

Preparations for National Day celebrations begin



Our Correspondent Muscat

The Secretariat General of National Celebrations (SGNC), the government body tasked with organising National Day events, has invited people from across Oman to send their design proposals for the National Day decorations.

Kick-starting the preparations for the 52nd National Day, SGNC in a statement, said, 'We invite

the public to send proposals for the artistic designs for the National Day decorations. The owners of the selected designs will receive financial rewards.'

The Sultan Qaboos Street leading from Al Alam Palace in the wilayat of Muscat to Al Baraka Palace in the wilayat of Seeb has been chosen as the main site for the decorations, it stated.

The SGNC confirmed that the types of decorations required on

SGNC invites the public to send proposals for the artistic designs for the National Day decorations. The owners of the selected designs will receive financial rewards

the Sultan Qaboos Street are for bedecking trees, side paths and government buildings.

SGNC has laid down conditions and specifications for the

designs, such as ornamental forms must express a clear meaning of the Omani heritage, plants or musical instrument, with a simplified explanation of

the design.

'The participant must abide by the three colours of the sultanate's flag (white, red and green). The designs of the ornamental shapes should be simple and clear, and be in harmony with the celebrations of the National Day, and free from complexity for ease of manufacturing.' The winning design will be owned by SGNC. The deadline for submission of designs is April 19.

Amazon to host 100 Omani small firms

Our Correspondent Muscat

Soon, 100 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Oman will get a chance to register with the e-commerce giant Amazon and sell their products.

As part of its efforts to support SMEs, the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) will launch an initiative to help SMEs join Amazon.

An official at ASMED said that the authority will launch an e-commerce programme to support 100 SMEs to join the platform. 'The initiative aims to stimulate the Omani economy, support owners of SMEs, and promote Omani products through the world-famous platform,' said the official.

He added, 'Under the pro-



gramme, experts will hold workshops for owners of SMEs and train them as well as provide all information related to e-commerce.'

The authority invites SMEs to register with ASMED to participate in the programme.

The total number of SMEs registered with ASMED was 66,769 at the end of January 2022, compared to 49,337 SMEs registered a year ago, accounting for a growth of 35.3 per cent.

ROP cautions violators of COVID-19 measures

Our Correspondent Muscat

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has called on citizens and residents to abide by the decisions of the Supreme Committee in charge of dealing with COVID-19 that were issued for the holy month of Ramadan.

It added that it will work in cooperation with the competent authorities to follow up on violators,

stopping anyone who violates the decisions issued in this regard, and will issue violation notices according to the list of violations stipulated previously.

'ROP calls for adherence to the decisions of the Supreme Committee to preserve everyone's health and to avoid any violation that may lead to the closure of non-compliant mosques. It calls for cooperation and reporting any violations on 1099,' ROP stated.

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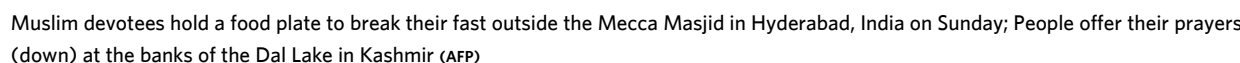
*TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLIED

Hadiths of the day

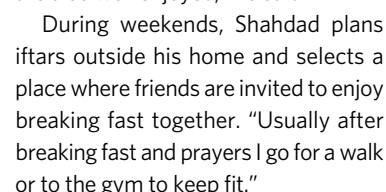
Fajr	Sunrise	Duhr	Asr	Maghrib	Isha
4.37am	5.54am	12.14pm	3.42pm	6.30pm	7.41pm

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‘Buzzing Ramadan night markets in Kashmir’



The hadiths highlighted here throw light on the status of the blessed month, its merits, rewards and special offers, as well as the Prophet's example in Ramadan.

Our Correspondent

Muscat



البنك الوطني العماني
NBO

1,298 sites offered to investors under development programme

The governorates are implementing a number of projects to develop their economies

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman has provided 1,298 sites in various governorates for investment to stimulate the development and economy of the wilayats across the sultanate. Speaking at the Ramadan evening programme 'Development of governorates, economic and social objectives and dimensions', organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), Mohammed bin Saif al Amri, director general of local affairs at the Ministry of Interior, said, "The transfer of all land assets for investment projects, financial and administrative authorisations, and auctions to governors will contribute



The number of land contracts signed in the governorates reached 95, with the total value exceeding RO18mn

MOHAMMED AL AMRI

to the development of investment in the governorates." "The number of contracts signed in the governorates reached 95, with the total value exceeding RO18mn, while 1,298 sites were allocated for investments," said Amri. The programme discussed

achieving development in all governorates through a number of axes such as setting and implementing economic plans and integration between the offices of the governors and OCCI branches. Eng Redha bin Juma al Saleh, chairman of the OCCI board, said

that developing the governorates' economies is one of the goals of Oman Vision 2040, as per the population growth in all the governorates. Redha, added, "His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's directives to raise the funds for each governorate from RO10mn to

RO20mn during the current five-year plan (2021-2025), starting from this year, aims to accelerate the development of the governorates. This will enhance private sector participation and support projects of youth and small and medium enterprises, create job opportunities for the people of the governorates and revive the commercial, industrial and tourism movement in each governorate."

Sheikh Said al Qatbi, director general of social sectors at the Ministry of Economy, said, "The ministry has set specifications for selecting projects related to the governorates development programme. The number of projects implemented by the governorates during 2021 reached 158, which is aimed at developing SMEs and developing tourist sites in the governorates."

"The governorates are implementing a number of quality projects that focus on developing their economies, creating job opportunities and providing service centres during the first quarter of this year."

Two bogus medical staff arrested: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat



The Directorate General of Private Health Establishments at the Ministry of Health is to exercise greater control and evaluation to ensure patient safety and reduce irregularities committed by a few in the private healthcare sector.

Dr Muhana al Maslahi, director general at the directorate general of private health establishments, on Wednesday stated that people's health can't be compromised.

"The evaluation teams have recently recorded a number of offences including an expatriate licensed as a farmer working as an optometrist in an optics shop in Buraimi," he said.

In addition, a domestic worker who was working as a laser technician in a dermatology clinic in Muscat was also caught. "All irregularities have been referred to the Violation Committees and assigned to legal authorities in the country for appropriate action," Dr Maslahi said.

He added that the directorate general will continue to resolutely take action against every irregularity of the laws and health safety rules and simultaneously

provide all the facilities to support the development of the private health establishments in Oman as well as encourage health investment in the sector.

Dr Maslahi said that directorate received more than 150 new applications for the establishment of private health institutions in Oman. "Eleven of the applications were for new hospitals as per the latest statistics," he said.

He pointed out that the number of the private health establishments in the country reached around 1,700, apart from pharmacies and the number is expected to rise up to 2,000 private health establishments in the coming years.

Khareef events to be held in various locations: Dhofar Municipality

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Dhofar Municipality has announced that the events and activities of this year's Khareef tourist season will be held in various locations such as parks, gardens, and natural and tourist sites.

A statement issued by Dhofar Municipality, said, 'Recreation Centre, where the activities of Salalah Tourism Festival are generally held, will be closed due to the ongoing comprehensive development work, which will include the addition of several new facilities.'

The municipality said that the distribution of events came with the aim of attracting a large num-



ber of tourists and introducing them to tourist sites and landscapes in the governorate.

The municipality was responding to social media reports that the Salalah Tourism Festival will not be held for the third year in a row.

The municipality's decision

sparked a reaction among social media users.

Mohammed al Ghassani, said, "Distributing events to different locations is a good step because it will be beneficial for the commercial activities of these wilayats, and reduce traffic congestion."

Haitham Jaaboub, a twitterati, said, "Holding events in gardens and parks, will stimulate domestic tourism and revive economic activity after the festival was cancelled in the past two years due to the pandemic. I think, holding events and activities in open spaces will also limit the spread of COVID-19."

The number of visitors during 2019 Salalah tourism season reached 766,772, a decline of 7.2 per cent compared to 2018 season. The visitors' spending reached RO78mn, up by 1.4 per cent compared to the 2018 season, when it was RO76.9mn, according to 'Statistics of Salalah Tourism Season 2019' released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Two-shift system for govt employees

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) on Wednesday announced that it will implement a two-shift working system in all units of the state's administrative apparatus during the holy month of

Ramadan

A statement issued by MoL, said, 'The ministry decided to implement a flexible working system (two shifts) in all units of the administrative apparatus of the state. The employee is allowed to work in a double-shift system, equivalent to five

working hours per day, provided that attendance in the first shift is from 8am till 1pm, and the second shift is from 9am until 2pm during the holy month of Ramadan. The employee has the right to choose between the two shifts."



The Internal Tender Committee at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology In AL Khuwair invites for the Following Project:

TENDER NO	TENDER NAME	DATE OF PUBLISHING	LAST DATE TO PURCHASE TENDER DOCUMENT	SUBMISSION DATE	COMPANIES WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THIS TENDER	DOCUMENT PRICE
1/2022/MTCIT/H Q-1 - Recall	Produce Audio-Visual materials to enhance the digital content	05/4/2022	13/4/2022	09/5/2022	Experienced Companies And Registered With General Secretary Of Tender Board	(25/-) Twenty Five Omani Rial Non-Refundable

Interested Companies registered with General Secretary of Tender Board may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted online on given website. Note: Electronic bid bond feature is now activated on eTendering, Please contact eTendering support if assistance is required.

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1. Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at e-Tendering System. (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
2. E-Tendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-Tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: Tel: +968 24402200 e-mail : etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE

BEYOND WORDS



VAISHALI HAMLAI

The columnist is a certified MBTI coach and author, and writer who delves into the complexities of the mind and soul to guide and interpret social behaviour

When was the last time you judged your kid's grammatical error? When was the last time you thought that kid needs to work on his math? When was the last time you tagged a kid for being a failure? We never told them it was okay, instead we told them it is their fault. We ridiculed them for not working hard. We told them they weren't good enough. And with the last sword on their chest, we also compared them to that other geeky friend, who scored to be a winner in this rat race of grades.

It was then we put them in their first lowest self-doubt route. We set them for their own failure. What if they weren't equipped with the same things as others. We all are unique in our own ways, and we were made to be different in our special way. If we all thought in a similar fashion, then we would be robots. We would be manmade not creator made. Sometimes, we adults don't deserve to

SMART KIDS OF THE 'UNSMART' WORLD WE CREATED

be responsible for the tiny lives on earth, instead we should birth them, and leave them with other kids older or younger. Probably then they might turn out better than in our hands. We push our personal vendetta, our unfulfilled desires, to our kids. They become the ornament we wanted to wear as kids.

Never once did we look back and see why did they get those grades? Why can't they know the difference between 6 and 9? Did we put ourselves out of the parent shoe and think that maybe, just maybe, they don't see what we see? Why can't they read a simple sentence? Maybe they can't relate to the characters in that book? Maybe they don't know why the math figures don't make sense to them? In a parallel world where we can read

what we see, they see running rivers. If our math teacher asked us, there are 4 ducks in the grass and 3 more joined in, we know now there were 7. But they are bogged down about why they are ducks in the grass in the first place.

When God was engineering brains for humans, he had programmed a few things for all, but for some special people he let them go with a clean slate, for them to conquer the world, and make the world the way they wanted to make it. Maybe God was experimenting for the future children he was to create, or maybe he knew that these clean slates would bring grander ideas on earth than the programmed ones.

He created them, to let them overpower the world in their own unique way and let them not be defined by the rules of the world. He made these warriors to maybe, just maybe, make the world a better place to live in.

A kinder place to reside in....

MARKET WATCH

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Sensex	59,610.41

FOREX RATES
(RO1 equals)

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Bangladesh taka	223.92
Philippines peso	133.42
Sri Lankan Rs	779.05

*Rates as on April 06
Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Germany warns against over-reliance on China trade

German Finance Minister Christian Lindner voiced concern Wednesday over his country's heavy reliance on trade with China, saying Europe's top economy needed to "diversify" its export destinations.

"My concern is that... we have a strong economic inter-connectedness with China," Lindner said in an interview with Die Zeit weekly. "We need to diversify international relations, including when it comes to our exports," he said. Tensions between China and the West are on the rise following Beijing's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whereas the European Union and the United States have imposed sweeping sanctions on Moscow.

Germany's centre-left-led government came to power in December vowing "dialogue and toughness" in its dealings with China, with a focus on human rights after the commerce-driven pragmatism of previous administrations.

"Perhaps the time has come when we should preferentially do business with those who are not only trading partners, but also want to be partners in values," Lindner said.

GCC banks post \$35bn profits on higher revenues in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Total net profits for the GCC banking sector increased by 40 per cent to reach US\$35bn in 2021 as compared to US\$25bn in 2020, recording one of the highest yearly profitability levels.

The growth in the GCC banks' profits during 2021 was led by an increase in total bank revenues as well as a decline in loan loss provisions, Kuwait-based Kamco Investment said in a research report.

However, GCC banks' profits remained below pre-pandemic profits of US\$37bn reported in 2019, the report showed.

The year-on-year increase in 2021 was broad-based across the GCC with profits for Kuwaiti banks almost doubled to US\$2.9bn. Saudi and UAE-listed banks also reported healthy profit growth of 40.2 per cent and 52.6 per cent during the year.



Higher profits also pushed the aggregate return-on-equity for the sector to a seven-quarter high level of 10.4 per cent at the end of 2021 as compared to 9.6 per cent in the third quarter of 2021 and 8.1 per cent at the end of 2020.

'The growth in profits during the year was led by an increase in total bank revenue as well as a decline in loan loss provisions.

Total bank revenue increased by 6.9 per cent to US\$90bn in 2021, one of the highest on record and mainly led by 17.6 per cent growth in non-interest income,' Kamco Investment said.

Revenue growth, the report said, was broad-based across the GCC with Qatari banks reporting the biggest growth of 9.9 per cent followed by UAE and Kuwaiti banks revenue growth of

9 per cent and 7.1 per cent, respectively.

The UAE-listed banks reported the biggest growth in non-interest income at 31.7 per cent but was the only market to report a drop in interest income during the year by 3.2 per cent.

Loan loss provisions reported by GCC banks declined by more than a quarter in 2021 to reach US\$14.9bn from US\$20.4bn in 2020.

However, loan loss provisions remained elevated as compared to pre-pandemic levels with an average loan loss provisions of US\$9.1bn for the ten years preceding the pandemic (2010-2019), according to Kamco Investment's report.

'The decline in loan loss provisions during 2021 was seen across the GCC barring Qatar, which reported an increase of 20.1 per cent to report provisions of US\$3.4bn, the second-biggest provision booked during the year after UAE-listed banks,' the re-

port noted.

In terms of quarterly trend, growth in lending decelerated during the fourth quarter of 2021 to a three-quarter-low gross loan growth of 1.2 per cent to reach US\$1.7tn.

The subdued growth came after strong lending growth recorded by banks in Kuwait (3.7 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (2.8 per cent) were partially offset by below one per cent growth in UAE, Bahrain and Oman and a decline of 0.6 per cent reported by Qatari banks during the fourth quarter.

GCC banks' customer deposits also showed a similar trend during the fourth quarter of 2021 with a growth of 1.2 per cent, also a three-quarter low, to reach US\$2tn.

As a result, the loan-to-deposit ratio for the aggregate GCC banking sector declined marginally by 10 basis points to reach a five-quarter low level of 79.9 per cent.

MSX closes up amid weak trading

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) increased 0.13 per cent on Wednesday to close at 4,143.02 points. Trading activity at the Muscat bourse remain weak compared to the previous day.

Among sectoral indices Financial and Services indices inched up 0.03 per cent and 0.01 per cent, respectively, while Industrial index remained flat. MSX Sharia index dropped 0.32 per cent to close at 476.33 points.

Total trading volumes dropped by more than 22 per cent to 18.7mn shares on Wednesday compared with 24.2mn shares traded on Tuesday. Market turnover fell 15.8 per cent to RO3.36mn against RO4mn recorded in the previous.



Opal to set up RO20mn vaccine factory at Khazaen

Muscat - Khazaen Economic City on Wednesday signed an agreement with Opal for Biopharmaceuticals and Business Company to establish a factory for the production of biological human vaccines.

The investment for setting up the factory is estimated at RO20mn. The first phase of the

project will be set up on a total area of 37,000 square meters.

The agreement was signed by Eng Salim al Thuhli, CEO of Khazaen Economic City and Sa'ad Moosa al Junaibi, chairman of the board of directors of Opal for Biopharmaceuticals and Business Company.

ONA

UAE receives \$21bn worth of FDI in 2021

Abu Dhabi, UAE - The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows into the UAE recorded a 3.9 per cent growth in 2021 compared to 2020 to reach nearly AED76bn (US\$20.7bn).

As a result, the total FDI stock in the country increased to reach nearly AED630bn (US\$171.6bn) by the end of 2021, highlighting a 13.7 per cent growth over 2020.

Over the past ten years, FDI inflows into the country have grown by 116 per cent, while the total balance of those investments during the same period grew by 113 per cent.

Abdullah bin Touq al Marri, Minister of Economy, said that



this distinguished result is the country's latest achievement under the UAE leadership's wise vision and directives, which are based on the principles of proac-

tivity and future foresight.

He noted that it has proven the strength and flexibility of the UAE's economy and the attractiveness of its business and investment environment once again, highlighting the advantages it offers to the global investment community.

"These integrated and pioneering competitive advantages and incentives consolidate the UAE's position as an economic and commercial capital both regionally and globally, making it a preferred and attractive destination for FDI and pioneering projects from various international markets," Marri explained.

The foreign investments received by the UAE are spread across all sectors and vital economic activities, such as traditional and renewable energy, oil and natural gas, financial sector, insurance activities, real estate, health, industry and agriculture.

Various new economic sectors such as digital economy, technology, innovation, artificial intelligence, Internet of things and blockchain, innovative medical technologies, high-speed transportation, virtual and augmented reality, robotics and self-driving cars also attracted considerable FDI.

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DEWA raises \$6.1bn in UAE's largest ever IPO

Dubai, UAE - Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) on Wednesday announced that, following the completion of the book building and subscription process for its initial public offering (IPO), it has set the final offer price for its IPO at AED2.48 per share.

Upon completion, the DEWA IPO will become the largest ever IPO in the UAE and the largest in the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region so far in 2022.

Having received overwhelming demand from investors, the final offer price was set at AED2.48 by the Government of Dubai in its capacity as the selling shareholder of DEWA.

A total of 9bn ordinary shares, representing 18 per cent of DEWA's issued share capital, were offered, which will generate approximately AED22.3bn (US\$6.1bn) of gross proceeds for the selling shareholder upon settlement.

This includes commitments from cornerstone and strategic investors amounting to approximately AED13.8bn (US\$3.8bn). Following completion of the DEWA IPO, the Government of Dubai will continue to own 82 per cent of DEWA's share capital.

The offering saw strong investor demand and oversubscription for both the qualified investor offering and the UAE retail offering. Total demand for DEWA shares amounted to AED315bn (US\$85.7bn). Excluding cornerstone and strategic in-



vestors, the orderbook for the IPO was 37 times oversubscribed.

DEWA is expected to commence trading on the Dubai Financial Market (DFM) on April 12. Upon listing, the company will have a market capitalisation of AED124bn, which will make DEWA the largest company on the DFM by market capitalisation.

Investors that participated in the UAE retail offering will be notified of their allocation of shares via SMS on April 11.

Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, Deputy

Prime Minister of the UAE, Minister of Finance and Chair of the Securities and Exchange Higher Committee, stressed that the high international demand on DEWA IPO reflects the trust and confidence in Dubai's entities as quality investment opportunities.

The strong demand for DEWA shares from international and local investors, including some of the world's largest asset managers, underlines the strength of DEWA as an issuer as well as Dubai's growing recognition as an increasingly vibrant capital market.

Saeed Mohammed al Tayer, managing director and CEO of

DEWA, said, "We are delighted to have seen incredibly strong demand for DEWA shares from local and international investors. This level of interest is not only indicative of DEWA's status as a world-class provider of utilities but also underlines the attractiveness of Dubai as a global capital market."

"As we look ahead, DEWA will remain focused on creating value for all its stakeholders by meeting the increasing demand for electricity and water in Dubai and by supporting the Emirate's energy transition to net zero by 2050," he added.

WAM

Europe takes sanctions aim at Russia fossil fuel exports

Strasbourg, France - EU leaders on Wednesday said the bloc will soon have to sanction all of Russia's hydrocarbon exports as they blamed Moscow for "war crimes" discovered in Ukraine, especially in the town of Bucha.

The declarations, made to the European Parliament in the French city of Strasbourg, came as the European Union was poised to implement a fifth round of sanctions cutting off Russian coal imports, while NATO and G7 foreign ministers gathered in Brussels for further steps on co-ordinated action.

The EU must also impose oil and gas sanctions on Russia "sooner or later", European Council chief Charles Michel told MEPs. The deaths of civilians in Bucha and other parts of Ukraine were "war crimes" and "yet more proof that Russian brutality against the people of Ukraine has no limits," he said.

"We the EU, we will not turn our backs. We will look reality straight in the eye. There must be, and there will be, severe consequences for all those responsible," he said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen echoed that, saying: "We will hold accountable those who are responsible for war crimes. The perpetrators must pay after Bucha more than ever."

She said the EU intended to keep ramping up "smart" sanctions that would hurt Russia more than the European Union.

The latest package of measures, she said, "will not be our



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks during a plenary session at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France, Tuesday (AFP)

last sanctions".

"Yes, we've now banned coal. But now we have to look into oil. And we'll have to look into the revenues that Russia gets from the fossil fuels," she said.

Russia's oil, gas and coal exports are its key sources of foreign income, with the EU its main customer.

Some EU countries, notably Germany, have been reluctant to hit Russian energy exports because of the damage it would do

to their own economies.

But pressure has been building to go after them following the reports of mass civilian deaths in Bucha and other areas in Ukraine formerly held by Russian troops.

The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stressed to the European Parliament that the bloc's payments for Russian fossil fuels were funding President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

"A billion euros is what we have paid Putin every day for the

energy he provides us since the beginning of the war. We have given him 35bn euros," since the February 24 invasion date, Borrell said. "Compare that to the one billion (euros) that we have given to the Ukraine in arms and weapons. This gigantic difference has to highlight the importance and need of implementing what the (European) Council asked to do - we have to reduce energy dependence."

AFP

ADB trims Asia growth forecast

Manila, Philippines - The Asian Development Bank trimmed its 2022 growth forecast for developing Asia Wednesday as "increasing" price pressures after Russia's invasion of Ukraine threaten a recovery from Omicron surges. Inflation across the vast region stretching from the Cook Islands in the Pacific to Kazakhstan in Central Asia was expected to gather pace as countries bounced back from the pandemic, and energy and food costs rose, it said.

In the wake of the Omicron-driven surge in coronavirus infections and the conflict in Ukraine, the Philippines-based lender lowered its 2022 economic growth forecast to 5.2 per cent.

That compares with its previous prediction in December of 5.3 per cent and the 6.9 per cent growth chalked up last year.

While the bank was optimistic the region would continue to rebound from COVID-19, chief economist Albert Park said the recovery would be "uneven" and there were "significant downside risks". "What is certain is that the fallout from the war is an additional hurdle for economies in developing Asia which are still



contending with the pandemic," Park said.

While the Caucasus and Central Asia would take a direct hit from the Ukraine crisis due to their close trade and financial links to Russia, the rest of the region would be affected indirectly through higher food and energy prices. Inflation was expected to reach 3.7 per cent, compared with 2.5 per cent in 2021, which Park noted was "still well below" other parts of the world, which he partly attributed to relatively lower consumption of wheat and fewer supply chain disruptions.

But ADB warned that in developing Asia "price pressures are increasing and monetary authorities need to remain vigilant."

COVID-19 still casts a shadow

over developing Asia, with the risk of more deadly variants emerging and the Omicron outbreak in China threatening regional growth and supply chains, the bank said.

Countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia were expected to record the slowest growth, with 3.6 per cent in 2022, down from 5.6 per cent in 2021.

East Asia was tipped to grow 4.7 per cent, compared with last year's cracking pace of 7.6 per cent, as a slowing China grapples with a growing COVID-19 outbreak. Crisis-hit Sri Lanka was tipped to grow 2.4 per cent - the worst performer in South Asia where the economy is expected to expand by 7.0 per cent.

AFP

Fed prepared to take 'stronger action' to fight rising inflation

Washington, US - Reducing high inflation is of "paramount importance" for the US central bank and policymakers are prepared to act more aggressively if needed, Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard said.

"Getting inflation down is our most important task, while sustaining a recovery that includes everyone," Brainard said in a prepared speech on Tuesday, noting that rising prices for food and fuel hurt lower-income families the most.

The central bank's policy-setting committee "is prepared to take stronger action" if warranted, said Brainard, who is awaiting congressional confir-



Lael Brainard

mation for the position of Fed vice chair.

The committee took the first step to raise the benchmark lending rate last month with a quarter-point increase, but a growing number of central bankers, including Fed Chair

Jerome Powell, have signaled bigger steps could be coming as soon as its meeting next month.

The Fed also is expected to start reducing its massive bond holdings as part of its efforts to cool price pressures and bring inflation back down towards its two percent target.

"It is of paramount importance to get inflation down," Brainard said. "Accordingly, the committee will continue tightening monetary policy methodically through a series of interest rate increases and by starting to reduce the balance sheet at a rapid pace as soon as our May meeting."

AFP

Putin condemns European 'pressure' on Gazprom and warns of reprisals

Moscow, Russia - Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned measures taken against Russian gas giant Gazprom in Europe over the conflict in Ukraine and warned of potential reprisals.

"The situation in the energy sector is worsening as a result of non-market, brute measures, including administrative pressure on our company Gazprom in some European countries," Putin told officials in a televised meeting on Tuesday, after Germany said it was temporarily taking control of Gazprom's German subsidiary.

"We are already hearing statements from officials about the possible nationalisa-



Russian President Vladimir Putin

tion of our assets," Putin said. "If we go that far, let's not for-

get that this is a double-edged sword."

Berlin said its move to take over Gazprom Germania until September 30 was aimed at securing energy supply and critical infrastructure, amid growing distrust between Russia and the West.

EU antitrust investigators raided the German offices of Gazprom last week, on suspicion the Russian company had illegally pushed up prices in Europe. Ukraine has repeatedly urged European nations to stop imports of Russian gas over the conflict.

Russia provides roughly 40 per cent of the EU's gas supply, mainly to Germany, Italy and a few eastern European countries.

AFP

Russia will 'monitor' food exports to 'hostile' nations

Moscow, Russia - Russian President Vladimir Putin said Moscow would carefully "monitor" food exports to "hostile" nations as the West pummels the country with sanctions over its military action in Ukraine.

"Against the backdrop of global food shortages, this year we will have to be prudent with supplies abroad and carefully monitor such exports to countries that are clearly hostile towards us," Putin said at a meeting on agriculture.

The Russian leader also said that the country's food production "fully" covered domestic needs and urged officials to ramp up import substitution.

"We need to set clear targets for import substitution and persistently pursue them in the very near future," he said, referring to

the country's "potential" in agriculture, industry and science.

He also said it was important "to minimise the negative external effects" for Russians who should have access to "high-quality affordable food products, including fish products".

"This is a key task for the current year."

Developing and import-dependent countries have been heavily impacted by Russia's military campaign in Ukraine -- the two countries that account for more than a quarter of the world's annual wheat sales.

Supply chain problems caused by the Covid pandemic quickly worsened after Putin sent troops to pro-Western Ukraine on February 24, sending food prices even higher.

AFP

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Ahlibank gets 'Top Omani Brand'

Ahlibank won the coveted 'Top Omani Brand' award in the banking category at the 'Top Omani Brands' felicitation ceremony, organised by Alam Al-Iktisaad, Oman's premier Arabic business magazine from United Media Services, at the Al Bustan Palace recently.

The award marks a new chapter in Ahlibank's history, which has seen it grow exponentially with a rightful position of being one of the fastest growing banks in the country, a press release said.

As per the set protocol, the winning brands were chosen on the basis of a survey, conducted by Alam Al-Iktisaad, in partnership with Arabian Research Bureau, to assess and evaluate Oman's top brands. The survey concentrated on highest brand recall among consumers, bringing to the forefront home-grown brands that are marked as the nation's pride. Top Omani brands, trusted and preferred by consumers across industry segments, were shortlisted for the grand felicitation ceremony.

Zaliya al Balushi, deputy general manager Large Corporate



and Mid Market, Ahlibank, said, "This is a momentous occasion for team Ahlibank. It is a reflection of our collaborative effort to shape the bank's fortunes and bolster its growth to augment Oman's Vision 2040. This award is a proof of our ongoing endeavour to establish a strategic bal-

ance between our growth goals and our commitment to be responsive to our society. Our customer-centric approach to business has proven to be a winner on all spheres of our activities, and we will keep developing and implementing innovative products and services to cater to

the ever-changing needs of our customers.

"At Ahlibank, we are proud to have been chosen as the Top Omani Brand in the banking services category, and this achievement is a motivator for our commitment to continue our successful path towards achiev-

ing the highest quality standards for our customers."

The event was held under the auspices of H H Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said, the gala evening was witnessed by top brass from Oman's corporate sector. It shed the spotlight on Oman's leading brands from different sectors.



Alizz Islamic Bank offers referral rewards

To ensure that its customers benefit from its offers, services and products, Alizz Islamic Bank announced a special offer where any customer referring and bringing ten successful new Bushra customers will have a chance to get an RO50 reward.

The first 500 customers who successfully refer ten new customers to open Bushra accounts during the holy month of Ramadan and they maintain a deposit balance of RO1,000 for a minimum for 30 days will be rewarded with RO50. The new customer's deposit must be sourced from pure credits (fresh deposits) while deposits sourced from internal transfers, existing salaries and postdated cheques will be excluded from the campaign, a press release said.

Alizz Islamic Bank currently offers a tiered Bushra Savings Account, which is based on the Shari'a principle of unrestricted 'Mudarabah', where the customer is the owner of the money, and the bank manages the 'Mudarabah' by investing the pool of customer funds in joint 'Mudarabah' transactions, in addition to other Mudarabah-based accounts. All profits are divided be-

tween the customer and the bank, based on a profit-sharing ratio determined by the bank. Profit rates based on each category will be applied to the deposit balances kept in the Bushra Account.

Based on each customer's account balance, the bank will deposit their profit shares on a monthly basis. Customers can get more details on profit rates by visiting the bank's official website at www.alizzislamic.com, visiting the nearest bank branch across Oman or calling the customer service center on the toll free number 80072265.

The Bushra Savings account has been designed to keep up with the changes in customer lifestyles by ensuring the best possible profits for the customer. Alizz Islamic Bank continues to tailor-make products and services to suit the expectations and requirements of customers.

Bushra customers, whether Omanis or expats, enjoy many advantages and benefits including monthly profit payment, instant debit card issuance and collection, and free online and mobile banking, and SMS alerts.

Zubair EDC signs MoU with MTI Consulting

Zubair Enterprises Development Centre (Zubair EDC), one of the Zubair Corporation initiatives in social responsibility, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with MTI Consulting. The MoU was signed by Said bin Salim al Sahib, director of Zubair EDC on behalf of the centre and Hilmy Cader, CEO of MTI on behalf of MTI Consulting.

This agreement aims to strengthen the relations between the Zubair EDC and MTI in order to empower entrepreneurs who own business in the Sultanate of Oman, a press release said.

"Zubair EDC is committed to provide comprehensive support



Said al Sahib

to Oman's promising small and medium enterprises to enable them to succeed and grow in a sustainable manner. We believe that this collaborations with MTI



Hilmy Cader

will enable both parties to progress and achieve the targeted objectives," stated Sahib.

Cader said, "MTI has a strong presence in the Middle East

since establishment and we look forward to working with Zubair EDC to continue the growth of our presence and support the development of businesses in Oman."

Zubair EDC is an organisation founded in 2013 and is one of the initiatives which emanated from the Zubair Group strategic vision towards Omani society. It reflects the Zubair Group's belief about the great importance of small and medium enterprises in enhancing the national economy and spreading its benefits.

Zubair EDC's vision is to provide comprehensive support to Oman's promising small and

medium enterprises to enable them to succeed and grow in a sustainable manner. Today, Zubair EDC is a professional body that capitalises on its high professionalism, diversified offered knowledge, wide range of accumulated expertise, and its own global and local network and strategic partners, and builds on The Zubair Corporation's strengths to lead positive change in the local business environment.

MTI Consulting is an internationally networked boutique management consultancy that has carried out over 680 projects in the past 25 years.

Sri Lankan trade minister concludes visit to Oman



Sri Lanka Embassy in Oman organised a bilateral trade visit of a five-member Sri Lankan delegation, led by Dr Bandula Gunawardhana, minister of trade of Sri Lanka, to the Sultanate of Oman from March 27-28.

The visit of the Sri Lankan trade delegation was prompted by the recent visit of a 17-member Omani business delegation, headed by the chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce & Industry (OCCI), to Sri Lanka, from March 5 - 9, a press release said.

The Sri Lankan delegation comprised of H E Ameer Ajwad, Ambassador of Sri Lanka, M Somasena Mahadulwewa, director of Department of Commerce of Sri Lanka, Yogendra Perera, chairman of Sri Lanka Trading Corporation (SLTC), Admiral (Rtd) Thisara Samarasinghe, senior consultant to CINEC Campus, and Ranjith Rubasinghe, president of SLTC.

Gunawardhana, together with

the delegation, met with H E Dr Mohammed al Rumhi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and discussed potential cooperation in the establishment of oil refinery and gas storage facilities at the G2G level between the two countries. He handed over a special letter addressed to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik from Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Sri Lankan delegation also met with H E Salem bin Mohammed al Mahruqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism of Oman, and explored ways and means to promote tourism between the two countries. Both sides agreed to facilitate links between the tour operators in both countries.

During the meeting, H E Ajwad highlighted that a MoU, which has now been finalised between the ministries of tourism of the two countries for signature, would serve as a catalyst for the enhancement of cooperation

in tourism and hospitality sectors between the two countries.

The delegation held detailed bilateral discussions with their counterparts in Oman from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion of Oman, headed by Dr Saleh Said Masan, Undersecretary for Commerce and Industry. Both sides exchanged information related to opportunities available in both countries for trade and investment.

They also identified potential sectors to initiate collaboration between the two countries. It was also agreed to organise a Business Forum and B2B meetings in Oman with the participation of a multi-sector business delegation from Sri Lanka in September 2022.

During the meeting, the Sri Lankan side also proposed on concluding a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with limited product coverage between the two countries.

Indian embassy hosts health camp

The Embassy of India organised a Consular-cum-Health Camp for workers in association with Al Ansari Group and Badr al Samaa Hospital on April 1.

The camp was held at Al Ansari Group labour camp in Muscat. It was part of the 'Sewa Utsav' being organised by the Embassy of India from March 31 to April 16 to commemorate 75 years of India's independence which is being celebrated as 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav'.

H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India, addressed the gathering and acknowledged the contribution of Indian blue-collar workers in Oman's economy, as approximately 400,000 blue collar workers are employed in various



sectors. The ambassador highlighted that welfare of workers and protection of their rights is a priority for the Government of India.

The participants were also informed about various schemes and programmes of the government related to migrant Indian workers. A presentation on

health and basic hygiene was given to the participants, which was well appreciated. The camp provided basic health screening, including tests for BP/sugar.

Malabar Gold pledges RO150,000 for CSR

Malabar Gold & Diamonds, one of the largest global jewellery retailers, amplifies the spirit of Ramadan by strengthening its CSR activities in the GCC and Far East.

The brand has planned month-long CSR activities in association with embassies, and like-minded organisations, which include the distribution of food provision kits and Iftar meals to deserving labourers and families. This initiative is expected to benefit a large section of the society across all countries in which Malabar Gold & Diamonds operates, a

press release said.

"CSR remains a core value at Malabar Gold & Diamonds ever since its inception in 1993 and contributing to the community has been a key part of the company's ESG (Environmental, Social & Governance) goals. Ramadan is usually the time we reflect on our actions and contribute to society in whatever way possible. Every year during Ramadan, we engage in various CSR initiatives, aiming to create a difference in the community in and around our area of operations and to drive other organisations, both big and small, to

initiate such activities that will help the needy," said Abdul Salam KP, vice chairman - Malabar Group.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds will distribute both Iftar meals and food provision kits as part of this Ramadan CSR initiative. In Oman, Iftar meals will be directly distributed to various labour camps in Muscat, Seeb, Barka, Sohar and Salalah, in addition to needy families, individuals who have lost their job, and those on visit visas, references of whom will be provided by likeminded organisations and customers of Malabar Gold &

Diamonds.

"The spirit of Ramadan gives us an added opportunity to exercise humanitarian values while making a positive impact on the lives of those around us. At Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the Ramadan CSR activity is spearheaded by our team members themselves along with like-minded organisations and associations, together with whom we identify and provide support to the needy in the local communities. It gives me a lot of happiness that we can continue to add goodness to society."

Bank Nizwa opens branch in Jalan Bani Bu Ali

In an endeavour to bring its services closer to its customers, Bank Nizwa has remained steadfast in continuously expanding its branch network to cover all strategic and remote locations across the country. In line with the same, the bank recently inaugurated its Jalan Bani Bu Ali branch.

The inauguration ceremony was held under the patronage of H E Said Mohammed al Saadi, A'Shura Member representing Wilayat Jalan Bani Bu Ali, a press release said.

Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa, said, "This is Bank Nizwa's first branch in Jalan Bani Bu Ali and we are eager to start serving the local community in the region. The new branch comes as a realisation of the bank's ambitious strategy that is aimed at establishing its presence throughout the sultanate so as to extend its innovative, Sharia-compliant financing solutions to various segments of society. As part of Bank Nizwa's long-term vision, we seek to consistently expand our reach to better serve our customers and make the bank's services and products more easily accessible and readily available. The opening of the Jalan Bani Bu Ali branch is a reflection of our continuous efforts in furthering our expansion plans, forming stronger connections with our growing customer base, and creating awareness about the benefits of Islamic finance."



continuous efforts in furthering our expansion plans, forming stronger connections with our growing customer base, and creating awareness about the benefits of Islamic finance."

The full-fledged branch, strategically located to provide

convenient access for all, offers the distinct Bank Nizwa environment that is geared at meeting the customers' every banking and financial need by offering a comprehensive suite of products and services.

Striking the right balance between incorporating the latest technologies and maintaining a personal touch, the branch will focus on efficient, effective, and hassle-free processing of services while delivering the exceptional level of customer service the bank has always taken great

pride in. With a team of expert professionals who reserve the necessary product knowledge and also understand the needs, sentiments, and values of the local community, Bank Nizwa seeks to pave the way to further advocate Sharia-compliant financing in the region.

A prospering commercial town and tourist destination, the wilayat of Jalan Bani Bu Ali has seen significant developments in recent years. As a bank dedicated to the socio-economic progress of the country, the new

branch of Bank Nizwa in the wilayat will, apart from providing standard banking services, also give an impetus to the local businesses and SMEs by providing them the needed financial advisory services and other credit facilities.

Meethaq launches special finance offers for Ramadan

Bank Muscat has launched a number of exclusive financing offers on the occasion of the Holy month of Ramadan.

The offers will be available from April 1 to June 30 and applicable on a wide variety of Meethaq financing options including Home Finance, Auto Finance, Personal Goods Finance, Education Finance, Marriage Finance, Travel Finance, and Takeover Finance. Customers can take advantage of an attractive profit rate of only 4.99 per cent per annum, a press release said.

Customers who apply for any of the products will benefit from quick processing and minimal documentation. Meethaq customers are eligible for up to 80 per cent financing for home or auto financing while 100 per cent financing is available for Travel, Marriage, Education and Personal Goods Finance.

Applications may be submitted at any of Meethaq's 24 state of the art branches across the sultanate.

Sami Bait Rashid, assistant general manager - Meethaq Personal Banking, expressed his best wishes to Meethaq customers for the Holy month of Ramadan.



Sami Bait Rashid

Meethaq has established the largest Islamic network in Oman consisting of 12 branches in the Governorate of Muscat and 12 branches across other governorates.

Meethaq Islamic Banking, which has been recognised as the Best Islamic Bank in Oman by Islamic Finance News in 2019, has adopted the best global practices in Islamic banking and finance to combine a robust model, which protects customers and complements the Islamic banking industry.

Every Meethaq product goes through the process of Shari'a compliance certification by the Shari'a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman.

Meethaq was also recognised as Oman's Most Trusted Brand for Islamic banking in 2021 by Apex Media.

Meethaq also has a dedicated network of over 40 ATMs and CDMs, and provides free access to more than 740 plus ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country for customers to conduct their banking transactions with ease.

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DANUBE TENNIS BALL CRICKET TOURNAMENT 2022



Lions XI defeated Super Sunraisers in the first round of the Danube Ramadan Tennis Ball Cricket Tournament 2022, organised by Al Hail Cricket Club

Starzplay offers season's family entertainment

The time of the year has come when families come together to celebrate the spirit of joy, unity and goodwill. And Starzplay, the leading subscription video on demand (SVOD) service, is making sure that families have the best content to choose from for their post-Iftar entertainment.

A mix of Arabic series, as well as Fatafeet cooking shows,



Starzplay has something for everyone during the holy month. The top picks include TV shows like Bab Al Hara Season 12, Al-Daheeh Season 2, The Ottoman Season 1, Shoghol Aali, Kasr Adhem, Pablo, Kayd Al Hareem, Wajouh, and Discovery+ Ramadan Specials, available to stream on the Discovery+ add on channel on Starzplay

Oman Huawei ICT Academies premiere conference held

Huawei ICT Academies in Oman gathered in Muscat for a premier conference at Huawei ME ICT Training Centre to share experiences and developments of the previous year.

The event was hosted in partnership with the Oman Ministry of Transport, Communication and Information Technology and Omantel, with senior executives from all entities addressing the students and teachers from all the ICT Academies in Oman, a press release said.

The Huawei ICT Academy is a school-enterprise cooperation project that involves higher education institutions and helps build the local talent ecosystem and nurture the future ICT leaders for each country. Since its launch in 2013, Huawei has built a talent supply chain covering the entire process of learning,



certification, and employment by deepening the cooperation mechanism between universities and enterprises. To date, Huawei ICT Academies have benefited the lives of 5,000+ students in

Oman, enabling them to develop crucial ICT skills.

Fahad al Abri, director general, Sector Development and Capacity Building at Oman Ministry of Transport, Communication and Information Technology, said, "The digital transformation goals of Oman Vision 2040 require an accelerated talent development programme to match. Our universities cannot

do it alone, so we strongly encourage partnerships across the ICT ecosystem. Huawei is a long-term strategic partner for Oman's ICT sector, and its support in advancing the ICT skills of

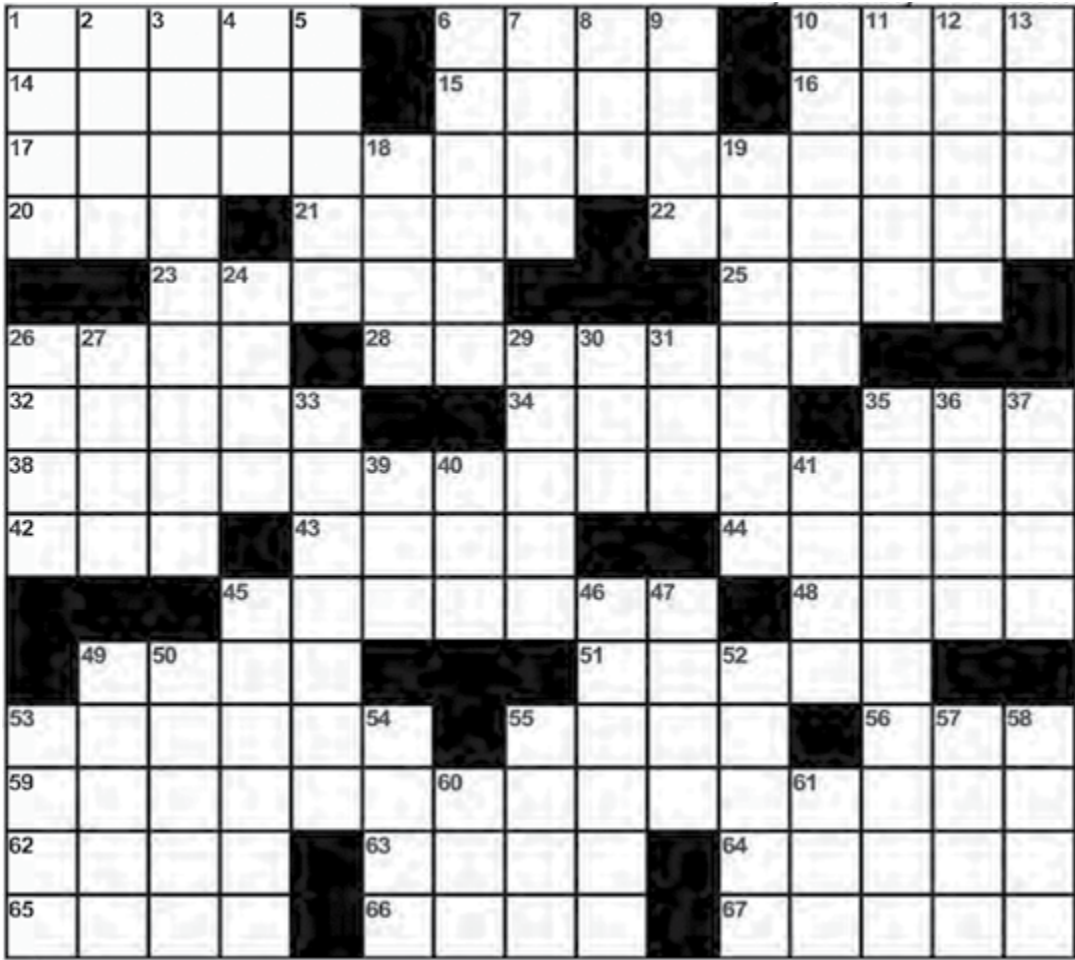
our youth through the ICT Academy will help us reach our goals faster."

Ibtihal al Riyami, general manager of Organisation Planning at Omantel, said, "As the leading

enabler for Oman's digital transformation, access to people with advanced digital skills is a necessity. As long-term partners of Huawei in various fields, we benefit greatly from its various ICT skills development programs that allow us to elevate the customer experience."

Chenjianhan, Huawei Oman CEO, added, "At Huawei, we remain committed to developing Oman's ICT ecosystem and nurturing local talent through cooperation with governments, universities, and industry organisations. At the Huawei ICT Academies Oman Conference, we were inspired to witness the growth and development in the ICT skills of young and talented students across Oman. We would like to encourage all ICT academies to continue improving performance."

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**

 - 1) Gold coin of old
 - 6) Quite excited
 - 10) Give a free pass to
 - 14) Historical period
 - 15) "Long live"
 - 16) 23-Across solo
 - 17) CFO's job
 - 20) Corporation name-ending abbr.
 - 21) Tumblers' surfaces
 - 22) Make known
 - 23) Buffo's place
 - 25) Large tooth
 - 26) Cowboy boot attachment
 - 28) Baby rockers
 - 32) Activist Silkwood
 - 34) Wedding cake level
 - 35) Ballerina's hairdo, often
 - 38) "Conduct" penalized in football

MAN OF LETTERS

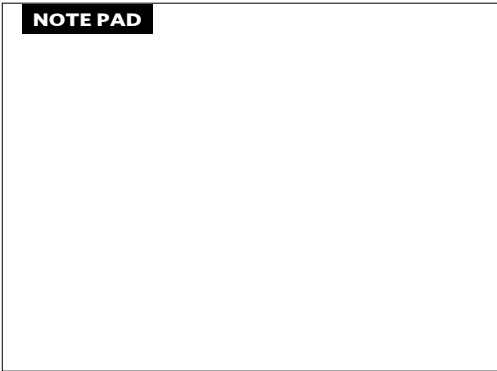
 - 42) Noshed
 - 43) It may be stolen in a park
 - 44) Able to walk the line?
 - 45) Go by rapidly, as
- time

 - 48) "Not to mention ..."
 - 49) Reduce, as expenses
 - 51) Writer Tom or Thomas
 - 53) Least straightforward (var.)
 - 55) "Buona_" (Italian phrase)
 - 56) Car grille accessory
 - 59) Assume responsibility for
 - 62) Court attention-getter
 - 63) Borodin's "Prince_"
 - 64) Sesame seed and honey confection
 - 65) Be on the way out
 - 66) Thick, eggy drinks
 - 67) Computer keyboard key

DOWN

 - 1) Prefix meaning "half"
 - 2) "Once_ a time ..."
 - 3) Way to prison?
 - 4) High or low card
 - 5) Certain herb
 - 6) Online game personification
 - 7) Beefeater products
 - 8) Egg cells
- 9) Plum variety
 - 10) College setting
 - 11) Popular cookies
 - 12) Belarus' capital
 - 13) Fancy spread
 - 18) Artist Chagall
 - 19) Non-resident doctors
 - 24) Kind of school
 - 26) Gull-like bird
 - 27) Breathe hard
 - 29) Baffled while yachting?
 - 30) Barely lit
 - 31) Pasture
 - 33) Most aristocratic
 - 35) Area of many believers
 - 36) Hawaiian instruments, briefly
 - 37) Claudius' successor
 - 39) Sunlight unit
 - 40) Cooking meas.
 - 41) Hang around lazily
 - 45) Restraining order?
 - 46) Uses indelicate language
 - 47) Conflicted
 - 49) Costa del Sol feature
 - 50) Clay of "American Idol" fame
 - 52) Carpenter's spinning
- machine

 - 53) Put away in a hold
 - 54) Slender
 - 55) Dirty air
- 57) Amble
 - 58) Nowhere near?
 - 60) Anima counterpart
 - 61) PC linkup



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You've played your cards close to your chest for a while now, taking care to maintain your privacy. Better keep that up, because the heavens have arranged an opportunity for you to take a risk and to issue a challenge. For the next few weeks, a secret tryst will be possible. Think you're ready? Are they? This is going to be exciting and memorable.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
You're feeling pretty darned restless, aren't you? Like something is about to happen? Well, you're right, but you can't push it along to make it happen any faster, and you can't drag your heels and make it stop, so don't even try. In fact, rather than sitting there and tapping on the coffee table or trying to find a television program that's tolerable, get yourself dressed and go out. All you can do at this point is wait anyway.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21
It's time to let go and let the universe have its way with you. First of all, there's no other way for things to go right now, and anything is possible at the moment, especially if it's something from the past. Your job is to surround yourself with loved ones who are good at saying, "Sure, why not give it another shot?" You know exactly the person to call, and you know they'll be supportive.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
You're known as a money magnet. That doesn't mean that money just shows up, though. You attract it, sure, but only because you're unafraid to go after it the old-fashioned way, by earning it and working hard for it. You'll be doing plenty of that now, but for a few weeks you might also need to be especially careful about signing anything that's presented to you as a sure thing by a 'friend'.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
No one has ever accused you of being lazy or not taking care of business. You have, however, been called a workaholic every now and then, usually by someone who's jealous of your work. The good news for them is that for the next few weeks you'll have plenty of time to spend with them. Just don't be surprised if nothing you plan together turns out the way you expected it to.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
Among the many admirable qualities on your list, you're famous for your integrity and your never-ending sense of responsibility. That goes especially for people from the past - the ones you've never stopped loving. Before you take them back, and you certainly could have that chance, you'd better at least talk it over with someone you trust. You should be openminded and ready accept the consequences of your actions.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
You just can't stand not knowing absolutely everything that's going on around you, but for the next few weeks you'd better at least try to get used to it. Someone who loves you is working on a surprise for you right now, and even though you know you can figure it out if you really want to, don't even try. You'll only spoil it. Let them have their fun.

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
If anyone can find a nice way to say anything at all, it's you, even if it's a secret. Your skills at mediation and negotiation are legendary. At the moment, however, you'll need to leave those skills right where they are and keep quiet. No one says you'll have to do it permanently, but for now, mum should definitely be the word. The only word.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
Every now and then, the universe tosses us a day that's isn't destined to turn out the way we thought it would. You're due for a few of those now, especially in the financial department. A business situation you've been working on has suddenly become impossible to pull off, at least it seems that way. Stall the initial negotiations for at least the next few weeks. You might end up doing some celebrating with a loved one.

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
If anyone is a homebody, it's you. Your nest is cozy and comfy, and you love spending time in it. Needless to say, talking you into leaving home isn't easy, even if it's just for a weekend. At the moment, however, you're in the mood to do a bit of traveling, probably to revisit some old stomping grounds. Go ahead. And see if you can't take someone along with you, someone who's heard all the stories about that particular place.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
There's just no doubt about it. You've been an especially good person lately. So when the one you thought had gotten away suddenly turns up, think of it as a lovely surprise, a second shot at the title. Oh, and when it happens, if you can let go of the past long enough to smile at them, give yourself a reward. You definitely deserve it.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
You're due to cross paths with someone who's equally enthusiastic about all the subjects you simply adore. The catch is that it's probably going to be someone you've known for a long time, someone you haven't seen because they've been gone. Your first impulse will be to make a great, big pot of coffee, clear off the kitchen table, and have a look at those old photo albums and scrapbooks.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. A species of elk is named after which of these US presidents?

- A. John Kennedy
- B. Theodore Roosevelt
- C. Jimmy Carter
- D. Abraham Lincoln

2. Tableland, large flat elevated areas sitting above cliffs, is sometimes called what?

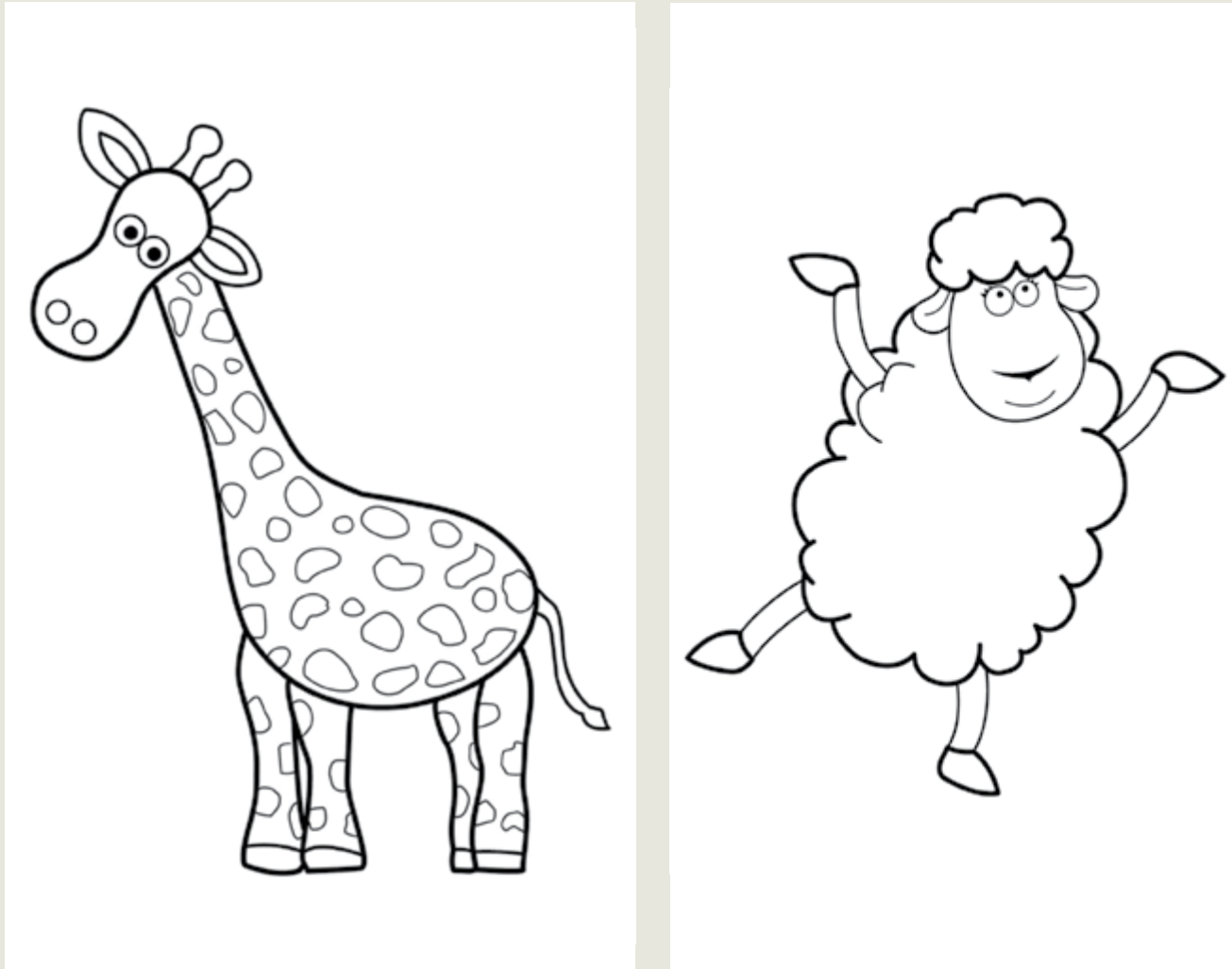
- A. Flatlands
- B. Plains
- C. Mesa
- D. Plateau

3. Who does the character Sancho Panza accompany?

- A. Don Quixote
- B. The Lone Ranger
- C. Calamity Jane
- D. James Bond

Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. A

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

O	R	E	R
D	Y	S	E
A	M	E	O
P	I	L	E

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

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

DO YOU SUDOKU?

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

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

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

West readies new sanctions on Russia over Ukraine killings

Kyiv, Ukraine - Western powers were readying new sanctions against Russia on Wednesday after Ukraine's president called for tougher action and accused Moscow of atrocities during the six-week war.

The measures follow an international outcry over hundreds of civilians found dead in areas from which Russian troops have withdrawn around Ukraine's capital, including the town of Bucha.

In a video address to the UN Security Council on Tuesday, Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky showed harrowing images of corpses - including of children - that he said were victims of Russian atrocities.

"They cut off limbs... slashed their throats. Women were raped and killed in front of their children," he said, after earlier comparing Russia's assault to the 1937 Nazi bombing of the town of Guernica.

The Kremlin has denied any civilian killings, claiming the images emerging from Bucha and other sites are fakes produced by Ukrainian forces, or that the deaths occurred after Russian soldiers pulled out.

Zelensky called for Russia's exclusion from the UN Security Council, where it is one of five members with veto power, saying it was blocking the UN from carrying out 'the functions for which it was created'.

On Wednesday, Pope Francis - who has repeatedly called for peace, while not naming Russia or President Vladimir Putin - also deplored the 'powerlessness of international organisations'.

At his weekly audience at the Vatican, the 85-year-old pontiff kissed a flag he said had come from 'that martyred city Bucha', condemning 'ever more horrendous cruelties' in Ukraine.

The UN General Assembly announced later it would vote Thursday on suspending Russia from the body's Human Rights Council, after moves by the US and Britain to have it excluded.

Push to isolate Moscow

Thousands of people have been killed and more than 11mn displaced as refugees or within Ukraine since Russia's invasion on February 24.

Western powers have already pummelled Russia with debilitating economic sanctions, which forced Moscow on Wednesday to make foreign debt payments on dollar-denominated bonds in rubles.



Debris of destroyed armoured vehicles is seen on a street in the town of Bucha, on the outskirts of Kyiv on Tuesday (AFP)



The mother of Ukrainian soldier Lubomyr Hudzeliak mourns over his coffin during his funeral at the Lychakiv cemetery, in Lviv on Wednesday (AFP)

But the killings in Bucha and elsewhere have galvanised support for Kyiv, with Washington announcing another US\$100mn in military aid, and produced new momentum for additional sanctions on Moscow.

Washington, in coordination with the G7 and the European Union, is expected on Wednesday to announce measures including a ban on all new investments in Russia.

"You can expect... that they will target Russian government officials, their family members, Russian-owned financial institutions, also state-owned enterprises," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told a briefing on Tuesday.

The EU meanwhile was poised to implement a fifth round of sanctions cutting off Russian coal imports - and European Council chief Charles Michel said that 'sooner or later', it must also impose oil and gas sanctions.

Condemning 'war crimes' in Russia, he said: "There must be, and there will be, severe consequences for all those responsible." But addressing the Irish parliament on Wednesday, Zelensky condemned the 'indiscipline' on the part of EU nations, which are dependent on Russian energy.

"We still need to convince Europe that Russian oil cannot feed the Russian military machine with new sources of funding," Zelensky added, calling also for the total exclusion of Russian banks from Western finance.

In Britain, which says it has so far frozen some US\$350bn in assets from Putin's 'war chest', Prime Minister Boris Johnson said what happened in Bucha 'doesn't look far short of genocide to me'.

He said the international community 'will be moving again in lockstep to impose more sanctions and more penalties on

Vladimir Putin's regime'.

In other moves to isolate Moscow, a string of EU countries including Germany, France, Italy and Spain have expelled more than 200 Russian diplomats and staff between them this week.

The Kremlin called the mass expulsions a 'short-sighted move' that would complicate efforts to negotiate an end to the hostilities. Putin also warned of 'reprisals' for recent European measures targeting Russian gas giant Gazprom - and said Moscow would 'monitor' its food exports to 'hostile' nations, raising the spectre of shortages and price spikes.

Kremlin denials

At the Security Council meeting, Moscow's ambassador rejected Zelensky's claims, saying the 'ungrounded accusations... are not confirmed by any eyewitnesses'.

But satellite photos taken while Bucha was still under Moscow's control show what appear to be bodies lying in streets where the dead were later found by Ukrainian forces and seen by journalists.

And multiple Bucha residents told AFP they had seen Russian soldiers killing civilians.

"Right in front of my eyes, they fired on a man who was going to get food at the supermarket," said 43-year-old Olena, who declined to give her family name.

During a grim cleanup, the remains of partially burned bodies in black bags were lifted into a van, with officials telling journalists 'dozens of bodies' remained in apartments and in nearby woods.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who will visit Kyiv this week, has offered the bloc's assistance in documenting proof of war crimes.

Cluster bombs

Ukrainian authorities have warned that other areas may have suffered even worse fates than Bucha. Scenes of devastation have met those venturing into areas from which Russian forces have withdrawn.

In the northern city of Chernigiv, which was besieged from the early days of the invasion, a charred children's hospital, full of bullet and shrapnel holes, served as a shelter.

In the dank basement, children painted on walls - tiny handprints, a smeared rainbow, a fluttering Ukrainian flag.

"Cluster bombs were flying, we have traces of these bombs," said 51-year-old Olena Makoviy. "The injured were brought to the children's hospital, both adults and children."

City officials estimate around 350 civilians have been killed in Chernigiv, with fellow residents digging mass graves to bury them. "It was very scary here from the first days of the war," said Makoviy. "They brought guys, handsome, young, but no longer alive,"

The Russian withdrawal from areas around Kyiv and the north is part of a shift of focus towards Ukraine's southeast, in a bid to create a land bridge between occupied Crimea and Moscow-backed separatist statelets in Donbas.

AFP

Burkina former prez gets life for Sankara killing

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso - A military court in Burkina Faso on Wednesday handed down a life term to former president Blaise Compaore over the 1987 assassination of revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara.

Applause erupted in the courtroom as the long-awaited verdict was read out, bringing the curtain down on a case that has afflicted the impoverished and volatile state for 34 years.

The court also issued life terms to Hyacinthe Kafando, an officer suspected of having led the hit squad, and General Gilbert Dienderé, an army commander at the time of the assassination, which coincided with a coup that brought Compaore to power.

Compaore, who lives in exile in Ivory Coast after being toppled by public protests in 2014, and Kafando, who has been on the run since 2016, were tried in absentia.

The six-month trial was avidly followed by many in the landlocked Sahel nation, for



Blaise Compaore (AFP)

whom Sankara's bloody death remains a dark blot on the country's history.

A fiery Marxist-Leninist who blasted the West for neo-colonialism and hypocrisy, Sankara was shot dead on October 15 1987, little more than four years after coming to power as an army captain aged just 33.

He and 12 colleagues were killed by a hit squad at a meeting of the ruling National Revolutionary Council.

Discussing the leftwing icon's death was taboo throughout the 27-year reign of Compaore, Sankara's comrade-in-arms.

AFP



A traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony is being conducted in the Mungo National Park (AFP)

Australia to rebury Mungo remains

Sydney, Australia - Australia's oldest human remains, dating back at least 40,000 years, will be reburied near the Outback site at Mungo Lakes where they were first uncovered, the Australian government announced on Wednesday.

The ancestral remains of 108 people, including the most famous bones known as the Mungo Man and Lady, will be interred near their original resting place in the Mungo National Park - about 11 hours drive west of Sydney, NSW Environment minister James Griffin said.

"While the discovery of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady helped scientists establish that Aboriginal people have been in

Australia for more than 42,000 years, it's time to let their spirits rest in peace," Griffin said.

The discoveries at Lake Mungo and Willandra Lakes between 1960 and 1980 redefined the anthropological understanding of Australia, pushing back the estimates of when humans first arrived on the continent by tens of thousands of years.

Mungo Lady is still among the earliest evidence of cremation in the world.

Further research of rock shelters in the Northern Territory has since extended evidence of Indigenous Australians, believed to be the world's oldest continuous culture, to at least 65,000 years.

AFP

Pakistan president wants election date set as political crisis continues

Islamabad, Pakistan - Pakistan President Arif Alvi told the country's election commission on Wednesday to fix a date for a new national ballot, as the supreme court adjourned a hearing into the legality of political manoeuvres that led to parliament being dissolved.

The court - which will sit for a fourth day Thursday - must rule if the deputy speaker of the national assembly violated the constitution by refusing to allow a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Imran Khan at the weekend.

Had the vote taken place Khan was certain to have been booted from office, but the move allowed him to get the loyalist president to dissolve parliament and order an election.

The opposition have cried foul and are refusing to cooperate with forming an interim government to oversee any ballot,

but on Wednesday Alvi upped the ante.

A statement from his office said the election commission had been told to propose a date 'in order to carry out the mandate of the Constitution'.

On the campaign trail

While the opposition applied its resources to the court, Khan effectively hit the campaign trail - telling party workers in Lahore late on Tuesday that he would be more careful in picking candidates to stand for his Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

Khan's woes started weeks ago when a group of rebel PTI lawmakers threatened to vote against him, but his fragile ruling coalition was beginning to unravel anyway.

There had been high hopes for Khan when he was elected in 2018 on a promise of sweeping



A leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party Asad Umar addresses media outside Supreme Court building in Islamabad on Wednesday (AFP)

away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism, but he struggled to maintain support

with soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan has

been wracked by political crises for much of its 75-year existence, and no prime minister has ever seen out a full term.

Whether the election commission has the capacity to organise a ballot within 90 days remains to be seen, with a watchdog group warning this week of 'grave concerns' for potential violence.

"The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) has identified multiple constitutional, legal and operational challenges to the conduct of an early election," said the group.

"Public confusion and political divisions that have already arisen as a result can potentially translate into violent expression."

Khan has already blown anti-US sentiment into the political atmosphere by saying the opposition had colluded with Washington for 'regime change'.

The cricketer-turned-politi-

cian says Western powers want him removed because he will not stand with them against Russia and China, and the issue is sure to ignite any forthcoming election.

Court precedent

It is unclear when or how the court will rule on the issue - or if Khan would even accept its decision - but there is precedent.

In 1988, Muhammad Khan Junejo appealed to the court after the assembly was dissolved by then president General Zia-ul-Haq, who had taken power in a military coup years earlier.

It agreed his government had been dissolved unconstitutionally, but ruled that since elections had been announced anyway it was best to move on.

In 1993, the court ruled president Ghulam Ishaq Khan had also illegally dissolved the assembly - then with Nawaz Sharif

as prime minister.

The supreme court is ostensibly independent, but rights activists say previous benches have been used by civilian and military administrations to do their bidding throughout Pakistan's history. Publicly the military appears to be keeping out of the current fray, but there have been four coups since independence in 1947 and the country has spent more than three decades under army rule.

"I don't think the court is going to deliver any noticeable decision, it will be a sort of doctrine of necessities," said Ayesha Siddiqi, an independent analyst.

"On one side judges will declare the ruling of the deputy speaker as unconstitutional, but at the same time will justify the fresh elections... as every political party wants to go for a fresh election."

AFP

Israel's Bennett loses majority after MP quits

Yamina party member Idit Silman’s announcement left Israel Prime Minister’s coalition with 60 seats

Jerusalem - A key member of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s Yamina party said on Wednesday she was quitting his coalition government, in a surprise move that leaves him without a parliamentary majority.

Idit Silman’s announcement left Bennett’s coalition, an alliance of parties ranging from the Jewish right and Israeli doves to an Arab Muslim party, with 60 seats - the same as the opposition. “I tried the path of unity. I worked a lot for this coalition,” Silman, a religious conservative who served as coalition chairperson, said in a statement.

“Sadly, I cannot take part in harming the Jewish identity of Israel.”

On Monday, Silman lashed out at Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, after he instructed hospitals to allow leavened bread products into their facilities during the upcoming Passover holiday, in line with a recent supreme court ruling reversing years of prohibition.

Jewish tradition bars unleavened bread from the public domain during Passover.

“I am ending my membership of the coalition and will try to continue to talk my friends into returning home and forming a right-wing government,” Silman said.

“I know I’m not the only one who feels this way.”

Bennett’s coalition may continue ruling with 60 seats, although with difficulty passing new legislation.

If another member of the coalition defects, however, the Knesset could hold a vote of no confidence and potentially lead Israel back to the polls for a fifth parliamentary election in four years.

Political analyst Dahlia Scheindlin told AFP that if Silman ‘is the first person to really prepare to bring down the government, she is doing it from the place of conviction’.

“She is religious, and I think we all underestimate the power of theology,” said Scheindlin.

In a formal resignation letter addressed to Bennett, Silman said: “We must admit that we tried. It’s time to recalculate and try to form a national, Jewish,



Israel PM Naftali Bennett tours at the Beit El Israeli army headquarters in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday (AFP)

Zionist government.”

‘Limp government’

Following the announcement, Silman was embraced by the same right-wing politicians who

had relentlessly attacked her since she followed Bennett into the governing coalition last year, reneging on election promises.

“Idit, you’re proof that what guides you is the concern for the

Jewish identity of Israel, the concern for the land of Israel, and I welcome you back home to the national camp,” opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu said in a video recording.

Sadly I cannot take part in harming the Jewish identity of Israel. I am ending my membership of the coalition and will try to continue to talk to my friends into returning home and forming a right-wing government

IDIT SILMAN

“I call on whoever was elected with the votes of the national camp to join Idit and come back home, you’ll be received with all due honour and open arms,” the right-wing former prime minister added.

Netanyahu, Israel’s longest-serving prime minister who was in office from 1996 to 1999 and again from 2009 until June, had vowed to play the role of spoiler against Bennett’s government

which brought an end to his years in power.

At a special session of the Knesset, which is currently in recess, Netanyahu said: “There is a weak and limp government in Israel today. Its days are numbered.” The Knesset will reconvene on May 8 to resume its legislative work.

To form a coalition of his own without new elections, Netanyahu would need the support of at least 61 lawmakers, which he currently does not have.

Bezael Smotrich of the Religious Zionism party, once a political partner of Bennett, expressed his appreciation to Silman for her ‘courage to make the difficult move’, and predicted the ruling coalition would not survive her defection.

“This is the beginning of the end of the left-wing, non-Zionist government of Bennett and the Islamist Movement,” he wrote on Twitter.

There was no immediate comment from Bennett, whose Yamina party now holds just five of parliament’s 120 seats.

AFP

Fresh clashes erupt between army, M23 rebels in Congo

Goma, DR Congo - Fresh fighting erupted on Wednesday in the DR Congo’s troubled east between army troops and the M23 rebel group after a week of relative calm, local sources said.

“The army attacked all the M23 positions in Musongati, Tchanzu and Runyoni” that the rebels took last week, Damien Seburazane, a representative of civil society groups, told AFP.

Colonel Muhindo Lwanzo, the chief aide to the territory’s military administrator, said the rebels had retreated from the hill of Bugusa close to the highway linking the city of Goma to the Ugandan border, ‘before the army arrived in the area’.

The fighting has been taking place in Rutshuru territory in North Kivu province - the epicentre of a resurgence by a group that was dormant for several years. The M23 was born among former members of a Congolese Tutsi militia that was once supported by Rwanda and Uganda.

The rebels had been incorpo-



A soldier of the DR Congo’s armed forces holds his weapon during a security patrol around the Kiwanja airfield in Rutshuru on Sunday (AFP)

rated in the Congolese army under a peace deal signed on March 23, 2009.

In 2012, they mutinied, saying the deal had not been upheld and named their group the March 23 (M23) Movement.

Becoming one of the scores of armed groups that roam eastern DR Congo, the M23 briefly seized the city of Goma before being defeated and forced out of the country. After its defeat, the M23 eventually signed an accord with Kinshasa that included provisions for its fighters to reintegrate into civilian society.

But the group has again accused the government of reneging on the deal and resumed fighting last year. On March 28, the M23 moved out of strongholds in the high hills to attack army positions in Rutshuru.

After two days of fighting in what it called a unilateral ceasefire, saying it sought a ‘peaceful settlement in the crisis with the government’.

AFP

El Salvador criminalises gang-related messages

San Salvador, El Salvador - El Salvador’s Congress on Tuesday approved sentences of 10 to 15 years for those who spread gang-related messages in the media, prompting journalists to raise censorship fears.

The reform to the penal code applies to those who ‘reproduce and transmit messages or communications originating or allegedly originating from said criminal groups that could generate anxiety and panic among the general population’.

The measure, which was requested by President Nayib Bukele, also targets those who ‘mark’ their territories with acronyms - a practice that gang members use to threaten those who report them to authorities.

“When the Germans wanted to eradicate Nazism, they prohibited by law all Nazi symbolism, as well as messages, apologies and everything aimed at promoting Nazism... Now we will do the same with gangs,” Bukele said on Twitter. El Salvador declared a state of emergency 10 days ago following a weekend of violence that in-



Members of the Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs are seen under custody at the prison in Ciudad Barrios (AFP)

cluded at least 87 reported killings, which the government attributed to the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs. About 6,000 suspected gang members have been arrested since then, according to official figures. There are about 70,000 gang members in the Central American country.

‘Gag’ reform

El Salvador’s journalists’ association issued a statement expressing its ‘concern’ about a ‘clear attempt at censorship’.

The ‘gag’ reform, as the group described it, ‘threatens with imprisonment the media and journalists who report on a reality that the current administration’ of Bukele ‘seeks to hide’.

It is a ‘new tool to criminalise journalistic work’, the group said.

The deputy of the ruling party, Marcela Pineda, said the reform does not seek ‘to restrict freedom of expression’ but to force responsibility ‘in the messages that are disseminated to the population’.

The reform adds to a series of

changes to the penal code approved by Congress to crack down on gangs, which the government refers to as ‘terrorists’.

Last week, Congress increased the maximum prison sentence for being a gang member from nine to 45 years.

The government also raised maximum prison sentences for children and will allow teenagers to be tried as adults for the most serious offenses, and serve their sentences in adult prisons rather than juvenile detention facilities.

AFP

Six wounded in attack at mosque in Afghanistan

Kabul, Afghanistan - Six people were wounded in a grenade blast at a mosque in the Afghan capital on Wednesday, police said, minutes after worshippers offered midday prayers marking the holy month of Ramadan.

Attacks on public targets have largely diminished since the Taliban seized power in August last year, but the Islamic State group continues to operate across the country. “We had finished the prayers and were heading out of the mosque when the blast occurred,” worshipper Mohammed Yasin told AFP.

Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran told AFP a grenade was thrown inside the Pul-e-Khisti mosque and a suspect was arrested at the scene.

No group has claimed responsibility, but the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group has carried out recent attacks in Kabul and other cities.

AFP

Italy takes to battlements to save its dying hamlets

Calascio, Italy - The streets are silent and cats hunt in abandoned houses, but the view from the battlements of Calascio’s castle is spectacular - good enough perhaps to save this dying Italian hamlet.

Local officials have put restoring the ruins and attracting tourists at the heart of their bid to revive the village, which has won €20mn (US\$22mn) in EU post-pandemic funds.

Surrounded by Abruzzo’s snowcapped peaks, Calascio is one of 21 dying or deserted villages awarded an equal share of a €420mn pot by the Italian government. Critics question how equipped the tiny councils are to spend such vast sums of money - which translates to almost €154,000 per person in Calascio.

The nationwide project has soured relations in several regions between winning villages and those that have lost out, and prompted warnings over potential fraud and waste.

But Calascio’s mayor Paolo Baldi, a former mountain guide originally from Rome, is undaunted. “We want to bring the



People sit by the castle of Rocca Calascio to enjoy the spectacular view (AFP)

hamlet back to life,” said Baldi, who did up one of its ruined houses in 1993 and moved in with his young family.

New life

Once a bustling and wealthy wool centre, Calascio shrunk from over 2,000 residents at the start of the 1900s to just 130 now, almost all of them elderly.

In the winter months, only 70 or so people remain.

Just three children have been born here in 12 years. It has no grocer’s shops, school or doctor’s surgery.

What the hamlet does have is Rocca Calascio, an ancient castle which draws 100,000 tourists a year.

Baldi plans to spend a big

chunk of the funds - just over €4.6mn - on restoring part of the ruins, which were damaged in a deadly earthquake in 2009.

It is hoped archaeological digs will determine when the castle - originally a watchtower - was built, and reveal more about a neighbouring church and graveyard, where bones come to the surface after storms.

Some funds will also go to creating jobs and attracting more tourists, with just under €7.5mn earmarked for a ‘scattered’ hotel in the village’s empty houses and nearly one million euros for a museum.

Locals say they hope young families will move in to the area and perhaps open their own businesses.

“Do you know what the biggest event was in Calascio this year? It was the birth of a baby,” tobacconist Walter Zara told AFP.

Big winner

Italy is the biggest beneficiary of the EU’s €800bn plan to boost the bloc after the pandemic, allocated almost €200bn in grants and loans. The funds for Calascio are part of a programme to increase tourism in undervalued areas, notably in the poorer south, and ease pressure on hotspots like Venice.

Villages across Italy competed, with winners including Pietrabbondante in Molise, which boasts a sixth-century amphitheatre.

“Italy’s real wealth today lies precisely in these small centres,” Mayor Baldi says, adding that countless hilltop hamlets across the country are in a state of serious decline but could be ‘a driving force for the economy’.

Shepherds and maggot cheese

Here, that driving force includes a sheep farming school. The plan is to teach youngsters the ancient art of pastoralism, where shepherds and their flocks spend the warmer months on the move. Funds will also go to increasing cheese production. The region’s pride is Marcellino, a traditional sheep’s cheese made using live maggots, which soften it with their digestive acids.

It was staple for herders who used to gather with their flocks outside the 16th-century Santa Maria della Pietà church, perched just along the ridge from the castle.

Bleating livestock permitting, mass at the so-called ‘Shepherds’ Church’ was followed through a little side window.

AFP

Sri Lanka parliament speaker warns crisis risks starvation

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis risks starvation across the island nation of 22mn while acute shortages and blackouts will get worse, the speaker of parliament warned on Wednesday.

Scarce supplies of food and fuel, along with record inflation and blackouts, have inflicted widespread misery in the country's most painful downturn since independence from Britain in 1948.

Public anger is at a fever pitch, with crowds attempting to storm the homes of several government figures - including President Gotabaya Rajapaksa - and holding large demonstrations elsewhere.

Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana told legislators that more hardships were to come.

"We are told this is the worst crisis, but I think this is just the beginning," Abeywardana said at the start of a two-day debate on the worsening economic woes. "The food, gas and electricity shortages will get worse. There will be very acute food shortages and starvation."

Security forces have dispersed protests with tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, but a state of emergency imposed by the president last week to quell demonstrations



Members of the Government Medical Officers' Association hold placards during a silent demonstration against Sri Lanka's deepening economic crisis in Colombo on Wednesday (AFP)

was lifted at midnight.

More than 60 people had been arrested in connection with unrest and many have said they were tortured in police custody.

Legislators had pushed for a debate on the emergency decree during this week's session

of parliament, where the government has lost its majority after the desertion of political allies - several of whom have since called for President Rajapaksa's resignation.

Opposition parties had already rejected the president's

overture to form a unity administration after the resignation of nearly the entire cabinet late on Sunday. But there has so far been no clear signal that opposition legislators will attempt a no-confidence motion to topple the Rajapaksa administration.

Prior warnings

A critical foreign currency shortage has left Sri Lanka struggling to import essential goods, with the pandemic torpedoing vital revenue from tourism and remittances.

Rating agencies have warned of a potential default on Sri Lanka's US\$51bn foreign debt, and authorities are unable to raise more commercial loans because of credit downgrades.

Economists say the crisis has been exacerbated by government mismanagement, years of accumulated borrowing and ill-advised tax cuts.

Agriculture ministry secretary Udith Jayasinghe warned in December that the country could face a famine due to the government's decision to ban agrochemical imports last year.

The decision, taken in an apparent effort to shore up foreign currency reserves, saw farmers leave their fields barren instead of toiling over crops without the aid of fertiliser and pesticides.

Jayasinghe was sacked within hours of issuing his warning.

Sri Lanka has said it will seek an IMF bailout to overcome the crisis but negotiations are yet to begin, and the country's latest finance minister resigned on Tuesday after just one day in office.

AFP

NASA delays final test for giant Moon rocket

Washington, US - The latest test of NASA's giant Moon rocket SLS has been pushed back to allow for a SpaceX rocket to launch later this week, the US space agency announced on Tuesday.

The dress rehearsal for the giant Space Launch System had been scheduled for Friday at launch pad 39B at Cape Canaveral, Florida, at the same time as SpaceX's lift-off from pad 39A.

The test of the rocket, which is to return humans to the Moon, is now expected to resume shortly after the take-off of the SpaceX flight, which is to carry three businessmen and a former astronaut to the International Space Station.

The 322-foot (98 meters) SLS rocket will remain on its launch pad while waiting.

In this final test before blast-off for the Moon later this year, all the steps leading up to launch must be rehearsed, from filling the tanks to the final countdown, which will be stopped just before the engines fire.

The run-through started last Friday and was originally scheduled to end late Sunday, but NASA teams encountered 'a whole myriad of technical challenges' as well as uncooperative weather on

Saturday, said Mike Sarafin, the mission manager for the Artemis Moon landing.

Among the problems encountered were four lightning strikes hitting the launch pad during a thunderstorm, which at least proved that the protection system had worked as planned.

But the problems were not 'major issues', Sarafin said. "We haven't run into any fundamental design flaws or design issues."

"We take pride in learning from these tests," he said, calling the ones already carried out in recent days 'partially successful'.

Artemis 1 will mark the first flight of the SLS, whose development has lagged years behind schedule.

The Orion capsule at its top will be propelled to the Moon, where it will be placed in orbit before returning to Earth.

The first mission will not have astronauts on board. The take-off date is to be announced after the so-called 'wet' dress rehearsals.

A launch window is possible in early June, and Sarafin said he was 'not ready to give up on it yet'.

Another launch window is possible in early July.

AFP

Brothers held for California shooting

Los Angeles, US - Two brothers suspected of being involved in a mass shooting in California that left six dead were under arrest on Tuesday.

Detectives probing the apparent gun battle in downtown Sacramento, which erupted as nightclubs were emptying early on Sunday, say both men are suspected of possessing firearms.

One of the men, Smiley Martin, was among 12 people treated in hospital after a shootout in which at least 100 rounds were fired, apparently after a brawl.

Martin, 27, whose injuries are described as 'serious', is suspected of being in possession of a 'machine gun', police said on Tuesday, adding he was being guarded by an officer while his medical care continues.

He is the brother of Dandrae Martin, 26, who was arrested on Monday on suspicion of weapons offenses.

A third man, Daviyonne Dawson, who was allegedly found to have a gun in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, has also been arrested.

Sacramento police say officers rushed to the scene of the shooting around 2am on Sunday after hearing gunshots and arrived to find a large crowd and multiple victims.

Video footage of the immediate aftermath showed first responders tending to bloodied victims. The bodies of the dead lay nearby.

Three of those who died were women. All six have now been identified.

The shooting happened just blocks from the state capitol and close to the venue where the NBA's Sacramento Kings play.

Firearms are involved in approximately 40,000 deaths a year in the United States, according to the Gun Violence Archive website.

AFP

Former Hong Kong security chief declares leadership bid

Hong Kong, China - A hardline former Hong Kong security chief sanctioned by the US for his role in China's purge of dissent declared his bid on Wednesday to become the city's next leader.

John Lee, who oversaw the police response to huge democracy protests three years ago and its subsequent crackdown, resigned from the government to run.

"If the Central People's Government approves my resignation, I shall inform you of my next move in detail," he told reporters without taking any questions.

Lee, 64, has been widely tipped by local media and government loyalists in recent days as Beijing's top choice - and there are growing signs he could be running in a one horse race.

Citing sources, the *South China Morning Post* reported on Wednesday that Beijing does not want anyone to compete



Current leader Carrie Lam announced on Monday she would not seek a second five-year term (AFP)

against Lee.

Hong Kong's leader is not popularly elected, the source of years of democracy protests that have been comprehensively squashed in the last two years.

The new chief executive will be chosen by a committee of 1,500 Beijing loyalists on May 8, a process that is choreographed

behind the scenes by Chinese officials through Beijing's Liaison Office.

Current leader Carrie Lam announced on Monday she would not seek a second five-year term, firing the starting gun on the race to replace her.

Lee rose through the ranks of the police before heading up the Security Bureau until he was last

year made the city's number two leader - often perceived as a springboard to the top job.

Only those who get the nod from Beijing have any hope of standing and then securing a majority of votes in the Election Committee, whose members are vetted for their political loyalty. Local media reported that Beijing's Liaison Office in Hong Kong summoned dozens of election committee members on Wednesday morning for meetings to discuss the leadership race.

Like Lam, Lee was among 11 Hong Kong and Chinese officials sanctioned by the United States in 2020 for 'undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and restricting the freedom of expression or assembly'.

'Selection, not an election'

Democracy supporters and government critics have often mocked Lee with the nickname

'Pikachu', a pun on his full Chinese name Lee Ka-chiu.

During the huge 2019 democracy rallies it was not unusual to see protesters carrying stuffed toys of the cute Pokemon character.

Former opposition lawmaker Nathan Law, who now resides in Britain, described Lee as 'even more hawkish and hostile to democratic pursuit' than his predecessors.

"This is a 'selection' process rather than an 'election' process," activist Law told AFP.

"Beijing determines who will be the next leader of Hong Kong, rather than the people of Hong Kong."

Ivan Choy, a political scientist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said a Lee administration would reflect Beijing's desire for 'loyalty, discipline and national security'.

"If (Lee) becomes the next chief executive, it means that national security concerns

would override the other concerns in the future five years of Hong Kong," Choy said.

The nomination period for the leadership race began on Sunday and will last until April 16, with the selection scheduled for May 8.

Lee has been endorsed by establishment figures including pro-Beijing heavyweight Rita Fan and Bernard Chan, convener of Lam's Executive Council.

Aside from Lee, Hong Kong's finance chief Paul Chan has also been tipped by the local press as a likely contender although he has yet to declare his intentions.

If Lee stands unopposed, it would bring Hong Kong closer to nearby Macau, which operates a similar political system and saw its leader Ho Iat-seng win a one horse race in 2019 with Beijing's approval. Hong Kong's new leader will take office on July 1, the 25th anniversary of the city's handover by Britain to China.

AFP

US approves \$95mn sale of missile defense support to Taiwan

Washington, US - The US announced on Tuesday it has approved the sale of up to US\$95 mn worth of training and equipment to support Taiwan's Patriot missile defense system, something Taipei said would help protect the island from any invasion by China.

"The proposed sale will help to sustain (Taiwan's) missile density and ensure readiness for air operations," the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a statement.

It added Taiwan will use the proposed training and equipment as a 'deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen homeland defense'.

Taiwan's foreign ministry welcomed the arms deal - the third approved under US President Joe Biden - saying it would help protect against Beijing's 'continuing military expansion and provocation'.

"In the face of China's contin-



Taiwanese Air Force pilots listen to a speech by President Tsai Ing-wen at a military base in Hsinchu on April 1 (AFP)

uing military expansion and provocation, Taiwan must fully demonstrate its strong determination to defend itself," it said in a statement.

"Our government will con-

tinue to strengthen our self-defense and asymmetric combat capabilities."

Taiwan's defense ministry said the planned deal is expected to take effect in one month.

The latest arms purchase comes as Taiwan closely watches the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as it also lives under the constant threat of an invasion by a giant neighbour.

China regards Taiwan as its territory and has vowed repeatedly to seize it one day, by force if necessary.

Beijing has dramatically ramped up its sabre rattling in recent years, sending 969 Chinese warplanes into Taiwan's air defense zone in 2021, according to a database compiled by AFP - more than double the roughly 380 in 2020.

Taiwan has recorded about 280 warplanes entering the zone so far this year.

Western powers, including regional neighbours Japan and South Korea, have looked on with growing alarm at Beijing's designs on Taiwan under President Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader in a generation.

On Tuesday, Australia announced it was accelerating plans to buy long-range missiles, citing new threats posed by both Russia and China, including a potential invasion of Taiwan.

"There was a working assumption that an act of aggression by China toward Taiwan might take place in the 2040s. I think that timeline now has been dramatically compressed," Australian defense minister Peter Dutton told Seven Network television.

Washington has remained Taipei's most important ally and leading arms supplier despite switching diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979.

The Patriot is a highly mobile surface-to-air missile system that would be a crucial defense against Chinese warplanes.

Former US president Donald Trump ramped up big-ticket arms sales to Taiwan during his time in office as he feuded with Beijing on a host of issues from trade to national security.

Sales included drones, missile systems and new-generation fighter jets.

AFP

GLASS KHAALI

THE EMPTY Goblet

Indian expatriate Pratibha Sharma's second single – *Glass Khaali* – crosses 5 million views on YouTube within one week



Photos: Syed Fasiuddin

Hubert Vaz

The video sizzles from the opening shot itself, as Shefali Jariwala and Ankit Siwach begin a sensational groove with a batch of enraptured youth in a downtown pub styled like a rugged warehouse... And the peppy beats get you in its sway instantly... But, you simply cannot bypass the silken voice of Pratibha Sharma, the sole element that holds onto the listener with its feline grip – one that releases only when the audio fades out towards the end.

Glass Khaali, the second single by Pratibha, an Indian expatriate in Oman, has shot well over five million views within just a few days of its release on YouTube, a feat that has left the budding singer herself spell-bound. *Glass Khaali* (the empty goblet) is a catchy song for the new generation about reviving one's spirits and inducing motivation in life.

Her first single – *Pasand Aaya* – was a romantic rendition that had also been well received but with *Glass Khaali* out on Zee Music, Pratibha has now been catapulted to an all new level and she looks upon Oman as a lucky charm that has been instrumental in some way for her success.

Pratibha, who had always been inclined towards music, right from the time she was a little girl, admits that she never gave a serious thought to taking it up as a career. Having studied in Delhi, she had always been



appreciated by friend and folks for her informal renditions, but the good measure of praises never ever got to her in an overpowering way, she says.

After marriage, Pratibha moved to the UAE with her husband, and stayed there for about a decade before they moved to Oman. And the usual cares and obligations of family life had somewhat thwarted the path of her passion which lay dormant within her for years, she revealed.

After the decent success of her first single some time back, Pratibha grabbed hold of

the next opportunity that came her way without batting an eyelid. Faced with a good offer, she was abreast of the fact that opportunity never knocks twice and plunged head-long into creating her second single.

"After getting married, the scope of following your passion becomes limited and one also faces the cliched assertion of being a typical Indian housewife," says Pratibha, adding that she broke free from taboos and got enrolled with music institutions in Dubai and India to pursue classical as well as Bollywood music as a fulfilling pastime.



You don't have to worry about going to another country to learn music because everything is digital now. You can learn everything from YouTube these days, if you have a real interest. Besides, the classes are also digital these days

have been very supportive and have told her to focus on singing without any guilt.

Offering a tip for young girls in Oman who aspire to become singers or performers but are faced with grim prospects as no grooming institutions are available in Oman, Pratibha said, "You don't have to worry about going to another country to learn music because everything is digital now. You can learn everything from YouTube these days, if you have a real interest. Besides, the classes are also digital these days."

Asserting that music or singing is a God-given gift, Pratibha said, "I must say, singing is something that everyone cannot learn. You must have it in your being deep within, only then you can understand music, beats, melodies, naturally. The natural talent of a singer has to be 70 per cent, the rest can be learnt."

Also, the greatest virtue that a performer needs is patience, she said, adding. Things never happen overnight and one cannot give up after facing small setbacks. It is the determination alone which will take one towards realising one's dreams, she said.

Pratibha already has a few plans for doing more albums in the near future, besides doing a duet with another singer, she disclosed. Also, she is open to the idea of an Arabic rendition, if the right offer comes her way, so that she could connect her talent with the region in which she has been living for over a decade.

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Tiktok travaganza

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Tiktok world seems to be taking over the youth of Oman, whether through popular Tiktok trends or Tiktok influencers. This new addiction, however, has given rise to a new breed of content creators

Can't seem to stop scrolling? Do you find yourself glued to your phone, watching and making Tiktok videos for hours on end? You may not be alone in this obsession. The Tiktok world is getting the better of the youth of Oman, whether through popular Tiktok trends or Tiktok influencers. While it may have been a platform for entertainment for some, it has transformed the lives of many others. But the question is, what is it about this platform that makes it so addicting and unique?

The answer to this remains with the community of brilliant content creators. As this platform has grown in popularity, it has fostered a community of regional influencers that now dominate the Tiktok world in Oman.

Among scores of those hooked onto this new addiction, are four prominent Tiktokers in Oman who have more than doubled the number of their followers over the past two years.

Ali Haider, also known as 'bigbagofpotatoes,' is a renowned Tiktok influencer who began his Tiktok journey in the early 2020s and now has 2.6 million followers on the platform. Ali has effectively tapped into the local and international Tiktok market by using experimental comedy and a distinctive content style.

Addressing the platform's impact on Omani youth, he stated, "Tiktok has given the youth of Oman a voice, allowing them to express themselves further and interact directly with the rest of the world. The trends on Tiktok have made people feel more connected and reinforced their sense of belonging to something bigger."

Since its launch, the popular short video sharing platform has dominated the internet and created a digital wave. The rapid growth of this social media app has given rise to unique talent and has become a means for people to create unique content and advertise their small initiatives.

Tiktok has become a game changer in the social media industry by empowering Omani content creators like Omar al Zadjali. A cinematographer and photographer who enjoys documenting his adventures, Omar regarded Tiktok as the ideal medium for him to showcase his talents.

"The app has enabled me to not only present my work, but also the process of creating it in a short video format. It has enabled people to learn more about photography, and as a result, most of my photography tutorials include a lot of tips and tricks to 'get the shot right'," said Omar. Having observed his content positively influencing his followers, he aims to inspire people to experience the beauty of Oman and take up photography as a hobby.

Tiktok has often been praised for having a considerably better algorithm when compared to other platforms. It has enabled influencers to not only reach a large audience, but also to monetise their content.

Dr Iqra Hussain Shaikh, an Oman-based Tiktok influencer recognised for making entertaining content related to her professional field of pharmaceuticals, said, "Tiktok has helped me create a passive income through paid promotions and brand collaborations. Using this platform, I was able to turn around the sales of dead products." She believes Tiktok will play a significant part in product marketing and will account for roughly 80% of promotional activities in Oman in the near future.

While this platform has brought people closer together, it has also made some expatriates feel more connected to Oman. This is the story of popular Tiktok star Mia Katerina, who hails from England.

"Tiktok has played a significant role in deepening my admiration for Oman." I've been able to see the sultanate in a variety of ways. This platform has also allowed me to meet so many new individuals and have fresh experiences," Mia remarked.

Tiktok has had a distinct impact on each of these influencers, but one thing they all have in common is that they are all enthusiastic about what they do and utilise the platform to spread joy.

(Contributed by Aashna Sanghani)

The trends on Tiktok have made people feel more connected and reinforced their sense of belonging to something bigger

ALI HAIDER

Tiktok has played a significant role in deepening my admiration for Oman

MIA KATERINA

The app has enabled me to not only present my work, but also the process of creating it in a short video format

OMAR AL ZADJALI

Tiktok has helped me create a passive income through paid promotions and brand collaborations. I was able to turn around the sales of dead products

DR IQRA HUSSAIN SHAIKH

De Bruyne gives Man City slender lead over stubborn Atletico Madrid

Spanish champions Atletico will believe they can cause another surprise in the second leg in Madrid on April 13

Manchester, United Kingdom - Pep Guardiola praised Manchester City's patience after Kevin De Bruyne broke Atletico Madrid's stubborn resistance to clinch a 1-0 win in Tuesday's Champions League quarter-final first leg.

Guardiola's side spent much of the night banging their heads against the red and white wall of Atletico's massed defence at the Etihad Stadium.

But Guardiola sent on Phil Foden midway through the second half and his sublime pass teed up De Bruyne to finally reward City for their territorial dominance.

"I didn't expect to win three or four nil. I knew who we were facing. They have been together for many years," Guardiola said.

"They defend so well, so compact and so deep. We were patient. You have to be against these teams. They want you to be anxious.

"It's a good result. Unfortunately we had a couple more chances with Kevin to score again."

While Guardiola launched a water bottle in a frenzied celebration that underlined what a testing night it had been for his team, the City boss knows the tie is far from over.

"Even a 1-0 lead going to Madrid is tough," Guardiola said.

"We have to control our emotions. It will be a good test for us, our maturity. We will try to score and win the game."

At the start of a season-defining 11 days for treble-chasing City, this was a qualified success that justified their patient performance.

But Atletico have already knocked out Manchester United in the last 16 this season, while Liverpool fell victim to Diego Simeone's side when the Reds were the holders in 2019-20.

The Spanish champions will believe they can cause another surprise in the second leg in Madrid on April 13.

"It's clear we were playing against an extraordinary opponent. We have to use a great way of defending and without being embarrassed," Simeone said.

"We need to be better, see if



Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne shoots past Atletico Madrid goalkeeper Jan Oblak to score the winner in their Champions League quarter-final first leg match on Tuesday (AFP)

I didn't expect to win three or four nil. I knew who we were facing. They have been together for many years. They defend so well, so compact and so deep. We were patient.

PEP GUARDIOLA



we can have the ball a bit more in the second leg. Perhaps we can create more difficulties. We are still in the tie."

City have no margin for error over the next two weeks as the Premier League leaders host Liverpool, just a point behind them in the title race, on Sunday.

They head to Madrid next week before facing Liverpool again in the FA Cup semi-finals at Wembley three days later.

'Special quality'

Guardiola has often been criticised for his curious team selections in previous Champions

League knockout stage defeats with City.

However, Guardiola's game-changing decision to introduce Foden should silence a few critics after it turned a difficult evening into a vital victory.

The England forward played a key role when City at last broke

through in the 70th minute.

Taking possession outside the Atletico area, Foden shimmied away from two defenders and slipped a precise pass to De Bruyne, who timed his run perfectly to drill a low strike into the far corner from a tight angle.

AFP

Liverpool in sight of semis after putting three past Benfica

Lisbon, Portugal - Liverpool took charge of their Champions League quarter-final against Benfica on Tuesday as Sadio Mane, Ibrahima Konate and Luis Diaz gave them a 3-1 lead after the first leg in Lisbon.

Konate nodded in his first Liverpool goal from a corner before Mane tapped home to put the visitors in command at the Estadio da Luz.

Benfica made a game of it early in the second half when a Konate error allowed the lively Darwin Nunez to pull one back, but Diaz, who was superb all night, added a third to put Liverpool in sight of the semis.

"They fought for their lives. We opened the door a little bit for them," said Jurgen Klopp.

"We scored a third one and I think everyone agrees we could and should have scored more."

Liverpool will be confident of finishing the job at Anfield next week, with Klopp comfortable enough to take off Mohamed Salah, Mane and Thiago Alcantara after an hour.

Salah, in particular, was surely being preserved for Sunday,



Liverpool's Jordan Henderson (left) and Benfica's Nicolas Otamendi battle for the ball (AFP)

when Liverpool face Manchester City in what could prove to be the decisive match in the Premier League's neck-and-neck title race.

The only disappointment was that Salah was unable to get on the scoresheet, with the Egyptian missing a handful of chances.

Benfica are dotted between a Liverpool-City league and cup

double-header, with the FA Cup semi-final at Wembley coming after the second leg next week, before Klopp's team continue a crunch period with league games against Manchester United and local rivals Everton.

Liverpool's convincing victory may offer Klopp the luxury of rotating players again for the return leg next week.

Klopp has been downplaying suggestions Liverpool could yet win an historic quadruple this term. But this contest demonstrated the gulf between the Premier League's heavyweights and some of the old, European elite.

Despite a 20-minute surge in the second half, Benfica were clearly second best.

AFP

Maradona's 1986 World Cup 'hand of God' jersey to be auctioned

New York, United States - The jersey worn by Diego Maradona when he scored twice against England in the 1986 World Cup, including the infamous "hand of God" goal, is to be auctioned off later this month, Sotheby's announced Wednesday.

The blue number 10 shirt has been owned since the end of the controversial World Cup encounter by opposing midfielder Steve Hodge, who swapped his jersey with Maradona after England lost 2-1. The quarter-final showdown, one of the most memorable in World Cup history, held particular significance for Argentina as it was played only four years after they lost the Falklands war.

The match became etched in football folklore for Maradona's two goals -- one notorious and one sublime -- in Mexico City's seething Aztec Stadium.

The first came shortly after half-time when Hodge, on the edge of the England penalty area, intercepted a pass and



Maradona scores arguably the game's most controversial goal

flicked the ball back towards goal.

Maradona, running into the box, rose with England's goalkeeper Peter Shilton and punched the ball into the net.

England were incensed and complained to officials who, believing Maradona had headed the ball, allowed the goal to stand.

Maradona then stirred the controversy afterward by saying the goal had been scored "a little with the head of Maradona, a little with the hand of God."

Sotheby's said in a state-

ment to AFP that it will hold its own public display for the jersey in London, during the online auction scheduled for April 20 to May 4.

The decision of whether to keep it accessible to the public will be up to the winning bidder.

Bidding for the Maradona memorabilia will start at £4 million (\$5.2 million), below the \$5.6 million record for game-worn shirts, set in 2019 for a jersey Babe Ruth wore while on the New York Yankees.

AFP

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IPL 2022



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BRIEF SCORES:
Mumbai Indians 161 for 4 in 20 overs (Suryakumar Yadav 52(36) 5x4, 2x6, Tilak Varma 38 (27) 3x4,2x6, Kieron Pollard 22 (5) 3x6; Pat Cummins 2 for 49) lost to Kolkata Knight Riders 162 for 5 in 16 overs (Venkatesh Iyer 50 (41) 6x4, 1x6, Pat Cummins 56 (15) 4x4,6x6; Murugan Ashwin 2 for 25) by five wickets.

TODAY'S MATCH (6PM)



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Du Plessis hails 'great asset' Karthik after Bangalore's IPL win

Mumbai, India - Skipper Faf du Plessis on Tuesday praised Dinesh Karthik for his "composure under pressure" after the wicket-keeper-batter steered Royal Challengers Bangalore to a four-wicket IPL win over Rajasthan Royals on Tuesday.

Chasing 170 for victory, Bangalore were in trouble at 87-5 when Karthik (44 not out) and Shahbaz Ahmed (45) put on an attacking partnership of 67 to achieve the target with five balls to spare in Mumbai.

The effort trumped Jos Buttler's unbeaten 70 that steered Royals to 169-3 and two wickets by leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal who rattled the Bangalore batting before the Karthik-Ahmed blitz.

"To pull it out of nowhere, you need some great characters and DK is as great a character as you can get," Du Plessis said after his team's second successive victory after their opening loss this season.



Dinesh Karthik finished with seven fours and one six in his 23-ball 44

"His composure under pressure is amazing. He is really calm and such a great asset to us."

Karthik, who has remained unbeaten in the three matches so far, took on Ravichandran Ashwin in a 21-run over and finished with seven fours and one six in his 23-ball blitz.

The left-handed Shahbaz was equally destructive as he took on the Royals bowlers including Trent Boult for a four and six before being bowled by the New Zealand left-arm quick.

Karthik, 36, stood firm with Harshal Patel who hit the winning six to hand Royals their first loss in three games.

Karthik, who last played a white-ball international in 2019 and was picked by Bangalore in the February auction, said he is "not done yet".

"I made a conscious effort to do justice to myself. Felt I could

have done better in the last few years," said man of the match Karthik.

"The way I've trained has been different. I was telling myself I'm not done yet. I have a goal and I want to achieve something."

Earlier Buttler, who made an unbeaten 70, and Shimron Hetmyer, who made 42 off 31 deliveries, boosted Bangalore's total.

In reply Du Plessis and Anuj Rawat started strongly with an opening stand of 55 before Chahal broke through to send back the veteran South African out for 29. Chahal then ran out Virat Kohli, for five, at the non-strikers end and the upbeat bowler bowled David Willey on the next ball.

But Karthik and Shahbaz built a winning partnership for Bangalore, who hunt for their maiden IPL title.

AFP

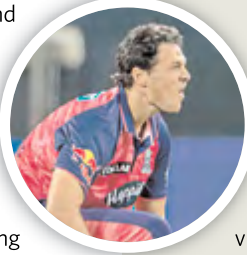
Injured Nathan Coulter-Nile flies home for rehabilitation

Mumbai, India - Rajasthan Royals' fast-bowling all-rounder Nathan Coulter-Nile has returned to Australia for rehabilitation after suffering a side strain during the team's opening match in IPL 2022, against Sunrisers Hyderabad on March 29.

"Unfortunately, I have the hard task of wishing him farewell," Royals' head physio John Gloster said in a video posted by the franchise on Twitter.

Coulter-Nile hurt himself during the final over of Sunrisers' innings when he pulled up in his follow-through. He has sat out Royals' following games. He had been bought by the franchise for INR 2 crore in the February mega auction.

AFP





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Next stop the Oscars? Lewis Hamilton eyes biopic

Melbourne, Australia - Lewis Hamilton says he is open to a biopic being made about him in a similar vein to 'King Richard', the critically acclaimed film based on Venus and Serena Williams and their father.

Britain's seven-time world motor racing champion is currently producing a documentary about his life and career, but would be happy to see a feature-length film too.

"We have this documentary that we're working on and I think you have to just do every-



Lewis Hamilton

thing at the right time," he was quoted as saying by the official

formula1.com website ahead of this weekend's Australian

Grand Prix.

"The documentary is the current focus. I think stories are there to be told. I think it's important. I think there's lots that can be learned.

"So I think, yes, one day I perhaps will try to do the same maybe. I'm very inspired by how Will (Smith) did it with his team.

"And with those two icons (Venus and Serena Williams), pretty proud of them."

Smith won the best actor Oscar last month for his por-

trayal of the Williams sisters' ambitious father Richard.

Hamilton said he could relate to the film.

"Behind everyone that's successful there is always somebody, and I can relate to it because I have a very amazing family who, without them, I would not be here today," he said.

"And I hope at some stage, I'll be able to do something similar... I think it's inspiring for families out there."

AFP

Olympic medal in 10 years is Oman Sail's top target

Muscat - Oman Sail has reflected upon a strong 2021 and shared its key priorities for next phase of development for the sailing sport in the country.

Despite a challenging period for all sports globally, Oman Sail managed to rebound and stage eight world and continental events, attracting more than 2500 athletes to compete in spectacular Omani shores.

From a sailing performance standpoint, the team excelled in multiple participations such as finishing second at the Marina Militare Nastro Rosa regatta in Italy with a 100 per cent Omani crew, Musab al Hadi and Waleed al Kindi qualifying to a Gold Fleet at the 49er World Championships for the first time ever and Al Muatasem al Farsi and Abdulmalik al Hinai getting a first podium position in an Olympic Class at the ILCA 6 World Championships.

These achievements served as a reminder that the national sailing programme continues to make progress.

The roadmap for the next ten years culminates with the goal of winning a medal in sailing at the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Along the way, Oman Sail has identified key milestones to measure progress and success, including the 19th Asian Games Hangzhou 2022, taking place in September this year, the qualification for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and beyond.

Further Asian and Olympic events, such as Asian Games Aichi-Nagoya 2026 and Asian Games Doha 2030, as well as the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic



Oman's Al Muatasem al Farsi (left) and Abdulmalik al Hinai (right, both on the podium) impressed at the 2021 ILCA 6 Men's Championship in Muscat



Dr Khamis al Jabri, the CEO of Oman Sail

and Paralympic Games, will provide valuable opportunities to gain experience ahead of the

2032 Games in ten years' time.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail, said, "We are incred-

We are incredibly proud of all of Oman Sail's achievements to date and the progress we have made

KHAMIS AL JABRI

ibly proud of all of Oman Sail's achievements to date and the progress we have made. Starting a sailing programme and building it into such a recognised name in world sport, positively impacting the lives of thousands of Omanis

and bringing major events to the nation shows is an impressive feat and everyone involved in this journey has left their mark on our history."

"Now is the chance to set the path for the next ten years and build towards the future. Our ambitions to win a medal in sailing for Oman remain on track and the progress made by our athletes shows that it is possible for Oman Sail to compete at the highest level. We will continue to support our sailors and the community, and look forward to seeing the Omani flag flying at regattas around the world in the coming years," he added.



Oman to take on Scotland in first match of UAE tour

Muscat: The next leg of Oman's qualification run for the ICC ODI World Cup 2023 in India will begin on 10th April, 2022 with a tri-series against Papua New Guinea and Scotland in the United Arab Emirates. A double-round robin format will be followed, with the matches being played as part of the ICC Men's CWC League 2 2019 - 2021/22.

Head Coach and Chief Development Officer Duleep Mendis said, "As a team, we are very excited to get started with these next set of games in the CWC League 2. Our last trip to the UAE was a successful one and we will look to deliver at a similar level this time around too. The boys have played some great cricket on the domestic circuit recently and look hungry and sharp for this tour. Scotland and Papua New Guinea are both good sides and I look forward to some competitive and high-quality cricket over the next two weeks."

Oman currently holds a 14-point advantage over second-placed UAE in the table, having played 10 games more. All the matches can be viewed

live on [icc.tv](https://www.icc.tv) worldwide.

Oman squad for the upcoming tri-series:

Zeeshan Maqsood (captain), Jatinder Singh, Kashyup Kumar Prajapati, Shoaib Khan, Mohammad Nadeem, Mohammad Naseem (W/K), Ayaan Khan, Nester Dhamba, Khawar Ali, Fayaaz Butt, Kaleemullah, Suraj Kumar (W/K), Bilal Khan, Sandeep Goud;

Support Staff: Duleep Mendis (Head Coach), Amir Ali (Assistant Coach), Zeeshan Siddiqui (Analyst), Evert Laubscher (Trainer), Sean Nowak (Physio), Avishkar Selvi (Fast Bowling Coach)

OMAN'S FIXTURES:

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16th April 2022
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Aubameyang: Barcelona's free gift who keeps on giving

Madrid, Spain - "A gift from heaven," was how Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez described the arrival of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and the striker, discarded by Arsenal, has certainly delivered.

It is hard to think of a more significant January acquisition than Aubameyang, given his impact on Barca's immediate and long-term future.

By the end of the season, Aubameyang's goals could be the biggest factor in Barcelona finishing in La Liga's top four, an achievement that could prove transformative.

He has scored nine goals in 12 games so far, including a hat-trick against Valencia and two against Real Madrid.

Missing out on the Champions League next season would have derailed Barcelona's financial recovery and destabilised the entire project under Xavi, who looks an astute appointment



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has scored nine goals in 12 games so far, including a hat-trick against Valencia (AFP)

now but was unproven when he took his first major coaching job in November.

Barcelona's fortunes have turned around so dramatically that they now have two chances to qualify for the Champions

League.

They could finish in the top four in La Liga, where they are second after overhauling Sevilla on Sunday, or they could win the Europa League where they are clear favourites.

They face Frankfurt on Thursday in the first leg of the quarter-finals, with the winner to face Lyon or West Ham in the last four.

The 32-year-old Aubameyang's departure from Arse-

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XAVI HERNANDEZ

nal mid-season continues to cause debate in England, with some questioning Mikel Arteta's decision to let the striker leave for free, particularly given the team's struggles to score goals. Many say the wisdom of that move will depend entirely on whether Arsenal finish in the Premier League's top four and qualify for the Champions League for the first time since the 2016-17 season.

"I think (the problem) was just with him and after he made this decision, I can't tell you much, he

wasn't happy and that's it. I was not very happy, I was very calm and that's it," Aubameyang said in February of Arteta.

Perhaps more to the point is that in January, Arsenal and Barcelona had very different priorities.

While Arteta was nurturing and protecting a young Arsenal team for the future, Barcelona wanted to patch together a short-term squad capable of averting impending financial disaster.

Aubameyang's disciplinary problems, age and lack of fitness meant he no longer fitted in with Arteta's long-term vision.

'A privilege to have him'

But his goals, talent and ego made him the perfect fit for a Barcelona side desperately in need of a quick fix.

"Auba has been a gift from heaven," said Xavi.

"He is a player who is positive, has taken very well to the dressing room, he adapts very well to the needs of the team, he scores. It is a privilege to have him and he will contribute a lot to us."

Barcelona's veteran defensive midfielder Sergio Busquets agreed. "He's working really well," said the 33-year-old.

"He came needing more minutes but he's getting them. I hope he keeps contributing like this because he's a great guy. Getting him on a free transfer is a gift."

Barcelona president Joan Laporta confirmed that Aubameyang's contract runs until 2025 but has a break clause at the end of next season, in 2023.

He will be almost 34 by then and it seems entirely plausible that Barcelona, who still have enormous debts to erase and a hefty wage bill to trim, will move Aubameyang on.

AFP

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