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► NEWS BRIEF

MAJLIS A'SHURA MEMBERS INCREASED TO 90

Muscat - The number of representatives in Majlis A'Shura has been increased by four to 90.

H E Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidi, Minister of Interior, issued a ministerial decision (No 19/2023) on Sunday specifying the number of representatives of the wilayats in the tenth term of the shura.

The number of representatives in the ninth term of the shura was 86.

The decision states that the number of representatives from the wilayats of Bidbid and Ibra has been increased from one to two, and Jabal Akhdar and Sinaw will have one representative each.

The decision was issued on January 25.

In June 2022, the Minister of Interior issued a statement on representation of the wilayats of Jabal Akhdar and Sinaw in the Majlis A'Shura.

Unified system to evaluate govt employee performance



The system aims to measure employee performance and process appraisals according to a unified legislative framework for all government employees

MOHAMMED AL KALBANI

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Dr Mahad bin Said Ali Ba'owain, Minister of Labour, has issued a decision (No 36/2023) approving a unified system for evaluating the performance of employees of the state administrative apparatus.

Mohammed Mubarak al Kalbani, Assistant Director General of Legal Studies and Assistant Project Manager of Ejada

System, has informed that it will be effective starting Monday.

The system will be applied by line managers and human resource departments to measure employee performance and evaluate their contributions and achievements.

"The human resource criteria of this system apply to all employees of units of the state administrative apparatus who have been in service for a period of more than six months," he said.

According to Kalbani, performance evaluation will be conducted twice in a calendar year. "The system aims to measure employee performance and process appraisals according to a unified legislative framework for all government employees."

He informed that evaluations will be done based on employee's career plans, which will be prepared in coordination with their line manager.

The decision approves the pu-

blication of names of employees who get 'Excellent', 'Very good', and 'Good' remarks. Such employees will be given incentives and rewards at the end of each year as per approved allocations.

According to the decision, performances will be assessed on a score of 1 to 100. A score of 90 to 100 will be considered Excellent, 80 to 90 - Very good/above average, 70 to 80 - Good, 55 to 70 - Satisfactory, and less than 55 - Unsatisfactory and weak.

US official visits region to warn on sanctions evasion

Muscat - H E Sheikh Khalifa Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, met Brian Nelson, US Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, on Sunday.

In a statement, the US Department of Treasury said that Nelson will travel to Muscat, Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE, and Ankara and Istanbul in Turkiye during the week of January 29.

'At each stop, he will discuss the Treasury's efforts to crack down on Russian attempts to evade international sanctions and export controls imposed for its brutal war against Ukraine, Iran's destabilising activity in the region, illicit finance risks undermining economic growth, and foreign investment.'

In Oman, Nelson will meet counterparts to discuss cooperation on countering illicit finance, including terrorist financing.

The official will also warn countries and businesses that



Brian Nelson

they could lose access to G7 markets if they do business with entities subject to US curbs.

'In the UAE and Turkiye, Nelson will meet government counterparts as well as businesses and financial institutions to convey that the Treasury will continue to aggressively enforce its sanctions, and individuals and institutions operating in permissive jurisdictions risk potentially losing access to G7 markets on account of doing business with sanctioned entities or not conducting appropriate due diligence to guard against illicit finance risks.'



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N Ireland's journey from building ships to screen hits

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) issued a decision (No 9/2023) on Sunday outlining the executive regulations of the Statistics and Information Law, including fees for conducting electronic surveys, statistical advisory services and statistical training programmes.

As per the decision, the fees for services provided by NCSI will be RO5,000 for conducting an electronic survey, RO30,000 for preparing a statistical study or report and analysing data, and RO20,000 for conducting surveys with a sample size of more than 1,600 people, among other services and fees.

Dr Khalifa al Barwani, CEO of NCSI, said the regulations cover



methods of conducting statistical activities for both government and private institutions, academi-

cs, scholars and researchers. "The regulations make it easy for researchers and academics to carry out statistical activities without obtaining a permit."

According to Barwani, individuals and non-governmental entities are prohibited from conducting any survey or poll unless licensed by NCSI. "The decision allows the centre to provide special statistical services for pre-

scribed fees, including provision of unpublished data and information, statistical advisory services and statistical training programmes," he said.

The regulations exempt several entities from the requirement of obtaining a licence provided these have an approval from the centre and the purpose of conducting the statistical activity is scientific or academic.

Universities, colleges, schools, academics and students - studying in Oman and abroad - are exempted from the requirement of a licence.

The regulations specify 11 obligations for an individual in charge of statistical activities, including performing statistical activities impartially, and not disclosing data with any party except in the cases specified in the law.

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Omran, Buraimi governor sign pact to develop tourism projects

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Continuing its efforts to boost local tourism, Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) has signed an agreement with the Office of the Governor of Buraimi to develop tourism projects at prominent sites across the governorate.

The agreement was signed by Dr Hamad bin Ahmed al Busaidi, Governor of Buraimi, and Mohammed bin Salim al Busaidi, Chairman of Omran Group Board of Directors, with senior officials from sides in attendance.

The agreement is part of the group's efforts to enhance partnerships with various stakeholders and achieve its tourism development objectives in the sultanate.

Under the agreement, Omran will provide technical support and oversee operations of the Buraimi Gate and development of Al Ubila Park.



(Supplied photos)

The Buraimi Gate project will serve as a platform for interaction between visitors through interactive digital panels and a display screen. The screen will display unique material and showcase the cultural history of Buraimi.

Al Ubila Park will cover an area of over 181,000sqm. The project aims to showcase the region's

rich beauty to tourists and visitors and create a fun and relaxing recreational area for the community.

Speaking on the agreement, the governor said, "We are pleased to partner with Omran and establish significant projects that stimulate tourism growth in the governorate. These projects

will enrich the tourism facilities and services for visitors. Recently, Buraimi implemented several development projects designed to attract visitors from across the sultanate and advance economic growth in both the governorate and the sultanate. These efforts will create many business opportunities for

local companies and SMEs in the governorate."

On Omran's part, its chairman said, "We are continuously working to strengthen collaborations with stakeholders to achieve our comprehensive tourism development goals. The group is dedicated to developing the tourism sector in various governorates by creating high-end tourism projects. By developing the tourism sector and collaborating with local entities, Omran aims to maximise the sector's contribution to the government's economic diversification plans."

Omran is exploring additional tourism development opportunities in partnership with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and various stakeholders. This is part of the group's ongoing efforts to improve the tourism sector's competitiveness and create unique offerings in line with the National Tourism Strategy 2040.

MHUP offers 15 sites for investment in four governorates

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MHUP) is offering 15 investment sites under usufruct contracts in four governorates as part of its efforts to attract investors and stimulate the real estate sector.

According to a ministry official, MHUP will offer land measuring between 3,113sqm and 108,000sqm for usufruct contracts in an online auction via the Tatwir platform.

The initiative aims to achieve the objectives of economic growth, including commercial and industrial real estate units, while also aiming to enable the private sector to attract investments in various governorates to contribute to the development of integrated and sustainable urban communities.

Plots between 3,113sqm and 108,000sqm will be auctioned via Tatwir platform

The 15 sites include eight in Dakhliyah, three each in Dhofar and Musandam and one in Muscat.

To bid for sites, interested parties must be registered with the Real Estate Development Services Centre using their ID or commercial register number.

National Centre for Statistics and Information data indicates that the value of real estate transactions in the sultanate until the end of November 2022 was RO2.311bn, 2.6 per cent less compared to RO2.375bn recorded during the same period in 2021.

Sahim initiative to train over 350 jobseekers in Muscat, S Batinah

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A training programme called Tamkin-Sahim for the empowerment of youth wishing to take up government jobs was conducted by the Ministry of Labour in Muscat and South Batinah on Sunday.

The five-day course is targeting 351 jobseekers - 146 from South Batinah and 205 from Muscat - who cleared interviews and tests.

The programme aims to provide participants with practical experience in developing communication skills, enhancing leadership skills, teamwork, and raising awareness of the requirements and application of Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.

The programme is being undertaken by the Ministry of Labour, represented by the Training Support Centre based in different governorates.

MCSY announces festival of poetry, folk arts

Muscat - The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY) will organise Omani Culture Festival 2023 from March 19 to 22 focusing on poetry and folk arts.

The festival will include poetry recitations and competitions in both popular and classical forms, as well as folk arts. Sixteen Omani poets are expected to participate in the festival, besides poets from GCC and Arab countries.

Additionally, 12 folk groups from across Oman will present



(Supplied photo)

shows that represent different forms and styles of poetry and dance.

H E Sayyid Saeed bin Sultan al Busaidi, Undersecretary for Culture in the ministry, said that the Omani Culture Festival in its first edition will be a forum for poets, artists, and lovers and connoisseurs of arts from Oman and abroad.

"Poetry - in both popular and classical forms - is representative of the identity and heritage of societies. This festival is an oppor-

tunity for Omani poets to showcase their creativity, harmonising classical and popular forms of poetry."

Omani folklore, said H E Sayyid Saeed, showcases the personality of citizens and reflects their interaction with the environment and society.

The festival will also include symposiums on popular and classical poetry and preserving Omani heritage, in addition to individual and group performances by folk groups.

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Mahdah records 124mm rainfall in six days



Our Correspondent
Muscat

Heavy to moderate rains lashed several governorates in the past six days, according to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

In a statement, CAA said, 'A number of wadis overflowed, and low-level clouds spread over parts of Oman.'

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), Mahdah recorded 124mm rainfall in six days (June 24 to 29).

Data collected from the rain

monitoring stations of MAFWR from Tuesday till Sunday showed that Shinas received 105mm of rainfall, Liwa 103 mm, Dibba 90mm, Madha 75mm, Ibri 61mm, Khasab 53mm, Barka 43mm, Sohar 37mm, Taqah 36mm, Quriyat 35mm, Masirah 32mm, Nizwa 27mm, Muttrah 23mm and Seeb 22mm.

Royal Oman Police has urged motorists on the Jabal Shams Road in Dakhliyah to drive cautiously and leave a safe distance between vehicles.

It also urged people to avoid venturing into wadis.

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YOUR SAY

MUSCAT NIGHTS

FOOD, CULTURE AND TRADITION – RECIPE FOR SUCCESS



? NEXT ON YOUR SAY

In every Majlis A'Shura and Municipal council election, men far outnumber the women elected. What can be done to increase the number of women elected?

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

After a gap of three years, Muscat Festival - re-branded as Muscat Nights - has returned to woo citizens and residents. Running from January 19 till February 4, the event focuses on youth. The festivities, spread over 17 days, are being held at four locations: Qurum Park, Naseem Garden, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and Oman Automobile Association. How can Muscat Nights be made more attractive? Here is what *Muscat Daily* readers said on the matter:

Kaleem Ahmed
Businessman

One of the best ways to promote the festival is to have more international pavilions like earlier, when it was called Muscat Festival. If that is challenging and difficult, embassies in Oman can set up stalls showcasing their culture. Also, there can be more rides and games for families.

Taiq al Busaidi
Private sector employee

I believe that one of the best ways is to have more food stalls. I have seen that the food stalls at Muscat Nights are general ones serving fare that we can have in any restaurant in and around our city. Food always attracts people and having new dishes from different countries will attract more visitors. And yes, prices need to be reasonable.

Mohammad Ahmed al Hinai
Advertising professional

This year, I am very happy with the addition of modern features like car shows and virtual reality games. But at the same time, I am disappointed that the traditional village section is almost non-existent. We do not get to see much of the village life and our children only visit the interiors during festivals. Chances like this must never be missed to showcase traditional village life. There must be a good blend between modernity and traditions.

Kiran Choudhury
Homemaker

Muscat nights can be made more attractive by introducing more cultural events, quiz programmes and visual shows on Oman. Moreover, transport arrangement should be made for visitors to the festival. Package tours for schools and offices should also be planned

Ruskeen S
Private sector employee

Include more popular international artists, particularly from the Arab Gulf, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Easy accessibility and children-friendly daytime activities will attract people from far and near.

Jay Prakash
Private sector employee

Muscat's infrastructure is renowned and has the potential to organise any kind of event. In this event, the primary focus should be on football, hockey and tennis. Apart from these, international artists like the Korean band BTS and classical music maestros should be invited to perform. Additionally, food shows and carnivals focusing on Oman should be the highlight of these festivals. A combination of all of these will make the event more attractive.

SEND YOUR COMMENTS

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

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Show jumping, drones and samurai shows wow Muscat Nights visitors



(Supplied photo)

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Although the activities of Muscat Nights were suspended on Friday due to rain, the festival sites witnessed a good turnout on Saturday.

The festival began on January 19 and will continue till February 4.

An official of Muscat Municipality said, "Muscat Nights saw a good number of visitors at its four venues that are offering a wide variety of activities."

On Saturday, Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre hosted renowned Syrian composer and singer Tarek Alarabi Tourgane and his family - Muhammad, Dima and Tala - who celebrated their childhood memories in a concert.

Tourgane and his family are counted among the most popu-

lar artistic families in the Arab world best known for composing theme songs for animated series.

The Muscat Municipality official said, "Their presentations are humorous and fun to watch. They tour extensively with the aim of bringing back childhood memories with sweet melodies and words that reflect the meaning of life, friendship and family."

Show jumping championship

The final of Muscat Nights Show Jumping Championship was held at Qurum Natural Park on Saturday. Muhammad al Hadhrami of Royal Cavalry won the championship. The event was a show of equestrian skills that thrilled visitors.

"The four-day championship is counted among the local show jumping league competitions," the Muscat Mu-

nicipality official said.

Drone shows

Qurum Natural Park also witnessed drone shows which dazzled visitors. Drones flew in different formations filling the night sky with shimmering lights.

Other attractions at Qurum Natural Park included activities by the lakeside, boat shows and helium balloon displays.

Samurai show

Activities at Oman Automobile Association included a theatrical samurai performance in a Japanese Village set up on the venue grounds.

The activities of the Japanese Village started on January 24 and will continue till February 4. Kimonos are available to visitors for hire in the village for photo ops wearing the traditional Japanese dress.

إعلان مناقصة

TENDERERS ANNOUNCEMENT

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No رقم	Tender Ref الرقم المرجعي	Tender Title عنوان المناقصة	Tender Fee OMR الرسوم
1	SIPC 2022 - 099	School Student's Program	26.250

- The above-mentioned tender fees including the VAT 5%.
- Tenderers can request to receive the electronic tender documents from 9am on Monday 30th January 2023 until 4pm on Sunday 12th February 2023.
- Tenderers to follow the below procedures and steps to obtain the electronic tender documents:

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- على مقدمي العطاءات اتباع الإجراءات والخطوات التالية للحصول على مستندات المناقصة إلكترونياً.

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- يتوجب على جميع المؤسسات الصغيرة والمتوسطة تقديم بطاقة زيارة إلى جانب مستندات الشركة.
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FOREX RATES

(RO1 equals)

Indian	211.81
Pakistan	651.21
Bangladesh	275.56
Philippines	141.58
Sri Lanka	946.27

*Rates as on January 29

Source: xe.com

BRIEFS

Brent crude rises over 1% during last week

Oil prices increased by over one per cent during the week ending January 27, with strong economic data in US and demand optimism in China, the world's largest crude importer.

Brent crude was trading at US\$88.63 per barrel at 1054 GMT on Friday, posting an 1.06 per cent gain from the Monday session that opened at US\$87.70 a barrel.

American benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) registered at US\$82.12 per barrel at the same time on Friday, increasing 1.09 per cent relative to the opening price of US\$81.23 a barrel on Monday.

Strong growth of the US economy, decrease in recession concerns and the expectation of an increase in oil demand in China pushed prices higher.

The US economy expanded 2.9 per cent in the fourth quarter of 2022, coming higher than the market estimate of 2.6 per cent, according to the Commerce Department's first reading released earlier.

GCC fiscal positions to remain robust in 2023, Moody's says

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The 2023 outlook for the GCC economies is positive as high oil prices continue to bolster fiscal positions and provide space for economic reforms, Moody's Investor Service said in a report.

'Our outlook for sovereign creditworthiness in 2023 in the GCC is positive. A revenue wind-fall from still elevated oil prices, despite recent declines, will allow governments to lower debt burdens and rebuild fiscal buffers,' the rating agency said.

Moody's assumes Brent crude oil will average around US\$95 per barrel in 2023, below the 2022 average of US\$100 but significantly above the average of US\$57 during 2015-2021.

According to Moody's, wind-fall from elevated oil prices will further strengthen government balance sheets in the GCC this year. 'Although GCC crude oil output is likely to decline in 2023 on strategic production cuts by OPEC+, hydrocarbon revenue will remain robust, allowing most GCC sovereigns to run substantial fiscal and current account surpluses,' it said.

These surpluses, Moody's noted, will offer GCC governments a further opportunity to pay down debts, rebuild fiscal reserves, accumulate foreign-currency buffers, and advance structural reforms and diversification projects.

'Stronger government balance sheets and more diversified



Oman reduced its debt stock by nearly 15% in nominal terms in 2022 and we expect another, albeit much smaller, nominal debt reduction in 2023

MOODY'S INVESTOR SERVICE

economies will increase resilience to future economic and fiscal shocks, while reducing government liquidity and external vulnerability risks. Even if oil prices fell to around US\$80 per barrel, we expect most GCC governments would avoid a material rebound in debt burdens and deterioration in debt affordability,' the rating agency said.

According to Moody's, oil revenue windfalls and spending restraint will continue to support fiscal positions in 2023.

It said, 'We expect all GCC governments except Bahrain to post surpluses in 2023, as they did in 2022. In addition to robust hydrocarbon revenue, this reflects our view that expenditure increases in 2023 will be contained compared with previous periods of high or rising oil prices.'

Repaying debt and rebuilding

buffers will bolster GCC countries' overall fiscal strength and resilience to shocks, Moody's noted.

It said that another year of fiscal surpluses will allow GCC governments to consolidate the reductions in debt burdens and improvements in debt affordability which took place in 2021-2022. In most cases, greater debt affordability will be sustained despite rising global interest rates as relatively long maturities of existing government debt will delay repricing of the outstanding debt stock.

Moody's further said the GCC governments will also have the opportunity to use their surpluses to rebuild fiscal buffers that were eroded over 2015-2020.

'In some cases, these buffers are already very large and significantly exceed government debt, lending material support to our assessment of the sovereigns' fiscal strength. As of 2021, government financial assets amounted to around 340 per cent of GDP in Kuwait, 280 per cent in the UAE, and 185 per cent in Qatar. The assets were

more modest, but still large by international comparison, in Saudi Arabia (around 33 per cent of GDP) and Oman (26 per cent of GDP).'

Moody's said that for all GCC sovereigns, sustained growth in nominal GDP following the large rebound in 2022 will continue to reduce debt-to-GDP ratios. However, in Oman and Qatar, debt burdens will also likely decline further in nominal terms as they did in 2022, as the governments prioritise deleveraging.

Moody's said, 'Oman reduced its debt stock by nearly 15 per cent in nominal terms in the year to December 2022 and we expect another, albeit much smaller, nominal debt reduction in 2023. By the end of 2023, we expect Oman and Qatar to have reduced their debt-to-GDP ratios by around 25 and 35 percentage points of GDP, respectively, compared to peaks at the end of 2020.'

By contrast, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, where government debt is relatively low, Moody's expect governments to prioritise accumulation of liquid fiscal reserves and sovereign wealth fund assets. Kuwait is the standout, with nearly no debt to repay in 2023 out of its already very small debt stock of only 3 per cent of GDP at the end of 2022.

Moody's, however, warned that sharply weaker global growth and oil demand are a key risk to the GCC's positive outlook.

Inma Fund provides funding for 144 SMEs

Muscat - Total number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Sultanate of Oman which are funded by Inma Fund during 2022 stood at 144 projects in various economic sectors, with a total value of RO20mn.

At the forefront of those sectors is industry (accounting for 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.

These SME projects contributed to revitalising the economic movement and increasing cash flow.

The industry sector, which received the largest share of funding from Inma Fund in 2022, is considered one of the vital sectors in Oman that contribute to boosting the sultanate's gross domestic product (GDP).

Moreover, Inma Fund implements international standards, standards of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

ONA

Cooling inflation lifts hope for smaller US Fed rate hike

Washington, US - Slowing inflation and a cooling property sector are fuelling expectations that the US central bank can adopt a smaller interest rate hike this week, as policymakers assess current efforts to rein in prices.

As consumer inflation rocketed to decades-high levels last year, the Federal Reserve raised rates seven times in an aggressive campaign to cool the world's biggest economy and lower costs.

Since then, the interest-sensitive property sector has slumped, retail sales have weakened and wage growth has started to ease, prompting some Fed policymakers to suggest it may be time to slow the pace of rate hikes further.



US Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, DC

"A slower pace of rate hikes will give the committee time to assess the full economic effects of monetary tightening thus far," said Moody's Investors Service in a report.

Markets expect the Fed to adopt a 25-basis-point hike at the end of a two-day meeting Wednesday, slowing the pace of increases for a second time in a row.

This would take the benchmark lending rate to 4.50-4.75 per cent, a level last seen in 2007. In December, the Fed announced a 50-basis-point hike, stepping down from four earlier, steeper spikes.

"They are seeing the desired effects of policy," Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics told AFP.

"They don't want to keep on pushing until they get the economy into a recession," she said.

But the inflation fight "is far from won," warned the Moody's report.

Although demand appears to be moderating and supply bottlenecks have eased, spending has been stronger than expected.

This has prevented inflation from falling more rapidly and suggests the Fed's "terminal rate" - the level at which it will halt its increases - remains uncertain.

For inflation to come down to the Fed's target, "we will need a little bit of softening in the labor market," Madhavi Bokil of Moody's Investors Service told AFP. This could show up in a slower pace of hiring and fewer vacancies.

Wages do not appear to be driving inflation up, but they do lend some support to consumer spending as households draw down on pandemic-era savings.

Salary gains remained high last year, while employers were reluctant to shed workers they may have struggled to find since the pandemic, keeping the labor market tight.

'Soft landing'

On the other hand, the fact that the labour market has not slumped in response to tightening monetary policy brings optimism for a "soft landing" of the economy, where inflation comes down without triggering significant job losses or a major downturn.

"No one ever said that arranging a soft landing is easy, but our base case remains that if the Fed stops raising rates soon, the risk of a severe recession is quite small," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics.

If the Fed raises rates too far, a "bigger danger" would be an unnecessary recession, he said.

"However much the Fed might want to be sure the inflation demon is put back in its box," dragging inflation below policymakers' two percent target and an "accompanying rise in unemployment would represent a policy failure," said Shepherdson.

AFP

Qatar joins consortium to explore Lebanon's offshore gas

Beirut, Lebanon - Qatar on Sunday announced it had entered a consortium to explore Lebanese offshore gas in waters bordering Israel, following a historic border deal last year between the two foes.

The agreement greenlights Lebanon's exploration of its southern Qana, or Sidon, reservoir following the signing of the landmark deal last October demarcating its maritime borders with long-time enemy Israel.

Sunday's deal will see the gas-rich Gulf country's state-run QatarEnergy receive a minority 30 per cent stake in two blocks of Lebanon's exclusive economic zone, according to Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati.



Qatar's Energy Minister Saad Sherida al Kaabi (left) and Lebanon's caretaker Energy Minister Walid Fayad sign the agreement in Beirut (AFP)

French company TotalEnergies and Italy's Eni will both retain 35 per cent shares in the blocks after Russia's Novatek relinquished its minority stake in 2022.

Lebanese Energy Minister Walid Fayad and his Qatari counterpart Saad al-Kaabi, who is also QatarEnergy's chief executive, signed the deal Sunday, along with the Eni and TotalEnergies chiefs. Under a United States-brokered accord, Lebanon and Israel, which are officially still at war, delimited their maritime borders in October 2022.

The accord paved the way for Lebanon to begin exploration in the Qana reservoir - which is partly located inside Israel's territorial waters - in return for compensation payments.

According to energy consultant Najj Abi Aad, "Qatar's entry into the consortium is above all politically significant."

AFP

Air India finalising 'historic' order of new aircraft

New Delhi, India - With its completion of an year with Tata group, Air India on Friday said it is finalising a 'historic' order of new aircraft to power future growth and also looking forward to achieve its five years roadmap, 'Vihaan', and make Air India the world's best airline.

Air India said various initiatives across 22 broad workstreams are underway to transform the airline over three phases, namely Taxi, Take Off and Climb.

These initiatives under Vihaan included the commitment of US\$400mn to refurbish the interiors of its entire wide-body fleet, the merger with Vistara with the combined entity having a shareholding of Singapore Airlines, the acquisition of AirAsia India and



its merger with subsidiary Air India Express, establishment of an information technology centre in Kochi, and establishment of a world-class training academy.

On the occasion of its first anniversary under Tata group, Air India also said the airline will transform itself over the next five years to being among the best globally with an Indian heart.

carrier AirAsia India with Air India Express and the merger is likely by the end of 2023.

On January 27, Air India completed an year of its return with Air India under Tata. When the Tata group took charge last year, the public perception was that it wanted to take the airline back to the glory days under the legendary JRD Tata.

Soon after winning the bid for Air India, Tata Sons chairman N Chandrasekaran said, "We are excited to bring Air India back to the Tata Group and are committed to making it a world-class airline."

A year since Air India came back to Tata's fold, the airline has made some significant gains.

ANI

'Not the time' for austerity as global growth slows: UN

New York, US - A pessimistic growth forecast for 2023 should not lead to "short-term thinking or knee-jerk fiscal austerity" that could worsen inequality or threaten development goals, the United Nations said in a report.

This comes as the world economy faced a series of shocks last year including fallout from the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and surging inflation.

Global economic growth is set to slump against this backdrop, from an estimated 3.0 per cent in 2022 to 1.9 per cent this year, said the United Nations in its World Economic Situation and Prospects report.

But "this is not the time for short-term thinking or knee-jerk fiscal austerity that exacerbates inequality, increases suffering and could put (sustainable development goals) farther out of reach," said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

"These unprecedented times demand unprecedented action," he added in a statement.

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) Guterres referred to were adopted by UN member states in 2015. Their aims include achieving food security, eliminating poverty, and providing access to clean and affordable energy by 2030.

While a summit in New York later this year will assess the progress towards these goals, many are not on track to be met.



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres speaks during a session of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland on January 18 (AFP)

Global economic growth is set to slump from an estimated 3.0% in 2022 to 1.9% this year, the United Nations said in its World Economic Situation and Prospects report

"Slower growth, elevated inflation and mounting debt vulnerabilities threaten to further set back hard-won SDG achievements, deepening the already negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic," said the UN report.

Under current economic circumstances "the typical prescription" from economists would be to cut spending, said

Hamid Rashid, who led the writing of the UN report.

"Governments will be often asked to tighten their belts," he told AFP.

"Our key message in the report is that governments in developing countries especially... must avoid austerity," he said, adding that this would be "extremely detrimental" for development goals.

As restructuring becomes tough when a country defaults on its debt, it is better to do so before a default, he said.

According to the report, in 2022, debt servicing accounted for over 25 per cent of government revenue in eight developing countries. For Sri Lanka, this hit nearly 80 per cent of government revenue.

The UN is also concerned about risks of a fall in development aid.

War in Ukraine and future reconstruction "will divert some resources," Rashid said, warning of a huge setback for low-income countries.

AFP

UK dismisses economic 'gloom', eyes Brexit boost

London, UK - Britain's finance minister has dismissed "gloom" over its recession-threatened economy and vowed to tap into Brexit opportunities and tackle rampant inflation to boost growth during a cost-of-living crisis.

Jeremy Hunt laid out the Conservative government's growth plan in London's City finance district on Friday, following recent criticism from the business community - and insisted that the nation was not in decline.

"Declinism about Britain was wrong in the past - and it is wrong today," Hunt said.

"Some of the gloom is based on statistics that do not reflect the whole picture."

The Bank of England and the UK government's own fiscal watchdog, however, believe that the economy has already entered recession on fallout from rampant consumer price inflation.

The finance chief outlined how Britain would benefit from "freedoms" as a result of its exit two years ago from the European Union, after voting to leave in 2016.

"Like every G7 country, our growth was slower in the years after the financial crisis than the years before it. But since 2010, the UK has grown faster than France, Japan and Italy."

"Since the Brexit referendum, we have grown at about the same rate as Germany."

He added: "If we look further



Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt (AFP)

ahead, the case for declinism becomes weaker still. The UK is poised to play a leading role in Europe and across the world in the growth sectors which will define this century."

Hunt, whose official title is chancellor of the exchequer, will oversee a strategy aimed at boosting poor productivity and focused on key sectors including digital technology, green industries, life sciences, advanced manufacturing and creative industries.

He added that it was necessary to look beyond "short term" business fallout from Brexit, such as border delays, red tape and staff shortages.

"It's a big change in our economic relations with our closest neighbours, and of course that is going to need adaptation and of course there is some short term disruption," he noted.

"But I think it is completely wrong to just focus on that without looking at the opportunities."

Cooling inflation

Hunt shunned calls to slash taxes from his own lawmakers, arguing that tackling rampant inflation would instead put more cash in Britons' pockets.

"The best tax cut right now is a cut in inflation," he told the business audience.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak wants UK inflation, which is running close to a 40-year peak at 10.5 per cent, to be cut by half this year.

It has started cool from a peak of above 11 per cent as the Bank of England raises interest rates.

Sunak's predecessor, Liz Truss, was ousted from Downing Street last year after her tax-slashing budget sparked markets chaos, crashed the pound and prompted emergency BoE intervention to safeguard financial stability.

Hunt added Friday that Sunak's administration offered a new plan for "long term prosperity".

AFP

US appeals WTO verdicts on steel tariffs

Geneva, Switzerland - Washington announced that it had appealed against four World Trade Organization panel rulings faulting it for punitive tariffs imposed on steel imports from China and other countries.

It also appealed a ruling that it was flouting international trade rules by labelling imports from Hong Kong as being from China.

Former US president Donald Trump's administration introduced the tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from China, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey.

Marking a departure from a

decades-long US-led drive for free trade, Trump justified the steep tariffs with claims that massive flows of imports to the United States threatened national security.

The administration of his successor, President Joe Biden, has taken a less combative tone but has stuck with the tariffs.

The expert panels the WTO set up in 2018 to settle complaints filed over the tariffs ruled last month that they were inconsistent with various articles of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

AFP

Italy's Eni signs \$8bn gas deal with Libya

Tripoli, Libya - Italian energy giant Eni signed an US\$8bn gas deal with Libya's state-run National Oil Corporation Saturday as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited Tripoli.

European governments have been scrambling to find alternatives to Russian gas since last year's invasion of Ukraine saw deliveries slashed to less than half their pre-war levels, sending prices soaring to record highs and triggering costly state subsidies to protect consumers.

Eni said it was the first major project in Libya since early 2000 and involved the development of two offshore gas fields.

"The combined gas produc-



Eni CEO Claudio Descalzi (front left) and Libyan National Oil Corp chief Farhat Bengdara (2nd right) sign agreement during a ceremony attended by Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (back 2nd left) in Tripoli, (AFP)

tion from the two structures will start in 2026 and reach a plateau of 750mn of standard gas cubic feet per day," Eni said in a statement.

"Production will be ensured through two main platforms tied in to the existing treatment facilities at the Mellitah Complex," 80 kilometres (50 miles) west

of the capital, it added.

"The project also includes the construction of a carbon capture and storage (CCS) facility at Mellitah, allowing a signifi-

cant reduction of the overall carbon footprint," the company added.

"The overall estimated investment will amount to US\$8bn, with significant impact on the industry and the associated supply chain, allowing a significant contribution to the Libyan economy."

Eni has an 80 per cent share of Libya's gas production.

The agreement was signed in the presence of Meloni and her host Abdulhamid Dbeibah, who heads the UN-brokered Government of National Unity which is contested by a rival administration in the east.

AFP

Toyota to replace Akio Toyoda as CEO

Tokyo, Japan - Toyota named Koji Sato president and CEO on Friday, in a surprise reshuffle that sees third-generation chief executive Akio Toyoda step aside to become board chairman of the world's top-selling automaker.

The Japanese automaker said Sato, 53, would also become operating officer when the changes to its executive structure take effect on April 1.

Sato - previously chief branding officer, and president of Toyota's luxury Lexus brand - is taking the helm at a time of major upheaval for the industry, with electric vehicles now centre-stage.

He is the same age as Toyoda was in 2009 when he became the company's youngest president, after the global financial crash.

"He has youth, and like-minded colleagues - I expect this team to go beyond the limits that I cannot break through," Toyoda told reporters.

"To promote change in an era in which the future is unpredictable, the head of management must continue to stand on



This photo taken on January 13 shows Akio Toyoda (right) and Koji Sato (left) posing during the Tokyo Auto Salon festival in Tokyo (AFP)

the front lines. For that, stamina, energy and passion are indispensable."

Toyoda, 66, is the grandson of company founder Kiichiro Toyoda. His father Shoichiro Toyoda also led Toyota, in the 1980s and '90s.

He is known as a charismatic leader, having steered the group through a quality-control scandal that saw him apologise before the US Congress, and supply chain chaos caused by Japan's 2011 quake and tsunami.

More recently, he has worked to strengthen Toyota's ambitions in the key electric vehicle sector.

The company pioneered hybrid cars, but some critics say it has been slow to make the shift to battery-powered engines even as demand soars for low-emission automobiles.

In December 2021, Toyota hiked its electric vehicle sales goal by 75 per cent and said it planned to roll out 30 battery-powered electric models by the

turn of the decade.

Sato has worked for Toyota since graduating with a bachelor's in mechanical engineering in 1992.

"I'm an engineer and have long been engaged with developing cars. I love making cars," Sato said.

Toyoda will replace 76-year-old Takeshi Uchiyamada as board chair. Uchiyamada was chief engineer of the team that developed the hugely popular Prius, the world's first mass-produced hybrid model.

Born in the city of Nagoya where Toyota is based, as a child Toyoda wanted to become a taxi driver.

He is a passionate motor-sports fan and has even competed in races himself - using the pseudonym "Morizo", so as not to draw attention from his day job as a chief executive.

Although the Toyodas own just a small percentage of Toyota's stock, several subsidiaries are run by extended family members in a complex cross-ownership system.

AFP



الأنوار للاستثمارات ش.م.ع
Al Anwar Investments SAOG

Post Box: 468, Postal Code: 131, Al Hamriya, Sultanate of Oman, Tel : +968 24692503/24692504,
Fax: +968 24692507, E-mail: info@alanwar.om, Website: www.alanwar.om

UNCLAIMED DIVIDENDS

Al Anwar Investments SAOG hereby informs its respected shareholders that Muscat Clearing & Depository Company SAOC has deposited the unclaimed dividends for the financial year ended 31 March 2022 with Capital Market Authority (investors' trust funds). Accordingly, please refer to the Muscat Clearing and Depository Company, and present their identity card or passport along with the supportive documents supporting their rights in order to update their data and receive their dues.

For more information on the method of receipt please contact:

Muscat Clearing & Depository Company SAOC

P.O.BOX: 952 Ruwi, P.C.112

Phone: 00968 24822222, Fax: 00968 24817491

Web site: www.mcd.gov.om

Al Mouj residents mark Republic Day



The 74th Indian Republic Day was celebrated with great grandeur and pride by the residents of Indian community residing at Al Mouj Muscat. The event took place in large gathering with more than 100 families participating at a private function held at hotel location in Muscat. With national tri-colour dress code, coupled with Indian breakfast added extra glamour to the event. All elders distributed Indian traditional sweets and delicacies to children and families celebrating the occasion under one roof. Everyone enthusiastically sang the National Anthem with children taking the center stage. The Republic Day celebrations ended on a very positive note and everyone was rejoicing with some of them singing and dancing to the patriotic songs.



Atelier Rebul opens first boutique store

Award-winning brand from Istanbul, Atelier Rebul has opened its maiden store at the Mall of Oman in Baushar, marking the brand's debut into the luxurious scent expertise in the Oman Sultanate. Inaugurated in the presence of H H Sayyida Hujaija Jaifer Saif al Said, who graced the opening as the esteemed guest of honour, Atelier Rebul boutique will house over 220 products in their unique range of authentic collections. Established in 1895, the brand caters to a wide range of audience with fragrances, home scents, skincare products, home accessories and luxurious gift sets. The store is located at the L2 floor in the Mall of Oman.

Ooredoo gives free fibre speed booster

Binge-watch, stream, game and download at extra speed but at no extra cost for six months with Ooredoo's Fibre Speed Booster for existing Fibre Home Internet customers. Speeds have been boosted from 50Mbps to 240Mbps for customers on the RO28 plan, and from 120Mbps to 500Mbps for RO35 per month users, while Ooredoo will increase 300Mbps to 700Mbps for RO45 per month customers. The range of plans not only offers amazing speeds and unlimited usage, but unlimited Ooredoo fixed minutes and discounted international minutes.

Meethaq Islamic's package for pensioners

In line with its strategies aimed at sustaining the country's progress, development and improving financial inclusion for different segments of society, and offering the best Islamic banking services, Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has launched the Ikram package for pensioners, which is a specialised package of sharia'a-compliant financing products with attractive profit rates catering to Omani pensioners. It was introduced after studying and understanding the needs of retirees who were earlier working in government and private institutions.

Committed to innovation in its services and products and offering the best services possible, Meethaq developed the Ikram pensioner package to offer a full package of Islamic financial services. It is designed to provide tailored financial facilities and services that meet its customers' needs and aspirations. Meethaq's current and new customers will be able to benefit from the wide range of services this package offers, including exclusive offers related but not limited to auto, goods, personal and home finance offers, credit card offers and discounts at selected outlets and personalized campaigns. Customers who wish to benefit from this package, can apply



by visiting their nearest Meethaq branch. Customers can get further details about the new package offers by contacting call center 24/7 on 24656666. Meethaq is continuously introducing new financial products and services targeting different sections of society in line with the changing needs of its customers and the nation's progress and development. On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager, Retail Banking - Meethaq, said, "We are pleased to launch this package, focusing on providing specialised services for pensioners. The Ikram package has been developed after carefully studying and understanding Meethaq's customers' needs and listening to their comments and feed-



back on the type of services that best suit their needs and aspirations. Meethaq will continue developing its products and services to meet the needs of customers and help them achieve their financial goals. We take this opportunity to thank our valued

customers for their trust in Meethaq products and services." With its innovative sharia'a based products, Meethaq's services witnessed a remarkable rise especially with the new offers and financial facilities which are designed to meet cus-

tomers aspiration. Meethaq Islamic Banking continued working on its strategy to launch innovative services and products to enhance customers experience. It must be noted that every Meethaq product goes through the process of sharia'a compliance certification by the sharia'a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman. Meethaq's adoption of AAOIFI standards (Accounting & Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions) further distinguishes Meethaq Islamic banking practices in terms of standardisation of its products and services complementing its world-class Islamic banking experience. As the leader in the Islamic banking industry in Oman, Meethaq has a strong track record of winning many prestigious local, regional and global awards for its outstanding achievements in Islamic banking. Accolades won in the past include the Best Islamic Bank in Oman award from Islamic Finance News (IFN), Oman's Most Trusted Brand (Islamic Banking) from Apex Media, GIFA Award and Best Islamic Digital Bank Award. For more information on Meethaq's Ikram package, one can visit <https://www.meethaq.om>.



LuLu Exchange opens 38th branch at Ohi Sanaiya Sohar

LuLu Exchange, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, opened its 38th branch in the country, at Ohi Sanaiya Sohar on Wednesday. The branch was inaugurated by Sheikh Mohammed Hamed Ali al Ghazali, Director, LuLu Exchange. Other attendees at the opening ceremony included Narayan Pradhan, COO, LuLu Exchange, Lathish Vichitran, General Manager, LuLu Exchange, and other senior management of the company. The new branch also marks the 265th Global Branch of LuLu Financial Holdings, and Adeeb Ahamed, Managing Director of LuLu Financial Hold-

ings congratulated the team on the milestone occasion. "The expansion of our branch network reflects our ambition to innovate in matters of customer experience and convenience for both retail and corporate customers. We are fully committed to the growth prospects of the Omani economy, and are actively driving the future of the payments ecosystem by putting technology and innovation at the heart of all things new." LuLu Exchange presently provides remittances, currency exchange and value-added services in a timely, transparent and reliable manner through its network of branches and mobile payments app, LuLu Money.

Zubair sponsors 'Deaf and Hard of Hearing Forum'

The Zubair Corporation sponsored a forum for the DHH-Deaf and Hard of Hearing in collaboration with Vertex Business Solutions & Al Massa. The forum was an opportunity to highlight some of the challenges faced by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community in Oman and to call for further recognition of their social status and welfare access. This Forum sponsorship is an integral part of The Zubair Corporation's CSR strategy to support the socio-economic development of the Sultanate of Oman. It was held under the auspices of H E Sheikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosni, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour. The forum held under a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Labour, and with the support of The Zubair Corporation, Tanmia and Octal, this is the first time that an event has been exclusively organised to encourage and support DHH individuals and business owners and corporates. The forum included several panel discussions focusing on ways to empower people identifying as deaf or with a hearing impairment. The focus was on the influence of the private sector specifically and how companies can provide further job opportunities with flexible requirements to ensure more inclusion and diversity in the workplace. As part of the forum, several working papers were published with recommendations to improve the access to employment and Education for deaf and hard of hearing people.



Commenting on the forum, Hilal Omar al Siyabi, Chief Corporate Services Officer at Al Zubair Corporation, said, "The Zubair Corporation's sponsorship of this forum is a reflection of our commitment to support local communities and empower talented individuals in various artistic, cultural, sports and social fields, enhancing their skills in order to achieve their desired goals. We will continue to contribute meaningfully by helping similar initiatives that lead to the development of skills of people with special needs, especially those in the deaf and difficult hearing." Muna al Shukaili, the Founder and CEO of Al Massa Company, said, "We

at Al Massa & Vertex Business solutions are honoured to be sponsored by The Zubair Corporation for this forum as it contributes to improving the life of the deaf and hearing-impaired community. "Through this forum, we seek to educate citizens and private sector institutions about the importance of providing good education and job opportunities for the deaf and hard of hearing people, adapting to the skills and abilities available in this community. This forum is also in line with the sultanate's vision to improve inclusivity of all communities in Oman, specifically for deaf and hard of hearing people," Shukaili added.

Oman Data Park/Cisco Ingram Forum maximises awareness about cyber security

Oman Data Park/Cisco Ingram forum, on maximising the awareness about the cyber security, kicked off recently at Novotel al Seeb Hotel, in the presence of a number of representatives of governmental entities, private sector companies, interested parties and invited guests. The forum reviewed a number of working papers and discussions on opportunities to maximise cyber security maximising cyber security through assumed breach assessments and through Cisco cloud security, Cisco App Dynamics to transform the applications and business with App Dynamic's real-time performance monitoring, as well as by using other leading applications in which Oman Data Park deals. The organisation of this forum comes within the keenness of Oman

Data Park in the field of information technology, cloud services, hosting and virtual data center services in the Sultanate of Oman, to continue its active role in contributing to the digital transformation process in the Sultanate of Oman. Commenting on this event, Maqbool al Wehaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park said, "Our organising of such kind of events contributes to the consolidation of Oman Data Park's rank as a leading company in cyber security services while it continues to provide pioneering and effective smart security solutions to limit the electronic hackings, while its capabilities are supported by a set of preventive and experiential smart cyber security services to protect its customers from electronic attacks." Wahaibi pointed out that this focus



of Oman Data Park on cyber security activities will also lead to an increase in awareness among public and private entities on the importance of hosting their data within the Sultanate of Oman



in order to avoid the risks of hosting them outside the country, while Oman Data Park is proud of its capabilities and equipment that are able to repel more than 8,000 daily electronic at-

tacks on various institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. Fayeze al Zadjali, Senior Sales-Manager Development Manager, briefed the forum's attendants on the services Oman Data Park provided and its interest in digital data and cloud solutions. For his part, Mohammed al Ruzaqi, Senior Specialist in Cyber Security, focused on the possibility of strengthening the cyber security mechanism by simulating the penetration process as a way to identify and develop the cyber security system in the targeted entities and arrange to serve them. Rami Abbas, Regional Director of Cyber Security Services and Cloud Solutions has addressed the attendants of the forum on the importance of providing protection and insurance for employees in all circumstances to which they may be exposed, in addition to its

impacts on employee productivity and the suitability of the work to achieve the required tasks. Shadi al Shami, a systems engineer at Cisco Oman, highlighted the cyber security challenges that the technology sector is witnessing today, and how Cisco meets customers' needs related to cyber security to ensure the protection of business and data. It is noteworthy that ODP, the sultanate's first managed cyber security and cloud services provider, plays an integral role in supporting the digital transformation of Oman, through their offering of an all-in-one solution of computing, cloud computing, data storage, networking, web hosting and network security services. ODP also offers the Sultanate's first Artificial Intelligence ready cloud infrastructure - Nebula AI powered by Nvidia.

Oxy Oman attends freelancer platform launch

Oxy Oman recently attended a launching ceremony for the national freelancer platform that was developed by AWJ Innovation (Sustainable Technologies & Innovation Development-STID), and exclusively sponsored by Oxy. The platform is designed to provide opportunities for freelancers and fresh graduates in the market to present their skills and capabilities to companies registered on the platform.

The launching event was held at Kempinski Hotel under the auspices of H E Eng Salim Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals. Thamer Dawood, Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility, Communications & Public Affairs at Oxy Oman attended as a representative of the company along with other senior executives.

The freelancer platform will enable clients to get different expertise and services from skilled and qualified registered workers.



In addition, the platform will showcase freelancer profiles to employers and facilitate employment opportunities.

The platform is developed to advance the goals of the Oxy Oman exclusively sponsored - .NXT training program, which continues on its third year to target fresh graduates with training in frontier technologies and entrepreneurship, through workshops and online technical courses. The platform will also service .NXT programme graduates to find future career opportunities and have access to the job market.

"We are proud to sponsor the development of a national free-

lancer system, as a unique service to connect employers with fresh graduates and job seekers, and to display their skills and capabilities," said Steven Lauver, president and general manager at Oxy Oman.

"The freelancer platform builds on Oxy's commitment to investing in national capacity development and prioritising the training of fresh graduates for entry into the job market, as we continue to support job seekers with internship programmes, on-the-job training, and other specialised programmes such as .NXT," he added.

This sponsorship falls under the umbrella of strategic partnerships and continuous collaboration with key stakeholders, and is part of Oxy Oman's endeavor and long term commitment to support programmes that enhance economic growth and sustainable development that yields positive impacts in the neighbouring communities.

ODBW, OREX to help boost growth in infrastructure, commercial projects

One of the most anticipated events in the building, construction, design and real estate industry, the 18th edition of the Oman Design and Build Week (ODBW) incorporating Oman Real Estate Expo (OREX) is slated to commence on March 13 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Muscat (OCEC).

Organised under the patronage of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning and supported by the Oman Real Estate Association, the three-day event will run until March 15.

Recognised as the sultanate's largest trade exhibition and conference in the sector, ODBW will bring together the latest products, advanced services, and emerging solutions in the industry, providing definitive networking and information exchange opportunities to both exhibitors and visitors.

Meanwhile, OREX is uniquely positioned to connect local and international property developers and brokers with potential buyers and investors from Oman's market.

An event that seamlessly unites different facets of the industry, ODBW is expected to



register around 250 exhibiting companies and witness more than 12,000 attendees.

In addition, the exhibition will also feature more than five dedicated country pavilions. It is set to welcome individuals from different business domains that include architects, engineers, consultants, contractors, surveyors, trade associations, government representatives and real estate developers as well as private homeowners.

"Acknowledging the vital role of the construction industry in the nation's economy, ODBW seeks to act as a catalyst to accelerate further development across all verticals in the sector. With a number of mega-projects announced in the real estate, hospitality and infrastructure segments, the country has not only set new benchmarks for sustainable development but has reaffirmed its position on the map as a destination for lucrative investments," said Sadiq Jaffer Sulaiman, president of Oman Real Estate Association.

"ODBW being an event of a national scale, will act as a bridge between various stakeholders in the sector, facilitate strategic partnerships and alliances, and offer a platform for companies to showcase their innovative projects. These otherwise independent elements, when holistically strung together, have the ability to fuel enhanced growth and development in the industry and aid in the socioeconomic progress of the nation."

Another key highlight of the event is the ODBW Conference, which will encompass top-level keynote sessions, thought leadership presentations and technical panel discussions.

The three-day CPD-credited PMI-certified sessions will provide invaluable insights on trending subjects and further boost competence in project leadership roles. In addition, the Design Talks, an open workshop conducted by exhibitors and stakeholders, will present industry-relevant panel discussions and presentations on design, architecture and construction topics.

Strongly aligned to Oman Vision 2040 and its revenue diversification agenda, ODBW is geared at providing the needed impetus to the building, construction, and real estate sectors. Whilst the event will enable exhibitors to enhance and refresh their relationships with buyers and peers and generate new leads, visitors will benefit from increased knowledge of the upcoming market trends, breakthrough innovations and the latest technological developments in the sector.



ROHM announces concert featuring Fatoumata Diawara

The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) is delighted to announce an exciting concert featuring a global phenomenon: Fatoumata Diawara, The Star of Africa, will perform at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts on February 9 and 10 (Thursday, Friday) at 7pm.

Hailed as a visionary musician and voice for unity and hope, Fatoumata Diawara sings in her native Bambara about lost childhoods, women's rights and precious manuscripts from Timbuktu. She dresses with magnificent originality, taking on the traditional elements of her heritage and bringing them to life for her stage performances.

A Grammy-nominated singer, songwriter, guitarist, actress and activist, she embraces modernity as well as tradition. Hugely charismatic, Diawara has played major festivals including Glastonbury (UK), worked with the likes of Gorillaz, Herbie Hancock and Cuban jazz pianist Roberto Fonseca and formed a super group of Malian artists to record a song calling for peace in her troubled West African homeland.

One can book tickets via the box office, website or ROHM App.

Shangri-La Al Husn appoints new hotel manager

Nick Flynn has been appointed as Hotel Manager, joining the exclusive Shangri-La Al Husn, a breath-taking cliff-top retreat for adults located in beautiful Muscat, Oman. The Australian native joined in October 2022 from the Shangri-La Rasa Sentosa, Singapore where he held the position of Resident Manager.

The seasoned hotelier brings with him three decades of experience across an impressive portfolio of top-tier luxury hotels and resorts around the globe including stints in key strategic cities such as Australia, Singapore, Korea, India, Dubai, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Malaysia and Singapore.

Flynn began his career in hospitality in the early 90's in his home country of Australia, working in the food and beverage department.

First exclusive BOSCH Brand Store opens at Oman Avenues Mall

The first exclusive brand store dedicated to Bosch home appliances was inaugurated at Oman Avenues Mall in Muscat last Wednesday, showcasing an iconic German brand synonymous with quality, durability and inventive ingenuity.

High-level representatives of OTE Group, exclusive distributors of Bosch in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as BSH Home Appliances Corporation, Europe's No 1 home appliances manufacturer, were on hand to celebrate the grand opening of the BOSCH Brand Store.

Present from OTE Group were Mohamed Saad Suhail Bahwan - Director and Sandeep Attri, Senior General Manager.

In attendance from Bosch were Tomas Alonso - BSH Home Appliances FZE CEO, Irem Yazlar - Head of Brand Marketing, Sabrina Straube - Brand Marketing Manager, and Amit Behal - Regional Sales Manager.

Strategically located on the first floor of Oman's leading shopping and retail landmark in Bausher, the superbly designed store allows customers to ex-



plore the world of Bosch products and experience the brand's innovations up close. On display is an impressive line-up of Bosch-branded products from built-in appliances, free-standing refrigerators, dishwashers, and washers/dryers, to an array of small appliances, such as coffee makers, food processors, juicers and much more.

Unquestionably high quality, yet affordable, the Bosch range comes with the legacy of a 140-year-old brand that continues to win global acclaim for its application of engineering and innovation in the design of products of everyday use - designed to help us save time and energy, and most importantly, simplify our lives. Equally, they are durable, easy to operate and represent excellent value for money.

To celebrate the opening of the first flagship brand store, OTE Group has announced a 20 per cent discount on selected Bosch products on display - an offer that runs until February 14. Included in the offer are high-end appliances that promise to transform the kitchen or laundry room space in any home.

"This exclusive BOSCH Brand Store is unique in that it aims to

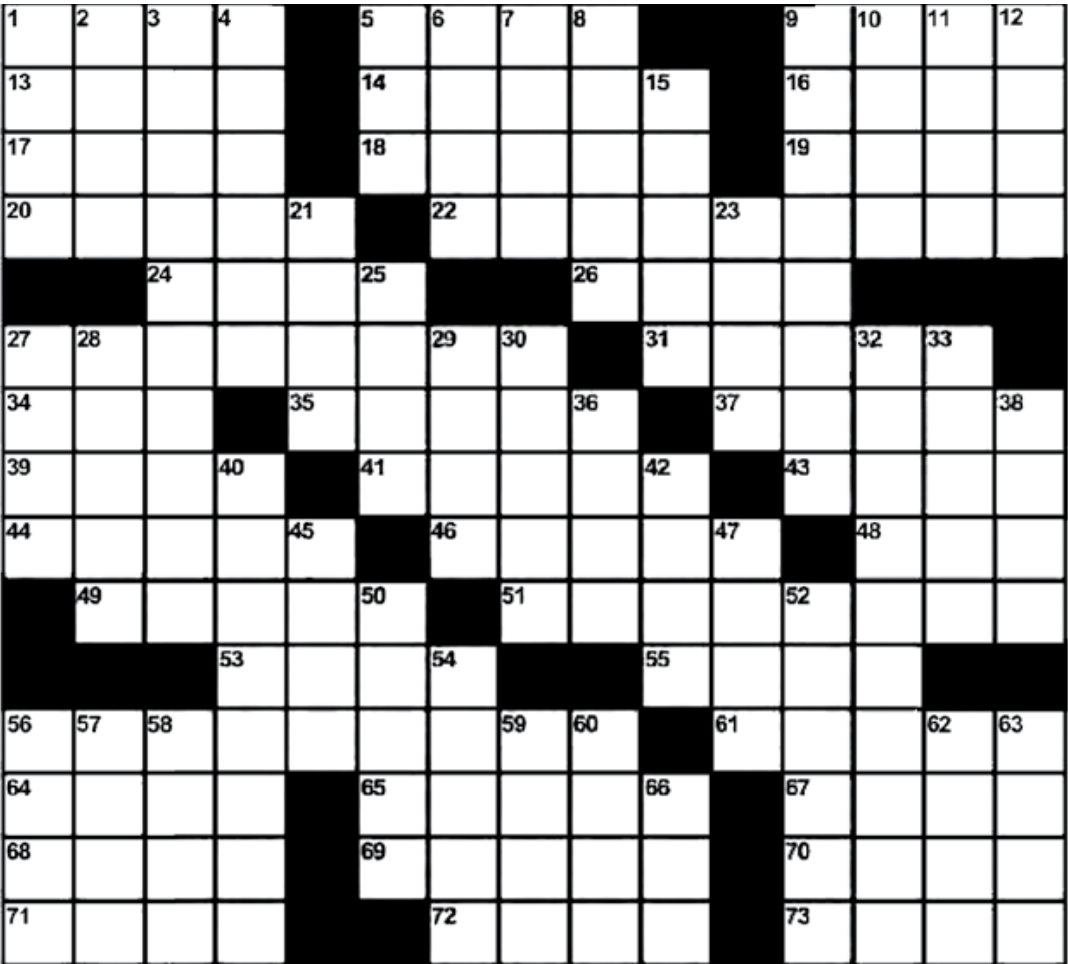
kindle in customers an enthusiasm for Bosch products, primarily for the unmatched quality that they represent. Customers can get hands-on with the products, get acquainted with their functionality and features, and hopefully make a closer connection with the Bosch brand. Our competent store staff are also on hand to address queries or assist in any way," said Mohamed Saad

Suhail Bahwan - Director, OTE Group.

The Bosch is known as a symbol of outstanding quality and reliability, backed by over 85 years of consumer manufacturing excellence. It is Europe's leading household appliances manufacturer. Its products are based exclusively on the real requirements of modern households. Thanks to trendsetting technology and surprisingly simple solutions, they effortlessly achieve perfect results and simplify everyday life. In addition, high quality, precisely finished materials and a timeless, internationally acclaimed design, ensure noticeable quality and sustainability. A recognised high service quality cements the trust of the user in the brand and underpins the Bosch guiding principle, 'invented for life'.

Established in 1991, OTE Group is one of Oman's largest business houses representing renowned international brands distributed across the automotive, auto ancillary, electronics, home appliances, and leasing and finance segments of the consumer business.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) Newborn
5) Sink obstruction
9) Wearing loafers, e.g.
13) Crow's-nest sighting
14) Hindu gentleman (Var.)
16) Balcony section
17) Athletic group
18) Wild animal track
19) Invisible thing around a person
20) Be silent, in music
22) Angered
24) Stomach tightness
26) "Awright!"
27) Get rid of pests, in a way
31) Feudal lord
34) Biochemistry abbr.
35) Hanging loosely
37) The "L" of XXL
39) Blows it
41) This puzzle's theme
43) Andean land
44) "This is terrible!"
46) "Paradise Lost" character
48) Always, in verse
49) Song of David

51) Assailed
53) Chimney buildup
55) A head
56) Healthy
61) Grunts
64) Hawaiian tuber
65) Depth charge target
67) Crop of a bird
68) Qatar head of state, e.g.
69) Pasta choice
70) "...and the King of Siam"
71) Viral phenomenon
72) Abbr. after many a general's name
73) "Check this out!" quietly?

DOWN

1) Deck post for cables
2) Cruising the Pacific
3) Reputation stainers
4) Saudi's neighbor
5) Items used by good buddies?
6) Drinks, as a cat
7) Shawn successor
8) Like a hot fudge sundae
9) Coal mining waste
10) Word with "witching" or

"happy"
11) Horrifying beast
12) Like some batteries
15) Projecting window design
21) Clothing, informally
23) Ammunition for a carpenter's gun
25) After-bath powder
27) Eagles' Glenn
28) Tear open, ironically
29) New Mexico art community
30) Critical success
32) Rookies
33) Bird with long plumes
36) Japanese 13-stringed instrument
3 8) 100 cents
40) Crashing waves site
42) Roast beef request, sometimes
45) _gin fizz
4 7) Tide level
50) Finish a task completely
52) Big white sheet
54) Rome's river
56) Any thing

57) Finger, in a way
58) Barber's job
59) _ of the above
60) Philosopher Immanuel
62) Nicknames for moms'
63) Police jacket acronym
66) Baseball's Williams

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

 **ARIES** MARCH 21-APRIL 19

If someone close to you tells you that they think you need to slow down today, listen to them. You've been living and working at a very fast pace, and while you might like the energy it gives you, other people are starting to feel neglected. It's important to make time for the people you care about. Even if it feels like an effort, it's an effort worth making. Sometimes you have to put your personal goals aside and put other people first. That way, you show them that they're important.

 **LEO** JULY 23-AUGUST 22

Your actions have an effect on others right now, so try to be considerate. Remember that you can't just do whatever you want whenever you want to do it. Other people are relying on you to exhibit your characteristic good sense and practicality. If you suddenly start acting on a whim, you'll set them on edge. Listen to the wishes of the people around you before you act. You don't have to do what they say; you just have to hear them out.

 **SAGITTARIUS** NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

A mistake someone else made should serve as a cautionary tale for you, but it can also help you redefine your approach to life. Judging other people only leads to loneliness and isolation, so learn how to live and let live. No one's perfect, including you! Wringing your hands over what someone else is doing will only leave you with sore fingers. If you're worrying about someone else's mistakes, redirect your energies. Try to stay open and let them figure things out on their own.

 **TAURUS** APRIL 20-MAY 20

Today it's easy for you to gain a deep understanding of the problems that have been plaguing you, if you have the courage to ask a few sensitive questions. Try to cut to the chase. Don't beat around the bush when asking what you want to know. You could test people's patience. Get to the point. Your organizational skills are better than ever, so use them to help you figure out your game plan.

 **VIRGO** AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Monotony could drag down your mood today, so you should try to welcome any disruptions to your routine with open arms. Too many stale ideas and emotions have been hovering around you for too long, and you could use something to stir up the stagnation, even if it's something you initially find kind of annoying. This is the beginning of a new phase for you in which your outlook is much more positive. Things suddenly feel more possible than ever.

 **CAPRICORN** DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

In this latest endeavor, the other people involved want good results just as much as you do. But they're also working on their own agenda, so what is good for them might not be good for you. Be careful about how much time you put into something that could benefit others more than it benefits you. There's no need to be suspicious of anyone, but you need to understand what your priorities are. Impressing other people isn't as important as propelling yourself to the next level.

 **GEMINI** MAY 21-JUNE 21

If it's unclear what someone wants from you right now, why should you waste your time guessing? Ask! Going to the source of the confusion is almost always the best way to find clarity. Are you worried you'll look stupid or silly for asking a question? You'll look a lot sillier if you base a decision on an incorrect hunch. Before you go down all sorts of fanciful rabbit holes for an explanation, opt for the most direct approach and just ask what they want.

 **LIBRA** SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Any limits you're pushing up against right now are completely self-imposed, so quit feeling frustrated and start feeling empowered! Step out of these restrictions and do whatever you want to do today. No one is going to stand in your way. Sure, one or two people might make a fuss, but so what? If you're not creating a stir once in a while, you're not really living. It's time that you tuned back in to that feeling of possibility. Anything can happen, and you can be anything you want to be.

 **AQUARIUS** JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

You won't do well today if you're stuck into a situation full of limitations and regulations. Restriction never looks good on you, so why even bother trying it on? Get out and away from highly structured situations like a class, seminar, or ceremony if you can. By limiting your movement and forcing you to do certain things at certain times, they'll put you into a very grumpy mood. Instead, you'll be better off with a flexible, undemanding schedule.

 **CANCER** JUNE 22-JULY 22

Saying what you mean is easier said than done right now. For one thing, everyone is moving at a pace that's simply too fast. Other people are likely to misinterpret you, think that you're beating around the bush, or assume you're being passive-aggressive. Be patient with the folks who can't understand what you're saying. They have too much on their mind and lack your focus. The good news is that you can make great strides today.

 **SCORPIO** OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Being nice isn't always convenient, but it's always appreciated. Keep that in mind when you come across a grouch today. Be kind and contain your urge to give them a piece of your mind. They could have more influence over the rest of the day than you think, and you'll want them on your side. Let them think highly of you. Being a team player requires you to take others into consideration. Smart people appreciate other smart people who know how to play nice.

 **PISCES** FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

Your generosity is coming out in full force, and you'll feel like you have time for everyone's requests. In fact, you'll probably help out a whole slew of folks before you even get to lunchtime! Be careful when it comes to how you dole out your wisdom, though. Not everyone is ready to hear the honest feedback and advice you have to offer. Ingrates aren't very fun to deal with, but with a sense of perspective, you'll be able to stay focused on the positive side of things.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

01. Tennis player, Naomi Osaka, started playing in but then withdrew from which major tennis tournament citing mental health issues?
A. 2021 Wimbledon
B. 2020 US Open
C. 2021 French Open
D. 2021 Miami Open

02. Which of these is a type of sheep?
A. Bolero
B. Merino
C. Matador
D. Gaucho

01. In which long-running comic series did the eponymous hero experience two dream sequences where he married each of his girlfriends, Veronica and Betty?
A. The Phantom
B. Archie
C. Tarzan
D. Batman

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. B

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

L	A	D	A
E	P	O	F
E	O	R	R
S	O	C	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

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

WORD BUILDER



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

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

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

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

Drone attack hits Iran defence ministry site

An anti-aircraft system destroyed one drone and two others exploded, the ministry said

Tehran, Iran - Iran said on Sunday a night-time drone attack had targeted a defence ministry site, at a time of high tensions over its nuclear programme and Russia's war in Ukraine.

An anti-aircraft system destroyed one drone and two others exploded, the ministry said, adding there were no casualties and only minor damage to the site in the central province of Isfahan. A fireball lit up the night sky in video footage widely shared on social media and published by Iranian state media, with people outside seen running and emergency service vehicles speeding toward the site.

"An unsuccessful attack was carried out ... on one of the workshop complexes of the ministry of defence," the ministry said, according to state news agency IRNA. "The attack, which oc-

curred around 11:30pm (2000 GMT) on Saturday, did not cause any disruption to the operation of the complex," it said.

Authorities did not elaborate on the activities at the site, but IRNA said the strike had targeted 'an ammunition manufacturing plant'.

Parliament member Mohammad-Hassan Assafari told the Mehr news agency that 'opponents and enemies' of Iran were aiming to 'disrupt the defensive power' of the country with the attack. The drone strike comes at a tense time in Iran, which has been rocked by protests over the death in custody of Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini in September, and as the standoff with major powers over its nuclear programme remains unresolved.

Iran has also faced accusations by Western countries that



This image grab taken from a UGC video posted on Sunday shows an explosion in Iran's Isfahan province (AFP)

it has been supplying armed drones to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine, a charge Tehran denies.

Major blaze

Iran has been engaged in a

shadow war for years with its arch foe Israel, blamed for a series of sabotage attacks and assassinations targeting the Iranian nuclear programme, and with Israel's ally the United States.

A few hours before the Isfahan attack, a major fire broke out at a motor oil production plant in the northwestern province of East Azerbaijan, IRNA reported.

Images of the huge blaze in the key industrial complex of

Shahid Salimi linked to the Ministry of Industry were published by the agency.

It said the fire was brought under control by firefighters, and authorities were investigating the cause of the blaze.

Shahid Salimi, located in the city of Azarshahr, is the largest industrial zone in northwestern Iran. It hosts 790 factories and other facilities employing nearly 28,000 workers, according to state media.

Iran has several known nuclear research sites in the Isfahan region, including a uranium conversion plant.

In April 2021, Tehran announced that it had started producing 60 per cent enriched uranium at the Natanz site in Isfahan province.

Negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, between Iran and world powers has stalled for months for multiple reasons, including the protests in the country.

The agreement offered Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme to guarantee that Tehran could not acquire or build a nuclear weapon - an objective it has always denied pursuing.

AFP

Israel proceed against 'families of terrorists'



Relatives and friends mourn during the funeral of a victim of a shooting attack in east Jerusalem on Friday (AFP)

Jerusalem - Israel sealed the family home on Sunday of a Palestinian in east Jerusalem who killed seven people near a synagogue, as part of measures to revoke certain rights of attackers' relatives.

The security cabinet announced a slew of steps late on Saturday, including revoking the rights to social security of 'the families of terrorists that support terrorism'.

It also announced that the home of 21-year-old Khayri Alqam, who was shot dead by police following Friday's attack, 'will be sealed immediately ahead of its demolition'.

An AFP correspondent saw Israeli forces on Sunday on the terrace of the building after they sealed its entrances, with Palestinians clearing out their belongings. Israel already demolishes

the homes of Palestinians who kill Israelis, although the process necessitates that prior notice be given to families and the chance to appeal the decision.

Dani Shenhar, head of the legal department at Israeli rights group HaMoked, said sealing the home overnight demonstrated the government's 'will of revenge against the families'.

The measure was 'done in complete disregard for the rule of law', he said, and HaMoked intends to protest to the attorney general.

Bill to revoke identity cards

Israel's security cabinet said there will also be a discussion Sunday over a bill to revoke Israeli identity cards from the relatives of attackers. The measures announced are in line with pro-

posals from Netanyahu's extreme-right political partners which enabled him to return to power at the end of December.

They are likely to apply primarily to Palestinians with Israeli nationality, known as Arab-Israelis, and Palestinians with east Jerusalem residency permits.

Hours after the deadly shooting outside the synagogue in the settlement of Neve Yaacov, a 13-year-old Palestinian boy shot and wounded two Israelis just outside the walled Old City of east Jerusalem.

The boy blamed for the attack in the Silwan neighbourhood was shot and wounded at the scene.

No group has claimed responsibility for either of the shootings.

The security cabinet also decided to make it easier to obtain permits to carry firearms.

AFP

Earthquake kills three, injures 800 in Iran

Tehran, Iran - A 5.9-magnitude earthquake hit northwestern Iran overnight, killing at least three people and injuring more than 800 in the region near the border with Turkey, state officials and media said on Sunday.

Panicked residents fled their homes as buildings collapsed and rubble crushed cars, with hundreds seeking shelter from freezing winter conditions in evacuation centres as more than 20 aftershocks rattled the region.

The shallow quake hit the city of Khoy, with a population of around 200,000, in West Azerbaijan province at 9:44pm (1814 GMT) on Saturday, said the Seismological Center of the University of Tehran.

"This incident has left 816 injured and three dead," West Azerbaijan governor Mohammad Sadegh Motamedian was quoted as saying by IRNA news agency.

People were seen wrapped in blankets and huddling around fires in the snow-dusted region,



A picture shows the damage after an earthquake struck the city of Khoy in Iran's West Azerbaijan province on Sunday (AFP)

in images published by Iranian media, as state TV broadcast footage of major damage to residential buildings, including half-destroyed houses.

Buildings in 70 villages suffered quake damage, the state news agency reported, with rescuers clearing rubble to free those trapped in the area around 800km (500 miles) northwest

of the capital Tehran.

Iran's Red Crescent Society chief, Pirhossein Koolivand, later announced the search and rescue operations had finished, with no more survivors or bodies believed trapped.

Iran's interior minister, Ahmad Vahidi, travelled to Khoy to observe the situation, where he said water, power and gas

connections were impacted but being restored, IRNA reported.

Iran sits astride the boundaries of several major tectonic plates and experiences frequent seismic activity.

On January 18, a previous, 5.8-magnitude quake near Khoy left hundreds injured.

In February 2020, a 5.7-magnitude earthquake struck the western Turkey village of Habash-e Olya and killed at least nine people.

Iran's deadliest recorded quake was a 7.4-magnitude tremor in 1990 that killed 40,000 people, injured 300,000 and left half a million homeless in the country's north.

In 2003, a 6.6-magnitude quake in southeastern Iran levelled the ancient mud-brick city of Bam and killed at least 31,000 people.

In November 2017, a 7.3-magnitude quake in Iran's western province of Kermanshah killed 620 people.

AFP

Israeli guards kill 'armed' Palestinian in West Bank

Ramallah, Palestinian Territories - Israeli guards killed a Palestinian near a settlement in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian health officials said on Sunday, with the Israeli military alleging he was armed.

Karam Ali Ahmad Salman, 18, was shot dead by 'the Israeli occupation near the settlement of Kedumim', the Palestinian health ministry reported.

Israel's army said a 'civilian security team' shot a person 'armed with a handgun' near the settlement in the northern West Bank. The Palestinian health ministry reported that Kedumim was built on privately-owned Palestinian land.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War and settlements are regarded as illegal under inter-

national law, a charge Israel disputes. Salman is one of at least 32 Palestinians killed in the West Bank this month, including civilians and militants, according to an AFP tally based on official sources.

A Palestinian gunman killed seven people on Friday outside a synagogue in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem. In response to the deadly attack, the Israeli

government announced a slew of measures including 'steps to strengthen settlements'.

The latest violence follows a surge in killings last year.

At least 26 Israelis and 200 Palestinians were killed across Israel and the Palestinian territories in 2022, the majority in the West Bank, according to AFP figures.

AFP

US secretary of state arrives in Egypt as Middle East violence erupts

Cairo, Egypt - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived on Sunday in Egypt at the start of a Middle East trip on which he will look to notch down Israeli-Palestinian tensions after an eruption of violence.

Blinken, who will travel on Monday and Tuesday to Jerusalem and Ramallah after his stop in Cairo, had long planned the visit to see Israel's new right-wing government, but the trip takes on a new urgency after some of the worst violence in years.

A Palestinian gunman on Friday killed seven people outside a synagogue in a settler neighbour-

hood of east Jerusalem, and another attack followed on Saturday. On Thursday, nine people were killed in an Israeli army raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank in one of the deadliest such operations in years.

Israel said it was targeting Islamic Jihad militants and later hit the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in response to rocket fire.

Blinken will meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and call 'broadly for steps to be taken to de-escalate tensions', State Department spokesman Vedant Patel told reporters as he condemned the



Antony Blinken (AFP)

'horrific' synagogue attack.

The violence is also likely to figure in talks between Blinken and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose country's traditional role as a Middle East

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel on Monday and Tuesday to Jerusalem and Ramallah after his stop in Cairo

mediator has helped him remain a key US partner despite President Joe Biden's criticism of his human rights record.

The United States, with its close relationship to Israel, has

historically taken a lead on Middle East diplomacy.

But experts questioned whether Blinken could achieve any breakthroughs.

"The absolute best they can do is to keep things stable to avoid another May 2021," said Aaron David Miller, a veteran US negotiator, referring to 11 days of fighting between Israel and Hamas that ended with an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire.

Ghaith Al-Omari, a former Palestinian official now at The Washington Institute, expected Blinken to repeat traditional US positions rather than break new ground.

"The trip itself is the message," he said. "Blinken will ask Abbas to do more but it is not clear what they can do," he said, referring to the Palestinians.

'Flooding the zone' with Netanyahu

Blinken's visit is part of an effort by the Biden administration to engage quickly with Netanyahu, who returned to office in late December leading the most right-wing government in Israel's history.

Israel's longest-serving prime minister had a fraught relationship with the last Democratic president, Barack Obama, as Ne-

tanyahu openly sided with his Republican adversaries against US diplomacy with Iran.

Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, visited earlier in January to discuss Iran after Biden's efforts to restore a 2015 nuclear accord - despised by Netanyahu - effectively died.

"I've never seen such an intense flurry of high-level contacts under any administration as you're watching right now," said Miller, now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Biden team is looking "to avoid confrontation with Netanyahu", Miller said.

AFP

Memphis disbands police unit after fatal beating video

Memphis, US - The US city of Memphis on Saturday disbanded the special police unit whose officers fatally beat a young Black man, after graphic video of the assault sparked widespread shock and outrage.

The video, which shows five officers repeatedly kicking and punching 29-year-old Tyre Nichols as he moans and calls out for his mother, triggered calls for police reform.

The southern US city on Saturday announced it had deactivated the officers' special unit, known as Scorpion, which was launched in 2021 to reduce illegal activity by assigning more police to high-crime areas.

The Memphis Police Department said in a statement it was 'in the best interest of all to permanently deactivate the SCORPION Unit', which stands for Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighbourhoods.

"The officers currently assigned to the unit agree unreservedly with this next step," the department added.

Several dozen demonstrators called for police reform on Saturday afternoon as they gathered in the chilly rain in front of city hall shouting 'No justice, no peace!' and carrying signs with slogans such as 'Justice for Tyre Nichols'.

At one point, a police car ended up surrounded by a group of protesters, who directed their angry chants at the vehicle.

Memphis City Council mem-



Protesters march during a rally against the fatal police assault of Tyre Nichols, in Memphis, Tennessee, on Saturday (AFP)

ber JB Smiley Jr addressed the crowd's demands, speaking to protesters in the rain. "Memphis has an opportunity to set the standard on how to respond to actions like this," he told them.

'Beat to a pulp'

The five Memphis officers, who

are all Black, were charged with second-degree murder in the beating of Nichols, who died in hospital on January 10 three days after being stopped on suspicion of reckless driving.

The lengthy video footage from police body cameras released on Friday evening shows

the group of officers detaining Nichols, attempting to take him down using a Taser, then giving chase as he evades them.

Subsequent segments - the footage runs about an hour in total, and is audio-only in parts - show Nichols calling for his mother, and groaning as officers

repeatedly assault him.

"They had beat him to a pulp," Nichols's mother RowVaughn Wells told CNN on Friday. "He had bruises all over. His head was swollen like a watermelon. His neck was bursting because of the swelling."

AFP



Riot police clash with demonstrators during a protest against the government of President Dina Boluarte in Lima on Saturday (AFP)

Lima records first protest death after Peru lawmakers reject snap elections

Lima, Peru - Demonstrations in Lima turned fatal on Saturday as one protester died in clashes with police near Congress after lawmakers rejected a request by Peru's embattled president to bring elections forward.

Hooded protesters wielding shields, stones and pieces of cement pried from public buildings fought with police in the fog of tear gas as Lima became the scene of scuffles and the city's first death from the protests was recorded.

The South American country has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily protests since December 7, when former president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

In seven weeks of demonstrations, 48 people including one police officer have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the

Ombudsman's Office of Peru.

The latest violence comes after President Dina Boluarte had urged lawmakers to find a way out of a deepening political crisis by agreeing to hold elections earlier.

In the early hours of Saturday, lawmakers had rejected her request to move the polls forward to December, even as anti-Boluarte protests raging across the country have left dozens dead.

"Not one more dead, Dina murderer," marchers had chanted in what began as a peaceful and festive procession with Andean musical groups and artists, until hooded individuals arrived.

The ombudsman's office reported the latest fatality on Twitter, saying that 'we regret the death of Victor Santisteban Yac-savilca in the violent demonstrations today', without specifying how the death had occurred.

AFP

North Korea denies arms dealing with Russia

Seoul, South Korea - North Korea on Sunday denied providing arms to Moscow after the United States said the nuclear-armed state supplied rockets and missiles to Russia's private military group Wagner.

Washington earlier this month designated the Wagner group as a 'transnational criminal organisation', citing its weapons dealings with Pyongyang in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

The White House showed US intelligence photographs of Russian rail cars entering North Korea, picking up a load of infantry rockets and missiles, and returning to Russia, according to national security spokesman John Kirby.

The US said the nuclear armed state supplied rockets and missiles to Wagner

In a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency, a senior North Korean official rejected the accusations, warning that the US would face a 'really undesirable result' if it persisted in spreading the 'self-made rumour'.

"Trying to tarnish the image of (North Korea) by fabricating a non-existent thing is a grave

provocation that can never be allowed and that cannot but trigger its reaction," said Kwon Jong Gun, director general of the Department of US Affairs.

He also called it 'a foolish attempt to justify its offer of weapons to Ukraine'. Earlier this week, US President Joe Biden promised 31 Abrams tanks, one of the most powerful and sophisticated weapons in the US army, to help Kyiv fight off Moscow's invasion.

The move drew a rebuke Friday from Kim Yo Jong, the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who accused Washington of 'further crossing the red line' by sending the tanks into Ukraine.

AFP

Tunisians vote in second round of poll for defanged parliament

Tunis, Tunisia - Polling began in the second round of elections for Tunisia's toothless parliament on Sunday, but as the divided nation grapples with economic woes, all eyes will be on turnout.

A handful of voters trickled through a polling station in central Tunis on Sunday morning, casting ballots for a total of 262 candidates competing for 131 seats in the new legislature.

The body has been largely stripped of its authority following President Kais Saied's dramatic power grab in the birthplace of the Arab Spring uprisings.

On July 25, 2021, Saied sacked the government and froze parliament before dissolving it and pushing through a new constitution granting him almost unlimited powers, sweeping



A Tunisian voter casts ballot, in Ettadhamen on Saturday (AFP)

away the system that had emerged from the 2011 revolt.

The latest polls, whose first round in December saw just 11.2 per cent of registered voters take

part, are seen as the final pillar of Saied's transformation of politics.

The new legislature will have almost no power to hold the president to account.

"There's no way I'm voting," said Mohamed Abidi, 51, a waiter at a cafe in Tunis.

"Saied isn't listening to anyone to find solutions for our situation. The whole economy is suffering but he's not interested - he only wants to keep his place in the presidential palace."

But taxi driver Belhassen Ben Safta disagreed.

"We've got to vote! We can't leave even the slightest possibility that the old system returns."

Analysts predict few of Tunisia's 7.8mn eligible voters will cast their ballots in the second round, as major parties in-

cluding Saied's arch-rivals, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha, call for a boycott.

The ISIE elections watchdog said that by 11am (1000 GMT), around 4.7 per cent of voters had cast their ballots, slightly more than at the same time during the first round.

Youssef Cherif, director of Columbia Global Centers in Tunis, said 'this parliament will have very little legitimacy, and the president, who is all-powerful thanks to the 2022 constitution, will be able to control it as he sees fit'. With inflation at over 10 per cent and repeated shortages of basic goods from butter to cooking oil, Tunisia's 12mn people have been focused on more immediate issues.

AFP

French PM says no dice on pension age as strikes loom

Paris, France - France's prime minister on Sunday ruled out backtracking on a plan to raise the retirement age as unions prepared for another day of mass protests against the contested reform.

An increase in the minimum retirement age to 64 from the current 62 is part of a flagship reform package pushed by President Emmanuel Macron to ensure the future financing of France's pensions system.

After union protests against the change brought out over a million people into the streets on January 19, the government signalled there was wiggle room on some measures, including the number of contributing years needed to qualify for a full pension, special deals for people who started working very young, and



Demonstrators hold flares during a procession against a pension reform in Paris, on January 26 (AFP)

provisions for mothers who interrupted their careers to look after their children. But the headline age limit of 64 was not up for discussion, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne said on Sunday.

"This is now non-negotiable," she told the FranceInfo broadcaster. While unions have welcomed the government's readiness for negotiation on parts of the plan, they say the proposed 64-year rule has to go.

Calling the reform 'unfair' France's eight major unions, in a rare show of unity, said they hoped to 'mobilise even more massively' on Tuesday, their next scheduled protest day, than at the showing earlier this month.

'Even more people'

"It's looking like there will be even more people," said Celine

Verzeletti, member of the hardleft union CGT's confederation leadership. Pointing to opinion polls, Laurent Berger, head of the moderate CFDT union, said that 'the people disagree strongly with the project, and that view is gaining ground'.

It would be 'a mistake' for the government to ignore the mobilisation, he warned. Unions and the government both see Tuesday's protests as a major test.

Some 200 protests are being organised countrywide, with a big march planned for Paris, culminating in a demonstration outside the National Assembly where parliamentary commissions are to start examining the draft law on Monday.

The leftwing opposition has submitted more than 7,000 amendments to the draft in a bid

to slow its path through parliament. Macron's allies are short of an absolute majority in parliament and will need votes from conservatives to approve the pensions plan. The government has the option of forcing the bill through without a vote under special constitutional powers, but at the risk of triggering a vote of no confidence, and possibly new parliamentary elections.

In addition to protest marches, unions have called for widespread strike action for Tuesday, with railway services and public transport expected to be heavily affected. Stoppages are also expected in schools and administrations, with some local authorities having already announced closures of public spaces such as sports stadiums.

AFP

Pakistan: 51 killed in two accidents

At least 10 students died in the boating accident in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Bela, Pakistan - At least 51 people were killed in two separate transport accidents in western Pakistan on Sunday, when a bus plunged off a bridge and a boat carrying a class of children capsized.

Forty-one are so far confirmed dead after their bus crashed into a ravine in south-western Balochistan province, while at least 10 students died in the boating accident in north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, officials said.

As many as three are still missing in the waters, with a rescue operation underway.

At the remote site of the bus crash, north of the city of Bela in Lasbela district, senior administration official Hamza Anjum said 'the dead bodies... are beyond recognition'.

Anjum said 40 corpses were retrieved from the wreck alongside three injured, one of whom died shortly after. The remaining two survivors were in 'serious' condition.

The charred brown husk of the vehicle chassis smoked on a dry riverbed under the bridge on Sunday, according to video released by the provincial government.



Rescue workers search for victims drowned in the waters of Tanda Dam in Kohat district of northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Sunday (AFP)

A team of men used heavy machinery to move the twisted metal aside and pull out the burnt remains, which were then shrouded in white cloth. Head of the local rescue

service Asghar Ramazan told AFP the bus had been loaded with containers of oil. "When the bus fell down, it immediately caught fire," he said. The oil 'caused the fire to

flare up so much that it was difficult to control', he added. The bus was reportedly carrying a total of 48 passengers when it hit a pillar on the bridge and careened off course earlier

on Sunday. It had been travelling overnight between Balochistan's provincial capital of Quetta and the southern port city of Karachi.

"It is feared that the driver may have fallen asleep," Anjum said, also mentioning the possibility he had been speeding during the long-distance trip.

"We will investigate the causes of the accident," he said, adding that DNA tests would be needed to determine the identity of the remains, which had been 'badly mutilated'.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, local police official Mir Rauf told AFP all of the drowned so far recovered from the boating accident on Tanda Dam lake were aged between seven and 14.

A total of 17 were rescued alive from the reservoir by Sunday afternoon.

"Everything was normal until suddenly the boat overturned," said 11-year-old survivor Muhammad Mustafa from his hospital bed in the nearby city of Kohat. "I got stuck under the boat," he told AFP. "My shawl and sweater weighed me down, so I took them off."

"The water was extremely cold and my body went numb. I thought I was going to pass out when a man on an inflatable tube saved me." AFP

Rwandan soldiers clash with DRC police

Bukavu, DR Congo - A clash between Rwandan soldiers and DR Congo police on a small island in Lake Kivu sparked panic given ongoing tensions between Kigali and Kinshasa, Congolese sources said on Sunday.

Police stationed on Ibindja island in eastern Congo, on the south side of the lake which the neighbours' border bisects, challenged three boats carrying armed Rwandan troops as they approached their base on Saturday, a DRC navy source based in the region said on condition of anonymity.

According to the source, a DRC policeman went to challenge the soldiers as to why they were on the Congolese side of the border.

After a discussion, 'voices were raised and there were exchanges of gunfire,' sparking panic among locals in earshot in Chivumu village.

AFP

Former UN chief calls for climate action over 'visions' at COP28

Dubai, UAE - Climate talks in the United Arab Emirates this year should focus on action rather than visions, former United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon said during a visit to the oil-rich Gulf country.

"Many countries and many people have already presented the visions, so we may not need any more," he told AFP in Dubai on Saturday. "We need a COP of solutions and a COP of action."

The South Korean diplomat, who co-chairs the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens, was in the UAE this weekend to launch a partnership with Dubai Cares, a civil society organisation focused on training youth on 'green skills'. The last UN climate talks held in Egypt in November concluded with a landmark deal to create a 'loss and damage' fund to cover the costs that developing countries face from climate-linked natural disasters and slower impacts like sea level rise.

But observers were left disappointed that little progress had been made on reducing planet-heating emissions from fossil fuels.

Ban urged the COP28 presidency to consider 'harmonisation' between adaptation and loss and damage.

"We have to help developing countries to adapt to changing situations... (but) what about the situations already damaged and lost?" he said. "We have to help them so that they can recover from this loss and damage."

The UAE, a leading crude producer and exporter, named the head of its national oil company as president of this year's COP28 climate talks, prompting fierce criticism from environmental activists.

The wealthy nation argues that oil remains indispensable to the global economy, while pushing the merits of carbon capture - removing carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, as fuel is burned or from the air.

AFP

India: Odisha Health Minister shot dead

Bhubaneswar, India - Odisha Health Minister Naba Das, who was shot at in Brajaraj nagar in the Jharsuguda district, succumbed to his bullet injuries in Bhubaneswar hospital on Sunday, officials said.

The Minister, who was said to be in a critical condition, was airlifted to the Apollo Hospital in Bhubaneswar where he breathed his last. Das was shot at by one police personnel near Brajaraj nagar in Jharsuguda district earlier today, following which he was critically injured.

A team of doctors led by Dr Debashish Nayak immediately attended to and operated on him.

On operating was found that a single bullet had entered and exited the body, injuring the heart and left lung and causing massive internal bleeding and injury, the officials said.

According to officials, the injuries were repaired, and steps were taken to improve the pumping of the heart. He was given urgent ICU care. But despite the best of efforts, he could not be revived and succumbed to his injuries.

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik expressed deep shock and distress over the unfortunate death of Minister Naba Das.



Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik consoles Vishal Das, son of Naba Das, in Bhubaneswar, India, on Sunday (ANI)

"He was an asset for both the Govt and the party. His death is a great loss to the State of Odisha," Odisha CMO said.

Earlier, the Chief Minister reached the hospital and enquired about the health of the minister who was attended by the specialists.

Patnaik condemned the attack on the minister.

The Chief Minister also directed the Crime Branch to take up the investigation into the matter, following which a team of Odisha Crime Branch headed by a senior police official proceeded to Brajaraj nagar where

state Health Minister Naba Das was shot at.

The team led by Additional Director General Arun Bothra left for the crime spot to inquire into the firing incident on Minister Naba Das.

Earlier, an eyewitness, advocate Ram Mohan Rao said that

This incident occurred at about 12.30pm at Gandhi Chowk. Das was on his way to attend a programme. He sustained bullet injuries to his left chest, leaving him seriously injured," Rao said.



RAM MOHAN RAO

the policeman fired at the Odisha minister from point-blank range.

"This incident occurred at about 12.30 afternoon at Gandhi chowk when Das was on his way to attend a programme. He sustained bullet injuries to his left chest, leaving him seriously injured," Rao said.

"At a public grievance office opening, Naba Das was the chief guest. When he arrived, the crowd gathered to welcome him. Suddenly, a gunshot was heard. We saw police personnel running away after shooting from close range. Minister to be airlifted to Bhubaneswar," he added. The exact reason behind the firing is still unclear.

ANI

New Czech president Petr Pavel expected to foster EU, Ukraine ties

Prague, Czech Republic - Newly-elected Czech president Petr Pavel, a former NATO general, will promote close ties with the European Union and offer firm support for Ukraine in the face of the Russian invasion, analysts said.

The 61-year-old war hero beat billionaire populist Andrej Babis to win Saturday's presidential election.

A former chief of NATO's military committee, he will replace outspoken, divisive incumbent Milos Zeman who had fostered closer ties with Moscow and Beijing before making a U-turn when Russia invaded Ukraine last year.

Analysts told AFP that Pavel's experience in military diplomacy would be a clear asset as he held a very different

presidency than his predecessor. "We know that his contacts at NATO, as well as with peers from NATO member states... are very strong, and foreign policy will be his domain," said Pavel Havlicek, a scientist at the Association for International Affairs in Prague.

"I think he will be a proficient president if we realise the war in Ukraine is one of the key problems Europe is facing," Havlicek told AFP.

Pavel was a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the 1980s and began a rapid rise through army ranks until communism fell in 1989.

After Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, Pavel became an advocate of EU and NATO membership.



Petr Pavel and his wife Eva during a press conference in Prague, Czech Republic on Saturday (AFP)

During campaigning he argued there was still 'no better alternative'.

He also called for more aid to

Ukraine, which was invaded by Russia in February last year.

"He is very much in favour of Ukraine, he has repeatedly

voiced his support, and he's very critical towards Russia," said Jiri Pehe, a political analyst at New York University Prague.

"His stance will entail strong support to Ukraine without any conditions," Pehe told AFP.

EU presidency

European leaders have welcomed Pavel's win, which follows the Czech Republic's 2022 EU presidency.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said Berlin would work 'hand in hand for a stronger EU and NATO' with Pavel, while European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen praised his 'strong commitment to our European values'.

Pavel is also in favour of adopting the euro as the currency of the Czech Republic.

He is expected to work closely with his country's governing centre-right coalition led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala, which also provides military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

"Pavel will draw upon the government's policy in this sense, and I think there will be no fundamental disputes," said Palacky University analyst Pavel Saradin.

"There will be none of that ambivalence we had with Milos Zeman," said Pehe.

Analysts also expect Pavel to turn a more critical eye towards his country's close ties with the so-called Visegrad-four group, which consists of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been at odds

with the EU over the rule of law in his country and his ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Pavel has criticised Orban on several occasions and met with opposition figures when he visited Hungary last December.

"He would rather redefine the regional cooperation to a broader format of more countries, meaning that Hungary's influence would be neutralised," said Pehe.

Havlicek said he also expected Pavel to strengthen ties with the United States.

"(Pavel) has great and strong experience with meetings and negotiations and he will show it," said Havlicek. "He will be in his element when it comes to foreign policy."

AFP

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

PURE GOLD

Novak Djokovic wins Australian Open to equal Rafael Nadal’s record of 22 Grand Slam titles

Melbourne, Australia - An emotional Novak Djokovic called it “the biggest victory in my life” after sweeping past Stefanos Tsitsipas to win a 10th Australian Open title and equal Rafael Nadal’s 22 Grand Slam crowns on Sunday.

The Serb will return to world number one as he overcame a hamstring injury and off-court drama to defeat the Greek third seed 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) on Rod Laver Arena.

The 35-year-old climbed to his player’s box afterwards to embrace his mother and broke down in uncontrollable tears, collapsing to the ground sobbing.

His father Srdjan was again missing after he sparked controversy by posing with a fan carrying a Russian flag featuring Vladimir Putin’s face following his son’s quarter-final win.

The emphatic victory over Tsitsipas capped a remarkable return for Djokovic to Melbourne Park, having missed last year’s tournament when he was deported over his Covid vaccination

stance.

“I have to say this has been one of the most challenging tournaments I’ve ever played considering the circumstances, not playing last year, coming back this year,” he said, wearing a jacket with 22 emblazoned on it.

“I want to thank all the people that made me feel welcome, comfortable, to be in Melbourne.

“I try to pinch myself and really live through these moments, it’s a long journey,” added Djokovic, who was more emotional than usual.

“Only my team and family know what we have been through in the last four or five weeks and this is why I’d probably say this is the biggest victory in my life considering the circumstances.”

‘Not going anywhere’

There had been an air of inevitability about Djokovic triumphing once more.

After his three-year ban from Australia was lifted, he won the lead-up Adelaide International before reinforcing his status as an



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic celebrates with the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup after beating Greece’s Stefanos Tsitsipas in the final on Sunday (AFP)

Only my team and family know what we have been through in the last four or five weeks and this is why I’d probably say this is the biggest victory in my life

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

all-time great in Melbourne.

His dominant win drew him level with Nadal on a record 22 Slams, two clear of now-retired Roger Federer.

The Spanish great made a second-round exit with a hip injury, one of a series of shocks which upended the men’s and women’s

draws during the first major of the year.

“I guess we always find the A-game on the Slams,” Djokovic said of equalling his old rival Nadal. “This is what I feel both Nadal and myself probably still fight for. It is still what motivates us the most, winning the biggest

titles in our sport and trying to keep up with the young guns.

“Tennis is in good hands,” he added. “But we’re still not going anywhere.”

Nadal and Djokovic have won 16 of the last 19 Slams.

The 36-year-old Spaniard though is set to slide down the rankings when they are released on Monday, in contrast to Djokovic.

The Serb will dethrone Spanish teenager Carlos Alcaraz and return to the top for the first time since June. Tsitsipas will climb one place to three. Both men were back on a court that helped

them rise to stardom.

Djokovic won his first Grand Slam in 2008 at Rod Laver Arena while Tsitsipas burst on the scene in 2019 when he stunned defending champion Federer in the last 16.

Moving freely with only minimal strapping on his troublesome left hamstring, Djokovic opened with a comfortable hold after being greeted by huge cheers.

He worked two break points on Tsitsipas’s opening serve, to no avail, but kept probing and the Greek handed him a break for 3-1 with a careless double fault.

AFP

Djokovic ‘hurt’ by father’s absence from Australian Open final

Melbourne, Australia - Novak Djokovic said it “hurts him and me” after they decided that his father would not be court-side to see him win the Australian Open on Sunday, following a controversy over a Russian flag.

Srdjan Djokovic was absent from the Serbian’s box for his final against Stefanos Tsitsipas at Rod Laver Arena, where Djokovic won a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam title.

A seat next to Djokovic’s mother, usually occupied by Srdjan, was empty.

“We both agreed that it would probably be better that he’s not there,” Djokovic said after winning a 10th Australian Open title.

“That hurts him and me a lot because these are special, unique moments that who knows if they are repeated again.

“It was not easy for him. I saw him after the match and he was not feeling his best, let’s say. He was happy to hug me, but I could see he was a bit sad.”

“In the end we have a happy ending,” the 35-year-old Djokovic added.

Srdjan also decided to miss the semi-finals after he faced calls, led by Ukraine, to be banned from the Grand Slam at Melbourne Park.

A video posted to a pro-Russian YouTube account on Thursday showed him posing with a man holding a Russian flag with President Vladimir Putin’s face on it.

AFP

History and ‘school of life’ drive Djokovic through controversies

Melbourne, Australia - Novak Djokovic, who won a record-equalling 22nd Grand Slam title on Sunday, is driven on through controversy by his determination to be the greatest ever.

The Serb’s victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas in the Australian Open final drew him level with great rival Rafael Nadal at the top of the list of all-time men’s major champions.

For 35-year-old Djokovic, it matters to be the best, and he has a strong sense of his historical place in tennis.

But he also keeps ploughing on through the highs and lows because it is “a great school of life”.

“I play professional tennis for several different reasons,” he said in Melbourne ahead of his latest title triumph.

“Some personal reason is that I feel on the tennis court I always have an opportunity to learn something new about myself, I guess fight with my own demons that I guess we all have.



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic hits a return to Greece’s Stefanos Tsitsipas in the final on Sunday (AFP)

“When we’re on the tennis court in the midst of a battle, some of the things surface, and I have to deal with it, so it’s a great school of life for me.

“Then at the same time, of course, I have professional goals and ambitions,” he added. “Those are Grand Slams and being num-

His staggering achievements on the court have often been overshadowed by blunders and missteps off it.

The latest was his father posing with a Russian flag featuring Vladimir Putin’s face at this year’s Australian Open.

But easily the most controversial was his refusal to get vaccinated against Covid, which culminated with Djokovic last year being deported from Australia on the eve of the tournament. Even before that, the Serb was seemingly doomed never to be held in the same esteem as Federer or Nadal, the undisputed people’s champions.

There are those who see something too calculating in the Djokovic makeup - an intense, brooding presence prone to affectation.

His infamous default from the US Open in 2020 for petulantly swiping at a ball that hit a female line judge gave a glimpse of his fiery character.

On the tennis court I always have an opportunity to learn something new about myself

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

ber one in the world.

“So I do want to make more history in this sport, no doubt.”

But while Nadal and now-retired Roger Federer are widely admired, Djokovic continues to divide as well as unite.

Tsitsipas ‘couldn’t be more excited’ despite defeat to Djokovic

Melbourne, Australia - Stefanos Tsitsipas said he was excited about the future and took confidence from his exploits at the Australian Open, despite losing Sunday’s final to Novak Djokovic.

The third seed was bidding to be the first Greek player in history to win a Grand Slam, but fell short against the Serbian great 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) on Rod Laver Arena.

Nevertheless, Tsitsipas won 10 matches in a row to open the

season and made only his second major final, a feat that he said made him proud.

“There are definitely things that I can improve and get better at, given the circumstances today. But I don’t think there’s any reason for me to be affected by today’s loss,” said the 24-year-old.

“It is a step forward. I’m looking forward to scoring more points during this season, making bigger results, fighting for

I very much enjoy the way I play, my attitude on the court, my mental stability, my concentration levels

STEFANOS TSITSIPAS

bigger trophies.

“I very much enjoy the way I play, my attitude on the court, my mental stability, my concentration levels.

“There’s still a little bit more to add to the whole structure of my game. I couldn’t be more ex-

cited to be heading towards that path.”

Tsitsipas, who has talked about a new-found maturity this year, will move up to world number three when the new rankings come out on Monday.

While he lost to 10-time Aus-

tralian champion Djokovic, he showed resolve throughout the tournament when he was tested.

“There’s nothing that I could have extracted more for today. I did everything possible,” he said.

“Novak is a player that pushes you to your limits. I don’t see this as a curse. I don’t see this as something annoying.

“This is very good for the sport, to have competitors like him, to have champions like him.”

AFP



Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates with the runners-up shield

CASEMIRO SHOWS CLASS

Brazilian midfielder scores double as Manchester United progress in FA Cup, Son at the double for Tottenham

London, United Kingdom - Casemiro scored twice as Manchester United turned on the style to beat 10-man Reading 3-1 and reach the FA Cup fifth round on Saturday as Tottenham forward Son Heung-min ended his recent goal drought.

On a day lacking major shocks, there were wins for Premier League strugglers Leeds, Leicester and Southampton but Fulham were held by Championship side Sunderland.

United - fourth in the Premier League and within touching distance of a place in the League Cup final - produced more compelling evidence they are back on track under new manager Erik ten Hag.

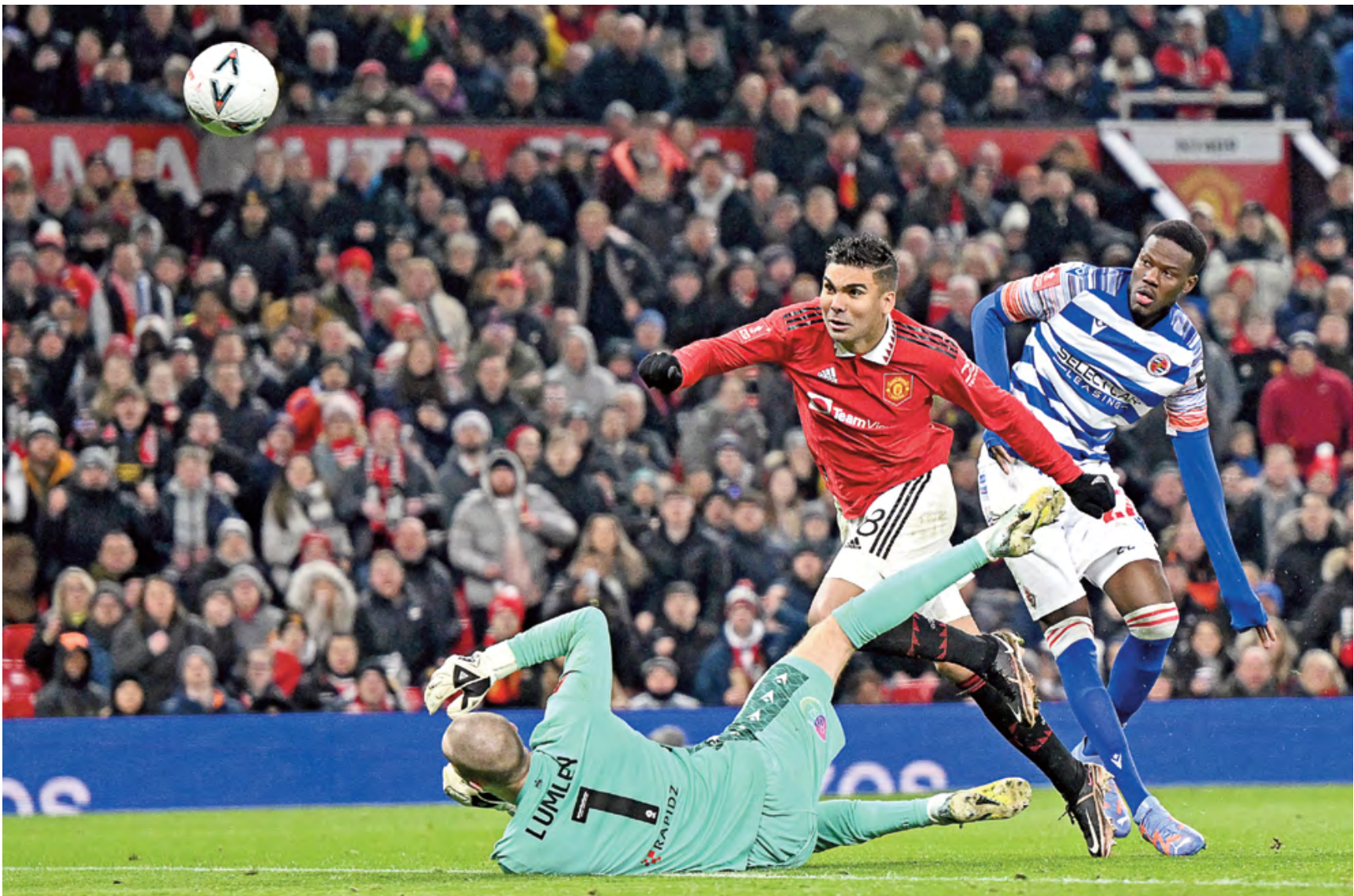
The home side took the lead at Old Trafford in the 54th minute when Anthony produced a defence-splitting pass to find Brazil teammate Casemiro, who lifted the ball over goalkeeper Joe Lumley.

Four minutes later United were two up, when Casemiro let fly with a stunning strike from outside the box to find the bottom corner.

With the home side brimming with confidence, substitute Fred produced an audacious flick from Bruno Fernandes' low cross to the near post to make the game safe.

By then Reading were down to 10 men after Andy Carroll was sent off for a second booking but Paul Ince's side still managed to score a consolation goal.

Manchester United captain Harry Maguire described former



Manchester United's Casemiro (C) scores against Reading in their English FA Cup fourth-round match at Old Trafford in Manchester on Saturday (AFP)

You don't win what he's won without being a top player. He (Casemiro) has improved the team, the morale and the performance. (He's a) phenomenal player.

HARRY MAGUIRE

Real Madrid star Casemiro as a "phenomenal player".

"You don't win what he's won without being a top player," he said. "He's improved the team, the morale and the performance."

Harry Kane was left on the

bench for Spurs' match at Preston, meaning he missed out on the chance to break his tie with Jimmy Greaves and become Tottenham's all-time top goalscorer.

In the absence of the England captain, Son stepped up with two fine finishes for a much-needed

confidence boost.

The South Korean, who shared the Premier League's Golden Boot last season, had scored just once in his previous 17 appearances for club and country.

But the 30-year-old brought

the fourth-round tie to life after a lacklustre first half with a sumptuous curling strike with his left foot and he killed the tie off 21 minutes from time by spinning his marker and firing high past Freddie Woodman. Arnaut Danjuma then marked his debut for Tottenham with a goal as his scuffed finish from Dejan Kulusevski's cross found the bottom corner to make it 3-0.

Leeds booked their place in the fifth round for the first time since 2016 by beating Accrington Stanley 3-1.

Liverpool stunned

Liverpool's disastrous season suffered another blow on Sunday as the holders were dumped out the FA Cup by a 2-1 defeat at Brighton.

Kaoru Mitoma's brilliant control and finish in stoppage time earned the Seagulls a place in the fifth round.

Liverpool had led at the Amex through Harvey Elliott, but have now won just once in their last six games.

Lewis Dunk levelled before the break for Brighton and they were well worthy of the victory given to them by a moment of magic from Mitoma.

The Japanese winger cushioned Pervis Estupinan's cross into his path, flicked the ball over Joe Gomez and fired high past Alisson Becker in the 92nd minute. Liverpool are languishing in ninth in the Premier League, 21 points behind pacesetters Arsenal.

AFP

Kolo Muani scores as Bayern held at home to Frankfurt

Berlin, Germany - Bayern Munich saw their lead in the Bundesliga cut to just one point on Saturday after Randal Kolo Muani's equaliser held the German champions to a 1-1 draw with Eintracht Frankfurt.

The result was Bayern's third consecutive 1-1 draw, with the Bavarians still looking for their first win of 2023.

Union Berlin's 2-0 derby win over city rivals Hertha earlier on Saturday meant Bayern's three-point cushion on top of the table had been erased by kick-off.

"We had three or four big chances that we might have actually made the most of before Christmas," Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann told Sky.

Bayern lacked fluency early in a testy opening half, which saw both centre-back Matthijs de Ligt and goalkeeper Yann Sommer pick up yellow cards.

With 34 minutes gone, former Man City forward Leroy Sane settled his team's nerves by



Frankfurt's Randal Kolo Muani (C) continued his top form and now has seven goals and 10 assists in the league

hammering a cross from veteran forward Thomas Mueller past the outstretched hand of Frankfurt keeper Kevin Trapp.

After the goal, Bayern rekindled their early season form and produced their best spell of the match, with France defender

Dayot Upamecano going close to doubling their lead just three minutes later.

Bayern continued to push for a second goal after the break but Frankfurt, who had only lost once in their previous 11 games in all competitions dating back to early

October, looked dangerous on the break.

Eintracht coach Oliver Glasner brought on Japan international Daichi Kamada just past the hour and the change had an almost immediate impact, Kamada exchanging passes with Kolo

Muani before the latter struck the ball past Sommer and into the net.

"We have a great group and if I can help the team, then I'm very satisfied," said Kolo Muani, who now has seven goals and 10 assists in the league this term.

"It was an intense game for us. We came here to get a point and we did it."

Union win derby

Earlier on Saturday, Union took the lead away to Hertha late in the first half through Dutch defender Danilho Doekhi, who headed in a free-kick from captain Christopher Trimmel.

Union doubled their lead halfway through the second half through midfielder Paul Seguin to run out victors over a spirited but toothless Hertha.

Visiting fans began singing "city champions" with 10 minutes remaining, celebrating their fifth consecutive derby win.

AFP



Sassuolo's players celebrate after Matheus Henrique scored their fifth goal against AC Milan in their Italian Serie A match on Sunday (AFP)

Milan's title defence in tatters after home humbling by Sassuolo

Milan, Italy - AC Milan's season went even further off the rails on Sunday after a humiliating 5-2 home defeat at the hands of Sassuolo left them at risk of dropping out of the Champions League places.

Everything that could go wrong for troubled Milan did at a gloriously sunny San Siro, with two goals ruled out for offside and a shocking defensive display condemning the champions to a second straight heavy loss after being hammered 4-0 at Lazio on Tuesday.

Stefano Pioli's side dropped down to fourth and will find themselves a whopping 15 points off the Scudetto pace if league leaders Napoli beat fierce rivals Roma in Sunday's late match.

Milan's title defence lays in tatters and they will also drop out of Serie A's top four if either Roma or Lazio, who host Fiorentina later in the day, avoid defeat. Domenico Berardi was the star man for Sassuolo, who

are 16th after winning for the first time since late October, the Italian having a hand in Gregoire Defrel and Davide Frattesi's goals which put his team two ahead after just 20 minutes.

Olivier Giroud, who had a fine early finish disallowed, then headed Milan back into the game but Berardi re-established Sassuolo's two-goal lead with a header of his own from a 30th-minute corner.

Pioli brought on Rafael Leao at half-time after leaving his star attacker out of the starting line-up but Milan were three goals down seconds after the restart, Armand Lauriente smashing home a penalty after being brought down by Davide Calabria.

And an awful afternoon turned into a nightmare when Matheus Henrique drilled in the fifth with 11 minutes remaining, leaving Divock Origi to curl home a beautiful but entirely irrelevant consolation goal for the hosts.

AFP

Where's the money gone? ask Jamaicans after Bolt fraud case

Kingston, Jamaica - It is the question on the lips of every Jamaican - and none more so than the country's most famous athlete, eight-time Olympic gold medal sprinter Usain Bolt.

"Where's the money gone?" The investigation into a multi-million-dollar fraud at the Kingston-based investment firm Stocks and Securities Limited (SSL), which has reportedly seen Bolt's \$12 million account left almost empty, is dominating discussion in the Caribbean nation.

So much so that one of the country's top dance hall artists, Gage, quickly released a song "SSL," whose chorus repeatedly

asks the above question in Jamaican patois.

True to the traditions of Jamaica's vibrant and straight-talking music scene, Gage's lyrics highlight the division between Kingston's affluent and influential "uptown" residents and the young people hustling in the city's poorer areas.

Finance Minister Nigel Clarke said he wanted to see tough sanctions on the fraudsters.

"The discrepancy between sanctions for white-collar crime and other forms of crime must be erased. If you rob depositors, or you defraud investors and you put our financial system and our

way of life at risk, the Jamaican society wants you put away for a long time - a long, long, time," he told AFP.

Bolt is one of around 40 people whose accounts may have been impacted by the fraud. While his status as a national hero means his situation has dominated the news, there is concern that elderly investors may also have been left penniless. Clarke said he will ask the FBI and other foreign agencies to help with the investigations after replacing members of the Financial Services Commission (FSC) board.

AFP



Usain Bolt



South Africa's Temba Bavuma celebrates after scoring a century against England in their second ODI in Bloemfontein on Sunday (AFP)

Bavuma century sets up series win for SA

Bloemfontein, South Africa - South African captain Temba Bavuma hit a century to lead his team to a series-clinching five-wicket win in the second one-day international against England at the Mangaung Oval in Bloemfontein on Sunday.

Bavuma hit 109 as South Africa chased down an England total of 342 for seven, winning with five balls to spare.

Bavuma battled cramps shortly before reaching his hundred. With his score on 96, there was a lengthy break while he received treatment. He reacted in an emotional fashion when he hit the next ball from Adil Rashid through the covers for four.

He thumped his chest and pointed to his name on the back of his shirt. He was the only member of the South African

team not signed up for the country's new Twenty20 league and his place in the national white-ball teams had been questioned because of a perceived inability to score at the rapid rate required in modern limited-overs cricket.

But he was in outstanding form on Sunday as he spearheaded South Africa's third-highest successful run chase, facing only 102 balls and hitting 14 fours and a six.

"It was very special," said Bavuma. "It was very enjoyable. I managed to hit a few out of the middle."

Bavuma said it was a confidence-boosting performance from his team, who have yet to qualify automatically for the World Cup later this year.

"We knew we had to come out and play."

BACK IN THE GROOVE

Spin rules as India level T20 series with tense victory

Lucknow, India - Suryakumar Yadav hit an unbeaten 26 as India edged out New Zealand by six wickets in a low-scoring and tense second Twenty20 international, to level the series at 1-1 on Sunday.

India restricted New Zealand, who won the opener of the three-match series, to 99-8 with Yuzvendra Chahal leading the spin-charge on a slow and turning pitch in Lucknow.

India then lost regular wickets as the Kiwi bowlers took it into the final over but Suryakumar, along with Hardik Pandya, anchored the tricky run chase to achieve the target with one ball to spare. The match witnessed 30 overs of spin without a six being hit in either innings.

The series moves on to the decider in Ahmedabad on Wednesday.

Chahal, a leg-spinner who came in as the only change in the team from the opening loss, bowled the fourth over of the innings and started with a wicket maiden. He bowled just two overs for four runs and a wicket but it set the tone for his fellow bowlers, with left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh taking two.

New Zealand opener Finn Allen attempted to take on the Indian bowling with two straight



India's Yuzvendra Chahal celebrates after taking the wicket of New Zealand's Finn Allen in their second T20 match in Lucknow on Sunday (AFP)

The match witnessed 30 overs of spin without a six being hit in either innings

boundaries in the third over after they elected to bat first, but was bowled by Chahal as he tried a reverse sweep.

The reverse sweep also proved to be the undoing of the next two batsmen, with Devon Conway caught behind off Washington Sundar and Glenn Phillips bowled by Deepak

Hooda.

New Zealand were in trouble when previous-match hero Daryl Mitchell was bowled by left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav, and slipped to 62-5 after a mid-pitch mix-up got Mark Chapman run out for 14.

Wickets kept tumbling and Arshdeep struck twice in one

over to get into the New Zealand tail. Skipper Mitchell Santner made an unbeaten 19 but could not help New Zealand avoid their lowest T20 score against India.

In reply, India lost Shubman Gill after the opener hit two boundaries but fell to Michael Bracewell's off-spin. He made 11.

Ishan Kishan was run out for

19 and the hosts looked in trouble when leg-spinner Ish Sodhi took down Rahul Tripathi for 13.

Suryakumar, a T20 sensation, stood firm and despite losing Washington Sundar to a run out steered the team home as he put on an unbeaten stand of 31 with Pandya, 15 not out.

AFP

McIlroy leads in Dubai ahead of Monday's finish

Dubai, United Arab Emirates - Rory McIlroy leads the Dubai Desert Classic into the weather-delayed final round by three shots despite dumping his second into the water guarding the 18th green on Sunday.

After the bogey on his last hole, the world No 1 signed for a third-round seven-under-par 65.

That helped McIlroy move to 15-under ahead of Monday's conclusion - three clear of English duo Callum Shinkwin (67) and Dan Bradbury (68) tied for second at 12 under.

For McIlroy it was a sense of deja vu as last year he found the same water on the 18th to eventually lose the Desert Classic title to Viktor Hovland.

"I'm always going to hit good



Rory McIlroy of North Ireland in action at the Dubai Desert Classic

enough shots to make birdies and hole some putts but keeping the mistakes off your card is the secret for me," said McIlroy, a two-time winner of the tournament.

He added: "I made one bogey out there today, which I'm pretty frustrated about. You know, the other 17 holes were very good."

"Overall, it was much better today. I need to go out and do the same tomorrow."

The four-time major champion was excited about securing a win in his first start of the season for the first time in his career.

"I have a nice opportunity to start the year with a win, and try to build off of that."

The 23-year-old Bradbury is living a dream, having secured

his DP World Tour membership after winning the Joburg Open in November while playing on an invitation.

The man from Wakefield was paired with McIlroy on Sunday, and said: "You hear so many 'Rory's and then you just hear a random 'Dan' in the middle of it, you can't help but smile. But it's nice to know that there are people out there wishing me well."

Last week's Abu Dhabi champion Victor Perez (66) was among a large group tied for fourth place at 11-under par.

That included five LIV Golf players - Patrick Reed (69), Ian Poulter (69), Shaun Norris (67), Adri Arnaus (70) and Richard Bland (71).

AFP

Kohli, Rohit hail India's teenage T20 women's World Cup triumph

New Delhi, India - Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma led tributes on Sunday to India's Under-19 women's team after their Twenty20 World Cup triumph in South Africa, hailing victory as a "special moment".

India, led by rising star Shafali Verma, hammered England by seven wickets in the final of the inaugural tournament in Potchefstroom.

Titas Sadhu, 18, led the bowling to dismiss England for 68, a total the batters overhauled with six overs to spare and hand England their first

loss in the tournament.

"Big congratulations to the U-19 girls cricket team for winning the World Cup. Well done on making the nation proud," Rohit, senior men's skipper, tweeted.

Kohli called the win a "special moment".

The Board of Control for Cricket in India announced a cash prize of more than \$600,000 and invited the squad to witness the third and final T20 men's match between India and New Zealand in Ahmedabad on Wednesday.

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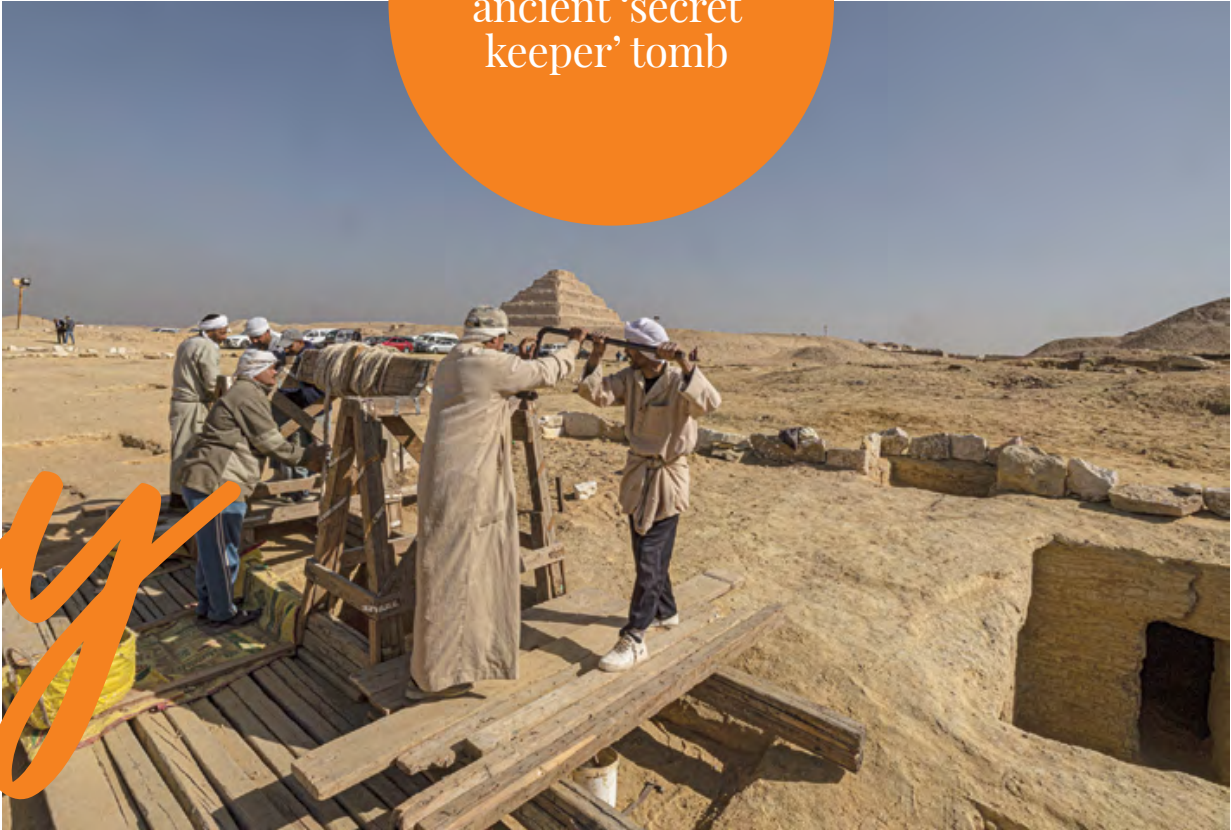
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NEW ATTRACTION



Egypt unveils ancient 'secret keeper' tomb



Egyptian antiquities workers dig at the Saqqara archaeological site, south of Cairo on Thursday (AFP)

Golden mummy

Egypt unveiled a gold-laced mummy and four tombs, including of an ancient king's 'secret keeper', discovered in the Saqqara necropolis south of Cairo. The vast burial site at the ancient Egyptian capital Memphis, a Unesco World Heritage site, is home to more than a dozen pyramids, animal graves and old Coptic Christian monasteries.

Archaeologist Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former antiquities minister, announced the latest discovery, dating from the fifth and sixth dynasties - around the 25th to the 22nd centuries BC - to reporters at the dig site.

The largest tomb, 'decorated with scenes of daily life', belonged to a priest, inspector and supervisor of nobles named Khnumdjedef, said Hawass.

It was found in the pyramid complex of Unas, the last king of the fifth dynasty, who reigned some 4,300 years ago.

Another tomb belonged to Meri, who according to Hawass served as the pharaoh's appointed 'secret keeper', a priestly title held by a senior palace official bestowing the power and authority to perform special religious rituals.

A third tomb belonged to a priest in pharaoh Pepi I's pyramid complex, and the fourth to a judge and writer named Fetek, Hawass added.

Fetek's tomb included a collection of 'the largest statues' ever found in the area, Mostafa Waziri, head of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, told reporters.

Down a 15-metre shaft, the expedition also found a large limestone sarcophagus that had remained sealed 'just as the ancient Egyptians left it 4,300 years ago', Hawass said.

Inside was a mummy featuring 'gold-leaf covering' that belonged to a man named Hekashepes, according to Hawass, who described it as one of the oldest and most complete non-royal mummies ever found in the country.



Artifacts are displayed at the Saqqara archaeological site

Egypt has unveiled many major archaeological discoveries in recent years.

Critics say the flurry of excavations has prioritised finds shown to grab media attention over hard academic research.

But the discoveries have been a key component of Egypt's attempts to revive its vital tourism industry after years of political unrest, as well as after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government's plans - the crowning jewel of which is the long-delayed inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum at the foot of the pyramids in Giza - aim to draw in 30mn tourists a year by 2028, up from 13mn before the pandemic.

The country of 104mn inhabitants is suffering from a severe economic crisis.

According to official figures, Egypt's tourism industry accounts for ten per cent of GDP and some two million jobs.

AFP



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Northern Ireland Screen CEO Richard Williams outside Titanic Studios (AFP)

N Ireland’s journey from building ships to screen hits

For much of the last century Belfast’s dockyards dominated global shipbuilding but now the harbour that built *Titanic* is the launchpad for some of the world’s biggest TV and film releases. A string of major recent cinematic and streaming projects made in the UK province have earned it a growing international reputation for television and cinema production.

Industry insiders say Northern Ireland is increasingly likely to be known globally as the backdrop to *Game of Thrones* rather than for the decades of sectarian violence that plagued it until the signing of 1998 peace accords.

Since the seminal HBO series, which ended in 2019, the region has provided locations and studio space for Netflix film *The School for Good and Evil* and the historical action feature *The Northman*, both released in 2022.

Fantasy blockbuster *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is due for release in March, was similarly filmed there.

Amazon Prime’s *Blade Runner 2099* series, based on Ridley Scott’s 1982 sci fi original, is due to start filming in the province later this year.

Meanwhile, homegrown series and films including Kenneth Branagh’s *Belfast* and Lisa McGee’s TV comedy *Derry Girls* have also won international acclaim.

Richard Williams, the chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen, which promotes the industry’s growth, said success is changing perceptions and helping the province grow in confidence.

“There’s probably a higher percentage of people in the world who only know about Northern Ireland from *Game of Thrones* than there are that know about us because of our challenged history,” Williams told AFP.

“Northern Ireland still needs to build up its confidence.”

‘Cutting edge’

Belfast’s once-mighty shipyards, which now house the Titanic Studios - among Europe’s largest - and the newer Harbour Studios, offered the huge spaces needed by blockbuster filmmakers.

“That was very attractive to certain types of early films that needed large-build spaces,” Williams explained.

He added that there were obvious parallels between film production and the heavy industries that once dominated the docks.

“There is a huge amount of craft involved. There’s a huge amount of construction involved. Doing things on time and on budget are just as important,” he noted.



Former British actor Flip Robinson, now owner and operator tour guide for Giant Tours Ireland, at the Dunluce Castle, in Bushmills, on the north Antrim coast, one of the many locations used for international film and TV shows (AFP)



There's probably a higher percentage of people in the world who only know about Northern Ireland from ‘Game of Thrones’ than there are that know about us because of our challenged history

RICHARD WILLIAMS

The UK government offers tax breaks to the industry, which in return trains and maintains a growing multi-skilled workforce.

Offering the latest studio technology to production companies is seen as a key plank in Northern Ireland’s economic plans.

In a sign of its ambitions, Belfast’s Ulster University has partnered with the harbour to deliver the next generation of film and TV production through its new Studio Ulster project.

The £25mn (US\$31mn) complex will include



Titanic Studios, in the shadow of the Harland and Wolff shipyard, in Belfast in Northern Ireland (AFP)

large-scale virtual production stages with in-camera visual effects, a motion capture stage, a 3D scanning stage and a research and development smart stage to support research.

Declan Keeney, director of the university’s Ulster Screen Academy, noted it will help quadruple the number of large-scale studios in Northern Ireland.

Comparing them to lighthouses that ‘draw people to them’, they put the province ‘at the very front end, the cutting edge of technology for film and TV’.

“We have a thriving sector here of people, enthu-

siastic people, who see the potential to work in this space,” Keeney said.

The university and academy are already a “talent pipeline” into the creative industries, with 900 students studying 3D skills, aspects of media production and other related disciplines.

‘Screen tourism’

Northern Ireland’s small size and varied locations have also proven a draw for production companies, according to Naomi Liston, the location manager for “The Northman” and “Game of Thrones”.

“(What is) absolutely key about Northern Ireland is that from our studio base we can be up at the north coast, which is one of the most famous beauty spots in the UK and Europe, in under an hour,” she told AFP.

“That makes great production sense. And that saves money -- you’re not travelling crews and having to accommodate them somewhere else.”

The TV and film success has spilled into the tourism sector. At the height of “Game of Thrones” popularity in 2018, Northern Ireland’s tourism office said the show accounted for 350,000 visitors.

That contributed over 50 million pounds to the local economy, it estimated. Flip Robinson, a former “Game of Thrones” body double and extra, now runs guided visits of locations from the show.

“We knew that it was going to bring tourists and

that was the great thing that we were excited about, plus showcasing our amazing scenery that we’ve got here to the world,” he said.

Robinson, from County Antrim, which includes Belfast and the famous northeastern coast, hopes the benefits of the film industry’s growing success will ripple widely.

“People are just all delighted to get involved in it,” he said. “I’m in the area of screen tourism, so it’s fantastic.”

AFP