conference in Downing Street in central London on Wednesday (AFP)

Many of these events should not have been allowed to happen. The senior leadership at the centre must bear responsibility for this culture

SUE GRAY

war in Ukraine and a spiralling cost-of-living crisis in Britain.

Gray published photographs of Johnson toasting staff with wine and described revelling that

sometimes stretched into the early hours to music from a karaoke machine.

"Many of these events should not have been allowed to hap-

pen," Gray wrote, revealing that Downing Street security and cleaning staff were mocked when they tried to protest at the staff conduct.

Junior staffers who ended up fined by London's Metropolitan police - most of them women - had been told to attend events by their bosses, the report found.

"The senior leadership at the centre, both political and official, must bear responsibility for this culture," Gray added, noting the painful sacrifices made by the UK public to respect the rules set by Johnson's government.

The report came out as a different photograph published by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper showed a Downing Street table laden with wine bottles and doughnuts.

It said an accompanying WhatsApp message told staff: "Time to open the COVID secure bar."

The prime minister defied calls to resign after he received the police fine in April.

AFP

Beijing health chief sacked as city battles virus outbreak

Beijing, China - Beijing has sacked its top health official, state media reported on Wednesday, as the Chinese capital battles a surge in COVID-19 infections despite the country's strict zero-tolerance policy.

The city has reported hundreds of cases in recent weeks in an Omicron-variant-fuelled outbreak. Millions have been ordered to work from home with the vast majority of bus and subway services suspended, while thousands of people were relocated to quarantine hotels after a handful of infections were detected in their residential compounds.

Yu Luming, the former head of the municipal health commission, has been removed from his position, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Yu is suspected of 'serious violations of discipline and law, and is currently undergoing disciplinary review and supervision investigation', Xinhua said, without giving further details.

China has persisted with a zero-COVID policy, imposing hard lockdowns and movement restrictions on several cities even as much of the world has transitioned to living with the coronavirus. In the capital, many parks, restaurants, schools and shops remain closed.

The Communist Party-owned *Beijing News* also reported on Wednesday that city vice-mayor Wang Hong had submitted her resignation, but the brief report did not mention a reason.

Local authorities who are unable to contain virus outbreaks have regularly been sacked or punished. This includes multiple officials in Shanghai, after a chaotic lockdown and spiralling outbreak that brought the city to a standstill.

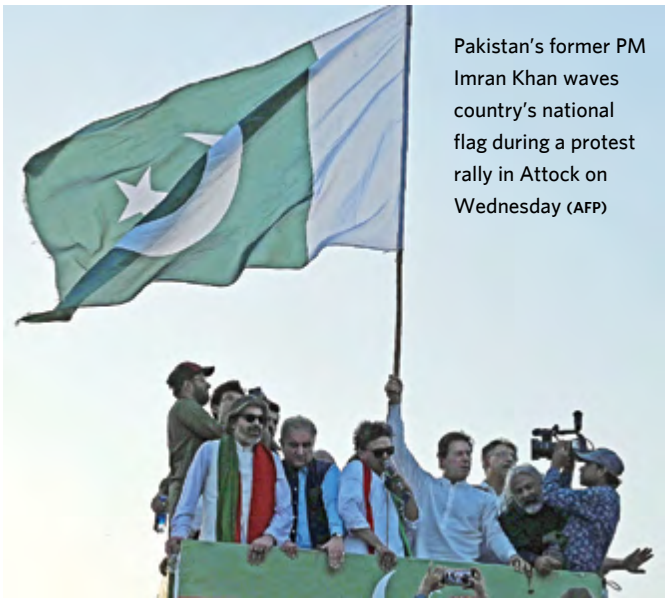
AFP

Ousted PM Khan leads protest march towards Pakistan capital

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan's ousted prime minister Imran Khan on Wednesday led a convoy of thousands of supporters towards the capital Islamabad in a show of force the new government has attempted to shut down, with clashes breaking out between police and protesters.

Since being removed from power through a no-confidence vote last month, the cricket star turned politician has heaped pressure on the country's fragile new coalition rulers by staging mass rallies, touting a claim he was turned out from office in a 'foreign conspiracy'.

In a centrepiece showdown



Pakistan's former PM Imran Khan waves country's national flag during a protest rally in Attock on Wednesday (AFP)

with his rivals, Khan had called for supporters of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party to gather in Islamabad and stage a sit-in until fresh elections are called.

"No obstacle can stop us, we will cross all the barriers and will reach... Islamabad," Khan declared, flanked by more than 20,000 supporters.

The government headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has pledged to stop the convoy from entering the city, calling the rally an attempt to 'divide the nation and promote chaos'.

All major roads surrounding Islamabad, where a heavy secu-

rity presence is in place, were blocked off with shipping containers while entry and exit points of major nearby cities were also cut off.

Sporadic clashes broke out between police and protesters who have tried to clear the roads, with tear gas fired in several cities.

Khan joined the march in dramatic fashion, arriving in a helicopter that touched down on a motorway clogged with supporters outside the city of Mardan, 100km northwest of Islamabad.

The convoy later crossed a bridge that straddles PTI-run Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

and government-run Punjab province, where shipping containers blocking the route were pushed to the side of the road by protesters.

"When we reached here, we had a tough clash with the police. But they fled and we were able to clear the bridge for Imran Khan," said Zulfiqar Khan, a 42-year-old labourer, in Attock.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday held an emergency session, ordering the government and PTI leaders to hold urgent negotiations.

It also ordered the release of supporters detained by police.

AFP

MONKEYPOX

VIRAL ZOOONOSIS

Barely out of the clutches of a longstanding global pandemic (COVID-19), one may not be in the right frame of mind to be wary of yet another... But the global spread of monkeypox now seems to pose a disturbing trend which calls for a clear understanding of this disease.

Monkeypox is a viral zoonosis (a virus transmitted to humans from animals) with symptoms similar to those seen in the past in smallpox patients, although clinically less severe.

Though not usually fatal, this disease can cause a fever, muscle aches, swollen lymph nodes, chills, exhaustion and a chickenpox-like rash on the hands and face. The virus can be transmitted through contact with skin lesions or droplets of bodily fluid from an infected person.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), with the eradication of smallpox in 1980 and subsequent cessation of smallpox vaccination, monkeypox has emerged as the most important orthopoxvirus for public health. It primarily occurs in central and west Africa, often in proximity to tropical rainforests.

Monkeypox is usually a self-limited disease with the symptoms lasting from 2 to 4 weeks. Severe cases occur more commonly among children and are related to the extent of virus exposure, patient health status, and nature of complications. Underlying immune deficiencies may lead to the worse outcomes.

Although vaccination against smallpox was protective in the past, today persons younger than 40 to 50 years of age (depending on the country) may be more susceptible to monkeypox due to cessation of smallpox vaccination campaigns globally after eradication of the disease.

Antoine Flahault, director of the Institute of Global Health at the University of Geneva, in an



informative chat, clarified a few key facts about monkeypox:

Is it an epidemic yet?

We're seeing the emergence of an unusual phenomenon, but it's still difficult to know whether it will explode into an epidemic, or whether its spread will be more contained. In recent days, the number of cases has doubled every three or four days, which could signal the exponential growth of an epidemic wave.

However, it can also be questioned whether the recent media coverage of the phenomenon has encouraged patients to consult their doctor, and their doctor to discuss the diagnosis more and notify the cases detected. It is, therefore, still a little early to speak of an epidemic, though the start of an epidemic would, indeed, resemble what we are currently observing.

Is the spread of the disease worrying?

The emergence of this phenomenon, which is new outside of equatorial Africa, should alert us and make us very cautious. It would be much more effective from a health point of view, and much less impacting in social and economic terms, to isolate the few cases detected today for



We can currently try to dismantle all the chains of transmission because we only have a few cases

ANTOINE FLAHAULT

three weeks and to demand quarantine for highly suspicious contacts.

Indeed, we can currently try to dismantle all the chains of transmission because we only have a few cases, rather than waiting to be overwhelmed by a possible influx of cases for which we have little knowledge, few treatments or vaccines available.

It should always be remembered that an epidemic progression of contamination follows an exponential law which can be very rapid. For the moment, what we know about the monkeypox virus does not lead us to fear the massive con-

tamination of the general population. Unless the virus has evolved significantly, both in its transmissibility and in its modes of transmission, this virus is known to be not very transmissible.

Is there a risk of it becoming a global pandemic?

We cannot rule out any scenario at this stage. That said, there are other less pessimistic scenarios, which are at least as plausible as scenarios. So far, no chain infections of more than six people have been reported. The reproduction rate in Africa has always been below 1 - i.e. without pandemic potential.

The conditions may be in place for human-to-human transmission to take place, thanks to increased adaptation of the virus, but also to mobility and to networks of human communities living in close proximity.

At the current time, however, there is no evidence that the monkeypox virus is sexually transmitted. It seems to be transmitted more by close and prolonged contact with an infected person who has blisters on their skin.

AFP

First case in Gulf

The United Arab Emirates became the first Gulf country to announce a case of monkeypox on Tuesday, insisting it was 'fully prepared' to handle any outbreak. The UAE is believed to be just the second Middle Eastern country, after Israel, to detect monkeypox.

The case was found in a 29-year-old woman arriving from West Africa, who is receiving medical treatment, the Ministry of Health and Prevention said.

"We have put in place precise mechanisms for diagnosing suspected patients," a ministry statement said. "The technical advisory team for pandemic control has also prepared a comprehensive guide for surveillance, early detection of the disease, management of clinically infected patients, and precautionary measures."

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KNEE PAIN

JOINT ACTION

EXERCISE CAN BE THE LAST THING ON MIND FOR THOSE SUFFERING FROM KNEE DISORDER. RESEARCH, HOWEVER, INDICATES THAT PEOPLE WITH KNEE PAIN OR DEGENERATIVE DISEASES OF THE KNEE NEED TO UNDERTAKE CERTAIN EXERCISES TO STAY MOBILE

There are numerous studies that show the enormous benefits of regular exercise on knee health and the protective advantages it can offer in keeping the structures, tissues and ligaments of the knee protected from damage.

If you suffer from chronic knee pain, as long as you clear it with your physician first, you might be surprised at the relief and active lifestyle benefits that can come with introducing exercise into your daily routine.

The knee joint involves the lower thighbone, or femur, the upper end of the shinbone, or tibia, and the roughly triangular shaped patella, or kneecap, that slides into a groove in the femur. Your thigh muscles provide strength for your knees. Ligaments and tendons keep the bones in place. And the cartilage provides cushioning between the bones, and a smooth membrane lines the other inner surfaces, secreting a fluid that helps the structures in your knees slide easily across one another during movement. But, exercise can cause pain and stiffness when these structures don't function normally due to injury or disease, thereby causing sufferers from avoiding exercise altogether.

It can be a mental challenge to exercise when our knees hurt. While that can be good advice for the immediate time after an acute knee injury (24 to 48 hours), it isn't the best course of action for the long term.

All of the joints in our bodies, including our knees, need lubrication to function correctly. And they do get that lubrication through movement.

If your knee pain has you sidelined, talk to your doctor about what you can begin doing to get you moving more. You might be surprised at what exercise can do, not only for your knee pain, but also for your spirit. Armed with a few tips for what to do and what not to do, you'll be on your way to healthier living, in no time.

Exercising with knee pain
WHAT TO AVOID

DON'T HAVE AN OVERDOSE OF REST. Contrary to popular belief, too much rest for an achy knee can weaken the muscles in the leg and may worsen knee joint pain.

DON'T RUN. No matter what surface you choose to run on (paved road, natural terrain or treadmill), running is a high-impact activity that places tremendous stress and force on every joint in the body, including the knees. Avoid high-impact activities when you've got active knee pain.

DON'T EXCESSIVELY BEND THE KNEES. Exercises like lunges and squats can be exceptionally bothersome for people experiencing knee pain. These types of activities can put excessive strain and pressure on already painful knees.

DON'T EXERCISE THROUGH ACUTE PAIN. Aches or muscle fatigue is common during or after a strenuous workout. However, sudden, sharp or shooting

pains in the knees are an indication that the offending activity should be immediately stopped.

Exercising with knee pain
WHAT TO DO

TAKE TO THE WATER. For people with chronic knee pain, exercising in the water can be one low-impact way to reduce stress on the knee joints while still reaping exercise's cardiovascular, joint and overall health benefits.

LIGHTEN THE LOAD. Putting too much strain on an ailing knee joint can be a recipe for further injury. Avoid exercises that jar the joints – such as running, jumping or deep squats that load the knees with lots of force. Opt for gentler activities.

WALK. Walking is a great total-body cardiovascular activity that can benefit people with achy knees. Be sure not to go too far or for too long if you're in moderate to severe pain, and make sure that the walking surface is even, without too much uphill or downhill variation, so that you don't risk tripping and falling.

MIND THE EQUIPMENT. Today, there are so many exercise apparatuses that allow for knee-friendly exercise while eliminating or reducing stress on the knees. Elliptical machines and recumbent stationary bikes are practical and helpful tools for enhancing fitness while reducing the stress, load and impact on the knees.



MENISCUS TEARS

The meniscus are two wedge-shaped pieces of cartilage that act as shock absorbers between the femur and tibia. Meniscus tears can happen when a person changes direction suddenly while running or suddenly twists their knee. Older runners are more at risk, as the meniscus weakens with age.

Runners more commonly injure the medial meniscus (inside of the knee) rather than the lateral meniscus (outside of the knee). Symptoms of a meniscus tear include general knee pain, swelling all over the knee, a popping sensation during the injury, knee stiffness (especially after sitting), a feeling as though your knee is locked in place when you try to move it, and difficulty bending and straightening that leg.

Many people are able to continue walking with a meniscus tear. You may even be able to continue running with a meniscus tear, although it is not recommended.

Diagnostic imaging, such as an x-ray or MRI is recommended. Also, the McMurray test is helpful to assess the range of motion and classify the severity of the tear.

TREATMENT

Treatment for meniscal tears depends on the size and location of the tear. Sometimes small tears heal on their own with proper self-care. Treatment for more severe tears can include a meniscectomy (removal of the meniscus) or meniscal repair (usually a minimally invasive procedure).

The best treatment will depend on several factors, including the severity of your tear, your age, your activity level, and your willingness to comply with treatment. Non-surgical management of a meniscus tear usually includes anti-inflammatory medication and icing your knee to reduce pain and swelling.

PREVENTION

To avoid meniscus tears in the future, make sure you're wearing the correct running shoes for your foot and running style. Wearing the wrong shoes may make you vulnerable to falls or twisting your knee.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

The final leg of FIM Motocross World Championship in Wattayah is a great chance for Oman to promote the country as an ideal destination for commerce, tourism, investment, and of course, sports, say the event organisers

Muscat - Motorcycles have always captured the imagination of men, especially those young at heart.

Powerful mean machines, whether built for cruising and racing on roads, or riding on tricky terrains and mud tracks have invariably stolen admiring glances, to say the least. And for some; riding a bike, its throttle in their hand and the wind in their hair, and without a care in the world; provides ultimate thrill.

Come September, a bunch of daredevil bike riders will come to Oman for the FIM Motocross World Championship to be held in Maidan Al Fateh Stadium in Wattayah.

Those riders are sure to thrill the spectators - thousands at the venue and millions all over the world in front of the TV screens - with their thrilling performance that at times defies gravity and belies the laws of physics.

Around 60 riders will fight for honours in two categories - MXGP and MX2 - on September 9 and 10 in Wattayah, making Oman the only country in the Middle East and the second one in the whole of Asia (after Indonesia) to host the prestigious championship this season.

The Oman leg has the added significance as it is also the season finale of the MXGP and MX2, while the Season 2022 Awards Ceremony will also be held here, on September 10.

H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, has appointed Trade8 International to organise the Championship in Oman, and they will be supported by Infront Sports which owns the MXGP brand, and Oman Automobile Association as they look to make it a grand success.

And with just over 100 days to go for the championship, Marco Occhipinti, Jelena Popovic, and Saoud al Shawarzi of Trade8 In-



KEY POINTS

- The championship is broadcast across 50 channels in 160 countries around the globe
- The average spectator turnout is between 5,000 and 8,000
- Oman is the only GCC country hosting the event
- The Oman leg will appear in PlayStation/XBOX MXGP game in 2023

all our efforts, commonly, in order to deliver a successful event to promote our country which will have a tremendous impact on ICV, visibility, tourism and investment promotion.

This event is not only about sports but is a propeller for many other sectors as we will show to the world just how our country is open, and ready for many aspects of international tourism, trade, and commerce. The world needs to know more about Oman and we want to contribute to this.

ternational, three people working tirelessly towards that goal, are excited about the first ever Motocross World Championship in Oman.

In an interview with Muscat Daily, they spoke about the championship, the challenges in organising it, and how it is important for the sport as well as the country.

01 The FIM Motocross World Championship is coming to Oman for the very first time. How excited are you?

Let us start by expressing our warm gratitude to H H Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, the whole team from the Ministry of Sports, Culture, and Youth working with H E Basil al Rawas, the Ministry of Information, H E Asilah bint Salem al Samsamiya and her team from Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, the Ministry of Tourism and Heritage, and Muscat Municipality that have all been extremely supportive by endorsing this event from the start helping us - the MXGP Oman organisers - and the Oman Automobile Association



(From L) Marco Occhipinti, Jelena Popovic and Saoud al Shawarzi of Trade8 International with Chiara Occhipinti, the firm's representative in Italy

in delivering this event.

With this kind of support and help, we are beyond excited to have such a prestigious event held in our country for the first time. International and global sports events are not only about sports. They also serve as a very powerful tool of communication directed at the world to promote the hosting country as a safe destination for tourists, businesses, and investment opportunities. It is time that the world knows about our amazing

and fantastic country so rich in history, heritage and culture.

02 What are the main challenges in organising such a big event, especially in a place where it has never been to?

As this event is huge in magnitude and since it is the very first time we are hosting it in Oman, there are many technical challenges to be dealt with.

But since we have the support of the government which involves teamwork with the Oman Automobile Association, we hope we will be able to deliver something amazing with further support from the private sector whose participation is crucial as valuable partners and sponsors in making the Oman Motocross World Championship a big success.

We hope that this interview can raise their awareness of how their involvement and financial support can make a big difference in the promotion of Oman.

03 What are the prospects of motocross becoming a regular sport in the region?

We wish that this world championship for which we signed an agreement for three years can be a regular event in the calendar of the Sultanate of Oman for many more years giving a new experience to the young population as we have no doubt some of them can become future competitors representing Oman.

04 Do you think this event will help improve the profile of motocross, and motorsport in general, in the country?

Since we announced this event, we have received many inquiries from motocross enthusiasts from Oman and the region. Motorsports is still at an early stage in Oman, however with the sheer scale of this event never hosted before in Oman, we need to put

05 Motocross needs specific tracks, which makes it a comparatively difficult one to pursue. Do you think FIM can do anything about it?

The MXGP and FIM teams were just in Oman a few days ago with their top technicians to assess three potential locations and they will assist us to build the track.

We are sure they will do a fantastic job as they have tremendous experience in this field and they have been doing it for more than 50 years. Without a doubt, Maidan Al Fateh Stadium in Wattayah will add to the publicity around Oman as the location itself will be a magnificent way to close season 2022 in Oman!

06 What are your thoughts on the track? Is it made specifically for this event?

The idea behind the track is to have a permanent structure in order to host GCC competitions and promote the exchange of tech and knowledge between the countries, continue attracting regional visitors and also create a future academy for children and motocross enthusiasts to promote the sport.

07 The Oman leg is endorsed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth as a family-oriented event. Are there any specific measures (like play areas for kids) planned to make it more family-friendly?

As this is a world-class event involving international regulations, and since as a country, we are hosting it for the very first time, the main focus is the event itself. Discussions are ongoing on creating a real festival in the second edition with cultural content such as concerts, and spectacles and to also showcase the products and services from the SME sector to the visitors.

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Patidar blinder helps Bangalore march into second qualifier



BRIEF SCORES:
Royal Challengers Bangalore 207 for 4 in 20 overs (Rajat Patidar 112 (54) 12x4, 7x6, Dinesh Karthik 37 (23) 5x4, 1x6; Mohsin Khan 1 for 25) beat Lucknow Super Giants 193 for 6 in 20 overs (KL Rahul 79 (58) 79 (58) 3x4, 5x6, Deepak Hooda 45 (26) 1x4, 4x6; Josh Hazlewood 3 for 43) by 14 runs

Miller always a match-winner, says Pandya

New Delhi, India - Skipper Hardik Pandya on Tuesday hailed "match-winner" David Miller after the South African batsman led newcomers Gujarat Titans in to the IPL final with a seven-wicket victory over Rajasthan Royals.

Chasing 189 for victory in the first qualifier, Gujarat rode an unbeaten 106-run fourth-wicket stand between Pandya (40) and Miller (68) to achieve the target with three balls to spare in Kolkata. With 16 needed off the final over, the left-handed Miller smashed each of Prasidh Krishna's first three balls for six to bring the house down at a full capacity Eden Gardens in the first qualifier.

Known as 'Killer' Miller for his big hitting, the left-hand batsman smashed three fours and five sixes in his 38-ball knock.

"A lot of people counted David Miller out but for us he was always a match-winner from the time we brought him in the auction," Pandya said of the attacking batsman who has been key to Gujarat's success in their



David Miller exults after emphatically finishing the game, as Hardik Pandya looks on, in Kolkata on Tuesday.

debut season.

"What he did today, we always expected him to do that. But for us it was important to give him importance, love and clarity that what we expect of him and if he fails it's okay, 'it's just a game'."

Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan set up the win with

figures of 0-15 that kept Rajasthan to 188-6 despite Jos Buttler's 56-ball 89.

Gujarat, one of two new teams alongside Lucknow Super Giants in the expanded 10-team IPL, now await their opponent for the title clash on Sunday in their home ground Ahmedabad.

Rajasthan, who ended second

in the table topped by Gujarat, have another shot of making the finals when they meet the winner of Wednesday's eliminator between Lucknow and Royal Challengers Bangalore.

'Still alive'

"We are still alive. We still got a chance, disappointed today but

dust ourselves off and go again," Buttler said of his team, who won the inaugural edition in 2008. "We have full faith in the guys, we have a really good team."

Gujarat lost Wriddhiman Saha for nought off quick bowler Trent Boult on the second ball of the chase with the crowd silenced by the departure of their local hero. Shubman Gill (35) and Matthew Wade (35) then took charge to take the attack to the opposition bowlers as Gujarat reached 64-1 in six overs of the powerplay when only two fielders are allowed outside the inner circle.

The right-left batting pair of Gill put on 71 before a mix-up between the two saw Gill comfortably run out. The Australian soon followed, slapping Obed McCoy to deep mid-wicket where Buttler made no mistake.

Pandya stood firm and found able company in Miller, who reached his twelfth half-century of the IPL and was named man of the match, as the two put the chase back on track.

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GIVE HIM THE BALL!

Real Madrid’s Karim Benzema needs final triumph to make Champions League his own

Madrid, Real Madrid’s Rodrygo was asked on Tuesday what was the best piece of advice he had been given by Karim Benzema, and he answered quickly: “To give him the ball”.

It has been a sensible strategy for Real Madrid, whose number nine will be the most dangerous player on the pitch in Saturday’s Champions League final against Liverpool and who has been arguably the finest player in the world all season.

Benzema’s 49 goals in 52 games dwarfs Mohamed Salah’s 33 in 59 while even Kylian Mbappe, whose rejection of Real Madrid has so dominated the early build-up to this final in Paris, is inferior, with 43 in 49.

If Real Madrid beat Liverpool to win a 14th European Cup, the expectation is Benzema will also beat the likes of Salah and Sadio Mane to win his first Ballon d’Or.

This season, Benzema has scored the most goals of his career for Real Madrid and the most of his career in the Champions League. He has become the oldest player to score a hat-trick in the Champions League and the most prolific French scorer in history.

If he scores two goals this weekend, he will equal Cristiano Ronaldo’s Champions League record of 17 goals, the most ever scored in a single tournament.

Zinedine Zidane, whom Benzema described as like an older brother, said Benzema was “a gift

to anyone who loves football”, “a total footballer” and “the best”.

Former Ballon d’Or winner Jean-Pierre Papin once said: “Benzema has the power of Ronaldo, the speed of Ronaldinho, the class of Henry and the instinct of David Trezeguet.”

“We always look for him,” said Rodrygo. “He’s phenomenal.”

To score twice against Liverpool, in a final, might be improbable but who would put it past this Benzema, in this sort of form?

Spectacular heights

He has scored 10 times in the knock-out stages, rattling the very best opponents, including a hat-trick against Paris Saint-Germain, a hat-trick against Chelsea and a brace against Manchester City.

“Madrid won because they have Benzema and Chelsea don’t,” wrote the Madrid newspaper AS after the quarter-final. “The reality is nobody has Benzema, who plays six different positions, often in the same move.”

On Sunday, as Real Madrid were still reeling from Mbappe’s decision and as the finger-pointing and blaming began, it was impossible not to wonder if Benzema might have breathed a little sigh of relief.

After all, it has been in the absence of Ronaldo that Benzema has thrived, that increased responsibility and importance stir-



Real Madrid’s Karim Benzema attends a training session at the Ciudad Real Madrid in Valdebebas, Madrid, on Tuesday (AFP)

He (Karim Benzema) is a player who feels more and more like a leader every day, he feels more important in the team. This is what makes the difference in him, this personality

CARLO ANCELOTTI



ring something in the Frenchman that has driven him to fill the void, to reach such spectacular heights. “He is a player who feels

more and more like a leader every day, he feels more important in the team,” said Carlo Ancelotti. “This is what makes the difference in him, this personality.”

For many years, it was always assumed Benzema went unappreciated, a player who might always be admired at Real Madrid but would never be widely considered one of the deadliest strikers in the game.

His supporting role to Ronaldo and a six-year absence from the French national team, including the World Cup that France won in 2018, played a huge part in that. But there has also never been a title that belonged to Benzema, a competition he defined in a way that meant it would always be associated with him. It would be a trophy to elevate him and en-

trench him among the very best. At 35 years old, Benzema is looking to win his fifth Champions League in eight years at the Stade de France, to go with his four La Liga titles, two Copa del Reys, four Club World Cups and three European Super Cups. This season, he also won the Pichichi Trophy after finishing La Liga’s top scorer.

AFP

Klopp named Premier League manager of the year

London, United Kingdom - Liverpool’s Jurgen Klopp has been named the League Managers’ Association Premier League Manager of the Year, it was announced on Tuesday.

The Reds won both the English League Cup and FA Cup, beating Chelsea in penalty shoot-outs at Wembley on both occasions.

But Liverpool lost out on the Premier League title to Manchester City by just a point after both Klopp’s men and Pep Guardiola’s side won their re-



Jurgen Klopp

spective matches on Sunday’s final day of a thrilling campaign.

Klopp, collecting his accolade at the LMA Awards dinner in London on Tuesday, said: “It is a great honour and it was an insane season.

“The last matchday when only two games were meaningless and in the rest, we all played for absolutely everything. It was not the best outcome for us, but we are already over it.”

The German, paying tribute to his backroom team, added:

“When you win a prize like this you are either a genius or you have the best coaching staff in the world -- and I am here with all of my coaching staff, they know how much I appreciate them.”

Klopp also collected the Sir Alex Ferguson Trophy, named in honour of the celebrated former Manchester United boss, which is voted for by the full membership of managers across all the divisions in English senior football.

AFP

Salah staying at Liverpool ‘for sure’ next season

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Mohamed Salah has confirmed he will see out his contract at Liverpool next season, but the Egypt forward remains non-committal on his future at Anfield beyond 2023.

Salah’s contract expires at the end of next season and talks over a new deal have dragged on for months without a resolution.

However, ahead of Saturday’s Champions League final against Real Madrid, Salah said his full focus is on winning the biggest prize in European football for the second time.

“I don’t want to talk about the contract. I’m staying next season for sure, let’s see after that,” said Salah at Liverpool’s pre-match media day on Wednesday.

“In my mind I don’t focus about the contract. I don’t want to be selfish, it’s about the team. It’s a really important week for us, I want to see Hendo (Jordan Henderson) having the trophy again in his hands.”



Liverpool’s Mohamed Salah (front) is all smiles during a training session in Liverpool on Wednesday (AFP)

Salah’s fellow forward Sadio Mane also refused to commit his long-term future to Liverpool.

Senegal international Mane is out of contract in 2023 and has

been linked with a move to Bayern Munich.

“This question (about my future) I will answer after Champions League,” Mane told Sky Sports.

Neymar wants to stay at PSG

Meanwhile, Neymar said he would like to stay at French champions Paris Saint-Germain despite rarely justifying his world

record fee of 222 million euros (\$236 million) and amid rumours the club would like him to leave.

The 30-year-old Brazilian signed an extension to his contract last year taking him up to 2025.

However, another disappointing season blighted by injury has placed question marks over his future at the Qatari-owned club.

French sports daily L’Equipe claimed in Wednesday’s edition PSG “would not be opposed to Neymar leaving.”

The former Barcelona star - who scored his 100th goal for PSG since he arrived in 2017 in the 5-0 thrashing of Metz last Saturday - said he had not heard the rumours about him possibly leaving the club.

“I have heard no such things thus far but on my side the truth is I want to stay,” he told the Oh My Goal website.

The departure of Brazilian sporting director Leonardo is also seen as possibly weakening Neymar’s position at PSG.

Zverev saves match point to advance

Paris, France - Third seed and 2021 semi-finalist Alexander Zverev saved a match point against Argentina’s Sebastian Baez as he battled back from two sets down to reach the third round of the French Open on Wednesday.

Zverev overcame Baez 2-6, 4-6, 6-1, 6-2, 7-5 after three hours and 36 minutes. He will play either Tallon Griekspoor or Brandon Nakashima for a place in the last 16.

World number one and defending champion Novak Djokovic eased into the third round by defeating the new pupil of his former long-time coach.

Top seed Djokovic saw off Slovakia’s Alex Molcan, who is coached by Marian Vajda, the man who inspired most of his 20 Slam titles, 6-2, 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

Djokovic fired 10 aces and 40 winners past his 38th-ranked op-

ponent and will next face Slovenia’s Aljaz Bedene for a place in the last 16.

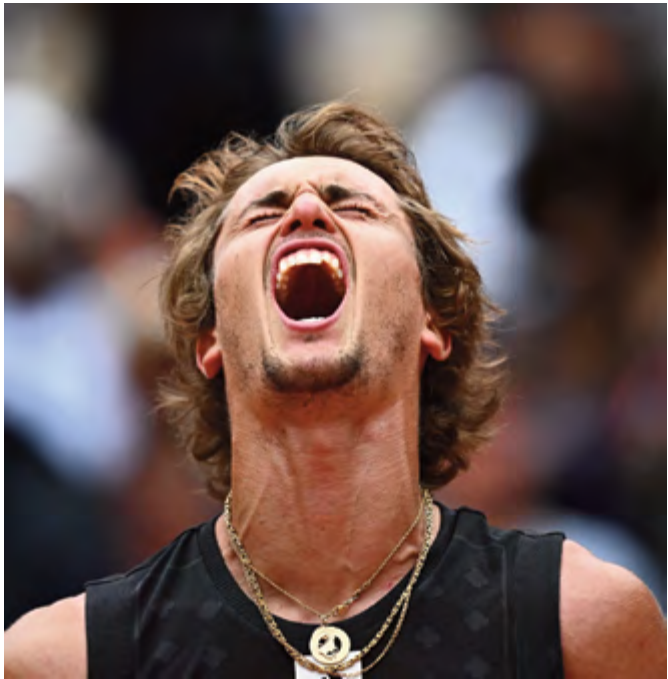
“It was a real pleasure to play on Court Suzanne Lenglen. I don’t have a lot of opportunities to play here,” said the 35-year-old.

Former Grand Slam champions Angelique Kerber and Victoria Azarenka also advanced to the third round.

Kerber, who won her first clay title in six years on the eve of the French Open, defeated French wildcard and 2020 junior champion Elsa Jacquemot 6-1, 7-6 (7/2) as she seeks the only Grand Slam missing from her collection.

The German 21st seed next plays Aliaksandra Sasnovich, the Belarusian who knocked out US Open champion Emma Raducanu 3-6, 6-1, 6-1.

AFP



Alexander Zverev reacts after beating Argentina’s Sebastian Baez in the second-ound of French Open on Wednesday (AFP)