

## ► NEWS BRIEF

RUSSIA'S SLEPOV WINS IRONMAN 70.3 OMAN

Muscat - The 2023 Ironman 70.3 Oman Muscat triathlon concluded on Saturday at Qurum Beach. More than 800 athletes from 63 countries participated.

Russian triathlete Ilya Slepov won the race, while Bryan van Rutten from the Netherlands came second, and Rafael Domingos from Portugal third. Krista Kuusijarvi from Finland won the women's race.

The closing ceremony was held in the presence of H H Sayyid Fahr bin Fatik al Said and H E Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidi, Tourism Undersecretary.

10



US says second Chinese 'spy balloon' over Latin America

## SEVENTEEN NIGHTS OF FUN AND FROLIC END



Under the slogan 'Enlightened by Your Presence', the activities of Muscat Nights concluded on Saturday. Seventeen nights of dazzling light displays and drone shows, besides spectacular theatrical and live performances, enthralled visitors at the four venues of the festival. On Saturday, Qurum Park witnessed, for the last time, a dramatic display of lights and colours with visual imagery crafted by drones (V K Shafeer)

# Industrial cities attract 300 projects, RO300mn in 2022

Total volume of investments exceed RO7bn; over 19,000 Omanis work in industrial cities

Our Correspondent Muscat

The industrial cities spread across Oman in the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates - Madayn - are witnessing a boom in investments with over RO300mn pumped in 2022.

Madayn attracted more than 300 new projects last year to its industrial cities with RO300mn in investments, taking the total volume to over RO7bn by the end of 2022.

Hamad bin Hamoud al Qasabi, Acting CEO of Madayn, said that due to increasing demand of investors to set up projects in the industrial cities, the volume of investments continues to grow.

Qasabi informed that Madayn is currently working on development projects in all of its industrial cities, for which more



Madayn is working on development projects in its industrial cities; more than RO120mn allocated for this

HAMAD AL QASABI

than RO120mn has been allocated. "Some of these projects are nearing completion and others are in the implementation stages, including the Ibri Industrial City and the Mahas Industrial City in the wilayat of Khasab. These will contribute to the development of the economies of the governorates of Dhahirah and Musandam by providing a conducive environment for various business activities and providing job opportunities."

Two other projects, in the governorates of North Sharqiyah and Dhofar, are ready for

implementation. "Procedures related to that are now being finalised."

Madayn is also working to improve the services it offers to investors.

"We have completed the opening of 'Masar' centres in all industrial cities and are working on developing the digital transformation system and automating other services."

Through an integrated, one-stop solution service system, Masar service centres are designed to provide all of Madayn's services to investors - from receiving new investment

applications to signing final contracts.

Each centre acts as the focal point for Madayn investors seeking to finalise all their required permits, approvals and licences.

Qasabi further informed that Madayn has created new spaces in the industrial cities in Sur, Nizwa and Buraimi, while development of Phase 4 of Raysut Industrial City has been completed.

"The national workforce is now more than 19,000, distributed over various industrial cities," he added.

## Bids invited to develop aviation strategy for 2040

Our Correspondent Muscat

Oman is looking to develop National Aviation Strategy 2040 to meet the current and future demands of the aviation sector.

To this end, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has invited bids from international consultants to develop a national aviation strategy up to 2040.

The tender documents were available until January 31 and bid submission closes on February 28, according to a public tender notice.

"The Government of the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Civil Aviation Authority desires to develop National Aviation Strategy 2040 to meet the current and future demands of aviation sector services. The tender is presented as a request to provide consultancy services to the client for developing the national aviation strategy," CAA stated.

The first workshop to discuss the National Aviation Strategy 2040 was held by CAA in December 2022, as part of plans to raise the quality of services along with developing the economy.

The workshop, held in the presence of representatives of partners in the aviation sector, discussed the strategy develop-



ment mechanism, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The development of the 2040 strategy comes on the heels of the National Aviation Strategy 2030, which was launched in February 2020.

Under its plans to open up the sector for local and international investments, CAA is considering granting usufruct rights to investors to use land and buildings owned by CAA for aviation-related activities. In this regard, the authority plans to explore the potential of granting concessions in the management and operations of local airports and aviation-related services to private operators and investors.

Among the major projects envisioned for implementation as part of the National Aviation Strategy 2030 was an Airport City at Muscat International Airport.

## Continental US records coldest wind chill of -78°C ever, freezes over

New York, United States - The coldest wind chill ever has been recorded in continental US as an 'epic' Arctic blast freezes a swathe of North America.

America's National Weather Service (NWS) said the icy gusts on Mount Washington in New Hampshire on Friday produced a wind chill of -78°C.

Residents from Manitoba to Maine were urged to limit their time outdoors until Saturday in the 'once-in-a-generation' cold snap.

"This is an epic, generational Arctic outbreak," the NWS office in Caribou, near Maine's border with Canada, wrote in an advisory.

It said the chills are 'something northern and eastern Maine has not seen since similar outbreaks in 1982 and 1988'.

The service added, 'Most stations are forecast to see their lowest wind chills in decades or, in some cases, the lowest ever recorded.'

It warned that frostbite to ex-

posed skin can occur within five minutes in such conditions.

'The dangers of being caught unprepared without shelter from the elements and without proper winter survival gear cannot be stressed enough.'

The most extreme conditions were forecast to occur Friday night into Saturday morning, with extreme weather warnings in effect across Quebec and much of eastern Canada.

In Montreal, the wind made the temperature feel like -41°C



Snow removal operations in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, last week (AFP)

early Friday afternoon.

The mercury was predicted to drop as low as -50°C in the northern regions of Quebec because of the strong, cold gusts.

White Arctic sea smoke rose over parts of the St Lawrence River due to extreme cold winds passing over the unfrozen water.

The Hydro-Quebec power company said it was preparing for a historic consumption of electricity overnight Friday to Saturday and called on users to reduce their use.

In the Canadian capital Ottawa, a snow squall - snowfall combined with 60-70kmph winds - overnight Thursday to Friday reduced visibility to near zero.

On the streets downtown, the few residents who ventured out wrapped themselves in wool blankets atop their parkas.

Further south, New York City was forecast to be -23°C.

Warmer air is due to move into the region early Sunday. Agencies

# Hon'ble Lady inaugurates National Autism Centre



Muscat - Honourable Lady Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah bin Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, inaugurated the Ministry of Social Development's National Autism Centre in Al Khoud, Seeb, on Thursday.

The first of its kind in the sultanate, the centre is a strategic partnership between the Ministry of Social Development and Oman LNG. It is designed to provide cutting-edge rehabilitation and treatment services for autistic individuals across all ages using the latest programmes to enable social inclusion and independence.

The Honourable Lady visited the centre's facilities and witnessed the services offered to beneficiaries, including behavioural, occupational and speech and language therapies, as well



as vocational rehabilitation.

She also visited simulation rooms, specifically built to help build capabilities and skills of autistic individuals, besides allowing familiarity and tolerance for day-to-day activities.

Additionally, the Honourable Lady was briefed about the recre-

ational activities at the centre that range from music and swimming to playrooms and sports corners.

The Honourable Lady conferred with several caretakers and specialists at the centre. She expressed her gratitude for their untiring efforts and dedication to-

wards the autistic community. She valued their integral role in fostering diversity and inclusion within the community.

The Honourable Lady later attended a play titled 'Innovators Factory', which highlighted the talents and creativity of autistic children, as well as the role of the centre in developing these talents and integrating them with society.

At the end of her visit, the Honourable Lady received a commemorative gift from Dr Laila Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development.

The National Autism Centre is spread over a total area of 23,600sqm, with the main building covering 5,225sqm. The project was set up at a cost of RO2.5mn and accommodates 120 autistic individuals.

ONA

# Efforts to replace expats in govt jobs gather steam

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) is continuing its training initiative for replacement of expatriate workforce with Omani personnel in different government units.

The initiative provides a training and qualifying programme to jobseekers with no prior work experience with an aim to replace expatriates occupying public sector jobs. Duration of training is usually six to 12 months.

"The initiative lays down a clear replacement methodology through which national cadres are included in the training and qualification programme for technical and administrative jobs, and subsequently replace expatriate workforce in government entities," said Faiza Abdullah al Raisi from Training Support Centre in the Ministry of Labour.

The initiative targets individuals with university degrees - or

## MoL refers private firm to judicial authorities for not paying wages

The Ministry of Labour (MoL) has referred a private firm to judicial authorities for not paying wages of its workers in Dhahirah.

A statement issued by MoL said, 'The Directorate General of Labour in Dhahirah Governorate has referred a private sector establishment to the judicial authorities for non-compliance in paying wages of its employees for many months and for violation of the provisions of Article No 51 and Article No 53 of the Labour Law.'

The ministry called on all private sector establishments to commit to pay wages of their workers on the dates referred to in Article 51 of the Labour Law.

lower academic qualification - who also receive a monthly stipend based on their qualification, while gaining knowledge, skills and experience to qualify for the jobs.

"The initiative allows jobseekers to develop and demonstrate their capabilities and employability. We hope that this initiative develops clear training plans for

# MoL, National Technology Group ink pact for on-the-job training

Muscat - The Ministry of Labour (MoL) signed a cooperation programme with National Technology Group to offer on-the-job training to national cadres on Thursday.

The cooperation programme was signed by H E Sayyid Salim Musallam al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Human Resources Development in MoL, and Hilal Hamad al Busaidi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of National Technology Group.

On the occasion, H E Sayyid



Salim pointed out that the ministry is implementing various training programmes. "Sev-

eral programmes will be directed to governorates during the year to support administrative decentralisation and offer job opportunities to Omani youth."

On his turn, Mohammed al Rasbi, CEO of National Technology Group, informed that there are 40 trainees in the second batch of the programme. The third batch will include approximately 60 trainees in various fields, many from information technology.

## FORESIGHT



### SYED ADIL ABBAS

Abbas has over 20 years of international experience working with the public and private sectors in the Middle East, Far East, Africa and India.

Pandemics past and present have all been biological in nature but as the world becomes increasingly interconnected through technology, the question of whether the next global pandemic will occur in the digital realm is a valid and pressing one, and Oman is no exception. With the rapid advancement of technology and ever-increasing dependence on the Internet and digital devices in all aspects of our lives, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which a digital virus spreads just as quickly and causes just as much damage as a biological virus.

There have been several instances of computer infections that may be considered digital pandemics.

In 1998, a virus - 'Morris worm' - caused many computers to slow down. At the time, only about 60,000 computers were infected with the virus. Today, if an infection rate similar to that of 1998 were to occur, it would be catastrophic.

The 'Blastor worm' from 2003 and the 'Storm worm' from 2007 were two more widespread infestations. Hackers used the latter to get control of millions of machines and use them to propagate spam and steal identities.

During denial-of-service attacks in 2016, the Mirai botnet gained control of security cameras and other Internet of

### DIGITAL PANDEMIC

Things gadgets and used them to block access to well-known websites including Twitter, Reddit, Netflix and Airbnb.

Since then, our computers have improved in security, but they have also grown incredibly complicated, making it easier to uncover vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Additionally, we use a variety of connected gadgets that might not be as secure as our computers.

Artificial intelligence may soon be trained to uncover and exploit software and

operating system faults, identifying updates' vulnerabilities as soon as they are released but delaying their exploitation until after they have been widely distributed.

In Oman, the use of social media and other online platforms has grown significantly in recent years. The ease with which information can be shared and spread on these platforms means that a malicious piece of software or a piece of false information could quickly spread and cause widespread panic or disruption.

Another potential source of a digital pandemic in Oman is the growing dependence on interconnected systems and devices. As more and more devices and systems are getting connected to the Internet, the potential for a cyber attack that could disrupt essential services or even cause physical damage becomes greater. This could be especially dangerous in the case of critical infrastructure such as power grids or transportation systems, which are necessary for the functioning of modern society.

Any potential future occurrence of a significant worldwide digital pandemic may not be a question of "if," but rather "when" and "how serious". In the worst event, all computers on the planet might be shut down, all data on Internet-connected devices might be lost, and there

might be a devastating economic collapse.

High-tech medical equipment will stop working. Automated vehicles, trains, air planes and drones would lose control and kill innumerable people. Unstoppable nuclear missile might be launched in response to such an occurrence, with no chance of alerting possible targets or deploying counter measures.

Although implausible, a digital pandemic of this size is possible. There are measures in place to prevent the spread of a digital pandemic, but it's possible that a tech virus that these measures are unable to stop will eventually be developed. If this happens, it could bring the world to a standstill in a much more dramatic and rapid fashion than any biological pandemic.

Oman has been actively working to improve cyber security and protection against potential attacks. We should increase awareness about cyber security and the potential risks of digital pandemics, with regular campaigns and workshops to educate the public and organisations about how to protect themselves and their data. To be well-prepared for any prospective digital pandemics, we should keep investing in and enhancing our cyber security infrastructure.

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# 5 firms licensed for tourism, commercial docks

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) has issued six licences to five companies to manage and operate docks for tourism and commercial purposes. Spread over four governorates, the licences aim to boost tourism and give a fillip to the economy.

In a statement, MTCIT said that it has granted licences for tourism purposes to Al Marsa Travel and Tourism Company in Dibba, Musandam for a berth of 250m length; Saraya Bandar al Jissah Company for Muscat Bay in Muscat, for a 105m berth; and two licences to Muriya Tourism Development Company for Jabal al Sifah in Muscat (864m berth)



*‘The initiative aims to support ports, maritime transport and the logistics sector, and enrich the tourism, commercial and industrial sectors in the sultanate’*

and Hawana Salalah in Dhofar (482m berth).

The ministry also granted two licences in Sur, South Sharqiyah to manage and operate docks for commercial purposes to Shorooq Marine Handling and Navigation Company for a 305m berth and Oman LNG for a 150m berth.

‘The initiative aims to support ports, maritime transport and the logistics sector, and enrich the tourism, commercial and industrial sectors in the sultanate.’

MTCIT has been collaborating with Oman International Container Terminal Company (Hutchinson Ports Sohar) to develop, manage and operate Khasab Port in Musandam since October 1, 2022. The agreement between the two aims to develop, expand, operate and manage the port for a period of 30 years.

The ministry is also working to develop ports for raw materials and mining. It recently gave the initial approval to Oman Minerals Development Company to construct the Shuwaimiya Mining Port in Dhofar, while it is currently overseeing construction of a raw materials berth in Shinas Port.

## Drugs worth US\$33mn seized in Sea of Oman

Muscat - A US Coast Guard vessel seized illegal drugs worth a total estimated US street value of US\$33mn from a fishing vessel transiting international waters in the Sea of Oman on Monday.

US Coast Guard cutter USCGC Emlen Tunnell (WPC 1145) was patrolling regional waters in support of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 when it seized 4,000kg of hashish and 512kg of methamphetamine from the smuggling vessel.

Currently led by the United Kingdom Royal Navy, CTF 150 is one of four task forces organised under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). This was the first drug seizure for CMF in 2023.

“This is just the beginning of our work in delivering maritime security operations in the region to stop illicit activities and drug



smuggling,” said UK Royal Navy Capt James Byron, Commander of CTF 150. “This comes as a result of a valued partnership between CTF 150 and all partner nations in CMF.”

Capt Byron assumed com-

mand of the multinational task force on January 18 after Royal Saudi Navy Rear Adm Abdullah al Mutairi led the unit for six months.

Under Rear Adm Mutairi’s leadership, CTF 150 ships logged

more than 10,000 hours on regional patrols and intercepted six shipments of illegal drugs that included opium, heroin, hashish and amphetamines. The combined estimated value of the seized drugs totalled more than US\$250mn.

Since 2021, CMF has interdicted US\$1bn worth of illicit narcotics during maritime patrols.

CMF is a multi-national collective of 34 like-minded nations, dedicated to promoting security and free flow of commerce across 3.2mn sqm of international waters in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Somali Basin, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf.

CMF’s main focus areas are disrupting terrorism, preventing piracy, reducing illegal activities, and promoting a safe maritime environment for all.

## 3,400 tonnes of fish produced from aquaculture in 2022

Muscat - The total production from aquaculture farms in Oman in 2022 stood at 3,469 tonnes valued at RO7.33mn.

Fish farming currently constitutes between five to seven per cent of total fish production and is set to grow further, according to Dr Issa Mohammed al Farsi, Director of Fisheries Development Department at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

Blessed with a vast coastline, Oman aims to exploit its marine resources judiciously, making the fishing industry one of the major contributors to the sultanate’s GDP.

The future growth in the industry is envisioned to come

from the bustling aquaculture sector as the sultanate has several large-scale fish farming projects - valued in excess of US\$1bn - under development.

Farsi said that production of seabream (cofferfish) stood at 2,101 tonnes in 2022, followed by white-legged shrimp (1,078 tonnes) and tilapia (290 tonnes).

He further informed that until last year, ten local firms had obtained licences for commercial fish farming of white-legged shrimp, seabream and Omani abalone. The volume of investment in aquaculture projects is RO153.025mn. “Two foreign companies operate in commercial fish farming, with investments worth RO101 million.”

South Batinah leads the list of integrated fish farming projects, while most of the commercial projects are registered in the governorates of South Sharqiyah and Al Wusta.

Aquaculture projects in the sultanate are categorised into integrated aquaculture and commercial aquaculture projects.

Integrated aquaculture projects are based on the integration of agricultural activities and aquaculture, aiming to optimise the use of land and water resources in food production activities that contribute to food security.

Operations of commercial aquaculture projects take place at sea or on land beside the sea.

## Oman Aviation Academy opens headquarters in Sohar Airport

Sohar - Oman Aviation Academy held a ceremony to mark the opening of its headquarters in Sohar Airport on Thursday.

The site covers an area of 70,000sqm and includes several facilities, including a flight simulator building, an aircraft maintenance hangar, a control tower, aircraft parking lots, and an aircraft crossing corridor.

The ceremony was held under the auspices of H E Said Hamoud al Ma’awali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The academy offers training to Omani nationals in the aviation sector to help them enter the labour market. It also attracts trainees from abroad and provides high-level practice in the areas of civil and military aviation in the Middle East and Africa region.

On the occasion, Abdullah Murad al Balushi, CEO of Oman Aviation Academy, said that the aircraft maintenance hangar at the academy was designed to attract small and large aircrafts of



*This will contribute to the development and revitalisation of the public and private aviation sectors in Oman*

ABDULLAH MURAD AL BALUSHI

interest to businessmen.

He added that the academy provides maintenance services for the facility’s aircrafts and as well as individual owners and companies.

The academy has 16 aircraft parking lots of different sizes and

purposes, Balushi informed. “This will contribute to the development and revitalisation of the public and private aviation sectors in Oman.”

The academy is the first accredited institution for civil aviation training in Oman. Its training

programmes include Air Transport Pilot Licence, Military Aviation Training and Personal Pilot Licence.

The academy currently has 100 trainees and the first batch is scheduled to graduate in March 2023.

The academy has a fleet of 13 training aircraft and three simulators equipped with the latest flight training devices and equipment to provide top quality standards in the field of civil and military aviation training.

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MOH No: 44/2023

# CBO increases repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.25%

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) on Thursday further increased its repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent, following the US central bank's decision as Omani rial is pegged to the US dollar.

However, the CBO has cautioned local banks not to increase lending rates for consumers as there is ample liquidity available in Oman's financial system.

The CBO's rate hike decision was made after the US Federal Reserve on Wednesday increased its key interest rate by another 25 basis points. The sultanate follows a fixed exchange-rate regime, and consequently its interest rate is closely aligned with US rates. As a result, the CBO's repo rate generally moves in tandem with the Fed's policy rate.

Repo rate is the policy rate that allows commercial banks to borrow short-term liquidity from the CBO as the lender of last resort.

'After the US Fed's recent announcement to raise its key policy rate, the Central Bank of Oman increased its repo rate for local banks at the similar rate of 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent,' the CBO said in a statement.

The US Federal Reserve slowed its pace of interest rate hikes Wednesday, tempering an aggressive campaign to rein in costs as inflation cools, but signalled the battle is not yet over. The Fed announced a 25 basis points hike to the benchmark



*CBO has cautioned local banks not to increase lending rates for consumers as there is ample liquidity available in Oman's financial system*

lending rate at the end of its two-day policy meeting, taking the rate to a target range of 4.50-4.75 per cent, according to an AFP report.

The CBO in its statement said that its monetary policy target is to sustain and maintain its fixed exchange rate. This policy is aligned with the structure and nature of the Omani economy.

'There are a number of advantages for Oman that are derived from this policy, namely ensuring the stability of the Omani rial, mitigating capital outflow and promoting certainty among investors by removing exchange rate risk,' the sultanate's central bank said in its statement.

Following the lead of the US Fed, Oman has raised its key policy rate to 5.25 per cent in eight successive rate revisions in 2022 and 2023.

The global economy has witnessed rising and sustained inflationary pressure and central banks around the world are attempting to address this pressure by hiking interest rates.

'While higher interest rates are expected to lead to lower inflation, in some cases, as related to consumers in high-income brackets, they could result in higher savings,' the CBO noted.

In the Gulf region, most GCC countries raised their key interest rates by 25 basis points on Wednesday and Thursday, fol-

lowing the US Fed's decision. As most GCC countries keep their currencies pegged with the US dollar, their monetary policy is generally guided by US Fed policy decisions. As per a Reuters report, the central banks of Saudi Arabia and the UAE both followed the Fed in increasing rates by 25 basis points. The Saudi Central Bank lifted its repo and reverse repo rates to 5.25 per cent and 4.75 per cent, respectively, while the Central Bank of UAE said its base rate would increase to 4.65 per cent effective on last Thursday.

Bahraini central bank also increased its key interest rates by the same 25 basis points. Its one-week deposit facility rate was increased to 5.5 per cent and the overnight deposit rate to 5.25 per cent.

However, Qatar's central bank this time decided to leave rates unchanged and kept its deposit, lending and repo rates at 5.0 per cent, 5.5 per cent and 5.25 per cent, respectively.

# Oman's Hydrom extends bid deadline for first round of green hydrogen auction

Our Correspondent  
Muscat

Hydrom - the state-owned company mandated to structure and accelerate the development of the green hydrogen sector in Oman - has extended the bid submission deadline for the first round of Phase A auction process for green hydrogen blocks in the sultanate.

'As part of Oman Green Hydrogen Auction process, Hydrom is announcing that the bid submission deadline for Phase A Round 1 has been extended by one month. Bidders are now expected to submit their proposals by March 15, 2023,' Hydrom said in a statement on its website.

Hydrom intends to award land blocks for green hydrogen projects this year, in order to meet the sultanate's 2030 production target of 1mn tonnes per



annum of green hydrogen.

The Phase A auction process is divided into two bid rounds. Two blocks will be awarded in the first round in Duqm area by April 2023 and an additional two-to-four blocks will be awarded in the second round in Dhofar area by end of Q4 2023.

Hydrom expects the winning developers to deliver integrated projects, covering the full green hydrogen value chain that includes renewable production,

hydrogen production, hydrogen derivatives conversion and off-take.

'Developers are expected to bid as consortia and partner with a government-owned entity post-award [of the block],' Hydrom said in its announcement.

Oman has set an ambition to become one of the largest green hydrogen producers and exporters globally, targeting production of one million tonnes by 2030.

# OPEC+ committee recommends to stay course on oil output cuts

Vienna, Austria - A committee of major oil producers recommended to maintain the cartel's current reduced output strategy, as the global economic outlook remains uncertain and the war in Ukraine drags on.

The 13 members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) led by Riyadh and their 10 allies led by Moscow agreed last October to reduce output by two million

barrels per day until the end of this year.

Collectively known as OPEC+, the group said at the time the move - the biggest cut since the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020 - was due to "market considerations", but the US denounced it as a concession to Moscow. Oil prices spiked following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In a virtual meeting on

Wednesday, the group's Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) "reaffirmed their commitment" to the strategy of a production cut.

The JMMC has no decision-making power but discusses market conditions and makes recommendations, which are then formally discussed and decided at the organisation's ministerial meetings.

AFP

## MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

# MSX index posts third straight weekly decline

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) posted a decline for the third consecutive week as investors await more corporate disclosures related to the 2022 financial performance and dividend announcements.

MSX30 Index of the Muscat Stock Exchange declined last week by 0.67 per cent and closed at 4,719 points. All sectoral indices recorded a raise except for the Financial Index which dropped 70.4 points. While Industrial Index recorded the highest increase at 75.8 points, Service Index increased by about 11.6 points, and MSX Sharia Index gained about five points.

### Local news

►Oman LNG last week signed a long-term agreement with Turkey's BOTAS Petroleum Pipeline Corporation to supply 1mn metric tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) every year for ten years. As per the binding term-sheet agreement signed with BOTAS, Oman LNG will start supplying gas to Turkey in 2025. The agreement helps strengthen its partnerships with international firms in the energy and LNG industry, Oman LNG said in a press statement issued on Monday.

►The Ministry of Finance and the Saudi Fund for Development signed MoU to finance the infrastructure construction project for the integrated economic zone in Al Dhahirah Gov-

ernorate in Oman. The signing ceremony took place on the sidelines of the Omani-Saudi Investment Forum in Riyadh. The first phase of the project will cost around RO122mn. The project includes the construction of infrastructure, roads, electrical installations, water and sewage networks, treatment of industrial waste, and the setting up of basic facilities. The new economic zone will augment trade exchange between the two countries, attract Saudi companies to set up projects in Oman and consolidate economic partnerships.

►Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) at current prices grew by 30.4 per cent to reach RO32bn until the end of September 2022, compared to the same period in 2021. This came in the first edition of the 'Quarterly National Accounts Indicators' report issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

►Omantel announced that as part of its deleveraging plan, it has prepaid its outstanding term loan of RO130mn (US\$340mn) on January 25, 2023. The company's management said that this will have a positive impact on future interest costs.

►The Muscat Stock Exchange has joined the 'Tabadul' platform, the region's first digital exchange hub, established on the mutual market access model that provides a trading network between stock ex-



changes regionally. As a result, the MSX's listed securities, along with those of Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange (ADX) and Bahrain Bourse (BHB), are now available for digital trading, further enhancing liquidity and facilitating trading mechanisms for investors. The announcement came during a bell ringing ceremony, organised by the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange at its headquarters to officially welcome MSX to Tabadul.

►Total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Oman which is funded by the Inma Fund in 2022 stood at 144 projects in various economic sectors, with a total value of RO20mn. At the forefront of those sectors is industry (20 per cent), followed by services (19 per cent), transport and logistics (16 per cent), infrastructure (15 per cent), trade (10 per cent), tourism (9 per cent) and

the oil and gas sector (8 per cent). The projects funded by Inma Fund in Oman's various governorates managed to boost their production lines and provided a number of products and services to the local market.

►The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) last week raised RO70mn by way of allotting treasury bills. The value of the allotted treasury bills for a maturity period of 91 days amounted to RO5mn. Whereas, the value of the allotted treasury bills for a maturity period of 182 days amounted to RO65mn.

### GCC markets

Saudi Arabia's GDP grew by 5.4 per cent in the Q4 2022 compared with the same period in 2021, driven by both oil and non-oil sectors, according to government last week. Oil sector activity rose 6.1 per cent

while non-oil sector activity grew 6.2 per cent, according to the General Authority for Statistics. Overall, the economy grew 8.7 per cent last year, the estimates showed.

The investments of banks operating in the UAE exceeded AED511bn at the end of November 2022, the highest level in 13 months, according to the latest statistics of the Central Bank of the UAE (CBUAE). The CBUAE's statistics also showed an annual increase of 7.7 per cent, equivalent to AED36.6bn, reaching a total of AED511bn at the end of November, compared to AED474.5bn in November 2021. Banks' investments rose in the first eleven months of 2022 by AED37.9bn or 8 per cent, compared to AED473.2bn at the end of December 2021.

The rapid credit growth has reduced the availability of liq-

uidity in the Saudi banking sector, said S&P Global Ratings in a new report titled "Saudi Banking Sector 2023 Outlook". "The government has large deposits with the Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) but is not deploying this liquidity to alleviate pressure on banks," said S&P Global Ratings credit analyst Roman Rybalkin. "Whether the government will step up its deposits with the banking system in 2023 is unclear. We expect banking sector credit growth will slow to 10-12 per cent in 2023-2024, owing to a high base effect, higher interest rates, and tighter liquidity."

Kuwait's caretaker cabinet submitted a draft 2023-2024 budget last week projecting a growing deficit with bigger state spending and lower oil revenues. The budget deficit will swell to five billion dinars (more than US\$16bn) for the year starting in April, up from the US\$10.3bn predicted for the current fiscal year, the finance ministry said. Spending will rise by 11.7 per cent to more than US\$86bn, with 80 per cent going on civil service wages and public subsidies. Revenues - 88 per cent of which come from oil - are projected at around US\$63.8bn, a 16.9 per cent drop.

### Global news

The German economy unexpectedly shrank in the fourth quarter a sign that Europe's largest economy may be enter-

ing a much-predicted recession, though likely a shallower one than originally feared. Gross domestic product decreased 0.2 per cent quarter on quarter in adjusted terms, the federal statistics office said. In the previous quarter, the German economy grew by an upwardly revised 0.5 per cent versus the previous three months.

The German government has said the economic situation should improve from spring onwards, and last week revised up its GDP forecast for 2023 - predicting growth of 0.2 per cent, up from an autumn forecast of a 0.4 per cent decline.

The International Monetary Fund raised its 2023 global growth outlook slightly due to "surprisingly resilient" demand in the United States and Europe, an easing of energy costs and the reopening of China's economy after Beijing abandoned its strict COVID-19 restrictions. The IMF said global growth would still fall to 2.9 per cent in 2023 from 3.4 per cent in 2022, but its latest World Economic Outlook forecasts mark an improvement over an October prediction of 2.7 per cent growth this year with warnings that the world could easily tip into recession. For 2024, the IMF said global growth would accelerate slightly to 3.1 per cent, but this is a tenth of a percentage point below the October forecast as the full impact of steeper bank interest rate hikes slows demand.

# EU, G7 reach deal on Russian fuel price cap

Brussels, Belgium – European Union member states, the Group of Seven industrialised countries and Australia said Friday that they have reached an agreement on price caps for Russian petroleum products.

The move is the latest part of an international push to limit Russian President Vladimir Putin's war chest for his assault on Ukraine by targeting his key exports.

The caps involve two price levels, US\$100 per barrel for more expensive fuel like diesel and US\$45 on lower-quality products such as fuel oil, according to officials.

Sweden, which holds the rotating EU presidency, called it an "important agreement as part of the continued response by EU and partners to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine."

The EU in December imposed an embargo on Russian crude oil coming in by sea and - together with its G7 partners - set a US\$60-dollar-per-barrel cap for exports around the world.

The second embargo, on Russian fuel, is set to come into

force on Sunday or soon after. It targets Russian refined oil products such as petrol, diesel and heating fuel, arriving on ships.

At the same time, the EU and the G7 group of wealthy democracies have also agreed to impose a price cap on Russian shipments of those products to global markets.

The G7 and Australia statement added that the price cap coalition will undertake a review of the crude oil cap in March.

The price caps on those transported products work by establishing a ceiling for the cost of fuel that can be transported on ships.

The price caps agreed were in line with a proposal from the European Commission, the EU's executive arm.

It had to balance tough demands from sanction hawks, such as Poland and Baltic nations, against the need to ensure the West does not cut off Russian supplies to world markets entirely, which would send global prices soaring.

EU diplomats called the agreed price levels "well-bal-



anced" and hitting the goal to "reduce Russia's income while guaranteeing access for third countries."

In a separate statement, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen applauded the latest decision and said it built on earlier ef-

forts.

"The caps we have just set will now serve a critical role in our global coalition's work... we are forcing Putin to choose between funding his brutal war or propping up his struggling economy," she added.

**Russia warns of market 'imbalance'**

The Kremlin lashed out at the EU ahead of the embargo coming into force, insisting it will "lead to a further imbalance of the international energy markets".

"We are taking measures to

hedge our interests against the risks associated," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Moscow's war in Ukraine has provided a harsh wake-up call for the EU, which for years had been reliant on cheap fossil fuels from

Russia to power its industries.

Brussels says the embargo on crude oil has seen the bloc cut out some 90 per cent of Russian imports, after exceptions were granted for supplies flowing by pipeline to landlocked countries like Hungary.

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen on Thursday estimated during a visit to Kyiv that the existing price cap on Russian oil was already costing Moscow around 160mn euros (US\$175mn) every day.

On Friday, she said the bloc was readying a new round of sanctions against Russia -- its 10th package since the war started a year ago.

"We must continue to deprive Russia of the means to wage war against Ukraine," she said, also highlighting the EU's import ban on Russian petroleum products from Sunday.

"With the G7 we are putting price caps on these products, cutting Russia's revenue while ensuring stable global energy markets," she said.

AFF

## US Fed signals inflation fight not over

Washington, US – America's Federal Reserve slowed its pace of interest rate hikes, tempering an aggressive campaign to rein in costs as inflation cools, but signalled the battle is not yet over.

The US central bank announced a quarter-point hike to the benchmark lending rate at the end of its two-day policy meeting, taking the rate to a target range of 4.50-4.75 per cent.

"Inflation has eased somewhat but remains elevated," said the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) in a statement.

While recent developments are encouraging, officials will need "substantially more evidence" to be confident that inflation is on a sustained downward path, Fed Chair Jerome Powell told a press briefing.

According to the FOMC statement, "the committee anticipates that ongoing increases in the target range will be appropriate" to bring inflation back to policymakers' two percent target.

The Fed has cranked up interest rates eight times since March 2022, including four consecutive 0.75 percentage point increases, lifting borrowing costs in hopes of dampening demand.

The aim is to rein in inflation, which surged to its fastest pace in decades last year but has since



US Fed chief Jerome Powell leaves after speaking at a news conference on Wednesday in Washington, DC (AFP)

come off a peak.

On Wednesday, the Fed acknowledged recent indicators "point to modest growth in spending and production" as economic activity eases.

The 0.25 percentage point rise marks a step down from December's half-point hike and the series of bigger spikes last year.

But the FOMC statement suggests rate increases will continue.

Powell noted that it will take a few more rate hikes to get to an "appropriately restrictive" policy level while inflation runs hot.

And under current expectations, it "will not be appropriate to cut rates this year," he said.

The Fed also stressed that officials are "highly attentive to in-

flation risks" amid fallout from Russia's war against Ukraine, which is contributing to greater global uncertainty.

**Pushing back**

"The Fed is pushing back against market expectations that rate cuts are coming," said Ryan Sweet, chief US economist at Oxford Economics.

"The central bank is clearly signaling that it will err on the side of doing too much than too little to tame inflation," Sweet said. He expects a policy-induced recession to start in the second quarter this year.

But Powell told reporters that growth will continue, though at a "fairly subdued level this year."

With a strong labor market,

fading inflation, as well as public and private spending in the pipeline to support economic activity, there is a good chance of positive growth in 2023, Powell said.

For now, data released Tuesday showed that a measure of pay and benefits rose less than expected in the fourth quarter last year.

On Wednesday, payroll firm ADP's figures indicated private hiring slowed more than anticipated in January, adding to signs that the economy is cooling.

Ian Shepherdson, chief economist of Pantheon Macroeconomics, believes an end to rate hikes is in sight.

He expects that if the Fed hikes rates again in March, it "won't be going again in May."

But he raised concerns that policymakers may be "so wedded to the idea of raising rates again that they will require disproportionately strong evidence to persuade them to stop."

Officials have expressed determination to stay the course, with Powell telling reporters Wednesday that the Fed remains "strongly committed" to bringing inflation down.

For now, markets liked the Fed's shift in tone as it noted the progress made in lowering costs, Shepherdson said.

AFF

## ECB hikes interest rates again

Frankfurt, Germany – The European Central Bank raised interest rates again Thursday and signalled it would "stay the course" with an identical hike next month, even as the outlook in the eurozone brightens.

The ECB lifted its key rates half a percentage point, as widely expected, seeking to curb soaring prices of energy and food fuelled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Earlier the same day, the Bank of England hiked rates for a 10th time in a row.

The ECB has now raised borrowing costs three percentage points since launching its unprecedented campaign of monetary tightening in July.

Signs are growing the eurozone may have passed the worst of an economic shock, with inflation slowing from a peak in October and the single currency area eking out growth at the end of 2022.

But making its latest rate hike, the bank said it would "stay the course in raising interest rates significantly at a steady pace", repeating the same hawkish language used after its last meeting in December.

The ECB "intends to raise interest rates by another 50 basis points at its next monetary policy meeting in March, and it will then evaluate the subsequent path of



its monetary policy", the statement said.

With markets looking for clues about what might happen after March, ECB president Christine Lagarde told a press conference that the Frankfurt-based institution still has "ground to cover" in raising rates.

"We know that we are not done," she said, adding that the ECB's determination to return inflation to its two-percent target "should not be doubted".

While consumer price growth in the eurozone has eased, slowing to 8.5 per cent in January according to preliminary data, it is still way above target.

Although the ECB has repeatedly stressed its determination

to fight inflation, policymakers are walking a fine line – seeking to tighten enough but not so much that it dramatically deepens economic pain across Europe.

Lagarde offered relatively upbeat comments about the 20-nation currency club's prospects, saying it had faced the fallout from Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and surging energy costs better than expected.

"Overall, the economy has proved more resilient than expected and should recover over the coming quarters," she said, citing improved confidence, easing supply chain bottlenecks and stable gas supplies.

AFF

## China factory output rebounds in January

Beijing, China – China's factory activity expanded in January after months of contraction, official data showed, as the world's second-largest economy stirs back to life after Beijing ended strict Covid curbs.

The Asian giant posted just three per cent growth last year as its economy was hammered by stringent lockdowns and a deepening crisis in the key property sector.

But it is now showing signs of a rebound, with a key gauge of factory output rising this month and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) upgrading its 2023 growth forecast to 5.2 per cent.

Pandemic prevention measures have "entered a new stage" that is allowing "a gradual return" to normal life, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) statistician Zhao Qinghe said in a statement.

He added that the official manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) rose to 50.1 this month, from 47.0 in December -- the first time since September the index has been above the 50 point mark that indicates growth. The non-manufacturing PMI, which includes the services and construction sector, rose to 54.4 in January, well above the 52 points forecast by economists surveyed by Bloomberg.

Authorities have said the soaring virus case numbers that accompanied China's reopening have now passed their peak, with a travel surge prompted by the country's biggest Lunar New Year holiday in years offering a much-needed boost to business.

"The official PMIs add to evidence of a rapid rebound in economic activity this month".

AFF

## Musk found not liable in Tesla tweet trial

San Francisco, US – Jurors on Friday cleared Elon Musk of liability for investors' losses in a fraud trial over his 2018 tweets falsely claiming that he had funding in place to take Tesla private.

The tweets sent the Tesla share price on a rollercoaster ride, and Musk was sued by shareholders who said the tycoon acted recklessly in an effort to squeeze investors who had bet against the company.

Jurors deliberated for barely two hours before returning to the San Francisco courtroom to say they unanimously agreed that neither Musk nor the Tesla board perpetrated fraud with the tweets and in their aftermath.

"Thank goodness, the wisdom of the people has prevailed!" tweeted Musk, who had tried but failed to get the trial moved to Texas on the grounds jurors in California would be biased against him.



Elon Musk

"I am deeply appreciative of the jury's unanimous finding of innocence in the Tesla 420 takeover case."

Attorney Nicholas Porritt, who represents Glen Littleton and other investors in Tesla, had argued in court that the case was about making sure the rich and powerful have to abide by the same stock market rules as everyone else.

"Elon Musk published tweets

that were false with reckless disregard as to their truth," Porritt told the panel of nine jurors during closing arguments.

Porritt pointed to expert testimony estimating that Musk's claim about funding, which turned out not to be true, cost investors billions of dollars overall and that Musk and the Tesla board should be made to pay damages.

But Musk attorney Alex Spiro

successfully countered that the billionaire may have erred on wording in a hasty tweet, but that he did not set out to deceive anyone.

Spiro also portrayed the mercurial entrepreneur, who now owns Twitter, as having had a troubled childhood and having come to the United States as a poor youth chasing dreams.

Musk testified during three days on the witness stand that his 2018 tweet about taking Tesla private at US\$420 a share was no joke and that Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund was serious about helping him do it.

"To Elon Musk, if he believes it or even just thinks about it then it's true no matter how objectively false or exaggerated it may be," Porritt told jurors.

Tesla and its board were also to blame, because they let Musk use his Twitter account to post news about the company, Porritt

argued.

The case revolved around a pair of tweets in which Musk said "funding secured" for a project to buy out the publicly-traded electric automaker, then in a second tweet added that "investor support is confirmed."

"He wrote two words 'funding secured' that were technically inaccurate," Spiro said of Musk while addressing jurors.

"Whatever you think of him, this isn't a bad tweeter trial, it's a 'did they prove this man committed fraud?' trial."

Musk did not intend to deceive anyone with the tweets, and had the connections and wealth to take Tesla private, Spiro contended. During the trial playing out in federal court in San Francisco, Spiro said that even though the tweets may have been a "reckless choice of words," they were not fraud.

AFF

# Badr Al Samaa launches Badr SOI IVF & Fertility Centre

Badr Al Samaa Group of Hospitals has launched Infertility Treatment Services in collaboration with Seeds of Innocence (SOI), one of the largest IVF chains in India in a soft launch ceremony at Badr Al Samaa Medical Centre, Mabella.

Badr SOI IVF and Fertility Centre, a state-of-the-art In-vitro Fertilization (IVF) and fertility centre, is all set to spread smiles on the faces of wish-to-be mothers. The centre is powered with advanced infrastructure and a multidisciplinary team of infertility specialists and embryologist. On this occasion Badr Al Samaa announced 100 free consultations for childless couples, a press release said.

The soft launch of the IVF Centre was graced by managing directors of Badr Al Samaa, Abdul Latheef and Dr P A Mohammed, Dr Gauri Agarwal, specialist gynaecologist and IVF, Sameer PT, CEO of Badr Al Samaa, Jacob Oommen, COO of Badr Al Samaa, Chetan Kohli, CEO of Seeds of Innocence, senior management staff, doctors, and other guests.

The centre is developed adhering to International Standards of medical infrastructure and facilities, and specialises in Assisted Reproductive Technologies, treatment of infertility, management of high risk pregnancies and genetic diagnostics. It offers high-end genetic diagnostic tests for embryos such as Preimplantation Genetic Screening (PGS) and Preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to eliminate

genetical anomalies or inherited genetic diseases like down syndrome and other chromosomal disorders in the fetus.

Abdul Latheef said, launching Infertility services is a reassurance of their vision of introducing advanced medical programmes at regular intervals to ensure eventually no one has to travel outside the country for healthcare needs. He counted much on Seeds of Innocence expertise to ensure better results in IVF.

Dr Mohammed added, that Oman has recently seen a surge in infertility cases and it was an appropriate time to start IVF. He said, with extraordinary skills of Dr Gauri Agarwal and other doctors, and state of the art infrastructure Badr Al Samaa will deliver best possible treatment.



# First Women's Heart Disease conference held in GCC

The Emirates Cardiac Society announced the launch of the first of its kind conference in the GCC - Cardiovascular Disease in Women Conference - in cooperation with the Saudi Group of Women Heart (Saudi Heart Association).

The conference, conducted by a group of experts and specialists to discuss the latest developments and research related to women's heart disease, saw the participation of specialists from the GCC - UAE, Saudi, Bahrain and Oman - and Dr Alaide Chieffo from Italy, a press release said.

The two-day event was held at the Conrad Hotel on February 3-4, coinciding with International Women's Heart Disease Awareness Day which is held globally on February 3. On the sidelines of the conference, awareness campaigns will be organised by the society throughout the year, in the shape of several virtual workshops to introduce and raise awareness of heart diseases, and several initiatives across UAE commercial centres and malls, where to measure blood pressure, body mass index, sugar and cholesterol as well as providing health tips and guidance about women's fitness and nutrition.

The CVD In Women Conference committee included Dr Juwairia Alali, president of the Emirates Cardiac Society, Dr Abdullah Shehab, vice president of the society, Dr Wael al Mahmeed, Scientific Committee chairperson, and Dr Ghadeera al Mansouri, head of Congenital and Genetic Heart Disease Working Group of Emirates Cardiac Society.



# Samsung offers pre-order for Galaxy S23 series

Samsung Gulf Electronics today announced that the new Samsung Galaxy S23 Series comprising the Galaxy S23 Ultra, Galaxy S23+, and Galaxy S23, is now available for pre-order for customers in Oman until February 16.

The series comes equipped with new standard-setting innovations, such as the ultimate 200MP camera that captures epic moments with incredible precision, and a powerful processor that unleashes a premium gaming experience. Additionally, the new devices feature a striking design that advances Samsung's sustainability commitment with more components made using recycled materials than any other Samsung Galaxy smartphone, a press release said.

To celebrate the milestone, Samsung Gulf Electronics is offering exclusive gifts for all pre-orders on Samsung.com. Oman customers who order ahead of time will receive Galaxy Buds2 Pro in addition to a 1-year Samsung Care+, Samsung's comprehensive warranty against accidental breakage and breakdown, 5X Samsung Rewards points and complimentary subscriptions with Samsung Members. Customers pre-ordering can also avail of exclusive colours - Sky Blue, Lime, Graphite and Red - only available on Samsung.com.

Fadi Abu Shamat, head of MX Division, Samsung Gulf Electronics, said, "Our exclusive pre-order offers make owning this icon even more rewarding for our loyal Galaxy fans. The improved camera, battery life, durability and the best privacy protection of any smartphone all add to the incredible value of owning one of the most advanced devices in the market."



# Sohar International supports Injaz Oman

As an organisation that is invested in the youth of the country, Sohar International has consistently been a keen supporter of education and development programmes that aid in creating a knowledge-based economy. The bank's most recent endeavor was signing an agreement with Injaz Oman to work together on two student programs.

Sohar International has provided assistance to the 'Company Programme' and the 'Personal Finance Programme' in accordance with the terms of the agreement, which was signed in the bank's main office on the Waterfront by Mazin Mahmood al Raisi, chief marketing officer of Sohar International, and Khaula al Harthy, executive director of Injaz Oman.

Mohamed Mahfoodh al Ardhi, chairman of Sohar International, commented, "With Oman Vision 2040 underscoring the value of education and identifying it as one of the key pillars to attaining sustainable human development, it becomes increasingly important to broaden the horizon and go beyond academic syllabuses - it becomes essential to provide students with targeted programmes that focus on sharpening skills in their specific areas of interest.

Through efforts to promote such programmes and platforms, Sohar International will remain committed to contributing towards fostering a self-motivated, capable, and socially-conscious generation that will uphold its roles and duties to the nation and drive sustained socio-economic progress."

The latest edition of the Company Programme, which will continue until September 2023, focuses on guiding students from diverse academic backgrounds on how to start, build, and sustain a business, including the fundamentals of carrying out various operational procedures in line with international standards and government regulations, and tackling various challenges in running a business.



# Barcelo Mussanah Resort champions sustainable promise

Barceló Mussanah Resort, part of the leading Spanish hotel management group - Barceló Hotel Group, launched its eco-friendly guest programme - VIP of The Day - in partnership with One Tree Planted, a non-profit organisation focused on global reforestation.

Aligning with its The Future is Green initiative, Barcelo Mussanah Resort will plant over 500 trees by the end of 2023 in the Sultanate of Oman, as part of its innovative programme, a press release said.

Mussanah's flagship beach resort invites one VIP guest of the day to create a positive impact on their environment. The lucky guest will receive a welcome gift upon their arrival at the stellar beach property, planting an agroforestry tree on their behalf from One Tree Planted.

The eco-friendly guest will also receive an e-certificate for their efforts and contribution towards preserving the environment. As part of The Future is Green initiative, the programme enhances the property's commitment to promoting sustainable tourism in the Sultanate of Oman.

# Jotun M E launches its 2023 'Stories'

The new Global Colour Card for 2023, Stories: Colour Design by Jotun presents a palette of expressive, hopeful shades. They are purposely designed to inspire a creative ambience in homes.

The 21 colours featured are timeless and not trend driven, but chosen for their positivity, honesty and versatility. In their unique way, they introduce an element of joy into the home, a press release said.

Lisbeth Larsen, Global Colour manager at Jotun, said, "Colour has an amazing power both to express how we feel about our lives and to shape it."

# Oman Golf Association partners with Sohar Aluminium

In an official signing ceremony held at Ghala Golf Club, Sohar Aluminium continued their support of golf in Oman by renewing as a partner of the Oman Golf Association (OGA) for 2023.

The partnership agreement was signed by Mundhir al Barwani, chairman of the OGA and Eng Said al Masoudi, CEO of Sohar Aluminium, a press release said.

Established in 2009 by the Ministry of Sports Affairs, the Oman Golf Committee was formed to grow and govern the sport of golf in the sultanate. Their efforts and progress were formally recognised in 2020 when the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth announced the formation of the Oman Golf Association. The aims of the Oman Golf Association are to increase participation and awareness in an inclusive way, to develop elite Omani talent, and to use the sport of golf to promote tourism and investment.

Barwani said, "We are delighted that Sohar Aluminium will continue as a partner of the OGA. Their signing comes on the eve of the first ever International Series Oman tournament which is part of the Asian Tour, the field of players who will be competing in the sultanate are extremely high profile, and this is sure to raise the interest levels in Oman from overseas, besides inspiring many within the sultanate to get involved in golf."

"Through the support of Sohar Aluminium the OGA will be able to continue to grow and develop the game, giving people the opportunity to try the game for the first time, as well as developing our more established players to prepare them to compete at the highest level. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and to H H Sayyid



Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik Al Said for their unlimited support and guidance."

Masoudi added, "We are pleased to continue our long-term partnership with Oman Golf Association which further cements our commitment towards the growth and sustainability of golf in Oman. We hope that this will have a clear and direct impact and contribute to achieving the objectives of the OGA to increase awareness and participation of golf in the domestic and international markets and ensure that this sport is used to promote the general interests of the Sultanate, both locally and globally."



# Ahlibank's Q4 retail banking sets new milestones in 2023

Ahlibank's resilient fourth quarter performance for the year 2022 received a thumping response from branch managers at its recently concluded Retail Banking Meeting, held to review the Bank's retail performance and explore newer avenues to enhance customer experience.

The meeting underscored the significant all-round growth witnessed by the bank during the last quarter, with the net profit for the period ending December 31, 2022, growing by 19.9% to reach RO33.1mn, compared to

the corresponding period in 2021. This growth has been commensurate with the sustained growth witnessed by the bank's branches throughout the year, a press release said.

Branch managers, partaking in the retail meet, highlighted their joint efforts to augment the growth parameters and achieve the set targets for the year. Retail performance discussions also explored the importance of enhancing customers' experiences by meeting their everyday banking needs with convenience and

ease through the network of branches established in all major governorates of the country.

Speaking on the sidelines of the meeting, Muneer al Balushi, AGM - head of Retail Distribution, Ahlibank, commended the role played by individual branches in shaping the outcome of the fourth quarter results. He said, "Our exemplary retail performance will set the tone for the current year, as we expect to make good on our initiatives and plans with our team of professionals helping the network of

23 branches in the country. We have established our enhanced presence through our branches, which are engaged in implementing Ahlibank's mission of exceeding customer expectations and delivering outstanding shareholder value through a suite of retail, commercial, investment banking solutions."

He threw the spotlight on the bank's e-channels, which have shaped, in no small way, the changing tide of the banking sector in the country and helped drive the government's Vision

2040 for a digital society.

Explaining further, he said, "We will continue to forge ahead with our robust digitalisation journey, engaging with our savvy customers to exceed their expectations with newer and innovative products and services. We believe in change management to adapt to the global trends that have brought about newer and more advanced technological solutions into the financial and banking sector. We are assured in the knowledge that the year 2023 will set a new paradigm for

growth - we will continue to invest our resources to enhance our customer-centric approach to banking and develop our key performance indicators to lead the industry from the front."

The interactive session also analyzed the bank's credit risk management as well as complaints management and the attending branch managers discussed operational plans so as to take advantage of the current sustained growth and prep up for any global economic slowdown by delivering innovative products and services.

## World NTD Day observed in UAE



Reaching the Last Mile (RLM), a portfolio of global health programmes driven by the philanthropy of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the UAE, on Monday joined with governments, partners, and global health leaders to celebrate World NTD Day and highlight the urgent need for renewed investment and action to end neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).

In Geneva, RLM partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UAE Mission to the UN to convene high-level stakeholders in recognition of the day. Held at WHO headquarters alongside the 152nd session of the organisation's Executive Board meeting, attendees discussed the need for greater collaboration to meet the elimination targets laid out in the WHO's 2030 roadmap.

Ahmed Aljarman, permanent representative of the UAE to the United Nations Office in Geneva, said, "In May 2021, the World Health Assembly adopted a decision submitted by the United Arab Emirates and its partners to recognise January 30 as World NTD Day."

## ISG students attend Round Square conference in Hyderabad

A delegation of six students from Indian School Al Ghubra - Abhinav Parasher, Ardra Menon, Asmitta Mohapatra, Ayan Dasgupta, Satvik Kumar and Viraj Krishna Ghosh, accompanied by Round Square representative Noella Vaz, attended the Round Square Conference held at Hyderabad Public School, Begumpet (India) from January 22 to 26.

The conference covered a wide spectrum of activities based on the theme of adventure - 'Inhale Courage, Exhale Fear'. About 170 delegates from 24 Round Square schools from India and abroad participated in the conference, a press release said.

The keynote speaker, Saad Bin Jung, a wildlife conservationist, broadened the delegates' minds



on Nature Conservation. Arun Tiwari, missile scientist, inspired the delegates to live in the present, give back to society, and have a role model to achieve their life goals. The brainstorm-

ing 'barazza' sessions on adventure also generated a lot of enthusiasm among the delegates.

The four-day conference helped the students to overcome fear, learn to be courageous and

forge new friendships. The experience they had helped them come out of their comfort zone and be involved in activities that add a new dimension to their personalities.

## Jindal Shadeed hosts Family Day

Jindal Shadeed has been at the forefront of leading initiatives and conducting programmes that add value to the lives of people. The company recently organised a large-scale event for its employees and their families - The Jindal Shadeed Family Day - which was held at the company's headquarters in Sohar last week.

Harssha Shetty, CEO, said, "Jindal Shadeed takes great pride in its community-centred approach and events like these help us to reaffirm our position as an integral part of society. Employees are the vital link between the company and its external stakeholders, and we acknowledge the quintessential and fundamental role that they play. We, therefore, continuously strive to foster a strong, resilient, and dynamic corporate culture that upholds the values of transparency, ethicality, and mutual respect.



Our staff engagement activities help promote increased collaboration and cooperation between team members while nurturing a conducive work environment."

He added, "To truly integrate employees into the ecosystem and instil in them an inherent passion to achieve new heights, Jindal Shadeed also believes that individuals should acquire a

more holistic understanding of the core business and also appreciate the roles played by each department. This is the main reason why we organised an extensive tour of the plant as part of the staff gathering."

The event brought together employees and their families from Al Falaj Township, Sohar Township, and Liwa Township.



## Audi Oman adds electric vehicle to lineup

Audi Oman, represented by Premium Motors has announced that Sayarti has become first leasing and rental company to add an electric vehicle to its lineup in Oman.

Sayarti added Audi e-tron Sportback, first full-electric model from the brand, to its premium fleet of rental cars. In addition, Kempinski Muscat became the first hotel in Oman to lease Audi e-tron Sportback from Sayarti, a press release said.

The fully electric Audi e-tron Sportback model, equipped with an e-quattro all-wheel drive system, intelligent technology, and

advanced charging capabilities, will now be available at Sayarti, Zubair Group's leasing and rental company.

Christian Nehme, general manager of Premium Motors Oman, was present at a ceremony where representatives of Sayarti (Zubair Group) handed over the key to Carsten Weigandt, general manager of Kempinski Hotel Muscat.

Nehme said, "We are excited that Audi fans will now be able to rent or lease Audi e-tron Sportback from Sayarti. The Audi e-tron Sportback is unmatched in combining all-electric performance and luxury. It is a great way

to experience Audi's electric future."

Syed Sohraab Hasnain, head of operations of Sayarti, said, "Adding Audi e-tron Sportback to our fleet gives our clients a chance to taste all-electric German luxury. We are thrilled to add a car which combines the space and comfort of a typical luxury class automobile with a range suitable for everyday use."

A spokesperson for Kempinski Hotel Muscat said, "We remain committed to promoting best practices in sustainability, from community engagement to environmental conservation.

## Khedmah renews collaboration with OCA

In line with its efforts to enhance community engagement, Oman Investment and Finance Company 'Khedmah' has renewed its collaboration with the Oman Charity Organisation to provide financial support for a number of initiatives implemented within the sultanate.

This agreement is part of Khedmah's social responsibility initiatives to drive social and economic development, and expand cooperation with charities that seek to assist individuals and families in need, a press release said.

Under the terms agreed upon, the Oman Charity Organisation will disburse this contribution to the support programmes determined in accordance with the requirements it specifies, which include providing support to a number of families in the sultanate and a number of emergency cases that require support.

Commenting on the collaboration, Said bin Ahmed Saifar, CEO of Khedmah, said, "We be-



lieve in the important role of charitable institutions and organisations. They play a huge role in advancing sustainable development within local communities, and empowering individuals and families to achieve a balance between the various segments of society.

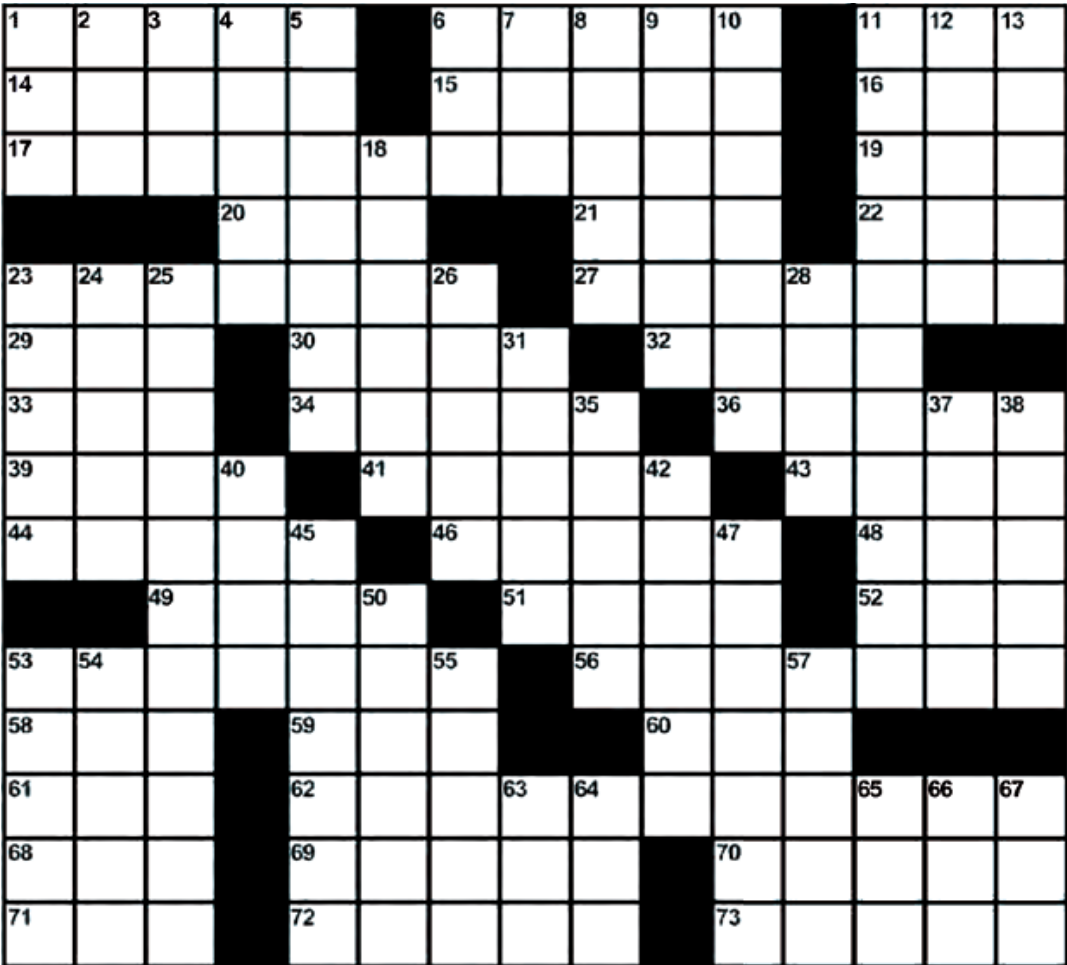
"Albeit, 'Khedmah' is committed to renewing and expanding our cooperation with different

organisations to provide beneficial initiatives to support those in need. As part of our corporate social responsibility objectives, and supported by the company's board of directors and employees, we work to instill community values at all times, and this agreement comes in recognition of the great role played by the Oman Charity Organisation in supporting such initiatives and

helping insolvent cases."

Mohammed bin Humood bin Saeed al Dhuhli, CEO of OCA, added, "Oman Charity Organisation is always focused on working to provide support and assistance to the beneficiaries under the terms and rules of the organisation. We always engage in mutually beneficial partnerships with various private and public sector institutions."

DAILY CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**  
1) Beyond's partner  
6) Update, as an atlas  
11) Put a lid on  
14) Drop by briefly  
15) Come to mind  
16) Hyperlinked item, often  
17) Confirms, in a way  
19) Cloak-and-dagger org.  
20) Be off one's feed  
21) Fish eggs  
22) Doll name  
23) Bo's'ns' quarters  
27) Distant fort  
29) Exclamation of amaze-ment  
30) Winged Greek god  
32) Hawaiian tuber  
33) Boot type  
34) Octagon features  
36) Damed things  
39) Pitch fish Charlie  
41) Chocolate source  
43) Apartment  
44) Slender part of the back  
46) Mixes by hand  
48) \_ Lady of Fatima  
49) Cafeteria worker
- 51) Uptight state  
52) Grand\_, (vintage)  
53) Like insider trading  
56) Handyman's gear  
58) Heifer's comment  
59) Feeling of rage  
60) Make stuff up  
61) Moneymakers for TV stations  
62) Lines of people read  
lines at these  
68) "Fancy that!"  
69) Make retribution  
70) It might be liquid or frozen  
71) Best suffix?  
72) Slow, on a score  
73) Place for potted plants
- DOWN**  
1) Football's flight path  
2) Sticker in the woods (Var.)  
3) Yoko of the music world  
4) Certain travel documents  
5) Stores on the farm  
6) "Go team!"  
7) Earlier, to the Bard  
8) Type of surgery  
9) Seek a date with  
10) Former Spanish money  
11) Mechanical timepiece  
12) Astrological ram  
13) Assembly line setting  
18) Parsonage personage  
23) Goes on a hunger strike  
24) Old hull caulking  
25) Dining room piece, sometimes  
26) Fast food staples  
28) Univ. employee  
31) Denominational off-shoots  
35) New Orleans pro  
37) Tall timber tree of New Zealand  
38) Pompous walk  
40) Burn soothing plant  
42) 2014 American League East champ  
45) Like Mr. Spock  
47) Impassive (Var.)  
50) Kind of chop  
53) Candidate's concern  
54) Gold deposits  
55) Disclose  
57) Car dealer's offering  
63) Rock blaster  
64) Zodiac carnivore  
65) Flashback cause  
66) Chair part  
67) "Jeanne d'Arc," for one (Abbr.)

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

**ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

The time for exploring new places and new ideas has come, so tune in to your wanderlust and get traveling! Plan a trip to a foreign land. Being intrigued by new people and new cultures will energize you to a point that you might finally understand what you really need to be doing with your life. The blinders are coming off. You're opening your mind to new ways of living, and although not every discovery is a revelation, most are at least interesting.

**LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your brain is a big and vital organ, and it's nowhere near even half full! Spend some time learning something new today and you'll be doing something very good for yourself. You'll also have a lot of brainy fun. Go online and research a distant country you've always wanted to visit. Read a biography about a historical figure. Find out once and for all the best way to make an omelet. It doesn't matter what you discover as long as it's something you're curious about.

**SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Today, despite the tension that you can sense brewing under the surface, you should just focus on having fun. The impending drama isn't something you created, and it's absolutely not your responsibility. This isn't about ignoring a problem or passing the buck. It's about knowing what you can change and what you can't. Keep things light with friends and family too. It will help your popularity if you keep the vibe of the entire day easy and pleasant.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Between 1783 and 1865, Englishmen William Wilberforce, Sir Cecil Wray and Dr Beilby Porteus, Africans Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho and, in the USA, William Lloyd Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Charles Henry Langston and John Mercer Langston were leading figures in which movement?

A. Removal of the death penalty  
B. Abolition of the slave trade  
C. Boy Scouts  
D. Suffragette (votes for women)

02. Which battle was partly fought on Senlac Hill?

A. Gettysburg  
B. Sino-Japanese  
C. Hastings  
D. Bunker Hill

03. The US TV series, "Mrs America", centres on the struggles in 1970s America to do what?A. The Pleasure Seekers  
A. Bring the Roe v. Wade action  
B. Stop the building of nuclear power plants  
C. Enact the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act  
D. Ratify the Equal Rights Amendment

Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. D

**TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Today, there's no need to rush around like a maniac despite what the people around you might be urging. A lot of the things you've been working toward are finally coming into being, and it's better if you just leave them alone. If you keep trying to make things perfect, you'll only make them worse. Step back, slow down, and try to keep yourself busy just having a good time. Take a long lunch or a long walk, whatever will keep you peacefully distracted.

**VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Keep your distance from needy people for now and avoid letting them use what's yours. It might make you feel a bit unneighborly, but sharing resources with disorganized people could have a very stressful effect on the relationship you have with them. Too many variables are at play, and the chances that you will emerge from the arrangement without losses are very slim. Define your boundaries today and you'll avoid making commitments that could come back to haunt you.

**CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

A door is opening in your career, but it might require you to leave your family for a while. Travel is something that you usually enjoy quite a bit, but this time it could be a lot more work than you were expecting. There will be significant pressure from the people you love, as well as pressure from your coworkers or employers. Be prepared for the fact that no matter what decision you make, you'll need to do some damage control. But don't fret. In the end, you can't make a bad decision.

**GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

When a suggestion is a good one, you should take it, appearances be damned! Go ahead and take the good advice of friends and associates. Who cares if that means they'll know how much influence they have over you? By doing what they suggest, you're doing the right thing and that's all that matters. You can't worry about looking like you're completely independent now. Remember, it's never a good idea to cut off your nose to spite your face.

**LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Your time is extremely valuable. Every minute of your day is as good as money, especially right now when you're so busy. Who deserves this valuable commodity more than your family and friends? Nobody. Your friends and family are your most worthwhile partners, so make some time for these people. Plan a weekend with someone who is fun to talk to and fun to go on adventures with. Enjoy having more one-on-one time with someone who makes your life better.

**AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Today, someone will ask you an insightful question that will cause you to think twice about what you're doing with your free time. The patterns you have developed in your social life are becoming a little bit boring -- what you need right now is a new cast of characters, and a new agenda for fun. Reconnect with someone from your past who always made you smile, and see what they are up to. Isn't it time you two caught up with what's going on in your lives?

**CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Your mental abilities are better than ever before, but your quick mind is going to be just one of the many skills you bring to the table today. Eloquence is right up there too. The right words will always be at the tip of your tongue, and you'll be in plenty of situations to make the most of your wit. People are impressed by your effortless charm today, so if you're going to a job interview or having a first date, your first impression will be dramatic and effective.

**SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Doing whatever you want whenever you want simply isn't possible, especially now, when you have made so many commitments to so many people. But if you try hard enough, you can still exert a lot of control over the course of the day. All you need to do is avoid conflict. So try to resist your natural urge to go against the crowd, because it could ruffle a few feathers. Just go with the flow and play nice. You don't want to rock the boat when you're this far out at sea!

**PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Today, if you let yourself get drawn into a mystery, you'll be giving this mystery power over you. Don't try to figure out why things are happening the way they are. Not only do you not have enough time to waste on such melodrama, you won't be very satisfied with the solution. Just roll with the punches and try to get comfortable with the ambiguous elements of your life right now. Your future will be full of them too, so the sooner you learn how to handle them the better.

KIDS COLOURING

BOGGLER

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| I | Y | W | S |
| S | H | S | S |
| E | T | T | E |
| H | R | O | B |

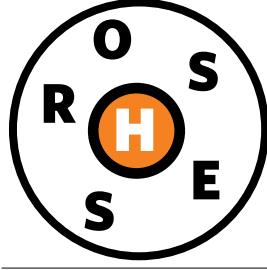
Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. 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

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

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

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

# Alarm over health of Iran hunger-striker

Farhad Meysami, serving a 5-year sentence since 2018, has been refusing food for several weeks

Paris, France - Alarm grew on Friday over the health of a jailed Iranian medical doctor and human rights campaigner after images of his emaciated body revealed the effects of a weeks-long hunger strike.

Farhad Meysami, serving a five-year sentence and in jail since 2018, has been refusing food for several weeks in protest at authorities' crack-down on anti-regime rallies, campaigners say.

His lawyer Mohammad Moghimi posted on Instagram images of the gaunt, skeletal naked torso of Meysami, who is jailed in the Rajai Shahr prison, in the city of Karaj outside Tehran.

It was not immediately clear how the images had been taken.

"My client is a political activist who lost weight severely due to the hunger strike in prison," Moghimi wrote.

He said Meysami was on hunger strike to demand an end to executions linked to the protests, the release of political prisoners and an end to the compulsory dress code for women in Iran.

Amnesty International described the images as 'shocking' and said they raised 'grave concerns about his health and life after more than a month on hunger strike'.

"These images of him are a shocking reminder of the Iranian authorities' contempt for human rights," it added on Twitter.

The US envoy for Iran, Robert



This image posted on Thursday, on the Instagram account of Mohammad Moghimi, the lawyer of jailed Iranian medical doctor Farhad Meysami, shows the latter following a hunger strike during incarceration at Rajai Shahr prison in Karaj city outside the capital (AFP)

Malley, also said the images were 'shocking'.

"Iran's regime has unjustly denied him and thousands of other political prisoners their rights and their freedom. Now it unjustly threatens his life."

It was not immediately clear

how long Meysami has been on hunger strike. Some reports said his action dated back to October, others that it had lasted for a month.

The US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) said he had lost more than 50kg

(110 pounds) through his action.

One of Iran's longest serving political prisoners, Meysami was arrested in July 2018 while campaigning in favour of the abolition of the obligatory headscarf and convicted on national security charges.

"Meysami was one of the first male activists to go to prison in Iran for demanding an end to the compulsory hijab for women," said CHRI deputy director Jasmin Ramsey.

"He has sacrificed everything to demand basic rights for the

## Iranian director Jafar Panahi released after hunger strike

Paris, France - Acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi has been released on bail after starting a hunger strike to protest against his almost seven-month detention, supporters said on Friday.

The director, a winner at all the big European film festivals, had been arrested months before the current anti-regime protests erupted. But his imprisonment became a symbol of the plight of artists speaking out against the authorities.

Panahi has been released from Tehran's Evin prison 'two days after starting his hunger strike for freedom', the US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) said on Twitter, while Iran's reformist *Shargh* newspaper published an image of Panahi jubilantly embracing a supporter after being released on bail.

His wife Tahereh Saeedi posted a picture on Instagram of Panahi being driven from prison in a vehicle.

Cannes Film Festival direc-

tor Thierry Fremaux expressed 'great relief' at the news of his release. "We do not forget all those, in Iran and around the world, who are subjected to violence and repression," he told AFP. "The Cannes Film Festival will always remain alongside artists from all over the world in defence of freedom."

### Temporary release

The prize-winning director was arrested in July and went on a dry hunger strike on Wednesday to protest his continued detention.

"Mr Panahi was temporarily released from Evin prison with the efforts of his family, respected lawyers, and representatives of the cinema," Iran's House of Cinema, which groups together industry professionals, said in a statement.

The announcement that Panahi was going on a dry hunger strike had sparked a wave of concern across the world about the director.

AFP

## Iraqis outraged after father kills YouTube star daughter aged 22

Baghdad, Iraq - The death of a young YouTube star at the hands of her father has sparked outrage in Iraq, where so-called 'honour killings' continue to take place in the conservative country.

Tiba al-Ali, 22, was killed by her father on January 31 in the southern province of Diwaniya, interior ministry spokesman Saad Maan said on Twitter on Friday.

Police had attempted to mediate between Ali - who resided in Turkey and was visiting Iraq - and her relatives to 'resolve the family dispute in a definitive manner', Maan said.

Unverified recordings of conversations between Ali and her father appeared to indicate that he was unhappy about her decision to live alone in Turkey.

Maan said that after the police's initial encounter with the family 'we were surprised the next day... with the news of her killing at the hands of her father, as he admitted in his initial confessions'.

*Women in our societies are hostage to backward customs due to the absence of legal deterrents and government measures*

ALA TALABANI

The ministry spokesman did not give further details on the nature of the dispute. Ali had gained a following on YouTube, where she posted videos of her daily life and in which her fiancé often appeared.

A police source speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity meanwhile confirmed that the 'family dispute' dated back to 2015.

She had travelled to Turkey with her family in 2017, but upon their return, she refused to join them, choosing instead to

stay in Turkey where she resided since, the police source said.

Her death has sparked uproar among Iraqis on social media, who have called for protests in Baghdad on Sunday to demand justice in response to her death.

"Women in our societies are hostage to backward customs due to the absence of legal deterrents and government measures - which currently are not commensurate with the size of domestic violence crimes," wrote veteran politician Ala Talabani on Twitter.

Human rights defender Hanaa Edwar told AFP that, according to voice recordings attributed to the young woman, 'she left her family... because she was sexually assaulted by her brother'.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights too reported the allegation. AFP could not independently verify the authenticity of the voice recordings.

AFP

## Hamas slams Sudan agreement to move ahead with Israel ties

Gaza City, Palestinian Territories - The Islamist rulers of Gaza, Hamas, condemned Sudan on Friday for agreeing to move ahead with normalising ties with Israel, breaking with decades of support for Palestinian fighter groups.

On Thursday, during the first visit to Khartoum by an Israeli foreign minister, the two governments agreed to move forward with the normalisation process agreed in January 2021.

Hamas condemned the move, which 'contradicts the general Sudanese stance that is against the normalisation of ties with the Israeli occupation state and supports the just Palestinian cause'.

In a statement, it called 'on the Sudanese leadership to backtrack on this decision that contradicts the interests of the brotherly people of Sudan and would only serve the Israeli occupation's agenda'.

During the three-decade rule of Islamist general Omar al-



Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (right) receiving Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen in the capital Khartoum on Thursday (AFP)

Bashir, Sudan was one of the staunchest supporters of Hamas and other fighter groups, but since his ouster following mass protests in April 2019, the policy has been dropped.

A spokesperson for Islamic Jihad, another Palestinian fighter group, described the move as 'a disgrace for an Arab country of the stature of Sudan'.

In 2020, Bahrain, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates

all normalised their relations with Israel, breaking with long-standing Arab League policy that there should be no normalisation without a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

AFP

## Western allies pledge precision rockets and missile systems to Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine - Western allies pledged precision rockets and missile systems to Ukraine on Friday, after President Volodymyr Zelensky called for sophisticated weapons to help retain control of the embattled eastern city of Bakhmut.

The European Union agreed to introduce price caps on Russian petroleum products to try to further limit Russian President Vladimir Putin's war chest by targeting his key exports.

The announcements came shortly after Zelensky told a summit with EU leaders in Kyiv: "No one will surrender Bakhmut. We will fight as long

as we can.

"If weapon (deliveries) are accelerated - namely long-range weapons - we will not only not withdraw from Bakhmut, we will begin to de-occupy Donbas," he said of the eastern region of Ukraine.

The United States on Friday announced a new US\$2.2bn package of arms and munitions, which the Pentagon said included a new rocket-propelled precision bomb that could nearly double Kyiv's strike range against Russian forces.

The ground-launched small-diameter bombs (GLSDB), which can fly up to 150km (93



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and EU leaders give a joint press conference during an EU-Ukraine summit in Kyiv on Friday (AFP)

miles), could threaten key Russian supply lines, arms depots and air bases far behind the

front lines.

They potentially give Kyiv's forces the ability to strike any-

where in the Russian-occupied Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, as well as the northern part of occupied Crimea. However, 'the delivery of the GLSDB likely won't be for several months due to contracting, production, and delivery timelines', said Pentagon spokesman Lt Col Garron Garn, declining to say how many would be delivered.

France and Italy will deliver mobile surface-to-air missile systems, the French defence ministry said, in response to an urgent request from Kyiv to help protect 'civilian populations and infrastructure from

Russian air attacks'.

The systems, called MAMBA or SAMP, are a vehicle-mounted battery of medium-range missiles designed to offer protection from airborne threats such as missiles and manned or unmanned aircraft.

Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, who had requested the weapons, tweeted his gratitude, saying the systems would 'help us save thousands of lives' from Russian attacks. Kyiv is also asking for fighter jets.

It has already secured promises from the West for deliveries of modern battle tanks and,

after months of hesitation, Germany authorised the delivery of Leopard 1 tanks.

In Brussels, the EU, the Group of Seven industrialised countries and Australia agreed to cap the price of Russian refined oil products to accompany an embargo on ship deliveries of the products that comes into force on Sunday.

Already in December, the EU imposed an embargo on Russian crude oil coming into the bloc by sea and - with its G7 partners - imposed a US\$60-per-barrel cap on Russian crude exports to other parts of the world.

AFP

# US says second Chinese ‘spy balloon’ over Latin America

Washington, US - A Chinese spy balloon has been spotted over Latin America, the Pentagon said on Friday, a day after a similar craft was seen in US skies, prompting the scrapping of a rare trip to Beijing by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The Pentagon said the first balloon was now heading eastwards over the central United States, adding it was not being shot down for safety reasons.

Later on Friday, Pentagon spokesman Pat Ryder said: “We are seeing reports of a balloon transiting Latin America.”

“We now assess it is another Chinese surveillance balloon,” he added, without specifying its exact location.

Moments before Blinken’s decision to cancel his trip - aimed at easing tensions between the two countries - China issued a rare statement of regret over the first balloon and blamed winds for pushing what it called a civilian airship into US airspace.

But President Joe Biden’s administration described it as a maneuverable ‘surveillance balloon’.

With the rival Republican Party already on the offensive, Blinken postponed a two-day visit that was to have started on Sunday.

In a telephone call with senior Chinese official Wang Yi, Blinken said he ‘made clear that the presence of this surveillance balloon in US airspace is a clear violation of US sovereignty and international law, that it’s an irresponsible act’.

Blinken said, however, that he told Wang ‘the United States is committed to diplomatic en-



This handout photo from Chase Doak taken on Wednesday and released on Thursday shows a suspected Chinese spy balloon in the sky over Billings, Montana (AFP)

gagement with China and that I plan to visit Beijing when conditions allow’.

“The first step is getting the surveillance asset out of our airspace. That’s what we’re focused on,” Blinken told reporters.

According to Chinese state news agency Xinhua, Wang said the two discussed the incident ‘in a calm and professional manner’.

“China is a responsible country and has always strictly abided by international law,” Xinhua quoted Wang as telling Blinken.

“We do not accept any

groundless speculation and hype,” he said, calling both sides to ‘avoid misjudgments and manage divergence’.

### ‘Pretext to attack China’

On Saturday, the Chinese foreign ministry released a statement addressing Blinken’s announcement that his trip would not go ahead.

“Some politicians and media in the United States used the (balloon) incident as a pretext to attack and smear China,” it said.

*China is a responsible country and has always strictly abided by international law. We do not accept any groundless speculation and hype... avoid misjudgments and manage divergence*

WANG YI

The statement further added in regard to Blinken’s trip, which had been widely publicised in the United States: “As a matter of fact, neither China nor the United States has announced any visit.

“It is the United States’ own decision to release the relevant information and we respect that.”

Blinken would have been the first top US diplomat to visit China since October 2018, sig-

naling a thaw following intense friction under former president Donald Trump.

Last month, Blinken said he would use the trip to help establish ‘guardrails’ to prevent the relationship from escalating into all-out conflict.

Republican lawmakers, meanwhile, were quick to pounce on the balloon incident, casting Biden - who has largely preserved, and at times expanded, Trump’s hawkish policies on China - as weak.

“President Biden should stop

coddling and appeasing the Chinese communists. Bring the balloon down now and exploit its tech package, which could be an intelligence bonanza,” tweeted Senator Tom Cotton, a prominent hardliner who had urged Blinken to call off his trip.

“Shoot down the balloon!” added Trump on his Truth Social media platform.

### ‘Force majeure’

After initial hesitation, Beijing admitted ownership of the ‘airship’ and said it veered off course due to wind.

“The airship is from China. It is a civilian airship used for research, mainly meteorological, purposes,” said the statement attributed to a foreign ministry spokesperson.

“The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace due to force majeure,” it said, using the legal term for an act outside of human control. A US defense official said earlier that Biden had asked for military options but that the Pentagon believed shooting the object down would put people on the ground at risk from debris.

The balloon has ‘limited additive value from an intelligence collection perspective’, the defense official told reporters on condition of anonymity.

The United States is also widely believed to spy on China, although generally with more advanced technology than balloons. The northwestern United States is home to sensitive airbases and nuclear weapons in underground silos.

AFP

## ASEAN ministers urge Myanmar junta to implement agreed peace plan

Jakarta, Indonesia - Southeast Asian ministers at the end of two-day talks in Indonesia on Saturday urged Myanmar’s junta to implement a five-point peace plan agreed two years ago to create a path towards ending the country’s political crisis.

Indonesia - Southeast Asia’s biggest economy - is the chair of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2023 and will host the bloc’s annual leaders’ meetings later this year. But the ministerial meeting in Jakarta has been overshadowed by the situation in Myanmar, which has been in turmoil since the army seized power in February 2021.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said Jakarta proposed an implementation plan to ASEAN members for the ‘five-point consensus’ agreed with the junta in April 2021 that called for an end to violence and dialogue between the military and rebels.



Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (AFP)

“Broad support was received from all member states to this plan,” she told reporters at the end of talks, without providing details of when and how they hoped the agreement would be implemented.

“This plan is very important for ASEAN, in particular the chair, as a guidance to address the situation in Myanmar in a

united manner. It shows a strong unity of ASEAN members to implement the SPC.”

The junta remains an ASEAN member but the bloc barred it from top-level summits over its failure to implement the plan that aims to achieve peace between the military and Myanmar’s anti-coup movement.

Myanmar’s foreign minister Than Swe - appointed this week - was not present at the ASEAN talks on Friday, the bloc having declined to invite a junta member and only requesting a ‘non-political representative’ - an offer rejected by Naypyidaw.

Indonesian officials have said the lack of progress by Myanmar’s junta tests the bloc’s credibility and are working to find solutions to the crisis. Jakarta has announced plans to set up a special envoy’s office under the foreign ministry to establish low-level dialogue with the junta. AFP



This file photo shows aircraft carrier Sao Paulo in the Atlantic Ocean, near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on November 29, 2011 (AFP)

## Brazil scuttles warship in Atlantic despite pollution concerns

Rio De Janeiro, Brazil - Brazil on Friday sank a decommissioned aircraft carrier, the Navy announced, despite environmental groups claiming the formerly French ship was packed with toxic materials.

The ‘planned and controlled sinking occurred late in the afternoon’ on Friday, some 350km off the Brazilian coast in the Atlantic Ocean, in an area with an ‘approximate depth of 5,000 me-

tres,” the Navy said.

The decision to scuttle the six-decade-old Sao Paulo came after Brazilian authorities had tried in vain to find a port willing to welcome it. Though defense officials said they would sink the vessel in the ‘safest area’, environmentalists criticised the decision, saying the aircraft carrier contains tons of asbestos, heavy metals and other toxic materials. AFP

## 13 dead as Chile forest fires provoke state of disaster

Santiago, Chile - Chile has declared a state of disaster in several central-southern regions after a devastating heat wave sparked forest fires that left at least 13 people dead, authorities said on Friday.

More than 100 homes have been affected and 47,000 hectares of forest destroyed since the fires broke out on Wednesday. “We have to announce that there are 13 deaths in total, 11 in the Santa Juana municipality,” head of the Senaprad national disaster agency Mauricio Tapia said.

Two crew members of a helicopter that was fighting the fires died in a crash on Friday afternoon, Chile’s agriculture minister Esteban Valenzuela said. “I am very sad about the helicopter crash which killed the pilot and a mechanic who were working to fight the fire” in the La Araucania region, said Valenzuela.

Tapia later added that the pilot was Bolivian and the mechanic Chilean. The death toll included at least four civilians and a firefighter previously reported killed. The government has declared a state of disaster in the regions of Nuble and Biobio, but fires have also affected the Maule and La Araucania regions.

President Gabriel Boric decided to suspend his holiday to visit the affected area, where there are 204 active fires.

Of those, 56 are considered out of control.

Interior Minister Carolina

Toha said the four civilians had died in the Biobio region.

She added that two of the dead were killed when the fires engulfed the road they were traveling on, while the other two died in a car accident, presumably while trying to escape the inferno.

Authorities later said a firefighter had also been killed.

The Senaprad national disaster prevention and response service and the CONAF national forests corporation said nine people have been hurt, in-

*We have to announce that there are 13 deaths in total, 11 in Santa Juana municipality*

ESTEBAN VALENZUELA

## Endangered monarch butterflies face devastating storm

Santa Cruz, US - As devastating storms pounded California, nature lovers feared for endangered monarch butterflies that winter there as part of a seemingly magical migration pattern.

The colourfully winged insects that travel vast distances over the course of generations have been closely watched in the US state since they neared extinction just three years ago.

As the sun rose one January morning, volunteers began counting monarch butterflies, finding them clustered atop cypress and eucalyptus trees in various sites along the California



Monarch butterflies are seen in the trees at the Pacific Grove Monarch Sanctuary in Pacific Grove, California on January 26 (AFP)

coast. The butterflies huddled in clusters of gray colonies until one spread its wings to reveal the or-

ange spots for which they are known.

The sight provided a bit of re-

assurance for Stephanie Turcotte Edenholt, who counted more than a thousand monarchs at a sanctuary in the California coastal town of Pacific Grove.

The educator spent much of the morning explaining the lives of the butterflies to young school students. They got to watch as dozens of butterflies took flight, believing - mistakenly - that the mild temperature signaled the end of winter.

“It’s too early for them to get so agitated, they’re using up their fat reserves,” Edenholt fretted.

She worried, too, that they would mate and the females

would fly off in search of milkweed plants to lay eggs on. Milkweed is all that baby caterpillars eat once the eggs hatch, but it was too early in winter for the plants to be growing.

Volunteers counted more than 330,000 ‘western monarch’ butterflies at the end of November, according to the Xerces Society conservation group.

That number came as a relief compared to the 2,000 butterflies counted at the end of 2020, and an encouraging step up from the 250,000 or so butterflies tallied in 2021. AFP

cluding eight firefighters.

Some 2,300 firefighters and 75 aircraft are involved in the battle against the flames.

The declaration of a state of disaster allows extra resources to be made available to combat an emergency.

Nuble has been put on red alert, alongside seven municipalities in Biobio.

The heatwave, with temperatures reaching 40 degrees Celsius, has created fears of a repeat of the 2017 disaster, which left 11 people dead.

AFP

INDIA

# Veteran playback singer Vani Jairam dies aged 78

Vani Jayaram who lived alone was found dead with bruises on her forehead

Chennai, India - Veteran playback singer Vani Jairam who has sung in over a dozen languages in a career spanning over five decades passed away on Saturday at her residence in Chennai. She was 78.

Known for her vocal range and ability to adapt to any difficult composition, Jairam began her singing career in Bollywood and her first break came in the Hindi film *Guddi* (1971) directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. The song 'Bole Re Papihara', featuring Jaya Bachchan in the lead role catapulted the singer into fame.

Jairam who lived alone was found dead with bruises on her forehead, according to police.

According to Malarkodi, the singer's househelp, she had arrived for work, as usual, on Saturday morning, but when she did not receive any response she alerted the singer's sister Uma. After Uma and Malarkodi entered the house using a set of duplicate keys they found the



Vani Jairam

singer unconscious in her bedroom with bruises on her forehead. Police arrived and found her dead.

The deceased's body has been sent to Kilpauk Government Hospital.

Triplicane DC Shekhar Deshmukh said an investigation is underway.

The singer was honoured with Padma Bhushan, India's third-highest civilian award ahead of Republic Day this year.

Born as Kalaivani in Tamil Nadu's Vellore, to a Tamil family of classically trained musicians, Jairam's career started in 1971.

She lent her voice for the playback for over a thousand Indian films and recorded over several thousand songs. The late singer also recorded thousands of devotionals and private records, as well as performed in solo concerts in India and overseas. She won the National Film Awards for Best Female Playback Singer three times and also won State Government awards from the states of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.

She has sung in Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Gujarati, Haryanvi, Assamese, Tulu, and Bengali, among others. She has worked with a slew of renowned composers like K V Mahadevan, Chakravarthy, Sathyam, Ilaiyaraaja, and M S Vishwanathan. ANI



Indian Ambassador T S Sandhu meets with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington on Thursday (ANI)

## US, India see each other as 'trusted partners': Envoy

Washington, US - The United States and India are looking at each other as trusted partners and their trust is seen in the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), Indian Ambassador to US Taranjit Singh Sandhu said.

In an interview with ANI, the Indian envoy said: "The iCET is a historic beginning that provides a platform for both sides to move ahead together in the field of technology." He also said the relationship between US and India strengthened after Prime minister Narendra Modi made his first visit to the US in 2014 and after President Joe Biden came into power, the interaction between the two countries and areas of discussion widened.

"One of the pillars of the India-US relationship has been technology which includes innovation and startup culture. All that comes together through the initiative on iCET. This is perhaps the first time that the

administration, academia and the scientific community have all come together."

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had already made an official visit to Washington from January 30-February 1. He was accompanied by senior government officials and leaders of Indian industry.

During his visit, both nations agreed to maintain sustained attention to achieve outcome-oriented deliverables within definitive timelines, the Ministry of External Affairs said in a press release.

The NSA interacted with US policymakers and stakeholders across government, Congress and business, academic and research communities on a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues of mutual interest, it said.

Apart from his meeting with US NSA Jake Sullivan, Doval held a meeting with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley. ANI

## Prime Minister Modi emerges most popular global leader in survey

New Delhi, India - Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been pegged as the world's most popular leader with an approval rating of 78 per cent as per a survey by a US-based consulting firm Morning Consult.

As per the survey Modi's ratings trump those of other leaders including US President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The poll surveyed 22 global leaders for the ratings. The 'Global Leader Approval' survey was based on data collected from

January 26-31 this year, said the political intelligence research firm which collated a seven-day moving average of adult residents in each country, with sample sizes varying by country.

Modi garnered 78 per cent of approval rating, way ahead of US President Joe Biden, who received a 40 per cent rating. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, came in second with 68 per cent rating and Swiss President Alain Berset occupied the third position with 62 per cent approval



Narendra Modi (ANI)

Modi garnered 78% of approval rating, way ahead of US President Joe Biden who got a 40% rating

under Modi whose advice 'this is not an era of war' to Russian President Vladimir Putin found an echo across the world.

The Russia-Ukraine war has put the world on the brink of

World War III, with every country choosing sides. However, Modi put his faith in United Nations and chose the side of peace, asking both countries to solve the problem through 'dialogue and diplomacy'.

In September, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, Modi said, 'now is not the time for war' - a statement welcomed by the US and other Western countries.

India's strategy in a multipolar world appears to be avoiding great-power competition

and forging its own, nonaligned path. According to the data shared on the US-tracking firm's website, 78 per cent of people approve of Modi while 18 per cent disapprove of him. Modi's approval rating has recently increased, standing at 79 per cent in the third week of January.

The list is updated regularly with US President Joe Biden currently ranking number seven. Out of the 22 countries, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, South Korean President Yoon Seok-you and

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ranked among the last three in the list.

The newly elected far-right leader Giorgia Meloni of Italy, the first female prime minister of the country is placed 6th with 52 per cent rating.

The survey also featured Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in 4th place with a 58 per cent approval rating. Brazil's newly elected President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was placed at number 5 with 50 per cent rating. ANI

## Sri Lanka weighs 'failures' on independence milestone

Colombo, Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka marked 75 years since independence with a sombre military parade on Saturday, as its president urged reflection on past 'errors and failures' at a time of national crisis.

Since the 1948 end of British rule, the island nation has spent much of its history at war with itself, including a decades-long Tamil separatist rebellion that claimed up to 100,000 lives and two deadly communist insurgencies. Its 22mn people are also still reeling from the hardships triggered by an economic collapse last year that brought months of food and fuel shortages.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took office last July at the peak of the resulting political unrest, said Saturday's anniversary came at 'an extremely critical and challenging time'. "It presents an

opportunity for us not only to review our strengths and gains as a nation but also to rectify our errors and failures," he said in a statement.

Wickremesinghe, flanked by top military brass, watched the hour-long procession of soldiers and army vehicles along a seafront promenade in the capital Colombo, inaugurated by ceremonial artillery fire but boycotted by opposition parties. For several months last year the boulevard was the site of a protest encampment erected by Sri Lankans outraged over the island's economic calamity and mismanagement by its leaders.

The protest movement peaked in July when a huge crowd stormed the home of Wickremesinghe's predecessor and chased him into temporary exile. AFP

## Pakistan asks Taliban leader to rein in militants

Islamabad, Pakistan - Islamabad will ask the secretive supreme leader of Afghanistan's Taliban to rein in militants in Pakistan after a suicide bombing killed scores of police in a mosque, officials said on Saturday.

Since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul, Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic uptick in attacks in regions bordering Afghanistan, where militants use rugged terrain to stage assaults and escape detection.

Detectives have blamed an affiliate of the Pakistani Taliban - the most notorious militant outfit in the area - for the Monday blast in Peshawar which killed 84 people inside a fortified police headquarters. The Pakistani Taliban share common lineage and ideals with the Afghan Taliban, led by Hibatullah Akhundzada who issues edicts from his hideaway in the southern city of Kandahar.

Special assistant to Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Faisal Karim Kundi, said delega-



Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir with a wounded police officer at a military hospital following a mosque blast inside the police headquarters in Peshawar (AFP)

tions would be sent to Tehran and Kabul to 'ask them to ensure that their soil is not used by terrorists against Pakistan'.

A senior Pakistani police offi-

cial in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where Monday's blast took place told AFP the Kabul delegation would hold 'talks with the top brass'. "When we say top

brass, it means... Afghan Taliban chief Hibatullah Akhundzada," he said on condition of anonymity.

Afghan officials did not immediately respond to AFP's request

for comment.

But on Wednesday Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi warned Pakistan should 'not pass the blame to others'.

"They should see the problems in their own house," he said. "Afghanistan should not be blamed."

During the 20-year US-led intervention in Afghanistan, Islamabad was accused of giving covert support to the Afghan Taliban even as the country proclaimed a military alliance with the United States.

But since the ultra-conservatives seized Kabul in 2021, relations with Pakistan have soured, in part over the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), formed in 2007 by Pakistani militants who splintered off from the Afghan Taliban. TTP once held sway over northwest Pakistan but were routed by an army offensive after 2014. AFP

# BOLT FROM THE BLUE

## Premier League leaders Arsenal stunned by struggling Everton

Liverpool, United Kingdom - Arsenal fell to just a second Premier League defeat of the season as James Tarkowski's header gave Everton the perfect start under new manager Sean Dyche in a 1-0 win at Goodison Park on Saturday.

Everton's first win in 11 games lifts the Toffees out of the relegation zone.

*This is the moment I love my players more. This journey is difficult, challenging, there are big stones we have to overcome and we have to prepare well for Saturday (against Brentford)*

MIKEL ARTETA

Arsenal remain five points clear of Manchester City at the top of the table, but may rue a huge chance to extend their advantage as they aim for a first league title since 2004.

Everton came into the game on a run of four league defeats at Goodison for the first time since 1958.

That disastrous form cost Frank Lampard his job and Dyche's appointment got the desired bounce in performance.

Everton's board again stayed away due to rising tensions between the club's hierarchy and

supporters.

Protests were planned for before and after the game for fans to voice their anger at the running of the club.

The Toffees were the only Premier League club to not make any signings in the January transfer window despite their perilous position in the table.

But the home side showed there is still enough talent available to Dyche to dig themselves out of trouble if they can harness the same level of energy and intensity on a more regular basis.

Two of Dyche's former Burnley players were included in his first starting line-up and they combined for the only goal of the

game on the hour mark as Tarkowski headed in Dwight McNeil's corner.

A first victory since October was no more than Everton deserved after they passed up a host of chances to go ahead before the break.

Keeping Dominic Calvert-Lewin fit will be critical to Everton's survival hopes, but the England international showed his rustiness in front of goal in a second consecutive injury-impacted season.

Amadou Onana's surging run and ball across the face of goal



Everton's James Tarkowski celebrates after scoring against Arsenal in their English Premier League match at Goodison Park in Liverpool on Saturday (AFP)

just needed a finishing touch that Calvert-Lewin could not stretch to make.

It took Arsenal half an hour to even threaten Jordan Pickford's goal, but they should have led when Eddie Nketiah fired high and wide with just the goalkeeper to beat.

Conor Coady then had to react

quickly to turn Bukayo Saka's volley off the line as the visitors began to find their rhythm.

But it was Calvert-Lewin who passed up another sight of goal in first-half stoppage time when he headed Seamus Coleman's cross wide.

Arsenal were brighter at the start of the second period and

Martin Odegaard will feel he should have hit the target when teed up by Nketiah.

But just as the Gunners were beginning to turn the screw, their luck at the back ran out.

Tarkowski was fundamental to Dyche overachievements in keeping Burnley in the Premier League for six consecutive sea-

sons between 2016 and 2022 and the centre-back rose highest to power home McNeil's corner on the hour mark.

Mikel Arteta's decision to substitute three of his most consistent performers this season in Gabriel Martinelli, Thomas Partey and Odegaard will be questioned as Arsenal lacked the guile to

break down the mass ranks of defence from Dyche's men.

"This is the moment I love my players more," said Arteta. "This journey is difficult, challenging, there are big stones we have to overcome and we have to prepare well for Saturday (against Brentford)."

AFP

## Chelsea can't buy a goal in Fulham stalemate

London, United Kingdom - Chelsea manager Graham Potter pleaded for time to gel his expensive collection of new stars after the Blues were held 0-0 at home by Fulham on Friday.

Enzo Fernandez made his Chelsea debut after becoming the most expensive player in British football history with a £107 million move (\$132 million) from Benfica on transfer deadline day.

Mykhailo Mudryk was also given his Stamford Bridge bow, while Noni Madueke and David Datro Fofana came off the bench for their Premier League debuts.

Chelsea's record investment of over £300 million in the January window took the total spend on players in their first season under new ownership to over half a billion.

Co-owners Todd Boehly and Behdad Eghbali were in attendance, but will not have been impressed as another chance to close on the top four slipped by.

Potter's men sit ninth in the table, still nine points adrift of the Champions League places.

"New players are adapting to a new country and a new league.



Chelsea's Thiago Silva (L), Benoit Badiashile (C) and Enzo Fernandez look dejected after their match (AFP)

It's not straightforward. When the price tag is what it is questions will be asked, it's the nature of the business," said Potter.

"The decision we took in the window you can see the profile in terms of age. We feel we have a very strong group of players. We have to gel and become a really good team. That's where the work is."

Fulham had secured a first victory in the west London derby since 2006 when the teams met just three weeks ago.

Marco Silva's men sit two points and three places above their local rivals in the table in their first season back in the top flight.

Havertz's hat-trick of misses Fulham were seeking a first-

lock before half-time.

The German international failed to get enough contact on Thiago Silva's brilliant pass to divert the ball beyond Bernd Leno.

Havertz then could not stretch to turn Mason Mount's dangerous cross on target.

But his best opening came when he hit the post with a lob over Leno from Hakim Ziyech's defence-splitting pass.

Ziyech would have been a Paris Saint-Germain player this week had Chelsea not submitted the wrong paperwork in the minutes before Tuesday's transfer deadline.

The Moroccan is just one of a wealth of wide options now available to Potter and he wasted no time in hooking Mudryk despite his price tag after a disappointing first 45 minutes.

The Ukrainian joined from Shakhtar Donetsk last month for a fee that could rise to 100 million euros (\$110 million).

Madueke was introduced in his place and Potter also threw on Raheem Sterling from the bench on the hour mark in the search for a winner.

AFP



Manuel Neuer

## Neuer dismisses calls to step down from Germany duty

Berlin, Germany - Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer has brushed off calls to step down from the national side, saying he's "sure" he will return from a serious leg injury to play international football again.

In an interview with Germany's Sueddeutsche Zeitung and The Athletic published Friday, Neuer, 36, said he told coach Hansi Flick he would come back from the broken leg which has ruled him out for the remainder of the season.

"Hansi Flick got in touch, we are in contact. Hansi certainly assumes I will return and I will do everything for that. I'm sure I'll be able to do it."

Former West Germany goalkeeper Toni Schuster has called for Neuer to step down and focus on club football, but the Bayern "keeper said "everyone can make recommendations".

"When the time comes, I will look in the mirror, and tell myself the truth, as always.

"If I don't perform, I'll vacate my position, but I don't expect that to happen.

"Whoever is the best will play. If I want to play, I have to be the best.

"It's always been like that." Neuer, who has 117 caps for the national side, will be 38 when Germany host the European Championship in 2024.

Neuer spoke publicly for the first time on Qatar since returning from the World Cup, saying the team had "relatively

*Hansi (Flick) certainly assumes I will return and I will do everything for that.*

MANUEL NEUER

## Lack of jobs for black managers 'troubles' Palace's Vieira

London, United Kingdom - Crystal Palace manager Patrick Vieira said on Friday it is difficult to understand why he is the only black manager in the top flight of English men's or women's football.

The former Arsenal captain was named alongside players Bukayo Saka, Raheem Sterling and Marcus Rashford this week on this year's Football Black List, which recognises the efforts of black figures working in various areas of the game.

A report published in October revealed that 43 per cent of Premier League players are black, but Vieira remains the only manager.

"It troubles me a lot," said the Frenchman. "It's difficult for me to get it and to understand it, and I think that just shows there is still a long way to go."

The Szymanski report, commissioned by the Black Footballers Partnership, also found that 14 per cent of those with the

top level coaching qualification are black.

However, black people made up just 1.6 per cent of those in executive, leadership and ownership positions in football.

Queens Park Rangers director of football Les Ferdinand said those figures showed the Football Association's Diversity Code - a directive launched in 2020 to tackle racial inequality - had failed.

AFP



Patrick Vieira

little support from back home" which gave them the feeling "we had a millstone around our necks".

"We could have perhaps done with a bit more support."

The German Football Association decided Neuer would not wear a "One Love" armband in support of diversity and human rights, after FIFA threatened sporting sanctions for any team doing so.

AFP

# FIRST STRIKE



Al Nassr's Cristiano Ronaldo runs with the ball after scoring against Al Fateh in their Saudi Pro League match in Al Hasa on Friday (AFP)

## Late penalty helps Ronaldo break duck after lucrative Saudi move

Al-Hasa, Saudi Arabia - Cristiano Ronaldo got off the mark for his new club on Friday with a stoppage-time penalty that rescued a 2-2 away draw against Al Fateh.

The Portuguese, who turns 38 on Sunday, buried the spot-kick in the 93rd minute for a point that left the Riyadh club joint top of the Saudi Pro League with a game in hand over Al Shabab.

Ronaldo broke his duck in his third appearance, after he fired blanks in the January 22 league win over Ettifaq and in this week's Super Cup loss to Al Ittihad.

Days before his Al Nassr debut, he scored twice for a Saudi composite team in an entertaining 5-4 loss to a Paris Saint-Germain side featuring his great rival Lionel Messi.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner, who holds the all-time records for Champions League and international goals, will bank more than 400 million euros for his surprise move to Saudi, according to sources close to Al Nassr.

AFP

## LIV Golf stars crash out of Saudi International

King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia - Mexico's Abraham Ancer retained his one-shot lead at the halfway stage of the Saudi International on Friday as a slew of big names from the rebel LIV Golf tour failed to make the cut.

Reigning Open champion Cameron Smith, six-time major winner Phil Mickelson, Bubba Watson and Bryson DeChambeau - all-star signings for the Saudi-backed tour

standing displays over the past couple of years, shot a second straight 65.

South African Louis Oosthuizen, Australian Marc Leishman and young Thai star Sadom Kaewkanjana were tied for third at eight-under par.

The afternoon conditions were not as difficult as the opening round at the \$5-million Asian Tour season opener, where Ancer has had just one bogey in two days.

The world number 37 said it was "very frustrating" to drop a shot at the 17th hole but that he was satisfied with his performance going into day three.

Young, who in 2022 was a runner-up four times and had three third-place finishes, was bogey-free for the round.

"My iron play has been very good so far and I've driven it nicely," said the 25-year-old, who is yet to win on the PGA Tour.

"I've controlled my ball really well and given myself probably more opportunities for birdies than most guys have had out here," he added, saying it was tough to predict a winning number on the course in King Abdullah Economic City.

*My iron play has been very good so far and I've driven it nicely*

CAMERON YOUNG

- dropped out at the par-70 Royal Greens Golf & Country Club.

Ancer added a four-under-par 66 to his 63 on Thursday to move to an 11-under par 129, keeping American star Cameron Young at bay by one shot.

Young, who finished second to Smith at last year's Open and has climbed up the world rankings with some out-

## Debutants Madagascar third in CHAN after dramatic win

Algiers, Algeria - Jean-Yves Razafindrakoto scored in the 90th minute to give Madagascar a 1-0 win over Niger on Friday in the African Nations Championship (CHAN) third-place playoff in Algeria.

Niger goalkeeper Mahamadou Djibo failed to hold a shot from substitute Tendry Randrianarijaona and the match-winner pushed the loose ball into the net to the absolute delight of his team-mates.

The dramatic victory in the

bronze-medal match by the first-time qualifiers was deserved as they dominated the second half before an 18,000 crowd in the western city of Oran.

After soaking up first-half pressure from Niger, Madagascar should have taken the lead just before half-time but Tsiry Randriatsiferana blazed over after Djibo fumbled.

Having beaten the Seychelles and Botswana to qualify for the CHAN, Madagascar were ex-



Madagascar players celebrate after their win against Niger on Friday

pected to be among the also-rans in an event confined to footballers playing in their country of birth.

But they shocked Ghana and hammered twice bronze medalists Sudan in group matches and comfortably eliminated Mozambique before losing narrowly to Senegal in the semi-finals.

First-time finalists Algeria are favourites to beat Senegal in Algiers on Saturday, pocket \$2 million (1.85m euros) and main-

tain a north African dominance of the tournament.

Morocco have been champions twice and Libya and Tunisia once each, leaving Egypt as the only team in the football stronghold not to have lifted the trophy.

Algeria have been hailed for their organisation of the 17-team CHAN with Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe from South Africa calling it "the best yet".

AFP

## Zverev storms to Davis Cup win after being cleared of abuse

Paris, France - Alexander Zverev defeated three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka in the Davis Cup on Friday as the German star returned to the courts for the first time since being cleared of domestic abuse.

The 25-year-old Zverev swept past Wawrinka 6-4, 6-1 in Trier to bring Germany level with Switzerland after the opening day of their qualifier.

On Tuesday, Zverev was told by the ATP that there was "insufficient evidence" to substantiate allegations against him of abusing a former girlfriend.

Former world number two Zverev always denied the claims, describing them as "baseless".

On Friday, Wawrinka, who helped his country win the 2014 Davis Cup, was returning to the team competition for the first time in eight years.

Now ranked 135 in the world, he was comfortably beaten for the fifth time in five meetings by Zverev.

"I think it's important to go into tomorrow's ties with a 1-1 scoreline," said Zverev after recording just a second match win in eight months. He missed the last six months of the 2022 season having suffered ankle lig-



*That was the best match since my injury. It's going in a positive way and I hope to continue progressing*

ALEXANDER ZVEREV

ament damage in June during a French Open semi-final defeat to Rafael Nadal.

"That was the best match since my injury. It's going in a positive way and I hope to continue progressing."

Marc-Andrea Huesler had given Switzerland the lead with a 2-6, 6-2, 6-4 win over Oscar Otte.

The tie continues on Saturday with a doubles and two singles rubbers as the Swiss look to beat Germany for the first time having

lost all nine meetings since their maiden clash in 1939.

Mackenzie McDonald and Tommy Paul gave the United States a 2-0 lead in their qualifier against Uzbekistan.

McDonald, who knocked Nadal out of the Australian Open last month, eased past Sergey Fomin 6-4, 6-1 in Tashkent before Tommy Paul, a semi-finalist at the season-opening Grand Slam in Melbourne, defeated Khumoyun Sultanov 6-1, 7-6

(8/6). Despite his lowly ranking of 480, Sultanov opened up a 4-0 lead in the second set over top-20 player Paul before the American's greater experience paid off.

"He picked up his level a ton," admitted Paul. "I felt like I wasn't prepared for it."

France, the 10-time champions, were 1-1 against Hungary in Tatabanya.

World number 182 Zsombor Piros stunned 45th-ranked Benjamin Bonzi 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 before Ugo Humbert levelled the qualifier by seeing off Marton Fucsovics 6-3, 6-2.

"It was my first match in the Davis Cup and I was very excited," said 24-year-old Humbert, the world number 86.

In Stockholm, Sweden opened up a 2-0 lead over Bosnia thanks to straight-set wins by brothers Mikael and Elias Ymer.

Norway, without world number four Casper Ruud, slipped 2-0 down at home to Serbia, playing without recently crowned Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic. Andreja Petrovic was defeated 6-1, 6-3 by 34th-ranked Miomir Kecmanovic in just 46 minutes.

AFP



Qatar's Nasser Saleh al Attiyah in action at Saudi Baja-Hail

## Al Attiyah wins Saudi Baja-Hail, Al Balooshi bags motorcycle class

Hail, Saudi Arabia - Qatar's Nasser Saleh al Attiyah and Emirati rider Mohammed al Balooshi confirmed victories in the car and motorcycle categories at the 2023 Saudi Baja-Hail on Saturday.

The overnight leading Toyota Hilux star and his French co-driver Mathieu Baumele were fastest on the second 184km selective section on a chilly Saturday morning and sealed victory by the winning margin of 15min 19sec on the opening round of the FIA World Cup for Cross-Country Bajas.

Al Balooshi came home in fifth place on the day's motorcycle stage - with the day's win falling to Canada's Jonathan Finn - but the MX Ride Dubai rider had done enough to clinch the win on the opening round of the FIM Bajas World Cup by 21min 09sec.

Saudi rider Haitham al Tuwaijri overhauled first day leader Abdulaziz Ahli to snatch quad success, while Saudi Can-Am driver Saleh al Saif won the FIA T3 section for lightweight prototype vehicles and young Spaniard Pau Navarro prevailed in the FIA T4 class.

Al Attiyah had taken a 7min

42sec lead into the final day, once a series of time penalties had been imposed on several of his rivals, and the Toyota driver won the second stage by 5min 27sec to continue his dominant start to the season in the cross-country rallying discipline and follow up a fifth Dakar triumph with more Saudi success.

Al Attiyah said: "This is a good start. We were happy to compete here and to win here another time. The target now is Abu Dhabi, where we will face Loeb and the Audis. All good over the last two days, no problems."

# Pakistan School Muscat win Oman Women's League title

Muscat, Oman: Pakistan School Muscat (PSM) defeated Indian Social Club (ISC) by six wickets in the final of the Oman Cricket Women's League powered by TM Done.

Asked to bat first, ISC made 108 for the loss of four wickets in the stipulated 20 overs.

Suhaani Dadhwal (30) and Geetha Jagdish (27) were their mainstay and the two were involved in a crucial 69-run partnership for the second wicket.

Sani E Zehra, Sameera Khan and Hina Javed picked up a wicket each for PSM.

In response, Hina Javed (25) and skipper Sameera Khan (32) were in fine form and were backed by Hira Javed (17) as they reached the target in 17.1 overs. Trupti Pawde, Flavia

Dsouza and Sushma Shetty bagged a wicket each.

Oman Cricket's Vice Chairman Paul Sheridan, Women's Co-Ordinator and Board Advisor Vaishali Jesrani and Chief Development Officer Duleep Mendis were present at the post-match presentation ceremony.

Jesrani congratulated both teams for the fine performance: "I would firstly thank Oman Cricket and its board to back and help develop women's cricket in Oman.

I would also like to thank the participating teams, players and management for showing great competitiveness in every game.

"I congratulate PSM Women and ISM Women for their podium finish. We are planning eight teams in the Women's Do-

mestic League in the coming years and we expect each and everyone to contribute to be able to play ICC tournaments in the near future.

We are also looking to play more cricket through the calendar year and look forward to your participation."

Sameera Khan won the player of the match as well as the best bowler of the tournament and received the award from Mendis.

ISC's Nikitha Jagdish was the best batter, while Hina Javed was the player of the tournament.

Paul Sheridan handed the champions trophy to PSM skipper Sameera Khan and the runners-up trophy to ISC skipper Trupti Pawde.



Pakistan School Muscat team members pose with the trophy

## Australia's Green an 'outside chance' for India Test

Bengaluru, India - Australian all-rounder Cameron Green remains an "outside chance" to play the first Test against India despite lingering injury troubles, coach Andrew McDonald said Saturday.

Green has been sidelined since the end of last year when a sharp delivery from South Africa's Anrich Nortje fractured his finger in Perth and forced him to miss the final Test of that tour.

The 23-year-old was named in Australia's squad in the hopes he would be match fit for the four-Test series starting Thursday in Nagpur.

"We've got a fair bit to work through before the first Test match, but we haven't put a clear line through him or... put him on the team sheet yet," McDonald told reporters in Bangalore after a morning training session.

"He's made some significant steps forward in the last couple of days, probably to my surprise," he added. "So there's still an outside chance that everything going well he might be on the team sheet."

The series is Australia's last before this year's Indian Premier League season gets underway.



Cameron Green

*We've got a fair bit to work through before the first Test, but we haven't put a clear line through him or... put him on the team sheet yet*

ANDREW MCDONALD

Green became the T20 league's second-most expensive overseas player ever in December when he was purchased at auction by the Mumbai Indians.

Australia are in the middle of

a four-day warm-up regime in Bangalore before they head to Nagpur next week.

India hold the Border-Gavaskar trophy after triumphing in their last three series

against the Aussies, who last won a series in India back in 2004.

Australian skipper Pat Cummins expects a hard slog leading the tourists' pace attack but said he was excited for the looming showdown between the world's top two Test teams.

"Coming here to India, a lot of the talk is around big spinning wickets, maybe fast Test matches, but it's not always the case," he told reporters.

## Hoggard withdraws from hearings into Rafiq racism allegations

London, United Kingdom - Ex-England international bowler Matthew Hoggard said on Friday he has withdrawn from the disciplinary process involving allegations made by his former Yorkshire teammate Azeem Rafiq over fears he will not get a fair hearing.

Hoggard, who was part of the England team which won the 2005 Ashes, was one of seven individuals charged by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) last June in a disciplinary case examining allegations of racism and bullying.

He believes the drawn-out disciplinary process has "failed" everyone involved, including Rafiq. Hoggard is accused of using racist language during his time at Yorkshire.

"I'm pulling out because I don't think it's a fair process," Hoggard told the BBC. "There are no winners in this. It is not an admission of guilt. The people who know the truth, know the truth. That is all that matters to me."

Another former England inter-



Matthew Hoggard

national, Tim Bresnan, and John Blain have also reportedly withdrawn from the process because they believe they would not get a fair hearing. They join former Yorkshire captain and head coach Andrew Gale, who has refused to engage with the process.

"The process has failed everybody. Every party involved has a problem with the way this process has been dealt with," added Hoggard.

"Azeem has a problem with it,

all the respondents have, (former Yorkshire chairman) Lord Patel has, Yorkshire have. There has got to be a better way."

The ECB's Cricket Discipline Commission (CDC) will hear the charges in March. Following a request from Rafiq, the hearings are due to take place in public.

As it stands only former England captain Michael Vaughan, ex-England batsman Gary Ballance and Richard Pyrah remain cooperative with the process.

# Al Mouj Golf Prepares to Welcome World's Top Pro Golfers

Sergio Garcia, Louis Oouisthazen and Joaquin Niemann, are among an impressive line-up of world-famous names set to compete in four-day tournament at Al Mouj Golf

Muscat, February 2023: Oman's championship golf course Al Mouj Golf is gearing up to host some of the world's best professional golfers including Sergio Garcia, Louis Oouisthazen and Joaquin Niemann at The International Series, the elevated series of tournaments on the Asian Tour.

Taking place at the oceanfront course over four days between 9th and 12th February, the Al Mouj Golf event is the first leg of ten events in 2023. Garcia, Oouisthazen and Niemann are part of an impressive line-up of 132 players entered which includes two winners of major tournaments, a Ryder Cup/President Cup player, and 14 golfers ranked in the World's top 300 all competing for their share in a total prize fund of \$2million.

Spain's Garcia has won 36 international tournaments as a professional, most notably the 2017 Masters Tour-



namment whilst South Africa's Oouisthazen's titles include the 2010 Open Championship. He has also finished runner-up in the four major championships of the Masters, the U.S. Open, the 2015 Open Championship, and the PGA Championship.

Other big names include Brooks Koepka of the USA who in October 2018 became world number one in the Official World Golf Ranking for 47

weeks after winning the 2018 CJ Cup. Fellow American Sihwan Kim plays on the European Tour and the Asian Tour, where he has won two titles.

One of the most prominent players is Joaquin Niemann of Chile who has won twice on the PGA Tour and was the number one ranked amateur golfer from May 2017 to April 2018. Joaquin has reached a career-high 15th in world rankings in April 2022,

and has been a top 50 player for more than two years.

Two other players that are ones to watch based on past achievements and current form are Graeme McDowell of Northern Ireland and Scott Vincent of Zimbabwe. Vincent has won three times on the Japan Golf Tour and in 2022 he won the International Series England and eventually went on the clinch the victory of

being The International Series' inaugural winner.

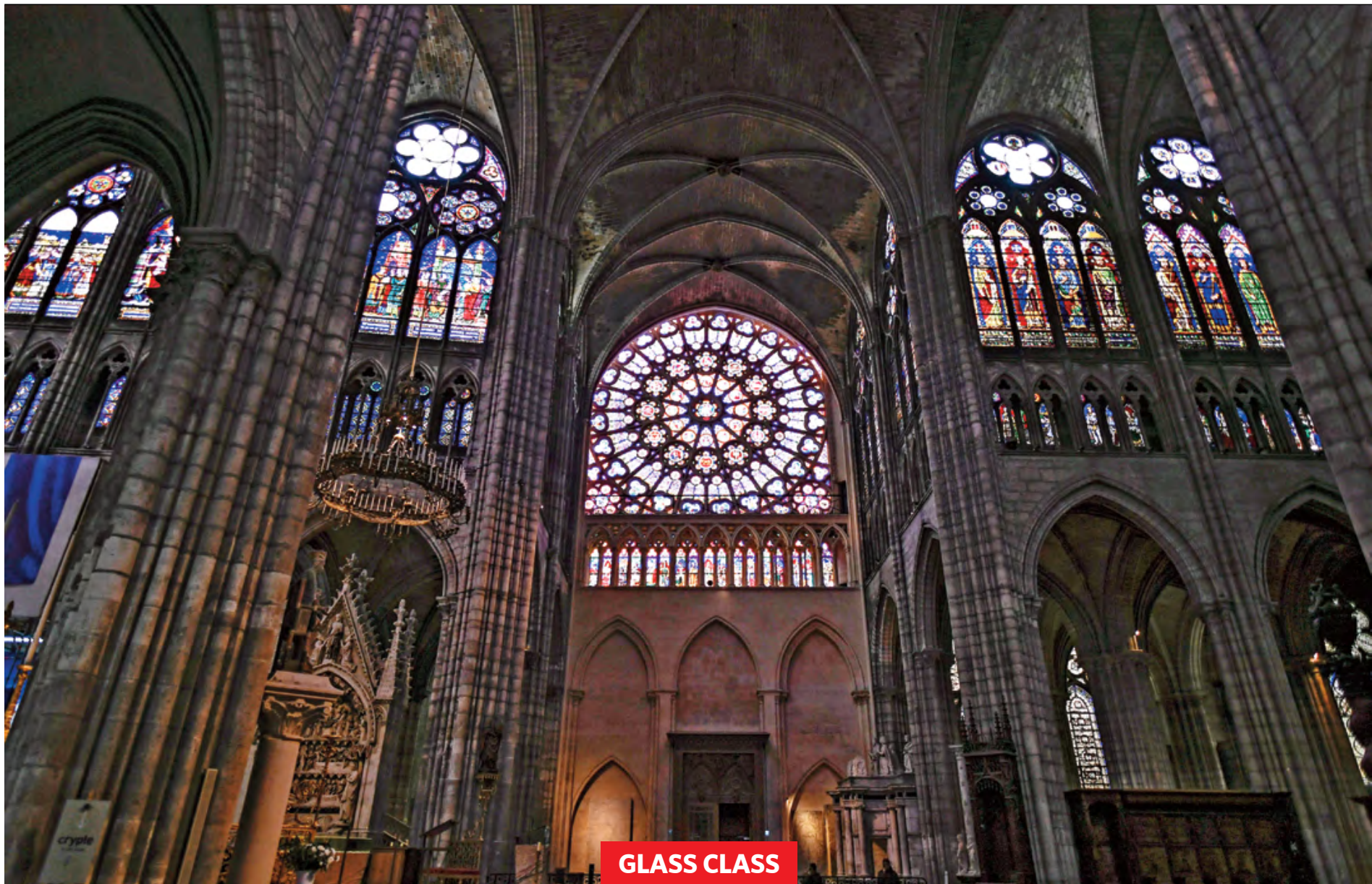
McDowell has a record of 11 tournament victories on the European Tour, and four on the PGA Tour, including one major championship, the 2010 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach.

CEO of Al Mouj Muscat, Nasser bin Masoud Al Sheibani says: "Bringing world-class players to experience Oman for the first time through the international series promises to promote the country across continents, elevating the competitive experience for players on the Asian Tour. Al Mouj Golf, a world-renowned top 100 course, continues to make a significant impact in supporting and driving the country's sports-tourism sector."

"With so many incredible players about to arrive in Muscat, excitement is building particularly for golf fans who will have the chance to watch these professionals up close. We in-

vite spectators of all ages to come and experience the competition over the four-day period. Our club will be open to the public during this time and to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for all, we will provide dedicated transportation to the golf course"

Al Mouj Golf has now received 23 International Awards and welcomes 16,000 golfers and 35,000 guests annually, many more are expected as part of this latest competition. The course is a key asset of Al Mouj Muscat, the Sultanate's leading leisure and lifestyle destination, and a joint venture between Majid Al Futtaim Properties, OMRAN, and Tanmia. As Oman's first Integrated Tourism Complex Al Mouj Muscat has delivered significant socio-economic impact on job creation, development, foreign direct investment, growth in the number of SMEs as well as across the tourism sector.



# All things heritage

LIGHT RETURNS TO THE STAINED GLASS OF THE SAINT-DENIS BASILICA FOLLOWING A YEAR-LONG EFFORT TO RENOVATE AND RESTORE ITS HERITAGE GLORY

The Basilica of Saint-Denis on the northern outskirts of Paris may be less famous than Notre-Dame, but when Emmanuel Putanier was asked to restore the historic monument's stained glass windows to their former glory, he jumped at the chance.

"This is something that you only do once in a lifetime," the master glassmaker told AFP. For a year now, his team has been working in the Basilica to restore the windows, which date back to the 12th century, to their former, distant splendour.

Just down the road from that cathedral to sporting excellence, the national Stade de France, the Basilica is nestled in a Paris suburb with more of a reputation for crime, religious sectarianism, and poverty, than for medieval architecture. However its architectural splendour, and the fact that it is the resting place of no fewer than 43 French monarchs, attracts 130,000 visitors each year.

The major renovation works have been underway for several years already.

Since last year, the building's stained glass windows have been the focus of the work at the Basilica, the culmination of 25 years of



A section of renovated stained glass window at the Basilique de Saint-Denis



preparation work, costing more than 2mn euros (US\$2.2mn).

"All things heritage take time," said Laurent Roturier, head of the Paris region branch of the office of cultural affairs (DRAC), which is in charge of the works.

The project began to take shape a quarter of a century ago when the Basilica's oldest glass windows went under the care of France's research laboratory for historical monuments (LRMH).

"We're just the final stage of the journey," said Guillaume Uvroas, a glassmaker working in the Basilica.

### 12th century splendour

When the project kicked off in 1997, the windows dating back to the middle of the 12th century and considered a milestone in the history of stained-glassmaking, were worn down by time and dulled by the elements.

Duplicates made of polycarbonate were installed in their place. That move started a new conversation: should the original stained glass art be restored and reinstalled, or should perfect copies be put in their place? Experts decided to go with the latter option - more than 20 copies have been produced in total.

Getting it right has, however, required deep research in the archives, going back to the French Revolution during which they were dismantled, said Thomas Clouet, an architect specialising in historic buildings.

Some windows had been vandalised, and there were various bits and pieces scattered about.

"We needed to find the pieces and retrace their history and journey before we could proceed to the duplication phase," said Roturier. "What we do here requires insane precision, from the colour range to the composition," said Putanier.

Because his team was not allowed to remove the originals from the laboratory, "we set up an operation plan to take measurements on site," he said. The most important task was to achieve consistency across the entire structure, a job made hard by several restoration efforts the Basilica had undergone over the centuries.

"To make the copies, we took into account distortions that happened over time," he said. "They couldn't appear too new or modern-looking."

The final step will be to fit the copies into glass panes that date back to the 19th century.

"The most important thing for us was to recover this relationship to light, because that's the spirit behind the construction of this basilica," insisted Roturier. "It's what the founders would've wanted."

More restoration projects are planned over the next five years, including of the Basilica's tabernacles and its spire.

AFP

## CLASSIFIEDS

### SITUATION WANTED

Construction Project Management Professional with B.Tech, M.Tech & MBA; 21 years field experience as GM, Project Manager, Construction Manager & Contract/Billing Manager in multi-national companies, available for position in Oman & Gulf Countries. email: engrsanjeeva@yahoo.com GSM: 79213105

Warehouse/Logistics A dynamic professional with 15 years of GCC experience in warehousing, distribution, inventory, procurement and logistics supply chain management is looking for a suitable position. Worked as a warehouse manager with knowledge of ERP, Oracle, Dynamics Microsoft & Onyx, SAP: MM/WM. Presently in Muscat on a visit visa. email: saifbadis@gmail.com Contact: +968-94355618

Indian male, Diploma, Degree in Civil, having 2-3 years experience including 10 months experience in Oman also having Oman Drivers licence looking for a suitable civil Supervisor job. Mob 78608219 Gmail: shahrulkh9722@gmail.com

13+ Years experience in Oil & Gas Industry, BSc Chemical Engineering +

CIPS (ongoing) with valid driving licence. Ready to join immediately Contact: +968-71164657 furqannaemalhanafi@gmail.com

Indian male - with over 13 years of experience, working at the capacity of chief accountant, with ability to handle accounts up to finalisation and lead a team - is looking for a suitable position. Has Omani driving licence. Contact: +968-90614634 Email: 2suveesh@gmail.com

Well experienced shipping professional with more than 15 years of experience in shipping and logistics operations, custom clearance, freight forwarding, chartering of marine units etc. Immediately available for joining. Contact: +968-96680576 Email: jabirappa@icloud.com

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INTERNET IMPACT

WHO ARE THE BEST NEW ARTISTS? CHECK TIKTOK, THE POPULAR VERDICTS SEEMS TO LIE WITH THE MASSES HOOKED ONTO SOCIAL MEDIA APPS

After several years of Grammy ceremonies with clear frontrunners for Best New Artist, Sunday's race is wide open - but no matter who wins, many of the nominees have TikTok to thank.

The short-form video app has been a powerful force in music for years now - a jump-off point for artists looking to make it and a means of promotion for those already established in the industry.

And though the Recording Academy is not exactly known for reflecting the zeitgeist - its voters routinely favour legacy performers and throwback acts - the Best New Artist category has grown increasingly eclectic and representative of the internet age's impact on popular music.

"Social media over time has made the music



Musician Trombone Shorty performs on stage during the 2023 MusiCares Persons of the Year gala honoring Berry Gordy and Smokey Robinson at the LA Convention Center in Los Angeles, February 3

While scouts used to check out local shows, find potential artists, and then cultivate them, labels now are "looking for them to already have an audience, and already have had sort of a breakthrough moment on their own," she explains.

In some ways, Cirisano says, this has been democratising, opening doors "for so many artists that may be never would have had the means or the resources, or just by luck been able to get the attention of anyone in the industry."

But it's also left some artists bemoaning the mental health toll that a robust online presence can have, or the stress they feel over spending too much time on social media instead of making music.

Marketer Petrey said that while promotion is important, it's not the job of artists to figure



US singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile

# 'App-solute'

# acclaim



The Four Tops perform on stage during the 2023 MusiCares Persons of the Year gala

industry a lot more reactive to what people are raising their hands for, rather than taking this top-down approach of kind of deciding, okay, this is the star of the moment," said Tatiana Cirisano, a music industry analyst at MIDiA Research.

It's not new for artists to come up through social media - Justin Bieber was discovered on YouTube, and Shawn Mendes gained traction on the video app Vine - but "TikTok has just really exploded," Cirisano said. "It's clear that it's an integral part of pretty much every artist's strategy."

TikTok named three of this year's artists vying for the Best New Artist prize - Latto, Muni Long, and Omar Apollo -- as top emerging artists on its app.

Also up for the coveted Grammy are Brazil's Anitta, who found viral TikTok fame with a dance challenge to her smash Envolver, and Italy's Maneskin, the Eurovision rockers who saw their cover of Beggin strike algorithm gold. The past two Best New Artist winners, Olivia Rodrigo and Megan Thee Stallion, also found resounding success on TikTok.

The other 2023 nominees - indie act Wet Leg, jazz duo JD Beck and Domi, rapper-singer Tobe Nwigwe, bluegrass artist Molly Tuttle

and jazz singer Samara Joy - all also boast strong followings on the app.

Joy told NPR last year she had recently joined "because that's where my generation is. I posted a couple of videos, and a month later, 100,000 people - I was like, I can't believe," she said with a laugh.



US singer-songwriter John Legend



US singers Chloe Bailey and Halle Bailey

"People now are coming up to me like, 'I found you on social media. I found you on TikTok, and I just had to, you know, come see a show.'"

**The new MTV**  
While most Grammy awards have

throughs into public consciousness is happening on TikTok," the analyst said. Cassie Petrey, the founder of the digital marketing company Crowd Surf, agrees, "TikTok is the new MTV."

"When I was younger, all the artists in the Best New Artist category generally would have been on the radio or on MTV... TikTok is one of those mainstream media platforms of our time."

And Cirisano says it's changed the way record labels find new talent in the first place.

out strategy. "You just have to stay focused on art - that's your job," she said. "We're reminding people of that all the time."

And though there have been complaints among some people in the industry that artists are tailoring their music to make it more social

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