

MHUP picks 3 'outstanding' projects for funding, support

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) on Sunday announced the governorates of Dhofar, Musandam, and South Batinah as winners for their outstanding development project proposals.

This annual competition is in line with the Royal Directives, emphasising the need for coordination and synergy among all units of the state's administrative apparatus for development of governorates.

The winning proposals are the Rathath (Drizzle) Boulevard project of Dhofar, the Aames Bay development project of Musandam, and the Rimal Park project of South Batinah.

"Three governorates have been recognised for their exceptional development project proposals, which will receive government support and involve private sector participation," an official from the ministry said.

The competition had 11 projects nominated by different governorates.

In the initial phase, five governorates qualified for the second round of evaluation. Subsequently, the evaluation results were presented to the Financial



and Economic Committee of the Council of Ministers, which ultimately selected the three winning governorates.

To ensure a fair evaluation process, this committee led by MHUP was established with representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economy, and the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

Dhofar governorate's Rathath Boulevard project, spread across an expansive 470,000sqm area

in Salalah's Itin, will be implemented at a cost of RO40mn over a span of four years.

This project will have the Salalah Eye Ferris wheel, captivating fountains, restaurants, walkways, vibrant shopping areas, engaging exhibitions, and thrilling theatres, among other attractions.

The Rimal Park project of South Batinah will come up on the Batinah Expressway at a cost of RO6.9mn. Spread over an area

of 225,000sqm, the park will feature a cable car, a resort, an amusement park, charming food carts, a retail centre, and ample parking facilities.

The project - to be completed within two years - will foster sustainable tourism, generate direct and indirect employment opportunities, and promote growth among small and medium-sized enterprises.

The RO6.9mn project for Aames Bay development in Mu-

sandam will enhance connectivity and infrastructure, stimulate tourism, and create new investment opportunities in the governorate.

The project over an area of 68,700sqm in Lima is slated for completion within 21 months.

Dr Nasser bin Rashid al Ma'awali, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Economy, said the objective of this initiative is to foster development in various governorates.

Oman on track to become one of largest hydrogen exporters: Report

Paris - The Sultanate of Oman is on its way to become one of the largest exporters of hydrogen in the world by 2030, says a recent report published in France's capital Paris.

The report, jointly published by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and the International Energy Agency (IEA), highlighted Oman's competitive potential as a hub for renewable energy and hydrogen.

The report was reviewed during the visit of an Omani delegation to the IEA's headquarters in Paris.

The delegation was headed by H E Eng Salim Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals.

Oman has allocated an area of more than 50,000sqkm in the governorates of Al Wusta and Dhofar for green hydrogen projects to be floated in stages. This is in addition to 15,000sqkm in other governorates designated for clean energy projects.

Oman plans to produce more than one million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030. The plan provides for the exploitation - by the year 2050 - of up to 30% of the land currently allocated, to produce about 8mn tonnes of green hydrogen.



The investment value of the projects is expected to stand at US\$140bn.

Recently, Oman has taken major steps to keep pace with global developments in energy transition and climate change.

Oman announced its commitment to achieve carbon neutrality, or zero carbon emissions, by 2050.

The country also outlined salient features of its green hydrogen strategy. It also announced having finalised regulatory and legal frameworks, as well as the preparation of policies necessary for the march forward in projects and plans of green energy transition.

Sayyid Fahd, Egypt's Awqaf Minister review firm relations

Muscat - H H Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received Dr Mohammed Mokhtar Goma, Minister of Awqaf of the Arab Republic of Egypt, on Sunday.

The guest conveyed greetings of the Egyptian leadership and best wishes to the leadership in the sultanate, wishing the Omani people further progress and prosperity. He also asserted the attention accorded by Egypt to its distinguished relations with Oman in several spheres.

After welcoming the guest, H H Sayyid reviewed the advanced relations binding the two countries, thanks to the firm ties binding the two leaderships and their brotherly peoples.

Conversation during the meeting reviewed the relations of bilateral cooperation between the two countries and the joint in-



terest in issues of concern to the Islamic world and stability of its countries, as well as the benign efforts exerted in various fields. The meeting also highlighted the real image of Islam at all levels.

The Egyptian Minister of Awqaf commended the wise, balanced policy pursued by the sultanate, as well as its positive role in backing efforts of understanding and constructive dialogue among countries to support security and stability. He

also underscored the importance of the talks he had with the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in Oman, as well as their positive reflections on the existing cooperation between the two countries.

The meeting was attended by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Ma'amari, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and Khalid Mohammed Abdulhalim Radhi, Ambassador of Egypt to the Sultanate of Oman.

NOUF AL SIYABI BAGS GOLD IN FIAP YOUTH BIENNIAL

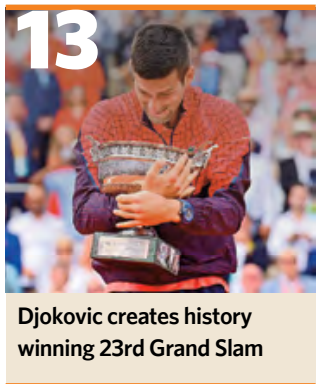
Omani photographer Nouf al Siyabi emerged victorious, securing the gold medal in the individual Under-21 category at the 41st FIAP Youth Biennial held in Norway.

Expressing her delight, Nouf stated that this achievement propels her further in her photography career, serving as both progress and motivation. She named her award-winning photograph *Mystery*, capturing a candid portrait of a young girl gazing at the camera with an air of curiosity and wonder.

Oman showcased its talent with an impressive participation in the competition. It had a total submission of 40 photos captured by 25 photographers from two age groups - Under-21 and Under-16.

The judges awarded Oman sixth place in the U-21 category with a score of 324 points, while in the U-16 category, Oman secured seventh place with a collective score of 353 points.

The sultanate also received two honorary awards at the biennial.



Djokovic creates history winning 23rd Grand Slam



Sahara salt diggers struggle to maintain trade

Procedures simplified to attract investors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Qais bin Mohammed bin Moosa al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, has issued a ministerial decision (No 361/2023), introducing measures to streamline investment procedures and encourage foreign investment.

The decision empowers the investment service centre within the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) to oversee the issuance of necessary approvals, permits, and licences for investment projects through its dedicated Invest Oman lounge, thereby simplifying the process



for investors.

The Invest in Oman lounge will serve as a centralised hub for obtaining the required documentation and information for investment projects. It will play a vital role in issuing approvals, permits, and licences, ensuring the swift

facilitation of investment initiatives.

Moreover, the decision mandates the submission of quarterly reports to the minister, providing comprehensive insights into the centre's operations. These reports will include detailed infor-

mation on the volume of completed transactions, compliance with quality service standards, and proposals for enhancing service quality, transparency, and performance.

Furthermore, the minister has the authority to allocate certain spaces within the centre to sector companies and institutions, such as telecommunications companies, banks, and finance firms.

These entities will offer their services to investors, contributing to a comprehensive investment support ecosystem.

The allocation of these spaces will be subject to a monthly rental fee, determined based on guidelines set forth by the minister in coordination with the Ministry of Finance.

Biparjoy intensifies into category 3 cyclone

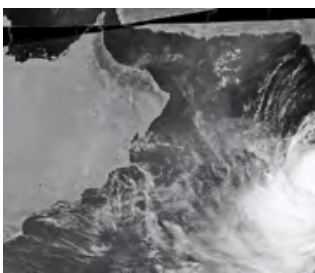
Our Correspondent
Muscat

The tropical cyclone Biparjoy in the Arabian Sea intensified into a category 3 cyclone on Sunday, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

In a statement, CAA said that Biparjoy has evolved into a category 3 cyclone, moving north towards Pakistan and northern India. 'There is no direct impact on the Sultanate of Oman.'

It also cautioned sea goers as the alert on the coast of the Arabian Sea continues for high waves till June 14.

The Indian Meteorological Department in its alert stated that Biparjoy 'is very likely to move



nearly northward till morning of June 14, then move north-northeastwards and cross Saurashtra and Kutch and adjoining Pakistan coasts between Mandvi (India) and Karachi (Pakistan) during 0600-0900 UTC of June 15 as a very severe cyclonic storm with maximum sustained wind speed of 125-135km per hour gusting to 150km per hour.



EXPECTATIONS RISE AS KHAREEF SEASON NEARS



With the forthcoming khareef season in Dhofar, a region renowned for its lush landscapes and pleasant weather, the authorities are gearing up for a large influx of visitors. The Dhofar Municipality along with other authorities such as Nama Dhofar Services and Salalah Airport have drawn up extensive plans to make tourists comfortable

during their holidays in the governorate. In light of the preparations, *Muscat Daily* asked readers what services and events do they want the authorities to organise for a perfect holiday and to attract the largest number of visitors during khareef in Dhofar. Here is what readers have to say about the issue:

Ruskeen S
Sales Manager

There must be more services for the Gulf visitors and more of family and children entertainment activities. Not so well-to-do and non-driving travellers should feel more encouraged to visit the region through affordable accommodation with sharing cab facilities.

Sahaya Vijay
QA/QC Engineer

There must be more rest rooms in public areas. Also, there must be enough signboards with good display of nearby tourist spots.

Sanarab Kazi
Housewife

I suggest hotels to keep their room rents flexible and not so high; because every time during the khareef season, room rents surge. Also, there must be more of local food stalls to attract more people.

Mohammed Nadeem
Investor

The place has been gifted with such an amazing weather, I think the government has to start developing

good restaurants at tourist sites with pest control systems. Having roads with more safety to connect them and easy to locate hotels would be a good option. They should build hotels near the tourist areas. Building malls is also a great point of attraction.

Anzila Ashraf
Online tutor

A reasonable airfare would be a great option. Create a proper help desk, a WhatsApp number or an active online portal to cater to the inquiries. Highlight all the attractions in Salalah, make the locals pitch in. Ask the locals to act as tourist guides, ask them to post things about the different tourist locations online. Organise a traditional fair showcasing local cuisines, traditional dresses, dance and music. Public skits can be organised to show the history of the sultanate.

Have a webpage for registering the tourists, coming by air or road. A contest or a lucky draw every week or everyday for those registering on the web page. Prizes can be a dinner or a BBQ arranged or gift coupons from any business house in Salalah. Frankincense is one nature's gift to Oman. Let it be highlighted and make more people visit the museum. Let

there be gift boxes given to every 100th person visiting the museum. People need to be acknowledged and given free things that would compel them to visit these places. If the water park can be opened, that would also draw a good crowd. Let there be a photo booth in the most visited places. Give the tourists local dress to wear and click photos. Let the traditional dress be given to the men including 'khanjar' and the women with ornaments.

Michael Dsouza
Photographer

I would request to have the flight fares from Muscat to Salalah not to soar so high and instead they should be reduced and more flights to be added to the sector.

Mike Omotegbona Kosie
Businessman

The monsoon season in Salalah can be enjoyed more by organising traditional folklore and dances, horse racing, picnics, camping events, sports and leisure activities. Invite or bring in some international music stars, especially from Nigeria and America. Boost the tourism industry by leveraging on the season. Relax some restrictions and improve security.

Abida Shamsher
Housewife

Khareef is almost there, I would like to encourage hotels, particularly those with beautiful views, to keep their rents reasonable so that more tourists can visit Dhofar and enjoy the weather and picturesque sights there.

NEXT ON YOUR SAY

What are your plans for the upcoming Eid al Adha holidays? What facilities and entertainment options are needed for development of local tourism?

The views stated here are those of the respondents and not endorsed by *Muscat Daily*. If you feel strongly about the issues discussed here, you can email your comments to muscatedaily@apexmedia.co.om You can also log on to our Facebook page or tweet us your comments on the issue.

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

Share your comments in not more than 50 words along with your full name and profession before next Sunday, 10am, via WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram

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Omani GCED project adopted in Unesco-affiliated schools in Kuwait

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has started a training programme for its teachers following the suggestions offered by a latest study on the implementation of global citizenship education (GCED) in the sultanate.

An Omani research project - funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) - revealed that while the principles of global citizenship are present in the visions and missions of Omani schools, there is a need for their reevaluation and strengthening.

Led by Dr Khalaf Marhoun al Abri from Sultan Qaboos University, the Omani researchers studied the nitty-gritty of the incorporation of global citizenship principles and concepts in Omani education policies.

The study confirmed the sultanate's commitment to education for global citizenship through the inclusion of relevant principles and elements in policy



While the principles of global citizenship are present in the visions and missions of Omani schools, there is a need for their reevaluation and strengthening

LATEST RESEARCH

documents. It also highlighted the importance of shaping a new approach to fully embody these principles in Omani schools.

Based on the research outcomes, the team developed a training programme for teachers, which was successfully implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the Omani National Commission for Education, Culture, and Science.

The programme, aimed at enhancing GCED, was adopted at the regional level by the Unesco office in Doha and has been implemented in Unesco-affiliated schools in Kuwait in April this year.

GCED is Unesco's response to human rights violations, inequality and poverty that threaten peace and sustainability. It works by empowering learners of all ages to understand that these are global, not local issues and to become active promoters of more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable societies.

Omani researchers focused on analysing school education policies and plans, particularly in primary schools, to evaluate their

alignment with the objectives of global citizenship education.

Dr Khalaf and his team also investigated the challenges faced in implementing education for global citizenship in primary schools.

This research project holds significance as it aligns with the sultanate's aspirations to be a global proponent of peace and coexistence. It supports the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and analyses educational policies and plans in Oman to ensure that they reflect national and international trends in global citizenship education.

The research findings have been published in the Sustainability and Citizenship, Social and Economics Education journals. The research team comprised Dr Khalaf al Abri, Dr Abdullah Khamis Ambusaidi, Dr Badriya Rashid al Hadi, Nadia Ali al Mamari, Nadhira Ahmed al Harthy, Dr Maymoona Hamad al Hina, and Asila Ali al Zari.

Oman, Saudi explore means to enhance maritime ties

Muscat - Officials from the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology received on Sunday a delegation from the Transport General Authority (TGA) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The visit aimed to enhance cooperation in the field of exchanging educational and training expertise and employment in the maritime sector.

The visit comes within the context of activating the memorandum of understanding signed between Oman and Saudi Arabia last September in respect to the mutual recognition of certificates of competency and eligibility for seafarers.

During the visit, the two sides discussed the restrictions imposed on competency certificates and the requirements for holding mandatory and qualifying courses. The Saudi delegation also visited the Oman Maritime College to view the registration and admission system.

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MHT launches tourism hub for travel partners

Our Correspondent
Muscat

In a bid to give a fillip to the tourism industry, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Sunday launched an e-learning platform for employees of local destination management companies and the hospitality industry of the sultanate.

The Oman Tourism Hub platform will serve as a valuable resource for partners in the travel and tourism sector across Oman, stated the ministry.

H E Azzan Qasim al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Tourism at MHT, underlined the platform's



Our goal is to maintain an up-to-date database of local partners, fostering business growth while serving as an essential source of information

H E AZZAN AL BUSAIDI

mission to provide strategic guidance and promotional plans to local travel partners. "Our goal is to maintain an up-to-date

database of local partners, fostering business growth while serving as an essential source of information and education."

The platform offers a range of valuable features. Firstly, the educational section provides training courses covering marketing strategies and the unique aspects of Oman's tourism offerings. Secondly, it features a calendar of events and seminars organised by the ministry.

The platform also includes a section dedicated to the development of tourist trip programmes. This aims to guide tour operators in enhancing and diversifying their offerings to

cater to tourists visiting different governorates.

To support decision-making and business development, the platform will provide partners with monthly newsletters containing essential news and updates relevant to the tourism sector.

It will also offer an extensive collection of promotional content, including photos and publications, for partners to utilise in their marketing endeavours.

The Oman Tourism Hub serves as a comprehensive tool, offering valuable resources and fostering collaboration within the local travel and tourism sector.

Agreement signed to conserve DNA, breed endangered animals

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Environment Authority (EA) and the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (MoHERI) signed an agreement on Sunday to protect the genetic material (DNA) of wild animals, particularly those facing the risk of extinction.

The signing of the agreement took place between Dr Abdullah bin Ali al Amri, chairman of EA, and H E Dr Saif bin Abdullah al Haddabi, Undersecretary for Research and Innovation at MoHERI.

Spanning three years, the agreement outlines collaboration among EA, the Oman Center for Animal and Plant Genetic Resources (Mawarid), the Royal Court Affairs, and A'Sharqiyah University (ASU).

As per the agreement, EA will provide financial support to the project aimed at safeguarding the genetic material of endangered wild animals and ensuring their continued existence in the ecosystem.

Key aspects of the agreement include cryopreservation of genetic resources from wild animals and the provision of reserve genetic material.

These measures will facilitate the restoration of genetic assets in the event of breed loss due to diseases or natural disasters.

The agreement aims to promote sustainable use of animal genetic resources within Oman, protecting them from the threat of extinction. It further seeks to make genetic material from wild animals accessible to students and researchers.

Among the targeted species are the Arabian gazelle, Reem gazelle, Arabian oryx, Arabian leopard, Arabian caribou, Nubian caribou, and wild rabbit.

MoSD launches national campaign for child protection, well-being

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has initiated a national campaign for ensuring high-quality care and protection of rights for children as per the best standards of practice.

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), in collaboration with Unicef, the ministries of education, health, information, and the National Center for Statistics and Information, launched 'Our Children Are Our Treasure' campaign to promote best practices in providing optimal care for children.

The campaign seeks to raise awareness about the well-being of children and emphasise that



every individual shares the responsibility of protecting them.

By utilising various media channels, including print, audio, visual, and social platforms, the campaign aims to reach parents, caregivers, and the community at large to make them understand the importance of direct

supervision in creating a safe environment for children.

This crucial role of parents, caregivers and the community at large would meet children's diverse needs and support their integration into society, the campaign planners asserted.

The initiative has been taken to prioritise early childhood education and the comprehensive development of children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being.

It recognises the profound impact of early experiences on a child's future and highlights the need for positive interactions during this critical stage.

Adnan bin Mustafa al Farsi, director, Technical Secretariat of

the National Committee for Family Affairs, explained the campaign's purpose, stating, "Our focus is to empower parents and caregivers to enhance the quality of child care, develop effective interactions, and provide an appropriate environment that ensures their growth and development."

These services, Farsi said, play a vital role in the comprehensive integration and protection of all children.

Explaining this aspect, he pointed out that safeguarding children's safety and well-being stands as a top priority, serving as the initial step towards ensuring societal acceptance and support for every child.

Oman to participate in Special Olympics World Games in Berlin

Muscat - The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Special Olympics Oman, is set to compete in the prestigious 16th edition of the Special Olympics World Games to be held in Berlin, Germany, from June 17 to 25.

Oman's delegation will be leaving for Oberhausen, Germany, on Monday to engage in the Host Town Programme from June 12 to 15. This programme aims to spotlight the integration of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the society.

Once this introductory programme concludes, all delega-

tions will gather in Berlin to partake in the opening ceremony and then various competitions.

Comprised of 36 players with intellectual disabilities and nine unified partners, Oman's delegation will participate in a wide range of games, including athletics, unified badminton, unified bocce, bowling, equestrian, futsal, golf, weightlifting, roller skating, sailing, swimming, table tennis, and unified tennis.

Mohammed Salim al Rashdi, chairman of the Board of Directors of Special Olympics Oman and head of the delegation, said



that a series of trials were conducted to select the players. He further spoke about the intense training programme that the participants underwent in recent months. Rashdi expressed his admiration for the delegation's high morale and expressed hope for outstanding achievements in the games.

Special Olympics Oman has previously taken part in the Special Olympics World Games, securing an impressive 48 medals during the last edition in Abu Dhabi in 2019.

The upcoming Games in Berlin

will feature 26 Olympic sports with participation of 7,000 athletes. The official opening ceremony will be held on June 17 at the Olympia stadium in Berlin.

Alongside the World Games, several conferences will be held, including the Global Athlete Congress (June 15-19), the Global Youth Leadership Summit (June 16-20), and the Global Forum for Inclusion - Partnering for Action (June 17-18). These conferences provide invaluable opportunities for discussions and collaboration within the realm of inclusive sports.

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BRIEFS

Saudi Arabia hosts Arab-China Business Conference

Under the patronage of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the tenth session of the Arab-China Business Conference is taking place in Riyadh from June 11-12.

Organized by the Ministry of Investment in partnership with League of Arab States, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, and Union of Arab Chambers, the conference aims to strengthen trade and economic cooperation between the Arab and Chinese business communities.

Held under the theme of "Cooperation for Prosperity," this year's conference will focus on exploring qualitative, multilateral investment opportunities in a range of sectors including technology, renewable energy, agriculture, real estate, minerals, logistics, innovation and others.

Hosted in Saudi Arabia for the first time, the conference's agenda also includes sessions and meetings highlighting how partnerships can help achieve sustainable development across Arab countries and China.

Profits of MSX-listed companies rise 17% to RO180mn in Q1

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Total net profits of the listed companies in Oman grew by 17.4% in the first quarter of 2023 to reach \$466.4mn (approximately RO180mn) compared to \$397.2mn (or RO153mn) in the same period of 2022.

The growth in net profits of companies listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) was mainly driven by higher profitability for banking, telecom and financial sector firms during Q1 2023.

According to a research report released by Kuwait-based Kamco Investment, Oman's banking sector witnessed Q1 2023 net profits growth of 19.4% to reach \$290.9mn, up from \$243.6mn in Q1 2022. In the banking sector, seven out of the eight banks reported growth in their net earnings during Q1 2023.

Total Q1 2023 net profits of the telecom sector increased by 4.4% year-on-year to reach \$62.3mn as compared to \$59.6mn in Q1 2022, according to Kamco Investment report.



In the food, beverage and tobacco sector aggregate Q1 2023 profits reached \$6.8mn as compared to just \$0.2mn in Q1 2022. The profits jump was mainly due to the return to profitability of Salalah Mills Company and A'Saffa Foods Company.

Oman's utilities sector was the only sector with total net losses during Q1 2023 after four out of the eight companies in

the sector reported net losses during the period.

GCC earnings drop

Quarterly profits reported by the GCC-listed companies declined on year-on-year basis during Q1 2023, mainly led by a fall in energy and commodity prices, according to the Kamco Investment report.

Most commodity prices witnessed a demand-led decline

during the first quarter that was reflected in the biggest quarter-on-quarter drop in the Bloomberg Commodity Index since the pandemic during Q1 2023 (-6.5%).

A fall in profits for the diversified financials sector was also reflected in lower GCC profits during the quarter after the MSCI GCC Index declined for four quarters in a row, Kamco Investment noted.

Growth in net profits of companies listed on Muscat Stock Exchange was mainly driven by higher profitability for banking, telecom and diversified financial sector firms during Q1 2023

sified financials were the top three sectors by absolute year-on-year profit decline against Q1 2022 as these sectors accounted for 56% of total profits during Q1 2023 as compared to 70% of profits during Q1 2022.

In terms of quarter-on-quarter performance, the growth in profit was led by higher profits for banks and utilities sectors that was partially offset by a drop in profits mainly for the energy, capital goods and materials sectors.

In terms of regional trend, the quarter-on-quarter profit growth was seen across the GCC exchanges during the first quarter, barring Saudi Arabia.

Aggregated profits for Saudi Arabia's listed companies decreased to \$38.9bn during Q1 2023 as compared to \$40.6bn during Q4 2022, a decline of 4.2% mainly led by a fall in profits for energy, materials and utilities sectors.

On the other hand, Qatari companies reported the biggest profit growth of 65.9% followed by Omani and Dubai-listed companies with quarter-on-quarter profit growth of 49.9% and 43.7%, respectively.

GCC-China free trade deal would be 'game-changer' for Gulf region

Dubai, UAE - A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between China and the GCC is a 'game-changer' that would boost the region and 'galvanise Middle Eastern economic transformation,' according to a top former Lebanese minister.

Although the deal is yet to be signed, there is a strong indication it will be finalised after China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang requested for it to be done 'as soon as possible' following a telephone call with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan earlier this year.

Writing exclusively for Arabian Gulf Business Insight (AGBI), Dr Nasser Saidi, who served as Lebanon's Minister of Economy and Industry, believes the landmark agreement can open many opportunities, benefiting both China and countries such as the United Arab Emi-



Dr Nasser Saidi

rates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

Today, China accounts for one-fifth of the GCC's total trade and is the largest export market for the region. With energy a key focus, he believes an FTA that removes 'trade barriers would boost trade investment linkages' and is likely to have a positive

impact on a wide range of sectors such as direct investment, technology, climate, and the environment, according to a press release.

"Laws and regulations would be modernised to accommodate the provisions of the FTA, thereby accelerating domestic economic reforms in the GCC," he said.

"These gains from trade, investment, and technology transfer would generate higher incomes and growth rates for the GCC and, through spill over effects, raise growth rates in the wider MENA region."

The energy sector would be at the core of the agreement. He said, "China is a world leader in renewable energy technology, becoming the strategic partner for the GCC as it diversifies its energy mix through investment in renewables and climate tech."

Dr Saidi added, "FTA would

also lead to a rapid expansion of trade and investment in digital trade and financial services, hi-tech, renewable energies and climate tech, AI, automation and robotics."

A fundamental sector that would reap the rewards from an FTA would be tourism. Other countries in the region would be added to China's 'approved list' - joining the UAE while collaboration between the governments and China can help enhance infrastructure, transport networks, and logistic operations.

GCC investors would also have 'privileged access to Chinese opportunities, free of exchange and capital controls' while the 'symbiotic relationship' between Chinese and GCC sovereign wealth funds - the largest in the world, will not only be deepened but also strengthen their global financial market power.

Emirati COP28 chief recognises reduction of fossil fuel use 'inevitable'

Bonn, Germany - The head of the upcoming COP28 climate summit, who also is the chief executive of the UAE's national oil company, has acknowledged that a reduction in the use of fossil fuels is inescapable.

"The phase down of fossil fuels is inevitable," Sultan al-Jaber said on the sidelines of technical climate talks six months ahead of the summit.

"The speed at which this happens depends on how quickly we can phase up zero carbon alternatives, while ensuring energy security, accessibility and affordability," added Al Jaber, who runs the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc).

Jaber defended a COP28 roadmap that includes a "global goal to triple renewable energy, double energy efficiency, and double clean hydrogen, all by 2030."

His comments came as numerous participants and observers in the UN climate negotiations have called on al-Jaber to explicitly acknowledge the importance of ending the use of fossil fuels, an objective no COP summit to date has been able to put down in writing.



Sultan al-Jaber

grew in 2021, and again in Sharm-El-Sheikh in 2022, Adow said this was the year to get it done.

Alden Meyer, a senior policy analyst at climate think tank E3G, called the acknowledgement of the need to phase down fossil fuels "a useful first step".

However he added that the vast majority of emissions reductions to be achieved by 2030 "needs to come from cutting use and production of oil, gas, and coal," rather than from carbon capture or hydrogen.

Ross Fitzpatrick, Policy and Advocacy Officer at Christian Aid Ireland, said it was great to see the COP28 chief "waking up to the inevitability of phasing out fossil fuels".

"The UAE would be a very fitting location to mark the end of the fossil fuel age," he added.

On Wednesday, al-Jaber signed a statement with European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen calling for "a transition towards energy systems free of un-

abated fossil fuels," meaning fossil fuels without carbon capture systems, hinting at a possible compromise in the coming months between different camps in the negotiations.

"We must be laser-focused on phasing out fossil fuel emissions, while phasing up viable, affordable zero carbon alternatives," al-Jaber said at an event in Germany last month.

The statement was interpreted at the time as a defence of oil and gas, on the condition that it is used with carbon capture technologies that are still not mature and remain uncertain.

At the talks in Bonn, the exit from fossil fuel use dominated the talk among activists and experts who pointed to the fact that burning fossil fuels is by far the main driver of global warming.

Activists have organised protests at the Bonn talks calling for energy firms to be kicked out of the climate negotiations.

AFP

UK to scrap energy windfall tax if oil and gas prices drop further

London, UK - The UK government said it would scrap a windfall tax on the energy sector should oil and gas prices drop to historically-normal levels for a sustained period.

The Energy Profits Levy, introduced after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent oil and gas prices surging, increased tax on profits from North Sea oil and gas production to 75 percent from 40 percent.

The government said it would return to 40 percent should average Brent North Sea oil fall to, or below, \$71.40 per barrel for two quarters in a row.

UK gas futures would also need to drop to, or under, 54 pence (68 US cents) per therm over the same period.

It added in a statement that such levels were based on 20-



year historical averages.

On Friday, Brent traded at \$76.22 per barrel and UK gas at 68 pence, with both having fallen sharply in recent months as the supply situation improves.

Should prices remain above historical norms, the windfall tax would remain until October 2028 as previously announced.

The higher tax has helped the state to reduce energy bills for millions of Britons after they soared on tight supplies caused by major oil and gas producer Russia invading Ukraine.

Fossil fuel companies have argued that the windfall tax harms investment in greener energy, a necessary transition as the UK seeks to achieve a net carbon zero economy by 2050.

AFP

Divided Fed expected to rally around US interest rate pause

Washington, US – The US Federal Reserve is widely expected to pause its campaign of interest rate increases on Wednesday to give policymakers more time to assess the economic impact of existing hikes and recent banking stresses.

But members of the rate-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) remain divided going into the meeting on June 13-14, with a minority still pushing for an 11th straight hike to fight inflation, which remains stubbornly above the Fed's long-term target of two percent.

The Fed has raised its benchmark lending rate by five percentage points since March last year, lifting it to between 5.00% to 5.25%.

"I think there is enough support within the community for that pause," EY senior economist Lydia Boussour told AFP.

"But at the same time, the compromise will be that the FOMC will be keen on carrying on retaining that optionality, and really keeping the door open to further tightening," she said.

Senior officials including Fed chair Jerome Powell have indicated they may vote to hold the benchmark lending rate at the next meeting of the Fed's powerful rate-setting committee, while leaving the door open to an additional rate hike in July if neces-



US Fed chief Jerome Powell

sary.

"Skipping a rate hike at a coming meeting would allow the Committee to see more data before making decisions about the extent of additional policy firming," Fed governor Philip Jefferson said late last month.

The data points to a mixed economic picture, with slowing growth, a tight labor market, and inflation still well above the Fed's two percent target.

Jefferson, who was recently nominated for the vacant number two spot at the Fed, added that "a decision to hold our policy rate constant at a coming meeting should not be interpreted to

mean that we have reached the peak rate for this cycle."

But those pushing for a further hike, like Fed governor Christopher Waller, have indicated support for a more aggressive stance on inflation.

"I do not support stopping rate hikes unless we get clear evidence that inflation is moving down towards our two percent objective," Waller said last month, adding: "whether we should hike or skip at the June meeting will depend on how the data come in" before the next decision.

The division among members of the FOMC over the best path

forward has led some traders on a journey, from predicting a pause to expecting a hike – and back again.

Futures traders who as recently as late May were predicting another hike, now see a more-than 70% chance that the Fed will vote to hold rates on Wednesday.

And many analysts now also see a pause as the most likely scenario on Wednesday.

"Chairman Powell is expected to corral the cats and get the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) to skip a rate hike in June, while leaving the door open to hike in July," KPMG Eco-

nomics chief economist Diane Swonk wrote in a recent note to clients.

While most major banks now predict a pause, there are still some notable outliers who expect the Fed to hike rates by another quarter percentage point.

"We are maintaining our call for a 25bp rate hike next week – though admittedly it is a close call," Citi economists wrote in a recent investor note.

If Powell does succeed in winning over a majority of FOMC members for a June pause, analysts expect the Fed to signal through its interest-rate announcement and updated summary of economic projections (SEP) that it expects another rate hike to complete the cycle.

"Among the key innovations for this meeting, we expect the statement will be hawkishly adjusted to note the potential for further tightening at 'coming meetings,'" Deutsche Bank economists wrote in a note to clients.

The SEP will likely show that "appropriate policy may require an additional hike to achieve a 'sufficiently restrictive' stance," they added.

This, analysts say, would help the Fed leave the door open for an additional rate hike if needed, possibly as early as July.

AFP



People select vegetables at a supermarket in Beijing on Saturday (AFP)

China inflation stays low as growth sputters

Beijing, China – Chinese inflation came in flat again in May, official figures showed, as the country's economy sputters owing to softening demand and falling exports, leading to calls for a rate cut and a bigger government stimulus.

The consumer price index (CPI) rose 0.2% on-year, from 0.1% in April, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), said.

The figure was in line with expectations of analysts polled by Bloomberg.

Beijing has kept interest rates low compared to other major economies, but the near-zero inflation highlights challenges faced by policymakers as they try to stimulate the economy.

Top economist and government adviser Liu Yuan Chun on Thursday called for regulators to cut borrowing costs further to ease the financing burden of small and medium-sized private businesses.

Private companies' borrowing costs exceeded that of large state-owned enterprises, Liu said, according to Bloomberg News.

Large state-owned enterprises enjoyed loan rates lower than 1.8% but many private firms had to pay nearly nine per cent, he said on the sidelines of the Lujiazui Forum in Shanghai.

"It'll be better if the rate cut comes as a part of a package of support policies," he said.

China's six largest state-owned commercial banks cut interest rates for savers on Thursday to boost spending, according to announcements on their websites, after being asked by the central bank.

The country's producer price index (PPI) – which measures prices paid by wholesalers – dropped a bigger-than-expected 4.6% in May, from a 3.6% decline in April, and the biggest drop since 2016.

AFP

China-Russia trade hits highest level since start of Ukraine war

Beijing, China – China's total trade with Russia in May soared to levels not seen since the beginning of Moscow's war in Ukraine, official data showed Wednesday, as Beijing steps up support for its sanctions-hit ally.

Trade between the two countries last month was worth \$20.5bn, data from Beijing showed, with Chinese imports from Russia worth \$11.3bn.

There was no official breakdown of the figures, which also showed China's exports more broadly falling for the first time since February – breaking a two-month growth streak as a post-Covid rebound.

Rising global inflation, the threat of recession elsewhere and geopolitical tensions with the United States have weakened demand for Chinese products. But China's trade with Russia bucked the otherwise grim trend for Beijing.



A file photo shows a cargo ship leaving Zhoushan port in Ningbo, China (AFP)

China is Russia's largest trading partner, with trade between them reaching a record \$190bn last year, according to Chinese customs data.

During a summit in March, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin pledged to boost trade to \$200bn in 2023 as they hailed their "no limits" partnership.

And Russian energy deliveries to China were set to grow by 40% this year, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said

last month.

Beijing says it is a neutral party in the Ukraine war, but has been criticised by Western countries for refusing to condemn Moscow and for its close strategic partnership with Russia.

Figures Wednesday also showed exports to Russia rising 75.6% in May, the highest rate since Moscow invaded Ukraine, even as trade with most major European markets and the United States fell.

AFP

US, Britain announce new economic partnership faced with China

Washington, US – The US and British leaders last week announced a new economic partnership that will boost industry ties on defense and renewable energy, in the face of growing competition from China.

On a White House visit, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak adopted an "Atlantic Declaration" with President Joe Biden, who has dashed UK hopes for a wider free trade agreement between post-Brexit Britain and the world's largest economy.

"We face new challenges to international stability – from authoritarian states such as Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC); disruptive technologies; non-state actors; and transnational challenges like climate change," the declaration says.

The document raises one key concern raised by US allies with



US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunaka hold a joint-press conference in the East Room of the White House in (AFP)

Biden – his Inflation Reduction Act, which massively expands US commitment to green energy, hoping for the United States to take the lead over China, by promoting domestic industry.

Under the agreement with Sunak, the two countries will launch "immediate" negotiations on the US treatment of critical

minerals that are used in electric batteries in Britain.

Biden also agreed to ask Congress to designate Britain as a domestic source for defense procurement, to speed up development of next-generation weapons such as hypersonic missiles.

"The UK and US have always pushed the boundaries of what

two countries can achieve together," Sunak said in a statement.

"So it's natural that, when faced with the greatest transformation in our economies since the industrial revolution, we would look to each other to build a stronger economic future together."

The pact will aim to boost the interoperability of US and UK industry and also feed into AUKUS – the new three-way defense alliance among the United States, Britain and Australia that was launched as concerns rise about China's rise.

The two leaders also called for joint efforts to prevent adversaries from using emerging technologies for harm including artificial intelligence, sixth-generation mobile networks and synthetic biology.

AFP

Banking giant UBS set to carve up Credit Suisse after takeover day

Zurich, Switzerland – UBS is set to finalise the takeover of Credit Suisse on Monday, but the hardest part is yet to come: turning the arranged marriage of Switzerland's biggest banks into a success.

Reassuring the financial markets, customers, employees, the government and the public remains a challenge once the mega-merger is completed.

"From Monday onwards, UBS can start being proactive," Andreas Venditti, an analyst at Swiss investment manager Vontobel, told AFP.

Switzerland's largest bank must already have an idea of what bits of Credit Suisse it wants to keep, close or sell, but "so far they were limited in what they could do," he said.

On June 5, the two Zurich-based banks announced that the merger should be completed on

June 12.

A merger this complex could turn out to be a nightmare, particularly given how little time UBS has had.

UBS expects an exceptional accounting gain of nearly \$35bn due to the difference between the purchase price and the recognised net assets of Credit Suisse.

UBS chief executive Sergio Ermotti has warned the coming months will be "bumpy" for the bank.

Takeover preparations have already brought "a first wave" of emotions and difficult decisions, but "other waves" are still to come, he told the Swiss Economic Forum conference in Interlaken on Friday.

He said jobs would be the trickiest part of the merger, adding that cuts were inevitable given the overlap in some activi-



ties.

Shotgun wedding

Like UBS, Credit Suisse was among 30 international banks deemed too big to fail due to their importance in the global banking architecture.

But the collapse of three US regional lenders in March left Credit Suisse looking vulnerable, and its share price plunged more

than 30% during trading on March 15.

The Swiss government, the central bank and financial regulators then stepped in and strong-armed UBS into a \$3.25bn takeover announced on Sunday, March 19, before the markets reopened the following day.

The government feared Credit Suisse would have quickly defaulted and triggered a global

banking crisis.

The deal includes guarantees for UBS in case there are any nasty surprises in the Credit Suisse cupboards.

UBS and the Swiss government signed the guarantee contract on Friday, which can reach up to nine billion Swiss francs (\$9.85bn), if the losses exceed five billion francs.

The takeover terms and the size of the resulting megabank are causing serious concern in Switzerland.

The parliament in Bern has set up an extremely rare commission of inquiry, with lawmakers set to investigate how the emergency rescue was stitched together in double-quick time.

Questions remain

Many questions surrounding the merger remain unanswered. Investors want to know more

about the integration process and the bits of Credit Suisse that will be kept and absorbed.

Venditti said the picture should be clearer once second-quarter financial results come out. UBS has pushed back the publication date by more than a month to August 31.

He said he hopes UBS will say more about the fate of the profitable domestic retail branch of Credit Suisse, the arm that was untouched by the scandals that dogged the bank.

Ipek Ozkardesaya, an analyst at Swissquote Bank, said "talent retention" would be one of the biggest challenges, as staff departs multiply in the face of downsizing fears.

She also highlighted the need for "creating a new bank culture" in the merged institution, referring to the string of scandals that tarnished the Credit Suisse

brand.

From the political standpoint, the financial regulators FINMA "should make sure to protect competition, which could necessitate an eventual spin-off of certain business units", Ozkardesaya told AFP.

The Socialist Party fears the merger will create a "monster" that would be too big to rescue in a crisis -- in which case the whole country would be held "hostage".

The government and the central bank released some 259bn Swiss francs of liquidity to facilitate the takeover.

"We owe it to the youth of this country to ensure that such a crisis cannot happen again," Damien Cottier, the parliamentary leader of the centre-right Liberals party, said in the National Council lower chamber on Wednesday.

AFP

Omantel receives Golden Gear Trophy

Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, received the Golden Gear Trophy for being the largest supporter of the sports sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

The awarding took place in a ceremony held by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth to honour the leaders in sports activities in 2022 and the supporters of the sports sector, under the patronage of H E Dr Hilal bin Ali bin Hilal al Sabti, Minister of Health, and in the presence of Eng Al-addin Bait Fadhil, chief commercial officer at Omantel.

The award recognises Omantel's role and efforts in supporting the youth and sports sector and its initiatives in this regard. Fadhil said, "We are honoured to have received the Golden Gear Trophy once again. It is a testimony to the efforts that we have made to support various sports activities in the Sultanate of Oman last year."

He further said, "Sports and youth are among the main areas of focus for Omantel, and our support for the sports sector is diverse - it includes the sponsor-

ship of sports federations such as sponsoring the Oman's national football team's participation in the Gulf Cup and the Elite football League 'Omantel League'. We also sponsor the Table Tennis Federation, Cricket Federation, Golf Federation, Asian Hockey Federation Cup 2022, International Horse Jumping Championship in Duqm, Asian Amateur Chess Championship, World Cricket Championship qualifiers, and the Oman eSports Championship for sports games."

Besides, Omantel has strengthened its presence in sports by supporting athletes and sports tournaments. It has supported Omani individual athletes like Ahmed al Harthi who participates in international motor-sports arenas, diver Omar al Ghailani, and ultra-trail runner Issa al Abri during the mountain trail running marathon in Thailand. In addition, Omantel supported Abdullah al Jabri in his participation in the World Bodybuilding Championship in Spain.

Omantel has also participated in supporting various local events and has been a partner in the successes achieved by those differ-



ent events, such as the conclusion of His Majesty's Football Cup, the sponsorship of the final of His Majesty's Cup for Hockey in 2022, sponsorship of the School Sports Union, sponsorship of the Bashair Festival for Arabian Camel Racing, sponsorship of sports activities and military teams for the year 2022 (Ministry of Defense), sponsorship of the Muscat Fitness, Bodybuilding and Physical Strength Championship, the first of its kind in Oman, sponsorship of the World Pioneers Table Tennis Championship hosted by the Omani Table Tennis Federation, sponsorship of the Tour of Oman 2022 for cycling, and support for the Women's Sports and Creativity Club for the year 2022.

Furthermore, Omantel supports the efforts of the Sultanate of Oman in hosting international sporting events, which enhance the country's presence on the global sports map. This is achieved through collaboration with various sports-related entities in Oman with the aim of introducing various sports and encouraging youth participation in them.

Hamriyah Free Zone inks pact with Infinite Mining

The Hamriyah Free Zone Authority (HFZA) has cemented its leading position and appeal for investment in the oil and energy sector following a deal with an Indian company - Infinite Mining & Energy.

Infinite announced that is going to double its investment in the free zone and establish a multifunctional oil refinery. The new facility will have a daily production capacity of 10,000 barrels and an annual refining capability of up to 3.6 million barrels, a press release said.

H E Saud Salim al Mazrouei, director of HFZA, and Bilal Merchant, managing director of Infinite Mining & Energy FZE, signed an agreement at HFZA headquarters in the presence of senior officials from both sides.

Under the agreement, Infinite will lease a 200,000sqft plot of land in the free zone to build its facilities. This expansion is expected to significantly increase the company's storage capacity, catering to the growing demand for its services and products.

The Infinite's strategic decision to expand in the free zone comes as no surprise. HFZA is known for providing integrated solutions for exploration, production, and refining projects.

Moreover, the free zone serves as a prosperous hub for regional and international companies specializing in the oil industry.

With an ideal business environment and a system of exceptional services and benefits, HFZA continues to stand as a



H.E. Saud Salim al Mazrouei and Bilal Merchant.

prominent industrial base for international companies in the sector. This latest investment by Infinite further underscores HFZA's success in attracting key players in the oil and energy industries.

H E Saud Salim al Mazrouei said Infinite's new expansion plans demonstrates HFZA's leading reputation as a preferred investment destination for heavy industries and the petrochemical sector.

"This also reinforces HFZA's appeal and significance in the oil, energy, and various other sectors, a testament to our commitment to the visions and directives of H H Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, which have transformed the free zone into a role model, showcasing a strong return on investment and an ideal environment for establishing key projects, thereby becoming a vital contributor to the national economy," he said.

Mazrouei added, "Infinite's new facility will be a significant addition to the emirate's burgeoning economic landscape through its production volume, which caters to the demand for energy products and derivatives for both existing and future industrial projects."

Elaborating further on the strategic decision of Infinite Mining & Energy, Mazrouei said the company's choice of Hamriyah Free Zone to establish a multifunctional oil refinery underscores the high global standards and the favourable investment climate HFZA offers to investors in the energy and oil sectors.

"As of today, the free zone houses over 1,200 companies, including major international corporations specializing in this sector. They operate within a dedicated area for petrochemical industries, which boasts a strategic location and is connected to a commercial port with a depth of 14 meters."

Ariston Middle East celebrates sustainable green solutions

Ariston Middle East acknowledges and celebrates Oman Government's initiatives at promoting sustainability and encouraging its own entities as well as private companies to look for greener solutions.

"We applaud the progress Oman has made in environmental awareness over the past years. Government policy clearly encourages clean energy and a reduced carbon footprint, paving the way for government departments, private companies and even individuals to emulate actions that protect the environment. We appreciate our customers who have chosen to opt for energy efficient systems for water heating," Said Alberto Torner, head of Ariston Group in the Middle East, Turkey, and Caucasus, on

the occasion of World Environment Day's 50th anniversary on June 5.

Ariston Middle East, part of the 93-year Ariston Group, markets a range of water heating solutions comprising of electric water heaters, solar systems, heat pump solutions and gas boilers in the UAE. Over the last two decades, Ariston Middle East has increased its commitment to sustainability through the deployment of renewable and high-efficiency solutions, such as solar systems and heat pumps across varied projects in the country, a press release said.

A high-profile Oman project that has leveraged Ariston's solar system is the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), headquarters in Al Khuwair. It is

a large complex made up of IPA Offices, retail outlets and an Intercity Hotel. The Institute of Public Administration Headquarters site is approximately 28,000sqm with a capacity to train 20,000 trainees per year. The hotel has 285 rooms and 3 conference events rooms over an area of 340sqm. The project uses a solar heating system backed up with an electrical system of 4x4000L cylinders to cater to a capacity of 16000L.

Other prominent sites with installations of solar heating backed by electrical systems are the Alila Resort in Salalah and Green Adventure Peak Resort. Currently, the ongoing projects include the Hawana hotel by Muriya and the Ministry of Energy and Minerals in

Muscat.

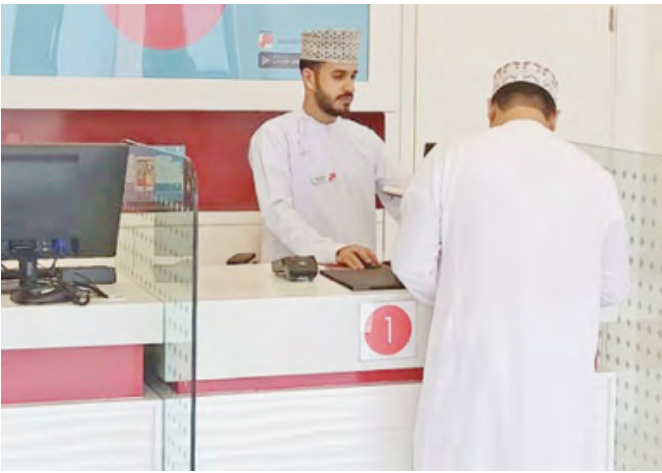
Heat Pumps, another sustainable solution from Ariston, have been used in a wide variety of projects from hotels to buildings, villas, offices, and shopping centres around the region. Heat pumps use a thermodynamic cycle to heat the water through the air sucked by the thermal group inverting the heat's natural flow.

Nizwa Museum uses heat pumps to heat water within its facility. Located in Nizwa, the crossroads of Oman, the Museum Project is a cultural and educational hallmark for locals and visitors. Commissioned by the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, the museum is a celebration of the country's economic, cultural and social renaissance since the 1970s.

Ooredoo opens latest franchise store in Dakhliyah

Committed to providing an unrivalled customer experience to an ever-wider audience in Oman, Ooredoo recently opened its 46th franchise store in Izki in Dakhliyah region.

The store, operated by Khimji Ramdas Group, is the latest and 11th addition to Ooredoo's successful franchise partnership with the leading business conglomerate. The opening is part of Ooredoo's expansion strategy as the new store will offer a range of products, services, and digital so-



lutions to people residing in the area, while the sales team will understand the needs of the local market and focus on building close relationships with all customers, a press release said.

Ooredoo has been expanding into new areas to reach new audiences who are now able to benefit from the company's many value-added, state-of-the-art digital solutions, including cost-effective bundles, high-speed data, unlimited packages, and excellent connectivity.

Second edition of Next World Forum returns in August

The biggest names in the world of international gaming and esports will gather in Riyadh for the second edition of the Next World Forum, a major global industry gathering created to shape the future of the rapidly evolving sector through knowledge exchange, discourse and debate.

This year's edition will build on 2022's success through an agenda that will explore opportunities and drive evolution in the space, with high-profile guests leading discussions and deep analysis of a business that

has a global worth of US\$170bn, more than Hollywood and the music industry combined. The Next World Forum takes place at the Four Seasons Hotel Riyadh at Kingdom Center from August 30-31, a press release said.

Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Sultan, chairman of the Saudi Esports Federation, said, "The Next World Forum is an important event on the global calendar for the gaming and esports industry. It provides a unique platform for leading industry figures to engage in challenging conversa-



Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Sultan

tions and sessions, asking tough questions that contribute to shaping the future of the sector.

"By bringing together leaders and experts from around the world, the event is fostering a

culture of enquiry, collaboration and knowledge sharing, and creating an environment where new models of working can be debated, discussed and developed to create a positive impact on the industry.

"It is evident that Esports and gaming are becoming valid career paths for many, not just in Saudi but globally. The Next World Forum will generate dialogue and offer insights that enable these individuals - from across the industry - to better understand the landscape as it grows and evolves."

Scheduled main stage sessions at the Next World Forum in August include: From Pixels To Podiums: Examining The Relationship Between Esports And The Olympics; Creating The Gold Standard Of The Competitive Gaming Scene; Breaking The Code: The Challenges For Women In Gaming Leadership; Press The Pause Button: Analyzing Esports Players' Mental And Physical Health; and many more.

Scheduled speakers include ministers of sport from leading nations, investors, gamers, developers, tech providers, start-

ups, public sector representatives, brands and advertisers, publishers, broadcasters, and federations and leagues.

Organised by the Saudi Esports Federation, this year's Next World Forum will also launch the Gamers8 Club Awards, a new and innovative rewards format that will revolutionise the world of esports. The Forum additionally will bring the curtain down on Gamers8: The Land of Heroes, the biggest gaming and esports festival worldwide, slated to begin on July 6 at Boulevard Riyadh City.

Alizz Islamic Bank launches 'Manahil Alizz'

Alizz Islamic Bank proudly announced the launch of 'Manahil Alizz' internship programme during a celebratory event which has been designed to empower and prepare third year university and college students and augment their capabilities by equipping them with the essential skills and knowledge required to successfully enter and thrive in the job market.

The programme aims to not only enhance their leadership, personal development and project management skills but also teach them how to overcome challenges in the business sector and find suitable solutions, a press release said.

The programme will broaden the students' perspectives and equip them with skills beyond their academic specialisation. This holistic approach is demonstrated through a comprehensive range of lectures and classes encompassing topics such as Islamic economics, Islamic banking, endowment (waqf), voluntary work, and



other relevant disciplines.

Additionally, the 3-month programme boasts a distinguished group of both internal and external experts, including specialised instructors well-versed in the principles and regulations of Islamic law as it pertains to Islamic banking. Alizz Islamic Bank's Learning and Development Department

has meticulously crafted an integrated curriculum that seamlessly blends theoretical knowledge with practical training.

The inaugural batch of the programme consists of 21 male and female students from various universities and colleges across the sultanate. The selection process involved nomina-

tions from their respective academic institutions and Alizz Islamic bank has meticulously prepared a suitable framework, comprehensive curriculum and high-level classes and sessions to enhance their educational skills using the latest modern techniques.

This approach ensures that knowledge is accessible to all

students, obtained flexibly and easily equips them to understand the corporate working environment, banking sector characteristics and fostering innovative thinking that enables them to become decision-makers and effective initiators in addressing key industry needs.

Ali al Mani, general manager of Alizz Islamic Bank, empha-

sised that the demand for specialised personnel in the Islamic banking sector has led to the development of this programme. Its primary objective is to provide students with theoretical and practical knowledge of Islamic banking, including its principles which are based on Islamic Shari'a and the fundamental distinctions between Is-

lamic and conventional banks.

"Given the continuous growth of the sector and the scarcity of specialisations in Islamic banking within universities and colleges, our commitment extends beyond the provision of banking services. We place great importance on education, training and development," he said.

Ministry of Education organises AI Day

Under the auspices of H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, the activities of 'Artificial Intelligence Day' kicked-off on Sunday in the presence of the undersecretaries, advisors and directors-general of the directorates-general of the Ministry's General Diwan and in the governorates.

The meeting is organised by the Ministry of Education represented by the Directorate-General of Information Technology and took place in W hotel Muscat, a press release said. It aimed to shed light on global developments in the field of artificial intelligence applications, and practical training on some generative artificial intelligence tools that can be employed in various fields of institutional work.

The meeting began with the opening speech, which was formulated using artificial intelligence (Chat-GPT), stating "We are here today to discuss and explore the prospects for digital transformation and artificial intelligence in the Sultanate of Oman. Artificial intelligence is not just a new technology, but rather a technical revolution that changed the features of the world and contributed to its transfer to a new era of progress, innovation and transformation that forms the essence of the fourth digital revolution by integrating it into all aspects of life for a brighter and civilized future. The Sultanate of Oman, thanks to its strategic vision and continuous efforts, is considered one of the leading countries in this field, through investing in research and development and adopting



advanced technologies. The sultanate is also working to promote innovation in artificial intelligence and transform it into powerful tools that enable digital transformation."

The meeting included the presentation of a number of papers specialised in artificial intelligence. Dr Salim al Shua'li, director of the Artificial Intelligence Projects Department for Advanced Technologies at the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology, presented the first paper in which he shed light on global developments in the field of artificial intelligence and the national programme for artificial intelligence issued by the Ministry of Transport, Communica-

tions, and Information Technology, and the hoped-for institutional role in this field during the coming period.

Dr Faisal al Busaidi, director general of the Directorate-General of Information Technology, presented a paper entitled 'Training on Using Artificial Intelligence Applications', which included a detailed explanation of the generative artificial intelligence program Chat GPT, its mechanism, and practical applications on using it in the field of institutional work for senior leadership positions by focusing on applications related to the areas of work with a comprehensive practical guide in this field. The paper also included a practical explanation of some

other applications of artificial intelligence such as the application of artificial intelligence of Google and other smart applications.

Dr Fengechun Miao, head of the Artificial Intelligence Unit at the United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), and Dr Holmes, Professor of Artificial Intelligence in Education at the University College London, both presented a paper entitled 'Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Education' which reviewed artificial intelligence technology and its impact on education, and its reflection on the performance of the school, the student, and the teacher. The paper also presented recommendations re-

lated to this aspect with the aim of benefiting from it in light of the Ministry's plans during the next stage.

In the last paper, titled 'The Future Plan for the Use of Artificial Intelligence in School Education', Dr Busaidi discussed the benefits of using artificial intelligence in the educational process and its importance in the field of institutional work. The paper reviewed the ministry's short-term plan in the field of using artificial intelligence applications, which includes the formation of a national team for artificial intelligence, the establishment of an observatory for new smart applications and other short-term future measures.

Oman Air offers more flights to Bahrain and Doha

Oman Air has announced the expansion of its flight services to Bahrain and Doha, offering passengers increased convenience and flexibility.

As of this month, the airline is operating 11 flights per week between Muscat and Bahrain, while flights between Muscat and Doha will increase from 21 to 35 a week on 24 June. Part of its summer schedule, the airline is offering a range of convenient timings, from early in the morning to late at night, enabling guests to seamlessly plan business trips, weekend getaways and even daytrips, a press release said.

Connecting Muscat to major cities across the GCC, Oman Air also offers 35 flights a week to



Dubai, 21 flights a week to Riyadh and Jeddah, and 14 flights a week to Kuwait. Meanwhile, it continues to cater to the increasing number of Muscat-based travellers who are choosing to holiday in the region. Wherever the destination, the enhanced flight schedule allows travelers to optimise their plans and enjoy a smooth and seamless travel experience.

Minister of Education meets CEO, chairman of OPAL board



H E Dr Madiha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, met with Dr Amer bin Awad al Rawas, Chairman of Board of Directors of Oman Energy Association (OPAL), and Eng Abdul Rahman bin Humaid al Yahyai, CEO of the OPAL.

The meeting comes with the aim of discussing ways to strengthen the partnership between the ministry and OPAL in the field of vocational and technical education in the post-basic education stage, considering that OPAL is the strategic partner of the ministry in applying some engineering and industrial specialisations starting from the academic year 2024-25 in a

number of schools in the governorates of Muscat and North Al Batinah, a press release said.

The Ministry also intends to establish other similar partnerships with various economic sectors in the Sultanate of Oman during the coming years within the framework of the gradual expansion of the application of vocational and technical education in the rest of the governorates.

It is worth noting that the Ministry is continuing to take executive measures to implement vocational and technical education in the fields of business administration and information technology, starting from the next academic year 2023-24.

Al Madina Takaful continuously achieves precedence

Al Madina Takaful has gone beyond adopting the latest corporate social responsibility world system, the Human Social Responsibility (HSR) policy.

Taking it a step further, the company established a new precedent by implementing the practical aspect through a simulation game rooted in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030, a press release said.

Al Madina Takaful recently organised five workshops for its Omani employees as a significant step in instilling a social



and human responsibility culture among all staff members. What set these workshops apart was the inclusion of a practical aspect, where participants actively engaged in creating a balanced world by employing the tools of the Human Social Responsibility system (5x5x5) and Social Innovation tools (3x5x3). Through these workshops, participants discovered the essentiality of concerted efforts, cooperation, and investing their time and resources to achieve a truly balanced world.

The workshops also intro-

duced another ground-breaking approach by implementing the 'crow-rule' in seeking sustainable and creative solutions within the work environment. This approach falls under the umbrella of internal human social responsibility, a crucial aspect often overlooked by many companies that adhere to traditional styles of social responsibility. By embracing this innovative approach, Al Madina Takaful set a new precedent in promoting a culture of internal responsibility and fostering sustainable practices within the organisation.

IN BRIEF

Several killed in Vietnam police station attacks

Hanoi, Vietnam - Several people were killed and wounded in shootings at two police headquarters in Vietnam's Central Highlands on Sunday, authorities said. Six people were arrested in connection with the shootings in Cu Kuin district of Dak Lak province, according to the ministry of public security's website. Investigators were searching for more suspects, it said.

The attacks on the police headquarters of both Ea Tieu and Ea Ktur communes occurred in the early hours of Sunday, according to the site.

It said a number of people, including police, local officials and civilians were killed and wounded but did not provide exact figures.

Police could not be reached immediately be reached for comment.

Staffer among victims of Somalia hotel siege

Nairobi, Kenya - An employee with the World Health Organization was among those killed in the weekend siege of a beachside hotel in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, the head of the UN health agency said on Sunday.

The siege left six civilians dead and another 10 wounded, according to police.

"I'm heartbroken that we have lost a WHO staff member in the recent attack in #Mogadishu, #Somalia," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director general, tweeted on Sunday.

"My heartfelt condolences to their families and to everyone who lost a loved one," he said. "We condemn all attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers."

The Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab have been waging an insurgency against the internationally backed federal government in Somalia for more than 15 years and have often targeted hotels, which tend to host high-ranking Somali and foreign officials.

Teenager killed in Sweden shooting

Stockholm, Sweden - A 15-year-old boy was killed and three other people injured in a shooting in Stockholm on Saturday, police said, adding that a motive had yet to be established. Police received reports of the shooting near a square in southern Stockholm in the early evening, and found two people with gunshot wounds at the scene.

Another two were found injured nearby.

The teenager succumbed to his wounds while the others were taken to hospital.

"The person who died at the scene is a boy aged 15," Towe Hagg, spokeswoman for Stockholm police, told AFP.

Another 15-year-old boy was injured, as were a man and a woman aged between 45 and 65, police said in a statement.

AFP

Indigenous upbringing helped children survive Amazon ordeal

Bogotá, Colombia - Lost for 40 days in the Colombian Amazon, four Indigenous children survived eating seeds, roots and plants they knew were edible thanks to their upbringing.

And it was in part down to the local knowledge of Indigenous adults involved in the search alongside Colombian troops that they were ultimately found alive.

"The survival of the children is a sign of the knowledge and relationship with the natural environment that is taught starting in the mother's womb," according to the National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia (OPIAC).

The four siblings survived a small plane crash on May 1 that took the lives of the pilot, their mother and a third adult. The family of the children clung to hope that the siblings' familiarity with the jungle would see them through.

The 'children of the bush', as their grandfather called them, survived eating yucca flour that was aboard the doomed plane, and scavenging from relief parcels dropped by search helicopters. But they also ate seeds, fruits, roots and plants that they identified as edible from their upbringing in the Amazon re-



Colombia's First Lady Veronica Alcocer (left) and Sofia Petro, daughter of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, visiting one of the four Indigenous children, at the Military Hospital in Bogotá on Saturday (AFP)

gion, Luis Acosta of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), told AFP.

'Spiritual force'

Acosta, who took part in search operations, said the children were imbued with 'spiritual force'.

That is a shared perception among Indigenous leaders, and Acosta noted that a guardian was to be posted outside the military hospital where doctors were attending to the children

to help accompany them 'spiritually'. "We have a particular connection to nature," Javier Betancourt, another ONIC leader, told AFP.

"The world needs this kind of special relation with nature, to favour those like the Indigenous who live in the jungle and take care of it."

During the search, soldiers worked side by side with Indigenous trackers for 20 days.

President Gustavo Petro praised what he called a 'meet-

ing of Indigenous and military knowledge' that he said showed respect for the jungle.

Army helicopters broadcast recordings of the childrens' grandmother telling them in the Indigenous Huitoto language to stay put in one spot until rescuers reached them.

"It was President Petro who brought us together," Acosta told local media, referring to soldiers and Indigenous experts.

"In an initial meeting, eight days before our search began,

The four siblings survived a small plane crash on May 1 that took the lives of the pilot, their mother and a third adult. The family of children clung to hope that the siblings' familiarity with the jungle would see them through

the president told us we needed to go with the army because the army couldn't do it alone," he added.

A winning combo

More than 80 volunteers from Indigenous territories in the departments of Caqueta, Putumayo, Meta and Amazonas joined around 100 soldiers in what was dubbed 'Operation Hope'.

It was an unusual union of forces.

In many of Colombia's Indigenous territories, armed outlaw groups roam and easily

coerce native peoples, who protect their lands with rudimentary weapons. Relations between Indigenous communities and the armed forces are also strained.

But in the Guaviare department, rescuers from separate groups set their differences aside to work together.

While soldiers planned operational details, native searchers held rituals to communicate with jungle 'spirits', using mambe, a paste made of coca leaf and ash, as well as chirrinchi, a fermented drink.

Using machetes, rescuers felled trees and marked them with spray paint to guide the children.

Indigenous medicinal knowledge was also used to adapt to the difficult jungle conditions, treating scratches, splinters, insect bites, exhaustion and physical pain.

The indigenous people have 'worked in the rain, in storms and in many difficult situations, but always with the hope and spiritual faith that (the children) could be found', Acosta said.

It all led to the discovery of the siblings by an Indigenous tracker in an area that hadn't yet been explored.

AFP

Philippine volcano spews ash, thousands evacuated

Manila, Philippines - Thousands of people living near a Philippine volcano have taken shelter in evacuation centres as officials warned on Sunday of health risks from ash and toxic gases spewing from the rumbling crater.

Seismology researchers said they had recorded at least one volcanic earthquake in the past 24 hours and red-hot rocks were falling from Mount Mayon in the central province of Albay.

More than 12,800 people have been moved to evacuation centres, the Philippine civil defence office said, most from farming villages at or near the foot of the volcano.

"There is a concomitant health risk while being close to the eruption because of inhaling sulphur dioxide gas or the particulate matter of ashfalls," Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa told a press briefing on Sunday.

Mayon, about 330km (205 miles) southeast of the capital Manila, is considered one of the most volatile of the country's 24 active volcanoes.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said rocks were falling from a disinte-



Residents board a government vehicle as they evacuate their village due to an eruption threat from nearby Mayon volcano, in Daraga on Friday (AFP)

grating lava dome being pushed out of the crater by molten material below the earth.

The rocks were raining down on areas up to two kilometres away and sulphur dioxide emissions had tripled on Saturday, state volcanologists said.

A five-step alert system for the volcano was raised from two to three on Thursday, with authorities warning of possible respiratory illnesses from inhaling fumes. "With Albay in a state of calamity due to Mayon's activity, we remind people to follow the recommendations and evacua-

tion instructions of your local governments," Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said on Saturday. Earthquakes and volcanic activity are common in the Philippines due to its position on the Pacific 'Ring of Fire' where tectonic plates collide.

Five years ago, Mayon displaced tens of thousands of people after spewing millions of tonnes of ash, rocks and lava.

The country's most powerful eruption in recent decades was Mount Pinatubo in 1991 that killed more than 800 people.

AFP

Trump rallies supporters after explosive indictment

Columbus, Georgia - Donald Trump addressed his supporters on Saturday for the first time since his indictment on multiple federal charges propelled the 2024 presidential election race into uncharted and potentially destabilising territory.

The 37 counts of the indictment - released on Friday and focused on his alleged mishandling of classified materials - set the former president up for a far more severe legal reckoning than the charges of personal, political and commercial misconduct he has largely ridden out in the past.

And it also sets the stage for a White House race like no other before it, with President Joe Biden's Department of Justice pursuing the prosecution of the clear front-runner for the Republican nomination.

Trump, who has already denounced what he insists is a politically-motivated witch hunt, is talking at two state Republican conventions in Georgia and then North Carolina, and was widely expected to use both platforms to attack the FBI and accuse federal prosecutors of unfairly tar-



Donald Trump gestures as he speaks at the North Carolina Republican Party Convention in Greensboro, North Carolina, on Saturday (AFP)

getting him.

In Columbus, Georgia, Trump railed against Biden and the Department of Justice and what he called a 'fake indictment', telling the crowd he was being pursued in court because of his bid for a second term in the White House.

"That's why they're doing it, if I wasn't, there would be no witch hunt, there would be no indictment," he told supporters.

The two events come just days before Trump is due to appear in federal court in Miami to answer the explosive charges he put US national security 'at risk' by willfully retaining classified defense information, conspiring

to obstruct justice, corruptly concealing documents, and making false statements. The charges, brought by Justice Department Special Counsel Jack Smith, carry up to 20 years in prison each.

Trump has already responded to the indictment with a string of posts on his Truth Social platform and a video statement, calling Smith 'deranged' and a 'Trump hater' and framing the prosecution as election interference orchestrated by Biden and his campaign. "They come after me because now we're leading in the polls again by a lot against Biden," he said.

AFP

'Unabomber', whose attacks terrorised US, dies in prison

Washington, US - Ted Kaczynski, known as the 'Unabomber', who terrorised Americans from 1978 to 1995 with his sporadic, anonymous bombing campaign, died in prison on Saturday, US authorities said.

Kaczynski, 81, whose attacks killed three people and injured two dozen, was found unresponsive at 00:25am (0425 GMT) at a federal prison medical centre in Butner, North Carolina, said the Federal Bureau of Prisons. He was taken to the hospital, where he was officially pronounced dead later in the morning. The reclusive Harvard-educated mathematician, whose targets ranged from academics to random civilians,

had a self-professed goal of halting the advance of modern technology and society, mounting his campaign of violence from a shack in rural Montana.

His bombs were either hand delivered or mailed over nearly two decades, confounding investigators looking to bring him to justice.

It was only after Kaczynski's capture and the revelation of his identity that the FBI uncovered his previous life - one where he scored 167 on an IQ test and entered university at just 16.

The nickname of 'Unabomber' came from his targeting of a university and an airline company, leading the FBI to dub him the 'University and Airline

Bomber'.

A nation on edge

The seemingly random nature of Kaczynski's bombings put the nation on edge, and at one point they brought a halt to air travel on the West Coast in July 1995.

But it would turn out that while Kaczynski picked his victims without knowing them, he selected them using extreme anti-technology views to justify the attacks.

Targets included an advertising executive, an airline president and a computer scientist. But in some cases, his bombs ended up injuring those unlucky enough to accidentally be on



Ted Kaczynski (AFP)

the receiving end of a concealed explosive.

In September 1995, *The Washington Post* published his 35,000-word anti-modernity manifesto, part of a joint effort with the *New York Times*, based on a promise that he would stop his bombing campaign if it

Kaczynski's bombs were either hand delivered or mailed confounding investigators looking to bring him to justice

were printed.

Federal authorities at the time urged the papers to go through with the move.

Upon reading it, Kaczynski's estranged brother David thought he might know the author, and alerted the FBI to his suspicions.

Life in prison

After his 1996 arrest, Kaczynski was convicted to life in prison in 1998. When his lawyers tried to enter a plea of insanity, Kaczynski asked the court to dismiss them, and rejected a diagnosis that he was a paranoid schizophrenic.

Kaczynski pleaded guilty, which helped him avoid the death penalty - and put a stop to any insanity plea.

He was given four life sentences, plus 30 years in a case prosecuted by Merrick Garland, who now serves as the US attorney general.

Kaczynski was long held in a high-security prison in Colorado nicknamed the 'Alcatraz of the

Rockies' - one that has also held the likes of drug kingpin Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman and would-be Al-Qaeda suicide pilot Zacarias Moussaoui. He was transferred in 2021 to the health centre in North Carolina.

Born in Chicago and raised in a bookish household, the fact that Kaczynski was a loner was not surprising to those who knew him. But his revelation as a killer shocked his family.

"What could I have done to keep him out of the wilderness?" his mother, Wanda Kaczynski, said in an interview with *The Post* in June 1996. "What could I have done to give him a happier life?... I just don't know."

AFP

Iran’s Khamenei urges cooperation with UN nuclear watchdog

Tehran, Iran - Iran’s supreme leader on Sunday urged continued cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog, while warning against succumbing to ‘bullying’ based on ‘unfounded claims’.

“Cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) within the framework of safeguards regulations should be maintained,” Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said during a meeting with Iranian nuclear scientists, experts and officials.

In his Sunday speech, the supreme leader said agreements could be reached in certain fields, but stressed that ‘the existing infrastructure of the nuclear industry should not be touched’.

Iran’s Atomic Energy Organisation ‘need not succumb to the pressure of unfounded claims and demands based on bullying’, Khamenei said, without specifying the demands or claims.

Iran’s nuclear programme has long been the subject of scrutiny from Western powers, resulting in sanctions that have crippled the country’s economy.

A 2015 nuclear accord between Iran and world powers gave the Islamic republic relief from international sanctions in return for curbs on its atomic



Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (centre) visiting an exhibition of the country’s nuclear industry achievements in Tehran, on Sunday (AFP)

programme.

But in 2018 the United States unilaterally withdrew from the deal and reimposed sanctions, prompting Tehran to walk back its own commitments to restrict nuclear activity including uranium enrichment.

Efforts to revive the deal have so far failed to yield results.

In late May, after months of wrangling over the question of traces of nuclear material found in previously undeclared sites, the UN agency announced progress and declared the file closed.

However, the watchdog also noted that Iran has significantly increased its stockpile of enriched uranium in recent months.

Iran has always denied any ambition to develop nuclear weapons capability, insisting that its activities are entirely peaceful.

Khamenei on Sunday reiterated the denial of moves towards acquiring a nuclear weapon, in keeping with ‘our Islamic principles’.

“Otherwise they would not have been able to stop it,” he continued, “just as they have not been able to stop our nuclear progress until now.”

AFP

Clashes resume in Sudan as 24-hour ceasefire ends

Khartoum, Sudan - Shelling and gunfire resumed on Sunday in the Sudanese capital, witnesses said, after the end of a 24-hour ceasefire that had given civilians rare respite from nearly two months of war.

Deadly fighting has raged in the northeast African country since mid-April, when army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), turned on each other.

The latest in a series of ceasefire agreements enabled civilians trapped in the capital Khartoum to venture outside and stock up on food and other essential supplies.

But only 10 minutes after it ended at 6am (0400 GMT) on Sunday the capital was rocked again by shelling and clashes, witnesses told AFP.

Heavy artillery fire was heard in Khartoum and its twin city Omdurman to the north, and fighting also erupted on Al-Hawa Street, a major artery in the south of the capital, they said.

Multiple truces have been agreed and broken, including even after the United States had slapped sanctions on both rival



A house is seen damaged after it was hit by an artillery shell in southern khartoum on Sunday (AFP)

Darfur, killing upwards of 1,800 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Nearly two million people have been displaced, including 476,000 who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, the United Nations says.

Over 200,000 have entered Egypt, mostly by land.

But Cairo on Saturday announced it was toughening re-

Multiple truces have been agreed and broken, even after the US slapped sanctions on both rival generals

been announced by US and Saudi mediators who warned that if it failed they may break off mediation efforts.

Egypt toughens visa rules

The two warring sides had ‘agreed to allow the unimpeded movement and delivery of humanitarian assistance throughout the country’, the Saudi foreign ministry said on Saturday.

‘Should the parties fail to observe the 24-hour ceasefire, facilitators will be compelled to consider adjourning’ talks in the Saudi city of Jeddah which have been suspended since late last month, it added. The mediators said they ‘share the frustration of the Sudanese people about the uneven implementation of previous ceasefires’.

The fighting has gripped Khartoum and the western region of



The bodies of three Iraqi soldiers who were killed in a pre-dawn attack are repatriated from Kirkuk airport in northern Iraq on Sunday (AFP)

Militants kill three Iraq soldiers, says military official

Kirkuk, Iraq - Three Iraqi soldiers were killed and four others wounded on Sunday in a pre-dawn attack in the country’s north blamed on the Islamic State group, a military official said.

The assailants used automatic weapons in the attack on their barracks in Wadi al-Naft, about 25km (15 miles) west of the city of Kirkuk, the official said on condition of anonymity. “Three soldiers, including two officers, were killed, and four other soldiers were wounded,” the official told AFP. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

The attack occurred in an area disputed between Iraq’s federal government, which holds Kirkuk, and the country’s autonomous northern region of Kurdistan.

IS militants seized swathes of Iraq and neighbouring Syria in 2014, declaring a ‘caliphate’ which they ruled with brutality before their defeat in late 2017 by Iraqi forces backed by a US-led military coalition.

Despite the setbacks, the extremist group can still call on an underground network of fighters to carry out attacks on both sides of the porous border, the United Nations says.

In April, the international coalition set up to fight the Sunni Muslim extremists said there had been a reduction in IS attacks in both Iraq and Syria.

In March, a senior Iraqi military official said IS had between 400 and 500 active fighters in the Shiite-majority country.

AFP

EU offers financial aid to Tunisia to boost economy

Tunis, Tunisia - The European Union on Sunday offered major financial support to crisis-hit Tunisia, to boost its economy and reduce the flow of irregular migrants across the Mediterranean Sea.

The North African country, highly indebted and in talks for an IMF bailout loan, is a gateway for migrants and asylum-seekers attempting the dangerous voyages to Europe.

The EU is ready to offer Tunisia a €900mn package plus €150mn in immediate support, European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen said on a joint visit with the Italian and Dutch prime ministers.

Aside from trade and investment, it would help Tunisia with border management and to combat human trafficking, with support worth €100mn this year, she said.

“We both have a vast interest in breaking the cynical business model of smugglers and traffickers,” said von der Leyen. “It is horrible to see how they deliberately risk human lives for profit.”

She said other EU projects would help Tunisia export clean renewable energy to the

bloc, and deliver high speed broadband, all with the aim of creating ‘jobs and boost growth here in Tunisia’.

Von der Leyen, after talks with President Kais Saied, said she hoped an EU-Tunisia agreement could be signed at the next European summit later this month.

‘Long and difficult road’

She stressed that the EU is Tunisia’s top trade and investment partner and had ‘supported Tunisia’s path to democracy’ since it became the birthplace of the Arab Spring revolts in 2011, ‘a long and difficult road’.

Von der Leyen visited Tunisia with Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte, for talks with Saied, who has assumed near total governing powers over the country since 2021. EU governments, under pressure to reduce migrant arrivals, last week agreed on steps to fast-track migrant returns to their countries of origin or transit countries deemed ‘safe’, including Tunisia.

AFP

Syrians turn plastic waste into rugs to make a living

Hezreh, Syria - At a rubbish dump in northwest Syria, Mohammed Behlal rummages for plastic to be sold to recyclers and transformed into floor rugs and other items in the impoverished rebel enclave.

In rebel-held Syria, recycling is rarely an environmental impulse but rather a grim lifeline for needy residents looking for work or items they otherwise could not afford.

Braving the stench, insects and risk of disease, 39-year-old Behlal hacks through the rubbish pile with a scythe and his bare hands. He and two of his six children earn a living sifting through the refuse in Idlib province’s village of Hezreh, earning US\$7 to US\$10 a week each.

“It’s tiring... but what can we do, we have to put up with this hard labour,” said Behlal, who was displaced from neighbouring Aleppo province during Syria’s civil war.

“Thank God, at least we have work with the trash,” he added.

Behlal was shot in the leg during fighting and has had trouble finding employment.

Hunched over to collect pieces of plastic or metal, he throws everything into a bag to sell to a nearby scrap facility.

Syria’s conflict has killed more than 500,000 people, and around half of the country’s pre-



A child works at a factory making mats and rugs from recycled plastic, in Sarmada in Syria’s Idlib province (AFP)

war population has been forced from their homes since fighting broke out in 2011.

More than four million people, most of them dependent on aid, live in areas controlled by militants and Turkish-backed groups in Syria’s north and northwest. In a large scrapyard next to agricultural fields, workers sort plastic junk loosely into piles according to colour.

They then cut it up and crush it into small pieces that are washed and melted into plastic

pellets.

Plastic thread

Farhan Sleiman, 29, is among those who handle the material brought in from the landfill.

“We buy plastic from roaming trash-picker trucks and children,” said Sleiman, originally from Homs province.

He expressed fear of the risk of contracting ‘cholera or chronic illnesses’ from working with the rubbish.

Elsewhere in northern Idlib province, workers at a factory making mats and rugs churn out brightly coloured plastic thread while large weaving machines click and clack.

Factory owner Khaled Rashi, 34, says rug-making is a family tradition.

‘We have more than 30 employees’ at the factory, he boasted as a significant feat in a region where many are jobless.

Large mats featuring geometric designs, some made with striking red or purple plastic

thread, emerge from the weaving machines and are stacked into piles. Shop owner Mohammed al-Qassem, 30, is among those selling the mats, which he says are a hit in an area where many people are displaced and live in basic tents or makeshift

In rebel-held Syria, recycling is rarely an environmental impulse but rather a grim lifeline for needy residents looking for work or items they otherwise could not afford

dwellings.

The mats made from recycled plastic cost between US\$5 and US\$15, while traditional Persian-style rugs are around US\$100.

‘In summer, demand for plastic mats increases’ because they retain less heat, Qassem said from his shop in Maaret Masrin, a town in Idlib province.

But ‘they can also be used in winter and are less costly’, he added.

AFP

UK opposition demands election amid ‘farce’

Keir Starmer demanded a general election as three MPs from the ruling Conservative Party quit

London, UK - UK opposition leader Keir Starmer on Sunday demanded a general election as three MPs from the ruling Conservative Party, including Boris Johnson, quit parliament following a probe into COVID lockdown-breaking parties.

Labour leader Starmer tweeted that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak ‘must finally find a backbone, call an election, and let the public have their say on 13 years of Tory failure’.

“This farce must stop. People have had enough of a shambolic Tory government and a weak prime minister no one voted for.”

Boris Johnson announced on

Friday he was leaving as a member of parliament, claiming he had been forced out in a stitch-up by his political opponents.

The 58-year-old Johnson has been under investigation by a cross-party committee about whether he deliberately lied to parliament over parties when he was in office.

As the committee prepares to make public its findings, Johnson said they had contacted him ‘making it clear... they are determined to use the proceedings against me to drive me out of parliament’.

By quitting, Johnson avoids the consequences of a humiliat-

The 58-year-old Johnson was under investigation by a cross-party committee about whether he deliberately lied to parliament over parties when he was in office

ing fight to remain an MP in his Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency in northwest London



Britain's former prime minister Boris Johnson (AFP)

where he holds a slim majority of just over 7,000.

He denounced the commit-

tee, chaired by veteran opposition Labour MP Harriet Harman, as a ‘kangaroo court’.

“It is very sad to be leaving Parliament - at least for now - but above all I am bewildered and appalled that I can be forced out, anti-democratically... with such egregious bias,” he said.

Nadine Dorries, one of Johnson’s allies quit on Friday, while another, Nigel Adams, resigned on Saturday, triggering three by-elections for a government languishing in the polls.

Speculation is rife about Johnson’s next move, and whether he will attempt to run to become an MP again at the next general election, due next year.

Influential Johnson supporter

Jacob Rees-Mogg wrote in the *Mail* on Sunday that said the former Tory leader could ‘easily get back into parliament at the next election’.

He also warned party officials against blocking such a bid, saying it would ‘shatter our fragile party unity and plunge the Conservatives into civil war’.

Sunak was finance minister under Johnson, and it was his resignation that ultimately triggered his then boss’s demise.

The party is still divided as a result, but had recently arrived at an uneasy truce that now looks to be under serious threat.

AFP



Fishing boats are anchored at a fishing harbour in Karachi on Sunday (AFP)

Winds, heavy rains kill at least 27 in Pakistan

Peshawar, Pakistan - Heavy rains followed by strong winds killed at least 27 people, including eight children, in northwest Pakistan, officials said on Sunday.

The storms hit four districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province late on Saturday, with five siblings aged between two and 11 among the dead.

“At least 12 people were buried alive after the roofs and walls of their houses collapsed,” Taimur Ali Khan, a spokesman for the provincial disaster management authority, told AFP.

More than 140 people were injured and more than 200 livestock died, he said.

Authorities have declared an emergency in all four districts.

Meanwhile, a cyclone is making its way across the Arabian Sea towards the coastlines of Pakistan and India, expected to make landfall at the end of the

week.

Pakistani authorities said they would begin evacuating between 8,000 and 9,000 families from along the coastline of Sindh province, including in the mega port city of Karachi, home to around 20mn people.

The army will be deployed from Monday to assist.

The cyclone could bring winds, storm surges and urban flooding from Tuesday evening as it approaches, the disaster management agency said on Sunday.

“Fishermen are advised not to venture into the open sea until the (weather) system is over by June 17,” the agency said.

In neighbouring India, the Meteorological Department reported on Sunday that the storm would likely cross the Saurashtra and Kutch areas of western Gujarat state as well as adjacent Pakistani coasts around noon on Thursday.

It warned it would likely make landfall as a ‘very severe cyclonic storm with a maximum sustained wind speed of 125-135 kmph, gusting to 150 kmph (93 miles per hour)’.

Scientists say climate change is making seasonal rains heavier and more unpredictable.

Pakistan, which has the world’s fifth largest population, is responsible for only 0.8 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions but is one of the most vulnerable nations to extreme weather caused by global warming. Last summer, unprecedented monsoon rains put a third of the country under water, damaging two million homes and killing more than 1,700 people.

In India, natural catastrophes are forecast to cause more misery as the planet’s climate warms and makes weather more volatile.

AFP

35 people missing after Ukraine flood: Minister

Kyiv, Ukraine - Thirty-five people, including seven children, were missing in southern Ukraine on Sunday following a devastating flood prosecutors called the ‘worst environmental catastrophe since Chernobyl’.

The Russian-controlled Kakhovka dam along the front line in the Kherson region was destroyed on June 6, forcing thousands to flee and sparking fears of humanitarian as well as environmental disasters.

Ukraine accuses Russia of blowing up the dam on the Dnipro River, while Moscow says Kyiv fired upon the structure. Ukrainian interior minister Igor Klymenko said that 77

towns and villages had been flooded in the southern regions of Kherson and Mykolaiv.

Klymenko said that in the Kherson region 35 people were missing, including seven

The Russian-controlled Kakhovka dam along the front line in the Kherson region was destroyed on June 6, forcing thousands to flee

children. As a result of the flood, five people died in the region of Kherson and one person was dead in the region of Mykolaiv.

A total of 3,700 people have been evacuated from

their homes in the two regions, the minister added in a statement.

Separately, Ukrainian Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin and representatives of the International Criminal Court visited the flooded territory, his office said.

“This is the worst environmental catastrophe since Chernobyl so we are investigating not only a war crime

but also an ecocide,” Kostin said in a statement.

“The situation is very complicated,” he added.

He noted that a number of ‘dangerous’ facilities including at least three cemeteries, oil storage terminals and garbage dumps have been flooded.

A total of 450 tonnes of turbine oil have spilled into the waters of the Dnipro and the Black Sea, he said.

More than 170 prosecutors have been investigating the breach of the dam.

“Our colleagues from the International Criminal Court are also with us,” he said.

AFP

INTO THE SEA



Environmental activists and students releasing sea turtles into the sea on Barane beach in Majene, West Sulawesi, Indonesia on Saturday (AFP)

India took ‘tremendous effort’ to secure release of sailors in Nigeria

New Delhi, India - The Indian Mission responded to ‘humanitarian issues’, engaged in ‘lengthy negotiations’ and remained in regular touch with the 16 detained crew members in Nigeria, eventually facilitating their safe return home, sources told ANI.

The 16 Indian crew members aboard the oil tanker *MT Heroic Idun*, who had been detained since August 2022 in Equatorial Guinea and later, in Nigeria, were released and safely repatriated to India on Saturday night.

The ship and crew were accused of various crimes, including oil theft and ‘falsely



Harshvardhan Savche, one of the Indian sailors detained in Navy of Equatorial Guinea and later in Nigeria, being welcomed by his family and friends on his arrival at an airport in Vadodara on Sunday (AFP)

accusing’ the Nigerian Navy of piracy.

According to sources, the Indian government, through its

Missions in Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, and in bilateral meetings, took up the matter with the respective foreign au-

thorities at various levels. They were pressed for an early resolution of the issue and repatriation of the Indian crew

members.

Following interventions of the Nigerian government, the crew were allowed to remain on board the ship with the provision of regular food, instead of being taken to a detention centre on land.

They were also allowed periodic contact with their families. Indian Mission officials remained in regular touch with the crew and also provided consular access to the detainees on numerous occasions.

The Indian Mission worked with the shipping company for legal representation to be arranged for the crew. It was conveyed to the Nigerian au-

thorities that there had been no oil theft, as necessary permissions had apparently been accorded; and the crew was not privy to the decisions of operations, sources told ANI, adding that humanitarian concerns around some of the detained Indian crew members were also underlined during the discussions. Following lengthy negotiations, all charges against the crew were dropped and the ship was released on May 27 on the payment of fines. They arrived at Kochi Airport in Kerala on Saturday night after undergoing trials and reaching a settlement.

They were received with garlands by their family members

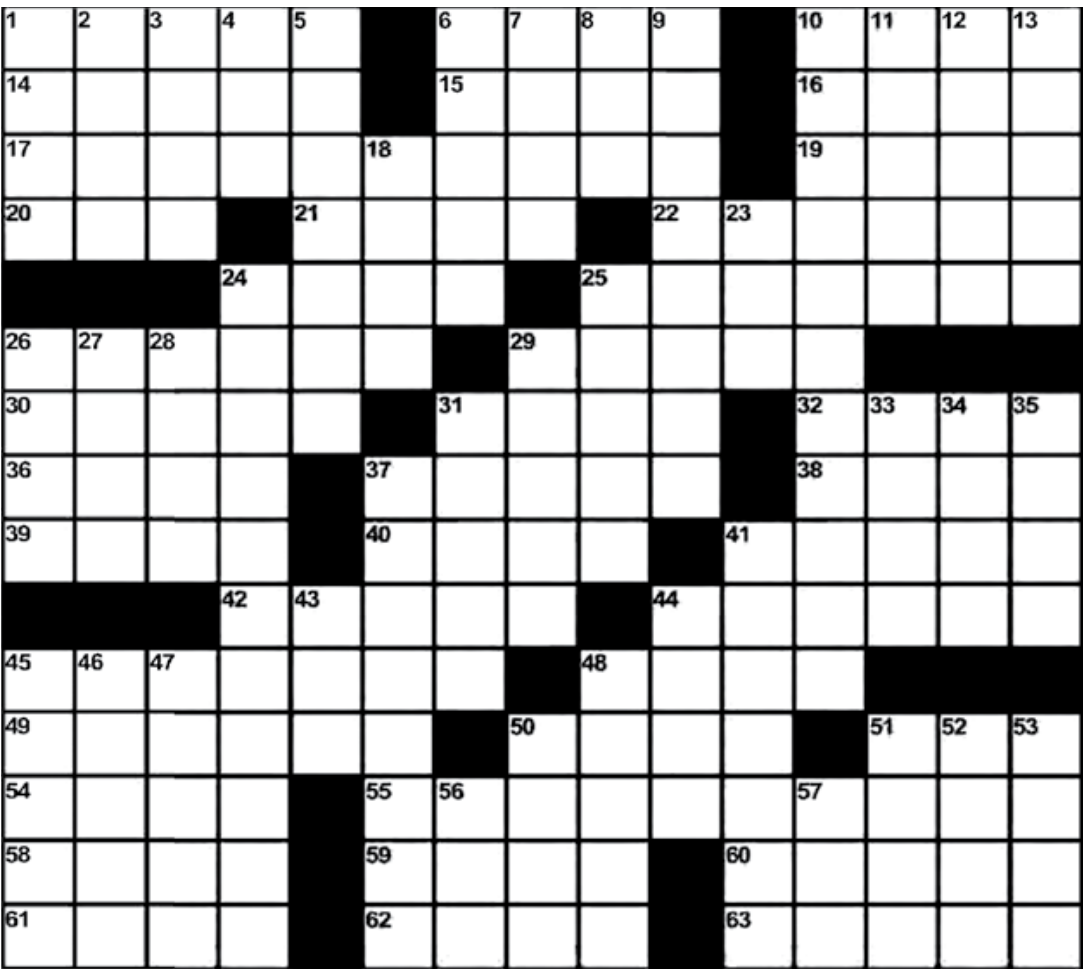
and Indian authorities on arrival at the Kochi airport.

Sanu Jose, one of the freed sailors, thanked the government as he reached Kerala. “I am very happy to be home now with my children. There was a lot of uncertainty about what would happen to us. We feared for our lives in Nigeria but I thank everyone, including the Indian government as well as the Kerala government, for helping us get home,” Sanu Jose told ANI.

Another sailor, V Vijith, said the Union government made a ‘tremendous effort’ and ‘did a great job’ in getting all the sailors released.

ANI

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Goodly sums
6) Splittable bit
10) Talk trash about
14) "Time is money," e.g.
15) Cryptologist's interest
16) Golden Rule word
17) Herb used in perfumes
19) Amphitheater section
20) "Chocolate" dog, for short
21) Announced
22) Drunk as a skunk
24) Like pizza for breakfast, typically
25) Happy brew
26) Hitchhiker on a shark
29) More astute
30) EGBDF part
31) Burgundy or claret
32) Go head over heels
36) Pal of Sawyer
37) Plateaued, with "out"
38) _ deck (part of a cruise ship)
39) Assault from Moe
40) American composer Charles
41) Attach, as a corsage

42) More forgiving
44) Classic Volkswagen
45) Used an aerosol can
48) Gives no stars to
49) Did away with
50) Jerome who composed "O! Man River"
51) Tiny ammo
54) Crow's home
55) Bike accessory
58) Fuss over, with "on"
59) One who's off-base
60) Trump ex Maples
61) Go toe-to-toe
62) Catches on to
63) Landscaper's gadget

DOWN

1) Grow wearisome
2) Mental spark
3) Dish with mint jelly
4) Psyche part
5) ESP part
6) Nasty-smelling
7) Wart-giver of folklore
8) Takes too much, briefly
9) Contacted on Facebook, say
10) Nervous feeling
11) "America" singer in

"West Side Story"
12) Bethlehem product, once
13) Nomadic tribe
18) Big bash
23) World Cup cheer
24) Dr. Scholl's product
25) Glaziers' units
26) Sports "zebras"
27) What Mr. Hyde personified
28) Suvari of American Beauty
29) Philly hoopster
31) Signaled "hi" or "bye"
33) Dryer buildup
34) Fan favorite
35) Dixie bread
37) A little of this, a little of that
41) Mark Twain or Dr. Seuss
43) Sailor's assent
44) Country dance locale
45) Fires off
46) Hospital prep area
47) Dreadlocks sporter, for short
48) Bursts of laughter
50) Two-by-four flaw
51) North Sea hazard

52) Seat at a hoedown
53) Milky Way part
56) Blow away
57) Bummed out

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

Grab a hold of your pioneering spirit, because you could be asked to do a little exploring today. You could have the opportunity to try something no one has ever done before, which should go a long way toward spicing up your life and making things interesting once again! Let other people travel the well-worn highways of life, never doing anything that scares them. For you, it's all about making your own way and facing unfamiliar challenges. You can do it!

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

The people around you today don't seem like they're saying what they truly mean. Could they be evasive because they're afraid of hurting your feelings or ticking you off? When they ask you for your opinion, you don't mince words, so why are they? Speak up and let them know that when you ask them a question, you expect the truth. Ask for this kind of honesty today and be prepared for what it may bring you. Dancing around the truth is a waste of time.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Today, all of your choices and ideas will have everyone buzzing with admiration and maybe even a wee bit of jealousy. But you can't let other people's envy get you down. Keep on busting out with your smart style, and stop caring who's getting all worked up about it. It's their problem if they can't give you support without giving you attitude. You can and should serve as a good example for them to follow. Show them that being an independent thinker is key.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

The fewer financial dealings you have with others today the better. It's not that you necessarily need to save any money; it's just that your emotions are uncertain, and you could be associating buying something with solving something. Paying a problem to go away isn't the right idea. It will only waste your money. You need to focus on any challenges you encounter the right way. They'll take hard work, but that's the only way to solve things once and for all.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Not in a social mood right now? Force yourself. It might sound counterintuitive, but if you're dreading that upcoming party or night out, the last thing you should do is cancel your reservation and stay home on the couch like you want to. Your gut may be telling you to stay home, but the Universe is telling you to go out, and the Universe always trumps your gut. Once you get out there and see the people and feel the energy around you, you'll get swept up into the action and enjoy yourself.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

It wouldn't hurt you to have a little more discipline in your life, so why are you so annoyed by the prospect of following the rules? Knowing what is right and what is wrong doesn't have to feel stifling. If you just switch your perspective, rules can actually help to simplify your life and give you a clear idea of the path you should be on. Playing around and goofing off is fun, but is it really getting you anywhere? This behavior is just keeping you going in circles.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

Observe the environment around you closely today, especially when you're in a place with lots of people. Not only will the people watching be great, but it will also be educational and even maybe a little inspiring. Expect to collect some new fashion ideas and a juicy tidbit of overheard gossip. Maybe you'll even make eye contact with a cute stranger! It will be way more fun sitting on the sidelines watching the world go by today than living in the center of the action.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Time spent exploring your feelings is never wasted time. Give yourself a break from all the activity around you and find a quiet place to contemplate the things that have been happening and the things that you want to start happening. You need to balance your expectations with your hopes. Otherwise, you run the risk of a major disappointment. Facing reality can be tough, but it's the wisest course of action.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

The advice you give to friends today might not be warmly received, but it will sink in nevertheless. So don't think that just because they don't thank you for what you said that they didn't listen to it. Passing on what you've learned from your past mistakes is something undeniably valuable, and they know that. They're glad you care enough to open up about what you know but not necessarily eager to do as you say. They have their own lives to lead and their own mistakes to learn from.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

You probably don't want to go public with your latest private problem, and the good news is that you don't really have to. Just share the news about your current predicament with the one or two people in your life who really know you inside and out. Divulge only as much as you want. They will probably be able to guess the rest. If you share too much too soon, the conversation could dissolve into a mutual whine-fest, and no one will get much done.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Today, that nagging feeling you've been having about something or someone will start to fade away. All of your worries were unfounded, which will be evident by the end of the day. You trusted your instincts, but they turned out to be wrong. It's rare, but it does happen. Don't focus on the fact that you were wrong. Focus on the fact that your stress is ending! And in the future, you don't have to doubt yourself. Things happen for a reason.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

It's wise to question authority, but you shouldn't go so far as to disrespect the people who are in power right now. You need to believe that they're doing the right thing unless and until you see proof of anything different. Don't listen to the people who are trash-talking the powers that be. They have ulterior motives and are trying to get you to see things their way. Instead, you should look at the facts so you can see things your way.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Which of these cities is the furthest from London?
A. Brussels
B. Athens
C. Paris
D. Rome
02. Which chemist, engineer, and armaments manufacturer invented dynamite and a detonator for it and then founded a long-standing series of world prizes for, among other things, promoting peace?
A. Alfred North Whitehead
B. Alfred Russel Wallace
C. Alfred, Lord Tennyson
D. Alfred Nobel
03. The following people died from what cause: Eva Braun, Wallace Carothers, Odilo Globocnik, Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, Günther von Kluge, Erwin Rommel, Alan Turing and the residents of Jonestown?
A. Asphyxiation
B. Gunshot wounds
C. Cyanide poisoning
D. Strychnine poisoning
- Answers: 1. B 2. D 3. C

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

L	L	O	E
E	C	A	S
R	L	T	A
A	R	E	C

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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

PARADISE CITY!

Rodri strike gives Man City victory in Champions League final

Istanbul, Turkey - Manchester City tasted Champions League glory at last on Saturday as a second-half Rodri strike gave the favourites a 1-0 victory over Inter Milan in a tense final, allowing Pep Guardiola's side to complete a remarkable treble.

Rodri fired in from a Bernardo Silva cutback midway through the second half at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium to decide a game in which City were knocked out of their usual rhythm and lost Kevin De Bruyne to injury.

Erling Haaland, scorer of 52 goals this season, went a fifth straight match without finding the net, but City still had enough to edge out opponents who had never been expected to get this far in the first place.

Having already claimed a fifth Premier League title in six seasons, and added the FA Cup, City are the first English club to win such a treble since Manchester

United side and have finally added the biggest prize in European club football, two years after losing to Chelsea in their first final.

The match was watched by owner Sheikh Mansour, who made a very rare appearance at a City game as his team capped their rise from also-rans to superpower in the years since he bought the club in 2008.

Guardiola's third title

Twelve years after last lifting the trophy with Barcelona, meanwhile, Guardiola joins an elite club of coaches to have won the Champions League three times.

Yet having brushed aside RB Leipzig, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid to reach the final, City did not have it easy against Inter, who saw Federico Dimarco and substitute Romelu Lukaku both almost equalise late on.

Inter had hoped to spring a surprise and lift the trophy for the



Manchester City players celebrate winning the Champions League final against Inter Milan at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium in Istanbul on Saturday (AFP)

I've been here just four years but we deserve it. We were so close these last years but when you go to semi-finals, finals, finally God gives you this present... It's a dream for all of us

RODRI



Manchester City's Rodri celebrates after scoring against Inter Milan in the Champions League final in Istanbul on Saturday (AFP)

comes just the second city to produce two different winners of the competition, after Milan.

De Bruyne injury

City, with Nathan Ake starting ahead of Kyle Walker in defence, expected Inter to come out and attempt to thwart them, and the first half went according to plan for the Italians.

They pressed and snapped at City's heels, although the best chance fell to Guardiola's men when De Bruyne set up Haaland for an effort that was well saved

by Andre Onana.

City were then dealt a major blow as De Bruyne - who came off hurt in the 2021 final - departed with an apparent leg injury on 36 minutes, to be replaced by Phil Foden. It was just as the prospect of extra time, and a final going on past midnight, that the game opened up.

Lautaro Martinez could not take a chance that was gifted to him by a poor Silva ball back towards his own goal, and City then struck on 68 minutes.

Manuel Akanji's pass found

Silva in the box and his cutback came off an Inter defender before falling for Rodri to fire in.

It was a second goal in the competition for the key Spanish midfielder following his brilliant opener against Bayern in the first leg of the quarter-final.

Inter's resistance was broken, and yet they nearly levelled almost immediately as a Dimarco header hit the bar.

They nearly did so again in the 88th minute as Ederson somehow got in the way of a goal-bound Lukaku effort.

Champions League win was 'written in the stars', says Guardiola

Istanbul, Turkey - Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said his team's maiden Champions League title was "written in the stars" after their final victory over Inter Milan on Saturday.

"It's so difficult to win it," Guardiola told BT Sport after the nervy 1-0 win.

"They (his players) are really good. Be patient, I said at half-time. You have to be lucky. (Goalkeeper) Ederson or they miss it, they could draw. This competition is a coin.

"It was written in the stars. It belongs to us."

Guardiola has now won the trophy three times after his previous triumphs with Barcelona in 2009 and 2011.

City's victory also clinched a treble following their Premier League and FA Cup successes this season. "After the World Cup the team made a step for-



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola (L) celebrates with club chairman Khaldoon al Mubarak after their victory (AFP)

ward and we were there," added Guardiola. "We're going to celebrate in the hotel with family and friends. Monday the parade is in Manchester. With this competition, the treble is so difficult."

City had suffered several near-misses in the Champions League since being taken over by their Abu Dhabi backers in 2008, including a defeat by Chelsea in the final two years ago.

Inter 'didn't deserve to lose': Inzaghi

Istanbul, Turkey - Inter Milan coach Simone Inzaghi insisted his side were unlucky to lose Saturday's Champions League final after going down to a narrow 1-0 defeat against overwhelming favourites Manchester City at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium.

"We do have regrets because defeat is the worst thing in sport but I have to congratulate my lads," Inzaghi said after the final was decided by a solitary second-half goal from Rodri.

"They are very disappointed but they should be very proud of the way they played.

"We didn't deserve to lose. We played against a top team, absolutely, but Inter also played a great final."

The Italian side were surprise finalists, reaching this stage for the first time since they won it in 2010 under Jose Mourinho.

However, they held their own for long spells and came desperately close to equalising after falling behind, first when Federico Dimarco's header hit the



Inter Milan coach Simone Inzaghi (R) encourages Romelu Lukaku as the Belgian forward comes on as a substitute in the final on Saturday (AFP)

bar, then when substitute Romelu Lukaku was denied by goalkeeper Ederson from close range late on.

"We were on a par with Manchester City. We are very disappointed but as I said yesterday (Friday) I would not change my

players for anyone else and tonight everyone saw why I said that," added Inzaghi. Inter finish the season with two trophies, having won both the Italian Super Cup and the Coppa Italia.

They also came third in Serie A to secure a return to the

Champions League next season.

"The team has proved over the last three months when everyone is available that it is up to playing in this competition and we can have our say in it," Inzaghi added.

AFP

Man City Champions League victory defines new era in European football

Istanbul, Turkey - Pep Guardiola laughed when it was put to him that Manchester City could go on to chase down Real Madrid's record tally of European Cups after their victory over Inter Milan in Saturday's Champions League final.

"Be careful Real Madrid! If you sleep a little bit we will catch you," he joked in the wake of City's first triumph in Europe's elite club competition, which also saw them complete a treble after they won the Premier League and FA Cup.

A Rodri strike gave City a 1-0 win at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium as they became European champions for the first time after

several near misses in recent years.

The Abu Dhabi-owned club have a long way to go to catch Real's record haul of 14 victories, and it would be some achievement if they ever get there.

Yet it is tempting to look at Saturday's success in Turkey and wonder if it might definitively mark the start of a new era in European football.

Real, the great aristocrats of the sport, have resisted the rise of City and Paris Saint-Germain, teams backed by Gulf riches, to win the Champions League five times in the last decade.

The Spaniards were blown away by City in this season's last



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola poses for a picture with the trophy (AFP)

four, though, and Guardiola's side -- beaten by Chelsea in the 2021 final - may take some stopping now they have claimed their first title. "The good thing is that we want more," match-winner Rodri said. "This project is to want more, more ambition."

City are just the second English side to win the treble, following Manchester United in 1999.

It is an era-defining triumph for a club whose rise has been remarkable, as well as a potentially era-shaping moment.

City were in England's third tier the year their cross-town rivals completed their treble.

United were reigning European champions while City had

finished ninth in the previous season's Premier League when they were bought in 2008 by the Abu Dhabi United Group, backed by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan.

City had not won the English title in 40 years at that point.

They have just claimed a seventh Premier League in 12 seasons and have won three FA Cups and six League Cups since the takeover. Now they have a first Champions League.

"Today's title is the result of a deliberate strategy developed 15 years ago," Sheikh Mansour, who is vice-president of the United Arab Emirates, said in a statement.

Shafique, Rafiullah miss out as Oman announce final 15 for World Cup Qualifier

Muscat - Oman arrived in Zimbabwe capital Harare on Sunday high on confidence for the ICC Cricket World Cup Qualifier after a successful preparatory tour in South Africa. The ICC Men's Cricket World Cup Qualifier will be held in Zimbabwe (Harare and Bulawayo) from June 18-July 9.

Following the trip to Durban in South Africa, where Oman played five warm-up matches and won four, the national team head coach Duleep Mendis picked his final 15 for the Qualifier.

It may be recalled Oman had selected 17-member squad for Durban warm-up tour.

Oman played all five games against a competitive South African side, Hollywoodbets Dolphins, that included few South African international cricketers.

Oman had included three wicketkeepers in the squad and as expected, dropped one from the final 15. Adeel Shafique failed to make the cut. He was joined by uncapped young all-rounder Rafiullah on the side lines.

During the Durban trip, Oman had few matches interrupted by rain but got off to a winning start to the tour with a 36-run win over Dolphins. The hosts bounced back to register a convincing seven-wicket win in the next match, but Oman took the third game in their favour with an easy eight-wicket win and continued their winning streak as they posted an 82-run win in the fourth match and concluded the tour with a five-wicket win on DLS method.

During the five matches, Oman's star batter Jatinder Singh scored three half-centuries while the other batters who were among runs were Kashyap Prajapati, vice-captain Aqib Ilyas, skipper Zeeshan Maqsood, Sandeep Goud, and Ayaan Khan. In the bowling department, pacers Bilal Khan and Kaleemullah along with Fayyaz Butt and Ilyas were among wickets.

Ahead of the Qualifier, skipper Maqsood sounded confident and said: "We are ready for the challenge and it's a big opportunity for all of us to showcase our potential. We will give our best."

The ten-nation Qualifier will decide the remaining two spots for the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup in India 2023.

Oman will begin their campaign on June 19 in Bulawayo against Ireland followed by a game against UAE on June 21. On June 23, Oman will take on 1996 World Cup winners Sri Lanka before concluding the league stage with a match against Scotland on June 25.

OMAN SQUAD
Zeeshan Maqsood (captain), Aqib Ilyas (vice-captain), Jatinder Singh, Kashyap Prajapati, Shoaib Khan, Mohammed Nadeem, Sandeep Goud, Ayaan Khan, Suraj Kumar, Naseem Khushi, Bilal Khan, Kaleemullah, Fayyaz Butt, Jay Odedra, Samay Shrivastav.

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

History-making Novak Djokovic wins French Open for his record 23rd Grand Slam title

Paris, France - Novak Djokovic created history on Sunday when he captured a record-breaking 23rd Grand Slam title with a third French Open triumph, reinforcing his case to be crowned the greatest player of all time.

The 36-year-old Serb brushed off an early wobble to defeat Casper Ruud of Norway 7-6 (7/1), 6-3, 7-5 and snap the tie of 22 Slams he shared with career-long rival Rafael Nadal.

Victory for the third time in Paris, after 2016 and 2021, adds

but 11 of his Slam trophies have now been won after he turned 30.

On Monday, he will reclaim the world number ranking and start his 388th week in top spot.

The sense of Sunday's occasion certainly attracted sports A-listers.

NFL legend Tom Brady watched from the Djokovic box, football stars Kylian Mbappe and Zlatan Ibrahimovic sat side by side in the VIP area which also accommodated former



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hugs the trophy he celebrates his victory over Norway's Casper Ruud in the French Open final in Paris on Sunday (AFP)

when his opponent buried an easy smash into the net with an open court begging.

It came at the end of a lung-busting 28-shot rally.

Djokovic missed a break point in the ninth game, tumbling to the red clay as he chased down a Ruud drive.

His frustration boiled over when he angrily accused umpire Damien Dumusois of rushing the players between changeovers on a heavy, humid afternoon in the French capital.

Fired up, he then raced through the tiebreak, sealing the opener with a running forehand.

Tellingly, that was Djokovic's sixth tiebreak at this French Open and in none of them had he committed a single unforced error in the 55 points contested.

Despite being Djokovic's junior by 12 years, Ruud, who also lost the 2022 US Open final to Carlos Alcaraz, suddenly looked spent.

Djokovic broke for 2-0 in the second set and despite Ruud saving two set points in the eighth game, the Serb moved closer to his dream.

Ruud saved a break point in the third game of the third set before Djokovic was hit with a warning for taking too long between points. But he wasn't thrown out of his stride.

Djokovic broke for love at 6-5 and sealed his place in history when Ruud went wide.

Another day, another record for you, another day you rewrite tennis history. It's tough to explain how incredible it is and how good you are and what an inspiration you are

CASPER RUUD TO NOVAK DJOKOVIC

to his 10 Australian Open titles, seven at Wimbledon and three at the US Open.

Djokovic is the first man to win all four majors at least three times and is once again halfway to the first calendar Grand Slam since Rod Laver in 1969.

Only Margaret Court and Serena Williams in women's tennis have managed to rack up 23 Grand Slam titles. Court's all-time mark of 24 will now be in his sights at Wimbledon next month.

There is little sign of Djokovic slowing down. He is now the oldest French Open champion

world heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson, a regular this weekend.

Djokovic was playing in his seventh French Open final and boasted a 4-0 career record over Ruud, not having lost a single set.

However, the fourth-ranked Norwegian was the more composed of the two at the start, sprinting out of the blocks for a 2-0 lead when Djokovic shanked an overhead.

Ruud, the 2022 runner-up to Nadal, stretched to 3-0 and 4-1 before Djokovic retrieved the break in the seventh game

Bagnaia wins Italian MotoGP, stretches championship lead

Mugello, Italy - Francesco Bagnaia won the Italian MotoGP to extend his lead in the world championship and complete a perfect weekend at his Ducati team's home track in Tuscany.

Sunday's race win followed the world champion's sprint success 24 hours earlier after nailing pole for both with a record lap time in qualifying.

His third win of the year after Portugal and Spain put further distance between him and Marco Bezzecchi, his closest rival in the standings who had to settle for eighth.

Jorge Martin took second with Johann Zarco completing the all-Ducati podium for the sixth round of the season at Mugello.

Bagnaia delighted his home fans by celebrating at a hastily erected picnic table, covered with a Ducati red tablecloth, in front of the stands.

Jack Miller got the run on Bagnaia off the grid but the world champion was back in front by turn two, the Italian showing he meant business after crashing last time out at Le Mans.

Martin emerged from the chasing pack to track Bagnaia, half a second splitting the pair.



Ducati rider Francesco Bagnaia celebrates with the trophy after winning the Italian MotoGP in Mugello on Sunday (AFP)

Bezzecchi was struggling for pace on the Ducati of Valentino Rossi's VR46 team. With 18 laps to go Marc Marquez crashed out.

The six-time world champion waved his arms in frustration at his fallen Honda as his wait for his first points in a race this term continued.

With Bagnaia setting sail for

home, Miguel Oliveira joined Marquez in crashing out, Alex Marquez following suit with nine laps left.

Up front Bagnaia stretched his advantage over Martin to well over one second to take the chequered flag at his Ducati team's local track in the picture-postcard Tuscan hills.

Sri Lanka likely Asia Cup venue, says official

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Asia Cup matches involving India could be played in Sri Lanka after the cricketing powerhouse refused to visit archival and official host Pakistan, a board official said Sunday.

The Asian Cricket Council (ACC) is due to make a formal announcement in the coming week after calls for a different venue for India's games in the 50-over tournament in September, a Sri Lankan official said.

India and Pakistan have not met on either side's soil in any version of the game since 2012, and only play each other in international tournaments on neutral grounds. The two cricketing powerhouses have fought three wars since being carved out of the subcontinent's partition in 1947, and are bitter political rivals.

"It is very likely that some of the matches will be in Sri Lanka," the board official said



Fans rush to see the arrival of the Argentine football team outside Four Seasons Hotel in Beijing

Drink with Messi for \$42,000: Chinese police warn over scams

Beijing, China - Dinner, drinks and a selfie with Lionel Messi sounds like every football fan's dream, but Chinese police have warned it's just one of numerous scams surrounding his visit to Beijing.

The Argentine legend's presence in China for a friendly against Australia in the capital on Thursday has drawn scammers and ticket-scalpers desperate to capitalise on Messi mania.

Beijing police are warning against falling for one widely circulated advertisement that promises an evening in Messi's company for 300,000 yuan (\$42,000).

"If you can be scammed of 300,000 yuan, we'll raise a glass to you," the usually austere Beijing public security bureau joked on the Twitter-like Weibo.

Other dubious offers posted online include "internal" stadium passes for 5,000 yuan and a "tailored VIP package" including an autographed jersey, front-row seats and a photo with Messi for over 8,000 yuan.

For 50 million yuan, Messi will appear on your shopping livestream to extol the virtues of your product, another unauthorised advertisement claims. Messi landed in Beijing on Saturday and will lead the world champions against the Socceroos.

INDIA SURRENDER WEEKLY

Australia thrash Rohit and Co in World Test Championship final

London, United Kingdom - Scott Boland sparked a dramatic collapse as a dominant Australia hammered India by 209 runs to win the World Test Championship final at The Oval on Sunday.

India, set a record 444 to win, resumed on 164-3.

But they slumped to 234 all out before lunch on the fifth day, losing their last five wickets for a mere 22 runs.

Boland did the initial damage with two wickets in Sunday's seventh over, including the prize scalp of Virat Kohli, on his way to figures of 3-46 in 16 overs.

Off-spinner Nathan Lyon (4-41) then polished off the tail.

Victory meant Australia had now captured the one major

men's cricket title that had previously eluded them. Boland might not have been in the side but for an injury to Josh Hazlewood.

The 34-year-old seamer now looks to have assured himself of a place in Australia's XI for the first Ashes Test against England at Edgbaston starting on Friday.

"It felt pretty good to get Kohli out," said Boland, who has now taken 33 wickets in eight Tests at the remarkably low average of 14.57.

"I have been playing state cricket for Victoria for 12 years," he added. "I have done some hard work and it is nice to play international cricket and get some wickets."

Defeat left India, beaten by



Australia players celebrate the dismissal of India's Mohammed Siraj (C) at The Oval in London on Sunday (AFP)

New Zealand in the inaugural 2021 WTC final in Southampton, still searching for their first piece of global silverware in a decade.

Had India reached a target of 444, it would have surpassed the West Indies' 418-7 against Australia at St John's in 2003 as the

highest winning fourth-innings chase in Test history.

India were also attempting to top the corresponding Oval

record of 263 posted by England in a one-wicket win over Australia way back in 1902.

Yet even though the odds

were heavily against their side, scores of India fans, the key component in a cumulative crowd in excess of 100,000 across the five days, still streamed into the ground.

Australia, who had lost their last four Test series against India, were in charge from early on in this match after being sent into bat. Both player-of-the-match Travis Head (163) and star batsman Steve Smith (121) made hundreds in a first-innings total of 469.

"The way Travis and Smith put on that partnership put us at ease," said Australia captain Pat Cummins.

The fast bowler added: "Boland was fantastic, he's now my favourite player, everyone just did their role really well...We'll savour this and then turn our attention to the Ashes." AFP

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BARN OWLS

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A member of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) holds a female adult barn owl

BIRDS

WITHOUT

BORDERS

Standing amid ears of wheat growing tall in the buffer zone dividing Cyprus, farmer Christodoulos Christodoulou can rest easy.

The rodents that once ran rampant in the decades since the no-man's land was created and destroyed his crops are being driven out by owls.

"Our village was full of rats and mice. They ate our crops, nibbled on our tyres," recalls Christodoulou, who owns a farm in the demilitarised corridor that splits the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus and the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. "Then we set up these boxes for the owls," he said.

Around 50 light wooden boxes with circular openings have been installed on tree trunks as part of a 10-year-old initiative led by the BirdLife Cyprus non-governmental organisation and the Cypriot government.

BirdLife says the objectives of the project are to encourage farmers to abandon using poison and to help repopulate the barn owl population of Cyprus, which has been on decline across Europe.

Deneia, one of the few villages in the 180km buffer zone that is still inhabited, is now home to between 20 and 50 barn owls and their chicks - recognisable by their milk-white plumage.

The birds of prey are only about 30cm tall but have large appetites, devouring as many as 5,000 rats and mice a year.

Rodents have proliferated in the corridor in the absence of large amounts of human activity - ransacking agricultural areas.

A miracle

Farmers have often tried to address the situation with rat poison - harmful to both humans and the environment - before the launch of the initiative.

"The owls are a miracle!" said Christodoulou, who first tried spraying poison on his fields. Their presence has had a radical impact in driving away the rodents and he can now practise organic farming.

Today, thanks to the owls, "to find a rodent here, you would have to search for a week," said Deneia mayor Christakis Panayiotou.

BirdLife director Martin Hellicar, who counts more than 1,300 owl boxes across Cyprus, attributes the success of the project to farmers becoming 'attached to the barn owls and reconnecting with nature'.

Further west in the same demilitarised corridor, whole villages have been abandoned for decades since the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, in response to a Greek-sponsored coup attempt.

Bird boxes have gone up in coordination with the United Nations.

Not far from looming watchtowers manned by some of the 800 UN peacekeepers patrolling the area, a ranger wearing gloves pulls two owl chicks out of a box.

The small creatures blink, blinded by the daylight. With an expert hand, Nikos Kassinis attaches a ring to them with an identification number.

Unique environment

Every year, authorities find the bodies of around 20 owls. Autopsies reveal that many



A member of Cyprus' Game and Fauna service inspects a four-month-old barn owl

die as a result of consuming rat poison.

"They lose their capacity to fly and get hit by cars," added the mayor, noting that this most often takes place outside in more populated areas.

Scientist Iris Charalambidou describes the no-man's land as a 'unique' environment for its expanse of largely untouched nature in comparison to the unbridled real estate development on other parts of the island.

With permission from the United Nations, the Greek Cypriot specialist sometimes comes to the area with a Turkish Cypriot colleague.

The researcher says being able to work together to observe barn owls in the buffer zone that divides them is 'invaluable'.

"Because no bird will ever respect the borders drawn by man," she said.

AFP



This aerial view shows salt field where salt is harvested and destined to animal consumption in Bilma

SALT DIGGERS

Brine business

SAHARA SALT DIGGERS STRUGGLE IN DIRE CONDITIONS TO MAINTAIN A CENTURIES-OLD TRADE

At the edge of an oasis almost engulfed by the dunes, where the rare caravan still passes, is a desert landscape punctured by holes.

The salt pans of Kalala, near Bilma in northeastern Niger, were once an essential stop for traders with their swaying lines of camels.

Salt digging, carried on from generation to generation, was a thriving business, involving a commodity so precious that it was bought and sold across the Sahara and beyond. Today, in this isolated desert region plagued by armed gangs and smugglers, the diggers struggle to survive.

Over centuries, hundreds of pits have been dug by hand and then filled with water to leach salt from the local rock. Standing in the black and ochre pits, Ibrahim Tagaji and a colleague were wrestling with a crowbar to harvest the bounty - a method of extraction that essentially remains unchanged over time.

A blisteringly hot day, when the temperatures reached 45°C in the shade, was coming to a close. Barefoot in brine swimming with crystals, the two men dug out salty chunks and pounded them into grains, which were then scooped out with a gourd. They then poured the salt into moulds made from date palms, forming slabs that were then ready for sale.

It is punishingly hard work, rewarded by an income that fluctuates according to whichever buyers happen to pass through town.

"When someone with money comes, you earn a lot," said Tagaji between shovelfuls. "Otherwise, it's a lot of work and the money's poor." But the local economy offers few alternatives and roughly half of Bilma's population still works in the pits,

according to local officials. "As soon as you drop out of school, you have to work here," said Omar Kosso, a veteran of the industry. "Every family has its own salt pan. You are with your wife, your children, you come and work."

The world has changed The camel caravans still stop over in Bilma, where the vast majority of residents live in traditional houses with walls of salt and clay drawn from nearby quarries.

An individual called the 'mai' is the traditional authority here, determining who gets which area to dig and setting the sale price. Kiari Abari Chegou comes from a long line of chiefs, each of whom has handed down to his successor the office and its attributes: a ritual sword and a parchment leather war drum.

There is also the white flag covered with surahs, the same one displayed by his grandfather in an old black-and-white photo from the early 1920s pinned to the wall of the family home.

As mai, Abari Chegou promotes the virtues of the locally produced salt.

"Sea salt has to be iodised to avoid deficiencies," he said. "Our salt is 90% iodised, so we can eat it directly without risking getting sick." Unfortunately for Bilma, however, the world outside has changed.

"In the past, the caravans came - the Daza, the Hausa, the Tuareg," he said, reeling off some of ethnic groups in the region. "Now it's not like before."

The Tuareg traders, for instance, gradually gave up their nomadic way of life to settle, farming the fertile foothills of the nearby Air mountains in the north.

"You make more money like that than tiring yourself out spending 10 days trav-



Kiari Abari (C), the descendant of a long lineage of Sultans, at his palace in Bilma

Our salt is 90% iodised, so we can eat it directly without risking getting sick. Unfortunately for Bilma, however, the world outside has changed

KIARI ABARI CHEGOU



A trader arranges salt slabs destined to animal consumption in Bilma

elling to get to Bilma, then 10 days back," Abari Chegou acknowledged.

It made more sense to buy a slab of salt for 2,000 CFA francs (US\$3.25) in Agadez, the regional capital 550km away, than to travel all the way to Bilma to bargain for it at a third of the price, he said.

Black market The desert journey is as dangerous as it is tough. The Kawar oasis borders Chad and Libya, a country ravaged by a civil war since 2011, and traffickers and other criminals take advantage of the region's porous borders.

That means that people travel in the region armed and, where possible, in convoys under military escort to guard against attacks.

"The bandits stop our trucks, they take our phones and money, and then they let us through," said a driver who gave his name as Ahmed and was about to set off with sacks of salt.

Salt worker Omar Kosso said that customers were hard-bargaining merchants, passing traders or traffickers. "We don't have good customers," he said. All of that means that offers are difficult to refuse for the people in this poor region.

The European Union did pay for several trucks, in an bid to open up the salt-producing municipalities. But the fleet of vehicles succumbed to the heat, the rugged roads, and squabbles between members of the local cooperative.

Abari Chegou, the chief, said he dreamt of a well-knit cooperative that could buy vehicles and have a place to store production to help buttress prices. In the meantime, he waited for the lonely caravans that passed between the dunes.

AFP



Caravanners are seen leading their animals along their 45 days journey to Libya, in the area of Djado in Niger portion of the Sahara desert